

ginosko literary journal



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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 Laughing Heart

your life is your life
don't let it be clubbed into dank submission.
be on the watch.
there are ways out.
there is light somewhere.
it may not be much light but
it beats the darkness.
be on the watch.
the gods will offer you chances.
know them.
take them.
you can't beat death but
you can beat death in life, sometimes.
and the more often you learn to do it,
the more light there will be.
your life is your life.
know it while you have it.
you are marvelous
the gods wait to delight
in you.

— Charles Bukowski

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She sat in water up to her neck, humming a song to cover up the thoughts of a boy she loved. She went verse, chorus, verse, chorus, and made up a breakdown because the song had none. She reached for her glass of gin she had placed on the toilet seat while someone shouted to her.

The voice was her mother's. She shook her head and laughed as she sipped the gin. She did not have to maneuver very far to get what she wanted right now. She had her drink and thoughts. The only thing she wish she could replace is the screeching voice at the bottom of the stairs. But that would come, in time. She was allowed to be in here. She had nowhere else to go. Where else could she go that was so safe, so calm? Maybe the boy's arms. But he was somewhere else, doing his own thing. Sooner or later he would come to pick her up and they could go out on a nice date.

She laughed, for the disembodied voice spoke again. She learned to tune out the words a long time ago. She put the glass back down on the seat and decided to go diving. Submerged under the lukewarm water, she thought of when she used to bring her toys into the bath with her, and instead of letting them float around carelessly, she would put them on the lip of the tub and knock them in one by one, kind of like a weird firing range. And once they fell into the water, she would let them stay underwater. They're going swimming. They need to learn to swim, too, if they're going to make it in this world. She came back up to get fresh air and then went back under again. I'm Jennifer Connelly, she thought, I'm in that movie. Only I won't scream. I have no reason to.

The boy. He would understand when she told him. They would be sitting in an Italian restaurant and he would about to eat his spaghetti when she would put her hand on his and say that she had something very important to tell him, and then she would smirk and flip the hair out of her eyes. He would smile, his eyes would crinkle, and ask what it was. And then she would change her mind all of a sudden, and get a weird look on her face, and he would ask what was wrong, and she would say, I don't know what part of love to share with you first. And he would ask what that meant, and she would suddenly collapse in her head, and poke at her spaghetti, and decide that an Italian restaurant would not be the place to talk about water. Where would be, she thought, as her head became stockpiled with questions, the best place to talk about water.

She reached back for her gin and took a good long swallow of it. It burned so bad it even burned her teeth. Was that possible? She laughed. Her head was getting fuzzy. Fine by me, she said, as she said it down on the floor and grabbed for the bottle nearby to refill. I have nowhere else to go. He's picking me up sometime around five to take me somewhere. Where they were going, she did not know. As long as it wasn't an Italian restaurant. She'd be alright with a pub. Somewhere low key, where there were simple people, where she wouldn't have to dress up. It was all speculation. She suddenly changed her mind on having another glass and rested her arm on the lip of the tub. Water, she thought. Where I could tell him about water?

She tried to conjure the perfect moment. Maybe we could be in a park walking past perfectly lined oak trees, and we would be coming up to a bridge over a stream, and he would point and try to tell me that there were trout swimming past, and I could say, no, honey, those are carp, I know because my Dad was a fisherman, and he would say, no, I think those are trout, and I would nod and say, you are correct, because I am in love with you. And he would say, you are? And I would say, yes, and I have more parts of love to show you, to tell you about, and right before she could open her mouth and tell him what she had to tell him, he would look at his watch and say, there's somewhere we have to be soon, I made reservations, and just like that, the moment would be gone, ruined. Just like a car crash, just like spilled milk. She would close her mouth and look at him and say, where? Where do we have to go that's so important? And he would tell her to relax, it isn't anything fancy or anything, and she would just have to be surprised, and then...

She realized she had laid back underwater and was losing air. She popped back up and gasped a few times and shook her head free of the cobwebs. What the hell, she laughed. I'm losing it. I'm overcome with love. Her phone started to ring in her bedroom, the next room over. It's probably him, trying to tell me he's on his way or he can't make it. One of the two. She did not want to get up, she was so comfy. The phone beeped with the acknowledgement of a missed call, and then two minutes later, the beep of a voicemail. So it must be important, she thought. Five more minutes in here. And then I'll get up and get myself ready for him. And then we'll go somewhere where I can share my heart so openly and easily. It's just that uncomplicated, that straightforward. It doesn't have to be a game.

They would probably just drive around the countryside for a couple of hours. Nothing big. The sun would follow them around for a while, and then when it goes to sleep, the moon would follow them around until they run out of gas and he would want to make out with her, probably sleep with her. He would tell her that she was so pretty, that she was so gorgeous, that he would want to be with her in public and show everybody that they were together. That there was no sense in hiding it anymore. Who cares if they were with other people? Why can't they tell everybody that they want to

spend their time together? Who are they to judge? And then he would go in for the kiss. And then I would go and stop him and say, no, before you do, I have to tell you something very important, it's about water, it's about what I love and what kind of love I have to give you, and he would say, tell me afterwards, tell me then, but let me do this before, and she would say no, and he would say yes, and then her thoughts would go murky and she would just go along with it and then when it was all over, she would never call him back, never see him again, because she wouldn't want to go through that moment again, because she had so much to say and he didn't give a shit.

She had loved other things than just him. She had loved her safety, and she felt it here. She opened her eyes; she hadn't realized she had closed them again. The gin made her dehydrated. She looked at her fingertips, all wrinkled and prune-like. Her hair, long and perfect, soaking wet. Her toes, her feet, her arms, were all covered in an immaculate safety. She did not want to go anywhere, all of a sudden. Could he wait another day? He could. Could I wait another day? Eventually, she decided yes. She could. She just wanted a few more days alone with her thoughts. She could stand that loneliness for a little while longer.

She stood up out of the tub and wrapped a white bath towel around her body. She let her hair become a mess. She walked into her room and grabbed her phone. The missed call was definitely the boy. She didn't bother to listen to the voicemail. She called him back and talked to him in the sweetest voice she could make up. She improvised a long tale about a stomachache and a headache and she just wasn't up for driving around or going out to eat. When he told her that he could come over and just sit with her and keep her company for a little while, she stopped, bit her tongue, and then told him what she really needed to tell him, about how she had her pride, and that she wasn't going to be played with, and that she wasn't going to become just another person, that she really wanted to be special, and that could take days, weeks, months before she felt that about herself. And when he was tongue-tied, twisted up in his words, trying to find the right explanation for his confusion, she said that she would call him later, and she ended the call. She put the phone on the charger and went back into the tub for a little while longer, before Mom came home. She needed a few more minutes.

She went back underwater and screamed like Jennifer Connelly.

Burrowing

Sheree La Puma

Mother

At 37, she opened the door to an eagle, cupbearer to the Gods, a boyish beauty. Without regret they frolicked throughout the kitchen, among the copper cookware, baskets of oranges and green plums, the scent of lilac on the counters. They created a dance of triumph, legs entangled as they sang, “Oh ecstasy, oh lover of mine.” Forgetting for an hour, the holes in the fisherman’s net. Knowing her husband would be home soon.

Then it all goes sideways.

At 57, her children are matured/estranged. She lies prone in the empty bed, fear blooming like nightshade. Memories spiral through dense of pockets of air, hit the wall and roll down over her. Stainless steel appliances hum lullabies in the kitchen like she had once done to her babies. Weeping, she questions the effort, all the years gifted to her family. Did it matter? Does she matter?

Death is beating on the door with a tire iron.

Father

Father, bronzed, constant, proud with a substantial strength, like diamonds, steel, ore. He divorced her a short while later, after losing her, forfeiting her to nothing, to everything – the lover. He lost it all to the delivery man. “It was a matter of principal,” he said. He ignored her emptiness, pushed it away and abandoned it. He abandoned her.

After twenty years, he held the prize, a wonderous gift and he let her slip away. Irony, Irony will bring you to the summit – push you over the edge. Too old to change, too old to forget he had nothing but snapshots, small impressions in his mind of rich cheddar cheese, with just a hint of jalapeño, a dash of chili pepper, a special blend,

zesty tastes and textures for those that want a little spice in their lives.

He'd crumple on the rug when he found them rocking, waltzing in the kitchen, curled tight among the crisp new boxes of cereal, a half dozen recycled brown paper bags from the corner grocery store.

Hating himself, knowing he'd neglected to feed her for some time.

Daughter

She'd grown up in the gap, the space between one silent word and another. A blessed child, precious, adored, no need to hoard love under the bed. She followed her mother's example, purchased soft, warm clean sheets, made of crisp linen and percale – so ready to swallow men whole in an ocean of hungry satisfaction. Addicted, so addicted – by 20 she had men beckoning, on their knees with flowers in their arms, roses, orchids, lustily open, wanting to be touched.

Never enough, 2, 3, 15. It was never enough. She had to feel their need, etch her being, deep into the rind, an indelible mark. Then she sinks into the silence, alone, overwhelmed with mountains to climb. So, she buries her lust/love deep inside her toes and curls them tight, locking everything away. Her face blank for ten years, no words, no poetry, only anger, bushels and bushels of misplaced anger. No more sex, no love, no passion, no wicked thoughts.

She turns 30, leaking out, her desire leaks out, every pore, every opening, like a flood, like the Mississippi, rising up and over with nowhere to go. First her neighbor, then on to others, uncontrolled pleasure, consuming everything in its path. Never free, she will never swim free.

She would sleep with you first.

blackbird
[the beatles]

Rebecca Oet

dusk is her caress, a shadow flinging itself full across the horizon.
a wing, tips stretched thin, holding the house and yard aloft,
folding the entirety of the world to a single tapestry.
the moon is her mouth, gaping and open. I can see into her illuminated body, hollow.
the pines are her teeth, blunt with youth. fresh and glistening.

*

in 6th grade she broke her wrist, a wretched thing. an 11-year girl fell over her own lack
of friction, roller rink smooth. she flew. for a moment she thought she would launch
through the ceiling, but instead was struck from the sky before she could open her
eyes for the first time -- an uncrusting. dewy. she got up and bought herself a slushie
before collapsing by the old neon arcade machines.

I am dusk, her caress, her shadow holding her full to the horizon.
an eyelash gluing her face together, dewy. fresh and glistening,
stretched thin across her body, I drape.
her mouth is my eye, look through it and see illumination.
my body is not my body, her fingers are my teeth. chopped and numb and
folding.

*

my whole life I've been waiting for this moment to arrive I've been waiting I've been
waiting for her to dream me I've been waiting to see.

The Fevers

Mary Shanley

What I saw was a landscape,
littered with casualties, who suddenly
rise and dance their way off
the impromptu stage of my vision.
The cruelty of the nuns was even worse
than I remembered. In my fevers, I fought back.
I screamed, like they did. I hit them
with a baseball bat and they cried
out in pain. I was relentlessly seeking revenge,
payback for lack of protection.

I rode in a float in the frog parade. Croak.Croak.
“Hey honey, can you croak out a tune?” they
asked. “Everybody says you could make a tune
out of anything.” A cold compress on my forehead.
An ice bath. Fever, 105 degrees. Sips of water,
Scratching invisible bugs. Thrashing. Held down by
restraints. I resist the restraints so fiercely, with
the energy of a beast and break free.

Escape from hospital bed and out of my room. Slip
across the hall and there’s a door. I open it. A
slanted roof. I am standing in a hospital gown,
with the fevers on the slanted roof of the hospital.
The nurses found me and brought me back to the bed,
back to stronger restraints. I’m shivering, like I’ve
never known heat. Chattering teeth: wind ‘em up
and watch ‘em chew! I’m driving a muscle car,
full throttle on I-95. No destination, just speeding.
I tried to mail myself in the post box, but it flew
away. I grabbed a hold of a leg and took a flight;
landing inside the confessional. I had nothing
to confess, but to keep up the act, I tell the priest
the same sins as I always did, every week.

Confessionals gave me a headache. Before the hidden priest doles out penance, I tear down the purple velvet curtain from the confessional and leave, unforgiven by a Catholic god.

Robbed a candy store, only stole cartons of cigarettes and sold them in the parking lot outside school. Got a ticket for following too close behind a fire truck. Stay back 200 feet, the sign on the fire truck said. "Who the fuck knows how to distance 200 feet?" I said to the cop. He showed no mercy. Cost me one hundred and fifty. I got the fevers. I don't feel typical.

for Alison and Jamie

The Boy Who Knew

Nicholas Arnold

She was dying.

That much was clear. The way in which her skin hung loose on her face, thin as tissue paper, left no doubt about it. She wasn't in the literal process of dying—unless, of course, from the moment we become self-aware, we are all simply in the process of passing. It wasn't going to happen right that moment, no. But soon. To any objective observer, there was no denying it any longer.

James Wick knew this, although the lack of emotion he felt suggested he was, indeed, in some form of denial. He wasn't sure how one dealt with that; if they deal with it at all.

I suppose once she passes, that's what therapy is for, he thought.

James had stayed the night at his childhood home where his mother still lived (*for now*) at 66 Whidmere Avenue. He had convinced himself he had done so in order to be a good son; loyal and attentive to his ailing mother's needs. In actuality, he had an interview in the morning just a few blocks away. The decision had been made out of pure convenience.

He stood at the front door, looking into the living room where his mother lay on the couch, a thin, wool blanket covering her skeletal frame. She was coughing, struggling for air, as a hospice nurse entered from the hall in a brisk but remarkably calm walk. An oxygen tank that stood guard by the couch turned on with a switch. James watched, helpless, as his mother took in air through the mask.

"You're alright, Mrs. Wick," the nurse reassured her dying patient.

James cleared his throat.

"I have to go," he said. A wave of guilt immediately overcame him.

"Go do what you have to do," the nurse responded. She didn't mean it as a slight, he knew that. Yet his mind couldn't help but interpret it as such.

James opened an umbrella as the Vancouver rain fell; misty and oddly pathetic—as though it wanted to rain, but couldn't. He removed a scrap piece of paper from his pocket; an address scribbled faintly across: 33 Spineal Road.

The house in front of him sat on a gorgeous property at the bottom of a gradual slope that was lined with gardens, shrubbery and small ever-greens that eagerly soaked up the falling droplets with their branches. The stone walk-way to a small, two-story home began at the top of the bank. At the bottom, an awning made for a quaint porch at the entrance, where a woman sat in a lone rocker. From the top of the hill, James wondered if she was asleep, perhaps having dozed off watching the rain. As he drew closer, he saw that her eyes were wide but dazed, staring past him. She held something in her hand, massaging it with her thumb.

“Mrs. Avalon,” he said. Her gaze was slow and deliberate as she turned to register, “I’m James Wick from The Herald. I’m the one you talked to on the phone.”

Mrs. Avalon snapped out of her trance, taking note of her surroundings. She swallowed, struggling to find her voice and glanced down at what she was holding; a small, pocket watch.

“What time is it?” her voice hoarse from lack of use.

“I can come back.”

“Don’t leave.” The urgency with which she said this made James stiffen. She stood, wrapping the chain of the watch around its face and placing it in the pocket of her dress.

“Thank you for coming,” she turned and entered the house, leaving the door open for James to follow.

“I know I had it in my notes somewhere, but what’s the name of the award? The Chris—”

“—The Charles Larson Arts Award,” Mrs. Avalon corrected.

James sat with her at her kitchen table; a mess of papers and old photographs were tossed between them. He scribbled in his notebook.

“How did they—find out—about Nello?” he said, writing as he spoke. She took a calculated breath.

“I wrote to them. He was too young to be nominated.”

“Why do you think he won?”

“He had such an incredible eye. He found a way to speak through his talent,” she fought tears with each passing word. James stopped writing. He forced a smile that reporters often do when interviewing an unreliable subject. From what he could tell thus far, Mrs. Avalon did not seem overly stable.

“Can I see?” he asked.

Mrs. Avalon paused before opening the door and James felt a certain sense of reverence upon entering; as though they were about to explore a tomb that had remained sealed for centuries. In reality, it was simply a ten-year-old’s bedroom. A flick of a switch brought light to the preserved room—and preserved it was. Even the bed was still unmade; the sheets piled from the last time it had been occupied.

James stepped forward and in a single breath took in the scope of the young boy’s space. As his feet sunk in the carpet, his eyes scanned the walls which served as a canvas for paintings and charcoal sketches that covered nearly every square-inch, ceiling to floor. Most of the drawings were unintelligible, although he was able to make out some imagery—birds flying, a crudely drawn figure in lotus, geometric shapes and patterns. The art resembled the work of a mad-man, save for one piece which hung at the head of the bed; a beautifully rendered self-portrait of the boy himself. The detail and texture applied to the piece showed no sign of the rough, unhinged work that

surrounded it. Instead, it carried an almost photographic quality, transcending the confines of the stretched canvas and grinning at James who felt a small tingling in the base of his spine the moment he locked eyes with it.

Pulling his attention away, he noticed a keyboard tucked in the corner. It was hidden under an array of scattered papers which James discovered to be sheet music. He examined the pages covering the yellowed keys. All of them were hand-written.

“When did he start playing?”

“Four,” the mother said. She hadn't moved from the door.

James picked a single page from the pile. A child's writing scrawled across the top spelled out the words: 'my requiem'.

“And this?” James asked, holding the page.

“He started writing when he was six. He stopped for a long time. But then he wrote that.”

James brought the requiem close. He felt strange holding it, as though it were some sort of lost relic.

“Forgive me for saying this,” he cleared his throat and smirked, “It seems a little morbid for a child to write a requiem. Mozart fan?”

Mrs. Avalon didn't smile. James hadn't expected her to. Instead, she walked into the room in a swift motion that made him almost stumble back. Now she was only feet away, gazing at the portrait behind him; a silent connection with her deceased son. She swallowed, fighting tears as she moved towards the dresser beside his bed. The unit rattled as she pulled open its wooden drawer and reached in, removing a leather-bound book and unwrapping the strap. She handed it to James.

He was wary to take it, but he did, slowly turning its cover. It was a journal. Much like the drawings on the wall, the book contained manic scribbles that screamed in their frantic presentation. As he flipped through the pages, the tiny fibres of paper skimming the edges of his fingers, James read the haunting words of ten-year-old Nello Avalon:

It's all an illusion.

The oil burns!

I am no one.

I am everyone.

There is no death.

James's breathing had inadvertently heightened. An ever-urging sense of regret and fear had crept into the back of his mind.

Either the boy was crazy. Or worse—wasn't even real. This could all be her doing.

As his mind raced, he took notice of something he otherwise would have missed, had it not been for the already unusual atmosphere he felt in his surroundings. Every entry on every page was ear-marked with a date. The same date. October 10th.

“Nello died on October 10th,” Mrs. Avalon said, recognizing what James was

seeing. She was crying now, the tears falling silently past her cheeks, her eyes puffy and red.

“A few months ago he stopped everything. Writing. Playing. Drawing. He became very withdrawn and quiet. Only coming out to eat. He would meditate from the time he woke to the time he fell asleep. I didn't know it at the time, but he had become sick.”

James tightened his jaw. Now his heart was pounding. He wanted to leave. He *had* to leave. He shifted in place and tried to hand the journal back to Mrs. Avalon. She grabbed his arm, firm at first, than loosening. James locked eyes with her. Her breathing matched his; shallow but heavy.

“The night my son died,” she said, “Every clock in this house stopped.”

The words slammed into James with a tsunami of dread. It was as though he knew some sort of bomb-shell revelation was coming.

But this? The woman is insane.

Mrs. Avalon gestured to the drawer where she had retrieved the journal. Fighting every urge to do so, James moved to the dresser and bent down, reaching inside. His hand met with a pile of sketches and as he pulled them into the light, the blood drained from his face. Each depicted a time-piece of some sort, crudely sketched with lines scarring the paper. On the face of each clock were hands, spread to 11:11, an exuberant display of jubilation and praise. As his hand sorted through picture after picture, moving at an increasing pace, it stopped at a child's watch lying underneath the prophetic portfolio; the tiny waist-band frayed and worn. James held it in his palm and as the light of the ceiling fan hit its face he saw it.

11:11.

Frozen in time.

James dropped the watch, standing. He flung his satchel over his shoulder and as he acknowledged Mrs. Avalon's grief, his mind drifted to thoughts of his mother. In a moment, what he thought he knew about death faded away.

“I have to go,” he said, avoiding eye-contact. He moved towards the door. Mrs. Avalon regained her composure.

“He smiled,” she said, stopping him in his tracks. He didn't turn around, but he did listen.

“Before he died, he smiled,” she continued, “He discovered it. What it means to live. What it means to die. We're all afraid of death. But not Nello.”

He felt her move towards him, the hairs on the back of his neck standing.

“Please. Write this story. Others need to know his secrets. His writings must be heard. His music and art must be seen and felt.”

James stiffened as he felt her arm graze against his and he looked down to see her slip the single page of Nello's requiem into his open satchel. He didn't resist. Something inside him simply accepted.

“Please believe me, Mr. Wick.”

“I have to go,” he responded, “Someone else will write your article.”

James walked out of the room. Mrs. Avalon covered her mouth, tears coursing down.

“Don't go! Please!”

Rain patted rhythmically against the bedroom window as thunder clouds rolled by in the distance. All of this was brought to a calm and graceful zen by the sound of Lucy Wick's oxygen tank; her masked breathing providing a gentle pulse that James matched with his own breath as he sat in silent vigil. It was almost midnight; the room illuminated by a single lamp on the bedside table. A rosary and statue of *The Pietà* provided his mother with the necessary comfort she required.

She was looking at him; her thin hair matted by sweat, her eyes heavy as she took in what air she could. Her hand reached out and slowly uncurled in front of him. He took it, holding tight.

“Mom,” he said, his voice soft.

She held his hand with a strength he was shocked to discover she still had within her. Pulling upon that strength, she leaned forward.

“Love—...You,” she said through rasps and coughs.

James felt his eyes burning as they glossed over. He leaned forward and embraced her. Her hand held his head as her arms wrapped around him. It lasted for nearly a minute in silence. Then, he slowly lowered her back to the bed and all at once recognized the sweet vulnerability of the woman who had raised him.

Minutes later, he was in the living room. The door to her bedroom was slightly ajar; her oxygen tank humming from inside while she slept. As quiet as the house was, there was a great deal of noise if one were to sit in silence and listen.

James held a picture of his mother, amidst an array of photographs scattered across the coffee table. She was in her twenties in the photo; beautiful and charming.

Setting the photo down, his attention gravitated to his satchel, its mouth open, revealing the contents inside. A piece of hand-written music stuck out, inviting. He took the page, holding it with the tips of his fingers. The unsettling memories of the day rekindled and he marvelled at the souvenir in his hand. It was a child's writing, that much was certain.

He looked to the upright in the corner of the room; the same piano his mother had given him lessons on some thirty years earlier. Moving towards it, he gripped Nello's composition. There was a sudden eagerness to discover the boy's music. He sat, setting the requiem on the stand and lifting the lid, a thin layer of dust dissipating in the air as he did so. He took a moment, gathering his bearings as he stared at the white and black keys. And then he played—slowly at first—then gaining in tempo. He played the notes that Nello had written.

It was a haunting piece; a beautiful melody that elicited memories of loss and love all at once. James felt a chill from the base of his spine to the bottom of his skull

as he played; the memories of his mother's teachings returning while the boy's music breathed life once more. And there, sitting at his mother's piano James lost himself in the artistry of a child prodigy, his emotions taking over as tears rolled down his cheeks.

In the stillness of his emotional revelation, the clock that hung above the piano ticked obediently. The second hand followed its rudimentary course with each passing note of the boy's requiem.

It ticked.

And ticked.

The piece reached its climax, painful and mourning. James hit the final chord and it rang out, the sound drifting from the strings. The second hand pulsed in time.

And then, as simply as it had once been moving, it stopped.

All was quiet.

by Vivien Jones

We didn't know we were poor

We didn't know we were poor.
Boiled eggs chopped up in a teacup,
the warm yellow yolk pooling
over the white chunks;
white bread soldiers on the plate
a teaspoon to scoop the last morsels.
nothing to do with a lack of egg cups

We didn't know we were poor.
Mince and sausages, corned beef,
circular slices of pink ham,
lots and lots of filling mash and gravy,
jugs of runny custard, semolina,
rice pudding and rhubarb
a roasted chicken at Christmas

We didn't know we were poor.
My mother did ; she filled all five of us
with scraps and leftovers, making a feast
of every meal, welcoming her hero home
with a set-aside dish -something spicy
for my father - we sniffed and frowned -
later, she ate the leftovers of ours.

Scribing Gouge

In my hands, molecules
of my father's sweat,
my true love's sweat,
a patina of constant use.

A block of box-wood,
brass for the ferrule,
steel for the shaft,
unmeasured as yet.

1920s - at Kelly & Sons
in Nelson, Liverpool,
a bright new tool assembled,
polished, sharpened.

Dad, young shipwright
chooses carefully, frugally,
paying as much as he can,
as little as is negotiable.

All the years he sharpened it,
worn away an inch of steel,
the water-stone is slick,
the leather strop is shiny.

Dad, old shipwright
about to move house,
offers a bundle wrapped
in newspaper; his tools.

Husband, instrument-maker,
takes the gift, extols
the virtues of cared-for tools,
both men are content.

Apprentice, here to help,
to learn, to innovate,
young hands on an old tool,
young hands in an old craft

In my hands, molecules
of three men's sweat now,
on the century old handle
of a century old tool

Nature Study

I take my half-Japanese grandchildren
on a Spring-leafed woodland walk.
They are town-dwellers, park visitors,
these uneven, accidental paths weave
through many layers of green close
enough to touch their fragile bodies.
'Mind the nettles'
I say every time I see one;
their almond eyes widen,
I mime a sting, point to a leaf.
There are no nettles in Japan,
only snakes and biting insects,
carelessly filleted fish that kill,
neatly landscaped public places,
and children that obey parents.
The middle child, a girl,
spots her own nettle,
holds up a finger to still my warning,
'Mind the nettle,' she whispers
leaning so close her eyes cross.
Two flickering peacocks flutter by,
the children laugh and point,
one lands, splays its gaudy wings,
the other stands close, wings clamped.
With a twig I tip the nearby nettles back,
show the rows of olive green rice grains
'Eggs' I tell them, nodding at the peacocks.
They walk their fingers on their palms
'...pirrars !' they cry in concert.

My Mother's Poetry

had the structure of housework
broadcast each day, except Sunday,
in rigid metre, in pinny and scarf.
No radio presence interrupted
her contemplation of metaphors,
her broad sideboard surface the world's
acres covered in dust and anguish.
She figured-eighted a yellow duster
to deal with dust, extinguished
the anguish in small measures
of listening and compassion,
an unknown natural healer.
Each day's dinner preparations
made her rich ; her casseroles
of mince and peas and carrots,
bubbling sluggishly in rich gravy,
made her treasure her
personal wealth in a poor world.
Cleaning the mess, messing the clean,
her recipe for good living.
Small philosophies in a good mind
tamed by family ; each child
a promise of life after death,
each meal a down payment.

I Nearly Drowned, Daddy

As a child, one of three, play-swimming
in the lacy-edged, turquoise, kind Mediterranean,
staying close to Daddy's strong arms,
in a moment of brash adventure, I dove
right under, eyes open in a sea of legs,
forgot to hold my breathe, and breathed.
Daddy hoiked me up by my swimsuit straps,
a dripping dead weight, spluttering, coughing,
he slapped my back none too softly.
I nearly drowned, Daddy - I wept dramatically,
he laughed, he just laughed as if it was nothing,
carried me to shore over his uncaring shoulder.

.....

I see the childrens' bodies, the ones who did drown,
in the cold, navy-blue, unkind Mediterreanean.
they are layered on the sea's dark bottom,
still clutching likewise drowned parents,
flung over their shoulders, quietly embracing
siblings in a lacework of right-angled limbs.

**BJ 581 in Birka
or
Androcentrism in Archeology**

Scandinavia 1880s

In the grave a warrior
with generous grave goods,
shields, an axe, a spear, a sword,
a bow with weighty arrows,
a stallion, a mare,
some game pieces
- a strategist then.
-

1970s

Osteological analysis
identifies the bones
are female.

Was she then a lover,
a wife, a sister, cousin, aunt ?
Was she laid there in jest,
as a punishment, as an example ?
Was she in receipt of inherited wealth ?

2017

American Journal of Physical Anthropology
after intensive DNA Analysis

*'The results call for caution against generalizations
regarding social orders in past societies,'*

lead researcher, Charlotte Hedenstierna-Jonson

In my heart and mind, today
Let her have been a sturdy woman,
scarred, broken-nosed, gap-toothed,
breasts bound for comfort in a fight,
no blonde plaits, no horned helmet,

a great belcher and farter,
a screamer in sex, childbirth and battle,
with thighs to grip a horse rather than a man.
Let the warrior describe the woman.

After the Funeral

(Frances, my sister - 1945 - 2016)

At last we are in the bar, somewhere familiar,
we pour into the space, those who belong,
like dancers who know their starting spot.

We, the seldom-seen relatives, welcomed
with a drink of something strong and sweet,
we stand together talking only to each other.

The men have loosened their ties, dumped jackets,
the women pile pale blossoming hats on a chair,
the children have started to race and shout.

We were more at home in the crematorium,
its taming quiet more comfortable for strangers,
keeping the lid on volume, on unfit laughter.

But the girl she was, the girl only I remember -
she would have laughed out loud, shared the joke,
told them to turn the bloody music down, seen

our discomfort and pulled us into the crowd,
pressed us with tiny sandwiches and cheese straws,
been the perfect hostess, had she been there.

Three Toy Shops

Malta - 1950s

Down the curving marble stairway,
two doors down Prince of Wales Road,
three steps up to a cavern of kites
hanging like technicolour bats,
tails bundled up in an elastic band.
I stood, a child of nine, silent in wonder,
imagining such a community
or kites must come alive each closing time
and fly up into the Mediterranean sky
there to share the night with bats and swifts,
before hanging again, swinging slightly,
in the shop.

Edinburgh 1980s

Blimey - a toy shop
with a resident child psychologist.
Serious business, play - not to be
wasted, not to be noisy, not to be pointless.
Serious young assistants demonstrate
the worthy wooden toys which are :
age-appropriate, develop fine motor skills,
improve hand-to-eye co-ordination.
In the corner, by the exit, two five year olds
have found a packing box waiting for disposal.
It is, at the moment, a castle but will over the time
the adults confer, become a ship, a lorry and a cage.

Castle Douglas 2018

We have had to be fierce, it has taken some time to be rid of the pink for Princesses, the blue of toys for boys, we have mostly failed, but for a few exceptions where a toy shop lights up the minds of child and adult with the multi-coloured, multi-cultured, multi-inspirational piles and shelves and boxes of things too many to list. Go there, take your children, take your grandchildren, wallow in their excitement, remember your own.

October Walk, Enhanced

I walk this woodland most days,
I know the parts of the path where
roots trip unwary walkers, the parts
where rainfall makes a mudbath.

I know its changing shades,
the glowing canopy that drops
its colours with the first frost,
a sensation underfoot.

But today, with two friends -
two biologists - walking slowly,
I peel more sensuous layers away.
'Smell that' one says, over a fungus.

I bend and inhale the pungent earth,
decay turned to growth. I walk round
trunks to trace the moss and lichen,
following the light and damp.

Heads cocked to catch birdsong,
heads together to watch the stream,
my friends, the biologists, scatter small
notes, small factual notes all round.

Water Portal

Too late now to un-know what you have discovered.
Stop struggling, the limpets have you in their sucking grip,
It is the moonlight that has betrayed you, its lying light
led you to this shore where you wait for judgement.

Soon, soon the shoal will come, if you cease moaning
you will hear the sweep and flow of their coming,
a thousand mermaids, fish tailed virgins coming to
the dryness of land and men to debate your case.

There is no defence, you have seen our portal,
watched me come and go all this glittering night,
I saw your eyes on my spun hair and breasts,
I saw your eyes on my writhing tail, my plated beauty,

Mermaids and selkies know the treachery of men,
their loving deceits, their desperate promises,
their loose tongues, flapping like gaffed fish,
a thousand stolen mer-tails and sealskins testify.

Hear the rush beyond the portal, it is the small
motion of a million sea horses showing the way
to the sea locked elders, barnacled creatures with
minds full of ship-wreck and watery mayhem.

Drowning is like sleeping a dreamless sleep,
but mermaids do not sleep or drown.

I will help you drown gently if they say it,
closing your frightened eyes to the sky.

Venison

Chris Cleary

People make jokes about car salesmen all the time, about how we're all slick as cat shit. Well, some of us are, but not me. Now it's true Lewiston Subaru put me on the floor because I have a fresh, young face and all that bull, but I'm no pretty boy. I know every car in stock, their engines and systems, what makes them do what they do. And I think I'm easygoing. I don't pressure you. You're free to make up your own mind in the end. I'm not going to chase you through the lot if you're trying to leave. See, I'm a sharp guy. Not book smart, but I can read people. There's something you'll say that tells me if it's sale or no sale. Sometimes I'll know in less than two minutes if you're going to buy. How high you're willing to go. What kinds of features you'll pay for. And so on. I guess you could say that given where I come from, I can't afford not to be able to do that. Read people, I mean.

See, I grew up in Stopes, on Railroad Avenue just in back of the dollar store, and with my dad dying in Fallujah and my mom going to pieces and not being around much afterward, I only had myself to make sure I got through high school. Wasn't too hard. They just wanted you to show up regular, not cause any problems, smile a lot like there's no place you'd rather be, and they'll get you passed.

Then I had to make sure Fawn got through. She wasn't really a problem anyhow because she's so shy. And I mean really shy. She can't even look most people in the eyes when she talks. And she's got this tiny voice that I guess you could say disarms people, helps them feel all protective of her, because she's so small, and her with her jet black baby bangs, she seems like some kind of porcelain doll. The only thing I had to watch with her was getting her out to the bus on time. Some mornings she just didn't want to go. Said she had no real friends. And lately I've had to make sure she doesn't bring home too many strays, because she sure loves her cats. But I guess that was good training anyhow because she got a pet-sitting service going after she graduated last May. It's really only part-time, but all her customers give her good reviews.

Jakie's another story. He's 16 and lanky like me, and kids make fun of his twangy voice, and he's sensitive about being in special ed, so he was starting to pick fights. So I took him aside and told him to look at the long game. Keep your nose clean, let the teachers help you get through, which they're ready to do because, "Oh, you're Lee's little brother, aren't you?" I think he's turned it around, but I'll sure be glad when he's out of there.

Okay, so that's enough about us folks, the Scarlet clan. What I really want to talk about is the people next door, and one in particular. Around the corner from us is their two-story box of a house, and a large tree in their front yard with brown leaves that stick to the branches like glue and never turn green, and the rusty shell of an old Dodge Dart in the back yard. And a flimsy chain link fence running round the property,

something that's not going to stop you if you take a running leap at it. Not that they have anything worth stealing, so you wonder what it's there for, who they're trying to keep out. Or in.

The dad, old Stimson Ferrick, he's a bit of a celebrity, and not just around here. Used to be a cop until he got involved with some hoods that tried to knock over a bank down in Lexington a few years back. We're all wondering when they're going to catch him, or if he's dead somewhere, buried in some field or fish food at the bottom of some river. The mother's sure he's dead. She remarried this loafer called Stanley. The boys, on the other hand, probably still think he'll be coming home any day now. Of course I never talked about it to Dane, the older one. We never really spent time together, that is, until lately. I'm pretty certain the younger one, Adam, does. I bet deep down in the puzzle of his heart he's just waiting for him to walk through the front door.

Adam was part of Fawn's class. Just barely graduated. He's this runty guy, with these beady eyes and a head full of coarse red hair sticking straight up, and his last name being Ferrick, it was only a matter of time till someone nicknamed him the Ginger Ferret. The name stuck, though he didn't seem to know about it. Nobody ever called him that to his face, probably because they were afraid he'd take a bite out of their leg. Besides, the hair isn't the strangest thing about him. It's his smile. He doesn't smile much, but when he does, it gradually breaks on his face as if he's suspicious about not having permission to smile in the first place. And it isn't really a smile. More like a leer. Something not right about it, like a needle in a sandwich. Kids tried to get him excited about things, like a food day in class or a test being cancelled, because then he'd start rubbing his hands together, jerky, like he was having a spasm, and if he got really excited, he'd hop up and down in a little war dance, like he was possessed by Satan himself.

A real piece of work. There was the time he stole a horse from Dot's consignment, you know, next to the prosthetic leg store in Bensonville. One day back in my senior year, we noticed sitting on their porch was this fake dead horse. Apparently they didn't have room for it inside, so Dot just left it lying there right next to the welcome mat. It was a movie prop, you see, and we knew that because there were all these note cards taped to it that said "Movie Prop" and "Not Real Horse." Yeah, we all had to go up and check it out.

Well, one weekend it disappeared. You know where it went? The Ginger Ferret and a couple of his buddies—some losers called Lurch and Bluto—drove the pickup out one middle of the night and stole it. Hauled it back to his place. I was awake and watched from the kitchen window as they took the tarp off and three of them carried it into the Ferrick house. Up to his bedroom. I saw the light go on. The mom must've been out working, and I'm sure Stanley didn't give a damn. I can see it now. Probably still there with all those tags on it, as if he has to swear there's nothing unusual or wrong with sleeping next to a dead horse, fake or otherwise.

I guess the Ferret always had an eye on my sister, but after they graduated, he

suddenly realized it was time to do something about it. First time I noticed this I was coming home early from the Subaru place, and I stopped by South Branch Elementary on my way back because I knew Fawn was picking up some extra money being a sub that day, so I thought I'd see how she was doing and follow her home when school let out, which was pretty soon because by the time I got there, the bus was already waiting outside. South Branch's right up next to the mountain, and all the town's got is a convenience store and post office and garage. I mean, it's real beautiful countryside, but pretty small, and the school's this one big hall with a dinky stage at the end, and five or six classrooms off it. Just a hint of finger paints and Elmer's glue floating on top of old textbooks, and the books'd come to smell anyway like all the old lumber of the building. A homey kind of feeling. Like summer camp, where you're always catching the smell of the fields and the woods just outside.

So anyway, who stopped by when he had no real reason to, South Branch being in the middle of nowhere as I said, was the Ferret. I went inside, and he was sitting on top of a stack of teeny plastic chairs real still like some mannequin so's not to tip them all over.

"They making you repeat?" I joked.

"Nah."

"What you doing here?"

"Just hanging out."

"You check in with the office?"

"Nah."

Not surprising. He wasn't one for following the rules.

"We should probably go do that. Let them know we're here."

I walked toward one of the rooms on the side of the hall. At the office door I had to gesture again before he slid off the stack of chairs and joined me. Someone told us the bell was about to ring and just wait there.

"I thought you worked with your brother at the trout farm, Adam."

"Yeah."

"Well?"

"Day off."

"Out driving?"

"Yeah."

"Thought you'd stop by?"

"Yeah."

"Cause you miss school this much?"

"What you think?"

And there was that needle-smile.

I still had no idea why he was there. That is, until the bell rang, and all the kids ran out of the rooms and got their stuff off the pegs, and some of them horsed around a bit before they all got on the bus, and the Ferret was up like a shot and beelining to one of

the classrooms. He must've scouted her out through the door window. He knew exactly where to go. Seemed he was making it a race to see which of us two got there first.

When I got to Fawn's classroom, he was just chatting away, like he was reciting stuff he'd memorized off a card, he was jumping around from topic to topic so much. I just stood in the doorway, and of course Fawn saw me as soon as I got there because she was avoiding his stare, and so I waved, and she waved back with three of her fingers. She gave me her usual peek-a-boo kind of look. It didn't say, "Come rescue me," or anything like that, so I just let the Ferret talk on and on until he ran out of ammunition.

Which eventually he did, so I stepped up and asked Fawn how the kids were for her, and she said she guessed they were okay. I was going to ask her about what she had to teach when he popped his shitty little weasel head back into the conversation.

"I don't see how you can put up with it."

"What do you mean?"

"All those brats running around. Screaming and squealing."

"Oh, they're not so bad."

"You serious? They're like those yappy dogs, what are they, those Mexican ones?"

"Chihuahuas," I said.

"Yeah. Or them mini poodles."

He glanced at me to make sure I got the comparison.

"I hate those things," he said, as confident as a kid standing on an anthill with a magnifying glass. "They come up at you growling, think they got you scared, but all you got to do is step on 'em, and they'll shut up."

That apparently was his lesson for the day, the law of the jungle, and how we'd all be ruthless as wolves if we could.

Anyhow, I knew there was something more he wanted to say to her, so I told Fawn I'd see her back at the house soon and left the classroom. Only I stopped around the corner of the door just to listen in, and sure enough, the Ferret suggested that both of them might watch a movie over his place that weekend. I hardly heard Fawn give her okay, but that was just her being quiet-spoken and not any kind of reluctant because it was the Ferret in particular who done the asking.

So since this was the end of the school year when all this started to happen, I got to see a lot of the Ferret over the summer months. Sometimes he'd invite himself over to play Xbox with Jakey while Fawn just sat and smiled and played with her cats. Sometimes he'd bring over DVDs he rented from Squishy's over in Bensonville, and it was usually some dumb slasher movie, so Fawn'd sit there uncomfortable while he cracked jokes at the blood and gore. I suggested to him in private that he switch it up, try out some comedies like *Anchorman* or *The Hangover*. The next time he came, he presented the DVD case to me real formal-like and asked me in a half-snotty way if I approved. All I did was nod and go to the fridge for a beer while I sat in the dining room

and pretended to work on bills.

As summertime wound down and the weather started getting cooler, they'd spend their time together outdoors, and Fawn'd watch the Ferret tune up his Ford. Just a matter of her grabbing a chair and a soda and wandering over to his driveway. I mean, that was the thing. He was right next door. If you're not getting out there—even just into Lewiston—and not meeting people, then your phone's not ringing off the hook, and you're going to settle for low-hanging fruit. It all boils down to supply and demand. Same thing drives sales.

So I figured I better talk to Dane and see what he had to say about all this. See where he thought his brother stood. I mean, I wasn't going to sit down and embarrass the hell out of Fawn by having one of those older-brother talks. She's got a good head on her shoulders, and even though she wouldn't have had the gumption to tell me to stay out of her life, I figure she didn't need any of my advice. And the Ferret, well, who the hell could get a straight answer from him, I mean, except maybe his brother? So it had to be Dane.

We went for a drink or two at Tooter's and talked mostly about the old high school days and what everyone was up to, about cars, about my line of work and his, all just kind of ice-breaker stuff until I even mentioned his brother, but when I did, I'm sure he came to realize why we were there. Dane's not dumb. He's one of those folks who come into the showroom having done all the homework beforehand. I had one question in particular I wanted to ask him, but I never did because he was starting to look resentful, like he was being used, and he'd say it was none of his business, maybe even that it was none of *my* business, and then change the subject or get up and hit the head. Other than mentioning his brother had been fired from the hatchery the week before, he didn't go into any particulars, but the bottom line, at least what I was able to gather, was that the Ferret still hadn't gotten his shit together.

He must have felt bad about putting me off about all my questions about his brother because the next week he calls me up and asks me if I wanted to go hunting with them that weekend. Firearms season had just begun, and we'd head out to the Bradley Pond area in the national forest. I thought it was a good idea, so I agreed. Maybe my being around the little twerp would set him a good example and give him some focus, some maturity. Maybe Dane thought that too. I didn't mention this to Fawn, who was generally against hunting and always got sick whenever we were out driving and she saw a deer thrown uncovered into the back of a pickup.

That morning it took a while for the deer to start moving. Hunting should teach you some patience, right? But the Ferret was griping that ever since October it had all been a waste of time. He couldn't wait and took his shotgun out there during early muzzleloader and didn't catch anything except holy hell for firing it out of season. While we waited, I got to thinking about Fawn, so I took out my phone to take some wildlife photos that she'd appreciate, some nice scenic stuff like piles of autumn leaves stirring in the breeze off a small waterfall.

About 9:00 Dane suggested we move off up to a ridge that looked down on a small clearing. He had scouted the area a couple weeks before and had seen lots of whitetails coming through midmorning. We settled ourselves on some rocks. Dane got out his binoculars, and the Ferret reached under his vest, took out a power bar, and began to munch away.

"I got nothing," Dane said eventually. "Here, you take them." And he handed me the binoculars.

I scanned left and right of the clearing and was about to give up myself when I thought I saw some movement through some greenbrier. I crept slowly to my right past the Ferret and down the ridge for a better angle.

"What? You see something?" he said.

"Maybe."

And there it was. Some antlers above the leaves. I lowered the binoculars and raised the .30-06. In a few seconds I scoped a beautiful four-pointer coming from around the bush. Then I heard some movement to the left of me.

"He's mine, Adam," I whispered as loud as I dared.

The buck had turned himself rear-end, and I was waiting for him to quarter so I could get a clean lung-shot. But at the same time, I knew the Ferret was raising his rifle. I whispered again. *Wait! Wait!* I should have shouted to warn the buck off, or else lowered and grabbed his stock to put his shot in the air. But all the time, and this was just seconds, all the time I was hoping he wouldn't be stupid and take the poor shot.

But he did. I heard the crack, and the back of its left leg disappeared in a pink mist. The buck scrambled and disappeared behind the greenbrier.

The next day the Ferret was at work on his car. His head was stuck under the hood, and he wasn't talking much at all. I stood there watching him under that brown tree of theirs that hadn't even bothered to change its colors to the yellows and reds of autumn. Fawn was sitting off to one side in a quiet kind of mooniness that made me cringe. I decided to grab my phone before I walked over to join them. I knocked on the side of the car to announce my presence.

"Shame about yesterday," I said.

"I don't want to hear about it," said my sister.

"Yeah, day was a bust," said the Ferret.

I handed my phone to Fawn.

"Play the movie. I got some nice things to show you. The beauty of nature."

She cocked an eye.

"There's no killing, is there?"

"No. No killing."

After a series of trickling streams and close-ups of bluebells and geraniums, she came to the part where the three of us approached the spot where the buck had been shot. She watched the Ferret stoop to pick up its shattered leg and hold it up like some

bizarre trophy. Then he laughed uncontrollably, bounced it in the air as if to reenact its escape, and danced a jig of mock victory.

Fawn watched the movie until the very end. Then she walked slowly over to the Ferret, who had now emerged from his cover beneath the hood. His face cracked into that poisonous smile of his. Standing behind her, I couldn't witness the rage that must've gathered on her face, but I did see her free hand ball itself into a fist and land a punch right between the beads of his eyes.

The Ferret staggered and squeaked. Fawn bolted from her violence. And I was filled with something wonderful, probably a brotherly kind of pride.

by Francine Witte

Chairs

Millie likes her chair simple. Like she likes her men. She likes to feel the bones. Chair bones should be good and sturdy. She wants to know it can support her.

Elise, on the other hand, likes it big and cushy. She wants to feel like she's swallowed up. Not know where it starts or ends. Like she's being gently cradled.

Baby, on the third hand, likes a big, strong rocker. She wants to be flung to and fro. Swing like a pendulum on unsturdy chair legs. Who knows when and if she will fall.

You can see my problem. How hard it is to set up a bridge game for this bunch.

New

You like the smell of new. New car. New apartment. New love.

You know, when you meet someone for the first time and your hands aren't sure and you squeeze too hard/too soft and when you say you're sorry, should you have said that?

And you love everything you used to hate because it's what this new person likes and how uncool is it to be uncool?

At the restaurant, you don't order spaghetti. You order rice. Nice, biteable, rice.

Pretty soon, you've settled into a groove with all this new, and man, it feels good, and that's when you look around at all the other people. All the ones you haven't met, and you realize that they're even newer than new and that's when you quietly sniff your dessert, a non-drippy apple pie and you wonder if the apples have started to go bad.

That night, right

before the end of us, we swirled in one last dance. All lights off, the two of us trying to keep the glow within us, but really that was gone.

Only the truth was shining. That love has an end date, and it's stamped on a heart, and when it comes it's just dead over.

And no matter how you try to dance, how fancy the steps, how you block out the light, or try to become the light, when that end date comes, the dark of finished love snaps on, leaving you to swirl all alone in the swallowing dark.

by John Sweet

this fragmented music

says *this is the broken bell*
and then she rings it

seven thirty, dark, and my hands
filled with the idea of rain

the rooms below me empty

nothing but the words of ghosts
written in chalk down
cracked sidewalks,
and she says it's not love
that she wants

says she has a husband for that,
and children,
and when she smiles it
sounds like anger

sounds like the corpses of
100,000 slaughtered indians
being dumped into mass graves

i would know that song
anywhere

subtle warmth

woke up like some joni
mitchell song like sunlight on soft
white walls, knew your name and
your face and your past and
none of the bullshit or pain mattered

none of the windows
were broken

thought about this
while i watched you dress

below zero

two o'clock february driving into the
face of god
blinded
hands cracked and bleeding in the frozen river
taste of dust memory of salt
and the buildings all shadows without
substance

the road where it ends at the house of lepers
in the field of crows

trees without beauty faces without
warmth and no story
and no plot
and only clocks coated with grime
only gears clotted with the blood of forgotten
wars of forgotten fathers of
unborn children

only these children
with their meaningless names

only this moment already beyond me

in the kingdom of nil

wakes up with the memory of
sunlight from that last good summer filling his
head and thinks about how to
get it back

thinks about the sword of damocles

about the suicide of a ten-year old boy
in the next town over and
he looks at his hands

he is tired of zealots
of demagogues
of the corrupt staying fat on
the flesh of the weak

understands there is no such thing as a
god who will give without taking

no such thing as
a god who cares and
he is sinking and he is trapped in concrete

he is walking blind into
oncoming traffic

and there is still room for hope here
but not as much as you've been told

in the lesser world

this wasteland of our own invention

these junkies gnawing on
the bones of angels

thought i told you i loved you when
we were both 16, but i was wrong

thought the desert
would have boundaries

thought escape would
always be an option

blamed myself for
being so goddamn young

a reason to run

nodding out on the
couch while his wife overdoses
in the bathroom he is thinking
of america he is thinking of nothing and
she is blue and she is smaller in
the grey light of history his
hand finding the flame his
rotting teeth his bleeding gums and
he is someone
goddammit
he is someone and
she is dead whether or not you
believe in the future, she is
the next song just after
the commercial break and
he is laughing

he is falling

there is never enough
time to hit bottom

trail of tears

a world of human failure, yes,
where children still step on land mines
left over from wars that were neither
won nor lost

where they still fall into
forgotten wells and
then become forgotten themselves

let pain be your guide, i suppose, like
some grey map filled with grey words

let the fire spread, or the fear

listen carefully
to these small distinctions

don't keep making the same
mistakes we all do

providence

the silence like glass in
the empty spaces
between abandoned factories

the sky like the ghost of falling leaves

grey burned to purple and
cut with wires

gorky's feet three inches above the floor

the last words he ever says to
his wife and daughters
useless and forgotten and then the
first time i tell you i love you
and then all the rest

the road we take
to reach the dying man's house

every room in it
thick with the smell of decay and
all of the clocks moving backwards
towards zero

all of the spikes driven through
the eyes of sleeping children

and you tell me
that it doesn't happen here
which isn't the same thing as saying
it doesn't happen

you tell me that beauty matters
but you never say why

you never hold it up against
the ugliness that helps define it

we can only ever be as blind as
whatever god we choose
to crawl towards

frost

finds joy in music and
in silence

sits in the same blue room his
marriage fell apart in
but no longer writes about it

those days are dead and gone,
like kahlo and pollock,
like ernst, and the
sky here bleeds beyond its borders

the woman he loves sends him
letters from 3000 miles away

he goes to bed depressed,
wakes up frightened,
stumbles out into the painful
light of too many ordinary hells

wonders when time
became the enemy

why his scars are only
beautiful when no one else
can see them

BOWED OUT

G D Brown

Momma was sitting there in the front row with her hands in her lap. She had balled up a tissue with her pudgy fingers, and she dabbed at her eyes with it from time to time. Then, she smiled with tear-sprinkled cheeks when I spoke my lines. She nodded when I sang. After all, she'd paid for my lessons, when, after school, I'd visited that fat old man's house with its piles of dog shit and the kids screaming over their board games, and that man and his big ol' paws had hit the piano and said I'd learn how to make my throat move like Frank Sinatra. Yes, Momma paid for the lessons for her chubby baby boy and then watched me, almost a goddamn man, from the front row, in front of other parents who traveled in from their family farms, where they grew corn and took care of chickens and woke up before the sun every morning. I was sweaty and my belly hung over the tops of my feet, but I sang for them and I performed for them like a real Hollywood actor. They were in for a treat, and Momma knew that better than anyone.

Afterward, I dreamed about the stage every night for a month, the lights bright and hot, our costumes crisp and unwrinkled and, in places, held together with safety pins. I'd walked all over the stage like I'd built the damn thing. I'd made Momma cry quiet, happy tears I hadn't seen before. The drama teacher had said I'd done the part right, and I didn't hear her say that to anyone else the whole night. And at the end of everything, after the bows, when the makeup mask had slid off my face like pancake butter, my Momma still sat there, smiling and glowing like the moon in the sky. So, I promised her I'd never stop.

* * *

"Ladies and gentlemen, boys and girls, God bless America, and y'all come back and see us. Have a good night, now!"

In Branson, Missouri, the real, weathered professionals like me can't much tell anyone in the crowd from anyone else at the end of the show, either on account of the lights or the fact that all those people in their dirty, velvet-covered seats are really just different versions of each other, flapping mouths full of various sets of the same words and hankerings for originality. I was in my forties, and the entire, faceless crowd clapped for me, and I blew them kisses and bowed from my waist like they'd taught me to. Then, I walked backstage and washed off my makeup in an ordered dressing room with unintentionally exposed brick that I shared with a guy who dressed up as a Civil War general during the day shift. An aluminum cap from a bottle of vodka rolled around the worn wooden floor, and it sounded like money, like cold, hard cash. I stripped off my suit and tossed it into a basket by the dressing room door. Then, I took the vodka and went out back behind the theater in my blue jeans. I watched the lines of cars sit still on the Branson strip, trapped by the never-ending taillights that burned holes in the

night between the half-lit signs from endless roadside attractions behind them. I smoked cigarettes. The guillotine wind grabbed at my neck and snowflakes like falling stars wandered the open spaces below the streetlights. My city turned the wheels of tourists nearly every week of the year. I watched them go back off into the dark from a concrete step at the back of the theater building as often as I could, and I wondered if I'd ever see them again.

I pulled on the open vodka bottle and went back inside. A woman who could barely speak English had my dirty suit draped over her arms as she walked past me. I winked at the woman, but she didn't take any notice. I'd find the suit pressed and on a hanger the next morning, anyhow. It didn't matter if she saw me.

By the time I was 21, I'd lost all the excess weight that I'd brought onstage with me in high school. I was fit when I first did stage work for the Presleys, and I'd stayed fit through my time acting at the Silver Dollar City, the Legends Theater, and on the Branson Showboat, where I'd told jokes and sang a decade-old pop music medley for people while another guy did magic tricks with metal hoops and mirrors. I'd started working as the host and narrator of Simon's Country Rock Opera when I was 42, and I was still just about rail-thin then. I'd lived my whole adult life in Branson, and I'd spent a fair amount of that time doing my best to make sure everyone with a vagina and at least a part-time job entertaining the people in the Ozarks knew about the tiny grooves that outlined my hips. I'd never told any of them about the fleshy beach ball I'd carried under my shirt in high school, and that seemed to work out best for just about everybody involved.

Luanne Roberson, for instance, was well aware of the grooves in my hips. My stomach was warm with vodka when I walked through the falling snow to the hotel where she stayed. When I'd first met Luanne, she'd rented a cheap hotel room and told me she wouldn't be in Branson much longer and couldn't justify signing a lease, but more than a year later, she was still here, just at a cheaper hotel, a yellowing building with a neon sign that nearly always read "vacancy."

I nodded to a woman with a double chin in the wood-paneled hotel lobby as I passed by, as I usually did. She wore too much makeup and smelled both sweet and vinegary from a distance, like she believed that there was a certain quantity of cheap perfume that could somehow replicate the quality of a scent worth buying. Her pink shoulder skin showed through a hole in her blouse, and entire swaths of her hair stuck together in greasy chunks on either side of her head. She just worked the desk in the hotel lobby, though, so it didn't matter much what she wore or how she fixed her hair. So, I kept smiling and nodding as I headed down chocolate milk tile and out of the lobby, probably made her day.

When I knocked on Luanne's door, I could hear her roll over off the bed. She opened the door and spit on the ground next to my feet. Her fingers curled around her cigarette and then split like legs around a pole. It was beautiful, the way she hung on

the door like it was the only thing keeping her from falling to the ground, the lipstick stain on the cigarette, her giant eyebrows rising and then falling again when she saw it was me who had been knocking. My hair was still slicked back against my head like it had been painted onto my scalp, and I followed her wide-apart eyes to the top of my head as she spoke.

"Sorry, I thought you weren't coming by," she said.

Her voice flowed off her tongue caramel sweet, cigarette smoke and all. She sounded like a girl half her age. Her face, however, had started to crease, and her blue eyes dug in deep into their sockets. I figured she'd probably been stamping out silver hairs with black dye for at least a year or so.

"I always do," I said.

"Well, come on in then."

She shut the door behind me, and I sat down on her naked bed. The sheets were in a heap on the floor among piles of dirty laundry, and a dusty ceiling fan knocked warm air around the room as it blew in from a window unit. I kicked my shoes off and lit a cigarette. Then, I put my feet up on the bed.

"Got anything to drink?" I asked.

"What, you need booze to love me now?"

"A little booze will help you love anything. It's nothing personal, really."

She walked into the kitchenette, and I heard her fumble glass bottles on the counter.

"I decided I'm going back to Arkansas," she said as she returned, a half-full glass of dark liquor in her hand. "Is brandy fine?"

I nodded and pulled the cigarette out of my mouth. I ashed in a bowl of milk-soaked cereal on the nightstand.

"So, you're finally leaving?" I asked her. "I thought your next stop was the coast. Arkansas hardly seems like the proper place for the brightest soprano in Branson."

She set the glass down on the floor and lay across the foot of the bed.

"Don't tease me, Rick. I'm too old for this shit."

"You think Streisand is too old for this shit?"

"Hilarious. I'm not Streisand."

"You never will be, either, if you go on back to Arkansas."

"Streisand never lived in a hotel named after baldknobbers."

I took a drink and crossed my legs.

"What do you even have going on in Arkansas?"

"Not a thing, as far as work goes," she said picking up her glass off the floor, "but I need a new start, and I can stay with my folks if I need to."

"You've only been here a year."

She finished her drink and tossed the empty glass back onto the carpet.

"And that's all time I've wasted," she said. "This town is a dump."

She crawled toward me and put her head in my lap.

"But you get to sing every night, and then, they pay you a real decent wage," I said. I pushed her out of my lap and stood up in the middle of the room. She sat with her legs open in the center of the bed in her dress, and I could see the milky part of her thigh without even looking for it. I glanced over the top of her head, and the wall behind the bed was stained yellow with cigarette smoke. My head felt like it could topple off my neck, so I finished off my brandy.

"I don't want to sing about amazing grace or our country tis of thee or any of it," she said. "These are songs for little kids. I'll be fifty years old before too long. I don't have time to sing song for little kids."

"Oh, come now. It ain't too bad. People would sell their souls to sing this shit. You're a star, dressing room and all."

"A nameplate on a door ain't going to do it for me too much longer, Rick."

"Then, make something more out of yourself," I said, the cigarette dangling out of my mouth. "Be better than a nameplate on a door."

Luanne stood up at the side of the bed. She pushed her jaw forward like it was about to burst through the skin. I loved the scowl on her face, the way she looked like she honestly believed she could beat the shit out of me if she wanted to.

"Who do you fuckin' think you are?" she asked. "What the hell are you trying to say?"

"You only get out of this town what you put into it. That's all I'm saying. Wipe that sour look off your face, Miss Priss."

"I have busted my ass singing to the wrinkly remains of the 1940s and their grandkids every night since I got here, and your dumb ass is trying to tell me I just ain't tried hard enough?"

I smiled around the back of my cigarette.

"More or less," I said.

"Listen here, motherfucker," she said as she reached her hand under the mattress at the foot of the bed. Then, she held up a gun, a tiny revolver like something a cop would have used in a show I'd seen on TV. Her arm was shaking, and I couldn't tell if she was scared or not. I couldn't stop smiling.

"What are you gonna do with that, Luanne? Now, if you could act like this on the stage, maybe you'd be a little happier with yourself as an actor. You wouldn't even have to sing."

The tip of the gun was cold against my neck at first.

"Who's acting?" she said, staring at the revolver in her hand.

"You don't know what you'd do with my body if you pulled the trigger. You can barely hold yourself up right now, imagine putting me in the elevator where anyone could see you or, God forbid, trying to drag me down all those stairs."

"Say one more thing, you dirty son of a bitch. I won't even miss you."

I pursed my lips and stood there a moment. She tapped her foot. I did my Sinatra.

"There's no business like show business..."

She pressed the gun harder into my skin.

"...like no business I know...."

Her eyes found mine, and she looked like a teen under her high school sweetheart for the first time on her parents' bed, the way she stared at me.

"...Everything about it is appealing, everything that traffic will allow...."

She bit her lip and cocked the hammer back on the revolver.

"...Nowhere could you get that happy feeling when you are stealing that extra bow...."

Then, she laughed and tossed the gun into the floor. I laughed too. She put her arms around my neck, and I could feel the heat off her face through my shirt.

"I can't believe you're leaving Branson," I said. "You should really try to stick with it another month or two, see if you change your mind."

"I've been sticking with it for too long already, but, if you're interested, I'll let you try to convince me otherwise."

I pushed her back on the bed with only my fingertips, and she rolled onto her tiny belly and smiled at me as if she knew something that I didn't. Then, I left her laying there alone and went to the kitchenette for another drink. The countertops were stained with sticky rings from old drinks. Bits of food clung to the top of the sink drain. I refilled my glass with brandy and turned back to the bed. Luanne had her hands at her temples.

"You want anything?" I asked.

"There's a bottle of painkillers in the freezer. Bring them in here."

"Why the hell are they in the freezer?"

"Isn't that where you keep prescriptions?"

"I've never heard that in my life."

"You've been taking tainted medicine then."

"Tell that to my Momma."

"I wouldn't dare."

I found an orange medicine bottle in the freezer and brought it to her. She scrunched her face up at her nose when she swallowed the pills like they hurt her going down. The light from the ceiling reflected off the tops of her cheeks. At her neckline, an orange-brown stain faded pink. I polished off the second glass of brandy and lay down next to her, kissing the makeup's edge. Her body smelled bitter, like a paper sack full of onions. She lay still, and I tried to kiss her face. Then, she turned away from me. A pioneer tear forged a trail across her cheek.

"What's the matter?" I asked.

"Daddy told me not to come back with my tail between my legs, and I meant it when I told him I wouldn't. I swear, I did."

"What are you talking about?"

"He thought I should go to college," she said. More tears followed the first, and black streaks made new maps across her face.

"Why does that matter? Your daddy's an old man now, and you're the best soprano in Branson."

"And no one knows my name."

"There's no business..."

"Stop, I'm serious."

I put my hand beneath her chin and tilted her face toward mine.

"You're fuckin' Luanne Roberson, the best damn singer I've ever heard. Now, let's hear you sing."

I kissed her mouth, and I couldn't tell if she was sobbing or if she was trying not to laugh.

* * *

I was the only person on the stage. The room was mostly dark, save a blue glow from the lights along the back of the audience.

"Now, I've been made aware that we have some very special guests in the crowd tonight, more deserving our undivided attention than anyone else here except the Good Lord above."

Red, white, and blue lights moved around me on the stage, and a track started playing through the speakers, rolling collisions of wood and polymer, single strokes without a melody at first. A video of a waving flag shot up over the top of the stage.

"Ladies and gentlemen, can you join me in honoring those who fought defending the very freedom that makes this country great, that keeps us free to worship how we please and to stand up for everything we believe in, that gives us a reason to continue to sing to you fine folks here at Simon's Country Rock Opera. U.S. veterans, will you stand up with me, as you've already stood for so much."

Some of the people in the crowd started clapping, and the rest quickly joined. The veterans, old men and ballcaps, mostly, but also a few younger men and a middle-aged woman with caramel highlights in her hair, stood up. The first of the men to stand looked around the room to see if anyone would join them. By the time they were all on their feet, however, the veterans were stone-faced and turned to the video of the flag above the stage, probably remembering their time fighting, or, at least, wanting to appear as if that's what they were doing. The huffing snares continued to rise, and the sounds of woodwinds began to float along with the drums. A wrinkled leather woman in a sweatshirt put her hand on her heart. I started to sing.

"If tomorrow all the things were gone I'd worked for all my life, and I had to start again with just my children and my wife..."

The colorful lights turned to stars and moved up the walls toward the flag. The people ached to make love to me from their seats, man and woman, the lovers of the stage and of the country where they lived. They told their children that they should grow up to be like me. Their eyes glistened like the edge of a sunset sea, and when the rest of the cast joined me for the chorus, they didn't mind it all too much. They never did.

"And I'm proud to be an American where at least I know I'm free..."

The whole of the audience stood up like a rising ocean ready to swallow me up with their patriotic blessings. The lights swung all over the audience, and flag above the stage became a picture of a cross before a crucifixion. I had sung both the Good Lord and Uncle Sam into Branson for yet another night, and everyone in the room was still thankful as ever. They were bursting through their pig-colored skins, the veterans and the rest of them, all waving hands and fireworks. Good God, it was always a sight.

* * *

Luanne was already out for the day by the time I woke up. My brains swelled up behind my eyes and at the base of my neck, giving me tremendous pain. It's part of the lifestyle, as they say. I found a bottle of something clear on her kitchen counter and drank as much of it as I could in between breaths to take the edge off my headache. Then, I put on my clothes and left, as I'd assumed everyone else at the hotel had also done. No one else was in the hotel elevator, and the desk in the lobby was empty.

Outside, the clouds covered the sky like they were hiding something. I thought it might snow again. Dead grass blades poked their heads through holes in the thin, white carpet along the streets and sidewalks. My jacket was no match for the wind that swept up the cold from the snow. It would be another month or so until spring, but it could warm up as early as tomorrow, at least, that's what someone outside a convenience store had seen on the TV.

I crossed the strip by walking between the cars that waited at one of the stoplights. Some of them were covered in political bumper stickers and stick figure families. I tried to ignore them. I don't give a damn about anyone's bumper stickers. I moved across the far side of the strip, where the buildings started to fade and the car engine sounds disappeared. I lived in a duplex three blocks deep into a grey neighborhood behind a theater where some guys I knew still played their banjos and their steel guitars, the way they'd always done. Sometimes, people would even come watch them play.

My duplex was about halfway down the street. I lived on the west side of the crumbling grey building, and I'd only seen the guy who lived next door to me once. We'd both been drunk, and we'd had a laugh about a house across the street, where, late at night, we could hear all kinds of cars coming and going and sometimes honking their horns. The old boy next door had figured the woman who lived there was dealing drugs of some kind or another. I'd said she was probably fucking all her guests. He'd winked at me and assured me there wouldn't be so many people stopping by if that were the case. The both of us had laughed like hell.

When I got to the duplex, I saw the neighbor's bright orange pickup, the only color on our block. I went inside and took a shower and put on new underwear. Then, I shaved my face. Outside, the snowflakes were sliding out of their clouds like wandering pilgrims who wanted to lay their heads on holy ground. I filled up an aluminum flask and put it in my jacket pocket before I headed off to work. As I walked again, more snowflakes fell around me, and I pulled on the flask to warm my stomach.

The cars were still putting down the strip with their "mother may I" sprints. Their drivers looked straight ahead as if they knew where they were going, but I couldn't be sure that that was the case.

The parking lot was all but empty outside Simon's when I got there. There was a note taped onto the door to my dressing room asking me to stop by Mr. Atkinson's office. Ronald Atkinson was friends with the show's namesake, but he'd stuck around after Simon sold the show and got into real estate. At least, that's what they'd told me. I've never met anyone named Simon in Branson, and I'd figured that if there were an individual with that name who owned the show at some point, he'd given it up long before I started working there. Best I could tell, though, Mr. Atkinson really had been there since the beginning. I truly believed that. He was the kind of old man who'd sit with his shoes on the desk all day and smoke cigars if that sort of thing was still allowed. His office door was open when I walked in, still wearing my jacket, and he looked up at me from over the top of his laptop computer. He was chomping on chewing gum, and the silkworms over the tops of his ears were swaying along with his jaw. The light reflected off the top of his head.

"You said you wanted to see me?" I said, my hands crossed in front of my waist.

"Yeah, Rick, I need you to tell me what happened with Candace?"

"Which one's Candace?"

I smiled at Mr. Atkinson, and he kept smacking his gum and staring at his computer screen.

"I need you to be serious. What the hell happened?"

"Oh, you know how women are. I tried to take her out a couple times, but she was being prude about things, and so nothing ever came of it."

"And that's all?"

"Best I can remember."

He leaned back in his chair.

"She tells it a little differently."

"Oh, does she?"

Mr. Atkinson's jaw moved from one side of his mouth to the other as he chewed.

"She says you were drunk as shit with your cock out yelling some sort of nonsense at her after the show the other night."

"The other night? Hell, I haven't seen her at all in probably six months."

"Either way, I can't have my show's host showing people his cock, especially the talent. I mean, Jesus, Rick, she's not even twenty."

"She's legal, and we weren't performing when it happened, if it even happened. To be honest with you, sir, I don't even remember the incident in question."

"Well, that's not my problem, but now I've got a fire I've got to put out, and it's quite the inconvenience for me. I'm gonna have to restack half the whole show."

"What are you saying?"

"Tonight's your last night, Rick," he said, sighing. "Now, I'll still give you a good

recommendation if you keep your mouth shut about the whole thing, because I can't prove what did or didn't happen. You're a hell of a performer, but you really are a goddamn liability."

I leaned forward, slammed my fists on the desk, and put my face beside the computer screen.

"Listen here, motherfucker," I said. "I've never let you down, not a single time. I've got people coming back to this landfill you call a theater every night. Do you remember the last time we had a real offseason? That's me. That's what I've built for you, you Elmer-Fudd-looking, ungrateful piece of shit."

Then, I stood up straight and pulled my face together around my nose. The warmth from my belly had climbed up to my ears and then spread out over my cheeks. Mr. Atkinson spit his gum out into a wastebasket under his desk. Then, he opened a drawer and pulled out a filing folder.

"Shut the hell up, Rick. It's not even two p.m., and you smell like a dirty shot glass. No one in this town has an offseason anymore, and you don't have a single damn thing to do with it."

"Bullshit!"

He rifled through the folder for a moment and then looked up at me.

"Get the hell out of my office before I knock those whiskey teeth back down your throat, and you'd better hope I don't see you anywhere between now and tonight, or I'll tear you to pieces in front of the whole crew."

Then, he went back to the folder.

"Don't worry about it," I said. "I won't be here. You can find someone else to host tonight."

I threw my flask against the wall and walked out of there without listening to anything else he had to say. The bar about a block from my house opened at 10 in the morning and stayed open until 1:30 the next morning, per the law, and that gave me a lot of time to think over my options. The wind whipped through the door as I walked inside the windowless dive. A young guy with a beard leaned over his phone behind the empty counter. When I sat down, he came over to me, and I could see dabs of yellow on his otherwise white t-shirt in the blue light of a sign that glowed behind him. He asked me what I wanted to drink, and I told him to pour me something cheap. Then, he stood there, looking like I'd asked him to turn the tap water into Everclear. So, I told him to pour me three fingers of his least expensive vodka.

"Can do," he said.

I gave him some money, and I could hardly feel the drink settle down into the bottom of my stomach. Two old men argued in a booth at the back of the dark room, but it seemed to me as if there was some kind of film between us, and I didn't much mind them. Within a few minutes, I hardly knew they were there, save their occasional laughs and waving hands between me and a single light from the far wall that burned half the place orange with its manufactured glow and left the other half blue-black. I

ordered another drink, and the bartender only grunted as he brought it to me. Then, he leaned over the counter and poked at his phone again. A rock song with its big guitars, artillery-fire drums, and complete disregard for the human voice garbled through a speaker in the corner of the bar. The guitars sounded like chainsaws.

"Can you play something a little easier on the ears?" I asked. "It's not even afternoon yet, and I've had a rough start to my day."

"It's almost four o'clock, buddy, and sorry about your day and all, but this is my bar. I choose the music here."

"Well, you think you'd have the sense to play something a little more likely to unwind your patrons. It may even help your business a little bit, get you more than two old men drinking here in the afternoon."

"I'll tell you what, you go and open a bar, and I'll let you play whatever the hell you want there. You won't hear any complaints from me."

The old men behind me laughed more, their voices like gravel in a concrete mixer, but I didn't look at them. I stood up to walk out without paying for my second drink. At first, the bottoms of my feet stuck to the ground like I had stepped in mud, but I jerked them up and sent them one after the other toward the door.

"Where in God's name do you think you're going there, partner?" the bartender called out.

"Somewhere with some decent music," I said.

"You haven't paid your tab. If you go through that door, you'll never come back here again."

"Well, lucky for me, I don't have any use for a bullshit rock and roll dive like this one."

I walked out, turning to look behind me every fifth step or so. The bartender didn't follow, and eventually, I stopped glancing back at the bar. The snow had stopped falling. It looked like dirty cake frosting over the ground. I felt dizzy, and the late afternoon grey swallowed me up and tossed me around with its tongue. I could have used another drink and wished I hadn't thrown my flask in Mr. Atkinson's office.

The sky was in that space between the daylight and the dark as I stumbled into the hotel lobby. A fat woman behind the desk pulled her finger out of her nose when she saw me enter. She said something to me as I waited for the elevator door to close, but I couldn't hear her. The elevator stank like dog shit. Fingerprints covered the stainless-steel door. When it opened again, I saw a cleaning lady with skin like an orange peel that had been left outside in the sun. She shuffled along in front of me with her cart of towels and antibacterial soap, and I moved along behind her with my arms crossed over my chest. She had earphones in her ears and didn't seem to notice that I was following her. Then, she went into Luanne's room, and I walked in behind her.

The room was less a mess than it had been in the morning. Luanne's clothes were no longer covering the floor, and the kitchen counter was cleared, save a handful of bottles clustered together near the sink. The dirty comforter and sheets were wadded

up on the foot of the bed, and I didn't see the bowl of cereal I'd used to ash my cigarettes the night before. The cleaning lady took out one of her earphones and waved her hands at me.

"Excuse me, sir, you can't be in here," she said.

"My friend lives here. I'm supposed to be meeting her."

"No, you can't be here."

She shook her head.

"I said my friend lives here."

"No one stays here. I'm cleaning. You have to leave."

Something like steam off my boiling brain seemed to leak out of the top of my head and then through my mouth.

"Listen, you immigrant bitch, I've been up here almost every other night for months now. Like hell, 'no one stays here.'"

"Sir, I'm cleaning. You need to leave."

The woman turned around, disregarding me as she pulled the comforter off the bed. She smelled like sweet bread as I put my hands on her shoulders. Her neck and back grew stiff, and her dark lips trembled as I turned her toward me.

"Where the hell is the woman who stays here?" I asked.

"I'm just cleaning. I don't know any woman."

I swiped the back of my hand hard across her mouth. An earphone swung like a used noose around her breast.

"Where is she?"

The woman choked up and didn't speak. I slapped her again. Her brown eyes turned black, and I couldn't stand to look at them. I searched the room for an answer. The woman trembled between my hands. Tears began to fall onto the carpet, but she didn't make a sound. I let go of her and lowered my voice.

"I'm going to ask you one more time. Did the woman who lives here check out today?"

"They tell me to come clean, so I clean. It's none of my business."

The heat from my forehead crawled down my back, and my shoulders were so hot I couldn't keep them still. I used both hands to push the woman back on the bed. She rolled into the floor and began to sob aloud, her face in her hands and her black hair jumping off her head in all directions.

"Oh, for God's sake now. Please do shut the fuck up," I said as I went to the sink in the kitchenette and sorted through the liquor bottles on the countertop. One was still nearly half full, so I put it in my coat pocket. The woman continued to cry.

"Did you hear me?" I asked, leaning over her as she tried to pull her body back up onto the bed. "I said it's time to be quiet. You're about to get us into some trouble, and that wouldn't do me a whole lot of good."

She made no visible attempt to shut up, so I swung my toes hard into her ribs. There was a cracking sound, and the crying kept on ringing like a broken police siren. I

kicked the woman again, and she bit her lips to keep from shrieking. Then, she whooped the air in and out of her mouth and reached her big, open face toward the ceiling like she was bobbing for apples upside down. I looked around the room to see if I should take anything before I left, and she soon started crying out loud again. So, I jogged down the hotel stairs, the liquor bottle in my pocket. When the door to the stairwell closed behind me, I couldn't hear the woman's sobbing anymore. I marched through the front lobby like I had somewhere to be, and no one seemed to question that.

Outside, the sky was almost dark, and more big, white snowflakes gathered on the sidewalk after they got done twirling through the sky. Headlights like shining circles on a stage caught the snowy dancers in their act, showed anyone who took a minute to pay attention something worth looking at. The sky grew darker still as I walked, and I could see the moon over the tops of the buildings on the strip. The snow began to cover much of the street as more of the flakes showed off their dances, unaware that they were merely an opening act.

I broke from the strip and the cars and their tiny spotlights, and the snowflakes continued to whirl around in the wind even when no one could see them. They crashed onto the sidewalk, and I crushed them with my feet. The moon was a spotlight for a grand finale as it shone down on me. I twirled around an invisible cane.

"There's no business like show business..."

My song echoed off the side of the bar around the corner from my home, and I knew the bartender was inside with his cell phone, regretting that he'd threatened me, hoping I'd poke my head in the door and show him a real good song.

"...like no business I know...."

I hopped inside my half of the duplex, pulled the liquor out of my pocket, and raised it to the ceiling. It was rum, and I usually hated rum, but the stuff felt like syrup as it ran down my throat. I lit a cigarette and tossed myself into the entryway floor, still in my coat. I could feel the tiny carpet loops through my pants.

"...Everything about it is appealing, everything that traffic will allow...."

I was sweating something fierce. The smoke from my cigarette seemed to dim the lights overhead, but my voice jumped through the duplex's open spaces, over the sink and the bathroom toilet and the couch and my unmade bed, and it brightened up the whole damn thing. I moved my throat just like Sinatra had moved his throat, the way I always did, regardless of whether Mr. Atkinson or Luanne or any other tunnel-vision hack ever paid attention. Then, someone knocked on the other side of the wall behind me, and I took another drink in silence.

* * *

"Ladies and gentlemen, boys and girls, God bless America, and y'all come back and see us. Have a good night, now!"

The people were all standing and clapping and grinning ear to ear. They tossed

flowers onto the stage, and I was hardly sweating when I bent at my waist, bowing to the masses after I'd filled them up again. Some of them were crying, and I would have been crying too if I had been watching the show. Anyone with dry eyes was probably a sociopath. I blew them kisses, the whole lot of them. Then, I looked up and down the rows at all those beautiful people and their children, and Momma was right in front of the stage, shouting something I couldn't make out over the roar of the crowd and pointing up at me, probably telling those around her that her son was a big-time actor, while their sons tended bars or sat at lobby desks in cheap hotels. I winked at her and walked backstage, away from the cheering. I'd promised her I'd never stop.

Superhighway

Jonathan B. Ferrini

I'm assigned to a county road crew picking up trash along the interstate highway wearing an orange vest and helmet. There are four of us on the crew who live in half-way homes and required to work until our probation periods expire. The crew consists of an obese, single, middle aged Caucasian woman named Fanny convicted of welfare fraud for collecting benefits from three social security numbers to support the horde of rescue dogs she loved. Her orange vest barely fits around her rotund body. She shares the sugar cookies she carries providing us with a needed surge of energy getting us through the day. Lopez is a slightly built Mexican immigrant who was convicted of workers comp fraud. When his knees gave out working as a laborer for a construction company, he was awarded workers compensation benefits. He mowed lawns and climbed ladders cleaning rain gutters to support his pregnant wife and three children before the insurance investigator caught him working and pressed charges. Jackson is a tall, lanky, chain smoking Black man in his seventies who fancies himself as a "Mack" and entertains us about his glory days of wearing full length mink coats, driving his custom Cadillac, wearing gold jewelry, and enjoying a stable of girlfriends. He was convicted of check fraud which supported the grandchildren of several of his former girlfriends. I was assigned the position of "siren blower" requiring me to face the crew and oncoming traffic sounding the warning siren if danger approached allowing the crew to seek safety.

Our boss is Deputy Horace who drives the orange county van which tows a trailer including our portable plastic toilet. He is tough. Regulations require we get a one hour lunch and two 15 minutes breaks but Horace only gives us a half hour to eat the unappetizing County provided sack lunch. The smug Deputy is nearing retirement and never leaves the van with the air conditioning roaring. He loves the Rolling Stones. The volume is so loud I can hear the lyrics despite his windows being closed. He plays video games and eats greasy burgers, chips, and gulps down discount store brand cola. The five gallon water jug provided for our hydration is empty by noon and Horace refuses to fill it. Each crew member is responsible for filling a minimum of ten orange trash bags and cleaning ten miles of highway in ten hours. The only time we hear from Horace is when the van's loud speaker barks,

“Pick up the pace or I’ll keep you out all night with two demerits each!”

Anybody accumulating ten demerits violates their parole and is sent back to prison. Working in the darkness is treacherous as we were only visible by our orange vests and a single flashing amber warning light atop the van. We’re often the recipients of cruel remarks shouted as drivers speed by,

You got what you deserve, Losers!”

What did I deserve, I wonder? The sun is beating down, the pavement is scorched, and I’m drenched in sweat inhaling the noxious exhaust fumes. I have a headache, feel nauseous, and I’m angry that life dealt me a “bad hand”. I know as the day progresses, obese Fanny will be unable to keep up the pace, Lopez’s blown knees, and Jackson’s chronic smokers cough will also slow us down requiring us to work late into the night with the possibility of demerits. I won’t go back to prison. I may dash into traffic and end my misery but I’d rather wait for the opportunity to kill myself taking Deputy Horace with me. The Stone’s lyrics resound from the van,

“I look inside myself and see my heart is black”

The trash we pick up along the highway symbolizes lives gone haywire. Most of it is cans, bottles, fast food packaging, and condoms but today we found a weathered photo album and a baby doll. The photo album depicted a happy family I envied and wondered what had befallen them. I spied a used hypodermic needle which reminded me of my mom who died of a heroin overdose while I was in prison.

I grew up in the high desert of Southern California. It’s sun scorched, flat, and runs along Interstate 15 towards Vegas. Trailer home and apartment rents are low. The major industry in the area is meth production. Dad split leaving me and mom to fend for ourselves. Mom graduated from alcohol to opiates to heroin and couldn’t raise me. My aunt and uncle filed papers to assume my custody motivated by the specter of being paid by the County as foster parents. They sobered up long enough to pass muster by the county. We lived in a doublewide trailer home.

My aunt’s husband, Brady, drove a sewage truck for thirty years. His job was to pump sewage from portable toilets and clean out the filthy plastic bathroom enclosures. His retirement gift for thirty years of service was the sewage truck he drove. He was a

schemer but never let anybody in on his scams. He was always tinkering with the truck and one day opened the sewage tank exposing the vile odor from human excrement. We lived miles from the closest neighbor and my aunt and uncle didn't mind the smell because they were drunk most of the time. He climbed inside the smelly tank and installed compartments always telling me to "beat it" if I came close to watch him work.

Dinner was fast food, a can of chili, or frozen dinners. My aunt would often slip into my room in the middle of the night drunk. I'd pretend to sleep as she caressed my body with her hand hoping I'd awake and take her. She would curl next up to me and fall asleep. In the morning, I carefully slid out of bed, dressed, and left for school. I suspect Brady was aware of his wife's behavior but didn't care.

On my eighteenth birthday, I was given a birthday present of sorts. I was handed the key to the sewage truck and told that it was now registered in my name. Brady wanted me to drive the truck to Los Angeles, Las Vegas, and then to Nogales making a stop in each city while unknown people attended to the sewage tank. I asked why and was told,

"Because we'll cut off your mom's heroine fixes.

What's your decision?"

I was arrested at a state agricultural inspection station when x-ray equipment alerted officers to the hidden compartments Brady constructed in the sewage tank which he packed with meth. I was facing a forty year sentence for interstate transfer of narcotics.

The US Attorney was a kind woman nearing retirement. She offered me a plea deal if I flipped on Brady. I wouldn't rat because my aunt and uncle would cut mom off from her heroin. I was a first time offender and the US Attorney knew I was protecting my mother. She took pity on me and recommended to the judge I receive the minimum five year sentence. The judge told me I'd be young enough to begin a "normal" life after prison. Guys like me couldn't live a "normal life" because we never had one. After sentencing, the US Attorney approached me saying,

"Timmy, don't let the past dictate your future."

Drivers routinely throw garbage at us. Lopez was hit by a full diaper and Jackson was hit in the head by a vanilla milkshake. They were humiliated. Deputy Horace is

napping despite the resounding Stones lyrics,

“I see a line of cars and they're all painted black...

I see people turn their heads and quickly look away”

Fanny was quick to aid Lopez and Jackson. She tapped on the window jarring Deputy Horace awake. Although I resented Fanny for slowing down the crew, I sympathized with her because she was subjected to vicious daily taunts from drivers about her weight. She politely requested towels and water to clean up Lopez and Jackson but Deputy Horace only threw a dirty towel at her and closed his window. Fanny did her best to clean them up using the dirty towel and the last of the water in the five gallon container.

The humiliation from the thrown garbage served to motivate the crew to finish before dark and get home to forget about the day. Fanny struggled to keep up the pace. Jackson's cough worsened and he spat bloody mucous. Lopez was hobbling with both knees ready to blow out. Jackson whispered,

“Timmy, come check this out!”

The crew was standing above a smelly trash bag. It wasn't uncommon to find decaying pets but as we examined the bag, it split open revealing a stillborn baby girl. I ran to Deputy Horace to report the finding. He rolled down the window and I was engulfed by the cool air-conditioning. He said,

“Bury it and forget you ever saw it. I don't want the paperwork and you don't want the demerits!”

He closed the window and returned to his video game and I returned to the crew with the instruction. Lopez was kneeling and reciting a Catholic prayer in Spanish. Fanny was cradling the baby doll we found. Jackson had located the most serene location he could find under a California pepper tree which would provide shade over the unmarked grave we dug.

Something snapped in me. My childhood and the job was like moving through the stages of purgatory and the final stage before entering hell was finding a baby in a trash bag with orders to bury it alongside the highway to avoid “paperwork” and “demerits”. I was ready to end my misery and take Deputy Horace with me.

It was a typical week of long days and nights but at dusk one evening, I noticed two cars racing each other. One of them split off into the adjoining lane cutting off a semi truck trailer which clipped the racing car sending it across the highway slammed by oncoming traffic but the semi truck trailer was out of control and heading directly towards us. It was my opportunity to end my misery as the semi would kill us all. My finger quivered on the trigger of the warning horn. I had come to respect my crew as friends and knew they had loved ones to return to after probation. Although I had nobody waiting for me, I recalled what the judge told me and I sounded the warning horn. Lopez hobbled slowly and Fanny was too slow to avoid the oncoming semi but with the help of Jackson, we dragged them both into the safety of the culvert seconds before the semi slammed into the orange van. Deputy Horace didn't hear the warning horn and the van was crushed into a metal ball and sent rolling onto the highway leaving behind a trail of blood.

Traffic came to a sudden halt. A chorus of horns from frustrated drivers is drowning out the sirens of rescue vehicles approaching the carnage. The people racing by us day after day with contempt, pity, or sadistic pleasure for our plight were now glued to their cell phones, and possibly, confronting their own mortality and meaningless lives.

Jackson muttered, "You got what you deserve, Losers." We discarded our orange vests and helmets wondering down the highway towards a fate unknown but united in the belief "our pasts wouldn't dictate our futures". From a distance, I could hear the Stones lyrics still playing inside the crushed van,

"I have to turn my head until my darkness goes...

If I look hard enough into the settin' sun

My love will laugh with me before the mornin' comes"

Mission Z

Christopher Stolle

You will all fall in love.

That's what you signed up for. If that's not what you signed up for, then you'll learn to love. You don't have any other choice now.

You'll learn more than love. You'll learn resilience. Compromise. Dedication. Fortitude. And how to keep going when you don't have any energy left.

You'll have no contact with the outside world. If something becomes too hard, you have people to help you through it. You don't cower in corners. You don't try to run. You don't threaten anyone.

You'll learn conflict resolution. You'll learn how to adjust to failure. Not accept. Adjust.

You'll change from seventeen-year-old boys and girls into eighteen-year-old men and women. And you'll be ready to go. To do what no one has ever done. You've been chosen for a reason. Make that reason your motivation. Bring that skill to this group. Share it willingly and often.

You'll have time for leisure. You can't neglect that. You can't go back home now. You're committed. But you can't deny yourself those pleasures being offered without strings attached. And don't be afraid to offer yourself up willingly to anyone who might need you. You'll learn how to assess situations for what you can do to make it better. If you think you'll make it worse, stand back and observe. You can learn a lot by watching. Listening. Feeling. You'll use that new knowledge to advise in the future. But don't complicate situations for those who clearly know what they're doing.

Know when to step in and when to step away.

Know when it's time to rest and when it's time to engage. Your own clock works better. But don't forget that each thing you do or don't do impacts everyone. Not equally. But in some way. Every time.

Know when you're being trusted and when you're being lied to. You're all here as equals, but fairness is a tricky scuffler. Know when to hold tight and when to let go. Don't let anyone trap you if you can help it.

You can fight and you can argue and you can debate. But you can't bully. You can't

demand. You can't lead anyone who doesn't want to follow your brand of reason. You can persuade. You can convince. You can encourage. But you can't require. Requests will gain you a lot more when you know you have willing participants who are glad to do what you suggest.

You have a brain. Use it. Constantly. Absorb instincts. Breathe in that powerful perfume others give off when they're working hard toward a goal.

You have a heart. You can't neglect it. The heart swells for a reason. You can't always give in to it. You can't let it lead you astray. Love reverently. Love cautiously. You'll know when it's right. Test it. Experiment. But be smart. You can't hurt another heart just to help your own develop.

You have a reason for being here. Follow it. Dedicate yourself to it. Don't let anyone keep you from it. Don't get in anyone else's way. Be vigilant. Be forthright. Be respectful. Respect will open more doors than you ever knew existed. No one's going to hand you a key. You have to earn it. And you will.

You should take time every day to reflect. To think about how you got to where you are today. To thank those who helped you through that day. Who helped you in life. And who will help you in the future. Pray if you wish. Join hands and sing if that feels right. Don't deny yourself simple pleasures. You're here to represent humanity, but you'll be nothing but mush and fingers and toes if you ignore any aspect to your internal and external physique and psyche. Brains and brawn. Ruthless combination. But a pair that will help humans endure long after we should.

You're an experiment. But you're real. You're flesh and blood and bones. You will hurt. You will sweat. You will get sick. You might feel like dying. You might feel like changing your mind and trying something else. You might learn a new skill. You should. Share with everyone as often as you can. The more you hide away, the more you'll disappear into the ether and others will march past you. You can help the downtrodden and neglected. But you have to be willing to be helped as much as you try to help others. You're in this with each other. You can't escape your duties. You have it in you to be amazing.

You'll be remembered forever. You'll have your name etched on brass signs and you'll have monuments built to you and you'll have schools and buildings with your name on them. Your grandchildren's grandchildren will speak eloquently about you. Every word will be a truth passed down from generation to generation about your sacrifice. But you won't be forgotten.

You'll have books written about you. Songs. Movies. You'll become a video game character. You'll have endless blogs and tweets and Pinterest pages devoted to you. You might even help invent some new platform to share your experiences with others.

You have a name and a reputation. Live up to them.

You have a place and a purpose. Live up to them.

You have a hunger. Feed it eagerly.

You have a passion. Push its limits.

You have a fierceness. Let it prowl and thrive.

A Song for the Dead Songbird

Sofia Lago

Marisha discovers her childhood swing on the Sunday after she returns to Shiloh. It hangs limp from the cherry tree's branch, creaking as it sways in the late May afternoon. Around it, the grass is so tall it nearly hides the wooden plank from view. She only knows it's Sunday because she hears the church bells off from the direction of town where the fishermen and their wives live, rolling up the inlet with high tide the way it did when she was young.

My Dearest, she imagines writing as she sits. Splinters poke through her thin nightdress. *The rope's gone green now. The wood's making a sound like it wants to break.*

And so it is. She pushes at the ground with her bare foot, mud sticking between her toes, and the wood groans beneath her weight. Just at the limit of her vision, she catches sight of her wash all stretched out on one long line tied between two spruce trees. Her dresses and smocks billow in the wind, a colorful flurry of cleansed cloth. From here, she can't see the house. Her hens cluck up a ruckus, muffled by distance.

The wood lets out an old man's moan, and the church bells' final ring settles as a sharp pain at the base of her spine. Marisha slips away while the swing's still swinging, and leaves.

My Dearest, Marisha doesn't write.

I must confess I am not brave. Your letter remains unopened, though I carry it with me. You join me in the early mornings in the chicken coop. I carry you to garden. You were with me when I caught my dinner at the hooligan's run. I must admit

When Marisha first sees Kit in the kitchen window's reflection, she drops her pail of sheep's milk right to the ground. *Clang splat!* It splashes and tips, spilling over the grass, soaking through her apron and skirts.

"How in the," she starts, but when she turns, she finds only her mouser Moxie skulking in the weeds. Beyond the greenhouse, Romeo the rooster announces what should be dawn, if dawn existed here. A cool breeze bows the spruces and hemlocks, and carry the smell of late springtime—promised rain, saltwater and rotting salmon, forget-me-nots in early bloom.

Her yard is devoid of humanity. Wild. Half-tamed, if that. She is alone.

Marisha turns again, and retrieves her emptied pail, though her hands shake so drastically the loose handle rattles. As she straightens, Kit's letter crinkles against her palpitating heart. There's no one but herself in the window now. In the overcast darkened glass, she appears sickly. The morning wind blows at the berry black curls that escaped her bun.

“You’re not there,” she says aloud. Half-tamed silence captures her voice, folding the words inside itself before it disturbs the peace.

With a deep breath, she wills her heart to calm and crosses the threshold of her cottage in three steps. Behind her, Moxie meows, a raven caws and an eagle answers, and Marisha is alone.

Church bells echo across the inlet, floating over the water from Shiloh proper, so cacophonous it seeps through the trees and prickles at Marisha’s skin, but they still do little to mask Kit’s song.

Sous les feuilles d’une chêne, sings the untethered voice. Je me suis fait sécher.

A raspberry breaks between Marisha’s fingers, sticky and red. The song goes, Sur la plus haute branche, un rossignol chantait.

There are no nightingales here, though, and when she stands, the only birds to join Kit’s mournful tune are the ravens. The basket of berries hangs heavy from the crook of her elbow. Though she has dirt on her apron, she ignores it; there’s no one here to care for her appearance, and she long stopped caring herself.

She wipes the back of her wrist across her forehead, as if that will rid her of the moisture the drizzle dropped there. Raspberry guts and muck join the raindrops. As the church bells fade, so does the song—*J’ai perdu mon ami sans l’avoir mérité*. Then they’re both gone, the memory of them leaving phantom imprints in the damp June air.

This is what she should write: *Was it necessary to follow me all this way?*

Though the song is gone, it will return soon, as it always does. Mama is dead. Papa is dead. Her brother, Lev, disappeared during the War. Yet it’s Kit who she can’t shake, Kit who said, “It was only ever you,” and to whom she answered, “I’m sorry.”

Ten months later, Marisha’s run across the country to escape her dead. With Lev’s whereabouts unknown and no husband to speak of, her grandparents’ isolated home is hers. She thought it would be far enough, surrounded with its snowcapped mountains and cerulean sea, with how busy the building repairs and garden and animals would keep her. Now, she does the work of both a man and woman, and ends her days so exhausted she sleeps despite the long sunlit hours. It should be enough to keep the ghost at bay. It should.

It isn’t.

August 14, 1873

New York, N.Y.

Miss Marina Mikhailovna Shapiro

66 Grand Street

New York, N.Y.

Kit's handwriting is a parody of neatness, uniformly made of shaky angles and looping lines unbecoming of a member of high society that Marisha memorized years before this letter darkened her doormat. "My mother would have a fit if I wrote like you," she said once during their youth, when she had first come to New York, to the tenement on Orchard Street, and still described the swing in her grandparents' yard with a certain measure of fondness.

"Miss Mabel says I'm improving," Kit said, but that improvement proved to only ever be minimal. Kit's improvement came in other subjects, ones less wholesome than penmanship.

The *s*'s in *Miss* connect, as do the *e*'s in *Street*, and the *in* in Marina looks more like an *m*. She scrutinizes the envelope on the evenings when the apparition gives her some peace, sitting alone on her covered porch churning butter or neglecting her knitting. For all she imagines how she would write her own letter, she rarely spares a thought to what this very real one reads. Is it in English, as she or Lev would write? Russian, as Papa or Mama would? The new neighborhood French? Is it a love letter? An apology? An explanation? A curse?

None of those options are good, though she doesn't know which is the worst. It's out of fear for any that she has yet to pry open the gummed seal.

During the day, she keeps the letter tucked into her dress. Shiloh, even at the height of summer, is not hot, but humidity nonetheless sticks the heavy paper to her skin. The messy letters fade, tattooing against her ribs. She carries it with her up the mountain to the frigid lake, and keeps it nested in her discarded garments when she strips to bathe. A heated burst of air trickles down into her bones, though the wind in the mountains is chilly enough to raise bumps on her arms.

She scrubs her name from her body with a rag and listens to Kit's song, coming distant from the tree line—*J'ai trouvé l'eau si belle que je m'y suis baignée*, it goes. For as beautiful as the water is, it's also bitterly cold, and her lips go the shade of a corpse's before the refrain is through.

There's a noise behind her like gnashing teeth as she steps out, and she startles so badly she falls. When she glances over her shoulder, she spots a brown flash disappear beneath the lake's surface. Just an otter, then. The native people, her grandmother's people, tell nightmarish warnings about them, about creatures that drown men by using the faces of their loved ones and then stealing their faces in turn.

When she stands, blood drips from her scraped knees, and she finds a ring of footprints around her discarded dress. Behind her, the water breaks with a *splash!* and needlelike claws go *clitter-clatter* over the stones.

No Land Otter People made these prints, nor had Kit died here and joined them. Instead, Kit died alone in a house in a city, died in a way that left inspectors knocking on Marisha's door asking, "How well did you know the deceased?"

The lead inspector was Irish, with an Irish accent and an Irish sort of name. His eyes were bluer than Mama's, than Kit's. Prettier certainly than Marisha's drab brown.

That's what she thought when he returned for the fifth time to say, "There was no culprit but the deceased's own hand, Miss Shapiro," and, "You haven't known me long, Miss Shapiro, but I believe—"

Kit said, "It was only ever you." Kit said, "We can be happy."

"I'm sorry," Marisha said. "We can't."

To the Irish inspector, she said she was sorry, and that he couldn't make her happy, but she had no doubt someone else would love him very much. He told her he loved her before Kit's body could rot, and all she thought was his eyes were prettier than her own.

She wipes her knees with her apron, scraping blood and dirt onto the clean cloth, and slips into her dress. One, two, three. Even with the buttons all done up, it still hangs loose about her body when once it fit. In the weeks since she returned, she's grow so thin that her arms protrude like twigs from her sleeves. She's a stick-figure drawing of young woman.

Might she write, *Do you mean for me to follow you instead?*

Marisha falls asleep one evening on the porch, and wakes to warm breath on her ear and Kit's voice saying, Yes.

"Yes?" Her voice is hoarse. When she draws herself to full consciousness, she's alone. The daytime rain's stopped, but the air's still thick with it. The northern summer, wet and living.

Across the yard, the swing that Kit had never seen in person creaks from a nonexistent breeze. The sheep baa, though the sound's softened by the barn. Slowly, Moxie creeps into view along the porch's rail and settles, licking at a calico paw. There's blood on her lips. A songbird's feather on her whisker. White fluff levitates towards the water like waifs. For the first time this summer, the sunset's come at a reasonable hour, lighting up the sky with the saturated pink red orange of a lovers' spell.

Kit is gone, for now, and Marisha is alone. She rocks back in her grandmother's cedar chair, watching an eagle flit over the low clouds, and thinks she would preserve this moment forever, if only she could.

Towards the beginning of August, Marisha begins readying for the turn of the season. She smokes a good deal of fish and dries her vegetables; she builds a straw roof to insulate her chicken coop; she collects firewood to compensate for what she can't cut; she twists wire into cages above her sapling apple trees to protect them from starving moose. Like her grandfather, she leaves a loaded rifle resting against the porch, easy to grab in case of intruders—predators after her animals, or humans turned dangerous from the wintertime weather.

Kit follows her, growing quieter as the days shorten. The singing decreases. The silence is sullen. On an unprecedentedly sunny day, when Marisha hangs her laundry

to dry, she walks away to check the salmonberries left to reduce on the stove, and returns to find her wash strewn across the grass.

Sighing, she says, "Don't you have someone else to bother?"

It's the first time she's spoken directly, intentionally. Kit laughs, thin on the wind, as Marisha retrieves her laundry. There's a stain on her nightdress, a vibrant green streak along the breast vaguely shaped like a human footprint. She clips it back on the line beside her autumn quilt, which Kit's mischief-making was kind enough to spare.

Forgot, says the ghost, and stands so close Marisha feels death's arctic chill through the shawl wrapped around her shoulders. Forget. You. Kit sings, *Il y a longtemps que je t'aime, jamais je ne t'oublierai*—

"Oh," she says. Her voice is weak. "Oh."

Her yard's half-tamed silence steals away the song. A sudden gust removes the chill from her side and ruffles the footprints from the grass. It whistles through the apple tree saplings' winter cages, the noise industrial.

Today is August 14, 1874, she imagines. A year and a day ago, she baked a strawberry cake in the Grand Street oven, using the recipe she learned from her grandmother, who learned it from her own in the days before Shiloh was even *Неваград*. "I chopped them smaller this time," she said after she walked it three blocks over, wrapped neatly, to give Kit as a birthday treat. "Oh, don't look like that. It will be good."

"Is that a promise?"

"On my life."

They ate their cake from china plates Kit's father swore he purchased on a youthful voyage to Cochinchina, and ended their sugary meal on note sourer than a poisoned apple. "I'm sorry," Marisha had said. She said, "We can't," and then she left.

Just twelve hours later, she woke to a banging on her door. Two days after that, the letter slid through her mail slot. Skip a year, and here she is on the outskirts of Shiloh, running from a reputation the dead ruined, dreading a ghost's return.

After she finishes fixing her laundry, she heads to the cherry tree to pick enough for a jar of jam. It's not until her wicker basket's heaping full and the sky turned golden that she realizes the humming she hears isn't Kit's, but her own.

The piano strikes out a pentatonic tune that floats through the room, buoyant from the heat wafting from the fireplace, drifting under ladies' dresses and settling on men's coats, just a dusty sort of memory easy for the guests to ignore as they murmur, their conversations nondescript chatter, the details of their faces so dulled and distorted from flighty shadows and warm light that one is interchangeable for the next until she loses her mama papa brother in a crowd too preoccupied by the attractiveness of its own babble to take inventory of a lone skivvy's grief, but there are still eyes at her back, watching, waiting, cataloguing her tension, which grows in time with the storm building outside the frost-patterned windows and the steadily worsening staleness of

the interior air weighing down upon her lungs as the room's other occupants mill about, pressing closer, shoving against her so she falls back against the plush sofa redder than raspberries, where above her a woman is saying, It's the Russian girl's doing, the Dubois' help, haven't you heard, she must have bewitched—she flees, running for the door, bursting out alone onto the rocky banks of Kóoshdaa Lake where the rain comes down in a blinding rush, where the ravens fight the nightingales, and when the hand finds a grip on her shoulder, she—

Marisha wakes to a flash of golden hair and a death weary voice whispering, Please. Night fell, starlight peeking through the cherry tree's branches. The swing creaks. On her lap is the letter that she, for once, had left indoors.

The first frost comes on a morning early in October, and by that afternoon, the swing's decaying ropes finally break. Marisha's out by the sheep's pen when it happens, using the wooden fence as a stand to beat her quilt, and startles so bad at the sound the plank makes against the ground that she smacks her hip on a post.

In the aftermath, the tree's bare branches rattle. Ravens flock above it, squawking in displeasure at the disturbance. As she abandons the quilt she dug from root cellar, she spies something in trees moving against the breeze. An animal, she thinks. She doesn't want to believe Kit broke the cherry tree swing she spent hours of their childhood describing.

She kneels down, tucking in her skirts. The green ropes look shattered. Papa built this swing for her. Braided the rope himself, carved the seat from a plank of firewood. He taught her to read on that swing. She learned he was dead on that swing.

With a sigh, she gathers the splintered seat and rope. At the edge of her vision, her ghost wanders towards the inlet, drifting over the grass. The first frost claimed a remnant of her childhood, but Kit may claim her before the winter has its chance.

We could never be happy, Marisha doesn't write.

I never intended to be harsh, Dear Kit. I never intended for my rejection to be so damning. It was not done out of a lack of love for you, but rather in an act of it. We could never have been happy. What right do you have to punish me? Is the burden of your final thoughts not punishment enough?

*Sincerely Yours,
Marina Shapiro*

Winter comes abruptly a handful of the season's weeks after the first frost, and Marisha spends the last hours of snowfall tending her hearth. The fire flickers, exhaling smoke into her chimney; Moxie watches from her place on the rug, her eyes reflecting the light flatly. Outside, the snow comes down quick as a rainstorm to coat her yard.

The trees' branches already sag with it.

Read it, whispers Kit's voice in her ear, the sound seductive. Kit sing-songs, *J'ai perdu ma amie sans l'avoir mérité.*

On the end table beside her lies the letter, her employers' address faded so severely it's illegible. Read it, says Kit's voice, so Marisha plucks it from its resting past. The envelope yellowed over the last few months. In the firelight, it glows.

Read it read it *read it—*

With her nail pushed beneath the gummed flap, she stops. Encased inside might be a love letter, an apology, an explanation. A curse. *What right do you have*, might she write, *to punish me?*

She closes her eyes. Breathes. Opens them. Listens to the ravens outside her window. Then she leans forward, and tosses the letter into the flames.

The old paper burns, and for a moment, her world is still.

by Marjorie Becker

The Time He Called Me “Chick”

He also called me
“Wild Tomorrow,”
found my voice
so thin, so languid
in the breeze
and then he sensed
my taste for stealing men,
collecting winks
symphonic notes
hopeful, long;

I’d learned to leap,
to grasp, to grab.
I floundered, stumbling,
awkward-shy
and yet I fed my men
and offered them
a chance to swim
my wayward stream
to settle near my kitchen.

Cheap Lipstick

He treats me as though
I wear and only wear
the cheapest lipstick,

and only wear that lipstick
oh so cheap beside my
stream where I invite him,

showing him the ways the lipstick
though it seemed so cheap
is nothing;

no, my lips themselves possess
that brightest gloss, that most extensive
yes the most expensive sheen

that somehow-still-reminder of their reach.

And Did You Hear The Train, My Love?

Just walking there and kissing where
we find the backyard tracks and hear
that wail of train, of sudden longing
the tender throng where pleasures hover,
shiver near the Queen Anne's lace.

The daisies' colors sense my breath,
you strip me down around
a Macon south with gesture,
ways you ponder, offer treasures
light as liquid as your glance
we walk a naked noon

so supple . . .

What To Wear

Practiced as they were at deep exclusion,
that group of Macon women still invited her,
my oldest Jewish cousin, my only prayer.

They asked her in and back into the cocktail party closet,
an open space they'd filled with whirls of silk,
the dresses wearing hues of blue, of open moss,
the finest garments drenched in red, the signal color, so she said.

They made her strip away her thoughts, her dreams,
she shrieked and then remembered how to sing and sing
until the men the women craved arrived to find her seizing silk,
a late-night stain, the broken folds encasing her.

Tug the Water

Eric Dreyer Smith

Midnight, as the men rowed toward the center. They, friends for years. The lake known to them, but not always so late in the evening. This, a Bangladesh lark. Spur of the moment bliss. They laughed. The boat settled.

“How is Amir?”

“Lovely.”

“Still, the lucky one you are.”

“Not always. You have your parents.”

“That’s a solace.”

The water lapped. They had no fishing poles, just the moonlight.

“I’m going for a swim.”

“Must you?”

“Just a short one.”

“Ok, fine.”

Splash, the ripples increase temporarily as the man disappeared into the water and the night. The other man sighed. He never had minded being alone, but the boat slightly rocked. His friend, Habib, should have known better. Yet, it could be forgiven, for Habib was most dear to him.

Rashon heard Habib surface. He must be thirty yards away, but it was too dark to be sure. Amir was beautiful and kind. Habib and her deserved each other. Rashon was happy for them. Graduation was near. Perhaps that is why they celebrated with a spontaneous row to the middle of the lake? A modest party. Rashon dwelled on his math final. He gasped slightly, a form of panic. Habib was swimming naked. Rashon wanted to move to closer to him, maybe that would lessen the sudden tension. He stood to row, but being only one man this challenged his agility. He never had taken off his tunics. It was hard to see. He didn’t have a good feel for his orientation. There were encumbrances.

Rashon steered toward the sounds of Habib playing in the water. That should get him close. Still, he didn’t see his friend. Another breathe of excited air, suddenly he felt like he was swallowing so much of it, that damn panic compounding again. He rowed too hard and a portion of his tunic caught on something, balance wavered and the boat tipped.

“Help! Help me!”

Habib had not been far. He heard the clunk of a man falling hard into the water. And then the yell of a frightened Rashon who could not swim. He rushed forward told the sounds. Being an excellent swimmer it did not take him long to arrive to where at the combustion. Rashon was thrashing violently, no longer able to shout, but vaguely recognizing Habib had come for him.

The first full thought Rashon formed was that Habib, the man grabbing him, had lost both his parents to death. He then had a moment of hope, but before any other thought could form, a wild terror seized his mind. The first gulp of water down his esophagus. He was under and thrashing. Worse, his tunic embedded with water weighed so much. As his arms and legs lashed out in asymmetrically, unhelpful directions the tunic further coiled around his frame like an anchor.

He felt Habib's arms try to close around just below his neck. Instinctively his being made the connection this was an attempt to bring him up, but emotionally he felt like another being was in the water, competing with him for life, and wishing to win, wishing to drown him first. He turned with rage, yet entangled more in the saturated tunics, struck Habib in the side with his elbow as his frenetic motions ensured some of the tunic now wrapped around Habib like the first inches of an octopus's tentacle. Then another gulp of water. Any thought that the other being was someone he knew, his Habib, vanished. The idea that the person in the water with them might have the skill to save him, vaguely remained in the back of his mind, so not all his actions fought off this person as if a murderer. Now, the two were under for some time.

Habib anticipated the frantic irrationality of his sinking friend, even the violence, but not the tunic. It made the man weigh twice as much, or so it seemed. And the garments were getting in his way, entrapping him. The normal technique would not work. The water was too dark to make eye contact. He had been struck by several blows, some hard. They were fifteen feet below the surface now and the only possibility was for both to emerge or neither. The rear grip did not hold. He maneuvered to the front. His mind was working, even after he took his first gulp of water into the lungs. Rashon's mind seemed gone, all was bodily reaction, the only movements that made any sense were the ones that seemed to want to push Habib underneath him, as if somehow in water one could use another man as a ladder to get to fresh air above.

Habib wondered if Rashon had any pity for him. This was not going well. The accidental drowning might include another man that Rashon brought down out of impossible desperation. Didn't Rashon have enough rationality and conscience to let Habib go? Habib then might be able to direct enough energies to finally loosen from the fatted tunic. That thought past as Habib gained a little ground toward the life air above, this with two swift kicks, thrusting upward, as he utilized a partial front grasp on the other man. Yet, this man disassembled that effort by inverting himself, acrobatically and sinking again. Why such effort toward adversity? There was no way for Habib to display instruction. This was a wild animal. Habib forgot the man's name and that he knew him well, after his second gulp of water. His own reason began to fail and his strength. The man, on his last attack, almost sensed this and fully put Habib beneath him, though the two still entwined by the tunic.

The fourth gulped of water proved too much for Rashon, he went limp as both men were now 25 feet below and served as nothing more than a cold reminder to Habib

that it was too late. Technically, Rashon was not dead yet, but he only practical function served as the urn to Habib's ashes they both sunk inevitably further down. Habib had no real power left, his senses confused, he forgot partially who he was. If anything, he was merely a single being, like some plankton just slowly residing, momentarily still in life. The last two inhalations of water would kill Rashon.

Habib did not sense his friend's demise. His was only two ingestions away himself. He swallowed too much water, was too deep and the unrelenting bond of the soaked garments had tied to the men together as if a ring woven from a woman's hair. Habib let go, with a sense of peace, perhaps even forgiving Rashon though he could place no specifics on who, why or how the two men were so far beneath the lake. His narrative was gone. The word "accident" flashed in his mind. Then there was no awareness of the other man with him, then none of himself – no inklings that any would find some familiarity afterward. If anything he felt he was a part of the lake, maybe water itself. Who could blame water?

The Bride from Clarry's Vineyard

Frankie McMillan

So we're just finishing up the wedding cakes when I remember we haven't placed the little bride and bridegroom on the top of the one for Clarry's Vineyard and I look at the order just to check it's not two of the same; two brides in white or two grooms in black which is becoming more common these days and Johnny wipes his hands on his apron and says, we've got to get more ventilation in here, the iced flowers aren't looking too perky and I point to the order and say, who took this order and Johnny says what's wrong with it and I say there's something missing, that's what wrong and Johnny shuffles forward, back hunched as a hamster and stares at the paper for so long, pity takes hold and I say, look here there's only one figurine put down for the top tier of the cake ... *so who's she going to marry huh?* And we hold the order up to the light from the window but there's nothing ticked there and Johnny says maybe there's not supposed to be another figure and now my kindness towards Johnny, working in the bakery for twenty five years, my kindness starts to harden like a ball of sugar at 340 % F and I bark at him, how can that be, what are you trying to say and I push past him to the decoration drawers and pull out a handful of plastic brides and bridegrooms and I say, *sort it Johnny.*

But even as I'm banging the drawers shut and even as he bends down to wipe the sweat off his forehead I know, just as I know about climate warming, and infertility and too much plastic in the ocean, and the rising divorce rate, I know there's a bride out there without a bridegroom and she'll walk alone through Clarry's vineyard and before the priest she'll put her own ring on her own finger and this is just the beginning of other brides, all over the country walking alone on their wedding day and what I'm going to do with all the extra plastic bridegrooms in the drawer, I don't know.

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The Crawl Space

Elisavietta Ritchie

“Merely the skin of a black rat-catcher, Mr. Melton. No copperhead. And by August, all snakes are long gone from the cellar to the garden.”

“I don’t trust no snake nowhere,” he said.

Generations of Meltons had been farmers and caretakers here, and this final descendant should be as accustomed to wildlife, even when not shooting it, Belinda Smithington thought as she knelt on wet grass outside the dark two-foot square opening beneath what the local paper used to call “Congressman Smithington’s historic mansion.” For years the scene of much partying and politicking, the structure was now only a ramshackle farmhouse no longer of interest to the press.

Snakes didn’t spook Belinda. Granted benevolent black snakes squeezed their prey to death and could, if frightened, chomp on an ankle.

Congressman Smithington’s mansion and its denizens were familiar to Belinda and to her cousin Daniel since childhood. Parlor and dining room were reserved for weekend politicking and partying, while various cousins from around the county entertained each other in the attic or the barn, accommodating Daniel’s infirmities without question.

Plumbing beneath the house, however, remained mysterious, foreboding. Brushing aside cobwebs and dangling wires, she commanded it into the crawl space.

“You okay going in there?” Daniel called from his wheelchair under the oak.

“Sure. Stay where you are!”

The crawl space was a labyrinth of grungy pipes, even dirtier than the cellar in the Gaza desert...Beneath the first floor, multiple pipes transported well water inside, other pipes carried wash water and sewage to a cesspool somewhere under the neglected gardens. A century of cinders, cement crumbs, insect carapaces, and good country dirt encrusted all.

Worried that Daniel might try to maneuver his wheelchair between the ruts, and tip over, she was relieved when Mr. Melton figured out which was the broken pipe, and she could exit, ripping her ragged jeans still more on nails.

Melton’s forbearers knew in their bones which pipes went where, their lives successions of squats, kneels, wriggles and crawls, loosening and tightenings, armed with wrenches, heavy-duty extension cords and flashlights.

Figuratively, Belinda’s life was, she mused, and sometimes literally, a succession of squats, kneels, wriggles, crawls, loosening, tightenings, armed with uncertain intellectual tools...

Clothes already torn beyond any hippie fashionableness would end up in the DONATIONS bag destined for anonymous Third World women to braid into colorful rugs, thanks to programs which, in air-conditioned offices, Belinda had helped create

in lands which had seldom bothered with indoor plumbing before colonials felt the need...

In addition to help when abroad, in the mansion as in the long-ago apartment or house in Georgetown, the Smithingtons employed a chauffeur and a cook-housekeeper. A Missus Brown, born with Smithington genes "if diluted by cross-breeding," ruled the house and kitchen. During the week Mister Brown, handyman/butler/chauffeur, had ferried Congressman Smithington in the Caddy to his office in the Congressional building, and Melanie to various charity boards and other "activities which might prove politically useful." Missus Brown drove the children too and from elementary school in the old station wagon where Daniel's wheelchair could be folded into the rear.

"Guess while I was overseas," Belinda said to Mr. Melton, "the real estate agents handling tenants set up periodic pest-control visits?"

"And I and my father," Mr. Melton said, "we repaired the roof so no critters in the attic. Ouch, I'm gettin' old, stiff limbs. Sixty's time to retire."

Retire, only sixty? Belinda never revealed her age, except when essential on official documents. Her father had set the example: until his mid-eighties Congressman Smithington, who was also Daniel's adoptive father, continued running for office and getting elected, only retiring when Melanie Smithington tactfully brought up his increasing forgetfulness. He still made appearance at fairs, bull roasts, tractor pulls, graduations, parishes, and veterans' clubs.

Mingling with county gentry was especially important as he'd married Melanie, daughter of a minor foreign diplomat. Her British accent added class in Washington, balancing the congressman's folksy demeanor, but was "downright off-putting to some country folks." The local obstetrician who'd yanked Belinda from Melanie Smithington's womb sixty years ago had barely understood her Oxbridge accent.

The year before Belinda's birth, a few farms away, a baby was delivered of a mother born a Smithington but rather unfortunately married to an alcoholic fiddler named Hayes of not verifiable genealogy. Their baby Daniel was handsome and relatively undemanding, but Hayes suddenly noticed what others already had: legs uneven and twisted, the child at age four only crawled.

"A cripple!" Hayes exclaimed. "You must take him to see the doctor immediately!"

The doctor, whom mother and baby already visited for periodic check-ups, explained, "A few cases of infantile paralysis still appear in this country..."

To distract him during the examination, the pediatric nurse sang. Daniel sang back in perfect pitch. "Musically talented!" doctor and nurse exclaimed simultaneously.

Hayes was proud of his own musical talents but, realizing he'd sired an "imperfect" child, he drank ever more, more frequently landed in the county jail. The Salvation Army dried him out and steered him into the Merchant Marine, but when his ship docked in Venice, he vanished.

Daniel's mother died when their old tractor overturned.

His elderly grandmothers both lived on farms rife with ruts and crumbling structures "unsafe for the handicapped." The grandmother with a telephone dialed the congressman. "The child has our Smithington blood, and Daniel's your middle name...Belinda shouldn't grow up a spoiled only child."

Melanie Smithington had agreed. Daniel was legally adopted. He seemed born musically talented, so Melanie nabbed an upright piano at the local thrift shop. Though Belinda proved to be tone deaf, she learned to read music and turn the pages of Daniel's scores.

Again Melanie Smithington agreed when the congressman insisted, "The children need a dog, a hunting dog, and I'll resume hunting as soon as the current 'Save-the-Wildlife' fad is over." He selected a grizzled Labrador called Butch from a neighboring farm.

A couple of years later, lacking the heart to consign the arthritic old dog to the vet's to be "put down," Butch died in the crawl space under the house. Beyond the gardens, one of the Meltons dug a grave deep enough to keep foxes from digging into it.

Seven-year-old Daniel crying inconsolably all night Belinda, then age six, held him, rubbing his twisted limbs. The next day she wheeled him up the dirt lane to the farm which produced dynasties of Labradors. Though Daniel swore nothing could replace Butch, Butch Junior curled up between the children, all three sleeping too soundly to be diverted by the thunderstorm and usual power failure.

"How sweet..." Belinda's mother murmured when she looked into Daniel's room, her candle flame making ghosts dance across the flowered wallpaper. She fetched her husband. "Come see our Heavenly Twins, and their new puppy—"

"Yep, honey, they're curled up like blacksnakes," the Congressman said. "And where blacksnakes live, aren't no copperheads. The way we Smithingtons want it: keep down undesirables in our county."

*

Age eight and the facts-of-life still hazy, Belinda worried less about the Congressman's inherent prejudices than the possibility that merely curling up with Daniel, she might become pregnant.

"My last routine radiologist appointment," he assured her, "the nurses were whispering about how 'repeated X-rays could cause sterility down the pike,' but when they realized I was listening, quickly said 'Oh Danny boy, you are too young to be concerned with such matters.' Back home, I opened the big dictionary."

*

Melanie remarked that "Local twang is dangerously contagious! We must import a proper English governess to cure the children's drawl and the absence of *g*'s on the ends of their gerunds. And they might finally acquire proper manners as well as accents."

A proper English governess was imported. One chilly bedtime, Daniel, Belinda and the Labrador curled up together, the governess entered to bring them each a quilt. "Heavens! You children are too old and your dog too doggy to be sharing one bed! What would people think!" Thereafter, they waited until the governess retired to her own room. Soon they convinced Melanie that, as they had overheard a teacher say, "Governesses are mighty elitist for a county congressman's kids."

*

The local schools had programs for blind and for deaf children but as yet none for the physically challenged. "We must take them into Washington with us," Melanie said, "and enroll them in a good private school!"

The Smithingtons moved to Georgetown, the large brick house and walled garden suitable for official entertaining as well as children and dogs. The house remodeled so Daniel would not have to navigate stairs, the servants' quarters off the kitchen became the children's bedrooms with playroom and bathroom between. The servants enjoyed the best views from their attic.

Belinda was allowed to sit in on Daniel's music lessons and he at her history classes. Though she could never master his scores, he memorized her assignments in French and international affairs.

Upon her graduation from school, on her teachers' advice, Belinda was sent to a women's junior college in New England. She was finally allowed to leave when the guidance counselor agreed she had become morose, anorexic and was obviously not benefiting from their fine studies program. Transferred to Georgetown University, she again lived at home with her parents and Daniel, regained her normal cheerful self, and both children maxed their respective exams.

The mansion in the countryside remained as it had always been, serving as an elegant weekend retreat, and Congressman and Mrs. Smithington continued to live there part of the time until a retirement home was built in the county.

For years Daniel avoided mentioning his handicaps until, reading one of Belinda's books from a literature course, he came across George Herbert. "Listen to this!" he said bitterly.

*Man is all symmetry,
Full of proportions, one limb to another,
And all to all the world besides;
Each part may call the furthest brother,
For head with foot hath private amity
which makes him pale and wan.*

Belinda had forgotten his anger at his condition. He regained composure only when she took up the book:

*"The stars have us to bed;
Night draws the curtain, which the sun withdraws;
Music and light attend our head;*

*All things unto our flesh are kind
In their descent and being; to our mind
In their ascent and cause.”*

He shut the anthology, wheeled over to the windows, closed the curtains, and hauled himself from his wheelchair into his bed. She followed, and drew him close.

*

At seventeen, encountering Washington’s perennial bright young interns and congressional aides, Belinda whirled through parties and balls. Considered “attractive rather than conventionally pretty,” long black dresses at least made her look almost svelte.

Daniel wearing a tuxedo, in his wheelchair parked against a wall, people paused to exchange a few words, but he soon found their well-meaning condescension too galling. His musical studies increasingly serious, he gave them priority. One car adapted to his needs, he soon passed the driving test and drove himself to amateur classical orchestras and jazz bands. He began working paying gigs, playing light classics for weddings and bar mitzvahs, and tinkly cocktail music at piano bars. His infirmities merely drew larger tips. “Better than freeloading one hundred percent off relatives,” he muttered, back in the kitchen thrusting a wad of twenties in the cookie jar. While waiting until Belinda came home, he’d listen to the university lectures she recorded: if never himself to join the State Department, he’d still learn everything she did.

Belinda’s escorts were disappointed she gave them only a quick kiss on the doorstep, then hurried into the kitchen for cocoa with a dash of rum with Daniel, who would quiz her about some point in history.

*

Belinda did linger on the front stoop with one young law clerk. Boswell Bostwick, as his cumbersome name went, was a Bostonian with a 40-foot sloop and a future in the financial community. When he invited her on a sailing house party off Marblehead, Melanie paid for Belinda’s ticket on the New Englander from Union Station. “Daniel could not easily manage leaping off trains and onto yachts—Anyway, no invitation for him was extended.”

Nor could Daniel have managed the duties of an usher when, four months later, in a chapel of the National Cathedral, Belinda was married to Boswell Bostwick. Daniel turned down their invitation to play Mendelson’s Wedding March. “Too corny.”

Belinda and Bostwick settled in his house in Boston. “I don’t want a working wife,” he insisted, so she took advanced political science courses at Radcliffe. She grew accustomed to his various yacht races and to his impulsive decisions, unexplained absences, and annoyance at her inquiries.

Their marriage proved childless and rather brief.

One rare weekend, instead of sailing off Cape Cod or skiing in the White Mountains, the young couple drove south in Bostwick’s red Cadillac convertible “to

check out your ancestral home.” Bostwick found a half-drunk can of beer in the sink but when he poured out the dregs, the puddle remained. Belinda had little experience with plumbing matters, nor had Bostwick, but, he insisted, “I can fix any old kitchen sink as easily as the head on my yacht. Pipes probably clogged with roots from your damned overgrown fig bushes around the house.”

He hunted in vain for a snaking machine, then drove off toward the local hardware store. When by morning he did not return, an earlier “Mr. Melton” reamed the drain clear.

Finally, Bostwick called from some telephone in what from the background noise sounded like a bar: “Hey, good weather ahead, I’m off sailing for a while, and—” When the operator interrupted for Bostwick to deposit more coins, he hung up. Belinda assumed he was just off for another race and would return in a few days. After a week in the old mansion, she dusted off one of the pickups in the barn and drove it to their Boston apartment. Another fortnight later, going through the mail, she finally opened his bank statements. These included restaurant bills for dinners to which she’d not been invited, department stores bills for lacy lingerie she never saw. When the mailman left a seemingly frantic love letter on pink notepaper from an unfamiliar female, she realized the situation. Daniel in the course of their near-daily phone conversations, suggested, “Perhaps under another name he flew with whatever sweetie to Paris—”

A week later, police knocked on the door to query Belinda about a red sports car abandoned in a seaside town: her name as well as Bostwick’s appeared on documents in the glove compartment. Then a dozen miles off New Jersey, the Coast Guard fished up the body of a man fitting Bostwick’s physical description. Apparently fallen overboard, his ID had survived in the shorts pocket on the shark-nipped body. His yacht remained moored in another harbor, barnacles thickening on the cracks in the anti-fouling paint. The police distracted by other demands, the Smithingtons chose to avoid further investigations, especially during the congressman’s election campaigns which kept him in the mansion.

Formalities over, Belinda accepted the status of early widowhood, resumed her maiden name, sold the yacht to pay Bostwick’s debts, and did not pursue the mystery. Glad to be back with Daniel and occasionally her parents in the Georgetown house, she passed the Foreign Service exam and began her career at the State Department. Daniel continued his musical studies, played gigs around Washington and the adjacent counties, in between reading all her books, vicariously preparing for the diplomatic life.

Whenever a new post abroad needed a replacement in a hurry, she was a safe bet to fly over. A handicapped but mobile and intelligent adult dependent seemed easier to accommodate than children to enroll in local international schools or to send home at government expense. They had no trouble finding tenants for the Georgetown house.

Belinda performed her assignments quietly and her colleagues seemed unaware of or too polite to mention the unsolved mystery of her unfortunate marriage. Elegantly

but conservatively groomed, a pleasant but not an undiplomatically merry widow, over time she developed the same chunky body as certain did other mid-life women in government careers. Colleagues liked her, and were impressed with Daniel's knowledge of international affairs as well as his musical talents. He read *The New York Times*, whether the specially delivered overseas edition or, eventually, online. He also perused whatever local papers, and seemed to know as much as Belinda of international affairs and indigenous customs. He continued his own career as a musician: He played whatever tuned-up piano in whatever American embassy, joined local orchestras and bands, took on students, and provided windows into local worlds to which Foreign Service officers might not be invited but in which they often were interested.

In whatever locale, while ostensibly sleeping in their respective rooms, they curled up together in his bed.

*

On a special assignment to a certain country with which relations were minimal, they were forbidden to contact the few other Americans in the country. Ostensibly there as visiting teachers on a special exchange program, under an assumed family name Belinda and Daniel began their first week in what had been a picturesque resort, though now quantities of trash rendered the beach fit only for gulls and rats. The paint on their rented Volkswagen half gone, the vehicle did not stand out amid the battered bicycles and mangy donkeys in the seaside town which had seen better eras.

One morning only a week after their arrival, the engine conked out on the main road. They flagged a rickety extra-large taxi and the driver offered to take them to the school. En route they picked up and dropped off more passengers.

Two new passengers suddenly gave directions to detour to a guardhouse at the border. When the taxi-driver hesitated, they reinforced their orders with a show of Berettas. Canvas bags went over the heads of both Belinda and Daniel, their hands were tied together, and they were forced to the car floor. Belinda tried to cradle Daniel with her body, but both could feel every swerve on the increasingly rough roads. Once they were pulled out of the taxi, while captors and prisoners relieved themselves in a ditch, then all were back aboard. The taxi drove through one noisy village after another between a few miles of fields and desert, then they paused at another guardhouse where the driver was dismissed and one of the new passengers took over.

Finally, the taxi stopped and the bags were removed from their heads. They were instructed to relieve themselves in the field, then pushed into the only farmhouse in sight, to descend via a trap door and down a ladder which descended into a cellar. Their captors expressed annoyance at the need to lower Daniel into a sort of hammock down the hole, and without demonstrating any extra care, did so. His wheel chair remained in some room above.

The man who seemed to be in charge shone his flashlight on a tarpaulin in a corner. His companion lowered a chamber pot, several bottles of a watery orange drink and some biscuits, then the men raised the ladder and disappeared.

The following weeks were days and nights in hell. Medieval dungeons couldn't have been worse. By day, dim light filtered down the ladder when someone lowered or tossed down slabs of flat bread, sometimes goat cheese and bottles of orange drink. A rope was lowered for the purpose, Belinda quickly understood, of tying on the chamber pot. During all their previous years of living in close quarters, they'd been discreet about bodily functions: now Belinda had to steady Daniel on the pot. Only the mice observed their activities.

No communication with the outside world, nor with their captors—quite likely Hamas supporters who spoke a Lebanese form of Arabic. Or Turks? ISIS operatives? Chechens?

Finally, a man appeared at the top of the ladder and questioned them in imperfect French as to why they were in the country. Their cover as relief teachers he dismissed. Belinda asked him to contact what was left of the French embassy in Beirut, then in Damascus, then Cairo. Though some contacts were presumably made, they got nowhere. As for a possible ransom—

“Personne vous connait, aucun pays ne veut acheter votre liberté.”

Belinda had seldom asked her parents for money except for enrollment in courses, Daniel never. The final hope, they now decided, wasn't the retired Congressman Smithington who was showing signs of amnesia, but Melanie, who still had her marbles, and might realize something was very wrong.

More weeks in the cellar while negotiations continued, fruitlessly. Their captors, evidently part guerrillas, part patriots, part terrorists, took ages to find intermediaries through which to communicate the need to obtain a considerable sum of in fungible US \$100 bills.

At last the ladder was slid down the opening under the trap door and a coarse male voice ordered, “Vite, vite!” They staggered from the ladder into the sunlight. A man with a checkered red-and-white bandana motioned for them to wash in the bucket lifted from the well. He handed Belinda a long cotton dress and head scarf, and Daniel a loose shirt and baggy trousers. Someone behind them lifted them none too gently into a truck carrying watermelons. Daniel's wheelchair was folded into the back. A man with a shot gun followed them aboard. The driver, whose face they never saw, turned on the ignition, the vehicle snorted and choked and turned onto a curvy, bumpy road. At one point they seemed to stop at a roadblock, and finally allowed through.

Several hours later the car stopped beyond what had sounded like a town, the driver got out, returned, gestured to them to get out and hurry to the door of a low yellow stucco house, the only house in sight. Belinda helped Daniel into his twisted wheelchair. A young man emerged and hurried them into the house.

“Come, come in! I am agronomist, friend in Peace Corps, he asked I get you to right people...You illegal, big risk for me.”

“If you could get us to any American, he or she would quietly get us out of the country.” Belinda and Daniel remained unsure what country. “Do you have any aspirin?”

The agronomist brought aspirin, a jug of boiled water from the little refrigerator, tomatoes and goat cheese from the counter, showed them to an outdoor shower. He insisted they sleep in his double bed while he slept on the couch in the little living room. He never asked their names nor gave his own.

Before dawn he revved up his Volkswagen and delivered them to the home of an American, a former AID worker who had married a local, sired six children, and stayed there.

Belinda and Daniel knew better than to ask for more details. “Thank you,” he said. “We will forget we ever met you.”

Both would forever be haunted not only by the under-cover assignment gone wickedly haywire, but as much by the dismissive words of the American chargé d'affaires to whom their host delivered them. “Sorry but we mustn’t tear the fragile spider web which could rip if news of your adventure reached the press...Sorry, Mr. and Mrs. Smithington, this is a gag order...I’ll get you out of the country but your presence, if reported to anyone, could also cost me my job.”

Was he too nonplused to offer sympathies for their long, painful, imprisonment?

After hasty debriefings, the procuring of newly-minted passports with exit visas, then several changes of planes and countries, two sleepless days later they were in a rented car en route to the dilapidated estate....

The old lawns had grown into savannahs, and old pin oaks, evergreens and lilacs were shedding their dead branches all over the farm.

Daniel resumed playing the old grand piano, newly tuned, and since his eyesight was dimming, fortunately he had memorized a broad repertoire and his fingers on the keys had remained sure. Over the next months, however, extra notes increasingly slipped in or escaped before hearing, due in part to increasing blindness, but also, Belinda realized, to fading memory. This also meant he didn’t see her wrinkles, and gallantly claimed her chunkiness gave him more to hang onto in the darkened bedroom.

Under the house, she held the flashlight while Mr. Melton reached for a wrench to tackle the drainpipe. Tomorrow she’d buy more aluminum tape, and clear the dead branches scattered around the farm. The firewood would be welcome on winter evenings.

Offspring of the county’s once most notable family, they were now merely two aging cousins on a ramshackle farm.

Four Rings of Light

Graeme K. Talboys

There is no knowing when it will happen. No way to taste the wind. No feeling in the bones. No way to place a finger on that particular pulse. Yet the days between must be filled; so you go on, turn your hand to all the other things that must be done.

Staring through the window, I could see the slated sky wedged between buildings at the crossroads. Snow began to fall – a nonchalant vanguard of wet flakes dropping into an unexpected stillness. And just for a moment that was it. There was nothing left to do, nowhere left to go, no more words to share. The end of the world had come and I had never felt so calm.

No one else noticed.

The three workmen at the counter stayed bent over their newspaper, engrossed in the quiet and earnest discussion that had occupied them since I arrived. Cigarette smoke wound itself about their heads before it trailed into the shadows by the ceiling. Paint flecks on their blue jackets were stars in a child's picture of the night sky.

Behind the counter, polishing a glass with a cloth, the patron listened to a conversation in the kitchen that I could not hear. He worked at the glass with unconscious twists, turning his head to make his contribution before turning back again with inward eyes on the voices behind him.

An old woman in the tenebrous depths of the café took short sips at her coffee, dabbing her lips with a napkin, eyeing the pile of loose change on the tablecloth. Perhaps she was wondering if she could afford to treat herself to another cup; perhaps she was calculating a tip.

Dim bulbs flicked on, struggling with the gloom. I looked back out at the end of the world, but it had passed by. All that was left of the apocalypse was the steamy ghost of a world beyond the blank pale face that looked back in. It faded as I moved out of the light from the overhead lamp.

Leaving my change on the bill, I pushed out through the door. Bundled in the same old garments, rags of yesteryear wrapped round like so many security blankets, I eased myself into the late December twilight.

A world moved through the smoke and fog of the cold afternoon, going down into the dark. Beyond the window, beyond the door, out on the pavement between dirty banks of old snow, there was a scene that was not open to arrangement. Chaotic, noisy, incessant; people fighting through the weather, foundering beneath the first of the new snow.

Each journey taken is a new one through unexplored territory, pulling sense from the turmoil, looking for the intersections where new vistas and routes can be found. It is a place of broken worlds where fragments of dream are stitched both bright and dark across the grey stuff of the everyday. And I must borrow every changing shape to form

my own dreams and find my own reality.

Beneath the heavy, yellow-grey sky, smoke clings in listless fashion to the chimneys and rooftops. The stench of sulphur is locked at street level. The world is not as I remember it. Stopping on a corner, waiting to cross, I stand beneath a lamp. The gas hisses and pops, anaesthetising the remaining colour with the ghost green glow of the mantle.

Away from the centre, the roads darken and the lamplight strengthens with uncertain conviction. Shutters are closed and curtains drawn, hints of warmth and private worlds glowing at their edges. One day the temptation will be too much.

Streets become alleys and the populated chaos becomes a deserted maze, haunted by disembodied voices and fragments of conversation, whispers and echoes. And looming from the wintry dark a high, old building that is hunkered down in misery against the coming winter's night.

It isn't far across the courtyard, the cobbles slick with half-melted snow. Heavier flakes drop through shafts of light absorbing sound from the world. Then the windy shelter of the narrow passage with the tailor's workshops above. Stopping there to stand sideways on the damp, worn paving as someone passes in the opposite direction, head nodding. Emerging at the far end beneath a canopy, ornate, rusting, and no protection at all from the wind and driven snow.

The Gothic double door was of time varnished oak, studded with farrier's nails and decorated with heavy, cast iron door furniture. The recto leaf was permanently bolted on the inside, top and bottom. The verso gave easily, swinging silently on greased hinges as the handle sucked warmth from my fingers. As I closed it behind me, the wind moaned around the edges, grieved at its exclusion. A handful of snowflakes whirled through the closing gap and fell in the suddenly still air.

The hall was dim and cold, sepulchral. Tiles that had once been red, white, and black covered the floor. They were cracked and grimy now from a century of indifferent shoe leather, despite their daily mopping. To the left was the entrance of a dark passage that exuded an odour of things long forgotten and best left that way. Beyond the dark opening the wall was covered with steel mailboxes, depository of countless fragments of frozen conversations.

To the right, the stairs clung with drunken determination to the wall and began a precarious climb into a chill twilight of the soul. Pale, broken light filtered down from a snow-covered sky-light, touching the wooden banister before pooling on the floor. At the back of the hall, beyond the stairs, there were deep shadows in which one expected to find the dead waiting, bereft now even of the knowledge of what they waited for.

Somewhere in the complicated geometry of the structure, lay a garden with trees. I had glimpsed it from various windows, but never found my way there. An adventure for another day. Perhaps. It was a building you could all too easily get lost in.

From above, the faint echo of a mellow glassy chime drifted down past the edge of hearing. Incomplete, tantalising, part of something bright that had escaped into this bleak wilderness at the opening and closing of a door.

I climb. At the first turning of the stair I stopped to catch cold breath, looking down with a mortuary gaze, before moving on to climb again, turn and turn around. The higher I climb, the narrower the stairs. They slant alarmingly toward the well and the hard floor far below. The last turn always scares me.

At my door I rest again, searching for the key. It feels like I have climbed on my hands and knees.

When I had finally coaxed flame from the soft, damp coal and warmth began to creep into the room, I went in futile search of that calm again. It lingered like an elusive scent; fading the more I sought to grasp it. No knowing when it will come; no way of calling it back.

Carrying the heat of the fire on my face, I moved about the room touching, straightening, rearranging, searching in the end for matches and finally lighting the candle lamps. Four rings of light danced pale on the ceiling, settling as the flames found equilibrium.

At the window I looked past the dim ghostly face staring back in at me with worried eyes, watched the glimmering street lamps below, the steady grey flutter of heavy snow. A shrouded figure, head bowed, collar high, pushed along at a steady pace, fading in and out of the cones of light. They moved off out of sight and the deep, ragged pock marks of their footfall began to soften and fill, dimples of pale green shadow.

I like it up here on my own in the dark. In this chair, at this desk, you can see beyond so many horizons; reach out and bring back glittering fragments of simulacra to examine and record, drop into the kaleidoscope and turn.

Cold breathed into the fire-glow warmth. Candle flames flicked. A pale face appeared in the shadow of the other chair as I turned. In that first glimpse, a wholly unguarded moment on both sides, I saw the deep weariness etched in grey. A slender hand stretched forward for a moment to take heat from the fire. The spectral face relaxed, fading back into deeper shadow, half-hidden eyes watching me. A greatcoat hung by the door, snow melting from the turned up collar. I remembered to breathe. Smiling, she slept.

Sometimes you only know she has been here because the scent of roses and sandalwood sweetens the air, like the memory of a kiss. Even then her presence is strong. Now she sleeps in the chair by the fire, long legs stretched in front of the hearth. I am overwhelmed by her proximity, the sight of that rose-gold hair, cropped again, the lustre dulled; the familiar folds of the worn old Guthrie; her strength; her spare, fey beauty. If truth be told, I am more than just a little bit in love.

There is so much more. I stood and listened. I sat in the chair opposite and watched. The reality in the shadow, detail drawn from a deep well of memories fed by the generations. But they are her stories. She must speak for herself when she sees fit.

Emerging slowly from metatemporal disorientation in this top floor decompression chamber of the senses, she slept as the sun rose and woke in the dark. I would tiptoe about in the strange grey light of snowy days. She would sit in silence by the fire at night, searching for words, drawing herself in from disparate locations.

She has her own little room with bed and chest and set of drawers. Perpetual summer sunlight passes unheeded through the window, one pane cracked, and moves slowly lighting up the colours in the rug on the polished wooden floor. It is tucked obliquely into the structure of the building with a door that's not always to be found.

Making tea. Toasting crumpets. Tending patiently.

I found muffins. It was the unlocking of the door. Talk of the muffin man with his weskit over his apron, ringing his bell as he walked the streets with his tray balanced on his head. Talk of her Nan. She wiped butter from her chin as her eyes focussed on precious memories; licked her slender fingers and sipped her tea, still lost in the distant years, warm with sunlight and love. And that sudden, desolate, imploring look; the silent cry of a drowning childhood.

Helpless in the face of this, all the horror and sadness she has been dropped amidst, I stutter into a familiar silence solid with guilt. As ever, that little kick, the tap on my ankle with her lazily turned foot to get my attention. And having caught it, a reminder of all the wonders she has seen; all the joy with which she has been blessed. All the chances given. All the stories.

Some are her own, shared in the conviction that I will find a way to retell them honestly. Others are tales she has heard along the many ways, brought back as gifts from exotic lands.

It is not all stories. We talk long into the dark as the fire settles. How strange and rare it is. We would catch ourselves in the act of throwing the remnants of dissected verse back and forth in the comfortable twilight. As the days pass and the snow continues to fall, we talk of other things and I tell tales of my own. Of that first time, in the heartbreak confusion of all the haunting visions of death, that I saw her mother resting on the houseboat. A serene, ethereal presence by the lake's edge, a misty oasis in an entropic world.

Rapt, she would listen, adding these tiny, precious fragments of reminiscence to the treasury. Laid out there like sherds in their cases. Studied, rearranged, always in the hope of creating a narrative, no matter how short; always in the hope of a clearer picture.

By way of response, she held out her right hand, curled in a loose fist, a fine tracery of scars across the flesh. Turning it over, she uncurled her fingers. A flash of blue as firelight caught a facet of the sapphire. Leaning forward, I could see the open locket in which the jewel was nested. The chain hung down like a string of quicksilver. She

rocked her hand gently, watching the sparks of blue light dart through the darkness. Then, with a swift, practised movement she snapped it shut. I caught a glimpse of the eight pointed wheel as her fingers closed over it.

So many things to be said; or left unsaid.

Memories of her yet to be shared, tenuous, revenant, limned in mist, sometimes emerging like shafts of late day sunlight undercutting a storm.

There is near here a stretch of ancient shore. Unobserved, I have seen her walk there against the liquid flint of the sea; seen her kneel and touch some fossil, caressing the form as if she had but lately seen it thriving in the warm shallows of antiquity.

The candles guttered, leaving us in the ember glow of the fire, breathing the acrid smoke of their extinction. When I lit them again, she had gone. Four circles of light danced pale on the ceiling.

You cannot take joy in a free spirit by holding it fast. But letting go is having some vital part of the self torn slowly away.

It was trying to snow again, hesitant flakes on the fall to envied oblivion. In the grate the embers faded. Seconds were shaved from the night, falling with the clock's steady beat. I wrapped a blanket round my shoulders. I will write. To still the voices. To fill the void.

In some distant part of the building someone whistled the opening bars of *Ich möchte nicht ein Engel sein*. The echo faded and with it went some of the pain.

A tiny ammonite lay on my writing table. At first I thought it a fossil, but on turning it in the light from the lamp I saw it was an actual shell, became aware of a summer's briny tang. It was warm in my left hand, the tiny calcite whorl rough against my flesh. Eventually it would join my other treasures in the Kashmiri mahogany box with the brass inlay of leaves. For the moment, I savoured the texture as I picked up a pencil and took a last glance at the falling snow.

by Darren C Demaree

EMILY AS SO MANY BUCKETS OF WATER

I don't know the god
that it's in the rain,
but I have stood

beneath Emily
& nearly drowned
in her Midwestern

intentions. Every time
I hear that steel smile
ring against

the side of the bucket
I open my eyes
to her tide. I swallow

her small, simple acts
to save me.
I spit a stream

of water at the sun
to mock the firmament
that burns without her

& any echo she
& I produce I consider
a new testament.

EMILY AS A DAY MOST AGGRESSIVE

We can ball-up
the vastness
of America

& roll it around
in our cheeks
for fun. This

is the language
we use when
Emily wakes up

ornery. I am
the sure, at night,
when we sleep

someone puts
a crown on her
head. I've seen

her eat that crown.
Our daughters
are going

to remembered
for the fires
they start

on the land
they've been given.
We'll need

new names
by the time
they bury me.

EMILY AS SHE IS NOT AN ORIGIN STORY

The light loves the curve.
The curve doesn't notice
the light. I look back

& I don't see Emily anywhere.
She's in the darkness
with me now.

All that action, the physics
& mythology of it, that
happened before she became

the wall I sleep next to.
I can go no further
than Emily's strength.

SWERVE

John Tavares

The last thing I remembered clearly was the collision with the Burger Borough transport truck and the smashing and crashing of steel, glass, and hundreds of hamburger buns floating and hovering, suspended above the wreckage and road.

My mother waved a paring knife, which she used to peel a chilled orange, into which she had injected vodka. My mother was a tax accountant, who, decades ago, fresh out of University of Toronto with a degree in commerce, worked for a multinational accounting and auditing firm, on Bay Street, in the financial district of Toronto. When she first met my father, she specialized in clever schemes, helping wealthy individuals pay the least amount of taxes legally feasible. After my parents married and my mother gave birth to me, her sole child, she became an aficionado of cooking and baking and an avid stay at home mom. Now my parents fought through messy attempts at divorce. When they weren't studiously refusing to talk to each other, they were arguing.

I often used Mom's Pomeranian as an excuse to visit and check on her well-being, because I was, well, concerned about her well-being. After Friday's tumultuous market close, which kept me awake, processing sell orders, and calming down clients who wanted to cash out of the stock market and, surprisingly, the bond market (since interest rates were rising, yields were increasing, and bond prices were falling), I used my mom's Pomeranian as an excuse to drag myself away from the desk in my home office. I drove back to my mother's house to drop off Buffet, who I half-carried and half-walked on a hike, on the pathways through Trinity Bellwoods Park, trying to impress, with my short shorts and my tight halter top, a handsome jogger. I first saw my favourite man, the mysterious stranger, who looked vaguely Middle Eastern, and whom I fantasized worked as a geologist or geophysicist in the oil industry, at Woofstock, an outdoor festival for dogs, and, then, later, whenever I hiked along the trails in Trinity Bellwoods Park during the evening around sunset and dusk.

My mother didn't want to talk about the new brand of organic dog food I bought for Buffet; she wanted to bitch and complain about my father. "I don't know why that man doesn't want to work and make money," my mother griped.

"Because he's retired," I countered.

"He's not sixty-five. He's not eligible for the Canada Pension Plan."

"You're in denial, mother, talking about the Canada Pension Plan. Dad doesn't need to work; he doesn't need a pension, period."

"All he wants to do all day is cruise the clothing optional beach on Hanlan Point, wearing nothing but his Tilley hat and a coral necklace and, if it's chilly, a button down shirt, and his flip flops or sandals, letting his flaccid penis hang out, chatting up the girls."

“Mom, he’s retired, a multimillionaire. For his own health and well-being, he might be better off not working. Don’t you think he’s earned enough money.”

“But he’s only fifty-six years old, dear. His sort of man needs some sort of purpose and meaning in his life. I know the type: I married him. He needs to make some sort of contribution to society. If he’s good at making money, than I think that’s what he should do.”

I gasped and sighed, as I considered some way of getting the paring knife out of her hand. I don’t think she realized how intimidating she looked waving the paring knife in my direction. Meanwhile, I heard her speeches and lamentations too often before. I stroked the furry head of the Pomeranian to sooth my mind and mood and distract me from annoyance and impatience.

“Your father was a pioneer in the world of electronic trading funds in Canada. He started First Canadian Food ETF in Canada, which had equal weight holdings in companies like Sugar Beach Sweeteners, Ocean Liner Foods, Scotia Seafoods, Guelph Juices, Premium Proteins. Prudent Insurance International bought his investment company for millions of dollars.”

“That’s exactly my point. How much money does a man need?”

“That’s besides the point. He needs to work. Work is therapy to him. He doesn’t even regard work as work.”

“Mom, you need to accept you’re separated and divorced, and he has his own life to live.”

“We are not divorced.”

“You mean you still haven’t signed the papers?”

“I refuse to sign any legal documents your father proposes.”

If I sounded surprised, my reaction should have been different. My mother’s latest obsession was my father’s class transgressions and his disregard for social convention; father’s flaunting of unconventional behaviour obsessed her and roused her ire. She made it her life work and duty to force him to conform. When she first separated from my father, she still had positive words about him, since she still appeared to be under the influence of that social psychological phenomenon companionate love, if I recalled correctly from my nursing school days. Lately, though, my mother the life-long teetotaller also started drinking. Wine tasting for the lifelong homemaker and stay at home mother became a full- time job as she sampled different wines, cordials, and mixed drinks. She even started to brew and craft her own beer, and distill her own wine and liqueur. And now she injected fruit with vodka and waved the paring knife, which she had used to peel and slice the thawed orange, at her only offspring. Meanwhile, she couldn’t accept the fact her husband abandoned their relationship.

“I think he had a stroke. He is definitely not acting normally.”

“The doctor examined him and said he didn’t have a stroke.”

“The doctor should have referred him to a specialist. A neurologist should have

examined him and ordered a CAT Scan or an MRI of his brain.”

“The doctor said he’s perfectly healthy.”

“How can he be perfectly healthy when he’s chasing girls half his age.”

“He’s interested in women, and didn’t you say he was a virgin when he met you?”

“Are you trying to justify his behavior? Are you giving him excuses?”

“I talked with him, and I think he wants to sample what’s out there. Didn’t you say he stayed loyal to you through all those years?”

“I don’t see your point.”

“He’s trying to recapture his lost or unlived youth. He’s lost friends at work to cancer, heart disease, stroke.” I enumerated the reasons, counting off my fingers as if I was explaining why a client should invest in stocks as opposed to fixed income. “He realizes life is short.”

“I do not see the connection. So the observation that life is short—and I beg to differ since all his grandparents lived and were still digging up beets and potatoes in their backyard gardens in the Azores in their nineties—justifies him—spending the entire summer, kayaking to Toronto Island, baring his wrinkled, dimpled flesh to young women on Hanlan Point beach, getting skin cancer.”

“He hasn’t gotten skin cancer.”

“He will. Trust me. He will contract the evil pestilence.”

“You’re starting to sound gloomy, dark, biblical.”

“He’s lost his moral compass. He’ll contract HIV, skin cancer, hepatitis A, B, C, you name it, as a consequence, if he hasn’t already.”

“He does look dark, but he tans easily.”

“His worshipping the sun will give him melanoma, and he won’t be able to say I didn’t warn him.”

“He’s Portuguese, mother—”

“He is not Portuguese; he is Canadian, so rid yourself of any romantic European notions about your father. Don’t delude yourself into thinking he’s some Latin lover.”

“What I meant to say is his ethnic background is Portuguese: he tans easily, and he’s somewhat dark skinned, so he’s probably protected from skin cancer.”

“You’re not a dermatologist, Isabella, so stop pretending you know and understand skin conditions. He’s only dark skinned when he stays in the sun for unhealthy periods of time.”

I realized my mother had probably drunk too much wine, but still I could not resist arguing with her, even though I thought I should avoid provoking her while she clenched the paring knife as if she meant business. “At least he sold the yacht.”

“You sounded disappointed. I hope you don’t anticipate—don’t expect to use that monstrous excuse of a boat. He actually didn’t sell the yacht, but he realized it was a mistake to buy a massive oversized toy he can’t skipper. He lets his friend use the yacht as long as he sails it when he asks, usually on long weekends or whenever he’s in no mood to paddle his kayak to the islands. That’s how he lands these girls. He

uses the yacht and the onboard stereo system and bar as a lure. That's also how he's going to get AIDS."

"Mom, he doesn't sleep with these girls. They just chat with him, make him feel better. He loves their smiles and positivity, their happiness. He told me so; he's tired of dealing with miserable, miserly people."

"They have sex with him."

"Ok, maybe they pull his wire. I talked with him about it, and his relationship with them sounds Platonic, pretty benign—they talk, drink, smoke, and party.

"Except you know as well as I do your father does not smoke, drink, smoke pot, or party. I gave him some edibles once—maybe one too many too soon, when I thought they weren't working, but they only needed time to be digested and take effect. He feared he was suffering a stroke and, before I could calm him down and give him a sedative, he panicked and called 911. That was the first and last time he ever consumed marijuana. He takes Valium or Ativan when he's scared shitless, which is more often than you think—that's the sum of his drug consumption. He lets the girls smoke, drink, smoke pot, and party; then they're in the mood for sexual adventure. You simply don't know what happens to him with these girls."

"True, but—" This was a futile, pointless discussion. "How does he get to the islands?"

"He straps the kayak to the roof of his car, drives down to Woodbine Beach, and paddles along the lakeshore and across the harbor."

I had no idea where this argument and discussion was getting us. In fact, it was pointless, not getting us anywhere, but my mother needed to vent.

"He's changed," my mother said. "Age has mellowed your father is certain respects. Before he worried about picking up some sort of virus or germ from the dog—you know he's a hypochondriac and hates getting sick—"

"That why he's afraid to fool around—"

"You haven't seen his condom collection." She even mentioned his book on male sexuality with the chapters on syphilis, gonorrhea, or chlamydia dog-eared and heavily footnoted.

"Still, he wants Buffet."

"Why would he want Buffet, though, he doesn't even like pets."

"He finds Buffet's companionship heartwarming, except he doesn't want to find his own pet. He wants Buffet."

"Mom, why don't you give him Buffet. He's giving you everything else."

I wish now I understood then how distressed and upset she felt about my father. Then I might have been able to prevent what ultimately happened. I now feel I am partially to blame, partly responsible.

I drove to my house in Little Portugal, disappointed I hadn't connected, or, better yet, landed a date with the handsome jogger, but instead received reminders of reasons the single life might be a better existence, an ideal existence free of

distraction, worry, stress and, by the same token, happier.

Then, while I luxuriated in the bubble bath, my mother called me on my cordless telephone. (I always used the speakerphone; sometimes I felt I could visualize potentially harmful electromagnetic waves emanating from communications devices.) She said father dropped by the house, hiking from his new apartment, which he bought several months ago in the massively tall Aura building, downtown on Yonge Street. I would not have been surprised if he hiked the entire distance from the condominium downtown, near College Park, but I figured it was more likely he succumbed to the convenient access of the subway stations along Yonge Street and took the northbound public transit train at least partway to Rosedale. Then again, he liked walking and refused to comprehend the North American obsession with the automobile. He especially enjoyed mocking motorists' drives to convenience stores for cigarettes. I recalled the crazy long distances my father sometimes hiked and how he tried to persuade me as a teenager to join him on his sojourns on foot, legendary for their duration. (Yes, my father loved to walk and hike everywhere. When we first moved into the Rosedale neighbourhood he was regularly and routinely stopped by a Metro Toronto police cruiser, because he was walking, bore a dark complexion, and wasn't dressed in the latest preppie, casual, luxury fashion.)

He hiked the distance to their house in Rosedale to discuss the divorce papers. At the insistence of my mother, opposing lawyers drafted and revised the formal papers countless times, racking up billings, despite the fact my father had no quibbles or arguments with her claims. My understanding was he decided to give her the huge house and their financial assets, since he decided to accept responsibility for their breakup to end their marriage, to simply try to make a clean break. But he was no longer capable of having a simple discussion with mother. Their heated talks inevitably spiraled out of control into arguments. I could hear over the speakerphone on my cordless handset, as the discussion turned into a fight, heated, violent. He picked up Buffet, the Pomeranian, and clutched him close. He said Buffet was actually all he wanted from their shared assets before he headed out the door. Distressed, upset over his seizure of Buffet, Mom started freaking out. I tried to calm her down from my cordless telephone in the candlelit bathroom, while I, bubble bath soapsuds dripping down my breasts and legs I just shaved, stood up in the bathtub and lukewarm water.

My mother started slapping him with the front and back of her hand. Then she started lashing out at him with the paring knife.

"Oh, come on, you're stabbing me. I can't believe my own wife is stabbing me with a penknife." My father, who protested he didn't believe in violence to settle domestic disputes (if you excluded shouting and yelling), said he was leaving. I could hear him complaining about the blood, that he needed bandages, before he made an exit.

During these times, I thought my mother suffered from an undiagnosed bipolar disorder. I told her to calm down, reassuring her I would arrive at the house as soon as possible. Like a speed demon, amazed I wasn't pulled over by the police, I drove my

compact, fuel efficient car, a stubby Smart car, which was easy to handle and maneuver and helped me overcome my driving phobia, particularly in the city, to their house in Rosedale, from my own small house in Little Portugal, a modest home I inherited from my father's parents, Portuguese immigrants from the island of Sao Miguel in the Azores archipelago. Of course, Mom wanted more than a pound of flesh, and pursued Dad, in his cargo shorts, golf shirt, and sandals, carrying Buffet, cradled and cuddled in his folded arms, who he refused to surrender. My father walked as far as the end of the driveway, before she started pursuing him by motor vehicle. She caught up to him in the rapidly accelerating Tesla electric car.

He carried Buffet, prepared for long hike home, to his ultramodern condo in the Aura building, several kilometres, away, but she drove the Tesla electric car into him. Then, instead of calling somebody to help her handle her misery or an ambulance, or, and possibly save the life of her husband, she called me.

I arrived at the scene where my father lay, near the front end of the Tesla, which, my mother complained, had better pickup and acceleration than she expected. Several years ago, when I graduated from Havergal College, I had actually taken first year nursing, but I decided to drop out of the Northern Ontario medical school at Lakehead University—the only Havergal girl I know who attended Lakehead University—when I realized I actually liked the sight and sound of blood and gore and injury. Meanwhile, I found I didn't possess enough empathy for patients or their families, to say nothing of the patience to master the physics or chemistry required in health sciences. My professors couldn't believe what I told them when I withdrew as a nursing student, but they appreciated my candour. They wished more students could be open and honest and not waste their time training for careers for which they weren't suited. After I moved back to Toronto, my father managed to land me an interview at the investment firm he helped found. He was one of the firm's top earners; I'm assuming that was the reason the interview was successful. I landed a job as a junior investment advisor. So who was I to say no to the opportunity to earn plenty of money, if I was willing to assume the mantle of super saleswoman?

Now I felt the moral imperative to save my benefactor, my father's life, but instead I argued with my mother about what happened.

“Why the fuck did you hit Dad?”

“Rest assured it was not intentional.”

I could no longer identify with this woman, who sipped wine, with fancy foreign names, including French or Italian, most of which I could not pronounce or remember, as my mother any longer. In fact, she sounded as if she had just polished off a bottle of Chardonnay. Her imbibing fine wine made her, in her own mind, a member of the intelligentsia, the literati, the upper crust of society, even if, under the influence of alcohol, she became a slobbering drunk, with gobs of drool running down the corner of the well made up mouth of her finely preserved, elegantly powdered face.

“Mom, why can’t you just talk like a reasonable adult with dad?”

“Well, it’s a little too late for mature discussion.”

“So you really wanted to hurt him?”

“He’s not dead. It was an accident.”

“Forget about it. He looks dead, mom.”

I called 911 and hung up the telephone in the middle of an awkward conversation with the emergency operator, while my mother prattled on in the background.

“He said Buffet was all he wanted from thirty years of marriage. Then he took Buffet, and I went after him to get my dog back.”

“Buffet was his dog, too.”

“But he got Buffet for me.”

“Couldn’t you have called your lawyer?”

“Mike’s driving the length of Alaska on his motorcycle.”

“Couldn’t you have called the police?”

She groaned, “Your father is injured.”

“Mom, I think he’s dead,” I said.

“Isabella, I want to turn myself into the police.”

She turned on the ignition key. Having smelled the vapors of Chianti or Chardonnay or whatever wine her breath exuded, I realized she was in no condition to drive. “Mom, I’m going to call an ambulance.”

“Call an ambulance. I’m not stopping you.”

“Listen,” I said, raising and folding my father’s limp arm and hoisting him, into the passenger seat of the Tesla, “I’ll just put Dad in the back and we’ll drive him to the hospital.” I lifted my father, who was only about one hundred and thirty-five pounds, about my weight, into the back seat of the car and tried to stretch him out into a dignified position. If father had indeed abducted the Pomeranian, Buffet had wisely made his retreat, escaping somewhere into the park, alongside the road, which bordered my parents’ oversized home. “I don’t understand why father suddenly wanted Buffet. He was never a pet person, never liked dogs.

“He even hated petting dogs; he was worried about whatever microbes and bacteria the coats might be carrying. Still, he abducted my Buffet.”

I was weary and annoyed at hearing the constant complaints from my mother’s voice, particularly as she chirped about Buffet, but I hoped the discussion of the pet Pomeranian would somehow relieve her. I also tried to persuade her to allow me to drive her Tesla electric car, but she refused to relinquish control, adamantly insisting on driving, controlling her own destiny. She sped down the parkway that branched off their quiet midtown residential street, the majestic trees shading the lawns.

“I need you to stop driving fast. I need to get back to the house to use the landline.”

“Never mind. Use your cell phone.”

“Mother, you know I don’t have a cellphone. You know I have this phobia about brain cancer and cellphones.”

“Don’t sell yourself short,” she retorted.

“It’s a perfectly rational fear; nobody has done any long-term studies on the effects of cellphones on the human brain or human health.” Distraction tactics weren’t working for Mom, under the influence of alcohol or a delusion or mood disorder. “Mom, stop driving. If you insist on driving to the police station, let me drive.”

That was when we got into an argument over control of the steering wheel. As we drove along the parkway, she approached a dog, far ahead, which looked like a Pomeranian. She insisted the toy dog was Buffet, and I said if that was Buffet, he must have been picked up and then dropped off, within a short time frame. She drove the car into the opposing lane, and I could see in the distance the transport truck, which supplied the fast food chain. We headed towards the tractor trailer delivering hamburgers buns and hamburger patties to Burger Borough, a new fast food restaurant, part of a franchise chain, a commercial real estate development, she vigorously opposed through the neighbourhood association, the local ratepayers association, and countless letters to the editor of several community newspapers in the vicinity as well as the *Toronto Star* and *The Globe and Mail*, which drove across the yellow median lines and then swerved at the last few seconds to avoid a collision with the tiny white fluffy dog.

That was the last thing I remember: the crash of metal, steel, glass, and plastic, and hamburger buns flying everywhere, as if we were flying through space, in zero gravity.

I woke from the head trauma and massive internal injuries a day after the autopsy for my mother, attended by a coroner and a homicide detective, and one week after the funeral for my father, upon whom they also conducted an autopsy, attended by the coroner and a homicide detective, who became involved in the case when they discovered my father’s injuries.

I suppose I should have felt grief stricken and traumatized, and indeed those emotions clouded my groggy sensorium but I also felt oddly free and liberated. I didn’t have to worry about the needs, urgencies, demands, and disagreements, sometimes hostile or violent, of my mother or my father. I didn’t have to worry about their censure, judgement, disgust, dissent, their displeasure. I didn’t have to worry about my parents, period. I was liberated, a free agent. The hospitalist, neurosurgery ward nurse, and neurosurgeon explained to me that because of the head trauma, the brain injury, there would be a long period of rehabilitation and there would be some mild cognitive impairment. Moreover, some of the brain damage would be permanent, since there could be no complete recovery in my case.

Because of my parents’ deaths and my own injuries, I felt numb. My parents’ lawyer paid me a visit. He gasped and sighed and informed me the police originally considered me a suspect, but I was not to worry. Before she succumbed to her injuries a few days ago, my mother confessed to injuring my father. Mother, originally expected to survive the car crash, admitted to doctors she was responsible for her husband’s

injuries, during a heated domestic dispute, before she succumbed to a hospital acquired infection, flesh eating disease, and pneumonia. The lawyer told me I was sole beneficiary of my parents' estate. At that point, my thinking was fuzzy. My own aspirations were limited and, while I listened to pop music from a radio in the background, I fantasized about retreating entirely from conventional civilized society and going on a prolonged spiritual retreat to any convent that would accept me. Money was truly and honestly the last thing on my mind.

Later, the nurse censured me and asked me why I shouted at the lawyer, told him to fuck off, and hurtled a disposable cup of water at him. I honestly claimed I had no memories of that event. I concluded I had blacked out, under the influence of painkillers and sedatives, and to this day I have no memory of that outburst.

by Frederick Pollack

Here Is No Cause to Mourn

The two we call “the philosophers”
live in B6 and C7.
Each day they converse happily
in a broom closet on A.
They used to meet in the sunroom
but were thought to monopolize it
(really, anyone who *talks* there is
accused of that).
Beneath the furry vent and hanging bulb,
they take turns sitting on the single chair
and keep the door ajar for air.
When C9, passing, tells them to “Get a room!”
they say they have one, and shut the door.
They debate the existence of universals,
the elusiveness of a final cause;
all very medieval,
they’ll admit, but something may be gained
from a return to Aristotle.
C9 tries to conate,
as they would put it, i.e.,

to focus, wait till the closet
gapes; but inevitably
moves on. That earlier
exclamation mark distorts
his tone. He would like to shout,
curse, hurl folding chairs
through windows, kick down
doors, punch people out;
but all these impulses become, if not
their opposites, a solemn pace,
fuddled manner,
and chronically red face.
“Bitch?” he mumbles, encountering
C2 where she usually sits
on the floor in a corner where halls intersect,
and proceeds to the weight room. Here

he has sculpted himself
into what elsewhere is called a yardmonster
(though he knows this is a substitute for violence,
evoking a facsimile of fear).

C2 believes she has the right to a chair
but that she'd be more conspicuous there.
Behind C9's receding back
she gives him the finger, feels proud of herself
and brave. Then the emptiness
of the corridor becomes
no longer relative but perfect peace.
Almost she could rise, find a couch ...
But an older woman from B4 shows up,
who prides herself on her intuition
though not intuiting much.
"He's a beast," she says. The girl
remains on the floor, in her corner, laying
her head on the woman's shoulder; both
enjoy the archetype they form. B4
wonders whom else to comfort, diagnose,
and save today, not noticing
(C2 does), through the half-open
door of the weight room, C9,
inert and pale on a bench, staring at iron.

The philosophers, who have emerged for air,
now stroll with their friend B4
(C2 begs off) to seek a cozier nook.
They know they must leave metaphysics behind,
embrace, in some sense, modernity;
and what results is praise.
"I know I would be paralyzed
with terror," says C7,
"if not for this calm." "And I," B6 agrees,
"with despair." The healer, between them,
wonders whether the self
can find, reach, her essence
through an intensification of peace
without relinquishing that essence
to violence. "Which *is* strangely easier,"
B6 admits, with a kind of rhetorical gloom.

In silence they all share
some memory or desire
involving rain, then think of killer storms.
The philosophers begin to miss their room

and to turn, when along
the corridor of A comes one of the residents
of A. They greet him, B4 hugs him,
then they notice his dismay,
which is painful, though likelier
to erupt in tears than in rage.
He is clutching something invisible
to his chest, partly tearing at it,
partly cherishing. And through his subdued sobs
and the exaggerated pleading of his look,
they hear, "Ha cookie! Ha *cookie!*"
Though it's near dinnertime,
B4 runs off at top speed, leaving
the men ineptly but urgently trying
to distract him. Would he like
to talk? Is he happy? Tears come
the moment before the healer returns
and hands him something warm
and fresh that he embraces
with an ecstasy germane to any age.

As He Left Them There

I like to fantasize a force
in the brain, not manifesting itself
as pressure, mostly not noticed;
but when the desire for violence
rises, loosening the fist, smoothing features,
softening or silencing the voice.
Guns rust in holsters, assault weapons
on racks, and eventually are melted down –
glumly, for who would welcome such a change?
A girl who wanted education
and in whose face acid was thrown,
or who refused a rich filthy old man
her father chose, and ran off with an ethno-alien
and barely escaped honor-murder – she,
perhaps. Or a child routinely
beaten and raped in a shanty or mansion.
But they would not be able, as I often
also imagine, to burn their tormentors alive
or stab them over and over,
for the force would obstruct them too.
At most they would marvel
at the (sometimes unfortunately beloved) foe's
passivity, and slowly remove
a veil, or fill a backpack,
and walk into a street among others like them.

Meanwhile the nazis who rallied at Charlottesville
and march in Athens and Zagreb
and fill their time with posts and images
of what they will do to their enemies feel
a strange cold hand, plus other things – the taste
of gas, a bullet's rude remark,
a taser's rhythm, a rope's close fit;
and shake their heads, trying to put
subject and object back where they belong,
but can't. They sweat, puke; they recall
(the Virginia contingent) their oath
that "*Jews will not replace us,*" and think
how, compared to howling vacancy,

mildness, kindness, some concern
for virtue might not be so bad.
Their donors and bigger donors
are found dead with no sign
of foul play but a dismayed
rictus. Like the White House staff,
the Cabinet and most of Congress, while their boss
undergoes an odd feedback: he wants to want,
rages because he can't, but each pulse
of rage makes him want less, not even
money, validation, food;
his last thought is there's something in his head.

But the boy or girl, wife or slave
who escaped abuse (apologetic,
righteous, or neither) expect,
on no evidence but feeling,
that they will find welcome, healing,
new life. That they won't have to build
favelas and eat scraps
along with others magically rescued,
who as I've said fill otherwise empty streets.
And they don't. Whichever door they knock on,
store, bureau, house, hotel or hospital,
opens on treatment, food, a shower,
shelter till shelter can be found.
But the helping hands and faces
lack love, or the shared sense of a beginning
the refugees want even more. It's as if,
thinks a bum with perspective, status
mourns itself in them. Renews
hysterically the promise
of selfhood, sovereignty, safety,
vengeance against everyone and no one,
it made. Which the concierge and maître d'
conceal as a desire not to disturb
guests and diners – though they too
half-rise from chairs, half-willing not to fear.

Elsewhere, in the least emotional
way possible, intellectuals
of a certain kidney urge
the needs of the lizard brain and all life:
to groom the lice from one's own clan alone;
to lick fresh-flowing blood. Don't you yourself
hate? they point out cleverly,
then without evidence add: much more than they.
In weird but fitting chorus, religious
and spiritual types advance
a case whose proof is their sincerity:
It isn't up to us to complete the work
(or notice that it's always sabotaged),
only to love. They obviously love
their love. They hug it to themselves.
I digest these arguments, and go outside –
the exercise poetry recommends
to avert philosophy. Victims
drift amid spores in seasonless warmth.
Birds hunt, among them no private totems.
A kaleidoscopic slick
dries where rain was. At three
the cloud that has weighed all day
parts and the sun appears,
which is just the nearest of many stars.

Identity

The duck has escaped from an old
but indispensable psych test: viewed otherwise,
he's a rabbit. But he
regards himself as a duck, and blames
the ambiguity (which pains him
to admit) for the dopey-looking,
perpetual openness of his beak.
In the void he has reached,
he bemoans his situation
to what may be a cat. Other figures
lurk in the fog but, wary perhaps
of pursuit, hold their peace. "What's worse,"
he quacks, "is that sometimes I think
how nice it would be to hop my way
over a meadow (I'm not *emotionally*
committed to slimy weeds), maybe meet someone,
oh, fuzzy ... It's because
he's facing the other way,
you see – I can't help but wonder
what's in that direction." "Nothing,"
snarls the cat. "What do you mean?"
cries the duck.
"Nothing is what you see behind your head.
It's what's beyond and after and before,"
says the cat. "To me the main point
is that you visualize *action*.
Sex. Hopping." He falls silent.
Stupid duck doesn't get it.
The duck (who has assumed
that hierarchies of predation
don't apply here) attempts to see him.
But the cat, till now a shadow, is invisible.
Then a tongue shows, fangs, a green eye.
"Remember," says the tongue, "the famous Grin
from a Tree? Do / grin?
Can you imagine a cat *grinning*?
Not to mention other demeaning,
exploitative images – fat,
lazy – I *need* my sleep,

we have problematic kidneys ...
Left to myself, I would patrol
in sharply angled zigzags, ten meters each,
the overall length of a football field,
eating whatever I met; and I would love
a stream to go through it, but where can one find that?
(Certainly not in this mush, though I had hopes ...)
You have to fight, territories overlap,
you run into *their* cars and houses;
and for that matter I lived or live
in a small apartment ...” He runs down
again, and for a moment
the duck’s reactions correspond
to his ever-gaping beak: he’s suffused with pity.
Nearby, mist stirs.
Long shapes move fitfully.
They seem to move independently;
the effect is disturbing; both cat and duck
would flee, but where? High cold tones
state: “Your fetish of action
is romantic and wrong. What action was possible
for *me*? He inserted his hectocotylus –
I’m the type that holds onto it –
and went off and turned senile and died in a month.
I’m left aerating the babies. Somewhere safe.
For them. I don’t eat.
They hatch and I die. What action is possible?
What choice? Could I desert them? To what end?
Only an inner, speculative life
(of which, despite all prejudice, my arms
and I are intensely capable) offers
relief, though it ends in this ink.” The duck
expects the cat to respond, but the cat
is depressed or perhaps asleep;
so he draws himself to his full height
and quacks about self-definition.
“Is that still a thing?” asks the now-distant voice.

The Body

As a side-effect, I've been deprived
of the rich associative patois,
weak on tenses, tending to reify
and eternalize conditions, which yet allowed one
instantly to sniff out
pretense, gauge rage, assert and subvert
dominance, invoke the ubiquity
of the oppressor and a comradeship
more real in some ways than his. Instead
I speak now always
as an observer – more, an elegist,
imprisoned in the tendrils of a sigh.

I had spent the morning replacing the bent door
of a Honda, which then required upholstery
from a third door and to be painted
a distinct white. The boss lurked
in his hut of grimy paper. Around me, friends,
part-friends, and sharers of bad coffee moved
in dust and paint-mist, yelling
through face-masks, over lathes and sprays,
our rich associative patois. Sport and women
were its topics, debt and fear
their burden. We didn't notice
the one who came until he spoke. Then his robes
and the ceramic or metallic
beauty of his features caused
almost as much commotion
as his posture in midair. We heard him
as if in another space. Gently he said
to go home: cars were done
until they were healed. By which, he explained,
he meant their "motive power" must be "purified."
With that, our tools and all ignition stopped.
Impassively he hovered
as we complained, threw cans and wrenches,
then helped our weeping boss into the sun.
At the intersection
of hope and fear and the uncomfortable

detachment mentioned earlier, we
dispersed, made as instructed our ways home
among the noisy and then quiet crowds,
around and between the silent, cooling cars
that filled the streets. At least the day
was pleasant. Figures like the one
in our garage attended,
so to speak, difficult births: they didn't need
to raise hoods, which writhed and settled
as engines changed to something clean
and differently driven. I felt
a moment's anguish: they cared more, I thought,
about cars than people. But some,
their faces bland and gleaming, flew
with forms from wheelchairs and ambulances
in their arms. I walked on, hoping
that some celestial hose
would douse what firetrucks would never reach.

Observance

It is the attack on Time. The spearhead,
according to physicists, should be physicists.
They alone have agents in the realm
of superstrings and the covert,
“curled” dimensions. May safely coopt
some of the energies of the Big Rip
that will, if Time remains in power, end things.
Their vision of postwar life
is something like a sea, with minds
like happy, immortal jellyfish. Philosophers,
however (even those
for whom Time, like all things, is a turn of phrase),
believe that they should be, inherently are,
the vanguard. Bergson claims
to know the enemy. Kant,
insisting he was young once, seeks
revenge for age and debility.
But meanwhile, Other Ranks dispute
the priority of either group.
It should be grief, not intellect, they say,
that commands. Lives lost to self or others or
a virus; wrecked children, those
who wrecked them; the consciously wronged
or wrong whose sole desire is reversal
must lead the attack on Time, although
their only tactic is a human wave.

The staging area combines
features of a lab from an old movie,
big shiny zapping globes, with the French
Resistance and a Zen retreat.
All this implies a premise less than concrete.
In choreographed groups, the spear-carriers,
wounded, regretful, quarrel with stars. What holds
the scene together is a constant sobbing
offstage (tears always think they are the center),
and the aria of a scientist,
who diffidently but at length maintains
that Time is death. He wants

to retake a point where he had confidence,
arrogance, hair, then move
forever in that point but never on.
This element of theater
should occasion no surprise. Nor does it change
the aim of the campaign. The only
mystery is the old one
about actors: how do they return,
after each curtain, to mild intrigues,
language and liquor, having dared to be?

If You Have to Ask

First, to get personalities out of the way ...
Decades before it was invented,
she wore a light invisible Kevlar armor.
It suited my stolid (I would say solid)
indifference, which never, however, applied
to her. The antibodies of money
ran massively in our veins,
which may have had something to do with our not aging.
(Which often proves embarrassing
but there are ways around it.)
We met at one of Gatsby's dreadful parties.
She was hard-boiled, I scrambled. Shortly
my Stutz, a boat, some horses had to go,
but were recouped. I adopted Capraesque earnestness,
she, at our lunches, the Party line,
if only to flout our long-notional fathers.
Soon I was posted to London
and a series of chateaux.
In the long ambiguous after, I often
recalled the early Dior
she wore to Doris Duke's. It was a talisman,
I said; you are my index and my hope,
my lethargy and an excuse to mope.
But she urged me to action –
tenderly under Eisenhower,
soulfully under Johnson,
then coldly, blandly, viciously, vaguely –
theatrically: because she thought one should.
(My good friend Andy stared at her
a long time at an opening. I miss him.
By then she had moved on from Givenchy.)
It was only lately, however,
that I popped the question or proposition.
I guess it was because we're all brutalized
and so much richer and don't bother dressing.
She said she didn't think of me that way,
and wouldn't falling into each other's arms
mean instantaneous disintegration?
It was a point. I turned. Her dogs –

she always owned a hunting breed
resembling fuselages
of fighter planes with legs instead of wings –
had always liked me, howled as I went away.

Missing Muse

Robert Wexelblatt

Wendy has long dark hair which sometimes looks brown and sometimes nearly black, just as her eyes can be either green or brown. I feel there's some mystery about these physical ambiguities that I should be able to figure out but can't. Wendy's neck is long, her nose straight, her chin just right, and her height is perfect, too. I'd have to be one of the poets she admires to say just how beautiful she is. I'm sure you get the idea.

Wendy's majoring in English which makes her exotic to someone like me. Before I met her, I'd have said her major is ridiculous. My own major is what my father and I agreed it ought to be, business. The B-School's architecture and culture could hardly be less like those of the College of Liberal Arts. Our place is only a year old, named for a plutocrat who ponied up millions for the tinted glass, the bricks, and the honor. It could be the headquarters of a well-capitalized multinational. There's an outsized metal globe in the middle of the ground floor and, over it, a four-story atrium, tributes to global commerce and wasted space. The Liberal Arts building is old, and not charmingly either, resembling a Victorian insane asylum. But it seems interesting things go on inside. Wendy reads all sorts of books and has friends who aren't just contacts. She gets excited about pictures and paintings, about poets and professors. She thinks about questions that don't occur to business majors and at which most of them would scoff. Wendy's sensitive in a good way, not touchy but intelligently alert, as if her nerves are closer to the surface than for other people. She's been reading and writing poetry since middle school. She can quote long passages and then tell you if it's Pushkin or Yeats, Chaucer or Dryden. When she recites poetry, she moves her hands as if playing some complicated, invisible string instrument.

We met in the library, the third-floor study hall. I was doing problem sets on my laptop and she was across the table, intensely focused on a paperback and taking notes on a legal pad. Her hair flowed over her shoulders in a way I can't describe and I tried to decide on its color. The expression on her face wasn't strained; it was serious. She ignored me so thoroughly that I gave up the pretense of looking at my computer.

I waited for her to take a break. It wasn't a short wait. At last she laid down her pen, looked up, and I seized my chance. I'd had enough time to come up with something better than "What are you reading?" but I didn't.

She lifted the book a couple of inches. "*The Faerie Queene*." I could almost hear my high school teammates guffaw; but I'll always have a warm spot for Edmund Spenser.

Wendy and I are always working on each other. We're so different yet so attracted that our relationship is a functional mixture of discord and mutual improvement that has done us both good. She's made me more liberal (*humane*, she'd say), while I've

made her more conservative (*level-headed*, I'd say). I've gotten her to read Ricardo and Hayek and she's gotten me to read Yeats and Keats and Tennyson and even Dickinson. In high school, I hated the stuff and felt intimidated by it; but now I like it—or, I'm coming to, some of it. This is because Wendy never treats the poems she gives me like so many cryptograms. To her, a good poem's a beautiful, harsh, truthful, poignant utterance. When I asked her what made a poem a poem, she gave me a surprisingly blunt answer: "Non-biodegradable language." So we share our enthusiasms and convictions, hone them against one another; but I have to admit Wendy loves her poets far more than I do my economists.

Most of Wendy's favorite poets are long dead. Her favorite living one is J. H. (Joseph Frederick) Brobinner, winner of both a National Book Award and a Pulitzer Prize. She emailed me three of his poems. I liked them, or parts of them. For example, I like the opening of "Good of You To Ask":

*Courtesy is being polite
when you don't need to be, when there's
slight consequence this way or that
as when the duchess asks the
gardener if his wife still suffers
from those frightful monthly cramps.*

In just those few words, Brobinner made me see that duchess, her gardener and his wife. I got the point, too. Courtesy is disinterested, nothing to do with profit or loss.

For Valentine's Day, I gave Wendy a two-tiered silver necklace set with garnets. She gave me two books by Brobinner, *Green Swallows* and *New and Selected Poems*. I confess to mixed feelings. It was an intimate choice yet it also felt a little like an assignment.

"You have to read him slowly," she cautioned as I unwrapped, "the way you would a mortgage."

Wendy was teasing me because I once told her I'd read *Moby Dick* in under a week. I wasn't bragging but making a joke at my own expense: "As I recall, it has something to do with a whale." Nevertheless, Wendy likes to pretend that I read everything too fast, that I'm what she derisively calls a "gist-getter."

"Is J. H. ever funny?"

"Sometimes, very. And often ironic. He can also be whimsical. But you have to be careful. His whimsy has steel in it. He seems much simpler than he is."

"I wish I could read him through your eyes."

Wendy smiled the smile of a woman who's sure of her man. "I'll bet you'd like to smoke Sherlock Holmes' pipe with him, too," she cracked.

I laughed.

Wendy held up *Green Swallows*.

“His last book and it was published five years ago. Absolutely nothing since, not so much as a single sonnet in *The New Yorker*.”

“Demand exceeds supply, then?”

Wendy raised her hand with the edge pointed at me. I’d learned this meant not to make jokes.

“Complete radio silence. It’s a puzzle.”

“Maybe he’s said all he has to say. Or could be he’s got new interests, like learning Italian or taking up the banjo.”

Wendy made a face. In her view, good poets never lose the urge to make more poems and never run out of things to write about. Before I’d learned prudence, I might have insisted that, while she’d certainly mastered the law of supply and demand, which explains so much about how the world runs, it might not apply to poetry. Maybe verses aren’t like sports utility vehicles or smart phones. Maybe demand for Brobinner’s stuff wouldn’t automatically prompt a rise in supply. I didn’t say it, of course. I didn’t want Wendy calling me a wise-ass capitalist pig. And I also didn’t say that, so far as I could make out, the supply of poetry vastly outstripped demand—let alone that that the same could be said of English majors.

Last Tuesday I got a breathless text from Wendy. “Brobinner’s getting an award. Reading. A week from Friday.”

I texted back. “Where?”

“Here!”

It was a lifetime achievement award from the Laterlake Foundation for the Advancement of Culture. The ceremony was to be on campus because the current chairman of the Foundation happens to be a professor in Wendy’s department. He’s also an old friend of Brobinner’s. The University wanted a large and distinguished space, so the event was placed in Marston Chapel, the oversized and underutilized neo-Gothic pile named for a devout and philanthropic slaveowner.

Wendy was excited. She’d never seen J. H. Brobinner in the flesh. Of course, there were readings posted online, and she’d also seen some interviews; but, as she said, “It’s like going to the MET and standing in front of Vermeer’s actual ‘Girl Asleep’ versus looking at a reproduction.”

“What *is* the difference?”

Wendy made an impish face. “The Blowtorch Effect.”

I thought this over.

“You’re not thinking of bringing a flamethrower to the ceremony, are you?”

“It’s not really attractive when you play stupid. You know perfectly well what I mean.”

Why “Girl Asleep,” I wondered later. I found the answer in *New and Selected Poems* which includes a three-stanza lyric with the same title. Here’s the third:

*She dozes, weary from washing down walls.
All the air's weight has been quite scrubbed away.
Now the Dutch sun and the artist's brush search
everywhere and are satisfied only
when they find the exhausted girl has
polished a world worth lighting, worth painting.*

When I mentioned finding the poem, Wendy was surprised I'd made the connection and/or that I'd actually opened the book. With the same pleasure I felt when filling her in on the Law of Comparative Advantage, she explained ekphrastic poetry. "Ekphrastic poems describe a work of art, and 'Girl Asleep' is one of my favorites." She added that she found it endearing that Brobinner portrayed the girl as worn out from toiling so diligently at Netherlandish hygiene. "The art historians claim the picture's an allegory of laziness. Brobinner's more chivalrous."

I agreed. "I like his interpretation better. I've always thought Vermeer had a pretty high regard for housekeeping and the women who saw to it."

"So? A woman's place is in the stove?"

"Certainly not!"

My vehement denial earned me a peck on the cheek from the humanities.

At seventy-one, J. F. Brobinner stood lean and straight as a cowboy and still resembled the decade-old portrait on the back of *New and Selected Poems*—sharp eyes, large ears, fine nose. But what remained of his hair was grayer; and, though his face hadn't lost its character or mobility, hadn't collapsed under the pull of gravity or been inflated by bloat, it was still a bit of a shock to see that he'd aged.

As people came up to him at the front of the chapel, he smiled at each. But the smiles were short-lived and I thought them forced. When he wasn't smiling he looked severe and dissatisfied, implacable, like one of those ancient orators or prophets always warning of catastrophe. He wore tan jeans that could have stood pressing and a black sport coat over a light blue shirt with a dark blue tie. The tie looked like a concession. A man and a woman, both more formally dressed than the guest of honor, directed him to a chair behind the pulpit then seated themselves on either side of him, chatting at him continuously. The man seemed delighted, the woman positively gleeful.

"They must be flattering him. He looks embarrassed," I whispered to Wendy.

"The man's Professor Renwalt, the chairman and Brobinner's old pal. The woman's the General Secretary of the Laterlake Foundation."

"Did Professor Renwalt recuse himself from the deliberations, being an old pal?"

"No idea."

"Prize comes with a lot of money, does it?"

Wendy wasn't looking at me; she only had eyes for Brobinner.

“Don’t be crass,” she chided from the side of her mouth. “I’m glad he never grew a beard,” she added unexpectedly.

Wendy had made sure we got there early. “Just a blowtorch blast away,” I teased as we took seats down in front. The crowd, such as it was, gathered slowly, probably more faculty than students. Then there were people you could tell were outsiders because they weren’t dressed as either faculty or students and looked around them curiously. I figured these must be other poets or members of the poetry-loving public, Brobinner groupies. Marston Chapel had plenty of room for five times the turnout.

The ceremony began promptly at eight o’clock, as advertised.

I wondered if Brobinner had family there for his triumph and asked Wendy if the poet was married.

“Not anymore,” she hissed.

“Kids?”

“Shh.”

Professor Renwalt gave a good speech. He explained how he and the poet became friends as members of the same graduate seminar “back in the Cretaceous.” He worked in two amusing anecdotes. A well-reviewed young Brobinner, asked by an interviewer what he hoped to write in the future, replied “Contemporary American literature.” An older Brobinner, picking up some money as a visiting professor, complained to Renwalt that the students in his writing course churned out heaps of verse but seemed never to have read any poetry. That elicited some restrained chuckles. He turned to Brobinner. “You said that trying to teach those kids to write poetry was like trying to teach penguins the Theory of Flight.” That earned general unrestrained laughter.

“Glad I didn’t take a course with him,” I whispered to my inamorata, certain that she felt exactly the reverse. After all, she’d read everything; surely she’d have been an eagle, not a penguin. Wendy ignored me.

Professor Renwalt briskly explained about the Foundation, the culturally devoted widow who’d established it with her deceased husband’s fortune, the prestige of the prize she established, the names of a few of its most illustrious past winners. To the thousands that came with it, he alluded tastefully. From a shelf in the rostrum he took out a wooden box and from the box a medal on a ribbon. He invited Brobinner to stand by him. The poet rose to applause and allowed his friend to drape the medal around his neck. He seemed to me a mortified man trying his best to look tickled.

“It’s just like the Olympics,” I whispered and got elbowed in return.

Brobinner’s acceptance speech was brief and unconventional. He said that, he was only a poet when actually writing a poem—or rather, when writing a *good* poem—so he didn’t feel deserving of the prize right then. He wondered aloud if the old fellow standing before us was still anything like the younger one who had done most of the

work of tossing, turning, cursing, and contracting an addiction to that mind-altering drug called English composition. He thanked everybody politely and stepped away from the microphone. Professor Renwalt took his place, and said that Brobinner would read a few poems and, if there was time—here he glanced at the poet and raised his eyebrows, earning a small nod—perhaps take a few questions.

Brobinner opened a book which had been on the rostrum all along.

I'd never been to a poetry reading or entertained the idea of attending one, though I knew such things existed and that Wendy liked them. I thought of poetry as something written down, except for Shakespeare, of course. Why not just read it to yourself? Isn't reading a poem supposed to be an intimate experience, a communion between you and those non-biodegradable words? A couple months earlier, Wendy tried to persuade me to attend a reading at Rheinach Hall featuring an allegedly famous poet from Romania or Bulgaria or Slovenia. I escaped thanks to a well-timed statistics exam. Listening to Brobinner read didn't change my mind. His voice was flat, with little dynamic range or alternation of intonation; I heard no enthusiasm at all. He did perk up some when he read a kind of patter song. I looked it up later online. It's called "The Emperor's Nose."

*A man from Osaka
all dressed in alpaca
and wielding an ashplant of grey
once said a strange thing
to the Emperor Ming
on a very cold, very wet day, etc.*

I leaned toward Wendy and whispered, "Jonathan Jo has a mouth like an O."
"Shh."

Brobinner returned to his affectless voice for one of the poems in *Green Swallows* I actually like, "A Small Regular Life." There's something about it I can't quite put my finger on, something pessimistic, humble, persuasive; something that feels like the truth.

*Evenings before the amusing virtual fire
holding nobody's hand after a futile day,
drowsy rather than tuckered out; for
cutting grass isn't harvesting hay.*

*Tilted by a hurricane, the locust tree
sways, leaves fluttering above the dull gray
wall whose fractures are root-made.
Cutting grass isn't harvesting hay.*

*It's all routine while we await the diagnosis,
brushing teeth, preparing the evening's entrée,
shopping, shower, shave and a haircut, yet
cutting grass isn't harvesting hay.*

*The past's a work of causes well understood;
whatever is explained can be explained away.
It's not just the past that's ineluctable, still
cutting grass isn't harvesting hay.*

Listening to Brobinner read this poem helped me to understand it a little better. *Cutting grass* is the commonplace, the repetitive drudgery of ordinary life. *Harvesting hay* is superficially the same but actually not; it's rarer, exceptional, a seasonal reward, not a weekly chore. The poem still eludes me; it's meaning an axe-length out of reach. But the tone is clear enough. It's a middle-aged poem mixing resentful discontent with fruitless fatalism. I think Brobinner's nailed a certain way of living or spiritual condition, one I hope to avoid for as long as I possibly can.

The final poem of the evening was, Brobinner said, also the last poem he'd written or published. He said it was too long to read now, in three parts, but he thought the first fitted the occasion. The poem's title, he said, was "Nada" and listening to Brobinner read it was about the bleakest experience I'd ever had. It felt almost improper to listen to him; it was like walking in on somebody in the bathroom, somebody who's just taken out a straight razor and is contemplating whether or not to use it. Wendy later found the poem in a five-year-old issue of *The Pecos River Review*. This is the section Brobinner read to us.

*He sits himself down at his desk like an
atheist awaiting the descent of grace,
prepared to propitiate, bargain, sacrifice,
whatever it takes for a vacuum to
suck up this vacuum he abhors.
On the beach the bathers
turn on their towels and sigh;
the teacher at the blackboard
explains how but never why.
In the lounge ladies clink ice cubes
and nod; in the park kids get high
on pot, glue, worse; before cathode-ray tubes
the old breathe the stale, ostracized air.*

*And as for him, he feels full of nothing.
Nothing on a chair.*

Nothing on a chair.

The chapel fell silent for a full minute. Then some people seated at the rear got up to leave. It's possible they thought the event was over but it felt as though they were fleeing.

Professor Renwalt, looking unsettled, joined Brobinner at the podium and again asked if he'd be willing to take questions.

"Sure," the poet said breezily, fingering the medal around his neck. "The least I can do."

I remembered something my macroeconomics professor said on the first day of class: "All questions always have answers, but most of the answers are wrong. That's why progress begins with questioning answers, not answering questions."

A woman to our left rose. She wore a beautiful shawl. Wendy told me later this was Laranya Prasad, a professor of Victorian and post-colonial literature, one of her favorites. The shawl was green, pink and burgundy. It must have been made from some special, iridescent silk.

"Congratulations, Mr. Brobinner," Professor Prasad began in an accent as attractive as her shawl.

"Thanks."

"This is my question, sir. Do you believe that a poet—especially one as noted as yourself—has a duty to take a public stance on the issues of the day?"

"You mean politics?"

"Among other things, yes. Perhaps chief among them."

"Well, that's a question I find difficult to answer, though not because I've never considered it. What makes it tough is that as soon as I say *yes*—a stand must be taken, petitions must be signed and rallies attended—all the reasons for saying *no* start grumbling and calling me naïve, pretentious, an unthinking conformist. But when I think of saying *no*, the reasons for saying *yes* leap to their feet and start chanting slogans and waving signs. I guess it depends. Depends on the issue. Or my mood."

"With respect," said the professor, "that's not an answer."

"Well, with respect, I'd say it *is* an answer, just not a good one."

"So, you recognize no public duty?"

Brobinner shrugged. "Some poets are public figures and some aren't. We live in a country that doesn't care enough about poetry to shoot poets. I think this is mostly a good thing. I can think of bad writers who've spoken up courageously for decency and good ones who've held despicable views. This inclines me to humility and skepticism. Sure, I'd like it if goodness and talent were twins, but often they aren't even distant cousins. So, yes, I guess there's a duty to take a position in troubled times, just not that this obligation is different for writers, painters, and musicians than it is for sales

clerks, jackhammer operators, and corporate lawyers. Is that a better answer?"

"It's a *longer* one," said Professor Prasad grumpily and sat down.

Wendy got to her feet, raised her hand and waved it around like a smart girl in middle school, like a teacher's pet.

"I see we've got a question from one our department's outstanding students," Professor Renwalt said. He smiled at Wendy and nodded for her to speak.

"Mr. Brobinner, I'm an admirer of your work and it's exciting to see you in person and hear you read. Congratulations on the prize. You deserve it."

The poet nodded, mumbled "Thank you," and seemed to expect Wendy would leave it at that. But he didn't know her.

"I do have a question. You said that poem you just read was the last you'd written, also the last published. It seems to be about emptiness, the hollowing out of the external world and the vacancy of the inner world. Pardon me if I'm wrong, but it sounds personal; it sounds like a meditation by a blocked writer. It might even be understood as a farewell to writing, an envoi. My question is, have you really stopped writing, publishing, or both?"

Brobinner gave a little shudder, pursed his lips, then his expression turned almost impish. The response he then delivered to Wendy took up the rest of the evening and probably abbreviated the reception the University had planned.

"For years and years," he began, "I had the gift of a faithful and compliant Muse. She was there when I first began to write as a teenager and never deserted me. It's not surprising that I foolishly took her for granted. There were absences, of course, dry spells. But when she was gone, I had effective techniques for summoning her back. I'd scribble random phrases and words until she gave one of them some traction; I'd avoid my desk and pretend I only wanted to read and not to write; I'd make superstitious sacrifices (no dessert, no tobacco or television), and I'd bargain, promising to work harder and longer if she'd just give me a jump-start. One or another of these ploys always worked, and she was never gone longer than three days. Those three days were bad ones. My spirits sank. I lost my appetite and was exasperated by all life's trivial disappointments, from high humidity and overcooked beef to hangnails and red lights. But when she returned all that went away. The game was afoot, and I was fine again. I had a reason to get up in the morning and to stay up late at night. In time, I developed the simplest, most binary of temperaments: if I was writing I was okay and if not, not.

"Five years ago, in the middle of a July heat wave, the writing stopped. It wasn't a mere block, one of those spells when the muse is taking a long weekend. It felt final, like a river the summer sun had permanently dried up. None of my ploys worked, not the scribbling, the sacrifices, the bargaining. I found myself repeating Hamlet's words about life being stale, flat, and unprofitable. After two weeks I had to conclude my muse had vanished."

Brobiner paused, looked directly at Wendy.

“I don’t expect you’ve heard of Howard Twomey. No? He’s what’s called a poet’s poet, superb but widely ignored. Howard helped me when I was starting out and we kept in touch. I went to see him at his farmhouse near Peterborough. Howard died three years ago, at ninety-four; but five years back he was still writing, hiking, and, I hoped, still a source of comfort and counsel. Howard grasped my problem right away. He reminded me about muses and mountains. He pointed out that muses don’t spend all their time hanging around the desks of people like him and me. They get homesick. They miss their sisters. So they sometimes go back where they came from, to headquarters. Howard said that muses have territories. The home of muses in the northeast United States was close by, in the Presidential range. Out west it’s the Rockies. In South America, the Andes. Russian muses gather in the Urals; it’s the Carpathians for inspirers of southern Slavs, and the Himalayas for hardy muses of the Subcontinent. He said to look for my muse I should get some proper hiking gear and head north. How could he be so sure? Because, he said, half a century earlier he’d blundered into a camp of about fifty muses in one of the valleys between Mount Washington and Mount Adams. He was sure they were muses because all of them were young, female, and underdressed for the mountains.”

I elbowed Wendy. “Is he kidding or just nuts?”

Spellbound, she ignored me.

Brobiner pressed on with animation now, as if inspired by his own improvisation. “I got boots and a map and drove up 93, found a B and B, planned out my daily hikes. On the third day, I found the Muses’ camp. There were about fifteen of them; it was obvious that they knew who I was and didn’t much care. They all refused to answer my questions, except for one who drew me aside and explained that my muse had been there for a week but had left on vacation. It had never occurred to me that muses took vacations or needed them. I had to admit that mine hadn’t taken a proper break in almost four decades. I asked when she’d be back. With regret, my informant said the vacation was indefinite. When I asked what that meant she said it meant my muse might be back or she might not. Of course, I was horrified. I asked where she’d gone. Europe was the answer. I was already jealous. What if she’s become some Italian or German scribbler’s muse? Entirely possible, she said. Our relations aren’t exclusive. Muses can emigrate, just like authors. How can I get her back? This plea was met with a shrug and the useless observation that I must know her at least as well as any of her sisters, who’d barely seen her in four decades. I was ashamed to realize that I didn’t know my muse at all, that I had never even thought of her as somebody I *could* know. In fact, I hadn’t believed in her existence, had regarded her as only a creature of my own fancy—until she went away.

“Guilty and bereft, I stopped just north of the Massachusetts border and bought a pistol. I was that low. However, instead of killing myself, I renewed my passport and flew to Zurich, to the Alps. I asked around. Most people thought I was mad; but, when

I posed my question to the owner of a used bookstore in a lane off the Hohlstrasse, he took me into his office, offered me coffee, and told me what I wanted to know.

“He said that a poet friend of his, now deceased, had told him that the muses gather on the slope of the Brienz Rothorn. A single-track steam train goes from Brienz straight to the summit; it’s popular with tourists. On the way up there are pastures and a forest. What I wanted was the forest. The train is slow and, if I was careful, he thought I could jump off safely.

“I went to Brienz, took the steam train, managed to jump off without being spotted, made my way deep into the forest which I explored without finding a camp of muses. I was on the point of giving up when two young women dressed in dirndl skirts and blouses emerged from a hidden path. I felt sure they were muses especially when they recognized what remained of the poet in me. I explained where I was from and that I was looking for my muse. It’s sad, they said, but my fate was not uncommon. I had to accept that my muse was no longer mine. They admitted they knew her, had spoken with her near this very spot. She told them she was off to Grenoble to take up with an artists’ collective. All the writers, painters, sculptors were young and French, they explained, whereas I was neither.”

Brobiner stopped and, looking straight at Wendy, said, “So, there you have it. No muse, no poems. Or just the one poem. Nada. Nothing on a chair. I cultivate my garden, though it bores me. I’ve been learning Italian. I live an uninspired life and seldom go out, though I make an exception for awards I don’t deserve so long as they come with money. I still have that pistol.”

He took a step toward us. “Does that answer your question, young lady?”

Wendy didn’t say anything.

Afterwards, she didn’t want to talk about how bizarre the evening had been. She didn’t want to go for a snack, either. She said all she wanted was to go back to her dorm.

That was four days ago. I haven’t seen Wendy since. She hasn’t picked up when I phoned or replied to my texts.

by Sandra Kohler

The Aunts of Existence

I am not one of the aunts of existence, generous in poverty, faithful, recognizing every occasion, remembering all. I am out of touch with my life's cast – family, friends – ignoring, forgetting their births, marriages, deaths. I record the daily: last night was spring in January: thunder, lightning, rain. This morning it's impossible to tell if the thin black glaze on the streets is water or ice or both, how treacherous its nature. Beginnings and endings wrap themselves in each other's arms, lovers reluctant to part, mother and child, the strong and the weak. What is happening to my son in Paris, daughter-in-law in Boston, my sister in Boca Raton? People to whom I'm connected and not, my sisters under the skin, my brothers dead and living. The day gives them voices: thunder rasped by anger, rain raw from tears. The day does no such thing.

Midday

The blue zenith
dirt and gravel path
river on one side
on the other graveyard
stones like small sails
craft moored forever
along the edge of the path
cattails not cattail red
pale oat wheat sheafs
buff plumes. Are
the reeds nourished
by the river or by
the graves? The blue
zenith is echoed
on blue waters,
its slant of light.
Walking, I'm closer
to the grave I'll go
to than the river
I came from.

Overcast

My sister dead, I mourn an absence I
wished for. It's like having a phantom
limb: it was dangerous,

infected; I'm lucky to be rid of it. Yet
to part of me so central that though
misery, its absence leaves me

bereft, bewildered. I wake sweating,
ripe. If ripeness were all, there would be
no rotting. I am shadowed,

overcast by death. My dreams are of
a foreign country, exile, alien distances.
My wakings are to disbelief,

incomprehension. Today is the solstice,
summer. What, in the long twilight,
will evening open to me

that morning has not? The structures
we create – temples, towers, pet names,
priesthoods, families, songs –

the imagined places where we live in
sisterhood, brotherhood, those mirrors
of connections, parades,

celebrations, funerals, that unlived
past, imagined future, poems of
our climate, climate

of our longings – can those Edens,
those Utopias, survive death's
surgeries?

Shades

Morning weighs. I want to be a shade lighter. I don't want to be a shade. I want to shadow my granddaughter, a silent presence watching her always.

The "all ways" I imagine do not exist now or ever: "all" is never, the "ways" I'd haunt are blocked by barriers of self, a solipsism as blind a bind as any

uncertainty principle. Only a seer, a Cassandra, could plumb prediction's hubris, define its depths. She calls up a crew of walk-ons from the wings,

eager understudies. Under the study of language lies the language of surrender. If there is violence and shock in my dreams the world isn't

waiting to see it. I am attendant, I do someone's bidding. Some are budding: roses in my garden. My granddaughter. The shades.

The Best of Times

Jon Kemsley Clark

They had introduced each other to friends but it had not worked out for either of them and so they had gone to a restaurant to pick it over. He is a fool and he doesn't deserve you, the man was saying. She is an idiot and you are better off without her, the woman was saying. They clinked glasses and drank long and then he filled both glasses halfway and pushed the bottle back into its ice. One day he will realise and come begging. One day she will come crying and you can tell her. The man called over the waiter who had made such a fuss about the wine and passed a menu to the woman. The lady is having, what was it? The salad. Only the salad. And the potatoes. She paused. Is it a big portion, the potatoes? We do a big and a small, the waiter told her. Oh, she said. Oh. The small. I think the small. Thank you. The waiter turned to the man. I'll have the moules. Just the moules. Do you want fries with the moules? The moules comes with bread, doesn't it? The bread will be sufficient. Thank you. The waiter cleared his throat and took the menus and disappeared through a side door leaving them to finish the bottle and what was left of the olives. Things are difficult before they are easy, the man said in an accent, and, dropping the accent, that chap will probably spit in my seafood now. The woman smiled. You have been reading the books I gave you. Good. She drew shapes in the air with an index finger and then wrote them down on a napkin but he was unable to say them. She shook her head and placed the napkin under his glass. You are rubbish. He shrugged. I tried my best but she could never really tell me. He tailed off. I don't know. We are adults, she said, and we know less and less each day. Her phone began to ring. Really? She pulled it out of her bag and read the name and looked across the table. It's for you. She passed the phone across and left the table in search of the restroom. The man stood up to read the name and swore and took the call. He listened for a while and then said, hello, no, it's me, and then listened for a while longer. I can hardly understand you. The voice at the other end persisted. He broke in. She's here now. I'll pass you back. He passed the phone to the woman who had returned from the restroom and was laughing softly at him. Take it. I can't do this. The woman talked to the phone in a quiet voice saying a lot of things he did not understand and making noises that he took for agreement or understanding. He sat back down and stared at his plate but did not eat. Eventually the woman came and sat back down. She looked at him and then looked down at her plate and began to cry. Huge hot tears plopped down into her salad but she did not seem to notice. He passed her the napkin with the words on it that he could not say and she thanked him through the tears. Sorry, so sorry, she whispered and then a little louder, stupid, I am stupid. No, lady, he said, you are not. He. He is stupid. You are the best he ever had. The woman stopped crying and set her jaw and spoke more words he did not know in a way that nobody would misunderstand no matter what they spoke. He began to laugh. As good as that? Eat your food, she snapped and then laughed

too. He dabbed at the moules with a crust and broke a piece off. You know I would never order these in front of her because they are so messy. Or I am. But it doesn't matter now because it's only you. She nodded. That's right. It's only me and soon enough I will be drunk. Shall we order another bottle? And then we can go dancing. The waiter came and went and they drank some more and the food remained largely untouched as they talked about all the fools and all the idiots they could think of. When the bottle was empty she picked it up and waved it around and said, there is no more, we are empty, what can we do? We can go somewhere else and have the best of times, he said rising from his chair and tucking money into the top of the bottle. They moved unsteadily between tables and out into the street in the hope of finding the best of times among the revellers already some steps ahead of them. They chose a club with a bar at street level and a winding staircase leading to a dancefloor in the basement. There was a second bar along one side of the dancefloor and groups of low seats pushed up against the opposite wall. They decided that it would be best to stick with wine and so a bottle was ordered and paid for and a bucket and two tall glasses were set up for them on the bar. The carpets smelled of years of spilled drinks with nothing to cover the smell since the smoking ban. There was a machine selling little plastic characters and another selling jellybeans. They fed the machines with loose change and threw the characters and the jellybeans at the lights and then full of wine they got up to dance. The music was no different to what everybody had been playing for the past decade but it was tasteful and it was easy to dance to. The woman pointed. I think you are having the best of times. The man pointed back. I think you are right. But don't worry. I promise to be miserable again in the morning. Nobody had followed them down the winding staircase and even the barman had disappeared and so they moved with abandon across the empty dancefloor. And somewhere between the music and the dancing and the wine and the disappointment in things they had worked so hard at they found themselves closer than they had ever been. And suddenly their lips were together and his hands were on her and for a moment there was no thinking. And then they pulled away from each other so that this too could be over although they continued to talk about it for a couple of hours. First on the dancefloor and then in a taxi and then in rented rooms with low lights and high ceilings until finally she put the phone down on him and went to sleep.

by Rusty Barnes

Waking at Six AM and Reading Frank Stanford

Pop-tarts and iced coffee.
A cat puzzling around my leg.
The Singing Knives in
my divisible hands.
No one else awake.
I dream of Subiaco
in the hour's soft chair.

On Revere Beach at Midnight

on a Sunday night only the cops
are out with one silent dog-walker
shifting the sand-blown
causeway for his mutt,

mad after the crazy gull who
walks into Bill Ash's Lounge where
the KENO machine freaks out and two
barflies cash in to buy a pizza

through the hole in the wall.
They laugh much. And bigly.
They drink gin, shoot the shit
while overhead the planes

from Logan boom like sleeper cells
in the great maw of the sky.

The Morning Opens Deadly

and I am in the old quarry
swimming in the pea-green storm,

my white towel suspended on
a branch and my arms near-asleep

in the thunder and hail.
On the other side a woman

parts the water with stiff hands,
comes toward me with a cigarette

and lighter between her teeth.
She puts the long filter

between my lips and flicks.
Together we tread water

and smoke as all around us
the fog dreams deeply.

Country Boy

for my brother

Some poets traffic in country misery,
but I have spent night-deep miles

in the bed of a truck, spotlight careening
across a field in search of deer,

watching raccoons chitter their way
through flooded ditches in search of trash,

the beam traveling down the long lanes
of timothy past redolent bales of hay,

dead of summer and dark, laughing
through the sliding window as you drive

the dirt roads in search of nothing at all,
AC/DC playing softly in the tape player,

till early morning comes
and the daybreak star aligns your

inner compass and in the dim light,
you turn the pickup toward home.

3's a Crowd

Andrena Zawinski

The strapping young man sporting a neatly-trimmed anchor beard, felt Stetson, and freshly pressed black-on-black slams down a bargain-priced bouquet onto the supermarket conveyer belt and broadcasts, “The third time this month she kicked me out; the third time I have to buy my way back in with roses for Rosie.”

The woman in front of him, fourth-deep in line for the cashier—arms brimming with celery, carrots, and kale, hastily picked up in a quick jaunt in to the produce bins—rolls her eyes at the Lucky Supermarket’s “3’s a Crowd” banner above their heads, trying to ignore him in a quick scan of the rack of the scandal rags with their celebrity downward spirals, the wives laying down laws, Hollywood’s worst boozers while all she wants is another promised line to open. “3’s a Crowd,” after all.

He continues to ramble, as if she is at all interested, proposing that maybe jealousy is a compliment and asserting that he really did just forget to wear his ring out with the guys last night. “Why me?” she thinks as she peruses the sweet Skittles and Snickers, almost breaking her New Year’s resolution for fitness, decked out in her new Total Woman Spa yoga hoodie, as she considers pulling an edition off the rack on women who lost half their size and the latest slurry of politicians snagged by infidelity rumors.

“Ever notice,” she speaks up instead, meeting his glassy eyes straight on, “those hammy Lucky Supermarket ‘3’s a Crowd’ banners, the false commitments taunting us as we stand five-deep in line and growing while we wait out another register error?”

He stays fixed in his own impending melodrama, leans into her apprehensively and asks, like he really wants to know, “So what do you think of jealousy?”

He reaches for a Diet Coke and Spearmint Mentos, sliding the roses with their nearly spent blooms up closer to her produce.

“What I think,” she replies with some confidence, “is that the line’s long enough that you have time to grab a bottle of Prosecco and box of Godivas from the aisle behind you to go with that bunch.”

Reluctant to enter the conversation further, she becomes increasingly annoyed looking up at the 3’s a Crowd banner, that he should think she could care to be drawn into it all like some Dear-Abby-of-the-Checkout. He snickers that he’s the one that needs a drink, a bomb shot of Jack Daniels in a Bud draught, as he clumsily picks up a Cosmo and thumbs to “Ten Surefire Sexy Relationship Fixes.”

When she gets into the car, her cell phone rings. It’s her sister, Rosie, crying again about her latest live-in boyfriend—the one she didn’t have to meet online, the one that chased after her and not the other usual way around, the one who only leaves to keep

up his live-aboard sloop docked in Ballena Bay, the one who brings home roses he says are as beautiful as his one and only Rosie. Rosie bellyaches about his having gone out again all night with the guys, the star-studded promise ring she gave him still in the soap dish at the sink glaring up at her like some telltale sign, like some other woman lurking backstage about to be discovered. She turns the conversation to tell her about the jerk she just met in Lucky's checkout line line who—Rosie snaps back that she hasn't time to hear about her escapades, cutting their connection. Alone in the apartment, Rosie muses about the first time they got together under an unusually warm and starry California sky mid-February and realizes how impetuous and optimistic she was about this one, this swarthy cowboy with a sailboat.

Just as she begins to wax melancholic, he lets himself into the apartment, plastic-wrapped bouquet in hand, red clearance tag still affixed next to the preservative packet, humming the Waylon Jennings's "Rose in Paradise" tune that played for the first dance they had barefoot onboard the Bronco's deck beneath a perfect fingernail moon. Rose yanks off the plastic sleeve and plunges the roses headfirst down the Insinkerator, loose petals flying up at her flushed cheeks, and then shoves him out the door. Since she had already visited Pagano's Hardware earlier in the day for instructions from the flirty clerk there on how to switch out her door knob's lock cylinder in her Park Central apartment, she ignored his "please don't do this" from the hallway. Ignoring his continued timid tap at the door—after all, this is the third time this month she had been expected to accept his apologies in flowers— she jams a dining room chair up tight against the shaft of the knob, determined not to let him get in. She digs through the childhood cedar chest at the foot of the bed, "Hope Chest" her mother called it, for a screwdriver to change the lock.

"What a Hope Chest," she broods, "nothing more than a giant junk drawer for all the things that just might come in handy."

She roots through it down to the bottom and yanks up a crazy quilt her grandmother made so many years ago from swatches of family rites—the various weddings, births, communions, and graduations, all the little stories having taken their backseats in time. She swaddles herself in the quilt, breathing in the long, woody scent fixed in it, flops onto the rumpled bed, wondering if maybe three times really is a charm, but roses fill her head, the crack and smack of their stems inside in the disposal drain, the whirl of their leaves spinning, spinning in a deliriously wild and final beautiful noise.

Tom

Virginia Watts

My mother never sang to me or listened with her eyes. The back of her head nodded, that was about the extent of it but even so, I coast on permanent rewind. I dial back, pause, implode, expand into a million tiny, tinkling pieces. The past envelops me as the freshest air. I float upon billowy, resuscitated life, breathe in and hold all moments granted more time. I am a vampire of the past. I might kill to get back there. I mean it.

Let's see. It is summer, 1968, no air-conditioning, the windows of our suburban, red brick ranch home as wide as they'll go. I know he is coming. He will be outside my bedroom window soon. I wake up just for him, sun still cold, the tepid, barren light of early morning. No true night left, and yet dawn is not quite herself.

There is no logical reason why our family has an insulated, metal milk box on the concrete slab porch beside our kitchen door, but I am glad we do. My father is plant manager for Harrisburg Dairies. According to my older brothers, that means he runs the whole show. Our father could bring home bottles of milk, half and half, buttermilk any day of the week, but he seldom does.

I hear truck engine chugging quietly first, then footsteps, the clink clink of glass being jostled inside a rectangular, wire basket. If there is a cricket or two still awake, all chirps fall silent now. I smash my cheek against window screen, capturing the flash of bright, white clothes in dim light. I never whispered a greeting. I never thought I should.

"Why do milkmen dress like doctors?" I ask my father.

"To show everything about the collection, pasteurization and bottling of milk is painstakingly sanitary," he always answers proudly.

With the truck humming on the street, a heavy, milk box lid thuds against brick. The bottles clunk into place. The mixed terrier across the street begins barking. Major hates life, resents the idea that anything good is happening. I can't blame the dog,

known to bite, chained-up day and night on a leaky carport.

My mother never guessed the truth behind some milk deliveries that failed to match her carefully completed order form. That's because I didn't change the requests for the next drop off too often, and because my father backed me up. He convinced my mother the unexpected items she discovered some mornings were free samples: chocolate milk, orange drink, lime aide.

I didn't want to be a bother, but sometimes I added a question or a greeting at the bottom of the order forms my mother left them inside the milk box. We had different milkmen over the years; only Tom wrote back to me. Here's some of our correspondence during his tenure:

Me: What is the price of tea in China?

Tom: Don't know. Only drink coffee.

Me: Do you think there are werewolves?

Tom: If there are, they don't hurt people. Just howl at the moon.

Me: Merry Christmas! Do you believe in Santa Clause?

Tom: YES! YES! YES!

The milk box was a perfect spot for my Barbie dolls. It transformed into many places: a sunken living room, swimming pool, school, hospital, airplane, genie bottle. I sometimes left Skipper and Francie inside the box overnight, wearing sleepover pajamas, arms raised as a good morning salute for the milkman. Tom lowered the dolls' arms and stood them up. Once, he left inch-sized bouquets of white and pink clover flowers cradled inside their outstretched arms.

Just before dawn, when nothing has shape or edges or independence, I hear the hum of a truck motor, the whoosh of milk box lid, the settling of glass bottles. I glimpse the starkness of white against the grey of dawn. If you have never tasted metal window screen, let me tell you, it's bitter. I taste that too.

In those steady times, I thought there would always be milkmen, three-dimensional Cracker Jack toys, a father, home from Harrisburg Dairies in his white uniform to stand beside a silvery green Chevy Chevelle, hands on hips, head cocked, grinning amusement at the sight of me jumping through an obstacle course of lawn sprinklers in clothes instead of a bathing suit.

“This hose water tastes really funny, Dad, like money.”

“How would you know? Have you been sucking on nickels again?”

I am a vampire of the past. I might kill to get back there.

by Edward Lee

ASH STAINS

The marital bed
was burnt before
it could be used,
nothing but warm ash
and smouldering tinders,

yet we lay down in its remains,
our skins pale and willing,
incapable of acknowledging
the unsubtle portent
of everything
that was
to come.

UNINVITED PLEASURES

The ground you spilled
your seed into, uninvited,
has grown barren,
its slowly decay
begin to permeate the air,
making dogs howl
and cats hiss,
while horses forced
to walk across its unturned form
empty their bowels,
wide eyes rolling despondently;

there will never be life
here again,
nor even the possibility of life,
your sweetly poisoned seed
a paradoxical harbinger of a worldwide demise,
that will come today, tomorrow,
or some swift day after
the echo of your grunt of selfish pleasure
has faded into wet memory.

THE WEAKNESS OF SCARS

The scars on my knuckles
embarrass me more
than those on my wrists,
my arms,

a giving in to anger
the cause of the former,
anger a weakness
I can fight, most times,
while a weakness stronger
than anger, a weakness
I cannot always overcome,
birthed those on my wrists
and arms, wrought
by my own hand,
a weakness that festers
in the darkness
that has coated my brain
since birth, and will continue
to do so until I succeed in my need
to escape, or my body
finally lies down,
succumbing to whatever
my body will succumb to,
be it old age
or some less aggressive disease.

The scars on my knuckles
embarrass me more
than those on my wrists and arms,
though, in truth, I am ashamed
of all of them, but at least
it is easier to hide
those self-inflicted ones.

INNOCENCE, LOST

You tell me
your necklace
was made from blood-red tears,
yet refrain from telling me
who or what
shed those tears,

and I do not ask,
though I believe you speak the truth,

my need to feel you against me
erasing any doubt
that arises;

after all, I sought you
so I might see that necklace,
the dream of my lost innocence
leading me here.

WORDS

I am not the messenger
or the message,
not the whisper
in the wind
or the shout
in the field.

I am not the sentence
or the paragraph.
I am not the comma,
not the full stop.

I am not the nothing
or the everything.

I am not
and yet
I am all;

a mystery
looking for sense
in a world
without.

NEW REPLACING OLD

From a distance
I watched your eyes
absorb the world,
the corners of your mouth twitching
with every second or third sight seen.

Manoeuvring myself
into your sightline,
I saw the light fade
from your eyes
as you saw nothing worth
seeing, nothing worth
smiling for.

You looked slowly away,
seeking new sights,
finding something just over my shoulder.

IGNORANCE

Hard to shut a window
that's never been opened,
yet many try,
fearful that the indifferent storm outside
might invade privacy,
or rearrange lives,
with its previously unwitnessed violence,
its temper legendary
in the single-syllabled words of loose mouths.

Hard to shut a window
that's never been opened,
but not impossible,
no, not impossible,
especially when we draw the curtains
and turn off our lights,
safety over sense

and visibility.

FOR I FEAR ONE DAY I WILL LOSE YOU
after Leonard Cohen

There is a man,
so I am told,
a lover of women
and men,
with eyes of brightest sky,
and a voice like the finest wine,
whose touch was once described
like warm candle wax.

And while I stutter
in my words of love,
tighten my grip when we make love,
it is because i hear
that this man
is looking for you.

THE BURDEN OF PAIN

It was after the priest gave you last rites
for the third time
that you decided to let go
and shed all that you were.

On strange mornings,
when I am slow to rise,
I sometimes think
that maybe
it wasn't the pain, the illness
that stole you,
but the embarrassment across that young priest's face
as he repeated words
we all knew
by heart.

by Donna Walker-Nixon

Pallets on the Floor

Grandma talked to Lawrence Welk.
“Keep a song in your heart,” he said.
She became his champagne lady.
He smiled; she smiled back.

Mother and Daddy shared a hide-a-bed sponge mattress
that curled into three rectangles and shifted shapes
since Grandma had no other stay-the-night visitors.

In the front room, none of us wanted to lie motionless courting
groggy segments of sleep on the steel black corduroy couch
where every fifth rib pricked us like mylar icicles on a Christmas tree.
The victim woke the next morning with weeping red and gray patches
of dried skin on her ankles, wrists, and neck.

Our unarticulated words fueled silent arguments until
Natalie fell to the corner nearest Grandma’s bathroom.
Lana jumped to the other corner, and
Grace stood trying to decide her course of action.
“Go ahead,” I may have said. “I’ll sleep on the couch this time.”
Next time, Grace slept on the couch that felt like a Brillo pad
impregnated with soap that scraped across my back.
The next time Lana took her turn, but never ever Natalie.

The next morning, Mother chided, “Don’t scratch!”
Like I had a personality fault in my weak stars
to not persevere and conquer dust mites
and mold in Grandma’s couch.

I preferred Aunt Vondie's pallets in one of the many shacks
where she and Uncle Earl eked out their meager income
on rented farms growing milo and other grains.
Her family quilts were thicker,
and she had padded shiny blankets.
She and Mother tugged fitted sheets
—whose thread count no one thought to measure—
around the corners to fit the pallet.
Some feared night-scouring scorpions,
but I feigned sleep to hear Aunt Vondie recite Grandma's abuses
and resurrect her infant daughters Aven and Virginia Ann
for temporary Lazarus moments.

Crystal shards ruptured her reality. Her I-am-ness and their I-am-ness
mingled for nine months, only to die while still alive,
leaving her to coddle her babies back from their bardos,
clinging to scalloped, frayed edges of hope
in a world infused with endless despair.

Your Baby's Coming Home

The winding road became

our runaway mine train.
We counted dips—
Declines & inclines in the road.
“You missed one,”
Mother’s voice echoed
when void canyons
expanded in the dusk.

And Daddy guided us through
his caliche dust of precious memories
with the Bel Air’s blunted front
and its re-envisioned grille.
Selling points the salesman said,
in the time before
Linda’s blinding migraines
blunted her response to tests
and outside stimuli.

In those hours before we
reached Fort Worth Children’s Hospital,
distant cries, fears surfaced.
Linda choked on her own saliva,
not able to breathe without
a tracheal tube snaking
down her collapsing throat.

Once at the hospital,
Daddy read the paragraphs
of forced pages they said
he must sign before...
before they could operate.

They abandoned hope:
“A fibrous brain tumor, somewhere,
Prepare to lose your daughter.”
And Mother prepared, not Daddy.
“No!!” he shouted through the void.

Determined, he forged darkness,
more than lust and love,
his faith somehow prevailed.

He checked Linda out of the maelstrom.
In the rough midnight hours,
he drove through other rushing tides
to a city he did not know—lusting
for waterslides of a doctor’s confirmation,
“Your baby’s coming home.”
Daddy captured his own Kodak memories—

All we needed for the moment.

The first time Daddy visited San Antonio

PawPaw drove my mother to distraction
As he fumed about them Mex-he-cants.
“We got to get back to civilization
Before the sun sets and they hold
Us up, demand *el dinero*, and
Force us to eat tamales.”

For the summer of '68,
Jeane Dixon predicted
the Tower of the Americas
would fall off its rotations,
crash to the ground,
and decapitate tourists,
the flying Indians would
twist into kaleidoscopes
of unmatched colors.

All confluence would be lost.

“She predicted President Kennedy’s
Untimely assassination,”
I quoted fears other kids
repeated on the school bus

“Never mind that she couldn’t
pinpoint whether it would occur
during his first or second term,”
Mother quelled my fears,
while Daddy guided the lemon yellow
Bel Aire through the Texas hill country,
afraid we’d run out of gas
before we reached Burnet.

When we got to San Antonio,
Mother promised us each a souvenir.
Monie chose a red umbrella
whose underpinnings tangled,
and she coveted Wendy's choice.
Neither would remember
the ragged banners of
our only family vacation
the summer after Linda
learned to walk again
when the brain surgeon
removed a Grade III tumor
and one-fourth of her cerebellum.

At the Hemisfair—
in Switzerland, we tasted
Belgian waffles and whipped cream;
in Japan, Daddy asked the woman
if she'd ever been to Gifuken City
where my penpal Ikuko lived.
I shrunk into livid
shards of rebellion
when she explained the suffix
"Ken" refers to something
much like our counties.

Mother whispered sternly,
"Quit mumbling about at your father."

More than the confluence of any civilization,
we retained our segmented memories.
Since all the hotel rooms were rented,
Daddy discovered a suite
in San Marcos in the college dorm.
We rode in a glass-bottomed boat,
and watched Ralph the pig
swim with mermaids.

Lost in the recesses of those Kodak memories:
the confluence of Juan O’Gorman’s
birthrights showcased in the muraled
kaleidoscopes of his European
and indigenous Meso-American roots.

We never fathomed, but instead
fought over who had to sit on the hump
while Daddy wound the yellow Bel Aire
with its rattling air conditioner
down winding country roads.

His own confluence spared
when the brain surgeon emerged
after the segmental resection and announced,
“Your baby’s coming home.”

by Stephen Mead

Seeing Spirit

This is skin nearness,
this almost flesh
dew glittering like glue
with watercolor added
in an oil marbling
where hue upon hue
is pearl auras past
the shell of weather,
knowing wonder goes on
cell-intimate as breath
in any time
crossing time
in the light of senses
touching what
 which
 whom
 is felt.

In the Stillness

Comes this light:
Apricot of dawn,
shell-fog, the lips
hint of lullaby,
a heated lemon
taste with a trace
of tobacco's nicotine
coasting over cotton,
that pillow, this nearby
face of closed angel eyes

pulsing

Intermezzo

Is it a thumbprint, one of ink,
or more a formation of frost
on the night closed rose?

Certainly it has such depth,
the degrees, the maple hue of heat,
soft, soft-----

What was solid, plum-full, wine glowing?
What was hot, rushing as blood,
to a bruise, to a clot?

Can the marks ever entirely leave
the dance of whispers, or any soothing
quell that most urgent thirst?

Southern, that blaze, orange cauldron
on the mouth.

Tropical, such tiger lily
tips, Rousseau's jungle over the natives of
Gauguin, now the real shape of Blake's
bright tiger, Blake's incandescent trance
though these faces, eyes, lips belong

to no painter, any more than the natives,
the islands. No, the meridian belongs
to its own, & this tango to anonymity,
the skin lit in sheets of shade,
in the nights velvet black.

Gentleness

Back 'n forth through the jigsaw of time
does anything that lasts ask to remain
resolved & complicit?

Understand we are more open
in our hold of lips to lips
& this secure state is that of grasses
growing back.
Somewhere there's a river of plasma
which spreads from tips & further in
until these depths are like those born
without pain thresholds.

No.

They cannot tell where one body stops,
the other begins.

Skin is the most spiritual thing.
Touch, learning its regions, is never immune
even when absence becomes touch
of another form.

Is that one of the hardest contacts
or just gentleness transmuted to
the smallest act:
Unbuttoning a button, slipping into lather,
watering plants?

It is by these degrees
lovers rise, outraged, to fight war.

Intelligent Beings

Dolphins diving & whale tails as well-----
Oh lethal galleons, oil riggings, cables
slick & thick-----
The foamy flesh plunged:
blubber now a wraith, stench spewed,
stomach pale, with figures, Lilliputians,
dragging Gulliver in...

Still, at a marina, hundreds visit, line
docks, watch a humpback, beached, taken
for dead, except-----
Divers, rubber skin, miniature caresses,
offering squid, antibiotics, victorious
when Jonah's allegory, Ishmael's kin
pauses, rumbles, a purr enlarged,
& opens scarred jaws-----

Arrroooogggaaaaahhhh!
Arrroooooogggghhhhh!:

Language, the cry, an incision
echoing nets, plankton, steel poles forgotten
among lotus floating finger bowls

in calm costly tea gardens.

(Poetry-art hybrid also available)

Mosul

Jake Shore

i

Snow down rift and the terrain calls out crack noise liken action righteous bloodthirsty animals. Havoc black night in day. Water pours out the basement mechanically, flapping on the asphalt like carp. Air colder than the arctic literal rocks the city and shakes your bones. Out here we are all equal. Stare up at the sky, eyes the color of it, and if not for grime the whites in your head would glow.

'What happened?' Eli asks, walking down his stoop stairs.

'Pipe burst. The fire department left. Whole block flooded. Is yours?' asks the neighbor standing down on the street.

'The basement, yeah,' Eli says and his breath rises.

'That's my pump. I'm gonna finish here, help Christine and then all the way down the block. You need it? All I gotta do is set it up.'

'Yeah?'

'Sure. I got it.'

'Yes. Yes, that'd be amazing.'

'Sure. I'll knock on your door.'

ii

Soft colors and warmth absorb this kitchen's breathing. If you've ever had bland chicken soup seep yuck through your mouth it's a damn shame, says the opposite sensation coursing through her. Ladle curves like hers', delicious ruby, slightly electronic pop bob brings her glide back and forth perfecting broth eternal back to the beginning of cold and time.

Lord, she thinks, should I now close my eyes and walk out into black eternity until it fills with light born deep inside me that I cannot share with anyone but all can get from deep within their own? Can I rely on the sense that I need not care for the wicked if they do not want to be saved? Is it wrong for someone to believe that the only path to virtue is through the only way to virtue?

He kisses the back of her neck.

'Mmm,' hums Marie.

'How's it coming?' asks Eli.

'Fine. What's going on?'

'Main pipe on the street burst. Our neighbor, the guy who does construction and lives on the other end of the block told me. He's got a pump, too, said he was gonna come by later and set it up for us.'

'You gonna tell Michele?'

'I called her.'

'And?'

'She said there are no valuables in the basement so it doesn't matter.'

'Seriously?'

'I know. No good deed.'

'I don't think we have hot water,' says Marie.

'What?'

'Yeah.'

'Goddamnit.'

iii

Father owns the restaurant and has been at the center of all things running it for a little over three decades now but he just announced to the family in a somewhat bizarre and altogether unsettling way that he no longer wants to run it and desires instead to pursue Buddhism one hundred percent moving forward.

'Buddhism?' his son Corey asked.

'Buddhism,' Father said.

It's not that family conferences were altogether unusual, but Corey and his younger sister, Renee, hadn't been asked by Father or Mother to have a family conference in quite some time, and the last time a family conference was requested it was by Mother and she wanted to let everyone know they were buying a summer home, so when Corey and Renee got the text from Father that he wanted to have a family conference, the kids honestly both thought and texted back and forth between one another, just the two of them, that some sort of grand news was going to be announced, like Mother hitting it big with one of the plays she'd written, but that's not what happened, and it really was from the second Renee and Corey stepped into the Brooklyn Brownstone where they grew up that they got a strong sense something was amiss.

For starters, Father was wearing some sort of robe. Corey and Renee later learned the garb was Buddhism related, but when they first walked in, by the looks of the garment, Corey jumped to the conclusion that his father was ill. This did arrive in the back of his mind when he first got the text from Father, that he might have cancer or had learned of a heart condition and was going to need surgery, but the relationship he had with his Father brought him away from the idea that Father would need a family conference to make an unfortunate announcement. Corey spoke to his Father at least once a week and sometimes up to three times a week over the phone and also got together to see a movie or go to a show or to go out to dinner or be invited over for dinner or whatever, and Father had always used these opportunities in the past to reveal bad news. When Father's brother died he called Corey. When Mother was

diagnosed with Hepatitis he invited Corey out to lunch at a diner. Also, Mother had only used family conferences ever to reveal good news, which, as has been stated, was really one of the initial things that alerted both Corey and Renee that this time might be similar.

Upon seeing Father in the robe Renee didn't jump to the conclusion that Father was sick but instead thought something was wrong with Mother, almost as if Father put on a nurses outfit or something once Mother was diagnosed with Leukemia, but when the kids got into the dining room where Father was sitting in the robe and sat down and were wrestling with these distressed assumptions that one of their parents was sick or dying, they heard Mother screaming about something in the other room obviously over the phone and instead of the ruckus alarming them it actually caused both kids to become relaxed. Dad was just blabbering about sports in the dining room and Mother was yelling, screaming, really, at her friend Eileen about ham. Neither Corey nor Renee could pinpoint exactly what it was about ham that Mother was going on about but it certainly had to do with ham and they both figured that if it really were horrific news that Mother and Father wanted to divulge they wouldn't one be talking about sports and two be going on screaming and ranting about ham. It set them at ease. Corey conversed with Father about sports and Renee reflected on her day at work which required her to go to a homeless shelter and speak with the head of it about the clinic she worked for and what benefits could be provided to those either without insurance or who were in need of hospital care.

Then Mother walked into the dining room.

'Your Father has news,' she said.

The kid's hearts.

'It's nothing bad, really.'

'Really?' asked Corey.

'We're both fine,' said Father.

Corey works at a local university in the registrar.

'Seriously, is everything alright?' asked Renee.

iv

Long out waste back and the trees whisper together longing for the next day's sun and rain on the back of a branch.

Cain stands alone. It's her entryway.

I am gray, he thinks, and keeps thinking we are the aligned nations forged from this earth not able to bury the hatchet or lick the wounds of our forefathers as long as they're around long enough to take the hatchet back. She look me dead in the face and said, I hate you, Cain. I didn't care. I told her she was set with me until the end of time. Rocked out clean and the water spurt like a wildfire in the far back part for real.

This be the negotiation that saves us all, he keeps thinking, standing there boots in hand instead of on foot.

'What you doing standing there with your boots off your feet?' she asks.

'What's it to you?'

'You're in my house, ain't you?'

'Not anymore. Last night you got so fucking drunk exile and abandoned with the hollering and then you clear tell me I own the house too and you love me.'

'That was just talk. That was just fucking and talk and it's got nothing to do with you now there now and what the fuck you doing with those damn boots not on your feet, huh? Huh?'

'They wet.'

'Yeah? Where were you?'

'Fixing something.'

'Well, did you do it?'

'What?'

'Fix it.'

'Nah. I ain't. I couldn't fucking fix it.'

'What was it?'

'The fuck you care?'

'I do care.'

He still stands at the entryway and her seated warm in the den, her heavysset and older than Cain.

'Why? What the fuck it matter to you what my name is or where I die? What the fuck it make a difference to you if we never talk to one another again, huh?'

She sits up in her chair, posture adjusted and says, 'Now, what did I say last night? About the house being yours and the connection between the two of us here for true being the only thing that fucking matters in the whole damn world? You listen about as well as you snort. Right up and without a thought in your brain for it.'

'What the fuck are you going on about, huh? I thought you just done denied it made a difference what you said last night drunk as a skunk and nothing left there to show for it,' Cain says and drops his boots on the entryway but stays standing there, not approaching her.

'What was wrong with it?'

'Huh?'

'What were you trying to fix?'

'...'

'Come on now.'

'Hot water heater,' says Cain.

'And why not?'

'I don't know. They got these pieces of electronics on them now. I didn't know really what the fuck was wrong with it. Thought I did. Got it sparking but it didn't light.'

'You get fired?'

'Nah. Sick, he a good man. He didn't hold it too much against me. He'll send me out again.'

'Sick?'

'Yeah.'

'Sick the fucking name of your boss?'

'Yeah.'

'What kinda name is that?'

'I don't know.'

'...'

'Go get yourself cleaned up,' she says. 'And come sit with me here. Get your ass warm for a change.'

'Thank you,' says Cain and moves.

v

'Eli, I am not in New York right now. I am in Maryland. My husband and I are trying to deal with all of this from Maryland.'

'Cain, the guy you sent, he couldn't fix it. We still don't have hot water.'

'You calling and telling me gives me no new information.'

'Michele, I appreciate that you sent someone to fix it, but last night this person Cain told me and you confirmed that he was going to arrive here at 6. He didn't come. Then he called again and said he was going to get here between 8 and 9, but didn't come. Then he said he'd be here by midnight and didn't come and called at 12:30 saying he'd be here by 1 and didn't come, and then called at 1 a.m. saying something strange. He didn't come until 10 this morning after calling me at 8 to say he'd be here at 9. I ended up being late for work. I'm just trying to understand why you're sending people who treat your tenants this way. He kept telling me he was coming for 7 hours, called me at 1 a.m. saying strange things, Michele, and then he comes and can't fix it.'

'Eli, my husband and I are going through our rolodex trying to find someone to come. We are doing everything we can.'

'...'

'We are doing everything we can to get someone to you who will be able to fix it. The second floor also don't have hot water. We are doing everything we can.'

'Okay. Alright... okay, Michele. Thank you.'

'What'd she say?' asks Marie.

'That she's in Maryland and she's trying to find someone to come.'

'What'd she say about the guy she sent?'

'Nothing. She doesn't take responsibility for anything, and she gives no shits to treat me like the fucking super.'

'I know. I'm sorry, baby.'

'Ugh.'

'Are you okay?'

'I'm beginning to think that guy with the pump is full of shit. If a main pipe broke in the street the water wouldn't be coming into our basement like that. I don't know.'

'What do you mean?'

'I feel like it came from the building next to us. He's the one like, overseeing the renovation.'

'Who?'

'The guy with the pump. Our neighbor. I'm pretty sure he's the contractor in charge of that renovation.'

'I don't know,' says Marie.

'Yeah. I mean, I wanna believe he was really being neighborly about letting us use his pump but I'm starting to think it was just to cover his tracks.'

'Like the renovation being illegal?'

'Yeah.'

'Well, hopefully Michele will send someone else soon.'

'Yeah.'

vi

'I mean, that's great, Dad. If that's what you want,' says Renee.

'Yeah,' says Corey.

'What do you think, Mom?'

Mother acts like she's wiping off the spot of the dining room table directly in front of her with both palms like there are crumbs sprinkled there but there aren't and she says, 'It doesn't quite matter all that much what I want when it comes to this.'

'Of course it does,' says Father. 'I care how you feel, I just don't necessarily have to change my behavior accordingly, that's all.'

'Right. So, I'll just keep my opinion on the matter to myself then, now, won't I?'

'If you want, I mean, Beth, if you want to tell the kids that you don't approve of this, go ahead, I'm not going to stop you.'

'Interesting how that worked out, Gerold. You just told the children.'

Father adjusts his robe.

'You don't want this, Mom?' asks Renee.

'Oh, I don't know.'

'This is why we wanted to have the family conference about it. This is the reason,' Father says.

'I just don't really understand it, that's all,' says Mother. 'Your father has just changed rather quickly and it's been a bit jarring for me to deal with, but it doesn't

mean it matters and it doesn't mean it's gonna change anything.'

'What do you mean?' asks Corey.

'I mean, darling, look at what your father is wearing. And that's just the start.'

'So are you... are you meditating all the time and doing that sort of thing?' asks Corey.

'Are you wearing eyeliner?' asks Renee.

Father says, 'I...'

'Your father has also decided that this new Buddhist outlook has changed the way he sees himself. Do you want to explain what that means, Gerold?'

Father tosses Mother a look that clearly states, we spoke about this and you know it and we're not going to tell the kids about this part of it just yet.

'Can you both please just tell us really what's going on?' asks Renee. 'I understand you don't want to run the restaurant anymore, and as we said, both Corey and I are more than happy to see that it changes over just fine and continues operating smoothly, but what really is going on, I mean, I'm sensing there are...'

'Your father has begun seeing other people, and doing so in a way that's totally outside regularity and decency.'

'...'

'Seeing other people?' Corey asks.

'Your father no longer believes in the self, the idea of it. He doesn't think he's your father anymore, he thinks he's just energy, or something, and that we are all one, so according to him...'

'Can you please stop speaking for me?'

'You?' asks Mother. 'You who? I thought there is no longer you, Gerald and it justifies all this fucking around you're doing.'

'Mom?' asks Renee. 'What the hell is going on?'

'I've come to the very real realization,' says Father, 'that all of this is just... temporary. That we don't really have any say in the matter and we're all just part of... it's hard for me to explain and come to grips with but... I...'

'You want to tell them how you're sleeping with their cousin, Gerold?'

The faces drawn onto both Renee and Corey widens their eyes and contorts their cheeks to display the debacle occurring on their insides.

Silence.

'What?' asks Corey.

'I've started sleeping with a lot of people. And, yes, your cousin Jan is one of them.'

'You're banging Jan?' Corey says.

'Corey...' says Father.

'What is it, Gerold? Is that term a bit too crass? What the...'

'Dad...' says Renee.

'I just don't really believe that we're... I've begun looking at the world in a fundamentally different way and it's not that nothing matters. I do believe that things

matter. But I'm gonna die soon. Alright. There, I said it.'

'You're sick?' asks Renee.

'He's not,' says Mother. 'He's perfectly fine, he was just at the doctor. In fact, it was a clean bill of health that jump started all of this, wasn't it, Gerald?'

'Mom,' says Renee. 'What are you still doing here?'

'What?'

'What are you still doing living with him?' asks Renee. 'He's doing this to you. He's sleeping around. He's having sex with your niece and you were yelling about ham on the phone when we walked in here. What the hell are you...'

'Why don't you explain that, Beth? Explain that one to the children, why don't you?'

Mother runs the inside of her left hand's thumb and index finger along her neck.

'I'm staying to keep us a family.'

'She's staying,' says Father, 'because she feels indebted.'

'Indebted?' asks Corey.

'I saved her life,' says Father.

A car drives by out on the street and squashes a rat. Mother stares down at the table and shakes her head slightly back and forth.

'Saved...' says Renee.

'When I was pregnant with you, Corey, we were living in a part of Clinton Hill that was more Bed Stuy, really. A man broke into our home one night, into the apartment. It was discovered later that it was a young kid, someone who was out with friends and had been in trouble, some pretty serious trouble before, and he broke into our house and your father...'

'I killed him,' says Father. 'He had a knife. I could've been dead and gone and Mother was pregnant with you, son. I took this person down with my hands and I murdered him for the family and you and your mother and myself, and you, Renee, too. I killed him. It was... I've had to live with it. I live with it every day of every hour of every minute of my life. What your mother is saying that she... I don't know what is becoming of me now. This Buddhism. My life now. What I'm doing. Your cousin. But...'

'Your father is damaged, children. Renee. That's why I'm staying... for now. That's why.'

vii

'Michele?'

'Hi, Eli.'

'I'm sorry to call you so late. The apartment next door is flooding badly, I can hear it. The basement of 17 Monroe, our basement is flooded again as a result. The water is pouring in next door. It doesn't sound like a pipe burst from the street but from...'

'Eli. We are suing 19 Monroe. They are responsible for all of this. We are calling now trying everything to get a hold of the owner of 19 Monroe to shut off the water but until we get a hold of him we can do nothing to turn that water off. No one lives there. We spoke to the fire department.'

'Okay. I called 311 and emergency services are here. If they don't pump the water out I think it's going to get to the boiler.'

'Has the boiler blown?'

'No. That's what I'm saying. The emergency services are here. They need your permission to set up the pump in the basement of 17 Monroe, our.. your basement. By pumping I think it'll stop the water from getting to the boiler. Can you talk to them and do that? I can give them my phone.'

'Yes.'

viii

I know if I can get in there and prove right to Sick and Mr. Eli then they're gonna get the right picture of me and there will be respect, it's just I'm not as used to the electronic ones, that's all, but I've been to my shop and I got the supplies and I'm taking the right tools to get the heater lit and it's gonna be fine to tell her I got it fixed and it's another job I got in the bag 'cause it's real kind of her letting me stay and all and I want to be able to pay her back and let her know I got what it takes. I got what it takes. She a big woman but I keep telling Sick she the right one for me in a way and it may not be in a loving sense like he got with his woman but she is there for me and that's real. I've been around enough to know that you can't just rely on people and it's about the people who let you into their homes literally and let you love them just for warmth and heat and the cold now is bad and I've got it bad here and this another job on top of the three others but it's this one that's for Sick and there's no way I can let him down. Not no way in hell I can let him down and forever clean the rapture into the place of God rotations of the earth innumerable in their stature and waste and we are aligned there me and her. She let me in good and allow and she probes and that's reality. I don't just got a boss I got a woman who checks in on me and I never had a mother and ruined clear water hot and warm and the other night she make me stand there with my boots in hand holding them bare feet on the cold entryway, felt like rock, before I enter and I did and I didn't say nothing because that's what the real... she the real one and I respect her. She grilled me about the job and I explained, I said to her, I explained to her about the electronic element and how it changed the structure of the hot water heater and she was real nice about it in the end and told me to come in and be warm and she held me a bit and that was fine and I'm not attracted to her in the sense of the physical like the heavy set thing and her age, she's older, but we all love people in different ways and even if it's like her house being open to me and I stay and

that being a kind of love is for real and I respect her and do love her in a way for it. She allows me a support foundation beneath my boots for the rulers of the world not to squash me and spit down on me in the air and cold raking through my stomach like a tortured crustation out of the ocean's lengths we are here together standing in unison Christ's eyes the colors of the almighty trident clank and spears into my heart. There is no love like what I get from her and it can't be jotted down or reconstructed into this working here and now it's sparking and boom you got the roar of the house now. The flame. That's the whole thing with the water heater for him. For Mr. Eli and I got it. I got it for him. It's just a matter of I got it sparking and now I just gotta get the spark to ignite and the job is done. That little tiny flame gets hot water, and I'll tell Sick I got the job done and she'll know, too.

ix

Both Corey and Renee made the decision before they left their parent's that they were going to go to a diner and talk about what just happened. As they were leaving they somehow reverted back to the normal family dynamic and said their goodbyes to Mother and Father and hugged and kissed and walked out in a fleeting instant of forgetfulness, not knowing anything that had just been communicated. Once on the sidewalk the two of them each bundled up a bit more, becoming much more concerned about how cold it was, adjusting their scarves and making sure their jackets were done up and secure all the way. Then they looked at each other and each gave the other a look that could've somehow been in a kind of strange sibling mirror where you receive the exact same image it's just from two separate vantage points and origin eyes. The look they gave one another was somehow new and ancient all in one, and Corey reached for Renee and the two hugged, moving from a moment where it was almost as though they were trying to make light of what had happened, to now, as the two are embracing and feeling very down and sad, coming to the even more real realization that their family is falling apart.

'Let's go around the corner,' says Corey.

'Maybe a few blocks over,' says Renee, chuckling and holding back tears.

'Alright. Or wanna just come over and grab a bite? I have some food.'

'Sure,' says Renee.

Once in Corey's apartment, Renee rests on the couch and stares at the TV but it's off.

'I can't eat,' says Corey, grabbing a beer from the fridge, but I got some... um, I got half a sandwich from the deli. You want it?'

'Yeah, I'm starving.'

'Here.'

'Thanks.'

The TV is still off.

'Ugh,' admits Corey.

'Yeah.'

'I might like move to California or something,' says Corey. 'I don't know if I really want to be around for this shit when it all starts hitting the fan for real. I don't think I can take it.'

Renee eats the sandwich.

'I was thinking about San Francisco anyway. There's a registrar at every college in the country so, it's one of the great parts about the job if I wanna leave.'

'Yeah,' says Renee. 'You can leave if you want.'

There's a knock at the door.

'Huh,' says Corey and walks over and opens it.

'Hey, Corey. Sorry to bother you.'

'Hey, Eli. What's up? Eli, this is my sister, Renee. Renee this is my neighbor Eli downstairs.'

'Nice to meet you,' says Renee.

'Yes, nice to meet you. Again, sorry to bother you but do you have hot water?'

'We actually just got back. I was out all day so I don't know. Let me check.'

Corey jets into the kitchen and Eli stays at the door waiting.

Renee keeps eating.

'Yup. Hot. It's back,' announces Corey from the kitchen.

'Great,' says Eli. 'Thanks for checking. Michele said she was trying to call you to see if you got it back and I was on the phone with her so she asked me to ask you.'

'She hasn't tried calling me,' says Corey.

'Figures,' says Eli. 'Get me to run errands for her.'

'Did Michele's husband fix it?'

'Nah. She sent handymen. The first guy she sent was... it was insane. Calling me at all hours of the night saying crazy shit. Telling me he's coming and stringing me along for hours and hours and never shows and when he does he can't fix it. Finally, after the second time the basement flooded, Michele sent someone who took care of it.'

'The basement has been flooding?'

'Yeah. Something is going on with the apartment next door. I don't know.'

'Damn'

'Yeah.'

'That's unreal,' says Corey.

'Anyway,' says Eli.

'Yeah. Thanks, Eli. Appreciate it.'

'Yeah. See you later.'

My skin is like a big suit full of bones and blood and at the heart of it is me realizing I've been so fucking sexually repressed my entire life that I'm like... I'm almost like a priest in a sense. Those priests are the best goddamn example of what happens when you pile everything up sexually and not allow it to come out. You go insane. Literally fucking insane, and maybe that's what Beth thinks I'm going through, sure. I don't care. I mean, all I know is if I don't give in to that which has been imprisoning me, these innate testosterone injections that claw at me day after day after day I mean what in the fuck... is there any mystery why these women who are turning themselves into men start to hate the wicked thoughts that surface once they start to feel the brutal and vicious wrench of the testosterone they inject into their bodies? I hate this fucking chemical. I hate it. Does that mean I'm a woman? I really don't know. I have no fucking idea. Maybe it does. Maybe I'm both a woman and a man here stuck in this big sock puppet full of blubber and fat and blood and skin and testosterone and it's all this pile of goop that I'm sick of and hate. My body. That which makes me me. I fucking hate it. These urges. The thoughts that manifest and come into my mind with no consultation. No fucking warning. On what planet are people choosing their thoughts like it's a multiple choice test in junior high school? I am given my thoughts like the slave is given his lunch, and if I decide not to eat that lunch and die, then maybe I'm making the right decision, but I cannot kill myself. I just can't. I am a slave, and when I get the lunch through the little slot, my thoughts, I fucking eat them because for whatever reason I have got to stay alive. And I'm sorry for that. Maybe I shouldn't and maybe in my even later fucking years I'll decide that death, death from my own hand is the right path, and what in the fuck, I mean, I didn't actually think my wife's niece would have sex with me. I thought she'd bat me down and I'd have to shamefully hang my head and lie to the family saying I'd never tried but for her to say yes, I mean, are you kidding me? I went through with it 'cause I'm in the throes of something where if I don't do it, then I am that slave in jail and I send back my lunch. No. Not that. No way. I'm searching for enlightenment that I design. That I want. For me. Like the Buddhists. All for themselves. I want my own feelings and me to be one and I don't want to be shackled to this fucking big sock puppet dick anymore without just giving in to all it desires before I die. I only got a decade left, maybe two, so what the fuck does it matter at this point anyway? I either go out like this, or just wait for death. Like murdering myself without suicide. Not me. Nope.

'Yes.'

'It's Cain.'

'...'

'Mr. Eli?'

'Yes.'

'I'm sorry about all the delays.'

'...'

'I'm calling because... alright, it's 8:30 now. I can be to you by 10 a.m. sharp. 10 a.m. sharp. I have the parts and I will stay with you until that water heater gets fixed.'

'...'

'Mr. Eli, no offence but the delays have been for...'

'Cain?'

'Yes, Mr. Eli, and again, I'm sorry about all the delays.'

'If you ever come to my apartment again I'll kill you.'

'What?'

'If you ever fucking come to my apartment again I will kill you. Do you understand me?'

'Mr. Eli, no offense but...'

'I did two tours in Iraq motherfucker. Do you hear me? YOU TELL ME YOU'RE COMING EVERY HOUR FOR 7 HOURS UNTIL 1 A.M. AND DON'T SHOW AND THEN YOU COME AND CAN'T DO SHIT? IF YOU EVER COME NEAR MY APARTMENT AGAIN I WILL FUCKING KILL YOU. Call me at 1 a.m. saying crazy shit? TRY THAT AGAIN. TRY THAT AGAIN MOTHERFUCKER. DO YOU HEAR ME? TWO MOTHER FUCKING TOURS IN IRAQ. DO YOU WANNA ADD TO MY KILL COUNT?'

'Mr. Eli...'

'...'

'...'

'...'

'...'

'...'

'...'

'Eli?'

'Yeah.'

'You alright?'

'Yeah.'

'What was that, I could hear you downstairs, what's the matter?'

'Nothing.'

'Are you alright?'

'Yeah.'

'What's the matter?'

'Nothing,' says Eli.

Air forgetting rancid cold perches sun and glints soothing gently through wooden blinds.

'Really?' asks Marie, her hands capturing his waist and behind his head. Shadows that cancer his peripherals taper back and tensions gone settling in her eyes and across the apartment warmth again.

'Hey, guess what?' asks Eli.

'What?'

'I was right.'

'About what?'

'That guy with the pump. The construction neighbor guy down the street.'

'Yeah?'

'He was just trying to cover his ass.'

'Really?'

'A pipe burst in the apartment next door, not in the street. He was just going up and down the block with the pump trying to cover his ass 'cause he's overseeing that bullshit renovation.'

'So it wasn't a pipe in the street. A pipe burst in the apartment next door?'

'Something like that, yeah, and then it flooded our basement. He was blaming it on the main street pipe and using his pump to just shut everyone up, but he must've fucked up and it flooded again. I'll bet if I hadn't called 311 he woulda...'

'Eli,' says Marie, clawing at forward proof of bright blooming rivers and morning.

'Yeah?'

Sort each moment with calloused hands to find peace.

'Are you okay?'

'I...'

'I love you,' says Marie.

And for a single, extraordinary instant, beam light proof treasures sparkling in eternal time.

Faith, by the light it sheds, becomes God's interpreter.
We don't even realize that God is speaking; we hear only
the confused language of human beings signifying nothing
but misery and death. Faith teaches us that the essence
of wisdom is understanding which reveals meaning,
so that we see only eloquence and divine perfection in all
the pompous nonsense and jargon of human beings.

Faith gives the whole earth a celestial aspect;
by it the heart is transported,
enraptured to commune with heaven.
Each moment is a revelation of God.

— Jean-Pierre De Caussade

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In 2012, Sheree traveled to Ghana, Africa to meet with a child trafficking survivor. Changed by the experience, she spent the next two years writing about his journey. Passionate about women and the rights of the child, Sheree wants to reach out and inspire the voiceless.

Rebecca Oet is a high school student from Ohio. She is the national Scholastic Writing Awards silver medalist in Poetry, and the winner of 2017 River Of Words Youth Poetry Grand Prize, VOYA Magazine's Teen Poetry Contest 2017 and the Short Poems challenge on Young Poets Network. She has published her poetry in *Teen Ink Magazine, VOYA Magazine, Columbia College Literary Review, Tears in the Fence,*82 Review*, and many others.

Mary Shanley is a poet/writer who lives in NYC. Four of her books have been published: Hobo Code Poems by Vox Pop Press and Mott Street Stories and Las Vegas Stories, Things They Left Behind and Poems for Faces by Sidestreet Press. I publish online at: *Mr. Bellers's Neighborhood, Blue Lake Review, Logos Journal, Hobo Camp Review, StepAway Magazine, Anak Sastra Journal, Shangra-la Magazine, Underground Voices, Edge, Poydras Review, Flagler Review, Garbanzo, Tell Us A Story*.

Nicholas Arnold is a writer, entertainer and speaker from Toronto. His articles have been published in *Elephant Journal, The Mindful Word* and *Intermission Magazine*. He has directed two feature films and currently tours in the hit bio-concert: "Dean and Jerry: What Might Have Been", paying tribute to comedian Jerry Lewis. He is a successful speaker, delivering talks on leadership and making your 'impossible' goals a reality.

Vivien Jones Her first poetry collection - About Time, Too - (Indigo Dreams Publishing) in September 2010. In that year she also won the Poetry London Prize. She has completed a second short fiction collection on a theme of women amongst warriors - White Poppies (2012) - with the aid of a Creative Scotland Writer's Bursary, Her

second poetry collection -Short of Breath - was published in November 2014 (Cultured Llama Press) She is one of three editors of *Southlight*, a literary journal in south-west Scotland, and one of three Literature Ambassadors in Dumfries and Galloway. In 2017/18 she has been writing award-winning short plays.

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Chris Cleary is a native of southeastern Pennsylvania, in which many of his stories are set. He is the author of four novels: The Vagaries of Butterflies, The Ring of Middletown, At the Brown Brink Eastward, and The Vitality of Illusion. His work has appeared or is forthcoming in the *Virginia Quarterly Review*, *Gargoyle Magazine*, *Belle Ombre*, *Easy Street*, *The Brasilia Review*, *Menacing Hedge*, *Wilderness House Literary Review*, and other publications. His short fiction has been anthologized in the award-winning Everywhere Stories.

Francine Witte is the author of four poetry chapbooks and two flash fiction chapbooks. Her full-length poetry collection, Café Crazy, has recently been published by Kelsay Books. She is reviewer, blogger, and photographer. She is a former English teacher. She lives in NYC.

john sweet, b 1968. A believer in writing as catharsis. His latest collections include the limited edition chapbooks HEATHEN TONGUE (2018 Kendra Steiner Editions) A BASTARD CHILD IN THE KINGDOM OF NIL (2018 Analog Submission Press). All pertinent facts about his life are buried somewhere in his writing.

G.D. Brown worked as a literary editor and award-winning newswriter at Oral Roberts University before graduating in 2015. His work has appeared in *Westview*, *Promethia Literary Magazine*, *The Oracle Review*, *Peeking Cat Poetry*, and elsewhere. He is currently an MFA candidate at Goddard College and lives in Madison, Wisconsin.

Jonathan Ferrini is a published author who resides in San Diego. He received his MFA degree in Motion Picture and Television Production from UCLA.

Christopher Stolle's writing has appeared most recently in *Tipton Poetry Journal*, *Flying Island*, *Edify Fiction*, *Contour*, *The New Southern Fugitives*, *The Gambler*, *Gravel*, *The Light Ekphrastic*, *Sheepshead Review*, and *Plath Poetry Project*. He works as an acquisitions and development editor for Penguin Random House, and he lives in Richmond, Indiana.

Sofia Lago I am a New Yorker living in the U.K., pursuing a PhD in history and folklore at the University of Bristol. My works have previously appeared in *Junto Magazine*, *Birds Piled Loosely*, *Folio*, *A Lonely Riot*, and *Twisted Vine Literary Arts Journal*.

Marjorie Becker I am the author of Setting the Virgin on Fire: Lazaro Cardenas, Michoacan Peasants and the Redemption of the Mexican Revolution (UC Press, 1996), and the poetry collections Body Bach (2005) and Glass Piano/Piano Glass (2010) both from Tebot Bach.

I hold a doctorate from Yale in Latin American history and am associate professor of History and English at USC. A fifth-generation Macon, Georgia native, I learned Spanish in childhood, served in the Peace Corps in rural Paraguay, and worked as a print journalist covering race relations in the south. I have received an array of awards, including a Faculty Fulbright Research Fellowship for Mexico, a USC Mellon Mentoring Award, awards from the AAUW and the NEH. I was honored as a runner-up in the Second Beyond Baroque Poetry Contest. My poems have been published in journals and anthologies including *Runes*, *Spillway*, *Askew*, *The Peacock Journal*, *Angle of Reflection*, *Chaparral*, *Beyond the Lyric Moment*, *Desde Hong Kong: Poets in Conversation with Octavio Paz*, and The Southern Poetry Anthology, Volume V: Georgia. I am currently working on a new poetry manuscript and the historical monograph: Dancing on the Sun Stone: Mexican Women and the Gendered Politics of Octavio Paz.

Eric Dreyer Smith lives in San Antonio, Texas. Currently doing studies for a PhD in research psychology. He works as a counselor at a hospital and in private setting. There are over twenty publications of short stories to his credit.

Frankie McMillan I am a NZ short story writer and poet and the author of four books. Recently I co-edited an anthology of short short forms including flash, prose poetry and haibun. (Canterbury University Press.)

Elisavietta Ritchie

Prizes: Winner: Great Lake Colleges award for Best First Book of Poetry;
Four awards National Endowment awards for stories; The Ledge: several firsts and seconds Other prizes& nominations including for Pushcart Prizes and individual stories & poems 3 Full fiction collections,: Flying Time: Stories & Half-Stories; In Haste I Write You This Note: Stories & Half-Stories (in print and e-book).
The Scotch Runner: Stories (in press)

20 Full Collections Poetry: Harbingers; Reflections: Poems on Paintings, A Poet's Gallery; Babushka's Beads: A Geography of Genes; Guy Wires; Tiger Upstairs on Connecticut Avenue; Feathers, Or, Love on the Wing; Cormorant Beyond the Compost, Awaiting Permission to Land; Elegy for the Other Woman; Arc of the Storm, Raking the Snow Tightening the Circle over Eel Country plus chapbooks including Lunatic Moons: Insomnia Cantatas [in press] Timbot, novella-in-verse; A Sheath of Dreams and Other Games Articles, fiction, poetry, photography New York Times, Washington Post, Christian Science Monitor, Toronto Star, Washington Examiner, The

Bay Weekly, Journal of the American Medical Association, Poetry, American Scholar, Southern Review, Ann Arbor Review, many literary publications.

Translations: Russian and French: poetry, prose, non-fiction for Voice of America, FBIS (Foreign Broadcasting Information Service), numerous newspapers, journals, anthologies Visiting Poet in universities, schools and libraries in US, Canada, and under USIA auspices, in the Far East, Balkans, Brazil, Soviet Union. Former President poetry division, then for prose: Washington Writers' Publishing House.

Domicile (not just tourist): San Francisco, Paris, Washington DC, Southern Maryland, Canada, Australia. Half years spent in Cyprus, Lebanon.

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Graeme K. Talboys was born in London and now lives in Scotland. He has had eight works of non-fiction, six novels, a collection of short stories, poetry, and various articles published to date. His non-fiction (published by the likes of Routledge and Grey House in the Woods) has addressed museum education, drama, and matters spiritual. His fiction (published by the likes of *HarperVoyager* and *Monkey Business*) inhabits the spaces in between; tales of the displaced who live and work in those places we pretend do not exist but are always there at the end of a dark alley or seen from the corner of the eye. 'Four Rings of Light' first appeared in his collection Stormwrack. His agent is Leslie Gardner of Artellus.

Darren C Demaree My poems have appeared, or are scheduled to appear in numerous magazines/journals, including *Hotel Amerika*, *Diode*, *Meridian*, *New Letters*, *Diagram*, and the *Colorado Review*.

I am the author of eight poetry collections, most recently Two Towns Over (March 2018), which was selected as the winner of the Louise Bogan Award by Trio House Press. I am the Managing Editor of the Best of the Net Anthology and Ovenbird Poetry. I am currently living and writing in Columbus, Ohio with my wife and children.

John Tavares was born and raised in Sioux Lookout, in northwestern Ontario, but his parents immigrated from Sao Miguel, Azores. He graduated from Humber College (General Arts and Science), Centennial College (journalism), and York University (Specialized Honors BA). His journalism was printed in various local news outlets in Toronto, mainly trade and community newspapers. His short fiction has been published in a wide variety of little magazines and literary journals, online and in print, in Canada and the United States.

Frederick Pollack Author of two book-length narrative poems, The Adventure (Story Line Press, 1986) and Happiness (Story Line Press, 1998), and two collections, A Poverty of Words (Prolific Press, 2015) and Landscape with Mutant (Smokestack

Books, 2018). In print, Pollack's work has appeared in *Hudson Review*, *Southern Review*, *Salmagundi*, *Poetry Salzburg Review*, *Manhattan Review*, *Skidrow Penthouse*, *Main Street Rag*, *Miramar*, *Chicago Quarterly Review*, *The Fish Anthology* (Ireland), *Poetry Quarterly Review*, *Magma* (UK), *Neon* (UK), *Orbis* (UK), and elsewhere. Online, his poems have appeared in *Big Bridge*, *Diagram*, *BlazeVox*, *Mudlark*, *Occupoetry*, *Faircloth Review*, *Triggerfish*, and elsewhere. Adjunct professor of creative writing at George Washington University.

Robert Wexelblatt is professor of humanities at Boston University's College of General Studies. He has published five fiction collections, *Life in the Temperate Zone*, *The Decline of Our Neighborhood*, *The Artist Wears Rough Clothing*, *Heiberg's Twitch*, and *Petites Suites*; two books of essays, *Professors at Play* and *The Posthumous Papers of Sidney Fein* (out in October 2018); two short novels, *Losses* and *The Derangement of Jules Torquemal*; essays, stories, and poems in a variety of scholarly and literary journals, and the novel *Zublinka Among Women*, awarded the Indie Book prize for fiction 2008. A book of Chinese stories, *Hsi-wei Tales*, is forthcoming in 2019.

Sandra Kohler My third collection of poems, *Improbable Music*, appeared in May, 2011 from Word Press. My second collection, *The Ceremonies of Longing*, winner of the 2002 AWP Award Series in Poetry, was published by the University of Pittsburgh Press in November, 2003. An earlier volume, *The Country of Women*, was published in 1995 by Calyx Books. My poems have appeared over the past forty years in journals including *Prairie Schooner*, *The New Republic*, *Beloit Poetry Journal*, *APR*, *Slant*, *The Missouri Review*, *The Gettysburg Review*, and *Tar River Poetry*.

Jon Kemsley Clark has recently been published in *Blood & Bourbon*, *Breakroom Stories*, *New World Writing*, *the Fiction Pool* and *Neon*. He lives and works on the south coast of England and occasionally remembers to call his brother.

Rusty Barnes grew up in rural northern Appalachia and now lives in Massachusetts. He received his B.A. from Mansfield University of Pennsylvania and his M.F.A. from Emerson College. His fiction, poetry and non-fiction have appeared in many journals and anthologies, and his latest book is the poetry collection *Jesus in the Ghost Room*. He maintains space at www.friedchickenandcoffee.com and on Twitter [@williambarnes](https://twitter.com/williambarnes).

Andrena Zawinski's third and recently released full poetry collection is *Landings*. Her poems have received accolades for free verse, form, lyricism, spirituality, and social concern. She is Features Editor at PoetryMagazine.com and founded and runs the San Francisco Bay Area Women's Poetry Salon. She is also an avid shutterbug and dabbles in flash fiction.

Virginia Watts is the author of poetry and stories found or forthcoming in *The Burningwood Literary Review*, *Temenos*, *Halcyone Magazine*, *Green Briar Review*, *the same*, *The Moon City Review*, *The Florida Review* and others. Her essay "Marti's Father" was nominated for a 2018 Pushcart Prize by the *Ponder Review*. She received honorable mention in *Passager's* 2018 Poetry Contest. Virginia currently resides near Philadelphia, PA.

Edward Lee's poetry, short stories, non-fiction and photography have been published in magazines in Ireland, England and America, including *The Stinging Fly*, *Skylight 47*, *Acumen* and *Smiths Knoll*. His debut poetry collection Playing Poohsticks On Ha'Penny Bridge was published in 2010. He is currently working towards a second collection.

He also makes musical noise under the names Ayahuasca Collective, Lewis Milne, Orson Carroll, Blinded Architect, Lego Figures Fighting, and Pale Blond Boy. His Facebook page can be found at www.facebook.com/edwardleewriter

Donna Walker-Nixon was a full professor at the University of Mary Hardin-Baylor, where she received the distinction of receiving the Mary Stevens Piper award for excellence in teaching. She currently serves as an adjunct lecturer at Baylor. She lists her five primary professional achievements as 1) founding *Windhover: A Journal of Christian Literature* in 1997, 2) co-editing the Her Texas series with her friend and mentor James Ward Lee, 3) co-founding *The Langdon Review of the Arts in Texas* 4) publishing her novel Canaan's Oothoon, and 5) serving as lead editor Her Texas, which has boosted Donna's faith that the voices of women writers and artists truly mean something to both men and women.

Stephen Mead A resident of NY, Stephen Mead is an Outsider multi-media artist and writer. Since the 1990s he's been grateful to many editors for publishing his work in print zines and eventually online. He is also grateful to have managed to keep various day jobs for the Health Insurance. In 2014 he began a webpage to gather links of his poetry being published in such zines as *Great Works*, *Unlikely Stories*, *Quill & Parchment*, etc., in one place: *Poetry on the Line*, Stephen Mead For links to his other media (and even merchandise if you are interested) please feel free to Google [Stephen Mead Art](#).

Jake Shore My short stories have been published by *Litro*, *Halfway Down the Stairs*, *The Pitkin Review*, *JCS Press*, *Soft Cartel*, *Eunoia Review*, *Calico Tiger* and others. In August of 2016, The Flea Theater presented my play entitled Holy Moly and its tandem novel, A Country for Fibbing. Broadwayworld states "it marks the first time a play with a correlating novel have been simultaneously released in the United States." My play The Devil is on the Loose with an Axe in Marshalltown was listed in Playbill's '13 Shows Not to Miss Off-Broadway August 1-16.' In October 2017, I read at the College

of Southern Maryland's Connections Literary Series with Tim Seibles, the current Poet Laureate of Virginia.

I'm currently an adjunct professor and the Director of the Academic Advisement Center at St. Joseph's College in Brooklyn, and earned my MFA in Creative Writing at Goddard College, where I studied with Ryan Boudinot and John McManus.

