

**ginosko**

**#24**

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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

There's imagination and there's reality, and they're not the same. They're not even in the same ballpark, in a funny way. Although you borrow constantly from real life, in the end what the reader wants, and what you should try to provide, is experience stripped of confusion. Life comes to us full of clutter; every moment is, in a sense, overloaded, and in fiction you try, without totally abandoning that sensation of overload, to hew out entities which have shape and flow.

—John Updike

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## **C O N T R I B U T O R S**

by Joshua Gage

## Deliquesce

December is the wizened beggar of months.  
It combs frost from the birch trees, slips  
a tongue of ice along the church's windowsills.  
In my prayers there's snow. Strangers saddle  
their horses of song at the end of night. They sew  
their melodies feather by feather, store our voices  
in earthenware jars, prepare supper quickly  
from tin cans. They are guests of jasmine  
wind leaving footprints of light in their wake.  
We part at the steps of dawn. They hang their whispers  
on tree branches, letters melting from the night's prayer book.

## Unawares

Come, stranger,  
if you have money,  
buy me a poem.  
If you have nothing,  
come sit by my fire,  
and let us share  
this bread and rich wine.  
In the morning, we'll gather  
sticks for firewood  
and toast our fortunes  
with coffee from chipped cups.  
If we're close to the sea,  
we'll swim and drink in  
the purple clouds and shadows.  
We'll fall asleep on the beach,  
your hand in mine,  
and wake to the foam of the tide.  
Come, stranger,  
if you have feet,  
wander the ruins of my city.  
And if you have wings,  
leave, and take me with you.  
Slip me in your robe and lift  
me up in your pocket of light.

## Orphan Hagiography

So many things become sacred  
in the candlelight. In the alleys of my prayers,  
their wings are filigreed honey. The night  
is slick and red as a ripe peach.  
Where were these miracles when I knelt naked  
slicing open my thumbs on a rosary  
of broken glass? Now the moon is a pool  
of melted wax and the wind hones  
its razor at my throat. There is magic  
in the conversation between wine and tongue.  
What isn't said becomes blossoms of fog.  
I want to say I am somebody's  
son, but the saints are all statues  
wrung with the smell of smoke. I dream  
they scatter into florescent petals  
until I clasp each one with a bare  
hand like a monk reciting his vesper  
prayers alone by the lamp of memory.

## **Pentecost**

Christ is a stone lodged in our throats.  
At once God enters every orifice,  
spreads the Spirit's relentless melt  
until we swallow the sunlight in wings,  
sing the rim of each dumb tongue  
with wild dialects, velvet and solarized.  
We become unmoored in spirit,  
blistered with the noonday's venerated luster.  
The Gospel sizzles, liberated from our lips,  
then flaps away, a conflagration  
of flaming syllables and scorched feathers.

## Carillon

To pray is to massage the bells  
of my body to ask the way.  
Their bronze is a shade of longing  
that alters the breath and turns  
each sigh to the topic of blossoms.  
To quit ringing is to sacrifice  
another gesture, to burn  
another page from out my psalter.  
At last, an angel pollinates  
my night with a desolate hymn  
that points out the shifting planets  
and weaves a temple from my bones.

## **Migrations**

We are all angels, for angel means stranger.  
We rotate the earth by shifting our feathers east.  
The night I'm caught and clipped, I'm sucking a stone  
as though its cool grit would erase the razor's inquiries.  
I wonder what wanderer would recognize these scars,  
unsure if the forced stigmata is theirs or mine.  
My unconfessed cicatrix gnaw at the dust of my alcoves.  
Can we beggars die from such silences?  
I will pray you wings tautening with wind.  
They deflate in forty days without direction.

## Self Stigmata

Asleep, I am a candle flickering  
with dreams of where the snow is hid. Water  
begins. My orchards are carved with names of angels.  
Deep among the alcoves of the trees,  
the dark is full of crows, their caws harsh clouds  
of breath beneath my limbs. A knife's cold psalm  
sings up my arm like sun upon the snow.  
It makes a wing-shaped hole, then fills with feathers,  
the smell of smoke, soft rapture on my tongue.



## Flesh

In the foul-smelling basement of the community building  
I kicked off white heels and the whole contraption  
of girdle and stockings. Linda Lu laughed.

She'd been the first to quit wearing a girdle. I envied  
and I disdained her. Already a girl from our class had  
died in a car. Linda Lu's twin. Never forget, I'll never

forget we wrote on wallet-sized black-and-white photos.  
"Flesh is how the soul proceeds," Mr. Jones told us  
from a stage crowded with flowers, our audience

filling tiers of bleachers. It was graduation but felt  
like a funeral too big to be held in a church. When  
the choir prepared for a funeral, we saw from a window

a hearse and cars piled with wreaths. I forget what  
we sang, what I wore under my choir robe, but I still see  
leaves that flew in the wind, black hole of a Friday,

song sheets, stumbling. The dead boy had been  
my sister's boyfriend. He chose me when she  
looked elsewhere, took me out in his car. I wasn't

beside him when he raced a train to a crossing  
and he died there. Under the lights Mr. Jones jittered  
like the skeleton hung in his classroom closet,

its dangling bones long like mine. Younger girls  
bet on me to get pregnant, first boyfriend, probably  
easy. That didn't happen. I betrayed every friend

from those small-town years. "Speak the truth," Mr. Jones  
told us. I think of myself as living tissue. "I'm sorry,"  
I say when I stumble, dirt staining my white shoes.

## Joining the Ancestors

Some I'll hug joyfully. Some will eye me  
with sorry suspicion—great grandfather  
holding a Swedish Bible, skin wet

from his nude baptism, total immersion  
through river ice. He couldn't wait  
until spring. Who is that man

vaulting canals? Is his dog a killer?  
They don't know what time is,  
much less how to stop it. I lay

in my father's arms, fists clenched,  
little white shoes on my feet. Mom  
minded the cows, walking forward

to cloud shadow, prairie flat as a floor.  
Dust stirs and lifts. I can't be mended.  
But maybe I'll land in an old barn,

breathe the scent of new-mown hay,  
choose a rake from a clutter of tools,  
hear from the haymow my uncles singing.

## Blessings

Winter abrades my skin. Forecasters promise  
a fearsome storm. The new car waits  
to be plated with ice, everything falling,

trunk filling with cold, lid freezing shut.  
My hair and clothes smell unpleasantly  
of new car. My gloves are pale and

inadequate against the snow and first scrim  
of ice. I'm dulled by the car's fugitive  
colors and the sense of having been cheated.

Didn't Dad joke, "Seen a lot of changes.  
Been against every one"? He wasn't  
a car guy though he and Mom traveled

for months in the Rambler, ate at campfires,  
slept together in their little tent. They had  
the habit of pleasure. Inside the house, I

shoot the dead bolt closed. The amaryllis  
bulges obscenely, grows so fast I almost  
hear it, rushes green blades upward.

I've already lost and found the new car keys.  
Finches flock to the feeder, fitfully beak nits  
from their feathers, shake ice pellets

off fluttering wings. I try to quiet my paper  
heart, my eel hands. Night slides toward me,  
a river of ice. I scheme: riddance.

I'll throw out frayed books, scribbled notes,  
clothes too shabby to give away. As I sort  
in the changing light, memory brings

a gift to me: my old body, the one  
I despaired of, and blessings of teachers,  
Dad in the car explaining the stick shift,

brakes, signals—I extend my arm  
into weather, out or up to indicate  
turning, catching sweet handfuls of air.

# Breathe

Nicole Zelniker

I hadn't even noticed the blood on my daughter's hands until her teacher pointed them out. Little hands, raw and pink, like uncooked meat, and cracked like glass.

"She doesn't use them in class," said Ms. Lee. "Or, I mean, she'll use them, but she puts her sleeves over them so that she doesn't have to touch anything."

I glanced at Emily in the corner. She looked like her father in miniature – auburn hair and hazel eyes, freckles splashed across her whole head, right down to the thick-rimmed glasses teetering on the edge of her nose. She was looking at the finger paintings on the wall. Red and yellow were most popular colors, Ms. Lee had mentioned offhand. I happened to know that Emily loved pink.

"The school can recommend a psychologist."

I blinked and turned back to Ms. Lee. Roxanna Lee looked like how you would want a kindergarten teacher to look, I thought. Non-threatening. Sleeveless blue button-up, light brown slacks, and a red headband perched on her black hair, bangs included. The poster behind her read "Treat others the way you'd want to be treated," with tie-dyed swirls in the background.

"A psychologist? But the problem is her hands," I said.

"We think she's washing them so often for another reason. She says everything is dirty. Her pencils and the desks, especially."

"Shit," I muttered.

"I'll get you the names," she said. I nodded.

Emily came running over. "Did you see the painting that I did, Mommy?" she asked, and held it up for me to see. It was us, her father, her, and me. Except that her father had a halo over his head. Her name was scrawled at the bottom, just legible enough that I could read it: Emily Jane Price.

Ms. Lee was right, too. Emily held up the painting with her right hand, grey sleeve between her skin and the paper. Just visible, her fingers stuck out like bloody worms.

"It's beautiful," I said, and Emily ran to put the painting back. I turned back to Ms. Lee.

"Anything you need, Allison," she said. "Emily's been a pleasure to have in class."

"Thank you," I said, and shook her hand. She grinned again, her placid, kindergarten teacher smile a disguise for the words just behind them, threatening to destroy my world.

"Can we get pancakes?" Emily asked.

"It's two o'clock," I said, buckling her into the car.

"So?" she asked.

"We just had grilled cheese for lunch," I said. "Remember?"

"Oh." She shrugged and I shut the door.

"So, Em," I said, getting into the driver's side. "Ms. Lee said something interesting today."

"Yeah?"

"She said that you haven't been using your hands in class, really."

"Yeah, not really," she said. "There's contamination there."

“Where did you learn that word?” I asked, pulling onto the highway.

“I don’t know.”

“Well, why do you think the stuff in the classroom is contaminated?”

Her eyes went wide in the rear view mirror. “Are you serious? All the kids are touching everything all the time. It’s gross.”

“But you know the janitor cleans it, right?”

She shrugged. “I don’t know.”

“Is that why you’re washing your hands so much?” I asked.

“Uh-huh.”

“But why don’t you do this at our house?”

“No one comes into our house, Mommy,” she said. “No one’s come over since Daddy died.”

“Ah,” I said, because I didn’t know what else to say.

We pulled into our driveway and she ran into the house ahead of me, her hair bouncing in her ponytail behind her. “Slow down, Em,” I yelled. She ignored me.

I loved our house. Max and I had bought it when I found out I was pregnant with Emily, years ago. We drove down from the city together to Brooklyn Heights. When he saw it, he gasped and put his hand on my belly, on Emily. “This is it,” he said. “This is where we’re going to have a family.”

He was still there, in a lot of ways. His picture sat in the entryway, under the circular mirror and on the wooden table, almost an exact replica of Emily’s painting, but with no halo. Max, me, and Emily in the middle, standing in front of our house, them with matching glasses and freckles, me with my dark, flyaway hair in a braid and my brown eyes crinkling with joy. Max had died three months later.

“Mo-om! I’m hungry.”

I set the mail on the table, beside the photo. “Coming, Em.”

She had sat at the base of the refrigerator, rearranging the magnets. She looked up when I entered. “I’m hungry,” she repeated.

“You want a snack?” I asked.

She clapped her wounded hands “Cookies!”

I laughed. “How about fruit?”

She sighed. “Banana?”

“Deal,” I said.

If we didn’t get called in soon, I was going to have to stop the clock from ticking myself.

The school referred us to a therapist, one just a block away from the school, easy. I ran my fingers over the print on the card in my hand, hoping she would have the answers. Dr. Sela Joseph. But the clock in the corner of her waiting room boomed with every tick.

Emily sat next to me, reading the Andrew Clements book she had borrowed from Ms. Lee’s room. I watched her she turn the page, fingertips carefully placed in the lining in the sleeve of her favorite pink sweater. How did I not notice? And what would we do when the weather got warmer?

A woman with an afro wearing a pale blue sweater poked her head out of the office. “Emily Price?”

Emily looked up from her book and turned.

The woman grinned. "It's very nice to meet you," she said, and led us to her office.

She shut the door behind us. We couldn't hear the clock tick, thank God.

"Have a seat." She gestured toward the couch and the chair opposite the desk. Emily hopped up on the chair. I sat on the right side of the couch, closest to her.

"I'm Dr. Joseph," she said. "How are you today, Emily?"

"Good." Emily kicked her feet against the chair and twisted her hands in her sleeves.

"Did your Mommy tell you why you're here today?" she asked.

"Yeah," Emily nodded. "She said we're here, that we're here to talk about why I wash my hands a lot."

"Do you think it's a lot?"

Emily shook her head. She had her hair in pigtails today. One was slightly lower than the other, but we were running late.

"Why not?" Sela Joseph asked.

"I don't think it's a lot," she said, her eyebrows furrowing. Max used to do the same thing when he was annoyed or confused.

"Can you tell me a little bit about when you wash your hands?" she said.

I thought it was a weird question, but Emily said, "It's like when I feel something on my hands. I can feel the air on them. And I know they're dirty."

Again, that seemed to make sense to Sela Joseph, who said, "And you have to scrub the dirty off?"

Emily nodded. "Or else it will get into me," she said.

"And why would that be so bad, Emily?"

My daughter shrugged. They went back and forth like this for a while, questions that felt indecipherable to me, and answers that, for some reason, made me afraid. For my daughter, and of my daughter. I couldn't say which was worse.

"Mrs. Price?" I looked up at Sela Joseph. She had a small gap between her teeth that I hadn't noticed before. Grey hairs danced on her head next to black. "Your daughter is classic OCD."

I blinked. OCD looked like straightening a room and flicking the lights on and off a couple extra times. OCD looked like fear of sickness, but not like blood. OCD didn't look like the little stumps that poked out from my daughters' sleeves, cracked with pain. OCD didn't look like my daughter.

I realized Dr. Joseph was waiting for an answer. "I'm sorry," I said. "I, just —"

"Take your time," she said. "You were very smart, bringing her here. It's still early. With treatment now, I'm sure she'll do great."

"Uh, huh." I looked down at Emily, who looked up at me, grinning. She hadn't even lost any teeth yet, or had her first crush. How was I supposed to label my six-year-old daughter mentally ill?

"I'm recommending meds," she said. "And, Emily, would it be okay if I saw you once a week?"

Emily nodded and continued kicking, the weight of her diagnosis not yet settled on her shoulders. For now, I would have to hold them on mine.

The best day of my life was one I spent most of screaming my head off. Max gripped my hand and I gripped back hard, hoping to make him understand. Our daughter was

tearing through me, struggling to escape my body, and my body was not taking it well.

Emily was an accident. We wanted kids, but maybe down the line. We had just married. It said so on our car, still, in washable paints. My best friend Jane had put that there, with Max's best man Derick and the rest of the wedding party. A week after our California honeymoon I woke up nauseous. Max joked that maybe I was pregnant. We laughed until we realized that could very well be the case.

The week before I turned twenty-four, I woke up in labor. It was a month early. Max called a cab, and we rushed to the hospital.

Later, Jane told me she could hear me down the hall, where she was waiting with my mother, Max's brother, and his friends from the firehouse, who had insisted they were family and made their way past the front desk, mostly on the merits of their FDNY badges. "I was afraid for you," she told me after, but she was grinning when she said it. "I was afraid you were going to burst your own eardrums with how loud you were screaming."

I held my daughter six days before my twenty-fourth birthday. Now she was screaming, but I had never heard anything more beautiful. Max was crying, hovering over my shoulder. "We made that," he said. And then, "You did all the hard work, though."

She was tiny, barely bigger than my hands. The nurses had cleaned her off, but she was still covered in whatever goop had come out from inside me when she forced her way into the world. More pain would come later, but for now, I watched her little hands, opening and closing, waving hello to her parents. A piece of my heart lived outside of me, now.

Emily had always slept soundly. I watched her breath, her stuffed bear held close to her chest. In one hand, I held the card Dr. Joseph had handed me in her office with the phone number for a Dr. Juan Reyes. He specialized in trauma, she said. He had tons of patients who had gone through September 11, or had a partner die, like me. "Maybe you should call him," she had said. When I asked why, she said, "It could only help Emily."

I sat at the end of her bed and saw her hands, balled into tiny fists under her Winnie the Pooh pajamas. I took one in mine, pried her fingers apart to let them breathe. She shifted, kicked her left leg, and was still. I climbed in next to her, my legs hanging off the end of the bed as I held my daughter in her arms. As though she could hear me, I leaned over and whispered in her ear, "We'll get through this." And we would.

## Being Liquid

I have been to the place you find difficult to talk about  
i've seen the art of bones sticking out from the flesh  
inwardly hooked to tendons thin as fish fins.

A baritone silence widens like a nostril  
blowing pips of impulse into your ear drums  
in walls speak the language of rot.

Night, never closes its mouth, not even in daylight  
its black cavity's visible  
along the sharp edges of flowers,

and the walls speak the language of rot;

Sleep is in exile, until the skeleton returns to the body  
dragging his dead foot full of terrors  
up the circulating belt of your spine

and the flimsy layer of circles swell  
like dark poppies under your eyes  
your face a hollow vase of hopelessness,

and the walls speak the language of rot.

Have I loosened the knot in your throat  
with my rendition?  
Or have I suffocated you completely  
to the point of being liquid?



## Static Star

The man with legs of water  
see's the flattened features of the forest  
face down from his hollow hammock.  
Those solitary spaces where trees once stood  
are the gaping wounds of our ancestors,  
their spirits leaking out like fluid  
from the cold, congested earth,  
sticking to the surtaceless wind  
like Sellotape.

Birds fly backwards as if rewinding  
to the beginning,  
when trees were staples  
for countless childhoods,  
and the forest  
a mouth of air-breathing giants.

Alone with only dark to lean on  
the man with legs of liquid  
blows his eyes of dust  
under the doors of dimly lit houses,  
searching for the furrowed bark of oak,  
the diamond-ridged bark of ash  
recast info furnishings  
choking on their age rings.

In the stillness of space  
he feels the pull of the plastic ocean,  
suffocating sea turtles resting at sunset,  
their bony plates almost visible  
under their shellacking backs,  
and squirming fish flickering  
in the oily shadows of sea birds  
entangled in their death spill.

What does in world know of her children,  
he whispers into the ear of a static star,  
the star saying nothing  
linked loosely to a wish list.

## **Without touching ground.**

A primate, with eyes of sapphire,  
watches little ringed plovers,  
swinging in an intimate swiftness,  
weightless and exquisite,  
their wings papyrus for the wind god.

Pine flowers bloom  
into the tufts of his monkey suit  
trailing their sinking shadows  
along a swell of endless trees,  
his muzzle a draw bridge for flies.

Is there any breath left to breathe,  
among the swords of Excalibur,  
he wonders,  
misplacing his feet among the clouds.  
Can those little wind whisperers  
fly the length of light?

His heart beats faster reaching further  
leaping through loops of sunshine,  
threading the line of synchronicity.

Not a twig rustles, nor leaf bends  
between abstract and concrete  
only soundless light and unseeable air,  
mountains rolling back the centuries  
and the sky birthing a new blue  
on the bed of Aeolus.

## Two Hands, Palms Up

Sharon Dale Wexler

We waited in a room furnished with all the discomfort and appearance of a suburban den. We bring to-do lists. Shop at Publix for half gallons of Gatorade in blue and green. We substitute meals with vacation food, eat cake from the hospital cafeteria, and brush the crumbs from our laps. We take off our shoes. We feel more vacationers, sometimes than daughters. In four days, our mother will die.

My sister rolled the black suitcase into the lobby and flashed yesterday's pass at the guard like a lunch ticket. The suitcase sported a yellow ribbon doing what decorations do: Dance in air conditioning on a hot South Florida day.

We waited while our mother was in surgery in the limbo of drinking Gator Ade and TV commercials.

"Look Xanax," my sister says. My sister is shaking the bottle like a snow globe.

I behold all the pills in the bottle she had broken into a million tiny pieces for convenience and self-deception.

My sister unzipped the suitcase and withdrew mounds of bank statements and credit card offers in unopened envelopes addressed to our mom's. Moved from our mother's house at age thirty but still hadn't changed addresses? She points out birthday cards our mother sent, Hallmark greetings written in our mom's script and caresses the handwriting as if it were our mother's hands.

"Why are you bringing all this stuff to the hospital?" I ask.

My sister lifts a Ziploc of five shades of red nail polish.

"To do," my sister said.

I picture our lives from our mother's point of view. We were her spinster daughters.

I don't remember when I started picking my cuticles, but I was starting. I picked, and the skin reddened., our mom said stop before I drew blood. My sister loved going for the kill and told me all the things wrong with me. Usually, she planted seeds of doubt. Today she opened her bills and left me alone in honor of our mom's burst heart valve.

Not much mail gets opened. My sister said the surgery was taking too long to the never-ending commercials on the TV. "Something is not right," she said.

She took one of the tiny pieces from the Xanax bottle and licked the powder from her hand.

I checked out the bathroom's cleanliness. It was just cleaned. For fun, I took the spare toilet paper roll.

I fed quarters into the vending machine banged out some diet coke. I stopped drinking in 1986. The drinking felt like hold music.

My sister filed her nails in the limbo of a Florida sun. The sound of the nail file hissed like an incessant ringing in my ears.

"You were a drunk," my sister said. She dug her nails into my arm and won't let go. "Stop," I said.

Once I heard if you picked as I picked until the skin turned pink then bled you don't have a habit. You have *Onychophagia*.

"You have problems," said my sister.

My sister rolled the suitcase to the nurse's station checked on our mom's lengthy progress.

"Watch my purse," she winked.

I heard the wheels, a musical inspiration. I took a bunch of pill pieces. Stuffed them in my pocket. Not to take them but to take them from her.

We arrived on day two eager to discover our mother in the recovery room, sitting up in the chair. But the woman behind the glass door is not the mother we expected. Behind our mother is a divider. Her nose and mouth connected to opaque tubes — something our mother would never allow. A tear bled in the corner of her eye. And deep within those tubes a heart flapped in her throat like a bird trapped in a house.

I told the nurse, "She's crying."

The nurse did not seem to mind. "That's just fluid leaving her body," she said.

I stared at the tear rolling from her eye. I could have died standing there.

"Dislodge a tube, you'll kill her," my sister said.

My sister and I settled down, sat by the window and read magazines. My sister left the suitcase by the door in case she wanted to open more envelopes.

Then we studied our sleeping mother and stared at her clammy legs as they swelled. And our mom springs up, unable to speak, her pouty lips taped to the tube breathing for her, her eyes looking like she was thinking the worst.

One day I cut an orange and found myself with the knife in the meat of my hand between the thumb and forefinger.

Two weeks earlier she informed me of her valve replacement surgery. I asked her what she wanted. She said feed me. During that gloomy afternoon, she told me her blood type was O, and she balanced her checkbook to the penny. I picked my fingers until our mom said stop picking. The urge to pick grew with each hour.

Finally, Mom hit my hand.

"I didn't know, I didn't know," I said

On the last day, our mom waited to die until we arrived. I pictured her listening to the wheels of my sister's suitcase rolling towards the bed so we could say goodbye. I saw our mom raising her hand to wave, her nails bare of polish, her fingers crooked as her spine. Not a hand you wanted to hold.

I realized I picked when I was nervous. My mom knew. I picked since I was a girl. There was a time when she used to scratch her fingernails across my forehead making circles getting me to stop. My sister knew too.

We arrived late; we stopped at Publix to buy Gatorade and return expired cans of diet soda.

The blue code light rang. Everyone was running around our mother's bed, behind the divider. I saw my sister dug for her Xanax.

"What should we do," I asked.

"Don't look," she said.

We hold hands. Something made me look.

"Didn't I say not to look?" my sister said.

We waited in the hall. I wanted to pull out the tubes and climb into bed with our mom. The nurse asked whether we wanted to see our mother one last time, once she was clean.

Our mom's bruised in the corner of her left eye.

"Green and blue from the paddles," says the nurse, who probably knew the ending four days ago.

There was elevator music piped in through the tubes. My sister wanted a lock of our mom's hair and asked for a scissor.

"Want one?" she asked as she cut from the back of mom's head leaving a bald patch.

"Why not," I said, knowing my mother wasn't going to stop us.

"Where's a zip lock?"

I get in the bed. I pick up the top sheet and put my arms around Mom's waist. She briefly raises her hand, as if to stop me. But she is not there; it was her body letting all the air out.

Suddenly everything was permitted.

## ***The Promise***

**Thomas Sanfilip**

She came to him almost out of his own wishing, beautiful, sensual, virginal, and he was shocked when she waited and they talked longer than he expected about everything from the limits of reason to what she wanted and why. Then she said something unusual, out of character, something at least on the surface contrary to everything about her being. She was fascinated with addiction, how it worked, why it worked, why there was no order in chaos, so he told her to begin again, to forget structure, to work after the fact.

But then there was something else she revealed, the need to talk about her soul, the fact there was no one to whom she could reveal the inner workings of her mind, and he thought how everything must be a struggle for beauty, her eyes brown and luminous, round, expressive, sensitive and unusually balanced, but calling for something impossible. He knew the naked flower's vulnerability to the light, yearning for an opening to the sky. She had no sense of this in her eyes as he talked and she agreed instinctively with everything he said, saying under her breath, "Of course," and "Yes, yes," because it was obvious he had traveled beyond and felt responsible for his knowledge. Somehow she knew this when their eyes met, but he was too far ahead of her beginning. The vast distance in time, the weight of his living scars and spiritual struggles, the highs and lows of a lived life purifying him a hundred times over. He could only burn away or sink into her

Imagine some hidden place by a river and quiet around them, a blue sky skimming over leaning trees and all silence between them. He lays her down and she opens like a flower, waiting among dim shadows because she wants what she does not fully understand. He finds his way into her, the sweet falling and climb and falling again. And they lay exhausted and sad, then sad. She looks at him with sadness and he runs his eyes over her form lying near the river, her legs taut and brown and golden, her soul quiet and emptied. There is the impossibility of it, the sadness of it, the desire for what is beyond the body. And then the reverie and they walk away and

they promise, but it is an empty promise. Like two strangers side-by-side until light hits their eyes and they turn away like hunted animals. In the end it is still summer and the sun still courses through the sky. Light blinds them and words come back, dying among the shadows.

## ***Innocence***

**Thomas Sanfilip**

I recall my vocal teacher telling me I saved her life once when she heard me sing a song in the key of A. She was having a nervous breakdown over her cheating husband and did not know how useful my vocal lesson scheduled that afternoon would be since she admittedly confessed she was feeling quite listless and unresponsive, though I suspect she was loaded on anti-depressants. Nonetheless, she invited me over in hopes seeing me would relieve her of some gloom.

I waited in her living room and sat at her piano and played a song I recently completed, naturally in the key of A with some modulation into C. I had no idea she was listening, until I heard her ask from an upstairs bedroom if the song was mine. "It's beautiful," she said. I thought it was too melancholic and mournful to be beautiful, though even then I found it naturally moving into the resonance of a solid A underlined by minor descents within the key, moving back and forth to C until resolving itself finally on a variable of A major 7<sup>th</sup>. She told me those modular changes saved her life because at that moment she was poised to swallow a mouthful of sleeping pills. I never made the connection until later that perhaps there was something magical in the key signature, though the tonal choices were wholly subliminal on my part, like salmon racing back to their place of spawning.

Perhaps racing back to a place of watery birth where everything is rank and renewed by the offal of death and disillusion is true redemption. The idea was intriguing, that I might be the conduit through which others could experience assurance of the world, that humans were the source of its light and substance, that absorbing my body's warmth night after night would bring others closer to the realization they were not alone in their isolated passion for each other.

I remember the day Brad and Kathy asked if I was interested in being their bed warmer. I blinked rather stupidly before they broke in to assure me they were not



suggesting a *menage a trois*, but rather quite literally to know if I was willing to warm their bed before they retired at night. They were quite serious.

“But you’re married, aren’t you? The warmth of your own bodies should be enough to light the sky at night.”

They looked at each other as if the time had come to confess what seemed to have preoccupied them for a long time. There was something amenable about me, something open and fresh and unassuming. I was real and unpretentious and understood the failings of human beings.

“But the real world is here,” I said pointing to the blue sky. Overhead floated a tranquil blue that was everything all at once, ethereal and bright, expansive and inviting, flowers nearby in their first bloom of the summer, the bubbly laughter of a child coming from a yard some distance from where we stood. Yes, they conceded, but there was something missing from the whole tableau.

“And what is that?” I asked.

Without hesitation they explained that the warmth between them was inviolable, but its circle was too small, barely radiating beyond their bed.

“If we could verify the existence of humanity with continual evidence of actual human warmth, it might affirm our suspicion that we’re not alone, but part of a greater human stream.”

I looked at them. They anxiously awaited my answer, like two children waiting for permission to eat a second piece of candy after a very long dinner. They stood before me, Brad and Kathy, two people who lived in the *cul de sac* at the end of the block, who walked by my house every day on what looked like the loneliest *passiagiata* in the world, waited for my answer like two nervous colts ready to bolt into space.

And when I agreed, I found myself relating the story of Tantalus, condemned to eternal thirst and hunger for betraying the gods, though they assured me my fears were ungrounded, that my agreement to help them surmount the terrible gap between life and death, belonging and decaying, love of all things and the decline of the world was a noble act. It was only necessary to warm their bed ten minutes before their arrival home in the evening. I was to slip away no more than a minute or

two before they walked through the door so they could quickly undress and slip under the covers to absorb my human existence.

Each night in Brad and Kathy's bed I admit entering a wall of darkness, as though life lived in reverse. I was surprised at the grey light that played over the walls of their bedroom. For me to wake up early is to forestall the inevitable by surprising something obscure and unknown. The night is less nefarious and more peaceful, as though a gentle urging to live rather than die. But in their bed I sensed an imminence prodding me to some form of reconciliation with dissolution beyond the residual waste of their lives. Sometimes my body heat dissipated too quickly and I feared their bed was not warm enough. I anguished over my disappearance too soon, but realized they would soak up as much as they could of my existence before drifting off into placid sleep.

How long this arrangement went on is impossible to say. I recall one night in the middle of winter sweeping their patio covered in snow behind their house, so luminous, the moon, so bright I could see every particle of snow falling from the sky. For some reason the lights were on in their house, though I knew Brad and Kathy were not there. The house was empty, the lights left on as if keeping vigil for someone.

I imagine the world ending somehow, Brad, Kathy and I walking with many others, walking, simply walking, looking for a new beginning. The city surroundings we walk through are wrecked and bombed in spots, but there are places where things haven't been destroyed. We walk on not knowing exactly what for, though it's clear the world as we remember it is gone. We keep walking knowing there is nothing of the old world left, only that it's ended and there's a place perhaps where life has begun again. I know it must be found because I believe it must be there.

Suddenly we come upon a pool of water. The surface is clear and clean and transfixes their gaze. They cannot take her eyes off its glimmering sheen when without warning they jump in. I dive in immediately to save them because I know they can't swim and will drown, but I can't find them, even below the surface. Did they die or find their way somewhere else? Did they commit suicide or find a path to rebirth? I

walk on asking myself these questions, puzzled over the paradox of whether they are alive or dead, but keep telling myself they must be alive, only transformed. I walk on without them and at some point rest with a small group of wanderers like myself. One of them assures me that, in spite of their disappearance, they are alright, but somewhere still searching or perhaps having already found a new beginning. I knew then it was no longer possible to guide them out of the irreality of their lives.

They wept inconsolably when I told them the truth, that there were other paths to enlightenment, that body heat was only the afterglow of a dying essence or fiery rebirth. I dropped the keys to their house into their hands after hours of handwringing. They clung to me, stroking my face, as if to memorize every contour. So many tears, so many seasons, I said, closing my hands over theirs, clenched so hard blood began trickling between their fingers. I told them Apollo's oracle runs dry. They listened with avid interest to every word that fell out of my mouth, but understood nothing. I told them it was time for me to retreat into anonymity, and though it was some time before they resumed their endless *passaggiata*, but for the lonely wail of their voices, there was nothing left but wind breaking the sky into sporadic blue.

## **Frame 313**

**Thomas Sanfilip**

The apartment window across the courtyard, all green with fronds and vines, twisted into a mosaic covering its complete face. Inside that wall of obscurity, a jungle grows with abandon. Eyes gleam inside a tangle of green, hands clapping in approval every time I play my guitar. A young woman behind that curtain of green barely discernible, her face partially obscured, her eyes resting behind that rush of foliage, listens to my voice trail on melody after melody. I play day after day at my open window that looks out at hers always covered in a thick web of vines and leaves. No one can live in that tangle of inextricable foliage, but invariably she appears behind that dense cluster of green whenever I begin playing, this strange young woman embedded in a web of green leaves, always listening in approval, watching me with curious, steady eyes as I work each song into a coloring of harmonic modulations. I can hardly see through the web of vines that press against her window frame, a frieze of dark-green mesh. Other tenants in the building clap when I play, but only her approval is important. When I detect a slight smile rise to her lips, it's all the reward I need for a long afternoon of playing my fingers to the bone. And though impossible to see her entire face and figure, she remains long enough to goad me on, as though her approval is all I need to stretch beyond the safety of my own inhibitions. All this after several months of a strange *tete-a-tete* without words, my voice the only medium that connects us in the bruised, open sunlight, no closer to knowing who she is or why she hides behind a thicket of foliage bursting at the window of her apartment across the courtyard, as though everything outside foreign to what is natural to our world.

Sometimes I think she walks by me on the street because I recognize her eyes and the shape of her body, though vague and indistinct, enough to tell me she is waiting for me to speak. We know each other instinctively without doubt or self-consciousness. I know my songs breach that wall of green holding the sunlight in her palm, keeping my voice from fading. Though she stands a half-angle away

beyond my direct gaze, there is a sense of familiarity about her eyes. She looks at me almost in recognition, but I don't know through whose eyes we are traveling. Somehow she understands my dilemma, and we exchange a few words before I ask her name, but in the end learn very little before her eyes become limpid and warm.

Sometimes she is different, heavier, flesh-worn and exhausted, in a completely different guise, as though having assumed a new physical identity, but retaining the same essence, as though I am looking through glass at an image that fades in and out of focus. Even when I think she knows me, there is no acknowledgement we've been spiritually intimate. She sidles closer, still not acknowledging my existence, finally registering a languid expression filled with complete indifference. She walks by never looking directly into my face, drawing me in slowly with tired eyes, awake to sensual desires so languid and still, submerged like underlying currents awakened too many times before. Everything pours out of her. I am exhausted by her own sensuality that ebbs and flows so clearly under the surface of her being, and I a complete innocent, awed and embarrassed as we pass each other slowly. I turn away as if refusing to recognize her. That we know each other more intimately than we can say at that moment ruffles the air between us, then settles as we move away from that one moment that calls us, dispersing us like seeds refusing light, lush foliage falling from her window across the courtyard, bursting green light in dim shadows, she standing there waiting for me to play.

## And The Tears Shed Will Water Your Future

Daniel Naman

The world doesn't choose favorites, so when you wake up to machines surrounding you, buzzing and beeping in your ears, you attempt to lower your eyelids only to see a figure in a white coat tell you to *keep them open*. And when you ignore him he doesn't leave. He instructs you to *open them*. You do, and then close them again because you really don't care. And when you open them again you see your parents at your bedside, mom holding your hand while your father tries to remain stoic about this whole ordeal. A nurse stops by to check your blood pressure, pulse and comfort level and says *it's a miracle that you're alive*. And while you smile at her you wonder internally whether this "miracle" is worth it.

You look around the room to find your company is comprised of elderly folks. Some may have cancer, which you believe is to be expected at their ages, but you feel that the differences in age between you and your fellow patients is the result of a flawed system rather than an act of transgression. And yet you feel broken and out of place, and wondering about all the "whys", "hows" and "sos" won't convince you that sometimes life throws you a situation that takes more than just a simple "I can do this" to get through it. And when you go over the facts, analyze your doctor's findings, think about the possibilities for treatment, you wonder whether any of this is worth it—not because life can be enjoyable, not because of happiness, but because a few weeks after being released you see the pain in your mom's face as she looks over the bill for your surgery and does her best not to cry in front of you. You overhear your father telling her that things will get better, and you remember your shrink telling you before the surgery that *it is possible you may die*. And no matter how happy people seem to be that you're recovering, or how happy they are to have you in their lives, you feel like you're setting a can of gas on fire in your parents' pockets.

The world doesn't choose favorites, so when you're rolled into a room and see that your roommate is a child of a similar age, you begin to feel the pangs of hope; that, maybe, just maybe the two of you can work together to survive. You smile at him, but he stares at you—not the cold glare that reveals an inner hostility, but the kind of stare that's distant, yet somber like, *not another one*. And you can feel him sizing you up, wondering how close to death you are and whether there's any hope for life. This, you found out, is decided by how often you are visited by doctors, and since your doctor comes once an hour, you find yourself in a much better position than your roommate.

That night you wake up to soft sobs and think it's your mom, so you look over but find her completely passed out, her hand still in yours. You look across the room and find your roommate's mother sobbing into her hands. Her child, asleep, you are reminded of your own mortality, that death can come at any age. You want the kid to survive. You want him to be able to unhook himself from those machines, get out of bed and walk out that door because it's unfair, because he deserves a chance to excel and share his wisdom and experiences. He deserves a chance to achieve something of value and make a name for himself. And his mother deserves a respite

from the constant pain she endures as she watches her son battle minute after minute for existence. You place your head back on the pillow and stare at the ceiling, vowing to remember this moment—the moment when you find yourself walking the line between life and death and realize just how badly you want to live, but know how easy it is to slip and fall.

But the world doesn't choose favorites, so when you wake up the next morning and find six legs behind your roommate's privacy curtain you feel bad for him. You are rooting for him to live, you are rooting for him to find a way to contribute something of value to the world. And when your doctor comes in and tells you that you are free to go your heart breaks. Your doctor is happy because he knows what's wrong with you, and your parents are happy because they have options to keep you alive, but you don't know how you feel because you see the other child's mother watching you, becoming jealous. And when you get into that wheelchair the doctors across the room open the curtain and make their leave. You and your roommate make eye contact and you're at a loss for words. You give a small smile as an offer of hope. And while his mother curses your luck and existence in another language, secretly wishing it was her own child being wheeled out of the room, her child smiles at you, slight tears forming in his eyes. These tears aren't out of jealousy or hatred. They form because he understands that you will remember this moment, that there is hope for you living a fulfilling life, and perhaps most importantly, he understands that the world doesn't choose favorites.

# LUCID

K.P. Taylor

In the courtyard of the strip mall, girl scouts would sell their cookies and panhandlers would ask for change and notices would be put up on the notice board. The notice board was ancient, its surface pocked from the tacks of thousands of former notices. Emerson always lingered at the notice board after his shift at The Greasy Griddle. He found it strangely reassuring that life here remained in a sort of stasis. There would always be couches for sale and ways to lose five pounds in one week and litters of puppies. "Will make great hunting dogs!" a notice proclaimed hopefully. Hunting, fishing, and trapping made up the holy trinity of outdoor activities in these parts, and the notice board was always cluttered with advertisements for fishing poles, hunting bows, and homemade deer lures. This holy trinity so occupied the minds of the locals that it was even how they measured time. They seldom spoke of spring, fall, or winter but rather trout season, bear season, or deer season. It was a fine place to live if you drew enjoyment from killing, which Emerson did not. He took great comfort from the notices, though, the same way he took comfort from checking the pilot light in his stove at home. That blue, flickering flame was evidence that everything was in its place, that everything was as it should be.

This time, however, as Emerson perused the notice board, he discovered something that made him feel uneasy, the way he felt when he stared into the black gulf in the bottom of the stove and found no light.

## *LUCID DREAMING!*

- *Learn to control your dreams!*
- *Experience vivid new sensations!*
- *Take charge of your life!*

There were little tear-off strips with a phone number, and...someone had taken one already! Emerson did not like this, not one bit. If someone else were going to take charge of his or her life, well then Emerson would take charge of *his* life too! Did people expect him to wait tables until he keeled over one day? Emerson tore off one of the strips. He dialed the number the moment he got home.

There are certain criteria an accommodation must fulfill in order to be accorded the status of *Inn*. The Mahogany Inn fulfilled none of these criteria. It should, by rights, have been named the Mahogany Motel but for the owner's vanity. It was a flat and rectangular and ugly building with not so much as a splinter of mahogany. Every sad room offered an identical view of the desolate, litter-strewn highway. Emerson had stayed here when he first moved to town, and as he pulled into the parking lot, he felt as if he were reaching back in time—absolutely nothing had changed. The same scrawny evergreen tree stood at the entrance, having neither grown nor receded an inch in all these years. The building was the same puce color—the color of wet cardboard, and he even caught the familiar whiff of bleach-with-a-hint-of-fabric-softener that permeated the place. *Trying to get blood*



*out of the sheets again?* Emerson would have quipped had the remark not rested so comfortably in the realm of possibility. It was an odd place to have your first lesson in lucid dreaming, but there were no other places in town that would suit the purpose. Emerson knocked on door number 7. A moment later he heard the latch being pulled, and the door opened.

She was young and tan and wore a white tank top, black pants, and a pair of surgical gloves. Her hair was dark and her eyes a deep blue with flecks of green encircling the pupils. "I'm Laverna," she said, smiling. "You must be Emerson! We've been expecting you. Please come in." Her left arm was tattooed with a feathered wing that curled around from her shoulder. At first, Emerson thought that it was the wing of an angel, but when she turned and led him inside, he saw that it was a raven in flight.

The curtains were drawn (as well as they could be—Emerson remembered how they would never quite meet in the middle) and only the bathroom light was on, so it took Emerson's eyes a moment to adjust. Soon he could make out the dresser, the television, the two double beds, and finally a large figure sitting at the foot of one of the beds.

"Emerson? Is that you?"

Emerson immediately recognized the voice as that of Jon Fudd, the proprietor and chief mechanic of Fudd's Auto Repair. Jon Fudd, who frequented The Greasy Griddle and always complained that the coffee was stale or the eggs were undercooked or the slices of bacon were too skimpy. Jon Fudd, who would say, "The problem with America nowadays is that no one complains," and Emerson would wonder what the hell sort of America Fudd lived in. Jon Fudd, dressed only in a bathrobe that was scarcely large enough to cover his blubbery belly.

"Gosh damn, Emerson, I'd never've picked you for one of these lucid dreamers."

Emerson shrugged as he sat down on the opposite bed.

The door opened, and another woman entered the room, carrying a large handbag. Silhouetted in the light of the open door, she appeared to Emerson to be as young and lovely as the first.

Laverna cleared her throat. "Jon, Emerson, this is my colleague Pasithea."

Fudd furrowed his brow. "Laverna? Pasithea? Y'all ain't foreigners, are ya?"

Laverna threw an arm around Pasithea. "No, Jon, we're both all-American!"

"Good."

Pasithea smiled. "I'm so sorry for the mix-up. We usually don't schedule sessions like this. Usually it's one on one, but...well, it's entirely my fault. I got completely turned around and scheduled you both for today. I hope you can forgive me?"

Emerson nodded immediately. Fudd followed a moment later. “As long as I don’t have to share my dreams with Emerson...”

“Of course not,” Laverna replied. “Your dreams will be entirely your own. Now Emerson, it is important that you’re comfortable before we start—physically comfortable. Jon, as you can see, is already wearing a robe. There is another robe in the bathroom if you’d like to try it on.” She had said this as if it were a suggestion, but he suspected that there would be no lucid dreaming until he had removed his clothing.

Emerson went into the bathroom and shut the door. He took off his clothes and put them in a neat little pile next to Jon Fudd’s neat little pile. He slipped on the threadbare bathrobe, which had *Mahogany Inn* embroidered on the front in a brown thread that may have once been gold.

“Doesn’t that feel better?” Pasithea asked as Emerson rejoined the group.

Emerson nodded. At least his robe was a better fit than Jon Fudd’s.

“Now...” Laverna said, clapping her hands together, “we are ready to begin.”

Fudd held up his hand like a cop halting traffic. “This is *not* somethin’ I usually do, this whole lucid dreaming business,” he said. “I suppose you don’t care as to why I’m doing this?” Fudd did not wait for a response. “Well, when I was 24, I bought a cherry red convertible ‘69 Pontiac Firebird. All the money I’d ever saved went to that car. All them paper routes and mowed lawns from when I was a kid...Damn, I loved that car. If I close my eyes I can almost smell the leather seats and hear the V6 engine. Well, when I got divorced I lost that car. No, not lost. My ex-wife stole it from me. Now I hope you don’t think less of me when I tell you that I shed more tears over that car than my own damn kids.” Fudd chewed on a hangnail. “I guess if I worked for another twenty years I’d have the money to get a car like that back.”

Emerson nodded in feigned agreement. There was a reason Jon was sarcastically nicknamed “Speedy Jon-zales”—it would probably take him *fifty* years.

“I don’t have the time, damnit!” Fudd threw his hands in the air. “I’ll never have the time...to feel the wind through my hair again.” He brushed the top of his head thoughtfully. “Hell, forget time—I’ve hardly got the hair anymore.” Fudd appeared to be on the verge of tears, his bottom lip quivering. “Y’all are young,” he said, waving his arm at the two women. “You’ll never understand.”

“Oh, darling, of course we understand. That’s why we’re here.” Laverna crouched beside him. She rested her hand on his and smiled up at him supportively.

Emerson recognized the pose from waiting tables; it was called “puppy dogging”—you would assume a submissive posture and direct all of your focus toward your customer, the way a puppy sits at your feet begging for attention. You did this to make the customers feel that they were important, that they were loved. It could earn you a big tip if you were good at it. Emerson had never really nailed it.

Fudd cleared his throat. “Are you telling me that in these lucid dreams I get my car back?”

Laverna smiled. “Yes, you get your car back! *And* you get to be twenty again and feel the wind in your hair. Feel *all* those things that you’ve almost forgotten.”

A fat tear rolled down Fudd’s fleshy cheek. “Well ma’am, that’s good enough for me.”

Laverna turned to Emerson. “How about you, honey? Do you have any concerns?”

“How much is this going to cost?”

“Nothing at all if you don’t have any lucid dreams.”

Fudd rubbed his hands together. “Yep, cuz I ain’t paying if I don’t catch any of them lucid dreams.”

“Anything else?”

Emerson shook his head.

“Good.” Laverna smiled. “Then we can begin. In the first session, we start with a guided relaxation and a sample of our LUCID Serum for a test run to gauge your natural aptitude for lucid dreaming. How you dream today will help us tailor your future training so that you can learn the techniques you’ll need to have lucid dreams on your own.”

After leading the men through a short breathing and meditation exercise, Pasithea removed two tumbler glasses and a brown medicine bottle from her handbag. She opened the bottle, filled the glasses, and then handed one to Emerson and the other to Fudd.

“What’s this then?” Fudd asked, sniffing the liquid. “Tequila?”

“It’s the LUCID Serum—our proprietary mix that helps facilitate lucid dreaming. Obviously I can’t tell you all the ingredients, but there is a lot of pure apple juice in there. Pure apple juice will supercharge your body’s acetylcholine production.”

“Right, then...” Fudd gave a final sniff. “Bottoms up!” He tilted the glass and swallowed its contents in one gulp. Emerson followed suit. “Ugh!” Fudd said, screwing up his face.

“It’s the pure apple juice,” Laverna explained. “No one remembers what apple juice is supposed to taste like anymore. We’re all used to apple juice that is loaded with artificial sweeteners. This is the real stuff. It takes some getting used to.”

Emerson was pretty sure that pure apple juice didn’t taste like medicine, but he figured that whatever else was in the “proprietary mix” must be important, so he said nothing.

“Here, put these on, please.” Pasithea handed each of the men a sleep mask.

“What’s this for?” Fudd asked.

“To block out the light leaking through the curtains—to help the body relax and enter a deeper sleep.”

“Okay. Makes sense.”

“Now, Laverna and I are going to leave the room. I want you to remain as still as possible and to focus your thoughts. Focus on all those wonderful things you want to see and do. Can you do that for us?”

“Yes,” they replied in unison.

“Good. Good boys. We will be back in a bit to discuss your dreams.”

Emerson heard the rustle of their clothes and the soft padding of their footsteps. He heard the door open and close with a click.

After several minutes of silence, Emerson called into the darkness. “Jon?”

“Uh huh?”

“So, Laverna and Pasithea... Those names sound like something out of an Anne Rice novel.”

Fudd grunted.

Emerson continued trying to make small talk. “Any exciting plans for the rest of the day?”

“Grass” was Fudd’s gruff response.

Emerson thought for a moment. “Cutting it or smoking it?”

“Would you shut up, Emerson? I’m trying to catch some lucid dreams.”

Emerson didn’t respond, couldn’t if he wanted to. He felt himself slipping into the clutches of a deep and irresistible sleep. As he descended into the foggy depths of his subconscious, he became vaguely aware that he and Fudd were not alone in the room.

Emerson came barreling out of sleep. He was waving his arms and searching for the light, but the darkness was complete and absolute. Then he remembered the sleep mask. He clutched at it, threw it off, and then fumbled for the light switch by the headboard. “Jon?”

Fudd was lying on his back, breathing sonorously. Emerson shook him until Fudd snorted and sat up with a start.

“Wha...Where the hell am I?”

“Jon, it’s Emerson. We’re at the Mahogany Inn.”

Fudd removed his sleep mask, rubbed his eyes. “Oh yeah.” He thought for a moment. “Did you catch any of them lucid dreams?”

Emerson shook his head.

“Yeah, me neither. How long have we been out?”

Emerson raised his wrist to check the time. His watch was gone! Then he remembered the piles of clothes in the bathroom. Feeling woozy, he made his way slowly to the bathroom and switched on the light. His watch really was gone! Both sets of clothes were gone. Their phones and their wallets were gone.

“My keys!” Fudd thundered, and then he blanched. “My car!” They ran into the parking lot. “Your car?”

“Gone!” Emerson replied.

“Mine too. It...can’t be.” Fudd walked one way and then the other, shaking his head. “It can’t be!” As he paced the parking lot in his scrawny bathrobe, Fudd became more and more agitated. “The LAW!” he yelled. “We’ll get the law on them!”

“The law?” Emerson countered. “What good will *that* do? Those girls are probably halfway to Indiana by now.”

“THE LAW!” Fudd bellowed. “The law will fix them. It will be a cold day in hell when a pair of skinny bitches get one over on Jon Fudd!”

“How do you suppose this will look—to the law?” Emerson asked. “Two middle-aged men at the Mahogany Inn? The law will think that we were soliciting those girls or shooting up heroin or any of the half-dozen other illegal things people do here!”

Fudd stopped pacing. “You’re right, Emerson. We need something. We need proof!”

“There *is* no proof! You saw the room—those girls have cleared out.”

“The notice board! That paper on the notice board!”

Emerson threw up his hands. “I doubt it’s even there anymore.” But Fudd was already plodding purposefully across the parking lot like a corpulent Caesar. Emerson trailed behind him, begging him to be reasonable. “Stop, Jon! God, look at us! We look like we’ve just broken out of Summit Hill Psychiatric.”

Jon Fudd would not stop, not until he had marched the half mile to the strip mall. By the time he got to the notice board, he was fire engine red, wheezing heavily, and coated in perspiration. He began picking off notices, skimming them and then tossing them to the floor. “No....No...No. This is not it... This is not it!”

“Jon, stop. Please! People are staring.”

One by one the notices came down. All those notices, pinned to the board like flags staking out territory, now crumpled on the floor. "It has to be here somewhere," Fudd simpered as he ripped off another notice. "It has to!"

Finally, when the board was empty, Fudd slumped down among the pile of discarded notices. Emerson sat beside him. "Emerson?" Fudd asked as though he had just become aware of the other man's presence.

"Yes, Jon?"

"Emerson, I don't suppose I'm getting my car back."

"It doesn't look that way."

"Either of 'em?"

"No."

Fudd buried his head in his hands.

Emerson stared ahead and saw the old men shaking their heads, the women whispering behind their hands, and the young children seeking refuge behind their parents' legs. He knew that some authority figure must be on the way. Someone to take them in and laugh at their impossible story while promising to "look into it." Then they would be returned, with a slap on the wrist, to their respective stations. Fudd would continue to work on his cars, and Emerson would wait his tables. The notice board would fill up with notices—not immediately, but gradually—like blossoms budding on a tree. There would always be fishing lures and old guitars and tractor parts for sale. Emerson would take comfort from these notices, these fixed stars. Yet, every so often, he would catch himself thinking about those women. Laverna and Pasithea. Wondering whether they were friends or sisters or lovers. Not that it really mattered. What mattered was that they were free. They were young and they were free, and that was the most fleeting dream of all.

## Dark City

My only memory of you—  
in the dark hallway of your Boston house,  
just off the sunny kitchen.  
I was two and you sixty.  
Tall and thin, wispy hair, light-blue eyes  
illuminated by a slant of kitchen sun.  
"You don't know me?"

I couldn't speak,  
but I understood what you meant when you rubbed my head  
and walked down the shellacked hallway towards the parlor.

You died in your sleep a few years later.  
Years of hard work behind you—  
a gravedigger during the day,  
hauling bags of mail onto the trains  
at South Station every night.  
Raising five children.

Close to your age now,  
I visit your homestead in Ireland.  
Cars whizz by where once was a dirt road.  
No one lives in the tiny stone house.

I hear birdsong and smell cut grass.  
The air is cool and damp.  
Sheep amble in the fields.  
The sun moves into clouds,  
and then lightness comes again.

What were you thinking as you exited this door?  
How conflicted you must have felt.  
Twenty-one-years-old, off to America,  
leaving nine siblings and parents behind,  
knowing you would never see them again.

From Athlone on the Shannon River, dead center of Ireland,  
you walked and somehow made it to Southampton, England,  
where you boarded the ship *Adriatic*, a word that means "dark city."

You knew no one in the promised land of your imagination,  
but you had courage and a dream.  
Just a few belongings, I'm sure, and not much money.  
Mostly you had hope.

I press my palm against the stone wall,  
just as you touched my head so many years ago.  
I see you move from light into darkness and beyond.



## The Crosswalk

Today I saw a father and son  
stepping onto the crosswalk.  
I braked and watched them pass.  
Son on father's shoulders,  
headed to the park with swings.

I drove on, thinking of you  
and wondered why you  
never lifted me and held my legs  
or brought me to the swings.  
But you were not that type of father.

Once, we built a shed together.  
I heard you say at a family party years later,  
"Remember when Danny and I built the shed."  
But it wasn't my brother  
who cut wood and hammered nails with you.

I was bothered just a bit.  
I had other memories,  
like when you held my hands as we knotted my tie,  
how we both looked in the mirror,  
and I saw myself in your face.

You patted my shoulders.  
Someone crossed the room and paused to take a picture.  
It was on the table by your coffin. Your hands on mine.  
Proof that we had closeness for a moment,  
and that is enough.

## Copacetic

The word of the day is *copacetic*.

I see my brother and me packing suitcases for our trip.

In the frame of the doorway my father stands.

“Everything copacetic?” he says.

One time I asked him where he learned that word.

“As a Marine,” and he told me about his service in the Korean War.

“It was tough,” he said.

In the end, I visited him at the hospital.

“Have some jello.” I held a spoon with a wobble of red before his face.

“Don’t want it.”

“You’ve got to eat, Dad.”

“I’m not hungry.” He pushed it away.

I sat by him from morning until shadows crossed his face.

Mostly he slept. Sometimes he asked what time it was.

I left at nine. The nurse called.

“Your father’s agitated. He wants to leave. Talking about a trip.”

“I’ll be there soon.”

I stand in the doorway of his hospital room.

He’s at the window,

wearing the blue bathrobe my sister gave him.

“It brings out your eyes,” she told him.

“Everything copacetic?” I say.

He turns and looks.

“It was tough,” he says.

I guide him to the bed and sleep in the chair beside him.

When I wake, I find that he has gone.

# Elegy for the Living

Tomer Witelson

Dawn.

The gentle and eternal lapping of the ocean on the pebbly shore,  
The sun not yet visible in the sky,  
The island mounds shrouded in its orange and yellow aura,  
Its presence preceded by its serene and sweeping light,  
The stars disappearing, leaving behind invisible ghosts to reappear upon the sun's  
retire,

I awake.

The crunch of sandals on the gravel shore,  
The sea kayaks laying dormant in the twilight,  
Still asleep, waiting for our return, waiting for us to breathe life into them,  
The vast and ethereal ocean seems utterly still at a glance,  
And the sun explodes over the horizon.

Its light scatters and reaches like some amoeba extending its primordial limbs,  
And it lays itself like a blanket over the landscape.

You, you may be enshrouded by the blackest of nights, or you may be as I am,  
feeling the warmth of the child sun, the embrace of its cloak,

Have you heard the music? Have you seen the waves dance to the present's  
melody?

The sheet music carved from the very earth, the light of the sun and stars and moon  
composing, furiously and joyously conducting life and death and air and land  
and water, nothing stagnant, the dynamic river of time flowing like a ballet  
dancer light on her toes, twirling and leaping, moving and dancing to the music  
of the universe, the music of the above.

The fog clears from my mind as the sunlight enters my eyes,  
And I can see.

The opaque trees barely visible in the distance, the nascent sparkles winking from  
the ocean waves,

The pale yellow of the grasses, the tawny brown of the driftwood, all is now, all is the  
present, all of time has led to now, everything culminates now.

Now is the composition of forever,

The present's music echoes throughout my entire body.

Midday.

Solid yellow surface, rough beneath my wet fingertips,  
The sea water writhes and twists and splashes gently around my paddle,  
The waves roll, blue, sapphire, black, green, turquoise,  
The dead kelp, carcasses floating, bloated and pungent,  
The sea kayaks, barely above the water line, floating.

The white wisps of clouds in the intensely blue sky, floating.

The belch of the brackish water as it slaps against the side of the kayak,  
I am present, all is present around me.

Eagle, perched on the thick twisted tree branch,

Current, push and pull my paddle, propel me and bring me to a halt, change, respond;  
every one of your movements is as ephemeral as the next,  
Sun, white in the sky, looking down silently and screaming at me your melody of light  
and warmth,  
Firm black handle, lead my gaze to the curved white end, slice and push the water,  
shatter the reflection of the glassy sky above.  
Blue sky and white clouds, split into millions with a slice of a paddle through the  
waves, split and come together, whither and expand, show me yourself, your  
every intricacy and melody; show me the notes you play with the movement of  
the present's conductor baton, the notes you play in tandem with the sun and  
moon and stars and universe.  
The sun is absolute in its brightness; it showers the landscape with light, the rolling  
waves, the  
green trees tall in the distance, the horizon stretching out as far as my eyes can see,  
There are no shadows.  
I paddle.

Dusk.

The glint of the last remnants of deep red sunlight on the purple waves, the gentle  
slopes of the islands poking their wooded heads out of the water,  
The purple and pink and violet palette of the sky, the clouds sprayed with color and  
brightened by the receding sun,  
The eastern half of the sky a hazy purple and blue, the stars winking back into  
existence,  
The tug of the warm evening ocean current,  
The gravel bar thrusting its pebbly shore out into the ocean, a promontory of  
variegated grays,  
The wet driftwood drifting, glistening in the setting sun,  
The regal sun's crown dripping into the waves, its golden aura sharing light with the  
endless ocean below,  
As the shoreline recedes into the distance, as the silence descends, only permeated  
by the gentle splash of the ocean's waves,  
I, alone, accompanied by my senses, accompanied by the wild, accompanied by the  
trees and water and land and life,  
I, the lone wanderer of this barren and fruitful waterscape, paddle.

Night.

The light has left, the stars have returned; they smile at me from above.  
The sun has left, its warmth only a memory; yet the cold is as ephemeral.  
I lay awake, drifting between dreams and consciousness, drifting between internal  
and external reality.  
And now, I see.  
I see him, I see her, waving the conductor baton back and forth,  
There is no time signature, there is no humanely predictable pattern, there is only  
music,

There is only the melody of above, the melody of the sun and of the trees and of myself and of yourself, our music ubiquitous and everlasting and unique and ephemeral and ethereal.

The present sings to us, the violins of the trees, the deep bassoon of the islands, the flitting clarinet of the sea,

The silent music fills me, and I watch the conductors, I watch the sun and moon and stars and galaxies and planets and molecules and atoms wave their batons in a song of light and life, a requiem of death and renewal.

Can you see them?

**dear departed**

in a creek of drowned stars  
we clean our hands of small matters

we dig a penance  
open an unmarked grave to the light

we're prepared to wait

## dear departed

you became a kid in a short dress  
you became a goat at work  
a puddle bathing the street light  
you became a lemonade stand    a serenade

when you left  
you removed the keeper from the house  
the food from the table  
talk to me about surveying the land  
when that parcel was a dime bag  
when we came that close to dancing

when children shared ice cream  
while the 90s rocked around the room

who I come from  
talk to me about that longtime song    that bright wind pulled from your lungs  
who I come from  
I bless you all

## **dear departed**

it's been fifty thousand years and counting  
we've run out of ideas  
we've run out of names  
whoever you were begins to fade

why can't I keep the memories gritty as sand

the sun comes out  
I think this means something  
about goodbyes that snowball into hellos



## dear departed

you frost crusted sidewalks at dawn  
you sweet coffee and warm red jacket  
you were a real influence on me  
on this newest arrangement of souls  
on this planet

people make the crossing  
every day  
their fur is up

if I could speak correctly I would sleep better  
if I could monitor this world completely  
(everyone doing their thing)  
I could let it go

a cowboy among us      spreads his wings

## **dear departed**

eventually the dirt is pounded dry  
nothing more  
asked of it  
you spin off into the dark trust  
the vessel

we gather around the box  
birds hover in a redwood cathedral  
fiddle sounds like a train  
this sweat means everything

bless the child that  
frees the sail from the ship  
the echo everything sticks to  
my friend it's about keeping  
the coal warm for the next fire  
the next home

## **dear departed**

I'm learning that there are different kinds of exits and different degrees  
of proximity to them

we visited the site  
you'd never guess how long it's been  
how long he's been down there  
spooned tenderly by the soil

we go on together  
we play the guitar for pleasure for solace or love  
we go on together

## dear departed

when I was young I worked so hard  
everyone around me worked so hard all the time  
I'm trying to take it easier now

I watched you move your hand because you still could  
you did alright

something new can fill your place  
like a new species of mammal

this understanding is fleeting, isn't it

we locked eyes for several minutes  
before I said  
*you take care*

## **dear departed**

with sweaty palms we try  
to say something new  
but we just don't have the training  
to express the ongoing addition and subtraction of our world  
the living silence around certain objects

we keep awake for you  
we finger the eye cavity, the ear bones

this is our puzzle, we who loved you  
we stay awake and work the puzzle

## **dear departed**

I microwaved your memory and ate it standing in the kitchen  
every day calls the next  
the regular rocking waves  
this is commonly known as: people needing each other

where I belong is nowhere  
on earth

so take me home like a head cold

swallow the moment by moment  
loss until it feels like deliverance

## dear departed

the millennium      like the crucifixion  
is old news  
so we space out  
we smoke outdoors  
we find ways around it  
wrap our arms and legs around it  
a month      a year without a reply  
bound at the wrist  
I started to notice when  
the tap reversed and sucked us  
into the city water supply  
only I remember  
that name  
it's almost washed away

## ASH WEDNESDAY

Ann Boaden

Once there was a loving woman whose love seared her like fire because her husband did not love her as much as she loved him. He was fond of her, but that was not enough.

He was a small man with hesitant words and ways and it is possible that fond was all he could ever be. Perhaps he was a little weak. Or afraid. She did not understand that. So she worked to make him love her. Everything she did in her life was to make him love her. Cooking, reading, exercising, dressing, housekeeping—all to make him love her. And the harder she worked, the more he could not love her.

He began to go out of the house without telling her. Sometimes she would see him, see the back of his dark raincoat as he bent to open the door, his shoulder blades sticking out like fledgling wings, and she would think of the child they might have had and did not. And she would say *Where are you going?* And sometimes he wouldn't hear at first, so she would repeat *Darling? Where are you going?* and he would turn slowly and say a little walk, just a little walk, or, just for a breath of fresh air, and she would ask to come too because she did not want him to be lonely. She would stop whatever she was doing, cooking dinner, darning his socks, and slip on her coat, and go with him. She would talk sometimes. His replies were brief and courteous. She could see that he preferred silence. And that would hurt her because she wanted them to share things, but she would fall still, and they would walk without speaking, and it would feel to her like the silence of great distance, until they came to the little wood at the end of their street. And they would walk a short way through its paths criss-crossed with long tree shadows and the quick flit of birds.

One day they were walking at dusk and he took a different path. It went down a steep hill, deep into the silence of the woods. She did not like it down there, for the path narrowed, the trees seemed to lean in. It was not quite spring, so the branches were bare like bony arms, and gray. And still he went on. And she said, *Let's go back now, darling, I don't like it in here.* And he stopped. And she said *Darling, please, let's go home. We could get lost in here.* And he said *Yes* and did not move. And she pulled on his arm and it was rigid as a branch. He turned then, slowly. They went out of the little woods and home.

She loved him, and it was like the burning of sunset.

One day at dusk he went out for a walk alone and did not come back.

It was Ash Wednesday.

Not being a regular church-goer, she had not remembered it, sitting stunned with disbelief, his note, brief as a blow, in her hand. After she had sat for a long time in the house she got up and put on her coat and went out and walked and sat on a bench the color of dead wood and then walked some more. She walked down to the end of their street and when she came to the little wood she turned quickly and walked back and away from their house and along the streets of their town. She walked till sunset faded and evening came and that is when she arrived at the church. It sat on a corner on the edge of a neighborhood where people dealt drugs. There was a light shining inside.



She was cold, the chill of late winter locked in her body. Shapes of buildings and trees were sucked to blurs in the dusk. The church windows alone were lighted. As if they floated on the dusk. She was cold. It looked warm inside. She went in.

The light of the windows came from the candles on the altar, small golden leaf-shapes. Shadows criss-crossed the sanctuary. The people around her were hunched like rocks in those shadows. The aisles were dark paths. Nobody turned to look. She slipped into a pew at the back. There was a large silence. And then the service began.

The leaf-prints on the altar fluttered. The words of the liturgy went over her like a brush of wings.

She did not really see the priest until she went forward for the imposition of ashes. She did not want to do that, but she did not want to call attention to herself by sitting alone in the pew. So she went forward, up the aisle into the darkness where the leaf-flames fluttered. And that is when she saw the priest.

He was short, dwarfed by great hump on his back that pushed up the cassock and thrust his head forward. It was a long head, with untidy red-gray hair. He rocked side to side when he walked, as if he were cradling pain.

He looked up into her face as he traced the cross of ashes on her forehead. His face was criss-crossed with lines. His eyes were severe and sad.

*Remember you are dust and to dust you shall return.* The oil, the soft feathers of ash. The finger of the little priest was thin and precise and gentle. And she thought yes that is what I am. All my dreams. My love. Dust and ashes.

The little priest sat on a stool in front of the altar to speak. Perhaps he was too short to be seen in the tall pulpit. His chin was nearly to his knees. He folded his hands on his knees and said *I will tell you a riddle. One fire to make the ash. One fire to save the ash.*

She did not know what this meant. She thought of her love, burned away.

And then a draft from somewhere made the candle flames long, and behind the little priest she saw the crucifix. It was carved in gray wood. And for that moment when the flames stretched like wands the face on the cross merged into the seamed face of the little priest. *Remember. Remember the fires. You carry their mark with you tonight.*

She did not understand. So much, so much she did not understand.

But she looked at the little priest up there, in the fire and shadow, and he seemed to be looking at her, and in his eyes she saw pain she understood and something else that made her want to understand.

And so she did not wipe off the cross of ashes, but carried them on her forehead, out into the night, where the fire of another day was beyond the last hill.

## Soup

The menu was confusing and overlong  
He thought  
Soup, yes, soup  
Beans and carrots and rice and tomatoes, maybe noodles, meat perhaps, and  
seasoning too  
But there is no knowing, just hunger  
Just tasting  
And he knew without knowing what he wanted to taste.

The dish arrived steaming and hot,  
Odiferous and pretty  
Beguiling and artful as  
Jesus hanging in his mother's arms  
In a fog of frankincense, beckoning, burning  
And smiling such sweet sadness.

Come close and let me taste you  
Burn me; season me, your rich raw ingredients  
Mixing in my mouth  
Until my hunger  
Slowly  
Subsides  
And I am iconic, like you, a Jesus, aching but complete.

## **I Sing of Blood**

A warm day has cooled.

Orange light, soft light turns rocks and dirt (this place where Jesus walked) into the October innocence of a fall night on the Columbia Plateau, after harvest, when I was young.

Johnny Walker mixes smoothly with Itzhak Perlman, excruciating and beautiful, flowing outward and inward.

I sing of blood and rocks and dirt, the horizon connected by a thread to my blood, the blood infused by all that I hope to know and forget, the blood of this land and my land and all land.

You can fall into Ramallah from Israel as into a dream from which there is no exit. You toss and turn and dream things more noble than barbwire, things that move the heart from shame to holiness, holiness that might spread like a sunrise.

Our fears are nurtured in dark places where imagination is dead.

Yet there is a desire to go on. And if we have not given up, if we are not prostrate with despair, we crawl painfully to that distant glow.

And stir the embers of our love.

# A Child in the Wardrobe

S E White

With the metal wardrobe doors closed, I sat in the darkness on the Paper Mill box where we kept the Lite Brite. I smelled the mothballs hanging in nylons, aged woolen sweaters, and the leather of shoes outgrown and cluttering the wardrobe floor.

I was five years old.

Not every child's bedroom has a wardrobe, but I needed one. There were no closets in my room. Our house was small. Floorboards creaked and crackled with each step, no matter which room, and the whole house would waken from coughs or sneezes in the night.

I had a vent that peered down into the living room in my bedroom floor. I would hold my breath and peek down and listen to my parents speak in low tones about serious things after my brother and I had gone to bed. I learned one Christmas Eve that Santa was just my father in tighty whiteys setting out presents. I watched him in the soft, multi-colored glow of the lights strung around the tree.

My older brother Matt had been fanatical about three stories in his life: *Charlotte's Web*, *Dune*, and *The Chronicles of Narnia*. He owned a set of the entire Narnia series, and he read them through until their covers faded. When he was older—after he'd tried to end his life and spent some months in the mental hospital—he stuck stickers with a selected Bible verse onto the front pages of each of the seven books: II Corinthians 1:2-7. He was 19-years-old at the time. A few years before, at the age of twelve, he had written the date, the year, his name, phone number, hometown (B.G.O.), and the price of the collection into each book in the series. I guess he didn't want anyone to ever steal them.

When I was 19-years-old, after he decided to exit this life, I inherited those books. Each sticker and scribble suddenly transformed into the story of a boy who struggled with adulthood and chose to escape the day to day burden of existence.

Before all of that, I sat in the pitch black of that closed wardrobe with my chin in my hand. I had not read the Narnia books myself. But, after listening to my brother and watching the 1979 "special television presentation" cartoon, my childish imagination ached with a craving for the magic of Narnia.

I fell in love with Aslan who I recognized as a Jesus-figure from my many hours spent in Sunday school and church. I cried when Aslan allowed himself to be taken captive, his mane shaved and his majesty mocked. But, my heart swelled at his triumphant resurrection and the destruction of the Ice Queen (who I also secretly admired).

What stuck with me most, though, was how that wardrobe, filled with oppressive fur coats, suddenly opened into another world, a world full of crisp snow, talking animals, and kings and queens.

I climbed into my own version, that familiar darkened place, closed the doors, closed my eyes, opened my imagination, opened my mind to the boundless possibilities, stretched out my fingertips to push through to the other side of the world, but I never felt the cooling chill, never felt more than the metal back of the wardrobe, the suffocation of my own dresses and shirts and skirts.

My disappointment felt all too real. And, there I sat, on the Lite Brite box, never less afraid of the dark.

I had reached the limits of my own imagination; it was a stirring that propelled me towards an understanding of time and space and reality that I did not yet know how to fully accept.

On that afternoon, so many years ago, I became aware of the full force of Narrative and storytelling. That wardrobe, that mystical magical wardrobe in C.S. Lewis' books, that portal back into a childish belief in limitlessness was like the book itself, to step into, climb into, and escape into.

I had only to open the cover like a door and enter and escape the burden of day to day existence.

And, yet, there are times that this middle-aged woman looks at closet doors and pines, closes her eyes and craves the taste of snow on her tongue, listens for the babble of talking animals, and loses herself in a world where a boy she once knew disappeared...

She hopes that on the other side of that door and darkness he finally found himself a home.

## Workshop

In a room full of hip  
dysplasia, blown knees  
hunched backs and  
dirty snowy hair, old  
poets tilt their heads  
like curious dogs  
collecting words like  
worn coins or shiny stones  
to place together in rows  
crumbs leading home.

## Where Eagles Die

We gather stones around us

glue them to our backs and crawl  
about the surface of this earth  
until we metamorphose and are

set free. The golden eagle soared  
muscled its way into oceanic skies  
above a tidal flat of sage, rabbit weed  
grease wood, rising on late morning  
swells across shallow bowls  
and sere flanks of mountains.

She raised her nymphs here  
until closing her eyelids in waning sunlight  
imagining liquid air against her belly

the rush of the dimensionless.

She felt her wings open  
golden primaries catch a honey-thick  
and tender breeze, her helpless

body soar over shimmering earth.

I found her shell where she had left it  
a pile of stones  
left in the shape of an eagle.

## Tooth & Bone

My granddaughter of 20-months  
is fascinated by teeth and bones  
support and nourishment  
the holes where nerves traveled.  
She carries skulls through the house  
trying to pronounce the words  
“coyote” and “horse,” her hands  
curled around brain cases and legs.  
Her fingers run along sharpened  
edges of skeletons, smooth joints  
what remains of curious creatures  
alien to her as surely I must be.  
Perhaps, she sees me in these things  
old, bleached, with sharp teeth  
a belly smooth as a knee joint  
feeding her eggs and cheese, looking  
together at photos of bees and water.



## Tour Guide

I would want to show you this  
the way the ocean made cathedrals  
how the hummingbird opens its mouth  
the way she shimmers in the sun.  
I would want you to smell the earth  
after the fire had passed, the dank  
blood of fresh cut mushrooms, how  
alkali dust is like sweet grass after rain.  
I would want you to hear the high  
pleading of a cedar waxwing, tubular  
whistle of rutting elk, how round stones  
clack and tumble in rough ocean surf.  
I would want the wind to touch you  
to feel grains of sand beating your skin  
how the skin snaps shut in the snow  
and how you are a slave to water.  
Taste me, taste you, let your tongue  
sense the iron knife blade of sex  
fold into the soup like sour cream  
and float on your back in the spices.

## The Sixth

I sawed through the belly of a tree and felt badly when a flying squirrel was jettisoned out of it as it was falling to scurry off and find another a mother woodcock braving a whirling chainsaw like a stone against death how a plastic straw finds its path into the nostril of a green turtle and mountain birds migrate like zombies toward the summit with no food clay of a forest gash sliding under the hooves of white cattle an ant ball rolling in forest duff and populations of penguins drowning the scream of an injured rabbit ringing through a forest whether it be fox or gunshot one bison hoof after another wallowing in the dust before a bullet from a train or the last shoot of grass and how ice slides on a solid warming surface of ancient forest a leopard seal floating to a surface with the last black rhino horn in its mouth so many frogs slimed by car tires on wet nights and the poisoning of bumble bees screaming out of a canopy of herbicide pesticide on wings of stone the crash of their landing heard by flowers and fallen butterflies in Mexico while orcas die of starvation in the sound and salmon run into concrete where there used to be stones the pods of confused whales rolling in surf across the bone dust of passenger pigeons dodos great auks giant moas and the genetic detritus of early immigrants into oblivion graphic lines rolling down toward zero as ice melts into coastal cottages and plovers have nowhere to nest teeth of megalodons washing up against infertile eggs in three-toed imprints in ancient mud bit by hectare of habitat lost to coffee beef tables bush meat money money money that has no worth when one million species are wiped from the chalk board and flying squirrels no longer live in the trees of a Wisconsin forest the sound of a saw all that is left.

## The Creek

Dennis and I swam naked  
in the backyard creek  
on hot mosquito days  
our still soft bellies  
rippling on the sandy bottom  
against our parents' wishes.  
In those steaming jungle years  
the older boys streamed home  
in bags and flags, no longer  
concerned about wishes  
of parents who did not want  
them swimming naked in creeks.

## Strings in the Corner

The strings remain stretched, ready  
almost begging to ring again, bent  
struck, plucked, waves of their  
harmonizing voices a rising incense.  
The strings are made of brass and steel  
have dented and cut my tender flesh  
made me cry and made me laugh  
shielded my body, an armor of sound.  
The strings made me more than I am  
gave me strength when there was none  
made lovers and friends from strangers  
riding together on highways of song.  
The strings are woven in my body  
like a metal tapestry of memories  
the scenes of my life in bold colors  
a warp and weft of words and notes.  
The strings will ring again, my voice  
grateful for familiar collaboration  
like a meeting of old men in the park  
players surrounded by singing pigeons.

## Rising Waters

White birds sit like a chorus line  
above a rain-blackened highway  
worm-line of red lights curving  
into the gaping maw of the city.  
Shades of gray towers rise  
ghosts of ancient forests gone  
the arching arms of light poles  
remaining perches for the weary.  
In the morning, the white birds  
disperse into a bland landscape  
points of hope in a rising fog  
searching for an imaginary ark.

## Remembrance

Remember the earth whose skin you are sun-worn blown water-logged feet blistered calloused fingers like juniper tangles stomach mud-painted rain-washed surrounded by rising clouds in impossible days like dreams amidst scenes of converging whales and talking stones all chasing an orb of retreating gas through an endless hallway of darkness.

Remember the earth whose heart you are clogged by fatty pronouncements of disbelief in injuries cellular accumulations burning fields and forests vertical columns of residue twirling molecules melting eons sliding into oceans of rising anger against walls of mountains daring resistance beating beating beating into another submission.

Remember the earth whose brain you will never be as it passes you by your skin feet fingers stomach and all of the whales stones fields forests oceans mountains washing into a sun-lit multi-colored clay sediment residue that will leave a comet trail through the universe like that of a wild stallion dashing through a limitless reincarnation of life.

## Record Keeping

This is how you place your hand  
on the rock wall  
surround it by ochre and grease  
to say *this is me*.

This is how you take the blade  
press it into clay  
on this Sumerian day.

Recounting traffic of stars  
bushels of grain  
is your life.

This is how you split the shaft  
of a peacock's feather  
to write love poems  
and plays  
in squid ink.

This is how you use a fountain  
to scribe the dreams  
of a new nation  
a sheep's skin still  
drying.

This is how you use a pen  
to write a story  
about how the hand  
and an instrument  
leads us on.

This is how to place a hand  
on a rock wall  
use the knife  
split a feather  
scribe dreams  
write a human song.

# The Hill of Monte Smith

Corina Skentzou

## She

She has to climb five floors to get in her apartment. This is a lot of climbing. She's on the second floor and she already feels her breath short. At the third floor now and her thighs are resisting to move.

She moves slowly. She moves like a turtle. She remembers last year, she used to run the stairs up. Sometimes she thinks that life is not worth it that much if you cannot climb five floors fast. Then she thinks that this sounds like a silly thought. Perhaps it is a silly thought indeed.

She unlocks her door and steps in the dark apartment. The silence is disturbing. She turns on the television. Donald Trump has an interesting haircut. She thinks that he is covering a developing baldness with his back hairs. She watches him gesturing with determination. He is full of vitality, Trump. She feels kind of jealous of him. She turns off the television. She never watches television after all. A thought comes in her mind: She doesn't like Hillary's haircut either.

Her apartment has a big window in the living room. In fact, the south part of the living room has a huge window instead of a wall. Her view is the building across the street. This building is taller than her building and has a doorman. It must have an elevator, definitely.

Lately, she enjoys looking outside her living room window. She does this for hours and always when it is dark outside. She likes it because she can see the lives of others. Lives that fit into window squares.

She sits on her red armchair, places her feet on the stool and observes them. The sixth floor woman wears a burgundy blouse today. She assumes that the woman is probably in her sixties as she has short white-snow hair. This woman is reading something. Most probably this woman is reading something very interesting as signified by her attentive body posture and associated facial expressions. That clear she can see.

Next to her, she sees somebody else's life. She sees this man. He seems tall with gray-silver hair. Definitely he is in his forties. He walks around his apartment with no shirt on. This usually happens when the blonde is there. The blonde visits on Mondays, sometimes on Thursdays too. On the other hand, during the weekends the brunette with the glasses comes. The brunette walks around the apartment with more confidence. She believes that the brunette knows the apartment better. The man walks in the kitchen again. He opens the refrigerator and drinks something from a bottle.

Next life, she sees this couple kissing. These people must really like each other. This is what they do when they are home, hugging and kissing each other, at least the evenings that she engages in her hobby: staring out of her window. Acknowledging this makes her a bit sad; perhaps this is the only hobby that she has. This is what she does, actually.



She looks around her square. The big round clock says that the time is 8:35 p.m. Her clock could be considered vintage and is made of bronze steel. She bought it last year from a traveling artist at Bedford Street in Williamsburg. Next to her vintage wall clock, her colorful paintings are hanging next to each other. Huge vivid tulips are covering her wall from the bottom to the top. Lately, it seems to her, that they don't match with the green couch.

The wooden desk which used to carry her plants is full of small orange bottles. She has organized a pill-taking calendar. She has set the alarm to notify her three times per day: morning, afternoon and night. She has put different color labels on the bottles. The red-label bottles are for the morning. The green for the afternoon and the blue before sleep.

She closes her eyes. She stays like that for a while. She opens them again. The time is only 8:40 p.m. She turns on the television again, she is searching for Netflix. She checks the movies one by one. She turns the television off. She stares at the wall again; the vintage clock resists to move on. She feels that an invisible elephant is stepping on her chest.

This is not sadness. She wishes that it was sadness. She wishes to be desperate. Being sad is something you are sad.

She has a box with cookies on the coffee table, chocolate chip cookies. She takes one and puts it in her mouth. She chews the cookie slowly. The cookie is melting in her mouth. This is not sadness. This cookie does not taste like anything.

**He**

The phone rings. He is looking for his phone. The phone is in his pocket. He answers.

Sighs.

“Claire? Is this you?”

“Yes.”

“Are you okay?” he calmly asks.

He hears Claire's heavy breathing; it sounds hesitating. Finally, her breathing calms down, freeing her voice.

“I have something really bad to tell you.”

His heart feels like moving inside his chest. It feels like a small trapped animal that wants to find an exit.

“Tell me...is it about Electra?”

“Yes...”

“She had a crisis again?”

“...No.”

“Then...what?”

“She tried to kill herself again.”

“How?” He continues the conversation with a calm voice.

She took some of her sleeping pills, filled the bathtub with hot water, took the razor and cut her wrists,” Claire says with a staccato stabbing voice.

The small trapped animal bites his way out. *How she found that energy?* he wondered, and the animal stopped moving.

“And...where is she?”

Claire sobs.

“TELL ME...”

I

When I first encountered some prodromal signs of my condition, I was touring with Denise in South America. This was two years ago. We were at Santiago in Chile. I recall the day, that morning we had visited The Houses of Pablo Neruda. It was middle afternoon and we decided to return to our hotel as Santiago surprisingly was hit by a heat wave.

I decided to have a cold shower, attempting to ingratiate the unavoidable sunburn covering my upper back. The cold water so soothing was embracing my neck and shoulders. I opened my eyes and my vision was blurry. I kept my eyes open and rinsed them with water. I looked around; it felt like a white veil was covering my head. I ignored my blurriness and continued shampooing my head. Suddenly, I felt a tingling sensation surrounding my scalp while my right leg started trembling. I felt like a puppet without the strings and I lost my balance. I fell down in the bathtub. The bathtub's floor was cold. I had fallen on my right side. I opened my eyes, a thin stream of blood passing by my face. My heart was reacting with fast beats to the incident but somehow I was not a part of this. I was the audience who watches a movie on a screen.

I heard Denise's naked steps on the bathroom tiles and then there is no memory.

I woke up in a busy loud hospital. I heard fast and perky voices coming from everywhere. I tried to detect the language. Spanish. I had forgotten that I was in Chile. I saw Denise who vividly was gesturing to this woman. Wherever country you are, doctors always wear white coats and a stethoscope is embracing their necks. I couldn't guess from their para-verbals if I suffer from bad news or not. I remember feeling calm though; my body felt heavy but in a comforting way.

Our next destination was supposed to be Argentina. Argentina never happened. I stayed in this hospital for weeks. I was semi-paralyzed and I did not

suffer from a stroke. I did physical therapy and I started walking again. “Walking” sounds a disturbing overstatement.

When we came back to New York, I didn’t return to work. Dizziness, blurred vision and imbalance attacks became a non-invited established routine. After three months of multiple and extensive exams, my doctor concluded,

“Electra, according to your last MRI it seems that your condition is Multiple Sclerosis (MS).”

Bees started flying next to my ears.

“This sounds bad.”

“It’s not an easy condition, as it is not treatable, but its progress can be well controlled.”

“According to your experience, my multiple whatever you said is progressed?”

He looked at me, I remember his iced eyes looking at me, transparent and cold.

“It seems that it has progressed but it is controllable.”

He dared to tell me and his face seemed empty to me. Gradually the iced eyes softened and with a mellow sticky voice he added,

“Don’t worry, Electra, you are strong.”

It started by my heart—the pressure—and traveled all over my throat, choking me. This was rage that my Anglo-Saxon upbringing drowned and pushed back to the heart.

This is what he thought to tell me, the stupid asshole! To not worry because I’m strong. Does he know me? What is “strong”? What does this word mean? Which part of me is strong? For sure my hand was strong enough to slap him in the face.

I reflect back and I know that I wanted to cause him physical pain not because of the “strong” comment. It was this sticky compassionate look that he threw me. You know compassion carries an arrogant quality. When you are compassionate you look down to someone, of course, with kindness. This implies a superiority. Even if the other person’s *downfall* is circumstantial.

My downfall was not circumstantial, my downfall was attacking me. It was like wearing a permanent suffocating costume. And imagine this costume having vivid colors making sure that others won’t neglect to see.

**He**

“Is she alive?”

His voice does not demand anymore, his voice panhandles.

“I’m sorry...I’m so sorry.”

**I**

The first months after my diagnosis, I did a lot of reading on the MS subject. I was reading articles on a daily basis. I was drinking the information like the thirsty in the desert who finds the oasis. The only difference was that my thirst insisted to be unsatisfied. The knowledge was comforting though. But the websites with the smiling people who suffered from MS were annoying. However, I was obsessively checking them, sometimes two times per day, every day.

Denise during this period seemed to me either inappropriately cheerful or inappropriately concerned.

First of all, she started engaging in these small talks. I never particularly liked her voice but her lifeless monotonous voice sounded worse than ever as it was colored with a cheap tone of fragile enthusiasm.

But more than her voice, the way that she looked at me I hated the most. Oh yes, I call this look the “doctor’s look.” Although her look had no magic powers, it compelled me to feel like the abandoned puppy that she found in the street on a rainy day.

She was asking me all these questions: *Are you in pain? Maybe your head hurts? Shall I bring you an extra pillow...I will bring you an extra pillow.* I sound unfair, I know. I sound ungrateful and I am ungrateful. I have the right to be ungrateful, I believe.

She has stopped touching me way before her developing “doctor’s look.” First time in my life, I admit, that I wanted to put a social role to someone. I was craving for social clarity, for social order. And then, I decided that Denise was a “nurse” with whom I used to fuck before.

I know that this sounds so cheap and so pathetic that it brings a sour taste in my mouth. I was in love with her—not the nurse—with Denise. We were in love. She was forced to be compassionate and I was forced to be an asshole or someone that used to be Electra.

Three months after my diagnosis I asked her to move out. I knew that she had started seeing somebody else. I was envious. This was not romantic jealousy. I envied her because she wanted to shower herself, wear perfume behind her ears and cover her fleshy lips with red lipstick. For this I envied her.

Now, I am not even able to be angry, or envious, or sad. I just am. I think that now I’m blank.

**He**

He goes to the kitchen and grabs a shot glass from the top of the cabinet. He pours some bourbon in his glass. He drinks it like water. He fills it up again. He walks to the living room and sits on the couch. His weight on the soft couch feels comforting.

It balances the cramping feeling on his chest, this sensation of multiple needles pinching his heart area.

He drinks more. The alcohol is burning his throat. The needles insist. He does not drink because this sensation is painful. He drinks because this sensation is unknown.

He takes his phone and calls Electra's number. She will pick up because this is a terrible mistake.

*Hi, I'm not able to answer right now, apparently. Try later.*

Her voice is deep and clear, always hides a tone of spicy sarcasm. He calls again and again and again. He leaves the phone on the table defeated.

And his phone rings. He picks it up instantly.

“Joe?”

He does not answer.

“Do you want us to come over?”

“No, where is the body?”

Claire sighs and the sobbing starts.

He allows her to cry, scream, whatever she wants to do; he does not have a sense of time, after all. Claire tactfully blows her nose.

“At the Metropolitan hospital...”

Claire's sentence is interrupted by her impulsive waves of sorrow. She is almost annoying. He does not want to hang up on her though.

“Did she leave a note?”

“Yes...to you...”

“I need this note, bring it to me.”

He says this calmly and finally decides to hang up without any notice. The phone rings again. He turns it off. He sits down but the feeling of his weight on the couch does not feel comforting anymore.

## **i. Us**

A year after my trip in Chile, I talked to my dad. We haven't really talked for the last seven years. Actually, he hasn't talked to me for the last seven years.

The last time we have seen each other was at one uncle's Bill funeral three years ago. I can still feel his stingy look all over my body when Denise and I walked in the church. Denise was holding my hand. I freed my hand when our eyes met. I felt

my hands numb and wet. I could not identify what this sensation meant. Now I know, it was the feeling of shame. It was a physical manifestation of *I'm not good enough and how I dare to be* belief about myself.

I had met his disappointment criteria list years before he stopped talking to me overall:

1. unacceptable utilization of my International Affairs master's from Columbia—check
2. broke up with Jeremy who comes from an amazing family of medical doctors—double check
3. democrat—triple check
4. single with no evident prospects to create a family—correction—a high-status family—check
5. bad manners—check (this had to do with my tendency to ridicule his devastatingly boring chitchats in holiday family gatherings)

However, I broke my “disappointment record” and violently finalized his list, when I added one more criterion, the massive one: the updated status of my bisexual orientation. And this criterion had to be deleted, as the granddaughter of a Republican senator *could not* be a lesbian and she *must not* be a lesbian.

This information was denied at first. In the form of denying that Denise existed. For example, on a Christmas Day he asked me if I had a boyfriend to bring to our Christmas table. As the information was maturing he adopted a series of different persuasive-demanding approaches: one of the most famous was the “good cop – bad cop” approach, i.e., *I will take you to the best psychiatrists, baby, don't worry everything is going to be okay to I will disown you, you embarrass yourself... you embarrass me and our family.*

He never did though, disown me. And I knew that his suffocating love, repressed, was waiting for me.

I still have not clarified *why* I told him about Denise. I strongly believed that this event stemmed from my rebellious nature; that is, a craving for challenging society's rigid, discriminative core beliefs about human relationships and family properness.

However, I know now that my incentive was highly hypocritical. It was not that I was just against society through my father, one of society's owners and distributors of power. It was a personal attack. Because I was resentful.

But, he was not always that cruel, my father; neither I. He used to be my parent. My only parent and I was his only child. He joyfully carried this dual parenting role.

My father used to be *my* dad until I reached my first adolescent year, eleven. When my mother abruptly left us.

That day was a terrible day. I don't know which day it was exactly, I mean the day that she actually physically left. And I say this because for me she was always gone.

But the day that I mentioned it as a terrible day was a Monday. When Dad and I returned from Claire's summer home in Cape Cod.

My mother was planned to come the day after us. She had some *social obligations* to take care of, as she said to my dad. As always, it was not necessary for me to know details.

Actually, I am not even sure if these social responsibilities were clarified to my dad, either, or if they were that urgent, making it impossible to be postponed for another day.

In fact, the Cape Cod trip was a family tradition, and social obligations including my father's business meetings were always scheduled on days around family vacation.

What matters though, is that she did not come to Claire's. She was sick, as she said to him on the phone. My dad, I remember, full of concern informed her that we would return back home first thing in the morning.

She most probably had serious objections, as evidenced by my dad's interrupted sentences and the vivid and continuous noise that was coming from the earpiece. But, he did not give up; he continued talking to her. He sounded very pampering: like not a husband, but the father of a spoiled child. He always had the tendency to talk to her like his child— she was twenty-five years younger than him, after all. However, I think that this time, his voice sounded more pampering than ever, a hopeless attempt to drown his disbelief on her.

He was listening to her patiently. I remember his eclecticism in picking up his words. And the color of his voice, careful and subtle, was gently wrapping up these selected words, as if my mother's ears were made of the finest crystal glass.

Finally, he allowed himself to be persuaded.

We drove back a day earlier than we were supposed to return. My dad wanted to surprise her, carrying clam chowder from the Sacred Cod Tavern that she adored.

When we arrived, the time was 10 p.m. We had recently moved to Rye and the absence of the city's busy sounds facilitated the transition between our vacation mood and the unavoidable everyday life routine.

The house looked dark. We drove the car in the garage. Her car was missing. We walked upstairs. The room's absolute darkness confided to us that she had left the house perhaps yesterday. The soonest that she could have left. I say so because we never turned off our floor light in the hall. We only did when we were going on vacation. In addition, the smell of the trapped air in the room confirmed the fact that she was not returning back soon. That she had not just left for the pharmacy store. Because the only excuse that she had to leave the house, according to her health status description, was the Duane Reade in Larchmont. She had reported a fever, however not one high enough to mandate us returning back and ruining our short vacation.

He started calling her name. His voice, firmly concerned at first, progressed to deep sobs. The tone of his sobs sounded mature and not spontaneous, hiding an underlying confirmation. He was not confused about her absence. Indeed, her absence was not shocking for any of us, for different reasons.

I remember myself climbing the stairs. I found him lying down on their bed in the dark. He was still holding her clam chowder. I took the plastic bag from his hands

and walked down to the kitchen. I stored it in the refrigerator. This clam chowder was not destined to be eaten that night.

## ii. Us

When I met Denise, it was five months after I had broken up with Jeremy. I met her at the dining room at work. We were both working at the United Nations headquarters building. I was working for the HR department and Denise was an interpreter. I think that she still works there.

I had never felt attraction for a woman before. Neither the day we met did I feel attracted.

I remember her walking in the room like a cat, with smooth and discreet movements. Her figure, thin and delicate, was hiding in this strict suit almost as boring as mine.

All the tables were busy but she did not seem to worry, holding a sandwich in one hand and a paper cup in the other. She was walking between the tables. I had an empty chair next to me. While I do not consider myself the most sociable creature on earth, surprisingly, I nodded at her. She smiled at me and the cat became a tiger, a young one, but still a tiger, moving with determination toward her target. And I say so because I noticed her staring at me when she was walking in the room.

However, I could not identify why. I could not categorize the incentive of our visual interaction: curiosity, checking up, attraction.

She sat down comfortably and slid her chair close to me. I felt invaded. I have a pet peeve about what I consider my personal space territory. I pushed my chair instinctively two inches away. She responded instantly.

“Too close?”

I liked her directness. I reciprocated.

“Too close indeed.”

“I’m Denise and you are Electra Thompson.”

“Wow, I’m that famous?”

“Yes you are, so famous that they have made tags with your name for people to wear on their blazers.”

I laughed spontaneously. I had not found anything funny lately, still recovering from my comatose relationship with Jeremy. Her witty sarcasm was refreshing. I replied.

“Between us, I have made these tags and distributed them to the new hires; it is a part of the job description.”

“I see...plus, I assume that you satisfy your egocentric narcissistic tendencies...”



“Definitely.”

“Hm...hm, what else do I need to know about Electra Thompson?”

We were flirting! Her plain flat voice—most probably a conditioned result of her job—contradicted her vivid, full-of-vitality hand gestures.

When I returned back home, I realized that I hadn't had such a good time in a while. I had isolated myself from friends and acquaintances, who mostly were shared between me and Jeremy. These friendships, mostly couples, had been developed within my seven-year relationship with him. My pre-Jeremy-era friends, neglected, had lost my traces.

We started to meet on every lunch break. Within two months, the lunch dates extended to dinners and movie nights. While I was denying it in the beginning, I was looking forward to seeing her. I was reluctant to admit it, but I was attracted. I was infatuated with the way she was looking at me, the details that she remembered about things that I had told her. I was falling in love with her full attention to me.

I knew that she liked women. She told me the next day we met. I remember that she asked me if I date anybody. Her question sounded indiscreet to me, did not fit in my *lunch at work* context. But the tone of her attitude was far away from gossipy. Her attitude, simply, did not include any layers. Her words were spontaneous, original but somehow tactful.

I told her that I was not dating anyone. Then surprisingly, I told her that I had recently broken up from my fiancé. And her with a pure childish interest asked me, “What happened?”

“Well, I decided to leave him when I found out that he was cheating on me.”

“Ouch...that sucks. You said you decided to leave him. This means that you were thinking about it before the cheating?”

“Well...actually not consciously, but I did not feel hurt. It did not bother me.”

I heard myself saying something that I had never realized before; that Jeremy's disloyalty was not painful, rather liberating, giving me the excuse to leave this

“...Freaking boring ridiculous relationship!”

“Ow! HAHAHA...I'm glad that he did cheat on you then!”

“What about you?” Excited from my newly developed awareness, I asked her.

“Well...I'm not dating someone right now. But generally speaking my job includes traveling, a lot of traveling, and it's hard to maintain a relationship.”

“When was your last relationship?” I heard myself asking her.

“I had a relationship two years ago; her name was Clara.”

I was not sure if I heard “Clara” and I asked her, “At least he was a good guy?”

She laughed.

“No, he was not a good guy at all; *he* was a good woman though.”

I felt uncomfortable and perhaps guilty for denying what I clearly had heard.

“Oh sorry, I was not sure if you said ‘Clara.’”

“You should not be sorry about it...I should have started with the introduction *I’m a lesbian and my last relationship was two years ago with Clara, who I met in Mozambique.*”

“Mozambique! Wow...you have traveled a lot! I have never been in Africa.”

Her heavy look covered me. I felt a sticky cold sensation; I was embarrassed by my homophobic redirection of the conversation.

She was direct as always, “I made you uncomfortable, didn’t I?”

I remained silent momentarily in an effort to select the best words to lighten up my impoliteness. However, I surprised myself by saying, “Yes, you did.”

She genuinely smiled and her lively eyes were shining.

“Do you want to talk about it?”

“Talk about what! Your sexual orientation?”

“Yes, and the effect that it has on you...”

“It does not have an effect on me...and thinking about it...you did not make me feel uncomfortable...It’s just the first time that I met...”

“Somebody gay?”

“A lesbian.”

“You mean that it’s different from a gay man?”

“I don’t know...I think it’s because you don’t look like a lesbian.”

“Hahahahaha. And what do lesbians look like in your mind?”

“You know...big, hairy...ugly women?!”

She laughed out loud.

“Then I guess that you did not feel uncomfortable, rather disappointed...hahahaha, I’m not that hairy and big.”

“I guess you did disappoint me, especially because you are very pretty.”

She took her eyes away from me; my compliment uncovered a part of her that was insecure and shy. The part that matched her delicate figure. She cleared her throat to regain self-control but her transparent complexion was revealing her blushing cheeks.

I said, “Did I make you uncomfortable?”

“No...but you disappointed me too.”

Her voice sounded serious, so serious that it felt intolerable. I rushed my answer, “I see...I’m sorry...I’m not hairy either.”

She smiled at me.

“You are funny.”

We were becoming close friends. I realized that the interaction with her was liberating. I had started being spontaneous, violating my obsessive routines.

I still cannot understand how smoothly it happened. It was a weekend in Catskills. We had gone hiking in the morning and it was evening when we came back to the bed & breakfast. I was so exhausted feeling my legs sore and stiff, so I went to the bathroom to take a bath. Denise asked me if I would like a glass of red wine. I found her idea delightful. I won’t lie that I had not thought about it. I fantasized her every night touching me, starting from my face and smoothly going down, stroking my breasts. And then I was imagining the velvet touch of her lips kissing mine.

She came in, wearing a white satin robe. The fabric was so thin that I could see the shape of her big nipples. She sat next to the bathtub and placed the glass of wine on the tiles. She took a bath-cloth from a pile next to her and started to rub my back. With the other hand she started touching my breasts. I took the bath-cloth from her hand and put it away. I removed her robe. I took her hands and pulled her in the bathtub. My moves natural and confident were liberating a sexuality that I had never disclosed before with any man.

And that was it. We became a couple. Eight months after our Catskills trip she moved into my place. Her friends became my friends and every weekend was an adventure: skiing, hiking, rafting, meditation retreats, cooking classes. I was alive, I was present. I loved and I was loved. I was happy.

### **iii. Us**

The first family person that I talked to about my MS was Claire, my father's identical twin. Claire is something like a mother to me, was even before my mother left. Her resemblance with my father has a comforting effect on me as it serves a compensative role and balances my father's judgmental, overcritical love.

Because, Claire is very loving and approving. You see, she never had a twenty-five years younger husband that left her for another woman...lucky Claire.

She is an open mind too. I could not believe my ears when I told her that Denise is not just my best friend but my lover too.

"Whatever makes you happy, honey...you know...your dad told me, he was very upset...but I told him that you have never seemed that happy before. I remember you with this Jeremy, your eyes were always sad...kind of empty."

"I'm astonished, Claire!"

"You should not...okay I am an old lady...but I am not that cognitively challenged that I cannot tell if you are happy or not!"

I loved her more for what she said. Because I knew Claire. I knew the difficulty of taking off the heavy costume of conservatism. Even me, thirty-five years younger than her and I was still wearing the costume. I just had unzipped it.

Well, when I told Claire about my MS, she broke down in tears. Peculiarly, I liked her reaction. It was an honest reaction; it matched better my perspective over my situation. I asked her to not tell my father. She asked me when I was planning to tell him.

"I don't know."

"Electra, I think that you should tell him soon. Your father has all these connections, the best doctors will take care of you."

"I know...but I don't know how you say this to a father."

I heard myself saying that and some escaped salty teardrops damped my face. I guess, I was still somehow human. I was holding back because of love. Love and fear for hurting him, abandoning him too.

### **He and She**

The house line rang, and it took her some time to reach the side table. The person across the line knew that she was there. The person across the line knew that she needed time to pick up the phone. It was her father.

"Electra? This is dad."

At first, she felt bad because she did not sound enthusiastic on the phone. The reality is that she put effort to hold her eyelids open. She cleared her throat.

“Dad.”

She felt awkward hearing his voice after so many years. It sounded deep and fruity, perhaps a bit more gravelly.

“Claire told me...I know...I have not been the best father the last years but...”

He abruptly left his sentence incomplete. His slow, firm breathing signified an expectation, making the silence alive, even demanding. His long pausing dictated her to rescue him from self-blaming.

“Dad please, I played my part in that...I have...I mean had a flamboyantly reactive way of life according to your standards...hard to accept I guess.”

He did not say anything, he was still demanding, he wanted more guilt relief. She did not have more.

“However, how hard for a parent is it to accept that his child is dying?”

The uncovered resentment left a sour and bitter taste in her mouth. She swallowed and felt her stomach getting upset.

“A parent has nothing to accept, a parent stands next to his child.”

She wanted to scream: *why now?* But she didn't. She didn't, because it did not matter. She didn't because somebody needs vitality to hate.

“Well...I have a list with the best MS rehabilitation centers in the country.”

“Oh...that's nice.”

She heard herself saying this with a dead voice.

“We have money, I will take you to the best doctors.”

His voice started brittle. Instantly, he cleared his throat, disallowing his emotions to show. She loved him for this. She did not find anything better to say.

“Thank you...”

“Are you tired?”

“Yes...a bit. Sorry Dad, shall we talk later?”

“I was thinking to visit you...if this is okay with you.”

“Sure, but not today...what about tomorrow? I think that I need to rest today.”

“Tomorrow sounds good. What about meeting at the coffee shop on 1st Ave between 70th and 69th?”

“Dad...we can meet only at my apartment...”

“...Yes, definitely, I just don't want to create problems...you know...with...”

“Denise does not live here anymore.”

“Oh I see...Why is that?”

“Dad, I really need to rest. So are we meeting tomorrow morning?”

“Yes, tomorrow morning, I am looking forward to it.”

“Me too. Goodnight, Dad. See you tomorrow.”

He came at 9:00 a.m. She was awake since 7:00 a.m. She was so glad, she did not feel dizzy that morning.

She took a shower. She shampooed her hair with a vanilla scent shampoo. She left it wet. She wore a woolen dress of deep yellow color, almost the color of mustard.

Around 8:30 a.m. she was ready, waiting for him on her red armchair. Surprisingly, she hadn't stared at the lives of others that morning from her window. She was witnessing her life that morning.

She heard the bell ringing. She looked at her cane next to the side table. She took her eyes away from it. Instead, she held tightly to the armchair's sides and lifted her body. She walked slowly to the door and pressed the key icon on the buzzer.

She was leaning against the opened door when she heard his strong and staccato steps walking up the wooden stairs. As he was coming closer, the steps were becoming louder but somehow softer. And his grey head appeared. He walked toward her door, wearing a long cashmere black coat. He was holding his leather gloves. He was still so handsome, my dad. Tall with a solid fit body. His face seemed older but in a beautiful way. His wrinkles seemed delicate as the taste of old French wine.

She looked at his face and she saw love. She saw joy. And she felt her legs strong and solid. She confirmed that the cane, indeed, was totally unnecessary. He walked in the apartment carrying a brown paper box. She knew the content of the box. It was a lemon tart. Lemon tart is her favorite thing.

He sat down on the green couch. She walked to the kitchen, making sure that her walking seemed solid and confident. His eyes were following her.

“Do you need any help?”

“No...I’m just boiling some water. Oh I didn’t ask you, do you want coffee or tea?”

“I don’t care...whatever you have.”

“I will make some coffee.”

“Sounds great.”

She almost felt healthy. She was almost human. She was a woman making coffee in her kitchen. She was almost somebody, when her limbs betrayed her and started trembling.

She lost her balance and held herself from the kitchen table. Her father instantly ran into the kitchen. The French press had fallen down on the floor and pieces of broken glass were covering the kitchen floor. He grabbed her from the armpits and lifted her up. He sat her down on the chair. They both looked down on the floor, the yellow round lake that she left behind. He tried to take a towel from the counter but she blocked his hand. She closed her eyes and tried to keep them shut, but her tears escaped, filling the room with embarrassment. He hugged her tight and she felt his damp face.

## He

The doorbell’s sound fills up the silent room. He does not buzz Claire in, instead, he wears his coat and goes downstairs. He walks outside. It should be really cold as he sees Claire wrapped up with this massive coat and endless scarf. Her eyes are red and look so tiny, almost disappearing in her swollen eyelids. She walks to him and hugs him. His body is stiff like a tree trunk. He puts some effort to reciprocate, imposing his lifeless heavy arms to embrace his sister. When he decides that hugging should end, softly pushes her away. He does not talk. They look at each other momentarily. His eyes dry and edgy contradict her moist face. She takes from her pocket an envelope and gives it to him. Without looking at it, he takes it and holds it in his hand.

“Claire, I’m not asking you to come up. I need to be alone.”

She dries her face with her sleeve.

“I understand...you call us please, anytime.”

“I will. Thank you.”

“If you need help with any arrangements...you know...We can definitely help you out.”

He forces a smile and walks away; suddenly he stops and tells her, “The cops called you. They did not call me.”

She does not say anything. He goodnights her and waits for her to leave. He feels the sealed envelope in his hand. Perhaps in this note, Electra states that she left the country or something. It's not sure that she is dead. "Dead"...this sounds so wrong that a cramp starting from his chest is expanding throughout his body.

He calls Metropolitan, the envelope still in his hand. The confirmation from the other end of the line slaps him in the face. He throws his phone on the wall mirror across. He achieves breaking the thick glass. Then he starts walking on the small mirror pieces. The sharp crystallized sound distracts his chest's cramping. He sits down and decides to open the envelope.

He reads it over and over again, obsessively. He folds the note in the envelope. He wipes away the shards from the table and leaves the envelope there.

He walks to his large bookcase across the living room and takes a photo album from the top shelf. The album is old and its leather cover is a bit frayed in the edges. He gently starts flipping the album.

He stops on a picture of hers. Electra, time-resistant, is smiling with her toothless mouth at the camera. She is five. Her straight long hair is flapping in the wind. She is wearing a red dress. A dress with white ribbons and laces.

He recalls the day that he took this picture: It was early April on a windy day. They were at the top of the hill close to their summer house in Rhodes, Greece. He closes his eyes and his memories, vivid, appear as a dream:

He remembers her jumping around, full of vitality as always. Happiness seemed to be a permanent state in her young life, evident in every movement that she made. He was walking behind her as she was running ahead. She was picking up flowers in every corner of the windy street. That day he realized what a curious child his daughter was. A hurricane of questions was coming out from her small mouth that day. Questions like "Why the dogs are barking?" "Why the sea is blue?" "Why they do not stay in the island forever and ever and they have to go back to New York when September comes?" He patiently answered all her questions. Perhaps, he was happy back then. He was happy, actually. He was with his only child at the top of the hill with the most beautiful view in the island.

**He**

"Do you see over there?"

**She**

"Where, Daddy?"

"Over there...this yellowish-brownish building that looks like a seashell, at the peak of the island!"

"Yes, I do!"

"This is the Aquarium. On your right, the land that pops up from the sea is Turkey."

"Turkey is a country, right?"

"Right...you didn't tell me, do you like it here?"



“Yes I do, I can smell the daisies.”

“The daisies do not smell...you silly monkey.”

“Ha! They do smell...they do smell!” she said with her singing-teasing voice and started running. She stopped a little before the hill’s cliff.

“Electra! Be careful!”

She stood at the cliff edge and spread her arms, facing the sea. She seemed to him like a golden-haired fairy.

The memory of her childish voice, alive, warms up the cold living room.

“I’m hugging the sea! Look at me!”

He did look at her and found her so beautiful, he took his camera and called her name. She instantly turned her smiling face and he captured her, forever. He touches her face in the picture. Her paper-smile will live forever.

He closes the photo album and places it next to the envelope. He takes his computer on his lap and books the flight.

## **She**

She wakes up in the hospital. Her throat is so sore, making it extremely painful to swallow. Lavage has this side effect, third lavage this month.

It does not matter how many pills she removes from the orange bottles to her stomach because she always wakes up. She closes her eyes and pays attention to the sounds in the room. She gets distracted by her thoughts about the nightmare that she has had lately. Yesterday, she had this dream again, but it ended differently. It ended to be comforting, actually:

She is with her dad at their summer home. It does not look like their actual summer home but it’s theirs. They are both in the living room. She is mopping the naked floors and her dad tries to relocate an old couch. His blushed sweaty face implies that he puts some significant effort into pushing the couch. He is sighing in every push but the couch resists to move. She leaves the mop and goes to help him. They start pushing the couch together. Success, the couch starts moving, gradually uncovering a hole on the floor. She goes closer and looks inside. The hole is deep and dark. Suddenly, she sees a roach coming out from the hole. Disgusted, she steps back when hundreds of roaches start covering the floor.

She, terrified, runs to her parents' bedroom. Her dad remains in the living room. She calls him but her voice is soundless. She tries to run to him but her limbs are heavy, stuck on the floor. She sees him walking toward her with slow moves. He says something to her but she cannot listen to him. She tries to talk to him too, but her voice is soundless still. The roaches are expanding closer to the bedroom. She gestures at him with terror. He smiles at her and continues walking toward the room. He totally ignores the roaches, he even steps on them. Then she realizes that only

she can see the roaches. Eventually, he comes in the room. She is rushing to close the door behind, she's pushing and pushing but the door is stuck.

This is how the dream ends: with the semi-closed door and her too paralyzed by terror to push the door with her weak hands to close.

Yesterday in her dream again, she tries to push the door and as expected the door is stuck. But she did not wake up. Instead, she bravely remains in her dream and effortlessly opens the door. No roaches are waiting for her outside the room. But an expanding bright light that she trusts is there, and she allows its spacious and warm quality to cover her entire body.

Then she decides to wake up, and feels somehow free, even with this tremendously painful sore throat.

## **Them**

He is in the airplane. He digs his hand in his blazer's pocket and takes the envelope out:

I died. I died in purpose. Perhaps I was a coward (what a cliché!), or I had tremendous awareness. Either or, it did not matter at all to me. But I think that both reasons can apply.

I utilized my free will and I chose to stop existing because it was not good enough. I utilized my free will and I chose to stop witnessing the person I was becoming.

Blind to the sunlight that comes from large windows. Not able to see any beauty and purpose.

I decided to leave that time not on impulsive terms. I was assessing my condition for a while. It was true. I could not detect incentive.

At the beginning, I was mad. How we say, "mad as hell"... something like that. That mad, maybe, was a "good mad" giving birth to constructive delusions of grandeur about beating up the death sentence of my dignity and why not? To give hope to other MS victims.

But being in a hopeful way mad, trust me, can be exhausting too.

Then I started to realize that I was so tired to resist to change. I was so tired of not accepting.

I was so tired that I couldn't even be mad. Mad at me and others.

Mad at others because they walk.

Mad at others because they are healthy.

Mad at me because I was envious and hopeless.

Mad at God.

And I decided to do this the time that I did because that day was a special day: I saw the beautiful trees outside my window and felt the breeze on my cheeks.

My legs felt strong and my mind vital.

And I brought you in my mind and I felt love. I recalled our summers in the island. I recalled our walks on the hill. I knew that I would never go there again. But that

thought was not painful anymore because my journey stops here. I gave and I received so much love and joy. I am in peace.  
Good death, I left surrounded by light.

## **Electra**

He reads it over and over again. He brings the letter close to his nose and tries to track her smell. It smells like paper.

He looks outside the window and sees the land attaching to the dark blue sea. He feels butterflies in his stomach when the airplane is landing to the island's airport. He has not visited the island in years. The airport is old and the travelers have to walk to the airport indoors. The cool breeze refreshes his dry face. He does not have any luggage, only his handbag. He could just avoid going inside the airport, he could just walk directly to the main street. He does not. He walks inside the airport and with the same steady walk, he walks outside toward the taxi lot. A taxi approaches him shortly. He sits on the backseat. He is hugging his handbag like it was a baby while looking outside the view from his window. Suddenly, he asks the driver to pull over. The driver surprisingly looks around and asks him if he is sure that this is the spot that he wants to be dropped off, as there is nothing else than palm trees around here. He nods his head and pays the driver. He ignores the change that rests on the driver's palm, gets out, and closes the door softly. It is almost sunset. He walks close to the cliff and bends his knees. He opens his handbag and takes out a wooden box. He holds it tight and stands up. He looks at the Aquarium that is surrounded by the pink sky. He stands over there still, at the top of the Monte Smith hill. The sun is hiding in the sea. He opens the box. Electra's ashes follow the wind, and they seem shiny to him, like gold dust. He observes them disappearing in the air. He closes the box. He takes a deep breath, closes his eyes and smells the daisies.

## Awakening From Cheerleader Fantasies haiku

Imprisoned deep in  
Five Hindrances – illicit  
sexuality

ill will and torpor,  
a restless remorsefulness  
or abiding doubt

in breath on board then  
out breath, you surf self-guided  
blue wave images...

... my joyous playful  
incredibly distracted  
meditation dawns.

## **Septuagenarian While Cardiologist's On Speed Dial**

Nerding out, this three-syllable  
person in a one syllable country  
hears calls of history but lets all roll into voicemail  
oy 'stead of joining crowds running to be President.

Flooding the zone, I self-medicate  
from nitrous cloud now above me,  
await candidate balloon drops presumably filled with  
heroin -- then just for kicks auto-erotically asphyxiate.

## **Bait And Switch Blade**

Once just a nursing rhyme's soldier-on milquetoast  
soft and runny before time in life's feral barrel,  
despite all the king's horses and king's men,  
Humpty-Dumpty's subsequent fallen world  
view was filled with hardboiled deviance  
but drew a firm line at masturbation  
fodder for masochistic pedophiles  
or pure torture-porn erotica's  
deplorable protagonists.

## Imagining

“You may say I'm a dreamer  
But I'm not the only one  
I hope some day you'll join us  
And the world will be as one.”  
-- John Lennon

Faced with sure death or some small chance to survive,  
even though none of us can swim,  
our tribe of humans dives from the bluffs into a raging river...

Are *Homo Sapiens* the only mammals who'd do this?  
That I don't know but how about those photos of orangutans  
engaging in Kama Sutra-worthy face-to-face copulation!

Though I haven't asked them yet, perhaps a reason  
animals won't use the "missionary position"  
rather than rear entrance is 'cause most can't execute such acts.

If they're looking straight at each other, their genitals  
are at opposite ends. Should partners lie down eye-to-eye,  
could quadrupeds' legs get in the way?

Wouldn't being on one's back also create entanglements  
while trying to stand up, thus making species  
particularly vulnerable to sneak attacks by predators?

Although I've never studied anthropology, eye contact  
seems to create bonds and resolve conflicts with females --  
without it for me intercourse wouldn't be the intimate pleasure.

It would be the wham, bam, thank'ya m'am  
which definitely has a place but doesn't lubricate  
keeping the family's little ones alive at least until breeding.

And then for something completely different there're the bonobos'  
erotic non-penetrative female-female rubbing and male-male frotting  
(aka Penis Fencing) – perhaps that's for another python of a good time.

## Ode To Duane Reade Drug Store Chains Knocked Off

Upside of downers 'n poppers,  
Oxy RXs, over the counter Sudafeds, under the counter  
or on the corner -- don't matter.  
At first as a general practitioner I could offer extra service  
feel-goods to winos but specialists  
armed with so much ice in their veins make my teeth ache  
gobbled that high price business  
thusly we folk devolved into pill-pushing soda-jerk clerk  
wholly owned nihilist subsidiaries  
for a handful of pharmaceutical-industrial complex firms.  
Gut-wrenching kick in the pants --  
OD'd girl unconscious on the floor of a Family Dollar store  
while a baby in dirty footie pajamas  
tugs at her mother's lifeless arm before trying to nurse --  
didn't bother me because by then  
I was well off the factory line whereas brothas still hump  
whether capsules above board or not.



## Secret Lover

I wake wrapped in my own arms, hand having found bare shoulder under shirt. Embarrassed, I start to withdraw my limbs, but then linger in this embrace. Who else could love me from the inside out?

## **Mystery of the Locked Door**

I remember Saturday morning cartoons, watching Coyote chase Roadrunner while my parent's bedroom door remained locked. But one morning, *surprise!* They emerge giggling, father chasing mother down the hallway, round the kitchen with a huge zucchini squash held between his legs. So unusual in our house, but it made me happy: secret joy spilling out from behind the locked door.

## Communion

My father was a preacher. At age five, I was too embarrassed to follow the others to the altar where he gave communion, but afterwards my body crumpled into his as he soothed, brought me alone behind the choir benches, the organ, the towering cross, to the room where bits of bread remained on the silver tray, a few tiny shot glasses still filled with grape juice. I hungered for him,

my remote father dressed in Sunday black—so when he pressed the crumbs into my hand, the purple stain to my lips, said *this is my body, this is my blood*, I took him inside, believing.

## Old World

Uncle Bob used to visit us at *Sandy Acres*—our handful of almond trees, old barn, scattered chickens and goats, on the outskirts of town. My parents became teachers, dabbled at farming between dips in the pool and nightly television. But Uncle Bob was a true rancher, a navy man—had seen the dead, the sunken ships, the roosters running round the dirt headless. When he came to visit,

he knew only one way to live: take a chicken firmly in hand, pluck head from body, feather from skin, wash thighs and breast for the oven, bring meat to the table. And to my eyes: a world, bruised with wonder.

## The Dilemma of Art, The Limits of Utility

The French doors of my study are open  
to the garden, where the old wood  
of a rotting deck only inches from the ground  
is sprouting greenery, again.

Long green-leafed succulents, errant  
thin-filigreed weeds with tiny flowers,  
slip through the empty spaces  
between weathered redwood boards  
hastily built too close to the dirt  
one winter. Gophers, too,

tunneling with hidden delight beneath  
the modest deck, push up the dirt  
till plank and flower, weed and deck  
become one. I should

tear it all out—the old wood—  
and one day will. For now,  
it is the performance art  
I love the most,  
the way my deck sprouts  
with color, inviting  
even the wildflowers  
to tumble over its edges  
like an orange wave. This

question of art confronts me,  
too, on the walking path adjacent  
my study, the large ceramic vase  
knee-high, its white paint and black  
Japanese kanji-figures slowly eroding  
with time and weather, revealing  
an earlier glaze of deep burgundy  
with white circlets like a hidden cosmos  
beneath. My friend thought,

of course, that I should fix it, repaint  
the dark blush with the clarity of Zen's  
black on white brushwork. But art

is other than repair. The dilemma itself  
ravishes. Watching the garden *become* the deck,

or the painted layers erode till another  
hidden beauty blazes.

## The Secret Odyssey

I know the stakes of being a poet in America,  
where any semblance of an inner life  
is suspect—

a confession worse than wetting my lips  
with whiskey in secret,  
a renegade against the *real* life I imagine  
everyone but me exists inside of.

A poem *is* something I exist inside of,  
like a soldier, a patriot  
carrying the flag of the entire world  
of me into the jungle, or

a draftee edged into the mud  
of the psyche's foxhole,  
gulping hundred-proof words,

an alphabet of desperate raging against  
an enemy I can only see  
in the mirror. Writing

is staring into that mirror  
while shaving the stubbled whiskers  
of my own original face  
that still ends up looking more like Melville,  
or Whitman, or Rumi

every damn hour. Which is maybe why  
Rumi says poetry is drunken prayer,  
Whitman wrote untamable lines long  
as the limbs of the civil war dead  
he nursed, desperate

for the life inside a life.

Like Melville: plying the illiterate sea  
endlessly, relentlessly, hypnotically,

harpoon in rough hand like  
the blunt end of lead hidden  
in the pencil's wood,

hunting the whale of the thing  
you drink whisky for.

## Another Zen Retreat Poem

After a while, there's no mistaking the world  
for anything other than miraculous.  
The small bird, pecking the dirt as I slowly walk  
in meditation toward it, eyes me—

lifts sudden as thunder in a whir of wings  
echoing between the row of dorms & the wall opposite,  
a Jetstream leaving no doubt of the tangible waves  
invisible between us. Things slow,

till humor whirs like a hummingbird:  
watching the 80-year-old master *sumi-e* painter,  
Alok, with his immense horse-hair brush  
standing in silence before the blank scroll,  
waiting to make the thick single stroke  
that will fall across the parchment like lightning,  
while a guy next to me whispers, bored,  
*It's like watching golf on television...*

Or later, walking up Rodeo Gulch Road  
in search of my non-existent self,  
pausing to sit on a boulder peppered with illegible graffiti  
purple, black, & orange as the mind's unreadable rants.  
At my feet, an empty bottle of King Cobra malt liquor  
lying calmly on the hillside—a sign

that someone emptied here too.  
Perhaps while staring at the moon-lit sky  
shining on the curve of road ahead  
where half the asphalt slid into the gulley,  
the gash draped with black tarp  
stanchioned by broken sandbags  
descending into tumbleweed & thatch.  
Wondering, as I do, who would undertake such repair—  
*this wound of self*. Still, the miracle

that any of this exists at all—  
the whirring bird,  
the horse-hair brushstroke of the moment,  
a golf ball rolling through the mind's green  
cluttered with indecipherable graffiti.

A *self*, empty as a King Cobra bottle—  
but like the mystic Rumi, drunk  
on the amber liquor of it all.

## After

*Linda and I will never be this young again,*  
the thought comes—

arrow in an open field—

untangling limbs, newly sixty-three,  
bodies still aquiver  
with the scent of each other,

yet we've lived this way for years.  
Each time,

never to be so young. Which means  
the truth is also this:

I am the younger lover *now*  
I'll look back on  
in this lust and reverence

when my wife, too, enters  
our verdant eighties together  
cooing

*Ah, we'll never, ever again  
be young as this!*



## Smoke & Mirrors

Flying into Delhi, India  
the air is thick with the smoke & exhaust  
of home-fires, vehicles, burning fields, burning cow-dung,  
the burning coal that stokes the new  
electric buses. It seeps inside

our Boeing plane even before landing  
in this mega-city of 25 million.  
When I step from our hotel into the swarm  
of bodies & sound on Connaught Place's  
old colonial circles, I can barely breath.  
Atmosphere congested with ancient myth  
& new capitalism. As though

the Hindu trinity of Brahma the creator,  
Vishnu the preserver, & Shiva the destroyer  
are sparring in a blind alley. I am

already lost to the gods of this place,  
walking the colorful streets with my wife  
in this our seventh decade. Pilgrims

to this other side of the world. Where  
not only the gods beckon, but beautiful young men  
with large brown eyes asking where we're from  
—*ah yes, I love America!*—  
won't you follow me, they say,  
just a few streets over to the Market  
where you can buy

anything, everything. Is it the smoke  
of Shiva's breath I inhale, or America's  
here? The balm of burning ghats?  
The dense perfume of desire?

This illusory mirror of a self  
I came here to offer India.  
As if she didn't have enough, already.

## *J'aime Paris*

Marc Simon

They went on a European vacation because his wife of forty-three years had insisted, that's what couples their age do. Besides, she said, she wanted to see Paris before she died. He asked her if she were planning on dying any time soon. She told him he wasn't funny.

On the morning of third day they took a group walking tour. After an hour he'd had enough of vaulted ceilings, murky stained glass, stone buttresses and Midwesterners with Iowa Hawkeye T-shirts and fanny packs asking where the bathrooms were. He removed his headset with the guided narration and put on his Bluetooth earphones. He opened his Charley Parker download. The first song was *April in Paris*. It's May, he thought but close enough.

He tapped his wife between her shoulder blades. "I have a headache. I think I'll go back to the hotel.

"What?"

He pointed to his forehead. "...have...a...headache. Going back to hotel."

She removed her headset. "You want me to go with you?"

"No, no. You go ahead. I'll see you at dinner." He handed the tour headset to her.

"Wait." She put a bottle of Tylenol 3 in his hand, replaced her headset and walked double time to rejoin the group.

He figured he could get in maybe an hour of writing before he took a nap, but after walking around for fifteen minutes he realized he had no idea where he was. He thought about asking someone how to get to the hotel. His wife said most of the French spoke English, but he was too embarrassed to tell anyone he was lost. He tried to walk purposefully, as if he knew where he was going.

He bought a bottle of water and a cinnamon scone at a bodega by pointing to them. He paid with a five Euro note from the thick pack of money in his pocket. At least he wouldn't starve.

The day was heating up. Sleek women in black sleeveless tops and bare legs walked past him. He wondered why all of them seemed so slim. Was it because they all smoked?

He shrugged off his jacket and pulled his wool sweater over his head. His wife had insisted he wear it. Well, she hadn't insisted. She said if he wanted to be chilly, that was up to him.

The sweater made his palms damp. He couldn't see carrying it around. Not knowing what else to do with it, he dumped it in a trash bin. Bluesy music came from around the corner, behind the bodega. *Stormy Weather*.

A young woman with blonde dreadlocks was playing a tenor saxophone. An open case lay in front of her. Three people were watching. Her hair bounced as she played.

Behind her was a tall red door in a stone archway, connected to a crumbling church that he guessed was medieval. Part of the roof was missing. Men with hard hats were climbing on the scaffolding above.

The woman wore a white tank top that said *Go Figure* and black jeans. A handful of coins rested on the black felt liner of the saxophone case. As soon as she finished the people that had been listening walked away.

The man placed a five-Euro note in the case. "Tres bon."

She slung the saxophone under her arm. "You're American."

"How did you...how did you know?"

"Your accent." She pushed her hair back. Star tattoos ran up the inside of her forearm.

"You're American, too?"

"I'm a Yankee Doodle Dandy." She removed the mouthpiece from the sax. "So, enjoying Paris? So-called city of light?"

He looked around. "Yes...I mean, no, actually." His throat clutched. His face felt prickly. "See, I was on this tour and I...well, I'm uh, I'm kind of lost."

"Yeah, I can tell." When he didn't answer, she said, "You wanna hear another song? How about the Gulf Coast High School Varsity Marching Band Fight Song." She reinserted the mouthpiece and hit five quick notes.

The man nodded. "Pretty good."

"Damn right. I made varsity as a freshman."

The man looked up at the scaffolding. "Umn, is this church famous?"

"Depends on who you ask. Some old lady in the neighborhood told me Edith Piaf used to come here."

"Really?"

"That's what she really told me." She pocketed the money and closed the saxophone case.

"And the red door?"

"People say it's a sign of welcome for travelers. I've also heard it's painted red to symbolize the blood of the lamb. All I know is, it's my front door."

"Wait." He pointed to the church. "You live in there?"

"For now."

Suddenly he wanted to know everything about her. "Could you play another song? I'll pay. Sorry, that sounded stupid."

"Not necessarily. What would you like to hear?"

"How about *April in Paris*?"

She turned her chin over her right shoulder, as if she were speaking to the rest of the band. "Boys, we got ourselves a romantic." She closed her eyes and began to play.

After the first few bars it was all he could do to keep from crying. When she finished he took out a twenty Euro note. The first few notes of *Purple Haze* rang out. She took a cellphone from her back pocket. "My public." She began to speak rapidly in French.

The man watched her expressions change from surprise to amusement. Her laughter skipped through the air. She walked in little circles and gestured with her free hand. He glanced at his phone. Emails promising huge 24-hour-only savings with Macy's and Target. An offer to earn money with your own car by driving with Lyft.

The breeze picked up. He wondered if his sweater was still in the trashcan. It was time to go, he knew, but she was still on the phone. He waited until she turned back toward him. He waved.

“Une seconde.” She held the phone to her chest. “You’re leaving?”

“Yeah, I have to get back.”

“Yeah? Well, thanks for the dough.”

“You’re welcome.”

“De nada. That’s Spanish.”

“Listen.”

“Yeah?”

“Will you, uh, will you be here tomorrow?”

She winked. “Ya never know.” She returned to her call.

The man photographed the street sign with his phone. He hailed a cab and told the driver the name of his hotel. Five minutes later, as they pulled in front he recognized some of the people from the tour. They were out front on the stairs, chatting in small groups. A few had wine in plastic cups. The tour leader was collecting the headsets.

He showed the driver the photo on his phone. He said, “S’il vous plez.”

She was closing up her saxophone case as he got of the taxi. “Wow, you’re back. Is it tomorrow already?”

“What? No, I was, I mean, I just wanted to hear you play some more. But it looks as if I’m too late.”

She lifted her case. “All work and no play. Get it, no play?”

“Oh. Sorry.” He looked down at his feet. “Uh, you really live here?”

“Uh, really I do. So.”

“Well, thanks again.” He extended his hand. “Fred Barton.”

She curtseyed. “Andromeda. As in, chained to a rock to be sacrificed to a monster but saved from death by Perseus. So anyway, Fred Barton. I’m going in now.” He stood there as she opened the door. “You’re not coming back tomorrow, are you.”

They were supposed to take a bus ride to Normandy and on to Omaha Beach. “I don’t know.”

“Hey, wait a minute.” She scratched her head. “Do you know my parents or something? Did they send you?”

“What? No.”

“Tell me the truth. Because it would be just like them to send someone to try to track me down. Are you some kind of investigator or something?”

He wished he were. “No, honest. I mean, look at me. Like I said. I was lost.” He glanced at his watch. Dinner was in less than an hour. The theme was *J’Aime Paris*.

“Are you supposed to be somewhere right now, Fred Barton?”

He wondered where he was supposed to be. A jackhammer began to pound. “I like it right here.”

“Wow. You don’t mess around.” She stood by the red door. “So anyway. You wanna come in?”

The room was long and narrow. Light slanted in from a window with vertical metal bars. A glass vase with a cluster of white chrysanthemums sat on a square wood

table under the window. The man pointed to a poster of Jimi Hendrix kneeling behind a flaming guitar. "Monterrey Pop Festival, 1967."

"You were there?"

He was tempted to say he was. "I saw the movie."

She kicked her sandals off. "You sure my parents didn't send you here?"

"I'm not sure what sent me here."

"Ha. Well, make yourself at home. There's wine and crackers. My back's killing me." She lit a candle. The sandalwood fragrance drifted around her. She got down on her hands and knees, lowered her chest to the cement floor and stretched her arms out. Her buttocks raised above her hips.

"What are you doing?"

"Puppy pose."

"What?"

"For my back. Yoga. Ever do it?"

"No, I ...no."

"You should. Definitely you should, Fred Barton." Her shirt slid part way up her back. Her triceps flexed. Her hair spilled over in front. Without looking up, she said, "Coming?"

He sank down next to her on his hands and knees. His back crackled. He stretched his arms out in front of him, supplicant. "Is this right?"

"There is no right or wrong."

He listened to her breath. He tried to breathe in rhythm with her. He closed his eyes. The stone floor cooled his forehead. His jaw relaxed. Saxophone music trilled in his head. He felt her hand on the small of his back. He shivered.

"You cold, Fred Barton?"

"No. I feel, I don't know. Different."

"Free?"

She pulled the bottom of his shirt from the back of his pants. Her fingers massaged his spine. He sat up. "What are you doing now?"

"Sexy yoga, Fred. You know what?"

"What?"

"A smile would take ten years off your face."

He smiled. It felt like the first time in a long time. "How's this?"

"Tons better." She turned over on her back. She pulled his shirttails loose and unbuttoned the top button of his shirt. "Ever kissed a saxophone player?"

"Not recently."

"Goddamn. You're secretly funny, Fred Barton." She wound her legs around his waist and pressed her inner thighs against him. "Umn."

He felt himself growing hard. "Is this more sexy yoga?"

"Nope. It's called foreplay."

Andromeda slipped on a jeans jacket with an embroidered *Mona Lisa* on the back. She poked him on his side with the tip of her saxophone case.

His eyes flew open. He groped around for his pants. "You're leaving?"

The flickering light from the sandalwood candle made a halo around her hair. "Places to go, people to see, music to play."

"When are you coming back?"

“Eventually.” She bent at the waist and kissed his forehead. “Stay as long as you like. Or don’t like. And don’t forget to feed the mice.”

He laughed. “What do they eat?”

“The same thing as the rats.”

“Got it.”

“Oh, I almost forgot, call for Fred Barton, call for Fred Barton. Here you go.” She handed his cell phone to him. “TTFN.”

“What?”

“Ta ta for now.” She slipped out the door and melted into the twilight.

He checked his phone. His wife had called three times and texted twice. He slipped the phone in his pocket.

It was 7:15. They would have had dinner by now back at the hotel and broken into discussion groups. One or two of them may have wondered where he was. The tour director, a skittish graduate student at the Paris School of Art and Architecture would be pulling her hair out. His wife would be pressing her to call the police.

His stomach pinged. He stopped at the bodega where he’d bought the scone and water and purchased two Lebanese flat bread rollups. He finished his by the time he got back to the church.

It had been remarkably easy, he thought, to forget about his marriage, his retirement plan, his grandson, his dog, his business, his house, his car, his car, his golf clubs, his taxes, his few friends, his investments, and so on. The song, *Fifty Ways to Leave Your Lover* played in his head. How dopey. How appropriate.

He found a pen and some paper and wrote a note to Andromeda: “Thanks for everything. Fred Barton.” He put the rollup next to the note. He inserted his headphones.

His phone vibrated in his pocket. From the taxi ride he knew the way back to his hotel. At least he thought he did. The air was cooler now, but not too cool, definitely not sweater weather. He decided to walk. The light was golden. There were so many things to see.

## The Dame and the Replicant

I like the city wet  
with sharp shadows  
beautifully illuminated by  
light bouncing off  
a million raindrops

It

almost

feels

real

until an angel  
with a hangover  
and a shattered wing  
passes me by

and the last piece  
of my weary heart  
drops into an ocean  
polluted with  
an unknown amount  
of starlets' tears

## **Cassandra Works the Night Shift at the Call Center**

She works from 10 pm to 5 am,  
because the money is better,  
and prophecies carry more  
weight in the dark.

She sits upright in her crummy swivel chair,  
sips tea from her favorite terracotta mug,  
and answers questions posed  
by those loved and lost.

Her eyes follow a steady rhythm  
as scripts flash across her screen.  
She'll answer honestly, but never  
take on questions about travel plans,  
or the apocalypse. No one  
believed her the first time.

For those who don't listen,  
she lowers her voice to the sound  
of whiskey poured over ice,  
and for those satisfied seekers  
she receives a 10% commission,  
and a 5-star prophetess rating.  
Sometimes, the crack of heartbreak  
can be heard, since all calls  
are recorded for training  
and quality assurance.



## **"I'm *fine*"**

Abuse.

Abject, and mean-spirited,  
is what it is, this poor overworked phrase  
applied to the wide Sargasso Sea of emotion,  
a pauper's legacy from the straightjacket mores  
of polite society. I scan for subtext  
in a raised brow and down-turned mouth  
to interpret the true nature  
of your condition.

If the questions in my direct gaze offend  
or frighten you, I refuse to apologise. This is  
NOT how we were meant to be,  
all of us are born with a thousand tales  
inside our souls that yearn to burst forth  
and scar the world with a terrible beauty.

Tell me,  
in painful consonants  
and sharp vowels

the story of  
*who* you  
are

and I'll sit at your feet as rapt  
as the Sultan who lifted the blade  
from Scheherazade's lovely neck.

## MUTE PROPHET

Hands beneath,  
and the eyes of a happy face.  
And yet, the tongue of a smile,  
beams out of the menu.  
but my subconscious bars the way.  
Candles are on the same flight  
For all the gaudy presentation of death before me,  
for hearts know poetry,  
from rake to slaughterhouse.  
How small was I? The bed swallowed me. A comic book licked up the crumbs. And  
how alone? As alone as people are in their bodies and in rooms and when everyone  
else is a giant saying, "Quiet" even when I make no sound. And important? Gone  
were the days of suckling and head-patting. I was nothing but a consequence of  
seven year old mating. Clocks ticked, likewise my school reports. Both ignored as  
anything but time passing. Meanwhile, in my comic book, adults fought adults,  
sometimes to the death. Heroes emerged but none in pajamas, none less than five  
feet. How late was it? Not late at all by the world's reckoning but so late for me that  
my mother knocked on the door, muttered, "Go to sleep." Heroes didn't sleep. Nor  
did they wash their hands or piddle in the bowl. I dropped the comic, closed my eyes,  
said prayers out loud. God is always watching, they said. But who felt less watched  
than me? I remember no dreams from then. Were they worse than life? Or did I save  
the world from evil madman? Still, to this day, I remember forty years ago but not last  
night. How odd is memory? Forty years of watering, still nothing will grow back then.  
The visionary's death –  
all that has gone before.  
not the possibility of subliminal bleeding.  
of table, shiny flatware, china plate.  
on our lips - the implements that get it here  
Thank God,  
the evening is willing to look askance.  
The implication strives to get at us  
There is nothing more earthy  
than how we compensate.  
We have both words and blood  
We imagine what comes later.  
we only think flowers on the table  
What if my medium is bloody rare steak,  
your gasping fish head.

## CITY FOLK VENTURE OUT

They stopped by an open field,  
with woods beyond,  
looked east and west, north and south,  
snapped away on their cellphones,  
and said, "So this is the wilderness."

They were from the city,  
having read about such places  
all their lives  
and either feeling they were surely exaggerated  
or, more likely, didn't exist at all.

But they bundled into the car  
on a Sunday,  
left the big smoke behind  
for a handful of small smokes,  
an odd farm, a park or two,  
and some patches of ground  
that didn't seem to be about anything.

They wore stiff collars but no ties.  
One even brought binoculars  
though he didn't once put them up to his eyes.  
They were hungry by this  
having brought no provisions  
and not trusting the small cafes  
they had passed on their travels.

So it was dark  
and they were back in familiar surrounds  
before they partook of the menu highlights  
of their favorite bistro  
washed down by flagons of expensive wine.

"We saw the wilderness today," one told the waiter.  
He was pleased to hear that it had hardly changed  
from the one time he saw it.

"Terminal," he says.  
That's death twice –  
spoken and unspoken.  
Millay wrote a wonderful poem about  
what it is to be simply awful and have nothing.

Renee, my first lover...six tumultuous...  
even in the men's room  
back of the Boy's Brigade  
both sides of the river.

It's all here -  
everything doing –  
these mansions, when were they built?  
bar is shiny brown and long and...

bar of the old Shanghai Hotel –  
battlefields and booze  
has been my journey  
although I understand  
Amanda will never let me forget that.

Just a brothel, thank God...  
for a moment there I thought it was a hospital.  
Butch is in a room somewhere on the second floor.  
It's not relaxation. More of an experiment.

Cancer had set him loose  
with a carving knife.  
He's serious.  
Creative engineering, he calls it.

Parked bedside,  
dark eyes that looked not unlike the dead –  
and the point is death...  
with plain white hospital decorations.

No cancer in his poems at least.  
He doesn't take revenge with words.  
Nor does his art dine out on how sick he is.  
And no elegies on where he thinks he's going.

What used to be tall,  
especially fine,  
can't come to terms with  
the figure of terror he's become.

Oh forget it, he says, reading Eliot.  
Something for him every time he opens a page.  
And, whatever you do, don't show him the picture  
of when all of us we're young.

He recalls the trials of teaching  
at that charter school downtown.  
And the pleasures of the nearby Oyster House.  
Before the oysters started eating him raw.

Gone and we are left with just...  
gone too deep...the last time I saw him...  
a withered great performance  
but he had been so kind as to share it with an audience.

He was dying of leukemia.  
He pretended to be happy  
as he faced the terminal  
like trying to outstare an oncoming train.

Known and loved,  
I mean I smiled and tried to laugh out loud,  
wanted to talk more,  
to be on as it were.

In bread and garlic,  
in dreams about him  
in lively old Providence,  
in some long-gone waterside bar.

In Roger Williams Park,  
florid grass, cabbage-rose  
good and reasonable,  
I accept all of the outdoors' intentions.

Examine each square inch  
that still functions,  
that bears the owner's name,  
that isn't full of death.

Kitchen – soon to be sold,  
layers of paint and abuse buy sickness -  
“Stormy Weather” is playing.  
It carries a lot of weight.

He's always the nice guy,  
why can't he scream out loud this hateful feeling?  
It won't matter to his audience.  
Noise is all part of getting over.

So many bars to the square inch.  
So many collages to the once blank canvasses.  
More drinks. More murder.  
In the street. In the hospitals. And counting.

Of all the shit I've read,  
of all the ferries I've ridden...,  
oh well, he had his life.  
And now it's been torn down.

Mirror glass – the eyes –  
such beautiful lettering.  
They have my vote.  
And then there's this jukebox I've been playing.

Two diagonals -  
we somehow became one.  
Enough was never enough.  
We retched in fine style.

The 70's? If you remember the seventies  
you must have been in Hoboken.  
Plunged in deep alcohol.  
Or poetry.

My friends puzzle me.  
Why them of all people.  
Why me even  
even if the result is right in its way.

Remember those grand old hotels,  
all rusty and coming unstitched  
but what stories their lobbies could tell  
let along their spicy postcard bedrooms.

Strong as Roman columns?  
Simply have not got the gift  
Maybe a fence post.  
Sinuous, virile. That's not what the mirrors were saying.

It was tough for me to visit,  
to see you skinny as a poem  
and having a hard time feeling like someone.  
I hated to see you hating yourself.

When the fun goes out of people,  
fear moves in.  
You tell me how splendid the urinals are.  
You squat low like a bear to piss blood.

I stared at you and tears began.  
The joke you once told  
still survives but barely. Not many do:  
Nothing's funny. At least, not funny enough.

You prefer Hoboken to any other city.  
Frank Sinatra's birthplace, you brag.  
That the most beautiful of times  
can happen in such a place  
is beautiful to you.

You called yourself the Hoboken queen,  
until it time to cut and run,  
preferred more anonymous bars  
up and down the east coast.

He rode the taxi all the way  
to the Terminal Hotel.  
Or was it a ferry boat?  
Or maybe he crawled on his hands and knees.

Today is one thing.  
Yesterday is a hike into the hills.  
Twenty years ago is a drunken ride on a riverboat.  
I stopped being a hero to myself soon after.

Cancer –  
was it always called that?  
Why not Sagittarius?  
Or Leo the hungry lion.

We picked each other up.  
Drank from the same wells.  
Now he wants to see me...well.  
Hospitals are death-traps.

So we parted.  
Where's he headed now?  
What's the point?  
What is that's nagging at me.

If there is  
no way to restore  
we hereby withdraw our emotional ties:  
the three most sorrowful looking guys in the room.

Wonder of toilet stalls,  
wooden and handsome,  
your name is etched  
in honor of your writing  
and, knowing other poets.

Years find the dead chasing me around.  
I don't really like it.  
You, perhaps, could get a date  
somewhere in the afterlife,  
as young and handsome  
as the nights you remember.



# The Fireflies Have Come Out to Play

Emma Wilson-Kanamori

The fireflies have come out to play. To Lydia, they take the shape of small, pill-like vessels darting through the night air, lancing between shafts of rainbow light. They shift between magenta, cerulean, lime, banana. They look like the gum between her teeth tastes, sweet and tangy and bubbly. The night licks at the back of her neck by ruffling the dark curls, unsettling the little fringe that sits over her still young brow.

She remains early in her teen years, an underfed figure clad in clothes that hug too tight, regardless. Not since she was even younger has she had the care or decency to find good and measured clothes fitting for her age and demeanour. These are scavenged things that she hoists upon her back, alongside the old leather rucksack she holds over one shoulder. This is her typical stand-off – her, her back against somewhere, and the bag roped over one side, held in place by tight fingers that pretend to be looser. Then, of course, the rapidly chewed gum. It sets a frenetic pace for whoever decides to approach her, having them measure the urgency of their conversation before her wide gaze darts away, ever moving onwards and upwards. She likes it that way, setting people on edge. If they linger overlong to get around that first foot, they're either the shady types, or there's something they genuinely need.

Lydia sets off toward the myriad shifting lights. The sound of thick, muffled music accompanies them. She twists her body perpetually sideways, poised to wind her way through any particularly close-knit crowd. Every time she breathes out, she breathes out lemons, and also a thin gauze of steam that coats the breeze streaming back into her face. The music begins to be off-set by a cluster of voices – diverse accents and origins. She ducks her head through a combined must of rank sweat and overdrawn perfume. By the time she reaches the entrance of the club, she's practically doubled over, her dark hair swinging by her fishnet knees.

One hand comes up, poised before her face. Slowly, Lydia raises her gaze. She has dark brown eyes, giving her pointed visage a softer look once one looks away from her quivering chin. Her opposition is almost lazy, giving her a once-over that is at once critical and pitying. When he doesn't immediately concede his space to her, Lydia straightens onto her two feet. A set of lights flicker above his head, decorating the outer rim of the building. From what she can see, they form words – the last being *delights*, the rest cut off from her down-below view. The song switches the beat from inside; becomes a little more guttural.

"You're in the wrong part of town." They're the first words she's heard all night – directed to *her* anyway, in a language that she can understand. She stretches the lemon gum over the tip of her tongue, her cheek roiling as she blankly assesses her challenge. She shrugs up the shoulder with the leather rucksack over it, as if that might offer an explanation. The man narrows his eyes. Pragmatically, she notes that half his skull is missing – or, rather, that half of it is made of a slightly battered metal shell, the wires running down beneath the corner of skin that marks the human and inhuman divide. Both of his eyes are perfectly recognizable, however. One of them makes a soft squeak against the steel socket that holds it in place.

"I'm looking for someone." She gives a patient answer, and maybe it is because of that generosity that he gives her a third look. The kind that really digs down and

evaluates. Lydia tilts her chin up. As she does, she becomes gradually more aware of the quiet that has rippled down the queue behind her. Those diverse accents and origins had hailed from even more diverse folk – wolf furs, long legs, grey skin, glass-like eyes. She doesn't look too closely. She knows already that none of them are who she is destined to meet here.

"Is someone expecting you?" her opponent queries. He has folded his arms back over his chest, fair hair idling around one fleshy cheek, one exposed to the steel bone. Lydia shrugs.

"No."

She begins to look past him. She can see through a dark doorway into the shifting of movement within, rhythmic and ceaseless. Only then does she begin to feel her first pinprick of nervousness. Besides the fact that everything she has journeyed here for lies beyond, there is also the curiosity concerning the type of person who would frequent such an establishment. Lydia glances quickly back over her shoulder, the frayed strap of leather. She makes out tall shapes and short shapes, thin ones – impossibly so. Faces without features, like a soft blur has settled over her irises. *Don't look*, she chides herself. So she takes a deep breath and looks back forward.

"Will you let me in?" she asks of this peculiar guardian. She's beginning to think he doesn't even work here. That he's just making a grand show of himself. He holds up a hand again and moves aside. Lydia thinks it might be an apology.

She wonders what he is apologizing for as she steps inside.

The beginning to the sea of movement is sudden and thick, like watching her breath fog up a car window between one instant and the next. This time, no matter how much she turns herself sideways, she keeps getting bumped between grinding shoulder and grinding shoulder. The satchel cuts sharp angles into her side – into other people's sides, as they say colourful words and break their harmony to punch out odd gaps for her to move through. Lydia is used to being that strange and discomfiting figure inside a room. Even more so now, perhaps, as she appears to be the only one here to somewhat resemble a young creature. Numerous sets of eyes turn to scrutinize her, sometimes all of them in one face. Slit yellow ones like purring cats; dark red orbs that are reminiscent of glowing embers. Patiently, ever persevering, she cuts through the crowd, letting her feet fill up the places that others have deemed abandoned. Then, like catching a breath in the ice cold winter, she steps free of the dance.

What follows is a parallel line of benches and stools, like emerging into a midnight diner. Candy-coloured lights hulk in every corner, sometimes converging in their echoes upon the ceiling. Lydia savors her gum for a moment, taking that time to gather herself and then, *truly* now, scout her surroundings. Everything up to the club itself had been a straightforward journey. Only here do the possibilities multiply, leaving various potentials for her to think through and entertain.

She realizes, belatedly, that she is over-thinking everything.

He is remarkable if only for the fact that he is unremarkable – a human comrade in a sea of everything but. Alone, he shuffles cards, dealing the stock pieces from one nimble finger to the next. His only opponent is himself, for he does not engage with the shadow that looms above him, a hulking, slumped thing with twinkling garnet eyes. His face is obscured by the fall of dirty blonde hair. It makes Lydia think of a photograph, wrinkled, caged in a frame that hasn't been dusted in years. He makes

himself small in one of the benches, sidled up to a window that offers little in the spectrum of views.

She wants to run, she realizes. Not out of any deep, irreparable trauma, but in that similar vein of intrusive whimsy that makes you want to take a step off a very high ledge. The option is there, waiting for you to plummet, if only to embrace the absurdity. Before she can think about it for too long, he looks up. Their eyes catch, indifferently at first, then with budding interest. He's been surrounded by the inhuman for so long, he must have forgotten what it's like to see a teenage girl carry her rucksack around like a schoolbag. A colorfully illustrated card falls unceremoniously flat on his table.

She's power-walking towards him. Slides herself into the bench as far as she can until her shoulder hits the wall. It's to stop herself from embracing that bizarre whimsy, which feels not so bizarre when she ultimately considers her surroundings. She keeps her eyes locked onto his all the while. Not brown like hers, but hazel – that obnoxious mix of colour that can't quite decide what it wants to be until it hits a certain light

"Hi." Her voice is nearly drowned out by the heavy, thickening dubstep. She can see the urge to cup his ear momentarily tighten the cord of his wrist. He's wearing old brown leather for a jacket, wholly reminiscent of her own which dwarfs her flat shoulders. They share the same scent too. Five o'clock shadow across tanned skin that hasn't had the time to develop further. His thick brows are slowly drawing together, closer and closer, pinching his eyes deeper into shadow. When he opens his mouth, Lydia quickly holds up a hand. "Do you want him to go away?"

This time, she allows him to speak. It's a thick drawl, like he perpetually alternates a marble and a violin string between his teeth. "Excuse me?"

"Him. Your shadow. I can distract him, maybe."

He looks up, and the garnet eyes peer down at him from above. Quickly, in the moments between looking up and back down, Lydia flings open her rucksack. His shadow grows distracted – shifts its weight toward the dark of the bag until the panorama behind the man is more transparent than opaque. The shadow around his mouth and cheeks seems to lighten. His eyes go a little brighter.

"You did something," he says, "jus' now."

"Yes," Lydia agrees, not quite enthusiastically. "I think it's only temporary. He's cunning."

The hazel eyes punch through her, leaving odd shapes in the centre of her stomach. She crosses her hands in her lap, worrying her index finger straight into her palm. It's now or never, so she takes a deep breath – but this time, *she* isn't allowed to speak. He lets his entire deck fall flat and, with decorum, declares, "Christ almighty."

She doesn't know if that's good. The closer she looks at him, the more she sees him lean backward in his bench, halfway between recoiling and simply observing. His features have melted over with surprise, then the melancholy of seeing a ghost. She has prepared herself for this. Imagined a thousand different ways his initial recognition might unfold. This was one of the first potentials, but it floods her with uncertainty all the same. Everything else about him is a wildcard – his aged whiskey scent, the soft creak of his leather against the vinyl of the bench. The cards, tarot laid

out before him, though they had only seemed an old playing deck from a distance. She wonders if they foretold her arrival, or any allusion to it.

“I’d recognize you anywhere,” he tells her, between awe and accusation. She can read his instinct to run as quickly as she’d felt her own. A surge of impulse sends her leaning over the table, her forearm pressing against the queen of swords. As though he has been held at their blade point, he remains distinctly still.

“It’s Lydia,” she says finally. “The name she settled on.” Guilt and sorrow darken his face, and she can see the shadow trying to squirm free of the rucksack’s flap. Hesitantly, she loosens the strap from over her shoulder. It’s a distraction again, though this time for him. His lips part.

“That’s my bag.”

“She gave it to me.”

He reaches out a hand, square fingertips peering free of cut-off gloves. She slides the strap of the rucksack against them, and it is like relinquishing the weight of rain off an umbrella. She feels suddenly empty and light as he removes the luggage from her side of the table. The music pulses so very close by like a constant heartbeat, but it is soon drowned out by her own.

“So you’re my daughter,” he says after a time. He simply holds the rucksack against him, staring into its depths with the wrinkled brow of a man recognizing nostalgia. Lydia shifts about in her seat, eyeing down the table. It isn’t like most diner tables, where she could identify the quality of it, its history, by the nameless stains and ink scribbles. Here, it is untouched, as shiny as though it is brand new. “How’d you come here? You shouldn’t be. This ain’t a place for you.”

“Mama called it a halfway place. A place for the lost and found.”

His expression doesn’t change, that haunted mask. “Are you the lost or the found?”

“The finding. *You’re* the found.”

He leans to one side, his hair slinging over one brow and cheek as he peers through the dance floor. Inversed knees totter around in a ballroom trot. Someone’s heels skid fire across the tiles, contrasting with the candy lights, a flicker of warm tone beneath the cool and manufactured. “They let you in?” he asks, squinting, as though he expects an answer instead from the grand masses.

“They didn’t keep me out. Sort of.”

He straightens again. He has a name, Julien Cabrillac. He sounds like the American South. He smells like freedom, tar-stained things stretched between leather and denim, and moth-eaten cotton gloves that curl away in sad droops from his fingers. She doesn’t think she would have ever thought he was her father, if they sat in a real diner together, two strangers adjacent. He might recognize her anywhere, but she recognizes nothing familiar about him. A peculiar shyness takes her, relinquishing her to pick at the vinyl of the bench. It too appears as untouched as the tabletop, infuriatingly so. He squeezes the rucksack between his thighs, shifting his own weight across the spread of tarot cards. He taps his fingers, a business-like *clack clack clack* that makes little reverberation in the dance hall. When Lydia glances up, the shadow creature is twining around his head again, its garnet eyes twinkling in consternation.

“Righ’,” he murmurs to himself. “Righ’. This is trouble.”

“Trouble?”

The clicking fingers increase in pace. He's starting to jiggle his knee, eyes darting to and fro. Then he sweeps onto his feet, bends down, and stares into her face. There is an intensity to him that she can't look straight into, as though he is peering right down into her soul. "Trouble," he agrees, but a half grin curls up the corner of his mouth. She likens it to a thief uncovering the Hope Diamond, the facets of the jewel dancing in his eyes. "Not unwelcome trouble. Still, this isn't a place for you. Ain't a place for anyone like you or me."

"*You* came here first," she points out. The midnight diner is abandoned save for him and her, as though it was a set wheeled into place for their pleasure. She glances back toward the dancing crowd. "Had to find you."

"Suppose she told you where to find me too. Your mother's resourceful like that."

Lydia looks doubtfully back toward his shadow. The garnet eyes seem to twinkle in a mirror of her father's, with the same strange avarice and pleasure. She wonders where it begins and he ends.

"Where are we going?" she asks instead. "Where else is there to go?"

"Come with me," Julien answers. "I know this place."

"But I just came here. They just let me in."

"Then they'll let you out too. Stick wit' me. Nothing's gonna hurt you."

He rises like a grand and pompous god, the rucksack falling taut over his shoulder as though it's always belonged there, never roped around her own thinned frame. His shadow shifts around the new obstruction, melting in and out of the shuddering neon that echoes from the dance floor. Before she's fully risen, he is already striding out the other end of the diner, his head held high.

Lydia has to stumble to keep pace.

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They are back outside the club, the music a distant insinuation behind them. The pill-shaped vessels dart overhead, sometimes large, sometimes small. Occasionally, figures swim down from the beams that they cast. An empty highway stretches out all around, a long snake that drifts over untouched plains. Julien stops and tilts his head back, breathing in so deeply, Lydia thinks he is about to scream. Instead, he pulls up short with a deep-bellied laugh.

"What's so funny?" she challenges. She hasn't felt particularly on edge until now, because this is truly where the unknown begins. He has become more than just a wildcard – he is a potential all of his own, and she knows next to nothing about her own father. Julien pauses, twisting back around to peer at her. His shadow goes invisible against the night sky, though the garnet eyes remain watchful.

"Life," he answers. "Life's funny. Life hasn't brought us together before now, Lydia. Makes me laugh, a bit."

She doesn't find it funny. Moments before, she had been an urchin searching for her father in a place where she didn't belong. She still doesn't belong, and him acting as though she does sends a ripple of discomfort through her belly. She is used to this, however – the not belonging. The keeping the head held high. Maybe she inherited it from him, in the end.

"Do you know why I've found you?" she asks him. "After all this time?"

"Your mother. She's a – "

“Resourceful woman. Yes. You’ve told me that.”

She moves to stand beside him, so that they are facing the empty highway together. She cannot imagine why he has deigned this abandoned exterior to be so much more suitable for their conversation than comfortable vinyl seating. The only reprieve is that it is comparatively quiet here. When she breathes in and out, the cold brings clarity, rather than the muffled electric nerves she’d experienced inside.

“*Did he who made the Lamb make thee?*” Her father recites a line that seems at once familiar, at once not. She twists her head to watch him. She barely reaches his shoulder, though he is not a spectacularly tall man. She is not a spectacularly tall girl. She tugs the oversized jacket tighter around her shoulders. “William Blake. Lookin’ at the stars made me think of it. You’re a bit of a tiger, you know that? Come walking in so boldly like the devil ain’t got a stake on your soul. That’s my blood, alright.”

“So you *do* know why I’ve found you.”

He’s quiet. The garnet eyes of his shadow could be mistaken for the stars as well, for when his shadow stands at its full height, it stretches ever upward like a redwood tree. Julien breaks the quiet with a cough, then a quick beckon. “Here,” he says. “I’ll show you around.”

“I don’t need to – ”

“You just want to talk wit’ me. I understand. Gotta go someplace I feel comfortable talking, you know?”

She doesn’t imagine he can feel uncomfortable anywhere, but she remembers his face when he first recognized her. Not a moment of confusion before the dawning. Not a heartbeat skipped before the gravitas had returned to him. She feels that she owes him her own sombre compliance, so she reaches for the strap of a rucksack that is no longer there, then begrudgingly follows.

The highway comes to life as they pick their way through the tumultuous and untamed grass. There is no-one here eager to wield clippers, no doubt, but there is plenty of small, inconceivable life blossoming along the gray tarmac. Little soul-fires drift along as wayward hitchhikers, the missing girls and the runaway creatures; the ones who climb into backseats they shouldn’t and then ride that same highway into a horizon from which they will not return. Lydia suppresses a shudder, wrapping her arms around her chest. Julien Cabrillac glances at her once or twice. Each time he does, he seems to do it covertly, like he is scouting on a wholly separate mission.

“*You* can ask questions too,” she says finally. “Even though you won’t answer mine.”

“Who says I’m not answering yours?”

“You do. Or don’t. You keep changing the subject.”

“How old are you, little Lydia?”

“Fifteen.” She hates the word *little*. She thinks of toddlers when he says it. He stares before him, though his feet keep up a crunching pace through the grass.

“Not even sixteen.”

“Should I come back when I’m older?”

She tries to sound snide, but simultaneously feels satisfaction at how the side of his face wrinkles into a small smile. He is not old, not young. He’s somewhere in his prime, but his prime has been stained by other things like tar. Things that stick and cloy and cling like a long, trailing shadow.

“Your demon,” she adds. “He won’t stop following you.”

“Whatever do you mean by tha’?”

She glances at him sharply, but he walks for all the world as though he is weightless. She doesn’t fully understand it. “Do you see anything behind me?” she asks after a moment. He doesn’t look.

“No. Not at all.”

The highway arcs up from the earth. Like the tracks of a roller coaster, it spirals into the midnight. When Lydia looks behind her, the club is far away. They are alone, truly, if it is possible to be so truly alone. And there, of course, is his demon, mingling with the stars. Julien sits down without prompt, flipping open the rucksack to stare inside. The first thing he takes out is a box of tarot cards. They mirror, perfectly, the deck with which he had been playing beforehand.

“I should call you a thief,” he ponders. He extends one denim leg out before him and taps the ground with the heel of his boot. “Sit. Look through this wit’ me.”

“Why?”

“Your mama told you to bring this with you. And she’s a – ”

“Resourceful woman.”

Lydia sits, tucking her heels in, wrapping her fingers around her sneakered toes. She can feel the crunch of damp grass and earth upon them, and she figures her trousers will get stains, even though they are black and hard to see the stains upon. She is conscious of all these things while he remains obnoxiously carefree. She envies and pities him in turn.

“You ever play with tarot?” He asks her this without looking up, flipping the cards in and out, in and out. They are simple Rider-Waite, with blue checkers for spines. He handles them as though they are treasures.

“No. They aren’t like playing cards, are they?”

“You know better than that.” It’s a sharp reprimand, and she feels the first bruise of a daughter scolded by her father. It’s peculiar, like appreciating a flavour long after it’s gone. Resentful, she ducks her head toward the ground. “C’mon. I’ll read you a spread.”

“Why does it matter now?”

“Can’ I appreciate and make the most of our time together? That too much to ask for?”

He doesn’t look up from his deck all the while. Already he is shuffling it, rippling the choice from out of her hands. Fate speaks through him, speaks through her, and as little as a tarot spread for her matters now, refusal seems to matter even less. She tucks her hair behind her ears and waits.

Rather than a spread, he reads the cards in a fluid, ceaseless motion. Death casts out into the palm of his hand without thought, and he sets it down between them as a given. She stares at it, the skeletal knight on his white horse, but he carries on ahead without explaining the ritual, the meaning behind it.

Next come ten pentacles, upside down, like an overturned candelabra. He shifts it beside death, a brief smile twisting his lips. “Legacy,” he states. “My legacy. You had no clue you were gonna find me here at all, did you?”

“I had a chance.”

Eight of cups. A man walking away from his bounty. Again, without meaning, he slides it next to his legacy, death. He impatiently thumbs for another card. Judgement, reversed. He begins a soft, frustrated chuckle, holding his hand over the

deck. “This ain’t a spread for you, is it?” She does not answer, thinking he is asking the cards. After deliberation, he chances the final card. The knight of swords. His smile turns less sardonic, and he keeps his fingertip poised on the arching leg of the stallion.

“That one’s you. Brave girl. Bold girl. My white knight.”

He sweeps the spread into obscurity, hiding the cards away as deftly as he’d revealed them. She opens her mouth to protest, but she sees that there is bitterness in his visage.

“They keep on tellin’ me the same thing. No matter who I try to read for. Same cards, usually. Same sort of order. Upright, reversed. Like they’re stuck in time.” He slides the deck back into their homely box, then sets the box on the earth beside him. He peers over the rucksack; chances a glance to Lydia. “Why don’t you reach inside this time? Bet you’ve been dyin’ to.”

It, to her, is like dipping her hand into someone else’s grave, fishing for bones. She recoils back at first, then that morbid curiosity sends her scooting nearer. She splays her fingertips down the warm, lifeless inside, fishing in the dark in the hopes that whatever is inside will choose itself for her. Hook on her little finger, like fish on bait. She feels cloth, satiny, and then she is drawing out a black kerchief. His initials are stitched along the bottom, *J.C.* It always seems like such an old person thing to do. She’s never known anyone her age to get their name embroidered upon any of their belongings.

“Here,” she says, holding it up to him. He looks up and down it, distinctly unimpressed. It mustn’t hold much sentimental value to him. Even as she thinks that, the ground shifts and spins. The grass grows taller, like a forest that sprouts from a blanket of its mother. Julien tilts his head up.

“Don’t worry abou’ that. Happens.”

She watches as the grass swallows up the sky. They seem to be encapsulated in a bud of latticework, and the lattice is made up of springy emerald blades. She reaches out through instinct to part it, and where her arm pokes between the growth, sunlight spills down her elbow. It settles finally a perfect circle on the rucksack – namely the kerchief, which hovers over it. Like a spotlight slanting inward.

The grass bud bends outward like a flower, blooming.

They are in a meadow, and they are underneath a bright, pulsing sun. The light seems to shift sometimes, like it’s remembering the flavour of candy from long ago. Lydia slowly rises to her feet. She has never seen anything like it. She knows cities, cold nights. Grey and greyer, with traffic green and red. This is like a storybook, and she takes her first baby steps out into the soft earth with her arms stretched out on either side, a tightrope walk. Julien follows, or makes to. When he straightens, his knees click into place.

“Hey,” he calls after her. When she turns, his demon is slouched over one shoulder, resentful of the brightness. “Careful you don’ go too far.”

“I’m not going anywhere.”

“I know where this is. Or where it’s meaning to be. The place plays tricks on you, gotta remember that.”

She wonders if this is his attempt at a fatherly lesson. She waits until he reaches her, sinking his gloved hands deep into the pockets of his jacket. The sunlight is so



avid, she shrugs off her own, that which is the mirror of his. He's watching the horizon, one cheek sucked inward.

The meadow is speckled with dandelions, drops of sun that have fallen from the sky. It shifts over a rolling hill, then slants down, then up and over again. Julien is watching a boy who sits on the rise. He is having a picnic with himself, though traces of his family remain around him. When Lydia starts to walk closer, he holds out an arm to keep her back.

"Got a bag full of delights, and this is the one you pick?"

She wants to reach around him, run through the dandelions. Instead, she rocks back onto her heels.

"I didn't know I was supposed to choose properly."

"You weren't. Guess I just hoped there was some meaning to it."

"Like your tarot cards?" she challenges. "You didn't like the meaning *they* gave. Maybe you're just never satisfied."

He squints down at her. In the sunlight, his dirty blonde hair looks like it's had too much product combed through it, then left in it. It reminds her of his old, fraying gloves. Her anger seeps out of her like a puddle run amok from a storm.

"You're too much like your mother," he tells her. The boy has been rejoined by someone – a woman. She bends and dabs at his mouth with a kerchief, and he starts wailing into the air, offended by the notion of cleanliness. "Why don't we go on someplace else? There's better things for you to see."

"You choose this time, then."

They return to the abandoned rucksack, squatting around it like it's campfire of solace. He dips his weathered fingers in, glancing upward in some cocksure manner of thoughtfulness. Then, out of it, he produces a block of wood. It seems unremarkable, stained, a little mildewed. He runs his fingertips over it, and Lydia realizes that it has already left more of a mark than the kerchief had.

The grass shoots back up into the sky. This time, she is a little less surprised. She will be even less surprised the next time. The blades widen and go firm into trees, proper. The earth beneath them becomes uneven. She is sitting on a root, and it bites into her thigh before she shifts forward, feeling a cramp come on in her ankle. Julien is still holding on to the piece of wood. He touches it to his lips, then he rises with a spring to his heels.

"C'mon," he says.

Once more, they fit in like comrades. They pick their way over jutting roots and sliding leaves. Lydia pretends that these are skyscrapers, but more ancient. Shrouded in make believe, they become less intimidating. She nearly walks into a girl, her size. Her back is against one of the trees, and she has a book unfolded over a plain white skirt. Her hair, dark and silken, settles over her shoulders as though it was arranged there by a mortician. She stares into her mother's younger features, the quiet concentration as she reads the strands of a poem.

*Tyger, Tyger, burning bright,  
In the forests of the night;  
What immortal hand or eye,  
Could frame thy fearful symmetry?*

She looks up, and she sees that she is being watched. Julien Cabrillac peers from behind the trees adjacent her, his hair still shiny and in good health, his age, stubble, and shadow washed away by the finite spring of youth. One tan hand is braced on gentle, moss-embroidered bark. They are each holding their breaths.

Julien Cabrillac stands beside Lydia. His eyes are far away, both present and yet not. He holds up his hand again, running his thumb over the piece of wood. "I kept it," he tells his daughter, "for years." She looks up at him, and she wonders if there was anything that reminded him of her. Anything that he might have kept and taken with him on the road. Then she decides it is peculiar, to be jealous of her mother.

"Mariko!"

The girl looks up from her poetry, her doll-like hair disturbed back to life. Her expression does not change, whether she looks at the boy who watches her, or toward the mother who calls for her. When she glances back again, Julien is gone from his perch, disappeared into the vast swathe of forest like a fey prince. She rises, slowly, and she dog-ears the page she had settled upon. When she turns, she turns straight through Lydia, leaving a chill like a fine misting of water to settle over her daughter.

"She wasn't afraid of anything," Julien says. "She'd climb a redwood to read her books. Leave her legs dangling for the bears to catch on. She was the predator, even if she ain't never seemed it."

"I know. She was my mother."

Julien frowns. He looks at her properly, at least for the first time since he had knelt beside her in the diner. He reaches out a hand. She is left bewildered before he asks, "Can I see something o' yours?" Her nose wrinkles.

"I didn't bring a bag."

"Nothing? Nothing I can't borrow?"

She looks down at her knees, peering through cut-off black trousers and fishnet tights, then looks back toward the jacket she'd left behind. There might have been something in the pockets. Candy wrappers. Yes. The lemon one. As she turns, though, her father takes her hand. Their fingers are as mismatched as jamming two forks together, and she feels the ungainliness of it straight through her chest.

"You got a bracelet," he says. It's an embroidered thing that centers on lava stone. It used to be that she could douse it with oils, her favourite scents. All the candied things, or the things that reminded her of home. She stills, and he separates it from her wrist. He catches one of the perfumes off of it, pausing, dangling it near his cheek. He opens his mouth.

There is no sudden growth of grass to shelter them in the transition. They land as though they had jumped, though their feet never left the earth. They are in a kitchen – a familiar one. Lydia promptly thinks of a bowl of soggy cereal, her toes kicking off the wall of the countertop. Her mother twisting between cabinets and the stove, a constant shifting figure. Julien lowers his hand.

"Ah," he says, as though he hadn't expected it. She knows better. She knows that he knew what he was doing. He looks toward the counter where a rhythmic drumming has been started up by a young girl, her hair braided back over both her shoulders. She doesn't see his face as he approaches her, though he reaches out and thinks better of it. Lydia herself feels awkward. She scoots back until her spine touches a wall, looping her hands together in an anxious ribbon. She had taken

everything else up to now for granted, it had been so tightly knit with her father. Now, this is an essence of herself, shoved under a magnifying glass.

She stares at the back of her past. The back of her father's head. He turns, a frown settled on the ridge of his brow. He offers the bracelet to her.

"That's it?" she asks. "Nothing to say?"

"D'you want me to say something?" She hates that he says that, even though she can see the world of hurt swimming in his gaze, reflected from hers. She has always imagined that these were her wounds to sew together. His absence to knit the story around. Now she realizes that he has lost a child, just as she has lost a father. She never thought that it might go both ways. When she doesn't answer, he closes the distance between them and presses the bracelet into the palm of her hand. Nothing about it is forceful. He takes great care, and he doesn't hold on for too long.

Mariko walks into the kitchen, taking up her place before the stove as though it is her throne. She can see his head shift. His glance takes note, even when it's not looking.

"You can stay a little longer if you want," Lydia mumbles. This snatches his focus. He looks straight forward, unfazed.

"Pick something from the bag," he says, and it is like the sound of a closed door.

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She thinks she has picked out a flower, and that the meadow stretches on inside of her father's bag. When she draws her hand free, the petals are made up of ivory silk, and the stem is alike to a bobby pin. The rucksack groans, surrounding their heads with the reach of its flap. They duck, make themselves smaller, obediently.

They surface in what Julien announces to her is a vineyard, though she couldn't tell a vineyard if anyone painted it for her. There are rows and rows of vines, and a little ways away, a fence has been set up to enclose numerous tables shrouded by white cloth. It takes her some moments more, but she's already figured out the occasion before her father announces that it's his wedding day.

"To mama?" she finds herself asking. He stops, giving her a peculiar look. The silk petals are still tickling her fingertips.

"What she tell you about how I left?"

"That it wasn't by choice."

He walks on towards the sea of white tablecloths. She follows after a brief pause. She has seen photographs of the day, and she begins to discern the things that are familiar. The details of the fencing, or the pavilion that has been set up in case the weather turns foul. She searches for the bride, her wedding dress a dazzling lace and appliqué star. But the tables, the pavilion, are all empty. Lydia pauses. Maybe these are the hours before, or the hours after. She holds the ivory flower to her nose, though no scent comes off it.

"She ever tell you stories about this?" Julien asks her. He stands between table and table, his shadow casting long and stark across the ground. Lydia rubs the toe of her sneaker in it.

"She framed pictures. There was one of you together. That's how I recognized you."

The line of his shoulders stiffens. Then, he turns. For the first time, she sees regret painted across his face. Was that what she wanted? Did she want something else? Anger, maybe. Anger, so that she can be angry back. But why? What is there to be angry at? Life? Death? The memories?

She doesn't notice when she releases the flower and it floats to the ground. The pin sits between tufts of earth. Her mother had worn her hair up. Lydia had never seen Mariko put her hair up since.

"I'm sorry." Her father bends to pick up the pin, rubbing his thumb over its length. "You shouldn't have had to come find me like that. You shouldn't have –"

"I had nowhere else to be."

His expression turns pained, the soft darkening of a bruise. She is afraid he will crush the ivory silk between his thumb and forefinger. Bend the pin. It's silly. It's survived all these years in his leather rucksack undamaged – his own portable house of treasures.

"You're wonderin' why I'm doing all this. Taking you through the past. That's not why ... not why you'd be finding your pa."

"I just wanted to see what you were like." She lifts her head when a firefly flutters past, darting between the tables, waiting for the night to surrender itself. "Everyone said mama was crazy. She believed in spirits and halfway places."

"You must've done too. Else you wouldn't have found me."

"I got used to it. I had my own ritual. I'd go into mama's bedroom, and I'd look in the rucksack. I think that's why you're doing it. I think you're a little bit of me, and I'm a little bit of you. Right?"

They look down together. The leather rucksack is placed between them as though it had always sat there, waiting to be unravelled. Julien spins the flower idly around his callused fingertips, creating a soft blur of ivory that melds into the air. Lydia tugs her hair free of her ears; crosses her arms in front of her tank top. The leather is slouching over, creasing. Greedy over its secrets like a knock-kneed urchin.

"What else is in there, pa?" *Pa* doesn't sit right like *mama*. *Pa* sits like an unfinished word, one she should apologize for using. She never made up the habit, the ritual, of saying it. He eyes the bag, then he bends, keeping the flower in his palm. What he pulls out next is a book. It's a book of poetry, like the one Mariko had been reading in the forest. He weighs it in his palm, then he turns the pages. As they flip from one side to the next, they settle back in an abandoned meadow, the stars watching them, the fireflies darting low across the ground. The fireflies above, those strange watchful pills, those phantoms caught in blurred cinematography and branded by the skeptics, are interchangeable with the stars.

*"Sweet sleep, come to me, underneath this tree. Do father, mother, weep? Where can Lyca sleep?"*

She wouldn't have said that his voice was suited to poetry. Now the creaks in his cadence, the un-oiled gears, hush to a tentative whisper. Lydia watches him, pulling her knees into her chest.

*"Lost in desert wild  
Is your little child.  
How can Lyca sleep  
If her mother weep?"*

*If her heart does ache  
Then let Lyca wake;  
If my mother sleep,  
Lyca shall not weep.*

*Frowning, frowning night,  
O'er this desert bright,  
Let thy moon arise  
While I close my eyes."*

He pauses, his thumb hovering over the edge of the page. He looks up at her between the firefly glows. He marks the page with his nail; lets the book fall to a half-close. "Ain't never seen so many of the bugs," he drawls. "They never much cared for me, I suspect."

"They're the last things that I remember. A field full of fireflies." Lydia pauses. "A park. Yeah. The city park."

"What were you doing there, girl?"

His shadow hunches down next to them both, crossing its legs, watching the grass with its garnet shards. Lydia looks to the other side, and she imagines that she sees a shadow of her own – a companion from young, half an orphan, with lemon candies for eyes and long, trailing hair like her mother's.

"I ran away," she says. "Just like you ran away."

"That what she told you? That I ran?"

"No. She said – she said you were taken. But you ran. You ran into the dark until she couldn't reach you. She couldn't find you. They never found you. They always said that you were a junkie, or homeless, or you could've been anyone. They never tried."

Lydia pushes her forearm up against her cheek. Her arms are bare and thin, and the evening is raising little bumps along them that whisper and shudder. She remembers amidst the fireflies, she had kept the lemon gummy on the back of her teeth. She remembers thinking how dumb it was, that the last thing she was left with in life were fireflies and lemon gum. Julien reaches for his back pocket, drawing out a half-withered cancer stick. When a firefly darts by, the tip of it glows – not with the usual orange embers, but some glistening viscosity of gold.

"Wish I could've made it easier." His voice never quite recovers beyond the rattling husk of an empty, blood-stilled chest. She tries not to focus on the cadence it implies, or even her own. "Wish I could've made a lot of things easier."

"You don't have to say that. I'm not angry."

"That ain't the truth of it. You been eyein' me for a reason to blame since you stepped foot inside that halfway place. You're right to be. You think your mama was some cruel witch who summoned a broken demon to sire you. Truth just is, she was a tired woman, and I was a tired boy. Ain't nothing crazy about what she believed. Ain't nothing crazy about the place you found me. There are pockets where we fall, the lost souls and the mysteries. They stretch through caves and deserts and mountains and swamps. They go off the highway and into the dark. You got lost tryin' to find your way back home, didn't you?"

Lydia tastes the city on her tongue like cold metal. Cold metal against the small of her back. She sees her peers with round, hungry eyes older than the backlit buses which swim past. The lemon gummies keep the tang of copper out of her mouth. "I saw him sometimes," she says. "Your demon. He kept following me, but then he turned into something else. Something a little more like me. I never met you, but I reminded her of you. I took the same paths, made the same choices – real quick. So quick. I wanted more. I thought I wouldn't see you for a long, long time."

"And she gave you these things o' mine?" His eyes are gentle, sad. Lydia presses a fingertip to the strap of the leather rucksack.

"She put your jacket and your rucksack in the coffin instead of my body. It's the only trace they ever found of you, left in your car, the doors wide open. They haven't found anything of me, though. I think. I think maybe she hoped ... hoped you'd make it easy for me. To find my way back home."

The shadows of his eyes never shift. "No-one finds their way back, child."

"That's not true. They might find us. *Both* of us."

"Ain't no matter what happens to our bodies. It's what rest we find with our souls. How much we can forgive ourselves to move on. Never back, girl."

She pictures Mariko, alone, in that sleek and modern kitchen. Filling bowls with palms full of cereal, leaving the milk out to grow warm as though the wayward daughter will arrive back before noon to polish it all off. The imagery is so vivid, Lydia isn't sure if it's a memory or a projection. Never once has she seen her mother fully mourn. Maybe it is a wish.

"Your soul's still restless, reaching back toward her. I know that. I been the same, caught halfway. Now I got you, though. Now you got me. She'll follow when she's ready. We wanna be there so she'll find us. That's what she was tryin' to do. Tryin' to keep us together."

Lydia is suddenly afraid. She is familiar with life, dreadfully so. She can hazard guesses about this halfway space, this shelf full of mysteries, the unsolved and the unproven. She knows nothing about what stretches out beyond. She has always imagined death to be a cold, vacuous abyss. No thoughts, no bliss. No recognition of whoever she might be with. When she looks up at him again, he reads the fear as easily as he might read a scrape on her knee. He becomes less of a stranger. She feels the blood ties between them as taut and real as tendons and sinew.

"I'm scared." Two words. Two honest words. The halfway space has forbidden them, but as she speaks them, a field is a field. A sky is a sky. The rucksack is a rucksack, and the things within are only so valuable as the life that they left behind. Maybe they were things of her father, but they were never really him. The demon that tangles around his shoulders, that isn't really him either. He's right there, sitting across from her.

"So am I. I ain't never been. We'll be cowards together, you and I."

"What if we don't remember her? What if we don't remember each other?"

The corner of his mouth shimmies up. The demon seems more a shawl around his shoulders, waning with each passing breath. The garnets dull in comparison to his hazel eyes. He is full of life and magic, the enigma of his being dissipating beneath the breadth and warmth of his smile. This is a shrine, Lydia thinks, if it was human.

"I ain't never gonna forget your mother. And I won't let you forget neither. You trust me, daughter o' mine?"

Trust is full of strength and security, neither of which the young missing dead girl feels in any of these moments she has shared with her father. Trust, she decides, is overrated. Trust can lead you off a highway to never be seen again by your family. Trust can land you in a city park, surrounded by fireflies.

They rise together, facing the empty road that stretches off like a colourless ribbon into the dark. The pill-shaped vessels above them flit away to stranger tides, to beings more uncertain of their reality than the Cabrillac man and the Cabrillac girl. After a moment's hesitation, Julien bends and ropes the rucksack over one shoulder, a mirror of the side that had weighed down Lydia only so much earlier.

Together, they walk into the dismal shade.

## Skyline

Golden teeth glistening  
In the mouth of the city  
Silver clouds colliding  
At the tongue tip of day

*Bite off all darkness*  
They whispered  
*And chew the season well*



## **Truncated Truth: My Crow**

Each crow you have seen  
Has a quasi white soul  
That used to dwell in the body  
Of one of your closest ancestors

He comes down all the way just to tell you  
His little secret, the way he has flown out  
Of darkness, the fact both his body and heart  
Are filled with shadows, the truth about  
Being a dissident, that unwanted color

Hidden in your own heart is there also a crow  
Much blacker than his spirits  
But less so than his feathers

## **Anagrammed Variations of the American Dream**

A ram cairned me  
In a crammed era [where]  
Cameramen raid

A dire cameraman [or]  
Arid cameramen

[Becoming]

A creamed airman [or]  
A carmine dream  
A minced ram ear  
[a] maniac rearmed

As freedom turns into a dorm fee  
Democracy to a car comedy, and  
Human rights to harming huts

## Hocus Pocus

This [bread] is no other than  
Jesus' flesh

This [horse's open mouth] is  
Vaisvanara

This [word] has  
A magic power

This [fish head] brings  
Courage & posterity

This [fluid] cures  
All diseases

This [sequence of syllables] drives away  
All evils & devils

This [ritual] ensures  
Good weather & good harvest

This [hat/hood] guarantees  
Purity, loyalty

This [flag] leads right  
To paradise

This [man] is  
A living god

This [statue, foiled or not] is  
Omnipotent

This [chip] will transform us  
Into superors

*So long as man is in his story  
All is well that believes well*

## Sonnet in Infinitives

*To be* a matter when there's no question  
*Or not to be* a question when nothing really matters

To sing with a frog squatting straight  
On a lotus leaf in the Honghu Lake near Jingzhou

To recollect all the pasts, and mix them  
Together like a glass of cocktail

To build a nest of meaning  
Between two broken branches on Ygdrasil

To strive for deity  
Longevity and  
Even happiness

To come on and off line every other while

To compress consciousness into a file, and upload it  
Onto a nanochip. To be daying, to die

# The World Brought Close

Martin Cloutier

All church basements looked the same: white drywall, fluorescent lights, metal folding chairs. Shepard went directly to the coffee urn and levered his dose of bitter liquid, felt the familiar crunch of Styrofoam between his teeth. There were no special effects down here: no carved wood crucifixes, golden chalices, stained glass or gilt – down here it was just guilt. He took a seat on a metal chair and watched the waves in the linoleum.

It was a small meeting with a new-agey theme: Sober Awakenings. The moderator had six years and called herself Mother Kai. Shepard had been sober ten, and this was his first trip away from his family in almost as much time. The Fidelity Insurance Conference kept participants on a rigorous schedule. After hours of lectures on risk numbers and land acquisitions, everybody headed for the bars like lepers wading into the Ganges. Shepard headed for a meeting.

The Unitarian church was just a four-block walk from his hotel on the outskirts of Boston. One guy was sharing about climbing telephone poles with a flask of Jack Daniels. He wore a denim shirt with Verizon Tech Support stitched across the pocket. The laces of his work boots were untied. Every time he moved his foot, they clicked on the floor. “One day, I touched the wrong wires and BAM.” He bumped his fists together. “Ten milli-amps right through me. Fell off the pole. Broke my collar, my wrist and dislocated my shoulder.”

A ripple of surprise floated through the group: chairs squeaked back in consolation. Shepard had heard worse. Mother Kai shook her head; her feather earrings oscillated in sympathy. He wondered what she'd be like in the sack. Not that he was remotely attracted to her tangle of grey hair or doughy body, but AA meetings were always a good place to pick up some strange. Sometimes he thought he only stayed sober for the prospect of meeting women. Though the Big Book forbade any kind of romance in recovery, its very potential provided a surreptitious thrill to his sedate suburban life. The women who came to meetings were usually in a high state of receptivity, raw and emotional, and he could comfort them, protect them from their own impulses, and offer his experience. He listened. Held them while they cried. And sometimes, he would take them to bed. Though not often, and with the full knowledge of his commitment to his wife and children. Taking care of these vulnerable women gave him the chance to be the kind of husband he had always wanted to be. They hadn't seen him at his worst.

For the past several weeks the idea of this trip had hovered in his mind as his last great adventure. He was getting too old for the emotional merry-go-round. And also for the women, who were starting to think of him more as a father figure than a lover. When he moved in to kiss them, he could not abide, even for a solitary second, their flash of distaste coupled with surprise. He might have received more appreciation from someone like Mother Kai. However, her long sweat-shirt and black leggings placed her as far outside the sexual world as a nun's habit with wings. Women like that had given up on sex. For them, it was all about aromatherapy and banana bread.

His wife Trixie had become an expert in baked goods. She had twenty pounds on Mother Kai, yet, thankfully, still remained a bottle blonde. She had a pie for every problem, and a cookie for each catastrophe. She'd stuck with him through the bad years: the arrests, the car wrecks, the different jobs, kneading and frosting her way through all of his fuckups. Finally, he was glad to give her some stability. And though they hadn't had sex in years, he still felt a kind of loyalty. Not to her body, but to her commitment to their marriage.

Around the room, other people were sharing. He focused on the scars on his knuckles and listened. Over the years, people in pain had become his music. Testimonies of addiction and remorse were songs from his youth he never grew tired of hearing.

One kid started speaking, and the room vibrated with his froggy voice. He looked like a teenager, but Shepard figured from his story he must be in his early twenties. The kid spoke as if underwater, speaking from swamps, from mud, from someplace deep where sound doesn't reach. Each word seemed to be pulled out of him with a hook.

It was a familiar tale about a father with a belt and a mother with a handkerchief. His name was Farley. He had been sober a year, but had recently relapsed. Shepard could tell he'd just come off a bender. His hair fell in black strings over his eyes, and he kept tucking it behind his ears. He stared at the kid's dirty tennis shoe tapping the air, and avoided his faded blue eyes. Eyes that had seen terrible things and were still seeing them, even while looking into a Styrofoam cup.

Farley was having trouble finishing sentences. His words sputtered like a lawnmower with a broken choke.

"This kid's wasted," said Verizon guy, and looked to Mother Kai.

"You can't come to meetings intoxicated. It's one of our rules."

Farley took a sip of coffee. "No. I. I'm not. I mean I am. Sober. Pretty much."

Shepard thought he had to say something. "Hey. I've been to lots of meetings where guys passed out drunk on the floor in a puddle of their own piss."

"We have rules here, see." Verizon guy was getting all stern in the face.

Shepard didn't like that "see" and the pointed finger that accompanied it. The old adrenaline surge started pumping through his neck. He spent years sizing up guys in bars. He knew in three seconds who he could beat and who would beat him. Verizon guy had some upper body strength, but was short. Shep could clear his reach and land one on his jaw if it came to that. The dislocated shoulder and collar bone were weak spots to concentrate on.

"Fuck your rules. Let the boy stay." Shepard moved to the edge of his seat. It was all coming back now: the rush of air through his lungs, the heat in his face, that unexpected knuckle-sting contact of bone on bone. He kept thinking: *this is my adventure*. But under the fluorescent lights of sobriety, his bravado appeared boorish. He was too aware of everything else in the room: the bags of off-brand Oreos on the folding table, the soccer goalie nets stacked in the corner, the message board advertising piano lessons and pottery classes. He would keep an eye on Verizon guy all the same.

"It's all right, honey," said Mother Kai. "You can stay. Next time, come to us clean."

"You get the urge to drink, call me." Verizon guy handed him a card.

Mother Kai brushed off some cat hairs from her sweat-shirt. “Does anyone else have something to share?”

People talked about the customary things: booze; family; God. Shepard thought about his boys back home. He felt closer to them in this circle of strangers than he ever had sitting in his plaid-cushioned living room. With the buzz of caffeine and these supportive smiles around him, he could almost imagine his wife and children as benevolent beings, always forgiving, persisting in a foggy addict’s memory as guiding lights and reasons for recovery.

His oldest, Jason, had just turned fifteen and was becoming a stoner. He recognized all the signs: the red eyes, the snacking, hysterical laughter coming from the garage at one o’clock in the morning. Jay was barely in kindergarten when Shepard’s drinking hit its peak. He couldn’t have forgotten the TV flying through the picture window, or daddy’s broken fingers after a bar fight. When Shepard talked about his alcoholism, Jay would turn all solemn and respectful, asking: “How much did you puke after?” “How fast were you going when you knocked down the fence?” For a teenage boy, bar fights and car crashes held a defiant glamour. And telling a son not to be like his father was a sure invitation for him to do the opposite.

Trixie’s solution was to keep baking pies: apple, peach, and pumpkin. She rolled the dough on the counter until it was thin as paper. In summers, she made lemon meringue and coconut something. Their younger son Patrick devoured them. He and Trixie would sit at the kitchen table with *The National Enquirer*, a thin wedge of pie between them on a china plate. They would take turns as if they couldn’t eat a whole slice each. Then they would flip the page and cut another piece. They could pass a whole afternoon like this.

The day before he left for Boston, he overheard Patrick talking to his mother in the kitchen: “Oh my God, Trixie. Look. This one’s having another baby.”

“She’s your mother.” Shepard stood in back of them. “Call her mom.”

“Shep. You know Paddy and I don’t have that kind of relationship.”

“Fine.” He slammed a spoon in the sink. “But just remember, I’m Dad. You understand?”

Patrick stared at his lemon meringue pie. His mother rubbed his back and turned the page. “Look at that one, Paddy. She thinks she’s twenty-five again.”

“Her hips are way too big for that dress,” Patrick said. “She needs something cut on the bias. Like your blue dress, Trixie. You should send it to her, air mail.”

He looked down at his pudgy wife and his even pudgier son, sitting in their matching aqua hoodies. They seemed like ill-formed stuffed animals. The kind of cartoon characters who always get hit in the face with a rake. And he wasn’t the only one who thought this. Patrick was coming home every day from school with a bruise or a missing book. Shepard had tried to teach him how to fight: how to throw a punch, to swing with the weight of his body. But Patrick didn’t want to fight. He stood with his little fists pressed into his pelvis and looked like he wanted to cry.

The day he left, Trixie asked for his contact numbers: the hotel phone, the conference coordinator’s phone and the cell numbers of three of his co-workers. “In case there’s an emergency at home,” she said. But he knew she was worried about his being alone. Packing his briefcase, he noticed she had slipped in a list of all the AA meetings within a five-mile radius of his hotel. For a man whose drinking had first started on company business trips, this was going to be a test.

He loaded his garment bag into the trunk, set his briefcase within easy reach on the passenger floor. It was twenty minutes past the time he told everyone he was leaving, and no one had come to say goodbye. He flipped on the wipers and washed the windshield. There was nothing stopping him from turning on the engine and backing out of the driveway.

From his position in the car, the house looked makeshift and neglected. The aluminum siding was coming loose around the upstairs dormer. There were dark patches on the roof where they had repaired a leak last year. The shrubs needed trimming. He imagined his family staring at him from behind the windows, waiting for him to leave, glad to be finally rid of him.

He slammed the car door and went inside his house. From Jay's room, he heard the crashes and gunshots of computer games. The laundry room was where Trixie spent most of her time when upset, and that was just where he located her. He could hear the dryer tumbling and Patrick singing from the basement. When he walked downstairs, he saw Trixie folding towels and Patrick with a pillowcase wrapped around his head singing: "They try to make me go to rehab. I say no no no."

He stood there watching his wife folding towels in perfect eight inch squares, and his son imitating a dead female heroin addict, and wondered how many ways he had fucked up his family. When they saw him, they both stopped. Patrick threw the pillowcase on a pile of laundry.

"I'm not going to rehab, son. You know that."

"I wasn't singing about you," Patrick said. He picked up a towel and started folding the same little squares as his mother.

Trixie reminded him to call when he arrived, then returned to her towels.

He wanted to do something fatherly, something husbandly: a kiss, a hug, make some lame joke. But the towels were stacking up in front of him. Looks were passing from Trixie to Patrick. It seemed like they wanted him gone. They wanted him not to leave and they wanted him gone at the same time. There was a pane of glass between him and his family; they stood behind it watching him, waiting for him to break through or disappear entirely.

"The car's all packed," he said. "I'm taking off."

"Okay. Bye, Shep." Trixie tapped Patrick on the shoulder. "Say goodbye to your father, Paddy."

Patrick stared at the towels. "Bye," he said.

He stood there trying to find his son's eyes, as if something could pass between them – a look that would say, take care of the house and your mother. But Patrick kept folding.

"Just go, Shep. Traffic's going to be crazy on the L.I.E."

He walked to the laundry table, grabbed a washcloth and tucked it into his pocket, as if it were just the thing he needed for his trip. As if his wife and son had been preparing this very item for him.

In the church basement, he took out the washcloth and wiped the sweat from his forehead. He had carried it in his suit pocket through a whole day of lectures. When things got really dull, he'd reach in and rub the terrycloth between his fingers. After he wiped his face, he folded the cloth into the same small square and put it back in his pocket.



When the meeting ended, the kid introduced himself. “Thanks for sticking up for me back there.”

“That guy’s a douche.” He was still clocking Verizon guy, waiting for him to step out of line.

“So I got about two hours sober. Any advice?”

“Well, try for three, then four. And every time you feel you want a drink – do a meeting.”

They huddled next to the coffee urn. The kid needed to talk, and Shepard didn’t have anything better to do. He stood there and nodded, repeated all the AA bullshit. Eventually Mother Kai closed fellowship time, and everybody maneuvered their jittery legs up the staircase.

Outside, he couldn’t shake the kid. Farley kept dropping hints about being hungry, so they went to a diner down the street. He bought him a hamburger. The kid had spent all his money on booze and was obviously starving. Shepard got a plate of fries which he didn’t touch.

While wolfing down his burger, Farley told the rest of his story. He ran away at sixteen, lived on the streets until the police found him in Medford Square and carted him back home. As punishment, his father made him paint the garage, and, when he dripped paint on the driveway, beat him with the long wooden handle of the paint roller. By eighteen, he was in and out of jail for stealing and dealing and had been scraping by ever since. He had recently lost his job as a shipping clerk and took that opportunity to go on a binge.

Farley spoke about his guitar. He’d taught himself to play in rehab and wanted to become a singer-songwriter like Bob Dylan.

“Kids still listen to Dylan?” Shepard asked.

“I do.” Farley swiped a fry from Shepard’s plate. “He’s like the master.”

“Blood on the Tracks. I listened to that a million times.”

“Me too. A gazillion times.”

They talked about music for a while: Springstein, Dylan, The Police, Bob Segar. Shepard was surprised at the kid’s taste. It had been a long time since he’d thought about music. It didn’t affect him in the same way it used to. He could remember opening up his Firebird on The Northern Parkway, Badlands cranked on the radio, thinking he could just drive right over the lawns and pools and industrial parks into some cool blue future.

“So how’d you stop?” Farley asked. “What made you hit rock bottom?”

“Christ. I hit rock bottom so many times my ass must be made out of lead.”

Farley laughed. He pulled some napkins out of the dispenser and wiped his mouth. “Seriously. What made you stop?”

“I don’t know. Life.”

“Yeah.”

“Death. I don’t know.” Shepard looked out the window. In the glass, he saw an outline of himself that he didn’t recognize: an old man with beard stubble and bushy eyebrows.

“You’re not going to tell me how you did it?” Farley balled up his paper napkin.

Shepard pushed his plate of fries over to Farley. “Nah. It’s all bullshit. Right?”

“So why you still at meetings then?”

“It works. For me.”

“So you saying it can’t work for me?”

It looked like Farley was about to get mad. Or maybe cry. Drunks after a bender were emotional wrecks. “Listen. I’ve seen a lot of kids like you. And you got no reason to get sober. And no one to get sober for. Are you gonna sober up to work another day in the stock room? Gonna get straight for dear ol’ Dad with his paint roller? Or some God who could give a shit? You have ten more years of hard living. And if you survive – if you don’t choke on your own vomit or get shot in some drug bust – than maybe, maybe you’ll be ready. But until then. Drink up.”

Farley threw his head back and contemplated the ceiling. “Maybe I’ll do that.”

“Hell. I’ll take you to a bar right now. Buy your first shot. What d’you say?”

“Fuck you.”

Shepard pointed to the plate. “Eat your fries.”

“I don’t want your goddamn fries.” He picked up the plate and dumped the fries on the floor. Shepard thought he was going to hurl the plate at him. Instead, he tapped it on the edge of the table, in a series of menacing thuds.

This was why he never became a sponsor.

In these situations, it was best to walk away. He was just about to stand up when the kid locked those horrible eyes on him.

“So. What did *you* have that made it work?”

Farley’s hands were twitching on the table. Shepard pushed the plates to the far end. “I suppose losing my job was a big blow. I had a reputation, and finding work again was difficult. I was letting my family down – more than usual. It’s one thing to wreck a few cars and vomit into the punch bowl at some cousin’s wedding, but when your wife is working a second job at Applebee’s and your kids are getting their clothes from the Goodwill, you realize you’re not just hurting yourself.”

“You have kids?”

“Two boys.”

“How old?”

“One fifteen. One eleven.”

“So you did it for them.” The kid was bug-eyed with awe.

“Funny how that goes.” Shepard put his hands flat on the table. “Now I can’t stand the bastards.”

“Come on.”

“Yeah.” He gazed into the dark hole of his coffee cup. “I really don’t like them.” It felt good to say it. Finally. To someone he’d never have to see again. “I’m sure they don’t care much for me either, fucked-up sons of bitches.”

“If they’re fucked up it’s because you made them that way.”

“Oh, I take full responsibility. Doesn’t mean I like them any better.”

Farley was twitching and tapping his fingers on the table.

“We’re all supposed to love our kids, right? Everybody deserves love? Right?” Shepard drained his coffee. “Sometimes you look at these weirdoes. These losers. These ... strangers. And think, no. I can’t do it. I can’t be part of this.”

“I don’t believe that.”

“You think your old man loved you?”

Farley took a breath and looked at the ceiling. “I don’t know. Maybe.”

“Maybe he wanted a basketball player, or a concert pianist, or just some good ol’ boy he could take hunting. Instead, he got you. And every time you walked in the

room there was disappointment. Every time you stubbed your toe or dropped the ball he had to examine his own faults and failures.”

“And. And. He was right to beat me because of that?”

“No. He was wrong to beat you. But that’s why he did it.”

On the street, the sun was lowering beneath the trees. People walked past with bags swinging at their heels and the breeze blowing through their hair. He wondered where all these people were going. Home. Most likely.

Farley finally spoke. “I just want to know what an eleven-year-old boy can do to make you not like him?”

“Well, he can be a fat sissy that gets his ass kicked every day at school then comes crying home to momma.”

“That’s not his fault.”

“Maybe you like fat sissies. I don’t.”

Farley put his head on the table. Shepard wondered if he’d gone too far. Pushed his awful truth on the kid. Then he realized Farley was sleeping. Typical addict behavior. In another five minutes, he’d wake up and forget everything that had been said.

He could just walk away now and be back in his hotel room with the king-size bed and a flat screen TV. Maybe even call home. All this talk about how much he hated his sons actually made him want to talk to them. When they were out of sight, he could always muster up some faint trace of affection. For the *idea* of them. The reality was walls of towels and video games and silence. He couldn’t remember the last time he had touched his children. When they were little he’d pick them up from their cribs, cradle them in his arms. But he always worried he might be infecting them, communicating his disease and failures as a man. As they grew, their round baby eyes narrowed in accusation. He needed to be half in the bag before he came near them. Now sober, he felt they were strangers, dropped into his life with their own histories and experiences completely alien to him.

Farley raised his head and rubbed his face. “Sorry. I must’ve... passed out.”

Shepard ordered him another coffee. Farley stirred in three tubs of cream, and Shepard asked if he had other interests.

“My songs.”

“Well, that’s something.”

“Yeah. Sometimes I jam out all night on the guitar.”

“That’s something to stay sober for. You can’t write songs when you’re loaded.”

“You wanna hear them?”

“The songs?”

“I got my guitar. Back at my place. It’s only a few blocks from here.”

“Naw. I got papers to read for tomorrow’s meetings.”

Farley’s head started shaking to his own personal music. “Okay. Sure. Papers.”

This was not a good situation. Leaving the kid here. Alone. In this state. “I’ll come for one song. But then I gotta go.”

They left the diner for Farley’s apartment. While walking, Farley kept bumping him with his shoulder, stepping on the sides of his shoes. He talked about his songs, which all seemed to be about heroic suffering. Shepard had long ago given up such sentiments. For him, suffering was the most ordinary aspect of life, like brushing your teeth.

His apartment was a sectioned-off basement in a large house. A plastic curtain was stapled to the rafters as a makeshift shower; a nozzle hung over a drain on the floor. They sat on a broken-down couch in front of a huge flat screen TV. A Playstation with dual controls and snakes of wires was laid out on a coffee table. Shepard banished the thought that Farley might have stolen these things.

“Nice TV.”

“I’m addicted to Grand Theft Auto.”

“I think Jay has that.”

“You wanna play? I’ll teach you. It’s super easy.”

Farley put in the game, and the room lit up with color from the giant TV. Shepard watched his car move through the streets. His screen character, Roman, a small-time gangster from Serbia, got beaten up by some thugs. He expected something futuristic, but this looked like nineteen-eighties New York. Maybe the future was always the past. He played a *mission* where Roman had to escape from a bunch of loan sharks. He could see how Jay liked it.

Farley cursed at the screen and laughed whenever he ran over someone. He made all the gunshot noises along with the soundtrack. They hadn’t even finished the first level when he jumped up and said: “I gotta play you this song. It’s about getting run over.”

He brought out his guitar and sat on the back of the couch with his sneakers on the seat. He fumbled with some chords and had a few false starts, but once he found his rhythm, he locked into a trance. The room vibrated with his monotone croak. The song’s chorus was: *run me down, run me down, roll your tires over my skull*, which Farley sang with eyes closed and his brow crinkled in earnest intent.

As soon as he finished that song, he launched into another. Something about a *black flag heart*. It was hard to tell where the first song ended and the new one began. Shepard didn’t think he could endure another. He asked if Farley knew any Dylan tunes, and Farley began strumming Buckets of Rain.

Farley’s voice was better suited to this folky tune, and Shepard couldn’t help singing along: *I been meek. And hard like an oak. I’ve seen pretty people disappear like smoke*. It was a happy song about misery – Dylan obviously drunk on his own pain. What alcoholic couldn’t understand that.

They drew out the last note with Shepard reaching for the harmony. By that time, Farley was standing on the couch strumming away. Shepard clapped as Farley finished his final chords.

“And now, I have to leave,” he said.

“No. Not yet.”

“I’ll stop buy tomorrow night. We’ll get a burger.”

“Okay. Okay.” Farley wiped his nose on his sleeve. There was panic in his eyes.

“This was fun, kid. You lie down and sleep. You’ve had a big day.”

Farley backed towards the stairs and blocked the way. “Will you do one thing? Before you leave?”

“What is it?”

Farley pulled out from underneath his bed a wide brown belt. He laid the belt across his arms and brought it to Shepard.

“Beat me with it,” he said.

Shepard looked down at the belt suspended across Farley's arms like some religious offering. The boy's flannel shirt was frayed around the collar. A little globe of snot pulsed in his nose. He visualized the boy painting the garage, packing his bags, stealing the car, wiping his terrible eyes in a jail cell. Across the kid's skinny arms, the belt looked thick and heavy.

"Do it," the boy said. "So I can sleep."

Shepard thought about his own boys. How he was always watching them walk out of rooms. How the hair on the back of their heads formed little swirls and knots, and hung thickly down their necks. He imagined he could part the hair and find their faces – blank faces that would look at him without accusation, without wanting something. He took the belt in his hands and pulled it from fist to fist.

Farley leaned against the wall and pulled up his shirt. His back was a map of fine white scars, little roads going in every direction, leading off the edges of his body. Shepard guessed his father had started the job, but wondered how many others had added their marks. There were fine thread-like lines crosshatched over thicker lines – scars trying to erase other scars.

"Do it," the kid said. His waist looked thin as a stalk.

How many times had Shepard wanted to hit his own kids? How many times did he want to slap the smirk off Jay's face? Punch Patrick in his fat stomach and say, be a man? How many times had he stood behind them while they watched TV, wanting to put a hand on their shoulder?

The sound of the first crack filled the room like a large branch breaking from a tree. The boy took a deep breath but didn't cry out. Shepard brought the belt down again. The boy braced himself with hands on his knees. The shirt fell over his head.

The skin on his back was getting red and mottled. His ribs trembled and shoulder blades sawed the air. He hated how the kid just took it without a cry of protest. No one deserved this. No one deserved this life.

"Again," said the boy.

He reached his hands around the kid's flat stomach. It was fluttering like a trapped insect. Shepard tried to pull him up and around.

"Again." The kid unbuckled his pants and dropped them to the floor. His skinny haunches bucked up against Shepard.

Just when he believed the worst was over, Farley was grinding against him – a blind man feeling for a hand in the dark – as if someone had plucked the worst thought from his head and said: *now you must do this*.

"Again." The kid moved his little ass around, two dents on each side like punched-in fenders. He could feel the boy through his pants. He didn't want to feel the boy this way. He was ashamed. Ashamed for the whole human race. He pictured Trixie watching him, rolling out her pie dough and spitting into the flour.

Shepard looked down on the back, flaming hot with his handiwork. The fine white roads rising up from the redness.

Farley bucked against him. "Come on, man."

Again, Shepard was doing the wrong thing. He was disappointing someone – disappointing himself. He didn't want to fuck this kid. He didn't want to beat him.

He grabbed the kid by the back of the neck and tried to pull him around. He needed to see a face. The kid resisted, pushing his head down and grinding his ass. Shepard tightened his grip and pulled him up. He couldn't have weighed more than a

hundred and thirty pounds. Lighter than Trixie. The kid struggled and tried to turn away. He shook him, lifting him off his feet, tightening his grip around his throat.

“What’s the matter with you,” Shepard shouted.

The kid’s face was bouncing in his hands, getting redder by the second, eyes wide and ecstatic. His Adam’s apple moved up and down through Shepard’s fingers; his cock slapped against Shepard’s leg. He felt the bristly neck – a surprise. The kid had a light beard that didn’t show on the skin.

He wanted to say something important, but the words became shakes. He held the kid by the throat and shook him with everything he had. Those eyes looked back at him, sick of looking at the world yet still looking.

He loosened his grip. The kid gulped. Water started pooling in his eyes, and ran down his cheeks. He cried silent sobs. Then not-so-silent sobs, coming out of him in bursts and stops like the crackling of frying meat. He brought his hands down on the kid’s shoulders. He watched him cry, and felt the vibrations through his fingers.

Looking down, he noticed the kid had come on his pants.

This was his one pair of dress pants. Dry clean only. How was he going to get out these stains: vinegar? soda water? baby shampoo? He pictured himself walking into CVS pharmacy and asking where he could find the cum-remover.

“You sprayed me. Like a goddamn cat.”

Farley started laughing, coughing up sounds from the back of his throat. It didn’t even sound like laughter except that his face looked happy.

“It’s not funny.” But Shepard couldn’t help but join in. They stood guffawing like a couple of retards, his hands bouncing on top of Farley’s shoulders.

Then Farley shifted his weight, from the back of his heels to the balls of his feet – a little movement, hardly perceptible but significant – putting more weight on Shepard’s arms which were still holding him a good two feet away. The urge to flee tingled in his calves: out the door and back to his hotel with the cool sheets and satellite TV. The kid’s shoulders flinched. More weight shifted onto Shepard. If he bent his elbows the kid would fall into him. Still they looked at the floor. Shepard was tired. His arm throbbed from wielding the belt. His feet ached. His fingers could still feel the soft cords of the kid’s throat. He didn’t owe him anything. This was a relapse. Relapses don’t get better overnight.

The kid slowly raised his head and looked at him; Shepard thought – run. Up the stairs and out the door, back to a hot meal and a hot bath. Call your wife. Talk to your sons. You don’t owe this kid anything. But his elbows were bending. He was reaching. Around the shoulders. The hot back. The wet cheek. The bristly neck. Such a thin and brittle body. All the way back – to the place where he held the child in his arms.

## The Devil

Sun-clean Cinque Terre terraces,  
helichrysum, grape, and lavender.

Pastel yellow Riomaggiore houses,  
and he is *going to and fro upon the earth*

with skin a worry whorl of olive bark,  
scent of rosemary and thyme.

I am stopped and turned, and see him  
on the trail well below me —

old man, open collar, cotton, white  
sleeves rolled up, blue denim cuffs,

black fedora on his head,  
weathered leather satchel.

I see him making sure I see him  
seeing me,

the sea assuring azure, calm,  
inverted firmament of hell below.

Not a whiff of sulfur,  
but a breeze to chill the soul,

and my sense of resignation.  
He is patient,

gaining step for step.

## Easter Sunday Evening

Hand in bony hand  
we sat silently,  
dusk leaching pink  
from cherry blossoms,  
trees planted down the lakeshore  
when our grandparents were young.

You rummaged memory,  
trying to go back  
to where you'd left your glasses.  
I was waiting to find out  
what kind of animal — turtle,  
muskrat, or a mud hen —  
was making ripples in the water  
near an alder felled by windstorms  
last November.

You broke a brittle twig  
from one of the old cherries,  
blackened as a candle wick,  
too spent even to host lichen.

*How much longer will these trees be here?*  
you asked, not me. My answer was  
to squeeze your hand.



## Driving My Adult Son to King Street Station □

Along the way he points toward a storefront,  
Little Saigon. *Dad, pull over there.*  
He wants to buy two banh mis from the deli  
for his train ride home to California.

Tiny shop, unfamiliar spices, unknown cuts of meat.  
Two young clerks are screaming at each other,  
curses I am guessing, Vietnamese. Red-faced,  
anger cabling their neck veins, until one turns to us, □  
smiles at my son, says, *Hey, Bro,*  
*always good to see you back in town!*  
From icy bed, a long-finned orange fish  
smiles up at me,

dead translucent eye that's seen the bottom  
of the ocean regards a graying man  
whose son — this boy right here! —  
will soon be turning 30. I want to tell it

to this fish, the way my belly's full  
of coffee, toast, and eggs but I feel hungry.  
*O sequin-scaled sage, he couldn't stay*  
*my soft-cheeked lad a little longer?*

The fish maintains its smile,  
blank-eyed, silent gaze. If there's a way  
to feed this hunger it isn't in this store  
or at the bottom of the ocean.

## Hound of Heaven

I am the future pastor of your local congregation,  
lighting up the day's first Lucky Strike,  
sitting in this Perkins parking lot in Minot, North Dakota.

It makes sense now, better than the seminary taught us,  
why Jonah in the Bible ran away.

Piloting my Honda 1300, I drifted into town upon a sea  
of sunflower fields, August dawn adjusting heaven's light,  
delft to white to banking embers on the east horizon.

Let's begin with this: God's preoccupation with the sinner  
has forever been mismanaged and misunderstood.

My purple t-shirt is a souvenir from one last night  
in New York City. Blood-red dripping letters cross  
my chest *Vampire Lesbians of Sodom*.

I'll bet the Minot Christian population regards  
the Vampire Lesbians of New York City as bound  
for hell,

even if they're only on a stage in Greenwich Village.  
Things didn't go so well for Jonah when he ran away.

So who am I to judge the citizens of Minot,  
if Minot is where I'm called to be?  
*Isn't it the loveliest of mornings?* asks the waitress,

smiling, pouring coffee in my cup as I peruse  
the Perkins breakfast menu.

## Hot August City Night

Hot as blazes,  
dangerous.

No unbarred windows  
on M L K Way South.

Lie in bed  
and sweat. Why pay a gym

to let your pores  
pour forth?

All night long, a show  
out on the sidewalk.

Couple coming down  
from crack and copulation.

No one's being beaten.  
F-bombs echo down the block.

Starling singing near the corner store,  
equidistant gunshot.

A bird is holding up the quick-pack  
for some cigarettes?

*Hand 'em over, Bud,  
tout suite...tweet, tweet!*

My wife is talking in her sleep,  
lying naked,  
sheets kicked to the floor.  
Lovely siren crying

*Listen, Margaret, you can go to hell!*  
Summertime,

and the livin' is easy.  
Paying not a penny for the heat.

## 12th Avenue, Monday Morning

All around the man who isn't dressed right for the weather  
everyone gets started on the day. Guy who changes mats  
in business doorways pulls his truck up to the curb,  
turns its flashers on, hoists a rolled up rubber mat  
like a bazooka on his shoulder. A magician, he unrolls it,  
vanishes the snow-sogged dirty mat. *Presto!* fresh new  
rectangle of fabric-covered rubber smiles, WELCOME!  
even for the man who isn't dressed right for the weather,  
passing by the barber shop.

Long queue of cars waits out the light at 12th and Cherry.  
Cop car with two officers inside, one man, one woman,  
girded for another day of traumas. There's the man  
they know by name, the ill-dressed one, no socks, no jacket,  
sharp white winter sunlight needling the cold.  
All three imagine melting April, days turned yellow  
as the pat of butter on the wheat toast in the diner. Waitress  
who stayed out till almost dawn, dancing with her girlfriend,  
smiles for the regular three times her age  
who dreams he has a chance to be her boyfriend.

The man who isn't dressed right for the weather plucks  
hanks of moss from trunks of maple trees along 12th Avenue,  
tosses them into the street, outraged,  
as if they've occupied the trees illegally. Above, treetops  
spindle thin. Black-capped chickadee appears to listen in,  
a doctor with a stethoscope, clings to tapered trunk,  
peeks with one eye and then the other, pecks  
at bark with sturdy beak, its sense of purpose and the man's  
the same.

Mother with her bundled toddler daughter ponders pastries  
in the bakery window. Child's language is *A-daa?* and *Bah!*  
She totters from her mother, adventure down the lengthy case,  
marveling at all she sees. Mother smiles, child stops  
to check if it's OK to be so far away.  
They buy an extra scone, pass it to the ill-dressed man.  
Mother hoists her to her hip, she wails.

Office on the 14th floor above 12th Avenue, where an accountant  
readies P&L sheets for the board that manages  
the shelters where the man who plucks the moss  
can have a meal and a shower and a bed. Spreadsheets  
show neat columns broken into boxes, numbered, lettered,  
she smiles over her small contribution  
adding order to the world. Copies of reports, stapled and collated,  
warm and smelling of fresh ink, gather in the tray.

Another Monday morning pulls the neighborhood along its currents,  
pulls the neighbors pulling eddies of decision,  
up and down 12th Avenue.

# The Wedding Guest

Fred Bubbers

In the sixties, when I was still in elementary school, retail businesses in the city stayed open later than they do now. Most stores closed at about 7:30 or 8:00. Drug stores, however, stayed open until at least 10:00. I remember summer nights when my friends, mostly Irish-Catholic kids from the apartment building up the street, and I would play on the sidewalk of Corona Avenue. For weeks on end, every night we would ride our bicycles on the sidewalk, up and down the block, up over the bridge that crossed the Long Island Railroad and then back all the way down Corona Avenue to Junction Boulevard where the name of the neighborhood changes from Elmhurst to Corona. Then, one night, one of the kids would come out with their roller skates instead of their bicycle, and we would start roller-skating for a few weeks. Then we would switch back to bicycles.

Whenever we would pass in front of my father's store on those nights, we could see a group of three or four men standing in the front by the plate-glass window, drinking coffee from the deli across the street, swapping stories. One guy was a short, fat bald guy who chewed a cigar and always had a newspaper of some kind folded up under his hairy arm. His name was Casey. He had a deep, gravelly voice and he liked to play the ponies. He drove a cream-colored Caddy that he parked in a no-parking zone across the street. I never knew what he did for a living, but I'm sure it was at least partially legitimate.

One of the other men who hung out on those slow nights was a stocky second-generation Irishman with bushy eyebrows and a seemingly over-sized head. His name was Jimmy Breslin. I was probably about eight or nine years old.

Breslin was a few years older than my father, about the same age as my mother's older brother, who also knew him. He grew up in Queens and was a hometown hero. Before my Uncle Bill had gotten married, Breslin was one of his drinking buddies. One of their favorite hangouts was the Carousel Lounge, a mob joint on Queens Boulevard in Sunnyside.

My father was a basketball nut his whole life and played it all the time when he was a growing up. When he was in pharmacy school, he still made it to the park down on Broadway for pickup games in the early evening. Breslin, who was by then a young reporter for one of the many, now defunct, daily newspapers in Queens and Long Island, used to hang out in the park on those evenings. Sometimes they would get a beer after playing.

My father once told me about the night a sudden cloudburst caught them and they all got drenched, including the future Pulitzer Prize Winner. As my father was running to his car, a pre-war Ford jalopy, Breslin called out to him, "Hey Bubbaz, can you give me a lift to work?"

"Bubbaz" is how you say "Bubbers" if you're from Queens. Once when I was in St. Louis, I called a car service to get a ride from my hotel to the airport. I gave the dispatcher my name, "Fred Bubbers," and he repeated it back to me as "Freddie Bubbaz." I stopped him right there and asked him where he was from. "Jackson Heights," he answered, "That's in New Yawk."

Breslin climbed into my father's car and started shivering because his clothes were soaked.

"Bubbaz, I'm freezin' my fuckin' nuts off, ya got any blankets?"

My father reached back and got an old threadbare blanket off the back seat and handed it to him. As they drove east on Queens Boulevard to Jamaica, Breslin stripped off all his wet clothes including his boxers and wrapped himself in the dusty old blanket, trying to warm up. He tossed his clothes in the back seat.

When they got to the storefront office of the newspaper, Breslin hopped out of the car. Wearing only his shoes and socks and wrapped in the blanket, he gingerly stepped around the oily puddles as he crossed the glistening street to the office. His wet clothes were still in the back seat.

Starting in the seventies, my father began closing the store earlier in the evening, and it was no longer a hangout for the group of cronies. It was during that time that Breslin became very famous and very rich. He wrote a bestseller called *The Gang That Couldn't Shoot Straight* that became a movie, but his full-time job was writing articles about the poor in the city, the decent working stiffs in the neighborhoods and exposing the ugly truths about a brutal and corrupt police force. My father didn't see him for about 15 years.

Then, in 1986, two boys from Queens hit the top of their chosen professions. First, Jimmy Breslin won the Pulitzer Prize for Distinguished Commentary. Although he still spoke for all the people he met in the working-class bars and diners all over the city, he now lived in a million-dollar co-op in Manhattan.

The other kid from Queens to reach the top of his profession was Antonin, or "Nino," Scalia. Scalia, who was just a few years younger than my father, had been nominated to the Supreme Court by Ronald Reagan. When Scalia was a boy, he had been a member of Boy Scout Troop 17, and my father had been a troop leader at the time.

One day during the summer and shortly after the nomination had been announced, I was visiting my father in the store. I had stopped in the deli and picked up four coffees for the two of us. It was a quiet afternoon, and we were standing in the back of the store, behind the prescription counter, drinking coffee and talking about the Mets, who were on their way to winning the pennant that year.

Suddenly, the glass door leading to the sidewalk swung open and there appeared a big hulking form.

"Hey, Bubbaz! How the fuck are you, you bastard?" Breslin bellowed.

"Breslin, where the fuck ya been" my father bellowed back.

I have to explain something here. In all my years of growing up, I never heard my father talk that way. He never used profanity in front of his children and his Queens accent was normally very mild.

"How 'bout that fuckin' Nino," Breslin asked as he strode to the back of the store. "How 'bout that fucking shit?"

I had a feeling that Breslin didn't actually know "Nino," but he knew my father knew him.

My father introduced me to Breslin, telling him, of course, that I was a computer programmer on Long Island, not a writer.

"Freddie Bubbaz Juniah," Breslin said, looking me over, "Shit I remember you."

I'm not a "Junior," but when you have the same first name as your father and your father is a kind of a local big shot, people call you "Junior." After a while, you get tired of correcting them, and you just let it go.

I gave Jimmy a cup of coffee, and he quickly got down to the business of interviewing my father about Scalia.

My father didn't know Scalia all that well. The Supreme Court nominee had been a quiet, studious kind of kid and he had been in the boy scout troop for just a year or two. Instead of going to Newtown High School, Scalia had attended Xavier, a Jesuit-run prep school in Manhattan.

When asked what he thought when he heard the news about the Supreme Court appointment my father exclaimed, "I couldn't believe!"

Breslin pumped my father as much as he could, and then they settled down and talked about the old days. He drank a second cup of coffee and started railing about the cops. There was an ugly story developing at the time about a black graffiti artist getting picked up by the police and somehow ending up in Bellevue in a coma with two broken legs, a busted nose, and a cracked skull. He eventually died. First, there was a cover-up, then there was public outrage, and then the Manhattan District Attorney finally awoke from his slumber and started an investigation. Just before the trial was about to begin, the key witness died in a fall down a flight of stairs at a Policeman's Benevolent Association Dinner-Dance. Breslin had the inside scoop on everything and had been hammering the DA, the NYPD, and the PBA in his column for weeks.

At one point, he walked over to the door to the small bathroom in the back of the store and faced my father. He stood at attention and with a fake British accent, he said: "Sir, may I please use your bathroom facilities, I must take a piss." Then he bowed.

"Ya gotta go, ya gotta go," my father answered. "I'm gonna put a sign up over the bowl that says 'A Pulitzer Prize Winner Pissed in This Bowl.'"

It was amazing to hear my father talk this way. It seemed to come naturally to him, even though I'd never heard it before. Being from Queens, it's no surprise that I can do it too. Maybe it's the same reason everybody says the pizza is so good in New York. It's the water.

Breslin howled and said, "Bubbaz, you bastard, you're all right."

Later that week, when the column appeared in the paper, my father's words, which became a family catch-phrase, were quoted: "I couldn't believe!"

It wasn't one of Breslin's better columns. He hadn't been able to come up with much about Scalia that was worth writing about, although that changed later when Scalia became one of the most reactionary justices to ever sit in the bench, so he had to use Scalia as a vehicle to write about something else. He picked the only institution he hated more than the New York City Police Department: The Catholic Church.

One of the reasons that Scalia had only been in Troop 17 for a short time was because the troop was sponsored by the Elmhurst Methodist Church. At that time, the Catholic Churches in New York didn't approve of their boys mixing with Protestant boys or even entering a Protestant church to go to meetings, so Scalia had been forced to quit.



Breslin used this to turn the column into an indictment of the Church for its bigotry, ignorance, and intolerance. It might have been a valid argument to make, but the facts about it all were fuzzy and Breslin, as he sometimes did, went way over the top, so the whole column seemed a little forced. I guess that's what deadlines can do to you, no matter who you are.

The next time we saw Breslin was in 1991 at a wedding. It was on New Year's Day, and the first Gulf War was about to begin.

My family had received invitations to the wedding of my parent's best friends' son. I had known him when we were young, but they had moved to New Jersey, and I didn't really know him that well by then. A few years earlier, they had come to my wedding so it was appropriate that my wife and I should attend their family's first wedding as well. The other reason for attending was to do a little stargazing. The father of the bride was a very successful and well-known character actor. As it turned out, he was Jimmy's neighbor.

The country was on the brink of war that day. The previous months had seen the first full-scale deployment of troops since Vietnam. The coverage was wall-to-wall on television, and the mood everywhere was somber. War, for the first time in a generation, was now inevitable and everyone was bracing for the horror that would come with it. The anticipated casualties were estimated to number in the thousands.

The wedding and the reception were at the Seaman's Union Hall in lower Manhattan, not far from the piers. Both the ceremony and the reception were in the main hall.

There was a small cocktail lounge in the back of the hall with a cash bar and some tables. It was all champagne, mimosas, and screwdrivers at the brunch, so people were buying serious drinks in the lounge and bringing them back to their tables.

There was a television mounted on the wall over the bar amid some Christmas lights and garland tuned into CNN. As I was waiting for the bartender, I watched the reports from various parts of Saudi Arabia where the troops were organizing and preparing to invade Iraq. The soldiers in their helmets and combat uniforms in the desert looked painfully young, although they weren't much younger than I was at the time. I heard a familiar voice call out my name.

"Freddie Bubbaz Juniah!"

I turned and saw him sitting at a table by himself with a bottle of Johnnie Walker and a glass. I'm honestly quite surprised that he recognized me, as I had barely said two words to him that day four years earlier, but that's a skill newspaper men have.

"You drink scotch Bubbaz?"

"Yeah, Jimmy," I answered, "I drink scotch."

"Hey Frank-ee," he called to the bartender. "Just give the kid a glass, he's with me."

I sat down across the table from him, with my back to the television. He picked up the bottle and filled my glass.

"Thanks, Jimmy," I said.

I wondered how someone so well-known could be sitting by himself at an occasion like this, but people were coming in, buying their drinks, and returning to the party.

His eyes were glassy, and he was staring up at the battle preparations on the television. His white hair was more disheveled than usual and his face, normally ruddy, was pale and drawn. There was a white carnation pinned to the lapel of his rumpled suit, which was bunched up around his shoulders as he slumped in his chair.

I turned and looked at the screen over my shoulder. There was a map on the screen with animated arrows showing the possible plans of attack. Then I picked up my glass and said "Peace on Earth."

"Fuck yeah," Jimmy said, and he held his glass up to me.

We quietly sipped our drinks. CNN already had theme music composed by John Williams and was playing it every time they came back from a commercial.

Suddenly he leaned forward and asked, "How old are ya kid?"

"Thirty," I answered.

"That's good," he said. "You're too old. They won't draft you."

For weeks, the same thought had been going through my mind. My eligibility had ended two years earlier. "Nah," I said, "the draft is over for good."

"Wait till this shit gets started," he said, staring at the television again.

I don't think I've ever seen anybody in as much pain as Jimmy seemed to be at that moment. I saw it in his eyes, in the way he slumped down in his chair, in the way he turned his head, and in the way he sipped his scotch. His whole body radiated despair.

"Twenty-thousand body bags," he said. "A guy at the Pentagon told me they have twenty-thousand body bags on hand." He looked down at the table and said in a low firm voice, "Goddamn them, those fucking bastards."

I took a few large sips of my drink. I felt uncomfortable sitting there with him, and part of me wanted to get up and return to the wedding party, but he had recognized me, he had remembered my name, and he had poured me a drink. They were small, things, but they made me stay with him.

"Your old man told me you write," he said, looking up at me.

"Not anymore," I said, "Just when I was in school. Now I have to make a living."

He laughed and refilled our glasses.

"Take mine," he said. "It's going to be a fucking nightmare."

"Why is that?"

"I have to talk to the families. Not the families where I live. Not the families where you live. Not the families in Forest fucking Hills." He held his glass up to the television and said, "I have to go to the projects in the fucking Bronx where those kids come from. It's not like they don't have enough shit to deal with already."

He looked away, and his eyes darted around the room, and he seemed distracted as his mind was processing something.

"My guy in the Pentagon tells me that in three weeks," he continued. "Five thousand of them are going to be dead."

He paused as if he were calculating something in his mind.

"Five thousand," he said again. "For what? Fucking Oil? The fucking Kuwaiti Royal Family? Fuck George Bush. That goddamn scumbag."

I didn't know what to say. I picked up the bottle topped off our drinks.

"Nobody's gonna be volunteering anymore after this shit gets started," he said.

I sat quietly with him for a while that afternoon, hearing reporters and retired generals from over my shoulder, breathlessly pumped up and analyzing the coming battle like a Monday Night Football pre-game show.

A couple sat down at the next table. They recognized Jimmy and caught his eye. Jimmy sat up and straightened out his suit. He put on his happy Irish smile for them. John Williams' epic fanfare thundered across the room and Wolf Blitzer's face dissolved into a black Chevy pickup truck.

## Midnight Bloom

They call this time of  
night the  
witching hour, for its dim tenebrosity,  
like the shadows of this city  
are a deity's conjuration to spell the people to sleep.  
Even so some are defiant in their wake—  
through this,  
every thirty seconds comes  
a soft *shut*  
of my father's camera perched  
on a tripod  
lost in concentrated creation of the  
perfect timelapse. It is this time  
of year again—  
in a burst of moonlight  
the epiphyllum in the living room erupts,  
in violent flower of six  
white blossoms  
in deadly stillness.  
Some silent fragrance  
creeps into our rooms and instills a dream in me  
so gold that

when, in the kitchen, some glass bottle breaks and spills  
just-boiled sweet sour plum  
soup on my mother's thigh  
I lay in blessed unawareness, just asleep and deep  
in baby's breath on baby's bed.

Some godly presence once christened  
those blossoms  
*Queen of the night*, like she was a white  
gowned strut down gilded stair  
or a pale silk whisper in a dark yard's corner,  
but she should have been called  
an *empress*, to better capture  
the intensity of that one-night-flower

and a scream so loud  
because this night's  
soup for some slow summer's eventide  
has now adorned thigh  
with blooming skin. But such a scream so loud is  
soft to sleeping ears. Like so,  
I sleep  
sweet sleep until the first slivers of dawn,  
when I wake and find that all the  
epiphyllum in the living room have wilted,  
leaving no proof of existence but a  
heavenly video on a still-waiting  
camera, like an old memory of an old beauty  
or an old woman  
or an old reign.

## Bugs

Here by the tree I learned—at one—  
how not to fear the bugs,  
picking up cicadas with baby-fattened  
hands and throwing them  
down the elephant driveway.

In this same way we might learn  
to no longer fear men; for what is a man  
but a fistful of insect in one's palms,  
sent soaring over the asphalt, gray,  
sloping, curled up towards the house?

## Our Idolatry

### I. We Made a Presentation So You Would Join the Team This Year

*The femininity of xenia:*

*We seek you out because we are a group of women and you a man, our patron god*

The first slide: Mickey Mouse. This is the team's iconic doll, the icon, to con you into coming.

He—no, you—the perpetual protagonist. Your eyelids thrown open to exhibit those dark

date stones, your ears newly protruding, You scrutinize us. All for the better of our protection, profit, pro-creation. You, the Mouse, our providence. You, the paragon of manhood, the abstract of the Odyssey, shirtless,

throbbing with authority in your yellow clogs, tower behind us, over us, as a pillar. We greet you

as a Greek God. Yet we are not sure you understand when we speak of everything as fruit, fruit of the womb, fruit of our labor—everything fruitless (until your arrival)

pointless,  
worthless, a lesson to Eve on the importance of Adam.

### II. The Fear Sets In

*The projector shuts down and the auditorium goes dark.*

*For a second: panic—but looking out the window*

*we see that we are not alone—the entirety of the city is in blackout. The fear is universal.*

Walking down 7th Avenue in the 20's past the Irish pubs we so often rely on the lifeline of each other, *phone-a-friend*, as if a distanced voice has enough form to punch a catcaller in the mouth. I contemplate slipping my keys between my fingers—then, might brass unveil its second meaning. I wish for that.

### III. We Forsake our Worship of the Mouse for, Well, his Wife

*We like her because she stands even taller,  
yellow heels a plinth to project her dotted  
bow into Zeus's domain. We share her hands,  
oysters for the donation of pearls which we*

*create upon invasion. She has our same intestines (interlacing, so well made for the swallowing of everything), our same throats which others like to clench in their fists, our same thighs, veiled with marks of our failure. She, the vertex of our parabolic power, our collective Soteria, stands before us in battle and catches every spear, every arrow, in the opening between her middle and ring finger.*

When the lights first come on, a friend splits an apple in two with her thumbs.

I think she is the strongest.



## Ylem

### Mehreen Ahmed

Her name was Andromeda. She swam on satin water. Lapped up in the silk, her mind was restive. Her thoughts were agile, but discrete and non-linear. Absorbed her musings, her dreams were clear. She swam in them, out of her depths, just as well, they kept coming back. Braided in and out, oscillating, and edgy, they chased her almost, inconsequentially. In a way her swim impeded, these half-formed thoughts, writ on water's hem.

In the aftermath of the war, random bodies floated. Down by the stream which eucalyptus skin coated. Covered by stringy barks, pale faces were spotted. The enemy gloated; bodies were quite bloated. Marked with agony, of the swollen bodies, some eyes shut, peculiarly, some were still open. Her focus turned in a moment.

She sat next to her mother. They chatted in an oval room, mother and daughter. Her mother looked fresh and young, way back, a maiden. Andromeda was born much later.

She asked, "Where have you been all this time?"

"I had been out to a conference," her mother replied.

"How did it all go?"

Her mother answered, "Very good. All was good."

"Ah, but I missed you. I really did."

Her mother smiled. Father entered the room. His handsome face was radiant, the atmosphere lightened. Mother rose to offer him her chair. But father took a stool, sturdy and bare. Father died nearly a decade, Andromeda thought, in retrospect. The room darkened. Over the water, bold and low, fluttered a lorikeet, a flying rainbow. It seemed it was going to gouge her eyes. But the sprightly bird frolicked, passed her elbow.

The neighbour, who like a father, died indeed. She went to his funeral with a wreath. Then he dropped by to meet her that night, this reverie, held her cheat tight. When she asked him, "Have you seen God?"

"No," he replied. This, a silent place. Where am I? This present moment. Vast, and void, this light space, offers no air. Did I die? Am I really dead?"

"No, God then?" she asked.

"Where is He? He hasn't come to meet me, yet," said the respondent.

"Do you miss us?" she had asked.

Tears in her dreams, she felt surreal.

"Yes, I miss your aunty," he answered, then he vaporised like a collapsed star.

A fusion of elements, hydrogen and helium, led to the birth of a cosmic star. The helium ran out. Star collapsed. He collapsed. She saw the neighbour, driving his car; through the suburbs of his choice, with his wife, whom he referred to, as aunty. The chemicals conferred. An accident occurred. He died. Of her dreams. Finite lives made of infinite gasses. Of the cosmos, of the elements, life perished. Andromeda contemplated, the stuff of life. This precious breath, did it not live outside the orbit of death? Helium, and hydrogen, oxygen, iron and zinc.

Mountain passes were rugged. She walked through the terrain. A storm picked up, she looked for a spot. She found a cave. In the dark shelter, she sat amidst litter. A lightning fell outside. That creepy light, opened her mind to shadows below. She was not alone; somebody there. In a flash, the shadow disappeared. She was out of her wits. She tried to sleep. Just when she saw some cave paintings. On the wall, they looked ancient. And they were, ancient. In a bit, she saw a little boy. A broken charcoal in his hand, he sketched stirring stories, like the fall of Troy. He lit a small fire. Lights emanating from the fire helped, this sentient boy, to see better. He drew stick figures of many shapes and sizes: tall, short, men, women and children. It was almost dark, on the rugged wall, shape of the boy silhouetted in the moonlight. Floodlights in the dark cave, paintings of tall tales, some washed up partly in the rain. Segment of a story, like this painting of an alley, people walked through with missing hands or hair. Many even defaced, in the falling rain. Colours ran down the leaves of trees, and turned them into lighter shades of green. Pure paintings filled the dingy walls, and onto the floor, some scribbles crawled.

Gallows hung without much peruse. Kings devised a horrendous ruse. Spilled blood into the soil to infuse. Children sacrificed, for fertility of the soils, far better use. Heavy harvest at stake, people kept quiet, no one to refuse. Little boys to be taken, gods to be appeased. Telltale signs of ominous days. The King's men marched, and dragged the boy away. Off to the gallows. Off with his head. The artist, little boy, broken into shreds. In white loincloth, wrapped around his waist, the boy's gaping horror, clouded his face. His small hands trembled. She looked through a portal. Tears, and cries of the innocent sacrifice. No one took pity at the bloody altar. Wounds remained unaltered. Cosmic parameter, a stern factor.

Flashbacks played wistful memories, she lay on a beach a mere bystander. A silent witness to the many silken dreams, lovers entwined a beautiful beginning. Sunken sands, in waxed moonlight. Of the mandala, an ephemera, imperfect finale of the drama; done and redone until time had spoken, given up on the beach, a part of resurrection. In the hours all became sand, quintessentially minuscule, and indestructible. In the heart of it, each wave flow, atom of H<sub>2</sub>O.

Over those swelling waves, she boarded a pirate ship. And saw a thousand vessels, a war imminent. On the horizon, a ship appeared like a phantom. A skeleton of a ship, spectacularly luminous, shone in the lantern. There was a gunshot fire. She was hit. Oh! It hurt! She was hurt. She felt the pain of the gunshot. But she lived. She saw ships pass by, while her own cruised towards the nearest beach; sea-gulls, scoured the skies. Sands, the most wondrous, where monks built palaces, and played Kings and Queens. Of a greater imagination, ruled by them, the three Moirae sisters. Monks made mandalas, painstakingly intricate, human history and destiny pleaded. Giant pyramids erected with care, and the Taj-Mahal, The great Ozymandias. The King of Kings, his life sized statue pitched on the beach. Immortalised in the scroll, the statue awash, the mandala destroyed, flattened to the ground.

The hollow sand; into the sand, she buried her legs deep to the waist. A hybrid formed of part sand and part flesh. At its best, a mermaid tail; she lay half covered

under the clay. High on her imagination, her dreams displayed, decrepit old castles', windows' deep plays. Such was the beach, on the edge of which, the tireless seas creased. Where romantics rode unicorns, nomads wild horses, Homer, churned verses, now deplete.

Time's most valued, gift offerings to gods, watched this once how their altars burnt? Stars burnt out. The sun burnt. This gleaming altar made out of gold; plush gold clouds, nestled the thrones. A toy boat marooned, on gold-plaited sheet, uncertain of directions, an aluminium plate; hot liquid gold, poured into the mould, this sea basin, replete to the brim. Gods' own altar, never to erode, shimmering and sure, until pilgrims came home.

Andromeda swam, a big hand bagged a snake. There was a man though towards dawn. He told her this, expressed a wish that he wanted to leave, to be born again.

"Born again?" she asked.

"Yes, that is possible," he said.

"Impossible. Because in order for you to remain what you're, you need genes from both parents."

"It is possible, though," the man said.

"What about your wife?"

"What about her?"

"Does she have a say in any of this?" she asked.

"Probably not."

The wife loomed. But she didn't seem to mind. She heard his desire. So, she did not hinder.

On a fevered night, in one short month, the man left for a forest, of illuminated fireflies. The blue forest sparkled, a pathway was strewn, with sprinklings of fire ubiquitously flown. Around tall trees and slim short bushes, he walked alone through a lucid forest. A forest transformed into a conduit, this hermit of a man, roamed its bended unit. Reincarnation on his mind, soul in another body, stars in the sky, twinkled a smile.

Here she was, with this lady in white, appeared in her dream, that's how it transpired. Some syringes in her hand, wet lips in betel juices, glowing with health, she stood at her bed. Holding them out, those long syringes, she knocked into her some worldly senses.

"Your mother's injections."

"What?"

The lady vanished. Her mother had run out of insulin and was on the brink of a disaster. The lady had come to tell her this, to ask her if, she could get her some insulin. Andromeda's grandmother, this dear lady, kind and Godly, rests now sadly. The silken waters blanketed her skin. Her swimming undeterred, held her by a spell. This undying chemical, once produced within her organ, the failing pancreas, now injected for survival.

"I've come to say goodbye," it seemed he taunted. She looked at her brother, then understood his intent. Upon waking, she found to be true, that this saintly priest had passed away too. This dreamland, not entirely unreal, of sense perceptions, a world

parallel. Sights sounds and smell, shaped up to be real, pain compounded a curious blend.

Disjointed thoughts came to pass. Mesmerising chimera seeped. Tantalising glimpse, of enormous replica, as shaded entity. Who's to know, what's with the truth, this wakeful life of actuality? A dream within a dream; doll within a doll, within a doll, the picture awry, always off limit. That cave painting in the rain, defaced people walked up the streets, the greens washed off. Waters dribbled over, of a partial reality, conceived by this artist in utter antipathy.

Such fragmented cognisance, manifold layered dream, alluded to allegory of the cave theme. Half a dream, a broken thought, the unfinished story, manifested to Plato's shadow reality. This palpable existence, transcended truth, hinged on puppeteers beyond familiar scope. Answered with certitude, flung within the stars, lay a larger image, the fate of the universe. The long and short of it, dismantle the stars, dismantle Leda, a sense of foreboding descended Andromeda. For, "It is the stars, The stars alone, that govern our condition," Shakespeare foretold.

**a want (illusory)**

a glob of fig jam dropt

a hundred ants or a  
veritable coven

swirls elliptically  
dense with pinching spells

a feeding frenzy  
an archaic wish to clothe

Eve's pudendum

as fig must signify

with their brittle bodies

in the garden eternal

it lives in my clumsiness  
with fruits  
(desires for all species)

to pluck and to taste  
one by one

what comes to be called  
pleasure

(to some, sin)

## it's all about the father

a colorless cocoon  
straddling the underside  
of an oak leaf

the sexless euphony  
of moths

who enter the abyss  
without parricide

we are different

simple hatred  
where no one is to blame  
throws the die

their one flesh  
erases a boundary

it is there for us

we are the mortal ones  
separate by day

a single pronoun  
economy hours bed

there, a wet stain  
an inland sea

seems the only thing  
in the room

and millennia  
try to efface it

## **purity**

texts not used

dispossessed  
in a lost and found

wanting an owner  
to meet  
at the landfill

someone to pout on  
a pinky ring  
and say *it's mine*

it fell off the shelf

the gem I'm looking for

perfect to set  
in an ode or sonnet

. . . .

if meaning is  
a sensed relation

it isn't a heartbreak

to be repurposed  
pulpwood

swished in a chemical  
wash  
for another day

to breed  
like the young and beautiful

each shred admiring  
its own ghost

whispering falsetto  
no no no no  
until the word means

anything at all

an auto-reset,  
stupid

**the shortest distance**  
between two  
is rejection

a self lags behind  
itself  
swaddled in shame

it's natural

jonquils stunned  
by frost, drooping heads

the broken wing  
tossed from the nest

. . . .

if there and here  
were the same  
we all would be winners

the loser's revenge  
a non-story

the hero's destiny  
a commonplace

getting would have  
no *how*

but be part of  
the wallpaper

a journey without  
surprise

life would take forever  
while dying  
of boredom



**that each drop**  
in the ocean

is what makes up  
the ocean

a long movie

. . . .

the round shiny  
stones  
in the mason jar

I covered with  
sea water

so they could drink

the saucer on top  
is to keep them  
feeling wet

. . . .

I want to suck  
each pebble

until it's dry  
as air

to figure how  
the earth began

# Nikolas

Katherine Johnson

You were always in my way. In the two classes we had together, Chemistry and English, you always sat exactly in front of me, and would talk so loud with your friends that I couldn't hear the teacher. Whenever I saw you in the halls, you'd be leaning on your locker with your friends, which happened to be next to mine, and say "hi, new girl" to me so that my cheeks would burn up and I would forget my combination.

The first time you ever said my name was the winter term of my first year here. I was in our chemistry class, trying hard to keep up with the teacher's fast-paced explanation of some question on the last test. You were whispering and laughing with your friend, and you suddenly turned back and asked me for a pen. I handed you the pen I was using, without meeting your dark beautiful eyes.

"Thank you, new girl," you said.

"It's Grace," I said on a sudden impulse, and I met your stare.

"My bad," you chuckled, "Thank you, *Grace*."

"You're welcome. What's your name?"

"Nikolas." You smiled at me before turning back to face the board.

Your friend nudged you and you smacked the back of his head. I spent the rest of the class staring at the hoodie of your black jacket that fit so perfectly on your back. My insides felt warm as my mind was wandering and contemplating our first conversation. As soon as the bell rang, you shot out of your seat and chased your friends out of the classroom.

The first time we hung out was the next day. I was in our English class, and you stretched your long arms casually right above my open notebook and dropped a ball of paper on my table. I opened it up, my stomach fluttering. I read it: *LET'S HANG OUT AFTER SCHOOL, GRACE:*). I smiled and wrote a *SOUNDS GOOD* on the wrinkled notebook paper and tossed it right on your closed notebook. I saw you open it, and though you weren't facing me, I knew you were smiling. Then you folded the note carefully and put it in your backpack. Once the bell rang, you punched your friend next to you and galloped with him out of the classroom.

After school, I kept my head down as I unlocked my locker. I knew you were next to me with your group of friends.

"Don't be a stranger, Grace," your calm voice sounded amused.

I followed you out of the school, and we walked into the cold air. You asked me to talk about myself; to tell you everything that I wanted you to know. So. I told you about how I moved to Massachusetts from Virginia with my parents who move around for work all the time. I told you about how my grandma's death made me become more grateful for everything that I had. I told you about the few friends I had in the school choir club. You listened as if I was telling you the most important secrets of the universe.

We came to a coffee shop and I asked you why you wanted to hang out with me. You were humored by this question, I could tell, as a faint smirk appeared on

your face. You ran a hand through your dark hair and replied “I thought you were cute, and I wanted to get to know you.”

And you did. We got to know each other. From then on, you would ruffle my hair every time you saw me in the halls, and toss me stupid notes when we were in class. Outside of school, we spent almost every afternoon studying in your house while eating your mother’s amazing blueberry muffins, and nights at the cinema or the bowling alley.

The first time we kissed was in the spring. You asked me to be your date to the annual spring party at your guy friend Jake’s house. I was nervous because this was the first ever party I was going to in this new town. You put your arm around me as we walked to Jake’s house which was just a few streets away. I could smell your musty cologne and I felt happy and comfortable under your warm embrace.

The party was overwhelming: The house was packed with hundreds of sweaty kids, the EDM sounded like gunshots, and the lights were blinding. I lost you at some points of the party, like when some popular song came on, or when some guys would pull you away to meet someone. I didn’t mind that, as I enjoyed watching you dance wildly, and do crazy handshakes with complete strangers because that was the type of person you were.

At some point that night, you came back and grabbed my hands, asking me to dance. I complied, and danced with you. We made up stupid dance moves together, and I never laughed harder in my life. Then we somehow made it into a dark hallway. You leaned into me. Our faces were inches away from each other. I could smell your sweet breath, and I felt like my heart could just burst out of my chest in that moment.

Your head hovered close to mine for a moment, before pulling away. My face was burning. You held my sweaty hand in yours. I could see your smile in the darkness and your lips whispered “be my girlfriend, Grace.” I didn’t even reply, and you leaned in and we kissed.

That kiss I will remember forever.

We spent the rest of the school year as a couple. We grew together. I would go cheer for you in all your baseball games and you would embarrass me with your loud applause at my choir recitals. You introduced me to your guy friends, and I no longer felt intimidated to go to my locker. I helped you with English, and you helped me with Chemistry. We met each other’s parents. Your mother loved me, and my parents loved you. Your hugs gave me life, and your kisses made me feel things I never felt before.

The last time I saw you we were sitting together in English. I was leaning my head on your shoulder barely awake because I pulled an all-nighter for my Calculus test. You were taking detailed notes for the first time this whole year, for me. I dozed off so you woke me up by whispering in my ear that you were going to excuse yourself and get me some coffee. “I’ll be right back” was what you said to me before you excused yourself. I nodded without even opening my eyes to look at you.

But you didn’t come back. Or maybe when you did, you had turned into someone else. And that someone else was no longer concerned with me, let alone distracted.

Sometimes I wonder, were you real? Were you a figment of my imagination, a mirror depicting back the me I so desperately wanted to see? Is love real, or is it a mirage, carefully constructed by two, only to so easily be deconstructed by one.

## The Second Boy I Ever Like-liked

Katherine Johnson

I wake up this morning to a few Instagram notifications, one of them being @william777777 liked your photo. I smile softly at my screen as my mind flashes back to middle school.

“William777777” is William Li: my second-ever crush and first-ever “boyfriend.” We both attended the same middle school, a local all-Chinese-speaking school in Beijing.

To put things into perspective, he was fourteen and I was thirteen. And God, were we dramatic.

*November 2014*

The first time I saw him was at the outdoor basketball courts. I noticed him because he had just hit a three-pointer at the last second of the game. Hordes of students flooded toward him, chanting his Chinese name.

All I knew about him at the time was that he was in the grade above me, and that he was a “golden boy.”

The next time I saw him, later that day, he was walking from the science building to the main building with a girl. The noon sunlight glowed down on their laughing faces. I nudged my guy friend, asking who the girl was.

“That’s Will’s girlfriend—Nino.”

The story doesn’t end there. It should. But I was a stubborn girl.

That night I acquired Nino’s WeChat (basically a Chinese combination of WhatsApp and Instagram) from a girl in my class, and added her.

I texted Nino that I was “in a competition with my friend to see who could add the most contacts in one night.” I thought I was a fucking genius for that excuse and Nino, being nice, gave me Will’s contact.

*Big mistake, stupid*, I remember thinking back then.

God, I was evil.

Will added me back and we chatted until three in the morning. I barely remember what we were talking about; it was probably cheesy and stupid, but I was into it. Each notification that would pop up on my phone felt like a Christmas gift, and each text gave me butterflies in my stomach.

The next morning I was excited to see him, and I snuck on some of my mom’s mascara to look *extra glam*. I saw him walking in my direction in the hallway, and my whole face heated up, my heartbeat quickening as I tried to meet his eyes, but he didn’t even make eye contact with me.

Despite us never really talking in person during our first few weeks of friendship, we were *very* active on WeChat.

Gradually, our chats became more flirtatious, or at least as flirtatious as two young innocent teenagers can be.

I never really considered Nino’s feelings in this whole thing.

Before I knew it, Will announced that he had broken up with her. A minute after he sent me this message, he asked me to be his girlfriend. I agreed way too enthusiastically.

*December 2014*

Deservedly, I got bullied for this.

When kids in William's grade found out about me, shit. Hit. The. Fan. Girls in William's class would add me in a group chat and send me mean texts. Pretty much every kid in the eighth grade hated me. I was known as the girl that broke up the cute couple. The homewrecker or whatever. I was afraid to walk in the hallways, because I would get mean glances. There were many rumors spread about me, ranging from me not being a virgin to my parents paying their way for me to attend the school.

But at the end of the day, I knew that Will liked me, and that was all that goddamn mattered to me back then.

Remember guys, I hadn't even talked to this boy in person yet.

The first time we talked, Will told me to come watch the interschool basketball competition with him after school. I shyly walked next to him. We said our hellos without looking each other in the eyes.

Thankfully, after that, we slowly got more comfortable with each other.

One day after class, I headed over to the convenient store attached to the gas station next to my school. It was freezing, but I was still craving my favorite apple ice pop.

I opened up the freezer to get my favorite apple ice pop. Suddenly I felt a hand on my head, "hey, dumbass."

I recognized Will's voice, and turned to face him, smiling, "you're the dumbass."

"I was looking for you earlier during lunch, but I didn't see you," he said.

"Oh, I was studying for my Chinese test," I replied, and kept rummaging through the freezer trying to find the flavor I wanted.

"Popsicles in the winter?" He laughed.

I found my flavor, and he grabbed it from me.

I tried to reach for my popsicle, but he held it out of my reach, "you know how unhealthy this stuff is?" He teased.

"You know how annoying you're being right now?" I joked, jumping to reach my popsicle.

"Grab me one, I wanna try this flavor."

I stopped reaching, surprised, and grabbed him the same popsicle, "I thought it was *too unhealthy*."

"But my girlfriend likes it, so I wanna try it," He takes both popsicles and heads to the cashier.

I follow him, blushing.

He paid for both of our popsicles, and I felt so special.

We walked out together, into the cold. Laughing, and licking our popsicles slowly.

He smiled down at me, and shoved me softly. In return I threw my wrapper at him and ran away.

"LITTERER!" He yelled as he picked up the wrapper and chased after me.

That was one of our first moments together in person. Also, one of my favorites.

Through more of these little moments of joking around, and making fun of each other playfully, we became even more comfortable with each other.

*June 2015*

I forget what fight we had, but we broke up at the end of seventh grade.

*September 2015*

I wasn't really upset about our breakup during summer break, as I was attending a summer camp in the US, and therefore distracted. But as the school year started again, I became really upset about the breakup. My fourteen-year-old self cried multiple times to my best friend, Andrea, lamenting about how my life was so "complicated." I saw Will at the outdoor courts, or ignoring me in the cafeteria, and I got mad, deciding that "flirting" with his friends would be the best way to make him jealous.

Let's just say, he didn't seem to give two fucks.

*June 2016*

At the end of eighth grade, before I was going to leave for boarding school, Will and I started talking again. To be precise: two days before I was going to board a plane for the US.

Dramatic.

Will, my best friend, and I went to 欢乐谷 (basically Six Flags but Chinese).

We had fun.

Will held my hand in the haunted house.

That was the first time we ever touched. I remember thinking frantic thoughts like these:

*My hand is so fucking sweaty, is that gross?*

*When is he gonna let go? Please don't!!*

*I'm not even scared of this stupid haunted house, but I'm gonna act TERRIFIED so he'll keep holding my hand heheheh.*

*I should've put hand cream on this morning ahhhh.*

*I can't believe I'm holding hands with a boy. It feels different...*

The next day, we all had lunch before my 5 pm flight. When my best friend got picked up by her parents, I was already crying. That was my first-ever goodbye that truly hurt.

Then it was just Will and me. We silently walked to the subway station together. I remember that my stomach was churning as I realized that after all our "drama" and wasted time, we weren't going to see each other in the halls anymore. We would never be able to get popsicles after class, and I would never get to pretend I was horrible at basketball every time he tried to teach me. I would never get to spy on him in the playground, and catch him glancing at me, which would fill my stomach with butterflies. I would never get to write him dramatic notes about how I was mad at him, and I would never receive his love letters anymore.

There we were, standing in the cool, bright subway compartment, staring at our feet. I remember feeling my eyes well up, and I remember being annoyed that he had sunglasses on.

My stop came before his, and I mumbled "goodbye" without even looking at him as I hurried out of the train.

"Katherine!"

I turned around, surprised to see him standing there, and not on the train that rushed by in blurred colors.

I felt like I was in one of those rom-coms that my fourteen-year-old self would watch and cry to.

I asked him what he was doing.

“Can I have a farewell kiss?” he asked shyly.

*I've never kissed anyone before. How does this work? What if our mouths miss? Does he just have to lean down a bit or something? But I just had pizza, so that's a no-go.*

All these thoughts overwhelmed me, so I said no. Then without another word, I ran up the stairs to exit the station.

The tears started coming, as I imagined him standing in that station alone, sad, and rejected.

I was too scared and shy. I was bad at saying goodbyes. This was the first time I had to say goodbye to people that I truly loved, and I couldn't handle it.

I got off the plane to fifteen texts from my best friend telling me to check Will's post (translated for your convenience):

*Okay, we are saying goodbye today. I am graduating and Katherine is going to the US. I don't know whether the next time we meet is going to be in a few months or even years.*

*I really want to just wake up and have never known you. I really wish you never appeared in my life. But the reality is that I am going to miss you more and more as the days go by. I didn't used to think that saying goodbye to a dumbass like you was going to make me so sad, 'cuz you're a dumbass. But today as I saw you walk away from me, I realized how badly I want you to just STAY. We were stupid kids during our relationship, but after being with you I realized how much I grew.*

*When we were together, you were a loser, and I was a dumbass. We played through the spring, fought through summer, hated through the fall, and cried through winter.*

*I don't know what magic you had on me that made me call you thirty times and send you twenty messages in ONE DAY. At that time I was only fourteen and you were thirteen. Many people around us have made our relationship really hard. Nevertheless we really don't have to care what others think about our relationship, all we need is each other.*

*I have a really bad habit in which I can be hesitant and lack a backbone to say how I truly feel. When we were “broken up,” I would see you near the playground or on the courts, and every time we would accidentally make eye contact, I would just look away. Just like that it became days, and days turned into months. We could've gotten back together, but I was too scared to say anything. After my eighth grade year ended, I thought: We still have another year together, I still have time with her. After the first semester of my ninth grade year ended, I thought: I'm still at this school for a few months, I still have a chance. Until today when I finally have the courage to tell you that I love you, and we barely have a day left together. But now what's the use, you're in the US.*

*Thank god I had those ugly-ass sunglasses in the subway today, or else everyone in the train would've seen me cry. But you didn't have sunglasses, hahaahahaha, karma.*

*Being with you was one of the most valuable, unforgettable, and amazing experiences in my life. I will never forget it.*

*Thank you. I'll miss you. Bye.*

*December 2016*

Will started dating someone. They were serious. High school relationships were SERIOUS. She was his profile picture on WeChat.

*March 2017*

Will, Andrea, and I met up for dinner when I came back for spring break.

He didn't look at me the same. In fact, he was quiet and awkward. He didn't really speak to me unless I asked him a question.

I spent that night crying. My chest hurt. That was my first heartbreak.

*March 2019*

Will and his girlfriend broke up.

He finally texted me after three years of blocking me and unblocking me, always refusing to reply to my messages.

My stomach didn't flutter. I felt nothing. I really didn't care anymore.

Will was the first guy I truly cared about, and I think that is worth remembering and appreciating. We found excitement in the secret glances, the late-night conversations accompanied by stupid memes, and just being dramatic and playful because nothing really mattered back then. We did start our relationship because I was inconsiderate of other people's feelings, but shit happens. Even though I don't feel anything for him anymore, I still am in love with our memories, with this whole thing that I have documented for you.

Now, at seventeen years old, I can't seem to find a significant other that wants to be with me just for my presence, just for what I have to say, just to hang out, without wanting my body, or something sexual out of our relationship. Maybe it was like that with Will because we were young and shy, attending a moderately conservative Chinese school. It was probably a cultural thing. Or maybe he really *did* like-like me.

I don't think any relationship I will ever have can be that pure again.



## Notes of a Designated Sleeper

I am the one who sleeps on principle  
in seminars, my head leans and I let  
the talk run over me until it is a river  
that floats me, by tilt of head, by  
inclination. I am taking the anti-  
minutes, recording the least susurrations,  
striplight flicker, small Cagean  
grunts, distant car-alarm,  
builder singing from the next street.  
Hear the voice, not the content  
of the man reading slowly from a sheaf of papers.  
The pages move, but the pile is long.  
Once my throat released the day's noise as snore,  
the seminar room erupted and I woke,  
could not place why I was in a room of laughter.  
Since then I've refined, refined.  
One should not fall too deeply into that realm,  
always maintain a parallel awareness,  
don't let the speaker see your closed eye.  
Lean the head as if towards your notes.  
Attune to the rise in tone that suggests closure.  
With training one can ask questions,  
referring to the speaker's unconscious bias:  
you were there, aware of dream-content,  
where we were in space, cradled by the planet's  
spare, offhand noise.  
You have earned the right to share.

## Mitten

In the changing-room corner he  
pulls on a grey sock, and then a leg-  
brace. One testicle hangs down, the way he  
moves suggests pain. I leave after him,  
to find him struggling  
to work out the exit, the knob you have  
to press. I unlock my bike  
think about the next thing in my day  
catch up with him past the steps.  
He has dropped his wet swimming shorts,  
I pick them up (they leave  
grey shadow on the paving) and pass them  
to him as I cycle, then stop

to watch him walk  
painfully round a corner stop for  
a moment, stoop to pick  
up a child's mitten from the ground  
and place it on a low tree  
stump and move on.

## The Line

A school, a disordered line.  
People rustle and cough, not talking.

A vague sense that I should follow others  
and get to the right place. When I get there,

My knees push up on the desk  
a question on the blackboard

about poetry, something to do  
with relations of couplets in a poem

but I don't understand one of the words,  
I look around and there's

my son in a corner. I'm relieved, he  
has to answer the question, not me,

and when I know this, I feel I can  
explain it to him, the way train

carriages couple together and pull,  
it is his distress not mine

the school has no controlling mistress  
and paper sleeps under my hand

piecing this together,  
the alarm raps in my head.

A week lies ahead, my eyes  
open on a new desert.

## Municipal Waste Centre

My new theory of time is that it is  
the finitest possible slippage in a  
held complex of everything. Only  
the slightest will gives it motion,  
in this way we accumulate downstairs.  
But into history slip the eyes. Yesterday  
I scratched a months' leavings from the garden,  
now it's the annual trip to the dump.  
I'll take the kids there, join a Sunday car-jam.  
Each skip will have its JCB and as  
people empty wood and garden-waste,  
the jaws will bite, metal arms pluck  
waste into lorries, the municipal loop.

In the cars the girls see a green-backed  
spider issue from one of the waste-bags  
and are shriek. They wait outside as I throw  
contents into the skip, careful to retrieve  
each bag, but one, an old bone-meal sack  
into which I had packed the cuttings  
from the thorn-bush in the front hedge,  
and I accidentally let go, bag and  
contents. The JCB drops its arm and  
lifts just it, and moves it to the bin  
for plastics with the tenderness of a mother-cat  
moving a kitten to safety.

Driving home with a few leaves left in the car,  
the spider probes the shadows under  
the passenger-seat. At the lights,  
a figure moves on the pavement, using  
something, not a Zimmer-frame, some  
trolley, one painful step at a time, each a few  
inches, he, I see now this person is a he,  
he stops to consider each step and on  
to the next, the frame is, I see, a pushchair,  
piled with bottles, bags, and as the lights change  
I wonder how he can cross the road,  
and as the lights change again I look as he  
approaches the crossing but by this time  
there is a pressure of traffic behind me.  
In that instant I see he has my face.

## Night Music

We talk about your pain,  
a gold-dense syrup sticking us  
in the same room, but apart.  
Uneasy winds slip through the blinds,  
the shod moon jumps down

lonely creature of no song  
loosens in the eye.  
Loss the river runs in the cloud  
sky colours our sense,  
the city loses its edge.

That which it is the nature of  
the shadow to search  
folds, according  
bone into stew, awful missiles  
into homes. The moon's  
gaseous cousin has come to visit

and we lose then what it was we are flakes of,  
we abut this river that flows in us that is loss,  
that the sky is draining.

## **The Knowing Objects**

The sun turns a new leaf  
for which read a page, and as it  
lightens, black figures can be seen  
crowding, agitating

these are words, they had been  
pressed down for so long and  
being turned they feel dazed.  
They start to form chains, and  
in those chains turns the thought.

## The Hard Woman

she uses her voice  
to cut demands  
from the crop  
you can tell she's been around  
something desultory  
ready to explode  
if the occasion calls for it

there is ice in the air  
you can see the trees  
the fig leaf  
that was thrown away  
to hell with this, she cried

what makes me work  
is how what softens  
survives the crap  
no need to disappear  
there is love there is some

in the surgery  
they find nothing  
to make her more amenable  
she is too human

## **I Knew a Man**

I knew a man  
Who made a living  
from Beanie Babies

He went  
from swap meet to swap meet  
selling, buying,  
living off them  
recycling money  
into Beanie Babies

He was a big man,  
a bright man  
a fast talker,  
smooth,  
a van dyke beard,  
read poetry

Somewhat  
in the dream way  
A motorcyclist

He roared on a Harley  
across the Midwest

Went to the Badlands,  
glided on his bike

With a deep black gas tank  
a Smurf on its side  
traveling across America.



## The Morning Before

The morning before  
I will be leaving  
I sit on a train,

watching the horseflies  
of newspaper  
stream in the breeze.

They hang, caught  
on the barbed wire fences  
the train passes.

They hum the facts  
of the design I sit on

like so many eggs,  
a brooding hen

not thinking of the cost,  
the blossoming life,

the cracking open  
of everything  
I think of as my life.

The morning  
before I will be leaving  
I have no idea  
I'm leaving,

just faint  
uneasiness,

like something  
slightly off  
I've eaten

\*\*\*

or the slow encroachment  
of migraine.

I look at the buildings  
of intense brick  
that even now crumble

under the constant  
revision of weather.

Pigeons are hunting  
the tarmac  
on roofs  
for food, for anything  
to live on.

The morning before  
tv has responded  
to every thought.

I leave my mind open  
to coming loss.

## Practice

1)

Think of the earth as the last repose where silence is enacted, a centered facade, or centered fading that enters as noise the vibration of air, for nowhere else is not silence, and earth is the home

giving without artifice

the chirr of blackbirds, robin calls combing mad musics of interrelation or seemingly chaotic notes, a still end

to the essence of music

the space between

2)

silence is our given, all opportunities we have to stop

just as the bird does between reports of the soon zinging noise once again got right

perfected, played on and on, the way a student learning the tuba might constantly repeat the notes to The Ride of the Valkyries, the monotony of the metronome, hoping to catch this time, this time,

the playing. Proverbial still being the played, improvised, studied, toward the moment of finally reaching

maybe what the composer was looking for in the player's mind, the orchestrated laying out of all that could happen

## Hymn to Flies

In its cosmos of infinite vision multiplied into the fast buzz of business  
about the house  
what a multitude is the fly! It walks sealing across walls and windows,  
each thing being  
a residence  
an element of residue  
surfactant imperceptible slime

a creation of maggots in the offing!

How godlike the sky-blue shimmer off bodies—a juggernaut, force of  
intestinal fortitude,

outlasting special representation, the human! To have, as to ponder,  
or as in  
off in thought or feeling, but a fly, like a switch,  
transcending perceptions, persecutions, explanations, eternity,  
buzzing its small chanson of what is in human speculation, life,  
activant, persistent, after all, captive, it  
endures, annotates, arrests, wastes,  
waits.

12:01 AM

I can hear the shine in your eyes  
on the other end of the telephone.

When I speak like this,  
I feel authentic  
and not heavy.

I don't have to tattoo meaning in the air  
to know what you mean.

I remember when you first told me...  
apropos of nothing...  
about the different levels of charitable donation.

I was sitting right across from you — over there.  
(You in that armchair, me in this one: our eyes.)

You said there's the donor who gives large sums  
and puts a placard on the wall, signifying  
who it's from;

and then there's the other one who gives...  
but remains anonymous.

Your words hanging like a phantom,  
I didn't have to be who I thought I was;

you were once me,  
once where I was...

In that moment, I knew.

## Still forsaken

There are others like us.  
We're like x-people of creativity.  
I've met them;  
and you have too—  
stop... forgetting.

Enact the sovereign state  
of temporal qualia.  
Without misperception;  
strike your head like the gladiator—  
the original one... before Rumi.

Cripple your soul into infinity  
so waters feel your drops,  
like loose eyelashes;  
strewn into the wind—  
of plenty... yet still forsaken.

## **The gate is not a gate**

Until it speaks,  
Until you don't say,  
Your mind is shut.

The gate is not a gate.

meat of memory

It's these grapes on the table  
in a white bowl with a golden rim,  
purple and plump, clustered

(when you lifted them)  
in an inverted raindrop, a swollen  
richness in the morning

light of so many  
entangled years ago, so many  
sunrises spilling

across tables in places  
like tombstones in memory's graveyard,  
a map of those losses

that living will gain  
however much it would avoid them –  
that hint of the flavor

of the day-by-day,  
that he remembers now, and shakes  
his head and smiles.

Is she still alive somewhere?,  
old and plump, flesh sagging like a sigh  
above the drumming chest

in fluttering shadows,  
the way so many lives are now,  
contemplating a bowl

broken and thrown away,  
the fat and juicy remembered feast  
reflecting that sunlight

that followed them  
through rooms of disappointment  
to a weary present,



through chambers of  
tenuous joy to a blinking at light,  
a scratching of the face

in front of a mirror  
blurred with steam and eyes  
bleeding the light,

the images like song  
that flaps and flutters, whispers  
briefly as it leaves.

The bones remind me  
that I am here now, aching and real,  
a stem that clings to

whatever it has been,  
with fingers that stretch out  
to what's been lost.

The tongue traces lips  
as if they were the memory  
that is all that meat is.

## nocturnal

One more beer, late in life.  
Dance for me, memories.  
Strut your stuff, illusions –  
no, sit down, get outta tha way.

Not nearly that drunk,  
since the Doctor said  
that all the years of not doing  
have finally done it

and good habits are here  
or here is gone. Blech.  
I hate good habits.  
I like good memories

of when time stretched out  
a hand with a big future in it,  
visions and actions and lust, oh my.  
I've had my paper plate

of what life serves up, and some  
has slid off and splattered  
and some has stayed, and the plate  
has buckled, but held enough

to keep me feeding me  
as, many miles of time ago,  
another younger older man,  
in what he was and could expect,

looked at a sky without lights  
from city or town, and thought  
of kills and fucks and children  
(I think of office work, not kills),

and miles into the future,  
a woman will gaze into space  
as stars rush by like events  
too quickly to understand

beyond the masks of names,  
and think of flight and fucks and offspring.  
One drop in the wave,  
one leaf in the forest,

and that is enough.  
I won't get to taste  
with my dead, stilled tongue  
(Jeez, he did shut up, at last)

what is there, and beautiful  
for being there, even the pain  
that nothingness can never feel.  
What is, is always enough,

and it's up to us to drink  
and taste and die, so, Doctor,  
I lift my glass toward you,  
one more than you want me to have.

## are stars not ourselves

I don't know Miss Maria  
if that's Orion's Belt

I know the Dippers  
lurk up there somewhere  
a hemisphere away  
from where you grew up here now  
for twenty years time alloyed  
in the mix of you as the stars are mixed  
explosive from the distance of self  
three feet away at night  
and waiting for the bus

I too was interested when young  
in the stars in the black sky's  
vast peculiar writing

I had a little telescope  
and I wasn't afraid to use it  
on the wild nocturnal island  
in the middle of Park Avenue  
the hidden minds of the filthy rich  
declining to examine us  
people without portfolio  
through the minifying glass  
of upper story windows

It's the same old upper story  
all gas no stars burning bright  
in the bleakness of the night  
smelling the white silk roses  
in an Oriental vase  
as far as old Cathay  
from the New York streetsmell

You and I        Miss Maria  
and your husband        my wife  
and our children  
do not smell the white silk roses  
or the lemony furniture  
polished by women  
in powderblue uniforms  
with white ruffled aprons  
who chatter with accents  
you do not have        your English  
is well polished        but I'd bet  
you sometimes think in the language  
you brought with you from home

I've known so many  
women I do not know  
just bits of them        smiles  
and factoids        eyes  
and politics        images  
that flicker and flame out  
in my memory  
like candles or stars

I finger the factoids of you

Your mother's dog  
licked the tears from the eyes  
of people who were crying

Your car's engine is dead

You think your boss  
will let you work at their office  
up in Middletown  
one or two days a week

You call all of the drivers  
Miss this or Mister that

Your daughter helps  
her younger sister  
get clean and ready for bed  
the way you helped yours  
love reflecting the light  
from one star to the next

You cut your hair  
It looks nice

I've touched so many  
women and not touched  
many more and you I know  
whom I do not know  
have touched and not touched  
so many men and all of us  
dance and flicker in memories  
like an old movie  
slightly out of focus  
jagged and blurred at once  
around each other

galaxies melting  
into galaxies stars  
whirling with stars and planets  
with the black silent music  
of emptiness around us

chains of orbits  
tangled and slack  
bound as by electrons  
or loose as pool balls  
on different tables  
in different bars  
long ago

humanity is perhaps  
in Vonnegut's term  
a granfalloon  
a mock aping of imitation  
masquerading as intimate

but the pull        the gravitation  
of meat        principle        being  
the same at different points  
angles of interaction  
like roses that unleash the stars  
to the bottomless black sky

mysteries wearing  
faces we recognize

stars        orbiting        stars

the flexing connections  
melodies from orchestras  
of love and ignorance  
in the blooming endless night

I almost miss my stop

you are sorry and amused

good night        Miss Maria        Good night

we are married to lucky souls  
and so are they

### **something surviving**

The fiancée of the beautiful suicide  
never married. Frozen in death,  
with one shoe off, her metal cushion  
the hand of a huge, indifferent God,  
she had removed herself from him  
completely, while staying in his heart,  
a living crucifixion nail  
upon which something fluttered and clenched.  
Suspended from the wood of his life,  
hung before an indifferent death  
with empty possibilities  
surrounded by cries of skeletal birds,  
all of his time a barren skull  
thrust into the deadened light.



## the crippler

As details ooze daily -- he killed  
his wife, his child, himself -- the mind  
returns to the worn stones of thought:  
a tragedy, fame has a cost, who knew?

The blood at the back of the head.  
The choking, the choking, the choking.  
The propertied house that is so beautiful  
that the lives lived there ought to be as well.

Films and photos of smiles and kisses.  
The black and white, impartial cars outside.  
Repeated expressions of sorrow and horror  
while so many hands rub absently at throats.

## **small doors**

Pass and say "Hi" to a face  
and name you know from work,  
a man with a smile, a wife,  
some kids he told you once  
about, college or something –  
just someone you know – you see  
the doorway of the eye  
and in the room beyond  
somebody holding someone  
else, and know it's real,  
stars and radiation  
rushing out in all  
directions from the bang  
of one hand clapping joy  
on its pink and skinny, round  
and shiny newborn ass.

## **Ipo means Sweetheart**

Ipo doesn't mean  
that a neutered cat  
should yowl in remembered  
heat down the hall  
at midnight.

How does meat recall  
the urgency  
of missing meat?

The amputated limb  
throbs with absence.

How do we find joy  
among the mounds  
of arms and legs  
outside the tents  
behind the battlefield?

Food rattles in the dish.  
Ipo scurries and feeds  
on what is.

How the plate spills over.  
How the body parts pile.

## casting

They all cast the first stone,  
one at a time, time after time  
the first stone strikes  
the head of the woman  
abloom from the dirt.

Dust twists and settles.  
Her head lashes back,  
twists and settles.

Her lips move in prayer  
to the god who prohibits this.

Figures walk by  
bravely masked.  
Stones fly.

Satisfaction oozes,  
pus in the wound.

Another first stone strikes  
the head. The woman is gone,  
hidden in dirt and hate.  
The head remains, a blossom  
on a bent stem, brushing dust.

## Old Girl Moses

“The Third of Her Name,”  
and a Queen Bitch, clubbing  
in the past all cats which needed  
clubbing, a left hook to send larger cats  
skulking, head bowed and looking back,  
but now she stands by a plate,  
waiting in line like a commoner,  
and a cat may brush by, and the castle  
topples, and she lies there, overthrown,  
winded and indignant, until the food  
is scraped onto the plates, and then  
she creaks up to ignore it.

Baby food she'll yowl for, loud  
as an ambulance on the highway.  
She makes small vacuuming sounds  
as I fend off the other cats,  
then stumps off to sleep somewhere  
in the way: a doorway, or in the bathroom  
on the cool tiles, as much a small rug  
with a fold in it, as a body.

It's that voice, the evil Queen  
in the fairy tale mirror, that says,  
“I'm not done yet. Some cream  
would be nice.” That shout  
is what tells me that Death,  
whenever it comes for her,  
might want to wear long sleeves.

## ingratitude

My ingratitude stuns me, like a hammer  
solidly thudding the stone-hard stubborn  
space between the vacuous eyes  
of a jackass: this world, so plump  
and berry-tart-sweet gushing in  
this mouth, determined to taste  
damp clay with every treasurable bite.  
This world doesn't do as I wish: things break,  
the imperfections of matter shatter, shards  
stick in my fingers, scratch at my eyes,  
and do I celebrate what the world must do  
if it is to do anything at all?, to Be? No.  
Why be that sensible? Why taste the feast  
in all its spicing of contradiction and possibility  
when I can bitch about my portion or my seat?  
Thank you, world, despite my half-assed  
kvetching -- and if that is brief, it is  
only because the waft and scent-rich  
luxuries can distract me to the truth  
past all my skin-locked dishonesties.

**"The Straight Up Second Chance Club"**

—after a photo by Steven Gutely

It's all beckoning blue through the boards over the window  
and the powder blue door draws me into summer  
early—or the rotten blue heart of some teenage kid

snaking home high on drugs, sneaking in  
while her parents snore—So okay, no entitlement  
blue, but surely sky blue by-not-quite-noon. Still,

that one splash of yellow, a stain spat on cement  
makes the whole building heave. I wouldn't call it  
a last ditch place to meet and mate, but it's damn near

how-low-can-you-stoop-blue, not the blue of a tongue kiss  
over absinth, more a smack that pours straight down your face  
into an open throttle of trouble. But I wouldn't say No

to adventuring lure, so maybe it's netherworld blue,  
a blues-in-the-night-morning-after, since this dive  
is closing for good. Too many depressives playing pinball.

Too many singing drunks. Too much straw on the floor . . .  
and just one back room, empty except for busted bottles  
and three-legged tables. Now it says, *Girl, you oughta sky*

*outta this joint, blow right through the rotted shingles.*

And I say alright, with a whisper, almost a choke  
an I'm sure-lonely-too-blue, just unlucky-blue-

through and through and I ain't got no discretion-blue,  
all those confessing voices inside and upside-my-head-  
blue.

## ***Carolyn's Pillow***

That phone call from Carolyn—after she'd left the reunion—we had to find her left-behind pillow. But my head was on backwards like one of Dante's astrologers, condemned for jumping the proper time lines. Blame the champagne from the night before and the cannabis and the wine (and maybe even the Mahi- Mahi) but I think it was more from the shock of what I'd done with a guy I scarcely knew in high school. Throw in the old Catholic claw coming out of the hotel wall wrenching a few drops of snarky guilt out of my sweaty hair, remembering his hands on me and in me and mostly something about our mouths like a couple of lowered buckets into a desert well—and did I really bellow "It's been eight years!"

To unlock the right rooms and locate the pillow, his spitfire Spanish and waving dinero scattered the maids to search all trescientos while my sense of timing pressed on with no rationale but a need to get out of Dodge—press a foot to the floor and hydroplane over the Florida tarmac like a thief with jewels sewn into a backpack. He had a ticket to fly and my phone knew the route to a terminal. And we *did* retrieve Carolyn's pillow with no major scandal—so in the end, I was grateful—for the rabbit hole fallen through, or whatever the whole *mishegas* meant.



## ***The Light in Aix***

Of course. Like I was wild in my strip poker phase at fourteen, devoted to Hearts and Knuckles, playing cards with Jimmy R. behind the snack bar, beach roses stuck up and heaving like nubile breasts along the clam flats. Later, eighteen, untamed, a bit more seedy like sunflowers in southern France among lavender and cypresses where the sun never set on the back of Guillaume's bike. Then hitching alone, just me and the light in Aix. And at twenty-five, sweet gardenia I tried to cultivate, coax into blossom, newly married, already wilting in a New England kitchen, Norwegian stove burning with cedar kindling, the rooms for living, cold . . . Some flowers fail in domesticity, are blighted with rust. I want to hurl myself wild again into the future—which kills the past once and for all— *after all*.

## ***No Forever in the Sunset***

She said he fell off a horse. She was far from him, that's all  
his text message said, the letters caught her like a slingshot,  
she was up in mid-air. Meanwhile my own heart was churning  
in the disposal and I supposed she felt something similar,  
some bet that he may have broken his neck. I wanted to sew her  
into my arms but I was bits of broken glass, my long penance  
exacted in debts I'd never pay. Inside the gated woodchips,  
the begonias stood up straight and I admired how  
they blessed each other in a kind of green-bodied blossoming  
that signaled they were one. "Hope is the hardest love we carry"  
a poet said and I hoped for several eons until everything around me  
offered itself— bricks, plants, piano stools, pools of water,  
all the charming darlings—just a matter of perspective, the shift  
into grateful. She said she'd waited for days for the hospital's  
call at the other end of that terrible landscape, no forever  
in the sunset, no gratitude in the mind's ICU—but there's  
a recovery room, I said, while my own miasma came on strong.  
So we howled together like a couple of coyotes and I saw  
she held her grief like a dog on a leash. *A cup of tea?* I finally  
mentioned just to change the subject. I dried my eyes, and she  
too smiled at the begonias. *I'll put alternative closures  
on a Moebius strip*, she said pulling herself together. *It's always  
a helix, non-linear*, I said, because I guess we knew our stories  
hadn't ended. *I had the dream again*, I told her. *The man desires me  
but I'm ambivalent. In daylight*, she said, *you could use a little  
currency . . .* And what do I know? He went to law school.  
A waste of money for a poet. *You'll get your son back*,  
I said, *what breaks usually learns to bend . . .* So we found  
a little solace in the chamomile, the dash of lavender honey.  
And the begonias looked sunny and happy, thank God.

## ***Such Things as Miracles***

I insisted to my bedridden sister  
there were such things as miracles  
or so I thought –and then I dreamt that I was fluent

in Italian and someone said *Miracolo!*  
and I bled into a toilet, a lacy ribbon of fertility . . .  
and someone said *Providence*

and I saw it—futuristic-celestial—oozing  
with love, not the city where my son lives.

Over half my life is over and I haven't found my better half.  
But we have to keep living as the past keeps on delivering  
its chokehold, as if our only job is to let go—

Unfinished business rising like Lake Okeechobee  
in Zora's novel. It's all aging black water and a rabid dog.  
I had a favorite friend who drowned, backed off a dock

in an electrical blackout! But the dead don't tell us  
what it's like to be entombed underground  
or blown ash over the ocean, though some come back

with an assignment, hellbent on getting it done,  
indifferent to glamour and mansions, power  
and fame. I shelter myself in the shower

where I swear to be grateful, pray to die  
in my sleep speaking Italian in my dreams.

## ***That Kiss***

Was a flashflood submerging  
the streets of my body, was mandorla  
and aureola, solar eclipse  
of the lips, lunar twist of the tongue—

That kiss was a knife slit into the heart's  
vena cava, a craft sent for burial at sea,  
was the biblical "cup of trembling"  
sailing my neuron pathways, vibrating  
in molecular cells— was a tattoo

with the scent of fresh lilacs  
painted on a Limoges vase,  
was birdsong in invisible trees—  
That kiss could open a trillion  
Russian dolls, one from inside another,

it was the sea, the teal-toned sea  
off a southern Pacific island,  
or applause leaking into a dream—  
the horizonless sky, launched  
from a humid cloud in the night  
sky's early summer— That kiss

was the daughter of sugar,  
savored only by angels  
and the mothers of angels.

## ***Of Men and Numbers***

I thought he ought to be Numero Uno. *Ought* to be even though his attributes actually added up to a ten and you can't get a ten if you're a five or so said my sister when I set my sights on him. But he wasn't a ten,

he was a very tall, mysterious and stunning nine and the nines are always appealing because they're so *almost* there—and so divisible by three! Spirit, Mind and Body which is after all, the Sacred Trinity, and

in numerology threes are simply the great humanitarians and who wouldn't want The Good Samaritan on her side? One who would stop on the highway for the sad man with bloodshot eyes, holding a sign

that says *Hungry and Not Psychopathic*. The nines take risks none of us would try, they scale buildings like Spiderman, go after armed madmen in theatres, they call 911 and so I pursued him despite my own designation,

my half-heimers rating of five.

## Sleep Harbored

*(after The Accidental Tourist)*

You think there's a traffic rule, if you see a sign  
for an airport you have to pull in and get on a plane.  
It isn't on my way and I don't have the fare.

I sit in my driveway and read your articles from Lima,  
Belfast, Shanghai. Weather and lights. Unexpected place  
settings and traffic patterns.

I picture your skill at packing a suitcase, adjusting  
to time differences with pills and naps, cafe  
conversations.

If you are to birth a new beginning you must be judicious  
as to the articles you pack, only versatile, lightweight things.  
Belongings you won't miss if lost.

But even lost things chance upon new lives with random  
finders. The umbrella, the apple core. A quarter. The picture  
of her you pack.

A plane flies over my garden near the airport  
as I bury what you discarded in the cover crop and leaf litter,  
compost.

If you travel here, will you push away vines and mushrooms  
to recognize what grows where you left me standing?  
Will you profile it as a point of interest?

Sleep harbored.  
Random finders can claim you, too.

## Tupelo Coyote

We were tracing Jack's Creek  
where the woods abducts it from the rolling  
hills of dairy cows and tobacco.  
I on the asphalt, you behind the tupelos.  
You stalked me like a fan  
afraid to ask for my autograph.  
Those alien eyes,  
calculating,  
measuring my marrow  
bend after turn, always  
thirty paces aside.

Now you trot out in the farmlands,  
legs like tobacco sticks, mapping the median line.  
I am roadside, reading.  
You are storybook real.  
I speak to you, familiar,  
as if you are the family dog.  
Your answer is a glare-beam  
that rips me, rights me.

You put me in the landscape,  
that's all.

## Sketches of the Falling Away

Words are thin.

Don't paper me at midnight when the truth  
is you're leaving. Don't start a fight to make  
the leaving right. Keep me  
in your eyes instead, cunning, murky,

devoted. Where your eyes land I am the shard  
of want, the fabric in your grasping  
hand. You wear me and no change of season has you peeling  
me back. You travel, to find  
what I am not,

you take me.

These are the things falling away.  
Quickness in our pulses, sympathy of our  
eyes for each other, dances without obvious music.

This is my skin, continuous with only itself.  
My room, a box of stillness and furniture  
that knew you.

Breath comes like the turning  
of a motor with the oil all burned off.

There's no way the next one could be better.



## Cornbread

Cotton takes care of me.  
I mend and wonder where  
a word went as Cotton hops  
out of bed, feeds the herd,  
showers. I'm late with his  
coffee. I have one job as he  
capers around, clipboards  
and clients' keys, leash  
and a dog to walk.

My hours pass in turns of  
whiplash and molasses.  
I'm glad he's at work,  
not watching. We both recall  
when I was brilliant.  
He soldiers and I try.  
Who takes care of Cotton?

He's aged out of his market.  
Once six figures, now Cotton  
cleans houses. Five today,  
done at six. Home at seven  
with stories and rags to wash.  
Spreadsheets and payroll.  
Menu ideas and shopping lists.  
Leash and a dog to walk.  
Cotton cares into the void.  
Tonight he'll make cornbread.

## Random John Fox

It's a sterile garden and he  
lies like a fishpond, still  
water, and the virus swims.  
Doctors are cats looking in,  
pondering the pounce,  
pondering the reflection.

We phone in morning  
glories to the critical floor.  
Each bloom believes its  
story in some symmetrical,  
hothouse way.

Will they find this poem,  
years from now, when the cure  
is common as clover,  
and try to understand the stun  
of randomness?

Random John Fox, who survived  
a drunk driver going the wrong  
way on 83, and got a shiny  
new car in the deal,

who built *Pride II* when random  
seas took *The Pride of Baltimore* out  
of diplomacy's service.

Diplomat John tendered a  
treaty between his  
child and the breakfast cupboard,  
morning and morning again.

Gentle pool, John Fox would sail  
around the table or the globe—  
if the morning would just  
wake him and say—  
Today is the day.

## **A Pisces in the Timothy**

The timothy grass is a lake of tickles and scrapes,  
for capering and cackling in these  
early days of fall.

I'm turning forty this winter.  
I bring dogs, goats and my neighbor's  
children to the edge and watch  
the show.

The air is satisfied. I love it till I hate it.  
The children crisscross the waves and swordfight.  
The shelties dive, surface and pounce.

Random mice and voles are herded  
like fish in schools, unseen in  
brown water.

I'm a pisces in the timothy, a fish on land.  
Two inches, the right flip  
and I could be righted.

The goats chew and check my location.  
They depend on me and I live  
vicariously. It's television. Technicolor and verge.

A warm clean breeze is a moment to be savored  
on the tongue, I learn from the goats.  
From the dogs—A hole is to dig.  
And children...Where is the child I  
planned to have? The timothy spits pollen in undulations.

I make it hard, a pisces in the timothy.

## Old Shelby

Your eyes go to glass and your  
thoughts are on that craggy mountain shelf where  
old Shelby raised heirloom apples and children.

I watched old Shelby glass into the past, telling me  
stories of dispatching snakes—rattlers, copperheads  
and moccasins, till his kids could tread  
the mountain free of them.

The snakes thinned but apples enough  
for you and me remain in this Ozark, near enough Eden.  
We love every curve, even after the ice storm.  
But the old divorced couple won't sell.

## **Wicker Me**

Wicker me.  
Bend me.  
Weave me into a rocker and I'll  
wait on your porch with your  
faithful dog Bart.

Some August night is our blanket.  
Park your clogs  
and I'll rock you,  
creak next to your skin,  
cushion you into your ease.

Wavy pool of cricket songs  
and horns out on the interstate.  
Wicker me into a painting of this.

## Broom Zen

Charles' mother is dying.  
He has planed  
800 miles.  
Now he sweeps  
her kitchen.  
He sweeps the hall,  
2 seconds per stroke  
by the mantle clock.  
"Get the stairs while  
you're at it,"  
his father says.  
He sweeps the living room  
and the porch.  
He sweeps the lawn.

His mother is awake.  
She asks about his plans.  
He talks of job changes.  
She takes out 3 papers  
and crunches numbers  
on the first.  
Charles makes  
clarifying calculations  
on the second.  
She rests.

And Charles waltzes the broom.

He spreads out the pages—  
her handwriting, his;  
The choreography of cursive.  
And one more...  
He takes the unused page,  
with a pause for  
all symphonies in the ether,  
unwritten,  
and drags his dust pile  
onto the page  
with his mother's broom.

## The Captive Fire

She tosses the yarn  
and the kittens roll with it,  
hitting the wall at the  
propane heater,  
its grill a cage for  
the captive fire within.

She lets out a smile  
but it swings back to her,  
on a pendulum,  
like a good smile,  
contained in quiet play.

In the span of a sigh  
the kittens will leave, cats,  
echoes of the children  
who fell, men and women,  
from her breast.  
She would give a breast  
to be needed  
that way again.

She snatches the yarn  
and the kittens  
settle for her shoelace  
as she finishes the fringe  
on her fourth grandson's afghan.  
Muted shades of  
red, orange and yellow.

## Dream Song for Berryman

There are no inner demons  
just selfishness overweening the for  
not just but anyone, the thought  
shall be in alcoholic insulation down  
be in the drowning of shall  
shall we I shall he in  
early gray seven day rainstorms wishing  
dry be no bones drinking shall  
the last late until  
word brushed across canvas  
blue-lined note both pages striking  
palette knife smeared the lines of  
which, by the irrendering  
fracturing of form anticipation  
therefore his leap from  
the scholar unsure hating life  
uncompromising undirectable dirigible  
the self-centered thwarted – life  
unwillingly uncooperative inchoate  
going where will will not guide  
spite-cutting Henry's nose  
crashing china-shop-bull-like  
the pains of self (absorbed afflicted centered  
congratulatorially emoluating aggrandizing) inflicted  
self upon self contra self letting go  
of the bridge rail and falling falling  
like life never in control and  
always with only one possible  
end. Welcome's arms.



## Windows

Women, coming home from work  
or leaving, suitcases in hand  
or young ones, delivering evening newspapers  
or in jogging suits the colors of azaleas  
trying to shed those few extra pounds

Women in the late afternoon sun,  
spring still chill in the air  
women driving hot cars, tending tulips  
women carrying children, cradling  
infants to their breasts, surreptitiously  
women running meetings, arguing  
points of politics or poesy with a calm  
self-assurance, unshakeable sense of themselves  
doing whatever they find themselves doing.

## Attila Lysergent

Watching the sun rise the morning after—  
what is the color that burns itself onto the retinas?  
Remembering the two phases of the moon—  
real, and our perception of real,  
or perhaps of time, real and perceived.  
The starry web of palpable ether had been  
laid out like a roadmap in the sky;  
the moon and stars, trees, grass, wind,  
your alien feet and hands all pointing  
in a direction somewhere you weren't,  
like an arrow that says 'you are here,'  
but with no point of reference.  
The map is folded up, place is impermanent,  
time a thick miasma of things we cannot  
perceive, could never understand without help,  
without non-being coming into being,  
without the self stripped, shredded,  
torn like skin from your essence.

## Trying to Define Julia

### I

I saw the eagerness with which  
you looked at me  
and ran from that familiar  
strangeness in your eyes,  
that haunted, knowing look  
I've seen before –  
and left after you read  
because  
I could not help.

### II

I read it in your poetry,  
I saw it in your eyes –  
but for your eyes I would have stayed  
and chattered in small talk  
like the rest –  
instead, I fled, trembling,  
into the night,  
avoided the fumbled  
canapés, the clumsily  
handled glass, the  
awkward word.

### III

But were things different,  
I would make your fiery eyes  
forget their constellation.  
I am flattered that  
you think of me this way,  
but all those early years,  
when I was merely learning  
how to read myself and  
others, you never noticed.

#### IV

Your face is like a footprint in my  
mind, moving aside a small  
crater's worth of  
rubble and debris.

Dozer-like,  
scrape me bare;  
I do not like it.

#### V

Since there can only be one  
response in this situation between  
we who have always known  
one another  
but never met, I make  
my excuses, avoiding your  
glances, the effort  
you make to worm your way  
through an admiring and  
congratulatory crowd  
at the reception in your honor,  
the conversation you would strike up,  
your hunger a net.  
Slipping out the side door  
after hastily gulping  
down the wine, no time  
to savor it, is, I suspect,  
how I would have had you.

**(4/23/2018)**

So the cat is out of the bag,  
my fears finally given voice, and  
by that merit more concern and care  
than I would give them – I am no  
friend of fear, that paralytic dread  
that lingers in the dark beneath one's bed  
when you are young – given its proper  
place – a small memento kept on a  
shelf, only recalled when it is time  
to dust. Back in your little box  
say I, I shall not cower nor  
shake in my shoes for I have  
met you ere this and  
fear not your power.

## The Search for Murdered Grandparents

Growing into consciousness aware of just the one grandmother, the one grandfather, believing everyone had only one set, that parents were the children of the same family, unsure of how the aunts and uncles fit. The question -- finally put, at age ten -- "What happened? Why?" and her response, a weeping uncontrolled and suffering Mom, breaking down then, tears and sobs, the pleas, some twenty-seven years too late for help, help, and the rejection guilt she feels to this day for reacting, as a nine-year-old might, in horror to her two dying parents, each mutilated but still alive from the fatal head wounds inflicted by the service 45 the mad-man stole, then used while proceeding up officers' row knocking on doors and killing, killing, and my ten-year-old's inability to cope with Mom dissolved weeping inconsolably on the kitchen floor.

Love is what remains when nothing remains. We all carry within us this memory when, beyond our failures, our separations, the words we survived, there arises from the depths of the night, like a song that is barely audible, the assurance that beyond the disasters in our lives, even beyond joy, suffering, birth, death, there exists a space where nothing threatens, that nothing has ever threatened and that runs no risk of destruction, an intact space, that of the love that was the foundation of our being.

—Christiane Singer

## CONTRIBUTORS

**Joshua Gage** is an ornery curmudgeon from Cleveland. His newest chapbook, Origami Lilies, is available on The Poet's Haven Press. He is a graduate of the Low Residency MFA Program in Creative Writing at Naropa University. He has a penchant for Pendleton shirts and any poem strong enough to yank the breath out of his lungs.

**Barbara Daniels'** book Rose Fever was published by WordTech Press. Talk to the Lioness is forthcoming from Casa de Cinco Hermanas Press. Daniels' poetry has appeared in *Prairie Schooner*, *Mid-American Review*, and other journals. She received three fellowships from the New Jersey State Council on the Arts.

**Nicole Zelniker** is an editor at The Conversation US and a podcast producer at The Nasiona. Nicole is also the author of "Mixed," a non-fiction book about race and mixed-race families, and "Last Dance," a collection of short stories. Check out the rest of her work at [nicolezelniker.com](http://nicolezelniker.com).

**Denise Ryan.** I am a writer of contemporary poetry from Dublin, Ireland. I have been published in *THE SHOP*, *Crannóg Magazine*, and also several online journals including *Lakeview International Journal of Literature and Arts*. Between 2010 and 2013, I was selected to write a series of poems for the National Famine Commemoration. In 2010 "Flowers of Humility" was read at the Dublin Commemoration and at the overseas twinning event in New York in Battery Park when president Mary McAleese officiated at the ceremony. I have been internationally received and highly recommended, shortlisted and runner-up in several poetry competitions. These include The Francis Ledwidge and the Jonathan Swift Awards. My debut collection, Of Silken Waters, was published in Autumn 2017, through Ara Pacis Publishers (Chicago, USA). I am currently writing my second collection for publication.

**Sharon Wexler's** teaching and writing have been awarded a fellowship from The Cullman Center Institute for Teachers at the NYPL. Her fiction has appeared in *New World Review*, *Madness Muse Press* and *Promethean*. She is a graduate of the MA Writing Program at City College of New York, The University of Florida and has studied with Gordon Lish.

**Thomas Sanfilip's** poetry and fiction has appeared in the Shore Poetry Anthology, *Thalassa*, *Ivory Tower*, *Nit & Wit*, *Tomorrow*, *Maudlin House*, *Feile-Festa*, *Per Contra*, *Brilliant Flash Fiction*, *Foilate Oak Review*, *Vestal Review*, *Imperfect Fiction*, *Thrice Fiction*, and *Gone Lawn*. Five collections of poetry have also been published -- By the Hours and the Years (Branden Press), Myth/A Poem (Iliad Press, 2002), The Art of Anguish (2004), Last Poems (2007), Figures of the Muse (2012), in addition to a collection of short fiction, The Killing Sun (2006).

**Daniel Naman** is a writer based in Austin, Texas. His work appears in *After the Pause*, *Piker Press*, and *Eunoia Review*. He can be found on [Instagram@Danbo88](https://www.instagram.com/Danbo88).



**K.P. Taylor** Born and raised in South Africa, I came to the US at 29 to work at an amusement park for a summer and never left. I currently live in Pennsylvania. My writing has been featured in *Lotus-eater*, *The Write Launch*, and *Kōan* (The Paragon Press), and I have pieces forthcoming in *Gargoyle* and *Running Wild Anthology of Stories*. I also have a few self-published short stories on Amazon.

**James Mulhern** has published fiction or poetry in over seventy literary journals and anthologies. In 2013, he was a Finalist for the Tuscany Prize in Catholic Fiction. In 2015, Mr. Mulhern was awarded a fully paid writing fellowship to Oxford University in the United Kingdom. That same year, a story was longlisted for the Fish Short Story Prize. In 2017, he was nominated for a Pushcart Prize. His writing (novels and short story collection) earned favorable critiques from Kirkus Reviews, including a Kirkus Star. His most recent novel, *Give Them Unquiet Dreams*, is a Readers' Favorite Book Award winner, a Notable Best Indie Book of 2019, and a Kirkus Reviews Best Indie Book of 2019

**Jessica Wickens** is a founding editor of *Monday Night*, a literary journal and small press. For the past twelve years, she has generated correspondence poetics with Della Watson including co-authoring the collection *Everything Reused in the Sea: The Crow & Benjamin Letters* (Mission Cleaners Books). Her chapbook *Things That Trust Us* was published by Beard of Bees. She is currently based in Richmond, CA

**Tomer Witelson** is a student at Tenafly high school. This is his first publication.

**Jessica Wickens** is a founder of *Monday Night*, a journal and small press, and a poet whose work has appeared in many spaces online and offline. She co-authored with Della Watson a poetry collection titled *Everything Reused in the Sea: The Crow & Benjamin Letters* (Mission Cleaners Books). Her chapbook *Things That Trust Us* was published by Beard of Bees. She is currently based in Richmond, CA.

**Ann Boaden** After receiving my master's and doctoral degrees in English from The University of Chicago, I returned to teach literature and writing at my undergraduate institution, Augustana College, Rock Island. My work has appeared in SOUTH DAKOTA REVIEW, BIG MUDDY, PENWOOD REVIEW, TIME OF SINGING, SEDIMENTS, THE WINDHOVER, PIETISTEN, SIMUL, and CHRISTMAS ON THE GREAT PLAINS, among other venues.

**George Critchlow** I am a retired law professor who sometimes writes things down in a style and format that seems poetic.

**S E White** Currently, I teach English and Honors classes at Purdue University Northwest. I have my BFA from Bowling Green State University, MA from Iowa State University, and MFA from Purdue University. I have published with *The Smoking Poet*, *Brink*, *Toasted Cheese*, *Prick of the Spindle*, *Niche*, *100 Word Story*,

and others. My novella *A Murder of Crows* is available in paperback and Kindle versions. My work can also be found in the collection *Best Ohio Short Stories*.

**Brad G. Garber** has degrees in biology, chemistry and law. He writes, paints, draws, photographs, hunts for mushrooms and snakes, and runs around naked in the Great Northwest. Since 1991, he has published poetry, essays and weird stuff in such publications as *Edge Literary Journal*, *Pure Slush*, *Front Range Review*, *Tulip Tree Publishing*, *Sugar Mule*, *Third Wednesday*, *Barrow Street*, *Black Fox Literary Magazine*, *Barzakh Magazine*, *Ginosko Literary Journal*, *Junto Magazine*, *Slab*, *Panoplyzine*, *Split Rock Review*, *Smoky Blue Literary Magazine*, *The Offbeat* and other quality publications. 2011, 2013 & 2018 Pushcart Prize nominee.

**Corina Skentzou** I am a new unpublished writer. My short fiction is based on my 12 years of experience as a minority psychotherapist in NYC.

**Dane Cervine's** recent books include *Earth Is a Fickle Dancer* (Main Street Rag), and *The Gateless Gate – Polishing the Moon Sword*, from Saddle Road Press in Hawaii, a cross-genre work of Zen koan & prose poems. Previous poetry books include *Kung Fu of the Dark Father*, *How Therapists Dance*, *The Jeweled Net of Indra*, and *What a Father Dreams*. Sixteen Rivers Press will publish his collection of prose poems in 2021, entitled *The World is God's Language*.

Dane's poems have won awards from Adrienne Rich, Tony Hoagland, the *Atlanta Review*, *Caesura*, and been nominated for a Pushcart. His work appears in *The SUN*, *the Hudson Review*, *TriQuarterly*, *Poetry Flash*, *Catamaran*, *Miramar*, *Rattle*, *Sycamore Review*, *Pedestal Magazine*, among others. Visit his website at: <https://danecervine.typepad.com/>

**Gerard Sarnat** won the Poetry in the Arts First Place Award plus the Dorfman Prize, and has been nominated for a handful of recent Pushcarts plus Best of the Net Awards. Gerry is widely published in academic-related journals (e.g., University Chicago, Stanford, Oberlin, Brown, Columbia, Harvard, Pomona, Johns Hopkins, Wesleyan, University of San Francisco) plus national (e.g., *Gargoyle*, *Main Street Rag*, *New Delta Review*, *MiPOesias*, *American Journal Of Poetry*, *Clementine*, *pamplousse*, *Deluge*, *Poetry Quarterly*, *Hypnopomp*, *Free State Review*, *Poetry Circle*, *Poets And War*, *Wordpeace*, *Cliterature*, *Qommunicate*, *Indolent Books*, *Pandemonium Press*, *Texas Review*, *San Antonio Review*, *Brooklyn Review*, *San Francisco Magazine*, *The Los Angeles Review* and *The New York Times*) and international publications (e.g., *Review Berlin*, *Voices Israel*, *Foreign Lit*, *New Ulster*). He's authored the collections *Homeless Chronicles* (2010), *Disputes* (2012), *17s* (2014), *Melting the Ice King* (2016). Gerry is a physician who's built and staffed clinics for the marginalized as well as a Stanford professor and healthcare CEO. Currently he is devoting energy/ resources to deal with global warming. Gerry's been married since 1969 with three kids plus six grandsons, and is looking forward to future granddaughters.

**Marc Simon's** short fiction has appeared in several literary magazines, including *The Wilderness House Review*, *Flashquake*, *Poetica Magazine*, *The Writing Disorder*, *Jewish Fiction.net*, *SN Review*, *Slush Pile Magazine*, *Everyday Fiction*,

*The Adelaide Literary Review*, *Burningword Literary Magazine* and most recently *Microfiction Monday Magazine*. Four of his one-act plays have been winners in the Sugden Theater (Naples) New Plays Contest. His debut novel, [The Leap Year Boy](#) was published in December, 2012. His new novel, [Moriah](#), has been accepted for publication and due out in April, 2020. Marc lives in Naples, Florida.

**Marie C Lecrivain** is a poet, publisher, and ordained priestess in the Ecclesia Gnostica Catholica, the ecclesiastical arm of Ordo Templi Orientis. Her work has been published in *Nonbinary Review*, *Orbis*, *Pirene's Fountain*, and many other journals. She's the author of several books of poetry and fiction, and recent editor of [Gondal Heights: A Bronte Tribute Anthology](#) (copyright 2019 Sybaritic Press, [www.sybpress.com](http://www.sybpress.com))

**John Grey** is an Australian poet, US resident. Recently published in *That*, *Dunes Review*, *Poetry East* and *North Dakota Quarterly* with work upcoming in *Qwerty*, *Thin Air*, *Dalhousie Review* and *failbetter*.

**Emma Wilson-Kanamori** was born and raised in Japan before moving to Scotland. Once a dancer, she transformed later in life into a scribbler of words and images. When she isn't scribbling, she's lost in her own halfway place of books, films, and comics. She also has a very soft spot for hamsters.

**Yuan Changming** published monographs on translation before leaving China. With a Canadian PhD in English, Yuan currently edits *Poetry Pacific* with Allen Yuan in Vancouver. Credits include 10 Pushcart nominations, 8 chapbooks (most recently *East Idioms* [[cyberwit.net](http://cyberwit.net), 2020]), *Best of the Best Canadian Poetry* and *BestNewPoemsOnline*, among 1669 others across 44 countries.

**Martin Cloutier** has been published in *Harvard Review*, *Crazyhorse*, *Contrary*, *Post Road*, *Tampa Review*, *Shenandoah*, *Story Quarterly*, *Smokelong Quarterly*, *Upstreet*, *Natural Bridge*, *The Southeast Review*, and elsewhere. He has been a New York Foundation for the Arts Artist Fellow in fiction, a Tennessee Williams Scholar at the Sewanee Writers' Conference, and has been awarded a grant from The Elizabeth George Foundation. He currently teaches at the City University of New York.

**Leland Seese's** poems appear or are forthcoming in *Juked*, *Rust + Moth*, *After the Pause*, *The Christian Century*, and many other journals. His chapbook, [Wherever This All Ends](#), is due in 2020 (Kelsay Books). He and his wife live in Seattle, where they are parents of six foster-adopted and bio children.

**Fred Bubbers** lives in western Maryland with his wife, Susan. A native of New York City, Fred received his Bachelor of Arts in English from the State University of New York at Albany in 1982 and holds an MFA in Writing from Vermont College of Fine Arts. His short stories, poems, and essays have appeared in such journals as *The Oregon Literary Review*, *Lily*, *The Green Silk Journal*, *The Loch Raven Review*, *The Blue Lake Review*, *The Remington Review* and *Palabras*. His

forthcoming chapbook, *The RIF*, will be released in March 2020 by Blue Cubicle Press.

**Rachel Zhu** lives in New York and is currently a junior at Horace Mann School. She is the cofounder and Editor in Chief of Horace Mann's creative prose magazine, *LitMag*. Outside of school, Zhu writes creative short prose and poetry, and is also an artist and ceramicist. She draws influence from her Chinese background and culture as well as classical European and American works of literature. Through her work, she hopes to inspire other Asian Americans to express their stories and experiences through the world of humanities and art. Zhu has work forthcoming in *Blue Marble*.

**Mehreen Ahmed** is an award-winning, internationally published and critically acclaimed author. She has written Novels, Novella, Short Stories, Creative Nonfiction, Flash Fiction, Academic, Prose Poetry, Memoirs, Essays and Journalistic Write-Ups. Her books have received Author Shout Reader Ready Awards, 2019. One of her books was a Drunken Druid Editor's Choice for June, 2018 and her short story was the best of Cafelit 8 Anthology, 2019. Her works have also been nominated for prestigious awards and translated in German, Greek and Bengali. She was born and raised in Bangladesh. Currently, she lives in Australia. She published with Routledge, Cambridge University Press, (Cambridge Core), University of Hawaii, Michigan State University, University of Kent, Canterbury, The Sheaf, University of Sackatchewan. *The Bombay Review*, *Down in the Dirt Magazine* multi-pronged acceptance, *Portland Metrozine*, *Ellipsis Zine*, *Ginosko Literary Journal*, *The Cabinet of Heed*, *Straylight Magazine*, *Creativity Webzine*, *Mojave Heart Review*, *The Piker Press*, *Kitaab International*, *Nthanda Review*, *CommuterLit.Com*, *Adelaide Literary Magazine*, *Scarlet Leaf Review*. *The World of Myth Magazine*, *Jumbelbooks*, *Literary Yard*, *Fear and Trembling Magazine*, *Terror House Magazine*, *Connotation Press*, *The Punch Magazine*, *Re:Action Review*, *Furtive Dalliance Literary Review*, *Flash Fiction North*, *Velvet Illusion Literary Magazine*, *Storyland Literary Review*, *Spillwords Press*, *CafeLit Magazine*, *Story Institute*, *Cosmic Teapot Publishing*, *Clarendon House Publication*, *Dastaan World Magazine*, *Books On Demand*, *Germany*, *Your Nightmares: Nyctophilia. gr Magazine*, *Best Poetry: Contemporary poetry online (2019)*.

**David Appelbaum** has worked in the university and in publishing, and is an author who specializes in the work of writing. His most recent books include notes on water: an aqueous phenomenology [Monkfish, 2018].

**Katherine Johnson** lives in Groton, MA and is a junior at Groton School. She is an aspiring writing with a diverse background: her father is American and her mother Chinese. She is primarily inspired by introspective works. She has published work in *Teen Ink*, *Lilun Magazine*, *Poetry Quarterly*, & *Young Ravens Literary Review*.

**Giles Goodland** was born in Taunton, was educated at the universities of Wales and California, took a D. Phil at Oxford, has published a several books of poetry including A Spy in the House of Years (Leviathan, 2001) Capital (Salt, 2006), Dumb Messengers (Salt, 2012) and The Masses (Shearsman, 2018). He works in

Oxford as a lexicographer, teaches evening classes on poetry for Oxford University's department of continuing education, and lives in West London.

**Allan Johnston** has been publishing poetry for over 30 years, and has had work appear in *Poetry*, *Poetry East*, *Rattle*, *Rhino*, *Weber Studies*, and more than forty other journals. Among other awards, he has received an Illinois Arts Council fellowship, Pushcart Prize Nominations, and First Prize in Poetry in the 2010 Outrider Press Literary Anthology contest. He has published two books of poetry, *Tasks of Survival* (1996) and *In a Window* (2018). He has also published three chapbooks, *Northport* (2010), *Departures* (2013), and *Contingencies* (2015). Besides writing poetry, he has written on American literature and other topics, is past president of the Society for the Philosophical Study of Education, and teaches writing and literature at Columbia College and at DePaul University, both in Chicago. He co-edits *Journal for the Philosophical Study of Education* and serves as an outside poetry reader for poetry journals and for the Illinois Emerging Poets Competition. His other occupations have included being a forest fire fighter and an East Indian cook. Regarding his collection *Northport*, the poet Alan Williamson said "These are beautifully-made poems of the Pacific Northwest, in Gary Snyder's tradition of close attention to the world, the moment, and the heft of words. It's a pleasure to see them in print," while Richard Jones commented, "In *Northport*, the poet guides the reader through the wonder and waste of the past, and to travel with him is to suffer with him; yet it is also a transcendent chance to recover valuable old territory, to make it new again, and to claim as one's own 'all the beauty dancing there'." Gary Snyder said of *Tasks of Survival*, "Strong, controlled, finished, some excellent turns." Regarding *Departures*, he said "Johnston's intimate knowledge of Pacific Coast L. A. suburb lifeways comes alive anew in an old language—dry and elegant literary English—even as the ever-present ocean washes over it all. 'We children' troop through the bedrooms and classrooms of the past. These poems chart how we left that (personal) past behind. A strange and moving gathering of poems."

**Joshua Corwin** is a Los Angeles native and a neurodiverse poet with a B.A. in mathematics and a minor in philosophy from Pitzer College ('19). Nominated for the 2019 Pushcart Prize, his work is published in *Al-Khemia Poetica*, *Spectrum Publishing*, *The Art of Autism*, *Placeholder Press*, *The Ephimiliar Journal*, *Ginosko Literary Journal*, *poeticdiversity* and forthcoming in the Beat anthology *Sparring Omnibus*, vol 1. His debut poetry collection, *Becoming Vulnerable*, details his experience with autism, addiction, sobriety and spirituality (Baxter Daniels Ink Press/International Word Bank; April, 2020 release). He is working on a Chassidic-Beat novella about history told by a bullet. Corwin hosts the poetry podcast "Assiduous Dust." Bringing to The Miracle Project, an autism nonprofit, poetry classes for individuals of all abilities, including those with autism recovering from addiction (starting April 22, 2020). He writes to honor his grandpa, Mert, whose last words to him were "Don't ever stop writing."

**JB Mulligan** has had more than 1000 poems and stories in various magazines over the past 40 years, and has had two chapbooks published: *The Stations of the*

Cross and THIS WAY TO THE EGRESS, as well as 2 e-books, The City of Now and Then, and A Book of Psalms (a loose translation). He has appeared in several anthologies, among them: Inside/Out: A Gathering Of Poets; The Irreal Reader; and multiple volumes of Reflections on a Blue Planet.

**Deborah DeNicola's** most recent book is Original Human, was recently published by Word Tech Communications. She compiled and edited the anthology Orpheus & Company; Contemporary Poems on Greek Mythology, from The University Press of New England. Previous poetry books include Where Divinity Begins from Alice James Books, and four chapbooks, two of which were contest winners. Her memoir, The Future that Brought Her Here was published by Nicholas-Hays/Ibis Press in 2009. Among other awards Deborah has received a National Endowment Fellowship in poetry. She won *The Packingtown Review's* Analytical Essay Award in 2008 and the Carol Bly Short Story Award in 2013. Her web site is: [www.intuitivegateways.com](http://www.intuitivegateways.com)

**Wren Tuatha's** poetry has appeared in *The Cafe Review*, *Canary*, *Baltimore Review*, *Pirene's Fountain*, *Lavender Review*, and others. She's editor at *Pitkin Review* and *Califragile*, journal of climate change and social justice. Her first collection is Thistle and Brilliant (Finishing Line Press). Wren and her partner, author/activist C.T. Butler, herd rescue goats in the Camp Fire burn zone of California.

**Jamie Brown's** poetry has been published in: American Literary, Bay to Ocean: The Year's Best Writing from the Eastern Shore, Beltway Poetry Quarterly, Café Review, California Quarterly, Connecticut River Review, Delmarva Quarterly, The Delmarva Review, Delaware Beach Life, Delaware Poetry Review, Galley Sail Review, Gargoyle, Handbook for Mortals (2nd ed.), Howling Dog, Kipple, Maintenant, Midwest Poetry Review, Minimus, Musings, Nebo, Negative Capability, Parnassus Literary Journal, Phase & Cycle, Poet Lore, Poetry Motel, Potomac Review, Prints (Second Saturday Poets Anthology), Rat's Ass Review, The San Fernando Poetry Journal, So It Goes : the Literary Journal of the Kurt Vonnegut Museum and Library, Sons & Daughters Literary Journal, The Sulphur River Literary Review, Tekintet (Budapest, Hungary), Voices International, Winners, (an anthology of the Wordworks Washington Prize), The Wooster Review, Wordwrights! and many others. He is the Founder, and was the first Publisher and Editor, of *The Broadkill Review*, Founder of the *Annual John Milton Memorial Celebration of Poets and Poetry* (now defunct), and first Director of the Dogfish Head Poetry Prize competition. He has taught at George Washington University, Georgetown University, Wesley College, and University of Delaware, and taught the first Creative Writing Course to be offered at the Smithsonian Institution. He was Poetry Critic for The Washington Times. He was a member of the Poetry Committee of the Folger Shakespeare Library. He was Fiction Editor of *The Washington Review of the Arts*, Associate Editor with the *Sulphur River Literary Review*, and Contributing Editor at *Wordwrights Magazine*. Five of his plays have been produced in the DC small-theater scene; one swept the four major awards when reprised in the 2007 One-Act Play Competition in Milton, Delaware.

He holds the degree of Master of Fine Arts in Creative Writing from the American University, where he worked on his fiction with Frank Conroy, Terry MacMillan, James Alan McPherson, Joyce Kornblatt, and Kermit Moyer.

