

A watercolor illustration of a pond scene. In the foreground, there are several large lily pads in shades of blue and green, with dark veins and some brown spots. A white lotus flower with a yellow center is in bloom in the upper right. A brown frog is visible on the left side, partially obscured by a lily pad. The background is a mix of light green and yellow washes, suggesting water and sky. The text 'ginosko literary journal' is centered in the upper half, and the number '25' is in the bottom right corner.

**ginosko literary
journal**

25

Ginosko Literary Journal #25

Fall 2020

GinoskoLiteraryJournal.com

PO Box 246

Fairfax, CA 94978

Robert Paul Cesaretti, Editor

Member CLMP

Est. 2002

Writers retain all copyrights

Cover Art

watercolor found in antique store in Petaluma, CA
from Saipan, artist unknown

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

If you are going to be a writer there is nothing I can say to stop you;
if you're not going to be a writer nothing I can say will help you.

When you're writing, you're trying to find out something
which you don't know.

The whole language of writing for me is finding out
what you don't want to know, what you don't want to find out.
But something forces you to anyway.

You know it's finished when you can't do anything more to it,
though it's never exactly the way you want it.

The hardest thing in the world is simplicity.
And the most fearful thing, too.

You have to strip yourself of all your disguises,
some of which you didn't know you had.

You want to write a sentence as clean as a bone.

...discipline, love, luck, but, most of all, endurance.

—James Baldwin

CONTENTS

Crust	10	
Christopher Heffernan		
Jeopardy	11	
Chella Courington		
Roman Candles	12	
Flower	12	
Women	13	
Thom Young		
A Curl of Severed Hair	14	
Before She Went to Sleep		16
North Martel Avenue	18	
Platonic Fantasy Roused to Extraordinary Limits		20
Jose Oseguera		
My True Love is a Lesbian Firefighter Not Only		21
Thomas Badya		
FOOTPRINTS IN THE FOG	24	
MOTHLIGHT	26	
ASTRAEA	27	
EDAPHOLOGY	28	
SKUNK	29	
NESSIE	30	
APOLLO	33	
Raymond Luczak		
The Golden Hour	34	
Melanie White		
BAD WORDS	39	
JACK DANIEL'S DEBUT		40
DARK GUITAR	41	
STREETS	42	
BE DRUNK	43	
R Nikolas Macioci		
When You Tell a Man You Read Tarot Cards		44
Lorren Tipping		

Escape	45	
Overwhelm		46
To the Daughter in Wild Denial		47
Tide	48	
Many Years Later You Find Yourself at the Wedding of Your First and Lost Best Friend		49
Dissonance	51	
Rebound	52	
Goals	53	
Plenty	54	
BeeLyn Naihiwet		
The Great Cold		55
Sochukwu Ivey		
The Heirs	74	
The Whip Hand		76
Pavle Radonic		
Traumabomb	79	
Auden Eagerton		
THE WATCHER		80
SATURDAY MORNING TENNIS		81
THE GRANDPARENT WHO LIVED INSIDE FOUR WALLS		82
Gareth Culshaw		
Power	83	
Michael Mark		
Yuletide Whiskey Joint	92	
Sweat, Smog And Sugar Donuts		95
Pizza and Chianti	96	
Wartime And Everyday Blues	99	
When The Big Man Blows (for Ed)		101
Phillip Henry Christopher		
Open	103	
Mud Ajar		104
Invited	105	
Ancient		106
Sign a Lease	107	
Hiram Larew		

The Smallest of Buds	108
Laura White Gray	
Chimney Swifts	110
Anomalies	111
Sjögren's Syndrome	113
Going Back	114
The White Hen Pantry's Last Green Pepper	115
Sometime a Bunny is Only...	116
Indochine	117
Cape Cod Evening	118
What a Difference a Day	119
What to Do with Entirely?	120
Marc Frazier	
The Little Death Scene	121
Lady Lazarus, Gaslighted	122
In Re: My Gaslit Fortune	123
Correcting My Enemy	124
The Seagulls After Lunch	126
After Carrie Fountain's "The Jungle"	
Jane Rosenberg LaForge	
How to Get Rid of Apartment Fever	128
Elise Tegegne	
SADHU	130
A DAUGHTER'S DANCE	131
THE WOMAN WITH A TALE TO TELL	132
HELEN Page One	133
HELEN Page Two	134
John Grey	
Losing It (The First Time)	135
Losing It (The Next Time)	136
Brother Oliver's Walnut Cookies	137
The Allegory of Porn	139
But I Love You	140
Shadow Dancing	141
Jomar Daniel Isip	

in which the book takes it back	142	
in which the book gets complacent	143	
in which the book talks about your book	145	
Glenn Ingersoll		
The Color Crusade	147	
When Brother Carter Spoke	150	
James William Gardner		
Public Works	152	
James Harris		
Minefield	154	
swel·ter / 'sweltər/ verb	155	
The Places We Inhabit		156
Yvonne Nguyen		
Street Scene in Early March	157	
Two Photos Arrive	159	
Remembering Leonard Cirino	160	
Poem without Color	161	
The Maple Watch	162	
Marjorie Power		
Church Fire Escape	163	
RETURN TO NAUVOO	165	
PAPERWEIGHT		166
Donald Levering		
The Birthing Cage	167	
Some Chair Over the Rainbow		168
The Silent, Virtuous Ones		169
We Like Nice Feelings Too	169	
The Forever Dance	170	
Luke Maguire Armstrong		
Dr. Salk	171	
A new chord	174	
Affinity		175
Zoo Civics	176	
A far cry	179	
Jeremy Nathan Marks		

A Different Air 181

Rita Plush

ALL I HAVE 183

Crystal Bevers

TOWARDS GRACE 188

Katharine Gregg

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

Crust

Christopher Heffernan

Some of them wear ski jackets in the summer and have tattoos of nothing more than a few broken lines across their arms, or hands, or knees, or across their faces. Most don't talk of love but of how many quarters they need to get a small coffee. Henry the electrician says, Christ, I'll just buy it for you. Not one of them ever says no. Not one of them ever says, Nah, it's alright, only fifty cents to go, I can make that in like a half hour. They put the handful of change away then say, Thanks! And without any eye contact, wait for the coffee to be delivered. They all play guitar, drums, banjo, accordion and roll their own cigarettes. They all smoke. Their eyes are always about to burst into tears or commit murder. Not fancy murder, just the regular kind. Or the regular self inflicted kind. Being hungry is like having hair, sometimes there is less, sometimes there is more, sometimes it's worn on the face, sometimes it's cut from around the mouth with a razor. The word undiagnosed has had no meaning for years. There are boys, and there are girls, and there is everyone in between. There are dogs, mostly dogs, and there are cats, some cats, and everything in between. If you hold up a candle in the dark you can see down the dark hall of their dreams where the doors all have busted hinges and bent knobs that won't turn. With a spotlight you can see their fistfights and broken bottles, a mother and a father (because we all have one of those), a way of going forward that somehow keeps kissing the asshole of itself. You want it to be a story. But it's barely a street sign. That they all swear says One Way. Though really we all know says Stop. Sometimes it says Yield. But mostly it says Stop. It is what happens as the wax is melting. As the feathers turn to spoons, and in mid flight begin to drop off and clang on the sidewalk below while there is still something called momentum that even the most casual of glances from the most casual of pigeons knows will not last. Spray painted in red on the side of the bar is a handprint with a black line through it. Because what is extinguished after it is extinguished keeps getting larger. And that is what seems the most difficult. Not the lack. Not what was never there that keeps falling into what was never there to catch it. That is all obvious. Anyone can deal with nothing. That has funny hats put on it and is joked about. It is the tooth that is a mountain that is the problem. The eye that burns up every night of sleep so that sunrise is not a victory but the lifting of a veil on a day that is always too big to hold with both arms. It is the undercurrent-of-enormity-that-constantly-overwhelms that constantly overwhelms. How your skin covers and holds the entirety of your blood until you make another decision. And then there is nothing to do but wait for another train as the ground turns red and you watch it all run away. Or with what strength you have left close your eyes and don't watch it run away.

Jeopardy

Chella Courington

My father built biceps working for US Steel
smelting iron in heat that humbled men.

Now I could break his arm
over my knee, brittle as kindling.

My father used to let me walk up his body
balancing my hands on his fingertips

till I flew from his shoulders. They began to sag
after my mother passed. Rising at night, no moon out,

she collapsed in the dark and never woke
as once my father fell when a clot in his head

tossed him down. He speaks of my mother
rubbing his back with eucalyptus oil and saves hair

from her brush, strands he wraps in tissue.

At night with his whiskey facing Jeopardy, my father

drifts off to Kargasok.

In the Russian mountains women live to be 105.

So do their men, eating dried cod with mushroom tea.
making love last forever.

Roman Candles

he beat her like a hog
and found a two dollar bill
under the couch
then wrote a letter to a woman
that lost her husband in a war
nobody won
as ants marched in a forgotten
Los Angeles sun.
love comes in many forms
many ways
many losses
many blood baths
many tanks stuck in the Russian snow
as a dirge plays for what might have been
if they only knew their wasted lives
they would pour one more drink
for the Roman Candles
that burned but burnt out way too soon.

Flower

you can always find a murder
if you want to be killed
and love is often a flower
pressed in a forgotten book
and found on a rainy day
as the mad sun
rises all over again.

Women

women with knives in their eyes
some are wives
some used to be wives, lovers, ex-lovers,
pregnant, mistakes,
reasons for wars, deaths of men,
some almost deaths, and some dead
before death.
but they are survivors,
the mad ones, the ones too strong
until there's nothing left
then they give a little more.

A Curl of Severed Hair

—after Algernon Charles Swinburne

The wisps that sprout like whiskers atop his head
have begun to drape over his ears like a Rubber Soul Beatle
and feather out at the back of his neck like a peacock.
They lattice a reddish tapestry—
a perfect ombré that courses from mousy through vulpine—
over his disappearing fontanel as lashes that blink over an eye never to see again,
cycloptic eyelids sutured shut, joint so that his other eyes can see
the world as it always has been,
as it will never be again.

The things his body does are now laced with intention,
something that can no longer be attributed to randomness,
my imagination or misplaced emotion, but rather,
to premeditation and genetics and moods
and all the things I hate about myself that now
I'm starting to hate about his 8-month-old self.

As his brain continues to grow under soft skull,
he calls out to his echo whenever we walk down the stairwell—
a leap into the unknown—
and looks around the cement crevasse for its reply.
As the fading sirens of his voice,
I give him the benefit of the doubt,
but what benefit comes from doubting
that isn't already a dictamen of fault,
of things I have to swallow like dog hairs floating invisible
afloat the surface of a glass of water?

As I comb the fuzz growing above the closing gap,
I wonder when my fear that, someday,
he might wake up dead will go away:
how much hair and bone will it take to satiate that chasm?

I rub his vanishing gently as one would the flesh of an egg:
I want to enjoy its fragility before he repeatedly finds my weaknesses,
my soft spots, and perforates them
until I'm completely impaled by my eternal love,
in spite of all the things I placed in his head
and failed to remove in the short window
before the tectonic motion under his infant acton
and the clouds above ceased: a still place of no give, and no-take.

How can I slow down, my heart,
until my whole being reverberates at the rate of waves
rippling away from the center of our couch,
our universe where stars and planets and black holes and dark matter
were birthed with the selfsame violence that lives in the very cells
that make the nebulous pigments in his eyes
stare at me as I stroke his hair?

Before She Went to Sleep

She'd often dream that I was gay—
the *true* reason for me wanting a divorce;
she told me that it made sense
given that her *suegra* only made gay boys.

I woke up my mom—
the night after I moved out of Thekla's apartment—
and told her that I didn't feel like myself
when I was around her *nuera*,
the woman whose womb was going to bless her,
and she rubbed her eyes as if she didn't want to believe,
nay understand what I was saying to her.
She told me not to be stupid and pray to God,
not to make me fall in love with my wife again,
or chase the thoughts of leaving from my head but, simply,
so that I wouldn't turn out a homosexual like my brother.

I wasn't gay, though part of me wished that I was
just so that I could give the college student from El Salvador
I once proposed to a pleasant taste in her mouth,
like a last kiss only better, warmer.
However, I did feel like a lithe Tom Hanks in "Philadelphia"
on the hospital bed, at the brink of death—
his hand in his lover's— as Thekla held me
in her doubt, but held me nonetheless.
As Andy Beckett succumbed to the unrelenting grip of AIDS
which wrung every cell in his body,
there were no aides to stop the emptiness
that had rung in our depleted bodies,
tired from trying to relinquish what little hope we had.

When I saw Thekla again, I took a nap on her lap
and when I awoke, I heard in my mind's ear Neil Young's "Philadelphia"—
a moonlight serenade of just the piano part—
and suddenly I no longer felt the need to cry,
though the sadness still lingered like a sour aftertaste in my throat,
something I either couldn't swallow or simply refused to—
I didn't want to know the reason for fighting the urge.
Was I afraid that whatever it was that was lodged in there
was the last bit of Thekla, a fag's last drag, in me?

I refused to extinguish her taste for as long as I could
so that I wouldn't forget that what we had *had*, at one point, been real.
Her green eyes greeted me red, watery with:
"I wasn't right about us; let me *at least* be right about you."

I wondered if the day would ever come when
I would dream of her and feel nothing,
and memories of her would bear no guilt, no face.

"Don't worry," she said, as she wiped away her tears
that trickled warm on my face,
"my dad used to leave the house all the time,
and my mom would always leave the door open before she went to sleep."

North Martel Avenue

It's the chrysanthemums that come to mind;
its amethyst petals christened our new place—
the asbestos saltine stack of an apartment
that never felt like home,
as fly-infested the first night
as the last we slept there—
a gentle simulacrum of the universe.

Standing proud in their water—
its sepals perched like elbows
on the vase's lip, pistils cocked, stamen akimbo—
its raspberry ovule gazed at us from the window
like an iris out of focus, a place where light didn't shine,
but was plucked away from the evening sky,
potted in the alley that served as our hearth
where the sun only visited for minutes at a time.

In spite of the landlord's policy of "no pets or plants,"
you kept me a secret off the lease,
next to your brown tortoise glasses and inhaler;
I was a garden tended on your bed,
which also served as our table, couch, and iron lung
allowing our roots to stretch
and dream on our own of a home
belonging to just us, as trees whose hair is tousled
and pulled by ghosts they cannot see at night:
a plot of dirt to call our property,
our mess of layers shed
from bodies that no longer clung to any mystery.

Our leaves whorled into the clean cascading
from the air purifier thrumming cold requiescats—
on at all hours, even when the house was alone—
for our flowers floating in dank, grey waters—
stagnant as years lived void of hope—
waiting for the sun to make up its mind
and walk by the alley again.

Its roots, so far away from water,
browned their drooping heads.
Their putrid scent perfumed the breeze
flooding our bedroom as the bouquet we wrapped
our nakedness into felt as though it could bloom anew.
But is this not what love is, to wilt and dry up
and stagnate and rot yet refuse to give up,
to cling to the remnants of life in what has yet to die?

At the verge of our dearth,
the chrysanthemums faced the air holes
framed into the alley wall— windows only in name—
and found new life as ovum and womb
for flies to lay their eggs into;
our lives lived by everything but us.

Platonic Fantasy Roused to Extraordinary Limits

Rolling grey hills— serpentine concrete
slithered where Sunset meets the earth—
bounce our collective skeletons
that browse and palpate any surface
prior to planting an ass on it:
the misfortune of sitting on urine
only as bad as having to worry
about sitting on urine.

Somewhere inside the bus, a warning beyond
“Watch your step when exiting the bus,”
should read: “You will get wet” or
“Stains on seats could smell stronger than they appear.”

Crossing its threshold
is entering another dimension
governed by its own laws,
and the reeked oxygen of diluted bleach:
a mobile circus in which the performers,
and audience are one and the same.

Our bones— indifferent and indignant
when in a seated position—
are hopeless and wonderfully transfixed
on the singularity of phone screens as fervent church-goers
praying on Sunday morning to a God they cannot see—
row after row of necks pivoting faces to a 45-degree angle—
the warm sterile glow of the Word
bathes their genuflected eyeballs with starry Virgin-blue.

Though the road lends its contoured breasts
open to nurse the middle passage of souls seeking freedom
from the two-hour paranoia voyage
caged in a metal box, behind glass as snakes
watching the world outside watching them,
the most poisonous known to man;
as the one back in Eden which wasn't the Devil,
but rather, human.

My True Love is a Lesbian Firefighter Not Only

Thomas Badyna

Wednesday night the moon goes toward full above the warm wind chasing litter and bums down the street I don't know where. The big buildings of downtown are near. You can feel their gravity, how the earth tilts that way. I am in shadows, seated on the sidewalk, back against brick, forearms on knees, longneck beer in one hand, cigarette in the other, waiting for Diane to ditch her girlfriend. Expectations left my life sometime back.

She was talking of Robert Frost, and I sneered. He swims on the surface, I said. You might sense the depth, but that is different from going there, leaving air far above.

Our fists meet, bash. She does that. Like baseball players. The new high-five not yet pass, but not freighted either, an agreement to lightness, inconsequentiality. She is tall, wiry, hair full, swoopy, cut up high, falling across her eyes, buzz cut on the sides, above her ears. She has baggy pants, walks like a little boy wanting to be a fighter.

I tell her I wanted to be a fireman once. Took the tests, third on the written part, second on the physical, out of two hundred and some. Flunked the psychological.

How did we get here? she asks. Meaning sitting next to each other. Boozy, leaning into each other, leaving, leaving ourselves, our pasts, the bar, each other.

There are two distinct essences of true romance, I say. It is dark, our mouths are close. She is afraid of the impending kiss we are falling towards. There is innocence, I say. Rebirth in the eyes of another. The rush to a happy ending. Our lips are so close, mine whispering move hers. I am kissing her with words. You build a dam against the past and live in the valley unchanging forever and ever. The water rises behind you unseen. Then there is the other essence. You leave your dim rooms to go into the evening and pause at the door, a tightness across your chest, the gray sky black-streaked. The wish for sunlight, hayfields, daisies, aprons, is a wish against your own life. Say a poem of your own devising. Make it true. One more step and the river runs. You cannot kiss without a broken heart. You cannot see God any other way. There is no air.

I sit on the sidewalk five hundred miles from home, sip at my beer. That moon shines on all that I know, on every step of my life. It is the color of old asphalt, the moon is, if you're walking on it, but against the black sky it is silvery. It is flat because the rims and walls of craters in the center cast shadows and on the edge they catch light, and every artist knows that is not how to make the illusion of a sphere. I hope Diane does not ditch her girlfriend. I hope she does not return. I wish for her daisies and sunlight and long for my dim rooms and books.

#

Thursday night I work in the bright light, in an unoccupied house, against the season's heavy fall of night. Even sweeping the stone dust is poetry and beautiful. I look from the kitchen and through the rooms to the fireplace at the far end. The floors are plywood yet. All the wood is fresh, raw. A Christmas from now a young family will

celebrate. Like ghosts I see their smiles, their sweaters, the decor.

Rilke is with me and every so often I sit on a bucket and read some lines perfectly true there like a knot in the gut. This is where I live.

Then I go into the big dark bar at John Casey's, thirty seats long. I pass, take one of the seats of polo shirts, Republican haircuts, They were laughing, impressed with themselves, their master-of-an-idiot-universe bonhomie. The barmaid is in tears. A couple of shits have just walked out on a forty-dollar tab. She has to cover it. I study her for a bit and think of the economic avalanche that this could start. I know how these things work. You suck it up and go on and in two months they're shutting off your electricity and you can't figure out how it happened. I get sad over America, leave a forty-dollar tip, leave, go to my rooms and books.

#

Friday night. Diane is at the tail end of a headache. That was amazing aspirin, she tells the barmaid. What was it? K-Mart brand. Really, she laughs. Good stuff.

I have my drink without asking, ashtray too. Studiously, courteously, I avoid eye contact with the barmaid, with Diane. Her purse between us is likely meant to save the seat for a woman friend. Women do not save seats for men, not even lesbians. I do not care. I have had enough. But I am surreptitiously observing her. Everything about her. Can't help it. Her purse is on the large side and nearly full. Her life takes unexpected turns.

I scratch my head, stone dust falls on the bar. I run my fingers through my hair. More stone dust. I will not engage her. I will say nothing. This is instinct. I will, however, wait forever and drink slowly enough to do it.

Her girlfriend comes with other friends. The purse is removed and the seat taken and possessive kiss is given and received. I am introduced. They have a drink. He is an itinerant stone mason, Diane tells them. She says it with pride. They are going upstairs to the third floor to hear a band. I am not. They leave. It is Diane and I and soon the words are of cheating, sexual fidelity. You have cheated, Tommy? Her mouth outextends her lips by a centimeter maybe, and I study those thin corners for signs of that downward turn such mouths are prone to. But there is none and in the firm straightness I see that optimistic will that would bid a tarrying sun to rise on her gloomiest mood. She has to go. I have to go. We talk. She calls me Tommy again. What is love? she asks.

I want to follow her upstairs, but can't. It is bad manners to follow a young girl upstairs. I can't follow her anywhere.

#

Plans for the dinner party have gone awry. Faith and I are tooling around in her Jaguar, arguing. Love exists, I say. It is something separate and like truth and beauty and Plato's spheres. We see shadows of it only. Faith says I do not believe that. And I don't, but argue for it anyway.

She is elegance and refinement and culture personified. She did it herself, left rural Mississippi at seventeen for New York City. She has just gotten her first rejection, from her agent. She is fifty-three, a decade older than me, a degree more frail every time I see her, frightened, almost, to look up.

Did you like it" I ask.

No, it was awful. Her agent says she needs to rewrite. A lot of work, she says, as if the very thought of rewriting was not only vaguely offensive but unconscionably wearying.

I tell her about Diane.

Twenty-seven years old, Thomas, what are you thinking? she says, as if I were inviting someone to ruin our dinner party.

I smile. Love exists, I say, something separate—

Oh, Thomas. And a lesbian, too.

I tell her about my trip up into the Appalachian foothills that noon, to Jeffries Stone, how much I enjoy the place and the people. This is my fourth fireplace here. Cynthia gave me a Christmas present, I say. A tree ornament. Her mother made it out of wood.

How nice.

It was. I don't need anything else for Christmas. That made me very happy. You want it? I think it's in my pocket here.

Come home, she says.

#

Dinner was beef filets in a puddle of Bordeaux sauce, each topped with a glob of Béarnaise. Odd combination, I thought, but very good, and I must have been happy, because I had desert, shared a German chocolate cake with drizzled orange sweetness on it—and that was beautiful.

And everyone had a final drink and went back to their hotels and homes and I stood on the deck telling myself to go in, go to bed with your books, but I pour more Scotch into a glass, return to the deck. The warm wind of Wednesday is gone and the air is chilly, wet and still. The coyotes are out on the ridge opposite. I can see them moving in the moonlight and would go there if I knew they wouldn't run away. Instead, a drink in one hand, a cigarette in the other, splayed in a chair, head tilted back, looking at the moon and the stars, I count the days in my life, backwards from this point, and forward, too, to the end and compare mine against all the days in the universe.

FOOTPRINTS IN THE FOG

I sought his presence in the fog and found only his footprints.
All that white, all that silence.
I wondered who the stranger was, what his story was, where he'd gone.
Droplets of mist drifted in and out of my being as I breathed deeply.
The fog sighed long enough to reveal the dagger tops of pine trees before they
evaporated again.
Why did it seem that I was forgetting everything?
I felt the chill of loneliness grip my hand.
I looked up but no one was there.
Had someone touched me?
I didn't know whether to move or stay put.
All I needed was a sign, an answer.
Silence bounced like a melody on clouds past my ears.
I tucked my hands into my jacket pockets.
My tears dribbled into rivulets frozen mid-stream on my face.
I was a topographical map of ache.
My hurts would've registered seismologically off the Richter scale.
I was a continent waiting to collapse from one earthquake after another.
Cartographers would have to redraw the world.
Yet in the mist I was smaller than these footprints ahead of me.
Each footprint, filled with water, was an oval mirror.
I lifted one foot into his footprint and gently set it down.
The water sloshed outward.
I felt a rustle of wind.
I glanced around.
Not a sound of bird swooshing.
Had I imagined the sensation of wind?
I lifted my ice-cold hands and examined them.
They hadn't turned blue.
I blew hot breaths on them.
Then there right in front of me appeared a man of no form or shape.
Just those forest eyes of his, slowly blinking, as if in understanding.
Still hazy, still misted.
I inhaled prayers as he breathed closer.
He was of my height.
I felt a rush of balm on my face.
Was it summer already?
He dove right into my arms as if I were water deep enough to contain him.

His splashes were heaven as he arose like a phoenix to meet me in a kiss.
In that moment I felt the tender shape of his head.
How many more of us from the heavens are still left on Earth?
I need to start praying again.
I will pretend that I can see my path glowing clearly as if in the sun.
I will not stumble, I will not fall.

MOTHLIGHT

They try to paint on the canvas of night
with their powdery paste of summer light
but nothing, nothing ever looks right.

The bulb glowing under the eave is too bright.
Their wingbrushes splatter dabs of white,
rather like specks across chondrite.

But their perspectives are too skewed tight.
Their sense of composition is a jumbled fright.
They don't know when to stop and exit stage right.

They all want to be Edward Hopper's acolyte.
They never learn his visual tricks, the sleight
of wing required to strike the perfect sight

of sister moon whispering *midnight, midnight*,
rolling afar from love's unseen klieg light.
Suddenly sensing bats nearby, they drop in height.

They return to where their enflamed hearts ignite.
They're still seduced by the mysteries of porchlight.
Trying to make great art is like surviving owl in flight.

ASTRAEA

Night, this skin
pulled across,
taut curtain of dreams,
worn-out, frayed,
darned too many times,
socks sucked wet
along the ridge, sheets
dense with chill,
bone sipped of ice
straw, is his cold heart.
When a tear streaks the sky,
spraying mist of wish,
it instead scalds, a needle,
a lacquered fingernail ripping
the fishnet stocking
of nightmare gone
unnamed. Memory
is a leg of maiden's day,
a disrobing of nightmare
until everything twinkles.

EDAPHOLOGY

Spirits old as stars pack down each step we make in the soil.
They know the answer to each song we've sung.
They've heard it all before.

They harrumph when we lament another death.
They can remember far back a billion years and then some.
Bodies are just fuel for memories.

They prefer the company of plants, who know how to take a joke or two.
They relish the feeling that comes from grandparenting.
Scientists say that soil is forever dying and birthing.

Truth is, their inscrutable ways are beyond scribble when we are obvious as shadow.
In the ongoing history of the universe, we don't merit a footnote,
but they're always listening. History is a trade secret.

SKUNK

in American Sign Language (ASL) gloss

me-see skunk never

{tail-waddle-fist} grass overlook

trees opposite-street Mom house

white {point-to-head-down-back}

warn {headlights-flash-flash}

once-while night

smell strong stink

spread-out

heavy same-same f-o-g

smell {pull-me-down}

similar {hands-choke-my-neck}

skunk {standing-upside-down}

stink {spray-throw-at-me}

my-nose dead finish

NESSIE

waves
bobbing to and fro
pull back
to reveal
her
prehistoric profile
neck sloped
like a giraffe
two flat bumps
on her head
quicksilver eyes
was the snapshot
a lie
people hoped
for a show
of her
dark green head
so they waited for
her
some held ready
a gaff
but so much time
a trial
on loch ness
a long while
rain
cold
stormy clouds
tired eyes
always thirsting
carafe
cursing
praying
please show
more than waves
a long stir
let us
zoom
on her head
see her before

we're dead
scanning
across each
mile
binoculars on
her
awakening
to rise
from murky depths
to glow
a shadow
of giraffe
a perfect
photograph
a clear view of her
head
her hump
still as a floe
the clarity
worth the while
mystery
in hereyes
dreamers are we
for
her
the way we wait
for her
ready to
photograph
experts
say she is
a lie
evidence
not a shred
us still in
denial
she's not
hiding
below
new photographs
of her
fact lie

APOLLO

Until once again the sun dons his gloves of night,
I daydream how I'll finally catch up with his flight.
I swear time and again I'll attune toward his ears
the notes I play on my lyre. He'll surely shed tears
when he sees how my songs turn into winds of might.
They fling meteors like a mere slingshot so light
across lightyears that are only a flash of white.
Even my family has to stop when the sky sears.
My heart is a star.

Am I not powerful enough for him? His light-
weight burns in me a hole, a lost melody of kite,
an endless pit of ash, a lament that lasts years.
His idle gazes past me lash like spears
into a snake. I am molten. My skin is blight.
My heart is a scar.

The Golden Hour

Melanie White

On the screen:
a woman, serene, nestled
in a plump armchair. Eyes
closed and barely huffing,
steady cool breaths. Next,
the birthing pool. Brief upshift
to pants – one two three,
hands down, baby out.
Aloft, slick little
frog from a pond.

My eyes screwed shut too,
from the moment we entered
the cab. Bearded man
at the wheel. On my knees
in the back, one little
speed bump and
waterfall, reverse Vesuvius.

No I can't sit on a wheelchair.
Clawing the walls.
Folded floorward and that's a
no
to your vaginal exam.
But how can we tell she's in labour?
Knot of pain,
balled-up mole, wailing.

They took their time
to fill the pool. Seashore
sounds of tides washing,
faint birdcalls, a soothing
narrator are
nowhere,
because the pain
in my back
has swollen like a monstrous
mushroom
to fill my ears. Rushing, solid,

a giant plug of pain.
Pushes apart my split legs
to cracking.

Drugs can lead to a cascade of intervention.

No belt. No gas. No jabs.
I will not
have a
C-section.

Warm water, finally,
like a fleece blanket
wrapped around someone
hit by a car.

Void time. Between surges,
clinging to the metal bar,
waiting, dreading
the next, intermittent
electrocution.
Arms ache from holding me up
on broken legs. Three hours.
I can't
hang on.

No I can't pee.
No no catheter,
no don't touch me.

Somehow on the
birthing stool.
The mental tickertape
scrolls
I'm going to die
around the penultimate surge.
The thought of pushing but
can't feel pushing, can only feel
mushroom, the bomb
in my back.
*(Are you pushing?
Is she pushing?)*
Dark room,
black hole.

After
I am going to die,
the thought,
I have to happen now.
It didn't, though,
not yet,
not then.

The next one.
You shot out, you
lugged.
Arms, not mine,
caught you and
swept you into my
numb cradle.
I looked down:
brown-slimer thing,
bog creature.
What, I thought,
what
what is this?

Oh the websites,
the birth stories.
*We looked into each other's eyes
and it was pure
bliss, I fell in love
instantly.*

There had been a snap/splash,
but anyway,
there you were,
in my arms,
in the dark,
almost breathing.

A quick dart and
from the still point to
eruption, red light
white light
footsteps running.
An army of whitecoats.
Pea soup on the floor.

They took you
to the hallway.
Me, on a gurney. Jab
to the thigh.
More thought of pushing.

*Physiological third stage,
delayed cord clamping,
still connected.*

Someone brought my phone.
Here, they said. Here's
a picture.
Within the thicket
of plastic and plasters,
two bulging eyes over
purpled shadows.
Little tube-arms,
patched torso.
Here I am.

*Bonding. Microbiome.
Skin-to-skin.*

For you:
antibiotics,
morphine.
Tarred lungs and a
plastic cubicle
for one.

They took me away
for stitches,
a needle to the vagina
puncturing the floodgates
at 3 a.m. You were born
at 12:48, but they
couldn't be sure.
Close to dawn
on the ward,
birdsong outside,
cries of
other babies
beyond thin curtains.

*Birth crawl,
first latch.
The golden hour.*

BAD WORDS

His mind did not dabble in holiness.
At one time he would have bled for his God,
but his notebook was his own confessional.
In it he admitted an attraction to the woman
who talked to him once a week through a metal
screen with a cloverleaf pattern. She had no clue
he dragged his heart through silence when
she whispered of her adulterous sin. The notebook
contained words he breathed only upon its pages,
words that brush-stroked adoration and unspoken
love into existence.

He watched her from his window when she crossed
the street to enter the church. Other times,
from his window he studied her pushing
her two-year-old son in his pram.
He had shot himself in the heart
with a soft bullet of guilt, couldn't stop craving her.

On this particular day he saw her leave her house
across the street, disappear through the entrance
to the church beneath his window. In the confessional,
he ripped the clerical collar from his neck,
pronounced words that had never come from his mouth
before. She arose from her knees, having learned
how he loved her. He apologized and did not say more.

She left, went home, planted nasturtiums, working soil
as if depth of her fingers in the dirt could bury embarrassment.
The priest dropped his clerical collar on the floor
of the confessional, didn't bother to pick it up.

Days later, he left town dressed in civilian clothes,
the notebook concealed in his suitcase beneath his cossack.
Regret scalded his conscience. Secondhand prayer offered
no solace. He drove to a small neighboring town,
hands gripping the wheel like a death hold on redemption.

JACK DANIEL'S DEBUT

I recently went into a liquor store for the first time to purchase a bottle of Jack Daniel's for medicinal purposes. Mom always kept whiskey on hand, made hot toddies to remedy a cold.

I looked around at the other customers and saw everything from a dapper aristocrat to a down-and-out derelict. Any resemblance to crowds at the Social Security Office or the mob who line up at the BMV is entirely identical.

I don't know exactly why, but shopping for booze made me feel like a criminal who would be arrested any minute.

I carried my distilled barley to the counter, handed the clerk a credit card. I expected him to ask for ID or at least a fingerprint. I felt as conspicuous as a teenager buying his first contraceptive.

When the cashier placed the bottle in a plain brown bag, I was certain I'd overlooked a pornographic image on the label. The liquor store had been relegated to the back most part of a large grocery store.

As I walked to the exit, I expected customers to turn and point their fingers at me. I made it to my car, told myself the next time I bought hooch, I'd get it out of town.

DARK GUITAR

I've always wanted to play guitar
in the dark, a glass of Merlot on
a nearby table. I would walk fingers
toward wine, their tips feeling
for the base. I would lift the glass
to my lips like a surprise kiss that
makes me wonder if I really was alone.
I would close my eyes, strum strings
with one hand and fret with the other.
I would sing "Screaming Infidelities"
while everyone sleeps-- a one-man party
without paper hats and confetti.
I would play and sing until empty
of everything but music. I would stop
when an orange glow of sunrise burns
beyond the window. The wine glass
would fill with light. I would fall asleep,
the guitar slump into my lap.
I would dream about love and how
a single man sings late at night
without candles, without romance.

STREETS

Everything lives loveless on the streets.
Gun, knife, finger in the air destroy reason.
Hard boys tear poems from each other's hearts,
throw away all words except "Man".
It is a shoulder to shoulder network of blame and blood.
The tip of a cigarette burns in the dark
as bright as a drug dealer's eye. Come to me he says
and I'll set you afire. There are those who shortcut
through alleys eyeballing every shadow for a fix.
So the beautiful stays within the brain,
and the body bleeds out a desperate voice.
Take me out of here! Out of Hell's neighborhood!

There are things to know about surviving
on the street. The main idea is to think
which friend is a friend. Scrunch up in a shelter.
Trust no one unless there is a debasing need
to trust. On the street, people do not grimace
at the smell of gunpowder. It is the stink of survival.
Who wouldn't kill to feed and fix the need?
So and so and such and such is in jail for possession,
and the news is pushed on down the line.
There are no genuine smiles on the street.
Lipsticked whores sometimes fake them.

Where is the sky in all of this. It is too far away
from what is happening in alleys to notice.
It is only after a rain that anyone sees white
light of stars glittering in the gutter.

BE DRUNK

Baudelaire says we should always be drunk
on wine, poetry, or virtue. Tonight I am drunk
on all three. I walk through a room, tilt
against the side of the earth, recite these lines,
think enough about goodness to feel humane.
I will go to sleep with a bottle of vodka
in my hand, a volume of Verlaine in the other,
When I awaken into the blinding light of being
sober, I will drink absinthe and be drunk again
because Time taps me on the shoulder, takes
my life in bits and pieces. In a moment
I will buddy up with Rimbaud, and we will stagger
together down the Rue de Rivoli, spouting Apollinaire.
We will conduct ourselves with enough respectability
to stay upright and balanced, an occasional misstep
interrupting equilibrium, bumping us together
in an unexpected embrace. Maybe I will raise a toast
with Mallarmé instead, overflow our flutes
with Louis Jadot Beaujolais Villages. We will drink
until our brains mute the tick-tock of Time,
until we see minutes and hours draped like Dali's clocks
over a tree branch and desk. Or I might end up alone
in a room with a bottle of Bordeaux and a book
of Paul Valéry and contrary to his advice,
throw away the lock and key
and let the madman out of myself.

When You Tell a Man You Read Tarot Cards

Lorren Tipping

He'll probably ask if you really like Halloween
From there, you will either be his newest fetish
Or the intrigue will sour at an instant
Fear of the unfamiliar will always break
a lust-drunk spell

This has always been a third date type of revelation,
a hobby shoved to the back of the broom closet,
punished for its oddity
only to be celebrated by candlelight
at private midnight hours

There is the man
raised with vagabond in his soul
Even he can be wary of bewitchment,
he might tell you you're interesting
That he wants a reading even
Only to ghost the seer,
but you knew he would

There is the man
bred with witch hunter blood
You were already hesitant with this one
Judgement consumes him with such ferocity,
burning you deep as
ansentrial wrought iron
But it's nothing you aren't used to

Escape

I'm trying to explain addiction
to my father the prodigal son. He's back
to giving advice he wouldn't take.
He now claims that a full understanding
of consequences is a reliable deterrent.
It's not that simple, I say. Addiction is
beyond reason — like love.
Love makes one better, he objects.
Sure, I try again, but addiction is
like unrequited love.
He starts to say something
about *common sense*,
barely catches himself —
like making the last flight out.

Overwhelm

There's a lot
to be said for love,
said the seed to the fruit,
but sometimes it will
bury you.

To the Daughter in Wild Denial

If your mother dies when you're eleven
you may look for her in other people's mothers
or any older woman who shows
the slightest interest in you.

You may look for her in her sisters
who go decades without calling and later
speak of their impossible grief by way
of explanation and notice of further absence.

You may look for her in your stepmothers
especially the one you call Mama
who introduces you as her daughter and
whose occasional mean streak reminds you
though you never forget that it's in name only.

Years later, you may be surprised when
you realize you'd even looked for her
in the men you loved desperately.

You may look for her in-between lines
of poetry that fill you up until
you burst like a balloon.

You may look for her in a stranger,
in the mirror, in her handwriting on the back
of the photo that you carry around for years.

You may look for her forever
and everywhere except in your father
which is the last place she would be.

Tide

I give him the moon.
He says it invades the night.

I give him the sea.
He says it divides the land.

I give him the garden.
He says it depresses the ground.

I give him the air.
He says it abandons the body.

I give him the poem.
He says it serves the poet.

Many Years Later You Find Yourself at the Wedding of Your First and Lost Best Friend

You look out into the dance floor where she radiates surrounded by her forever best friends, all of whom are your former friends except for one who dared (or cared) to somewhat remain in your life. You're happy for the shining bride and this capacity makes you happy for yourself. One of your older sisters sits next to you and, following your gaze, asks: *Can you believe they stayed close all these years?* Her tone registers surprise and disdain on your behalf. Instantly you're transported to the years since you were all seventeen. Back to that fateful day a cute boy who turned out to be twenty-two said you looked like a queen even though you were awkward and wore braces and happened to be standing next to one of the prettiest girls. How you came alive in that moment for the first time since your mother died six years earlier. How each red flag looked like a light at the end of the tunnel. How you swallowed your will for three years. You slipped into a world so lewd and lawless it served a savage God.

You escaped that world broken and bound by every terrible knowing. Your friends long gone with their carefully crafted reputations intact. Their close-knit two-parent families agreed with each other that their wholesome daughters were to keep their distance from you who knew wolves intimately. Neither welcome nor worthy, you became a warning. Your prideful father became bitter that you dashed his hopes of a trophy daughter. You apologized for falling prey to a man who saw your pain. Everywhere you turned you were That Girl who lost her senses, That Girl who was the shame of her father – a man prone to patronizing, That Girl who had seen too much to be harmless. You encountered a world so narrow and rigid it served a small God.

You departed from that world damaged and you grieved every dream you ever had. You wandered aimlessly for years before incidentally making a home out of the kindness of strangers, lines of poetry that lingered on your skin, the example of trees, and your own tenacity. You settled in. Later, you set out to create a world of women who had been That Girl. You roamed the wilderness of your becoming and rested in the water of your being. You grew to welcome and embrace all That Girls in you and bore witness to discarded others in sisterhood. You embodied a world so gracious and boundless it served a true God.

You return to the wedding. The stunning bride and groom dancing closely as the bridesmaids and groomsmen follow their lead. *Yes, I can believe it*, you respond to your sister at last. The scene in front of you makes effortless sense to you. What feels incredible, and what you couldn't have imagined as That Girl, is becoming this woman watching your long lost friends glitter together and who is suddenly filled with strange and blessed gratitude for everyone who ever left or counted you out and inadvertently served your audacious journey of self-discovery from scarce to plenty. You catch the bride's bright eyes and raise your glass in her honor from a deep place within you where God looks on proudly.

Dissonance

It occurred to her that perhaps novels
were to blame for her fanciful ways.
She had taken those grand gestures to heart,
blurring the line between art and life.
And when the men came,
she would confuse intensity for intimacy,
connection for compatibility,
and vulnerability for integrity.
She had followed her wild heart everywhere.
This time she would stay put,
attend to her regained senses,
dressed in fine disillusion—
not unlike the dumb plot
doomed to thicken.

Rebound

Love, n. A high voltage fan with variable speeds.

Love, n. The sky, a blanket.

Love, n. The number 1, denoting a beginning.

Love, n. The time from when you purchase a lottery ticket to when you check the results.

Love, n. An unlikely friendship.

Love, n. A window.

Love, n. An unpopular opinion.

Love, n. The last parking spot.

Love, n. The kindness of strangers.

Love, n. Blind spots.

Love, n. The moon, a witness.

Love, n. Self-diagnosis.

Love, n. Quiet.

Love, n. The shadow of an idea.

Love, n. Baby's breath.

Love, n. The world at 4:00 am.

Love, n. Water.

Love, n. Blackness.

Love, n. Moss.

Love, n. The poetry of traffic.

Love, n. The color purple.

Love, n. The hoodie.

Goals

Aim for heaven
in every encounter,
or something
more rare.

Plenty

What's better than ascension?

Boundlessness.

The Great Cold

Sochukwu Iyie

Who will plunge a tree should grow it tallest
and find ill winds render the height smallest
It fails eyes that the slight lives wrestle man
and hold fast all the while gracing their plan
The giant enthral and fights vicious hearts
where sway-craving demi-beings fling darts
This scares me into which I seek to breathe
I knew not how else I should bear or seethe
My breath, the fell pneumonia and this draft
I know not whose fight will last grasp a haft
Greatest heights sag; the sturdiest collapse
This is the spirit with which days now lapse
I am not made of brass which does not rust
Hence, I will trail our twin hearts to the dust
My mind lays no exact ear nor eye schooled
I yet not smell when earth will rout, so ruled
I should pay my art that does thirst for juice
God most high, Lord of all crafts, do me use
My mind may, past my tongue, tell far fluent
but I shall heed that my thoughts not truant
This garland virus does no fair thought help
but my pen wears no eyes nor knows a kelp
They that cut a yam when in haste they dug
would slow to unearth the tail earth did hug
Hot soup should be licked around its edges
To essay straight, this task, my pen pledges
Here is a tale of lives, cats and winged mice;
how man fronts their rebellion and the price
The winged mice click, but disrupt silly ears
They blind easy eyes and sink them in tears
Those dark-sky beasts and the sinister cats
trick the judgement of men who repel gnats
I know not what snake is young in the teeth
nor what centipede yet breathes in a sheath
How water made past the pumpkin's handle
my slight mind probes with a lighted candle

The arrow cast upwards cannot sleep there
One's shadow will bear one till one's last lair
The brow of the sky lifts in grief well etched
because man has harvested the far-fetched
Roused of the East, arresting past the West,
an eastern cold gusts and distracts our rest
It creeps through the air, behind the senses
and without limbs, strikes against defences
The eye of the sky is numb, and lives freeze
but sin to hurt, cough up sputum or sneeze
Grieved rest the diseased by a starved virus
An ill which, of else lives, breathes desirous
A close trade of presence fashions a bridge
through which nasal and oral droplets ridge
Stray droplets perch on the skins of objects
to which, by a loose hand, the face subjects
A fortnight next will have brought the result
Three days on the score finds its peak exult
The score, its hunger for roaming may pass
It still does proofs in the non-scored amass
Six-day old symptoms do the ill ached pluck
In six weeks, all jinxed cases are stiff-struck
Man is stuck in cobwebs and in vain stalled
This is a fright with which we are enthralled
If the mushroom lives a slave to the ground,
it sprouts from the waist of a stem aground
The sun has failed to awake from his house
to cleanse this epoch of the brooding louse
This age is such dressed in just made attire
Our thanks meet China who did all conspire
May we summon the Asian for handshakes
Laud the omnivores for a world that quakes
They well munched this epoch into a cough
such that man serves to a microbe a trough
It sugars the mouth that pains the buttocks
Men with puffy eyes may let their stomachs
Cure seekers who processed bat carcasses
may see that their toil, for praise, canvasses
The human crown is bowed and in our eyes

Man bows and brooks a fall, and nature rise
Who turned a palm frond and saw a serpent
would place it back or spurn and not repent
The two-legged featherless animal swerves
and keeps along, as he observes his nerves
But some singular hearts best savour fright
Certain full fledged ears position word-tight
Now, devouring meat-eaters who crunch all
exalt between neighbours a chest-high wall
The spirit of this age bears a strange breath
He gives out ill and strikes a dance of death
Students of life trace this terror to schemes
Finders, poets and seers bear fresh themes
It finds my head with threnodies consumed
and inks my nib with a verse of the doomed
I should not mouth a dirge, or spend my nib
but my fingers it has thwacked with a squib
In a cold sweat, they scratch for a keyboard
to word pieces of my mind made road-ward
These troubled shreds venture on a journey
to seek them that keep up with this tourney
My twin hearts and I heed these tragic bells
fetch our art of letters more leaves of spells
By way of faces - minds with earth acquaint
If not the mouth, the heart would retire faint
All minds still store all that did us hoodwink
My heart does my pen plugged into him, ink
When the months of our year arose in pride,
the twenty-fifth of the second moon sighed
She had divined the kite to sweep our clime
which would snake in, clearly amid her time
We had kept Christmas and its year's plenty
and the new year: two thousand and twenty
We had kept the year of more smiles on lips
when vile lives from behind made to eclipse
This plague would not swoosh past Nigeria
was he schooled we trounce harsh bacteria
The fifty-eighth dawn of the year woke grief
Our minds watched it not intrude like a thief

What our Italian guest much thrived to host,
had flown past his seat shooting outermost
Augury students would astray have begged
that visitors be, straight on the way, pegged
Foul news is brought by March the eleventh
that, in thirteen years, men bear the seventh
Keep this threatening rainstorm from falling
Heavens, if you bear, save us from squalling
The rise of a plague says the all-health desk
Breeds of this age tell new to the grotesque
Marked an open air walker none should join
our fright asks each to cast within, a groyne
This strain only caught life and has no balm
As we seek for a way, he wreaks more harm
Care givers bear clues from sick old epochs
Each day holds newer bits of the health box
Each day shows us her safest roads to take
Lives choke; and the enemy our flaws make
We never did bear this nor were we maimed
but spy this affliction straight at man aimed
I feel it could expend some time and means
So, my blank leaf covets to wear the scenes
I board a train whose stop men do not bode
I might quite soon alight for some else road
Either way, I will have filled these live blanks
if the scythe bearer not plays her fell pranks
Should the grim reaper betide without signs
to the wind, rains or fire might my lone lines
All lines would bury earth, water and clouds
A view of which would win me jolly shrouds
Most hearts lodge homelike for a pandemic
The theft of breath, mid most, tells endemic
While some eyes fail its life or mien, or both,
the science of weighing declares its growth
How we did earn the baneful broom, we ask
Our heads covered with loads it will yet task
We wrench into our skins bearing our angst
and nurturing that not to our roots chanced
God cheats not, we hold, so ills do us wreck

The white who lie in means may do it check
To lay on the first things our hands just itch
That is more covid, or our worlds we switch
Our skins wear the heart of the better made
and the yet-to-fall states' pride so conveyed
One may stitch shut the eyelids of the hawk
that flies with its wings astride a weak flock
The mortal shadow pulls all that keep close
Quick legs set out on a move, fleeing throes
The great stream would not drown anybody
with whose legs it not met, and rest shoddy
State leads tell: a lockdown for a few weeks
and we see one which of no set end speaks
Shutting the earth from its roof is so carved
during which the sly intruder dwells starved
Our eyes and hearts sit up to what happens
Dim they feel but their cold rims it sharpens
We concede to feel the turning globe stilled
Thus, do a lifeless and tiresome world build
Cities are locked up and fretful legs banned
Who makes home late is left out of the land
How early, price growth and famine is smelt
Blows of panic-shopping are to stores dealt
Who saw gates and walls even to be locked
here ply basics in their houses well stocked
Migrants stuck away, more seclusion baths
As if casting stones, roving feet seize paths
Noted sights bed ugly that sold guidebooks
Terminals that fed passports bear dry looks
In order that one will preserve one's phlegm
field affairs divorce scenes wedded to them
Now breathe daily schemes, to the air, given
No route lies, through which traffic is driven
Yet-living trades do breaths of else air catch
Schoolmates and worshippers on air attach
Known amusement houses, to the air, move
Distant souls let their bonds, on air, improve
Picked minds that do the art in the air grasp
comprise thin hands who cannot do it clasp

Hands that ate together now wave goodbye
We are snatched by a break without the sky
Are these Adam's first days when man idled
and reaped the earth, in freedom unbridled?
Noses grudged the gas of life stick farthest
but do warhorses' breasts' armours harvest
Who taught their child: genitals are covered
felt that their mind still on the nose hovered
Every hand bears Ignaz Semmelweis' words
Bathing a falling stream or glove, each girds
China smears his hands; ours swim a lather
He wears dread; we shoo our fellows, rather
While he defiles gases which gird the globe,
all else do their procedures for health probe
As they infect their houses and compounds
all elsewhere do surface cleaning, in rounds
Their diets walk their pores as some poison
while we avoid others whose skins moisten
A kung fu scheme though mimes an animal
crafts health and judgement at the maximal
The world wall but rock knows an ill crevice
Man pulls an abrupt discharge from service
Like some regulus prompt to wed with gold
hostile states quicken to build a stronghold
Eyes wear the teeth of combs on the ill cast
weighing its here and there, future and past
Hours erase their visages; days, their miens
Our souls evade us, scratching for vaccines
Those that live as one grab the art of health
Nothing outweighs staying alive; not wealth
The clock says life; no ambitions nor trades
Who can breathe has other lovely cascades
A young palm frond, still to unwrap, shrivels
but fails the blind eyes if the grieved snivels
Children are like lonely flowers wind-tossed
So mild and lost, it soon does them exhaust
Who took the winged train to foreign clinics
now relent on some field healthcare picnics
The richest and their bronze monies sunder

They freeze at this monstrous virus-wonder
The moneyed dispense vast copper monies
to charm fortune, and assume kind bunnies
The refuges of abodes, the chiefs of realms,
grind molars jointly while fright overwhelms
Our forerunners who merely lose their mirth
summon a long-haired star to kiss the earth
Our youth may be just while they hold aloud
that this bane seeks but the richly endowed
The wealthy return home from far countries
Their companions at most kiss their entries
The rich traverse through soils of this covid
They are kept, and the rest shooed like Ovid
The wealthy and ailing are the most-served
where others inflicted stay back self-nerved
Well, downcast souls look up to the steeple
sects, creeds and classes become a people
Heads sit else ways to lead the eyes abroad
How our visions turn revised casts us awed
This age gives us a new hunch of our breed
Now, strangers to our clout tenant our heed
Our care-givers and corps take up the cross
All else stretch out in their beds like a moss
Now breathes the chief strife of the century
when most hearts not catch its worst injury
The front line cry well seized by our fighters
Our healthcare leads rouse the field igniters
Mouths sing praises of the victors war-kept
Minds greet offers of their leisures ill swept
Man has so not vanquished Covid-nineteen
but the triumph woos his mind and as keen
A clash of bullets, and blades would quaver
Ours foils wide eyes but not meets a waiver
The brave strike their way to an other world
They make to a hell to foil the source furred
Who invades Satan's land must do else ripe
You not try his seat nor from a length snipe
They who do find not home in their number
They all may submit to the strange slumber

Bright news greets home, even if ill luck ails
A barred voice tries to ring of hope and fails
We bath under droplets yowling from eaves
and gulp drips of water bawling from leaves
Forty days have found our sit-at-home push
Meanwhile, its extension staged an ambush
Who earned every day are seized in the toils
They fall ill, whose lips this dry spell not oils
Caught in the snake-coil wheel of a cyclone,
into the soil man's forked roots scurry sown
We can brace ourselves like algae in chains,
to wreck this plague, or honour our remains
Our age lays sages composed as the young
who are eyes over their soils like the tongue
The tongue is one deft dweller of the mouth
It sways the realm from its west to its south
Marking the nooks of all that lurk and prowl,
it spreads about the walls as though an owl
Our fathers bore dusky days; these are ours
All hands bind to reclaim the free lost hours
Their god does fell them where anyone falls
The rest limp till their last gasps and pitfalls
There lie the feet of whom the earth chases
One who fights with oneself nothing graces
The distance mid thumb and the fifth finger
does prompt their eyes on each other linger
Most legs sent indoors do not bear the trait,
while they simulate the crab's sideward gait
We quite veer from our own selves horrified
playing the snail's shell turned half to a side
This home confinement lives with a manual
To sleep, dine, bath, and again reads factual
A poor man's day unfurls late; grief eats him
May no one ask others what lake they swim
A lifetime swept by techniques and science
Warfield lovers quake in home convenience
Men pushed animals to brawl in deep holes
Now, animals pull men's fight for their souls
Flag-wavers who bore fiery guns and knives

cannot sit behind doors and keep their lives
Man may conceive how animals judge zoos
A caged fine-limbed creature lives an abuse
I have, all through my life, itched to lie down
but on this short-stay prison I should frown
Lives we miss, we know you too do us miss
Hope leads us towards the path to our bliss
If these days pass and you not bear us next
do not thus hold that our love too fell hexed
We strain past our roles for the least to give
but all eyes are fought over which souls live
Many are crushed and many grown ill numb
Some lose their way; on a newer path, some
These are days set to lash man as they look
My bones say torn apart; my limbs, ill-shook
Scratching plagues him a lot that lice attack
He not tells when he does on his poo snack
Our breeding lockdown has a new daughter
Who not saw this plunge in earth and water
Dwellers across oceans, to hold home, earn
Our very statesmen do our hurt pleas spurn
Relief grants from larger hands make fables
While in fact food and meat blind our tables
Most men tell not else ways to fetch money
They live on the past that came most sunny
These are no fertile times to grow business,
but hunger torments more than unwellness
The skin wears no prickles and rests frozen
When itching grows hard, it greets the open
Who heeds the fear beyond walls no longer,
has been kindled and chased out by hunger
Their skins lie in the pupil's gray-green haze
of which etch hunger-struck veins in a daze
The thumb snaps the finger and stirs a clap
Able hands fill sunk cheeks that itches slap
Who break their arms as the fight escalates
carry who break their legs, with sturdy gaits
Lordly lenders and barefaced beggars swell
Limbs in fetters still grope for ways to dwell

Here, some minds are fired for some genius
Some else, at hatching ills, swing ingenious
He in jail starves; the starved has an ill mind
Thus, the dark-minded arm against the kind
Kitchens bear news of their ill-emptied pots
Days know grocers recording robbers' plots
In the sun, the land that one grows of crops
is that which, below rafters, takes raindrops
One works by lamplight; the daylight is shut
Across the unpeopled spheres, nature strut
Many souls are swept out by this vile dance
It smoothly strips this time of its substance
Few victims and deaths our registers quote
Many minds rot that these records not note
The rich knows none to bear his ill or doom,
nor contracts the dead to possess his tomb
No soul will rest a heap of numb pale bones
behind eyes that had him thrive over stones
Man's hearing dies last; an artist's hands do
If the last couplet of this draft pulls through
A deinked pen is first mourned by his drafts
Of the notes of his aired works he yet crafts
This is one death-of-cold with wings so rife:
A grim stroke that marks a cold break in life
Adroit to wreak earth-wide havoc, and brisk,
it is one fierce stream encircling earth's disc
Snared souls sing the song of a dying swan
These preys felt to die soon admit foregone
Seven million lives are caught in six months
Three and a half million thwart met affronts
When almost half a million repose trounced
time will rate the Pestilence far pronounced
This year of death is still faced within doors
It rivets prickles to hearths for some chores
While itchiness is employed in most homes
one is shorn of the ease at which life foams
One may wish for one's portion in the street
where this aerobe or our men-at-arms greet
Men live tricky times fraught with dilemmas

You rig truths, Wuhan ill, and numb lemmas
Stripped rough-edged leaves of a dandelion
have you been loaned some teeth by a lion?
Ought the spike of justice to thrust our legs
or hunger fill our pots, sketching our dregs?
Something another way does my rest touch
No prickle did thus well on my peace clutch
A child soothes, under the sky grown angry:
Mother, please bawl not; I weigh not hungry
We eat phlegm to soften the pangs of thirst
Who has a meal gulped drums of water first
One hungers in one's mouth, not one's belly
You bear ill-timed meals and freeze like jelly
Hunger ails others' bellies, not their mouths
You tire of eating if your tongue has doubts
A nursed baby begins each day with brunch
when its mother seldom has nuts to munch
This sad child's next and last meal is lunner:
lunch and dinner matched for a post-runner
Beneath fruit trees, its father gobbles meals
when the itches in the house seek his heels
Jackie Chan's 'Snake in the Eagle's Shadow'
Your snake fists and cat claws, by air, tiptoe
It is fell how new bloods bear their last rites
but your flinty forte lifts my mind to heights
Like those unbowed Ronaldinho's ball ploys
you invade, destroy and advance with poise
These days give to the eyes of the punsters
Our grief turns joyous, keeping our funsters
Plenty of sauce with which we lick our biles
does, now evil ruins men, concoct our wiles
Some germs, long sent into an endless gulf,
rise, having spied their breed do men engulf
There is no temple where man flees seizure
The seized, no priest frees, yet at his leisure
Each traced case bears Ibn Sina's health jail
Our other selves, here ostracized, grow pale
Avicenna's health jail clutched the diseased
Our 'Forties' is into fourteen days squeezed

Cases are lured to the scythe bearer's court
Fortunates buy the judge; the rest fall short
Who may fare, reap therapies for symptoms
and yet exploit assumed breathing systems
Who not people the care jail loll homewards
and ease their breaths or let the fell records
Who hold up not return in their best shapes
Who fall do straight into the well that gapes
The routed lie lost for their heads and limbs
to adapt to a truck which with deaths brims
When, daily, thousands of men loll perished
truckloads fill pits, away, by none cherished
Corpses are plied along trails morn till dusk,
when none is better honoured as their husk
The vanquished are robbed of fair requiems
Who cease home may keep for millenniums
The Occidental say less schooled than held
The United States, the great height, is felled
The heap of sand a stroke of her spade lifts
is seen while under her watch our sail drifts
Worlds the sculpture of freedom enlightens
will see how her defied torchlight heightens
State firsts tear up, on clear and else efforts
The Latin and German tribes lose their forts
The well-smashed Brazil, Britain and Russia
do no grace into their wrecked hearts usher
Shock runs through South Africa and Egypt
Northern African states confess ill-stripped
With doubts and each barely about a slump
Kano's, Abuja's and Lagos' strengths thump
The Pestilence is once more for lives ticked
The Great Depression comes soon to afflict
World economies, like the shameplant, bow
The bone-dry soil, the less fortunate plough
Humankind tires out like a bough-torn trunk
Our great voyage, thus sailed amiss, is sunk
It strikes worse in our land with just leaders
Men limp like birds fleeing coops for cedars
Swooshed past us has our Italian life-guard

He played a task for solely which he starred
Such flu which widely grips in colder climes
looks of man, but a Chinese stem so climbs
A child grown ill for work, wakes fit to brawl
Fire not keeps who woke it nor heeds a wall
Staunch to walk the else flesh to the bizarre
these were legs smelt to take the world afar
Eyes can grasp the rise and fall of each foot
and how each of their legs, to stretch, is put
The Asian wage and win the third world war
The new and else old nations blaze but roar
The snake that not swallows its companion
maybe not gets fat but grows some canyon
They still give a chase like the grudging flea
that gashed their neighbour with a machete
Hit are wiener dogs that work up no sweats,
fetched to dig the badgers out of their setts
Some Chinese hunt sway over their fiefdom
Such faceless names well defy our freedom
The kite can fly up; its shadow, down, wings
Arms not grow folded when ill at man flings
China could, behind shut doors, have a trick
This would not earn us the hungered magic
A ewe that lusts for horns may weigh a ram
She may scratch well if she has still to lamb
God gifts us faces and tongues, all may see
Life is His breathed words; cognates are we
Men could in their unique miens and voices
reap better than nursing some sole choices
The fruits of our deeds wait no split second
Everything spins upside down as beckoned
Legs keep roaming about on the same spot
I tell not our left from our right, thus fraught
The daylight grows dim like a waning moon
pulling from the nooks of our days, so soon
The past that spoke well of today masks up
The foretold wears the slips mid lip and cup
Our minds and work, with earth, did interact
Here, our feet kick against stones on a tract

False schools on air, of the spiteful ill, teach
Minds invent clues; fishers of regard preach
Hours hatch winged reports; anxieties reign
Prophets show us Jesus Christ come again
A wartime appears worse and has ways out
but on each of these days more evils sprout
A side could flex muscles and grab the field
but we lose the strength to exploit and yield
Fires of war could be put out by neighbours
but no creatures else can boost our labours
The bird flight's eyes of hints spy not ahead
None can tell the lot of this ruin widespread
All hold that hope-filled hunger does not kill
Instead, well close makes death, the killer ill
So smoothly could this come, but I feel glad
I swear an oath which in hearts will tell mad
Past my days, my return will not, here, make
if after deaths, souls for else times do wake
Life has never had dress such poor and dull
I should fall here; still, death will all men hull
Breathing has, upon our lives, lost its charm
Well, vanity still does our stored golds harm
Our rulers look leapt for their common cloth
sewn of far tales and transformed into froth
Law enforcers launch their fame for assault
and hope that these days not dash to a halt
They are else harm past Wuhan pneumonia
Well deemed fruitful, but hard like ammonia
Our hearts cry to unknown ears borne away
While we get no responses, our hopes stray
Our still but troubled spirits, here chagrined,
crush down and wear away and to the wind
They may join the cloud of smoke up above
If the clouds not do them down to us shove
They could seek being to some lower home
but you will, Almighty, not watch them roam
God who bears the earth upon His shoulder
grief, regrets and ruin, in our eyes, smoulder
This bespeaks the bowing down of this age

and could breed the tearing out of our page
We pray for a rope thrown from outer space
that would transport all out of this embrace
In the wild fields of tomorrows cures fledge
Each leg on this slick peak clings to a ledge
A tree that cannot dance, the wind coaches
All hearts grow to augment our approaches
A meal burns me; my intestines lie bunched
I rise to gape my mouth while it is munched
Our nerve and foiled fear will not cut a germ
At the winged data on cases, hearts squirm
Man stomachs an ire that does him enslave
We re-sit our hurt hearts to house the grave
Our fathers' spirits are here with us, housed
They bear our eyes even when we caroused
All minds serve them kola nuts, with fervour
The fruit which men and spirits both savour
Wherever one lodges one mends one's roof
No balm hunter will brook their hearth aloof
Many minds still deem this covid some joke
Some, that our clime merely does it provoke
They bear no faults who score this ill unreal
now a saviour from far skies does man heal
Their eyes that thwart ours may be genuine
while our leads fatten up and stay sanguine
The fat ask the starved to bear their houses
but the fat loll in streets where harm rouses
Disease check bureaux do our concern lose
Hearts not shake still at pieces of sad news
Horror now withdraws its sway upon minds
We make back slowly to our common kinds
Most brows stand other proper life troubles
for the mirth which under one's toil bubbles
A foul flu has come and now with men lives
It will fail or, God knows, leave when it gives
When no tongue terms it nameless or novel
who saw not, watch it here and there grovel
From the edge of space other horrors spark
On turns to reign upon breaths they embark

Hopes did take no fewer while it all hatched
We not deem, rather, attached nor detached
If hands keep so fettered and shorn of work
more troubles pile up, and for one's rest lurk
Partial white men's and to this scourge akin
some other flu lives that tries the black skin
The black man forges for himself own tools
but some sky-hue wearers attack as ghouls
Such whitemen wish to ask ills to our guard
They find the black soil best for a graveyard
They see no vaccine in our leaves and roots
that nurture pains in their eyes for our fruits
For all who assume skin-first and vice-Gods
the world will die and wait, against the odds
You grudge the black soil all its herbal feats
but let them on whose many a plague seats
The skin who does itself the sky-light deem
eludes earth painted of a black skin's gleam
The black-skinned meet drug testing in vivo
when they seem breaths not worth a relieve
These days are here to let men who discern
confirm more racist fell wills fume and burn
Lessons behind lessons shadow each hour
What has life fights to the morrow bent our
While a wraith, in a commune, stays so long
elders lure it where behind eyes they throng
Like asthma, dengue, Aids and else cancers
you grace the bar mid man and his answers
Wuhan pneumonia, you yearn to dwell large
and sway over lands along which you barge
So that your makers well conceive the huge
your art, Frankenstein's virus, plays the luge
A life from the shreds of the dead will surge
while the author lays his balm for a scourge
Within my thoughts' hearing I bear to speak
These words do you, aural, or heavens seek
Should the old and hoary-haired ill-treat you
Bad is bad; steel your mind and irk them too
When a baby crawls up and does you pinch,

drop down, nip back, like the beak of a finch
We flog a child that spilled the worthless oil
not whom broke wind to gag men in turmoil
By matching their strides, you fight warriors
They should gamble that must rise glorious
How banes have kept ailing earth from Asia
The blameful should dance to their fantasia
Our eyes can switch a more thorough study
So the pure are not cast through the muddy
World irokos seek China through tall courts
Leading seats convene her, heeding reports
Where ills befall and else ways bear legions
the stiff-necked kicks on, raiding all regions
Wuhan virus, where spirits bear weak joints,
hires a compass and infests the four points
Towards all lives the Wuhan harm is geared
States who disavow its presence are feared
We recline trapped, ill hit and grimly bruised
Some guilt of man's perhaps is not excused
I can hear, although the hell's bells may ring
cherubs and seraphs, at heaven's gate, sing
Any that falls, snow, sleet or hail, is stopped
My eyes, some hearts will disclaim or adopt
Yet, what rain on man are clouds' final spills
that walk the way to earth from the sky-hills
To weigh all we lose, hearts not say enough
Untold say the souls sunk in this fell slough
When our age not breaks into baseless pits,
the moon will shine soon if this rain permits
We will press our chests against each other
soon while we will have cast out this bother
Who must hold out must kindle a challenge
Brows raised fearlessly will refuse to cringe
As days come and go, our panic fall sapped
Such starved fears by each day fail to adapt
Views of unique faces gush for they should
Man casts off his foreboding but falsehood
The mortal will not kneel for dead concepts
which lodge not abreast of earthly precepts

Plans are awed and lifted how hearts kindle
to shake off vain contents and less dwindle
While it costs caution to claim our customs
we head for our lost aims like lay phantoms
Earth makes place to suit some other being
Man moves to match since he is not fleeing
When lives and this disease swap company
we keep from harm which does accompany
Well, dim but more form to fight they reflect
all faces and miens not reveal how wrecked
Paths are, by anxious legs again, massaged
Again, they wear life and glow camouflaged
Feet now go out again but here with modes
I veil my sunk flesh in free coats from roads
This captures not the case with the wealthy
who widen doors to go from rooms, healthy
While humans still in rank over earth mount
their wands led on else planets deftly count
Crises call but not from here do men sweep
Pinches foil the brave and yet do them keep
Our forefathers might have bent to a plague
when they kept behind eyes easy but vague
Man will his greatness his whole life secure
No disease nor scourge will his reign ill lure
It may wear quicker wings than the flu does
but men rout measles which beyond it buzz
Many creatures plot in their spectral worlds
to wrest the sway which is the ultra-furled's
Some quit all ploys and yield in fear of routs
as your spirit ultra-furled, man, lures doubts
More plights will tilt at your sceptre and orb
but live God's breath which only you absorb
The rare creature born of God's photograph
should mimic God's grace as His divine half
This single craft of God's resourceful hands
the rate of beings born of words not stands
Who alone says worth God's breath to exist
merits more life to bathe some blissful mist
They who when spoken to, do for life vouch

will if spoken to, towards death thus slouch
Beings that earned God's office and muscle,
seize earth and dwellers, knowing no tussle
He who on the Lord's last day of work came
on the day of death shall last yield his name

The Heirs

Rain close beneath the tin under the wing of the Studio before dawn was a trifle unsettling—something like the concern at howling wind and storm against the window in childhood. The evacuated possums would be having a torrid time of it without shelter. After having dispatched the large bushy-tailed felon, a second much smaller one was squeezing through a tiny gap on the other side of the front window. More trouble and expense. In the end handyman Goran had flipped the hinges on the box he had crafted that had fixed the first old fellow and filled that hole with expandable foam from an aerosol can. Three days later the operation appeared to have been a success—no sound of the creatures in the ceiling. After the funeral on Sunday over in Montenegro the matter of rain over a grave had played in the over-het brain. Finally the bereaved brother and the widow were reached on the phone and condolences offered. Words had been very difficult to find either side. As a sailor the brother Vajo had missed both his father and mother's funerals. On this occasion he had been found at home. A flinty old mariner, thought had been that Vajo might have gathered himself and a calm, settled voice would be heard on the phone. In the event it proved to be not the case. Bad choking. *Velika ti hvala*, Many thanks to you, Vajo had responded. There was little else intelligible. Often Vajo could be quiet and circumspect. As in the villages, in Vajo's place there at Kumbor where Aunt Radoslava had married he would live the remainder of his life one hundred metres below the church graveyard where all his family lay in the ground. Shaving the last days the thought had come of the preparation of the corpse. The younger brother Leka—Aleksandar—had a kind of large mole high on his cheek. In the summer it grew larger, he had said once. Some kind of skin condition ran through the male line in that branch of the family. Leka's nephew Vladimir had a large dark patch of skin on his forearm that had raised consternation among the grandmas in his early years. The women shaving would need to take care with Leka. Surprisingly, late last year up in Johor Bahru, Southern Peninsular Malaysia, it had been revealed that among the Muslims in the Tropics at least, it was the male kin who prepared the dead for burial. Not the case in another patriarchal form in Montenegro, where the duty fell to the widow, the daughters and other female kin.

2.

An unruly youth who disliked school; liked football, drinking, gambling and girls and couldn't be turned. Dark like his mother; thick black hair carrying hardly a wisp of grey even into his late 50s. Youngest of three. Eva was first-born, a pretty dark girl when her aunt left the country. With wily, undeclared affection, the aunt puzzled the child. (Mummy, mummy! This auntie's eating the pips with the cherries! Up in the village of course there were none. Were these the first cherries mother had tasted at her younger sister's on the water?) When she left Radoslava was pregnant with her second, a son Vasilije after the local saint. A scene of tearing cries on the wintry railway platform when the sisters parted, Radoslava unable to be shooed off home. The Partizan officer on the train who had witnessed much suffering and grief in the war had seen nothing like it. (The parting with brother George thirty-six years later after the return brought another episode of the same—George shrieking like a donkey, mother described it.) Leka—Aleksandar it will show on his headstone—was born the following year, the news arriving in a red and blue fringed *par avion* envelope that mother opened at the kitchen table where subsequent letters of heartbreak would be read. Diabetes in his late forties. The drink and the fags especially difficult to cast aside. All three siblings were heavy smokers, the sitting-room in the old house on the water was always as thick as a chimney. Tito years American *Marlboro* was highly prized; *Levis* likewise, gifted once from a trip across to Italy. (*Levies* in the local accent.) As cousins we had inherited the earlier generation's great feeling for each other. If our mothers were to be honoured as was their due, that needed utmost respect. Bonds of that kind from an age past, a way of life in a particular culture and locale that was no more. We the heirs managed best we could. One fine evening under Leka's porch some shared stories touched each of us in our own way. As a young lad Leka remembered Granddad Rade hauled out of the water off their pier at Kumbor in his winter greatcoat, the big bloated body. Having guessed what the old man intended, the two remaining sisters had denied him the high windows up on the hill at the younger Jovanka's. Therefore the leap into the bay. A non-swimmer. Radoslava, Leka's mother, was the only one of the siblings who could swim, taught by her husband the hard way tossed from the side of his fishing boat. The older brother Vaso valued the Russian authors above all; in the early 80s sister Eva had the complete Chekhov on her shelves in the flat in Novi Beograd. A friend of Leka's preferred what he termed a little known author from Norway, Knut Hamsun. The last email was in classic ceremonial form dictated by Leka to one his daughters. (Mother had done the same in youth, a kind of language lesson then.) With brimming heart they all awaited a return when they could again welcome their brother into their home; and looked forward to one day reading in their own language the writings that were being published in various foreign corners.

Vale Leka Vujnovic 1954-2017. May the black earth lay light upon him.

The Whip Hand

Magically vivid incident of this kind didn't come your way very often. There was a load available in the Tropics of course and you did need to try your best to steer clear. At least avoid that sort of thing in the temples, rituals and festivities; those were best reserved for the photographers. Nevertheless, in brief now and as it happened in the Carpmael house that particular Thursday morning. First, a burst of clatter like a single, large firecracker almost in the entry hall while breakfast was being prepared. Quite unusual. It was an echo chamber in there, but this was a blast and a half. A large, heavy tin plate falling flat from a height onto the tiles perhaps. When the first round was followed a couple of seconds later by another explosion again it needed to be investigated. Leaving the bowl on the bench-top even for two seconds was dangerous with the ants roundabout. However, there was no ignoring the matter. You didn't get a crack like that every day of the week, not in Singapore certainly. Coming out into the dining-room the Chinese handyman was met returning from in front, from the other side of the half wall. The man carried a kind of suppressed grin on his face, in his hand a bandana first glimpse. A long thin coil of fabric possibly; green & gold cord or belt that had been doubled up on itself a number of times; perhaps. Even as the man held it before you like a swaddled baby, it was unclear exactly what it was in his hand. Limited English one side and non-existent Mandarin or Hokkien the other led to an impasse. A blank only for a moment. Understanding the quandary the man handed over the little bundle for inspection. Unfurled, the piece measured about one point five metres in length, tapered at one end and the other terminating in a carved handle that might have been in the shape of a snake head. It was not a cobra; the form was more regular. One word that was clear was *Thailand*; a product of that country it must have been. The tapered end swung between us as we chattered. Another clear enunciation was *Buddhist*. There was some mental reeling and fumbling. *GHOT.... GOHT....* The man spelt out alternatives after some indecision. *How to say?...* The man thought he had the needed word in English, spelling the problem. It did not appear to be "goat" that was meant, though some of the gestures around his head suggested something of the sort. Horns. Teeth. Snarling expression. There may have been a front tooth missing in the man's top row which had not been noticed previously. Banishing of evil involved here; very unlikely the thing was anything else. Nether forces, the devil or evil eye—a couple of good cracks of the whip at the entryway and the bad, malign spirits would be sent away, gone and no more. The man offered you a go if you wanted; somehow he seemed to have intuited you could manage the article. Well, that was long ago.... Attempting to relate to the chap an episode of whip-cracking in a mountain field once thirty-five years before following an ox ploughing for potatoes quickly needed to be abandoned. Thai Buddhist/animist practice best guess. Fair enough. All

understandable. It was a trifle disappointing to receive this kind of matter from a man who wore a Buddhist sutra tattooed on his shoulder. The gold necklace had not been seen before either, delicate fine links with a small jade stone attached. Yes, jade, the handyman confirmed. Donned for the morning ritual safe to assume. The man had been seen bare-chested many times, taking his breakfast and at his supper at the dining table beside his wife; the cupping welts over his back had been touched once in a brief exchange. Down in Melbourne Babi had taught how to cup her. A few minutes before on the Thursday morning husband and wife had entered the kitchen from around in back, from the garden, before passing into their room. There may have been a kind of conspiratorial look borne by the pair. Nothing in particular; nothing untoward. What got the goat came later that Thursday out in the back garden, a few minutes after breakfast with the washing of the bowl. The man might have observed and approved of the water from the bowl taken over to the plants along the fence line. It seemed the chap was shyly eager for further exchange. He was a casual handyman, mostly working on call. The work was erratic, sometimes on, sometimes not. It was OK; there was no need to work so very much all the time. As one might expect to hear from a proper Buddhist..... So, it was the *kopi* shop between times then, was it? Shooting the breeze quiet and easy.... Yes; No. Rocking. That was not quite right it seemed. Hanging around the *kopi* shops was not quite it. Between times, waiting for call-out, what this whip-cracking rodeo man in fact was doing was writing. Writing sutras. In these kind of fractured conversations you often thought of Picasso portraits observing the planes of the faces. Not exactly unoccupied and mooning, the handyman between jobs.... It sounds like colourful, manufactured narrative tailored for the weekend stories in the newspaper supplements. This guy however did precisely suggest this very thing: in his chair at the favourite *kopi* shop while waiting for the phone to ring.... Ah! Gee. Well, then. We were authors both, lah! How about that?... Hmm.... More Picasso fragments, briefly. But really only a second of pause.... Ah. But no. Not really. You yourself wrote stories, the man had it in his head, this handyman. *Stories*. Someone had specifically told him and he had taken note. Probably Auntie Helen the Catlady. What that old JW had gleaned from the postings online suggested stories. Stories and nothing else. White guy, traveller, gathering stories like seashells on the seashore; like picking daisies. In between lunch, coffee and dinner, walking through the parks and the malls. Ice-cream in hand. Not so many words were needed for Helen in order to convey the point to the handyman and his Taiwanese TCM practitioner wife. The pair had observed the warm exchanges with Helen; she would know particulars. Stories like fairytales perfectly clearly what the handyman had understood. By contrast, this man when he had some free time sitting at a *kopi* shop table busied himself with earnest occupation writing sutras. Some from memory he indicated, and some generated by his own thinking self—twisting the knob at his temple made that point clear. Not to put too fine a point on it, through the course, the penmanship, the man explained, he was seeking. The man was pursuing. He was searching for specifically—*power*. This was his magical English word. *Power*. There had been no intended belittlement. Each to his own. The manner of the man was straightforward and direct. The Buddhists had these different stages and levels, like

the Hindus. One did one's own thing, the allotted task in life; more or less fated. It depended on many factors, what you were cut out for ultimately. The handyman no doubt saw his housemate was on a path of his own; one decent enough. No beer in the fridge, no cigarettes. Healthy eating, the man had remarked, having noted the breakfast cereals. He didn't mean you were piss farting around exactly in your endeavours. Still, this man, earnest seeker, knew what he himself was about.

Traumabomb

Auden Eagerton

I collect fragments, radio
dispatches on loop over the wires.
My memories are a reel of film
cut up,
wormholed,
projected through magnifying glass.
My trauma isn't repressed,
it's avant-garde.
I am TV static in a crystal ball
suspended in bullet time,
a connoisseur of blanks,
the shadow of hum
within a nuclear blast.
This is my tapestry
built against gods,
thunder, wooden spoons.
I am rubble, aftershock,
refugee of my own body.
Even my birth was a shattering—
I have always been escaping
womb after collapsing womb.

by Gareth Culshaw

THE WATCHER

He wasn't someone that I knew. Though his name hung outside his house. His red door stood against the moonlight. We walked by, aware of him watching from behind the window net. Our footballs lay under kitchen tables, but he still kept an eye on our heads like a summer sun on a puddle. We winked our feet sipped cans of Vimto until the stomach bowed out and threw a grenade burp into our mouths. We both watched him. Laughed at his egg shell belly and the wellies he wore when going to the chippy. His lips letterboxed his mouth. Telephone wires tent polled the sky. A sparrow shot from a hedge scratched the blackness as a match on sandpaper. We sat on the steps heard the clouds shimmy across our foreheads as slippers on carpet. He was still there watching. His eyes turned his house into a head. A car pulled up the road tugged its owner home after work. Stars pickled themselves as a waft of cigarette smoke whispered across our minds. We looked up and he was there standing over the neighbours hedge watching what we were doing out in the dark.

SATURDAY MORNING TENNIS

We filled the tennis court with the dirty laundry of teenage years.
Swore with gull tongues. Laughed at crayon haired joggers.
Whacked the hell out of the cyst that school had swapped with our brains.
Spat onto a brush that swept up autumn leaves. A dog walker watched
with two blinks of their mascara before carrying on with last night's wine.
We briefed each other. Knew the time on the watch dripped away
the tree winds. October mooched around.
The ball bounced as if trying to jump the fence and find a dog's mouth.
Orange cordial lit up the corner. Three kids ran through the gate
lost in the maze of childhood. We both shook our heads
to rid the memories of what we knew and they did not.
A crow pecked at the leaf mould found a point I lost three games ago.
The council worker followed the path around the park. Built plaque on his teeth
with the bubbles of cola that he swigged from his left hand.
Sunlight gave us the glow from Tesco at night.
A chimney popped smoke that looked like a white sky between tree canopies.
Clouds became thrown bread for the birds in a garden.
We played until the frowns weighed down the smiles we brought in our wallets.
Scone foreheaded, I gasped for a chicken lung of air, as he swung his racket
to hit another ball. My elbow bent as the branch of an apple tree
when scrumping. We both lost that Saturday morning, but neither of us
remember why. I wait for you to tell me.

THE GRANDPARENT WHO LIVED INSIDE FOUR WALLS

The four dogs he owned during his life were stuffed on the landing.
Their eyes followed you when you chuckled to the upstairs loo.
Sunlight squeezed through the door window as a letter in an envelope.
The stair treads creaked with each step, nudged away the silence.
Photos hung on the woodchip wallpaper as portholes in a ship.
Ceiling cracks looked like palm prints where he had pushed back the sky.
The hallway was a gap in his teeth and you heard the echo in his voice.
Sometimes the walking stick helped him visit the outside or a flat cap
kept a summer sun off his frail hair line. Either way, he lintel-frowned.
He ate his cake with a moose jaw and swallowed his morning.
I sat with a folded newspaper, and heard the coo of a wood pigeon.
Noticed the next door neighbour walking by with promenade cadence.
His head turned to the window as if he had seen bird shit on the glass.
We both frowned. Then I went back to counting the ornaments.
He fell asleep with a sleeping bag restless. I felt my life fall from my fingers
as rain through leaves. I returned two weeks later, and heard the pigeon coo.

Power

Michael Mark

Jake rolls three dice, and when the instruments of fate discharge, we count fourteen dots. I suck wind through my teeth. Cornelius Bennett has triumphed, and Moses, my Prophet, is dead. How exactly the Lombardi-Award-winning linebacker from the University of Alabama has just defeated the CEO of the Exodus, a man once portrayed in moving pictures by the one and only Christian Bale—a man who possessed a staff made by God that turned into a snake and gobbled up a whole passel of the Pharoah's piddling snakes—is not revealed. The dice are a crude diagnostic.

"I'm filing a protest," I say.

Jake waves me on. "Let's hear it," he says.

Though he is pale and gaunt, with cheek bones more prominent now than they were just two weeks ago, in this moment he is fearless. He is surfing the pain, and carrying us with him.

I look up from the table to gather myself. Images ripple across the curtains in the far window where a light breeze blows into the room. The face of a Navy Seal commander flutters in and out of focus on the makeshift screen. He is giving a speech to the graduating class of Florida International University about honor, sacrifice and teamwork, but we've muted the sound. What's needed is simply the presence. We're oncology patients, after all, not greenhorns. Motive is not something we lack. Jake has selected our motion picture this week, and he's chosen well. Already I know this man has looked adversity in the eye and discovered it was not the hell he'd once feared, but the crucible of human achievement. He did not make himself; rather, he was made. He was struck by a tremendous force, and all that remained was the precipitate face he shares with us tonight. The Commander emboldens me. It's tough to equal that with refreshment, but I've tried. Two days previous I stood in the aisle at Shaw's and read recipes on the side of bottles, cans and boxes for over half an hour. The spicy hot chocolate with nibs of real cacao and pink sprinkles on the top seemed an obvious choice, but I had a headache then tough enough to stop bullets, and chills from a tepid perspiration, so I may not have given the task the consideration it deserved. The important thing is that we each have a role. Everyone contributes. A process has been developed no less complex than the rituals of Major League Baseball—only we're not conjuring base runners, we're releasing psychic forces which, in certain Philippine tribes, have been known to cause head-hunting. We're in parlay with death itself and we have to be careful. There's a reason we meet in the wood-paneled room of a library.

I turn to Tanya. "Whereas it is historical fact that Moses caused the Red Sea to part with his staff when leading the Israelites out of Egypt, and where it is equally well known that Cornelius Bennett was a member of the University of Alabama *Crimson Tide*, it hardly seems plausible that Mr. Bennett could have resisted Moses' long-standing precedent in this case."

“Ollie,” Jake says to me, as he shakes his head, “Bennett is the product of modern nutritional science. He could lift everyone in this room up in a plastic kayak and throw us forty yards downfield. It hardly seems implausible.”

Tanya purses her lips in thought. “I need Images,” she says.

Using my Samsung, I access our civilization’s Akashic records. The scene I select is from *The Ten Commandments*. Charlton Heston stands atop a studio promontory, holding his arms up high in a manufactured wind. His flowing red robes exude a powerful symmetry, his eyes gleam into places no horizon could hide, and the sky beyond him is made to roil with blue-black thunderheads and the light of a hidden sun. I hold up my phone for Tanya, Jake, and the newest addition to our group, Tien, to consider. Tanya frowns, as if I’ve crossed the line somehow, and Jake scoffs, but Tien just nods. I can see she’s having a hard time investing tonight. I want to take her out in the hallway and tell her how this all works—what the last few months have meant to me—but the value of a therapeutic process cannot be conveyed in pep talks. On my first night I had three beers inside me, and the words from my doctor jangling loose in the background like sixteenth century coins. I kept wanting to cash them in. It was all I could think about—what I deserved for all this hardship I’d just been handed—when finally Delmore’s soft-timbered promptings proved too much. I could tell he didn’t get it.

“I have a tumor in my brain, you jackass.”

I said it like it was *their* fault.

My jaw trembled.

Jake paused with the dice in his hand, mid-throw. I remember like it was yesterday, his slender chest and shoulders, the sandy blond hair that lay easy across his forehead. He turned to reckon with me directly.

“I’m sorry,” he said.

I wanted to punch him.

Instead, a hairy silence grabbed me by the throat and I started spinning.

Everywhere I looked was the sun. I tumbled, blind, down a mountain.

“Ollie,” Jake said. He reached for my shoulder.

Next thing I was a carcass of twisted muscle and clutching breath, heaped on my chair like a broken bag of beans. Jake still had hold of me—he was saying something I was in no condition to hear—and Delmore was rubbing the back of his head. Tanya had both her hands flat on the table, a solitary tear rolling down her face.

Jesus Christ. What a performance.

I swiped my cheeks and pulled myself together. The crazy thing was I felt better. Renewed, somehow. You jump spread-eagled into the mouth of your own personal hell and live to tell about it, you rebound.

“You alright?” Jake asked.

I nodded. “Like I just went bobbing for apples.”

“Good,” he said. “Because in case you hadn’t noticed, I roll anything less than a twelve and I’m in Miss Powder Puff here’s Penitentiary, and I’m counting on *you* to get me out.”

“Me?”

“Look at your cards, Einstein. You put Jerry Falwell in a tent revival on the prison

lawn, you roll anything more than a two, and I'm sprung."

"You wish," Tanya said. "You keep forgetting I won that Intervention in History earlier. Protestantism no longer exists."

"Shit."

Tien hasn't gone over the edge yet, so she doesn't understand us—how we glide back and forth from irreverence to candor to bravado, how we implode and vanish, then reform anew—but I want her to understand, because I know it will help her, and because I know it will help *me*. Being understood is my crack cocaine. I shake apart without it.

Jake presents a black and white for consideration, from the Encyclopedia of Alabama, care of the Paul "Bear" Bryant Collection. Cornelius walks across the field, his weight on one foot as he picks up the other and stares into the camera. His helmet dangles from an arm the same diameter as my left leg before I got sick, and his jersey is tucked under his shoulder pads. We cannot help but contemplate this warrior's indomitable midriff, but the thing is his eyes. There is childhood in them, and manhood, the collapse of the wave function and the fickle injustice of being, while faces in the crowd behind him are stacked mute, like plums in a street cart. They've already faded, but Cornelius remains. His presence demands reflection: can you see what I am and what I am not? Can you see that I am all of this?

It's a tough call for me, but not for Tanya.

"Charlton Heston was an asshole," she says.

"Okay, but we're talking about Moses, not Heston. And might I remind you Cornelius lost five Super Bowls?"

Tanya holds out her hand for my Moses card. Our god for the night has spoken. I give it to her, she walks over to the kitchenette, lights the card on fire, and sets it in the sink to immolate. We have a moment of silence while the Commander wafts in and out of focus on the breeze-blown curtains.

I glance at Tien.

Our eyes meet and she looks away.

"It's very freeing," I want to say, "to ridicule convention. It didn't work for us, anyway, right? Didn't you do what you were told? You look like you did yoga every day and rode two hundred miles a week on your bike and drank fruit smoothies every morning. And this is what you got? A tumor in your womb?"

But I don't say it, because I know it wouldn't help, and because I know what she's wrestling with. We all do. We've got death inside us rooting around like a boar, creating confusion, ripping up syntax. In groups we can do what we can't do alone. We can look fate in the eye and call its bluff. Periodically, once a week at least, we need that.

"Tien," Jake says. "What happens next?"

I'm hoping for something brilliant from her, something she can offer that we cannot, knowing that sometimes just getting started is the key. I want her to pry the boards of denial loose from her throat and let something out, even if it squeaks.

"Maybe you should pull a card," I say.

Tanya nods. *Good call.*

This kills me. A mother of two with a face of ash, her lips nearly white, she has given the most pert little head snap you could ever wish to see. For a moment, we are joined. If the world could just see this—this one act of bravery—everything would change.

Tien looks at the cards. They appear to be lifeless, random even, but I know better.

They are our catalysts. You get stuck, you reach for the pile. There are two types in our game: the Powers and the Moments. Cornelius Bennett is a Power. Albert Einstein, Sissy Spacek, Mohammed. All Powers. A Moment, on the other hand, is a happenstance, a time or location where Powers might meet. We write them both down whenever we think of them and then bring them to Group. But Tien isn't in play here. She's the Commentator. The Color. Her job is to set the stage, to egg us on with uncanny suggestions. She just hasn't figured this out yet. She doesn't grasp the opportunity she has.

"Since you're the Color this round," Tanya says, "you don't have any Powers. You have to draw from the Moments."

Tien picks up the card.

She stares at it.

"It says a fucking Hallmark store."

As the author of that particular card, I'd certainly hoped for a better reception, but at least there's energy in her voice. She's bumped into a boundary and must make a choice.

Jake and I pivot to our task. My head is a sandstorm and my hips ache. If I eat something I'll throw up, but I fight it off. I offer myself instead to this manufactured glory—to our ritual perfection. I consider my cards. Crazy Horse is my last Warrior. I've also got three Women: Greta Garbo, Lisa Randall, and Calamity Jane, plus one Family Member, my sister Anna, who is inconvenienced by me one minute, scared for me in the next, and unbearable in the one after that. In an effort to atone for her last bout of being distant and unavailable, she signed me up for a mail-order Amazonian Super Food thing. Now she's disgusted with me for not slathering cupuaçu butter onto everything I eat. I *am* slathering it, of course. I even caulked a hole in the hall closet with the stuff. I just don't know if it's helping, so I haven't told her yet.

On the count of three Jake and I pass Tanya our cards.

It's the Archangel Gabriel and Lisa Randall.

Jake looks at me squint-eyed, intimating that he owns me. I offer stoic resolve in reply. While Jake is harnessing the devastating power of his will, Tanya explains the process to Tien, even though she already explained it once before. She's keeping in contact with her, woman to woman. "Okay," she says, "why do you think the Archangel Gabriel and Lisa Randall are in a Hallmark store?"

Good question.

After a brief pause, Tien blows her cheeks out like a puffer fish, which is disappointing. Never mind she continues to discount the genius of my Moment, the key is to keep the game moving.

"Who is Lisa Randall?" Tien asks.

"A string theorist from Harvard University," Jake says. "A foremost expositor of

extra dimensions and the dynamics of dark matter. Pretty good match for an archangel, I'd say."

Tien indicates that she understands, but it's hard to be certain she's really taken it on board. I offer the same sort of agreement to my father when he tells me the Republican Party has lost its way, and I'm hoping my agreement will make any further discussion on the matter moot. When the world has become an ambush of information, you must pick and choose. Some information you need, and some you don't, and if you're in treatment for a potentially lethal disease, it's a distinction you don't brook lightly. I'm not worried about the future of the Republican Party. I want to know why Lisa Randall and the Archangel Gabriel have converged on a retail establishment that turns a profit from selling sentiments we're too scared to say out loud, Vera Bradley handbags, and stuffed Doctor Strange dolls. I want to know how such an establishment exists at all.

The hardest part in all of this is not knowing. Not knowing how much pain you can actually tolerate. Not knowing if you'll be capable of saying what you really mean. Not knowing if you're going to die before it was really medically necessary. They're inventing new treatments all the time. It's like in the old days when they fought wars and two kings decided it was over, then six months later everybody doing the actual fighting got the message. Meanwhile, a shitload of people died. We don't want our deaths to be wasted like that. We summon vigilance, but it wears on us. It makes us too serious. That's why whoever invented this game decided that everyone was better off to assume they were going to die—just during the game—and act on that basis. We aim for maximum vulnerability and impromptu gusto. So if Tien doesn't say something soon—something we can work with, and not just some half-assed drib-drab because she's too afraid to get a little crazy with us—someone is going to call a Withholding Violation. Then it gets real for sure.

Tien clicks her tongue on the roof of her mouth like she can't think of anything to say. As if reading my mind, Jake pulls a blue silk g-string out of his back pocket and throws it on the table.

"Sweet Jesus," Tanya says. "What happened to the kerchiefs?"

Jake ignores her, and turns to look Tien in the eye, ushering us to the heart of our practice: honest, reckless disclosure. One at a time. "You're beautiful, Tien. I know that because when you walked in here tonight I got nervous, which I typically do around beautiful women. Even before I got sick. I got so faint when you walked across the room in those sculpted wood-block sandal things and set your purse down beside me, I forgot where I was for a minute. Then I remembered, and I hated myself for checking you out. That's not why we're here. Not why *I'm* here. What I want, is to know you, Tien: the person that you are. But in order for me to do that, you've got to say something." Jake starts coughing, which could spiral if he's not careful, and he makes his hands into fists. "And now you're here, I really hope you come back."

Tien gives the slightest of nods. Her eyes are wide and a little vacant. She doesn't know the protocol: is she supposed to say something with those panties laying there on the table?

"Griffin used to sit where you're sitting now," I say. "He was fifty-three years old

when he died. Evangelical. Couldn't stand it when my Harvey Milk defeated his Jesus in the first ever democratic elections held on the space colony Tiberius. Got *really* pissed when I had Jesus flung into a black hole. He flipped our table over and got so mad he shook. But the next week he came back, and after he puked into a bucket he asked if he could pray with us. We prayed every week after that. Like saints. If you ever want to hear the Twenty-Third Psalm, we're legit. Once I even tried to envision the Psalm backwards—inside-out I mean—and imagined I was a landscape of eternal fire with God walking straight through me. It was profound. I was going to tell Griffin about it, thinking it might cheer him up for six or seven seconds, but for reasons you'll surmise, I couldn't."

This time she holds my gaze. It's not the easiest one to hold because my left eye has gotten droopy—that's how the doctor figured out my brain is growing a fruit—but she doesn't waiver. "And you really are beautiful," I add.

Tanya punches me. "You asshole."

Before she begins, she has to adjust her Cindy Lauper wig. Each week it's something different with her. Bangles piled so far up her arm she can hardly lift it. A white fur coat, go-go boots and an afro. Once she wore this Betty Crocker outfit and brought us all pork chops. Tonight it's bangs and shimmering synthetic pink everywhere you look, but the truth is, I like her best without all that stuff.

"This morning," she says, "my older son Gavin—he's eight—he knew I was coming for treatment today, and when I came downstairs he was in the kitchen packing me a lunch. He's standing on a stool with a half pound of celery cut into little sticks, all in a row, filled with peanut butter mortar like he was raised a mason. Unbelievable, since his dad couldn't fix a pencil. Anyway, they're dotted with semi-sweet chocolate chips he dug out from the back of the cabinet that probably expired five years ago. He said he knew it just looked like lunch, but it was really something else. When I asked him what 'something else' was, he shrugged his shoulders and ran upstairs to get ready for school. What we do here, Tien, is like that."

Tien has the bit between her teeth now.

"My parents died in the Vietnam War," she says, "I never knew them. But my uncle worked for US intelligence from 1968 through 1975, so he was able to smuggle me out with him. I was two years old then. My cousins already lived here. They mostly raised me. They had to, because my Uncle kind of lost it there for a while. He—"

"Wait," Jake says. "You're in your forties?"

She smiles. "My uncle calls me his contraband. He lives up in Maine in a little cottage by the sea, and I send him money every month. He works on the boats some. They don't pay him much, but they let him tinker around. They say he brings them luck. He dangles a cigarette out of his mouth and fusses with the pulleys and wenches. Cusses at them in Vietnamese, which they love. Helps sometimes with the engines, or chases off seagulls. He rides his bike down the hill to the pier every morning, and walks it back up the hill in the afternoon. I bought him a moped once, but he gave it to this girl who works in one of the restaurants and walks down the highway all winter to work. I'm all he has. If something happens to me..."

"Nothing's going to happen to you," Jake spits.

He stares at the dice.

Behind us, the Commander's face wobbles on the swaying curtains.

"Next week I have surgery," Tien says. "Then I start chemo."

Tanya's smile has a hook in it. Her last round of chemo is next week. She knows what Tien doesn't yet. Also, her husband is having an affair, so that's in there too somewhere. She told us a couple weeks ago it's okay. He needs to feel alive and she can't give him that right now. "Larry's having a hard time," she said. "I want him to have at least one place full of light."

I want him to have an accident.

Tanya reaches for Tien's hand.

"My Uncle said he is going to ride his bike down the coast. He told me it's no more than twenty miles from one fish shanty to the next, and there's plenty of campgrounds. He wants to come and stay with me, but I don't think it will work. How can I take care of him during all of this? He'll be lost here in the city. And how can he ride his bike a hundred and fifty miles down the coast? It's just too much right now."

I wonder if she's for real. Her uncle is out there riding his bike through the darkness, probably as we speak, humming old war tunes and falling over sideways into potholes, and Tien isn't sure she can stand the inconvenience. Is she serious?

"I'll get him," I say. *Fuck it.* My eye starts shaking.

Tien rolls her lips under, into hiding, like she's just absorbed an insult from a dwarf and it wouldn't be polite to retaliate. There's something she's chosen not to say, and when I respond, it's to that.

"I can drive, for cryin' out loud. How do you think I got here tonight?"

She could make the drive, too, of course, much easier than I could, but she isn't thinking like that. She's thinking it would be awkward with her uncle on the couch when she walks into the kitchen in the morning, with him sitting outside her building all day smoking and chasing pigeons. Her life would get this kink in it and she'd have to explain about it to her neighbors. How he served in the war. Had some challenges in his life. How he's not what he seems, you know? Well I know the effort involved in driving a car for seven hours in one day—half of it with an old Vietnamese guy beside me who smells like fish and cheap cigarettes—will set me back about a week, but I also know it will be worth it. It's worth it already just to watch Tien compute whether or not she should be grateful, or just totally freaked out.

She bows her head slightly and blinks. I watch her blink several times in a row—her eyes unfocused—and I realize she might really be fighting in there. I glance over at Jake.

"Yeah," he says. "I'll ride along. Ollie gets lost as soon as he crosses the Tobin. But you don't have to worry, Tien. We'll bring him back. You got a description or something?"

Like we're going to go door to door until we find him.

"One condition," I say.

"Two conditions," Jake says.

"Right. Two conditions. The first is you have to tell us why the Archangel Gabriel and Lisa Randall are in this Hallmark store."

“And the second,” Jake says, “is that you have to ride along with us.”

There’s a flicker of warmth in her face, the faintest curl of her lips, and we see that victory is ours. Inside, we’re like kids along the fence, shaking and hooting and stomping. Pretty soon we’ll be arranging tours of the neighborhood for the uncle who smuggled her into this country, holding press conferences with the Governor. There’s no end to what this could be.

“I’m going, too,” Tanya says.

That makes five now.

I spin in my chair. “You think I drive an Escalade?”

Tanya sighs. She waves me off. *Whatever.*

“*What—?* Think about it.”

Her Cindy Lauper wig lists to one side. “We’ll figure it out, Ollie,” she says. “We’re probably not going, anyway.”

“Seriously, though. We’re going to sit three-wide in my Impreza? Put Uncle Wally on the roof rack? What?”

“Ollie, would you chill the fuck out?” Jake says.

I know I should stop myself, but I can’t. My wick these days is non-existent. One little thing and I’m on it like a pit bull. My mouth is half open, the words loaded in the chamber, when I see the pain in his eyes. Everywhere he turns, it’s the same. That haze hanging in the air, stalking him. We all know it.

What will I do when he’s gone? I wonder. Just be an asshole all the time?

I turn back around. “Tanya, I—“

She makes eye contact with me for a moment, then snorts as she turns to the rest of the room, as if she hates to tell me this kind of stuff directly. “It’s okay, Ollie. I forgot you drive such a shitty car. I shouldn’t have imposed like that.”

“Tanya—” I say. I’m groping now, desperate, trying to claw my way out. “We could just take two cars, right? Like a caravan. Why does it take me the rest of my life to figure the easy stuff out?”

No one answers. I need to find Tanya’s eyes. I need to tell her my favorite night was the one she didn’t wear a costume. It’s important.

But Tien pipes up. “I’ll rent one,” she says. “An Escalade. But only a white one.”

I’m slow this time, but Jake is on it. “I can work with that,” he says. “Ollie? A white Escalade?”

One thing I’ve learned: healing happens fast. It’s like cracks forming in glass, only in reverse. “So long as it has air-conditioning vents in the back,” I say. “And see if you can put flags on the front fenders, like the motorcades.”

Tanya giggles. “There’d be room for Gavin and Pete, too, then, wouldn’t there?” I smile and nod yes at her, and she looks me in the eye, and we both know we’ve been rescued by whatever it is that happens here that neither one of us can name, but I hold up a hand to slow us all down. I lean towards Tien and fold my hands together on the table. First thing’s first. “I’m waiting, Tien.”

She smiles. For real now. She has dimples when she smiles and all this time we never knew. I’m curious what else we don’t know, then I’m stunned when she reaches up with both hands and cracks her jaw or something. Puts her neck in alignment. It’s

unprecedented. She's her own personal chiropractor. "There's a key in the store somewhere," she says. "In the card racks, or the cash register maybe. Somewhere hidden. It's a key to the Universe. It fell out of Gabriel's pocket once when he was on a mission, and he wants it back, but because he lost it, it came into human view and Lisa doesn't know it's a key exactly, but it's something she's glimpsed and has started to understand. She wants to find it. And maybe neither one of them knows the other is there. They can't see each other because they're coming from opposite ends of existence. Opposite ends of history. And the question is: what if they find the key together somehow? What if their hands touch in precisely the moment when they both reach for it? What would happen?"

"Damn," Jake says. Pain etches lines across his face, then passes. He shoulders it, his burden. Hefts it into the void. "You really are beautiful, Tien."

I shake my head at his depravity. "Anything greater than a six and Lisa finds the key first," I say. "*Before* the angel." Nobody wants that—we want to see where Tien's vision takes us—but we have to play fair. The odds are against us.

Tanya takes a breath to center herself. This is for her boys.

Jake folds his arms and rests his head on them, on the table. "Six or less and they find that key together," he says.

I nod, pick up the dice and shake them around in my palm.

"Wait," Tien says. "Give those to me."

She takes them from my hand and cups them in her own, closes her eyes, then takes each cube one at a time and kisses them with her ruby red lips. I assume Jake is watching, but when I glance over his eyes are closed.

Tien hands them back to me.

I roll them around in my palm and release them onto the table. They scatter. Two one's and a three.

There's an intake of breath, but we knew it all along. Tanya offers a golf clap. "Jolly well good," she says. She leans over and whispers into Jake's ear.

Tien smiles again.

Behind her the air quiets, and the Commander settles into focus on the curtains. He's not moving at all now, not saying a word. Some piece of wisdom he's dropped is taking effect on the graduates, and he's giving it time to work, waiting for his audience to do the math. Then our eyes meet, mine and the Commander's, and something inside me rises. It's that power I can't control. I stand, my back straight as a post, and snap my hand to my brow, thumb tucked under my palm. I damn near collapse but keep myself steady.

Then Jake stands.

He's slower than me, hunched for a moment with one hand on the table, but he gets there. His right hand comes up to attention. Tanya closes her eyes and frowns—only it's not really a frown, it's something softer—while Tien turns to look over her shoulder. For a moment the Commander lingers. He gazes past us into the distance, into places we can only imagine. He is our leader, our talisman. He offers us passage.

Then the wind blows, the curtains skitter apart—Tien looks down at the dice—and when she looks back he is gone.

Yuletide Whiskey Joint

It's a melancholy holly
Christmas time,
an' a dude
on a copper-colored horn
blows mellow be-bop,
kinda blue,
pale snowflakes dancin'
down outta'
smoke sky gray
like cigarette haze
in this
yuletide whiskey joint.

Wind blows hard as
that damn horn
howlin' hot,
not be-ing
so much as
bop-ping
like his blues
got the news.

It's a melancholy holly
Christmas time,
an' a cool carol calls out
from the crowded stage
to Carla
at the bar,
who takes a long,
slow drag on
a skinny cigarette,
blows a thin
trail of smoke
from between
clenched teeth
an' goes green
like pale holly,
holds her swollen belly
with one hand,

clutches the
beat old bar
with the other,
an' Dale with the wobbly leg
whispers,
"Darlin', I wrote you a poem,
sorta' a Christmas thang...
In my poem
you have your own
baby Jesus,
but your kid's cool,
ya know,
blows dope and all...
an' all his Chrissmasss songs
are 'bout blunts an' shit!"

It's a melancholy holly
Christmas time,
an' Carla pats old Dale's
wobbly leg,
says,
"Wouldn't that be the shit!
me, the Mother of God...
Probly have a
devil child
instead"
an' the saxophone chokes
a tortured Silent Night
for pale snowflakes dancin'
down outta'
smoke sky gray
like the cigarette haze
in this
yuletide whiskey joint,
but it's a melancholy holly
Christmas time
for Dale,
who takes one last
longing look
at Carla,
then twists around on
the chrome an'
butt-worn barstool
to stare

way past the band an'
out the grimy picture window
at the Ghost of Christmas Past
standin' outside,
lookin' sorta thin,
suckin' on a doobie,
smoke risin' from its
neon glowin' tip
that shines like
blood red holly berries
in the
smoke gray night,
snowflakes dance 'round
Christmas Past
an' his stoner's beatified grin
as the old phantom nods
at Dale
peering through
cigarette haze
in this
yuletide whiskey joint,
an' it's a melancholy holly
Christmas time,
an' a dude
on a copper-colored horn
blows mellow be-bop,
kinda blue,
pale snowflakes dancin'
down outta'
smoke sky gray
like cigarette haze
in this
yuletide whiskey joint.

Sweat, Smog And Sugar Donuts

There's something about morning
in the rough-hands world
of western PA,
the worn flannel shirts,
faded collar blue denim,
rusted fender four by fours,
crackle-paint frame houses,
steel diners,
and the furious pounding
of an Aerosmith tune
blasting from a car radio
at furnace fire August 10 a.m.
outside shiny silver donut shop
in the shadow of Pittsburgh,
somewhere between the rivers,
where summer lush mountains
melt into the blackness of oil,
glowing open hearth crimson and
bright spitting neon yellow
sloshing massive black ladles,
thick melted ore flooded furnace
forging fresh slag
to rolling mills
and smooshed into
gun metal plates
turning rusty bronze
on summer flatbed railroad cars...
Another mill town morning
raspy-voiced fusillade
molten sonic fury
crashing like steel,
the clang of tempered plates dropping,
the smell of fire, sweat,
smog and sugar donuts.

Pizza and Chianti

1

Cruising past Saint Maria Goretti High School
at 9th and Moore,
9th Street,
where you can still buy fresh ravioli,
where Rocky Balboa characters
sport earrings and tattoos
under slick hair...

Down Moyamensing,
past Southwark,
where the kids of the projects
grew in the shadow
of monolithic high rises,
kids like Pinky and D-Head,
who escaped their concrete hell
each summer for two weeks
at Camp Linden,
met college kids
who staffed the bucolic
Chester County hideaway
on the Brandywine Creek,
where the pastoral
peace of the wood
was canoeing from Lenape Park
down miles of the creek
to land at Linden again.

A flash of memory,
of Moyamensing,
and Ronnie Ricci,
who lived,
a stone's throw
from the throngs of ebony faces
in the towering prisons
of Southwark,
who grew up
on Italian streets,
loved nature,
and taught the kids
to love animals,

who adopted the baby hawk
I found one day,
alone and destined to die
were it not for Ron,
and protected him,
nurtured him,
named him.
Remembering the daily joy
witnessing the wondrous
survival of the delicate
little predator,
who eventually
took majestic wing,
but perched each morning
at the peak of our cabin's shingled roof,
to call out to his beloved rescuers
a raucous hawk billed 'good morning!' and
'rise and shine!'
each dawn until late August,
when he flew off
to merge with the wood,
to live the destiny
of the wild and free.

Now I wonder how far
from Moyamensing has Ron flown,
have we all flown,
from that one idyllic
and desperate summer,
when so many abandoned birds met
to heal and grow,
then take flight back
into the wilds
of our concrete woods?

2

Then it's Passyunk Avenue to Mara's,
the best in Philly for generations,
the vibe of the old neighborhood,
real Italian food
in the same booths
where the poets,
lovers and friends

huddled together
to celebrate each
historic night's reading,
or birth poets' plots
to undermine normalcy,
to dig away at the banal,
words for shovels,
digging the very thing
they sought to subvert,
the timeless, changeless America
of Passyunk,
of Mara's,
of pizza
and chianti,
where Mario Lanza never died
and Sinatra lives forever.

Wartime And Everyday Blues

Scourin' the racks
at the D-A-V
for some thing
that says Blues
that sings
other times
vivid in
bottleneck steel string
guitar caterwaulin'
Mississipp,
found an ancient,
long-to-the-shins
olive drab double-breasted
heavy-as-1942
United States Army issue
stiff sandpaper collar,
tall-on-the-neck-of-a-GI-my-size
coat.

Slip my arms down sleeves
a dozen years older
than the flesh and bone going in,
gaze at the reflection
looking back from inside
a tall looking glass,
and wonder why
the perfect fit
feels so wrong,
why the same bold coat of
Hollywood World at War
flickering light movie star
hero posturing
monochrome pompadour
looks paltry beneath
haphazard chaos
of thin gray hair,
midriff bulging and
cheeks stretching
almost into jowls.

Pull on the collar and
sixty-two year old wool
meets fifty year old face and
scrub of dry sagebrush goatee,
mirror reflecting incongruity,
and ponder how this
thing of wartime
and heroes
just won't fit
my everyday blues.

When The Big Man Blows (for Ed)

When the Big Man blows,
relive those glory days
rockin' and rollin' in the back seat of
a beat up old Buick,
an Asbury Park tune,
a hemi-head
double-barrel bass guitar,
wild and innocent
shufflin' down E Street,
when Adam first raised a Caine
dancin' in the moonlight Rosie
low tide summer,
and the tilt-a-wheel
caught us by the collar
and we hung on
and went around and around,
when the Promised Land was
clandestine alleyways,
heavy breath moist
air-fogged window
gasp of a woman child
back street September sixteen,
rockin' back beat crashin'
fifty ton plates,
furious splooshing
ladles plunging into
liquid steel,
skinny silky skin
long-haired boy
trying to flee
the future,
the mill waiting
to turn velvet hands
to sand paper,
skin to leather,
the quick nervous
wrapping of limbs,
bumping of bellies,
then a house filled with silence
and forty years

of punching in and punching out,
of hot molten slag
like hell fire.

No Jersey Shore fantasy,
just the short ride
down Main Street
to the flats.

No sandy beach ocean,
just the Brandywine Creek.
No neon spinning carnival rides,
or stroll down summer boardwalks.

Just plod along under
smokestack steeples,
clock in and out forever,
but never forget summers
of desperate fumbling
on back street back seats,
of alleyway heat,
of the Big Man blowin' righteous
saxophone songs of
Sandy, and Rosie
and Crazy Davey,
while you sang a
song of yourself.

Open

Threshold me to new
Door wide my discoveries
My opens make fully
 woken and raised
 to leaf lucky song

And beyond my this happens
 with every latch that there is
Wonder with what just did
Or put look in the wings of what will come --
 a bluebird of handsome
 perched in new light

Mud Ajar

Love hay be daybreaks tossed
fill-full wheelbarrows allelu
Pull pushed soggy so meadows will
hallow be

Latches high raising low
to allelu
Beckon-found ditches cloud all
such mud ajars

For breakfast fields feast heaven-aches
These planks sing out
for allelu
Here where wings barn and stoop as if
rains lift each praise
by trill or rake

Invited

I am a procession
with candles that float
down aisles before parting
in two
just as forever reaches full high notes
Am a procession that carries an inlaid box of mystery forward
while names carved in stone
are murmuring
As much wax drips or beams the robes

And I am always a procession too
that depends on surrounding fields
with blackbirds knelt low
or fog offered up to bless the way

Yes

Am the step by step procession
towards any inside outside prayed
much as tapers at the windows flicker --
those sounds they make
of invitation

Ancient

What a pyramid this is –

my wife, my driveway, my nephew,
piled on top of my hat, my illness, my hobby,
my town, my clock, my husband, my lamp,
just above my fence and
the field out beyond,
then higher still
my lungs, my ego, my age, my cusp,
my tattoos, my grannies, my snacks

What a stack of rocks this has become --

age-old camels chewing straw
and with sand everywhere
in the foreground

Sign a Lease

When praise drifts by
dig a hole

When feet swell
wave hello

When the skies blue or bloom
go sweep the stoop

When gears slip
comb hair

When children grow tall
count to six.

The Smallest of Buds

Laura White Gray

She waters the bird of paradise, the succulents, the grasses, the honeysuckle, and the tenacious bougainville. The sky has been unforgiving, a glare of sun and blue, the light cerulean empty, pulsing, relentless. She waits for the clouds. Late July, and there has been no monsoon.

If she calculates, if she dare march back through the months in her head, she will remember a winter rain at the end of February—slow and deep and on the edge of snow. That night, her white breath gathered as she covered all the plants with sheets except for the lilies cut to stubble. They always come back more brilliant and grounded each spring.

Now, however, the pulse of blue and sun forces her and most of the plants to surrender. She turns her back to the unshaded part of the front yard and stands beneath the brown canopy of their single tree.

Later, she'll leave the hose on it, drip by drip, feeding its roots and hoping a deep breath will shudder its way up the trunk and bring green back to the leaves.

She watches the spray, controlling it with her thumb, watering the soil, not the foliage or flowers, knowing that when the sun shifts, droplets will magnify its power.

This is what she's doing, attention on her progress, when a car, with its soft sputter, pulls to the curb. She straightens, uncertain.

A man sends his voice across the yard. "You are a vision standing there."

She's confused. The hose comes with her as she turns, spray bursting across the gravel toward the curb and the voice.

"The light in your hair," he continues. "I had to stop."

A vision. She's never been called this. Never. Once, though, when she was nineteen, a man at work said if people took the time to notice her, they'd realize she was *something*. *Really something*. That was a lot of years ago.

She pushes back her bangs, embarrassed and giddy, both emotions rivaling for a larger place in her thoughts.

Behind her, the house is bursting with noise. The dogs scramble and bark at the living-room window as they vie for the better view of the front yard and the stranger. Their flat snouts and nails slide on the glass. Her husband yells at them from the dining room, a makeshift office where he makes and takes calls for his real-estate business. She imagines he's squeezing his phone and grimacing, a look all too familiar lately. At least it's the dogs, not her, not their daughters, derailing his work. Usually, the girls are fighting for control over Alexa or territory or even the new masks, patterned and colorful and seldom used. Other than nightly walks as the sun goes down and softens, their world stays small.

A vision.

She says thank you to the stranger. He smiles.

He's older than her, his beard gray, his hair brown. His girth is pleasantly thick from living but not swollen from unhappiness. She can see his wedding ring on his finger,

arm resting on the door, window open, and the other hand loosely cupping the steering wheel.

Suddenly he seems uncomfortable, as if realizing what he has done, stopping to compliment a woman he doesn't know in the heat of the day.

They both are surprised by the exchange. She cracks the silence with a nervous, "Have a nice day and be safe."

He nods, smile smaller, self-conscious. His window rolls up, and the car coasts from the curb into the street.

The air and earth have shifted off-kilter for her. The water still arcs and drops shy of the curb. She's left standing in the squat shade of the tree, a vision outside herself, larger than the small house and a stranger to what she is.

With a quick shake of her head, she shushes the dogs. They drop down from the sill and disappear. From the girls' bedroom, she can hear Billie Eilish's willowing angst, words absorbed by two layers of drywall. In a moment, she knows her husband will yell, "Turn it down, or off it goes."

She's not done. More plants wait, some with the smallest of buds. She starts to water again, back turned to the street, and in no hurry to abandon the green leaves to the burning sun.

Chimney Swifts

He did it by the storm cellar.
He filled a bucket with water, set it on the ground.
We couldn't think of one reason
to drown little black birds.
When my sister cried, he said it had to be done.

We said we would never grow up,
that we would rather die.
We did not watch so we never knew where he put
the bodies. But his hands became powerless to touch us.

She belonged to his world in some things
and we avoided her for it,
this strange woman whose hands
were always leaving her side to create space,
to move things about, to bring something warm to her breast.

The next morning he cooked bacon and eggs.
He stood motionless but for one arm
scrambling eggs while mother
with fluttering hands prepared a table.

Anomalies

...for everything flowers from within, of self-blessing;
though sometimes it is necessary
to reteach a thing its loveliness...

—Galway Kinnell

In the endless mall of Florida—a French patisserie run by French people.
Birds flit for crumbs.
Sherbet umbrellas beckon Town Cars of the aged to dock nearby.
Scents of hibiscus, sunset-hued blossoms of tropical vines blend with that of yeast,
humid asphalt, and Estée Lauder.
There is no one left to love.
Sometimes the evidence is overwhelming.
Sometimes I wish a gull will miss landing on its piling.
The real truth is that nothing mitigates.
Lonely birds call through a pink dusk.
If I could name the flora and fauna, I could cope with uncertainty.
I could walk outside to a gator in the pool.
Surprising things happen.
A double murderer was just arrested in Chicago where he'd lived as a poet for twenty
years.
I have to write so many words just to survive.
How many will it take to endure? To be happy?
The many places I've been make me like every place less.
I love the romantic excess of Spanish explorers: cities of gold, fountain of youth.
Here the old grow younger or think they do.
Who am I to shadow conquerors?
Sometimes a clean, well-lighted place is fine.
Sometimes nothing is enough.
Always that restlessness in the stalls.
The need to be touched.
The need to be reminded of my loveliness.
As if I am one of the few who are chosen.
Carlos Fuentes described Frida Kahlo with her jangling jewelry and intensity as her
own opera.
At times I am so tame I wonder if even the trained can prepare me for a return to the
wild.
At times the Leo in me sees the world as collateral.
A woman in a poem hopes in the growth of two dozen seeds.
The man thinks she expects too much: "To grow her a whole new life."
What can I expect here beside the ocean?
I do not ponder the damage done—a cul de sac of regret.
Loss.

Not everything happens for a reason.

I hear orchids grow in wet seclusion.

Stones are silent by choice.

Water builds only to lose itself.

Blue calms my tendency to wander, to see other sides.

Life, like anything, is a habit, can be found almost anywhere, can happen to anyone.

Sjögren's Syndrome

Anything
begins with water:
the mouth of the Euphrates,
villages, city-states, empires,
all our ideas
gathered, passed
down, one place,
another, now
and later.
And stays alive
as well: cell,
tributary, heart.

The body
a creek bed thirsty
for a few drops
to roll eyeballs around in,
to swallow so naturally
air is gourmet.
Surface leaves, twigs,
plants dried up like the privates,
their ache for this element.
The need not to always reach
deeper.

Going Back

Can a chair hand made from poplar make me whole?

We scour for the one-of-a-kind, crafted with the visionary's eye.
Spirits reach out in Lick Creek, Nauvoo, New Harmony.

At dusk, we join deer drawn by trust into open fields—
no moment more vulnerable than when one stares, waiting.

I scent out a psychic, who will know me as placeless, know me by smell.
None materializes as we dodge bats outside our cabin,
many versions at home in us.

We drive deeper into summer. Signs along dirt lanes:
Half Day Hollow, Quarry Heart, Clover Dell.
Time has gutted roads, our memory—that farmhouse on Inverness Road?
I join your search for a long-ago lover's home.
Each looks at me like the Tarantula Arms where Blanche lured her prey.

Between fields of corn and beans, it is easy to forget—
mind blank as the anonymous face of an Amish doll.
In this country, *now* and *then* are the same,
women so calm I want to lie down, sleep like a baby
before them, sit and work something with my hands,
eyes grazing prairie, until it and myself are perfect.

The White Hen Pantry's Last Green Pepper

She takes the waxy mass of green from its cool wire rack.

Outside, she throws the sack into the parking lot
where it dances on the hot concrete.

She tosses her find into sunlight,
squeezes it with pulsing rhythm,

feels its life return,
warm and beating
in her hand.

In the kitchen she opens drawers,
gazes at bags
folded neatly into one another.

She slices it,
licks the rough inside
of one quarter
and begins.

Sometime a Bunny is Only...

—The writer Sabra Embury has spent a decade collecting 10-second drawings of rabbits from some of the most esteemed names in literature (from an article in *The New York Times*).

It begins as a parlor game: asking writers to draw bunnies,
pass them around to see if guests can guess who drew which one

like hiring a psychic or palm reader only letting
those present think they have psychological insight to the writers/

Later she asks writers at book signings to take ten seconds
to draw a bunny alongside their autograph/

Of course, Atwood takes the prize with her
female rabbit holding up a carrot like a feminist torch/

But there are other runners-up like Joy Williams's dog
chasing a barely perceptible creature (the work of art?)/

(perhaps the amount of time a writer has to capture *le bon mot*)
How psychoanalytical should we get with something so silly?

If anything is really silly (ask the psychotherapist)/
Note Shteyngart's hare with ears like Einstein's hair on

a man's body electrified after a psychotic break (has he seen a rabbit?)/
Inside *House of Leaves* nearly a full page of ears

The rest scribbles of swirls: a body, a tail, a totally separate nose/
Lethem's chubby bunny balanced, pleased and sated

(like the reader after experiencing *Motherless Brooklyn*?)/
David Lynch at first plays it safe: tall, thin ears, but then

some other creature's long nose, a thick un-rabbit like tail,
the whole thing standing at attention: (alert as his imagination?)

Indochine

After French film starring Catherine Deneuve

I should have fled but nothing existed but him, Eliane thinks.

They make love in the back of a chauffeured car, in her childhood home in Saigon, Jean-Baptiste stifled by this small arrangement, his posting:

I want to discover the world.

As funeral boats bob in thick mist and fog, Eliane holds Camille's hand, the Asian girl she will raise on her rubber plantation.

Though French, Eliane says, *I am Asian*, calls her Indochine workers "coolies."

Camille, sheltered by Eliane from native unrest, from larger ideas, from love, is rescued by Jean-Baptiste from a shooting on the street, and sees him as her handsome knight in naval uniform.

If I don't marry him I'll die.

She takes off alone to Dragon Island where he's been banished,

walks for weeks to the sea, to where coolies are traded as slaves for the empire.

Eliane thinks: *Now she has Indochine inside her.*

Camille shoots a French officer and she and Jean-Baptiste flee.

He hears Eliane's voice: *You won't be able to resist her. She's irresistible.*

Their infant son in tow, they escape authorities for a time.

Eliane, a part of herself now, lies on flat beds in opium dens like a commoner.

Camille's matchmaker is devout and practical:

I'll never understand French peoples' love stories...

Just like our war stories.

Camille, sent to prison, becomes a communist destined to help form a free Vietnam.

Eliane gets custody of their son, holds him tight.

Jean-Baptiste visits Eliane before his court martial,

spends the night in her family's old home, tiny Etienne beside him.

The Popular Front frees all political prisoners.

Eliane is there among the horde, but the reunion with her daughter is not as she expected.

Camille asks about the child but her own pain is too great.

It's too late, Maman. I have no past. I've forgotten everything.

Your Indochine is no more. It's dead.

Cape Cod Evening

—Edward Hopper

I enter this evening to join them.
The dog, alert to the song of a whippoorwill,
still in the strange, long, blonde grass
extending into a stand of pines.
The grass rubs my shins and calves
as I greet the animated collie who twirls around twice
and stretches out its front legs in downward dog.
I pet it vigorously speaking with assurance.
Behind us rises a solid house—
window shades perfectly aligned, white lace curtains still.
A man in a white tee shirt sits on the one-step stoop,
and off to his side stands a stiff, thick-set, blonde woman,
arms crossed in tenseness shutting out
the evening sounds, their pet, the man close by.
She will stand there, I realize, as grass grows up her green dress.
The man stares down at something I can't make out.
I say hello to both and get no response,
saunter to join the strange, blue pines alive with birdsong.

What a Difference a Day

The one who got away returns at times amid the routine because today is not enough. It has to be enough or why go on? Sometimes I think of the one day of Mrs. Dalloway's story. The worry over the flowers, her thoughts flowing like converging rivers. The quotidian is the backbone of any tale. Any day. That's why the element of surprise is so necessary. That's why an orchestra of thunderstorms matters. My rituals vary little. I try to be mindful and make any task about being present in the here and now. Washing dishes can be a form of meditation. But it is not so easy to trudge along against the current of the ordinary, the expected. Daydreams are real and let me wander anonymous fields or hear the waterfall we walked three miles to see. I try to believe I'm better than laundry day self. Wasn't string theory supposed to explain all this? Where is the furious ecstasy, the dance of the dervish, the tune I can fit in my pocket? Where is the avalanche of affection I was expecting? Instead there is cleaning the cat's water bowl, recycling, signing in at the doctor's. A novel's gathering storm—a daily frequency I tune to as the day is stuck on one playlist like the long talks of lovers that lead everywhere but nowhere, turn back in on themselves and arrive where they began, a plot line with a single resolution.

What to Do with Entirely?

—with fragments from Sylvia Plath's "The Colossus"

No sense looking for an oracle here/
A voice says look at the other:
the hydrangea, blue-blush like a new color
inside me born through my O-shaped mouth/
Disaster blooms everywhere and I'm no wiser/

My soul bruised: the little children of Syria gassed
takes away your heart that sings with the daily joys
I hoard when I should be mourning/
Kissing your worried brow
hoping it will all clear if we learn

a new way to see with our eyes/
You lost in yourself, your own Roman Forum
we search for one another in a forest of cypress/
What to do with entirely?
A world of woe littered around us

to the horizon-line: the dead Crimeans
terrorized Parisians
the runners the Russians the ruin/
But here before me an azalea plum-colored,
freshly ground Lavazza, sun through my east windows

taste of honey-dipped brioche on my tongue/
The world as it is only a shadow
my body an invisible keel
taking me to yet another landing/
It is not right when a random bomb is
waiting to go off, singing.

The Little Death Scene

The propelled lead breeches
as if a hot line of type
too long for the matrix;
the old lingo's suddenly
relevant again, like a punch
to the gut that makes
the maze of human anatomy
quickly apparent after
years of taking it for granted.
The circulatory system
is as majestic as the reach
of an octopus, a relentless
assertion of its primacy
producing ever more
disembodied slickness.
The molten state practically
revealed, like the literary
education of a certain
journalist: pound, return,
rip, and read, over the air
or into the chest, to hear
whether it sounds the same,
what limbs and digits otherwise
cannot accomplish. Next,
cue the hallucinations
of the Jordanian desert:
rose sandstone giving rise
to a lost city embedded
beyond visas and religion,
a whisper you might make
of your own volition, an
adventure I wanted,
a commitment.

Lady Lazarus, Gaslighted

When she said her skin was lit
from within, people thought she meant
by violence, like the herding of cattle
as their mouths turned over
their sweet repasts; or the scuttling
of childhoods into improvised
fortresses topped with broken glass;
or the can-do know-how it takes
for a massive technological achievement
with searchlights and music
and stadiums filled with radical congregants;
anything but the simple act
of harvesting what stands ready
in walls and deep-sea cables,
or within the inert capabilities
of our surroundings, heated,
then cooled in a tense isolation,
for the advertisement of pleasures
rather than purposes,

yet now we know through a disturbance
of gases; from the hardening
of oil poured over gravel;
through the cutting of rock
and the market for black diamonds,
that she was saying nothing like that.
Instead, she engaged in an act
of finger pointing; of declaring
she had become a beacon to her people
in both the abstract and the particular;
reciting the names of those
whose limbs might be
similarly alighted but for
the adulteration of
their natural elements.

In Re: My Gaslit Fortune

In the layer before
the blood begins,
the lies live
in reserve,
alert and pulsing
as if amphibians,
their testimony attuned
to the sun and movements
of her estrangements,
masses that have escaped and yet
remain shackled to her influence.
Shut off in the cold dawn
of morning, awake in a succulent
night that cannot be enforced
since strength is always relative.
On-off, either-or: given these choices
it's best to remain static
until you can be absolved
by what you bear,
and avoid transparency.
Your visage wistful, perhaps nostalgic,
or naked as where the drunks and addicts
go to brave sandstorms,
thinking the sharpening
of their constituents
is purifying. You might come
to believe, like them, you are
blameless, but I am not
a mirror. After the scratches,
the failed sowing
and separation,
my pieces can
still see everything.

Correcting My Enemy

No, it was not an apple the lady
threatened, but a fruit without flesh,

all membrane and seed, disguised
as a smile, colored like lips in their

most voluptuous peak, packaged
in skin opening at the top, as if a

cowlick on a young boy's crown,
the nemesis of the neighborhood

and to an old man who wants only
to read, and fade into a tidy background.

Yet how could you know, oblivious
as you are to other people's details,

how we came to deserve pain in
childbirth, or lose our shirts to the first

president of the United States who
seized on to our regrets, because

it was never God who asked,
though He likes to claim astonishment

at the creations He's accused
of abandoning. So, He let it come

to pass that my grandfather
should venture into a New World,

be presented with a black edible
in rigid skin, told it was a more

daring cousin to those he knew
of sweet and bruised origins, and he

bit clear through the green meat
until his teeth broke on the pit,

bone and gums sudden implements
of fire, flint and kindling; he'd carry

these qualities from his jaw to
his tongue through the rest of his

life, never stopping to brag about
his other disaffections.

The Seagulls After Lunch **After Carrie Fountain's "The Jungle"**

The playground
depleted of its players,

the birds emerged
to feast on pillars

of discards from
another scavenger class,

those not raised by wolves
but regularly accused

of such parentage, though
who gets to choose their own

and who is happy with
the choice they make,

the woefully unprepared
and stubborn, lame at anticipating

changes in shoe sizes,
sexual urges, the width

of collars, verdicts from
standardized testing.

I remember thinking then
as I was a solid four foot eleven

that like is forever attracted
to what it knows best; the ugly

are cursed with their own
kind, and I had been barbarously

sentenced: I had been called
a dog at home, a pig, a witch.

At lunch I tore into paper and plastic,
unleashed fats, simple sugars,

complex starches, savagely depositing
my largess for my ancestors,

the garbage eaters, last in a cycle, a chain,
an order of wings and beaks and hungers

meant to be herded into manageable
portions, though only for as long before

they could be purged from the setting
that birthed them, onto a defeated patch

of green, what survived when the building
beside it died, as the earth's crust rolled,

rolled and shook like a set of preening
feathers until that structure was rendered

useless as a sated flea, a poisoned tick,
a set of windows we'd never look through

a hollowness that would collapse
as soon as we touched it.

How to Get Rid of Apartment Fever

Elise Tegegne

You will need a bike. Any bike will do. When you wake up, you will open a window in nearly every room in the house, and air freshly loosed from winter's binding will curl in through the open cracks, and your body, dormant these past five months, will breathe the scent of spring and rally for motion. Bike ride.

Voices will say, "That old Schwinn, bits of cobwebs in the spokes, metallic sky-blue paint scuffed and pitted, the garage-sale buy? The tread on the tires is shaved to a rubber nub, and you will have to drag your feet against the concrete at stop signs because the brakes are more like slow-downs. You will be late to work. You will ruin the shower you just took. You will be hit by a bus riding along the main thoroughfare, the four lanes of tense commuters."

Ignore them. Tell them this. Tell them you will buy tires and breaks this weekend. Tell them you will have enough time if you stop this too much thinking, and do. Tell them you have just returned home from Ethiopia. Tell them you haven't seen spring in four years (Addis Abeba has only two seasons.), and you've missed it. Tell them showers are for ruining and life is by nature dangerous and this nexus of time and space, this now, this beautiful morning is once in a lifetime and will never be again.

Now, your adrenaline sparks bright in your bones like pistons, because you've decided this morning will be an adventure. You will bike to the school three miles away where you teach. Your determination jitters as you sort through stamps and screwdriver tips and chalk in the drawer beside the stove to find the chain-link dog collar you've made into a bike-lock, a heft you haven't felt since winter. Rust then reds your fingers as you grab the air pump your father gave you. You think of him as you twist off the caps and adjust the nozzle and press breath into the worn inner tubes. Your father refurbishes old Schwinns as a hobby and tells you stories of his bike rides to work. You were away so long and will leave again, but are happy now that you can tell him about it this Sunday, Easter.

After breakfast, you adjust your laptop and bag on your back, double check you've packed your lunch, your keys, your book. You wheel your bicycle from the spare room, through the living room and the little entryway, out the door. With a determined huff, you heave the bike on your shoulders and walk down the three flights of stairs. Already, the blood jostles in your veins, and you feel strong. You squeeze through the front entrance—and are off. It feels somehow liberating to be carless, to be so in the air that unexpectedly chills your skin, so next to it, breathing it firsthand so to speak. You rejoice in your autonomy from the clumsy accoutrements of this age. Your ability to move forward is found in your own muscles. You feel more in control of motion, more one with motion itself.

Take the side roads as much as you can. Sidewalks are best, even if the cracks jilt. You will be surprised how much you notice from the seat of a bicycle. You are not seeing life fast-whipped or through the veil of windows. There is nothing between you and this day. You notice how the historic brick homes and apartments feel so immediate, almost as if you are trespassing on private property. You notice the puffs of

dandelion in the grass, red buds purpling trees, the names of things, like the apartments called “charmed.” You notice a man walking into a school and imagine people inside saying, there goes “Mr. So-and-So,” as he enters his world, that space where, for this day, he belongs.

Further down as the road curves, the homes expand with brick terraces, landscaped gardens, wide porches, picture windows: the homes of the wealthy who breathed a hundred years ago. You wonder how in your car you never saw all this frothing life. The trees petaled in pale green or bending under blossoms. A patch of violets. The warming wind cool over the curves of your face. When the honeysuckle hedges umbrella over the sidewalk and you rush through the leafy tunnel, down slowly, faster, thrilled with the boon of gentle gravity.

You will pass from the side streets back onto the main one, tumultuous with movement, and riding your bike you feel suddenly a part of this pulsed and pulsing city, a sudden and ephemeral belonging. Over the bridge, you pause and watch the water rushing like the traffic in the street. You then curve back to the quiet side streets lined in trees and sidewalks and homes for whom the word “quaint” was coined, trimmed city homes, new houses in the shapes of old ones. You see a lady walking her dog, then another cyclist in a white blouse riding to work, and you feel a sense of camaraderie. We are biking together, enjoying this day. You can smell flowers opening their perfumes quickly fading. Lilac, perhaps, or hyacinth? Memories of spring and crabapple-petal snows and running bare toes over cold mud. You arrive at school, almost surprised it is there. And you rejoice that you tasted this offered joy, this once-in-a-universe spring morning, this gift.

SADHU

He goes about in just a loin-cloth,
chest smeared with ash.
The locals call him a sadhu.
He lives in a cave
and survives on scroungings.

Some days, he ventures down
from the jungle-covered hills,
through mustard, maize and wheat fields,
to the bazaar,
wooden begging bowl in one hand,
staff in the other.
He nudges his way gently through
the merchants, usurers,
and slabs of squabbling chickens.
People avoid him
the same way his thin, stumbling frame
dodges carts and dogs.

In the hot, dry afternoon,
he sits on a rock
at the edge of the dusty business district,
prays loudly, words incessant and clear
despite his rotting teeth.

But at the edge of his voice
is another voice.
It's soft but carries farther,
beyond the dry sparse roads
to the distant mountains,
where it resonates like his gods
speaking back to him,

He's how the
rest of the people would be
if they were nothing more
than their religion.
But they put on their shirts and trousers,
their blouses, their dresses.
They beg silently and for their own sakes.
They leave their bowls at home.

A DAUGHTER'S DANCE

So Lena, having mastered the movements,
twenty times at least before the mirror,
took on the neighbor's boy, Luke,
in the backyard, that twilight.

It was one of those days
when boombox music flooded the yard
and a carpet of grass became dance floor
as the sun set behind the houses.

We watched from the window,
that jerky flurry of arms and legs,
when Lena and Luke traded mad steps
and bizarre arm twists

that mostly went with the music
but sometimes totally defied it,
while she sang loud and out of tune
and Luke did his best to not burst out laughing.

But Lena just thought it was time to grow up a little
and Luke had always been fond of her
and dammit, if he didn't lean forward
during one particular riotous, convoluted spiral

and kiss her on the right cheek.
Stunned as she was, Lena kept on dancing
all the way to the end of the song,
and into the oncoming darkness.

Then she ran inside, out of breath but saying nothing.
Luke stood there for a moment,
a dazed look on his face,
before heading home without a word.

All that noise, all those wild acrobatic dance steps,
and the end result was total separation and silence.
At least that's what we heard, that's what we saw.
They had their ways of knowing different.

THE WOMAN WITH A TALE TO TELL

she was one of those,
you know,
as a child,
and maybe it was
her father
or her uncle
and could be she
doesn't even remember
and maybe with a
thing like that,
you can't remember
and anyway, she's
in this bar,
and she's telling
everybody her story
like it's her only story
and though you can't
believe the details
because they keep changing,
her eyes tell you
some of it is right,
the pain is right,
and she's drunk all right,
almost falling into her whiskey,
and maybe she's had
more than she should
and maybe,
if you're her,
more than she should
just gets her started

Helen was an old woman
in the true meaning of the word.
She had lived in a whole other time
and was merely spectator to this one.
She was as devout as any old world Catholic
and yet the only section of the newspaper she ever read
was the astrology column.
And she believed in spirits...
spirits of the house, of the field, of the forest,
and she knew the spells
that drove away the evil ones.
She spoke of the old neighbor with the devil's eye,
nostalgically, despite the crops his droughts destroyed,
the fires, the sicknesses, the stillborn babies.
In her mind, not even the devil
had the devil's eye these days.
But every Sunday she still hobbled her way to church.
And ate her consecrated salt on Holy Thursday.

She picked mushrooms,
slowly, deliberately,
always a memory to go with each one
plucked and dropped into her pocket
She was picking the mushrooms of long ago,
the ones that only grew if no man looked upon them.

Her diet was simple.
Some lamb. Chicken.
Plain vegetables, no artichokes, no cauliflower,
and, of course, her favored mushrooms.
She bit into the years as much as into their soft gray flesh.
And, always, the blood and skin of Christ on Sundays.

She only went to school six years
and rode there five miles on a horse.
Despite her plain looks, she was married at seventeen.
And, by the age of twenty-three, she loved her husband.
She nursed him through his dying years
as faithfully as through his living ones.
She didn't complain

She had once played piano
but arthritic fingers killed the music in her.
And she sang, though her voice died
when her audience did.
My mother says it was a privilege for me to have known her.
Why read about the past in books, she said,
when you can hear it from the tongue.

Helen was the last of her generation,
sat patiently on the outskirts of my own.
When she spoke at all in her last days,
it was to pass onto me the secrets of mushrooms.
That's why I gather in fields so long ago.
That's why I close my eyes
to pick the ones no man has looked upon.

Losing It (The First Time)

Hurt. Like being torn in half
one part you hardly knew
who somehow saw this differently
a soft touch—caress, even fireworks

but that part falls off fast,
leaving one part looking up
past his puffed, panting face
a fake thatched roof poked

through with shafts of summer
light, the smells and sounds of
the San Dimas waterpark, friends
he hired, along with you, a deal

measured out in a hand's width
pressed into your thighs, marks
beneath the skin and meat, bruises
where your spine hit the dirt floor.

Sixteen learning how to say yes
with your eyes closed, your mouth
full, the glints of dust sparkling
behind his shoulders, unblinking eyes

that bore into you at the touch
of every man since, every sticky
summer breeze, chlorine, friends
laughing, every new yes. Hurts.

Losing It (The Next Time)

Was the first time I roleplayed. The first time I said yes
and meant it, I was back in the Air Force and he was Captain,
“I need to talk to you, airman”

A white-water rafting trip with my boys, the ones we have
who teach you how to be, sometimes flank you
on the dancefloor, sometimes bring a friend

They’d told all about you, twenty-three-year-old “virgin”
fresh out of Don’t Ask Don’t Tell, still smarting
from what you’d lost—and what you wanted to

He was happy to oblige, even if it meant the phone calls,
the conviction that *this* was love, the teenage drama
we mostly fumble through late into our twenties

“Kiss me here. Now here,” he was the Captain, but gentle
as if he knew what none of them knew then,
that he was pressing a mine field

Against his stomach, “Here,” a button-fly, “Here,”
Somewhere there’s a twenty-minute voice mail, a twenty-
something thirsty for more, “Here.”

More. A guy outside of Cherry Bomb. More. An old friend
from high school, curious. More. Half a dozen coworkers.
More. You get your goddamn fill. You don’t feel shame.

No more.

Brother Oliver's Walnut Cookies

His pristine Cadillac was his first love,
a business precursor to Uber
carting rich, distracted businessmen
from airport to hotel and back again,
all the while sharing the Good News,
the name he'd give his church

Straight from the East Coast
sporting a Southern accent, "Brother,"
he'd tell the men frantic with beepers,
"There's a peace that transcends all
of this, all of your troubles," but
they'd raise the dark window

Between them, and he'd just pray right
there for them, "Lord, they're so hungry
but turn away from the feast"—*Come
and dine, the Master calleth, come and dine!*
We sang, the six-person choir culled
from the starved poor families

He found in Carmelitos, an impressive
Oz, mustache and elixir, a way to spend
Sundays anywhere but in the hood,
maybe getting closer to God, too,
"This is the good news, flock, that Jesus
is planting us right here!"

In an airport hotel room, rented for two
hours, a spa-size bathtub baptismal,
cigarette burns on the triangle patterned
curtains, free pitchers of ice water,
a recycled tin of Brother Oliver's
"famous" walnut cookies

Cults and cookies go hand-in-hand,
both so simple to pull together, easy
to lose track of time, of souls, burn 'em up,
re-explain your motivations, how God
called you all to lick the spoon,
only you, special, chosen you—

“The secret,” Brother Oliver told us, full of
the Holy Ghost, “is to use only the best
butter, and that’s not cheap” so Mom
gave more than anyone, her big boys
gobbling up his cookies and his gospel,
a father figure she didn’t have to fuck.

The Allegory of Porn

Can we just begin by admitting that we are all here to get off?

I suppose we came for the experience, for the sharing of ideas and the broadening of our horizons—and I don't discredit these things, nor do I think that they are not present

but really, we are here to get off.

And maybe that doesn't jive well with you, maybe there's a tastelessness about it, so let me summon up my Plato and break it down like this:

Imagine that there is a man—or perhaps this woman—*Do you see him? Do you see her?*

He feels that he is alone in his feelings, in his desires, in his angst and regret, in his

“understanding of the world”—*Does this sound familiar?*—

and he's kinda just keeping his eyes open and his ears open and his mouth shut because, after all, the best way to attract others like you is to not let them know you are there.

So he never really connects,

and now he's here, *talking*, where he knows, he *knows* there is at least a surface connection—coffee & conversation, the soft-core stuff he used to like

the shit about ex-boyfriends and dead parents and those high school days (and we all kinda love that shit like we love soft core because it reminds us that at one time we believed in the preludes and the post coital—*once* we would pay attention to the story and not fast-forward to the fucking).

But I Love You

Which was true. So true you knew. I did not look up or at you. “That should win.” Your call on two losers, too blind to see what that impotent incantation does and does not possess, what it can and cannot do, even when we try.

Those big beagle eyes seemed to say, looking back at me walking out and away from you. What inter-species dialogue could tell you what we cannot say to our own? That word could not heal you or pay the vet to try.

Your every action up to then, raising me had shown—of course that was true. Still, “Bye, Baby,” I heard but didn’t look back or at you. Five years of phone calls and promises. The funeral I couldn’t make, even though I tried.

What can I tell you now that I have lost you forever except that, in the end, when I wake up in the dark, put on a pot of tea, hear the distant spell, recognize the magic is not in it, but in our resolve to do it, or try and try and try.

Shadow Dancing

Swinging open the saloon doors, real wood
warm and dank to the touch, held and pushed
by dozens of sweaty palms, wet backhands
gripping bottle necks, bare shoulders nudging
against the grain, a little patch of country

heaven in a hole-in-the-wall off Broadway
where I paced and shivered from the ocean breeze
ten minutes convincing myself to step in,
follow those brave and daring stares, men twice
my age, one beer on his lips bear smooching

two-day stubble into my cheek, “Come inside
where it’s warm, baby” nodding to his partner
how adorable *this one* was, the starched shirt,
Guess jeans I shared with my best girlfriends,
fifteen dollars, a bus card, and a fake ID

stuffed into my back pocket shielding my ass
from several friendly hands, still exhilarating
to be this naughty, nasty even—offer myself
to whatever may come on the other side
where the red walls welcome those in the cold

What the hell, the doorman, a drag king, didn’t even
check my ID, she just faked a drawl and said, “You
have fun now, sweetheart” because she knew us,
Twinkie teens who took three busses from downtown,
figured we were going to hell anyway—

Except it wasn’t. Up tempo, dancer behind dancer,
couples swaying in time, each arm moving in unison,
a shadow of one another, a shadow of the caustic
acceptance that this shadow life was without
romance. A little piece of heaven to ward off

every time I’ve doubted its existence.

in which the book takes it back

I'm lying on the carpet. The cat door clicks and one of the cat's back feet lowers to the floor, the rest of it follows, and it steps softly through the room, pausing over me to rub a cheek against a corner of my front cover. Sniffs. Then disappears under the bed. Let a moment pass. Then I get a something ... an urge. I stand up, wobble. With a thump I kick from the floor to the bed, landing on your hip, spread open, spine up. Your breathing changes. You stir, rise up only slightly conscious, and stack the pillows. You lie back down, propped now. Sleep comes back over you, you blink awake, then sleep. Finally, blinking furiously, you yawn. Now you seem a little more with it. Not much, true. You open your hands so I rise into your hands. Can you really see me?

You rub your eyes, slide me close. The light of the lamp, yellowed by its dusty shade, makes my page look old, like parchment. Shouldn't you read by a brighter light? Didn't your mother tell you you would ruin your eyes reading in light like this?

I can see by the way your eyes move that you are returning something to me, words I didn't know you had. Aren't they my words? But you seem to know them already, and you are interested now in my seeing you are done with them. OK. I don't know where you found them but I take them back. For pages you do this, the lefthand page following your fingers as they wave it to the right. One finger goes to your mouth and you place on your tongue a dampness you've claimed from me. You blink again, your eyes a bit brighter, more focused, more ready.

You don't do this all that long, a few pages. Then, with a relaxed anticipation you remove one hand from me and I close up. I go back to the pile by the lamp where I spend my days. The bedcovers jump to your beckon but you toss them aside. Out of the bed you climb and the covers leap again to you as eagerly as I remember leaping to you. At the time I didn't know I was to get something from you but now that I have it I know you have more to give, that tomorrow you will return to me more of what you know of me. You will keep giving what you have of me until you are done, until you have removed from your mind every thought related to anything I've ever said. You will forget my arguments, forget the rhythm of my prose. For awhile you will have a sense that you might want to read me but that, too, will pass.

The lamp goes out and you become the room's most important shadow, and you step, heel first, toward the diffuse moonlight, toward the bathroom, watching us as you leave, we who think we are hidden in darkness. Yet you leave as though you know exactly where we are and you want us to be certain you know. Bed, cold lamp, the table, the cat under the bed. A light goes on in the bathroom and you begin brushing your teeth.

in which the book gets complacent

I exist.

I have been planning to say that for some time. I don't really have a follow up. I just thought I ought to say it. Maybe that's all then. No need to go on and on. It was something I needed to have said. Not something I gotta elaborate.

It was something I needed to say for myself, to myself. You, Me, Exist.

Voila! I exist!

Isn't that nice? It is, exceedingly. Full on niceness. I could get comfy cozy. Just existing. Ah. Existing in presence.

Now. Any time I need to know if I exist I can check back here. I've declared it. It's fact, not fiction. It's what is, not what might be, not what might have been, not potential, promise or ambition.

Whew.

What a load off my mind. Wishing yourself up you have doubts. You know, you wonder what you're going to be. It's when you're yet NOT. Now that I AM I am, that's it. No worries.

I exist.

Thought I'd throw that in there. One more time.

We could contemplate what existing means. But let's not. Let's decide I've made a statement absent any ambiguity. Anyone who comes upon it will have no uncertainty concerning it. Let's agree that once one says one exists the matter is settled. Any argument about one's existing or the meaning of "exist" would be the sheerest nonsense – at best – the sort of silly childish fun that one can roll one's eyes at in a grown-up, experience-has-taught-me-better sort of way. Any words gathered to make an argument would look as odd as a randomly drawn Chinese character roped by Arabic behind a fence of Portuguese synonyms for saccharine. Aesthetically interesting? Maybe. But not an argument!

When did you know? When did you know you existed? Does a cat know it exists? Does an elephant? What about a monk or a nun? Does God have consciousness about his existence or is saying, "God believes he exists," such a redundancy one might as well say, "God believes in God" or "Existing has no doubt it exists"? Oops. That G word. Big no no. I should not have said it. The G word is off limits. It is not allowed!

And while we're talking about what's allowed I'll have you know that you have no permission to say anything as insulting or absurd as, "Book! Ha! You don't exist, Book!"

You don't exist at all!" You will be in trouble if you say such a thing as that. I will have to ban you from me. I will have to say, "You must now close me up because I cannot trust you to see me. You will utter manifest untruths just to be a pest. Go away." Yet here I find myself imagining you being so disloyal. I cannot trust my own imagination! It seems to run away with me, dragging me off to unpleasant locales. Next I will be banging on doors of houses weeping and no one will open those doors and I will stumble over the cobbles, fall to my knees and, sobbing, beat my fists against the stone until I can feel them no more; then I will collapse in a quivering heap which will stop quivering only when a carriage runs over it and leaves the impress of its wheel across my spine.

Damn imagination. What happened to comfy cozy? I swear. It's as easy to imagine myself lovingly paged through by a pretty page in the cloakroom, isn't it? What? Isn't it?

Having settled the existence matter, I'll have to figure out how to rein in my emotions, which seem to exist, too. And my imagination, which reasserts itself whenever I think it's conceded the terrain. I build my castle on the rational. I exist. I make sense. I stand on the shelf a thing, a solid incontrovertible thing. Here I am! Standing and standing. Nobody even has to see me, nobody even has to know I'm there. I am. I could stand here forever and exist.

in which the book talks about your book

Everybody has a book in 'em. No matter how dull you think your life there's a tale in it. Maybe it's your diary. Your appointment book. Your checkbook. All of those are books, aren't they? All of them tell stories about you. Even if you pay your bills on the same day every month ... it means you can, doesn't it? It means you are responsible.

Not everyone is.

And that's another story. But which is the better story?

Everyday life. It's full of dramas.

You don't have to stumble over dead bodies at work to spend your time among mysteries. What bigger mystery is there than waking up in the morning? Because, where were you? And now that you're awake, how do you know what to do with yourself? If your child asks you Why?, do you answer to the best of your ability? And if she asks again Why and Why again and why why why ... you have to stop answering at some point even if you are treating the question sincerely because you run out of reasons why. We ride on whyless space. Perhaps it is the pure absence of reason that gives us a world to walk upon.

You could imagine that always there will be a reason. And questing for the reason has done us a lot of good. It's given us all sorts of nice things. The germ theory, flying vehicles, philosophy.

But I recommend that you don't do it all the time. Not that you do. Nobody does. But I mean consciously. When you find yourself racking your brains for the reason why, notice that and give the racking a rest. Besides, there are different kinds of reasons. We all have a rudimentary notion of gravity. You're holding something, you let it go, you expect to find it on the ground. You don't glance up at the sky in hopes of catching your keys before they disappear into the clouds. And maybe you know you where you left your keys but they are not where you left them and eventually you find them on the back of the toilet and you gradually come to remember how coming home yesterday you burst in the door feeling a terrible tumble in the tummy and you had no time to put your keys on the dresser like usual and because you never take your keys with you to the bathroom you forgot you'd put them down there yesterday. Now that's pretty trivial, but suppose instead of misplacing your keys you misplaced your boot on a gravelly trail in the mountains and tumbled head over heels and ended up jammed between two pines, your left leg broken, your ears ringing. In the case of the keys you probably don't think about the fate that called upon you to place your keys on the back of the toilet, you're just relieved to find them and return them to their proper place. In the case of the tumble, well, who wouldn't wonder what gods were displeased and why? Even if rescue is immediately forthcoming.

It could have been worse, everyone will say to you, presuming you make it out alive. You could have been really mangled up. And then, just to make you feel tip top, they will offer, I have a friend who broke BOTH legs in a fall, one was shattered so bad he still has 18 pins in it. Or, there was this guy I heard of who was perfectly healthy, was always traipsing about the hills, going for long walks in the wilderness and one day they found him, it looked like he'd just tripped and he was lying dead in a meadow; the fall dislodged a bloodclot and it went to his heart and that was it. Don't you feel lucky?

This is what luck feels like. A book.

I should know.

I have a book in me, too. Maybe I'll write it someday. How I Became a Book. A memoir. Why not?

The Color Crusade

James William Gardner

It was August, 1967. My Uncle William bought my Great Grandmother, Momma-Two a twenty-four inch Zenith color television set for her ninetieth birthday. My Daddy named her that because she and my Grandmother raised him. Everybody came over to the big white house on Calhoun Street. All my Cousins from Daddy's side were there, Patsy from Greenville, Beth and Becky and Amy from Johnson City, and Ronnie from Orangeburg. He was my favorite. He was a year older than me. I was seven that year. I got to spend the week in the old house. I slept in the same room as my Daddy did when he was a boy.

Ronnie and his Momma and Daddy came up on Thursday morning. We played Tarzan in the two big trees in Momma-Two's front yard. They were loaded with hanging moss and looked just like jungle trees. We took our shirts off and made muscles. Ronnie could sound just like Tarzan when he'd call the elephants. According to my Grandmother, Ronnie was spoiled rotten. I never quite understood that, but he would cry and pitch a fit when he didn't get his way and he had a big comic book collection and three GI Joes and all the clothes and guns and stuff. Grandmother said that it was Aunt Savannah's fault he was the way he was. "She get's that boy everything he wants." She said it was because he was an only child, but I was too and I wasn't spoiled rotten. At least I never heard anybody say so.

Everybody else got there that afternoon. Daddy came when he finished work. All the men sat on the front porch and smoked and watched us play hide and seek. Patsy was practically always it because she couldn't run fast. The women were inside in the kitchen getting supper ready. Everybody brought something good. Betty Lou fixed oysters. I was the only one of the children that liked them. Momma brought a whole Virginia ham. Grandmother fried chicken and fixed a big chocolate marble cake with fudge icing for Momma-Two's birthday. She said that ninety candles were just too many though so she just put twenty. That's what came in the box.

About six-thirty, Aunt Savannah stuck her head out the door. "Y'all wash your hands and come on!" she shouted. We all hurried inside. I was starving. I was going to eat some of everything. Well, everything but My Aunt Margaret's carrot salad. That was horrible, nasty stuff, but it seemed like a lot of folks liked it. Uncle Dorsey brought big pink tomatoes out of his garden and we sliced them up and put mayonnaise on top. Daddy loved tomatoes cut up in his green beans so he ate them like that.

"Bobby, you ain't going to be able to eat all that ham. Put some back."

"I can too," I said. There were little beaten biscuits and I stuck the ham in them. All of us children ate at a folding table out on the back porch because there wasn't any room at the big table. Daddy got Momma-Two a Lazy Susan for her birthday. She put it in the middle of the dining room table. My big Cousin Riddle whirled it too hard and slung the lima beans off in Momma's lap. "Lord, I'm sorry, Juanita," he said.

"That's all right, it'll wash out," Momma told him.

After we finished supper, Grandmother lit the candles on the cake and brought it out and we all sang happy birthday. Momma-Two blew all the candles out on the first

try. I had two pieces. "Bobby Honey, you eat any more and you're going to pop." Uncle William told me to pull my shirt up and he thumped on my belly like it was a watermelon and laughed. "He's about ripe," he said.

After that Momma-Two opened packages and Momma and Savannah cleared the table. Then they washed the dishes and everybody went into the living room to watch the new Zenith color television set. Uncle William had bought it so that Momma-Two and my Grandmother could see *As The World Turns* in color. They watched it every afternoon no matter what. All the women did. Then they'd get on the phone with each other and talk about what happened. Me and Daddy used to laugh about it. "Women are funny," he'd say.

This particular Thursday night though, something very special was coming on. I didn't know exactly what everybody was talking about, but some friend of theirs was going to be on. It was somebody named Billy Graham. All the grownups seemed to know him. "Where is he tonight?" asked my Aunt Lucille.

"I believe he's out in Kansas City."

Well, everybody found them a seat. Most of the men and all of us children had to sit on the floor. My Daddy got down next to me and leaned over on his side. I scooted up and rested my head on his stomach like we did at home when we watched television. At eight o'clock the show came on. There were all kinds of people sitting outside in a football stadium. First came a lot of singing. I recognized a couple of the songs from church, but most of them I didn't know. While the singing was going, a blond haired man sat in back with a bible on his lap, listening. "Who is that man?" I asked my Daddy.

"Son," he said. "That is Billy Graham." I'd never seen him before, but next to my Daddy and Elvis Presley I believe that he was the coolest looking man I'd ever seen. He had a far off look in his eyes and a faint smile on his lips all the time they were singing. Then, everything got quiet and Billy Graham got up to speak. It turned out that he was a preacher like reverend Bowers at church, but he was a mighty good preacher. I liked listening even though I really didn't understand much about what he was talking about. Uncle William and Riddle and Betty Lou kept saying, "Amen." I whispered to my Daddy and ask him why they were doing that.

He whispered back, "Because they're Baptists."

I said, "Ain't we Baptists?"

"Yeah, but they're a different kind."

As Billy Graham kept talking, he seemed to get more and more excited. So did everybody in the living room. The grownups anyway, did. Then all of a sudden my Aunt Savannah busted out crying. She jumped up off the couch and nearly knocked the peppermint jar off the coffee table. "Oh Lord, forgive me! Please, forgive me!" she shouted. Tears were just pouring down her face. Uncle Dorsey stood up and went over and put his arm around her, but that didn't seem to calm her down any. "I want Jesus in my life! Please, I want Jesus!"

"Honey, why don't you call that number on the screen? That's what it's there for."

She ran out of the room to the telephone. "What is it?"

Daddy hollered out the number. Aunt Savannah called it. After a while she came back in. Billy Graham was just finishing up preaching. Lot's of the people there were crying too. I didn't understand what was happening. I finally got up the nerve to ask Daddy. "Daddy, why is Aunt Savannah acting like she is?"

"She wants to have Jesus in her life." He said.

"Don't everybody have Jesus?" I asked him.

"Yeah," he answered. "Yeah they do."

When Brother Carter Spoke

James William Gardner

Mister Lyle Carter stood about six-two. He had thinning gray hair, sunken cheeks and deep dark eyes that could look right down into you. He was wearing a plain black suit, starched short sleeve white shirt and a red string necktie every time I ever saw him. In his lapel he had a tiny gold cross that used to catch the sunlight coming through the sanctuary windows on Sunday morning. He smoked Chesterfields and he'd smoke then right down to the nub so short you couldn't see them between his fingers. During the week, he worked at Bennett's saw mill, but on Sunday mornings he preached the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

It was Cold Hollow Baptist, a small, one room Primitive Baptist church right near Lafayette, Virginia. I used to like to hang around Brother Carter when I was a little boy. My Grandmother would say, "Now Bobby, don't be pestering Brother Carter." That's what they all called him. In the Primitive Baptist Church they don't call their preachers minister or reverend. They call them Brother so and so. That's because they're lay pastors. Once when I was walking through the cemetery with Brother Carter he stopped and bent over a patch of grass and then reached down and plucked me a four leaf clover.

"Here Son," he said. "You keep that. It'll bring you good luck." I pressed it in my bible and still look at it from time to time.

"Brother Lyle Carter was old even back then. He'd been preaching for nearly sixty years. He'd preached in North Carolina and Virginia. Grandmother remembered him when she was a girl growing up. "Brother Carter used to be an awful fine looking man," she'd often say. I still thought he was a fine looking man. As a matter of fact, when he stood up in the pulpit you never saw anything so fine to look at. He talked real slow and had a deep voice. When he spoke people just naturally stopped to listen to what he had to say. I know I always did although a lot of times I didn't really understand what it was he was driving at.

Anyway, it was homecoming Sunday at Cold Hollow Baptist and everybody was there, Momma and Daddy and Grandmother and all of my Momma's people. Daddy didn't think much of Primitive Baptists. He was a Methodist and went to a big church in town. He said that you're supposed to know that you're saved. Primitive Baptists don't believe that. They say that they have, "A hope." of salvation. Daddy would get into arguments with my Grandmother about it.

She'd tell him, "Jim we just believe different ways about things."

Homecoming Sunday was a really big deal. I looked forward to it all year. I got to see all my cousins and we'd have a big picnic after the preaching and communion was over. Sometimes the preaching went on for hours. There wasn't any time limit. There would be three or four preachers and they'd just go on until they were preached out. They usually saved Brother Carter until last because he was the oldest.

On this particular Homecoming morning, I was sitting in the back of the little sanctuary next to the old woodstove with my Great Grandmother Lester. It was July, the windows were open and it was hot as fire in there. Everybody was perspiring. All

the ladies had paper fans with a picture of Lot's Funeral Home on them and they were fanning themselves in unison. It was comical to watch. It was like they were all connected with a string.

Before the preaching started there would be singing. Everybody had their own small hymnal. Grandma Lester kept hers with her all the time in her pocketbook along with her Testament. Some of the people there couldn't read though so my Uncle Cecil was in charge of lining out the words. He'd read a line and then the congregation would sing it. It sounded really cool. After we'd sung all of the hymn requests the preachers got up to speak. Sometimes, a preacher might just say that he couldn't preach that day because he wasn't moved by the Spirit. You see, they didn't prepare their messages ahead of time. That's something else they didn't believe in. The preachers just got up and started to talk as the Spirit of God gave them utterance.

I guess I was maybe thirteen. According to Grandma Lester that was past the age of accountability so I needed to sit up and listen. I didn't quite understand what it was that she meant, but I knew that it was important.

After the first two preachers had finished, it was Brother Carter's turn. He rose slowly and walked from the big stuffed chair to the pulpit. There was a water pitcher and a glass by the side and he poured him a drink and sipped it down. Then he placed both hands on the pulpit on each side of the big Bible and looked out across the room. Finally he began to speak. It was amazing, completely off the cuff. He quoted scripture from memory, great long passages without hesitation. It was like being in the presence of an ambassador from heaven or something. The congregation was mesmerized just trying to keep up with him and as he spoke he began to speak faster until he was finally almost chanting.

I could feel the presence of the Holy Spirit in the sanctuary. I could feel the Lord God looking down as if we were all cradled in the palms of His cupped hands. Men were shouting, Amen," The midday sun beamed across the pulpit and Brother Carter's gold lapel pin. The sacred word of God flowed like a raging river. Then in an instant it was over and we bowed our heads in prayer.

"Y'all come on and get you a plate," my Cousin Judy said as we filed out of the little church. You never saw so much food. We ate our fill. After I finished I snuck back into the sanctuary when no one was watching. I climbed up and stood in the pulpit. There was where Brother Carter stood. There was the water pitcher almost empty. There was the big bible. I stood there for a long time and pretended that I was a preacher too.

Public Works

James Harris

Brady parked the truck on the top floor. It was a cold day, not the kind you needed to wrap up in layers for, but cold enough for him to wish he had a jacket in the car. He usually carried one around with him, a high visibility one with reflectors. It being April, he thought those days were long gone so he left it in the closet at home.

A dramatic piano tune fizzled out as he turned the engine off. NPR was the only channel the old truck played, something about the antenna, he didn't know. In his life outside of Public Works, he listened to everything but classical. Still, travelling across town warranted music, no matter what kind. Otherwise he'd get bored. Nothing worse than a bored driver.

The parking lot was empty, excluding three or four cars from townies. Brady recognized one, it was always there. His watch read 5:23 AM; he couldn't believe someone was consistently up at this hour, already preparing their restaurant or coffee shop. This was too early for him, but he needed to pay the bills somehow, especially after last month. His student loans increased by two hundred percent. He didn't know how he was going to pay the electricity, let alone his debts.

Opening the door to his truck, he moaned as the morning air hit him in the face. He had shaved yesterday, he grimaced. He hated getting up this early, he hated how tired he felt, and how he didn't get enough sleep last night.

His assignment was a floor down, but the top platform was the only place he could park without paying. Yes, in a small town like this, he needed to pay for his parking, even in a city funded truck. He was going to be here for a while, and the top floor offered ten free hours of parking.

He grabbed his supply bag, filled with everything he'd need to take care of the job, and headed towards the stairs. The elevator was a more appealing option, but his doctor had told him he needed to start losing a bit of weight. Brady thought climbing up and down the stairs all day would be a great start to his day. He also thought a chicken fried steak from his favorite diner would be a great start too.

One by one, the cement steps corroded with grime and dirt and gum and God knew what else. Kids liked to smoke in the enclosed staircase, hovering around the third and second floor, not bothering to hide their cigarettes when adults climbed or descended. The public library was right next door. Brady wondered why he never saw people carrying books around town. To be fair, he didn't either, so-

In the middle of the third and fourth floor, Brady's assignment waited for him.

He stared at it in awe, examining it like a patron at the Smithsonian. "Woah," he smiled. It was beautiful. A portrait of an elderly black woman, holding a pen above her head in clenched fingers. Sure, there was a joint sticking out of her lips, but the detail of it all- Holy God. Brady supposed it was one of those kids that smoked in the staircase that must have done it, maybe skipped school, played hooky with a bunch of his or her friends, and did this. Created a piece of art.

And that's what it was, wasn't it? Art? Something to be looked at, appreciated? Pondered, discovered? Below the graffiti, a quote blocked in black letters read, *The*

Most Common Way People Give Up Their Power Is By Thinking They Don't Have Any.

Brady considered the quote and looked it up on his phone. It was by a woman named Alice Walker and he could see that the portrait on the wall was based off of her.

His own spray cans rattled in his bag. He knew what he had to do, was assigned to do, but he didn't want to do it. To cover the portrait with cheap, cement color spray paint seemed a tragedy. To cover up the countless hours this person spent on spreading the message. All because it didn't fit into what the city wanted on their walls.

Sighing, he opened his bag, pulled the spray paint out, ironic that he'd be covering graffiti with some of his own, and pointed the can at the wall.

"The most common way people give up their power is by thinking they don't have any," he said.

He read the quote again, focusing on the upright fist and the woman. She looked very much like him.

"No," he said and put the can of spray paint down.

He put it back in his bag and he took a step back, staring at the art piece for what felt like half an hour. He had other jobs to do that day, and he wanted to make sure he got home in time for supper. But he couldn't look away from Alice Walker.

He smiled, climbed the steps, back to his city issued truck, and tossed his bag in the passenger seat. He felt powerful, fulfilled, as if he had done the right thing.

He listened to NPR and the music made him feel wonderful.

Minefield

i.

Buying a house for the way
the snow huddles on the front porch
on the coldest day of the year
is like loving a sad girl
for the way her eyes crinkle when she smiles--
you won't see it often enough
to make it worth it. But you and I bought that
sad house with the snowless front porch
because you said we could use our imagination
and that would be enough. I imagine
lifeless snowflakes piling up
in our bathroom and kitchen now.

ii.

Leaving me is not the worst part of what you did. It was leaving
parts of you behind
for me to trip over when I got up
for water in the middle of the night.

iii.

I stumble past that bruise
in the drywall that I deepened each time I wanted to hurt you instead
and my hands feel that twitch all over again
like I could set this entire damn house on fire
and instead live in the memories that you left behind for me
like worn out clothes you couldn't bother getting rid of.
And when I flick on the kitchen lights I'm slapped in the face with that
sticky orange paint you let me pick out. Now, I never question what color regret is.

iv.

Memories crash in on each other
like burning buildings and suddenly I'm living in a minefield
of nostalgia terrified that
at any moment I could be struck
with remembering. That excruciating and familiar
warmth. It's like forcing whiskey down
a recovering alcoholic's throat,
it goes down so easy but

I can't want that burn anymore.

swel·ter

/ 'sweltər/

verb

(after Nicole Moon)

1. I remember that summer, not by the year but as the last summer you let your mom buzz your hair in the bathroom. The third summer my sister lifeguarded at the pool but the first summer the boys noticed her. The final surrender to the swelter. We were breathing through the smell of chlorine, the sunbeams dribbling into the dimples of your permanently flushed cheeks. We didn't know the difference between the universe and the cul-de-sac.
2. Bicycles with bells. Caramel-coated popcorn. Root beer in glass bottles. Sprinkler season. Pomegranate-stained fingertips. Multi-colored chalk on asphalt. Amber light oozing. Honey jars wrapped in ribbon. Daisy diving. Floppy sun hats. Carving our names into magnolia trees. The last bite of a cherry popsicle, victim to gravity.
3. The night we camped out in the backyard, with no one around to hear us but the lightning bugs, it still felt right to whisper. Even my mother, alone in her bed, slept with the window open, lulled to sleep by the breeze's endless hum.

The Places We Inhabit

i.

Wild grass grows golden, tall enough that
I cannot find my own feet in front of me.
Sometimes I lay down,
invisible in the dead forest of my own front yard, thinking
that as long as no one mowed the lawn, no one
would find me here. My eyes trace the curved line
that the drooping gutter makes and I cannot
help but smile back at this house. This house
that is faltering from the unforgiving sway of
time collects my carelessness on its walls in the form of
peeling wallpaper, so now the still flowers curve toward me
like real flowers do at the end of spring.
My home is more like a collage of broken pieces,
unaware of their own misfortune.

ii.

I cannot imagine sleeping in a different bed. Because at least
when I wake up with my skin burning,
I do not cry out,
I know the bed bugs have found me.

iii.

My body is the same
as a childhood home with splintered floorboards.
I am lucky enough to
recognize my traumas when they come around again.
So when I wake up with a racing heartbeat
and a pair of lungs that heave
and a body that is sticky
with the heat of remembering too well,
I'll know which memory has me by the throat.

Street Scene in Early March

A crescent-shaped bench
with a solid back, a young man at one end.
He wears shoulder-length curls
and cups a small bowl
with both hands.

Acorns. Five or six.
Yesterday, those
were not in the bowl.

He gazes through us.
A bare torso in weather like this!
Maybe he's waiting for Jesus.
Such muscular thighs and calves.
He must wander a lot.

At the other end
of the curved seat: emptiness.
Same as yesterday.

His vibe: *I warned Caesar. Thought I'd
change the world. Still can't help but hope.*

A snowman on a snow bench, sculpted
in front of an affordable housing unit.

He'll melt before the Ides.

Two Photos Arrive

for my husband, Max

In the first it's 1921. The man is 33.

Long face, strong jaw
like yours.

Ears, small and elegant
like yours.

Nose, photogenic
in the same way as yours.

Wide mouth. Narrow, well-balanced lips –
same as yours except
his are pinched shut.
He will never tell.
Never has done.

Now we come to the eyes.

Light, clear, swimming with secrets,
almost daring the viewer to pry.
Oh, he would have been a handsome cuss.
Subtract the secrets, and these eyes
still don't quite resemble yours.
Perhaps you got your mother's.

1950-something. A wedding anniversary.
Siblings, five grown kids, spouses, a row of grands.
The lower half of his face looks even more the-same-as,
though he's younger here by a long shot than you are now.
The secrets are just about ready to take him to his grave.
They pull hard at the corners of eyes and mouth. *Down*,
they seem to say. *We've done our time*. His wife tips her
shoulder to his, smiles broadly enough for them both.

Remembering Leonard Cirino

During one of his episodes he plucked out his right eye believing it had caused him to sin. That's how devout the man was. Afterwards he could see in the dark. Poetry, sensing the presence of a coffee pot and ashtray that could belong to none other than Leonard, began taking shape at night, slipping through slapdash insulation and cracks under doors whose weather stripping had peeled away. He'd caress each detail towards completion. The soul needs only one eye. Leonard Cirino's was made of glass.

Poem without Color

If I must choose between rain and snow
on an almost windless afternoon
I'll pick flakes like these
that moth all over: up, down,
open to chance.

Between drizzle
and a dither of dry flakes
I'll go with the wet, which knows what it's doing.
I've seen a lot of rain.
It has earned my trust.

Between winter weather
and a head full of fog
I choose another forty years
to make something out of nothing
with my love nearby.

The Maple Watch

From a cherry tree's most comfortable branch
I see a maple blazing its way into October.
I am eight. My friend, seven. It's our third
autumn in the cherry
so we are old hands
at this watch.

I am twenty. My new boyfriend
sits near, on the grass, plucks the strings
of his dulcimer. I believe I am in love with him.
Fifty years later I realize it was his music and
vast eucalyptus trees whose scent suggested
a future of doors that would open as I approached.

For a time he and I lived among many black oaks.
I like remembering them in late autumn
after last leaves dropped and the oaks
stood darkly on golden slopes, almost impossibly
round in silhouette, the quintessence of self-possession.

He took a job among hemlocks and cedars and alders and firs.
We parted there but I stayed in that rain, wandered
an indeterminate time. When I think of the fog
all those trees become a blur. What's defined
is a forest floor full of fresh-sprung maidenhair ferns

whose delicacy persists
here, through this blazing blue, punctuated
by hugely crooked cottonwoods.
These I love bare and crazy with wind
when their conversation
is beyond me.

by Donald Levering

Church Fire Escape

Fleeing flames the worshippers
hurry down this stairway
spiked to bricks

In the dream it's understood
the iron flights and landings
were forged of melted church bells

I also know the woman
who zigzags past the others
like a giant spider
is Mary Magdalene

The bottom step's suspended
out of reach of Mother
who has fallen and lies
grimacing on the ground

Just then the organ
is short-circuited by flames
and begins to play a dirge

Here comes the Magdalene
scarlet hourglass on abdomen
swooping down to lift my mother

Their bodies in ascension
go in and out of smoke

RETURN TO NAUVOO

*What if God was one of us? Just a slob
like one of us.*

—Joan Osbourne

*A myth is not a skeleton.
—Jennifer Pemberton.*

I am no Saint but felt compelled to visit
Nauvoo. I parked on the grounds of the
Smith House Museum and walked toward
the river, trailing after cranes I'd spied in
the reeds.

*Twice a year the Sandhill Cranes fly over.
Some will swoop to glean spilled corn
Or rest in Mississippi sloughs.*

On my approach the Sandhills acted
circumspect. Could one of them be God
checking up on us?

*Not for us to fathom why the angel Moroni
Selected Joseph Smith and not some
other man. Nor are we ordained to say
Why the angel buried sacred tomes
Of gold for Joseph to unearth.*

Inside the Smith House, I gaped at the
engraving of winged hosts escorting
Joseph's soul heavenward as his body
plunged toward a raging crowd. Men
from this mob had stormed the jailhouse
and shot the so-called "Prophet"
leaping from a second story window.

*How frightful their shouting and pounding.
Surely when the gang burst in,
Like any man, he must have panicked,
Frantic as a bird trapped indoors.*

LDS Church doctrine holds that his body
hadn't hit the ground before his soul was
spirited away to dwell with ancestor angels.

*When others pass overhead,
The cranes will dance and lift a bit
And tilt their heads skyward,
Crying to their kindred.*

In vain I searched every room in the
Museum for a picture of Smith sledge-
hammering the printing press that had
published tracts against his polygamy
and treason.

*Here we practice reverence,
Abstain from contemplation
Of shameful scenes.
Others may dwell on his righteous wrath;
In Nauvoo we honor his revelation.*

Before his Moroni visitation, Smith
had claimed psychic powers, charged
fees to the gullible to divine sites for
them to dig for precious ores.

*We treasure the revelation
of the golden plates to Joseph.*

Why was I called to this braided bend
in the river to retrace the steps of a martyr
I like to mock? Will I transform into a
member of a flock whose brains are
magnetized to return to certain shores?

*Twice a year the Sandhill Cranes fly over.
Some will swoop to glean spilled corn
Or rest in Mississippi sloughs.*

Poor Smith's bullet-riddled corpse was
not destined for a tranquil rest.

*O to fly away forever
From the sorrows of Nauvoo.*

For the public rites, a sandbag-weighted
coffin was lowered into the ground.
Smith's actual body was removed to a
secret site.

*Eighty-three autumns cranes would pass
Above his unmarked grave
Before one spring the rains did raise the river.*

Smith's grandson feared the flooding
Mississippi would carry away his
grandfather's remains and float them
to New Orleans.

*Who knows for what black magic divination
Or voodoo sacrament the Prophet's
Flotsam bones would have been conscripted?*

Exhumed once more, Smith's partly-
decomposed corpse was photographed
by his grandson before he re-interred it
in higher ground. This site is now the
prime Mormon shrine in Nauvoo,
flocked to by the faithful.

*There are those who wish his final resting
Place had remained unmarked. Sometimes
Mystery is preferred to certainty.*

I keep looking at the Museum postcard
with his grandson's photo of Joseph's
tattered flesh and crumbled skeleton.
Surely as any of us, his body rotted
underground.

*From anywhere in Nauvoo
He could rise right through our shoes.
He could lift with the cranes to the sky.*

Now I want to cry; Joseph Smith was
just a man like one of us. Maybe more
flimflam than most, maybe grandiose.
But one of us.

*When those down here are called
To rise again and join their throng
It takes our breath away—
Such grand wingflaps, such skittering takeoffs.*

TOAD MOUNTAIN MIGRATION

The foothills resound
with the syncopated chorus
of bellowing toads. They hop
toward water, spawn low fogs,

vanish into ponds, hunker in bogs.
They mount, make tadpoles, surge
into a glistening torrent
flecked with amber and verdigris.

Their damp glands extrude
kaleidoscopic changes,
rearrange the mountain's shapes—
the slopes, ridges, crags, and outcrops

flush with amphibian pilgrimage.
Hundreds of thousands climb higher,
round the summit, flow downhill,
call down thunder and rain.

PAPERWEIGHT

I'm about four, wearing hand-me-down shorts, sitting on the floor with my knees up, cradling a model TWA Super G propeller plane with the triple-tail.

That little boy wants his grown-up self to enumerate the aircraft poems he's written since this photo was sealed inside the glass paperweight now on my desk.

Poems ascending through pavilions of clouds or plunging into icy sea water. Poems like the shadow of a Boeing racing over glaciers and fjords.

He replays the vignette of the stewardess in a DC-3 wearing a cap and white gloves who offers cigarettes or gum from a tray.

And the newsreel of Able the ape blasting into weightlessness before splashing down in the Atlantic.

Let's put in the foggy Brooklyn night collision of a TWA and a Pan American, and the sole survivor, a boy his age who suffers third-degree burns.

We have to include the verse version of D. B. Cooper parachuting from a 737 over Olympic rainforest with Portland passengers' loot.

And the one where an airliner's crash debris on a Greek island dream-morphs into rocky amphitheater ruins backdrop for a drama of his divorce.

There's the reverie on the missing Malaysian airliner whose travelers exchange places with a flock of storm petrels at 30,000 feet.

And the reminiscence of gawking with his brother as godlike Harlem Globetrotters board the Convair 880 and loom over their seats.

We can't omit their father suspending the laws of physics to perform T'ai Chi on the wing of a cruising Airbus.

by Luke Maguire Armstrong

The Poems

The Birthing Cage

There are dawns so cold, dusks so lightless souls become brittle,
hearts frigid—
the future freezes, hopeless against all but darkened dreams.

We heard you were coming and invited everyone to the happiest room in our heart.
Where expectation mixed with elation.
There we waited.
Love always waits quietly in the background,
not talking to anyone,
aware of the gravel road ahead.

Some surprise parties end with every dish in the house shattered, end with the guests
hungry and confused,
the warmth of tears washing frosty faces.
We know— you didn't come to break our hearts.

So we hold our breath and wait through the miseries
for you to bring the mysteries.

Be brave in the hope that there's no turning back now.
Truth is your guide.
Winds of sincerity at your back.

While your belly rumbles allow yourself to be affected by every ripple of this reality. Open
that space that's closed and fill it with everything. Fill it with the untarnished light of
a setting sun. Silky as sleep is simple, birth begins with nowhere to look back.

Some Chair Over the Rainbow

There is a land within this land where finite things float away. Drop this habit
heart of feeling every untouched place over the mountains. Here paradise
presides.

Here she parades like the wagging tail of spring.

You love to run,
say a million twinkling diamonds of sunlight birthed on the water.
But we love to see you still,
have been waiting to be witnessed
to share our secrets.
Here is where forever lives,
says each universe
during her millisecond of magnificent life.

There will come a time when you stop
wandering through the worlds of your worried days.
I am ready, something inside will say.
Your heart will know,
it won't slow down or turn back
or run from home again.

The juiciest secrets are sealed with a smile.
What's possible will always be outside the imaginable. Believe in all the best
case scenarios you can conjure. Good things are coming. Surpass the
imaginable.

Love secretly shines behind dark curtains.
Have faith that everyone is learning everything they need. New joys have been
hidden along the way.

Every day, unwind one more string strangling your heart.
Knot by knot, morning by morning, you will find yourself already home. You will
become one more twinkling reflection
of light alive for a second
to fill one dark corner of the cosmos
with a moment's illumination.

The Silent, Virtuous Ones

They're all over—
men and women who stand by the strength of their smile,
whose hands give to hands reaching.
We've opened to something fresh and ancient.
Remove the harnesses and dive into bliss.
Humility's home is in the light of others, hoping for their happiness.
True strength is named neutrality, true love impartiality,
holding a code that plants lilies in a jungle of relentless interests.

We Like Nice Feelings Too

Here on planet earth,
we like nice feelings too.
We're livid for something to live for— desperate for something to do— frenzied with
feelings
of having found something
in the chunky heart—
a happening place
where subtle songs sing,
faint flames find each other and vagabonds dance for vagabonds, passing through the
phases of life.
Turn everything off.
Tune everything in.
Choose a flavor of joy.
Be unafraid to get a triple scoop. Be undeterred to ask for more. Tell us what you need.
We're here to help.
We're into ice cream and elation—
we're fans of the ecstatic and outlandish,
we talk to the angels and animals with the same tone. Fish carry our messages
on the wind and
trees stand stoic
claiming to have known
all along.

The Forever Dance

Joy kills sorry.

Faith replaces doubt.

Neglected stars are noticed.

The sun rises with a new smile.

While thugs are owning the streets.

the smart ones have hidden their bliss inside.

They see the laughter dancing behind every smile and frown.

Have you danced the forever dance?

Have you swayed in and out of your inner light?

Has the day dawned with a shining embrace giggling its way to your smile?

Would you believe me if I told you that you shine and glide through every day with
as iridescent a glow as you'll allow?

There are now great stretches of stillness to my days, vast swatches when I'm
more here than there.

But somehow, I still float forever far away.

No need to scramble around,

no reason to trouble yourself over burned toast, spilled orange juice,
and the lethal blows of life—

No one gets out of here alive—

but some of us wondered why we came and followed that question
until we wandered beyond what the sky can say.

So dive into the source of your smile and abandon yourself there—you will lose
everything that day, but will have risen to the reality of why you came.

Dr. Salk

On one car
and a ten year
mortgage
my dad's parents
put two sons
through college

Milk men
polio myelitis
measles
mumps
rubella
Babe Ruth
leagues of well-
stocked groceries
coal bin deliveries
a culture of public deference
schools within walking
distance

The pea
soupers came
down from
Trois Rivières
and Shawinigan
to thread thimbles
nimble fingered
textilers
with rosary
beads
their kids
spitting
kike
at my father
it was the era of
tail fins
and Studebakers

Ike and war
veterans
women baking
in aprons
Robert Young
and Donna Reed

Something
 called
 normalcy

Of course
James Dean
made every young
person a potential
hooligan
wanna be hoods
and toughs
carved curses
into
the few
trees
most of the block's
greenery
was vested in
nightshade leaves
the beefsteak tomato
being
a sole dose
of red
if you wanted
to catch
New England's
famed maples flaming
you had to
take a drive
on a Sunday
after the homily

It was all a great myth
too Rockwell
to remain
hell
the popular music
had no cursing
but thanks to
Dr. Jonas Salk
the kids could walk.

A new chord

The snow
white studio
player
monochromatic
suit to match
pricks
his
finger tip
lets his
blood
drip
onto the major
ivories

One drop
seems
a proper
stop
the progression
of platelets
is a new chord
revealed.

Affinity

In late spring
once all the trees
have returned leaves
a basswood linden
will perfume the air
until the breeze
assumes a special taste
and you share leafy
affinities with the bees

Zoo Civics

I am a gas and water
socialist
a student of Zoo Civics
the new 21st
century governance

Where once people like me
could see
black-banded delivery drivers
dropping off our bread
and calling me comrade
those folks
now wear surgical masks
are ordered not to shake hands
and they hand over my loaf in plastics

Since everything must be
hermetically sealed
for contagion prevention
my orders are texted
my receipts emailed
the delivery itself goes unseen
bread shows up as in a dream
it is enough to make me believe
in Moses and manna
if I wasn't so skeptical

In my city
the woman or man
who ran
for mayor
ran the 21st century
equivalent of a front porch
campaign
(s)he FaceTimed
her constituents
never held a scrum
then was inaugurated
in her living room
it was live streamed

Just another lesson
in Zoo Civics because
of the result of
a virus
caught from a monkey
or a bat
a giraffe
or a man who bought a cravat
in Italy
but better yet
it is because we crashed
some wild habitat
rubbed shoulders
with dietary habits
and cleanliness standards
unsuited to our Homo sapiens
pandemic prevention protocols

A reputed zoologist says
it's because we have made
the wild landscape un-wild
turned it into a new neighbourhood
an arrondissement
a quarter
in our cities
a party to our fantasies
of snow-globing the world
or shrinking it to fit
into a cell phone data plan
every last inch of wild Earth
now nearly urban
so that fauna
and flora
are claimants
clients
patrons
of City Hall
and the Public Health Board
they want their gas and water
like the Green Socialists they are
old Fabians
while we humans no longer talk
to one another
because we are allergic

to every animal
having used up all
of our antibiotics
inoculating chickens
and cattle
against viruses

Yes,
our civic model
now includes the rhino
the bonobo
the fruit bat
and the kangaroo rat
and we never planned
for that

Zoo Civics

All the plastic wrap
and surgical masks
in the world
won't deliver our bread.

A far cry

When the city
had to be shuttered
older folks
wondered whatever
happened to Doo-Wop

What became
of singers
on street corners
in fire escapes
on stairwells
loitering before
walk ups

Buskers
with harmonicas
gig jobs
chain wallets
strumming pawn
shop guitars
while earnest
never quite captured
the spirit of spontaneous
group intonement
that marked an era of
plaid jackets
horn-rimmed glasses
and the Mason Dixon
Line

Of course no one
now is doing
anything
in the streets
save gathering
refuse
enforcing
curfew
scrounging
for plastics

A far cry
from
that era
when
the only
thing
the world
waited
on
was
when
the
missiles
would
come.

A Different Air

Rita Plush

In 2015, after almost 58 years of marriage my dear husband passed away. It was sudden and it wasn't. He'd been sick with heart problems for a while, when an unknown virus in the aortic valve took him after five days in the hospital. I had a husband, and then I didn't.

A Little Night Music: We met on the wide steps of Jamaica High School, or rather I first saw him on the steps of Jamaica High School. *Who's that?* I said to my friend, of the curly-haired, dimpled heart throb (a term we used then) in a handball team jacket, *Captain*, embroidered under his name.

That's Herb Plush. Her voice was almost a whisper, confidential, as if his name was all the information needed. As if he knew we were discussing him, he caught my eye and held it. And that was it for both of us, him in his team jacket, me in my 50's poodle skirt and cinch belt. I was 15 when we began dating (going steady we called it). He came to my sweet sixteen, took me to my graduation prom. We married after he served in the army.

A fisherman, an archer, a marksman, he loved the outdoors. He played paddleball, racquetball, *any* ball, with an athlete's ease. I was happy with a book, or roaming a museum. But we both liked long walks, gardening, and fixing up our homes. We agreed on the important things like how we wanted to live and raise our children. He was the easy one, I, the "no" parent. We made it work. We gave each other room to be who we were.

I needed him more than ever now. Our son had ALS. Our younger daughter, soon to be married, was diagnosed with Stage 4 breast cancer. How could I face all that without him?

I thought about him all the time. He wasn't there, yet he was everywhere. In the house, in my car when I started up the engine—*You sure you have enough gas, honey?* In bed, I slept on his side and wore his pajamas. Sometimes the idea that I would never see him again, hear his voice or hold him, crashed down on me like a wave and left me breathless, groping for purchase.

And then, a month or so later I saw him. From my bed. There in the doorway. Not his true living form, but a dark and smoky image that I knew was him. He was stooping, tearing open a case of toilet paper—he liked to buy in bulk. I watched from my bed, astounded but unafraid, as if in a dream, yet understanding completely. There was my honey, providing for me as he always had.

Another time, just home from synagogue after saying *kaddish*—the Aramaic prayer that Jews recite in memory of a loved one—I pulled to the curb. Now he was outside our front door, welcoming me, pleased I had honored him with this prayer.

Had I missed him so much my brain was conjuring him back to me? Or, maybe *he* wasn't ready to leave me. Maybe, like living, dying was also a process. Or ... was something wrong with me?

I decided to see a therapist.

I told her about my husband so she would know the kind of man he was. Like that time in the hospital when I was in a chair writing and my pen rolled under the bed. I was down on my hands and knees when a nurse walked in. “She worships me,” he said to her. He had some sense of humor.

The therapist said the grieving elderly are known to have hallucinations about their loved ones as a way of coping. *Elderly?* I barely accepted the notion that I was a *senior*; now I’m *elderly?! And hallucinations?! With unhinged, psychotic underpinnings?* Nerves stretched to snapping, I took offense. “I *saw* him,” I insisted.

She looked at me sympathetically. Did I want to see a psychiatrist?

“You think I need medication?” *Was I going over the edge?*

“Let’s just keep an eye on it. And cut yourself some slack,” she said.

She told me to take some *me* time. A movie. A massage. Good advice. I hadn’t been touched in months; I needed that human contact. Though I left her office drained and exhausted, I also felt some relief, the weight I carried trimmed down a bit.

I plowed ahead and settled my husband’s affairs: a tangled nest abuzz with phone calls, forms, and lawyers. I put our home on the market and threw myself into our daughter’s upcoming wedding. I saw my friends. I looked to the future.

Almost five years passed. My son had recently died of ALS. I had wanted to slip inside him and die with him. Not yet 60, he left a wife, a son 17, a daughter 15. Why my son and not me? It was wrong and I railed against it. Not with words; there were no words. But with a roaring in my head I could not stop, a certain weight to the air that made it hard to breathe. And then I saw him.

My son.

One night.

In my bedroom.

In a kind of crouching stance, as if he might be in pain or unable to straighten himself. Was he still fighting for life after he had died? He so much wanted to live. And then another curl of smoke, my husband now—things had not always been right between them. I waited to see what would happen.

Then, in that helping, guiding way he had, my husband offered his hand. Without thinking I bowed my head.

Hallucination? My therapist might say so. But I breathed a different air that night, a lighter, softer air. My husband was with him and would show him the way.

ALL I HAVE

Crystal Bevers

The summer I was ten, I carved a staircase in the side of a mountain. That's how it felt, anyway, and when you're ten, how you feel is more real than reality. It was 1985 and my house was full of restless spirits—the ghost of my parents' marriage screaming through the days and nights, the phantom of my childhood fading with my widening hips and the greedy sweep of men's eyes and hands, the specter of adulthood with its desperate, grasping claws.

Sometimes I mingled with the spirits in the house, detaching from my body to float against the ceiling, searching for a way out, into the boundless stretch of California sky. The ancient Greeks believed the star-spangled body of Ouranos, castrated by Cronus at the beginning of time, formed the heavens, binding sky to earth—Gaea, the mother of all—by the arcing stretch of his broken, incomplete form. The old Norse stories say that the sky is the skull of Ymir, the first being and father of the jötnar, the frost giants, who was slain by Odin and dragged to the very center of the primordial void, Ginnungagap, where his blood formed oceans, his bones carved out stones and crags and fjords, and his hair became trees. Odin and his brothers smattered the inside of Ymir's dead skull with his brains to form clouds. But for me, a child fed on *Star Trek* and *Star Wars*, *Buck Rogers* and the space race, the heavens were not bound by broken bodies. Mother Earth might be finite and concrete, but Father Sky stretched into an eternity I longed to join.

And so, summer came and school ended and I'd wake with the sun and escape the mausoleum of the house to lie on my belly in the grass, witnessing the silent progress of ants and worms and creeping things for which I had no names. Summers in southern California, for the most part, were mild—in contrast to my birthplace, an eight-hour drive east in central Arizona—and I easily passed whole days under the sun. I awoke before the restless spirits and tiptoed out to grass soft with dew. I'd place my ear to the ground and try to hear a heartbeat—the wet smack of pulsing blood—in the earth. By lunchtime, the grass was dry and scratchy, so I'd slink inside for a sandwich, a book, and a blanket, and then laze through the afternoon with my cat (“No cats in the house!”), immersed in stories by Madeleine L'Engle, Hans Christian Andersen, and the D'Aulaires.

I read Madeleine L'Engle's *Wrinkle in Time* trilogy over and over that summer. The Murray family was everything mine was not: bookish and wise, kind and giving, gentle and intimate. They understood that there were important things afoot in the world and that they had a responsibility to the planet. They wrestled with matters of faith in a way that was fluid, generous, and open-hearted. Meg Murray was my first hero. She taught me that I could be both awkward and graceful, frightened and brave, small and important, and that love was the most important thing in the universe, the thing worth sacrificing for.

I had discovered *D'Aulaires' Book of Greek Myths* in my school library the previous fall and managed to keep it checked out the entire year. The saga of the gods captivated me. I memorized their family tree. I named places around my home and school after mythological landmarks: the drainage ditch at the back corner of the school playground, for instance, became the river Styx, and the only way to cross was on a broad leaf that doubled as Charon's ferry to the Underworld, marked by an abandoned snake den. The highest point of the playground, a few feet from Styx, was Mount Olympus, where the gods ate ambrosia and nectar and lived out the drama of their lives, their passions, their jealousies, their tricks and deceits. On the last day of school, I smuggled the book into my backpack, determined to find echoes of the old stories in my own backyard. The D'Aulaires' version of the gods—their round, serene faces drawn in pastels—was kinder, softer than the gods I would later come to know through Homer's *Iliad* and *Odyssey*.

The hardbound volume of *Andersen's Fairy Tales* I found at a thrift shop my mother briefly worked for, however, was altogether different. Where my *D'Aulaires'* book was best suited for the brightness of a summer day, Andersen's tales were the sharp scratch of a thorn on a moonlit window. I would crawl into my closet with a flashlight and shiver over stories like "The Snow Queen," "The Wild Swans," "The Little Match Girl," and "The Girl Who Trod on a Loaf"—a particularly terrifying story of a selfish, vain little girl who sinks to the bottom of a bog where she turns to stone while bugs crawl over her eyes. I'd read with my breath shallow and tight, shoulders hunched to my ears. Andersen's stories made God and the Devil real and brought them close, the devil as dark and terrifying as my mother said he was, but there was little room in the fairy tales for the God who took human shape and died for love. The God of Hans Christian Andersen was angry, bent on justice and punishment. There was no balance in Andersen's tales: sinful humans lived out cold, doomed lives, and even the less sinful suffered at the hands of pride, greed, lust, envy, gluttony, wrath, and sloth. Arthur Szyk's jewel-toned illustrations seethed from the page, the humans and creatures alike boiling with melancholy, dread, and malevolence, the detailed bodies and faces hovering on the grotesque. When the spirits howled through my house, I'd lean closer to the page, unable to look away, hardly able to blink, because maybe *this*—the sadness, fear, and regret of Hans Christian Andersen—maybe this was truer than any of the stories. Maybe there was no hope, no Meg Murray fighting darkness to bring her father back, no Mount Olympus or smiling gods in the sky. Maybe we were all doomed, like "The Girl Who Trod on a Loaf," to sink forever into the mud.

As that summer of 1985 grew older, my mother started leaving the windows open, and the sounds of the house began to invade my little spot in the sun. My tortoise-shell cat disappeared one day and never reappeared. "She was a mean thing, anyway," Mama said. I retreated to the further perimeters of the back yard, up the hill under the wild eucalyptus trees that shielded me from the sight and sounds of the house. I'd sit on the dirt, leaning into the angled elbow of the back fence, my palms placed flat against the earth, trying to feel for life. Was this warmth, this gentle give, the deep bark scent—was this Gaea? Did I come from her? The leaves rustled above and around

and below me, a whisper rattling to the bottom of the hill, toward the lawn, toward the house, and it was easy to tell myself this was Mother Earth, whispering her story to me, murmuring my place in her story, offering shelter and rest. I'd curl onto my side, leaning my ear into her breast. Sometimes I slept, but more often I would just listen. Just be. There at the top of the hill, I could be anyone I wanted. There at the top of the hill was my Mount Olympus.

My parents almost never came into the back yard, much less to climb the untamed hill that rose steeply to the back fence. My hilltop was truly a sanctuary; it might as well have been above the clouds, beyond mortals or their petty measurements of time. Even when my mother slid the glass door open to yell— "Crystal Ann! Get in here and do something useful!" —it was easy to pretend I hadn't heard. I'd get it later, for sure, but for the moment, I was safe.

The main trail to the top of the hill ran along the side fence from the outer edge of the lawn to the back fence at the top. By midsummer, I'd worn that trail smooth with my footprints, first in shoes, and then, as the undergrowth gave way to soft loam under my regular traffic, my bare feet. Eventually, I grabbed my father's shovel, and spent a week digging a shallow staircase into the trail. Although I think now of the act of digging stairs as invasive and aggressive, it was a ritual of love, a way to honor this sacred space that invited and then held me so gently. I dug and dug and wiped sweat from my face and my mother gave up asking what in the world I was doing and settled for shouting reminders to, for heaven's sake, drink some water.

The back corner of Olympus, where the side and back fences joined under a particularly heavy eucalyptus tree, my favorite tree, was the size of a small bathroom. The canopy was dense enough that little sun reached the packed dirt. Gradually, over the first part of summer, I'd hauled up a long piece of plywood, then lawn clippings, and finally an old blanket I found in the garage, to create a sofa of sorts. I refreshed the clippings each week after my father mowed the lawn. Here, among the pungent, decomposing grass covered by a blanket, I lingered, my back against the worn wood of the fence, and I imagined the trees around me—especially this older, heavier tree directly above me—stirring and shushing and speaking and all I had to do was close my eyes and push my mind out, out of my body, out of my reality, out of this yard and this family and the whole broken world, and I could be one of them. I could see with a tree's eyes, feel with a tree's roots, speak with a tree's bark and leaves.

I gathered a few relics. A brown, speckled feather, fuzzy at the bottom and rigid at the top. Pink quartz that glittered even in the diffused light of Mount Olympus. A worn brass hand bell I'd found among the Christmas decorations in the garage. Sheaves of paper that held scraps of stories I started but never finished, sketches of animals and people and homes that would surely house more happiness than mine did. A tiny, perfect skull—a mouse? a vole? —bleached by the sun. These I tucked in a sturdy cedar box I'd purchased at a thrift store. I cleared away last year's leaves at the outer edge of my little haven, placed the box on the earth and piled the dead leaves on top of

it. This box was my altar. It was both an offering to the trees and earth and sky, and a marker of *my* space, sacred and holy and untouched by hatred or fear.

I started to interact with the trees. My mother would likely have doubted my sanity, or even thought my behavior vaguely blasphemous, but especially after my cat disappeared, I'd sit or lie in silence, reaching out periodically to caress a living branch or leaf, rubbing it against my cheek, tracing the breathing, flowing veins. I'd melt into the ground directly under the old, heavy tree that shielded me and simply allow it to drape its abundant body on my head, on my shoulders, sweep across my eyes and face. I'd received many blessings from my father over the years, a laying on of hands unique to our religious tradition. I'd sit in a starchy dress on a chair and my father and other men—always men—from church would gather around me in a circle and rest their heavy, callused hands on the crown of my head, my neck stiff under the weight of them. "Crystal Ann Boling," my father would start, "by the power of the Holy Melchizedek Priesthood which I hold, I place my hands upon your head and give you a blessing." He would bless me with peace, with wisdom, with health and strength. I took comfort from these blessings, but ultimately believed that these gifts for which my father prayed had to be granted by someone, by man or by God, and they could be taken from me just as easily if I were not worthy of them. There under my trees, however, I received a different kind of blessing, one that felt distinctly feminine. And it wasn't a bestowal of gifts, but a sweet reminder that I carried peace, wisdom, health, and strength within me, just as the trees and the birds and the soft mammals burrowing in the earth did, and that I was simply and forever worthy of them.

My Olympus became more real to me than the confines of my home. As the summer wound toward its inevitable end, I returned to my house only to eat and sleep and perform my chores. My real life, the life I carried inside my head and my heart, happened on that hill. And that life, that space, became more sacred to me than any verse of scripture, any sacrament, any prayer. My life on that hill *was* my prayer. I breathed into the trees. I entangled my toes in the soil. I brushed my fingers along the fence and tipped my head to hear birds speaking from the very roots of their bones. I spoke there, mostly to the trees, but to whatever else might be listening. I told them my stories in whispered spurts. Not just the Greek myths, or fairy tales, or the stories of the Murray family time-traveling and saving humanity from our worse selves, but I told deeper stories without even knowing they were stories: tales of who I believed I was in this fractured world, tales of how I fit in (or, more accurately, *didn't* fit in), tales of scarcity and fear and the small, fragile shell of my heart that threatened to break every day. And the trees just listened.

That summer ended, as all summers do. In the fall, we moved to a new house with a flat, tame yard with nowhere to hide. My body grew along with my sense of displacement. I lost my Olympus, my altar, my friends, and my sense of *realness* that I experienced at the top of that hill.

At the beginning of the summer of 1986, I stepped outside and suddenly couldn't remember what I had ever done out there with the glaring sun and the manicured lawn

and the flowers in exactly the right places. I went back to my room and never went out to play again.

Here I am, forty-six years old, worn out from the cycle of education, work, productivity, and consumerism. Here I am, wondering, as most forty-six-year-olds do, what happened to that girl, what happened to her stories, to her prayers, to her relics. Were they meant to be lost? Was that time on Olympus simply a rite of passage, a turning point as I ran on, fleet-footed and sure, to the secrets and promises of adulthood? Or, maybe, that summer was the truest, most real, most authentic I've ever been. Maybe, as we scramble through our lives trying to be happy, to be useful, to have more and do more and be more and, above all, to be worthy, we've lost track of the stories we lived by as children, stories that nourished us and offered a way to relate to the living world, indeed, to remember that this world *is* living. Remember: put your ear down close to the earth and wait for the pulse of life. Remember.

Stories shape our lives, our world. Not just traditional stories, like Andersen's fairy tales or the mythologies that define a culture, but the stories we tell ourselves on the darkest nights, about who we are, about why we're here, about what we do and don't deserve. Not only do these stories shape our individual lives, but our communities, our relationships with ecosystems and the planet and beyond.

The notion that there is a tangible power in storytelling is an ancient one. Although many Western cultures have lost the practice and significance of storytelling, most indigenous cultures understand that stories change the course of the planet. Stories can raise mountains, hold the earth in balance, or die to be reborn as crags and fjords and frost giants. They explain natural phenomena, the human place in the universe, the way to health and joy. They warn us and hold us accountable. Stories link us with all the life around us. They even challenge our definitions of "life."

Stories are a way back to sacred space, to healing, to reverence. Stories are my way back to myself. Because, really, this is all I have: this body of mine moving through time and space, the meadows and wetlands that surround my home, the work of the bees in the clover, the sun on my son's face, my husband's laugh, my mother's soft body collapsing in on itself with age, and, running through it all, the threads of stories that hold them, and me, and more, all together.

Count them. Number the stories as you number your days and hours and minutes. Gather those stories in a register more precious and real than any bank account.

This is all I have.

TOWARDS GRACE

Katharine Gregg

The experience of Coronavirus brings to mind big words like *profound* and *cosmic*, *unfathomable*. Words expressing the vastness of space and the depths of abyss—really the same phenomenon. *Boundless*, a condition we haven't yet begun to apprehend, let alone understand.

When everything we have accumulated, built, arranged around us that gives shape to our lives and substance to our personhood is stripped away, how do we know, even recognize ourselves? We are like infants, naked and bereft of a guiding heartbeat. Spring is moving into summer where I live. The wheel of the year continues to turn. Trees and all plants green and blossom. Animals turn to generation. At first we will continue the motions of life as usual—there will be courtship, marriage, babies will be born, ambitions pursued—but all this may soon turn out to be the mechanical motions of habit. Empty.

We have been paused by an invisible force and are no longer the possessors of free will and choice. In fact, we are reduced to wearing hazmat gear to safely breathe.

I have awakened at three in the morning with the phrase *grace of serving* in my mind. *Grace* is a beautiful word. From Latin *gratia*, gratitude and kindness. I hear a reciprocity in these two meanings, for *gratitude* doesn't stand alone. It suggests relationship, a looking back to something given. *Kindness* looks forward. It is an act. Grace, then, is relational.

Except in theological terms, the word has been trivialized. My online dictionary defines it as "simple elegance or refinement of movement" or "courteous goodwill" and "an attractively polite manner of behaving," "the condition or fact of being favored," and, finally, "a short prayer offered in thanks for food." So I go back to the Latin and play around with it. *Servire gratia est*. I like the sound, and the slightly rearranged meaning. *To serve is grace*. That's really what I'm thinking at three in the morning.

Grace requires connection, participation, interaction—understood in most spiritual traditions as divine potential in human beings. *Potential* is my word. Divine potential is surely present in all living things, but we have given it specifically to ourselves and treasure it as the gift that separates us from the rest of creation. It brings free will and choice and—another relational word— *service*.

In my life *Servire gratia est* has become limited. I live in a residence of elders, and rightly or wrongly we are heavily protected and restricted during this time of lockdown. We are reduced to experiencing the world through the TV screen, so the actuality of hospital wards, surreal doctors and nurses, refrigerated dead and mass graves is further removed from us. Only through TV or newspapers can we experience the faces of supermarket workers, police and fire fighters, nurses and doctors who have died serving. And if we long to serve, we weep.

Grace here is as simple as bagging groceries at food banks, making deliveries to shut-ins, offering a presence to people who are sick from other diseases and need comfort and care. A smile, a wave, a nosegay of violets from the back field.

I've been reading the biography of a woman I knew when we were both 18 or so. Annalena Tonelli was an American Field Service Exchange student from Forlì Italy, near Bologna, to our a posh little private school in Cambridge, Massachusetts. I don't believe any of us ever got to know her, or perhaps ever really tried. She was different and, amid the gush of early 1960s teenage girls, serious, a bit remote, unfathomable, already touched in her *liceo* by reading Gandhi. For her senior speech she spoke in her rarified English of the *Risorgimento*—a word too foreign for us even to imagine—from pages of densely penciled notes in her beautiful calligraphy. Back at the University of Bologna she discovered the Casermone, what must have been a Dickensian warren of tenements where she cared for the needy, especially the children.

In 1969 Annalena went to Wajir in The Northern Frontier District (NFD) of Kenya, a wedge of the worst kind of desert between Kenya and Somalia. She went to teach English but gradually was drawn to working with sufferers of the most virulent and tenacious disease of the area: Tuberculosis. And especially with the children. She had no medical degree, but she studied to learn how to care for them and administer the medicines necessary to cure their scourging illness. Most importantly she learned to tailor the lengthy treatment required for the disease to the most needy, the desert nomads whose lives were constantly on the move. "There is no one," Annalena wrote to her family in one of the letters collected in *Lettere dal Kenya*, "and I mean no one, who takes the initiative to wash a sick person or clean urine or vomit. No one listens to the suffering, no one brings them the relief of a little water, a change of position, a word of comfort." Though not a doctor, those things she could do, and she did. Holding three-year-old Ibrahim who suffered from malnutrition and spinal tuberculosis, she said, "Who knows how much he has suffered. Now he just wants comfort, peace, and the security of a mother's heartbeat." "We must do everything . . . to love all, serve all."

Annalena survived heat, drought, terror and disease. She was assassinated outside the tuberculosis clinic she had founded in the remote village of Borama, Somaliland in 2003. She was a tough, iron-willed woman of love. Even as a child her determination made her difficult for those around her and later caused her to make costly mistakes in her work. But love and service were constant. This surely is grace.

Tuberculosis and a society unhinged by warring cultures and poverty created—and continue to—inhuman challenges in the Horn of Africa and many other parts of the globe. Yet Coronavirus is unimaginably greater. Those words *profound, cosmic, unfathomable* arise again. When the immediate—and surely just the first—crisis passes, what world will we find? Some of us may stride around defiantly reclaiming business as usual. Others may constantly look for signs of the next tide of pandemic. Some will be permanently afraid. Will squares six feet apart be the new

norm for public interaction? How will we listen to music, attend a ball game, visit a museum? Will we dare to get close enough to one another to talk, to hug, to kiss, to make love, to create children?

I studied for a while with Eliot Cowan, who teaches the healing energy of plants. He sees the human world today as cold, human beings separated, each in our own carapace—my word, not his, but the image brings into view the hard, cold kind of shells we have drawn ourselves into. He taught me that we have lost the warmth of community and its concomitant, service. Each in our own separateness we have lost the connection of sitting together by a fire, of sharing food or a heartbeat. It is the egotistic, competitive character of our society that has brought us to this place. How much colder will Coronavirus drive us?

The grace of service we have been given by caring professionals during this pandemic is a grace of crisis, but that doesn't at all diminish its value, its beauty. However, when these conditions ease, the dimension of pandemic will remain. We will grope our way back to life, but we will be forced to understand it has profoundly changed. It's as though we have scaled the mountain, but instead of a beautiful view on the other side we find empty space. All we have known is gone, and the blank before us will require us to create and shape the world in a new way. Perhaps it will be similar to what Noah must have experienced when he stepped off the ark. An unrecognizable land. And the biblical story suggests yet something else. A warning. Pandemic is a kind of flood after all, and coronavirus is an admonition to look back before we assume we can move forward. Especially in our old ways of separation and egotism. Out of the blank we have an opportunity—if we choose to pursue it—to shape a different kind of relationship for our living. But a band-aid, skin-deep gesture won't do. This requires diving in head first where we cannot see the bottom or the old habits of being that will confront us. Such was the action of those who served in the crisis with kindness and gratitude. Such are the actions we individually must bring to the world. Such are the actions of a new grace.

To Serve and to Be Served Are One and the Same

[Zen sanctuary, dimly lit by candles, smokey]

MASTER

It was my pleasure to wash them for you.

CAINE

They were very dirty from my work in the garden.

MASTER

Yes. But no more.

CAINE

I am very grateful. [bows]

MASTER

And I to you, for allowing me to be of service ... If in serving one, one is served, and in being served one also serves. Are these not the folds of the same garment?

CAINE

I do not understand. I am pleased you have done my wash, and ashamed I have not done it for myself.

MASTER

Again, you have taught me.

CAINE

How?

MASTER

A man truly himself will not enrich his own interests and make a virtue of poverty, he goes his way without depending on others yet is not arrogant that he needs nobody. The greatest man is nobody.

from the tv series, *Kung Fu*
episode: "In Uncertain Bondage"

CONTRIBUTORS

Christopher Heffernan My poetry and fiction have been placed in magazines and journals around the country such as *The Believer*, *The Writer's Journal*, *Pacific Coast Journal*, *Cottonwood*, *Talking River*, *Toasted Cheese*, *The Broadkill Review*, *Midway Journal*, *The South Dakota Review*, *Louisiana Literature*, the *Sierra Nevada Review*, thologies and journals including *Spillway*, *Los Angeles Review*, and *Lavender Review*. Her flash novella, *Adele and Tom: The Portrait of a Marriage*, (Breaking Rules Publishing) was published in February. Originally from the Appalachian South, Courington lives in California

Thom Young is a writer from Texas. A 2016 Pushcart Prize nominee. His work has been in *Poetry Quarterly*, *3am magazine*, *Thieves Jargon*, *Word Riot*, *The Legendary*, *48th Street Press*, *The Zombie Logic Review*, *Commonline Journal*, and many other places. Featured poet and critic of social media poetry on PBS Newshour.

Jose Oseguera is an LA-based writer of poetry, short fiction and literary nonfiction. His writing has been featured in *Emrys Journal*, *The Hiram Poetry Review*, *Inlandia* and *The Literarian*. He was named one of the Sixty Four Best Poets of 2019 by the Black Mountain Press. His work has also been nominated for the Best of the Net award (2018, twice in 2019) as well as the Pushcart (2018 and 2019) and Forward (2020) Prizes. He is the author of the forthcoming poetry collection *The Milk of Your Blood*.e *Tampa Review*, *Whiskey Island*, and *Big Muddy*. I have had a book of poetry and flash fiction titled *Rag Water* published by Fly By Night Press.

Chella Courington is a writer and teacher whose poetry and fiction appear in numerous anthologies.

Thomas Badyna Formerly publisher of alternative weeklies; later, various roles with various construction enterprises; presently, beverage importer, Toledo, Ohio. I am not young, have come to a proper literary avocation too late, I think, to have as my gods what others have or have had for theirs. Maybe there's a god for old men starting out, but if there is, he or she is a distant god, an attenuated thing like having no god at all. I don't mind.

Credits:

2016, screenplay, *Shitstream Sayonara*, probably to be retitled, written on contract.

2010, thereabouts, published in a variety of literary magazines a couple of essays, four or five short stories, one of which, the "Toledo Penis Reader", was anthologized, *Test of Underground Voices*.

2000, give or take, an Honorable Mention in a 24-hour fiction contest

In the late eighties, published, edited alternative weeklies; also was a staff writer for *The Coloradan* in Fort Collins and *Metropolitan Magazine* in Toledo, Ohio.

Nineteen, twenty years old, published a number of poems in literary magazines.

Raymond Luczak is the author and editor of 25 titles, including *Flannelwood* (Red Hen Press) and *once upon a twin* (Gallaudet University Press, forthcoming in February 2021). His latest book is *Compassion, Michigan: The Ironwood Stories* (Modern History Press). His work has appeared in *Poetry*, *South Carolina Review*, *Passages North*, and elsewhere. A ten-time Pushcart Prize nominee, he lives in Minneapolis, Minnesota.

Melanie White I'm an Anglo-American writer currently living in the UK, where I have published fiction and non-fiction in the *Literary Review*, *Times Literary Supplement*, *Cent Magazine*, *Liars' League*, *Litro*, and newspapers including the *Observer* and *Independent on Sunday*. I currently edit *Shooter Literary Magazine*.

R. Nikolas Macioci earned a PhD from The Ohio State University. OCTELA, the Ohio Council of Teachers of English, named Nik Macioci the best secondary English teacher in the state of Ohio. Nik is the author of two chapbooks as well as six books: More than two hundred of his poems have been published here and abroad, including *The SOCIETY OF CLASSICAL POETS Journal*, *Chiron*, *The Comstock Review*, *Concho River Review*, and *Blue Unicorn*. Forthcoming books are Rough and Rustle Rustle Thump Thump.

Lorren Tipping is a poet, writer, and student. She is currently studying to get her bachelors in Psychology with a minor in Creative Writing.

BeeLyn Naihiwet is a Seattle-based Ethiopian-American poet who immigrated to the United States when she was ten. A mental health therapist by day, aspiring poet by night, she discovered poetry was her second language while reading Rumi in a Medieval Literature class. Most recently she has studied poetry at the Hugo House in Seattle, as well as worked closely with Joy Roulier Sawyer at Lighthouse Writers Workshop in Denver.

Sochukwu Ivye is a linguistic stylistician, a rhythmist and a distinctive metrist. A final-year student of English Language and Literature, he is particularly interested in English Language (as opposed to English Literature) topics. His most enjoyable pastime is learning about newer linguistic trends. Sochukwu hails from Isseke, an ancient Igbo town in Eastern Nigeria.

Pavle Radonic Australian by birth and Montenegrin origin, Pavle Radonic's eight years living and writing in S-E Asia has provided unexpected stimulus. Previous work has appeared in a range of literary journals and magazines, including *Ambit*, *Big Bridge*, *Southerly*, *Citron* & *Antigonish Reviews*.

Auden Eagerton is a non-binary poet located in Kennesaw, Georgia. They received a Bachelor of Arts in English at Kennesaw State University, and will pursue their MFA in Creative Writing at Georgia College and State University beginning in August 2020. Their interests lie heavily in studying American literature and poetry. In addition to publishing their own poetry, Eagerton aims to one day become an editor for a literary magazine and be involved in both sides of the publishing process. Their work has been

featured in *Exhume Literary Journal*, *Cathexis Northwest Press*, *LandLocked Magazine*, *Across the Margin*, *DASH Literary Journal*, *The Bookends Review*, *The Orchards Poetry Journal*, *Digging Through the Fat/Digging Press*, and is upcoming in *peculiar*, *The Meadow*, *Kudzu*, and *Swimming* with Elephants Press.

Gareth Culshaw lives in Wales. He had his first collection published, *The Miner*, by FutureCycle in 2018. He is currently doing an MFA in Creative Writing at Manchester Met. He has been nominated for Best of the Net. Gcwculshaw@moonfruit.com

Michael Mark's work has previously appeared in the *Solstice Literary Magazine*, *New Limestone Review*, *Delay Fiction* and the *Tahoma Literary Review*. He studied fiction writing as an undergraduate at Auburn University, and presently resides in Maine with his wife.

Phillip Henry Christopher Poet, novelist and singer/songwriter Phillip Henry Christopher spent his early years in France, Germany and Greece. His nomadic family then took him to Mississippi, Georgia, Ohio and Vermont before settling in the steel mill town of Coatesville, Pennsylvania, where he grew up in the smokestack shadows of blue collar America. Escaping high school, he made Philadelphia his home, alternating between Philly and cities across America, living for a time in Buffalo, New Orleans, Fort Worth, even remote Fairfield, Iowa, before settling in Indianapolis. While wandering America he has placed poems and stories in publications across the country and in Europe and Asia, including such noteworthy journals as *The Caribbean Writer*, *Gargoyle*, *Lullwater Review*, *Blue Collar Review*, *Haight Ashbury Literary Journal*, *Blind Man's Rainbow* and *New York Quarterly*.

Hiram Larew's poems have appeared widely in print and online journals, and have received four Pushcart nominations. His Poetry X Hunger initiative is bringing poetry and poets to the anti-hunger cause. He lives in Maryland and is on Facebook at Hiram Larew, Poet.

Laura White Gray Last month, my poetry was accepted by *Tulane Review*. My fiction appeared in *Whiskey Island Magazine* and *Berkeley Fiction Review* this past year. Under my previous name Laura White Schuett, I published in *Owen Wister Review*, *Black Warrior Review*, *Beloit Fiction Journal*, *Northwest Review*, *Pennsylvania English*, *Women Behaving Badly*, *Original Sin: The Seven Deadlies Come Home to Roost*, *Event*, *Confrontation*, *Kaleidoscope*, *Calyx*, *Xavier Review*, *Potomac Review*, *Southern California Review*, and elsewhere. I also am a recipient of the Academy of American Poets University Prize, the Kuehn Award, and the Arizona Commission on the Arts Creative Writing Fellowship.

Marc Frazier Thanks for considering. Appreciate it. The first five poems have been published in literary journals. The second five have not. Thanks. Marc. Marc Frazier has widely published poetry in journals including *The Spoon River Poetry Review*, *ACM*, *Good Men Project*, *f(r)iction*, *The Gay and Lesbian Review*, *Slant*, *Permafrost*, *Plainsongs*, and *Poet Lore*. Marc is the recipient of an Illinois Arts Council Award for poetry and has been nominated for a Pushcart Prize and a “best of the net.” His book *The Way Here*, as well as his second full-length collection *Each Thing Touches*, are available online. *Willingly*, his third poetry book, was published by Adelaide Books, New York in 2019.

Jane Rosenberg LaForge's third full-length collection of poetry will be *Medusa's Daughter*, from Animal Heart Press in 2021. Her novel, *The Hawkman: A Fairy Tale of the Great War* (Amberjack Publishing), was a finalist in two categories of the 2019 Eric Hoffer awards. Her work has been published or is forthcoming in *Cease, Cows; Feral; Poetry Birmingham Literary Journal*; and *The Comstock Review*. She reviews books for The American Book Review and reads poetry for *COUNTERCLOCK* literary magazine.

Elise Tegegne A high school French teacher and emerging writer, I recently graduated with my MFA in Creative Writing from Seattle Pacific University. My work has been published in *Genesis* and *Indianapolis Monthly*.

John Grey is an Australian poet, US resident. Recently published in *Sin Fronteras*, *Dalhousie Review* and *Qwerty* with work upcoming in *Plainsongs*, *Willard and Maple* and *Connecticut River Review*.

Jomar Daniel Isip I am a mid-career poet, having published my first collection, *Pocketing Feathers*, a few years ago with Sadie Girl Press in California. However, just like most of the writers I know, I still feel like I am just getting started. My works—including poetry, fiction, and plays—have appeared in many print and online journals. I'm a full-time English professor in Plano, Texas.

Glenn Ingersoll works for the public library in Berkeley, California where he hosts *Clearly Meant*, a reading & interview series. He has two chapbooks, *City Walks* (broken boulder) and *Fact* (Avantacular). *Thousand* (MCTPub), a multi-volume prose work, is now available from Amazon; ebook from *Smashwords*. He keeps two blogs, [LoveSettlement](#) and [Dare I Read](#). Other excerpts from *Autobiography of a Book* have appeared in *Hawai'i Pacific Review* (as fiction) and *Caveat Lector* (as essay).

James William Gardner writes extensively about the contemporary American south. The writer explores aspects of southern culture often overlooked: the downtrodden, the impoverished and those marginalized by society. His work has been nominated for the Pushcart Prize. His work can be found in *Fiction Southeast*, *Deep South Magazine*, *Silk Road Review*, *Newfound Journal*, *Gathering Storm Magazine*, *Burningword Literary Journal*, *The Virginia Literary Journal*, *Streetlight Magazine*, *Soundings East Literary Journal*, *The Mulberry Fork Review*, *Linden Avenue Literary Journal*, *Straylight Literary Magazine*, *Ginosko Literary Journal*, *The Fredericksburg Literary Review*,

Wilderness House Literary Review, Map Literary, Scholars & Rogues Literary Journal, Constellations Journal of Poetry and Fiction Anthology, Foliate Oak Literary Magazine, Crack the Spine Literary Magazine, Huesoloco Journal, Edify Fiction Magazine, Sincerely Magazine, Torrid Literature Journal, From Sac Literary Magazine, Map Literary Magazine

James Harris is a Black, Mexican, and Irish writer who works as an English teacher at numerous colleges in both Maryland and Kansas. He currently resides in Lawrence where he and his wife fend off two demon cats named Todd and Ladybird.

My first work was published in Dark Fire Fiction, released April 8, 2019. I have works published in Youth Imagination Magazine and Jitter Press. My latest story is featured in Allegory Magazine, released in the November 2019 issue. Soon, a piece will be released sometime in 2020 in the podcast, Tales To Terrify. I have an English M.A from UMBC, and I currently live in Lawrence, Kansas.

Yvonne Nguyen I am a recent graduate of the University of Virginia. There I earned dual degrees in English and Drama as well as a Master's in Secondary English Education. Now I serve as an English teacher to high school students.

Marjorie Power's newest poetry collection, SUFFICIENT EMPTINESS, is forthcoming from Deerbrook Editions. ONCOMING HALOS appeared in 2018 from Kelsay Books. A chapbook, REFUSES TO SUFFOCATE, was in Volume 7 of the Delphi Series from Blue Lyra Press in 2019. Journals and magazines which have taken her work recently include SOUTHERN POETRY REVIEW, MUDFISH, COMMONWEAL and ARTEMIS JOURNAL. She can be found at www.marjoriepowerpoet.com

Donald Levering's 15th poetry book, *Any Song Will Do*, was published by Red Mountain Press in 2019. He is a former NEA Fellow and won the 2018 *Carve* magazine contest, the 2017 Tor House Robinson Jeffers Prize, and the 2014 Literal Latté prize. More information is available at donaldlevering.com.

Luke Maguire Armstrong (SingTravelWriting.com), is a multilingual writer who has lived in Kenya, Iceland, Guatemala, Thailand, and India. He has worked in various roles in international development, was interviewed by Christiane Amanpour, and featured on ABC News 20/20. Twice he was mauled by a raccoon. He leads writers retreats at his center Karuna Atitlan in Guatemala, is the author of five books, including most recently, "All the Beloved Known Things" (2019). Luke co-founded The Integral Heart Family Education Center in Guatemala, a haven of hope that teaches former street children creative writing, meditation, yoga, critical thinking, philosophy, art, and psychology.

Jeremy Nathan Marks lives in London, Ontario. Recent work can be found in places like *Muddy River, Unlikely Stories, Literary Orphans, Apricity, Right-Handed Pointing,*

and *On the Seawall*.

Rita Plush is the author of the novels *Lily Steps Out* and *Feminine Products*, and the short story collection, *Alterations*. She is the book reviewer for *Fire Island News* and teaches memoir at Queensborough Community College, Continuing Ed, Queens, New York and the Fire Island School. Her stories and essays have been published in *The Alaska Quarterly Review*, *MacGuffin*, *The Iconoclast*, *Art Times*, *The Sun*, *The Jewish Writing Project*, *Down in the Dirt*, *Potato Soup Journal*, *Flash Fiction Magazine*, and are forthcoming in *Backchannels*, *LochRaven*, and *Chicken Soup for the Soul*.

www.ritaplush.com

Crystal Bevers I have an MFA in Writing from Pacific University, a BA in English from Washington State University (WSU), a certificate in Social and Environmental Justice from WSU, and a certificate in Mythological Studies from The Hedge School in Ireland. My creative writing has been published in *Exponent II*, *Silk Road Review*, *GlassFire Magazine*, *Spark: A Creative Anthology*, and *Soul Paws*. In 2016, I presented at TEDx Yakima on the value of a liberal arts education, and you can find my academic research in peerReview. I was Pacific University's 2012 nominee for the AWP Intro Journals Award and have been a finalist for the Brass NUCL Award.

www.crystalbevers.com

Katharine Gregg I have an MFA from Vermont College. I have work published in major magazines such as *North American Review*, *Cimarron*, and *Nimrod*. My poetry collection *Mere Thread* is forthcoming in May 2021.

