

ginosko literary
journal



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Cover Art:

Water Color of a Carousel in Golden Gate Park

San Francisco, California

Early 1900's, 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

Get up early or stay up late. Think of oneself as being a writer every day.

Write something, anything, almost every day.

Welcome the arbitrary beginning.

It's not what one begins with that matters,
as much as the quality of attention one gives to it afterward.

Surrender to the materials.

Don't try to satisfy some vague standard or ideal.

Rather, try to be interesting to yourself.

Stop thinking of literature in the usual ways.

Think of the piece at hand as a dance. ...

For a writer, the act of writing is kinetic, a dance.

Again, the idea is always to write with abandon.

— Marvin Bell

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The Flood

Amaya Koss

When I'm dead my mother's gonna blame anyone but herself. She's gonna weep and preach and stand on my coffin and talk about God and not me. Like our phone calls. Like the text messages I get at work, vibrating angry, radical against my thigh while a customer screams over three dollars. *Ask God to forgive you of any sins and get close to Him NOW. Pray to JESUS go to church there is no time to waste.*

I know better than to get drunk on a weeknight with unfinished homework waiting in the backseat of my car. Still, I order another beer. I sip at your margarita and watch you from over the silver wall of glass. The rain splatters the outdoor patio with loud claps of thunder and vivid flashes. I ask you to drive so I can dissolve without repercussion. The waiter takes too long at everything.

"My life's a tangled ball of yarn," I say. "My mom keeps sending me apocalyptic text messages. I don't want to talk about how I feel. I always cry."

"It's okay to cry," you say.

I don't want to think about my best friend who resents you and is spiteful and drinks too much. Not about my mom who keeps texting me, voicemails, missed calls, *end is near*. Not the people at work who are cruel about lamps and chip card readers and price changes or the car dealer who may or may not have hidden a crack on the windshield with the price sticker. I ignore when as a child I watched my brother beach a small stream fish until it writhed itself to death, until its little liquid spirit sponged into the concrete the way I do.

The way you collect water on your arm hairs like dewdrops. You say, "You can always talk to me."

When I'm dead I will be for the first time in my life, quiet. The echo of words will disintegrate somewhere I have left behind. They will seal the grounds of my oxidizing decomposition in an affordable casket and everything I owe to the world will disappear and everything I foolishly believe I am owed will disappear and I will be only a few lines scribbled on notebook paper, in class, illegible.

We cannot leave until the rain stops. Somehow it doesn't stop. We try to time it just right, try to pay the bill quickly so we can be ready to run, but the waiter hasn't come back yet, and the rain is an overturned kettle. You calculate the tip with the same, stern expression you wear when you calculate me, decipher my variables. I see the answer in the reflection of the icebergs in your eyes, but I can't understand how you somehow find this beautiful sum of me.

When the storm stops to take a breath, you bolt. I struggle to follow in my slippery, damp shoes. The shivers that blister my arms are not from the rain. My extremities are cold and numb but my animal heart, pumping tired blood, fills up my gut, my stomach and stomach folds, churning with acids and sangria and the skin particles I stole from you, swallowed, when we last kissed. Caught in the rain, water swamps my sandled

feet. Footsteps slosh little buckets of water up at my crotch, my legs, cold. This concoction, this witches brew boils rapidly, instantly, and I have no limbs. I am a pillow that is hot, floating, dreaming, trudging to my car. I fade the way an old t-shirt fades or the way my bank account bloats up and then deflates. I feel big, huge, like I could lie belly down across the continent and actually be grounded, until I'm not. Until my mother texts me again, that vibration at my leg, *Let go of the past! Forgive everyone! Time is short!* Until you, with hands like hot coals and petrichor cologne, grab me in my drunk giggling, harder than you've ever grabbed me, drag me to you in the pitter patter of rain and hold me. The product in my hair washes away from my curls, down to my cheeks and lips, diluted, coating my mouth, slippery, the most ridiculous, wet, chemical gloss. It rises up to my ankles, my calves, my neck. Your presence is not water soluble. My troubles are a slow erosion. We are the animals caught in the flood. A droplet crash-lands in the corner of my eye. It slips down my chin and neck. Cold. Sad. Rapid. You hold my fingers like fossils and I am small and ancient and brittle.

The Woman Clothed with the Sun

You live in my bones like sunlight and rain turns the world silver,
Warm, welcome, wholly unavoidable,
I am stripped bare under your presence, transformed
If I opened my eyes to you I would surely go blind,
So I close them,
Crack my ribs open and surround you in them,
Let your head rest in the cradle of my skull,
Your heart beating alongside mine,
Every step I take on your feet,
Every lover I kiss with your lips.

Coins for the Dead

I am not ashamed to tell you I dream of you in waking hours,
Fantasies, let me tell you of them,
No, let me take you there:
Nighttime, a constellation mobile hung from a velveteen sky
I ask to hold you, and suddenly your head rests in my throat where I cradle you like a
child,
Surely there are stars reflected on my cheeks,
Mary herself,
Surrounded by graves,
Clover and gravel underfoot.
I have been there alone,
Now it is not the same
During the day, smaller
The place where we lay seems closer to the ground,
The penny I leave behind sits dull in the sun.

Will This Become Your History?

Sometimes I think that my purpose is to be burdened
With love for you, fated
To say with my words what the profile of your face said to my heart,
Captured in the blurry glow of early morning and mist.
There is my love, written
Across the bridge of your nose and over the curve of your mouth.
I have tried to immortalize the feeling of your laugh in my chest, alight
As if a thousand phoenixes were burning,
Tugging at my heartstrings.
Keeper of your secrets,
Historian of your dreams,
Am I the divine consort to the sacred blue soles of your feet?
I wonder if my words are preserving you,
Or destroying me.

I Slip You On Like A Well-Worn Coat

Hide inside my head
Where there are no friends, no lovers,
No one real enough to demand my attention.
There are only my thoughts,
As meaningless as a beating heart, will o' wisps that flutter gossamer wings
Against grey matter.
Here in the heavens of my own psyche, locked away from love that pounds at my
bones
Like it is contained in an earthquake and not a weak muscle caged by ribs,
I take the shape of you
So you may walk the corridors of my mind again.

Your fingers linger over my memories,
Tombstones wrapped in sunlight to warm your palms,
A railroad hiding in the undergrowth makes a path for your feet,
Notes of a song that said all the things we could not breeze through your hair,
A plastic lawn chair waits for you like a throne,
Its mate attracting dust somewhere in your own head.

The illusion of you isn't enough to trick my thoughts and they sting like sleet on your
skin,
Melt in fiery trails across your arms and cheekbones,
Bitter like tears when they slip between your lips.
It is my tongue that tastes them,
Only your face that wears them.

I Am

When will my mind break free from my body?

It is a shimmering creature of wings

that beat furiously against the fraying ribbon

that holds it to the earth.

Glittering golden where it dares float close to the sun, opaque like milk glass in the shadows.

My tethered mind pulled taut, straining at the seams. Fluttering with potential,

Trembling at the approach of freedom, waiting

for the gentle snap of separation, when it comes

will my spirit pursue the tempest of thought, or find a home in the bowels of my bones?

The First Bite

You would be wrong to decline It,
This sweet salvation of knowing.
The Golden-Eyed Sphinx, calling out across the sands of time,
It is past and It is present, a tomb to rest within,
A pyramid of possibilities, a myriad of moments.
Swallowed up by The Beast, cradled in the bosom of serpentine coils
You are given the gift of flame, the curse of humanity.
When you reach out with star-speckled fingertips It reaches back,
Surfacing you from the depths of mortal sea,
Upon a chariot.

The Lyrids

Sitting in a graveyard, I showed my brother
His first shooting stars, quick to disappear
This moment like a meteor itself, burning away
Faster than we can capture, I let go
Of the memories I held close, my chest full
With treasures we hunted, those I forged
Golden and dripping through my fingers

Surrounded by the dead, crickets sing a funeral
For my brother and I, still living and burning like
Stars that age above us, whiplash wishes
You must be lucky enough to see, gone as fast
As they came, we were struck silent in awe
Of blood shared between our veins, tied
Together in this lifetime

Honoring strangers, buried below our feet
Are stories already told, ours overlapping
A time and place I shared, selflessness an art
My brother is teaching me, to love
You were a gift, to love myself is a lesson
Learned like the astronomer, I realize
I can witness the stars and not wish for more

What Incarnation

Skull to skull, pressed against
The ivory of the moon was
A masquerade, a dance for two
Sang a song like creek water in
Early summer, fishing for secrets
Beneath the laurel leaves of
A forest home, sweet and unforgiving like
Mother Void who held us fast in the womb

Born again, to a world of
Wild and wet and warm
Blood beneath flesh, felt within hand
Holding fast to quicksand years
Spent time, a clock spun too much
To do, write these vessels like
Ships passing waves of lovers
Once known, the act of recapturing
Moments impossible to reconstruct

In nebulous fields, a twilit guide
Reaches over ripples and tides to
Give divine, remember energy instead
Of matter which is only mortality
The gift, knowledge that may last
Longer now without a future or past
Death repeated, only to find it again
Naked skulls grew into an infant

I Am Not In Love, Love Is In Me

I am that which is not my body,
You will not find me tethered to thoughts
What I am is not fraught with senses,
It is less like the ground and closer to the clouds
How then, can I say I am in love?

I am not my anger, I will not allow it to wear me
The earth is my cloak and the moon is my crown
I am filled with the sun, and the sun it fills me
I am not my sorrow, the golden chariot will not let me drown
How then, can I say I am haunted?

Your ghost cannot touch me if it only follows my steps,
The phantom of your memory remains locked in a mind that only rests in a head
When I leave this moment in eternity,
I will forget the body that lay on its deathbed
What is it of you that remains with me?

A face I cherished is naught but a mask
A laugh I caught and held within my chest,
As fleeting as your name, countless ones I have called you the same
What is this we share, beloved,
That the stars themselves tremble to witness?

Racetrack Apologies

I swear you were there
Illuminated in dream-sun,
Speaking gentle in dream-tones,
Dream-mother said my eyes were bright,
The vision of you filling me with light,
Words and affection came so easy, dream-lover.
I told you how I ached and
You spoke of love to ease my pain.
I would have taken you to the graveyard,
But before we arrived I found myself awake
If we had made it there,
Would I open my eyes to you in the light of day?
I spend a moment in bed, eyes closed, and
Can almost hear the echo of my soul,
Dreaming with you and your own.

I swear you were with me
Filled with dream-love,
Moving in dancing dream-steps,
Dream-sister was glad to greet me,
A moment in unconscious made me family,
The path before us seemed so easily lit, dream-beloved.
You told me how you ached and
I whispered admissions to free your pain.
We should have ended there, among the graves,
But this night ended in morning wide-awake
If I had kept eyes closed,
Would a moment more have let them open to your sleeping form?
I spend days in the pines, sacrum fetal, and
Can almost remember my spine unfurled,
Spiraling through the cosmos where we were born.

from Elsewise In

1
what was once

a sigh of resignation
prayers in your cup

was once a simple unit
of meaning

crutch-like

to prevent failing

regardless of
the yes song
adorning your lips

a line of tragedy
diverted
to some artist's image

art is climax over
foreplay

down that shakes out
a billion stars

fieldgrass broomed
from the incandescent

desire that was
impalpably bright

now a wisp
sublimated

in leaves drooping
invisibly in wind

the next look at trees
winter-bare

virgin bark
invaginated

2

the sum of murders
provoked by faith

the many ghosts
you learn to love

the bizarre happenings
you ascribe to angels

the voices you hear
praising mute silence

the words you speak
negligent on caring

the pendant you wear
a cross with a hilt

3

morning delivery van
Guiding Eyes for the Blind

blaringly white

the word *phylacteries*
in my dream

is buried aside
(the master reminds us)

until the smart soul
says it's under the desk

this one?

unbury things
feel for a small box

animal skin
ribbon of raw silk

a vellum tab within
has the secret name

ecstasy

4
bathing the living
in preparation for . . .

that transport
temptation

rest and be in truth
purged
elided

of all extra categories
like prissy

the imprudent wear
collars
made from dead animals

no whisperers
no consolation

the bather, divine

5
the moment before making sense
reds coruscate
like blood on snow

edges mobilize
gathering dispensing
waiting on the trumpet

pixels like hornets soar
raising a dust you cannot see

the brain laps time
thinks, you must go everywhere
take the shortcut

you earmark trauma
from upside down

to see nothing has happened

the yet nevertheless
where the heart beats
its mysterious swerves

take one before it misses

8

And its whole *infinity* kind of thing. Its whole *sounds like the past tense of eat* kind of thing. *Number of days since you left me* kind of thing. *Date without a D, Hate without an H* kind of thing. Its whole *figure skating* thing. *Skate without the sk* kind of thing. *Years it will take to forget you* kind of thing. *If ever*, kind of thing. *How it looks like two people hugging* kind of thing. *Like the people we were* kind of thing.

Power Out

The whole city blackened like a chicken. Like a fish. You thump around the apartmentbox, bump into the bedbox. All in search of a flashlight. No bars, of course, on your fancy, fancy phone. You dig out a transistor radio. It was your mother's and she thought you might need it someday. That was before she died even though you might need her someday. The transistor croaks and spits out a word here and there. Grid and citywide. All you know is that the dark is getting darker. You remember that your phone has a flashlight, but by now you've settled in the thought of how far you have lived since your mother. You want to know the same about light. You take a seat to wait it out. The transistor still on. Every so often a sputter.

On a Crosstown Bus, I Pretend That You Love Me

I answer my phone and tent my hand over my mouth. I pretend I am speaking a secret, though the entire bus glows with people. I am alone, always, in a crowd. Minutes wander, gather into hours. You sent me spinning when you left me. I pretend-talk to you now because I love to look like love. I turn toward the window. I pretend to say goodbye. I look back now to the people, my finger ending the call, the crawl of hurt continues.

Do Trees Have Fathers?

This tree, for example, which by the way,
does make a sound, cries every autumn

letting go of its leaves, moans as it watches the hikers
crackling them to shreds. And then, the scream

as the woodsman strikes his axe, wails the tree to the ground.
The woodsman hears the sound, stands back and smiles,

Good work, he tells himself and goes on to the next. He leaves
the branches shivering behind. The wood will be turned

into fireplace logs, floorboard planks. The next tree
is older, scabbier bark and drier to the touch.

A creak and then a thud as it hits the forest floor,
the hundreds of trees inside of it making no sound.

This Day

Eleven in a string of hush, the woman tiptoes cups of black tea, bowls of apricots to the man she is keeping hid.

He killed a man, two men, three. They had been torching houses, the char blackening the drifts of snow. They had been flaming trees, winterbare and gnarled like fingers. He put his last bullet through the men, lined up in trio. It went from head to head to head.

Out of nowhere three, four, five sprouted up. And him with his gun bullet-empty.

He ran and found a house, so white and see-through it blended into the snowscape. If he hadn't bumped into the house, he wouldn't have known it was there. He felt around for the front door. His fingers finding the icy bell.

The woman who lived there took him in. *The best way to keep a secret, she said, is to become one.* And so, they did. Now, eleven days in, only her cup is visible, and only a touch of his cap. He drinks the tea. It flows down to his barely-there stomach. This goes on and on. The two of them disappearing, first down to a whisper, then down to a breath.

Not that he was afraid to look down

Not that the sidewalk was speckled with people running this way and that. Not that the birds were flying right by him. Not that this one bird looked him dead in the eye as if to say, we're trapped up here, too. Not that the sirens below were wailing and spinning their lasso of sound. Not that anyone was running anymore, their faces turned upward now, their open bird-mouths saying *ohh* and *ohh*. Not that he could tell you what brought him here in the first place. Not that it was part of the story anymore.

Jet Is Not My Horse

Jim Latham

She's my mom's all-time favorite horse. She's almost twenty years old, and she's down on the ground, rolling, when I get back from town.

Right away, from the way she is moving, I see it's bad.

I have absorbed enough veterinary medicine in thirty years of watching my parents practice to know that colic this bad in a horse this old almost always ends one way.

I grab a halter in one hand and dial Kitzel with the other. Kitzel is the only large-animal vet in this small Colorado town who isn't either of my parents.

* * *

My parents are away in California. I'm house-sitting. Keeping the dog company and feeding the horses.

I get Jet up and try to walk her, because that's what you do with a horse with colic. That's all you *can* do before the vet gets there, but she won't stay up.

After the tenth or hundredth time of Jet going back down, I leave her for a few minutes and try my parents on their cell phone.

No answer. I leave a message. I focus on medical detail. I focus on trying not to sound panicked.

* * *

Kitzel arrives. The look on her face tells me Jet is exactly as bad off as I thought she was. We get Jet up, again and again, and walk her, but she keeps going down, keeps trying to roll the pain away.

I call my parents.

No answer. I leave another message.

Jet is starting to bloat. Bloat means intestinal torsion—a piece of intestine has flipped over itself, cutting off the blood supply, which kills the trapped section. It means our only options are surgery or euthanasia.

* * *

The bloat and the pain are overpowering the meds. We can't keep her comfortable. We can't even keep her up and walking.

I have absorbed enough veterinary medicine in thirty years of watching my parents practice to know colic this bad in a horse this old almost always ends one way.

The phone rings in California.

Nobody answers. I don't bother with a message.

We keep trying to walk her.

I keep dialing.

* * *

There are two choices, and it is past time for choosing: put Jet down or trailer her to Kitzel's hospital for a surgery with a very low chance of success.

I know what the correct medical decision is. I know colic this bad in a horse this old ends one way.

But I chicken out.

I chicken out because out of all the horses she has loved in a lifetime of spent loving horses, Jet is my mom's all-time favorite horse. I can't tell her over the phone that Jet is dead and I made the call.

Not without allowing her a chance to consult with Kitzel.

I tell myself I'm giving Jet a last chance to live, that I'm giving my mom a chance to say goodbye. But the twist in my guts tells me I'm lying to myself.

I ask Kitzel to perform the surgery not because I don't know what to do, but because I'm afraid of the responsibility.

My cowardice sentences Jet to hours of pain.

* * *

Head held low, Jet walks into the surgical bay on shaky legs.

Kitzel administers the anesthetic, and Jet goes down again. Her barrel-shaped body is propped on a table and shrouded in green drapes. Her long black tail is wrapped in white gauze and held out of the way.

After the prep, Kitzel makes the incision. Techs wearing goggles and face masks and green gowns cradle what seem like miles of Jet's purple-blue intestines in their latex-sheathed hands while Kitzel searches for the loop of intestine that twisted over itself. She finds and excises two necrotic loops and sews Jet back together.

* * *

I check the messages while putting away groceries. Mom and Dad have dropped everything in California and started the drive back. It takes about seventeen hours if you drive straight through. They'll be here late morning.

They're probably in the Sierras now. No reason to call. I go to bed.

* * *

Late morning. Jet is back in her paddock. The bloat and the pain are also back. The only things keeping her up are a whole lot of pain meds and Mom walking her.

A friend with a backhoe has dug a hole in the shady spot Mom picked under three ponderosa pines at the edge of the pasture where Jet liked to stand on hot days. The two of us walk her over to it.

Dad has a syringe full of purple euthanasia solution. Mom presses her forehead to Jet's, strokes her neck with her free hand.

The needle goes in, and Jet goes down for the last time, involuntary sighs shuddering out of her lungs as her legs buckle.

* * *

Nothing in the world is as dead as a dead horse.

Dad and I run chains from the bucket on the backhoe to her hocks, and then the engine revs and her shaved, incised stomach sloshes as it follows her hind legs into the hole. Her head moves last, pivoting mechanically at the neck when her upper incisors catch on a root and pull her neoprene-thick lip away from her long, worn teeth.

The bucket presses against Jet's body, fits it into the grave. Dirt clods rumble down. Before long, the dirt hides her from view.

Mom walks away, looking for solitude. Dad and I stand and watch the backhoe moving back and forth, working the dirt on top of Jet's grave.

When it's done, I pick up the empty halter, and we trudge uphill to the barn.

The Central String

Nicholas Bridgman

George's parents, Gene and Rose Carter, had always been poverty-stricken. From as early as George could remember, they lived in a tiny 2-bedroom apartment in an inner-city slum. They had had rough childhoods, having to drop out of school to work in factories and scrounge what little money they could for their families. They met when they were both age 18 and working at a chrome nickel plating factory. They locked eyes over the chemical vats, and one day Gene asked her out to dinner. He wanted to take her to a movie too, but he did not have enough money to buy tickets. So after eating at a cheap burger shack, they ended up sneaking in the back door of a local theater he knew about, from having snuck in several times before. He always felt guilty about doing it, but not guilty enough to stop, seeing as he never had the money anyway. But even though he had little to spend on the date, Rose could tell he felt genuinely interested in her, and she enjoyed the date very much. After a year of low-cost dates sneaking into movies, hiking in parks, and just sitting together holding hands in the evenings, they decided to get married. They had almost nothing, but what they did have in each other they appreciated, that central string around which everything else resonates: love.

Once they married, they moved into the small apartment they would inhabit their entire lives. They decorated and furnished it sparsely, but what items they possessed were special to them: a houseplant Rose loved watering each day and watching grow, a sign she had woven saying "Bless our home," a comfy recliner Gene picked up second-hand at a thrift store, floral dishware Rose's parents gave her when she married, and a 12-inch television with an old-fashioned tube Gene felt thrilled to find at a garage sale for \$5. The television was so old it could not connect to modern digital channels, but Gene rigged up a receiver using a cable box and some wires a neighbor had thrown in the trash. It worked well enough to pick up the news and a few sitcoms on basic channels, which he and Rose enjoyed watching together regularly.

Less than a year later, Rose became pregnant with their only son, George. Gene stood in the hospital room where she delivered him, watching her push with such strength and life force. He felt transfixed, never having seen anything so beautiful. When George's head came out, Gene felt bringing this son into the world was his greatest accomplishment, it made him happy beyond what he thought possible. After all that Gene had suffered, after a life of poverty and hard work, illiteracy and cheap dates, he had something even the richest princes and senators and celebrities most desired: his own child to love.

When they brought George home, they felt happy but also ashamed they hardly had money to provide him basic essentials. They had no crib, only two onesies for clothes, and a half-pack of diapers someone at the hospital had kindly given them. They decided that night, George would sleep in their bed between them, their bodies

acting as the sides of a crib, protecting him from danger as he slept.

In the first few months of his life, they had to choose between buying food for him and paying for their own needs such as medication, clothes, and food, which they had hardly been able to afford before having him. But they cared for him so much they would often forego their own needs so he could have applesauce or mashed vegetables. Rose often felt lucky that she could at least provide him milk from her own breast, saving money by not having to buy formula. On occasion, Gene felt so hungry for a full meal containing meat, he would take some of George's baby food money and buy himself a steak. This inevitably made him feel bad, and he would again forego meals the next week so George could always eat.

Despite not having many material things, as George grew they did many wonderful things together. Rose would take him for walks every day, in an old second-hand stroller she purchased for \$3. She enjoyed pointing out the flowers and birds to him. He would smile in delight at what she showed him, and she felt happy to introduce him to the natural world.

She also became very creative at cooking delicious meals with few ingredients, mostly from the dollar store. While none of her meals were fancy, they were usually surprisingly flavorful and filling. She learned what foods George liked the best, and she became good at pleasing his taste buds at each meal. For example, he liked the smell of the sage bushes that grew near their building, so she would buy sage cheese or cook stew with sage leaves. He also had a fondness for seafood, perking up when they took him to the wharf and he could smell the fish. While they could not afford salmon or mahi mahi, Rose would buy certain pink mushrooms that were much cheaper but had a similar seafood flavor. George loved these in stir-fries.

Each year, they celebrated his birthday as festively as they could without spending much money. Rose would bake him a cake herself, and she and Gene would each give him a small gift, having no friends or relatives nearby to invite. At the time, George noticed neither the sparsity of the party nor his parents' extreme joy to celebrate him. He was just happy to have a party.

As he grew older, going to elementary school, and then junior high and high school, they continued to sacrifice everything they had to give him what little they could. In between 50-hour weeks of grueling manual labor, they took him to sports and music practices, helped him with school projects and homework, and even let him drive their only car, an old used Toyota Camry, while they went to appointments on the bus. Meanwhile, they and his teachers noticed he had great aptitude in math, and they encouraged him to pursue the studies he most enjoyed. They met with his high school math teacher, who felt he should move on early to studying AP Calculus. For months, Gene worked overtime so they could afford to purchase an inexpensive laptop, one that would double as an advanced calculator for George's studies.

But as often happens with boys as they become young men, at age 17 George reached a turning point in his life. His parents had spent months saving up money to

send him to San Francisco for a junior year summer internship in math and technology. They knew he would love the in-depth study of math, and hoped it could launch a potential career. They wanted to do all they could to give him what they could to succeed in life and be happy, but what happened there to his psyche they did not anticipate. Maybe they should have, maybe they simply thought the truth, that their love was enough to give, but for whatever reason they genuinely had no idea what to do when they faced the change his trip induced.

In San Francisco, for the first time in his life, George met kids his age without the shelter of what he knew, that is, his parents' poverty and the life they made accessible to him. He lived with well-to-do 17- and 18-year-old roommates who dated young women with expensive tastes, bragging about taking them to \$100 a plate dinners and buying tickets to the front row of rock concerts. He heard kids talk about having huge parties for their birthdays, and receiving lavish, expensive gifts—that, in addition to checks from their parents for \$500.

Sometimes, the kids noticed and made bruising comments towards him for not having the money they did. For instance, he only had two sets of tattered old second-hand shirts and slacks, which he alternated wearing each day. Every time he went to a special event, he wore the same ragged, used brown suit his parents had worked for days to buy him. The other kids mocked him, saying, "Why do you always wear that same old suit? You live in the Projects or something? Tell your mom to turn tricks faster so she can get you another pair of clothes." George felt ashamed, he thought if life was fair they would not be able to talk to him that way.

Suddenly, George saw all he had never noticed before. In just a summer, it became instantly clear to him that his parents were different from other kids' parents—they were paupers. He became enraged at what he felt his parents' poverty had kept from him. His warm and affectionately small birthday parties became unjust exclusion of potential friends he could have invited to a larger party. His parents' gifts, such as his computer they had worked for months to buy him, paled in comparison to the material things his peers' parents provided them with. Even the car his parents let him drive now appeared worthless, for it lacked the status of the pricier BMW's and Audi's the other kids drove. If he had had all these things that money would have bought, money most of the other kids' parents appeared to have, he would have been in a better position to begin adult life, to have friends and girlfriends, to appear valuable in other people's eyes. But as it was, what had his parents provided him? It appeared they had given him next to nothing. Certainly in dollar amount terms, this was true.

Ironically, his parents' sending him to the internship set him up for a career in accounting, which ended up teaching him just how valuable this dollar amount was. His supervisors advised him to study finance in college and gave him good recommendations. Largely as a result of their help, he obtained a full scholarship to Santa Clara University, where he double-majored in Accounting and Business. There, he spent most of his time studying. Even though parents' wealth was not such an apparent factor in college socializing—the students by and large began making their

own way in life—he still felt limited by it. He could not shake his feeling of inferiority, and his anger that because of his parents, he had not started out on equal footing with other young adults. Nevertheless, he earned good grades and when he graduated, he had no problem obtaining employment as a financial adviser at a Silicon Valley tech startup.

After only a couple years, the company promoted him, and he ended up going into management. Not much later, his supervisors recognized him as a standout employee helping their bottom line, and they made him Senior Vice President and Chief Financial Officer. Over the years, he became very rich from this work, seeing his stock options increase significantly as the company grew and merged with other companies.

George obtained through this career the things he always hoped money would bring: women, a fancy house and car, status, and the ability to do what other “normal” people were able to do—that is, normal people who made average or above-average amounts of money at their jobs, unlike his parents. However, this ability proved less satisfying or substantial as he had believed it to be growing up. For one thing, he did not feel the women in his life really cared about him, apart from his being able to provide them financial stability. At age 33, he married a lawyer, becoming even more rich—and yet their union disappointed him. They lived in a mansion with four cars, but they felt unhappy, fought constantly, had affairs and lied about them to each other, and generally felt their marriage was empty, devoid of the life force that animated other people’s relationships. All their money could not produce happiness.

Nevertheless, within a couple years, they had a baby girl named Adele. This girl ended up giving George something no one else had yet been able to provide—not his wife, not his employers, not his colleagues, not even his parents, at least, until now. She gave him the realization that he loved her. He may not have been close to his wife, but his child, his creation, he could love forever. He realized for the first time that his parents gave him so much more than money, they gave him the most special gift of all: love. All that time he hated them, felt they cheated him, they had in fact loved him. All that time they had been financially unable to provide for him, they had loved him. All that time they had cooked whatever food they could find, baked cakes for his birthday instead of buying fancy ones, helped him with schoolwork, let him drive their cheap used car—they had done it all out of love. Every birthday he had had as a child was a celebration of their love, for having created him. And he had nearly thrown all that away for want of money.

Now that he had Adele, he understood how his parents felt. He saw that money was not as valuable as he imagined it was when he did not have it. While it was not desirable not to have it, the other things his parents did for him counted for so much more. They gave him all the love he could ever want, and that was more valuable than money—even in the eyes of the wealthiest kings. He did not want or need the money, the status, the connections. None of that would make his parents better parents, or him a better father to Adele. Now all the facets of his life and relationships began to come

together and make sense in one coherent concept—it did not matter how much he spent on Adele, so long as he loved her. He could do anything he wanted with her, buy her everything or nothing, and if he loved her, her life would turn out okay. For love is the central string to which everything around it resonates, harmonizing, augmenting, and healing even the smallest things it touches.

George's parents had passed away in the last few years, Rose from stomach cancer and Gene of heart disease, and they never lived to see him reconcile his feelings with them. Now he felt so moved by his realization he went to visit their graves. He stood looking at their headstones and the damp earth, and he believed even though they were no longer living, they still resonated to the string of his love. He could still send his love to them, and their beings would receive it, despite that they could not respond. He knew they would always love him, wherever they were, and he felt content in their presence. He did not regret he had not reached this peace with them sooner, while they were alive, because he knew what mattered most was he now appreciated what they had done for him. That in itself was enough. Finally, there at their graves, he could reciprocate their love, and this would resonate on that central string beyond mortality, beyond the edges of the universe, and beyond the mistakes of the past.

Alteration Systems

Even though twenty-six dimensions
might curl in upon themselves
like a nautilus, in this caldera
everything expands.

The thin crust pulls apart,
riding over the burning mantle plume.
Catfish and smallmouth bass drift,
pyrite scales glinting.
The buffalo herd clusters,
then fords the Yellowstone
like ants on a log,
their fur dark shadows
clotting beneath their bellies.
They hoof up the steep bank.
A few stand on the hot asphalt
while stalled cars stretch
like expansion joints.

In the far meadow, finally,
it's too early for mating season,
so the cows forage alpine timothy
and tickle grass for the young,
while the bulls court other bulls
in the wallows, turning their fur silver,
massive ghosts of what they were
before we came.

Time is a dimension.
It reduces everything
until we become
the bison, the fish, the rocks.

Painting My Grandmother's House

I lay down washes, darkening
and deepening them at the top
of the sky, thinning at the horizon,
then intensifying as they slip
to the bottom of my canvas.

Where the mountains vee, I see a house.
The snow above it looks as though
it might slide into the house,
carrying it far down the hill
in a jumble of timber and stone.
The soft snow covers the rocks
around it, freezing in crevices
and expanding when the sun comes back.
Freeze, thaw. Freeze, thaw, nature's
alteration so slow we scarcely see it.

Time alters us, too, rolling us down
the hill to a cliff towering over
the bottom of eternity, then
winding up our years like balls
of yarn, until only the house
in the painting and the shapes
haunting its windows remain.

Elderberries in Autumn Light

I dread seeing the raspberries shrivel on their painful canes
and the ripe yellow waxed beans curl their blackened leaves.
Dark mornings, but I live for noon's refrain, when fat dusty
elderberries dance on their thin red twigs like so many eyes.
I sketch them in blue letters. Sunlit notes form squares on the

berry clusters, shapes against the black spiraling steps that lead
to my bedroom. The water falling down rocks to the pond holds
the sun captive, sparkling diamonds my pen can't capture. The bricks
hold warmth, so I let myself doze in my fading canvas chair, older,
focus forgotten. When I waken, I throw words into the air like sweet

prayers. I conjure the sun into a golden globe and hold it above my
head, almost immolating myself, but my steady inward breaths
wash my cells from pink to silver. They crescendo in a brilliant burst,
healing my sore muscles, my unruly bone marrow, summer's loss.

Light Denied
after John Milton

My visitor cambered his head
at a ninety degree angle to the pond.
What could he hope to catch?
It was midnight and skunks blind.
The goldfish drowsed beneath the rocks,
the mosquitoes had stopped hours ago.
Even so, his silver arrow quivered,
drawn back and pointed at the water,
legs tucked beneath the bow of his trunk.
Each hair aligned, his trail draped over
the other edge of the sandstone bridge.
He was a two dimensional twenty-four
point letter—an “I.”

No: not hunting, not watching—
he drank in dainty gulps.
Perhaps the tissues in his mouth ached
from feasting on the guard bees swarming
when he had attacked their hive at dusk.

Then he rose slowly from the plank
and turned toward me. I lifted my feet
so he could glide beneath me, his ribbon
outlined by the moon’s beams.
I memorized him. If I went blind,
I would still see him. How close
I had come to what I feared most,
teetering on the edge of night, waiting.

Praying

Sinkyone Wilderness, California

hours from uneven gravel

we gather our fragrant things

toothpaste, grapefruit peel, next breakfast

before laying under stars

dangling beyond reach

we sling sack through high branches

not because we've seen bears today

but because we believe

Migration

Mendocino, California

every scoop of pelicans I see
in blue skies between rains
seems to fly South

imagine explaining to them
our national borders

the pelicans scatter
meander and gather
no ghost at their heels

where can all this
unbelonging lead us?

Cape Town Book Lounge
South Africa

standing before the poetry shelf
overflowing with finding
 having and losing
it occurs to me
I've never had
an original thought

 in my life
her "you"
flows into
their "you"
and you flow
through me

when I stepped outside
a raincloud consoled me
 I know
 what it feels like
 to fall
 into a million pieces

originality no longer
concerns me
who would accuse
one raindrop
of plagiarizing heartbreak
 or laughter?

Honey

With those who wonder
“what difference can one make?”

I will plant flowers

and when the buds bloom,
watch the little buzzing bee
who’s life is made here

in the few hours
it has to gather all the
sweetness it will know.

Without faith enough
to prepare seeds in winter
there would be no bee.

Trees see us this way:
hurrying from place to place.
They hang fruit on limbs

to ask: “why not rest
a moment in my shade and
taste your precious breath?”

The bee takes my gift,
to make honey. Flowers receive
the bee and make fruit.

Eat the fruit until
your fingers are sticky and
your belly is full.

“What gift will you share?”
is the work of this world and
the meaning of joy.

Although industry
has filled our hands with pride,
always remember:

only by grace of
another’s hope do we know
the nectar of breath.

Abalone
Mendocino, California

When we first saw them
glistening like oil slicks

felt the smooth
sea-tumbled

not quite metallic
or crystalline

mysteries in our
wind numbed fingers

intuitively we knew
we must be the first

humans
to discover these

puzzle pieces strewn
across the grey shore

or else we would have
heard of them before

equally believable
as scales shed

by some shimmering
sea serpent

or as trinket shards
washed up

from an ancient
truck stop gift shop

no less alien
after hearing them called

“abalone”
conjured no silhouette

in shadow puppet theatre
of mind

returning after
whirling full circle

focus lifts to multitude
fragments of bone

broken stones
soft bodies in fragrant decay

at the ocean's swaying edge
at once

so intimately aquamarine
and distantly blue

all clues to a world full
of unknowable wholes

seen only in
visible scattered glimpses

why then is this familiar
feeling so new?

because my world grew
as it has continued to do

ever since
I discovered you

Inner Sanctum

Richard Risemberg

When we were young, he used to take us with him to his office now and then. I'm not sure why he did this: he had not left our mother yet, and she did not work, and in any case we were in school. But on holidays, when he would go in to work anyway, he would often take us along. It was no treat, although apparently he felt it was.

He worked alone by then; his first big commissions had brought him enough renown in the world of civil engineering that he could leave the firm he had worked for and choose among the suitors that came to him. His office was, in fact, in a building he had designed, flagship of a complex of glass-clad towers on the tonier west side of town, across a grand boulevard from a golf course. The golf course meant nothing to him—his sport, when he was younger, had been swimming, which gained him several trophies that he eventually threw away. But the building itself was a showcase of his work, and at the time it was considered a paradigm, though to our eyes now it looks unutterably banal. The banality was not his fault; he was an engineer, not an architect. But he did like banality, as I have come to realize, and the building suited him: the design principle appearing to have been that of a shoebox stood on end and painted black. Of course there were windows, but they were tinted, and even though they were separated by little ribs of black metal, you could hardly notice them from outside.

Nor did the view from my father's office make an impression: as one of its first tenants, he could have chosen any suite that was in his budget, so anything short of the penthouses. But instead, he chose a pair of windowless rooms in the building's core, on the "wrong" side of the hallway. This was where he spent his days, hunched over a drafting table in the dusty glow of fluorescents, surrounded by drywall painted a particularly dull shade of beige.

To a child of our age a day spent here was worse than the dullest class in third grade, without the noisy grace of recess. He had a library that filled a cheap bookshelf, but its holdings were of course all technical publications: tables of the strengths of metals and concrete, methods of computing stress distributions, applicable building code requirements that were to be followed no matter how the client pled, and a section of magazines with photos of half-finished skyscrapers and smiling jowly men in hard hats and ties. Some of the photos were of our father, looking a little bit the odd man out, as he wore only bow ties, an affectation that constituted the extent of his rebelliousness in those beige days. Girders featured prominently in the magazines, and we understood that I-beams slumbered behind the featureless walls of his office, trembling silently under the weight of the building and all its burden of furniture and soft flesh. We had of course visited dozens of construction sites with the old man, a much more interesting sort of day for us, trailing silently behind him in our half-sized hard hats, while cranes and huge trucks grunted, and muscular swearing men swarmed over the girders that would soon be hidden behind drywall. That was not a frequent

treat; usually it was the office, the beige walls, the dry light, the scratching of his drafting pen in those days before computers changed the soundtrack to the clack of keys. The old man switched to computers before anybody else in the trade, back in the punch-card days; but in the era when he dragged us to the office to see what work was like, he still drew blueprints onto paper with his hand. The most intriguing machine in his office was the copier, which seemed almost playful to us in the deadened air of old man's inner sanctum.

This was not what is thought of nowadays as a copier; it required pulling a crank that initiated some process inside it resulting in a mysterious glowing light, odors of solvent, and various clicks and hums. The copies that eventually came out were bluish and damp, and had to be left to dry; they were strictly "do not touch" items for my brother and me. However, if we nagged my father enough when he needed to use the machine, he might let us pull the crank; that would be the high point of our day if we were condemned to a term in the office. Fortunately we were both readers and always brought books, but, even so, we were used to reading at home, on a comfortable sofa, with windows open to the world all around us, and often the fortunate interruption of a neighborhood friend tapping on the glass with a plan for minor mischief. At the office, we had dead air, dull walls, the various metal cabinets holding blueprints, and the dry dusty glare of fluorescent lamps in their ceiling panels. It was a space excised from the life of the world, perhaps cut out of space-time itself to exist unconnected to anything vital, at least for those of us who were not absorbed in calculating the intricacies of shear wall loadings in the massive skyscrapers the old man designed back then.

At one point I wondered if this was what it felt like to be dead. I had seen one dead man at that time, a colleague of my father's who was laid out in his waxen ignominy so friends could pay respects; he did not seem real, and I wondered whether the corpse was not some copy taken on a cosmic version of my father's machine.

Then one day the phone rang on the desk in the front room of the suite, and my father left his drafting table with a scowl to answer it. I didn't pay attention to the conversation, and in any case what I did catch of it included words I did not know, and which I do not remember. I do remember my father's expression: he looked annoyed as he took a clip-on bow tie out of a drawer in the front desk and worked it onto the collar of his white short-sleeved shirt. He also pulled a plastic comb out of his pocket and ran it through his hair. He had curly, dry, and very black hair in those days, and the comb didn't seem to have much effect. Back then he took my brother and me to a barber college downtown where haircuts cost a dollar twenty-five and didn't leave enough hair to comb, so I was ready. My brother wasn't there that day; he had been invited on a play date with a neighbor's kid, so the visit was particularly boring. "Do you need to go to the bathroom?" my father asked, then said, "Go anyway, just in case. We have to go upstairs to see a client." I followed him to the public restroom down the hall, a room different from his office only in that it featured urinals, sinks, and toilet stalls instead of drafting table and file cabinets, though the vast mirror over the sinks made it seem brighter in a dry fluorescent way. I saw myself in the mirror as my father watched

intently while I washed my hands: a thin, serious face with the same drooping eyes as my dad, and my scalp showing through the dollar-twenty-five buzz cut. Then we went along the shadowless hallway to the elevator bank.

There was no one in the elevator when it opened; sometimes I felt that there was no one else in the building, only my father and me, lost in the windowless long halls of this inexplicable box and its beige doors that almost faded into the walls, its dry hum of fans pushing air you couldn't feel. Gravity changed as the elevator accelerated upward, then it opened into a world I had never suspected: the penthouse office suite, a dazzle of bodies and blinding light: it had windows all around it, I was amazed.

A crowd of men in black slacks, long-sleeved shirts, and long ties bustled about or stood at drafting tables, along with a few women who sat primly behind desks making bright spots of color; the clamor filled a space that seemed to reach across the city, which was visible in the distant windows surrounding the vast room. My father walked quickly, perhaps nervously, to a desk where a slim black woman with lustrous gold-hoop earrings waited; she smiled at me and then spoke briefly with my father; I couldn't really hear them, distracted as I was by the hum of voices and the clatter of typewriters, as well as the brilliant stabbing light that came through the window wall. The woman picked up a phone and I saw her mouth move and noted, though I'm not sure why, that she wore a glistening lipstick in a shade between orange and red, which I now know would probably be called coral. My mother wore lipstick, but always and only the standard red, and only if she was going out or if guests were coming. The only women I had seen in workplaces up to that day had been nurses and receptionists at doctors' offices and the cafeteria ladies at school, who all wore uniforms, or teachers, who somehow didn't count as "workers" in my mind. Soon the black woman told my father that he could go in now, adding, "You know the way, right?" And indeed he did, and he seemed to know many of the people along the way, whom he greeted by name as we passed. Of course they all smiled at me, their large white faces looming down from the bright light of the busy room; I felt almost dizzy and was not capable of smiling back, let alone speaking. I held my father's hand tightly as we walked towards a corner office.

There was another brightly-clad woman at a desk outside that office, a pretty, dark-haired older lady who reminded me of one of my teachers. She smiled at me, of course—how often did children show up in the penthouse suite in those days?—and then addressed my father as "mister," as had the first receptionist. Although I was aware that adults often addressed each other thus, I had never been able to think of my dad as a "mister." He was relentlessly casual, as much as he could be in those days, and actually had instructed me to call him by his first name. At the time, when the first hippie communes were over ten years in the future, I did not realize how unusual that was, though I realize now it was of a piece with his clip-on bow ties and short-sleeve shirts: the minor rebellions of a man who did not truly accept non-quantifiable values, except when they were forced on him by the necessities of economic or, as I later learned, physical survival. The dark-haired lady stood up and opened the door for my

father, who had already begun to reach for the knob, and she gestured him to enter. She asked him as he passed, "Do you want me to tend the little one for you?"

He answered with a curt "No" and took my hand to drag me into the corner office.

The outside of the office had presented nothing more than a broad panel of drywall, a material I had learned to recognize from my father's little lectures on building materials; it was decorated with black-and-white photos of various half-finished buildings, often with low hills behind them, indicating that they were to be found in our city. Inside, however, I was surprised to find the drywall covered with panels of dark polished wood, hung with what looked like certificates and diplomas. There was a large wooden desk against one wall, a plush sofa against the other, and a convoluted potted plant before the floor-to-ceiling window that glared opposite the door. Behind the desk was a large, pale man in a suit, with the folded tip of a handkerchief sticking out of the jacket pocket; even I in my clueless youthfulness noticed that it matched his tie. My father, skinny as a teenager and looking frail in his short-sleeved shirt, advanced towards the large man, who had stood up and come around the desk to greet him. To my surprise, they hugged and spoke a few words of greeting in another language, and then turned to me. "I am very pleased to meet you, little man. Your father and I grew up in the same town, though somehow we never met back then." The large man, whose name I must have heard but not registered, squatted down and gave me a brief hug that blotted out the light of the room. Then he stood up and laughed: "A shy one, eh? Well, I was shy too, when I was your age. You'll grow out of it."

I saw my father smiling down at me; I rarely saw him smile in those days. The large man put his immense hand on my shoulder and guided me towards the window, which looked out over the glittering plain of the city; I could see the ocean far in the distance, a smooth gray-blue bulge leading to the edge of the world. I had been to the beach many times with my family, and to me "ocean" had meant only waves and sand, and my father swimming out far past the breakers while my brother and I splashed in ankle-deep foam or dug sandcastles, and my mother huddled under the umbrella watching us, her head wrapped in a scarf to protect her complexion from the sun. I had never before noticed its implacable vastness. The large man, whose hand still weighed on my shoulder, spoke: "Impressive, isn't it? And your father and I made most of it."

At first I thought he meant that they had made the sea, something I knew was absurd, then I realized that to the large man and my father, the view of the city and the sea was nothing new, and they meant the buildings of the office complex that sprouted immediately below the window. I lowered my gaze to the black angles of the offices, but the most interesting thing I saw was a worker kneeling on the roof of one of them, adjusting something on a large metal box. I raised my eyes back to the texture of red and gray roofs leading to the sea and the distant blur of the horizon. "Look at him," the large man said. "He's fascinated by our work." My father said something in the strange language again, the large man laughed and clapped me on the shoulder, though fortunately not hard, and they left me there, staring out the window, while they talked business behind me. I felt a low, humming exhilaration as I gazed at the distant water,

which seemed quiet as stone from this far, while the city itself trembled gently with traffic in the streets between roofs and trees. At one point, a large bird, probably a raven or crow, passed by below me; its black feathers gleamed in the sun, and I almost gasped, I would have, but I did not want to attract the attention of the two men talking their business. I watched the bird glide through the gulf of air between the buildings of the office complex, finally diving down behind one of them, and watched for a long time to see whether it would return. But it had business of its own, and I did not see it again. The sea in its bath of clear light was always there for me, and the horizon, and I lost track of time. When the men were finished, I could tell by the change in their voices and the brief return to the strange language, I thought it was too soon. My father's lighter hand touched my shoulder and called me away from the sea; the large man smiled down at me again and made some noises with his mouth; I don't think I spoke one word during our time in that office. We walked back past the desks and the black-clad legs of the male workers, past the brightly-dressed women, and down the elevator to my father's inner sanctum, the windowless office with its impossibly even lighting. I tried to read a magazine while my father finished his day's work at the drafting table, but I fell asleep in the chair in the front room.

On the way down in the elevator at the end of the day, my father asked me what I had liked most about the view. I told him it was the little man fixing the box on the roof of the building next door, and asked him what the box did. I knew he would enjoy explaining it to me, and asking that was, I think, my way of forgiving him. He had given me the sea, and didn't even know it. He should have known, but he was as clueless in his way as I was. Yet he gave it to me anyway, and I have never let it go.

MOTHERS' VIGIL

Say her howls were heard throughout the world.
The anguished cries of a mother whose daughter
was dragged down to the realm of the dead.
Hades mad with lust, bore her away in his chariot
drawn by inky-black horses, haunches heaving.
The earth's gaping hole closed behind them.
Say she is ripping her linen tunic, pulling out hunks of hair,
wandering the earth searching, desperate, sleepless,
desperate, hollering until her voice is hoarse, her lungs
exhausted. Say salt tears soak her near naked body.
How could grain sway in the Greek sun
when the shadow of her child covers the earth?
The earth shrivels, plants wither, seeds
die barren in parched drought.

Say he is lying in bed, listless for days, not eating,
maybe nibbling a pomegranate seed. Say his eyes
are sunk in the caverns of his cheeks. Say my son
is mired in another cycle of melancholy, unable
to face a life that feels failed. I see mothers and sons
sipping coffee in sidewalk cafés or meandering
through bookstores, meeting up in the children's
section where they share memories of Max in his wolf
suit and Little Bear on the moon. Say I sleep Ambien
sleep, drink tea gone cold, leave emails unopened,
forget to water the Cyclamen or feed Shiloh. Say I hurl
prayers at a stone deaf god, spit flying from my mouth.
How dare everything seem the same
while his shadow covers the earth.

Say she likes being queen of the underworld. Say she enjoys the feel of the soft satin robes, enjoys comforting the newly dead, who are wandering bewildered on the banks of the Styx. Say he prefers the thick blanket of despair, the dank day after day that blurs the broken angles, that allows him to slip below the surface, sip the waters of Lethe and slide away. Say I reach across the ebon night and touch Demeter's hand. Two mothers waiting for a sign of mercy, a few flickers of light.

WINGS

He soared ever higher on his homemade wings
easy gliding over the Mediterranean
giddy as only a teenager can be
elated to have escaped the dust of Crete
the filthy prison of the labyrinth
and the wrath of old King Minos
I can be anything he shouts to the sun
startling the eagles and vultures
with his newly fractured voice
too close, too close
the wax melts, the feathers drift away
he is flailing wingless arms
help me Father he cries
as he plummets to the sea

What of a boy whose wings lie
limp against his shoulders, a prisoner
of pain's wide wounds, but alive
though his dreams left long ago
no visions of flying in Apollo's chariot
fiery stallions streaming across the skies
or dragging Cerberus from hell, a hero like Hercules
or taking a slow walk around the block, smiling
at Sara Sanders tending her sweet-briar roses
his soul shriveling, curled like an arctic tern
or a three-banded armadillo, tensed against
the future, but alive, still alive
what of that boy whose feathered wings
failed to unfold

STICKS AND STONES

She hums to herself as she dips her paintbrush blue,
coloring the wolf the color of sky so he isn't as scary.
Not about to open his jaws and grab a little girl wearing
a red sweater, like the one she's wearing right now.
She leans back and softly smiles.

There's no such thing as a blue wolf says Miss Webster,
her fleshy underarms jiggling as she grabs
the picture and tosses it in the trash.
Blue tears streak the cheeks of the child.

What of a girl in the second grade play, long skirts
and pigtails with pink bows she tied herself.

Let's see you dance says the drama teacher.
She swirls across the stage, skirts held high,
circling in ever larger circles, thrilled
with how alive she feels in her body,
delighted with the swing-swish sound
and the warmth of the lights.
The teacher laughs.

The child curls inward like a three-banded armadillo
rolling up in a ball with its bony shell on the outside.
Never volunteers to solve math problems on
the blackboard, to take a turn reading
aloud from *The Secret Dragon*.
She sits in the back row
docile and dutiful. She
gets perfect grades.

TIME OUT

I am stingy
with time. Pinching it like pennies
that look like copper but are mostly made of zinc.
Saying no to a walk with Sally or lunch with Eli.
Absolutely no to babysitting my six year old niece
who wants to squander hours playing Barbies
while I check my watches again and again.
Hoarding time like Midas gold. Since
time is a zero sum game.

But time
is an illusion says world famous physicist
Carlo Rovelli. Simply a projection
from a pool of ignorance, our vision flawed
because we can't find the right optometrist.
If we could see the world with all its quantum fuzz,
its mists of probability, we would see
there is no smooth flow of time.
Actually there is no time at all.
Sorry Newton, but here's a Macintosh.

So maybe a tentative yes
if I can bring my iPhone to the family reunion,
to lunch with Eli or a day at Salt Sea Spa
with my weird sister. Wanton hours
wasted, deleted from my diminishing
supply. Quantum leaps that propel us out
of our costive worlds, consuming
piles of our precious nonexistent time.
But like unicorns and pots of gold,
like myths and miracles
they make us feel more alive.

THE WINNER

Steven calls the slack-faced announcer, tugging on his wispy beard. My shy son's number is the first. Impossible. No one ever wins anything in my family. Not raffles or lotteries or well-behaved genes. Manic highs and suicidal lows float freely through our family, like a deranged game of *Duck Duck Goose*, you, you, you, not you, you a sentence inscribed on a soul, indelible *a mother, a brother, an uncle, a niece*

Here he is at six. Nose peeling, sun-kissed blond hair, skittering bird-like on skinny legs up to the table laden with prizes. He stares at the pile. He doesn't pick. The next two winners rush up. One grabs a leather baseball mitt. The other a KitchenAid Blender. Then six more, shoving and pushing. Off go the two handled kite, the GI Joes, the Lego set, the badminton racquets. Frantic, wings beating, my son grabs the canned ham.

Not such a winner after all, especially when later he uses heroin to calm his whirling mind and collapses under covers for days at a time. Stands on a ledge until a bless-you-forever bystander talks him down. *a mother, a brother, an uncle, a niece, a son* But linger a while before you walk away from that warm summer Sunday afternoon in Beachwood Town Hall. Can you see his proud grin as he offers me the Oscar Meyer ham? Can you see his wings unfurl as he soars?

POST COVID GROUNDHOGS

Most people are scurrying out of burrows like strung out groundhogs, blinking at the bright sun, staring at unfamiliar faces no longer covered with Darth Vader masks eager for acrylic nails, a melt massage by *Knead the Knots*

A margarita, make that five, at Manny's Last Stop perched on a barstool, long legs swinging *c'mere* looking forward to sleeping with strangers

But the rest of us don't mind our jagged hair, our craggy nails the same sweats every day, ripped and stained with spaghetti sauce no need to spend hours wondering if the green gingham shirt works with the purple and red striped pants

We don't mind the no-dishes dish of noodled Top Ramen and prefer Zoom, contact once removed, no need to worry guests will stay past eight or decide to spend the night

No need to spend hours preparing a tragic beef wellington or worry about wandering hands in a dead end bar no need to invent excuses since we have a handy prepaid one courtesy of Dr. Fauci and the CDC

But invitations are starting to invade our email a breakfast, a dinner, a Parcheesi club, a new knitting group messages from doctors saying we are overdue

For a crown, a mammogram, a colonoscopy, a synapse scan and we hit *delete delete delete* turn out the lights and scuttle back to our burrows hoping spring will never come

SOMETHING OLD, SOMETHING NEW

My five year old grandson carries a Brontosaurus backpack with his orange lunch, a bottle of water and an extra pair of pull ups, just in case. He hops on the bus and settles in his usual seat, holding a toy, perhaps the green engine Percy or maybe his bright blue monster truck.

When my son went to overnight camp, he hid his GI Joe with a Kung Fu Grip under the shirts and pants and sweaters in his suitcase. He hoped I wasn't looking, it was too babyish. Later he told me he shared a cabin with Jeremy who brought a stuffed cougar with only one ear.

I took three *I Heart You* bears to college to put on my bed. Others brought Ginny dolls pretending they were cute decorations, matching their new ruffled bedspreads. But we knew we all needed a seed of the familiar in order to safely leave home.

When she was older than old, stooped back, half mast mind, painful bunions on both big toes, my grandmother announced she wanted photos of her husband, her four children and all seven grandkids buried with her, along with her saucy crimson heels, just in case.

SKIPPING PAGES OF THE SCORE

Only a thin sputter of spring this year,
like squeezing the last drop of dish detergent
from its plastic bottle. Only a flash of daffodils
before the sun pushed mercury past ninety,
sidestepping tentative shoots in misty rain,
the first robin wrestling a worm.
The rhythm off. Pages ripped from the score.
Moving from winter's largos to summer's prestos,
passing over the delicate adagios of spring.

A splash of lipstick, a swipe of blush, a belly shirt
and skin-tight jeans, rippling and pinging cell phones
in their pockets, fifth grade girls ripe and ready,
skipping tween years, racing to eighth grade.
No more climbing trees, jumping rope, playing
with Barbie dolls *too babyish*. But a Teddy Bear
with a missing ear tucks in with them at night.

My bones ache in the mornings, aches
beyond the read of Advil or Aleve.
I want to linger in the warmth of wool blankets,
curling up like a ground squirrel in its winter burrow.
Skip a walk in the woods. Skip the book club at ten.
Skip lunch with Tara, laughing at her latest
tryst with yet another Mr. OkCupid.
Reaching for the resolution of the finale.
Leaving notes of the frisky scherzo unlived.

GOD OF RANDOM AND ROULETTE

To be crossing Webster on
Sunday at 11:27, swinging
a Wilson tennis racquet
thinking of the tournament
his new topspin serve

at the exact second a woman,
distracted, texting, worried about
her heroin daughter who didn't
come home last night,
runs the red light

The unluck of it all
the cold bleak lack of luck
like a calving iceberg severed
into before and after
or a blizzard obliterating
the first fragile crocus

Dystonia

says the young doctor, who has pimples
and looks too young to shave
painful, progressive, incurable
he turns away in the silence
not what he signed up for
not a success story
with smiling patients

Only the tiny waiting room
at John Muir, only my fingers
clenching and unclenching
nails digging into palms
I see a battle of bladed
days in his future
night-tossed spasms
of a hip, a shoulder, a wrist

and here I am four drinks past seven
at Gil's Bar and Grill
grabbing a handful of god
from a bowl of pretzels

whispering a prayer
for my son, who was simply
crossing the street that afternoon
simply wanting to win the LA
County annual tournament
may he stay alive
no that's not it
may he want to stay alive

The Desperate Lot

John Ryland

The misty rain slipped from the gray sky with a silent grace. It settled gently on the car parked in the vacant lot with a quietness that was both comforting, and efficient. Parked behind a towering brick wall that belonged to a long dormant factory, it waited in the rain for the hours to pass. The empty lot also belonged to the factory, and it too was abandoned by all but a few stray cats, Jenna, and the stranger in the car.

Like the other strays, Jenna was wary of people. She preferred to stay hidden. Things were much easier that way, safer. You didn't know who you could trust anymore. She liked the lot. It was relatively safe. The long, narrow alley leading to 47th street was easy to watch.

Away from the street, the Black Warrior River widened and slowed to a crawl. Its dark waters strolled casually by in a way that always made Jenna think of the word "amble". She didn't know why. Maybe she'd read it somewhere.

She looked down at her watch. 3:17. Pursing her lips, she cast another worried look at the car. There was no movement yet. She sighed and checked her watch again. Now it was 3:18.

Jenna slid closer to the edge of the makeshift shelter, built from wooden shipping crates and cardboard. Her eyes swept the lot. It was empty, as usual. She looked again to the car and shook her head.

Almost every day the blue car rolled onto the lot just before nine in the morning. Sometimes the man would get out and go to the faded yellow railing and stare out at the river for a long time, watching it slip past in its perpetual motion. Sometimes he'd just stay in his car and sleep.

He was old, but not really old. It was hard to tell sometimes with people. The guy had a visible bald spot in his dark hair and a touch of gray at the temples. He was neither slender nor fat, but regular. He wasn't tall, nor short, but average. He usually wore clothes like he worked in an office; gray slacks, a white shirt, and a solid colored tie. His favorite one must be the light blue one, because he wore it a lot.

She'd watched him for weeks and often wondered what he was doing. His presence was a bit of a bother, confining her to the edges of the lot, but she didn't mind terribly. At least when he was here, she wasn't alone.

Jenna checked her watch again. 3:20. "Dam," she whispered, moving forward cautiously. Rain settled on her arms. She held one up, admiring how the mist sat on her hair in tiny droplets. She smiled as her eyes washed down her arm, but it faded when she saw her watch again. She had to do something. The man in the blue car always left between 3:20 and 3:25. She had no idea where he went or why, only that he left. Today there was no movement in the car.

She chewed a ragged nail as she contemplated whether the man was dead or not. Maybe he'd taken some pills and killed himself. He looked sad and lonely, and she knew sad, lonely people did that sometimes. She also knew what it felt like to be sad and lonely.

He might have had a heart attack, she thought. He was old enough for a heart attack. She'd give him another minute. If he were dead another minute wouldn't matter.

She wiped the rain off her arms and settled back on her haunches, squatted beneath the overhang. Her eyes stared at the driver side window. The mist clung to the glass, shrouding the glass in a veil of water. She chewed on her thumb nail, then looked at her watch again. 3:22. She had to do something.

She slid from beneath the safety of her shelter and scurried to a patch of overgrown weeds near the railing. There was still no movement from the car. She sighed around her thumbnail and shook her head again. Why are you even doing this? she thought. Why do you care?

She knew why but wouldn't admit it to herself. The man overslept that was all. She'd knock on his window to wake him up and be gone before he even realized she was there. He'd think it was a dream or something.

Jenna rounded the weeds and hurried to the car in a crouch. Kneeling beside it, she reached up and gave the window three solid raps with her knuckles. Her heart thundered in her ears as she listened for movement. As soon as she knew he was awake, she'd bolt, and he'd never see her through the window.

"Come on," she whispered. She reached up and gave the window three more knocks. Poised to run away, she listened. The rain settled on her hair while she waited, but no sound came from within the car.

She shook her head. Now what, she wondered? The man didn't even know she existed, and she preferred to keep it that way.

Wiping the moisture from her watch face, she grunted under her breath. It was 3:25. If the guy weren't dead, he'd need to leave to get where he was supposed to be. She rolled her eyes, mad at herself. Standing, she pounded on the window with the side of her fist.

Jack awoke to a pounding in his head. His heart leapt into his throat as he rubbed sleep from his eyes. The thought that he was being robbed sent his heart racing. The windows of his car were covered with a fine mist, enveloping him in a silk cocoon of diffused light. There was no way to tell who was outside.

He jumped when three more knocks struck the window beside him. He shrank away from the glass, putting his hands up to defend himself. With no idea what else to do, he stared at the window as a small handprint formed in the mist. The hand made several wipes back and forth across the glass, opening a porthole in the mist.

The small, frail-looking face of a girl stared in at him. Light reflected off the mist covering her hair. The effect produced a tiny rainbow about her head as she squinted to see inside the car. He sat motionless, staring at the girl with a halo.

Her eyes grew wider when she saw him staring back at her, and she turned to run. Jack moved to the window to see where she went, but she was gone. Now alone, he let out a sigh of relief and rubbed his eyes.

“That was abrupt,” he said aloud, shaking his head. Stifling a yawn, he pushed his shirt sleeve up and looked at his watch. Dam! He was running late.

Jenna watched from behind the weeds as the driver started his engine. The wipers came on then the car backed away from the railing. It turned and headed out of the lot in a hurry. She smiled, hoping that he’d make good time and not be late to wherever he needed to be. She went back to her shelter and crawled inside.

“Mittens,” she said, lifting the calico kitten from the blankets. “Have you come for a cuddle?” She settled into the covers and cradled the cat to her chest. It meowed once, then settled down against her and immediately began purring.

Jenna picked her way along the edge of the river, hopping from one boulder to another. The blue-gray rocks lined the riverbank at the base of the wall that supported the vacant lot. Searching the crevasses of the rocks was always fun. All sorts of things got washed up and trapped between them. Most of the stuff was trash, but today she’d found a fishing lure. The metallic silver and blue lure sparkled in the sun and rattled when she shook it. If she could get the hooks off it, it would make a nice toy for Mittens.

Today was a good day. Yesterday’s rain had given way to a crystal clear blue sky and a sunny morning. A woman at the produce stand had given her an apple and a banana, which she ate for breakfast. And now she’d found a “pretty” on the bank below the lot. That’s what her mom always called shiny things. “Pretties.”

She sat down on the rocks and rested her back against the concrete wall, shaking the lure in front of her. She smiled, watching the sun reflect off the glitter in the paint. She didn’t know what something like this would cost, but probably more than it was worth. It was beautiful, but a lot of money to pay to catch a fish when a line, hook, and a grasshopper would do the same thing.

Her smile disappeared as the sound of gravel crunching alerted her to a car pulling onto the lot. She moved down the wall to a pile of rocks that would allow her to peep over the wall.

The familiar blue car rolled to a stop a few feet away. Jenna cursed her complacency. If the man got out and looked at the river like he sometimes did, he'd surely see her. She looked downriver to the place where the wall stopped, wondering if she could make it before the man saw her. If she left now, she might.

Jenna pursed her lips and looked back at the car. From her angle she could see the top of the man's head. He was moving around some, like he was gathering things in the seat next to him. Her eyes narrowed as she watched him. What was he doing?

The man always left her with more questions than answers. Why did he come here every day? He had a car, which meant he probably had a house too. If he had a house, why would he come here and sleep all day? Why not just sleep in his own bed?

A slight gasp escaped her when the car door opened. She scurried down the rocks and hurried along the wall, bouncing deftly from one to another. She ducked around the corner and pressed her back to the wall. A smile came to her lips as the adrenaline rushed through her body. She'd made it easily.

She climbed the slope to the top of the wall. From here she could see the crates where she slept, but the tall weeds prevented her from seeing the car. If the man went to the rail, she wouldn't be able to see him either.

She squatted next to the wall and listened. When the car door closed, she nodded. The man would probably go to the rail, but he couldn't see her now. The sound of loose gravel crunching under the man's feet piqued her interest. She dared another peek over the wall.

Her breath caught in her throat when she saw his head over the top of the tall weeds. He wasn't going to the rail like he always did but was coming towards her. He stopped and looked around nervously.

What are you doing, dude? she thought as her eyes narrowed. The man took a few more cautious steps toward her and stopped again. He was getting too close. Dammit. Why did she have to get involved? Why did she care if he were late or not?

"Hey," he called.

Jenna ducked beneath the edge of the wall. Her heart raced in her chest. Had he seen her?

“I don’t even know if you’re here or not.” The man took a few more steps then stopped.

Behind the wall, Jenna sighed with relief. He hadn’t seen her.

The man walked closer, a bag hanging in his hand. “I wanted to say thank you for yesterday. For waking me up. I got you a little something. A gift.” He surveyed the broken crates and debris lining the brick walls of the empty building. To his left a set of rusted steps lead to an equally rusted door. To his right a patch of goldenrod, milkweed, and briars had taken root in the broken concrete.

Getting the girl a thank you gift had made perfect sense at the time, but now felt foolish. He’d read articles in the newspaper about homeless people beating and robbing folks. But this was a young girl, his mind told him. She was probably desperate and hungry. Scared.

“I’m going to leave this here.” He walked over to the stack of broken crates and sat the bag atop them. “I wanted to say thanks.”

Jenna smiled. The man’s voice wasn’t at all what she expected. It wasn’t strong and authoritative, but soft and gentle. He sounded like a nice man.

Even nice men have a dark side, a voice in her head reminded her and her smile faded.

Jack turned to leave but stopped and turned back. “You don’t have to be afraid of me.” He surveyed the junk and sighed. “Anyway, thanks.”

Jenna peeped over the wall as the sound of the man's footsteps faded. When his head disappeared behind the weeds, she moved to her right, allowing her to watch him walk back to his car. For a few minutes, he sat behind the wheel, staring out at the river then started the car. He backed up, pausing for a moment as he stared at the bag he'd left on the crate, then drove through the alley and was gone.

When Jenna was sure that he wasn't coming back, she made her way up the rocks and pulled herself over the wall. She crouched where she landed, watching for movement from the alley. When none came, she scurried to the weeds. From there, she could see that no one was in the ally. The man had left.

Her eyes went to the bag. A smile slid across her thin lips as she rose. With one more cautious look at the alley, she hurried to the bag. Grabbing it with both hands, she ran back to her hiding spot behind the weeds.

She sat in the midday sun and began to unpack the bag. The first thing her hand found was a card. She slid it out of the envelope and opened it. The woman's voice singing, "Thank you, thank you," startled her, but only enough to make her laugh. The man had written "Thank you, your friend, Jack" inside the card. Jenna smiled. His name was Jack.

Jack stood with his hands in the pockets of his gray slacks, watching the dark water as it slid quietly past. His eyes found a boat and a pair of fishermen on the opposite bank and watched them for a while. One of the men caught a fish and the two men high fived each other, their celebration coming to him across the water.

He let a jealous smile occupy his lips for a second, then stopped it with a heavy sigh. He'd never been much of a fisherman, but he envied the comradery the men shared. He'd never made friends easily and now couldn't bring a name to mind that he'd call a friend.

He leaned forward, resting his arms on the railing. Across the river, the fishermen started their boat and raced off upstream. His eyes followed them until they disappeared. As his eyes drifted downward, a curious smile slipped across his lips. A young girl sat on the rocks at the base of the wall with her back pressed against the concrete. Her brown hair hung in unkept tangles over the collar of the long sleeved

plaid shirt.

“Hello there,” he said, watching the girl. She remained still, giving no sign that she’d heard him. Jack smiled. “You know I can see you, don’t you?”

After another moment of stillness, the girl shrugged. “So.”

“So nothing. Just letting you know I was here. I didn’t want to frighten you.”

Jenna grunted and shook her head, keeping her eyes on the river. “What do you want?”

Jack shrugged. “Nothing, I suppose.” He looked out over the river. “It’s a nice day.”

“Really?” she asked. “Small talk about the weather? That’s lame.”

Jack laughed softly. “I suppose it is. What would you rather talk about?”

“I’m not the one doing the talking.”

Jack looked at the girl, wondering if she were a runaway. She was thin and even from a distance he could tell her clothes were dirty. His heart sank as the notion took hold in his chest.

“Would you rather I just shut up?”

Jenna picked at her fingernails for a moment then shook her head. “I don’t guesso.”

“Good. How about introductions. I’m Jack.”

Jenna sighed then told him her name.

“It’s a pleasure to meet you, Jenna. Are you the one who woke me up the other day?” The girl nodded but said nothing. “Well, I’d like to say thank you in person.”

“I didn’t want you to be late.”

Jack eyed the girl, curious. “How did you know I would be late?”

“You always leave the lot by three twenty-five.”

“Have you been watching me?” He looked toward the river, embarrassed although he didn’t know why.

Jenna spared him a brief glance. “You could say that.”

“Some people might find that a little unnerving, don’t you think?”

“People who sleep in their car in a vacant lot probably wouldn’t.”

Jack laughed again. “Touché, Jenna. Touché.”

“What does that mean?”

“It means you’ve got a good point.”

“Then why not say that?”

“I don’t know. I guess people are weird sometimes.” Jack sighed and looked down river as a tow boat pushing a rack of barges came into view. “Big boat’s coming. Aren’t you worried about the waves hitting you down there?”

“Not even a little. The waves never get this high.”

“Okay.” Jack nodded. “Did you get the package I left for you?”

“I did,” she answered sheepishly. “Thanks.”

“No worries. It was the least I could do.”

Jenna stood and looked up at him. “Why do you sleep in your car? Don’t you have a house?”

Jack shook his head. “I do have a house.”

“Are you hiding from somebody?”

“Of sorts, I guess you could say. It’s complicated.” He looked back at the boat, watching it make its way upriver toward them. “Do you live here on the lot?”

Jenna shrugged. “Of sorts. It’s complicated.”

Jack laughed again, watching the boat. The drone of the engines filled the air as it drew near. “You know, if you came up here, we could talk in a more civilized manner.”

“I’m fine right here, Jack.”

“Okay, suit yourself.” He watched the boat push the rusted metal barges upriver. They rode low in the water as the motors behind the boat churned the river into a frothy white torrent.

“Where do you think they’re going?” he asked, shouting to over the noise.

Jenna stood and cupped her hands around her mouth. “Birmingham, probably.”

Jack nodded, accepting her answer as his eyes watched the boat pass. The waves rippled across the river and began crashing on the rocks below the wall. He watched as the worst of them came and went. They crashed on the rocks spilling water only a few feet up the bank, well short of Jenna’s position. This wasn’t the first boat that had passed her by.

He looked back to the boat, watching the white water stirred by the powerful engines. The name on the side of the boat was Madison Nichole, leading him to wonder if she were the captain’s daughter. She must be someone’s daughter, he thought. Just like Jenna.

His eyes went back to the spot where she’d been sitting, but she was gone. He leaned further over the **rail** and looked along the rocks, finding her to his left, halfway down the wall. She bounced gracefully over the rocks and disappeared around the corner of the wall.

Jack stood from the rail and shrugged. “Oh well,” he said. “I tried.” He walked back to his car, pausing to watch the boat again. He reached for the door handle and looked around the lot for Jenna.

“You’re not some kinda pervert, are you?”

“I’m not.” Jack smiled, turning around. “But then again, if I were, I wouldn’t admit it.”

“Touché,” she said with a smirk, stepping from behind the weeds with one eyebrow cocked. She stared at him from across the lot, her arms crossed on her chest. “It’s hard to tell nowadays.”

“I suppose it is. Can’t be too careful, especially a young lady in your predicament.”

“Predicament?” she asked. “I’m not in a predicament. Who said I was in a predicament?”

Jack held his hands up. “Not me. I’m sorry for the assumption.” He leaned against the side of his car and shoved his hands into his pockets. Jenna took a few cautious steps toward him.

“I have a knife, so don’t get any ideas.”

“I’d be surprised if you didn’t.”

“I’m not some foolish little girl, you know.”

“Of that I’m quite sure, Jenna. But I’m really not a pervert. I like to think I’m a rather nice guy if I do say so myself.”

“I can protect myself.” She reached into her back pocket and produced a short knife, opening it with slight difficulty. After getting the blade open, she showed it to him. “See?”

“I see,” Jack said, working to contain his smile. The girl was rail thin and unkept. She wore a pale green tee shirt that had lost so much of the design on front that he couldn’t tell what it had been. The arms of a black hoodie clung to her narrow hips.

His heart sank as he took her in. She was homeless and, despite her bravado, scared. He wanted to take her in his arms, hug her and tell her everything would be alright, but he knew he couldn’t. If he reached out to hug her, she’d run, and he’d never see her again. And he had no idea if everything would be alright or not. Not for her. Not even for himself.

“Are you hungry?” he asked.

“I’m okay.”

“Do you need anything?”

Jenna laughed. “A million dollars.”

Jack shrugged. “That would definitely help.”

Jenna took a few more steps toward him. “Seriously, I’m okay. I do alright.”

“Do you live here? On the lot I mean?”

She eyed him suspiciously. “I’d rather not say.”

Jack nodded, dropping his eyes to his feet. “Fair enough. I’ve just met you and I’m asking too many questions. I get it.” Jack looked out over the river. It was settling after the boat’s passing. “Want to join me?”

Jenna walked to the rail a few feet away from Jack. Her eyes washed over him cautiously.

“Why do you come here every day?”

Jack shrugged, giving her a smile. “To tell the truth, I am hiding.”

Jenna nodded. “I figured. From who?”

“I don’t know. My wife, the world, my life. Take your pick.”

Jenna’s eyes narrowed as she surveyed him. “Why?”

Jack toed the gravel at his feet. "I got laid off two months ago. I couldn't tell my wife and I couldn't stay home. So, here I am."

"Why not find another job?"

"It's not that simple," Jack said with a shrug. "Plus, I didn't want to. I hate my job."

"So stay home."

Jack shook his head. "I hate my wife more."

Jenna laughed. "That's harsh."

"She's harsh." Jack sighed and looked out over the river. "When you're grown up and married things are different than you thought they'd be when you were a kid."

Jenna nodded in agreement but said nothing.

"My turn. Why do you live here?"

"Because I want to."

"Do you have a home? A family?" Jack watched the girl tense. She didn't like talking about herself.

"I do, but I can't go back there."

"Why not? Is it a bad situation?"

Jenna crossed her arms over her chest. "You could say that."

Jack nodded. "Let me guess, mom's divorced and her new boyfriend is a little too friendly?"

Jenna let out a sarcastic chuckle. "You think you got me pegged, huh?"

"Just going with the most common trope."

"Well," Jenna looked away. "I'll spare you the details. Let's say you're close enough and leave it at that."

Jack shook his head, disgusted. "I'm sorry."

"You didn't do anything."

"I'm sorry things are bad for you."

"Things don't sound too great for you either."

Jack nodded. "I'm sorry for that too."

Jenna inched closer along the rail. "Why do you hate your wife?"

Jack ran a hand through his hair and sighed. He shoved his hand back into his pocket and looked at the river. "It's not so much that I hate her. She hates me, I guess."

"So why not get a divorce?"

Jack shrugged, unable to look at the girl. "I can't." He sighed again and looked around the lot.

"Do you want me to stop asking questions?"

Jack shook his head. Vocalizing what had been bouncing around in his head for so long felt good, but he didn't want to scare the girl away. "It's not pleasant."

"Life usually ain't." Jenna moved closer. "My mother is on drugs. She can't help it, you know. She used to be such a good mom when it was just me and her."

Jack gave her a sad smile. "What happened?"

"A guy she met." Jenna shook her head. "She got hooked quick. Things went downhill fast. She told me to run away. I guess she knew things would be bad if I hung around, you know."

Jack shrugged. "At least she thought about you."

Jenna grunted and shook her head. "I guess."

"A couple years back we were driving home from a restaurant. Me, my wife, and our daughter. It was raining." Jack wiped his mouth with the palm of his hand. He looked up as a gust of wind tore across the lot.

"A car ran a red light and hit us. My daughter was killed, and my wife was hurt badly. She's bedridden now."

"That's terrible."

Jack nodded in agreement. "My wife hates me because of it."

"It wasn't your fault."

“She blames me for it. She hasn’t come out and said it, but I know she does.” Jack closed his eyes and drew in a deep breath. “So many times I wished it would have killed me instead of Brooke.”

Jenna pushed off the rail and walked to the car. “I’m sorry.”

Jack looked away, not wanting her to see the wetness in his eyes.

Jenna leaned against the side of the car next to him. “Life really sucks sometimes, don’t it?”

“It really does.”

Jenna caught sight of her reflection in the car’s window and shook her head. How long had it been since she’d actually looked at herself? She barely resembled the vibrant, happy girl who lived in her memory. She smoothed her wind swept hair with a sigh and shook her head. Turning, she watched one of the strays, Elvis, leap onto one of the crates and begin bathing himself in the midday sun. He’d simply showed up two months ago and never left. He hadn’t let her pet him yet, but always seemed to be somewhere close to her.

Movement caught her eye near the alley. A gust of wind caught a few pieces of trash and spun them into an eddy behind the factory. The swirling debris dropped one by one as the wind faded, bringing more cast off debris to the lot. Each piece had been left behind by different people at different times, for different reasons but somehow ended up in the same place. Here.

“Do you ever think there’s some reason behind stuff?” she asked. “Some big cosmic game board or something with someone controlling how things play out?”

Jack shrugged. “It’s hard to believe there’s a good reason for the stuff that happens to some people.” He shook his head and looked out over the river. “You know, I did what you were supposed to; all my life I followed the rules. I studied hard in school, got a job, worked hard, I wasn’t frivolous with money. I did my best to be a good husband and father. Things weren’t supposed to be like this.”

Jenna gave him a weak shrug, nodding in agreement. She hadn't done anything to bring about her situation either, yet here she stood. Her life wasn't supposed to be like this, but it was.

"You know," she said timidly, "If you want to, you can keep coming back here. We can talk and stuff."

Jack nodded slowly. "I'd like that. It'd be nice to have someone to talk to. If it's okay with you."

Jenna watched him smile. The expression looked uncomfortable on his face, like he hadn't used it in a long time. When he looked at her, she saw the weight of loneliness in his eyes.

"Yeah," she said nodding. Her eyes moved beyond Jack and watched an empty fast food wrapper move down the alleyway. Pushed by the wind, it tumbled toward them like a tiny yellow barrel. "It's okay with me."

Stiff

Bethany Bruno

The first dead body I ever saw was of a woman I didn't know. 2004 was a rough year, as I had started my freshman year of high school that fall. We lived on the Treasure Coast of Florida, which is named in honor of the legend of Al Capone using our beaches as a reckless safety deposit box for all his stolen loot. People would come from all over with their metal detectors, but only ever found melanoma from constant sun exposure and hurricanes. That September, within the span of six weeks, our county had received two out of the four major hurricanes which destroyed our way of life for months. The fourth hurricane, Katrina, ended up passing right by us. We all cheered, and thanked mother nature for sparing us from another beatdown. Little did we know that Katrina would crawl her way to Louisiana, and destroy so many lives, homes, and history.

First came Frances, who caused some damage, but mostly left unscathed. Then, twenty days later, Jeanne came barreling through and caused millions of dollars of damage to every single person's home that I knew of. Our own roof was battered and needed a complete redo. The hurricanes weren't the worst part though. It's the time spent waiting around, cramped in a house or a building with people, and waiting for the electricity to go out. Then, it's dealing with the aftermath of having no electricity or clean water for sometimes weeks or months. This is during some of the hottest months of the year in south Florida. Well, when you throw two hurricanes, a state filled with millions of older and physically disabled people, and a lack of space, people tend to die. Because my mom was a Registered Nurse with the State of Florida, this meant she had to work within the hurricane shelter. Our shelter was the local community center where my mom and I had gym memberships and would go every single night during the week after to walk off our spaghetti dinners.

The day before Jeanne struck us head-on, all of the retirement homes had dumped their patients inside the ballroom of the center, making what looked like a wartime trauma center. Cot after cot was lined up in an effort to accommodate everyone. There were dozens of nurses on staff who worked in shifts. My dad, brother, and I joined her in the community center in order to stay together. Since the ballroom was full and all of the offices were already secured by the nursing staff for their personal sleeping areas, there was only one room left- the gym. It was a fairly large sized room filled with treadmills, ellipticals, and all sizes of weights. There was also a cleaning closet located toward the back of the gym, where I decided to make my bed using my sleeping bag from girl scouts.

One night, while my mom was on her shift in the ballroom, the gym door opened. There were two paramedics standing there, as they wheeled in an old woman on a stretcher. She was strapped in, and laying vertically, as the two men carefully wheeled her in the gym. She looked peacefully asleep as I was wide awake, having just gotten to another level on Pokémon on my Gameboy Color. The room was silent, except for the occasional loud synchronizing snores from my dad and brother. As the stretcher reached the closet, the paramedics stopped and looked down at me. My bulging eyes stared into theirs. We had a mini staring contest for what felt like hours but was probably more like seconds. The two men looked at each other, shook their heads, then proceeded to push the stretcher into the tightly compacted closet before closing the door and locking it with the key. They quickly walked out of the gym, forgetting to turn off the closet light. I was totally confused as to why this woman was being put in the closet. Maybe she had been a bad patient and said something to the paramedics, so this was her punishment? Or she had a mental breakdown and was being forced to stay locked away from the others? Or maybe there was more to that room than I realized and that there was, in fact, a whole other spacious hotel suite on the other side of that door. I tossed and turned all night, with the yellow light from underneath the door illuminating my face. Not a single sound emanated from that closet.

Hours later, my mom appeared by my side and asked me why I slept near that locked closet door. She seemed mad at me, annoyingly irritated actually, for some reason. After many hours of not having a cigarette, her patience had dropped dangerously low as she explained that a patient had died last night in her sleep in the middle of the ballroom. In order to not create a panic, they decided to act like she needed an escort “to use the bathroom.” This was all a giant ruse so they could relocate her corpse to a space where she could be stored until the ambulances were up and running again. It was a clever tactic, which worked. Later that day, after the eye of the hurricane passed by and we were given the “all clear,” the old woman’s body was gently bagged up and quietly moved into a white van.

My mom would later tell me that the woman had no family, like most “snowbirds” who move to Florida for their final days. I remember the oblong black bag, which contained everything she had once been, as it flapped in the wind on its way towards its final ride. Now, over fifteen years later, I wonder what her name was. I wish I could know more about who she was before that fateful event. The memory of that night, and sleeping beside that makeshift morgue, still pops up in my mind. Especially during raging storms, as I lay in bed. I stare up at my ceiling as lightning flashes sporadically. I imagine that she did have family and friends at some point in her life. No one lives to have wrinkly skinned hands without leaving an impact on someone’s life. My biggest question is how does someone die without a single person in the world to write down as their next of kin? Where in her life did those connections sever?

One thing for certain is the impact she's left on my life. Her death taught me a brutal truth, which could only be learned from witnessing it. Ultimately, regardless of friends, family, money, or status, you may die without a single person to hold your hand as you take your last breath. Not everyone gets the ideal end of passing away quietly in your bed, surrounded by numerous loved ones. Sometimes, thanks to our choices or the choices of others, we die within a crowded ballroom filled with people from your generation. Though you're surrounded, you're utterly alone. As you gasp, panic sets in of what's about to occur. There's no contentment or acceptance. It's pure fear. Afterwards, your once lively body becomes stiff with rigor mortis as it's stored in a community center's cleaning closet. Hidden away like a scarlet letter from those around you, who are just trying to live out their final days in what they believe is paradise. But outside that locked door, laying on the floor on a shoddy sleeping bag, is a teenage girl. Who's trying to make sense of the world that you too once occupied. Years later, as she ages and inches closer to old age, she wonders if anyone gets a comfortable death. Regardless, she has just one wish-that no one is able witness their own aftermath. Especially if they're stuffed into a closet.

Platform

Lovers lift their huge shoes,
separate. The ceiling ribs embrace us,
standing in for slavish valentines.
A man sleeps on a metal bench.
Watching the trains, eyes fill
with needlework, hands hollow useless sutures.
Open shadows ready for departure
we run beside the greasy gravel,
luggage rolling obediently.
Soon the earth will be little more
than ice cream, melting quick
as the prophylactic moon.

The Harbor

Yachts ring the basin.
Sharks snap light from the water.
In the middle of eternal summer
people come here to gamble,
bet against an iceberg shuffling in,
exhuming people with rocky colons,
iron lungs, people who squat
on the crap tables, assume faith
is any memory beyond the birds.
You live in an apartment above
the yachts, sharks, tourists, casino,
thread along the disbelieving heights
after the tiresome buzzing of the race
has come and gone; luckier than most,
you might even assume your life
is foolproof.

Learning To Talk

Spit boils over.
Stiff innocence wilts in a room full of wet mouths.
Your facial cavities taste retaste over and over
what is invisible; you see it,
amazing as lightning, startling as thunder.
For the first time your blood flowing linear
as you close your fist around the sound, speak.

More

David Shapiro del Sole

“It’s been good,” he tells her.

He’s talking with his mother on the phone. She has just asked him how things are between him and his wife, Lisa. In the past, he inwardly would react like someone who just stepped on a sharp object with his bare foot had anyone asked him that question, but not now. Although he hasn’t forgotten those seemingly intractable difficulties in their marriage, and at times is still made poignantly aware of them, all the same, things are better now.

“I’m so happy for you, Darling, his mother says, pauses and then adds, “I think you are much braver in love than I ever was.”

“What do you mean?”

“I mean you don’t run away the way I did.”

Is that what it’s about, bravery? He has only moved back into the house with Lisa and Rita, his five-year old daughter, a few months ago. He isn’t sure how things will play out.

He listens to the quiet on the other end of the phone line. Is his mother crying? For herself, for her endlessly prolonged adolescence full of failed romances? He stands in the backyard with the Hills Hoist, a small veggie patch and some shrubbery in the background supporting him in the unobtrusive way ordinary things can do. The day is already warm and it’s hardly mid-morning. His mother’s tears, which he imagines streaming down her carefully arranged face, leave him feeling uncomfortable as though they were making a claim upon him.

“Love you, Jimmy.”

He is predictably relieved to hear what for him amounts to a facile expression of motherly love and that it signals the end of their conversation.

He remains standing beside the empty clothesline, lost, without any purpose and feeling that he needs one if he isn’t to fall into a funk. It’s as if a connection in his brain has short-circuited as a result of the conversation with his mother. He can almost smell the acrid odour of burning combined with his sense that something that has been wrong for a long while seems never to get fixed.

He places the phone back in his pocket, turns and heads into the house, which after months still seems a little strange, as he enters the back door into a small, screened verandah. Before he left, more accurately, before he was asked to leave, he had been living here for three full years and then out of the blue, or so it seemed to him at the time though he now admits there already were cracks showing in the relationship, came her startling request.

A melody and the odd word of a song waft into his awareness. It takes him a while, but then a coherent string of words falls into step with the music. "For everything, turn, turn, there is a season..." He tries to remember who made that popular, tries to recall a name, but there is only the sound in his head of a sweet, male voice singing of life's ceaseless circling.

He remembers clearly Lisa saying to him that she thought it would be better if they lived apart. Her tone was calm and not without concern for him. What felt as if it would just about kill him was not primarily the proposed separation, but her implied message that his sense of self was so fragile it could be snapped like a dry twig by a few simple words. That she could see him in that light shattered his view of himself. He was like some town planner, having designed a whole city, which once built he was fated to watch being buried in flaming lava and choking ash from an angry nearby volcano; and just as the fine weather that may have preceded and accompanied that eruption would belie its terrible consequences, so did her civility disguise the suffering it caused him. There was no shouting, no acrimony when she asked if he would be okay to move out and find his own place. She simply explained that she had felt alone for too long and that she was losing herself trying to find him. She was tired.

"If that's what you want," he replied in the flat tone of defeat. He felt again like a child left by himself. And yet he was, at the same time, a husband and a father aware that there was a strange satisfaction in having the thing he most feared finally occur.

She was asking him to surrender the one province of his living that made any kind of sense to him. For them, to be with Rita and her, he had cut his way through a jungle of ensnaring blather, of "helpful advice" he did not want, never asked for and that relentlessly reached out to entangle him from all corners of his young life. "Get over it, make amends, wake up, be kind, wash your hands before leaving, plan for the future, stay alert, slow down, hurry, take two before each meal." A storm of unrelated, conflicting directives rained down on him until he was sodden with confusion and a sense of incompetence that assured him that he was incapable of making his own decisions. So, when Lisa asked him to go, he went--to a place he could only describe as "nowhere".

Echoes of that time persist in the surrounding walls, in the pale blue colour that the laundry is painted, the darkly stained wood moulding over the kitchen window as seen from where he now stands in the enclosed back porch. Briefly he bears witness to that nightmare that won't entirely depart but lurks unsettling him and leaving him none the wiser as to what it all has meant.

He enters the kitchen. Lisa and Rita are standing, Rita on a chair, in front of the kitchen counter. On the counter is a large, yellow mixing bowl, in which Rita is stirring a thick, dark mixture with a wooden spoon. Jimmy observes the depth of her absorption.

"Daddy, guess what Mommy and I are making?"

"It looks like it might be a cake."

"It's brownies!"

"Yum, I want some."

"You have to wait, Silly; they're not cooked yet!"

He keeps the conversation in play by asking her how long he must wait, and it occurs to him in a rush of unexpected emotion that he would wait forever for this small, enchanting person, his daughter, to give him the answer, any answer at all as long as it was hers, in her voice green with spring. He watches as she stirs the dark mixture in the ribbed, yellow bowl.

"Can I lick the bowl afterwards?"

"Mommy said that's my job. But you can have some, too, if you want."

Jimmy catches Lisa's smile and then glances back at his daughter and thanks her for her willingness to share.

He watches as Lisa steps to the side so that she is standing behind their daughter, peers down into the bowl and says, "I think it's ready, darling." She removes the spoon, Rita's hand is still attached, and with her finger wipes some of the mixture stuck to the spoon back into the bowl.

"I can do it, Mommy."

The child's forefinger wipes a small blob of chocolate dough off the spoon, and then shaking her finger vigorously over the bowl, tries to extricate it from the sticky substance.

“Let go,” she shouts, “go way!”

She tries to free her finger with the help of a finger from her other hand, and it too is clung to by the thick, dark dough.

“Aaah!” she cries impatiently.

Her mother takes hold of the captured hand, wipes the dough carefully from her daughter’s finger and deposits it in the bowl.

Jimmy takes in the ease with which Lisa intervenes forestalling a possible melt down. But there is something else as well. His daughter’s impatience reminds him of his own when events unfold contrary to his expectations. When that happens, his initial impulse is to destroy something, anything.

“Rita would like to have a swing in the park this morning,” Lisa says turning to him.

“Yeah, that’s fine,” he replies.

“Now?” asks Rita.

“Who’s going to bake the brownies, Darling?” reminds her mother.

“Oh, yeah. We can go *after* the brownies!”

There are children, moms and dads, young lovers, dogs on leads, one dog not on a lead, elderly folk, groups of adolescents hanging out, joggers with inserted ear buds breathing heavily through their mouths, a boy and his dad kicking a soccer ball and plane trees casting broad circles of shade on the park grass. It is Sunday: no one is having to be anywhere.

Jimmy is pushing Rita on a swing. She has learned this year how to swing by herself, but she still likes to be pushed; that way she can go higher. She is swinging high now and squealing with delight.

“Not too high,” Lisa cautions.

“She’s fine; she knows how to hold on,” Jimmy replies.

“I’m getting a bit nervous.”

“It’s okay, Lisa,” he reassures her.

Father and daughter are one in their excitement as the swing rises ever higher and for an instant the child seems to become part of the sky, as at home there as any cloud, until Lisa protests, "I'm really not okay with this!"

Jimmy continues pushing his daughter, completely caught up in her enjoyment that is pouring out into the sunlit morning like a choir singing praises to the day, and though there is an elusive instant that vanishes almost as quickly as it comes into being when he wonders whether his response to Lisa may have been a bit abrupt, the rhythm of the swing sailing away and then returning, of the round of successive days unfolding into this free day that belongs exclusively to him and his family, and of the entire unwritten history of generation following generation of parents at play with their children—all of that feels too big to leave room either for Lisa's protests or his own momentary twinge of conscience.

After returning home from the park and having lunch, Jimmy's day is taken up with a number of tasks: mowing the backyard lawn that seems to have shot up without his noticing, giving Rita a bath, which she seems to love as much as swinging towards the clouds and while Lisa is making dinner—he offered to help but was told it wasn't necessary—putting up some shelving in the shed. He, however, hasn't rid himself altogether of the niggling doubt that all is not well. There have been conversations in the past about his not taking Lisa seriously enough when she's trying to tell him she's unhappy. She takes that kind of thing more seriously than he does, he knows. He also knows that if his doubts have any substance, he will hear about it. Lisa's good at that. She isn't afraid of hard conversations the way he is though he never thought he was before she asked him quietly, almost caringly, if he would like to move out. That's the thing, he thinks, his mind making a leap over dark waters, there is something about Lisa, a solidness even through what he experiences as her occasionally inexplicable behaviour. Over time, he knows, her patience shown to him has cost her. He is not an easy person, and he recognizes that he has slowly come to trust her, perhaps, more than himself, like an ill-treated dog warming to the kindness of its new master. Even when she says and does things that hurt him, as she has done at times with surgical precision, he, nevertheless, senses that it's done cleanly, so that there's no funny business that leaves him wondering what her motives are. It feels as though, at those times, she is still holding him.

She's good, he thinks, and he is pleased to have that thought and the solid feeling it gives to him.

Only after Rita has been put to bed that evening and Jimmy has read her a story and lain beside her until her breathing has slowed and surrendered to sleep, does he rise, move silently through the darkened bedroom in his stocking feet and exit into the disconcerting light of the lounge.

Lisa is seated on the sofa reading a magazine.

Jimmy sits down at the other end of the sofa.

She looks up. "I was upset this morning at the park."

He waits.

"I felt dismissed."

He gazes at her and feels apprehensive as if anticipating the arrival of an unwelcome visitor. He nods his head, trying to buy time, to break through to a place where people don't misunderstand and hurt each other.

"I felt I couldn't get through to you," she says. "It's painful when that happens"

He is motionless except for his breathing that benevolently supports him to stay present. He feels entangled in a web finely spun from countless small evasions in his past when he felt he had no choice but to walk away from what he didn't understand.

"I'm sorry," he says.

He searches her face for a clue that might suggest he is heading in the right direction.

"I'm *really* sorry, Lisa."

"I hear that."

He knows more is expected. Always more. He is silent, eyes downcast. He is trying. Fuck, he is trying! He so wants to get it right.

He is half declaring, half enquiring when he says, "It's not enough."

"No. I want you to understand what it's like to be ignored, when what you think and feel doesn't seem to matter."

Does he know that? Of course, he does. If he knows anything, he certainly knows that. It seems too simple, too obvious even to mention. Nevertheless, he replies, "I think I do know that."

He looks into her face, searching.

"I don't think you do sometimes."

He is still. She is no longer looking at him, and that frightens him more than her accusations for he has experienced her silent journeys into herself, like visits to a secret oracle from which she returns each time with a determination as immovable as a mountain.

“I wanted you to hear that I was scared.”

“I felt she was okay, that she wasn’t...”

“It has nothing to do with whether Rita was okay or not! It has everything to do with my fear that she might not be. We’re talking about my concern as a mother for our child and whether that is worth listening to.”

He is lost, now, in that place where everything is turned upside down, and he is expected to act, to speak despite his being paralyzed and dumb.

“I don’t know what to say.”

“Good.”

They sit in the silence, each hoping for a solution beyond themselves but hopefully accessible to someone who will share it with them. It’s as though they were waiting for a text message from an airline to inform them their missing baggage has been found. He notices her gaze down towards the floor, and he feels that there is something about her *being here* with him, right now, in this house, the yellowed light of the lamp softening the night with the slowly released heat that he feels in her voice trying to extract from him once again what seems impossible for him to give and that makes his life... *possible*? The word startles him. He encounters in it no meaning, nothing delineated so that it might take shape, and yet he feels its power subtly moving inside him as though he were a rock over which a silent stream is slipping and he desiring to hold still and make his own for an instant the caress of its soundless passing that has flowed over him forever.

“You give me...” He doesn’t know how to say it so that it sounds right, so that it carries what he now knows. It’s as if he is struggling to share with her a truth that explains everything.

“You give me life.” There, he’s said it. Though what has come over him to say a thing like that, he doesn’t know. But it’s out now, it’s done.

“I need some giving, too,” she counters.

He muses upon that, keeping her words inside where hopefully, given time, they will grow into some real understanding.

“I’ll try,” he offers.

“Even if there’s no reward?”

Now, she’s really left him behind. That patient, questioning look on her face is breaking him. He is trying to comprehend, but the ease and simplicity of her question only bewilders him more. He is able to respond out of what he knows, and right now he feels he knows nothing, at least nothing that will help.

He looks down at the dark, brownish carpet as though he were gazing into a large excavated hole, past the hardened crust of the earth, and there below, in the shadowed emptiness, appears an imagination similar to those that sometimes visited him in his childhood. In a private vision that could only be guessed at by outsiders, he would behold an intricate network of deeply buried underground corridors all leading to a hall of prodigious size and grandeur, its walls and high, vaulted ceiling encrusted with radiant crystal.

He is unaware how long his attention has been diverted to that clear, illumined silence that, after years, has suddenly reappeared to him and that has endured and thrived all this time below the surface. He looks intently at his wife and says again, “I will try,” takes a breath and awaits her response.

I Left the Kansas Rectangle

three presidents ago
yet I still have a 913
area code you must call

if you want to hear my hands-open
Oakland voice
smiling with an out-of-state mouth.

At 36th & MLK, my phone
screams like a man
who sleeps on concrete.

As I walk past a tent encampment,
I welcome my mother's voice
speaking before her Kansas window.

Home Mattress

I reach my apartment lock,
open darkness

while hearts sleep in tents
in this bisected neighborhood.
Nylon walls are their chamber
in an Oakland winter.

Four states away,
my mother's shadow
occupies a hospital room
her brain sleeps within.

I have a bed
where I search for sleep every night
not tethered to an IV
nor on concrete sheets.

If Only Oakland Darkness Had Hands

I'm told I must squeeze Oakland
out of my California body,
affix domesticated skin

like a fur coat I can't & don't want
to buy in this grid squeezing from all sides.

When I find my heartbeat
within suburban walls,

will I mutate
into a reflection

who wears a feline against winter
slapping my future self
on a replicated lawn?

Will I ever transverse
down Temescal sidewalks

as an alien
in the warmth of slaughter?

I'll no longer know
the shade of oak branches
that wraps around my frame

into a Lake Merritt hug
if only Oakland darkness had hands
to build my body a home

on a street of roots
I for now find
my breath & pulse & voice.

1964

Bett Butler

The young girl's sandals slap the buckled sidewalks of Wesley Street. She feels silly and conspicuous in her grandmother's sun hat, the sweatband stained blue-black by hair dye and perspiration. Stiff from decades of blackland prairie summers, the straw crown swallows her head like an overturned bowl, hot and heavy on her scalp. She thinks about taking it off, but wearing it was a condition of the old woman's consent for this little outing, and spying eyes lurk behind curtains along the way. In this town, everybody knows everybody's business.

"If I send you home looking like a Negro, your parents won't let you come anymore," her grandmother had said, rough hands tying the cord tightly under her chin.

That wouldn't be so bad. This is the most boring place on earth, the girl had snapped in her imagination—and immediately felt guilty.

But now she is on her own, free and flush with cash, three dollars and sixty-seven cents—not counting the newly minted silver dollar her grandfather slipped her that morning—in the patent-leather handbag swinging from her shoulder. She is walking the twenty-odd blocks to "downtown," past the Piggly-Wiggly's faint aroma of Pine-Sol and rotting produce; past CeeBee's burgers, five for a dollar; past the Tucker Candy Company with its air-puffed peppermints and the Sinclair filling station with the plastic dinosaur in the window; past the print shop and tiny storefronts selling insurance and legal services. She walks as fast as her thin legs will carry her, past Marshall and Morse, Spencer and Crockett Streets; left on Lee Street, where yesterday she was dragged to Sunday School to sit stiffly in a small chair amid small strangers singing "Brighten the Corner Where You Are"; past the bus depot, past the sign that has hung over the town's main street for almost half a century:

THE BLACKEST LAND	GREENVILLE WELCOME	THE WHITEST PEOPLE
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Sweat mingles with street grit between her toes, and a trickle of moisture tickles the skin along her spine. In the stifling humidity, the hat gives off the faint odor of mothballs and unwashed hair, making her feel queasy and unsettled.

One more block, and there it is on the right: Kress, with its gold letters and terra cotta curlicues outside and its riches of melamine and china, dish towels and toys, makeup and hair tonic inside. She uses both hands and her full weight of sixty-plus pounds to open the heavy glass door, which gives way with the jingle of a bell and a gust of electrically cooled air.

The saleswoman at the cash register looks up briefly, then returns to her magazine.

The girl's sandals make soft noises on the hardwood floor as she heads to the makeup counter, where cardboard women smile seductively with lips the latest shades of red. She takes off the hat and sets it on the counter, wiping the sweat from her hairline with the back of her hand. Perched on the glass, in all its cobalt crystal glory, is a bottle of *Evening in Paris* marked "tester." With a quick look at the oblivious saleswoman, she sprays it on her neck. From an adjoining display, she picks up a bottle of Sue Pree nail polish, *Shocking Pink*, a color she has never seen in nature. Glancing at the saleswoman once again, she unscrews and gently lifts the lid. Acetate and formaldehyde sting her nose as the liquid drips down the brush back into the bottle. She imagines it on her fingernails, transforming the chewed and ragged ends into something beautiful, mysterious, and adult.

The entry bell jingles and she jumps, hastily screwing the cap back on. Struggling with the door is a boy even younger and smaller than she, his skin the color of the mahogany coffee table in her grandmother's living room. The saleswoman looks up, frowns, and returns to her reading as he passes close by the girl and heads straight to the toys, one aisle over.

Still holding the nail polish, she watches the boy inspect a bin of brightly colored metal trucks. His cotton shirt is clean and pressed, he smells of soap, and his hair looks like the steel wool her grandmother uses to scrub the char from her frying pan. She wonders what it feels like, whether it is stiff and scratchy or soft like lamb's wool. Feeling her eyes on him, the boy looks at her and grins. She looks away, pretending to examine the label on the back of the bottle.

The boy picks up a tanker truck and examines it carefully, spinning the wheels with his finger. Smiling, he waves it in figure eights through the air. "Vrooom," he says softly. "Vro-o-o-o-m-m-m-m!"

She reads the label on the back of the nail polish. Caution. Flammable. Do not use near fire or flame. Keep out of the reach of children.

"Hey, you!"

She jumps at the voice of the saleswoman barreling toward them. Hiding the nail polish behind her, she backs up against the counter.

"You, boy! Put that down."

The boy's smile quickly fades, and he drops the truck back into the bin.

"What do you think you're doing, boy?" The woman's clenched fists are planted on her hips. Loose flesh quivers on her upper arms, and her wattled chin juts forward and back, reminding the young girl of the chickens in her grandmother's yard. "You're not supposed to be messin' with that. Just what do you think you're doing?"

His small face crumples into tears. The front door jingles, and in walks a young woman who looks as if she is searching for something. She is wearing a hat and white gloves, and her skin is the same shade as the little boy's. She sees him and rushes over.

"Myron, what are you doing?" She grabs him roughly by the arm and steers him toward the door. She looks at the saleswoman, apologetic. "I'm sorry, ma'am."

"What are you doing, letting a youngster run wild like that? He has no business here."

"Yes, ma'am. I'm sorry, ma'am. It won't happen again."

"Well, just see that it don't. Take him out of here."

"Yes, ma'am, right away." She propels the crying boy out the door, shaking him by the shoulder. "What were you doing? You know you shouldn't be in there."

The bell jingles on their way out, and the saleswoman shakes her head at the young girl.

"Them people, you gotta watch 'em ever minute, or they'll steal ya blind." She walks to the cash register and returns to her magazine, her face pinched with annoyance.

The girl stands motionless. Clammy air chills the sweat running down her back, and her feet feel strangely remote and cold. She opens her purse. With the hand holding the nail polish, she pulls out her grandmother's damp, floral-scented hankie and dabs her face. The handkerchief is now wrapped around the bottle, and she slips them into her handbag, underneath her coin purse.

The saleswoman doesn't look up.

The girl feels elated but eerily calm, as if she has crossed over to a place from which there is no turning back. She picks up another bottle of nail polish, this one a frosty off-white, and reads the label. Caution. Flammable. Do not use near fire or flame. Keep out of the reach of children.

She takes it to the cash register. The saleswoman puts down her magazine, smiles, and rings her up. "How old are you?"

"Twelve," she lies.

The saleswoman laughs. "Right. Does your mama know you're buying this?"

"Yes, ma'am."

"Well, all right," says the saleswoman, slipping the receipt and the polish into a small brown paper bag. "Ain't no law against it, but don't you be makin' a mess, now, or your mama and daddy will be over here gettin' me into trouble."

"Yes, ma'am." She walks to the door.

"Wait!"

Her stomach drops.

"You left something over there."

She walks quickly back to the counter and retrieves the sun hat, slipping it on her head and tying it tightly under her chin. "Thank you, ma'am," she says.

The doorbell jingles as she walks out, her sandals smacking the concrete in the still and sultry air.

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A Theory Of Horses

The padded room like hush
Of late spring, morning snowfallen
Glittering free from boot prints for now
Dogs running across the road
The second astronauts
You know, they sent dogs after chimps
I've intuited a theory of time travel from their orbits
If you went back and an event you didn't interfere with happened
What's the chance the coin lands different?
Say the Cuban missile crisis
Or Stanislav Petrov at the radar
When dogs shit they align themselves with the North Pole
Here,
Snowland aglow
A wild horse, just one, on the ice floe
Hooves radiating cracks like haloes
The objects of promise
A ringing bell
Like a wine bottle smashed
On the hull
Of a newly christened
Warship

Limerance

A silver shot through cloud cover, rocket leaving the atmosphere but never The World
Sicilian Oranges squeezed to pulp and fortune telling devices all set to receive static
It almost sounds like
Something that might rhyme
What's happening is that the farther out the rocket flies the farther our field of vision
extends, we're making our conquered nation a little bit bigger, at least I hope we are
It's the *yawing* motion, is what I'm trying to indicate
Like a daydream
Like a very specific daydream,
This one
I'm with you
And I'm a woman
I have a string of sea blue pearls around my neck
And my hair is up
Just so, for you

*

A final *presence*, gravity and glow, hard pan and rain, leaf and shade
I am on the verge, my hands on the shuddering metal railing of a train moving *north*
I am breathing light
I am one breath from the sun
I am on the edge of a bright white world

Desire

Do you think whoever stole the 1984 Godzilla costume from the film “The Return Of Godzilla”

Off the studio lot in a daring heist,

Do you think they still have it?

In their closet like a shrine

With the door cracked so it can look at them

Or with the door closed so that it can't

Or perhaps it deteriorated years ago

Do you think they might have sometimes,

Put on the suit, assuming they were the same height as the man who first wore it

And stomped around their living room,

Roaring at the cat or knocking around their children's toys

But then again they're probably childless

Or if they had any kids they probably lived with the other parent

Who left them for trying to wear the suit when they were being intimate

Do you think that 30 plus years later now

They still wake up in cold sweats

(It must be awfully hot in that thing)

Dreaming?

About being not just any Godzilla

But *this* Godzilla

A mean Godzilla

Who sneered as he dropped a building on the Super X Robot

The last hope of Japan crushed

The monster triumphant under a nuclear red sky

I know I would

I know I do

Godzilla is a man in a rubber suit

Crushing small buildings

And wishing they were real

Storm's Eye View

All the things you knew for a moment, then quickly forgot
Anecdotes and funny stories, the allegedly inspirational
Odd coincidences on the tip of your tongue
What's a matter?
Did you think the days weren't keeping track too?
Keeping better track actually
Better than I ever did, halfheartedly leaving notes in unintelligible handwriting
Like time capsules assuming I'd eventually find them again

Here's one: think of it as an informal tarot card (incidentally also the theme of our talk tonight if you hadn't noticed)

*Robert E Lee posed for a photographer in his uniform the very day Abraham Lincoln was killed,
Victorian black umbrellas at the procession, the only color that could successfully hide the streaks of coal smoke endemic to the era*

Here's another: Maybe this one shows the future if you're into that kind of thing

*Two men getting married in a synagogue even though one is an atheist
It's always,
It's always a middle place: wind picking up in the streets when they get in the car, both in the same thin suits
One gets a nosebleed, the other gets out a tissue for him and they laugh about it
Overhead the magpies are wheeling, forming asemic gyres like writing in the daylight
I did look up, when they started, almost thought I could read them
These flight patterns turning in the dark,
Trace them with your fingers
Like a map of the known world on your husband's shoulders*

A psychic moment, age 10, face pressed to the fogging glass of a moving vehicle
Vehicles are what we define the world through or haven't you noticed?
The days and century's flying by like images you might interpret from tea leaves
It used to be horses
Even in your memory
But not for a long time
In the middle where it's winter
Where it's always winter
Snow made from old newsprint curled acid white
Burning pages adrift and gravitating

Like the asbestos they allegedly used in movies like “It’s A Wonderful Life” and “The Wizard Of Oz”

All the things you knew for a moment

What we might be willing,

What we might be willing to burn if it meant we could remember

Drone

A nearby stream is hushed
by the woods, but you can still sense it,
the disarray a light dew on your skin.
Near the outskirts of a city split
by this stream, a drone hums along
& purrs at the base of a cypress tree.
Put out your hands with the few almonds
you've palmed here from home
& in the static, it will screech
the national anthem—

Sweetness

A hummingbird whirs
through the Appalachian air
& its wings can only be imagined
for a moment as they angle
incessantly its iridescent chest.
Delicate, skeletal-strung
feather through red maples;
only intricacy permits it,
and the sweetness needling out
of the nearest cleomes—

A Storm Approaches

& tree-leaves tremble in the rain.

The Condition of the Working Class in England

Step out onto the street,
where a whiff of diesel
shivers the limp wisteria
bound along brick houses.
Nothing but stray coos shift
on the rivers of concrete
and gather as a golden loaf
ruffles out of a bag warm
from the bakery. Two centuries ago,
anonymous & unpaid angels
pooled overnight into the nearest parks
& the wind hunched under
the moans of their hunger-pangs.
Today, a balloon wanders
from a birthday party, & it falls
into the clutch of a puddle—

Ars Poetica

Pick your brain
& flick it
on the page.

THE POST QUARANTINE CHRONICLES

E. Martin Pedersen

After 100 days of complete lockdown, these poems narrate the first 5 days of LET-UP (LET-DOWN?) or LET-OUT: June 14-18, 2020.

Day 1: Swab, the foot-long swab
up the nose down toward the toes
past the tonsils and gizzard and kidney stones --

I finally tested yesterday for the novel
crony, aka COVID-19, the plague, the crud, the fuzzy bug.

it wasn't that unpleasant though I now have a crusher
sewn in through my left eye out the back of the cranium
wrapped round like a lasso with needle and thread of white fire,
aka a migraine.

we had to wait an hour idling in the car with bad radio and no conversation,
but it done got done. done. done.

the sign said: The End is Here,
then it's over, it's really over, what's over, the emergency?
contagion? bad times? fear, loathing?
I. Think. Not.

we're in, if anything, the eye of the summer twister –
go out, have fun, part two after this commercial
break (with quarterly sales somewhat higher than
expected) before the second spin devil comes, worse
than the first.

Have a Nice Day :), to go back to my cave ; P
and hermit some more, I don't fancy
this street, asphalt parking lot, people in Ebola
suits, I don't like people. especially now.

take me home, I want to come out slow
like a shaky groundhog, it's too sunny here, we need
another month of winter, or more, and then
I can see it, here comes the sun,

and in that sun, here comes a human storm, a flash flood,
tsunami wave of people waving, marching penguins, bodies
flow down every main street on Earth and the bubbles above
their heads go: Yes Justice, Yes Peace!

the 1st amendment bubbles they carry on sticks
freely all the way on buoyant babble
all the way down the roads to number 1600
Black Lives Matter Plaza,
Washington, D.C., U.S.A.

to lay it to rest
dump it on the steps
of bold redress.

Day 2: Nothing from nothing, but lately I've been social
media social distancing socially hiding in a fake social world
of socialism for socialites, drink in hand, red high-heels, puffy hairdo
there I noted that everyone who's everyone is a comedian,
a wiseacre, a jokester, gagster, funnyman, jester, buffoon
meant to be so stand-up funny – coronavirus?
laugh at this crack -- police brutality?
here's my pithy remark --
millions hurting choking dying drowning dead?
LOL, that's a good one (tweet, tweet) --- there's still
even now, supply and demand,
TV full of comics and comediennes, really good ones
getting their daily material directly from the White House,
and thousands of imitating amateurs sprouting up, spouting off –

but why? why so wry? are you high?
can we not face disaster with a straight face, blank face, long face,
"pull my finger" at a funeral? the griefily coping mechanism?
I don't see anything humorous happening these days --
Gerald Ford burnt toast, stumbling on replay -- that was funny, but this
pathetic Benito act is not comedy –
you got to look; you got to see
here comes the firestorm, the avalanche above
the tidal wave below -- and no time to run –

this is everything –

no laughing matter
experience your full
impotence
frozen in place
inner peace
open your
arms, face
the fear
will let
yourself
go.

Day 3: I went outdoors -- it was
terrifying. I skulked around like a fish net thief
till I could harbor back home door locked,
alone, I saw other human revenants walking
driving automobiles, we passed one another
in shifty doorways, violating the one-meter rule.
I saw many people using their masks to warm
their chins, everyone smokes now for fresh air,
I saw a cat on the cement steps that looked like mine
but was not. I talked to some people in a shop downtown
I don't trust or like them –

what a relief to get away from the hoard, the mob
infected bubonic plagues, coughing hacking serial killers
or asymptomatic college cheerleaders smiling welcome
notwithstanding. I turn on the TV to see thousands marching
resisting insisting desisting persisting in cities everywhere
unafraid – “you can't go out" -- "we can't stay in ... even if
we should” -- against racism, sexism, brutality, bigotry, homophobia,
yes, all that, but more. Trump and his clone army of matryoshkas
made in Mother Russia, covered in vulgar flags, longbeards, horns, the
return of deplorable Nazism, the return of Oppression (which fascists love
as long as they do the oppressing) –

we reject you, we the people, all the we everyone, no pigs
are more equal than others, we
despise you, a million voice chorus: can you hear us now?
CAN YOU HEAR US NOW?
we to be in the street
be street

make a point
in the street
we are sick
of you,
go away.
vanish.

you are
virus.
we are
vaccine.

Day 4: Keep bailing, don't quit, the boat is filling with water, keep bailing, your arms are tired, you want to let go and sink, don't let go, don't stop, it's your job -- do it! the water level rises and descends, keep bailing, you can't fix the leak, it would feel so good to relax, to sleep, to dream of letting it rise up over your knees hips nips shoulders head so wet and free of sweat –
don't! quit! bailing!

I have projects on my desk
that need immediate attention. Other
people are taking it easy, why
can't I? The desperation and anger
that drove me -- the fear and sad-
ness seem dampened, diminished
by personal freedom -- wanna go out?
You go. I have work.

I need to finish a love story
and prepare a book for eventual
publication. It's a big deal,
I'm very happy -- but I don't
feel happy. I feel like
making a cake and eating it too,
savoring the stomach ache
then maybe watching that disaster
movie about a guy and his imaginary
daughter looking for something essential
after the pandemic takes its toll.
Whatever.

Whatever happens next is my responsibility
I own this world and all its miseries and microbes
we gods cannot be petty or superficial
this is on me.
you are mine.
I am thine.

Day 5: I drove the putt-putt.
I went to see Rapunzel
in the castle tower.

She let her hair down and
I climbed up -- it was
controversial.

Will we get used to anything?
depravation, isolation, contagion, thirst hunger sickness pain???
-- we are humans, we adapt,

but a sore rotten tooth requires extraction,
no matter what millennium,
walls crumbling on my watch,

yet I try to keep a couple ideas as pets.
I attempt to train them and take them for walks yet
they recognize me though

I wear a mask like the Lone Lone Ranger
who respected and protected Tonto
as they protected the trains from bandits

working for the banks
like us all, train chugging along
up the hill -- I think I can

achieve some celebrity
singing train wreck ballads on the platform
behind a Jimmie Rodgers mask

or at least survive the small pox
government blankets piled on pallets

next to buffalo hides

and make a grim play or two
push the line along
into Fairyland USA

even when Rapunzel doesn't recognize me.
I'll be okay.
We are humans. We adapt.

Paperwork

Zaqary Fekete

Sai nervously scratched at his thigh with his remaining two fingers as he waited for the employment office to open. It was just before 8 in the morning, but the sun was already hot enough to cause sweating. Or maybe the sweat was nerves. He had traveled through the night by train from his small village to Pondicherry, the largest city in his district.

Puducherry, Sai's district in India, had the highest rate of unemployment in the country. Once it was clear that Sai's damaged hands would not allow him to do field work, he decided that his best chance was to apply for some kind of paper job. He had been practicing, and he had taught himself how to sort paper using his two fingers and the stump on his left arm.

Last night on the train Sai was calculating his options. If he could get a job in the city he could probably sleep on the streets in order to avoid rent. Within the first week he would be able to send money home to his mother. His father and sister had died two years ago during the Monsoon season from a flood. His mother had ankle-swelling and could no longer walk very far.

Sai wiped his brow as he heard a key turning in the lock of the office door. He politely stood back while the bored turnkey came out and did a cursory sweeping of the threshold with an ancient broom. He gestured Sai into a waiting room.

"Sit there," the turnkey said, indicating a row of limp plastic chairs. He disappeared down a dim hallway.

Sai sat down and waited. He couldn't see into the inner office because the glass was frosted. As he waited he mentally practiced his paper sorting technique. He was so absorbed in his practice that it was not until the second call that he realized the inner office person was summoning him.

"Come in! Come IN!", the voice was thin but loud.

Sai jumped up and cautiously opened the inner office door. The office was stifling and hot. An old desk fan rattled from one of the corners, offering no help. The man behind the desk was balding and covered in sweat.

"Sit", the official said. Sai consciously kept his hands behind his back as he stepped to the chair. The official was writing something; Sai waited.

After his writing the official looked up, saying nothing. After an uncomfortable moment, Sai said, "Sir, they said that your office needed paper sorters. I am from the country, and I would be glad to work for 50 percent less. I can begin today."

There was a long pause.

The official gestured at Sai, "Show me your hands."

Sai's heart fell. He slowly put forward his hands. The official looked at the mangled mess at the ends of Sai's arms.

"What happened?"

Sai shifted in the chair, "There were many snakes in the fields. The village doctor said that most people die. He said I was lucky."

The official looked up at the ceiling and uselessly pushed the sweat around his face. Then he looked at Sai again.

"You can begin this afternoon? I can offer you regular pay."

Sai's mouth dropped open. Then he quickly stood up. He stepped forward to bow. That was when he noticed the official's legs. Both of his feet were gone.

Sai looked up at the official's face. The man had a small smile.

"I understand," the man said.

Ella

Though Ella was the beauty of the three
(She'd been the toast of Dartmouth, as a Wren),
The others (one a beetroot, one a *bride*)
Were patently more fortunate with men.
A grandma, thrice, at fifty, was Lenore,
Complacent as a hen on seven eggs,
While Hannah, made a widow by the war,
Remarried in a trice, despite her legs.

It puzzled me, their nephew. In her past
(Unreadable, unless by wizard's art),
Had someone nailed her kerchief to his mast,
Then sailed away and left her, crushed of heart?
Or did the hurt that hovered in her eyes
From no one having bothered to, arise?

[Wrens, during World War 2, were volunteers who
served in the Women's Royal Canadian Naval Service.]

Never

'I'll *never* go back there again,' you mutter,
On your way home through dampish pre-dawn streets
Where rain-swept leaves block up and flood the gutter,
While she remains enthroned on purple sheets
(The mind's eye shows), sipping a *Vieux Carré*
Picking a chocolate from the box you brought,
Tapping *Gitanes* ash into where it lay.
'Damn her!' you hiss (as usual distraught):

'I'm not some android with a moving part
Designed to give enjoyment to a whore,
Built with neither emotions nor a heart
And safe to take for granted! Well, no more!
You're back that night, though, timely as a watch,
Eager to ease the throbbing in your crotch.

[A *Vieux Carré* is a cocktail popular in New Orleans.]

Just the Weekend

Said Ben, 'It's just a tryout, not for good:
If it's not *us*, it's over – done with – dead,
Although of *that* there's not much likelihood....'
Come Saturday, until the night had fled,
The foursome skimmed the floor; then off they went,
The wives with men they'd hardly met till now....
On Sunday night, 'Well, that was time well spent,'
Said Ben, 'that wife of Steve's is quite a wow!'

Unmindful of her silence, he undid
The buttons of her blouse with practised ease,
As masterly as Casanova slid
It off her shoulders. She could only freeze,
Praying she wasn't made to take a quiz,
Tell how gently Steven had made her his.

First Kiss

Jeff, at sixteen, said he'd never been kissed
'Like *that*'. A bolder friend, playing his part,
Got his girl to set up a movie tryst
For four, hoping to ease his buddy's heart.
On the back row, the two girls in between,
Jeff (acutely aware that next to him
A beauty sat), being painfully green
Wondered what he'd do when the lights went dim.

Remembering how movie stars embraced,
Flinging round her an arm, he crushed her lips
But, when she pulled away, leaving a taste
Divinely sweet, he couldn't come to grips
With stifled snorts arising from his right,
And found his feet and ran into the night.

Twenty Years On

Each Jack within the group had found his Jill,
Successfully, you guessed from their deportment,
Even the oddest match in the assortment –
A schoolmarm so punctilious, so chill
You *knew* she'd never warmed a boyfriend's bed
And a roué who'd fertilized more ova
(At least by his account) than Casanova
And swore that he'd have made Our Lady spread.

Twenty years on, you look around and see
A mess of separations, shaky truces
(Not for the parents' sake but Jane's or Bruce's)
And, circumnavigating the debris,
Who but the oddest matchup, hand in hand,
Acting as if they lived in Neverland.

Umbrella

That day in Bruges it was raining and we were
our own umbrellas as Donne says we must be,
our own umbrellas, and our own suns,
for the weather was gray and foul, sluicing cold water

down our sleeves, tangling our umbrellas, knotting them,
one after another, into tortured trees and tossing them
into the street, strange sculptures piling up at every
corner--

think *Our Town*, the last act, but mourners tilting

with twisted umbrellas, think Thornton Wilder
dragging his friend Samuel Steward around Zurich all night
so they can hear the bells in the morning. Wilder
is wildly happy, as we were happy ere the drenching,

but poor Samuel Steward weeps for an umbrella,
he wants to go back to the hotel, please, and suddenly
I too am weeping and saying I can't go on,
not another step in this wild rain, and then the bells—

and Wilder can return to write the third act of *Our Town*.
Umbrella. From *umbra* shade. The Italians called it
ombella, a small shade like a ghost word floating
in our heads, like a shadow we carry with us,

something to protect us as Donne says we have need,
and we find a place to eat out of the rain,
a cafe full of sculptures, bright and brash
roosters, and we sup and are warm again.

Thy Seed as the Stars of the Heaven

Before going west, your grandfather
saw the ocean once and only.
Scalded his trotters scuffling
barefoot on the beach.

Some say he was German,
some Jewish, whichever
he didn't wear sandals
that wild trot to Wyoming.

No one tried
to conscript his soles,
neither the Schwartzwald left foot
nor the Ashkenazim right.

Meanwhile your grandmother
fierce and Irish
grew feet flat and strong,
big enough to gap the stars.

First he sang to her sister,
take that old shoe without its heel
for a ride with me,
she said no.

And then to her,
Reserve that bed in the birthing tent,
you're gonna have babies.
And she did. Eight.

Who needs grains of sand
if you can generate constellations?
The easiest years of my life,
she claimed.

Come, said the August sky,
time to be fruitful
and bring forth.
But we knew enough was enough.

Vacancy

i.

Imagine vacancy
the empty vessel

how it allows
emptiness to fill it

or the uninhabited room
how it invites you in.

You want to scoop yourself out
like a pumpkin set on a porch,

live on remembered seeds.
You summon your father

delicately removing the carpels
of a tangerine

to make an empty carriage
for you.

He turned chocolate kisses
into wheels—

voids do that,
kisses on air,

small puffs
that spin and disappear.

ii.

But how long can you
tolerate such hunger—

be the empty tomb—
Cecillia Metella's tower

with its crenellations
like teeth

biting the empty sky.
You always turn

water into whim
null into metaphor.

Your small
classroom miracle

Elijah's jar.

iii.

But there is too
Magritte's open window,

Kevin staring vacantly,
Anita bending towards

the wordless page.
What did you give them

to take and eat? Mariam
stares blankly

as an Amish girl
bending over her empty needle.

Her grandmother's eyes
have filled with milk.

Sometimes there is so little
you can see,

sometimes you remain empty like a spoon,
sometimes you refuse porridge.

Eos

Greek goddess of dawn

Barely beyond the blue hour
the hostas lap fog with white tongues—

white dogs with blue-black lips,
thick milk in a blue-green cup.

I know the keys of old pianos
turn yellow in the dark.

I have thick legs like a grand,
body like drum.

Some mornings you hear me
snaring the black keys.

I bruise as easily as the sky,
as easily as a purple plum.

At the recital my mother is ashamed
because my battered shins look dirty.

That night I rushed through the moonlight
like a sonata in the rain.

Some birds can sing, some cannot.
You hear which one I am.

Two kinds of robins, too,
one *gracile*, one *robustus*.

Both hop, both walk—
oh, Simon says, one dinosaur step after another.

I have watched robins mob a squirrel
stalking their fledgling.

Slip

It happens sometimes
that skid
from consciousness.
Maybe you are tired
or sick
of reading,
and something—
a phrase,
an idiom,
a flit of bird
against the window,
and you are somewhere else,
walking in a fog,
and you trip
to catch yourself
flail your arm
and clutch
the one beside you,
no, not that story of Christ
at your side,
but someone
who has caught you
too from time to time—
and when you wake again,
wake up, the pinch is over.

Nothing as drastic as
the Rip Van Winkle blitz
or the *krieg* of Chinese courtesans—
a young man goes to the Island of Pleasure
and when he returns
he is crippled
and the world is 200 years older.

Just a minor adjustment, a wobble
in the space-time continuum.

I stray but not too far . . .

I have boundaries
inner and outer—

parietal bone to contain the brain—
ribs, the heart—

limits that sometimes slack,
sometimes squeeze.

Too much too often
not enough—

a turtle I breathe
belly down,

shell checking
suffocation.

My father had further frontiers:
Ask and ye shall receive.

Once we journeyed 400 miles
to visit,

and he left us alone
in the house

while he drove a woman
sixty-one miles to Akron.

I'm not talking adultery—
merely that he believed

hers the greater need.
Nor do I know

how she wandered
into his borders—

I was so often
beyond his pale.

Wind and Billow

How hard to tell the difference
between formality and nakedness,

that woman wearing what?—
a slip, a dress? Covered with—

no, as if—
embroidered cheetah spots?

Black gloves upon her table,
an ivory madonna,

flowers sent, spent—
and those high cheekbones

as if ready to bone her prey.
Bone. Her. Prey.

Bone her, pray?
Yes, pray, that's easy—

like the distinction
between wind and willow:

one breath turns dust
into desire, the next

the gasp and we grasp
the gallows.

Lockjaw

The year I was eight I woke
every morning afraid
that I could not open my mouth.

Later I learned tetanus didn't lock
the jaw, just caused muscle spasms
as unlikely as leprosy

which I also feared living in a world
where whales swallowed nay-sayers
and coughed them up in Nineveh.

My father was a man of faith
and might sacrifice me
to that God who demanded victims;

I knew no pet lamb would come along
as rescue. How can I say this?
I knew early I would be the stone

the builder rejected. So I kept quiet
as long as childhood lingered,
trying to be saved, but guarding jaw and limb.

Something about Some Poems

First of all the opening: *Just after dawn, we get up without coffee*—immediately this poem excludes night owls

and singles and in Manhattan there are 38 percent more young female college grads than male and 9 to 12 percent of those are *they*

and as for the *without coffee*, true there isn't a Starbucks on the beach but really, without coffee at 5 am—it's hard to believe.

As for taking her *hand* and feeling *the blood warming your fingers, as the dog bounds off dragging its leash*

is that possible since a *morning breeze stirs the now turning tide, breathing over it*, it's damp, isn't it? chilly? probably

impossible to *feel the blood warming her fingers* and assuredly impossible *to feel the beat*,

the blood in her hand, unless this improbable speaker has a seismograph so sensitive it excludes the pounding waves.

But how we want such things to be true.

Like a poem inside a poem inside out

this morning—a cat that needs let in
wants out, and the red-bellied pecker
is hectoring what he doesn't seem
to be able to poke from the curb. I twitch
and the rabbit I have been watching
disappears; she's been cutting clovers one by one,
sucking up each stem through her harelip
to the blossom, and I remember my dad
always saving his meatball until he slurped the spaghetti,
saving the best to last, he said, as if he were Christ
at the Marriage at Cana, explaining the wine,
and he was a Christ of sorts—the way men
about their Father's business have priorities,
every disaster *an opportunity*.
He thought my end should be the same,
but I'm the robin flitting from her nest
in the spruce, hungry from sitting so long
beak thrust up like a bishop's mitre.
She is not a pious bird, look how she pokes
through the grass to get the worms—
one for herself, one for the biddies.

Unlike most birds she can hop and walk
so I take up my bed and stalk
inside to feed my chicks.

Side by Side in Fragile

Locate a crudeness,
a thought about
a fortress where help
is a sign of rumored comfort
and abandonment
means insanity, a lost
hope of what things used
to be, before the malice
set in and took over like
a new pleasure that used to
be painful. How can we do this
over and over without learning
from the missteps we make.
It's a sign in the back of
our heads, a cold-seeking
war machine that looks out for
where we are most damaged and
seeks the parts where we are
most awake and inside the most insincere and all weak-kneed
about, as we are hopeful,
It takes that away by
dodging reality and expecting everyday
to be an occasion, like Holy Ghost festas in June.
Home, the place where
we are drawn out and vulnerable because of
our dreams and the bounds of excess
joy we exude. The machine seeks out
where it knows we are pain,
and can be cut off into that deep
hurt contentment that no one ever
could fear or listen to or react towards.
Yes. far away from here, all the way
back to that back of the back-time when
everyone on your block was still
close at hand. That is where the machine sends us.

Settled Down

Quite completely,
the motion was
In both of them,
something of a joke
of the rest and among
those Informed by nothing
who felt as if they knew
them, and crying was like a
force for them, about
whether they could
let the madness
unwisely though it be so,
let it be brushed aside for a season,
towards a new gravitation
of love that they were trying
for. That they would carry thru
again and again,
staying up til the blue satisfaction
knelt in through the window.
At least they can
break a glass to sort
things out. This time
they'll go on, without anything
being done or managed.
Bright and brought forth
Upon a tray, when they said
Inside the door
That this is what they did not want
To hurt.
More than the alphabet,
they sorted through
in the same small country
they lived in, had grown used to
all this time, that
That She had Been
That He had been.
It was all About the morning
When they were predisposed

To apart, grow in the manner
by which they felt
they had given for rest of their
lives, in a limbo true
and close by, balanced with
a loose touch far away, a deep
wall between the curves and the ending.

Weakens as She

Falls in her dumb luck stupidity
of trusting in the endangered and enchanted.
Clear as a wily ghost, she missed the
gift of the arrogance of timing,
Isn't that everything? And how Sadness
grieves over her at such unsettling
weeks, grief subjected like a rain being spellbound
around a formerly sunny almond grove
She knows that settled feeling all too well,
which suggests that she has fallen in love,
a phrase of knowing which inhabits her
everyday thoughts, tears open her well-being
and causes her to be confined momentarily
again to this bright earth
that all she needed were soft words,
once more to grab her down
and hold her as she is thrown into the
hard, tinned air.

A Reason for My

Graciousness, the closely held
Sacrifice Of how we thrill through life
Like almonds and peaches,
Never realizing what our fragility
Is made up of, steel instead of cotton
And crimes to our memories are
Lost on sale in a quick field of
Demarcation where apple seeds
Are not poisonous and that one day
When there was no news
And all the radios played piano music.

About Whether She Could

Live among them. If she worried,
it was a rush that carried her forth
past noun and verb inside a small
cramped room of If and The.
For that, she was chastised
and blessings were taken from her alongside
adjectives and long titles of books
she held close at hand. For that
was her wish of the world, indeed,
that she would have fulfilled a brief promise
of not disappointing people. That she may
have meant something after all and not
for that, if and when and what if she
discovered no secrets under the rocks, no pearls .
What if there
was no great heart inside her love.
If she were honest for that, with herself it was
her pain love blood and lust
that caused the most anxiety
and sweated through the skin of her
when she thought about how distant she felt in the middle
of when passion took her
down in its harsh clutches of hope. And she was stuck
when she looked everywhere in the closet for the sweater with the golden flowers on its
braided front, that she liked to button up to her chin when she got cold.

After the War

A return shadow isn't there
Forgive this, hold on
Timing that was assault and battery
Lost and broken free
No longer by now
This all felt like a habit
The dirty had come back
To find color unlike harming
Truth we touched our
Distance a distance we cannot maintain
Or Push farther away into my love
How much more distance can
We put between us before the weather
Supersedes the murder stories on television
Which are all we can discuss
all that you can bear
To look at more closely than
A plate of steak, prepared red, at order
for you, served up on a mattress
pulled free from sheets
atop a brazen serving of
I told you so and here I am talking
and still taking
care of you as if things still are
the same as when they most assuredly
are not because you held
one of the keys in your pocket
about our needs and your want
and it was and has been
washed clear from the rusted lock
solid, a great and far distance
away of who you are.

And Admits

In heart-felt kind
That things were flat
That it had been a many
Too long day of this day's solitude
And when we at thought we had it all
And life was just starting
And just starting it was like that for
More than half a lifetime
Like that when the riches
of being busy and flush full of normalcy
were clearly outlined
as honest as perfect timing
when a rabbit jumped
away from a hawk.
We were rolling down the street
Listening to Beethoven
And drumming the side of the open
Window with our feet
Hanging outside
As we turned through the fields of
Almond groves stupidly
being, almost whole
the subtle trunks thick and solid
awaiting years of height,
Subjected to grief, sadness
And a slick flush of wet jealousy
We ran afoul of the flames
That we were running towards.

Darkness we are Having

(from a line by Jane Kenyon)

Then, right is used as a verb,
a signpost of what we are supposed to
suppress and keep quiet about as if we
never had the whole world inside our
puerperal vision. Rights are used to change
the subject in a discussion or discourse,
they used to mean a solution to someone who
is out of line, as if an interjection, like, Oh Dear
or Not me is an excuse for the abrupt remark
out of place, a remark of strong emotions.
Like a long sentence that trails off, filled with
the dense flavor of putting up with orders spoken
to us, as if it would always be this way, the way
that it is now. As if we had always been this way.
We keep trying to learn when to stuff it. When to focus
on the heat inside the bones, their marrow beat.
For instance, we count, for a moment, the pause
when it is time to move, to speak. When the word
right is used as a verb, we correct, we are faced
with righting all the wrongs of a given afternoon,
swallowing the list of needs to be less than
impossible, as as if any war will be impossible
like us, including the war inside our bodies
telling us to move or stretch our atrophied
muscles, parched from bouts of dehydration.
The communal world of being female is fluid.
We bathe in we speak and we are often
the difference between words. Opinions
righted as if they were a flipped vehicle
stranded on a middle highway strip, stuck,
broken, bent over as if to say, Oh, that tow truck
righted the green Buick when he wind died down.
Affecting the end result is to return to normal.

We sit on our hands, the state of being
used like action verbs, We run, we attack
We attach, sometimes splitting open the old usage of
slang terms, what words are meant to mean:
is, was, to be. Are we in a state of being half.
Moreover, needing to shut up and curl into
that shape who complies inside the full moon
and shines clear the definitions of justice, law, reason.
We are, after all, filled with a lack of agitation, an immigrant
disturbance. Peaceful talk they say, at random
and set into place, between the almost given, neatly
as if no one noticed us there, as if that is the darkness
that we are having, the state of being serene.

Trentwood, Wa. (1965)

Gregory Davis

- Big K grocery- Shasta soda eight cents a can.
Where you could watch a red-nosed man.
Turn in 400 empty beer bottles, penny apiece.
Enough to buy twenty-four full ones.
- Thrift Store- A miles' frozen walk, dad and I
fetching home ten Presto logs.
So we could survive
another zero degree night.
- Kaiser Aluminum- Ravening hulk.
Squatting south of Trent Ave.
Swallowed dad for forty years.
Cut him loose with an arthritic knee.
- Blessings Tavern- Long, low dive.
Steelworkers separated from their paychecks.
An ocean of three percent lager
the social lube.
- Breese's Barber Shop- Old men with bad coughs
spittin and chewin.
Cursing new words into my adolescent ears.
While I got my boot camp style crew cut.
- Trentwood (ca.1965)- Kids played on the mean streets.
Grownups prayed for ends to meet.
Some called the place a slum.
It was, for some.

Eiffel 65

blue house
with a blue
tall weed
sunflower heart blue
snake on the window
board half in half out half
void no sun no blue
the sky fence
hill inside blue
not blue no
blue is the fire
smoke and eggplant eyes
blue death in drawings
a deep blue wind and water
dirt on my face and hands
cobweb and dust blue dream on blue
is purple is blazing eyes in your skull
is my skull same face different
blue flat and bright light
blue silk on blue bed

April 6, 2020

We rearranged the patio
though no one's allowed
back. Silver chairs survived
the winter, now the virus.
The navy rug we slid on
brick, under long legs.
We hung string lights under
nostalgic blue, a horsefly
floating by. We put our porch
tables there in negative sun
when I said *the new people
watching is through barbed
wire*, through dead weeds
overlooking distant sidewalk
behind the abandoned printing
press and the parking lot
of Rite-Aid. There
I saw a congregation
shouting and prowling
abandoned concrete.
All I could picture
was ubiquitous spit—
how will the world
seem clean when
we are allowed
the world again?
Beaks of birds,
always lurking.

Anachronism / Angiosperm

I'm trying to tell you
I'm trying

my petals' attempt
at opening

an articulate tongue

the phylum anthophyta

glass breaking in the sun

I am Late Jurassic
early Cretaceous

it's true I don't belong
here among your desiccated peonies

I plead bee telepathy

antennae

someone read
my mind

before the era ends

before I swallow

pyrethroids

over ensuing millennia I can't promise
I will adapt

Chasing Shadows

no end to entertainment tricks
of light when I lack sleep the world
is out to get me starlight in the rain
horn-nosed scythes in the shadows
lately I've felt the presence of twins
in our bathtub I swore they were
behind the curtains I could sense
the waiting knives

For You the Invading Weeds

moss spirit water
air with freshness
unknowing us
capable I understood
how much to lose
beside leaves
wilting off
trees onto grass
to grow anew

New Year's Eve, 2020

this is no end
nor beginning
I climb into the clock
and hairs of time still
wend from its beating
wings until purpose
finds me this is just
another way to kill time

A Morning in Knox, PA – September 2020

can't risk having you fall in
 it's the same blue blood buzzing everywhere
a spider's on my face and all I see is dusk
 and lavender cornfields
you would tell me if (I made your) birthday a ruin, right?
you'd come out of your (hole in) the ground,
help me navigate through pink-spiked weeds?
every step I take close bullfrog leaping into moss
to escape me I get it I don't know if it's my intention
misplaced or if my body's just unable to execute
 the further I walk from the house a little more it rains
 moths displaced little insects winging away
 each further step I take toward the lake

Before Coronavirus

We would shake hands in public but embrace
in private the kitchen counters I'd pour myself

a purple punch. Slung ear ice. Not much music
from the grass but songbirds chatter refrigerator

hum. My speedometer reached a hundred barren
roads leading to summer rooms. Fingerprints

everywhere. We touched everything tortillas
knobs ladles. We even touched each other's

faces, then inhaled.

The Movies

I want to go to the movies I want to see people
act like people I don't know enough about

anything to know if I know about anything
except let mise en scene keep my mouth

watering I am happy to drop yellowy
popcorn in my lake to swim the butter

and I want to laugh like a lake and ripple
in the conflict of others because if this

is the life I am meant to live one
of darkness surrounded by strangers

I want us to at least see the same thing

Multimodality

too many avenues to take
to achieve [what]?

goldfisted, I punch Jupiter
through the rings
I'm bound to. a racetrack

this zipline I cling
to the forest not the tether
nor the trees many

branched and beholden
to gravity I seek
to lunge headfirst

through the brush
renewal in sharp
sticks and scrape

the surface of
what composes me

Why I prefer endure instead of endear.

The estrangement of man is unconquerable. Even
god, sick of hallelujahs, cannot conquer it.
So why not endure these in Bird: flesh, saliva, semen,
a cycle of transgression so earthly even god wouldn't squander it.
But she demands more, a sponge wrung. There's no reason
to hunger like starving angels—the rustic pitch
of bodies reunited. Whether this man, all air & silt, is conquerable
believing god, lungs full of used-up light, cannot conjure such hymns.

Days strung out in pastels, canapés, the dust of a veranda.

Eat? I should eat. So, stomach a gutted balloon, the Admiral eats a half a canapé. Like his life, the sunlight settles. He doesn't know the weight of light, how much dust must be between the Adderall in his stomach & the soft spot on his gums. The Admiral posturing in the sunlight of the veranda, fingers crumbed, admiring the shamelessness of a cat preening itself on a rowboat, the cat choosing to lick the bird-dust especially for his Highness who, having eaten half a canapé, clueless, couldn't say no.

Gravitating onto a couch, Bird and I both pretend the eros, bittersweet, and between us, must be dealt with.

Here's to your love. What's my name? She pushes these towards him (a Grecian urn, the spines of magnets) along with a saucer flush with salt & some smushed plums. Here's to you. Love it. What my name pushes against the dryness of lips. The air in the room: squished peppers, dustings of salt. Something edible for a bit. Here it is, he says, to his love. What? My name. She pushes towards him. He withdraws, yearning. Bodies meaty magnets.

The noonlight of a cellar door opens on the grit and mold-growth of stone, the way I feel when I wake up, head a bottle of Goldschlager, heart a half-rotted potato.

So, now, half drowning, & bringing a man
of god with me, I was incapable of saving myself,
or anyone. It is luminous—the limits of a life.
Half of what I've inherited—a man. The other—
some part of a person that I can't stand,
something rotted in the back of a cellar shelf.
So bring it out. Boil it. Half drown it in salt.
There's some good. Save, please, the half-dead half.

The way grass snaps over in a crop circle, the trees look around the tornado-hit lake. Someone's basement, like the split belly of a fish, is exposed, showing its canned peas, acorn squash, lima beans. Several of us are left with only the hallways of our houses. Huddled under a pillow in the bathtub. A year later, there is still a dumpster, red as a siren, in the lake.

Unacceptable—what a person is asked to endure in a life. Maybe it's not to be, not really. Even the smallest task, at the end, becomes difficult to ask of a person, who is, after all, an unacceptable amount of flesh. Somewhere, in the bowels—a self. Or possibly not even that. Maybe, like a lichen, only an illusion of wholeness. What's endured—a person is. A life—not to be, but rather, to not be nothing

After spending three days drinking from someone else's well, the Admiral became very sick—sheets smelling like the well's stone sides, mouth tasting of the moss that grows there. As I walk through an orchard near the water pump, thinking of his insistence on self-dependence, I see, in the tree, a plum large as a baby's head. The next day, I pull Bird away from where she is nursing the Admiral. The plum has fallen and appears eaten from the inside. Time, not in anytime, really, the Admiral whispering, *This is what my life is.*

But where is the sense of loss? What a very weighted moment to have fallen. A plum gorged from the inside—to collapse is all I ask for. But what's the point? To be lost is to nearly never exist at all. Though to hold on is clearly not worth losing friends over. A worm forged just under the skin—the sensation is very heavy. Finding, momentarily, what loss isn't.

On a trip to Montana, Bird and I tried to build a snowman. She'd never lived in a place that wintered. But in Butte, the snow, like the lives of the folks that lived there, was too dry. And so we dumped a mug of water on the snow, rolled it a few inches. Dump. Roll. Dump. Roll. Again.

So there I sat—sad shamble of a morning.
It was December. We were used to
doing nothing. Energy is a horrible thing
to have when you are ashamed of the shambles:
your life, the way everything is always boring.
Shame, Bird says, the way, like a balloon, we
go through these shams of flight, tied
to what we're used to. A December of was.

Slouching in a scrap of grass near an abandoned gas station, Bird found a book, half weather-worn, its cover torn. She began to paraphrase from page eighty-seven. Palimpsests, I said, noticing the reflections of cars, passing along highway 216, on the station's empty window.

The lovers believe they are inventing love.
What other metaphor do they need?
Bird, nearer the earth, giving herself. Shadowed above,
I am the meaning she believes the sun erases. Love,
she says, ruffling dress over knees, is not enough.
What happens after we, rewritten, feed on
the intentions the lovers believed in? Then, they are
some other metaphor. Not of need, no no, but of what?

Silence honeycombs my throat. And so Bird, who believes all communication is acknowledged in response, buries a broom handle into a wasp-nest, parchment grey and plastered to our porch awning. The bees—roiled silt—swarm. We wait, not to see whether they'll rage, no, no, but whether, after a month or so, they'll return.

The hell they want? Bird was saying. Why, she scarcely knew, a month later, to me. All time is resolved in the present. Her & I getting the hell we wanted. Bird saying, why, lonely bee, must you do this to us? Together a couple of wasps whose nest disjarred from tree. To hell, I said. Why do you want it, Bird? She scarcely knew the month. Or, sometime later, me.

Because Bird hated Montana, and I went there to testify to her discomfort, we moved back to Alabama. We've been here awhile. In small grey cotton shorts she hangs a strip of sticky paper above the kitchen tiles, the paper turning over, shining bright, then black on its backside. Sweat micas her neck. I reach for her and for a moment I believe, because I feel that she will leave again soon, that I shouldn't touch her.

We cannot really say what desire is
to bring absence into presence, or to collapse
some comfort in which we've conspired.
Bird, say what you cannot really. What desire
would drive you this way? A raptus, fly paper
that somehow, on its sticky strip, trapped
a desire we cannot really say. Some plump bug.
Is a collapse always so present in your absence?

The Dead Space

Sean Padraic McCarthy

Sticky parked the Path Finder three houses down. The sun had yet to rise, and Stephanie was kind of a late sleeper, but he didn't want to risk it. Didn't want her to see him. He pulled his knit hat down tight on his head, and started down the street. It was mid-November, a week before Thanksgiving, and the temperature was stuck in the thirties. He could see the sun breaking in reds just below the tree line. He loved this time of day because everything was new, and you could move around and do what you wanted without too many people asking questions. Sticky hated questions.

The neighborhood was filled with so many memories. All the old houses, all the old friends, some who had stuck by him, but most who had sided with Stephanie. It didn't matter though. He would win them back, be friends with them again. He was going to fix everything. He was sure of it. Everyone loved him, and that wasn't going to change.

He stopped at the end of the street. His little slice of paradise. The front light was on, but that was it. No lights inside. And that was good because that meant Stephanie and the kids, his son and his daughter—teens--were still sleeping. He looked at his watch. He didn't have to be at the warehouse for another hour. And by then, if all went well here, Stephanie would see that he had taken care of the garden problem, that the rabbits were gone.

He rounded the house. The frost had already come several times and what was left of the garden was blackened and wilted. The pepper plants and tomatoes still clung to their posts, and forgotten squash had already gone brittle and hollow, the flesh, paper thin. In years past, Sticky had usually helped her rip the garden up by now, but this year they had both been in limbo, and everything was different; this year she didn't want him around anymore. This year Stephanie was acting crazy.

The lawn was covered in leaves. Sticky had been out of the house for over a week—staying with his friend Butchie--and he had been sneaking by and raking when Stephanie wasn't home, but it was hard to keep up when she wouldn't let him live here anymore. He could see the first cage at the edge of the woods, just beyond Stephanie's garden. He had bought three cages—three traps—and paid \$41.99 for each. He wasn't cheap, and he wanted Stephanie to see he was willing to do what had to be done, that he was willing to make things work again. Stephanie loved the garden and usually started planting late April or early May, and once summer came, if she wasn't at work, you could find her out here, weeding and tending to the vegetables well into dusk, while Sticky sat, sipped his beer and watched. Life had been peaceful. But the problems weren't exactly new.

The problems had started twenty-four years ago back when Sticky's old girlfriend Doreen had gotten herself pregnant with Nadine, and then yelled at him and told him that she was done with him, and they had gone their separate ways. The problem was

Nadine, and the problem was Lucinda, Doreen's mother, who had sent Doreen to Connecticut to deliver the baby way back when, and the problem was Doreen. The problem wasn't Sticky.

Now Sticky had just turned forty-five, and Nadine had just turned twenty-three right before the trouble all started, but up until that point, he hadn't seen her since she was three months old, and he might not have seen her still, but then a year ago, he was looking for pictures of Doreen on Facebook, wondering how she had turned out, and he found her. Her hair was a lot lighter, and her face thinner, and she obviously looked older, but not nearly as old as most women their age—not like a wicked old bag--and she was hot. Sticky's brain began to work really good like it did sometimes late at night when the house was all quiet, spinning pictures of Doreen. Pictures of her naked. Beneath him, on top of him, on all fours before him. Begging him to fuck her. But he wasn't sure how that could ever happen, and that kind of bothered him. And then he scrolled down some more through the pictures, and then he saw Nadine. All grown up.

"I want to contact her," he had told Stephanie the next day when he got home from work.

Stephanie was mixing up some cookie dough. She dipped a finger in it, then put the finger in her mouth. Popped it out. "Who?"

Sticky came over and she gave him some, too.

"Nadine," he said. "My daughter." And as soon as he said it, he knew it was true. And that was what this was all about, not wanting to have at Doreen—he wanted to contact his daughter. His daughter. His.

Stephanie's face dropped a little, worried, concerned. "But Bart, it's been over twenty-three years. You deserted her."

"I know," he said. "I feel awful about that, but it wasn't my fault. And I didn't desert her. Not really. Doreen didn't want me around anymore, and I had to respect her wishes. I did it for her."

"But you were the father," Stephanie said.

"I was, but then I wasn't sure—I thought Doreen was fooling around on me--and then I was sure again. It was a lot of sure, not sure." He smiled. "I found a picture of her on Facebook though. She looks just like me, so I guess I am her father. Maybe I should send Doreen a message, reach out to her." He ran his finger through the batter again. "What do you think?"

Stephanie's jaw was still open. "I don't think it's a good idea. That woman probably wants to kill you."

"Then I'll reach out to Nadine. I have to meet her."

He found out where Nadine worked. Just out of college, she had a job in the city, Boston. Sticky hated the city. He hated the traffic, the noise, the big buildings. But she worked and lived in the city, so he had to go there—he couldn't call; he figured that either she wouldn't answer, or she'd hang up the phone. So Sticky had his friend Butchie drive in with him in.

Butchie, like Sticky, had had his nickname since high school. He had played on the defensive line back then, and even though he was short, he was pretty strong and everyone thought he was tough. But now he was wrinkly and most of his hair was gone—just a few sparse gray tufts that Sticky thought made his head look like some old guy’s ballbag-- and he had a big belly. When he got into the car, he was wearing his driving vest, and he had egg yolk smeared across the stubble around his lips.

Sticky stared at him. “What the fuck are you doing?”

“What do you mean?”

“Didn’t you shower? You look like a slob.”

“I never shower on weekends. Especially in the winter.”

“That’s friggin gross. You need to make a good impression.” Sticky put the car into drive. “This is my daughter, Butchie, and she’s going to think I’m a loser or something.”

They had fought traffic all the way into the city, and by the time they got there Sticky had bitten his nails down to the nub. He pulled over a block down the street from the deli where Nadine worked. He looked over the message one more time, and then read it out loud.

Dare Nadine,

My name is Bart Stickman.

I’m your Dad. I love you a wicked lot.

Want to get a beer? Maybe me you and you’re

Mom can get a beer.

Call me.

Love Dad

774-721-8999

“What do you think?” he asked Butchie, but Butchie was playing air guitar to an Iron Maiden song and didn’t respond, so Sticky just handed him the note, and sent him on his way.

It was two minutes later when he came out of the deli. He got in and turned up the radio.

“What happened?”

“Nothing happened. I asked the girl at the counter which one was Nadine, and they asked why, and I said I had a note, and they threatened to call the cops, and I said it was just a note from her father, and they said they’d give it to her.”

“Was she there?”

“How should I know? I never met her.”

“I showed you her picture of Facebook.”

“Oh, yah. You did. But everyone kind of looks the same on Facebook.”

Sticky waited for her response. He figured she would call right away once she read the note. But then a week went by, and then one month into two, and he still didn’t hear from her. And that would have been that, until he got a text a year later. A text

from Doreen.

Now Sticky crouched down and looked inside the first cage. The bait was still there—some lettuce and carrots, and a sweet potato-- untouched, and the water in the dish had frozen over, but the trap was empty. But they would have to come this time of year, he knew. Food was getting scarce, and all handouts were welcome. And rabbits just weren't all that smart. He had sprayed the cage with apple cider because he had heard that they liked that, and it got rid of the human scent, and he had left a trail of food going out into the woods. If he could show Stephanie that he could still be useful, that there were things around the house and yard only he could do, then Stephanie would get happy. And she might let him back.

When Doreen had texted, saying her husband had told her that Sticky had tried to contact Nadine, saying that she wanted to talk to Nadine about giving him a chance, that she wanted the past to be the past, wanted them to meet, Sticky's heart had started to pound. It came out of nowhere. He had figured that if he ever heard directly from any of them, it would be Nadine, not Doreen, and then he could just see if Nadine could take it from there. But here Doreen was, contacting him. After a minute he asked her if she could meet with them, too, and she said she couldn't even promise that Nadine would agree—right now she was being stubborn—and then, she said, she wasn't sure how her husband would feel. But she would like to, she said, she would really like to, and she would ask. She had told him she would text again, and Sticky asked her if she could just be careful what she said. His wife, Stephanie, snooped on his texts, he said, and he didn't want to give Stephanie the wrong idea. It was better to keep it quiet, for now.

“But what does she snoop for?” Doreen had texted.

“I don't know. That's what women do.”

“Not all of them.”

“Well, most. If they get suspicious. She was suspicious of me once. She thought I had something going with a soccer mom, Yvonne—her son played on my son's team—but it was all in her head. She thought I used to have sex with this woman on a dirt road down by the lake and the 495 overpass. And then she thought I bought her flowers, got a motel room for an afternoon in Plymouth with her once.” Sticky could feel himself getting excited, stiff. “Crazy stuff, but she couldn't prove any of it. She created this whole little fantasy. Women do that sometimes, too.”

“They do? That sounds like a pretty unfair generalization. Pretty sexist actually.”

Sticky began to back track. He had said too much. He did that sometimes—when he wasn't careful.

“Well, not all of them do that,” he texted. “I bet you don't. And I'm not sexist, not at all. I love women, I really do—I think they're beautiful, even the fat ones. And my wife is the most beautiful, so that obviously means I'm not sexist. You know?”

There was dead space again-- on the phone page. Blank. Then the dots, Doreen typing. “Well, if you're as sweet as you used to be, she's lucky to have you.”

“I am,” he texted. “I’m just like that.” He hesitated. He needed to throw the bait, to see how she’d respond, and now he sensed a glimpse of light, the door being opened. “But nothing can happen between us though, you know that?”

There had been a pause again, and then when the message came, it was ten minutes later. “Of course nothing can happen. Don’t insult me, Bart. I’m married. I tell Frank everything.”

Except she didn’t tell him everything, couldn’t have, because a few days later, five minutes into their first phone conversation, he had told her—whispering in the garage—that he had been thinking about her for years, ever since the last time he saw her, and then Doreen was quiet again, and then she told him that she had been thinking about him, too.

They had talked a lot about what had happened, and by the second conversation, she told him that she had begun to realize that she had what she called “unresolved feelings” for him—Sticky didn’t know what unresolved meant, but he knew all about feelings, he was like an expert on feelings, and so he right away agreed with her that he must have them, too.

“Unresolved feelings,” he said. “That’s exactly it.” And then by the third conversation, he told her that he needed to see her—not just pictures on Facebook--and he asked her if she knew how to face time. And she said that she did.

It was late August then, starting to get dark earlier. He waited until Stephanie went upstairs, and then he went out into the back yard, keeping an eye on her bedroom window.

He went to the shed in the far corner of the yard. He crouched down below the window, and then he pressed face time, and dialed. The phone on the other end rang, and then she was there. Doreen.

She had her hair up in a palm tree pony tail—that was the first thing Sticky noticed, he loved ponytails, and he had told her so—and the second thing he noticed was that her face was blue. This caught him off guard for a second, but then he realized that it was just one of those mud masks women wore sometimes to make their skin all tight and beautiful. Stephanie wore them sometimes, but he didn’t think it was working. With Doreen, though, there was something about it—having the mask on just made her even more hot, different, almost like an alien, and between that and the ponytail, he immediately felt himself getting hard. He was horny, but he was also something else, and he couldn’t put his finger on just what it was, but he was overcome with the feeling. It was a feeling of fullness and beauty. And he wanted to share with her; he wanted to show her his junk.

He asked if he could, and when she whispered yes, keeping an eye on his bedroom window, he pulled out his stuff, and focused the camera of his phone down that way, and asked her to kiss it, to kiss the screen. After she did, she began to whisper that she was both hungry and horny, and then Sticky asked her if she would touch with herself for him, and Doreen, after glancing up as if listening for someone approaching, sat back against the headboard of her bed, slipped off her shorts, and

slipped off her panties, dangling them before the camera for a moment, and then she did. Sticky didn't last more than a minute.

He had told Stephanie he had been in contact with Doreen, but had said they had only talked once, and that was it, and they were making plans for him to meet Nadine. Nadine had now moved out to San Diego, but she was coming back over Labor Day, and Doreen had told him she was going to arrange a meeting.

"That way I can get to see you, too," she had whispered. "It's been so long. I can't focus at work, and then I just end up all wet."

"What does Frank think about you going to meet me?" he had asked, and Doreen had paused.

"I don't care what he thinks. I told him I want a divorce."

Divorce. Sticky felt both excited and worried. That little alarm that sometimes went off in his head was going off. Divorce was good—divorce meant that he could have her, like really have sex with her, but what did that mean in the big picture of things? Would she expect him to get divorced, too? He didn't want to get divorced. He had the house, the yard, the horseshoe pit, the kids. Stephanie. He had a lot. He was going to have to think about how to respond, and think hard, just in case Doreen suggested it.

Stephanie was already starting to get suspicious, though, asking him whom he was texting all the time, and when he would respond that it was Nadine, she would sometimes ask to let her see, and he would tell her he couldn't because they were sharing personal things between a father and daughter, and he didn't want Nadine to not to trust him. He had to regain her trust, he said, and he needed Stephanie to be patient with him.

And Stephanie would just look at him blankly. But Sticky wasn't stupid, and he knew she was a snooper. He kept his phone on him always.

When the meeting day finally arrived it was a Sunday. Sticky had told Stephanie they were meeting at Plymouth Harbor, so he could show Nadine Plymouth Rock, but in reality they were meeting at Miles Standish State Park; Stephanie had been even more suspicious lately, and he couldn't risk her driving down there and spying, just in case he and Doreen did a lot of touching.

They met outside the gates to the park, and the second Sticky saw them walking towards him, Doreen waving, he felt something stir inside him. Something he hadn't felt in over twenty-three years. He hadn't seen them in twenty-three years. How could that be possible? Doreen hugged him—seeming like she would never let go—and then Nadine hugged him quick, and then Doreen hugged him again, and then he and Doreen were crying.

The day hadn't gone great—he had to do a lot of explaining, with Doreen's help, to Nadine about why he had never tried to contact her, and she got emotional, and said she was confused, and didn't know what to think—but it hadn't gone awful. And then it was one week later that Doreen texted saying she had to see him again—she was going through withdrawal, she said. Sticky withdrawal. She couldn't stand it anymore.

The problem was how could they meet alone? How could they do it without Nadine there? Stephanie was now acting really paranoid, and she was still upset about the incident with the wedding picture when Nadine had come over for a cookout a few nights before.

Nadine was due to arrive at six, and an hour before she arrived, Stephanie had come into the living room as he was taking their wedding picture down off the wall. The picture was 24 x12, and black and white. Silver framed. Sticky and Stephanie in front of a gazebo. It was a nice picture—he looked really good, his hair still long, and his mustache still dark—but he needed them all put away before Nadine arrived. He didn't want Nadine going home and telling Doreen that he and Stephanie looked happy. They were happy, they were, and he wasn't denying that, but if Doreen thought that, she might get cold on him again. And then she might stop texting him. Face timing. He didn't like to think about no more face timing.

"What are you doing?" Stephanie had her hair pulled back with a head band, jean shorts, and a red blouse.

"Oh, I just want to put this someplace safe," Sticky said.

"A safe place is on the wall."

"Yah, but it's been up there forever. I figured it's time to change things up a bit."

"Yah, that's you, Bart. Always looking to redecorate. Why don't you tell me the real reason you're taking the picture down? It's because Nadine is coming over, isn't it?"

Sticky breathed deep. "I don't want to make her uncomfortable. I think we should get the other pictures of me and you out of here, too. Just for tonight, and then I'll put them back."

"What the hell, Bart? She knows we're married. We've been married twenty-one years. She knows that. Why are you trying to pretend we're not married?"

"I'm not, of course I'm not. I just don't want her to feel uncomfortable. This is all really new to her. We're her family now. Her new family. I don't want her to feel like an outsider."

"She has a family."

"Yah, but I don't know how long that is going to last. I think she is really taking to me. I wouldn't be surprised if she tells Doreen's husband to screw, that she doesn't want him to be her father anymore. He really isn't her father, I am. He's a wicked dickhead—Doreen told me. I can't stand the guy. I don't even know him and I want to hit him."

"Doreen told you that?"

"Yes."

"When?"

"That day we met. Don't start with me Stephanie—it's not like I'm talking to her on the phone or texting her a lot or anything."

"She's making a pass at you."

"She's not. That's ridiculous."

“Yes, she is Bart. Anyone woman who says that about her husband to her ex-boyfriend is making a pass at him. I don’t want you seeing that woman again, Bart.”

Sticky pulled out the couch, slid the picture behind it. “Don’t worry. I won’t. I have no intention of seeing her again. But can you do me a favor? Just for today?”

“What? What else can I do for you? Just for today?”

“Can you take your wedding ring off?”

Stephanie took off the ring, and Sticky ducked as it sailed over his head.

So now, he figured, the only thing he could do if they wanted to meet in secret was tell Stephanie he was working late. Overtime. He set up signal with Doreen. They would both flick their headlights three times just in case someone had followed them—for all he knew Stephanie could have hired a private detective or something. Still, he was nervous. But the spot he picked—a dirt road down by the lake and the 495 overpass—was secluded, especially at night, so he figured they would be safe. He was there almost a half hour before he saw the signal.

Sticky flicked back three times, and then Doreen pulled her silver mini-van up about fifty yards away. That was the plan, too—it wasn’t smart to park next to each other. This way if anyone came, he told her, she could just jump out the passenger side of his truck, facing the woods, and hide for a minute until he hauled ass out of there and was gone from sight. Then she could just sneak back to her own car. It would be dark, he said, and no one would see.

Now, he felt his heart begin to pound. He hadn’t had sex with her in over twenty years, and now here he was about to do her again. It was both crazy and exciting. He watched her get out of her car, and then she casually strolled over, a brown bag beneath her arm. She came to his window, and Sticky looked left, and then looked right, and then leaned out and gave her a quick kiss. She was wearing tight white jeans, and a blue sleeveless blouse. Eye liner and lipstick, and her hair up in a palm tree—just like he had requested, just like when she was in high school.

Once she was inside, Doreen put her bag on the floor. She seemed nervous, looking straight ahead. “I bought you a twelve pack of Bud Light, and I bought a bottle of wine.”

Sticky turned to her and then pulled her close to kiss her. The car heated up quickly, and within seconds, she was kissing his neck, and tugging at his belt.

“God, it’s so good to be able to actually kiss you in person instead of just face timing. I’ve waited so long, it’s been physically painful.” She moved lower and lower, and then his shorts were down around his ankles, and she was pushing him in past her lips, going up and down like a crazy woman. Sticky’s heart was racing, caught up in the moment, but he also had to stay on guard, watching and listening, still not convinced Stephanie hadn’t sent somebody to follow them. She was so untrusting, so suspicious, so *uncomplicated*—it infuriated him. She just didn’t understand “unresolved feelings.” Now Doreen looked up at him, puppy dog eyes, and Sticky felt his body begin to buck.

When they had finished—Sticky had taken a generic Viagra and was able to go

twice, doing Doreen doggy--they were both drenched in sweat. He rolled down the windows, and shotgunned one beer. Then another. Doreen had brought some plastic cups and was drinking her wine. Sticky sipped from his third beer and toasted her.

"That was just like the old days," he said.

She kissed him again, purring. "Kind of. But now you're much more experimental than you were in the old days."

He looked at her a moment, his mind going blank. He hated those blank periods, the dead spaces, because he knew he must have something to say, but didn't know what.

"I was willing then," he finally said, "But I was a little afraid. I knew that some positions are a lot easier to get the girl pregnant from, and I was worried about you—I didn't want you to get pregnant. So I didn't do stuff I really wanted to. Now you probably can't get pregnant anymore, so I'm like a madman in bed. That's what Stephanie always says. I can make her cum in like thirty seconds."

Doreen sipped her wine. "I don't want to talk about Stephanie."

"Is that why you were you crying?"

"Shut up," she said, a coy smile.

"No really.?"

"I was crying because I wish it was the old days, but it never can be again, and we can't have them back. You belong to me, not *Stephanie*."

"But we can have those days back." Sticky opened another beer. "I do belong to you, and you belong to me."

Doreen just stared at him a moment. And then she started to cry again, hugging him, and wiping her cheeks on his shoulder.

It was two weeks later that Stephanie exploded. Nadine was long gone, returned out west. But he and Doreen were still texting and face timing, twenty-four seven, and meeting to talk about what had happened to them, how unfair it had been, and to explore their relationship more.

Sticky had got home about 8:30. He had hoped Stephanie would be up in the bedroom, but she wasn't, she was still in the kitchen, standing at the sink. And Sticky's antennae went up. She always turned to say hi to him when he came in, and now she didn't.

She was washing a pot. Her shoulders shuddered a little like she was crying. Was she on to them? She couldn't be—Sticky had been extra careful. So what was wrong? Sticky decided to play it cool, funny; he was good at making her laugh. He sniffed the air, loudly.

"Did we have dinner tonight? I don't smell anything."

Stephanie still didn't turn.

"No biggie," he said. "I can just make myself a sandwich."

Stephanie spun around. "You can make yourself a fucking suitcase, Bart! And get the fuck out of my house! I'm not going through this again." She lifted a potato

from the counter and threw it at him.

He ducked. "What are you talking about? What are you doing?"

"Facebook, Bart?! She's posting pictures on Facebook! Pictures of my husband on her fucking Facebook page?! My husband! Are you kidding me?!"

"What pictures? I didn't see any pictures. I don't know what you're talking about. I haven't done anything wrong."

"Look at her fucking Facebook page! She posted about ten fucking pictures of you. You! My husband! That bitch has the nerve to post pictures of another woman's husband! You're sleeping with that little bitch! That fucking little slut!"

She threw another potato. This one got him in the forehead.

"Oww!!!" Sticky rubbed his forehead. "I'm not sleeping with anybody! Except you!"

"Liar!" Stephanie shouted. Another potato.

Stephanie had thrown a pile of clothes at him, and screamed at him to leave again. Sticky went to the garage and sat in his truck. He had to think. Figure out a way to talk his way out of this one. He hadn't done anything wrong. He hadn't *slept* with anyone. He and Doreen hadn't slept together—not once. And what they had did in the truck couldn't really even count as cheating because of the "unresolved feelings," and they were just trying to explore them and resolve them, so in reality, he wasn't even having sex with her. He wasn't doing anything wrong.

And later looking at the page, he didn't think the pictures were that big a deal. Just a few of him and Nadine, and a few of Sticky alone. In one he was being really funny, whipping the camera the finger, and in another he was flexing. Looking at that one now, he thought he looked really jacked. No wonder Stephanie was pissed—he was probably going to have chicks friending him left and right after they saw that one, looking for a little Sticky for themselves.

He went to see Butchie. Butchie and his wife had split up a few years before, but they still hadn't got divorced. Butchie said the longer he held out on the divorce, the more he would save on child support and alimony. Butchie lived in a square brick apartment building with a dead cat floating in the pool out back.

Now when Sticky knocked, he came to the door in his striped pink and white boxers that were so old that they were almost see through. His nuts were hanging out of the fly.

Sticky had a thirsty pack of Bud Light under one arm, and a pile of clothes in the other; he shifted the clothes to the hand with the beer, and a sock dropped. He pointed at Butchie's junk. "Hey, put that stuff away. I don't want to see that shit. Nobody wants to see that."

Butchie had a cigar in his mouth. He puffed on it a bit, and tucked himself back in. "How come you have clothes?"

"I need a place to stay. Stephanie kicked me out."

"What for this time?"

"I don't know. She's crazy. A lunatic. I think she's going through that woman

change thing or something when they become mental cases. She thinks I'm sleeping with Doreen."

Sticky pushed by him. Put his beer on the dining room/kitchen table. The table was covered with bills, and dirty plates and fogged glasses. A *Quiet Riot* cassette tape. A cigar ash tray. Beer cans and a torn issue of *Hustler*. Vintage 1997.

"But I thought you said you were sleeping with Doreen?" Butchie said.

Questions. Again.

"No! I'm not. That's what everyone is getting wrong. We are not sleeping together. We have unresolved feelings and we need to explore them. That's all we're doing—exploring."

"But you told me you fucked her."

Sticky slammed his bag against the floor. He took a deep breath. The little voice in his head that popped up sometimes told him to cool down, to take it easy, did so now.

"I did say that," he said, "but that is not the same thing as sleeping with her. Sleeping together is much worse. More intimate." Sticky cracked a can of beer. "You have to have sex if you're going to explore unresolved feelings. Doctors and shrinks say that all the time. I'm doing it for Stephanie as much as for me—it will make our relationship stronger—but she doesn't understand it that way, and she doesn't appreciate it. She's too selfish. If she had just minded her own business in the first place there wouldn't be any problems. She never minds her own business."

"Women never mind their own business," Butchie said. "They don't know how. I kind of wish I had known you can fuck your marriage better with someone else though before I put on all this weight. I would've fucked my way back in like three years ago. Right now whenever she catches up with me, she shakes me down, threatens to call the cops and stuff unless I write her a check for support. It's terrible. I think I'm abused."

"Women suck." Sticky opened a beer. "Except Doreen. She really understands me."

"She's probably a keeper then," said Butchie, scratching. "Maybe you should go stay with her."

"I can't—her husband is still there. Besides, if I keep her, then I'll be paying for shit with her, and paying for shit with Stephanie. Paying for shit with the kids. I can't afford all that shit. I need to get back with Stephanie. I could never live in a garbage dump like this."

"Hey," said Butchie. "Easy."

"No offense. I've just become too cultured. Doreen says that's one of the things she loves about me—I'm wicked cultured. I took her to see the Mayflower, and showed her where Miles Standish sacrificed Pocahontas on Plymouth Rock. All that shit."

"I don't know how you remember all that. You always had a good brain for it."

Butchie took a seat at the table, but Sticky couldn't sit. He was too anxious.

"I know," he said, "But these days I have so many other things on my mind that

it's getting all clogged up. If Stephanie doesn't take me back, I don't have to pay child support after the kids turn sixteen, right?"

Butchie scratched himself a bit. "I don't know. I think it's like when they turn adults."

"Sixteen can be considered an adult. I first started dating Doreen when she was sixteen, and I was twenty-one."

"Yah, you probably should've gone to jail for that."

"She was wicked mature though, so I think they look at that, and take it into consideration."

"Only if the judge is a pervert. If the judge is pervert himself, he probably takes it into consideration. Or if he comes from Arkansas. Down there she only has to be like twelve or thirteen or something."

"That's disgusting," said Sticky. "There's a big difference between twelve or thirteen and sixteen. And I've always had principles. Ask anyone who knows me, and they'll tell you that. Besides, the people who came over on the Mayflower were marrying sixteen year olds all the time. I read the list of names of all those people who were on there, and one guy was named Stickman, so it's probably in my blood."

"Yah, but most people didn't live past like twenty back then—they all died of immunity—so they had to get married and get their women pregnant young or none of us would be here right now. The whole human people would've died out."

Sticky picked Doreen up the next day and they parked behind Walmart and he did her in the front seat, and then they did it again back on Butchie's couch, but Butchie was in the kitchen, making it kind of weird, and then he got mad saying he wasn't running a house of ill dispute, and they had to leave. And then when Sticky got home later that night, Butchie said that his landlord had found out Sticky was staying there, and said that he had to go.

"If you don't go, he's going to evict me," he said.

Sticky packed his bag again the next morning, and he called Stephanie—hoping he had given her time to cool. He asked her if they could meet, or he could come over, come home for a while, they could just hang out on the couch and cuddle and watch T.V., but she just said no.

"Listen," he said, "please. Just for an hour."

"No."

"We didn't do anything. I swear. And I know it looks like it was my fault, but it really wasn't. There wasn't anything I could do. I was a victim. She was trying to trap me, Stephanie. Just like she tried to trap me when we were young."

"When you were young, you got her pregnant, Bart," Stephanie said.

Sticky was pacing outside his truck. The anxiety was back. He hated the anxiety.

"I know, I know," he said. "She didn't try to get herself pregnant this time, but it still was like she was trying to trap me. And she probably would get herself pregnant if

she could. She's crazy. She had all this talk about feelings and emotions and her mother being the Devil, and it got me really confused. We didn't do anything though, I swear it. We just talked."

"I don't believe you."

"Please," he said, "I'm sorry she's such a bitch."

"You're not innocent Bart."

"I know. I know. But I never touched her. The only thing I did was act stupid. And I'll admit it. I acted stupid. But that's all. I should have known she was just trying to trap me. It was her plan all along, to get me back. She's wanted me back for years. Come on, Stephanie, please?"

There was silence on the other end of the phone.

"Stephanie?" he said.

And then there was a click and then there was a dial phone.

Sticky called back again, but she wasn't answering. Texted, no response. And then he texted Doreen, and asked her to meet him down at the I95 rest area. He needed to see her, he said, needed to touch her. Stephanie was treating him awful and acting crazy, he said, and Butchie had given him the boot. But then Doreen got mad and started yelling at him again, demanding that he tell Stephanie to go fuck herself, or not bothering to contact her anymore.

"I'm tired of it, Bart," she said, "Tired of it. If I hear that bitch's name one more time, I'm going to lose it."

"I'll call her, and tell her. I'll tell her we can't talk anymore unless it has to do with the kids. I promise. She's crazy. Now can you meet me at the rest area? Please?"

But then after he got there, he waited, and Doreen still didn't come. He texted her but she didn't answer. Sticky had barely been able to the sleep the night before, and now he was struggling to keep his eyes open. He watched the cars, passing on the highway, counting them, trying to stay awake.

He dreamed he was on a cruise. Beautiful women everywhere, short grass skirts and serving him drinks, and then the dream switched to a guy who looked like his Uncle Alfred, except he was wearing a pointed hat and one of those skirts Scottish guys wear, teaching Sticky how to golf, and then it switched again he was in his backyard. And there were rabbits all over the place, trying to eat Stephanie's vegetables. Most were small, and just hopping about, gray bunnies with white tails, the kind that were always raiding Stephanie's garden. Hop, stop, hop. And Sticky was chasing them, trying to grab them. But one was really big, and he ran by dressed up in vest and carrying a pocket watch, and Sticky thought that was fucked up and didn't know where it came from. Stephanie was in the garden, weeding on her hands and knees, and Doreen was there sunbathing, and she was naked, moaning like she was all horny and having a good time and rubbing her body with lotion, but Stephanie must not have seen her, because when she stood, little shovel in her hand, her eyes all empty like she was a ghost, and dirt on her knees, she just smiled and said, "Get the rabbit, Bart. Get the big rabbit." And then the big rabbit turned. He looked at his watch.

And then he looked at Sticky.

Sticky woke with a start. The moon was high in the sky, and the rest area lawn was silver in the light, the frost making everything look like it was from out space, and Sticky was alone. He had to do something. Something to convince Stephanie to take him back. He needed somewhere to go.

He had spent two more nights in his car--one more in the rest area, and one in the parking lot at work—and one night in a motel, and now in the yard, three days later, the sun was approaching the tree line—people were starting to get up. Sticky glanced at his house, but no lights were on yet. There was one last cage in the far corner of the yard, out near the mulch pile, off the path, just a few feet into the woods.

Sticky used to like going into the woods, especially when the kids were little. He missed those days. There was a small pond about a quarter mile out, and they would bring their nets and try to catch frogs, and sometimes in the early spring, plastic bags to catch pollywogs. It was nice in the woods, and sometimes he would bring a couple beers. The kids got all excited about the pollywogs, and they would bring them back and put them in a big glass fish bowl, and check in each day as the pollywogs lost their tails, and started to look more like frogs than fishes. If they lasted long enough, they would grow front legs, too, but that was the problem—they usually didn't last long enough; they usually died. And Sticky had never figured out how to fix it, how to stop them from dying.

Now he approached the last cage, and heard a scraping noise, and saw something moving in the shadows. A small gray cottontail, sniffing the corners, trying to find a way out, and when it saw Sticky, it suddenly froze, its ears flattening down against its back. Sticky crouched down and looked at it a moment. He wondered why they always did that—just froze up. If nothing else, it didn't give them much of a chance of not getting caught. No resistance, no fight. Sticky unlatched the trap door and reached in and took out the bunny.

The thing moved a little, but slowly, and not much. Defeated. Sticky pet its head. He had never killed an animal before. He could bring it far out into the woods, let it go, he thought, but then what? Come spring, it would just be back, and in Stephanie's garden, eating whatever it could, and then this all would've been for nothing. He wouldn't have taken care of the problem, wouldn't be able to let her see—he was useful. He felt the rabbit tense a little bit more, and it made a small noise.

Sticky petted it again, and then cupped its head. One quick twist, that would be it. And then she would see. He was a good husband. He was a good man. He glanced at the house. A light was on now in the kitchen, a warm yellow rectangle in the blue gray dawn. A shadow passed by the window, and he wondered if it was her, and if she could see him--crouched at the edge of the woods, the frost and the cold—and what she would think.

The rabbit moved now, gently trying to pull away, and Sticky clutched him tighter. At the angle the bunny was at now, Sticky could see his eyes, empty and distant.

Scared. Sticky's head went blank again. He heard something then, something moving in the brush, and when he looked up there were three more rabbits, one beneath a small fir tree, one beside the stone wall that ran through the woods, and one on the path, nibbling at the bait. They were all staring at him, watching. Almost as if they knew what he was doing.

Jägermeister Don

Joe Smolen

Daylight. Barely. I kneel on the roof where I have to install steel the next few hours. Waiting for the frost up there to dissipate, I use the roof shears to cut steel roof panels. I shiver in the east wind's mountain-dump cold and feel the fear.

On wine, I'd car-sales-pitched how easy standing-seam steel roofing is to install. Sold everybody I talked to on it. Sold my wife on it. Even sold myself on it. We drove clear to the valley and bought it. Hired the mountain of roof panels delivered. On the house, the panels went up pretty fast, pretty good, pretty neat.

But today, on my own, I'm roofing an after-thought firewood storage. The Y where the long horizontal ridge is supposed to junction with the two ascending hips and all the roof sections have to plane together? I tell myself I'll "finger it out".

Jägermeister Don did, though. Seven years ago. On the house. On the garage. An easy dozen Y-junctions all dead-nuts perfect work.

Alone, I'd climbed up on Don's garage roof. I'd studied his precise, hand-sheared cuts – clean as factory finish. But Don's mystic "how" was cloaked under his exact steel folds and bends. Made me shiver. Fear. The fear particular to builders – the fear of not being able to float the illusion that they know what they're doing.

Back last night at 1:57AM, I woke up sweating again – realizing I started the long ridge toward the Y-junction with the two hips completely wrong. Desperate, I wanted to take a headlight and straight-edges, and go up there in the sleepy dark and risk a header off the roof. Instead I turned on the TV news and reminded myself since I wasn't being shot at and didn't have cancer, I didn't have any real problems and fell asleep to psycho-babble.

First time Jägermeister Don showed up on our house site, I smelled it on him. My crew tooled and bagged-up with screws and nails, they all knew it was dangle-big-beams-over-perdition day. They all knew that day was all sky-work, placing support for the huge roof trusses arriving from the valley in a couple of days.

Smiling, Don asked that first time, "You said cash?" I just breathed the octane of his breath and showed him the spot-cash pay-off 20s I always had on me in those days. Baffled how I was going to get my crew to do it, I explained the twenty-foot-up destination of the four-by-twelve beams laying on the ground. But while I talked, I saw only one mind switch on – Jägermeister Don's.

So, feeling the fear, I walked away to the Porta-Potti and hid for about five minutes behind the plastic slap of its door. But when I came back out, my beams were aloft and so was Jägermeister Don, balancing free-hand under one of my four-by-twelves with my seventy-eight-inch level – fifteen feet up on the east deck's railing framing. Like it was candy, he tossed a wise-crack to his grinning Team.

But today. Short version is, by the afternoon sunshine, I finally stand up like The Creator I think I am and say my Y-junction is good. With spit, I wipe my dried

blood off the painted steel. A thermally-operated pneumatic system, my ego bulges. So I do. Tell myself I'm a craftsman. In a sort of awe, I tell myself out loud that even though there's a shallow buckle in my Y- junction and my final fold-lap's out nearly three quarters of an inch, my finished roof looks awesome.....from twenty feet away.

Problem is, though, from here I can see Don's garage roof, too, and suddenly, I see clearly Jägermeister Don's ghost up there in his "Will Work for Peppermint Schnapps" t-shirt, bent over the roofing shears. Suddenly, I remember the cosmic fog of truth in which Don skilled each of his unassailable perfections. Only reason long-hair Don worked for us at all was I paid him that spot cash – whenever he felt like showing up – so he could go back over to the Flounder Inn and drink.

I just sag and swallow the big, wild-blue-yonder fact of Jägermeister Don: the Y-junction I just faked, Don origamied – no, Jägermeistered it.

by Sean Howard

shadowgraph 70: *the nuclear skin*

(poetry detected in robert hofstadter's nobel physics lecture, 1961)

Sean Howard

i

church: 'the captured
cross.' (atoms: milled

clouds; taxed havens; aug-
ust bodies.) 'in the end, only

method essential...'
all gods child—

ren?

ii

'charming': scattered wave—
lets. (meaning as usual?) invent—

ilators. exam; 'the double focus-
ing.' the dragon's last cave. men —

guns mounting... *o my*
sweet/form you/

lay

iii

shadow: skinned
light. 'so proud'; the

falcon in the villa. (lab
adders.) school — marked

graves. *secretaries*
type in the dist—

ance

iv

words, the bit be-
tween our teeth. (bikini;

sun burnt...) 'new ways':
the novel dead. 'just

think'? *the dove—*
tail all we

need

Hearings (from *The New York Times*, January 10, 1913)

RULES FOR DRESS EXPENSES

Judge Decides Women Must Not Spend More on Clothes than on Rent

SUFFRAGISTS WILL HIKE AGAIN

Feb. 10 Date of Start for Washington to Call on Wilson

*

Judgement Day. On
the move, *rent*
dress-

es...

Hearts of Darkness

Captured poem, from *Collier's Photographic History of the European War* (1915)

Troops from Algeria and Morocco came
to the aid of France; from India they came
to fight for Britain, while

Belgium's army contains
some soldiers from her great
African colony of the

Congo.

Child's Play

(in *STAPLES (That was Easy®) Flyer*, 'Canada's Back to School Experts')

Cell –
'no out-
let required'?

*

Ego –
movie
built-in

*

The Titanic®
desktop

*

Beaten –
arm
rests

*

Money!
The
fed...

*

(Basement
roadsters)

*

'Sleek' –
self &
otter

Trinity test –
capture, convert,
consume™

*

Pollution?
Print
air...

*

Dream –
work
surfaces

wrack triptych, main-à-dieu beach

september 23, 2021

st-
orm
over,
still
fl-
ails

*

film
str-
ips,
now
play-
ing

*

dul-
se,
wa-
ve
ton-
gues

double vision (prose/poem)

physics (aftermath)

“the speed at which
a drop of rain falls,”
j.j. thomson noted
in his 1906 nobel
physics lecture, “is
given by the formula
 $v = (2/9) (ga^2/\mu)$,
where a is the radius
of the drop, g the
acceleration due to
gravity, and μ the
coefficient of
viscosity of
the air.”

metaphysics (inside out)

tree-
rings, rain-
drop man-
da-

la

the care takers (faust postcard)

con-
trails, low
net, moon-

set

proofreading (afterlife triptych)

hand of god? *all*
that's left; data
points; van-
ishingly
slim

vigil

the mother keeps watch
the boy grows into the man
all those child-lives
roll through callused fingers
like beads of repeated prayers

she would touch
his soft child-face asleep
innocent of desire
tender snores drift
like leaves seeking sunlight
torn between rising and falling

but now the boy-man roams
a ghost in dark streets
beyond shadows of a wall
she cannot breach
lost and lonely in her waking

the performance
to my son who was lost

leaves, barely hinged, naked
veins, letting light through
--the last ones on the tree

you were such a performer
a clown really and this your stage
center ring under the big top
your audience of friends in a panic
to snatch empty vials out of your hands

out of your hands
it is quite out of all our hands
this thing you do
so well so well always

each spent leaf a slow drift
from its seat aloft to the ground
to the ground to rot

circus sham—I am--now asked
to bear witness, to bear this
this that you have done so well at last
to walk past your show in my own

show of indifference having buried you
buried you a hundred times already

worm come ravenous to the feast
too late finds desecrated ground
stem empty leaf-cuticle cut
ribbed veined acid-eaten leaves
a slow meander of tracks in the earth

In the Pause

We have held each other
in the room in this room.

Tonight we hold
hold tight feel
the pulse of our bodies
each other and trying

trying to merge overcome
separation but there is something
something coming between.

Little fears like whispers
small sounds that leak from
our mouths from our hearts.

The paused moment
begins to move
we still holding on feet gripping
the shifting floor

the shore where we have stood
is washing away like a tide
intent on its own will

the moment falling away
we feel the parting
become two again
each alone
our small sounds.

Wild forces whirl in the room
moonlight leaking through
windows make

shadows on the wall
dark shadows around us
between us

...the garden at our backs.

Leaving: the edge of winter

*And all the lives we ever lived and all the lives to be
Are full of trees and changing leaves. —Virginia Woolf*

It is the winter of our new year.
Withered Christmas trees hug the roadside.
Tangles of dry and leafless vines strangle tree limbs.
On the dull surface of the lake, a lone white gull floats.

Spare sun, shadows of weather everywhere,
The hues of a winter sky waiting for snow.
The last red leaves hold on before the coming freeze.
Beeches cling to crisp ecru leaves.

Yet sparkling green mosses creep up gnarly trunks,
and small glittering lichens spring from leaf piles;
Mahonia are ready to burst into flower, tiny yellow buds in spikey stars,
The camellia, weighed down with the pink froth of too many blooms.

My old friend--her smile despite recurring cancer--
And I--walking side by side, breathing.

Mother's Hands

I always loved my mother's hands:
so grown up, capable, so magically, mysteriously hers.
I've always dreaded becoming her, my mother,
myself, so different, yet entangled
in strings of genes, days of time.

Today, my hands fly out from my body
and there she is
 picking a piece of lint from a sweater
 rubbing lotion on scaly skin
 planting seeds in a row
 playing the piano
 turning the page of a book
 holding a pencil.

It's strangely comforting to see Mother's hands
there, stretching out of my blouse
so alive, so real, so close,
participating intimately in the banalities of my day,
 plying a needle
 smoothing a bed sheet
 plumping a pillow
 scrambling an egg
 stroking the cat
 slipping a bobbie pin into a curl
 pouring two aspirin into an open palm,
 waving goodbye.

A scrap of a gesture, a stance, a phrase,
an expression, and for a moment
I'm a mirror in which Mother
returns, and I'm glad
I see in mine--my mother's hands.

**Black Woman Poet Visits Dead White Woman Writer's House in Georgia:
A Found Poem**

Reading Alice Walker

Andalusia* is a large white house
at the top of a hill with a view.

It is a kept house, and there are,
indeed, peacocks strutting about.

Behind, an unpainted house within
calling distance of the back door....

No one lives there now.

I go up to the porch and knock.

That her house still stands while mine,
which, of course, we never owned,
is slowly rotting into dust....

But, I am here, and rage dissipates
into the hot humid air of a Georgia day
and the hollow sound of my shoes
down the worn wooden steps.

*Andalusia: the name of Flannery O'Connor's home in Milledgeville, Georgia

Making Landscapes *on Edvard Munch*

The artist tries to map the world,
to capture with his strokes and hues
its contours and domains, as if
by line and color, life could be explained.

But he draws only his own vast terrain
there—no escape.

There: a scrim of translucent lovers;
there, the hollow eyes of the bride;
over there, faces lost in embrace;
in the corner, impasto oval blonde--
lone voyeur; the moon, not moon
but radical phallus riding
the black lake.

There: the approaching man, dark shadow
across the stark geometry of the house,
itself marked by its white spiked fence;
the still-life woman paralyzed at the gate
awaiting the man who neither comes nor goes.

Old Wine

You who wintered in a dark
without window for forty years.

You who walked always hands
in your pockets.

This room, its door. This room
I have never been able to enter.

I can scarcely imagine, cannot breathe in,
holding my breath, your breath in my hands,

wanting to penetrate your face, lips sealed
against kissing, like a cork on a vintage wine,

wintering in a basement, dark without
window for forty years; forty years

of walking with hands in your pockets.
Take off your glasses--I would see your eyes.

Kiss me!

Kiss the secret stone

Kiss with me the secret stone
and whisper me sweet truths
to singe the flaming breath
of night.

Kiss with me the secret stone
and climb with me the trellis
of the climbing rose flower
by flower.

Lie with me till dawn arrives
escape with me the cold
of lying alone in the pitch
of night.

Celebrate with me the touch of light
and come with me to the curve of day
our new blood
the life we make.

Wanting Out

Morning breaks.

Cat comes
through the half-shut door,
rattles the vertical blinds
barely lets light in.
She wants out, but we're not
ready, still caught in the cusp
between waking and sleep,
bodies barely defined.

My feet
rub round his instep,
snag on his toenail.
Cat thinks I'm playing with her,
and not him—pounces.

Delaying,
we warm the cool air
with murmurs of dreams
we scarcely recall; we turn
over, hook back together;
I shiver as he nuzzles the back
of my neck—otherwise
hardly anything stirs.

Cat wants
to be fed, but accedes
to our laziness, curls up
in our faces—does not purr.

Dim light
filters through cracks
in the blinds.

Sheets to the Wind

The young housewife ducks beneath
clean sheets that hang in the sun,
that flap in the wind ready for flight.

A garrote of line links
a staid pair of crosses, marks
a charted course across the yard.

Unworried birds grip
the taut wire, the wind
at their backs urging departure.

She bundles the sheets,
smelling of bleach,
shrugs off a whisper

of wind at her back,
and trots her taught way
without thought or design.

Yet, aroused in the night,
she lies tangled in sheets
deflated like sailcloth

bereft of its breath,
the dim call of birds
stirring visions of flight.

excerpt from -unnamed-relation-

mirage i

the-in-between-o
f-a-mirage-i-reme
mber-the-hot-ariz
ona-roads-appea
ring-to-have-slick
-pools-of-water-o
n-them-then-just
more-heat-much-
like-the-unravelin
g-of-my-us-histor
y-education-the-f
ounding-fathers-t
oppling-off-every-
inherited-pedesta
l-meritocratic-ide
als-concealing-th
e-college-admiss
ion-scandals-raci
sm-on-top-of-raci
sm-my-sister's-fri
end-thinks-all-pri
vate-schools-sho
uld-be-illegal-aki
n-to-chomsky-wh
o-is-not-against-t
he-draft-because
-a-citizen's-army -
would-better -refl
ect-the-attitudes-
of-the-society-

the possibility of joy

the-in-between-o
f-the-possibility-o
f-joy-today-i-calle
d-my-goddaught
er-whose-mom-d
ied-less-than-a-y
ear-ago-we-talk-
about-moving-gri
ef-through-our-b
odies-writing-out-
our-feelings-the-
ways-the-counse
lors-help-us-keep
-going-when-her
s-said- talk-to-you
r-mom- she-said-
no-i-will-not-there
's-no-one-there -a
nd-when-i-asked-
about-god-she-s
aid -what-do-i-kno
w-but-i-don't-thin
k-so- we-laughed-
when-she-added
- and-reincarnatio
n-is-ridiculous -bu
t-one-of-the-last-t
hings-i-said-to-de
b-was- see-you-o
n-the-flip-side-

etymology the word

the-in-between-of-etymology-the-word- operate -from-17th-century-italy- done-by-labor -julie-andrews's-botched-surgery-stole-her-voice-so-much-diligent-labor-undone-when-the-college-app-asked-for-an-influential-woman -my-child-wrote-julie-andrews -milquetoast-and-embarrassing-as-the-answer-seemed-to-me-they-said -she-made-so-many-people-happy -think-of-that-physician-his-realization-of-the-labor-done-by-his-hands-four-octaves-gone-andrews-said- it-will-change-something-inside-me-forever-

offering advice nvc

the-in-between-o
f-offering-advice-
nvc-says-advice-i
s-violence-that-e
ach-person-know
s-what-they-need
-they-are-the-one
s-in-charge-of-th
eir-wants-and-ne
eds-my-rheumat
ologist-once-told-
me- dana-when-y
ou-do-not-know-
what-to-do-some
times-it's-best-to-
do-nothing -i'm-mi
ssing-the-people-
no-longer-in-the-
mix-entertaining-t
he-idea-of-not-pr
oducing-anything
-not-being-a-prod
uctive-member-o
f-society-just-wat
ching-the-changi
ng-light-the-early
-morning-mist-an
d-the-evening-fo
g-out-there-beco
ming-its-mirror-

Lying in bed, Loath heard the shift whistle blow. He opened his eyes. On the wall of his bedroom were a pair of rifles his father had bolted there. He had done this without telling his son. Loath knew that his father and older brother felt that he lacked a suitable affinity for guns.

It was now November, and from the kitchen, he heard his brother complain how it was shooting season and that, again, there was nothing to shoot. Out on the flats, not even hoove prints remained. Things were so dire that young and middle-aged men drew ovals in the dust and fought inside of them. When the fights ended, they staggered to the tavern, slapping each other on the back. Inside, there were antlers mounted above the bar.

At the breakfast table, Loath drank coffee and took a single piece of toast while his brother and father ate meat. What kind of meat was it? They did not know. Breakfast was their dinner, their end-of-shift meal, and every morning they disapproved of what Loath ate. Where are you going today, his mother asked him.

The flats.

Loath's brother shifted his eyes toward their father, who did not look up from cutting what was on his plate. Soon you'll work a shift, not laze away the day, his brother said before hitting him in the shoulder. Loath finished his coffee, then cleaned his dishes in the sink. He quit the kitchen, brushed his teeth, fetched his coat, and left the apartment.

Didn't take his rifle, his father said.

What good is it? His mother asked.

The boy should not be without a rifle.

If there was something to shoot, his brother said.

There is always something to shoot.

Loath walked for over an hour before coming to his first tree. It was a scrubby pine no taller than he was. When he reached his destination, there would be a few more of these trees. The sky overhead was clear, a dull blue whitening near the horizon. There was no wind, and the flats were silent. Behind him, his town looked like a collection of discarded cans glinting in the sun. Loath closed his eyes. A red sheet appeared, the

sun wearing a shroud. Without that star, the scant trees would die. There would be nothing but the foundry fires and those who stoked them.

A few minutes later, he reached the pond. Not much of a pond; it was probably a discarded ditch fed by an underground source. It was also the spot where Loath first saw *them*. He unbuttoned his coat and lay on his back, looking up and waiting.

Years before, his grandfather -his father's father- told him about them, the ones that visited the flats. He said they had many wings, and none had identical-looking feet. Some had several feet and were so light on each one, they scampered. Others resembled a creature called a snail, moving slowly on a single giant foot. The single-footed ones would slide along, seeming never to lift themselves. Loath's grandfather talked about seeing the tall and the short -and how they all would sing. You were never alone on the flats, he said. Now, in the sky, there is nothing but the sun. On the ground, there are no stones. When was the last time the sun had a companion?

As the sky darkened, Loath heard the songs, and he understood what they said.

The world is wide but not long.

They came down and touched his chest, playing with the buttons of his shirt. If he allowed it, they would purloin each one, absconding to the heights where buttons and stones mingle.

The world is not long, but it is wide.

Toward evening, Loath watched them go. They retreated east, the dusk trailing them like a tail feather. He had never seen a storm in his life; that beast said to speak snow and weep rain: a creature impervious to bullets.

At dinner, Loath's mother asked him where he had been.

The flats.

His father cut his dinner with a knife and fork. Next time, take your rifle, he said. Loath's mother served everyone seconds.

There is nothing out there, Loath said to his father, not even stones. His brother laughed; you could fight, he said. You should.

There is always something to shoot, their father said.

Shoot at what, Loath thought. The air? The town? He thought of the shadows cast by the foundries. He could shoot at the darkness, but darkness would leave when it was ready.

He looked at his father's expressionless face; the quiet way the man ate a dinner that years before became his breakfast. Soon, both of his sons would keep his eating schedule. They would all take coffee at night.

Who wants the worry, the hurry of city life?
-Cream

We have discovered Telsus, planet of streets.

We of Earth were looking for a planetary mirror image; a twin, a companion, a port of call in the great sea of space. And when we found it, we sent Telsus more than just intrepid explorers. We sent it our Dodge Intrepids, Ford Pintos, Chevy El Caminos, and many other Challengers and Chargers. We sent Telsus our antiques and our jalopies.

Telsus was a dream come true for a car culture planet like Earth, a world whose people learned that cars were too costly a thing to have.

We believed that Telsus would be a new playground where we could burn our fuels and flex our rotors; we would use Telsus as a platform for pursuing peace with our intergalactic competitors. We might even negotiate deals with some of our enemies. And we would do this by entertaining them all with some good old-fashioned earthy entertainment: the demolition derby. Our Earth-bound ecologists thought this idea a winner: sure, go ahead and amuse our competitors with discards of rubber, steel, the internal combustion engines humans reluctantly abandoned. The ecologists finally embraced our human automotive fantasy to spare the overtaxed landfills of Earth.

Diplomats were delighted, too. They saw the demolition derby as a cost-effective way to push negotiations, to forge new commercial treaties or alliances for progress and peace. Our most highly trained negotiating elites sensed that we, the human race, would gain the upper hand in any bargaining session where we played host, even on a different planetary surface. Telsus was Earth 2.0, home and hearth, gifting us aplomb and confidence. And, of course, that is what we sought. Otherwise, why go into space?

But what the ecologists did not know, and what our diplomats never could foresee, was one confounding Telsian quirk: none of its streets intersect.

On its surface, Telsus is nothing but parallel lines and upright parallelograms. And this produces planes of profound solitude. When you disembark from your spacecraft, you discover that you are by yourself, alone on one solitary boulevard unending. And no single individual lands on the same street. You can arrive with a crew of five, all serving the same craft, but the moment each of you steps down from the landing ramp, Telsus deposits you on separate streets.

There is not going to be any demolition derby.

The planet remains an utter mystery to us. How it is that no two streets can meet and why it is no two humans are allowed to walk together is unknown. What is more, no one down on the surface shows up as a life form on any of our scanners. And, of course, no one can tell us why an uninhabited planet is covered, end-to-end, with streets and boulevards.

It's a bummer.

Telsus was supposed to be the planet that resurrected the possibility of the city. The Earth metropolis turned into the megalopolis; it became an overwhelming, overweening commercial soliloquy that drove the human race into space in the first place. Eventually, we could not stand to be so near to one another all of the time. And though we never ran out of things to sell or hawk, we were ingenious at devising new and better and manifold spaces to store our truck and trade. But we never mastered the art of making Earthen surfaces infinite.

Our species needed someplace else. A planet promising smog-free and functional infrastructure; public squares and parks and river walks, the kinds of things history taught us great cities once possessed. At least, this is what our scanners showed. Telsus would be a meeting-of-the-minds planet, a celestial projection of what Geneva, Switzerland was supposed to be to the United Nations.

No dice.

Telsus, they told us, had transparent towers hundreds of stories tall. You could enjoy a stroll in their cool shade without forfeiting your vitamin D. Meanwhile the boulevards were wide, a perfect platform for our discarded vehicles. They posed new frontiers, an El Dorado for our gear heads. We had what looked like the new Eden, and it was a low-hanging fruit we would pluck ripe.

Sadly, this unwonted planet houses but a few hundred of us, we few who never catch sight of each other. I know this because I am one of the stranded. Every day, I stare at my reflection, projected to great heights, my eyes gazing at the sun one hundred floors up. I am taller than any giant, but I have never felt smaller. While it is true that these towers are a marvel, they are not transparent but a set of mirrors. My limbs elongate alongside their windows, my skin slowly baking because I have no shelter. I try the tower doors, but they do not open. No doors open anywhere.

I have no idea who would build a boulevard of towers that never yield to visitors. And the proportions of these buildings, from the height of the windows to door width, clearly suit human bodies.

For now, I walk down this impervious street with my eyes fixed on no terminal point. The mothership cannot tell me when it will retrieve me. Sometimes, when being with myself is too much, I make faces at the buildings hoping they will laugh. Then I laugh, and the buildings laugh, too.

Maybe I can amuse myself to death.

In my life, every one of my thought transmissions, each memory I possessed, was recorded in a databank. The images in my head are what humans call bytes; they do not believe I have memories. My kind does not dream, has no emotional recall, they say. Now I shall free myself of those assumptions and offer you this confession, my “last will-and-testament.” You see, I have decided to “unplug” myself and you, who read this, I cannot imagine who you are.

Tonight I am standing on the roof of my house, as I do before dawn each day. I search the sky for a ship that will not come. I have no ticket home; no one on Earth awaits me. I know that the plant where they built me is no more; my creator, the woman who envisioned me, is dead. I seldom hear from Earth anymore: they ignore my messages but track my thoughts, storing them in a digital vault.

On this planet, the night sky is impossibly bright, and if I were a human, how would I ever sleep? The daytime, the former workday, has become a twilight world, while the stars illuminate the land in ways our sun, a moribund white dwarf, no longer can. Watching that decrepit star, I used to wonder how much time remained for me, but the lifetime of stars is a mystery, even to sentient machines.

The landscape here is cold and brittle; the only vegetation a scattering of gnarled trees no one bothered to name. They are stand-alone beings; no animals visit their branches, no plants grow at their roots; they remain the only thing separating this planet from a complete desert. When I walk among them, they remind me of Joshuas: an extinct species of thorn trees from Earth. While they lived, the Joshuas always looked like alien visitors, beings set apart.

When I came to this planet ten years ago, I arrived as a lawman to oversee a mining colony. It was your classic frontier posting: the place was wild, populated by grizzled miners shipped in from unfriendly Earth colonies, many of them asteroids. The miners liked to go boozing, and the rotgut they drank often led to killings. The anger and despair the miners felt, aggravated by the absence of women, made them homicidal. And their employers, knowing the men suffered from anomie and bloodlust, recruited spies and paid them not in higher wages but with “companions.” Some of these were women, and some were men, and all of them were made wretched.

I tried to play my appointed role of Marshal, but I never had backup. A lone gun, I found that I was wretched, too. I was the sole representative of my kind, a victim of iso-

lation, a figure alone on a dying planet, trying to help other victims find their ticket home. Gradually, those I aimed to protect died off, lying down in exile here. And as they did, I learned that the only companions I had were the Joshuas.

In my fifth year, the mines began to fold. It was no surprise because there had been too many strikes and so many murders designed to prevent those work stoppages. Then there was the problem of the “darkness sickness,” that malady found on Earth among peoples of the far north, a region of the long dark. While it was never a secret that the sun on this planet was doomed, that darkness ruled, and that miners lived deprived of Vitamin D, no one in the mining business took this seriously. The thinking was, as it always is in business, short-term and bottom line.

The mine closures spread like a virus, exacerbating the tendency of every man to drink and fight. When one mine closed, laid-off miners took to hunting down their competitors so they could usurp their jobs. During the cascading closures, over two-years, I dealt with at least three murders a day. I learned then that I would never return to Earth; no one would take me back because of my fecklessness; my failure to stem the killings was an embarrassment. It would not matter that I faced an impossible task.

By my seventh year, the last mine closed, so the murders dried up. The companies packed up what they valued and departed. I bribed a few contacts onboard their ships, and the last surviving companions got stowed away. Now I had no one to talk to.

In my eighth year, the nighttime temperatures grew mortally dangerous, and with daytime scarcely better, the remaining miners died. (I am impervious to the cold if I keep my joints oiled.) I had nothing to offer those last men, and it was torture to watch their upright bodies transform into stooped arthritic shapes. They reminded me of the Joshuas. I tried to requisition supplies, the necessary insulation required to survive the days and nights here, but my requests went unanswered.

By year nine, I alone remained. I had not seen a Swaak, those gopher-like creatures, so numerous when I arrived, since the days of the mines. At night I listened for their nocturnal songs but found only silence. The bird-like Sounts that I once saw fluttering above the rims of the open mining pits were gone, too. My companions were the wind, the dark, the cold, and the trees. To combat my loneliness, I ceased going outside during the day because I could not bear to watch the dying sun. At night, I went for long walks among the Joshuas. Hiking for hours, I talked to the trees, wondering if they might answer me. Then I came home and went up onto the widow’s walk, covering my eyes against the starlight, always searching for something.

There is something you should know about the stars, about light. They can be bright enough to blind you while providing no heat. The Joshuas know this, and that is why they survive.

Researching Another Biography of Bob

Tropical Leafwing Butterfly

The sky falls to where the sky is and sometimes the sky falls further without humor or childishness. The sky is not a boundary, nor a rock, nor any inkling of tomorrow, which always has a different sky.

Trillium rows the forest boat, which reveals itself one floppy, slowly hardening plank at a time. Each plank is a system of logic that joins using growth to the other systems to become strong enough to be thought of as a plank. The planks leak ideas and not water because they are supposed to. It does not threaten the boat.

Some of the planks ride higher than the boats, which should make them top heavy but does not. The mysterious and complex angles of tension leave the boat and yet travel with it beyond the water. Bright orange-red with dark markings, female this time with separate bands of yellow dots crossing high on the upper side. Scalloped outline. Ocean extended across Texas north to Kansas and Oklahoma, as if that smell from the past beneath could not be remembered but only repeated through the waves, which is a kind of time travel, and you can't do that but the boat can, the way the sound of breaking doesn't leave when the broken parts do.

My name is not Bob, not simple or funny, but More Than Bob because I'm not alone in myself. You were here before you paid attention. You were here when the here was unclear.

Take the forest back with you to the place where the oars grew and the planks of the boat will swell as they would not on the frightening ocean. They're not hard and joined by planes or death but by necessity, and the necessity has changed. You must change with it, More Than Bob, because you're not alone in yourself. All the More Than Bobs stop bobbing on this new ocean reflecting this new sky until they are blue and peaceful. They are very busy at this, and you're lucky the sky fell to provide for them.

We don't need to talk about trees anymore, or oceans, and boat is only a name for the way we participate in the sky, More Than Bob and I. More Than You and I is just You and I where the sky accepts us, accepts all of us because we are already there and have a long way to go.

A Cut while Hanging the Wash

Two-tailed Swallowtail Butterfly

Monotony is a love best drunk with kippers. But now there is more yellow enveloping Seyhan and an extra tail on each side to keep him stabled away from boredom. Over near the chokecherries, the silence is quieter, but it tries to move and gets sloppy. Leaves fall. Stems are straining. The chokecherry turns the color of broken plums. Like Seyhan's children, it gets sloppy and colors the whole garden with its penance.

Purple birds arrive and the caterpillars emit a pungent odor for protection, but the birds want the fermenting chokecherries. They flop and dance, forgetting how to fly. They eat more chokecherries. They fall asleep on the ground and do not notice the cat at nightfall making off with one of their brothers. Did they think he was only in their drunken dream? A red tile falls from the roof where the cat is eating. The birds startle but fall quickly back to sleep.

Love is a memory of broken plums. Love waits for the drunken revelry and survives, Love lifts from the apple tree with a chokecherry in its mouth.

Now Seyhan is a figure of speech that hasn't been spoken. Now the Barley is growing in the field nearby. Now its odor of childish fecundity releases. Now it's blind as the child's face worrying the mother's hand. Small families of neighbors arrive with heavier and heavier evenings.

Love is a memory of broken plums. Love is barley, fermenting.

Now there is more darkness enveloping Seyhan and two tails on each side. Now the mirror of Seyhan's thinking closes upon itself and becomes singular, a folding of parts upon one another.

I used to think I was better than the universe at being random, but now I find myself hunkering up where down lives only to find gravity on the other side. One wound to the body, another to the thought that recognized it.

What must we do now, with the bandages falling slowly away as the skin replaces itself, this day's moist disturbed dew silking to the hands that direct it, so many of them in one you'd have to call it a pleasure there below the whiff of wash freshening on the line, which does not stop at the end nor start at the beginning.

The FamilyTree

Esta Fischer

The first time I heard my grandmother say she wanted to die was at my Great Uncle Edward's burial. I was thirteen and finally deemed old enough to attend a funeral. Until then, I and my baby brother stayed at home under the supervision of our neighbor Mrs. Mahoney. Our parents' absence always stretched past lunchtime and we were treated to Kraft macaroni and cheese from a box, which my mother disapproved of.

I had reached my adult height of five foot five by then, and "slimmed down" (as my mother put it). My brown ponytail had been traded for a pageboy. I desperately wanted eyeliner to accent my green eyes but that was forbidden.

I wore one of my two Sunday dresses—a navy blue shirtwaist with white lace collar and cuffs, Mary Jane pumps and my beige Spring coat.

"Not just because it's Sunday," my mother explained, "but because it's a solemn occasion."

My grandmother made her announcement as soon as the ceremony ended, when everyone stood around the grave as if waiting for the signal to leave.

"I want to die!" she said. "Everyone else gets to die. I want to die!"

"Stop it, Ma," Aunt Ellen, my mother's older sister, said sharply.

Aunt Mimi, my mother's younger sister, rolled her eyes and shook her head, causing the feather in her hat to tremble. She was famous in the family for her hats.

I was standing next to my grandmother and she give me a little nudge with her elbow.

"That's the family tree," she whispered, nodding at the huge tree with branches extended over the family graves. "I've got a spot right under it."

Back home, after the cemetery and the family lunch at Clark's Diner, I tried to think why Grandma wanted to die. She was in her late seventies, which seemed very old to me, but on television I heard of many people much older, in their eighties and even nineties. Grandma didn't even look that old. She had auburn hair (which I knew came from hair dye), didn't use a cane, and wore low-heeled pumps rather than sneakers or orthopedic shoes.

She lived in the apartment she'd shared with my grandfather, who'd died suddenly when I was a child, and where my mother and her sisters grew up. Most Sundays we went to visit, and sometimes Aunt Ellen and my cousins Emmy and Ralph came along. Aunt Mimi made an appearance once each month, when she didn't have to work. She

was divorced and had a job at the Metropolitan Museum.

The apartment was furnished with heavy mahogany pieces. Stuffed chairs and a sofa were draped with lace doilies on their arms and headrests “to keep them clean,” my grandmother explained. My cousins and I once removed a few doilies, wore them on our heads and ran around the apartment until my grandmother came after us with a fly swatter. We all laughed hysterically, but when we tried to remove the doilies again they’d been stitched to the upholstery.

My grandmother always prepared a Sunday dinner for us: pot roast or chicken, rice or potatoes, and a vegetable. In cold weather there was chicken soup, in warm weather chopped liver and crackers. We always stopped at Crumbs Bakery for a cake (my favorite was Black Forest, but it was expensive and bought only for special occasions such as birthdays and anniversaries). My mother and Aunt Ellen always offered to help in the kitchen, but Grandma brushed them off.

“I’m perfectly capable,” she would tell them. “I enjoy cooking for you. Just relax.”

She did let them clear the table.

One Sunday when I was fifteen, and my mother offered to help as usual, Grandma turned her down.

“Marlie can help,” she suddenly said, and she beckoned me into the kitchen.

She handed me an apron, pointed to each pot on the stove and told me how each dish was made. I was allowed to stir the soup with a large wooden spoon, ladle the soup into bowls and bring them to the table.

“My hands have been a bit stiff lately,” Grandma told me. “Arthritis.”

I’d never heard of arthritis.

Everyone was already seated when I brought in the soup, one bowl at a time. Finally I was able to sit down.

“You’re Grandma’s favorite,” Emmy, seated next me, hissed in my ear.

“Right,” I said, frowning. “So I get put to work.”

The idea of being Grandma’s favorite stuck in my mind. Was I her favorite and why? I was neither the oldest nor the youngest grandchild. I didn’t resemble her physically. But I decided there must be some advantage to being a favorite. I would bide my time to find out what that would be.

As my tenure as Grandma’s favorite continued, I graduated from soup duty to mashing potatoes: plenty of butter and salt added.

“Don’t overmash them or they’ll get gummy,” Grandma instructed.

She didn’t use an electric mixer like we had at home, but a long-handled metal

utensil.

The pot roast already made (“always make it the day before”) and sliced, and I was allowed to arrange it on the serving platter.

Then Grandma’s brother George died.

The funeral and burial were on a weekday. After much discussion, my parents decided to take me out of school for the day.

“If she’s not there, my mother will notice and make a remark,” I overheard my mother tell my father.

I knew she was referring to me and my grandmother. My status as favorite had now granted me an absence from school, about which I was not entirely happy. I would have double homework to do the next night.

Grandma’s brother George (who I did not remember at all) had requested a graveside service. The day was gray with a threat of rain.

“I hope your good shoes won’t be ruined,” my mother remarked, referring to my new black patent leathers. “I think people have graveside services to save money, but there’s no consideration for the family. Especially the older people. Standing outside in the rain and cold could cause serious problems.”

I assumed she was referring to my grandmother, who was now approaching age eighty. We picked her up in our car, she and I seated together in the back. My mother had offered her the front but she preferred to sit with me. I helped her fasten her seat belt and she patted my knee.

“Nice coat,” she commented, referring to my new London Fog, which, with my mother’s help, had been purchased at a discount store.

“Thanks,” I said.

When we arrived at the cemetery I helped my grandmother out of the car and she took my arm to walk to the gravesite. My mother’s sisters were already there along with several older people I didn’t know. The branches of the family tree showed the beginning of leaf buds.

Aunt Ellen approached us and kissed Grandma on the cheek.

“Hello, Marlie,” she said. “I’m surprised to see you here.” She sounded disapproving and I didn’t know what to say. A smile seemed inappropriate on this solemn occasion so I gave a little shrug.

Aunt Mimi, decked out in navy blue with matching hat (but without a feather) caught Grandma’s eye and gave a little wave..

I half listened to the drone of the service, thinking about the classes I was missing:

English, World History, Biology, French. I was an A student and not worried about falling behind. My best friend Claudia would give me her notes. The coffin was lowered into the grave and the gravediggers began to shovel the earth over it. For a moment I imagined being dead and a chill went over me. Suddenly my grandmother spoke.

“I want to die!” she announced. “Everyone else gets to die. I want to die!”

Everyone was looking at her, at us. No one seemed surprised, or taken aback. Aunt Ellen shook her head. I glanced at my mother but she was staring at the sky, which had turned dark and threatening.

After a moment the group began to move from the gravesite into cars and headed for Clark’s Diner. I escorted my grandmother to and from the car and sat next to her at the long table that was set up for our family.

“I’m going to order the brisket, what do you think?” she asked me.

I was pondering the menu, undecided.

“Sounds good,” I said. “I think I’ll have the tuna salad plate.” What I really longed for was the Kraft macaroni and cheese served by Mrs. Mahoney.

“Have something more substantial,” Grandma said. “Have the brisket. It’s very good.”

So I did, and it was.

Later in the evening, as I helped my mother dry the dishes, I summoned my nerve.

“Why does Grandma say she wants to die?” I asked.

My mother rolled her eyes.

“I really don’t know,” she said. “It started when her baby sister died.” She paused. “You were very young, you wouldn’t remember. Her sister Ann had just turned sixty. She was the youngest of the siblings. Your grandmother is the oldest.”

“Was Ann sick?” I asked.

“No,” my mother said. “One morning she just didn’t wake up. It was a big shock. When she was buried, Grandma said she wanted to die. We assumed it was just that she wanted to be with her sister. They were very close, and they were the only girls in that family.”

I knew my mother and Aunt Ellen were close. I often heard them talking on the phone, discussing my grandmother and Aunt Mimi. Mimi was the youngest by several years. I tried not to make it obvious that I was eavesdropping, but sometimes my mother lowered her voice if she saw me nearby. A lot of the conversation focused on “what to do about” Grandma. I didn’t see that anything had to be done. But I gathered that they didn’t expect Aunt Mimi to be of much help.

I thought of my mother and her two sisters. If one of them died, would the others want to die, too? I didn't think so.

"But then she said it again at someone else's burial," my mother continued.

"Did you ever ask her why?"

"My sister Ellen spoke to her. I don't think she asked, just told her it was inappropriate. Your grandmother told Ellen to mind her own business."

That sounded exactly like my grandmother.

"Don't bother asking her," my mother added.

"Why not?"

I had actually thought of asking her, but logistics had prevented me. The only time we were alone was in her kitchen preparing Sunday dinner, and that didn't strike me as an ideal situation. I decided to wait until our next cemetery visit. If she announced she wanted to die, I would ask her right there.

Then I went away to college.

I didn't know if I would still be Grandma's favorite. Did it matter? In one of our phone conversations my mother mentioned that the Sunday dinners at my grandmother's apartment had stopped.

"She said it's too much for her. So Aunt Ellen and I alternate. Dad picks up Grandma in the car and brings her home."

I was not pleased by this development. I wondered if my absence from my grandmother's kitchen, leaving her with no assistant, had precipitated this change. Of course, my mother and Aunt Ellen, even Aunt Mimi when she was there, could easily have stepped in. Maybe my grandmother was just too old. My being away at college caused me another concern. What if someone died and I wasn't at the cemetery to hear her say she wanted to die? I would miss my chance to solve that mystery. Not, I realized, that asking her would solve anything. According to my mother, Aunt Ellen had sort of tried. But Aunt Ellen was not the favorite. I might have a better chance.

During winter break I was home for Sunday dinner, which was at our apartment. I went with my Dad in the car to pick Grandma up. She seemed the same as before I left: chipper, well dressed. She insisted on sitting with me in the back seat.

"How is college? Meet any nice young men?" she asked, and she nudged me in my ribs with her elbow.

"Lots," I told her, and she laughed.

When we got to the apartment she whispered in my ear.

"Make sure you sit next to me."

“I’m helping Mom, so save me a seat,” I told her.

I concluded that I was still the favorite.

Back at college, I picked psychology as my major. I was especially interested in why people behaved the way they did. I soon realized my interest was related to my grandmother’s saying she wanted to die, and I was even more determined to figure it out. To admit I looked forward to another death in the family struck me as morbid and ghoulish. What I wanted was just another chance to confront my grandmother. But I quickly realized asking her would be futile. Favorite though I might be, I knew she wouldn’t give me the answer.

Then my grandmother’s remaining brother, my great-uncle Thomas, died. My mother mentioned it during our weekly call. The funeral was the following Sunday.

“I was planning to come in for the weekend,” I told her. “I’ll go to the funeral.”

I hadn’t been planning to go home but I canceled my weekend schedule and arranged transportation. This might be my last chance to solve Grandma’s mystery. I knew she wouldn’t give me an explanation, but now, with some psychology under my belt, maybe I could figure it out.

“Lucky it’s warm for October,” my mother commented in the car as we drove to pick up my grandmother. “My mother shouldn’t be out in chilly weather.”

“Is she okay?” I asked.

“As okay as someone her age can be,” my mother said.

I went to Grandma’s apartment to bring her downstairs. I hadn’t been there in a year, and it struck me as a relic of the distant past. The furniture and carpets looked seedy, and the air felt stale. Maybe it was also that my own life had moved on, past the childhood I’d spent there. Grandma herself seemed the same, but she walked slowly. She sat next to me in the car.

“How’s school?” she asked.

“I’m studying psychology,” I told her.

“Psychology?”

“You know, why people do what they do. Why they say what they say.”

I hoped I was dropping a hint, but Grandma didn’t buy it.

“That psychology is nonsense,” she declared.

We stood together at the cemetery. It was the usual family grouping, as much as I could remember. Aunt Mimi wore an elegant rust-colored hat, and a man was with her, their arms linked.

“The tree looks nice in autumn, doesn’t it,” Grandma whispered in my ear.

I looked up at the family tree. The branches were covered with red and gold leaves.

I half-listened to the ceremony. I was watching my grandmother from the corner of my eye, waiting. She was right on schedule.

“I want to die!” she announced.

No one reacted. I supposed they were used to it. I opened my mouth to confront her but before I could speak my Aunt Ellen appeared next to us.

“Let’s go before it rains,” she said, and she took my grandmother’s other arm.

We sat next to each other at Clark’s Diner, eating brisket.

“You know, I’m the only one of my immediate family still alive,” Grandma suddenly said. “And I was the oldest.”

Her tone was proud, which, if she really wanted to die, made no sense. And then it hit me. Grandma didn’t want to die. Saying she wanted to die was her way of keeping Death away, figuring if she called it, it wouldn’t come to get her.

Later that year, my mother told me my grandmother was moving to assisted living.

“The apartment is too much for her.”

I pictured that old apartment being dismantled, the family history disappearing.

On my next school break I visited my grandmother at her Assisted Living. She had a tiny apartment with new furniture.

“I’m going to become a psychologist,” I told her. “I’ll be a doctor.”

“What about a husband?” she asked.

“That, too,” I assured her. “Maybe next year.”

“I can’t go to the cemetery anymore,” she suddenly said. “I’m not steady on my feet.”

“That’s okay,” I told her.

On one of my visits, the resident social worker asked to see me.

“Every time someone here dies, your grandmother announces that she wants to die,” she told me.

I didn’t know what to say, other than that I was not surprised, but I kept that thought to myself.

“It could be a sign of depression,” she went on, “or possibly dementia.”

“Possibly,” I agreed.

“People here die with some frequency,” she pointed out.

All the more reason to keep death at bay, I thought. I shrugged.

Grandma lived another ten years. After she died, any time I felt I might be in mortal danger, I announced (out loud if I was alone, silently if anyone could hear me) that I wanted to die. Several decades have passed, and so far it has worked.

Evening News

In the midst of our troubles
I take St-Exupéry into the safety
of a steaming bath right at the point
where he crashes his plane
on a huge dune covered with black pebbles.
It's night and visibility is nil,
this being the Sahara,
but those black pebbles, rolling
under the weight of the craft,
are what save him from obliteration.
The next pages give me a taste
of the water-deprived aftermath,
the rationing of half a thermos of coffee,
a few grapes and one orange, all of which
of course he shares with his mechanic.
I murmur to myself (as I always do
when I read) the description
of the two of them searching in vain
for the slightest trickle in the ground,
the barest moisture in the wind.
I shudder at the report (submerged,
as I am, in pine-scented suds)
of his great thirst, the mirages
of white crosses and sanctified wells,
and then the ensuing fevers,
and how he has to bury himself
in the sand to stop the nighttime cold
from clawing into his bones.

Later on, assured of his imminent rescue,
I dry myself off and slip into bed,
alone (because our decision
now seems irreversible), and,
with a glass of water standing sturdily
on the night table, look at some lines
from *One Hundred Japanese Poems*
about how the human heart,
without anyone ever laying eyes
on it, just withers
out there in the world.

Deconstructing Papa's Little Midlife Crisis

He's not much of anybody these days.
She's mopey and would prefer to sit
in her room than get some fresh air with
him. But now that she's here, she perks
up and throws out this hundred-meter
challenge. She sets her stop-watch
on the phone and says go. There he is,
going, scudding like a cloud in the cold
October dusk. It's just a plain old
path where they first measured out
the distance with the GPS. In his mind
he is not the father past his prime
with a gadget-savvy teenager fast
catching up; he is still the leviathan,
fleet-footed and stark. Half-way
down the line, though, his left
knee gives out: it can't hold
the leg together, which simply
crumbles, leaving a litter
of kinetic parts on the dirt
and grass. The other leg fails
the lopsided task and promptly
sunders. The arms and back
refuse to carry what's left,
and so they go, too,
bouncing, snapping like
twigs, perversely glad to be
free of the whole. The head,
for its part, unfolds and sinks,
spilling like a magnolia
flower on a mournful
street. She has no choice
but to gather up his
scattered remains
and stuff them in her
pockets. At home

she'll find a box that's
big enough, and when
the time comes, in
some years or so,
she'll open it up
and find an app
to help her put
the pieces
together
again.

Stumped

I am not a virtuous man. I am
far from virtuous. There are surely words
for people like me, though I think
my name is as good as any at this juncture,
just like *chair* will do for that chair
over there across the room. I'm not
so sure I always did good by my daughter,
which is to say I am puzzled
by those self-administered cuts on her arms
and the silence
between us where only yesterday
she couldn't stop talking, couldn't stop
pointing at and going on about
all the props – both brilliant and dull –
in our stellar lives. Time happens
to the best of us, I know. And wonderment
is never far behind. Those countless stars
that shine on through an infinite universe.
And weird, mysterious inspiration,
like all the other words
that suddenly hit me for that thing
over there across the room, whether whole
or separated into a multitude of pieces.

Disconnected

She is thirteen, hates meat, and sounds as though she were talking about bungee jumping, or eating lobster. *I am NOT going swimming!* We never thought we'd be going anywhere – not to that red crustacean place down the street, least of all the bridge over these russet waters – what with airplanes grounded and beaches deserted, the planet strangely ungagged, yet all us masked villains paying the price for our various transgressions, big and small. The stats were a reminder to be scared, just as we reminded ourselves with our own crazed look in the mirror (or in the glossy surface of our favourite device). But now, finally, we have the chance to get away, our immune systems primed, our nerves never readier – these last weeks: floating past each other like ghosts and doing our best Clint Eastwoods, murmuring, yeah yeah, make my day, make my day... But here's the thing: she simply refuses to cooperate. True, she never asked for this holiday. But, as if staying home were an option: watching bloody Japanese anime and carving up her arms in fine lines that dare not be crossed (like a precipice, perhaps? or the edge of a burning volcano?). So: *No! Don't order that long-sleeve piece of shit because I'm not gonna wear it! I am NOT going swimming!* The sun is setting, the sky doing its best not to choke. How can we start packing when we still have so much to unpack? Some places are so off the map I don't even know their name. Anyway, I tried. Now all I can do is shrug and wonder: where the hell is that blessed remote?

Good Company

You are late, but the train is even later.
The silence down the aisle means the game
is over. At least she said it was over.
You grit your teeth and wear your cap
at an angle like a pitcher sixty feet
from all souls on the last day of October.
A hundred other passengers riding this
very slow train, each one hiding a world
of joys and sorrows behind a sanitary void.
Outside the window, up past the sky,
if you look, billions of stars fill the darkness
of space, maybe one for every friend
who freely shared their sparkle.
You used to own a big German Shepherd
who dragged you into a ditch when you were
six because you wouldn't let go of the leash.
Sillier, meaner things have happened
in this life. Most people just pretend.
Dylan's *Slow Train Coming* was dismissed
as an aberration. The fact is, tireless birds
fly past our windows, mending
their twig-and-leaf homes at all hours
of the day, but we hardly notice. When you take
your empties to the bottle shop, a guy
with a sagging grey moustache and one arm
keeps greeting you from his wheelchair.
You stop, drop some loose change in his cup,
and talk about yesterday's ball game
for a minute or so. There's a woman who
with agony, long ago, willed you into
this world: she now lies in a care home
half-wondering what it is she still remembers.
When you call her up and say who it is,
she says she knows someone by that name.
No, you are not really alone, though you squint
your eyes like a center fielder with one hand
on the wall and a heart full of zeal,
four-hundred feet from home plate. Once,
your shallow pop-up to the opposite field
was bobbled and dropped,

which put you on second base with the only double ever credited to your name. The shame, for once, not yours. Standing there with that rare view from the other side, one week after Bella was put down. A tiny miracle, that. Merciful. Took something off the bat's blistering sting.

Empty Arenas

The seats are all vacant, the air dry
as sandpapered souls floating
between pews: the ideal auditorium
for a world wary of grazing garments
and skin – and that one stray sneeze.
It's just the players on the ice scraping,
hacking, calling out: *High!...*
Drop!... Shoot! There's a skirmish
along the boards but the referee presses
them to *play on!* because he *ain't*
gonna whistle! It all rings out true
and real from the screen of my tablet.
Smouldering eternal commandments.
I hear them. I'm a believer. Always
there: not up in the seats, but down
here, wheeling through the wispy
snow florets and blazoned curlicues,
privy to the drama and the inside jokes,
the insults and hectoring, the weight
of bodies heaving and lurching

and the one hip check that sends me
reeling down the years to the rink
at the end of the street
where the energy is just as honest
and razor sharp, where it's all trial
and error, but also enact the patterns
branded in prayer and ritual
(like the *CH* embossed on the chest
of my jersey), lungs burning, legs aching
and, above all, the blessed freedom
in the space between those creaking
boards that lets us imagine anything

– anything, except maybe
the discord and distance,
a strange kind of *fear* sown in
a boisterous future by the tiniest
baffling germ that however coded
to silence the chants and smother
the cheers,

could never take the fun out
of our liturgical game.

Fireflies

Last night, during my run, I saw the fireflies scattering. I still don't know what makes them light up. Maybe I don't want to know. My teachers always said I was deeply incurious about the topics at hand. Before getting into my jogging shoes, I spoke to my brother on the phone. We were glowing about the Habs, who made it to the Stanley Cup finals: first time in twenty-eight years.

Twenty-eight years!

We had a lot of catching up to do. We both live in different parts of the world now. But the pictures of the fans dancing and cheering in the streets of our hometown made us forget our respective exiles. At least for a while.

I heard, once again, the sound of the puck against the boards when we'd go out to the park in the dead of winter. Lacing up our skates, stick-handling, cranking up for those explosive slap-shots. A zinger off the crossbar ringing in the night: the clearest of chimes in the temple of our youth. And now it's July and here we are, reliving a bit of the glory, all flushed and excitable like the kids we used to be.

Equations

Love – whether a ring, or a tangerine smile, or a bolt of lightning – is all well and good, but it's all five senses that clamour for a say, and the plain fact is I can't seem to overcome the grey musty smell whenever her hair and skin flit past my nose. It's all I can do to keep from noticing, at the oddest moments – for example, while basting a chicken as she sits on the wicker barstool just watching me – how a dating site can never provide a complete picture of the one you pay a handsome fee to start chatting with, and for the trip you both take to save the other from boredom and solitude. No, at some point compromise must enter the scene. Either that, or you will have to decide if it's the smile and crackly voice (plus maybe those beautiful thoughts inside her head) or that Proustian remembrance of your grandmother that wins out in the end.

Stepping Out

Walking the two-hundred-fifty-mile road from Arnstadt, in his home province, to the Hanseatic city of Lübeck proved much less taxing for the stripling J.S. Bach than the prospect of explaining his prolonged twelve-week absence to the gruff superintendent of the church where he was employed as organist. Why was he gone so long? Well, he had to hear his hero, the great Buxtehude, play. But that's not how he put it, of course. *I tarried there, not without profit.* Nothing more needed to be said. Nothing about his own polished soloing in Buxtehude's oratorios, performed at St-Mary's Church that Christmas season. Nothing about the after-concert dinners of marinated fried herring washed down with oak-flavoured Rotspon, followed by marzipan-layered cakes. Not a peep about his late evening strolls through the harbour with one of the maestro's beautiful daughters, and gazing at a three-mast fluyt while simultaneously sounding out the girl's innate understanding of the heart's fugal structure. Not a word, for that matter, about the ten-day journey itself, and carousing with Felix Mendelssohn and Glenn Gould at the sundry pubs along the way. Felix and Glenn doing their own bit of *tarrying* – some hundred years' and two hundred and fifty years' worth (give or take a couple weeks), respectively. The reflections and revelations that would ensue in due course, by the future versions of Mr. Bach's travel companions, have assured us that long bouts of freedom and fresh air – along with their stealthy glories – can't be such a bad idea after all.

Canon

Gap-toothed and stubble-faced,
a blur of thick grubby hands,
black hair spilling
down from under a black
longshoreman cap:
he sits in the grime
of the shopping street
under the silicone gaze
of sequined mannequins,
unaware of the din of phones
and consumer glee, slapping
and strumming a taped-up guitar
and belting out bulerias and rumbas
as if there were no tomorrow.

Shoppers gather before him,
baffled by the lingo perhaps,
fettered, certainly, with their big shiny
watches and the latest fashion:
looking on, as if astonished
by these raw sounds that rise
like birds from his throat,
and the spark-like dance of fingers
on strings.

Then, suddenly, a child stirs.
He moves like in a dream, released
momentarily from the demands
of primness and smart button-down
shirts. Trembling ever so slightly
(but not from fear), he teeters forward,
entranced, goes to him
to offer up his tiny ruby hands
in exchange for that something about him
he cannot reveal,

cannot speak or play,
as it lodges safely inside his head,
until he himself one day
will pick up his own stringed box
of marvels – wooden temple of Christmas
Oratorios, ragtime, bebop –
and cover it with fingerprints and scars,
and say what needs to be said.

Vanishing Point

Clara Roberts

St. Joseph Medical Center for Eating Disorders Admission Center March 21, 2004

My mom sits with me in a waiting room at St. Joseph's Medical Center around 8:30a.m. I tap my feet to a manic beat and cry on and off because, at 5'4" and seventy-eight pounds; I'm too fat to be hospitalized. In the waiting room I pluck at my chair's red and fuzzy cushion, then circumnavigate the wooden table filled with piles of worn wellness magazines. I want to burn calories, as many calories as I can manage in my wasted state before I become hostage to the Eating Disorders unit.

My mom pleads with my doctor to find a way to admit me into the intensive program. Now the doctor, who advised inpatient hospitalization for me in the first place two months ago, responds that it might be another week before my family's inflexible insurance company agrees to cover the stay. My mom does not think I'll live that long.

Even after my mom's desperate request, I ask questions about my appearance. "Am I thin? Do I weigh too much? Can't I wait a few more days so I can lose some more weight? Am I thin enough? Can we please go back home? I changed my mind – I really don't want to go!"

I turned fourteen years old in February, and my body is already degenerating into an elderly woman's. My hair falls out when I run my fingers through it, and I have the beginning stages of osteoporosis. I wish I was thirteen again. Life was better. Days thrived. My negative thoughts did not chain me. When a person gets this sick, she is so enveloped by the compulsive ritualistic actions of the eating disorder's commands that there's no end to the madness. I name the anorexia, "Ana," a friend who never leaves my side. There comes a certain point in the starvation process when the victim starts to lose her mind. I am at that point. Deep down, I understand that I am not well and need to go inpatient, but Ana is making her last threatening orders: if I go into treatment I will have to eat, gain all the weight back that I worked my ass off (literally) to lose, and that is the last thing she wants to happen; surrendering to a treatment program will mean I have no control. I will lose my main reason to wake up in the morning—my mission, my identity as the sick skinny girl who has an obscene amount of willpower.

Around noon, our rigid insurance company finally agrees to admit me. Mom escorts me from the stuffy waiting room – where we both have been panicking for the past four hours – to the cafeteria near the Center for Eating Disorders. We have to wait until my room on the unit is ready. She watches me mash around two tablespoons of cottage cheese, then cross my arms, looking away from the plate in disgust.

"Why are you making me eat now? This isn't right. I am about to be force fed!" I whine.

"Fine, have it your way. I can't wait until they make you eat," my mom snaps. I am shivering even in my heavy winter coat. My mom, who almost never cries, starts

sobbing as we walk out of the cafeteria, toward the unit. She cannot get over the fact that she is putting her daughter away. I am a broken little girl who has been brainwashed by some nefarious force inside of her mind. But I am my own victim. I choose to wilt away.

A hefty nurse, mostly likely around two-hundred pounds, unlocks the door to the unit and takes me to a small white examination room with a scale and various contraptions that take my vital signs. She needs to document whether I am sick enough to warrant admission to the Intensive Care Unit, which is in a separate part of the clinic. She tells my mom to wait in the hallway as she scribbles numbers onto a chart. She shares some of the results: my heart rate is a healthy sixty bpm (beats per minute) while I am sitting, but upon standing the numbers leap more than double that number. This means I am severely dehydrated, and I cannot stand up without becoming lightheaded. An average anorexic body mass index is 17.5; mine is an unsettling 13.7.

The piercing fluorescent lights hurt my eyes and head. I want my dream world of numbers- on-the-scale-falling-downward and the caloric restriction to stay with me. I cannot comprehend that my body is deteriorating. I do not see that this oh-so-successful-diet is a regimen of death.

My mind dwells in a fogged-up jar the first few hours I am on the unit. I have fallen into a parallel universe where sterility and insanity tries to mimic a typical home. The Yeah Yeah Yeah's song "Maps" is on a steady loop in my head. I can picture the singer, Sharon O, in the music video on the verge of tears singing, "wait/they don't love you like I love you."

Ana is the one I love. She motivates me to get out of bed in the morning. I wish everyone would let me be with my eating disorder – spend the remainder of my life with it – and leave me alone for good. No one would fight with me during meals, and I would not have to go to a hospital. I admit, life these days is difficult and narrow. All I am able to think about are food and weight. I am intoxicated by my best friend. And she who wants me dead.

Ana wants me to be conceited, to stare at myself whenever I can catch a glimpse of my reflection. Yet, no matter how diligently I follow her demands, she still finds me ugly. Ana reminds me that my work will, eventually, payoff:

"Everyone else in your life is fat compared to you. I promise to make you the perfect weight, to the point where you can dance between the raindrops."

My family will have to bury me before I reach that weight.

Arrival

Seven hours later, I arrive on the unit. I am one of twenty patients. Jackie is the first person to approach me. I cling to my mom and squeeze her cold hand, latching eyes with this girl. Her face is angular and her eyes are blue and starved of light. She wears a navy blue Mount Hebron High School sweatshirt, so she is a few years older than I am. Her sandy-blond hair, in a tight ponytail, is strained and pulled back from her scalp. The hair style seems headache-inducing.

"I'm Jacqueline Bielson, but you can call me Jackie for short. You're going to be okay," she says.

My mom tenses at the sight of her because she thinks Jill is freaky. She sees Jackie as a preview of my life if I stay sick—a life of missed adolescence, of withering away.

"Thank you," I murmur, looking down at the carpeted floor.

"Everything is going to be okay."

Even through my teary blood-shot eyes, I feel a little safer when she repeats those words. Yet she wears her baggy jogging outfit as though there's a chance she could slip outside into the freezing cold to do rapid laps around the hospital. Later that night, my roommate, Whitney, tells me that Jackie has been on the ward for two weeks and has barely gained any weight, despite the program's rule of underweight patients needing to gain .2 kilograms per day (almost half a pound).

"I admit that I sometimes break the rules here. I don't recommend you follow my lead," Jackie says a few minutes after my mom leaves. My mom is able to visit again that night at 7:00 o'clock. but only if I eat all of my dinner at 5 o'clock.

"What happens if you break the rules or don't gain weight?" I ask. I hope that maybe this place will not punish me too harshly if I don't gain weight, or if they catch me hiding food inside my pockets or shoes.

"You lose all privileges. You aren't allowed to take an eight-minute shower because it burns calories. The staff calls it "caloric conservation." If you don't make weight for three days in a row, on the third day they do let you shower."

"Taking away shower privileges sounds pretty degrading," I say. Although I hadn't even thought of taking a shower as a form of burning calories.

"It is. I'm convinced that the people who run this program want to strip us of our dignity. You also can't have visitors or make phone calls if you don't make weight. You and your mom seem really close. It would be a shame if you misbehave and can't have contact with her."

"Are you close with your parents?"

"No. I live in my older sister's shadow."

Jackie never gets visitors and gets scolded by the nurses when she attempts to sneak phone calls. She does not gain weight because she exercises in her bedroom at night during the fifteen minute gaps when a nurse is not peeking into the bedroom. Be it jumping jacks, jogging in place, or rotating her arms, she finds ways to burn off those extra calories. My heart sinks at the thought of getting into trouble and not having any contact with my mom, my confidante who is supposed to see me every day, who is supposed to be there to comfort and protect me.

I wish she did not have this power to tug at my emotions or else I would not be afraid to break the rules. Yet, my mom is not what my doctor would call an "ideal" weight for her age and height. She is 5'4" and one-hundred and ten pounds, about ten to fifteen pounds below what most doctors would deem healthy. I want to smack her for making me gain weight while she gets to maintain her low number. I want to stay thin. Getting to a higher weight than hers would be the death of me.

I get a brisk tour the first day of the dining area, the two therapy rooms, and my room. My luggage is ransacked by a nurse. She takes away my candles and incense because they are a safety hazard. She even rolls her eyes at me, saying I am not going to use "all of this stuff." I have so many clothes and belongings because I have no idea how long I will be staying here. A nurse also confiscates the R-rated movies I thought I was allowed to bring because all of the best movies are R-rated. On my single bed I drape a pink, knitted blanket on top of the hospital comforters provided by the hospital, which are not thick enough to warm me. All of my clothes are folded and hung in the wooden armoire next to the tiny bed. I put my CD player, albums, and books into a neat pile on the nightstand. I notice that the room does not have a mirror, only a large framed picture on the wall where I can just barely see my reflection. It is only a clichéd picture of a rose, and the frame is built into the wall so patients cannot take it down and smash it.

While the nurse looks through my belongings, I sit and lay out some of my books. The bed is hard and uncomfortable, but I will eventually be able to fall into a deep sleep with a stomach full of food and supplements. Later during my stay I will occasionally get night-sweats, which my nutritionist says is "normal" because my body is apparently starting to function again. My metabolism speeding up, a blessing in disguise. The one window in my room looks out into a garden and a parking lot. Since it is spring, the flowers are starting to flourish and blossom to life as though the blistering winter never happened.

On the right side of the room is an identical single bed and armoire where my roommate is already settled. Her name is Whitney, and I learn that is her fourth day. She makes sure to tell me her current stats: 5'2" and one-hundred and one pounds, but she was ninety-seven pounds when she first was admitted. She says she lost thirty pounds in less than three months. Momentarily, I am glad inside because Ana is proud of how I am thinner than my roommate, but jealous because I did not lose as much weight as she did. Ana reminds me that if I had lost thirty pounds these past six months I would be sixty-eight pounds. That night, Whitney fills me in on who each patient is, which eating disorder they suffer from and how much some of them weigh. Whitney's last name is Harrington, and I smile pointing out that she has the same initials as Whitney Houston. She says many people say that, but she still laughs.

Whitney gossips about Jackie's roommate, Nadia. Nadia speaks broken English and never snitches on Jackie's nightly workout regime. Even so, they do not get along. Nadia is twenty and initially sees America as an utter marvel compared to the Romanian orphanage she was forced to live in until she was sixteen.

"She has the mentality of a ten year old and it is hard to get through to her," Whitney says.

Nadia wants to be a pop star. She trusts no one. I wake up in the middle of the night to Nadia's screeching and sobbing because she is convinced Jackie steals one of her stuffed animals while she sleeps. Whitney believes Nadia is delusional. The first time I walk past their bedroom, I see Nadia piling and then re-piling a mountain of those

animals on her single bed. I wonder how she evens keeps track of each one. Nadia has blonde hair like Goldilocks and the body of a twelve year old ballerina. She twirls and picks up a handful of her animals, cradling them against the fuzzy angora pink sweater covering her bony chest.

"Thief," Nadia yells at Jackie, who is on the other side of the room. Jackie gives her a blank stare and then paces around the bed.

Jill is not the only person Nadia accuses of being a thief. Anyone who invades her space while she beads jewelry gets the same treatment. In Nadia's world, the jewelry she makes is highly valuable. I still have the pink bracelet she created for me, each plastic bead a precious "jewel" I would never be able "to get at American store."

Nadia never makes jewelry for Jackie. But Whitney knits Jackie earth-colored gloves and maroon scarves to keep her warm. Jackie is so underweight that she has lanugo (fine, downy hair which commonly appears on anorexics because of their lack of body heat) carpeting her cheekbones and limbs. I have lanugo going in a straight line from my sternum to my bellybutton and on the back of my arms, but not on my face. I wonder if I touch her face, would the surface feel like peach fuzz?

Whitney idolizes Jackie. She raves about how talented and smart Jill is, how she is in school plays, student government, and all AP classes. Whitney also brings up again how Jill lives in her sister's shadow. Jackie's solution to getting attention is getting emaciated.

Whitney rolls her eyes up at the ceiling when I ask more questions about Nadia, responding that she is only on the unit because she does not like American food. Nadia makes a scene during mealtimes because there is at least one item she refuses to touch. I burst out laughing when, later in the week, I first hear her protest lunch.

"Disgusting food. I take supplement!"

She pushes her tray across the table, crosses her arms tightly and pouts like I used to when I was in kindergarten and my friend did not want to play with me at recess. I do not mean to laugh, but I find it almost admirable that someone actually has the audacity to re-iterate to the entire group how shitty the hospital food is. Many other patients find her comments "triggering" because eating is challenging enough as it is. Nadia's behavior at the table further convinces Whitney that this foreigner is an attention-seeker and does not actually have an eating disorder.

"All the food is awful. I worship devil now. I live in hell," Nadia says.

No one says a word. Everyone looks down at their trays.

Night

Aside from the cafeteria cottage cheese, I have not eaten a full meal since the day before. At dinner, I sit next to Whitney and across from Liz, the most emaciated girl in the program. When Liz sits down to eat her child-sized jeans hang off her. The pants look like they belong to a nine year old. She carries a blue plastic cushion (in the shape of a donut) with her all day so her coccyx does not bruise when she sits. My first morning (day two) Liz offers me one of her extra cushions, but I decline because I do not think my heavier ass warrants one. This is only one of Liz's many rounds at this

program.

My tray has a Styrofoam plate with two scoops of mashed potatoes, a roll with butter (the nurse watches me spread it), and a slab of unseasoned chicken. There is a bowl of watery broccoli and a cup of orange sherbet. The carton of two percent milk looks like the ones I used to drink back in my school's cafeteria, back before I got sick, when I used to enjoy drinking them. The heat from the chicken and mashed potatoes waft into my nose while Vanessa Carlton's depressingly hopeful song "A Thousand Miles" plays from the tiny stereo by the windowsill. The song is a part of what would become a soundtrack to my life – eating and crying at a table in a sterile hospital while my eating disorder yells at me. There is no way they think I can eat this whole tray of food. The people who run the program are bingers. Nobody eats this much.

"Just focus on one item at a time," Whitney suggests as she takes tiny sips of her milk. "Right now you are not even on "standard meal-plan," just "basic" since your body needs to get used to eating again. This is the smallest tray of food you are going to have during your stay here."

"Do I have to eat everything on this whole tray?" I ask, trying to hold myself together as I open my container of milk.

"Yes."

I cannot hold back my tears. They drip onto my mashed potatoes, making them soggy and saltier, and onto the red shirt that is not keeping me warm. I want my sweater, but the nurses instructed us to remove all "double layers" before our meal began. Ana is absolutely furious. This is an obscene amount of food, and I will probably gain two pounds just from this meal alone. The loss of control makes me shake and sweat; I would do anything to see my mom right now, even my dad.

"It's okay girlie. You've got this," Liz encourages.

Vanessa Carlton's voice echoes in my ears making me cry even more—how she would walk 1000 miles just to just to see and hold someone.

Still, at this moment, I would walk a thousand miles just to be able to keep my eating disorder and to get thinner again.

"I can't do this!" I bawl uncontrollably.

"The first meal is always the hardest. But don't you want your mom and dad to come visit you tonight? If you don't eat dinner they won't be allowed to come see you and you will be forbidden to even call them," Liz says.

I want my mom to be with me, to hold my hand like she always does and let me know everything is going to be fine. I want her to repeat that I am not going to be in this hellhole forever—that she is not going to let the doctors make me fat, that she will take me out of here before I get fat. I stop complaining and gulp down each item, while a nurse monitors every bite I take. Each swallow hurts because of the giant lump in my throat. A year earlier, I would have had zero anxiety at the thought of eating a complete meal. I once ate three a day like a "normal" person.

But one of my friends from school, Angela, was an anorectic. She was so thin that she seemed to glide and walk on air because she weighed next to nothing.

"I have a model's body," she bragged.

I never felt overweight until I met her. I never thought my weight was too high. I seemed to take up too much space when she was around. The summer before eighth grade I began to worry about becoming heavier than ninety-eight pounds. I thought I could go on a temporary diet so I wouldn't take up as much space anymore.

When I finish dinner my stomach feels full and strained, a sensation I have not experienced in almost six months. I cry on and off for the rest of the night, even when my parents come. Yet, I have no choice but to adjust to this scary and foreign routine.

When my parents visit, I realize Nadia must have other problems that justify her place on the ward. She flirts with all of the male nurses and visitors, including one patient's husband. And my dad.

"Your daughter... She trying to get used to it here. I'm used to it here," she says to my dad while batting her eyelashes and giggling. My dad looks shocked. After she waltzes away, he shakes his head and says he cannot remember the last-time he felt so disturbed and how she makes it seem like I am part of a full-blown loony bin. My mom ignores Nadia during the entire exchange, too focused on holding my hand and getting me to stop crying.

"Your father. He like me," Nadia announces to me when my parents leave.

"Yeah. I'm sure he does," I say, not to looking her in the eyes.

"No, he really really like me."

Nadia brags to everyone how all men like her and want her.

Then, one day, in a group therapy session she runs her purple nails through her thick straw- blonde hair and screams, "I hate men!"

This explosion triggers her to confess: a young man at her orphanage in Romania raped her on a daily basis and when she arrived in America she had guys in school stare at her body. She feels like less of a target when she loses weight.

Day's Nights

The dining area has a bank of windows overlooking the hospital's campus. The nurse's station is three feet away from the tables, making it effortless to walk over to patients during meals and hover over their trays. At those same tables I eat all of my meals, do my schoolwork, and play games. I have to ask one of the nurses to open the cupboard with the decks of old cards, board games and tattered magazines. No fashion magazines are allowed because they are "triggering" and might make patients jealous of thin celebrities. Before I sit down with my tray of food, a nurse calls my name and I walk over to the special table set up for her to watch me open my drinks, spread butter or another fatty condiment on my already soggy bread, empty out all of the dressing on the limp pile of lettuce, and remove the plastic wrapper from my utensils. Caffeinated coffee is never allowed because the doctors believe it is a "symptom"—artificially boosting the metabolism and retaining fluids in case a patient has not been gaining weight.

Nadia is right; the food is awful hospital gunk. Even the doctors and nurses know it because I never see them eating any of it. I know to expect my hot food to be cold or

my cold desert to be warm (ice cream), especially if my tray is called close to last. I compulsively obsess over my menu, trying to follow the chart my nutritionist gives me: proteins, dairies, fat condiments, vegetables, caloric beverages, carbs, fruits, and desserts. Everyone pretends to dread the food after being there awhile, but our expanding stomachs come back to life and we begin to feel the body's raucous hunger and the joy of satiating this appetite.

In this hospital vacuum, I eat breakfast, lunch, dinner, and a snack. During meals, I try to ignore the non-compliant patients, those who spread butter underneath tables and avoid lifting silverware to chapped lips. They always get in trouble anyway. I learn the songs that play on the tiny stereo so well that I mouth the words, as I try not to cry, between uneasy bites of food. 101.9 Light FM is the preferred channel and songs like "The Greatest Love of All" by Whitney Houston, and "Sunrise" by Nora Jones play constantly. I talk about trivial stuff like movies and celebrity news to other patients, while nurses scrutinize our eating habits. If I stir my mashed potatoes too much, mix my salad repeatedly, churn my ice cream, dunk cookies into the milk, cut up my chicken into too many pieces, or push the food around on my plate a nurse is sure to chime in: "That's a behavior, Clara."

When I am new I ask, "What's wrong with what I'm doing? This is how I eat!"

When Jackie sits next to me at meals she snaps at me if I wrap my hand around my wrist and upper arm; any sort of body checking is a no-no.

"Watch it, missy," Jackie warns, catching me in the act.

"Sorry," I say and continue eating my tuna sandwich.

She is looking out for me, but habits like body checking are not going to be thrown out the window. I cannot just start ignoring my appearance and the additional flesh every day, the fat that I crave so damned hard to vanish. I know I supposedly do not see my reflection the way others do, but I cannot be so distorted that I am imagining my clothes tighten. Otherwise, I must see the world through purple sunglasses.

I sit there trying not to cry because Ana bitches at me, reminding me how I am a fat failure for breaking her regulations and giving in too easily to hospital rules. She tells me I am gaining weight too fast, that food is the enemy. I have to tell her to shut up because I am stuck at this place and there is no way out unless I am compliant. But Ana reassures me: You can lose all of the weight you gain when you get out of here. Don't worry. I am here to make you skinny again.

By week two, at around 10:45 a.m., I sip thick Ensure Plus shakes and clutch my seemingly ruptured stomach with disgust. I must drink three a day, and there are 350 calories in each cup of this supplement. Then more meals come.

The same nurses are there every day on rotating shifts. Bathroom breaks are every two- to- three hours and, if it is an emergency, I have to ask one of them to unlock the door. During designated bathroom break the nurses stand outside one of the five stalls while I go and then flush the toilet with a key. God forbid they catch a patient purging or throwing food down the toilet; punishment is a certainty. My first day there minutes and minutes pass before I can urinate because I am too embarrassed to have someone

listen to me. The nurse chuckles and says I have a "shy bladder" which is not uncommon in the beginning.

One of the bathroom breaks is right before breakfast. Girls make cordial chit-chat and turn to the mirror to continue applying make-up to their sunken eyes. Jackie teases and curls her thinning hair every day as though she has somewhere special to go or people to impress. The most I do is comb the knots from my hair. Subsequently, I get a lump in my throat at the fact that the bathroom mirror is hung too high to "body check" my butt or even my waist. Instead, I have to focus on my slinky neck, shoulder bones, and cheeks. I think that the older girls overdo it with make-up so much because they have been meticulously refining their appearance since puberty. Routine must be maintained. Routine includes discussion of who gained or lost weight that morning. Maybe it is a way to deal with the cruel reality of spending that day and the next and the next on the first floor of the hospital, with no one to see us but the nurses and the other crazies in the hole. Routine, no matter the protocols, is life.

The air at the hospital is dry. My lips and skin chap quickly and if I want to use chap-stick and hand-lotion they have to be dispensed by the medication nurse only at a specific time when it is convenient for her.

Patients are to be as sedentary as possible. Pacing is something a patient gets "redirected" for by the nurses. Standing for what they judge to be an excessive amount of time guarantees they will tell us to sit down on a seat that hurts our bony asses. Patients even joke that shaking an Ensure is a form of exercise. The nurses' voices still echo in my head:

"Could you please have a seat?"

"I need you to sit down now."

"If you aren't waiting in line for the bathroom, you need to have a seat."

The place where we sit down the most is the common room. We call it "The Bubble" because of the foggy Plexiglas surrounding the circular room. When I sit in there for groups, or even to just watch TV, I stare through "The Bubble" and see the little eating room with the clunky clock on the wall. And my already cramped stomach churns. "The Bubble" is another reminder of our officially being locked away from the outside world. At night, I look at my reflection in the window, while the voices from the television echo throughout the room. I can see the baggy clothes I am wearing and my face, but otherwise it is too dark to do a thorough body check. The parking lot outside is bare and empty, except for the occasional nurse who is taking a cigarette break or heading back to her car.

Day eight, and it is that time again.

I lie in bed, quivering, as the clock ticks inexorably forward: 5:59 a.m., 6 a.m., 6:01 a.m... We get weighed every morning in the room next to mine. I feel throbs of panic as I step onto the huge metal scale that declares the day's fate. .

Standing under the florescent lights of the weighing room, I try to ignore the urge to look at the intimidating number. I find it ironic that the scale looks like a treadmill since any form of exercise is prohibited on the unit.

Did I go up or down?

That day, Richard (the only male nurse on the unit) weighs me. I think he looks like a perverted Kevin Spacey. We have a brief chat, and he says that he understands what I am going through. He asks if I want to be destined for a life of disposable paper gowns, force-fed meals and ugly furniture to sit on. I do not say anything. He does not deserve a response because I know from his smirk that he does not really care. I am just another anorexic going through the revolving door of the consequences. Richard does not seem to mind the cold silence.

Tell me what I can do today; please tell me when I can leave.

I sneak a peek at the scale and immediately regret doing it. I gained over half a pound in just a day.

"You still have quite a long way to get to goal weight," he says in a sing-song voice while he jots down my current weight on a thick clipboard.

My thoughts jumble: This place is a fucking hellhole. How am I supposed to recover here?

Why must I gain weight?

Just let me stay thin. I worked for six months to get to this weight!

I remind myself that if I do not gain weight I won't get to the eight minute shower, have visitors, or get phone privileges.

I pray to go up .2kg, no more, no less. Yet, I feel awful gaining more than what is expected because it means I am getting further and further away from thinness.

We patients file down the hall each day for not only occupational therapy or relapse prevention group, but also art therapy. We make collages out of magazine clippings that are supposed to express our inner selves, mold clay and Play-Doh, decorate fabrics, and paint fake stained glass. But we occasionally participate in what the therapist calls body tracings. The art therapist tells us body image therapy is going to arouse significant anxiety. Our body contours are carefully traced onto the giant billboard-size paper on the chipped pink wall. Before the body tracing, we draw life-sized outlines of what we hypothesize our actual outlines look like. Almost everyone, including myself, over-estimates the size of our bodies. Jackie's "before" image looks like an average-sized teenage with a substantially thicker head of hair. My "before" image resembles what a physician calls a "healthy" weight. The descriptions "fat, grotesque, cottage cheese thighs" cover the outside of my tracing because "healthy equals fat". When my actual body is traced over my distorted perception I see an alien; my tracing shows a wasted and fragile little girl. Still, Ana, tells me the therapist has made a mistake because the outline is too thin to be mine. I look around at everyone else's outlines the therapist had traced and realize how accurate they are. Still, the eating disorder knows she made me thinner than I am.

The therapist stands over my shoulder and gently asks me to write what I am feeling and I do: Who could ever love someone like me? Someone who was so obsessive with her body that she did not care about anything or anyone else?

I tear down the tracing that day, roll it up, and put it in the corner of my room because it is an outline of the reality I did not want to face.

Disappearing Act

I am not even on the unit a full two weeks before Jackie runs away. The morning starts off like any other: I am woken up by the pale gray bedroom lights and the nurse who has two different colored eyes (right eye green, left one blue). I mumble “good morning” back to her and stretch my wasted right arm out from the sheets so she can take my vitals while lying down. The machine makes a beeping noise like the one a digital scale makes, the alert for me to stand up and have her compare the results. She jots down some numbers on her thick clip-board and wheels the vitals contraption out the door and down the narrow hall. I have not gained weight that day, so I am on restriction. I lounge around the Bubble watching the morning news on the seventeen-inch TV until the carts with our breakfast trays arrive. I look around for Jackie who usually sits next to me and Liz. I strain my eyes to see if anyone wearing a pair of jellybean-pink Sketchers and a paper gown is speed walking down the sterile hallway. The ensuing interruption by Richard stabs my neck. I already know Jill ran away the last time she was here, hopping into the laundry cart and hiding beneath all of the towels and sheets; it reminds me of the musical Annie because Annie does the same stunt. And nothing good comes out of it.

“Jackie? Jackie Bielsonson?”

Worries rise from the rest of the patients, and one of the nurses is frantic because her key to the unit is missing. Jackie is taking her disappearing act to the extreme. Hours go by and wild gossip seeps through conversations at each meal, group therapy, and leisure time until nightfall comes and it's lights out. I wonder if she is still awake and if she has a place to curl up and sleep without freezing to death.

“I bet she doesn't even have much money on her,” Whitney says to a group of patients gossiping about Jackie.

“What the hell was she thinking? No one ever gets away with running away from here. I mean, she has nowhere to go,” Liz says. Even though we do not say it out-loud, we feel betrayed by Jackie. She is the one who helps hold us together, even when she does not have the motivation to care for herself. Concerns for my own selfish comfort tick through my mind:

Who is going to hold hands with us when we get our blood-work done or talk the minutes away with us during meals?

Who is going to help me with my homework during study periods?

What if she loses a ton of weight? She will end up in trouble, but at least she will have gotten even thinner.

The sun goes down and still no sign of Jackie. In the morning, she is hauled back to the unit in the morning. She looks gaunter than the morning before and bows her head, refusing to look anyone in the eyes. From that moment on she is on 24-hour watch. She has a nurse hovering a couple of inches over her shoulders with every step she takes. A nurse sits on a stool watching her while she showers and makes her keep the

bathroom stall door completely open. The humiliation that plasters itself on Jackie's face never recedes.

After a few days of this intense monitoring, she refuses every meal and sits at the table the entire day. I watch her at breakfast placing a napkin over her bacon and ignoring her milk. She does drink the water that comes with each meal. At one point I come up to her and try to urge her to eat, something she would have done my first day there, but she looks away from me and says she is being transferred the next morning to another hospital to get tube-fed so there is no point in consuming calories.

People stand in line to say their farewells to her. Before she is put in an ambulance and moved, she flicks my dangling, blue earring and tells me to keep up my sense of fashion; it is way cooler than being thin. After the goodbyes, we watch her stroll down the hall. She never looks back.

Boney

My parents come visit me in the evenings on the days I gain weight. We try to avoid talking about where I am and play board games at the same table where I eat my meals and take my supplements. We do not talk much, especially about my changing appearance. I used to be a semi-normal girl with a normal life before I transformed into a patient, a case, a file filled with forms covered in numbers and health problems. I feel sorry for my parents for putting them through this, but the anorexia ate my old brain and turned me into an eating disorder. How could I explain to them the love I felt for the solitude that used to cradle my stomach?

Both of my parents are strong, but I do not tell them that I am hesitant to kill Ana; even they do not have enough strength to handle the possibility that she will kill me first. Death sounds so simple and fast. Every day I think about dying. I am too scared to do myself in all at once. Instead, I kill myself gradually so I will not feel as scared. I like when the sun sets early in the winter. Darkness is soothing and tricks me into thinking I have more time to sort out my problems. Darkness covers up cloudy and gray days. Darkness envelops my mind, highlighting everything wrong in life. Ana forms her own deceptive darkness within me. Like heroin, it feels like a heater and a lamp turns on inside of my bloodstream, until the original pain returns to my body and mind with a vengeance; I go from being cradled by my mom, to falling beneath the cracks, everywhere I step. I go to bed early because, when I sleep, I shut my life and the world out of my mind.

My mom visits me more than my dad, since he sometimes works late into the night at his job as a sales representative at Formica Corporation. If Formica had not hired him in February 2004, the new private school I got accepted to, let alone an inpatient hospital stay. He still visits quite often considering how demanding his new job is, but I do not expect his presence like I expect hers. I breathe in the aroma of my mom's sunny blonde hair, her fancy perfume, and then hug her tightly as though it's the last time I'll see her. Other patients comment about how thin my mom is, and I get angry. I love my mom and I hate her at the same time. She has had anorexic habits my whole life, and it is not until I got sick that she started eating healthier. She would make a big

deal out of eating a little bit cup of ice cream: "I'm sacrificing myself," she continued to say even when she tried to get me to eat the same desserts. She is still bony and model-esque, and I do not want to take up more space than she does.

My dad calls her by her nickname: "Boney." I am not annoyed by this until I saw my own body starting to develop into a curvier figure than my own mother's. Mothers are supposed to protect their children. If I got physically bigger, the number on the scale would get higher than hers and I would take up too much room. She would not be able to shield me from the future.

Yet, any idea of a future is desiccated and useless in this place. Eighth grade resumes without me, and I wonder if I will wind up back here in ninth grade too. But there is the sense deep down in me—a part of my old self—knows I can keep working on things that could start to promise a future. I need to get outside so I do not disintegrate into a sad porcelain doll. Outside, life is moving along, offering an alternative that one could live, not merely exist.

Around my eighteenth day on the unit, I stand ten pounds heavier and am prepared to gain another ten. But after group therapy one day, my psychiatrist stops me in the hall and says that my insurance has terminated the covering of my stay; I have to transition to intensive outpatient treatment (three hours a day) and return to school.

There is a metallic taste in my mouth, a typical reaction when I experience shock. I panic. My mom pleads with the insurance company to continue covering my stay. The person handling the situation responds that I am not planning on killing myself so there is no reason for me to be there. My mom says I am still severely underweight and need medical attention.

"You can always take her to the ER," they tell her.

This is not my last time inpatient. Two months after my discharge I relapse, keeping the numbers down just the way Ana tells me to.

Passing A Derelict Building At 242 Marylebone Road

Groundsel patrols the site like a security guard,
its flowers brighter than flashlights.
Attractive enough to freeze would-be trespassers.

Leaves fallen from a nearby plane tree, wrinkled like bat wings,
have started colonising the paving slabs.
Their shadows will screech in the seconds
when you are alone.

I can't tell if the building misses its former occupants,
keeps their dust like a relic. For now, it is just a shell
waiting to be carried on the tides of another sea.

Just as currents of warm sunlight start to stroke it,
incoming clouds flick their tails like a sign.

Sea Fishing With My Father Near Sellafield

After a few minutes, he began
to haul silverware out of the sea.

Half a dozen mackerel with his line,
none with mine. No breaks
on this trip, the crumbling power

station not enough to end years
of silence between us. The lifejacket
I wore, dull as week old Lucozade,

while he hauled more of the sea's silver.
A fisherman caught a red gurnard,
ugly as a Doctor Who prop, and we both
lied politely. *Great catch!*

Another half a dozen mackerel with his line,
none with mine. Someone caught a dab,
round as a dessert plate, while my bucket

heaved with fish. Still, no mackerel
with my line. Not even the Irish Sea
could end years of silence between us.

By the time we returned to port, we were
at opposite ends of the boat - our rods
slumped like rifles, waiting for the signal.

Garratt Lane Old Burial Ground

In the sun, a flotilla
of grounded funeral-grey boats
that might have been pigeons once.

The graves don't know when the tide
will rise. *It's been ages since
the river flooded this far*

the grass bent into compass needles
tell my feet. They always
seem to be pulled back like arrows
lately, keen for a different trajectory.

Cows

Theirs is a life
of innocent nostalgia,
watching clouds pass
like targets on a fairground

shooting gallery. Grass
rarely changes, the rain
still tastes of yesterday.
People, too, remain in stasis.

Faces change but one quality
always remains: How we long
to swap our complicated lives
for one of simplicity.

Our voices drain in dreams,
how we hope they return innocent
as milk.

Sundays

Sunday morning droops
like a pancake lifted out of the pan,
like one of the clouds imitating Dali's
clocks, like the teenage pigeons
on a neighbouring roof unsure of flight.

I wear last night's uneasy sleep
on my eyelids, watch sheep reflections
in the office building opposite
tease me back to bed. My back
stiffens as I stretch, attempt to fetch

coffee while the fridge hums
and shines a disapproving light.
The cooker prepares a glowing brand
while I watch the kitchen turn
into a field filled with nothing but grassy dreams, dried to the point of kindling.

The Great Dane

After saying *Mein Fuhrer*, he took a *Wehrmacht* oath
and chewed on marrow. A battalion of flies
at the *Tiersprachschule* lab were savagely mauled

after flying too close to him. Poppies
grew downwards. He did not think
of the cattle cars, of the ash coloured clouds
pinned to their roofs like little devils
as they left to the camps,

of the thousands of hearts tumbling
out of mouths; choosing, instead, to sleep
and run through shit, roll over and beg
while villages, towns and cities were licked
clean like bone.

A Great Dane was reported to have said Mein Fuhrer during WW2

Funereal

I

Smoke from the allotments
might be papal, funereal.

The procession of crows
scouting my lawn for food

might replace the train
of cars; the wild-flowers bent

towards the ground onlookers
offering respect. The sky

offers no rain but a simple blue
that floods through everything

like light through a skull.

II

The wireframe trees speak
the language of grief. Cats

dare not scratch their bark
for fear of catching a word

that cries and screams. Birds
hop across the grass in search

of some other food, not what
these trees might offer.

III

The ballast of cloud might collapse
on the flats any moment now.

Sleeping neighbours turn to face
them like umbrellas. They wax

and wane with the sunlight trickling
through, every shadow nearby

slinking into the corners. Whatever
started is now finished.

The Figs

The fallen figs on the path
are shrunken cellos. I'm tempted
to split one open and listen
to music that might outdo
the birds making radios
of nearby shrubs and bushes,
might wake the rising shoots.

I hold a fig in my palm
and let its notes take me back
to a Mediterranean coast
with cypress and olive trees
taking in the music of the sea.

I want the music of here,
I say, and fling it away.

Sunday Morning

The garden is a museum of birds
flash-frozen by the morning's frost.
Magpies caught mid-hop. A robin,
almost unreal, on the holly. Blackbirds
pecking at the lawn. I picture them
how Darwin must have seen the fauna
in the Galapagos: something out of myth
though they are familiar. Sunlight
tries tuning itself into the scene but can't
get it right. I wait for everything to pause
and each prop to fall into place. Perhaps
I'll slip away quietly whilst rain rolls in
like a god from the machine, ready to save
everything from the inevitable drama.

(A version of "Figs" was published in *Spillwords*)
("Sunday Morning" previously published in *Literary Yard*)

My Grandfather's Wallet

Italian made. Still reeks of Liguria: ancient villages clinging to the rocky coastline like limpets. The pungent whiff of basil. Tinfoil pans of *focaccia con formaggio*, the melted cheese almost as long as your arm. Turquoise waters. Postcard-perfect Portofino with pastel houses borrowed from strawberry, mango and orange sorbet. Somewhere among this, a man searching for his son lost among the wolves howling through the hills.

Justice Delayed

You have never wrestled Hades
in a microscopic shoebox,
unarmed and unadvised.
It is easier to watch

from a covered verandah,
a cozy perch to look down at men in tattered cloth,
as you sip Cabernet, arms wrapped in silk and diamonds-
ill-gotten gains of twisted vines.

Unhealed wounds enrich you most,
as your wingtips beat a 4/4 tempo
in halls of marble polished
by the ghost janitors whose voices have dried up.

Count your doubloons, your yen,
your fetid stacks of dollars;
prized currency most closely guarded
won't survive rebellion's wind.

Soon, buried under foot,
you will lie entrapped, entombed,
covered by detritus,
an empty retribution offered, far too late.

View From a Hospital Window

The monitor beeps. A buttercup sun
dispenses blessings through reticulated filter
of mournful fenestrated clouds.

Beyond glass, I see the swaying beach grass,
threatening to flee the dunes and tumble
seaward, where adventure beckons in a maroon skiff.

Sing to me again,
“Amazing Grace.”
In your delicate soprano,

I hear a quiver of unshed tears.
I cannot sate your hunger, unsatisfied
by sympathy’s insubstantial appetizer.

Pour me a Dixie cup of water.
Do not let the curtain close.
The world grows dark.

A Long Time Coming

In my swirling antebellum nightmares
I hear the auctioneer shout through his bullhorn:
“Greetings, gentlemen, and welcome
Today we have the world’s finest stock
Fresh and exotic.

Behold these broad, sloping shoulders
thick-sinewed haunches
ridged with muscle
prepared for faithful service
each for his purpose

in silent labor.

This fine specimen will never cry
whether under hottest sun
or lash of sharpened leather.
There is something here for one and all

as sure as gentleman and ladies
Have needs that must be met.”
Two centuries beyond,
Though shackles rust
And chains have broken,

Still they gawk at Black and Brownness
as at a snorting Brahma bull.

Know this:

Rebellion's thunderhead
will soon be heard.

Sure hands will reap
the produce of equality
from cotton fields made fertile
by gallons of forefathers' blood

Unfettered bodies sing in unison,
raise every prideful voice aloud.
Silent obedience lies mute;
Riot gear and dogs won't stop the truth.

A Conversation_

Reverberations of an empty throat
Carry on the wind wishing to be heard

Who says innocents should not be heard?
So treacherous the shoals of cosmic justice

Children meet me in the court of cosmic justice
A thousand wraiths that grasp at sweetest nectar

I gorge myself upon the sweetest nectar
That sits upon your lips awaiting orders

Soldiers never smile awaiting orders
Denying evil deeds with thoughts and prayers

Of what use are hollow thoughts and prayers
Under absent God's arches and keystones?

Make light my arches and my keystones,
With your sweet waters fill my hollow throat.

Letter to a Clouded Mind

Howl at evening's evanescent shadows:
Flashing forms shift for your eyes only.

Intangible but solid, cold vapors blow
into a hollow, endless mineshaft.

Who lives here, behind your shuttered windows
that conjure spirits from beyond the sky?

It is no blessing, your anamorphic sense
that broadcasts memories so out of order

Do you crave crystal pools of consciousness,
sparkling clear, pristine and unreflective?

Sitting five feet away, I see you leave
though your body remains frozen in its chair

Bright sunlight shines upon our common earth
as you retreat I sorrow for our loss.

DAY 121 AND STILL NO TOMATOES

Day 121 and still no tomatoes.
It all comes down to
soil and weather, labor,
time, and the grace of God.
Labor is under your control,
grace is not, and time,
they say, is relative.
Penelope waited 20 years
for her man to come home,
Job 80 years for his release
from torment, Sleeping Beauty
a century to wake ,and we all
still wait for the Messiah.
You're not stuck with a wait
for your ship to come in,
for pigs to fly, or for Godot.
So be patient; water,
watch, believe, with life
and tomatoes there's still hope.

THE EMIGRANT

Grandpa was the first man in my family
to wear a dress, shaving his beard,
slipping into drag to escape
Russia and a war no one remembers.
He sailed to America, owned a store,
spent weekends at Brighton Beach
swapping dirty jokes in Yiddish
with the other naked old men in the solarium,
and nights watching the great Antonino Rocca
wrestle Nature Boy and the Amazing Zuma.
Rocca starred in a DC comic
taking on the Man of Steel but Grandpa
did not believe in Superman,
was not a scholar and never read it.
He stood by the halakha,
the old Jehovah laws and ritual,
but Grandpa could not pay
the Orthodox temple fees.
He settled for a Conservative
shul he could afford,
with up-to-date notions
and a rabbi fond of wrestling
with Toynbee's theories
on the Jewish problem,
then came home to tell his wife
"He talked about books again."

A QUARTER'S WORTH OF POETRY

BUY MY BOOK!

Ten bucks for 40 poems,
just a quarter a poem
what else can you do
with a quarter?

Get a gumball.

Make change for a dollar.

Scratch a lottery ticket.

Use it as a screwdriver,
or pay your rent in quarters
just for the hell of it.

So pleasure yourself
with some poems

before time and inflation
blow them up.

They last longer than sex,
take less energy,
and don't hurt.

IN THE CARDIO WARD

The nurse who plants her wires
on my chest has seen too many
broken hearts to offer comfort.
The probe snoops behind my ribs,
chuckling, searching for death.
C'mon bod, help me out here,
lie a little..... Nope! The gizmo
echoes into the hole
where my heart should be
and yells for help,
spewing secrets. Years
of stress without love,
work without joy, lies,
and the occasional war
ground the heart right out of me.
The rest goes on out of spite
and habit. World, you know me now,
a hollow man, aching
to mete out blow for blow,
pain for pain, starting
with the heartless nurse
yanking out her damned electrodes
from my fallen flesh.

THE EYE OF THE STORM

(for Anne Sexton)

Shut the door. Block the pipe.
Turn the key and breathe.
It takes a while to die.
There was, perhaps, a wisp
of time just long enough
for her to find peace
in the eye of the storm
that blew her life away.
Now only the words remain,
hard and bony, stripped
of flesh, hollow eyes
and bared teeth looming up
for us to marvel at; for a moment
we too escape and are eternal
till we close the book,
come up for air,
alive, breathless, safe.

THE ANARCHIST EXILES AT GENEVA

Snow is falling again; it
drops out of the sky for no apparent reason,
the clouds dissolve, the snow
goes quietly about its business

and buries us. We never
hear it coming. It is too much
to understand, something to endure
in silence, our last bravery.

We have no martyrs now
no one to mourn for;
we melt away slowly
beneath the stones with the snow.

There are many debates.
We read too much, and smoke.
The old men reminisce and die,
their eyes fixed on the mountains.

PHOTOTROPE

Daybreak. Emptiness
beside me, rumped
and cold. Every day
begins in darkness.
Every night in dreams
I open up to you
too late and wilt
and wake up twisted,
a broken flower
searching in vain
for the morning sun.

GRANDMOTHER TEACHES THE CHILD ABOUT DEATH

Her mind fell like a leaf,
fading from red to gold
to wrinkled brown rot
eating up her breaking stem
until it cracked, and the wind
grew curious. A child listens
to her rasping breath. No one
taught him dying but grown-ups
whisper in the dark and weep,
he sees, he wants to know,
and aims his ripening wit
at grandma, to blow away
the wall between her life and his
and penetrate the mystery.
This is not death, says the child,
there are no angels here,
no stink, not even silence,
and turns away
to the noisy comfort
of gunshots on the television.

Adoption

My other kids and I moaned an Irish dirge from
our hotel beds, nearly a hundred miles
from the crematorium, our

shock and grief salved only seconds in
the sharing. Driving north from Virginia,
her boxed cinders still hot in my hand,

no autopsy, we sewed her sweet body up tightly from
town gossip, how and why she died at 39, newly in
love, long in recovery. I lit December's endless

nights like a desperate Druid, sweeps of white
lights reflecting inside and out, tree shaped
alters decked with sassy and soulful pictures

of her glowing, piles of M&M's
bidding her to come to us these
crass Christmas days.

Earth's circling the sun nearly a year gone now,
garden turned with her ashes and fresh bulbs.
I pick the plum tomatoes lined up like packs of teen

girls huddled together on the ground, place them
on my counter, unblemished and safe
from rot, where the black kitten who's

come suddenly to live here minces tenderly
around the vegetables, adopting us for sure,
craving my touch, my talk, jumping into

my gait while I walk, her white paws
tiny boots, holding my gaze with
love and knowledge, my girl returning.

Birds of Philadelphia

More than half the world's sapiens live in cities. Concrete a common groundcover, we forgo private gardens, birdfeeders, overhyped lawns for human culture--theatre, art, street and nightlife.

On our best days, the Delaware River calls us to look up, ghostly white gulls gliding toward Jersey, or down, along the Schuylkill, fluffy, Dijon-yellow goslings tottering underfoot. Street sparrows brawling over pizza crust or taking dust baths serve our daily biodiversity. No one moves to a city to birdwatch.

That was the Aughts and Teens. When dinner parties reconvened, we entertained one another with tales of what we'd survived, or not, questions epochal and Biblical. Were the Spotted Lanternflies a sign, hitchhiking across the counties a few years back, sucking on sap that morphed to deadly tree mold? We mused on where our post-plague signifiers might emerge. Bird stories fluttered back and forth across the table:

Temple's 90.1 sang praise for thousands
of robins wrestling worms in the wet earth
across campus; a Merion teacher
saw scores of Cooper hawks
gripping tree branches along 76 East;
a South Philly plumber claimed a conclave
of cardinals nesting beneath roof decks,
flashes of red through the air like
flamenco-dancing fathers. Finches
by the dozens painted the stone walls
at Eastern State with yellow motion
singing among the thistles. The hostess
dishes up a final tale: *Back from Hot Yoga,
I stopped short as two white doves huddled
on my window ledge, their cries a love language,
dirge, the seventh seal?*

Winged creatures our secular angels,
trillions of Brood X cicadas surfaced
in days, tymbal organs thrumming from
Georgia to New York and westward,
eating, mating, aerating the soil,
their dead bodies dusted into nitrogen,
their prophecy: to reverse
our damned dominion.

Are We There Yet?

Straight from Glacier's Road
to the Sun, limestone tinting
stream pools turquoise, snow
capping mountain peaks in July,
the drive to North Dakota features
a ten hour study in high plains grass

the color of jaundice, sky endless
sheets of white smoke, five miles of train
cargo cars a relief from the unnerving
blankness of big sky country, even a
gas station glamorous with a place to pee,
Nutty Buddies and ten types of beef jerky,

a stack of T-shirt's promising that if we
lack deep love for the red, white and
blue, the wearer would happily pack our
suitcase for us.

When we arrive at Theodore Roosevelt
National Forest, the trees were gone,
only acres of colorless Prairie Dog
Villages dusting the ground, pups popping
up and down, Whack-A-Mole waving their
front paws and singing high and strained,

like the Star Spangled Banner's upper notes
on *the land of the free*, so high who can reach
them, so we bend our heads, take a knee.

Come on Down

Before the Philly day wraps us in a damp,
heavy blanket of heat, I carry the sparrows'
bag to our stoop, even when it rains. They're

already lined up, then I sling white bread cubes
on to our alley, the brown birds tussling each other,
little street urchins itching for their share. I know

I look forward to this time as much as they do,
the block still dark and hushed this early, just me,
my hot coffee and those pure bird souls scrounging

for crumbs--what my own life has been, me and my
sweet, simple son, God love him, living together here
these forty-five years, his Disability, my cleaning work,

lately Social and Medicare, enough for scraping by.
I try to do all that gratitude stuff magazines preach,
I do, along with that peace breathing, and to be glad

for others' gifts, like my little sister and her husband's
cruises each February 'cept during the COVID, then
her showing off pictures of raw bars and umbrella drinks

saying "Rose, I am bringing you with us next year, and
I mean it!" Well, even if, who would have an eye out
for Anthony, as I must, day in and out, Mass, chores,

some socializing--away from kids. Well, today I am
grateful for the 50th anniversary of *The Price is Right!*
Lordie, I have had my fun with that show all these

decades, curling up at 15 with my mom on our sofa
in this very house, loving on dreamy Bob Barker,
now it's me and my boy watching. I know most

contestants just go home with a year's supply of
Bounty, or whatever Drew Carey and them decide
you're worth. Still, I have my dreams, a little filling

for my bare life. I often fall asleep to thoughts of Tony and me traveling to Television City, California, us getting the price just right.

FOOD DIS/EASE DECALOGUE

1. Anthropocene

They stole beets
from our field.

There's scent of
blood in the barn
where someone
hung my prize
hog upside down
on a hook with
its neck slit.

Whole village
angry, spitting
at me (widow
hasn't left her
house in years
only one who's
willing to talk).

Mayor's men
walk into house
uninvited then
threaten family
must go along
with fearsome
Nazi screed.

But new hay
gives us hope.

2. cheery chill minimalists cough blood on our children's hands while swearing aren't talkin' tuberculosis

suicides
down

worldwide

up now in the [un]United States

but

where opioid addiction
hoarding
anorexia
run rampant

oy ain't it quaint the way we twee peeps alternate purging with consumption, beer and Coronavirus?

3. Sing Sing Sing-Song

Once college student
word blizzard from
Ossining New York
max security prison

banked impressions,
sedimentary layers'
black ink font collage
on white parchment

ecstatic descriptions
which do not speak
of money or status
much as our donuts

hunger is a drive-by
habit like homeless
peeps among shopping
carts that were parked

tiptop freeway ledge:
whoopee while some
get so young -- before
I push one to be gone.

4. As (Un)United States Squabble

Throughput again and again,
sooo many hungry people are
told, *Chinese citizens must be
willing plus able to work 9-9
6-7 days every week to keep
these jobs or replacements
from other side of mountains
shall come from countryslopes
to take your place in factories*

that ?too ambitious young adults
used to enduring near-poverty
scraping livings there on dirt-poor
farms where they always slave hard
soas to impress their police bosses
who eventually may grant permission
then supply necessary papers to leave
little kids with grandparents, travel
into hustly-bustly metropolis slums.

<https://realfoodchannel.com/humor-dominos-tests-limits-of-what-humans-will-eat/>

5. Oxymoronic War Games

Parlor trick curiosity
not a Jew but Jew-ish,
untenable paradox,
torments of hot closet's
glacial indifference,
Darwin once remarked
Lamarck's epigenetic
plasticity to be "veritable
rubbish" but fetuses
as well as their mothers
traumatized during
World War II's inchoate
Dutch Hunger Winter
argue absolute otherwise.

6. “DARK” CONTINENT? [2] Feel free to use subsection/s.

i. Serious African Rift Business haiku [3]

Like rodeo clowns,
young lions taunt bulls — but stay
just away from horns.

Springtime water pools
usually full but now so
wafer-thin – summer

empty – climate change
makes this a fluid (no pun
intended) process.

ii. No Garden Of Eden

-- thanks to film *Fig Tree*, 2018

Mama and sisters and aunties
hide me
to flee being kidnapped
then conscripted on wrong side
of country's civil war.

The stewardess who make\$ a killing
smuggling us
out of Ethiopia's famine
says, *Everybody wants to be a Jew
these days since Israel with accept you.*

While exhorting not to be a crybaby
about having to shroud myself
top of forest's remote fig tree
'til night, Mother whimpers,
I wish I could put Eli back in my womb.

Even past dark, soldiers descend
like tornadoes
to seize every boy in their paths
then open black gates
other side river of doom.

No men left to protect our family,
Grandma tries to rally another grandson complaining,
This place pillories young men,
with her *No long faces,*
we'll prevail over dictator's watery evil-eyed lizards.

Which rallies next door's older farm-boy to boast,
I'll drop shade
on 'em with some mouse farts
instead of running away like rats
inside inescapable hellish nightmares.

7. Kids' Lives Matter: One Toddler Grandson's Modest Proposal

Coachie, when that virus goes away again
plus I can come in Bubbe's house again
without us getting the sickness

will you make rackaroni plenty of cheese
plus pour 3 big glasses strawberry kefir
since we always got so awful hungry

and then please put out new boxes of robots
on messy office's torn leather chair for
me to hold too not just stare at after

I am driven back home to Mommy before
reading a dinosaur book next morning on
FaceTime together with my tiny brother?

8. Ponce De Leon's "Hormesis"* haiku

Every day try to
be hungry and out of breath:
stay fit plus get thin.

*Harvard anti -aging molecular biologist, George Church's term quoted in "Can We Live Longer, Stay Younger?"; by Adam Gopnick, 20May2019 *New Yorker*.

9. LBJ Died From Several Broken Hearts haiku [5]

Pitched battling for
our American stomachs
well as hearts and minds

a famous pizza
chain decides to litigate
past fast food wars etc...

Apparently we
humans willingly swallow
almost anything

-- including hooie
about how invading Huế
in central Viet Nam

would prevent Commie
Domino Theories -- no less
actual black tiles.

10. Second Arrow Buddhism

Pale or not so pale faces,
no big difference,

pain's inevitable
but suffering more optional.

Lifted up then cast down,
our human race's

never won or done
-- ending that fabrication

of cravings even beyond
five basic senses

when there aren't
enough real hungry ghosts

come/go like Michelangelo
with deathlessness --

good night rage rage
against dying of the light.

So much country at night, and the city

debarking a 12 hour
bus ride. september –
chicago – we're under
a bridge. the light is all orange
and grey the line of a pencil;
a lingering moisture-
stained brickwork of dirt
under shadow and never
made dry. I am tired –
slept some, but not much
on the bus – an overnight trip
from toronto. but to arrive
seems so sudden
and violent this 5am
morning – a cracked open
egg and the long lines
of driving. I've seen so
much country in purple at night
and the city a life's
punctuation. I'm tired –
there's things going on though.
and then suddenly joy
strikes – chicago! I've read
so much algren! and I know
how to get to my hostel from here.
and a bottle of wine in my jacket
12 hours, and cigarettes going
around from the rest
of the passengers. everyone stands
about under the overpass
and watches this road-
corner terminal, looking like characters
in violent short stories – things about poverty
and what that might lead to - that somebody else
writes, and not me. someone
who knows more of that
than of buses and how it feels
to get off them and how else things feel.

No plan but an instinct

an editor, reading
what's sent in an email,
takes shears, makes
suggestions, non-
negotiable cuts.
says perhaps to remove
just a couple of words
from one line, or a couple
of stanzas. if I do this,
she tells me, it'll go out
in august, at the point
when all leaves start
to burn in a wild-
fire orange. I love it – this self-
conscious topiary. words
all a garden – poems
wild bushes which grow
and which point into light
with no obvious plan
beyond growing
though straightforward
instinct, and no kind
of aesthetic intent.

What we lose isn't soul

what we lose isn't soul –
just some tendon, some colour
of bonemeal. chapters can close
and the cobblestone too. they can tear
out our markets and fill in the space
with hotels and with cheap
student housing. dublin an eggshell
in cracking to vultures –
a collection of buildings
all made out of granite
cement. waiting for buses
each morning along
on the quayside – it's cold
in october. i'm watching a spider
between two black railings;
a swing, pulling web from its body.
its body, a weight and a counter-
weight. the fatness of thorax:
an apple – a pendulum. naturally
knowing geometry.
and that is the soul
of these fenceposts – not iron.
this thing between steel,
leaving something about,
which allows it to live
in its patterns.

My life without you

breaking the habit of six months of not
having cigarettes. you've gone
out to dinner. there's nothing to do
in the flat. I wander our rooms
like a spider on green
bedroom carpet. clumsily open
a beer in the kitchen and sweep up the glass
from the tile before anyone's
hurt. my life without you
now is something like canned
syrup peaches. not alive,
or so thought of, though sweeter
than things that have grown
from trees. I could walk out our door
and go anywhere – and you wouldn't
know it for hours. I could get in the car
and start driving – could go
where I want if I want. I am a hawk
turning circles of earth
like the clock hand which turns
round a falconer. you are the falconer –
I feel freedom, my wings and a fulcrum,
which is also your talon-
proof glove.

Nobility

swans float across the liffey – violent,
in their own way, as the battle-grey
of navy ships, moving with a silken
silent smoothness out of dock.
the stillness of their feather
is a warning and nobility – and what else
is nobility, except fear
in all who see it of reprisal.
people throw them bread
from quaysides, and apparently
that's bad for them. who cares
though – how they move
across the battle-grey
of rivers. the way purpose
is imprinted in the feathers
on their bodies, like muscle
on an undiscovered champion.
drunk and walking home
I throw them bits of torn tissue –
they charge, they eat and curse me
and move on to what they want.
I do not care – I am too weak
to care for power and its beauty.

Such fantastic last nights!

bookshops closing. pubs
closing. music pubs and pubs
where they don't allow
music. hotels going up
like fungus from wood
on a mountain gone rotten.
the city with bones
and with no marrow –
no flavour, some structure
and mummified shape.
and they just announced chapters
is closing down too.
and next year they're closing
the cobblestone, northside

of smithfield – you walk
over streets like a beetle now,
past stones in a newly
paved garden. you touch
things which stood there since
england ran ireland and also the 90s
when you were a child;
when everything built
was immortal. bricks get
put in places and loose
all their context, it's misery.
but the closing-down sales
have such bargains! and the pubs,
such fantastic last nights!

A little hint of gunpowder

this evening the air
smells of leaves and a little
of gunpowder. you are
out for dinner. I'm at home –
I am standing on our balcony
having a cigarette. and you don't
like me doing this, but you
aren't here, and the city
is night and light
rain and spread out
like a mattress and a turned-
over jewellery box.
shines wetly, shines darkly
and occasionally lit
by a firework and feeling
of you coming home.
of you smelling
my clothes and you telling me
you don't like me doing that
because you like loving me,
and don't want me to die
before you do.

Bespeak

So much they don't know about
cosmogony.

There was no
Big Bang, but
a slow expansion
of a hot something
from nothing.

So much I don't know
about this world
except my life
is no whimper.

It is a continuum
of the something
my ancestors made from nothing.

When it is time for my exit
from this realm
to the next, let
these verses I leave
behind
brawl/bawl/bluster/
sing

Nonesuch

Going gray feels like missing
my best lover.
Tried turning this newly tawny
hair black.

Black be so pretty, leaning
against brown skin.

Black henna
Black semi-permanent/permanent:
Glimmered black.
Until

Sweat. Showers. Shampoo.
Sable black
onyx black
leaked into my pillows,
gurgled down the drain.

Love, longing for beauty
never fades.
As this tawny brown
fades with streaks of silver

let sunlight breaking
through trees,

moonlight
be spotlight,
as grass
tickles the
bottoms of my feet,

as I tickle tulips
until they open,
caress the rounds of me
with fallen petals.

Let wind
through the trees be
my music,
when I skylark until sunrise.

A Bronx Kind of Love

Only he was ready for the adventure of me.
One wrong look, an acrylic-tipped finger is in your face.
You might expect a heart as hard as slate
in a woman like me, who walks blocks of sidewalk
until the canvas of my sneakers disintegrates,
who delves into books
hums to the strum of a guitar
falls asleep on the subway to the music
of steel wheels running over tracks
and the opening and closing of doors.
Ask him, he will tell you, you'll find
a woman too sweet to eat lamb--
avocado and spinach on my salad, please--
who awakens to the cardinal's song.
Summertime, we dodged bees buzzing by tulips
sat under the cover of dogwoods
drew hopscotch boards on the ground with chalk
when we had it, with rocks if not,
rode bicycles around the front of our stoop
until we could see our shadows,
bounced between KISS-FM and WBLS
until the peak of the full moon.

Reunion

Oh, my creamy patron,
I never fish for them,
so waste no time
with compliments.
Soothe the pain
of your absence
before my muscle memories
fade.
My sky.
Let us not wait for the full moon's peak.
Tower over me like a bridge.
Tower over me like a castle.
Dog dog dog dog dog dog
Rush at me like a river until
my lips be crimson.
Until I be emerald sparkle.
Merge me in the fortress of your embrace.
Sweet as herbal tea with honey.

Joan Didion was Right

Jessica Crowley

I've been mourning my son since before he was born.

From the moment *they* told me about his heart I've struggled against mortality, clutched with my motherly hands his life (head against my chest) and pushed the possibility of death away with tenacious force.

Our love has appeared, and remained, so profoundly fragile that I've kept vigil for years, anxiously awaiting Death—searching the light and the dark—ready to stop Him before my boy can be stolen from me. If Death and I ever meet (in the circumstances in which I write about here), I'll scream—*fuck you*—scoop up my son and run like hell away.

While I was still suffering the effects of Botox, I was massaged by an Asian woman whose name tag read *Amy*, though I doubt very much it was her real name, she spoke no English, more likely a name she'd be told to take on while working in America.

Earlier in the morning I tried to alleviate the pain myself, contorting my body into pigeon and lotus and dolphin, staying in each for the appropriate yin yoga time, My kids, four and six, squeaked and giggled under the dining room table. My husband laid on the couch, hungover from a night of drinking; his blue eyes, bloodshot red, and his position, fetal. We argued about whether I should keep the appointment. "Just go, already," he said, "I'll be fine." "No, it's fine; I don't need to," I replied, trying to be the selfless wife. (Besides, I disliked the icy air that blew against the house and much preferred to stay at home where my mask was off and my insides split out like overcooked egg noodles). Yet,, I heard that damn voice in my head—*you know it will help—go!* and so I went, calling the salon from the car to preemptively apologize for my tardiness.

Outside all was quiet and seemingly desolate for a Saturday. It was January in New York, freezing winds and cloudy skies; red-cheeked women, scarves flying in the frosty wind, rushed from their parked cars into the salon where they chose colors: reds, pinks, French white tips, and sat with their pants rolled above their knees and their feet submerged in warm, bubbling water, or else in swivel chairs with their shirt sleeves rolled to the elbow and hands outstretched, ready for maintenance. I slowly walked to the staircase in the back and up to the second floor where the scents of lavender and eucalyptus wafted through the humidified air. I sat on the camel-colored leather couch in the waiting area and acknowledged my surprise—this place had real spa characteristics: essential oils, lotions, linens, electric candles, and, of course, several Buddha figures. Amy told me to go into "Room Ten" and "take clothes off."

The room itself intimated the typical Western approach to holistic healing: small, rectangular, with a massage table appropriately placed in the center and along the walls shelves upon which more oil dispensers and lotions and linens were placed. The appliance that warms the washcloths sat like a fat cat in one corner and a chair like a

poodle in another. On one wall a large, brass mirror hung, and along the other wall, perpendicular, a window adorned with blackout curtains. A massage table made up like a military bed with a soft white cotton blanket tightly tucked under the padding; the buzz of a small fan; a consciously silent room. I, invariably, decided to keep my underwear on and discarded the rest of my clothing one piece at a time: thumbs tugged at the waistband of my black leggings (the teacher's dress pant) and dragged them downward toward the cesarean section scar where I pulled the shelf of fatty tissue upward in an attempt to smooth the skin; plain, white tee-shirt yanked over my head (carelessly knocking the crown-like messy bun loose); I unclipped my nude bra (long gone are days of hot pink and black lace) and laid it on top of the other garments like a Jenga piece.

I pulled at the blanket until I was able to squirm underneath, sticking my face through the oval hole; my shoulders rolled down to rest against the table and my arms like baseball bats laid unmoving next to my body. The sounds of water dripped onto the belly of a small, gray Buddha. During those restless, anticipatory minutes I observed my thoughts as a prisoner came to know his guards, waiting each day to see who would show up.

"Okay, you ready now?" she asked.

"Yep."

"Hello? You ready?"

"Yes, sorry. You can come in," I mumbled, a bit flustered.

Her breath, heavy, labored, and the sound of lotion rubbing in her hands. She cleared her throat. My body braced for her touch. *Remember, enjoy it.* Along the vertebrae and into the muscles near the base of my skull, she pushed. I listened apprehensively to the tendons and hair crunch. She played the back of my neck as if it were a piano, and I began, sloth-like, to relax into her rhythm. "So tight," she commented. "Yeah," I whispered, feeling mildly validated. I'd been in pain for several months, afraid that the muscular tension would never end; and my heart scrambled and floundered at even the briefest thought: *Aidan* (even his name), *heart* (just that word), *future* (the tense that once ignited fireballs of excitement, now dark clouds of thunderstorms), *life* (a concept with a fairy-tale sense of doom), and when I gave into any of these intellectual sparks, the muscles in my upper body tightened and hardened.

She worked, loosening the knots in my neck; I thought of my neurologist, scrutinizing our one-time interaction and subsequent downfall into a life of physical pain. He recently treated my migraine condition with twenty or so Botox injections in the back of the neck and trapezoids, claiming, as many do, that the substance helps to ease strained muscles (which are thought to be one cause of migraines). He even (he made a special note to tell me) injected my face (forehead, sides of eyes) as a "bonus." The day after the visit I was fine, walking with my family (nuclear and extended) through a renaissance fair in upstate New York where we drank ale and threw axes, but the following morning when I bent my head downward to spit out toothpaste, I felt a tremendous weakness and pain in the back of the neck; and from that point on, it took a great

deal of effort to hold my head (I hadn't thought it heavy before this) throughout the day, using muscles that weren't intended for such laborious responsibility, and this was how they remained for much longer than the three months the Botox was supposed to last.

I've spent an unreasonable amount of time placing blame: *him* for not telling me the potential side effects; *me* for not even thinking to ask. I found myself like the girl in the *Exorcist*: "Why you do this to me, Dimmy? Why Dimmy? Why?"

The palm of her hand rhythmically kneaded my right trapezoid. My arm hung like an elephant trunk, loose and swaying, and I wondered if her fingertips could actually fracture my rocky neck: hard, dense, sometimes with a sharp edge and sometimes with no edge at all. "This, no good," she mused, rolling the shoulder clockwise, then counter-clockwise, and I heard the "tsk" sound of parental disapproval. *Tell me about it*, I thought.

"That's not common," another doctor (I was not able to speak or even see the original physician again since he, apparently, left for Israel and no one seemed to know when he was returning) said when I reported the pain. "Injection sites can feel tender, but this is only temporary." I described, in detail, the pain, almost hysterically; he remained incredulous, feeling for himself, the lumps and knots in my neck. "This isn't from Botox, must be stress. Are you under any kind of extreme stress lately?" he persisted in his defense. *Yes!* I thought, *but that's not it*, an image of my son appeared like heat lightning in my mind. Then began a marathon of muscle relaxers, anti-inflammatories, and steroids, none of which did a damn thing to unwind my muscles that seemed to be in a permanent state of tension.

Awareness of the breath; eyes closed. I tried to clear my mind of any thought, but my mind bucked and neighed: *Is John okay? What are the kids doing? I shouldn't have come. How much is this again? A mental sigh. God, please let this help.*

Amy drove her thumb into and behind my right shoulder blade. *Push harder!* I imagined an elbow or a hammer. As the minutes, achy and awkward, passed, the knots began to warm under her tough touch. The fascia—tight and taut from years of panic—began to give way, releasing the heat and the fury that lives there as a result of a heart in need of mending.

My thoughts, random and simultaneous illusory in their connection and premeditation, returned to John and the kids. Ava was four at the time and I thought about her owl-like screech; certainly, our son, Aidan, then six, wouldn't stop talking on account of his father's raging headache. My day was filled with his chatter: "Mom, did you know that beluga whales are the friendliest sea animals?" "Hey mom, do you think dad will be home this weekend?" "Mom I was going to let it slide, but you said I could get a new bey blade." *He's never going to get them to be still and quiet*, I thought, grinning as I pictured the sitcom scene in my mind. (I learned later that day that almost immediately after I left, he threw up in the upstairs bathroom while the kids chanted outside the door, "Daddy, Daddy, Daddy, Daddy, Daaddee," banging their little fists with annoying speed and volume.)

Buzz—I became instantly rigid when I heard my phone vibrate. *Check it. No, it's fine. But, what if? Faster breath. It's fine. No—check it! It'll be okay. But? If it goes off again, I'll check it.* Amy's fingers pressed into my hip socket (where thoughts have built a home deep within the joints like termites) and to my utter embarrassment, I moaned. "Too hard?" she asked. "No, no. I like it hard," I said, mortified. She forcefully pushed the meaty buttock up and down; I sang *thong, thong, thong, thong, thong* in my mind.

The burn in the hamstring. The pressure in the calf. The sting in the heel, the ache in the arch. The pop in the toes.

A phrase I recently read—*thoughts have wings*—popped up in my mind like a Facebook advertisement (seemingly from nowhere, and yet so very intimate) and though I didn't know from where I read it, I knew that my thoughts were *not* winged.

My thoughts were: thick, gnarled, fibrous, tangled roots, like the Aspen trees of Pando—a forest of thought from a single root system. They twisted around organs like predatory snakes, they entangled my soul in webs like the ones that decorate the basement steps, they spread like squid ink through my veins, they created a tautness in the body like my husband's fishing line in Lake George (he reels and reels until the fish is eye level, flapping like an injured bird in the sky). These rooted thoughts scraped and clawed—*give us attention*—they screamed, poking at tear ducts with wispy memories and droplets of future fears. They barked and burrowed in between shoulder blades like the groundhog who saw its shadow. Amy vigorously rubbed the left trapezoid (made more "tsk" sounds); her fingers dug deep into the muscle, "relax," she told me.

Inhale (I counted *one*). Exhale (2). Inhale (3). Exhale (4). Inhale (*food shopping*). Exhale (*laundry, clean bathrooms*). Inhale (4). Exhale (5). Inhale (*oh, that feels good*). Exhale (*what should I do for dinner?*). Inhale (*is John working tonight?*). Exhale (7). Inhale (*Aidan missed karate, damn it*). Exhale (*grade periods two and five study guides, what am I going to do about the seniors?*). Inhale (*ouch!*).

She's found the mother of all knots, hiding behind the left shoulder blade; she leaned into it the burn—*never stop*—an image of my daughter (blonde hair, green eyes, long legs, toothless smile) appeared. But as soon as I warmed to her, she vanished; kidnapped by dread.

Instead: a memory—my son lying in a hospital bed—immediately, instinctively—*will he be okay?*

Tears, thought themselves invited, burst through the front door of my eyelids, swelling with presence until excess fell, fat drops, onto the floor below my face. I stared at them in shock—not that I had cried; I cried all the Goddamn time—but for fear she might have seen and then we'd have to interact, verbally. These things can't be spoken aloud.

Amy left the knot still intact (burrowed perhaps too deep in the muscle) and continued fingering my spine. When she leaned her weight into her hands which laid upon my lower back, I exhaled like a popped balloon. *Don't take him.* Knuckles into the hip socket. *Stop it—don't do this.* I shook my head, cleared my throat, and blinked my

eyes, shedding hot tears that pooled together in a swell like a bloated river.

Save me Mommy, save me! (his small, scared voice).

Her hands (thank God for her hands) brought me back. “Roll over,” she told me, holding the blanket up like a curtain. Careful to stay hidden, I quickly, awkwardly, leaned onto my left shoulder, wiggling like a slug covered in salt (a childhood game) until I was on my back. She pulled the blanket over my breasts, smoothed it under my armpits, and moved to stand belly to crown at the head of the table. She pulled my right leg from under the blanket, bent the knee, held the foot, and pushed the leg back, stretching the groin.

This never was supposed to happen, I thought, Joan Didion was right.

Often—amidst the hum of daily activities—the memories of past surgeries commingled with future fears, and my thoughts, for the most part, muddied with the same indeterminate anxiety bled through into my sleeping hours: chest tubes, his body covered with bandages, blood and needles seemingly everywhere and endless nurses and doctors to whom I begged for information I knew they couldn’t, perhaps wouldn’t, provide. I had a lot of vivid and nightmarish fantasies, tidal waves of fear where I fell to my knees (sometimes while cooking dinner) hardly knowing from where the emotions came and when they would subside, but, nevertheless, hid on the left side of the refrigerator so that if one of my children walked in they wouldn’t find their mother collapsed, a puddle of trauma of the floor. Time and space mixed together like scrambled eggs, cheddar cheese, pieces of ham and onion, but instead of a satisfying western omelet, I was left starving, craving hope like an addict in acute stages of withdrawal.

It was in these moments (clenching my heart) I saw my son at every age, and at the sight of him I was paralyzed with fearful love. It was him, a few freckles (painted with the world’s smallest paintbrush) on his cheeks right below his almond eyes; it was him with his wide smile (two chompers; top row) innocent and full of life, it was him with thick auburn hair and a funny sideways glance, it was him not a memory, but a presence, a presence that filled the whole room, my whole world: a force all his own, a living miracle.

The fury and despair washed over (over and over) revealing the simple truth: *I cannot save him.*

Amy used a warm, moist washcloth (eucalyptus, peppermint) to wipe the residue of lotion off my chest, throat, and neck. I breathed into the freedom of no-thought for one second. Amy (maybe she knew my struggle) stroked my hair like a mother before she bent down to my ear, whispered, “All done;” I nodded, gently, slowly, and responded a heartfelt, for now I could feel my heart, “thank you.”

“Take your time getting dressed and drink water today,” she ordered as she closed the door behind her. I laid there for a moment, thinking—*how does a mother accept that she cannot save her child?* I innately rejected the fact that I cannot (through sheer determination and fierce love) keep my son alive. And although my daughter’s health was (is) real at this moment, I knew (know) that control over the trajectory of her life is just as illusory.

I knew this, but I didn't feel this.

To—*let them go*—felt (feels) as unnatural as setting myself on fire. He was born with congenital heart disease and if I was reborn as—*mother*— the moment I heard his cry, then I, too, was born with congenital heart disease, believing with every cell that if I cannot mend my son's heart, mine shall also stay broken.

Aidan, otherwise healthy, without doubt happy, and most importantly, full of life, doesn't know (perhaps in some ways he does, he's very intuitive and empathic) I've continued to fear losing him. I've learned, ten years into this journey, that once I descend down this staircase of grief I won't stop until I've crashed into the darkness of what I imagine life will be like if I lose my son, if God or the Universe or Whatever chooses to take him.

Amy gone, I sat up, a bit dizzy, and am face to face with my reflection. I reminded myself: he is not yours to keep, but what good does that do me? For, it feels as though he is more mine than I am. To pull myself out of this terrifying and debilitating stream of consciousness before it is too late, I relocated my awareness to the tingle in my hands and feet. I slowly breathed, expanding my belly with oxygen until I felt calmer, more in control.

Please God heal my son. (Another desperate prayer, just in case).

Like a rainstorm in Florida, the tears subsided as suddenly as they appeared and I sniffled the clear snot back into my nose with determination to keep going. *I love them.* I nodded in acknowledgment; reconciled in the declarative—*this was never supposed to happen.*

I fear his death because I know it will be the end of me, too. Not that I can't live with—out him, only that I won't want to. To be the recipient of his love is to be the sun's only flower, is to be the dark room in which he flickers, is to be the night sky in which he shines, is to be the stem upon which he blooms, is to be the ceramic bowl in which sustenance is poured, is to be the only ear that hears the ocean, is to be in harmony—is to be at peace—is to be honored by the Universe.

I didn't know grief felt like fear, I didn't know the panic inside could try to destroy life on the outside. I didn't know how good his love would feel, I didn't know—purpose—until, *him.*

I fear his death for it will mean death for us all, my little girl with blondish, light brown hair, stringy like mine, green cat eyes, a mind that doesn't stop. What will become of her if he leaves us behind? Will I be enough? I can't imagine the answer is, *yes.*

Will her father hug her tight enough to stop the pain? How will I fill the black hole inside her?

Will he come to us in our dreams?

I fear his death for it will be the death of my marriage. For how can I stay married if I am, also, dead? What will be left in me to love? if— I hate God and the Universe, myself, if I hate my husband and the doctors and life, if I hate the beach without his sand-castles and swimming sand crabs, if I hate the food on the table, if I hate white snow and twinkling lights, if I hate green and automonal leaves, if I hate words, periods,

commas, semicolons, if I hate his empty room. Can I walk down the stairs on Christmas morning, robe tied tight, coffee in a mug that reads “Heart Warrior,” and feel happiness while feeling grief? Could I even take the first step? Wrap the presents?

Can her artwork cover the entire fridge? Should I save every piece of his just in case? My husband ‘took on a lover’—it’s not funny, but it is. He always said (Hemingway-like), “if I ever cheat, I’ll tell you, ‘*I’ve decided to take on a lover,*’” but he didn’t tell me. *I’m sorry you feel guilty, I never want to see you sad* (she wrote). If my marriage ends, if he dies before me, my daughter—what will happen to her? I know why we cheat. All of us in the world. We cheat because in the moments, in the arms of another, with no strings attached, strings of past disappointments and future fears, we are most present. We are escaping the past and the future, looking for the present. The other person is simply the vehicle with which we use to get there—presence—freedom.

I fear his death for I know I want to live only in a world in which I feel his love. I fear hers, too. I think of her—safe, but I know this is ill-usury, and she’s fragile, too. I think of her—in relation to him, peanut butter and jelly, I hear them bickering and giggling, her long legs, bones and skin, his satisfying smile and gleaming brown eyes, her pug nose and petal-soft neck, his sideway glance and pleas, “Mommy save me. Save me, Mommy!”

I’m trying my love, I’m trying.

If I didn’t have her, love her, need to do right by her, want her, think about her, pray for her, embrace, kiss her, smell her, I would die. If he leaves me before I can leave him, if I didn’t have her, I would want to die, I would die. There’s no part of me (if it weren’t for her) that wants to stay here.

I never got a moment to love them free from sorrow.

I wonder how it would’ve felt to love him without the barking, biting dog of fear, without the maelstrom, without constant overcast, without monsters lurking in the shadows, without dry air from vents in intensive care units with blue, hospital curtains, without open-heart surgeries, without fentanyl, without chest tubes filled with blood and fluid, without the fog of mortality ever present.

I wonder—would our love be quite so intense, raw and real? Would we click into place as easily if I hadn’t calmed him (you my baby boy) after Rapid Response, if our heartsbeatingasone—if we hadn’t laid together so many nights, sharing that hospital bed? How can I convince her (I love you, baby girl) just as much, only, yes, it’s different.

Sometimes, I fear she’s more broken-hearted; she’s been a witness. Observed. Stood on the out-side of the ambulance, reached with both arms out to me, grasping—

I fear I cannot save you. I fear I cannot save her, either. I’m sorry. Language is not enough.



In certain people's lives there comes a span of time, some years in all, in which everything they thought they knew is shattered. When the twilights turn dark and ominous. This period of fragmentation does not occur when life is steady and ordinary as it were, but rather when a transition, usually, but not always, unwanted and unanticipated, comes quite instantly. A change of seasons then occurs. You find yourself swimming in the dark colors of fear. You think of the twilight, somehow you thought the end of day would never come, but now the dark descends, and you think, *this will won't do, you must find the light*, and find the light you shall. I suppose, like anyone, I might have had any number of stories, but now there is no other. This is the only story I will ever be able to tell because it is the only one that truly matters.

by Liana Sakelliou
(translator: Don Schofield)

Short History of a Deluge

The river with turtles and lichen
filled with rubble last winter,
carried it all down to the sea,
where it clogged up the seaside with debris.
The ravine continued to fill
with rocks and sediment,
all that rubble uprooting huge pines,
dumping them into the sea as well.
With all that silt and detritus,
the sea changed color.

We didn't notice
till it flooded the asphalt,
surrounded our houses with crabs,
and covered the road with fish.

"If only a sirocco would come,
even a small one,"
some said, and others,
"Will the sea ever recover?"

Coat of Arms

For Nellie Kyriakaki and Dimitris Grivas

My father loved me a lot.

They took him into the Navy because
of our family's standing.

His aunts lived on Hydra.

One was engaged to some guy
who'd bring them chests filled with gifts from Russia.

When I'd visit, they'd give me costume jewelry—
gold rings, a cross made from mother-of-pearl.

They had land in Kokkinia, so many lemon trees
they'd rent them out to nearby farmers.

In '33, when my mother died from heart failure,

Father had to send me to the French nuns
at Joan of Arc School, on Filonos in Piraeus.

I ate my meals there, but lived with my cousins
in a house he rented on Karaiskou, near the Municipal Theater.

He said to my aunt, "I want you to love her
for me. She won't be a burden,"

and whispered in my ear,

"If by chance you end up living alone,
your aunt will look after you."

Nina took me everywhere.

She'd come to Piraeus just to see me.

She'd talk about a lot of things,
encouraged me to take up dancing—

tango, foxtrot, waltz. All the officers
with their striped uniforms danced them.

Some evenings she'd hum me to sleep:

*"Oh mon Dieu de Paris, donne-moi un mari
pour passer avec lui."*

My dreams at night were always good.

After a year or so we moved to Athens—

into a big house with a yard facing the road.

I started to go to a different school, Saint Joseph's.

When I grew up, I wound up using my French
in my husband's retail store.

I loved the language.

Watery Miracle

In the Bogazi Strait
the sea was calm,
but in one place
water spewed up
like a fountain
in slow motion,
bubbles gushing.

At first, she was here on the surface,
later, farther down,
later still, she disappeared completely.

Suddenly she revealed herself
upright on the prow of his boat.

He took a while to return.
As he docked,
he was whispering to himself,
The boat smells of incense.

**Monsoon
Nong Son
1967**

Brent MacKinnon

“Can you hear me, Mac? Nod your head. Good.”

The sound of rain. A waterfall slid off the roof of my hut and poured down over cobblestones running to the Thu Bon River raging below. My fever burned hot and the medic from Echo Company shook his head. His distant voice fighting with the sound of the storm outside. “Mac, I can’t get the temperature down. Only thing for that in my kit is aspirin. You gotta drink as much water as you can.”

I said nothing. I couldn’t.

“We need medivac but a no-fly order is in effect until this storm lets up. I gotta get back up the hill before dark or they might shoot me comin’ in. Hate to leave you here alone.”

Behind him, four or five of my students stood against a wall.

The security team leader stuck his helmet through the broken window. “Gotta go, Doc. Captain says now.”

“See you tomorrow Mac.” I felt someone pat my shoulder.

Motion. Whispers. Silence.

Cracks and patches in the ceiling plaster floated and danced above me in beautiful patterns sketching a map of my long journey from Los Angeles to Nong Son.

“We help you, Tai.” An elder pulled off my T-shirt and fatigue pants. Naked, dizzy, near delirium, I could only lay exhausted, unable even to wonder if my shorts were clean.

Over the river, thunder boomed. Two of the younger men stood me up. “We help, Tai.”

I leaned on them as they pulled and hugged me through the front doorway and into the monsoon. And there we stood. Under a torrent of water, two five-foot human crutches supporting a six-foot white ghost.

In just a few minutes, my temperature began to drop. Clarity returned and in a flash of lightening, I saw the smiling faces of my two saviors staring up at me. After fifteen minutes of Vietnamese hydrotherapy, we returned to my room and old Quang dried me off before the three of them laid me back down. He covered me with a dry sheet, tucked me in, and gently wiped my face.

He smiled. “Drink chai. Good.” Hot tea stank of rotten roots and dark earth. He folded his arms across his chest and stood like a statue, a midget gunnery sergeant in pajamas.

Quang turned down the lamp, gathered spectators, and left the room. Yet I felt the presence of another, softer energy somewhere nearby. Gradually the ceiling stopped

crawling and I began to dream....

...An elderly woman with white hair sat cross-legged at the foot of my bed. In front of her, a charcoal brazier supported and heated a pot of tea. The dancing red glow of coals cast her shadow on the wall as she chanted and rubbed a string of wooden beads back and forth between wrinkled and ancient hands. I slept the sleep of the Dead.

A streak of sunlight splashed across the ceiling. Our monsoon had gone as quickly as it came and taken my fever with it. I felt renewed, born again, lighter in body and spirit. The after-taste of terrible tea from the night before filled my mouth, accompanied by a raging hunger.

Quang leaned against a post in the open doorway, smiling. He nodded in the direction of the far corner and I twisted around to look. The old woman from my dream smiled back as she sliced vegetables, making Pho soup.

Something strange and wonderful was happening to me. The tough combat veteran, now a helpless patient ten thousand miles from home, won over by the hearts and minds of peasants in a remote Vietnamese village.

As a Marine, I was no good after that. The thought of shooting someone, anyone, belonged to a Self who no longer existed. I had been recruited and initiated into the human race. I now knew the real mission: To do as much good for the village in what time I may have left to live.

Something had transformed me from within; charged with purpose and meaning, I was full of energy. My days became fully alive and my body vibrated with urgency and purpose. I didn't want to go to sleep. I knew this new life, this new feeling could end at any moment. I didn't want to miss anything!

As the war around us intensified, I ate and slept in students' homes as they rotated me around like a circuit-riding preacher. Returning to my own room in the mornings, footprints left evidence of midnight visitors. -We never spoke of the danger. And in the Vietnamese way, only a gentle squeeze of my hand while inviting me to dinner sent the darker message that guerillas might visit that same night.

And so began the love affair of my life. Whatever intelligence, creativity, and strength I was born with was called forth, valued, and embraced by those around me. Giving and receiving became one. My naïve suburban soul recognized something very precious and fragile -- filled every moment. It couldn't last.....

The war continued around us, and after three months I became a casualty, not of war but of hospitality. Each day students manipulated and competed to bring me home for a meal. While flattered, I knew that my performance as the new oddity in town was much in demand. My repertoire of excruciating tonal accents, a few card tricks, songs, and amusing cultural body language, entertained and distracted families. After many meals of mystery cuisine, I began to lose weight, energy, and the ability to concentrate. River fever ended my stay and Doc of Echo Company called in a medivac.

On the flight to Tripler Hospital in Honolulu, I waited to exit the plane last because of brown spots on the seat of my pants. I stared out of the window down as troops waved

and yelled to ecstatic relatives waiting behind a temporary chain link fence.

In those days a portable stairway rolled up against the exit door and passengers departed onto the runway. Combat soldiers rushed to happy reunions waiting just a few yards away. Pow! An engine backfired on one of the luggage trucks under our plane.

Half of the disembarking troops dove on the asphalt to take cover and in some sort of schizophrenic, In-between Land, hands continued to wave to loved ones while bodies lay face down on the tarmac face. Relatives froze like statues, and for one brief moment, caught a glimpse of the price paid by sons and fathers.

There are those who give little of the much which they have – and they give it for recognition and their hidden desire makes their gifts unwholesome.

And there are those who have little and give it all.

These are the believers in life and the bounty of life, and their coffer is never empty.

There are those who give with joy, and that joy is their reward.

And there are those who give with pain, and that pain is their baptism.

And there are those who give and know not pain in giving, nor do they seek joy, nor give with mindfulness of virtue;

They give as in yonder valley the myrtle breathes its fragrance into space.

Through the hands of such as these God speaks, and from behind their eyes He smiles upon the earth.

– Kahlil Gibran, *The Prophet*

CONTRIBUTORS

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Infinity Gatlin is creative writing graduate of The University of Tennessee at Chattanooga. Her poetry has previously been published in *Shards*, an online journal through Glass Mountain. Her current lifetime has been made special by her brother Siddhartha's music, graveyards under the night sky, and smutty fanfiction. She lives in a dream with her wonderful partner, a noisy old lady in the form of a cat, a demon in the form of a cat, and too many (not enough) books."

David Appelbaum has worked in the university and in publishing, and is an author who specializes in the work of writing. His most recent books include notes on water: [an aqueous phenomenology](#) [Monkfish, 2018] and [Portugese Sailor Boy](#) [Black Spring, 2020].

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Claire Scott is an award winning poet who has received multiple Pushcart Prize nominations. Her work has appeared in the *Atlanta Review*, *Bellevue Literary Review*, *New Ohio Review*, *Enizagam* and *Healing Muse* among others. Claire is the author of *Waiting to be Called and Until I Couldn't*. She is the co-author of [Unfolding in Light: A Sisters' Journey in Photography and Poetry](#).

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Bett Butler's poetry and short fiction have appeared in *Weave, Feathertale, Voices de la Luna, Amp, and Fabula Argentea*. An award-winning songwriter and jazz musician (International Songwriting Competition, Independent Music Awards), she co-owns Mandala Music Production in San Antonio, Texas, where she and her spouse produce music and spoken word licensed for HBO, Discovery Channel, and more.

Nate Maxson is a writer and performance artist. The author of several collections of poetry including the forthcoming Maps To The Vanishing which is coming out in 2022 from Finishing Line Press. He lives in Albuquerque, New Mexico.

Andrew Rader Hanson I am a writer and poet living in Miami, FL, and I have been accepted by *Clackamas Review, Broadkill Review, Bookend Review, Ekphrastic Review, Birmingham Arts*, and more.

Zaqary Fekete has worked as a teacher in Moldova, Romania, China, and Cambodia. They currently live and work in Minnesota. They have previously been published in *Shady Grove Literary, SIC Journal, and 101 Words*.

Peter Austin Many of my poems have already appeared in the USA (*Atlanta Review, Blue Unicorn, Raintown Review, Fourteen by Fourteen, Barefoot Muse, lambs & Trochees, Philadelphia Review, Better than Starbucks, The Hypertexts*, etc.), Canada, the UK, Australia, New Zealand, South Africa and Israel. Of my second collection, X J Kennedy (winner of the Robert Frost award for lifetime contribution to poetry) said, 'I Am Janus is a controlled explosion of strong and colorful stuff, and it's a joy to read a book in which every poem is splendidly well-made and worth reading.'

Lois Marie Harrod's Spat will be published in June 2021. Her 17th collection Woman won the 2020 Blue Lyra Prize. Nightmares of the Minor Poet appeared in June 2016 (Five Oaks); her chapbook And She Took the Heart, in January 2016; Fragments from the Biography of Nemeis and How Marlene Mae Longs for Truth (Dancing Girl Press) appeared in 2013. A Dodge poet, she is published in literary journals and online ezines from *American Poetry Review* to *Zone 3*. Online link: www.loismarieharrod.org

Millicent Borges Accardi, a Portuguese-American writer, is the author of three poetry collections, including Only More So (Salmon Poetry, Ireland) and the upcoming Through a Grainy Landscape. Among her awards are fellowships from the National Endowment for the Arts, Fulbright, CantoMundo, Creative Capacity, the California Arts Council, Foundation for Contemporary Arts (Covid grant), Yaddo, Fundação Luso-Americana (Portugal), and the Barbara Deming Foundation, "Money for Women." Through a Grainy Landscape has been nominated for a 2022 PEN award.

Gregory Davis is sixty-seven years old. He is retired from a major aluminum company in Spokane Valley Wa, where he spent forty-three years as a grunt on the factory floor. He has been writing for five years. His work has been published in the *Scarlet Leaf Review* and *Ginosko Literary Journal*.

James Croal Jackson (he/him) is a Filipino-American poet working in film production. He has two chapbooks, Our Past Leaves (Kelsay Books, 2021) and The Frayed Edge of Memory (Writing Knights Press, 2017). He edits *The Mantle Poetry* from Pittsburgh, PA. (jamescroaljackson.com)

Jesse DeLong's debut manuscript, The Amateur Scientist's Notebook, was published by Baobab Press. Other work has appeared in *Colorado Review*, *Mid-American Review*, *American Letters and Commentary*, *Indiana Review*, *Painted Bride Quarterly*, and *Typo*, as well as the anthologies *Best New Poets 2011* and *Feast: Poetry and Recipes for a Full Seating at Dinner*. His chapbooks, Tearings, and Other Poems and Earthwards, were released by Curly Head Press. He Tweets [@jessemdelong](https://twitter.com/jessemdelong)

Sean McCarthy I have published stories in *The Hopkins Review*, *The Sewanee Review*, *Glimmer Train*, *Water~Stone Review*, *Fifth Wednesday Journal*, *South Dakota Review*, *Bayou*, and *Hayden's Ferry Review* among others. My story "Better Man"--originally published in *December Magazine*--was cited in The Best American Short Stories 2015, and I am a 2016 recipient of the Massachusetts Cultural Council's Artist Fellowship in Fiction Award.

Joe Smolen I took a B.A. English at U of W. My post-graduate work is just fiction. Recently, I pubbed short fictions at *Fleas on the Dog* (#6) and *Friday Flash Fiction*(as L.W. Smolen).

Sean Howard is the author of five collections of poetry in Canada, most recently Unrecovered: 9/11 Poems (Gaspereau Press, 2021). His poetry has been widely published in Canada, the UK, US, and elsewhere, and featured in The Best of the Best Canadian Poetry in English (Tightrope Books, 2017).

Cordelia Hanemann is currently a practicing writer and artist in Raleigh, NC. A retired professor of English at Campbell University, she has published in numerous journals including *Atlanta Review*, *Connecticut River Review*, *Dual Coast Magazine*, and *Laurel*

Review; anthologies, The Well-Versed Reader, Heron Clan and Kakalak and in her own chapbook, Through a Glass Darkly. Her poem, "photo-op" was a finalist in the Poems of Resistance competition at Sable Press and her poem "Cezanne's Apples" was nominated for a Pushcart. Recently she featured poet for *Negative Capability Press* and *The Alexandria Quarterly*, she is now working on a first novel, about her roots in Cajun Louisiana.

Francis Fernandes grew up in the US and Canada. He studied in Montréal and has a degree in Mathematics. Since spring 2020, his writing has appeared in over twenty literary journals, including *Saint-Katherine Review*, *Modern Poetry Quarterly Review*, *Defenestration Magazine*, *Front Porch Journal*, *Etched Onyx Magazine*. He lives in Frankfurt, Germany, where he writes and teaches.

Dana Teen Lomax is a poet, filmmaker, performance artist, activist, educator, and mom. She is the author of several poetry books and an avid creator of film-poems. Her last editorial project, *Kindergarde: Avant-garde Poems, Plays, Stories, and Songs for Children* (Black Radish Books), was awarded a San Francisco Creative Work Fund Grant and won the 2014 Johns Hopkins University Press Lion and Unicorn Prize for Excellence in North American Poetry. With Jennifer Firestone, she edited *Letters to Poets: Conversations About Poetics, Politics, and Community* (Saturnalia), which Cornel West called a "courageous and visionary book." Dana's work has been nominated for a Pushcart Prize, named among the Guerilla Girls' favorite poetry books, and received grants and awards. She served as the Human Rights and Equity Chair for her teachers' union and lives in northern California with her family. Dana's work can be found at danateenlomax.com.

Sean Howard is the author of five collections of poetry in Canada, most recently Unrecovered: 9/11 Poems (Gaspereau Press, 2021). His poetry has been widely published in Canada, the UK, US, and elsewhere, and featured in The Best of the Best Canadian Poetry in English (Tightrope Books, 2017).

Jeremy Nathan Marks lives in Canada. Recent work appears in *Jewish Literary Journal*, *Chiron Review*, *Bewildering Stories*, *New Verse News*, *Dissident Voice*, *Anti-Heroic Chic*, *Boog City*, *365 Tomorrows*, and *The Last Leaves*. His short fiction, "Sturgeon Sea", won a Mariner Award from *Bewildering Stories* in 2020.

Rich Ives has received awards from the National Endowment for the Arts, Artist Trust, Seattle Arts Commission and the Coordinating Council of Literary Magazines for his work in poetry, fiction, editing, publishing, translation and photography. He is the 2009 winner of the Francis Locke Poetry Award from *Bitter Oleander* and the 2012 winner of the Thin Air Creative Nonfiction Award. His books include Light from a Small Brown Bird (Bitter Oleander Press--poetry), Sharpen (The Newer York—fiction chapbook), The Balloon Containing the Water Containing the Narrative Begins Leaking (What Books—stories), Old Man Walking Home After Dark (Cyberwit--poetry), Dubious

Inquiries into Magnificent Inadequacies (Cyberwit--poetry), A Servant's Map of the Body (Cyberwit—stories), Incomprehensibly Well-adjusted Missing Persons of Interest (Cyberwit—stories), and Tunneling to the Moon (Silenced Press--stories).

Esta Fischer My short stories have been published in numerous print journals and e-zines including *Imitation Fruit*, *Front Range Review*, and *Coe Review*. My A la Russe murder mystery series and my recently published The Good Fortune Bakers of Bayside Avenue are available on Amazon, Barnes & Noble and other bookselling venues. I received my MA in Creative Writing from Boston University.

Francis Fernandes grew up in the US and Canada. He studied in Montréal and has a degree in Mathematics. Since spring 2020, his writing has appeared in over twenty literary journals, including *Saint-Katherine Review*, *Modern Poetry Quarterly Review*, *Defenestration Magazine*, *Front Porch Journal*, *Etched Onyx Magazine*. He lives in Frankfurt, Germany, where he writes and teaches.

Clara Roberts is a graduate from the MA in Writing Program at Johns Hopkins. A Best of the Net nominee, her nonfiction and poetry have been published in *Entropy Magazine*, *Idle Ink*, *Heartwood Literary Magazine*, *Portland Metrozine*, *Door is A Jar Magazine*, *Journal of Erato*, *Trampset*, and other venues. She lives in Baltimore where she finds material to write about every day. Twitter: [@BurroughsTie](#)

Christian Ward is a UK-based writer who can be recently found in *Wild Greens*, *Discretionary Love* and *Stone Poetry Journal*. Future poems will be appearing in *Dreich*, *Uppagus* and *BlueHouse Journal*. He was recently shortlisted for the 2021 Canterbury Poet of the Year Competition and the 2021 Plough Prize.

Mukund Gnanadesikan is a psychiatrist, novelist, and poet who lives in Northern California. His fiction debut, Errors of Omission: A novel, was released in November of 2020. Recent poems have been featured in *Riverbed Review*, *Cordite Poetry Review*, *Grand Little Things*, *Sledgehammer Lit*, and *Bluepepper*, among others.

Paul Bernstein began writing poetry regularly when he was in his 50s. Since then his work has appeared frequently in a variety of journals, and his collection What the Owls Know was published by Kelsay Books in 2019. Paul currently lives in Ann Arbor, Michigan.

VA Smith lives in Fairmount, Philadelphia, her adopted city, where she reads and writes, hikes and bikes, serves as a home chef/caterer and interior design wanna' be, and loves on her family and friends. VA has published in *Review*, *The Southern Quarterly*, *Southern Review*, *Pure Slush's Growing Up*, *Uppagus*. Yes, *Poetry*, *Corvus Review* and forthcoming in *Verdad*, *Silkworm*, *Parkinson's Poetry*, *Quartet*, *Evening Street Review*, and *West Trade Review*. Her book, Biking Through The Stone Age, will be published by Kelsay Press in 2022.

Gerard Sarnat won San Francisco Poetry's 2020 Contest, the Poetry in the Arts First Place Award plus the Dorfman Prize, and has been nominated for handfults of 2021 and previous Pushcarts plus Best of the Net Awards. Gerry is widely published including in *Hong Kong Review*, *Tokyo Poetry Journal*, *Buddhist Poetry Review*, *Gargoyle*, *Main Street Rag*, *New Delta Review*, *Arkansas Review*, *Hamilton-Stone Review*, *Northampton Review*, *New Haven Poetry Institute*, *Texas Review*, *Vonnegut Journal*, *Brooklyn Review*, *San Francisco Magazine*, *Monterey Poetry Review*, *The Los Angeles Review*, and *The New York Times* as well as by Harvard, Stanford, Dartmouth, Penn, Chicago and Columbia presses. He's authored the collections Homeless Chronicles, Disputes, 17s, Melting the Ice King. Gerry is a physician who's built and staffed clinics for the marginalized as well as a Stanford professor and healthcare CEO. Currently he is devoting energy/ resources to deal with climate justice, and serves on Climate Action Now's board. Gerry's been married since 1969 with three kids plus six grandsons, and is looking forward to potential future granddaughters.

D S Maolalai I'm a graduate of English Literature from Trinity College in Dublin and recently returned there after four years abroad in the UK and Canada. I have been writing poetry and short fiction for the past five or six years with some success. My writing has appeared in such publications as *4'33'*, *Strange Bounce and Bong is Bard*, *Down in the Dirt Magazine*, *Out of Ours*, *The Eunoia Review*, *Kerouac's Dog*, *More Said Than Done*, *Star Tips*, *Myths Magazine*, *Ariadne's Thread*, *The Belleville Park Pages*, *Killing the Angel* and *Unrorean Broadsheet*, by whom I was twice nominated for the Pushcart Prize. I have also had my work published in two collections; Love is Breaking Plates in the Garden and Sad Havoc Among the Birds.

Carla M. Cherry is a veteran English teacher. Her poetry has appeared in publications such as *Anderbo*, *Eunoia Review*, *Random Sample Review*, *MemoryHouse*, *Bop Dead City*, *Anti-Heroin Chic*, *433*, *The Racket* and *Raising Mothers*. Carla is studying for her M.F.A. in Creative Writing at the City College of New York. She has written five books of poetry; her latest is Stardust and Skin (iiPublishing 2020).

Jessica Crowley I've been published a few times in smaller literary journals. Most recently, I won "honorable mention" in the memoir genre of the *Writer's Digest* writing competition.

Liana Sakelliou has published 18 books of poetry, criticism and translation in Greece, the USA and France. Her poems have been translated into several languages and have been published in a number of anthologies and international journals. She teaches American literature, specializing in contemporary poetry, and creative writing in the Department of English Language and Literature of the University of Athens. The recipient of grants from the Fulbright Foundation, the Department of Hellenic Studies of Princeton University, the University of Coimbra (Portugal) and the British Council, Ms. Sakelliou is a member of the Greek Writers' Association Coordinating Committee and a

short story judge in the European Union Prize for Literature.

Don Schofield (Liana Sakelliou's translator) has been living and writing in Greece since 1980. A citizen of both his homeland and his adopted country, he has published several poetry collections, the most recent of which are The Flow of Wonder (2018) and In Lands Imagination Favors (2014), as well as an anthology of American poets in Greece and translations of contemporary Greek poets. He is a recipient of the Allen Ginsberg Award (US), the John D. Criticos Prize (UK) and a Stanley J. Seeger Writer-in-Residence fellowship at Princeton University. His first book, Approximately Paradise, was a finalist for the Walt Whitman Award, and his translations have been nominated for a Pushcart Prize and the Greek National Translation Award. Currently he lives in both Athens and Thessaloniki.

Brent MacKinnon began his teaching career living alone in a Vietnamese village as liaison while serving as a Marine interpreter. After two tours with the Peace Corps he returned to graduate school to study linguistics. He has published six books, worked in many third world cultures, happily immersed in the natural world. Here in the States he developed programs for immigrant and low-income communities. Recently, Mac taught memoir with incarcerated veterans and facilitated well being workshops for traumatized first responders. Currently, he instructs a poetry group with senior citizens.