



ginosko

Ginosko Literary Journal #29
Winter 2022-2023
GinoskoLiteraryJournal.com
PO Box 246
Fairfax, CA 94978

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Est. 2002

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Cover art: "Lost Prophet", artist unknown

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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

When I'm writing, I am trying to find out who I am, who we are, what we're capable of, how we feel, how we lose and stand up, and go on from darkness into darkness. I'm trying for that. But I'm also trying for the language. I'm trying to see how it can really sound. I really love language. I love it for what it does for us, how it allows us to explain the pain and the glory, the nuances and the delicacies of our existence.

— Maya Angelou

CONTENTS

Flight	8
Nikki Boss	
Rock and Water, Sand and Bone	9
Robert Savino Oventile	
the lights of maury island	10
Christine A. Brooks	
<i>Diffract</i>	19
A Kaiser	
A Verbal Shanty	22
Ian Jackson	
Celeste	23
Mehreen Ahmed	
The Art of Falling	25
Dian Parker	
Saturnalia	29
Fractals and Delineations	30
Prismatic	31
Walk before Dinner	32
Old Couple	33
Jeneva Stone	
This Is a Moment of Suffering	34
Linda C. Wisniewski	
What I Brought With Me	36
Jeffrey Wald	
Peripatetic	48
Loquacity	48
Frank Lloyd Wright	49
Philip Kobylarz	
Dreamlandia	50
Jim Daniels	
Bird, Beast & Flesh	52
David Mohan	
Surrender	54
Rimma Kranet	
desiderium	57
Every Dancing Flame	61
Molly Nichol	

Billy at the Foodbank	66	
Dispute	67	
The End of the World, Pending	68	
Heed	69	
Mercedes Lawry		
Falling	70	
One Room	71	
A Love Poem	72	
The Silent Longing	73	
The Sparrow Dance	74	
Jeddie Sophronius		
A Light For Us	75	
Matthew Berg		
Rihanna's Debauchery	76	
Paul Chuks		
The Bird	84	
Ivey Buffenmye		
Putting Billy Barnett Back Together	85	
Colored Night, Buckeye Lake Amusement Park, 1965	86	
Self-portrait as the House on Comanche Drive	87	
Roy Bentley		
Before Impermanence	88	
Long Ago	89	
Queens, NY, 1972	90	
The Slap	92	
The Rule of Dew & Tiny Parachutes	93	
What a New Refrigerator Once Meant	94	
Understory	96	
Cow Tongue	98	
Cloudburst	99	
Lana Hechtman Ayers		
SAILBOAT	101	
Jarrett Mazza		
A Girl in a Purple Dress	106	
Dmitry Blizniuk		
<i>The Poet Stairs</i>	108	
<i>Planting the Solstice Stake</i>	111	
<i>Sissy Cryptodira</i>	116	
David M Rubin		

New York, Friday, 2 AM, 1941	119
Andre M____, 1790	120
Jacob von _____, 1768	122
Hidden Observatory	125
In Madison	127
Archives	129
Equestrienne	131
Tillage	133
Independence Day	135
Jesse Wolfe	
Coyote Woman	138
Laura Holt	
The Big Thing	141
Gabriel Garofano	
fruited plain	156
the morning you cried	158
xinjiang	160
athens and sparta	161
one year	164
what smoke can do	166
club	168
Livio Farallo	
The Teacher	172
Florina Enache	
I Want to Dance for You	177
Fog	178
Shower Tempest	179
Taiji	180
Desire	181
Divinity	182
Strangers	183
Ark	184
Jesus' Bride	185
Xueyan	

CONTRIBUTORS

Flight

Nikki Boss

The inn is crowded and it takes too long to get outside, where tears can be erased with my palms before they matter. Men pinch and grab at me as I walk through the room. Each step I take is a syllable, the lament and moan of customer's names. Prostitution: the patron saint in my homeless existence.

I make it to a field behind the inn, alone with the full moon offering solace until footsteps hit my ears. I am afraid and alone in the night.

"Mary." His voice creates pause. My name has become unfamiliar to my ears; they call me Magdalene. They also call me whore.

I do not know this man before me. Some of the villagers call him Messiah in mockery, but not all. I cannot answer him, because my voice will suffocate beneath the weight of each man I have lain with.

He offers his hand, and I wonder.

"Walk with me, Mary. Follow." His voice is a request, gentle.

I give him my hand, and we walk together without looking back. My sins are named. We stop and watch as each one grows wings, and then we clap when they take flight.

Rock and Water, Sand and Bone

Robert Savino Oventile

Waves ground the stone, which wonder stepped inland, where a palm cradles the cobble like a phone displaying a full moon. Or, grasping the quite oblate spheroid at rest in the streambed, a hand lifted it from the sand into everyday use. The sun shone regardless.

After a rain, the sand gave up a ring of bone, industrially sawn, a trace of the El Dorado Inn. Fifty-three years ago, a flood unmoored and sunk the steakhouse to the clunks and thuds of boulders the water made jump and roll.

Small seeds fill a small basket baking under the cloudless blue. Sides of beef crowd a walk-in freezer. Mouths water regardless. Living on lives on, the Earth circling and spinning. Yet the adjacent silences remain distinct in their contours.

With steady rhythm, a hand slides the cobble in a shallow gray basin of stone (an oval about three hands by five), grinding small seeds into fine flour, though there's a moment of delay when the hand ends and begins each circular pass.

With steady rhythm, a hand slides the tray of a gray machine (inside, two brisk wheels circulate a loop of toothed metal ribbon), cutting a hind shank into round steaks (*ossobuco*), though with each linear pass, there's a moment of delay when blade hits bone.

the lights of maury island

Christine A. Brooks

She was alone.

Mostly she didn't mind it though. Not only did she not mind it, in many ways, she had grown used to it and most days she even liked it. Today was different. It was New Year's Eve and as far back as she could remember, she couldn't think of a time that she was alone on this night. It was normally a day of hellos and goodbyes and of wanting and hoping for any small miracle that would remind people that anything was possible. Even, peace on Earth. Even, peace for her. It was a day and night that even if she chose to spend alone, friends and family were only a text away, waiting to send celebratory texts in return. This year she knew that texts would not come at midnight and as she watched the year drain away minute by minute, she remained focused on the clock in the corner of her small living room.

Tick. Tock.

As the cold Pacific Northwest rain pelted her coffee, she stared off from her small deck across Puget Sound at the lights that twinkled as people she did not know lived lives she was not a part of. Still, those lights made her feel less alone, so she slipped her father's thick blue cotton sweater over her Gore-tex raincoat and allowed the mushy snow-like rain to drip down her rosy cheeks as she watched the shimmering darkness, for life.

She pulled the too-long for her sleeves over her cold hands and remembered his face when he opened the large box from LL Bean. The one wrapped in shiny gold paper with a red velvet bow. It was challenging to find a sweater in his size, 2XL tall, and one that didn't itch, so they both smiled when he held it up against his belly proclaiming, "It's perfect!" And it was. Everything was, right up until it wasn't.

Before the trashmen could even haul away that empty box and without him ever having a chance to wear his Christmas sweater, he died.

Now, less than a year later, she watched lights on an island she had never been to, instead of the ones on a Christmas tree. The cottage she rented 3,000 miles away from her home was too small for a tree and it was not the year to celebrate anything anyway, so she stacked Christmas cards by his memory candle and plugged in a small string of white lights around her front door, and hoped it was enough.

All she wanted to do was pull her gray and white striped comforter over her head and sleep, but every time she closed her eyes she heard his voice, "I'm done. Tell the doctor. *Please.*"

So, she did what he requested just as they discussed the night before, and like the lights across the Sound, when the morning came, his too was blinked out and even though no one said the words, she knew his death was her fault. She did not keep him safe. She did not keep him home and she did not argue when he asked to come off the machines that were forcing oxygen into his tired lungs. She failed him and Covid was watching.

She found it not only difficult to sleep but also difficult to stay awake and often she wasn't sure which world she was in. What she did know was that living in his house among the memories and reminders was not healthy for her so seven months after his death she left the small white house on the noisy street that she cursed and moved as far away as she could. She knew she could not escape herself, but she hoped that the miles would help her forget all the tiny details that kept what happened, sharp and crisp in her mind.

Even the moon who had always been her friend, could not help her, so it slipped behind the thick gray curtain, leaving her more alone than she had ever been and more alone than she ever thought possible.

"Why Seattle?" he asked, swiveling around in her bright red computer chair, one of the only pieces of furniture left in her father's house. "Is it just for the water?"

He was looking at her now, moving from the chair to her arms and for a few moments she forgot his question and why it was that she was leaving at all.

It was easy to forget because mostly she didn't know. There were a hundred small reasons to go as far away as possible and one big reason she wanted to leave, but as for why Seattle, she just didn't know exactly, but she suspected it was the water pulling her, as it had so many times in the past.

It rained more in her small City in the month of July than it ever had on record, and while most people griped about it, she felt peaceful. It was that rain that directed her to the Pacific Northwest. The rain gave her permission to just sit and be and while it had not been something she excelled at in the past, now, during these heavy months of grief and solitude, it brought her the silence she needed to listen for her voice.

She wanted to say yes, but the yes went so much deeper than the three letters could explain, so she hugged him harder. Her head on his heart his hands around her waist she just breathed with him. In and out. She wanted to say something profound, something he would remember forever. Some one thing that would make him fall in love with her right then and there. She wanted that. She wanted him so she searched her brain for just the right words.

"I'll miss your face," she whispered, rubbing his back because she was still her awkward self and her moving 3,000 miles away couldn't change that. He didn't laugh at her silly words though. Instead, he breathed in deeper pressing his chest against hers, and said nothing as their bodies exhaled together. He was one of the hundred reasons she was leaving and they both knew it.

Two days later she packed up her red Mini Cooper with her surfboard, dog, and a small suitcase of clothes and left the east coast for a beach cottage she saw advertised on Craig's list. Over the past few weeks, she looked at dozens of rental properties but when she saw this one, she knew right away it was the one. Something about its charming front deck felt familiar to her. She thought perhaps she had been there before, but she knew she hadn't. Each night as she lay in bed hoping for sleep, she pictured that cottage. Even before she saw it on Craig's list and even before he died, she saw it, so when it popped up on her laptop for rent, she knew she had to have it.

It was just a few hours before midnight now on the East Coast and she imagined her friends tucking in with their New Year's Eve snacks: chips and dip, cheese and crackers, and pigs in a blanket. She missed them and for a moment she wondered if she had done the right thing by picking up and leaving everything she knew with the hopes of a better job, a better life, and a better reason to get up each morning.

So, she did what she did best in times of great adversity. She rolled a joint, poured a glass of whiskey, and turned up the Rolling Stones so loud the fronds of her small palm tree bounced to the vibration of the bass.

It was somewhere in the middle of "Country Honk" that she heard a knock on her front door.

She would normally try to peer out a window to catch a glimpse of whatever person dared to knock on her door so late, or duck and hide until the offending knocker went away, but this time she decided to simply open the door.

"Hello, can I help you?" she said to the scruffy-faced drenched young man standing on her deck.

"Is she here? Is she safe?" he said darting his eyes beyond her to the small living room.

"Who?" she asked looking behind her. "Is *who* safe?"

"Well, I was down by the water," he said, wiping his nose on his sleeve as he pointed to the Sound. "Been down there awhile, I was sort of, stuck...stuck on the rocks I guess."

The person she was before she moved would've called the police or shut the door in his face, but something about her had changed. Maybe it was the whiskey, maybe it was the weed, or maybe it was the thought of being alone on New Year's Eve that had her feeling friendly so instead of being her aggressive self, she said, "It's pouring. Why don't you come in and dry off for a minute?"

"Ah, well, okay I guess that would be alright. I don't want to impose on your night. I just wanted to make sure your daughter got home safe," he said as he hesitated at her entry-way looking nervously behind her.

"I don't have a daughter. Who is it you're looking for?" She asked the damp stranger as he removed his green canvas coat and made his way gingerly past her.

"The girl, the one down by the beach," he said again pointing to the Sound. His tone changed now and he was looking straight into her eyes.

"The little girl down the street," he said pointing again across her front lawn to the water. "I was on my boat for most of the day, although it feels like a lot longer," he said rubbing his trembling hands across his forehead. "I was stuck on the rocks out there," he said pointing again to the darkness off her front deck. "I thought she might be lost so I dug my ore in real hard and pushed off from the rocks to make sure she was okay. I had been trying all day to get off those god damned rocks. I thought I might die out there to be honest. I just couldn't break free. Anyway, I think I frightened her because she started walking up towards this house and as I got closer, she sort of disappeared... so I thought she was here."

"I didn't see any little girl," she said pulling out a chair for him. "Are you sure that's what you saw? The rain and the darkness will have you seeing things out here that's for sure," she said suddenly very aware of how drunk and high she was.

"I really thought I saw her though. I got a pretty good look before she disappeared into the dark. Maybe we should call the police?" He asked getting up and looking out her front window. "Or maybe I should go look for her."

As he reached for his coat his eyes fixed on a picture on the mantle by her a little gas fireplace.

"What's going on here?" He asked pointing to the picture.

He didn't sound aggressive, he sounded mostly tired, defeated, and although he didn't seem violent, she was beginning to wonder why she let a stranger into her quiet little house.

"I'm not sure what you mean," she said, snatching the little picture off the mantle away from his sight.

"That's the girl I saw," he said rubbing his temples again. "Right there, that girl. But I know the man in that picture too. *Who are you?*"

"Maybe you should sit down," she said pulling the chair out again wondering if maybe she needed to sit down as well, or maybe she did need to call the police. She too was tired and at that moment she felt like calling the police would be a hassle and the last thing she wanted was to be hassled and she didn't believe there was any girl so she continued.

"Can I get you a drink?" She asked pouring herself a large glass of Jameson, no rocks.

"Sure," he said slowly squinting his eyes at her as if he was trying to size her up and figure out who she was.

"Here, this should warm you up," she said putting the short glass of whiskey in front of him. "So, you think the girl in the picture was the one you saw?" She asked sitting down beside him. There was something gentle about him, something kind in his eyes and there was something about his face that felt familiar to her. She pushed those thoughts down deep though and decided he must have mental issues. It didn't occur to her that he could be violent. It didn't occur to her that he could've been stalking her and it didn't occur to her that he could hurt her. It also didn't occur to her that he could be telling the truth.

"Do you live around here?"

His brows were knitted and his eyes still squinted at her. He swirled the whiskey around in his glass and sighed a heavy deep sigh.

"I don't," he began. He was looking at her again studying her face. Because she was not frightened by him, she looked back into his eyes trying to figure out what it was he was looking for.

"I don't know who you are but you have a picture of my friend," he said gulping his whiskey.

"Who's your friend?" She asked forgetting for a moment about the picture that she put down in the kitchen to pour the whiskey.

"The man in the picture," he said slowly closing his eyes slightly, as if he was trying to remember every detail of something that happened long ago. "I was stationed with him during the war. The girl in the picture is the one I saw down by the beach," he said pushing back his chair abruptly and standing up to look out the front door again. "What's going on? Who are you?"

Still assuming he was homeless or suffered from a mental disease she put her tattered blanket around his shoulders and urged him to sit back down by the fireplace.

"I'm just so tired," he said, as he slumped down into the chair. "I feel like I've been on the water for so long, but I guess it was just one day because I've only seen one sunrise. It just feels like I've been out there," he said pointing again to the night, "for years."

"Well, I was down there earlier walking along the beach and I didn't see your boat so maybe you're just a little bit confused?" She said softly now because his tone was gentle and she didn't want to do anything that might scare him away.

"How do you know the man in the picture? And the girl?"

"I was stationed in the war with him and when we got back my wife and I couldn't seem to get along. Just couldn't seem to talk to each anymore. He would take me in and let me sleep on the couch while my wife and I tried to patch things up."

"I never laid a hand on her," he said abruptly as he became aware that he was a man in a strange woman's house late at night.

"Well, I hope not," she said sitting up straight to try to make herself look bigger, taller, stronger. She didn't imagine he'd ever hurt anybody and it was hard to think about him in a war because he didn't look like the kind of person that could ever hurt anyone, but she had always been a bad judge of character so she rustled in her chair and puffed up her chest a bit. Had she not been drunk she would have realized that

there was no war and he was too young to know her father, but she was so she let him keep talking.

"I could never hurt anyone else," he said softly stretching his legs out to warm his feet by the fire. "So how is that you have his picture?"

"Well, that's my father. That was taken in front of our house a long time ago," she said breathing in deeply trying to remember the day it was taken.

She got up to get the bottle of whiskey, took the picture off the counter, and carried it back into the living room, clutching it against her chest.

"Can I see it again?" He asked not reaching for the whiskey or the picture but instead gently reaching for her hand.

She extended the whiskey to him but he did not take it so she slowly handed him the picture of her and her father.

He scanned the picture over and over and over again for so long that she got tired of standing there with the whiskey bottle so she poured more in her glass and sat down next to him on the couch.

Finally, he said, "That's you. I *know* you. But how?"

It was quiet now, even the clock in the corner held its breath as they sat together trying to make sense of what was happening.

"I used to babysit you. Not often because you would holler and cry when your folks would try to go out. You would make yourself physically sick from all that carrying on, so they stopped even trying to go out. Only sometimes would you let go out without you."

"How did you know that? I don't remember you and wouldn't you be much older now anyway," she said still dismissing his claim.

"Yeah, I don't know. Maybe I am losing it. All I know is the people in that picture are people that I used to know. I guess the past is never really where you leave it."

"When did you last see them?" She asked mostly just trying to be a good sport and enjoying someone's company on what had been the loneliest night of her life.

"Well, I don't know exactly. I guess it's been a while. I just," he stopped, stood up, and looked out across at a void where there was usually light.

He stood there for a long time looking out. She didn't know what he was looking for or who he was, but his words felt genuine so she allowed him to stay. Finally, he said, "I do remember the last time I saw them. Saw *you*. Your parents wanted to go out to dinner so they asked me to come over to watch you," he said still looking out the front window. "I never said no to them. I loved your mother. Like, really loved her. She never knew. I never told her and I never told him. I would have done anything for her

but I couldn't tell her how I felt because he was my best friend. Friends don't do that to each other you know," he sighed taking another gulp of whiskey.

"So, what happened?" She asked taking another sip from her glass.

"Well, that's where things get a little hazy, I guess. I could tell you but I don't know if you'd believe me and honestly, I don't even know if I believe me. I'm not sure what I'm even doing here. Maybe I should just go," he said not moving.

He had nowhere to go she assumed, so she persisted. "Tell me, what's the last thing you remember."

He did not move. He stood there looking out with his back to her as the hands on the clock in the corner silently stretched out past midnight.

She was very tired now. The whiskey was settling in and the warmth of the fire was giving her little cottage a homey glow that she had not seen since she moved in. She stretched her feet out to the small hassock and covered her legs with the frayed blue and white crocheted blanket that her mother made her when she was a child. She knew better than to close her eyes with a stranger in her house but the whiskey was winning and her lids were getting heavy.

Just as she was dozing off, he moved, startling her awake.

"I took pills," he said loudly, turning to face her. "I took *her* pills. I took all of them," he said sitting down next to her so close she could feel his thigh against hers.

She didn't know what he meant, but she didn't want to speak fearing he would stop talking so she sat still until he spoke again.

"I was sitting on the couch you were tucked in, kind of like we are right now. Your parents had gone to dinner and asked me to watch you. They didn't scold you for crying, not ever, not that I remember at least. They just seemed to get it. Seemed to get that you were afraid they wouldn't come back, so usually, it was easier to just stay home than go and worry about you. That night though, your mother really wanted to go out, so your dad asked you to be brave," he paused for a sip from his near-empty glass.

"I didn't know I was going to do it. Really. I really didn't know, it just happened. I knew I could never have what he had and I just didn't want to get up in the morning anymore knowing that my feelings would crush him. And I was so tired, so God damned tired. I guess you probably think I'm crazy."

She turned to look at him now. She looked at the contour of his chin from the side and the shape of his nose. Sitting on the couch next to him in the orange glow of the fire she remembered this moment. She remembered sitting on the couch with him and she remembered the grandfather clock gonging twelve times waking her and she remembered what happened next. All of it came rushing back to her but she did not jump, did not interrupt, did not move. She just listened.

"She had headaches," he said. "Really bad headaches. They would sometimes last for weeks. The doctors didn't know what was wrong with her, so they gave her really strong pills to help her sleep. Your father hated having them in the house and he hated her taking them, so she usually didn't. I was supposed to be watching you, but you were sleeping and so peaceful. I left you just for a minute, went upstairs to her bathroom, and took those pills. All of them. I just wanted to rest you see. It was so quiet in the house and I had no quiet in my life and I just wanted to be there and to sleep."

She listened as he told her a story that she had heard many times before. One that was as much a part of her as her pigeon-toes and curly hair.

She felt safe with him and she was secretly a little proud of herself that she was able to let them go without her. She knew he would stay with her and sit with her by the fire until she fell asleep and even after. It was the "even after" that allowed her to sleep. She knew he would always be with her.

So, on that night, New Year's Eve 1975, as she drifted off to sleep under her new crocheted blue and white blanket, she watched the picture on the wall in front of her flicker and blink to life from the glow of the fireplace. She had never been to the little island in the picture, but her father had and he had told her about a little place in Washington state that he visited once when he was a child. It was a small island off the coast of a town she had never heard of in a place called the Pacific Northwest. He told her about the most amazing sunsets and the sweetest apples in the world.

As they sat together under the frayed blanket, somewhere across the dark water of Poverty Bay, lights blinked on and time began again.

Diffract
A Kaiser

She can take her body where she needs it to be, or can I say, her soul, to wherever she wants it to go. She can do it at will, can stay steady on her moving cycle, in the conversation at hand, carefully drying the wine glasses, while she leaves, goes where she pleases, light.

She shows me one day. The white posts holding the road together. Suspended road trip. Around here the dragonfly comes often in black with a stripe of royal blue down its back. Seen furiously flying alone or coupled, still furiously fluttering its lattice wings. Reflections. The accurate or their illusions.

The first day: check-in, skip to the sea, cut foot on a 1/2-open oyster shell for all my blind enthusiasm. This was not simulation. Glass can be broken from within or without. The blown glass I threw against a wall and watched break. Sun overhead slightly behind them slightly to your left as well, dear viewer. Two crossbars of shadow keep two bikes steady.

As it turns out, people spend at least 1/2 their waking hours simulating rather than paying attention to the world around them. This pure simulation greatly drives their

feelings. Corrupt compass stuck on lost. Hills where philosophers sweat. Get off the wrong side – flesh smell, marrow sting.

My biker friend needs no compass. She teaches voice. How not to break it unless your conscious mind wants it that it is the subconscious cracking through when a voice falters. A fine silver chain relatively. (I mean the fine part relatively or by *fine* I mean not very thick. Also, not a chain-link chain until the very end so the circular clasp can clasp onto something). The stone held by a sliver of silver folded over and attached to the almost oval Petoskey stone. An array of taupe hexagons fit together.

I am a braided helix. Tumble is what I am learning. If only I were not the twisted lines of a shadow of my past cast over crevices in the pavement. Stumble barefoot on hot asphalt fragile the recovery from immolation. The fact of no water. Of being broke. Water and work. A gesture towards abundance. Bounty. Enough to leave town.

I am the rider in the front. The helmet leading the pack I drive the group to where we are going. If you look at the image you'll see I see what's over the hill before the others. What's coming what we are going into. Like you felt at the beach the other day: riding your bike to the dunes wind, seaward grasses. In the distance, you saw three bathers an umbrella stuck in the sand. Cresting the slope, the crowd. You'll ask: "simulation or stimulation? Driving or being driven?" What if I said "both." [Road otherwise smooth, gentle incline to nowhere. Lines of communication cutting across the vector. Across blank sky.]

Take a pause a line break a break in the action in the breathing a voice breaks a bone can break inside force outside force or depression by which I mean the opposite of suppression. Our private plane and one of you piloting and the other finding it excessive while I, too, find it excessive, but comfortable, too, and probably the best way to get out to the end of the world sorry this tip at the end of a continent of this round world.

The hidden glint of the key in the pocket. Seeing a headless statue of a dictator fall. Hover above any wall feel the suffering on either side. Out to catch your breath the sea has taken (away). As it turns out we can be far from a situation far from an emotion and

still have it affect us. Is this simulation? If simulation is fake unreal inferior to what we prefer to call reality why do we spend so much time there trying to perfect it? The sense of the building to elation as you stripped off your –

Do you know the doorway arm trick? Press your arms hard against the frame of a door for a good solid minute. Step away. Feel your arms float up from your sides. Imagine that sensation taking over your whole body. Sometimes people say to do it you should tether your heart. [The urge a person needs in times of desperation when it is too late to wail across cavernous scars at the gated something. Us pulling the needle through. Stitch a human heart.]

My son thinks it's astounding that, as I recount to him the poet being in line to wait to hope to see her imprisoned son and give him the bread she has brought and someone turns to her and asks "can you write this?" that I choke back water that I return to the sea of non-simulation - stimulation dive in with my whole self. The proof of the weight breaking the body. Her voice did not break. In any tongue.

When I hold you in my arms I wonder where you are. Skyward you wander off. Sense the chill the squid's head full of ink. Dip in. Write across my body. Storm (shattering of voices play over the waves) my float, my swim. In this one moment of uncovering all simulation and stimulation in your life came to another distilled vector of experience this dune the sweat running down your spine winded walk trudging because you needed to keep shoes on to protect your foot from the memory of where the oyster shell cut in.

Relaxed she grabs my hand and we depart we ascend. I think of the giddy rush of run contained in the birthday kiss. The couple lips locked. They float above their village. I notice the flapping of excess clothing, its sound, feel. I take in a breath after I take in the elation by which I mean the sensation of floating.

Elated.

A Verbal Shanty

Ian Jackson

I am chained.

I am chained just as my ancestral history has always foretold. It has been my past, and present, it will forever be my future.

I look at the house I built, one that represented the world I knew. The house was one I had made from joy – with words from a President promising our freedom. I nailed every board, aligned every shingle on the roof, and tended to every weed and root.

But now I am in the paddy wagon, a chained brother to either of my sides. The only thing that defines me are the clothes that lie across my back. My trousers as black as my skin, my coat as red as the crimson flowing freely from my wounds.

Now, I can see what the house really looks like.

A brother on my left, twitching with restrained trepidation and frustration, knowing we are about to relive the lives of our forefathers. Another on my right, head hung so low, as if he has already been suspended in the trees, lungs unable to take a struggle breath.

I know that we must look like our kin – lifeless behind iron bars, duly watching the sun move across the sky before we're locked away, fading into persecution. Once we enter that jail, our steps will be shuffled by the weights attached to our ankles as we plow fields and chip boulders. Subjugation takes many forms, this one called incarceration.

The floorboards are loose.

Our ancestry is a curse, and no chained punishment can be just to a broken law. Our criminality is a burden, a poisonous residue left behind by the serpent of slavery. We have committed an immoral sin and Jim Crow is frowning on us today.

They have locked us up and are moments away from throwing the key. The barred window of the wagon torturous, reminding us that freedom has always been within sight, but could never be grasped.

The roof decrepit.

Here I stand, waiting in the wagon, waiting for them to take us away – for the ship to sail to the place our masters called the New World. Copper chains locking us in place, wrists weak with the weight, minds chipped away with oppression.

The yard overgrown with weeds and roots.

Only now, chained with my brothers, do I see my house for what it is. The floorboards aren't pristine granite, but rotten wood. The roof does not protect us from the elements but funnels water into my home. The yard is filled with roots and weeds, fighting for control. The house is without purpose – no use, no hope, no structure.

I slowly take the hands of my fellow brothers; I have nothing at this moment but them. All we can do is gaze outside the bars of the wagon, watching the last glimpses of a world we once considered free.

Celeste
by
Mehreen Ahmed

The children of the alley made clay dolls. They sat by a rubbish pile and dressed them all. Dolled them up, faceless at first. Then they gave them eyes and nose and curvy mouths. Legs and hands to dance with them at sundown. If this wasn't enough, they also made tears with Lipids, Lysozyme, Lipocalin, Glucose, and Sodium. Water, made out of H₂O. Oxygen to breathe, blood from Iron to carry oxygen to the brain; carbohydrates, fats, proteins, and ethanol. Estrogen and so on to trigger pleasures, euphoric. The brain, composed of Cerebrum, Cerebellum, and Brainstem. Skin to cover and protect.

The children were blind. Still, they melded a silken network of chemical medley into this unique creation. Even kindness, generosity, jealousy and cunning—propensities—were inclusions of this concoction. They gave them a name, Clay Dolls who had everything they needed to dance with them—energy, intelligence, sentience. Except, there was one potent component, the children were circumspect—eternity, they reserved only for themselves, which the Clay Dolls found disturbingly lethal. The chemicals they had been tied with were eyewash.

Every dance was long and nuanced; the children took a lot of care to choreograph. In great details, they took a butcher's knife and pierced it through the Dolls' hearts. They were blind; they didn't see them die; but they had known it all along; this dancing was thrilling, in which the bodies putrified, not the chemicals. They used the same building blocks to make new dolls in tightly packed chemical knots. In their blindness, the children saw naught, what the Clay Dolls had asked for. They'd never even viewed their own reflections—let alone them—but Clay Dolls had eyes. They saw them—The Makers for who they really were—insensitive, in wanton jouissance.

No matter, the Clay Dolls matured over time. They developed a foresight, which eluded The Makers. The Dolls thought of a ruse to get even with them. They learned the ropes and progressed. While they danced with The Makers, they'd also begun to tutor themselves in natural herbs, potent in medicinal value. The Makers had taken them for fools—Clay Dolls. Surely, when they tried to butcher them, they realised they couldn't kill em' all. Some stood back up while some fell. The Makers comprehended with a sixth sense, but couldn't do anything preventable.

The Clay Dolls were gradually overpowering them. Knowledge had given them much boost. Still, they continued to dance but far fewer kills, for The Makers to roost. More Clay Dolls survived as their skills exponentially exceeded The Maker's expectations. However, The Makers found comfort that the ultimate power over the organic world resided in their hands. Only they were eternal and wise enough to govern these lands. Although, the creepy sixth sense alluded to them that the Clay Dolls were not only dancing in tight compartments under the blue but had traversed the space as well, who now had the sense of space-time, the gaseous Canopus, and the laws of physics.

Why, the Clay Dolls were unstoppable, yet they were fettered? The Makers felt angst and conferred amongst themselves. The Clay Dolls were reaching heights too far in the sky. They needed to be cut down to size. Whoever had the knowledge of immortality would win this war. The Makers found solace that the Clay Dolls would not win because they danced to a mortal tune which they had been attuned to since inception. The Clay Dolls would never know how immortality worked, thereof, The Makers would always dominate.

It rang true, the laws of physics did decree that in time every organic life would perish. The Makers had made sure that the Clay Dolls were just that—organic, and nothing more. The sixth sense allowed them the light of prediction. However, The Makers had not predicted this. The Clay Dolls persisted. Did they not deduce that immortality was immutable and not bound by any strict parameters? Maybe, The Makers were delusional of galaxies that when they blossomed, they hinged on the laws of physics, alone.

Who made The Makers, anyway? The Clay Dolls theorised that The Makers were subjected to the rule of law, too, not all that powerful—astronomical objects galvanised the stars. Where did black holes exist—wholly eating stars and what not? Galaxies could die and another could be born. Also, true to time. Since the big bang, this stretch of the solar system had occurred. It stretched and the stretching continued, theoretically, towards a gravitational collapse—Clay Dolls collated and observed the true nature of the universe.

The Makers spun out of gasses, far surpassed the lowly masses—immortal creators just their luck, but, no interlocutors by any long shot. Both mute and blind, they made the Clay Dolls in their own image. Albeit, the Clay Dolls were borne out of them but had not turned out eternal, but different—enigmatic and more.

The fate of the Clay Dolls was sealed. Without oxygen, they couldn't breathe. Without food, this variant would be deficient. All designed in blindness, but the same law could be applied to The Makers in reverse—stars, the sun, the rains, the rainbow, and all the lovely confection that fell from them. In hindsight, they too died. They too were prone to destruction which the deluded Makers wouldn't know. The Clay Dolls, figured out the celeste. More lights sparked through their neurons than all the lights sparkled in a milky way.

In this blinding paradox of the sixth sense, The Makers had not marked a proximate magnet—a spiralling blackhole they couldn't flee; new stars were born, new Dolls were made—locked in a deadly dance—a game without a referee. Much to their delight, this much light the Clay Dolls had perceived. Knowledge that had given them an upper hand that there were more things in heaven or on earth—no one was free from the strict laws of physics. Such choices had not existed. Not to date at least.

The Art of Falling

Dian Parker

Lying on coarse white sheets in an unfamiliar whitewashed room, I think of his body. White and impossibly strong. In a Florence hospital tended by a young Italian doctor. Room swirls, wildly. I focus on a single curl of his blue-black hair.

“I asked the *Galleria* to post danger signs countless times. And now – my fourth case in one month.”

Even at fifty feet, I’d felt it coming. Knees soft, between my legs quivering, fingers reaching out.

“They faint at Botticelli and our great Leonardo. But the most – one hundred patients in four years – is *the David*.” The doctor rubs his head back and forth in the palm of his hands. I watch carefully as the lanky black curls flatten then spring back. Can’t stop yearning.

“A few questions, *Signorina*, if I may. We are doing a study.”

How far had I to look up to find the Giant’s eyes? The arched backbend required.

“Have you been feeling insecure?”

I hadn’t expected David to undo me, but insecurity?

“*Signorina, per favore*, a little patience. We Italians have no problem with these emotional attacks. Tourists are often agitated by *Firenze*. We are trying to understand.”

I surrender to exhaustion. Will not call parents or the American Embassy. My case is labeled, 'overdose crisis.' Would be worth it to die in a moldy hospital from an overdose of splendor. I want saturation, baptismal fire, explosions.

Fainting at the base of Michelangelo's *David* was not in any plan of mine. I'd only waited until the last tour group left so I could be alone. His magnetic pull tossed me forward. I ran. Like all the others, I had no choice.

In ballet class, the teacher played Korsakov's *Flight of the Bumble Bee*. When we felt the urge, she said to let go and dance like the wind. The other girls twirled and leapt while I stood still, trembling from head to foot.

Again in Yellowstone. Winter. Sleigh gliding along. Dusk. Three dark bison ambles by. Stop. I can touch the black eyes, deep as a whale. When one turned the mammoth head and stared into my eyes, I felt a molten quiver and fainted.

Reading Paul Bowles, listening to Arvo Pärt. Flash of green at sunset, rose-laced rock of Petra, waiting for the night blooming cereus to open its potency once a year. Hitting that deep place, like with babies and stars. Not wanting to let go. Impossible to sustain.

Doctor is back. Leans over with stethoscope of cold steel. "Come va?"

I know my heartbeat is normal now. Unfortunately.

"We doctors have observed a unique visitor that establishes a strong bond with our David. Usually travels alone. You admired too much, *vero*? May I suggest you start taking the pills I give you?"

Takes pulse, gives more water, another pill. After he leaves, I'll spit it out like the others. Ground between my fingernails until it is dust blown away.

“May I ask if you have hallucinations?”

I want *more*. A two-ton block of Carrara marble and chisel.

“I’m so tired, doctor.”

“The David Syndrome does that to everyone. Rest.” The doctor leaves, so sheerly beautiful.

The key is not to react. I should have waited. Waited to jump onto his left shoulder and lay my cheek next to his, stroke his curls, kiss his lips. I reached out with all my might for his brave furled fist. If I’d only calmed down first. The moment wasted.

Next morning, Doctor is back. Sleek black hair even more unmanageable. If only I could wrap one ringlet round my finger, draw him close, whisper into the translucent shell of his ear, tell him about my black cat, my muddy dirt road, the scores of peepers in spring singing their mad serenades. Whisper sweet somethings of profound importance to take his mind away from all his interminable clinical trials, all his instruments designed to probe.

He hands me a book, cover worn and yellowing. *Naples and Florence: A Journey from Milan to Reggio*. “If you please, Signorina, open here and read.”

I read: *Absorbed in the contemplations of sublime beauty, I reached the point where one encounters celestial sensations. Everything spoke so vividly to my soul. I had palpitations of the heart, which in Berlin they call ‘nerves.’ Life was drained from me. I walked with the fear of falling.*

“*Signorina*, I know you are unhappy. Maybe time to go home.” He pats my hand, bows slightly at the waist, backs out of the room. So it’s time to go.

In milky twilight, streets are wild with night. Motorbikes buzz and spurt, smutting black soot. Young boys dance like girls in the street, swinging hips, pointing leather toes. Tourists take pictures with phones. Everyone talking, talking, talking.

The city vulgar, dirty, chaotic and I regret leaving the white bed. White room. White porcelain Doctor.

I sit down on stone steps. I can see Michelangelo, searching the towering stone for *disegno, the deep true art*. What lays hidden in that block of marble buried and cold for centuries? What lies hidden in Michelangelo's soul?

The night is damp. Cold. Need to get off stone and move. Weight of body is marble.

When's the last time I had food? A simple repast of bread, fennel soup, one herring, and glass of wine. Michelangelo's meal.

Michelangelo is hunched over the two-ton marble. He is divining. The seventeen-foot *David* is in the stone. Hiding. Michelangelo will find it.

I lean my cheek against the Giant's bent thigh. Touch the cool surface of marble knee. Look up into large vanilla eyes. *His tight curls*.

Begin the breath. Slow and even. Breathe life into his broad white chest, hidden beating heart, young white forehead.

A great thigh rises up. Chest swells.

Heart leaps over itself.

This time. I. Will. Remain. Calm.

Saturnalia

I wish I could tell you how fragile the day became.
How sunrise splintered and left skies nearly erased.
Then grass curled up its tiny fingers as a newborn
does before it begins to howl.

Somewhere a perfect week decorates a wall, a
daisy chain of days interwoven in prayer or in joy.
Not here. I'd toss perfection out on its ear if ever it
dared show its face.

I'm here, my indeterminacy a jagged row of
certainties, chairs pushed back in no order at the
end of a performance. I appreciate disorder now,
that banished prince of suburbia.

Dirt under fingernails. Coffee grounds sprinkled in
the sink. Sunset prowls the horizon. I've pulled
loaves from the oven only to serrate them into
slices.

Pick one day, any day, like an olive from the jar and
pop it in my mouth. *Thank you, I say, thanks.*

Fractals and Delineations

Mourning doves on a power line, all in a row. Below them, crosshatched fence around the athletic field where, yesterday, tiers of blue folding chairs held the parents of high school graduates.

Each day bumps into the other as if, at the bottom of an escalator, a person in descent refused to budge. They pile up, the times, crowding the edges of the calendar. No more. Let me spill off the edge, hang by my fingernails from the lip of my life.

Windows, of course. Rectangles for viewing. Frames for passing dog walkers, segments of sidewalk. I'll take now, now the moment that arrives and revives something green and leafy, twigs and branches like fingers reaching and grasping through staves of power.

Prismatic

I drove the countryside and tall grass waved in sheets by the road, bent one direction by the wind and then another, sunlight refracting differential shades of green, stalk by stalk, blade by blade. And the trees! Puffs of greeny clouds rising like balls of exhaled smoke.

I met a painter consumed by the variety of shades of white. At dinner, she passed around a polyhedron, each facet of it brushed "white," an object we could tumble in our hands, watching its sides change.

In physics talk, white light obscures all other colors of the spectrum. Or contains them. It depends. The heat here can oppress for days until an enlightening jag breaks the weather open and apart.

Walk before Dinner

Slate sky and the dog ambles on her walk, little legs pistons getting her where she needs to go. The end of her leash sways in my hand, red webbing.

Somewhere thunder crackles, but not too near. These clouds are a roof, a pot lid on the world while it steams.

Her tail, the dog's, lifts high, fur brushed neatly back from her arse, neck long, head lowered, sniffing, sniffing. Grass of the easement. Saplings held by cords, pressing skyward from a cone of mulch.

Thunder flirts with us. The dog trots on.

Old Couple

White and red lights of an ambulance tattoo our bedroom's night walls, distorted by corners. I peer through curtains down two stories at the black cross of the corner. Our windows at close inspection are smudged with dust the rain leaves behind in its passing.

The neighbors' brick house peels white paint, resisting suburbia's relentless geometry. One afternoon she called me *Penelope*, as if I, too, faithfully waited for a ship to broach Ithaca's horizon. Cancer plied its skeleton key to her brain.

An early spring loom of budding branches cross-hatched against my view as a white stretcher's batten presses into the front door. None of the EMTs hurry, rotating lights shout colors only down the macadam stretch.

My husband stirs in sleep, but doesn't wake. Warp & weft, death never stalks. It weaves with fine hands and elegant precision.

Letting the curtains slip shut, I do my best to be courted back to sleep, the way a dog turns round three times to rest after recognizing its long-lost master.

This Is a Moment of Suffering

Linda C. Wisniewski

Next to the sticky-note on my standing desk stands a little blue angel about two inches tall. I like to stroke her rough stone dress with my thumb or rest a fingertip on the tiny blue heart she holds in both hands.

When I answer the doorbell and let her inside, Kathy's head is lowered over the bucket in her hand.

"You're early," I say. "Good morning!"

She gives me a thin smile. "Where would you like me to start?"

"Upstairs, I guess. We're still finishing up in the kitchen."

Once she is out of sight, the house is quiet, the two of us working in different rooms. I load the dishwasher and climb the stairs, wondering. Kathy is normally friendly, even loud. She always asks about my weekend or a recent holiday. Not today.

I find her in a bathroom, rooting around her bucket of sponges. She doesn't look up when I come closer.

"How was your weekend?"

"Okay." She straightens and begins to mop the floor. I don't move, sensing more will come. "Actually, I have to tell you something." She pushes her glasses up with one finger and takes a long deep breath. "My son passed away."

"Oh, no! Oh, Kathy, I'm so sorry!"

She nods but keeps her eyes low and begins to talk, standing in my bathroom. What was God thinking? Why can't he send him back? She's read the sticky-note on my desk, a quote from a self-help book: "This is a moment of suffering. Suffering is a part of life. May I have compassion for myself in this moment. May I give myself the comfort I need."

"I don't think I can do that," she says. "Give myself the comfort I need." This is her first cleaning job since the accident claimed her son's life. A fall in a warehouse broke his neck, leaving behind a one-year-old daughter and fiancé, plus eight brothers and sisters and his parents. Kathy's husband finds a quiet spot at work to cry alone, she says, as does her son at high school. We talk about guidance counselors and grief support groups.

She rubs at her arms, and I hug her, and when Steve gets home, I break the news. She thanks us for letting her talk, says keeping busy helps her cope. No obituary because she didn't want calls from his friends.

I remember my disbelief the day his father called to say our son attempted suicide, the way I repeated one word: What? What? Over and over, pleading for it not to be true. Thankfully he survived, but other sons among my friends did not. How random this is, how different we are, and how much alike.

"I know you're religious," Kathy, a devout Catholic, says. Is it because of my angel figurines? She is tall, strong-boned and works alone cleaning my entire townhouse in

three hours. I feel stiff and old and sometimes go to the gym while she is working.

“Good for you, she says, you want to stay in shape.”

As she goes back to work, I walk into my office, wanting to do more to ease her pain. I read the sticky note quote beside the angel and revisit the moment I first saw her in a little art gallery in Lahaina. No. Not her. She is mine. I look around for something else. A card? An artificial flower? I have so many articles of beauty here: pictures, sayings, beads.

I spot another angel, a gift from Janice. It’s not as nice and kind of hokey, like you’d find in a card store: big eyes and a floral ringlet on her head. Maybe that one. I go downstairs and quietly talk to Steve. He listens to me explain about the angels.

“Shall I give her the one I bought in Maui? The one I really like?”

“It’s up to you,” he says.

If I give her the big-eyed angel, I won’t really miss it. She has Janice’s energy, not mine.

I pick up my angel from Maui and stroke her skirt with my thumb. This one I love. This one has my energy, the compassion and care I feel when I look at her every day, when I hold her.

I hear Kathy downstairs, packing up to leave. I hurry down to her, beauty in my hand, and say, “I want to give you this.”

What I Brought With Me

Jeffrey Wald

The house smelled of wood smoke. I didn't want to leave the arms of the uniformed man. He was fat and smelled of sweat, like that other guy who held me once. But his big belly felt nice. The new man was skinny. His clothes hung loose on him. Maybe he didn't have enough to eat? The woman wore a brown dress. She had curly hair. She had enough to eat. The woman took me from the uniformed man. Her hands smelled like dish soap. I didn't like the smell of dish soap.

The woman brought me close. But then she lifted me away from her. She looked down at her dress. There was a wet spot where I had been. My diaper was wet and poopie.

The uniformed man gave the skinny man a stuffed ninja turtle. You'll want to burn this and his clothes he said. He pointed toward a fireplace on the other side of the room. Bed bugs.

The skinny man shook his hand. The uniformed man opened the door and left. The skinny man looked at the woman. Then he walked toward the fireplace. The woman brought me to a bathroom painted green. It smelled like yellow pee. She turned the water on. She took my onesie off. She laid me on the tiled floor. The tile was cold. She unstrapped my diaper and cleaned my bottom with a wipe. She put me in the tub. The water felt cold.

The skinny man stood in the doorway of the bathroom. The woman handed him the onesie. He turned and walked away.

The woman put soap on her hands. She rubbed it on my head. She rubbed it over my body. It smelled like a new kind of soap. She poured water over my head. The water was cold. She took me out of the tub and dried me in a large grey towel. The towel felt rough. She left me on the floor wrapped in the towel. She walked out of the bathroom. I looked at the walls. There were pictures of flowers on the walls. The woman came back with a diaper and clothes. She put the diaper on me. She put me in a onesie with footsies and long sleeves. There were bears on it. It smelled like the closet with those white balls.

The woman picked me off the floor. She brought me back to the room with the fireplace. A fire was burning in the fireplace. The skinny man was kneeling in front of the fireplace. He was watching something burn. I didn't see the turtle. The man with the white beard who always had that smell on his breath gave it to me. It smelled like Skittles.

The woman turned around with me. She walked past the table into the kitchen. She moved me from her right arm to her left. She reached up with her right hand and opened a cupboard. She brought down a box. She reached into the box and pulled out something brown. She gave it to me. I put it up to my nose and smelled. It smelled like the carpet in that one place I slept. I threw it on the ground.

The woman bent down and picked it up. She walked to the garbage and threw it in. She put the box back into the cupboard and closed the door. She walked across the kitchen to a counter. There was a large bowl with bananas in it. She picked out a banana. She peeled it halfway. She put the tip of the banana up to my mouth. It was brown. I smelled it. It smelled like the onesie I wore the day that one thing happened. I slapped at the banana. The top half fell off and landed on the ground. The woman picked it up. She walked to the trash. She threw the bottom and the top into the trash. She grabbed a rag from the sink. She wiped my hands with it. It was cold. I smelled my hands. They smelled like the basement of that one place.

She walked with me back to the room with the fireplace. There was smoke in the room now. But not the smoke of the last place. He won't eat said the woman. It's late said the skinny man. It was dark outside. He's probably tired said the skinny man. Let's say night prayer and put him to bed he said. The woman sat on a brown and orange couch. She tried to hold me with my head on her shoulder. My face went into the couch. The couch smelled like leaves. I moved around to face out.

The skinny man sat beside her. He held a big black book. He opened it. It didn't have any pictures. The skinny man and the woman moved their right hands over their foreheads and chests. They sang something together. They thanked someone for Trent. My name is Trent. Then the skinny man sang something. It ended with and a peaceful death. Amen. The skinny man stood up. He stood over me. He touched my forehead with his thumb and moved it around. His thumb was cold. He walked away.

The woman brought me through the kitchen to a staircase. The staircase was dark. She walked me up the staircase. She turned on a hallway light at the top of the stairs. There were three closed doors. The woman opened a door on the right. She walked into the room. She didn't turn on a light. There was a small bed in the corner. She walked with me to the bed. She knelt on the carpet. The carpet was yellow. The room was cold. She laid me on the bed. She opened a door. She reached up and took down a pillow. She walked to a dresser. She opened the top drawer and pulled out a purple blanket. She walked back to the small bed. She bent down and lifted my head and put the pillow under it. She put the blanket over my body. It felt scratchy. She brought her hands to her chest and mumbled something. She stood up and walked toward the door. She walked through the doorway and closed the door part way. She walked away.

The hallway light was still on. Some light came into the room through the crack in the door. I didn't have my turtle.

I looked at the ceiling. There were no cracks in it. I didn't close my eyes. I heard the sound of running water. Then it stopped. I heard voices downstairs. I couldn't hear what was said. It was the skinny man and the woman. The voices continued. I was cold. The voices stopped. I heard feet on the stairs. I looked at the wall. There was a picture of a man holding a heart. He had long hair and wore a dress. The heart was on fire. The light went out. I could no longer see the man holding a heart.

I heard feet down the hallway. I heard a door open. Then light came into the room. Less light this time. I heard the skinny man's voice. He said should we check on him. I saw a shadow on the door. The door opened more than a crack. I saw the

woman's head. Then the woman's head was gone. The light went out. I think he's asleep said the woman.

I laid on the small bed. I didn't close my eyes. It was dark. I looked at the wall. I couldn't see the man holding a heart.

I sat up in bed. I took the purple blanket off. I walked across the room. I opened the door. I walked to the staircase. I sat down at the top of the stairs. I turned my body and scooted down on my belly. I walked across the kitchen. It was dark. A kitchen machine was making a noise. It smelled like soap. There was a red glow across the room. I walked to it. It was the fireplace. I looked inside the fireplace. There were no flames. There was no turtle. It smelled like wood smoke.

I walked to the front door. I sat down. I leaned my back against the door. I didn't cry. There were lots of shoes. I didn't see my shoes. My shoes had ninja turtles.

I sat there. I heard something from upstairs. Then I heard something on the stairs. The kitchen light came on. I saw the woman walk out of the kitchen. She had different clothes. She was wearing a t-shirt and black sweatpants. She walked to me. She sat down beside me. She looked at me. I looked back at her. She tried to take my hand. I pulled it back. She looked at me. I looked at her. She said I'm sorry sweetie.

She stood up. She picked me up. My face went into her curls. Her curls were wet and cold. They smelled like hair soap. She walked with me to the kitchen. She opened a cupboard. She took down a bottle. It didn't have ninja turtles on it. She opened the fridge. She took out a jug. She removed its lid and poured something white into the bottle. She screwed on the bottle top. She gave it to me. I turned it over. It dripped on my hand. It was cold. I smelled my hand. It smelled like that one thing but it was different. I pushed it away. I liked orange in a bottle. I didn't like white in a bottle. The woman put the bottle in the sink. She put the jug back in the fridge.

She turned off the light in the kitchen. She walked up the staircase. The staircase was dark. The hallway light was on. Two doors were closed. One door was open. She walked to the open door. She brought me inside. She laid me on the small bed. She laid my head on the pillow. She covered me with the purple blanket. There was some light from the crack in the door.

The woman laid down on the yellow carpet next to the small bed. I could smell her wet cold hair. She touched the top of my head with her hand. I didn't move. She put her hand on my heart over the purple blanket. She looked at me. I looked at her. I couldn't see the color of her eyes. She closed her eyes. I could hear her breathing. I could feel her breath. Her breath felt warm.

I looked at the wall. The man holding the heart looked back at me. I didn't close my eyes. But my eyes closed. I fell asleep.

I woke up the next day in the house that smelled of wood smoke. I have slept many nights now in the house that smells of wood smoke. I sometimes ask the man holding the heart when I will go home. He has yet to answer me.

Twig

The night began just as I thought it was ending. I was driving back to St. Paul's West Side over the High Bridge, looking at the St. Paul downtown where my wife, Camila, and I'd just enjoyed some *Black Sheep* pizza, the neighbor girl watching our two kids back at the house. The moon fat and bright, the Muddy Mississippi beneath us, only tonight not looking muddy, but a deep and reflecting blue. All seemed at peace. Which I knew was an illusion. I am a former probation officer after all. But I let myself be carried on that dream, aided by my wife's glowing beauty. I felt good.

But peace is not lasting. My wife's phone dinged, and she pulled it out, read it, typed a message, and the phone dinged again.

"Who is it?" I asked.

"Monique," she said.

"What's wrong?"

"It's Twig," (his real name's Trayvon, but everyone calls him Twig on account of he's skinny as a twig). "He's been causing trouble with mom again. Refusing to follow her rules. Coming and going. Smoking. Monique gave him the ultimatum. Obey or get out. He chose to get out."

Twig. All of 12 years old roaming the East Side, doing God knows what in that godforsaken place.

And I knew what was coming next. And my smile left my face and my muscles tightened. I looked away from my wife, straight at the houses and businesses that lined Smith Avenue as I continued to drive home. Then she said it.

"Would you go look for him?"

A fork in the road. To say yes or no.

I'd told myself I was done with being the do-gooder that did no good. I became a probation officer because I thought I could make a difference. Thought that what the stew of fatherless boys needed was tough love, accountability, and a dad figure. But then I'd seen too many of my kids turn into the very stereotype of the neighborhood they came from. Too many mindless yes sirs, outright fuck-you's, or simple dead stares. And then there was K-Dott. Son to a dad serving a life sentence, and younger brother to a menace to the city, now six feet under. Yet all smiles, all the time. Told myself one kid. Quantity didn't matter. One kid and it'd be worth it. And I thought K-Dott was that kid. Which is why I fought for his release, told the judge he was a good kid, just had no role models. A little mentorship and supervision in the community, and he'd be a real gem. This in contradiction to his mother, who didn't want him released; said she couldn't bear the thought of the streets taking another of her son's. The judge released him; his mom gave me a death stare. Two days later, I got a call in the middle of the night from the Juvenile Unit. Dope deal gone bad. K-Dottt, two weeks from turning 15, shot and killed in an alley on the East Side.

I quit. Turned to insurance, sold it out of a former cobble shop on the West Side.

But Camila wasn't done. Somehow she meets these folks. She'll be in the checkout line at the grocery store, standing behind a mom with an infant strapped on her back, twin girls sitting side by side in the shopping cart, said cart near to overflowing with hot dogs, chicken nuggets, bags of chips, sugar drinks, and three or

four other kids like a whirlwind grabbing gum and Starbursts and other junk from the aisle. Then of course the EBT card won't work, and my wife will quietly slip the cashier our Visa, and the beleaguered mom her cell phone number. My wife's goodness is both inspiring, and annoying.

"OK," I said.

"OK, what?" said my wife.

"OK, I'll go look for him."

She gave me that look, of gratitude and solidarity or something. Like we were in this thing together.

A couple blocks later I dropped Camila back at our house, made sure the neighbor girl got safely home, turned around, and drove back down the High Bridge, then onto West Seventh, past the strung-out homeless milling about, the pub-crawling college students, and the middle-aged men and women leaving the cocktail bars, arms locked in first-date awkwardness. I drove toward the Saint Paul Saints Stadium at the edge of downtown, the lights on and a game in progress, a flurry of smells intersecting like cars. Grass growing. The stale river. New asphalt. Hot dogs. Then I crossed Mounds Boulevard and entered the East Side, the pungent odor of pot hanging heavy in the still air.

The East Side. What ought to be the mirror image of my West Side, the left and right lungs of the city, both on the bluffs, overlooking the Mississippi and the beautiful skyline. But a lung can collapse. Can become cancerous. Can even die.

I figured I'd start on Tonique's block (that's Monique's sister, where they'd been staying). It was a block off the bluffs. I turned down the lightless street and drove slowly, peering out the windows at the overgrown grass, the sunken porches, and garbage heaped nearly everywhere. I came upon a white Infiniti parked in the middle of the street, a dreadlocked man in a Vikings leather jacket talking to the bald driver through the window. I inched my way around them. They glared at me; I looked the other way.

I got to the end of the block, turned around, and came back the other way, again going around the Infiniti, this time faster since I thought I saw a Glock in Vikings' hands. This time, I found some teens gathered on a doorless porch at the end of the block. I stopped the van, rolled down the passenger window, and squinted at them, trying to make out Twig. Three of the kids from the porch saw me, pointed, laughed, and walked toward my car. Two of them had their hands in their pockets. They couldn't have been more than 12 or 13, but they walked with a fuck-you confidence that was unnerving. I could see that none of them was Twig. But I thought they might know where he was, so when they got within a few yards I called out, "You seen Twig?"

The one in a colorful shirt replied, "What's it to you?"

I said, "I'm lookin for him."

Colorful said, "You his P-O?"

"Nah. Just a friend."

"You don't look like no friend. You a dick?"

"In a shitty Kia? Give me a break. Where's Twig?"

"Ah, I see. You want plug, right?"

“Weed?”

“Dirty green stuff. He don’t got none. I do though. Want some?”

“I don’t want none of your weed. I’m just lookin for Twig. Seen him?”

One of the boys behind Colorful, wearing a white and black striped shirt, looking like the Hamburglar, said to Colorful, “Let’s stain his ass. He don’t want no green? Then what’s he doin on our turf?”

Colorful said, “Nah, he’s gotta be po-po. Or a P-O.”

“Look guys, I’m neither. I’m just lookin for Twig. For his mom. She’s lookin for him. Where is he?”

“You know ‘Nique?” said Colorful, raising his eyebrows and smiling. “Ooh boy, boys. He know Auntie! Digger ain’t gonna like that. How much you give us?”

“Give you?”

“Yeah, if we gonna snitch to Auntie, *and* not tell Digger, you gotta pay us. Snitches get stitches, right?”

“I’ll give you five bucks.”

“Woo woo woo! Five bucks!” mocked the Hamburglar.

“Fuck it!” said the third boy, wearing a Juice Wrld print screen shirt, with the flesh dripping off a skeleton face. “Stain him!”

Juice Wrld pushed Colorful out of the way and pulled a handgun from his sweater pocket and pointed it at my face.

I looked at the muzzle and smiled.

“You tryna rob me? With an air soft gun?”

“Ain’t no air soft gun,” said Juice Wrld. “It’s the real deal.”

“That ain’t real,” I said. “Look. At the tip. At the crack where you broke off the orange plastic.”

Juice Wrld turned the gun around and looked at it. He lowered the toy to his side. “Don’t matter. We’ll beat your ass anyways. Gimme your money.”

“No thanks. Get a job guys.” I put the Kia in drive.

“Yo, wait!”

A fourth teen emerged from the porch shadows. His big white teeth glowed.

“Ah, leave him alone,” said Twig, laughing. “He ain’t got no money anyways. Look at this piece of shit.” He pointed and kicked the driver’s side door of my van.

“You know this stain?” said Colorful.

“Yuh,” said Twig.

“P-O?”

“Nah. Just a white ass do gooder.”

“Get in Twig,” I said. “Let’s go get somethin to eat. You hungry?”

“Yuh,” said Twig. “Catcha later.” He opened the passenger door and got in. I drove toward Metro State University, watching Colorful, Hamburglar, and Juice Wrld return to the porch. As I turned left to get on the highway, I heard four or five explosions. I sped up, telling myself they were firecrackers (though July Fourth was weeks away), and didn’t look back. Twig didn’t even seem to notice.

“Yo, Twig,” I said. “What the hell took you so long? You were gonna let them rob me?”

He smiled. "I didn't know it was you."

"Lies. Who else drives a Kia around here?"

"It was kinda funny though." His hair twists like burnt Cheetos framed his smiling teeth.

"That's what you do to your friends, huh?"

"What friends?"

"Me."

"Oh. Ha. Them boys couldn't do nothin to you. They weak."

"Well, what if they got a real gun?"

"Then they might shoot you."

"Exactly. That don't bother you?"

He shrugged his shoulders.

"Where you wanna go?" I asked.

"Sonic?"

"Great."

I got on I-94 westbound. "Twig," I said, "why you givin your mama a hard time."

"Me? Shit."

"Watch your mouth."

"Fine. Shoot. It ain't me givin nobody a hard time."

"Not what I heard," I said. "I heard you wouldn't start yappin your mouth and pickin fights with your brothers and sisters."

"That what she said?" He shook his head like I didn't understand a damn thing about the world.

"Ok," I said. "Why don't you tell me why you're roamin the streets past 10, lookin for dumb white dudes to rob."

He laughed. "You think I think you a dumb white dude, Bok?" He calls me Bok since I'm allegedly the last person on earth who wears Reeboks.

"You sure didn't try to stop them."

"It was kinda funny."

"Yeah, real funny. But why you runnin around anyways? I know you're on the bracelet." I pointed to his ankle. "You're supposed to stay home."

"Stay home? Shit. Can't be in that house with that woman no more."

"Why's that?"

"Always my fault. That's why. Never Smoke's or Doogie's or Trig's. They always buggin me."

"Still. You're the one on probation. You gotta follow the rules."

"Yah, yah. And what about her? Followin her own rules?"

"What you mean?"

"Ah, never mind."

"Ah, come on now Twig. Don't leave me hangin."

"She always sayin to stay out the life, you know what I mean? But—"

"But what?"

"Never mind."

"Your mom ain't had it easy, Twig. She's tryin to give you a better life."

“Bullshit. She gives every asshole a better life. Then they just sit on the couch, eat the food, yapping and yellin.”

“Maybe you could talk to probation about stayin somewhere else for awhile. How about your dad?” He looked at me like I was joking, then, seeing I wasn’t, like I was a true idiot.

“Nah.”

“Why not? Your mom said he was doin good in Utah or somewhere out west?”

“He dead.”

“Dead?! Shit. Sorry, I didn’t know that.”

“Yuh. Mom don’t like to talk about it. He been dead for years.”

“What happened?”

“Gunned down. Bullet to the back of the head.”

“Ah Twig. Sorry. I didn’t know.”

“It’s aight. I never knew him none. Plus, it’s better than a bullet to the front of the face, right?” He laughed.

I didn’t know what to say then. But we’d exited I-94 and pulled up to the Sonic drive through.

“Sonic! May I take your order.”

“What you want Twig?”

“Two quarter pounder double cheeseburgers. Fries. Five-piece buffalo sauce jumbo popcorn chicken. Chili cheese coney dog. And a peanut butter master shake. Please.”

Kid couldn’t have been five foot and weighed barely 80 pounds. But he could pack it in. Like he hadn’t eaten for days. And he probably hadn’t, besides Takis, Skittles, and sugar drinks. I relayed the order and drove up to pay. They handed me his shake and my cone and told me the food would be ready in a minute.

I parked. Twig slurped his shake. He looked over and said, “Lemme drive.”

“My minivan? Yah right.”

“Ah, come on!”

“Yah right. I drive my kids in this thing. I can’t have it wrecked.”

“I’m a good driver.”

“How many cars you stole, Twig?”

He shrugged his shoulders.

“You want me to teach you to drive, the right way, not runnin from cops, you gotta stay crime free.”

“Crime free? Them wasn’t no crimes.”

“Really? How you figure?”

“We never take from the East. We go to Blaine or Shoreview, where everybody got six fancy cars. They don’t need em all.”

“Oh, so you’re like Robin Hood?”

“Huh?”

“You think it’s ok to steal from rich ass white guys, right? How so? What makes it right? What you do to deserve it?”

“Nothin. It’s just fun, that’s all. And they got more shit than they know what to do with.”

“It’s still stealin, Twig. It won’t get you anywhere. And besides, I know for a fact that you hoodlums rob little old Asian ladies more than anybody else. Awful what you guys do. Creep up on em as they’re getting out of their car, hit em over their heads, make off with a purse full of cash. And you know where they live? The East Side.”

He smiled.

“That’s awful, Twig.”

“Look, I ain’t never robbed nobody. Honest to god. Stealin, sure. But robbin, never.”

“Well cut it out, and I’ll teach you to drive.”

“Yuh, yuh. Whatever.” The food arrived and filled the van with the delicious aroma of grease and dressed-up cholesterol. Twig chowed with an abandonment that was inspiring, ketchup and mustard coloring his white tee.

“Ah shit,” he said, trying to wipe it off.

I handed him a napkin and entered I-94 headed east. “So, what’s it gonna be Twig? Your mama says you either come home and follow the rules, or I’m to take you to jail.”

“Better start drivin to the JDC then.”

“You’re tellin me you’d rather go to the JDC then follow your mama’s rules?”

“Ain’t no way to follow them rules, I already told ya.”

“Well just, I don’t know, stay in your room. Stay outta her way or whatever’s causin trouble.”

He gave me that look again like I didn’t know a damn thing.

“What?” I asked.

“Room? Stay in my room? Shit.”

Then I understood. I’d never been to Tonique’s place, but I’d seen enough places just like it to know there was likely no place for Twig to lay his head, what with brothers and sisters, cousins, Aunties, boyfriends, Grannies, and even friends and strangers crashing with no notice.

I’d exited 94 and was back on Mounds Boulevard, headed back toward Aunties’.

“Hold up, hold up, wait wait wait!” Twig yelled, pointing to the sidewalk.

I slowed. Before I’d come to a full stop, Twig jumped out and ran at a group of three kids pushing bikes.

Twig came up to the short, pudgy boy pushing a blue one, grabbed him by the backpack, spun him around, and punched him in the face. The two other boys, big boys, looking like twins who only got half a brain apiece, a stupid expression on both their faces, dropped their bikes and were on Twig instantly. They pushed him to the ground. One of the twins dropped to his knee, repeatedly punching Twig in the face who tried to block the punches with raised arms. The other twin raised his leg like a punter and kicked Twin in the midsection, while the pudgy boy climbed off the ground screaming and grabbed Twig’s throat.

I parked and jumped out of the van yelling, “Hey, hey, cut it out! Get off him!” They just kept pounding Twig. I ran to the jumble of flying fists and swinging legs and

pulled the boys off him and told them to scram. They looked at me and looked at Twig, not knowing what to do or think. The pudgy boy did a little head nod, which must have meant “nuff boys, we kicked his ass. Let’s get outta here,” because they all got on their bikes and rode away.

I turned to Twig, who lay in a lump on the grass, and reached down to help him up. He twisted his shoulder away from me, muffling sobs. I stepped back. He pushed himself up and tore after the bicycles which were barely visible further up Mounds Boulevard. I grabbed hold of his shirt, worried it would rip.

“Lemme go!” he shouted.

“That’s enough, Twig.”

“They stole my bike!”

“I said that’s enough! What the hell you thinkin, Twig? Come on man. Is that what you want? To get your ass kicked more? What’s wrong with you? You wanna spend your life in jail? Don’t you want something better for yourself? Stealin cars, runnin the streets, pickin fights? You wanna end up like your dad?”

As soon as the words poured out of my mouth, I wished I could have swallowed them, buried them deep beneath a landfill of other regrettable words I’d uttered and things I’d done. But instead, they hit their mark, appearing as bruises on the boy’s expression.

He looked at me, his face taking on a darkness and a distance I hadn’t seen before. That maybe I knew existed, just beneath the smiling surface, but hoped had not yet – and would never – stain his face. His face said, “fuck you,” but he didn’t mouth the words. He just turned and began walking up Mounds.

“Twig, where you goin?” I said.

“Home.” He didn’t turn around.

“Bullshit. You ain’t goin home.”

“The streets *is* my home.”

“Come on Twig. I’m sorry about what I said. Get in the car. I’ll drive you home.”

“Nuh. You was right. I’m just an asshole and a shithead. Gonna end up just like him.”

“It don’t gotta be like that. People care about you.”

He turned around and reached into his pocket. He pulled something out that looked like a small piece of paper. He stepped toward me and handed it to me. I looked down. I didn’t need to ask what it was. The resemblance was so striking, like a die cast replica. The same bony jaws. The ears that jutted out just slightly. The extra-long neck. The twisted hair. But then I noticed something. A dissimilarity. A goneness in the eyes of the kid in the photo. Like a jug emptied of its contents. That wasn’t in the eyes of the person in front of me.

“This your dad Twig?”

He shook his head yes.

“You look like him. But you don’t need to end up like him. It don’t gotta be that way.” Blood and snot ran down his nose. He wiped it off with his shirt, adding to the grass and dirt and ketchup stains already there. His eyes were wet. Then I did something. Didn’t think about it, or consider its meaning, just stepped forward and

hugged the kid. Didn't say anything, just hugged him. His body tensed. I could feel it, like a pinched hose. But then it relaxed, and he received it. I looked east, over Mounds and Kellogg and toward the lights of CHS Field. The baseball game had ended and the last of the cars in the parking lot were leaving.

"Hey Twig, get in the car. I want to show you something." He took a few steps away from me, turned, and looked back up Mounds. He looked back at me.

"Thanks for the food, Bok."

I looked at the van, and he looked at the van, and then he got in.

I drove and turned onto Kellogg Boulevard back toward downtown. I turned into the huge Union Depot parking lot just south of the stadium, empty now save for a couple cars parked overnight. I parked, got out, and walked around to the passenger's side door. I opened it and said, "Ready to show me what you got?"

"Huh?"

"Go ahead. Get in the driver's seat."

"What? Really?!"

He climbed over the center console into the driver's seat, like a kid taking the wheel of a bumper car. Although he could barely reach the pedals, he somehow seemed like he belonged there. Like his hands were made to grip a wheel. I said, "Go for it," and he did. He put it in drive and floored it, kicking up dirt and pebbles and making a beeline for the exit onto Kellogg back toward Mounds. I thought, oh shit, I have made myself an accomplice to what? Why'd I think this was a good idea? Was he headed back into the deepening night to find and run down his three assailants? I put my hand on the dash and opened my mouth to interject when suddenly he spun the wheel, slammed on the brake, and we began gliding, like we were barely tethered to earth. Then he spun the wheel again and punched the gas.

He drove that piece of crap Kia like he was in Formula One. He picked up speed in the long straight runs and then twisted the wheel and floated over the loose gravel. He spun donuts, pushing my body up against the door. He slammed on the brake, throwing the van into reverse, and sped furiously backwards, then yanked the wheel, and we flew forward into space unknowingly. What was forward and what back? What left and what right? What the past, and what future? It didn't matter because the immediacy of the moment was vitally clear. He drove with such reckless abandon that all seemed to coalesce to a single point: everything outside the van was nothing, ceased to exist, save for the grip of the tires on the ground.

After twenty minutes we were both were breathless, sweating, even though we'd only been sitting there. He put the van in park and turned to me and said, "Alright Bok, take me home."

When I pulled back onto his street, red strobe lights spun and danced. I gazed through them, seeing the white Infiniti I'd seen earlier parked along the curb. Baldie, now handcuffed, was also parked on the curb, watched by two policeman who were talking and pointing at a mass of something cordoned off by yellow caution tape halfway down the block.

I pulled in front of Tonique's house, and he said "seeya Bok," and hopped out and ran up the three front concrete steps, nimbly missing the largest cracks, and opened

the front door. The door shut behind him and I put the car in drive, but then heard tremendous shouting and cursing and banging from inside the house.

I hesitated. Considered. Then began my drive home, looking over the luminous city as I went. At the Capitol, dozens of lights illuminating the white granite exterior and the Quadriga, a four-horse statue known unironically as the Progress of the State. At the Dorothy Day Center, the homeless milling around outside appearing to me not quite-so-sad and downtrodden as usual, a few of them dipping their hips to the trombone notes of jazz on a radio. I drove up the High Bridge, the hundreds of lamppost globes lighting my way, a man-made Jacob's Ladder. At the top, I looked back at the Cathedral dome, towering over the Capitol and the downtown and even the East Side on the opposite bluff; the dome appearing for once not as a barrier between heaven and earth, but their meeting place.

But when I entered the West Side, the left lung no longer in my rearview mirror, I couldn't help but feeling tremendously sad at the bruised world, its shadows so blue.

I got home about 11:30, checked on the sleeping kids, put on my pajamas, and crept into my room. My wife was under the covers, sleeping sideways, using both her hands as a pillow. I stared at her for a spell. Then I got under the covers, wrapped my arms around her, and waited for the sleep that I knew would be a long time coming.

Peripatetic

Sunrise's radius. Walking a distance outloud. A collateral of stair cases. Seed caught in
between
the teeth. Romances
shelved in the drugstore, smelling of sandwich bread. Flies waiting patiently at doors.
Paint on
woodwork stretching its arms.
Her pocketbook containing combinations of locks left locked. Crippled pencil broken at
both ends.

Loquacity

It is ornamentation that we decorate. Tiles. Wallpaper. Pictures and photographs of.
Lamp
in its shade. Peppers
green. Peppers red. Rude incipience of the born. Unmediated, a star chart tells of
anomalies
that the evening inspires.
Wildflowers never to be tamed. Music from a radio turned off. Walk to the lake having
no
directions, waves on
water. That there will be an end, unverified. Telephone call nearly expected. The signal:
busy.

Frank Lloyd Wright

Refraction, as simple as. Fly caught in the mystery of the house. Boxes of everything owned

and packed, are boxes
of what would be dire to forget. And, release. An alternative the same as its opposite.
M and

N. Boundaries with sub-
sidence. Coinciding with miracles in the everyday are electric outlets. Escape is
offered: a hint

lime centered. Obsolete
grape is drained of its blood, a wart is left. Why gargoyles hold their heads up there,
cathedral found boring.

Pattern in the quilt, plan of a city never to be. Populace votes, the monument is: a
lawn.

Dreamlandia

Jim Daniels

Such a plain place, that small patch of weeds behind the anonymous white garage on a street lined with them. Yet possibility existed there, leaning against the green mold on the lowest wooden slats. In that narrow space, the sun was not allowed, and perhaps that's what gave the space its power—the absence of God, the dim perfection of the lack of heaven—heaven, it stirred in him such confusion and terror. What would it mean to live *forever*? How could it be possible to extend beyond the arc of life. Like Noah's Ark, floating through space above the earth? What did *above* even mean?

He crouched on the small slope of earth that raised the garage slightly higher than the yard, which had once been a swamp and still flooded during heavy rains. Beside him, the broken shovel leaned against the wall like he did. The dogshit-scooping shovel. His father had pushed too hard on it against some immovable object and broke the handle in two. Still long enough for a boy to use, to scoop crap into a grocery bag to be dropped into the trash can on Thursday and taken to the curb.

The boy wasn't good at doing this, his most important chore. The father scolded him. He never understood that he was giving the boy the attention he craved as one of seven children in that boxy three-bedroom house. His father seemed more proud of the garage than the house. Spotless inside except for small stains from oil and antifreeze and gas drips. Neatly categorized tools racked and stacked or on hooks against the wall. The red jack ramps placed carefully on top of each other in a corner.

The dog was big and the shit noticeable. But behind the garage—the dog never shit in that thin strip between garage and cyclone fence. The burn barrel for paper trash rusted there—the one task the boy loved—the char and floating ash, the matches in his pocket in lieu of change, the stinging tang that meant definite destruction.

For his confirmation, his father had given him his first wallet. Was he an adult now—a man with an empty wallet? The church thought so. He had chosen his saint: Guy, the patron saint of dancers and comedians, though he was neither.

He had spent time with the lives of saints. They reminded him of biographies of baseball players he'd read—a formula to follow: overcoming adversity. Miracles. He had stopped collecting baseball cards, but imagined trading cards for saints. With bubble gum. No, with hosts! No one could scold him in that cool damp place. Sometimes he picked a long weed and chewed on it like kids in movies.

Against the fence up on bricks rested the three garbage cans that his older brothers carried out full each Thursday night and that he returned empty each Friday.

The boy liked routine. As an altar boy, he liked lighting candles and ringing bells. He liked the bright stink of incense and the dark hollow echo of an empty church when he arrived before dawn to get ready for mass.

The boy liked a lot of things—liked girls now, though he feared them. One girl at school had begun discretely placing folded notes beneath the lid of his desk. He liked things and feared things. Behind the garage, no one missed him. They all had better things to do.

Sure, the dog would jangle past to pee or squat on the other side of the yard. To bark and snuffle. *His* dog. The plan had been to give him, the strange child, something to love. The lost child among the seven, alone, smack in the middle, a pause on either side while his mother lost two others. His dog, and he couldn't even do that right. The broken shovel, the dark piles dotting winter snow, melting into spring muck.

He took deep breaths of damp air. He stared at the garage in the yard behind theirs on the next street. The parents there had the loudest fights. Everybody knew. The boy's mother sometimes intervened. The boy's father was rarely home, off building cars for Mr. Henry Ford. The boy's father saved his words. He engraved his initials on all his tools. Once, he mixed extra cement and let each child make a small brick and scratch their initials in it, then peel off the shoebox. These were the bricks the garbage cans rested on. The dog, a mutt, had been a reject from another family moving away. It already had a name, Buddy. Buddy, like their friendship had been imposed on him in advance, like the ownership of the dog. Buddy was getting old, grizzled around the muzzle, limping up the stairs. One day while he's at school, his mother will borrow a car and take the dog away and he will never see it again.

That's the way in his family. No screaming fights. Vows of silence in the face of grief or even joy. Level as a level, his father said. He, who lost two siblings growing up and was instructed to never say their names. Would screaming be allowed in heaven? The boy felt dampness seep up through his jeans as the sun set and the burn barrel glowed with small red edges of paper on which he had conveyed all his dreams and wonderings.

Heaven never made any sense except being the opposite of dying. Do you get to keep your pets? Do you get to keep the notes that girl gave you? Forever and ever and ever, a spiral with no center. Wouldn't you get bored? Wouldn't you do something bad?

The boy and the neighbor's dog Queenie shared a special silence. That was the dog he really loved—someone else's neglected pet. Smaller than Buddy—delicate, silent and watchful. The two older boys in that house couldn't have cared less, nor the parents, who never emerged into the yard—yet the grass mysteriously got cut, and the crap mysteriously disappeared. The boy hopped the fence often to retrieve the balls he'd thrown over himself. Queenie did not bark. Queenie welcomed the intrusions. She stood at the fence and watched the boy think his thoughts in Dreamlandia.

Dogs did not live as long as humans, the boy told the neighbor's dog. The dog nodded, or maybe did not. Queenie. Someone gave it that name. Not like Buddy. a name that mocked the betrayal of his first owner. If you had your pets in heaven, who cleaned up their shit?

Nobody lives forever, he told the dog. Thank God, he said. And he laughed. *God*, he said. He laughed again. Then, he stopped laughing.

Bird, Beast & Flesh

David Mohan

I met you on the dunes one morning. I was out jogging. It was one of those immediate things. You had the furtive look of a long-haul gull, watching for scraps. The dried-up scurf of foam blew up the beach like tumbleweed. We kissed.

Next thing I knew you'd moved inland. I saw you in the town the following week. When our eyes met in the street you had the look of a garden-scavenging fox caught in the orbit of torch-light. I brought you home. In our bed you bit my neck, my mouth.

Soon, I began seeing you more often. When we went out to restaurants you'd tuck your napkin around your neck and gorge yourself, every inch the wolf, then pat your lips daintily, a cat. When the candles were lit you eyed me hungrily across our table.

One day, you drove me to a forest. You said, "Trust me, just this once." And with a shake of your head you turned into a stag and leapt into the thicket. I followed your swerves, your elegant silhouette. When we could run no more we collapsed into a bed of leaves, exhausted, laughing, in love with the hunt.

You took me back there night after night, a different creature each time. I chased your owl call, and looked for the yellow gleam of your eyes in the trees. And when I called your name, you swooped into my hand.

We visited rivers when you wanted to bask on your back as an otter, a fish clutched to your chest tenderly, like a sleeping lover. I dived in and swam alongside you until you slipped away, curving, sinuous, your sleek back shining.

On marshy ground I let you burst from my fist like a firework, swooping up in the form of a hawk. Then, coasting amidst thermals, you glided above me, your shadow close to mine.

Sometimes, close to dawn, we would tramp through deserted fields. And you would run in circles as a hare, chasing yourself, predator and prey all at once. Of course, I would try to mimic in my club-footed way your deft skating dance. And sometimes, you would

freeze and let me cup your delicate chest. I'd feel your heart beating feverishly underneath your fur.

Other nights we'd stop home, too tired to roam. But courtship was always a dance for you. Love was always a game and a chance and a dare.

You hid and I was meant to seek you out, unearthing your web where it hung in a corner, intricate and secret; or where you buzzed behind the curtain; or where you crept near the wainscot and rubbed your paws in the shadows. You slunk and swept and drifted, omniscient as dust.

Soon enough, you tired of me. You had too many other options, shapes, escape routes. And you were too wild and too strange to be anyone's lover for long.

The last time we met was on our original beach. We strolled together hand in hand in parody of long-time lovers who have chosen to eke out their eternity like swans. And next thing, without warning, you were gone. I looked about to see if you had scuttled off sideways like a crab, or sloped away for a beach run like a dog, or taken off to distant lands like an albatross.

But then I saw you at a distance, your seal head ducking and weaving through waves.

You swam along the shore line for a while as I walked barefoot along the sea.

Then with a wild splash of salt you entered the cold blue-grey surface of a breaker.

The dried up scurf of foam blew along the beach like tumbleweed.

Surrender

Rimma Kranet

I am being escorted outside, held upright by two women I hardly know. I can feel their strong hands, their fingers gripping my forearms, gently leading me with soft determination, step after step into the waiting car. It is a cold December night. Under my feet, the stone steps soak up the rainwater, their light shade of grey turning black. The car in the courtyard is black like the stairs, and I can hear the water slap against it like a whip on bare skin.

The shadow in the driver's seat is my husband. I am pregnant with our child and wonder why that doesn't make us kin enough for me to stay. But I am not a blood relative. So I go.

Hard as I try, I slip, and apologetically hit the ground to a chorus of sighs and exclamations in a language which I now call my own. I don't understand why there is no light when there is a light switch on the left side of the wall, I know it's there because I pass by it daily on my way to Piazza Garibaldi, adorned by trees and crowded benches made of the same grey stone as the stairs which tonight have eluded me.

It's not a hard fall, creating a stir and a wet spot on the back of my pants.

The inside of the car smells of mold. My husband turns on the heat and starts pulling out of our driveway which on most nights is blocked by illegally parked cars of those passing the hours at the adjacent bar. But tonight, avoiding the rain is the only activity and the gate swings open freely to the outside world.

"I'll take you to Aunt Gina's. It's just for one night. She's waiting for you." he says. He has a questioning tone, as though the decision were up to me.

Aunt Gina is not my aunt. She is an elderly widow who comes to the house after mass on Sundays to see my mother -in-law. At Christmas she is the one who brings the carved, gilded image of the "Madonnina" from house to house for a holiday blessing. By the time it reaches our house countless lips have been pressed against its surface, and just as many prayers released into the heavens while imploring her image for a safe passage into the new year.

We are the only ones on the narrow road heading out of town. The rain hits the windshield in bursts, like water being pumped from a well.

My husband reaches for my hand to find it limp with disappointment.

"You know I have no choice. I can't ask my relatives to go to a hotel. How would that look? What would you have me do? They are elderly people."

He knows he's wrong and is grasping at forgiveness. Appearances are at the forefront of his discomfort. He has the fear of invoking local gossip, were he not to welcome his out-of-town relatives and offer them refuge on such a gruesome night. Through my water-streaked window I see the coral pink Hotel swim by and disappear, it's walls looking animated.

Aunt Gina lives on a hill a few miles away, across the street from the cemetery. Her land had been deemed unfit for construction by the city, a plot that should have remained barren, but her husband didn't heed the warning and built a home across the street from fields of death. Now every Sunday she watches the procession of mourners making their way up the hill to keep their dead company. She sees their familiar faces, their bodies, two by two, arms entwined so as to keep one another from falling, or from slipping into grief along the way.

Beyond the concrete barrier that divides the living from the dead there are walls filled with bones, decorated with flowers, protected by religious symbols, names inscribed on shiny metal plates. This must be how God keeps track, how he files away all of his disciples.

On Sundays this cemetery is a winter garden, humid with the breath of the living, a greenhouse of memories in bloom. From Gina's house you can walk a straight line into the mouth of the graveyard, without having to veer to the right or to the left. The front porch has stairs leading directly to its regal iron gates. Once this Auntie is on her death bed they will only have to carry her out of her front door feet first.

As we drive up to the curb, I see her small figure standing against the light in the doorway. She appears to be on the brink of leaping into the rain, and a feeling of tenderness overwhelms me.

I look at my husband's face who is leaning over me in wanting. But I do not owe him the gesture of affection he is seeking. I climb out of the car and try to walk as fast as I can toward the light of the front porch. My hands are in my pockets, wrapped around my middle from the inside. Bowing low under my hood, I watch my feet take brisk steps to avoid the puddles, the toes of my shoes already sopping wet.

The inside of Aunt Gina's house is very bright. She smiles, exposing the two gold teeth on the right side of her mouth, one next to the other and ushers me down a narrow hallway of closed doors. I watch the backs of her heels in their thick black stockings as she scurries in silence. She shows me to my bedroom which has walls the color of French vanilla and a single wooden cross hanging above the bed.

I am Jewish, but I do not mind.

I moved to a foreign country for love, an immigrant times two. Once out of necessity, then later by choice. My father tells me I have a restless nature. The experts call it something else. They say longing to be "elsewhere" is a defect of all refugees. Whatever it is, I carry it with me day in and day out, referencing it as you would a history book or a favorite playlist.

The bedroom window looks onto a field littered with empty wine bottles. A discarded Heineken can stands out as a sign of the times in an otherwise anonymous pile of garbage as though it's waiting for the owner of that good time to return and claim it. The rain falls, hitting the can, tap tap tapping out a morse code.

Further down, the land is disheveled, wild with rocks and boulders.

In the silence I think of my mother. She would have raised a fuss. She would not be pushed out of her own bed. Her understanding of marriage does not allow for such surrender. Her life is guided by an invisible manual that only she can access. In this

book there are instructions for everything, from washing dishes to breastfeeding. At times I wish that I too had such large toms to consult for internal guidance.

“Let me check,” is my mother’s favorite expression. To her, everything is dictated. The Soviet gospel has corroded her. She holds on to the reigns of her memory with unharnessed strength, with fingers like roots curved inward, nails digging into the soft soil of her palms. She can no longer “sleep it off” with a “deep Hypnotic sleep,” like the one they prescribed in the sanitariums in Tashkent during the war. She lived in a hut made of clay back then, recoiling from the dank, hard floor into a stranger’s lap, like a household pet.

After forty years in the United States she is still dreaming in past tense, unable to conjure up a new identity, one free of supervision.

But I am “loose” with my thinking, my reasoning too messy. Lying in bed I am finally warm under the two matching down comforters. The freshly ironed sheets are hand embroidered, white on white.

desiderium

now

Red seeps over the horizon. Orange follows, and yellow, fuchsia, lavender—and a baby pink that makes an image of a crib flash across her mind.

She clutches her purse tighter to her chest, the chill stinging her skin through the lace of the dress. The concrete bites into the worn soles of her flats, and with every step, her bones smash against each other, joints jarring and aching.

She ignores her reflection in each passing store window, and the occupants don't even glance up from their laptop screens or animated conversations to notice a woman in a wedding dress hurry past, her blazing red hair blowing in the wind.

The bell tinkles, and warm air hits her, enclosing her in a hug. A teenage boy wanders from a back room, a smile plastered on his face. "What can I do for you today?" His eyes flit to her dress and then up to her eyes.

"I'll just look around." It's the first time in a while that her voice has resembled anything like normal.

"Of course." He disappears into shelves displaying children's toys.

Shoes muffled on the carpet, she drifts from steel rack to steel rack, her hand caressing the cloths hanging, the tiny garments soft to her skin.

She thinks of mornings buttoning these outfits and looking into a smiling face. Alexander coming in, already dressed, coffee in an outstretched hand. Taking the warm mug, feeling him wrap his arm around her waist, hearing the deep rumble of his voice as he coos. The *See you when I get home, baby*, and the footsteps resonating from the room, into the hallway, and out the door.

Out of her life.

She thinks of mornings she'll never get. The peace, the happiness, the normalcy.

The catalyst of this entire nightmare was a morning. A morning of happiness.

two weeks earlier, morning

She sat on the closed lid of the toilet, breathing in, breathing out. In, out, in, out.

Everything she's wanted for the past few years was about to come true—no, everything they've both wanted.

She forced herself to stamp out the hope rising in her chest.

Those five minutes were the longest of her life. But seeing those two little pink lines inside the little white window was worth it.

now

She glances out the window, watching a father push a double stroller past and point at something in the distance to his children. One of them is ginger. Like hers might have been.

“Is there anything I can help you with?” The teenage boy appears behind her, closer this time—she can see the individual acne scars on his face. He should probably get those treated.

“Actually,” she says, digging through her purse. “I was wondering if you had this baby mobile. Same color and brand and everything.”

He looks at her phone screen. “Yeah, I’ll bring it up to the front desk.”

She wanders to the cash register, picking at a stray thread on her dress as the boy sets the mobile on the counter and punches in the item.

“So are you expecting?” His words hold no genuine interest, and he doesn’t even bother with eye contact.

“Yeah.” She hopes her voice is convincing, thinking of an alternate universe where she doesn’t have to lie.

He glances at her flat stomach. “So you’re having a girl?”

“No, I don’t know yet.” She taps her foot, watching light catch on a hair bow embedded with plastic stones. Thinking about how that used to happen on the diamonds of her ring.

“Oh.” A few more clicks. “I just assumed ‘cause the mobile’s pink.”

“Oh, yes.” She fiddles in her purse for her wallet, not looking at him. “Actually, it is a girl.”

He shoots her an odd look but tells her the total without any other questions. Bag in one hand and receipt in the other, she sits on a bench outside a coffee shop.

She paid without really noticing the amount, and her eyebrows shoot up when she looks at the receipt. Dread—a feeling that has become much more familiar to her lately—twists around her.

—

one week earlier, night

She scanned the document, her eyes skipping to the number at the bottom. Her heart dropped at the massive figure. *But it’s all gonna be worth it.*

“Why are you all dressed up?” Behind her, the refrigerator door snapped open, and Alexander popped the top off of a beer.

She could feel his eyes on the back of her green chiffon dress. “Uh, I just wanted to.”

“You and the green.” He didn’t sound amused by it, just annoyed.

She picked at the shiny fabric, letting the material flow through her fingers. Green was her signature color—it complemented her red hair so well. Alexander used to crack jokes about how she treated every day as if it were St. Patrick’s Day. *What, are you scared of being pinched?*

“So what did you want to talk to me about?” The couch dipped as Alexander settled into it. He leaned back, beer in hand, and raised it to his lips.

“I have some news.” Her voice trembled slightly. She threw the paper back on the coffee table, but continued to stare at it.

“Good news?”

She hesitated, then nodded, closing her eyes but still seeing the number behind her eyelids.

Alexander breathed a sigh of relief. “I could use some good news.”

She looked up then, and studied him, placing her hand over her stomach absentmindedly. Dark bags and wrinkles covered his face, and she was sure those hadn’t been there before—but before what? Had she been so caught up in wanting a carbon copy of Alexander that she hadn’t been paying attention to the original?

This wasn’t going at all how she dreamed of it. She wanted a happy doctor’s visit, and an extravagant reveal, something she could post on social media and get likes and comments.

“I’m pregnant.”

The words fell between them, landing in the half-foot space he’d left on the couch. He was close enough to her that she could lean over and wrap her arms around him, but she didn’t.

His brow furrowed, the wrinkles in his forehead deepening.

“What?” she asked. She hadn’t even told him the bad news yet.

He closed his eyes and sighed, as if her question was stupid. “I have something to tell you.” He told her how he’d hooked up with some girl, but only because he was stressed about paying for the treatments, and it was only supposed to be one night and it was a mistake, and it hadn’t meant to go on for months, and *Baby, I hope we can move on from this.*

“And did she have an STD?”

His head snapped up. “I—uh, I don’t think so.”

“Really?” Sarcasm colored her voice. Her eyes bore into his, but she made no other sign of anger, of betrayal. “Cause I have one.”

She remembered the vice that had wrapped itself around her heart when she found out.

Alexander stared at her deadly calm. “I’m sorry.”

“You know that STDs cause miscarriages.” It wasn’t a question—it was an accusation. Nothing that would hold up in court, but an accusation nonetheless.

The wrinkles folded into themselves even deeper, as if they were trying to hide from the shame, the guilt.

He’d always said there wasn’t anything worse than watching her cry, so she didn’t hold back, imagining each tear as a knife stabbing his heart. She allowed her wails to fill the room. After a few minutes, there were no more tears left to cry, and no words left to say.

Yet—“I’m sorry,” Alexander whispered.

And she was out the door.

—

now, night

The door closes with a *click*. She flings her shoes onto the antique rug her mother-in-law gave them for their sixth-year anniversary. At their party, an uncle made some remark about a seven year itch, and she and Alexander laughed.

“Where are we now?” she asks, flipping the lights on. She shakes her head, letting her voice get louder and louder. “There’s no us anymore. You ran off with her and—”

She clamps a hand over her mouth, remembering the complaints the other tenants filed. “Shh, you have to be quiet.”

She giggles, flinging her purse onto the couch, where it collides with an empty pizza box. The metal of the straps clink on a wine bottle that she picks up. There are a few gulps left, but alcohol is a no-no for pregnant women.

She sets the glass on the coffee table.

Holding the baby mobile she assembled on the walk here, she tiptoes into the hallway, careful not to wake her sleeping husband.

He has to get up early tomorrow.

She passes the doorway to their bedroom, the crisp, empty sheets taunting her. It’s been a long time since anything more than dust mites touched those sheets, much less the long nights of passion and twisted limbs.

Passing the mirror around the corner is always jarring, no matter how much Alexander told her she’ll get used to it. She hates being scared by her own reflection, watching it pop up out of nowhere. Alexander liked the mirror, a family heirloom, but she always thought it was too gaudy and way too large.

They kept the mirror.

She can see her double in it—the white of her dress glowing eerily in the dark, the flaming hair adding a burst of color to the dress like a pool of blood around an angel’s wings.

She looks away.

Down the hallway, the next door is open. Moonlight cascades through the window, illuminating streams of paint that run from the walls over the baseboard. Empty wine bottles and crumpled soda cans litter the floor. A hastily-built crib slumps against one corner, and a battered dresser occupies the wall near the window, chips missing from the only slightly glossy wood.

“I got you more decorations,” she says softly, flipping the lights on.

The room looks even worse in the light, but she doesn’t notice. Walking over to the crib, she kicks aside a mattress covered with a blanket, revealing a dark spot of red crusted in the carpet.

“Just a little something,” she says. Carrying the baby mobile, she knocks a wooden box in front of the crib. She steps on it to hang the mobile from the ceiling, stretching up and wrapping her hand around the railing for support.

Snap. The crib crumples, and the entire world crashes beneath her.

Every Dancing Flame

“All of which mattered little. There was the fire, promising life with every dancing flame.” - Jack London, To Build a Fire



Dear Edmund,

I write to you about the two little girls who play in the woods. They are out every day, all day. They seem to be twins, for they appear and dress identically; they have unbound hair and wear pastel-colored dresses, as is the fashion for girls their age.

No weather—not rain, nor sleet, nor snow—forces them to abandon their games, during which they dance around the old well on the edge of the forest. Their childish squeals seem to float around the house, entering in any window that I have propped open to dispel my home of the unbearable summer heat.

Many times I’ve considered going outside to ask them the whereabouts of their mother, their home—but every time something stops me. Edmund, something scares me about these girls. When they are breaking from their fun around the well, they will stare up at my window here on the third floor. Mayhaps it is merely chance that they look when I am pacing my chambers, or writing to you, or cleaning my rifle—but something does not feel right. I sense their eyes on me as I am going about my business, and it discomforts me greatly, sending shivers up my spine and prompting me to revive the fire in my grate.

Perhaps I am simply unaccustomed to dealing with the antics of children, so if you have any words of wisdom, I incline you to share.

I welcome your proposal to have Benjamin come stay with me, and I express my gratitude that my family business may be passed on despite the fact that I am an unmarried man and have no heir of my own flesh and blood.

Please let me know the details of his arrival as soon as possible. I’ve enclosed an amount that I think ample enough to begin this process.

Say hello to Mary and the children for me.

*With best regards,
Your brother Silas*



The little girls were watching the window while the man penned his letter. The flame of his candle swayed, casting shadows on the walls, and every so often, he would glance up from his desk to check if the girls were still there.

They were always there.

Heads tilted up to the house, they stood by the well. The plank roof creaked in the slight breeze, the small wooden bucket stirring. Insects crawled on the rough stones and buzzed in the thickly-warm air—but never flying too close to the girls. They skirted around them, soaring into the sky. The sun descended to the west, leaving behind streaks of fire.



Greetings Mr. Wellington,

I have been working diligently to uncover the mystery that surrounds your estate. It seems that your grandfather, George Wellington, lost the deed to the land in a fire, as he did not trust in banks to keep his deed secure.

Wellington accused a neighbor, Mrs. Theresa McCoy, of setting fire to his house. This claim was dismissed by the entire town due to Wellington's known drinking problem. He was afterwards laughed out of court when he tried to sue for damages.

This house was rebuilt by Wellington and his sons. The only part of the original estate that remained intact was the well on the edge of the southern forest.

Of course, since the deed is lost, the only way your nephew will be able to inherit the estate is if you file for a new deed.

*Yours in service,
Hugh Alexander, P.I.*



Silas Wellington did not know much of anything. He did not know how to go about procuring a deed, nor how to cook his roast over the fire without burning it, nor how to catch the fancy of a lovely lady. But least of all, he did not know the history of the house.

The girls danced around the well, running and twirling in circles. Their chatter rose around the forest and hovered to the man's study, where he was bent over his desk.

Silas did not care to listen much, but on the few instances that he tried, their voices seemed too quiet to hear and their words too indistinct. He would then shake his head, admonishing himself for being distracted, and return to what he was writing.



Mr. Alexander,

I thank you for your dedication to my situation. I find your information tremendously helpful. Since the passing of my father, I have wished to learn more about my ancestors and the estate, and you provide the key to that knowledge.

Have you any details about the accusation from my grandfather to this Mrs. Theresa McCoy?

I await your response. I have dropped off the envelope with your secretary, including more payment to address my aforementioned question.

*With my gratitude,
Silas Wellington*



Silas Wellington was in the parlor for tea time. Through the window he could see the girls leaping around the well, playing some sort of tag. The skirts of their dresses bloomed like flower petals in the wind, and their hair—waist-length and light-colored—drifted behind them.

They were ethereal, like the angels painted in the cathedral near Silas's childhood home. He'd escaped to this church for a bit of peace and quiet, which he couldn't get around Emund's children. But unlike his siblings, Benjamin had been calm and collected, even as a small child. That was when Silas had decided to make him his successor.

Silas sifted through the mail scattered on the coffee table. He threw the bills back on the table, nearly landing on his plate of orange-flavored scones, before he reached the envelope with no return address.



Greetings Mr. Wellington,

Your payment is not sufficient enough. My secretary will forward a letter to you at the soonest convenience.

Mrs. Theresa McCoy suffered the losses of loved ones in a fire in her own home. This drove her to insanity, during which she was accused of setting fire to your grandfather's house, and her husband placed her in a mental institution. She would continuously tell the nurses that "he" started the fire and "took them from her." She never named any particular person, but I would assume that your grandfather is the man of whom she speaks.

As long as you are satisfied with my work, I believe that this is where the book of your family history closes. If you need more work done in the future, you have my address.

*Yours in service,
Hugh Alexander, P.I.*



The girls made their way across the lawn. They had never ventured past the well.

But there they were, placing each bare foot before the other, never rustling the grass that the man was too busy to cut.

Busy reading in his study, Silas Wellington didn't notice the girls abandoning their usual post, their eyes trained on his window as their pale feet took every slow step toward the house.

The door to the house was oak and large, and a bronze knocker adorned it. The matching doorknob remained untouched with the girls' approach, but it turned, seemingly of its own accord, and the door swung open.



Dear Silas,

I would advise you to leave the girls be. They are only children, and they mean no harm. Occupy yourself with other activities, and allow them to have their fun, even if it is to be on your property.

Benjamin will be arriving on the stage in two weeks time. He has things to settle here before he can leave. I thank you for the sum you enclosed, as it will pay for his train ticket and for his new clothes that are more suitable to inheriting your business.

*Write soon,
Edmund*



The girls passed through the foyer to the parlor, pausing at the mantle, upon which were golden, oval picture frames. Black and white pictures showed a woman with her hair pulled back in a tight bun, two boys on her lap; a Union soldier holding a rifle; and finally, a man busy over the freshly-laid foundation of a house, grimacing at the person behind the camera.

The girls did not move a muscle, but this last frame fell off the mantle, crashing onto the dark wood floor and splintering in a way that metal did not. The glass shattered into a million pieces, and a stray spark from the fireplace landed on the man's face. Within the blink of an eye, a flame consumed the picture, and it shriveled up, quickly turning to ash.

The girls watched this happen with empty expressions before turning their attention to the golden candlesticks. One of the candles toppled off the mantle to the carpet, and a fire caught, spreading steadily around the parlor before trailing to the hallway that led to the staircase.



Dear Edmund,

The strangest thing about these girls is that no one else seems to notice them. I've inquired in town a few times, but every time I am informed that there are no pairs of twin girls within these parts. Even the gardener and the maid give me odd looks when I mention them.

But while I sit and write this, I look out at the well, and they are nowhere to be seen. This is most unusual, as they typically appear and disappear when the sun does.

In other news, I am in the process of obtaining the deed for the land. I am enclosing copies of the letters from my private investigator, who gave me news of a fire

The hairs on Silas Wellington's arm raised, and his fountain pen stopped scratching on the paper. He could hear something—soft popping sounds, and a gentle roar.

Setting down his pen with a clink, he stood to investigate the source, his chair catching on the carpet. He crossed the room and grabbed the brass doorknob—but drew his hand back quickly. The skin on his hand flared; the metal was hotter than the summer sun at noon.

He pulled his shirt out of his pants and used the cloth to protect his hand as he threw the door open—only to be met with a wall of fire, singeing his eyebrows and heating his skin like a fever.

Taking a step back, he slammed the door, the force shaking the door frame. Flames consumed the wood as soon as he did, tearing at the stained-glass arch above. Silas's head whirled to the window, and he hurried over to it, almost tripping when the corner of the carpet caught his shoe.

The heat had already surrounded him. His breath struggled to reach his lungs through the thickness of the air. In a moment the fire would engulf the entire room, and it was a matter of whether he would burn or suffocate to death.

Picking up his desk chair, he rammed it into the panes of the window, the sound of glass breaking not audible over the shriek of the fire. He glanced back at the door, seeing that the fire had spread past it, eating at a corner of his desk. The letter he had been writing was curling up, the whiteness of the paper swallowed by red and orange.

Silas threw himself at the window, thrusting his arm out in the clear air, the broken glass around the frame like a halo slicing into his arm.

No one could hear his scream as the fire crept closer to him, millimeter by millimeter.

Below in the parlor, the girls leaped around in the flames, their feet brushing the wood and carpet that were blackening to ash. They danced, and danced, and danced.

Billy at the Foodbank

Billy scrambles through the produce for something soft enough for a man with no teeth, grinning and grateful to the volunteer kids, earning their school credits and discovering some tough truths.

Billy's hands are dirt-crusting and sinewy, his forlorn covid mask slipping below his nose. He talks Kierkegaard and Descartes and the history of injustice that keeps rolling over people with no means or recourse.

He asks them what they study, taking the spongy bread he can easily mash in his mouth. The kids dig around for him – Pie? Pudding? Canned peaches in a glut of syrup?

Billy loads his trolley, his thin jacket not much good in the splintered January rain. Don't stop reading, he tells the kids. Don't stop learning. Keep your brain alive, your precious, precious brain.

Dispute

Boys holler down on the corner,
shattered glass and tempers
in a hot flurry, the glare
of July a sizzle-white.

Words whip around,
little black birds with razor wings,
spill into the street dotted
with old cigarettes and pools
of blue plastic.

Boys blazing over some small thing,
a measure of a life spent cagey
and denied, a wide hunger
never satisfied. Maybe gun now,
maybe not. Fury rises up
in a broken moment.

The End of the World, Pending

Hope squats in the deep shadows, faint,
wispy because of the smoke of war.
Balance is impossible,
a child's cry in a dim tunnel
a child's sigh in comfort.

A raccoon plods past me without a glance,
my hands burrowing in dirt to loosen
the net of weeds. Do animals know
the darkness of the soul?
I bought peas to plant, and lettuce,
perhaps in a few days when the air warms.
I hear planes and do not flinch. Do not
shudder at what's sleeping underground.

Here is a jonquil from the yard, pleasing
in a glass vase, a little sun to look at
as if that might wipe clean the stagger
of bombs, the rubble inscribed on a city,
the long trail of the exhausted.

Heed

Chest high swallow-grass, those are no drums you hear, your sudden gasp alleviates nothing in your backyard rush to understand this upside down country, one big bruise of a place, never imagined except in hellish fever. The guardians have left the gate, blooms are trampled, hidden by a wilderness of furious lies. This is nothing and the whole caboodle, shifting eyes rumors of dark stars and fractures. Go out and smell the tinny fog, as small shards rise up to prevent your progress, the electric night all moans, plates spinning and crashing at alarming speed. Go out into this vacuum of truth and speak in a loud voice. Rattle the moon.

One Room

Monday

You spill your roasted chrysanthemum tea on the bed. Now the pillows smell like a field of sunflowers—I can almost hear the flight of hummingbirds in this room.

Tuesday

Biscuit crumbs all over the blankets. I try to trace your name, but I run out of crumbs. Let me go get some more.

Wednesday

Love exists here and there, like echoes. The room longs for us, all eight limbs. The room remembers our little laughs, guards them deep within four walls.

Thursday

In this room, we dance with broken shackles, the chains tapping the floors with each step. Our body sway to the rhythm of the ocean inside us.

Friday

In this room, no one can take us. We remain safe here. No voices telling us what we have is wrong, a carnal thirst. Let Asia's sun have the protesters with their megaphones and red signs. Think of them as crows; hate is their meat, our bodies, the cadavers.

Saturday

Don't worry, we don't have to listen to anyone. Just, try to rest, for now. Later, I will part your hair, unveil sleeping your black eyes, and kiss your forehead as you dream.

Sunday

I don't know where we'll be tomorrow. But we have this room for now. As I hold you to sleep, I whisper, "This is heaven.

sleep, I whisper, "This is heaven.

A Love Poem

I like to run my fingertips over your bare body,
from your shoulders slowly to your waist, and up again
on the other side. Just close your eyes. Let me start
from the bottom this time, your thighs, your navel,
your nipples—I tease them all with traces of circles
as I bite your ear. I know where you want these fingers to go,
but please be patient. Try to remain still in this bed
like wind chimes in the forest. How you sing is up to you.

Let me drink from your river streams until
you're quiet again. Honey, we can do this all night,
but you have work tomorrow. So close your eyes
for the last time tonight and I go outside to write this poem.
I think I'll fry you an omelet over rice for your breakfast.

The Silent Longing

I boil water, make tea,
but I forget to drink.

I dice my apples
into chunks,

put them in a lunchbox,
still, I forget they exist.

I let the shower run,
their white noises

sound like indiscernible
laughter. I make and unmake

my bed, just to give
myself something to do.

I cook rice, then leave them
untouched for days.

I have leftovers in the fridge,
pizza, pasta, salad.

They stay there until
they've gone bad.

The Sparrow Dance

In the beginning, God
started a bonfire in the snow
and called it lust.

We never know what to expect
from something that won't last.

We dance barefooted
around the hungry flames,
sparrow and goddess.

In the cold,
the other beasts shiver in fear and jealousy:

the red owl snickers,
retreats to its nests,
the racoon runs away to a damp cavity in a dead tree.

Sometimes, I put out a burning wildflower
by swallowing it.

Here is a goddess
that burns. Her touch stops the winter
every night

so her footsteps can stay
forever.

I chase her until she turns into
a dandelion that vanishes
in the dark

and we cause
a wildfire.

All I can see now is
snow,
snow,
snow.

The unfamiliar ground embraces this lost body.
When can I call out your name
without having to worship you?

A Light For Us

Matthew Berg

Darkness gave way to light. A small flashlight from a small child, ours. "A light for us." were the words he uttered, a hopeful truth made clear as the once dark path was suddenly visible. This struck me how this little life was able to make way through the darkness by a seemingly unexpected thing: a small beam of light from a bright soul. Such a surprising example that gave courage and inspiration to the worn and weary of soul such as I.

The darkness cleared away little by little and the way was made known, the impact felt. His contribution was evident and the message was clear: purpose through faith lights the darkest of impossibilities, makes us brave through belief.

There is a light for us all, a God-given light we receive from our first breath, to the very same light we are intended to share throughout every gift of a day given (however long that may be). Such light is purpose. A special set of skills or gifts, personality or character traits, even the experiences that shape us and our convictions that are all "lights". Here the darkness scatters where these are applied and a light for us all makes possible what wasn't before. The hidden is revealed and we live fully. Purpose is a bright and beautiful vision for all that makes life worth living (no matter how small or seemingly insignificant that purpose may appear).

Walking through such darkness that's now lit up I am grateful, grateful for purpose and hope that shines far beyond the little light of a little flash light held by a little child; one given in this truly unique picture: light and dark. Funny how it took a small child to show me. You'd figure forty some years would've brought better clarity.

Rihanna's Debauchery

Paul Chuks

Four years and three months, you count with your right fist unfurling finger after finger, was the last time you were in a relationship. You roll your eyes and collapse on the bed. This feeling has never bothered you before, but tonight it is the bone in your neck. You keep reeling left - right on the bed like one whose soul is being exorcised somewhere Hogwarts-like. The cold outside has conspired against your body to remind it of its frailty and inlay a known fact that: body plus body keeps the cold away.

After your last relationship, you lost something essential. Something that no longer exists and made you become something you never were. It all started when she kissed with open eyes and wasn't remorseful. You had taught her earlier that kissing was the point where lovers' souls met and closing of the eyes was to behold them. She would ask *why* like a curious philosopher waiting to unravel a mystery, you'd tell her it's the way God made it: the eyes to only catch the birds and see rainfall, never the soul. She would laugh, close her eyes and say *kiss me*. You'll oblige her. She'll raise her hands in demonstration as both lips lock, pause and say *Fred I can see it, I can see us floating in angelic fluid*. You'll say *shut up and kiss, it is bad manners to talk while kissing*. Sometimes, you'll end up on the rug, other times in bed.

The day she kissed you with open eyes, it had just rained. You both sat apart on the sofa with the same gray sweater flung around your bodies, looking into the void. The rain was still pattering on the roof, but gently-gently. The atmosphere was sick with cold. Usually, it was a reminder for couples like you two merge bodies. That evening was different. Her head was fell on the sofa-back. You inched closer and tapped her left shoulder but she didn't budge. You pulled her hair, she looked at you cynically. You elided her attitude as one of those goofball moments that usually resulted in genitalia jam. Her eyes, blue, the blue of the sky— of the ocean, drowned you as you stared at each other. She wouldn't say more than the words on her face. The words you couldn't read. In your cluelessness, you kissed her with your eyes closed. She sat there like a plant, watching you. That day, lovers' soul did not meet at the point of a kiss. It didn't end there. There was no means to find your soul. She wouldn't close her eyes, as if she knew that opening it kept your soul away from you. And without the soul, man is blood and flesh— utterly physical, just like trees and iron doors— with no account of the divine.

She left your house the next day before the morning hatched. There was a tiny piece of paper on the centre table that said: *I'm done Fred. You are too good for me. I cheated*. It was your deal breaker as she knew. You couldn't imagine another person touching her, kissing her and that thing between her thighs harboring something that wasn't yours. *How many souls does she harbor now?* You quizzed yourself. You shredded the paper into grains and squandered weeks, grieving your soul. You blocked her on every social media platform and deleted all her pictures from your phone. Months after, you'd catch yourself kissing into the void. *I want to fetch my soul back*, you'll tell yourself. You roll some blunts and smoke till your mind travels away from reality.

The soul is why we can tell a man from a statue, you frequently tell yourself. You had lost something, but more importantly, you had become someone else. That day, after the rain, after the kiss, you lost your soul— your human setup— the world as you always knew it. You hissed at couples who celebrated their anniversaries on the internet and crossed February 14th as a red date. The word *love* became the knife set against things that kept you intact. You understood God's motive for destroying the humans in Genesis. You wished it happened again, but were you the Noah of today? You checked.

You tried to heal. But healing here, translated to immersing yourself in this newness that meant living bereft of a soul. That scared you. You had never lived this way. You did not know the rudiments of *healing* — because you have never had to *heal* — now, it felt like foraging into a bleak city with no lead. The world appeared to you like a glass house you had to break into, to heal. But you dare not because then, there'll be no world again. Do you just watch humans from outside in their transparent form, or die trying? You asked yourself. You failed to heal.

It's the New Year and everyone is writing down their goals for the year. You had stopped setting goals that way because you barely achieved any. Your life always took another strange route instead. Like when you planned to study Biotechnology in the UK, but was denied the scholarship, despite meeting the requirements. You learnt to stop planning life and let life plan you. This time was different. The urge stalked your head like a ghost seeking vengeance. You succumbed and wrote a list in the middle page of your diary. Your last result was poor according to the standard you set for yourself. You had Bs in all your five courses and dropped to 4.0. This was the first time since you became a student, as you have always scored straight As. You determined to upscale your grade in the second semester. That was the first on the list. Then healing came second, and getting a partner, third.

Therapy wasn't a route you were willing to tow. The last time you visited one, she suggested prayers, instead of medications and told you to draw closer to God. But you needed to heal. You Googled *how to heal after break up* or *steps a sensitive person should take after getting fucked over*. One site says, *set firm boundaries, listen to sad music, meet new people*. She has remained blocked on all platforms after you had read that paper. How firm should boundaries be? You asked yourself. You had organized a list of sad songs, including Lilwayne's *No Love* and Taylor Swift's *wailings*. The one that stuck the most was Juicewrld's *Lucid Dreams* where he moaned that *evil girls have the prettiest face*. You have done everything else the Google search said, except one thing; meeting new people. You became extroverted and began attending social gatherings.

At the tennis court, you notice a new face in the crowd. You had never seen her before and she was the only lady in the court, in a jersey. Other ladies photographed the event or just watched. She was slim— perhaps of two figure body mass index, her hair packed together, strangled upward in a rubber band's trap. You could only see her

back view, though her melanin glowed like she had let the night into her skin. You were eager to know what she looked like.

After a series of elderly men had slammed their bat against the tennis-ball for hours, back and forth and the crowd had thinned. She sought to play with anybody available, but the moderator underrated her. He proposed she came with her female counter-part next time, to avoid the embarrassment of playing with men. She dared the moderator to a game of four rounds and promised him #10,000 right away, if he won any round. The moderator felt his masculinity fall to the ground, and out of embarrassment, he obliged her. He couldn't catch any of her service as he kept scampering like a clueless keeper at the mouth of a goal post. That thrilled you. A lady, a tennis lover, whooping the ass of an elderly man who has probably played tennis his whole life? She piqued your interest, but you didn't know how to reach her without prior happenstance. You left the tennis court with her in your mind.

Evening tennis games had been your routine since you were an adolescent. Your father would take you to the tennis-court in Ikeja, Lagos and train you as if you had an Olympics game the next day. It became part of your life that you made most of your friends at the tennis-court, including your ex-girlfriend. You had met her the day she accompanied a friend to watch a big game he was to partake in. While your friend, Dayo was in battle, you were both seated, bonding. She introduced herself as *Chidinma* and told you she fantasized marrying a Doctor. You smiled and glanced at her almost-white face. You ticked all the boxes she had prepared for her potential man. She wanted a tall, broad-shouldered, hairy, light skinned man who sported locks or carried fried hair and spoke British English, with the intellect of Sheldon Cooper. The following day, you went as early as 4pm to secure a seat at the front row, close to where she sat the previous day. You had wondered why she was that interested in tennis. Why she was that good. You thought she was faking the funk but remembered the embarrassment from the previous day. People started filing in thirty minutes later and the regular game began. Two elderly men against each other, slamming their bat against the ball, praying it slips off their opponent and bounce off the marked line. She came in a triangular sunglasses, blue ball gown and a pair of slippers, with a book strapped between her arm. An unlucky man had sat on the seat you had clandestinely left for her. There was another seat just beside the man. She dropped on the seat and focused on her book. She wasn't in Game mode today. You stared in amazement. She caught you staring and smiled back. The man in the middle of you both had oblong head, it somehow blocked your viewing. Soon, he stood up to play. You migrated to his seat and held your breath as she looked at you. She smiled again and continued her book.

You are not ready for today's game, I see, you said to her.

Erm. No. Not that. I am just glued to this book, it's a page turner, she replied.

What book is that? You asked.

Dan Brown's Angels and Demons.

Oh! You exclaimed, it truly is a page turner. What page are you on?

Page 400, she replied with a tone indicating she felt disturbed.

You let her alone and started a monologue with yourself on the very next step to take. To request for her number after the game, or to just let go, after all, love is brief and earth will perish. This recklessness sat in your heart. It was the deepest part of your life pouring onward like a river bank.

You avoided the tennis court for two days to repair the notion of desperation you had borne in her mind. You didn't know if she perceived you as desperate, but you wanted to clear it anyway. Despite your time away, you kept thinking of her. Her face haunted you. Your father had always said love was like that shadow that finds you no matter how distant you are away from the sun.

The next time you resumed at the court, she wasn't there. You sat at the front row, occupying a seat with your bag, hoping that she'd come. Time weaned, darkness hatched in the sky, bats colonized the sky. You left and got home in a gloomy mood. Everyone outside the compound greeted you, but your attention was faraway where love lied.

You were already ticked off from achieving this *new year goal* of meeting new people. You had your grades to attend to. But you didn't give up. You determined to fight some more. You got Dan Brown's *Lost Symbol* and wrote your phone number at the back of the book. It was your way of getting into her heart. You prayed she appeared at the court today because the book was a hardback that made your bag into the weight of a rock— a small rock, you didn't want to carry everyday.

She appeared at the tennis-court to your joy. You smiled as she sauntered in and sat far away from you. You didn't watch the games that were being played, instead her face— her beauty— the mystery you were trying to decrypt. She caught you looking at her and winked. You winked back. She smiled. You removed your face and stared into the blank. You looked at her again and your eyes met, intimately, like the love was already happening.

After the game, you both gravitated towards each other as if under a supreme being's programming. There was something about her smile that tickled the softest part of you. It carried the homeliness of a nursing mother. Her handshake was warm, it lasted over thirty seconds.

I'm sorry for how I responded to you the other day. I didn't need distraction, she said warmly.

No. I'm sorry for distracting you. I was just excited to meet another Dan Brown fan. I think we are rare in this part of the world. You replied.

Is my apology accepted?

Yes, you replied with a smile.

I love Dan Brown so much that I want him to get married to me so I can read his unpublished manuscripts, She said joyfully.

Haha, he's married.

He just divorced his wife, check it. She responded.

You were shocked at how up-to-date she was concerning Dan Brown's affairs. Time peeled, birds peopled the sky, showed humans the flexibility of their wings and how deep they could fly. And you hadn't given her the book.

I got you this book, you said, removing it from your bag. On seeing the title, she beamed elatedly like a child whose favorite cartoon came on.

Thank you soo much for adding to my book stack. Thank you. She wailed.

You departed. You were happy with yourself, the events that happened, the uber driver, everyone you encountered. You prayed she saw your number at the back of the book.

You switched off your phone to douse the anticipation that froze your mind and distracted yourself, playing FIFA. You dropped it and read two chapters of your *Modern Biology* textbook. You were already ahead of the class and it had been eight hours since you returned from the tennis-court. You watched your phone come alive with all its designs and embellishments, as you held down the power button. It boots. You

switched on the data connection and messages from all social platforms leaked into your phone. Whatsapp was your first visit. An unsaved number already left a message saying *Lol*. You wondered who that was. Your instinct predicted her, but you couldn't be sure. *Lol?* You replied. Swiftly, another message came in. *It's me, Angel. How are you?*

What a short pompous word that clicks the tongue, you said to yourself. *I'm fine. I was scared you won't take the hint,* you replied.

Lol. Of course, I know that readers pass messages via books to their friends, sometimes. In fact, it was the first thing I checked for when I got home. Was expecting a letter instead. And I've seen the way we look at each other. She replied.

Your jaw dropped. You stared at your phone for fat minutes without a word. *Lol. Wanna go on a date?* You texted back.

Sure, she responded. You could perceive her enthusiasm from the phone. Her messages came in at the speed of light. You swore she liked you and were ready to take an oath of loyalty, provided to be the silk to your sonic.

On your arrival at the location for the date, you were approached by two huge, rotund men whose arms appeared like rocks were stuffed in them. You knew they were the security men doing their jobs, so you allowed for easy search. You arrived earlier than the stipulated time, so you spent all the while perusing the venue. It was a lit, bar-like lounge that lodged budding artists and comedians who were paid a token to entertain their customers. Spherical tables adorned with white garment, upholstered chairs paired in twos, were saturated inside the lounge. The blue of the light bulbs reflected on everyone's face. People started filing in. Some with their lovers, others with their soon-to-be-lovers. You took your seat and became expectant of your date. You checked your call log, message and WhatsApp, for any message you might have missed. There was none. You locked your phone, felled your head backwards and closed your eyes. Something touched your left shoulder, you dismissed it. Again, a light touch. You dismissed it. The scent of perfume took over the air. You adjusted to know whose perfume it was, but met her sitting just beside you, smiling. You smiled back and interlocked your arms like a couple who haven't seen for years.

She was dark, with curly spread hair, shiny lips like she had kissed a diamond, in a yellow gown, the length of her knees, that told more of her hips than anything else. Her high heel shoes increased her height.

You look beautiful, you said to her as you offered her the empty chair.

Thank you, with a smile, she replied.

You bonded over scotch. She talked about how boring her childhood was— her disciplinarian father who foisted books on her, and only allowed her play outside on sundays— her religious mother who was always fasting and often prays before she kills a cockroach. You told her about yours— your gentle father who always waited for your mother to discipline you and your siblings when you erred— your disciplined mother who was a teacher and also a trader, who very many people feared that they dared not owe her money. You talked about your music taste— how Kendrick Lamar sang in your ears most of the day. She preferred JCole, and argued who the better rapper was. You claimed Kendrick was the overall Hip-hop GOAT, she said it was between Eminem and Jay-Z. She had read all of Khaled Hosseini's books and told you a little about them— how they were grief-laden with religious extremities. You promised to read them and in return, told her about Dean Koontz— how his books always gave you sleepless nights and made you see his characters in real humans, but will despite the horror, never not read his works. She talked about her love for tennis— how she was Serena Williams inspired. The semblance in taste stunned you that you thought of her as your social siamese twin. Things didn't always fall together for you this way, or if they did, you suspected something crazy was about happening. She was the only cunabula of light in your life and you were going to protect her by any means. Noon peeled from the sky and night came forth with its darkness, the birds and insecurities. You dismiss her with a hug.

At home, you whip out your phone to inquire of her whereabouts. You click on her contact and place a call. No response. You tap whatsApp only to find selfies of her before the date, on her status. It sires your feelings. You kiss your phone and laugh at how love-drenched you are.

At what phase in all of this will you kiss me? She asked on WhatsApp.

You were shocked at how fast-paced she was. You even felt timid after the question because it revealed that she knew your intentions and were not fast enough in revealing nit..

When next we meet, you returned.

Okay, drop your address.

You dropped your address and ran off whatsapp. The next day, you called and spoke at length about things that trended on twitter. Will Smith had just slapped Chris Rock on the Oscar stage. You called it inappropriate and a nomad behaviour from Smith. In her opinion, Will Smith was justified because he was defending his wife. She asked of your reaction if anyone ever insulted her when you were out together. You knew it was a trap, so you agreed to imitate Will Smith, but this time, with an even tougher blow on the nose. She guffawed, and said *that's my man*. Butterflies swole in your stomach. She said she was visiting on Sunday but you conflicted because of church.

Why Sunday? You asked.

Because Sunday is when couples can have sex and make all the noise in the world without getting arrested for noise pollution, you know all the neighbours must have gone to church.

You laughed out loud like you were being tickled and accepted her wishes. To prepare for Sunday, you scrubbed the floor of your room, washed the bathroom till the tiles became blinding white, washed all the bedsheets, towels and dirty plates. You bought air freshener and sprayed it all over the room till it scented like heaven. You stacked your books carefully on the desk and changed the curtains. On Saturday, you went to market to stuff your kitchen with ingredients. You didn't want leave any T uncrossed because this was one goal you had planned achieving earlier in the year.

That Sunday, you were a little nervous. You woke up as early as 6.am and took your bath. You finished the morning routine, cooked, ate and settled for a movie. The title was "The Hate U Give." In the movie, a black girl at a very tender age is woken to the cruelty of racism in America. Her best friend, Khalil, had been shot by a white cop who thought he was reaching for a gun, after asking him to place his hands on his head. Angel came and joined you in the scene when the black girl, Star, was recounting events prior to the shooting, in court. *He kissed me that night*, Star told the Jury. Angel looked at you and kissed you. She kissed you, closing your breath, as if to enter your face. She paused and continued again, this time spits were exchanged as your tongues locked. She stood you up, undressed and collapsed on the bed. She widened her legs and asked what you wanted to do first— penetrate or blowjob? You looked at her cluelessly. She grabbed your head forcefully and buried it in her genital. As your tongue tickled her clit, she fell backwards and scattered the bed. She came forward again and scattered your hair. She moaned and moaned, you felt her legs quiver from pleasure. She removed your head and loosened your belt. You pulled off your knicker and brief and penetrated her. She gasped at the length of you but then took you in like a pro.

You've just shifted my womb, she said as you both showered. You knew it was a diplomatic way of saying that you performed well. You smiled, having not disgraced yourself and having earned another star on your masculinity crown.

You resumed the movie. Star, the black girl, had a flashback of Khalil's murder. She burst out of sleep, vomiting into a bucket, with her father patting her back. Angel pitied her and said it was the reality of racism in America. She explained each scene, thematically, giving new insight to the movie. As the movie ended, she said: *If any god existed, the scores we have lost to racism, for over 500 years wouldn't have happened. At one point, he'd have to step in.* You looked at her askance, as if she had just confessed to murder. *What?* You replied. She moved to her bag and brought out four sticks of blunt. She offered you one stick but you refused. She lit one up and smoked to its last length. You looked at her, astonished. She was a wonder to behold. *So you don't believe in God?* You asked.

Yes, I do not believe in God. My father is a pastor till date. Guess what? His assistant pastor in our former district raped me numerous times when I was young. He'll tell me not to tell anybody and it's only the head he'll put in. And the next Sundays, he'll go to church and pray fervently, claiming to heal people. Guess what again? He's now a

senior pastor today, somewhere in Lagos. My Father said the Holy Spirit directed those who promoted him to the role. This was when I started losing my faith. She responded, tearingly.

You sat there, confused, bereft of words, empty of action, because the revelations were too intense for your heart. You had never met an atheist before neither do you know how to love one. You loved her more than your ex-girlfriend, she was more funky. She had Rihanna's debauchery, but you needed that praying side. Your love for her turned septic. How can one be an atheist? Don't they see the moon and the stars? Who designed them? The sun, the respiratory system of man, who made them, chance? You asked yourself. She's not unusual. She smokes and drinks like a thug. You couldn't love her that way. You had dreamt of a home steeped in christianity— your wife walking majestically beside you as you mount the podium to preach the gospel. You called everything off. She left angrily, swinging your door to a bang. You became miserable again. Love is a dragnet, once you enter in, you are not allowed to leave whole as you came. It's either your soul is stuck there or you leave in pieces. You considered going back to her but your people wouldn't welcome her. She was a storm that you weren't ready to tame. Everyday that passed, you missed her. Her dark skin and full hair. Her tiny voice and her epic jokes. Her smell. Her warmth. Grief turned itself inward and bottled itself inside you and sought an outlet. You shattered your phone and flung anything that was in your way. Depression crippled in. You skipped classes. You wanted to go— to go join the ranks of those making love happen, since it couldn't happen to you.

The Bird

Ivey Buffenmye

The cold was biting into his face, sharp teeth, cutting into his cheeks. His parakeet had long since died, though he still carried its corpse in the breast of his jacket pocket. Perhaps it was sentimentality, perhaps the knowledge that he would die here, too, and that when they found his body they would find the little bird's too, and come to their own conclusions. Or maybe they wouldn't find his body. It was unlikely that anyone could survive out here for more than a week, no matter what supplies they had.

The parakeet hadn't even lasted a few hours. He knew it would die, but cupping it in his hand, its tiny heart thumping against his thumb, for whatever warmth that offered, seemed more merciful than pitching it into the air. Now they were just two, boy and bird.

Putting Billy Barnett Back Together

This one had the swell-white-guy-from-the-hills name *Billy* to match a last name said *Hey, asshole*. Meaning: get ready to fight. No one tells this story:

that, according to my cousin/his brother, he wanted to piece the head back together, Billy's, after the roar of a shotgun-blast Providence provided as alternative

to answering a lot of prayers. Said he raked blowback and brain matter and an eyebrow from a bedroom wall. *He was my brother*, Doug said: like he'd stuck a hand

into a car fan with the engine running and then reached for the hurt hand with its match, forgetting. Doug said he scooped the mess that had been a living, breathing

human into a hand like any of this can be put back. When he was working for Peabody Coal, in New Lexington, my cousin used to pick me up. The

radio in his Plymouth (or his daddy's Dodge truck) would be blaring, a deep-toned bass speaker rattling. He'd buy beer, drive, and lie about Pussy; though

I had yet to have sex. After a few more beers, Doug would get weepy. Tell me what he wished he'd done. It had been three or four years then. Billy was gone,

and Doug, his brother, kept saying he wiped blood and the rest from the wall. Because since when has failure or cluelessness disqualified us from acting.

Colored Night, Buckeye Lake Amusement Park, 1965

That summer, I was visiting my pops who had a trailer by a refinery. A solitary gold diamond—a methane gas burn-off-flame—pirouetted nightly above scaffolding, seeding the Sulphur smell you got used to.

Once or twice, I had asked to go to the amusement park up the road. My pops said we could go but that the Tilt O' Whirl made him sick. He and my mother were divorced but getting friendly again. He'd

leave me alone at the trailer to go to work. At 11, I managed fine. I hadn't asked for shit, if you don't count a Border Collie rescue we tried out and returned to the Pound later the same Saturday.

So we get to the park. And it's clear we're in the wrong place at the wrong time. However, he isn't taking No for an answer. He buys tickets. Takes change. Ushers me past amazed faces.

So I dragged him to The Wild Mouse, a coaster that whip-snaps the shit out of you (turns out) with right-angle turns and freefall curves. Its wooden rails went out over water—

we were standing in line with Black kids, Black parents. Then, because he could, a carny asked Blacks to step aside. The guy wanted to usher us on and not let anyone else ride.

Which pissed off a bunch of people. My father shrugged—leaned over. Spoke. He wasn't a small man, by any means. I imagine a Crackerspeak equivalent to Goddamn it to hell.

Whatever it was, the guy started letting on Black riders whose parents gladly peeled off the requisite ride-tickets. Later, he told me a story about fellow-Kentuckian Fats,

a bootlegger, a big Black man who used to ask for him (my dad) by name for his skill at pumping gasoline when he was still a kid. Now he was seeing something he said

made him sick. Said he saw Fats mouthing: *Stop this.*

Self-portrait as the House on Comanche Drive

We were 2808. Top of the hill. Moved in when the house was new. In the first part of the summer after I turned five. Early on, my father traveled TDY for the Government a lot. Enough that a five year old boy could tell that here was a man with whom something was up—he never relaxed in that house. He and Mother fought and had Christmases there, on Comanche. A street named for the original Americans, vanquished Americans, the street where they slept, my parents, and bought the Shell station which my father ran—lots of long hours, so he might as well have

been traveling. So he ran around and got busted a couple of times and they divorced and my father moved out of the brick house with the Vines next door on one side (Beth and Wes Vines) and the Kings (whose seven-year-old died) on the other. If they aren't careful, kids grow wise in houses like that. I learned to vanish into the orchard in that small house—the day my father left for the first time. Just drove away. I've read that there were more birds in those days. Twice as many birds and insects and animals on the planet then.

What I can tell you is: the first time my father moved out, a yellow Westinghouse clock radio under one arm, the sky filled with blackbirds. Not right as he was leaving. After his Ranchero truck with *Roy's Shell* on the side had roared away. That day, on Comanche, blackbirds nearly blocked out the sun as I went into the orchard to cry for a time without interference. That time, my mother had moved to slug him and she had missed. That time, she hurt her hand and had started to cry but flashed mad and said enough to my father he grabbed his jacket and was gone.

Before Impermanence

My father touched the back of his hand to my forehead, checking for fever. Lying in my tiny bedroom with its drab hospital green walls, the pink ballerina-skirted lamp allowed a mellow glow. I was damp all over. Uncomfortable in a body that felt too heavy, too unnatural. Like a lead dentist x-ray apron or a winter coat I wished I could shed. I could have been three or five or seven or any age really— illness plagued my entire childhood. That twin bed never a place of rest or easy sleep. More a torturous slab for staring up at the ceiling that seemed an endless black void. The sky outside barely squeezed in through one small window tucked under the roof eaves. Sometimes a single star shone through it, or the yellow rind of the moon. More often, red and green lights of a plane taken off from nearby Idyllwild airport.

Through seemingly contiguous stretches of illnesses—colds, flus, chickenpox, mumps, strep throats, stomach viruses, tonsillitis— nothing was balm except my father's hand. His palm against my cheek after confirming fever. I could barely discern his face in the dim—wide brow wrinkled as sheets fresh from the dryer. Shiny bald pate surrounded by his crown of tight coiled hair, what remained of his once afro. His slightly crooked nose, square jaw. I wanted my father to sing to me or speak soothing words. But his silent vigil by my side served as love's most certain proxy. His grey-blue eyes, a milky light in shadows, I didn't know, and never asked what went through his mind as he sat in that hard-seat, hard-back kitchen chair for hours at a time.

Even sick, I was a sleepless child, but I would drift off for a little while. Sometimes, when I woke, my father and the chair were gone. For a moment, I'd imagine I dreamt his presence. But something of my father always remained, lingered on the air. Even through stuffy noses I could still sense him—Lucky Strike cigarette smoke, coffee, and a scent particular to my father alone, to his brown skin—a molasses sweetness.

Long Ago

I wanted only to be clean as laundry
drying on the line in the open sunshine.
But I grew within the shadows of a monstrous womb,
virtual forest of dark bourgeoning
under the ceiling of childhood.
Speaking to my prickly mother was a rocky precipice
that taught me to hoard words in a cavern far away from ache.
I grew silent.
The constant chill of despair slicked my skin with salt
so that I was nearly an ocean
of longing.
My unkempt desires for nourishment and joy kept me alert.
I grew exhausted, scrupulous as an owl
seeking kind eyes that would meet my own.
Every breeze was fire and brimstone.
I grew ashen.
I grew tiresome as moss,
trivial as a moon no one gazes upon,
a moon that never shines,
not even with borrowed light.

Queens, NY, 1972

Because she was my mother, an adult,
and in charge of everyone around her—
my father, brother and me, and our dog Ricky
who'd wandered in from the street,
I believed her.
My mother said,
We're poor.

And I saw for myself the other girls at school
wearing clothes still bearing forgotten price tags—
a fuchsia T shirt with a mirrored heart across the chest
that cost at staggering ten dollars in 1972.
A pair of jeans that cost a bounty of twenty-five.

My clothing arrived on the stoop
in brown paper grocery bags
from our next-door neighbor—
cast-offs from three daughters,
each a fair skinned beauty thinner than I'd ever be,
even after weeks in bed with the mumps too weak to eat.
The clothes that almost fit had nubby fabric,
faded pastel colors, sleeves and hems so long
I had to roll them half a dozen times.
And still even the biggest ones,
strained taut across my middle.
Poor meant no clothing stores, I guess.

But every evening, my family squeezed around
a round table too tight for the four of us
in the tiny Formica kitchen,
sat down to a platter of meat,
a bowl of mushy canned vegetables,
and potatoes, mashed or baked.
I filled my plate and never walked away hungry.
Even our dog Ricky was gifted scraps.

When my father was out of a job,
there was no meat,
but ample charity cheese dressed in ketchup
and canned pineapple for dessert—
ingredients Graham Kerr would have shunned
on that cooking show my mother watched religiously

but never reproduced any of his recipes.

My belly grew and I grew
wider than I was tall.

I never felt poor because I went to bed
so full of food.

I saw those orphans on TV,
the ones from Africa whose arms and legs
reminded me of toothpicks my mother sucked,
having plucked the maraschino cherry first,
before swilling the golden drink
she called *Manhattan*.

If she couldn't afford to live there,
God damn it, mother said,
she could swallow it.

And I believed her.

The Slap

an ars poetica

I was dragging behind
my mother, her hand a tight leash,
the sun checkerboarded
by maple trees above our heads,
green leaves exotic as parrot wings,
with undersides a secret treasure of silver,
flapping in the breeze that tickled
my bare arms, and from somewhere nearby,
an ice cream truck playing its three-note song,
promising delight.

The scent of lilacs mingled with roses,
the old-fashioned single petal kind,
everything warm and bright,
I stretched to see the lovely lacework
of blue sky peeking through,
so that I hardly noticed that the tugging
at my wrist had stopped.

I stumbled over my mother's toes,
she stock still, facing me,
her hands planted on her waist.
She stared down from behind dark
sunglasses, eyes invisible,
mouth a red gash,
and before I could say *Sorry, Mama*,
she slapped me on my cheek, hard.
Hard as that time with frying pan.

As tears exploded from my eyes,
a single leaf let loose from a lower branch
and through my blurred vision
I watched it turn over and over and over,
drift down toward me,
slowly, like a fairy or an angel,
and a voice whispered
inside my head that said
this, this is poetry.

The Rule of Dew & Tiny Parachutes

When I was a child, my father waged war
against the dandelions in the lawn,
a battle I never fathomed,
thinking their yellow spirals sunny,
their fancy geometric lace even better
when my breath would launch airborne
their heads of fluff gone to seed—
a million tiny parachutes up into sky.

But for Daddy, a carpet of unbroken green
meant he lived in a world where rules
were obeyed and everything made better for it.

The eye is the window to the world
of other and self,
and a dew drop
is a crystal ball on a small scale.
When I looked into its invisible oracle
on a blade of grass
I witnessed a bead of knowledge
in a language that has no words but wonder.

What a New Refrigerator Once Meant

Our vehicle for great adventures—a refrigerator carton rescued from the garbage pile at the curb in front of my best friend's house. Wise and inventive Joann, five years older than me, wove myriad stories out of thin air the way a line of robins suddenly appeared on electrical wires overhead.

The box, lying on its side, our mighty ship sailing across the windblown black seas, sailing us all the way to the North Pole. Joann, as captain, threw herself along the long sides, rocking us back and forth across her backyard's grass. I copied her, although a few beats behind. She didn't mind. She pointed at a brown squirrel perched atop the chain link fence, waving his bushy tail at us. "Thar, she blows," Joann said, cupping her hands around her eyes like binoculars, "the white whale." She offered her hands to me to see for myself. A whale indeed.

Joann maneuvered the carton upright and we became astronauts in a tall spaceship capsule. She leaned into a long wall, pumping it with her feet and angled precariously sideways. She pointed up into the robin's egg blue sky at plane recently taken off from the nearby Idyllwild airfield. "A new comet," she pronounced. "Comet Lana!" We headed for the moon after that, and upon arrival she tipped the box down for the crash landing. We traipsed the lunar surface, really just patchy grass, on the balls of our feet. Joann planted an invisible American flag to mark the landing of we two girls from Queens.

The box next became our house, tossed about in a tornado. Joann as Dorothy and I her faithful companion, Toto. Suddenly, the backyard transformed all black and white.

But Joanne's mother called out from their back bedroom window, *Time for supper*. We never made it to Oz.

That night, Joann's dad dragged the refrigerator carton back to the pile and the curb, and the next morning the garbage men hauled it away as if it weren't a spaceship or a whaling ship or a Kansas house.

At dinner, my mother said to me, *So, the got-rocks next door have a brand-new fridge. Bet it even has an ice maker. They think they're better than us, showing off that big box like a new Cadillac.*

Joann's parents didn't care about what anyone else had or didn't have. Joann wasn't stuck up, and I was thrilled to be gifted her hand-me-down clothes. I wished I could be exactly like her—full of glorious imagination and the magic to transform trash into treasure.

The fridge in our house, a twenty-year-old white Norge with rounded corners and a handle like the lever on a bank safe. Had a freezer the size of a shoe box that sadly only fit one gallon of ice cream but kept the milk nice and cold. Arctic—just the way I liked to drink it.

Understory

I spent just one summer's endless daylight
in the acres of woods surrounding
my Bubbie's Rock Hill, NY summer bungalow,
no other house around for miles.

I cocooned under the canopy of trees
that gifted tempering shade away from
the too-bright sun of sticky August heat.

I feasted on wild blueberries,
napped on scented beds of fallen pine needles,
wandered endlessly never feeling lost.

My head swam with the songs of birds and insects
flittering about, and my eyes traced the tracks
of small brown creatures
darting in and out of the undergrowth.

The buzzing yellowjackets, a threat
I avoided by moving sloth-like
everywhere I went.
My older brother,
racing himself,
fared far less well.

My playthings were decomposing leaves,
and my bare hands digging into the humus
to unearth pink worms that unfolded and refolded
their rings across the roadways of my palms.

A few pale yellow butterflies flitted
in the honeysuckle bushes
that smelled like heaven must,
and, that late at night became a theater
of glow with fireflies.
Oh, how I loved their green flashes
against the navy velvet screen of night.

My brother jarred the tiny bugs,
but I knew such magic cannot be stolen
without a price.
They were always dead by morning.

Forced to go to bed before the show ended,
I stood on my lumpy mattress,
staring out the window,
hoping for another glimpse or two
of that cool lightning.

But I always fell asleep just as the moon
filtered into the small dark room,
casting a bridge of brightness
across the white satin-edged coverlet.
I never discovered where
that moon path could lead me.

Cow Tongue

The raw tongue lolled on the yellow Formica
kitchen counter, bigger than my father's head.

Looked a lot like my own tongue, magnified
a thousand times, wrenched and hacked out.

It was not Halloween.
I was not dreaming.

Mother hoisted the ungainly meat, plopped it
with a thud into a massive aluminum pot.

The tongue brooded atop two burners,
blue-red flames licking away for hours.

Our house filled with smells of mud
and meadows, salt and sea and distance.

I imagined a cavernous cow jaw filled with
grassless grief, canyons of unchewable cud.

I felt as if I'd grown four stomachs,
all of them swirling with sickness.

Whence the aluminum pot, came the pink tongue,
its blistery white bumps and purple sheen.

Dropped onto the fancy daisy platter,
cow tongue gawped from the center of our table

seeming more like a massive heart pummeled flat.
Pumpless. Bloodless.

Mother carved the creepy beast with ease, lit
cigarette bobbing at the edge of her pleased smile.

Slices splatted onto my plate, and first bite I gagged
but mother's fist forced it back in my mouth.

My mother's love a recipe for violence,
I swallowed my tongue in briny silence.

Cloudburst

There's a joke about the rain
my father once told me.

Now, I hold myself in my own arms
watching slanting drops
out the window, evidence
of sharp squalls from
the west. Somehow
the unrest of shrieking winds
and clattering downfall
becalms me, the sky a soft blanket.

When I was two
or three maybe,
no storm raging outside,
I witnessed a storm inside
our kitchen—
my father goaded
by my mother's yelling
do something about it
wrenched
a row of teeth attached
to arched pink gums
from his mouth
and hurled it
across the room.

His teeth zoomed
toward my mother
and I cowered
under the kitchen table.

My mother, unflinching,
laughed the entire time.

My father's mouth
broke at her feet
into jagged pink and white
drops of rain.

We meet someone,
call it love, cleave

to that other. I have given
myself to men whose hands
were weapons, whose words
were blades.

Even now, I wonder whether
my father's expelled teeth
were violence or a kind
of surrender.

Whenever it rains, I recall
how quiet my breath can be,
one exhale away from death,
and in that stillness
I hear my father's voice:

*What do raindrops
say to one another?
Two's company,
three's a cloud.*

SAILBOAT

Jarrett Mazza

IT WILL FLOAT.

The boat, constructed from crumpled, scrunched, discarded paper, it was sealed with a fresh coat of wax. The current from the approaching storm would help. Bending the edges, made at ten, still I can see my hand, gliding as I separated the four sections and curved each of its corners. The next step, remake the triangle, yet the page, ruffled and ripped, remained flimsy, *soft*.

I shudder, remember more.

Too damn soft.

With the triangle section completed, I fold the bottoms, the sides, and reshape the hull.

Life, a flat circle, often it curves, disrupting symmetry, and what sinks- as I've come to know -still can be remade, can still *survive*. The process, though meticulous, *prosaic*, to make a boat out of paper, the purging of one's memories, however, is easier if the evasion is connected to something tangible.

The storm, torrential, I recalled waking early to retrieve some old paper from a shelf by the window. My father, believing work with your hands was the best work of all, at the desk, my hands slipped, and it dropped, and I looked over, seeing him as he walked by.

Look, I made a boat!

Shaking his head, he ran his hand across his sallow scalp, slamming his fists as he yelled.

Sleeping!

The brushes, the scissors all jumped and, in midair, one of the blades clipped me just under my left eye. Head down, refolding the paper, I lathered it quietly while hiding in bed. The only sounds heard were those that could be detected if you were standing too close to the door. Bent and sharp, the boat stayed inside the desk and there it remained until the next storm.

If you're going to build something, build something that takes a long time to die.

Arguing with mother two days before, he whipped the toolbox down to her feet. The boat, stiff as a knife, I waved it around as ran. The rain, which, made puddles of placid water, I stopped, kneeled, and splayed my fingers to gauge the temperature. Easing the boat gently into the stream, seeing it skitter, it quivered, floated. Boats change depending on the current. What's smooth one day can be rough the next, but such is only determined by the intrepidness of its captain, the *will* of its maker.

Hard fists, loud voices, every parent is guilty of hitting their kids at least once.

If not, they come so close that, what forces them to go no further, is but a fragment of self-control; a little less of a violent temper compared to that of their counterparts. Children obey and obedience breeds honesty and honesty makes them good, honest; the kind of people every parent wishes for their kids to grow up to be.

Children aren't born this way. Making them so requires time, effort, and...

Unable to really communicate, or keep order, as father said, the next point of control is the easiest.

Hunkering by the stream now, the cold air gnawing my neck, today the boat feels hard as it once did. Having creased the angles too much back then, I had not let it go but swore today that I would, *would*...because I needed to. Father's hands, not chiefly created to preserve order, sometimes they were also used to lift, to hold things.

On Tuesdays, he would let me sit next to him and eat dinner in front of the TV.

From inside the boat, old memories emerge in a cascade of opalescence.

So many colours, each one showing a different day, beneath a dark sky, listening to the trickling sounds of water; so soothing, so inhibiting. Trying to avoid flashbacks, kneeling, the boat's edges, crisp, shelled in the wax I had only haphazardly applied, it will be- *it is* -ready. Just waiting for more wind, a breeze, and maybe more rain, though *not too much* because it would sunder, diverging from its intended course.

Fortuitous the act, and me, only willing to send it on a straight stream, a straight path that I can observe from beginning to end.

No child is raised without punishment and no parent should be unwilling not to deliver a swift one when necessary, and I thought that's what this was...*then*.

Communication, negotiation, explanation, due diligence, the so-called modern-day parenting methods taught by those who labelled themselves as experts... all of them saying the same.

No one knows for sure what works. All made up as you go along.

The book of good parenting, a communal assembly of measly verbal exchanges and other untold stories, all of it passed down to those who are willing to tell their own tales while never disclosing the actual truths that credit them with the actual experience.

Mythic, almost apotheosized because of their alleged "goodness", the only good parent is the one who is not afraid of being a bad one.

At the time of making the boat, I also found a kite in our garage.

Twangy, its rope, thin and plaited, it scratched my hand as I pulled it. Given by my mother, she said she would help me fly it someday.

If not today, then another. I promise.

Unraveling a hunk of peeling string, I tied it to the base of the purple triangle. Sauntering down the steps, unable to contain the bonhomie, I listened to the wind, passing the nearest window, and stared at the unblemished sky. Searching, the kite, dragging behind me, in the basement, I saw him.

Sprawled, feet hanging off the sofa, no shoes, wearing only one sock he snored, and a spillage of drool leaked from his gaping mouth. Nudging, the wind, transient, there was only so much time before the weather changed. Mumbling, his stink protruding from his slovenly self, I didn't know why he had chosen to sleep here of all places. His bed, only a few steps away, shouting, he jolted, and his ability to stand... futile. Gone well before I found him, smiling, he lifted my hand to show him, and it was on days like this where it would surely fly- getting so high I could pinch it between my fingers, like a coin.

Sleeping!

His yell, quick just like his hand, he whacked me with the pillow.

Often, parents choose to hold back their screams. Often it's to not their intention to lose composure or to raise a hand. Avoiding pain, control is more than just a requirement, for pain is always what follows, and stability is but the gift bestowed upon those deemed as strong-minded, *unbreakable*.

Soft.

To reflect on childhood is to remember times of imparting wisdom; the procuring of either regret or relief. Never both. Even the best upbringings, peppered with a few absent moments, a long list of mistakes, to say that nothing bad ever happened is to insult the happiness one received.

To define trauma, strenuous and chained by that which has happened but is never forgotten, it is not defined by the self or by others, and certainly not by those who claimed to have had it better; *those who say not everything was as good as it should have been.*

Exhaling, tendrils of minty smoke wafted before me, and I could only ask him so much before his vigor remerged.

Earnin' and burnin', how he talked about his work.

No time for softness. Time's a wastin'.

A fast reactor- the defining attribute of his so-called success -the words he chose sounded the same.

Do, don't just sit by and watch.

Considering his life, the details are buried in a long calumny describing the man that he only thinks that he is, except it's not the false ideas or nefarious deeds I remember. Pity, I knew his choices were burning him from inside, so true and yet, I can't think of anything that could be.

Why care to know now when he's gone.

Seeing him, another shudder followed by another moment of longing singes my nerves, I don't miss him. I just see him.

/Ignited by the vicissitudes created after things deemed too fragile to hold onto, maybe I was or maybe my preconceived notions about what it really means to raise a child will never be attained until I have one of my own.

The boat's edges, so sharp they can cut skin, the folds, imperfect, they're not as symmetrical as I would have liked, but it will- must -float. The downpour, lighter, drops trickle the sidewalk, and I'm standing in rubber boots, a pink poncho, with no umbrella, and so I can feel the rain as I stand by and wait.

Stop!

Screaming, hearing nothing I haven't already, all that finds a way inside are more memories.

Hands up, magnanimous, I knew I should have gone on, but then I am remembering the day when I asked about dinner.

Provoked, often it was just a word or a phrase that rocked his stability, something always so delicately assembled. On a bad day, it's human to demand silence, to be excluded from an interminable world. A lonely man, scared, if one does not try and eliminate the bad moments, they turn calamitous, ruthless and there is no shell made

for the human spirit that's capable of sustaining them. Only time heals and yet we are perforated by the things that fester in the moments in between.

In the end, it all floats.

Gently placing the boat into the stream, even with the damage, feels light; *ethereal*.

Too many questions, father said, too many voices, too many cries, too few places to visit, too many left unsatisfied, unscathed, too many taken too early, too little to eat, too little to look forward to, not enough time to build, to rebuild, no friends to see, nothing new to say, and no family, none who matter. And, with each raised hand, each scream, each hammering fist, it was all just a response to how little there *really* is, and how we're all just clawing at whatever's left.

Tasting the insipid dish, I gulped water to wash it down. Gawking, he folded his hands, and scooped globules of whatever was left on his plate. Shoving it into his face, which in his old age, was now pallid. concave.

Done.

Not hungry, not even remotely, looking at his stone face; a display of sullen countenance as he finished. Parents put food into hungry mouths whether such mouths choose to open or not.

Feedin'em is the easy part. It's talkin's while they're eatin'... that's the hardest.

Pushing the plate all the way to the center, as far away as I could get it, leaving it there, I stood, and was despondent as I declined to look at him.

Eat!

Whipping the plate, it fell and shattered into sharp, serrated pieces. Trembling, I knew whenever he descended into his obstreperous bates it was never about things that were comprehensible, or real. One word, one comment, one moment of disrespect, and he was gone. The reasons, always evident prior, the results did not change. You don't have to spend hours thinking about what makes people into monsters or fathers into beasts. Such is definable by a slight change in the metaphorical current; life's plans marred by the denial that only quickens their descent, accelerating them into territory they don't understand until they're made a part of it. Often slow, possibly the slowest transition one can endure, the ride is tumultuous, and very, very long. A boat sailing boisterously, some things persist without knowing where it is they're going, if they'll sink or swim.

Whatever happens, at least once, they'll float.

Pushing the chair, leaping, I feel fists- solid as oak -and see the food in his mouth seeping past his lips while the morsels trickle out like blood-soaked bits of bones, splurged together in a great vomit of gore. Through gritting teeth, I beg until an endless chain of hands sock me like waves crashing my sternum. I pretend I'm on a beach, and what I'm tasting is sand.

Twenty-eight, my father was twenty-two when he had me, and was twenty-nine when mother left. Older, I thought he was when he raised me, he did it the same as his father did, and his father before him.

Now there's only me.

I see a reel comprised of my many moments, the ones that I once thought would be confounded to me for all time. Always, there's always the promise of absolution, of order, and still every day a parent tries just a little more than theirs did.

Whatever their child asks for, they receive.

Feed me, help me, protect me.

And so, the parent gives. The child shouts. It whines. All day long, their bleeding, querulous, perpetual begs persist- demanding more. Following the parent, it's an odor, what they crave is just a small sign that lets them know they were caring enough, wise enough, good enough. Then the whining returns, and the outcome of asking too much is fear and the cure for such? A hand, a kick, a scolding gesture done to preserve order, keeps peace.

A parent provides, a child takes, and everything is going to be okay.

Make sure there are no holes. All it takes is one for it to sink.

I will. A few holes isn't going to stop it.

Rainfall and thunder, it's only just beginning. The currents, rippling against the gutter, effervescing the intricacies of the narrow sidewalk, I hunker as I hold my own little precious tool of catharsis, of succor with both hands. The paper, still crinkled, still ripped, the wax manages to keep it, but the blue, the color is the same.

Like the sky when it rains, it's his and it is mine.

Opening my hand, letting it go, it skirrs; a ship obdurately battling the wind, capitulating the current, beleaguering. As I ameliorate, the memories ploddingly disappear- with the only fragments that remain are the tiny drops in between- so small that, if you wanted to, you could catch them all with one hand.

A Girl in a Purple Dress

A girl in a purple dress
sits on the edge of the roof of a five-story building,
dangles her legs until
a sandal, which looks like a pink baby toad, falls from her foot
onto a flower bed far below... Don't worry,
Daddy will bring it back...
The smell of heated resin, of dusty roofing felt,
little pebbles,
and she is also so little – tiny hands,
flax-colored locks...
And cooing doves flock together behind her back.
She is not at all afraid
of teetering on the edge of falling
into the cozy gray and green abyss
with horse chestnuts, asphalt, and a bench in it.
The girl named Not. Today is her not-birthday,
the day when she was not born.
No one is going to give her presents:
an expensive doll, or a picture book, or a new smartphone.
The girl in a purple dress sits on the edge of the world made of
silly brick substance –
she's neither happy nor hurt.
No one sees her, except my guilty conscience...
Forgive me, girl, for not allowing you to be born.
I butted like a bull against the soft white belly,
with a net of red blood vessel inside –
the subway of anger, where the train
blindly grabs and gulps innocent people...

I gnaw at myself like a pit bull may gnaw at a Rubik cube smeared with fat,
but dots don't connect. My thoughts are not thoughts, just
bite marks on the colored plastic,
and nothing is going to be right in my life again:
the girl in a purple dress sits
on the edge of existence;
she's not angry with me. Instead of the face, she has
two woman's hands with warm water,
and a bright orange fish pulses inside,
but the water leaks through the thin fingers...
I've paid for everything I've done, I've cut wings off of my back,

and the stamps of the talent tried to grow back over and over again,
unable to believe that no one needed them.
Life with you has passed me by, and it's all my fault.
It's all my arrogance and my stupid fear
that was like a spreading tree
made of black boiling water that quivers in the wind.
My girl, you come to me in my dreams,
you scramble up onto my shoulders (I am the five-story building now)
and dangle your legs,
and remain silent,
and your stare burns through the cityscape
like a cigarette through a clear bag...
I'm holding in my brick hands
the pink sandal that
looks like a pink baby toad...

(Translated by Sergey Gerasimov from Russian)

The Poet Stairs

David M Rubin

She flew in with great purpose. To gather icons and tracts on angels and devils. To heal great rifts and mend her world. Her clothes merged with the background, greys and pale-blues that held no interest to people or mosquitos. She pulled her hair up, always. She appeared attached to a tattered backpack crammed with trail mix, scattered toiletries and one change of clothes. Always a second, often a third, a fourth bag overflowed with poetry and postcards, and always one translation of Rilke.

One of the bouquinistes, though she couldn't guess which, would have an original German-French edition of the Duino Elegies. Poetry made of words to transcend language. Rilke-words were silver knives without delineated handles. More an act of communion than reading, direct as if from angels. *Chaque ange est terrifiant*. She couldn't read more than a few lines at a time. The cadence repeated -- she started, she immersed, she was overwhelmed by inspiration and a compulsion to sketch... the urge to create.

Green painted stall after stall for days on end and all she kept were a *Lunar Baedeker* with the improper spelling and two dozen 1900 Kunsterinnenverein postcards with Mina Loy's face sketched onto deities and demons, naked and chained to rocks and mainsails. Scandalous pornographies. Conceptions. *Pig cupid rooting erotic garbage*. She bought up armfuls of Rimbaud's *Une Saison En Enfer* and threw them in the Seine.

She denied the Louvre's ancient stairs their ability to overwhelm. Powerfully she climbed two steps at a time. The space was miraculously present. Walls and walls of matte, just-off-primary-colored Poussins. Vast rooms and hallways with no people. Not a soul. Heaven. Ecstatic Paul carried by a team of angels on the thin air of clarity, pillowed by brown and smoke-grey heaven, a huge billowing background. Angel-servant legs, arms and torsos tangled, wings free to power them up and up. And a dissenting crash, always the *Abduction of the Sabine Women*. *Sabinae raptae*.

Churches echoed empty. She stole bird-like glances at wounded and burned Notre Dame cast in scaffolding. The men scurried to add dry sand to the castle but the ocean was vast. The little squatting fanged gargoyles horrified her. Like children. She repeated over and over *that the terrifying angels were not fallen*. A mantra for the trip. The fallen were constitutively magnifique. She recognized herself a fallen object and vastly more beautiful than Helen. Her opal eyes focused fire so she aimed away. Her long silver hair pillowed forth in curls with specks of blackhole dust. Her hair was meant for delicate braids with twists of Queen's Anne Lace, to anoint with rose and vanilla. She slashed off what extruded from unseen crevasses as *other*, and bunched the remainder into a tight bun. *She sat Beauty on her knee... found her bitter... and hurt her*. She scrubbed her face red to make sure it was clean and clear. Her form was exquisite... and abhorrent as it grew the two that were taken as easily as their birth was war. Two whimpered moans that traveled from the center of creation. Swaddled and whisked off. Pain endured, counted out in eons by the click of each small bone that gravity pulls to the marble floor.

The sun dragged past the enormous mausoleum on the hill. Foucault's pendulum shifted imperceptibly. She soul-shivered. Creator of life. It appeared to make no difference to the universe if she was violently attacked or pulsed by Gabriel's rainbow. And either way, in the end... abandoned. Eloi eloi lama sabachtani. Forsaken to wander... alone. She, her twins, Adam, Eve, Jesus, Lucifer and the whole damned pantheon of fallen angels... Her paradise lost, wandering worlds of fractured angels and devils. Sifting for pieces that wouldn't re-assemble.

In the bowels of the Pantheon, she stepped over the metal barrier to Rousseau's tomb. She wept, pulling at the preposterous torch-holding hand that emerged from the sterile final resting spot. Hell for a devil who abandoned his newborns, and was exiled too. Abandoned and exiled when alive, but brought back here dead. She was dragged mechanically by indifferent gendarmes, but broke free to spit on the smug stone quill of Voltaire. They carried her outside past gasps and laughs. She shut her murderous fire-eyes, and was placed gently on the cold stone steps next to her overflowing bags.

The last light faded along the Rive Gauche. She leafed through more and more stalls of books. She browsed sections on Parisian Style, an incomprehensible language. First there was the word, then word-built rules. Creatures appeared from muck and fear, donned masks and played their awful games. She hoarded 1920s postcards with Edna St. Vincent Millay's head pasted and re-photographed on nude bodies of can-can girls with the word *PROXIMATE* kicked about. *No one but Night, with tears on her dark face, watches besides me in this windy place.* She bargained down an original Djuna Barnes *Repulsive Women*. She sketched angels around Corpse A. She tore out Corpse B and threw it in the Seine. The chariot of the sun was lost in the propinquity of darkness.

Ideas and flesh. Humankind and humans. She squinted the passing crowds of paternity into a Pissarro. The blurred movement overwhelmed both sides of the Seine. *Mirrors and copulations are abominable*, blasting through rues and tunnels of air like buckshot hosts of mindless wiggling sperm. *Reproductions*. She managed her crescendo of panic by transforming the living mirage into entropic objects, like grains of sand and pebbles bouncing about the surf. When sufficiently calmed, she brought them back, by sorting them into the categories of style – convivial, voluminous, sleek, sparkly, paradoxical, androgynous, flared, punk, high-low... Perhaps this was grace?

Each person was more terrifying than a hurricane, than cancer. Hands reaching from hell to pull at live ankles. How to define a sufficient amulet? The twilight streets were crowded and crowded. A terrible pulsating like maggots falling from the carcass of a dead fox. It was so hot. Unbearably so. Her three bags of tracts and icons overflowed. One for angels, one for devils, one with blurred lines. She stopped to inhale the peach musk decay. That was the nature of angels too. Grace?

Slowly ascending each stair to the needle of the Eiffel Tower, taking the time to focus with great concentration on intention. What language to speak and what to ask? How to claim a place among the angels?

Planting the Solstice Stake

The curly-haired Cyrenian wore an immaculately pressed purple toga stenciled with green Palm Trees. He hammered a three-foot stake into the ground as his disheveled friend from Syracuse coaxed it perfectly straight.

The Cyrenian declared, "We should have been met by an adoring crowd."

"No one knows we're even here," mumbled the Syracusan.

"One last measurement and then considering Euclid III.XI and I.XXIVX, and a few calculations, we will have reckoned..."

"Seems unlikely that by simply measuring a shadow cast by a stake..."

"Yet the calculation requires just this one final measurement. It's so simple a Thracian farmer's ox..."

"I'm not convinced it's that simple."

"It's that simple. Why should be it be more difficult?"

"Too simple feels like you are mocking the Gods."

Exasperated the Cyrenian shook his head. "The greatest chance for error will be in determining the exact noon sun and then accurately measuring the shadow."

"So, we just measure the length of the shadow cast by the stake at the exact moment when, exactly 5010 stades away, the sun plunges *without shadow* deep into the wells at Syene."

"Yes, for the myriadth time."

"Feels as if something is missing."

"Shall I repeat it slowly in case any dumber than an ox are in attendance?"

"We are alone."

Eratosthenes of Cyrene laughed, "I often feel alone when I am with Archimedes of Syracuse."

"Maybe the earth *is* so enormous we are not meant to reckon its size?"

"It is enormous yet small compared to the sun."

"A humble sentiment?"

“Hardly. The relatively more massive size of the sun is fortunate as all of the sun’s rays are parallel as they hit the curved surface of the earth. So, at the exact moment of solstice, though a far-away stake in Syene will cast no shadow, this stake will cast a shadow. Do we agree?”

Archimedes scrunched his face into a maybe, possibly, perhaps.

Eratosthenes pointed one hand towards the stake’s shadow, which was quite elongated as the sun made its way to the apex, and he pointed the other hand in the direction that the stake was pointed. “Our stake’s shadow will form one side of a triangle and another side will extend from the stake to the earth’s center where it will meet with the imaginary line from the stake in Syene... setting up alternate equal angles and...”

Archimedes said, “I’m not a religious fellow, but I am declaring this event a heresy. Hubris. A transgression so severe that I see you chained to a mountain with eagles picking at your liver. I shall testify against you and hope that you admit that you tricked me into helping. Let’s claim I was told to hold the boundary stake for a new Zeus olive grove.”

“If Zeus of the Lightning exists then he has already heard you, you fair-weathered fool. He lurks as an irresistibly handsome boar that will egregiously seduce you at nightfall.”

Archimedes thought back to when he first met Eratosthenes, who was not a teacher, not a student, but freely wandered the library researching and provoking. The first thing he said to Archimedes was: “You’re the one who falls so deep in thought he does not pay attention and forgets when he has classes? Aximandios claimed you arrived as his test was ending and you marked correct figures without proofs. A dreaming dolt *and* a cheating scoundrel!”

Archimedes had mumbled then, “Cheat from who... Stimax of Samos? Cleon of Boetia? Alcideon of Athens? No one else had even finished.”

Eratosthenes whistled Archimedes back to the present.

Archimedes calmly stated, “Free of hubris, full of doubt, I just need time to think before I make such bold declarations.”

“Oh, Pan’s under-balls! You can measure a toy ball. You can measure the globe of the Atlas statue at the library, but any bigger and Archimedes doubts that reckoning works. Your watermelon head holds a brain so big it slumps you forward like an ape, but you only dabble with Euclid to measure your momma’s oranges, when by Apollo you can reckon anything.” Eratosthenes roared. “Oh Geometer, do take refuge in the math!”

Eratosthenes was designed to fire endless spears of logic while Archimedes needed quiet to ponder, perhaps over a cool lemonade, maybe after a nap. Take the proper time to sift through the what-ifs within the refuge of the math. The quality of Archimedes thought ebbed in inverse proportion to Eratosthenes excitement and chatter. Eratosthenes was younger than Archimedes but was perhaps wiser from travelling the breadth of the Greek world. He was nicknamed *Pentatholos* because he “competed” in every subject -- one day he was detailing a 700-year timeline from the Trojan War to Alexander’s conquest of Egypt and the next he was writing a critique of the plays and poems about Mycenae’s women, which numbered into the hundreds. On the walk to the “Planting of the Solstice Stake”, Eratosthenes shot off a string of stories involving his devising, organizing, advertising, and partaking in the “Orgy of the Nine Cultures”. Archimedes made mental note of 47 dubious seeming claims, involving detailed workings of reproductive organs, harem sociology, the evolution of languages in response to mating requirements, the history of reptile sexuality, and the tacit encouragement for any and all of this madness by Dionysus. The stories nestled aesthetic or ethical lessons, like that there was no fundamental difference between Greeks and “barbarians” despite the claims of Aristotle. He would work through the 47 dubious claims silently while eating dinner later.

How strange the workings of the mind. Archimedes was planning out future dinner thoughts while being teased by Eratosthenes in a present that was on the verge of a revolutionary breakthrough, as yet another part ranged to the safety of his childhood home in Syracuse. *In the absolute center of a circular courtyard ringed by olive and lemon trees, he uses a stick to mark in the sand an elaborate design of spheres and cylinders. The shapes are cut into wedges and the wedges pulled apart*

into what looks like an elaborately peeled and dissected orange. His mother yells from the house, "Archimedes, you will be late to receive those vlakas honors from those library alitas, and you must bathe."

"A myriad of myriads will happen today but that set will not include my bathing."

"Get in the bath or I'll rip the hair from your head. You smell like the flow to the Cloaca Maximus from the Gravoulos house."

His father laughed, "You know, if King Hiero catapulted those Loukoumades-devouring gluttons into the Mediterranean, the waves would roll over the shores and flood both Rome and Carthage."

Archimedes pivoted back to Alexandria, wondering "How rotund would a catapulted glutton have to be for the resultant wave to wash out Rome? Was there that much water in the sea?" And then stating, "Eratosthenes, I don't believe the part about the Persian prosthetics that you declared were the star of the orgy. Or the part about the naked Spartan pyramid."

"Ask Cadmius of Thebes to show you the acquired thirty-degree bend in his whatsis after toppling from the pyramidion. Or ask his wife if you dare."

Quite out of character, Archimedes asked, "Have I mentioned that I fought a Roman soldier?"

"Ha! Eratosthenes of Cyrene is all ears. Please tell more."

"When I was 11, I was invited to the palace of Hiero to receive my first invitation to the library. I was late so was running with my head down for maximum speed. I held grapes in one hand and in the other an oaken block I carved to explain the conical dissection of an orange. As my mother shouted across the agora to finish my grapes outside and not stain my toga, the side-door opened and a furious Roman delegation was ushered out. I plowed into the lead Centurion with such force that I rattled the helmet from his head. He lifted me off the ground by my throat. I smacked the grapes into his left cheek, and as the brute swung his head to avoid the insult, his head crashed into my carved wooden orange that I held near his right temple. He fell to the ground... good night said Romulus to Remus."

Wide-eyed Eratosthenes was speechless, so Archimedes continued, ‘I always take refuge in the math, but need time to digest your reckoning without limit.’ He leaned down and picked up a handful of sand. “How many grains do I hold? How many would fill the huge spherical earth, assuming you are right about its size? How many grains would fill the whole universe? What numbers could we use that even count that high? If you gave me a lever long enough and a place to stand, could I lift the earth?”

“That’s the spirit! A wooden orange to Aristotle’s temple! Ask questions, generate data, make connections, understand the patterns in your world. One day you will be called *The Sand Reckoner!*”

The sun quietly climbed through the sky. In Alexandria two men noted the length of a shadow. 5010 stades away in Syene that same sun cast no shadow. The surface of the world was curved and Eratosthenes reckoned that the arc from Alexandria to Syene was approximately one fiftieth part of a great circle round the earth... and that that great circle measured 250,000 stades.

Archimedes whispered, “That is amazing. Absolutely nothing has changed, yet everything is different.”

Sissy Cryptodira

Lindsey noticed that the field mice were smaller near Solomon Gundy's barn where the Sycamores sprouted neon yellow splitgills. Gabriella perked up and told Lindsey and Carlo the gardener to harvest half the mushrooms, and she got to researching myco-spells and shrink-potions. Soon enough she declared her concentrate "*fini*" and went about shrinking down 400 mice 40 times smaller than the native Gundy runts, then a mom and eight pouched possums, four beagles, one little boy (which was supposed to be a chimp), and Cassius an asthmatic gorilla. And then I shrunk Carlo.

It was one big blur. When Gabriella had said to shrink a chimp at the zoo and bring back one regular-sized gorilla, we laughed, but then she laughed louder and said she would just turn us *back* into apes and shrink us.

"Can you elaborate on what you mean by *back*?"

Ask a chaos witch a direct question and get back butterfly flapping hurricane complexity. She said that we were the famous baby chimps stolen from the Columbus Zoo and our memories were conjured and implanted along with a thesaurus and a set of encyclopedias. Lindsey whispered to me that Gabriella must mean two other "people" because she said yesterday that Lindsey used to be an ocelot and I used to be a giant tortoise. Lindsey picked pretend fleas from my head to tease me or maybe we really used to be chimps.

Gabriella asked, "Have you so little regard for the coven that you are aping lawyers?"

I wasn't sure what she meant, so I respectfully said, "I have the highest regard..."

Lindsey wacked me one and said, "Gabriella means you religiously progress from a to b to c when obviously what the world needs is more leaps and swerves."

I still didn't understand so I said, "One big ape coming up."

Lindsey dressed me up in a purple wig and a N95 mask that said "No Masks Except on Halloween", and drove me to a few blocks away from the Philadelphia Zoo. She repeated for the third time, "Pay cash and meet me back here." We patted our

sides where we kept our magnums, which was shorthand for “if real big trouble comes, blast and run.”

I dallied at the reptile house but couldn't tell if the giant tortoises recognized me. I spotted a little boy straying from a family of eight, and used rainbow lollipops to lead him to the primate house. I handed him the bag of coated peanuts and told him a special monkey named Lucky was waiting for him to give him these peanuts. The boy took the peanuts and slipped between a railing and line of holly bushes. I am pretty good at hide and seek so assumed when I couldn't find him, he must have eaten the chimp's peanuts and shrunk.

On the ride back we picked up the gorilla from an exotic animal dealer in Ottsville as planned. He said blah blah blah what he had to do to get a gorilla and that this one was called Cassius and he had asthma and needed inhalers. Lindsey said, “we prefer him faulty.” (An asthmatic gorilla made it less likely Gabriella would turn it into a human and shrink one of us instead). After we forklifted the gorilla cage onto the truck, Lindsey slapped the dealer's back with sleep potion microneedles. When he dropped, she took back the envelope with the money, and said, “Sissy, help me get this scoundrel into the big cat pen.” We got him mostly over the cyclone fence, but the tigers pulled at his hair and shirt too soon and he got stuck up there and they only ate his top part.

When we got back home, Gabriella talked to Cassius in a strange language, and we couldn't figure out how to move him or the cage so we just fed him a mushroom puck on the truck. He flung it away underhanded like a softball and hit Lindsey in the forehead. We all laughed. Gabriella put vanilla icing on another one and he ate that right down. In a few minutes he shrunk to about two feet tall, and started squeezing through the bars. Even a quarter of a scared and angry gorilla, huffing from asthma could likely rip someone's arm off, so Gabriella told me to shoot him. I paused and she said, “Shoot him, turtle slow brain!”. Thinking leap and swerve all day, I aimed between her eyes and pulled the trigger. Gabriella slowly moved a hand to cast, but she dropped in the driveway like a sack of potatoes. A hiss of cold blue air leaked out from the bloodless hole in her head, helped along by two-foot Cassius leaping on her chest.

Gabriella's air surrounded and infused me with the tales and spells of the ancient coven.

Lindsey, who looked hilarious as an ocelot, said, "Do you have a plan, boss?" I suggested maybe she should consider an appropriate tone with Sissy Cryptodira. She nodded and then we glanced over at Carlo the gardener, who was mowing the grass, praying and crying, pretending not to see anything.

I made Carlo climb in the swimming pool and handed him a mushroom puck. "Getting small was ok because you will never run away and tell anyone and that way, you will still be alive till the spell wore off in a few years. Then you can go home." I couldn't pinpoint a paramecium sized Carlo, but that was because he got set upon by predatory *Didinium gargantuas*. I laughed and taught Cassius to say, "Arrivederci, Carlo" in all the different languages.

New York, Friday, 2 AM, 1941

She labored through nights mopping floors.
A lean towering building downtown.
Deserted halls and empty offices.

One hall polished clean, then up (or down)
a flight, and then another hall.

The squeak of her shoes
on tiles. The bucket thudding—chipped
wheel—the mop, strangled, dripping
dank grey water, the ammonia scent.

For three years, none had had the time of night
for her. Her landlord and the woman
at the corner drugstore register,
the only souls who spoke to her.

But last week, an older white man—Frank—
who worked the Thursday shift, had smiled.
Did she like pasta—and wine?
He had pasta and wine;
his flat was tiny; he seemed ashamed;
three blocks away, a pleasant walk ...

Long lines knit his brow and cheeks:
he too was tired. There was too much
she craved shelter from.
The third, maybe the fourth—
of all the pairs of white eyes in the world—
before which she'd felt visible.

He would meet her in ten hours.

Time had lain, suspended,
floor after floor, stories in the air, for years.

In pale light, the corridor glowed.

Andre M____, 1790

He caressed their quill pen:
a luminous feather
from a nameless raven.
Candlelight danced on its barbs.
That bird may have been sacrificed,
but its genus remained robust.

His window propped open with a book,
he could almost hear the Atlantic
sigh through the night.
Two voices—laughing, drunk—
floated in from the street.

Tonight's entry in his vellum journal
could honor his boisterous country,
a masterpiece of words:
"truths ... self-evident" and "liberty."

It could confess his search,
but "I" would make a poor entry:
a garment obscuring a multitude.

Nor would "he" suffice:
a cold third person,
as though an authorial mind floated free
from their confusion and ecstasy.

Whatever confession he'd lock
in his armoire
should rise from within,
almost like blood
or like ink that flowed
through the shaft of their pen.

Andre stretched in his negligee
which no one must know they wore.
His muscular legs shone
through semi-transparent lace.

His hands spread across their chest.
What would it feel like to carry breasts
and to have no penis,
only an opening?
To have a man penetrate me?

He was alive at a glorious time.
In Paris, in Philadelphia,
the world was bursting,
a new life from a chrysalis.
Many had died for words,
but he had none
for his own blend
of consciousness and flesh—

He stared again at his pen,
brushed his thumb down the feather tips.
As though the right opening
could order the wilderness ...

grinding and polishing glass,
languishing in house arrest,
renouncing his discoveries.

He watched the reflected moon
 w o b b l e
in the water.

He pondered his cousin Daan,
a churchman who whispered hymns
when he strolled at night with friends,
the mayor, his neighbors, his wife.
In spectral procession
 their faces
 passed,
but what transpired in their minds?
Were they *sure* clouds housed angelic hosts?
That after you died—
a magician's trick—
your soul was coaxed to the skies?
Did some, fleetingly, think like him?

In a scattered fraternity,
from classical schools
(thinkers in robes
as Raphael portrayed),
to Paris today,
to the coffeehouse club,
and in private reveries everywhere,

candid women, resolute men
were roused by the thought of how free we are—
masters of a planet
orbiting through space,
endowed by our supple, sovereign minds
with intellectual grace.

Hidden Observatory

If we worked, slept, and woke—just us two—
in a small observatory on the peak of a hill,
only monthly braving the narrow road
down the mountain for supplies and food,

with no distractions from the prodigious sky,
stewarding every ancient whisper
from which to infer the widening voyages
of waves of gravity through space and time;

if we never made coordinates of ourselves,
of feeling annoyed, unwanted, or, worse yet,
at sea in our narrative, dreading the lack
of a destination for our work or love;

if all our attention streamed toward the night,
fearless of distance—a blended thought—
could we orbit back into relearning ourselves
as we first blindly gleaned how vast we were?

* * *

In the earliest storms our memory can conjure
we spoke in luminous incoherent torrents
felt each other listen voraciously
then fell silent as we disclosed ourselves.

* * *

After years of downed branches, clumped sodden leaves,
bottles, wrappers, clogging gutters,
that thunder recedes to diffident mutters.

But telescopes housed in our unlisted dome
could capture explosions millennia old
while a necklace of lasers draped through the hills

collected background chirps from the universe

when it was new. Imagine our minds

fluorescing crystalline impersonal

In Madison

*Could you, I wondered,
after our prolonged sojourn
into voluntary burdens—
all the worries of our wearisome careers—
envision a complete return?*
We walked once in the arboretum,
textbooks in backpacks,
learning from a century
of dilated time, plastic
space, probable
movements
a dance!

Novels weave meanings in matrices—
one spills
into the next—
written by no *one*, everyone.
(As if we stood on a Norse longboat
all stars, which meant the future, spiraling
all oceans, which meant the past, slumbering.)

I envisioned one. In Madison, then,
late October air turned
like a crisp page.
We wore wool sweaters,
spotted cedar waxwings in pines,
egrets in a pond, a hawk in flight.

Since an Egyptian peasant unearthed codices
in 1945,
we've glimpsed the spiritual metropolis
the early Church obscured.
The past opens, as vast as the future—
we barely gather who we've always been.

*We could even now, I thought, be winding nearer
after years of never having been away.*
Nothing magical:
footsteps on soft grass
between clumps of bright dry leaves.
Poems before patriarchs and naves.

Neither the waxwing nor endangered kestrel ever abandoned
Wisconsin, Jamestown, or Jerusalem.
As we stood motionless beneath a tree,
our eyes would adjust to behold

colonies of wings

invisible a thought ago.

* * *

That very moment, I would decide—
grounded in East Los Angeles,
where your second transfer landed us—
as we're approaching Madison,
it will be 1999 again,
the best time of all
because it is every time.

Archives

I'd cut two lines from a poem about Japan
and stored them in a folder marked *Disjecta*:
We were stuck, "thousands of miles from anywhere
we'd end up living."

Peppered with slant rhymes and misleading clues,
the poem had furnished glimpses
of one-way tickets,
fragile companionships,
elusive returns.

The more I altered other stanzas—
reducing the eclectic landscape
to emblems of itself
(a green hill packed with houses hastily built,
lines of bicycles on narrow roads),
honing time's rhizomatic flights
into a tunnel, a comforting line
that led toward us settling, reconciled—
the less those lines belonged.

I made *those* edits when you lived with me.

* * *

I leafed through your photos
of our week in the countryside:
rice paddies, roadside shrines
to aborted children, train platforms
that you captured at the rise of dawn.
(You'd slip off the futon while I slept in,
into the sunrise, where
your long legs and lengthy hair
would briefly disappear.)

This was after you moved out.
(I found your album in my *Archives* box.
You must have forgotten it there.)
I wondered then if I was hoping again
that you'd explain our journeys' motives to me.

* * *

I opened my diary from my two “gap” years
(sleeping by palm trees near Tahitian beaches).
I wrote of money “misspent,” the “shame”
of fancying myself a new Cezanne
who brandished words like lush pastels.

This was years before we met.
For how long had I been indicting my life
for failing to conform to a narrative?
I decided that, read properly,
those lines from Japan should cancel themselves.
*How, they should ask, could I be thousands of miles
from wherever I’m living now?*

* * *

When I got to Japan, before we met,
I lay awake listening to frogs in the fields,
spent long days mastering a language
we scarcely used since then.

You told me your twenties felt like a detour—
a train rerouted after an accident.
I thought for a moment
I could be the hero your drama lacked,
foreshadowed since its opening act.

We met, by chance, by the Ashida River,
each on tour with our group of children.
You were telling yours something about native plants.
I fell in love with your fluent Japanese.

Equestrienne

As I roll my daughter through the park
under her stroller's canvas hood,
tucked in her solar-system blanket—
sun and planets in a pastel sky—
a copy of me, rough, and thus herself,
with her olive skin and tired brown eyes—
I'd bottle up this moment if I could,
so she could sip later from its joys.

Twenty-five, thirty, I power-walked alone
through parks like this,
August winds unzipping trees,
scattering multicolored leaves.
I pictured multitudes of molecules
after thousands or billions of years
assuming the intricate shapes of linnets
and gathering into human brains.

Where was my duty in that intricacy?
For years this question smoldered,
from her grandparents' fervent church in Iran
through my tortuous Ph.D. in the States
Something (exhaustion? or a need for peace?)
told me: stand back, let it subside—
embers in a glassed-in fireplace.

She'll outlive me by decades; whatever my schemes,
eventually she'll chart her own release.
For now at least, her place is with me,
in her budding, babbling curiosity.
*That's a "doggy," those are "clouds,"
and there's another "baby," like you,
with a parent (tired and grateful) like me.*

I hope she'll savor the pleasures of thought:
the strength it grants us to fashion ourselves
out of a primordial nothingness
and the grace to respect what's partly our own:
the earth, the cosmos, and the future we shape.

But I hope it won't, like a descending train,
whisk her into valleys *it* has scoured—
exiled from literal birds in the trees.
I hope she'll be the equestrienne
who always masters her horse,
senses when it nears the end of a course,
and dismounts, to relax her face in the breeze.

Tillage

I like to think we're children still:
we've only lingered here
a meager 300,000 years.
A blink of an eye ago
we first tilled the Nile's fertile soil,
bathed in the Yangtze and Euphrates,
and grew food by the Indus's muddy banks.

As we crouch in our garden, grubby-kneed,
gathering arugula for dinner tonight,
hoping our harvest is early enough—
before bitterness sets in—
pruning three-inch leaves to toss
with olive oil, lemon, and parmesan cheese,
we can envision a vigorous future race,
eight feet tall, living two hundred years,
everyone an athlete and scientist,
as innocent as your 14-year-old face.

When the table's cleared
and your mother and brother have fled
into their endless work,
when we've prepared hot cocoa
and repaired to the roof
to chat, sit in silence, and ponder the moon,
we'll try not to think
of climate change or nuclear war,
invading aliens or rogue AI,
or the hatred our species inflicts on itself
over skin pigments, deities, nations, or sex.
We'll try not to imagine our genetic kin
smothering innocent galaxies with laws
that reflect our neural circuitries.

We'll imagine luminous gardens blooming
in oceans, on mountains, and in countless backyards.
We'll imagine descendants as kind
as your and your brother's births
have made me aspire to be.

Your mom and I might bequeath—
to each of you—galaxies!
We dream that you'll engineer paths—
on airways, railways, across synaptic clefts—
toward the rims of dark nebulae.

Independence Day

For years you engraved defiant thoughts,
like streaks of fire, across the sky—
during our private Fourth of July.

You saw life as a solitary trek,
my brave and foolish twenty-something self:
an arrow launched toward a dark, fixed end.
Inwardness was your dearest friend
on long walks through mountains—alone
or with our brother shuffling at our side;
at night, with books stacked by the bed;
on the coast highway, with the radio
streaming messages into the car, and breeze
sweeping them toward the sand and waves.

Men, you vowed, could be honest, brave,
hammering visions into spectacular shapes:
blacksmiths whose lives'
accoutrements—jobs, houses, wives—
were molten material.

* * *

You know how desperately I now believe
that no one is alone.
We were swaddled as an infant by two god-like gazes
that have surveilled us through a dozen places
between our college dorm and this drafty home.

For years I strove to escape:
our mother's family photos—
Old World figures peering
out of country fields,
homespun dresses, gaudy beards.
Our father's obsession
with the law's abstractions—
shelves of treatises
alphabetized in dignified lines.

After my Hawaiian sojourn, with my phone cut off,
teaching strangers by day to wind ski and surf,
nights wrestling with Nietzsche and Gibran —
sprawled on my desk in a broken row—
searching for an unbelief
in which to unreservedly believe,
I circled home, sunburned, half ashamed,
ready to begin a family and be reclaimed.

* * *

A riptide of years has whisked me
into the middle of my life.
I am now a god-like mass of meaning
for a child abandoned, hours at a stretch,
to tv and computer screens.

The apocalypse has come, or is near.
The heroine has two or three frightened friends,
and mutant creatures or giant robots
menace them everywhere.
In its crude hyperbole,
every cartoon parodies
your clumsy adolescent quest.

* * *

Now I'm convinced that you and I
were never more than zero at our core.
But at our periphery—
star-trails, arms of the Milky Way—
shine everyone for whom we've cared.
I am not one,
but many, never having been alone.

Mom's portrait hovers in our daughter's room.
She's twenty-five (I'm not yet conceived),
with an oddly gorgeous foreign face.
Once, with her slight off-center gaze,
she seemed to envision some mistake.
Now her image seems to say
that she carried—from her childhood
to the U.S.A.—
due reverence for what she cannot know.

Dad strides across his patio, oddly fit—
although his memory's shot—
retaining gestures and tics
that long conveyed intransigence
with everyone less expert than he.

* * *

Could you hover—a penumbra
in this mirror's deep space—
over my loose skin and thinning hair,
facing the man you spent decades fashioning,
I'd ask what you sought freedom from
during your personal Independence Days.

Many storylines of people dear to us
unspooled offstage.
Mom traversed a swollen ocean
to join a line of black-clad mourners
on a muddy country road.
After four months in the neuro ward,
our brother emerged
songs scattered on his guitar,
nearly intact enough to hold a job.

Decades have circled me here, seeking your ghost
in the empty pockets of my face.
They passed while we blinked our eyes!—
and I'm exactly where I was:
a greying body in the same flushed mind
awash in hope and time.

Coyote Woman

Laura Holt

A Retelling Inspired by the Southwestern Yaqui Legend

There is a place in Mexico where, if you go beneath the light of a new full moon, you can find coyote bones lying scattered across the sand like fallen stars. And, if you gather them up, and take off your shoes, and sit at the bottom of a small hill, and wait patiently—sometimes an hour, sometimes more, sometimes less—an old woman will emerge from the house that stands at the top of the hill.

She will come down, long serape dragging the ground behind her. *Shush. Shush.* She will take the bones you gathered in her wizened hands. Her eyes, when she gazes lovingly at them, will be like two moons in her sun-wrinkled face.

Softly, so softly you will barely be able to hear her at first, she will begin to sing to the bones. It will be a song you recognize. Not because of the words, as the language has long since been forgotten, save by those who already know it. But because it is a soul song, a song of freedom and healing. And little by little, as her voice rises, the bones begin to come alive.

Muscle and tendon knit together. Skin grows a covering over them. Hair sprouts, and with it, eyes, a snout, two pointy ears, four legs, and a bushy tail. When she is finished, the coyote is whole again, and so are you.

You run together, as sisters, dancing across the sand, wild and joyous and free in the moonlight. More coyotes will join you, round golden eyes popping up over the weathered dunes, gleaming like lanterns in the moonlight. They will sniff you, rub against your fur, nuzzle your ears. Welcoming you. Accepting you as one of their own. You will hunt the long-eared jack rabbit that makes its burrows in the sand, catch it by the brown fur of its neck and bloodying its white cotton tail with your teeth. You share your kill with the others, for the pack gives you strength. When everyone has eaten their fill, you trot to a small pool, a hidden oasis. You wet your thirst, wash your muzzle in the clear, cool water, then nap in the shadows of tall saguaros until the sun rises,

and the coyote becomes bare bones once more. Then the old woman returns to her house to sleep, and you gather up the bones, yours to take with you when you return to civilization, a gift from Yoem Wo'i.

The Big Thing

Gabriel Garofano

For my father, John Richard Garofano

The sound is comprised of two separate noises which I notice very distinctly. A slow creaking groan, then an explosive snap. It reminds me of a tree I saw split open two weeks ago at the park near the house where I grew up. I was sitting on one of the cement picnic tables at the park's northern edge, looking at the checkered lawn stripes' crisp angles in the recently cut grass, when the tree next to me just tore in half. It was heavy and rotted through its center and it cracked under its own weight; I could see the winding patterns of soft brown rot between the splinters of bark. The break was loud and precise, almost mechanical, and this sounded the same.

I'm also aware of the drop, obviously. But not only of the car. Not just the quick downward pull that it turns out feels more like suction than falling; the cold air drawn in from the ceiling grates that smells of grease and bitter metal; the vibrating of the carpet still covered in protective plastic; the subtle strobing of malfunctioning light. I get all that too. But there is also a drop that happens within me. A seizing, near-nauseating feeling in my stomach that is similar to driving across a road with low hills, just after passing over the top as the descent starts and that light tingle opens up in the center of your body. I notice all of this, and at the same time I don't. Really, it all happens so fast and instinctively that it seems to bypass the thinking part of my brain. In that I'm not working out the details of it or making connections or doing any of the brain-work that comes with thinking. It just happens. All at once. It rushes in and settles directly into my stomach.

After that, my first recognizable thought is actually an attempt to avoid another and more regrettable one. It's a refusal, a disbelief. A desperate shot at coming up with some harmless explanation for the drop that will take the place of what I already know to be true but can't yet face. A distant thing burning and unformed, still many levels of denial away from the surface. And so I do my best to force some alternative explanation that will smother it before it can emerge and become real and true. Maybe there was just a loose mechanism in the hoist or a slip in the sheave. Maybe the engine short-circuited and momentarily kicked on. Perhaps a power surge. Anything that can be shrugged off as a close-call, something I can laugh about later on the phone with my brother, when I call him to fill him in on how Dad is doing and recount how pant-shittingly close to disaster I came. But as the elevator car keeps falling and picks up unmistakable downward speed, as the lights keep flickering and the suction intensifies, that little hot crescent in my gut becomes impossible to ignore. It rises quickly until it's no longer a little wisp but an irrefutable reality. Then there's nothing left to do but resign to panic. The rush of adrenaline is fever-like, and there's something simple in its truth. What might have been reassuring if it weren't so final. This elevator car is falling. This is it, the real thing, The Plunge, and likely what comes next is not a phone call to my brother but a slab of unforgiving concrete subflooring.

When I was a kid, Dad had one of those station wagons with the rear-facing seats in the trunk, and I always liked sitting back there to watch things recede. Whenever we drove over the road that went right past the north end of the park by our house, where all the trees were still strong and fibrous and not yet rotted-out at all, we would climb the hill that leads to the freeway, and I would lay back and look up through the windows with sky on all sides and focus on that whirl in my stomach as the car passed over the hill's apex. The whole drive, as we approached the freeway, I would anticipate that one moment without gravity. I think it was the uncommonness of the feeling that I liked. Going up the hill with complete focus, I would track the altitude and the speed of the car, noticing the force build and finally break through the middle of my small body. Then the umbilical tug of zero gravity before the world sank back in. The association is so strong that even now, as the elevator car drops and the hot truth of it send a feverish shudder through my limbs, I'm transported into the back of Dad's station wagon, a split—almost out of body—second, passing over the hill's peak before the fall.

Maybe it's some sort of adrenaline-induced heightening of senses. Maybe it's the hollow clack death-rattling through the wall panels of the car as it slides down the travel rails and passes one of the emergency brakes not being activated by the governor. Maybe it's some inexplicable psychic understanding or in-tuneness triggered by the nameless throb in my center as I collapse and imagine death below me. I've heard of all types of unbelievable and supernatural occurrences of awareness people claim to have as the end comes up to meet them, as they are forced to confront the stark truth of their own fragility and finality—the mind's restless eternity bumping against the body's brief walls. What amounts to a truth that runs so fundamentally counter to our existence that we are essentially able to both acknowledge and generally ignore the inevitability of death for a lifetime. So that when the mind does face the lights-out total demise of itself in a frighteningly close and meaningful way, the experience is said to be borderline spiritual. But that's only after the fact. If and when the skeletal hand misses its mark. Before that, while in the burning grip of it, there is only a confrontational whirl in your center and brief pieces of sporadic back-and-forth thought that feel at once incredibly clear and totally unconnected. Like knowing that I'm falling at what will peak at a brisk 50ish mph—the iridescent odometer's green—that there's probably around 19 stories between me and the very solid and newly-paved bottom of the parking garage—champagne carpeting—that the elevator car I'm in weighs about 2k lbs., that I have learned to compute mass acceleration more than once in school—the blue trim around the door of LBUS's mobile classrooms—and that if I could only do the math in my head, I could probably figure out how likely I am to hit terminal bottom—sidewalk-chalk blue—crouched here in my grease-stained work pants, holding my computer and side cutters, but the utter fear of all of this is so total that I can't seem to do much of anything but frozenly watch as my thoughts spread uselessly out as if they were not my own.

The thing about moving back as an adult to the area you grew up in as a kid is that everything has a kind of haunting nostalgia to it. All the places you pass walking the dog or driving to the grocery store, although many of them have changed

physically, all have a lasting familiar essence about them. The corner gas station may now be a parking lot, the road to the freeway paved with new asphalt and a landscaped median, and while the park is still a park, the playground equipment has been replaced by tennis courts, and the trees at the north end are all rotten on the inside—and when you pass them you still remember them as they were, and by extension as you were, and that lost essence surges up with a painful feeling of irretrievable chronology. So now, every time you do head to the grocery store, you drive down Overland Ave. with the coffee shop you used to hang out in when ditching first period of high school to be with Rebecca Thompson. Using fake sick notes that she would write for you in her best neat-but-hurried-from-concern mom handwriting and that you signed with artful forgery, and where over sandwiches and chai tea you promised her your ageless high school love, and even though you are honestly happy that she is now married with a newborn baby and have since fallen at various levels of passion for many other ageless-love worthy women, something eats away at you inside. Because you are affected by the irretrievability of things, and it's no longer just Rebecca Thompson, but a reminder of everything you once hoped would happen. When the future was so far out ahead of you that it seemed perpetual—a machine unbuilt or even just the first idea of a machine, one that in its engineer's head functions perfectly, every component holding the capacity for the greatest precision and proficiency, completely unblemished before being compromised by the inevitable shortcomings of execution—that which now, as you think of it while driving down Overland Ave. under the carob trees with the coffee shop's red lettering faded and chipped on your right, is lost to eventuality, no longer potential but something else, something that is wistful and distant and so irreparably gone that it haunts you every time, as you try and remember what was on the grocery list you forgot at home.

I didn't notice when I entered the car this morning, through the now whistling ceiling grates, that under its thin protective plastic, the carpet's pattern is blue squares and brown circles. A tingling is building in my legs and hands and some screeching sound is crowding the air around me. There are two sets of shadows spreading and then falling through the interior of the car—the smaller and jagged ones from the car's internal lighting flickering over my equipment on the floor around me, and the larger ones that overlap everything coming in from the open grates themselves. The walls of the car are heavily brushed steel, and I can make out the crescent strokes of the machine that fabricated its panels. Behind the muted shine my reflection is an indistinct blur. I can see the little illuminated circles that indicate the floor number that the car is passing on its way down. I watch it shift from 15 to 14. A drop of sweat throws itself from my nose and lands on my thigh making a jagged-edged wet spot on my pants, of which the pattern of impact has a particularly unsettling splatter to it. I can't be sure if the thrumming feeling in my legs is from actual vibrations coming up through the carpeting as the runaway car scrapes its way down, or from that weak-in-the-knees adrenaline induced feeling of total fear. As I look down, I decide I don't like the carpet's pattern very much at all.

Impractical memories. Rebecca Thompson had freckles and a magazine-quality nose. The park was eight blocks away from my house. I was still driving the station

wagon when I was in my Emergency Elevator Mechanic Operations class. This was long after Dad first handed it down to me in high school, and I backed it into a hip-high yellow pole a week later. The whole rear bumper bent in on the left side, and the trunk's window cracked into a spider web of tempered glass that was hard to see through. Out of anger Dad made me drive around with it all fractured like that, so that I had to basically stick my head out of the driver's side window and crane my neck around to look behind me every time I wanted to go in reverse. Although he quickly got it fixed when he realized that the danger of not being able to see out of it negatively outweighed its function as a cracked reminder of his disappointment in my negligent backward maneuvering. I drove it all the way through high school and then pushed it with its dented and permanently yellowed bumper up the hill to the LBUS campus where I learned to work on elevators. I remember the EEMO class had wooden steps and navy blue carpets, and there was a brown spot just below my desk that I never could identify. I remember there were a dozen-or-so of us in the class and that the instructor—whose name I don't remember—was skinny the way old guys with years of hard work behind them look skinny and tested and bulletproof. The skin of his cheeks were slick and waxy, the rest all mustache and sideburns. His mouth was always puckered around hard candies that he kept in a plastic basket on his desk and clicked against his teeth when he spoke. I remember thinking how easy it would be to remember everything he said, that if I ever needed it, it would be there in my mind, distant but accessible, not accounting for the adrenaline flush and stricken mind that charges through you as the car falls, and you are frozen in a useless huddle over the unfortunate choice of carpeting with all calculated and rational thought replaced by spurts of impractical memory.

There was something miraculous about sitting in the back of Dad's station wagon as a kid watching everything fall away. There was a certain thrill to it. Being backward made the cars behind us kind of bounce back and forth as varying speeds and stop lights dictated the flow of traffic; a sort of visual springing of vehicles that only works when you are rear-facing. Like everything was smooth or on a track or just generally better and more exciting. Even the stationary things, the carob trees and rows of buildings and green metal street signs with square white lettering were spectacular from that angle, appearing out of peripheral nowhere along either side of the car then being flung back into the horizon. Plus, because the back windshield was big and pretty much vertical, there was nothing to block my view. No piece of automotive steel covering the road like there was in the front seat, so I could see the pavement peel away underneath me, and it was probably the closest equivalent I could think of at the time to flying, which was something I thought about a lot.

Between clicks, the EEMO instructor had once said something about the increase in safety measures over the last 40 years that make a total collapse a thing of unlucky anomaly. Maybe less than ten-percent of all the on-the-job accidents that result in injury. That of all the guys he knew after a lifetime of being an elevator mechanic, only one actually knew of someone who took The Plunge. Explaining with a few more clicks that The Plunge was industry vernacular for a complete malfunction of all precautionary elements in which the car, with one very unlucky and anomalous

mechanic inside of it, collapses down the entire shaft. As in, he only knew of the one guy who took The Plunge, and it was only because, as it was later discovered, high-winds some ridiculous-number-of-miles away had knocked out a few power lines while the guy was working on a partially installed car, and it blacked out a whole city grid that happened to include the building where the guy was working. Causing him to take The Plunge, which, according to my instructor, showed just how anomalously unlucky and singled out for misfortune the guy really was.

The seats back there were small and folded down. They were made with that fibrous carpeting that lines car trunks everywhere in a kind of sad taupe color that the automotive industry likes to call champagne and that crudely matched the car's light gold exterior. Later, the color made the whole car appear old and out of place; a relic of some era decayed. But at the time, it gave the station wagon a certain elegance that bordered on mystical. It appeared to gleam in our sloping driveway. A slick shining thing with complex contours. From the trunk, looking over my shoulder, Dad, in the driver's seat, seemed to be down a long aisle. Like when you see the pilot of a plane—which he actually was—sitting before his numerous and intricate instrument panels as you board and head to your designated seat. The digital clock and the backlighting of the dashboard were an incandescent green that illuminated the front of the car with a spaceship-like glow, which made sitting back there at night especially exciting. It wasn't just driving to the freeway and passing over the hills by the north end of the park. It was also getting on the freeway itself. Because the onramp had a pretty steep grade to it, unobstructed by buildings or trees on all sides, so if I twisted around to lie flat in the rear-facing seats, especially at night with the turquoise glow washing in from the front of the car, as the climb started and the strips of city receded, it was like taking off into a long stretch of untold sky.

Growing in intensity and pitch, the shrieking sound seems to be somehow getting closer. I assume its source is some dislodged fixture—a piece of the cable or bent balustrade on top of the car grinding the inner wall of the shaft. The expression nails on a chalkboard comes to mind as a pale comparison. The hair on my neck pricks up. Meanwhile, some kind of material panic is caught in my throat that feels like a constant low-grade choking. I try to swallow but it's as if I'm drinking sand. All the hills by the park had streetlights with a pinkish tint to them. The wheeze in my throat seems to be spreading to my face and chest like little needles trying to escape my skin, and at some point it converges with the hollow near-nausea in my stomach. I realize that to notice all of this—to be able to identify the pounding in my veins and the whirl in my center and call that gripping feeling fear—I must also be somehow calm and acutely aware; an observer inspecting something volatile from the other side of thick protective glass. I can't do anything about it, but I can visualize and isolate the frantic seizing in my throat and witness it work up and down that way, a hot and cold piercing from my temples to my stomach. I imagine this is the same sort of thing people talk about when they have out of body experiences, although I'm very much in my body, completely at one with the raised hair on my arms and rush of metal-bittered air on my face, and what I can only identify as an itching on the backs of my knees where the fabric of my work pants is bunched. It's more like an out of mind experience. In that I'm not hovering over my

body, watching myself crouched above the rippling plastic, struggling to gulp sour air in the corner of the car, but that I'm outside of my mind. In a way, separate from my thoughts and feelings, seeing them vividly apart from myself, aware of them whipping impractically through my head at arm's length, safe behind the glass shield. It's as if there are two parts of me. Like I have a second consciousness that has remained calm and unaffected and is detachedly observing the first part that is wild and frozen with dread as it reacts to the leg-and-face-tingle of my body and struggles to cope with the truth of collapsing toward freshly-paved oblivion.

During the day, when we weren't driving past the park or heading onto the freeway, I would lean up against the back window, the lane-split asphalt a moving blur beneath me, and feel that I was involved in something somehow extraordinary. It happened in a sort of snap. Climbing into the car things were straightforward and uneventful. Even as we started driving everything remained rooted in its rigid normalness with a kind of two-dimensional flatness. The trees just trees, the sky the sky, and the front-facing faces of drivers behind us hovering over their steering wheels expressionless and trance-like. And then we would turn out on the main road. The white lettering that spelled out 'Overland Ave.' would blur into the flank of carob trees and the asphalt street would kind of pull back as if made of enormous black elastic, and when I looked out again it was all full of vivid depth and texture. It was as if I had been suddenly granted some special perspective, able to see the fundamental mechanics of things, the internal force and life of them. The sky would telescope in and out and the cars would start bouncing behind us, their driver's faces squinting at the kid in the back of his Dad's champagne station wagon, sitting in the trunk waving and grinning. And they would either smile back or seem annoyed, but they would always react, and we became a pair of strangers on the same road, which made us not strangers. With the trance broken everything would appear somehow new, all of life framed through the back window, no longer mundane, but urgent and alive. I felt unbounded and separate from all that was ordinary. Above it, like the monotonous routine of things had made a kind of exception, revealing some great agent of interconnectedness within itself. Some profound essence that lighted the world made momentarily substantial and contagious; able to be seen and shared with unmistakable clarity, if only briefly. Like I could look down at my neighborhood from this great altitude and see the tops of all the houses, people walking their dogs or getting into their cars, everything small and neat looking, each an unknowing but perfect part of a map. The height allowing a simplicity and clarity that is lost when drudging through it at eye level, all the tedium and complications that even at a young age I was aware of seeming insignificant from up there, from back there; a pure expression of purpose and self-actualization, and I was way above it, pushing my face into some momentous imagined height, flying.

The indicator light above the door has a warm and subtly pink tinge to it as it flickers past 10. There is an eerie similarity in feeling between floating and falling that I try to ignore.

Other than the story about the luckless guy in the power-outage, I can remember one thing from that day in EEMO, which arrives with the slightest chances of hope: The

best thing to do, in the event of a complete collapse, is lay down with your back flat against the floor of the car. I'm still in a sort of half-crouch, looking down at the little creases in the protective plastic under my leather work-boots spread out like ripples in water. The tea Rebecca Thompson drank was always chai. Each time the car jolts and my position shifts, the little lines roll and return. The bitter smell of hard metal and machine grease is overwhelming. The idea is that by being horizontal instead of vertical when the upward impact of the car rocks grotesquely through all the bone and soft tissue of your body, the force will spread out lengthwise, and your skeleton is less likely to splinter, and the tendons in your legs are less likely to snap your shin bones through your kneecaps. Her thermos was street-chalk blue. If there is any chance that every piece of you down to your blood vessels won't instantly rupture, being flat is the way to go. There was even a little digital simulation to watch of a naked body with no genitals and ambiguously colorless, sickly skin—which was probably intended to be ethnically neutral but that matched so closely to my own scared-pale flesh at this frozen moment, that looking back, it seems like a particularly cruel choice, even accidentally—and the body, in various positions from standing through the recommended supine, took The Plunge over and over. Each time hitting the ground and being flung mercilessly across the screen, collapsing in crumpled and unnatural ways that directly correlated in death-inducing severity to its position on impact and determined the appropriate level of wince in the dozenish students watching with queasy intrigue. What the video didn't show, and what quickly turned the tiny bit of hope I thought I had found back into an even hollower pit in my stomach, was how the genitalless body assumed the potentially life-saving supine position. That part was left out. Which I understand now because it's almost impossible to do. I realize this as I go to lay down, and my body doesn't move through space the way it normally does and instead sort of hovers, paralyzed there in a hopeless half-crouch that causes ripples in the plastic under my boots, all nearly-nauseated and headed for something grotesque. As if my body wasn't a moving, functional thing, but just weightless matter floating around a wildly humming center.

At the same time I'm thinking about not thinking about this elevator falling 19 stories, about the rotted-out trees and the navy blue carpet's unspecified spot and Dad's old station wagon and the digital body's crumpled angles—all of which has really occurred in a single intricate burst of contemplation, one thought with many sides unfolding in a concentric mental rush that fractures and expands over and around itself, the way all thoughts works internally before you try and explain them to someone—at the same time all of that is webbing out, the detached second part of my consciousness realizes a terrible irony and smirks coolly down from behind the glass at the first part that is still too dumb with shock to realize the real tragedy unfolding.

The light above the elevator door passes 7.

Because the truth is, my whole life, I've been waiting for something big to happen. What I imagined as a great destiny-fulfilling thing. In high school, I started calling it The Big Thing, likening it The Big Bang, as in the event that started virtually everything in existence. Only for me, it would be the true beginning of what I imagined my life could amount to if it was to fulfill all its potential; some essential trajectory-

altering moment that would shift what I felt was a rather ordinary existence into something exceptional; the first falling-domino-like-occurrence in a series of milestone dominos that carried with it the kinetic momentum to push the whole delicate life balance straight through to the meaningful end. In other words—and I always really hated putting it in such a seemingly arrogant and rough way—I believed I was *special*. But more as a feeling than an idea. It was all still very internal, and expect for one failed attempt with my brother, totally unspoken. Because the thought of trying to tell someone I felt *special* seemed horrible and self-important in all the wrong ways, and it really wasn't what I meant anyway. Not better or more significant than anyone else, just somehow different and set apart. Which is why I named it in the first place, hoping that by putting a framework to what was just abstract notions of some cosmic gut-feeling, it would make more sense and become real. I guess another way of thinking about it would be that I was waiting for my purpose to emerge so that this undefined *specialness* could take hold. Or at least what I expected something like a defining purpose would feel like when found. A snapping into position, where all the previously unconnected desires and motivations and skills I recognized in myself—but that had no overarching point, no cohesion—would suddenly make sense and fit together, and I could be confident and proud in my pursuits from then on, knowing that I was participating in something larger and more vital than just shoving myself through every day's motions. The central idea being that once it arrived and I tried the right pursuit or task or deed, the snap would engage, and everything would fall into place with all subsequent meaning and importance just a matter of time away.

The light fixtures at the top and center of each wall of the car are small half-spheres, and each one is blinking on and off at its own epileptic rhythm, exaggerating the patterns of shadows. My center is humming so wildly it's almost painful. Now less like driving across a low hill and more like looking over the edge of a tremendously steep cliff, peering at the ground below's certain-death. And what is really getting to me is this terrible mental smirk that I seem to be making at myself. As if I'm on the brink of some huge realization, seeing the outline of an expansive idea but unable to fill it in; the second part of my consciousness a few steps ahead of the first, aware of something I haven't been able to fully process yet. So the image of this idea is in a drunken state of double-vision, moving laterally against itself with an unfocused dizziness. And yet the picture is right there. And the detached second part of me that has enough composure to center itself and make out the image, is waiting for the realization to sink into the first, bearing this derisive grin that seems to imply *I told you so* as it pulls its lips back and puffs air from its nostrils.

It was never lost on me that everyone has some version of The Big Thing, particularly within the adolescent realm where everyone sincerely believes they are essentially different and predestined, and that it's only a matter of time before things start happening that will set them dramatically apart from everyone else. But inherent to this type of thinking is that despite acknowledging that everyone at one time or another feels this way, there's a deeply internal belief that something is crucially unique about *you*. That somehow *your* internal instincts about rising up to some gut-level cosmic challenge are more central and full of predestination and so inevitably are also

more real. I remember the first time I really thought about it in a concrete way. This was before I had named it, and it was just a totally wordless feeling. It was my first year of high school, and we took a family trip down to La Jolla to visit my uncle and aunt. We stayed in a big hotel right on the coast that had white marble floors and strikingly huge windows that were always being cleaned by some guy in a jumpsuit and really elaborate light fixtures that hung from high ceilings. In other words it was by far nicer than any hotel I had ever been in. The kind of place designed with great care to make those inside of it notice just how elaborate and striking and worth constant jumpsuited cleaning it really was. Just standing in the lobby brought with it a certain tangible excitement; what people on vacation are expressly looking for: An unordinary moment that stands out as being bigger and more remarkable than everyday occurrences. And it worked. As we were checking in, and the whole impressiveness of the place with all its astonishing features overcame me, it seemed like a sort of preview of what was to come, as if everything I felt but had no words for was starting to align itself. It had nothing to do with the core extravagance of the place, or any of the common associations to wealth or anything like that. It was that rare feeling of being interconnected and boundless. I don't know. I've never been able to explain it. Even now, trying to really define it and think it through logically is useless. Because I never had the words for it, not really. There aren't any. It's too instinctive and broad. When I do think about it, it's just a big splash of memory and intuition that ripples out in all directions at once. So even the internal voice that I'm talking to myself with right now can't articulate it. Meaning that all I can really do is feel it, without words or logic, and anything else is just a flimsy imitation. Which explains why later on the trip, when I did try to talk to my brother about it, I was unable to get at the depth of the true rippling feelings behind the words and ended up awkwardly circling around the same few inadequate expressions, repeating variations of *essentially different* and *domino-like-occurrence* and *specialness* until I felt ridiculous and arrogant and decided some big feelings will only ever exist internally and are far too complex and deep for words to do anything but poorly scratch the surface of.

The screaming sound has taken on a kind of personality or emotion. Which is to say that the cold metallic quality of it seems to have become alive in a raw and animal way, containing a primal essence, a simplified version of life and death that can only exist as adrenaline and fear, survival and extinction. In its wail I perceive an entire spectrum of existence. I've never heard machinery take on such a soul-biting and fully animated noise. It's unsettling. I look up and try to see what might be broken or where the scraping is coming from, but the intense flicker of shadows only reveal things in indiscernible flashes. And anyway, I can't really see out through the hash of ceiling grating. I do now realize the reason I can't easily lay down is because the car and my body are falling at the same speed, which eliminates the usual downward thrust of gravity and causes me to sort of float in paralyzed weightlessness. I know that much. Using the copper handrails that run about midway around the car, I'm able to wedge myself into one of the corners and keep myself there by pressing the bottoms of my feet into the L-brackets that hold the rail in place. It occurs to me that this is not the

same as lying flat on my back, and I wonder if it will prevent or exaggerate the unnatural angles my body may soon be flung into.

So I named it The Big Thing in my head and contemplated it in silent privacy. At first it felt good to think in those terms. I believed in it so thoroughly that a low-grade thrill existed in all things. The way the weeks leading up to a vacation or some other highly anticipated event have a certain eager calmness to them; a kind of stride is achieved that makes the tedious or boring day-in-and-day-out flames easier to walk through. Like sitting in the back of a station wagon and watching everything in reverse become new and impressive and alive.

I tried a lot of things hoping to collide with The Big Thing. Then I joined a program through my high school called the Young Engineers Academy and came to quickly and genuinely love it. You had to apply to get into YEA, which I did my junior year successfully, and then spent a thoroughly engaged hour after school three days a week in, building things like mouse-trap cars and Van de Graff generators and illuminating light bulbs with various household items. It was there that I first felt the peripheral inklings of what I had felt in that La Jolla hotel. It was also where I met Rebecca Thompson and learned first-hand what high school terminology had been invented to neatly describe. She was 2 years older than me and was considerably *cooler* than the rest of us young engineers, and I had a *crush* on her almost immediately but was too shy to ever ask if she wanted to *hang-out* because of the age difference and cool-factor, and the inevitable awkward behavior that immediately overcomes a junior when talking to a senior who they *like*. For reasons I never fully understood, she ended up inviting me to *go driving*, which everybody knew had very little to do with actual driving, and a lot more to do with parking somewhere and listening to CD's and potentially many other under-the-shirt things that I had spent a good deal of time imagining. What really ended up happening was that she picked me up in her bright red Honda Civic, and we parked at the north end of the park by my house, hidden by the big trees there, and she had a blue thermos of chai tea, and we sat talking in a way I never knew was possible in terms of depth and intensity. As if we were briefly free of the awkwardness of language, and I found her to be what is usually described weakly as *easy to talk to*, which I guess is people doing the best they can to explain what it's like when you can effortlessly get to all the rippling circles behind the words with someone, assuming into a truth that is usually impossible to share with anyone but yourself, and the *crush* I had immediately developed into something much more complex and indescribable by high school parlance, and that was it.

With my back on the floor of the car, every shake and thrust of the fall is exaggerated. I clench my jaw to keep the off-center axial jolts from gnashing my teeth together. It also seems to be creating a conduit between my spine and the poorly-designed carpeting that allows whatever is up there wailing away to enter my body. I can feel the metal beast shout through my bones, it's cries primal and full of some quality that registers as defeat. I want terribly to make it stop. To help the unfortunate animal, or at least put it out of its obvious misery.

A year ago Dad got cancer.

Then YEA had a spaghetti bridge building contest, and my design held more weight than anyone else's, including all the seasoned bridge-building seniors, supporting 46 lbs. before breaking and yielding a first prize ribbon and golden-sticker gilded certificate. Afterward I went to celebrate with Rebecca in our customary way at the park. We had her trunk open and were sitting on the lip of it with our feet dangling out, the shade of the north end trees so dense that only when a breeze picked up would a confetti of sunlight fall over us, and she poured me tea into the cap of her thermos, then took my hand and kissed me on the mouth.

It's in his blood. An abnormal mutation of his white blood cells that turn his bones thin and splintery. It was discovered one morning when he bent over to put his shoes on—not knowing that his skeleton had been deteriorating inside of him already for months, microscopic fractures working their way across his spine and hips like the tempered glass in the back of the station wagon before it was replaced, cracked but holding shape, just barely, a delicate maze of imperfect bone turning silently to shards of thin white ice, just a shift in weight away from breaking—and he leaned down and broke his spine in 2 places. In the x-rays they saw the fractures plus found 12 tumors on his spine; the smallest the size of a little ball bearing, the biggest a quarter.

The problem was I had such finely-tuned expectations for this approaching Big Thing that nothing could live up to the soaring relief I anticipated. So later that night, when I was lying in bed, thinking about the beautiful parabolic curvature of the bridge's low bend just before it victoriously broke, and the slow movement of Rebecca Thompson's tongue as the pressure of her body built against my chest, something in me snapped. I realized with a frantic clarity that although the day's events should have induced a dream-come-true degree of satisfaction, they didn't. Had I been asked the day before how I would feel about winning the bridge building competition and getting kissed by Rebecca Thompson, I would have said something about not being able to be happier. But now that it had happened, it was suddenly not enough. This low degree of happiness was negligible, and in order to really be happy, some even Bigger Thing was necessary. And in that moment, the feeling seemed unending. Like all I would ever be able to do is wait in a purgatory of misled anticipation; moving from one thing to the next in a perpetually state of bare disappointment. To the point that what had previously been a glowing excitement became in that instant an inescapable anxiety, and I began a terrible spiral of worry—there in my bed, 8 blocks from the park, a storm of feelings I could not put into words rippling out in enormous, untamable waves of thought, a weight pinning me to the sweat-dampened sheets until almost morning. Much later I realized it was the first of a series of panic attacks, but at the time, the best I could do was liken it to someone that was in a terrible accident being rushed to the hospital, totally nerve-shattered and insane with pain, only able to hold on because of the promising hope of pain medication at the hospital. Only to get there, receive all the available help and medicine, and get no relief. Able to look up from the gurney through the red blur of pain-tears at the crew of doctor's shrugging the confusion of their unsuccessful last-ditch efforts and seeing in their faces an eternal hopelessness. What it must feel like in that instant, that split second of sheer terror to realize that no help is possible, believing that every conceivable moment of the future will be full of that

unbearable degree of teeth-grinding pain, so that on top of what is already agony at an illogical level, exists an unnamable realization so deeply disturbing and without end that thoughts themselves become fear, and it seems as if there is and never can be anything else.

At first I stayed home in San Francisco and we just talked on the phone a lot. It was all emotional sickness at first anyway, aside from the surprisingly brief time Dad spent in bed, given the fractures on his spine and all. He had a crisis of identity; started calling himself Cancer Dad; told me he didn't feel like the same person even though physically, he felt alright. Blood cancer doesn't go away. And even though the doctors unanimously agreed he would live many more years, so many that death was not even yet in the conversation, he will never again not be sick. I think the permanence of that got to him. Turned him into Cancer Dad. Forced questions on him that have no answers. We would talk about them, but we were back in that realm where words fail, *why* and *fair* and *scared* just too thin to explain what I could hear in the slow despair of his voice over the phone. Then he got what I learned was called chemo brain. A forgetful side effect of the drug Melphalan, and words failed yet again, becoming unrecallable symbols for things he wanted to say but couldn't. It wasn't until the stem cell transplant was scheduled that he asked me to move back down and help him.

I never told anyone about that first panic attack. But it changed me. To the point that every decision or step of everything I did seemed to bear the complete weight of my entire life's possibility. Which is actually a pretty paralyzing way to think, because for every choice I made or thing I did, innumerable other choices could not be made. I was constantly worried that one of those other paths, some thing undone, was the one that would lead to The Big Thing, and that by way of elimination, I was always on the verge of missing it. After all, the machine, once built, even as a fully functional thing, can never live up to the more-than-perfect potential it had when it was still an unassailable idea. Once I started thinking like that it made it pretty much impossible to be satisfied or content with anything. What my brother started calling the Other Party Problem, as in I could have been at the most complexly fun and seductive of parties, but would never know because I was too busy thinking that there was inevitably some other party with infinitely more complex fun and seduction.

I actually haven't thought about all this in years. Like everything else, time numbed the edges. The idea that something exceptional would happen to me, was in fact destined to happen, breaking all statistical likelihood in its arrival, took on a much simpler hue. I can't say that the anticipation totally abated. But the whole dramatic explosiveness of it calmed. Somewhere the line of expectation and reality intersected, the curve flattened, I got older, moved to SF, prefer the bitter taste of instant coffee to drip, perfected my recipe for pasta sauce, recently bought an excellent rug for my living room, became an elevator mechanic. Then Dad asked me to move down and I did. The first day I was back I went to get him groceries, and as I was driving down Overland Ave. near the coffee shop, I realized I had forgotten the list. Without really knowing why I drove to the old park and puller over at the north end where I got out and sat down at one of the cement picnic tables, and a few minutes later the tree split open right next to me with a groan and a snap because it was all rotted out on the

inside, and I got nostalgic and uncentered remembering The Big Thing and driving over the hills with Dad on the way to the freeway, and when I realized I had parked in the exact place where Rebecca Thompson poured me tea and kissed me on the mouth everything became irretrievable and wistful and I started crying red tears into the palms of my hands.

Maybe it's partly due to the fact that my brother is named Brian after my father, and I'm named Alan after my grandfather on my mother's side, who died of prostate cancer before I was born and was always just a series of stories and a few pictures in the family photo album. So when my brother decided he wanted to become a pilot, like my father was, it seemed like he was simply picking up a preordained Brian-thread that had always been laid out before him. It happened the way someone engages a switch, with a popping into place. I think my dad secretly hoped one of us would become interested in following his aerial footsteps, but neither of us had even the slightest interest in planes during most of our childhood—my own fantasies about flying having nothing to do with avionics and existing solely in a superhero-type way, jumping straight off the ground and into the sky. Maybe it wasn't so much of a secret wish in Dad, and more that he wanted our interest in piloting to be a genuine and uncoerced desire. Maybe that was why, from right out of the blue—an expression he often employed as a dad/pilot joke that was hardly ever funny—when Brian was 13 or 14, Dad got him a flight simulator game that came with a highly complex and realistic looking joystick ornamented with what to me, as a 7 or 8 year old, seemed an impossibly high-volume of buttons and control devices protruding from all over the shaft and base. Much to his disappointment, my brother had very little interest in it, and it sat next to our television untouched for quite some time collecting a forgotten layer of dust that made it's black plastic appear a dark grey. Then one weekend, as if struck by some inner galvanizing force of enormous purpose, my brother took the joystick down, turned on the game, and played it without pause. He began asking Dad a lot of questions about flying and landing angles and take-off procedures. Then about a month later he announced to everyone over dinner, telling us very casually, as if he was asking for someone to pass him some item on the table, that he was going to become a pilot. The switch clicked into place; I saw it happen. It was like watching something bloom in an instant. That was long before the weekend in La Jolla, but I think witnessing it was what set me up for all of the expectation that was to come, believing that a bigger purpose could just at any moment snap into reality. That was how it was for him. He never questioned the decision or had any doubt, and when he was 17 he got his Recreational Pilot License, Dad of course teaching him everything he could ever want to know with undisguised elation and pride, and he has been an accomplished and deeply satisfied commercial pilot ever since.

So shortly after I won the bridge building contest, I took my driver's test and when I got my license, Dad gave me the station wagon. He continued to drive it right up until that exchange, so it wasn't like I hadn't been in it recently or seen on a daily basis the cosmetic wear of all the years we had owned it. Still, it wasn't until a week after he gave me the keys, and I was parked in the lot of the grocery store just past the park, that I realized how raggedy the car had become. The driver's seat was worn so that the

once champagne nylon fabric was flattened into a greyish imprint of Dad's back and legs, and I was sitting in the center of it, outlined by his past presence. The plastic piece over the instrument panel was all cloudy so that the digital clock's numbers were a flat green and hard to read, and the headliner sagged unevenly above me. And when I peered into the rearview mirror and saw the tops of those little seats in the trunk, looking small and uneventful, the whole car felt painfully real in a simple and disappointing way. Like when you've seen someone many times in class or at work but never really looked at them, always just passing them in a hallway or seeing them across the room and acknowledging them without really taking them in. Then one day you do, and you see them full of detail with their freckles or asymmetrical eyebrows or protruding nose hair, and they look somehow more detailed and human than you ever realized before, and you are left with an uncanny and puzzled feeling. And I sat there in the front seat, looking at those folding seats with the keys still in my hand, feeling uneasy and sick with a bare inevitability. The worn void of Dad's back and legs a shadow of thick oil all around me, spreading out like glass and bones breaking in every direction. After all that time pretending to fly in those back seats, feeling singled out and predestined, it was Brian that made flight possible. Although it wasn't a possibility, that's not the right word. It wasn't a thing of chance but an absolute, like gravity or entropy. A definitive bloom that was completely elusive to me. And I was left in the center of an enlarging void of oil, waiting around for some silent snap that lingered too far away to see, getting even smaller and more indiscernible below the surface—and I was so afraid of missing it or it not happening at all that when I started the car, I was completely distracted, and I didn't notice that there was a yellow pole behind me, and I backed right into.

Dad's stem cell procedure is in 3 days and *why* and *fair* and *scared* poorly outline the deep truth of it, and everything here is haunted by nostalgia and covered in wordless ripples, so to distract myself I took a job fixing this elevator with its horrible carpeting and loose mechanism in the hoist, or maybe slip in the sheave, and the orange tint to its floor indicator light that is just now passing 2.

The first part of my consciousness, the one full of whirling dread, begins repeating to itself a desperate mantra: *I don't want to die*. As I recognize the phrase in my head, my mouth begins to form the words. And as it does, the screaming in the car suddenly stops, and the low choke in my throat eases. It takes me a moment to understand. Then I realize that there was never a piece of metal scraping above the car. That the sound did not have to take on life. Because the whole time it was me, my own unknown sustained shout echoing into the car as I fall in such a quick and immediate way that my consciousness splits into two versions of itself, and the instinctual reaction is a nasty scream that happens all on its own, so thoroughly and completely bound to the whirling fear that it happens outside of my thoughts and appears as alien.

Now, the clacking and rolling sounds of the actual car falling are a type of churning silence.

The second and objective part of me continues to smile in a truly terrible way, *I told you* so becoming an almost audible taunt that overlays the first part not wanting to

die as an image of irony slowly steadies itself enough to be seen. And within its edges is a man removed, looking so far ahead he is blind, as if his eyes are covered by a cloudy film and he is staring out into a hidden expanse, arms raised in an attempt to feel through the chasm, but he touches nothing and keeps turning his head and squinting, trying to make out even the faintest traces of something, yet only confronts a wider and more depthless hollow, so he looks deeper and with more intensity, and the harder he peers into it the more frightening its vacancy becomes because he believes so truly that there is something there, until a shock overtakes him and his wide-eyed expression becomes frozen by the enormous emptiness swallowing him. Like a tree with its center all rotted-out in the north end of the park, as I headed up the hill to fly over the city in the back of Dad's station wagon only to see its sobering plainness on my way to the grocery store, and become reminded of things I can never get back; things I missed the real essence of as I worried about some Big Thing in the distance that I couldn't quite make out and thought about all the ways I may miss, so that even though Rebecca Thompson hung out with me many more times in the back seats of her car, and we shared the unchangeable depths of first-love, and in my senior year I became president of YEA and built another bridge in a statewide contest that made it into our local newspaper, and Dad handed me down the station wagon that I got to fly for years past the park and onto the freeway, there was always a nagging in me that made me unable to appreciate how truly special all of it was, sitting in the trunk listening to music and drinking chai tea out of a pale blue thermos, taking the station wagon to college, having instant coffee or perfectly-sauced pasta at the table over my new rug, only seeing the open space behind it so that I really saw nothing at all, and then becoming accustomed to the view, either from expectation or just time's slow decay, never really taking any of it in, and not until now has it all come rushing back, as the elevator light passes 1, and I see that the Other Party has always existed and that I was always at it, I just couldn't see well enough to tell, and as I'm aware of the smooth dry feeling of plastic sheeting under my back and the uneven pressure of the thin handrail against the heels of my feet, while *I don't want to die* runs across a sort of screen in my mind and the humming in my center finally stops and all the calm second part of me can see as it examines the first is a frozen expression, not until this moment does it become clear that what the mental smirk is laughing at is that the thing I have been waiting for, The Big Thing that makes some statistically impossible exception for me and sets me apart from everything typical and uneventful is

fruited plain

a copperhead
worming into ground to resurrect
finds it too hot.

the last
lace of sun

hitting

it
splits the skin. an element
cracks

in bison dust. before
the horizon

buried them,
words in the sky
were

mountains

reading braille and quiet rocks
climbing

to
the top. the
purple where land and sky
are zipped to-
gether

is a seam

you can't cut like a
tight
frenulum.

it mumbles, "the silos are full."
grain is mistaken

for ruin,
and
magic in the air

they say
will

kill you.

the copperhead speaks a dialect
in

the
giant moonshot of the
countryside is mouthing
the
yawn
of
a
desert hit once a year by rain,
and she talks
into bedsheets as if someone's
listening
while an earth quakes with
the

soft
rumble of sleep and i reach for her
when
she is unblanketed
and not there.

xinjiang

it happened in the apple grove. a silly thing with blood. the leaves were exceptionally sharp. saw grass it was. elephant grass. sides like razors. i'm sure it was an apple grove. maybe more like an orchard. anyway, there was blood. much forgetfulness of why the trees bent low. there was no fruit i could see. maybe the harvest had passed. maybe the helicopters had knocked down all the apples and small animals ran away with them. there was a good amount of blood. must've been a lot of chewing. half-eaten things. it's odd you would have fruit trees mixed with cattails and saber grass. makes for a bloody fruit-picking experience. thirst is the one thing i recall after all the juice spilled. bloodletting. hemorrhaging. exsanguination. the helicopter blades still carried on a thwack thwack with branches. falling fruit bleeding. people green and overripe bouncing. pickers on a sunday stroll. i was sure i saw small animals running away, crouched down. they were carrying something valuable in their winter fur. i'm not sure how they ran with trees falling like that. beaten to death. beaten with the punch. running and tripping. cartoon-falling. cartoon-dancing on wax. it was a silly thing. especially with the sword grass and razor wire. grape shot falling. the helicopters coming over the hill again and again. it happened in the vineyard i think. all that small fruit on a sunday afternoon with rodents and pickers falling over themselves, sprawling. blood of the smallest things. juice of the largest hearts. blood of the grape.

athens and sparta

I. somnolent and
brief as brick,

sometimes

a
pulse

is
never
dashing

as
a slicing sword
; is never

bent
like a broken arm.

and
worries,

vapid as
a
language
not your own,

spill
from sewers
that
gurgle in their
sleep.

II. digging for cobwebs

we
have
forgotten gravity
and
spilled

like dice
in an alley,
tasting coal
with miner's hats.

when will the sun
come to earth?
as soon as a skin cell
is satisfied

with
its
simplicity
; as long as constellations
 paint minds
 with
images
that
were
never there.

III. this is
 a
 strange case of bereavement
for
the long dead and never born.

chandeliers
that you thought brought light
are
baking time
 off the morning walls,
and
you
 blister in in-
somnia:
 licking,
 blinded,
 ragged as the
greek
coast.

IV. in time, the populous
 will die of
 stupidity,
of forgetting
 how
 to
 wipe
 each
other's mouths.

survivors
will have the

strongest thumbs in
many generations but,
unable
to
count the coins in
their pockets, will
hemorrhage from wiping
themselves with
the pages of
digital books.

one year

that year the
 winter melted away
like
stolen
shoes
and every day of
 every week
 was
a galleon lost over the
 horizon.

that year
beaches were grand-
 fathers that
never
died;
never
lingered
on the tip of a tongue. and

that year mattresses
 shook as
men
shake wanting to be
 fatter and happier
 in a bed
that
doesn't twitch
 when
 you dream.

 that year, trying hard,
 shadows and
 sand ate lunch
before
 bridging water but
 sunk
like the lead of an
iceberg in their
 bellies.

that year,
someone died and
gave
you
a
gun.

what smoke can do

in the insincere
 in the doorway,
 and
 the salivating smile
 and
 curtains
unblown in gale,

the dresser is spread
 fast
 as a table.

at
un-
wanted
christmas
which
is every whisper
that interrupts
 in
 the
 un-
broken
dawn, is
 the unmysterious
 christ un-
 hung
in peeling
 paint from a high
 wall sag-
ging.

now there is a
quarter room of
your love slipping
 off
 the
 sheets
in dead
weather.

slipping off

a pump
from a leg
bent

back with awful slowness slip-
ping into the cave of my arms
like

a bare

twig

nestling into
a lower branch.

and falling now,

a slip

hung

by a bent nail on

the back of

the closet

door, yellowed and
unworn for years.

club

three locomotives steaming in different directions
arrive at the same destination.

across the river

a large tower screams

CASINO

in giant red neons

that jump through the large front window

to where i sit with unflavored coffee.

through the same window

a bus passes by asking

“having sex?”

as if there is an answer that matters after yes or no.

drums

upright bass

piano and saxophone

all burn on the track.

front window behind them,

one large pane,

never shakes.

traffic darkens in headlights

outside,

night never shakes.

i am the only one here.

i clap and smile after the first piece.

“we’ll play all night for you, man.”

“i’ll be here,” i say.

and drink hazelnut coffee

on a cool metal table.

and see two views of the drummer

seated sideways on the stage

with his back against a sectioned mirror

and he plays.

he plays in closed eyes.

shoulder blades worked by muscle.

rhythm explained by something else.

they are all in head rolls

deep into music.

CASINO

now on staccato neon blink

want an answer:

do you gamble?
will you gamble?
having sex?
the bus needs to know.
the stage is small;
room for three or four
in front of the large
reflective window.
i can see my face there
hazy and suspended
next to the pianist.
i am moving his hands.
i am arching his back.
he is no longer responsible
deep into the music.
the bassist wears no socks.
his ankles are swollen
but he plays like a locomotive,
steams away. he is
a coal burner in the yukon,
gray smoke whistles from his collar
and i don't want to hear about acid rain
not tonight.
the same bus
again
approaches in the mirror,
“?xes gnivah”
“there is never enough time
for all the coffee we need to drink,”
the waitress says.
i add sweetener this time.
i am in a foot tap.
i am in a tempo i can't continue.
they've chugged for an hour now,
stop to refuel.
lights go on
and there is an argument outside.
two men getting off the bus
i don't think they know
if they're having sex or not.
they come in.
more people come in.
i go to the rest room
and bump into a man

coming out.
we say "sorry"
at exactly the same time.
i don't smile.
he seems distracted.
i switch to espresso,
served in a thimble.
i feel like a fool in hooked pinky
but sip it in airy slurps.
delicious.
very strong.
the lights dim
the arguing men are subdued.
the bassist starts to sweat away on
notes he doesn't even know.
his ankles are thinner,
he smiles.
"can i sit here?" someone asks me.
"no."
the river smells of fish.
i hope no one else opens the door.
CASINO
pulsates in different colors,
all green.
the pianist runs up and down the keys,
spills his water.
they turn on the fans.
behind me a couple kisses.
i see their lips in the front window.
everyone claps.
i think,
for the drum solo.
they play together again
in a new piece.
headlights spill in
from the dark traffic
going this way and that.
ancient shadows
spin off the instruments.
"what kind of coffee would you like this time?"
the waitress asks.
"let me think for a second."
they are in the world,
playing.

the floor is littered with feet
moving this way and that.
no one is talking.
i shrug my coffee choice.
the waitress inches away with an idea.
the night shakes.

The Teacher

Florina Enache

She came with a heart full of fear, a short time after it happened. The house is one hundred years old. The air inside was thin and poor, like everything that is old. A layer of dust crowned the furniture and a yellow smell followed her wherever she went. But the house stands sturdy and holds well the fading canvass of her solitude.

She left in a hurry, gathering a handful of possessions, mostly clothes, in the back of a neighbour's truck, leaving behind a lifetime of things bought with precious savings and bank loans. When she arrived here, she sat on a chair for hours, paralysed by sadness and scared to look around, as if in a trance. It took long years to clean the house and improve it to make it feel like a home. Or close to it. She never thought it would be so hard to get hold of her own life.

The neighbours are good to her, maybe a bit too nosy sometimes, but she's got used to them over time. It feels good to be asked how you are every morning. Or if you need a loaf of bread from the small store down the road, as she is going there anyway. She lowered the fence of rigidity that surrounded her life. They respected her pain and avoided questions that could lead to it. They try to cheer her up, only sometimes peering through the mesh of her sadness. They remember her birthday and bring her presents, a small pack of ground coffee, the green Fortuna she likes, a bar of chocolate, knitted woollen socks. She, too, prepares now for the occasion by baking a cake, which she didn't in the first years. Why celebrate? And what is the birthday anyway? A simple day, just like all the others.

*

She walks to the small church up the hill, like every Sunday, early in the morning, as the mist still floats above tree tops and the small houses. The black lengths of her dress touch the damp grass and the church shoes are uncomfortable for her feet. At her age, all shoes are uncomfortable for her feet.

Summer will be over soon: she knows the signs. She will have to buy wood for the winter, when her pension comes. It's been seven years. She can't go there herself, but she could send some money over. She is torn: the pension won't allow both. Coal would have been cheaper, but they no longer dig it out. It's bad for the environment, they say. How things have changed.

He sits on a large boulder at the side of the road. Grass grows around it, as if to keep it warm. She has seen him before, but she can't remember where.

"You know who I am," he says, as if reading her mind. "I'm the teacher."

His clothes are gray, cut in an older style. She can't remember how teachers were dressed when she went to school, it's been too long ago. She only remembers she wore knee-high socks in the winter and her legs were freezing, as she walked through the snow every day from the house to the tiny school.

“There are good people everywhere.” His voice reverberates through the cold air. His hands are folded in his lap.

“I shouldn’t have left,” she says, as if talking to herself. “I abandoned my life.” She stares at him, searching for an answer, as she straightens her back.

“Blessed be the ones who doubt.” His eyes are clear. He stands up. “You did what we had to do.” He walks away along the path that goes down to the old well, the one with a wooden bucket strung to the wheel.

She bends over to get her stick, which she has dropped, then keeps walking to the church. It is a quiet morning. The birds are still asleep. The narrow path to the church is hidden by a ridge of high ground and the wind can’t reach it.

She goes around the church into the cemetery, where her mother lies behind a whitewashed stone cross that tells her name and age. Ninety-four she was, when she left. She cleans the soul glass with a piece of cloth and fills it with the oil she has brought in a small bottle. She straightens the wicker and lights it up. She lights a candle and crosses herself. The church bells begin to ring. The tall firs guard the small church and wrestle the wind.

*

She likes to crouch on the wooden stool close to the fire. She is always cold. She has crumpled old newspapers under the logs and lighted them up. There is a litter of smoke first, then timid flames, yellow and orange, emerge and grow stronger, gold and russet, dancing joyfully. The heat touches her face.

She dreads the cold days of late autumn, the iron grip of winter, and the deceiving sunshine of early spring. All aches, known and unknown, open in her body. When she wakes up, arthritis keeps her immobile, for a while. It takes time, patience, and hot water to make the body work again.

She dreams of the sea often. She has never seen the sea, but she likes to imagine the warmth of the sun smothering her body and flooding the old bones like lava, and the salty air invading her lungs, making her breathing easier. She would be afraid of so much water, of course, but she would lie on the beach all day, with her eyes closed, not even moving, as if she were dead.

She opens her eyes. The bare walls look down at her. Stretched on his cross, Jesus bows his head to listen to her prayers. She finds solace in the small room. She was born right here, in this wooden bed, on a straw mattress. In those times, women gave birth at home, with a midwife, who came and stayed until the baby was delivered. There were no drugs for the mother, and the baby would tear its way out into the world. The fire crackle has mellowed and the flames begin to dwindle. She gets another log from where only a few are still neatly aligned against the wall.

*

She fills the bucket with clay and lime. She adds water and mixes it with a thick stick, that someone long ago has used to walk or to herd animals, cows, maybe. She chops

a handful of straws and dumps them into the bucket. Then she stirs it, until it becomes a paste. Hot sweat travels down her temples to her chin.

Hard work she did a lot before; she fixed fences, hauled buckets of water every day, collected wood for the fire, in addition to her normal chores of cleaning the house, cooking, and washing the clothes. She spent a good deal of time on his clothes, ironing the shirts and the suits, mending the socks. It was her job to make him look presentable. When he first got the job, she and his parents were beside themselves with joy. It was an important job, as the leader of the community, and the money was good.

He spent all day at work, dealing with people and authorities. There were meetings to attend, reports to write, places to visit in an official capacity, and problems to solve. He was always smart, so he learned the ropes of leadership quickly. After hours, he talked official business at the pub. He had to be there. A good leader must be with his people.

Every night, she cooked steamy stews of shredded meat, tomatoes, and capsicum, laid on a bed of polenta, yellow as gold, and kept them on the stove until the fire died out. She went to bed, crushed by the day's work, and tired of waiting for him to come home. When he did, he was morose, or angry, or jealous, stirred by something he had heard at the pub or from his imagination.

The bucket is heavy and she has trouble hauling it close to the house. The old stucco has fallen off, eaten by time and rain, and the river stones in the wall are bare. She wets the wall with a bunch of old rags doused in water. With an old trowel, she found in the shed, she smooths the paste on the wall in circular moves, as she saw her father do it, a long time ago. She must work quickly, as the paste will dry up.

Those nights, almost every time, his heavy hand flung across her face leaving red marks in its wake, which turned into purple bruises the next day. She remembers the metallic taste of blood in her mouth, when the lip was caught between his fist and her teeth. Her blood was flowing through her veins like liquid fire. She was young She thought about leaving him, but couldn't do it. She stayed and time passed.

"I had to stay," she says aloud.

When the regime was upturned, he was caught unaware. He lost the job. People mocked him and threw stones at him. He couldn't find another job, as no one would hire one who belong to the old regime. When he died, her world collapsed. She didn't know how to go on. She couldn't eat because he was no longer eating. She didn't know what to do with herself, without him.

Tears unite under her chin, in the old black kerchief. She moves her arms in circular motions to spread the paste and make it stick to the wall. Her arms ache, but she doesn't stop.

When she decided to leave, a small part of her soul stayed behind in the graveyard, at his head, on the stone cross. She wept continuously in those days. Now, the tears have seeped into the creases of her face and draped themselves around her temples and her mouth, where she used to smile.

She obeyed the rules: mercy meals and koliva forty days after the funeral, then after three, six, and nine months and, whenever she could, every year around the time he died. But, now, she can't do it from here. Soon, it will be seven years. An anniversary and a farewell. A duty.

She dries her eyes with the back of her hands. The wall is still wet, but all the stones are covered. She moves slowly through the grass. A few chickens are pecking happily for grains and worms. She sits on the tree trunk she uses to split wood. Honey light filters through the branches of the old walnut tree. Fresh nuts drop from their husks and onto the ground, like newly born calves, wet and shivering into the world.

On a day like this, his soul floats at the eaves, and her mother's, her father's, and her brother's. and the ones of her relatives and people she knew, the young uncle who looked after her when her mother went to work in the fields. They are all there, floating like flowers tied loosely to the same stalk, not bothering her, just lingering at the uneven beams and the chapped shutters of the old house, in the silence of the two rooms, in the faces of the red geraniums bunched at the windows, in the red meat of tomatoes, plump on the vines, in the oily sheen of red apples and the silvery down of velvet grapes, purple and sweet.

It's been a good year. The porch is hung with braids of onions and garlic, clusters of thyme and basil tied with strings. She will get to the other side of winter safely. There is food down in the cellar, potatoes, sauerkraut, and jars of mushrooms. Plum jams for the lent days before Christmas. Before, she lived on potatoes and apples baked on the lip of the oven. She survived.

She closes her eyes. She is not even surprised to see him a few steps away, in front of her. the gray of his clothes reflects into the clear blue of his eyes.

"I don't remember you from school," she says as an apology. "It's been a long time."

"You didn't see me at your school."

"But you are a teacher."

"I am."

There is silence. From time to time another walnut frees itself from the husk and plunges into the world. Her words have deserted her and she is embarrassed. She has so many questions to ask him, but she cannot bring herself up to say a word.

"You did what you had to."

"So, I don't have to send money?"

"Live your life." He stretches his arms to include the yard, the old house, the garden behind it, the old walnut tree, and the wooden gates to the narrow road. She looks around and sees all these as if for the first time. A rush of peace and love goes through her chest and she begins to pray. She hasn't noticed that the Teacher is gone and only a light breeze stirs the fallen leaves. Now, it's just her and her prayer, but the prayer is not like the ones before. She doesn't ask for forgiveness or for good health or for him to be well received there in Heaven. She only gives thanks, for herself, for being well,

for the crops and the chickens, for the warm weather and the sun, for the fresh walnuts.

*

The small houses are still asleep, behind fences. Terracotta roofs are red and damp from the fog. She tries to remember who lives in each house, every time she walks to the church. When old people die and their children live far away in big cities, busy with their lives, the old houses are left to the mercy of thistles, nettles, and mulleins, that drown the fences and the stables, choke the paths and suck the life out of houses until they dry out and cave in.

But the tiny village, with its pure air and its whispering pines, sits close to the sky, as if God made it himself, with just a stretch of His hand. A few fork-tailed swallows draw circles on the morning sky. She becomes dizzy, all of a sudden, and she has to steady herself. It takes a while to remember where she is going. The ringing of the old church bells brings her back.

She steps into the church and lights candles in both trays. One for the dead, one for the living. Inside, the walls are silent. The saints are blackened by time and candle smoke. From the altar, incense spreads and soars. Sun rays slant through the painted glass. There is a murmur of voices and angel wings.

*He has blinded their eyes,
and hardened their heart,
lest they see with their eyes,
and understand with their heart, and turn,
I would heal them.*

She thinks of love and forgiveness and life. A millstone lifts from her heart. Tears well her eyes and travel down her cheeks. She lets them.

After the service, she walks home with the other women. They walk slowly to match her step. They talk about the service and their village. About the little things that fill their lives. They talk about death, but not as something to be afraid of, but as something that happens in life. Like a cup shattered in the sink. Or that time when the clean washing falls onto the ground when the string is snapped by the wind. Or the branch of a tree giving way under the weight of too much fruit. They laugh. She is no longer afraid.

The fog has raised and the sun is higher. The grass is still wet with dew, and it grows around the old boulder at the side of the road, as if to keep it warm.

I Want to Dance for You

I want to dance for you

I don the ocean and twirl

The tsunami sweeps you under

Fog

Woods longing for water

Dewy dreams pervade slumberland

Shower Tempest

Hot rain beats our skin

We hug

Thunder roars

Lightning flashes

In our bones

Taiji

O, that piano is burning

It melts and morphs into a circle

Black and White

Yang and Yin

Groom and Bride

The black and white in our eyes

That piano is playing

The man in black holding hands with the woman in white

They gaze into eternity

Into each other's eyes

Desire

I undress you

Cover you in my dream

Just in case

You slip into others'

Divinity

Angels strip my flesh

Wrap my soul with golden threads

When I emerge from the cocoon

I soar to the divine

Strangers

We walked past

Did not look at each other

We were in love for one moment

When our shadows overlapped

Ark

You swing an axe to left and right

My arms emerge, encircle you tight

You break the bow

My head emerges, kisses you crazy

You chop the stern right at the center

My legs emerge and split

Sweet vortex sucks you in

The flood baptizes you

The ark is smashed

I become your new Ark new God

Jesus' Bride

A heart tender as a kiss on snow

The tears she shed for the poor

Become pearls adorning her wedding gown

She walks down the aisle paved with angel feathers

Will the groom wait for her at the end?

Will she stretch her trembling finger
toward that hallowed ring?

Toward the hollow of his palm?

And yet, though everybody seeks to get away
from self as from a cell that hates and keeps
its prisoner in, the greatest miracle is
knowing that still *all life is lived*.

But who does live it? Is it things
which, like an unplayed melody,
hang about a harp at night?

Is it the winds that come from the sea,
is it branches that give each other signs,
is it the flowers that release their scent,
is it the long and ancient alleys?

Is it the warm-blooded animals that walk,
is it the birds that rise up from valleys?

Who lives life really? Is it you, God?

— Rainer Maria Rilke

CONTRIBUTORS

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content and writer resources at <https://holtlara2.wixsite.com/lauraholt>. Coyote Woman is an Adult Magical Realism short story. A standalone, it features a woman who has lost touch with her wilder feminine nature and seeks to reclaim it. Its folklore, which contains kindly old witches and shapeshifting magic, is drawn from Southwestern Yaqui Legend, and will appeal to fans of Clarissa Pinkola Estes and Sharon Blackie.

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