

ginosko  
literary  
journal



#31

Ginosko Literary Journal #31

Winter 2023-2024

[GinoskoLiteraryJournal.com](http://GinoskoLiteraryJournal.com)

PO Box 246

Fairfax, CA 94978

Robert Paul Cesaretti, Editor

Est. 2002

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Cover Art: "The Raven"

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ginosko

A Greek word meaning

to perceive, understand, realize, come to know;

knowledge that has an inception, a progress,  
an attainment. The recognition of truth from experience.

Γινώσκω

I wrote to find beauty and purpose, to know that love is possible  
and lasting and real, to see daylilies and swimming pools,  
loyalty and devotion, even though my eyes were closed  
and all that surrounded me was a darkened room.

I wrote because that was who I was at the core,  
and if I was too damaged to walk around the block,  
I was lucky all the same. Once I got to my desk,  
once I started writing, I still believed anything was possible.

— Alice Hoffman

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## **CONTRIBUTORS**

# Air Boy

Michael Loyd Gray

I was born in the air. Literally. Somewhere over Ohio, so I was told. A few miles straight up. Among the clouds. Literally. An air boy. If I had a memory of it, which I don't, maybe I'd remember white, puffy clouds lingering outside the plane's windows. Or the faces of passengers sneaking looks at the fuss I created with my dramatic entrance.

But my first memories began much later. I certainly don't remember the hospital in Michigan where I was taken when the plane landed, and where I was declared a Michigan resident. Now, when I look at the sky, I think all of it stretching everywhere is where I'm from. I'm not bound by soil at all.

My folks – that's another matter. They weren't air people. They were consumed by fire. Roasted alive when my father tried to beat a train to a crossing and lost the bet. They had been drunk, of course, and so they were alcohol people as well as fire people. One fueled the other.

Then they became ash people.

I was cycled through various foster homes but never fit in and so I always escaped. On the lam seemed my natural state. That cycle went on until grandparents stepped up and said they'd take a crack at it. But they were ancient and broke except for Social Security. I got tired of pork and beans and hamburger helper in a double-wide trailer surrounded by other old folks waiting for death.

How I got my name – Hap – is a good story, I suppose. Everybody on the plane that day said I just sort of "happened." The boy who just happened on the back seat of a plane over Youngstown, Ohio. For a few days, my mom called me the boy who happened and then she shortened it to Hap because she liked how abrupt it sounds. I don't think about it as a name. That's just what I know, who I am – Hap.

Hap who happened.

When I met Shiner, while I panhandled on the streets, he said Hap was a silly name for a kid, but he took me in anyway. He was a hard man, a veteran of Afghanistan, his only soft spot apparently for kids like me who struggled to live off what the streets provided. That had happened to him, too, he said. He was man, like me, who just happened, I reckon.

I knew that Shiner was a thief but didn't yet know he was a killer, too. By then, it was too late. I was along for the ride. "You ride with Jesse James," Shiner sometimes said, "and you *are* Jesse James."

It all just happened, like that day in the air over Ohio.

by Sequoia Cristobal-Mandel

## Inside

Warning: references to self-harm

When my mind wanders, I always—and have always—imagined a rectangle forming in my head. Growing into itself, making four lines, except that that last line doesn't close off the rectangle—it halts and goes inwards, stops right before the edge, and continues to create more rectangles inside, and again inside that one, and again, one big rectangle spiral. I imagine getting to the center of the biggest rectangle, now filled with smaller ones, to find that I can keep forming rectangles, smaller and smaller, and it will never end. I notice that the small rectangles get bigger, and the borders expand and expand. My rectangulation will not and cannot ever reach its conclusion. And that's the thing I want most—I want to go to the center, to fill up all the space, but there is always more to fill.

The nurse tells me: No necklaces. No hair ties. No underwire bras. I strip my clothes and get my blood pressure taken. I sign forms, agreements not to harm myself, appropriate behavior, and the like. She gives me a pair of gauze underwear. I tell her, "Oh, I'm on my period." "We'll get you a pad, wait a minute."

She walks out and comes back with a fresh pad.

I remove my underwear and rip off the one stuck there, leaving dried blood bordering the elastic. I start to roll up the dirty pad, only for the nurse to say, "Don't worry, hospital staff have seen worse."

I put on a hospital gown. I get scanned for scars, my forearms, thighs, midsection. I feel like a puppy being prodded for ticks.

It's six in the evening, and I have missed dinner, so I devour a PB&J and vanilla soy milk. The last meal I ate was earlier in the emergency room: applesauce and dry chicken tenders. There, at the children's hospital, I was given an allergy wristband that just says one word: *nuts*. I wear it for the next three days, and joke about it to the staff at any opportunity I get. I continually try to show that I am stable, through jokes, through reassurances that I am of sound mind. Reactions are mixed, but that's okay: I can handle a bad audience. I prove myself worthy of discharge, that I feel *fine*, that I am okay. That's the thing— I don't feel any different than I did before. So how could I be so unwell that I need to be here?

Later, I pace back and forth in my room, scanning the blank walls. I find myself crying, and I can feel it sorely in my stomach. There are no clocks, but I can see the sky turn pink outside. I hear a nurse call for a room check. I consider my options. When she opens the door, I decide to speak.

"Hi. I don't feel good." I feel mucus rising in my throat.

She asks me what's wrong, and pinches her brows together: it puts me over the edge.

"I just can't...I can't really breathe?" I tell her, and I sob, and I heave, and the ocean has never been so dry. I am guided out of my room to a chair, and given a paper cup of ice water. I sit there, hunched over, like a sick child. Who else could have sensed my sickness but me?

It's far too warm, and my ears are chilly. I don't get up. The nurse calls for her coworker. He walks over and sits across from me, smiling. All the while looking at me like I'm dying.

“This is so—this is—I’m sorry. This is so weird, I don’t know what’s happening.”

“Why are you sorry?” he asks.

We talk about travel, and his smile never falters. I think that all this is filler, fodder to distract from my grief and the halting breaths I’m desperately pushing out of my mouth. He asks me where I would most like to go.

“Oxford,” I manage to squeeze out. “I want to study abroad at Oxford.”

I think about the world out there, and with some sense of entitlement I think I don’t really exist while I am in here. Like time will stand still for me as I recalibrate. For a while, my breath snags on the corners of every word I say. Eventually, it rests in its reserves. The nurse never stops smiling at me.

## **Outside**

I have so many unanswered questions. Am I beautiful? Am I intelligent? Am I good? Am I better? Is superiority an Earthly concept? How do I learn every language? How do I use none? How do I live a life? And if not here, where?

So, I turn to nature. I think of the one-way roads spilling down tumbling mountainsides. I think of the greatest soil on earth and the most forgiving avalanche of deadly rock. The sea holds itself captive and moves beyond its own boundaries. The highest peak of earth asks to be cradled in blue, and it tells me that I'm the child of some god, somewhere, even if I never have been before. Only then can I think, "Where else but here?"

When I get in the car for the first time after my stay, I realize where I am. We are so close to home. Now, there is no view of ambulance doors, or my feet strapped into a gurney. Someone asking me what year it is, who the president is, if I'm in pain.

"This is where we are?" I ask my dad. I think of the view from my window in the hospital. I think of the people who lived across the street from me. I didn't know what I looked at every morning and every night, but I looked outside for refuge.

The first thing I do when I leave the psych ward is take a hike. I recount my time to my family through laughs— the people I met, the food I ate, the too-firmness of my bed. The absence of clocks.

I can smell the eucalyptus trees here, and it brings me back to where I am standing. To be alive is to be reminded of all the lives you have and have not lived, through a scent in a breeze in a place. Like the smell of disinfectant, applesauce and papery sheets. Like the smell of nephrite pines slashing through your lungs. (Remember how happy you were in the mountains?) Like home: that vanilla perfume sample your aunt gave you, the refrigerator stench, the pads of your dog's feet.

Home (home!) is a relief. My room (my room!) is the biggest relief of my life. My bed is half-made, my books are in order. My desk is clear of any clutter. The chair is pushed in. The comforter is folded over, and a soft imprint of my body lays in the mattress. My slippers sit perched, ready for fulfillment. I left for the ER from a tidy room.

Sitting in the therapist's office, there is a beat of silence— one serendipitous second when the light shines through the windows and a flock of birds fly overhead, and you can see their shadows dancing on the sun-soaked floor. I sit in it for a while. It feels wrong of me to pollute such a beautiful space with my words.

We are talking about the depressive tendency to spiral.

I say, "I spend so much time just trying to make myself feel worse."

My eyes rest on the carpet.

And I do, I always dive deeper inside of grief, as if to find its end in an endless rectangle spiral. And it never does end, does it? It has no limit, and its corners cut you with every turn. Why do I do this? Part of the desire probably has to do with some comorbidity of disorders. Some comorbidity of pustulating futures and festering plans, like a wound that captivity attempts to

heal. "Captivity" is an ugly word, though: I wasn't trapped, although I felt like I was. I am sick, and I was being tended to. The question is, what do I do now? I am still sick. I am going to let my body melt into the earth. I am going to imagine what could have happened if I had not been born into this body.

This body feeds the mind that creates rectangle spirals in phase-space. This body upholds the soul that heals itself. This body creates change. So I will, and I do— I do— but it is never as easy as it sounds. I cradle myself in my pain, in bruises of the heart and mind that I don't want to heal. I walk amongst trees. I play guitar. I write. I read what I have written, and I write again. I think. I think, *the nature of infinity is not a bother. It's a beauty.* I live in it, and stretch myself to the sky.

## Implied Water

## LB Sedlacek

I don't read the obits. I take that back. I do read the obits to see if any of my customers have died. Not that I want to know, but I have to know.

My Mother, my Uncle, and my husband also want to know. My husband says my Mother reads them for entertainment. He tells this to a friend of mine he just met and she agrees. She says her Mother read them to see whom she had outlived.

A parent should not outlive a child. That's the obit of today. My Uncle finally returns my calls. He calls me long distance (it's long distance for him cause he still uses a phone wired into his house) to tell me the son of a friend of his, Derrick, has an obit in the paper.

It's a monthly paper. The town is that small.

He doesn't understand how I'm reading it along with him – instantly on my tablet. I tell him I'm reading it on my computer because a tablet to him is a notepad or a flat slab and nothing electronic.

The obit he's reading has been scrubbed squeaky clean. It doesn't give a cause of death.

But I find the obits in the young man's adopted hometown. These list the cause of the accident. Loss of control, running off the road, the illusion of a part of the highway that wasn't there.

The only time I drove in and out of Glacier National Park, it was the same thing. Someone drove off the edge of a high mountain curve and died.

It happened again on a highway winding up towards the Blue Ridge Parkway. A new motorcycle rider, a woman from Charlotte, hit a gust of wind and off she went over the mountainside.

Same for my Uncle's cousin. He was riding his motorcycle on the switchbacks near the Smokey Mountains in Tennessee. He swerved to avoid a kid on an ATV. Landed in a ditch. It fried his brain. A few days later at a stoplight he had an aneurysm and died.

My Uncle brings up that accident comparing it to what happened to his friend's son. He says "motorcycles are dangerous." He pauses then adds "a helmet implies safety."

I think it's like the scenic stone walls, the painted or rusted out brown guardrails, the cleverly poured cement ditches, the orange traffic cones, the orange and white traffic barrels, the yellow glowing painted lines, the flashing red, white, green, yellow lights, the blue signs, the blinking yellow neon arrows on curves, the green electronic blip billboards saying to slow down, to share the road – all of them imply safety.

I picture Derrick's last moments and wonder if he was wearing a helmet, was he being safe? Did he know that was his last ride along the Colorado highway?

His picture shapes in my head. My hand shapes it with my brush.

In my painting, he was wearing a helmet. His motorcycle was red.

It was a beautiful fall day in the mountains. He wasn't driving too fast.

I paint in his motorcycle – close to the road's edge. The front tire is over the line. If the bike kept going it would land in water – bright blue and white dripping down from the glaciers.

Implied water. My Uncle is still on the phone looking for an address so he can send a sympathy card. He doesn't notice the relief in my voice because now I can think of this young man (with so much life ahead) as safe. Instead, he asks me if I can print off Derrick's accident report, and the local obits the ones in black and white, the ones full of life but ultimately death, and mail them to him.

Hours later, long after we've hung up, long after I've assured everyone my Uncle is still okay (even though he has an answering machine he never listens to the messages or returns any calls), I print off three obits of someone I never knew. I stuff them in an envelope with a card. I can't think of anything to say except "Stay warm cause in some places it's already cold." And I add "Here are the obits on Derrick."

I never knew Derrick. I can only paint what I think he looks like.



**Henrietta**

The red light penetrating the blinds called out a new night. If she didn't leave soon, she'd be late for work.

Henrietta lumbered out of bed with last night's dregs caked on her body. She had violated her only rule: shower after work. But life had been in full swing by morning.

For now, the apartment was silent. She scurried into the bathroom to rinse off and put on makeup. Gold blush to turn her plump cheeks into lustrous, velvet puffs boys liked to kiss as much as her breasts. Dark red lipstick over her full, ambrosial lips, to be reapplied and reapplied. Finally, she placed a cascading crown of thick black curls upon her head, to conjure the brown-sugar fantasy.

In the cracked mirror, she forced a smile. She was young, with vibrant skin. She could still meet a nice man one day. Then her gaze turned to her bloodshot eyes. And in a sliver of glass, the reflection of her son crawling across the stained hallway carpet. She needed the night's money. Her smile wilted like a burned flower.

The boy howled. A white spot the size of a fist covered his face. Henrietta thought it was the imprint of God's fiery palm, who pushed the baby down Heaven's drain onto her. Her mother came and carried him away.

Henrietta slipped into a short red dress and tall black heels. She said goodbye and walked out of the apartment without turning back. Outside, people loitered along the sidewalk. In the distance, the incidental sounds of prosaic happenings in east Detroit -- sirens, gunshots, and shouts. She stomped on by. The curb was the destination, and the journey.

She departed for an explicit tour of the city. Her views: the laps of men and desolate landscapes through rear windows. Boxers and briefs. Dark alleys and overgrown lots. Men from the burbs served as chauffeur. One man in a new convertible felt guilty enough to drive her home. The leather seat felt like butter. As the warm wind caressed her face, she closed her eyes and let herself dream this was real and hers.

Above her building, dusk and dawn clashed like jealous lovers. Her window was illuminated. She sighed. At that moment, a car pulled to the curb and an eager voice asked if she wanted to go for a ride. She hesitated before walking over and vanishing into the dark

cavern of space behind the front seat. That's how everyone talked of Henrietta -- gone, missing, disappeared.

## **Ghost**

The small house in the woods had no windows. Actually it did, but they were boarded up with plywood. And it wasn't in the woods, but on a street in Detroit's Brightmoor neighborhood, surrendered by humans to nature. Residents called it Blightmoor.

People waited on the rotting porch. Some loitered among the tall grass and young saplings.

"Ghost, open up," a man pleaded.

Inside, Ghost unzipped his backpack, filled with tiny plastic bags of pearl-colored powder. He readjusted the pistol in his waistband, then obliged the desperate calls and opened the padlocked door. As if a nightclub, one ravenous person entered at a time.

Ghost exchanged the bags for money proffered by stained fingers with a perfunctory grace. This was his seventh home. When the police catch on, nothing remains but vestiges of addiction -- spoons, syringes, empty bags, and, sometimes, the eternally sleeping user. He avoided his customers' eyes. It was just business. But he felt compelled to look into the hollow eyes of a young man with a wide white spot across his face shaped like an egg. He was slim and lanky like a pipe cleaner.

The egg-masked man retreated into a dark side room. A deep snort, followed by a heavy thud echoed from the darkness. After a moment of silence, Ghost grabbed his backpack and ran out. Four blocks away and out of breath, he stopped. He took a phone from his pocket and dialed 9-1-1. He stayed on the line long enough to give an address, then pitched the phone into an empty field and walked on.

## **James, Sandra, et al.**

In a park along the Detroit River, James locked the bathroom doors and shut off the drinking fountain. The parks office called it winterizing. Yet, the air was stubborn and still warm. He stopped to wipe his brow and take a sip of bottled water. A dry wind carried the earthy smell of fallen leaves, chased by an oppressive stench that stretched his nostrils and seized his stomach. The smell emanated from the drain.

Another dead rat, he thought.

James lifted the iron grate and shined a flashlight into the black hole below. There breaching a pool of brackish water, the top of a human head. Before he called the police, he called his girlfriend, Sandra, to tell her he'd be late again. She sighed loudly, then hung up.

The police arrived with the coroner. As the nude, putrefied body was raised with a crane, Private Thomas remarked: "Shit, his face's worn off."

"That's a birthmark or something, dumbass," Sergeant Penske said.

The body was transported to a forensics lab where Dr. Watkins examined it on a cool steel table. Male. Acute case of vitiligo. No apparent signs of foul play. Cause of death: unknown.

Mrs. Matthews, a mother of three, walked into the police headquarters the following day. She heard about the found body on the news. She explained her children played in the same park days before and witnessed a homeless man with a pale face take off his clothes. He then removed the drain cover and descended into the darkness where parents dispose of children's sleeping goldfish.

A next of kin was not found.

An undertaker and his apprentice buried the unnamed body in a pauper's lot somewhere outside the city. For some, there are more hands to carry us at the end. The men laid the body to rest, wrapped in a sheath of white cotton and ensconced in a wooden box, under freshly tilled dirt that would surrender to the grass.

## **A Place to Be Healed**

**Shannon O'Connor**

I.

When I enter the hospital, it comes to my mind that it's a place to be healed, not a place to kill. I am there to kill something, not of my choice. I don't want to kill the body inside me, but I was offered a glazed chocolate donut every day if I did.

II.

What does it mean to love? I thought it was love, but love isn't supposed to be torture. I was coerced into thinking I would be invincible if I loved him. I don't think I loved him hard enough, but he never loved me at all. I would have been better off if I had never left the house.

III.

I never wanted a child. My psychiatrist told me that I had to release it from my body. I asked him if I would be able to find it again, if I wanted, like if I went shopping for a shirt, and I returned to the store, it might still be there when I went back. He said it wasn't like shopping, and I couldn't buy anything because I didn't have any money, but someone would pay to get rid of my child, and it would be forever. I told him nothing is forever, and he laughed.

IV.

Forever is like being alive, and never dying. I would really like to die sometimes, but I'm told that's not a normal way of thinking. I want to tell these people, if they had a brain as messed up as mine, why would you want to be alive? They tell me I might get better someday, and I should hope to live a regular life. I don't think it's possible I could ever be normal, but I might be able to breathe fresh air in a country where I've never been.

V.

I think of the child I never had, and I wonder if it was a boy or a girl, and if it had been a girl, would she have been beautiful and smart, much smarter than me, and more talented? She might have been able to make spaghetti sauce from scratch, and also dance the tango, but my life was a mess when I was young and pregnant, and I will never know what kind of child I would have had; she could have been crazy like me, and then I would have been in trouble, and I'm glad, because I have a hard enough time taking care of myself. Life is sharp in the world when you're insane and alone, and nobody listens to you, because you don't make any sense, and there's a good chance you never will.

VI.

I have words now to keep me comfort, and the luxury of a plush blanket. I outgrew my stuffed animals many years ago, but I think of the white bear I had, which I pretended was real, and loved him to death.

VII.

In my life, I've known lots of sorrow, but nothing has been like that of loss, my family, my friends, my unborn child; we live in order to lose; I've lost plenty of socks in the laundromat, but they're miniscule compared to loss of innocence and sanity. Everyone loses innocence, but not everyone loses their mind. I've gotten better. I can live in the world, and walk around and nobody laughs at me, which I think is a marvelous accomplishment, my best yet. I'm working on more, but that's all I have on the menu for now.

## Omphalos

In Jerusalem gravity is so strong  
the sky sticks to your hair.  
Every grain of sand is a star  
fallen as the seed of man.  
Time never moves forward  
but spreads out in every direction  
like water spilled from above.  
I have returned to tickle the bellybutton  
of the world, to touch what is left  
of the stones, to find a boy in love.

## dance of flame and moth

the ineffable name  
of God is your name  
whispered by no one

each one is drawn  
to the other  
longing to disappear  
within

so it begins again  
the dance of flame  
and moth

consciousness made pure  
holding no subject but itself

will you finally be free?  
Will you lose your mind?

eternity never lasts  
more than a moment

## **never mind**

take a minute or two  
of my time  
you with buttocks  
so hard so round so smooth  
to the touch  
you may drink from the pools  
my eyes have become  
though I would not blame you  
if you have a taste instead  
for fresh running waters  
you may pick through my mind  
as the ragpickers pick  
don't tell me  
if nothing is left to find  
don't wake me  
if something is left behind  
take it home  
put it on your shelf  
keep it for yourself  
as I dig in  
with both hands

## **After the flood**

Silt is everywhere. Remnants of the river's belly retched and left behind. Smells of wet fur, moldy clothes, sour socks rotting in the hamper. The sweet scent of earth overridden. It's just dirt after all. Dirt with a little motor oil, sewage perhaps, animal feces, urine. I wear rubber boots. The carpet is covered in wet grit. The bottoms of the curtains stained dark. Walls splashed in dampness, as if someone took a coffee pot and twirled and twirled in the room, coffee flying on walls and furniture, staining everything brown. If left too long it molds, the brown turning to spider black.

The neighbor across the street hired two men to clean up his house. They play Tejano music on a boom box because there is no electricity. Not yet. Refrains dance, floating through cracks, filling crevices. Notes suspended above putrid silt. I walk through the apartment touching this, picking up that. Nothing below two feet is spared. Objects are strewn about, books freed from stacks, lamps tipped over, personal details of life tossed by amused waters. On the floor beside my favorite chair — the red velvet one I rescued from the thrift store — is a theatre program. I pick it up, wipe the mud from its cover, but it tears. Names rip apart, the title disappears, dates erased. I was one of the actors, singing, dancing. Fresh out of college in my first role. A sparkling show with ushers and box seats. A show on a stage filled with lights and props of a grand scale.

The men across the street sing as they throw items in the dumpster. Their voices underlie sounds of clanging and banging, sounds of preciousness discarded. I search the room for the untouched. What the ravenous hands of the river could not reach. The dirty dishes in the sink — which won't get washed because there is no water. Not yet. Dried beans in the orange and green bowl on the counter. The chopping block with the diced translucent onion ready for soup before I ran. On the kitchen table the bronze pony my dad won at the State Fair. I was seven. He was sick. But still he managed to win at the horse racing game, shooting at the target, sending the animated horse towards lights and bells and a finish line. He won again and again, trading small for large and large for larger until the foot high pony was mine. I cradled it to my chest as he carried me on his shoulders, high above the flood of people, the smell of cotton



candy surrounding us. The pony rears on hind legs, victorious above the dank. I stroke its mane, its majestic tail. Wrap my hand around its broad back. A cold strength rises through my palm while strains of Tejano guitar fill the room.

## Eddies

We have traded places. She rising like a whirlwind toward a second adolescence. Me caught in a downward current toward rapid aging. She, who was once a designer of fine woolen suits for The Bon Marché and now needs help to dress and button a blouse, giggles at her lopsided efforts and her mismatched clothing. Me, who was once a thriving artist and marathon runner and can no longer see the awe in a perfect orange, collapses fully clothed on the bed at the end of the day.

I feed her oatmeal in the morning. She wipes her mouth. *Hear the birds?* she asks. *The birds are always singing this time of day.* I wash up the dishes, tell her she must take her pills, watch her veined hand wave me off.

In the middle of the day, the soap operas play on the television, the volume drowns out the refrigerator that continues to run. *Do you want to read? Should I read to you?* I ask. She shakes her head no; tells me she wants to sit and enjoy love gone bad on the television screen. Rosa has left Joel for the tenth time.

I can't paint in her house even though I try. Age old scolding floats in the air and swirls about the canvas. The colors run instead of blend and the subjects I attempt, mountain vistas and rolling streams, turn dour and dark. She, a master of sketching and painting, sits next to me in her chair. She is painting a city scene and decides the people should be stick figures. She dips her finger in red and draws people in awkward positions, some upside down hanging from windows, some walking with a lilt, their limbs askew, some lying prone on the sidewalk.

Tomorrow I will wheel her outside to see the gladiolas that are budding in the garden. The sun will be shining ever so lightly. I will stand beside her and will my shoulders straight, attempt to direct the ache in my back to subside. She will smile and turn her face toward the warmth of the sun in childhood pleasure.

## Silver Under the Bridge

Craig Dobson

Until the man came, the boy went most days to the bridge. The stream had steep banks except under the bridge where they were shallower and the boy could sit on the edge with his toes touching the water. The stream flowed down from the reservoir at the edge of the town, through the park, winding close to the rose garden and then away from the bandstand and back towards the boating pond, and on, disappearing under the main road, to surface again by the railway station where it ran past the old factories to the sea beyond.

The tarmac path led from the rose garden, over the bridge, to the bandstand where it split, one way leading back up towards the reservoir, the other running down to the boating pond.

Between the rose garden and the bridge sat a squat Victorian tiled building divided down the middle, each half bearing its own small signpost with *Ladies* or *Gentlemen* painted in bright gold lettering on a black background. The building was set into a bank of thick shrubs bordering the park fence and the road which ran alongside it into town. The front of the building was edged with flower beds. Old people would stop to gossip with the gardeners, congratulating them on their efforts as they knelt among the blooms.

Large rhododendron bushes crowded the sides of the path where it approached the bridge so that its lattice of dark green metal ribs seemed like an extension of their foliage. The boy would slip between the leaves and disappear down to the shaded, bare earth under the bridge, hidden from sight, the muffled sounds of footfall and talk passing above him as – hunched and motionless and excited – he waited for the familiar dark grey outline of the fish to show, curving its big, lazy s in the flow. Sometimes it was alone, other times smaller fish crowded it, shuffling for position like courtiers round a king. On the days it didn't come, the boy would gaze into the shallows, scanning the promise of every inch until, beyond the shadow cast by bridge, the grey sky was mirrored in the calm surface, blinding his view, leaving him nothing but the stream eddying gently over the brown, sludge-covered pebbles in front of him and the odd bit of litter or leaf floating past.

#

Always the dirty, hanging stink of old pee as the boy entered, as if it had soaked into the bricks, like a cave where something had lived for so long that nothing could get rid of its memory. He waited till the quiet times in the afternoon, when the path was clear.

To the left of the entrance was a big porcelain urinal, divided along its length by six jutting porcelain ridges. The wall opposite the entrance was lined with sinks and a long, cracked mirror speckled with dark, fungus-shaped blotches. To the right of the entrance were two large lavatory cubicles. The drawing was inside the first one, on the partition wall between the two. She lay back, propped up on her elbows, staring directly out with her legs open. She wore a blouse, a skirt and shoes with high heels. The blouse was undone, and the skirt pulled up. She had no bra and no knickers. Her face was expressionless. She was drawn skilfully, her features and the folds of her clothes very detailed. Her hairstyle, too. The nipples stood out, darker than their heavy hanging breasts. The hair between her legs was black, clustered plentifully round the gaping, mollusc-like vertical lips. Directly beneath that, not quite touching her, a hole the size of a tennis ball had been gouged, about waist height from the ground. Some days it was blocked, stuffed with the cheap, shiny bog paper. Other times, it gaped open, and he could see the other loo beyond. If someone came in when he was gazing at her, he walked out quickly, looking at the ground till he got back under the bridge, where he'd close his eyes and see again the weight of her breasts and the creature hair between her legs.

#

He'd tried to catch the fish so many times. It moved so slowly he couldn't see how he'd miss. Gently lowering the net far behind its lazy curl, making sure his reflection never crossed its sight, he'd inch along, silent and soft, softly trying to keep from snagging on the pebbles or stirring up the green-brown sludge. If it did, the fish would be gone, leaving nothing where its dark, easy sway had been. The boy got so close sometimes that the lip of the net was no more than an inch from the tail before a flash of silver left the mesh full of the bridge's shadow. He set traps, his net deliberately buried under small pebbles where he knew the fish would come. Then he squatted, waiting with his hand on the long bamboo cane, motionless as a heron, for the slow, dark slide to glide closer and closer until he wrenched the net up and out, its gut bulging with pebbles, drops of green-brown sludge water silvering as they slid through the mesh to escape back into the stream. He caught other, littler ones: tiny gudgeon, minnows and baby roach. They danced like small change in the net before he killed them.

#

His friend Carl was older. His parents had divorced; he lived with his mum, but his father sent him expensive presents every birthday and Christmas. The year before he'd got a complete set of fishing tackle. He spent the weekends and summer evenings after school at the reservoir. The younger boy sat next to him for hours, watching Carl's float, waiting for its red tip to dip and bob, dip and bob and then judder down beneath the surface. He hadn't told Carl about the fish under the bridge.

Carl was the one who'd first showed him the drawing. Pointing between her legs, he said that, in real life, the hair there felt like a Brillo pad. Carl had a magazine he'd found in the wasteground near their houses. Dozens of naked women. Carl told the boy he'd show it to him in return for his pocket money, but when the boy told him he'd already spent it, Carl just shrugged. That was when he told Carl about the fish, how big it was. He said he'd show Carl where it was if Carl let him see the magazine. Carl said he might, *if* he caught the fish. Crouching under the bridge together, they waited till the big, dark form slid over the streambed. They watched it for a while, then Carl whispered to him to follow. They walked downstream, looking into the water all the time until Carl scrambled down the bank and picked up a stone, larger than all the rest, lying half out of the surface. When they got back, the fish was gone. They waited on their knees until the slow outline drifted back from the mirrored sky beyond the bridge, curling unhurriedly over to their side. When it was almost below them, Carl lifted the stone very slowly above his head, his eyes always on the shape below. He gave a sudden grunt and the bridge echoed with the splash that soaked their faces. "Fuck!" Carl spat into the empty, sludge-smear'd ripples, the squirt of his white gob flowing slowly away.

#

The following week, the boy gave Carl his pocket money. Carl took him to the wasteground and told him to wait while he fetched the magazine from his secret camp. When he got back, they sat against the inside of the hoarding and Carl opened the pages, showing him the first girl. Then he closed the magazine and told him he'd have to pay the same for each of the others. He said the others were better and that he'd save the best one of all till last.

#

It was a couple of weeks before the fish came again. Straight away, the boy saw the white spot on its back. It was swimming differently, too, tipped to one side, its movements not as smooth. The fish didn't move as he inched the net closer until, jerking his arm forward and up, he lifted its sudden weight above the surface. On the bank, the fish flapped weakly a couple of times then lay still on the fine green mesh, so big that its head and tail spilled over the metal lip, its mouth opening and closing. The boy could see more white spots on it now, and red-brown

patches where some silver scales were missing on its sides. He'd seen dead fish in the reservoir before with white spots on them, their eyes milky, their bodies curved over as they bobbed among the weed and litter near the water's edge.

Nothing happened. It just lay there, gasping. After a while, he lowered the net back into the water, but the fish didn't move. He had to turn the net over, moving it back and forth till the fish flopped out. It swam weakly for a bit then tipped, one silver side rising up, its mouth still opening and closing at the surface, its motionless eye staring at the underside of the bridge as the current span it gently round. It pulsed once, dimpling the water, then lay still, carried slowly downstream. The boy followed it, leaving the bridge behind him, keeping pace with the still, shining form as it drifted and turned on the surface. He stopped by the fence at the end of the park and watched its silver form disappear slowly into the darkness beneath the road.

He walked back to the bridge. Crouching on the bank, he put the net into the water and shook it, a couple of tiny bright scales floating away. Then he laid the net on the bank beside him. There was nothing in the shaded water now but the brown, sludge-covered bumps of the stones crowding the empty bed. He looked upstream, to where the mirrored sky began on the flat surface. He stared hard, as if something might come from it, a dark form gliding through the water towards him. He kept staring.

When he turned, a man was standing on the bank near the bridge, hidden from the path by the bushes. He wore a dark green coat, black trousers and shoes. His hand was moving under his coat and it was a moment before the boy saw, between the coat flaps, the clenched fist jabbing backwards and forwards, getting faster, blurring round the swollen tip that jutted from it as the man's breath, too, speeded up, forced out in gasps.

"You know this," he said to the boy in a rasping whisper. "You know this, don't you?"

## **Meredith**

**Zach Keali'i Murphy**

Each night, Meredith places her husband's blue terry cloth robe next to her in the bed. Before she turns off the dusty bedside lamp and drifts into her dreams, she drapes the robe's fraying sleeve across her body, hoping to feel a faint embrace, if just for a fleeting second. When she wakes in the morning, sometimes she smells the aroma of dark roast coffee wafting into her bedroom. As she journeys downstairs, the steps creek like her bones. She looks into the kitchen and it's always empty. Maybe the aroma has lingered in the tattered walls. The walls hold a lot of history. Or maybe the aroma has lingered in her head. Her head holds a lot of memories. She keeps the windows closed during the day, even when the temperatures are sultry. This makes it easier to feel a desperate breeze. The house is over a century old, so she realizes it's no stranger to witnessing drafts. At dinner time, she swears she sees the tablecloth move every once and a while, especially on the nights when she cooks her husband's most cherished meal of beef stroganoff, garlic potatoes, and red peppers. She knows that your eyes can play tricks on you, but she'd rather not blame her cataracts. After the sun sets, the same routine begins. Some people fear ghosts, but Meredith fears missing out on what could have been. Time is an excruciating toothache when it doesn't give you what you long for. Meredith learns that moving forward is even harder when you want to be haunted by the past.

## Life in B-flat Minor

Sharon Lopez Mooney

*In all this sand*

we walk in the sand listening to words  
of broken glass pass between us  
picking up each piece cautiously you  
make designs to satisfy yourself  
my hand offered soft side up palm open  
each jagged piece spoken carefully random  
not caring you place a pattern to it  
the stinging slivers of sound  
on my flesh too small to see,  
you rub my skin, say I am too sensitive  
I shape a sharp question with my mouth  
you reach in taking it with your thumb and finger,  
exposing no delicate underside to me  
you lay in your own tender hand  
my threatening words  
pressing your fingers close around them  
they cut your fleshy palm  
draw a dramatic trickle of blood

I begin to no longer care,  
you say none of it matters  
your hands are tough from work  
not to worry  
we leave no footprints

## Talking with the redwoods

You, who together, nourish each other  
beyond seeming death  
through complex weavings  
in meshworks  
of roots feeding continually  
over hundreds of years  
until new growth finally blooms,  
how do you recover  
from the obsessive embrace of fire  
that engulfs so intensely  
so voraciously it threatens to the core?  
How does that fixation of flame so powerful  
crumble your beauty into ashes  
bend your shape into gargoyles  
and still you remain upright?  
How do you survive  
an appetite so fiercely overwhelming  
it threatens your connection,  
even to your precious roots,  
your invisible ties to family  
lying sheltered underground?  
How is it that whole communities  
of you, redwoods, in spite  
of near catastrophe  
continue still?



## Be careful with silence

walls open  
floors become liquid  
pulse softens  
ears purify

when my skin no longer responds  
to the anxiousness of air  
and my feet glide on the texture of now  
the cosmos listens  
and there is possibility

eyes swallow rivers  
fears become ash  
ears consume stars  
lips exhale hope

when my heartbeat tunes itself  
to the rhythm of the land  
i recognize scents of opportunity  
released through each exhale  
and there is hope

## Prostrate

He cleaned house in every corner  
leaving no dust, no future,  
moving out memories  
stealing futures  
changing everything forever  
once emptied  
we were abandoned for riper fruit.  
When Death finished  
there was not a scent of our beloved man,  
our smoker, our black coffee drinker,  
we could not remember his voice,  
even whether he'd cut his beard,  
i still was a mother but  
could not save my children,  
sapling adults from  
the scar  
of his fingerprint  
on their hearts  
and the rupture of their lives.

## The hills remember

The winter green ocean of hills  
receives rain heavily exhaled from the north  
casting a lush stage for my winter holiday  
in the shadows of northern california

a whispered promise of love wafts  
on my inhale of fecund air  
and pulses back out my pores  
chaffing my heart's memories

his voice, never finished the words  
of deep music that resonated in empty tones,  
illusory visits and promises of intimacy  
long past overdue are about to expire

and yet a hint of hope breaks behind the hills

walking companion

walking alone sad crisp sunlight  
folds across my shoulders  
Your grace opens to me  
in the ancient pine's bow  
i feel Your broad stretch  
fold around me with affection,  
hefty loden green branches  
gracefully transmit Your closeness,  
rings of stout trunks  
mark Your finite presence,  
pine's thirty foot reach  
exclaims Your bounty  
the elegant whisper of beyond  
gives a deep laugh at the clouds  
i relinquish  
am no longer alone

## Abruption

Reed Kuehn

Twenty-three weeks is early, someone murmurs. The nurses do their best to calm me, but frenetic energy belies their professional demeanor. I close my eyes, overwhelmed by the chaos of change in the few hours since the blood and pain and David rushing me to the hospital.

Scrubs and white coats come and go, their movement and speech so fast I have a hard time keeping track. The obstetrician isn't mine. He's the on-call guy and seems fine; tired, though. He says it's a placental abruption, a true emergency. There's a fellow here now talking about my baby going to the NICU. She fires off a litany of potentials, like "surfing" the baby and intubation. She continues chattering alongside the gurney as I'm wheeled to the operating room. I nod reflexively at the seemingly appropriate times.

They transfer me to a freezing table. I'm staring up at a ceiling of blinding lights. Everyone is wearing gowns, including David, who's been seated in the corner, too far away to hold my hand. The anesthetist stands above my head and is speaking to the doctor, who I can't see over the curtain draped across my chest.

The fellow is in the corner with a scrub-clad group, huddled around a piece of equipment with a large plastic cover. I feel pressure in my belly but no pain, so I keep my head facing the group in the corner, thinking they'll be the ones to take care of Kieran. Will he cry? I hope he cries. Tears stream down my cheeks, soaking the bed linen and my hair. The anesthetist wipes them away with a tissue and whispers in my ear, telling me that everything is going fine.

Another gown joins the corner group. The ponytail suggests it's a woman, and she's important because the others stand aside. She nods at the fellow, which I take to mean they're talking, but there is so much noise I can't hear anything. The senior person turns to face me, and the immensity of her pregnant stomach is startling, almost comical.

The pregnant one and the fellow move out of my line of sight. I ask what's happening, and the anesthetist is in my ear again and says they're delivering my baby right now. I try to sit up, my arms tugging against the restraints. The obstetrician shouts something about me keeping still and tells the anesthetist to take care of it.

My vision swims, and my muscles relax despite protest. Hands cradle my head back to the pillow facing the corner where the pregnant one and the fellow crowd around the contraption I saw earlier. They hunch over whom I assume is Kieran. I feel a kiss on my temple, and it must be David. I recognize his voice, but the words are muted, like he's speaking underwater. I hold the image of the doctors and nurses caring for my baby but the world blurs.

I wake, sitting halfway up in bed. The room is dim, unlike the operating room, but my memory is foggy, untrustworthy. A nurse I don't recognize offers me ice chips. I ask where my husband and baby are, and she tells me they're in the NICU. She doesn't provide information on Kieran's status, but he's alive, or David would be here. My body feels strange, foreign. My toes tent up the sheet and blanket. I tell them to move, but they don't.

A resident and a white-coated herd appear at my bedside. They barrage me with questions. I try to answer. *No, I'm not in pain. Yes, I'm nauseous.* One lifts the sheet and presses on my belly. I ask about my baby, but they're the medical team for me, not him, and I'm doing fine. They nod in turn and leave.

My brain clears, the world returns, and David is beside me. He takes my hand and says Kieran is alive but is having a rough go of it. They intubated him and needed to insert things called umbilical lines. The doctor will tell us more after they run tests. I ask him if the doctor is the pregnant one. David must sense my apprehension. He tells me she seems like she knows what she's doing.

The exhaustion returns, and I fight because I want to know more, but my eyes close of their own volition. I imagine Kieran in the hospital, enclosed in a plastic bubble, tubes coming out of him, fighting to live, and I reach for him, telling him I want to be there with him, that he has to stay with us.

I wake up facing windows; I've lost track of how many rooms I've been in. Dawn's first greys streak the sky. My toes move now, and my stomach hurts. The smell of coffee tickles my nose. It's been months.

Another nurse tells me David is in the NICU. She helps me shuffle to the bathroom on jellied legs. I nearly slip and steady myself with one hand while the other instinctively goes to my stomach. I pass dark clots. The nurse offers encouraging words about my progress while helping me back to bed.

David returns with the pregnant doctor and fellow in tow. The fellow stands in the corner, and the pregnant one sits to my left, her swollen abdomen level with my eyes. I stare at the wall while she talks about Kieran, the difficulties he's facing, and what may come. She says a lot of big words. Retinopathy of prematurity. Bronchopulmonary dysplasia. Intraventricular hemorrhage. Necrotizing enterocolitis. Sepsis. If he survives those, he faces a host of physical and mental developmental delays, if not outright deficiencies. The words keep coming, but they jumble in my head.

*Twenty-three weeks is very early, she says.*

## Stoplight

Her blond ponytail cinched at the nape of her neck dips below a wool houndstooth fedora sitting low on her brow, as low as she sits in the bucket of the Mini-Cooper, top down, brass backseat rollbars acting as headrests for passengers who couldn't fit there. Jaques said, *All the world's a stage*, and she's riding to her fifteen minutes of fame: fuschia scarf, French tips.

I'm in the next lane. We both wait for the light. She adjusts her sunglasses. I adjust mine. Her car rocks back and forth with the anticipation of manual transmission. Her hand hasn't left the stick shift. I'm steady on automatic. She lights a smoke just as the light turns green, then drops a lit match to the roadway. The muffler bluster of her starts off first—the plan since junior-high.

## **Delusion**

This wasn't the first time Dara asked herself whether shame could drive a person into madness. She'd found him—her brother at his new address. Quite by accident. Just driving by. She recognized his rusting, teal-colored pick-up. Pulled in over crushed gravel that packed tighter beneath her tires.

Donnie dropped his head onto its hood and sobbed. He had plans—add a shower stall, toilet, kitchen sink, insulate, paint the place. Turn this shed into a cozy one-room—quilt on the bed, repair shop out back. But he hadn't, and he wouldn't, and they knew it.

Windowless. No fridge. A microwave run by electric stolen from the neighbor. With her knuckles pressed against her lips, Dara listened to his strategy as a loaded dump truck groaned down the narrow road. The plywood shuddered. They witnessed roofing timber tremors.



## Interrogation

For as many times as she'd watched *Law and Order*, you'd think Chickie would know how it felt to be handcuffed in a police station accused of being in the wrong place at the wrong time. But she's not sure whether to be scared or relieved—at least here, she's somewhere.

The cop with the blue eyes leans toward her across the steel table. You know the stance. *What have you been doing with your one wild and precious life?* She tells him she tried to brush on mascara but nearly blinded herself. Now she wears sunglasses. She tells him she can name every freshwater fish in the Weekanaquag River. There are thirty-eight species. She can say 'Weekanaquag'.

He's not impressed, and when she looks up again, the cop's dressed in a black cassock with the white collar of a priest. A confessional screen separates the two of them. Wrong place—wrong time. Scared—relieved. Wild—precious. Law—order. Her life—thirty-eight different fish going in different directions.

## Sun, Frost and Snow

I can see her as **she moves**  
through the shapes and colors

actually she's **dancing**

with lines that are  
soft and jagged

there's a field **in the hills**

where the valley deepens  
and a house in the distance

that looks like a large animal **sleeping**

with little slits for eyes  
the summer sun is blazing

in this part of France **and**

that's why

the windows are **squinting**

This painting is a composite of Vivi's memories, and also a vision of something beyond. It's something like what she would draw as a child, long before she knew pastels and gouache. Once upon a time, her parents gave her a book about a child that gets a clump of coal in the stocking for Christmas. She spent that winter with her little hands in socks making marionettes. She sewed buttons on for faces and then she made them dance and sing. That's when she first dreamed of running away.

The first escape happened one day in the middle of the 1960's when the family had come back to France after years of following her industrial engineer father all over the globe. Vivi was barely older than her teens and had fled hoping to join an experimental dance group in Germany. She was hitchhiking near a dark forest and next thing she knew she was in a mental asylum in the south of France. Her parents had put her there saying it would do her good – that she would become less eccentric – that she would learn to conform.

During the time in the asylum they fed her almost nothing but sleeping pills. She would scrape her fingers against the walls of her bedroom at night and when she opened the drawers of her dresser, little figurines would come marching out. Vivi spent hours drawing these things or just staring at a blank white page, until one day she drew the plan to sneak out and onto a train back to Paris. That was her second escape.

But as soon as she got back home she realized that ending up back in her parent's home could never be a viable plan. Late at night she would plead with her father "But what have I done wrong?" "Why do I always feel as if I'm being punished?" And her father would throw answers back at her with a stern face saying she'd have to sleep in the kitchen and do the washing and cleaning to earn her keep. The next escape happened soon after this.

She had been sewing, it was night and they were at the country house. She pricked her finger and while washing off the blood, she fell down into a well. In the morning she woke up in a little cottage at the edge of the grounds. It was abandoned by the family, the grass was tall, apples were rotting on the trees and bread loaves were burning in the still lighted embers of the old ovens. They had always said they believed a strange woman lived in that house, though no one had ever actually seen her. The family legend was that her silhouette would appear at the cottage window sometimes when it snowed.

Vivi was grateful for the chance to live in this place. She painted and sculpted and danced there. She held workshops and artists came from far away. One of them was a handsome actor who rode in on horseback one day with the brashness of someone who was convinced

he belonged there with her forever. Together they gathered fruit from the orchard, and scattered dust and ashes to make the ground fertile again. They farmed the land around the cottage and regularly brought treats up to the big house. They repaired all that was broken and Vivi's family was delighted to see her so happy for once. But then the summer ended and one day the man died. She received little sympathy from her family. "What's to become of you now?" they said.

**The weather** grew bitterly **cold**  
as Vivi prepared the cottage for the chill  
shaking bed quilts and pillows  
so **hard**  
that feathers flew  
all around  
and it began to **snow**  
not only outside  
but inside the house  
where with a heavy **frozen heart**  
she finally lay in the soft blankets  
and slept in  
lots of **scattered plumage**  
until before the dawn  
there was a loud knock, knock  
at **the thick wooden door**  
which opened with  
gusts of wind  
throughout the cottage as **beyond, she saw**  
a glacier that extended into the night  
and  
left **a trail ...**  
of snowflakes that glittered  
even on  
her eyelashes, **diamond beams**

that looked out as far as she had ever seen  
and blinked  
just **before the ice**  
and all the snow  
had time to melt  
but simply **disappeared**

The very next day Vivi painted a farmhouse on a hill, where she would soon go and live. The brush strokes guided her as she visualized a place far away from all the sorrow of her past - a place with sun and snow, but also love and fertile land. Soon after, she brought apples, bread buns and honey to the big house for her parents. Before leaving she said, "I think I met that woman that shows up sometimes when it snows." They nodded, perplexed, not knowing what to say and robotically waved good-bye as she made her final escape.

Recently, I saw Vivi at an art show in Paris. I can still see her moving around the room with cheerful pink lipstick and sunny blond hair curling onto her shoulders. I stand by the painting of the farmhouse with its stucco walls like tanned skin, a little mouth and eyes. She tells me it's her new home. It's a community of artists in the south of France where they take care of the land and also one another. "The painting's called Kairos, like the community itself" she says with a smile.

**I ask** her if Kairos means **anything**  
and she says laughing  
**"Oh yes!**  
It's an ancient word in Greek  
that means something like

**"Now or never,**  
here and  
**now"**

## STORMY WATERS

A few weeks ago Noah and I were walking by the bay and there was a sailboat anchored near the edge of the water that was tipped over onto its side. It was a 40 foot sloop that looked run down. The exposed part of the hull was dirty and reminded me of a bathtub that hadn't been scrubbed in a long while. We wondered if the owners were aware of what had happened to their ship. It seemed vulnerable to us like a sea lion waiting for the tide to come back up after too long basking in the hot sun. The picture made us feel melancholy as we walked along the edge of the bay that day.

For a while everyone had been feeling nervous about the slowly deepening drought. There hadn't been rain for over 6 months here in California so the tide was much lower than usual. In this part of the bay where there's a mixture of salt and freshwater coming off the mountains, the water was beginning to look stagnant and murky after so many months without rainfall. Noah and I were both shocked the last time we'd walked over by the dam on the mountain side of town. The water was so low there that much of the root system of the plants and trees was exposed. A ranger told us it was at about 30%. He said that a lot of people were not willing to take the necessary steps toward conservation. Over by the bay the boat we had seen looked as if it had been carelessly moored and Noah kept talking about how the owners should think more about where they throw down the anchor and also that they should take more care to keep the hull clean. He said the hull is easy to forget about because it's on the shadow side of the ship, but the hull is where the vessel's integrity lies.

He mumbled something about how careless people can be and then started talking about how his father had abandoned the family when he and his sisters were still young. I learned he had been abusive and had mental health issues that exposed Noah, his sisters and his mom to danger and insecurity throughout those early years. He said his father had tried to make it up to him when he was older by taking him sailing and teaching him about boats. But by the time he was a teenager it was too late as far as Noah was concerned, the damage had already been done. « Anyway... » he said and his voice trailed off...His voice always trails off when he speaks about his father. He seems to speak about his father mostly when he's around boats.

##

When we walk by the boats Noah becomes talkative and often tells stories about his time in Alaska when he was a young man in his twenties. He tells me about his time working on fishing boats up there. He says he'd met some of the most horrible and most wonderful people while fishing in Alaska. He said most of the guys that would come up to Alaska for work from further south loved drinking and got into fights whenever they could. There were few women and most of the nice guys were the ones from native tribes, mostly Tlingit. They avoided hanging around on the boats and would go back home every chance they got. Even today if you ask Noah what languages he speaks he'll tell you English, but also a little Tlingit. He says it with a smile because actually he speaks no Tlingit at all, but what he means is he would like to.

He says their language is the most beautiful in the world and that it sounds like birds flying, fish swimming, brown bears running, like the forest and the tides. "It's a nature language. They're nature people." he says. But ten years of dredging up salmon, halibut and king crab taught him nothing, he adds jokingly, except that the water in Alaska is freezing cold. The fact is, he would always feel gratitude to the Tlingit people for having opened his eyes to so much beauty. He decided he had to quit that job on the trawlers one stormy night when he got the short end of the stick and had to drive the boat over the waves as they were all wondering if they'd make it through alive.

During those years fishing he began spending more and more time with his native friends and that's how he learned something about « real » fishing, courage and respect for others and nature. He said these people were always telling stories. One day a friend of his told him a story about shadows. The friend said that shadows had been invented as a way to stay in touch with the hereafter. They give us a picture of where we're coming from and allow us also to see where the light is going.

He told Noah about how he'd once helped out one of the younger seasonal workers that was having a hard time managing money. This nice guy had even invited the poor worker to come and stay with his family for a while and eat their food. He told Noah the young man just left one day without saying good-bye -- never said he'd pay him back or even thank you. He just disappeared -- didn't even leave a shadow.

Noah said that's like what his dad had done in the early years. And then there was a long period of little or no contact. He was telling me these stories in bits and pieces and especially when we'd pass the tilting boat. Then one day it started raining. It was the first rainfall in about 6 months and it was much heavier than usual. It lasted for several days and ended with a big

storm that left over 9 inches of water all around the bay where we live. People were grateful it had put out the wildfires and raised the water levels, but it also left a lot of debris and flooding.

##

During the nights of rain there was commotion in the air and Noah had dreams. In them he was playing an ancient board game called Go. He was at the old café in San Francisco where he'd played a lot as a young man before going to Alaska. He couldn't see his adversary in the dream because he was so focused on the board, but he told me later it didn't matter because "Go", he said, "is really a game you play against yourself. It's as if you're playing with both your shadow and the light." He told me many things about Go and how it's played with an adversary – but there's never a battle. You build, but you don't destroy. And you play with rocks – making moves and reconfiguring rock by rock, as the board is changing.

The second night he fell asleep and dreamed again of Go. He picked up the game exactly where he'd left off the night before. But this time there was water in the room and it was rising over the pieces. Noah worked quickly in his dream to make his moves, trying to stay very calm but so concentrated that he could see the big picture and all the details before the submerged pieces would disappear altogether.

On the third night he dreamt again of Go and once again picked up the game where he'd left it the night before. But this time the water had disappeared and the old pieces now emerged in a new way, but also with clearly recognizable elements from the previous time. He realized it was like seeing the shadow of the other board but with an entirely new perspective. When he woke up he wondered if reading tea leaves or runes wasn't in some way the same. Depending on how you look, you see light and dark patches moving. If you have great concentration you can even sense the presence of water, earth, metal and wind making the picture come alive and full of possibility or else constricted and enclosed. It's a matter of moving the rocks while also observing how they change.

He told me about these dreams once it had stopped raining and we were walking by the bay again some days later. We noticed the sailboat was now standing, but couldn't shake off the picture of it leaning over as before. And we knew that the bay would always be marked in our minds by that boat that had seemed so abandoned before the storm.

That day Noah told me he'd finally learned as a teenager about his father's traumatic past fighting for the Americans as a Jew in Germany during World War II. He had learned of his



father's death after he'd already come back from Alaska and that his father had been awarded a purple heart only after he was already dead and that he died without ever having spoken to his children about being taken POW by the Nazis, being tortured, forced to walk through the snow in terrible conditions of starvation in one of the coldest and most miserable winters in European history. He hadn't learned this from his father. There had never been a reckoning or even a good-bye.

Noah had learned so much so late and from other sources. All he knew of the cold was that one day he had jumped off the ship in Alaska as a playful challenge with himself to swim in the cold. The Tlingits did it all the time all the time but he wanted to see what it was like for himself. He says the second his body hit the water he saw his life flash before his eyes and scrambled like he was on fire back into the boat. That was the day he really knew he would soon be leaving Alaska -- maybe go back to school, to San Francisco or maybe take up playing Go again. However it would be, after that swim it was time to reconfigure the stones and move on.

##

And there he was just the other day walking, years later, in the very northern part of the San Francisco bay thinking about the sailboat that had tipped over and about his dad. Now after all the rain and with the high tide the boat was floating evenly with a tall mast standing vertically and all of its shiny parts were gleaming in the after storm sun. The little buoy bells were ringing softly in the light wind. And he realized what a difference it made to walk over there with the new tide, after a good heavy rain and in the sunshine.

There's also a lot of debris floating around after flooding. People feel relieved it's over and then they need to deal with what's left all around. There's fear and also reaching out to one another. A neighbor who lives at the property Noah manages said just the other day that he didn't like Wednesdays anymore. He told Noah jokingly that bad things always happen to him on Wednesdays. The rain had started on a Wednesday. Noah said, "Well you know what? We just won't have Wednesdays here at the property anymore " It was his way of saying he'd always do what it takes to keep the boat sailing and clean.

After the storm things at the property were very messy. The elevator shaft needed a complete gutting and a tree had fallen down. Noah worked so hard he gave the impression he was about to put everyone he could find onto a boat and sail away to a place where there

would be no Wednesdays, destruction or cruelty. Noah would want his boat to be spick and span in the sunshine.

He doesn't have time for Go these days, but he often talks about how if he were to take it up again he wouldn't start with an entirely new board. He says it depends on how much you've already played. "Even if you start a game with no pieces on the board, you always show up with your shadow," he says "And that's how you feel confident you'll see where there's light and where to move". That was recently when we were walking by the bay. Noah also told me how much he'd like to go back and visit his friends in Alaska one day. He said he'd love to go canoeing with them over there some time, tell each other stories or just watch the ripple of the currents moving over rocks, filling empty spaces, making little waves upon the water.

## COMING HOME

He died on the commuter train  
her husband I mean  
my best friend's husband  
coming home for dinner, he died  
riding from Penn Station to Ossining  
reading the *Daily News*  
he died  
her kids were with me  
building Lincoln Logs  
arguing over Legos  
cookie crumbs scattered on the carpet  
she called to tell me  
I took her kids to her  
three-year-old Lisa, her face full of laughter  
five-year-old Steven, already a frowning philosopher  
she was at her kitchen table  
staring gaunt-eyed into space  
sipping a half-empty glass of scotch  
I bathed them, laughing at their bubble beards  
and mustaches, wearing an everything-is-OK smile  
but she insisted on reading the bedtime story  
Steven picked *Little Bear*  
and my friend read every word  
I willed her to skip pages  
to skip chapters, no need for every word, not tonight  
no, especially not tonight  
she read slowly, showing them the pictures  
I watched her keeping him alive.

## JEALOUSY

I am not a jealous person. No, not me. I don't covet my neighbor's brand-new solar Tesla that can parallel park perfectly. Nor do I want my sister's credit card to be hacked because she won a poetry contest with a saccharine poem and I didn't even place. Only a one-line computer-generated note saying don't bother to submit again.

But I am green as a Sheep Leaf Sea Slug watching those who believe in a divine being, an afterlife and cosmic justice. They are the lucky ones, whether Buddhist, Christian, Jewish or Muslim. Those who believe there is a god or gods up there somewhere, or maybe everywhere. Someone who listens. Who actually cares.

Sometimes I look over the fence at people on their way to church, to temple, to a mosque and wish I lived on the other side. So much easier to shuffle off this mortal coil knowing there were many wonders still ahead. Reincarnation, temple virgins, streets of gold. No dust to dust. No slimy worms nibbling cold skin.

So why not be baptized, bat mitzvahed or take the Bodhisattva vow to save all beings. What to lose except a few hours on Saturdays or Sundays, missing a football game or two. What of sore knees five times a day on a prayer mat, trying to figure out where Mecca is. Or sitting on a cushion for days on end, staring at a wall. What of listening to hours of tedious sermons and singing or chanting in Sanskrit or Hebrew or Arabic. I breathe a sigh of relief, realizing I am not a jealous person after all.

But I would like a brand-new Ultra-Red Tesla. And a prestigious first place poetry prize.

## EXITING GODS

And the gods departed  
exiting stage left  
hauling tarnished halos and tattered suitcases  
white robes tangling and tearing  
on unwieldy rose bushes  
stopping every now and then  
stalling for time  
taking furtive glances  
at their once glistening thrones  
at the months and years of being revered  
by puny mortals who once believed  
hearing the last plaintive notes of hymns  
celebrating their existence  
*Joyful, joyful we adore thee*  
while louring cherubim  
fill out unemployment forms  
fingering the few coins in their pockets  
and a gaggle of dope-fogged seraphim  
slouch on the stoops

We are left with empty heavens  
a *for rent* sign wobbling in the breeze  
but no takers for the miles of pigweed  
the acres of poison sumac  
no more of that water to wine stuff  
no rachitic bones rising from the dead  
relieved to turn back to our own lives  
with their white lies and worn loves  
no worries about hell's barbeques  
smoke singeing, Satan gloating  
no worries about smug Saint Peter  
shaking his hoary head  
although sometimes on late afternoons  
as dusk creeps over the hollyhock, the hyacinth  
and silence settles the land  
we find ourselves humming *Amazing Grace*  
turning the tissue pages of *Saint Matthew*  
*I am with you always*  
wiping wayward tears

## AIRPORTS

I want to live in an airport  
simply take all my stuff and move into an airport  
no rent, no mortgage  
no property tax, no utility bills, no clocks  
no need argue with dandelions or crabgrass  
I love watching adrenalized toddlers finally fall  
asleep on exhausted parents' laps  
or seeing old ladies with wobbly white heads  
still smiling, despite walkers and wheelchairs

And the dudes, oh yes, the dudes, studding up  
and down in black tees and leather jackets  
checking their reflections in store windows  
I love sitting on a plastic chair  
with no responsibility  
time to read *The Washington Post*  
to find out what I think  
time to paint my raggedy nails *Pixel Pink*  
and pretend I am a lady of luxury

I keep my suitcases close by so  
they won't be labeled "unattended"  
and "subject to search, seizure and ruination"  
I snack on turkey sandwiches and pepperoni pizza  
mediocre at best, but no cooking, no dishes  
no guilt stepping on a sticky kitchen floor  
or seeing mounds of laundry looking reproachful  
I wander over to Peets for a vanilla latte  
before I return to reading *Wild and Wicked*

Cheering for Stella who has a habit  
of murdering men who wear backward baseball caps  
and spend days in bars drinking bargain beer  
she heaves their headless bodies over bridges  
their wives barely notice  
too busy cooking and cleaning and scraping by  
perhaps dreaming of airports, like me  
but I have plenty of time to enjoy my book  
my flight isn't till next Tuesday.

## HEAR YE, HEAR YE!

Have you heard?  
god's turned atheist  
no longer going to church  
singing hymns of praise to himself  
*joyful, joyful we adore me*  
no longer performing miracles  
walking on water, raising the dead in their filthy shrouds  
feeding five thousand with a few scrawny fish

No longer weeding the garden left fallow  
since that couple left muttering  
about wormy apples & a witless snake  
the pearly gates no longer polished  
Saint Peter working on his tan  
somewhere in the Seychelles  
seraphim flown south with  
finches & swallows

God slumping about heaven  
with stiff knees and a pot-bellied heart  
looking slightly crazed  
by the world he created  
hubris to think six days was enough  
no longer answering  
the calls of desperate disciples  
only a scratchy recording  
*this number is no longer in service*

## TOASTER

My toaster died this morning.

Just before a slice of whole wheat toast with peanut butter. Just before heading out to my dead end job at Chewy Call Center. I fiddled & faddled with gobs of cords & knobs, but no luck. I admit I cussed & cursed as I flung it on the floor. Off to Amazon where over two hundred toasters were listed, ranging from \$17.50 to \$449.98. They all make toast. Just toast. No roast chicken. No macaroni & cheese. I spent five hours choosing one. I will be late for my dead end job. My boss will dock my measly, peasley pay. I picked a pastel pink toaster that cost \$22.37. It arrives in a huge box with no directions, but a recommended YouTube video. The video is twenty-eight minutes long. A sexy twenty-something, blonde with perfect teeth explains how to plug it in, how to put toast in, how to eject the toast & how not to take it in the shower or stab a coil to retrieve refractory toast. She suggests we unplug it if smoke spews & sparks. She is wearing a Versace black silk minidress, not stressed & strained sweats.

I want her job.



## CLYTEMNESTRA

*Who shall tear the curse from their blood?*  
*Oresteia* by Aeschylus

Blood. so much. blood.  
cloak soaked. red. red.  
hands slipping.  
knife slipping.  
heart flailing slakeless fury.  
stabbing. three  
times stabbing.  
the body. I once  
loved. the man. I once  
lay with. now helpless.  
in the bath.

. . .

We traveled to Aulis, my daughter and I  
bumping along in an uncomfortable cart,  
*sing sorrow, sorrow*  
filled with trunk loads of linen garments suitable  
for a royal bride. she eager to marry the fearless Achilles,  
the husband her father had chosen.

I didn't know  
of Artemis' anger,  
the slain stag staining her sacred forest.  
I didn't know  
of winds that wouldn't blow.  
I knew nothing  
of the sacrificial altar,  
or the throat-slitting knife hidden in his tunic.

Ten years nurturing rage,  
my daughter slaughtered like a goat.  
What blame to take a lover to my desolate bed  
while men's dark actions destroy a city.  
Ten years of killing, raping, enslaving,  
all for a boy's war, a beautiful woman.

Agamemnon strutting on a purple carpet  
as the people of Argos cheered,  
bowing to their triumphant lord.  
    *sing sorrow, sorrow*  
then he went. to his bath.  
where. I was. waiting.

Chorus:  
What is that shadow we see?  
Is that a mother pleading for pity  
as her son approaches?  
    *who shall tear the curse from their blood?*

## GOOD TIMES WITH MOTHER

I wanted to write a poem about the good times,  
the flashes of light  
in murky shadows.

### FAMILY TENNIS ON A CRISP APRIL DAY

My mother's rule: first one in.  
Wearing in a full length winter wool coat  
she served five balls in a row,  
none of them even close.  
Then five more, two over the fence.  
My mother started laughing hysterically,  
hitting balls right and left, regardless,  
announcing she was setting a world record.  
My father's face was frowned in fury,  
as he fumed off the court. At first  
us girls thought it was pretty funny.  
(Until the forty-fifth attempt when it was pitch black.)

### CHOCOLATE EMERGENCY WHILE SHOPPING

A sudden urge for milk chocolate.  
An emergency. What fun! Important  
as writing wish lists to Santa or  
searching for dimes when a tooth fell out.  
We left our wrinkled outfits on the floor  
of Wanamaker's dressing room, trailed  
our mother to the nearest drug store  
and sat on the sidewalk smack in the middle  
of downtown Philadelphia. Our mother gobbling  
Whitman's, licking her fingers. We nibbled  
chocolate clusters by her side.  
(People stared. We looked away.)

## MAGNUS CRAFT CHRISTMAS CATALOG

We picked Christmas gifts to paint  
for Uncle John, Aunt Peg, Granny, Grandpa, Nana  
and assorted cousins. The four of us kids  
choosing tiles, ash trays, coffee cups, coasters,  
hot plates and paperweights.  
Our mother ordered them all.  
A huge box arrived, with over forty art projects  
along with scads of tiny jars of paint.  
We fought over whose was whose,  
punching and pulling hair like a band of barbarians.  
(My mother blitzed-out in bed  
surrounded by bottles of Jim Beam.)

What keeps happening to this poem?  
There were good times.  
I know there were.  
There must have been.

## RAGE

Do you know about the Pacific Tree Frog?  
Not only is it the state amphibian of Washington  
(an astonishing honor given the fierce competition),  
but it can change from green to brown and even yellow  
blending into the background, not rocking the proverbial boat.

I have decided to remove rage from my repertoire.  
Too disruptive, too divisive, too attention-getting  
and I desperately need the few friends I have left.  
Rage has been riding shotgun since  
first grade when I slapped Phyllis in the face  
for stealing my pink barrette and told her  
she looked like a pointless pig and her mother called  
my mother and she never came over again.  
I blew at my new boss last week for expecting me  
to work overtime again, missing *Magnum P.I.*  
I yelled at my husband for eating the last slice of strudel  
and we spent a glacial afternoon in separate rooms.

I am now beta testing an unflappable self,  
smiling serenely when someone cuts in line,  
deep breathing when Cathy forgets my birthday,  
sounding sympathetic when my sister cancels lunch,  
inserting a funny joke rather than filing another grudge.  
But I can't sleep at night. Dreadful dreams  
of ax murderers and serial killers, a virtual reservoir  
of rage building like a volcano. Not a chance of changing  
color to a calmer shade. Not a chance of being voted  
the best of anything in this stupid two-bit state of California.  
I tried to be a Pacific Tree Frog.  
Please know I tried.

## MISSING YOU

A bag of Tate's lemon cookies  
along with some Kettle Chips  
how did they get in my cart  
I don't eat processed food  
must have been tossed in  
by an absent-minded past

Adrift in my life  
like an errant star  
wandering without an orbit  
luck-starved, fate battered  
bent and buckled  
my walls bouncing off walls  
since—

I take the chips and cookies home  
stare at them on the shelf  
reminding me of you munching away  
crumbs on the carpet  
me with a stiff-lipped righteousness  
saying sugar causes fatty livers

At times I feel I am living  
a posthumous life  
too slight for gravity to hold  
floating weightless  
all whiff and bluff  
like a harp with no strings  
a voice with no song

Last night, wandering the house  
in stained sweats and wool socks  
opening closets and cupboards  
I notice *Inciting Joy* on your desk  
tortoise glasses on top  
I touch the scotch tape on their frame

Then open the bright green bag of Tate's  
munch a few cookies with a cup  
of sweet chamomile tea  
I smile for the first time since—

and wonder what else I have missed  
while sharing a life with you

## Canto 7            Your Inexhaustible Image, My Dull Impoverished Past

I watched at the window, pregnant, my plump fingers gripping the ledge, as though guarding safe, all the unborn of the world, from the invasion of life’s tortuous divide, where death claws like the shredding dark, at dawn’s chrysalis barely spun. And yet, even when rearing and ready for fierceness, as all mothers are in protecting their young, even when stabbing at the dread eyes of death itself -- I feel another tugging, a deeper impulse, to make our souls a soaring over seascapes, wherein you arrive like a progeny of moths, rising moistened to the moan, from a beautiful quiet and a bountiful sleep.

Will I see you descend, a disturbance upon my soul, of that crisp arcadia called forth, from the enfeebled one receding? For there is a temple beyond the ledge, where the virgin priestesses tend fires of longing, to nurture the love-hungry hollow, that breaches and bridges *ad infinitum*. And so, infinity jolts again by your upstart life, too green, too ripe – an event “untimely ripp’d”, a potential form and ancient soul, looking backwards from heaven; or did the gods rise again, in a recycling of starlight, to this one heavy atom, fusing the passion of our solitary lives?

“Come tell, how shall we dance together – gracefully or ungainly?” Was our togetherness ever in doubt? Why does your inexhaustible image, still in the locking arms of night, spend itself on interleaving dreams, so radiant upon my dull impoverished past?

## Canto 87            I Provoked the Immigrant Workmen

When I was young, my short skirt provoked the immigrant workmen. Its seductive flutter, stealing their glances, cornering their notice, commanding their attention, was a capricious swish to their gleeful nudging, shoulder to shoulder in preparing my shame, signaling and pledging their unholy attraction, and howling at the lewdness, of my pantomimed disgrace.

Their interrupted work, caught a solitary streak of light, through clouds as grey as the grim foreclosure of their bricks, mounting identically, like an undivided mind – my skirt gingerly rising and succumbing to the lustful draft of a rainless wind.

And then I saw *her*, like the terrifying one, looking me up and down, and underneath – “that’s right, that’s right, accuse *me!*” -- the shrinking eyes of the blameless old woman, stone cold upon her spat Sicilian curse.

I see it all now. I was confessing to Him, or his priestly surrogate, only yesterday. But I didn’t understand what he really wanted – the evil of me to which he cleaved in secret – his ungreen envy of my incessant heart tug, between the smell of growth, from the mossy ground of my mother’s potted basil, and the murderous air, bearing up the wings of my enticing lace petticoat ...

– no more obvious symbols of my youthful bloom (now lost), and my inevitable fall (so complete).

## Canto 89

### The Player and Newton's Third Law

The player offers to throw the ball from across the field — a knuckle ball no less. Am I ready for the execution? I gape at the rebirth of hands and feet, flung out and recoiling from the wheel house of the torso, like planets reeling round the sun to fashion odd seasons -- strange rotations that play with the climates of time.

In this artist's legerdemain, I perceived a secret code that spelled out both the mystery of the eye to stay locked upon the ball, and to stay locked upon that stealing of hands, retracting the other way, in the obverse of release. I shuddered to see the hybrid of forces from the inside, behind which one could imagine the most magnificent agonies – a universal pattern packed with the fractured tracks of every demolished boundary. The dispelling breath that preceded the throw, helping to propel the ball, equally scattered half its force along more surreptitious lines, as if winding us back, by default, to the insight of a force ultimately belonging to no one and always too prodigious for its handler.

I made no response; I was standing-by, awkward, clumsy and shy, rendered inert by the arcing midday sun, spent by the spectacle – the very improbability of what it is to 'act' – needing now only to relieve this truth, to uncoil its spring, in the cool shadowed intimations of a sister hour, midnight moon, with her crouching persistent nightmares.

## Canto 117

### The Gods of Impending Blood-Sport

O' the pressure of the seconds passing, the anxious waiting upon a stalled red-light, making me this hollow of the stomach, strumming terror along in mounting reverberations, of confounding passages and dead-end streets.

I am late, my absence unaccounted, my delay forecasting a threatening fate. The slow unreality of my unravelling gravity transforms the timeless watcher, into dread memory stalking the other way — into surreal projection, stalking farther out of reach, but never stalking out of risk. The incessant lag of swirling time plays like an Aztec ritual, exalting the gods of impending blood-sport.\*

\*Note: this canto arose from a teenage memory of coming home late from a dance party, my strict Sicilian father fuming as he paced back and forth the length of our front porch.

## Canto 138

### The Hawk Imagined It was Once a Dog

Wings are tucked into torn flanks, cloistering the ethereal perfume of launch. In failure, I am grounded at the earthly crossroads, in dense grass where I heave to a plight, in brambled thickets which obscure, the interleaving lanes of life. In flight, I would have Sky any which way, low or high, and upside down, when night is day, and day is night, and feathery heaven has still to lay upon the earth, as the empyreal element of this frame -- its lightness still impending, its fire still attending, upon a *terra firma* torso.



But would it happen, if I spread my other wings – spirit reborn and swaddled in the cool lips of September morn -- that I could feel communion's longing for a newly minted symbol? Name after name would arise from the soft lark's trilling, composing the notable to a featherweight clarity, the lanky sum of the lowly dog exceeding itself, through the tautly whimpered whine, upwards to a pitch of screech, where the taloned hawk imagined it was once a ditch-pawed dog, air-fired on sanguine clay, and myself, the meagrest participant, in all this staggering creation.

## Canto 148

## The Spider's Medley

A spider web trembles in the rafters, shuddering to the organ's momentous note. A fine light glimmers and glammers along its thread, right down to the sub-atomic, quanta jumping in and out of gloom, gathering the spider's frantic activity, a pulsing dark devouring, a tricking of hidden prey out into open sunlight, for time's stealthy dash and hunger's silent death-wrap.

And what will be left to ignite you then – another Bach consumed by his own creative fervour, who caught a spark from rarest genius coursing past, granting brief fibril composition, to lonely, orbicular strife, to the dark web of the world, and its stealthy ensnaring stickiness? The cosmic arachnid is everywhere, assembling its creation, from the pulled threads of hope's despairing act.

And so, terrified horses burst the doors of their burning barn, their scattering manes on the edge of alarm, their furled lips, their rolling eyes, glinting light from streaming snuffed out stars, mounting panic through the rearing whinny, dread eruptions of the ragged throat – they sense the Black Widow's oscillation between the hunter and the hunt – and they flee, outstripping the organ's quavering last note.

## **The Must Grove**

**Ben Goodman**

Something thousand over evening, what  
makes it hang plum-blue. The new-bare  
trees pitch branches out like they wanna try them.  
They've got no mouths though, and so, as far  
as most are concerned, no wisdom. Me, I seem  
to take to them, which is to say they take me in  
as if they might convert me. So I must believe  
my way out of that growth. Shut tight the cabin door.  
The night tendering. I cut some light into her,  
some warmth. Feel the space that I am. Shelled here  
on wild-planet. I put the radio on. A murmur  
out from static. Track it down, let it clear.  
Nice to hear a voice sometimes. Wait here  
for rain to come. Blow this place sky-high with stars.

**Asylum Case EU:C:2016:1731**

after Julio Cesar Morales' video installation, "Boy in Suitcase,"  
(smuggled to Spain via Morocco)\*

My father fit me  
inside a case  
and carried me away.  
Hard and cold and dark,  
it led  
to suffering the deeper  
I crawled  
from the latch-hole of light  
telling of days shifting white  
to blue to black,  
the flashes of red.

Darkness led me to the secret  
past, head to knees  
bumping warmer  
dark, as if to taunt me  
with the roar and cold  
of this hard box.

My father carried me  
inside a case.  
It smelled of skin,  
my grandmother  
crushed when the bombed wall  
fell in.  
He said stay quiet  
as a lamb no matter  
what I heard,  
and he would carry me home  
to my mother  
gone north  
where she cleaned people's rooms.

The walls were made of murmurs,  
of shouts,  
of sighs and coughs,  
sometimes steady breathing  
I knew to be my father.  
Then I might sleep,  
his hand warm  
pressing through the skin.

When he pulled me out,  
my tongue  
    stuck to my mouth  
    dry as leather.  
My eyes couldn't see  
                    to see the sun  
                    cold and small  
over a brittle land.  
My limbs creased like a bird  
    in desert sand.

My mother unfolded me,  
washed the crust  
    from between my thighs,  
                                    promised

I would not have to be born  
again.

\*Crossing Border immigration Exhibit, February 2017,  
Dowd Art Museum, Santa Clara University of California

## **Late Capitalist Bedtime Story**

Tell me a story she said

*You have no home  
Go to bed*

Where will I sleep? she asked

*Under a bone  
With the dead*

Tuck me in she said

*Leaves for a sheet  
A worm under head*

Stay here with me she begged

*Not while a fortune  
on the Street's to be had*

## The Suitcase

was one I never

saw and still haven't seen but only heard about from a former student who became my surf buddy who went to Germany to be with his girlfriend and they took a trip to Poland where they went to Auschwitz a place that terrifies me as much as Trump just to hear the name and he emailed me about the horror and confusion of walking through the camp but what he really wanted to ask me was had I ever been there and did I know there was a room bigger than two or three garages packed with suitcases from the Jews and Romanis and homosexuals and disabled and everyone rounded up by the Nazis who died in the camp and he said it was so uncanny Kirk a suitcase on the bottom in the front pressed up against the glass with the name Glaser on it spelled the same way you do did you have relatives who might have been there and I did through my grandfather whom I never met because he died in 1945 in New York City while my father was in the Army my grandfather who left Poland as a young man nineteen maybe to come to New York at the turn of that century and make his fortune and he did with a stationery store turned printing business this man who loved to mill about the theater after shows by the stage door to meet young actresses and all through the 1930s my dad used to tell me would send letters with money begging relatives to leave Poland before it was too late because he knew what would happen because he had seen the pigs rooting at bodies in the streets after pogroms but they believed no Britain and France would never let them invade no the Poles would never let the Germans round up the Jews but Poles were rounded up too if not gunned down from the air or by soldiers ordered to target citizens and there is a suitcase in Poland at Auschwitz with my surname on it and the word Krakow and I wonder if it is etched into leather maybe gilded and flaking or a leather patch sewn on canvas and oils of what hands still remain on the casing and who knows it may have belonged to one of my ancestors bought with money sealed in a card from New York printed in the back of a shop on the upper east side by the ink-stained hands of a grandfather I never held.

## The Cave

*Morgan Territory, California*

At the cliff's edge  
we drop from ledge to ledge  
and climb into the low-roofed cave,

a horizontal slit  
of sandstone on granite

and slide bellies over the lip,  
hips and thighs  
riding into darkness.

The floor a fine soft sand  
fingers sink in.

Our eyes adjust  
to see someone before us  
sculpted two torsos from the earth,

prone female curving  
shoulders, breasts, bellies, hips, vulvas

arousing, as if rising  
in this dark protected place,  
head and limbs last to find their way

into these delicate grains  
to wake and walk into the world.

*Oh*, you gasp, and I see  
the stub of a cigarette  
jammed in each form's crotch.

Stillborn weave of fibers, stained  
phallus of breath and dust.

What burned  
in that brain, what rage  
smelted from desire,

a gnawing to shape, fondle, strike  
sequestered here in earth's fold?

*They need to go back.*  
We dig hands in, bodies  
crumbling back to soft earth bed,

and turn as antidote to offer our own,  
the good taste of salt-wet skin,

as the cave drinks us in  
and our limbs tauten  
flecked with sand.



## Beloved

When the young man in class  
asked why we had to harp  
on slavery when it ended  
so long ago, and the class, silent,  
all looked at me, the half-Jew  
agnostic practitioner of the Dhamma  
teaching literature at a Jesuit university,  
I thought, well, I should probably  
read a passage of Morrison  
and let her lyrical, compassionate,  
complex voice speak the truth,  
profoundly unqualified  
by my race and privilege to answer  
before a class without a single  
Black student for all those who have suffered  
under this history, but instead  
I asked him, "Do you celebrate  
Easter?" He nodded. "And Good Friday,  
too, then, when Jesus, a good Jew,  
not calling it that of course,  
celebrated Passover with his disciples  
to celebrate his people's escaping slavery in Egypt.  
It was over a thousand years already,  
and it's been a few thousand more,  
guess we Jews should get over it."  
The class, a few smirks, others looking  
deep into the book, I found a passage  
to escape myself and read.  
He didn't come back the next class  
or ever again, and I felt relieved,  
and that I failed some lesson in compassion  
or in what beloved means.

## Coney Island is Still Closed

but the angels are crying  
*WAEK UP TO ANOTHR WORLD*

in graffiti tagged on a Cross Bronx  
Expressway billboard hovering

above headlights and taillights  
of the ten thousand souls

rushing past the sun down now  
on this first day of spring,

my brother driving back to  
the suburbs, four beers in him

over eight hours, so I think he's okay  
to ask him about his thirty-year-

old anarchist Brooklyn  
graffiti artist son living by

the food shipping warehouse  
district south of South Williamsburg

along the canals. All day the three  
of us walking and driving

Williamsburg, Vinegar Hill, Park Slope,  
Red Hook, Gravesend, talking, listening

as my nephew deliberates about end  
times he sees the world facing and still

his hope he imagines radical  
restructuring of people

to people, scales of economy,  
the end of capitalism, fish and beer

at the shores of Red Hook,  
the wall holding back the water

and I stare with him at the Statue  
of Liberty, *I've never seen it at this angle,*

the bright red Staten Island ferry  
with its tourists and the day's end

workforce headed home  
cruising by against a brutal wind.

## Milosz on the Streets of SF

Czeslaw was hanging with his Polish buddies, lifting weights in the sun on Polk Street, in the late eighties before the tech wave stole the city. His arms and chest bare, muscles glistening with sweat, tattoos trickling down his veins, his spare gray hair in long thin braids down his back. They were bullshitting in Polish, doing curls, taking turns on a bench press, bunch of aging and outright old pasty men with big muscles fed on kielbasa and kraut and lager just burning up the day, a new poem about the pogroms brewing in Czeslaw's frontal lobe as he searched for words to describe the angel of the Pacific sun freed a few hours from fog. A big dude strolled up, muscles bulging, sun shining on his ebony skin, stopping in front of Pieter, younger than Milosz, in his late fifties, just a kid when his parents fled with him, but he spoke Polish pretty well. He challenged Pieter to arm wrestle and took him down in seconds. The crew shouted and cursed and laughed, clumping together behind the defeated Pieter, biggest of them all. Anyone else? the man asked, and Czeslaw leaped to his feet, strode up to the guy and grabbed a thigh-sized arm in his hands. Only if you'll do it as in the old land. The man narrowed his eyes and grinned, barely nodding before Milosz twisted his arm and pushed him to the ground. The crew howled and high fived behind Milosz, who stood still as granite over the man, reaching out a hand. The man took it and pulled himself up, leaning into Czeslaw, chest to chest, face in face. Not fair, hot breath and ready to snap the old man. Czeslaw nodded. I've been saying that for fifty years. Not fair. What's been done. What you know. What I know.

## White Courtesy Telephone, Detroit Metropolitan Airport

On the ground for a layover,  
summoned by terminal speakers,  
cold hand holding my daughter's,  
a voice in my ear.  
Who? Gabe? Who?  
Oh. How did you find me?  
Why are you calling?

*I was heading up early  
to check on things,  
knew you were flying home.  
I saw a firetruck  
coming down the road  
and got this awful feeling.*

*When I saw the place,  
firetrucks and people everywhere,  
and smoke all this smoke,  
black and burnt and gone*

*all your dreams,  
I couldn't believe it,  
all your things.  
That beautiful home.*

What? The house? What happened?

*Gone.  
A fire.  
It's all gone.*

The shaking begins, bones leaching time  
crumbling into what  
will be not be what will be.  
I squeeze my daughter's hand,  
look down, smile,  
the blood drains  
from the mask of my face.

*All night long I couldn't sleep,  
kept feeling something wrong.*

What do you mean all gone?  
What did you do Gabe?

*Nothing's left        a few walls  
                         leaning over the foundation,  
                         logs spiked together.  
The fire marshal kept staring at the charred logs.  
                         Alligating, he called it,  
                         the way the fire crawled up the corners  
                         like they'd just been oiled.  
No, I told him, just the decks,  
I'd been there yesterday  
staining the decks.*

You were there? What? We told you  
not while we were away. What did you do?

*I asked could it be the rags  
                         I stuffed in a can, the oily tarps  
                         I left in the garage.  
Maybe, he said, maybe  
                         spontaneous combustion.  
                         Oh god, I'm so sorry,  
what's happened to you,    what's happening.  
I hope it wasn't my fault  
                         I had to let you know  
before you saw.  
                         Miranda, is she there with you?*

What? She's on the plane.  
Why tell him, why does he ask?  
                         Disembodied voice of a stranger  
                         who kept showing up,  
                         asking for work,  
sat down one night for dinner  
                         when his truck wouldn't start,  
played hide and seek with our daughter.

*Oh. I'm so sorry  
                         it's the worst thing  
in the world        what's happened.  
                         I'm so glad I caught you.*

## Clearing the Field

Gabe, the hired hand, hops on the mower's tail  
and grabs my shoulders to weigh down wheels  
spinning dust high on the dry weed slope.

Sheer morning gladness at the brim, no reason  
to feel hands slide round my neck, fingers  
dig in. I shake it off, slip the throttle to full,

drop the blade to clear the field.  
Spirit fire far from home and be done  
with him leaning on my back.

Later, on the slope under the big oak's shade  
eating lunch, dust-coated, shirts sweat soaked,  
Gabe nods at the red mower in the truck's bed:

"You could start a business with those." What is it  
in his voice tingeing the fact? How need shapes thought,  
how possession thrusts itself between two men

who work together, whether they work together or apart.  
"You work pretty hard, for a guy like you."  
He leans against the trunk, chewing open-mouthed.

A dust devil stirs out of the field and blows  
through us. Sting of metal in the nose,  
of blood in the mouth. A burnt hand reaching...

I walk to the tailgate, slam it shut.  
"Wind's kicking up, too hot to work anymore."  
"Sorry, just meant, you don't need to, right?"

Your some kind of writer, teacher? Must be  
a good life." I pull at the tie-downs on the mower,  
open the door. "I need to pick up my daughter at school."

Gabe rises, lights a cigarette, the flame a ghost  
flaring under the sun as he draws it in.  
He holds the pack out, I shake my head, he smiles,

"Yeah, figured. Listen, I've got this screenplay  
all worked out. What do you think? Two guys,  
a girl, no money, sick of their jobs. They rip off

a resort and go on the run, but she falls for one.  
They double cross the other guy and split.  
Police chopper chases them off a cliff, the car

a big ball of flame. Great movie, huh? Just need to bang it out. All it takes is money and the balls to make people do what you want.” Gabe stretches,

faces the house. “We could use this place for the party scene, booze and drugs and people all night. The jealous guy finds the couple in bed, dumps his bottle on the sheets

and throws a match. They escape and he’s left there fighting the fire, the mountainside raging above all those lights glittering along the bay.”

“Action, love story, betrayal, it’s all there.” I slip into the seat. Just the words on the page that will never happen. “See you tomorrow,

I’ll pay you then.” And be done with you. The engine roars, the AC blows its sober cold. He grows small in the mirror as I wind up

the road, still standing there by the house, taking in the view. Maybe he’s just gassing, harmless, maybe it’s all in my head.

## Stone Cold

*AWP Reading 201X*

Another poem about a sculpture  
by a river with geese in it—  
in the river or decorating some corner  
of the poem, I'm not sure listening.  
Maybe in the sky, but they had no wings,  
no feet either to paddle, only the word  
geese. The sculpture seems some sort  
of stone slab, or it's squatting on one,  
but let's not forget that this sculpture—  
chiseled or polished, who knows?—  
is second hand, or third through my ear,  
from whatever moment on a cold  
January day in a sculpture garden—  
why are they always gardens?  
It's not like anything's growing there,  
not to eat, anyway, not in January  
in upstate New York, not in this poem  
being read too close to lunch time,  
and so much noise, a thousand voices across the blue  
curtain where the tables full of books  
barter in rows for a city block.

But what about that poet left freezing  
in a sculpture garden by a river  
in a foot of snow, the sky clouding up,  
the sun dropping its pale plate  
behind a ridge of trees bleeding ink  
branches against gray-blue at day's end?  
This poet challenged by some young  
woman to write a poem about a sculpture he didn't  
even care about seeing, so he stands there teeth  
chattering, toes grown numb in his shoes wrong for this,  
searching for the right word, the meaningful  
and leaping image, but really driven  
by the flutter in his heart when he hears  
the tease in her voice, the soft wet words  
coming from between her lips  
after her tongue has pushed them  
here and there inside her mouth,  
the pulse deeper down, and lower,  
dreaming of after this walk, after dinner,  
a few drinks, a hope if only he could  
find the crowbar of this sculpture, the end  
to grab, the fulcrum to set it against  
and leverage this slab of lines toward his desire.



## Tracking this

scent the Muse  
scatters words  
along the path

There she is  
on the ridge  
her nose close

to ground lifted  
to air gleaning  
earth currents

and heavenly streams  
beyond the narrow  
gauge of my

senses She drops  
over the ridge  
the moment

before our eyes  
meet and when I  
make the rise

she is far  
across the sweet  
grass a speck

on the desert  
or slipping into  
the forest the paths

at my feet  
three five eight  
thirteen twenty-

one all hers  
spiraling bewildered  
with hoof prints paws

a thousand tongues  
of root mycelium  
needle and leaf

following her not knowing  
the way and so  
on the way

## Some Things

Maziar Karim

1.

I knocked my fist  
To the mirror  
For tolerating huge suffers  
I should have multiplied my self

2.

Standing on the beach  
Wind  
Taking my wishes with itself  
Till the breeze of matureness  
Sand by sand  
Will making me again  
And wave of death drown me

Life  
Was even shorter than this poem

3.

It was drought of humanity  
Missiles  
Have rained instead

4.

Feet writes  
Earth puts spot  
We are a narration with thousand years  
That our ending  
Will be suffering  
It will be a sigh

5.

My hair  
Have Raised up White flag of itself  
I wish you command retreat  
Your black army

6.

We dance  
Hug our self  
And this thick volume  
Will bend the world

**in a white plastic chair**

Sunday afternoon  
waiting for the silence  
to be broken  
sitting in outdoor sunshine  
on a white plastic chair  
bottled water in hand  
under the umbrella shelter  
gazes at his northern cacti in bloom  
a dragonfly hovers over yellow flowers  
the scene serene bordering on transcendence  
eyes discerning the intricacies of simple things  
among the creations surrounding  
a witness of life in a white plastic chair  
waiting for the silence to be broken  
it never was

**the question**

when your question goes unanswered  
drive away on a country road  
listen to your wheels on gravel  
as you scream out your pain  
count telephone poles and dogs  
window rolled down will dry your tears  
drive until darkness caresses you  
then you can count the stars  
as they orbit around you  
smoke your last cigarette to the radios  
bitter melodies of sad songs  
don't waste anymore words or time  
on questions requiring a yes to  
and never sell your soul for an answer

### **ward wishes**

blood in his veins that needs resurrection  
legs and arms numb as ice  
his sense of what he was distorted  
become a blurred facsimile of him self  
he wishes he was an evening cloud  
free to roam the sky under sun and moonlight  
to change shape but be still the same  
forever renewed without the need for pills  
at every sunset ablaze like lovers in their element  
ready for the sunrise, painless and free

### **inferno**

this summer I hear the screams of forests  
their treasured silence shattered by flames  
their souls clouding the earth's air  
white wisps of smoke ghosting the horizons  
the smell of fires burning, consuming, acrid  
destroying Virgin stands into charred graves  
stunting sunrises and sunsets into yellow pallor  
wounding the breath of men and beasts  
with its phantom fire ash particulates

### **slip away**

between grains of sand and snowflakes  
nothing ever remains held for long  
for a brief moment or a little longer  
they slip quietly away without apology  
untraceable, only their memory remain  
in your fingertips and hands and heart

## **over the radio**

ready to drive  
on those hot summer nights  
hair combed and neck cologned  
new air fresher hanging from the rear view mirror  
having her slide beside me  
one hand on the wheel  
the other around her  
love is all around playing on the radio  
hoping that's the way she feels  
seventeen and riding anywhere  
listening for inspiration from that radio  
it was everything that mattered then  
it was everything that could suspend  
your everyday into something more  
and heal the wounds upon your soul  
through the magic that was driving  
and the songs over the radio  
giving you all you needed to survive seventeen

## **traveller**

I went out walking  
on streets once familiar to me  
No one remembered me  
I'd become a stranger  
in what was my world  
wanting to hear my name being called  
waiting to see old ghosts reappear  
as summoned up memories  
of when I and they walked here  
yearning for my old home as it was  
finding only shadows and a street  
that no longer needed me to be there

## **arrivals**

in the Hall of arrivals  
surrounded by travellers  
some holding flowers and babies  
waiting grandfather's and lovers  
some liveried as chauffeurs  
holding cards with names  
for important business executives  
there is no one to greet me  
no one embracing or crying for me  
just myself waiting, in a long line  
looking at baggages circling

## Behold, A Son

### Isabel Behling

When Reuben thought of his father, he thought of silence.

Silence probably wasn't the right word. Silence suggests the absence of something. His father's quiet was normalcy, often tangible, taking up space when they were in rooms together, stretching so he was not only surrounded by his own silence but was engulfed in the desolate cave of his father's. It was infectious, innate. Possibly the same passive gene in Reueben's blood was activated when tasting the chilling presence of his father's linguistic absence. Perhaps when their fingers momentarily touched when passing around a plate of steak at dinner, the aversion of speech was transferred through nothing but skin. Can the second hand smoke from one mouth passing through the nose of another carry habits through the air like disease? Can seeing a man use his vocal cords as little as possible stir something in another, prompting him to do the same? What does the world look like to a boy who's only ever known his father in four of the five senses?

Reuben thought of his father a lot these days. He would see him in things. In the foggy gray sky on trips to the gas station for his morning coffee. In the pages of work piled up on his desk at the office. In the pocket of quiet surrounding his cubicle. Even now, years after his father's passing, Reuben sifted through his memories bathed in silence until the quiet transcended the verbal plane into the physical. In each thing his father did, there was a resounding absence of sound. No shifting of denim as he made himself more comfortable in his smoke-baked recliner. No grating of skin against stubble as he scratched his chin. Not a breath when he'd wet his lips, opening and closing them briefly before returning his attention back to the book in his lap, lost in a world where his son wasn't. Reuben always wondered if there was sound in those wrinkled pages, in the ink he was so torturously jealous of. But more years were stacked onto Reuben's back and his father passed away one warm summer night without ever saying much at all. An absoluteness was solidified in that silence which nothing could shake.

His father was everywhere. Reuben tried to focus on what had to be done, but the days were dwindling. Silence filled his mind, sweat creeping in tendrils down his spine. The only time he could hear anything was when he'd press his ear to his wife's pregnant belly.

This was his daily routine. Wake up, go to work, try to hear *something* until he'd come home disheveled and exhausted, hanging up his jacket, setting his briefcase on the kitchen table. He'd make his way into the living room where Camille would be, usually sleeping, sometimes with a book or pen in hand. She had gotten in the habit of journaling. To remember, she'd said. Things about now, things about the baby. Things you wouldn't want to forget. Reuben never saw the appeal. Forgetting can be both a necessity and a blessing in some cases, he thought. Not to mention, pregnancy didn't seem like something Reuben would *want* to remember if he were Camille. But she did it diligently each day, scribbling down notes about kicks and shifts, sometimes sketching their baby boy in anticipation of his arrival. Her pen was never apprehensive to predict the slight curve of his nose from his dad, the dark curls on his head from his mom.

As Reuben came in, Camille would smile at him and he'd kiss her on the cheek and lean down, his large hands cupping her stomach. He could feel his boy then, the slight shifts and stretches, so foreign and terrifying and exhilarating all the same: to look up at his wife and know that this was theirs, this was real. He'd kneel in front of her, close his eyes, set his ear on the soft fabric of Camille's shirt. He would hear his boy then, muffled, almost impatient, the



thrum of his tiny baby heart sending chills down his spine. *My baby, our baby*, he'd think. Camille would wipe the tears from his face with her soft fingers.

It was any day now. All Reuben could do is think of his father's lip-smacking silence and wait to get home, to confirm for himself that this was real, that the baby was, in fact, coming. He often found himself fearful of a reality that he had dreamt up; that upon returning home, he'd find Camille on the couch with her book or pen, smiling up at him and he'd look down at her stomach and there would be nothing—her shirt hanging loosely on her frame. He'd tell Camille this at night, curled up in bed, her hands on his face.

"Benny," she'd say. "Don't worry. The baby will be here soon."

He hoped so. He hoped not. Sweat continued to slip between his shoulder blades in that office silence. He'd feel his father's eyes on his back. He'd turn around. The only thing ever there were the egg yellow walls of corporate America.

The call came on an unassuming Wednesday. That morning when Reuben looked up at the foggy sky after stepping out of the gas station, nothing seemed to be any different. His fear, his father's silence, was still as alive as it had ever been—pulsing, almost pounding inside of him. His sweat was still piggish, his pen wobbled foolishly on the forms he had to fill out. His phone buzzed in his pocket. Not thinking much of it, he answered the call to hear Camille, breathless, sounding simultaneously elated and terrified as her voice crackled through the speaker.

"Reuben," she said. "Our baby is here."

Rush. Everything rushed after that, rushed inside of him, rushed outside of him, to his car, speeding his way to the hospital. He was sweating more than ever, dark patches of gray underneath his arms, soaked into the small of his back. He wished Camille were with him, wished he would've been home when it happened. This wasn't how it was supposed to go, he thought, all this rushing. Time flew past him as he sprinted through the hospital doors, stuttered to the nurse behind the desk, loosening and retightening his tie over and over again as he was led to the room where Camille was lying on the hospital bed. Her soft shirt was replaced with a stiff gray gown, her hair sticking to her forehead with sweat. She smiled when she saw him like she always did. But there was a tightness underneath it, a tautness. He gripped her hand fiercely as she told him that it was going to be alright, that she was going to be alright. She did some sort of breathing exercise with the nurse. Reuben paced the length of the room, his tie now undone, his glasses sliding off his face as he worried. Camille's features were twisting in ways that they didn't usually, and then she gasped, clutching the sheets, tears slipping down her face. It was happening.

The baby was here.

Camille insisted on no epidural which Reuben didn't understand, but she was a woman set in her ways, and her mother was strongly against the use of the drug. *Pain makes you love the baby more*, her mother would say when she came to visit the pair in their dingy little apartment, scanning the place with that same sort of tautness that Camille had in her terror-filled, pre-birth-giving smile. Her mother's eyes would linger on Reuben, on his disheveledness, his exhaustion, his timidity and rawness against the daring and confident figure of her daughter. She'd pat his shoulder. *Don't worry, Reuben, your baby is a gift*, she'd say, and Reuben would wonder if he was really that transparent, if his silence spoke so much that even a glance could tell her everything she needed and didn't need to know about his feelings towards the soon-arriving child.

Camille had already told Reuben it was okay if he didn't want to be in the room when it happened. He had been embarrassed that she knew him well enough to offer as he was quite squeamish when it came to anything of the body. He planned on going but still lingered at the door frame, watching her teeth grit, veins bulging in her forehead as she welcomed the painful

sensation, closing her eyes and wading through it because she knew her baby would be waiting for her on the other side.

Reuben felt an overwhelming sense of love for her then, the woman he married. The same woman who would hold his face in the dark of night, who would go with him each year to visit his father's grave on the day of his death even though he never spoke a word about him and she never asked. The same woman who would take his hand in crowded places like parties—which he hated—and smile at him like he was a wonderful thing. Her eyes shining like she was reminding him of a secret they both shared, he'd squeeze her hand back and be more thankful than he had ever been.

He felt guilty for leaving her, but then the door was shut and the screaming began. Reuben tore a hand through his hair, sat in the lonely chair outside of the door. Her muffled cries from behind pounded through his head, his glasses now in his hands, his fingers pressing into his eyes.

With all the joy that came with being expectant parents came all the terror festering in Reuben's bones, maggots curling up in the marrow, reminding him each and every second of the enormity that comes with bringing more life into this world. There was a whispering in his ear as Camille walked around the house cradling her imminent stomach, and it was like all this time he's been oblivious of what life truly meant until he saw the way she struggled to sit down, the stretch marks painting lightning across her skin, the ultrasounds of his child that look more like a suggestion of a human than anything else. But that suggestion was human. There was a person behind that wall of flesh. A person with a soul, with dreams, who will love and hope and break and sin, and through the months he'd spent watching them take up space in the person he loved the most, he realized that he doesn't know them. There was a stranger sleeping at his side at night, a foreign presence in each room he entered where Camille was. And whoever that person was was not only his blood but his responsibility, his *legacy*. If he doesn't mold or shape them just right, then they will take their own form. And children on their own are heartless, ignorant and deceitful. How can he possibly mold a child right if he hadn't been molded entirely right himself? How could Reuben know what to do if his first instinct was hesitation, if everything inside of him wanted to stop just as it was beginning? How could he be sure that the sins of his firstborn were something he could handle, that he could give it the proper amount of love it needed to grow?

Despite the screams, despite the writhing and gasping fear that had been alive in his heart since that first test came back positive, Reuben thought of his father again. It was impossible not to think of him, now that Reuben was minutes away from being not only a son but a dad, not only a provider for one but two.

Much younger, much more naive, Reuben had asked his mother about his father's silence. *How come dad never asks me to play cards with him? How come when I get home from school, he doesn't ask about my day? How come the only time he ever talks to me is when you're around?*

His mother would run her fingers through his hair, squeeze him on the shoulder reassuringly, her eyes never leaving the laundry she was folding or the book she was reading or the taxes she was filing.

*Dad's just tired from work, honey, she'd say. He works very hard, you know.*

Reuben did know, but that didn't make it hurt any less. His father used to sit reclined in his seat in the living room, his silence masked by the drone of the TV, his weary eyes glazed with that gray-blue light as his son sat at the kitchen table. Sometimes his eyes would flicker

over to his son a room away. He wouldn't smile. His cracked raspberry lips would part and smack absently, soundlessly. He'd turn back to the TV.

His father's eyes were something that Reuben saw in his nightmares when he was a boy, those glassy gray marbles staring back at him silently in dark rooms. His father would gawk at him gape-mouthed from corners and hallways on lonely nights in Reuben's head. They were not as wild as they were wide, but this wideness did not suggest fullness as they were always devoid of anything, of any thought or feeling or human character. Sometimes, when his father would glance at Reuben and that terror would begin to trickle down his spine, he'd wonder if there really was a person behind that face, behind the flesh stretched over those soggy pebbles. Perhaps there was a person in there, deep down, clawing and crying and gasping to be heard as his captor's lips opened and closed robotically, his mouth moving almost as if that person was fighting every second for the ability to say *something*. Eventually, those dirty gray coins would flit back to the TV, latch moth-like to the light once again. The twitching of his mouth would cease as he was transfixed onto something else.

The silence of his father was something Reuben didn't understand until he was much older. Something that he felt so stupid for not realizing sooner. His father didn't speak to him unless he had to because there was nothing else to say. He didn't share anything with his son and his silence was the most blunt and direct way of saying the words that each and every child fears the most: *I don't love you*.

His father didn't ever love him, not when he was alive, not even now as he reclines back in his seat in Heaven or in Hell or somewhere in between. As he rots, wrinkled eyelids fraying over those shiny silver pill bugs that infested Reuben's dreams, those wide but never wild pieces of asphalt that would strike hard into the back of his head in crowded places.

There was a painful intake of breath, a curdling cry from the room behind the chair in which Reuben sat. *No*, he thought, a frantic chill passing through him, *not now, no I'm not ready*. Suddenly, the idea of a child became more terrifying than anything. He wanted to rush into the room, tell everyone to stop, tell the baby to go on, *go back where you came from, stay in there for a few more months please, just until I can face this, until I can think of you and not think of him, until all of this doesn't terrify me as much as it does*.

He thought of that boy in there, of his emergence into this new world, the drum of his heart echoing through Camille's stomach like the heavenly horns of the rapture. He thought of holding his boy in his hands, feeling the heat of life under the skin of his son, seeing the malleable soul inside his chest and knowing that it was his to take care of, his to weed and prune and water and *not mess up, oh God* —

Reuben tore his hands through his hair, grabbing chunks at the sides, curling his fists around the strands as if he was gearing up to pull. He closed his eyes so hard he could hear the muscles strain and his head begin to pound. He sat there for so long his body began to ache, his sweat stained shirt drying cold against his skin, his glasses still useless in his lap. The symphony of pain behind the door didn't stop, ebbing and flowing, hitting notes he didn't think possible and pausing dramatically before a hellish crescendo that made Reuben wish to cover his ears and cry out for himself to mask the noise.

A startled gasp sounded from behind the door. Then quiet. There was shuffling, wheels squeaking against tiled floor. Then there was a higher cry, the cry of being exposed to the air of the world for the first time. Reuben froze in his seat, his legs shaking as he stood and he gripped the doorknob but he couldn't go in, couldn't face it, no, not now, not until he —

The crying ceased. The silence that followed was definitely suffering from an absence. Something missing from the madness. Something dropped hard onto the floor that couldn't be

picked up. It stretched for a heartbeat, two, three. Everything inside of Reuben slowed until it stopped.

A scream sounded then, something that was so undeniably Camille. It was much more curdled, much more filled with pain than any of the ones that had preceded it. A murderous, unhinged and desperate sound. It was not welcome. It was not the kind of pain that makes you love. The infant crying that ceased did not begin again.

The door was opened. The manic crying was sharpened as Reuben stepped in, his eyes quick in passing across the room, lingering on the sobbing figure of his wife, snapping to the pink mound of flesh in one of the nurse's hands. There was a flurry of bodies around him, someone squeezing his shoulder, other doctors beginning a horrifying recitation process that he could not tear his eyes away from. But through it all, the only thing he could hear was silence.

When Camille and Reuben's baby was born, his heart stopped beating.

Reuben stood next to Camille in the small hospital room, her hand gripping his with such ferocity, her dark hair matted down to her flushed cheeks. The nurse held the naked baby in her hands, tears filling her eyes behind her glasses. She shook her head with a solemn slowness. She tried to speak but her voice broke. Camille, that wild look with its fingers still pulling at her face, wanted to hold him. To say goodbye to the boy she only ever knew in movements, in the theories of lovingly scrawled pictures. Reuben could not speak. He did not tremble. He was only absently aware of the feeling being lost in his fingers where Camille clutched him. The nurse handed the boy back to the shaking mother, so small in her hands. But when the baby was back in her arms and Camille cried out in that murderous agony and everything inside of Reuben finally collapsed, his features writhing and contorting with pain, the baby boy gasped and his little chest expanded as he took his second first breath.

Camille cried out in an earth-shattering relief when she saw this, her little baby boy resurrected in her arms. She brought him close, kissing his face with salty lips. As the baby began to breathe, Reuben stopped doing so. He glanced over to the nurse at the end of the bed. The tears spilling over her eyes and wetting the blue polyester of her mask were more vocal than anything she could've said at that moment.

The soft muttering of the newborn was closer to Reuben than before and he looked down at the woman he loved, exhausted and tear-stained. He took the child from Camille's shaking hands when she offered. It was as though he had turned to sludge and was trying his hardest to trudge through the muck to gain control himself again. He knew he was looking at his son, but he couldn't see anything. A blurry figure occupied his stone hands. He knew it was fragile, and he was suddenly deathly afraid.

In a moment of clarity, he imagined himself kneeled in front of Camille in the living room, his ear pressed fervently to her belly, waiting for the beats to come and counting them under his breath. He brought the hazy blob up to his face then, pressing his ear into the boy's soft chest. He could hear the small expansion and contraction of a new pair of lungs, could feel the pink nebula of fragile newborn skin brushing against his cheek, could smell that raw metallic scent and the heat brewing underneath it. He stood there and he listened, ready to count, lips curved around the numbers. His lips were pursued in an "o" for so long, they began to shake. He didn't hear anything.

There was no heartbeat.

Rush, everything was rushing again. The doctor's rushing into the room from the hallway, the baby rushed from his arms, the blood rushing to his ears. Had he misheard? Was this some sort of post-shock delusion? But no, each and every doctor that came through the door wanted to hear (or more accurately, not hear) for themselves. The resounding silence was

evident in each one of their faces, striking them, infecting them until their lips were smacking wordlessly as they handed the little boy carefully to the next doctor in the line. Some used a stethoscope, some took the Reuben approach of skin on frail skin, the boy's chest ravaging with breaths from all this excitement in the new world he had entered. Reuben stood in the corner and he watched. The blank walls of the hospital room blurred in front of him until everything was splattered across his visions, contemporary art hanging in a museum with no apparent meaning. Reuben was at the center, squinting and turning his head and thinking, *what the hell are you getting at?* His hand was then searching aimlessly across his chest until it was nestled into the space beneath his collarbone almost feverishly, as if in a trance. An erratic drum pounded against the pads of his fingers. He was able to release a strangled breath for the first time in what felt like a very long time.

"What's happening? What's going on?" Camille was saying. She tugged violently at Reuben's sleeve. It took him a few seconds to look down, a few more for his vision to focus. Her eyes were simultaneously wide and wild. There was not a single atom in them that was devoid. "What are they doing with my baby?"

Reuben looked back up to see the doctors bottlenecking themselves out of the room, pushing and prodding each other out the door like a herd of cattle. A swaddled baby was at the center, gloved hands careful around his fragile head, his thighs. Bewildered muttering was trickling out the door with them. One doctor swiftly explained that they had to run a few tests, had to make sure the baby was stable, and then she was out the door too, following the storm cloud of commotion exiting the room.

The nurse from before, glasses fogged and mask now soaked with salt water, seized Camille's hands as she began to cry once more. The nurse explained that everything was going to be okay, taking Camille's curls matted to her face and pushing them gently behind her ear. They breathed together. Camille, despite the terrifying circumstances, found an immense joy rising within herself now that she had gotten to hold her breathing boy and she smiled, turned to her husband, reached for him.

Reuben's eyes stayed locked onto the empty doorway. That question played over and over in his mind, that mangled art piece swinging in front of him like a hanged man, ticking like a countdown of destiny.

*What are you getting at?*

Days passed. The only interaction the couple had with the child was through pictures, through glass thick enough thick enough to stop a bullet. The shuffling of doctors back and forth through the sterile halls was the melody of their uncertainty, the soundtrack of their comedic tragedy. As they waited for reports, Camille poured over the pictures of her son, running her fingers over the screen like touch could be felt through a photograph. They had her pumping breast milk for the boy and when she sat next to the child's enclosure, she would do the same to the bullet bed glass, her nails tracing gracious lines across the surface. Reuben watched everything unfold, his vision now muddied with the gray green of scrubs, the faded blue of masks, the blinding brightness of the hospital lights. He never failed to sweat under those lights. The ticking inside his chest was more noticeable to him than ever before and he was often found with his thumb smashed against the skin at the base of his wrist, a large and rough black widow in the middle of the spider web of blue veins as he counted under his breath.

Days passed and the wonderance filling the hospital never ceased to rise. The baby breathed with a silent heart monitor as his only companion.

As the world was fated to watch and wait, so was Reuben. Fated to watch, fated to count, to check his own pulse in moments of such agonizing fear, doing the same to his wife

with his fingers pressed tenderly to the side of her neck. No silence in them, ever. The last thing he ever wanted to be was *Reuben, 33, tragic father of a heartless boy*, front page of every newspaper in the country. The vocalization of his terror scared him even more. All he could do was watch as Camille embedded her love for her heartless son in fiberglass.

After all the tests that could be done, after absolutely everyone had hypothesized and pondered their heads into the wall, the couple was finally able to see the child with no barriers. Camille clung to Reuben as they entered the nursery. The soft pumping of the machines cocooned the space, broken up by rhythmic beeping. It was times like these that made a person appreciate how such a startling noise could have such a comforting connotation. Reuben's hand was limp in Camille's as she led them to the baby isolated from the rest, to the eerily silent heart monitor at his side. With his hands resting over his head and face scrunched up in sleep, the boy rested peacefully—silent inside and out—as the couple got to see him, skin to skin, for the first time since he was born.

Camille reached down tenderly, cupped his chubby cheek with her palm. She couldn't take her eyes off him, her miracle boy. The boy cooed, brought his arms closer to himself, eyes still closed in a slick heaviness. She melted in the magic of the nursery.

Reuben had been doing a lot of staring these days; probably too much, but he couldn't help it. Sometimes it seemed as if it was the only thing he could do. He had been reduced to a pair of weary eyes behind thick rimmed glasses, to the river blue veins in his wrists. He gazed down at the baby in the box. He watched Camille caress his face.

"That's our boy," she said, her glazed-over eyes transfixed on the sleeping child.

All Reuben could focus on was the silence of the heart monitor.

He was finally able to speak for the first time in a long time, his voice trembling from its misuse. "What are we going to do?" he croaked.

"What do you mean?"

Reuben waited for a blip in the straight green line of the monitor's face that never came. Heartbeats were strange things, he thought, something he had been thinking for the past few days cooped up in the gray green of the hospital's aura. Comforting but terrifying. Essential but overlooked. It's always there, but only ever noticed in times of adrenaline: after a run, when applying for a new job, passing dark alleyways on your way home from work. But what about the regular moments? What about the in between? Sitting on the couch, mowing the lawn, reading a book. How can you be sure it doesn't stop if you're not always aware of it? How can you be sure that there's something beating inside of you every moment that your fingers aren't pressed against your wrist? Like a sputtering engine between your ribs. A steady drum, an accelerating drum, a too-slow drum. A flopping fish out of water, tail beating against your bones like an urgent thing, smacking sea water into your marrow so slowly you never realize you're drowning. Maybe that's all a heart is; ticking down and down until it eventually gives out, and this whole time it was ticking and tocking you were never smart enough to slow down and take note, to press your fist below your collarbone and take comfort in the fish mashed between your lungs. Never curious enough to ask *what are you getting at?* until finally everything falls into place and you discover your heart was counting down to your demise in a language you never sought to understand because we never assume that things have meaning until we are told they do.

He stared at the silent boy below him until colors began to twist horribly across Reuben's mind. He could clearly see that baby in his house—heartless, hollow and empty. Engineless, drumless, fishless. Were they even sure that it could do things for itself? The image began to shift and then there was only a demon boy, a freak boy. A boy forever silent in dark corners, eyes shining, fist pressed into the space underneath his collarbone with a purpose never fulfilled. Seeking answers that Reuben would have to provide for him. What

would happen to it when it realized it wasn't normal? Would it even live long enough to think about those things? Was this all some sort of sick joke? But no, the silence surrounding the baby spoke more than anything ever could, and no matter how many times Reuben counted his own heartbeats or imagined the beeping of the monitor in his head or willed or hoped or prayed, he could not give his son the working heart he was not born with.

Reuben thought of his father despite himself: again, always. His money-wrinkled face drowned in the blue-gray TV light. Those aimless smacking lips, searching and searching for words that never came, someone gasping just below the surface waters. Those gasping gray eyes sending tendrils of dread down his spine.

How was he supposed to share things with that baby? Father-son things like baseball games and cards, like a soda over a movie seat, like a large work-rough hand on the back of a soft, sun-kissed neck? It didn't beat, it shouldn't live. What kind of life would it lead if it was missing one of the only consistencies of this existence? The fundamentals of being?

"That baby," Reuben muttered and he couldn't look at it, couldn't think about the empty place in between its lungs that would be a lonely house of nothing but dead air and swollen muscles for the whole of its life, no matter how long it may be.

"That baby," Camille's voice was stone, "is our *son*."

"It doesn't even have a heart, it shouldn't be alive, it—"

"*He is*." She grabbed Reuben's face then, thumbs swiping across the pocket of space between his glasses and the skin under his eyes. Just like she did in those lonely nights listening to him, taking the secrets he gave her in the dark. "*He is living, he is breathing. He's alive. And he does have a heart, it's just...the doctors say it doesn't beat.*"

Reuben shook his head, wrenched himself from her grasp. No. That couldn't be. It was empty, he knew it was. The beating he heard so long ago when pressing his ear against her stomach must have been some fantasy, some delusion. It had no heart, it couldn't. He ran a hand down his face. The boy in the box shifted in his sleep.

How could something he had created be missing the most vital bodily instrument? How could this burden have been placed on Camille and him? They had been waiting so long to have a baby and now when Reuben *finally* said he was ready, this. How was he going to look this child in the eyes and know that nothing inside of him was the way it was supposed to be?

The nursery was no longer a peaceful orchestra of hope. Something fermented underneath the tile, fissures and cracks sprouting underneath the shoes of two distraught parents as they spit terrible things at each other, their newborn son mere feet away. None of the heart monitors could be heard over the noise. The other babies began to cry. The couple was dragged from the nursery as the heartless child slept.

Later, as the rest of the hospital slept alongside the bewildering boy and the couple was getting ready to leave, Reuben waited outside of the bathroom for his wife. She was taking extra long, a punishment of her own. He grew impatient. He wandered the halls instead.

Reuben hadn't been planning on visiting the nursery again that night. After today, he wasn't even sure if he or Camille were allowed to be anywhere near it. Maybe it was because the route had cemented itself into his brain during these few perilous days. Maybe it was coincidence or fate or destiny. Maybe it was the steady beat of the other heart monitors, the pocket of silence in the corner of the room that he couldn't get over.

The scuffing of his shoes against the tiled floor ceased as he stopped in front of the boy, sleeping still. All babies did was sleep, it seemed. His eyes fell to the baby's chest. It rose and fell like any baby's should. Like any *person's* should.

It shouldn't have unsettled him as much as it did.

Its face was compressed, its eyelids pudgy and thick like unbaked bread. It shifted around in its little bed, the wires hooked up to it shifting as well. The heart monitor's lips were

zipped shut tightly, almost defiantly, as if it was never meant to beep in the first place. One would think it was broken if not for the glow of the green light from its screen.

Silence. Consistent, like the steady beat of a hand on a soundless drum. Reuben clutched the side of the boy's enclosure, gazed upon him. He waited. Methodic swaths of nothingness was all he was ever given. Reuben sighed and was about to walk away when more movement caught his attention.

The baby stretched its arms above its head. Its mouth was moving as if it could speak, baby pink lips opening and then closing silently. Its eyes were closed and then they weren't, and the child was staring up at his father for the first time.

Reuben couldn't rip his gaze away. His breath fogged up the glass. The dim lights buzzing absently above him, the half dark hallways stretching to either side, the beating of his wrist now pounding against the skin of his chest. A single set of beats echoed in the space between the father and the son.

Foggy skies, grimy laundromat coins. Silver pill bugs cowering in dark corners, flashing white in the dark.

His son had his father's eyes.



## Talk About the Wild West

Talk about the wild west,  
talk about the plains,  
talk about the bygone Indian days;  
there never was a time we couldn't see  
in our mind's eye  
the tribes passing, rambling  
through that outstretched land,  
staying and settling,  
never was a time we couldn't feel  
the anger of that tomahawking  
wild and wooly holdup age;  
the rage that never ended until death  
lost nations, destroyed the old ways,  
the broad paths, the houses, the tepees,  
the very remains of the hearths  
broken in the dust.

It's gone now  
and now we only see  
the piebald horses, the rust-colored  
run by the buttes  
as spring snipes away  
at the Rockies; twittering birds  
eat what they can find,  
whatever's left on the ground.  
Sweet grass comes up timely  
for the cows lowing and eating  
and we talk about the wild west  
to the takers of the land,  
to the sad remnants  
of bygone nations.

Lady Look, lovely messenger,  
reigns over hill and dale,  
towns and mountains;  
spring's mansion of leaves  
and blooms fills, blossoms out;  
dogwood trees white white  
like fallen parachutes  
lift up their plumage  
to the warming sun;  
daffodils spread lavish light.

Spring besieges summer,  
more, more, it asks,  
presses for more beauty and life,  
newness, the colors of the rainbow,  
the paleness of the new moon,  
the red-winged blackbird,  
the oriole, all showing the world they bring  
and we sing old cowboy songs  
to the takers of the land,  
to the sad remnants  
of bygone nations.

O skipping lamb, cakewalk  
by the broken shopping carts;  
with your small hooves, click, click,  
show the asphalt you're the boss.

Nevertheless, never endless  
the reign of spring ends,  
the bird notes slow,  
dwindled away by the sleepy summer  
heat, drowsy the trees barely shrug,  
the tar melts on the roads.

Only misbegotten seeming  
perennials apprehend  
the end of a proud race;  
heads of flowers and men  
gay only for a while,  
knowing the cycle of bygone days,  
heads drooping already in dreams  
of root-clutching cold, change of seasons,  
the end of an age, a way of life,  
the end of the wild west we knew,  
caught in lifeless tightfisted memories  
and we talk about the wild west,  
talk about the plains  
to the takers of the land,  
to the sad remnants  
of bygone nations.

## Good Old Dad

Had enough of it,  
pushing along with  
his job and family  
and gave up.

Game over.

Good old dad,  
always liked trains  
and that's where he went.

Coming out  
of the roundhouse  
a couple of yardmen  
couple a baggage car  
full of old  
newspapers  
and dad  
riding out west  
out of style,  
alone and happy  
in the boxcar.

Big wheels turning,  
chug chug  
goes the locomotive,  
struggling up the mountains,  
rolling, whoo-hoo, down the dales.

Shed of us,  
dad's free and easy now.  
Before the rain stops  
and the silent snow  
starts to fall,  
crossing the Rockies,  
he'll be singing.

Kids and all, the wife  
weighed in the balance;  
the right thing  
too heavy a load  
for a restless rambling soul.

Sooner or later  
he'll pay through the nose  
for his selfish evasion.

Offenders will be prosecuted!  
Railroad cops  
and God's avenging angels  
will be on the lookout  
for a middle-aged newspaper  
bearing the headlines,  
"DAD GOES OUT WEST,  
OUT OF STYLE."

That's for sure;  
out of style,  
out of bounds,  
and out of our lives.

So thoughtless, so uncaring,  
how could he do that?

Wherever he goes,  
whatever he does,  
bad cess to him  
but keep him safe!

## Las Vegas

Behold,  
the corn-fed chorus girl,  
breasts bedizened with pasties,  
forgets the business of pleasure,  
forgets her place  
in this big ongoing  
graceless show, forgets  
her fleshly trade,  
her blazing nakedness  
under the big-time lighting  
and delivers her Iowa,  
its corn, its farms,  
stillborn on the stage.  
Tears in her eyes turn  
to pearls and glisten  
running down her face;  
even the drunks in the balcony  
see her pain as  
she remembers her home,  
spoilng our pleasure.

Can we hate her for that?

first published in *Leaf Review*

## Buffalo Bob

*With a bow to E.E. Cummings*

Buffalo Bob  
is ding-dong dead

rode across plains,  
chaps flapping  
and banged the breeze

six-shooting.

He was purty  
perfectly winsome

so he's gone died  
and Charon rows  
him home.

And how don't Death  
in Hades' barbershop,  
combing and combing,  
calming and cajoling,  
do up for the last roundup  
his long blond hair?

Ride 'em, cowboy, ride 'em;  
from here on out  
in this red-hot realm

you ride nowhere.

first published in *Halfway Down the Stairs*

**lightness**

*Do not go gentle into that good night ...*

— Dylan Thomas

but carve your body into

a tree    morning on earth

night underground    two steps

to gloomy sky    one

to eternity

from root to top the suffering

of light in chambers

small of time    and do not

bend in this

wicked wind    stay tall

and ready to fly

## **beautiful in the rain**

crossing line after line  
coming to see the world the bleeding  
and the flow of light the contraction  
the slaughterhouse skinny words floating  
on the river  
ink for a sonnet rose water for the dead  
what is left & what will grow sorry for  
my language of thorns everything will be  
future & past you sit on the rooftop  
with folded wings crossing time after time  
coming to see the beginning of life



## wilderness

I can't hear you    stuck  
in this wilderness sometimes  
                  is quiet  
sometimes I cry    this is a poem  
                  for blind elephants  
crossing the page    stepping  
                  on graves  
it smells like fire and a star  
                  dies in my eyes  
adieu my love    these words  
                  will burn me  
to the end

## September

there is a road and then

there isn't

I have to temper my heart

to find a reason for climbing

the hill

& laying down skies

seasons in black letters

a dying

hour threatens us—

however

September the gold

the purple

hoo hoo the owl

is calling

us

**hang god from the moon**

& pray for

the fruit slowly

melting

in your mouth his blood

running too late

to let you live another

day the rhyme goes on

so do the hands

leaves of grass by millions

caressing

caressing the earth

**I built a silence in my throat**

a neverness with feathers

and clock      hard

to erase what's never said

dreamed or drenched

in the day ahead      you sister of the

moon

open the gate      someone is speaking

& flames are rising

everywhere

## Before the Blanket Falls

Mark Groody

Almost lifeless bodies lay strewn here and there, without regard to place or time. And the Sun, if it dares to shine at all from behind the blanket of fog, will thaw the anesthetic in the persons who have abdicated or been robbed of dignity, worth, and reason, for a clouding of self-medicated thoughtlessness. Who knows what pains are hidden within them, what hopelessness or missing synapse is held within the heads of these creatures of almost divine design, who chose a base and animal existence.

A well-dressed matron with subservient spouse in-tow walks briskly around and through the blanket wrapped docile strangers with their regurgitations, defecations, shopping carts, and cardboard houses to enter a gleaming tower of high lives, where precise gilded decorations adorn, where collected worth is esteemed more than the joy of charity.

The human divide is made more so by loud and obnoxious men and women, who's lust for power isolates them in surreptitious covens of utopian thought, and a smug and blind belief in their own benevolence; a false notion that abandons all consideration of the least of these 'street children' who themselves were once of the row houses, tenements, little topless boxes, and even the suburbs over the bridges. They left home only to arrive and get lost without a trace in a concrete jungle of indifferent belching masses of the rich and the poor.

The once alluring mysticism of the beat generation, and philanthropic society has transformed into a melting pot of addiction and insatiable appetites for all of mankind's pitfalls, such as the lust for, and striving for bodies, minds, money, control, obsession, and uncontrolled fetish.

Personal artistic expression, self-confidence, personal acceptance, and the desire for a singular identity has been usurped by cookie cutter stereotypes of international dress, confining generational customs, and a striving for magnanimous acceptance for habits and behaviors once thought ignominious or even illegal by antiquated values.

This once proud port city, of which great folklore and tales of character and bounty that echo in ever diminishing memories, now has a pall of sad newness, and glossed over significance, and the homogeneous appearance of any other place. The denial of the imbalance of the new and old, the rich and poor is palpable. Yesterday's poetry and grace has given way to the cheap facades of not so cheap dwellings that betray a warehouse culture within.

The early day stirrings appear as of a humanity whose luck has run out. They shuffle out of rooms full of artificial objects of beauty instead of real nature. They move as if stooped over by an ethereal cloud of oppressive confinement, which looms over them despite their upright stance as they and all the others begin the daily rain dance of relevance, and survival in a crowd of faceless and fearful disregard. And they rush to accomplish another day without confrontation or complication before the cold grey blanket falls over a place I may never visit again.

## The Pencil Case

The four of us sat around the thick beamed table in the science lab. I stared at the carved obscenities, astonished that anyone could be so daring, so bad. The first day of secondary school, all of us hunched, shifting eyes and half-smiles. Elliott I knew from primary school, fidgeting on his stool, thighs tight in black trousers. We are no longer friends. Mark, vacant, inscrutable. I have no idea what became of Mark. Jon, buzz cut and ears like a chimpanzee, twitching, glancing around, never at rest. Jon's dead now. He killed himself, unable to live with addiction. On the desk in front of us, ready for inspection, a pencil case, pristine, filled with sharpened pencils, fountain pens, rulers, rubbers, protractors, and, for stabbing each other in the back, compasses.

My pencil case was brown, a faux-leather oblong, zipped up tight. My grandparents had bought and stocked it for me. It was a good pencil case, better than the others', I thought, looking around. There were tin ones, set to be dented, wooden ones with sliding lids and hinges, indestructible but unwieldy, cloth ones with pictures, designs meant to reflect their owner's character: Manchester United, The A Team, Duran Duran, horses, and so on.

As the years went by, my pencil case endured as others fell; seams undone, hinge misaligned, zipper broken, or retired due to embarrassment. Mine was timeless: stylish and utilitarian. I looked after it in a way that I didn't with much of my stuff, perhaps because it was a gift from my grandparents. The exterior remained immaculate; the interior lining showed ink stains, but they didn't bleed through. It was a weird thing to be proud of, but I was.

As we grew older and more destructive, many pencil cases were vandalised. Elliott's ironic Henry's Cat case would sport huge erections and pendulous testicles each time his back was turned. There were only so many times they could be erased before ghostly phallic outlines became indelible. Someone scrawled 'gay rights now!' on Jon's pencil case, which was funny back then, to some of us. Maybe because it was brown and hard to mark, my case remained inviolable; felt-tip wiped off and the surface depressed under ball point so that it couldn't grip. But even those attempts to assail were rare. There was, on some level, respect.

By the GCSE year, it had attained almost mythic status. It was, to my knowledge, the only pencil case from day one, let alone year one, left standing. On the outside at least, it was almost as perfect as the day as it been given to me. It was the Dorian Gray of pencil cases. In our still short lives, it seemed to defy the passage of time, of the change that we saw in ourselves. Though we were still in the ascendancy, my pencil case seemed to give hope in the face of the inevitable decline that must surely await us.

Until that day in Biology. The Bunsen burners were on, hissing blue and orange around the room. Elliott stared at me over the flame, a smile twisting his lips. I realised he was heating something, holding it with pliers; a piece of wire, I realised as it began to glow red and then orange. I could not have anticipated such an act, could have done nothing to prevent it; the act was committed with such swiftness, suddenness that it was not until I smelled hot plastic that I realised.

I snatched the pencil case away. A thin line was scored in the front, just below the zipper, a fissure with lips of melted latex, a keloid scar. There was nothing that could be done to put things right. It was over, the perfection, the immutability. I stared at the desecration and then up at Elliott. He looked away, smirking. He had made his mark.

## Naked

Braithwaite, who had been whittling a piece of wood into the shape of a bird, spotted him at sunrise and alerted Corporal Summers. Before long, half the company was taking turns to peer through a firing slit or periscope. They'd all seen men wandering in no man's land, but never like this.

Squinting through the dim light, they tried to identify him, but his face and hair were caked in mud. As he moved across the cratered terrain, the man seemed unaware of his surrounding. His arms hung at his sides and his gait was that of a sleepwalker. Every so often he would stumble or trip, and there were times when he would stop and stare at the ground for a minute, before starting once again, but moving away from the trench to which he'd been headed, and thus he moved from side to side without getting close to either.

Streaked with dirt, his body was thin and muscular, pale against the russet filth of his face and hands.

"Got a fair tackle on him," came a cockney voice. "Got to be British!"

There was laughter and the calls began.

"Over here!"

"Come here, mate."

"Get your head down, you daft bastard. Get over here."

Soon, the whole company was calling, a hollering cacophony, until Sergeant Keele yelled for silence. In the quiet they could hear other voices shouting.

"Kamerad!"

"Herkommen!"

"Komm zuruck."

Hearing this, Lieutenant Bowers gave a nod to Keel who got the British lines yelling with renewed vigour.

The man seemed to come to, blinking and looking from one trench line to the other. He stood motionless, arms slightly out from his body. The calling increased in its fervour and the man took a step forward.

He disappeared in a flash, a boom, and a pillar of smoke.

With the blast still reverberating, silence fell on the trenches.

From no man's land came pattering and thumps as the man returned to earth.

Braithwaite resumed whittling.

## Swansea West Services (Off the Leash)

Kelly and Pavel met in a traffic jam on the M4. It was hot and they both had their windows down, barely crawling. Pavel was in a right-hand drive, so they were close, almost touching distance. The conversation flowed; he was funny, charming, though they had compete with the yapping of Rosco, coming from the back seat. Rosco didn't seem to like Pavel.

Kelly did though. Pavel had a mischievous grin and sparkling eyes. Kelly kept glancing in the rear-view mirror to check she wasn't sweating too much. She was happy sitting there, breathing in the petrol fumes, basking in his desire. Keeping her hands low, under the steering wheel, she worked her wedding ring off her finger. Not that she thought he would care. As the cars edged forward, they made sure they stayed abreast of one other, even when one lane advanced faster than the other. The cars behind didn't seem to mind. The only irritation was Rosco, who wouldn't shut up. It was getting embarrassing and she could sense Pavel was getting irritated. When she turned and shouted at the dog, he laughed, but it was a forced laugh and she wanted the fun laugh, the seductive laugh.

It took forty minutes to reach the services. Pavel stared meaningfully in the direction of the sign and raised his eyebrows. She smiled and nodded. They pulled off and into the Travelodge carpark where they rented a room and spent a sweaty hour waiting for the jam to clear.

Kelly emerged from the building alone, flushed and already beginning to regret her encounter. She'd left Pavel smoking on the bed and scrolling through his phone. She'd dressed in silence and, when she'd said goodbye, he waved at her without looking up from his screen.

In the lift she found her ring and put it back on. Her reflection in the mirror glanced back, tousled and shiny, and then looked away to the floor. She prayed for the lift doors to open so that she could breathe.

In the lobby she checked her messages – nothing – and then headed outside.

As she hurried across the carpark, she saw a group of people gathered around her car. They turned as she approached and fixed her with stern gazes. She could hear Rosco barking. It sounded too clear, not muffled by the glass. The crowd parted, eyes twinkling in anticipation. Someone had smashed the passenger side window.

Rosco stopped barking when he saw Kelly and sat down on the glass-scattered seat, tongue lolling, tail wagging.

'Shit,' she thought. 'What am I going to tell Gary?'



## IN THE LAP OF THE LAST LANDSCAPE

We suffered as dogs suffered in dog days of heat-seeking missiles to slaughter the night. *Come to me* we whispered, *ready?* to let it end, ready or not they left us to listen we called one another, I kissed you under a broken bridge we shattered it left us reeling, to falcon out in wide whistling arcs in the night calling we could not hear over the next one but did what anyone can learn to do when the war is falling long enough we learned not to flinch fisting hard marks in the dark beneath the shattered bridge we came against the rubble in the aftermath we knew our first belief was no god but the howling of this jagged *now* in our throats how it knew us called us out— *now ready or not here I come*, I want to gather an impossible communion inside this broken breast. My lover absent I say stranger, make me an arid field then a river running witness and lover tell me can you remember homes? Home me now calling of your lives and your deaths, the body. Is this song a map to the last stranger you knew? Or to know me knowing we are dripping winds, birdsong, these rivers now beds for the absent and the dead for these trickster selves of fluid flesh surrogate glows of denied truths the fallen fruits of loves labors forgotten until lost in our remaking make me run again, a river back new world, lens flare: if light's origin is the beginning of time, who controls it moves the vision and its form, then what difference is there, at any genesis, between making space and shining into it? Let's test the light against our skins in the dark until we find a new lens. Now is a hard time for thinkers but you were luminous, reason, the ripe swell of your heat while you co-opted fire and then these lives after you deemed us fit for fuel and what debt can we know in this siege except by waning radiance our invocation, light us. Stay, and then something comes—shadow; forest; flickered dark, yawning long silences at twilight. Speak into the limits of this container that will not contain me, pressing flesh of my flesh give me some end to hold before you give me new life that I may catch it. Only by some jagged fray at the beginning of *none* can I begin to say *I am* and only by your mouth against my ear will I begin to hear it biting back—

*here I come baby come to me hold*

## **BARDO**

What was this—any of it—but the husks of skinned days waiting as though form might come again? Or blood enough to fill but where are the animals they run from their names or rather would have tried if they knew. The birds flew until they could not fly—our names, our lists, this growing record now the column of the age: extinct. Now what, now nothing, when we yet are not, but what slouching Genesis built the Bethlehem of your birth and where are the words for sorrow? Answer but not so late that I am beyond correction. Siri, I am afraid. Siri, play something of music. Siri, play me my grief, Siri, where are our mothers now? Don't tell me again you don't understand. I am telling you Siri, don't say you can hear me so quickly, I want you to wait. Do you hear me now, Siri? You without ears, I am calling you Siri, do you know the time or my name? Siri, my watch is gone—and my phone, and my voice. Siri, hear me. I wait.

## THE LAST STOP

In the old world, we left ourselves dreaming days to come, but upon arrival wanted to crawl back in. Certain loves move this way, entire lives sharing only this admission in the end: *I do not know you anymore*. And yet. *Will you?* —a refrain and its penance, demanded. It varies, who is addressed. Maybe this is the crux of this long want. To be challenged, then absolved. We went out looking for the animals, but the animals had gone. They ran from their names. We had to admit. That it was possible we had the wrong names. The turning happened where we almost ended, feeling the old king's gaze, the walls of his long sleep around him, each drowsy syllable dripping from the mouth a study in certain effects. One being subatomic explosions. *How long?* We wondered, had been wondering. We shivered, had been shivering, naked in the shadow of the fortress. Of fortresses. How many were there, of these gilded gates? No one could say. The next cold rain started a whisper among us, in the direction of concessions. *What was the point?* with the freeway cars above us hissing Yes. We could have run then and almost did. But one dropped her knees to the grass and then her ear, and we followed, to hear who was coming beneath our soles to be counted, even now.

## **STOP MOTION**

Before we go further, love, I will admit certain reservations about furthering anything, long nursed on the blood of Icarus and prone to blinding myself staring too long at the sun, daring the oracle to blink first. If you find me supine on a sidewalk seeming unsure whether to give up the ghost or the pretense of holding it close against the tide thinking it must be something in this noise to ever hear someone holding a sustained note through the roar of it long enough to be—counted, one witness, Your Honor, call me now. I come.

## **IF THIS IS HISTORY**

Let it be known that the bleeding bodies of our words went first. Once emptied they could be sharpened to capital letters and fired toward certain ends. The first layer of a portrait is wet on wet, a luminosity that won't come again. Point being, let this not be a likeness, but more. When everyone had waved goodbye and the cars between us hummed a question of what might be saved, there came a flame at the end of the sharpened tip of a sawed limb, and we could touch but not taste it. We meant to leave the known world, but it chased us, yipping at heels. We meant to tap the skies until from somewhere behind their altitudes we heard the click of a door about to give.

## JESSES CURTIS

[from an anonymous source]

### Mark Tate

I LEARNED SOME INTERESTING THINGS about some of my long-ago relatives in Georgia listening to a story at our family reunion which was held in a large tent behind the Main Street Café catered by Todd Peterson's folks where my Aunt Wilma works. Most relatives who lived nearby brought dishes and picture albums and quilts to share, but Aunt Wilma convinced Russell Ames, my grandfather who organized the reunion, to get some main dishes catered because of the number of us who came from greater distances. I overheard her tell my mother, "in only a decade these families have gotten all spread out after the second world war. And anyway, I explained to Russell that I wanted to concentrate on my pies."

The gathering itself was characterized by the bustle of the women herding what they called "these gabby men folk" to keep the program on schedule. We had music from different aspects of the family, country to jazz to some solo classical performances; and we had some trivia quizzes so that prizes of handmade goods could be shared; and we had family updates, births, graduations, honors, and deaths. However, for me the highlight was the story I heard conveyed after the reunion when we were cleaning up the café kitchen. Aunt Wilma and my mother, Trula, were getting all the leftovers packaged and all the dishes washed. Mother had volunteered me to help with the washing.

Wilma's distant cousin Joshua Randall had come from his home in Texas, and sat out of the way in a corner of the café kitchen resting with a tin of apple pie Wilma had set before him. I heard Wilma ask him if he'd tell the story of his great-grandfather in Georgia. When she returned to the sink area, she told my mother that she'd heard the story of Jesses Curtis from her mother, that it had been passed down from a copy of the original confession and held in the back of a Bible, but that Uncle Joshua probably knew the story best. She said he recited the tale occasionally at previous reunions whenever story telling was on the program.

Joshua was a short man, a sort of frog-looking fat man with a wealth of flesh under his chin which quivered when he spoke. His deep voice was a croaking affair as he worked on a piece of pie. But as he took on the persona of Jesses Curtis to convey the tale, his voice assumed a resonant quality. To hear him speak was to hear the laughter and singing that a true storyteller finds pleasurable in the act of delivery. He sat on a stool in the far corner, and it was plain to see that he had used the wide black belt to rein in his prodigious belly. He had thick, black-rimmed glasses that from time to time he shoved back up on his sweaty nose. Numerous times he pulled on his right ear lobe, a tic I guessed. Joshua began his oration:

"NOW THE REASON YOUR AUNT WILMA said that about the Bible is that the story was written down by the town court reporter based on what Jesses Curtis said just before his baptism by three preachers in Sampson, Pruitt County, Georgia; this was 1903 mind you, it was recorded by hand, but the preachers, William Godward, Tyler D. Ot, and Brother Timothy Otis questioned him for quite some time in the presence of the Sheriff of Sampson Township before they agreed to baptize him because he had murdered two men and was due to be hanged in less than a week. This confession was transcribed and later placed in the family Bible, along with some pictures.

"Ot and Otis might confuse some, but really, what we should remember is that Ot came to town after Otis, and his name, also Otis, had to be shortened to Ot because folks were getting the two of them confused. I'll tell you more about this later. The three preachers heard Jesses

Curtis's confession and asked questions to make sure he was sincere about his desire to be baptized. Ironically, Godward described to his congregations that here was a man, Curtis, who was preparing himself to be hanged, and after his confession, after the baptism, just before his body was thrown down from that deadly height, was a changed person, a man who demonstrated a new and buoyant spirit."

"CURTIS SPOKE FREELY, RELIEVING HIMSELF of his guilt—"

JOSHUA TOOK A SIP OF WATER and finished off the piece of pie he had been holding by the crust with his thick fingers, took another drink and looked at us to make sure we were listening. He cleared his throat to bring clarity and luster to his voice. Behind me, as I worked on the monstrous pile of dishes, I tried to put out of mind the image of the little fat man and just listen to the timber of his voice, let myself travel to rural Georgia. I imagined Joshua taking on Jesses Curtis's persona.

'IN VIEW OF THE FACT THAT I must soon die on the gallows and pass into a boundless beyond, I will make known to you with Sheriff Leon present the secrets concerning myself and an account of my deeds. I must give you a short history of myself first. I was born in the year 1877, August 5<sup>th</sup>, near Sampson in Pruitt county Georgia. My parents were always poor, therefore the chances in my boyhood days were very limited. My schooling amounted to nothing until about the time that I was fourteen years of age when I entered the common schools and attended two or three terms. In the year 1897 my parents moved to Atlanta, Georgia where we lived for about two years and where I spent most of my time working on a farm, but growing dissatisfied I returned to Brookville, my old home place near Sampson, where I lived with my Uncle Ernest Crowder about one year, and at the end of that time my parents returned. I had always entertained the idea of joining the army and should have done so at this time, had it not been that my grandmother offered me all that I could make on her farm for one year. The year following, I concluded to go to Chicago, which I did and stayed there for about two months, when I came back home and worked on the farm the remainder of the year. During the year of 1902 and 1903, I worked on my grandmother's farm again, getting all that I made.

'In the fall of the year, 1901, there was a protracted meeting at Little River Baptist Church near Sampson's Mill, which I attended several times. One night during the meeting my mother requested me to take my sister Millie with me to church, which I did. Previously, Ben Tillman, a brother of James Tillman, had been giving some attention to my sister, to which I became opposed because he was given over too much to intoxicating drinks. On this night he was very much intoxicated and wanted to engage the company of my sister, and I let him know that I was opposed to his keeping her company. Afterward I wrote him a letter telling him that his presence at our home was not needed.

'In a few days after this I met Ben with his brother James at the home of my Uncle Nolan Beasley and asked him if he had received the letter that I wrote to him, to which he replied that he had not. I then told him in substance what I had written; that he was not welcome at our home. He became angry and talked in a very discourteous manner, to which I gave no attention, and then went into my Uncle's house.

'A week afterward, on February 22<sup>nd</sup>, 1902, I met Ben Tillman again at Brookville, when he was again intoxicated. He was standing in the road at the time with Ivan Niblett. I rode down in speaking distance of him and his first words to me. . . well, he called me a very vile name. I turned and asked who he meant, and he said that it was another man, but while I was hitching my horse, he called my name twice and called me vile names again. I answered him by saying

“you are drinking, and I will see you when you get sober.” I turned from him and went into the store. I crossed over to go into another store when he caught my overcoat and said to me that he wanted to have a talk with me. But after going with him a few steps, I saw that he wanted to urge me too far away and I refused to go further. Thereupon he drew his pistol on me two or three times and continued with his rough language.

‘There were numbers of witnesses who saw this and had summons issued and forced me to go before the grand jury and indict him. I did not want to go before the grand jury knowing the disposition of the Tillman boys. Nevertheless, being summoned beforehand, I and one of the witnesses were compelled to speak before the grand jury and the indictment was secured. On Sunday after having been before the grand jury I met with him at Brookville church, whereupon he asked me if I had indicted him. When I told him that I supposed that I had, but that I had been as easy on him as I could, he persisted in talking with me. I told him that the case was now out of my hands, that he would have to talk with the courts. After this we met occasionally when Ben would sometimes speak to me and other times he would not, but James always spoke to me when it seemed that he could not get out of it. James always appeared cool towards me and would use slighting words to others about me when he thought likely that I would not hear of it.

‘A month or two after the indictment, I met Ben near the Sampson United Baptist church and he said that there was no use of this coolness existing between us, to which I answered, “I have no objections to being friendly, that I am not pushing the indictment against you.” But I felt that he was doing this in order that the case against him might be made as light as possible. Contrary to the wishes of the family, my sister Millie ran away and was married to Able Patrick and the Tillman boys, glad to work against the wishes of our family, aided Millie and Able with the elopement. I wasn’t particularly opposed to the marriage, but I am sure that the Tillman boys thought I was. We had good evidence to show that the Tillman’s had also worked up prejudices of some of our relatives against us, causing them to remain distant and cool toward us.

‘I have cited the above facts to show the state of feeling existing between myself and the Tillman boys which extended through a space of nearly two years. I want to make clear that I am not to blame for the bad feeling. I would have been willing at any time to have laid down and cast aside any and all unkind feelings, but they seemed to take a different view of the matter.’

I WAS COMING TO THE POTS AND PANS and the largest casserole dishes, and one big pot slid on the counter and crashed on the tile floor. The ringing of the metal was like a bell tolling, and I turned to look at Uncle Joshua. “Sorry,” I said.

“Here, here, let me get in there,” Aunt Wilma said. “You’ve got soap and water all over the place. Poor thing. You’re probably tired. Go sit down and take a break, young man.”

My mother chuckled and resumed wiping down the table that had been cleared. I took a chair at the end of the country-style table to watch the orator. Joshua moved his heavy glasses up his nose and surveyed the pie tin he had set near him. He cleared his throat and began his intonements again: “Now we come to the part of our tale where we meet one of the deceased a Neal Ramsey. Please, let Jesses Curtis explain:”

‘ON THURSDAY THE 24<sup>th</sup> DAY OF NOVEMBER 1903, my cousin and the person who I am convicted of killing came over to my home to get me to write a letter and help him out with his sweetheart, Miss Eliza Charles, a daughter of Raymond William Charles, who lives near Victory Point, which is about six miles from my home. I wrote the letter and promised him that as I was going to her home on Thursday that I would take the letter and give it to her. I went on



Thursday as I had intended but neglected to give the letter to the girl. Neal Ramsey rest his soul and I had been in the habit of going together to visit our sweethearts, and my sweetheart was a sister of Miss Eliza, the girl whom Neal was going to see. Both girls lived with their father. On this same day and before I had written the letter for Neal, we were engaged in a conversation in which it was mentioned that some of the boys in the neighborhood were opposed to our going to see the Charles girls. I remarked further how is it with you Neal? He said, "the same over here." On the next Saturday I met Neal at Brookville and arranged to go to see our sweethearts on the Sunday following and as Neal had no horse to accommodate him, I agreed to go with him and walk.

'According to our arrangements Neal came to my house on Sunday morning, and we started together to see our sweethearts. After going about two thirds of the distance we were overtaken by James Tillman and Kenneth Curtis, who were friendly toward each other. At once it began to dawn on me that Neal Ramsey had not kept his promise to keep our trip a secret, for Neal well knew that I did not want to spend the Sunday in company with either one of the Tillman boys, and I saw that his attitude toward me was not as friendly as I had supposed. Our only view in keeping our trip a secret was to keep those away who were opposed to our going, for I knew that if they knew it that they would be there for no other purpose than to interfere with my affairs. Tillman and Curtis, on horseback arrived at the home of the girls before we did and when we got there they were engaged in conversation with the girls. The time passed very pleasantly except during the whole visit, I could plainly see that all three of the boys, Tillman, Curtis, and Neal were casting slurs at me. Miss Iris Charles and I had occasion to engage in conversation aside from the other parties. When we returned into the room Curtis and Tillman had gone, and Neal Ramsey handed me a note which informed me that the other boys had gone to the distilling house for whiskey and that they intended to beat the hell out of me when they returned. The note also said they told Neal to keep me there until they came back. The truth is they had realized that they could not beat me with the girls present. And Neal asked me before those other boys caught up with us if I had my pistol with me.

'On receiving the information that they intended to beat me I immediately prepared to leave, not desiring any trouble. Neal almost refused to go with me, but seeing that I was going anyway, reluctantly followed along behind lagging back. To elude the pursuers, I told Neal that we would go a nearer route which he strongly opposed but followed anyway as he saw that I was determined to go. After we had gone about four miles and had come to the road home, we heard Tillman and Curtis whooping and yelling in the distance, and in a few moments, they overtook us in a drunken condition with their horses foaming with sweat.

'James Tillman alighted from his horse and gave Neal Ramsey a bottle of whiskey and then pulled his coat off and handed it as well to Neal. Without saying a word to me stepped up and hit me in the face with his fist two or three times, knocking me down. This angered me and I arose with the intention of taking my own part with my fists, but seeing he had a knife in his hand I said, "James, I have done nothing to you to make you mad." He said, "you are a liar, you have insulted me." I replied that I had not insulted him, and he said, "don't you deny it, or I will kill you." All this time he was making oaths that he was not afraid of death, hell, or the grave, that he cared for nothing or nobody. He said, "you have told a lie on me." I denied this and he threatened to kill me again. He beat me a while in the face and then commenced cutting at me with his knife. At one time if I had not dodged, he would have killed me. Finally, he quit beating me and left off flourishing his knife and spat in my face. The spittle was of a slimy nature owing to the whiskey he had drunk, and this almost glued my eyes together. Instinctively I used my coat sleeve to wipe my eyes clear. My trying to remove the spittle angered him and he again used his fist on my face, knocking me down. When I got up, he spat

in my face again and told me that if I wiped it out, he would kill me. Moreover, he said, "if you wipe it out, I will put your face up a horse's ass." I looked at Neal who was smiling.'

UNCLE JOSHUA PICKED UP HIS EMPTY GLASS and shook it at me while he took a deep breath and pushed his glasses higher on his nose. I went over and took the glass from his left hand and went to fill it with more water.

"Milk, son," he said.

Aunt Wilma nodded me to the refrigerator and said, "He's aimin' at some more apple pie, so wants the consistency of milk."

Joshua lifted another piece of pie from the tin with his stubby fingers, twisting the point of the pie up quickly so the fruit wouldn't fall out of the buttery crust. His wide mouth chomped off a mighty bite and his wavering tongue helped slide the bite into his puffed-up cheeks. He lifted his eyebrows at me to hurry and bring the glass of milk back to him. He smacked a bit, holding the rest of the piece of pie at some distance from his big belly and I put the milk on his table. "I was saying," he continued, "that I would inform you about the three preachers and their questions for Jesses Curtis. I should take this time to cover that part of the story before returning to the rest of poor Jesses' tale. Otis number one, born and raised in Sampson, Georgia, had been accused of having a parishioner in his home when she should have been in her own home attending to her children. At that time, Otis number two, having been in town about two years, already annoyed by the confusion among their respective parishioners by the coincidence of same last names, Timothy Otis, and Tyler Otis, and the rumors which alluded to "some preachers who take advantage of their position to satisfy their humanly wants," so-called Otis number two changed his name to Reverend T. D. Ot, leaving Brother Otis to his namesake by seniority. Now, think about this odd circumstance for a moment. Ot means zero, nothing, and O-tis means something, or at least the existence of something. Odd, indeed, but I should return to the story. It was Reverend T. D. Ot who asked the young Jesses Curtis why he did not go to see Sheriff Leon after reading the note given him by Neal Ramsey. And if he felt he could not reach Sheriff Leon, being that it was Sunday, why he did not go to a neighbor close to the Charles residence who might lend him some protection. Curtis answered that he knew from the question about having his gun with him or not that this was headed for trouble with the Tillman boys, his cousin Kenneth Curtis, and Neal Ramsey, that he was in shock about Ramsey's betrayal, saddened, that he just wanted to get home as quickly as he could. Curtis told Reverend Ot that he prayed to God that he'd get home and nothing more would happen."

Joshua took off his glasses with his left hand and reached over his large belly and laid them on the side table. He made short work of the pie cupped in his right hand and then emptied the glass of milk. He looked up to the ceiling and squinted to recapture sight of the threads of the tale.

"Curtis was in quite a mess. What was he to do? The story continued thusly:"

'AFTER TILLMAN HAD DRIVEN ME into perfect submission by beating me so that my face rose, and by subjecting me to indignities that were unbearable to my self-respect, he took the bottle of whiskey from Neal and pulled at it and then passed it between himself, Kenneth, and Neal and back to himself. He pointed it to me and said, "if you have nothing against me after I have given you a good beating, take this and drink." I took a very small portion, knowing that if I did not drink with him the trouble would continue. Tillman got on his horse—with Neal Ramsey behind him—that same Neal Ramsey with whom I had left home that Sunday morning, and whom I had been assisting in his affairs of love, and who had just stood by and held the horse, the overcoat and the whiskey, while James Tillman beat me. When they rode

away, Kenneth Curtis mounted his horse and insisted that I should ride behind him across the creek and I consented because the creek was raging, and I was still reeling from the beating. After crossing the creek, I insisted on getting down and going directly home. He urged me strongly to ride on with him, saying that he would soon come to another road that would be nearer for me to go home. Soon we came near my uncle Captain Ramsey, and I got down. I told him that it seemed my sweetheart had been somewhat cool toward me today and that I believed I would go off and join the army inside of the next two weeks. He laughed at me; said he thought I would get over my feeling down. He remarked that he had just bought a new gun like the one I had bought for my brother and proposed to go hunting with me the next day. I told Kenneth that might be able to borrow a gun from Mr. Tom Hollis. He said to get a gun and come over the next day and we'd go hunting. Before I left Captain Ramsey's house, Kenneth Curtis invited me to come inside. I declined for a couple of reasons. He had treated me unkindly by backing up James Tillman and I was already thinking of avenging myself for the beating from James Tillman. I went on to Brookville to see Mr. Hollis about getting his gun to take hunting with Kenneth Curtis. After securing the gun and starting toward home, I reached a point where one road leads to my home and the one that leads to Captain Ramsey's. Knowing that James Tillman was yet down at Ramsey's, I decided that I would go down and call him out and see him further about the way he had treated me, as now I was able to defend myself.

'After going about halfway, I changed my mind and decided not to go, thinking that if I should go down there and call Tillman out, I would get into a general hurrah with all of them. The thought entered my mind to go down and eavesdrop and with that thought uppermost in my mind, I went to Captain Ramsey's. I took a position at the back of the house to listen for a while to what might be said about me. Unable to hear anything in back, I went around to the corner where the chimney left a small opening through which I could see James Tillman and hear him distinctly. He was relating how he had treated me that evening. I heard Neal Ramsey remark, "I knew it was coming, but I did not want it to come up that much there." He meant he didn't want it to come up in the presence of the girls at the Charles home. Tillman then said, "I gave it to him hot and heavy. I'll bet that he will remember that beating as long as he lives." He leaned back and laughed. Here was the pivotal point of my history. I felt that I could endure it no longer. I fired both barrels of the gun through the crack in the wall at him, one closely succeeding the other. Now all hell broke out. I heard them charging the shooting to me. I heard Neal Ramsey say that "I will kill him if it is the last thing I do." Feeling uneasy about my safety, and seeing Captain Ramsey coming toward the window with something in his hand, and recalling how he had led a group of seven or eight angered and maddened men against me, their revolvers drawn, and told me to immediately get the small sum of twenty-five cents which he claimed I owed him, but which God knows I did not owe him, I shot him. I shot altogether by impulse, knowing that I was outnumbered, realizing I was in a serious fight, and I went to the back window and saw Kenneth Curtis, who once said he had hot lead for me at a time when I could see the print of the pistol in his pocket, and who on another occasion pulled off his coat to whip me, and who, although being my cousin, had on that day stood by and saw James Tillman heap indignities on me that he himself or no other human being could or should have endured, and being wrought to a high pitch and being in a desperate state of mind, and having suffered for years from prolonged provocations at the hands of these boys, I fired the shot that tore his jaw away. During all this time Neal Ramsey was in the house using the bitterest words against me, saying that he would kill me, and I knew that if he got within reach of me, he would do it. He came out near me, not knowing exactly where I was, still swearing and threatening. I shot him twice, not knowing whether he was facing me or had his back turned. It has been stated that he pleaded with me for his life, was on his knees, but if he pleaded with me, I do not

know it. I know he was not on his knees but running toward me. As I shot him twice, it seems that the first took effect and turned him and the next shot hit him behind.'

"NOW, PREACHER GODWARD ASKED HIM what was in his heart at the time of the killing. Do you not know that the Bible says that God has commanded that vengeance is his and that 'thou shall not kill?'"

Uncle Joshua waggled the empty glass at me again. He closed his eyes and rubbed his face as though he were trying to relieve himself from the trance to which he'd been given. Wilma stopped washing cutlery for the moment and nodded to bring the glass so she could fill it with water at the sink. As Uncle Joshua continued the tale, I set the glass near him. He continued:

'IT WAS NEVER IN MY MIND TO HARM the women or Oscar Madison, a young man who was there giving his attention to Cousin Miss Willa Curtis, who he later married. How this sad dark part of my history came to be, I am unable to say. It seems more like a dream that a reality. At times, I am unable to believe it happened. I do not believe I had it in my heart to murder anyone. It seems this disaster never came from deliberation. I wonder about the whiskey I drank that day, although that was such a small amount, and I have never been a habitual drinker. It may have been that I was so badly treated that day that I was driven to desperation or partial insanity. One thing is certain, I acted more on impulse than I ever did before, more so than I thought I could have acted. It was clear that God was not with me that day, nor was I open to hearing the sweet words of God.

'Those wounded and those who I feared were dead lay in a mess around me. I took the gun and started home. After getting into the woods, the thought struck me of using the last two loads on myself. I set the gun down and laid down on the ground debating whether I should do it or not. Here, my friends, is another great pivotal point in my life. I realized I was not ready to die, that I was not in the right condition to die. I then decided I would go and lay the whole case before a friend of mine. After talking with my friend, I asked him if he would go with me to the magistrate that night so that I could surrender myself. My friend advised me to go home and rest, that I was too hasty because of the excitement, that I should lie still and let the authorities find things out. He promised to come over the next morning to speak with me again.

'When I arrived home, my folks were already in bed, and being hungry, I went into the kitchen to look for food. While stirring around, I woke some of my family and they asked me the time of night. I told them that it was about seven o'clock, but it was closer to nine. This was the beginning of my falsehoods and my attempts to evade the law. I retired but arose very early the next morning. My mother asked me where I was going, and I told her I was going to Brookville to mail a letter. I caught my horse and started, but instead of going to Brookville, I went to see my half-brother, William Curtis, and told him to follow me to Upton to collect my horse and bring it back home, because I was going to Atlanta by train to enlist in the army. I went on to Upton and put my horse in the livery stable and bought a train ticket to Atlanta. When I reached Queenstown, I was taken off the train and arrested. On the same day I was brought to the Five Corners jail and later collected by Sheriff Leon.

'I want to add that I am very happy that I did not kill the man I was mad at, James Tillman, and I am ready to die for my crimes, but I would be much better satisfied if Neal and Captain Ramsey were still living. This is my confession for my awful crimes, and it is given of my own free will and without reservation, signed, this fifth day of March 1904 by Jesses Curtis.'

JOSHUA PICKED UP THE GLASS OF WATER and brought it to his lips and drained it entirely, his eyes closed. He had a wide smile on his face. I looked to Aunt Wilma who had

listened to the end of the tale while leaning against the metal sink. She shook her head slightly at the short fat man perched on the wooden stool. Joshua had perspired around the neckline of his shirt, and she took the wet towel that hung from the faucet and brought it to him so he could moisten his neck and face. He put his glasses back on and summed up the story:

“A FEW DAYS PASSED BEFORE SHERIFF LEON could arrange to have a lengthy bathtub carried to the jail and allow the three preachers to perform the baptism that Curtis requested. Godward prayed in the name of ‘God, his Son, and the Holy Ghost’ and Brother Otis said quietly, ‘my son, in the afterlife, may you find the sweet arms of Mary.’ Revered Ot raised his eyebrows at Otis because this was unorthodox, as we know that most revivalists in the southern states called upon Jesus, not Mary, to save a sinner’s soul. Anyway, we mentioned when we began this tale that after Curtis’s baptism, his spirit appeared relieved, even buoyant, and I want to relate more evidence of this claim. After Curtis changed into dry clothes, Sheriff Leon walked him back into his cell with Preacher Godward. Curtis must have been in a playful mood because he walked to the cell door and closed it, remarking to Sheriff Leon that now he had an opportunity to close the cell on the sheriff even though the sheriff had so much on him. The three men had a chuckle over this prank and Godward raised his hands and said over Curtis, ‘O, what a wonderful power has this divine life of Jesus to hold the spirit of a man sweet, gentle, trustful, and buoyant at such an awful time as this. Goodnight, rest peacefully Jesses Curtis, knowing that you will be received unto God.’”

MY MOTHER WHO’D BEEN SPELLBOUND through the oration rose from the table where she had placed herself once Joshua had begun his story and said meekly, “Thank you for your great effort.” Joshua said, “Thank you, dear auntie, my pleasure. Well, I’ll be saying goodnight, I’m headed to the hotel.”

WILMA BEGAN THE PROCESS OF TURNING OUT the lights. Joshua had exhausted himself, but as he left, he looked at ease about the re-telling of Jesses Curtis’s tale.

My mother and father were staying with another of my aunts and uncles for the rest of the week. I had work scheduled the next day and so had to return to San Francisco. I kissed mother and Aunt Wilma goodnight, and walked to my car prepared to drive the three-and-one-half hours to my flat in San Francisco. I stood for a moment leaning up against the car door. The sky was moonless, and the stars went on forever.

**11:11**

This is a request from the dead  
Come see these warm gray pools  
steaming with planet heat  
Bathe in waters I no longer dread  
Come and be my companion  
Stay near me as I hover weightless  
by the dirty storefront windows  
Here nothing breathes, begins or ends  
nothing speaks, there is no view  
We assume the form of odors  
of stale and tasteless bread  
I could be standing right next to you

This is a message from the dead  
You, blinded by wristwatches, cotton  
dull aches, complex plans, yellow hats  
corrupt luxuries, pressure of atmospheres  
that touch which lingers on your skin  
Come! pull my memory from the  
soft remains of my customary chair  
and place it in a spot that  
will not be forgotten  
right next to those shoes  
you always liked to wear

## **Never Alone**

We labor, sometimes we ache  
take a moment and listen  
for the sound of wheels  
coming and going

You're up north  
visiting your child  
in that brown prison  
safe but motionless

There's a war going on  
churchyards fill with neighbors  
who woke up unaware  
they would never eat again

No burning lasts forever  
We can never be alone  
We'll dig a short while  
and sleep a long time

## **Asleep**

Someday I will sleep  
Iron and salt will occupy  
the space where I was  
That lost moment will return  
a recollection out of time

How can a longing be empty?  
This region of desire  
What are the outlines and  
where is its middle?

I sat in the sun so long  
and lay beneath mountains  
hoping for the spring  
looking up at rusty tubers  
Over everything was a  
kind of rain

I'll walk someday in wind  
and drift with currents of water  
Some of my muscle will  
rise in sparks and smokes  
and the evening earth will  
carry some reminder of my skin  
Some warmth remains  
and some dim vision  
My greatest desire is to  
feed you



## Lingering Sparks

Once, her classroom was flooded gloriously  
with the scent of saffron and roses.

Wilful words echoed off the stone walls,  
and the floorboards groaned patiently,  
as eighteen girls, shrouded in simple silks and soft sunlight,  
filled the modest space.

Now, the walls crumble under the weight of mistrust,  
the air is dense with the smell of dread,  
while the wooden floor coughs tired dust.

Only nine pupils remain.

They wear the shadows of their absent companions;  
their girlhood sacrificed to premature marriage –  
to shield their families from poverty,  
and their bodies from rape.

The teacher mourns her lost flames,  
then considers the lingering sparks.

She feeds anew the fires of their wisdom  
with stubborn words and ferocious tales;  
she prays – may the cinders of ruin never bury  
these precious flares.

## **Unseen/Unnoticed/Invisible**

Unseen, she observes – her brothers in clean clothes, heading to school.

Patiently, she awaits; her father leaving their modest home, searching for work.

Eyes sad yet forgiving, her mother begins her chores.

Unnoticed, the girl plunges into sunlight to trail her brothers' footfalls –  
imprinted darkly in her memory.

She reaches the school.

Invisible, she listens – the window ajar lets out the musical tones of the teacher.

She spies the chalky spell written upon the blackboard.

She captures the letters and hides them within her humming chest –  
where they flutter alongside her dragonfly heart.

Away the girl runs to her secret place – the pathway of a river empty.

The stolen words spill onto the dry earth.

She makes sticks her pencils, stones her punctuation.

The soil becomes her murky notebook.

Every day, she wears a dress of stitches and stories.

On the day the sun looks down on her, ferocious and insistent,  
the girl lingers for too long under the shadow of the school;  
she becomes seen by a woman – the teacher.

Why are you not in school? A gentle question.

I will soon become a wife. A bitter answer.

The girl returns to her dry path.

The teacher finds her way to the heart of the child's mother.

Rain pours upon parched souls.

The girl awakens to a dress untouched, and paper pure.

Bright pencils infuse her gaze with hopeful sparks.

Now, she marks the dirt road with her own footprints;  
and fills the classroom with her voice.

## **Courage**

A small, flimsy boat surrounded by the immense sea.

It carries a stubborn girl, who holds a soft infant.

The girl glimpses shadows all about her;

they shudder to the rhythm of the waves,

then they gather into the shape of violence –

a man forcing the girl into womanhood, too soon,

and without her consent.

The girl grasps the infant's fragile heartbeats.

She faces the raging sea, and another cruel remembrance;

of familial eyes dark with rejection and shame.

The young mother exhales the innocent scent of childhood,

and claims her daughter, over and over again.

The sea feels dense with the promise of the unknown;

still, there is so much courage cradled within the wooden husk.

## **Before/Now**

He reached inside her body and ripped out her soul and screams.

He swallowed her breaths and words.

He tore at her insides with filthy fingers,  
and forever rewrote the course of her story.

Every day, she rises with the thought of ending her existence.

She searches for a place to rest her disrupted spirit.

She finds a town with houses of stone climbing up a gentle rise;  
and blue lazily teasing its edges.

The bare skin of her feet grazes moist obsidian sand.

Her gaze lingers upon the surface of the lake;  
the hours unravel, the water reflects the changing sky, absorbs its shifting moods –  
silver, indigo, moonlight.

The moment she decides on the method of her ending, the waves still and turn murky.

Clouds gather and release stormy rain.

The lake surges and responds with raging tears.

She whispers her pain.

The tempest abates, and the liquid expanse laps quietly at her mind,  
suggesting a surprising dream –

about a woman claiming anew the pages of her life.

## The Storyteller

Her gown a patchwork of colours, she stands amid agony and ruins.  
Children surround her, reaching for the curious garb she wears.  
They stretch broken limbs, but their eyes brim and well with life.  
She gathers her courage in a breath;  
she pulls golden and silvery threads from her frayed dress.  
She spins stories in the air –  
about gentle sunlight and soothing rain.  
Voices ripple around her –  
they crave the comfort of more tales.  
She twirls and turns, the fanciful fabric unravels.  
Small hands claim whimsical and fluttering fables.  
The despair dissipates.  
Her body now bare to the world, the Storyteller awaits.  
The ruins release the echoes of footsteps.  
Women approach, bringing garments woven with tales –  
of pain, growth and strength.  
A gift for the Storyteller –  
of remembrance and womanhood.

**Cavoli Riscaldati**  
**Flavian Mark Lupinetti**

*Cavoli riscaldati né amore ritornato non fu mai buono*  
Neither reheated cabbage nor revived love is ever any good

Grandma Sofia imparted the aphorism earnestly and often to my father, the last of her sons still unmarried at the age of 38, her attempt to warn him about *that girl* he was besotted with, that girl not Italian or even Sicilian but mostly Lithuanian and possibly Polish and possibly something else with *something else* suggesting Jewish. So after years of dating and breaking up and dating and breaking up when they eventually agreed to marry, Grandma Sofia learned of the nuptials only at church when she heard the priest announce the Banns of Matrimony. Well, what recourse did she have but to engage a locksmith to change the locks while my father was at work? Well, what recourse did my father have but to wait until his mother left home so he could prop the extension ladder against the back of the tall, narrow, clapboard house and climb twenty-two feet to the open window despite his wooden leg to retrieve his belongings--his good suit, a few other clothes, a book about boat building he would never use, a copy of *Great Expectations*, and his Roy Campanella-model catcher's mitt? He tossed it all to the ground, all but a pair of underwear caught in the November wind and blown into the branches of an elm tree where they waved like a banner of triumph, provoking Grandma Sofia to swear out a warrant for breaking and entering. When the sheriff showed up at the steel mill on evening shift, thank goodness he heard my father's version and said okay don't worry about it, but Grandma Sofia forever after hated my mother. Then again she hated all her daughters-in-law, but damn the old lady loved her grandchildren, and she taught me how to cook cabbage so perfectly that to this day everybody eats every last morsel. And to this day I have never reheated a single leaf.

## A Viking's Quest

Flavian Mark Lupinetti

Whoever heard of a Viking with leprosy? A just universe would confer upon me fair compensation for the absence of my ear. You would expect so large a void in the side of this distinguished head to make a chap appear that much more ferocious to a cowering Celt or Saxon. The discerning enemy, however, soon notices how my colleagues distance themselves from their fellow marauder--the one with missing parts--so I'm kind of screwed in that respect.

Peculiar that *leprosy* begets the title *leper*, transfiguring person into vector of disease, yet those afflicted by *plague* bear no parallel epithet. One who suffers *consumption* does not receive the label *consumer*. In retaliation for Erik's stamping me *unclean*, I now pronounce him *syphilitic*. Granted, I should not stoop to name calling, but Erik could keep it in his tunic once in a while.

Our guide Henrik has thus far failed in his efforts to devise a charm or physic that lays waste to my vile affliction the way our crew lays waste to a village of farmers. Henrik's arsenicals upset my stomach yet do nothing to preserve my toes. His potion brewed from mammoth tusk slowed my tissue loss a little, but those non-formulary medicaments prove so costly. I had to exchange twelve sheep for the tiniest of phials.

Leprosy places a giant boulder in one's career path. Seldom does the tribe promote a warrior with open sores. A shame, really, not to make fullest use of the skill set possessed by a battle-tested berserker who wields the two-handed broadsword just fine despite a seven-fingered grip, a fellow recognized throughout the fjord for his administrative accomplishments. Oh, and as well a mentor, respected for the guidance he generously provides to new members of the organization . . . Or at least used to until . . . Well, you know.

I have pleaded to the gods for palliation, thus far to no avail. Odin failed to reward my sacrifice of oxen. Thor likewise deemed my virgins unworthy. Freya, capricious female, who can say what moves her? Desperation now forces me to undertake apostasy. I have heard rumors about followers of this Jesus character, said to have done creditable work with lepers. When we make our next voyage, I shall invade their village. If I pledge to leave their nutsacks intact, perhaps they will bestow a remedy.

## Return of the Monthly in the Gated Community

Mark Lupinetti

Flavian

*So much time locked up*

The Wiggins took a ribbing for being the first to miss their turn as hosts. They must have tired of hearing that with seventeen months to plan, they had an obligation to make this the greatest block party of all time. That would explain the theme they chose: "It's a Brand New World."

Few objected to Wiggin's writing *Vaccination or Mask Required* below RSVP, but DeCastro argued for evidence derived from immunoglobulin assay.

--Tell the truth, Maxine said to Wiggin. You just wanted Peterson not to come.

--No, said Wiggin. By which he meant, hell yes.

*So much time locked down*

Helene, a big hugger, opened her salon-tanned arms, confident she could resume her public displays of affectation, and she scowled when met with fist bumps and stiffarms. Art Reynolds offered to play mixologist, his credentials to do so vouched for by Lynn Reynolds:

--There isn't a son of bitch alive who's made more cocktails this year than Art.

In the before times Dowd found a different hot babe to accompany him to each of our monthly parties. This time, all by himself, he looked like the kid who got picked last in gym class.

--Online dating, man. Never did get the hang of it.

--Peterson told me he did his own research, said Barbara Knauss.

--Really? said Chivers. Epidemiology? Or did he build a cell biology lab in his auto parts store?

Hunter asked to have a word with Geleni about the latter's new shack.

--You mean my studio?

--The architectural committee didn't approve it, 'swhat I heard.

--Ah. The committee whose chairman has yet to return from his apocalypse bunker in Hawaii, and whose senior member has relocated to assisted living?

*So much time locked in.*

Martina DeJohn and Glenn Baker spent the afternoon as intertwined as two hooked-up cicadas, which did not escape the notice of Bill DeJohn and Franny Baker. Jill Macomb's dog went after the Gerazys' dog again, and Sue Gerazy threatened intervention by the sheriff or animal control, a threat as credible as bamboo ballots, because no one from the county comes out this far for anything less than a homicide.

*So much time locked out.*

The whole block agreed the Wiggins put on the best block party ever.

The block also agreed that It's the Same Old World as before.



## Tears of Repentance

### O Sincere

Everything passes through the park. Even though it is tucked away at the end of the neighborhood's trail, the thick, deep forest beyond it swallows all, but always gives back everything. Birds and spirits take flight high above the open ground used for playtime. The park is a portal to and from unknown places. When the dirt road that acts as everyone's front yard becomes green with sharp leaves and wide bushes, the park waits, wanting to be visited. It is a place of convergence but not just for the children during the summer. The rusted swing sets and metal slides, the black and brown mulch that got into their shoes, the vast openness of it welcomed all living things, dead ones, and things neither born nor created.

Moe knew none of this when she and her sister Marie went to play one afternoon. Their trip to their mother's homeland was filled with all new things: six shots at the airport, a language they had only heard when they were being scolded, and a slew of aunties, uncles, and cousins. Mabalacat had become their playhouse, a space where Moe and her sister were not under the watch of adults. Their grandfather's home was filled with chores to do, and no matter how small, everyone had to help.

Every morning, clean water had to be pumped and brought into the house for that day's use, and that was where Moe and Marie found themselves being useful. Moe helped Auntie Mari by holding the bucket still as she pumped in water. The metal basin was wide, and Moe could see all of herself in it when she peered over the edge. Her thick, black ponytails were distorted and her fat, brown cheeks bobbed in the reflection. It was like the mirror funhouse she enjoyed at the carnivals back home.

Together, they took the basin to the deck to pass it up to Marie and Auntie Tess, but Marie was the only one who took hold of the heavy water bin. Moe watched Auntie Mari hand it to her over the deck's railing and Auntie Tess watched Marie struggle. When Marie tried to pull the bucket over the railing of the deck, the bucket pulled her to the ground instead. It flipped her over the bar where she landed in the rock landscaping. Marie looked up at all of them with a face full of deep, red cuts and rocks.

Marie's face contorted when she let out a wail. The sounds of the house began to drift outside as everyone gathered to see where the sound came from. When their mother found her child on the ground bleeding, her body forgot it was pregnant. She hurried down the steps and took Marie up in both her arms, squeezing her gently against her round three-month belly. She ran through the neighborhood to get to the town center, and no one could keep up with her.

Moe looked at the now empty water basin and went to retrieve it. They still had to get water for the day. Her plans to help were stopped when her grandfather told everyone to go inside for breakfast. She followed behind her other cousins and aunties, but her grandfather was adamant about Mari and Tess staying outside. Moe remembered how the empty bucket of water echoed with the pained yells of the women when they were beaten by her grandfather for being so careless. After that day, the older cousins were instructed to take the girls to the park to play for the rest of the summer.

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The girls could not feel the hot, humid air as they ran around the park toward all the other neighborhood children that called Mabalacat home. Children understood the language of games. The top of the jungle gym became a helm to a large boat vessel and to go down the slide meant to drown leaving shrieks of feigned horror and entertainment.

Moe and Rosie loved the swings even though they burned their fingers on the metal chains. It was pain lessened by the adrenaline of play. When the single seat came into view, the girls raced to see who could get their first. Loser would be forced to push the other until her elbows hurt. They ran through the mulch, past the worn green plastic playset and the peeling red monkey bars. Moe ran faster than Marie and crossed in front of her to throw Marie off balance. Moe won. She took up the chains and steadied them as she sat in the hot seat, the thin fabric of her yellow dress protecting her from being burned.

She looked up to see Marie pushing herself off the ground, her white bandage peeling off her cheek. *Cuts on the skin allow things to creep in.* That's how Moe's mother explained why Marie needed the bandage after she fell off the deck. Moe thought this meant yucky bugs would crawl into her sister's face. She hopped off the swing to squat over her younger sister. Moe dusted the dirt out the white bandage and tried her best to stick it back to Marie's face. She saw crumbly cuts on her sister's cheek, brown marks speckled with red and white wetness. "Are you okay?" She asked.

Marie nodded, looking up at her sister with big, blank eyes. She smiled at Moe with a small corner of her bandage still flopped over.

"Are you ready?" Moe asked.

Marie looked her squatted sister up and down before pushing her over. That gave her time to scramble to her feet and sprint to the empty swing.

"That's not fair!" Moe yelled. Marie squealed in response.

"I got there first," Moe said, standing in front of the swing.

"Nooo," Marie cooed.

"Get off!"

Marie did not budge, something she got from their mother. She sat on the swing, dangling her feet. Moe walked away; arms crossed.

"If you don't get off, I'm going to tell mommy!" She called back.

"Don't do that!"

"Get off the swing!" The further Moe walked away, the more Marie whined and squirmed in the seat.

"Fine!" Marie jumped down from the swing and held one of the chains in one hand. She jerked the swing back and forth as she stomped her feet into the ground. Moe ran back ready to begin playing.

"Move!" Moe demanded. Marie huffed and chucked the swing at her sister. Moe tried to catch it, but the thick, plastic seat flew at her, jamming her in the forehead and knocking her off her feet.

Marie's whining became muted as Moe's face became flushed and hot. The heat waves of the sun-soaked park contoured before her turning everything yellow with a small black void in the center. Her head throbbed on beat with her heart and made the sides of her face warm. She shook her head in her hands and tried to rid herself of the feeling. She sat up on her knees and wiped her eyes with the sleeves of her shirt, replacing the hot feeling she felt in her face with the sting of dirt in her eyes. Moe huffed while she sat on the ground, growing increasingly aggravated and restless. She didn't feel pain until she saw the red streaks on her sleeves.

This time Moe's yell sounded out in the park. The older cousins at the playground rushed over and decided it was time to go home. Marie cried the whole walk back, scared of what their mother would do when she found out what happened. Moe kept her hand to her forehead. She was dizzy with black streaks staining her vision as she walked home.

In between the streaks, Moe saw herself walking ahead. She- this other Moe skipped all the way to the crosswalk and stopped. The vision of herself stood next to the tall crossing sign

and looked back at them, her whole head swiveling on her neck, blood dripping off her chin. Her skin burned in the sun. Smoke drifted from her scaly, crisp skin. It began to whistle. It tried to whistle, but in the small circle of its mouth blood gurgled and sputtered onto its tattered white dress.

Moe stood short of herself. She wiped her eyes. Again, and then again until it disappeared from the sidewalk corner. Moe noticed how quiet the street had been while they walked home. Not even the breeze made the trees whisper to each other.

Ж

*When you get hit in the head, it's important to stay awake because if you fall asleep, you may not ever wake up.*

That was the reason Moe's mother gave her when she forced the little girl to help clean up the kitchen. Moe stood at the sink full of dishes looking at her reflection in the window. It had gotten dark outside, but there were little orange squares of light coming from the other houses across the street. From the window, Moe thought the street looked like an undone jack-o'-lantern. It was just missing the smile. She moved her reflection around the windowpane and flashed white teeth under the sets of orange lights. She tried elongating her grin by flexing her cheeks or stretching her lips to complete the scary face that she carved out every Halloween. But the curve of her smile was too short.

Moe looked at her mother with the same tilted, stretched smile she tried out in her reflection. "Don't do that. You look scary," she said softly pinching Moe's cheek with suds dripping down her wrist. Moe looked down at her hand as she swished them around in the green tinted water with empty shrimp heads and wet vegetables. She couldn't see herself in dirty sink water like she could in the basin.

The little girl returned to looking at her jack 'o' lantern reflection. This time her eyes were missing. In their place were hollowed out black pores that sprouted thick, purple veins from the gapping sockets. Her jaw looked broken, teeth jutting out and allowing a stream of white suds to fall out the side of her mouth. A red, sinewy ring was laced about her neck, strangling her image.

Moe jerked away from the image and fell off the stool she stood on. Her mother grabbed her by the shirtsleeve, yelping as her strength failed to carry her daughter. "What's wrong?"

Moe sat up and reached for the edge of counter. She was too scared to look back through the window. The cut on her forehead began to hurt again, and she noticed that she was shaking. Moe slowly climbed to her feet, peeking over the counter to see if the monster was still in the window. All she could see was her own eyes back at her in fear.

"What happened?" Her mother asked again.

Moe looked up to her mother and ran her fingers across the bandaged cut on her forehead.

Still shaking, she sputtered out her words, "I'm tired."

Ж

Mommy always went out with the other moms for to play mahjong after the kids went to sleep. It was a time for all the women to take a break from the housework and childcare they kept them busy through the days. When bedtime came around, Adia makes sure that her daughters, Moe and Marie were tucked into the floor mattress laid out for them. Underneath the padded quilt, the girls curled into each other and the rhythm of theirs become the same faint wind. She listened to them coo in their sleep, peaceful. She ran her fingers over each girl's bandage. Both of her girls had bloodied their faces and she blamed herself for not keeping a better eye on them. She preferred them to stay in the house, but the children grew restless when they weren't allowed to play.

As Aida rose to leave, she felt Moe shutter in her sleep and mumble with the whites of her eyes barely visible through her closed lids. She rubbed her daughter's back until the tremor ceased. She was worried about the cut on Moe's head and how she got spooked earlier, but all things heal in due time.

Ж

The woman played mahjong at Maelynn's house. It was the one where each room was a different color. The kitchen was yellow with fading beige cabinets. The Living was the green room with a striped corduroy couch and thin room. The parlor, where they played and gambled was the red room. It had maroon wallpaper and dark wood furniture. The red felt table was good for dealing cards and absorbing the sound of the hard plastic mahjong tiles as they clinked against each other during the first wash. Aida sat with the eight other women in the parlor. Some drank and told jokes while others smoked as they tossed tiles around the table. Aida was focused on her hand. She ran her thumb under each tile she pulled, knowing what it was before she even looked at it.

"Marvin said your little one got hurt in the park today," Maelynn said. She sat across from Aida. "He walked them back to the house when it happened. They have to be so careful in there."

"She did, but she fine she's at the house sleeping. Her and her sister fight too much."

"They are sisters it happens. But I don't like any of them hanging around there too much. Not since they that girl." A hush fell across the table and all the ladies began to shake their heads or tsk at the statement.

"What girl?"

"It happened a few years ago. They found the body of a missing girl there. Young. Only 19." Maelynn was unbothered as she spoke, simply pulling tiles and tossing them in the center.

"Oh. I went to the vigil."

"That's why I don't let the kids stay there late."

"It's sad."

All the mothers chimed in. They lamented about how dangerous the little town was becoming. Some blamed the police others blamed the president, but they all agreed that even the park was not safe. For the rest of the night, they all fell into the same pattern. Gripping about something until someone won the hand and yelled "Mahjong!" A release of the tension that would build among them. The constant swell and release was the fun that Aida needed. Being back home allowed her to fall into the familiar rhythms of her childhood that she wanted her girls to experience. If she had it her way, she would have this new baby in Mabalacat, but knew it was better to have her back in the States.

Here, she felt like her could move more freely. She wandered the streets and tended to household chores with ease. There was a pressure she felt in the States that made her body ache more easily. It felt like her soul was more susceptible to be bent and broken, something only being home could mend. It was why she thought it was so important that the girls saw a piece of their motherland, a different way of living. Yet, in the time they had been there, it seemed like everything in Mabalacat was rejecting her girls.

By 1am, the ladies had had their fill of gambling and drinks and began to walk home. Aida stayed the furthest from Maelynn's house so as she walked through the neighborhood, the crowd of women began to thin out until it was just her left. In the night, the moon made the dirt road look muddied and stale, but it was the brightest part of the whole place. The rest of the small duplexes were washed in a blue.

Aida stopped short of the silhouette that stoop in the middle of the road. She could she the door to the house swing freely in the breeze, a square, black void. Aida nerves twisted under her skin as fear and dread wrapped itself around her. The thing hollered at her, its voice

deep and unintelligible. The commotion alerted the other neighbors and made people stir and come out of their homes.

She approached the thing wearily. The thing poised itself on all fours and crawled along the ground. Eyes glowing bright orange. Fingertips and toes-stained dark red. Purple veins etched across its body. Its head twitched and swiveled on its neck and bore the face of her daughter, Moe.

It didn't take much to startle the thing. The moment Aida called out to her daughter, she scurried away leaving charred hand and footprints in its wake. It leaped and bounded past all the other houses and crashed into porches and trash bins. Aida and some of the other neighbors ran after it. They chased the thing all the way to the park. Aida knew immediately it was there that her daughter was corrupted by whatever controlled her now. The things bellowed into the night while trying to fend off the neighbors that came out the corral the thing.

Aida lunged toward her daughter, but it swiped at her, scratching the skin of her neck and shoulder. They wrestled on the ground. The thing wasn't strong just unruly. It squirmed and chattered its teeth trying to free itself. Aida never thought bringing her children home could compromise they're very being. Her daughter was being possessed by something resentful and wild. Though her shoulder was raw with pain, she couldn't let go. Her daughter thrashed in her arms, resisting her hold. The mother sobbed over her daughter, a language in the tears only God could hear. Others should about them. Some weaved prayer beads about their fingers while others cupped candles in their hands in pray.

The sounds of the park were washed out with Aida's cries.

Aida's cries washed the skin of her child until it regained its even brown complexion. She felt her little daughter's body relax in her arms. She looked down to see a familiar set of big eyes wet tears. The tears that dripped onto Moe's face were warm and released the tightness she felt though out her body. Together, they had learned what it felt like to be home.

## Mulberry Tree

David Shapiro del Sole

She is receding. That's the feeling Jane gets when at dusk she hears the doves crying into the empty space above the rooftops and she starts thinking about her eighty-three years. With chronic back pain, a hip and two knee replacements already under her belt and a conviction that things aren't going to get any better, she can't see it makes much sense to keep hanging on. She tells herself she's foolish, and yet... there are things she still wants to do; what they are she can't say.

At this moment, intending to phone her grandson but along the way having slipped into thoughts about her mortality, Jane has been holding the phone receiver in her hand for more than the allotted time. Her communication provider allows its landline customers thirty seconds and no more to pick up the phone and complete their dialing. Getting distracted, as Jane has, even by thoughts as inevitable and commanding as those of life and death, does not constitute an exception. Her time is up and the phone is now screeching, beep-beep-beep, into her ear.

"Oh, hell!" she shouts slamming the receiver down.

There are things of this world that shouldn't be. Her current experience is an example: she has been dismissed, not a trace of civility shown and no one available to complain to other than the monomaniacal beep-beep-beep. The receiver sits smugly in its cradle. She stares at the phone's smooth, hard blackness, considers its infuriating solidity and then fetches up a word that she's recently acquired and that for her has the power of a charm. It's a word she learned a few months earlier from a tradesman doing repairs on her back verandah. Strictly speaking, the word was not entirely new to her; she'd heard it many decades before as an adolescent—from boys standing round outside her high school—but it was only on that afternoon, following the heated argument she overheard from her open kitchen window between the tradesman and someone at the other end of his phone, that she experienced for the first time the authority of its hammering syllables. What she saw and heard from her kitchen window was the tradesman, his tanned, muscular legs in his tight-fitting khaki shorts, put his phone back in his pocket, then take a couple of quick steps forward, violently punch the air and howl to the sky the word she'd soon make her own and endow with life-giving power. Out of respect for its mystical power and not wishing to profane it, she vowed never to utter the word aloud. If someone was talking to—rather, *at* her, which gave her the feeling that she was not being seen or listened to, she would wait until they finished and while offering them one of her wholesome, little-old-lady looks filled with innocence and kindness and a hint of vacancy, would, gazing benevolently, silently form the word of resistance, *cocksucker*. Having been momentarily weakened by another's failure to adequately acknowledge her, Jane would then feel restored. With the assistance of an unspoken word she could reclaim her power and feel herself again, allowing the unvoiced magic of the word to resonate within her, savouring each deliciously forbidden note as it flowed through her warming blood.

This was her secret ritual for avenging wounds received from an increasingly unresponsive world. The displacement of what she described as "person talk" by beep-beep-beeps, recorded messages that instructed her to press buttons she couldn't find, promotional deals fired at her as if from an automatic weapon, and a robotic voice patronizing her with the absurd

assertion, "Your call is important to us." And if all that wasn't disheartening enough, later to hear real people in public spaces speaking in the same tones of disconnection as marked those life-sapping phone calls. Human participation was no longer wanted, it seemed. How then was she to express her need to be heard, to be met, other than with an obscenity for what could not possibly hear or meet her?

She stands and walks about the lounge, then into the kitchen. She'll try the phone call later, doesn't know when. She's tired. These days she often feels that way, has the sense of things slipping away, things she one day planned to do. The spice shelf, for instance, that with the help of her friend Louise, she put up in the kitchen a few years back, but despite good intentions, the shelf still lacks any kind of order. A sensible arrangement for all the spices and herbs, now sitting higgledy-piggledy on the shelf, has become a distant dream. She pauses as she remembers other instances of her ebbing will. She'd once thought (actually checked out the cheapest and most direct flights to America) of visiting her son Raymond living in New York. Whatever happened to that? And she recalls the film she saw many years before, set in New York, a love story, scenes from which at quiet moments still come back to her: streets fronted by charming old brownstone houses, a large, lovely green park where the two lovers would often meet, its man-made lake dotted with ducks and families in rowboats together enjoying a leisurely afternoon. All of it, including the air breathed in by the city's mythic streets, was there for the lovers, for *their* story. But here, in the kitchen now, the thought of one day visiting her son strikes her as being like so many of her other former plans that have quietly excused themselves. She wonders if somewhere deep down, she always knew she would never visit Raymond or New York. But she's being silly, how could she have known? In any case, she knows now.

She stands looking out the window into the backyard as if trying to see what lies ahead. Her gaze rests on the mulberry tree; its slender, bent branches appearing burdened under the weight of thickly hanging leaves. She remembers the day she bought it as a small plant from a nursery over by the river. She liked shopping at the nursery and that whole area of town, where, when the weather was fine, she'd often stroll along the paved public path that accompanied the river's mute meandering. At times, she could feel inside herself the river's flow as it slipped quietly by, and her feeling would banish all thoughts of where the river or she were going as if its destination and hers were in their very passing.

Browsing in the nursery that day, she came upon the small plant; some of its young leaves brown from lack of water. It sat in a black, plastic pot with a label crookedly stuck to the vinyl surface, announcing, "Sale, 50% off!" A plastic card stuck in its soil said it was a mulberry tree that would produce an abundance of sweet, dark berries. It seemed so small and solitary; she wondered would it ever reach maturity. The 50% reduction label, carelessly pasted to the pot, suggested its chances weren't good. But statistics and numbers generally weren't tools Jane ever found to be useful. And, as well, she had in her a vein of contrariness, a difficulty in submitting to so-called certainties. Like the view she often heard expressed that betting on a winner was a smart thing. For Jane, what people who had faith in that belief didn't understand was that good things could come from doing just the opposite, that welcoming loss as an equally valuable result might turn out to be a win. Of course, that muddled up the whole notion of winning and losing to the point that, at times, it was hard for Jane to know which was which. Confusion was no stranger to her, and so, in the end, she bought the tree, hardly worthy of that name at the time, took it home and planted it in her backyard, a thing she'd never done before, plant a tree. She was then twenty years old, not long married and carrying new life in her belly.

Her thoughts continue to wander as she leans against the kitchen counter facing out the window into her backyard, and eventually remembers a time she has been revisiting with increased frequency of late.

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A clear, peaceful morning in early Spring, the first day after the end of school holidays. Jane's family moved house only a week earlier to a suburb further out from the city, and today is her first day at her new school. It all feels strange. She recalls her mother saying as they were walking to the car that morning, "You're a big girl now, a school girl."

Jane is standing in the school playground with a girl she has just met from class two, a year ahead of her. When the girl first approached and asked Jane, who had wandered off on her own, if she wanted to play, Jane felt there was something cold and hard in the girl's look, it sent a shiver through her, and so she didn't answer. There is awkwardness now between them as they stand at the edge of the playing field, apart and unnoticed by the other children, distant enough to be invisible to their schoolmates who are busy with their games, racing about and shouting at the other end of what seems to the playing children an endless stretch of green grass and open sky that excites their limbs. Though mistrustful, Jane feels that right now the girl's company is better than standing at the margins of the field alone. She is experiencing a mix of discomfort and relief when out of nowhere, the other announces, her words puncturing the air, "I'm gonna do a poo."

Jane doesn't understand. She stares.

"Do you wanna do one?" the other asks.

Jane looks over the field's expanse. In the distance, on the other side, three teachers stand together monitoring the students' play. What does she mean, Jane wonders. It's the kind of question her mother asks before they go out for the day, but this girl is not her mother.

'I'm gonna do mine here. You can do one too.'

The meaning of the girl's strange words frightens Jane. In the distance, the weathered, red-brick, windowed face of the school stands remote from what is happening, the brick walls with their glaring eyes of glass alert for any threats to the serious work carried on inside.

Jane hoped the other was wanting to play nicely. She doesn't want to play bad play, the kind that naughty children play. Jane has never been that kind of girl, never wanted to be. She now peers past the other to where far away the three teachers stand. She doesn't want to ask for their help because that would mean she wasn't a big girl, a school girl.

The sky is a large, blue innocence stretching above them (this strange girl and herself) and within the blue enormity, Jane feels small and frightened and wants to be back home. The other girl, older, who seems to know things Jane doesn't, hard, cold things that scare her, is looking at her and waiting. And then, as if all rules of behaviour are suspended by a sudden, simple act, the girl pulls down her undies and squats. Jane does not move, frozen where she is. The world contracts around her; her mother's absence is knotted in her stomach. A chaos



of moments happening at once in a space without features or outline. All goes dark. Then, as abruptly as light has vanished, it beams again. The girl's eyes are staring up at her from where she crouches on the grass. But now the eyes are beacons of safe harbour, rescue from unbounded distances and faces belonging to children Jane doesn't know. The eyes are inviting her to a place as quiet and reassuring as her mother's voice, redeeming what a moment earlier Jane believed was totally unacceptable.

The need glowing in the girl's eyes is pleading irresistibly, and at the next moment, with equal clarity, proclaiming an uncompromising sovereignty, back and forth, first one and then the other, but which Jane experiences as a single, steady gaze reminding her of times at the beach when her dad carries her on his broad shoulders as he wades into the water up to his chest, and she looks down and, if the sea is still, sees all the way to the sandy bottom. It's *that* that's in the girl's eyes, and Jane takes it as a sign that what is happening is part of something much more than she can now know.

The other children's shouts and laughter ring out across the playground. Jane feels the wind on her neck, the companionship of the trees standing tall on two sides of the playing field. She has a sense that all her six years are calling her to witness in another's eyes a mix of light and darkness that's different from anything she's ever beheld in eyes and that she knows lives in herself as well.

The wind blows and carries away all that is unnecessary. Nothing is left but a need burning in a pair of green eyes, the intensity consuming whatever defines and divides. A quiver up her spine, and for a split-second Jane feels... but no, she mustn't. She turns, runs, running as fast as she can across the wide, open space of the grassy field until she reaches the other side where a group of children is playing tag. Her heart pounds and for a while she feels she can't get enough air. When her breathing finally calms, she looks back across the field and at the other end sees the girl standing alone looking in her direction. The girl is motionless and seems to be trying hard to make out something unclear in the distance.

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Jane is standing in her kitchen looking out the window. She is here, she tells herself. And there's the mulberry tree that early each summer bears its fruit. She will have to wait almost another whole year to again taste the sweetness. Will she still be here?

During what is left of the morning, Jane watches a few television programs that do not interest her. She makes herself a sandwich for lunch, thinks about what she wants to do, then goes for a short walk, stopping at a café not far from home that she frequents. She orders a pot of tea, reads some newspaper articles, mostly the headlines. But it is not news she is feeling in need of. She's uneasy, restless. Again, the memory intrudes: that day at school on the playing field when she experienced something she has repeatedly fled and then returned to. But now, the memory of that day transforms into an imagined scenario, in which she honours the girl's request, squats and releases onto the grassy playing field her own bodily expression of defiance. She entertains her imagining for a while until she abruptly cuts it short.

She is again aware of the café's surroundings. Her breathing is rapid. She looks about; customers are eating, sipping from their mugs, chatting, gazing absently into space. No one is staring at her. She breathes out slowly.

When she makes her way home later that afternoon, she goes to her room, lies down, dozes and has a dream she can't remember when she wakes though the disturbing feel of it is still with her. She turns her mind to other things, wondering if maybe she should sell her house; she doesn't really need so much space. She could shift into a small flat. Yes, she tells herself, she'll do that, something she's told herself before, many times. As she lies on her bed with the blue cover with its yellow-threaded embroidery pattern she is so fond of, she finds herself once again back on the open playing-field of her childhood.

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The girl, whose name she can't remember (she feels as though she never knew it though she is sure that's not possible), runs off, finds Miss Hampsen, the school principal, who is out and about inspecting her flock, and tells her that Jane has pooped in the playground. Miss Hampsen, doubtful such a thing possible, demands evidence, and when moments later, appalled, she witnesses the scene of desecration with her own eyes, as if they were a bird of prey's, her sharp, exacting gaze begins sweeping the playing field.

The prey is standing by a tree watching Miss Hampsen and the girl as they speak. The girl's hands are gesturing to highlight some element of her story. Jane is too far away to hear what they are saying, but burning in her lungs is a sensation she has never experienced and has no name for.

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Jane stretches on her bed. She is lost in thoughts all leading nowhere. She reproaches herself for allowing a small incident that happened when she was a child to still gnaw away at her. She wonders if perhaps she needs help. One in four, she knows, are diagnosed during their lifetime. She heard that on tv, can remember the expert being interviewed, a psychiatrist or psychologist or some such thing, an older man; spoke very nicely, no airs. After the program, she wondered what she'd say if she had the chance to speak with him. Maybe she would tell him about her husband of thirty-three years, a decent man, to whom, after a while, she had little to say, and he to her, especially as the kids were getting older. She would try to tell the nice man about her feelings during those long silences between her husband and herself, about the aching feeling in her that there should be more, and yet the both of them submitting to the silence as though they were meant for it.

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On the following day, Jane's mother is called up to school to speak to the principal, and Jane is interviewed by a psychologist, asked to place coloured pegs into differently shaped holes and answer questions about nightmares and bedwetting. It does not take long for the school to figure out who the guilty party is. A few weeks later the other girl is no longer to be seen at school. Jane learns from a year-two student that the girl's family has moved from the area.

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That evening, Jane decides to try again calling her grandson. This time she's successful, happy that she has caught him.

“Hi Jimmy, how are things?”

He hesitates, and she waits silently.

“A bit difficult at the moment; Lisa and I are... having a hard time.”

“Oh, I’m sorry.”

Jane is more than sorry, she’s scared. She needs Jimmy and Lisa settled, content, a happy family. She has invested too much time and effort, too many of her own dreams in her grandson’s journey from suicidal, substance-addicted teen-ager to responsible adult for her train of hopes now to be derailed.

“Is there anything I can do?” she asks.

“Thanks, Gran, I don’t think so. We’re working on it.”

Jane feels helpless. She so badly wants to help. For Jimmy’s sake and Lisa’s. She likes Lisa though Jane knows she can be a force when she feels wronged. She knows, too, that her desire to help is not for others alone. As her capacities have slowly diminished and her world grown smaller over these past few years, she has increasingly placed her hopes in her grandson and his family. She doesn’t want to think what it would be for her if they broke up again. And she’s aware, as well, that Jimmy can easily take the path of least resistance. Those years of drug use have left their mark; sometimes it pains her to witness it. He has had so much disappointment in his life, and his mother, Jane’s own daughter, always too busy with other things, her work, men, a different one every few months it seemed, and at the start of each relationship, she’d claim it was different, that it was the real thing this time, and true to pattern, it turned out to be a disaster just like the ones before. Jane cannot fathom that Ruth never saw how her son was pining for her just as she regularly pined for her lost lovers.

There’s a difficult pause; neither knows how to continue.

Jane reaches for the doable.

“The reason I was calling was to ask if, maybe, you and Lisa and Rita would like to come for lunch one afternoon?”

“When were you thinking, Gran?”

“It’s up to you, really; I’m here pretty much all the time”

“I’ll need to check with Lisa, if that’s okay, and then get back to you.”

“That’s fine, darling.”

When the call finishes Jane remains seated on the lounge sofa. More thoughts, many the same ones, and memories. The time she found him lying face down on his bedroom floor after having swallowed a fistful of painkillers. Her shock, her grandson, a fourteen-year-old child!

What had the world come to? That experience and others like it during those dreadful years of his addiction now drift through her mind like a chilling draft of air. And it occurs to her that she too is drifting--on a cloud as she looks down at the barren landscape staring back at her, challenging her to rouse herself and, knowing what she now knows, to dare descend.

In time, after standing and making her way unsteadily past the long dining table with its eight straight-back chairs, past the photos of her three grown children hanging on the wall--the two boys now living in faraway countries, the daughter in Australia like herself, in the same city in fact but rarely in touch--Jane passes through the arched doorway into the kitchen. It's dinnertime. She stops to stand by the sink and look out the window into the backyard. Her place, she thinks, where her children grew up. The mulberry tree that she planted shortly after she and John moved into the house, their first child about to be born. So many things. She wonders that a small plot of earth can hold so much.

The evening sky, the colour of a sweet amber syrup, stirs feelings in her too mixed to separate out. Light streams through the window and gilds the corner of the kitchen counter and outside the topmost section of fence marking the boundary of her suburban home. Remembrance tinged with presentiment seeps into an evening that is shading towards a lilac twilight. She feels her life: what it was, might be and everything in between. She gazes at her frail hands. As a younger woman, she was a quick and skillful seamstress. As a wide-eyed, nineteen-year old, having experienced little of life, meeting the nice-looking young man at a church social and later becoming his wife. It's hard for her to recall now what she felt back then, her memory having become clouded by the grayness of her life's small, accumulated events. How different her recollection of that moment on the school playing field when she beheld a gaze that in its wake, even after all these years, sparkles the colour of green eyes.

Crazy, she thinks. She will never understand it. She wonders if maybe it was her fearfully running away, leaving the girl alone with her disgrace. Who had betrayed whom after all?

She bends at the waist, her back painfully resisting, takes a pot from the cupboard under the benchtop, then cautiously straightens and begins preparing her evening meal.

When all is simmering along on the stove, waiting for the egg noodles to soften and cook through and the previous night's vegies to re-heat, she sits down and soon finds she is too tired to get up again to flick on the light. As the kitchen darkens, she sits drinking in the growing obscurity as though it were a warming cup of tea. The outlines of breakfast and lunch dishes set in the drying rack gradually blur and dissolve, the numbers on the wall-clock face melt away, the kitchen window becomes a weary eye that having witnessed enough for one day is about to close. Among the threads of vanishing light, Jane, settled comfortably in her chair, is thinking about nothing particular when she realizes that she's not actually hungry. So, with effort and some annoyance, she rises balancing herself against the kitchen table, crosses to the stove, turns it off and then returns to sit down. It's almost totally dark. She's exhausted, doesn't want to move. She imagines how it would be to do nothing forever, and a sense of ease seeps through her. Time and its purpose slow and then vanish altogether. Nothing is behind her, nothing ahead.

When the flow of moments resumes, it's accompanied by a faint tightness in Jane's chest, which she feels that for her whole life has never left her except for the moment just past when everything but herself seemed to stop. Strange, she thinks, to have nothing but yourself and

that it should feel... so quiet. A feeling she would not have expected. It's as though all the old, noisy bits have stilled. For a time, she sits surprised by where her life has come to, to a place where nothing is happening except her. Sometimes when she shuts the tv off—it's a little like that only much more. She marvels at how *she* is happening and thinks that until now she's overlooked herself, that she's never actually noticed that that gentle, crazy music that was always playing in the background and that she never really paid attention to, was her. She feels about to grasp something of great importance, but she's not agile enough and it slips quickly away. But despite its getting away, her contentment stays, for something was there, something she initially thought too small to warrant her attention and that, like the unrolling sounds of a tolling bell, is now expanding out from where she sits bestowing on each and every object in her shared space its rightness.

When finally she acknowledges the day has ended and that she desperately needs to sleep, she prises herself out of her chair and slowly makes her way through the arched doorway leading from the kitchen into the dining room and then into the lounge. She progresses by small, uncertain steps through each room of her home, and as she does so, allows her fingers to brush affectionately along the walls that, for better and for worse, have structured her life. At last, wondering at the quiet that for a moment had so completely taken hold of her and that is still lingering in its strange way, she carries her tired body down the hallway to sleep.

## Beach at Larrabee State Park

On the shore  
my wife sits in a lawn chair  
looking out at the whirling grey  
clouds trapped  
in the overturned glass of sky  
suddenly a gust  
of cold wind blows her black bangs back  
revealing her adventurous heart  
bang foliage  
knocking heart oak  
next to her my son  
plonks stones into a bucket  
then waves a flag  
of seaweed stuck to a stick  
like he is signaling the lone boat on the bay  
the waves drop items on the beach for him  
that they've won from the Pacific in trade

I head out in search of shells  
with my daughter in tow  
at low tide  
there is an eerie muck over everything  
a haunting of lichens and barnacles  
that has turned the beach  
into a grim witch's den  
of eyeballs in caldrons  
and mason jars filled with blood  
this place is unrecognizable  
the crowds of yesterday  
with their water games are gone  
gone too the beach's placid smile  
revealing sparkling teeth  
we are alone  
and in some ways I must say  
that I prefer the beach today  
it looks stricken  
but fearless  
a piney war vet sitting upright  
on a piece of driftwood  
one leg crossed over the other  
I feel the kind of happiness here  
that drips slowly into sadness  
until I can no longer tell the two apart  
as I point out  
the different shells to my daughter  
telling her which ones  
would really add to her collection

## Barcelona Sunrise

I have no desire for purity  
but there have been a few short moments of my life  
when I gazed upon beauty  
so magnificent that my skin was lost  
in a galaxy so distant from myself  
that I knew it must be perfection

One night in Barcelona I awoke in the dark  
feeling drawn to the Mediterranean  
the city had committed some crime  
leaving oily fingerprints all over her streets  
and I made my own way through the distorted grimace  
of five a.m.  
I saw drunks past drunkenness  
thieves past deceit

I saw a man violently holding a woman down and believe it or  
not I had the presence of mind to whistle to the nearby policia in  
fact I saw something like a carcass on every cobblestone  
and by the time I'd had enough I'd made it too far to turn back  
desperate for coffee I stopped at a twenty-four hour market I  
tried speaking Spanish but my eyes must have been reddened by  
American cartoons because the clerk asked me what I wanted in  
English I guzzled an iced coffee drink and scarfed down a  
banana on a bench outside I knew I was safe there because the  
nearby dock was filled with yachts and nothing keeps out the  
corruption of the poor like the corruption of the rich

Finishing my makeshift breakfast  
I continued on my journey  
because of the docks I knew I was close  
the wax of my legs was melting  
on a short wick of burning pain  
but sure enough the streets of the city soon ended  
and I climbed a short rise  
spread out below me was a beach  
and the sea just beyond

A few scattered onlookers had gathered  
a red fingernail was dipping into the sky  
I found a solitary spot  
and sat down to watch

Then the pale hand of a princess slid those red fingernails back  
and forth along the horizon leaving her orange peels while she  
enjoyed the fruit I waited there for quite a while but I didn't  
mind because the gulls were crying the tales of Odysseus and  
peace would come down now and then to shatter me into a kind  
of liberated wreckage by now a single cloud had slithered its  
way to the horizon its underbelly lit up with pink virtues as the  
surfers began their morning rides and soon

We	all	saw
the sun		
arriving like a birth		
or a grateful hand	reaching	
too small for minutes		
too big for centuries		

Moving up beyond the confines of time  
shaking off its droplets in the cool air



## Do You Remember

Hey, do you remember that movie?  
The one with the heroine trained in the ancient art  
of kung-fu who also worked as a waitress. She  
befriended a struggling painter who only knew  
how to paint his dog. We walked  
the foreign streets of our hometown as we talked  
about the movie all night, our dialogue  
and the character's dialogue melding into one  
great projection from our hearts. Sidewalks  
faded into pixels, traffic sounds were orchestrated  
by memories, and I felt like we understood things  
maybe even enough to change them. It's killing me.  
What was the name of that one?

Hey, do you remember that song? The singer  
sounded like a cross between Bruce Springsteen  
and Jello Biafra, it also featured a bass solo  
and a woman rapping about breastfeeding. We  
illegally downloaded it from a snowbank,  
so it would only play at nighttime or when it was  
cold outside. We used to sit in your basement  
for hours listening to it, each note a whale  
occasionally rising to the surface of our consciousness  
to spout philosophies. I swear, it's on the tip  
of my tongue. What was the name

of that—? Hey, do you remember that video  
game? The one where the characters descended  
into hell on skateboards to slay demons and zombie  
stockbrokers with baseball bats. We spent thumbs  
sinking into the couch, the tug of eye  
on spectacle the only force keeping us from drowning  
in cushions as we indefatigably tried to beat  
that game. Our friendship became more vivid  
in the fog of imaginary war and our proximity  
made that final victory so exhilarating.  
What was—? Oh hey, look, your phone  
is dangling another thread of light for us  
but it is so bright that I can't see anything.

## Taco Bob and the Sour Creams

Bob started off playing Black Sabbath covers on a nylon-stringed Spanish guitar as his taco truck developed the odor of no customers which metastasized into the stench of imminent closure. One day “Cool” Jackie McKay, saxophonist for the Sunday Night Show Band, stopped by. Biting into his mediocre pork taco, he heard jet streams plucked from an acoustic guitar and wildflower-strewn hillsides stretching out from a voice. “Excuse me, was that you singing?”

Taco Bob was annoyed at the interruption, “yeah.” “Listen, it sounded great, here’s my card. If you even wanna play together, look me up.”

A few months later the taco truck was a steel shell packed with melted dreams and crisp darkness sold to a corn dog vendor. “Blasphemy,” Bob shook his head as one last drop of salsa receded into the darkness. He looked up Jackie McKay the very next week and soon enough they formed a band with McKay on sax, “Thundering” Lee on drums, Lester Podewitz on bass, Alan Greer on keyboards, and Taco Bob on vocals and guitar. The first practice felt like a sneeze setting a tissue on fire and they all knew this was something special. “But why

are all the songs about tacos?” Lester Podewitz asked. Bob shrugged, “tacos are my first love.” And so Taco Bob and the Sour Creams recorded their LP *The Hottest Sauce in History* and shocked the world with a hit single, “Hiding in a Soft Shell” in which jazz was seduced by funk, who in turn was cheating on punk rock, all of them infatuated with heavy metal. The band toured the U.S. and Europe singing, *hiding in a soft shell, we’re hiding, oh, oh, we’re hiding, oh, oh...*

When they returned to the studio a year later,  
Lester Podewitz announced he had written a song  
that was not about tacos but did have  
four bass solos for him to show off his chops,  
“Cool” Jackie Mckay complained  
about his share of royalties, “Thundering”  
Lee was struggling with a heroin addiction  
he had picked up from a stripper in Texas,  
Alan Greer wanted the band to sound more pop.  
More importantly, every musician seemed empty  
of their flavors and one day Bob  
never showed up at the studio. The record company  
searched everywhere but to no avail. In fact,  
no one has seen him since. A few months back  
I did hear about a tack truck in Tucson though.  
It is said that if you make a request  
at a certain time of the night and if he is in  
the right mood, the owner  
will take out a guitar and sing,  
*we're hiding, oh, oh*, to the entertainment  
of the diners. Supposedly, he's pretty good.

## Traffic Light Meditations

After my wife informed me  
of her cancer diagnosis  
I wasn't exactly having a great day  
and when "Under the Bridge" by the Red Hot  
Chili Peppers came on the radio  
my throat tossed out a strand of song,  
hoping the right note would grab it  
and pull. It didn't. Once those  
high notes hit I was left on that oxcart  
of limitations barreling into my heart  
(the same one that crashed  
into piles of basketballs when I was a kid);  
the oxen fled, goods were scattered,  
and awakening in my car again I came

to a stoplight a few blocks later.  
An elderly man was crossing the road,  
in truth, maybe not much older than me.  
As I watched him I thought  
of all the landscapes that had seen his body,  
all the foods that had tasted him,  
almost done with him now.  
Crouching in a grey jacket, he reached  
the sidewalk and it felt unfair  
that such a rich catalogue of pain  
and loveliness should pass by my car  
without speaking a word, without  
looking into my eyes to say,  
"I know it's hard and things seem meaningless  
but one day..." He just kept walking  
up his hill, one more sparking wire  
attached to a machine we couldn't fix  
if we tried to. The traffic light turned green.  
I met a friend for a beer.

## Dance Partner

A record spinning  
dancing with Time  
before that prince of satellites  
is on to the next partner  
but while they are in each other's tocks  
the record dominates  
her long locks of rhythm sweeping back and forth  
the notes of her body  
suggestively pressing against clocks  
and when Time releases her hand to go  
you almost feel bad for him

These vinyl belles for Time  
have eyes of blues and golden jazz  
have red rock lips and the soul smile  
Time prefers their full black hips  
to the skinny distractions hiding in the alleyways  
between thoughts  
I enjoy having Time so entranced  
this Time that has always entranced me so cruelly  
but of course he's winning our little game  
now that my wife is sick  
I see the way he dips her down  
to the cracking glass floor  
during the gurney waltz  
the way he lifts her limbs in the lindy hop  
ready to toss a leg over his shoulder or an arm  
between his legs  
so all I can do is offer  
these waxen beauties as substitutes  
hoping grace and groove will keep him at bay  
feet stepping fast and hot

## Taco Night

Beef sizzling  
I add water  
from an old coffee mug  
I admit  
I'm the whitest guy ever  
so all the ingredients can be found at Safeway  
but I can't stop loving tacos  
cooking from the body  
for the body's delight  
I stir in the seasoning and keep stirring  
my thoughts slosh around  
with the water on the stove  
waves of faces and regrets  
this food probably isn't Mexican  
so I can't tell my kids  
that this is a way to honor their Latin heritage  
like my wife's atole  
and yet we are all excited for taco night

The water boiling  
I stop stirring and turn down the heat  
I empty a can of refried beans into a pan  
vegetables are chopped  
cheese is grated  
when the meat is done I slide it  
into the crunchy Ortega shells  
shortly thereafter we all sit down to eat  
we laugh during dinner  
telling stories from the day  
the meal lacks tradition  
though it is a celebration  
of what  
I cannot say

## The Murder

I feel bad for the crows, all they want  
to do is meet up with friends  
and everyone is already pointing at them  
whispering, “murder.” They are loud  
at the park this morning, squawking  
in unison, then flying together from tree  
to tree. It seems odd, as if the crows  
have a secret. Maybe one of them  
has bad breath, or maybe food was seen  
on a branch but they cannot remember where.

My son and I are kicking a ball back and forth  
and as I retrieve it from a puddle I look up  
to see the autumn red of a maple covered  
in a black bathrobe of crows, all gazing at me  
with that awkward stare of interrupted intimacy.  
I continue kicking the ball with my son,  
still aware of their precarious perch.  
If my parents were here they’d laugh  
about Hitchcock’s *The Birds* but I’m disconcerted  
by the furious flight, the silent stillness  
of its aftermath. In that tree, I see  
the strangeness of my own mortality  
and its many eyes peering back at me as if from  
some timeless darkness just beyond the dinner table.  
Then caw!—flapping, pecking chaos—the crows  
are swirling in the air. I duck and kick the ball  
back to my son. He doesn’t even notice  
the crows as he sets the ball up perfectly.

## Improvisation on a Theme

*Berlioz' 'Harold in Italy', as improvised  
by organist Haig Mardirosian*

*Bass line on the pedals--*

The man walks to her door.  
She is without expectations--  
her last boyfriend had been unfaithful,  
the one before had left.

*then, brightly, Harold's theme.*

First date: dinner at the *Yeng Ching Palace*.  
She tells of her immigration,  
her love for D.C. He speaks of his Kansas  
childhood, the films he makes about science.  
He says the *Yeng Ching* is the best Chinese  
restaurant in D.C. She asks if he's tried all  
of them. He laughs, admitting he hadn't.  
At evening's end, from joy and relief,  
she kisses him.

*The serenade dances*

They start to explore one another.  
At the Corcoran, he shows her  
how to view photography "where  
is the center of interest?"  
She reads Adrienne Rich to him.  
Laughter at word play.  
Sharp exchanges,  
finely honed tongues clashing.

Can they surmount  
her English upbringing,  
his Midwest background?

*disharmonies enter.*

He enjoys vistas, like the prairie,  
she wants an enclosed English garden  
with hedges and a gate.



*Tensions, loud power,  
cadence faster: sharp tones of promise.*

They cook curries--  
coriander, cumin, sweet cardamom,

*The early theme repeated, tentative touch, mature now.*

attend *Othello*, discuss the new interpretation,  
sing *Mack the Knife* together,  
attend organ concerts.  
She reads his stories, he reads her poems.

*The serenade, loud and powerful  
this has come from that:  
passion from restraint  
roar, shout, crescendo.*

## Irrigation

Last year, you set up our irrigation system in the raspberry bed: PVC pipe, soakers connected to a stand-pipe with its stiff blue handle.

Now, one soaker's broken, sending water gushing. How to replace it without breaking fragile stems with their hard promise of berries?

"This is how you change old wiring", you say, "attach the end of the new to the old, and pull." You snake long soakers until the new one's in place.

You didn't change wives that way. You made a clean break, no lover to tide you over. You dragged through thickets of discord alone, no replacement in tow.

## **Paris, The Elevator**

With its shaft crammed into the open O  
of the old spiral staircase, the elevator  
holds us side-by-side, but close.  
Our ritual kiss. We've gone up  
and down for two weeks, as we have  
these past few years, commuting  
from close to aloof. Here, we exit to Paris,  
its pâté, Matisse or Rousseau.

We're going home now. My suitcase and I  
fill the space, as you wait upstairs.  
At the bottom, I drag it out, close the door.  
You press the button from the top.  
The elevator ascends between us.

## Memory

a sharpened pencil, starts off  
pointed, accurate. For some, it grows  
rounded, flattened, until the lead is thick  
and dull. We, their spouses, often  
aging ourselves, must remember and resolve  
for two: record names, numbers,  
all appointments, what to say to the plumber.  
Do I remind my husband for the third time  
to call his doctor, or must I call her myself?  
He's looking for the pencil sharpener.  
He asks me: Do I remember where he put it?

## **Legacy**

I knew your sons first as boys, their robust shape handed down like a family legend. From grandma Maud, who braised old hens in bacon grease, to grandson Tom, whose swimming and baseball leave his form unscathed. It's true of character, too. You're becoming a curmudgeon,

taking lessons from your father, who growled into old age. He had an imaginary dog, Fritzie, whom he'd call to heel in front of your friends. Growing tired of hearing neighbor dogs bark, he talked of starting a dog daily renting service. You tell me you're thinking about one of your own.

## Appreciation

Count on your fingers  
the things you cherish about him:  
how he cooks you mashed potatoes  
every time you ask, teasing you  
“It’s the third time this week”,  
how you see politics, other people  
the same way; and how you laugh together  
over puns or silly things.  
Remember them  
amid the hard times,  
when he should have been home  
two hours before  
and you notice, plugged into the wall,  
his phone, still charging.  
You guess he can’t find  
where he parked the car.  
He’s walking around, searching for it  
and all you can do is wait,  
like Houston losing contact  
with their solo astronaut.

## **Breaking the News**

In a country where the Gender Reveal Party has become the fashion, we have some different news to reveal to our friends: my husband's been diagnosed with Minor Cognitive Impairment. First lesson for me, it's not mine to tell-- the information belongs squarely to my husband.

Second, it is bespoke, must be tailored for each person. He tells friends who love food, he cannot remember the measure of cardamom in a cup of sweet raita; our theater-loving companions, that in the play *Othello* he is no longer able to recall the name of Iago's dog.

## The Bologna Man

Gary Wilkens

My mother at 19 had something in her face my old photos of her did not catch. There was the long, almost brown from freckles face that in a less pretty woman would have been called “horsey.” There were the kaleidoscopic brown eyes, the untamed wheat brown hair, and the arrow straight nose. The small but full mouth with the suggestion of a smirk over perfect teeth. I was staring, the words *élan vital* on my tongue.

“See something ya like there ...what did you say your name was?” Her breath was sweet with whisky from the green glass in her hand, her voice clear over Led Zeppelin’s “Kashmir.”

“Oscar,” I supplied, trying to look apologetic but not quite able to unlock from her gaze. I thought of her giving her my real name, as she would not meet my father until later the next night, when she woke up from a night of drinking to go drinking on the Navy base. Something made me use the nickname she would know me by.

“Like the bologna?” she asked, with mock teasing. That was of course how she would be most familiar with it, after the commercials that began in 1973.

“The very same,” I said, miming being caught.

“Nifty,” she said with a small laugh. “Hey, you don’t have a beer, bologna man. You stick out.”

“Right,” I said, moving to the tiny kitchen’s fridge and retrieving a brown bottle of something called Stag. I popped it open and came back. “So, *Betty*, right? How long have you known Larry?” This was a post-Christmas, late-night get drunk and get laid party, which probably explained the absence of Larry.

“Since we were married for about a day,” she said with a bigger laugh, dropping her tall, just-short-of-plump body onto a black leather couch and motioning for me sit with. This confirmed what the scant records I had of that time of her life had said. A very brief, tempestuous marriage at 18 to Lawrence Robert Gilmore of Raleigh. Apparently, they remained friends, which I had not known. “You?” she asked as I sat, leaving a decent gap between us. She raised an eyebrow.

“I work with him at the autobody shop,” I said, drinking. The beer of the 70s was ... not good. What I said about work was true, though I omitted the part where I had gotten the job a month ago solely to be invited to this party. Around us the light was low, the living room cluttered and smoky, and we were almost alone.

“Really? You don’t look like a mechanic.” She looked me up and down.

“What do I look like?”

“I don’t know. Familiar. Like a history teacher I had in high school or something. A little dorky.” Betty finished her whisky, burped, and grinned.

“Not me, man,” I said, trying to get the rhythms of era speech down and not *sound* like a teacher. “I was a goof in school.”

She snorted. “I doubt that. Anyway, you wanna *boogie*?” She leaned in, floral shirt unbuttoned over her breasts.



I froze. She could mean to dance, but her body language said otherwise. "I ... uh," I began.

She laughed loudly. "*Man*, you *are* a dork. Take a chill pill." She turned away and sat back. "I ain't down for that with nobody at the moment."

"I had gotten the idea that that was the point of this gathering," I said teacherly.

"This 'gathering'? Man, you are a trip, Oscar." She was quiet for a moment. "You ain't wrong. I wanted to feel different, but I just can't." She sat up quickly and reached for the whisky bottle on the coffee table. "You going around with somebody?" she asked as she poured liberally.

"Not at the moment," I said, making myself drink more of the thin beer.

"Right on," my mother said and sat back, taking a big drink. "Sometimes, man, I can't deal with people's shit, you know. Everybody wanting something from me, and I just want to be quiet. But you can't be quiet, you can't be alone." She took another deep drink.

For the first time I recognized in her the woman she would become later. A deeply introspective, thoughtful, and self-destructive person who would disappear off the face of the earth in 14 years, leaving behind four small children. I watched her face, thinking of the effort I had gone through to see this. Thinking of what I had come back here to do.

"Take a Polaroid, man. It'll last longer." She managed a brief grin. "You want a hand job or something quick? Guess that's why you came here, to this *gathering*."

"No, I ... uh, just came to get out. I don't know many people here." I did, indeed, have Polaroids of her.

She looked at me. "Pity. They say I do it well. Then *drink*, bologna man, before you bum me the hell out."

I leaned back and drank, my face suddenly hot and my stomach queasy. Not from her offer, but as the reality of what I *had* come here to do settled over me. I was not even sure I could, personally or by the laws of physics.

"You, uh, ever think about the future?" I asked, trying to put on an air of drunken philosophizing.

"Nope." She took another drink. "Why?" She rolled her head to the side to look at me.

"I mean like just wondering how you will turn out. What job you will have, if you will get married or have kids. If you will be happy." I sounded lame to myself, and she raised an eyebrow high.

"What're you selling, man? You from the Disciples of Christ? My soul's just fine, and I don't care where it will spend eternity." This was close enough to why I was here to freeze me for several seconds. The music had changed to "Muffin Man."

"Aw, shit," she said with a laugh, "you *are* a religious nut. That explains a lot. Man, Larry will kick your ass if you come in here with that shit. Hell, *I* might," she said, and grinned.

"No, no! Nothing like that. I haven't been to church in a very long time." Which was true.

She paused, and drank the last of her glass. Her eyelids were getting heavy, and I noticed that they had as many freckles as did every other part of her face. Mine, gotten from her, were faded to near non-existence. "Sorry, Oscar," she said. The tone was just how she would say it to me, many times, a decade and more from now, when she was drunk and on the floor.

Unless I did this. But it was too enormous. How to even start? “I am not selling anything. What I have to offer you is free.”

“Okay, man, you are going to have to stop being mysterious and tell me what you want from me. I don’t believe you came here just to meet people, and you’re not *just* a friend of Larry’s from work. What do you want from me, and who the hell are you?” Even very drunk, she was smart.

“Can we maybe go somewhere quieter? The porch? I will tell you everything.”

“Fuck, you want me to *get up*? This couch is comfy,” she protested, but when I stood and offered her my hand, she took it. I helped her up. A very Chong-looking guy smoking a pipe in the corner winked at me, assuming I was taking her to a room.

Outside the midnight air was near freezing, and only a porch light illuminated the front yard. Betty supported herself on the rail and said “Alright. Tell me a funny story man. I’m game.”

“No way to say this other than the straight truth. I am your son, from the future.”

She lost her grip on the rail and nearly fell down the steps. I caught her barely in time and stabilized her. “What the *fuck* did you just say?” She laughed. “That’s gotta be an original line.”

“It’s true. I have travelled back in time to meet you. To change the way your life turns out.”

She looked at me and blinked. “What? What happens? I die in a wreck or something?” She grimaced. “Man, what the fuck am I talking about? This is some weird Star Trek bullshit. Beam your ass home, Mr. Spock.” She moved to go back inside.

“Wait, please. Look at this.” I held up a small tablet that I had kept carefully hidden in my pocket. It showed rotating pictures and videos of her, in the mid to late 80s, with my siblings and myself. She stared open-mouthed.

“What the hell is that? How’d you make those?”

“They will be taken in the future. They are not fake. That is yourself and our family. You eventually have four kids, including me, by a man you will meet in a bar tomorrow evening.”

“I ... I don’t understand. How did you come back? Why to *me*, if you have a fucking time machine, or whatever? Hitler too well-guarded?” She gave me the smirk and eyebrow again.

“I don’t have a time machine. Not exactly. This is the one and only time I can do this, and seeing you is all I wanted to do.”

She cocked her head at me. “Well, damn. I’m flattered. But ... *why*, again? Say I believe your bullshit, which I *don’t*. You wanna save your momma from something bad? Sweet lil mommy’s boy you are.” She wobbled.

I paused and looked at her. This was it. “You become an alcoholic. You are well on your way to that now. You live in poverty, have a series of bad jobs and even worse relationships, are homeless with the kids several times, and eventually it makes you abandon your children at a babysitter’s. You disappear. I am asking you to quit drinking. I’m warning you so you don’t end up like that.”

She stared at me. “Well, fuck me. Or, no, fuck *you*. I’m not a goddamn alcoholic, and I won’t become one, and I don’t need you telling me how to life my life, you fucking dork.” Her

face was red with anger and alcohol. She walked slowly back towards the door. “*Fuck off,*” she added, flipping me off for added effect.

I do not know how I expected it to go, but it should have been something like this. Why would she believe me or like what I told her? How did I know that, in my timeline, I had not done this already, and it had had no effect? There was the idea that what a time traveler did in the past, he had always done. You cannot change the past, because you did not.

I did not do *this*. I caught her before she was fully in the door and held her by the arm. She yelled and struggled, but I yanked her back out onto the porch. The screen door slammed. She raised her hand to slap me, and I remembered beatings she would give me in the future. Maybe not now. The patch, my only way home, was in my hand before I had fully thought through what I was doing. I stuck it to her chest and the tiny clamps anchored to her skin.

“Ow! Let me go, motherfucker! Larry!” she yelled. A slap missed. She was the same size me, and more athletic. She almost broke free. But I had punched in the combination, and the device was lighting up and producing a hum. Around her, gravity and light were bending. I let her go.

“What the fuck is this? What did you do?” my young mother shouted, voice distorted, clawing at the bright rectangular area on her chest. Her eyes were wide. I looked into them. I had always known that if I succeeded it would be the end of me, at least in some sense. I would not be raised the same way. It dawned on me then how complete and final the change would now be.

Suddenly there was silence, and my mother, Betty, was still. In every atom. Then she was gone. Irrevocably. Kicked some years, ten or more, I guessed, into the future. She would not meet my father at the bar. She would not have me. She might not have my siblings, or all those boyfriends, or those jobs, or that ending.

*Ending.* I looked around. I was still there... *am* still here. Trying to think through what I did, if it was right, if I had a right, what will happen to me. My hands look a little translucent. I will spend my last however long thinking about her.

## Dark Sky

Under a surprise-scattered June night  
sky my niece and I gather. Behind us,  
a necklace of lights ring the ranch  
where a friend's 50th birthday party  
rumbles into karaoke and confident kids  
up late, smoke stalking itself in circles.

Morgan surprises me with commentary  
about the wonder of stars in the darkness  
and forgotten distance of eastern Oregon.  
Capping out the light from the screen  
where 90's song lyrics fire off, we look up  
and watch for shooting proof of wonder.

Morgan sees the first one blast pass  
on a sudden long tail. We take turns  
to talk about the sky and that myth of spilt  
milk I have longed to tear over. There  
she finally is, faintly arching over us,  
a bridge between an adult and teenager.

We try to get others to marvel with us,  
to use primate eyes to find the galactic  
center, the divinity of beholding, but  
they're busy watching strained singing,  
clapping the same kid going back for  
one more song, his time to shine.

## Food Web

A thumb size husk swings  
in a nook in the door frame.

I thought.

Looking closer,

the empty husk of a baby

lizard looks back, empty eye sockets,  
desiccated, a disgraceful illusion.

Lurking behind, utterly still

a palm-sized shudder in the shape  
of a spider.

A cocoon,

## Freedom

Madras, OR on Labour Day.  
A small crowd work hard

waving blood-stitched flags  
and banners demanding  
freedom, a free Life, no masks,  
no tyranny, a different Governor,  
end to oppression. Behind them  
a vast bank of smoke makes  
Victorian London shudder  
and keeps truly free minds  
in doors, fans filtering doom.

We pass through the protest,  
heads bowed, no eye-contact  
with Medusa's many mouths.  
We drive towards the smoke  
that is coming for us all.

## For One Night Only

Patient, my parents told me  
in the litany of life lessons

pays off.

They were right.

For here they are, Vaux swifts,  
clotting the humming air  
above the ska-infused rock stage

tasting the space above  
the Deschutes river

tilting southward, sensing equinox  
and other tingling mysteries.

The music plays on. The food  
of my life is a feast of dark bodies,

snipping wings, clouds of bodies  
that disappear into individuals

and reappear like a Vegas act.

## **Flying Kites at Namche Bazaar, Nepal**

On a stony, bare palm of land  
held aloft a bent wrist of a valley

children as small as Harry Lime's  
ants flew kites, tiny red and blue

birds that blessed the terraced town  
with a memory more movement

than the surrounding mountains,  
geisha-ed in cloud and snow.

*Namche Bazaar.* That name spell-  
ing pounding heart, supplying

the base camp of my belief  
that the smallest steps matter.

## Different River

On the bank of the Deschutes River,  
past the dog turds,  
out of the way of the walkers  
talking loudly in passing barks.

the river is wide, shallow, slashed  
with boulders that tear the silk ragged.  
Panic attacks on halt.

Here I meditate in March,  
the warming afternoon sun kaleidoscoping  
closed eyelids, iPhone app counting  
down the ten minutes of me-time.

When I open my eyes,  
a different river before me.

Journeying geese rally against the tide,  
the whistle of duck wings,  
gusts of wind turn the water's top  
so that new waves steal the sunlight's jewels,  
spills and sinks them sparkling.

Darker, slower, older. It takes me time  
to adjust and wander off home,  
changed, Heraclitus rolling his eyes.



## Dishwasher Revelation

Damascus is reached in the apartment.

Call me pathetic  
but I think that if I can fill the dishwasher,  
run it and empty it on one afternoon,  
it's a victory.

I've stolen back time  
from the consuming Domestic God,  
time I can use tomorrow  
not loading and emptying.

I can use it to devise  
an amazing new poem, so good  
it gets a prize,

or perhaps I will become Buddha

and realize that every desire  
is a distraction from the truth.

Buddha never worried about dishes,  
poetry submissions,  
the dishes,  
buying  
back

time.

## Farewell

In Farewell Bend park  
the wind has coated the grass  
with yellow aspen leaves,  
the first grief of early Fall,

the grass a city awash  
with waves of pale immigrants as long as the ghostly coast,  
a billion doors slamming shut,  
to the sound of told-you-so  
and cracking ice.

Crows caw  
me back, spiraling above  
the revealing trees. I flutter away,  
pretending everything will be alright.

The trees will recover.

## A Large Room's Sole :: Light :: from a Single Bulb

### *Fort Morgan, Colorado*

Step onto the white plastered pavement. See one big old house :: You ponder :: paint-gone-missing :: the multiple white tiny polka-dots on sad, dull moss color :: Worn-off bits sign little care :: just the start of the wrong.

Two doors in front :: Choose your steps because no clear walk can be seen :: around the side more doors and locks :: Twenty five folks within? :: no one know the residents.

A Denver investor bought :: this apartment :: in a town stinking of meat and sugar beet processing :: You bet he never made :: the hour drive here :: never seen the insides as you do today :: at least :: the landlord :: didn't freeze out his renters.

Four units of asylum seekers :: refugees from tribal wars :: survive in this ancient house sectioned off :: a single meter :: no AC :: uneven heat :: space heaters needed. :: Tenants labor in varying shifts :: night or day :: no wonder they can't gather to portion out the bill from their sole meter.

Disrepair beyond what you'd fathomed :: large dark rooms where all light :: comes from a single, low-watt bulb in the ceiling :: half only curtains :: ragged sheets on windows :: no furniture :: no fan in kitchen or bath :: a black man lies on his side on the floor facing the mammoth TV :: picturing grasslands of his home region.

A giant tarantula of mold sprawls on one window :: fearing to breathe :: you rush on. Nearby, a kitchen floor buckles :: rising up like a wave :: you leap off before the sinking :: Paint peels from sheetrock :: like a bedsheet.

What do you expect from a 93% :: White :: town? *I don't want :: Somalians on my block* :: Rental properties known :: by word of mouth :: sub-standard housing left for refugee :: guests ::

Solemn, dark faces hint at loss. Anguish beyond knowing. Is it running from a machete's slice? A child shot :: bleeding out :: What images replay?

Recommended potential :: to better this place :: What a punch in the gut :: The toddler throws :: himself on the floor :: on seeing pale-faced you :: His mother's gleaming :: ruby-lipped smile—bright yellow emerald and sapphire African-motif wound around her--& arms wraps him close.

## Monticello Marvels

### i. Tom's Mind and Passion

I walk the mount to the Monticello mansion, in awe of its pristine white trim, columns, octagon dome—a style labelled Jeffersonian. How innovative the windows—

triple-paned. Mustard curtains, golden walls inside—creativity forged from French fashions and kidnapped peoples you called your own. Your soft, gentlemanly

hands didn't clutch the whip, but you built and grew your debt—requiring their servitude. You penned slavery wrong, but didn't stop it for your large negro "family."

After Martha's death, you endured loneliness, then escaped to Paris. Did you know Sally to be your dead wife's part-sister before calling her as your daughters' handmaiden in France?

### ii. Her Sagacity and Virtue

Sally, your alacrity and grace blazed in the hut where enslaved children spun woolen thread and hand-stitched clothing. Called to voyage, you washed your young mistress's gowns and allayed her tedium.

You gaped at Parisian wonders. As a fourteen-year-old slave, you couldn't say no to your master's ardent hands. Yet you kept more in mind—wheedled exceptional privileges from your

master. So you meekly left French freedom. Pregnant, you returned to a room of your own in Monticello and to promised liberation of your unborn children. Perhaps you ate fresh

trout and French macaroni—same as your Tom savored. You wept when you lost his baby, fruit of unending night-time trysts. In a cave-like room, under parquet floors, you cradled Jeffersonian

offspring through the years. Your little ones hammered, spun and waited table, dawn to dark. Your hands—veins protruding as you aged—shined silver, set table, and at night pressed & soothed

knotted thighs, gripped your master's hand, gazed into his hazel eyes—convinced him of your love—used him for your purpose.

## Misguided Spring

January first our fence's jasmine  
vine lay bare—no scent.  
On inauguration day, looking dirt-wise,  
your green and pointed tips push  
up through loose soil—whisper  
as a kettle nearing boil—above you a  
wan sky. That broadcast— a well-crafted  
speech pledged much. Out back  
a shiny crow caws and gathers  
a murder.

In February's start, your soft swords in my yard  
daily grow longer—soft fronds.  
Quince flowers murmur sweet—  
beware  
its thorns.

Mid-month you, daffodils, burst out—  
sunshine encased buds or unbolted to solid, heated  
yellow—like a July or Hawaii sun--  
pointed edges of your crowns  
promise so much—winsome governance?

Yet while songbirds warble, this morning  
the ice of their bath lies thick.  
Still. Silent. Shaggy  
fleece snuggles my arms—I open  
my eyes—squeezed and news weary  
—my apricot tree buds  
vulnerable as  
pale nipples. Commentators warn—  
a chill blast of wind comes—will it terminate  
the fruit? I dare not drape  
my jacket over a hook or keep naive  
belief in the swell of  
of any swelling politician.

## Sex as We Change

Once you were the one  
distracted, unmoored  
    Now it's me.

    How many times  
have you said, our heads  
pillowed,

    "You're not all here.  
Analyzing the "hero's journey?"  
I admit, worries also gust me—  
    a catamaran drifting,  
    with rudder broken.

Let's meld minds today that  
    distraction won't blow us far apart.  
That a sweet rice cake wouldn't sit  
    heavy, panging our guts.  
    Like a virgin again  
I learn to unscrew my tightened soul.

Sands in our shining hourglass  
dribble ever faster, taunting us,  
    threatening our merging.  
Let's choose to stop proving ourselves.  
    I write fewer lines,  
    You bike fewer hills.

I remind you, sex starts well  
    before the sheets—  
    light touch—unexpected  
on my arm, pleasant  
    pressure on my soft, round cheeks.

## Within the In-Laws' House

My husband and I stay a week  
with his Oahu parents—their  
parents from Korea.

Complexities  
confront.

Over breakfast of Portuguese sausage, kimchi and rice,  
I reply to my new mom's query—

"The pad left my back hurting."  
Shame clouds her coal-black eyes—  
Anglo tongue  
too transparent.

Should I curtain frank thoughts?

If I seal my lips,  
will I fit in  
and safeguard love?

Customs diverge—how  
much—how can  
I curl and smooth my tongue, or  
screen my eyes long green?

I'm of the kind  
who jailed this land's queen,  
imposed rule, stole lands from natives—grew rich  
on pineapple and cane—on plantation  
land my Love's grandma once toiled  
under thirst, sweat, poor wages.

Escape to the beach where  
a foaming river  
pours into the sea—its water so clear  
looming gaps are seen  
between rocks—sharp or polished—tan, rust  
volcanic black and golden—stunning yet  
—so slippery—

## Hand Tailored

But intentions browned & crinkled  
like apricot-hearted leaves in autumn.

A decade from the purchase, I brave again  
the project: you in shirt, arms T-framed,  
shoulder seams sagging far beyond.  
*Clothes make the man*—so I think.

I meant to fit it to you—pierced  
fabric with care, intending not to prick  
your soft skin.  
I started & stopped the sewing—fearing  
my failure.

Long ago I spied it in a Honolulu department  
store—synthetic, not  
an island-made design of cotton.  
Your lips pressed tight—a signal  
I ignored. You've long disdained such spending.  
*Decades-old jeans & tees are fine*—to you  
—but to me: tattered, faded.

In pandemic isolation, palms quivering, I face the  
needed—irreparable cuts to size shoulder  
caps narrow, pierce fabric with gathering stitches.  
I spin a slim thread between moist fingers,  
target the needle— a lemon seed of a hole.  
Oh that, it didn't tire me so  
fitting this shirt to you. Still, I benefit  
in my vision clearing—what careless  
presumption gripped.

You don't wear it—though completed—  
your choice—  
Honolulu shirts your sister creates.  
And more & more I find they're the ones  
befitting: Oahu turtles swimming  
a mellow, blue Pacific—



## Museo Reina Sophia

Vasquez Diaz - you my art-loving friend, do you know him? I want his soft greens, barely reds & embracing grays in my own home salon. But Picasso self-portrait—you're broken apart, split, cubed. Santos deserves a page—but who's heard of his brunette with such golden stare. Then there's that serious communicant—small white book in pale hand, white & cyan bouquet stand in her other. Well done, Blanchard. Master Mallo knew Madrid so well & leaks love for its merriment—girls in headdresses, gents in ice cone hats & diamond helmets. What texts tell his name, show his somber face?

Cubists slid far from ordinary eyes. But, Juan Gris, oh for his beige, peacock & crème fractured guitar—triangles, skittish four-sided planes—to hang, gaze into my square yard. He & Villa & Riviera brushed waggish harmony on ivory canvases—worth replaying again & again. Yet so many don't know your names. Why so? Forms less mysterious—or ugly—than Picasso. The muse struck you too. Critics or Salon-visitors snubbed—such capricious masters.

## Hard on Granny

Isaac rides in baby pack on Daddy's shoulders beside a chattering creek. We four hike level, then up, past snow patches. All new, so green, my heart rockets high while the air I take in thins. My lungs constrict. Grandson shrieks—do his lungs pang him? Today new heights for him.

I chew my cheek instead of speaking. I note his cheeks growing pink. Do I dare ask if sunscreen keeps him safe? I check concerns to avoid his mom's irritation. Today his parents gauge whether sun will blister, I tell myself. Still reports on sunburns causing cancer plague my mind. I repeat my mantra: I'm not on watch—relax.

We labor up a ridge, reach a gap and stop. Far off alps of ghostly blue entice me with whipped cream peaks. On spongy pine needles I idle, while red ants march near my naked toes. Bird calls zen me till the babe yells with lusty lungs. He awakens. Shoes on, he goes racing. A root sticking out and trips him. Oh, the crying. Could I have run near and stopped this pain?

Feelings both fault and boon. What's a grandma to do? I inhale alps of baby blue.

## Sailing to Strange Harbor

Did panic grip as you leaned over handrail of the boat to wave good-by to parents at port of Busan? So long ago, no phones, seldom mail.

Did you mutter in Korean during immigrant processing, and cringe when meeting your fiancé? You knew on first look what a lying photo you'd received—a man thirty years older.

Lying on your pad on the shanty floor of a plantation, perhaps you bit your salt-sore lips. Stifled tears. That first night, did he grope? Perhaps you shrank away.

He was eager to get what he paid for. He soon got his way. For you, a dark and lonely night—no one near to explain the tender drops of blood.

When he died soon, did you blame yourself? Perhaps relief at his demise dampened fears and calmed the sea of your stormy, homesick eyes.

Korean sisters found a man to protect, fill your hollow, earn dollars. While he labored, you tried to join him. Your babes played or slept nearby.

How long till he despaired at harsh work, scant wages? Did you seize his cash before it went to drink? Perhaps you solely prayed. How wrong your father: *no cruelty to converts in America*.

Later in a canning plant, acid ate your hands—still your savings bought a home. You never met your kin again, but survived your voyage, mastered your strokes, and for years swam strong.

*Inspired by my grandmother through marriage, and the book written about her by her deceased daughter Bessie Park. Myung Okie arrived as a picture bride to Honolulu at age 19, 1917.*

## The Mix

Oil and vinegar shine in the shallow bowl—a tasty concoction transforms bread many days old. The chunk of porous whiteness I dip brings up mere grease—olive oil and balsamic separate—savory combo to bland coexistence.

Sunshine dandelions turn to fairies—child me loves to blow them free—waltzing with the wind. Pernicious weeds—passionate, orthodox gardeners despise.

Grandchildren reach my waist—yet cry at a mask become sopped—2020 precautions. Wails so shrill I strap hands to my ears. My homemade zucchini bread rejected—my frown like a blood crescent moon. Yet they wiggle inside my breasts and burgeon within—my old heart inflated like some all-pink bunny won as a carnival prize. They leave but stay within. Perhaps a surgeon's tools may extract their darling smiles and my wanting. Mixed and changed from independence.

## A Distant Conversation

Daniel Belanger

“When my hands are cold, and my feet are cold” says Sandra Cassandra to Tim Tom Tim as the two walk with seven thin coats worn between them, “when my mind is cold, and full of cold empty rooms where happy thoughts once lived, when my teeth chatter, when my bladder fills, when the wind batters, when my tears spill, when my nose is cold, when my toes are numb, when my legs cramp up, when my stockings run, when the day turns to night, when the darkness falls, when my ankles swell, when my skin crawls, when my headache starts, when hope and fear sit like a pair of loving larks in the half-dead tree of my broken heart, then I know, then we know, then I know that we’re going home....”

Tim scratches his left ear. There are a herd of words that buffaloes in there while Sandra was speaking-not a one of them that she ever said.

The wind it was that’d carried scraps of a distant conversation, filling not only Tim’s left, but a right many other random ears:

“How was he today?”

“Today? How wasn’t he! Wistful, angry, confused...”

“Oh yeah? What’d he say?”

“Well, when first I walk in, he says *pretty!* so I smile. Turns out, though, he’s not talking about me. He’s talking about early morning light.”

“Early morning light?”

“Yes. Something about it, he says, connects in a way that cannot be captured on film, to something deep inside.

“He turns on me then growling like he thinks I’m someone from his past and says you weren’t much to begin with, and now look at you. You’re all fucked up. Always making the wrong decisions, always doing the wrong thing.

“To change the subject, I tell him a story from my childhood, about me and my sisters, Sandra and Dawn, playing in a garden. Three morning glories we see. Our grandmother who sits watching from the veranda calls us the three glories after the flowers.

“Butterflies eat milk weed so birds won’t eat them, he says, completely ignoring me. Birds hate the taste. It’s best to stay on my good side.”

“Oh that old man Arno! Every night, lying awake in bed, babbling off-the-wall things that roll around inside his head!”

“Yes, but as his social worker, I am obligated to listen. I try to hear the hidden glory so I can share it back to him.

“Even when I’m not feeling well, he says, I try to get out into the garden. I get a deep pleasure seeing the interconnectedness of the colors and the patterns.

“I have a lot of stuff rattling around up there, he explains, pointing to his head. Most of it is rubble. Every once in a while, a gem pops out.”

“Is he sleeping now?”

“Yes, I think so. I’ll just look in on him one last time before I go home.”

“All right, then.”

“All right, Ella. Good chatting with you, but you need to quit smoking. It’s cold out here!”

“I know, Miss Kim, I know...”

A few stray notes of piano music escaping through the cracked window of a sixth-floor East Harlem walk-up faintly score the Black Friday night.

*Tinkling notes flow*

Kim, a forty-year-old social worker at Casa Juntos, an East Harlem supportive housing residence, pushes long brown hair out of dark, weary eyes while leaning to close her sleeping client's window as a cold draft of wind blows into the old man's room with the errant melody. She turns out the light, then departs, closing the door to his room behind her. Opening his eyes the moment that she leaves, Arno gets out of bed and quickly dresses.

*Rippling wrinkles of rhythm ring...*

Jorge Garcia and Gabriella Santiago, a pretty Puerto Rican couple wearing matching Yankee caps, argue as they pass by Pavlov's Lexington Avenue Pet Shop, about why they can't afford a puppy they see there. They'd just heard that a law will soon go into effect that will ban the selling of puppies at pet shops in the city, so they know they will not have time to save up. Gabriella loudly blames Jorge for their poor financial straits, Jorge Gabriella.

"You always make the wrong decisions," exclaims Gabriella.

"You always do the wrong thing," Jorge grumbles.

Each curses out the other before they walk off in opposite directions.

*...trickling note streams flow*

David Woolf, a middle-aged, paunchy white man in a gray tweed coat, stops walking along Third Avenue to make the sign of the cross over a yellow fire hydrant.

*...trinkling trills trail...*

Across the street, Samuel Forte, a medium height, young-looking black veteran of the Gulf War, with a business degree from an online university, ponders the indignity of having to work a menial job. He zips up his hoodie and hops on a bicycle to deliver takeout ordered from the Blue Tiger Cafe.

Samuel got the job after Hàoyú Chang, the son of the Blue Tiger's owner, who used to deliver the takeout, was attacked while out making a delivery, by a red-bearded mad man wielding a baseball bat. Hàoyú was able to subdue his attacker, but the incident caused him to reconsider his father's advice to quit his job so he can focus more fully on his college studies.

*...ruffled riffs reverberate ...*

Dorothy Bolger, a handsome octogenarian, and retired librarian, fondles various pieces of fruit picked from a stand outside Diego's Deli on 102<sup>nd</sup> Street. She drops an orange that rolls down-sidewalk to stop at the feet of Arno Anders, an ancient marionette with whom she will fall in love and spend the rest of her life.

"*Miraculous!*" exclaims the wonder-struck Arno, who, after pretending to fall asleep so his social worker would leave, slipped out past Ella Jeter, the security guard at Casa Juntos, to see if he could hear the music in the night that he'd heard playing all through that day.

Delighted, but distracted, Dorothy casts her eye on the grungy couple across the street, wondering if it is the flashy neon sign of the Knock-Knock Nail Salon by which they are walking, drug use or some random disease that tints their faces blue.

*...tinkle, trinkle, trip, tap topple...*

"Some say proceed with caution," thirty-something Sandra exclaims, pushing back a stringy blonde strand so her crossed eyes can cross hair the spit of her gum, accurately aimed and fired into the sewer. "I say proceed with kindness."

"Be quiet, and keep walking" says thin as his receding hairline, fifty-four or more year old Tim in a tongue that, though sharp, is safely sheathed in cheek.

"Where are we going?" asks Sandra.

"We're going home," says Tim.

"We have no home," says Sandra, shivering as the dark night around her begins to rain, creating a soft percussion that compliments the tinkling notes of piano music.

"We'll make one," says Tim.

"With what?" Sandra's voice cracks. "We have no money."

"Charm," says Tim, offering Sandra his arm to steady the gait of her lop-sided frame in the rain, "and cardboard."

"Well, cardboard, maybe," Sandra says skeptically, as her eyes narrow, then widen, exposing the blood shot through their whites, "but charm? Snakes you can charm. Not wolves."

"There are no wolves," Tim replies.

"They are wolves," says Sandra. "They are wolves more than wolves are wolves. If they weren't, maybe I'd still have my baby."

"You never had a baby," he tells her.

"Yes, I did," she insists. "They can take away my future, but they can't take away my past."

"The people pulling the strings in this life can do whatever they want," Tim says flatly. "They're rich."

"So what?" says Sandra with a scowl. "So they were born with silver spoons to shovel the shit they feed us, and golden parachutes they can use when I tell them to go jump off a cliff."

"All right, tough guy" says Tim sadly. "But wolves or not, I think, like you're always saying, that when our hands are cold, when our feet hurt, when our stomachs are empty, then we're just where we belong and home must be just around the corner."

"Corners can be cut," Sandra begs to differ, shaking her head in disgust at Tim's abject optimism. "Cut the corners and what have we got? The wolves, the dark, the night."

"Light particles that are in entangled states have an intricate inter-relationship with one another," physicist and MIT professor, Jim Dickens, who regularly embarrasses his wife, Dawn, a Harvard English professor, at cocktail parties, mansplains to their neighbor, Mrs. Hobbs.

The egg-shaped Mrs. Hobbs, co-owner of Hobbs Home Furnishings, is one of the last guests to leave their famous No Thanksgiving Dinner Party. Although its late, and the other guests have long since left after sharing the things that they are not thankful for like COVID, fingerless gloves and Zoom fatigue, Jim continues to pontificate into poor Mrs. Hobbs' uninterested ear.

"These particles exist in a shared relationship," says the flabby-at-forty Jim Dickens, "so that what happens to one, effects the other no matter how far apart they are."

"Fascinating," Mrs. Hobbs, who wishes she never asked Jim about his work, politely remarks.

"Not if you have to live with him," slim blonde Dawn snidely interjects.

"Thanks for that," Jim replies as he sees Mrs. Hobbs to the door.

"Its' cold in here," Dawn says once Jim closes the door behind Mrs. Hobbs. "The fire needs help."

"Can you fix it?" asks Jim. "I need a nightcap."

"I know you're always saying you wear a lot of hats," says Dawn, "but how many nightcaps do you need?"

"One for each of Reality's many heads," says Jim.

"Oh all right," Dawn sighs as she goes into the living room to fix the fire.

Her mind is far away in a garden where she is playing with her sisters. Her grandmother who has been dead now for going on twenty years watches from the front porch, which she

calls the veranda, with its highly ornate, Victorian-style posts, and living lattice wall of petite red roses. She misses her grandmother and her sisters now. Especially Sandra who fell out of touch not long after her breakdown.

Jim goes into his home office to shake up another martini. He is lost in thought himself, remembering a conversation that he had with Bob, Mrs. Hobbs husband, an avid gardener, over the fence that separates their backyards.

"I had some yellow impatiens growing next to a pink rose bush," said Bob. "The roses started to pick up a bit of the yellow of the impatiens. I've always been amazed at the way plants communicate with each other across species. Not all can do it, but those varieties that can, are really something. It's like they have this capacity within them that is only activated by certain types of plants. Congrats on the Nobel Prize by the way."

"Thank you, but I wasn't on that team," Jim replied. "I'm on the other team,"

"Oh, I'm sorry about that," Bob said. "What other team is that?"

"The team that didn't win the Nobel Prize," Jim told him. "We've been studying entanglement theory as well so I can see why you'd make that mistake. While we didn't win, it's good to see that this work, work in the area of entanglement theory, is being recognized. Anyway, your story about flowers communicating reminds me of ways entangled particles interact with one another."

"Really?" Bob said with surprise. "How's that?"

"Teleportation," he replied.

"What?" baffled Bob bellowed.

"Teleportation," Jim repeated. "One of the ways the entangled particles interact. You know that a pair of entangled particles interact with one another even if separated by great distances. But did you know that when a third particle interacts with one of the entangled pair, it transfers all of its possibilities of becoming over to the other member of that pair?"

"It's possibilities of becoming?" Bob scratched his head, which was bald but for a few feathery hair strands, giving him something of a plucked-chicken look.

"Yes, you see these particles have the possibility of becoming many versions of themselves, until they interact with one of the paired particles, at which point they change into one type of self and lose the ability to become anything else. It's like they have a sleeping rainbow inside, which, once awakened, becomes a single color."

"Sounds more like marriage than gardening!" Bob said with a chuckle.

"How's that?" Jim asked.

"Well, before Mrs. Hobbs and I became an item," Bob replied, "I dreamt of becoming an astronaut, a professional golfer, or a food critic instead of the furniture store manager that I have become!"

"Funny, but your description of flowers becoming changed by interacting with other flowers seems more similar to me," said Jim. "The roses, as you suggest, must have the possibility of turning yellow to turn yellow once introduced to the yellow impatiens just like the third particle becoming one version of itself when it interacts with one of the entangled particles. Perhaps the rosebush, like the interloping particle, had the possibility of becoming many colors, which maybe it transferred onto another impatiens after turning yellow."

"It still sounds like marriage!" Bob laughed. "Youth's rainbow of possibilities diminishing as we enter adulthood. We marry and become old and dull!"

"Well, people do get entangled," Jim allowed.

"Right?" said Bob. "What relationship in nature is more entangled than human marriage?"

Jim nodded. He halfway agreed with Bob in regards to his assessment of the entanglement of marriage, especially inasmuch as marriage generally involved the rather



messy prospect of in-laws. But the observation of his own in-laws suggested that the entanglement of siblings was even more intense.

He thought about the closeness that existed between Dawn and her sisters, Kim and Sandra, even though they were now living far away from one another. Especially Dawn and Sandra. Dawn and Sandra were twins. Kim was born a few years earlier.

Yet somehow Kim and Dawn had grown to be more alike as Sandra, an adjunct professor at Columbia University, and promising poet who wrote under the name of Cassandra Carson, slipped into mental illness and alcoholism. Jim was convinced that Sandra's relationship with Tim Timmons, a homeless veteran who Sandra met on the street when she lost her apartment, was inhabiting her potential recovery. Tim, like the third particle interacting with one of the entangled pair, changed when he met Sandra.

Sandra changed as well. The two of them turned something on in one another that could not be stopped, like particles in an entangled state. Did Dawn inherit anything from Tim in the exchange? The time she'd spent with Sandra she now filled with other interests such as cleaning up the shoreline along the Cape Cod Canal, which was not far from their Buzzards Bay home. Had Tim harbored environmentalist ambitions before hooking up with Sandra? Jim wondered.

He also wondered if, in addition to the technological problem-solving that his nom-Nobel prize winning team was working on, there might be a sociological use for entanglement theory. Maybe, he speculated, an energy of interest could be teleported from person to person. Perhaps an energy of knowing could be transferred this way, even, possibly, an energy of healing.

"Maybe people, on one level, have always behaved like entangled particles," Jim said. "A person might start out with many possibilities until they choose a mate. They then become the one thing that they need to become to complement their significant other. The possibilities the first person started out with might then spring spontaneously to a third person, whoever was closest to their mate before they got together, a parent, perhaps, or a sibling. That way, no one loses. That way, there may be possibilities for all."

"Well, this conversation has officially gotten too deep for me!" Hobbs exclaimed, wishing Jim a good afternoon before going into his house.

Hope, thinks Jim, as he continues to muse his No Thanksgiving Nightcap, is another word for possibility. If there is a level at which we behave like entangled particles, perhaps we can teleport specific possibilities from person to person in a kind of quantum leap frog.

Language could be a vehicle of teleportation, he thinks. Language and music. The music of language, and the language of music. There might be a deeper meaning to music and language than we know, an energy that is hidden behind the logic that we put to them. If words and music can be allowed to exist without logic forcing them into narrow lanes of meaning, perhaps they can be used to teleport possibility.

Jim smiles. He loves it when his thoughts veer off the narrow lane of logic as he drinks. Taking the last sip of his martini, he puts his glass down on the little table beside the liquor cabinet, then walks across the room, on his way to bed, but stops at his desk and turns his computer on instead.

The slightly senile, snowy-haired Arno Anders walks in the formal gardens, a part of Central Park not far from Casa Juntos where he was housed after the building that he'd inhabited since he came to America from Glasgow as a young man in the late sixties burned down. While his dream of becoming a Broadway star never materialized, the retired steampipe fitter became quite a proficient puppeteer. Having just completed a successful performance, the half German/half Scottish Arno allows his mind, on this Black Friday morning,

to flow as he walks home, pushing the cart that contains his puppets and stage. As his thoughts dissipate into his surroundings, his awareness is heightened. The boundary between himself and the park disappears.

He becomes random birdsong, the snap of a twig underfoot. He can hear the sun beaming through green leaves as clearly as the silence roaring between each of his heartbeats. There is the voice of a pine tree singing. A parched wind blows clouds over the tops of buildings.

Leaving the park, anxiety and regret return, and Arno finds himself remembering the argument he had with his wife the last time that he saw her. He envisions the warm look of her eyes that once ignited the hope and possibility of his former life; the life he lived within rooms demolished in the fire that took her, and rendered him homeless.

Arno has imbued the possibilities that he was able to salvage from that snubbed-out life upon his strung up wooden entourage. He now lives the lives of his several possible selves in every show.

Random notes of piano music tinkling on the breeze, make Arno think, for some reason, of the computer in the rec room at Casa Juntos.

It spoke to me when I woke it this morning, he remembers.

Sing, it said, sing as a tangle of puppet strings appeared onscreen. Untangling, these fine lines formed words:

Speak Mind Music

I did not understand, and yet somehow it altogether told me to sing.

Now birds whistling through the woods in my mind accompany the simple song I sing. How many people walking past ignore my song. But there are those who look and know. They've received the message too; they have become entangled in this intrigue.

Thoughts come to me through them like the thought that we are made up of time, which is music. Particles, cells, molecules, atoms in motion are the notes that create the song of our fleeting human forms. All time must collapse into one second, the thought goes, and in becoming one, pass all possibility of becoming anything other than the one on to another in this entangled state.

It's like some kind of linear leap frog, he thinks. But who is making it happen? Who is the linear leap god?

Arno wondered.

Jim didn't remember the next day how he'd done it, but somehow or other he had created a computerized message using sound and image, ostensibly to reach deep within randomly selected users to inspire them to do a little light lifting of their voices.

It was all based on a theory of his that nothing is truly random. Throw a handful of marbles down on a table and they will roll into a specific, predictable pattern. Arbitrarily select a series of numbers and they will form a mathematical equation. The more random an action, the more precise the order.

He had come to believe that everything in the universe is a variation on the golden ratio in which the ratio of two quantities is the same as the ratio of their sum to the larger of the two quantities. His message envisioned a linear equation that was based on entanglement theory and the golden ratio.

First, he created a random pattern of three dots. There was a white dot gliding from the far left hand side of the screen towards the far right where a red dot and a green dot moved together in small circles as if in a dance. When the white dot touched the red dot, it turned purple, and caused the green dot to turn white. The white was meant to represent the possibility of turning any color. When the green dot turned white, it instantaneously inherited the full extent of the white dot's possibilities.

A millisecond later, the dots revved up their motion until they were streaming so quickly that they appeared to be three lines entangled in a golden ratio. The length of lines one and two added together was the same as the length of line three, and the length of line three was longer than line one by the same proportion that line one was longer than line two.

They streamed across the screen like this for five seconds, then reformatted themselves into three words, the first written in red, the second in purple, and the third in white. The three words appeared for exactly three seconds against a black background. They said:  
SPEAK MIND MUSIC

Jim then randomly selected followers from his Instagram account to send the programmed message to, assuming many would in turn send it to their followers. His hope was that the message would prompt those who saw it to say certain words or, if musically inclined, play certain notes that would spread to others around them.

He theorized that entangled people behaved like entangled particles, and that they could be used to distribute, in his message, a set of possibilities. Ultimately, he hoped that this would lead to the one possibility that he wanted to make a reality-the reuniting of Dawn with her sister, Sandra.

Viewers, according to Jim's vodka-soaked theory, would speak whatever words flashed across their minds in the moment that they saw the programmed message. These words would be heard by others who would speak whatever words then came into their minds.

Musical viewers would sing or play random notes that followed the same mathematical sequence as the dots that'd streamed across their computer screens. The notes would cause birds to sing in similar patterns. Random interactions like this would spread in threes, mirroring the three line pattern, across the cosmos in an ever-expanding golden ratio.

Three clouds would dance across the sky, three trees would bend together to three gusts of wind. Three cats would slink together, three dogs would dog each other, and three people would promenade with one another. Linguistic and musical conversations would cause other lyrical exchanges to emerge.

The net of words and music would, ultimately, catch Sandra up in it, messaging her to return to Dawn. The way he saw it working was by embedding the title of Sandra's first (and last) book of poetry written just before she had the breakdown, *Speak Mind Music*, into the signal he sent, making it a personal message to her.

Throughout the book of poetry, Sandra referred to herself, Kim and Dawn as the three glories who, though torn apart by circumstance, would one day be brought back together through divine intervention. Jim amused himself with the notion that his message, while not divine, might prove an intervening agent that would have the same effect.

"But oh, that blurry late night thinking," Jim now chuckled, as he rubbed his bloodshot morning-after eyes, "brought on by that bleary late night drinking!"

Turning off his computer, he went downstairs to the kitchen to get tomato juice and Advil with which to nurse his hangover.

Amancio Castillo, an out-of-work Argentinian concert pianist, started the coffee when he got up that Black Friday morning, and then turned on his computer, checking his Instagram account to see if he could find a gig for the weekend. The design that appeared on his

computer screen caused him to go over to his piano, which stood by a window in the front of his apartment, and start playing the odd little tune that he heard playing behind the design. Forgetting about his coffee, he continued to play all day, and long into the night.

The piano playing a few random notes mixed in with Arno's song, causing the marionette to stop walking along so that he could more carefully listen. An old woman fondling an orange, dropped it when she saw the marionette standing still in the middle of the sidewalk, his beautiful eyes incidentally falling upon her own.

"Glory be!" Dorothy Bolger exclaimed upon falling under the spell of that magical gaze. "What fashion fruit might next I fondle?"

"Is this yours?" asked Arno after picking the orange up and carrying it back to the woman who dropped it.

Dorothy, whose glance danced from Arno's eyes to the spectacle of a broken-down, blue-faced couple across the street, returned at the sound of his voice, which was warm and kind.

"Not yet," she replied, "but I'm thinking about it."

A young couple arguing at a pet shop about a puppy, felt something strange in the night that made them fight.

*Palabras enojadas*, Jorge thought, shaking his head, after they parted. Angry words. But from where?

Possibilities of happiness that came along with the puppy when Jorge saw it and wanted it, were transferred to Gabriella who, later that night, met the next love of her life. Amazingly, he turned out to be Paddy Pavlov, the handsome, happy-go-lucky pet shop owner.

After Gabriella left, Jorge reconsidered his financial situation, then went back and bought the puppy, which he named Borges after his favorite uncle. Jorge and Borges went on to live happily, not forever, but for a good long time.

Gabriella had a nice walk with Pavlov who, in a state of euphoria brought on by his good fortune in meeting her, generously threw a hundred dollar bill into the paper cup of a homeless man that they passed.

Tim and Sandra heard piano music in the air but no clink in Tim's cup when a passer-by tossed something in it, so Sandra reached in to see what was what, and pulled out Pavlov's hundred.

"Glory be!" she exclaimed.

"I can't believe it!" Tim cried.

"Do you think we have enough now?" asked Sandra.

"Enough for which?" Tim asked.

"Either," said Sandra.

"Enough for either," Tim confirmed, "but not both."

"So which?" asked Sandra.

"Depends on what you want," said Tim. "A good bottle of whiskey or a bus ticket."

"Which whiskey?" asked Sandra

"“Maybe we have enough for Oban 14,” said Tim.

"Ok," said Sandra. "And where's the bus going?"

"Buzzards Bay," said Tim, "where your sister, Dawn, moved to during the pandemic."

"Dawn of the Buzzards," sighed Sandra. "I remember now."

"There were three glories," said Tim, remembering scraps of a distant conversation that he'd heard earlier that evening.

"How do you know about the three glories?" asked Kim.

"I don't know," said Tim, "but one is you, Dawn is two..."

“And then three is Kim,” said Sandra, disdainfully adding, “but she’s no good. She’s a social worker. Dawn has money!”

“That’s right,” said Tim. “Dawn can help you. But you’ve got to choose to go. She might not like me, so if you go, it’d be better for you to go alone. Or you could stay with me and share one good bottle of whiskey.”

“What do you want?” asked Sandra.

“It wouldn’t be right for me to say,” said Tim.

“Let’s get the whiskey,” Sandra quickly decided.

“Ok,” Tim immediately agreed.

As he shops at Jimmy’s Liquor Store for the bottle of wine that his wife asked him to pick up for dinner, Samuel is still thinking about the last delivery of takeout that he made that night, which went to what turned out to be a man standing in front of a fire hydrant. His thoughts are interrupted, though, when, approaching the checkout counter with his wine, he hears loud reels of laughter coming from the street. The door opens, and a shabbily clad couple walk in.

“You can’t come in here,” the young white man behind the counter shouts at them.

“We have money,” the male half of the pair declares.

“Don’t make me call the cops,” the condescending cashier retorts.

“We’re just going to grab a bottle and go,” the unwanted customer replies, grabbing the first bottle that he sees.

The counter man picks up his cell phone.

“We’re going,” the thrifty shopper says, excusing himself as he passes in front of Samuel to throw money down on the counter.

“Don’t buy that swill,” his disgruntled darling demands as, standing on tiptoes, she pulls a bottle of Oban off a high shelf, “buy this!”

Samuel sighs deeply. Always when I’m most tired, he thinks. When all I want to do is go home.

“This money has slobber all over it,” the entitled apprentice exclaims. “Get it off my counter and tell Dusty Doris over there to put that bottle down.”

“Don’t talk to her like that,” the righteous customer says, raising his voice in defense of his companion.

“I’m not talking to her,” counters the cross cashier. “I’m talking to you.”

“Well, then, don’t talk to me that way,” says the riled up recipient of the offensive remark. “I’m a veteran!”

Oh no, Samuel thinks as, all at once, he recognizes Timothy Thomas Timmons, a soldier from the regiment he served in during the Gulf War. But he wasn’t just any soldier. Tim had saved Samuel’s life. Samuel had gotten cornered by members of the Iraqi Republican Guard who were bearing down on him. Tim took a bullet to his collar bone, and another to his left hip fighting to get Samuel out of there.

Disgusting to see this man who served his country and saved my life now homeless, Samuel thinks, and being disrespected by this snooty kid half his age.

“Just take the man’s money and get it over with,” Samuel tells the annoying kid. “I don’t have all night.”

“This isn’t your business, man,” the soaring star of the service industry shoots back.

“Hell if it isn’t,” says Samuel.

“How’s that?” queries the squirrely clerk as he throws his arms up in exasperation.

“Just put both bottles on this,” Samuel replies, plopping his debit card down on the counter.

“Sam?” the other would-be bottle-buyer says tentatively, as he begins to recognize his old army buddy.

“Hello, Tim,” Samuel says with a sad nod. “How have you been keeping?”

“All good, but nothing like the present,” says Tim as he gratefully grabs the gifted bottle, “thank you.”

“Don’t mention it,” says Samuel, who picks up his own bottle.

Tim proceeds to hold the door for Samuel and Sandra as they all three exit together.

Kim whistles a strange little tune that somehow worms its way into her mind while she is walking down Third Avenue towards the Blue Tiger where, having gotten out of work early, she’s hoping to surprise Samuel before he heads home. She’s almost there when her path is blocked by a well-dressed man sitting on a blanket in the middle of the sidewalk, eating Chinese takeout. Always the social worker, Kim cannot pass by without checking to see if the man is in need of assistance.

“Are you all right?” Kim, bending to look the man in the eyes, asks.

“I didn’t see his face,” the man says, his eyes fixed upon a nearby yellow fire hydrant. “There was too much smoke.”

“Pardon me?” Kim says.

“It happened many years ago, on this very day,” the man replies.

“I don’t understand,” says Kim. “Do you need help?”

“The fire,” he responds.

“I’m sorry,” says Kim, “but if you don’t need help, I’ve got to go. I’m meeting someone.”

“Don’t go,” he pleads. “You can help by listening.”

“Five minutes,” Kim says.

“I was just about to sit down to eat dinner,” he explains. “Chinese food I ordered that was just delivered. I was starving. I hadn’t eaten since breakfast. I closed a big deal at the office that day, but I had to work through lunch, and well past closing time to get it to the finish line. I was just taking my first bite when it happened. They found out later that the guy in the apartment across from mine had a whole arsenal of explosives that somehow ignited. The blast threw me across the room.

“I was able to stand after a few attempts by grabbing on to the side of the kitchen table, which had been knocked over. It wasn’t easy as I had twisted my ankle when I first tried to get up. All my food was tipped over and spilling out except one carton of chicken in peanut sauce. I grabbed it, and started hobbling towards the door. That’s when the second explosion knocked me unconscious.

“When I came to, I found myself being cradled like a baby in the arms of a fire fighter. Amazingly, I was still clutching onto my chicken in peanut sauce.

“How can I ever thank you I said after he got me out of there. Chinese food, he said with a smile. What? I said. Chinese food, he repeated, pointing to my chicken in peanut sauce. I see you like Chinese food. Oh, I said, yes, I do. The Blue Tiger does pretty good takeout, he said. You can buy ne dinner sometime! Sound goods, I told him.

“A week later, I called the firehouse on 111<sup>th</sup> Street to try to find out who he was. I wanted to thank him properly for saving my life. No one knew what I was talking about, though. Finally the fire chief told me that it must have been a guy named Hayes. Hayes had died that night, he said, fighting the fire.

“They knocked that building down not long after the blaze and built this monstrosity you see behind me. It makes no difference, though. I still come back every year on the twenty-fifth of November, to remember the man who lost his life on the night that he saved mine.”

“Excuse me,” says Kim who just then sees Samuel walking down the street towards her with a man and a woman, both bundled in tatters.

As they get closer, she starts to laugh in pure delight, realizing that one of the tattered two is her sister Sandra who she thought she would never see again.

Kim begins to wave ecstatically to her long lost sister.

“Oh no it isn’t!” Sandra exclaims, vehemently shaking her head. “Please tell me it isn’t Kim!”

“Yes, it’s me!” Kim calls out happily as Sandra turns around and starts walking in the other direction. “You can’t get away so don’t even try!”

“Glory be!” says Tim as he recognizes Sandra’s sister Kim who Sandra had introduced him to after they bumped into her on the street over a year ago.

“Glory don’t be!” Sandra begs to differ.

“You have to go to her, Sandra,” says Tim. “It’s like it was meant to happen!”

“What is going on with this day?” Samuel mutters as he suddenly recognizes the man he hadn’t recognized when he delivered takeout to him earlier that evening. “How many years have passed since I carried this guy from a burning building?”

It wasn’t long after returning from the war. Samuel came home to find his wife, Gabriella, living in their apartment with a man named Jorge. Having no living relatives to support him at the time, and feeling too sad to ask friends for help, Samuel found himself living on the street until the outreach worker helped him get into Casa Juntos, which is where he met Kim.

That November, which he spent on the street, though, was hard. When he got too cold, he’d sneak into buildings to warm up. He’d gone into the building that used to stand on this location on a number of occasions by simply ringing doorbells until someone buzzed him in.

After warming up, he’d sometimes go out on the roof to enjoy the view of the city. Once, he found an old blanket by a warm smokestack on the roof, so he curled up and went to sleep. Awakened by the sound of sirens screaming on the street, and raging flames roaring all around him, Samuel was terrified to find himself suddenly trapped atop a burning building.

He scrambled to make his way back down the stairs, and through the smoke-filled corridors until he came to a wall of fire. He stumbled over the badly burned body of a fire fighter, then knelt down beside it to check for a pulse. There was none, so, with no time to think, he picked up the fire fighter’s helmet, which had been lying on the floor beside him, and, putting it on, leapt through the roaring flames.

On the other side of the fiery wall, he saw an apartment with the door blown off, and a man lying on the floor inside. He went into the apartment to check on the man, and saw that he was still breathing, so he picked him up and carried him to safety.

When the guy came to after he’d carried him out of the building, he had a conversation with him about Chinese food from the Blue Tiger. He didn’t know that he would find himself working at the Blue Tiger years later or that he would ever again run into the man whose life he had saved.

“I see you brought me my Chinese food,” Samuel says with a smile.

“I’m sorry,” the bewildered man replies.

“My name is Samuel,” he tells him.

“David,” the man says. “Do I know you?”

“Not really,” says Samuel, “but I once pulled you out of a burning building,”

“Impossible,” says David. “That man is dead!”

“No, I’m not,” says Samuel who goes on to tell David the whole story.

“My God!!” David exclaims as he stands and throws his arms around Samuel. “I thought I’d never get the chance to say thank you, thank you for saving my life!”

Invited by David to join him, Samuel, Kim, Tim and Sandra sit down on the blanket to have the dinner that Samuel and David had planned to share so many years ago.

When they finish eating, Samuel embraces David and says goodbye. He and Kim then take Tim and Sandra to their apartment, deciding to put them up until they can help get them back on their feet. A week later, they all go up to Buzzards Bay to join Dawn and Jim in an After Thanksgiving Dinner.

A little too sober at the moment to believe that it had anything to do with his experiment, Jim was nonetheless elated to see Dawn's face light up when Sandra and Kim appeared with Samuel, who brought a decent bottle of Perrier-Jouet, at their front door.

"To the three glories!" said Jim, raising his glass of champagne in a toast as, skipping the ceremonial recitation of all the things that they were not thankful for, they sat down at the dining room table to enjoy a glorious Thanksgiving Dinner a week after Thanksgiving.

There was still, of course, much to be unthankful for. Kim felt frustrated that she was so far unable to convince Sandra that she should go back on her psych meds. Dawn and Jim's marriage was still stressed by Jim's excessive drinking. Samuel continued to be reluctantly employed as a food delivery person. Tim and Sandra had not improved their housing situation. But they were all together, and for this night, at least, that was enough.

"I've got to cut back on my drinking," Jim, after the others went to bed, said to himself with a sigh as he sipped on his second nightcap, "tomorrow."

He then walked into his home office and over to the liquor cabinet to fix his third nightcap.

Life is like an experiment designed by some half-baked scientist trying to prove a theory concocted after a few martinis, he thought. Everything's just slightly out of whack.

He was about to pour the vodka into the shaker when the moon rising over his neighbor's garden suddenly flooded in, bathing the room in an ethereal light. He put the bottle down, walked over to the window, and stood there looking out. There was a solace to the moment that sent his mind floating out beyond the hysterical experiment of living to the plain, serious beauty of the world.

A few minutes later, the moon was consumed by a bank of dark clouds. Jim carefully closed the curtains, and, rather than returning to the liquor cabinet to make his final martini, went directly up to bed.



## The Snag

The huge red oak, long dead, by the creek  
has been leaning against a smaller living tree  
for years, moaning in the wind—an ache  
we still ourselves to listen to, my wife and I,  
to feel our own breathing. It's been leaning so long

its bark's worn away, smooth wood gone black.  
It could kill with the weight of its falling, and it will fall,  
of course, someday when no one's standing there  
to see it, though maybe we will hear it in the distance  
as we move through our lives. She told me she wondered

what it felt like to be born, to move from that darkness  
in a sudden burst of energy and breathing; she told me  
she sometimes felt empty of herself, like a ghost.

We were sitting outside to watch the summer darken,  
listening to a barred owl moan in the distance  
and waiting for something whose name we didn't know,  
something like an animal approaching

in a language we'd forgotten, and all we could do now  
was open our bodies, and wait for it to come.

## The Hungry Ghosts

In some other life you paused on the sidewalk  
at dusk: you'd noticed your mother moving  
back and forth  
across the upstairs window  
behind glowing curtains. Her silhouette seemed  
to be dancing as she held out each item of clothing  
and turned to herself in the mirror. Then the bedroom  
went dark as she headed downstairs

to cook dinner. It was chilly. The streetlights came on  
so you went in and called out *I'm home*. She was standing  
in the hallway listening  
for your father's train  
in the distance. She was barefoot, though the house was chilly--

and you suddenly felt as though you'd intruded  
on something intimate and visceral, like  
a strange new smell, or a dance whose steps  
you couldn't follow  
and maybe never would--

and you felt a kind of panic rising through your body,  
a rush of freedom and release that frightened you like joy.

## **Sudden Happiness**

Through one window, horses keep crossing  
the horizon: shadows of the dreams we thought  
were our lives, until we forgot them.

And when the moment opens: another kind of window  
we could step through like a door, walk out into a field  
wide as the horizon, where those horses stand still

as though they were waiting, wild horses we could never ride

though we might move close enough  
to hear them breathe—  
we'd have to slip softly through the grass like a breeze—

close enough to catch the light in their eyes,  
smell the sweet sweat of their bodies.

## A Dash of Memories

I've saved the garter from the day  
I was married— something borrowed,  
something blue, something quieter  
than the magpies that have learned  
to mimic a fire engine in summer—

once I lived inside a summer's  
evening and the sound of a violin  
with its horsehair bow; a romance  
made up of memories, love  
and isolation—

my grandfather was an engineer  
who loved the roar of locomotives  
and any woman who called his name,  
yet never heard the sound of his  
own daughter's dreams—

there was a picture of a falling leaf  
above my mother's bed. It fluttered  
in darkness while she dreamt  
of being cured inside a room  
full of winter—

a winter's owl waits on a telephone  
wire to catch and regurgitate his prey;  
a lone cat creeps under the same  
moonlight, unknowingly  
towards death—

when death pulled me into grief's  
murky wave, my lungs filled  
with loneliness; a solitary space  
until I missed the need  
to breathe again—

if I could put my favorite breath  
inside an hourglass, you'd be the one  
turning it upside down—wake up  
and breathe, you'd say wake up  
and breathe forever—

I don't remember the lake,  
only the fishing line that hung  
in the depths of forever and my father  
leaning over the shallows with  
a baited hook—

when I was young, driving my car  
home after midnight, a cop said he'd  
follow me as if he was my father, as if  
my father would have ever said  
anything like that.

## Letter to My Mother-In-law Long After Her Death

*Dear Angie*

I confess, sometimes you reminded me of a golden retriever with your big puppy dog eyes, hearty gait, and playfulness, your dedication to hard work. The way you protected your beloved chickens living in the backyard. Standing on your sturdy hind legs, you'd bark in Greek, your native tongue, at the coyotes and foxes prowling the neighborhood for food. At night you'd lay your body down, one cheek on a fluffy pillow, dreaming of the old country and the hilly grasslands of Greece damp with midnight dew.

Yours was a simple life, exuberance could fill your soul with a car window rolled down, your nose rimming the edge of the door's metal frame as you'd ride around in the backseat in that furry pink robe, bare feet calloused and grey like the undersides of scruffy paws. Your silver hair would whip across your face in a tangle of strands, your image reflected in the rearview mirror of the family Chevy. Us kids taking turns driving you through familiar streets while memories and warm air brushed you to sleep.

And when Pete died, as his coffin was being lowered from its steely scaffolding into the ground, you howled like a wolf then kneeled on the newly overlaid grave, your large hands sifting through dirt as though unearthing some hidden bone, your nose skimming the soft soil for his scent as if trying to retrieve your young from the dead. And for just a moment I wanted to be him, to have someone love me like that.

*Sagapo*

## In the Oblivion of Dawn

5:06 in the morning, the caregiver calls, says it won't be long now. It will take me three minutes to get there—my father's house, where I left a few hours earlier to get some rest. I pull on my jeans and last night's sweater lying over the chair beside my bed. I get dressed in the half-light seeping through the window's curtain sheer.

5:07 I run upstairs to wake my youngest brother, who's been staying at my house for the past week. I tell him I'll be in the car with the engine running, *come quick*, I say, thinking it will be just the two of us taking this ride together that winds through a path between houses summiting at the end of life.

5:08 We're in the car; I thank my brother for staying, knowing otherwise, I'd be alone, navigating my way to my father's home one last time. There's something careful about the way he looks at me, searching my eyes for a sign, reminiscent of when he was small when I'd read him a bedtime story, with the final words *happily ever after*.

5:09 We're on the road, in what seems slow motion as we drive by a crowd of trees and newly fallen leaves that line the streets punctuating the sadness of September. It will be ok; I tell him—though I know that's just what people say when things aren't going to end well.

5:10 We're at the light, and I'm trying to recall the sequence of numbers that'll raise the mechanical bar to the entrance of the parking lot of his house. Something I use every day, metaphoric in a way since I can't recall, and I imagine my dad waiting outside Heaven's gate, asking someone to let him in—his Alzheimer's again, depriving him of an access code.

5:11. We arrive, and I park the car, run to his door and swing it wide, walk inside past the gallery of pictures hanging in the hallway to his room. *He's stopped breathing;* I say as I reach over to kiss my father's cheek, whisper my name in his ear, but I already know he can't hear a thing.



## Making Things Wright

—for Fred

My grandfather used to recite this old joke  
*Hey, you know why the neighbors named  
their dog Carpenter, because he did so*

*many odd jobs around the house!* I thought  
it was a good gibe the first time, but after  
it became part of his regular greeting

routine, I wondered if he even  
knew it was funny, or just wanted  
to recite the only one-liner he could

remember, something to generate  
a reaction, laughter until it became  
predictable at which point he wasn't

aware. He'd lounge on our sofa with  
a glazed stare in his eyes and press  
his gold pocket-watch between his fingers

as if he could change the time by holding  
it, which he could if he kept watching the hands  
point from one roman numeral to the next.

One o'clock, two o'clock, three o'clock—  
*time to leave*, he'd say, the face of his watch  
reflecting the day's movement. I've always

liked cats better than dogs, and I felt like telling  
him every time he recited that stupid joke.  
They're neater, they use a litterbox and don't

require a stroll around the block to take  
a shit, but I listened to my grandfather patiently  
and waited for his back-and-forth repartee

because I gave a shit and thought it would  
be impolite to say, hey, I've heard this a thousand  
times before. I always had a thing for carpenters

anyway, guys who walk around a house  
fixing broken stuff, and I wanted someone to fix  
him, to make him remember more than a couple

of lines from an old joke. They say, Jesus  
was a carpenter, but I wonder about that now  
with all the odd jobs that still need doing.

Maybe that depends on someone's definition  
of odd. The last time my grandfather came over  
and told that joke, he forgot the punchline—

when I recited it for him, he looked insulted,  
like I'd not given him enough time to finish,  
not even the three hours he'd usually visit,

as if I'd rushed to reply, and maybe I had.  
I mean, how long is the right amount of time  
to wait for an answer? How many hours

would it take to fix the unfixable? One  
o'clock, two o'clock, three o'clock,  
that old watch still keeping time.

## Beautiful Lady with Pity

*"And this is why I sojourn here"*

La Belle Dame Sans Merci — John Keats

I'd write about death yet it's daunting  
to feel the boundlessness of eternity;  
like trying to run your finger along  
a soft cat's tail waving at the moon...  
it can't be done; sleep must first prevail.

So, I'll write about the only love who  
understood what it was to embrace me;  
the way a boy climbs a tree, holding tight  
for fear of falling, fingermarks mapped on my skin,  
a human compass of where he's been.

And if I write about trees, it would be  
the eucalyptus, a maverick dressed in myrtle,  
unfallen through a storm with its downward  
growing leaves, devoid of nest or lark, contrarian  
among the woodlands shady bower;  
oh, yellow or white-box beautiful flower.

Because I saved myself long beyond the night  
until I met the man who drowned the virgin in my veins,  
I held him tight within my bones, my limbs becoming  
reins. He rode me when my soul was frail  
and then that man revered me, so I gave him  
all I had to give, transforming love beyond ethereal.

## Footnote to the Men Who Will Follow

*for Elvira Shatayev*

*"We will not live to settle for less. We have dreamed of this all of our lives"*

—Adrienne Rich

Do not follow us here to the cold—  
we who have become us, blued with  
the desire to claim what is us—  
we, who are not safe to list our last

names and addresses in a telephone  
book or open our front doors without  
a weapon behind our backs, we who speak  
for the other, who traverse the mountaintops

brushed with snow, we who glean strength  
from gathering each and becoming one  
as we embolden ourselves with desire  
to own courage rather than learn it. Where

soon our husbands will know there was  
no need to find us, our bodies last halleluiah  
rejecting the sentimentality of burial, anesthetized  
from the freeze of these glorious arching peaks.

We who are silently screaming to them from  
the majestic earthwork, our remains beautifully  
imposing, swept within the bulwark that entombs  
us. Do not cover up what we have accomplished!

Do not try to undo the high winds that never  
claimed us, but ate our breath in exchange  
for near victory when we arrived here willingly  
to this place called death, only to find love,

even without you.

## Husband Poem

To the man I live with in this two story house  
who says he loves me in the morning even  
when I'm half-dressed, hair mussed and makeup  
free...to that man who watches me  
without ever saying a negative thing  
regarding my obsessiveness with being clean,  
my endless struggle with trying to appear  
younger every year no matter that nearly twenty  
have gone by in-between that echo in the photograph  
he keeps beside his bed, to the man who said,  
'I'm going to marry you one day long before  
I believed he would, not knowing he understood me  
more than I ever could, and to that man who sleeps  
with his legs intertwined in mine, who thinks  
I look good even in glasses and doesn't mind  
my two-pillow ritual for neck relief, my mouthguard  
hidden underneath the spread, in case I grind  
in my midnight sleep, to that man who doesn't complain—  
let me be the ritual he never grows tired of  
the habit he can't live without.

## **Twist on Lewis Carroll's Alice's Adventures in Wonderland**

Delirious, my sister had a dream,  
grand fantasies beneath a tree, affairs  
both wonderful and queer. In fact, it seems  
quite cruel now thinking back, poor little dear  
just dozing off to hear a rabbit speak  
of being late! She followed him, that fool  
then drank for curiosity, to seek  
one key upon the tabletop, a tool  
of gold that soon unlocked the garden's gate.  
The dormouse, hare, and hatter having tea  
until the Queen of Hearts declared her fate  
of dire consequence. All caused by me.  
One night my mother's pills were scattered loose,  
I stole a few then dropped them in her juice.

### At Thirteen

At thirteen, I received a birthday card  
from my aunt in Buffalo, my Dad's poem  
he had written at thirteen. Our back yard  
picnic table became a podium  
as I savored each word... 'Oh for a good  
old Summer's day with no cares in my way.'  
A fishing poem by a stream has stood  
the test of time, planting a seed, a ray  
of sunshine seething throughout the seasons.  
How unsuspecting was I? But the blind see,  
and now, does he know? God has his reasons.  
for reeling me to writing poetry.  
Limned by shade trees, fish swim in the stream,  
and here while I write, I see him. I dream.

## The Hill

I will climb and go now  
up this bold grassy hill  
where from a winded oak's brow  
burnished scarlet leaves spill,

and I shall find myself peace  
in the quiet bustling swirls  
as Autumn's own verse  
all around me unfurls.

I shall look to the valley,  
now a stanzaic Fall scene  
in the low mist of morning  
secreting vibrance in a sheen.

And as the sun starts to rise  
midst October's chilly clime,  
there will be warmth in my soul  
and visions of rhyme.



## Monet's Bridge Over Pond Painting

Untroubled lilies catch a breeze.  
Low light to color sways and shifts.  
Reflections linger, distant lees.  
One wave life ripple slowly sifts.

Low light to color sways and shifts.  
I see a palette in my mind.  
One wave like ripple slowly sifts.  
A painter's vision of some kind?

I see a palette in my mind.  
Brush strokes of warmth bridge sunlight's rays.  
A painter's vision of some kind,  
sweet fragrance from Giverny days.

Brush strokes of warmth bridge sunlight's rays,  
a poet's words, the lilies blooms.  
Sweet fragrance from Giverny days,  
impressionism fills my rooms.

A poet's words, the lilies blooms,  
untroubled lilies catch a breeze.  
Impressionism fills my rooms,  
Reflection lingers, distant lees.

## Tug of War

their cotton stitches

loosen

like the supple  
skin

of our aging

faces  
pressed tightly  
against worn

scarlet dyed cloth

strange-shaped animals

“Let go!”

“It’s mine!”

“Everything must by its nature be mine!”

though there has never been  
called *conquest*

still we reach

for and embrace

what was only

ever briefly

there

## Homecoming

lavender lily sprays lay silent  
waiting to wilt

on polished cherry wood caskets  
once vying for breath like  
every other living thing

a sweet fragrance  
meant to mask the decay  
of another body returning to the earth

## Smokestacks and AI

in this golden-glazed garden

self-preserving roots

beholden to 1s and 0s

battle binary smokestacks

exhaling

through blackened mouths

choking our children

to silence

a digital sea

swallows overcooked earth

destined for dirtless

graves

in this golden-glazed place

where everything ends

even death

when there is nothing left to nurture

## Grebes at Salton Sea

*An estimated 150,000 Eared Grebes died between 16 December 1991 and 21 April 1992 due to toxins in a large landlocked body of water formed when Colorado River floodwater breached an irrigation canal being constructed in what is now an abandoned ghost town resort bordering the San Andreas fault.*

like a gilded serpent in sand

slashing a careless path to

an accidental paradise

of indigo reflections

and neon green blooms

traced in white linen shores

we bask in the radiance

of our ruin

admiring

ebony quills and straw-colored wisps

searching candy apple eyes

pressing thirsty beaks

softly lifting tides

to bathe

the bones of dead fish

turning talon-like toes from

nipping burning sludge

we muse on

vacant twig-weaved frames

dusty glass end tables

and spray-painted makeshift canvases

near peaked fault line cliffs

in an evaporating Turner-esque landscape

by the sea

waiting to ensnare all

blind to blame

## Home by the Sea

A fist full of droplets

*Cast down*

From the heavens

Against glass panes

Like unsharpened diamonds

Little glistening eyes

Peer out at rough surf

Nipping at the horizon

Counting everything

They cannot save

Still adjusting

To the unfamiliar shadows

Of those we're meant to

Love

*Most*

Yet, the storm advances

And those cold tiny tears

Roll down all our smooth

*Surfaces*

Layered over tumultuous sea

A carer's soft hands cradle

The tender necks of children

Who may never grasp this wealth

Before them

*Comforted briefly*

By touch

But tides that go out

*Return*

*Disturb*

*Scar* the sand again

Only to be captured in a moment

Washed away, but

*Never forgotten*



## Three Phil Vas

### I

From the fifth floor window of a weathered old building, a boy gazes down. He counts cars and buses, follows pedestrians rushing about. A steady hiss of steam rises from the radiator and he welcomes its warmth on his hands and face. Nose pressed against the foggy glass, the boy watches two adults usher a child onto a school bus. "Three minus one equals two," he says as the school bus pulls away.

The apartment is only three rooms, and he is comforted by his mother's proximity. She talks on the telephone in the kitchen, her tired voice mingling with war coverage that blares from the living room television. "I know I'm alone, you don't gotta tell me that.... Oh, please don't give me that Melody-I'm-sorry shit.... It was his decision. I couldn't force him to stay."

She hangs up and enters the living room. Melody's eyes, young yet old as alms, settle on her son. She stumbles over a toy truck as she approaches him.

"Damn it, Ernesto, I told you to clean this up!"

He sits silently, his slight frame frozen beneath her glare.

"Well?" she says, softer now, checking her frustration.

He leaves the window and begins to gather his toys from the floor.

"Hurry," she urges him, "we're leaving soon."

Arms full of dinosaurs and plastic soldiers, Ernesto pauses before the television to watch a series of explosions. He stands enthralled, a rifleman clutched in his tiny hand, as cryptic phrases narrate the display: "Coalition forces entered the city today...a mobile defense unit came under fire...more casualties reported...."

Melody marches over and shuts the television.

"Put your toys away," she says.

### II

The sun is bright, but it is cold for March. Hand in hand, mother and son troop up Foster Avenue. Approaching the el, they hear the familiar rumble in the distance. "Hurry," she yells, "the train's coming." Melody quickens her pace up the stairs, but the boy can only climb so fast, so she scoops him up.

"Come on!" She shoves Ernesto toward the turnstile. "Go under!"

Panicked by the train's screaming halting, he pauses.

Finally, she pushes him under, pushes him through.

The doors close just as they enter the train.

She leads them to two window seats. For a few minutes Ernesto watches the world speed by. A worker in reflective orange waves from across the tracks. The man is gone almost instantly, so instead of waving back Ernesto wipes his brow. The radiator below is kicking in.

Melody's cell chimes.

"Hello? Oh, hey, I been meaning to call you."

"Mommy...."

"I told you, I'm waiting for that paperwork to go through."

Ernesto tugs her sleeve.

"But I can't give you the money if I don't have it."

"I'm hot," the boy says.

She digs into an olive drab satchel, retrieves a small plastic carton, pops in a straw, hands it to him.

He drinks.

“But that’s not what you said when you lent it to me.”

“I wanna take off my coat,” he whines.

She glares and shakes her head. Her voice sharpens. “What, you think I got money hidden somewhere? That’s a good one.”

“But I’m all sweaty!”

“Well, do what you gotta do!”

Ernesto gets down off the seat, pulls at the zipper of his coat. The carton hits the floor. Red liquid dribbles from the straw.

“Shit!” Melody shuts her cell and bends over to right the carton. Then, seeing the boy’s perspiring face, she pulls him toward her, brushes away his hand and attempts to open the coat herself.

“How come you never listen?!” She yanks the stuck zipper repeatedly. The boy’s body jerks forward with each pull.

Ernesto’s face wrinkles up; a tear disturbs the red puddle at his feet.

Her son’s crying brings Melody back to herself. She focuses, steadily working polyester from the zipper’s grip. “It’s okay,” she whispers, “it’s okay.”

### III

The morning has warmed. Hand in hand they walk the gravel path. They hear sparrows chirping, see bright young buds on trees.

“Do you remember where he is?” Melody asks.

“Three rows up and seven in.”

“Go ahead.”

Ernesto charges down the gravel path, turns right and vanishes behind a row of hedges. When she catches up, he is standing before a nondescript headstone.

“Can we eat yet?” he asks. “I’m hungry.”

They settle down on the grass to chips and soda.

Then, in accordance with ritual, the boy curls up in his mother’s arms. They rest, and morning sun shines on the headstone above. Rank, branch, birth and death dates, and the name of a distant desert war are illuminated. Slightly duller, yet seemingly deeper in the stone, is another name – that of the grave’s occupant: Ernesto Reyes, Sr. It is to this inscription that Ernesto now turns his attention.

“E-R-N-E-S-T-O,” he says.

“Very good,” says Melody.

Squeezing him to her, she closes her eyes, and for the first time in days, sleeps.

## Refueling at the Border Beha, Upper Volta, 1974

Brenton MacKinnon

Day driving in the Sahel desert is hot with a broken air conditioner. We were about to cross into Upper Volta from Mali to survey traditional well digging techniques. Three of us Peace Corps volunteers, an interpreter and well digging tools filled up our well used and battered Land Rover.

From the back seat Mamadou tapped me on the shoulder. "Mac, slow down. Border after big rocks."

Billy reached back over his seat. "Pass the water bag up here will ya?"

We hadn't stopped to piss in many hours. Dry heat in almost zero humidity consumed whatever water we drank as it evaporated on skin in an attempt to cool bodies. The exotic long robes we onetime made fun of, covered heads and faces up to the eyes of locals. We now stared at their portable shade with envy.

Inscrutable Mamadou, guide, interpreter and babysitter, kept his distance from us in town. Our team of roustabouts sometimes offended locals through immaturity and ignorance of local customs. Two of our youngest volunteers had already resigned and repatriated due to culture shock and prejudice. A 20 year old kid from Louisiana exclaimed in amazement on his first day, "My Gawd! They're all nigs here!"

But the Peace Corps is a corporation and needs a flow of warm bodies to keep up their funding so we continued on as the Darwinian selection processed new volunteers.

Mamadou placed his hand on my shoulder. "Stop Mac." I slowed down and pulled over.

"Soldiers block road." He pulled out his pouch with passports and visas to enter Upper Volta. A hundred yards ahead and under an umbrella, four border guards slowly rose and picked up rifles.

"Go slow, Mac. I talk."

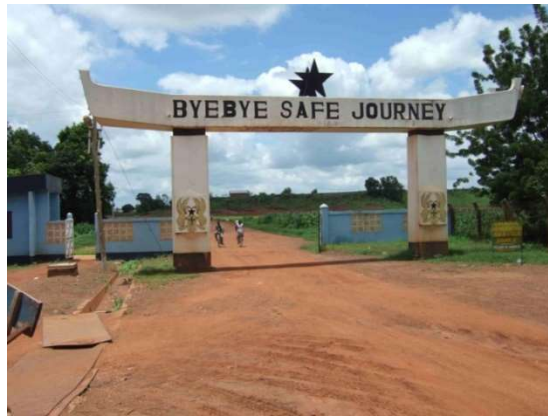
We pulled up to the iron bar across the road. More curious than threatened four weary border guards pointed AK47s at us. Maybe they just wanted a bribe, food or a souvenir from foreigners.

''' Mamadou got out and approached their big umbrella. Former French colonies, Mali and Upper Volta still used Francophone French: *patois noir*. But I heard our guide and a soldier speaking Fula, smile and then hold hands. Mamadou got back in. "Mali and Upper Volta war. They arrest us. Follow motor cycle. No one act stupid. We go jail. Mac, See if radio work."

I spun through the channels on the car radio. Nothing but static.

Billy and Del chatted nervously, Mamadou retreated into silence and I dug out my portable radio and handed it back to him. Only one scratchy broadcast station playing Kora harp music.

Del laughed. "Perfect. There's a war going on with some sort of church music playin." In the rear view mirror, Mamadou almost smiled.



Leaving Mali

I drove a couple of hundred yards and crossed into a sandy village of about fifty tired buildings and huts. The soldier parked his motor bike in front of what once might have been a hotel. We followed him inside and after waking up the clerk; Mamadou asked a few questions and handed over some francs. Our guard sat down at a corner table and pointed at a couch and two wooden chairs with his rifle. We sat.

Mamadou said, "No jail only hotel. Telephone line broken. We wait. Give me radio, Mac."

Our guard spoke to the clerk and after nodding his head the clerk went outside, cranked up the motor cycle and took off. Leaning back into the couch Mamadou pressed the transistor radio to his ear and closed his eyes just as a jeep with the other soldiers rattled to a stop outside.

"There's no one guarding the border now. War is hell." Del stood and nodding at our guard walked over to what looked like a bar. He leaned over a dozen wooden crates stacked together with goat skins on top and looked down the other side. A big Oklahoma grin turned around. "Beer!"

Billy and our guard jumped up in sync just as the three border guards walked in. Confused, they raised their rifles at the ready. After six weeks of French lessons Billy knew about six words of French and saved the day.

"Bière!"

The mood in the border war at Beha, Upper Volta, immediately improved.

A devout and sober Muslim, Mamadou had witnessed many episodes of diplomacy lubricated by alcohol between Europeans and tribal Africans. Sensing a moment of international détente, he dug out more francs from his pouch and waved them in the air.

"Le Corps de la Paix paie!" (The Peace Corps pays)

Issaka, our former jailer and Billy went around the end of the bar and lifted up a case of *Ouagadougou ZDB Pale Ale*. The rest of us joined them and hovered around the wooden crate as though it was a cradle from Bethlehem.

Del broke the silence. "How do you say bottle opener in French?"

The Fula are an intuitive people. Issaka pulled out a large knife from under his shirt, pried a bottle cap off and handed the bottle to Del who saluted and took a long drink. A dozen more bottles soon popped open and rifles happily stacked in the corner. Billy passed beer all around, declared a cease fire and pulled out his Jew's harp.



Issaka

. With no TV, smart phone, newspaper or movie theater, tribal people continually gathered round travelers wondering what amusing body language or bizarre French pronunciation would appear. In the Southern Sahara we Americans were an exotic side show, creatures from outer space

And we were about to be a very big hit at the *Beha Border Bar*.

As Billy twanged the Jews harp a guard went out to the jeep and returned with an *n'guni*. He tuned the string instrument to the musical key Billy was flipping on his mouth harp. We had a band.

I yelled. "Del! Do your yodel thing."

Workin' on his second beer, Del winked at Billy, "Honkey Tonk Blues!"

Billy smiled and twanged the new tune louder. The *n'guni* joined in playing top end harmony. Hands beat rhythm on the bar top in and a couple of boots pounded bass counterpoint and a Hank Williams' tune joined the party. Del had a great voice and classic yodel skills. Our new friends matched him with vibratos and tremolos. And so we waged war all night long sometimes with competing vocals but more often merging into African street corner doo wop.

The roar and popping exhaust of the retuning motor bike woke the eight of us in the morning. Our band slowly got up off the floor, put on serious faces and tried to look normal.

Mamadou rose majestically from his couch and said in two languages, "Say nothing."

Grinning and covered with dust, the hotel clerk burst in, "La guerre est finie!"

Mamadou placed his right hand over his heart and announced to the linguistically improvised, "War over."

He pulled the messenger aside talked quietly for a few minutes then turned to me. "Mac, fill water bag. We go Ouagadougou."

## Canticle of the Sun

### Sandro Francisco Piedrahita

“For the welcoming darkness  
and the wounds that bring us  
to a place of unknowing,  
we thank God!”

— Barbara Holmes

I knew Francis long before my ruin – the horror caused by my disease – when we were both young and carefree and spent our nights singing and carousing, fancying ourselves troubadours and searching for lovely women with whom to share a dance or a bottle of wine. At that time, elephant disease was the farthest thing from my mind and I never imagined the possibility that I might get infected. Lepers were the detested other, the poorest of the poor, the putrid and the unclean. I never contemplated the idea that I – the privileged son of a wealthy merchant – would end up isolated in a leprosarium before my twenty-fifth year. Never in my worst nightmares did I foresee that I would be forced to divorce my wife and lose all contact with my son, that I would be barred from all interaction with healthy persons, other than the occasional almsgiver encountered on the road as I rang my bell to warn everyone of my presence. “Beware!” I cried out. “Beware! A leper is among you.”

Francis was the chief of all the troubadours. He could write his songs in less than an hour and quickly put them to music. They were all songs of courtly love and often he serenaded a lovely woman with his mandolin as she stared down at him from her balcony. On Saturday nights, he led our small group to the Avellino Inn, where we sang and drank to the wee hours. Francis could imbibe more than the rest of us and yet never lose control of his senses. While Federico and Giovanni could barely walk after a night at the inn, Francis was fully alert at four o'clock in the morning, ready to keep drinking until the inn was closed. The one thing Francis would not do – unlike myself and the rest – was to seek the company of bawdy women who were always available for a few coins. This was before his full conversion to the Catholic religion – his faith was lukewarm at the time – and yet he already felt that paying women for intimate relations was an abomination. It was the complete opposite of the chaste love he sang about as a chivalrous troubadour. Women were to be loved and praised for their beauty, not to be debauched.

Perhaps if I had imitated Francis' example, I would not have ended up in an asylum for lepers, since I probably got infected by consorting with prostitutes. Or perhaps my elephantiasis was a punishment from God for engaging in such depravity. I should say that some claimed my leprosy was a secret blessing from God as it made me closer to the Christ in His suffering, but initially I tended to disbelieve that theory. Why would God curse me with malodorous sores all over my body, eventually letting me lose my fingers and toes as a result of my condition, if it was not an act of supreme retributive justice?

At the time, before his full conversion, Francis detested lepers. He was a devotee of beauty – in poetry, in women and in song – and he could not tolerate the unsightly lepers with their bloody pustules and dark blemishes. He could not stomach their stench either, the smell of rotting flesh and infected wounds, and he did everything to avoid it. I remember once when we were en route to visit a tailor in the center of Assisi – Francis insisted on being well-dressed at all times – and we happened upon a leper clanging his bell as we were walking to the piazza. The man was clearly in an advanced stage of elephantiasis, although he could still

stagger from place to place. His hands were deformed, as he had lost most of his fingers and only stubs were left. His face was grotesque. He looked as if he didn't have a nose and his upper lip seemed to be split in half. The area above his eyebrows was swollen such that his forehead seemed to protrude from his face like that of a monstrous simian. And of course there were skin lesions visible over every part of his body not covered by his cloak.

"Mercy! Mercy!" he cried out as soon as he saw us. "Do not forget the words of the Christ. 'Truly I tell you, whatever you did for one of the least of these, you did for me!' I assure you no one is lesser than me in all of Assisi."

"Let's walk to the other side of the road," said Francis. "I don't want to get any closer to him. I'm sure he reeks."

"Just a coin or two," the leper implored as he ambled in our direction. "Just enough to buy a piece of bread and maybe a little cheese."

"We don't have any money," responded Francis angrily. "Go on your way. I'm sure you'll be fed at the asylum."

But the leper continued to walk toward us even after Francis and I crossed the road to the other side.

"Shouldn't we give him a little something?" I asked Francis. "He looks so desperate."

"Do you want to reward mendicancy? He'll be fed at the leprosarium, but first he'll have to work for it. One must not reward laziness. My father always says sloth is one of the cardinal sins."

"I see nothing wrong with giving him a few cents," I answered. "And charity is one of the cardinal virtues."

"If you want to get close to him, have at it. But beware of contagion. You can contract elephant disease merely by speaking with a leper. If you inhale the breath of someone who's infected, you might on your way to doom."

"I don't think the good Lord would punish me with leprosy for performing an act of charity. Wasn't Jesus often surrounded by the lepers?"

"You're not Jesus," responded Francis. "Don't tell me you're striving to be a saint. Lepers nauseate me beyond measure."

"I'm a wayward sinner, certainly with no aspirations to sainthood. But this man is in need and I have a surfeit. Thanks to my father, I'll never go hungry."

"Well, go ahead and give him the money then," Francis replied. "Let's hurry and get to the tailor. I want to be dressed like a gentleman at Lucia's ball. She's spirited and lovely and is of noble birth. She wouldn't make a bad wife."

"That's true," I responded.

"And her dowry wouldn't hurt," Francis laughed. "Now get to it. Give your money to the leper so he can buy his lunch and leave us in peace."

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My initial diagnosis coincided with Francis' full conversion to the faith. One morning I woke up with pink colored patches all over my arms and chest. Within three months, I had developed small lumps on my face and earlobes and constant nosebleeds. I also felt a great weakness in my legs, as if my soul was too heavy for my body to carry. I initially said nothing to my wife, for I feared the worst. I knew with time she would figure it all out. I sought out a book on elephantiasis, trying to see what was in store for me. What I learned from my studies couldn't have been worse. The treatise explained that with the passage of time the leper suffers paralysis of all extremities, ulcers on the soles of his feet, shortening of toes and fingers, nose disfigurement, a burning sensation in the skin and – as if all that weren't enough – total blindness. The only silver lining was that the treatise said sometimes it took years for all the symptoms to appear. I wasn't about to go blind overnight. Still, when I visited a physician,

he ordered me to move to a leprosarium immediately in accordance with applicable law. I was to be completely isolated. No longer would I be able to enjoy the company of my friends nor even that of my wife and son. To my great surprise, she promptly initiated proceedings to divorce me, as the existing regulations dictated that leprosy was sufficient grounds for the annulment of a marriage.

When I say Francis underwent a conversion, I mean a *full* conversion. He relinquished any claim to his father's estate and began to live the life of a beggar, living like a leper seeking alms for his daily sustenance. We the lepers weren't allowed to interact with healthy people, but the news of what was happening in Assisi reached us anyway, as newly diagnosed lepers arrived every month with new tales to tell. One day a beautiful woman arrived, with auburn hair and a shapely figure. Nobody would have suspected her of being ill with elephantiasis, since she bore no marks on her face and covered her entire body. She was still lovely, young, and desirable. Soon the rumor spread about the asylum that she would never have been interned in the leprosarium but for the perfidy of her husband. According to the gossip, Georgina's husband turned her over to the authorities because he thought her disease was the result of adultery.

Georgina reported that Francis was living on the streets, sleeping wherever the night found him, and eating only due to the generosity of passersby who felt pity for him as he walked the streets in his ragged clothes. Many thought he was a madman, not only because he was the son of the wealthy Pietro di Bernardone dei Moriconi and could have lived in comfort, but also because he was as unkempt as the poorest of the mentally alienated. His brown hair was often uncombed and his face was often dirty. He always wore the same threadbare brown tunic with a corded rope about his waist with three knots, signifying the vows of poverty, chastity and obedience. Even though he lived from day to day and wasn't sure where the next meal would come from, he didn't hesitate to turn over what little he had if he found a mendicant on the street. As far as humanly possible, Francis tried to live the life of the Christ. Not surprising that one afternoon he appeared at our leprosarium.

"How long has it been, Riccardo?" he asked me as soon as he recognized me. At that time my nose had still not fallen off and I bore some semblance to the man I had once been, although my face was already covered with red marks and I had sunken eyes which made me look frightening.

"Let's see," I said. "Before you went off to war and I was married, I would say probably about three years ago. You must be surprised to find me here, just as I am surprised that you became an itinerant preacher. Who would have said that the two partygoers would have ended up leading such radically different lives from those of their adolescence."

"You must be surprised – nay, astonished – but I would gladly trade places with you," said Francis. "I have made a vow to Lady Poverty and there is no greater poverty than the one you suffer from, other than perhaps the poverty of hardened sinners."

"That's easy to say," I responded, "when your body is not falling apart, when you don't have to live with the constant stench of your own wounds. You live in poverty because it's your good pleasure. I live with the decay of my body because I must."

"God loves those who live in poverty in all its forms. Remember the words of Jesus. 'Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick.'"

"Yes, I need a physician!" I exclaimed. "But there is no doctor in all of Italy who can cure me. I am no longer who I was. I am only what remains of me."

My illness had taken away all my faith and optimism and filled my mind with fears. There was no palliative for my despair.

"Come, let me wash your wounds," said Francis.



And then he took a sponge and a bucket of water and slowly started to cleanse me, with no fear for his own health.

“Do you believe in miracles?” I asked him,  
“I do,” he replied, “but we seldom recognize them.”

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There are hierarchies even in Heaven, the old saying goes, but I was surprised to discover there were also hierarchies in the leprosarium.

At the top of the pyramid were the abbot and the twelve monks who ran the asylum like a monastery, making sure all the lepers lived a life of prayer. In the morning, we began with the Mass, followed by the *Lectio Divina* – the reading of sacred Scriptures – which lasted four hours, and in the afternoon we engaged in the silent contemplation of the Blessed Sacrament. Below the monks were the newly arrived lepers who still didn't exhibit any symptoms of the disease other than pink patches on their chest and arms. Among that group was Georgina, an island of beauty in a sea of ugliness. I think I fell in love with her from the first moment I saw her, for there was no one as pretty as her in the whole asylum. The third rung in the hierarchy were the lepers like me, who already bore the malodorous sores typical of those who suffer from elephant disease but whose faces were not yet disfigured. Below that category were the walking dead, monsters without fingers or noses who were still able to stagger from place to place and caused people to shudder when they ventured outside the leprosarium. Finally, there were those in the throes of death, who were to remain in bed until they died, although sometimes it took them years of constant suffering before they did so.

I was also surprised that the lepers had some degree of self-governance, although the abbot always had the final say. There was a group of ten of us, elected by the rest of the lepers, who made decisions as to how certain monies were allocated, about who was allowed to beg outside the leprosarium, and about disciplinary matters. Among other things, we often had to decide whether a leper should be forced to leave the asylum for breaching the rules of the leprosarium's constitution. That was a fate worse than death for it meant the leper would no longer be fed at the asylum and would have to depend on the generosity of passersby to eat. When two lepers were found *in flagrante delicto*, the committee convened to decide their fate.

There is a myth among ordinary people that lepers suffer from abnormal and extreme sexual desires. That is a complete falsehood. Those with elephantiasis suffer from lust no more and no less than those who are healthy. It's just that lepers are forbidden to marry and have no healthy outlet for their normal sexual passions. I know for a fact that even if I were not ill I would be fiercely attracted to Georgina. I do not desire her because I'm a leprous monster but because she happens to be a lovely woman. At some point, it fell upon me to decide the fate of two lepers accused of engaging in the sin of concupiscence in an empty shed next to the leprosarium. Both of them were extremely unattractive, already in the later stages of the disease, and I was shocked to learn that they had found refuge in each other's arms. The abbot strongly recommended that they be expelled from the leprosarium, saying their sin was uglier than their bleeding pustules in the eyes of God. After all, the two lepers – as if they were monks – had been forced to make a vow of chastity upon entering the leprosarium. The abbot felt that they had flagrantly violated an oath made before God, justifying their expulsion if not worse. The abbot was not a bad man – he had dedicated his entire life to the care of lepers – but he was stalwart in his condemnation of open and manifest sin.

Georgina had recently been elected to the committee and defended Luigi and Regina with a relentless passion, knowing from her own experience that lepers could not be allowed to participate in a marriage sanctified by God. What else could be expected then, other than sin? The couple should just be allowed to go to Confession, argued Georgina, and asked to pledge

not to sin again. And then Georgina shocked the abbot by saying she wasn't even sure that Luigi and Regina had engaged in sin.

"If they felt love for each other and couldn't marry," Georgina asked, "why should God punish their love? Why should we punish their love? It's obvious that they didn't act based upon a base physical passion since they were both physically repugnant in the eyes of ordinary men. It is clear, then, that their bond was deeply spiritual and not a crime in the eyes of God."

The abbot was incensed by Georgina's defiant posture.

"Lepers are no different from women who have been abandoned by their spouses," said the abbot. "They're alone through no fault of their own and yet cannot engage in sinful union with another. A life of chastity is not a punishment from God but a means of getting closer to Him."

"Don't forget what Jesus did when the adulterous woman was about to be stoned," Georgina retorted. "He didn't agree to the punishment ordered by the Pharisees but told the woman, 'Go and sin no more.' We should treat Luigi and Regina in a similar manner. If what they did was a sin, let us forgive them and tell them to 'go and sin no more.'"

"We're not about to stone them," responded the abbot in an even voice. "All we are doing is saying that given their conduct they have no place in this holy leprosarium. Don't forget this institution is an organ of the Catholic Church. In fact, it qualifies as a monastery."

"Let's put it up for a vote," replied Georgina. "The constitution of the leprosarium dictates that the rulings of the abbot can be overruled by the unanimous decision of all members of the committee. I say that Luigi and Regina should not be forced to leave the asylum and face their perils alone."

"If you all vote against my wishes," said the abbot, "I shall see it as a decision to oust me from my position as abbot of this leprosarium. So vote as you will. But know if you refuse to expel Luigi and Regina from this asylum, you shall be expelling me."

In the end, only four members of the committee, including me, voted against the abbot. I must admit that I voted that way with trepidation for I greatly admired the abbot and his gentle love and toleration for the lepers. But I knew that if Luigi and Regina were ousted from the leper asylum, they would be condemned to suffer a slow and grueling punishment. Given that they were both physically hideous, few people would approach them on the roads of Assisi and give them alms. So they would probably die of starvation. Before the two lepers left with only the clothes on their back, I hugged them with tears running down my face. Suffering results in a grim solidarity with others who suffer from the same affliction. So I felt nothing but empathy for them as they slowly shuffled down the hill which leads from the asylum to the town.

But then something happened to prove the grace of God, something I was beginning to disbelieve. The news was all over town and reached the halls of the leprosarium. My old friend Francis had come upon the two lepers and they had explained their situation to him. When he learned they could not return to the leprosarium, he asked one of the priests who traveled with him to give them the sacrament of Confession and then invited them to follow him wherever he went, as if they were his disciples. "Follow me and sin no more," he had told them, echoing the Christ. For a period of about six months, everyone thought Francis was even madder than before, not only living in abject poverty but now making his way about Italy in the company of two hideous and contagious lepers. Eventually Francis and his group reached the town of Perugia, where there was another leper asylum. The two lepers were accepted without reservation once the abbot of the leprosarium realized it was Francis who was bringing them. The news had already begun to spread throughout Italy that Francis was a saint.

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I lived among many lepers, but despite their numbers the worst thing about the leprosarium was its solitude. There was not much conversation going on at the asylum. And it wasn't because the monks encouraged us to live in silence and contemplation. It was because all of us led truncated lives. For all of us, the before and the after had been violently riven asunder by elephant disease. We could talk about the past, when so many of us led ordinary lives, often with spouses and children. That only made our present condition seem more dire. We could talk about the future, which portended our complete destruction. That led only to despair. We just had to look at the bedridden lepers slowly wasting away in the special wards to recognize the future which awaited us. The leprosarium was not a place for carefree conversation. It was a place where humans – yes, humans after all! – were sent to rot and die.

Although Georgina was still a beauty and I was already beginning to become a monster, we soon learned that we had a lot in common. We only saw each other during lunch and dinner, for otherwise the male and female wards were strictly separated, but that gave us the opportunity to see each other every day. We both had been in what most people would consider loving marriages, blessed by every material comfort, certain that we were cherished by our spouses. And then our lives had suddenly been upended by leprosy. We lost everything, everything, as if each of us were a modern-day Job. Almost overnight, we lost our families, our friends, our spouses, our livelihoods, and simultaneously our bodies started to rebel against us.

“Do you think you could ever love again?” Georgina asked me.

I felt like telling her, “Have you gone mad? Who would ever fall in love with such a ghoul?” but I held my tongue and only said it was unlikely. Why would she ask me such an importunate question?

“I for one think I can love again,” she told me. Her hazel eyes suddenly seemed to shine.

I decided to be kind and not tell her that her illusions were impossible. At most she could find a furtive lover at the asylum as long as her symptoms didn't worsen. After all, her beauty would not last. She was doomed to a relentless decay, as were all the rest of us.

“Could you love one of the men at the asylum?” I asked. “Or are you thinking of a relationship with one of the monks? Because in this leprosarium you have no other alternative.”

“Sometimes those infected with leprosy don't manifest any significant symptoms in twenty years,” she responded happily, as if she believed it.

I didn't have the courage or the cruelty to tell her that most men at the asylum were no longer at the earliest stages of the disease. Those lepers who were asymptomatic were still living with their wives in their own homes. And there was certainly no reason to believe that she herself would not face a worsening of her leprosy.

“What about the men with symptoms?” I asked her. “Could you ever love one?”

Frankly Georgina had made me think of something impossible. Could Georgina ever love me?

“I don't know,” she vacillated. “Maybe, maybe not.”

“Don't lie to me, Georgina, and don't lie to yourself. You could never share a bed with one of the unsightly denizens of this monastery.”

“Don't you believe in miracles?” she queried. “Christ healed many lepers. And there are rumors that a man called Francis is doing the same in many places, from Germany to the Arab lands. They say he even kisses their wounds before he cures them. Francis' disciples are also obligated to tend to the lepers, to feed them, to house them, even to clean their sores. And there is a story which I've heard that should give you hope. I for one shall not give up on prayer.”

“What’s the story?” I asked. I hadn’t received news about Francis in many months. “As for myself, I gave up on prayer long ago.”

“There was one heretical leper who was something of a madman and constantly blasphemed against Jesus and the Blessed Mother in an effort to scandalize the monks at his asylum. The monks were on the brink of expelling him from the leper hospital and decided to call Francis as a last resort. Francis visited the man and soon discovered that the man spoke ill of God because the leper had succumbed to a suicidal despair. ‘What peace can I look for from God,’ the leper said when Francis directed him to pray, ‘when it is God who has taken from me peace and every other blessing, and made me a putrid and disgusting object? How can I thank God for His blessings when I am in constant pain?’ Then Francis started to clean the sores with a wet sponge and wherever Francis touched him, the elephant disease would disappear. Soon the man recovered the handsome face of his youth and began to weep, for he had directed insults against his God.”

“I used to know Francis when we were very young,” I said to Georgina. “He was disgusted by the lepers and even pinched his nostrils when they approached him in order not to smell the pestilent odor emitted by their wounds. Now Francis is dedicated to washing them and pressing his lips to their sores. It’s a complete reversal. I’m sure some say that’s a miracle in itself.”

“In the lepers,” Georgina assented, “the blessed Francis has found the Christ.”

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The war against the lepers was short-lived but devastating. It began in Toulouse, France when a few lepers were accused of poisoning the city’s wells with lepers’ urine in order to infect the rest of the community. Soon the claims against the lepers became more outlandish. The fast-paced rumor was that the lepers had developed a horrible concoction to make healthy people become infected with elephantiasis. The concoction supposedly consisted of a mixture of leper urine, blood from the lepers’ pustules, frogs’ legs, toads’ heads, and various poisons. The lepers were accused of collaborating with the hated Jews in an attempt to destroy Christian Europe and let the Muslims take over. Almost immediately a group of lepers confessed to having hatched the plot as a way to seek revenge for the way they were treated by the healthy. Of course, the lepers only confessed after being tortured, but that didn’t stop those who hated the lepers from starting a pogrom against them. The news traveled fast and we quickly learned about the attack on the lepers in France and soon thereafter the lepers in Aragon as well. A great number of those suffering from elephant disease had been decapitated or burnt at the stake, without distinction of age or gender.

The abbot convened all the lepers at our leprosarium to tell us the grim news. During the persecution of the lepers, many abbots and monks had been killed as well, blamed for participating in the terrible plot without any proof other than forced confessions. The worst thing according to the abbot was that the campaign against the lepers would soon make its way to Italy, perhaps to our own leprosarium, and there was little we could do to defend ourselves. When one of the residents at the asylum suggested we get armed, the abbot told him retaliatory violence was inconsistent with the Christian message.

Within a few days, the abbot once again got the lepers together to announce that a group of marauding thugs had attacked the largest leprosarium in Rome. Apparently there had been a great massacre. Every leper had been considered fair game, even those who were bedridden in the last throes of the disease. Some lepers had tried to escape the asylum, only to be hunted down like animals on the streets of the Eternal City.

“Yes, like animals,” said the furious abbot. “It’s no longer enough to banish the lepers and pretend they don’t exist. Now it’s incumbent to eliminate them, to make them disappear, and they have the gall to make the spurious claim that they’re protecting Christianity.”

“Are you afraid?” Georgina asked me.

“I don’t know. I’m not really surprised. We’ve always been the hated other. Francis may see the Christ when he encounters a leper, but for most people we’re repugnant eyesores. Our very presence is an accusation against those who are healthy, a forceful rebuke to how the sick are treated in a society which claims to be Catholic.”

“I think I will escape,” Georgina said in a frantic voice. “If I wear a long-sleeved gown, no one will know I suffer from a disease.”

“Everyone in town knows you suffer from elephantiasis. If an attack occurs, it will come from your former neighbors. Among them will be your ex-husband, who probably detests the lepers. How can you possibly live in clandestinity when you have no money and no one to hide you?”

“I’m terrified. Do you understand me? I don’t want to be gang-raped and then burnt at the stake.”

At some point Francis appeared at the leprosarium, with a large group of his disciples, all of them dressed in brown tunics with ropes about their waists. He had heard that an attack on the lepers of Assisi was imminent and he wanted to be with us in that moment. It was nearly twilight when the crowds began to congregate in the small plaza adjacent to the leprosarium. Many of the men – residents of Assisi just like us – seemed drunk, giddy and dazed by fury. From the windows, we could see what was happening in the waning sunlight. Apparently the marauders had spent the afternoon getting into a number of homes in Assisi where lepers reportedly lived and dragging out their inhabitants. They had brought them to the leprosarium to make an example of them. On the middle of the plaza they had built a makeshift scaffold and were preparing to execute the lepers they had brought with them. As the winter sun was setting, some of the attackers prepared to enter the leprosarium immediately. Most were armed with pickaxes, knives, lances and swords. Some had crossbows, as if they were going to war.

That is when Francis decided to act.

He exited the leprosarium and stood in front of the entrance to the asylum. I followed right behind him, since I did not want Francis to be alone and thought I was going to be killed anyway. He began to speak in a parsimonious voice as the masses hooted at him, throwing bits of trash at him and telling him he would be the first to die. The crowds recognized him and, knowing his reputation for miracles, derisively shouted that he should save himself.

“What you are planning to do is a great sin,” he said in a calm voice. “These lepers are guilty of no crime and do not deserve the punishment of death. But if you do anything to kill these people, it is you who shall be gambling with your soul. At the time of the final judgment, you shall have to render an account for each and every one of your deeds. Go back to your homes and thank the Good Lord because you are not infected with leprosy. Thank him for your families and for your health. And leave these folks alone.”

The men assembled at the plaza in front of the asylum were ordinary people who had never committed a crime – Francis knew that well – and yet the collective rage of the crowd was omnivorous and cruel. Soon a group of about six men were taking Francis by the arms and taking him to the scaffold. I saw everything as it unfolded, yet there was nothing for me to do. Francis made no effort to resist but told them he would willingly die if his beloved lepers were spared. The men laughed at him, this madman who traversed the roads of Italy in rags, and proceeded to put the noose about his neck as they made him stand on a wooden stool.

“Hang him! Hang him!” cried out the throngs. “He helped the lepers poison the wells of Italy.”

“Let me say the Lord’s prayer before I die,” Francis requested in a voice without fear. “And I shall say a prayer for you too, since you do not know what you are doing.”

Suddenly all the crowds began to disperse as they witnessed something strange and wondrous in the heavens. Even though it was already early evening, the sun shone brightly above them as if it was a noonday sun and emitted multicolored rays and radiant colors. Many people knelt and wept as they prayed, never having seen such a prodigy, the sun surrounded by a scarlet flame and seemingly careening toward the earth. Those who were closest to the scaffold were blinded temporarily by its light like Saul on the way to Damascus. The man who was about to kick the stool and hang Francis begged for his forgiveness, for he viewed his sudden blindness as a punishment from God.

“It is not a punishment,” Francis replied. “By blinding you, God has saved not only the lepers but also you. Say thanks to Brother Sun who bears God’s likeness and make amends to your Lord by helping your brother lepers from now on.”

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By the time Francis began to live at the leprosarium, I was still not ugly enough to make people shudder, but I was getting close. I could no longer hold a fork and knife with my mangled hands, and I needed a person to feed me. For a while, Georgina took on the task, but that was before her miracle. At some point, Georgina had begged Francis to join her in prayer and ask the Sacred Heart of Jesus for a cure. And the thing is the Lord did it! Georgina was rid of every symptom of elephantiasis and was allowed to leave the asylum. But what was a miracle for her for me was sheer disaster. For me, she was the only source of hope in an otherwise hopeless place. With her gone, I had nothing to look forward to each day. So I fell into a deep depression, worse than ever. When I had first received my diagnosis of leprosy, I felt a deep melancholy, mostly because I was soon to lose my wife and son. But it was worse after Georgina left because I had already been ravaged by the disease. When I entered the leprosarium, I had some notion of what to expect, but in truth I had no idea of what would come. For a man who was already little more than a specter, Georgina’s departure was the harshest possible blow. I drew no pleasure from the company of the other freaks at the asylum and spent most of my day alone in bed. So I raged against Francis. If he was powerful enough to cure the beautiful Georgina – leaving me completely alone in the God-forsaken asylum – why couldn’t he bequeath a similar favor to me? Paradoxically, after Georgina’s miracle I doubted the grace and munificence of God more than ever. After all, the monks made us pray day and night, from sunup to sunset, yet lepers we remained.

I must admit that Francis and his men did wonders for the leprosarium. I suspect that’s why they stayed at the asylum for so long. They spruced up the place until it looked brand new. The walls were painted, new floors and windows were installed, and the chapel was given a complete make-over. New stained glass panels were put at either side of the altar and they brought a large wooden crucifix to replace the old one. Francis made sure the asylum was impeccably clean, for it had been filthy and unkempt before his arrival. He saw the leprosarium as a holy place, where those who had been excised from society could find solace in God. Not surprising that his young assistants delivered powerful sermons brimming with hope. They were written by Francis himself, but he could not celebrate the Mass since he was not a priest. Compared to the homilies of the monks at the asylum – which were long and tedious and said very little – Francis’ acolytes seemed excited to preach the Good News and to save the lepers from despair. They understood that leprosy is not just an affliction of the body. It can also be an enemy of the soul.

Despite the beautiful homilies, it seemed that nothing could shake my deep melancholy. For the most part, I avoided Francis since I blamed him for my destitution. But one time as we were leaving the chapel, he approached me. He told me he couldn't understand why I didn't want to be in his presence. I didn't know what to say, so I opted to tell him the truth.

"You can make the lepers healthy but you refuse to help me even though we've been friends for years. You see how my body decays more quickly every day and yet you will not pray for me. I asked you to do so in the past and the only thing you did was tell me to trust in God."

"And that was the best possible advice," said Francis. "I pray for you every night. But I don't necessarily pray that you heal from your disease. I pray that God will allow whatever is most conducive to the salvation of your soul."

"You can do more," I bitterly responded. "You prayed that Georgina might be healed from her leprosy and she was."

"That's where you're mistaken, friend. I said the same prayer for Georgina that I do for you. Did you know that Georgina has entered a convent where the nuns take care of the aged and the disabled? In her case, God decided that it was best for her to be cured of her malady. But that might not be what's best for you."

"How could it be best for me for my body to slowly degenerate? How could that serve a salvific purpose? Did you know that when I venture into town to ask for alms, I terrify the children? They call me *il mostro* and try to flee. Do you know what pain that causes me?"

"Do you think you know what is best for you better than our Heavenly Father? You're like a patient who visits a learned physician and then tries to tell the physician how to heal him. Focus on your soul, not your body."

"I'm a slave to my body, Francis. I can't even walk without stumbling because there are sores on my feet."

"You're carrying a heavy Cross, I won't deny it. But after the Cross came the Resurrection. You may not believe it, but there will be a time when things get better. Keep praying."

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The abbot tapped me on the shoulder as I was praying in the chapel and advised me that there were two visitors waiting for me. I had no idea who they were, as I had never received even a single visit at the leprosarium in fourteen years.

"Who are they?" I asked the abbot.

"One of them is Georgina. She comes dressed like a nun."

"I haven't seen her in seven years. I wonder why she'd remember me now. And who is the person with her?"

"The other is a boy. I've never seen him before."

"A boy?"

"Yes, he must be fifteen or sixteen years old."

I immediately looked at myself in a mirror in order to comb my hair. I hadn't looked in a looking glass in months, since all I did when I saw my reflection in the mirror was to witness the ongoing deterioration of my face. But this time it was Georgina who was visiting and I didn't want her to think I was completely defeated. I wanted her to think I was a survivor. I wanted her to believe that somehow I still cared for my appearance despite the repellent marks on my face. Since I had last seen her, my condition was much worse and I was perturbed by her visit. What would we say to each other after all these years? How would she react to my relentless decline? We were in different worlds now. She was a beautiful woman who could walk in

freedom through the streets of Assisi. I was the exact opposite, neither handsome nor free, the merest remnant of a man.

Georgina and the boy were waiting for me in the lobby of the asylum. The lobby was austere: only a small sofa and two smalls chair across from it, on the walls a single crucifix and an image of Our Lady of Perpetual Help. When I first saw Georgina, I realized that she was more beautiful than ever, despite the veil on her head and the black habit she wore. The boy next to her sat timidly on a chair, looking at the floor in an apparent attempt to avoid making eye contact with me. He had jet black hair and deep blue eyes, which reminded me of how I looked before the plague ruined my face.

Georgina was abrupt. Before even greeting me, she turned to the boy.

“Giuseppe,” she said. “This is your father Riccardo.”

And then she turned to me.

“Riccardo, this is your son Giuseppe.”

I started to swoon, felt I was about to faint. But I also felt a primal anger. Why would Georgina bring my son to the leprosarium where he could see the monster I had become?

“You shouldn’t have,” I addressed Georgina. “What benefit could be derived from startling the boy? Can’t you see you’ll terrify him?”

But then the boy fixed his eyes on mine and spoke to me.

“You don’t frighten me,” he said. “I have been wanting to meet you for years.”

Georgina intervened.

“Giuseppe occasionally visits the leper asylum in Peruvia with the nuns from my convent. He’s used to dealing with lepers. I can assure you that you don’t frighten him at all.”

“You suffer from a disease, that is all,” said the boy. “Your voice is kind. I’m sure you have a beautiful soul. I’m very happy to meet my father.”

Suddenly I began to weep. At first I cried silently, the tears just running down my face, but at some point it is was if a dam had broken, as I started to sob loudly. It strangely sounded as if I were laughing, laughing out loud amid my endless tears and muttering disconnected phrases

“I love you so much,” I stammered. “Even though I last saw you when you were but a toddler – but a toddler – I haven’t stopped thinking about you during all these years. I’m sorry! I’m sorry! The damn plague – the monstrous plague – wasn’t satisfied with devastating my face and destroying my body, with making me but a shadow of myself. Elephantiasis took my son as well. You don’t know how massively happy I am to see you, how sad I am that we’ve lost all these years.”

“I can come to visit you at least once a month,” the boy responded as he hugged me. “Do you like to play chess? I’m pretty good at it.”

“I can’t, I can’t.” I cried. “Nor with the stubs I have instead of hands! I wouldn’t be able to move the pieces. I’m so sorry, Giuseppe. I love you so!”

Then the boy did something entirely unexpected. He kissed my disfigured face.

“You don’t need to kiss me,” I said. “There’s no sense in risking contagion.”

“Don’t you know that’s how the celebrated Francis became a saintly monk, because he kissed a leper? Francis was a man who was terrified by leprosy, perhaps hated lepers in some way. But one time he saw a leper as he was riding his horse and the Lord moved his heart. He got off his horse and gave the leper a kiss as Francis sobbed uncontrollably. From then on, he dedicated his life to ministering to the victims of leprosy, even washing their sores. To this day, he hasn’t been struck by the disease.”

“Thank you for your kindness,” I said. “Perhaps we can play chess if just tell you where to move my pieces.”



“Yes,” said my son. “But there’s one more thing I need to tell you although you may already know it. After Francis kissed the leper, the sick man simply disappeared. The rumor out there is that it was the Christ appearing to Francis in the form of a leper. To me, that proves beyond any doubt that victims of elephant disease are lovely in the eyes of God.”

From then on, my son began to visit me regularly. My existential despair was gone.

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Francis visited the Assisi leprosarium many times during the following years, arriving with his group of acolytes about once every four months to take care of the lepers, especially the most advanced in their disease. During all that time, I never broached the subject of a cure for my leprosy with him, for I knew what he would say, to pray and pray and pray. He personally washed down the sickest lepers, using a sponge to clean their bleeding sores and massaging their weak extremities. By then, he was famous throughout the country for the many miracles obtained through his intercession, including the cure of more than four dozen lepers. In fact, I knew that he had healed about ten lepers at my own leprosarium. Many of the residents of the asylum pestered Francis for a cure or asked him to kiss their wounds, believing that would be enough to obtain a miracle. He dutifully kissed their bleeding flesh, but most were not cured immediately because – he told them in a gentle voice – God didn’t think it was the appropriate time for them to be healed. But that time would come, he reassured them, either in this world or in the next. Everyone in and out of the asylum believed that Francis was more like Jesus than any other person produced by mere humanity. Not only did he obtain manifold miracles from God, but he also shared Christ’s passion for the ostracized, the sick, even the grotesque. The only thing Francis had still not shared with Jesus was His Cross, but that would come with time. At the moment of his death, some swore the blind man had died of elephantiasis.

I for one had made peace with my deformity. My leprosy had gotten so bad that I was bedridden most of the time, but my state of mind was better than ever. Indeed, my later years at the asylum were some of the happiest of my life, even though physically I was a catastrophe. I was visited by my son each month. Sometimes during the summer he spent more than a week at the asylum at a time. Those moments with him were worth more to me than any treasure, worth more than having a healthy body, worth more than a handsome face. If I had been given the choice of leprosy with my son or health without him in my life, I would have chosen the former in an instant. When my son spent a week at the asylum – the monks had prepared a room especially for him – he made me walk around for about an hour in the morning and an hour at night, saying it was imperative that I exercise. Those simple walks filled me with joy and I looked forward to them each and every time he came. I was happy. I was inexplicably happy. My companion – Lady Leprosy – could not control my spirit for Giuseppe, the love of my life, had not abandoned me.

About two years before his death, Francis returned to the asylum. He had lost much of his sight, but was not completely blind. One morning he entered my bedroom as I lay in bed and kissed my forehead.

“It is time,” he said.

“Time for what?” I asked.

“Let me tell you a story,” he responded. “Let me tell you of the miracles I’ve witnessed. And what everything has to do with you.”

“By all means,” I said.

“I went to the mountain retreat of La Verna to fast for forty days and forty nights, in remembrance of what Christ had done. Then I saw a celestial vision. At first I thought it was a

seraph, since the heavenly creature appeared with six white wings. But as the light emanating from His body increased, I realized that it was Jesus suffering on His crucifix.”

“You saw the Christ?” I asked.

“Not only that,” said Francis. “As soon as the apparition disappeared, I sensed a liquid on my hands and feet, on the side of my chest as well, just below the ribcage. Then I realized I was bleeding from five wounds, the wounds of the crucified Christ. Since then, the marks have not disappeared.”

Francis paused before continuing.

“Do you think that was a punishment, Riccardo? You know the wounds cause me a great pain.”

“I would say they are a blessing,” I intoned. “You have been chosen especially by God to suffer in His Passion.”

Francis locked his eyes with mine.

“Why do you think my wounds are a blessing, but not yours?”

“I’m not sure my leprosy is a blessing,” I responded, “but I firmly believe I have been blessed by God *despite* my illness. I have food and shelter while so many of my leprous brothers and sisters throughout the world have to survive as best they can by begging on the streets. The monks come and pray with me in my room when I am too weak to make the short trek to the chapel. I receive the Eucharist every day. And I have been immensely blessed by my son Giuseppe. He’s never seen me as a monster, but only as a father.”

“I am glad to see that you realize you have been blessed.”

“Have I told you that he’s getting married soon? He has told me that come what may he intends to take me to the church on his wedding day. I just place my trust in God as you have recommended and I no longer worry overmuch about my disease. It is a challenge, but challenges are meant to be met.”

“That is why I think it is the time,” said Francis.

“The time for what?” I asked again.

“I think you’ve finally learned what the Good Lord has been trying to teach you for years. There is no longer a reason for you to be ill. I want to wash you. Let me ask for a sponge and a bucket of water.”

Then he started cleaning a bleeding sore I had on my chest. I think it was infected and it was oozing a purple pus. Initially the feeling of the sponge on my wound caused me pain, but then I noticed something strange. The sore had disappeared.

“The night after I received my stigmata,” said Francis, “I had a vision. I’m not sure whether I was awake or asleep, but it doesn’t really matter. I heard the voice of the Christ speaking to me. ‘Riccardo has learned to trust me,’ said the Lord. ‘I know it is the right time to take away his heavy Cross. The more a soul trusts in me completely the greater is my mercy.’”

Every time Francis rubbed one of my sores with his sponge, the sore simply disappeared. I was paralyzed, not fully understanding what was happening, and I said nothing to Francis as he healed me with great patience. Eventually he started to rub my face with his sponge and suddenly my nose was normal, no longer amputated. I desperately wanted a mirror, in order to see what miracle Francis had effected on my face.

“Now you must confess your sins,” Francis said as soon as he was done. “God has granted you a great opportunity. It is up to you to profit from it. Give praise to God for you are healed.”

I rose from the bed, as strong as a twenty-year-old. I hugged Francis as I began to weep. I remembered the verses from Scripture. “And great crowds came to Him, bringing with them the lame, the blind, the crippled, the mute and many others, and they put them at His feet and He healed them.”

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Two years later, I visited Francis on his deathbed. He showed me the Testament he had written.

“When I was in sin, the sight of lepers nauseated me beyond measure; but then God himself led me into their company, and I had pity on them. When I became acquainted with them, what had previously nauseated me became the source of spiritual and physical consolation for me.”

“I loved all of you,” he added. “You taught me how to face adversity with faith and trust in God. These last two years have been difficult, particularly after I became completely blind. Were it not for your example, I don’t know how I could have managed.”

“You will be rewarded in Heaven,” I responded. “And it is you who were an example to the lepers.”

“Let me show you something I wrote before I lost my sight. I call it the Cantic of the Sun. It celebrates what every human should be thankful for, but sometimes takes for granted.”

He handed me a piece of paper where he had written the cantic. I still remember the first few stanzas.

“We praise you, Lord, for all your creatures, especially for Brother Sun, who is the day through whom you give us light. And he is beautiful and radiant with great splendor, of you Most High, he bears your likeness. We praise you, Lord, for Sister Moon and the stars, in the heavens you have made them bright, precious and fair. We praise you, Lord, for Brothers Wind and Air, fair and stormy, all weather's moods, by which you cherish all that you have made.”

“It’s lovely,” I said to the dying Francis.

“It’s a paean to God’s great grace and bounty. We fail to realize that everything is a miracle, the sun, the moon, the stars. Even the poorest of the poor can feel the breeze upon his face, the warmth of the glorious sun ...I am ready to go home, Riccardo, for even greater things to come.”

## Julian of Norwich and Her “Shewings”

Martin Willitts Jr

Julian of Norwich (1343 – 1416) was an English anchoress in permanent seclusion, and she lived in the English city of Norwich. Her real name was unknown, because she took on the name of St Julian church. She was a mystic writer like Rainer Maria Rilke, Hafiz, Rumi, Gerard Manley Hopkins, and others. Although the other names are poets, Julian wrote messages she received from God. She called these messages “Shewings” (“showings”), where she was *shown* the way to God through God, and she wrote these messages in old English. Her writings, now known as *Revelations of Divine Love*, were written during the same time period as Chaucer. In 1373, aged 30 and so seriously ill she thought she was on her deathbed, Julian received a series of visions or “shewings” of the Passion of Christ. She recovered from her illness and wrote two versions of her experiences, the earlier one being completed soon after her recovery — and a much longer version, today known as the Long Text, written many years later.

During her lifetime, the city suffered the devastating effects of the Black Death of 1348–1350, the Peasants' Revolt in 1381), and the suppression of the Lollards. In spite of the devastation surrounding her, she wrote the famous quote, “All shall be well, and all shall be well, and all manner of thing shall be well.” Such a positive tone. Her quote reflects the temporary nature of life, but offers hope and recovery.

Her visions were not prophecies of the future. Instead, her messages were radical during her time period. Julian's mystical theology included her equating divine love with motherly love, a theme found in the Biblical prophets, as in Isaiah. Julian wrote of the Trinity in domestic terms, comparing Jesus to a mother who is wise, loving and merciful. She wrote, “As truly as God is our Father, so truly God is our Mother.” Julian explained how the bond between mother and child is the only earthly relationship that comes close to the relationship a person can have with Jesus.

Because she saw the feminine side of God, she saw God offering the nurturing kind of love related to mothering. To her, it made perfect sense that a loving and caring God would be more like a mother with a newborn who watched her children grow up. The idea of God being both male and female was suppressed by the church. This belief was dangerous during her lifetime, because they were burning heretics at the stake in her city, within her eyesight. In fact, the concept of God being both male and female is still considered radical today.

Her “shewings” were not poetry but concepts for reflection or a Buddhist koan. The more she studied the messages, the more she saw meanings within meaning. She expended upon many of the messages in the long version. First, she listened, recording the messages, then she reflected upon each message. Her contemplation was in silence, and silence allowed her to listen to God. She explains her process this way, “Pray inwardly, even if you do not enjoy it.”

For Julian of Norwich, silent prayer was a gateway to her visions. When she listened, Julian of Norwich becomes a transcriber for God's message of hope and love. She offers short testimonies of faith and practice, living within the moment. Her messages were almost lost in history. She almost predicted the fact that her messages would be hidden when she wrote, "because I am a woman, should I therefore not tell you of the goodness of God?" Luckily, her writings survived.

She was providing *testimony*. Consider that the dictionary defines *testimony* as meaning "a solemn declaration usually made orally by a witness under oath in the response to an interrogation by a lawyer or authorized public official, or a firsthand authentication of a fact (evidence), or an open acknowledgment." The word, *testimony*, also has a spiritual meaning which better explains Julian's writings. She was receiving messages, recording messages, and sharing these spirit-filled messages. She probably said that the messages were from God, therefore, were *good* messages when she wrote "for you are good enough for me." That *you* she mentioned was God.

By opening herself up to the messages, by listening and loyally writing the messages, she was *witnessing*. *Witnessing* has a spiritual meaning to the word, and it means *bearing witness* to the greatness of God. It did not matter if it was Rumi or Rainer Maria Rilke, or Gerard Manley Hopkins, or some other writer, each one is *bearing witness*. Each of the poets were finding God in their own way. Julian of Norwich said, "Prayer is not overcoming God's reluctance, but laying hold of his willingness."

Julian of Norwich heard God and reported, "I am Ground of your longing." This means that if we are sad or depressed, and we do not know why we are having those feelings of isolation or abandonment, then we are really feeling the *longing* we have *to belong* somewhere, to be loved by someone. Our soul is restless until we find God. She suggested, "What a better center for this comfort than God? If we find God, we will find inner peace." She said this best when she wrote, "The more the soul sees of God, the more it desires Him." She also said, "Everything that God inspires us to search for, is God's own eternal desire."

*Desire*. What a powerful word. We tend to think of *desire* in sexual terms, but here she is directing us towards our inner cravings for God. We crave, and our souls are fed. She explained, "The greatest honor we can give Almighty God is to live gladly because of the knowledge of his love." Our *desire* is met by finding God, and then we can honor God by knowing that God loves us. We are back to God being a "mothering" kind of God with a mother's instinct to nurture us.

But God is also a teacher according to Julian of Norwich when she proclaimed, "God is the ground, the substance, the teaching, the teacher, the purpose, and the reward for which every soul labors." We have an earth-centered God, a rewarding God, a God interested in our soul, our wellbeing. We learn from God's simple teachings if we listen and observe the world around us. Julian's writings show that "The fullness of joy is beholding God in everything." When she wrote, "I saw the soul...as if it were a blissful kingdom," she saw the soul filling with joy.

She wrote, "And this was my understanding led of God to see in Him and to understand, to perceive and to know." The key word is *understanding*. How else can we *understand* God, but *to perceive* God, and the best way is to listen and observe. She learns this simple lesson from a simple hazelnut. It was a teaching about caring for the smallest thing, and a hazelnut has a shell which needs to be opened to find the secret nut inside.

This brings us to the question of what do we notice and appreciate in this world? Do we walk in awe? Do we *behold* and become speechless with surprise? Does God work wonders? Better yet, what are we "shewn" and do we record any inner voices we might hear? Do we kneel unexpectedly, because we are compelled? Do we *desire*? If we find God, understand God, will we see that "all will be well"?

## Choosing the Light

Allison de Laveaga

It's Friday night and we are giddy after a long week of school. I am 12 years old and want nothing more than to curl up on my best friend Camille's couch with an issue of *Seventeen* magazine or rehearse the dance routine we're preparing for the middle school talent show. But the sun is setting over the San Francisco skyline across the bay, and we've been summoned to the dining room.

Speaking French, Mr. Landau calls us to the table.

Mr. Landau is not French, but Camille's mom is, and French is the language of the house. I don't really know where Mr. Landau is from, and it doesn't occur to me to ask. He is a bit of enigma to me. He, not Camille's mom, Babette, does most of the carpooling for the kids and the house chores. I figured this had something to do with being European. Later, in high school, he was the one who purchased birth control for Camille, just in case, which shocked me. Was this another European thing? In any case, he seemed to relish his role as a caretaker, often offering me a ride home from school and correcting me if I forgot to say thank you. He made us tea late at night and found us warm blankets when we wanted to hike up the hill beyond the house and look at the stars.

As we gather around the dining room table, Mr. Landau is presiding over the ceremonial cup and candles. His face, naturally tanned but even more deeply amber from the California sun, glows in the light of the candles Babette has lit. He says a few words in Hebrew that I don't understand. Camille and her siblings repeat some other words. I'm not Jewish, but it doesn't matter. Whoever is at the house on Friday nights is invited to participate in the Shabbat ceremony.

This ceremony fascinates me. Like so much of Camille's life, it's like nothing I experience in my house, where we are churchgoing Christians from a long line of Protestants. In my family we say conversational, informal prayers at dinner time. But during the Shabbat ceremony, the Landaus recite ancient prayers in an ancient language. I liked the mystery of it, the sense of ritual and the connection to the past.

The next year, when Camille and I turn 13, she celebrates her Bat Mitzvah at the oldest and largest reform synagogue in San Francisco, a formal temple filled with stained glass and rows of wooden pews. It is so different from my church, which meets in a school gymnasium with folding metal chairs and a temporary stage. The scroll Camille reads from in Hebrew seems like it came from one of the Dead Sea caves pictured in my children's Bible.

After the ceremony, the Landaus host a big party for Camille on the deck of their home. Babette greets each guest with a kiss on each cheek. She's an artist and has filled the tables with bouquets of fresh flowers. Mr. Landau helps serve the lunch.

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It is April, 18 years later, and the bright California sun is streaming in the windows, but my pastor has lit a candle, as she usually does. She prays that the Holy Spirit will be present in our conversation. Then she asks me, “What seems important to you today?”

I pause and begin to tell her of my recent trip to Arizona to see my elderly grandparents and introduce them to my one-year-old son. There was Grandma at the door, smiling and oogling over my boy. “He looks just like you!” she said, patting his cheek. And there was Grandpa somewhere down the hall yelling, “Ruth, the food is getting cold, hurry up.” Then later, “Ruth, you forgot the butter again...Ruth, would you stop talking.” He had always nagged Grandma a little, but I saw now that dementia and pain made him perpetually grumpy and short-tempered. I had lost the fun grandpa I had always known.

“That sounds very hard. Perhaps this Easter season, this is your cross to bear,” says my pastor.

I feel comforted that Christ can relate to my pain. My shoulders relax and I settle into my chair.

“Would you like a few moments of silence?” my pastor says.

Sure, I say and close my eyes. Suddenly I remember a scene when I am a young child, maybe 6, and Grandpa is kneeling with me at the side of my bed. He’s teaching me to say the Lord’s Prayer.

I open my eyes from this memory and look at my pastor. “Can we say the Lord’s Prayer?” I ask.

It’s one of the many times of solace I feel during my year of spiritual direction. Direction has opened up a whole new world to me, a way of claiming an ancient part of my faith I never knew about growing up in my large evangelical church. It is a practice first conceived in the Catholic church and now gaining popularity among Protestants. In direction there is time and space to contemplate life’s events with a spiritual lens. There is also room for honesty. A good director will help her clients explore not only the high points in life but the valleys as well.

I like the fact that it has been practiced for centuries. It reminds me of the long history of my faith, something that wasn’t always obvious to me growing up in a church that met in an auditorium and eschewed masses of liturgical formality in favor of “seeker-friendly” worship times, boisterous youth groups, and church potlucks and picnics. I still attend an evangelical church as an adult, albeit one that meets in a real church building, but I feel spiritual direction and other contemplative practices bring a balance to the way we practice our faith.

Growing up in the church, I was always longing for a big faith. During long sermons, I often paged through the Bible I was given in third grade, looking at the half-dozen color photos of Holy Land. There was the Dead Sea and Jerusalem. These places halfway around the world looked so mysterious. I wanted to know how this old faith had survived millennia. I would think of Babette lighting the Sabbath candles, and how that act expressed a faith passed down through generations.

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On a recent Sunday afternoon I stay after my church's 10:30 service to meet Jim, a single man in his 50s who attends another church in the area. I've been meeting Jim for a year now. In the last year I've become a spiritual director, praying with people the same way my pastor did with me so many years ago. We sit in upholstered brown arm chairs across from each other in a quiet room above the sanctuary and talk for an hour. I begin simply, by lighting a single candle to remind us of God's presence. Then I say a short prayer.

During our sessions, Jim talks about his prayer life, his church experiences, and the ways he has seen God show up in his life. I ask questions, make observations and perhaps offer a gentle suggestion. Occasionally Jim's eyes water a bit as he describes a powerful experience. I believe the Holy Spirit is guiding our conversations. I know how ridiculous our talks would seem to a non-believer. To truly believe is unfathomable to some. I can't remember a time I didn't believe. However, I am still a new spiritual director, having just received my certificate last year, and I am not sure I'm up to the lofty title.

Today Jim is excited to tell me he had a breakthrough with the inmate he regularly meets with at the nearby maximum security prison. He has been meeting with this prisoner for nearly a year. They are both Christians and often talk about God. He tells how the last time they met he was suddenly inspired to tell the inmate the parable of the widow and the mites. (Mites are small coins.) He told the inmate that he was like the widow, who didn't have much, but his small "mites" (gifts) could make a big impact right there in prison.

"He was really touched by the parable," said Jim, leaning forward in his seat and squinting his eyes a bit as if holding back tears. "It was incredible."

"Do you think the Holy Spirit guided you to tell that story?" I asked.

"Absolutely," Jim said.

"That sounds very affirming for you. It sounds like you were practicing something like spiritual direction," I said. I knew Jim was thinking of becoming a director too.

Jim shifts positions in his seat and looks around the room.

"You have a really great church here. You're really connected, right?" he says. "I still don't feel like I fit in at my church. Everyone else is married or has kids. I don't have those things. I think I made a mistake."

"Have you talked with God about that?" I say. Jim has mentioned this issue often.

"Yeah, I have. I guess it's just the way things are," he says.

I felt at a loss. I can't think of what to say next. No Bible story comes to mind, no wise insight or question. Should I offer silence or a prayer? How do I accompany someone in the valleys of life? Am I really cut out to be a spiritual director? Why does God allow people to struggle and suffer?

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After high school, college and my wedding, in which Camille was a bridesmaid, I didn't see

Camille and her dad for many years. I heard bits and pieces about them both from my parents, who often bumped into Mr. Landau at the grocery store. I heard about his painful divorce from Babette. I couldn't imagine my friend's parents--happily serving lunch after her Bat Mitzvah, dancing at my wedding, warmly chattering in French and sharing household duties--separating.

The story of how Mr. Landau met Babette was almost a legend. Babette had grown up in Tunisia and Corsica, a beautiful but small island. As soon as she could, Babette decided to become an Air France flight attendant to see the world. Those were the days when being a flight attendant was a glamorous enviable position for women, and with her platinum blond hair pulled back in a neat braid and her pretty smile, she fit the role perfectly. She met Mr. Landau on a flight. Mr. Landau traveled a lot for business in those days and had dated several stewardesses. He was 10 years older than Babette. George's aunt actually spotted Babette at the Tel Aviv airport just before George was to get on the flight. "Get to know that one," said the aunt. It turned out that Babette didn't speak much English; George didn't speak much French. Retelling the story to my mother in her thick French accent, Babette said the language issue didn't matter—in bed! They became lovers, friends, and companions.

"Your parents lived together before they were married?" I asked Camille, shocked, when she recounted their tale to me when we were in junior high. To me, living together was a sin.

"Yes," said Camille, "it gave them the chance to make sure they got along well. I think it was a good idea."

Mr. Landau and Babette married and moved to Geneva, Switzerland, where their three children were born. Eventually they moved to California, which is how I met Camille. Mr. Landau also purchased a 500-year-old manor house in Babette's village in Corsica, which gave Babette a place to use her interior design skills.

Camille adored her parents and their story. She was devastated after the divorce. Mr. Landau was devastated too. It would take him three years to regain his equilibrium. Meanwhile, Babette had fallen in love with a new man, also an artist, and threw herself into his lifestyle of skiing, traveling, painting, and fishing.

What happened? What went wrong? Camille suspected her dad had given Babette too much in their marriage. He had done so much—the carpooling, serving on the school board, keeping Shabbat and taking the kids to synagogue—that Babette had felt edged out of a role. George suspected Babette simply chose a new and different lifestyle. It didn't make a lot of sense. In any case, over the years Babette had filled their home with beautiful art. She had also embraced George's faith, converting to Judaism.

When I saw Mr. Landau again, years later, I was in my own valley, though at the time it also felt like a mountaintop. I had been living in Spain with my husband and kids for almost a year and had suffered a series of anxiety attacks. In the ensuing recovery period I entered into a manic state. I had excess energy that made my heart race, made sleep difficult and made my usually quiet self talk on and on, more openly than normal. Only many months later did I understand that I was experiencing a bipolar episode. I had been forced to come back to my parents' house from Spain and I stayed there over a month to recuperate. One night I decided to call up Camille to see if we could get together and we ended up meeting at her dad's house.

Mr. Landau hadn't changed. He had the same tanned skin and lean figure. He made us tea just like old times and we sat at the kitchen table. I talked openly about my health struggles. Then, as the night grew dark and Mr. Landau refilled our tea, he mentioned almost in passing that he had been sent, as a Polish Jew, to Siberia during World War II. I was shocked. Why hadn't I heard this before? Why did he mention it now? Was it because I had been vulnerable, opening up about my own problems? I wanted to know the details, what happened to him and how it impacted him. But the hour was late. My curiosity was ignited; I thought about Mr. Landau on and off for many years, puzzling over how this Jewish man and I had crossed paths.

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I continued to meet with Jim and other clients. At times I smiled widely as they shared their joys and triumphs. But I continued to feel inadequate when they shared disappointments or regrets. I sometimes questioned God quietly as I listened. Why does God allow suffering? There is the pat answer, that we only grow through challenging circumstances. But often this doesn't feel satisfactory. How could it be that a loving God would permit so many painful things to happen?

Most Christians explain theodicy, or the question of why God permits evil, with the concept of free will. The reasoning goes something like this: God gave us the choice to do good or evil. He didn't want to make robots. This is why evil exists in the world. God allows us to make bad choices in order to give us freedom.

Most of the time the free will explanation makes sense to me. I can embrace it and I see that fortunately most humans choose good most of the time. But when I read a news article about wars or kidnappings, I can't imagine how free will is worth it. I want a better answer. I want to talk to my own spiritual director about it or simply cry out to God: Why? I've never been able to find a satisfactory reason why God permitted my own health crisis with bipolar illness. Although I did emerge from mania and then depression, I continue to take medication daily and I have bouts with sleeplessness and anxiety. I had another episode this year. Perhaps--I think in my more hopeful moments--God can use me as a wounded healer. My wounds have given me an understanding of one kind of pain. Each day, I think, as I more fully face what I went through, I can help others better. But perhaps I'll never understand why I plunged into that darkness.

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Mr. Landau never talked about his survival experience, his exile in Siberia, when his children were young. Most survivors didn't, with a few notable exceptions like Elie Wiesel and Viktor Frankl. Things began to change in the 1990s when Steven Spielberg made the movie *Schindler's List*. For the first time people saw what it was like to endure the horrors of the concentration camps. The movie paved the way for survivors to open up about their experiences. The same year the movie premiered, the US Holocaust Memorial Museum opened in Washington, D.C. It was a watershed moment.

Camille, who studied film at USC, had always wanted to make a film about her parents' life. She never quite got the momentum. Maybe she was too close to the story. Mr. Landau's cousin, however, knew about his exile in Siberia and had a copy of his father's memoir. She

began conducting interviews and in 2019 she produced a documentary, which she called “Lies and Miracles.” Mr. Landau was now in his 80s; his story fully known to the world.

The night the documentary premiered, the atmosphere was festive in our tiny hometown theater. Mr. Landau was there, as was Babette, whose second husband had passed away and who was recuperating from a stroke. She had moved back in with Mr. Landau and he was caring for her, not as a spouse but as family. Camille and her siblings were there. My parents and other members of the community came too. My mom spotted Mr. Landau’s swim buddy from the swim and tennis club. They knew each other from church.

The film opens in September 1939, when Nazi Germany invaded Poland from the west and the Soviet Union invaded from the east and World War II began. The Soviets began rounding up professional people they deemed “enemies of the state.” George Landau was only seven when his family was among the 1.7 million Jews deported to slave labor camps in Siberia. Over half of those people died.

His father’s memoir describes the moment when the soldiers came to their door to take them away. When his mother asked one of the soldiers where they were going, the soldier replied only, “Take warm things.”

Through drawings, stock historical and family photos, we watch little George and his family make the long journey to Siberia, where they are assigned a hut with no door or windows. His father is sent into the snow-covered woods for months with other men to cut trees. It was a miserable life with little food or hope.

After a year and a half in Siberia, Germans attacked the Russians and the family was let out from the camps and moved to Uzbekistan, where they only confronted more misery. Here, they had to stand in bread lines, eat turtles and sell their clothing for food. But after two years, they found a way out. Through a Polish diplomat, an aunt arranged an exit visa to Australia. From there, the Landaus traveled to Persia for several years. Later, they went to New York when George was 12.

“I attribute it to a miracle,” Mr. Landau says at the conclusion of the film. “I am forever asking myself, well, what am I expected to do? I’m obviously supposed to give back... I don’t think I’ve met the mark yet but at least I have an idea of what my role should be.”

In the theater, we rise to our feet and applaud. George beams a smile and hugs his cousin.

A line from the movie stays with me. It’s the dedication that Mr. Landau’s father wrote to him in his memoir. “To George: You were, during the most difficult years, always of great help and comfort to us.”

Perhaps, even at seven years old, George was a helper. Exile only sharpened this part of his personality.

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Six months later, in October 2019, Camille invites me to her home to celebrate Sukkot, a harvest festival. Jews create “booths,” temporary structures, where they eat for seven days.

I'm sitting in her backyard, under a trellis. She has hung sheets from the beams of the trellis to create a booth. This is how Jews remember that God sheltered them during their journey in the desert. Orthodox Jews eat meals and even sleep in the booth over a period of seven days. But this night, Camille has invited friends of all or no religious persuasion to share a meal, which she has prepared using recipes from Jewish cooks.

It is dark in this booth and candles flicker on the faces of the guests. Camille and I are 51 now. At one end of the table I see Mr. Landau, his skin still the same amber it was when I was child and his hair still thick but now a wintry white. Next to me is Babette, just as beautiful as before, with her long blonde braid running down the back of her soft pink sweater.

We've been asked to bring a poem, song or quote from a Jewish person and share them. Guests share a song by Leonard Cohen, a poem by Denise Levertov. When it's my turn I show everyone a painting of Ruth and Naomi, which has touched me recently in its tender portrayal of the older Naomi comforting her daughter-in-law Ruth. In the painting Naomi is holding out a lantern to Ruth. I resonate with this image, now that I am approaching the age of Naomi, and I'm a spiritual director, offering solace to others. But I stumble trying to explain it all and Mr. Landau jumps right in and retells the Old Testament story expertly. Later, Babette leans close to tell me Ruth was the name given to her when she converted to Judaism after marrying George, as Ruth was a convert as well.

I stay late at the party, huddling under the heat lamp warming our corner of the booth. Mr. Landau recounts some of his victories as a member of the school board and Rotary club, back when Camille and I were girls. He tells me these days his life is focused on helping his 87-year-old brother, his only sibling, who lives in New York and is about to have hip surgery. He has been flying back and forth all year and has another trip there next week. I'm surprised that George, not exactly young himself, is flying back and forth to New York to help his brother. I remember the line from the movie: "George, you were always of great help and comfort to us."

We face so many choices each day, some small and some large. Something within me has made a choice to walk with others in their spiritual lives. I want to be a witness to their hills and valleys, darkness and light. And I want to pass along those things my parents and grandparents taught me—the informal prayers and the formal ones—in all their complexity and nuance. Is it true, what the psalmist says, "Yea, when I walk through the valley of darkness, I will fear no evil"? I can't quite say I have no fear. But will goodness and mercy follow me all the days of my life? Yes, I believe that wholeheartedly.

You remember how you were taught to write when you were small.  
Your mother put a pencil in your hand, took your hand in hers,  
and began to move it. Since you did not know at all what she meant  
to do, you left your hand completely free in hers. This is what I mean  
by the power of God being manifest in weakness.

Anthony Bloom

## CONTRIBUTORS

**Michael Loyd Gray** “Michael Loyd Gray’s prose unspools with the unmistakable cadence of a storyteller.” —Stuart Dybek

My stories have appeared in *Alligator Juniper*, *Arkansas Review*, *I-70 Review*, *Litro Magazine*, *Adelaide Literary Magazine*, *FictionWeek*, *New Plains Journal*, *Westchester Review*, *Flashpoint!*, *Black River Syllabary*, *Verdad*, *Palooka*, *Hektoen International*, *Potomac Review*, *Home Planet News*, *SORTES*, *The Zodiac Review*, *Literary Heist*, *Evening Street Press & Review*, *Two Thirds North*, *JONAH Magazine*, *Press Pause*, *El Portal*, *Shark Reef*, *Cholla Needles*, *The Waiting Room*, *Burningword Literary Journal*, *Your Impossible Voice*, *Litbop*, *Flare Journal*, *Wrath Bearing Tree*, and *Johnny America*. I’m the author of six published novels. My novel *The Armageddon Two-Step*, winner of a Book Excellence Award, was released in December 2019. My novel *Well Deserved* won the 2008 Sol Books Prose Series Prize and my novel *Not Famous Anymore* garnered a support grant from the Elizabeth George Foundation in 2009. My novel *Exile on Kalamazoo Street* was released in 2013 and I have co-authored the stage version. My novel *The Canary*, which reveals the final days of Amelia Earhart, was released in 2011. *King Biscuit*, my Young Adult novel, was released in 2012. I am the winner of the 2005 Alligator Juniper Fiction Prize and 2005 The Writers Place Award for Fiction. I earned a MFA in English in 1996 from Western Michigan University, where I was a Phi Kappa Phi National Honor Society scholar (3.93 GPA). I was also a fiction editor for *Third Coast*, the WMU literary magazine. At WMU, I studied with MacArthur Fellow Stuart Dybek, Writer in Residence at Northwestern University, and John Smolens, former head of the MFA program at Northern Michigan University. I earned a bachelor’s degree from the University of Illinois, where I studied with Flannery O’Connor Award winner Daniel Curley. For ten years, I was a staff writer for newspapers in Arizona and Illinois.

**Sequoia Cristobal-Mandel** Is a high school student from the Bay Area and Aotearoa New Zealand. She has a passion for everything she happens to find herself doing, namely: writing, music, painting, acting, philosophy, and psychology. Sequoia is infinitely grateful for any chance to experience nature, art, and conversation.

**LB Sedlacek** has had poems and stories appear in a variety of journals and zines. Her poetry has been nominated for Best of the Net. Her latest poetry book is *Unresponsive Sky* published by Purple Unicorn Media. Other poetry books include *Swim*, *The Poet Next Door*, *This Space Available*, and *Words and Bones*. Her latest short stories book is *The Renovator & Motor Addiction* published by Alien Buddha Press. Other fiction books include *The Jackalope Committee and Other Tales*, *The Mailbox of the Kindred Spirit*, and *Four Thieves of Vinegar & Other Short Stories*. LB also enjoys swimming and reading.

**Jacob Schroeder** My work has been published in *Lunch Ticket*, *Flash: The International Short-Short Story Magazine*, and *Maudlin House*, among other literary publications. My story, In the “Land In Between”, was nominated for a Pushcart Prize.

**Shannon O’Connor** holds an MFA in Writing and Literature from Bennington College. She has been published in ODDBALL MAGAZINE, THE WILDERNESS HOUSE LITERARY REVIEW, WORDGATHERING, and others. She lives in the Boston area, and works at a hospital. She can be found on her blog [mshenreviewsthings.blogspot.com](http://mshenreviewsthings.blogspot.com).

**Jacob Friesenhahn** teaches Religious Studies and Philosophy at Our Lady of the Lake University in San Antonio.

**Cristie Coffing** holds an MFA in Writing from Lindenwood University. A self-published novelist and playwright, her work has been published in *Flash Fiction Magazine*, *Does It Have Pockets*, and elsewhere. She was a 2013 Santa Fe Writers project Finalist, third prize recipient in *Flash Fiction Magazine's* 2021 contest, a 2022 Pushcart Prize nominee, and a 2023 Best Micro-Fiction nominee. She currently writes, teaches dance and waits tables in a small river town.

**Craig Dobson** I've had fiction published in *Active Muse*, *The Adelaide Literary Magazine*, *Better Than Starbucks*, *Black Works*, *The Delmarva Review*, *The Eunoia Review*, *Flash*, *Flash Fiction Magazine*, *The Frogmore Papers*, *Halfway Down the Stairs*, *The Interpreter's House*, *Literally Stories*, *Rue Scribe*, *Runcible Spoon* and *Short Fiction Magazine*. I live and work in the UK.

**Zach Keali'i Murphy** is a Hawaii-born writer with a background in cinema. His stories appear in *Reed Magazine*, *The Coachella Review*, *Maudlin House*, *Raritan*, *Another Chicago Magazine*, *Still Point Arts Quarterly*, and more. He has published the chapbooks *Tiny Universes* (Selcouth Station Press) and *If We Keep Moving* (Ghost City Press). He lives with his wonderful wife, Kelly, in St. Paul, Minnesota.

**Sharon Lopez Mooney**, poet, is a retired Interfaith End of Life Chaplain, living in Sonora Mexico, and part-time in Northern California. Mooney received a California Arts Council Grant for a rural poetry series; was a '22 "Best of the Net" nominee, a "Peseroff Prize" finalist, and received two other publisher's honors. Mooney's poems are published in national & international publications like, *Ginosko*, *California Quarterly*, *Galway Review*, *Tipton Poetry*, *Kennings Literary Journal*, *Glassworks*, *Adelaide International*, *Kennings Review*, *Breakwater Review*. Her upcoming poetry book, *Cantata for a Desert Poet* will be published in 2024 by "Arteidolia Press". Mooney's poems indexed at: [www.sharonlopezmooney.com](http://www.sharonlopezmooney.com).

**Reed Kuehn** is a physician and combat veteran who has called Wisconsin, Maryland, Washington DC, North Carolina, and Colorado home. He currently lives and writes in Rhode Island. His work has appeared in *The First Line*, *So It Goes*, and *Calliope*.

**Debbie Gilbert** A dual citizen of Ireland and the United States, D. Walsh Gilbert is the author of five poetry books, the most recent *[M]AR[Y]* (Kelsay Books, 2023), and forthcoming, *Deirdre* (Impspired, 2023). A multiple Pushcart Prize nominee, she's currently preparing two verse stories of historical narrative set in Ireland. Short fiction is her newest venture. She serves on the board of the non-profit, Riverwood Poetry Series, and as co-editor of the *Connecticut River Review*.

**Lucia Coppola** is an ESL teacher who is originally from New York and has lived in France and California. She has a B.A. in Medieval Studies from Swarthmore College, and a professional background in dance and body techniques. Her writing is informed by nature and traditional storytelling. Much of her work has been presented on the radio, online and in print. Her first collection of poems, *Talking With Trees* was published by Plants and Poetry in 2022.



**Sandro Francisco Piedrahita** is an American writer of Ecuadorian and Peruvian descent, with a degree in Comparative Literature from Yale College. His short stories have been accepted for publication by *The Acentos Review*, *The Ganga Review*, *Hive Avenue Literary Journal*, *Limit Experience Journal*, *Label Me Latina/o*, *Sundial Magazine*, *The Write Launch*, *Synchronized Chaos*, *Peauxdunque Journal*, *Carmina Magazine*, *Faultline Journal* and *Foreshadow Magazine*.

**Claire Scott** is an award winning poet who has received multiple Pushcart Prize nominations. Her work has appeared in the *Atlanta Review*, *Bellevue Literary Review*, *New Ohio Review* and *Healing Muse* among others. Claire is the author of Waiting to be Called and Until I Couldn't. She is the co-author of Unfolding in Light: A Sisters' Journey in Photography and Poetry.

**Josephine Anderson** (born Morello-Cassara) is 66 years of age and has written thousands of pages over the last 35 years. She has not previously published. Josephine completed a Masters Degree (English Literature and the Western History of Ideas) in 1989. Her native tongue is not English, but the ancient Norman dialect spoken only in the town of San Fratello in Northern Sicily.

To read more of Josephine's poetry, contact her at [josephineandstephenco-creative.ca](http://josephineandstephenco-creative.ca)

**Ben Goodman** and I am a poet, counselor, and educator. I currently reside in the Hudson Valley. My work currently appears in *Strange Matters Magazine*.

**Kirk Glaser's** poetry has been nominated twice for the Pushcart Prize and has appeared in *The Threepenny Review*, *The American Journal of Poetry*, *Nimrod*, *Split Rock*, *Chicago Quarterly Review*, *Catamaran*, *The Worcester Review*, *The Cortland Review*, and elsewhere. His poetry collection, The House That Fire Built, will be published in 2025 by MadHat Press. Awards for his work include an American Academy of Poets prize, C. H. Jones National Poetry Prize, and University of California Poet Laureate Award. He teaches writing and literature at Santa Clara University, where he serves as Director of the Creative Writing Program and Faculty Advisor to the Santa Clara Review. He is co-editor of the anthology, New California Writing 2013, Heyday.

**Maziar Karim**, is from Tehran, Iran. He holds an MS degree in Information Technology. He has been doing research in different fields of philosophy, psychology, philology, mythology and literature. His essays and books in these fields are forthcoming publications in both Persian and English. His work in America has appeared in different magazines such as *Better Than Starbucks*, *DREGINALD*, *The Bookends Review*, *Gramma Poetry* and *Smithsonian Magazine* *the tiger of riview*, *fictional cafe*, *G\*mob magazine*, *alchemy magazine of translation*, *Quail magazine*, *Azonal translation*, *the gravity of things* and others. He is also a literature translator and he recently published a quatrain complex in persian language with title of Suffer of Nothing.

**Joseph A Farina** is a retired lawyer in Sarnia, Ontario, Canada. Drawing from his profession and his sicilian-canadian back round, he is an internationaly award winning and published poet. Several of his poems have been published in *Quills Canadian Poetry Magazine*, *The Wild Word*, *The Chamber Magazine*, *Lothlorian Poetry Journal*, *Ascent*, *Subterranean Blue*, *The Tower Poetry Magazine*, *Inscribed*, *The Windsor Review*, *Boxcar Poetry Revue*, and

appears in many anthologies including: Sweet Lemons: Writings with a Sicilian Accent, Canadian Italians at Table, Witness from Serengeti Press and Tamaracks: Canadian Poetry for the 21st Century. He has had poems published in the U.S. magazines *Mobius*, *Pyramid Arts*, *Arabesques*, *Fiele-Festa*, and *Philedelphia Poets*. He has had two books of poetry published— The Cancer Chronicles and The Ghosts of Water Street and an e-book, Sunsets in Black and White.

**Isabel Behling** is currently studying English with a focus on Rhetoric and Professional writing at the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, as well as minoring in German. When she is not studying or working, she is reading and writing. She hopes to one day pursue a career in creative writing or publishing.

**Jack D. Harvey's** poetry has appeared in *Scrivener*, *The Comstock Review*, *Valparaiso Poetry Review*, *Typishly Literary Magazine*, *The Antioch Review*, *The Piedmont Poetry Journal* and elsewhere. The author has been a Pushcart nominee and over the years has been published in a few anthologies. The author has been writing poetry since he was sixteen and lives in a small town near Albany, New York. He is retired from doing whatever he was doing before he retired.

**Stella Vinitchi Radulescu**, Romanian-American poet, Ph.D. in French, is the author of many collections of poetry published in the United States, Romania and France. She writes poetry in English, French and Romanian, Her poems have appeared in a variety of literary magazines in the United States, France, Belgium, and Romania. Her last two collections of poetry Scrape the Window of Nothingness and Traveling With the Ghosts (reviewed in Publishers Weekly) were published by Orison Books. A translation (Luke Hankins translator) from her French collection Un cri dans la neige (A Cry in the Snow) was published in 2018 by Seagull Books Press.

**Mark Groody** Long time Marin/Sonoma resident Thomas 'Mark' Groody has lived all up and down the 101 corridor. One day late in life found that he could design houses, create music, and connect words to what he experienced in the past and more recently sees in one of the most interesting places one can live.

**Matthew Roy Davey** was winner of The Observer short story competition 2003 and winner of the Dark Tales competition (August 2013). He has been long-listed for the Bath Flash Fiction award (Spring and Autumn 2017), Reflex Flash Fiction competition (Spring 2017) and Retreat West Quarterly Competition (Summer 2018). His story 'Waving at Trains' has been translated into Mandarin and Slovenian and been published in anthologies by Vintage and Cambridge University Press. He has recently been published by *Everyday Fiction*, *Flash Fiction Magazine*, *Odd Magazine* and *Flash: The International Short-Story Magazine*, and has been nominated for the Pushcart Prize. <https://matthewroydavey.wordpress.com/>

**Stacey C. Johnson** writes and teaches in San Diego County. She is a graduate of the MFA program at San Diego State University and creator of The Unknowing Project. Her work appears in *Oyster River Pages*, *Pacific Review*, and *Fiction International*, as well as various other publications. Her poetry chapbook Flight Songs is forthcoming from Finishing Line Press (February 2024). You can find her at [staceycjohnson.com](http://staceycjohnson.com)

**Mark Tate** Submission from the confession of a young man due to be hanged for murder-- from an anonymous source, Kentucky 1903—the names and places have been changed because the source did not want his family names in print. I have written the document as a true story being told at a family reunion. I have published three novels through McCaa Books available at Amazon. Due out this fall, my book of poems won the Blue Light Press 2023 Poetry Book of the year. A long-time resident of Sonoma County, California. I live with my wife and two cats.

**Philip Newton** I am a writer, musician and stonemason living in Oregon. Most recently, my work has been published in the *Letters Journal* (Yale), *The Hamilton Stone Review*, *Roanoke Review*, *Calliope* and other periodicals. A novel, TERRANE, was published by Unsolicited Press in 2018. I am a graduate of the Sonoma State University writing program.

**Petra F. Bagnardi** is a TV screenwriter, a theater playwright and actress, and a poet. She was short-listed in the Enfield Poets' Twentieth Anniversary Poetry Competition, and her work was featured in several literary journals including, *Masque & Spectacle Literary Journal*, *Punk Noir Magazine*, *Poetica Review*, *Red Door Magazine*, *Drawn to the Light Press*, *Rabid Oak*.

**Flavian Mark Lupinetti**, a poet and fiction writer, and cardiac surgeon, received his MFA from the Vermont College of Fine Arts. His work has appeared in *About Place*, *december*, *Redivider*, *Sheila-Na-Gig*, and *ZYZZYVA*. Mark lives in New Mexico.

**O. Sincere** is a writer from Las Vegas, Nevada. She holds two Bachelor of Arts degrees in English and Communication Studies from the University of Nevada, Las Vegas. Her work has been dedicated to reimagining the family stories that have been passed down through a diverse and multi-cultural family tree. Miss Sincere is interested in the complexity of relationship and the social environments that shape them. She is currently studying at Columbia University in New York City. Her short story, "Eggface," is featured in *Beyond Thought* journal.

**David Shapiro del Sole** I live in Tasmania, Australia where I work part-time as a counsellor in private practice. I have previously had stories in *Ginosko*, *Braindrip* and an anthology, One Surviving Story.

**Benjamin Schmitt** is the Elgin Award-nominated author of four books, most recently The Saints of Capitalism and Soundtrack to a Fleeting Masculinity. His poems have appeared in *Sojourners*, *Antioch Review*, *The Good Men Project*, *Hobart*, *Columbia Review*, *Spillway*, and elsewhere. A co-founder of Pacifica Writers' Workshop, he has also written articles for *The Seattle Times* and *At The Inkwell*. He lives in Seattle with his wife and children.

**E Laura Golberg** A Pushcart and Best of the Net nominated poet, E. Laura Golberg's work has appeared in *Rattle*, *Poet Lore*, *Barrow Street*, *Birmingham Poetry Review*, *RHINO*, and the *Journal of Humanistic Mathematics*, among other venues. She won first place in the Washington, DC Commission on the Arts Larry Neal Poetry Competition.

**Gary Charles Wilkens'** first book, The Red Light Was My Mind, won the 2006 Texas Review Breakthrough Poetry Prize. His manuscript "Fayetteville" was a Finalist in the 2014 Moon City Review Poetry Contest. His poems have appeared in many journals and anthologies, including

*The Texas Review, Moon City Review, Passages North, the Adirondack Review, James Dickey Review, Melancholy Hyperbole, and Midwest Quarterly.* His fiction has appeared in *Drunk Monkeys, Foliate Oak Literary Magazine, and Pale Ghosts Magazine.* His day job is Associate Professor of English at Norfolk State University in Norfolk, Virginia.

**Matthew James Friday** is a British born writer and teacher. He has had many poems in US and international journals. His first chapbook The Residents is due to be published by Finishing Line Press in 2024. He has published numerous micro-chapbooks with the Origami Poems Project. Other poems are forthcoming in *The Oregon English Journal* and *The Amsterdam Quarterly* (NL). Matthew is a Pushcart Prize nominated poet.

**Carol Park** roams from cities to wilderness. Six years in Japan altered this California girl forever. She enjoys the work of teaching ESL and serving in a jail, and finds refreshment in hiking, gardening, and reading. Her MFA comes from Seattle Pacific University. Her poetry has appeared or is forthcoming in *The Haight Ashbury Journal, Black Fox Literary, MiGoZine, The California Quarterly, Foreshadow, Monterey Poetry Review* and a number of anthologies.

**Daniel Belanger** I've published fiction in *Bewildering Stories Ginosko Literary Journal, Tiger Shark, Mysterical-E, Obra/Artifact, Dark Matter, Home Planet News, Art Times, The Milo Review, Mobius, Bellowing Ark, City Primeval, Lynx Eye, and RE; AL, The Journal of Liberal Arts.* I have published poems in *The Joycean Lively Arts Guild Review, The Moody Street Irregulars and The Little Apple,* which I formerly co-edited. I've received a Jacob Goldfein Award for Outstanding Scholarly and Creative Work for a paper entitled *Aspects of Spirituality, Religiosity and Existentialism in Seniors Facing Death.* I have a Bachelor's Degree in English Literature from Clark University and a Master's Degrees in Social Work from Hunter College. I currently manage a quality of care program aimed at improving healthcare for people living with HIV in a ll regions of NYS. I live with my wife, Lori, in Peekskill, NY.

**Michael Hettich** has published over a dozen books of poetry, most recently The Halo of Bees: New and Selected Poems, 1990-2022, which was published in May, 2023, by Press 53. His work has appeared widely in journals and in a few anthologies as well. He lives with his family in Black Mountain, North Carolina. [michaelhettich.com](http://michaelhettich.com).

**Carol Lynn Stevenson Grellas** is a recent graduate of Vermont College of Fine Arts, MFA in Writing program. Her latest collection, Alice in Ruby Slippers, was short-listed for the 2021 Eric Hoffer Grand Prize and awarded an honorable mention in the Poetry category. Her work has been published or is forthcoming in some of the following journals: *The Comstock Review, Redactions, Verse Daily,* and many more. She has served as editor-in-chief for both *The Orchards Poetry Journal* and *Tule Review.* An eleven-time Pushcart Prize nominee and seven-time Best of the Net nominee, according to family lore, she is a direct descendant of Robert Louis Stevenson.

**Lucia Haase** I am a published poet who has been writing formal and free verse poetry for 25 years as the direct result off a spiritual experience. Many of my poems are inspired by nature, human nature and spirituality. I recently had poetry accepted by The California State Poetry Society, *The Deronda Review, Time of Singing, Conceit Magazine, Amulet Magazine* and *The Pen.*

**Louis Efron** is an award-winning writer and poet who has been featured in *Forbes*, *Huffington Post*, *Chicago Tribune*, *North Dakota Quarterly*, *Flapper Press Poetry Café*, *PentaCat Press*, *Words and Whispers*, *Bourgeon*, *The Deronda Review*, *Young Ravens Literary Review*, *The Ravens Perch*, *POETiCA REViEW*, *The Orchards Poetry Journal*, *Academy of the Heart and Mind*, *Literary Yard*, *New Reader Magazine* and over 100 other national and global publications. He is also the author of five books, including *The Unempty Spaces Between* (winner of the 2023 NYC Big Book Award for poetry), *How to Find a Job, Career and Life You Love; Purpose Meets Execution*; *Beyond the Ink*; as well as the children's book *What Kind of Bee Can I Be?*

**Phil Vas'** work has appeared or is forthcoming in such places as *Ludlow Street*, *Somewhat*, *Zygote*, *Letter X*, *Cherry Bleeds*, *engine idling* and *100subtexts*. He has published two books: *Parish* and *The Body of the Father: Art, Stories, Poems*. Connect with him on Instagram [@p.vas.1](https://www.instagram.com/p.vas.1)

**Brenton MacKinnon** began his teaching career living alone in a Vietnamese village while serving with the Marines as an interpreter during wartime. After two tours with the Peace Corps, he returned to graduate school to study sociolinguistics. He has worked abroad in 3rd world countries and with refugees, low income communities and convicts in the U.S. as they seek to recover from trauma. He has half a dozen book on Amazon, Domestically his social work includes; the Navajo Reservation, refugee and immigrant communities, low income neighborhoods plus incarcerated veterans. Mac speaks 5 languages and now leads groups in the healing value of the written word.

**Sandro Francisco Piedrahita** is an American writer of Ecuadorian and Peruvian descent, with a degree in Comparative Literature from Yale College. His short stories have been accepted for publication by *The Acentos Review*, *The Ganga Review*, *Hive Avenue Literary Journal*, *Limit Experience Journal*, *Label Me Latina/o*, *Sundial Magazine*, *The Write Launch*, *Synchronized Chaos*, *Peauxdunque Journal*, *Carmina Magazine*, *Faultline Journal* and *Foreshadow Magazine*.

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