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Ginosko Literary Journal #32

Summer 2024

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GinoskoLiteraryJournal.com

PO Box 246

Fairfax, CA 94978

Robert Paul Cesaretti, Editor

Est. 2002

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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 must write down that I am to be an artist. Not in the sense of aesthetic frippery but in the sense of aesthetic craftsmanship; otherwise I will feel my loneliness continually—like this today. The word craftsmanship takes care of the work angle & the word aesthetic the truth angle. Angle. It will be a life struggle with no consummation. When something is finished, it cannot be possessed. Nothing can be possessed but the struggle. All our lives are consumed in possessing struggle but only when the struggle is cherished & directed to a final consummation outside of this life is it of any value. I want to be the best artist it is possible for me to be, under God.

I do not want to be lonely all my life but people only make us lonelier by reminding us of God. Dear God please help me to be an artist, please let it lead to You.

— Flannery O'Connor, *A Prayer Journal*

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Far to the south of Hollywood, where the glamour fades into body shops and taco stands, Venice Boulevard crosses La Brea Avenue and forms a nexus of desolation. At this point, Venice is eight lanes wide, with a median strip hosting half-desiccated plants, and it is often bordered with frontage roads, separated from the main boulevard by narrower medians with their own clusters of dying weeds. The clangor of traffic, the plastic signs set on posts high above the street, the patches of graying asphalt surrounded by small shops selling everything from marijuana to knockoffs of famous shoes, the little houses and stucco apartment buildings on the dusty streets away from the traffic: these are home and work to thousands, tens of thousands. One of those tens of thousands is a tall old man limping west on Venice, with one pantleg caught in his sock.

Although he slouches a little as he walks, he steps firmly with the stride of someone who has someplace to be at a certain time. Despite the glaring sky he is wearing a windbreaker, perhaps the result of a miscalculation in the cool of morning. The heating has not operated properly in his apartment for over a decade, and it is cold inside in the shadowy dawns. This leads to misinterpretation and subsequent noontime discomfort. Carter Harris scratches his short gray beard as he waits at a traffic light to cross a side street by the printshop. There is not much traffic this far from La Brea, so he contemplates crossing against the light, but changes his mind as he sees a gardener's pickup truck hurrying towards the intersection. The driver does not want to miss the green but is too late, and strikes an old white van that has tried to cross along Venice ahead of the light. Neither is going too fast, but they hit in such a way that both spin halfway around, spilling lawnmowers and rakes in a semicircle around the two errant vehicles. Carter Harris is unhappy to have witnessed such an incident, although it appears that no one has been hurt. However, he is sure there will be a dispute.

He stands and watches, hoping no one will take particular notice of him. The two drivers emerge, and Carter Harris senses the anger in their postures. They stand face-to-face for a short while, and the tones of voice Carter Harris can hear indicate that they are in fact disputing. The gardener gestures at his scattered tools, the driver of the van waves his arms in a manner that seems to indicate the directions of the two vehicles prior to the crash. Both vehicles exhibit twisted front wheels, and it is likely that neither can continue on its own. Finally the cell phones come out, and the two drivers stand back-to-back about six feet apart, talking separately in their personal rages. Other drivers inch their way around the scene, and Carter Harris, noting that no one is looking in his direction, takes advantage of a favorable green light to cross the side street and continue west along Venice Boulevard. He is glad no one is hurt, but he is also glad that he has a story to tell his friend Rupert at the repair shop. It is Rupert Castillo that he is hoping to visit that day. As he walks he realizes that Rupert may have a financial interest in knowing about the crash. Carter Harris almost turns back to offer his friend's services to the two drivers, and in fact stops walking briefly, but then decides it would make him feel like a tout, and continues on. Carter Harris decides that he will not describe the incident to his friend after all, as it might feel like a missed opportunity to Rupert.

Carter Harris is now walking past the nightclub. It is a square cinderblock structure, single-story but as large as the lot that Carter's apartment building covers, entirely lacking in windows, and painted black. It is otherwise plain except for a mural on the side facing the

asphalt parking lot; this mural consists entirely of the brandmarks of beers, liquors, and junkfood snacks. There is a folding metal chair on the sidewalk by the entrance to the parking lot. A security guard in a black uniform sits there; the security guard is hefty, almost fat, and is bent over a smartphone with her eyes locked to the screen. Carter Harris can see that it is a woman despite her shaved head, though she is so voluminous that he feels he might have misinterpreted her. Since he will never visit the nightclub and thus have no chance of offending her by addressing her inappropriately, he decides that it is of no importance whether she is male or female or otherwise. He limps on past; she, or perhaps he, raises their head and says, quickly, "Hello," startling Carter. Harris answers back, "Good morning," in a flat neutral voice, and continues onward. He recalls passing the nightclub late in the evening once, after several hours spent drinking with Rupert at a stripmall bar frequented by neighborhood residents who spoke mostly Spanish. On his walk home he teetered through a dangerous-looking crowd by the nightclub. It was then surrounded by shiny loud cars, the cars disgorging young men with tattoos and leering smiles, and young women wearing excessive makeup and short tight skirts over their ample bottoms despite being barely more than girls. Loud music emanated from the nightclub, and a great deal of apparently joyful shouting filled the night air. Carter Harris felt uncomfortable passing through this crowd while drunk, but everyone ignored him except to giggle at the tall old man weaving through the noisy tangle of young flesh. He was tempted to look over his shoulder as he continued on towards home but did not do so, in case it should serve as a provocation to some young thug. However, nothing happened; the nightclub's patrons found him uninteresting, for which he was grateful. He remembered: the same security guard was there, her attention no longer sunken into a phone screen. There had been a shooting there once, Carter recalled from listening to the news on his radio, and two stabbings over the years. Carter had not gotten drunk since then.

But now it is late morning and the club appears deserted except for its rotund guardian. Carter walks on, passing by a welding shop and an establishment sporting only a name on the windowless façade facing Venice Boulevard: the words "Segerstrom Enterprises" in wooden cursive over a glass door protected by an iron grating. There is a doorbell by the door and nothing else. It is the sort of mystery establishment common in the neighborhood, and he does not understand how they do business. Or even whether they still do. This particular edifice is painted dark brown. There is a driveway next to it, closed off with a chainlink gate, and there is an old Buick always parked beyond the gate. The Buick is clean and does not look abandoned. Carter Harris walks on; he is only two blocks from Rupert's auto shop.

He is hoping to have lunch with Rupert, something they have done several times a year since they became friends. He has not telephoned Rupert, because Carter Harris always feels clumsy on a phone, talking to a faceless voice while staring through the gloom of his apartment at a pile of bills, or perhaps at a dirty plate that he has left on his table. Nevertheless, he carries the phone in his pocket, always hoping that it will not ring. He prefers to take the chance that Rupert will be busy with a customer, or stuck on the shop phone negotiating with a parts supplier, leaving Carter to sit in one of the blue plastic chairs provided for clients in the office. The office is a small, faded cube painted white; the walls are covered with signs proclaiming the shop labor rates for various types of work, and also sport photographs of customers who Carter supposes must be famous in some way but whom he does not recognize. There is as well the inevitable promotional calendar depicting a woman in abbreviated clothing standing by a shiny car and holding some incomprehensible mechanism

as if it were a piece of jewelry to display. Carter Harris has not owned a car since he retired from a lifetime working in a warehouse where everything he handled was in cardboard boxes stenciled with numbers. He sold his last car to Rupert after finding that the repair bill equaled a month's pension, and realizing that he rarely drove it any more. Carter Harris had never married nor spawned children; no relationship that he had had had lasted more than two years. He lived alone in his apartment and cooked for himself, albeit simply. He counted three friends that he visited; Rupert was foremost among them. He sees the sign announcing Rupert's establishment to the world: "Castillo Car Repair Center," with the words, "Trucks & Boats" under it in smaller letters. Carter has never seen a boat at Rupert's shop. He waits for the signal to turn green, then crosses the side street to the corner that hosts Rupert's shop.

The parking area in front of the shop bays is full of cars, mostly German and expensive. Their paint gleams in the hazy noon light, although several are missing body parts and show their uncouth interior structures. Carter Harris drove cars most of his life, as well as the electric forklifts at the warehouse, but he never felt curious to understand how they operated, and such machines have remained a mystery to him. He stands briefly by a BMW with its hood wide open and stares at the jumble of hoses, tubes, and metal castings in the engine compartment. He wonders, as he always does when he visits Rupert, that people entrust their lives to agglomerations of metal and rubber as they do. He remembers the incident he witnessed on his way over and again ponders whether he should mention it to Rupert. Then he turns towards the shop bays and nods to the portly chief mechanic, who is reaching up to the underside of a cream-colored car raised high on the hydraulic lift. The mechanic looks at him with a surprised expression as Carter turns to enter the office. He has never, in all the years he has been visiting with Rupert, learned the mechanic's name. The office, however, is empty, and Rupert's chair is pushed up to the desk. Carter Harris assumes that his friend is in the restroom, a windowless cube behind the office, entered from the shop floor. He sits in one of the blue plastic chairs and prepares to wait. The office sports a single window that looks out on the parking area; Carter sits with his back to it, waiting for Rupert. After five minutes or so, the chief mechanic comes in, wiping his hands with a blue rag.

"I'm sorry," he says. He has a heavy but undefinable accent, which Carter Harris suspects is east European. "You have not heard?"

Carter looks at him with a blank expression and shakes his head. The chief mechanic stares at him briefly and then blurts out, "Mr. Rupert has passed on. Two weeks ago, car crash. Was in newspaper."

Carter Harris sits silent in the blue plastic chair for a long minute. He feels suddenly hollow and dark inside, like a closed-off empty room. The mechanic continues after waiting: "Was late at night. Maybe drinking, I don't know. His son owns shop now. What happens, I don't know." Carter looks back at the mechanic. He says what he has heard others say in similar situations. "I'm sorry. He was a good man." The mechanic nods. "Excuse me. Customer car is waiting." Carter sits alone for a few minutes, studying the desk with its clutter and its cheap computer, the battered swivel chair behind it. The room is silent though he can hear the occasional clank of a tool from the shop bays. A pale light drifts through the window. He waits there for several minutes, unsure of what it would be appropriate to do. There is no sign that the son will show up, or has shown up, needing consolation. Carter Harris always feels

awkward in such situations. He heaves himself out of the blue plastic chair and leaves the shop without saying anything to the mechanics. He doesn't really know them at all, though the mechanic who spoke to him seemed to know he was a friend of Rupert's. He is still feeling hollow and dark inside, and a little dizzy. It is certainly the result of the emotional shock, but is perhaps just hunger. Carter Harris had been looking forward to a lunch with Rupert and the chance to talk with someone, even if about nothing. Now he has lost that chance.

He decides he will buy himself lunch at the cheap Mexican restaurant in the strip mall across Venice Boulevard. This is where he has eaten with Rupert many times. The food is satisfying though not exciting. He will order a beer as well though it is barely noon. He is walking, so he can do that, he tells himself. This will be his tribute to the friendship with Rupert. He leaves the shop and crosses the wide dusty sidewalk to the streetcorner. The traffic light is red in his direction, cars and trucks rumble along Venice Boulevard going too fast. Carter Harris studies the wide pale asphalt and the wide pale sky above it. He stands there patiently, waiting for the light to change.

Our Sentences

Andrew Miller

[Lightly edited and arranged after asking 50 men in my Creative Writing Class to write one sentence about life in a Florida State Prison]

How long are ten years, really? Please remember that I am a person, NOT a number. The present moment is the only moment. Going to prison feels like lava at the end of a rainbow. This place would have enormous potential if all the staff came on board. Upon arriving, I noticed the trees and gently rolling hills. Living here, you can feel a peace not found at many other camps. This prison is changing lives. I must move again, lugging everything I own in a bag like a hobo. Lights out. Today took a tragic turn; I'm going to confinement for contraband. Should I sell my tray, my chicken tray, for two ramen noodles? Please hurry up and clear the count; I must use the toilet and don't know how long I can hold it before I make a mess. Prison taught me to stand in line, show respect, and follow a schedule—but not much toward my self-confidence. Freedom is a mindset. He leaned against my bunk and moaned, "I disappointed God again." For a moment, I wondered how he had dyed his shirt red. I used to like the colors: white and blue. The noise is perpetual—a crushing weight—and I am Atlas. Just a hundred dollars a week, and you can become anyone. He was lying peacefully when the stretcher finally arrived. The level of incompetence displayed was truly astounding. Some officers are like some inmates; they can't stop creating hostile environments with aggressive attitudes. Prison can be a great opportunity for self-improvement if you make good use of your time with mental exercise. Just like the street, don't believe everything you learn on inmate dot com*. The indignities poured on us are like swill for hogs. There is protection from the storm by calling on the power within. If a man is his dreams, then prison is the place where dreams come to die. When dreams become preferable to reality, hope begins to fade. Prison can be your coffin or your cocoon; it's all in your perspective. Benji, wearing an all-blue jumpsuit, never thought he'd be wasting his life for the next 12 years. Standby to stand up. You're in prison—get over it. Be who you want to be. You are an illusion of your mind. This place has taken my worth as a human and perverted it into a cog in a broken machine. I feel like I'm good for nothing, physically and mentally abused by fences, walls, chains, boots, fists, and words. Held for ransom as your kidnappers steal wealth and food from your family meant to keep you alive...hoping someday you'll return home. Is this all that's left? I was born, I lived, I died, the end.

*Not an actual website—an “inside” joke.

10 Poems

Eva Eliav

1

I'm done with cactuses

a few
miraculous blooms

not worth the soul-deep thorns

2

memory
sharp as a blade

softens
with time

a broken tooth
no longer tastes
of blood

3

I've lost patience
with flesh

smelling respectable

covering pale limbs
with camouflage

cooking
and digesting
what I've eaten

repairing what's been broken

containing a bright red stream

4

I hold my arms aloft

they ebb and flow

swayed
by gravity

the rolling earth

5

some wounds
must be kept open

allowed to bleed

safeguards breached

reticence
disrespected

6

after the fire
everything tastes
of ash

I flee
swift as a cat

from branch
to smoking branch

hissing my truth

7

something has been planted
in my thoughts

a cuckoo's egg

a foreign obligation

swelling
beneath my fingers

birthing words

8

this morning the pen
felt foreign
in my hand

no longer flesh
of my flesh

no longer green
and pliant
as a stem

no longer flexing
yearning
towards the light

9

in my fears
you are always
falling

about to fall

I find you
limbs splayed
on the kitchen floor

cradled by its alabaster arms

head resting
on a pillow
of bright blood

10

each day
our children remind us
what we've forgotten

what springs
from the chest
from the throat
like a gush of laughter

crimson bright
unstoppable

no detours

Heavy or Prolonged Bleeding

Michelle R. Brady

The baby I aborted was conceived in Germany, on leave from Iraq, when I was twenty-one years old. I wondered when it happened and why I couldn't immediately tell. I wondered if it was in the woods under the strung-up poncho and combined sleeping bags to hide us from the wind and soldiers and God. You'd scattered glow sticks around us that pulsed in pale orbs of green and blue, because we'd been granted two weeks freedom from sand. I thought it might have been in the shower at that rest stop we found after days of going without, listening to the man singing in German while sliding against a wall dirtier than we were, our fingers pruned, our feet burning from the water. I knew it didn't matter. Of course, it didn't matter, but I found myself wondering about it all the time.

I was young then. Just as I am now, but more so because I didn't realize that murder wasn't that easy, that the person never left you. Ripping her out of my stomach didn't rip her out of my head or my blood or my fingernails.

You weren't there when it happened. I refused to say it was you, to accuse you and destroy you, and I went alone. You hugged me. "You'll be fine. It'll go perfectly," you spoke into my hair. "You made the right decision. This is the only way. I mean, it would be crazy to think we could be parents. I wouldn't have had anything to do with it. There's too much ahead, you know. I mean, think about Germany. The guy who saw our fire and came over to roast marshmallows with us, wasn't that great? Think about running through Paris with those gold masks on. I want my whole life to be like that. An adventure. Plus, think about art school. You'll have a hard enough time, as it is."

Tell me not to go. Tell me not to go! Tell me we can work it out. I want to be whole. But you couldn't hear me, and I didn't listen to you. We were each deaf and afraid.

I boarded the plane without you, scorched by the scorn and disgust of my fellow soldiers, the weight of my decision, the one I didn't really ever make, and something worse than the nausea and body aches--dread. It was heavy and crushing. It made my heart beat too fast and my palms sweat. I wanted to die and thought out ways to do it. The flight was rough and long, with more stops than I remembered on the way there. Other soldiers asked why I was leaving, and I lied, telling some of them my mother died, others, later, that both my mother and brother were killed in a train wreck. After awhile, I just didn't answer, or maybe people stopped asking.

You told me you'd split the cost with me, and then when I seemed not to protest too much, that you'd pay for the whole thing. You watched my face, I guess expecting some sort of gratitude. "Wait, how much is it?" you asked.

I shook my head. I didn't know.

"Well, I guess that doesn't matter. I've made enough money here, and you're the one who has to fly home and then wait for us in Kansas, plus go through with it all." Maybe here you

noticed my face. "Look, hey Claire. Look, it's going to be fine. I've got the whole thing. Don't worry about anything, okay? Shh...you're alright."

When you perform an abortion by the suction curettage method does it ever happen that a portion of the fetus is extracted from the uterus while the fetus is still alive?

A. Yes.

Q. And how does that happen?

A. When a suction curettage abortion is performed, one of three things is going to happen. One would be that the catheter, as it approaches the fetus, tears it and kills it at that instant inside the uterus. The second would be that the fetus is small enough and the catheter is large enough that the fetus passes through the catheter and either dies in transit as it's passing through the catheter or dies in the suction bottle after it's actually all the way out.

In the bathroom, at the airport in Ireland, there was a pamphlet on choices, women's choices. There were a few of them in an untidy pile under the sink. I saw them while vomiting. They felt secret. They instructed women to clinics in England. They were full of descriptions and stories. I kept one, pushed it into my pocket just before someone came in. I wiped my mouth with the back of my hand and watched the woman in the mirror. "Why are you leaving?" I asked her.

She didn't look up at me, only at her blond hair and the bobby pin she was attempting to insert into it. "I'm pregnant," she said.

She walked around me and into a stall. I re-boarded the plane.

Q. How is dilation and curettage performed?

A. Dilation and curettage is a surgical abortion procedure performed during the first twelve to fifteen weeks of gestation. Dilation and curettage is similar to suction aspiration with the introduction of a curette. A curette is a long, looped shaped knife that scrapes the lining, placenta and fetus away from the uterus. A cannula may be inserted for a final suctioning. This procedure usually lasts ten minutes with a possible stay of five hours.

I was about thirteen weeks pregnant when I stepped onto the plane, the big C-5, and about thirteen weeks and four days when I walked into my mother's apartment in Council Bluffs, Iowa, loaded with gear and wondering how I would pay the cab fare. She didn't know I was coming because she hadn't answered the phone in months. I pounded on the windows until two knuckles on my left hand were bleeding. "Oh, hi, Claire," she said, turning away and leaving the door open for me to follow.

"Do you have money for the cab?" I asked, looking over my shoulder at the anxious man in the driver's seat, worried about the neighborhood probably.

She threw her head to the right, toward the kitchen table that was covered with stacks of paper and dirty dishes, and sat down in the living room where the TV was on a little too loudly. I dug around and scrounged enough money in a twenty and change.

"Good luck," the man said, as I handed the mess to him. He smiled, but when I looked

higher, I saw the shadows around my eyes and my tight, cracked lips reflected in his bald head.

I walked back up the stairs slowly, feeling desperate, looking up and down the street for an escape. She made me feel more alone than being alone. I laid my bags in my old bedroom, in the doorway, actually because the room itself was full of boxes, trash and dying plants. "What's going on with you?" I asked.

She looked up from filing her nails. She was wearing an old, once white bathrobe barely closed over her skin and fat. Her hair was slick and flat with grease, her face puffy and lined with the creases of sleep. The apartment smelled of death, and she herself permeated unwashed crevices and defeat. "I'm not doing too good, kiddo," she said and looked guilty.

"Are you working?"

She shook her head and started to cry. "I've spent all of Grandma's inheritance money. Your share and Ted's."

I was sickened but also exhausted, too tired to battle with her self-pity, too tired to battle my own. "Is there any food?"

She looked a little wild and wiped her eyes. "I'll give you money if you want to go to the store. We could use some food around here. I've been eating chocolate frosting for two days."

"What? What the hell are you talking about?"

"You know, that stuff they gave us from the missionary."

"Mom, that was six years ago."

"I know, but it's all that's left." She was looking more frantic now that someone knew.

My head hurt. "I am not going to the store for you. Get up, shower, get dressed and get some fucking food. I'm going to bed, as soon as I uncover it. When I wake up, if there's no food, I will go and pick up some for ME." I started to walk away. "Don't you want to know why I'm home? What happened? Anything? A year, Mom. A fucking year," I said, looking back at her hunched over in the brown armchair.

She started crying again or harder, I'm not really sure which. "Of course! I know how disappointed you are that I didn't write, but I thought about you all the time." She tried to stand up, maybe to hug me but didn't follow through. "Is it over, then?"

"No, it isn't. I'm pregnant. I'm having an abortion in five days. Get up! Get dressed! Get some food!"

I shoved everything on my bed to the floor and went to sleep.

Q. What are the side effects and risks of dilation and curettage?

A. Common side effects that most women will experience following the procedure include cramping, nausea, sweating, and feeling faint. Less frequent side effects include possible heavy or prolonged bleeding, blood clots, damage to the cervix and perforation of the uterus. Infection due to retained products of conception, an STD, or bacteria being introduced to the uterus can cause fever, pain, abdominal tenderness, and possibly scar tissue.

"That's why I'm here, too," I said to the couple sitting next to me in the waiting room.

They glanced over, noticing me. They'd been speaking to each other. The girl moved her blond hair out of her eyes and smiled weakly at me before turning back to her boyfriend. My legs jiggled under the chair, and I looked around. I still wanted to kill myself, not for any

anticipatable reason, just to end the heavy, heavy dread sitting on my chest, welling up from my stomach. Just to not be alone.

I closed my eyes to block out the pastel wallpaper and the crying of babies, then took off my sweater and made a pillow of it. The blond girl was lying on her boyfriend's lap. He was stroking her hair and watching the door to the parking lot. I wanted to scoot over and lay on her, laying on him. I wondered if I scooted slowly enough, if they'd notice.

A nurse was standing over me. "Ready?" she asked. Her face was heavily rouged and one of her canine teeth was missing. The top left. She made me think it was sunny out, she was so happy.

I stood up and followed her to another room without answering. I wanted to hug her, and I wanted to vomit. She did an ultrasound, rubbing cold gel on my small belly. The monitor faced her, and when I decided she wasn't likely to show me, I asked. "Can I see?" Her eyes were greenish brown and, at my request, screwed up a little in surprise. "Uh, sure. I guess that's all right."

The monitor was small, and the screen reminded me of pictures of the Loch Ness Monster when it swiveled in my direction. She showed me the heartbeat. It was fascinating, and I watched, leaning forward toward it, until she turned it off. I wondered if they would print me out a picture like they do for all the other women. I figured they'd give it to me when I left.

"Now, Claire, we just want to make sure this is what you really want to do, that no one coerced you into it and you are very comfortable with the whole thing." She was looking down at her clipboard, shuffling around papers, speaking fast. She stood up to leave before I'd answered. She glanced back at me. "All set?"

I followed her. In this second room, a second nurse, Tracy, took my blood, and then the doctor was there with a gray crew cut and thin exposed ankles, facing me with a syringe of Valium. "Left arm, please," he said.

I could see the blond girl and her boyfriend in the ultrasound room across from me. She was crying, and he was kissing her head, holding her hand.

"Don't you need to wait for the blood test to come back?" I asked. My voice was high and tight. It didn't sound like me.

"Shhh. Your blood is fine. This will sting a little," he said.

The nurse was there—the first one. She held my hand when it hurt and whispered how brave I was. I thought I might love her. "There. See, all done," she said.

I didn't feel normal, slow and clouded, like I was surrounded by cotton. I couldn't believe it was done so quickly, but the cramps made it real. I couldn't keep from crying, they hurt so bad.

I told her I wanted to see the remains. She didn't want to at first, but a few minutes later she brought a tray over to me. I thought she was supposed to be carrying a baby. It was supposed to be crying, and I would secretly think it was ugly, but hold it and name it and love it anyway. What was on the tray looked like a piece of disintegrating white cotton gauze and a lump of mucus. I looked up at her. She didn't look as happy as before.

When I was ready to leave, I asked the lady at the desk if she had my picture—the one of my baby. "I'm sorry, I don't know what you're talking about," she said.

"The ultrasound. Where's my ultrasound picture?"

"Didn't you have a termination, Miss?" she asked.

"Yes." I didn't see what that had to do with anything. I'd still seen the picture.

"Um, we don't give those out."

"Oh," I said. "Well, I want mine."

"No, what I mean is, we don't save those. It's gone."

I thought I might hit her. I needed *something*. I couldn't walk out of there empty. I wanted to go and get the remains. I started to move toward the door, when the receptionist stepped in front of it. "Miss, do you need to talk to someone?"

I looked at her, really saw her. She was round, like a ball with fluffy dark hair and too little make up. And I shook my head.

She didn't get food. I didn't know that for a couple of days because I'd been sleeping in a friend's basement, but when I did go home I discovered her asleep on the couch, fat and 50 something clutching an empty microwave popcorn bag. I didn't wake her up; I just watched her. She lay on her left side with one arm draped over the edge, the other somewhere beneath her. Her mouth was open, and as she breathed in and out her head shifted a little up and down. I sat down on a pile of papers two feet in front of her, cross-legged and reeking of smoke and alcohol, to watch her breathe. Three failed marriages, estrangement from her family, fired from almost every job she'd ever had, and two children who not only didn't like her, maybe didn't love her, either.

I took a shower and packed. I drove to Kansas that night, and checked into a hotel. I was due at Fort Riley in two days. I spent them at a conservatory there, at first just sitting and the next day helping them move seven-foot tall cacti. At Fort Riley, I answered phones and read a fantasy novel about enchanted cats. I slept with a Specialist named Stevens once at his barracks. Afterward, he told me he had a girlfriend "back home" and cried into my t-shirt. That was how I spent the time until I saw you again.

Cheap Bargains

Travis Flatt

I've started praying, and I can't stop. I make these constant bets with myself.

When they cut my head open to scoop the tumor out—that's when I "found religion." The night before the operation, I asked to see the hospital chaplain. Before I spoke to him, I excused my parents from the room. They aren't Christians and wary of organized religion. I was embarrassed. I shouldn't have been ashamed, that undermined the whole purpose, made the whole thing feel empty and cheap, like a white lie. I bargained to survive.

The worst part was I couldn't articulate that to the chaplain. Well, I didn't even try. The gist of it went like this (I was way medicated, and my memory's all janky):

"It's okay to be afraid."

"I'm terrified. What if I wake up and I'm a vegetable?"

"Your family will love you and take care of you. They'll keep you comfortable. Some people recover from the worst—"

"Okay. If I die, will I go to hell?"

"Do you accept Christ as your Lord and savior?"

"Yes."

I've always had this fear of hell, despite the fact that I'm not religious. How can you really know? Wouldn't that be a bitch?

Obviously, I survived the surgery. I went to church after I recovered, but only a couple of times. I'm too lazy to get out of bed on Sundays. I broke a direct promise with God, within weeks of meeting the Guy.

It's become a tic. Like an inner monologue, I'm constantly muttering to the God I found in the hospital. And I'm bargaining. I'm in His debt. For living. I'm squirming here trying to talk about it.

Sometimes, I'll clean the toilet at work between classes. Then I'm late because I was wiping up piss my—or someone else's—piss. People are animals, they piss all over the seat, the floor. Or, I'll throw away litter in a parking lot. Not out of concern for the planet: honestly, I couldn't care less. I feel indentured. Those are just examples. Yesterday, I stacked up the plates and wiped down an empty table at Red Lobster because I saw the server was busy.

I've begun doing good deeds, but:

It's out of control. Say the Braves are playing—trivial things like that—I'll perform little favors all day and think, *If I do this, the Braves will win*. I won't admit that's what I'm doing, not while I'm doing it. Never in the specific words. That counteracts the spell.

So, there I'll be, in the toilet, wrapping my hands in paper towels, thinking, *I'm doing this for You, Possibly Existent God*, and then double back, *I shouldn't be talking to You in the bathroom, sorry, this is inappropriate*. Why is it inappropriate? I have no idea.

Who do I talk to about this? The only time I saw a therapist, it was a joke.

“I talk to myself all the time. Mostly in my head. And, I’m always making these little bargains...”

“It’s very traumatic, going through such a serious illness when you’re so young.”

I talked and talked while she watched the clock. She told me things I already knew. It was pointless. And expensive.

Yesterday, vice principal Maddux was waiting for me in my classroom, clearly pissed that I was late after the bell. What was I supposed to tell him? I got flustered and lied, told him my bladder was junked up from my medication, which made me sound unfit for the job. I’ll end up getting fired over this.

To even things out, I pray for other people—like during the moment of silence in morning announcements. I ask God to help my dad, who had a heart attack last year, or my sister-in-law, who’s pregnant—people who actually need it. I’m only covering my ass; I’m not praying the way you’re supposed to. Even to win lottery tickets I beg. I cannot help it. It shoots through my mind seconds before I scratch the quarter, then think: *Stop! God doesn’t decide who wins the goddamn lottery.*

I’ve read about Zen and Buddhism—other religions, but I feel like some part of me wants to subscribe to what everybody else around here does, that I was born in rural Tennessee for some reason, in the Christian Deep South. If something’s drawn toward it inside me somewhere, there must be a grain of truth, right?

I almost died.

The concept of hell—which can’t be demons and lakes of fire—is obviously ludicrous. Hell is lying on a thin mattress, collecting bedsores. Or, it’s being wheel-chaired around, spoon-fed applesauce, applauded for shitting yourself, your muscles atrophying, everyone baby talking for thirty years, making strangers squirm, locked in my mind forever, all these thoughts withering away on an endless loop until what?

Silence. Rest. Dirt. Ash.

Doglegs

Travis Flatt

Most nights after school, my brother and I shot ducks or stomped turtles with Mom in my parents' bedroom.

Dad would come home for dinner, then drive back to his clinic to check on the animals. We didn't see him much growing up, and I'd later learn he snorted pain pills on those nightly checkups.

One night, frustrated with *Super Mario 2*, taking a break, we flipped channels, searching for a sitcom or movie. Dad wandered in to pick his keys and wallet up off the dresser. He noticed a commercial for a monster truck rally, stopped and said, "I'll watch that," which excited me because he so rarely stayed there with us.

But, it also embarrassed me. My mom grew short with him, said it was only a commercial, not a program. I'd never seen Dad wrong before.

All I knew about Dad was that he fixed things. He could repair the TV, treat earaches with drops, and make a sickly kitten disappear and return home well. He was this warm but distant, infallible presence, like Santa or God.

Around this time, my first dog, Ghost, began limping, and Mom told us that Dad found a tumor on her hind leg. I understood "tumor" as a bad disease on television. Naturally, I assumed Dad would fix Ghost. My faith was unwavering; At nine-years-old, I also understood "workaholic."

To save Ghost, he amputated the leg. The cancer had spread. The dog was overweight and couldn't support himself on three legs, so he languished away, miserable in a run, whimpering atop a bed of newspaper. We'd visit, but my brother and I couldn't stomach the sight of the heaving, sutured Ghost slathered in foul-smelling ointment.

A few weeks later, when Ghost died, our friends at the lunch table laughed at the irony of our dog dying from disease.

Ten years later, Dad redeemed himself. My second dog, Lily, penetrated the barrier of her invisible fence chasing a squirrel, dashing in front of a car. That same back leg was crushed beneath a tire. Dad completely reconstructed the knee and shin, and soon Lily could climb stairs and fetch a tennis ball in our side yard.

The year I graduated college, my Dad's pill addiction nearly cost him his clinic and license. Someone at the drug company noticed the numbers on his monthly orders. He kicked those but began drinking cheap wine by the magnum. He'd send his interns to the liquor store across the county line for crates of Yellowtail Chardonnay, worried a client might see him buying large quantities of booze. We lived in a small, conservative town in rural Tennessee.

My parents divorced the next year. Mom finally discovered he'd been meeting with his interns those late nights "checking on the animals." Mom kept Lily, of course, a great dog, and that's all we really cared about.

The Family Doctor

Travis Flatt

“Dog’s don’t hold still.”
—Dad

Case 1: 1999, an aluminum folding chair

My uncle, Jack, said, “If you play in Jamestown, you’re going to fight.”

This was high school, our first band, a ska punk disaster itched to get out of the basement. We jumped on a show held, for some reason, in a rural veteran’s hall. Within seconds of our set, someone in the crowd threw an aluminum folding chair, smashing my brother across the eyebrow. So much blood poured down his face no fight broke out, everyone just scattered in horror. To his credit, my brother remained standing.

My Dad arrived at Jamestown hospital and disapproved of the suture job.

His son’s face. It wouldn’t do. “Must’ve used a goddamn boot lace.”

Back in Cookeville, at his vet clinic, which perpetually smelled of antiseptic and cat heat, Dad snipped and redid the stitches on his stainless steel exam table, my brother squealing not to poke him in the eye with the lidocaine shots.

Dad snorted laughter but told him: “Shut up. Don’t move.” Watch the VHS Uncle Jack camcorder, you see there’s deep worry in Dad’s concentrated frown. The tape’s still in Dad’s basement somewhere. Our clinic cat, a fat orange tabby named Charlie, sits on bemused.

Seven stitches and a thin line where hair doesn’t grow back.

Case 2: 2002, a novelty Gatlinburg switchblade

My best friend Michael was so proud of his new switchblade. He somehow sharpened the thing into a skinny ice pick, a sliver, a prison shiv sharp enough to cut oxygen. Naturally, it only took him an hour showing off to slice the back of his hand open. Maybe because he’s got the biggest hands I’ve ever seen. Gorilla hands. Like, an extra knuckle or something.

I drove him to Dad who was reluctant to sew outside the family, but Michael had neither insurance nor money.

I thought Michael, tough as he acts, was going to faint. He broke into a sweat at the shots.

Ten stitches and a fat, half inch scar.

Case 3: 2007, a Gibson SG guitar

After most of my college friends lost interest in playing DIY music, Owen and Erin soldiered on in a touring screamo group called “Ghost Acres.” Hard up for a show on the road between Nashville and Knoxville, we found them a basement outside Cookeville. Midway through their set, Erin, a pint of bourbon deep, jumped face first into the headstock of Owen’s guitar.

Dad, depressed and considering retirement, had recently taken up drinking chardonnay by the magnum. When he tended to Erin’s chin, I was the only sober person in the room, probably the only one who remembers it.

Four stitches and a half moon dimple.

Case 4: 2016, 8-inch chef’s knife

After my divorce, I needed a job close to my apartment, something to pay rent.

I’d quit teaching—had to, really—after my adult onset epilepsy diagnosis. The seizures, and the subsequent self-destructive behavior, created the divorce, like when you mush different colors of Play Doh and get that bruise shade of mud.

I went into work drunk and stoned. While washing dishes, I picked up a Shun Classic by the blade. When I looked down to see my hand covered with chunks of fish, cheese, and blood, I seized, then woke up in a booth with the manager saying my mom was on her way. Dad wasn’t driving anymore. Something was wrong with his heart—or so his doctor said—and he had these occasional dizzy spells.

Dad’s partner had bailed on buying the practice last minute, leaving him scrambling. His memory started slipping in ‘14. He sewed steady as ever. Under all that blood, the cut wasn’t as bad as it seemed, like an inch long paper cut. I couldn’t stop thinking about putting my Sheltie, Hero, down on that table, how she collapsed into my arms.

Two stitches and no scar.

Case 5: 2022, shower floor

My first seizure in a year. I fell in the shower and busted the back of my head. My girlfriend heard it. She walked me wet and addled with one blood soaked towel around my head and another around my waist, sat me in her truck and drove me to a human hospital.

Dad had died of Parkinson's ten months earlier; nothing was wrong with his heart.

The four stitches, scans, and drugs cost almost as much as my Dad's funeral.

Fifteen stitches and I'm not ready to talk about it.

And When You Found Him, What Did He Say?

James Hartman

The sky is the dim hue of shale, the air about to crust. It's cold but there's nothing else to do. Across the pebbled street from the baseball field no one uses, the perfectly circular pond is ringed by reeds that look like wheat but are something else. They sway in the breeze the same fluid way as a flock of synchronized starlings. But there are no starlings anymore. There's no breeze, either, and the pond is flat. My wooden bench is splintered in fifty nine different areas. The CATCH AND RELEASE sign stands like a sentry, but I've been coming here every day for the past four months and never seen anyone fishing.

So many corporations around the world manipulate their numbers. You'd be surprised by how corrupt our global business infrastructure really is. My job was to investigate any possible corruption in those numbers and report my findings to an independent third party. I relished performing my job, in thirty three countries, for seven and a half years. But I have lost all of that, too. Maybe that's why it feels right coming here, to this isolated and abandoned park. It sees in me what I see in it: everything that has been lost.

A guy in wading boots, with a tackle box and fishing rod, sits next to me. Apparently solitude is something else I have to lose, too. I turn away but the guy says, "C'mon," and I notice he keeps looking at a worm and the end of his fishing rod. He keeps trying to connect them but they won't affix. He keeps trying and trying. Then he looks at the pond, and slouches. "Well, shit."

Even if I could help, helping requires speaking, facial animation, and I can't do that anymore. What I have to do is close my eyes despite knowing it will not instill any sort of peace. Peace, I have learned, is a physiological deception, an ink blot that only creates a falsified result.

"You have any idea how to operate this thing? The instruction manual tells me to attach this worm to the hook at the end of this rod." The guy sighs like this is the most confounding idea he has heard in his life. "It should work, right? Or else why would this instruction manual tell me to do it?"

When the pain is this bad, I want to position a shotgun against my right cheek and liquidate my face. All the doctors, all the medications, all the procedures. You seek help for

yourself, you search for answers, and maybe you don't improve right away, fine, but you try and you try and you try to help yourself only for your condition to progressively deteriorate? As if to spite you? Tell me how that should make sense.

"I just wanna fish normally." The guy's voice hushes. "I thought this would be easy. Sure I can make fish suddenly appear but there's no meaning in that. Where's the mystery? I think of a specific fish and whattaya know, there it is. Big deal."

I thought I understood what it meant to have nothing left to lose. Why not try this, why not try that, my friends and family suggested. *Because you've got nothing else to lose.* Well, I followed their advice, and turns out there is always something more to lose, because the pain only concentrates, amasses, overwhelms. The pain always devastates and suffocates.

There's rattling and fidgeting and sighing and then a thump as if his hands collapsed on his thighs. "The instruction manual said, 'Easy to Follow.' Easy to follow! Can you imagine? And here I am!" He starts laughing.

I see people who smile and laugh so joyfully carefree, who obviously take these acts for granted, and it terrifies me how I can develop a strong yearning to smash their face and hope I have caused enough damage to induce my exact condition so they would understand, so maybe then they would stop calling me a freak.

"At least I'm not the only one. I saw a gentleman," the guy says, "who kept sticking a dollar into a vending machine only for the vending machine to keep spitting it out. He could not comprehend that he was putting the dollar in upside down." The guy laughs louder, like this is the funniest thing he has heard in his life.

And I open my eyes, against the pain. My hands have built huge fists and I can't feel them and that's not good.

"I mean, the effort is certainly there. He's trying, you know? But, for whatever reason, he does not notice the display above the slot that shows how the dollar must be inserted." The guy studies the fishing rod in his left hand, the worm in his right. "My problem is the opposite. I comprehend the directions, but I cannot execute them." He laughs like this is even funnier.

And I realize my huge fists are now lifting, poised, charged in the air. People have accused me of growing increasingly sarcastic, but it's a lackadaisical effort at sarcasm right now that prevents me from furiously pummeling the guy. "Why don't you just wade into the pond then," I say, "and catch the damn fish with your hands?"

The guy frowns. “Actually, there’s no fish in this pond. The city relocated them about a month ago, I believe, to another pond in another park that receives more visitors.”

I am so stunned and bewildered I don’t notice what my hands are doing. There is a serious elevation in pain, but what the guy said is so absurd I have to laugh and my laughter jolts multiple relentless blasts of electrical stabs that bounce throughout my entire face like massive fireballs. And yet I still lean over, and ask him, “What the hell are you trying to say then?”

The guy looks at me, and smiles. “I don’t know. What am I saying?”

Something for the Loneliness

James Hartman

“And her, well, everyone just calls her whore.” My roommate Joe, a kid half my age, told me this. I wanted to ask him why he was here but I wasn’t sure yet of the etiquette. From her room’s doorway she squiggled her fingers at me. “Dude,” Joe said, “she tried to come at her mom with a steak knife. Wanted to scoop her eyes out and play marbles. Food’s not bad here. Seriously. Regular hospital patients have it worse. Trust me, I know.”

In our room, Joe sat up straight on his bed. “Seriously, stay away from whore. She’s the craziest.”

I didn’t change into the gown. I got into the bed in my clothes.

Joe stared at me. “Why are you here?”

I rolled over the other way.

“That’s okay,” Joe said. “I know a suicide when I see one.”

She was in my group therapy session the next morning. She interrupted others by crisscrossing her arms into the air until the social worker finally nodded at her and she suddenly folded her hands primly on her lap as she explained why her mother had needed her eyes scooped out. “I was out of marbles,” she said. “To be exact, I was two short. Now, are eyeballs in the shape or are they not in the shape of marbles? What was I supposed to do? Scoop out my own eyeballs? I’m not crazy.”

The social worker nodded at me. When I didn’t speak, he said, “Do you still want to kill yourself?” When I still didn’t speak, he glanced at his legal pad. “You were diagnosed with atypical trigeminal neuralgia two years ago, a facial condition that causes arguably the worst physical pain a human being can experience.” He looked at me. “There’s no shame in feeling lonely.”

I didn’t answer.

“That’s fine. Just know the sooner you talk, the more progress you’ll make, and the more progress you make, the sooner you can leave.”

The girl tilted her head at me, and grinned.

I was walking to my room after receiving my medication at the nurse's station when I saw her in the doorway. She swayed like she was being tickled by a breeze. I stopped.

"Am I in your way?" she smiled.

I shrugged.

"I'll move if you tell me."

"Tell you what?"

"Don't play," she said, and, grinning a sly curl she dragged her neck in a circle. "I want to know what your face feels like."

"Like it's constantly being sliced and gashed apart."

She stopped swaying. "How often?"

"Almost every minute."

She carefully touched her fingers to her bottom lip. "Do you," she whispered, "wish you didn't feel it anymore?"

I backed away. Her grin was contorting. She gnashed her teeth together. Then she began howling. She howled all down the hallway as three male nurses carried her thrashing into her room.

That night the psychiatrist called me into his office. "You haven't been speaking in Group."

"I'm uncomfortable," I said.

"Why?"

"I think a girl wants to harm me."

The psychiatrist leaned forward. For the first time he emitted genuine interest. "Which girl?"

"The one everyone calls, you know."

He wagged a finger. "Jasmine, yes. If we switch her to Group B, will you be more open to speaking?"

"Yes," I said.

"Very well."

Joe shouted my name until I rolled over and faced him. "Seriously," he said, "she only has two moods. She wants to fuck you or she wants to harm you. Last month she almost broke

Marky's wrist after fucking him in the art therapy room. She went from fuck to harm in three seconds. You're best not to show her any interest at all. No one else does."

"Why are you here?" I asked.

He rolled over the other way. "Goodnight, Suicide."

She was still in my group. The social worker asked me to speak first, and I told him to go to hell.

After receiving my medication at the nurse's station, I saw her in the doorway to my room. She stopped swaying. Her hands dropped to her hips. "Where does it hurt? Show me."

Ignoring her might have enraged her even further. I swallowed hard. Then I said, "What's your favorite color?" Not knowing why. Maybe I felt bad that no one showed her any interest besides calling her whore.

She bared very gritted teeth. "*Show me now.*"

I pointed to my upper right cheekbone, to the bridge of my nose, to my upper left cheekbone, to both eyebrows, to both eyelids, to the skin between my two eyes, and to my forehead.

"Thank you," she said, and slowly padded down the hall, her hands clasped primly on her lower back.

I did not attend Group the next morning. As he was leaving, Joe told me to be careful. Coming back from the nurse's station, I saw her waiting for me in the doorway. She stopped swaying and grinned. One hand dropped to her hip. The other remained behind her back. I turned to run just as someone crushed my shoulders and heaved me into the room, pinning me against the wall. I blinked again and again, but it was still Joe's face I saw. He didn't look at me. I screamed and he clapped my mouth shut.

Clutched in the fingers of her other hand was a small orange handle, and attached to that a long glistening scissor blade.

"Hold him good," she said.

Joe elbowed me in the chest, and I lost complete breath.

Stepping closer, she raised the long glistening scissor blade.

And slashed her upper right cheekbone. Then she sliced the blade along the bridge of her nose, into her upper left cheekbone, across her eyelids, in between her eyes, and then she gashed straight up her forehead. Through all the showering blood she smiled at me, and as three male nurses dragged her away by her arms, she puckered her lips as if for a kiss, and mouthed, *Blue*.

The Marble Jar

Lucy Kulwicz

I

She eats chips for the both of us, her breath carrying a breeze of fried ooze, sitting in the armchair the hospice leave by my bed, telling me about universities she needs to apply for. Her fingers are rubbing my knuckles with her thumb, round and round on the ridge of the bone. She tells me how she found the jar of marbles we use to play with in the garage, filled with colours galore. She speaks as I watch her black hair singe against the dying light of the day, as the magpie sits patiently on the sill outside.

It has come each day this past week, sitting on my sill with a small draw string pouch it brings. Each visit, it knocks on the pane of glass until a small crack appears. The beak enters the crack, but doesn't push the whole way through. Then it recedes, drawing out of the glass a clear, thin strand, the texture of syrup, which is then rolled carefully between the tips of the beak, forming a small, translucent marble. The magpie will fly away with the pouch it has put the new marble in, the streak of indigo in its feathers leaving an imprint once I shut my eyes.

The first time the magpie came I tried to do the same. I weaved those gel-like glass strands between my fingers and rolled my own marbles. They never touched my skin, for they simply floated between each finger, swimming in and out, in and out, conducted by the air.

Now, I can see those very same marbles lined up for battle at the foot of my bed. She is younger now with the innocent rapture of a pup, and I wait for her to lead us ahead. I wait for a signal to lead the cavalry towards victory. Her tiny hands work quickly to reassure each marble with a tiny tap to the top of each. My, my, what a crusade, I tell her. Her small arm will sweep them across the carpet, her whole body lying on the floor to gain the upmost power, and smash the uniformed marbles to a charge. Some will bash against the base of the wardrobe, while others will trail off beneath the dark clouds with no stars. We won, she'll say, before gathering them all again for the next enclave.

She is concerned about their personalities, whether they are enjoying themselves. Once she borrowed her grandpa's chess board and placed each marble to a square with the delicacy of a patisserie chef. These are their cells, these are their homes, she told me considerately. But they look rather small homes, I asked. Each home may look small to us, she told me, but to them it is amazing. And they are all next door to their friends. Look at it Grandma!

I look through her and watch her stretch through time, now holding a gaze that still keeps those wild, glittering thoughts, even at seventeen. When she sits next to me again in the unpronounced chair, her eyes start to roll and come closer, dark brown glass orbs funnelling down a tube that leads me elsewhere. Her voice now thicker and hard to hear. She brought me a poem to read yesterday, but I insist on the marbles instead when she brushes my hair. I see her clearer as she was then, rather than as she is now. Dark hair rattles down her chest, and she is crowned by a white light that stabilises her outline. She twitches away from the window when the magpie comes, it taps on the window and collects what it must.

We always liked her hair long, pummelling in the wind with the net curtain like untied gauzes at the window, counting stars together instead of going to sleep. And sometimes we would roll a marble around in our hand, digging it in to see if we could find a bit that hurt in our palms. The sharp massage of the marble depending on its size. The ruby roundness of the larger ones, gobstoppers to break our teeth to.

But what if we tried this Grandma, she would say, placing one atop the other. What if we built a marble tower? Or build a house for them out of themselves? And I would feel shame I had not come up with this sooner. I tell her we should be careful, as we don't want to break any, and if any were to break and I was not in the room, she is to call my name. She is to keep her tentacles away. When the marble shatters it shatters its heart into a million pieces, and it cannot be replaced.

She visits today with chips, again. I can no longer eat but I can smell them. Vinegar cutting through the thin air quicker than the scratches on my lower back, crusted into bedsores. This dead skin a thin veil between where I am and where I am going to. I am surprised the birds from outside don't crash through the window to pick at my bones. I would go out and share

some chips with them, but I've heard it clogs up their throats. Still, we sit and talk about the painting opposite my bed. She tells me things, the scenes that are happening in it, the snow that has settled both in and out of the room. I tell her I would love some snow to suck on, and she laughs.

I tell her, if we are to build a house out of marbles for other marbles, won't they get tired? Surely they will need to be fed and looked after too. She looks at me quizzically, rolling a marble called Jupiter between her hand and the carpeted floor. She breathes as if to speak, then stops. Suddenly she exhales, bursting with pride, her bunches on either side of her head shaking with excitement. They can take turns Grandma, once they have been a wall in the house for a bit then they can go into the jar to rest, then they live in the house for a while before they become the house wall again. Her smile is as wide as her head. She goes on to say she will put some tissues in the jar so they can sleep, to rest properly. I tell her it is a brilliant idea.

We plot the walls with the marbles in a straight line. Once a marble feels tired, they are put to bed in the glass jar. Then a marble sleeping in the glass jar will wake up and become part of the household before working as a wall. Jupiter never works as a wall, he is too large, the size of a small satsuma with burnt oranges and crimson shades frozen in the glass. She places him in perpetual limbo, constantly in the living room having tea with a smaller marble called Ethel. Ethel is a quiet sea blue and has a small chip to the surface, so she isn't well enough to work as a wall, so often needs to rest in the jar. Do we think it is time for Ethel to rest, I ask. Oh yes please, she says, and places Ethel delicately in a wad of tissue into the base of the jar.

I am now chipped like Ethel, I tell her today. My back has a hole, a vertebrae disintegrated, gobbled by the leukaemia. I have to be propped on cushions for the pain not to be tremendous along with the morphine funnelled intravenously. I need a pillow folded in half to put pressure against the bit of my back which is missing. A finger can be placed in it, the hole has sucked in the skin. It could be a place for a small marble to find comfort, maybe for Ethel that hole shall be. As long as we keep Ethel inside, the hole in my spine, she won't be sick, they will not have to put her to work. It will keep her safe from the magpie who comes, who may well whisk her away, I tell the hands that tuck me in to bed that night.

Now she is taller she will read me things, poems of crags and heather. She will smell like a perfume I once wore, she will tell me that her mother is too stressed and she needs to learn her lines for the school play, to send her university applications off. She will smell of vinegar from the chips, I will smell her before I see her, and shoo the magpie at the window away. That's enough for today, I say. I draw circles on her palms when she rests her head on my shoulder. I cup her face like a conservator with their most prized marble sculpture. She, mine. I wish her to glisten always, and I feel her pulse when my fingers slip to the side of her neck, beating with blood.

I forget when we made each other cry.

II

Tonight, the magpie comes. It is the first time it has visited during the night. I must have drifted off, the dinner I didn't eat has been taken away and the lights in my room are off. The light from the hall dimly creeps under the door, making the solid things in the room known. Tucked beneath the wing with gashes of white feathers it brings out the pouch. Hello, old friend, I say with a wink. The magpie taps at the window as it has done each day before, and keeps tapping until the crack appears. He draws out the glass in its melted form, and rolls the substance in its beak until it is a perfect glass ball. It tries to fit the marble into the pouch, but it is full this time, and slowly takes them all out carefully, lining them up on the window sill outside. I count seven. Are these for me, I ask, as the bird sits facing the garden between us and the road, leaving the marbles on the sill in the frozen cold.

She is younger again, asleep beside me, a small body curled with her lashes swept against my arm. I stroke her hair, French plaited on the scalp, and slowly scratch beneath her ear, trying to wake her in the gentlest way. She stirs with a slow smile. I ask her to go fill up the glass jar on my bedside table with the marbles left outside on the windowsill. They are ours now, I tell her, and we don't want to lose them. She tells me that her Mum won't let her go outside on her own yet, so we must go round together. She gets my slippers ready and brings me over my dressing gown. There is snow on the ground so we have to be careful, she tells me judiciously.

She puts the glass jar in my hand and we begin our journey together, her hand leading me out of the room.

The dirty pink carpet of the hospice is swallowed by the darkness of the night, a deep blue sea casting perspective trickery. I have the warmth of her small hand in my left, the right firmly gripping the jar. She walks slowly with me, yet is firm to keep our pace purposeful, with an even glide through the night. I follow this eager creature before me, her head below my hip line, burrowing through the dark. We must be quiet, she tells me. I tell her it's ok, I am with her. We don't want to wake up anybody sleeping, but there is nothing to worry about, we won't be getting in trouble.

Outside the snow is perfectly blanketed, the earth glazed with a soft glow from the moon charged with a pink blossom. The road is silent beyond the railings, tenderly dusted with crystallised mounds. Our steps are the first to break the fresh snowfall. She takes the glass jar from my hand and whisks ahead, her tiny feet disappearing into the woollen ground, mine stuttering behind. It is so silent, her mouth is moving and yet all I can see is the warm glimmers of her eyes, and then the balancing gestures of her hands with her arms stretched wide as a bird's wing span, parading before me in a glorious march to where the magpie sits.

Perched on the outer sill of my window, it is a shadow in the snow, their black eyes glistening into mine. Seven marbles for seven days, laid in a neat row, each cushioned by the pillow of snow. She rushes up to them with a soft skip, and begins to place each marble, one by one, in the jar, making sure each one goes in softly, lovingly, with care and grace. I watch her meticulously secure the lid, her fingers tightening it with the might of a storm. The magpie watches from the sill behind as she hands the jar over to me, and then it hops to rest on her shoulder, stroking her cheek with its beak.

I look at the jar and look at her. We have all our marbles in a row, I say, before she reminds me there are seven for a secret never to be told, placing the marble jar in my hand, smiling cheekily before walking into the sheet of snow where the horizon is clustered with trees. I look at the marble jar with joy, waiting for the secret to unfold.

Come, she says, spinning round to look at me with such content, her deep brown eyes blackening against the snow. Her hair feathers out of the plait into indigo encrusted wings, reaching towards me.

The Pauline Poems

Blake Leland

The North Shore I

That Fall and Winter before Dad got sick
We took a lot of day-trips to the coast—Marblehead,
Gloucester, Rockport—long Saturdays
In the station wagon. Never the two of them
Off alone, always the six of us:
The Father and Mother, the Boys, the Girls,
A basket of sandwiches wrapped in foil
And a whiffle-ball bat to make us behave.

We liked best to go just after a storm
When the waves, humped black in the distance,
Turned green-gray rolling in,
Lifting and breaking, one after another,
On shelves of scored stone, filling the wind
With foam and with thunder—salt
In our hair, on our lips, on the lids of our eyes,
Closed as we dozed in the dark car riding home.

Hawaii or *Metastasizing Melanoma*

The ambulance came around 10 am.
They brought him in on a stretcher and set him on the bed in the bedroom.
He wanted to come home, once,
before he died.

I saw that it was no longer difficult to lift him up,
and didn't know what to think or feel.

It was mid-May.
The day was beautiful, fresh, all the windows open.
The breeze blew white curtains into the room
and the sound of kids playing in the neighborhood.

I was 14 (almost), the elder son.
I sat in the little room with him and his Uncle Al.

There were cuttings of forsythia in a tall glass,

his bones under the clean sheet,

the open windows.

He asked me to get the encyclopedia, to read to him
the article on *Hawaii*, beginning with the capital, the latitude and longitude,
and then on, word for word.

So there was my voice in the room.

I didn't get far, maybe to a list of the different kinds
of palm trees rustling like the curtains in the breeze, and he was sleeping.

Uncle Al said that I should go and play. I did.

All my father ever wanted
was to lie on a beach

in the sun.

The Summer Of Love

My mom went crazy when my father died.
Not all at once; it took about a year.
She'd done what Nuns had taught her:
Offered it up; held her tears in.

A little later, when she learned to drive,
She cruised, with my Aunt Ruth, the big motels
Along Route 9—dim bars done up in red and black,
Full of salesmen, full of love.

Before she came to run through red and stop on green
Or thought to show the doctor she could fly,
She knew that Love is All, All is Love, and Heaven's
Where the body tingles, glistens—there

At the lips—or where she'd tossed
Laundry from the hamper on the floor and told
Neighbor ladies, come for coffee or for haircuts:
“This is Heaven. These are clouds.”

She knew that what you want and what you need
Are just the same. Not that they ought to be, they are!
And told her four children to believe,
To live with her in Heaven here and now, or leave.

I thought that should be true, but at the time
I was 15, Detroit was burning on TV:
I walked out of Paradise, afraid,
And sat a dazed afternoon in the backyard shed.

My little sister, Leslie, found me there:
“Come have supper, Mum went out.”
And I played *Sgt. Pepper's* on the stereo:
“Picture yourself in a boat on a river...”

Then a Handsome Policeman took her away.
And her father came when she was gone,
Made fish-eyed stew and sent us to bed,
While they taught my mother, finally, to be sad.

Blue Christmas

After a loony month in the nuthouse
Where they told her "Work is Health!"
She mopped the floors every day,
Smoked a lot of cigarettes,
And tried not to let us see or hear her
When she wept. But the house was small.

Even so, we were kids; the thing that mattered was
That she was home.
How could we know that manic fire
Had made a charcoal of her skull,
That her heart, quick once
In rhythms of bliss, ticked now
Like a drugstore clock?

We watched her scrub the off-white tiles—
Linoleum squares flecked with gold—
Until the black goo that held them down
Began to ooze around their edges,
Filling all the ashtrays up.

And soon it would be Christmas!

For us a clutch of things that glittered
And were new; for her
A widow's business in the weeping dark—
Something more for her to do
At the far end of December,
To make that cramped house compose itself
About some wreaths and candles, lights
Low or off, fire in the fireplace,
And in the windowed corner that faced the street
A masterpiece, a Christmas tree: a spruce,
Dense-bristled, five feet high,
Tight-packed branches lifted up,
Trimmed in big blue velvet ribbons
Dipped in starch to make them stiff,
Oversize round ornaments
Closely wrapped with slick blue thread—no tinsel—
A few strings of ghost-blue lights
That shone as if they weren't quite there
But somehow there and somewhere else.

And beside it the crèche my father made,
With a star-head comet carved of wood
Nailed to the front of the peak of the roof.

The North Shore II

After the madhouse she drove there alone,
Coming back late, or stayed overnight;
Then Sixteen, Fifteen, Twelve and Ten
Were up past all bedtimes, while she was with him
On a beach, in the wind, facing the sea,
The sunset behind them, and later, dinner
At a diner in Gloucester, and then
Combing sand from their hair
In some Driftwood Motel.

He was tall as my father, almost as handsome,
Wiser, older, and married with kids.
There must have been rumors. We didn't hear them.
All that we knew was our mother seemed better.
Then one day he died, without any fuss, sudden
And smiling. And his widow came veiled
Down the aisle of the church, where she stopped
To give my mother one red rose—
My mother was right. She was right about Love.

Throwing Her Life Away

Alice didn't throw her life away by smoking, drinking, marrying multiple times, moving from job to job, or even one apartment or trailer to another like her relatives had. She somehow escaped that cycle of poverty and stupidity, had escaped bad genetics, and avoided poor choices, but when she listed their house for sale after her husband died, it zapped her energy when her realtor gave her lessons on freshening paint, upgrading landscaping, and decluttering items collecting dust throughout the house. She quivered and felt uncomfortable. Going through items, Alice became acutely aware of how much time had passed, how life seemed to pick up steam and head down the mountain like a runaway train.

Some things were kept and packed away in boxes for her adult children or grandchildren, but truth be known, this action simply postponed throwing away her life and passed the burden to them. Alice knew the inevitable destination was the trash dump on land that would one day be recycled for a subdivision with HOA fees, a pool, sidewalks, and gas lights. Throwing away the other items of her life, Alice boxed or bagged for a Goodwill donation. She hoped for a tax write-off that likely wouldn't come because of tax codes constantly revised to help the richest and penalize the poor and middle class.

When Alice finished, she got in her car, drove across town, and over the bridge. She pushed the electric button to lower her window, and she breathed the salty ocean air. When she pulled into the garage, she went inside, and spooned out some dry dog food for her old miniature Schnauzer Sam who she mused looked like her late husband with his untamed eyebrows, over the top lip mustache, and goatee.

"I'm gonna take you to the groomer," she said, and Sam barked. She figured he knew what that word meant just like he knew the words "walk" and "outside" when she said them, and he wagged and barked.

Chamber Man

Flying by the seat of his pants, just like the origin of the phrase from pilots in fog without instrumentation, Parker felt comfortable and didn't panic when he spoke to groups in the region or prospective businesses looking to relocate for free land and infrastructure in exchange for a few hundred jobs above minimum wage. He felt good, not because he knew what to say but because he had memorized a few key positive points that he shared over and over. The key points were half-truths, like a freshman's research paper that doesn't address the opposition or counterpoints to seal the deal. Questions and concerns were avoided or dismissed like a politician, but Parker was so good at it, people who didn't know any better believed him and those who did know better were jealous they couldn't do it as well.

Skinny jeans, fashionable paisley button downs, dress shoes with tennis shoe soles, flashy socks, small-frame cat eyeglasses, and firm hold hair gel all helped present a senior nearing graduation to social security combined with 401k payouts and a consulting deal with other Chamber men and women to move forward in time with style. Parker's administrative assistants, who his board referred to as Parker's angels, not because they were beautiful like Charlie's but because they took care of him, kept him organized, and made sure he took his medication and ate well. They even made up a jingle about him they didn't share with him: "Cham-ber man, Cham-ber man, doing the best Cham-ber man can."

Parker was the only person in the community driving a convertible Miata whose hair didn't blow in the wind, and he trusted citizens would obey traffic laws when he entered the roundabout, circling left, but the paper mill plant that operated just outside of the town limit on the river had a truck driver who didn't see the yield sign and slammed into the Miata, the tires of the truck went right over the front and back of the Miata and pushed it to the stop sign facing the opposite direction. Fire fighters figured he was a goner when they arrived on the scene of the flattened Miata, but they were thrilled to pull him from the wreckage with no injuries, save the soiled skinny jeans.

One of the angels picked him up, drove him to his house to change, and he drove the Chamber's car until he bought another Miata. Many folks asked Parker how he survived, and he simply responded "Survivor's survive. That's what we do."

Things Not to Do When Running Away from the Halfway House

1. Do not wear a fluorescent orange ball cap.

The fluorescent orange ball cap was noticed by the woman in her office through her peripheral vision; otherwise, she wouldn't have noticed him trying to open trunks and car doors of employees' cars in the parking lot, and she wouldn't have called security.

2. If you are going to steal a golf cart, do not steal the security staff's golf cart.

Security guards do not think like cops, and the guard who left the key in the golf cart may get written up by Human Resources. The suspicious fellow in the fluorescent orange ball cap jumped into the security cart and took off on the side street. No one knew if he looked in either direction before running the stop sign of the main street artery through downtown, but by then, security had called the police who chased him, albeit slowly. Even though he stomped the pedal to the floorboard in the golf cart, with blue lights flashing and sirens wailing behind him, he crashed into a second police car that pulled in front of him to stop him. The golf cart left a dent in the door.

3. If you are being arrested for choices you made, then do not curse the police, call them names, resist arrest, and spit in their faces.

The police officers knew he was a runaway juvenile from the halfway house a block away from where he stole the golf cart, but in addition to theft, assault (from ramming the police car), they added simple assault charges for spitting in their faces and resisting arrest.

They didn't have charges for the screaming and cursing, and bystanders who thought it was humorous seeing the police chase a golf cart should have stayed inside their homes instead of gawking from the sidewalks since they might be hauled to court as witnesses.

in the blood

What's in the blood can never be erased
unless all the blood is emptied from our veins
And sometimes
 sitting in a cooling bath
 bled by life
 we're tempted to do just that

What's in the blood sings and surges
with what was told to us
 shown to us
 sung to us in the before
Before thought
 before words
 before willful
 autonomy that convinced us
 that mind alone
 knows better

Mind over matter
 mind over blood
 and kin
 and connection

beached high
 and dry
 bleached
in an ivory tower
 in a city on a hill

But we can't escape the blood

What's in the blood
 sings and surges yet
 though we try to still it
when it pounds too loudly in our ears,
 whistles urgent alarms and rages

What's in the blood
 red river of salt
 sea of tears
 torrents of sweat

Can human hubris liberate us
from primordial origins
or are we inescapably tied to the sea
that sighs and surges within us all
rising and falling
As the ocean rising and falls
to eternal circuits of sun and moon.

What's in the blood
what's in the blood
what's in the blood

BE STILL!
And listen.

smoke song trilogy

i. daddy o

Sing me smoke-smudged eyes
bottomless pits
yearning under a shock of black hair
deep brown pools tempting even the wary
to caress the love curl on a blue-veined brow.

Sing me ink-stained fingers, nicotined nails
stray tobacco shred on full red lip
with a sardonic twist to the right
and a tongue that knows its business
is not the talking kind.

Cool, Daddy, cool, the Dad I never knew
the one I improvised out of shadows
of the hollowed-out husk
who was there but not there.

Sing me a story of silence
cloaked in mothers' excuses and wives' laments
burying memories of American barbed wire and Hiroshima ash
in the stale perfume
on the powdered necks of Tokyo bar girls.

Little girl me hides under the stairs
reading, reading into the night
hiding in silence and speculation
spinning hopeful connections of gossamer
webbing together unasked questions
with silken threads of hope.

I tried to touch you, Dad.
singing both parts of a one-way duet
the praise you never heard
the love you almost felt.

But oh, Daddy oh, who remembers now
how far a pack of Luckies
and black-market nylons
could get a guy.

ii.

smoke signals

Long, white and pure
a kind of male totem
“I’m grown up like Dad,”
the cigarette proclaims.
“Inhaling the manhood that
girls are denied.”

Sucking in confidence,
feeling grown up like him.
surveying the world
through smoke-slit eyes
slouching my hips
in casual mastery.

Now I was old enough to flout death
and court it at the same time.
I didn’t know at fifteen that
Dad didn’t master death at all.
He flew from life
sucking mini deaths at the end
of a long white tube
going unconscious just for a second
whenever life was too much.

Each flare of the match
hastening the day of his liberation.

iii.

daddy's girl

"You're just like your dad," my cousins said
"So smart, always with your nose in a book."
While they sneaked out for ice cream or
bowling with friends, I wrapped myself in virtue
crouched under the stairs scouring the pages
for ancient wisdom to solve present puzzles.

When does love become a leash?

"Don't be stupid!"

"You don't want to end up like those bums."

"Careful! You're gonna fall."

Stainless-steel links in a choke-chain
that separates the well-owned
from the nameless mongrels of the street.

Of all the family, my dad was the one who made it
out of back alleys and into success
spit-shined and Brasso'd, perfectly creased shirts
roaming the world—and at ease in none of it.

But in the end, he went to back to the home gang
that used to squat on their haunches
shooting craps in skid row
Life was a gamble—whether chasing rank on foreign soil
or dead-end jobs in the old hometown.

By the time I learned the secret
that first flamed Dad's six-year old cheeks with shame,
it was too late for me
marinating in fear
exiled from the ordinary
condemned forever to a lack of innocence.

the summer of scabby knees

Fool's gold glints in gravel beneath the clotheslines.
Starved sheets fluttering in the wind
will dry harsh and stiff,
rubbing raw a child's restless legs.
Black and buzzing flies drone near the outhouse
refracting cyan, magenta and gold in the new light.

The little girl trips while chasing butterflies.
When she wails, her mom yanks her upright
inspects the broken flesh
the first bright drops of red.
"Be careful, I told you!
Why can't you watch where you're going!"

"Be careful, I told you! Why! Can't you!
Watch where you're going!"

Is this what love sounds like?

lies we told ourselves

*Raw does not bleed
Is not red except in our imagination
In actual fact, no one even noticed.*

*Feeling flayed, frozen in the headlights
Pinned in public by private humiliations
Everyone is laughing*

*There are no flies in a sanitized world
Sores discreetly swathed in gauze
in actual fact, no one even noticed.*

*It's only the insides that suppurate
Silently leaking ancient wounds
Everyone is laughing.*

*In actual fact, no one even noticed.
Everyone is laughing.
We can, too.*

Finally.

The Sleepless Man

Jeff Hazlett

A warm midsummer twilight lingered across the plains of northern Nebraska. In the small town of Augustana, the courthouse clock chimed nine times, echoing through the quiet streets and out into the growing darkness.

Parents called in their children and waited on porch swings, sipping a lemonade or gently pulling on an evening cigar to cap the day. Families welcomed the comfort of the night after a turn of hard work or rambunctious play and, once inside, would soon slide into restful beds and drift effortlessly to sleep.

Far away from everything and surrounded by an endless sea of prairie grass and flint rock buttes, Augustana boasted tree lined streets, cozy homes enveloped by shady canopies and summers on the lake. Days were filled with casual conversation and easy laughter. The weekly newspaper, *The Gazetteer*, always sold out whenever there was news of Princess Josephine, Mrs. Idleman's cow, who would frequently get loose and saunter a determined four blocks to eat watermelons from the backyard garden of Pastor Mills. Bless him, he never complained.

This summer evening, Toby Dawson sat on the front porch of his simple Augustana home. He sipped, with the careful measure of lips and tongue, his own lemonade and resisted the growing urge to check his watch. With all his will, he waited and listened for the courthouse clock to chime ten times.

This was his well-worn ritual. He strained to hear the collection of creaking machinery that had measured time for nearly a century. Each metallic click of the minute hand advancing felt like an answered prayer. He tortured himself with the effort, tortured himself until ten chimes would set his mind at ease and let him know – never quickly enough – that it was time to go to work.

He waited. He listened. He sat his half-empty glass of lemonade down on a side table and he let his eyes close to increase his concentration, to increase his focus. He breathed deeply and slowly, his eyes still closed, his head tilting – on its own, it seemed – to one side, setting his good ear toward the town square.

Then he thought he heard his phone ringing in the living room – ringing faint at first, so faint he thought perhaps it was a neighbor's phone, but then louder and more insistent.

Somehow, then, the receiver in his hand and at his ear.

"The C shift is canceled tonight, Dawson," a voice said. "Koosman told me to call you."

He didn't remember even saying *hello*.

"Oh," he said. The news hit him hard. The graveyard shift was his savior and his sanctuary. "Is he there? Is Mr. Koosman there? Isn't there something I can come in to do? Maybe prep the barrel line with supplies for the morning crew?"

"No one's there," the voice said. "The place is already locked up."

Strange, he thought. *So strange. And who was that on the other end?*

He found himself back outside. He stood on the front porch for a moment. In the distance, the courthouse clock chimed ten times.

Ten already? he wondered. *That went fast.*
He stepped off the porch and took off into the night.

#

Toby lived at the end of Monroe Avenue, next to the ravine that ran the length of Augustana, along the eastern side of town, and separated his neighborhood from the rail line and the surrounding pasture. The ravine was a world unto itself. Hedged with dogwood and franklin and crabapple trees, and always humming with the sound of insects and creatures, during the humid months of summer the ravine sometimes smelled like a primordial stew of life itself.

Off his porch and out of his yard, he turned to the ravine for a moment, long enough to let his eyes catch sight of the busy and brilliant world of countless fireflies as they moved through the air.

It's going to be a long night, he thought. *Could I, if I stood here long enough, count a hundred fireflies? A thousand?*

Through the soles of his shoes, he felt the sidewalk pavement radiate the remainder of the day's heat. It spurred him to pick up his feet and turn back to the heart of the neighborhood and toward town square.

Mr. Koosman, his foreman and shift supervisor, lived in that direction. He and his family lived in a bungalow near 5th Street and Adams, just a few blocks away. For Toby, it was a familiar nighttime walk.

After all, he was the Sleepless Man.

He had wandered the streets of his hometown many nights, staving off the thing he feared the most, counting his steps, counting sidewalk cracks, counting by moonlight the black walnuts fallen from the treasured trees on the schoolhouse grounds.

Did Mr. Koosman's house have three hundred and fifty-seven bricks in the walk leading to its front porch? Or was it three hundred sixty-seven? Toby could not remember.

Mr. Koosman was an okay guy and okay to work for, especially considering he was the owner's son. As long as Toby showed up on time, did his job and kept out of the way, Koosman left him alone. Toby had no complaints. And he liked the work. It was simple and mindless. Nuts go into cardboard boxes. Bolts go into wooden barrels. Seal the boxes, easy. Seal the wooden barrels, not so easy but, after some time, you develop a skill for it.

He counted the graveyard shift as a blessing. He slept through his shift in his own way, letting his mind rest while his body performed the work.

#

He didn't name himself the Sleepless Man. The local paper did that.
One night, someone reported hearing footsteps on their sidewalk.

“They went back and forth,” they said. “Back and forth.”

Another night, someone reported hearing footsteps crunching across their leaf-covered yard.

“And it wasn’t Princess Josephine,” they said. “It was a man.”

Just by chance, someone spotted him out one night and from a distance snapped a few photos. They showed up in *The Gazetteer*, blurry and unhelpful, nothing that anyone could use to identify him.

The photo caption caught some attention, though: *Sleepless Man Checks the Time at Courthouse Clock*.

For a few nights, people bolted their doors and left their porch lights on. In time, the concern faded but the name stuck. Whenever there was an odd noise at night and Princess Josephine was found the next morning safe in her pen, then it must have been the Sleepless Man.

#

He stood in front of Mr. Koosman’s house for a while. The lights were off and the house quiet. He imagined everyone already asleep, not just here but everywhere across town, and he wondered at the miracle of it all.

Sleep, the source of all his fear.

Others welcomed it, relished it even – while he succumbed only at odd times and in odd places. He had no memory of ever sleeping through the night.

Suddenly, he noticed a light come on from where Jenny Marks lived, across the street and a few doors down from Mr. Koosman’s house. The light escaped through the crack between the two swing doors at the end of her sunken driveway. Jenny worked at the nut and bolt plant, too, in payroll during the day shift.

Toby felt himself float to a spot where he could peek through the crack and into Jenny’s basement. Jenny was what some of the fellows called a smoke show . . . with a strong dose of girl next door. Just out of school, she caught the eye of every guy in town. Curvy and with a luxurious head of long, jet black hair, Jenny nevertheless felt approachable. He loved seeing her drive through town in her old rag top Corvair, blasting country music like she was running for office and trying to turn out the vote.

He heard water running and peeked through the crack. Then on the inside something moved back and forth across the crack between the two swing doors. Something big. It breathed hard and its footsteps sounded out a menacing heaviness. He jumped back, then leaned in to peek again. He could see. Then not see. See. Then not see.

From Jenny’s driveway, he felt himself floating up and up and up into the night sky, hovering over the neighborhood and moving here and there above Augustana. He wondered at this new power, which felt completely natural, as he flew to the town square and landed.

The courthouse clock chimed three times. *But he noticed that the hands still said ten o’clock.*

“Shame on you,” said someone from behind him, a woman’s voice.

“What?” he asked.

“Shame on you,” she said. “I saw what you were doing.”

It was Princess Josephine. She had been munching on some grass behind one of the town square benches. “You’re a peeping Tom, young man,” she said. “I saw you in Jenny’s driveway, peeking into her house. Shame on you. And people get on me for eating a few watermelons. I should tell on you and turn you in. Or at least tell Jenny to pull those swing doors tighter together.”

“Hell,” Toby said. “It’s not like I . . . I mean, I’m not even sure how I got there. Please.”

Toby could not explain himself.

They stood there staring at each other for a moment. Princess Josephine’s tail whisked back and forth a few times, though Toby doubted there were any flies to swat away at night.

“So you’re the Sleepless Man,” Princess Josephine said.

Her voice sounded familiar, but he could not remember ever hearing her speak before.

“That must be rough,” she went on. “I love sleeping. Standing up. Laying down. Trouble is, I don’t really need all that much sleep, not as much as people, anyway. So what am I supposed to do all night except get into trouble?”

There was something comforting in her voice and in the conversation itself.

“How long have you been unable to sleep, young man?” she asked.

He heard, faintly, the courthouse clock chime four times. He turned to look at the clock. *The hands still said ten o’clock.*

“You can call me Toby,” he said, turning back. “Toby Dawson. As long as I remember, I’ve been afraid to go to sleep. Just afraid. I’ve talked to people about it. Doctors and such. They were all full of shit. Just telling me stuff I could read on the internet, like I just had insomnia or something. Go to bed at a consistent time, don’t drink caffeine. What a load.”

“It’s actually a fear isn’t it?” she asked. “Like when I think I hear coyotes in the ravine. Tough to go to sleep then, I tell you.”

“Yes!” he said, “That’s exactly it! Like hearing coyotes in the ravine and being afraid to go to sleep. I drove to Lincoln to see a psychologist a couple weeks ago. She made some sense. She said it was a fear of losing control, of not being in control of what goes on around me while I’m sleeping. That somehow I fear something bad is going to happen. She called it something.”

“Somniphobia,” said Princess Josephine.

“That’s right,” he said, wondering for a moment how in the world a cow might come to know such a word without ever wondering how a cow might come to speak at all.

Princess Josephine seemed to be thinking then, carefully contemplating one thing or another that might pop into a cow’s mind. Perhaps she was thinking of Pastor Mill’s watermelons or the crabapples laying around down by the ravine. Toby hoped she might have another good word or two for him.

“Let me walk you home,” she said. “Before the clock chimes six times. Along the way, you can tell me what this person down in Lincoln told you to do.”

From there they began walking back to Toby’s house.

For Toby, it felt, almost, like they were holding hands. But they weren't of course. He started picturing Jenny Marks again and, when he did, Princess Josephine seemed to know it and gave him a side-eye glance and a loud moo to bring him out of it.

Toby feared she would wake someone.

Walking along, he told her about some of the advice offered by the gal in Lincoln. How to focus on externals. How trying to fight off fear only increases it. How to let the fear come and let it go without any thought or comment.

They were walking still, but Princess Josephine said nothing. She just listened.

It felt peaceful. And, unburdened, Toby wasn't worried about a thing.

#

A car horn. A cow mooing. A car horn. A cow mooing. A car horn that sounded like a cow mooing. Toby struggled to rouse himself. *Who rigs their car horn to sound like a cow mooing?* he thought. *Did I float off and land in Omaha or something?*

He sat up and found himself on his front porch swing.

A turquoise blue Ford pickup sat in his driveway, engine running. A classic Ford F100 from the sixties. His boss's truck. Mr. Koosman's truck. The driver side door was open and Koosman was standing there in his driveway, reaching into the truck cabin and honking the horn.

"What happened to you, Dawson?" he asked. "Where were you?"

Toby had no idea what he was talking about. Trying to get up, he knocked his half-finished lemonade off the side table and onto the porch floor.

"You missed your shift!" Koosman said. "What do you have to say for yourself?"

Strange. What about that call? A prank call? An imagined call?

This experience was new to him. Waking up after a deep sleep, coming out of a confusing dream, trying to remember it before it disappeared into a fog and rubbing his eyes open to the earliest sunrise of the year.

"Sorry," he said. "I must've . . . fallen asleep."

Toby said nothing else. He knew Koosman was an okay guy, so he stayed silent and counted on his good nature and the fact that he'd never screwed up before.

"Moooooooooooo," came the word from Princess Josephine. She was munching on some crabapples near the ravine, not far from Toby's front yard. "Moooooooooooo."

Koosman and Toby looked at her and then back at each other.

"What would you think," Toby said, with a surprising calm, "about putting me on the day shift? And giving me another chance?"

He waited on an answer and knew it might mean the start of something new.

Koosman mumbled an okay, with a look that expressed a warning, told him to show up Monday morning for the A shift and took off.

Toby sat there for a moment and thought about what he'd just experienced. A night's sleep. Outdoors, no less, where anything could have happened. But nothing did. He looked over at Princess Josephine and laughed.

“The coyotes didn’t get me,” he said. “At least not last night. And that’s a start.”

He walked over to the friendly brown and white cow that everyone in town loved.

“Let me walk you home, Princess,” he said, gathering up a few crabapples to entice her along. “It’s the least I can do.”

As they started off, he heard clearly the familiar courthouse clock chime six times.

DOMESTICITY

Angry father drives the car tonight.
Make yourself small. The dark

well of the backseat may protect you.
When he turns hard, you'll fall

into the light.
A traitor moon

numb.
No trick,

no truck, no way
to shave off.

Angry fathers drive other cars too.
They swerve, cut over lanes.

Swift curses. Other children duck
under blankets, out of view. Stay still.

Don't beg. Any sound from you
will pull bullets out of a hat

like a gag, a joke
grown-ups get.

Father forgets after
the ride is over. Mother wails

and beats her own breast bloody
as mothers do.

THE DEEP DISTRACTION OF YOUR ABSENCE

At the end of the island, water
descends a mile into a cavern.

At the train
station a man's head disappears into
his body's shadow.

Underfoot, the yellow
honey locust leaves slide, tip a balance
not recovered.

Overhead, the droop
of a power line checks navigation.

Even the pause
strays, without interruption.

CALLOW FELLOW

Pop songs on the radio. So many car crashes. From the dashboard, high voices swooned over dead boyfriends. “Johnny Angel,” sweet circle pins of loss. First pangs of breakups felt as death but not final, smashed inside, but yet not tragic.

Other songs brought me into death, in minor keys, the dragging steps of older men. *It was a very good year. Try to remember that time.* September curve of notes ceremonial somehow and yet no ceremony at all, just notes with what the words withheld. Leaked from the pinprick holes, they pressed against my chest.

AM in the car. When we stopped short, my mother thrust out her arm to hold me back—doubling the strap. Ahead, she must have seen him faintly, beckoning from the verge.

SPARTA

Spring 1968: in the red VW bug, AM radio plays *Oh-wo-why do you fill me up, Buttercup, baby, just to let me down, mess me around*. I'm bouncing in the bucket seat, the passenger side, up front, where ankles burn. My mother, never moving her eyes from the road, flicks the knob. "Filthy," she says. Puzzled, I mull it over. How? The woman would have to be Buttercup, but he without a cup has been filled up. A kind of war of shapes. A mess. That's as far as I can get.

I get farther in the battle that runs over the board at school, where all our photos are pinned along a corkboard road. My merits keep me near the front. I'm the lead Athenian. Kimberly Martin, the smartest, is first but she's a Spartan. Thin and fast. In June, I'll become *strategos*, but I don't know this now, thickening here in the car behind my own lenses. Tired of uniforms, Kimberly Martin leaves St. Simon's the next year. The year after, at public school, she gets pregnant. I win a scholarship to Ladywood, where the gray blazers bear a shield on the pocket, with LWA stitched in pink.

Decades later, at a bar mitzvah, the guy sitting next to me says, "It's *Build Me Up, Buttercup*" when I sing along, rocking in my chair. I'm trim now, but he doesn't ask me to dance.

UNTITLED [OUR MOTHER DIED LAST NIGHT]

“Our mother died last night”

is a simple declarative sentence. Nothing
to confuse, nothing to interfere with bare
comprehension. Yet what could it possibly mean?

The plate screwed into her gone jawbone
made tough enough
to stand the final fire.

GHOST BABY

Nina Schuyler

When the baby-faced doctor looked at them with sad, liquidy eyes, Maeve and Leo felt a deep bond with him as if they might all go have a drink at the morose Clive's Bar on the corner. But the knot was abruptly severed when the doctor began filling the room with cold clinical verbiage--nonviable, fetal resportion, organogenesis...

Those child-like teeth—how old was he, anyway? For some reason, the room became scalding hot as if to fight off the storm of frigid words. Leo stood wide-eyed, sweating, and Maeve sat paralyzed on the white crinkly paper, staring at the faded poster on the wall of the Heimlich maneuver: a young man behind a woman, his arms around her waist, the woman folded over like a dried-out flower.

Out the window was a cheerfully empty blue sky, strange for Seattle in May, but they didn't see it or the doctor who left the room. A door opened, closed, and the man would forever try to dislodge whatever was stuck inside the woman.

Oh, Henrik, Maeve whispered to her emptied-out womb, feeling her inner architecture collapse, the post and beams and drywall.

They'd fought for six months over the baby's name. Maeve was sure it was a boy because a son walked through her dreams, a funny, mischievous, smart, kind, silly boy who would blow up their world in a mostly good way. Henrik, they'd decided, with its European flair, hoping it was outside the realm of American male violence. Europe had an even longer history of violence, argued Leo (full name Leonardo Antonio Rossi), but she'd already fallen in love with the name and for twelve weeks, held daily conversations with Henrik, telling him about the world, leaving out the bad parts as any good mother would do.

A glossy pamphlet in her hand. The whir of a machine. An industrial clock, tick-tock. The atmosphere smelled of hand sanitizer and ruin. The woman, Maeve knew, was forever folded in half.

Somehow, she got off the table, somehow they were in their old Volvo car, muffler grumbling, the busy world whizzing by, carrying on as if it was an ordinary sunny Tuesday. A billboard blasted Time for a Face Lift, Romance at a Hilton Hotel, Casino! Take a Risk! and then into the zone of cement. Leo drove with both hands gripping the wheel as if the car might decide to ram into a meter.

At a stop light, Leo turned to her. I love you, he said, his neck artery throbbing. What does one say at a time like this? He was doing his best; he was only twenty-eight years old, and his major life setback was failing biology in his junior year at college. In fifteen minutes, Leo had aged a decade, lines carved his forehead, the beginning of a cold sore, his hair like patches of blown wheat. We'll get through this, he said. We're together and that's what matters.

She nodded. Meaning was gone—what did he mean?

He didn't know what he meant, only that he needed to fill the suffocating cavity of the car that smelled of sour milk and illness. No fair, he wanted to shout. Why them! This morning they had been in a happy bubble, a routine doctor's visit, but now they were in a place with scant oxygen and menacing trees. He started to cry and the light turned green. For a moment, the world let them be, but then the cars behind them honked, first a tap, then louder, longer, angrier.

Jesus, shouted Leo, and slammed his foot on the gas, the tires squealed as they shot through the intersection, a puff of blue smoke and burnt tire smell. Maeve's head was tossed back. Adrenaline rubbed shoulders with excitement at the possibility of death, and that, to Maeve, seemed the only answer.

At home, she staggered into their bedroom and threw herself on the bed, which whispered it would never let her go, not ever. It was all right with her. Leo brought her a tall glass of lemon water. Oh shit, he said and turned to take it away, but she wanted it, she must have lemon water. And lemon slices and alternating handfuls of salted almonds and candied ginger. Her strange cravings, no, Henrik's cravings. She lay on her back in bed like roadkill. On the radio, the reporter said new charges could finally bury him, and then the voice dissolved into static, which she found soothing like an ocean wave heaving itself on her head. Then the static vanished, and the reporter laughed, and she thought she heard him say, We can't get rid of him, he's like an indefatigable cockroach. Did you know they can live a week without their heads? She looked at the dust balls under the blue velvet chair, the chair she'd bought and put in the corner to nurse Henrik.

She'd never heard of it before. No one at Lamaze class had talked about it, her ob-gyn never brought it up; her friends who had babies... something exploded behind her eyelids. Her head ached, her abdomen. Like a lost dog, like a wayward sheep, like an untrodden path that led to a desolate land, she had landed in a wasteland. Every month would be the cruelest. She was a mother who devoured her baby. When you pared it down, that's what the doctor told her.

Do babies even exist? In the wasteland, there was so little life. Stony rubbish, cracked dirt, a shadow always behind you, even on cloud-infested days. Was this new devastating place devoid of babies? She had to see one right now.

She sprang up, grabbed her coat. I'm going out.

I'll go—

But she was out. It was spring, but to Maeve, it felt like autumn, summer gone, erased like a bad drawing. She kept looking for dead leaves. To anyone wandering the streets, Maeve would look ghost-like, a face stricken as if she'd seen a car wreck, bloody bodies hanging out of the doors. She didn't hear the upward-sloping sound of a russet-backed thrush or the car horn blaring angrily as she crossed in front of it like a somnambulist.

Two blocks later at Cowen Park, she sat on a bench and watched a father in a baseball cap speak to his baby in a swing in fluent Parentese, sing-songy, high-pitched, with exaggerated vowels. The newborn baby can distinguish 800 sounds, her Lamaze teacher's voice. Hey Wally, Walter, Wallibee, said the father. There, I see that smile. The two were eye-locked, the father singing made-up silly rhymes. The baby threw an imaginary ball at the father, and he threw it back. Back and forth, the baby laughing hysterically. A kind man, a good man, a man who did not eat the baby.

That night, Leo put a plate of saltines and cheese slices in front of her, her usual pregnancy dinner. Again he apologized. When he reached to take the plate away, she gripped it with both hands and said, I need it.

You heard the doctor, he said. Something was wrong with our baby, you heard that.

Leo was saying the right things, but what made them right? They sounded right, but also terribly wrong. Because they were in the wasteland now, far from civilization. Something had short-circuited, the old world torn apart under an immutable deviation. As this realization took root, Maeve felt an electric charge run through her, tingling her toes, hands, and skull. She was free in a weird way, free to think and do as she pleased. She could weep at the grocery store, scream at a garage can, wear her pajamas all day long, and stop someone on the street and ask what was the point. The thought of becoming unhinged felt exciting and daring, and in that terrain, there lay the possibility of an entirely different life. As quickly as that feeling arrived, it vanished like a candle snuffed out, and she was back to her plate of saltines and cheese slices.

After dinner, she stepped out on the back porch and saw her neighbor, Gus, sitting at his picnic table in his cowboy hat, playing solitaire. She had a strange taste on her tongue, something beyond the ordinary, something sour and sweet and tantalizing, like the feeling of freedom that had ambushed her earlier. The sky was loaded with purples and blues and the baby red tail hawk was calling in its high-pitched note, over and over, not in distress, Gus had told her, but to announce it's here, it's here. Over and over until the night devoured the sky, and then the baby hawk would sleep. She used to find the sound irritating, but now it was the only thing she wanted to hear. It rang in her ears, and she murmured, I'm here, I'm here. Henrik, where are you?

Leo fell asleep instantly, whistling through his nose, and she stared at the ceiling with both hands resting on her stomach. The moon was high, the refrigerator sang a low clicking song, and bewilderment settled down for the night on the rug. Henrik, she whispered. Something fluttered beneath her hands, inside her, spinning now, now somersaulting and what, what, she laughed incredulously, and Leo moaned in his sleep, tangled in a nightmare. Henrik! Henrik doing a backbend, the little contortionist! Touching his fingers to his heels. She felt him unwind himself, then bubbles inside her like she was gassy, but she knew he was laughing; he laughed and laughed. A sensation of him scrunching into a ball, then leaping. A swan dive, she told him, you're a little swan.

She shook Leo. He jerked straight up, looked around, blurry-eyed. What?

Our baby. She took his hand and put it on her stomach. Do you feel him?

Now he was wide awake and studying her like a stranger. It's going to be OK, he said slowly.

He's there. Oh my god, he's having a great time.

Leo lifted his hand, but she grabbed it and put it back on her bare stomach.

I don't know, he said. A dream, Maeve. You need your rest. So do I. I have work tomorrow and it's been a shitty day and I just want it over.

She lay on her side, her hand on her stomach, laughing silently in the back of her throat as Henrik bumped his feet against her womb, then his head, ricocheting back and forth like a ping-pong ball. What a goof, she thought. He'd always been active and now he was supercharged, as if assuring her that all was well.

In a matter of days, it seemed Henrik was bigger, and her body, so smart, so generous,

had produced a new batch of amniotic fluid for him, a nice warm sloshy pool. For some reason, with this new fluid swishing one way then the other, she could understand everything he said. Not words but waves and vibrations that she could translate. She'd always been good with languages, mastering Spanish in elementary school, French in middle school. As a child, she and her best friend had invented their own language, Yobagani, so they could talk in front of their parents, who didn't understand a word.

Leo certainly wouldn't understand what was happening, so she didn't tell him; marriage was full of secret rooms. After Leo left for work, she lingered in bed and talked with Henrik for hours. He had a wonderful vocabulary, which he attributed to her. He told her that he already knew the cost of a bottle of wine, the rent was due by the fifth of the month, and many songs were about doom and lost love.

When she mistranslated, Henri corrected her. No, Mama. I said the wind carries the cry of a jay because it found not a horn but an acorn. When she went outside, she heard the bird. Someone is riding a bike, coming toward the house, he told her. And there was a dot, a line, a boy on a bike.

After four days at home, she had to return to work, her leave of absence expired. Grief was allotted only so much time in this country. But she had energy now that the future was no longer a long corridor of nothingness. As a physical therapist, she spent the morning focused on wrists, knees, and necks. Turn slowly, hold, there, she rubbed her warm hands on skin, then found a heating pad. Her motto: The body is amazing. She had seen arthritic, claw-like hands open again like a blooming flower; tight hips that strangled a stride slowly released their grip so one could glide. She was an optimist by choice.

Mid-morning, she stopped in the hallway and asked Henrik how he was doing. When he didn't answer, panic scampered through her, ran circles around her ribs, and swatted her throat; heat dashed up her spine and crowded her skull, creating a heat dome. She dizzily stepped outside near the big willow tree. Henrik? Are you there? she said louder. A mist coated the world like watery milk. In her peripheral vision, she glimpsed the wasteland, the stretch of desert with nothing but sand, an occasional boulder like a deceased star. She vigorously patted her stomach, trying to make waves and rouse him.

Henrik!

Mama? he finally said.

I thought—

Your heart is like a jackhammer. Can you stop?

I'm sorry. Deeper breaths, her pulse plummeting—he's alive!--she stared at the curly cue willow tree leaves and imagined making a bed of leaves for them, right here in the shade-filled parking lot, section B.

Are you OK? asked Leo at dinner.

I'm doing better, she said.

Good, good to hear. How was work? Nice to be back?

Yeah, she said. So many secret rooms, they were adding up like a hotel.

Leo had thrown himself into work and mostly thought about the New Shoe Campaign. He nodded absentmindedly at Maeve, only hearing a few words of what she said as he tried to come up with a new slogan—something catchy, witty, and clever. He was on a roll; he could see the top of the career hill. Execs smiled at him; their “Good Mornings” were laced with good humor. His Light As Air slogan had made him visible, somebody.

The truth was the world had revealed itself as something that could wound, and he could not think about the heart-cracking loss of his baby son without sinking into a pit, so he walked quicker, worked faster, talked faster, and threw himself headfirst into the Shoe Campaign. If anyone listened closely—Henrik heard it but didn’t know what it was and didn’t like it—you could hear the tiny soundtrack, the fine cry of Leo’s heart.

As Maeve talked about her day, she knew he wasn’t listening and knew this was part of marriage, the illusion of listening. She didn’t mind, she didn’t feel ignored or slighted. She had Henrik to tend to.

As a good mother (a very good mother, trying to make it up to him), she always carried Henrik’s favorites in her bag: a thermos of lemon water, salted almonds, and sugary ginger. But he was so active now, somersaulting, doing handstands, he needed far more food. At the hospital cafeteria, she ordered two, three meals, salmon with lemon, lemon chicken, lemon and butter pasta, with a side plate of sliced lemons, which she sucked on, though her dentist had said it was destroying her teeth.

Whoa, Dr. Maeve, you got a feast, said the cafeteria worker.

She smiled slyly.

Actually, she was sick of lemons. If she never ate another lemon--they made her stomach coil into a hard nut. But her little Henrik loved them, and she would satisfy his insatiable desire for the acidic. See, I would never devour you, never destroy you, she thought, I’ll sacrifice my tastebuds, my teeth for you. But what she would give for a salad with red onions, tomatoes, and broccoli, but Henrik hated those things, and the last time she had one, he threw a fit, kicking and screaming, and she ended up bent over a toilet.

Leo transformed into a stream of sensory elements moving out the front door, leaving a trail of coffee smell and Old Spice. Always a relief to leave the house, where he felt a strange energy, not sure what it was, but something like a relentless field force that pushed him out. Maeve seemed better, though spacey. He’d read there were many responses to loss, and if she needed to space out and imagine Henrik still existed—though that was not on the list—he’d let her be.

Good that he was gone because Maeve was listening to Henrik all the time, and right now, he was telling her in an excited voice that the crows wanted to visit him today, so could she skip work and stand on the back porch? Please, please, please please please please please.

She looked outside at the clouds moving like undisciplined children scattered everywhere. But it was too late to find someone to cover her shift. If she didn’t show, they’d be short-staffed. And she loved her work, and the old lady with sciatica needed her help. Something inside snapped back into shape.

No, she said.

That set off Henrik, and all day, as she cared for patients, moving arms and knees, Henrik wailed and whined. You don't love me. You hate me. You never pay attention to me. Everyone but me. What about me? I didn't ask to be born, you borned me, with that man I hate it here everything is terrible you're terrible. All day he ranted like an irate preacher, enraged with her and the entire human race. By the end of her eight-hour shift, she was tense, headachy, and tired.

Pause here and observe as she stared at her stomach, which was oddly flat, as if it contained nothing, only a lot of lemony food and dissolved enamel fragments from her decomposing teeth. For the briefest moment, she wondered if something was wrong with her, if her mind had been hijacked by something, someone.

You seem distant, said Leo at dinner.

She almost told him everything. Almost. Bad day at work.

I'm sorry. A difficult patient?

Yeah, she said, eating her salad. Thank god Henrik was sleeping so she could eat lemon-less food.

Well, tomorrow is a new day.

Sometimes Leo sounded like ad copy, but the words were soft and cozy, having been used so often that she didn't mind.

He put his fork down. Are you still feeling... him?

Heat ramped up on her neck. She took a sip of water to give herself some time. No.

I'm so glad.

She felt herself mentally move away from him. He had a streak of olive oil on his chin and she said nothing.

You know, if you ever need to, you could go to that support group. He reached for the pile of mail and pulled out the pamphlet. On the front, a photo of a woman holding flowers sculpted into a baby.

She reassured him she was fine. Not perfectly fine, but on the winding and circuitous road to fine.

We're young, he said. When we're ready, we can try again.

That jarred Henrik awake, and he began screaming, NOOOOOO! The scream seared her spine and she jackknifed straight.

Everything all right? said Leo.

My head, she said, pressing her temples. Just a really long day.

#

On Maeve's days off, Henrik liked to go for long walks, 40-60,000 steps or more, even in a thick drizzle, even if the rain was a solid, steady sheet of silver. Today, there were puddles everywhere, an assault on the roof. What's a little water? said Henrik. Wear a raincoat, rubber boots. Don't be such a baby. She wanted to read a book or bake banana bread, anything but spend the next four hours in the rain.

Outside, the black umbrella was like a huge growth over her head. He wanted her to describe everything in great detail, he was hungry for the world. Say more, I can't picture the pigeon eating a peanut. What is a pigeon again? After two hours of narration, she said nap time, but Henrik said he would not waste his life napping; he would not do it and she could not make him do it.

Mothers take a lot of guff, the Lamaze teacher's voice. Sacrifices will be made, sometimes

tremendous sacrifices and you won't recognize yourself for long stretches of time. The Lamaze teacher had rubbed her eyes, and Maeve felt the room roll over with melancholy. Maeve told herself that walking was good for her to shed the remaining pregnancy pounds—though there were none—and to breathe the fresh rain-washed air, except Henrik liked to walk along exhaust-infused Main Street and have her describe the cars and trucks. They had to find at least one backhoe for the day to be a win.

People on the sidewalk cleared out of her way, as if she was parting an invisible sea, and she understood they thought she was crazy and perhaps dangerous. No phone, no earbuds or thin white cords dangling down her chest, yet chattering away, as if the only way to make the world real was to turn it into language.

Hours later, when she finally returned home, her feet aching, her throat sore, she heard the baby redtail hawk calling. She wished it would shut up.

I love you, Mama, said Henrik sleepily.

Everything brittle inside broke. I love you too, she said.

#

She dreamed Henrik snuck out of her vaginal canal, crawled down the stairs, slid through the gap in the backdoor, and scrambled across the grassy yard, where he scaled the bird bath like a muscular mountaineer. Naked, illuminated by the moonlight, he put his feet in the tepid, buggy water and splashed and kicked and laughed recklessly, tossing his head back, calling to the bright stars (he's having such a good time, she thought) then lost his balance and fell in.

She leaped up, gasping.

Leo jumped out of bed.

Henrik drowned!

Leo sat down. You scared the hell out of me.

He fell in. I've got to check.

Her eyes blazed, her body like a live hot wire, Leo knew if he said there was nothing to check, she'd lash out, maybe withhold whatever tenderness remained. Time heals...maybe. Where was the Maeve from two years ago? Happy, cheerful Maeve, newly married, who said life was a wild adventure and she wanted to spend it with him? He put a pillow over his head.

She rushed out to the bird bath. No floating pink body in the dirty water. She stood, eyes closed, trying to sense him. The night air was a shroud with accusatory stars. Henrik? she called out. An owl hooted like a drunk woman, and a dog barked, the loneliest sound she'd ever heard.

Evening, said Gus. He sat in his backyard in the dark, the orange glow of his cigarette a beacon, a buoy. She had a craving for a cigarette, though she didn't smoke.

She walked over to the fence.

Nice night, he said.

It's cold.

He shrugged. I've seen worse. The Korean War was worse. So was Nam, not cold but heat. My divorce was worse, a lot worse, a trainwreck I didn't see coming. He paused, sucked on his cigarette and breathed out like a little volcano. The bats are magnificent tonight.

She looked around but didn't see any bats.

They're swooping low, he said, right by my ears.

I like bats.

Most people don't. When you're old like me, you don't take anything for granted.

I don't either.

It's a good way to live.

She was going to ask him if he'd seen a small naked boy crawling around but decided not to. Good night, she called out softly.

Yeah, he said, it is.

#

When she woke in the morning, Leo had already left for work, and Henrik was humming a new song about black ants.

She glared at her stomach. Where were you last night?

Out.

Where?

Do you have to know everything?

He sounded like a sassy teenager!

I'm your mother. I have a right to know.

Geez, calm down. I didn't go anywhere, I was asleep.

You're lying.

A long pause. OK, I went outside, so what. I wanted to look at the oak tree at night. You said its bark turns silvery and I wanted to see it.

She gave him a lengthy lecture, her voice quivering with fear and warning, the danger of night, of being small; the swooping owls, roaming dogs, hungry cats. Do you hear me? Maeve shook with a sense that things were out of control. How did he get out? How could she keep him in? But didn't she want him out? Wasn't that the whole point? Have a baby—out of her? Confused, she wished Leo was here, but what could he do?

OK, OK, said Henrik, in his new snotty tone, with the rumbling subtext, I've got a big life ahead of me and you're in the way.

He ordered a huge breakfast, his nighttime adventures made him ravenous: scrambled eggs, toast, blackberry jam, bacon, vanilla yogurt, a bowl of chocolate ice cream, and lemon water. She couldn't eat all that. She liked small breakfasts, an egg and coffee.

After the meal, she had to lie down because she felt sick and stuffed, which thankfully muffled Henrik's voice. In the rare semi-silence, she imagined riding a horse across the Bonneville Salt Flats, the dazzling white stretching for miles and miles, so barren not even the simplest life form could exist. She was alone, utterly and beautifully alone.

She abruptly stopped the imaginative escapades. Could Henrik eavesdrop on her imagination? She dilated her attention on him. He was doing vigorous cartwheels and singing loudly about the oak's silvery bark.

On her way to work, she stopped at the park with the circle of sand, because when Henrik heard the squeals and little voices of children, he clapped and danced a funny little jig. She sat on the bench, watching the children hurl themselves down the shiny slides headfirst and kick their legs back and forth on the swing, intent on touching the clouds. Across the way, a gaggle of mothers and soon-to-be mothers were laughing and talking and not watching the children, as if they were a given, like rocks. Maeve couldn't stop watching their nonchalance, their indifference to the many dangers, their taken-for-grantedness, and then she recognized one of the women from Lamaze class. The woman, who was very pregnant, spotted her and whispered something to the others and they all looked over at Maeve.

The woman waddled over to her and said her name was Patty, from the Lamaze class?

It was all coming back to Maeve, Patty, a fourth child on the way, Patty who craved sauerkraut and chocolate.

Janice told the class what happened to you, said Patty. I'm so sorry. I'd never heard of such a thing.

For a moment, Maeve couldn't see. Slowly, something came at her, and Maeve saw Patty's face: her pouty puckered lower lip, her pity-soaked eyes.

It must be so hard, said Patty. I mean, I don't know, but I can imagine it.

You can imagine nothing, thought Maeve.

It's so good you're outside, said Patty. Well, you seem to be hanging in there.

Patty returned to her fold. Maeve tried to ignore them, but they kept glancing at her, probably weaving together a version of Maeve that united them in an energetic, almost erotic way. Maeve's irritation blotted out Henrik's clapping and singing so despite Henrik's pleading for them to stay, she left.

#

Henrik escaped again. This time she did find him naked, trying to kick his perfect ten-toed feet in the bird bath. He looked ghostly in the moonlight; his skin was translucent, and she could see the blood coursing in his veins down his arms and his little heart beating so terribly, dangerously fast. Strange-looking, ugly, she loved him desperately.

You're not ready for this, she said, scooping him up in her palm, anxiety biting her hard. He was far too delicate, one knee scrape, one cut on the arm, it would be over, a mortal bloodletting.

I'm ready, he said defiantly.

You're not!

The moon spilled on them. Henrik's eyes were closed, the black pigment of his retina shimmering through thin skin.

She saw him shiver. You got to get back inside this minute! Where did you put the umbilical cord?

Nice night, said Gus.

She startled. Gus. Hi.

Everything OK?

She was too upset for restraint. My kid got out and it's too early for him. He'll die if he stays out here.

Sounds strong-willed.

Oh, he's strong-willed all right, she said. She cupped him carefully, so carefully, feeling the rubberyness of his skin, and when he reached for the bird bath, his arm bent in an unnatural way.

I can still hear my kid calling, said Gus. My wife, she never heard him. My whole life, I've heard him.

Maeve came over to the fence. How old was he?

We lost him at 17 weeks. Wife got sick, real sick when she was full with him. Now that the house is empty, I hear him all the time. I like to sit out here and listen to him. Sounds like wind through fir trees.

What does he talk about?

Everything under the damn sun, he said, chuckling. He makes me not so lonely.

Henrik was waving his arms and kicking his legs as if to move inside her. Cold, he chattered, so cold.

I should get going, she said.

Got to take care of that boy, said Gus.

#

Lonely, she knew the sound of that word, the long O that moaned like a low wind blowing through her, even though Henrik was a noise machine, demanding, chattering, whining, crying, asking her a million questions. Her only break was when Henrik slept at night, which was rapidly disappearing. A budding insomniac, and she, a sizzled brain from no sleep.

When she called the number on the pamphlet, the therapist said she had group sessions on Tuesdays, and Maeve was welcome to come and see if it felt right for her. It's not what someone says is right for you, said the therapist. I've had enough of society telling women what's right and wrong for them. If you have a ghost baby, no one can take that away from you.

A ghost baby?

That's what the group calls the baby. If that name doesn't work for you, that's fine, you don't have to use it. I'm not saying what's true or not true, only that the group has used this term and has developed a sense of comfort around it.

The meeting was in the YMCA's basement, and the dark hallway leading to the room was a narrow passageway to an underworld that smelled of mold and ancient books. Stacks of

cardboard boxes lined the hallway as if someone was moving in or moving out. The lone bare bulb flickered like a malfunctioning lighthouse. When Henrik asked if they were going to the park and could she stand near the slide this time so he could hear the metal rattle, she didn't answer.

A circle of twelve women talking. One empty metal chair was next to a woman who said her name was Dawn. The therapist with gray wiry hair welcomed her and the other women, hands on their stomachs, smiled. The room had high walls of a milky green and the acoustics of a pool. Everyone looked normal, brushed hair, clean clothes, faces washed. Maeve smoothed her hair with her hand, and Henrik flipped upside down, his feet near her ribs.

The park NOW, he said.

No, she whispered.

I want to, I want to go to the park!

I said no.

Is that kid talking smack? said Dawn.

My kid is full of it today, too, said a woman with feather earrings. She wants candy candy candy. No matter how many times I say no, she begs for candy.

Soon Maeve told the group about Henrik, his endless demands, his tantrums, his love of lemons, her intense hatred of them, and, get a load of this, he figured out how to vacate the premises, so to speak, and play in the backyard at night.

My kid did that the other night, said the woman with feather earrings. Freaked me out. I wanted to punish her, it's so scary, but, you know, I'm just so happy she's here.

A soft aura filled the room and the fluorescent light changed into something less harsh as they discussed what to do about a rebellious ghost baby. Maybe give them a little freedom, someone said. They're growing as ghost babies do. Sure, it's frightening, but that's what a mother of a ghost baby has to endure. Some rules might be good, stay in the yard or the living room, wherever they escape to. No talking to strangers. Watch out for owls and cats. Back in the womb by 10:00 pm. A plate of sugar cookies made the rounds, and Maeve took one, though she knew it would put Henrik in a manic mode, zooming around inside like a squash ball.

When Maeve left, she felt revived and enlightened. Later, she'd look back and realize she'd stumbled into one of the countless rooms of female knowledge, hidden until the female affliction or condition struck you, and then a secret door opened. Inside, women, so many women waiting for you, drinking wine, eating pretzels and chips. Sit down, girl, we've got a lot to tell you. At some point, you might ask, why didn't I know about this earlier, and they'd shrug, say, Beats me. Well, at least Maeve found it.

When Leo came home, his face was flushed with excitement about the Light as Air, Quiet as Air (new slogan) launching next week in Europe, my god, can you believe it! Pacing the living room in his love-drenched shoes. A promotion to vice president was possible. Likely. She listened, ignoring Henrik's whining for her to get up and dance to Ring Around the Rosie.

Over dinner, Leo said he needed her help coming up with a new slogan.

What else about air? said Leo. Help me like you did in the old days.

Transparent as air? she said.

Yeah, but, you know, you can see the shoes. He waved a shoe-clad foot in the air.

Clean as air? she said. But the air was often filled with smoke and pollutants.

Vital as air? she said.

Yes! His arms raised in triumph, and he came over and kissed her on the mouth.

For the first time in a long while, she felt the stirrings of desire like a low glow of coal. Beauty, it was as simple as that, her first attraction to Leo and then it plumped into more, but the foundation was beauty, and he still had it, the way he shimmered with happiness and loved her endlessly.

At the next meeting the group argued about how much to give in to the ghost baby's demands, which were constant. Little dictators who resorted to violence when they were pissed off—kicks and aggressive headbutting the ribs, punches with their little fists. Didn't matter the gender, they all did it. God Almighty when they sit right on top of your bladder. And they know what the hell they're doing, can't you hear them laughing, the bubbles that fill you up with their mischievous laughter? So bossy, ready to rule the world, though they know nothing about it, except what we tell them.

It felt good to vent, and they went on, knowing they'd do nothing about it, no punishment, no sending them to a private room in their womb. The venting released the pent-up pressure like a pot giving off puffs of steam.

The meeting was nearing an end when a woman who had been quiet the entire time announced she had something to say. At that moment, Henrik cried out he was tired of all the sitting around. He wanted to go for a 50,000-step walk right now! If she didn't do it, he'd start jumping up and down, ripping holes in her insides until he got what he wanted!

I'm going to try to have another baby, said the woman. She moved her hands to her thighs. Capable hands, hands that looked like they'd been many through intense battles with dishes, laundry, cooking of dinners, and the making of beds.

The room grew silent as if the air molecules had stopped moving and oxygen was in limited supply. The shade no longer tapped against the windowpane and the therapist stopped writing in her little notebook. The women sat in their chairs, some mouths closed, some open, some looking at their laps. No one could avoid what had been uttered because now the communal question was there in the air, like a different demanding entity.

Dawn voiced it in a trembling voice, Why?

A truck rumbled by, a siren in the distance. Maeve felt her curiosity run through her, taking up space, taking over everything, even Henrik's whining. The room grew quieter, stiller, poised to hear the unspeakable and yet not wanting to hear the unspeakable.

Because my ghost baby is turning into a spoiled brat, that's why, said the woman. He's a little bully.

But, said Dawn, when I once brought it up, my ghost baby threw a tantrum.

That's what I mean! I mean, who's the boss here? We are! Let's not forget that. We are the boss.

Maeve found herself nodding, that's right, and the refrain, that's right, echoed in the room, catching on, catching fire, turning into a roaring flame.

But what if the ghost baby leaves? said another woman.

The woman's jaw flared, her eyes turned steely. She won't. She's here for life. Come on, we all know that.

What they knew at their core arrived in the air as a murmur of agreement. The therapist did her usual long inhale, which meant time was up. As the women gathered their things, Maeve sat, feeling the dark hairs on her arm rise and tremble, then the trembling got away from her, turning into something else.

#

On her way home, Maeve bought a bouquet of blooms. She took off her gray sweatpants and hoodie, put on a flowery dress and spritzed herself with lavender, disregarding Henrik's pleas to go outside so he could hear the crows. Now! Now! Damn it NOW! A hint of shame lived in her--she was the one who taught him profanity--then she picked it off like lint. Cut yourself some slack, Dawn's voice. A dash of lip gloss, a brush to her hair, she couldn't remember when she last did things to make her dull surface glimmer.

It wasn't their anniversary, but it felt like it, so why not make it one? A shedding of something, a beginning, maybe. She longed for a ginger ale, so she drank one.

Dinner became something surprisingly gourmet-ish, teriyaki salmon, green beans with salt and garlic, no lemon. A bottle of white wine—was that OK? She hadn't had wine since forever. Would it harm Henrik? Make his brain contort and twist? Just a sip, or maybe more. The sun glowed in the window, tossing itself on the floor, and Henrik whined, walk, walk, crows calling, the trees, a backhoe!

The front door opened and Leo sang out, I'm home! He came into the kitchen, wearing his Vital As Air shoes, a little scuffed, a little dirt on the right toe. He stopped at the threshold.

Whoa, you look beautiful. I mean, you always do, but particularly right now.

He smelled of cinnamon and laundry detergent. She kissed him hard, a feeling of being engulfed, caught up in hot desire. He pressed back, and Henrik pressed from the inside, whining.

Hey now, said Leo, waking up to the gesture.

He unbuttoned her dress, and there she was, the Maeve he knew, grinning, and Henrik howled, walk to the ocean, birds, the waves, sand, pulverized rock, 60,000 150,000 steps, away from Leo, from this romantic crap or whatever was going on, his voice expansive, an astonishing avalanche of words. But Maeve's resolve hardened, and she shoved the sound away because she could feel her life moving again, making plans. Leo's hands on her back, and now he was nibbling on her earlobes, the way she liked it. Outside the baby redtail hawk called, but she didn't hear it.

He'll always be with us, she said.

Leo kissing. Then no words, only her fingers reaching for his belt. Henrik paused, hiccupped, and settled down like a good baby, momentarily.

by Rebecca Klassen

Surface

- 1) *The Blue-ringed Octopus lives in colourful coral reefs. It relies on the rocks and crevices in its environment for refuge.*

A customer wants to speak to the manager. A girl in a turquoise-striped jumper is hitting other children in the ball pit. I'm in charge of the soft play, the manager struck down by tequila shots, so I apologise to the customer, then go to find the offender. Ready to smile and tell them to *pack it in*, I wait by the ball pit, watching for stripes.

- 2) *The creature's circles flash electric blue. They're warning colours to ward off predators.*

The sea of balls is motionless. A squeal crescendos from the tube slide, and a boy, static hair sticking out like dandelion pappus, plops into the balls with a rumble of hollow plastic. When he surfaces, so does the stripey arm, along with a brunette bob. She's been waiting. Her hand whips the boy across his ear. He clutches it with a cry, then lets go, revealing his purple lobe. Before he sees her, she submerges.

- 3) *If threatened, the Blue-ringed Octopus will fight to the death. It will fight a Giant Pacific*

Octopus, over ten times its size, to protect itself.

Ear boy runs past me, wailing, and I pray his parents aren't the type to leave negative online reviews. I wade out to where I last saw the girl and ask her to come up. Usually, they crawl and scuttle away, but she stands tall with scarlet cheeks, red-rimmed eyes, and streams of clear snot lining her philtrum. Bending to her level with a horizontal smile, I tell her to stop hitting and ask her to get out of the ball pit. No tears, no denial, not even a *piss off*. I hold out my hand...

- 4) *Its venom is toxic. In humans, it causes respiratory depression and paralysis.*

She bites, molars clamping on my index fingernail, incisors pinching my knuckle.

Ripping my hand away, I clasp my finger, mouth open. I can't move or breathe. I've had a milkshake thrown on my shoes, and a ball pit ball launched at my shoulder. The aggression is always at a distance.

I don't care if this kid's dad is the head of a biker gang or president of the boxing league. I'm throwing her out.

5) Don't misunderstand the Blue-ringed Octopus. Though it is deadly, it has three hearts.

I manage to get her out of the ball pit without protest or a second bite. Before I can ask her which of these adults bowed over phones and coffees is her parent, she clasps her collarbone.

'My necklace. It came off in the ball pit.'

It's a choking hazard, so I go back for it, feeling cautiously along the bed of dust bunnies, plasters, and sticky sweets.

I find it. A silver chain with a round pendant, a jewel of the ocean. There's script on both sides.

Daughter of Angels

Their hearts will always be with you.

Just a Rock

I tell my son the time has come to punch Jaxon in the face. I show him to keep his thumb on the outside of his fist, explaining that this isn't an eye for an eye. My son shakes his head. He still believes in Santa, and hugs me goodbye and hello in the school playground. Jaxon hangs out in the park after dark, and wrote Merry Shitmas in his cards to his classmates.

After I tuck my son and his fresh bruises in every night, before I turn on the tv, I fantasize about spotting Jaxon alone in an alleyway, grabbing the scruff of his jacket, and throwing him into a hedge of holly, prickles scraping his neck and cheeks. I want to scream in his face and make him cry, make him piss his pants and grovel. Like mother, like son, though, I don't have it in me. Instead, we cling to talismans; my son a small teddy, me a piece of black tourmaline.

When we enter the school playground, our hands holster in our pockets. His fingers fondle soft fur. Mine run over clean edges of the rock a decorated shopkeeper told me would *repel negative energy*. Jaxon's mum knows I've complained to the school about him, and though the principal does very little about him, Jaxon's mother often scowls at me.

So, when she marches over to my son and I, pulling Jaxon behind her, purple encircling his eye, I roll the tourmaline in my palm. She tells me to look at what my son has done to Jaxon. I roll the rock faster. She asks my son what the hell is wrong with him? Sharp pain; the rock slips quicker in my bloodied palm. She spits at us and tells us we're pointless bitches.

I wish we were alone in the alleyway when I shoot my rock, striking her hard in the eye.

Liana

1) *Liana vines are rooted in the earth and use trees to climb towards the canopy.*

Mum sews in her armchair, the embroidery hoop in one hand like a tambourine as she plays it with cotton, the needle's tempo remaining steady when Dad gets home from the pub again. I notice the root sprouting next to me from the carpet, curling around Mum's ankles.

2) *These tough vines grow best in temperate environments.*

He sways, telling her she's a piece of shit. She stays calm and carries on sewing as the root spirals up both her legs, then snakes across her lap and around the back of the chair, the wooden vine belting her in place.

3) *Lianas can form bridges between trees, allowing passage for small creatures.*

Dad tells me I'm a piece of shit, too. The root forks from Mum, a section branching to me on the floor. I scramble on and use it to climb onto Mum's lap, the seat of vegetation uncomfortably rigid.

4) *Forests without lianas grow 150% more fruit.*

As he starts to tell her again about the other women he's been with throughout their marriage, all better in bed than her, the vine helter skelters around her body, binding her to the chair, stilling her hands so that the needle cannot slip through the aida.

5) *Trees with lianas are twice as likely to die.*

When he tells her he'd love to slap her and watch her cry, listen to her beg for him to stop, the vine twists around her neck and face. I try to rip it off, but it's hard and unyielding. Turning to Dad, I scream and sob, pleading for him to leave her alone. He relishes my reaction.

'Now, why can't I get your mother to do that?'

Bumps in the Night

Perry Genovesi

Alec Fiedler told us that the streetlight glaring into his window had cast a shadow of a giant hippopotamus head in the corner of his ceiling. It bared down on him, he said, right above where his night table with the Spiderman lamp had been. This was a few days before Halloween. Big Barry, who sat one desk in front of Alec in homeroom, turned and told Alec to take a picture of that hippo if it were so real.

The next morning, Alec shambled into class clutching a Polaroid. All of us gathered under the Take Your Parents To Work bulletin board Ms. Proffers had pinned over the radiator for God knows how long. We could only see the night table's edge and the yellow geo rings of Alec's solar system model. Big Barry right there crafted his high-quality proposal on why Alec was a *liar and a pussy*; he was preparing to seal his testimony, but Ms. Proffers finally made it into class.

As I started writing on whatever worksheet Proffers had assigned, a squealing sound made me turn. I peered past Big Barry to see Alec at his desk coloring in the Polaroid with a fat, dark-green magic marker. I could smell the pine scent. Maybe the other kids could too, because I remember a whole bunch of us were watching his wrist shake as Alec scrubbed the page.

After class, about ten of us gathered near the water fountain. Alec's head was hung low over the photo, like when Proffers had us regurgitate New Testament bull. Alec had colored in right above the tip of Pluto (RIP). I couldn't believe it: the horrifying open jaws and canine teeth bearing down on Alec.

If I remembered correctly where his nightstand was when me and Barry would go over to his house when Mrs. Fiedler still lived there with Alec's dad, that fucking hippo would've been sizing up his head, getting ready to chomp him. And I saw these weird ceiling cracks, like bite marks. I didn't know if Alec had stabbed them out with a pencil, or if I'd just missed them on first viewing, or what.

I asked Alec to tell us whether it had been the shadows which had hidden the creature at first, or if he'd modified or zhushed the shadow in a direction to make the head with a marker. But he just kept looking down. So Barry reinstated my inquiry a touch less gently. Alec pleaded, "It's real!" He said that when he'd aimed the camera at the animal, he'd left on the flash, and right after he took the photo, the hippo had stampeded back up the ceiling, out the window and onto the roof, over Alec's dad's bedroom. The noise had woken up Alec's dad.

The next day, a bunch of us brought in our own Polaroids and laid them on the radiator. There was a roaring, purple, ceiling lion, a red squid, a komodo dragon and a meerkat. Years after writing this I realized that all us boys had drawn tough, killer animals. Ms. Proffers had finally pulled down the Take Your Parents to Work display from that shitty event. I remember Alec's dad had lumbered in talking about his 'police beat' which had been little more than a desk job. *A big dick contest*, but I would not have used that phrase then. Mrs. Fiedler, though, had been an actual NASA astronaut, who we all had loved when she was around. Finally, Ms. Proffers came in and we dragged ourselves back to our seats, except Alec, who stood by the Polaroids looking like he was at his own execution.

I guess Ms. Proffers thought our shadow animals were cute or something: the next day, Mischief Night, she asked us all to bring in pictures like Alec's. She brought in her personal Polaroid and *made it communal* for kids who didn't have one. We did what she said, and the next day, she pinned our pictures to the bulletin board under an orange-and-black banner. She had I guess painstakingly cut out these wormy-looking letters. It read for Halloween's sake, *Bumps in the Night*, arranged all psychotically. Even Barry had a picture - a warthog. I'd never seen the guy so giddy. It was all kind of fun. I made walrus tusks out of the upturned hooks of my mom's standing coat rack.

Everyone was happy except for Alec. I might've forgotten to tell you this, but the whole reason he confided to me and Barry about the hippo was because it scared the shit out of him. And me and Barry were the only ones in class who'd ever seen his room, back when we used to hang out and watch *Beast Wars* and eat the grilled cheese and tomato sandwiches and pizza rolls and whatever else his mom would cook for us. Alec claimed the hippo was so loud it kept sneaking further and further down his wall each night getting ready to bite him or something.

Halloween fell on Friday that year. Barry and I trick-or-treated without Alec for the second time in a row - we'd tried stopping by his house just to say hi but all we could hear was some clodding. I thought the noises were, like, a haunted house soundtrack but now writing all this down I wonder if Alec was telling some kind of truth. He wasn't at our school anymore by Monday and we never really saw him again after that.

A Revolution Without Explosions

Perry Genovesi

The sole grazing my thumb, the sneaker and its brother kicked into the waning sunlight. Leading and then following and then landing on the powerline right outside his backyard. A perfect drive-by, ahahahahah!

Mike in Security had told me to use a pair of Nike Cortezes; I trusted him for this. Bet the Scaredy Cat doesn't even know Mike's name. This was all for Marcy's graduation thing - she's going to one of the lesser snob schools, ahahahahaha. Anyway, Scaredy Cat was grilling, I could hear the hot dogs crackling, smell the barbecue from the holly where I crouched and then I delivered my gift like some damn discus thrower. He sees his powerline shake. He must have caught a glimpse of the shoes through the vents of his spatula, which he held up to block the sun. He examines my handiwork, my "symbol of urban decay", ahaha, hahaha! Maybe at first he thought it was a landing pigeon. He eases the spatula into the grill coils Soooooo slowly.

Natasha in HR said he just gave his notice at 11. Scaredy's finally moving to Cheltenham with Tracy and Marcy until she leaves for school. Just talked to him. He said everything you said he would about crime and urban safety. And the best part of it is, he's offering. So, I'm willing to give you his parking spot if you want, but I'm not backing down from his corner office.

Woka Cola Perry Genovesi

I see a young, African-American man in red push through the dancers, at least ten crowding the aisle. I wonder if this rider's an Agent hunting me down, on this night when my bus ride happened to have turned into a club. My face sweats. Or, is it all just racist thoughts rising? (I often held thoughts like this surrounding young Black men - but I'm only telling you.)

Then it clicks: our multinational, multigender cadre is celebrating. A young Sikh man is twirling up the main aisle while another woman in an orange headscarf snaps her fingers toward an Indian girl with ghungroo beads.

I remembered the third Thursdays planning in the Peoples Church behind Cilantro's.

We'd won.

The Community Councils in the Southwest Library's Meeting Rooms, or near the rickety grills at Pappas Park - wherever we could huddle working people on their terms.

We spoke to their experiences of being hosed by bosses and landlords, cycles of need, trauma, poverty. Attending retreats, marching at rallies, then, finally, distributing arms. We had to host struggle sessions around the US's sorry history of gun violence in noisy, oil-smelling firing ranges - but some of the recruits were natural comrades. We worked until our crew had organized into a forty-strong army. *The Fab Forty*, we'd joked. (Even though people floated in and out - it was more like 35).

We had places for everyone: a Marketing Crew, Kitchen Patrol (always smelling like weed and garlic - especially on Spaghetti Sunday), and an Action Committee.

And now we're en route to Centennial Olympic Park.

When I peer past the Black comrade pushing his way toward my seat, I see the driver toasting a Kitchen-Crew-rationed Woka Cola.

During training we'd stocked them in the fridge. Now training is over - it's go time. The driver's a young comrade with a mohawk and three tattooed ice cubes on her scalp. She taps on the steering wheel to the song. *If you say that you are mine / I'll be here 'till the end of time*.

There had been counterrevolutionaries of course, poisoners, wreckers, moles. The demo against the construction of the Barlow Police Training Facility had made the cops despise us to the point of making major moves: infiltration and the like. We wrote and executed a solid Expulsion Policy for any flip-flopper or other abuser. We dealt with 'em.

It's the dregs of my own bias now which makes me remember my setting. I know we - the masses!! - will still have to confront the remains of our racist, capitalist, patriarchal society. It was showing now in thinking that this Comrade Brother wanted to jump me. It's because society is at odds with the old.

Where we're going is the C.O. Park, and I am getting ready to address the masses at our Victory Rally. I know, through my haze, that I need to get on the mic - the four foot lectern the

Events Committee's set up. Perform the speech Comms crafted with my edits. Where is it?
The bus swings to the left and me with it.

"Will," says the comrade. "I don't know *what's* going - what the agents did to you, but ..."
"Ro--" a distant twinge surfaces the comrade's name. I catch the wrinkle lines in his forehead.
"Ronald? I know you?"

"Take this, man, take it!" And Ronald pushes it in my lap: a full soda bottle wrapped in paper. Cold. A Woka. My speech, wrapped in cellophane - one of our precautionary measures. I can almost taste the bubbles. *All our work*, Ronnie had spat at Camp M-Freedom, showing me how he'd tuck the paper inside the label. *Ship in a bottle, shit in a bottle*. The necessity of covert action in a movement like this. *We need to see it through*. Now I trace his stare to my other hand: I clutch an identical Woka! I raise my arm to show him. "No no no," he cries. The dancers, or the erratic driving, shoves me into him. He smells like pine, like he did at Camp. Have I been drinking drinking? My tongue buzzes with the flavor of the Wokas. Ronnie & Kitchen Committee had risked sabotage, the Whitechapel Correctional Institute for. The bottle I grip now is lighter. I *must've* been drinking it. *And if I stay it will be double*. When I look up, Ronald has his hands raised.

The bus driver prods a gun into his ear. My stare whips from my comrade to the window.

The cover of wooden black beads on the empty driver's seat rattles. Taking a left...the Bank of America skyscraper flashes past...the bus is driving on its own.

The dancers are hunching and popping back up. The Clash's bass locks into the kick drum. With her other hand, the driver takes Ronald's bottle and shoves it into her hoodie. "There you go, *comrade*," growls the bus driver. (Why would she do this unless Ronald was indeed a spy? I'm so confused.) Bile rises. I lay the bottle against my hip and the drink sloshes. I loosen the label, peel it off, and smooth it out. It's a little wet but the ink's legible. A few sentences written in a blue hand I don't recognize. *Refreshing Revolution. Social change starts in the palate*.

Three cameras flank me. Reflective umbrellas shudder. It's an Indian woman, and then the Sikh man, dancing moments before. Blinding flashbulbs spark. Men behind them, a white guy with a faded, bleach-stained denim cap and dark sunglasses crouches. Then, keeping watch of the floor and their shoulders, the dancers inch by inch fill in the space.

A spidery black mic descends from the ceiling. The song ends. I stare at Denim Cap and grip the mic. "Workers," I choke, reading out loud, "take up arms against thirst with Woka Cola." It was as if my lips were forming words on their own. "You have nothing to lose but your thirst." It's all for a commercial.

Twenty Blocks South

Mark Wagstaff

“What’s that?” His index knuckles the curtain.

“Tenth Avenue.” Next to him at the window, she smells of cleaning supplies.

“Is it always this?”

“Busy neighborhood. Sought after, Mr. Carpetto.”

“Don’t call me that. Say Rick. Never Ricky.”

“I’ll remember, Rick.”

“Keep your boat on the lake. I ain’t staying a week.”

When Rick leaves the block, he scrambles some bums on the stoop necking spirit from brown paper. They shuffle apart, cracking open minimal space for him, not seeing more than his brogues tap the steps.

Rick surmises mostly women live in this block, squeezing by awkwardly with their groceries, not bitching till they get inside about ‘those men on the walk’. He cranks down his spine, infusing himself into their blood-curdled eyes.

The rummies are old, every bone in their head shows clear as x-rays. They mostly have tufty stubs of gray hair with a few days’ chin-wire, except one with a full bible beard.

Rick smells their love of chemical liquor. “You guys are here when I get back, I’ll take you apart bone by bone and display you at the zoo. Anyone need more information?”

The threat raises glutinous eyes. “Why the fuck we listen to you?”

“Be here when I get back,” says Rick, “you find out.”

He goes brisk to the barber on Ninth, the shop squelched in permanent shadow by the bus terminal ramp. He presumes the pollution of all that distance gathers under the bridge, making the blue-painted shop a toxic hot spot.

Rick takes a seat, immediately in front of the TV. Not much catches his eye but a story about an astronaut who ran down a kid while coked to the tits. That it’s an astronaut, not a trucker or guy who rods drains, that’s the story. Guy can drive a rocket but can’t drive a car coked. Everyone by the crash site gets asked their opinion. Rick’s fingers drum the bench.

Disappointed he doesn’t get shaved by the only female barber. She’s young, though walks as if her back has seized and resists new instructions. She doesn’t smile, her eyes rarely stray from the head at hand. Rick likes to be shaved by a woman. He likes to watch a woman’s eyes inspect his face for bristle. He likes watching the mirror while a woman draws an open blade across his throat.

This time he gets shaved by the old Greek with the mustache seeping over his lip. The guy seems quietly happy, like he got pleasing news he doesn’t want to share. He heats towels in the microwave to swaddle Rick’s throat and chin. Rick’s skull throbs like August.

The Greek leans close so their heads align. “Fucking paradise,” he tells their reflected faces. Rick won’t argue with a man’s religion.

He walks a couple diagonal blocks. Checks back and forth before trying the basement door. A complex series of locks and warnings advertise paranoia. Rick wouldn’t do it this way but it’s out of his hands.

Inside, the blinds are down. If there’s aircon he can’t feel it. Clamminess waits its stinking tide.

Couple of chronically ugly joes chow in the corner on something out of a box. They're making heat for Ty Stendhal who paces like a zoo tiger gone nuts, his dark bald head bobbing back and forth. Stendhal growls at the woman who opened the door. She's dressed for the weather and looks both scared and bored.

The room's a pit – minimal light, basic table and chairs, the bare board floor creaks and crackles as Stendhal roams about. Rick strokes his knuckles on the hairs the barber missed. "Who do I speak with?"

As Stendhal turns, he kicks a tap step with his right foot. "If you're worried about getting paid, you get paid."

"I'm not worried about anything. Who do I speak with?"

"His doctor. It's difficult."

Caution is needed – can't give Stendhal's greasy joes much to munch on. Rick takes it another way round. "You say 'doctor'. Meaning what?"

Stendhal drops that phony tap step again. "What does 'doctor' mean to you?"

"Some guy who gave Lorraine bad news about her stomach."

"Try your head."

"He's got a head doctor?" Rick hums loony tunes.

"Everyone in this town got a head doctor."

"I don't."

"You're not from here."

"It's because it makes you crazy this city." The woman's hissy voice fills the room. "Get crazy like him." She points at Stendhal. "I curse that day I met him." She crosses herself and spits.

Stendhal shrugs. "Open the door, walk out."

"You know I would." She puts up her short blonde hair. Pale skin drinks all available light. "You want me crazy like the rest. You can't deny me." She folds her arms tight, switching about for something more than this shabby room.

"Sure," Stendhal tells Rick. "He's got a head doctor."

Air's warming up, his shaved skin tingles as he walks to West 23rd. Chelsea, where he should be staying, with a widow next door who opens wine in the evening. Some of these places are real little nests. Sees himself, years from now, at that New Hampshire golf club, lying about how he made his money, how long he's been married, how many kids they have between them. Lying about all those tertiary things. No good ever came from this sort of approach. But the guy's got a head doctor.

The building runs a concierge, a woman who glances and smiles right on the button when Rick strolls past the doorman. Rick nearly neglects to tip the old guy, so sudden his surprise at this woman in a glass booth, at a glass desk, tinkering with a laptop, while taking a call, while glancing and smiling at Rick, who now has this added step to take care of.

"Good afternoon." He lets his voice fill the lobby. "I'm looking for Dex Roberts, on a personal matter. I understand he's based in this building?"

By the pause and her slight frown, it seems likely she's briefed for this situation. Not that she stops smiling, but what her lips say is undermined by that crease to her forehead. "I'm not sure Mr. Roberts is here right now. He may be away on business."

"Who might know?" Rick leans on the counter, twinkling, charming. "For a fact. Who keeps his schedule?"

"I'd need to know more about your errand before revealing that information."

"Would you?" Rick's fingers pull a tune from the counter. "I'm Rick Carpetto. I'm not sure I

should reveal my information.”

A pro, this one, she didn't get all this glass for nothing. “If you want detail on Mr. Roberts' schedule, one of us has to blink.”

It's in his face and annoying, but he nearly enjoys this ping-pong over the counter. She's spry enough to catch a weight, so he checks his nails, folding one set of fingers then the other into his palms. A tweak at his lapel, then he delivers. “You remember that little thing in Iraq, few years ago now? I was there, pulling a muscle. Met Mr. Roberts in a little bar the grunts set up in Basra. You know, for the social side. Sharing a jug of lemonade when a pipe took out half the floor. Bad news for me, I was wrong side of the table. If Mr. Roberts didn't have such a strong right fist you'd be staring at empty space. So we keep in touch. Where is he?”

She folds her hands on the counter, about level with his chest. Perks her spine, tilts her chin, lets loose a big, lippy smile. “You expect I believe that crock of shit?”

“Should I look more soulful? I was there though.”

“Doing what?”

“Enough.”

She releases her hands into a blessing. “Mr. Roberts' is on the sixth. He's not usually home and I haven't seen him today. You could go up, check he locked his door. There are cameras on every hallway.”

“Could a hallway camera malfunction a moment or two?”

She laughs, frisking her hair. “Sixth, at the back.”

“The back?”

“He prefers quiet to daylight.”

The elevator has those tall, hard buttons and space for a stool, where maybe an attendant once sat. Rick makes sure to glance at the camera, to look knowing and on the money, though the performance, on top of this heat, saps his patience. This sort of business gives him too little space, bouncing around as errand boy for Ty Stendhal. Moments like this, he pinches himself to recall it's the work that puts silver bars through his cuffs.

The sixth – and probably every floor – is painted claustrophobic gold. A heavy, leering color that whips his eyes. The gold walls bear gold-framed pictures, abstract patterns in beige and gold. Elaborate, ludicrous bouquets, fresh for this day only, stand on shelves. In the hall-end mirror, its gold frame molded to resemble stumps of driftwood, Rick catches sight and fixes his face. That rolling stance, his stocky progress, the tight, sweated suit makes sense only when topped with a clenched expression. He clicks his fingers wide of his body like goading chained dogs.

The door a sallow green – maybe someone painted it gold then tried rowing back to a shade less vulgar. He inspects it nonchalantly, feels the camera probe his spine. Tries the peephole – of course it's blocked. A little breath uplifts his chest, as his fist meets paint. “Dex. Hey, Dex Roberts. It's your pal Rick.” Hammering echoes into the room beyond. “Hey, fam. It's your Basra buddy. You old so-and-so.” Pretends squinting in at the peep. “She a blonde or one of them avatar things? Unclench her a second, buster.” His racket dies to nothing. Stendhal won't appreciate a nil return.

Without further fabrication, Rick balls his fists in his pockets, stumps away down the hall. Since all those plush hotels caught fire in the Middle East, providers of upscale accommodation have been sprucing the fire stairs, and this one's a peach. Concrete given the marble treatment, black iron rails so plain they must cost a mint. Signage in five languages. Even the emergency lighting has fancy brackets. He busts the bar to the street behind, hearing nothing but knowing that when those doors open, an alarm speeds over to Rescue 1 and the

Deputy Chief gets a beep. Practice is never wasted.

The building straddles a whole block, showing its blank backside to West 22nd. A tall brick fuck-you to anyone searching out the old Shearith cemetery. Rick swings away from the slammed fire door, not wholly surprised there's a voice waiting.

"Hey, fat back. Yeah, with the shaved gourd."

Not casual, nor incidental. That concierge must have pressed the button the second he went upstairs. Turning about, there's the black car, there's the guy stood next to it yelling. Some heavy beige figure bunched at the wheel, chewing gum. Both wear the kind of zip-up varsities that naturally conceal a strap.

Rick saunters toward them, keeping it mild and easy. "Talking to me, friend?"

The guy by the car lets him walk a while. "Who else I be talking to?"

"Well, I don't know." Rick's close now. "I thought you maybe got lost from Pre-K."

Those hands, the guy's hands, stay worryingly tight in his pockets. "Rick Carpetto, am I right? Told you." Words shot from the side of his mouth in through the car window. "Didn't I say that's Carpetto?"

"Is this where we take a ride to one of the city's unrestored piers?"

"We like nothing more, truly." The guy steps back, opens the rear door. "But that ain't our orders just yet. Mind your dome on the paint."

They go south on 7th, West Houston drenched with dusty heat. The guys ride with the windows down, gray air beating their skin. "Carpetto," the guy next to him laughs. "Well isn't it."

His bulk barely fitting the seat, the driver growls the whole time.

"Roberts set you up for this? Dex Roberts?" Rick tries keeping hold on his juice, but it's tough in the nylon air.

"Dex Roberts?" The guy damn-near slides his arm around Rick's shoulder. "Isn't it? Dex Roberts."

Upfront, the driver growls.

They slide onto Brooklyn Bridge, the guy liking the steel-dark water. "See that?" Boats churn pier to pier, gulls swoop, the city scatters across clubby islands. "Isn't it. Who wouldn't love this town at the time of their death?"

"What you numbskulls want? Is this about Roberts?"

"That name, man." The guy tweaks Rick's ear. "You think you say it and he appears like Jesus?"

Why Stendhal set him up for this and when does Rick get paid are the only pertinent questions in the city. "You taking me to his doctor?"

"Americano." The guy flips one hand out the window, the other clonks Rick's head. "Take notice. Blue sky. Wide river. That smell. Breathe it up. These are moments of pleasure. Of life. You don't even need to drive. So, for Christ, shut your mouth."

They come to ground by Whitman Park, the District Courthouse flanged and banded like an old radio set. Through homey streets, then a stop light at Boerum and Atlantic.

As they wait, a crumpled suit hurls his belly at the car. "I come at you with the best sheet metal offer you ever had. You want siding, I got siding. You want cut by laser, I got it." His salesman face sucking like a jellyfish.

Rick Carpetto presumes asking this guy for help would be asking a nun for French. "I don't want siding."

"Sure you don't." As the car takes off the salesman yells, "Cocksucker."

The chuckling assassin claps Rick's shoulder. "You shouldn't offend, man. He just making a living."

“Like you?” With keen disgust, Rick unpeels the guy’s fingers from his suit. “You make a living kidnapping people?”

“Kidnapping?” He taps his head. “You got in the car.”

Driver’s antsy with endless Cobble Hill intersections, giving gas to spook the young moms chivvying long-haired daughters over the crosswalk. Just a few blocks west is the Brooklyn-Queens Expressway. If Rick could hijack the car, push on down to exit 26, he’d blow these creeps through the Battery Tunnel. What a challenge from the back section. Rick tries not to notice how sweet these brownstones catch the school’s-out sunshine. Lorraine always wanted a place like this. Like she wanted a husband who cared shit. He checks someone’s mom rocking a chestnut fringe, man’s shirt and cargoes. Kind of how Lorraine liked to dress. Till the sickness ate her stomach and spat out the rest.

They stop by St. Paul’s Episcopal, advertising its once-a-month Jazz Mass. Once-a-month sounds right for that. Driver gets out, wrestling his pants the bulky way of sedentary men. Glares like the street annoys him.

“Americano.” The talkative guy slaps Rick’s knee. “You need this,” the guy taps Rick’s noggin. “This rooster chest,” the guy sticks out his chest in mockery, “that’s no good for anyone. You nobody’s home boy, fam. You not in Kansas.”

Climb the stoop of another sweet brownstone, its outer door unlocked in this family neighborhood. Inside, the usual paper: insurance, maintenance, pest control, the same uncollected mail. Mr. Cheery unlocks the hallway – a walkup, listing a little, the street stealthily sinking. Apartment doors with spyholes and busted-looking locks. One door parts from its frame, unable to fight the gathering slant of the building. A sunny sliver of room beyond, a hint of life.

That playful tug at Rick’s sleeve. “We go top of the block.”

So they climb to the fifth, the stairs leaning into each floor. Plants trail off the bannisters, giving a jungle taste. There’s funk behind closed doors, a mat of sandy-gray dog hairs on each rug. Junk complicates the hallways: wilted shoes and outpaced umbrellas.

The top floor stands thick with heat. A roof light traps the surging sky. Sweat breaks across Rick’s brow. The driver cusses with exertion. The other guy, the merry one, he’s okay with warmth, fresh in the fat light, sparkling in twenty-blocks-south-of-nowhere daytime.

Rick gets prodded toward the rear apartment. The nameplate says D. B. Cooper. Guess it’s been empty a while. The place is a wallop – sharply furnished, plush gray couch, beige wing backs each side of a glass table. Big TV, physical books – arty stuff, Vogue covers. Some neighborly paintings, the kind traded by cashless friends for future favors. A sundeck with about a dozen chairs. A swankier prison than home.

“See, Americano?” Again, the touchy stuff. “You think we put you down the hole? We are professional people. Now get comfortable, eh? Feel the aircon. The doctor will see you soon.”

Rick waits for their footsteps to die in the heat, then tries the door. It’s locked. The sundeck door is locked too. So are the windows. The TV he could maybe fling through the sundeck door, take a hike down the fire stairs, catch his breath on a Cobble Hill corner – no idea why he was there, no way to find out. So he takes a seat, plays patient, pulls a book on Cape Cod etiquette from the shelf.

The book teaches weekend manners for adult and child guests. Its jauntiness pricks him. Whale watching off the Cape with a couple of pretty kids was maybe something Lorraine would yearn for. Little pile of shells by the cabin door. Rick never questioned why Lorraine stuck with him. Why she thought, in time, he’d buy that brownstone, give her those kids. No one told him she’d go before he got around to things.

Rick tries the doors, the windows again, tries the kitchen – the kitchen is sweet. Wide stove, tall refrigerator, sparkling clean. No sense that anyone cooks there nor ever will.

There's no bedroom. The couch folds out. Enough pillows and throws to stay cozy. The bathroom has no natural light. Finicky lamps make the pink of the walls bounce around. He takes a whiz then waits for the tank to refill. Water jogs and shies through the pipes. Somebody plumbed this, wired the power, bought furniture, paid guys to sweat it upstairs. Tacked D. B. Cooper on the door, a wink to the wiseguy. The exact simulacrum of a Cobble Hill rental that unravelling newlyweds would claw eyes for. A slice of theater for times like these. Lorraine would have loved this. Rick knows he was the problem. Always thinking she could wait another day.

Survival lights his blood – on the quiet air he hears someone walk upstairs. They won't stop at the second or third, they want top of the block. By the sound, it's someone who doesn't feel age or altitude hobble their legs. He tries the kitchen again but it's showpiece – no knives, nothing heavy.

He sets himself in front of the window, so whoever has to face the formidable daylight. His shadow stains the rug, a little pudgy, a little close.

The first lock, then the second, then a woman smoothing the sleeve that shoved the door. Her curls are relaxed, her single-button brown jacket sits on a soft white shirt. Her pants are straight. Mid-forties, maybe. No jewelry. Her face, squinting with sunshine, expecting things quick and tidy.

“Mr. Carpetto. No need to look shifty.”

“Call me Rick.”

“I won't do that. You can sit down. The chair isn't rigged.”

“Reassuring. What's with the case?”

A slim, shiny briefcase in her right hand. “Please, no chit-chat. Sit down, Mr. Carpetto.”

Moving sideways to keep her fully in sight, he plants himself facing the door.

She walks briskly across the soft, plush room, her jacket taking auburn notes from the sunlight. Tidily compact, she sits opposite, squaring the briefcase on the table between them.

Business nags at Rick. “I'm looking for Dex Roberts. A personal matter. Been looking all day.”

Her lips are a rich purse. “I'm aware Ty Stendhal employed you.”

“Ty Stendhal asked me to find Roberts. ‘Employed’ suggests getting paid.”

“You know why Stendhal set you running?”

Rick taps a beat on his knees. “I'm not open to ‘why’. I got told: speak to his doctor.”

“But you went to Mr. Roberts' building instead.”

“Well aren't you well-informed. Those comedians that brought me here, they your kind of people?”

“They were helping you not to make foolish mistakes.” She's pissed with him, he knows that. Him, and more besides. That abrasion might dislocate her poised disappointment.

“So I'm here now. Do I get to see Roberts? Or his doctor?”

“I'm his doctor. Dr. Dana Carlton.”

“Head doctor?”

“Neuropsychiatry and brain dysfunction.”

“Sounds like I met someone smarter than me.”

“I wasn't brought here by armed men, if that's what you mean.” Her restless fingers brush the briefcase. “If I know about Stendhal, don't you think Roberts does too?”

Rick holds up his hands. “I'm sure it's all over the wires. I was told to get in with your guy,

here I am. You know Stendhal's girl is top-drawer crazy? She'd get a kick off neuropsychiatry."

"You assume a lot, Mr. Carpetto. If you're successful at getting an in, where's Mr. Roberts now? In the bathroom? Did you miss him there?"

In her line of work, he figures, enjoyment is sparse, so he runs with the play. "Maybe I saw and forgot him. My memory's not so good."

Both hands, flat on the briefcase. "Forgetting can be just what the doctor ordered. If you could delete one memory, Mr. Carpetto, which would it be?"

Can he break for the door? Can he chance that? She'll have goons in the hall. Dex Roberts won't want to hear about any screw ups. "Well, that's an interesting question. Especially as I already forgot a barn-load of things. What was I doing at age eight, age ten – couldn't tell you. You want to sell forgetting? It comes free with just living a while."

"These childhood events, when did you forget them?" She straightens, didactic. "I'm willing to bet it took decades for that hurt to fade. They're not gone even yet. You might go someplace, meet someone, watch a ball game, taste a cookie. Catch the smell of a stagnant summer pond or the shriek of a girl. Like that, you're back there." Her fingers seam the edge of the case. "I'm asking what you want forgotten, here and now."

"Hypothetical, right?"

"You say so."

"I live alone." He needs defense, she's a shrink. "When I'm not working, I go home, watch TV. Go to the diner for Jack Benny and Eve With A Lid. Buy a hand-hold for the walk home. That's me, Dr. Carlton, I don't think about it. My head's elsewhere entirely. When I'm not working, I think of Lorraine."

"Communication is more than a shiver, Mr. Carpetto." She yanks the chain of this dense and surly dog.

"I had this wife. Lorraine. All a man needs and more. If I paid you two gold bits an hour, I'd maybe admit that, yeah, I let work distract me from her. I believed there'd always be later. But she was done. Ate up inside. So fast the doctors took pictures. Hollow, she was. The parasite supreme and of her, nothing. I've helped a few guys to eternity. I got paid. But when I saw Lorraine on that slab I was broke on the tiles. Because we weren't done, you see? There was meant to be later. So when I'm at the bar, drunk as a judge; in a basement with short-time candy; asleep in each weary day, all I have in my head is Lorraine. You flip that out of me, Doc, I'm your number one sales boy."

"Except you wouldn't remember why."

"You can frug with Dex Roberts, tell Stendhal I quit. If you, for real, can give my Lorraine peace, save her poor ghost from my thinking, then I'm your schoolboy, Doctor. I'm your mouse in the maze."

Quiet, on the fifth. Only aircon and, now and then, birds with shrill, electrified cries. The cross streets stretching to intersect, block by block building the city. Blond plaster and rusty bricks. Cowed with swollen heat, everyone sleeping.

So quiet, the click of her briefcase lock is an earthquake. The lid tips back, he sees himself in wine leather. "On the couch please, Mr. Carpetto."

Obediently, he forces a den in the comforters and blankets. "Did my luck change, Doc?"

"You say so." Those angry eyes sweep him. "Coat off please, roll your shirtsleeve."

"I'm wearing links."

"You can straighten your jewelry when you're done. Roll your sleeve." In a slick, pressured move she draws a hypodermic from the case.

"You're putting me on," says Rick, jacket slung and cuff dutifully tucked.

“Humor me.” Doc sits beside him, smelling bleached and expert.

“What’s the juice?”

Dr. Carlton pops the cap, shaking the stuff through inquisitive sunlight. A slinky, silver liquid, swirled with dark, metallic shards.

“PTSD is a vibrant market. More customers all the time. You know the difference between a psychiatrist and a psychologist?”

“Is that like: what’s the difference between your mom and a washing machine?”

“Not nearly so gross, Mr. Carpetto. Psychiatry is medicine. Unlike those cranks who talk you to death, I can prescribe. You were in the Mideast?”

“Old news travels fast.”

“You mask very well your bewilderment at how I know your history.”

“I got to see Dex Roberts.”

“I think your order was talk to me.” Without needing to watch her hands, she preps the needle. “I treat patients caught up in combat.”

“I’m no stinking veteran.”

“No, you were there doing charity work. I treat what’s scraped from the roadside after the bomb. What they want to forget is what made them deadly. But not you, Mr. Carpetto.”

“I told you.” He watches her squeeze a vein. “I can’t think, can’t act, she’s always on me. Wanting the rest of her life.”

“You still love her.”

“That.” Surreptitious, his left hand digs in the plush of the couch, to brace the flinch, to not give him away when the needle rides home. Rick Carpetto looks to the window, focusing off from the rare, familiar burn. The savage light, the hot, wet air, New York City smelling of burned dust and chlorine. Lives and intersections, rust and birds on the wing.

“A man without love,” Dr. Carlton slips the needle, “that’s childhood without sunshine.”

A sprightly breeze flows over his face. Behind closed eyes there’s a kink to the day, sun rewritten by shade. Distant sigh of the wind. That smell – fresh wholeness. A clean whistle of air to focus him on the weight behind his spine.

Rick Carpetto opens his eyes. White oaks rise above, their crazed trunks riding distant canopies on the wind. Far beyond, clouds rip the blue sky. Green-smelling woods, yielding to fruit. He raises his head enough to glimpse fields, soaked with corn.

Some kind of knock-out drench someone must have slipped him. Inertia welds his back to the earth, this lumpy dirt at the edge of the forest. Stiff, he flexes his arms, bracing into the ground. Flounders like a man in sand. Hoists himself halfway, seeing wide, fertile country under the hill. Homesteads scatter across the fields, shingles gleam with sunshine. A flash of water, a river maybe, a lake dislocated from its meanders. Corn to a horizon ripe with hills. Whatever snuck in his veins, he sure feels rested.

A small interruption, a weathered cough, a slight jingle of metal. Slowly, the man becomes visible – that lean frame of outdoor labor, bleached denim bib pants suspended from squared shoulders. A smock shirt, copper skin shaded by a wide hat. Tools for everyday mending fixed at his belt. When he sees Rick, his legs stop but his upper body cranes forward in a short-sighted stance. He rubs his hand under his chin.

It’s obvious, Rick knows he looks off in his suit, his Nicky knot and links. Like he leaned against a door on a plane that wasn’t bolted tight. Wrenching himself to a sit there’s cramp through his body. He wants to be up on his dogs but gravity pounds him down.

The man squints. “Take a knock there young fella?” his voice at one with the trees and earth.

“Taking five.” Rick slaps the dirt in pally affection. “Long day.”

“Got a name, friend?”

“Dan Cooper.”

“I’m Chester. This is my spread, from over by the track, those fields, to the far end of this tree line. It’s pretty good country. We turn about a hundred-thirty bushels an acre. You know anything of the corn trade?”

Again, Rick fails to prize himself up. “I’m a tourist here.”

“It’s hard business. Old too. Them other folks, when they was here, they knew corn work. Had a big jamboree for the harvest, dance around and such. Very, you know, very astute people. They knew the corn long before.”

“Pity they ain’t here to ask about it.”

“You know their god, they called their god The Breath Maker. He’s still about, that old fella. You feel him, in this air.” Chester gazes to Rick’s crumpled tailoring. “You get lost someway?”

Rick watches the corn roll with the wind. “Well, I could use a ride to town.”

Chester scrapes his stubble again. “Well, I don’t really have what you might call wheels. I stay pretty much on my spread. Is there someone to send for, maybe?”

“Someone?”

“You know, like a girl, like a sweetheart or wife?”

Sly breeze through the old woodland smooches Rick’s face. He looks around but there’s only tall trees. “No. No one like that. I’m single. Always was.”

Up on the fifth, in the tall haze, Dr. Dana Carlton doesn’t hear the street door slam. She doesn’t hear Rick loaded into the truck nor the truck start driving. She waits all the same, tracing her gaze on the cross streets. Watching the blackening sun. She waits till she knows the street door slammed, till she knows the truck left the block. Something stirs inside her, an intensity not quite joy. Even with the mechanical breeze her body is warm in these clothes, her hair damp on her neck. She times her pulse. Lays her face against the sundeck door. Its heat enrages her.

When a half hour slips by, when her veins pop and tingle, she unlocks her phone and deletes the log of calls she made today. She taps the one number she knows by heart. “Hey, it’s me. I’m on my way back. You want to stay home tonight, get wine and pizza? Yeah, yeah I love you.”

She gets her briefcase, straightens the cushions, goes out the door, clicks the first, then the second lock. Tests the door with her shoulder. Breathes the heat of the stairwell, stifling a smile.

LAST NIGHT AT THE HOUSE CONCERT

1.

the ceremony of the exchange of the arrangements the dried winter berries and preserved pussy willows from the last time we met four years ago the night before everything changed exchanged for a glamorous fresh floral bouquet floated hand to hand across our giddy gathering placed to applause elegant on marble mantelpiece just as I wrote this in the blossoming park an exuberant floral trolley bike thingy extravagantly amassed in plastic petals peddled by wow that was gorgeous I wish I took a photo

2.

as was the song the banjoguitaristfiddler played transcribed from music he'd learned with difficult diligence from a pair of sibling musicians he'd encountered in Africa playing contrapuntally confounding tempos in competing keys all the while singing in unison a verse whose rote words they'd been raised on in a lost language no one spoke the song is called Peace Farmer so centering so soothing as though it really could grow peace if we would only if only we would listen to its syncopated weave

3.

after desserts chattering and final wine the lyric guitar girl younger daughter sang her brand new beatitude composed at the end of pandemic house arrest the band her older sister's banjo friends' fiddles & harp her father intensely attentive on piano & trumpet all of us humming the humming part the repeating languid chant *this is my palace this is my palace* to her radiant mother in the audience weeping

SECOND QUARTER SONNET

And now it is April the holy month of seed sewing
Snow on Mount Tam and in New York an earthquake
Snowed twice since the lake's been unfrozen
Water remnant from mountain-making late in the Elzevirian orogeny
It's on occasion been known to snow as late as 9 May I observe
Noting my fifty-eight year old baby brother's snow born arrival
Misreading "the fragrant rafters" as "the fragment rafters"
Which the author surely wrote in summer's heat not April's precarity
The fragment rafters is where I live
Motes floating from the sky in my eyes
I wrote this even before p.s. an eclipse

8 April 2:31 pm

WOOLLY BLUE CURLS

note found in a thirteen-year-old scribbled green gardening journal
from that prior Mendocino life reclaiming the quarry the wild
flower fields lichen forests of oak madrone manzanita bay
Poonkinney Creek hastened to feed the stream beseechingly called Goforth
into the torpid Eel at the interval named Two Rivers in another stolen language
it was May I'd been documenting the native grasses deschampsia melica stipa elymus
the common sedge or juncus crowding edge to edge the uncommon redwood bog
the amusing thrilling ephemerals that they were there & that I could name them
blue-eyed grass blue dicks mule ears shooting stars sharp darts of Ithuriel's spear
benign flames of paint brush firecracker scarlet larkspur cardinal flower
farewell to spring each spring I sought & counted that spring I noted—
“I am so happy this is one of the best weeks of my life fifty-seven &
I'm still having them who knew the woolly blue curls are so beautiful
last year I pruned them what they call severely & severely I culled the yellow
star thistle over & over four years or more last year the purple thistle also
I made an anti-Andy Goldsworthy extallation 6,666 thistles plus or minus extracted
suddenly finally at last & all at once the yellow star thistle is minimal sporadic spots
not all over cover two effortless armfuls tugged & the purple a few weak stalks
like the polyps in my colon which as it turns out astonishingly I also culled
they just called to tell me the polyps are gone plain disappeared though they insist
that never happens at last year's scope there were sheets & sheets forty to fifty
chemo-fed polyps waiting impatiently to kill me this year just two tiny benign
easily eradicated thank you goddess & thank you dear Nestor beloved brilliant
humorous acupuncturist who somehow mysteriously made this happen”
I gave Nestor an early version of this poem w/a huge bouquet of non-native florist flowers
robust spring peonies which seem to flourish into old age untended in squalid yards
this was in the spring of the year that ended with me walking that thistle-free field one last time
the morning before a heart attack & stroke ended the tending

MOUNTAIN BECAME A MEMORY

Came upon a tree once on the Dawn Falls Trail, entirely engulfed, swarms of adult convergent lady beetles smothering its trunk, an indolent diapause

spent in a mountain dale far from their sustenance. I was a ladybird, waiting for more illuminated days to fly to what feeds her. Meanwhile, monarchs covered eucalyptus

in the butterfly grove. Slow trekking the Dipsea, high on mushrooms, we stopped to nap curled in a redwood's burnt-out gothic arch. Huckleberries gathered in a hat. One

long ago anniversary we hiked to a honeymoon cabin sleeping porch. Clear star-filled sky above the fog—I had not known there was an above the fog. Against my heart and will,

I'd followed his insistent lead up a deer trail above the town that ended on a hillside so steep I was paralyzed, unable to descend or rise, frozen in place. He had to drag me,

frustrated and angry. How did I get there? Acquiesced to men's unnatural conviction they must tell me what to do. Why did I stay? The things we've created or allowed or

think we can't do anything about but fret and vent. He was not my true love he was endlessly unfaithful. I was a ladybird, waiting for more illuminated days to fly to what feeds her.

DOS RIOS

stillness the near absolute holds a hum opaque and gray as though

with rain coming though it's too early isn't it

douglas fir piercing skyline bristling creak of the bay trees

air turning cool as though with rain ohming

slight shudder of leaves gentle bend a waver over then back again

truck's rattle as it passes metallic crackling like thunder down the hill

vultures' static glide do they always look downward they do

I am obsessed with my death

the mysterious livingness of this spiraling body

so deceptively well with its

odd spots and traumatized linings still

the near absolute holds a hum opaque and gray

as though with rain coming though

it's too early isn't it

CORONIS

back in the living with filled dish
feathers scattered bloody entrails

the bird drags a broken wing
an augur crow descends
bearing the symbol of medicine & the WHO

A tough thing for birds is having hollow bones

*unwanted physical contact
can be a death sentence*

corvid the crow / covid the crown

Coronis was set among the stars in the Crow constellation

by her murderous plague-god lover once he'd
cut their son from her burning womb

her snake-staff bearing son Asclepius
her granddaughters & grandsons

healers all

Asclepius of *asclepias incarnata* for instance
nectar / nest of the butterfly

monarch / regarded as a god incarnate

transformation & change for the better / or death

Asclepeion temples were clinics & med schools

where Hippocrates & Galen learned their craft
surrounded by a healthful grove

no one was allowed to die there / no one could be born

remedies revealed
in sleep & dreaming

THREE UNTITLED POEMS

from *For the Anniversaries of All Loving Kinds of Meetings*

1.

everyone is an artist

involved in the cosmogony of
her own bearable world

all the glimmering things
yellow river of pollen

pink garment of blossom
shattering leaves

the vocal throat
a vase spreading stems

2.

postcards from poets

it's all play

—or remember the splashing with girls—

—that's all accomplishment is to play as much as possible

which is huge and we haven't even eaten yet

3.

the gorgeous shiver of participation

in the astonishing beauty of everything

the dance both aural & visual
on the abstract screen of the mind

it made me want to laugh I smiled & smiled

cycling through
contortions of longing

in the constant background of my multitasking

SECRETS

I've kept her secret 40 years.
I carried a paper bag of money
to the woman patient that was bribing her.

That day was snowy
and I couldn't find my boots
in the back of the closet
where so much is buried
and forgotten.

The white coat you discarded
at her apartment
smelled antiseptic
with a small dot of blood on the collar
you would have never noticed.

I hand over a paper bag
filled with money
working class lesbian swagger
warns the woman to never ask again,
leave word with your receptionist
that your house is cleaned
and yes I locked the door.

I blink and here we are
retired and sipping tea
on the patio before your husband comes home.

We've had some interesting times
haven't we
and click our tea cups and smile.

The gazebo is still overgrown with ivy
that tangles together
holding up
a lush and green journey of growth.

BABYSITTING DANNY

Danny and I met for the last time
at a 5th Street bar
two doors down from his mother's old haunt,
where I ran numbers for her
to the bookie joint across the street.

My hand reaches for him,
then retreats.
He is a tear waiting to fall on my cheek.

I taught him to steal at Woolworths.
He emptied his small pockets
and delivered his haul
to older girls he wanted to please,
balloons, eye liner, and candy lips
that bled into our mouths.

His mother was 43
when she was found dead,
empty pill bottles beside her,
no last words
in an apartment above Katz Bagels.

I wanted to steal something for him,
to give him his mother's laugh,
the way she held a martini
and a cigarette.

I paid for his beer
and offered nothing more.
He lagged behind me.
My car door opened and shut.

Six months later he's dead.
Beer bottles on his floor.
California sun on my face
when I get the call.

A gun in his hand.
No suicide note.
A lone picture of his mother
on his night stand.

MURDER ON GARLAND STREET

"I shot a crow"
My father tells me on his death bed
his blue and hooded eyes
need me to know
but I can't hold his regret.
He's 90
Diapered lying on a hospital bed.

My young sons beside him that day,
the whisper of autumn leaves
hushed by the thump on the ground
open winged
beak headed north with the moss.

He says he was a cruel man
yet not always
and I'm sure he is thinking of me.
The time we made a doll house
in the basement
little people sitting on chairs
watching tv.
At 16 the keys to his 1956 Chevy.

Still, he needs to tell me
nights at the hunting lodge
his friends cut of the balls of deer
and threw them into flames.

"Why had I done that" he asked?
Did the crow's mate mourn
as he does now
lying with a blistered heart,
the crevices in his body filled with medicine
that can't fix him.

"Do you think there is a God"
This man of faith asks his atheist daughter
and I have compassion still
that sweeps between anger and love
back and forth
the way a broom does
unconscious of what it picks up.

I open the blinds
watch them lift higher and higher
to reveal the city.
A police car roars by.
The death rattle stops
and I never want more than now
for there to be a God
who will forgive him.

doormat

julie ball

you meet this group of friends and you're so excited that these people are being slightly nicer to you than the average person so you are so happy that you feel respected and then eventually the group ditches you in a really harsh traumatic way so then you go on alone for a while and then eventually you meet this group of friends and you're so excited that these people are being slightly nicer to you than the average person so you are so happy that you feel respected so in gratitude you give them a really nice gesture of appreciation because you know how great it would make you feel to receive something like that so you put your heart and soul into this group and then eventually the group ditches you in a really harsh traumatic way so then you go on alone for a while and then eventually you meet this group of friends and you're so excited that these people are being slightly nicer to you than the average person so you are so happy that you feel respected so in gratitude you give them a really nice gesture of appreciation ever better than what you had given the previous group because you know how great it would make you feel to receive something like that so you put your heart and soul into this group and then eventually the group ditches you in a really harsh traumatic way so then you go on alone for a while and then eventually you meet this group of friends this group of friends

Petrichor

Caroline Livermore

(a pleasant smell that frequently accompanies the first rain after a long period of warm dry weather)

Jesse drives
his sunflower yellow backhoe
slowly ahead of me.
Punctuating dampened whale grey asphalt strewn confetti-like burnt orange, mustard and
dappled crimson leaves.
He is oblivious to my quiet creeping, voyeur-like stealth surrounded by the electric air of his
unknowing.
Jesse cranks his head back and forth, breathing petrichor.
His strength sapped from a grueling death watch over Linda, beloved sister, nearing her
denouement.
Tricky, what to gift, or write to the dying.
I made her a card, stamping The Lady of Guadalupe in sepia on antiqued parchment.
Inside I wrote "Good Luck"
instead of "Get Well," enclosing an authentic
unused ticket to the Louvre.
I invited her to hold it tightly,
close her eyes and transport herself to Paris.
Linda surrounds herself with childless images of the Virgin.
Having no children, perhaps she prefers

The Skin on the Back of Your Hand is as Thin as the Ice at the Dam

Chris Hart

I am on. Not getting on. Only on. I am up, out of bed, on my feet, shoes on, wool socks on. Mother's wool socks she made and I wore for years and years and then even more of those years, after. I am going to drink coffee that is too hot to drink and then make peanut butter on saltines. Pack them in the noisy pouch. "Watch those fingers around that zipper, kiddo." I am going outside and walking where I want to walk. Know the way. No, the way is here. Here. There. Back around. Then here. Down to the path, the snow just that high.

* * *

Sky is starched. A bedsheet, ironed. Smooth to the touch. Egg white over lemon curd. Tires splash through ruts in the road. Closer.

"Where you going, Tommy? You need a ride?"

Dairy Farm Man in his rusty old International, pulls up alongside this tall feller. He leans out his window, spits. There's black tobacco in it.

"Yuck," Tommy says.

"Where you off to? It's freezing this morning. Want to see the cows?"

Tommy glances down at the spit in the gravel and snow. Says "Nope," but doesn't say it.

"I'm fine," he says. His breath settles in among his whiskers. He leans into the straight lane, walks on. The pouch, under his big black coat, Dad's coat, makes its dulcimer sound. Two notes, out of tune. Zee *zuh*. Zee *zuh*. Only when he walks. That's always been funny. Always. He steps along with it.

"See you later," Tommy calls out to the farmer. "Stop by our house some time, all right?"

"Don't you be out here too long, Tom," the farmer says as he drives by slowly. "It's cold."

* * *

My Dearest Family –

I do worry about that boy, now a man. And yet, I know worry is a wasteful emotion, an indulgence of which I want no part. I write to you today to ask you to look in on him after I pass. He will not lock the doors. He will not empty the cat box. He will not (and you might make a note of it) cook – not much more than canned soup or tuna on toast. He is the boy we knew, the same boy, with his face in the doughnuts

and the pie and a second piece of angel food cake when he was so, so stuffed. Remember when he got into the tin of cough drops and nearly choked? That's that sweet tooth.

As his mother, I ask you to watch over him, but do not "hover" over him. I ask you to talk to him, but not order him about as you would an employee. I ask you to keep up his spirits, pray with him, and please sustain his love of Our Lord. He is yours as much as mine. Especially now.

Do not encourage him to shave. Oh, you will want to! I have said to him, "There are many things I proudly watch you do. Shaving is not one of them." He is hell with a razor.

As I say, I worry about him. However, this is not a concern that I wish to pass along to you. Rather, it is my wish that he be permitted – perhaps encouraged! – to continue to live the life that I, in my limited perspective, allowed him to live during that earlier time of calamity and grief. It was my decision to make, and so I made it.

On the page that follows you will find notes, telephone numbers, names of professionals who know him well. Share copies, please. And when your heart tells you it is right, say this to him about me: She loved you and gave you all that she knew how to give. Admittedly it was not much, but.... Etc.

Yours in Christ,

Emma Jean

* * *

Dairy Farm Man comes in. Shuts down his truck. The barn light is a hat with a brim and a greeting: "Good evening, sir, may I take your cane? Would you like a drink? The lady of the house awaits you in the parlor." He walks in, drops his boots, sits down at the kitchen table. Fried chicken under a dish towel.

He thinks back to the morning. Where was old Tommy going? Did he even say? Shit, now. Did he?

* * *

I am on it, that's for sure. I am right on the trail. Ain't been in these woods for so long! God! Smell that air. That's clean. These places was ours. I don't know, sir, maybe they still is. If they had me, owning them, I mean, I would make them warmer. I'd get a blanket, a big, big blanket, and I'd lay it down. Tuck everything in, right up to the edge of the lake. But I wouldn't touch that ice. Listen to that ice, just listen to it. The nothing of it. Look at how those brown geese walk right on it. I don't think I ever saw that before. I could go clear over there, across. Walk where I want to walk. Do I ask her first? Am I proper dressed for it? Church shoes kept me dry so far. I

have my lunch. Mother, would it be all right if I? But you said yourself, "You grew up fine, you did that much. You don't need quite the same sort of help anymore, Thomas."

I want to get right up by the dam. I want to see it from this side. Daddy and Uncle Pim took me fishing there, way back when. They said it's deep and to use the trolling motor. "Don't get out and swim, son. Jesus Christ, don't ever do that."

I'm not fishing today. I'm walking.

* * *

"It's his nephew. Can you talk to him, honey?"

"Sorry to get you out of bed, chief. Tom's my aunt's – yes. My aunt's boy. No, the neighbor called me first – he had our number. He thought I'd know where Tom was. Yeah, I tried. Yeah. Nobody answered when I called the house. I didn't want to wait 'til morning. Tom's either outside, or something's wrong with him. He's not in the best shape. Aunt Emma never let him go out after dark. Oh, man, I was gonna check in on him this weekend."

The Fire and Rescue Man pulls his heavy turnout coat and pants over his pajamas.

"I didn't even know Tommy was still living in that house," he tells his wife. "On his own – can you believe it? Somebody shoulda let us in on that."

* * *

I don't need no help. I love where I am. It's bright. I'd like to stay. And she said I'd be all right when I got old. So.

* * *

Voices call out through a fixed state of darkness. The fact of darkness. Its flatness, stirred into an awakening by the shouts and cries of men. Rounded-off cries that carry over the snow, the hills, the woods, then rise up into the cold stream of stars. Cries, they die off.

Two lights, three lights, their beams cross and dance and shake.

Tom! Tommy! Tom! Tommy.

Dairy Farm Man cradles his rifle as he walks with them. He thinks about raising it into the frigid air. If he shoots, Thomas will hear it. But he might get scared. He might be on the ice – he could trip and go through.

"Don't fire it off yet, buddy," a volunteer fireman tells him. "We'll keep calling for him. He's bound to hear it. Who's got a flare? You guys seen any tracks?"

The fireman, in his heavy gear, steps into a slab of snow piled up around a fallen tree.

“Goddamn it, it’s thick back in here,” he says. “Hard to listen for him.”

Others pass through. Shout his name. Reflective bands on their arms and legs, catching light. They shout. Stop and listen. Talk about getting the dogs. But that’s an hour or more. Clouds and woodsmoke and steaming mugs of sweet tea.

* * *

I am here. I’m on here! I’m in here. I push up, but I sink back in. It’s not working, nothing I’m doing is working. God. I lost a sock. Mommy, I lost one. Just the one. I’m sorry, sorry, sorry I came down this way. Knew it was wrong, but I remembered and I wanted to see it again. It looks pretty strange right now, don’t it? Like I’m in a black and white TV, but it’s not giving off no heat. I’m wet and really cold. Maybe you might like the sound of it, though. It’s a music, a music not like any I ever heard. Ever. It hums a while, then it pops like a firecracker. You probably can hear it now, I’d say. Can you?

Tomorrow, I’ll tell you about it. I’ll make the noise it makes. And you’ll laugh and try to pick me up.

The Department of Defense

Chris Hart

See, I knew Boyd. Knew Simpson, too. Boyd, we called him Colonel. When he was straight in his chair, I mean straight like sat up, like Simp got his cap on him and those stripes stood out and he looked fit to serve. So we'd serve him, we'd get him a coffee and a roll which he might have or he might not.

"Colonel, now, you gotta eat so I can take you to the track this weekend. We're gonna go, uh-huh," Simp'd say. We'd sit there in that Bennigan's, watching. I was always on the other side from them, but I was with them. I had a tea and a fried egg. By God, they could fry an egg and get it squared up on a piece of toast in that particular Bennigan's. That'd be those skinny girls in the back. Stef waited on us, talked for a long while with us.

"I'm not sure but I think Simpson might've been in the Navy," she said quiet, to me. I said, no, I don't suspect so, but I bet his daddy was and that's why he was led into this work, this caretaking work or whatever you'd call it.

"Well, that's sweet," Stef said, sorting through her change at the table. "Always have thought he was the dearest young man, looking after you all. No one can say nothing else about it."

Simp wasn't married, he wasn't widowed. He weren't nothing in that regard, far as we could see. He gave us rides and met us at the restaurant and helped us with stuff like drapes for our house, new socks, incidentals.

"You did a world of good for me and everybody, and I'll make sure y'all ain't never alone and forgotten," he said.

Boyd was the worst off of all of us, so Simp was specially good to him. He brushed his hair and wiped the crumbs off his shirt.

"You wild thing," Simp'd say to Boyd. "You need a shave." That made us laugh like, goddamn, did we laugh.

One time this lady come in the Bennigan's – younger gal, pulling along her little kid. They flop out in the booth next to me. I can't see her good, the late morning sun's just retching white light through the window and I can't reach the blind. Her kid's whining because he don't want to be there. I get that, but –

Simp asks me if I want the shade down. I say nah, that's OK, and meantime the lady's talking to Stef.

"What is that man doing?" she says. And it's probably because Simp is cleaning up Boyd. He's got Boyd's wheels pushed back, he's down there adjusting something or wiping up something and Boyd is for sure in some pain.

“Jesus Christ Almighty,” Boyd says.

“Hang on a sec,” Simpson says. He’s working on it. He’s got it. The tubes and whatnot.

This gal says, “Excuse me. Are you all right? I don’t think you should be doing that here.” She wants the manager.

Simp turns to look up at her. That’s all he does – looks. Brother, you couldn’t get a darker look than that. Like, there’s the *void*. Oh, man, you shoulda seen it. No, no. You should not.

She says, “If he’s sick, he shouldn’t be in here.”

Col. Boyd coughs.

“I was starting to choke,” he says. “Can’t you see that? Simp’s just doing his job and I’m lucky to have him. So go fuck yourself, ma’am.”

He hocks and rattles some spit. The place is quiet.

Simpson hands his cup to Stef and she fills it. I sit there and I’m good.

Salt and pepper shakers, in a line.

Freud

Cocaine-wild, knitting a new religion,
gloves ink-smudged by fidgeting,
palm-shaking hands,
the written word clean,
digging up his own darkness:

some we have and bury away,
some we know and don't carry,
some we see and barricade within.

Hesitation marks decorate his bedposts.
It all goes back to the matriarch for him.

He builds a chair for people to lie down in.
He picks apart their brains

as if they were his own totem's catalog.

Old Rogue takes a job survey

What is your work experience?

Once, I used a nail-gun and hit a knot.
Now, I'm halfway to sainthood.

Doing anything at all, turning my back on what I must do.
Deadlines and countdowns waving,
a sea of seconds expiring.

I submit portfolios, look-books, resumé,
cover letter and manuscript,
in a corrupted file.

Do you have a goal? If so, explain.

That's the idea: a world teeming with potential
the way an inkblot awaits association
from a face leaning forward on a couch.

Where do you see yourself in five years?

If it's cloudy, I might not be here. I've never been able,
never had the ability or inclination, to rise with the sun,
though it does shock me into believing better days lie,
like highwaymen, in the available weeks.

What kind of father would you be?

Wonder-gone and set in my ways,
what would I even show them?

How would you characterize your work ethic?

Clutching at a bathroom's cold tiled floor, head pressed against a porcelain god's neck, a prayer does come out along with the rest of me. Every moment, I'm wishing this moment away

What is your medical history?

Heredity is a thing with wings. I hear it cawing.

Any last words?

Afraid, religion becomes a consolation of stars I consider.

Prometheus

Who can say what he, in all likelihood,
was actually thinking, as each night
Vulture circled chomping at the last
of light for twelve hours, closed in,
wine casks lying empty before him.

He didn't mind forever—being remembered
a hero, a kind of truth that makes one flinch
as it touches the small of one's back.

The vulture, wrinkly head
circling day, got a taste for delicacy,
limpid organs from living bodies,
enjoyed the fatty deposits,
how unbelievably large a liver could grow,
how, without fail, it regrew every night.

Ode to Prometheus's liver

He takes a beating, don't he,
regenerating pulpy lobes

after I've broken him down.
Thank God for you, Vulture.

I'd be all liver by now if not
for you, your scalpel face and toes.

Old Rogue throws clay

I glazed a flower pot last week.
Today, when I returned,
it was crazed—fused
to the kiln floor.
I wept; trimmings left,
like punctuation,
unspooled on the wheel.

AT THE SANCTUARY, THEY DREAM OF THE RED DOGWOOD

They come here for similar reasons
yet by different routes. Yes, they know the meaning
of their history and the day unfolding like
rosy promises and requests for them to reach beyond
themselves, as well as all the risks to stay and not to stay.

Just before they fall asleep, they may hear the phrases
of a trumpet light as a nocturnal breeze and they may see
the dogwood under Pleiades in red and pink
at the corner of the yard, but there's one who always
leaves a window open to hear the stray cats and coyotes
even when the frigid night's ghostly airs arise.

THE MOON'S CLOTHING

change of kimono: showing only her back to the blossom's fragrance

—Chiyo-ni

. . . the Moon-goddess was everywhere worshipped as a triad, in honour of the Moon's three phases — waxing, full, and waning . . .

—Robert Graves

At what age did I begin to conceptualize *mother*?

The soft garments under the perfectly pressed
linen suit, the beige color off-set by the dark scarf,
a print of pink camellia flowers and olive-green leaves.
The waves of her russet hair.

I cherished her image for years, even when
confounded by a young woman—

the rustle of her dress,

her scent like nuts or yeast, or later, flowered scents
borrowed from bottles that refracted the light
as it streamed through her open windows,
the sheer curtains moving languorously
as she partially disrobed.

O my young lover, a secret kept but worn like
a blemish—

And the older woman I visited
instead of my anguished lover.

She welcomed me on late evenings, often wearing
flying black cranes on a white silk jacket.

Her long black hair was loosely wound into a side bun
with strands hanging down her left jawline
to hide the remnants of a scar; and she shadowed her eyes
with dark liner, her lips were crimson, as though she held

the stem of a red rose in her teeth.

In that dim room, in the faint cloud of her perfume,
reminiscent of citrus, orange flower, ylang ylang
of bergamot with the subtle hint of pear and mint.

So we sat, conversed. But charmed,

I can't remember anything we talked about.

WALKING NEAR THE LAGUNA

After Jane Hirshfield

Following my cardiologist's orders to walk at least four miles per day, I'm up early, dressed & after cereal & coffee, I head to the gravel lanes near the Laguna. In some of the many turns there is an acidic scent in the air from the pellet stoves & in other spots the scent is that of woodsmoke from fir & oak. The fog is still heavy & I see my breath before me. A horse called Cowboy comes to the corral fence swishing his tail for a handful of green grass growing profusely on this side of the fence. His eyes, enormous black orbs, gently apprise me as I reach the wet sweet grass over the fence. His fleshy mottled lips nuzzle the grass blades from my palm. Waving, I walk on toward the far end of the lane, even nearer the Laguna, to visit the old brown roan with the spotted rump. This is Slew Anne. I've recognized that she's been lonely for decades, almost forgotten in a makeshift leaking barn, corralled in a small, weed-filled paddock that gets quite muddy after rain. I step through a broken gate & walk through the green-silver grass where the deer run. Now my trainers are wet & I can feel the moisture seeping through my socks. At first, as I approach, she shies away from the metal fence frame, but then nods gaily & ambles closer to me when I pull a carrot from my back pocket. Held in my fist high over the metal bar, Slew Anne snaps the long carrot in half with her big yellowing mahjongg ivories. She crunches, nods, paws the moist ground, nods again & then accepts the remaining half carrot. Turning to finish my walk, I whisper to her: "Good day, Sweetheart." Now the sun is emerging from the smoke-filled fog, I hear hawks call to my chariot heart to mount the hillside path to my house, to change out of my wet shoes & begin the day's work.

The Shadblow Rite

Colby Galliher

When we tried to bury Ryan the earth wouldn't have it. From the moment of his death in January Bon and I spent every frigid day through March begging the ground to thaw. Only then could we lay him into the soil in his woods. Telling ourselves that to inter him where he had wished, at his spot by the river, would break our sorrow.

By April the winter had not stayed its punishment. Every day the sun would rise into a sky cloudless and stark, its softening blue teasing us. Those interminable false springs coaxed Bon and me to the site of his intended burial to test the ground. But each day of our breathlessness the shovel would pierce the leaf litter just to clang against the ice-locked earth, the thwarted strike flattening us. As the month wore on each night would inflict another freeze. And Ryan would spend another day in the morgue, we another day numb with grief.

The final Sunday before May Bon and I dragged through the woods. The wooden handle of the shovel blistered my palm. The trees dripped, the air sighed light-green with moss and leaf buds. Gnats frenzied with renewal in the phosphorescent shafts of sunlight slanting through the still-bare branches. The afternoon sun had been warm and a seedling of hope had germinated within me, even if I had fought it. Refusing to believe that the land would finally release us from our flagellation.

* * *

The September before we lost Ryan portended a hard winter. One we hadn't seen in some time, the kind we had stopped planning for. The frost descended early on the valleys where the rivers still echoed with the cries of swimming children, on the backyard gardens still yielding a harvest, the land green and reluctant.

Ryan predicted that first frost weeks before it came. Said the herring and the eels were hurrying out to sea, that the loons followed in haste above with umbrage in their cherry-red eyes. That the bears had hoarded all the acorns and beech nuts in advance, for they knew it was coming early too. He told Bon and me that he was salting his fish and curing his meat and storing it all away like a whiskeyjack.

"A what?" Bon had asked him as we sat around the kitchen table in the house in which our parents, long gone by then, had raised her and me. It was August. In less than half a year, hardly six moons, Ryan would be gone too.

"A Canada jay," I told her. "Those birds that'll take food from your hand in the woods."

"Aha," Bon mouthed and nodded. Her strong hands gripped the table edge as she leaned back in her chair. Her fingers were stained maroon from canning beets.

"'Whiskeyjack' is a woodsman's term," Ryan called over his shoulder as he went to the fridge. I could see the disruptions in the fabric on his right shoulder where the buckshot had burrowed and torn years before when his alcoholic father had shot him during a hunt. Other men might have flaunted such a scar as a trophy of their grit, but to Ryan it brought great embarrassment, the memory one of pain and hatred. After the flesh had closed, the wounds calcifying into a sort of brail on his skin, he did everything to hide that stamp of an upbringing by a violent drunk.

"Solene's grandfather called them that. Said on his trapping runs they'd follow him through those endless woods, animating the pine winter. Supposedly each whiskeyjack carries the soul of a dead woodsman."

Bon listened with dancing green eyes. Her summer-ripened hair cascaded down her neck like the red tail of a comet. All that remained on our dinner plates was the grease from the bass we had caught that afternoon and the juice from the tomato chutney we had spooned onto the fish.

“Solene certainly has educated you on the finer points of Acadian folklore.”

Bon shot me a disapproving look. Ryan glanced over his shoulder with an unamused expression as he reached into the fridge. He knew I thought Solene was a pox on him. My distrust of her was a constant wound he was trying to sew up.

Ryan came back to the table and gave a beer to Bon and me and then opened his own. He snapped off the aluminum tab and tumbled it between his knuckles as he sat down. The conical light hanging above the dining table feathered a soft glow down on him. He looked robust, healthy then. His black hair was freshly cut in anticipation of Solene’s arrival. His beard, which had grown wild like a patch of strawberry vines, was pared back to a dark, vital shadow on his tanned cheeks. A lankiness belied his strength, an understatement that helped him best overconfident challengers in fights when we were boys, but his biceps and chest gripped his bones tautly. He sometimes appeared much older than his true age, like his twenty-some years had taxed him prematurely. But in those periods of vigor, when he was taking care of himself, his dusk-blue eyes pulled magnetically and his mouth shapeshifted with an effervescent confidence.

“The bass was good, Ry,” I told him.

“Hey, you brought us out.” He sipped his beer. “You should come with us next weekend, Bon.”

She looked at me and raised her eyebrows.

“Maybe I will,” she chirped and smiled, the left corner of her mouth rising above the right. “Though there’s a lot to do in the garden, especially if you insist we’ll have an early frost.”

“On Saturday I’ll come early and help you and Tom with the garden and chores and then we’ll all go out on the water in the afternoon.”

Bon thumped the table.

“Deal. I’ll bring my dad’s gear.”

“I bet he’d like that.” Ryan raised his beer. “To Saturday.”

He and Bon clinked their cans across the table. They looked at me and I nodded and lifted my beer an inch or two into the air.

Ryan chuckled and shook his head.

“He’s just being crabby because he knows I’ll catch more than him,” Bon said. “And because he doesn’t want to share you.”

Ryan scolded me with a stern look.

“Don’t be a crab, Tom.”

I suppressed a grin and shrugged.

A thought flashed over Bon’s face.

“What would you say if I asked Jim to come?”

“No,” I answered flatly.

“Tom!”

“Tom, c’mon.”

“He can’t fish.”

“Not everyone was raised outside. Give him a break.”

"I've tried showing him. Bon has too. But he's too proud, he doesn't listen. Then he knots up the line or jams the reel and pouts all day."

Bon glowered at me with a flush in her cheeks.

"And I can't take that cologne or musk or whatever it is he douses himself in. It's bad enough when he's over and it stinks up the house but on the boat? It'll repel the fish."

"Alright, Tom."

Bon's eyes glinted like fishhooks. I could see her teeth clenched behind her lips, her breath building up to dress me down.

"Bon, why don't you invite Jim to dinner after? He can work the grill," Ryan intervened. He had two decades of experience as our peacekeeper.

Bon tore her glare from me and looked at him.

"Fine. Good."

She glugged down the remainder of her beer and stood up.

"I left some tools out back and I don't want them rusting." She slapped a few stray crumbs from the front of her faded t-shirt. "Good night, Ryan."

"See you soon, Bon."

She pierced me with her eyes before stomping to the sink to deposit her plate. The screen out to the yard flew open and shut.

Ryan sat back in his chair.

"Jesus, Tom."

"What?"

"You know what. Take it easy on her."

"What did you want me to do? Lie?"

"Just don't be so harsh on people. Jim's a fine guy. So what if he can't fish."

"Corinne left him for a reason. He just wants a woman to take care of his daughter so he can wheel off and go shooting or whatever the hell."

"You don't know that. You're too quick to judge. Always assuming the worst. God forbid we review the catalog of your sins."

I flicked the empty beer can and the aluminum dinked hollowly.

When I looked back up I could see that sheepish mold his face took on when he wanted me to ask him something about his personal life. Otherwise loathe to discuss himself, he was always itching to talk to me about Solene, swooning like a lovestruck schoolchild.

"When does she get in?"

His face softened. The fool.

"Friday. Want to come for dinner? I think I'll cook for us at my place."

Ryan's usual imperturbability, the way he engaged so heartily with the world and yet managed to shrug off its disappointments and cruelties, made these moments of vulnerability especially delicate. Bon and I knew to respect them, to cup them gently in our hands like the wishbone body of a baby bird. Solene knew those moments too. But her palms were rough and brash, impatient. She twisted the privilege against him.

"I'm interviewing in the statehouse all week for a story in the Monday paper. But bring her by when you come Saturday morning and we'll all go out on the water in the afternoon. Bon will be happy to see her."

Bon maintained that matters of the heart blunted Ryan's keen understanding of people and their natures like an axe on a stone; that Solene's near mystical hold on him was not derived from her beauty, her intellect, or their shared affinities, but rather from her independence, her quality of emotional self-sufficiency which rendered her love uncommonly precious for its

superfluity to her needs. Her affection was wily and transient like a trout, spellbinding in its speckles and gleamings, always ready to slip back into the eddies to leave Ryan bereft, seeking.

But Bon's reading of their dynamic absolved Solene too much. She was no mere trout wriggling from a fisherman's grasp to survive. She led Ryan along by a string, toying with him. They would talk of marriage, of a life together, and then she would disappear up north for months on end. No warning, no mention of when she'd be back or of what she was doing. Her family was in Quebec and he justified her absences with that. But there were the "slips" when she mentioned another man's name, a description of future plans clearly formulated without concern for Ryan. Then, when he recognized her manipulation and recoiled, she wrapped around him tighter, listing his house as her American address, leaving her clothes and books behind as a promise of her return. Talking of children, for she knew Ryan's capacious heart, of his simple wish to tend to and dote on a child in repudiation of his father's abdication.

"Great," Ryan beamed. "Sol is always saying how she wants to get to know you better."

I looked at him incredulously.

"We'll see."

The back screen door squeaked open. Bon thudded around in the back room. The last hazy daylight waned on the windows along the back wall.

Ryan pushed his chair out and stood up. He cracked his knuckles against the ball of his hip.

"You should go apologize."

"Take the rest of the catch."

He shook his head and sighed. "I don't know how you two haven't torn each other apart, living in this house together. It's a wonder, I swear."

"What would get you out of bed in the morning if Bon and I didn't fight? We make it work." I stood up and stretched. "Let's bring the cooler out."

After we had loaded the cooler with the remaining fish into the bed of his old Ford I stood by and waited for him to go. The massive oak in the front drive panted with the exhaustion of summer's end, its leaves drooping and varnished with dust. The air smelled of the dry, sweet chaff of August. The dusk shadows were cold and stripped of sultriness.

"Good luck with the article," Ryan bid me from the driver's seat, his head hanging out. "If you have a free night before the weekend, drop by. If not I'll see you and Bon with Solene on Saturday."

I nodded and raised a hand in farewell. He ignited the engine and the dogged truck groaned to life. The temperature was dropping and I rubbed my palms over my bare forearms. I looked into the sky as though it might foretell of frost.

Ryan noticed.

"Telling you, it's coming early. Time to prepare."

The truck's transmission shifted and Ryan pulled out onto the dirt road. I watched his face in the rear-view mirror. His eyes shone clear and sharp like that autumn-warning sky, his forehead unnotched and his color good. Only later did I come to hold to that reflection of him in the mirror, to that evening with him and Bon, so dearly. Only after it had all drained away.

* * *

"I'm sweating. This is the warmest it's been," Bon called. "That's hopeful, right?"

We walked on. The woods were darkening. The chickadees darted among the saplings and tittered to each other. I followed the trail of boot prints I had left the day before, the day before that, molded into the earth and hardened by the freezing nights.

Ryan's woods were torturously redolent of him. Every day we pulled ourselves past the same

totems: the wizened beech whose base had been Ryan's reading seat, the shaded glen where we had acted out skits, the boulder where we had snuck cigarettes whose butts rotted in the dirt beneath. The first days of April Bon and I had stopped at these relics to trade recollections, arrested by pulses of memory and believing that to pay homage to them was to bring him back in some way. We smiled and laughed, distracted by the surrealness of our youth, the passage of the years.

That temporary levity curdled when the ice in the soil rejected the shovel's entry. After that first attempt we stopped pausing to reminisce, kept our heads down as we walked. For while Ryan was unburied those halcyon images of him withered with the frost and the darkness of the grey prison in which he languished. Perhaps one day, when he drowsed at peace in the humus, we could once more hang on those bygone times like children on the branches of a storybook tree. But not before.

* * *

Solene never came. Ryan showed up that next Saturday in August as planned. He explained away her absence, recycling excuses. Her grandfather in Quebec was sick; there was some delay at the border. He put on a tough face, labored like a mule with us in the garden, but there and on the lake I could see the early clouds of torment gathering around him, his eyes churning with gloom and panic. On the boat his cast limped into the water. When Bon and I squabbled over some idiocy he did not react. The sun had gilded the lake, the near mountains just beginning their descent from the lush green height of summer, and yet he watched the water with a hopelessness that begged for the drowning release of the waves.

I cannot prove that Solene alone was the catalyst for Ryan's destruction. But I know that her caprice tossed him about like a hurricane, and that no one can withstand that kind of whiplash without incurring some degree of brokenness. When she withdrew, always creating the possibility that he might never see her again, it showed in him.

But what Ryan deteriorated into after that Saturday afternoon on the boat was more extreme than his past forays into desolation. His posture sloughed off center as though she had extracted a tithe of vertebrae. His mouth lay straight and motionless as a dead worm; his beard chewed up his face. He spent more and more time alone in the woods, forgot to eat. And he drank, hard. His father was in him then, a walking, besotted corpse, egg yolks pierced and running in his eyes. But his father was born a bastard and had died one. Ryan was not.

He ran his own business as an electrician and his line went unanswered; clients, people we had known since we were kids, waited for him to show up to jobs, only to be left hanging. Our town was small, cupped in the fist of the mountains, and I started receiving questions. I told people he was traveling, or laid up with some injury. When I grew irritated with their badgering Bon would step in and change the subject, steer people's minds and noses back to their own troubles. The town dined on the growing mystery like a horde of vultures.

Bon and I were unprepared, unequipped for such a rapid degeneration in someone we loved. Like Ryan was a svelte bunny squealing in our palms with a pain we could diagnose but not treat. As August became September Bon would find him passed out, sometimes on the kitchen floor, sometimes in the driver's seat of his truck, the keys in the ignition. In mere weeks he shriveled. His skin blotched and took on the color of sweat-stained sheets. When I lifted him from the floor or into his bed he seemed to weigh less and less each time, a cornstalk flattened by the wind. We got rid of the empties, confiscated half-full or unopened bottles we found around the house. To prevent him from hurting someone or ending up in jail we took his car keys, a measure Bon and I had fought about.

But it was no matter: When we were both at work he ambled out onto the road and flagged

down neighbors heading into town. When he was around others Ryan had an unparalleled ability to hide his intoxication. He spun stories about a lottery he had won, some money he had come into that allowed him to take time off. With his easy charm he had no trouble weaving harmless yarns. And so he always made it to the liquor store, riding along to perdition in the passenger seat of beaten-down trucks with the window down, eyes closed with the ocher air on his face, the country ripening like a wild apple.

We pursued every measure to save Ryan from himself. The hospital would not take him, telling us he needed to sober up before treatment. The rehab on the other side of the mountains had no open beds. We moved some of his things into our house, put him up in mom's old sewing room. I took articles that allowed me to stay close to home; Bon shifted her hours at the clinic. We tried to coordinate a constant vigil, as though we could supervise the self-effacement out of him.

Somehow, our stumbling triage worked. Once under our watch Ryan did not resist. He slept for days, sipped broth for meals. When his body rebelled against the abrupt absence of liquor he weathered the suffering like a penitent, never abusing us. So that after several weeks, just as October crested and the days crisped with deep autumn, Ryan, Bon, and I lived again. We fished and hunted. We pressed cider, canned peaches, harvested beets and parsnips. We clipped goldenrod and asters and hung them in the kitchen to bring us through to spring. He picked up his business where he had left it, offered discounts to those clients whose jobs he had missed.

By the New Year Ryan seemed the same man he had been five months prior. His features lost their affliction. Not a drop of alcohol had touched his tongue since his recovery. The three of us quit together.

Solene disappeared from our mouths like a dislodged tooth. I cleared out the things she had left in his house: her clothes from his closet, her toothbrush and products from his medicine cabinet, her scattered books. I junked it all. She never came back, never contacted him again. His life resumed its course, Solene an obstruction we thought washed away in his revival.

* * *

I held back the branches of a winterberry thicket to let Bon pass. We emerged into a clearing. Ahead of us the river creaked, its groans echoing through the woods.

"More ice-out today," Bon noticed. "The water's breached the banks. Think that'll help?"

"If it doesn't freeze tonight."

"Maybe it won't."

"Maybe."

The riverside swelled with dark, frothing water in the shade of a hemlock stand. Swamp mallow, azalea, and buttonbush grew from the flooded bank. Their skeletons teased buds on old wood. Jagged plates of ice thrashed in the current.

I sucked in the fetid air of the woods' awakening. A tiny sob escaped from Bon's throat. I stretched my arm around her shoulders. She pushed away, marched forward to the river.

"Bon."

She removed her boots. She stepped barefoot into the floodwaters with a pained inhale.

"C'mon." I felt my temper shorten. Without Ryan I had lost control of it. Bon and I bickered frequently. "Your feet will freeze."

She continued ahead, looking up. The river lapped at her bare ankles.

"The shadblow is blooming," she announced with an absence in her voice. "Look."

Before her the neat, untangled branches of an Amelanchier burst with thousands of small white flowers. They trembled: Bumblebees crowded the blossoms, feasting on the early offering of nectar and pollen.

“Serviceberry,” Bon called. “Because when it blooms the ground has thawed and people can be buried.” Her upturned head lolled on her shoulders. “Ryan told us.”

I returned to the middle of the clearing. Pines on its rim dampened the remaining evening light. I readied the shovel. In the dirt before me was the tortured gash in the land’s shell, first opened when March turned to April, where we had intended to dig Ryan’s grave. The wound had refrozen nearly every day since, refusing to yield to our pleas. Reminding us that if the earth did not want something, it would not be.

* * *

In the second week of January the call came to us from his neighbors. The Keeneys, retirees. They and Ryan had been friendly. He would bring them venison and fish; they gifted him cherries and plums from their backyard orchard. Ryan was still on thin ice with some of his clients after his fall “sabbatical,” as he called it, and they were quick to chafe at a sign that he had stiffed them again. When he failed to show up for a job the Keeneys’ phone rang: Mr. Henderson, the inflated assistant manager of the town hardware store, trying to hunt Ryan down like an outlaw because the wiring to his mancave had fizzled. A dutiful citizen, Mr. Keeney knocked on Ryan’s door. His truck was in its usual spot backed up to the detached garage where Ryan kept his arsenal of tools. The body was freshly washed, gleaming green beneath the previous night’s dusting in the sorrowful winter sun.

Seeing the chimney wisping no smoke gave Mr. Keeney pause. That’s when he went around back and saw the tracks. A set of boot prints leaving from the back door but none returning. Crystal flakes dusted the indentations. They led across the back field and into Ryan’s woods, through the gap in the trees where he had come and gone nearly every day of his life.

Mr. Keeney had a veteran’s sense for calamity and told us that when he looked through that portal into the woods, the mountain wind a razor on his leather cheeks, a shiver up his spine told him what lay within, what had been taken. He strapped on his snowshoes and navigated through the torpor-gripped woods to where Ryan had brought him fishing several times. On the riverbank he found that precipitate of his prophecy, our Ryan, motionless beneath a shroud of snow.

Bon had stopped Mr. Keeney before he could describe in more detail what he had come upon. She wouldn’t look at Ryan in the morgue. But I did. Whiter than the snow, his lips drained to a blue like the last indecipherable remnant of twilight. His hair thick and full, his beard recently trimmed. Standing there next to him, the hollow, bony light sterilizing the white walls and the metallic shine of the mortician’s instruments, I almost expected Ryan to flutter his eyes open, living and azure, and look around the room in bewilderment.

“Yikes, Tom.” A relieved smile. “Let’s get out of here.”

And we would not so much escape as return to his woods, where the river would hold us atop its skin. Where the three of us—Ryan, Bon, and me—would crunch through the snow, forgetting in those moments the long, vengeful winter. Knowing as we loped back to the house, drunk with exhaustion, that spring would come. That Bon or I could find Ryan standing in the river’s torrent of rejoicing, his ankles kissed by homebound fish, the shadblow opening to welcome their return, and his.

It took some days for the toxicology report to come back. When it did I had a mind to make copies and paste them around the town to shut up those chattering tongues who whispered about Ryan following his father’s example: He was sober when he died.

Bon and I would not consider that Ryan killed himself. We had seen every day of his resurrection, listened to his eager plans for the future. We knew he sought solace in the woods, liable to retreat there when his thoughts wouldn't quiet, when a biting thought of Solene or his father harried him. Maybe his grief had corroded his instincts, blunted his awareness of the hazards of his wild place in a way even he hadn't recognized until he had broken through the ice and plunged into that subfreezing water, shocked as he finally scrabbled out onto the riverbank and collapsed on his back. Wiping out his last awestruck breath enclosed by the trees and stars and the sliver of silver moon, the river burbling from the hole his folly had made.

* * *

The shovel sliced into the earth. As it cut through I locked my fingers tightly around the handle, as though the soil might claim it from me. My stomach leapt.

"Bon."

She watched the broken pieces of ice clamor down the river, careening towards oblivion. Her hair streaked pale fire in the dusk.

"Bon!"

She turned around. I looked at her and then down at the shovel. I withdrew the spade from its thawing sheath and plunged it in again. It grated on rocks and hold-out ice but the earth gave way. A manic giddiness gripped my mouth, my eyes.

"Oh!" Bon cried.

She threw her wet feet into her boots and dashed over. She grabbed the shovel and dug the blade into the entry point, kicking the head deeper, pounding it with the sole of her boot. Breath expelled furiously from her nostrils and her leg jerked violently, the shovel burrowing into the soil. When the metal was no longer visible I steadied her shoulders.

"Alright, Bon. Okay."

She stopped. Her muscles relaxed. She pried her hands from the handle. The shovel remained upright, anchored in the dirt.

"Can we bury him? Do you think so?"

My eyes rose from the perforated ground to the water, a dark flume now. The shadblow shimmered as a thousand-flowered phantom. Behind it the river cracked and wailed, making us promises in the darkness. Something calcified broke within me. Its remnants dissolved in my blood. An overwhelming tiredness fell over me. I felt that I could lie down and curl up there, keeping vigil by Ryan's waiting grave. Ensuring that the earth did not freeze, did not renege, or else take me too with its cruelty.

I Spoke to Nzambi After My Grandmother's Funeral

I found myself staring at the broken skin of the earth.
Gravediggers slit open it, placed my grandmother in, sutured
her resting spot with a tombstone.

In nightly dreams, I watch you, Nzambi,
swimming along the Kalunga, always
with her bones.

I never wanted to slip into
the water's mouth. But here,

I find myself drifting, bobbing up to feel along
the headstones in this cemetery. At the surface, I
feel the comfort of the etched blocks, tracing her name
and the moss that limbered its way from the grassy floor
to perch.

Along the silted river, you've watched her dance,
her fleshless bones crackling like fire. Nzambi,
I gave into the dark and ate my grandmother's ashes, becoming her
when the sun rose.

Blue Picassos

The Moon- pregnant- gave
birth to Picasso's soul. He
sketched the pale blue
skin of her child, shaded
it's body with dusk.
Somewhere in his brushes,
he held the memory of
the babe's writhing wails close.
Feeding on the carcass
of his mother,
the artist painted twisted
troubadours- and left the latch
of his heart open for those willing
to peer inside, see him
entombed on canvas,
and realize their own wombs
were weeping for stillborn
dreams, living through
sanguine subjects seated,
his indigo etches
taking form, depressed
desire now alive in
their blue shadows,
crowing.

Maiden Warning

I gave my womb
to *Diospyros Virginian*,

let her guard my ovaries between
pious fingers. When a cad

pollinator wandered by, I
renewed my chastity against

her wishes and let
him kiss me. He declared

his deal- love for one
night only. I accepted his offer,

only breaking away in
morning- I awoke to a memory.

He was already gone,
having flown between

the legs of the earth and sky
and finding comfort in her instead.

Plucked and pregnant,
I cursed the Persimmons.
Diospyros Virginian
sighed when I returned

to her, palms downturned
in rejection. In the winter,

I gave birth to sorrow and
buried it unceremoniously,

proclaiming myself to
have been a rotten harvest.

I'm Now the Black Sheep My Uncle Used to Be

God
gave my uncle
 heroin
 and watched
him wander the streets,
dodging lunar light
 hope fading
 body worn
 mind weary

 He called for Yahweh,
 and our family didn't know
 who that was. But he called for
 'JESUS!'
 When his mother gave him
 a laxative to relieve his
 bullshit.

We whispered about God's wisdom,
 while giving my uncle money for a
 'weekly bus pass',
 knowing he rarely led
 prodigious pursuits;
instead he would buy
 6 sepia glassed women
 for less than 20 bucks
 and fall down the steps,
 in stupor
 nearly splitting his head
 open.

'He OD'd again'.
 Medics revived him
 while I watched on

He was
 always drunk
 infantilized
 babbling
 cursing
 stealing

At 28, I met God again,
 who gave me Damiana.
 It told me that life was dead

and offered me
an edible to cope.
I wandered the streets for
six hours

dodging lunar light
hope fading
body worn
mind weary

I split my heart open with
limerent relationships,
the mother I only see
every five years
the father I hated
as a teenager.
I found God,
and learned to call him Nzambi,
but my family doesn't know
who that is. I now call for
'JESUS!'
In 3-star hotels
with men I know from
Facebook and Instagram
with money I get for my
"prodigious pursuits".

I now understand my uncle
as a woman
who is just a woman
watching a man who
was just a man

whose heart gave out
one morning while he was
putting on
shoes to

wander the streets,
searching for money
mercy
meaning.

I admit,
I do this too.

Two Homes

Was Islip, New York ever a place that erected triumphant monuments for anything it accomplished? I listen via hearsay about this place called my birth home. Gathering geography, I find that Google has a history for me- uneventful, unevocative. No bombastic battles for American freedom,

no scandalous allegations battled with publicly broadcasted bloodshed. No screaming for Pulitzer or Nobel Prizes or awards winning anything. I can't come from such conventional conception. Living in this place seems as dreamy as a water waste treatment plant. And even that seems more eventful than what I know.

My father told me I used to go to the beach, paddling my little hands in the water. At least, that's what I imagine I did. When my mother brought me to Baltimore, Maryland, she always dressed me out of season. Corduroys in Summer, tank tops in Winter. I think now, at 30: *Is this what Islip does to you?*

I imagine that Islip is like Baltimore. Row Homes lining streets, stoops with missing steps, photographs from transient, award-winning photographers who click click click at smiling children and dog-eared but dignified men and women. Overwhelmingly banal to those who live on the other side of the camera, but somehow this work is interesting enough to

debut at MoMA or wherever people go to give fraudulent praise for the resiliency of poverty. I think to myself that Islip must have someone's favorite Chinese joint on the corner of a strip mall that's run down and red taped for 'crazies'. '*But the Lo Mein hittin tho*' customers say, grabbing plastic 'come again' bags; they'll be back on Monday after their 10-hour shift.

I imagine they have bus lines that stop in the middle of a route, frustrating riders with the lack of government funding. I wonder if they are hungry, for anything in life. I wonder if I'll ever go back to this place called Islip on Long Island. What is this place? Anywhere USA. Except, it isn't just anywhere, is it? Perhaps my birthplace is a fantasy that did happen. At least in my mind.

Folklore of the Town

Vocal cords
sing like tensing metal in
Winter. If you can figure out
the fleecy blitzed riddle of this town,
you're sure
to get out. I once thought
my song would rise above the rolling hill
in December, bridging the doldrum
to the wider springtime periphery. Now I wonder
how such a task could be doled out
in childhood- hardly any
preparation is given. The wind shifts, leaves
disappear and you're
left with impotent branches
to scratch your notes on. As the Gregorian
resets, we're tricked here
to believe in a new attempt at revolution.
Some illusive
survivors became mist and drifted
away from here. Few records
of this folklore exist.

The natural truth is that I'll become a
white sinewed mound in time. So now I wait,
listening for the clock and watching as
the chimneys smoke. Whiny echoes dust over
us and the town
becomes unknowable. In the old cemetery
you'll find me with the
tombstones- reminders of ill-fated attempters.

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.

The Sea of Tranquility

Lance Romanoff

The car, a shabby 1983 Saab 900, expired seven miles south of Eureka, Nevada. Finn and Saoirse O'Malley knew nothing about automobiles. They didn't even pump their own gas.

"I'll walk in. It shouldn't be more than a few hours," Finn said.

"Right. And I'll sit here."

"I'm open to suggestions."

"I'm not comfortable sitting here alone for hours. Who knows who or what could show up?"

They sat, staring out the windshield at the unyielding road.

"OK. I just thought I'd be saving you a long walk. There's no one out here. You're not in danger."

"You don't know what could happen. I don't know what could happen. You're insane if you think I'm just going to sit alone in a car in the middle of nowhere for hours."

"Fine. OK. Fine. I'm not telling you not to come."

Saoirse folded down the passenger visor and stared into the scratched mirror. The mid-afternoon sun illuminated her white-blond hair in a wild glow around her head. Finn tightened his grip around the steering wheel.

"It's just, there's no reason for both of us to go," Finn said.

"There's no reason for one of us to stay," Saoirse responded.

A day before they were happily gambling in Las Vegas. Saoirse won \$200 playing blackjack. Finn played the slot machines and left the casino a dollar richer.

"I'm not telling you to stay."

"Right, so?"

"I'm just saying that it's going to be a long walk. You might as well stay here and be comfortable at least. Nothing's going to happen."

"You don't know that."

"We're alone out here. If we weren't alone out here, I wouldn't have to walk! Jesus."

Finn tugged at his left eyebrow. It was a habit he acquired as a teenager to soothe his migraines. Now he pulled on his eyebrow whenever he wanted to say something but thought better of it.

"There's no need for us to argue about this," Saoirse said. "I don't want to walk for several miles or however far it is either but I'm not staying out here. And the longer we sit here and fight about it the worse it will be."

"That much I agree with," Finn said.

Neither moved. Finn sunk deeper into the driver's seat. He'd decided not to shave during their trip and now wore the early stages of a scratchy, greying beard.

"This is what you do. You know this is what you do, don't you?" Saoirse said. "You're turning this into a situation and making everything worse. You always do this."

"I always do this. OK. Every time we're stuck in the middle of nowhere, I do this," Finn said.

"You know what I am talking about."

"I have no fucking idea what you are talking about."

"No, you probably don't."

Finn sucked in a long breath and opened his door. He took a leaden first step, and then a second and a third. A quarter mile down the road, he hunted in his jacket for his cigarettes. He discovered them, a gently crushed pack of Merits, in his inside pocket paired with a book of matches. The matchbook was glossy black with the logo of the Dunes casino embossed across the cover.

"Miracle in the desert," Finn thought to himself and lit a Merit.

He stared down the road in the direction of Eureka.

He thought about the six and a half miles left to walk.

He squinted at the horizon.

No town.

Turning back the way he came he saw his wife sitting in the passenger seat of their car - staring at him, daring him to choose a direction.

"Are you coming?" Finn shouted, to no reply.

He marched back to the car and opened her door.

"Are you coming?" Finn asked again.

Saoirse turned to look at him but said nothing.

"Are you coming?" Finn asked a third time.

"Just go if you want to go. I'll wait." Saoirse said.

"OK. Now you want to stay. Fine."

Finn dropped his cigarette into the earth and stamped it out. He stared at his wife.

"Where did that two hundred dollars really come from?" Finn asked.

Saoirse studied his face. The features she'd known for years were now suddenly unfamiliar.

"What are you talking about?" she asked.

"You don't know how to play blackjack. How do you win \$200 when you're playing a game you don't know how to play?"

"Are you upset I won more than you? Is that seriously what we're talking about?"

"Is that what we're talking about?"

"I don't know. Tell me what we're talking about."

"I just don't understand how someone who doesn't play blackjack wins \$200 at blackjack."

Saoirse stood up, pushing Finn aside as she rose.

She took a step toward the rear of the car.

Finn lit another cigarette.

He dropped the lit match at his feet and watched it burn itself out.

"I just want to know where that money came from," Finn said. "I'm just asking where it came from."

"No. No. That's not what you're doing. You're doing what you do."

“What do I ‘do’?”

“You’re accusing me of something. Except you can’t even do that. If you have something to say, just say it.”

He stared at the burned match on the ground.

“Miracle in the desert,” Finn said to himself.

She noticed it first. Recognized it was a truck: maybe a box truck, or perhaps a tow. It seemed to squat there in the distance forever. Suddenly, the flat-fronted Ford resembling a hulking, mechanical bulldog choked to a stop with a squeal of airbrakes.

Saoirse opened the passenger door and spoke to the driver. Finn watched her mouth move. He thought she might have smiled. But he heard nothing.

Joe Says

“We are lucky boys
to have had those
experiences
and come through
unscathed...”
Remember
gun shots, wrong turns,
towed cars, high speed
and low speed
curves, Bourbon Street
and Pearl Street,
Omaha, Arkansas,
red dust and burnt
mattresses, garish
hangovers and heaps
of eggs and hashbrowns,
those days of calculations
in bright evenings
of chipped curbs,
slick alleys, endless
hours shooting
pool, beers, cigars
Tanqueray, a pulse
into the next corner,
block, neon blurs
of rain and lightning,
the Milky Way
in the Sandhills,
an ignition against
darkness, catfish nibbling
the shore.
Joe’s hearse
reaching into subterranean
nights, and we,
saving each other
from each other,
and I, sitting on a curb
in the Old Market
outside a vanished bar,
and Joe, pulling
up in his hearse,
lifting me up
out of dark calendars
onto the leather seat
into a hollow moon’
stare.

Just Like in the Movies

Says every spectator on the street...

My brother Mark died at 56,
fighting Paranoia and Schizophrenia
since 20, had 2 cancers, bits
of him cut out, his shaking

hands, his smile a symphony
of kindness. I could not save him.
Found brother Pat,
a dead Buddha, hands

with palms facing the ceiling,
the gray clouds, chemo pump
beeping "Empty," trash can full
of Grolch bottles, Elmore James

on his turntable, rigor mortis set in. 54.
My father in an orphanage, escaped
to the Air Force, dead suddenly at 63.
His father, my Grandfather, an Irish

Immigrant, a doughboy, gassed in France,
the Bonus Army March on Washington,
his brother P.J. dead in France, MIA,—
the end of World War 1, The Big War to be

"The last war." Mother pushed her life
to 80 with Alzheimer's in tow. On her
deathbed she pleaded, "Save me, Michael."
Just like a movie. I fight 5 cancers now,

fought large fights in high school
under full lights in Hinky Dinky parking lots,
Left upper cut / right cross Dad taught me,
anger like lightning, anger dying

finally in the beautiful dust
of the calendars, of expanding time.
Alcohol and loneliness in worn boots,
self-destruction, terror in bar mirrors,

terror in the hills, terror under
the indifferent universe. Wanderlust,
car wrecks, danger like a shirt, drunk
on motorcycles— all of it I carry,

all of us slowly dying, no more or less
than anyone, one step, one mile,
one world, into charming thorns under
the growing glow of my wife's roses.

Dust Is Our Savior

“In everything, truth surpasses the imitation and copy.”

Cicero

Break through the emptiness,
the concrete chunks
you drag in your boots.

Stomp along the road
like a rich hobo, an anti-hero,
maybe the shy magical color

of sunsets that bleed, the moon
hanging like busts of Cicero,
wires threading your sour heart,

holding you in iron bracelets,
strangling the joy like oxygen
under water, the deep murk

that sits beyond you, the sad
savior slowly disappearing,
falling over into the dust

and gravel, nothing clear or
left, just noise, the sounds,
weak and faint, reaching for you.

Stillness Is an Anvil

An emptiness
trails behind us
as clouds race
by our shoulders,

where the sun
falls on its side,
crawling along
a stoic prairie—

grasses weave
at this field's
seams. The calm
burns us alive.

Spectators

The man in torn pants
weaves through sidewalks
to the damp alley
where night is flames
and burns all his ashes
while pedestrians wander
past the dull walls
there. They almost stop
but finally glide through
evening like smoke
where none outlive
the tired recurring night.

Forgotten Taverns

There's a blur of taverns you don't recall,
all faceless but a few angry sneers
from around the bar. Some dives are long
cold dips into narrow caves, places leaky
with sadness, no humor, just dull faces
misaid in some nook of the country,
the south, the west, the end of the road.

And sometimes you came to these places
glazed with drink, filled with the rust of anger.
You felt absurd acting sober and wandered
rooms for comfort in the smoke,
your worn boots sticking to the floor,
urinals caked with dried piss, the piss
soaking into your socks through the worn
holes in your Goodwill Acmes. Fire escapes
stared at you in alleys while the jukebox's
faint heartbreak tunes followed you out and down
the street where the next promising OPEN
neon sign reached through the glare
of narrow windows.

The bright yellow
sunrises you missed shook outside
in the dance of delighted trees.

Searching for Rosebud

Rain reflected on a polished desk,
interiors towering over Foster Kane.

"After you Mr Kane."

"Are they standing for me?"

"Are you still eating?"

"I'm still hungry."

Gas lamps against the dim evening walls.

"I've got to make the *Inquirer*
important as the gas in these lights."

A Declaration of Principles.

There's dancing in the windows—.

Shadows dance on the low ceiling.

"Statues?"

"Am I an old stuffy schoolmarm?"

"Yes!"

"Mr Thompson, the *Rosebud* you're trying

to find out about,
might be something Mr Kane lost?"

“Oh, Charlie Kane,
he never gave anything away,
he just left a tip.”

Hand shadows on the evening walls.

“A giraffe?” “No, a cockatoo.”

”I’m on my way to the Western
Warehouse to find my youth.”

“You decided what you
were going to decide
a long time ago, Mr Kane?”

Headline: *Candidate Kane*

Caught in Love Nest with Singer!

Crosses on the ceiling, a celebration
of ribbons and confetti on the floor.

”A toast, Jedediah, to love on my terms,
the only terms anyone knows.”

Curtain up, curtain down.

"Still one notice to come. Leland?"

"Yes."

Mr Kane and Mr Leland

haven't spoken in years."

"Mister Kane is finishing your notice,
writing a bad notice like you wanted.

I guess that will show you." Shadows
cross the hospital walls as Leland
puts-out his cigar. Nurses take him
back into the shadows.

Letter opened:

"A Declaration of Principles."

"What is it?"

"An antique."

Mister Kane against

the dark bedroom

walls. "You won't have to fight

them anymore. It's their loss."

Mister Kane swallowed by the fireplace.

Shadows in the puzzles. Ten cars
in a stream to the beach for a picnic...
jazz, a pig roasting. A woman screams
outside the tent in the flames of light.

“Goodbye, Charlie.”

”Rosebud. I’ll tell you
about Rosebud. A thousand dollars?

Flashback: Bedroom tossed. Snow globe
in Kane’s
palm.

High camera shot:

Crates.

Statues.

Debris.

“Rosebud”

chokes

the black

coiling sky.

Mr Thayer and the Sea of Books

Stacey Medlock

October Tinsdale was looking forward to the fall and winter of nineteen hundred and twenty-two, after ending an engagement to the son of a department store owner, promising her a lifetime of wealth and security when she had her own money and wealth. She never liked the idea of marriage, nor the horrors she believed that were to take place.

Submitting herself and compromising was simply not an option for at all, and she often wondered if she was ever in love with this man who proposed to her. Was he ever in love with her? That question, she asked herself fifty times over. In the depths of heart and logic she never really wanted to know. She knew her mother would bury herself even deeper in her grave, not turning over.

October was often at times angry with herself for accepting the marriage proposal from Ashton Fleming, a very tall and handsome fellow with mild eyes and dark curly hair. "I am free, and I will always be free, no matter what!" She said that to herself when Ashton's father told them that they would move into a mansion in Paris so that Ashton could oversee the opening of another department store. Ashton arrogantly wrote her a note saying: "you will wish that you had not turned down my proposal."

She still had plans of writing books, and she had recently graduated from college with a degree in English Literature, and it excited her when she had received an offer from to be an assistant professor at a new college in Africa. October was more than ready to remain in Kingston and start writing her novel; it was a long dream of hers to become a writer. She could write about anything from all of the places that she had been and seen from when she was a young girl, and in her teens. When she was younger, she remembered her grandmother working in the garden, and talking about gardens in other places. October knew that her novel had to be compelling and unforgettable, and on the day when she finally started to write it, she heard her grandmother's voice talking about gardens, and what they meant to her in older years.

"God ordained gardens, and we must keep them beautiful and healthy and treat them as family. You will one day have a garden of your own, October; it will be your job and your happiness to take care of it, and to love it."

October was happy that she was a single and independent woman, and she was going to stay that way, no matter how long. Gardens and writing had motivated her, but how could she incorporate a garden or gardens into her book? Strangely and suddenly, gardens and books about fairy tales had entered into her thought process. She never even read fairy tales, really as a child.

Looking into her own garden that was graciously kept by Mr. and Mrs. Armstead. To help her focus on her work, she listened to classical records, and that was what the doctor had ordered. She began writing about a young woman just like her, who had a profound hunger for freedom and independence, independence from men and family pressures.

While writing her novel, October could only see gardens and dark forests with tall trees covered in stars, stars that were large soft looking. She opened the window of her study on a cool and breezy day, and the scents and fragrances of the garden had brought a fantastic experience and introduction into her study. The breeze had become quite cold for October, but somehow the cold breeze and the scents and fragrances were in a perfect formation that could not be denied not altered.

She allowed the window to remain open and she typed away on her typewriter that she

rarely used, and she was grateful to be in that moment. She sat back in her chair and reminisced back to her childhood. Her grandmother always worked in her garden, but what October remembered was she worked at night; she even asked her why that was. "My dear, that is when the most magic and peace and excitement all comes together."

October's father had told her that his mother never really believed that until she was much older, and up until her passing. October's father had too, believed it himself; her grandmother was sure that the moon shined perfectly over the sea to assist in the lighting. She wore glasses every other time, except for her gardening, and declaring that the garden was no less fascinating in the daytime, but at night, the garden itself was more appreciative that it was tended to.

October's mother was far less sympathetic to her mother-in-law's feelings and ideas about the garden, and thought it was pure senility. To some people, gardens were like people and pets or family; good people were accepted and treated each other well as they would like to be treated. The garden believed that October's mother was not nice and caring, and their perception was key.

"Silly woman wasting her time in this so-called garden, when this whole entire property should be ours; she is such a pity." Even October knew that her mother was the kind of person she was, and her mother never made any apologies. The garden made sure that she would not speak out of turn ever again, at least in their presence. "You really have her fooled, don't you all?" She stood over the black rose bed, and she looked down on them with malice and contempt.

"You know that flowers and roses knows when people are nice to them." The voice that spoke to October's mother was loud and clear, but no one was around; she felt the weight of those words push through her back. She attempted to sit down on a garden bench, when there was nothing but pure silence throughout the entire garden.

The sky had turned black, a black that was almost spellbinding. She again looked down at the black roses in the rose bed, and they had shrunk to a smaller size; the columbine plants right behind the black rose bed had gained their entrance between the black roses, and the black roses had grown back to their original size. "Dear Heavenly Father, forgive me." The light of the moon had reappeared, brightening the ocean. October's mother never entered the garden after that.

October thought back to when her grandmother encouraged her to work in the garden by herself; her grandmother had confidence in her that she could. One week later, after October's mother had shown disrespect to the garden and was reprimanded, October took her grandmother's encouragement and was inspired to do so. "For you, my dear, the time of day will not matter when you enter the garden; they would love to see you and work with you." One early morning at six o'clock, and after staying up all night thinking and daydreaming about the garden, October had put on work overalls that seemed to fit her perfectly, and a gray cap that complimented her bun. Her grandmother was up and awake, and October knew that she would not be in the garden, since nighttime was when she was there.

Now, October's grandfather was more enthusiastic than her grandmother about the garden. He read "The Secret Garden" many times, and he hoped that October would read it and be inspired by it. The morning was warm and fresh, and the scent of honeysuckle and almond had poetically filled the air.

October could not understand when her grandmother said about working in the garden at night; "does she not know that darkness can be bad for the eyes? Even I know that." With in an instant, she saw beautiful and wondrous things that she never knew that existed. Many times,

throughout her young life, of course, October had played in the garden, and spent time. The garden... and now there was more than what she thought it was. Further up from where the sitting area was located, she had noticed a wall covered in ivy and black roses. It could not have been new!

Petunias and Daffodils were her grandmother's favorite. October's father loved Perennial flowers, and White roses; her grandmother planted them after he had passed, and never stopped. It was sure to be a warm day filled with sunshine, and the warmth was good for October Tinsdale. After the warmth of the sun, dark and purple clouds began to take shape in the sky, in the shape of one million flowers in each cloud, and the air was cool and the ocean was blowing wind, prompting her to hold onto her cap. The mysterious flower shaped clouds had faded away, appearing as if they were going into the sea; the sea itself had showed magnificent colors combined with the clouds. October was happy and speechless.

"Well, Good Morning, Miss. I see that you are finally here to work in your garden, and most of all, enjoy it." Edwin Thayer was a retired dentist with a passion for art and gardening, and he at times helped October's grandmother in the garden. He knew who October was. She was such in a trance that she did not hear him speaking to her; he lightly tapped her on her shoulder.

She turned around calmly and said "have you ever seen anything so magical and...hello, sir, my name is October Tinsdale. Nice to meet you." The garden was so large and spacious that it could almost be taken for being seen for miles away, equivalent to the ocean, or that was what October's grandmother envisioned. Edwin Thayer or anyone could have hidden. "I know that your grandmother comes out here only at night, and you are here in the beautiful daytime. She allows me to walk around in get ideas for my paintings, and I sometimes come here to work."

Edwin Thayer was tall with dark skin and very light brown eyes, curly dark hair, and a thin face. "My grandmother never mentioned you. I think it would be easy for anyone to get lost here," said October. As Edwin had been in the garden many times, he was always in amazement, not only for his work, but for the simple and yet elegant atmosphere. "I should feel ashamed of just now coming out here, and really paying attention to what my grandmother has wanted of me." She wished that she was alone when she said that without Edwin there. As a child, October spent plenty of time indoors reading books, no matter where she was. There was a black leather bag she noticed that Edwin was carrying; one book she saw was positioned upward. "Do you read books, Mr. Thayer?"

Before he could answer, the purple clouds had returned, but without the flower shapes. They both looked up, standing side-by-side as if in a united front, and they knew that it was nothing to fear. "I am glad that asked that, because I have something for you, Ms. Tinsdale." From what October could see, the books were very eye catching and could not be bypassed. She was certain that it was from her grandparents, even though that her grandfather had passed on as well as her father.

"Not only do I paint, Ms. Tinsdale, but I also write stories. I would like you to read this." The background on the book cover was a huge and wide waterfall with green colored water flowing and a small garden appearing behind the waterfall. October was taken aback and ever so inspired and appreciative. "I drew the cover, but the book was written by... well, don't worry who the book was written by."

Edwin Thayer had disappeared, and the flower shaped clouds had reappeared, and the wind moved the current of the ocean, and ocean had turned purple and gold, and the sea was filled with books.

A Princess Discovered

Stacey Medlock

In the year 1930, archaeologist and Professor Richard Benson had just returned to Kingston, exhausted and drained after excavating into grounds on wealthy estates and plantations, looking for priceless and ancient treasures from all over the world. No doubt that Professor Benson was well-known and respected, but Professor Benson had the advantage of surprising people that Professor Richard Benson was a woman.

She had spent nearly a month in England on a forgotten but beautiful estate not far from Cornwall excavating treasures with her two interns she was told was buried there. When she became tired and wanting to call it quits, she found a green and black box, and a book was wrapped in wide a dark green ribbon.

The book too was green and black and held at least one thousand pages. "This is most fascinating, Professor Benson; to find a book buried on this majestic estate. I know you love books, Professor, and so do I!" said Roger Hilton. Yes, Richard loved books, reading books and collecting books, but to find one buried was not what she expected. "Why, Professor, you look disappointed; there must be something very special about this book. It was buried for a reason; how often do you hear of books being buried?"

Roger passed the book to Richard with excitement and motivation about the book, and motivation for Richard in hopes that she was pause her skepticism and disappointment. Richard received the book from Roger with a feeling of intrigue and excitement while trying to suppress in the presence of her interns. The book cover was designed with small diamonds with an African embroidery on the exterior

She opened up the book, and in the middle of the book, a flash of potpourri had pleasantly greeted her sense of smell. "This reminds me of fairy tales I used to read as a child, and still read to this day," said Leslie Fairbanks, Richard's other assistant. Richard was glad that the few spectators, journalists, photographers and well-wishers had left the estate. It was already a cloudy and cold day, and though she did not like the cold, she enjoyed excavating in the cold weather. She had left her favorite work gloves at the hotel where she and the interns had stayed; her fingers had turned purple. "We will stop for today, due to my fingers dreadfully freezing and the cold is pricking at my skin like one million needles.

"Welcome back Ms. Benson. Would you like to have dinner sent to your room? The restaurant will be closing soon," said the hotel front desk clerk. Richard appreciated that her interns were with her during this excavation and was thankful that Roger had a bag large enough to cover and carry the book. Richard insisted on keeping her finds private until she was ready to reveal them.

"I think I would like a grilled cheese sandwich and French fries, and coca cola and you could have it delivered to my room, please, thank you." She was sure that Roger and Leslie had eaten their dinners and retired to their rooms; she noticed that Leslie was quieter than normal during the excavation. Could have had something to do with the book? Richard was no expert on books, but she loved books just the same and she had a collection of them at her house. Richard treasured every moment excavating, and being out in the open fields and lands, all over the world and the earth.

Therapeutic, fun, fulfilling and handsomely pays, she thanked God, her father and uncle. Richard followed in their footsteps, and she knew that they were watching over her and guiding her. After she had eaten her meal, Richard had slept for an hour when she could and should have slept much longer. Out of all of her finds, Richard could not fathom who would bury a

book and eventually dug.

The one hour of sleep had ended, and she looked at the book, waiting for an answer or guidance. "Why do you insist on keeping me awake? This is not a mistake, or is it?" She appreciated that books were just as valuable as her other finds, but there had to be a monumental connection with this book. She thought that if she opened to the middle section, then maybe it would introduce itself to her. Richard had fallen asleep, this time, for hours and hours. Eight o'clock had arrived, and she was still rightfully asleep.

She had awakened with a smile and a feeling of joy in her spirit that she had a profound book in her possession, but if she had it her way, she would let her mind guide with heightened stubbornness that the book had to be a waste of time. Richard's sleeping provided the confidence and motivation to explore the book, and also indulged her assistants, especially Roger.

She was not sure if Roger and Leslie were already awakened, or if they returned to the estate or were still asleep themselves. After waking up and still feeling happy and joyous, Richard had washed her face and brushed her teeth, and she noticed that a beautiful and welcoming sunshine had presented itself over the village. Her room was quiet, and she began to feel eerie as she looked over to where she had the book; like to book was watching her or waiting for her. She turned on the radio to soothe her eerie feeling. Richard's hotel room felt fresh and crisp, but not cold or cool; she left the windows closed.

Richard liked her room and all of the freshness that it offered her. The eeriness had disappeared, and she turned off the radio. Immediately, she heard waves breaking, and it sounded as if it was coming from the book; the breaking of the waves had a peaceful sound and transformed into an angry tone. A tune could have played a like that on a piano, but only for a very brief time.

The color of the book seemed to have become darker, like a dark ocean and with a strip of light blue entering to join the dark blue world. "It is definitely meant for me to have this book," Richard said to herself. She had decided once and for all to listen to what the book had to say to her and seen past what her eyes saw. She knew the book was friendly, inviting and mysterious and unescapable in profound ways. Richard could no longer avoid turning to page one. Before she could turn to page one, there was an art illustration. The art illustrations was a drawing of a princess holding a gold scepter, and with long black hair and green eyes with perfect dark skin standing at the edge of a waterfall, surrounded by millions of flowers and roses.

Underneath the illustration, there were words in the form of a letter: "My dear Richard, this is your throne that you had not known until now. You have finally found your treasure from the ground to the garden of all gardens and the ocean." She recognized the handwriting. It was from her father.

A Winter Nightly Village

Stacey Medlock

The summers were always so unbearable and dominant in Kingston, and the days were the worst time ever to be outdoors, or some people thought. Tempest Curry enjoyed Kingston all year long, regardless of the weather, and at only ten years old, she had an unmatched passion for gardens, and Kingston had its share of gardens.

In the summer of 1930, it was not that different from any other, and she was no less happy or content with her young life of seeing the world and all of its cultures. She was finally home with her father, English Literature Professor Arthur Curry, and newly retired, he was equally happy as his daughter.

"I am telling you now, dear father, that I am done with traveling here and there, and I will be right here even if you choose to leave again." The unimaginable pain of losing a wife was guaranteed, of course, but for Tempest, it was more merciful by the universe of losing her mother to a rare cancer at the age six.

Arthur could not deny that his only child and daughter was lacking the love and guidance of a mother. Tempest Curry was stronger, grounded and more mature than her father had anticipated. "No, my dear, a I am going to remain in Kingston and catch up on my reading and plenty of relaxation." They lived in a cottage that seemed to have been perfectly built for both of them; there was a housekeeper, cook and a gardener.

"Like everyone else, though, the heat here is utterly stifling, and how I wish for cooler weather. We have seen worse in other parts of the world, I will admit." The village of Kingston was beautiful and quaint with only one church, and the sea as a backdrop to make you stop to take a deep breath and smile. "Thank the Lord for such beauty." During the summer, naturally, the children were not in school, and it seemed that the hot weather would keep them in the house in the daytime, but one day, Tempest wanted to oppose that.

"My dear, I am going to read, play chess and listen to Beethoven, and even read; you know that you are welcome to join me if you would like." Arthur certainly knew and hoped that his daughter would not want to, but she had spent many hours playing chess before, and had won. "You enjoy your time with the chess game, and I will be outside," said Tempest.

Her father had begun to smoke a pipe, and she closed the door to his study behind her; he was clearly in his element. "I said to him that I am going outside into the heat, and I do not believe that the words actually registered." Tempest had a concern and curiosity about on how gardens maintained itself the summer and in the intense heat.

Before she entered the garden, she had become reasonably hungry. "Miss Tempest, I have a feeling that your father is in his study playing chess or reading a wonderful book. I just made a delicious salad with oranges, strawberries and roasted sweet sauteed sweet potatoes, just for you."

Mr. Daly was the cook and in his late twenties and could have passed for a younger gentleman. Salads were his specialty, and it was no question that the fruits and vegetables were picked from their garden. "Thank you, Mr. Daly. I just love your salads; my father does not know what he is missing. I am sure will be hungry for dinner." When Tempest had sat down in the kitchen, she that there were coloring pencils and blank sheets of paper in a suede portfolio. She started to eat the salad; the taste was absolutely refreshing and tasteful.

"Do you draw, Mr. Daly? My mother was an artist, or she tried to be, at least that is what my father said." Mr. Daly had spooned some roasted sweet potatoes into a small rustic bowl along with lettuce. "Yes, ma'am. I like to draw about places and people from a different time, but in a

lovely place like Kingston. I guess you could say that I like fairy tales and places that are dark and surrounded by deep oceans that have many myths... excuse me, Miss, I am keeping you from your lunch.”

Tempest Curry had stopped eating after the third time. She hoped it would not bother Mr. Daly that she had stopped eating the salad that was so artfully made. Please tell me more about that, Mr. Daly; I think it so wonderful.” More so, she wanted to see his drawings and how the drawings could match what she fantasized about, too. Mr. Daly had too stopped eating the roasted sweet potatoes, and gently handed his drawings to her.

The drawings were exactly what she was expecting and not expecting. She took her time and gently opened the book of drawings and turned to the first page. It was a forest with very tall and wide trees shining the most magnificent green from the trees in the night. On top of one the many grand and steep hill was a village of people sheep, good witches and even a scarecrow holding a giant black key to a castle on the other side of the steep hill. The scarecrow was a noble and trusted creature. They all co-existed in peace while patiently waiting for the scarecrow to lead them to the castle to use the key to open the door.

“Mr. Daly, this is so awesome, and I just love this; has anyone else seen this?” She carefully turned each page, ran her fingers over the pages enjoying the softness of the pages as if the pages were specially made for the drawings in particular. “Thank you, Miss, that compliment means so much to me; I knew that you would love it. Have you heard about the myth here in Kingston where the gardens somehow don’t hold up so much in the summer?”

Mr. Daly had lived in Kingston all of his life as Arthur and Tempest Curry. Mr. Daly was quiet and always kept to himself; this was the first time that he had mentioned it to her. “If you mean the village somehow turning into winter in the summer at night, yes, I have; I have never experienced that, nor has my father. I am sure it would take place when we were abroad. Have you ever seen that, Mr. Daly?” In a good way, it was like two children talking about that; no one could dispute that Tempest Curry may have been an old soul. Mr. Daly was a child at heart in the most innocent and inspiring fashion.

His body language showed embarrassment and joy, the of the conversation that he so wanted to have, but with the right child and a child at heart as well. “I could never sleep at night or hardly ever. There was one day that was very hot, I believed it was more than ninety degrees in the day, and I could not wait for the sun to go down to work in the village garden that everyone likes to work in, especially the kids.

The one night when I was all alone in the village garden, or I thought that I was alone, company had entered into my presence, but it was not people, you see, and no one who lived in the village. I heard a voice in the far distance say that is for us all, and it can be shared. I had suddenly become thirsty, like I had been out in the daytime heat; even though the weather was cold. The sound of the lake had caught my attention, and I escorted over to the lake by a deer, and I was no longer thirsty.”

Tempest had closed Mr. Daly’s book of drawings without looking at it, and she looked, listened and held onto every word as if her life, dreams and hopes depended on it. “The deer was over the lake, and I thought that it was going to drink from it, and he did not; the deer looked at me with such faith and trust and sympathy. A wonderful scent of raspberries had perfumed the lake, not the air or garden, but the lake itself; my thirst had returned, and I knew that I had to quench it. There was a gazebo, and a table and chair like it appeared from nowhere. A clear pitcher along with a glass was situated on stand, and it was filled with the colors of lavender and pink rose. I poured the pretty looking mixture into the glass and drank it; the taste was heavenly, and it tasted exactly how it looked.”

The sun outside had shined brightly over Kingston, bringing good light and health to the elements and even the deep ocean. Was it really true that summers were not so friendly and nourishing to each and every garden? Make no mistake that the people of Kingston loved to work and spend time in their gardens, but did they just see what they wanted to see? Every flower, rose and tree, and the entire family of flowers and trees would beg to differ. A sudden chill had filled the Curry cottage to where it drove Tempest Curry and Mr. Daly outside into the garden and warmed up in the sun. Mr. Curry remained in his study, and the housekeeper was out on an errand. "My, it is almost freezing in the cottage, how can your father stand it?" Mr. Daly was shivering, and he stopped when he saw that Tempest did not shiver. She looked on at the garden and was utterly astonished. The garden from the village had joined her garden, and there was no sign of weakness or it not surviving in the summer heat.

"Mr. Daly, that myth is simply not true! You do see what I see, or do you not?" Mr. Daly was too amazed to speak when he saw what he told her about the night garden, and the clear pitcher was also filled with the lavender and pink rose mixture on a stand in the gazebo that Tempest never sat in. The garden also smelled of raspberries. The deer had escorted them to the lake, and from the water of the lake, the key that the scarecrow held floated in the water. Tempest bent down to collect the key from the lake water. "That is the same key that I saw, Miss," said Mr. Daly. The hot summer day had turned into a winter night, and the castle could be seen on the steep hill, and Mr. Curry had joined his daughter and Mr. Daly. "Let us go to our castle, my daughter."

A Sense of Fire

John Calvin Hughes

Merk this in your mynde.

Lydgate, Horse, Goose & Sheep

Effie Rabren braced herself in the open door, facing the prairie. She heard it. She didn't see it —she was blind. A small blind woman, with thin gray hair, a narrow face, and a long nose with a small star-shaped scar across the bridge. Gaunt, rail-thin, thin as the very dime. Round owl eyes, gray and darkened. She heard the wind, felt it on her face, but there wasn't nothing special going on out there. Alice had always said that Effie's other senses were stronger than most folkses'. "You smell a body before they ever ring the doorbell," she liked to say. But, in truth, all those years ago, sixty-five long years ago when she'd lost her sight, nothing like that happened for her, her other five senses had not grown stronger, at least not so she could tell. More like she grew another sense to take sight's place. Not that all the senses in all creation could have stopped the drunken juggernaut that was the story of her life. Nor would it have stopped her from reaching that moment when the last card in her hand was to move into this retirement home on the edge of the tall grass prairie.

She felt around for one of the rocking chairs. The porch was wide and warm, and the dust slid around under her feet on the painted boards. No way to keep it clean, what with the workings of wind and prairie and the generally poor work ethic among the cleaning folk. Not that she minded. Her room was clean enough. She missed Alice. Alice had taken her in after Effie's only child Connie and her husband were killed in the fires of '02. Effie's own husband, Butler had died some years before that. Her poor brothers, Abel and Trask, had both been killed long, long ago, in the war, Abel at Midway in '42 and Trask in Italy in '44. All that was left of her family was her granddaughter, Leah who was studying up at Yale College in the northeast. Sometimes she let herself cry for everything she had lost. Nothing wrong with that, with a little self-pity, as long as it didn't become your defining quality. As long as it wasn't what you were known for. Or remembered for.

The home wasn't terrible, as many old folks' homes were. The food was good. The staff were nice. The residents were mostly quiet. They played cards or board games, they watched the television and followed their stories. When she wasn't on the porch listening to the prairie, Effie would sit in the recreation room, listening to the slap of the cards, the rattling of the dice, the foolishness in the words of the actors on the television. On some afternoons Mr. Elias Eno played the old upright piano in the rec room. Soft, slow, ethereal tunes. Nothing Effie ever recognized. She thought he might be making them up as he went. He never seemed to hit a wrong note. No way to ask him. He was lost in dementia. Never spoke a word. Never left his room except for meals. And to play the piano in the afternoon. The home always smelled like baking bread. Because they did bake their own bread. Good bread, at that. All in all, it wasn't the worst place for one's final act.

No, her other senses had not grown keener when she went blind. What had really happened, truth be told, was that her *marking* had gotten stronger. That's how she thought of it: *marking*. Sometimes sound would reach in through her ears and *mark* something on her brain, like chalk on a blackboard. Now it was true that even before she went blind, she had heard things, heard strange things in strange ways. But whether that was marking or not, well, she just couldn't say. It was so long ago. She had gone blind when she was thirteen. *For three days prior to her first womanly time, she had heard something approaching, coming to her or, more terribly, for her, out of the sounds and sights and smells of her parents' horse ranch where she grew up, coming to her through the taste of food, the smell of frying bacon, the soft cotton of her clothes. It was a sound like a thousand needles dropping on a tile floor or a field of grasshoppers screaming, and when her period came on that third day, Effie went completely blind.*

But in that moment, beyond the panic and the terror and the disbelief, it was as if somebody, or more probably Somebody, turned up the volume on her *marking*. *Marking*: yes, it was a kind of hearing, but not so much like it was coming in your ear. It was more like a pressure that was inside her, in her head, just above her mouth and behind her nose somehow. Now—after her blindness, after her first period—she knew things. She knew what her mother was thinking about cooking for supper. She knew when Mr. Carpenter from up the road was going to show up unexpectedly. She *marked* when a colt was coming or when a mare had gotten into some Johnson grass. Her father, hands caked hard by dirt, rough sweat-stiff clothes smelling of pipe tobacco, held her his arms in the evenings after supper, whispering cowboy ballads to her and listening to her *markings* about the ranch. He took seriously every single thing she said, even if some of her warnings came to nothing. He had once ridden the full fifteen miles of north fence when she told him a horse was caught in the wire. There was no horse, but near the end of the day, in the flaming last red light of the sun, he did come upon a spot near a stand of pines where he had once freed a horse caught in that very wire back around the time Effie was born. He never doubted her. And whatever he believed about the truth and the source of her *marking*, he kept it in his quiet heart and in his prayers.

Her mother, Jessie, though, was inconsolable. The tragic coincidence of womanhood and blindness in the person of her one and only daughter stole a treasure of great price from her. Her sweet mother, Jessie, of the light eyes, the wheat-colored hair, the sun-browned skin, had been born sometime just after 1900, came of age in the Great Depression, found her cowboy, Jason Dalton, had the baby Effie late—nearly forty years old! and vowed her daughter would not endure the poverty and the privation and the want that she had herself endured. She and Jason had worked hard and wrestled their ranch and their home out of nothing but the thorns and thistles that constituted the biblical wasteland of west Texas. And now her child, her only daughter, would be blind!

When Jessie would pull Effie onto her lap and hug her with all her might, the agony her mother bore poured into Effie and seemed to fill her stomach and lungs with a cold, hard pain. Effie spent years trying to convince her mother that blindness had not ruined her life, but had

made her grateful for what she had, for all the good things she had, the good things her parents had provided. Effie did all the things a young woman with sight could do: she finished high school, she dated, she fell in love with and married a good man, the inestimable Butler Rabren. She had her own child, sweet Connie. But even so, even at the great remove of time and distance, she could still *mark* her mother's pain. When her parents had driven over to El Paso and Jessie held the baby Connie for the first time, she wept Noah's very deluge. Effie *marked* the moment, when grandmother met granddaughter: not her mother's joy, but grief, brutal ice-cold grief.

Effie thanked the Lord that her mother had passed before Connie did. If Jessie had been forced to carry the weight of her granddaughter's death on top of everything else—ah, it was just as well. No parent should outlive a child, much less a grandchild. Effie had learned the bitterest truth in the life of the faithful: the Lord is sparing with his blessings and mercies.

On the other hand, Effie had gotten no inkling that her daughter and her daughter's man would be killed. She had not *marked* that. *Why not?* She had been living with them, first in Texas and then in Oklahoma, after her own Butler had died of that aneurism back in '96. Connie's man, Tom Grove, was an agronomist or agriculturist or some such. Studied plants, is what he did. Before he met and married Connie, he had taken his doctoral degree in botany and hied himself off to South America somewhere to study plants. He had theories, wild theories, crazy theories, really. Lord, the Antinomian heretics had nothing on that boy. He would sit on the porch of an evening with Connie and her, talking a blue streak about how the plant world was awake, how it was as rife with good and evil as much as the human world, maybe even more so. Professor Grove had been let go from the prestigious University of Texas at Austin (for spouting just such foolishness, Effie suspected) and found his way to Oklahoma State University where he got in with a group there working to make the wheat better, more nutritious or sturdier or some such.

But Tom Grove kept returning to South America over the years. He was always tight-lipped about whatever he was doing there. It didn't have nothing to do with wheat, Effie knew that as surely as she knew her own name. On his last trip, he brought back some plants Effie knew he didn't have no business with. She thought he had probably smuggled them in. She had heard Tom telling Connie not to mention the plants to anyone. *Secret plants? And what exactly would that be about?*

Late one afternoon, she and Connie sat under the elm tree, while Leah rode her bike up and down the driveway. Effie lifted her nose in the air and said, "Do you smell that?"

"Course I smell it, Mama. You'd have to be dead and buried not to smell it."

"Well, what is it?"

Connie sighed. "I think it's those damn South American plants."

"The who?"

"Something Tom got from Bolivia. He says he's crossed them with something else, though he didn't say what. From what he says, it's the crossing that makes the stink. And can I just say, I think he likes the smell?"

"Likes it? Lord oh mighty. Where is he keeping them?"

Connie said, "He's planted them on the south side of the house."

"Mm. That is quite the stink."

"It's worse at night. They're right outside our window, and Tom likes to keep the window open while he sleeps so—"

Well, the plants got the lion's share of Tom Grove's attention, to the point where he was ignoring his duties at the university. Effie overheard him and Connie one night arguing the point, Connie saying that she was tired of making excuses when the Ag department called looking for him. And just what was it he called himself doing standing there for half a day, staring at those damn plants? It wasn't like he was even tending them—watering, hoeing, and whatnot—he just stood there staring at them.

Later on, Tom seemed to rouse himself from whatever had gotten into him, and he packed up Connie and they drove north with several of the professors from his work to see some wheat fields where they'd been sowing the seeds that they'd somehow modified in their god-forsaken laboratories. Mrs. Driscoll from the Lutheran church came and stayed with her and Leah, cooking and watching out for things. Connie and Tom were to be gone for a week. But, of course, they never came back.

On the fifth day, Mrs. Driscoll got a phone call. Something was wrong, but she didn't say anything until that night, after Leah had had her supper and gone to bed. She told Effie that Tom and Connie had been killed in a fire, a wind-blown wildfire that had swept through the wheat field that they and some other college folk had been inspecting. Effie had a hard time imagining such a thing. Mrs. Driscoll turned on the CNN and eventually the coverage got around to the tragic wildfire that had swept through northern Oklahoma. Over five hundred homes and more than a hundred thousand acres destroyed in less than two days, the fire driven by forty mile an hour winds, the flames overtaking people before they could get moving good. Tens of millions of dollars in damages. Effie asked her to turn the television off.

There was a bad scene when Child Protective Services arrived two days later. Mrs. Driscoll had called them. Reluctantly, Effie supposed. *What else could the good woman have done?* She couldn't come and live with Effie and Leah herself. She had her own family to look out for.

Leah cried and said she wanted to stay with her grandmother. The child told the lady from the state that she'd just lost both her parents and now she was going to lose her grandmother too? Of course, the lady had no response for that. There was just nothing for it.

Effie thought that, while there is no good time to lose one's parents, thirteen seemed a particularly bad one. Right on the verge of womanhood, adulthood, woman but still child, independent but still needy, smart but really really dumb. Effie had been the same age when she lost her sight. It hadn't destroyed her, but that was only because she hadn't let it. She had had something to prove. To her mother, mostly. Her mother who was thoroughly ruined by Effie's blindness. Who did Leah have to prove anything to? What would be her motivation to overcome this tragedy?

The lady from the state said that she was willing to listen to any reasonable ideas the child or Effie had. But, of course, they had none. The lady was right. But that didn't make it right.

In the end, she and Leah said goodbye on the porch of the rented house in the flat little

neighborhood north of Berry Creek. Leah cried all the way to the lady's car and Effie could hear her crying even after the door was shut. And she thought she heard it even after they had driven off and left her on the porch with her suitcases, waiting on her friend Alice to come and fetch her. Laying down her last card.

She couldn't really hear the child crying, of course. She *marked* it though. Leah cried the whole trip. Effie just knew it.

The wind shifted. She smelled those plants. Though she had no business doing so, Effie made her way around the side of the house to where Tom had planted them. Up close, the stench was wretched. There was a tool shed in back of the house. It would be pure luck if she could find it, but she did, and she felt around the cool, musty interior until she put her hands on a hoe. She uprooted the plants (there were three of them) and chopped at them like they were snakes. Whatever sap was inside them reeked to high heaven. Satisfied that they were in small enough pieces, she kicked them around in the dirt, trying to separate the pieces as if they might reassemble if left to their own devices. She'd have burned them if she trusted herself not to burn down the whole world.

As if the whole world hadn't burned just a week ago in a massive wheat field.

The Holy Island

The wealth was acquired by hands covered with soil
and the man was allowed to walk into the grave. This was one of the entries to the underworld.
The family said, *yes, enter.*

The rocks were smashed to scare the ancient folk,
and now we see the pieces placed on windowsills.
The light reflecting off the glass allows us to see them as is—
the same one color.

The woman laughs,
not guilty, she said. They were told they had to leave. To take the grazing animals with them.
To live elsewhere. Not selected to be included with the scientists.

And now, here I am, with chamomile flowers in one hand, a joint in another
in a tourist village painted all blue, facing a footpath to a front row view
of a historical Vatican for another set of people. Another lifetime,
before the absolute collapse of civilization.
Yet, the sea, even back then, was always the sea.

Fused together, seamlessly, our breath.
Our ancient brains. We don't know anything else, but to get out of the water.

Abstract Erotic

Our tradition is of soap-making,
frying moray at noon, fucking in the fields.

The figures are defined by a warfare geometric
blueness and the thickness of flesh.

This time,
a handful of earth, oil, water, a white rose. The terracotta organs.

The pressed flower in the book from the concrete
home. Doorless. The wood-fired

baked bread exists here. The simple textiles.
We were just children playing with a garden hose.

These blended together that didn't resemble
what is supposed to be human.

Nor was the well-sculpted eyebrow that was raised before us.

The eye watched, the fly that buzzed around watched.
The neighbors watched.

Once again, a dry season—
green oil, green that matched the eye. The undecayed green December.

A gold pin was placed carefully upon the lapel
and I needed half a kilo of wine that day.

None of us had any cheer left. Our glasses were filled, but held low.

The paper table cloth, ripped at nervously,
traced the whole Peloponnese all the way to the old Venetian tips.

It no longer mattered where I was from. I was told I had kind eyes,
but Saint Paraskevi took my eyesight that day—she covered them with aluminum foil.

Left behind was winter orange.

The Acid Garden

Deep in the canvas bag:

a teal acrylic cup

a gold-wired Parthenon carrying an Altoids tin filled with weed.

What wasn't held anymore was pressed against the flattened grass.

From the outside, the home was dripping water from floor to floor.

The gods moved quietly in their liquid robes, keeping the sense of sleep warm against their bodies. Money was exchanged.

The primeval eyes sparkled every time the rock was touched and with every bite of meat.

There was previously only a crab apple tree back here. Uneven from all sides.

Ocean Beating & Gravity

Lesser loved
and the sand, it's an invitation for you—please be nice to me.

Come in,

with some pine (Merry Christmas)
the ocean knows it well,
perhaps from
when blue shielded blue, forever,
skin on skin. I'm here. Beyond a Titan, beyond the virtual.

Bring back the normal pace of waiting.
Everyone is on high alert.
It's the medium: water. Uncomplicated.
I started paying attention.

The intelligent ocean knows many facts:

how I was ignored. Not a fact.
It's raining and he's in the water. The ocean holds him.

I've been called bad. Defined as: water.

The 12 Months of the Year, Much Later

With a dance to start us off. The disturbed dust moves from one corner to the other.
We are aligned with the polar north and with song. It's time, a dialogue.

There must be a reason why, there must be intelligent spectators.
Repetition is found in new forms. Repetition we celebrate.

Maybe I'll miss going to the pharmacy to buy toothpaste.
The restraint to prove my worthiness,
I deserve it! A place in heaven,

the thousand years of development and wanting more.
All subsequent productions allow for the final act's lines to be fed to the actors on stage.

We like to believe in the improvements of our individuality—
our unburdened future. I'm trying to keep it light here. It's almost to the end.

The sun is on my face now.

A Hundred Times, the Ocean's Depth

*I arrived in a coastal wave,
pure as salt, as simple and unspeaking.
My comfortable fear, this mouth's heat.*

I felt the new.
It was unpierced skin. The gorgeous.
The home: a cream rectangle and the laws of the Byzantines;
the clothes they wore in hot weather. This is our sold off suburban ranch.

Then: an unstable feeling, my adolescent temper well known.
My slow discoveries,
some fuzz above my lip.

A group of men started blowing one other on this part of the beach.

With a Lisp and an Accent Mark

Built with layers deep in the ground,
sturdy enough to withstand earthquakes,

It's the best place to catch a sunset.

To sleep on the porch in June.

Heading west, we were driven on the moped towards the seaside mill.

The dog barked at the group of friends walking at night after they drank too many beers.

History here should be an accurate description of events. Of people drawn on paper.

Or of emotions.

I felt this way once.

It occurred in dim orange light.

It's all timed, given a birth.

I was revealed through intonation. The sing-song

of childhood. And now, the lyrical *umms*.

Yet, the language doesn't need to be realized,

there is remaining meaning, it's obvious.

It's easy to let it get absorbed. Lying there in the sun, hearing it spoken, unrolled.

The inaccuracies were considered cute.

Altered to be reasonable, all in the diminutive.

On this Flatland

A bag of money was collected
when the Greek music ended with the silencing of the bouzouki.
This was a big party, an advertisement.

Now passing empty bars I ask “what’s good here Chicago?”

The artificial moonlight, a faded blue, lit up the theater to signify we were in the nighttime.
I wasn’t in a costume, but I danced as the clown.

I shoved rose petals
into a box and placed a large crystal dish on top of each layer to make room for additional
colors.

A lot of money was spent, fuck it, we wanted to spend it.
These were the silver offerings to the Empress. It should have been a conversation between
the two mothers—a manual on experience, yet it never happened.

A gold fork was stuck into the cooked meat and
I wanted more (I asked for more).

Psaltic Art

Pssst, I have a beautiful city for you right here,
a monophonic love note sung during a night filled with anxiety.

The culture continued to evolve
in its own manner, it always found the way.

The coins sewed on our velvet vests and the womenfolk
in a chorus displayed the imaginary art in a French salon, loose hair

and blood. How brave and destructive.
How religion became the identifiable trait.

Come here. Hold this 13th century notification of
a backwater place with a crescent sand beach. The sand, so nice, so warm.

Help us become! Sing, please.
Our dead, our waiting—it's my one note voice. The earth shook.

We've entered into a new generation
with an arm full of gifts. Please, accept this marble slab. This half-melted candle.

There's no music here. Only the sound of a group of people
and the expired earthly thrills formed into another world. This heavy rock.

The tarot deck says: this is a tower moment.
An unstable fire will burn and burn.

This is why we created the phoenix.

Leftover Blood

The half-life,
reflected every day,
off velvet green rocks,
it crawls. It shouts.

And so, with

an insult,
inhaled Pentelic marble as a silent weapon

and a throat full of dusty emerald,

I watched blue lights moving, not in unison, but hitting the same beat.
It was a cover to the exit of the extra wet ocean that night.

It was after all the heartbeat of the experience,
like biting into a fresh quince. Ha!

The wilderness escaped solitude,
passionate and rogue.

An island ferry transports your past.

Wiped Out

Carl Meuser

He had always loved the light from the dining room window, the way it diffused through the elm tree that still held the tire swing in which he had spun and soared and dived through sun and rain and snow. Beyond the tree and the gravel driveway, was the barn in which he had saddled horses and stacked hay and fed cattle. Beside the barn was the corral where he had sorted, branded, and inoculated steers and heifers.

The century-old Sears and Roebuck house meant comfort and safety. The wood that framed the world outside was heavy, the light that streamed through the windows was soft. The Great Plains wind that screamed through the tree branches, amplified the stillness inside. Rain pounded against the walls, then dripped into the flower beds his mother tended.

His mom sat across the table, a firm smile on her face. She could load cattle, haul hay, or drive a wheat truck as well as anyone, which he admired, but what he appreciated most was the feel she furnished to the house. She believed that a house should provide a neat, orderly sanctuary, and that a good meal could cure a truckload of ills. To him, she was as much a part of the comfort and safety of the house as any joist or window or frame.

A plate of her lasagna, his favorite, sat untouched in front of him. "When's dad going to be here?" he asked.

She studied him from under a furrowed brow for a long moment before answering. "Like I said, Jacob. He's just watering the cattle over at Elizabeth's. He'll be here before long."

He nodded, acknowledging but not rejoicing in his dad's imminent arrival. Then, he stared at his food, which should have provided comfort, and moved it around his plate.

The kitchen door screeched open, the screen door banged shut, and his father's heavy boots dropped on the linoleum. His dad stopped in the doorway between the kitchen and the dining room. The man's soul matched his façade, and Jacob's stomach knotted at the sight.

His father was two inches taller and twenty-five pounds heavier than his own solid, six-foot frame. His heavy hands were calloused, and they had been scarred by everything from barbed wire to plow shares to manila rope. His long-sleeve snap shirt and jeans were faded by countless hours of sun and heavy-duty wash cycles. He was not a cruel man, but he was hard.

"Well, look who's back from the dead. It's our boy Jacob." Then, his dad yanked a chair back from the other end of the simple, heavy dining room table and dropped into the seat.

Jacob shrank into his starched shirt. "Hi, Dad. It's nice to see you, too."

His dad's head tilted slightly at this greeting, then he said, "I thought you'd plum forgot our phone number. How'd you figger out where we live?"

The sarcasm, delivered in a faux southern drawl, was a surprise. His parents were stoic dryland farm people. They endured drought, washed-out roads, dead cattle, political stunts in faraway lands that crashed commodity markets.

But this was different, personal.

His dad helped himself to the biggest slice in the pan, then locked his eyes on Jacob. "Well son, we're all ears."

"You know what happened."

"I know that I drove to Enid to rent a tuxedo. Me. Then, the next day, when you knew we'd be at church, you left a message on the answering machine telling us it was off. That was a month of silence ago. This morning, you call your mother and invite yourself to lunch. I'd say..."

His mom squeezed his dad's arm. "Mark, give him a chance to speak."

His dad snorted, turned to his wife, then turned to Jacob and said, "You heard your mother. Speak."

"I regret my failure to communicate more fully..."

"Cut the crap. You're talking to your folks not a jury."

Jacob strained to keep the searing anger from his face. "As I stated earlier, you know what happened."

"You didn't state a damned thing!" His dad appeared ready to spring from his seat, but he restrained himself.

As the stillness settled, his mom asked, "Didn't she tell you anything?"

The nerves twitched in Jacob's cheeks. "Nothing of value."

The light in his mother's eyes dimmed. "What do you think?"

"I don't know, Mom. I've been focused on cleaning up the debris - returning presents, ending the contract with the realtor. Turns out there's a lot to do."

"Add 'figure out why' to your list," his dad said.

Jacob clenched his jaw. This was not the conversation he came home to have. "Whenever I ask that question, I always come up with the same two follow-up questions," Jacob said. "Why would I care, and why does it matter?" He sat back in his chair and made a show of looking out the window. "Why is her problem?"

"No," his dad said. "If you have a crop that fails, you don't put another one in the ground until you know why."

"Jacob," his mom said as she leaned across the table toward him, "I think that Jessica made a terrible mistake, but she's not stupid."

Jacob lurched to his feet, toppling his chair. "I've been alone in the dark for the past month, so I drove six hours looking for a little bit of light from my family, and the way you two finally start taking an interest in my life is to cross-examine me?"

He turned and strode out through the kitchen, slamming the screen door behind him.

Something in his mind knew where he was going. He climbed into his pickup and slammed its door, disappointed again that nothing broke loose. He spun his tires in the gravel, hoping a flying rock might do damage somewhere.

As he slowed at the end of the driveway, his older brother Jim stepped out from behind a tractor that had been hastily angled into a metal shed and waved. Jacob glanced in his direction, then turned away, fish-tailing his truck into the middle of the county road. He didn't want to talk to Jim, to have his older brother ask, "What'd I tell you was gonna happen?"

Jim was a bachelor farmer with the personality of a tractor tire - rough and direct. Jacob told him about Jessica over Thanksgiving break his third year in law school. "She's the kind of woman who can walk into any room, point at any man and say, 'I choose you.'"

"So, why would she choose you?"

"Besides my looks, charm, and solid farm-boy body?"

Jim shook his head.

"All the guys she hangs out with are undergrad frat boys. They're years away from being anything, but I'm graduating law school in the spring."

"And then what'll you be?"

"A lawyer. I'll pass the Bar and make a bunch of money."

Jim took a long, loud breath and said, "Jacob, I'm in the market for a bull for my heifers. Most any bull's going to produce calves, but I don't just want calves. For my heifers, what do you think I want?"

"A bull that throws small calves."

“Yup, and if the bull I choose doesn’t produce the calves I want, I haul ‘im back to the sale barn.”

At the corner east, he turned south and a mile and a half later pulled off the road and into a field at the top of a hill. He climbed out of his pickup and stood facing the south wind. Jacob closed his eyes and filled every crevice in his lungs with the fragrance of freshly tilled soil and slowly exhaled. The pounding in his chest eased.

He opened his eyes. He had always loved the view from up here. In his youth, the small hill had seemed a mountain. Its crest, perhaps forty feet above the adjacent land, was tall enough to look down upon all of the surrounding country. The town of York was to his southwest, a smudge of trees and houses with two grain elevators jutting from the leaves.

Though he couldn’t make it out clearly, he knew where the school sat on the west side of the smudge. His mind could zoom into the football stadium, the gymnasium that rose above the single-story school, the vocational agriculture classroom and shop that sat aside from the main building.

He had played football and basketball, because that was what mainstream kids did. He had taken Vocational Agriculture all four years in high school. It was what almost all the boys and a few of the girls did. He had showed the best steers from the farm at the county stock show each fall and spring, which was standard for Future Farmers of America members whose families ran cow-calf operations.

Back then, everything beyond the horizon of this hill, the options and the obligations, had been beyond his vision. He didn’t know where he wanted to fit or even what the possibilities were, so he did what was in front of him.

School was never difficult. He had been salutatorian with little effort. Had it challenged him more, perhaps he would have put more thought into what he wanted to take from it, where he wanted it to take him. The college in nearby Alva offered a scholarship, unsolicited, and he was flattered. Most of his friends were going there, so he did, too.

The one thing he had always known about his future was that the farm wasn’t big enough to support two grown sons, so Jim, and not he, would be the farmer. That’s just how it worked. As proof, he needed to look no farther than his own family. Uncle Charlie, his dad’s younger brother, graduated high school, joined the Army, and had seldom visited since.

Jacob’s life changed one Sunday when Bill Schmitz, the only lawyer in York, asked him after church what he was studying. “I haven’t settled on anything.”

“You should get yourself into law school.”

His ego fluttered. Law school sounded both cool and grown up. “Really? Why law school?”

“Because you can do about anything with a law degree.”

“Anything?”

“Well, you can’t be a brain surgeon, but you can do a lot of other things - criminal defense, wills and probate, be the everything-lawyer in a small town. Plenty of CEOs and congressmen are lawyers. You’ll give yourself a lot of options.”

Jacob walked around the pickup and faced north toward the family house. He thought again of the view from the dining room table, the elm tree where he had smashed and scraped while swinging in the tire, and the corral where he had been kicked and shat upon by panicked and angry cattle.

To the east were scattered farms and outbuildings that broke up the quilted expanse of yellow-green pastures, ripening cotton, deep green alfalfa, and flat, reddish-brown patches that would soon be planted to wheat. The quilt was slashed north to south by a miles-long line of trees that marked Cottonmouth Creek.

A shorter line of trees to his southeast fixed his roving eyes. He climbed back into his pickup and put it into gear.

He pulled into the driveway at the northwest corner of a wheat field. A strip along the entire half mile of the north end was planted to grass and two rows of cedar trees.

He thought about a girl. Christy Thompson. They had talked once, for a few minutes after a basketball game at Grant's Fork, where she lived, but he had seen her many times. The sixteen-year-olds in Sherman County who played sports or were cheerleaders or showed livestock knew or knew of every other sixteen-year-old who did the same.

He was a bit surprised and very pleased to see her arrive at a party at Miller's round tops. She asked him to dance, then after the second song she towed him into the shadows, pulled his face down to hers and put her tongue deep into his mouth.

This field was where he had taken her. It was a couple of miles from the party, and you couldn't see a vehicle from the road when it was behind the shelter belt. It was legally trespassing, but he knew the owner wouldn't mind. Howard would consider Jacob losing his virginity a good cause.

Meeting Jessica wasn't all that different.

One Saturday afternoon, his "Oklahoma Law" sweatshirt caught her eye when he went to the concession stand during a football game. Jessica and her friends maneuvered themselves behind him in line. As he collected his order, she reached around him for the napkin dispenser and rubbed her breasts against his back and arm. He started, nearly spilling his nachos, and she smiled and helped herself to a chip.

"We need some wine," she said.

As he drove with Jessica and her friends to the liquor store, he understood that her intention was to use him, then discard him like a dirty rag, but he didn't care. He was happy to play along and see where the lark might take him.

"What year are you?" he asked.

"Senior. In another month, I won't need anyone to buy wine for me."

"What'll you do when you graduate?"

"I'm moving home to Dallas. I'm going to business school in two years, so I'm going to get work experience and save money living with my parents. What about you?"

Had anyone else asked him that question, he would have said that he was looking forward to taking a job with the land services company in Oklahoma City where he had interned the previous summer. But Oklahoma City was two hundred miles from Dallas, and he wanted to give her no reason to dismiss him on day one, so he said, "Whatever I want. I have options."

At her sorority house, when her friends bounded away with their bottles, she lingered for a few moments and gave him her number.

After meeting her family on a weekend trip two months later, he had sensed, or imagined, that tension over their future would build as graduation for both approached. By the time he told Jessica his thoughts, he had turned down the job at the land services office, accepted an adequate offer at a large firm in Dallas, and paid the first month's rent on an apartment in the suburb where her parents lived.

"You want to move to Dallas?" Jessica asked.

"Sure."

He tried to make the impulsiveness sound romantic, that he was throwing over his grand life plans to be with her and make her happy. There was enough truth in what he said for it to be believable.

Jessica was a blue-eyed woman from north Texas, hardly a novelty, but he found her exotic. Her family had wine with dinner. His had iced tea. Her dad and brothers played golf together on Saturdays. Saturday was just another work day for his family. Her parents had taken her to Europe to celebrate her high school graduation. The farthest he had been was a ski trip to New Mexico with his church youth group.

Jessica tried hard to teach him the skills he needed for her world. She made him learn about wine and learn to eat medium rare steak. She introduced him to art museums and musicals. She improved his snow skiing. While, after some effort, he came to prefer medium rare to well-done and appreciate cabernet sauvignon, he fidgeted through every fundraising gala she asked him to attend.

One day, as he mediated between middle-aged siblings who were squabbling, he realized, not over the physical substance of the estate, but over the relative value their parents had given to each and how it differed from the value they attached to themselves, he was struck by the thought that his own life resembled the faux wood facade concealing the true substance of the table around which they conducted the sad battle over relevance and meaning.

The more he thought about this revelation, the less he could claim to understand the true substance of his own existence. What he did understand, was that as a human he had never advanced beyond being the poor player who gave up his nachos and bought the wine.

He started when his phone rang, and he reflexively answered. "You still in the country?" his dad asked.

Jacob closed his eyes and let his head fall back against the seat. "I'm a couple miles north of Miller's."

"Good. Meet me over east."

Jacob sat up and thought for a moment. His dad was a simpleton. If the old man wanted to square off and have it out, now that Jacob had had an opportunity to collect himself, then he was happy to show. "On my way."

Jacob crested a small rise in the rutted dirt road, took his foot off the gas and let his pickup coast for a time before braking. He asked aloud, "Why the hell didn't the county put the 'bridge out' sign back at the intersection?"

The end came on a Friday evening, a week before the wedding. Jessica brought his favorite pizza and beer to his apartment. She poured herself a glass of wine from one of the bottles she kept in the rack she had given him as a birthday present.

She sat across the table, her eyes penetrating as always, yet now merciful as well. His stomach knotted.

"Jacob. I need a partner, not a passenger. I need that now, and someday when my skin is wrinkled and my breasts sag, I can't have a passenger who doesn't like the old upholstery."

He pulled into an abandoned farmstead and drove past the collapsing house to a gate at the edge of a wheat field. Other folks called this the Morrison place, after the family who claimed it in the land run, but his own family called it "over east." The field was one hundred and eight acres of silt loam, bordering the east side of Cottonmouth Creek. Almost every year, it produced the best crop on the farm.

As Jacob parked, his dad got out of his own truck and walked to the edge of the field. "You get lost?"

"I took the scenic route."

"See anything better'n this?"

Jacob loved this field. The tilled soil sloped gently away to the west, and in the creek bottom on the other side, the yellowing grasses were shaded by massive, old cottonwood trees. The blue sky, faded by the full sun, pushed down the horizon on all sides, while the breeze rustled the farmyard's trees. The only man-made sound was the distant, muffled rumble of an oil well pump.

"No."

The two regarded the field, then his dad said, "Jacob, lying's bad in general, but you damned sure better never lie to your mother again. You hear me?"

Jacob dropped his eyes and kicked at a weed.

"The main thing I've always liked about Jessica is she's a straight-shooter."

"I thought you didn't like her."

"You know I get cranky when I'm confused. That's all that was."

"What was confusing?"

"Why you hitched yourself to her tractor and left your brain in the shed."

"My brain was always thinking about how to make her happy."

His dad cocked his head and stared at Jacob. Only when Jacob felt his face twitch did his dad speak, "What do you want?"

"Thank you for finally asking that question." Jacob faced the field and spread his arms, "All I know about what I want is that I can't have this."

"Why d'you say that?"

"The whole farm has been Jim's since he was born. That's the way it's worked all the way back to your Bible stories."

"You never did pay much attention in church. The child who got the job was the one who was best for it. Jim's been working hard to learn this business, since he was knee-high to a duck. He bleeds dirt. You're a hard worker, but you've been like some leaf floating down the creek over there, just spinning and twisting along wherever it took you."

Jacob was trained to brush aside arguments but the judgement kicked hard and connected full in his chest. He stepped back and glared at his father, while he reset his thoughts. After a few moments, he asked, "And you just watched? You watched and came to the conclusion that your son was adrift and aimless, and you made the conscious decision to do nothing and say nothing? You observed that he was engaged to a woman who wasn't right for him, and you made the conscious decision to do nothing and say nothing? Is that correct?"

His dad said, "Your honor, the day a good parent was supposed to stop spooning food into your mouth and wiping your ass passed about twenty-five years ago."

"And what, exactly, sir, did you do during those twenty-five years?" Jacob swept an arm as though pulling back a curtain to reveal the countryside, "All I know is what's inside this horizon. This is it, and it's damned empty. You never bothered to show me what might be downstream. What forks I might take. Where I might want to land."

His dad pulled a long audible breath through his nose. "I don't suppose you put a second's thought into why I asked you to meet me here?"

Jacob folded his arms.

His dad shook his head. "D'you remember disking up this field, while I showed the insurance agent the hail damage?"

Jacob faced the field and thought back to the summer he turned fourteen. The one year this patch of ground didn't produce the best crop on the farm, it was their only promising field in a dry year. A few weeks before harvest a thunderstorm rolled through, and while it broke the drought, it also dropped hail that wiped out a swath of wheat across Sherman County that

included “over east.”

His Dad sent him to the field the morning the insurance agent came to assess the damage. “I want you disking when he gets there, so he sees that I’m tearing up the whole place. There’s not enough grain in the heads to pay for the diesel to run the combines.”

That thunderstorm was the first in a regular string through the summer and fall. The rain in the spring melted the last of the snow, so that the next year his dad boasted that it was the best crop “since ’82.”

“I remember,” Jacob said.

“Show me any college that’ll give you an education like that.”

Jacob stood and stewed.

“And now,” his dad asked, “you’re a young, healthy, educated man with a world of options, and you’re mad at me ‘cause I didn’t put a silk halter on your head and lead you to your life’s passion?”

Jacob glanced over his shoulder, and his normally restless dad was sitting on the front bumper of his pickup. The old man’s face, tempered by wind and sun and rain, by hilltops and creek bottoms, had softened. Jacob turned back to the field.

“Son, I know that Jessica wanted you to be barreling down the river, but I don’t see what’s wrong with you being the leaf in a twisting creek right now. You’ll find your way.”

“Leaves don’t get Jessicas.”

“And Jessicas miss out on a lot of interesting little streams and creeks.”

Jacob unfolded his arms and stuffed his hands into his jean’s pockets. He squinted into the sun for a moment. A short, stiff gust rippled through the farmyard trees. He turned back to his dad and nodded.

His dad smiled. “You have to go back tonight?”

“No.”

“Good. You’ll have supper at home?”

Jacob nodded.

“That’ll make your mother happy. I’m sure we can dig up some clean sheets for your bed.”

“Thank you.”

His dad turned to leave, then stopped and said, “Your mother has a box of ‘thank you’ cards, if you want to send one to Jessica.”

Jacob considered the offer for a long moment. “I think I’ll take a card but not send it until I’m paddling down my next stream.”

His dad crumpled his face thoughtfully, then said, “You got your mother’s good sense, even if you do take the scenic route getting to it.”

Jacob eyed his dad sideways and slowly shook his head.

“Well, I’m burnin’ daylight. I’ll see you at supper.” His dad climbed into his truck and started to leave, but he stopped, stood on the running board and yelled over the cab, “And I’ll tell Jim to keep his damned mouth shut.”

Jacob smiled as his dad drove out of the farmyard and turned west on the red dirt county road. Then, with what felt like new eyes, Jacob regarded the creek where autumn leaves would soon be drifting down upon the waters.

He thought about the corral where he had risen from the mud and brushed off the manure and kept working through the pain, and he thought of the view from the dining room window and of the elm where he had learned to spin to face the tree, and brace his legs, and push off with his feet.

Driving My Father-In-Law Home

i.
The high fields are hard with wheat stubble—

Dry land farm means no irrigation.

Our car takes each hill with a huff,
its rhythm a heart bleating.

How many times in the past have we passed
the broken store?

ii.
Legend is that you flee the family farm at 16.
They send the sheriff after you, but his truck catches
fire at Lowell, and he stops dead.

Last Chance is burned down.

iii.
Someone thinks the name for the sweat-line between
two states is clever: Kanorado.

Republican River.

iv.
Hannibal, Missouri, in the rain—
I like to rhyme: Mark Twain.
His boyhood home— white, plain.

v.
This is what I am in it for:
We drive forward to your past.

Heritage seeds await sowing.

vi.
Mr. Bergstrom shows me identical
screened boxes. *For the kids*, he says,
meaning goats, not children, and I wonder why
goats need houses.

vii.

In the Land of One Grain Silo,
your mother's orchard is alive.

Plant every other year.

Little Thorn Apple River is over-
run with weeds, but trickles come through here
and there, slivers of surprise.

viii.

We climb splinter stairs in the packed-away house—

Painted-pheasant plates wrapped with newspaper, flightless
in the oak dresser. Leather trunk with jet necklace
for a baby girl.

Add moisture so seeds can't fly away.

ix.

Neighbors bring bowls of raspberries, curdled cream, sweet
corn, potatoes (just dug), purple runner beans. Kindness is canned
ham. We scrape aspic from the oink, watch for rain.

x.

Bowne Center: Each headstone name is rose and thorn.
Nine of us stare into the dry-earth hole. The crimson velvet bag,
then ashes, then shovel, then shovel.

Postcard

My love,

Taos is ripening this time of year.

I walk unbraided mesas, borrowed sunlight glowing through jade. Across low-smoked edges of the Rio Grande, cottonwoods rise up as velvet gloves on fire. Chamisa and cholla intertwine, sheltering cupped cactus burning wild with blood-of-warrior rims.

Lifted into midday sky by copper hands, the sun is a bowl of summer plums plucked from the Sangre de Cristos.

Here and there, hints of piñon smoke, the tock tock of chiles roasting on the paseos, ristras of wrinkled reds hanging like plumed serpents on old adobes, and the Taos blue of their doorways; on the blacktop, a lizard with its 13-part encrusted tail sleeps, unblinking.

Left of the plaza, the child with my mother's eyes dances—her swirling skirt a gypsy's mandolin. I fill my basket: lemons, jackfruit, lard and pork, lilies ringed in sapphires, tomatillos folded like loneliness.

It is too-soon dusk; I wait for night sky filled with silver-stamped beads. The house breathes stillness, except for staccato barking of Esquibel's dog, tied to its coyote fence.

On moon-washed walls, shadows are broken branches; tonight I dream you—the green apple taste of your core.

Madreperla

You cannot remember my name,
but here is a pearl: *la perla--*
this is the name you would call me.

This pearl rests in the dresser
with all the others; if I taste it, it is
a new tortilla, or posole, maiz of alabaster.

17 beads now ring the drawer, one pearl
sent each year until the necklace forms
round as a promise kept.

On the day you die, I thread pearls
on jeweler's wire, weep tears-of-mary
for garnet of blood on your railed bed.

The necklace-of-you fits but wants your clasp.
Remembering the prayer for the dead,
I repeat our life's rosary: We believe

the luminous mysteries of light, pale
hands of the postulant weaving, garland
of roses, *perlado como la nieve*, casts

ghost petals across mantilla of night sky.
This circle holds arc of moon as adornment—
everything we were to one another.

Self-Portrait as the Queen of Spades



A spade is a garden tool.

The garden of this Queen of Spades wants
hail, packed earth, trellis-point Ace.

Overgrown thyme climbs unmasked.



Midnight, and Black Queen dreams a knot-
work maze. Never mind my hem is jagged,

never mind my blaze and stain:

The flower I am holding needs no name.



Tell me how to live in a stranger's house—

2 and 3 sleep far away; 4 is the number
of my fingers. Y is the thumb missing?



Steal me from the Jack, who dreams
in profile, the King, sword pointing

underneath my wrecked breast. If you turn me up-

side down, my face is a mirrored spade.
Pay the ransom: This box is 6 x 8.

The letter J keeps appearing in your dreams

after your father lulls you to sleep with
the same old family story—

We lived happily ever after
but for the wolf hiding behind
those fallen oak trees.

Jump. Don't jump.

Across the room, the tall cabinet unlatches,
and a stranger becomes involved.
He tells you to jump *through*

the world with 13 moons and no sun
the turquoise world without sin
the world in which the word
on page 12 is spelled *j-u-m-p*.

Here's the part in the poem where
we slip you the ransom demands—

4. Pack up the house.
5. Sign the *Do No Resuscitate* order.
6. Burn the photo of your mother's Greek lover.
7. Cut up your velvet dress (you know the one we mean):

the old blue jumper.

Overlooking the Rio Grande

Below the fish-eye of the Gorge Bridge,
boulders, tall grass, scrub pine,

and among suicides of another day,
a mermaid *seems*.

We are landlocked,
(except for fish-line of moss and rain)

voyagers across *llano quemado*,
earth so worked it weeps

corn and stones. Everything *not* water—
rod of sun,

skree fields and skim of sorrow,
our red earth's

volcanic flow, layers of magma
cooled hard into ice.

ξ ξ ξ

This is what I know of mermaid: sea nymph · siren ·
mistress of salt · fish tail · skin · not fin · comb and
dark mirror · daughter of each sunrise · pleasure
palace · threaded with forbidden · temptress
leaning into the east wind · bleeding rubies · but not

ξ ξ ξ

She must have traveled such a long channel

from sea bed or sand bar, and I wonder
what broken god led her to this place.

She is opalescent.
She is laid open.
She is oddment of nipples and tail

dreaming a moon-rise when she lured tides into her pearl
petticoat of fish bone or fish net belly awash with coral;
did she see her reflection in the young-of-the-year?

ξ ξ ξ

This bridge sways with a swoop breeze,
and I peer into chasm of glass stream.
Perhaps I've seen a tree limb, left-

over, or a long length of cloth. Perhaps
tomorrow it will rain scales.
Or salt.

I like to think she knows the prayer
for river, fish-maiden dressed
in empty shells, perhaps it is enough that

there is a shining.

**llano quemado: burnt plain*

The Apple Thief

Across my neighbor's yard, hundreds
of green apples and reds of a variety
too lowly to be named, from three trees,
their limbs grown stark and stunted.

Yolanda and Tylan are often in disarray,
or away, apples unsprayed, straying
sometimes on our side, mostly on theirs,
but not in such a wanton way for harvest.

I dream of apple crumble, flour and brown sugar
mixing with chopped walnuts. Or apple pie,
my knife carving curls of waxy skins into sink,
even flat-palm slices for a pony's wanting tongue.

On an August Tuesday, I make my move, watch
the lane for a passing truck or a stranger's eye,
tiptoe over small rocks, errant thorns, spent iris,
and here, the look of a house with no one home.

Bless the maker of this apron with large pockets
or the God who made me strong enough to bend.
Fallen apples leap into my hands despite signs
of squirrel holes and rotting rind of larvae squish.

Sorting greens for ripening or reds for cooking
is a thief's work—there the apple for my table,
here the one that can't be saved, how about
twenty for preserves or ten for tomorrow's pie?

Next morning: the reckoning. Across my counter,
green apples with filigree of snail and reds trembling
with top leaves withered. Providently, this plump worm
working its way toward me, proud as the Serpent.

Salt Is the Covenant

Here is the country remembered—

A table laden with bowls of salt.

What would I give for a taste?

The breaking before dawn when everything
pricks white. Silence eating its own light.

Grains are beginning to swell;
each one is my dead lover desperate
to lay his name on my tongue,

I can taste him if I sway inside myself.

I place salt in his pockets,
salt in one shoe, then the other,
but none on his lips, none

on his lips. Now I am the wooden lid
nailed shut, salt swallowing sin.

A man asks, *Are you hungry
for marrying?*

The brine-and-pulse.

The taste.

Stein at Window, Sixth Avenue, 1918

After the artwork by John Sloan

Open the door, she calls,
and I do.

She waits in the oak chair,
cushioned in pink flowers and stains, ragged
along the ruffle. She leans over to pour tea.

It is black and strong and brewed
over many days; it rings the cups with
climbing roses.

She is sad again. (I know this.)

I examine her clothing—
brown skirt pumpkin silk tunic
cleavage melting into sugar
those bohemian curls.

All around is beauty—
blue and white cream jug
green ceramic bowl birches on canvas.

The interior of the room deepens.
She turns into profile, and then there is
the window—

flag train elevated railings
New York Bank building
tower clock ticking out the minutes.

She could jump at any moment.

I jump too.

I am clothing this poem in skin

skin of the serpent
skin of the jaguar skin of the moon-
headed hare

skin of bitter water in the jade glass
breast-of-nectar skim on the lips
of lupe's second son

imagine this poem dressed
in goatskin
shaking its stubborn head
ringing a little bell

or plump wineskin drunk on palabras

there is moleskin but nobody
likes a poem hiding
its warts not on the dark beauty
dreaming on the twice-woven rug

thin skin of a grape licked by Neruda
at your pine table
skin of tomatillo lonely at twilight

jealous spines on skin of nopales
if they prick
this poem will it bleed

flame as skin of the messenger god?

if an ancient warrior wears this poem
how many centuries to vanquish
its spirit?

Difficult to Love

R. Anderson

When I was nineteen and backpacking in South America – Bogota, Quito, Lima – my mother suffered a number of violent and graphic deaths. A shotgun wound in the barn. Trampled underfoot by a rampaging bull. Thrown through the windshield in a late-night pile-up. Back home, when I went to Uni, the deaths got more humane, more boring. She slipped away from cancer or had sudden heart failure. Eventually, I settled on something that was opaque and which invited no further questions: “she is no longer with us,” I would say with sad resignation. By my twenties she must have died a hundred times, a succession of cartoon deaths, dropped off cliffs, exploded, run over. And like the Wile E. Coyote, she too would not accept death, she would reappear, oblivious and unscathed in the next scene.

People, invariably the ones who didn't know her well, would describe my mother as a “free spirit”. Others said she was a “live wire” (another euphemism). Many in the village just called her “that difficult woman”. It was ironic that someone who hated women so much produced three of them; three daughters who, when we were of an age to understand, she called the ‘three hags’ or ‘wicked witches’. When she saw our reactions to this, she'd throw her arms in the air and shout, “It's a joke!” Women, she liked to say, had no sense of humour.

Jo is the eldest. Daphne is a year younger, and I am the baby, the result of a coil failure. Inevitably, she called me Sugar. Josephine and Daphne, and Sugar. Yes, she had a sense of humour, and she loved *Some Like it Hot*. She thought it was hilarious that she had named us after two men (in drag) and Marilyn Monroe. The girls were always saying that I got the best name. “And you two,” Mum would say in triumph, “got the fuzzy end of the lollipop”. (She was quoting Monroe from the movie in case you've not seen it).

She could be entrepreneurial and witty, but she was also unpredictable, spiteful and prone to sudden fits of rage. Men found her attractive. She had a weather-beaten face with prune-deep wrinkles and intense blue eyes like opals. Her jeans were always two sizes too big drawn tight at the waist with a piece of nylon rope. She had worn false teeth since her early twenties after a dark bay mare kicked her in the face. It can't have been easy inheriting a farm at twenty-six, and in more generous moments, I wonder if this hardship made her who she became. After Dad died, she remarried another four times; each were soft, teddy-bear men. They dozed in armchairs or took to whiskey; they shrugged, or stalked off, or sulked but never raised their voices. They were not fathers to us, they were husbands for her, and they died or moved away because they couldn't match the ferocity of her spirit, the way she tirelessly worked the land. Wheat, sugar beet, oilseed rape. She was unrelenting and machine-like. The men got worn out, like pairs of old boots.

At some point, I stopped killing her; the joke had grown thin and besides, I had moved back near the farm so people would know it was a lie. Mike urged me to tell the truth, and so instead, I explained that I had “chosen to cut contact”. People were generally appalled. Their eyes bulged in shock like I'd just hauled a baby out of a crib and smashed its brains out on the floor, and I would have to reassure them that, no, it's OK. I had chosen to cut her out from my life. She was a diseased crop that needed uprooting to prevent spread, but they still felt sorry for me because they couldn't conceive of an unlovable mother.

Each of us cut contact with her at different times, sometimes out of despair, sometimes exhaustion. Sometimes we did it because we were sick of the drama, other times we were just busy. Mostly we cut her off to teach her a lesson, like a tug of the choke-chain. Or maybe it was self-protection because the pain of being motherless was lesser than the pain of being her daughter, of being a strange object of need and ridicule.

We all survived differently. I painted landscapes in watercolours and developed anger issues.

People have called me “brittle” or “aloof”. Mike would say, “you’re a bloody difficult woman to love”. Daphne got hooked on drink and pills and let's just say there was a fair amount of trouble involved with that, but she’s been clean and sober eight years now with the help of Alcoholics Anonymous. She goes to the meetings and even gets to say, “My name is Daphne, and I am an alcoholic,” just like they do in the movies.

Jo’s drug of choice is perfection. She mainlines it with denial, like a speedball. She has a gay guy, camp as Hell, over in Norwich, who does her nails, and they are painted in the most intricate designs you’ve ever seen with jewels and ombre shading or iridescent swirls. Seriously, they are works of art. To her, we are imperfect reminders of her imperfect past. Unlike Daphne, Jo doesn’t like to talk about the past, she says she likes to focus on ‘the now’. Our childhood is the unfortunate dog turd on an otherwise pristine lawn, something to be stepped over, ignored, or hastily cleaned up. When we get together and talk about mum she pretends to switch off and scroll her phone, but she has a ‘tell’, a bit like a poker-player, a faint twitch below her left eye that flutters gently when we mention her name.

One day, we were sitting in Jo’s kitchen drinking wine. “Mum called me today,” Daphne announced, and we all froze. “She just called out of the blue, as if nothing had happened.” Daphne sounded incredulous, confused. “Why does she keep coming back? After everything?” Jo’s cheek twitched but then she recovered and topped up the wine. “Well, I – for one – am not getting sucked back in,” she said. Two weeks later we’d all got sucked back in. A task here, a lift there; waiting on double yellow lines while she queued at the post office, picking up a prescription for fungal cream at the chemist, long complaining phone calls, a family Christmas. Don’t get me wrong, there could be flashes of generosity. A dozen treacle toffee apples, or two discounted packs of white tights which she would thrust towards you as she walked through your front door. “I saw these and thought you might need them.” And I’ll wonder – is this ‘sorry’ in her language? And there have been times in my life when she would smush my cheeks with her cracked, onion-smelling fingers and shriek “you’re brilliant”. How many people in your life say that to you?

And then she died. Even people who are as strong as an ox can drop dead with an aneurysm, apparently. My first thought was: *Aneurysm! I’d never killed her with one of those!* It was so sudden that when I called Daphne to tell her the news, she burst out laughing and I had to go, “I am not joking, Daph.”

“Are we going to have to pretend to be sad?” she asked in a whisper, and we giggled about that. Jo refused to have the wake at her house although I couldn’t understand why. Her kitchen island would have been perfect for the buffet, but she said she didn’t want all the shoes traipsing into the house. As it was, we had it in the Jolly Butchers down the road from the crematorium. Jo left early because she had an 8am work meeting the next morning. Daphne put on the Backstreet Boys, and did the dance routine, just like we used to do in my bedroom. I drank tequila slammers, smacking the shot glass on the bar – BAM BAM BAM – and sculling the drinks, spilling half of it over the floor or my face.

“Am I difficult to love?” I asked Daphne as she put me in her car, afterwards.

“Mind your head,” was all she said, and she passed me a Tesco bag and told me if I was going to be sick, I needed to do it in there. When we got back to hers, she helped me undress and put me into her bed, and the duvet felt unbelievably good, soft and warm. She tugged the blanket over the top of me, and tucked me in. I could hear her little grunts as she leant over me, making sure every last corner was carefully arranged. I saw my daughter swaddled and sleepy after her nighttime bath.

“Am I difficult to love, Daph?” But she just put a bowl on the nightstand, kissed me on the head and flicked off the light.

Between

*why would we want to as long as we live
besides all the nothings we say
between shining and laughing*
—W.S. Merwin, “Untold”

We reap benefits in silence, care
packages of nonentity, nonengagement,
like the wind surfing the turbine, in between.

Hubris, like the vacuum of space,
is easily forgotten. I want to find orchards
inside of orchards, like Russian dolls,
only the smallest piece is a blossom.

Something funny spirals through you
at the speed of gamma rays every day.

In the summer, what cannot be wine?

Never Campaign

—*Benazir Bhutto*

I thought of my daughters first, after
the bus attack. Even my years at Ratcliff
came back like a prowling cat. It's easier
to read books than run a country,

though I am a woman who does both well,
as if with my Kurdish chicken recipe, yellow
as a daffodil with turmeric and scallions,
busy kicking around, embraced. Asking the rich

what it means to give is not corruption.
It's like asking everyone to come to the table,
to eat as a family, to drink whatever blue
blood fills our glasses and entombs our names.

Salacia

Did you die underwater, sea salt
caressing your hair, to say, “Be
calm, stay?” Did you find depths

more peaceful—like petals that cup
stamen in respite from the wind—so
hiding in blue-black blankets was stilling?

Neptune was never a good swimmer.
Sometimes, while children played
with whatever the tide brought in,

you remembered how free it was
to slice between the freezing bottom
and your husband’s call to come home.

Why ever return when so much is already lost?

Sleep In The Grace Of Touch

To brighten the dance of skeletons

—Czesław Miłosz, “For Jan Lebenstein” (1985)

Sometimes we are more than what we see
when fortifying marches reveal we are straw.

These are the days when we cower like stew,
blending mutton, sage, and thyme. You like

controversy? Consider how your life is a basket,
a petrified tree, so able and lit in the fondness

of hope. Consider how you play, winded against
pain, against bicycles balanced on rails and corroded

fountains. What is really sacrificed in battle and
love is the idea we may ever feel an alternative

to pressure, to the somnambulant, to a reach
for the other—a mimic, a restless base.

Utility

Be ready to glide and extend iris ears,
to shorten victory songs and fly,
to know the sour vinegar tang pooled
around your gums like moats.

I am an exhibitionist expeditionist,
comfortable enough to share all,
parts unknown, prepared inventions
collected Swiss-army style: baffle-

giggle-breaker, top-idol-waffle-extruder,
sounded-door-plucker. All so I extend.

Desire Line

I have a desire line inside my head. The path that connects me through the urban and into the hearts of the invisible crowd that is my community. I want to be on the other side of that vacant lot. Grass, garbage, tree stumps, and holes, a void of what once was. I yearn for the efficiency in the twist and turn of time and space. I look for a way to cross. The diagonal calls me with its quickness. I take the first step and find that my people have already created the trail. Well worn, it cups my feet and holds them like a hug across time from humans I've never met.

Dreamy Dream

Amidst the mystical, mythical opulence of dream, she spins
arms outstretched on the dance floor of three-fused bespoke rooms
stitched together by the threads of time and the tender tendrils of jazz notes
vining down from the cracks in the ceiling corners.
Bright slivers of her hair alight in the glimmer of glorious chiseled art deco lamps,
faux fireplaces made from sunset steam,
and tickling candlelight tucked away in wondrous, soothing sconces.
She moves as if the walls could talk, whispering secret stories of long-lost friendships
over sweet drinks in spaces where neither was once legal.
The iridescent sparkle in her irises flickers with delight from the warmth
of the majestic paintings draping and quilting huge swaths of redwood inlaid with touching tales
of how history plays games with what we sometimes know to be change.
Involuntarily, she tilts her head back and closes her eyes, her mouth a touch agape
The scents of the world's richest flavors rise up and rest on her lips
leaving behind a labyrinth of swirly fragrant circles as her fingers trace the thick air.
In the corners of her mouth she can taste the faint edge of orange
and the deep scarlet candied woodiness of cherry carefully diluted by perfect ice
immersed and left to age in long forgotten handcrafted crystal.
For a moment, she feels it concentrate and fill her heart;
she is nearly stunned by the intensity of its bursting forth
an almost corporeal feel within such a sublime, ethereal state.
It is a dreamy dream she will play over and over again in her mind and soul,
whenever she wants to dance with the spirits of memory
and the twirling starry night sky twinkling in the heavens above.

Circle Walk

Carpets of green cover time-torn fallen trees. Tiny seasoned leaves sprinkle down with the forces of gravity, dictating no particular destination. Lichen dangles at the whim of the winds, pointing to the rambling rocks that the tree frogs hurdle over, these irregular mountains, the children of long ago volcanoes. One more layer of water teases them into erosion but after millions of years they still dwarf the shiny ceramic-like clumps of teacup mushrooms, their gumdrop cousins, and turkey-tailed brothers and sisters. Striped, splotched, crumbled, crinkled, the rain softens the life from each cell. Shiny transparent, textured, taut, downpour pulls the browns from the greens, preparing plant-life for the moment their friends gobble them into the ground.

Earth pieces, dirt tunnels, soil hills, and an under-land world where the blind don't care to seek the sun. Instead, they inhale, munch, chew the detritus. They transform the leftovers of photosynthesis. They bite, tear, rip, swallow the sunlight out the cells making a platform for the birth of the bio-solar panels. Rich with moisture, nutrients, and symbiotic hope, they help the upcoming generation of vegetation rise up, closer and closer to the edge of the atmosphere until their DNA's seasonal director yells, "Cut!" and their walls thin, wilt, crumble, and fall back into the circle.

You Look Like My Next Mistake

I've fallen for people too many times. I land on the very knife that I use to whittle their faces into what I want them to be. I get drenched in the rainstorm of pain, stepping in its puddles, splashing myself. I dry off, get warm, and swear it hurts too much to ever do again.

You look like my next friend-mistake, I want to say to the innocent, intriguing, pensive woman standing in line in front of me, gazing at a book on the shelf, walking across the parking lot, talking to her friends at the party. Don't come near me. Don't look at me. Don't talk to me.

Save yourself, save me. Let the hyper excitement lay at bay. Allow the no-way-we-have-all-that-in-common to rest.

Don't be my friend. I've fallen.

Color Destination Hanoi

Sound see-er. Forget the words I want to sing to you. ***Life on the open road is the essence of freedom***, Isabelle pleads with me. She pulls Rimbaud from one pocket and Kerouac from the other. Roads rambling, highways loop-di-loo-ing through the craters. Our song now is the sweetness of the air. ***The delectable flavor of solitary freedom***. Taste the intricacies as they unfold the longer they roll around in the mouth. Bubbling up from the magic, dreams manifest their real-lifeness. ***At home everywhere***. Filled with an omnipotent yes, I've arrived. ***The torturing need to know and see for oneself what is there, beyond the mysterious blue wall of the horizon***. The red river. A labyrinth of fuzzy mossy stone lined streets. Lakes reflecting red rooftops, new sea creatures hoping to break through the tight surface of the murky waters. ***The white road leading off into the unknown distance... feeling the imperious necessity of giving in to it and following it obediently across mountains and valleys***. *Penciled Notes* of a pilgrimage, soaked in spiritual synesthesia. Clonking marimbas out of context sway in rhythm with the seabirds of black and white skies. Old movie clips hint of future dreams. Tunes of hand-inked notes blown dry by fans of fuschia incense popping through the fields. A color destination ***covering the whole vast earth... ends only at the nonexistent horizon***. I want to know, is ***vagrancy deliverance***? Or is vagrancy where the dream unfolds from the journey? The place, the time, where the dream wakes up onto the stage of the streets of Hanoi? Because ***I dreamed I was*** in Hanoi, ***flitting around in the streets; then I awoke. Now I wonder: Am I a woman who dreamt of being*** in Hanoi, ***or am I*** in Hanoi ***dreaming that I am a woman***.

*Inspired by a dream, Isabelle Eberhardt, Zhuang Zi, and I joined together to write this - words in italics are theirs.

Amoransia

Portuguese amor, love + ânsia, craving. Pronounced "ah-moh-ran-see-uh."

n. the melodramatic thrill of unrequited love; the longing to pine for someone you can never have, wallowing in devotion to some impossible person who could give your life meaning by their very absence. [Taken from The Dictionary of Obscure Sorrows by John Koenig]

It could be torture, the nightmare that you never wake up from. The obsessing over obsessive thoughts that catch you with a barbed hook in the side of your cheek. The noose wraps around you as you dangle from the fish line, hovering over your wondering.

It could be a playful inward bliss that happens when you press play on a lonely evening in your mind's eye. The story unfolds to you in all kinds of ways. 101 flavors of sweet, but one strongly underlying leftover taste of bitter on your tongue and in your heart.

Eventually you will need to decide if amoransia is worth it. Or so you think you have control over its creeping, crawling limbs. But maybe it will just need to crash into a tree, drop over the side of a cliff, or pop like a soap bubble before you'll really see that it's not real. It never was. You made it up. You invented the blow up doll from the heavens that you couldn't ever have. And it was never worth the pain and struggle. But it made for a good story, and a heartbreak that left scars even though it was broken before it even happened.

Beside The San Saba River

Extra alive in the tingling humidity, I walk under the wispy canopy of a West Texas pecan grove just after a late summer sunset; the fireflies make it perfect.

How Was Your Day

Minutes of incessant talking drone on like fallout shelter sirens. My only cover is the quiet quitting of this conversation. You tell me your name and how you got it. I yawn. You don't notice. You tell me all about your European ancestors. I listen for a pause to excuse myself. You shed several skins of monotonous syllables, blah-blah-blahing me about why you love your work. A break never comes. My eyes glaze over mirroring the icing that is calling me from the dessert table just a few feet behind you. Somehow I am invisible again. My breath is stuffy, the walls are creeping closer. You tell me that you just returned from a diving trip in the Bahamas. The honey-sweet scent of decadent cake fills the air. A cloud of chocolate relief rises up my nose creating a momentary lapse of all reasoning. What a great deal you got on the flight. That cake would be so delicious with a cup of steaming hot coffee. You're so great at booking travel, all of your friends ask you for help, and you gladly assist. It is such a huge slice on such a tiny yellow plate, but where are the forks? You just love scuba; you caught on right away. You're a fast learner. I have to get faster at ditching people that don't ask my name or how my day was. Faster to the cake. People tell you you're so generous and such a great listener. A piece of cake when you don't ask a single question. When it's all about you. Behind you someone sets down a carafe of coffee and several white ceramic cups. You tell me that the wine I'm drinking is actually quite delightful. Someone else walks by with a box of shiny chrome forks. Laughing deeply with a drunken roar, your kind words mask confrontation. You joke at others' expense, wanting me to laugh too. You're deep in mid-soliloquy about the last award you won. I make my move. In two short sweeping ballet-like turns, I leap to your side, scoop up a piece of cake, jump back, and smash it in your face. You stop talking. I start laughing. Now you know how my day was.

Deceived Dream

Rushed, pushed, chased out. You have shrunken our time together. I march frustratedly forward but blow it off my face like it doesn't matter. I find the relief of my car, rushing to close the door and lock it as if you are trying to stop me. Empty windows taunt that you don't even know I'm gone. I became invisible when you looked at your watch. So I fly down the hill, racing my curfew, my face in a fury. Zooming around curves crashing into question marks scattered about the nightness. Soon, I tangle in a spider web of electric currents. All hell breaks hearts loose and my headlights cease. I am voided, left alone with the howling of the damp darkness. Like from a magic bottle, a decision rises in vapors before me. Drive into a black wall or stop. Contestless, I skid, slamming on the brakes into a directionless nothingness. My compass points to void and surrenders movement north. I chase back and call you. You don't see me, you don't hear me, you don't know me. You just answer the many blurry voices on the other end. Animals call and you spin. Another dense wall; I hang up your mid-sentence to someone else. Exasperated. I vow to walk into a new world of light and vision. To leave this darkened beast behind. Fine. Let your unknowing trap you. Let your mind worm up inside its own brain. Let it be your problem if you can't stand still on the merry-go-round. May you curl up in this metal shell and make it your home. Where you comfortably transplant chaos into comfort. For a second. Let yourself pause and I will escape.

Ode To Sakura

Sakura as pink as the sky is blue. One day you are the dream that hasn't yet happened - just crisp, cold crunchy branches, a silhouette in the grayness. Then not calendared, you surprise us with a pop of color. A tiny hint of your flavor. Just a taste to wake up our eyes. You arrive to announce the season's opening. As soft as you appear, you grow, you expand. You cover the sky, opening like a fan in the wind. Petals dropping like sweet juicy rain. You grow and grow. You become the sky's best friend. Holding hands, the two of you are the place where eyes feel they can rest, where park scenes are framed, where picnics are giggled over.

Billowing in the softest, most subtle pinkness, now at full bloom, I realize you aren't just a trend. You are not just for tourists, you're not a marketing tool, you are more than a popular attraction. Sakura, you are a way of being, a history, the absolute essence of a culture. You take on your own being. You are loved and you give love. You show us that there is so much more. Even if you are fleeting, even just before you disappear into flames of tender folded green. Leaving puddles of yourself on the earth, you give way to the next cycle of life. You are there even when you are not there.

Ophelia
Steven Ostrowski

A person out of my past calls as I'm about to step into the shower. An old sort-of girlfriend, from a lot of years ago. She's calling to say she just remembered the time we were on a canoe on a lake and fell in together and we were both lame swimmers and didn't have life jackets on and the water was freezing and it was early in the morning so there was nobody else on the lake, and she laughed about how we saved each other by saying things like, "Let's not die yet," and "I want to get ice cream tonight." Somehow, we treaded ourselves back to the shore.

"That's it," she says. "That's why I'm calling. You know, because, you know, we practically died together but we're still alive. Anyway, hope everything's good with you."

I tell her it is. I'm in minor shock that she's called and can't seem to say much.

After that morning in the lake, I think we were maybe supposed to live our lives together, but it got messy when we each let other people in and drifted into other lives and before you knew it, we'd lost each other.

"Okay," she says. She sounds happily nervous. "See ya. Stay dry."

"You, too," I say. And that's it. That becomes our new goodbye.

Amanda

Steven Ostrowski

Walking alone through the little downtown of her New England seaside village, Amanda noticed a woman, black, maybe thirty, maybe a little older or younger, sitting on a bench outside a used bookstore; the woman was singing softly and accompanying herself on an amber-colored ukulele. From a discrete distance, Amanda stopped to listen. The song wasn't one she was familiar with, but it had a haunting, goosebump-lifting quality. The singer apparently wasn't busking, as there was no open case, no basket or hat.

Amanda pretended to look at the covers of used books in the storefront window and listened. The song seemed to be about the passing of time and the loss of love and the desire for wisdom and peace. "At last," the woman sang. "Peace at last." The song was so poignant and strange and mournful and gorgeous that Amanda thought she might faint right there on the sidewalk. But a man with long, caramel-colored hair and strong arms emerged from the bookstore and in a deep, happy voice said to the woman, "I'm back, sweet baby eyes." She scooted over and he took a seat beside her. "Found it," he said, and lifted a book for her to see. The book, Amanda saw, was called *The Denial of Death*. The woman put her instrument in its case, said, "Yay for you," and they kissed. Then the man whispered something in the woman's ear and she laughed a full-throated laugh.

In the kitchen, preparing the supper that they'd share with another couple, Amanda and her husband chopped tomatoes and carrots and chatted about his upcoming business trip. He was very excited about this one, as it might prove quite lucrative. He said that he intended to approach a particularly important potential client by playing it super-cool, like he was only half-interested in doing a deal. Like he could take it or leave it. He told Amanda that with a guy like this, you can't seem too eager.

Amanda was pretty sure he got the idea from one of the books he was always reading about being a conqueror in the business world. She nodded and said, "Uh huh" and "Sure, sure. That's seems like a smart approach." Really, she was trying, with increasing frustration, to retrieve some trace of the words and music of the ukulele woman's song. She'd managed to keep parts of it for much of the day, but now, when it seemed particularly necessary, all she could hear was her husband's plan for getting something that they didn't even need.

Guns and Ammo

Steven Ostrowski

I.

Throwing his clubs in the back and climbing into the truck, Denny turned on the radio to the local news station; a shaken newscaster's voice told of a mass shooting at the middle school just after classes were dismissed at 3:30, near the main entrance. At least eleven kids dead and as many as fifteen wounded. Three adults killed, including the recently-hired assistant principal; several other adults wounded, one of them the female police officer who was assigned to the school. The shooter, a lone gunman, used an AR-15 for the massacre and some kind of handgun to kill himself. His identity remained undisclosed; details would follow. A press conference with the chief of police and the first selectman was scheduled for seven p.m..

Denny drove, his body and brain gone numb. He headed for home though the meaning of home had vanished. He'd sold the rifle to the killer; of that he was gut-deep certain. Young guy, 22, 23, with a fake blonde color to his hair and eyes so blue Denny thought they were fake, too.

This was yesterday, for Christ's sake, just before he closed at five and headed out to the driving range. These days he went almost every evening, determined to correct the slice he'd developed for no reason that he could figure.

II.

The morning of the first of the funerals was raw and rainy. Denny had said to the police chief, his buddy Les Givens, that he wanted to attend at least some of them. "Not safe for you," Les said. "Not safe for us either. In fact, Den, I wish you'd take a vacation."

Denny thought, yeah, a permanent one, right? But on Les's advice he did temporarily close the store. Even so, dozens of people with signs and slogans marched there every day. Some against him, some for.

The day after the massacre, Denny and his son, Connor, had issued a joint statement of sympathy for the dead and wounded and for their families. Connor wrote most of it, then, without saying much, left and went home to his pregnant wife. The statement was published not just in the local papers but in the national press; it had been discussed on the radio and on

T.V. (“Not his fault”; “guilty of aiding and abetting.”) Death threats came in, mostly from people who claimed to hate guns. *Live by the sword, die by the sword*, one phone caller said in a voicemail, and added, *fucking murderer*. They’d since changed the number, but calls kept coming.

“Denny, you know damn well you did nothing wrong,” Margery, his wife, had said to him that first night, when all he could do was pace the floors.

“No T.V., no radio,” he told her. She was watching every station.

Over time, she repeated a hundred times, with increasing frustration, “You did nothing wrong.” She’d grown defiant, telling everyone that nothing could have prevented what happened, the kid was hellbent; if it wasn’t a gun, it would have been a bomb. The sale was perfectly legal.

To Denny, the words “perfectly legal” carried no meaning whatsoever.

III.

He sat at the evening window, looking out into the disappearing backyard. Margery came and handed him the phone. “NRA,” she mouthed.

“Christ,” he grumped.

“Dennis? This is Bradly Stevens, assistant director of public relations, NRA. How are you, sir?”

“Been better.”

“Understandable. But Mr. Croft, you should know that the NRA considers you a hero, sir.”

“Well, that’s bullshit.”

Margery, standing by, winced.

Mr. Stevens was calling to make sure Dennis was not going to capitulate to the lefties in any way, shape, or form. “Can we count on you, sir, to continue to defend our second amendment rights? You have a national pulpit and your voice must be loud and clear.”

Denny murmured, “Nice talking to you,” and hung up.

IV.

Info emerged: in early childhood, the young man had been beaten by his father and then, later, in middle and high school, by his stepfather. He’d hated everything about his life

except theater. He acted in middle and high school plays, aspired to be a professional actor. He was effeminate and took abuse at school from dozens of boys and some girls, too. Other girls, though, befriended him. He went to a college with a good drama program but had to drop out in the middle of his sophomore year when his stepfather was killed in a car wreck. His mother needed him to get a job. He did. He worked for a package delivery company. Apparently, it came out, some of the men at the warehouse enjoyed tormenting him.

His note read *I hope I'm saving them from worse.*

V.

Denny was to be a grandfather in seven months. Since Connor told him, he'd been thrilled about it. Now he could not fathom it.

VI.

Once he'd decided, he obsessed. Better by gun with all the irony that would carry? Or better just to jump, or hang, and never have to see another gun?

VII.

Because he'd forgotten to take them when he left the house, Denny went into the local CVS to buy a notepad and pen. The people who still cared about him deserved at least a note. The words he'd write formed and unformed in his mind. He still didn't know what the note should say, except, sorry. Maybe that was enough.

He chose a good quality pen and a name brand notebook. His hands trembled as he picked them up from their racks.

Ready to go to the checkout, Denny only stood still, breathing, shaking. He glanced down an aisle and spotted, perusing the racks of greeting cards, his parish priest, Father Ralph. Father Ralph saw Denny, clearly, but pretended he didn't, put the birthday card he was considering back in the rack and walked off in the opposite direction. Denny took this as final confirmation.

OFFER ME FEATHERS

With a nod to Annie Dillard

So here is where I am. Three days and then we all rise from the dead. What is it I remember? Did I not hear the earth open wide this morning, on the trail, running? Didn't I rise from the light of the earth to this silent, fragrant night? The small, smooth, soft murmur of magic is real, for everything else is a veil. The small, soft murmur of magic is real, for life is breath and magic its inevitable offspring; and reality is full of error, is covertly flawed from the very start, and joy is not, and is ever returning. The joy beyond the magic's gracious falling returns as our loss of each other, our loss of the sky and the scatterings of the stars, is returning, spiraling as long as we lose within the realm of magic's healing hum. And we are freed, loosening a piece of loss when a child is born and then a second, when a friend is found, or a place, and a time returned, retrieved, my childhood self restored and warmed, my old dog come back and me breathing: we pull in both ends of spiraling joy together, full like a thicket shaken to send seeds to the wind, like a thicket shaken with laughter and wind, its time come at last.

I stand by the woods. It is a worthy task, this standing, thinking thoughts and filling the road with words as I stand. Shall I become young again? There she goes, the cardinal in the bush, fleeing my gaze. It has begun. Bird, do you realize how old I've become? Where is your nest, little bird? I know you'll die before me. Send me your young. Offer me feathers like the birds in tales of magic. I have chosen you.

JENNIFER JUNIPER, 1969

If he hadn't knocked
on my window at midnight,
if I hadn't let him in
if I hadn't let him touch me,
if he hadn't smiled that smile,
if he hadn't called me extraordinary,

if my parents could have afforded four whole years of college,
if the antiwar protests hadn't exploded into violence,
if I hadn't changed my major three times in three semesters,
if I hadn't lost myself playing Estelle, the nymphomaniac in *No Exit*,
if I'd been the person my father said I was,

if someone had listened to me about the white tiger,
the devastation, the smoke, the babies falling into sewer pipes,
if I hadn't had to miss my classes to save those babies,
if I'd known sooner how important it was
to pay attention to these, my own dreams,

if any one of the doctors had been willing
to bend the law, rather than send me home,
walking barefoot and weeping, ashamed
if my shrink had been willing to testify
my life was in danger,
if he hadn't said, "This will teach you
not to be promiscuous,"

if a friend of a friend hadn't found
the guy in Chicago,
if my married lover hadn't had a car
to drive me there,
if I hadn't been willing to die,
if when we got there
I'd said no, I changed my mind,
if I hadn't lain down willingly
in the small room
with the floral wallpaper,

if I hadn't asked
"Is it a boy or a girl?"
if he hadn't answered, "We never look"

if the pain hadn't been so terrible,
if I hadn't bled all over his car
on the way home,

who would you be now?

On the anniversary
of your blood-soaked
death-soaked birth
my body suffered
a flashback of labor pain
your exit, your end
as if happening again
the same tears seeping from
my closed eyes

If you'd lived
would you be mine
if not mine, whose?
would you know me
somehow?

Sometimes I hear you call
from far away
a soft echo
from the place I stored you
held you
in silence in secret
inside me
decades ago

Last year I bought a Jizo
statue, the Japanese god of
travelers and dead children
a small god
to hold all this sorrow,
to hold you
the one I never met
the one I never held
I took us to the woods
I set the Jizo and a hydrangea blossom
on a Leopold bench, making an altar
a memorial to you
under a cluster of birch trees
on a trail where no one walked

The tree toads sang in the background
as I spoke to you, my gone-child
"I'm sorry, Jennifer Juniper"
(the name I gave you
when you grew inside me)
"I loved you
I couldn't keep you
if I'd had money, skills,
family, a safety net
maybe then...
if your father, the man I loved
had wanted you
had money, skills, a safety net
maybe then..."

"I was not ready.
I had to let you go,
to save myself
to save my future life"

I told the Jizo then to hold her
forever, to guide her
forever and I promised her
I too would hold her always
in my heart
as I always have

Jennifer Juniper
there
in the woods, with us,
with the tree toads
and the 21-year-old me
watching, listening
knowing my tears
were for all of us
for the small ball
of Jennifer
the unfinished child,
and for the 21-year-old
I used to be,
so alone, so unprepared,
so afraid, grieving
a loss she could not share
with anyone

If I made another memorial
it would be for her, in honor of her courage
in honor of all the times she shattered
and glued the pieces together again
in honor of that patched-together life
in honor of the strength it took

If I made another memorial
it would be to that year, 1969,
the hardest year,
but also the year
that changed everything
that woke me up
that opened doors
that showed me
how much pain and despair I could carry
and still go on
to build from these ruins
a rich and worthy life.

OLD

Yesterday I realized I was
ashamed that I'm not
young anymore:
the thickening of my waist
the net
of fine lines above my
upper lip, but it's also the way
I can't
recall
a name, a place, a fact,
until hours later it
pops up like a
belated guest
and about as welcome.
The way the tumult of
restaurant noise
unnerves me and sometimes, yes,
I admit this now,
I can't hear as well as
once I could.

It's bad enough, don't you think, that
I must give up
what once was power
in drawing
men's eyes, their frank lust
fumbling attention,
not always nice, but still, it
was evidence,
now vanished.
I have fallen off the screen
or if detected,
treated with the deference I
once reserved
For my grandmother.

I wish I could stop
all this regret,
the way I miss the size six,
the waist so small
my hands could
enclose it,
my body's fluidity, the
miraculous ability
to create and carry
new life.

I'd like to stop grieving
the quick mind,
the soft and graceful hands,
the smooth face,
the belief in possibilities:
never-too-late,
your-whole-life-ahead-of-you:

I don't like this aging business
can't do anything
to forestall it
but flail in this
great wind
that even now shakes my
flesh loose,
pulls my feet from underneath me,
will drag me under
soon enough.

I try to be grateful for my
eyes and ears and limbs,
the flow of air
in and out,
the dog asleep on the bed
beside me,
the love
of a good man,
and my children
moving away
like ripples
from a stone
I don't remember
throwing,
toward shores impossible to see
from where I am.

Sonny's Bridge

Overhead shot of the bridge, above the steel cables at
Its pinnacle. 'Nice sound, Sonny', shouts the
Repairman after the solo. 'Whatchoo doin' up
There man?' 'Learnin' to fix, fixin' to learn'.
'Long as it's not a certain kind of fix'. 'Got that
Right Sonny. I hear you every night'. 'It's like you
Learnin' to fix. I want to master my sound. Practice
Excellence'. Sonny was clean—tonsured skull
And trimmed beard. In that grey suit he had
The body of an athlete. Trane & Sonny, Sonny & Trane.
He kept his ear open. Higgins tells us he heard
Ornette. Sonny liked cowboy songs, pianoless trios,
Exquisite guitarists like Jim Hall. He played St.
Thomas, the Carib source. The crane descends, it's
The repairman's POV. 'I hear you man, keep
Doin' what you do'. Sonny raises on the parapet
His gold horn like a chalice for the Brooklyn
Night to hear. He practiced an imperfect mastery,
The only attainment there is.

*Tenor saxophonist Sonny Rollins practiced on the Triborough Bridge at night.

The Day of Birds

I dream a miniature horse with dragonfly wings
Half-Pegasus, half-Tinkerbell, shining.
It's my guide when day is done, the day of birds
A flock of hummingbirds, iridescent green neckband
Figure-8 wings, nectar sweetness. The day sounds with
A cowbird's 40-note solo, a nightingale's all-
Night wooing, the knockknock of the woodpecker's
Acorn habitat. It's the fall of day, fire flaring over the gulf
Into a blue night when you can see ultraviolet.
The tiny horse flies you home to a green green sea.
A necklace of lights shimmers along the shore. There is
Nothing of which I am afraid.
No longer human no longer old no longer

Story

In the lodge in the morning woods
Everyone was naked. The wagon wheel fan was
Stilled. Clothes were heaped like small hills,
Ashtrays overflowing with buttends, roaches
Yellow and white pills scattered across the
Maroon shag rug like goat pellets. bodies
Posed in arrangements of coupling and decoupling.
Some were dead, pallor grey. The sun rose
Reluctantly. Some announced the end of
A golden summer, a fin de siècle, some said
Nothing but staggered down the road of excess
Into oblivion where the boatman waited for them
To drift across the misty river. Surely there is
A reason to believe, I can't go on, I go on.
The stone must be rolled back up the hill. Someone
Died in a car crash. The Porsche contained the
Novel that narrates this unfinished story.

The Bear

It rises to its great height, blocking the sun.
Its fur brown as feces, its paws like skilletts
Its eyes black as the edge of the universe.
Except for man with his shotgun, he has
No predator. He sniffs the wind and
Smells meat. He will disremember your arms
Grind his incisors into your guts, your
Diseased kidney, liver, spools of intestine.
Your blood will drool down his chin. He will
Remove a portion of your thigh leaving you
Immobile. Snow falls like the holy water from
A censer. It is very late in the season of the planet.
His belly must be full. There is no name for
The pain you feel but it is deserved. Your brain
Cycles through shock and deadness. You do
Not think of grass or flowers, fugu or the
Good Humor truck, roasted chestnuts. No, you do
Not even think of love what is that after all for you
Are spinning in his jaws and you are falling and
Fade to blackness is the denouement to the anti
-climax.

Mendocino Beach

We go in April's heat-lull through
tall grass to water so blue it's
green.

Wind susurrus
through chapped redwoods.

Light drops
through redwood fronds on the
white sea-heave, on hard wet
sand,

on us, you, this light, the
weight not of this light
but of not inventing more.

Gully

When I get hopeless I go to Ocean Beach to
watch the seagulls.

Here, the wind-botched sea.

Here, the sea-wind coughing sand. Here,
fog thick with a dejected white a
sleekthroated a soft a bloodymurder

crying. One gull dives to shore, watches the
others glide into a W, then a V,

then a shrinking I, calling from
the shore.

I wait for the world, water, a bird to say Yes,
to leave you must lead to the great and lasting thing.

I think of you, and think

it's never promised that someone will love you
again, again, again

but it always comes. We
watch it,

calling from the shore.

Today

the raw march rain
having pelted san francisco
through the fullness of an afternoon stops.

we went to see the botticellis at the
legion of honor,
men cast from line as
wind from air
when we left raindrops fell soft through the
eucalyptus
on the marble plaza
in the center hunched a bronze dupe
of rodin's thinker
eyeing him eye
me with you—for once his rapt
hell seemed
childish

the heart of the heart of
what's here today
which was not yesterday i can't
say.
the words would change it. let it
be
here,
whether or not the rain.

After William Carlos Williams

I leave you for one
fucking minute and
you
eat the fucking plums that
were
in the fucking icebox which
I was saving for my
fucking breakfast and
you have
the fucking nerve the gall
to write
a poem about how
delicious
so sweet
and so fucking cold they
were
like a fucking psychopath Well
this is just to say
I have ripped off
your poem

At Tide Pools

It's the hour when the day almost decides to
not be day.

You were in front

but not ahead, where rocks stop insisting
against the tide—it swells a prematurely
pitched

bullocking kind of tide, the kind

you reel back from before you know you see
it—you reel

on mussels so thick you

crunch to move at all, as on a bed of
maimless nails. The light winces
vermilion—it's one of those sunsets

they don't make anymore, from when they
still called it vermilion— between our toes a
mussel winces

in two. We pause there

and for a pause break nothing or
close to it as two can, being two—our
breath breaks

as water, where un- stillness
means to split—no, not water

but the mussels we move over— a
fusing rift.

CAT'S CRADLE CONTRAPUNTAL

For Tiny Peck (Martha)

I remember you as a child,
before Peck came around, all sinew and scruff,
we played together, games
back when you were still called Francis, still unbruised
by the river, your fingers quick,
and agile enough to outrun him. You could run,
never dropping what you held
fast, with your dark eyes always fixed toward home.
I remember your laugh echoing
Between the mountains, where we'd lose you to him,
back when we didn't care who won,
and we didn't understand the stakes.
We played past dark almost every night,
not knowing the price you would pay someday,
our slim treasures doled out as prizes
in fragments of bone, in jewels of ourselves.

EPPIE

(Sis)

Her hair as black as mine, she hunted rabbits behind our house when I first laid eyes on her. She darted between trees in the stand of white pines like a game of hide-and-seek, and I gathered my skirt to run near and yell greetings. She shied away at first, until I waved and smiled. A half-raised hand, hello back, and her black eyes as wide as a blinking owl, we learned each other that day. Her skin as dark as mine, in the days to come and time after chores, we turned friends. I didn't know what it was she left unsaid, but it grew thick around us like a river dammed with sticks and secrets.

I know this. Once here, she didn't want to leave our house, waiting for the last ribbon of sun on the ridge before setting out.

GUIDED

(Granny Grills)

Though I read our Lord's words every night by candlelight, it's the darker mysteries I live by. The dipper that rattles the bucket when nobody's there, smoke from the chimney of an empty house, or bones gathered in a hollow tree. These are the omens I understand and heed. I sink so deep in the ribs of these mountains, my listening's grown sharpened to shine, my eyes trained for signs, scattered for the seeing.

Child, follow your ripe
compass of sun; follow howls
heard in forests within.

FLAIL

I just like feeling the cusp of
experience, an outside
force saving life, day by day.
I be front and center, aptly.
I make coffee, upturn chairs, people
come in, I do what I can. It's

me in the weird zone. I'm
probably the sexiest.
I strut Machiavellian.
Doors open like eggs.

I move the needle,
care for me first.
Is it so wrong? I'm a
monk with thorny rod,
questing and sublime,
deeper and farther into
a cloud of blue.
I don't know, but who does?

Until I do, I'll do.
I'll push, grit my ride,
I can do it, go past. My
ends lift the engine. I

like I can up
and just move.
Can't it be
my body I'm giving,
where body and I can reach,
it's more than body
everywhere at once.

A PALATABLE DOSE

White sheets, white walls, but
warm, not like a crazy house.
Sunlight burns,
Emma barks.
I'm glad for the white walls,
the droning AC.
But I awoke from a terror,
an ill-lit backroom in Chinatown.
A search for the unsavory?

No, give me white noise
in this gray space of Midtown.
It grows across the city
(but not out of the way, like Canary Wharf)
from its center—a new heart.

I kick off the body pillow,
the one Julia hates, since it assumes
space of a third. I smother her
with my body.
She's tough, like mahogany. My kind of
love.

I left dishes in the sink, books,
pens on the couch, tennis shoes
on the kitchen counter. I love my
morning croissants, their debris
remains unlike Julia's single
bite, cleanly collected. She points to
my gathered trail, my flung-out
unconscious. *Get out of bed, clean
my mess, feed Emma.*
Sisyphus, somewhere, is smiling,
sweating under a white sun.

MUSICOLOGY

MC Two Times scratches the record,
time pauses, dances, he rewinds a beat.
MC Two Times delivers time, stays cool
under heavy shades, his signature blue
Kangol hat. He takes them back,
does without doing, plays
Biggie, LL, Kool Herc, even The Sugarhill Gang.
He goes off, goes crazy, mixes in
Ella Fitzgerald, Vivaldi, Gregorian chants,
throws it back to Siddhartha,
Om Mani Padme Hum
on the Ones and Twos.
Be Here Now, he says on the mike and
picks up the stylus.

MC Two Times
spends like it's going out of style,
rocks diamonds and gold chains.
MC Two Times dresses
like Elvis fucked a peacock.
He's a proud man.

MC Two Times looks at
the multitudes in the club,
spins time on the record.

CAVALIER

Diane drives up 87,
her foot's on the gas.
We pass other cars.
I look at her,
her mouth is tight.
I want to touch her
but fear she'll disappear.

She might disappear
if she reads my texts.
They burn holes
in my pocket, rob me
blind. She squints to see
the road, sky, dark
and closing in.

Love turns dark, closing in.
I've been waiting,
I can feel the coming shock.
I love the crook of her nose.
She gazes out beyond us.
The ride is smooth,
I reach for her hand.

I squeeze her hand,
it's limp, cold,
doesn't squeeze back.
"I love you," I say.
She pulls her hand away.

Diane squeezes the steering wheel,
her knuckles turn white.
"Who's Gaga Mama?" she asks.

SIX-POUND EMMA

Napoleonic strut and shout.
Everything as you like it, or else.
I watch your thoughts flit and flicker.
Bed? Fire? Treats? — always the latter.

POEM WITH A CROOKED PAINTING

Your life is perfection, enviable, without question—
the blue skies trail you like a captured flag.
You planned the party down to the wire, everyone
danced with corsages of decorum. Your life is idyllic,
but when you go to pour water in a glass, a crack
in the pitcher. Water everywhere. The bar is now closed.
You planned your life to the tee, standing on
one foot. Your life is immense, potent.
In the river, you can see yourself, the rocks
are your exquisite features. You have the perfect mate.
The perfect son. The perfect dog. The perfect sofa
in the perfect town. But there's that one person who grinds
you to a pulp, zeros in on all your flaws.
A paradigm of extraordinary, yet there's a crooked
painting, a tad askew, and the whole room
is off-balance. You are the wall.
--triggered, undone, haunted—
like when you pick up the phone
to silence—only breathing on the other end.

ASKING FOR A FRIEND

Is it okay to have an addiction to Vitamin C3 gummies, because *pills* sound more dangerous, gummies sound huggable. It's all semantics, bub.

Will the phone ring if you play sad songs? — Is it alright to like Michael Jackson— pedophile or prodigy? —So what are we supposed to do with the gray areas of life?—

Maybe try to match it with a couch. Will the mail come sooner, if I tap my pencil on my shoe?
—

If you do a cartwheel, will disappointments hurt less. I've heard smoke will find its way

out an open window. Does the self writhe in despair when your childhood hangs up the snow pants for good? — Can you use someone else's school photos

for an interview? — Are expiration dates arbitrary? —And do dogs really go off to die. I've thought about you in this world of heaping questions, passcodes, polarities,

friendships getting lost in the dark madding crowds. If you don't go big, do you still need to go home? --Will you promise to have a coffee with me, If I promise to pull up your socks? —

At the Sound of the Drum

His cadence brought attention repeated staccato-triple-beats
echoed on a wide central Athens shopping street Four feet
short brown hair maybe eight soft light brown eyes quick mouth
beating his drum—their pockets a four-by-four block radius
tourist pillage season awaking

Get your picture here she yelled straight dirty blond vintage clothes
a camera for vintage shots Who wouldn't want to be remembered
moments aged a block from the drum

He moaned patterns to the triple beats of the drum
lying on cardboard rags covering him cut up fresh open soars
slow oozing blood wrist to elbows creating a sunken empathy
his voice loud enough to murmur as a heart thump staggering steps to see

A rose was handed to me I paused—observing her midnight hair
travelers dress warm olive skin facial expression werewolfed
when I said *no thank you* Maybe the talking drum spoke to me
echoing blocks a warning

Was it not sunrise when I saw the naked streets dress itself
these same streets were emptied walking against echoing pigeons
the only beggars here.

Minutes Measured to a Song

Each week a mother
measures the minutes mounting
birds in foster care

A mother works weary, a 60-hour waitress
worrying at night, three children away,
that slumber with strangers in foster's brittle
bird nest away from mother's night in a cage.

Each week a mother
measures the minutes mounting
birds in foster care

A mother bundles her joy for weekly reunions,
filling her heart on their hugs and happiness. She
keeps fighting, court dates find frustration serving
restaurant clients, smiling through sadness.

Each week a mother
measures the minutes mounting
birds in foster care

A mother scrapes the change, discarded at tables
to appease social workers, to state she is fit,
scrutinizing her character, to call her a mother
only desiring to cuddle them daily to sleep.

A mother worked hard
measures the minutes mounting
birds now sing with her

Hamburg's Hallucinations

I read that two percent of Hamburg
were millionaires, I question
how many pigeons scraping for crumbs,

human fingers pecking away before daylight
street sweepers, motionless, horizontal
wrapped over benches, in alleyways against

waterways, on crystalizing cement coveting
space beside cash machines, on a corner
as the woman in her green coat, thin, frail

with a scowl face half covered by her orange
and brunette hair flailing in the wind near
her white and black patch dog. Gawking

at me steady stepping by. She stood guard
by her bright blue bedding, prized possessions,
last trinkets of the life before, a necklace,

a ring, a gifted dress I polled in my mind
wondering how she got here, protecting
packed black rolling bag and burgundy handbag,

more swank, not using Ikea bags
for found treasures as those I saw
on the benches down the street, cuddled

in deep-door entryways. I pondered how she ate,
how they ate, no dumpster diving
with red street upright rectangle litter bins,

a one-way trap door stating, "Push me down,"
on the front. As the sun rises these faces
vanish in the crowded streets, I question

how many millionaires did I see this morn.

The Water Bridge

Each time we cross the English Channel, I hear echoes—
gurgling water, clouded effigies on my brain's theatre screen,
while reading headlines, twenty-seven drown in capsized dinghy,

a year to this day, four more upend in this ninety-mile
stretch of water from Calais to Dover. Thirty-one
in the treacherous winter, unrelenting waves wrestling

fishing boats, scarifying imbalanced inflatables, freezing
bones briskly, silencing screams in instants. Why—
do they come? Thirty-one of thirty thousand lives, a raindrop

in a swimming pool, trending across the water to family,
for existence without oppression, a bystander of aggression,
a scapegoat paraded. Thirty-one running to a country

crafting black onion layers, hiding the molded apple inside
of scribbled political policies. Ink blots—less than one percent
of those migrating, pictured by paparazzi's front pages. Thirty-one

unable to request asylum until they grasp the white cliff shores.

Under an overpass in Calais, a dozen plus men clustered, crouched
in a reverent crocheted circle, skirting a blazing fire on concrete,
they are wrapped in thick layered blankets, their faces, skull

bone sharp cheeks, their eyes, the sight of war or death
branded in their stare. How long would they ponder their path
across this narrow sea, its clutching waves? We stopped

our automobile, motion to them with voice, with eyes
quietly, softening our faces, passing them morsels of food.

Hallelujah, He Sings

a Moroccan man,
off rue De La Montagne,

across the Charles
Buls fountain
on Bruxelles's uneven

cobblestone streets,
gaps wide enough
to trap crumbs

of croissants
for flying-rat
pigeons to find.

I am broken.
A twisting tug
of war inside

my head,
from my hand
to each Romanian,

Syrian, Polish
voice for handouts
holding empty cups,

waves of five-minute
rotations, walking
within inches

from my cafe
table. I recognize
these languages

pleading
with soft eyes,
withering bellies,

or not. Not all
have a voice,
an art, a talent

to loosen privileged
change, sending young
girls to melt hearts

reminding me
of Oliver Twist
hustles. Scents, sounds

in the movie's opening
scene, the centuries
of drainage, drink

and piss soaked
in the soil
betwixt cobblestone

cracks overlaid
by fresh beer, pastries,
Belgian frites, layers

of Belgian waffle
sandwiches with sweets,
fruits, chocolate sauce

tracing its birth
from the ivory coast's
conflicts—maybe, not.

The Moroccan man
with microphone
and small box

speaker amplifying
his heart, a troubadour
belting top-ten movie

tunes, apple playlist
tunes for applause,
but tinging tips

in his precisely placed
hat brings him joy
more than claps

from shoppers, tourists
shifting shadows in this
mid-day afternoon.

XYZ

The painters came for an agreed price of X. Quickly, they found more rotten wood than baked into X, the extra carpentry leading to a new price of Y; two days later the news that some roof shingles would need to be lifted over rotted eaves called for another adjustment with a price I'll call Z for zenith though you might favor zany. All the above led to debate over unbudgeted expenses and how to mobilize funds. I found myself doing mental arithmetic and considering tax implications while grinding coffee beans or brushing my teeth and wondering what rot was within me buying a house as old as myself. These mental perambulations didn't limit themselves to coffee and teeth but seeped into everything like a January damp, confirming my sense that nothing more surely kills creativity and imagining than managing.

Hold that Thought

Hold that thought she said
which though
mine or your translation
mine alone a whirlwind
of emotions, ideas
some independent
of our conversation
and irrespective
all interacting chimerically
with her posture, tone of voice
a grab bag of many thoughts
likely summing to none
as most
will be of that moment only
never to return

Beginning

the war ended

dignified plenipotentiaries signed the armistice at a long table
in front of the glistening bay

people cheered

over coffee shop tables, wine shop bars, pool halls
and in the town's kitchens

skirmishing persisted

a generation later, an exhausted people argued little, aware
their lives were full of unceasing rancor

reconciliation was proposed

starting at the harvest celebration that October culminating in the
annual Spring Festival

another beautiful day

nobody saw the bramble seedlings near the houses, the school yards,
the playing fields

SUNDAY'S SCHOOL

Who taught me the purple-blue prayer
of bachelor button and Dutch Iris
or how to receive a sacrament drop
from the apex of honeysuckle? Who taught me
the gentle rosary of wild blackberry and pulpit of stump?
How did I learn the liturgy of birds: roseate spoonbill,
monk parrot, snowy owl? Who rehearsed my catechism
of clouds: cirrus or horsetail? Someone must have taught
me to worship in a chapel of woods, sacristy of fields,
shown me how to baptize myself in brooks' holy waters.
Who taught me the offering of lightning, call and response
of thunder? Or have I known where to find succor and solace all along?

IT SIMPLY ISN'T TRUE

I do pray. It just doesn't appear that way.
There is no Methodist Sunday-Go-To-Meeting
followed by The Ladies of the Church Tea in the Fellowship
Hall, no Catholic prayers in Latin, no rosary or confessional,
there's no prayer shawl, Baptist tent revival, no laying
on of hands, no snakes, no speaking in tongues. But I am
praying while my hands are deep in hot, soapy dishwater
or while I sweep the kitchen floor. I pray when I peel
rutabagas, dance, or slice tomatoes into a blue bowl.
I pray in the sugarcane fields and during any Tuesday's
thunderstorm, pray when my hand reaches out in the dark
for the warm head of the hound. We make the sign of peace.
He sighs, I sigh. A peace that passes all understanding.

GRATITUDE FOR ONE OF THE FIVE, OR SO, SENSES

So very grateful to discern a nuanced tone
and the way Russian *almost* sounds
like English, if you could only lean in
and listen a little harder. It allows me
to pinpoint a Great Lakes from a Bostonian
accent or South African from Australian. I can
determine fear or nervousness by pitch
and cadence, tell the difference between
one dog or the other by their bark, and know
when the green parrot flock is passing over.
Because of this, I can predict the exact moment
the cello's bow makes a resonant downstroke
and know for certain, as I am awakened from sleep,
the orchids are getting watered.

RELAX

Moses had no interest in returning to the scene of the crime, to the reed-lined Nile, nor want to hold a knife at his son's throat. You think you have troubles? Relax. At least the godhead didn't show up as fire in a bush or force you to carry heavy stone tablets around convincing people to obey them. Relax; you didn't have to beg Pharaoh for freedom or lead an unruly throng through parted walls of the Red Sea. Relax you are white and male. Relax. It's unlikely law enforcement will decide you are dangerous simply for driving at night. Relax if you are not an Afghan woman who wants to learn to read. Relax if you don't live in Kyiv or weren't born female, third child to a rural Chinese couple, or don't carry your infant on your shoulder a white flag on the other hoping for safe passage through Gaza. Relax if your parents paid for your college, your car, your first house. Relax if your wife doesn't want a *career*, relax if you can still touch your toes, eat corn on the cob, and recycle in multicolored bins. Relax. You are doing enough.

THE WAYS WE PRAY

Sister has a box labeled "String too short to save" just in case her prayers go unanswered. We pray on the wind and out our windows, we pray as the rain tamps down the raging forest, we pray when the levees break and the rain won't stop. We pray on takeoff and landing, we pray as the lab technician draws our blood, we pray when the doctor's office leaves a voice message, *Please call our office; the doctor would like to go over your biopsy report.* We pray at bedsides, and as a hail of accusations fly, we pray. We pray when the hurricane hunters read 29 millibars and the winds approach 150 mph. And we pray for the spirit of the huge frog crushed under the wheels of a Lexus.

Gilded Shadows

Laura Lambie

Professor Paul Harris felt what he called the constriction. That tightness in the middle of his chest; as the conversation continued it spread throughout his torso, until any semblance of sincerity or his real self was drowned in its vortex.

Mrs. Phillips stood next to a bush of blooming hydrangeas, the white ribbon on her hat blowing in the breeze, holding a crystal wine glass full of garnet liquid. She smiled at him, but still, there it was, the constriction. Everything in him began closing up.

It wasn't her words that caused it; they were perfectly pleasant, speaking about her dog, and how difficult he had been to train, but then she and her husband had finally been able to do it. And they were so happy that Chance was housetrained. No, it wasn't the words, it was something else. But when having a conversation, what was there besides the words?

There were facial expressions, of course, and body language, but how could those simple things cause the constriction? Paul thought there must be something attached to the words; he could almost see it, some sort of force, sticking to the words, so that when someone spoke, the force pushed its way into his being. But there were times, like when he spoke to Stella, that the words were weighed down with something sweet, that attached to his heart and bathed it in brightness, that let it open like one of the crimson roses on the bush in his front yard in springtime.

As Mrs. Phillips went on, talking about the dog show she was training Chance for, as Paul nodded and smiled when appropriate, his mind floated back to comfort; back to his garden, to the huge old oak tree that created shade dappling over the grass, moving over it, a rapid alternation between shadow and light. The thought of it caused a small expansion within him, but then the woman kept talking, and the small expansion was lost beneath the torrent of her words.

Paul sipped his champagne cocktail and made a comment about a dalmatian his parents had when he was growing up, and how difficult it had been to housetrain, and how hard it had been to let him go when it was clear that he was untrainable. Mrs. Phillips smiled, a pleasant, polite smile, and said that's why she was so relieved that Chance had come through.

Paul wanted to escape, but where could he go? A man came up to them, tall and young, and Paul saw his chance. "Looks like I'm low. Would you like another drink?"

The woman shook her head and turned her attention to the young man. Paul veered onto a path that led into a grove of trees. He certainly didn't cut such a fine figure as the young man; he was middle aged, his large paunch showed in spite of the flattering cut of his suit, he had a receding hairline, and the hair that he did have was being overtaken by grey. No, he certainly wasn't what he had once been in his Eton days, tall and athletic, his interaction with women effortless. But he had never found anyone to captivate him, to make him want to know more, to go further.

Now he was middle aged, and Stella was only a dream. But he cherished their moments together; they stood out in his mind as reliefs: her soft, shiny, honey-colored hair, the strands glistening as they were touched by the sunlight streaming through the window behind her, as she sat at the desk in his study grading papers; Stella sipping a cup of tea from the purple geranium covered cup and saucer on winter afternoons, the clock over the mantle ticking as the light outside softened into shadows. With Stella, he finally felt free. But she was a young girl. In a year she would graduate and he would never see her again. And what would she want with her fifty-five-year-old professor?

No, it was useless. With Katherine he didn't feel the constriction, but there was no expansion either. They went along together, as they had for years, traveling in the same direction, looking in the same direction. There were times, as they sat together in the evening, Paul reading and Katherine working on her needlepoint, her head bent down, the lamplight resting on her grey hair—short wiry tendrils—as she hummed an aria from Carmen, that he felt he couldn't take it anymore. He wanted to get up and walk out, walk anywhere away from her, from the sound of her voice as she hummed, from her steadiness, her evenness. But he would only look up at her, sigh deeply, then go back to his book.

"What is it Paul dear?" she would say.

"A particularly moving passage."

"Ahhh." And she would go back to putting the needle in, and pulling it out, and putting it in, and pulling it out, and putting it in, and pulling it out, until she had a bouquet of flowers or a horn of plenty that she would hang in his study. Paul had met her at the university; she had been a secretary for a colleague who was retiring. At the retirement party she had worn a red dress with red lipstick, and a silver barrette in her short hair. He had liked her style. They had gone on one date, then another, then another, until one day he figured it was getting too much to keep going on dates and that she should move in. So she had moved into his large, drafty, Victorian house and they had kept on going the way they had before.

Every morning she would make coffee, fill her mug and stand in the kitchen, looking out the back window at the large stone birdbath in the middle of the yard, watching the sparrows jump in and out of the water. When he came in, she turned around and pecked his cheek, and said, "good morning Paul dear." She would get down his mug and fill it for him. He would thank her and sit down at the table. She would continue gazing out the window; every now and again she would make a remark about what she had to do at work, or how far Professor Brighton had gotten on his latest article, or what she needed to pick up at the market that evening. Paul would nod and say "mm-hmm," gazing at her slender back encased in a cardigan sweater.

Paul sat on the cold, hard, stone bench, half covered by trees, watching people standing in groups, holding their drinks, talking and laughing. Katherine had an event that day, some sort of get together with some of the other secretaries, so she hadn't accompanied him. She was a comfort to him at parties; there was a cord of emotion between them, an easy companionship.

He saw a young woman join the young man in the suit, and he thought he was having a vision. The honey-colored hair, the petite, slender body; that could be Stella. The young woman laughed; it rolled through the air, gently, like the tinkling of a small bell. Stella's laugh. She put her hand on the young man's arm, and Paul felt something much worse than the constriction, something much more intense. He stood up. Maybe that wasn't her. He edged closer, keeping close to the trees, keeping his eyes on the young woman's face. Would she have Stella's large, sensitive eyes?

He reached the edge of the path. She turned and smiled at the young man, and he saw that familiar smile, he had seen it so many times. First it revealed the even teeth, then it traveled up to the eyes, and they shone with a soft light, that soft light he thought of in the dark hours of night when memories came back to him, that had taken the sting away from their sharp edges. That soft light that made life tolerable. And now, it was shining at the young man. Paul clutched his chest. The glow. His glow.

But it wasn't his. And what was more natural than for a young woman to be with a young man? She turned; she had seen him. She held up her hand and smiled. Paul let himself pretend, for just a moment, that the smile was his, everything about her only for him. He smiled back and waved. He walked up the path.

“Stella, so good to see you, I didn’t think you would be here.”

“I sometimes grade papers for Professor Smith also.”

“Ah, of course, I had forgotten.”

“This is James. James, Professor Harris.”

“Good to meet you,” said Paul, holding out his hand. He looked at the young man’s chiseled, handsome face. Of course Stella would prefer him. It only made sense. He felt with every ounce of his being that he needed to get away from the party.

“James is a pre-med student.”

“Ah, how nice. And how did you two meet?”

“I saw her at a coffee shop,” said James, “and well, you know the rest.”

Paul forced a smile. “Yes, of course. Wonderful girl here.”

“Oh yes,” said James, throwing an arm around her.

Paul cleared his throat several times. “Oh excuse me, I had better fill my drink. I’m low as you can see. If you’ll excuse me.”

“See you Friday,” said Stella.

“Yes, see you then.”

Paul stumbled past Stella onto the path that led to the gate. He opened it and traversed the lawn to the driveway and got into his car. He didn’t remember how he made it home, but there he was, standing on the doorstep in front of the old oak door. A light was on in the living room; Katherine had gotten home before him. He put his hand on the doorknob but hesitated. Something in him dreaded going inside. He knew that Katherine would smile at him, offer him a cup of tea, and give him an outline of the event she went to. Then she would ask him questions. And he couldn’t bear to answer them.

He knew he was a fool, and what was worse than that, he was an old fool. But he couldn’t help what he felt, the vein that had opened up in his chest, that poured out pain and bitterness.

“Hello Paul.”

Paul turned around. His neighbor, who was always out walking his huge grey husky, waved and smiled.

“Hello Tim, how are you?”

“Fine. Did you forget your key?”

“Oh no, I was just...uh...I was just going in. Have a good evening.”

“You too.”

He turned the knob and entered.

“Paul dear, is that you?”

“Yes, it’s me.”

“You’re back early.”

“Yes, well, you know, it was one of those parties, that...you know, the same old thing.”

“I understand, but Jane does throw great parties.”

“Yes, she does. I’m going to go change.” Paul climbed the stairs, listening to every creak of the tortured old wood of the staircase. He sat down on the bed and looked at the lengthening shadows created by the start of dusk. The sight of Stella with the young man floated before him like a specter. He stood up, slipped off his suit jacket and pulled on his brown cardigan sweater. He took off his shoes, placed them in the closet and pulled on his slippers. He went to the window, pushed aside the curtain and looked out onto the street. The eastern sky had deepened into a glowing cobalt blue; soon it would be enveloped in darkness. He heard sounds from the kitchen; Katherine was preparing dinner. The thought of looking across the table at her, telling her about the party, filled him with dread. He needed a drink. It was the only

way to get through the evening.

He entered the kitchen and saw Katherine standing at the stove, stirring a pot, humming.

"I think I'll have a drink tonight. Would you like one?"

"Oh, no, thanks. But you go ahead."

Paul went into the living room, to the drink cart against the far wall, and poured a finger of whiskey into the finely etched cocktail glass Katherine had given him last Christmas. He took a sip, then returned to the kitchen.

"So how was the party?" asked Katherine, as she scooped rice into a bowl.

"It was OK, you know, a huge spread, string quartet set up in one end of the garden, everything crystal." Paul took a long sip of his drink. "Oh look, I'm already low, I don't think I poured a full finger before. I'll be right back."

Katherine didn't answer as she forked chicken cutlets onto a serving platter. Paul refilled his glass and returned to the kitchen. When Katherine turned from the stove, setting the bowl of broccoli on the table, he felt that he didn't love her. That was why he had never asked her to marry him. He had believed his own excuses, when he and Katherine had talked about it and he had said, "I don't need a piece of paper to define what we have. I don't need some sort of external thing on it. We know what we have, and really, in the end, that's all that matters isn't it?" He had honestly believed that was how he felt. But he had been lying to himself.

Katherine sat down and smiled at Paul. "Who was there?"

"Oh well, half the department, and you know, I never saw Jane. You know how she is, the whole time she's in the kitchen, directing the staff. I don't know why she even gives the parties. She never leaves that kitchen."

Katherine chuckled. "She is rather eccentric, isn't she? You know, I ran into her in town. She was with one of her teacher's assistants, and they were sitting in the coffee shop looking very cozy."

Paul sipped his drink and sighed. "You know how I feel about gossiping."

Katherine's lips pursed. "I hardly call it gossip. We were just discussing how eccentric she is, and so I was giving an illustration. In fact, you interrupted right in the middle of my story."

"Well you have a very narrow definition of gossip."

"I see." Katherine concentrated on her broccoli, as she speared a piece and chewed.

"And you know how intense Jane is about her students. She's a very devoted teacher. So for you to say she was getting cozy with him was gossip plain and simple." Paul took another sip of his drink.

"Really Paul, do you have to drink so much? You know how you get. I hope you won't be like this when we go to the concert tomorrow night."

Paul looked at her and sighed. "Of course I won't dear. Now tell me about your event."

In the dimness of the concert hall, Paul watched Katherine fold and unfold her hands, place them on her knees, place them on the armrests. It was very distracting. He put his hand over hers and squeezed. She smiled, took in a breath and settled into her chair.

There was a moment of hushed silence; the pianist lifted his hands and played the loud, sharp opening chords of the Grieg piano concerto. Paul settled in. It was a favorite of his. But he wasn't prepared for what he was going to feel when the second movement began. As the strings created a canvas of glowing beauty that the piano set its tender notes onto, Stella's eyes floated through the rising music, expanding into it as the sound flowed through the room

like a stream of light. A feeling opened up in him, like a beam of sunshine resting on the ground: steady, serene, peaceful—he felt that something in Stella’s being answered to the lush beauty of the music. Tears came to his eyes. He turned his head slightly to the right, so that his eyes were hidden from Katherine.

As the second movement led into the third, and the piece became more agitated and filled with passion, he knew he had to end it with Katherine. He couldn’t go on like this anymore. Seven years had played out whatever had been between them. The piece ended, the lights came up and it was intermission. Eyes still on the floor, he held out his arm. Katherine placed a hand on it and he led her out to the lobby. People milled around talking; there were lines to the bathrooms.

“Isn’t that Stella?”

Paul turned. Stella stood next to the window, talking to the young pre-med student, her eyes fixed on his face, smiling, putting her hand on his arm as they laughed.

“Yes, that’s her.”

“Who is she with? I didn’t know she had a boyfriend.”

“He’s a student. And I don’t know if he’s her boyfriend.”

The young man put his arm around Stella, pulled her close to his side and whispered something in her ear. Paul had to leave. “Katherine dear, I’m terribly sorry, I’m not feeling well, I need to go home.”

“Really? What’s wrong?”

“It’s my stomach. It must have been that meal we had at the restaurant. I guess the clams aren’t agreeing with me.”

“Alright, let’s go.”

“No, you stay. You’ve been looking forward to this for weeks.”

“I know but....”

“Please dear. I want you to stay. I know how much you want to hear the Beethoven. Liz can drop you off afterwards.”

“Alright, if you’re sure.”

“Yes, please.”

“Feel better dear.”

“Thank you.”

Paul rushed through the lobby, pushed open the door and entered the cool darkness of the night. It was such a relief to be under its cover, alone, no need to keep up any appearances. He breathed in the fresh night air, laced with a hint of honeysuckle from a large bush next to a bench. He sat down on the bench and looked up at the night sky. The light of a few stars emerged from the darkness, and the moon was a large, bright orb. Looking up at it, he felt free, under the cover of the darkness, his only companion the moon. From the corner of his eye he saw the door open and someone exit the building; he hoped it wasn’t someone he knew, someone who would rip him from his solitude, and then he would have to adjust his being to their conversation, when all he wanted at that moment was to be, to think.

But the voice he heard in the darkness, saying his name, was a bright sound that reverberated through the air and entered his heart, adding a balm to his solitude. “Professor, I’m glad I caught you. I had a question about those papers you asked me to grade. I couldn’t figure out....” He watched Stella talk, covered in the cool dimness, next to the honeysuckle bush, and he forgot everything. Nothing else existed, and he felt a hint of something more, something that wasn’t constrained by time, that seemed to continue forever. She smiled, through the dimness it was like a spark, she stopped talking about the papers and began talking about the

concert.

"That second movement. It was beautiful, wasn't it?"

"Yes," replied Paul. "I felt...I felt it so deeply. More than ever before."

Stella looked down at the ground. "Yes, there was something about it for me too...."

Paul felt the inner expansion, and with each word Stella spoke it increased, erasing all the constriction; his heart bloomed, as though it contained a summer garden, warm and fragrant, filled with vibrant streaks of color.

The door opened, and the young man walked towards them.

"Oh yes," said Paul, "about the papers, I'm so sorry, I forgot to tell you that you are to grade them with different criteria. I'll email it to you later."

"Yes, right, thank you professor."

The young man walked to her side. "The concert is going to begin again."

"You two go in. I'm going to head home. Something...uh...something has come up."

"Is everything OK prof?" asked the young man.

"Oh yes, of course. You two go in. Enjoy it." Even through the dimness he saw Stella give him a wistful look. She turned and followed the young man.

Paul sat in his study, enjoying a cup of tea. The ticking of the clock over the mantle punctuated the silence; Paul felt the silence, he breathed it in. This would be his last cup of tea at the house for a while. Katherine's things were gone, she had taken up residence in a small apartment above a boutique in town. The night of the concert they had stayed up until dawn; Katherine had been very calm. It turned out that she hadn't been happy for a long time, and she put everything honesty before Paul: she had been having feelings for Professor Brighton for a while, and they had gotten a drink a few weeks before. Paul had been grateful that he hadn't sacrificed himself to try and keep her happy, since she wasn't happy anymore anyway, and her affections had already strayed.

He finished the tea, stood up, brought the cup and saucer to the kitchen and rinsed them out. He put them in the drainer where Katherine had put her empty coffee mug every morning, and he felt a strong pang of missing her. But as quickly as it came on, it passed.

One of the things he had realized in the past few weeks, spending time alone in his study every night, sitting in front of the fire, letting himself look at his feelings and unravel them, was that, in the end, Katherine had been more of a friend than anything. A companion, a fellow traveler.

He glanced at his watch. The car would be there in five minutes. He went upstairs, put on his traveling hat and picked up his suitcase. He paused at the threshold of the bedroom door. Stella. Her face flooded his mind, his heart ached; was it a mistake to go away? He looked at the mellow sunlight slanting onto the old, threadbare hallway rug. Dust motes floated through the shafts of light, and once again, he felt that Stella's soul was present in the sunlight, in its bright, nourishing, warm light.

Every morning since the concert, he had been greeted by a faint echo of the joy he had felt as Stella had spoken to him, enshrouded in shadow, standing near the honeysuckle bush. He would get out of bed, go downstairs, and watch the vestiges of the sunrise disappear as the sun rose higher in the sky. One morning, as he watched the bright, fresh morning sunshine tumble down onto the back lawn, he had realized that it wasn't Stella's being that was in the music, or the sunshine; it was something that his love for her had helped him to see in those

things. But what was it that he saw?

He didn't know.

Slowly, he made his way down the stairs, listening for the last time to the creaking staircase. He would begin his sabbatical at his brother's cottage in the countryside. He had spent a week there a few years ago; he remembered the quiet, and taking walks surrounded by the wildflowers in the meadow behind the house. They had been days of peace.

The driver knocked on the front door. Paul looked at the dear old house, the foyer and the staircase, the living room sitting empty, knowing it would be a long time until he saw it again. He turned and went out the door.

The house stood, the clock in the study ticking into the empty silence.

White People in Busses

Mary Pacifico Curtis

Since you are looking at me in my white t-shirt, shorts and straw hat, I might as well tell you that my name is Wu. You see a skinny man at the edge of a duck pond framed against a large, low thatch, shelter for the hundreds of white birds in my pond. You see white fluff, white wisps in the sky, a poor Cantonese man.

I am a man of riches. The Pékin ducks in my pond are dreams, puffs of eternity, angels in tranquil waters. They are sacrifices to Heaven and Earth, the royal ancestors, the gods of grains and soils, sun and moon, stars and other gods and spirits that reign over the realms of the cosmos of Confucius. These ducks are my steppingstones and path. They will multiply and move on to sustain. You are right to think this is not my pond, my land, my home.

If you go into town, ask the youngest child who still pees through the crotch slit in his pajamas: where is the home of Wu the duck-pond keeper? It's a small town. He will lead you along dirt roads to a small house. My mother will be inside watching a TV slightly elevated from the earthen floor. My wife will be where the sitting area opens to the kitchen. She is preparing a meal. Both women are happy now. There is a baby boy asleep in a cradle. Things change. Once our people had many children, now we are allowed two. White Pekin ducks will provide for our two.

My brother moved to the city and returns with attitude. What does he know of Ming in the 15th century and Qing in the 18th century? They perfected techniques for cooking the duck—closed roast in Ming's day, open roast in Qing's day. All my brother knows is counting his money and what he likes to eat.

I return to my pond every day, shoo the sleepy ducks from the thatch to the water, lay out food to make the fat birds fatter. Rarely do they fly. They preside as gods and goddesses of this pond, fat and fattening. My wife is thin, my mother shrinks with the years, my father perished at the plow.

The white people in busses look healthy, like my ducks. We only know what we can see, all of us. I wonder.

“Do you own the bus? Do you own a pond?”

“Do you own a flock?”

“Do you serve your gods and sustain your people?”

“Do you own a cloud, a steppingstone,
a future you can hold in your hand?”

As you forget about me,
I wonder.

Cleveland Wild

Varley O'Connor

The day after we moved into our new home in Cleveland Heights, Ohio, a dead squirrel lay smack at the center of our front walkway. No blood. It had not been attacked, mangled by another animal. The dead squirrel was perfect, fat as they often are in this inner suburb with its bounty of acorns. Towering oaks on the patchwork suburban lawns twisted and loomed over the houses like Dr. Seuss characters.

I stepped off the stoop and moved closer, inspected its glossy brown pelt, and determined it hadn't been dead for long. I hoped the squirrel wasn't an omen. Earlier that day, two men delivered a table I'd bought at an estate sale. Grimly, they told me that at a nearby bar/restaurant on Lee Road the owner had been shot dead during a robbery last night. It was mid-June of 2014. My fiancé, Joel, was in town for the week. Next year he'd move here, and our long-distance relationship would finally end. For us it was a festive time, briefly marred by the squirrel.

That summer my daily project and obsession was to finish the novel I had begun in Stow, Ohio, near my teaching job at Kent State. Summer was the one part of the year I had oceans of time to work on my books. I had always guarded these oceans, pushing all else to the margins, as I pushed many of the papers and boxes I didn't unpack in Cleveland Heights, storing them in the basement of our 1925 Colonial, where a defective humidifier turned the space into a toxic dump that required an expensive mold remediation for the sake of our health and the eventual sale of the house in 2022.

My office was in the refurbished attic near the leafy tree crowns in the backyard. How long did squirrels live? It didn't look old or sick. Could it have been poisoned? Weedkiller? Roundup? If it was bad for us, it couldn't be good for the squirrels. As I adjusted to the house and yard, I watched the squirrel acrobats flying from branch to high branch, fearlessly racing across the telephone wires and taking Olympian leaps back into the trees. It could have fallen. Athletes that squirrels are, they must have occasional mishaps.

Before I left New York City for my job at Kent State, nature for me meant rats in the subways, pigeons pressed up against double-hung windows, roaches skittering over grimy kitchens. In Stow, my feisty sable Burmese cat and I stood awestruck in front of a tall tangle of bushes filled with hundreds of lightning bugs that glittered and pulsed more impressively than the annual Christmas tree in Rockefeller Plaza. Such grandeur in Stow, Ohio. Who knew?

Since college I'd dreamed of a rambling apartment on Central Park West, not a rented condo in Stow, not even a house in the desirable Forest District of Cleveland Heights. From my New York City perspective there was nothing to do in Stow except work. But on walks through monotonous suburban Stow streets, I grew aware of migrating birds: A clunky hedge shuddered and twitched and seemed to rise with a flock of birds soaring up into the sky like synchronized swimmers. Or a dark clump against blue burst apart and the birds bounced the air currents and pulled into lines drawing streamers over the earth. Oh, how I tracked those October birds! And this wonder bled into a Thanksgiving visit to New York where in a tremendous murmuration starlings swirled back and forth from the southernmost end of Central Park to the lighted roof of the Plaza Hotel. The sight pinned me to the sidewalk, my head raised in ecstasy, watching as crowds bustled past me oblivious to the show in the sky.

We had two red oaks in our front yard in Cleveland Heights and three in the back. A gardener we inherited from the previous owners mowed the lawns and attended to the perennial plantings I didn't have time to care for. But I liked to water the trees. Who knows if they needed my watering. Cleveland is typically rainier than the Pacific Northwest. Joel, a pianist as obsessed by his art as I am by mine, declared that with all the rain, at least we would not have to water. It may have been dry that first summer, or I was enthralled by the novelty of a yard full of trees, but my watering progressed from the trees to the bushes and grass and became a daily rest from my literary labors. Pedestrians complimented the tall oaks as I sprayed waterfalls in the front yard. Later, I almost hated the trees, after a huge branch torn off by lake-effect winds took out a fence and an arbor and part of a Japanese maple. Later still, a lightning storm felled dozens of trees, smashing cars and roofs in a swath across Cleveland and Shaker Heights.

But our house that first year felt idyllic, still awash in the fantasy of peace and perfection one feels in a fresh new place, a place, we assume, that will be different from everything that has come before.

One day as I dreamily shot watery arcs, I heard a peeping sound—from the ground. Grass I'd just watered. I looked down at a bald patch: a rectangular declivity lightly disguised by bleached grass. The patch breathed, heaved. Under the thinly spread camouflage were the rounded backs of a litter of rabbits, deposited by the mother, away finding food? I squatted down and saw tiny rabbit ears, the backs of the babies like miniature islands pushing up from a grassy sea. Nearby was a brick, dislodged from the grass, I presumed, its imprint carving a perfect spot for a nest.

Perfect? They were only maybe three inches down. I'm sorry, I thought, are you okay? The peeping resumed. At least I didn't drown them.

The next day Anthony, the man who cared for our yard, arrived with his industrial mower. I greeted him as I always did, the nest at the fringe of my mind. I figured the rabbits were deep enough not to be harmed, assuming the mower would glide over the surface. The truth is my logic was cursory. I had been thinking about so many other things since finding the nest, human things, writerly things.

I went back upstairs. Hours later, I felt a grip in my throat. In the blankness of exhaustion, I remembered the baby rabbits. I hoped they'd be magically gone. Or that their tiny backs would move again beneath the straw.

Body parts were scattered in a wide circle five or six feet away from the nest. What they had been was easy to see. Tiny lopped-off heads with rabbit ears. Bloodied torsos.

I fled to the house. I was alone. By now, Joel had gone back to Montreal. I couldn't stop trembling. Murderer, I thought. How could I have done this? For fiction?

I gathered a rake and a dustpan, a black garbage bag. I was responsible and I'd clean it up. My stomach heaved as I faced this reality, this hard lesson. I wedged the brick back to discourage another nest.

The brick was a memorial. A reminder I did not at all need whenever I was out back. I didn't water much after that. Anyway, there was the rain. My watering hadn't helped anything. The baby rabbits had warned me, and I didn't hear.

Joel sympathized about the rabbits on the phone that night. What spooked him though was the murder on Lee Road. The neighborhood looked safe, but we weren't sure. East Cleveland was less than three miles from our street of lush yards and gardens. I'd gotten lost in East

Cleveland driving, and it looked just as one of my students described it in an essay: desolate, eerily quiet, as if people watched from the windows for signs of violence. My student grew up on those streets before he enrolled at Kent State, a mainly white suburban campus south of Cleveland, near Akron. Kent State had nearly closed after the 1970 shootings, but by the time I was hired it was known as a safer, blander school than, say, Cleveland State. Yet with a touch of bizarre cachet because of the widely publicized student shootings.

I'd heard from colleagues that Cleveland Heights was very safe, but given Joel's concern, I kept everything locked tight when I was writing upstairs. Nights, I left my bedroom windows open for the breeze and the ruffling sound of the oak leaves.

Early that first summer a friend wired me a bouquet of lilies as a housewarming gift. Lilies are poisonous to cats, and meeting two of our next-door neighbors at the fence, I asked if they wanted the lilies. They accepted exuberantly. Roberta Borders, the elderly mother of Bobby, a middle-aged chef, said she had raised her eight children here, once they moved up from the South for Cleveland's industrial jobs in the city's prime.

On the Fourth of July Bobby rang our side doorbell and invited me to join their extended family for barbecue. I'd been upstairs writing as usual. Now I heard kids playing in the Borders' backyard and caught the smoky scent of cooking food. I was tempted, moved by the invitation, the warmth, and the opportunity to enter a kind of family life I didn't know. But already, in my head, the start of school loomed, and I felt the magnetic pull of my desk upstairs.

I explained that I was working. Bobby said he would bring me a plate to save for later and I accepted. Ordinarily, I don't eat much meat, and never barbecue. That evening I and the Burmese cat devoured Bobby's food.

I didn't think I had put a foot wrong with my new neighbors. Perhaps though I did. The neighborhood had changed through the years and the Borders were the only Black family on our street. That autumn Bobby got in an argument with our gardener, Anthony. I went outside to their raised voices and tried to intercede, but it was as if neither one of them heard me. Then Roberta came out of the house and accused Anthony of blowing our leaves onto their lawn.

I don't recall how a truce came to be. I know that, thereafter, Anthony took special care blowing leaves. It didn't help. Bobby acted increasingly strange. He accused me of spying on their house. He informed me that Roberta would stay where she was until the Good Lord called her home. Nothing I said dissuaded these accusations that came for weeks whenever Bobby and I met outside. "Yes, of course she'll stay," I insisted, and "Why would I spy on you?"

"I saw you right there!" he shot back, pointing at the sidewalk edging their front lawn. "Taking pictures of the house with your phone."

"I didn't," I answered feebly.

Over time, whatever crimes he associated with me, or someone who looked like me, seemed to fade from his mind and our relationship smoothed.

Then he got a puppy, the most adorable German Shepherd I'd ever seen, and he proudly carried the dog through the neighborhood, wrapped in his winter coat, until it got too cold. In spring, the nearly grown dog was chained every day to the Borders' back porch. It barked so ferociously that I didn't take our cat out back anymore. "Watch dog," Bobby said. I couldn't tell if it was a warning.

Bobby died of lung cancer the following year. Soon Roberta moved out, and a single male family member moved in. We hardly saw him. He didn't attend the block parties. He always kept his blinds drawn. I came to understand that he wanted nothing to do with any of the neighbors. Finally, nobody lived in the house.

I still regret turning down the barbecue invitation. It probably wouldn't have made any difference. My presence would not have erased any indignities the Borders may have suffered from other neighbors. But one never knows. Small gestures bring little healings, or so I hope. And my inability to enact a small gesture is another instance of my myopia and intense work drive, my adherence to virtual over real life.

Writers are supposed to be curious, aren't they? Didn't Henry James say that a writer is one upon whom nothing is lost?

But there I go, writing about human life when I started with a squirrel. Deer grazed all over the neighborhood, in yards and medians. I liked how willingly people stopped their cars as the deer crossed the streets in a ritual of this time and place, a nod to the beauty of wildness and the painful fact of the deer's wildness spilled out of their plundered habitats. I liked the skunks living under our deck. I was warned that they could become a major nuisance. This didn't happen. Only wisps of skunk smells in fine weather. Or a skuttling thing, keeping low to the ground, emerging for food in winter, leaving a thin line of footprints in the snow it later followed back to the deck. The skunks seemed to me the most pathetic creatures, and I loved them for their difficult lives and their unpopularity and skunk forbearance. I liked the spectacle of a mama racoon leading her three racoon children down from one of our trees. I liked that we coexisted with many life forms. I liked learning their lessons and experiencing the permeability of our precarious boundaries. Yet often, as with the rabbits, it hurt.

The house was too big and old for two artist people to manage. One winter, the bulb in the side porch light fixture burned out, and we failed to replace it for months. When I finally did, I discovered a nest of baby bird skeletons in the cold half globe. Nearby, two robins squawked from the fence as I scooped the nest into a plastic Rite-Aid bag and dumped it into one of the garbage cans. On trash day we had to bring everything out in trash bags to the street for pickup. A bad policy that created a lot of clean up when animals tore open the bags and dragged away food.

Before the garbage containing the skeletons was picked up, a trash bag was torn open in a delicate way, or I should say a meticulous way, and I found the Rite-Aid bag in our yard not torn but only opened, as if the robins wanted to make sure those babies were dead.

What? I felt completely disoriented. Honestly, I had first learned about robins from a Walt Disney movie. What did I know about robins? What they saw and how they felt? Tiny bird skeletons in a Rite-Aid bag—what had we done? We conquerors of earth and sky.

Not long after the incident with the baby rabbits, I read about the movement to ban industrial lawn mowers like Anthony used: These mowers dig deep into ground, far deeper than necessary to cut grass, grass itself not great for the planet in any case. But these mowers destroy countless creatures who live just below the visible surface. Industrial mowers for suburban lawns? Personal trucks and vans the size of assault vehicles, why?

One chilly morning I took our Burmese cat, belted up in his purple harness and leash, for a walk. Turning into the backyard, we were startled by a huge antlered deer interrupted in grazing the meager late-winter green. In a heartbeat it leaped the fence to our neighbor's, Ann's, yard. The high plastic fence had sharp spikes, and the deer didn't quite clear it. I heard a muffled but definite thump as he went over.

From inside, I didn't see him in Ann's yard. I thought that meant he wasn't injured, had walked down Ann's driveway and out to the street. But in the afternoon, he stood again in Ann's with two other deer: he wasn't all right. As he moved about, I saw a hoof hang and flop from the fetlock. I thought of racehorses I had seen shot on TV right on the racetrack after a

leg injury took them down.

And in the evening, I found the Burmese at a second-floor window, his tall brown ears pricked in attention. The deer lay alone in a corner of Ann's yard. Deer fed in our yard, but rested in Ann's. She and her husband worked regular hours and were gone most days. But I'd never seen a lone deer at rest in their yard and never at night.

Later, in the glow from the dim spotlight on Ann's garage, I saw the resting deer's great head raised to the sky. Would it die there? In deepest night I woke up and checked again. In the same place, it slept.

Facing the empty yard in the morning, I felt as though it had all been a dream. Ann emerged from the house for her run, and I rushed out and told her what happened. She'd been worried too. I told her I'd googled "deer leg injuries" and learned that deer anatomy was different from horses'; deer often recovered. If the deer had walked out of the yard, he had a chance. Ann waved and trotted away down the street. A positive outcome, I guess. But how much reprieve was it, really?

I listened recently to a podcast in which an English monk described how their monastery in an ancient vast tract of fields, woods, and streams, gifted by a benevolent organization, was built without any killing. No trees were felled. Bees found in a wall were moved at night as they slept by a monk in an amateur beekeeper's suit to a bee sanctuary. These places exist. An accidentally injured bat was taken to heal in a vet hospital. We're nuts, we humans, but in small ways we try. Some people heal bats. We try, but not hard enough. We can't seem to coordinate our efforts. Does that mean nothing done matters? Is the size of the problem a death warrant for everything?

What struck me most in the podcast was the part about rabbits. As the monastery went up and the grounds cultivated, the monks were informed by an inspector that they had a problem with rabbits. There were too many. The vermin had to be managed, shot. They would spread to neighboring properties. Farms would lose produce. The locals were already uncertain about these weird monks. The monks built a fence, of wood, I assume, they didn't buy one of plastic with spikes from Home Depot. The monks figured that if they had too many rabbits for the neighbors' comfort, they'd keep them in. The rabbits flourished. They hopped everywhere in the fields, in the gnawed-down gardens. Soon the grounds looked covered in gray furry carpets. But gradually, nature took care of the problem. Maybe foxes, cats, dogs, but in time the gray carpets cleared and today an average rabbit population lives on the monastery grounds.

Well, monks. Well, Buddhists. Who has time even if the inclination is there? The world is dense. It's too late. Is it? About my neighbor Bobby I wrote, small gestures bring little healings. Little healings can grow. Why not? Why not?

I learned a lot about my delusions in Cleveland and I honor it for that. It taught me the price of my American dreams. I thought I already knew, but it was a distant, intellectual knowing. I never wanted to move to Ohio. So, I was squeezed. That, it seems, is the one way we truly learn. There was somehow a sweetness to Cleveland I'll always remember, an innocence somehow, though I suspect it was the sweetness that comes after hardship. Joel and I had big plans for our marriage and almost none of them happened. If the animals suffered, we did too. Right before Covid Joel finished eight months of chemo for Hodgkin's lymphoma. His odds to stay in remission are good. But the chronic pain I developed a year after we moved to Cleveland Heights hasn't shifted, despite selling the house and moving last year to the Southwest. Where do you go? Everything feels locked tight, like my body. Nothing much

anywhere has shifted in an essentially positive way since 2014. Yet it feels light years ago. The world is on fire—in nature, in our own minds. And still we dream. How much more do we need to be squeezed to realize that for now it is time to put away dreams and roll up our sleeves? What kind of sense does it make to hold on until everything's gone? On both sides of the political spectrum our aggressive, speedy, relentless idealism is tearing up everything we have left. I never told Joel about what I saw on the night his sister died in the pandemic. 2020. August.

I went outside on a balmy summer night. Two houses down the street our neighbors had put out balloons to announce their new baby born three days before. Locked tight in our houses, venturing out for our walks, we all saw the sign, the balloons. And on this summer night I went out and stood in the front yard looking out at the sky when one of the balloons appeared on the breeze and touched down on our grass. First one, then two: "It's a boy." They gently bobbed on the grass. A mist rose and wreathed the grass. I was so tired of balloons, of signs, of announcements, of celebrations. I wanted to touch something. The baby. Joel's poor dead sister. But she was in Florida in a box alone. And we were here.

The New Economy

Mark Lewandowski

An incidental touch. Anya's pinky lightly brushing her wrist. The tingle slowly traveling up Renata's arm. The sensation opening into a magnificent fall day. The two traipsing through the linden trees hunting for the season's last mushrooms. A reddened leaf floating and floating before landing in Renata's basket...

Jarred. Yanked from the past. Not so much by a sound, but a slight movement in the earth, a faint concussion. Not every bomb dropped from every Messerschmitt found its target or detonated. That's what it felt like, that same reverberation in her bones from fifty years earlier: 250 kilos of dead weight thunking into a distant field. Renata shook her head and looked down. The water had long ago filled the kettle. She turned off the faucet.

"Ridiculous."

Something creaked outside, and then something banged. She wondered if the barn door opened in the night. Tadeusz roused his old self from the pile of blankets near the front door and barked away, setting the cocks to crowing and the chickens to squawking. Unmilked and unfed Emilia wouldn't get far, but Renata left the kettle and the bread rising on the counter, changed slippers for Wellingtons and scurried outside.

"With me," she commanded Tadeusz, who whined, and then pawed at the threshold before slumping after her. The early light slithered through the trees and tip-toed on the watering pond. Sure enough the barn door was open. Tadeusz, more lively now, trotted over, growling at the darkness seeping from the barn. Renata, though, saw something down by water's edge, a big lump. Heard it, too. The lump was snoring.

"Oh, Jesus," she said. "Emilia, is it." Yes, her milk cow, on her side, snout a few centimeters in the water, the gusts from her nostrils blowing ripples. Renata gave her a good shove with both palms.

"Up now, beast!"

The cow heaved a sigh and continued to blubber into the water. Renata pressed her ear to the Emilia's side; the heartbeat sounded normal, and no obstruction gurgled in her gut. Meanwhile, Tadeusz went from growling to excited yipping. The shadows from the barn had cut away his body. There was just his disembodied tail wagging in the dawn's light.

"Have you come for a visit, my love?" Renata asked the sky.

When she reached the barn Tadeusz spun and slipped between her legs. Renata felt for the lantern and searched the pockets on her coveralls for a match.

Something was stirring in the barn. A cat? A hare? No. Something bigger. She primed the lantern, flicked the match head with a thumbnail, and lit the mantel.

"Hello? No games now. I haven't had my tea," she said, probing the dark with the lantern's glare.

To the left her Polski Fiat, covered with a blue plastic tarp, looked untouched. The pitchforks and shovels still hung from the back wall. The milking stool and buckets, all there. The door to Emilia's stall, though, was open. The leather strap she used to keep it shut hung loose, but intact.

She stepped into the stall, lantern held high. She didn't see anything immediately, not until she lowered the light. In the corner. What was it? A man? A boy? Naked, apparently, and white. Like unpolished marble. Renata thought back to the old stone kings on their coffins in Cracow's cathedral. Anya had taken her there once. So long ago, it seemed. This thing, this creature in her milk cow's stall, looked like that, one of those kings, but only if someone had

stripped it of robe, of crown, of sword and orb, peeled it from the coffin and tossed the limp bag of a body into the corner.

Renata stepped closer and held the light above the thing's face. Its eyes popped open, sending up a fine spray of dust. A big, brilliant green, the eyes were. Electric, even. Like Christmas lights. The figure pulled itself into a seated position and squeezed tighter into the corner of the stall. Tadeusz remained behind Renata's legs and whined.

"Huh," she said. "And who might you be, and what did you do to Emilia?"

The manboy of marble blinked rapidly, sending out more dust. He mumbled something, but Renata couldn't understand it.

"I can't hear you," she said.

The manboy slithered across the stall and bowed in front her, those green eyes looking up to her. It spoke again, firing off a barrage of guttural, sometimes squeaky sounds. It wasn't Polish or Russian or Ukrainian or German or Yiddish. Probably not English or French or whatever else.

Maybe the poor thing was slow. There was a smell, now that she thought of it. She knelt to take a big whiff. What was that, underneath the hay and manure? Alcohol? Just a drunk then? But how did he end up in her barn? The nearest bar was ten kilometers away. She stood and searched the stall. No empties.

"Men...Well, you can sleep it off, but be on your way afterwards."

It was getting lighter out. She extinguished the lantern and went to check on Emilia.

"To me, Tadeusz."

The old dog made it to the barn door, where it dropped to his haunches and looked back towards the stall. Emilia still snored away. Before Renata reached her, the cow rolled over on her back and shimmied, for a moment all four feet straight in the air and shaking like flag poles in a heavy wind before she flopped over to her other side, on impact blasting out a loud and odiferous fart.

"Oh, Jesus," Renata, stepping back.

Emilia blinked and licked her lips.

Renata looked past the cow, over the watering pond and into the shadowed trees. Something wasn't right. She felt it.

She reached down and patted Emilia.

"You're fine for now, and I need my tea."

The manboy, the creature, that thing from the cow stall, now stood shivering out in the open as Tadeusz circled him, play barking and snipping at his heels. As Renata approached he wouldn't look her in the eye. He was a small, scrawny thing, and wore no clothes, except underwear, it looked like, though he covered his crotch with his hands. He was caked in something, and was starting to crack. There was a bushy head of black hair, she could see now, and full brows.

"I'll have no drunks in my house," Renata said. "Touch your nose."

He still wouldn't look at her, not into she snapped her fingers inches from his face.

"Like this."

She stepped back and extended her left her arm to her side before slowly bringing her a fingertip to her nose, then did the same with her right. The man, the boy, the whatever, looked down at Tadeusz who panted in response.

Renata again snapped her fingers.

"He's not going to help you," she said, arching an eyebrow.

Now he did as commanded. Satisfied, Renata grabbed his arm and pulled him towards

the front door.

“A stranger in the house is like God in the house, as Grandmama used to say. We’ll see about that.”

She had a big tub, from before the war, she reckoned. It had come with the house. In the time it took to fill, she was able to get the bread in the oven, to collect the eggs and feed the chickens, to slice the cheese, the ham, the tomato and cucumber, and set the table. When was the last time she had laid out a spread for a guest? Since Father Marek? Or her neighbors Mikhail and Ludmila? She couldn’t remember. She missed it though, the company.

In the bathroom the tub was full. The manboy stood guard next to it, his hands still covering his crotch. Given the crumbs and dust left on the seat it was clear he had least used the toilet. Now, looking at him closely under the light she realized he was encased in mud and clay.

“Go on,” she said, pointing to the tub. “You’re not sitting at my table in that state.”

He looked down at the floor. Dried bits dropped from his head.

“Ridiculous,” she said, and turned around.

She waited for him to get into the tub, but not for long. As a nurse, back when she still worked, first at a hospital in Warsaw and later at a country clinic, she’d dealt with far larger, and more stubborn patients. She turned quickly, scooped him up in her arms and dropped him into the steaming bath. He squealed but didn’t resist. Renata rolled up a sleeve and thrust her hand into the scolding water, under his legs. Those big green eyes of his widened even more when she pulled off his underwear, and without looking, flung them over her shoulder; they splatted right in the center of the hand sink.

“I’ll find you some clothes,” she said, handing him a rough sponge.

She thought for a moment, for what might fit the manboy. She had some old coveralls an itinerant worker had left behind. They’d been patched in multiple places and the front zipper was broken, but they were clean. There were work shirts, too. Even some underwear of her own, from back when lady things weren’t so easy to buy in Poland. She sat at the table and sipped her tea. She didn’t hear much splashing.

“I have things to do,” she shouted. Though she really didn’t.

After a couple minutes she barged back into the bathroom. Her guest had made some headway, but now he was just splotchy.

“Ridiculous.” She knelt and grabbed the sponge. He squirmed and grunted as she scraped at his back and shoulders. That done, she pulled him back by the hair and went to work on the front, first his chest and arms. Now she could see he was actually quite hairy. Older than she had reckoned. She rubbed more soap into the sponge and did his legs and thighs. He squirmed less, became even too quiet. Renata, her face just centimeters away, looked down.

There was his *ptak*, unsheathed and pink, poking eel-like out of the mucky water.

She stopped then. And remembered.

How many years ago? She was so young... Anya had brought a man home, to their apartment in Warsaw. A man. Renata locked herself in the bathroom and cried and cried while Anya and the man drank vodka in the kitchen. So stupid, really. Anya wanted a child. So did Renata. This was the only way. But still. A man in their bed?

Soon Anya and the man left the kitchen and shuffled towards the bedroom. Renata snuck out of the bathroom and pressed her ear to the bedroom door. She heard mumbling and murmuring and the unzipping of clothes and then a chuckle, and a laugh, and at last Anya, that

sweet woman, began cackling hysterically.

Through the door she heard the man tumble to the floor and she hurried away to the kitchen and pretended to read the back of the vodka bottle. With Anya's laughter echoing behind him the man, red-faced and fuming, stumbled through the flat, out the front door and down the dark stairwell, never to be seen again.

So there were no children.

Renata sighed.

The manboy-she'd have to find out his name-was still in the bath, and there, still, was his *ptak*. She flicked the tip with her finger. Hard. He yelped and flipped to his side, looking back at her with wounded eyes.

"It's okay," she said quietly. She grew gentle then. She squeezed some shampoo onto his head and lathered it into his thick hair. She cooed as she massaged his scalp. This seemed to calm him. It took some time to get all the grit from his head, but eventually it was done. She handed him her thickest towel, pointed to the clothes, and went to the kitchen to scramble the eggs with fresh chives and a dash of cream.

At first he stood nervously in the doorway. He did look silly, Renata admitted. The coveralls were too big for him; he had to roll up the legs just to walk. Eventually, though, when it was clear the spread on the table was for him, he sat and started shoveling it in.

"Slowly!" Renata said, touching his hand. "You'll get sick."

He just kept eating, which made her happy despite herself. He wouldn't touch the ham, though, even after she nudged the plate toward him.

"Ham is good," she said. She speared a slice and tried to put it on his plate but he stopped it with his hand.

He was dark, darker than most Slavs. Jewish? No. She'd seen him. All of him. Maybe Tarter.

"Renata," she said, touching her chest. "Re-na-ta." She then pointed to him. "You?"

He'd just chugged half a glass a milk and now had a white mustache and some drops on the tip of his nose.

"Ah," he said. "Fattah. Fat-tah."

He piled more cucumber and cheese on a slice of still warm bread and stuffed it into his mouth.

Fattah, Renata thought. Fattah?

She left him to his food and skipped to the main room. Even though there was a television in there, it was more of a library, with cases overflowing with journals, magazines and books, especially novels, including the westerns Anya loved so, every Louis L'Amour and Zane Grey she could find in translation, as well as all the Russian and Polish classics. Above the cases hung framed collections of some of the awards and accolades, including the Cross of the Brave, and other ribbons and testimonials Anya had received from the Home Army and the Party and the Sejm. Framed photos, too. Even some from the war of Anya and Renata, both in jerry-rigged uniforms, snapped and developed, somehow, someway, by the nine-year old son of a murdered wedding photographer.

While she scanned the shelves for the atlas, Fattah had sidled up to her so quietly her heart leapt.

"You're a sneaky little bugger, aren't you?"

He still had some bread with him and chewed while he looked at the photos on the desk. There was Anya with President Walesa, and another of both Anya and Renata with Pope John Paul II. Even one with General Jarulzelski on the eve of Martial Law.

The largest, though, was the last taken of Anya. She was bare-chested, but the angry scar where was once her left breast was hidden by the stock of the old Gewehr 24 liberated from the first Hitlerite she had garroted. For the picture she had removed the sun hat from her bald head, and even though her face had lost all its roundness she still struck Renata as the Amazonian who clawed her way through the war, and later, up through the ranks of the male-dominated political ranks of Poland.

She took up the framed photo and held it to her chest.

"We argued that day," she said. "She didn't want to go back to the hospital. 'But maybe this time it'll take, I said.'"

She knew Fattah didn't understand, but she kept talking, and he looked at her with those bright green eyes as if he actually could.

"Who could blame her? Every time she came back from Warsaw there was less of her. First her muscles, then her hair, then one breast."

She placed the picture back carefully on the desk, wiping away a bit of dust from the brass frame. There, right above the typewriter, nestled the atlas.

"Ridiculous. I was looking right at it."

She pulled it out. It wasn't more than ten years old, but still out of date. In it Germany was two countries, Czechoslovakia just one. On the page for Poland she found where they were: south of Bialystok, a stone's throw from the River Bug, the border with Belarus.

"Renata, here," she said. "Fattah? Poland?"

He shook his head. She turned to the page encompassing all of Eastern Europe. Still he shook his head. He spun the book, flipped a few pages and pointed.

"Afghanistan?" Renata asked.

Fattah put his hand on his heart and sighed.

"Huh," she said.

Fattah finished off his bread.

Outside, there was a commotion.

"For heaven's sake! Emilia!"

On her way out she tripped over Tadeusz, who had dragged his empty food bowl into the hallway and dropped his head into it.

"My word!" Renata said. She filled the bowl with kibble and out of guilt covered the mound with the ham her visitor refused. What a day, she thought, what a day.

Outside, the milk cow had managed to get to her feet and slowly lumbered back to the barn. The sun arched above the tree line. Now Renata could see the far edge of the watering pond clearly. The level had risen over night. Really? A small channel had opened on the edge nearest the woods and water sluiced through it. Now she noticed the pond's shore had inched closer to the house. What? Had Emilia misjudged the edge? Slipped?

Only occasionally, after the heaviest sustained rain, had this happened. It hadn't rained in nearly a week. How was this possible?

"Fattah?"

He had followed her outside, he thought, but now he was nowhere to be seen.

"Men," she mumbled.

On the far side of the pond, at the base of a large ash tree a large puddle had formed. But now, no more water seemed to be leaking from the pond.

"I'm losing my mind, I am..."

Fattah must have something to do with this, she thought. My pond. Emilia. She'd find out, she would. She hoofed it back up to the yard in time to see a large air bubble form in the

middle of the pond. It stretched above the surface—a good foot at least—before collapsing, sending a small wave back over the edge and into the woods.

“Fattah!”

Nothing.

She poked her head in the house and called but got no answer. Then she heard the unmistakable sound of milk spraying into a bucket. In the barn there was Fattah, happily squatted under Emilia, expertly draining her udder. Her cow looked at her and mooed softly, apparently not at all alarmed by this strange man’s hands on her.

“Well, now.”

Time to take stock. Her cow had tipped over for no apparent reason. A strange man, from Afghanistan, of all places, appeared out of nowhere, like he was dropped from the sky. No angel wings, though. Nor car, clothes, or identification. Maybe he swam across the river? But what was he doing in Belarus? Her watering pond had grown in volume, and if that air bubble was any indication, something was feeding it from underground. All these things must be connected, though she couldn’t figure out how. Phone calls could be placed. To the police.

Or to certain numbers in Warsaw.

Someone would come and take him away, and she could go about her day. There were things to do, surely. Perhaps a rummage at the Russian market in Bialystok. Or a film at the theater.

The funeral had been 741 days ago. Renata had yet to go back to work at the clinic. Anya tried to make her promise she would. After. Renata reasoned if she couldn’t care for the love of her life, couldn’t stop what was happening, what good was she to anyone else?

Instead, she became a master at puttering away the hours of the day.

Yes, she could make a call, and someone would take Fattah away and she could get back to...things.

“Emilia doesn’t seem to mind you,” she called out.

Milk he certainly could, but Fattah somehow managed to dump the entire bucket. No matter. There was plenty in the refrigerator. Likely perturbed by his clumsiness, he next attacked the weeds in the vegetable garden. He quickly found other chores as well, like changing the hay in the cow stall, strengthening the patch in the chicken coop, and clambering up to the roof of the house to clear the gutters.

It was nice, Renata had to admit. She wasn’t always on top of things. Sometimes she forgot to collect the eggs, and the fall after the funeral she let the vegetables rot in the fields and the apples and pears drop, brown and shrunken, to the early snow. The farm had been more of a pastoral fantasy, even before Anya died. They’d bought it as a weekend getaway in ’84, a dacha where they could grow fresh produce. Only after Anya left the Sejm did they sell the apartment in Warsaw to live here permanently. This was the place they were to grow old together. Even though they bought Emilia and a dozen chickens, they needn’t depend on the farm financially. After the war Anya, just five years her senior, had officially adopted Renata. And now, even after Anya’s death, monthly deposits were made to her bank account, more than what the official state pension could account for. On her death bed Anya had assured her she would be taken care of.

“Don’t worry about it, Little Mole,” she whispered, touching Renata’s cheek with fingers light asher voice. “Haven’t I always protected you?”

Fattah hammered at something outside. Renata looked down at the phone and absently scratched the back of her neck. No, she wouldn’t call the police, or Warsaw, at least not yet. There was the Afghan embassy. They’d have a dictionary, at least.

But. What if. What if Fattah was in some kind of fugitive? Would they be looking for him? Afghanistan had become a lawless place, she'd read, after the Soviets left with tails between their legs. Why didn't she let Anya buy them that computer? There was something called the World Wide Web, she heard. You could find things.

Renata shrugged. Give it a few days. Maybe he'd be gone by then, as quickly and silently as he arrived. That prospect saddened her for some reason. Just in case, though, she lifted the top of the convertible couch in the library and rummaged through the bedding and pillows stored there. They were clean, but the wind would blow some freshness into them. Outside she set the feather pillow under a sun beam and pinned the sheets to the line. Back inside she scrubbed the dried gunk from Fattah's underwear before dropping them into the washer. Soon it would be lunch time. What besides pork would a Muslim not eat? Potato cutlet would be safe. Eventually she'd have to do some shopping, but for now there was plenty. The house came with its own "Priest Hole," as the English call them, though during the war the family who owned the farm hid partisans in there, or maybe Jews. Both Germans and Russians had requisitioned the building, which is how it had remained intact so close to areas of battle. It was rumored in the surrounding areas that when a Polish family once again took over the farm in 1946, they found two skeletons down there: one of an adult, one of a child, their intertwined bones swaddled in rotted clothing. Supposedly, they'd silently starved to death waiting for the Germans and/or the Russians to leave the premises.

Renata accessed the Priest Hole by pushing a button hidden on the floor beneath the base of a lamp. A bookcase slid behind the couch, and steep stairs led down into what was essentially a concrete bunker. These days Renata used it mainly for a root cellar, though Anya had provisioned it years earlier with water, canned goods, cots and blankets, even a two-way radio "in case the Americans invade." A wall locker held Anya's Gewehr, Renata's Karabinek, three hand guns, including a Luger, and ammunition for all, as well as various blades. Whether out of habit or buried worry, the women had kept the weapons clean and oiled.

She slipped the Luger from its peg.

"Ridiculous."

Still, she didn't put it back. She couldn't explain why. Other than Fattah's appearance wasn't, well, normal. She slipped the case from the handle and filled it with 9 mm bullets. She dropped the gun into the pouch in front of her coveralls, on her way upstairs taking a packet of dried mushrooms and a jar of green beans.

In the bedroom she could hear Fattah clambering on the roof. A broken tree limb with a smattering of dead leaves sailed past the window. Renata slid the luger under Anya's pillow, then went to the kitchen to soak the mushrooms.

...

Fattah devoured everything Renata set in front of him: the chicken soup, buttered bread, the potato cutlets with mushroom sauce, the leek salad, and two large glasses of raspberry compote. Even half of a packaged German loaf cake. After, eyes droopy, he smoothed his napkin and penciled what she assumed was his family. Stick figured wife, two girls, and what might've been three cats. Renata laughed. And then teared up.

As it turned out, Fattah did seem to understand some Russian. A few words here and there, so she switched from Polish and told her guest about the first real happy day of her life, even though he probably couldn't follow it completely.

It was right after the Hitlerites left Warsaw, making their way back through the wasteland they had created, to their last stand in Berlin, just before the Russians crossed from the

eastern banks of the Vistula. Someone had miraculously found a working projector and an American film, a Charlie Chaplan one, and Anya and Renata and a smattering of other survivors of the Uprising, those fortunate enough to evade capture, including children and the elderly, bodies diminished from hunger and disease, crouched in a theater, roof ripped from the walls, and watched it, over and over again, their high-pitched laughter bouncing off the smoldering ruins of their beloved city. Even after the stars began to disappear in the morning light, they rewound it and rewatched until not one drop of gasoline remained in the generator.

The crowd broke up then to scrounge for breakfast. Near what remained of Saxon Garden Renata spotted a scrawny cat mewling in a bomb crater. Anya pounced, grabbed it by the neck and shattered its temple with the butt-end of her bayonet. Skinning that cat Anya started laughing again as she recounted Chaplan eating his shoe. With the cat spitted and roasting over a coal fire, she finally stopped, if only to eat. They sat elbow to elbow in the bowels of the crater, ripping at the stringy meat and sucking on the bones. After slurping from a shallow puddle they flipped onto their backs and looked up at the promising blue sky.

“So what did you think of breakfast?” Anya asked.

“Tasted like a shoe.”

That only got her going again, and Renata started in as well. For who knows how long they laughed until Anya hiccupped.

“You brat,” she said. “I pissed myself!” She grabbed Renata by the neck and pressed her greasy lips to hers.

The first kiss. Just fourteen years old, Renata knew then that this woman, this savior, who pulled her from the rubble of her family’s apartment block, would be so much, much more than the mother figure she had clung to for five years.

Oh how her mind wandered these days. Only into the past, though. No longer about what could be. Just memories unspooling like an old broken film.

Fattah was asleep. Upright in his chair. Renata gently shook him awake and led him to the library, where she stripped him of coveralls and tucked him into bed. He began to snore even before she could close the curtains against the mid-afternoon sun.

. . .

The next morning Tadeusz licked her awake. He only did that when she overslept. Sure enough the sun was already up.

“Day 742,” she said, wiping sleep dust from her eyelids.

“Oh, right. Fattah. Slept right through dinner, he did. Must be starving.”

The table, however, was already set for her. He’d even managed to make a type of flat bread. She looked out the window above the sink. Her houseguest was out there scything the tall grass. She knocked on the window. When he looked up she waved and smiled.

The bread was delicious. She’d have to ask him how to make it. After she finished she poured milk into a pot and squeezed three lemons into it. Once the milk curdled she’d wrap it in cheese cloth and hang it from the faucet to drain; the soft cheese would be excellent on Fattah’s bread. Maybe some honey on top.

As she bathed she thought of driving into Bialystok. The new German supermarket there might have lamb chops. That would take all morning, though, and she wasn’t sure if Fattah would be comfortable going with her, or staying behind for so long. Instead, she packed up some snares and a catch pole.

He was still cutting the grass—she hadn’t done it in over a year.

“I go down there,” she said, gesturing beyond the vegetable garden.

He mouthed something and pointed to himself.

She shook her head. "No, I go. Ducks." She showed him the catch pole. "Quack, quack!" She pointed to him with one hand, and then held up a palm. "You stay. I won't be long."

He looked first beyond the garden, and then back in the opposite direction, towards the long road that ended at her house.

Was he nervous, she wondered? Did he plan on leaving?

"You come then," she said, waving him forward.

He smiled, but shook his head and started back on the grass, whistling that tune again.

Tadeusz followed her, though sometimes she had to stop and wait for him to catch up.

The duck pond was a good fifteen minutes' walk, around a dense grove of trees that thrust into her fields. Sure enough four ducks splashed happily in the water. Before she looped one, she set the snares; wild hare often watered here. Fattah might like the terrine she made with them; Anya certainly did. She found some late season black raspberries, too. She filled a plastic shopping bag with them, then looped a duck before heading back. Again she often had to wait on Tadeusz, but she was in too good a mood to be cross with him; he couldn't help it, the old thing.

They eventually rounded the grove. Fattah was no longer working on the grass, but he had left the scythe. Renata stopped. Though the duck had been calm up to this point, it started to thrash in the bag. Tadeusz whimpered.

"Ssssh."

She took a few more steps, just until she could see around the corner of the house, between the barn and chicken coop. An unfamiliar vehicle was there. A white one. Only the front was visible, since the barn blocked the back end. Might be a small delivery van. Maybe she had no reason to think the worst, that Fattah, and by extension herself, were in danger here, but she trusted her instincts. She'd survived the war, hadn't she, and not always with Anya's help. Fattah wouldn't have left a tool in the field. This is why she had loaded the Luger. Fat lot of good, though; it was still under the pillow.

She tipped the duck out of the bag and kicked it back towards the pond. Tadeusz immediately loped after it. Renata crept up to the barn. No one was in sight, but then someone coughed and smoke streamed over the vehicle. She continued behind the building and peaked around the corner. A man. In a bright baby blue track suit. He had his back to her, smoking and looking towards her house. It was a delivery van all right, with Belarussian plates. The back was open; Fattah, bound and gagged, lay inside. He had been stripped naked. Even from this distance she could see that one eye was swollen shut.

There had been so many like that in the war. Beaten and bloodied, men, boys, old women, young women, thrown into the back of trucks and kept alive just for the trip to the countryside where'd they be summarily shot and dumped into shallow ditches.

She turned and considered the catch pole. The wire loop was strong, but was it big enough to get over Track Suit's head? And quickly? She doubted it.

She'd have to improvise. She set down the catch pole and bag of raspberries and quietly turned the corner. Fattah raised his head. Renata pursed her lips and pressed them with her pointer finger.

She slowly made her way to the barn's entrance. A lightness had kicked in. She wasn't nervous, nor worried that the strange man in the track suit would turn. Just like fifty years ago, right before she drove the needle-pointed knife up under the rib cage of her first kill.

No knife this time. No matter. She reached into the barn and grabbed the first weapon at hand: a garden spade. With the back of Track Suit still facing her, she pulled down her sun hat

and stooped over. Like a walking stick she held the spade with both hands and shook them as if palsied. Shuffling now, she inched forward and cleared her throat.

Track Suit finally turned.

“Well, ah, hello, Granny!” he said in Russian.

“I see you have him,” she said.

“Ah, this?” he said, tapping cigarette ash onto Fattah’s head.

“I thought he was going to kill me,” she croaked out, still shuffling forward.

“Our little boy? We are, ah, sorry about that.”

The man now leaned back against the van, his right foot bent back and flat against the bumper.

Idiot, Renata thought. So sure of himself. It’s the scared ones you had to worry about. They’re unpredictable.

Still moving. Closer now.

“You’ll have to forgive my brother,” Track Suit said. “He’s, ahhh, using your facilities? I hope he, ah, doesn’t destroy anything? We’ll compensate you, if so. Plus whatever our little digger cost you. My brother. His bowels are always giving him problems. He fancies himself, ahhh, a vegetarian? But the man doesn’t like vegetables? So it’s all, just bread and—”

Renata slammed the spade’s blade down on the crown of his head, dropping him like a sack of turnips. What a nice sound, she thought. A good, clean thud. He’d be out for a while. She dragged him to the right of the vehicle, out of sight from the front door of her house. Fattah started squirming and struggling over the gag.

“Shhh!” Renata implored, holding up a palm. “One more?” she whispered, holding up a finger.

Fattah nodded as best he could.

She took up the spade once again and held it, blade to the ground. Like before she stooped over and pulled down the lip of the hat’s brim, not so much though that she couldn’t keep one eye on the front door.

The man who came out of her house was clearly a brother, an identical twin, most likely. He had the same square face, the same bulbous nose, the receding hairline. Even the track suit matched; his, however, was cherry red.

“Hello!” he called out. “You’ll have to forgive me for that, Grandmother. I couldn’t even flush! Our digger has cost you enough, I’m sure, and here I go, causing you more trouble. No problem. I’m good for it.”

From the front pocket of this track suit he pulled a wad of money—American dollars she thought—and flipped individual bills into the air as he walked, leaving behind a trail.

“My good brother tells me I have to cut down on the cheese, but I love it so. Camembert, Provolone, Gouda, even the Polish stuff I’ll bobble up, so I took some medicine for, well, you know, my issues. The box promised ‘easy relief,’ but I have to tell—”

Down came the spade. He dropped just as easily as his brother. What a rush!

Adrenaline still surging, Renata slipped off Fattah’s gag. He spit out a bloody tooth.

“Whore!” she shouted, taking up the spade once again. Before she could swing at Red Track Suit’s head--that big, meaty croquet ball at her feet--Fattah tumbled out of the van. His hands were tied behind his back, but still he managed to wrap his skinny body around Renata’s legs.

“No No No!” he cried in Russian, shaking his swollen head.

Renata dropped the spade.

“Ridiculous,” she said. “All right. Get off me now. I don’t know who these two characters

are, but they're not worth your bother, I assure you."

She was able to untie Fattah without the help of a knife. His clothes she found in a pile near the driver's seat in the van. While he dressed, she went to the barn. She kept a stock of livestock tranquilizer there. Fattah's one good eye grew wide when she came back with the large hypodermic.

"Don't worry," she said. "Only to sleep." She tilted her head and pretended to snore.

After pumping healthy doses into both, she rifled through their pockets. Red Track Suit had that wad of American bills. The first was a hundred, the rest all ones. Breath mints, keys. Not much else. Not even an Afghan-Russian dictionary. She found their passports in the glove compartment, as well an old Makarov. Loaded. She pocketed the gun and left the rest. She had hoped for some identification for Fattah.

Tadeusz had made his way back and was now sniffing Blue Track Suit.

"What am I to do with these lumps? Can't just leave them."

So she and Fattah rolled them up in horse blankets and bound them in packing tape.

Now what? She needed help.

Mikhail. He and Ludmila were caretakers of the park bordering Renata's property. In order to get to her house—by car, at least—you had to pass theirs. Perhaps it was no surprise then that when she went to call, her message light was blinking. While she was picking berries and setting her snares, the white delivery van had passed Mikhail as he tended his prized chrysanthemums. He thought it odd, he said in the message, this white delivery van with Belarussian plates. She called back. He agreed to come. No questions asked.

While she waited for him, Renata tended to Fattah. The swollen part of his face was already turning purple and yellow. She dabbed at it with peroxide and butterflyed the worst of the cuts. After testing his one good eye for concussion, she wrapped ice in a kitchen towel and showed how to apply it. She couldn't do much about the new gap in his teeth.

"Not too hard now," she said.

Soon, Mikhail clopped into the yard on Maria, a feisty mare who'd burst herself on Renata's pears if you let her. Guilt swept through Renata. How many winter nights had the four of them stayed up late playing Gin Rummy? Or whiled away long summer days roasting sausages over a crackling fire? She'd only had Mikhail and Ludmila over once since Anya left her. 42 days after.

"You're looking good," Renata called out from the front door.

"Honey!" Mikhail said. "Flattery will take you anywhere."

"I was talking to the horse."

"Ha!"

Mikhail was a big man, with a full, bushy beard and long hair kept black as tar with dye. He leapt from the mare and fed her a carrot from his own mouth.

"So what do we have here," he said. "Two piggies in a blanket?"

The feet of both Track Suits stuck out. White tennis shoes. Ridiculous. Mikhail gave Red Track Suit a good kick.

"Dead?"

"Not yet."

"Probably foot soldiers," Mikhail said. "More and more are coming over the border to do 'business.'"

"Yes."

"But not with you, Honey?"

"Not any business I'm interested in."

Mikhail arched an eyebrow. He could really get it up there, like an inverted checkmark.

Renata sighed. "Fattah!"

A moment later Tadeusz led him out.

"Well who's this little guy?" Mikhail asked.

Eyes on the ground, Fattah placed himself right behind Renata. She could feel his breath on her back.

"It's all right, Fattah. Mikhail is a friend." She stepped aside so Mikhail could get a look at his face, then told him the story, all the way back to her discovery of Emilia the previous morning.

"This piggie here called him a 'digger.'"

"Smuggling, then?" Mikhail asked. "Under the river?"

Renata shrugged.

Mikhail stared off into the woods.

Of course, Renata thought. A tunnel. The pond. Emilia. She drank from the pond. He probably dumped the milk on purpose, then.

"Alcohol," she said.

"What, my love?"

"Vodka, they're smuggling vodka."

"Yes, yes!" Fattah said, nodding his head, but then he moaned and pressed the ice pack against his eye. "Vodka," he whispered.

"Vodka?" Mikhail said. "Here? We bathe in the stuff! Why smuggle it in?"

Renata shrugged. "Duties? I guess they're pretty high now, right?"

"It's the new economy," Mikhail said. "What do the Americans say? Anything for a buck?"

"Ridiculous."

"You know I'd the move the sun for you, my sweet. Do you have an extra shovel?"

Why not. This was Poland. There were more people under the ground than above it. What was two more?

"Despite what they did to him, Fattah seems to care for some reason," Renata said.

"I'll take them back for you, just leave the van somewhere," Mikhail said. "I have friends in Terespol. I can cross back over by foot. No problem."

"Keep the van," Renata said.

Mikhail walked around it, nodding.

"Mercedes," he said. "Pretty new. I can get a decent price for it in Ukraine."

"You're a saint."

"Again with the flattery. I can take him, too."

"Fattah," she said, pointing to the van. "You go?"

She felt half-hearted about it. He was trouble, most certainly, but she liked having him around. She imagined something crazy, like him bringing his family from Afghanistan, even the cats, taking over the farm close by.

"Back to Belarus, maybe?" she said, gesturing, pointing. "With your friends?"

It took him a moment, but he then seemed to understand.

"No!" he shouted, shaking his head. "No!" He dropped the ice and ran back around the van. The trail of the one dollar bills flung by Red Track Suit still lay in the dirt. He snatched them up, even went after one a bit of wind picked up and blew around. It reminded Renata of Tadeusz as a young pup chasing after a butterfly.

Mikhail laughed.

Fattah came back and shoved the crumpled ball of bills into Renata's hands, then he was

on the move again, down to the pasture where he took up the scythe and wildly swung at the grass.

"Looks like you have new roommate, sweetheart." Mikhail heaved the Track Suits into the back of van. Renata pulled the tarp from her Fiat and draped it over them.

"This isn't the end," Mikhail said.

Renata nodded.

"We'll watch the road, honey, but what's coming might be more than you can handle."

"Seems likely."

Mikhail handed her Maria's reins.

"You have some pears for her?"

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Fattah had come out of the earth just north of the watering pond, not far from the old road that cut through the trees and ended at the river. Broken paving stones started at the edge of the woods, right next to an old wooden watch tower. At some point a bridge spanned the water: the pylons were still there. Renata assumed they'd dug under at this point, the shallowest the river was for some distance. On the other side, in Belarus, stood a few dilapidated service buildings. Nothing else.

"Ridiculous."

Fattah's escape hole had filled. Renata scooped up a handful, sipped then spitted. Spirit, she thought. 90%. Seemed like an incredibly stupid plan. Was there really money to be made this way? She considered Fattah. His black and blue face. What was one little Afghan to the Track Suits? Were they even paying him? She still had doubts about letting them go. Maybe she could've gotten answers from them.

She turned back to the house. Fattah and Tadeusz followed.

They had a day at least, maybe two. She first showed Fattah the Priest Hole and how to access it, doing her best to mime and explain that this was his hiding place when they came for him again, and how he could open the door from inside. He wasn't comfortable with guns—at least if how he held the semi-automatic Mauser was any indication—but she left it loaded down there for him, just in case. The Makarov she'd gotten off Track Suits would stay in her front pouch pocket. She taped the Luger and a wooden block together on the underside of the kitchen table, and sat in her chair to make sure she could unobtrusively reach for it to pull the trigger.

...

Three days after Mikhail drove the Track Suits back across the border, he called.

"They're coming," he said. "You have five minutes at most."

She hung up and called the number, the one not written down. Anya had made her memorize it and repeat it back to her nearly every day. On the other end someone picked up but said nothing. Renata said what she had to say. The other end went to a dial tone before she hung up. She didn't know what to think of that. Seemed like a good idea, though, to disconnect the answering machine.

She opened the door to the Priest Hole and ushered Fattah to the opening, but he hesitated, began shaking his head and firing off words in Afghan.

"We don't have time for this," Renata said.

He looked back at her. Tears rivered down his cheeks. Was he afraid to go down, or was he worried for her?

"Ridiculous. Tadeusz, to me."

Though old, he was a smart dog, so perhaps he sensed the urgency in her voice. He scampered to her, and didn't struggle when she plucked him up and shoved him into Fattah's arms.

"Now," she said.

After Tadeusz licked his face, Fattah nodded and backed carefully down the stairs. Renata clicked the book case shut.

She heard the car before she saw it. It was big. American. A Cadillac? Its driver was big too, even bigger than Mikhail. Well over two meters tall, and half as wide. Sunglasses. Long, dark trench coat. After parking in front of the barn, he hurried over to open the passenger door. A short, pudgy man dressed in white--from rounded hat to polished Oxfords--hopped out holding a phone. He shouted into it, punched it, and then shouted into it again. He pressed it to this ear and shook it. Cursing loudly in Russian, he pitched it out of Renata's view from the window; she heard it splash in the watering pond.

Who was that character? From that American serial about the two brothers? Boss Hogg. That's who this guy reminded her of.

She opened the front door before they could knock. The driver said nothing, just reached down into the front pouch of Renata's coveralls, pulled out the Markarov and pocketed it. She raised her arms and slowly twirled, allowing a pat down. Apparently satisfied, he stepped aside.

"Thank you so much for accommodating my guard," Boss Hogg said, taking off his hat. "He insists on the precautions, though I don't anticipate any issues. Do you?"

Renata said nothing, simply turned and led them into the kitchen where she started the kettle. As expected the boss sat at the head of the table, with his back towards the wall. Renata prepared tea and a plate of biscuits. The guard's lumbering feet creaked across the floorboards in the bedroom. The chests opened and closed, as did the bathroom door. In the library he considered the guest bed, scanned the book cases, peeked behind the curtains. The pictures and honors on the walls and on the desk made him stop. He bent over to look more closely, and then slowly pivoted his head towards the kitchen, peering over his sunglasses and squinting at Renata.

Boss Hogg took a small nibble of a chocolate-covered wafer. Apparently satisfied, he ate the rest of it, and then gobbled down the remaining ones on the plate.

"Ah Polish hospitality," he said, before draining his tea. "But on to business. You know why I'm here, correct?"

Renata remained silent. She sat in the chair opposite of him with hands in her lap. The Luger was inches away, still taped under the table. A quick belly shot. No problem. But the guard was another issue. Securing the gun with tape was, perhaps, not the best idea. Sure she could turn the gun, but, with the guard standing beside the boss only his legs could be targeted; she could easily miss.

"You have some things of mine," Boss Hogg said. "I want them back."

Still she said not a word. He didn't seem to notice.

"Ah, I should've mentioned earlier. My boys. Not the brightest. Tweedle-Dee and Tweedle-Dum, I call them. They don't know the allusion. Not big readers. They got their brains from their mother. Also their looks, God help them. But hey, they're family. What can you do? You spared them. I appreciate that. If killing you becomes necessary, I promise you it will be quick."

She didn't even flinch.

The guard bent down and whispered to his boss.

"Where's the woman?" Boss asked. "The one in the pictures?"

"Gone." And just as well, she thought. If she were still here, Dee and Dum would be dead, as would these two. Bullets between the eyes before their car even stopped. Oh, Anya, why did I let it get this far?

"My condolences. I'll assume she was your sister. Let's move on. Just produce the van and our boy and we'll be on our way."

Silence still.

"As much as I've appreciated your hospitality, I'm a busy man. Honorable, too, though I have my limits. Your death will be quick. I promised you that. But what comes before, well..."

Far better people than her have lived far shorter lives. To be reunited with Anya. What kind of threat is death? But there was Fattah. Could she just leave him to his fate? She thought of the legend of the two skeletons found in the Priest Hole.

"Have you ever seen that film 'Alien?'" Boss Hogg said. "I love it. I even have a poster in my office. 'In space no one can hear you scream,' it says. Your place is so quiet, so secluded. Just one road in. Just like space."

Her right hand felt itchy. She rubbed her thumb against her trigger finger.

"Let's start with a finger," Boss Hog said.

"Uh, Boss, maybe we should..."

"Maybe? Maybe I shove a 3 iron up your ass. Do what you're told!"

The guard rolled his lips and stepped towards Renata. She lifted her right hand just enough to embrace the Luger. 744 days since I've seen you, she thought. Maybe that's long enough.

"So unnecessary," Boss Hog said. "I don't like blood. But business is business."

The guard thumbed open a switch blade. She lifted her right hand and embraced the Luger.

Renata looked up at the guard. A drop of sweat was ready to drip from his nose. The hand holding the knife. Was it shaking?

She pivoted her right hand, Luger still hidden but now aimed at his thigh. His eyes widened, then narrowed. He knew. The knife no longer shook. His free hand reached for her.

Then, the phone rang. All three of them momentarily froze. The ring was jarring, louder than she'd ever heard it. Or at least it seemed that way. The guard waited for the boss.

"No answering machine?" Boss Hog asked. "Who doesn't have an answering machine?"

He nodded towards the library. The guard went, knife still open.

"Don't cut the cord. We might need it."

The guard lifted the receiver and immediately dropped it back onto the cradle.

"Now where were we?"

Or was it 745 days? The closing of the coffin. The earth opening its maw. Why couldn't she remember? Since Fattah. The days have just blended together.

Before the guard made it back to the table, the phone started to ring once again.

"This is insufferable," Boss Hogg said. "You may answer your phone but one wrong word and I might have to rethink the whole 'quick death deal.'"

Renata remained seated. The phone continued to ring.

"Let's be reasonable. Answer the phone, and politely say you'll call back."

Renata shook her head. "It's for you."

"For me? She's a comedian, this one. A real Lucille Ball." He winked at his guard. "Go ahead and tell this very rude person who insists on interrupting my business that the lady of the house is indisposed."

The guard plodded back to the library, picked up the phone and listened. He took off the sunglasses and wiped his brow with a sleeve.

“Uh, Boss?”

“Now what? Need I remind you that the 3 iron is in the trunk?”

“I think you should take this,” the guard said.

Boss Hogg threw his hands up in the air. “Just goes to show that when you want a job done right...” He huffed and puffed to the library and tore the phone from his guard’s hand.

“What!” he shouted into the receiver.

He said nothing more, just listened for some minutes, his free hand reaching up and smoothing back what hair remained on his head. Sweat had seeped into the pit of his suit jacket.

Renata reached under the table and peeled away the Luger. She could’ve easily plugged both goons then, but now there was no reason to.

She heard Anya: *Didn’t I say I’d take always take care of you, little Mole? I’m sorry if I doubted you.*

The tape had left some sticky stuff on the chamber. She picked at it with her thumbnail.

Boss Hogg carefully replaced the receiver back on the cradle. As his guard had done earlier, he did a double-take when finally seeing the pictures on the wall. He opened his mouth and rubbed his jaw.

“You have, ah, some interesting friends,” he said.

Renata blew on the Luger and wiped away the condensation with a napkin.

“You won’t need that...”

“I know,” Renata said.

The two men started to leave. Before they reached the front door, Renata called out:

“Afghanistan is far away. And plane tickets these days are pricy, or so I’m told. I’ve never actually been on a plane.”

The two came back. Renata placed the Luger on the table.

“That place is a dump,” Boss Hog said.

“So maybe his wife wants to leave,” Renata said.

Boss Hogg nodded to his guard, who began fingering out German Marks. After stacking up a healthy pile of 100 Mark notes on the table, Boss Hogg raised his hand.

“He has two daughters,” Renata said.

Boss Hogg sighed. His guard added more, and once the Marks were gone, he reached into another pocket for American Dollars and started another pile.

“That’s more than enough,” Boss Hogg said.

“And three cats,” Renata said.

“You’re killing me. This is murder, pure and simple.” Still, he flipped his fingers like he was brushing away a pesky fly. His guard dropped the rest of the hundred dollar bills on the table.

“So much for one little digger,” Boss Hogg said. “Please give me a chance to earn some of it back. This new economy isn’t easy. I’ll fix the tunnel, send in my bottlers. Set up in the woods. You’ll never know they’re here. We’ll split the profits...”

“If that phone rings again you won’t make it back across the border.”

“Okay, okay,” he said, he plopped his hat back on his head and thumbed the brim.

“There’s always Lithuania.”

He left then, cursing under his breath. His guard hesitated for a moment. Once his boss was through the front door, he turned and dipped into his pocket. Renata reached for the Luger. The man smiled, though.

“This might be useful.” He placed a tattered Russian-Afghan dictionary on the table, and

on top of that the Markarov. Bowing slightly he said, "My father had a Luger like that. From the war. Probably got his the same way as you."

She nodded and followed him outside. Up at the rise Mikhail sat on Maria. The Cadillac sped past and enveloped them with dust. Once it cleared Renata waved. Suddenly Fattah was at her elbow and Tadeusz at her heels.

"Such a sneaky little guy," she said.

There was so much to do now: first dinner, and then phone calls. Passports. Visas. They'd have to drain the pond and destroy the tunnel. And the clinic. Yes. Perhaps she should check in.

"Just a little longer," she said to the sky. "And then we'll have all of eternity."

Growing Up on the Edge of War

Daria Sommers

It was 1963 when Vietnam first tattooed itself into my memory. I was six years old. My siblings and I were seated on the living room sofa in our suburban New Jersey ranch house when my father, staring down at us, announced he was done being a town manager and had taken a job with the State Department. We're moving to Saigon, he said. The capital of a country called Vietnam. He explained his new job at length. Not much registered except that we had to get lots of shots and Vietnam was as an underdeveloped country that needed America's help. "What's underdeveloped?" I asked.

"They don't have the modern conveniences we have," my father responded.

"What about bathtubs? Do they have bathtubs? Will I be able to take bubble baths?"

"Don't worry," my mother placated. "It will all work out."

That was her answer to everything.

Whether it was the influence of *National Geographic Magazine* pictures or wacky Saturday morning cartoons, I'll never know, but my wee brain concluded with precocious certainty that bathtubs in an 'underdeveloped' country must be made of mud. The image I conjured is as crisp today as it was back then. A reddish brown tub, dusty to the touch but remarkably solid. I don't recall being upset about leaving New Jersey but the question of whether Vietnam's mud bathtubs would turn my Mr. Bubble bubble bath brown or leave it white and fluffy troubled me endlessly.

Two months later, across the Pacific, my concerns evaporated. Our new house, a mansion compared to our New Jersey home, had six bedrooms, five bathrooms (four with shiny new ceramic bathtubs), a twenty-foot stocked fishpond, an outdoor aviary, extensive servants' quarters, a spacious yard, and a large swimming pool shared with our landlord.

It just wasn't in Saigon. A last minute change of plan sent my father to Bangkok, Thailand. Another 'underdeveloped' country near Vietnam that also needed America's help. That's how my father described it. The switch didn't seem to upset him. His nonchalance made me think the two countries were interchangeable.

Years later, I learned about the tragic event that precipitated my father's reassignment. I was fifteen and had begun to glimpse the bigger picture. How America's presence in Thailand was feeding the war effort in Vietnam. How the policies that enabled my fantastical childhood were responsible for inflicting brutal devastation on a country for reasons that, in 1972, no one even bothered to pretend were true. But in 1963, that future wasn't on anyone's radar and would have been, in any case, well beyond my six-year-old grasp.

My early years in Bangkok were wonderous in their extremes. Despite the heat and language barrier, life was all-consuming. Each day opened up new dimensions of experience. In the cool of morning's first light, monks stopped by for food. Water buffalo sometimes followed. The soft knocking of their wooden cowbells made for the kindest wakeup call. At Ruam Rudee, the Catholic Missionary school I attended, my new friends were from around the world: Japan, Pakistan, Egypt, Taiwan, Italy, Switzerland.

One of my teachers was Sister Elizabeth, a French nun whose white habit hid all but her ancient, sweating face. Another teacher, Mrs. Mohan from Sri Lanka, mesmerized me with her colorful saris.

After school, I took ballet, horseback riding and piano lessons. My mother had a dressmaker create clothes to our specifications. Anything I wanted. I learned to swim and play

tennis at the Royal Bangkok Sports Club. We attended Sunday Mass in a Church that looked like a Buddhist temple. Afterwards, my parents packed us into our giant Plymouth station wagon to visit actual Buddhist temples.

During monsoon season, fish swam through our flooded kitchen. In the dry season, I stayed off the grass because of pit vipers. After getting attacked by a swarm of red ants, I stayed away from bushes too. Once, walking home from a friend's house, I froze. A long, thick snake I thought was a cobra was slowly slinking across the road. I was more fascinated than scared.

Snakes were a fact of life. On holidays, my father invited the local snake charmer, an Indian man with a beaming, nicotine-soaked smile, to stop by. When he played his flute two, sometimes three, cobras rose up from wicker baskets. With their hoods open they swayed to his eerie music.

I often accompanied my mother on her visits to Bangkok's numerous markets. She liked the lesser-known places where few *farangs* (foreigners) ventured. The finds were better, so were the prices. At the *Woeng Nakhon Khasem*, popularly known as the "Thieves Market," the stares directed our way were unpleasant reminders that as much as I loved living in Thailand and had begun to think of it as home, I was and would always be an outsider.

In 1965, my world changed. Overnight, our neighborhood filled with so many American families that trick or treating on Halloween became worthwhile.

Many were transplants from Saigon which was no longer safe for dependents. The others had fathers who worked for the US Mission, USAID, CIA, the military or as contract workers. The number of U.S. military personnel around town multiplied. So did the nightclubs, massage parlors and bargirls catering to American servicemen. Hotels welcoming GIs on R&R from Vietnam mushroomed in tandem: *The Prince. The Florida. The Swan. The Honey. The Grace.* The list went on.

In a city dense with aromas, even I caught whiff of the darkness these changes signaled.

By 1966, adults talked more openly of the fighting in Vietnam. My father made a number of trips there. When I asked him about it, he didn't mince words.

"It's more than a conflict," he said. "American soldiers are fighting to stop the Communist North Vietnamese from taking over South Vietnam. It's a war I think we can win. Even Thailand is under threat. I've got projects in the Northeast meant to counter the Pathet Lao insurgency along the Laotian border."

At ten, I'd learned to listen. My father's words were Gospel.

Emboldened by his fervor, I wanted to meet those fighting this war.

On Saturdays, I slipped away (easy to do since I was now one of six kids) and rode my bike to nearby R&R hotels. Standing at the entrance, I asked random GIs to buy me a hamburger. Most laughed at the sight of me. But a few times, big brother types, indulged me.

Danny and Coop are the guys I remember. They were returning from a sightseeing tour when I accosted them. The food was good, our conversation light and teasing.

Where are you from? No, you go first.

What is Arkansas like?

Do your parents know where you are?

Yes, we go trick or treating here. Last year I dressed up as a clown.

A clown? You like living in Bangkok?

They refused to believe me when I said I never wanted to leave. They must have found me amusing because they ordered another round of French fries. But curiosity inevitably trampled my good sense, and I pointedly asked Danny, who'd mentioned being in the jungles, if he'd ever killed anyone.

The table went silent. The mood changed. Coop put his arm around the back of my chair, leaned in close, sighed, and in a church whisper said, "That's not a question you should ask. Ever."

I put down my half-eaten hamburger and stared at it in shame.

I had my answer, and it felt horrible.

In 1969, my father's tour in Thailand ended. I was almost thirteen and heartbroken. Wherever we ended up next, it would never compare. Plus, I hated the idea of starting over.

After a few months in the States, the posting my father wanted, Rio de Janeiro, was denied. Another last minute change. The Saigon desk wanted him for the Civil Operations and Rural Support (CORDS) program, a joint military-civilian effort to get rural populations to support the South Vietnamese government. "Pacify the peasants" was the idea. Because of the war, my father's orders were non-negotiable. Vietnam or resign. As a civil servant with six children, he accepted the assignment.

That's how, in 1972, at the age of 15, I ended up in Saigon.

My mom and us kids occupied another palatial house in Bangkok while my father took an apartment in Saigon's Red Light district. We looked forward to his monthly visits with Christmas-level excitement. His high-energy presence was the glue that held our divided world together. When 'safe weekends' were declared, my mom was only too happy to ship one or two of us off to him.

By now, I'd read all about the anti-war movement. A poster on my wall said, 'Make Love, Not War.' I wore a string of rawhide around my forehead, covered my arms in Indian bangles and lined my eyelids with kohl. On the one hand, I was against the war. On the other, I believed in my father. Working with rural populations was his strength. If anyone could make a positive difference, it was him. He'd never doubted himself, so why should I? I didn't see my position as a contradiction. It was how I made sense of my world.

There were only three passengers on my Saturday morning Air Vietnam flight to Saigon. During our descent into Tan Son Nhut Airbase, I counted bomb craters. Taxiing up to the terminal, I scanned planes, helicopters, sandbags, barbed wire, and enormous guns hanging from shoulders of stern-faced soldiers. The charged atmosphere put me on edge.

The sight of my father just outside the terminal – smiling, waving, happy to see me – calmed me. He whisked me through security, and we were off. Brunch at the Continental Palace Hotel was followed by a drive into the countryside to tour an old lacquer factory. Somehow my father knew the owner. After watching the artisans at work, we were served refreshments and the owner gifted me a wine and gold colored jewelry box. Aside from the candied gasoline smell, it was all weirdly normal.

On the drive back, we passed two dead bodies on the road. Young Vietnamese. They looked like boys. Neither of us said anything.

Before dinner at House of the Seven Beefs, we had drinks on my father's balcony. I tried to keep my eye-rolling to a minimum while he subjected me to yet another round of questions about school, grades, and my piano lessons.

Then he went quiet.

In the distance, smoky black plumes from dropped bombs curled up into the early evening sky.

"How's it all going?" I asked. He swirled the ice cubes in his scotch glass before emptying it. Minutes passed. His expression twisted into discord. I could feel him sinking.

"Dad? Dad?"

"I don't know if you remember," he said in a monotone so subdued I had to move my chair closer to his, "but we almost came here in '63. An old friend was an early advisor here. Great guy. Brilliant, too. He convinced me to join USAID and come work for him. At the time, it all seemed possible. A month or so before we were to arrive, he and his interpreter met with a village headman to discuss aid projects. Turned out to be a VC set-up. They were both killed."

The moment turned suddenly fragile. An old injury resurrected into a fresh wound. "That's so sad," I murmured.

"It's more than sad," my father added bitterly, shaking his head. "It's a waste. This whole thing," he continued, swatting his hand against the dirty pink sky, "is nothing but a senseless, tragic waste. We shouldn't be here. We never should have come."

We sat there until sunset. He with his anguish, me with mine.

In the fall of 1975, five months after the Fall of Saigon, I started college. My father was stationed in the Philippines with my mom and younger siblings in tow.

Where are you from? became a question I hated.

At first, I answered truthfully, even explaining my father's work. My eagerness to defend his honest desire to improve lives was naïve. I didn't anticipate the backlash. More often than not, someone saw fit to condemn my father and by extension me.

USAID was part of an immoral war.

American advisors were fat cats living large.

Nice that you had such a great time while so many people died.

I understood where they were coming from. I recognized the truth behind their words. But silently I raged at how easily they denounced me and my family when they knew nothing about us. I started telling everyone I was from New Jersey, sharing the truth with only my closest friends. Even then, I was selective about what I said. By the time graduation came, I'd become expert at circumventing certain facts of my childhood and sometimes my whole background. So much of what made me who I am was hidden away like contraband.

The evening I spent with my father on his Saigon balcony, sequestered in the folds of my memory for so long, burst back into my consciousness in the spring of 2008 through a chain of events I could never have predicted.

After graduating college, I'd gone on to become a writer and filmmaker and by the 1990s, I was living in New York.

I was there on 9/11 when the Twin Towers fell. I wanted nothing more than to bring those behind it to justice.

But then, in the spring of 2003, like many Americans, especially those who'd lived through some version of the war in Vietnam, I found the invasion of Iraq more than unsettling.

So did my father. We followed the developments in Iraq obsessively. The threat of a

Vietnam-style quagmire shadowed our endless discussions. When I told him I was considering making a film about a group of Army women who were serving in combat in Iraq without formal recognition and in defiance of DoD policy, he couldn't have been more supportive. As my filmmaking colleague and I navigated the uphill battle of funding and permissions to make it happen, my father's belief in our efforts was unflinching.

Lioness, our feature documentary, received its US premiere at the 2008 Full Frame Documentary Festival in Durham, North Carolina. The film focused on five women – Army support soldiers – who were attached to an all-male Marine combat unit to defuse tensions with Iraqi women and children during house to house searches.

In 2004, with the rise of the insurgency, these women, without the proper training, ended up fighting in some of the bloodiest battles of the Iraq war. Left out of the media's accounts, they returned home to a society that was both ignorant of the role they played and ill-equipped to give them the healthcare benefits and support they needed. While the film didn't take a position on the Iraq war, it did reveal the disconnect between the boots-on-the-ground reality in Iraq and the public's perception back home.

I was buoyed by the film's reception in the media and the big crowd at our Full Frame screening. But mostly I was thrilled that the *Lioness* women's stories were finally receiving public acknowledgement.

After a lively Q&A, a woman came up and took my hand. Her face red with emotion, her eyes teary, she thanked me for making the film. She explained that she had been an Army nurse in Vietnam assigned to a field hospital. Like the *Lioness* soldiers, she'd felt invisible when she returned home.

As she detailed her experience – a year of near daily trauma, working to save young men with mangled bodies and wounded psyches – her anguish was palpable. The film's recognition of the *Lioness* women, she said, made her feel seen. I clasped her hands with both of mine. My voice cracked when I thanked her for her kind words.

That night I couldn't sleep. Meeting that nurse, listening to her story, provoked something in me. My thoughts shuffled back and forth like a deck of cards, returning me to that evening with my father in Saigon, to his anguish, to the sting of accusations at college, to that hidden part of me. Decades later, the hurt was still there, the guilt too.

I replayed my answer to an audience member's question of why I made this film. *To make sure the Lioness soldiers' stories were heard*. True but on a deeper, personal level, making this film offered me a degree of catharsis, soothing my inability to reckon directly with my own story.

After its national broadcast on PBS in 2009, *Lioness* screenings continued at women veterans' events, military healthcare conferences, VFW posts, VA hospitals, veteran community centers, and educational centers around the country. Special screenings were also held on Capitol Hill and at DoD. The film served as an alarm bell for much-needed changes to healthcare services for women veterans returning from Iraq and Afghanistan. This effort was spearheaded, in large part, by a network of women Vietnam veterans, most of them nurses, who, during the 1980s and 1990s, began the fight for gender equity in the veterans' community at large and at the VA in particular.

I attended most of these screenings and, in the process, got to know many of the women who'd served as nurses in Vietnam. Over conference dinners, late night drinks and car rides, they shared their individual experiences with me and, without filtering myself, I started sharing the details of my life in Thailand, my father's two tours in Vietnam and my time in Saigon with

them.

While my stories were inconsequential compared to theirs, simply being with them helped me feel like less of an outcast. My childhood wasn't contraband. It was just my childhood. No one was judging.

By 2015, I had moved on to other projects and was surprised when I received an email from Diane Carlson Evans, founder of the Vietnam Women's Memorial, inviting me to speak at the National Vietnam Veterans Memorial, The Wall, on Veterans Day. I was overwhelmed by the honor, plagued by impostor syndrome, and immediately said yes.

That November 11 was clear blue and crisply cool. With the names of those lost carved on The Wall behind me and the faces of those who survived in front of me, I told my story.

first printed in *Veterans Breakfast Club Magazine*

What is a person without the form that shapes him, the form that surrounds him inexorably like a coat of armor and which nonetheless is the very thing that bestows suppleness on him and which makes him free of all uncertainty and all paralyzing fears, free for himself and his highest possibilities? What is a person without this? What is a person without a life-form that is to say, without a form which he has chosen for his life, a form into which and through which to pour out his life, so that his life becomes the soul of the form and the form becomes the expression of his soul?

– Hans Urs von Balthasar

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Michelle R Brady is a writer and an attorney. She is/has also been a soldier, pilot, and mother. She lives in Washington DC with her family, dogs, cats, turtle, multiple aquariums. **Travis Flatt** (he/him) is a teacher and actor living in Cookeville, Tennessee. His stories appear or are forthcoming in *Bending Genre*, *JMWW*, *Flash Frog*, *Maudlin House*, and other places. He enjoys theater, dogs, and theatrical dogs.

James Hartman's fiction appears in *Blue Fifth Review*, *Litro*, *December*, *Raleigh Review*, *Gris-Gris*, *Hamilton Stone Review*, *New World Writing*, and elsewhere. His fiction has been nominated for the Pushcart Prize and Best Small Fictions, and was an Honorable Mention in New Millennium's 50th Annual Flash Fiction Award. His scholarly work is featured in *The Hemingway Review*. He holds a Master of Fine Arts in Creative Writing from Eastern Kentucky University, and lives in York, Pennsylvania. You can reach him at Jhartm17@yahoo.com.

Lucy Kulwicz is a writer, born and living in London. She has worked in eastern Europe as a journalist, now working in education in the UK. She has an MA in Creative and Life Writing from Goldsmiths, University of London. She is currently working on her first novella, *The Orchids*.

Blake Leland has published poetry in *Epoch*, *The New Yorker*, *Commonweal*, *Atlanta Review*, *Indiana Review*, *Thomas Hardy Review*, *Canopic Jar*, *The Art Section*, *Poetry International* (online), *The Ekphrastic Review*, *Shiela na Gig*, etc. A Pushcart Prize nominee, he co-authored a selection of occasional poems: *On Occasion: Four Poets, One Year*.

Niles Reddick is author of a novel, three collections, and a novella. His work has been featured in over thirty collections and five hundred publications including *The Saturday Evening Post*, *Muleskinner*, *New Reader*, *Cheap Pop*, *Citron Review*, *Right Hand Pointing*,

Nunum, and *Vestal Review*. He is a five time Pushcart, a two time Best Micro nominee, and a two time Best of the Net nominee. His newest flash collection [Who's Going to Pray for Me Now?](#) and his novella [Forgiven](#) are forthcoming this spring.

Shizue Seigel is a 3rd generation Japanese American writer/visual artist/editor based in San Francisco. She grew up as an Army brat in segregated Baltimore, Occupied Japan, skid-row Stockton, and strawberry sharecropping camps. Her American-born parents were deeply traumatized by their WWII incarceration in American concentration camps. Shizue dropped out of school in the early 1960s to learn by doing—from the Haight-Ashbury to Indian ashrams, from the corporate advertising to HIV prevention in public housing.

As founder/director of Write Now! SF Bay (<http://www.writenowsf.com>) she supports writers of color through workshops, events and anthologies. Her books include five BIPOC anthologies and three books on the Japanese Americans experience. Her work has been supported by the San Francisco Arts Commission, California Arts Council, California Humanities, the Zellerbach Family Foundation, and others. *She's a five-time VONA alum whose poetry and prose have been widely published in journals and anthologies.*

Her latest project, [Hidden Histories of the Central Coast](#), connects the Japanese American experience with that of Latinx and Asian agricultural workers.

writenowsf.com

shizueseigel.com

Jeff Hazlett lives and writes in Omaha, Nebraska. Jeff's short fiction is upcoming in *Lighthouse Digest* and other publications. Find him at: jeffhaz.com.

Jean Kane's work has appeared or is forthcoming in numerous publications, including *Ignatian Literary Magazine*, *Prairie Schooner*, *The Georgia Review*, *American Short Fiction online*, *South Dakota Review*, *Cimarron Review*, *Courtship of Winds*, *Indiana Review*, *3:AM*, *Hotel Amerika*, *Euphony Journal*, *Fogged Clarity*, *The MacGuffin*, *Nonconformist Magazine*, *Open: Journal of Arts & Letters*, *Pine Hills Review*, *Posit Journal*, *Rue Scribe*, *Slab*, *Voices de la Luna*, *Word For/Word*, and *Doubly Mad*. Her book of poems, [Make Me](#), was published by Otis Nebula in 2014. She is a recipient of the Otis Nebula First Book Award, and she was nominated for a 2021 Pushcart Prize by *Hole in the Head Review*.

Nina Schuyler My stories have been published by *Zyzyva*, *Fugue*, *Nashville Review*, *Santa Clara Review*, and elsewhere, and have been nominated for the Pushcart Prize and Best of the Net. My award-winning collection, [In This Ravishing World](#), will be published on July 2, 2024.

Rebecca Klassen is a co-editor of *The Phare*. Her work has featured in *Msllexia*, *Popshot*, *Shooter*, *Burningword*, *Literally Stories*, and *Ellipsis Zine*. She has won the London Independent Story Prize, and was shortlisted for the Oxford Flash and the Laurie Lee Prize. Rebecca's stories have been performed on BBC Radio.

Perry Genovesi lives in West Philadelphia, works as a public librarian, and serves his fellow workers in AFSCME District Council 47. He's a '24 Best Microfiction nominee, and his published fiction is forthcoming or has been featured in *The Santa Monica Review*, *Bridge Eight*, *Gone Lawn*, and collected on tiny.cc/PerryGenovesi. He lives with two cats and he still

needs to get it through his skull that, when he's running late, he has no time to lint-roll his black shirts & just needs to settle on another color. Twitter: [@unionlibrarian](#)

Mark Wagstaff's work has appeared in *Does It Have Pockets?*, *The New Guard*, *Open Doors Review* and *Abraxas Review*. He won the 39th Annual 3-Day Novel Contest with off-kilter romcom *Attack of the Lonely Hearts* published by Anvil Press. Mark's latest novel *On the Level* was published in 2022 through Leaf by Leaf, an imprint of Cinnamon Press.

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Dale Going is a poet and printer living in the canyons of Manhattan and the Adirondack Park of upstate New York after a former lifetime at the foot of Mt. Tamalpais and the Mendocino mountains of Northern California. She has published the poetry collections *The View They Arrange* (Kelsey St. Press, nominated for the Poets' Prize) and *As/of the Whole* (SFSU Award, selected by Brenda Hillman) as well as numerous chapbooks, broadsides and artists' books. Her work has received support from Fund for Poetry, California Arts Council, Yaddo and Djerassi Fellowships. Her Em Press letterpress editions of poetry by women are archived internationally in prominent library special collections. She co-founded the quarterly *ROOMS*, which for a decade published formally innovative work of women writers and artists. New work appears or is forthcoming in *VOLT*, *New American Writing*, *Blood Orange Review*, *Banyan Review*, *Equinox*, *Griffel*, *LandLocked*, *Milk Press*, *Nelligan Review*, *Stone Canoe*, *Wild Roof Journal*, and the exhibition catalog of *Ars poetica* at the BRAHM Museum in Blowing Rock, NC. A chapbook is forthcoming from Albion Books. www.dalegoing.com

Linda Quinlan book *Chelsea Creek* was published by Brickhouse Press and she was the recipient of The Wicked Women's Poetry Award. Her poems have been published in many literary journals. She was Poet of the Year in Wisconsin. Presently she lives in Vermont with her partner.

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Caroline Livermore was born in Walnut Creek, California. She was raised on a working ranch, Called The Bishop Ranch, in San Ramon California. She has been published in the book *Resilience* and was a semi-finalist for her poem in *Margie The American Journal of Poetry*. Her family has a working ranch on Mt. St. Helena, above Calistoga, CA. The author currently lives in St. Helena, California.

Chris Hart is a Baltimore-based writer and editor. A 2021 graduate of the University of Baltimore MFA program in Creative Writing and Publishing Arts, Hart is the author of *Useful*, a collection of stories, as well as the creator, playwright and lyricist for *TRY: The Musical*, which was recently presented in salon at Baltimore's Fells Point Corner Theater. He has been published in two editions of *Welter*.

Nick Visconti My poems have been published by *Prelude*, *Painted Bride Quarterly*, *GASHER*, *Image*, *Vallum*, *Burningword*, *Gulf Coast Online*, and others. I was a finalist for Kallisto Gaia Press's 2023 and 2024 Saguaro Prize

Mark Tate is the author of three novels, *Beside the River*, its sequel *River's End* (McCaa Books, 2021), and *Butterfly on the Wheel* (McCaa Books, 2022). He served for ten years on the Sonoma County Poet Selection Committee for the poets laureate of that county. His book

of poems Walking Scarecrow won the Blue Light Press Book of the Year, published December 2023. He is a long-time resident of Sonoma County where he lives with his wife, Lori, and two cats.

Colby Galliher's short fiction has been published or is forthcoming in *Inscape Magazine*, *Harrisburg Magazine*, *the Inlandia Literary Journal*, and elsewhere. More information about his work is available at colbygalliher.com.

Toni Hornes Sullivan I am a first year MFA student at the University of Baltimore. My submission contains poems in which I'm processing some part of my life, whether a literal death or generational patterns. These poems best encapsulate my desire to communicate and to explore memory and to uncover or acknowledge self in others, process, art, or geography.

Lance Romanoff is a short story writer and novelist. He is currently working on a novel set in 1970s Russia in addition to several stories. A New England native, he now lives in Los Angeles with a hairless Sphynx cat and a motorcycle. His earlier work has been published in *Riddle Fence*, *The Charleston Anvil*, and *Door is a Jar*.

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 by (February 2024). You can find her at staceycjohnson.com.

Lance Romanoff is a short story writer and novelist. He is currently working on a novel set in 1970s Russia in addition to several stories. A New England native, he now lives in Los Angeles with a hairless Sphynx cat and a motorcycle. His earlier work has been published in *Riddle Fence*, *The Charleston Anvil*, and *Door is a Jar*.

Michael Catherwood's awards include a Nebraska Arts Council Grant, Pushcart Nomination, The Holt Prize for Poetry, and Finalist for the Ruth Lily Prize. His books are Dare, If you Turned Around Quickly, Projector from Stephen F. Austin Press, and Near Misses from WSC Press. He was former editor at The Backwaters Press and was Associate Editor at *Plainsongs* since 1995. Recent poems have appeared in *The Opiate*, *As It Ought to Be Magazine*, *Pennsylvania English*, *Zoetic Press* and *Common Ground Review*. He's a cancer survivor, retired, and lives in Omaha with his wife, Cindy.

Richard Eddie I read and write in my spare time, and I have never been published.

John Calvin Hughes has published in numerous magazines and journals, including *Dead Mule*, *Southern Indiana Review*, *Autumn Sky Poetry*, *The Timberline Review*, *The American Journal of Poetry*, and *Mississippi Review*. His publications include a critical study, The Novels and Short Stories of Frederick Barthelme (The Edwin Mellen Press); two poetry chapbooks, The Shape of Our Luck (Sargent Press) and Cul-de-sac Agoniste (Black Bomb Books); a full-length poetry collection, Music from a Farther Room (Aldrich Press); and four novels, Twilight of the Lesser Gods (CreateSpace), Killing Rush (Second Wind Publishing), The Lost Gospel of Darnell Rabren (Bowen Press Books), and The Boys (Regal House). Nominated for a Pushcart

in 2015, he is also the winner of the Ilse and Hans Juergensen Poetry Contest and The Thomas Burnett Swann Poetry Prize. He lives and works in Florida.

Carl Meuser has been a farm hand in Oklahoma, a disk jockey in Iceland, and a warship captain who has sailed the globe. His peer-reviewed professional writing has been published in the U.S. Naval Institute's *Proceedings*; his travel writing has been featured in the *San Diego Union-Tribune*; and his fiction has appeared in *Orca* and is forthcoming in *Red Coyote*.

Dionissios Kollias's work has appeared in *No Dear Magazine*, *Pinwheel*, *Raleigh Review*, and elsewhere. He lives in New York

Andrea L Watson Founding publisher of 3: A Taos Press, Andrea Watson's poetry has appeared in *Nimrod*, *Rhino*, *Subtropics*, *Cream City Review*, *Ekphrasis*, *The Feminist Journal of Studies in Religion*, and *The Dublin Quarterly*, among others. She is co-editor of the poetry anthologies, Collecting Life: Poets on Objects Known and Imagined and Malala: Poems for Malala Yousafzai. Andrea has designed and curated eighteen ekphrasis events across the United States, commencing with Braided Lives: A Collaboration Between Artists and Poets, sponsored by the Taos Institute of Arts, and, most recently, Take a Detour from Route 66: Taos to L.A., featured at the Homestead Museum in Los Angeles and the La Hacienda de los Martinez in Taos.

Ross Anderson Previously, I have been shortlisted for the Parracombe prize, and last year won the Sussex prize for my short story in the Hastings Book Festival.

Joddy Murray's chapbook, Anaphora, was published by Finishing Line Press in 2020. His work has appeared or is forthcoming in over 70 journals, including, most recently, *Blue Unicorn*, *Neologism Poetry Journal*, *Across the Margin*, *El Portal*, *Birdy Magazine*, *The Torrid Literature Journal*, *Wrath Bearing Tree*, *The Fourth River*, *Prism Review*, *Nude Bruce Review*, *OxMag*, *Flights*, *Perceptions Magazine*, *Cape Rock*, *Redactions: Poetry & Poetics*, *Sou'wester Literary Magazine*, and *Version 9*. He currently lives in Marion, Illinois.

Bridget Hayes lives in Northern California. Her writing is published or is forthcoming in *Yellow Arrow*, *Wild Roof Journal*, *Ionosphere*, *Ink In Thirds Magazine*, *The Sitting Room Women Travel Writers Anthology*, *The Letters Home Collection*, and *California Writers Club Ekphrastic Anthology: Vision and Verse*. She is a tech librarian who helps people overcome their fear of technology. When she is not reading or writing she is likely outside. She lives with her wife and two orange cats. You can read more about her here: <https://bridgethayes.carrd.co/> or [follow her on Instagram @beoutside2writes](#)

Steven Ostrowski is a widely-published writer, painter and songwriter. His novel, The Highway of Spirit and Bone, was published in 2023 by Lefora Publications and has been called "...a literary road trip for the ages." His poetry chapbook, Persons of Interest, won the 2021 Wolfson Chapbook Prize and was published in 2022. Steven and his son Ben coauthored a full-length collaboration called Penultimate Human Constellation, published in 2018 by Tolsun Books. Steven's newest book of poems, Life Field, will be published in early 2024. He is Professor Emeritus at Central Connecticut State University.

Judith Ford My writing has been published in *Apricity Magazine*, *Better Than Starbucks Poetry & Fiction Journal*, *Caveat Lector*, *Clackamas Literary Review*, *Confluence*, *Connecticut Review*, *Evening Street Review*, *Hampden-Sydney Poetry Review*, *Hong Kong Review*, *Ignatian Literary Review*, *Jumbelbook*, *The Laurel Review*, *The Meadow*, *New English Review*, *North Dakota Quarterly*, *The Paragon Journal*, *The Penmen Review*, *Pennsylvania English*, *Pine Hills Review*, *Quarter After Eight*, *Rubbertop Review*, *Southern Humanities Review*, *Thin Air Magazine*, *Umbrella Factory Magazine*, *Voices de la Luna*, *Waxing & Waning*, *Willow Review*, *The Write Launch*, *Young Ravens Literary Review*, and many other journals. I coauthored a poetry collection with Martin Jack Rosenblum, *Burning Oak*, published by Lionhead Press (1986). My memoir, *Fever of Unknown Origin*, (published by Resource Publications) is now available on Amazon and will soon appear in bookstores. I've received Pushcart Prize nominations for fiction, nonfiction, and poetry, won first place in the Willow Review Prose Award (2005), and was awarded "most highly commended" in the Margaret Reid Poetry Contest (2008). I have an MFA in writing from the Vermont College of Fine Arts, a BS in education and an MSW from the University of Wisconsin. I'm a retired psychotherapist and in the past have led workshops in the use of the arts in psychotherapy. I've also taught creative writing to middle, high school, and adult students. When I'm not writing I enjoy reading, hiking, dancing, strength training, yoga, and Words With Friends. I am the mother of three grown children, and grandmother to four wonderful grandchildren.

Richard Oyama's poems, stories and essays have appeared in *Premonitions: The Kaya Anthology of New Asian North American Poetry*, *The Nuyorasian Anthology*, *Breaking Silence*, *Dissident Song*, *A Gift of Tongues*, *About Place*, *Konch Magazine*, *Pirene's Fountain*, *Tribes*, *Malpais Review*, *Anak Sastra*, *Buddhist Poetry Review* and other literary journals. *The Country They Know* (Neuma Books 2005) is his first collection of poetry. He has a M.A. in English: Creative Writing from San Francisco State University. Currently retired, Oyama taught at California College of Arts in Oakland, University of California at Berkeley and University of New Mexico. His first novel in a trilogy, *A Riot Goin' On*, is forthcoming. He is currently at work on a young adult novel and a full-length poetry collection.

Selen Ozturk is a San Francisco-based writer. Her work appears or is forthcoming in publications including the *San Francisco Chronicle*, *SFGATE*, *Hobart*, *Evergreen Review*, *Bayou Magazine*, *Wilderness House Review*, and *Senses of Cinema*, and has received support from the Bread Loaf Writers' Conference. She holds a philosophy degree from UC Berkeley and works as a journalist. Find her work at freeverse.blog.

Ellis Elliott My chapbook *Break in the Field* was published by Old Scratch Press in June 2023. I have been published in *Apricity Magazine*, *Belle Ombre*, *Big Muddy*, *The Broken Plate*, *Brushfire Literature & Arts Journal*, *Cerasus Magazine*, *Cider Press Review*, *Copperfield Review Quarterly*, *Courtship of Winds*, *Dash*, *The Ear*, *Euphony Journal*, *The Ignatian Literary Magazine*, *Isele Magazine*, *Journal of Undiscovered Poets*, *Kaleidoscope*, *Literary Mama*, *The MacGuffin*, *Meadow*, *MORIA Literary Magazine*, *Pennsylvania English*, *OPEN: Journal of Arts and Letters*, *Overheard Magazine*, *Riggwelter*, *McNeese Review*, *Neologism Poetry Journal*,

Nude Bruce Review, Perceptions Magazine, Pink Panther Magazine, Plainsongs, Platform Review, The Rail, The Round, Signal Mountain Review, Sheila-Na-Gig, Sierra Nevada Review, Spotlong Review, Streetlight Magazine, Thin Air, Umbrella Factory Magazine, Voices De La Luna, Wrath-Bearing Tree, and Your Impossible Voice. My poems “Hyde Lake, Memphis,” “Easy Fix,” “After Words,” and “Our Truest Hungers” have been nominated for the Best of the Net awards. I participated in the Palm Beach Poetry Festival 2015 Workshop with poet Aimee Nezhukumatathil. I was a finalist in the Two Sylvia’s Press Wilder Poetry Book Prize in 2023 for my published book, *Break in the Field*. I received a bachelor’s degree in English from Rhodes College and an MFA in Creative Writing from Queens University. I’ve taught ballet for over 30 years, and currently teach ballet, yoga, and lead online and in-person writing groups. My husband and I have a blended family of six grown sons and I enjoy mixed-media art, swimming, and miniatures.

Nick Godec writes poetry and short fiction, with works appearing in *Brief Wilderness, El Portal, Flights, Grey Sparrow, Hedge Apple, MORIA Literary Magazine, Pennsylvania Literary Journal, Rue Scribe, Shark Reef, Sierra Nevada Review, Steam Ticket, Thieving Magpie* and *Thin Air Magazine*. He has a B.A. in history and an MBA from Columbia University and currently works in finance in New York City. Nick enjoys spending time with his wife Julia and their miniature pinscher, Emma.

Cynthia Atkins (She, Her) is the author of *Psyche’s Weathers, In the Event of Full Disclosure* (CW Books), and *Still-Life With God* (Saint Julian Press 2020), and a collaborative chapbook from Harbor Editions, 2022. Her work has appeared in many journals, including *Alaska Quarterly Review, BOMB, Cider Press Review, Diode, Green Mountains Review, Indianapolis Review, Los Angeles Review, Rust + Moth, North American Review, Permafrost, SWWIM, Thrush, Tinderbox, and Verse Daily*. She earned her MFA from Columbia University and has earned fellowships and prizes from Bread Loaf Writers’ Conference, Virginia Center for the Creative Arts, The Writer’s Voice, and Writers@Work. Atkins lives on the Maury River of Rockbridge County, Virginia, with artist Phillip Welch and their family. More work and info at: www.cynthiaatkins.com

Mervyn Seivwright writes to balance social consciousness & poetry craft for humane growth. He is a nomad from a Jamaican family, born in London, England, and left for America at age 10, now residing in Schopp, Germany. He is a Spalding University MFA Grad and has appeared in *AGNI, American Journal of Poetry, Salamander Magazine, African American Review*, & 64 other journals across 10 countries, receiving recognition as a 2021/2023 Pushcart Nominee & Voices Israel’s Rose Ruben Poetry Competition Honorable-Mention. His new collection *Stick, Hook, and a Pile of Yarn*, is available through Broken Sleep Books <https://www.brokensleepbooks.com/product-page/mervyn-seivwright-stick-hook-and-a-pile-of-yarn>

Link: <https://www.clippings.me/mervynseivwright>

Socials: <https://www.facebook.com/deep.cobra> / <https://twitter.com/Deepcobra> / <https://www.instagram.com/deepcobra/>

Ivo Drury A native of Ireland, Ivo Drury lives along the California Coast. Most recent poetry published in *The Ocotillo Review* and *California Quarterly*.

Susannah Winters Simpson’s work has been published in *North American Review, Potomac, Wisconsin Review, South Carolina Review, POET, Nimrod International, Poet Lore, MORIA*

Literary Magazine, Salamander, Sequesterum, South Florida Poetry Journal, SWWIM, and Xavier Review, among others. Simpson's work was selected twice to be read at the Norton Museum. She was chosen as a 2023 Featured Poet for Miami's SWWIM/The Betsy Hotel's Reading Series, and her poems have been included in several anthologies. Four of her poems won second prize in CommuterLit's 2023 National Poetry Contest. Her book, Geography of Love & Exile, was published by Červená Barva Press. Her manuscript Mother Wind is forthcoming in 2024 by Pine Row Press and Dharma of Death & Desire is forthcoming by Shanti Arts Press in 2025. She is the founder and co-director of the Performance Poets of the Palm Beaches. Simpson holds an MFA in writing & literature from Bennington, a PhD from Binghamton University, and a Certificate of Advanced Study in therapeutic writing. She currently facilitates WriteRecovery groups in treatment centers.

Laura Lambie is a wife, mother and piano teacher who resides in Texas. She has published a story in *The New English Review*, and she is a finalist in the 2023 J.F. Powers Prize for Short Fiction.

Mary Pacifico Curtis is a Silicon Valley entrepreneur, seasoned branding and PR professional, and author of poetry and non-fiction. Published work includes her recent memoir, Understanding Moonseed, two poetry chapbooks, Between Rooms and The White Tree Quartet and numerous pickups in literary magazines and anthologies. The recently released Hawk's Cry is her first full-length poetry collection. Accolades include recognition as a 2012 Joy Harjo Poetry Finalist (*Cutthroat Journal*), 2019 Poetry Finalist in *The Tiferet Journal*, non-fiction finalist in The 48th New Millenium Writings contest and a 2021 non-fiction finalist in *The Tupelo Quarterly Open*. At 24, she founded Pacifico, Inc., which grew into one of Silicon Valley's largest independently owned PR and branding firms with clients that included many global technology leaders. When both daughters went to college, she earned an MFA in 2012 in creative writing from Goddard College. Curtis lives with her husband in the foothills of the Santa Cruz mountains on a terraced property where she grows vegetables and fends off gophers while admiring deer, coyotes, wild turkeys and the occasional bobcat.

Varley O'Connor I am the author of five published novels, most recently The Welsh Fasting Girl (Bellevue Literary Press 2019) and The Master's Muse (Scribner 2012). My shorter prose has appeared in *Missouri Review, Santa Monica Review, The Examined Life, Capra Review, The Sun, Calyx, Publisher's Weekly*, and elsewhere.

Mark Lewandowski I am the author of the story collection, Halibut Rodeo. My stories, essays and scripts have appeared in many anthologies and journals, including *The North American Review, The Gettysburg Review* and *Cimarron Review*. My work has also been nominated for numerous Pushcart and Best of the Net nominations, and has been listed as "Notable" in The Best American Essays, The Best American Nonrequired Reading and The Best American Travel Writing. Currently I am a Professor of English at Indiana State University.

Daria Sommers is a writer and filmmaker whose work includes the feature documentary Lioness and the recently completed novel Sawadika American Girl (Vine Leaves Press 2026). She's been a MacDowell Colony Fellow and a recipient of grants from the NEH, the NYSCA and the Rockefeller Family Fund. www.dariasommers.com

