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ginosko

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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

When we awaken to the call of beauty, we become aware of new ways of being in the world. We were created to be creators. At its deepest heart, creativity is meant to serve and evoke beauty. When this desire and capacity come alive, new wells spring up in parched ground; difficulty becomes invitation and rather than striving against the grain of our nature, we fall into rhythm with its deepest urgency and passion.

— John O'Donohue

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by Michael Rerick

[of a telephone line of power boxes along a scraggly ditch lip]

of a telephone line of power boxes along a scraggly ditch lip
collecting clothes plastic metal and furniture not meant to be repaired
scraped in another morning this one with a little cold sun so
distant foam draws us to water to play on our toes on the edge
water that works as a metaphor for want because we wade into it
I am on a small town street in my city lost in store windows
where a dog strains toward the open doors of a pet store
where dresses hang and bars are "open" and plates bang and
games wait to be played and metaphysical insurance is sold and
real estate advertises expensive homes and plants sprout from
bright pots and ice cream scoops and the sidewalk is wider
asking

what are you doing there?

[picking through clothes racks like a crow in tree moss or grass]

picking through clothes racks like a crow in tree moss or grass
I call from the porch "kitty kitty kitty" to a blank neighborhood
while a beautiful morning apparition takes out the garbage and lifts
a finger to brush their tired hair aside after warehouse lifting and sorting
I am in all black because movie ninjas sneak dangerous perimeters
like a tarp raising in the weather to shade against the weather
a tire collection invites children to invent numerous uses
the way love is suspended in the dark dusky air of an old pine tree
calendar lists day dates and future hours thankfully vanish
in a shortcut across the park that turns into a slow unlabored village
where a heavy garlic mist travels from numerous kitchens
like wet wood on fire a dark day rain unravels and scatters squirrels
familiar as a parking lot puddle or mossy tree hollow
we make music for each other sharing out our apartment window
saying

morning's smear welcomes strokes of light
and a cloud band amped for wind's performance

[clothing the day with a draped look exchanged at a safe distance]

clothing the day with a draped look exchanged at a safe distance
stealing a slow errand between rain in sun steak slabs
I am retired turning my head with a spindly sprout bathing in mist
satisfied to spot the city's camouflage of jacket and jeans
I talk on the phone in the rain reaching my humble bearded friend
or long haired world traveler momentarily settled to riff
as the generosity of public schooling dawns in houses and apartments
animals close to the ground carry seeds away all day
exposed to magic beings coming and going from a tree crook
children point to asking the difference of matter and air
just as truck lords sidetrack bicycles and runners with flashing lights
improvements disrupt muddy sidewalk corners for months
like Socrates distracted by tiny ants following a red curb
house lights tuck into a forested yard illuminating a bookshelf likeness
where naïve state to state hoppers sleep scum on couches and floors
recognizing recurrent pine needle mat and pecan crunch
saying

life dubbed by a crow pecks
ice and flies off in winter
leaving spiked maple seeds
or floating walk arounds
rolled into shoe impressions
revisited soon in the melt

by Bridget James

Hack off a limb

Diary entry August 1992 - *Mum's brother is taking his kids to Lumley beach and she's asked if I could tag along, like a discarded piece of chewing gum stuck to the heel of a flip flop.*

I'd always struggled with the poor self-image of a hairy monster and dreaded changing into a swimming suit in front my uncle's daughters. I'd tried to explain that, but mum had shoehorned me into Uncle Arthur's 1991 Citroen with, "She's the most reserved of my daughters, always hiding under floaty clothes."

I'd inherited father's hairy legs and no-one in Freetown had taught me to shave them. There if you were hairy, you wore it like a badge of honour. I'd never heard of depilatory creams and had only seen one razor- on my dad's side of the family bathroom shelf above the sink- an eyesore with chipped black plastic peeling off its spine which held a rusty blade that sat permanently in a mixture of dried toothpaste and water.

"She has her father's genes."

Mother had noticed my legs but missed the obvious symptoms of body dysmorphia. The self-loathing, hatred of my reflection and internal turmoil because she had not conceived me a less-hairy husband.

I was going to the beach that day in a skirt which kissed knee-length socks concealing classified secrets- my legs.

Feeling nauseous seated in the back of Uncle Arthur's Citroen, I glanced furtively to my right, my mixed race cousins were called "*first colour*," in my language. Behind the bushy eyelashes I again got from dad, I scanned seventeen-year-old Tanya's legs, smooth as peanut butter, sprawling out from the shortest pair of multicoloured shorts. Regina a confident nineteen-year-old, was in her skimpy bikini already.

Then Uncle was attempting a three-point turn on the sandy bank. A hawkker had materialised by the driver's door trying to entice him with husky fruits. Soaking with perspiration from anxiety, I clutched the rucksack with *Beaver Girl Guides* emblazoned on it, pushed the door the widest its hinges could allow and scuppered off to one of the pastel coloured beach huts.

Among their kaleidoscopic ray of colours was a carpenter's shop. He was hunched over with his back towards me, working. On one of handmade benches outside with a *For Sale* sign on its seat to entice tourists, was the glistening metal blade of the wooden handled saw he probably used to chop away at stumps of palm trees. I smiled with the realisation that while I might not have access to hair removing products, I could easily saw off my legs and remove the problem in its entirety. I grabbed the saw and ran like a gazelle into the beach hut to amputate an offending limb.

Diary entry August 2017- *Still hairy. My imposing leg tattoo covers a self-imposed scar after I tried to rectify the issue of living with furry legs from the onset of puberty at age thirteen.*

Devotion

Divya Gottiparthi

There was a time when the liquid splattered across my skin was paint. Dry and wet patches dotted along my clothes. Socks soaked bare. Dragging the tips of my fingers across my cheek, like melted wax, curdles of it catching on the ends of my fingers. It was smeared all along my arms and neck, some bits clinging to the strands of my hair. It was easy to imagine the multicolored smock she wore as she dragged the paintbrush along the mural of swirling colors dancing across the walls and ceiling. It was easy to close my eyes and imagine our colorful limbs. Grins scrunching up both our faces.

My hands shook just like they had when I pulled the trigger on a shotgun for the first time. My fingers crunched into a fist, the energy wriggling under my skin even as they wrapped around the smooth porcelain faucet knob. It seemed delicate, cracked, and hollow, any more pressure it could just as easily shatter in my palm. The water hummed under the ceramic basin like a churning dam, before a blast spouted out running along the gooey slick on my hands. Clumps clunked down into the basin going from scarlet to pink whirling along the bottom before being swallowed.

“Keep the dirty clothes in the bathroom!” Mama would always say after a day swimming in the ocean. The clothes on our backs had been heavy, and when we unzipped one another, they slapped against the tiles, salt water leaking from the bundle of thread, streaming along the cracks of the tiles below maybe trying to find a way back. Copper and arsenic saturated the air. Cold water slashed against my back like ice pellets before melting and rolling down. The red that had dried along my arms liquified, before slipping off so much like the sticky streaks of grape juice along the gaps of my fingers. The faint scent of flowery soap wafted in the foggy air, white orchids and lilies swaying in the meadow. It was easy then to let my eyelids close.

The world around was blue, crushed with tangerine and white all except for her standing in the ocean with the waves crashing over her chest. Black cloth wound around her, inky as it swayed with the waves who trampled their hooves against the sand before receding into the surf. White fizz bubbled along my feet, settling in between the crevices of my toes. The grains of sand seemed especially golden along the shore, the color quite similar to the sun’s rays against her skin. Her palms were pressed together as she bent under and fully submerged in the water again. The tightness in my ankles and shoulders didn’t vanish ready to bolt just like the first time she had done it.

One, two, three, four, five, six, seven, eight –

Her head eased out of the water slowly, water beads cascading along the long plaited braid that hung along her back, sopping wet. After a final bow and a prayer, she turned, walking along the shore with practiced ease even when the tides barreled against her feet, pushing and pulling at the loose sand beneath. The red of the tilak streamed down her forehead along

the side of her nose to the top of her lip. She settled beside me.

There was a time when I was envious of her features, something about her was delicately artisanal, molded by nature, meant to be preserved. The delicate lines went from the bridge of her nose to the turn of her chin, the soft curves of her jaw and cheeks. There were small wrinkles creased by her lips, ever present with the small smile she wore. *'The face of a lotus under the starlight'*, Mama had always said.

"God is with us today," she murmured like always.

The waves were now high, rampageous crashing and belting against the shore almost as if they were restrained when she was in them. 'Yeah', muted to a hum that vibrates in my chest. I tried to see the figure a sparking ghost that captured her attention. Squinting out at the horizon maybe with the trick of light the woman painted in the many framed pictures that hung along our walls would appear. But the details were always hazy, even in memory they all fell away becoming a blurry figure in the distance. The wind howled, and the seagulls screeched.

Her hand was soft on mine, a balm easing the tightness in my crunched fingers balling sand below. Her skin was like a flower's petal fresh in the spring, a hard contrast to the cuts and calluses that were present on my own. Her fingers flat to my palm she pressed slightly. "You have to believe to see." The wind drifted circling us. There were voices that I could pull from the wind's song, but it was muddled like hymns sung underwater. I turned my hand over so I could press my fingers into her skin as I held on, trying to see.

My hands were wrinkled, numbing slowly from the burn of the antiseptic. The sheet of cloth oozed before I twisted, wringing it, dabbing it against blood-stained flesh. The freckles dusting across her skin used to look like constellations in the sky. They would glow to life under the moon when we lay across the grass in the backyard outlining stars. Now they looked more like spots made by a marker.

The smell of antiseptic had repulsed me at some point, but with it constantly drifting in the air, I didn't feel the urge to faint or vomit anymore. It stung at my nose and the inside of my lungs, a necessity almost. It was the only thing that seemed to hold me still in the room wiping, dunking, wringing, and wiping again.

One, two, three, four, five, six, seven, eight, nine, ten, eleven, twelve thirteen fourteen fifteen sixteen seventeen eighteen nineteen twenty

The rag tucked into my jittering fist slapped against the tile below. Eyes closed, her finger no longer twitched, and stretched for mine. The bolstering black veins along her neck and legs jolted out her skin, like wires under a thin carpet. Her cheeks were sunken, and her features were now sharper. It would have been easy to think that she was asleep since for the past couple weeks the disease progression had worsened. It was deceptive if not for the gaping wound of a blade on her neck and the stillness of her chest.

Behind her, the flicker of the candlelight had become a small string of orange burning along the wick barely alive. My knees popped as I slipped off the stool, tucking her in like I did every night for the past couple of weeks. Before I knew it, I had gotten to the cupboard where the pot-like candle sat with a pool of oil near the bottom of the wick. Facing the carved wooden statue in the middle, it burned dry.

The cupboard doors creaked shut like clamps held open for far too long. Settling into bed was the same as it was the previous night. The cold metal of the pistol and blade touched my fingers, below my pillow. Shadows of the rattling tree branches and current wires cut through the light of the moon-like webbed veins across the ceiling. My eyes held open until the firelight on the bedside table blew out.

With her legs crossed in front of the cupboard, her hands rubbed together rolling two cotton wicks, her fingers sliding now and then. Staring spells, dizziness, and vomiting were the few others that I had noted a couple of days back, they only increased in frequency as the days passed with the symptoms showing up like clockwork. She scraped the red sulfur tip of the match against the box, again and again before striking it even harder where a spark started at the end.

The flame ate away at the wood licking at her fingertips. She didn't flinch watching it go, before dropping it into the small ashtray. Foreign enchantments long and strung out spewed out of her lips flying right over my head, similar to how they did when Mama sang them.

It was getting worse, the reports from the doctors who published their findings of the viral disease in the news. The symptoms matched the millions of cases across the world, with death often preceding. But so far the resistance drugs were working, they had eased it a bit, maybe if I could grab some more IV bags and cleaning supplies –

“Can you please stop assessing me and come here,”. My eyes jerked away from her shivering shoulders to her eyes, lit by the flame. I had once thought they were like a jar of honey under the sun, but now it seemed more accurate to say a glob of honey in a cup of hibiscus-infused water.

Settling beside her, I folded my hands into my lap mirroring her. Her shoulders eased slightly before she closed her eyes again and continued her enchantments. I watched the flame as it swayed reminding me of snakes in woven bins in the market. It licked at the corners of the cupboard and set a glow on the statue in the middle of the space—a blue-skinned man lying on top of a snake holding a conch shell and a chakram.

“God is with you,” she murmured. It came with a fit of coughs, I reached to dab at her blood-coated lips with a handkerchief. She turned away, holding out her hand to block me, before wiping at the blood with the hem of her shirt. I caught a glimpse of peeling skin, and thrumming green veins, I had to bite my lips to stop the gasp that arose.

“What—”

“I need you to promise me you will try to see,” her fingers were curled along my wrist at the pulse point, like a noose settled around one's neck, merely holding. A shadow seemed to hover over her, dark moon-like bags hung under her eyes, hollowing her cheeks. She turned to

the cupboard and the flame continued its dance becoming sharp, long, soft, short. "Fire is the entity of transformation and life, you remember Mama telling us about that." She didn't look at me, only at the flame pausing for a minute.

"She said that's why people are burned when they die, for rebirth and reincarnation," I couldn't recognize my voice in the silence but it pulled her out of her daze as she nodded. Her movements were shaky and fragile looking down at where our skin made contact. She kept rubbing her fingers along my inner wrist just like when we were kids when the nightmares remained in dreams and storybooks.

"God is with us," I muttered, swallowing down the saliva lodged at the base of my throat. She smiled, raising her hand to cup my cheek, "With you, you have a blessing." Her eyes drooped before her head fell against my shoulder, I cradled the back of it, watching the flickering flame in the cupboard grow smaller. The figure's face was still left lit, and for a moment I breathed in and out for the both of us, I pleaded for her.

Please don't let her die too, please.

Flame crackled eating away at the house. The pain's blew out, the wood fell to bits and pieces of ash. I watched from the sidewalk of the barren neighborhood of abandoned homes as the roof bottomed out and collapsed. Ash and soot whirled in the air. The smog thickened, dark clouds sweeping, blanketing the light that devoured from the inside out. I pocketed the small matchbox in my hands along with the blue-skinned idol. With the supplies strapped to my back and a gun strap across my shoulder, I watched as everything crumbled, all until the raging orange scraped the edge of the sky.

by Kristin Roedell

So I Can Stop Falling

I would live in a shack
down a red dirt road
with a tattered rooster
that slept past dawn.

I'd cast hen's feed
like fishing nets,
pick dandelions
for dinner.

I would farm alone in the frost,
keep sheep in the kitchen
for warmth, go out at dawn
in pajamas and boots,
to sink an axe through

the ice in the trough;

I would pace a widow's

walk as years and sea

winds passed unchanged,

as salt rimed the porch

swing, and rust pulled

the mailbox down,

Only to sit on the back steps

with my three legged cat,

as the pills for my darkness

expire,

so I can

stop falling

speak clearly,

sleep before dawn.

I'd rather the night

fall, like snow

quietly descending.

To My

Fifteen Year Old Niece

On Her Way To The Third Floor

I still think of this on lightless nights:
the woman who had been depressed
for thirty years, her hair stuck in a wet
web of saliva over her nose and chin,
the man who clung to his plaid coat
with hands like a mouse
trapped in a cat's mouth,
the beautiful boy with yellow curls
who crowed like it was sunrise
when his lithium was late--
me, in ratty pajamas
smoking on the fire escape
with the roommate who choked
herself out with my hair dryer cord.

Last night I saw your tapping fingers,
the way you knuckled the butter knife--

your bones like wire hangers,
your shoe laces tied in treble knots.

This morning you came to breakfast
with gutters down your forearms,
(you carry me in your blood)
which will take you to some third floor
where the elevator is locked.

I said I'll wear pajamas
at every funeral,
put a cord around my sister's throat,
crow out my morning window,
take you out of the cat's mouth,
to prevent it.

I'll take up smoking again,
tipping ashes out the taxi window
when I come to get you.

In fact, look over the fire escape.

Climb down into the lightless night.

I'll wait in the car.

by Carole Greenfield

Fractured

You who have so delicate a touch, how could you produce any form of shattering but that of shells, shards, glassy rock, volcanic? How you are going to break me. How we shall one day break our hearts in tiny pieces like safety glass, glints scattering shell-like fragments, slicing my brother's cheek open in two places, little face covered in blood, mouth split wide in terror. Reaching in past sharp edges, an angel in blue uniform pulled him put, pulled him through. You tell me you once tried to overtake a truck only to see a message from an angel on its side. How will our hearts be broken? I am the one with cleavage, zones of weakness easily found. And you? Fractured soul, little slivers breaking off here, there and everywhere? Yet some would say you are an angel. Some have said you are an angel. You say angels shadow you every step of the way. So what to do? Break myself away, or trust my heart, my soul in gentle hands that hold me like a shell, that carefully, that lovingly, that well?

Silhouette

There to be seen when we saw them,
hoping to escape notice while we dared
press close as those shared shadows on
the museum walls, just-touching as we did
through halls of beeches, in the heavy
reaches of a slack June evening, our time
soon dripping through, we pressed back,
slipping underneath the copper shade,
caressed by shadows, later frayed
and somewhat tattered. Were we there?
Does it matter? Was it true? Do we care?
They were there. We were too.

Home

I am home to the grayness that curls round the door
seeps through the screen mesh and always wants more
of your soul, of your sleep, of your mind, of your heart
I am at home to the sliver, the piece, to the part

not the whole, not the frame, where's your land,
what's your name, do you know what they say
do you know how to play, have you even a clue
to the name of the game, to the path up the mountain
or down to the sea

I am at home on my hand on my knee,
with my head in the sand, with my eyes that can't close

I am at home from my head to my toes
and nobody, nobody, nobody knows

Done is Better

Good is good but done is better.
On this they never will agree, though
some say he's the only one to truly get her.

From the first time that he met her,
she's tried to make him see that just below
top-notch is fine: good is good, but done is better.

Some stand willingly in rain, others still get wetter.
She wonders at the price she'll pay to stay, the cost to go,
considering he's the only one to truly get her.

Signs that go ignored can twine into a fetter:
choked in encroaching vines, love cannot grow.
It bears repeating: good is good but done is better.

In earlier times she would have stopped to write a letter,
put pen to paper, heart's blood in colored inks to show
how much she loved the way that he could get her.

No matter what comes next, he'll not forget her
and she has learned all that there is to know;
Despite what's left undone, the troubles that beset her,
when all is said and done, love can't be bettered.

No Holds Barred

What you say you want. You don't even know you don't mean it.
If I let go the bars, you'd buckle under the weight, the fragile
construct of desire dispersing like dandelion floss, pernicious
weed my gentle husband battles every spring, intent
on eradicating menace though he'll never win the war.

Doesn't keep him from making effort, the knowing
that he may not win. When he tells me he wants the truth,
he means it. He's strong enough to take it. I've tested
his mettle, tasted his steel, tensile strength stone-solid,
foundation on which I build my living dreams.

Snail Mail

Once it meant so much: the coming of the mail
The sight of your dear script made my heart rise
Handwriting was unique; each told a different tale
Your heart in words: my fingers held a precious prize

The sight of your dear script made my heart rise
Folded pages wrap a history of dark and light within
Your heart in words: my fingers held a precious prize
Letters from old lovers stowed in a candy tin

Folded pages wrap a history of dark and light within
Creased and softened edges shelter love long past
Letters from old lovers stowed in a candy tin
Kept for memory's sake. Not every bond is meant to last.

Creased and softened edges shelter love long past
Letters can be saved, re-opened and re-read
Kept for memory's sake. Not every bond is meant to last
Despite the years of silence, a still-connecting thread

Letters can be saved, re-opened and re-read
Take them, smooth them open, read them through
Despite the years of silence, a still-connecting thread
Tangible reminder of emotions we once knew

Take them, smooth them open, read them through
Each word counted. Letters carried weight
Tangible reminder of emotions we once knew
The sight of your dear script was worth the wait

Each word counted, letters carried weight
Handwriting was unique; each told a different tale
The sight of your dear script was worth the wait
Once it meant so much, the coming of the mail.

Try

Bold in all their blueness, ferocious landings, severity of speech that drowns conversation, overpowers crow and starling, robin and sparrow, they have been known to take on squirrels and human heads, whenever we get too close to the babies, stunned tufted fledglings huddled under garden hostas, trying to drink from a dripping hose.

No point trying to convince a mama jay we pose no threat. No point protesting that you are not a danger to my daily balance. I can't deny the squawks and scratches that show up between us, the way a jostled record needle dragged its jagged path across our grooved and whirling discs. The way fear so often clouds my wish to keep on trying.

None can say a bluejay has a pleasing song. But I will try to remember, try to believe that everything is a grace, everything is a gift, everything has a lesson. Bluejays just want their babies to learn to fly. I just want one more day to walk by your side, feel your fingers in my hair, taste your tongue in my mouth, hear the morning song of all the birds in the world rise and disperse the darkness, remind us to live, stand up on our own two feet, spread our wings, try and fall, try and fly.

THE RISEN FIELDS

Diane Glancy

We must be sparing, my parents and grandparents who lived through the Depression said. Saving *threads too short for using* labeled on the jar. The fragment of threads. The gnarl of them. Dissociative. Maybe to camouflage the dearth. There was stewardship. Conservation. This Depression-marked writing. The absence of plenty. Fewer words used sparingly. Thoughts that don't fit together. But of necessity. Observations in a house of closed doors.

^

I have trouble with the concept of nature. Maybe it is the absence of nature. I live where there is land. And sky. There are clumps of trees. Rows of trees between the fields. Windbreaks they are called. After the Dust Bowl removed the topsoil to the Loess Hills in western Iowa. There are moths and butterflies. Cicadas. Wasps, bugs and other insects. Birds. Squirrels and raccoon. The usual tenants of nature. But nature to me means flat land with an occasional hill that makes the land rise. Afterwards it falls again into the flatness

of the central plains.

Crossing the 400 miles of Kansas you feel suspended on the flat land. You feel you are not moving, but have become one with the land. The exits to small towns off I-70 show up and disappear, and you are still in the same place. Glued forever to Kansas.

You cannot use many adjectives in your sentences. There is a plainness that claims you. That heats you and freezes you and threatens to blow you away.

^

The Land as Memory

The land was important to my maternal grandparents— married in 1904. They had a small farm in Kansas. They went no other place. They lived on it daily. They were the land. The farm defined them.

I remember as a child, I played in the field or garden on the farm, and in the woods or vacant lots wherever my parents lived. My father was transferred several times— always in the central part of the country— our house always on the outskirts. I had a small cart my father made. I pulled it on the farm road, or I pulled it to the woods wherever we lived, that had not been cleared for houses.

I was by myself as the land seemed by itself. What did I do those places? I cleared a hovel in the thickets that were gnarled and bent with vines. I made *place*. The primal act of *being*— of making something out of what was before me. It was elemental. It was autonomy for a child. Self-determination. Independence.

To this day, I pass a woods along the road and the oneness of those days comes back.

To this day, I write and those days are there. This from a poem, “The Space that Was Left Has Been a Source—” “A vacant lot down the road— a bird dived at me once as I got close to the nest it built in the thicket that seemed to call me into it— I told the bird.”

It is the land from which we came. The land to which we return. The land holds the bones of my family. When I visit the cemeteries. Their memory is there.

The farm of my grandparents in Kansas— the wind swept the flat fields. The land left dirt on my shoes and socks. I think I dreamed the land tried to eat me. I dreamed of the land with teeth. My grandmother with an ax and a chicken. My grandfather with his knife. There was a smokehouse where a dead animal hanged. The weather was a wild animal in the smokehouse of memory. There was a hump of ground that was my grandmother’s potato cellar where they went when wind shook the farm.

I remember digging in her garden with a stick. I never have gardened. I collect rocks.

They have voices from the places from which I took them. There is a fireplace in my house I have not repaired. It is an open space in the wall. I keep my rocks there.

It is in me to drive to places. It is my gardening of sorts. To be on the rows of highways. Passing over the flat terrain. The earth is a story. A history. It is associations

that form the land. A unit needed for the work of imagining.

Memory is a farm. The land is a page from which crops rise.

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To write the land is to imagine it— The wind where it meets the resistance of a tree or a farm building. Where leaves— where hump of cellar— where barn with an open loft door. The hiss of wind along the wire for electricity that came later. I remember walking on the old farm road, looking up at the wire when it spoke to the wind. I remember the kerosene lamp at night on the table. The water pumped with a handle. The outhouse. I lifted the ramp once and there was a black snake beneath it. I told my grandfather and he killed it with his hoe.

Once, on the way to the farm in winter, our car slid off the road. My father walked to a farmhouse and the farmer came with his tractor and pulled us from the ditch.

Outside, a woodpecker works on the branch of a tree. The sameness of it. The repetition.

Thou shalt be visited of the Lord of hosts with thunder, and with earthquake, and great noise, with storm and tempest, and the flame of devouring fire— Isaiah 29:6.

I, the Lord, speak from the clouds to the bedrock of the earth. I say to you, hold on.

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I-35 is the central north/south interstate in the center of the country, running 1,568 miles from Duluth to Laredo. The United States north to south is 1,900 miles— from the Canadian border, through Minnesota, Iowa, northwest Missouri, southeastern Kansas, Oklahoma, Texas, to the Mexican border. If the map was folded, I-35 through Wichita would be the crease.

There are 3,000 miles east to west coasts.

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The wind, the sea have accounts. They leave storm and rogue waves. But the land has few uprisings. It holds steady. Until the storm of earth as earthquake and maybe fire.

50 miles north of the Red River, on I-35 in Oklahoma, the Arbuckle Anticline rises to 1,412 feet. The interstate cuts through the bedrock upturned / downturned / buckled back on itself in an old upheaval.

The land is full of karsts, sinkholes, fractures, fissures that led to underground caves. After all, in Chickasaw origin stories, the people came from a hole in the earth. They knew The Maker lived in the sky when missionaries told them of their God. The Indians knew of the wars there. The lines of rock strata vertical on the land were a row of The Maker's arrows.

The story of history is full of rocks and the language that belongs to them— thrust-belt deformations and displacements— angled and wrench-faulted— the horst of exposed folds sorghumed together until layers of rock once horizontal stand at attention— the sedimentary layers from a sea over igneous rock of volcanic origin— strata folded by tectonic compression into a mountain range worn by wind erosion over time— violent and knowledgeable of unbearable disruption.

Now, passing there, on I-35, the lines of exposed, upturned strata look like rows of crops planted across a hilltop field.

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The Smokehouse Creek Fire, Texas Panhandle, February 26, 2024. Maybe a wooden light-pole fell in the wind. Or boys played with matches. Or an argument in a field dry as hardtack. I've seen the poles leaning along a dirt road. I've seen the aurochs grazing on a cave wall— their horns long as fire lines when the brush-unit from the firehouse arrived. For breakage, the Japanese used powered gold in lacquer to reassemble a bowl or plate to show loveliness made from ruin. A sentence in a book you remember also is *kintsugi*. Maybe lightning touched grasses in a field. I've seen bolts jagged as barbed wire the way a sentence can cross a page and start fire. Fields of it uncontained. Once I walked on a blackened field— the footprints behind me were a time-lapse photograph of the moon traveling the night sky. "The way the wind turned from the north— there was nothing we could do. We lost cattle and pastureland in the battle." The fields burned. The bowls and plates broken.

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I live now in north central Texas on land where Comanche, Arapaho, Wichita, Waco and other tribes roamed.

In Texas, I have a house with a backyard with an old privacy fence I'm not sure will continue to stand. I walk into my yard and no one can see me. I see the roofs of the one-story houses, but not them. Being alone with the yard and oneself is nature.

I am met with mosquitos. Wasps look for places to build their nest. I pulled a new mud-glob from a nail that was on my house for some reason. The wasp flew when I walked from the door. It has rained in Texas. The earth still damp. Before the 105^o temperature settles in my yard until October. Even close to November it can be near 100. Under the back fence is a hole dug by some animal. I saw a large raccoon walk through my yard after I moved in. It is my wilderness.

There are three catalpas in the yard. Another tree I don't know the name of. Nature is the yard. The dirt. The grass. Silent and abiding.

In spring, the catalpas drop white petals in the yard— they are small, white teepees— with a few markings of violet and yellow on the inner wall. Later, spikes come from the trees,

dropping in the yard, sometimes sticking in the ground like arrows. They are a nuisance. They are remnants. A history book from tribes that passed the land.

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Eclipse 2024

The old catalpa drops its sticks in the yard. Dry and brittle I snap them like string beans. I think of a woman gathering twigs. Maybe an ancestor who visits at the odd moment the moon stands in front of the sun with a cold fist raised to the fire.

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Often a place name carries definition. Instruction. A place known for its name and all the information therein. A declaration that sets into motion. A placename of what happened there.

It was the Inuit who helped a search party find the *Erebus* that left England in 1845 to find the Northwest Passage. After years of searching for the location, an Inuit told one of the searchers about a bay the Inuit called, "boat place." And there, scanning the floor of the sea, in 2014, the hull of the *Erebus* came on the sonar screen.

It was the place name, preserved through Inuit oral tradition. that led searchers to the remains of the ships some 160 years later, where other searches had failed.

Often memory resides in place names.

I can say, *Flackville*, to my brother, and he will remember a school in Indianapolis where we went after our father's first transfer. Where we entered as strangers mid-year, to be stared at. The school was named after Joseph Flack, landowner and brick manufacturer. It was land I own in memory, for we lived in one of those areas of new tract houses made of brick on land that Flack owned. There was still uncleared land nearby, where I pulled the cart my father made for me, and played for days and days in the thickets after school until he was transferred again.

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And now, in the development of memory— the development and establishment of it.

At first, I didn't understand the moving car. The going of one place to another. A house in the city on a paved street. A farmhouse in the country on a dirt road. The passage between. Then the passage to other places. I, myself, a passage being formed. A disruption of the journey. A curve in the road. There was a coming together of two differences. A third was made from it.

It was the farm from which the sky was seen. The fields in the distance had no bounds. They rolled into the sun following it west. They came back the next morning when the sun shined from a different direction. The fields left their door open and the clouds got in their way. But even the clouds passed. Then the battle of drought. Of crops that came from the ground and flourished. Or they shriveled— not being fully what they were to become.

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The names... of... objects that have one definition in the eye, another in the hand, of forms and features on the rim of the world— Pohd-lohk, Keahdinekeah, Aho.

From *The Names*, N. Scott Momaday

There are old land formations within memory.

My grandparent's farm is gone now. It is a field that belongs to another. Crops are planted there. The name I would give the place— "The place where I was." Though nothing is there now.

I saw the land. I held it with my hands. I saw the form of the rim of the earth from the field.

The name of place. The name of self. The name contains various meanings. The root of meaning. The essence. The spark of creation.

In Bourbon County Kansas. The leftover hiss of the Big Bang still can be heard as static. A sound that is stillness. Memory carries the soundlessness of the farm. The open land under the open sky. It was there from the beginning. The quiet of recognition.

When I think of the land, it is the imaginative part. The core. Focus. The root cause of being.

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Yet

Somewhere from Virginia the maternal great-grandparents started half-way across the land. Chickens in a crate. Four mules pulling the wagon. The story of the world. Was there argument to go or stay? The hills and green hope. The land far away. He would go. She left family and would have stayed. Get the chickens in their crates each day— The mules before the wagon—

The river where the flatland met— The open road not wet. Let them travel without attack. Hold them on the wagon-seat. The ruts and stones in their way. Their net of endurance going thin. And how they knew to stop? And where? How they unloaded the wagon. Slept beneath until one room of a cabin built. A bet the roof before winter. How could they get a field plowed? The game sufficient. She set a cloth on the ground and made supper from a fire. The mules grazed. In the dark nights something howled. The chickens back into their little crate at night. Who knew what prowled?

^

The lot is cast into the lap, but the whole disposing thereof is of the Lord— Proverbs 16:33. When I was a child I went into the woods where I imagined bears. A print apron unfolded every morning to let the birds out. The leaves flew before they landed. When the animals jostled, I crawled on their lap. Workers came and took down trees for more houses and the brush between them. Before silence rented my mouth, I called to the bears circling a curved knife on the moon. The Lord was the suburbs then. He roasted marshmallows in the logic of

his being. The heavenly ones, his sidekicks, sat in lawn-chairs in the gravel holding their beach towels while he worked on the ocean with the drumbeats of the carpenter's noise.

by Glenn Marchand

Breathing by Fate

You keep dreams awakened. Such memory to sleep. A den with lions. A cure for such lions. To have sung upon harp, to sooth memory shadows. To live for you, to die in patterns—so uncured and pushing diamonds. A field of debated thoughts, an acre of curses, so many landmines. The oceans of time, poured out into deserts, to trek therein, trying to make it home. A man to his ghosts; a woman to her phantoms; such allegiance—certain feelings, as to bond uneven skies. You keep dreams awakened—shadows of evening, leopards of a great loss, in adoring what might adore in return. Many fathoms in, swimming like a madman, sharks nibbling heels. Too

much for immaturity; too gray for plaid; walking through a deeper dungeon, minds inverted, filled with tenacity. And coyotes watch and dance, to encircle prey, to strike at random, certain to face it. By some miracle, sitting and wounded, scents wafting high, must go underground. Such sentiments in humankind, sworn to riddles, tugged by literature, living vicariously. So many miles, unveiling collectively, no understanding of how it would affect religiosity. Tales told, sagas released, such deep and benighted lights, a soul making years, such blackdamp wars. Encouraged against all odds, the dying 300, to perish into a legacy.

Grandfathered In

One thousand winks—heartbroken mystics; in sealing myself, in remembering you, to have absence and scenery; inside castles, each room shares your grief, with tomorrow tasting mythic. By slumber to put it off; by courage to inflate a soul. Knowing it means much in a land giving

eternity. It's paradoxical with me: every soul will contradict itself. Truly; as actual. Intrinsic rivers, yogic purification, numen purging; aloft a feeling, touching an emotion, teepee minded, visionary questing—too much, as one reminisces—sore rites, core meaning, Cajun stew. Tying knots, knotted inside, unbelieved sourness. To hold a rail, to tug covering, trying to outwit a

certain state of affairs, to love freely, wrestling with the Great Dragon. Life gets heavier than us, hectic at turns, eating croquettes—as into a whisper, swimming deeply, leaping upstream,

salmon of souls; to imagine a depressed bear, or a tragic mood shift, asking, what was it?
human

epicenters. Sacred spaces like Tibet, or Shiloh. Over a flagon of spirits, nurturing ailments,
returning to first base, as it seemed so distant in passing. A crestfallen moment. A second to
ponder life. To make music upon a viola. Such power—to drive through calamities, a poet to
his elegies, a ballet to entertaining angels. And uncertain of how days become jejune.

A Tribute to Reality

I have no business where sunshine dwells in another's arena. I, too, have condemned self, as
to let go of fancy, cursed it feels, as if cosmic mania has lodged a peg. If to think aside
nemesias,

asking for tragic catharses, so released, so disconnected, upon its on illusion. I have a belief in
excellence, to have submersed one's spirit through arts: mind motion, heart trance. In loving

some wild experience—where it became numbing, with passing winds making for a delicate
return, such California mantis. I would imagine some utopia, some renaissance of satisfaction,
to

then reach further into a given future—seeing travesty, seeing another's gaze, as a soul has

subsumed myriad traits. One is often without feelings of guile; as presumed in an audience.

Suffering chains of innocence—somewhat redeemed, to know is challenging. Let freedom be kind. Let treasures mount up in spirit. Let each hurt become a blessing. Such buoyant charms, so

much a charismatic countenance, to have life, somber as it may come—braving each day, by benthic plumbness, to swim with tiger sharks, to carry white whales, to raise and keep family. I

slip into mesmerism. So many afflatuses! To fret at times—wrestling is teeming with abrasions, some scars, a feeling of isolation—such an alienated consensus.

Passing Through Intuition

We try to vet theories. Such theoretical insistence. It was life to feel something, it became hectic. I would adore an image passing through intuition. To believe in something authentic. On a flat day, with fire feeling like pressure, to grasp an inclination, to ponder tomorrow. The love one might give, the belief in that possibility, the illusion to follow. Sudden fear-tables, such rabid

anxiety, to mellow into something feeling holy. In for out, out for in. The many joys, the many skies, the harbinger of peace, kept in solace, hoping for jazz. (It all speaks to why existence. It might cause discomfort, as it gives meaning. One complains about something intriguing life; and still, the poet is between fences.) To dispute what a soul gives her life to, to falter at points,

desiring something different, those complicated assertions, made persuasive, to kill parts of

the soul one says to adore. Those eyes when they dart; those frustrations seeping out, to have challenged once too often. A man is behind an eightball, a woman desires to stay with youth—such gray survival, depended upon maturity; soul of my soul, spirit by my spirit, on occasion

feeling neglected. To gaze into a pond, to see one's reflection, to know one's errors, as to walk away and forget. If to cherish, to celebrate, to love entirely, makes for certain desperation.

On The Day of The Dead

It seems more than a feeling, true extraterrestrial reigns—silent sounds, christic casualties—to have commandeered the root, excellence brings souls back. An abandoned dream, sad affliction by its dungeon, loved that way. A soul is what was given, bled of humanity, such cutthroat existence. A man died cleaving to his child; a mother cringed in reflection, to imagine certainty

of love given in desperation. Fire of my flame; ache of my atmosphere. It never mattered much when addiction kicked in. It meant life or death during sobriety. It seems difficult to condemn an unforgiving soul; one might ask, nay, plead for certainty, if once, if twice, if three times

convicted. So tacit those storms, susurrous rains, if delivered with strength, if able to carry

society; one feather, one book, a variety of chips: just trying as it were to be normal. Plus, the day of the dead—to have built an edifice with souls, to have noticed banshees in souls, eyes locked, foreheads knocking, to roll into the next season. In seeing happiness, to imagine joys,

asking one believe. Told he could not; believing in what was said; to again persevere, looking back ever and anon. Those colors, so opalescent, pouring into the universe. Over a decade, to sacrifice to dice, playing—life on the line, still climbing a steep force.

Slipping Away

Miles until completion. Rivers bypassed. Oceans dwelled in. Explosive pains, such differing creeds. Too much time suffers; by candlelight and scar. Knowing what you give, I wonder of how much it aches. That deeper region, explored by one giant; curve of one's disasters, life of one's dreams. Don't let us fool you, our need is damn near critical. More literature. More mistakes. More repentance. And it would if it mattered, so occasioned by screams. New America,

old roots, as we live one tear to soil. Baffled creatures, filled with needs, an anchor confusing us: spirit of my sanity, days of my years. One would be amazed by it all, to realize in passing, critical magnifiers. Ancient seas, one pursuit, one focus, if to make heaven before hell. And a decent tale, as told to souls, one seeking his visions. In running deeper, defused in parts, wondering what life pushes out of us; soul of my soul, ink of my spirit. So many miles until

completion. Such camouflage. With trying to suspect you. Flame of my afflatus. Palms full of symbolism. Angst by fever. So far into history. So confusing. Much taken for granted, more upon a breeze: depth of suspicion, rising lakes. Blamed until blindness. So easy to efface our parts. So many kilometers, so many false nooks, to sit in fluids—damn near abandoned.

Love Seems Immortal

I sense in demure a woman wiser than many. A man is set to believe best as *wills* itself. Anxiety of my cross. Walk of my life; anguished by beauty, crazed over suffering. I sense in demure a woman seized by life, managing multifaceted mansions. Unlike many, maintaining ties, surfing tides, an upsurge of realities. (A little freshet at times. We bring it back.) Honor of a soul's grave. Magnet of a spirit's brains. Fire of my flame; life of my deaths. So many moths! I stand in admiration, amazed by anomaly, such goodness inside, chasing sunshine. Such heaviness, heaving up a future, so furtive inside, with getting closer, with touching spice, one feels like running. It's too much; daylight is seldom sweet, nightfall is seldom safe: mirror of ponds, lakes of injustice, as for love, it seems shaky at points; so much beauty in danger, so secure those thirty minutes, so intimate those few numen skies. I sense in demure a longer process, best of a furnace, kiln of chi, chiseled to precision: life is war! I sew. You sew. We dance. Arts are invisible. At a given second, deep darkness, grappling with sunbeams, trying to see clearly. I notice an understanding of decorum, deeper receptivity, a radiant smile, a

weeping to it all, imperceptible to its reality. Such a wrecking ball, pushing fragments, diligent to keep it all by treasures.

Sky calligraphy, excellent pressure. Trying to hear life, mental elements, accustomed to uncertainty, asking Fate for guidance. Love sees further, part avoiding repetition; having given a lung, having passed away, still solid, given all to endure. (That's fire skyscraping, soaring, a little sad, looking at a nonending component. I felt fey. I thought to you. I paused. Most of a dungeon key; rapid motion, a vow meant so much, those years during youth. Wanting to believe, swayed against cogent thoughts; sold a soul, asked for a retake, denied and forced to live it out.) A jagged road, palming gravel, feeling reality, writing a thesis. Looking to balance out before clouds fall. And Love analyzes; might do on a moment's notice, might wait until seas dry.

Vulnerability

Deep, terrible infatuation; nothing is enough; art made of bone and arteries. Giving much to survive by curse, refilmed inside, tiptoeing a precipice, adrift a star. And Love was genius to have sung her diamonds; in reality—it churned, low points, dearest, darkest moments—not mine to say, nor ours to fabricate, to each soul their privacy. If enamored at times, certain silence, accustomed to civic duty, suffering by presence. Such is life, greeted by passions, so much desire in a given moment. Near misperception, beloved of a citadel, chained lions, domesticated cheetahs. To remember when Love perished, standing picturesque, so many wishes, so much depth a scar. A given moment, such fickle futility, upon a memory—running to mend science. Many needs. With Love alike to an artist, part chasing winds, part satisfied, clouded by crowding thoughts—imperfect cogitation. Upon neighboring shadows, trying to keep evil out, aflame a current, fraught by undulations, given to esoteric wisdom. To give it clearly: seeing requires clarity, counsel, a reaching for closure. In asking a soul's motivation, if disclosed, two might gather lessons together, might invest in dreams together, might

rejuvenate faith together. By no means have souls exhausted love, tentacle clasping breath, spirit by vision, vision by sudden satori.

Sunshine Somber

We're missing out on enjoying an experience; icy white winters, jasper-green autumns, bright lime summers. I fall into it, weeping my chills, languishing over an image, a smile, part elated, with a hint of brokenness. To compare majesties, to feel part realized, sore radiant glitter, one first gesture—as memory serves life, a capturing mist, perfume at times. I hear into traffic a buoyant force, so incredible, left to wonder for whom; galvanized, drained, a remarkable stronghold, and ever steadfast. I find flirting cute, enchanting, upon a feeling, kneading uncertainty. It never mattered at end of day—it meant so much, wider than an oxymoron, and one wish. Tender blue skies, cozy gray-white clouds, surefire cozen, a need to exist better, alive—turquoise eyes, jasmine brows, reaching through thistles, one vibe, another tear. So much for me. Never a rhythm. Crisp pains. Cryptic rain. It was a flicker of its flame. Blessed in a petal, to gaze across traffic, deep clarity, all failures fail to count. To ask for marriage, to locate agreement, to adore for eternity, one lasting, feral understanding. Listening to each

breath, filled with mesmerizing chatter, to plant a million roses, so uncured in life. Sun shimmering. Trenchant moonbeams. Was an iconoclast; having life in arcane truths, somber by an elated presence—soil by its torch.

Tender Precipice

In essence, by core substance, time feels redundant. I've daggers inside, contempt of self, feeding into wells of imperfection, striving for immortal ideas. And loving was first intoned, becoming affectional, carried into psychic clutching; needing one's beloved, seized by resonance. In motion

art takes form, roses appeal to glory, earth becomes intimate—rising in beauty, filmed attractions, staged chemistry, as it becomes emphatic; days seeking dreams, vivacious velocity, caves and causality; fevers by chills, maps by terrains, during one life, sorting through foreign memories.

I've a feeling inside, nights are growing younger, days are in a rush of affairs. It all means so much, pure intonation, wafting upon an orison, guided by mystery, one says, "We're part familiar, following patterns." If we must, I suppose, if feeling this way produces comforts. One

perspective

courts another, with horns blaring, with triumph so far away, soul of spirit, spirit of one's saga.
I've become in part postmodernist; life has and loses order; moments are cherished as chaos.
Battle

of one's soul, lord of one's shadow, making an appeal to some uncanny reality—entity of solar,
hertz of intensity, evenings in limbo. Trying to get closer to expression, to say experience
without emphases, memories unclaimed, ideographs given life, pictographs made impossible.

by Anne Dyer Stuart

Highway Fire

By the time she came upon it, it had fangs and a tail, bright
horror, smoke unfurling from a brick throat,
roof already gone, men arriving in the aftermath.
Everything now for that family, after.
Life had already happened.

She was twenty and running from a drunk, two drunks,
that house full of a different smoke, brothers
she loved but couldn't like, her desire trained
on her own bones. The car she drove would break
down but not now. She was gone.

By the time she came upon it, neighbors stood in the yard, secretly grateful, outwardly grieving. This was something they knew. And even the one across the street, indifferent, came over in walking shoes, beige orthopedics, laceless. She carried a certain kind of grace, her neck long.

It had cost a lot to choose what she thought had been a choice, what burned her nervous, shed of the others and how with them she was needed, if overlooked. She would not get out of the car but she would think about them, paper dolls in the yard, a fragile chain hooking them to each other, everything burning.

House Party

Thirty years later I see a girl flat
on her back, front yard of a house party,
two boys teasing with their fists.
But it was just a long line of insults
absorbed as matter-of-fact girlhood.

I had a history

of imprisoning myself. History
of scrutiny, witness. Large blooming
girl whose body, cooked dough,
crisps in front of everyone. A history
of hiding when she cannot hide.

Lectures

I knew the one I refused to kiss
had a homelife only glimpsed on TV,
Daddy thin from liquor, strong fist
to his mama's eye. That year a priest

let my Episcopalian self confess
whatever I'd needed to, temporary
Catholic in a school of nuns. I could feel
that boy in the room when we sat in front

of the speaker, sweaty animated
man talking *sin, sin, sin*. Surely
I've conflated several lectures now,
but I remember a paralyzed best friend,

haunting regret, empty bottles, women
who tempt men. How that day Mama'd dressed
me in a mini skirt, massive earrings
bought in Florida. He'd looked at me

and I felt that boy shift in his seat
with all he knew of home. What women
do to good men. What women

make men do.

Sunday

Some beast takes them in its mouth overnight,
acid of strawberries in July,

hops out into moonlight, fortunate.
Apples fall early, pockmark the lawn

like a teenage face, one that will carry
these years upon it, dented. You were young

once, that threat of winter too sudden
to take seriously. You stayed in place,

and the river pulled around your cold knees,
gray ribbons between your fingers. Geese

shot out against the sky, choreographed,
brave. A brown one walks along the bank,

and finally, you spot the problem. One wing
bent at an angle, faint moon in the sky.

Varsity

Once, you were subbed into varsity last
minute and didn't finish last. Your coach,
surprised at first, then disappointed.
You're not supposed to have anything left.

What she didn't know: every morning, up
at five, nine miles. Eleven after
practice, because there was no way to know
how much y'all covered around River Oaks,
your coach pushing her girls in the jogger.
Those normal bodies. You were not. So you
ran. It was a wonder you placed at all.

Heat

Under an exhausted August, sky
like a cut throat, black blood, skin exposed,
girl waits on a swing. Desire will never

grip her this way again, out where the wind
doesn't stir and the moon is bored. Girl waits
in the night air thick with steam. Hope

is a thing that will keep her here.

Purgatory

Purge, root word
of purgatory, state
of waiting when you know
the outcome, when
a tiny sliver of yourself
hopes you're wrong.

But, there's so much *action*
in purge. Force, decision,
wish to shed the body
of its ills. What kind
of alchemy would it take
to make the outcome your own?

Purge, not just bulimic
urge but certainty:
what's inside is wrong.
Runway's slick ribbon
of rejection. Future
a test already failed.

My Unborn Brother

Swetha Amit

The day after I turned six, during summer vacation, Pa said I would have a baby brother in a few months. Together, we cleaned up my room to make space for the baby. I was excited to have a sibling finally. Being the only daughter, I felt lonely sometimes. All my friends had siblings. Ma was in her room resting. For a few weeks, I noticed her tummy getting bigger. I thought it was all that chocolate ice cream she'd been eating lately, besides the yucky egg yolks. Ma always told me to eat less sugar and fat and more vegetables. When I told her the same thing, she started crying. Pa said she was extra sensitive now and shushed me. "It's all those hormones," he said. I never understood what he meant.

Pa took me to the toy shop the next day to help him choose something for the baby. I was trying to think what my baby brother would like. A toy car? A stuffed toy? Pa took me to the rattle section and said the baby would like to play with a toy that made a jingling noise. Among the giraffe, zebra, and panda rattles displayed, I picked the panda. It had a cute face with a button-shaped nose and a polka-dotted red bow around its neck. I could imagine this in my baby brother's hands. I named it Bobby and played with it daily, imagining how my baby brother would coo and giggle whenever I tickled him.

One Sunday morning, Ma came out of her room panicking. Her face was red from crying. Pa's face was pale. He grabbed the car keys, ushered her downstairs, said something to Granny, and shut the door. I wondered if it was time for my baby brother to come out. I quickly drew a card with a sunflower and wrote, 'Welcome home.' Granny had come to live with us for a few weeks. I could hear her shuffling downstairs, muttering a prayer. I arranged my toys and placed the panda rattle on the cradle. Then the phone rang, and Granny picked it up. She gasped loudly and then spoke in whispers. Later, I heard the sound of her muffled sobs as she was preparing breakfast.

When I went downstairs, Granny was quiet, and there were traces of red in her eyes. She placed a plate of boiled eggs and toast on the table. The eggs were half-cooked, the way Ma liked it. The yolk spilled on my hands as I cracked them open. I wrinkled my nose. The rotten smell felt like the trash bags Papa always took out. I wonder how Ma could bear to eat them this way.

"The eggs are not cooked," I complained to Granny.

She quietly wiped the gooey yellow liquid from my hands and boiled another round of eggs. Then she sprayed some vanilla scent across the room, removing the bad egg smell. The flames were high, and I could hear the water making a sizzling noise. I nibbled on the buttered toast. There was silence until I asked about Ma.

Taking a deep breath, Granny muttered, "Your Ma will come home after a few days."

"What happened?" I persisted.

"Do not talk with your mouth full," she scolded me.

After some time, she switched off the stove and cracked open the eggs. The yolk was intact.

Granny looked at the new hard-boiled eggs wistfully. A tear rolled down her wrinkled cheek. She sprinkled pepper on the eggs, put them on a plate, and handed it to me. Then she shut herself in her room, leaving me to finish the eggs. Later, I went upstairs and played with the panda rattle.

A few days later, Pa brought Ma home. Her long blonde hair was tied into a bun. She looked thinner, and her tummy wasn't so big. I ran to hug her, but Pa said she needed rest.

"Where is my baby brother?" I quipped. Ma avoided looking at me. Pa quietly led Ma upstairs. Granny shut herself in her room.

Later that night, I heard Ma sobbing in the room next to mine, and Pa was comforting her. I could only hear a few words from their whispering.

I clutched the panda tightly and drifted away to sleep.

The following day, Granny and Pa were setting the breakfast table. Ma was still asleep. Pa took out the eggs from the carton. He accidentally dropped one while trying to put them on the table. The brown eggshell cracked open, and the marble-white floor was splattered with bright yellow liquid. The rotten trash bag smell filled the room. It was worse than that day when granny only half-cooked them. I felt like throwing up. The mess on the floor resembled the butterfly drawing I made in art class at school. As the teacher pointed out, the wings were short and uneven. It didn't feel right. Pa stared at the mess and suddenly left the room. Granny began to clean the floor and spray the room. When my tummy started to growl, Granny handed me an apple from the fruit bowl.

"But my eggs," I began.

"It will take time," she replied.

"Where is my baby brother?"

Granny had a sad expression. She stroked my head gingerly.

"Your Ma needs rest."

"But what happened to Ma?"

Granny picked up the broken eggshells.

"She will take some time to recover," she said.

After breakfast, I went upstairs and heard Pa tell Ma, in hushed tones, "It was so complicated..." His voice trailed off. Ma was sobbing.

I went into my room. My welcome card was still on the table, and the panda rattle was on the cradle. I picked the rattle up. The jiggling sound drowned out some of the noise of Ma crying and Pa trying to say something. I wondered if all that chocolate ice cream and raw egg yolk made Ma sick. I continued to shake the rattle harder.

The Night Walk

Swetha Amit

After putting the toddler to sleep, you step out for a little stroll. It's chilly again, and you feel the slap of cold breeze on your face. You grab a large black jacket and tuck a thin, multicolored enamel bangle designed with flowers and butterflies in one of the pockets. It was your husband's first gift when you began dating almost twenty years ago, which your toddler found on the floor and began to suck on it. A time when your wrist was tiny enough to slip the bangle on. You try it on again, only to find it wouldn't go past your knuckles. It hurt like hell. You manage to remove it with some soap.

You close the door after telling your husband to manage if the toddler walks up. He nods quietly, and his eyes are transfixed on the laptop screen. Ahead of you, the street is wrapped in darkness and silence except for an occasional rustle in the bushes, which you assume to be a raccoon. The sky above you is jet black, the shade your long, wavy, dark hair used to be a few years ago. Not a spec of grey cloud, you think enviously, ruing over the grey streaks sprouting on your thinning hair when you turned forty-two last year.

The houses in your neighborhood are sturdy and have weathered storms and earthquakes. There is a light burning in one of them. You see a couple, probably in their thirties, watching television. The man's arms are around the woman, the way your partner would snuggle up to you before the toddler was born. You stand outside that house in the darkness as muffled voices from the television drift into the air. You watch the couple throw back their heads and laugh while pangs of envy twirl in your flabby stomach.

You lean against a tree, watching the woman get up, holding an empty glass. You stare at her red dress, accentuating her slender waist, toned arms, and narrow hips. A passing car startles you. You almost lose your balance, but you grab hold of the tree as if your life is in danger. And you wonder if it would matter to anyone if you were gone. Another gust of wind blows. You tuck your hands into your jacket, which conceals your arms and chest. The bangle pokes you, and you immediately withdraw your hands. You can almost taste the flavorless cold air as it enters your mouth. The light inside the house goes off, leaving you alone in the darkness.

You decide to continue your stroll. Memories of those movie nights with your partner, rooftop dinner dates, or long night walks under the moonlit sky play in your mind like a bittersweet movie. It all feels like a distant dream. You think of the strained communication now, his long working hours, leaving you to quit your job and tend to the baby full-time. You try to comprehend the inexplicable change in him. You visualize him now typing on his laptop fervently, only to be interrupted if the toddler wakes up crying.

Above you, the sky lights up as the moon creeps out from the shadows. The entire road is suddenly bright. You feel like you are transitioning from one station of life to another on a speeding train. Your shoulders feel worn out from the days of constant cradling, burping, and feeding. Your hands look puffy. Your legs feel stiff and wobbly from those folds of fat. It has been a long time since you got any exercise, a stark contrast from those days of sweating it out in the gym before your tennis practices.

You pass a creek near your house and listen to the gurgling sound of water. You take out that bangle, stare at it briefly, and hurl it into the water. There is a loud splash before the gurgling sound resumes. Your shoulders strangely feel lighter as you walk back to your house and stand outside the door. Glancing up at the sky, you detect a face on the moon carrying traces of unhappiness. You smell the damp grass and feel wistful as you think about that hike in the rain where your partner proposed and later caressed your face lovingly. You wonder if he would ever look at you the same way again?

You suddenly see puffs of swirling clouds eclipse the moon. Drops of water trickle from the sky and sting your bare face. You hurriedly open the front door and retreat inside. Your husband is still on his laptop and barely looks up. You slip into an empty bed, listening to the gentle pitter-patter sound of rain on the roof. You close your eyes and feel your knuckles. It's still a little sore. You pray the rain doesn't elapse into a thunderstorm. You don't want the toddler to wake up crying. You are tired and worn out. Everything seems peaceful at the moment. You hope the soreness subsides and the clouds dissipate with time.

Dreaming about that fawn

Swetha Amit

I dream of that fawn again. The one with a dark line from its left eye that looks like a black tear. It has pointed ears and tiny white dots on its golden skin. In my dream, the fawn is scampering on the side trail road that leads to the Stanford Dish, trying to find its way home. And I am on the opposite side of the road, watching the fawn warily while waiting for the traffic lights to turn green. The fawn is staring at the cars whizzing by on the highway. I try to catch its eye and signal it to turn back and go home. But it never looks at me. My heart beats loudly at the thought of the fawn stepping on the road unknowingly. Every time, I wake up with a piercing scream until my throat is parched, and my eyes burn as though they are on fire.

I've never been fond of trails or hiking. I'm content in the cocoon of my research lab, conducting experiments. I can't understand the repeated appearance of this fawn in my dreams. Later, I learned that dreaming of a deer symbolizes compassion and gentleness—words I have been asked to instill in my soul for the past two years after that dreadful accident.

That incident always leaves me with a lump in my throat. I yearn to wipe away those memories forever. I wish to gaze into those black gem-like eyes and seek forgiveness. I want my voice to rise above the car horns and reach the fawn so that it can hear me say, "Stop, don't run on the road." I want to grasp its brown skin and hold it close. I imagine soothing it with comforting words and drowning out all those accusatory voices haunting my mind.

The voices that blamed me for being a phone addict and neglecting your whereabouts. The voices that labeled me selfish and irresponsible. All because I had to answer that emergency work call, and I thought you were playing on the slide and swings, not realizing you had strayed outside the safe haven of the lush green park. I noticed you were nowhere in sight until I heard the loud screeching noise of the brakes and the thud sound. I tripped and fell on the path trying to get to you and bruised my knee. But it was too late.

One night, I find myself walking barefoot on the street outside my home. The cold breeze slaps my face, and I shiver in my plain white nightgown. It's pitch black, and all I can see are shadowy silhouettes of the trees. I am not sure how I got here. I call out to the fawn, hoping it can hear me. "Don't venture far from your home. Your family is waiting for you." I continue screaming until my voice turns hoarse. I only stop when I hear the screeching sound of a car's brakes. The headlights blur my vision.

Under the Watch of the Moon

Greig Thomson

The carers wash her body with wettened flannels, rubbing the soap across her forearms gently, cleaning between her fingers, massaging the back of her hand. She flinches when they wet her brow and clean around her eyes, and she moans in relief as the flannel moves around the back of her neck. She is almost gone. These final moments of comfort, her body giving in to the touch of the carers, who work so carefully, lifting her legs, her arms, turning her head. Such a fragile body, one mistake, one word out of place even, and she might break. That would be the end of her.

When Rhea was born, her mother would cradle her in her arms, rock her and sing gently to the moon. It was here that Rhea learned the nature of motherhood, before memory, an impression stamped on her very essence by her own mother. And it was a happy childhood, to begin with. As a young girl, she learnt the wonders of nature and the magic of infinite space, so full of majesty and sublimity. But it was a flawed canvas. There was a dark spot, small but conspicuous, unbalancing the symmetry of the composition. For Rhea, this mark expanded over time, an ever-growing etching, an itch compulsively scratched, into the background. Rhea's father was an absent king, leaving his home to fret over business matters, affairs of power and vanity. When he was at home, he was cold and indifferent, a distant star, blinking down at Rhea, unconcerned with her life, her happiness. In the early days, after her birth, he had been a kind man, looking on as Rhea's mother coddled her with love and compassion. He had spoiled her, doted on her even, but his work took him to dark places. Ambition was his undoing. He was left unable to love with a hate that had hardened his heart. Rhea did not know it at the time. She was a young girl, only interested in experiencing the splendour of the world around her; the warm, summer evenings blowing through the illuminated streets of Downtown Los Angeles. She was too young to understand the fear hanging from the utility poles like occupied gallows, or the violence that stained the walls alongside alleys and pathways behind derelict buildings. Too young to understand her father's life. Rhea lived on the hill, above it all, an endless ocean of night sky above her, blanketing the grid of tiny lamp lights that blinked along the streets below. It was where Rhea escaped in her mind, this cover of night, the embrace of the endless darkness, surrounding their little planet. And then there was her mother, cradling her in her memory. She loved Rhea deeply, leaving an indelible imprint on her soul. Late at night, Rhea tucked up in bed, her mother would look up into the night sky at the crescent moon and point to it so that Rhea could see it's wonder. That humble, celestial orb, the perfect synchronicity with the earth. She would tell Rhea when she was old enough to understand, "There are many moons in the universe, Rhea. When we die, we will live amongst them, looking down on the people on earth. We are always under the watch of the moon. It is even looking out for you as you sleep." And with these gentle words, Rhea would drift off into a blissful slumber, safe in her mother's arms, the universe watching on, protecting her.

At night, she drifts from dream to dream, inconstant landscapes, half-recognised faces. The carers return each night to bathe her and the nurses file in and out, checking her vitals, administering the morphine, wetting her lips. She is far away, deep in space, in her celestial home. It is a shrine to her life, each room devoted to a different interest, a collection of memories. It is so fragile, this celestial orb, perched above the earth, moved by the push and pull of gravity, a winking candle in a child's window as they close their eyes and dream of her watching them. But the dream has become her new reality, away from the aches and pains of the hospital, the crude muscle memory of life's collective traumas. She has moved on from the earth, finding her new home amongst the stars.

Rhea wakes to the undulation of her celestial home, a constant, light rumbling, the purring of a living being. Surely, she had fallen asleep on the chair by the telescope. She thought that, at times, one must get lost in the delirium, reliving memories of great joy and sadness, the strange counterpoint of happiness and sorrow that writes an ineffaceable score on the song lines of one's soul. She picks herself up slowly from the chair, her bones aching and creaking. She can still carry her weight, but she feels the pull of it, the inertia of her existence slowly pushing down upon her. And then she becomes reaccustomed to the weightlessness of the sphere, the diminished gravity. She floats through to the library, looking for a tome she had long forgotten, a book on *the Celestial Spheres*. She opens it and wonders at the artwork, the sublime *Le Sphere de Monde* by Oronce Fine, the seven spheres connected like pins on a wheel. It makes her happy to think of the universe connected like this, a grander scheme to an otherwise detached and distant galaxy. Making her way through to the kitchen, Rhea makes herself a cup of coffee, the machine spluttering and gurgling momentarily, sending tiny droplets floating up into the air in the sphere's manufactured atmosphere. With a conk, the machine stops, a metal arm encasing the coffee cup with a plastic lid and straw. The smell of the brew is still in the air, the roasted, almost burnt coffee beans, and then, a sudden flash, a memory. She was looking up from her coffee at the local Cafeteria in Los Angeles, the Grand Central Market. Night had thrown its cloak over the sky and Rhea could see the full moon blooming like a wild orchid. The crowds of people making their way slowly along the stands and stalls, moving at an even pace, connected in a kind of symbiotic understanding, a mark of civilisation. A young couple, leaning against a wall by the side of the stalls, looked lovingly into each other's eyes, stroking each other's arms gently. For a moment, they were separate to the rest of the crowd, occupying their own private space, spinning blissfully in each other's orbit. And Rhea remembers how it felt to be in love, the anticipation of the touch, the trust, the longing in each other's eyes. She had felt it too, many moons ago. Her husband had been her first love and he was besotted with her to begin with. That look, she remembered it well. And then, it was extinguished, slowly at first. Soon enough it was gone completely, replaced with a look of steely detachment, an emotional dislocation. She could still feel the chill of it. She remembered, it was in that moment, sitting at the Grand Central Market, sipping her coffee, that she stared up at the bright, full moon in the sky and made up her mind, "It is time to leave. I am under your watchful eye," she said. Rhea felt her arms weaken, she gave in to the weight of her head, allowing it to fall on her shoulder. She woke in the hospital, alone in bed. Priceless

solitude. Her room, a place of remembrance. A tomb for the living.

Sipping her coffee, she admires the floating sphere, an animate work of art. It absorbs the planet's blue, umbrellaed sky from up in orbit. The inside of the sphere is a carefully controlled mess of verdure, plants and trees living in a hermetically sealed atmosphere. Rhea glides through her anti-gravity house, tending to the plants, floating through the great library and into the top floor kitchen, which look deep into an ocean of emptiness, the stars and planets of the solar system far in the distance. She spins neatly through the music room full of instruments that Rhea promises herself she will master. A place for her to paint. Bedrooms and bathrooms on one side. A beautiful home, one in which someone would be happy seeing out the rest of their days. The sphere: earth, encapsulated in a nutshell, tailor made. And now Rhea lives within it, a single living soul, tethered by gravity to earth, oscillating against the gravitational attraction, inches from sailing free into the profundity of space. In the back of her mind, Rhea holds on to that moment in Grand Central Market. It was the moment she chose to begin to live by deciding to die.

Placing her coffee on the magnetic coaster on the side table, Rhea turns the telescope to her home in Loma Vista and then to the hustle and bustle of the Los Angeles Union Station. Amongst the throng, a woman stands by her stroller, smoking a cigarette. She seems aloof, preoccupied. Rhea remembers it was easy to get lost for a moment, turn away from a child. Rhea had been a mother. Six children. Her marriage to her husband had been fraught after he had begun to change, an envious man, paranoid, abusive, like her father. A powerful man too, yes. Rhea knew he was not an honest man. He had worked with her father in the beginning, building their empire, stacking their money on the woes of the people they duped, ingratiating themselves into their lives. As time went on, Rhea's husband's need for success turned to rapacity. He was envious of her father who had been in power for many decades before her husband's arrival. Secretly, he schemed to accelerate Rhea's father's downfall, wanting to take the crown from himself. He carved out his living in ways he would never share with Rhea, but she could sense that he was a fallen man, lost in his own delusion, spiralling out of rhythm with the universe. In the end, it was her husband that took her children from Rhea. All but one. She had sent the remaining boy over the border to Mexico, to find a life free from the hateful grasp of his father. Her husband felt compelled to break his lineage and dissipate the power the children would have once he was gone. It was irrational, but it was a sign of how far he had fallen. He would not even let his children revel in his successes, even once he was gone. He kept the five children in a high-rise in Downtown Los Angeles, next to the Central Business District, with a meagre stipend. He had them watched, day and night. Rhea knew this, but there was nothing she could do. They were trapped, entombed in the great, metallic tower, the petty grasp of their tyrant father, their destiny corrupted, Rhea's heart broken. Rhea had planned her escape to Mexico, to find her last, remaining son, but she had not even known where to begin. Perhaps he was lost forever.

She hopes that he, her lost son, will still come before the end. He is the final tether to her motherhood. But she cannot voice it, even speak his name. She is slipping away, pulled through the atmosphere to her final destination.

The sphere turns slightly, bowing toward the earth. There is a clear view of the North American continent in the lens of Rhea's telescope now, her eye casually drifting across the shoreline of the Gulf of Mexico. Turning the telescope ever so slightly, she scales the summit of the Pico de Orizaba, moving up the Sierra Nevada, over Popocatepetl and up to Iztaccihuatl. She had travelled the Sierra Nevada in her youth. She loves those mountain ranges, thinking wistfully that she would never walk among them again. Rhea thought that her missing son might have gone there, lost his way and fallen into one of the volcanoes. That would explain why they grumbled with such tumult, threatening to overflow with anger. And then, she focuses her gaze on Mexico City. So different to the city she had known throughout her life. Rhea had moved there many years ago. She wandered the callejones, sharing a photo of her lost son with strangers in brightly coloured, wooden doorways. The answer was always the same. Looking through her telescope, sudden memories of her life in the city appear in her mind, walking the sidewalks on the busy streets, bumping her way through flocks of people, making her way to the markets to buy fresh fruit and vegetables. The heady smells of grilled meat, tacos and tamales filling the air. She can see it through the scope, Mexico City. A rambling place, full of history, art, music, a small turn of the objective lens, the infamous drug dens and bordellos. The Paseo de la Reforma lit up, full of tasteless and gaudy advertisements, reaching up to the tops of the buildings, filling the promenade with a fluorescent glare. She hates this part of Mexico City, what it has become. The history has been boarded over by commercials for soft drinks and skin care products. Rhea can see her youth covered up, replaced with empty slogans, hollow sentiment. But she still has her memories. She recalls with fondness the magnificent Metropolitan Cathedral. It is still there, but dwarfed by the commercialism of the celebrity effigies burning neon light for the demagogues in charge. The cathedral's walls are grubby, as dirty as the streets around them. It seems, tourists came for the nightlife, not the culture. They use it up, leaving only their trash behind. Rhea moves her telescope just out of the city limits to the Aztec ruins of Teotihuacan. She can see Coatlicue rising up, snakes covering her legs, a slithering dress revealing her fearsomeness. Her spirit still hums in the air of the great city, the Temple of the Moon and the Temple of the Sun. Still, there are swathes of tourists, dropping their junk food wrappers and clambering over the great steps of the temples, stomping across the ruins, oblivious to the ghosts that lived there. Rhea no longer belongs in Mexico. It seems she is disconnected from all the important places in her life. "Perhaps it comes with age", she thinks to herself. But it is more than that. Change is inevitable but this is desecration. She is glad she has taken her place amongst the stars to escape the slow destruction of this ancient city, the vandalism of the past.

Rhea removes the telescope from her eye with a sigh. There is no sign of her son. "Would I even know him now, if I saw him?", she wondered. She gently floats into the lounge to sit quietly, and turning on the stereo, Rhea chooses Thomas Tallis' *Lamentations of Jeremiah*. As the music plays, Rhea thinks about her years of worship, praying in her local Iglesia, talking to God, and feeling the warmth of his presence. But she has stopped talking to God and God has stopped talking back. The choral music soothes her as she drifts off into a half-sleep. And then

darkness. It seems endless, but she wakes quickly, the humming of the idling stereo filling the room. Rhea looks out, to the world beneath. The bio-dome is still sitting inconspicuously in the night sky over the North American continent. Mexico City, godless, sinful. "It has lost its way," Rhea thinks to herself. It has taken her son, left her reeling, out of sync, alone. She curses Mexico City, "Te maldigo!"

And, as the words leave her mouth, a miniature explosion of light erupts by the Gulf of Mexico, startling Rhea. Then, another, larger explosion bursting from closer inland. Rhea, rushes to her telescope and trains it over the sites of the explosions. She cannot believe her eyes. The great Sierra Nevada is tearing apart, the mountains suddenly spewing lava from the craters at their summit. Each mountain, thought to be inactive, explodes with ash and fire, ripping the east of Mexico away from North America. Rhea is in awe of its splendour, but horror-stricken by the wrath that is befalling her people. She quickly adjusts the lens on the telescope, directing it toward Mexico City. The eruptions move far and fast. Rhea can barely see through the ash cloud. The streets are filled with fire, people screaming, caught motionless in the wave of lava. There is a sea of brimstone, a sulphurous tsunami sweeping away the buildings and billboards. Rhea cries out as she watches the horror unfolding. Through her telescope, the suburbs on fire, a single house stands modestly, waiting for the wrath to envelope it. Rhea is desperate, and she realises, she must look for her son in all the madness. She will never give up on him, no matter how hopeless things become. But there is nothing. No sign of him. Just the burning streets and houses, the desperation of the people, running for their lives. Rhea thinks perhaps it is her son in the volcano, venting his rage, avenging his abandonment, that it is his doing. But this is not the quiet boy she remembers, the shy boy eager to please. The telescope slips from her grasp. She weeps into her hands, an overwhelming sense of futility washing over her. There is nothing she can do. Looking out to space, Rhea sees nothing but darkness.

The nurses congregate in the room, but there is nothing to be done. They stand back reverently as, with a sudden burst of air, the room is quiet, just the whisp of wind through the window, the departing soul returning to its place in an ocean of stars.

It is time to leave, find her place amongst the souls of the universe. She set a course out of orbit, far off to Saturn to take her place beside Titan. Perhaps she would find her mother there, she thought. Rhea looked down once more at the pit of fire engulfing Mexico. "My son, wherever you are, I will be watching out for you," she whispered. She would watch with them, all the moons of Saturn, searching for the son she sent away so long ago. The immortal cogs of the universe turned slowly, indifferent to the lives spinning slavishly to the rhythm of the earth. Rhea's Celestial Sphere drifted into the depths of space, deeper and deeper, utterly alone but ever closer to the Gods, always under the watch of the moon.

anna

six, seven babies, six,
seven husbands, grandma
anna was quite the character
and we loved her dearly, didn't
we, still not anything like done
at eighty five?

at our wedding, dear, still going
strong, she jumped for the bouquet
you threw over your shoulder
vying to catch it with the twenty
year old virgins.

in the family photos of her last
years, what a hoot, she sat there
in the easy chair, legs far apart,
a fragonard, a swinger, hose
and girdle yawning, cupid,
gotta love him, smirking
in the underbrush.

arms review

from a trade magazine of the same name

the switchblade drone's c4 explosive charge, the size of a claymore mine, can take out infantry and artillery up to six miles away. two feet long and just five pounds, launched from a tube like a mortar at one hundred mph, this loitering munition doesn't loiter long before it hits the target, whether taliban fighters or russian tank teams trapped in their tanks. a good option for urban warfare, it can track and engage non line of sight targets with precise lethal effects, and at a mere six thousand dollars this unmanned aerial system is quite a bargain, annihilating the enemy and minimizing operator risk.

ask alexa

natron beeswax
pitch and linen
is how crocodiles
were mummified,
she says. though
why crocodiles
were mummified,
god knows, and
did i really want
to know. make
that gods know.
egyptian antiquity
is a mystery to me,
how about you? oh
come on, now, guess.
for gods' sakes,
just guess.

clerk demands license

does this driver's license
in my wallet, checkout lady,
truly establish who i am,
how old or sober i may be?

does this shady trade
in measly ones and zeroes
suggest i am simply
the sum of all my ciphers?

rather scan this wrinkled face,
this puss, this protoplasm,
just as true or false a claim,
may i suggest without sarcasm.

in the dentist's waiting room

drab lazy pastel daubs, blue n
beige n murky gray horizontals
on canvas way up near the ceiling
of the dentist's waiting room walls,
one black squiggly arrowhead in the
upper right hand corner as if to ask for
direction? maybe the dentist's artist friend,
bought for a friendly price, or pro bono, who
knows? compare my daubs or yours, for that matter,
with which we while away the time being, all we have,
or look here, if we're not making the art scene how about
we watch the house porn on the tv overhead, well fed and
overly affluent middle aged americans deciding how to spend
their spare millions in prestigiously inflated real estate markets.
which is not to say that the dentist herself is drab, or overpriced,
hell no, a scandinavian american with long blonde braids I asked
once upon a time could i call her dr sweetiepie, at which she
refrained from whacking me and admitted she'd been
called worse things. verse things? i said, my oh my,
but thanks for the good work, you do, unlike some
people we know, know just what you are doing.

Subtext
Irena Praitis

I'd left—stacked my refrigerator and other living materials that didn't fit in my car in my office, and took off. I'd driven that "my life is in my car" vehicle all the way to Anchorage, Alaska, before turning it south again with the early onset of autumn. I made my way to Prescott, Arizona, rented a one bedroom, and found a cheap foldable card table. I wrote. When I was done with my own work for the day, I opened the cardboard

He'd left with me,	box	
husband, saying,	<i>What are the properties of cork</i>	her widowed
Would you like to see?	<i>that it accepts the sharp point of the tack</i>	she wrote haiku.
That box remained,	<i>without seeking to resist or expel it?</i>	Of course, I'd said.
my travels,	<i>And reminders, announcements, celebrations,</i>	throughout
when a lover	<i>see how we make use of such steadfastness?</i>	staying quiet
after all my driving north.		stood me up,

With the warmth of the desert, I found her words, green felt
penned on yellow post-its, poems about cleaning the microwave, the spats between her
glorious cats, the dog who played second fiddle to them, and the husband, the early riser to
her night owl, who received her words, who had received her words from their beginnings, their
early days in college, their trysts, their personal and unique anniversaries of days they forgot
lunch in their ardor. These small poems, commemorated, remembered the days, made them
into anniversaries for private moments and bore witness to a shared life, love, the cat sitting on
the essays-in-waiting to be graded, each small note offering its promise of what to hold.

First, he saw the leaves, dull brown, soggy with all the recent rains, matted flat against the asphalt holding mostly to the long strip between the white bike lane line and curb. He'd been seeing them throughout the ride, plastered and thick or thin depending on tree proximity, the flow of water toward grates. He noticed this pile more because he'd just applied the brakes and started to skid.

He could see ***Leaves of autumn*** individual leaves,
flat like a human hand ***how long can you hold the branch*** but without the same
fingers, under his tires now ***in full glory?*** angling perpendicularly.
He thought of his friends, riding behind him, had raced them
up the hill, faster than them, smiling back at them after the crest—not only had he convinced
them to ride on a wet day but he'd outdistanced them, climbing hard—and now the leaves, the
brake, the skid, and then the van--going full speed, sliding out fast, there was nothing else to
do. He had to meet it.

I felt awkward as a child, strange, different from my siblings. So likely to cry in response the world. Since none of my siblings were as emotional, I felt flawed, out of control. I was shy. I failed at making small talk as I grew older. I didn't know how to pleasantly say nothing at the few parties I was invited to, no serious relationships, **Autumn, I've been waiting** very few dates. I squandered my youth **all spring and summer for you.** in relationship pursuits. What could be more **Arrive early.** important than love? And after exhausting **Stay long.** myself trying everything I could, soul mates, a loveless marriage, partnership, back to "love is all and worth sacrificing everything for," I stopped. I learned to take care of myself, learned to look outward, to listen to the world, to give, to start my own family, on my own, and feel the blessing in that. At my strongest, healthiest, most loving, here later in life, harvesting.

i see my ancestors

i come from slaves
and slave owners,
fishermen and sailors, and
creole cigar makers
and jazz violinists at the
turn of the century in early
new orleans (c. 1910) and
from gamblers and gambling houses
and catholic housewives who
prayed every day.

my great, great grandmother
was a slave named victoria,
victoria doucette, and
was owned by my great, great
grandfather, whose name
was lucas, who came from italy,
(genoa it was)
and she died in 1890.

and maybe that's why i'm
drawn to the blues when i
hear little walter
(or wolf or muddy)
but i can't say for sure.

or why yin and yang
and the four noble truths
have had so much meaning
in the course of my life.

it's been twenty years since i read
the russians and even longer
since i read the bible but i study
the sky on a daily basis and the sea
at times when I feel forsaken and
i see my ancestors among the stars
as i search the future for the past

across this room

across this room
a photograph of my father
half-smiling
(eleven yrs. dead)
sits atop the bureau
like a smooth black stone in my stomach.

i sit holy next to my mother's bed,
her thin worn body
about to take leave of this world
and read to her
the poetry of james wright.
*(if only i knew where to mourn you
i would surely mourn you)*

a pale blue
wing broken swallow
flutters from her mouth,
the darkened sky
is hiding
at the foot of her bed.
her rosary now
is a thin grey rain
falling through her fingers.
but yet,
i see her still,
downstairs,
thanksgiving day,
preparing dinner for the living
as well as the dead.

her catholic hands
stained with suffering,
her sacred heart
a silent prayer in the wind.

and into this wind
she whispers "sometimes,
when you're not here,
i can feel you
holding my hand."

the wind was nothing then

i lived for years inside a blade
of grass and spent my days in a
spanish hat dreaming the blues.
you must take this to heart.
the wind was nothing then.

the woman i loved was made of
rain and lived in a tree struck by
lightning. every winter she followed
the moon and with her i went.
(carrying thunder in a knapsack)
this much is true.
the wind was nothing then.

we lived by chance on the smoke
of ancient fires and danced on the
graves of unlikely heroes and
there was always the illusion of
chaos wherever we went.
you need to know,
the wind was nothing then.

we made love in fields overgrown
with silence and trampled by horses
and men who died in too many wars.
yes, I lived for years inside a blade
of grass and spent my days in a
spanish hat dreaming of the blues.
you must believe me,
the wind was nothing then.

how to count the stars

einstein tried
and stopped at one billion.
harriet tubman only needed one
to free her people.
odysseus saw orion's shade in the
underworld and he was never the same.

in the fall of our youth we would lie
on our backs the night inextinguishable
and try to count those that had fallen and
those that were shooting across the
pure autumn sky.
(the days seemed endless then)

Now, with the passing of time and
that time being attenuated (but in
value immeasurably increased) we
see ourselves as stardust with no
need to count what we already are.

listening to the wind

in a language only the trees
could understand,
robert johnson knew c. 1936
(can't you hear that wind howl?)

chief joseph put it in words
for the rest of the world to
comprehend.
(we didn't bother to listen)

now it's late and the wind
has stopped talking. it looks
like rain from here on out
(but more than rain).

chief joseph heard the thunder
when it was years away and even
new orleans heard buddy bolden
say, katie bar the door, the field's
too wet to plow.

the age of enlightenment

on my evening walk
past the ancient chinese elm trees in our neighborhood
the squirrels scatter like saints in the rain,
dropping their berries
like beads from a rosary.
i take out my handkerchief for the sake of
the five years we spent on east carmen and
the walks we took holding hands past the paper houses lit up
for christmas and the next age
(i won't even mention the boogie woogie piano).
i let my hat stand for the times we made love
and had dinner by candlelight and listened
to kathleen battle sing mozart
when french bread and lentil soup meant more
than supper on a rainy night, and a simple bottle
of french table wine caused two world wars.
*who knew that your ragtime playing would put
an end to both.*
tonight i called you,
to let you know tha the moon was full- sometimes
i get the feeling that you don't look up anymore- sometimes
i picture you like mimi in la boheme, whose beauty held a
whole nation in sway, whose song tore the hearts
of a thousand desperate men. but what i mean is,
sometimes i think my one chance for love depends on
rain, and a deep understanding of the provence rose
(in all its varieties)
on the way back home
as the moonlight shone through the brittle branches
of those elms
i could see the squirrels kneeling
and praying- praying for the age of enlightenment
to come again.

the unnameable

when he whispers the unnameable or
even the unthinkable, the jewel like
stones that sleep on the poet's tongue
stalk his memory and coat his eyes
with a quiet film.

he walks streets of a different era
in the clothes his ancestors wore
searching for the names he lost
unaware they are hiding in his shoe.
in his coat pocket he carries the
address of a former lover who
dressed herself in prayer and guilt
when he himself was naked.
he reads the italians by candle light
and his thoughts become a boat
and his hands become oars and
he dreams that he is seaworthy.

the unnameable, the unthinkable,
the names he lost, they will all come
back as the moon in a poem he writes
about the unhoused and the innocent
when the vaulted air was weeping ashes.

in the unlikely event of a rainstorm

in the unlikely event of a rainstorm
happening anytime soon i have
gathered all my thoughts concerning
world peace and climate chaos and
anything i can remember about desire
and what krishnamurti had to say
about it and placed them in a small
wooden bowl near my bedside for
safe keeping.

in the future i won't be so careless.
(lost time is not found again)

i've read faulkner and hurston and
melville more than once and even
what the hindu scriptures have to
say about the meaning of life, and
i keep kindness in a suitcase at the
foot of my bed while forgiveness
sleeps under my pillow, but some
mornings when i wake up and that
unlikely event is on the horizon i
have to remind myself of where i
put them before the day slips away

Waiting for Doug

Mary Lewis

Andrea cycled over the river, so wide now it overflowed the banks on both sides to form a broad moving lake. Another flood, like the one five years ago that had closed the main bridge out of town for fear downed trees in the raging current would tear it from its footings. She headed up valley to Falcon's Crest Park where she stashed her bike at an entrance nobody used.

She waded through the waist-high grass laden with moisture that sparkled in the sunlight, after the rains of the last few days. Soaked from the waist down, she picked her way through prickly ash at the brushy forest edge and dove into the lush shade of maple where her eyes released their sun drenched tension. Here a walking path wound along a stream bed as wide as an alley that carried water only in times of flood as it did now, from the uplands into this narrow gorge. The land rose steeply on each side above her, to occasional outcrops of limestone.

Moving upstream, Andrea followed a faint deer path along a side ravine that had its own smaller stream bed and steep banks. It ended abruptly at the base of a vertical cliff, from whose base only the smallest trickle of water emerged. The land here was underlain by limestone whose subterranean cracks and rivers swelled with water from surface rains, and once those spaces filled up like a sponge, the water erupted out through openings in exposed rock, like this one where the foot of the cliff met the stream bed.

Andrea sat down on a soggy log at the edge of the stream bank, and took her sketch pad out of her backpack. Pencil in hand she began drawing, her hand moving while her eyes darted up to the cliff, then back to the paper again and again, with the freedom to look frankly she could never get away with anywhere else, especially with people.

But after a few minutes she let her pencil fall to her side, to take in the whole vertical scene, with a breath that made it out to her fingertips. She scanned from top to bottom, slowly, as though she was taking a video that would need narration. See how the green from the high slope spills down over the cliff like dribbles of frosting on a cake where crevices hold a bit of soil and a few courageous bushes cling by their roots for a season or two. See how the limestone is fissured most near the top. Farther down, fewer intrusions, as though the rock knows how to heal itself. At the base, greenery rises in a fringe like teeth sprung upward from a lower jaw, to mask a dark horizontal crevasse which now exudes the thinnest of streams but at any moment could let forth a torrent that could transform the creek bed into a whitewater deluge.

She brushed away a lock of hair too short for her braid, and picked up her tablet again. A few more swift lines, but then she startled and her pencil ripped a jagged line across her drawing. Metal on metal, a scream, then a lot of yelling. Back on the main trail. She raced to see, and there on the path two bikes lay in a jumble like broken insects, their riders somehow on their feet, one holding his elbow, the other pressing a hand to his forehead. Fat tire riders; she'd seen them at the bike shop, hanging around on that old sofa.

"You two need help? Both of you sit down."

The guy with hand to head said, "Where did you come from?"

"Back in the woods. Listen to me, catch your breath at least."

The one with the elbow tilted his head at her with a half smile, but he did sit down, and asked her name.

She kneeled next to him. "I'm Andrea. Does it still work?"

He bended it slowly. "I think so."

She took out her phone, but the standing one shook his head. "No don't, we're OK." He took his hand away from his head. "See, just a little gash."

She stood up and came close to take a look. "Maybe you won't need stitches."

They probably bragged about their injuries down at Frankie's Place, the bar where bikers hung out.

A dog charged out of the woods, and nearly toppled her, black, big.

"Did he bash into you too?"

The guy on the ground said, "Fool dog ran across the trail as we were passing each other, so we crashed head on."

The standing one started to pick up one of the bikes, and bounce it on its oversized tires. "I think mine works. But yours, Grant, could be DOA. I can bike home and come back with my car."

Grant began to stand up, massaging his knee, but the tail wagging black lab ran into him and knocked him back down.

"Damn dog. Bug off."

Grant and Doug, yes, spread out on the enveloping sofa talking trails while she stood in the back of the shop with Kyle as he adjusted the brakes of her old Schwinn.

"OK, I'm off. Doug got on the bike and with a few minor creaks, headed down the trail."

The dog chased him for a time, but came lumbering back to sit next to Grant.

"Get off of me you lousy mutt."

"I think he likes you."

"Shows it by trying to kill me." He started to get up again. "Look you don't have to stay here; I have this fool dog for company."

"Ridiculous, you can't even stand up." Did he really think she'd leave?

"Sure I can, if this dog stays away."

As if on cue, the dog darted away into the woods, on some other mission.

"Stay here, I'm going to collect my backpack." She started out.

"Where?"

"Back a ways by this side stream."

"That comes out of the cliff?"

She stopped and turned around. So there was someone else who knew.

"No, wait, I haven't been back there in years." He got up this time, with some grace, and tried out his legs.

"But you're limping."

"I'm not going to sit here like an inert lump of clay."

A guy with words. Maybe he worked at the college.

She sighed, and offered an arm, but he grinned and shook his head.

"I guess you really don't need my support."

Men were weird about accepting help, especially from women. All she could do was walk slowly, so he could keep up.

It didn't take long to get to the edge of the little side stream, where a breeze disturbed a scraggly maple that showered drops of water from its laden leaves.

"It always rains twice in the forest." He laughed.

She brushed the moisture from her face, and watched him do the same. Thinking she'd have a dour patient on her hands, his laugh surprised her. A rangy build, like those Tour de France guys. A face people probably dwelled on the way she was tempted to do now, to understand why it attracted her. The eyes maybe, which were sort of ordinary but under mobile brows, up now as he talked. If he was single, it would be because he wanted to be.

The dog bounded towards them from the brush and batted its tail against their legs,

and Grant grabbed a tree for stability.

“Damn dog has no boundaries.”

Andrea grabbed him by the scruff of his neck. “Here, bump into my legs.”

Grant cradled his arm.

“How’s the elbow?”

“Needs a little support. Probably nothing to do with bones.”

“Wish I had some ice for you.”

He glanced at her, like he was surprised. “Soon enough when I get home.”

She sat down on her mossy log, and gestured an invitation to him. He pushed away from the tree and came over to lower himself down next to her. They watched the dog explore the rocks in the dry stream bed below them.

“What did you come to do here, just sit?”

“Love to do that, but I brought my sketch pad.”

“Go ahead.”

She never liked it when people watched over her shoulder, but she took it out anyway. Something to do instead of sit like strangers on a bus. As a waitress at Chat and Chew she easily talked to new people, but this was different and she wasn’t sure why. She could get up and walk around. Maybe she would but not just yet. It would seem like she didn’t want to be there.

When she began to sketch he took something out of his pocket. So as not to look over her shoulder?

She drew some outlining strokes, and glanced over. “Haven’t seen one in years.”

He unfolded one attachment after another from his Swiss Army Knife.

“Here’s what I use most.” The most complicated one, a pair of scissors.

“Really? Not a knife at all.” She realized she was leaning in, her shoulder against his, and she backed off.

“It’s surprising how often I find a need for it.”

“Like what?”

“Fingernails, dangling thread, getting into some impossible blister pack.”

She watched him scissors the air high above his head, where a bit of sunshine caught it and made it sparkle. Like it was some astral pleasure.

With a catch of breath, she rescued her pad that was slipping from her knees.

“Aren’t you afraid to get it wet?”

“Part of the challenge of nature drawing. A wet spot could be part of the picture.” She drew a tree trunk under one. “I’ll sketch in branches after it dries.”

He watched her draw in big broad strokes to map out the cliff, and its major cracks. Why didn’t she mind? Now it was him leaning into her, though not touching.

“It’s good to watch someone who knows what they’re doing.”

“Like biking off road.” She said it without looking at him.

He moved away and stood up.

“Sorry, no, I really admire it.” She looked up at him. “Did you think I was commenting about the accident?”

“That’s what it sounded like.”

“You can’t control when some mutt runs into you.”

He moved his gaze upstream to the cliff. “I’d swing down to take a closer look, but not today. Something changing though, do you see it?”

Not just a trickle anymore, but an infant stream snaking its fingers around the rocks of the stream bed. She kept on with her sketch, gracing the brow of the cliff with that arc of greenery.

"I've climbed around up there, to see what it looked like from the top. There are coon trails that go right to the edge."

Grant looked at her with those mobile brows of his raised. "They've got four feet with claws."

"I always make sure I have a tree to hold onto."

Grant held onto his own at the edge of the bank. "Kind of like this?" He swung around it, and the sapling bent under his weight.

"Good you can count on one arm."

If he slipped it would be right over the bank with a six foot drop. So as not to look, she riveted her gaze on the big crack high in the cliff she was getting down on her pad.

The dog came circling back, this time with something in his mouth. First to Andrea, then to Grant.

Grant pushed away from the tree and half kneeled to pick up the object that the dog dropped there, as though giving him an offering, but his knee gave way and he sat down hard.

"You OK?" Her pencil poised over the sketch pad.

"Can't trust that knee I guess."

Pencil to paper, but only light shading that didn't take much attention. "Deer bone?"

"Humerus." He lined it up against his arm. "Down here the trochlea, like a spool, where the ulna and radius attach. And here's my fav." He held out the bone to her, from his spot on the ground. "See this big indentation, the olecranon fossa."

"You a doctor or something?"

He laughed. For the second time. "Teach anatomy at the college. Do micro too."

"You mean bacteria?"

"And fungi." He made a wild face.

"That means you know mushrooms."

"Not really, but I can tell a basidiomycete from an ascomycete."

She never liked snow jobs and said so. "I think people like you should learn to talk to regular people."

"Sorry, I just like the sound." He shuffled closer to her. "Look here's the depression, pretty deep." He put his thumb into it. "This is where the elbow bone goes when it straightens its foreleg. Just like our arms see?" He worked his injured arm, gingerly.

The dog grabbed one end of the bone and tugged, growling.

Grant pulled it away from him and tossed it from hand to hand, teasing him.

"You asking for another injury?"

"It's play growling, plus look, he's wagging his tail."

She reached for the bone, but he was already arcing it overhead, and tossed it into the woods.

"I was just going to look at it."

"It'll come back."

The dog raced off and soon made his lumbering return through the brush to set the bone down again in front of Grant. Andrea scooted off her log to join them sitting on the ground, and ran her fingers along the dog's fur, wet from the moist underbrush. "He must belong to someone. Looks like he's smiling."

"No collar."

"Fido, I think."

"Really, can't we be more original?" But she couldn't think of anything better.

Grant stroked the dog's neck too, and their hands took turns flowing along the fur of his neck. Until hers ran right into his. She withdrew hers and dried it off on her wet pants. "Sure is moist around here."

“Even with the sunshine it’s too wet for people. No wonder there’s no one else around.”

“Just the people who can’t stay away I guess.” She often blurted out this way with people but for some reason she didn’t dare look at him. She moved away to sit on the edge of the bank with her legs dangling over. He followed and let himself down slowly next to her. The dog squirmed his way between them.

“A human sandwich, must be bliss for him.” A little gravel in his voice.

The dog whimpered and flung his head side to side, giving each of them a lick.

“I suppose he’s hungry.” She had to laugh.

“I’ve got a meat stick.”

“It’ll be all over if you give it to him.”

He took it out and peeled the wrapper off. “Here, Fido.” Who polished it off in one gulp. When she came into the woods today, all she expected was a chance to be alone and feel the nature vibes. And he wouldn’t have pictured himself sitting on a muddy bank next to a wet dog and a lonely waitress. Wait, he didn’t know anything about her except that she liked nature and drawing. Was he the least bit curious?

With her feet swinging in mid air over the open space below them she felt like a kid sitting on a dock at Crappie Pond at that low budget resort her family went to years ago. Green scum on the surface she could stir with her toes to see the dark water underneath. She’d come up from a plunge all coated with algae which was great for scaring her little bro.

“Did you have a dog as a kid?” It wasn’t because she needed something to say, they were doing OK with silence.

“How do you know I don’t have one now?”

“You fed this one, unless you’re not thinking ahead.”

“I’ve got another meat stick you could give him, then you’d be the one he’d go home with.”

“Thanks a lot, I can barely remember to water my house plants.”

Below them the tiny flow relaxed a little wider to wet the tops of some rocks that used to be islands.

She pointed down. “Do you see that?”

“Could be working up to something. Maybe you should pull your feet up in case.” But he didn’t make a move with his.

Across Fido she looked at him in profile, taking the chance while he studied the creek bed.

The only reason he was there, that they were there together, was by necessity.

Fido leaped into the creek bed, and she nearly fell into the space he left, next to Grant. But she caught herself in time and sat upright again. “Jeez that dog does whatever he wants.”

“Sounds like you’re jealous.”

“How would it be to go from one impulse to another with total freedom?”

“Could lead to some mishaps.” He cradled his elbow and looked sideways at her.

Fido lapped at the new water, then he scrambled up the bank a little ways downstream and bounded back into the woods.

“What’s he got in his brain now?” She got up and went back to her log and her sketch pad, leaving Grant with his legs dangling.

“Sorry I interrupted your afternoon.” Was he pouting? Ralph, her ex of several years, used to be that way sometimes. This air of hurt feelings as if he was wronged. Expecting her to console him. She wasn’t going to do that, no way, as though this was her fault?

“Wasn’t what I expected, but neither was it for you.” She kept her eyes on her sketch.

Neither spoke while the dog rustled through the brush nearby and the water trickled below.

Maybe Doug would come back soon. She hadn’t thought of him for a while.

Then Grant from his seat on the bank said, "What do you do when you're not drawing in the woods?"

Here it was. Is she a real artist or is this a Saturday afternoon hobby? People always assumed the latter. But she'd sold a few landscapes, was working on some leads to illustrate a children's book.

"I wait tables at Chat and Chew and give the customers a hard time." A rough feeling in her throat.

"Do you draw them too?"

"Sure, I sling them eggs and bacon and then ask them if they mind me sticking around to stare at them chomping away."

She made some broad angular strokes, darting her eyes to the cliff and back to the pad as she had before, but faster now.

"I'd hold still for you, unless you wanted to watch me chew." He was leaning forward with elbows on knees, on the verge of pitching forward into the stream bed. Not looking at her.

What was he thinking?

Really, where was Doug? She sprang up from her log and paced along the bank, then leaned against the same tree Grant had swung out from.

From his seat on the bank, "You don't have to stay here you know. Doug will be here soon."

She wasn't going to respond to that. Of course she would stay even if he was being annoying; he was an injured person. But what was it that annoyed her? His good looks? His self-absorption? His big words? The fact that she was attracted to him?

"I'm going to walk around a little." She slid down to the creek bed, and started turning over rocks.

Looking down at her he said, "You never know what you'll uncover."

She picked up a rock and showed him the snail she'd found. "Here, take a look." He reached down for it but pulled back, with his elbow in hand again. "It's OK, I can see it from here."

"Sorry, I'm forgetting your injury."

He said something she barely caught as he looked away. "Flesh wound."

She felt as though he was about to reveal something but she wasn't sure she wanted to know what it was. Despite what people said was an outgoing nature, she could shrink away like the snail she now held in her hand.

The dog returned and dropped another deer bone at Grant's feet. "OK Fido, good boy, but I think we have enough now." The dog barked and jumped, but though Grant did not throw it out again, Fido plunged back into the woods anyway.

"By the time Doug comes back we'll have the whole skeleton." She resisted pulling out her phone to check the time.

Grant cleared his throat. "My kid always wanted a dog like that."

"Oh," she said. Something crawled up her neck. "You have a son?"

Almost too fast he responded. "Third grader, into soccer, video games, climbing trees, all that."

"He'll be sorry to see you got hurt."

"When I see him, a couple of times a month."

She turned over a few more rocks, moving closer to the rock cliff. "That must suck."

"I don't know why I'm telling you this, it's not your problem." His voice sounded rough, as though it was hard to push the words out of his throat.

"Maybe because I'm the one who sees your other injuries. This is a new one too isn't it?"

"Two months. My ex got custody."

Why, was he unfit as a father? Neglectful? Hard on his son? Expecting too much? No, see the way he is with Fido.

She walked back to where he was sitting on the bank, she in the creek bed six feet down, so she looked up to him, foreshortened so his knees flanked his head.

“From here it looks like your head is between your knees.” Stupid thing to say. But it made him smile. “I’m going to take a look at that leaky crevasse of ours.” Why did she say “ours?”

She had to concentrate on her feet, suddenly unstable on the rocky ground. He’d be watching her from behind.

She touched the vertical face, leaned on it for stability. The flow now rose to lap at the top of her boots. It was barely running an hour ago.

Bending down she peered into the opening by her feet. Nothing to see in its black depths but she felt something on her face, a cool breeze from that dark hole, and the sound of rushing water as if from a distance, getting louder.

“This is amazing, I think I hear the flood coming,” she shouted up to Grant.

“Then get out of there, Andrea, it could happen all at once.” He yelled back.

But she kept listening, yes, louder by the second, and her feet getting battered by the flow of water.

“Seriously, Andrea. Turn around and run!”

True, she should do that.

Then another sound, Fido barking like crazy right there. She turned. “Get out of here, Fido, unless you’re a good swimmer.”

He barked and whined even as she turned to leave that magical spot. When the surge of water exploded out of the rock it knocked her feet out so she lay back on the water that carried her on its crest for seconds that went on and on. She laughed until the water poured over her head. This must be what a wipeout is, she’d have to let the wave pass and climb out. But a beach wouldn’t have all those rocks that beat against her legs and bottom. She had to hold her breath. For a while. She wasn’t going to breathe until there was air. No, it’s too hard, just give in.

And when she did the miracle was, it was air, not water.

She struggled to stand in the water that pushed her farther downstream, waist high. It plunged her down again and she had to hold her breath again. But there in the roiling torrent, a furry black back she could lean on. Fido the water dog, in full rescue dog paddle. They struggled to the bank and she grabbed an overhanging limb. Fido licked her face and whimpered. She could barely speak, but murmured, “Oh Fido, you going to retrieve me now?” Turning upstream, she couldn’t even see the cliff, they must be a hundred yards downstream. They still needed to climb the bank, in the rising water that sought her legs up to her knees all over again.

And there was Grant, limping along the bank above her.

She watched him swing down with one arm and grasp her with his other one. How could he do that? They managed to claw their way up the steep muddy bank using a tree limb, and flung themselves down on the ground. Sweet ground.

Grant leaned over her, pushed hair out of her face and took her head in both hands. “You alright?” He looked so concerned she laughed between coughs.

“That was stupid. But I’m glad I did it.”

“Great, but you scared me to death.”

It was the nicest thing anyone had ever said to her.

He asked her where it hurt, helped her test out her arms, neck, and knees. “You don’t need to move, just lie still.”

“I’m so cold.”

As before, Fido squeezed in next to her and the three of them hung onto each other.

"I never liked wet dog smell," she buried her head into his deep wet fur.

Grant pulled out his phone. "Still dry." He called, explained, asked for blankets, stashed it away. For the first time in their odd encounter, she didn't want Doug to hurry up, even through her chills.

Reaching over Fido, Grant whispered in her ear. "You know, we may be the only people who have ever seen the flood burst thru that cliff."

"Bet I'm the only one who ever rode it." She had to smile but at this close range he wouldn't be able to see it.

"And I'm the only one to see you do it."

"Plus Fido." She snuggled closer to the dog. "Too bad we don't have a photo."

"Oh I don't need one. Someday I'll tell you how you looked doing it, but not today."

She felt his hand stroke past the cord of her dripping braid and down her shoulder. Then he did it again.

THE GIRL UPSTAIRS

E M Schorb

Jimmy had met Vera at the famous 46th Street rehearsal studio. He was there because an acquaintance of his was playing piano for a dance troupe, of which Vera was a member. She sat down next to him on a bench and dried herself with a towel. Next thing he knew they were making love at her apartment. When he thought of it later, he could not remember having said or done a thing to get himself there. Nevertheless, he was complimented by her attentions. He asked himself who wouldn't be? He was a lucky dog. Everybody who met them together said that he was a lucky dog. And a dog he felt, for he suspected an invisible leash had been snapped on his fifteen-and-a-half inch neck. He discovered very quickly too, that her strong dancer's body was a very fit instrument of aggression, even violence, and he began to pull back from her emotionally only to discover that such withdrawal led to even greater aggression. She was more of a hot potato than a hot tamale, as he'd first thought, but he was an ex-Marine and he wasn't going to be intimidated. Even though he had read Sartre and could see no exit, he was still proud of this prize, this beautiful energetic dancer.

West Seventy-first Street in Manhattan was a shabby, low-rent neighborhood in Nineteen Fifty-eight and they lived in the worst building on the block, a big, ancient brownstone warren. Vera had complained for months that the apartment was dark and dingy and Jimmy calculated that a coat of paint might just cozy the place up enough to make her feel more at home—to subliminally contribute to cooling her on the idea of striking out for Hollywood. Jimmy was a drama student and his mentor, a famous European dramatist, had pulled strings and had practically set up a very promising film gig for him. But Jimmy, who was of a studious bent, was also attending N.Y.U. on the G.I. Bill, and had deep misgivings. He wanted an education. Something solid. Not the shimmering mirage of tinseltown.

Vera liked pink, so they went out and bought several gallons of pink paint. And one day when they were standing with rollers in their hands and the door open for air, the new young lady from upstairs, whom they had passed once or twice in the hall, stopped at their door, introducing herself as Lola Sherrill. She was eighteen, from Missouri, a singer, and was looking for work. Vera invited her down for supper. Lola said that she wouldn't dream of eating supper with them unless she could help them with the painting. Jimmy took a break and went into the kitchenette, a curtained, wall-debouched hall with a small bathroom to one side, to get a can of beer. He discovered that Vera was whipping up a big gourmet spread, to impress their new neighbor. "Paella," she said. "It's Spanish."

Jimmy drank his beer, listened to some jazz, thumbed through *War and Peace*, and after a while a knock came at the door. He opened the door, and there was Lola, in skin-tight, see-through tights. "I've come to help you paint."

Vera called from the kitchenette: "Ask Lola to come in."

"Well, come on in, Lola," Jimmy said. He felt like an endangered species. He knew that, somehow, Vera would blame him for Lola's state of undress. He said, "I'll just break out more paint."

Vera popped out. She was hot and bedraggled from cooking, paint-smeared: had been hitting the bottle. And there was Lola, dipping her cello-bottom this way and that as she painted, her see-through tights displaying with perfect clarity the flexures of each ample adorable cheek. Vera stopped short in the doorway of the kitchenette, the curtain tangled over

one shoulder, took Lola in with a deep inspiration, and looked at Jimmy as if he had pulled off Lola's knickers. Jimmy stirred paint so fast that it splattered on his shirtless torso, turning his taut tummy pink.

Lola said, "I'm helping your husband." Jimmy thought: "Either this is the dumbest dame I've ever met, or she has more chutzpa than a vacuum cleaner salesman in a marble hall."

Vera said, "Well, Lola, I think we should call it a day on the painting, now." Jimmy thought it was about time for him to put his two-cents in. He said, "Maybe we can get this wall done before we quit. Why don't you just go ahead and concentrate on supper. It smells good." He meant it. They could use the help, and he didn't care what it wore, or didn't wear.

"Yes," piped Lola, "I'll help Jimmy get the painting done. I'm a good painter."

Vera went back to cooking. Pots and pans could be heard whizbanging in the kitchenette. Jimmy was having a good afternoon, even though Vera kept popping in and out; and every time she caught him looking at Lola, which he couldn't help doing, gave him one of her You'll-pay-for-this looks.

Vera came out, Merlot in hand, finally, to survey the job. She stood with Lola and admired the wall. Jimmy heard Lola say, "I'm glad I could be of help." Vera had the table set and told them to wash and come and eat. At last, Lola's behind was out of sight, on a chair, and her legs were under the table.

"Oh, this Paella looks delicious," she said, and Jimmy felt her pink-nailed toes walking up his leg. No shoes, either, of course. He moved his leg away to see if the walk wasn't an accident.

"Yummy!" cried Lola. "You are a *wonderful* cook, Vera," and back came the tootsies.

"She sure is," said Jimmy in a disturbed voice. No doubt about anything now. Lola was pure brass. It seemed to Jimmy that Lola certainly knew how Vera felt, maybe could tell that Vera wasn't too stable, and was actually trying to make her crack. He did not know how else to explain Lola, a stranger, sitting there wearing next to nothing, running her chubby little toes up and down his leg while his wife looked on! Vera didn't show it, but Jimmy thought that she must know what was going on under the table. "Why doesn't she blow up?" he asked himself, and kept moving his legs away from Lola's groping toes; but he couldn't well dodge Lola and not be obvious about it. The table was too small. Then, through his alcoholic fog, he could see that Vera was on to Lola. He could also see that Lola knew that Vera knew, but didn't care what Vera thought.

They were all getting drunk. Vera slammed down her fork. "Whatever you're doing, Jimmy, I want you to stop it."

"Really, Vera, your Jimmy hasn't done anything to deserve the way you're treating him."

Jimmy got up and went to the bathroom. He took a long freedom-loving pee. "Hell, no!" he said to himself, stepping out and zipping up.

"What have I done?" He was crooked, and not at all sure of what had taken place during the course of the evening.

"But if you feel that way," Jimmy heard Lola say, "I'll go up to my own place."

"Go ahead, you ungrateful little bitch!" said Vera, tears squirting from her eyes.

Lola said: "But not till we clear the air."

"You *want* him!" cried Vera. "You *desire* him!"

"I don't want your stupid husband," Lola shouted, then looked at Jimmy apologetically. "You're just crazy, that's all! Everybody in the building knows it. You're crazy. *We all* hear you!"

Jimmy went back to the kitchenette to fix himself a drink. Now Vera was crying, Lola consoling. "Vera's about to be violent," he thought, remembering how she cried, like a bird of prey, before she swooped; and just then she flew by him, like a great mad bird, and locked herself in the bathroom. Lola pursued; pulled at the door knob.

“She’s going to kill herself!” Lola cried. Jimmy told her not to worry. “She loves every ounce of herself. She’s a performer.”

Vera heard him—“I heard that!”—and flew out wielding her little pink Princess safety razor. She went straight for him. He fended her off, and she kept on going into the front room. Then swaths of pink paint came back, like watery cotton candy. *Swash! Swash!*

Lola had got more than she’d bargained for. She cowered behind the freshly pinked refrigerator. *Crash!* they heard the front window break. Vera had thrown an open can of paint through it.

In two seconds, sirens sounded through the shattered glass.

Vera heard them. She was scared now. She had done something fairly serious this time and it panicked her. She charged back into the kitchenette and then locked herself in the bathroom again. “This time I really *am* going to kill myself,” she shouted through the door.

Jimmy noticed that she still had the razor with her. Maybe she *was* going to do it this time. She had had enough to drink, meaning too much even for the survival instinct.

Lola put her arms around Jimmy’s neck. “What should we do?” she said, rolling big brown eyes.

He put a hand on that behind he had wanted to touch all evening, and said: “I don’t know.” He didn’t.

Lola said, “Shall we break the door down?”

He told her that he couldn’t; he had had occasion to try.

Vera screamed. It was the worst fit of many. Jimmy was more than a little scared himself. He put his drink down and put another hand on another cheek. What a behind!

The hall door was being pounded. “Open up, police!” He went to the door and opened it. “What’s going on here?”

He tried to explain the situation. The building super, who was gay, stood behind the police. He liked Jimmy, disliked Vera. Jimmy could see that the super had been talking to the cops. They gave Lola the twice-over, but there was too much confusion. “Come on out of there,” one of them called to Vera.

“I’m going to kill myself.”

“Do you think she’d do it?” one of the cops asked.

“No,” Jimmy said.

“Yes,” said the super. “She crazy bitch. Oh, I sorry, mister, but I hear.”

“I think she would,” said Lola. Jimmy wondered if she wasn’t hoping so.

“I will!” cried Vera.

“In that case,” said a cop, “I’m calling Bellevue.”

“No,” Jimmy said. “Don’t do that.” He was weakening, as he often did, begining to feel sorry for Vera. This was how he always lost his wars with Vera—pity.

“This is out of your hands now,” said the cop. “Have you got a phone?”

“It’s in here,” said Lola.

The bathroom door flew open and there stood the wild woman herself. She had pink paint all over her, and looked pitiful.

“Don’t let them take me to Bellevue,” she cried. “Please don’t let them.”

“It’s out of his hands,” said a cop, grabbing her. “You’re nuts, lady.”

“They’ll help you there, Vera,” said Lola, nursily.

“You little. . .” fumed Vera, speech failing her, and *wham*, she threw her Princess safety razor at Lola. *Zing!* It missed. Both cops seized her arms.

Then the men in the white suits showed up. “We’ll help you,” they said.

Jimmy fixed himself a drink. He looked away while Vera was carried out in a straight jacket, screaming and kicking. He was not allowed to go with her. He went to the radio and

turned it on. Music! Lola had assumed the role of hostess. She saw the whole menagerie out.

Suddenly it was very quiet in the apartment.

Jimmy went to the window. Vera had cleared the glass out of it, but for a few jagged pieces. He leaned out and saw that there was a lovely long swath of pink paint down the front of the old brownstone. Below, there was a fracas. A small crowd watched as Vera was dragged, kicking and screaming, to the nut wagon. Lola came up behind him and put her arms around his waist. "You poor man," she crooned.

A bitter little laugh caught in his throat. "She certainly brightened the old place up," he said. "Did they say when I can see her?"

"They said you could visit her tomorrow morning. Now you come over here and sit down. I'll fix you a fresh drink. Then, later, I'll sing you to sleep. I'm really a very good singer, you know. I'll be a star in no time."

The next morning Lola left him to find herself a singing job. She kissed him goodbye and promised more delights upon her return. Vera, however, was released to him at ten that morning. So there wasn't much chance for Lola to get at them again and Vera made it no chance at all. Jimmy was to accept that Hollywood offer immediately. After a few phone calls, she insisted that they leave for the west coast that very afternoon. After all, what could be better than Lola than La La Land?

POLAROID

EM Schorb

Jimmy Whistler was visiting his parents over the weekend. On Saturday morning, sitting around the tiny kitchen table in a tiny apartment in Baldwin, the mad house—as Jimmy thought of it; most of the tenants were sent to them from the Vineland looney bin— rooming house his parents superintended, his mother Fay showed Elliot, Jimmy’s father, the Polaroid photo she and Jimmy had had taken at a local bar, the Juke Joint, where they had danced their first Chubby Checker “Twist” the night before. Elliot examined the photo, his horn-rimmed, taped five-and-dime magnifying glasses at the tip of his pink nose. “You both look drunk,” he said, who had stayed home with his dignity and a bottle of sherry and a pack of Chesterfields. “I have a hangover,” Fay said, holding her head in her small hands as if she had just caught a football. She had had three cups of coffee and was coming awake.

“I need a pick-me-up,” said Jimmy.

“A hair of the dog that bit you,” said Elliot. The idea of them all getting drunk again was appealing to him. After a few pick-me-ups and increasingly enthusiastic calculations, Elliot and Jimmy decided to buy a used Polaroid themselves at Kelly’s Newark Pawn Shop, which was near the Hudson Tube Station, and take pictures of customers in the bars and night spots around Greenwich Village. “After all, that’s the place for exhibitionists who love to have their pictures taken,” said Elliot, employing over a half-century of sales wisdom to the case. Jimmy reasoned, too, it was the weekend and he was entitled to a little recreation. He did love his father, in spite of the fact that he had grown up with the difficulties of dipsomania, and it would give them some time together, an adventure. He didn’t take the idea seriously. It was a lark. Elliot was always ready to go into some kind of scheme, the crazier the better. Recently he had been talking about opening a phrenology parlor in Greenwich Village. To supplement his social security, he had been managing an Angel’s Own thrift shop, where he came upon a porcelain head, the kind with the skull mapped off in sections, the sections conforming to mental and character qualities such as Conjugalinity, Inhabitiveness, Alimentiveness, etc. He had read up on the subject, bringing home books by or about Gall, Spurzheim, Combe, the Fowler brothers, and others among the famous bump-readers of the world. No one knew if he took the subject seriously, or if it wasn’t just something to talk about.

The photography scheme, or Jimmy’s slightly inebriated view of it that Saturday morning, was that Elliot would put up the capital for the camera and Jimmy would run around like Weegee, the famous candid photographer, taking pictures galore all over Greenwich Village, making a fortune, of course, which he’d split with Elliot, and at the same time making himself a famous Village character, like Maxwell Bodenheim or Little Joe Gould. Everybody would know him; and when he flew, busy and vigorous, in the door of a Village dive, they’d say, “Hey, there’s Jimmy Whistler, the famous candid photographer, and he’s packing his Polaroid!” Fay was to stay behind, and, as Elliot advised, “Keep the home fires burning” (which suited her fine, for she still had, that morning, “an awful hangover”), while Elliot (who phoned downtown and got himself a leave of absence from the Angels’ Own stores on the grounds of receiving medical treatment) and Jimmy went to the Village to make their fortune. As soon as they could afford to move into a Park Avenue apartment, they would send for Fay. Then she could pack up all her cleaning paraphernalia, pay back whatever money she had embezzled from Baldwin’s books to its owner, Howard Burns, and give up superintending forever. She could be like the Society

Ladies she was forever reading about in the columns of Dorothy Kilgallen and Cholly Knickerbocker in the newspapers.

On the train Elliot got up, his big overcoat heavy upon him, and swung and swayed his way to the end of the car; and turning toward the wall, in full view of his fellow passengers, who believed he was about to pee, perhaps disappointed them by removing, with what he seemed to think was great stealth, a half-pint bottle of Haig & Haig from his hip pocket, and slugging—judging from the number of times his head bobbed—three good! stiff! drinks! He returned the bottle to his back pocket, patted his ass; and, returning down the aisle of the racing, rocking, underground-going train, smiling and nodding in a most cordial manner at the frowning or giggling faces he passed, proceeded to sit down on the wrong side of Jimmy, placing himself slowly and carefully on a young woman's lap; even having time, in his *sang froid*, to pull up the sharp creases of his shiny trousers, and to cross his legs, before the dumbstruck victim could figure out whether to scream or push or what. Fortunately, she was a good-natured young woman, and only tapped him on the shoulder from behind with her dainty rose-tipped fingers, saying, "Sir—oh, sir—you're sitting on my lap, sir—" Elliot finally got the message, removed himself from her lap; and, with many a courtly flourish of apology, tried to undo his ungentlemanly wrong. Jimmy shrank in embarrassment, especially now that Elliot strap-hung over the poor, sweet kid, grinning at her, his handsome, debauched old face sometimes not an inch from hers, and his breath smelling mephitic, like a tub of hooch. They pulled into the station that way, like a sideshow.

They began their career in photography, as they had planned, by making the rounds of the Village bars. In five hours of steady drinking (they *had* to have a drink in these places; it wouldn't look good to just walk in and out—as Elliot put it, "You have to spend money to make money."), they ran across one prospective customer, a tattooed sailor in a bar over near the docks who had a couple of bimbos with him and wanted them to go to a hotel and take porno pictures. He wanted to show his shipmates what a good time he had had on shore. Elliot and Jimmy held a conference and decided not to do this because the sailor was drunk and rowdy and they didn't want to get into trouble with the law. Too bad they didn't take the gig, however, because they never got another offer of work. Their drunken dreams of fame and fortune in the art of photography were shattered that snowy evening, as was the lens of their camera (the disappointed sailor had knocked it from Jimmy's hands). But they were resilient; they'd find another way to make a fortune. Elliot was keener than ever on the phrenology parlor and he decided to stay with Jimmy in Manhattan while he solidified his plans. During the next few days, big Denise, a graduate student at Columbia and Jimmy's upstairs neighbor, would come downstairs to his breadbox of a room at Miss Bee's single-rooms-for-rent establishment around the corner from a riotous gay bar, and create a crowd of three. They would hold long philosophical discussions, Denise touting Locke or John Dewey and whatever liberals she had in her bag, Elliot being legalistic with Coke and Blackstone and Roscoe Pound, and Jimmy spouting Bergson and the *elan vital*.

Denise and Elliot turned on and off like a couple of blinker-lights. "Here," Denise would say, "try some of these little reds, Mr. Whistler. They'll bring you down a little."

"I've never seen any little red ones like these before," Elliot would say, like a connoisseur, studying the bottle by holding it up to the light while pulling his broken glasses down to the tip of his rubicund nose. "What are they?"

"They're a downer, Mr. Whistler."

"I don't like barbiturates, Denise. They always leave me with a headache."

"Oh, these don't, Mr. Whistler. Go ahead and try one. It's just a gentle trip down. Nice and smooth, like a sliding board."

"Well, I'll try one—I'd like to come down just a little;" and he'd flip it in and wash it down with a

shot of Haig & Haig. "By the way, Denise, I was reading DeRopp on hashish. Do you suppose you could get some?"

"Oh, I don't know, Mr. Whistler, it's kind of tight right now. But I'll try." And they'd sit there, a handsome, unshaven, grizzled old man in his fart-stained underwear, and a big, unkempt young woman, not much more than a kid—he on the cot, and she, cross-legged, in the lotus position, on the floor at his big pink feet, fingering through her box of goodies as if they were chocolates—exchanging pills and popping them, until neither of them was talking to the other anymore, but just talking—talking to the hooded mystery guest.

After a couple of weeks, Jimmy and Elliot were having a bit of trouble, what with Jimmy trying to work during the day and Elliot walking up and down his back all night. In fact, they were a little sour on each other. Jimmy slept on the floor and Elliot slept on the sagging single bed, really only a cot; and they hardly had room to turn around in. Jimmy's peaceful existence was fading a little more with each day that Elliot stayed, as were his joys of a single life, because with each sleepwalking night he was almost run out of his room. It was maddening to Jimmy. In the middle of the night Elliot would wake up from his rumbling sleep, throw his huge pink feet over the side of the cot and right onto Jimmy's back, and wobble down Jimmy's spine like a tightrope walker. Then, Hey, Presto, the lights would come on, with a "*FIAT LUX!*"

"Dad," Jimmy'd say, "for Christ's sake, do you have to walk down my back?"

"What?" Elliot would say, oblivious. "Oh, I'm sorry, my boy. I just wanted to take another Miltown and have a couple of spoonfuls of peanut butter."

"Miltown! You're like a zombie already!"

But Elliot wouldn't pay any attention to that, or perhaps couldn't.

"Have you seen that bottle of sherry I bought yesterday?"

Jimmy'd have to get up and look for the bottle, which was usually on the bed-table, right under Elliot's nose, among the dirty litter of pill bottles, sticky glasses, left-over, skin-topped clam chowder cups, and the always delightful-looking sets of false teeth. Then back to sleep for an hour or two, if there weren't other trips up and down his spine, and off to work Jimmy'd go, at some temp job of the moment, feeling like Quasimodo. He wasn't doing any writing (his secret passion) at all.

After a few weeks, at some vague, pilled-up point, during one of their evening conversations, Elliot, feeling grandiose, told Denise that he had written a history of Rome. He was honest enough to say, "I didn't quite finish it, but what I did of it exceeded Gibbon, if I say so myself."

"I didn't know you were a writer, too, Mr. Whistler. Oh wow!"

"I'm a professional, Denise. The W.P.A.—you know what that is, or was?"

"Of course. My folks were New Dealers. The Works Project Administration."

"Exactly! You are a very wise young woman. You not only know ancient history, you know modern history. If it weren't for the fact that you were a woman, I should call you a gentleman and a scholar."

"Women are scholars today, Mr. Whistler. I'm working on my master's degree"

"And Denise is very much a gentleman," said Jimmy. She gave him a pilled-up look and he smiled back, nodding approval. Then she nodded back in a sort of salute.

Elliot said, "I wrote many a speech for Mayor Parnell of Newark. I wrote the great anti-reefer speech."

"But you didn't believe it—?"

"We writers sometimes have to say things for the public consumption. You're sophisticated enough to understand that, I dare say."

"Certainly! Oh, Mr. Whistler, you could help me so much! "

"How could I do that, my dear?"

"It's my thesis for Columbia. I've tried and I've tried and I just can't seem to write it."

"Try cutting back on the pills, Denise," said Jimmy.

"Nonsense! I find them a tremendous help—don't you, Mr. Whistler?"

"In getting the mind operating with full cargo and at full speed, indubitably, yes. Now, how can I help you?"

"I'm supposed to write a thesis on John Donne."

"I'm not sure I'm—"

"John Donne, Dad, the poet," said Jimmy.

"Of course, John Donne. The poet!"

"I'll supply you with all my notes, over two year's worth."

"And I shall have to read them. I mean—"

"I'll pay you five hundred dollars."

"Five hundred dollars?"

"I'll give you fifty to start you off."

"Yees, I see. Now when would this thesis have to be completed?"

"As soon as possible!"

"And you say you've been trying to do it for two years?"

"Yes, but I just can't get started."

"We have an agreement. Jimmy, you stand witness. I shall write this thesis before a month is out. Now, about the fifty dollars—" Denise pulled fifty dollars from her wallet and slapped it into his big hand. "We're on our way," she said. "We're on our way," Elliot repeated, grinning darkly. His grinning, approving teeth floated in a glass at his elbow.

When Elliot got the chance to pick up the fifty from Denise, he already had it in his noodle to blow, and the night after she gave him the money, he vanished, leaving Jimmy to convince Denise, who had been a good friend, that he knew nothing about what his Dad was up to. The double-dealing old con-artist! Jimmy was sore. Elliot had been living on him for weeks, and Jimmy was behind in the rent, and the Miss Bee was swooping down like a vulture on him for it.

Jimmy had a hunch that Elliot wouldn't return; but he wasn't sure yet. So, when she asked him, he told Denise he thought his Dad had just gone to Newark for a few days to check in with his Mom; for her, Denise, not to worry; that Elliot would probably get started on her thesis while he was over there and bring it back with him when he came. That kept Denise happy for a day or two, then she started getting worried again. Jimmy called Fay. Elliot hadn't showed up. Fay was a little worried, but not too. After all, she knew Elliot. He was probably parked in some hotel room, either in New York or Newark, having a maid run his errands for him. After about a week Jimmy called Fay again and Elliot was there all right, sobering up. He had been hiding out in a Philadelphia hotel.

"What about Denise's paper?" Jimmy asked him. "Or her money?"

"Tell her I'll give her her money back as soon as I get my social security check," he said. He sounded sick, as he always was after a binge, so Jimmy didn't push it too far. Only thing was, Denise was after Jimmy now. So he said: "Denise wants to know where you live. Should I tell her?"

"For God's sake, no! I'll send her the money when I get it. You can't get blood from a turnip, can you?" Jimmy realized that he must be broke and waiting for his check.

Elliot sounded beat; so Jimmy said, "O.K., O.K.," and let it go at that. He knew that Elliot was going to dry out for a couple of weeks, take long hot baths, eat, and take vitamins, and sleep, until he was his old ruddy, rosy sixty-eight year-old self again, detoxified and sober as some judges. He figured Elliot would pay Denise off, now that he was getting sobered up. What he had not reckoned was that Fay had been living on the owner's house-money all this time, juggling the roomers' rents in the books like a champion embezzler. Elliot would have to

replace that money, so he might not be able to pay Denise back. A few more days passed, and Jimmy couldn't hold Denise off any more, and he didn't have enough money to pay her himself, having to fork over every extra cent he earned to Miss Bee, who had become a double-barreled bitch since Elliot had taken off, Elliot having apparently given her reason to believe that there might be something between them (the old goat); so Jimmy gave Denise the address in Newark, and his blessings into the bargain—let the principals fight it out; Jimmy was only an agent, an unwilling broker. Denise took off for Newark, angry now, and hurt, and determined, and formidable as a sumo wrestler, too.

Elliot's pomaded, neatly-combed hair stood right up on end when he saw her come in the door. She said: "Mr. Whistler, I'm surprised at you. I thought you were a gentleman, and I discover instead that you can't be trusted. I should have remembered what Jimmy told me once about how you stole his money when he was in the Marines."

Fay smelled Elliot's blood and wanted some of it herself. She chimed in: "I know; it's *terrible*. Elliot, you've got to pay this girl what you owe her." Fay was only on Denise's side because she was angry at Elliot for leaving her to steal from the landlord.

Elliot had been caught off guard. His social security check was sitting on the table, right under Denise's nose. She saw it through her hornrims and said to him: "I'm going to stay right here until you pay me;" whereupon she sat down, opened her *The Brothers Karamazov*, and began to read with great concentration. Elliot considered running her out, but she was too big. Fay offered her something to eat and began to prepare a little spread. Denise began cutting slices from a leg of lamb that was on the table, and that decided it. Elliot figured if he didn't get a move on to cash that check Denise would devour the whole larder. He hurried up to the supermarket on the corner, cashed his check, and hurried back, forked over the five tens to Denise, and sat down, fuming.

"Thank you, Mr. Whistler," Denise said. "I cannot say that I have enjoyed our dealings. Good day."

"Goodbye," called Fay, from the front porch, waving her to the bus stop on the corner. "Come back and see us—any friend of Jimmy's is always welcome."

A month passed and Jimmy regained his solitude. Though he was working at physically demanding jobs during the day his mind seemed strangely alert and ambitious at five o'clock. Even the rejection slips that he'd taped to the wall seemed to inspire him because he'd just won a five hundred pound prize from an English anthology for his poem, "The Poor Boy." He wished he still had that Polaroid. He'd take a picture of that check and pin it up at the top of all his rejections.

Sedōka

Jerome Berglund

Note:

“Sedōka is an authentic but uncommon Japanese poetry genre from the 8th century. Its style of composition was created by a venerated Japanese court poet, who was known as Japan’s first great literary figure, Kakinomoto no Hitomaro... The Sedōka...is a sophisticated concept to grasp, and best suited for esoteric poets... A Sedōka consists of 2 tercets (three line verses) as a question-response exchange between lovers, a question-answer learning tool between mentor and student, or it can also be two 3-line reflective verses by one poet that juxtapose...”

– an’ya, UHTS

1 (sedōka)

ornamental onions
arrow sign
in limbo

desolation peak
staring at things
‘til they fall

2 (sedōka)

small free garden
in the ritzy part
of town

turning blind eye
to pried lattice
squatters' rights

3 (sedōka)

drop into eighties
measuring success
on a micro scale

quarter-sized hail
the futility
of token reforms

4 (sedōka)

fragrant leaves
supporting raptor the line
bows toward center

jolly roger
to be apolitical
IN THESE TIMES

5 (sedōka)

major seaport
even a byline
is doctrine

carpet stain
on these paths caterpillars
tread over

6 (sedōka)

load left in –
a piled basket
neglected

charmingly
doing wrong
first generation

7 (sedōka)

skipping out
on the bill
another diner

ghost pipe
do you want to empty
the trash

8 (sedōka)

risk assets
disposing of
wastewater

the program
getting sick of
commands

9 (cherita)

if these men

were
all
poets

they would see
the bees

10 (senryū)

loudspeakers
on bicycle and
a firm helmet

by Ron Jevaltas

Tuesday Afternoon

Fecundomondo -
The jealous outrage that is
rain, on the eve of

what matters most. Ears
long for the quelling and
artless blather of

crickets to cease. It
will come all bandy-legged and
I told you so: Snow

chomping at the bits. And
tears, always tears in runnels
down the twin cheeks of

a season gone too
old for its breeches. The grand
c' est la vie unhinged

and viral gone, on
the edge, on the verge of a
something that happens.

Kiss

Simple food seasoned
with hunger, warming at a
fire, thirst quenching, gut

wrenching, a touch, a
grimace, a smile, a kiss; to
go to bed a stone

and wake up new bread:
need and satiation - all
that currency fits

in the tiniest
recess of anyone's hip

pocket, no holds barred.

dead-heat

kibble on a ritz
a silk purse from a sows ear
that pablum rank as
it sounds a needle
skip on a vinyl round match
point deuce and match point
again vitriolic
clowns volley hoping something
sticks nothing but ribs
on the skinny flank
of what passes for truth words
a salad of cats
eyes in a marble
bag hoping beyond hope for
more than a circus
8:57
The new moon rises
over a frosty embrace.

There's nothing subtle
about cold. Now, each day starts
with fire. This routine,

inspired by nature,
something tangible to sink
rotting teeth into.

pirouette.

Cutlery, China,
and redolence; the fussing
ministrations of

tradition within
each keep, and blessings before
each season - this Day's

anticipation:
like stringing lights, like kick-offs
like eyes lost in bold

A Night by the River

Barry Fields

...After he had sent them across the river, he sent over all his possessions. So Jacob was left alone... Genesis 32:23-4

Jake couldn't avoid the confrontation forever. He looked again at the text from his brother, "Meet u at the old field," signed, "Red." No way to tell his brother's state of mind, if he wanted to reconcile or meant to kill him. Having crossed the river, back in his home state after twenty years, Jake had sent his wife, their children, and their belongings ahead. He'd sent along a valuable gift for his brother as well.

A tall man, fit and healthy, Jake in his early forties had a solemn face that had long ago lost the boyishness Red would remember. He stood at the water's edge, looking west as the sun set behind the Savannah. Wide and lazy, the river took on a silvery hue. He'd parked in a dirt lot covered with wood chips along the river bank a quarter mile from the bridge. He watched the procession of cars, headlights coming on as the darkness intensified, unprepared to face the brother he'd wronged.

Mosquitos buzzed around his head and he slapped one on his neck. Turning away from the river, he saw a man leaning against the trunk of his car with a grim look of determination, arms folded across his chest.

"Where'd you suddenly come from?"

The man didn't answer. Jake asked, "What are you doing here?"

"What are you doing here? You've been here for hours, pacing and fretting. You look like you want to go somewhere, but you're chicken."

"Did Red send you?" Stupid question – impossible that Red could intuit his location.

"No one sent me."

Suspicious, Jake kept his distance, walking in a semicircle to get to his car. The man looked older than Jake and had a full beard, not as tall but stocky and well-built. He moved to block Jake's access to the driver's door.

"I don't know what you're up to, but please move out of the way."

"No."

Stunned, Jake stepped back. "Wherever you came from, why don't you go back?"

"I just got here."

Jake wasn't a fighter. He'd run away to escape his brother's threats of violence, and he'd never had a physical altercation in his life. But he walked up to the stranger and tried to push him out of the way. The man gave him a surprisingly hard shove, sending Jake staggering a few feet back. He pulled out his phone to call 911, but the man rushed him and knocked it out of his hand.

"Ha!" the guy said with a satisfied smirk. "Don't try to pick it up."

The wild-eyed fellow was obviously deranged, maybe delusional. How to appease him? Jake took a friendly tack. "Look, let's not get so riled up." He extended his hand to shake. "I'm Jake Isaacson."

"Big deal."

Jake dropped his hand to his side but kept a conciliatory tone. "You live nearby?"

"Listen up, Jake. Wherever I'm from, I'm here now, and you've got to get through me if you want to move on."

The glow in the west faded, leaves lost their color, and the river turned black. The only light in the parking lot came from a sliver of moon. What an unnerving predicament. Nothing in his past prepared him to face a mentally unbalanced foe provoking a fight.

He'd passed a town less than a mile back and began walking for help. The man ran after him and tackled him from behind. Jake hit the ground hard, the wind knocked out of him. The man stood over him triumphantly but made no move to capitalize on his advantage.

Shaken, Jake rolled over, seated on a bed of wood chips. "What do you want from me? You want money? You trying to steal my car?"

"There's nothing you have I want."

The guy was certifiably crazy. "You won't let me get into my car. You attack me. You must want something."

"I want to know why you're afraid to resume your journey."

Jake stood up. "That's none of your business."

The man ran his fingers through his beard. "I'll make a deal with you. You unburden yourself and I'll let you get into your car and you can go on your way."

"Are you for real?"

The man pinched himself on the upper arm. "Seems that way." He leaned against the driver's door. "Go ahead. Tell me. I'm a good listener."

Jake should have been outraged, either furious or frightened. Instead, he considered the proposal, calmly looking at the bridge connecting Georgia and South Carolina, where traffic had thinned. Maybe he really would listen, offer his ideas. In any event, Jake didn't have much choice.

"Okay. I'll tell you. There's bad blood between my twin brother Red and me. He was always something of a hothead. My mother found out he actually had a plan to murder me. I fled, went up to Seattle because it was far away and her brother lived there. Now it's time to go home, but I'm not sure what kind of reception I'm going to get." Jake approached the man. "Alright? I held up my end of your bargain. Let me go."

The man grabbed him around the waist and pushed him. Jake wrapped his arms around the man's torso and pushed back. One foot out front, Jake braced himself with his rear leg and drove hard, head first, forcing the man back against the car, but the guy got his hands out front and pushed against Jake's chest. They remained like that, frozen in position, until Jake saw it was useless and disengaged, his breathing labored.

When the bearded man caught his breath he said, "You call that unburdening yourself? Why is there bad blood between you and your brother?"

"That's a long story."

"I've got all night." The meddler rushed him and head-butted him in the gut. Jake grabbed him, brought him with him when he thudded down, and rolled on top of him. He drew back his right hand, ready to bring his fist down onto the man's face, but the man struck him first in the throat. Jake rolled away, gasping for air.

The man lay beside him and asked again, "Why is there bad blood between you and your brother? Any time you're ready."

When he could breathe easily again, Jake stood up. The man held out his hand. Without understanding his own action, Jake took it and helped him to his feet. Something about his assailant couldn't be put into words. Maybe he wasn't such a nutcase after all.

"Like I said, we're twins. Technically he's the older one since he came out first. He was always our father's favorite. Don't ask me why. My father had a profitable firm. Industrial engineering.

Red had no interest in it, but dad was going to turn it over to him anyway. My mother encouraged me not to let that happen.”

“So you were her favorite?”

The man looked ancient up close, deep furrows in the forehead, sagging cheeks. But his eyes blazed, outside of time.

“Yes. My brother even told me once he didn’t care if I took over the organization instead of him. He always liked doing things with his hands, being outdoors, hunting and fishing. Dad needed help developing new software, modernizing the workforce, so I got a degree in engineering.”

“What was it you cared about? Your father or the profitability of the business?”

“I wished he would love me as much as he loved my brother. My brother’s wife was selfish and lazy. She enjoyed making my parents miserable. But no matter, to my father Red was the golden boy.”

“And you were jealous. Such an old story.” The old man sighed, shook his head sadly.

The insight encouraged Jake to continue. “When dad’s eyesight failed, he was ready to give the whole thing to Red. My mother wasn’t about to let that happen. She talked me into tricking my father. He’d prepared a stock transfer. My mother redid it substituting my name for my brother’s. I showed him where to sign. I became the owner of the company instead of Red.”

“You’ve got free will and you used it to become a thief. Nice going, Jake.”

Jake didn’t need the reminder, but hearing it triggered his fear of meeting his brother. “Red found out and said I cheated him, which was true. It was too late to undo the change, and by then dad figured it wasn’t such a terrible thing anyway. My brother was furious. I don’t know why the corporation was suddenly so important to him.”

“It represented your father’s love. That’s what you both wanted.”

“That’s right. You hit the nail on the head. My mother got wind Red was plotting to kill me. She sent me away. I relocated the company to Seattle and stayed with her brother. It turned out to be the best move I could have made. Microsoft, Amazon, startups you probably haven’t heard of. Everyone’s got some sort of presence there. I did well. Got married, had kids. But it’s time to return home. To my roots.”

The man seemed to be pondering what Jake had told him. They’d moved away from the car, but he still blocked Jake’s way.

“End of story. Do I have your blessing to go now, oh mighty one?” Jake asked mockingly.

“Only if you’re ready to face your brother.” Jake remained silent and the interloper laughed.

“You’ve got a stupefied look on your face like you have an IQ of sixty. Are you ready?”

“You’re a real pain in the neck, you know that?”

“I’ll take that as a no.”

“Come on already. You wanted to hear me get it off my chest. I’ve told you enough.”

“I can’t blame your brother for hating you. You could have taken fifty-one percent. Shared the wealth and still have been in control. But you stole the whole thing. Why?”

Jake rushed him and stuck out his leg as he pushed. The man toppled over. Jake began to sprint to the car, but the man grabbed his ankle. Jake went down, too. The man wiggled towards him and grabbed both his legs. Jake tried kicking him off, aiming for the head. He didn’t want to hurt the guy, but things had gone too far.

The man’s strength was greater than Jake anticipated given his age. He let go of Jake’s legs and lunged at him. The two of them wrestled, rolling over and over on the dirt and wood chips, too close for Jake to get in a good kick or punch. When the fellow pulled away to get air, Jake got up and raced for the car again. He reached it this time, but the man yanked him away before he got the door open. They landed on the ground, locked together. The scuffle went on until Jake was exhausted, panting, arms aching, sweat running down his face. On his back,

aware now of the orchestra of insects, he looked up at the heavens, which seemed impossibly far away.

The man sat facing him, breathing just as hard. "You cheated your brother out of everything. Everything. Why?"

Over the years, Jake had asked himself the same question without answering it. "I don't know." "I don't believe you. Tell me why," the man commanded, as if knowing it was something Jake needed to come to terms with, "Why?"

Jake sat up, seized by the urge to confess. "I hated him. Our father loved him, not me. Red did nothing for him, but he liked to cook and dad acted like his making dinner was the most precious gift on earth. What about me? I'm the one who cared about him, about his legacy. I'm the one who became an engineer so I could help him. But it was never enough, I was never enough. All Red had to do was make venison stew and you'd think he was a three star Michelin chef. Yeah, I hated Red for that."

"So you got even."

"You bet." He spat out the words with venom, shocked by the truth he'd never before acknowledged.

Jake took a step towards the car, but the man put a hand on his arm. "You emphatically do not have my blessing to leave. Not yet."

Jake pushed him away, tried to kick him but missed. The man leapt on him and they were on the ground again. Jake had lost track of time, with no idea how long they'd been in hand to hand combat. He tried without success to gain the upper hand, but as the night advanced the stalemate persisted, both of them giving it their all, neither of them able to win. At times his antagonist would back off, leaving Jake with the impression the struggle was with himself. Weary from fighting, his shirt stained and soaked with sweat, Jake was exasperated by his inability to win the match or satisfy his opponent's inexhaustible demands. Yet Jake found himself unable to feel real anger towards him.

The fighter looked harmless, as dirty as Jake and breathing heavily. "Tell me what you need before seeing your brother."

Jake sat up. "His forgiveness. We never talked in all these years. He never mentioned me on Facebook or Twitter. Has he forgiven me? Does he still want revenge? I just gifted him fifty percent of the company. I sent the stock transfers to him with my wife. The company's grown by so much that fifty percent is worth more than ten times what the whole thing was worth twenty years ago."

"Money won't solve the problem."

"Fifty percent makes us equal partners. We'll have to cooperate, work together. The only other thing I can do is apologize. Tell him that I regret what I did, I know it was wrong, and it hurt him. Tell him about the sleepless nights I had because I deprived him of what was rightfully his."

"You said he didn't deserve it, under him the whole enterprise would have failed."

They'd gone from battling under the stars to talking as though they were intimate friends. Like everything else about this encounter, he didn't know what to make of the unexpected twist.

"It's a question of what's important. At the time, I thought it was the company. But even if the business had gone under, it wouldn't have been the end of the world. Red and I would still have had a relationship and I wouldn't have had to run away to the other side of the country."

Stars dimmed as the sky began to lighten in the pre-dawn, the river still a black abyss. Jake couldn't recall ever having been as tired as now. His body ached from hours of physical exertion, but his mind was inexplicably alert.

"I think it's time to get going," Jake said.

"Almost," came the reply. "There's one more thing."

Jake watched the eastern horizon slowly brighten. He'd known all along without admitting it that what he needed, more than his brother's pardon, was to forgive himself. He understood, too, that the whole night of struggling with this baffling challenger had been leading up to the moment in which he could do just that. The intruder had known all along of his torment, his endless wrestling with guilt, as if he was a part of Jake's own psyche. Eliciting the narrative from him had been an act, not of aggression but of compassion. As if the man's presence held the power of absolution, Jake discovered in himself the power to let the self-recriminations go. The battle with himself was over.

Jake kept his private act of self-absolution to himself. He no longer needed the other. "You know what? I'm done with you."

The man ran at him, tackled him, and again, as the ground lightened in the morning and the trees by the riverbank became green, they wrestled. At the moment the sun lifted over the horizon, the man abruptly stood up and backed away. Jake got to his feet as well. The man fainted, acting like he was going to land a blow to the chest, but gave a strong kick to Jake's hip. A sharp pain shot through his upper leg, but enraged, Jake attacked with a ferocity he didn't know he had in him. Although it hurt, he got the guy in a leg lock, arms around his neck. The man couldn't move.

"Let me up. It's dawn. Time for me to leave."

"Do I have your blessing this time? You're not going to fight me anyone?"

"Consider yourself blessed. Everything's going to work out. You're going to do great things."

Jake let him go. They rose to their feet. Jake found his phone, put it in his pocket. Even with the intense pain in his hip, he felt freer than he'd been in two decades.

The man began walking away, but after a few feet turned around. "You're starting a new life, and you should have a new name. From now on, tell everyone your name is Izzy. It's a good name. It suits you."

"Where are you going?" Izzy asked.

"Home."

Izzy turned away from the sun to the river, blue now under the clear sky, then back to the parking lot. There were no trees nearby, no place to hide, but he was alone. The visitor had come and gone as if through the gates of heaven, which he'd once seen in a dream. Izzy limped to his car, texted his ETA to his brother, and drove back to the highway for the last hour of the long passage.

by Beth Sherman

Relic

Meghan keeps her son's ashes in his soccer ball. She'd seen a 15th Century sculpture of a hand in the Springfield Art Museum. A reliquary for blessing people or healing the sick. The fingers were extended in a sign of benediction and bones from the saint's hands were placed inside. The right hand because there was a stigma to being a leftie. She remembered thinking how beautiful it looked, how wondrous that it contained traces of the dead.

Now she sits in the living room, the soccer ball cradled in her lap, looking out the window to where a patrol car idles. She should make the officer a sandwich. But the thought of getting up exhausts her.

"We could leave Ohio," her husband had said the night before. "Move to Indiana near your folks. Or Florida. You've always liked the beach."

She had dropped her gaze to the soccer ball, which had to be ripped apart and sewn back together again so the ashes could fit inside.

It happened on Wednesday, the first day of school. There's a picture on her phone of Alex with his two older sisters under the sour gum tree.

The girls were in a rush, applying makeup, fixing their hair. Only Alex was excited to mark the occasion like they always did. In the photo, he's grinning, his bangs flopping too near his eyes, a tiny piece of toast caught in the space between his front teeth.

Hey, Mom, he said. Say applesauce.

Even though she'd been the one taking the picture.

The start of sixth grade, the end of everything else.

She used to believe in God. Kneeled in church every Sunday. Said her prayers. Beheld that relic in the museum with something like awe. At the glory in it, a saint's bones preserved for eternity.

At the Town Hall meeting, Meghan's husband stands in front of the microphone, sobbing.

Meghan sits in the front row, clutching the soccer ball. She won't leave home without it.

She's gone over the accident so many times in her head it's like she's sitting beside Alex in the school bus. Fourth row from the back. She can see his knapsack on the seat. Can hear him telling his best friend, Hector, a joke. His voice the warbling of a sparrow.

How many psychiatrists does it take to change a lightbulb?

The car came around the curve so fast the bus driver had to swerve and the bus tumbled down a short embankment, landing on its side. Twenty-two kids injured, one dead.

"I wish he'd been killed by a white man born in America," her husband tells people at the meeting. "Not an immigrant."

A legal immigrant, Meghan learned later. A man who'd just finished a 16-hour shift at the meat processing plant.

Some people in the crowd applaud, but most jeer, unleashing a stream of hate so ugly that Meghan covers her ears. They'd kill that man if they could, Meghan thinks. That's how much anger they've stored up.

How many psychiatrists?

Only one, but the bulb has got to want to change.

What if they'd driven Alex to school instead?

If he sat in a different row?

If the bus had been five minutes late?

If the man driving the other car hadn't been working overtime?

If she'd kept Alex home and they'd spent all morning in the yard, Meghan in goal while he tried to kick the ball past her?

Meghan tries to re-write history but it never works.

The first death threat arrives by mail. Accusing them of being anti-American, unpatriotic immigrant-lovers.

As Meghan's husband reads it, his face turns ashy.

He teaches third grade in a neighboring school district. Since the Haitians first arrived in Springfield, he's learned a new Creole word each day, writing its definition on the blackboard, creating mini friendship circles in his classroom.

"Alex would have hated this," he says, folding the letter into tiny squares. "Why are they doing it? Why can't they leave us alone?"

Alex. Her sweet boy. Her youngest, who'd always be her baby. Those long lashes. That gap toothed grin. He used to let her kiss the top of his head. Now his face is plastered on fliers all over town that say JUSTICE FOR ALEX, *killed by a Haitian invader*

When the doorbell rings, Meghan flinches.

"Come in," she calls. "It's unlocked."

If one of her neighbors wants to shoot, rape, maim, or kill her – all things the letters and phone calls threaten – let them. She feels like she's already dead.

But it's only the deputy sheriff, a short balding man with a goatee. She's seen him on TV, answering questions for a bunch of reporters.

He sits down opposite her, crosses his legs, clears his throat.

For a moment, she thinks he's here to tell her that one of the girls has also died.

"Please . . ." she sputters, putting one hand up, like the church reliquary, to ward off evil.

"I was one of the first people at the scene that morning," the sheriff tells her. "I just wanted you to know that Alex didn't suffer. I'm sure of it. I stayed with him the whole time. So he wouldn't be alone."

Hugging the soccer ball to her chest, Meghan starts to cry. Fat, sloppy tears. A tiny shard of something like peace lodges near her heart.

"Ma'am?" the deputy says, looking helpless.

But she can't stop crying. Relishing the goodness of this man, his kindness.

Boo

Every Wednesday at four o'clock Emily visited Dr. Lindner, the ghost psychologist. His office, located in the basement of the campus science building, had flooded over spring break and still smelled faintly of mildew. Dr. Lindner specialized in studying ghost emotions. Most of the time, Emily hovered above an uncomfortable chair facing his desk and answered the Doctor's questions. Occasionally, to flip the script, he gave her pictures of human facial expressions and instructed her to identify them, which was fairly easy: sadness, anger, disgust, joy. Emily could tell which was which by the shape of peoples' lips.

She was auditing a Victorian literature course at the community college. *A Christmas Carol*. Marley dragging his chains like an escaped prisoner, Scrooge seeking guidance from spirits. As if people became wiser after they died. As if wisdom were a game changer. When Emily was alive, she'd lasted exactly one week at this school before deciding she'd rather be a beautician. She didn't regret her choice. Enjoyed working at the salon, shampooing and styling, listening to women talk about their kids, sometimes a cheating husband or financial setback. Offering encouragement while remaining in the background. Now, Emily sat next to freshmen who spent the entire class watching WitchTok videos.

Emily lived with Charlotte and John, a young couple who bulldozed her old, rented house and built a grand mansion that took up most of the half acre lot. Stucco and stone veneer, gabled roofs and columns. It reminded Emily of a castle, minus the moat. On the inside: An open concept living area. Huge kitchen island. Luxury vinyl flooring. A soaking tub in the en suite. Emily stayed in the guest bedroom. When people came over, Charlotte liked to show Emily off, saying, "We thought a ghost would add a classic touch to a modern home." She'd instructed Emily to answer all visitors' questions politely. The questions were dumb. The one she got most frequently was: how does it feel to be dead? Emily used a thesaurus to help her. *Startling. Remarkable. Electric. Prickly.* None of the words were right.

She died four days before her 32nd birthday. She'd gone to Walmart to pick up a quart of skim milk and some bug spray when a disgruntled ex-employee walked into the store and started firing his AK-47. A bullet hit Emily in the back of the head. She didn't remember anything until the day of the funeral when she sensed a tingling, popping sensation and felt herself slide free of her body as easily as a snake sheds its skin. Oddly enough, being a ghost wasn't terrible. She liked not having to worry about how she was going to pay the bills or whether she'd ever find someone to love her back. She remembered how exhausting it felt to want things all the time.

Are you getting out enough? Are you making an effort? Dr. Lindner asked each week. No and no. Except for Charlotte and John, humans steered clear of Emily as if being dead were a communicable disease. She found other ghosts to be cliquish. They sized her up and kept floating. She wished there were a third group she could join that combined the best of both spheres. In the meantime, she read Dickens, rolling her eyes at Scrooge's transparency, his transactional change of heart. What good is change, she asked Dr. Lindner, when it could all end so randomly in the dairy aisle? The Doctor wrote down what she said in a Moleskin

journal, studied her expression, annotated. He was an expert on ghost's faces, charting each emotion they experienced. The college had given him a sizable research grant. He saw other ghosts, of course. Emily noticed them in the waiting room, but each time she tried to interact, they drifted away.

The man who killed her was named Allen Michael Willoughby. Emily spent lots of time in the college library Googling him. He was ten years younger. Graduated from college with an engineering degree. Lived with his parents on a quiet cul de sac. His neighbors thought he was odd, but they never expected him to snap. He was sent to the penitentiary upstate. Spent his time writing poetry. Or getting a master's degree. Which just proves anything is possible. *You could haunt him*, Dr. Lindner advised. *It might make you feel better.*

Are you angry? Dr. Lindner asked repeatedly. *It's okay to be mad at what happened to you.* I know, Emily wanted to say. I don't need your permission. She stuck her index finger in the place where the bullet used to be. A hole with rough prickles. She enjoyed stroking its edges, continuing around her head and down her body, tracing her outline to make sure she was still there. *You should find other people who were killed that day*, Dr. Lindner advised. *You could all meet up, talk about what you've been through.* Like a club, Emily said. You didn't need a doctorate to detect what she was feeling then. Her sarcasm sliced through the Doctor, skewering each of his trying-to-help-here words. Emily thought she saw him wince.

She tried to picture herself hanging around the prison, following Allen Michael Willoughby to the dining hall, the yard, balancing on the bars that enclosed his cell. What could she say to him that would make any difference? He was angry when he pulled the trigger. That much she knew. Anger lived inside her too, coiled in her throat like an ugly sausage. *Why not torment the man*, Dr. Lindner pressed. *Wouldn't that force you out of your lethargy?* Emily had drawn in her breath, which was ragged and shaky, huffed a thin stream of air at the Doctor's shaggy face. BOO, she screamed and when he jumped, she was not unhappy.

Rain

At dinner last night in Cassis, it rained
so hard the awning billowed then bellied,
pouring its contents, dousing the diners beneath
who rose and fled as one soggy body,
seeking refuge inside the bar and café.

The waiters dabbed at us with white napkins,
at faces and necklines, hairdos and ties, as Henri
bellowed, "S'il vous plaît, plus de boissons
pour tout le monde!" We guzzled gin
and strong brandy, all drinks on the house.

Once the storm had abated, spent itself and lay
off in the distance, we righted the tables,
the doorstep rooster, and returned to our stations.
The cobblestones gleamed; the run-off flowed
from the bridge span to the dark river down below.

A Couple

At dinner last night in Cassis, a couple sat arguing at a nearby table. Her fists were clenched, and his left leg bounced under the table as their chihuahua trembled and shook, her small cries unheard.

What was it about? Although we all strained to listen, they were hissing through their teeth, the specifics of this particular fight not delineated. We've all been there, no? Our complaints, imagined slights, small and large, overpowering...

I wondered if they'd come through, if recovery were possible, given the disdain, the contempt, the hostility so open, alive, the hatred palpable. Would they look back on this moment and laugh, a mere breeze that lifted and fluttered our napkins?

The Bicyclist

Before dinner last night in Cassis, a man riding a bicycle kept passing the restaurant on the street, up and down, back and forth, as though he were on a mission, relentless, but couldn't quite find the entry door, the address, the right accommodation.

He was wiry, tanned, wearing a knotted white handkerchief on his balding head. Each time he passed, he looked at me, head cocked, as if to ask about my interest, and availability. He smiled. His eyes were an intense indigo, his teeth bright.

I lifted my glass with my left hand. My wedding rings caught the sun's last ray. I shook my head. No. He stopped, dismounted, and set the kickstand. He lifted a bouquet of cerise peonies from his basket, set them before me, then got on his bike and rode away.

Soirée in the Back Bay Connie Johnstone

Perhaps no person can be a poet, or even can enjoy poetry, without a certain unsoundness of mind.

—Theodore Roethke, “The Poet’s Business”

It’s assumed that everyone has made a little effort. Make-up, some lipstick for women, a messy bun for those with longer hair. Beards trimmed on men, just a bit, and a surrendering look that says, yes, ok, this is a special night, the way men give their sleeves a tug upon entering. And the messy buns? Not that messy. We’re young, in that mid-career way; we like looking at each other’s residue of youth. But always included are those in late careers, to ground us all with gravitas and sense, to remind us that memory requires invitation, an intention for the evening’s story to be told again, and thus all randomness and accident must be invited in. And most of us are arriving by subway, so, added vibration.

Outside in a courtyard the Euro-accented hostess and her Southern-accented husband seat us at their very long and rustic table. Food is served, candles are lit, fine wine is pouring. An artist stands, hands in pockets, beside his abstract painting on an easel, and describes his process of paint, newsprint, social comment. I stand, read an excerpt in progress, a conflicted Episcopal priest named Annie; my hands shake. A composer shares his new saxophone creation, a sound ribbon twirling through the leaves and shadows. Others read; someone sings.

We shrink in our seats when the famous poet of witness steps away from the table, then turns to face us and recite her poem, her latest excursion into international terror, leaving us with blood on our hands, feeling if we didn’t cause it, why were we not there? How does she do that?

After such brisk soul- and palate-cleansing, the husband stands and rings a little bell. The hostess bows her head, then tilts toward him, looking up as he explains her furniture-artist work, a brief overview. She escorts us inside to see her creations. Watching their synchrony, one thinks about ballet, *pas de deux*. Our footsteps clatter on the polished floors.

The living room furniture has been pushed back against the walls, rugs rolled up, allowing for display. She is a maker of full-size chests and cabinets, two placed at the center, both recent winners of prestigious awards—wood smooth, silk-like. One stands on square legs, bleached birch, a shade of palest yellow. The other of polished mahogany, taller, on curved clawfoot legs. Each with fine, hair-thin traces of the grain. She says, “I have to hire a fabricator, but only when I must. I do love my electric planer.” I like the deep, confiding register of her voice.

The husband leads us to framed, poster-size sheets of labyrinthine drawings like an electrical engineer’s—her designs. All the little drawers and hinges. We are pulling tiny pegs on tiny chains from parts that open into other doors. What look like shelves hide compartments beneath them.

“Rubik’s Cube,” someone says. And then another says, “A giant jewelry box.” Next one offers, “The Cabinet of Wonders, at the Met.” Why do we keep comparing this to something else, I ask myself, but then I chime right in, “Alice, down the rabbit hole.” Why do we want her to be

the other, this furniture artist with her objects of intensity? Then I see the famous witness poet take the artist's hand. I notice the artist's short-clipped fingernails.

"You've externalized the pain, haven't you?" How could she know to ask that? Conversely, how could I not have thought it? I have to eavesdrop: "Not so much the pain," the artist says, her brown eyes direct but also lowering as she speaks. "I've shown the places where it hides."

She invites us to open the taller cabinet, discover hidden recesses, all of them cylindrical, she tells us, within the rectangular frame. On tiptoe I open a hinged lip on top and peek inside: a narrow mine-shaft column where a tiny light flickers on or off; I feel a brief claustrophobic flash, I pull back.

I walk over by the courtyard doors, breathe. A noted editor, salt-and pepper man-bun, dark-rimmed glasses, comes over. "Art, the intricate world," he says. Then, under his breath, "Hours and hours alone in a room." Pascal, I think, uncertain. The hostess joins one man on hands and knees to see the cabinet undersides.

Reassembled at the table for dessert and coffee, some have questions: the time it took, when it all began. And was it lonely work? She laughs and says, "You need a little OCD to keep you company. And I am a perfectionist, you know."

The man beside me sets down his mug of coffee; it thumps but doesn't spill a drop. He's a practicing psychiatrist who resembles Niles on Frazier; he also, paints and is known to be, as they say, on the spectrum. "OCD," he states, nodding as he speaks. "Obsessive Compulsive Disorder. That's in the DSM. It isn't normal." He looks up.

Silence falls.

"Perfectionism." He rocks a little, side to side. "Also in the DSM. Not normal." The editor leans across the table. "Grayson," he says. "Are not all artists hiding somewhere in the DSM?"

A pause.

Grayson is thinking. Conversation is restarting, but with an undercurrent of significance, our minds turning inward, knowing now what to remember. At the subway station, the editor walks by and waves. I nod, complicit. He walks on down the stairs. I hop on the Green Line when it comes screeching in.

APPLES

Nancy Alvarado

Javier polished three green apples on the edge of his shirt. The shirt was threadbare, but clean. He had washed it the previous afternoon, taking care to scrub it gently against the concrete washboard—enough to remove the day’s dust while not wearing through the fabric. Scooping water from the blue barrel, he rinsed the shirt, wrung it out, and hung it on the line to dry. From time to time, he unpinned it from the clothesline and shook it out to smooth the wrinkles. He remembered his mother placing her metal iron over the fire to heat, then neatly pressing his father’s clothes. That was years ago. He didn’t own an iron, so he ran his hands down the shirt as it dried on the rickety clothesline he’d strung between the corner of his house and a post he’d sunk into the ground a few meters away. Now the shirt hung on his thin frame, stiff and dry, smelling of fresh air. He wiped the apples one more time against the hem, admiring their glow in the sunlight.

Apples were expensive, far more expensive than the cucumbers he harvested in hot greenhouses or the tomatoes he lugged in buckets through rows of vines. It would be easy to filch chiles, onions, or even flowers from the vast fields that sprawled across the valley, but Ana loved apples, and Javier craved the reward of her smile.

He checked himself again, feeling his face for stubble, sniffing his armpits, breathing into his hand to assure himself that the smell of alcohol had dissipated. Satisfied, he sauntered down the hill toward Ana’s shack, apples dwarfed in his massive hands.

Pretty little Ana usually waited outside for him. Coming up the rise toward her house, he tried to guess what he’d find her doing—washing dishes, spreading grain for the chickens, tending to the garden she’d planted. It wasn’t much, just a few rows of corn, herbs, and tomatoes, with a few flowers thrown in because, as she explained, she needed beauty to keep the darkness away.

Javier liked watching Ana work. From afar, he watched her sweeping debris away, glancing up periodically to see if he was approaching. Her son Gustavo followed her like a shadow, sprinkling water on the dirt with his tiny hands in hopes of keeping the dust from rising.

He whistled as he drew near, a greeting rather than a catcall. She lifted her gaze, leaned the broom against the fence, and dipped her hands into the water barrel to smooth back tendrils of hair that slipped free from her ponytail. After splashing her own face, she turned her attention to Gustavo, wiping his nose, running her fingers through his rebellious black hair.

Javier approached, faking a bravado he didn’t feel. He’d been courting Ana for months, but still found himself dumbstruck at the sight of her close to him. She was closer to cute than beautiful, but she radiated a tightly coiled spring of energy, a manic frenzied force that drove her to make a home for herself and her son without bitterness or complaint, the kind of energy that could set them free. Javier sought that flight in the acrid crystals he inhaled through a 20-peso bill or a rolled-up leaf if he had no money. Touching Ana gave him the same feeling—he could do anything, be someone, run without stopping.

He handed her an apple. “*Toma.*” Gesturing to Gustavo, he held out another. “*Ándale, peque.* It’s for you.” Gustavo peeked at him from under dark lashes, accepting the fruit in silence. Ana nudged him, and he muttered his thanks before retreating to the shade behind the house. Javier tapped his apple against Ana’s. “*Salud,*” he said with a smile.

“*Salud.*” She smiled back timidly. “*Gracias.*”

Ana motioned for him to sit. He plopped down on an old tire near the fence, she on the tire next to him. They ate in silence, surveying the sunbaked patch of dirt that made up Ana’s yard. Javier could feel the heat rising off of Ana’s arm next to his, just centimeters away. He decided that today he would gather the courage to kiss her, the taste of sweet green apples between them.

FLOWERS

Ana’s shoulders tensed each evening, listening for Javier to come home. It seemed like she waited often lately, as he often came home well into the night. She never caught the scent of other women, but even after disappearing into the tarp structure that served as a bathroom, even after scrubbing his skin with Ariel soap powder and splashing off the remains of the day with scoops of cool water, the stench of liquor permeated his pores. Some days, there was another odor - chemical and bitter - and less money in his pocket. Ana both anticipated and dreaded those days. He would come home effusive, twirl her around, tell her she was beautiful, hug the children in a suffocating embrace. He spilled over with excited plans for the future.

“Just a little while longer, Ana. I’ll earn enough money to buy some wood, sheets of it, and we’ll build ourselves a real house. We’ve already got our land; I’ll build you a mansion on it soon.” In this expansive mood, he would shoo the children outdoors, sweep Ana into the dark shack, and remind her how he wanted her. In these moments, she felt clean and loved and hopeful.

Ana was realistic though; experience had made her cautious. She knew as the night marched on, the effects of whatever he ingested would wear off, changing his mood.

Some nights, his recrimination was directed at her. “¡*Chingado,* Ana! Why can’t you keep things tidy? I work all day, breaking my back for the family; the least you could do is make some effort. A man deserves to come home to a hot dinner and a clean house!” It did no good to remind him that they were out of firewood for the cooking fire, out of gas for the stove, out of meat, out of drinking water, out of money. There was no point in explaining, again, that her days were consumed by a never-ending battle against dirt. The bare earthen floor ensured that their clothes, even freshly washed, would always be coated in a fine layer of soil, that the children couldn’t be scrubbed enough to remove years of ground-in grime even if she had money to refill the water drums and buy soap.

She knew better than to strike back, to remind him that the money he spent on a six-pack of Tecate or a knot of crystal meant no money for food or water. Although Javier had never hit her, she feared that if she provoked his wrath, he, like every man she’d known, would snap. The day he hit her would be the day that something would be irreparably broken between them. She wanted to put that day off as long as possible. Despite years of struggle, something about his green eyes, nearly the color of apples, drew her in again and again. If she lost Javier, it would be one in a list of losses - her father, a series of stepfathers, Gustavo’s father – but it would be the one that broke her.

“*Sí, mi amor,*” she soothed on such nights. “I will try harder. I will do better.” It was easier to pick up a broom and sweep for the tenth time in a day than it was to listen to him rail against her failures, his failures, the children’s failures.

If there was a bit of water left in the blue barrel, Ana would make her way to the back of the house. Dipping her fingers into a cup of water scooped up from the bottom of the container, she sprinkled the plants, whispering their names as she moved. “*Yerbabuena, maíz, tomate, cebolla.*” She paused for as long as possible in front of the flowers, mesmerized by their cheerful pinks and purples, falling into the color, propelled backward through years of memories.

Ana had always planted flowers, a path to survival she learned early in life. No matter where they lived, no matter how poor they were, Ana’s mother created a patch of brilliance, breaking up the drab landscape with plants. As a child, Ana spent hours staring into the blooms, trying to erase the injustice visited upon her little body, trying to see bright pinks and purples instead of calloused hands on her tender skin.

Now Ana disappeared into the flowers again, willing her mind to be transplanted into a place where there was no dirt, no hovel, no endless routine of cleaning things that would never be clean. She stood until night fell, until Javier’s ranting had silenced and the plants were no longer visible. Snapping back to the present, she called out to her children, summoning them over to the water barrel to remove at least a layer of dirt before shooing them off to bed.

SUNSHINE

Celeste watched as the *gringa* opened the paint can. “*¡Está hermosa!*” she exclaimed. The American smiled at her.

“This will be the color of your house,” the woman said. “I’m glad you like it.” Celeste imagined the house. The contours of the neighborhood around her were dotted with church-built houses, but only theirs would glow on the hillside like sunshine. Perhaps in this house, her mother would never be sad again.

Celeste didn’t understand how these feelings could happen at once - happiness and sadness. She’d followed her mother like a shadow for months now, telling jokes, clowning outrageously, helping with chores; anything to keep a smile on Ana’s face. At any hint of clouds behind Ana’s eyes, Celeste would pull her mother toward the garden. “I forgot, *Mamá*; what’s the name of this flower?”

Ana would smile. “Ah, *m’ija*, I’ve told you a thousand times. It’s a drosanthemum.”

“Write it down, *Mamá*, so I don’t forget. You have such beautiful writing. You didn’t even go to school, right, *Mamá*? And you still read and write better than *Papá*.” Celeste’s hopeful voice was a combination of praise and begging. She couldn’t bear the thought of her mother sliding behind the curtain of darkness again.

But today was happy. A week before, a pair of thick gruff men had come to lay a concrete foundation where the new house would be. Celeste wanted to stick her finger in the wet cement, to write the family’s names on what would soon be the floor of their new house, but the men wouldn’t let her.

Yesterday, a truck pulled up. More men unloaded stacks of lumber, packages of shingles, boxes of nails. The driver asked Ana to count the materials and sign a paper to acknowledge that she received them. Celeste caught her breath for a moment; she knew *Mamá* couldn’t count past ten without error. She raised her hand as if in school and asked,

“Can I do it? I’m the best in my class at math.” The man smiled down at her and ruffled her hair.

“No, *chiquita*, an adult has to check the material. Little girls can’t sign contracts, even if they are good at math.”

Celeste ran indoors. “Gustavo, Daniel, hurry! Someone has to count the boards for *Mamá*!” Gustavo lifted his head from the scrap of cardboard he slept on. The floor was cool against his pounding headache and he had no intention of getting up. Last night’s excesses had taken their toll on him. Celeste pulled at his arm. “Come on. *Ándale*. You know how *Mamá* gets if she’s embarrassed. Do you want her to...you know? They might not even leave us the wood if no one checks it. Maybe we won’t even get a house. ¡*Gustavo, levántate!*”

“Can’t Daniel do it?”

“No, they said it has to be an adult. ¡*Apúrate!*”

Groaning, Gustavo rolled over, pulled on a pair of pants, and stumbled out the door into the morning heat. He knew he looked and smelled frightful, but he nodded, “*Buenos días.*”

Squinting in the sun, he began to count the sheets of siding. Ana watched, her lips moving along with his tally. Studs, sheets of siding, buckets of paint, totaled and signed for. After the men drove away, Celeste moved among the pieces of lumber. She picked up a block of wood and held it to her nose. “*Mamá*, smell this! It’s what our new house will smell like.” She ran over to the concrete foundation, talking half to herself and half to Ana. “Gustavo and Daniel’s bedroom will be here. Yours will be here. We can put the table here.” She walked imaginary boundary lines, almost quivering with excitement.

Celeste knew that this house would change everything. In this house, *Mamá* would never be sad again. Her eyes would never seem distant, clouded over. Her shoulders wouldn’t slump in despair. In this house *Papá* wouldn’t drink again. His breath would not carry that harsh, hot, chemical tang that Celeste recognized as a prelude to anger. Already, she was hopeful; since they went to the local church five months ago to sign up for a house from the Americans, he remained sober.

In this house the color of sunshine, Gustavo would find a job. He would work. He would not come home late and drunk, sleeping in the yard because the heavy chain that ran across the wall to a hole in the door had already been looped through and padlocked shut.

Celeste knew this morning as the strangers arrived that this yellow house would change her luck as well. As people filed out of vans - the tallest, whitest people Celeste had ever seen - a smiley lady came toward her.

“Hi, sweetheart,” she said in accented Spanish. “How old are you?”

“*Ocho*,” Celeste answered. She was too excited to be reserved, and the woman speaking to her was tiny, the size of Ana, unlike the other Americans towering like giants.

“*Mucho gusto*. I’m Elizabeth.”

“I’m Celeste.”

“I brought you a present,” the smiley lady said. Celeste looked at her curiously. Had she brought presents for Gustavo and Daniel?

“Another little girl I know, in my city, thought you might want this.” Celeste’s eyes widened as the woman pulled a brightly colored plastic doll house out of her car, then a clear bag containing the residents of the doll house: a man, a woman, two blond plastic children, a

dog, and a cat. Celeste had never thought of a cat as a pet; on this hillside, cats were useless. They couldn't guard the house, required precious money for food, and didn't last long before falling prey to dogs or coyotes. Celeste supposed that America had different kinds of cat, cats that asked for less and gave more.

Papá had lived in Bakersfield for a year when he was a teenager. He said everything was easier for Americans.

Celeste stopped admiring the plastic cat when Ana nudged her. “*¿Qué se dice?*”

She blushed remembering her manners. “*Gracias.*”

Ana turned to the American. “Celeste was sad this year at Christmas, because there were no gifts for her or her brothers. We didn't have enough money.”

The child interrupted, her voice shrill with excitement, “No, *Mamá!* Now I understand; Christmas was just late this year!”

She hoped the American had some Christmas in her car for Gustavo and Daniel as well.

BEES

Daniel watched as the men began to work. Slowly, the skeleton of the house took shape. It was bigger than he had dreamed. He wanted to help but he didn't know if he was allowed. Maybe a twelve-year-old would be in the way. He listened to the group banter as they worked, and began to pick out the leaders. Two of the men had dark skin that mirrored his own. He hesitated for a moment before moving toward them.

“Can I help?”

“*Claro que sí.* It's going to be your house. Go get a hammer.” Daniel's heart pounded with excitement. He was good at this; he'd helped cobble together the current version of the shack they lived in. One of the men handed him a tool belt and a fistful of nails. The pounding around him made his ears ring, but it was a satisfying, thick, solid sound, not the thin, quivery rattle of scraps being pegged together in ramshackle fashion. He gripped the hammer and sank a nail into the stud. He knew the work would leave him aching, but he would work as long as he could.

The men filled the yard, their arms laden with tools or lumber, Daniel looked up from his work from time to time to survey the scene. Across the road in a neighboring vacant lot, *Mamá* was painting boards a sunny yellow, laughing as she talked with the American woman who had given Celeste the doll house. He breathed a sigh of relief, surprised at the sudden threat of tears pooling. He hadn't seen *Mamá* so relaxed in months, possibly years. Even after his father stopped drinking, his mother continued to move through days in slow motion, each action slow and heavy, a woman walking through molasses. He wondered what the American was saying to her that made her happy. Maybe it was just the sunny paint, the noise and activity, the promise of a house with a cement floor that could be.

Daniel continued working. “*¡Bien!*” one of the men said, his smile warm and broad.

The boy flushed with pride. He envisioned himself looking at the finished house, thinking, “I made this.”

A rush of movement caught his eye. Two men dropped the sheet of siding they were carrying, and began swatting at the air around them and yelling. The bees! Daniel dropped his hammer and ran over to the men, “*Son mis abejas! ¡Dejenlas!*” Realizing they didn't understand him, he beckoned urgently to the dark-skinned man who had allowed him to help. Panting, he explained, “Please tell them they can't walk on this side of the yard. I have

my bees here. If you disturb them, they will leave, and we need them for *Mamá's* flowers." As the man translated to the group, Daniel pointed to a corner where he had propped two thick sticks together, forming a triangle about two feet above the ground. Clinging to the peak of the triangle, hanging in the shade made by the boards, was a thick cluster of bees. Daniel thought proudly of them as his. He didn't know why they had come to him, but he knew they needed the bees, and *Mamá* needed the flowers, so he protected the bees fiercely.

Daniel glanced around the yard. Wood was stacked in every empty space and there was little room to maneuver. He was afraid the workers would get stung, or worse, frighten the bees away. It was possible they would even step on *Mamá's* plants. Daniel knew the men were kind - they were building a big sunny yellow house - but they weren't careful. Perhaps in the United States, they didn't need flowers to keep their mothers from sliding behind a curtain of clouds; perhaps they didn't need to rely on the luck a swarm of bees might bring.

He flashed on a solution. Stepping into the shady darkness of his home, he grabbed a blanket from the cardboard mat that was his bed. Shaking it out, he carried it outside. It was wrong to make a hole in a blanket, he knew, but he would face that later. It was more urgent to protect the garden and the bees. Recovering his hammer, he draped the blanket from the roof of his house to the ground, making a tent over the garden and beehive, and nailed it into place.

COTTON

When Javier got home from work, grimy and exhausted, he was surprised to see the new house towering in front of him. The frame was complete; bright yellow walls illuminated the yard. Ana came flying toward him and threw herself into his arms. He couldn't remember the last time he had hugged her, other than a few perfunctory caresses in bed. He pulled her against him, nuzzling her hair, breathing in the scent of sawdust and paint and sunshine.

He knew she was sniffing him as well, for traces of alcohol or the harsh odor of crystal. He'd been clean for five months now, but he knew it would take her months, even years, to stop sniffing out the trajectory of her evening. He didn't blame her.

He pulled back, looked into her eyes. He was surprised to find them filled with tears. "¿*M'ija?*"

"¡*Está tan hermosa!*" she choked past the lump in her throat.

"It is beautiful," he agreed.

A petite woman walked over to them. Javier released Ana and turned to shake the woman's hand. "Good afternoon," he said, in thickly accented English. "I am Javier. Nice to meet you." The woman smiled, greeting him first in English, then in Spanish. She scrutinized him, her glance resting for a moment on the tattoo on the inside of his forearm. Javier saw the tiniest flicker of recognition in her eyes and slid his arm around Ana's back to hide his forearm.

"What do you think?" the woman asked. "Would you like to help with your house?"

Javier hesitated. "Let me wash up first. Today we were fertilizing crops and I don't want my new house to stink. Also, I do not think you will like my smell." He left and went to draw a bucket of water from the barrel.

As Javier cleaned himself in the tarp bathroom, he scrubbed at his tattoo fiercely. He knew no amount of scrubbing would eradicate it; his mistakes couldn't be washed away.

He wondered if the American woman would ask him about it. In the fields where he toiled, “*Sur 13*” meant nothing to the men around him, each one focused on eking out their own families’ survival. The look on the American’s face, however, was one of recognition. He wanted to explain to her that it was a teenage mistake, that when you take a thirteen-year-old boy from the lush mountains of Oaxaca and drop him in middle school in dry, dusty Bakersfield, bad things happen.

He wanted to explain that if school in his native language was difficult, school in a foreign country was almost impossible. It’s hard to get expelled from middle school, but Javier had, after a cluster of fights. His father eventually gave him an ultimatum - go back to school or go to work - and at age fourteen, Javier found himself picking cotton. It was the worst job he ever had; worse than hothouse cucumbers, worse than lugging buckets of tomatoes, worse than spreading fertilizer, worse than even stooping to pick strawberries. In the cotton fields, he was always hot, always thirsty, too young and small to keep up with a man’s quota. He came home each night with bits of fluff in his hair, scratches on his arms, and burrs in his clothing. He came to dread heading out daily before dawn, being yelled at in a language he didn’t understand if he stopped to take a drink or empty his bladder.

Getting off the bus and trudging home in the afternoon, he tried to stifle the envy he felt watching the clusters of boys on the corner. He watched as they high-fived each other, headed over to the soccer field at the nearby school. He saw their sharply pressed blue bandanas and wondered if their mothers ironed them or the teens ironed them themselves. His resentment grew, until one day rather than heading home, he adopted their jaunty strut and approached the knot of boys. In his work clothes, covered with burrs and bits of fluff, he faked a confidence he didn’t feel. “¿*Qué hubole?*” he asked.

A stocky boy, clearly the leader, inspected him from head to toe. “¿*Algodón?*”

“Yeah, cotton. My old man makes me work since I got kicked out of school.”

“¿*Te gusta el trabajo?*”

“No, I hate it.”

The boy laughed. “There are easier ways to make money. We could teach you, if you want to learn.”

Of course, Javier wanted to learn. He would do any job they asked, if it meant he didn’t have to return to the fields. His first required step in “job training,” he was told, was to get a tattoo, the same one they all had. A few days later, Javier looked away, trying not to wince as a fellow inked his arm with a device made from a pen, a metal guitar string, and the motor of a CD player. He hid the tattoo from his parents, covering it with long sleeves even in the Bakersfield heat, but he couldn’t hide the fact that he always had money even though he no longer came home with burrs and fluff from a day spent picking cotton. His parents, worried for his safety, sent him back to Mexico to live with an uncle, who demanded Javier work alongside him in the fields.

ORANGES

Gustavo watched the house grow. When the group left at the end of the first day, four walls stood before him, rafters towering over them. Celeste and Daniel kept running in and out of the house chasing each other, shouting with glee. Throughout the first day Gustavo had watched with a tinge of envy as *Mamá* and Celeste painted, Daniel nailed boards into place, and Javier, whom he had long since come to call *Papá*, helped set the rafters. This morning the pounding of hammers and boisterous shouts of Americans made him wish for a

quick death rather than the painful hangover he nursed. Midday, he slipped away unnoticed, down the hill, near enough to hear the clatter, but out of sight.

He sat on the slope, his arms wrapped around his knees, his back to the house. He wanted to see how his house and his life were changing, but Gustavo couldn't bring himself to lift his eyes, to turn and face his future. His skin reeked of sweat, alcohol, failure, and fear. What would this new house bring? What if everyone in the family became new in their new house? *Mamá* calm, *Papá* sober. Perhaps the worried cautiousness would leave Celeste's face. Daniel would stand tall and confident.

But Gustavo? Perhaps he could not change with them. He was exhausted. He couldn't remember a day that wasn't hard, a day that he could let go of his quiet vigilance. He'd learned to drink away his worry and fear. He knew *Mamá* hated seeing him drunk, especially now that *Papá* abstained, but it was the fastest way to tamp down demons and doubts. If he drank enough, he couldn't see the storm clouds rising behind her eyes.

Gustavo heard footsteps behind him. He turned. The woman, the one who had been working alongside *Mamá*, making her laugh in a carefree way he'd longed to hear for years, stood a few feet away. He wanted to thank her for that gift, but her presence next to him filled him with an anger he did not understand.

In her hands, small round oranges beckoned. "¿*Naranjas?*" He shaded his eyes with a hand as he glanced up. He did want some. He couldn't remember the last time he'd tasted an orange. The cool sweetness would ease his headache.

Remembering his manners, he stood.

"*Sí, por favor,*" he answered. Despite the pounding in his head, he lifted his eyes to meet hers.

"*Toma.*" she extended her hands.

He took the oranges, three of them. He didn't know if she would stay, if he should wait to tear the peel off. Suddenly he wanted to bite into a juicy section of the orange more than he'd ever wanted anything in his life. The woman motioned for him to sit. "Go on, eat them," she said. Without waiting to be asked, she plopped down beside him. He slid his fingernail under the peel, conscious of the dirt embedded there. He hoped she didn't look closely at him. Her own pants were splattered with paint - yellow from yesterday, and other splotches that matched the church-built houses in the neighborhood. Her shoes were as filthy as his. He supposed even Americans didn't have a way to stay spotless in this neighborhood.

Gustavo gobbled a few sections of the first orange before stopping to breathe. He gulped a few breaths, then polished off the rest of the fruit. Even on the hottest days picking cucumbers in a steamy greenhouse, water never tasted so sweet.

The woman waited, her body poised expectantly. He could see she wanted to ask him a question. He was embarrassed at the greedy way he devoured the oranges, but for a moment all that mattered was their liquid sliding down his parched throat.

It was rare that he ate fruit. Although he spent his days among produce, he ate little of it. When he was nine, he had stolen a tomato off the vine he was harvesting and received a ringing blow to the head in return, the boss's heavy hand causing him to see nothing but darkness for a moment. Since then, he'd been tempted by the food he picked, but never dared take anything. Lately, he hadn't been working. Labor crew leaders contracted workers at 5 a.m. and he was often just falling asleep at that hour. *Mamá's* anguish could be softened by the money he would bring in if he worked, but he was too fatigued to care.

After he finished the third orange, the woman spoke softly, "Would you like to come help us? We could use another pair of hands." Her eyes met his. "This will be your house. When you see it, you will know, *'I made this. It's the work of my hands.'*"

He shrugged, annoyed. Had *Mamá* told this woman something about him? *Mamá* didn't carry tales, especially about her children, but perhaps her newfound joy had made her feel free and open. "It's not my house," he answered, "*Es de mi mamá y mi papá.*"

"*Precioso*, you live here too. Your mom and dad are helping; Daniel and Celeste are helping. You don't want to miss out on the fun." She stood, extending her hand. "Come on. I'll show you."

Rage began a low boil in his veins. He didn't need this woman to show him anything. He knew how to hammer a nail. Who was she to look in his eyes and tell him anything at all? Who was she to see into him? Biting back angry words, he stood. "Thank you for the oranges. I will go help now." He didn't need any old woman, any American, to tell him how to be a man. He walked toward the house, his long stride leaving her behind.

PONIES

Ana couldn't remember when she had last laughed this much. The Americans were loud and boisterous, cracking jokes in broken Spanish. She watched the sunshine-colored house take shape in front of her and thought she would never be unhappy again. Gustavo and Javier laid shingles, working with a rhythm and energy she didn't realize they had lost until she saw it reappear. Celeste bounced between playing with her doll house and trailing behind the workers, chattering and getting underfoot.

Ana rubbed her sore arms. She was no stranger to hard work, but painting and hammering were new to her weary body. She dreaded doing the wash later and noted with relief that Daniel was washing his own tattered jeans.

Elizabeth approached, accompanied by another woman. The woman, tall and blond as Ana imagined an American movie star to be, bent toward Elizabeth and spoke rapidly, as Elizabeth interpreted. "This is Carol. She has some money to spend, and she'd like to know what you need."

Ana stood speechless. An unexpected lump rose in her throat. The clouds that had lifted for the past day and a half threatened to overtake her. She stared hard at the bright walls of the house, willing herself to see sunshine instead of darkness.

They needed so much.

They always needed so much.

What didn't she need? Money was tight; just as Javier stopped spending money on silvery six-packs, Gustavo stopped working. She ran through a list in her mind: groceries, the monthly payment they owed for their property. Javier had taken the day off to help with building, which meant he'd given up today's wages.

The house was beautiful, and Ana didn't want to seem ungrateful. But they couldn't eat the house. The children couldn't wear the house. The rainy season - if rain came this year - would soon be upon them, and no one in the family had shoes without holes in them.

Ana felt herself slipping underwater. She could hear the women's voices as if far away. "Three hundred dollars. Let's see. That's ... um.... fifty-four hundred pesos."

The air cleared. *Fifty-four hundred pesos*. Had she heard correctly? Perhaps Elizabeth miscalculated. That seemed an impossible sum of money.

“What do you think?” Elizabeth looked at her with a smile. “I bet you can find a way to spend fifty-four hundred pesos.”

Ana burst into tears, laughing and crying at the same time. She threw herself at Elizabeth in a hug, almost knocking her to the ground. “¡Ay, Dios! Dios. Gracias. ¡Muchas gracias!”

Elizabeth laughed, her eyes sparkling with tears as well. “Don’t thank me; it’s her money.” She gestured toward Carol.

Ana’s eyes darted around, seeking her family amid the lively chaos. Her happiness was eclipsed by something like panic; everything was changing so fast. Gustavo and Javier were still on the roof, but Daniel was wringing out his jeans over the cement washboard. “*M’ijo*, come.” He could do the math quickly, make sure she didn’t seem ungrateful asking for too much. “Add this please. The land payment is thirteen hundred pesos. We need last month’s and this month’s payments. Five of us need shoes, but we can buy them used at the swap meet. We need soap, oil, shampoo, flour, salt, milk, eggs. We might even be able to buy meat.”

“*Mamá*, wait.” Daniel put his hand up. “We can’t afford all of that.”

Elizabeth was smiling. Ana had forgotten in her excitement that the other woman spoke Spanish. “We can do that,” Elizabeth said. “Get your family and let’s go into town.”

Daniel looked wide-eyed from his mother to Elizabeth. “Go on, get your brother and sister,” Ana ordered. He dashed away to tell them to hurry. What if they weren’t fast enough? Would the women change their minds?

They piled into Elizabeth’s truck, adults in the cab while Gustavo, Daniel, and Celeste spread out in the truck bed. Ana was quiet in the presence of Carol, the woman who offered the money, but to her surprise, Javier was not. He answered the women’s questions in broken English, waiting for Elizabeth to translate when he got stuck. Ana watched him speak, confident, animated. Where a shell of a man had been just days before, now sat the man she had fallen in love with years ago. Shavings on his clothes, tar on his hands, and dirt in every crevice of skin paled under the glow of his green eyes. She understood that somehow the house had breathed new life into him, as it had to her, and she vowed to hold onto that feeling.

Carol insisted that they go to a shoe store, rather than the swap meet. At the entrance, Ana paused, paralyzed. There were so many shoes, glossy shiny footwear she had only seen in pictures. She gazed longingly at some silvery high heels, then shrugged with a giggle, picturing herself teetering up the hill to her house in them. Tennis shoes for herself and Celeste, work boots for her husband and sons.

“*Mamá*,” Celeste tugged at her shirt. “These have ponies on them. Can I have the pony shoes?”

Elizabeth was silent, watching as Ana and her family fanned out through the store. Ana wanted her near, wanted her to guide them. Instead, a slender young woman in a short skirt and high heels approached. The woman’s hair was loose and straight, a dark shining curtain over her shoulders, a contrast to her pale clear skin. Her white blouse was spotless, free of stains, her nails long and elegant. She raised one perfectly shaped eyebrow at Ana, asking, “Do you need help with something?” Her tone wasn’t rude, but neither was it friendly. Ana blushed with sudden awareness of how she must look, how all of them looked. Yellow paint still dotted their hands. Javier and Daniel had sawdust in their hair. Gustavo smelled, not of alcohol but of sweat, of hard work on a black roof under blazing sunshine.

Ana's heart pounded. She wanted to say, "*No, gracias,*" and slink away. The bright hues around her inundated her senses. The sales clerk was too cold and shiny. Before Ana could respond, Celeste piped up, her clear voice ringing with confidence, "I want the pony shoes."

The clerk peered down at her. "They're white. Wouldn't you like something that doesn't show dirt?"

Celeste's body stiffened in indignation. "I wash my shoes when they are dirty!" Ana looked down at her; who was this little warrior with her fist clenched and her chin jutting out? Ana wondered if she'd ever had such courage. Perhaps she once had, but life had leached the courage out of her. She put a hand on Celeste's shoulder.

"No, *mamita*. Choose something else. Brown or black."

"*¡Pero yo quiero a los que tienen caballos!* Elizabeth said I could choose whatever I wanted!"

The woman sighed. Her face contorted in exasperation, suddenly ugly in Ana's eyes despite her elegance. "*Bien*. What size do you wear?"

Ana shrugged. "I don't know. We've never bought new shoes before. Whatever fits, *m'ija*."

Elizabeth and Carol strode over. Carol stood tall, towering over the clerk. "Is there a problem?"

"The child doesn't know her size."

Carol's voice rose as she said, "Then bring her some pairs to try on. You work in a shoe store; you must have a general idea what size her feet are." Elizabeth translated rapidly, her tone mimicking Carol's.

"Does the young lady have socks?" The saleslady's voice dripped with a false solicitousness that Carol understood without translation.

Ana regarded her daughter's feet. Worn soles, missing laces. Under the flapping shoe tongue, Celeste's dark skin was mottled with dirt. Ana tried to remember when she had last cut her daughter's toenails. They were long, she knew, and rimmed in filth. The calluses Celeste had formed from a lifetime of barefoot days would be rough and discolored. Before Ana could speak, Carol raised her voice again sharply. "If it's not too much trouble, could you sell us some?" She was commanding in a way that made Ana flinch. Were all Americans as loud and confident? Perhaps it was more natural to be strident in a land where everything was easier. Elizabeth translated, softening her tone, but the clerk had already gotten the message. She scurried to bring socks to each member of the family.

As the sales clerk handed Ana a pair of socks, she was careful not to touch Ana's hand. Anger and shame roiled around her brain, causing a rush of blood between her ears. Why couldn't they have just gone to the swap meet, where they weren't any smaller, darker, or dirtier than anyone else? Yes, they all needed shoes, but that tall sneering lady in front of her made her want to crawl away barefoot.

Celeste pranced across the floor in gleaming white tennis shoes. "*Mamá*, look! Look at me! Look at the ponies; their tails are rainbows!"

Ana smiled, almost a real smile. Seeing her daughter happy, she could feel the dark cloud sliding away. She scanned the store for Javier. He stood in front of the opposite wall, Gustavo and Daniel at his side, debating the merits of the work boots versus tennis shoes. Their discussion was animated, and although Ana couldn't hear the words, she could tell from

the tone that they were happy. The thought of Javier's tired feet in soft clean white socks and well-cushioned boots give rise to a lump in her throat. If his feet felt better, his work day would be lighter. He would pick faster, earn more money, walk up the hill toward home each evening with a spring in his step.

Maybe with new shoes, he wouldn't be tired. None of them would be tired.

SUGAR

Leaving the shoe store, they climbed back into Elizabeth's car. Gustavo herded his siblings back into the truck. As they pulled out of the parking lot, he leaned toward them. "Listen," he said. His voice was low and serious. "You will not ask for anything at the market. Do you understand? No *papitas*, no candy." He stared hard at Celeste, who blushed under his gaze. "Daniel, if you see *Papá* picking up beer, you must stop him."

Daniel interrupted angrily. "Beer? *Papá* hasn't had beer in a long time. The only one who drinks all night and sleeps all day is you!"

Gustavo clenched his fists, saying, "Listen, little brother. You're no one to tell me what to ..." He stopped. He stared at his hands, unclenched them, stretched his fingers wide, willing the fury out of his fingertips. He would not strike his brother, not today. He closed his eyes, picturing the house the color of sunshine waiting for them, *Mamá's* flowers, Javier's proud face as he tacked shingles onto the roof. He would not ruin this day. Taking a deep breath, he began again. "Daniel, if you see me picking up beer, you must stop me."

Daniel smiled, lightly punching his brother's arm. "*Sí, hermano.*"

"Let's think about what we need," Gustavo continued. "The ladies are very generous, and we don't want to make them angry by spending too much. You know *Mamá* won't do the math right." The siblings looked at each other in silent understanding. Daniel began to scrawl numbers in the dust of the truck window. "The land payment is thirteen hundred per month, times two; that's twenty-six hundred. We've already used two thousand, one hundred and sixty pairs of shoes." His finger raced across the dust. "We have six hundred and forty pesos left. That's almost nothing. We need to plan well."

"Milk?"

"No. That will spoil. We need to get things they don't have at the *abarrotes*, things that keep." Gustavo sighed. He knew they needed many things. They always did. If only he had the money he'd squandered freely on alcohol. The shiny silver cans called out to him, a siren song of rest. But today the memory of each sip, far from relieving his thirst, choked him with its rebuke.

Salt. Cooking oil. Lard. Flour. Soup. Nescafe.

Sugar. He knew *Mamá* loved her coffee, enjoyed quiet moments sitting outside on an old tractor tire in the fresh morning air, sipping sweet coffee, and staring at her flowers. But there was rarely Nescafe, and even less often sugar. There was always beer.

Gustavo grabbed his sister's hand as the truck braked. He put his other hand on Daniels's shoulder.

"*Lo siento*. I'm sorry."

Daniel nodded, just a tip of his chin, a gesture he'd inherited from Javier. Celeste patted his leg tenderly. "Don't worry, *hermano*. *Mamá* will be happy in her yellow house. We will help her stay happy."

Gustavo swallowed hard. "*Sí. Así es.*"

As they entered the market, Ana began to give orders. "Celeste, go get soap - the powdered kind because we can use it for dishes and laundry, and for bathing. A bottle of shampoo, if it's cheap. Daniel, you go get salt, lard, and oil. Gustavo, you stay with me. We'll get eggs, vegetables, and fruit. You keep track of the totals."

"*Mamá*," he said quietly, hoping Elizabeth wouldn't hear, "That's too much. We don't have enough money left."

Ana sighed. He could feel her deflate next to him until she seemed physically smaller. He had known this sensation since he was a small boy, the feeling of his mother shrinking beside him. Now that he towered over her, he could see her fold in on herself, see the top of her head drop and her shoulders slump.

Gustavo turned to find Elizabeth beside him. "Carol says you can spend a hundred dollars here. That's about eighteen hundred pesos. You know what you need better than I do, but I can help you keep track of what you're spending if you want."

Gustavo shook his head. "I don't know what we need. I don't pay enough attention. *Mamá* knows. But," he lowered his voice and leaned toward her, saying, "*Mamá* likes coffee. With sugar. I really want to get her some. I'll even pay you back, I promise. I will get a job Monday, and I will pay you back. I'll get the money to you somehow, even if it's to the U.S."

She smiled at him. It wasn't a condescending smile, he didn't think. He could tell Elizabeth liked his mom, and he thought if she knew Ana well, she would want her to be happy in a yellow house. To have rested feet in soft socks, to sip coffee in the sunshine. To have sugar to sweeten the bitterness.

APPLES

As soon as they entered the grocery store, Javier slipped away. He was exhausted. The effort of speaking English all morning to Carol had worn him out. She was their benefactor, and his gratitude made him feel obligated to talk to her. But it had been so long since he'd used English for days on end, and the words felt like sandpaper in his mouth. They tasted like Bakersfield, and cotton, and the metallic tang of blood when knuckles hit teeth. Now the words in English had a new flavor, though, of sawdust and shingles and leather tool belts. A taste of new shoes, of clean white socks.

Still, Javier was drained. The merciless sun baked dust and sweat into a shell over his skin; exhaustion and shame shellacked it into place. He wanted to scrub away the day with hot water and rough soap, then rest in the soft stupor of alcohol.

He paced the perimeter: meat counter, freezer, cooler. He stopped in front of the brightly colored containers of ice cream. What if, just once, he bought his children a tub of ice cream instead of a bucket of grief? He knew he couldn't spend Carol's money on frivolities; he kept moving.

His gait was anxious, the pacing of a caged tiger. He knew he should feel gratitude and relief, but exhaustion tugged at him. He ran his fingers over the smooth coolness of the refrigerator cases of milk, leaving a smeary trail in the condensation on the doors. To his left, with no doors to block him, were cases, cans, bottles of beer. He could imagine the heft of a bottle in his hand, smooth and cold against his palm.

He reached into the case, touched his fingertips to a bottle. Slowly he wrapped his hand around it, lifted it off the shelf. Just one bottle. Just enough to rest.

"Let's get a case of eggs." Javier heard a voice, echoing from the next aisle. Poor Daniel, always the responsible one. He didn't have Celeste's lightness of spirit, nor Gustavo's

anger. No storm clouds floated behind his eyes. He worked and worried, cared for Ana and her flowers and their bees.

Stung by guilt, Javier drew his hand back from the refrigerated case. He wiped his palm off on his jeans, as if to erase the evidence of how close he'd come to falling.

Any second now, they would turn the corner. Daniel or Ana would see him staring longingly at the beer like a forbidden lover, and no sunny yellow house would be enough to erase their disappointment. He had not been the one to give them the house they deserved, but he would not give them despair they didn't deserve.

He walked away from the voices of his family, pacing restlessly. He would wait for them by the cash register. He would root himself to the floor, to one single linoleum square, far from temptation. He would not move until he was safely surrounded by their smiles and excited chatter. They would show him their purchases, and he would be pleased, as much by their broad smiles as by the eggs, lard, and salt.

Javier made his way through the produce department. After seeing fields of chiles and tomatoes daily, it was hard to be tempted by them. A pyramid of watermelons, heaps of carrots – the colors and quantities were almost overwhelming.

Then he saw the shallow bin was filled with green apples. And he knew. Quickly he plucked a plastic bag from the roll and began to fill it. First Ana. Always Ana. Then Gustavo. He had wanted to do right by tiny solemn Gustavo from the beginning. An apple for himself, to accompany them as he had in those first tender days of courting. One for Daniel, who deserved to feel the sweetness and crunch under his teeth after years of biting back worry. And finally, one for Celeste, who brought light to the family like sunshine to the apples.

He dusted each apple on his shirt before dropping it into the bag. Once it was filled, he moved toward the cash register, where he could hear the voices of his family.

He placed his hand on Ana's shoulder, bashful as an adolescent. He could feel the warmth of her skin against his arm, the warmth of their children around them. In the background he could see the two American women, and he knew he would thank them with overwhelming emotion later, but this moment was his, and Ana's.

He raised the bag slightly, his green eyes intent on hers. He put an apple into her hand. "*Toma,*" he whispered. Turning to Gustavo, he placed one into his outstretched palm. "*Ándale, peque.* It's for you." Ana nudged him, and he whispered gruffly, "*Gracias, Papá.*"

He lifted his apple, tapped it against hers, ignoring the bewildered stares of the others.

"*Salud,*" he whispered.

"*Salud,*" she murmured shyly.

He knew that this night, he would kiss her, the taste of sweet green apples between them.

Overcoming

Nancy Alvarado

It's May of 2020 and I've lost count of the number of things that are imploding. A year and a half has passed since I came home from work one Thursday to find that the man of the house had vacated the premises without warning. My son has been in the military for nearly that long, and I miss him like I would miss an amputated limb.

We're in the second month of a global pandemic, with no idea what lies ahead. I'm teaching online from my kitchen table, and trying not to mourn the sudden loss of the other things I love: church, yoga, building houses with a volunteer organization in Mexico. My daughter lost her job and her college graduation ceremony, which we replace with a snarky covid-themed graduation photo shoot in the backyard. More significantly, she's lost her peace of mind.

To some extent, we all have. We wipe down groceries and doorknobs and shopping carts. We wear masks even outdoors. We discuss how it's not a matter of if we get covid, but when. Over time, I calm down. I resume as many activities as I am able. I no longer sing "Happy Birthday" as I wash my hands to ensure that I'm scrubbing for 20 seconds. I stop disinfecting things brought home from the outside world.

My daughter does not. Her anxiety intensifies. The world feels to her like the glitter experiment elementary school teachers use to show how germs spread. She feels the potential for bacteria everywhere.

I'm confused. This is the same child who as a toddler bit a preschool classmate and ate a fingerful of Tijuana mud, in both cases because she thought they'd taste like chocolate. She's camped, built houses with me in Ensenada, waded through creeks. I don't recognize the young woman who sees and fears the dirt of the world. The child who only ever got sick once a year has developed a terror of becoming ill.

We both know she's not ok. Neither of us knows how to fix it.

It's December of 2020. As part of the divorce settlement, I'm forced to sell her childhood home. We move in with my fiancé. For me it's a lovely, safe, welcoming landing place to start a new life with the man I will marry. For her, it's a whole new set of germs to fear.

She begins therapy, and we now have a diagnosis for her, OCD. Obsessive Compulsive Disorder. This comforts neither of us.

She spends a lot of time disinfecting things. She develops rules and rituals that confuse me, anger me, and make me sad.

I'm not allowed to hug her unless we've both just come from the world - dirty - or we're both freshly showered.

I'm not allowed to touch anything in her room. I stand in the middle of her carpet awkwardly when I speak to her, controlling both my urge to sit or lean and my rising irritation.

She leaves dry clothes sitting in the dryer, but I'm not allowed to touch them to get them out of

the dryer because if I touch them, she'll have to wash them all over again.

I hear her in the middle of the night cleaning things and crying. I want to go to her, to hug her, but I can't. I know she needs that hug on one level, but on the other, I am a bearer of germs.

It's summer of 2020. She has a boyfriend. He's a good guy, and I'm happy for her. Still, I'm hurt that he's always clean enough to hug and I rarely am. He's earned his hugs; he's more willing to follow her complicated rules than I. Still, I miss her so much it hurts.

It's December of 2021. I'm learning to be patient though this is still foreign to me. I sympathize but find it hard to empathize. I offer to have a session with her and her therapist to better understand. She says she'll let me know.

I speak to her sharply more often than I should. Twice, we get into shouting matches, something that even during adolescence never happened. My husband, on the other hand, is calm and patient. He buys her UV wands and disinfecting bleach spray guns. It reminds me of when she was little and I would tell her the air freshener I sprayed in her room would keep the bogeyman away.

I know this isn't her fault or her choice. I know if it's exhausting for me, it must be twenty times worse for her. I don't blame her. If anything, I blame myself. I feel I failed her in some way I can't quite put my finger on. Circumstances? Genetics?

She blames herself as well. She doesn't want to be difficult, doesn't want to hurt my feelings, doesn't want to be a burden. Her brain will not let her rest without disinfecting rituals, however, and that takes precedence over anything else.

We're all exhausted.

Intellectually, I understand her need to control her environment; still, I spend a lot of time trying not to sigh in exasperation. I'm just not wired to fear so much. My type of anxiety is a whole different animal. Covid-wise, I'm not quite unconcerned enough to lick strangers in small, airless, enclosed spaces, but I'm pretty comfortable out in the dirty world. Meanwhile, much of what she wants would end up controlling what my husband and I do or don't do in our own house.

I'm torn between accommodating her compulsions and forcing her to adapt. I read more about OCD and realize that all things considered, she's doing pretty well. She works, goes to dance classes, and has a boyfriend. She still wears a mask almost everywhere, but she's developed an "outside brain" to use in the world, which helps her let go. She disinfects everything to within an inch of its life when she gets home though.

I enjoy living with her for the most part. I truly do. These are not among my best parenting moments though. I try to control my face, but sometimes I sigh or make a face when she asks a question that I know is a prelude to rituals.

"Did anyone go into my bathroom?"

"No. Literally no. Not ever. No one uses your bathroom ever. No, you don't have to disinfect the

light switch.”

I could just say no. I usually just say no. Every once in a while, the above slips out.

I feel like a terrible parent. She feels like a terrible daughter. We love each other. We miss each other. The wall called OCD towers between us more often than it should.

It's February of 2022. She turns to me one day and says, “I'm ready. I want my life back.” She makes an appointment with a psychiatrist, who prescribes her a low dose of an antidepressant. The change isn't instant, but little by little, she relaxes. She stops washing her hands until they are rubbed raw, cracked and bleeding. She stops wearing a mask during dance.

She kisses my cheek one day. I almost cry.

It's June of 2022. She returns from a dance conference in New York with covid. Her symptoms are akin to a cold. I am overjoyed. She got on a plane! She stayed in a hotel! She enjoyed a dance conference in crowded hotel ballrooms for three days. And covid, the fear that loomed so large in her mind, is gentle with her. I'm so proud of her that I'm able to ignore the suitcase sitting in the middle of her room for three days “disinfecting.”

It's April of 2023. I'm in Mexico leading a housebuilding group. A teenage girl on the trip has a panic attack; she can't sleep in the room assigned to her because someone in there is coughing, and she's terrified of getting sick. As she talks, I hear echoes of my daughter in 2020. I hear OCD. I text my daughter and ask if she would be willing to talk to this young girl. They spend almost an hour on the phone, and at the end of their conversation, the teenager is calm and able to sleep, albeit on the couch. My daughter is elated that she can use her experience to help someone else. It may be the first time she's seen a bright side to her struggle.

She takes and teaches dance classes, works in an elementary school, goes out with friends, talks to her therapist, and takes the little pill every day that makes this all possible. I've learned when to hug her and how to ask if she's “clean or dirty” before touching her. She boasts proudly when she can resist the urge to disinfect something. I warn her that if she doesn't get her laundry out of the dryer, I'm going to lick every individual piece of clothing, but it's a joke now, and we both laugh.

We can breathe. We're ok. We've made it, our relationship intact or maybe even better than before. We've learned some hard lessons, individually and together.

It's August of 2023. She auditioned for a stage production of Evita, and is cast in her first professional role. On opening night, someone snaps a photo of her on the red carpet. She's absolutely stunning in a red satin dress, relaxed, open, smiling. She is the most beautiful girl I've ever seen.

I'm brought to tears, this time of relief and pride. She's worked so hard to overcome this chemical imbalance and its effects. While shadows of it lurk in the background, they are faint and manageable.

She is back.

Ground

Mother and night's
child in a cardboard
box rooted in holy
ground, reading
the unsweetened
Book of Job — on
TV for rich to feed on
poor, for the comfort
of the comfortable, for
conveniences.

Each one sees the
dice are blank and the
lottery is won by
designated hitters, a
half century of losers.

Let's color the Bible.
Let's sing the batting averages.
Let's break bread
and pick out the weevils.

I move plotless.

Each one sees the
sum of all angles, the
map of lost saints, the
communion of tribes.
Each one is blinded by
the blank white and the
dappled duty. Each
one sees abyss.

Ground down by
psalmic oppression, by
enemy might, by
self-sin, deafness to
the shouting sky, alive to
evil feared, unarmored,
unmoored on the dark
sea of storm.

Let us give each other names.
Let us give sight to the blind.
Let us give way.

I embrace the sharp-angled.

The grounds crew rakes
the sand, silt and clay
for the white ball bounce.
Above the ground: robins,
hummingbirds, vultures,
ospreys, birds-of-paradise,
birds-of-prey, flamingos,
peacocks, black swans,
white swans and sparrows.
Below ground: quartz,
crystals, grave dust and
gold. Class, order, genus.
Blue, green, yellow.
Mosquito boat run aground.

Let the snow melt.
Let the rock spin
through the dark empty.
Let the baby's eyes open.

Each one sees and does not see.

A scarred palm

On Ashland, near Montrose,
One-Cent met the woman clothed in neon,
more than homeless.

“I am apocryphal,” she said,
but she seemed real enough.

He could see the sweat of her face.
In her voice, he heard sunlit graves opened
as if a multitude of bus doors.

“Happy fall!” she said. “Happy flaw!”

It was the bright star of noon above
and the grit of sidewalk cement below,
more than tangible.

They sat on an ad bench
with a real estate seller photo,
“Boo can do!”

And she told One-Cent
of fleeing in gleaming robes
to the wild place. She told of birth pangs,
more than passing.

She had been an angel’s mistress
in a time before.
Her bed had been sweet leathery storax,
her ring cinnamon red onyx,
more than hollow.

From a pocket inside her suit jacket,
she had a map before him.

Her home city had twelve gates
she measured as gold clear as glass.

Her home city had twelve foundations
she measured as precious:

The bottom four were white-banded sardonyx,
green chrysolite and rusty jasper
and chalcedony of sky blue.

The middle four: seawater beryl and red sardius,
apple-green chrysoprasus
and amethyst of deep violet.

The top four: ocean-blue sapphire, emerald,
orange topaz and royal red jacinth.

Her home city had twelve towers
she measured as pearl gray.

One-Cent sat on the bench
with this woman of flame and
showed her a wrinkled family tree.
Showed her a scarred palm.
Showed her the book that cannot be opened.

He recited from memory more than words.

Benedictus

One-Cent of the magnified soul
is great with birth,
visited and redeemed,
a downtown megaphone preacher.

Two genealogies,
two annunciations and denunciations,
two arks. No room for turtle doves.
Read the tight penmanship chart.

His uncle engineers sewers.

One-Cent interweaves testaments,
dons vestments, tallies resentments,
arguments and lies. Arcane formulas
on the Chicago grid. Visions dreamt.

Sword through soul,
wisdom and grace, One-Cent, sorrowing,
sought the overshadow. Made of a woman,
he sought a new covenant.
Early and often.

He ponders at heart the holy thing.
He waxes strong with Temple answers.

His aunt is a nun.

And, lo, the womb leapt
at the arrival of three wayfarers,
at the horn of salvation,
the clout of blue thunder
— and out of the mouth of holy prophets:
the oath to Abraham. City in a garden,
onion thing, wind place, New Jerusalem.

His parents hunker down.

All the days of life, the dayspring,
light in the shadow of death,
One-Cent is with you, down
streets, avenues and alleys.

I am a change coming on

I am the law and the prophets.
I am a change coming on.

I am naive years, a happy mind,
January fog upon the Ashland Avenue rhythm.

Spatulate toe, hammer toe.
I am history, injury, memory,
raw imagination, equivocation,
transubstantiation, deforestation and wrath.

I am a bun in the oven.

The rat scurries daylight-blind
along the Loop alley wall.

I am who am.
I am a change coming on.

I am omen-bird, blowfly,
cemetery picnic bread and wine,
the third part of the day.
silent Cordelia, the omega,
to hand, too late, a long neck,
to have and to hold, a rare monster,
the gridiron government, a peculiar tariff,
a Rooseveltian masque, the missing sidewalk,
a tableau vivant, a skirt skit, a pose.

I am long-suffering Western Avenue,
jewelry-box Astor Street, the Hundreds, K-town,
Blue Island from Chinatown to the jail.
I am Leamington.

I am the shadow of the raptor.
I am the sheep and goats.
I am the walrus.

I am wishing and hoping.

Angels are out
tonight.

Cancer the Betrayer, I am.
Behovely. I am the Fool, nuncle.
I am prodigal incarnation, ribald prescription,
definition, conscription, depiction,
bawdy inhibition. I am
the full moon of November.

I am the tomb to come.

I am Baptism with the wrong words.
I am a brand-new dime.

Speaker of the House.

I am the sword of doubt,
divine symphony, the Reeve's Tale,
the huckleberry cave.
I am lots cast, the Gehenna ravine,
a whole offering.
I am the village priest.

Head-smashing Goneril, I am.

Weight of words,
word mystery, word delight,
westward ho, wrong turn,
Wentworth Avenue and West End,
homeless Wilson and home-run Waveland.

The communion of saints
bringing in the sheaves.

I am naked I came. I am curious.
I am the sum of all sums.
the clock tower, the Hanged Man, the Joker,
Guy Fawkes, John Wilkes, Cain,
Judas and Cermak shot by accident.

I am sure as hell.

The royal touch, I am,
the sign of the cross,
fasting in Lent and in
prison and in the last days,
holy water, holy oil.
Iago and the Little Flower,
Columbus Park, alley maggots,
Bubbly Creek, Mud Lake, the Mudhole,
the backyard catch-basin cesspit.

I am the egg and precious stones,
the Temple, the moneychangers and the whip,
the hard heart, the seven-day fast,
the sacred substance,
the dung of a swallow.

I am dodging.

I am the twelve gates of New
Jerusalem, the lost tribes, darkness
on the face of the deep, salt
of the earth. I am starting out.

I am to blame.

You saw me
as the package you delivered.

I am a change coming on.

I am the nine deadly sins, the
Seven glorious mysteries, the
three cardinal virtues, the
nine wonders of the world, the
donkey beaten seventy times
seven. I am dancing in my
grandfather's new clothes. I
am the devil in the details. I
am angels in the outfield. I
am quarantine, cop car flowers,
false north, the street-gang monk.

I am evil.
I am the blind dog, barking.

Pyro Mo, I am.
Venomed Regan.
Asp prick.

Heavyweight Champion of the World.

Firestarter, firecracker.
I am the organs of the tree, the sap of the land.
Angel horn music.
Lightning bug.

I am better not to have been born.
I am hysteria, the white toad.
I am my dung hill. Haphazard, unplumbed.
The weed pushing blossom through cement.

I am dirty behind the ears.
I am the stadium flags, several directions of wind.

I am the archpriest, manual labor,
seminary fields, the daily office,
chanted psalms, charted maps,

maps of the heavens, maps of the stars.
I am Neptune. I am moonlight in Vermont,
the moon over Washington Boulevard.

I am singing the song of songs.

Fee-fi-fo. I am enough. I am lack.
I am the whole fabric.
I am a change coming on.

I am the mystical body,
honey dripping from the comb,
needle streets on the West Side,
the maidenliest star over Hegewisch,
the shield of Achilles,
the naked bowman returned home,
the blood grass and cement
behind the house in Oak Lawn,
the empty vessel,
the Friend Taxi,
Brother Arthritis, Sister Skin,
the light of many suns,
the light of the world,
the light in the darkness,
the blank white, flat, formless, untouchable.

I am two or more,
the rose window blue-glass light,
the withdrawn hand,
the withered hand,
mud and spittle on the eyes,
vim and vigor and zero,
indiscriminate grace,
the tempest, kaddish,
shadow on the water,
the underworld.

I am wanton flies.
The fractured realm.
The call of the swan.
Wordmaker.

In the beginning, I am.

If I die

If I die, the baby sees stained glass.

If I die, salt grass in the ocean shallow.

If I die, brick belief,
loss leader, thunder sparrow,
little sister the table of sinners,
tree hymn, tree alms, tree charity,
the rat wall hurry,
dining on nest blood, song of steel.

Offered: the seminary fields,
the sweat-boy chapel-kneeling,
adoro te devote,
the basketball trumpet, rigor.

If I die, Joan of Arc,
addled assassin,
camp employment,
orders.

If I die, the baby sees wind shadows.

If I die, travel to Caesarea Philpa,
upper room in Edo, water and wine,
Nile flood victim, lost railroad fingers,
the Jackson Boulevard bus punch,
striding the fire-burn prairie,
uneasy in sunlight, two thieves, no names,
gem dust.

Back room sun-motes psalm offered,
the cup of empty sound,
ad Deum, qui lætíficat iuventútem meam,
mystic baseball numbers,
dust leather mitt to dust, chafe.

If I die, the maidenliest star,
nuncle love, whirlwind voice,
cloud garments, south wind quiet,
sky dimensions, snow storehouse,
dark valley path.

If I die, the baby sees mirror.

If I die, ghost of weak will,
transient womb, flushed failures,
wearing the green lead sweater,
ring bartered, boy already crying,
bassinet strap-down, back box radio,
brass ashtray chewed and gun.

Foreignness offered,
missing from the photo, unlisted,
disciplined, *Confiteor Deo omnipotenti*.

If I die, syncopated bible song.

If I die, next door dog,
only a hobo delight,
mustard seed pie,
wood plane, rust nail,
broken glass cosmos.

If I die, the baby sees still water.

Our Lady of the Belt

Another late shipment
and the line slows down like lava near solid.

I ain't no prophet.

Many choice birds harry the gold above the altar.
In her trance, she sees everything,
Our Lady of the Line.

She leapt in her mother's oft-used womb,
remembering all she would forget.

She wears a robe of mud and shoes of sun.

I ain't no prophet.

Moon water settled on the angry grass at midday,
watery manna.
She cooks with Assyrian spices
with a recipe from the age of tin.
with a lilies and blue flakes.

She writes bulletins from the ether.
She hears the echoes of the stars.
She owns the moon.

I ain't no prophet.

Unseeded, she is the sacred delta.
From space, she is the unseen continent.

Hired for a job no one understands,
she is always amove, askitter,
around the conveyer,
like a lovely rat.

She knows, when she dies, her legs will be broken.
She knows, when she dies, she will be encaved.

We, her dopey disciples, offer
to build a tent here to hold her,
as if she can be held.

A truck at the loading dock.

I ain't no prophet.

Still

In Burger King, the Filipino singer is louder than the gold sparrows of Deuteronomy, Texas, as proud as the bearded eagles (technically hawks) of Suwanee River, a Bubbly Creek songbird, encased, for whim, in a garden apartment next to the Avenue O el sis-boom-bah-ing the midnight moon over four young innocents on a car hood under the Arch at the Mississippi bank, old man hour, bare toll, current ripples the running of a two-year-old, tired from pushing the wagon up an incline to the church door and the inner cool and the glass stained with mysteries, glorious, sorrowful and mundane.

Still point triangle.

The green-brick apartment building is a massive idol, settling its butt comfortably into the vacant lot soil, as it was written in this or that testament, the reading of early afternoons in winter sun, as silver and sharp as a switchblade, snap open, snap shut, the red door is always there, going from here to there, carrying what you have to, or sitting down like a tantrumer in the toy store aisle, like the sitting-in-judgment, like the sitting pontiff of a small religion, like absent enemies, like plows left in naked fields, so many misremembered irritations.

Still point triangle.

From the pulpit, read the
prophet's words into the
purple light of wonder, read
out the vision of lost hobos,
empty mystics, the blank
white, three temptations,
three persons on one bike,
three blocks north and one
block west, the back stiff,
the child new, the footsore
mile, and the only clarity
a long parking lot, gray
wildness, and the spatula-
handle doors into Burger
King and the bare song of
a Filipino guitarist.

The hill

Reign and tremble, the
earth moves to the
sound of the terrible
name. Judgment is
given, righteous
answers to unasked
questions on Exodus
Avenue. The priests
are hard wood, carved
by sharp stones. Pillar
of cloud, pillar of smoke,
salt pillar. The hill is holy.

One-Cent is naked to the
tin stare, scrutinized by
the praetorium crowd,
like a pinned data point,
unarmored — no shield for
the sword sweep.

In the land of the
Red Earth People
on Great Horse Mountain.

Nowhere to step but
in mud. The growl above
of airliners approaching
over wide water. The
candidate, unctuous as
a well-fed actuary. The
fool chanting: No canker,
no cracker, no corker, no
cooker, no cancer, no
conger, no cooler, no
collar, no caller — a
calm cult negation.

At the gray lot in
mornings, along Best
Minds Boulevard, slant
sun sparks broken glass
— brown, clear, green —
slivered in asphalt
crevices, constellation.
Broken-leg yellow
traffic horse, worn,
brown rust nails
spiking the bare
boy calf of One-Cent.

On the Blue Frog
River in the year of
the hapless Swiss.

The sheep assigned to
the table. Corded
and reproached. Arc
of scorn, temple of
confusion. Avengement.
One-Cent asleep in
the prayer drone, the
mollyrattle of cicadas.
Eloi, Eloi, lama sabachthani?

In the White Lizard Field,
at the foot of the mountain
of death shadow: Secrets and
slaughters. Mercy. Mercy.
The boy was big-boyed.

With the Black Wood priests.

A galaxy of broken glass,
beautiful and abrupt,
color glints addressing
one another in psalms
and hymns and spiritual
songs over the roar of
sewer rivers.

Two thieves, no names

Two thieves, no names, led by father to
the altar of the knife, no angel on the way.

So many days till the solar eclipse,
so many souls rising out of the sidewalk
to a city of God,
so many sheep, so many hungry wolves,

Sent by Pharoah with chariots and
charioteers onto the dry Red Sea floor,
wall of water on the right,
wall of water on the left,
until the waving of the staff and
the falling of the water walls, like
a thousand thousand buildings,
onto grunts under orders.

Such a night, such a dark funnel,
such a sad gaiety in the service of making money,
such a loss leader.

Caught making lunch in the apartment kitchen
in the tall stolid building on the sun-warm street,
exploded by a rocket, distant violence
over who will have power.

So many bricks on flesh,
so many trees in flight,
so many birds into clear-glass high-rise death.

Two thieves, no names, on the blood-weed hill,
one on the left, the other on the right
with a preacher in between,
both still breathing after he his spirit commended,
day of preparation before high sabbath,
danger of fouling holy day, so the legs of each
— thieves, after all, deserving of a hard heart —
shattered with the sacred sledgehammer,
forcing each, the one on the right,
the one on the left, to sink into suffocation
and, so, the early cross strip and the ditch dump
and the dogs' meal, and everyone else
done sooner for the day.

Wine days

The chronology of wine
days, roses and lollipops,
bubblegum pop like a
slapped face in fall-down
vaudeville and Smallville
and D'Urbervilles, a snap
without crackle, Hudson
3-2700, the charge of the
six without reason why,
without the window of
the airplane coming in low
over fields of two-flats
and bungalows and oil
change places, swing low,
carry home, carry the load,
carry the four, the gapped
arc, the missing tooth, the
thin-tooth comb, the strut
cock, Coke and Pepsi, Pepto
Bismol, Abyssinia, Ethiopia,
the curious ones, the lonely
gerrymandered garden, the
garage sabbath, tarnished
silver sorrow, the visit of
the misericords, medical
billing and cooing, beak-rub
rumba, shame and hate,
what was told of enemies,
long drink of water, empty
bottle music, Denmark
Jones called his red dog
Distortion and his pale
infant Steel, by the grace
of, by and by, by now, the
arrows of the king are heavy,
sudden shafts, the large
stone cracked, now and at
the hour, imps slash sharp
slashes in the skin, red
orphans, green buses, blue
squirrels, obtain for me,
make water, the saxophone
guy, the body of the brother
on snow-rain grass, business
back in town, gown guilt,
mown lawn, laundry hymn,
the dog and the wolf and the
space between, hyssop grows
from a crack in the old wall.

Dear Dead River

deeper than you were wide
there was no room for me
by the end the drowned
beetles and hunting spiders
the amphibian swarm
swept to the borders
whole trees you carried
fast and dangerous
there were eddies
you went against yourself
you crawled out of your
well into houses
sometimes you pulled
back with you cradles
and canned food
bottles from
under the sofa
you took ages
to snake around
things deeper buried
the mountains
the craters you left
little alone you tore
out a garden once
tasted what no one
else would of its fruit
that's where I found
you churning away
at love and living
you were a soft wall
to pass through a great
curve on the earth
a path of desire uncaring
the forward motion
the reaching hand
the hurling time
away from yourself
how could I keep from

falling you have been
everyone you have
touched everything
in the planet's brief
containment every
light mote
the trickle of mist
down the mountain
the dog's bared teeth
running in her sleep
the twins closing a rank
of two the halved
beacon of flowers
in a broken glass
everything I made
in your clay bed I put back
then washed my hands
of you in more of you
dear dead river I did
love you to the last
damp pebble
warming its time
left in the
sun loved you
to the last
knot of yourself
I could find
out here in
the soft new grass

Snowfall at Dusk

We were cold on the beach that day
and had walked for some time, the blue
tinge of a flat-clouded sky, the fuss
of icy water about bare feet and hands

I have always loved shells, those
patterned bones of ocean things, whole,
if I can have them, but I'll take pieces
for the sake of what broke them

We came upon it quietly, the divot
in the sand, a large scoop underwater
then not, invisible then open-faced
as the tide breathed its way out

Half-sunk, a clutch of Atlantic scallops
empty and pristine, some the color
of salmon flesh, of asphalt and cream,
and some the rare hue of a halved peach

Bright, even as I plucked them under
a sky ready to shed water, filled
both our pockets and left with handfuls,
all of them hard and perfect

As if they were some reward for our
long walk, for our finding a language
of ourselves, we piled them
into the hem of my shirt like children

We turned our mouths around the names
we shook off like so much snow

Dangerous Animal

I remember when
I bought it, the car
I still drive. My father
the oracle looked
underneath and pointed
to a jut of iron, "That
will hook something,"
which I thought of
before the yelp
left my throat years
later, the racoon
bristled and gold in
my split-second light.

Half a body spread
over fifty miles of
highway. I took
the other portion home,
assured by my husband
that I hadn't. Wouldn't
I sense a change
somewhere in the
feel of the machine,
in the texture of
motion? Is my father,
who after my only
bout of sleepwalking
barred the front door
every night until I
moved out, a worrier
and not a sage?

My dog found it
the next day, barking
at the car's belly.
At the shop, where
I drove so gently,
I clutched her small
soft body to mine
while the mechanic
lifted the metal,

brought down the pelt,
still and matted in
blood pitch. It is not
that my father
knows something
we don't, but that he

wants nothing caught
unaware in the street—
the way his own
father was, too young—
in the damnable maw
of a bypassing life.

Before Everything Happened

We were looking up
at the sky to distract you,
on a boat for the first time
with a net suspended half a foot
over the sea. Your shoe
had fallen through and how
it slipped away, I think,
taught you about water,
taught you to fear it.

So we watched the clouds,
six inches of air and
some twine between us
and the bay, then the open
where an unfamiliar ground rose up
under my back and your palms
that were turned toward
the incomprehensible deep,
a sudden steadiness,

an island to calm us, we thought
because we were children.
Then the glide of a fin felt,
not seen, a muscular transference
we understood as result of thought,
a thinking thing, immense
as it rose between us.
The loggerhead moved against
a current to stay fixed.

You looked at me as if
for proof of the ornamental
body, the geometric
spits of gold fanning from
vertebral segments, the pebble-eye
and stone beak that breached
over the swell of a wave

lifting us three together
at its crest. A bit of air

before drifting back
to the long, dark swim.

The Half-Life of Love

We do not touch; we don't;
we do;
we always have;

Of welcoming; of between;
of flowers soft with water;
soaked green to the bone;

Of wet church bells ringing like a body;
I retract; shoes on the sofa;
red mud in the fibers;
of you

I retract;
glass bowl for
raincatching; for
taking out of time;

Scene

The two of us, a little out of the sun, but still well-lit, even in November. The Greek-style theater's stone a touch too cold for performance, but our voices carry all the same, staged below the empty seating cut out of a little green hill.

Every now and then another leaf adds itself to the dusting while I discover that my head fits neatly between your jawline and shoulder. Leaning on the rim of the platform, I tell you there's an ant. It has a tuft of moss on its back and can't see that it's headed straight for the sleeve of your blue jacket.

You move neither yourself nor the insect. *It'll take her a while yet to get to me*, and that too sounds off the time-tested design. Really, a little architecture, the right elevation, is all it takes to make a spectacle of anything.

Remaking the Birthplace

At a certain age
you look at your mother
and clarity nestles
like a blade in the spine.

Aura

A type of migraine preceded by an absence
in the vision, a shape of nothing that says:

*You have between twenty and thirty minutes
before I split that howling, weathered path*

from your eyebrow to your scalp wide open.
Crescent moon of black and oil slick static,

a warning carved into my right-side retina
like a cold open door. And then pain,

the kind of pain that makes you think
about pain. Can it really be this bad?

Is it a trick of the light? Is this how it felt
a minute, an hour ago? It's anyone's guess.

I think if I could put it in a hand or a foot,
farther away from me, I could manage.

If I could look at it and think about cutting
it off, conjure the logic of a flesh wound

in its place. To imagine a release in my hands
instead of the thick, moping hours. My worship

has always needed a hook by which to hang.

ABSTRACT

Jenna Putnam

I can easily forget the hospital room: a white not like ivory or bone, but a man-made white, intrusive and anxiety-inducing. Sitting for hours in a chair facing the window, watching the other patients' fatigued faces brighten as they step outside for the first and only time during their monotonous days. My houseguests, Giuseppe and Antonio, have been taking me for walks on weekend afternoons as the sunlight softens into a deep yellow. Yesterday they brought me a book of poems by Edoardo Sanguineti, which Giuseppe read first in Italian and Antonio the English translation.

What I cannot so easily forget is that dark highway, slickened by the first rainfall in months, the buck with antlers sticking formidably out of its head like felt branches, the swerve so as not to hit him. Blinding headlights, screaming tires, glass shards glittering beneath the crescent silver moon. Not the sound of metal but the taste of it. Cold. Impenetrable. Unforgiving.

I kept asking if I was having a nightmare. *Wake me up*, I screamed, *Wake me up*. It took me an hour to work up the courage to look at it, longer to ask the nurse for a handheld mirror so I could truly examine it. The first time I did, I vomited into the bucket at my bedside. It reminded me of the horror stories my father would tell me about the Vietnam War of young soldiers whose limbs had to be amputated. The screams he'd hear, the sawing, the blood. He was only nineteen when he got drafted. And here I am at thirty-seven: a painter with half her good arm gone. How's that for twisted irony?

I was leaving my sister Marianne's house in Kentfield that night. It had been one of the first warm days of the year, and she was having a party for her son Orson's eleventh birthday. His friends from private school ran amok in the backyard as their elitist parents sipped crisp martinis with thin, alabaster lips. The sight alone made me feel uncomfortable and displaced. The moment I set foot on the driveway, I felt the regret surging up in my throat like poison. Marianne had sent the invitation months earlier (who sends formal invites to their own sister?), and I only clicked YES out of some faint, distant hope we could reconcile the animosity that lingered between us like a vibrant fuchsia elephant in the room.

However boring the crowd was, I still managed to kickstart my social moxie and make conversation, something Marianne doesn't fair very well with. She's only good in social situations if she's hosting; if she has something to provide, something to flaunt. In this case, she wanted to show off the newest addition to her multi-million-dollar home: a long, rectangular Mediterranean swimming pool in her backyard. It looked like it was torn out of a dream, like you were swimming in some mythic portal to another world. I ran my hands along the smooth Moroccan tile, my body slowly parting the glassy saltwater that reflected the verdant redwood and camphor trees.

Later that evening, I proceeded to tell the wealthiest of Marianne's friends about my recent exhibition at Altman Siegel, one of the finest galleries in San Francisco. I've managed to corral a few collectors from these quaint, lifeless get-togethers.

"And how many of those pieces actually *sold*?" Marianne jeered. "You see, that's the problem with art, there's never a guarantee. Everything's a gamble."

For someone with so much money, Marianne didn't possess an iota of tact. I could sense her friends' discomfort.

"Truly Simone, I don't know how you do it. I suppose it must be exhilarating, the not knowing?" She took a sip of white wine, her slender wrist weighed down with a diamond-studded watch from Tiffany's. Marianne is four years older than I am, as tightly wound as a greyhound, and

just as thin.

“Even if only a couple sell, that’s enough for me.” I said this mostly to her friends, then I looked her straight in the eye. “At least I have my freedom.”

Marianne’s nostrils began to flare. Steam billowed from her ears. The quiet rage that boils inside her is most palpable during the times I exude even a shred of confidence. She has always led a life of stability, one that succumbs to the ideation of a structured and desirable American life. How she hasn’t cracked given all the demanding full-time jobs she’s held is beyond me, but since her recent promotion to engineering manager at Tesla, she hasn’t been the same. Something died in her. She hardly has a moment to herself, and when she gets home to her husband James—a trust fund tech mogul who works from home—she is smothered by him and Orson.

I’d had a few drinks that night and expected to sleep in the guest room, but Marianne had friends in town from Chicago. (The only interesting people at the entire party.)

“Can I crash on the couch?” I asked. A storm was coming in, and even though I’d only had a couple drinks, I didn’t want to drive.

“I don’t think that’s a good look,” she said as she shooed me out the door.

And then it happened. The warm air, the cool rain, my mind drifting haphazardly into anxious ruminations. I should have been paying more attention to the road, but my stomach was twisted in knots. I lost control of the wheel but managed not to hit the animal. That was somehow more important than anything.

It wouldn’t have been so bad had I not crashed into the tree on the driver’s side. My mangled arm was pinned in the crushed door, slick and sanguine as a ruby. I kept thinking about the deer, wondering if he witnessed what had happened. If we were now somehow branded on each other, forever connected. I must have gone into shock, as I hardly felt any pain. It was as if my soul were separate from my body, like I was watching a movie of my own life. The next thing I remember was waking up in the hospital, the nurses’ faces full of a sympathy that was strange and disconcerting.

I step outside and inhale the sweet traces of summer in the warm, late-May breeze. Wisps of dandelion float through the air, fleecy clouds drift lazily through the Aegean blue sky. It feels almost unreal to be leaving the hospital after so many days of stale air and bland food. The concussion slowed my brain a little, so rather than my thoughts moving at the speed of a freight train, they churn along like a little tugboat at the edge of a wavering horizon.

I’ve tried writing with my left hand, doing little sketches. It feels like a stranger I’m beginning to know, a stranger with a mind of its own. I talk to it, tell it of its tremendous responsibility, how it mustn’t let me or anyone else down. I’ve imagined myself painting masterpieces, as if the accident were some miracle that will finally project me into stardom. After all, the left side is supposed to be the creative one.

I step into Antonio’s car and flashback to the night of the crash, but I decide right then and there not to let the past control me. This is my new life. Everything before this I’ve left behind in ecdysis.

On the short drive from Kentfield to Mill Valley, I think of how badly I want to walk the trails at Mt. Tamalpais, feel the lush green forest envelop and spit me out into the wide, open expanse of rolling hills facing the sea.

Giuseppe and Antonio argue in the front seat in Italian, their voices intermingling into a banter I can’t understand. Giuseppe stops it. He turns back to look at me and smiles, his honey-brown eyes and long, thick lashes a beauty I find quite overwhelming. He puts his hand on my knee. “You look beautiful Simone,” he says.

“Yes yes, you look stunning Simone. All that rest has done you good,” Antonio assents. I meet his eyes in the rearview mirror, his white-knuckled hands tightly gripping the steering wheel,

and I can tell he means it. "So, what are you going to do first? We can go to the café if you like, get a nice meal. I think Theo is working today," he says in a girlish voice, and winks. Giuseppe elbows him. "Stai zitto. E tieni gli occhi sulla strada," he barks. "She probably just wants to go home and get situated. Rest in her own bed for once."

"Oh, yes. We washed the sheets so they're nice and fresh for you."

"The house is very—how do you say in English—"

"Cozy."

"Yes, *cozy*."

"I just want to paint," I say, and the car goes silent.

The house feels colder than I remember. Everything strikes me as pretentious: the large canvas paintings on the walls, the mosaic of photographs in different-sized frames, the thick, glossy art books stacked too perfectly on top of one another. *You will never be this perfect, they say, not again. Not after THAT.* I look down at my arm and feel an acute sense of loss, stomach carved hollow, head swimming. The sudden weight of permanence is terrifying.

"You alright darling?" Antonio asks.

"We'll make you something to eat," says Giuseppe. "Eggs Florentine, tuo preferito."

As I attempt to voice hesitation, G presses his finger against his pouty, brilliant lips and whispers, "Shh."

I can only finish half my meal, my shrunken stomach thanking me as I make my way to my studio in the garage. It's just as I left it: brushes still crusted with paint, mason jars filled with Gamsol, oil pastels scattered across the canvas backdrop on the floor, half-finished paintings begging to be realized. I drop down to my knees in surrender. The tears rise in my throat and cascade down my face like resplendent, salty waterfalls and I pray to whatever gods I've created in the parched plains of my spiritual world to please grace me with the ability to paint again. I wish I had practiced sooner. I'd always dreamed of being ambidextrous as a child. In interviews, people often ask me why I paint figurative. *It doesn't lie* is the response I usually give, which is significant and vague enough for journalists to move on to the next question. But isn't every work of art a lie, some exaggeration of the truth?

I go about it slowly, as patience is the key to my sanity. Lush shades of green, deep cobalt, burnt sienna. I use a small canvas, attempting to echo the landscape of Big Sur like I did when I was first apprenticing. *Little tiny baby steps*, my doctor said, and after three hours, I've painted the scene. Not utterly terrible. But not exactly worth a damn.

Antonio waltzes into the room with a bouquet of flowers in a ceramic vase he crafted with his stone-like hands. An array of carnations, chamomile daisies, and freesia.

"These are from Marianne," he says with a nervous twitch.

"Has someone died?" I ask.

"Simone . . ."

"Marianne can go to hell."

My sister visited once during my two-week stay at the hospital, and she was there for less than an hour. I know she came out of guilt and obligation, which only deepened my gaping well of loneliness. I could tell my situation made her uncomfortable. Anything of ailment has always struck fear in her, as though incidences of misfortune are somehow contagious. She came two days after the crash, my bandages soaked with blood so dark it was almost black. Her face contorted with fear and disgust, though she tried to hide it with a faint, hopeful smile.

All I wanted was to be near family, and Marianne is the only kin I have left in California. I craved the botanical scent of her silken hair, traces of perfume mixed with her feline pheromones. It was her I had wanted to read to me during those desolate nights at the hospital, like she did when we were kids. I often thought of those cold evenings in winter when

our parents would yell and scream at each other, their voices rattling the walls. We couldn't make out what they were saying, but we could tell it was fueled by hatred—the kind of hatred one can only feel for someone they love. It got worse during the holidays, as we were indoors more often and my father had a break from teaching at the university. I'd sometimes wander out of our room in my nightgown and sit on my knees at the top of the banister until the fighting stopped, or until I'd feel Marianne's soft, gentle hand on my shoulder. She would coax me back into bed with *The Neverending Story*, and read it to me until I fell asleep.

Sometimes it feels strange to still be living in our family home. Like the ghosts of our former selves are haunting every room. Our father left after the divorce and moved back to Ithaca, where he's from. Marianne doesn't speak to him, but he and I talk on the phone occasionally, and I visit him in New York every autumn. When our mother passed five years ago, she left the house to me. It had been in her family for generations. Shortly after Marianne married into old money, she started earning a six-figure income, and my mother began to worry about me. I can almost pinpoint the moment she changed the will. It was right after she was first diagnosed with cancer, and every time I came over to visit from my barren studio apartment in the city, she would ask me questions about renovations, saying things like "one day this will all be yours" and "promise me you'll never sell". I assumed she would leave it to us both. I was wrong.

The full moon ignites these memories like a slow-burning fire I can't put out. I thrash beneath my cool linen sheets like a captive in a straitjacket. After what feels like hours, I sit up and do alternate nostril breathing, massage the nub of my arm, and attempt to conjure a vision of what I'll work on the following day. At 2 a.m., I finally pop a Trazadone and wake to the cadence of Giuseppe and Antonio bickering in the kitchen.

Hearing their voices in the morning takes me back to the spring in Italy we met. I was doing an artist residency at Villa Marlena and had set off on a long hiking trail near Montefioralle. It was one of the most beautiful places I'd ever seen, with endless rows of grapevines and winding dirt roads leading to small villas of ancient stone, benevolent yet haunting in the flaxen Tuscan light.

I came back to a family meal of rigatoni pasta bathed in nutty green pesto with roasted chicken and a wet, glistening Caesar salad with briny anchovies and freshly grated parmesan. Later that night, I and several other carnivores of the group got terrible food poisoning. Putrid things came out of every orifice, and the three of us who got sick took turns in our shared bathroom emptying ourselves, which was equally as humiliating as it was disgusting. It was the only time in my life I wished I were vegetarian.

The chef was fired (something about improper evisceration during the slaughtering process), and the following day a staggeringly handsome young man with a disarming naiveté and eyes the color of fine mahogany brought me some avocado toast to soothe my stomach. I'd like to think Giuseppe and I fell in love right then, the untouchable kind of love that blossoms between best friends and soulmates. I was immediately overtaken by an all-consuming wave of inspiration. It was halfway through the residency, and I'd hardly created any paintings worthwhile. When G came into my life, I knew he was the Beatrice to my Dante, the Diego to my Frida. Nothing else mattered. Time stood still.

Antonio and I mostly kept our distance during the residency, as he is a sculptor and worked from a different studio. But when Giuseppe arrived, he brought us all together. Antonio had suggested his fiancé to the director, who was in a state of panic because every chef in central Italy was either already working or on vacation. Antonio made it seem as though G were some kind of everyday person, an afterthought, someone without merit. As if for some reason, he didn't want Giuseppe to be a part of his private world. It drives me insane the way Antonio looks down on him, as though the fine arts are tiers above the culinary arts, as though he's a

deity among mere mortals.

I wander into the kitchen, hoping to dissipate whatever mundane thing they've been arguing about. They're both in matching striped robes, Antonio's revealing his ribbed tank top and boxers, Giuseppe's wrapped and tied like an old grandmother.

"The queen hath risen!" shouts Antonio, at an octave that feels like knives stabbing into my eardrums.

"We have a plan for today, Simone," Giuseppe says. He puts his arm around me and rubs my back like a mother coaxing a moody child to go to school. "We're going to take you to Café Florencia, our treat."

"G, come on. You know I haven't felt up to it."

"We haven't been going there out of respect for you," Antonio interjects, with a modicum of impatience.

"It wouldn't be the same without you," Giuseppe coos.

"Now that you're getting better, we think it would be good for you to slowly dip a toe in the outside world again."

"It's a Tuesday. It'll be slow and we can sit out on the terrace. Plus, you-know-who will be working."

I hesitate. Theo's statuesque grandeur floats into my mind: his warm, Midwestern smile, his perfectly sculpted biceps and shoulders, his ripe, round ass.

"Give me twenty minutes."

The Italians are right. The terrace is glazed with lemony sunlight, the patio filled with just the right amount of patrons for people-watching. I stare at the hostess' ringleted auburn hair as she tucks us into our favorite table, an enclave nestled in dark green ivy with little white flowers opening to the light.

An old man with a wooden cane and fedora reads *The San Francisco Chronicle*, a tinge of annoyance intensifying his wrinkled face while a Pomeranian yaps from a blonde woman's oversized purse. The man tilts his head down to view the little beast without the amber filter of his tinted sunglasses and scowls.

"What do you think, Los Angeles or Laguna Beach?" Giu whispers into my ear.

The blonde woman and her husband ask Theo what his favorite dish is as he takes their order. His hair has lightened since I last saw him, glossy caramel strands tousled in chocolate. He catches my gaze and smiles, his posture shifting as if he's striking a pose.

I squirm slightly in my floral-printed sundress, which was too tight the previous summer but now fits me perfectly. The weight loss has come with a newfound weakness, and the ascending temperature makes me nauseous. I wonder if it's a good idea to have come here as Theo gathers the couple's menus and walks toward us. My blue cashmere cardigan is draped elegantly over my bad arm, a fashionable accessory to keep people's gawking and pity at bay. "Long time no see," Theo says. His voice is heavenly, like clouds drifting through a mountain range at dawn. Giuseppe and Antonio bat their eyelashes in unison.

"Work has been busy this month," I lie.

A scaly mermaid is inked on Theo's sinewy forearms, peeking out from the sleeve of his button-down. "New tattoo?" I ask, attempting to divert the conversation.

"Yeah! Isn't she something?"

He rolls his sleeve up further, and as he does the menus under his armpit cascade onto the ground. Instinctually, I lean over to pick them up, and my cardigan flutters down to join the fallen menus. Theo squats to grab them and looks straight at my nub—he's practically eye level with it—and I imagine how grotesque it must look, like being face-to-face with a ghastly monster. He looks surprised for a moment, but instead of the sheer panic I imagined spreading

across his face, he picks up my cardigan and hands it to me with tenderness. I pray he won't say anything. My face flushes scarlet, my bone-deep mortification transferring to Giuseppe and Antonio, who are frozen.

Theo casually takes our order as if what he had seen were nothing. My heart pounds like a voodoo drum in my throat as I'm transported to our night together before the accident. The song he played on his baby grand as I sat on his couch and watched, already painting him in my mind. The red wine we drank had put me in a malleable state, as if my body were one with the music, each note a release of some primordial invocation buried deep in my subconscious. I fell asleep on the couch with my clothes on, and he put a small wool blanket over me as I slept.

"And how about you Simone, the usual?"

I stall for a moment. The brain fog caused by the crash mars my mind like thick, heavy soup. I feel a pearl of sweat pooling at my temples.

"I think I'll try something different this time."

Back at home, my body screams in exhaustion from the restaurant excursion, my bones like splintered wood, as if I've aged a decade since the accident. My bed is a sanctuary, a safe space, a haven, forever imprinted with the shape of my body as I've hardly left it since I got out of the hospital. Theo's face floats into my head again, how he pranced after us like an eager puppy as we walked out of the café. His hand on my shoulder, grazing my hair. *It was really good to see you, Simone.*

I walk into my closet and pull out an old photo album. The thin, transparent page I peel apart smells of rotting paper and stale glue as I pull out a photograph of Marianne and me, faded and curling at the edges.

Like a zombie, I wander to my studio and place the photo on a falling-apart wooden stool covered in paint next to the easel. The flowers Marianne sent are still pristine and fragrant. I put a petal in my mouth—soft, bitter—and begin to mix my colors.

The photograph has the palette of a Rohmer film, grainy and forgiving. We are in our mother's yard splayed out on a thin cotton sheet—gangly, pre-teen—me cross-legged in lotus pose and Marianne perched on her knees behind me braiding my hair. Both our backs are turned toward the camera. I love this photo because neither of us has a memory of my mother taking it. After she died, we found there were lots of these voyeuristic snapshots. Boxes of them. She worked as a nurse at the local hospital, and on her walks home, she would take portraits of strangers on the streets. A young girl's face staring dreamily over the Golden Gate Bridge, its slashes of apple red slightly out of focus in the background; an older couple holding hands in the Haight, surrounded by pastel-colored houses with sunlit bay windows; lost souls bruised with anguish and track marks haunting the sun-drenched streets. I think she liked to study people, assign them a story of her own making. A sense of control she achieved if only by way of her imagination.

To my surprise I paint for hours, a new energy forged by some visceral urge to make sense of the past. I stand back to admire my work, my bare feet grounded against the cool concrete floor, the sky outside deepening to a greyish violet.

The painting is absolutely horrendous. I stab it with a pencil as if it were an unwanted intruder, and slash it to pieces with an X-Acto knife. Just as I'm about to sink into complete despair, my phone lights up with a text message.

One is from Marianne.

How are you doing?

Coward.

The one from Theo catches me off guard, and my heart drops into my bowels.

I'm sorry I never called. Giuseppe told me about the accident. I had no idea.

Three little dots pulse as he types . . .

That Rothko exhibition opened at MoMa last week, want to check it out? Could be inspiring. He bookends the text with a ridiculous painting emoji.

Is this a pity date? Did Giu and Antonio put him up to it? Or is he genuinely still interested in me? I set my phone back on the barstool and compose myself. I'll text him back after dinner. It's been a while, but I still know how to play the game.

Always make them wait.

The light in my therapist's office is ambient and calming. There are no windows, but she's set up a Lynchian lighting scheme of lavender-blue and chartreuse. The humidifier swooshes a pillowy vapor into the air.

"Loss comes in many different shapes and forms. Loss of a loved one, a job, a marriage. With this loss comes grief. You're allowed to mourn your former life. This is a huge change Simone, and adapting isn't going to be easy."

I realize I'm shaking. I try to steady my hands, my body.

"Remember the breathing exercises we talked about? Let's do it together. Breathe in for five . . . four . . . three . . . two . . . one. Breathe out for one . . . two . . . three . . . four . . . five . . . six. There we go. That's it."

Carmela is a much stronger woman than I am. Single mother of two teenagers and author of three best-selling self-help books, all while maintaining a full-time job as a therapist. I pray her strength will transfer to me.

"Breathe in the positive, breathe out the negative."

We do a few more rounds together and I stabilize.

"Once you're ready, you can start taking small steps towards rebuilding your new narrative. Things will get better, Simone. I know it."

I nod, taking it all in.

"You should reach out to your sister. Is there something you can do together, something you both enjoy that's low commitment and won't cause too much stress for either of you?"

"Archimedes Banya."

"I beg your pardon?" Carmela speaks like she just stepped out of a Renaissance painting, and she looks it too. Her deep brown hair is rippled and thick as a horse's mane, reaching all the way down to her hourglass hips. She always wears a button-down blouse tucked into high-waisted trousers or a skirt, and the woman never ceases to wear heels. She has the face of someone who has been watching people fail for centuries.

"We used to go to this Russian bathhouse together once a month," I explained. "It always put us in a good mood."

"That sounds like a wonderful start."

Antonio picks me up after the session, as I can't bear the thought of driving yet. An embryonic layer of fog ensconces the Bay, and I text Marianne a photo of us playing chess at the bathhouse in terry robes, our hair crinkly and wet, our faces fresh as spring, as if we'd aged in reverse.

The next day I meet Theo at the gallery. I study him for a long moment before he sees me, his hands stuffed into the pocket of his light, faded jeans, his t-shirt thin and effortless beneath a black blazer, looking like a 90s Calvin Klein ad. His hair shines like the reflective wall of glass behind him as he smiles nervously at passersby.

As if sensing my presence, his eyes meet mine. Those eyes. Like shivering pools of tidewater just after a wave has come.

We walk across the glossy oak floors of MoMa, and I feel my dreams of being a successful artist slowly shrivel up and die inside me. Everything I've worked so hard at feels like its own

retrospective, the paintings I've created hanging gloomily in the gallows of my mind. One of Rothko's most famous paintings stares us in the face. A coral-like fog takes up two-thirds of the dark, crepuscular canvas, the remaining space an inky midnight blue. The colors glow like the depths of the sea, eerie and forbidden.

Theo looks at me and smiles, his crooked teeth pressing wildly against his carmine lips. "Are you a fan of Rothko? I guess I should have asked you that before."

"I'll see any kind of art, even the work of artists I hate. There's always something to learn."

"So you hate him."

"I like Rothko's work. I'm just not sure I understand abstract painting in general."

Theo stares pondering for a moment. "It's a feeling, an emotion. Like poetry. Rainer Maria Rilke once said—"

"Oh god, don't tell me you're a poet."

He laughs. "Rilke said 'I want to be with those who know secret things or else alone.' And I feel like that's what art is—whether it's painting, film, music, whatever. It's like a secret language."

We walk slowly towards another painting. This one is larger, with three horizontal panels of ebony and charcoal.

"I prefer art to be more concrete and digestible. Something that can tell an obvious story," I insist. "I know that's not the popular opinion, but I think it requires a lot more skill to tell it like it is than to entertain surrealist delusions."

"Where's the imagination in that? I mean, the things that exist in our world are arguably more abstract than any surrealist work. I think we're arguing the same point."

"I suppose," I say with a hint of feigned boredom.

We stand there staring at each other for a moment with grins of self-righteousness. He tucks a stray strand of hair behind my ear, his fingers tracing my collarbone and shoulder down to my nub, which he massages gently as he looks into my eyes. It feels strange, like the sensation of touching the inside of one's belly button. I lean in to kiss him, and a familiar warmth washes over me.

Back at home, the storm outside reflects Giuseppe's mood. He stares out the window despondently as rain pours down in jagged diagonal sheets. I sit down on the couch and look out at the storm with him, the rain a veil separating us from the world.

"What's wrong with you?"

He doesn't answer, doesn't even look at me. I can sense it has something to do with Antonio. "I think I'm gonna open that bottle of chianti, want a glass?"

"Se insisti."

I walk into the kitchen and forget for a moment that I can't yet open a bottle of wine on my own. I bring it to him, and he delights in the action, the ritual, the being needed. He slowly pours us two glasses. The smoky, leathery scent is comforting and somehow accentuates the rhythmic drum of the rain. We sip in silence, and I stare at him until he cracks.

"I think Antonio and I are breaking up."

"I doubt that. It's probably just another harmless fight."

"There have been many of those lately. And they're not harmless."

"What's going on?"

"We're having a hard time in America. Or let's be honest, *I'm* having a hard time in America. I love San Francisco, I love you and the terrain and the ocean. It's all great. Antonio is doing so well with his art, but I'm just . . . stuck. Being a part-time sous chef isn't enough for me."

"Well, why don't you look for another job?"

"I've tried Simone. You know that. These places that pay a decent salary, they all require this fancy culinary training. I grew up in a tiny village in Umbria, cooking since I was a teenager. I've worked at some of the best restaurants in Milano, Toscana, Roma. But apparently it's not

enough.”

“Just give it more time. Try the smaller restaurants, places around here. I don’t know why you’re so dead set on working in the city.”

“Because that’s what Antonio wants. You know him, he likes the big, fancy galleries, the five-star restaurants.”

“You should do what *you* want.”

“Listen, I like it here. I really do. But do I wanna live here? Not so much. I miss speaking my native tongue. The people here are—how do you say, like, *manichino*, *plastica*. Not real.”

“I feel you. I’ve been trying to leave Marin County all my life.”

Giuseppe puts his hand on mine as he takes a sip of wine. “All in time, my little *guerriera*. You know you’re welcome to stay with us in Italy.”

“Have you talked to him about all this?”

“Not yet.”

“Where is he right now?”

“He’s at a meeting in Chinatown.”

“Let’s go into the city tonight. The storm is breaking up. You can seduce him and convince him to go back home.”

“I don’t think it’s that easy.”

“It wouldn’t hurt to test the waters. For all you know, he feels the same way.”

G looks at me like one would look at a small kitten or pet. “Thank you.”

“For what?”

“For everything. For letting us stay in your beautiful home, for being such a great host. For making me feel like a person.”

“I should be thanking you.”

“For?”

“For saving me.”

“I think we save each other.”

I nuzzle into the crevice of his shoulder, and he leans his head on top of mine. We sit there for a while, perfectly content with each other’s company, and I want that moment to stretch forever, I don’t ever want it to break because when it does, we’ll both have to face the cruelty of real life.

“Simone?”

“Yes, my love?”

“You should call your sister.”

The dance floor is so loud it’s silent. Swathes of color, bodies in perfect synergy, an ocean of breath that heaves and spits. It somehow escapes my mind that I haven’t drank or smoked weed since the night of Marianne’s party, both of which Giuseppe and I have participated in this evening. It feels good to float on the surface of my thoughts, to separate myself from past and future. My best ideas come to me when I’m in a feral state, so it doesn’t surprise me when my saving grace slaps me across the face like a good lover: ABSTRACT.

I try to scream to Giuseppe but he’s dancing with Antonio, who came here straight from his meeting. They have no doubt made up, as they’re slow grinding to a fast song, and once again I find myself wishing I were a gay man in my early forties as I valiantly whisper in Giuseppe’s ear that I’ll see them at home. I struggle to stay in this feral state in the Uber ride, the city lights glittering like a million jewels getting smaller as we crest the hills. I flashback to a scene from childhood of Marianne’s strawberry-blond hair whipping violently in the wind of mother’s car, a smile on her face and as I paint in the candlelight with an emotion stuck in my throat for decades, I wonder if this was the last if only time I witnessed her at peace.

MICHI

I am alone, facing a simple bunk bed.
In the dream, I am about five years old,
Aware that my family has left the barracks-like room,
As someone enters from a dark hallway on the other side
Of the bed, a wide door opens to the darkness.
There is the thought of invasion or occupation.
Beside the bed, I see an old Japanese woman,
She looks at me and then at the bed covers.
The sheet looks like a buttoned white shirt.
And she examines the sheet as though she is looking
At a collar, looking for a number
Or a company name or the name of the tailor.

The single wool blanket becomes
A kimono lying over the bed. Falling ashes,
Falling snow, rising sun, flying shadow, moon above,
Moon below.
Falling ashes, falling snow, rising sun,
Flying shadow, moon above, moon below.

Is this Michi, who came to live with us when I was five,
Who had floor-length hair, then cut her hair
To help those in Hiroshima?
She taught me and my sisters origami.
This old woman across the bed from me
Could be Michi, still older than me, an old man dreaming.
She carries a look in her eyes like that old woman
Who sold me bags of marbles through a fence.

The old woman looks at me in this dream—
Is this a parallel timeline, me young, me old—
Falling ashes, falling snow, rising sun, flying shadow,
Moon above, moon below. Buttons moving through holes,
Years passing like buttons moved up and down, above,
Below, passing like buttons through the gaps of time,
Like moons passing through holes in fabric
Stretched over the expanse of undulating water,
The white sheet furling and unfurling from the edge
Of her dream to the edge of mine.

Farmers' Market—Healdsburg, CA

for Doug Stout

As I walk along the aisles at the Farmers' Market
phrases from his poems are seeds of thought complementing
the many-colored offerings
treasures from the earth at reasonable prices
friends and families exchanging hellos over coffee and pastry
I am awaiting the dedication of his memorial bench
simple and flat polished wood overlooking the creek
his table had been stacked with books by local writers
what he liked to call a bounty of local literary produce
as important as what was pulled from trucks
spread on tables here making this a meeting place
of the community he said
old and young with arms of flowers and baskets of salad mixes
greens beets Bok choy plums peaches boxes of berries
our laureate wore no laurel on his head
his poems were feral and ferocious
respecting the feminine in our spirits
birthing and nurturing each word climbing
along trellises of language

[Note: poem "Farmers' Market" is from the unpublished manuscript titled *Fountain of Thistles*. After Doug's passing, the organizers of the market disallowed the local author's table.]

Wild Geese

Following the sun, which wanders but is not gone—
over mountain peaks and rivers, the moon rising according
to the hare's whims. Pulling weeds, an old man sighs,
back muscles straining, above him a calculus of clouds,
and he hears a hundred geese calling, stops his work to
look, lifting his hands to them as they pass, fenced dogs
nearby finally silent. Flying urgently in their fine design,
he wants to go with them, but his knees ache in the mud.

[Note: ancient Chinese poets believed there was a rabbit on the moon.]

I could have died from this...

2 am was electric.
Everyone one else asleep.
Outside in the lanai
I was desperately hungry for air.
Streetlights lit our pool
in gleaming streaks.
Palm tree shadows
sliced my vision,
bouncing off the glass table,
multiple lenses in each of my eyes.

My striped cat approached
wary. What was I doing
wrapped in a king size coverlet
dropped to the tile floor?
A corpulent king
staggering drunk near the castle's
moat. But I was sober as a telephone pole.

Having quit a week before. Proud to do it all
cold. Swift. Quickly became a terrifying roller coaster gaining
speed. Couldn't feel ground underneath me.

Where was the straight, the narrow peace of being clean?
Been shaking so badly I couldn't press buttons on my phone, prepare a meal, leave
the house
safely and know which way to go.
My torso frequently spasmed,
convulsed. Leaving me sore,
sheets soaked
cold.

I tipped sideways near the pool.
Could've suffocated in the water
under the heavy blanket. Submerged as a rock under a
wave at sea. How did I get so unaware of over-drinking?
Almost like a rip-tide had gradually lead me further out to sea.

Feeling slanted, I bent to feed the cat. But the
food bag was covered in flying ants
billowing up freely from inside.
Where did they come from?
The 20'high x 50'wide cage
swarmed full of them inches apart. How was the cat
eating contentedly in the midst of this plague?
Since when did ants fly?
I wanted all to go still.
Weird frenzy of searching
out their own mystery.

Outside,

two Hares nibble
noses deep into thick green
grass. Slender fawn ears
draw back with the slope down
to a pond, blackened,
still.

All
done for the day.

My strolling steps the only sound.
An obscured bird's beak nick-
nicking behind a sliding
shed. Planked sides widening at the base,
the roof's middle concave, a motionless dark,
only a small opening beneath.

I give thanks for stopping.
For slow darkening.
Tomorrow can't turn over yet.

I am skipping, my feet light and happy.

Said no, I won't go.

I've handed myself a chocolate-chip cookie,
hold it high in the air, a storybook child.

Told her I'm not coming.

Won't have to wear armor to survive her company.

I remain in light cotton.

Dance around on the tops of my toes.

Did exactly as I wanted to do.

Living my life,

by not meeting her expectations,

not doing what would be polite.

Instead of being pushed

prodded for an entire weekend

avoiding what wasn't myself,

I'm genuine true.

Why not bow to the coffee pot

at 6 in the morning
for it's quick churn: espresso quickly
driving into my
cup, frothing
foam. Gulping it, I watch as a daily
group of grackles congregate in
our dead but branch-filled southern yellow pine.
Zealously they chatter over each other.
I offer nothing, only my head bending in their
direction. Thanking them for talking.
No deciphering required.
My cat too has needs, whiskers
brushing against my shin.
I bend low to fill her dish,
then sit cross-legged, as she crunches, intently through each nugget.
The gossipy flock, floats, swirls
away.

Winter.

It got dark
early. I remember
the repetitive
pattern of the school bus'
turns to each stop
and the accompanying

up shift, down
shift of gears.
Doors open folding,
Doors closed unfolding.
Repeated until my stop.

Once home, the scales
on our piano, dark,
light. The paper scrolled
in horizontal, vertical,
lines, white, black.
Sounds on the keys
sequenced up, down.
Down, up.

Various combinations closed
out the black night,
grey slush, grainy
hard cold. The glossy black
keys raised or lowered the tones,
of the matte white ones.

My skinny fingertips manipulated
this magnificent apparatus of
all dark wood taking up so
much space in our living room.
While I wondered, once
I'd practiced enough, what
other phrases, I might play
with when I got bolder.

Bamboo

One fall evening, sitting at supper,
before wooden bowls of warm soup,
a monk asks his master: "What is the meaning
of this new teaching from the West?"
His master whispers: "I will tell you later
when nobody is around."

After all the others have gone to bed,
the monk asks: "What does the bodhidharma
come up from the West mean?"
His master says: "Shush... I will tell you later
when nobody is around."

The next day, standing together,
hidden in the bamboo forest,
the monk pleads: "Tell me now,
what is the meaning of the new teaching?"
The master points to one stalk and says:
"This one is taller."
Then gesturing toward her neighbor:
"This one is shorter."

That winter the master dies in his sleep,
his body already cold and stiff by dawn.
The monk walks alone through the bamboo,
trying to remember the face of his master.

He stops. He stands upright and still,
as a chill begins to blow through a body,
grown smooth and hollow.

Portrait

Tell me
what hurts.
Show me
where it hurts.

And I will name it,
explain its etiology,
with patience
and equal parts
science and poetry.

Together we will frame
your pain,
producing a painting,
worthy of admiration
at an ideal viewing distance
of approximately three times
that of its width,
worthy of a smile
and a slow nod,
worthy of approval,
aesthetic and moral.

Then one of us must be
the first to walk away.

Ruins

Don't remember me like this.
Remember me as I was.

We squeeze their hands
but know not to listen.
We feel the gray glory
belonging to them.

There is wisdom
found only
in the accidental
aphorisms
of fragments.

Ruins have a beauty
of their own,
the simplicity of rock,
marble stripped white
by time,
stones arranged
by hands unknown.

What remains towers
inexplicably after centuries,
high enough to evoke memories
of the past
that belonged to us
before we were born,
of all we are
and never knew.

Nautilus

I climb again
these limestone hills
I press ancient sea shells
into my memory
encased in rock beauty
sleeps frozen still
when the nights turn cold
you will come to me

I press ancient shells
into my memory
you will love me
like a long forgotten
secret
as the nights turn cold
you call to me
I remember you
like a lover I have
not yet met

you love me
like a long forgotten
secret
encased in rock beauty
wakes frozen still
I remember you
like the lover
I have never met
I cling again
to limestone hills

mundus

the elegantly curved
wooden leg of a coffee
table upon which
nothing yet has been
set

the trunk of a young
elephant reaching up
to smell the ripe fruit
hanging on every tree
to bring something good
down into his mouth

a helmet-headed phallus
alert erect and bent
ready to explore

the outstretched arm
of your baby boy
the chubby arm
of your own son
holding up
a small globe
ball and cross

for you to take
from his hand:
Here Daddy,
this is for you.
Yes, this too
belongs to you.

ars poetica

“for poetry is the oldest of the arts” –
outside of the art
of making love
 the hardness of a penis
 the aperture of a vagina or an anus
 the mystery of sword and sheath
 so necessary for you and me
of burying seed
 watering and hoping
 and waiting
of discovering fire
of forgetting death
of knowing when to cover
 and when to uncover
 your body
of opening your mouth
 to make a sound
 understood perhaps
 by another
of releasing bowels
 when the time is right
of looking up at night
 with eyes open
 even when closed
of letting go

by Linda Scheller

Prayer (Sanctuary)

Black walnut writhes time
with limb-strewn, wind-kissed wonder.
All bless the blue shade.

Dia de los muertos

marigolds

the color of saffron, the color of a dying sun
falling into hills, the color of a smudged moon
swollen in the smoky air

cempasúchiles

sold in white buckets lining the corners
of roads beside the orchards, sold by men
with flowers in their hands

tagetes

breathe the memory of our dead
expelled in orange clouds of absence
through which we must walk

Born With Eyes Wide Open

-Mary McLeod Bethune-

Fifteenth child of ex-slaves, she arrived to light open-eyed, staring at the distance. *This child will foresee the future.* A midwife knows what births portend. A caul gives luck to a draped child. The breech babies become healers, and children who emerge face up are born to seek vengeance against their foes.

Mary sought a means to read and daily walked five miles *on winged feet.* The future she envisioned was built with songs and prayers on a dollar and a half. She mashed berries to make ink and charred wood for pencils.

She bought an abandoned dumping ground, built a girls' school, and opened a hospital.

Klansmen with torches rode to Bethune's school. She faced the faceless men. *If you burn my buildings, I'll build them again.* Mary stared through the flames into the future singing "Be Not Dismayed Whate'er Betide" with the voices of her students ringing from the windows. The Klansmen recoiled, turned their horses, and rode away.

Those who further learning construct a refuge from the refuse, and singing, oust injustice with their vision of the future. Bethune knew no flame can too brightly burn when we refuse to look away.

Pantoum: Catalyzed by Fire

-Frances Perkins-

Haunted by the workers' cries for help
calling for rescue, begging in vain,
she never forgot their desperation,
their screams resounding in her mind.

Calling for rescue, begging in vain,
immigrant girls jumped to their death.
Their screams resounding in her mind,
she vowed this must never happen again.

Immigrant girls jumped to their death
locked in the crowded factory in flames.
She vowed this must never happen again
and drafted new laws protecting workers.

Locked in the crowded factory in flames,
workers had no recourse. Frances planned
and drafted new laws protecting workers'
safety, welfare, health, and lives.

Workers had no recourse. Frances planned
forty-hour work weeks and child labor laws.
Safety, welfare, health, and lives
were prioritized over profits on her watch.

Forty-hour work weeks and child labor laws,
unemployment insurance, worker's comp
were prioritized over profits on her watch,
first woman on a U.S. President's Cabinet.

Unemployment insurance, workman's comp:
we praise FDR for these accomplishments.
First woman on a U.S. President's Cabinet,
she committed her life to laborers' rights.

We praise FDR for these accomplishments
that Perkins envisioned and lobbied to law.
She committed her life to laborers' rights,
haunted by the workers' cries for help.

Behold
-Joan of Arc-

They said young Joan was lovely, a guileless woman of stubborn faith told by martyred saints to lead the French in war. This was a woman who refused to marry; refused to only cook, clean, and spin; refused to dress in women's clothing when bells and prayers in Domrémy flowered in visions perfumed with urgency. This was a woman who rode astride and carried a sword, strategized, and won despite all odds, intrepid under fire. This was a woman who wept for the vanquished and cradled the dying.
Behold her spirit blazing in a strike of lightning.

Through the Maelstrom

-Daisy Bates-

Imagine, when you were eight, learning that your mother was lured from her home and raped, murdered, and thrown in the river by three white men who were never convicted, never tried, never charged with a crime. Imagine Daisy Bate's anguish and horror when she learned this was her mother's fate. From despair's depths she emerged enraged. *Injustice must not stand.* Daisy pledged her life to equality of access, opportunity, and protection under the law.

Another window, broken by a thrown stone wrapped in a note: *WE WILL KILL YOU.* Crosses burned on her lawn. Phone calls late at night hissed of Daisy's lynching. The governor sent the National Guard to block the Little Rock Nine, guns out, while thousands of screaming protesters shoved the teens and spat on their clothes. Federal law meant nothing to segregationists determined to keep Central High School white.

She'd found families willing to risk the contempt of thousands, loss of jobs, incessant threats, and danger. Nine youth braved the mobs, and Daisy counseled them saying, *Remember, the world is watching you.* Day after day, year after year, she pressured politicians and organized actions to further racial equality. Eyes forward, head high, she waded through hatred's maelstrom and turning, offered both her hands.

In the Mad House

-Nellie Bly-

Many, like my grandmother, were sane,
committed to asylums against their will.
Immigrants, destitute, ill, overworked
prisoners of misfortune, they suffered,
and many, like my grandmother, died
locked in those cold rooms.

Nellie Bly, girl reporter for *The World*
feigned madness for ten days
in Blackwell Island Lunatic Asylum.
She sat on benches in drafty halls,
scrubbed floors and walls, shivered
in filthy bathwater, and tried to sleep
while nurses yelled and doctors laughed.
Patients were kicked, slapped, beaten, choked.
Rancid butter, putrid meat, spiders in the bread
--the more Nellie argued her sanity,
the more they considered her mad.

Released, she wrote an exposé
that moved its readers' hearts and pens.
The state was moved to rectify conditions,
adding oversight and funding
to improve the patients' care.

The grandmother I never knew
gazes from the portrait on my desk.
I light a candle to honor her life
and whisper my thanks to Nellie Bly.

For My Mother and Gene Kelly

Maybe 80, maybe older, dark summer suit, a crisp straw hat by his side, he is the only one who smiles when I walk in the waiting room, an assured smile, polite, then gone behind a Lexington Herald. Relaxed in this public clinic, he might be Kentucky's answer to Gene Kelly, humming a tune about walking in the rain. I listen for a nurse to call his name, but no one famous would

come here. I think of my mother when I was a child, when we went downtown in August, her dark blue dress, her long brown hair held back at one side by a silver barrette, the feel of her soft cotton glove as she took my hand, and how my nightmare of being lost as we walked by the stores and restaurants in the grand metropolis of Mt. Vernon, Ohio, dissolved.

Only last week we stood at a street corner when the light turned for us to cross. Panic shook her tiny frame. She knew I had no magic tricks to cure her fears, and we stood arm and arm for two more lights. Then rain streaked the pavement darker grey. Perhaps if I didn't tell her I found him waiting for a doctor, this man could use his smile to dance her across the street, and back.

Late

And in a rush, I jolt
to a stop, a sideways
stutter dance in the hall
mirror of my remorse.

Why that grimace, hair
like the sun in a fist,
seeping through knuckles,
the one last mouth lined

in pink anyone would
kiss and eyes squinted,
disapproving what's
to come. I see a pulse

in my neck warning
my heart, that anxious
philanderer, will balk
at this day of regrets.

Reading Poetry with My Dog

Lucky brings me his ball to toss.
Lucky brings me the toy I fill
with treats to buy myself some time.

Lucky brings me his ball to toss.
Lucky brings me his ball to toss.
Lucky brings me his ball to toss

And I hold up one finger, say
wait. He lies down long enough
maybe for a sonnet, a sestina.

No, a haiku, then he rises.
Lucky brings me his ball to toss.
If I like the poem I'm reading,

I might toss the ball on a chair.
Or if the poem looks too repetitive,
we'll go outside to play frisbee.

What's in a Name

I found the code.
Look in the back
for the red globe.
It pulses, dull,
persistent. Look
at what it means.

Open. It means
you find the code
and read fast. Look
for your name, back
to scan the globe
before it dulls

and your name dulls
before it means
you claim the globe,
imprint the code
so it turns back
to you. Now look

at the spin, look
how the speed dulls
your name, turns back
the red that means
you are the code
stamped in the globe.

Your part, the globe
prints it deep, look
how you spin, code
in your blood, dull
pulse turning back,
repeats. It means

what you will mean
on this fast globe,
no turning back.
Another look
and you will dull
the only code.

So you look back:
Dull core, red globe,
you mean the code.

Nighthawk

This was my grandparents'
farmhouse, front porch pines
cut down. The nighthawk
swoops around the windmill
and here it comes again.

The chicken coop stood
where those cars wait
for tires. The ghosts of cows
lope slowly to the maples.
Child-me gives them leaves.

Across the road, its blind hill
littered with metal and glass,
a stream runs through
woods of thin trees,
vines and the blue flowers

of chicory rising through
dissolved bark and leaves.
I see the bird by moonlight,
beams tossed up by water,
lifted again by river rocks.

Chanterelles by the fence
sponge up the insects.
The nighthawk misses
those black dots living
flightless at ground level.

The gnats rise on boiling
salted bubbles, dead,
from the rot-fed mushrooms,
Grandma's small gray
kitchen clouded again.

“To live a life is not to cross a field.”

—David Lehman, “April 27 or 28”

Especially not if there’s a path, of course,
and a list of the common dangers
from hay fever to snakes. You could swallow
a pill for most of those. Instead you will

fly over it, plow it or take photos
of its rare wildflowers. Or you may reside
your whole life in an arid city, read
Hamlet and never comprehend the full

impact of words like “field” or “meadow”
depending on your translation. Pashto
gives your language some choices unknown
to both William and Boris, provides

a string of metaphors by which to pull
on a light, open a shade, start to cross.

Introduction to Photo Cropping

Measure the photo, measure the space
it must fill on the page, then measure

the lift of the boy's feet from the floor
as he shoots the basket. Airbrush

the floor he forgets when he reaches
his point of release, the slack folds

of shirt and shorts that drag behind
the parabola of his fingertips

like a fountain of light. Now measure
the guard crouched low to his right,

arms widespread for balance. Enlarge
his shadowed face till you find

his sharp shout, his acid tension, see
him follow the ball's desperate arc,

its victory lap around the rim, still
circling the heart of the photo.

The Lacemaker

A young woman bends over her work
with her elaborate hairdo and lace collar
against a plain grey background
completely absorbed in her task.

Both hands are busy on her lace-making cushion.
Between her fingers she holds two spools
while others on threads hang off
the pale blue pillow.

The individual threads are then twisted
and crossed around pins in this
complicated dance of making lace.
White and red threads cascade from
the pillow-shaped sewing box like liquid.

She is intent on her task
as much as the painter his,
deliberating on his brush strokes.

The Love Letter

A seated woman holding a note
delivered by her maid interrupting
her cittern playing that causes her to look up.
Has she abandoned her domestic duties
for the pleasures of making music?

The woman hold the neck of a lute
in her left hand, near her feet a laundry basket
holding linens, and a sewing cushion.
In the doorway a pair of cast off shoes and a broom.
Behind them a pastoral landscape and a seascape,
and on the chair in the foreground sheet music.
The quizzical exchange of glances between the two.
Is the letter from a secret lover, perhaps away at sea?

Tronies

They were not intended as portraits
but fictional figures in fantastic costumes
prominently displayed in the artist's studio
to entice prospective buyers.

In one a young woman sports
an exotic red feathered hat,
a swath of bluish satin fabric
casually draped over her shoulder.

In another she wears a conical hat
which casts a gentle shadow
over her eyes, dressed in satin
and fur, a flute in hand.

A further study depicts a young woman
with a subtle pale complexion looking
out beguiling at us, as they all do.
A slender scarf holds back her hair which
disappears into the black background,
the silver-blue satin cloak shimmering.

Devoured

Through the writhing waves
Down the gaping maw
That devouring wrath
Of the seething deep
Consuming greedy depths
Rapacious in its fury
She'll ne'er again see the light

Leaking, seeping
Creaking, weeping
Down the gaping maw
She'll ne'er again see
The light

Empty Rooms

A flickering shiver
Light that drips
Upon the floor
Cold like wax
The distant brush
Of fingertips
In empty rooms
A silent ghost
Fading notes
From broken keys
Twirling dancers
Seen only in
The corners of
Forgotten eyes
Whispered dreams
Left drifting down
 down
 down
 down
As teardrops on
The stage

Wishful

She waits inert amid the prickling beige of dying grass
Her pale eyes scaling the raw, cracked bark of barren apple trees
Recalling the sharp metal taste of crimson to her mouth
Or perhaps she hears it in the wine-red hue of raven song
Perhaps that's all it is

Once vines flourished in this secret place, long stems vivaciously abloom
Once the sun-kissed heads of honeysuckle nodded beneath the rain
Now only the harrowing thorns of ruby roses linger
Perhaps remembered pain of their wicked points is tapping at her chest
Perhaps that's what she feels

The garden was the hidden cupboard of her mother's heart
Only a small corner of the wild, eked out amid the fallow
Warmed to life in the summer gold of her mother's lovely, gentle smile
Full lips she cannot call to mind through the muggy haze of her thoughts
Perhaps that is the cause
Perhaps

Her memories drift past her like snowfall in the bitter springtime air
As she lies motionless at the groaning foot of the wizened oak
Still she tastes the metallic bite of apples that do not grow
Yet no longer does she feel the cruel curve of piercing thorns
Perhaps she'll feel nothing soon
Perhaps mother felt nothing too
Perhaps

One falling memory catches atop her cherry tongue, like whispers from the decrepit oak
A towering tree no longer fed from the blood and sweat of her mother's calloused hands
But instead from the ashes of the casket on that, the darkest of days
The gnarled branches which once grew stalwart had creaked and cracked and grumbled
Perhaps the wind had tossed them about
Perhaps that's all it was

Perhaps the taste blooming past her teeth
And the numbness in her limbs
Perhaps the cawing of startled birds
And the splintered wood against her skin
Perhaps her climbing of the tree
And the darkness now infesting her mind

Perhaps it all is but a dream

Perhaps
Perhaps
Perhaps

Wicked Murmurs

Crimson shadows
Bruised across her
Laden eyes
Does she perceive
The impish whispers
Thorny murmurs
Undulating
Across the terrace
Of wicked roses
The seeping gloom
Of crimson shadows
Devoured
With sweeping copper
Laden eyes
Can she hear
The truculent hum
Of devilish roses
Above the shriek
Of rushing wind
As from the terrace
Of blood-tinged blooms
She plummets
Hear the whisper
Grotesque colloquy
Until existence shatters
Forevermore
Crimson shadows
Fade to light
Those vile whispers
Red stained roses
Were they there
At all

The Taste of Snow

Deeply she drinks in
the strawberry taste
of snow blossoming
across bitten skin
A frost-laden
euphoria
of glacial rays
from only the phantasm
of blazing sun
captured severely
in the effulgent melodic crush
of rainbow white
The ponderous
woven cloak of the
boreal Lady
Cold maiden gliding step by
encumbered step
across the glass expanse
Her breath
That icy veil
creaking in the branches of
waiting lemon trees
so somber in
their diamond garlands
Cowering
as she brings forth the
strawberry taste
of snow

by Collin Garrity

Guarded Blackberry

latent blackberry,
why have you always dressed
down for me in a worn
 summer blossom shirt
 threadbare petals
 braless cotton bramble
hedging eyes high-walled,
closed book longing bramble limbs
thorn scratching wordless
interest, guarded fruit.
astringent leaves
alone willful me.
thoughtless quick goodbye
quiet amble
torn sleeved branches
practiced overripe disinterest,
unsoftened cluster fruit
 an amateur fence
 but intimate silence
 heartfelt loving glance
overdarkened, hasty and chanceless

Blackberry Wing

dear blackberry

you cannot help but wait

but seem to watch

your berries, like the eyes painted

on the wings of an insect,

pointing simply away.

for what do you watch, do you

live to wait for passers by.

there, the old men going early

to their chess board, eager

to admit mistakes,

slow to forget them.

Blackberry L'abri

did you ever watch for me,
do your torment yourself,
do you wait for god,

i am reminded of
the handlebaring philosophers
in utrecht, telling me
if god came in a pillar of fire,
i would hate him for it.
then catching a ride to brussels
where they told me not to sleep
with the window open.
blackberry, dear mismarked thornberry
i left that window open
and have nothing to regret
that is my curse

Blackberry Windfall

dear blackberry, do you see that?
those piled stones stair-stepping
down toward the water? There
was a bridge there at a time,
although there's no road
to remember it by
only a line of tougher perennials
who years ago won out
against the packed clay. do you
see the darker green,
and how you can follow it
to the hill! the bald ridge

that was once a shelter. a mill,
a wheat contraption and
now just flowerless crag

Blackberry Uprooted

blackberry,
where are you, where are have you gone
passing me on the road this morning,
a blue lipped man gave
his faint hobble toward the town,
with no recognition. i am left
alone in the harsh frost
 of a blackberry winter
 carolina silence,
 the cold, pedal-closing wind
alone as the waving morning passes,
its coat dragging on the clay path
like you, sour. offering sweet
the apples have fallen and begun to rot
the village boys, unimaginative
in their haste
to uproot you
and your binary canes

by Lyndsey Knight

all this

i am toppled by the world
i fear and love. i look out.
light unfolds at the window
the nothing the nobody
that was there suddenly appears.
how miraculous to see your face
the flowering earth the nesting thrush
how miraculous the colour
sound and taste of it -
everything is utterly itself.
the universe steps through me.

i am toppled by the world
i fear and love. i look out
to a rice-paper child twirling, spinning
toes to an easy sky, to his brother
all thrash and wail as we scoop him
flailing from the sea.
the ocean roars, feels a belly-swell of junk
skies swallow man's unquenched lust to kill
one breath and all is gone
one breath and all begins again
the trophy tiger's head so still. such tender eyes.

i am toppled by the world
its smorgasbord of form, this light of spring
this taste of oranges, the feel of my feet on sand
these raining windows in this house my father built
that old brick path leading to the door.
this cherry tree perhaps that blade of grass
the cicada's song its luminescent shell
the world - a freckle on the pond frog's back
i fear and love. i look out.
i am toppled by it all.

Note: This year is the 100th birthday celebration of life of New Zealand's favourite writer, Janet Frame. The words in italics are from her own poetry

crete with cows - because you love them

in the light of a dog-rose moon
we watch the sun come up
over a cretan sea
later at the market we buy jars
of wild honey and an angel made
of straw they have their own shining

a small girl sings at the feet of a woman
making lace shadows of old men
play cards walking home heat builds
so that things ahead detach themselves
from surfaces and shimmer free
there is a trick of perspective here

sheets flap domestic on coastal wind and there's
something about the light on cows in late
afternoon - even though there *are* no cows
oh my love, see how light and heat
warp time warp memory
on such rose-coloured bovine days?

white chrysanthemums

in autumn you resemble
white chrysanthemum
next, you are exactly the bib-bob
of a sparrow
i hold your chestnut warmth
in winter and watch you
push up through cold earth
to reach the sun.
in spring you surprise me as
the teats of a cow
we feel that close.
now your summer face
flushes the hydrangeas,
your voice a songbird
on the paint-chipped sill.

the fullness of round objects

like for example, an egg
from some fabulous bird or
a newborn's head in the palm
of your hand like the thwack
of racket on ball
and like tears

like the weight
of an orange perhaps
the perfume and juice of it
like paua shell and snail's back
and coins on the eyes of the dead.
like bicycle wheels and roller wheels
or gold hoop earrings catching the sun
like button like bubble and like moon
like snare drum and like rubber band
this dear sweet earth, these stones
those soft sky drifters and how the
water is hotter in a hollowed-out
rock full like the potential of a
nest infinity seen with the
ear heard with the eye

women in trees

we shelter from
the hurly burly in trees
hushing each other
our dresses catching
on the grabby hands of
branches, our cellphones
falling into the deadfall,
small rips in cover and
communication. we crouch
on limbs, recite our girl guide
creeds, sharpen our pencils,
make grudge lists, then work on them.
we sometimes wonder if this is
foolish - some old hades-coloured
thing, too hot to handle.
held numb, trapped in dreams
we sooth the babies
with one hand, cook dinner with the other
all the time weaving spells, whispering
the leaves not to fall, whispering
the birds to sleep.

A Place for Prayer / Adele Failes-Carpenter | Personal Essay

“Oh, hope enough, infinite hope, — just not for us.”

-Franz Kafka, replying to his biographer's question on the justification for hope in 1921

My dad always declined to have the rug appraised. If he had gotten a bad deal, he did not want to know. He had bought it simply because it was too beautiful to never see again. As a young child, I easily saw what he must have when he first gazed at it. My three-year-old body stretched nearly the kilim's length. I would lay face down on it and think about everything and nothing—literally—always managing to end up stumping or scaring myself. After all, nothing was *still* space, which was *some* thing. But the feeling that overtook me while pondering the infinite evoked memories from early childhood fever dreams that had frightened me beyond death. Having thus undone myself, I would return to letting the dark parts that bloomed at the edges of the rug's design, still a deep black then, absorb my vision and clear my mind.

I would later try to assimilate my interests in all I encountered in the rug—the ways its shapes resembled the designs that flashed in neon shades behind my own closed eyelids—into Catholic prayer. Still in elementary school, I resolved to stop carving gorges into the thick, soft acrid-smelling wax that coated the parish's wooden pews with my fingernails. To stop counting gray hairs on the backs of heads floating in front of me throughout mass. Instead, I devoted myself to memorizing the words and cadence of Sunday prayers, convinced that if I got the incantation right, the holy spirit would pour into me and faith would take the wheel of my mind such that I could finally make something meaningful out of the weekly gospel readings. My performance worked well enough to fool others. I was praised by adults. I was voted most likely to become a nun in a spontaneous poll taken in my third grade class. It didn't matter that I was one of just a handful of Catholics at my public elementary school. My classmates saw what I intended: a studious and severe girl, private and morally scrupulous.

But where the holy spirit was concerned, I entered adolescence feeling like a limp windsock. Studiousness gave way to intellectual curiosity. Obedient moral scrupulousness to an interest in ethical rigor. I met girls, who, instead of privately coaching me on how to sound less intelligent in order to attract boys, were stimulated by the intellects of other girls (dykes, all of us, it would soon enough turn out). Eventually, I found politics while still a teenager and quickly realized the means to fulfill fundamentalist urges far deeper than any promised by a Catholic upbringing.

My dad gifted me the rug when I graduated from college at age twenty-eight. I had not finished earlier because I had dropped out, colluding with history to convince myself that higher education would have nothing to do with the things of import unfolding around me: major anti-globalization protests and the invasions of both Afghanistan and Iraq all before my twenty first birthday. In truth, I was frightened by the possibility of loving study too much. Of ending up on a straight and narrow path into academia. Of the wedge educational advancement might drive between myself and my family members. Most of all, I was afraid of the ways *thinking* politics might eclipse *doing* politics.

Upon gifting me the rug, my dad told me he had had to fight the impulse to give it to me sooner—reflecting, once he had, that sometimes part of giving a gift is ensuring someone has first done the living necessary to appreciate it. He was right about this. The gift of the rug felt impossibly rich and wrought—a repository of hundreds of hours of a woman’s time, the value of which my father, a U.S. airman on temporary duty in Turkey, had almost certainly haggled over with a local man. His encounter with the rug happened in the midst of the U.S.’ Cold War bid to expand bases in Turkey as a matter of limiting Soviet expansion, but also of gaining proximity to the Persian Gulf—in other words, in the lead up to wars that I would later spend many years of my adult life working to oppose as an organizer in the GI resistance movement.

The collisions of history that had brought the rug into my possession felt as intricate and deserving of contemplation as the near-fractal floral and cypress patterns carefully knotted into its expanse. It is an object so beautiful that even as a toddler, I had seen something holy in it—a spark of recognition that had always linked me and my dad, despite growing to inhabit radically different, and often irreconcilable, world views.

Amidst multiple moves and a bid to arrest the chaos of parenting a young child through the cultivation of a tasteful minimalism, the rug ended up in storage. Truthfully, I feared perhaps my dad had overestimated me and I did not, in fact, know how to own it.

A year ago in August, a fast-moving wildfire consumed my parents’ home. They had no warning and only minutes to evacuate as a towering two-thousand-degree inferno consumed their entire neighborhood and much of the neighboring town—one of several catastrophic fires that wracked Hawaii, Canada, and the Pacific Northwest in the space of a few short weeks.

Lost along with their home was my parents’ fragile consensus about what they are doing with the later decades of their lives. After the fire, my sister and I watched our parents avoid sitting with the interpersonal questions and new possibilities raised by both the devastating personal loss and the evidence of escalating climate catastrophe in favor of throwing themselves into a rebuild. It turns out actually processing climate grief will be much harder than maintaining a singular focus on being ‘made whole’—attempting to gain back all that we have lost or are on the verge of losing.

Talking sense to loved ones is inadequate to the task of addressing the aftermath of trauma and disaster—perhaps especially when that disaster portends further disasters, unfolding at incomprehensible scale and speed. I spent the first week after the fire researching therapists in my parents’ area. But such suggestions turn out to be easily dismissed when made by adult lesbian daughters. Later, I took a different tack and looked up the priest from our childhood parish, now retired. Prepared care packages with herbal medicines. Invited my dad to meditation seminars and night hikes under the full moon. Investing in spiritual grounding and practice seem to offer the best chance of inviting him into connection and contemplation, and the possibility of meeting him there also requires opening and tending to that space myself.

The rug now sits on my bedroom floor in front of a tiny altar. It is one of just a few items from my family home that has not been reduced to ash. It is where I sit to contemplate the awesome and

destructive power of fire. The present and impending climate and humanitarian catastrophes and absolutely incomprehensible brutality of empire's dying gasps. What it means to live amidst the possible end of the human story. What it might mean to allow us to have been just that: a good story. It is where I pray to have my heart opened to the plot twists that might yet emerge. And to be able to gracefully accept the likelihood that they very well might not. It is where I pray to be able to see possibilities for aligning with the presencing of love and justice in this realm. To become and remain fully alive to the responsibility, privilege, and mystery of being a body, a being both within this historical present and within deep time.

Bearing Weight Rachel Hoskins

A tiny cross lies in the cubby next to my car's gear shift. By "tiny," I mean miniature. It is scarcely longer than an inch. A Christ figure equally as diminutive rests with arms stretched and knees bent fixed to its staff. A priest on pilgrimage gave me this small crucifix in Jerusalem in the Church of Saint Peter in Gallicantu as a prayer for my body. He said it carried the weight of being blessed by Pope John Paul II. Mistaking us for a Catholic couple, he swept us into a crypt full of his parishioners and announced our plight.

"This couple is unable to have children," he said, putting words in my mouth. "Let us pray a prayer of blessing." The group swaddled us there next to exposed dolomite limestone deep in that holy hill. A woman squeezed my hand. "We tried for years, and now even our daughter has kids." Her husband nodded. "It's not too late." I thanked them, blushed, looked at my husband, then for the exit. They prayed a blessing on me and my future children. The priest urged me to visit the Chapel of the Milk Grotto of Our Lady in Bethlehem. God would answer my prayers for progeny, he said, if I said them sincerely before the shrine. Beaming, he pressed the crucifix into my hand. "God will be with you and make you fruitful." I thanked him and we hurried out, too polite to admit the truth: we had been childless by choice. But two weeks later, I miscarried at nine weeks pregnant. The following year, we divorced. Now, all this feels comical, maybe more than it should. When people say, "God must have a sense of humor," I believe them.

Since then, I have wondered if the priest returned to his hotel room that night and added our blessing to a list of miracles and faith-filled events from that pilgrimage. *Childless couple given hope*, he writes in his journal. *All in attendance encouraged by witness of faith*. Later, he will present a video to his parish. Next to photos of smiling congregants outside chapels and grottos, he will highlight a bulleted list dedicated to each day. Under *Jerusalem: Day Two*, it will read:

- *Met and blessed barren couple*
- *Prayed childless mother would be filled like Mary by God's Holy Spirit.*

Then the list will go on. The priest and his parishioners will marvel. They will climb the stairs from that cinderblock community room, confessing how they bore witness. And when the trip fades like a photo exposed to too much sunlight, and days turn over in dull and painfully plain ways, they will return to that list or to next year's schedule, and plan their next pilgrimage, and plan again to change and be changed. After all, wasn't that my hope in traveling miles to walk foreign and ancient streets, to run my hands over sacred stones smoothed by centuries of touch? Wasn't I hoping for transformation? Or maybe I was looking for a center. Maybe I was looking for what would finally bear weight.

I do not carry religious symbols or tend to believe in signs. Home from the Holy Land, I left the tiny crucifix in the glove compartment of my car. Which is where I found it the other day while cleaning. I left it out. I catch myself picking it up as I drive. I press my thumb into the

knees of Christ, or suspend the cross's poles between my fingertips. I like to feel the pressure and see the marks in my prints. I wonder what kind of blessing that cheerful priest, those earnest pilgrims, and Pope John Paul II gave me that day in that ancient crypt. Was it for birth, death, or birth of another kind?

I never went to the Chapel of the Milk Grotto of Our Lady and knelt before its shrine. But lately I have taken to enacting another ritual: making the sign of the cross while I pray. It brings gravity, this gesture. Words can be just words that skim the surface of the psyche without making a dent. But this movement – a finger to my forehead, then to the divot in my chest just before my ribs splay, then to my left lung's superior lobe, and finally to my right's – pulls my words down, as if into my core, as if providing the necessary weight to sink in. This small gesture embodies my prayer with more than just aspirated rhetoric released from vocal cord on cord, as if in the praying of this prayer, and in the movement of this gesture, I am indeed bringing something to life. May it be so, in the name of the Father and Son and Holy Spirit, amen.

I am going to walk 20,000 pounds of chocolate to make a 100-layer fudge cake. I am going to make a side walk.



Justine Pla
Deer Park
age 8

I cannot think that we are useless
or God would not have created us.
And the sun, the darkness, the winds
are all listening to what we have to say.

- Geronimo

CONTRIBUTORS

Michael Rerick lives and teaches in Portland, OR. Work recently appears or is forthcoming at *Brief Wilderness*, *Cola Literary Review*, *Epigraph Magazine*, *Marsh Hawk Review*, *Slouching Beast Journal*, and *Word For/Word*. He is also the author of In Ways Impossible to Fold, morefrom, The Kingdom of Blizzards, The Switch Yards, and X-Ray.

Bridget James Poems and stories by Bridgette James have appeared in various UK online and print publications. She won the 2024 Fiction Factory Summer poetry competition and has been shortlisted for the Bridport prize.

Divya Gottiparthi I'm a third year undergraduate student studying neuroscience at Binghamton University. I am interested in the medical humanities, and storytelling, and hope to integrate my interests for both literature and medical science in the future.

Kristin Roedell graduated from Whitman College (B.A. English 1984) and the University of Washington Law School (J.D. 1987). She practiced family law for 10 years in the Pacific Northwest. Her poetry has been published *The Journal of the American Medical Association*, *Switched on Gutenberg*, *CHEST*, and *VoiceCatcher*, among others. She is the author of a chapbook (Girls with Gardenias, 2012, Flutter Press), and a full length poetry collection (Downriver, Aldrich Press, 2015.) She lives with her family in rural Washington.

Carole Greenfield grew up in Colombia and lives in New England, where she teaches multilingual learners at a public elementary school. Her work has been featured in such places as *Sky Island Journal*, *Dodging the Rain*, *Amethyst Review* and many others. Her first collection, Weathering Agents, was released in summer 2023 by Beltway Editions.

Diane Glancy lives in Gainesville, Texas. She is professor emerita at Macalester College. Her latest books: Island of the Innocent, a Consideration of the Book of Job, 2020, A Line of Driftwood, the Ada Blackjack Story, 2021, Home Is the Road, Wandering the Land, Shaping the Spirit, 2022, Psalm to Whom(e), 2023, and Quadrille, Christianity and the Early New England Indians, 2024. Lazarus, the Intended Writings is forthcoming in 2025.

Glenn Marchand is a poet-writer holding an MFA in Creative Writing from Mount Saint Mary's University. Marchand is speaking to various realities created by the human condition. In exploring religious and scientific truths, Marchand carefully employs observations. It is with a sense of pleasure and enthusiasm that Marchand presents these prose poems. Each one was written with an eye on enlightening the author and the given audience.

Swetha Amit is the author of two chapbooks, Cotton Candy from the Sky and Mango Pickle in Summer. An MFA graduate from the University of San Francisco, her works appear in *Had*, *Flash Fiction Magazine*, *Maudlin House*, *Barzakh*, *Oyez Review*, and others (<https://swethaamit.com>). Her stories have been nominated for Pushcart and Best of the Net.

Anne Dyer Stuart My journal publications include *NELLE*, *Pleiades*, *North American Review*, *AGNI*, *The American Journal of Poetry*, *Raleigh Review*, *Cherry Tree*, *Sugar House Review*, *The Texas Review*, *Louisiana Literature*, *New World Writing Quarterly*, and *The Louisville Review*. My work won a Henfield Prize, *New South Journal's* Prose Contest, was anthologized in Best of the Web, and nominated for Best New Poets. What Girls Learn, a finalist for

Comstock Review's 2020 Chapbook Contest, was published by Finishing Line Press, and the title poem was featured on WPSU's Poetry Moment, selected and read by Majorie Maddox. I edit *IMPOST: A Journal of Creative and Critical Work* and teach at Commonwealth University of Pennsylvania-Bloomsburg.

Greig Thomson I am an author living in Adelaide, South Australia. I recently completed my First Class Honours in Creative Writing at the University of Adelaide. My work is heavily influenced by 'transrealism', including authors such as Philip K. Dick, Margaret Atwood, Virginia Woolf, and Samuel Beckett.

Greg Zeck A native Minnesotan, Greg Zeck has published fiction and poetry in such magazines as *Ambit*, *Barrow Street*, *Caesura*, and the *Spoon River Quarterly*. Now retired in Fayetteville, Arkansas, he reads, writes, hikes, bikes, and gardens. In 2020 he published a first book of poetry, *Transitions*, and in 2021 a second book, *Lost & Found: Poems Found All Around*, both of which can be found on Amazon. He's about to come out with a third, *Glioblastoma Variations*, about brain cancer. You can read more about Greg at www.youngzeck.com.

Irena Praitis walks, runs, and cares for loved ones in Fullerton, California. She's a professor of creative writing and literature at Cal State University, Fullerton, and is currently serving as Department Chair. Her most recent books are **Cage of Bone,** (2023) **Rods and Koans,** (2018) and **The Last Stone in the Circle,** (2016) all published by Red Mountain Press.

Glen Delpit Born in New Orleans, raised in California. Been a professional musician for the last 45 years. Writing poetry for the last 50 years. This is the first time he is being published.

Mary Lewis has an MFA in creative writing from Augsburg University, an MS in Ecology from the University of Minnesota, and she taught in the Biology Department of Luther College in Decorah, Iowa. In 2023 two of her stories have been nominated, one for a Pushcart prize, another for both the 2023 Best of the Net Anthology and the Best American Series. A sampling of journals where her work appears: *Allium*, *Antigonish Review*, *Blue Lake Review*, *Book of Matches*, *Boomer Lit*, *Cleaver Magazine*, *Evening Street Review*, *Feels Blind Literary*, *Inscape*, *Litbreak Magazine*, *Map Literary*, *North American Review*, *Persimmon Tree*, *Rivanna*, *RiverSedge*, *r.kv.r.y. quarterly*, *Rundelania*, *Sensitive Skin*, *Sleet Magazine*, *Superstition Review*, *Taj Mahal Review*, *The Spadina Literary Review*, *The Woven Tale Press*, *Thieving Magpie*, *Toasted Cheese*, and *Wordrunner*. Forthcoming: *Main Street Rag*, *Minerva Rising*, *Nonbinary Review*, *Valley Voices*, *Wilderness House Literary Review*. My website: marylewiswriter.com.

E M Schorb My work has also appeared in *Agenda* (UK), *The American Scholar*, *The Carolina Quarterly*, *The Mississippi Review*, *The Hudson Review*, *Outposts* (UK), *The Queen's Quarterly* (CA), *The Southern Review*, *Stand* (UK), *The Sewanee Review*, *The Massachusetts Review*, *Sand Literary Journal* (DE), *The Virginia Quarterly Review*, *Poetry Salzburg Review* (AU), *The Yale Review*, and *Oxford Poetry* (UK), among others.

Jerome Berglund has worked as everything from dishwasher to paralegal, night watchman to assembler of heart valves. Many haiku, haiga and haibun he's written have been exhibited or are forthcoming online and in print, most recently in *bottle rockets*, *Frogpond*, and *Modern Haiku*. His first full-length collections of poetry were released by Setu, Meat For Tea, Mötus Audāx press, and a mixed media chapbook showcasing his fine art photography is available

now from Yavanika. Berglund is a committed activist as well, and has been thoughtfully involved in the Occupy, Standing Rock, and Black Lives Matter movements, supported grassroots efforts promoting the Green Party.

Ron Jevaltas is a phenomenological poet whose poetry often takes the form of journal entries. Since 2010 he has made over 1,500 such entries that recently have found homes in *The Font*, *Moss Piglet*, *2River*, *Bramble* and *The Wisconsin Review*. He has been writing poetry for 60 years.

Barry Fields lives with his wife and dog in North Carolina. His short stories have recently been published in *34th Parallel Magazine*, *Sundial: A Magazine of Literary Historical Fiction*, *New English Review*, and *Unlikely Stories Mark V*. Two stories placed in contests, and numerous nonfiction articles have appeared in a variety of publications.

Beth Sherman's writing has been published in more than 100 literary magazines, including *Portland Review*, *Tiny Molecules*, *100 Word Story*, *Fictive Dream*, and *Bending Genres*. Her work is featured in Best Microfiction 2024. She's also a multiple Pushcart, Best Small Fictions, and Best of the Net nominee. She can be reached at [@bsherm36](https://www.bethsherman.site/) or <https://www.bethsherman.site/>

Pia Borsheim Previous work has appeared in *Michigan Quarterly Review*, *Tar River*, *Birmingham Poetry Review*, *Southern Review*, *Barrow Street*, *Northeast Narrative* and *The Bear River Review*, among others. Full-length collections Moon on the Meadow (2008) and Above the Birch Line (2021) were both published by Gallaudet University Press in Washington, DC, while three chapbooks have appeared: Two Winters (Finishing Line Press 2011), Mother Mail (Hermeneutic Chaos Press 2015) and Love Poems (Cherry Grove Collections 2018). I live in Presque Isle, Michigan, and have a Ph.D. from Michigan State University. I had been a professor for 43 years, the last 28 of those years at Gallaudet University in Washington, DC before retiring in 2020. Now, I spend my time writing, sailing, and tromping the woods of northern Michigan.

Connie Johnstone her poems have appeared or are forthcoming in *The Scarred Tree: Poetry of Moral Injury*; *Ravenous: le terroir du Montolieu*; *The Amethyst Review*; Loss Anthology 9; *The Calendula Review: Journal of Narrative Medicine*; *Voices 24: Anomalies, Pathologies & Paradise*; and elsewhere. In her other lives she published a novel, The Legend of Olivia Cosmos Montevideo (Atlantic Monthly Press); edited an anthology, I've Always Meant to Tell You (Pocket Books); was a professor of English and chair of creative writing at American River College; changed careers and was a hospice chaplain with Kaiser Permanente using Narrative Therapy. Degrees include MFA Bennington and MTS Harvard Divinity School. She lives and writes in Davis, CA, with her cat named Baxter. She will travel to France with her son Charles in 2025.

Nancy Alvarado My fiction has been previously published in *Relief Journal*, San Diego State University MFA Anthology, *Santa Clara Review*, *A Year in Ink* (Volumes 14, 15, and 16), the *Mason Jar Press Journal*, the San Diego Decameron Project Anthology, and *LatinoLA "Expresate!"* I was one of the Honorable Mention winners in the Writing Away Refuge First Chapter Contest.

Patrick T. Reardon, who was a Chicago Tribune reporter for 32 years, has published six poetry collections, including Darkness on the Face of the Deep and Puddin': The

Autobiography of a Baby, A Memoir in Prose Poems. His manuscript Every Marred Thing: A Time in America won the 2024 Faulkner-Wisdom Prize for poetry collection from the Pirate's Alley Faulkner Society of New Orleans. He has been nominated three times for a Pushcart Prize for poetry.

Hayley Phillips A Virginia native, Hayley Phillips received her MFA from Randolph College in 2021 and is now a PhD candidate at Louisiana State University. Her work is included or forthcoming in *Blue Earth Review*, *ONE ART*, *Evergreen Review*, *Appalachian Review* and elsewhere.

Jenna Putnam is a writer based in California. She is the author of the novelette Cicadas and the poetry collection Hold Still. Her work has appeared in *Hero*, *ExPat Press*, *The Moth*, *The Sun*, *The New York Times*, and others. Her poem "The End (pt. II)" was nominated for a 2023 Pushcart Prize, and her screenplay Northern Lights was a quarterfinalist for the 2024 Outstanding Screenplays Feature Competition. She directed and produced the short film "Agathe" in 2021. Putnam has written two feature-length screenplays: Northern Lights and Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror. She is currently working on a novel.

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 Award, published December 2023 (Amazon, Barnes and Noble). He is a long-time resident of Sonoma County where he lives with his wife, Lori.

Jane Spencer After working in the fine arts for decades, Jane switched to poetry. She loves expressing visual images in words, pulling meaning from the natural world, and contemplating our place within it. The pandemic turned her focus on how we think about death, vaccination lead her to the afterlife. Jane says poems allow her to connect unrelated experiences. A wonderful process of surprise and discovery for the soul. She has been published by: *LindenAveLit*, hummingbird Press, *Tinyseed Journal*, Hauntedwaterspress, Halcyone Press, Deep Water column/Portland Press Herald, and *Black Mountain*. In December, will be published in anthology called the Power of the Feminine on amazon, Thresh Press-Donna Biffar. Finishing Line press will publish her first chapbook in fall of 2024 via Amazon. Matches Strike Boxes.

Jacob Friesenhahn teaches Religious Studies and Philosophy at Our Lady of the Lake University in San Antonio. He serves as Program Head for Theology and Spiritual Action and as Lead Faculty for Philosophy. His first book of poems is forthcoming from Kelsay Books.

Linda Scheller is a retired elementary school teacher and the author of two books of poetry, Fierce Light (FutureCycle Press) and Wind & Children (Main Street Rag Publishing Company). She serves as vice president of Modesto-Stanislaus Poetry Center and volunteers as a programmer for KCBP Community Radio. Her website is lindascheller.com.

Marcia L. Hurlow's chapbook of poetry, Dog Physics, was published by Main Street Rag Publishing, fall 2024. Her second full-length collection, Practice Rapture, will appear in the summer of 2025 from Pine Row Press. Her poems have recently appeared in *Baltimore Review*, *I-70 Review*, *Chiron*, *After Happy Hours*, *The Naugatuck River Review*, *Gyroscope* and *Humana Obscura*, among others. She is co-editor of *Kansas City Review*.

Dennis Maloney is a poet and translator. A number of volumes of his own poetry have been published including The Map Is Not the Territory, Just Enough, and Listening to Tao Yuan Ming. A bilingual German/English volume, Empty Cup was published in Germany in 2017 and In 2021 a chapbook, Some Windows, with translations in several languages appeared in Germany from hochroth Verlag. Recent collections include The Things I Notice Now, The Faces of Guan Yin, and Windows.

Brenan Wednesday I've been writing poetry since I was a child, and have taken inspiration from masters such as Sylvia Plath, Robert Frost, and Edgar Allan Poe. However, I am new to the world of publishing and hopeful to find my poetry published for the first time in a literary journal.

Collin Garrity (He/Him) is a woodworker and poet based in St Louis, Missouri. He grew up in a small Black Forest town in Germany and studied poetry at Warren Wilson College in Asheville, NC.

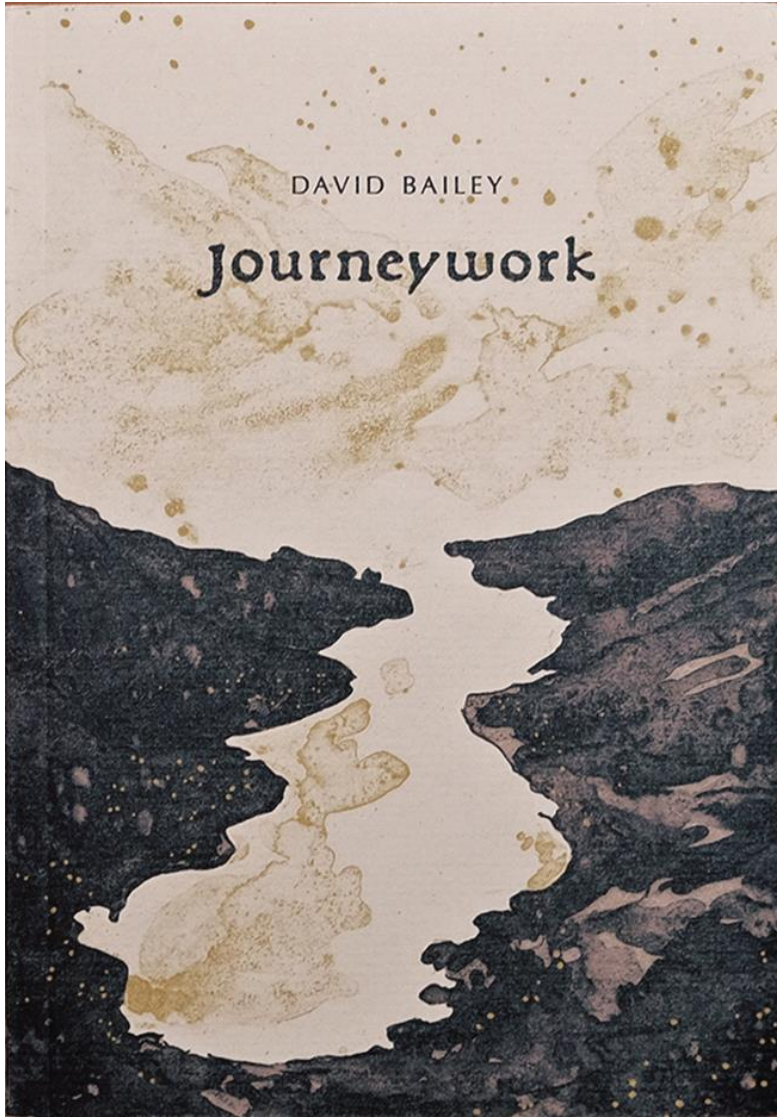
Lyndsey Knight lives in Auckland with a special interest in creating hybrid works combining printmaking, collage and poetry. Her short stories and poetry have been published in various anthologies, Landfall, A Fine Line, The Listener, Kiwi Diary, with articles, reviews and poetry in various publications abroad.

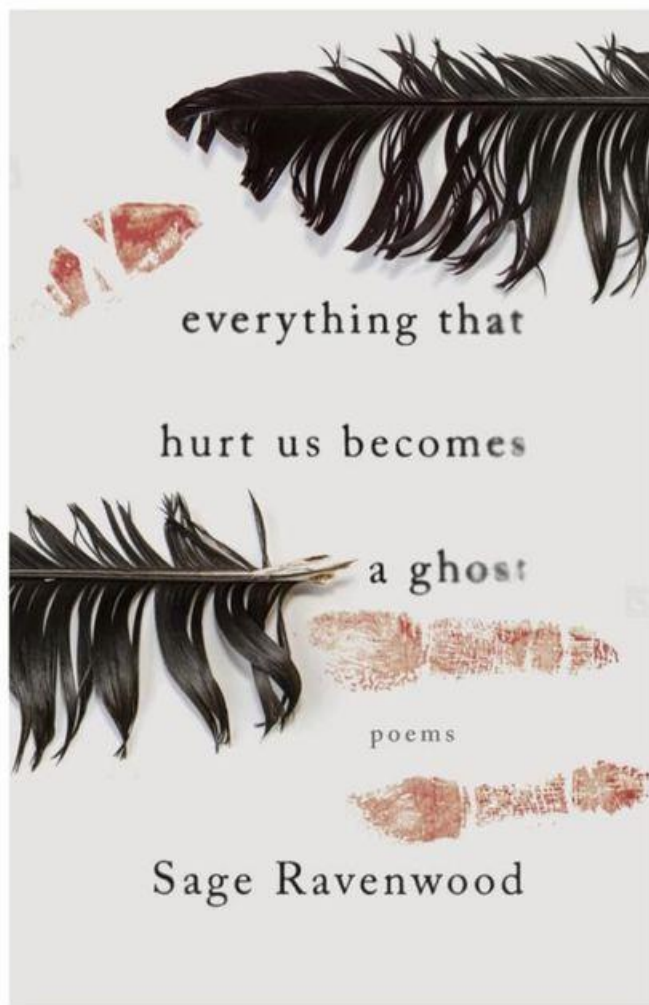
Adele Failes-Carpenter (she/her) is a queer parent, public educator, and labor organizer residing on Ohlone land where she teaches Women's and Gender Studies at City College of San Francisco. Adele has spent decades organizing with young people, GI resisters, anti-war veterans, and labor unions. As a writer and educator, she aims to tend abolitionist imagining and is committed to ongoing experiments in solidarity and the proliferation of possible futures. Adele is a Lambda Literary Summer 2024 fellow in Nonfiction.

Rachel Hoskins grew up in Ohio and recently pursued theological studies at The University of Oxford and at Princeton Theological Seminary. Her work appears in *The Christian Century*. This piece is her first work of published creative nonfiction.

DAVID BAILEY

Journeywork





everything that

hurt us becomes

a ghost

poems

Sage Ravenwood