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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

Let Your love play upon my voice and rest on my silence.

Let it pass through my heart into all my movements.

Let Your love, like stars, shine in the darkness of my sleep
and dawn in my awakening.

Let it burn in the flame of my desires
and flow in all currents of my own love.

Let me carry Your love in my life
as a harp does its music,
and give it back to You at last with my life.

-Rabindranath Tagore

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Their Childhoods Follow Them

Seven women bathe in a gloomy swamp. Giant octopus tentacles curl above the water. The women wash their clothes, unafraid. Their bodies gleam in the moonlight. The scent of ancient bog hangs in the air and the atmosphere is green and black. They speak to each other in vibrations, indicating by hums and whirs what they'd like the others to do. They say *Polly, raise your arm. Jamie, lie on your side, turn your head that way. Agnes, roll your eyes upwards. Persephone, point at Lilac. Lilac, lick the palm of your hand. Ingrid, laugh softly. Patty, toss away the clothes and wander off by yourself naked.* The octopus tentacles stroke their hair gently, comforting them for they have been on their own since puberty. With sad faces, they move slow as snails in the dark night. Thinking of their childhoods when they had to obey strict parents and teachers over pointless and futile tasks.

Three Words

A dancing face is made up of pearls. But her true human eyes stare out, her mouth blood red. In the background lie haughty cliffs and a tired ocean, doomed to repeat the same motions over and over. Sea spray tickles the air along with the smell of brine. But the pearls are a necklace meant to strangle. Dancing at the shoreline, the face waits for small sea creatures to capture. Creatures like hermit crabs, star fish, barnacles. It's not that it would kill them, though it wanted to. No. It would capture and release, capture and release, only terrifying and confusing the poor creatures.

The sea breathes its last breaths. It's like being on a ventilator in a hospital. The cliffs turn their nude bodies to the surf. And the pearls twirl in the blue light of a ghostly haze. Where is the pearl woman's flesh? It's been sucked away by the outgoing tide. Her eyes have died, along with her mouth. They are gone with the sea. Improbably, she has died and wound up in Heaven. Angels with a secret pass await her there, and tend to her. Now, her spiritual eyes see all manner of things, whether or not they actually appear on Earth. Things she avoided thinking about before. Things like *child* and *mother* and *sadness*. It tires her out to know these three words. She lies down in an ozone layer in her new heavenly home, far above the cliffs.

Damage

Claire Massey

My husband rubs his back against the park bench, decompresses after cramped confinement in the sound-proof booth. I study the lines of his audiogram, spikes like cloud-to-ground lightning, plunging deep into the valley of severe hearing loss.

The young Audiologist had joked, *fear no evil. We can amplify the speech frequencies. He will hear take out the garbage and what's in the mail. But the low, subtle sounds...?* —she had looked apologetic. I read the diagnosis at the bottom of the graph. Sensorineural. Noise Induced. Permanent.

Who or what did my husband this evil? The whoosh and grind of a six-lane nation, the shrill whine of planes overhead, the aftershock of long-ago concerts, hard rock reverberating in the blood? Or was it cheapskate employers supplying bum earplugs, the eighth nerve numbed, defenseless against unwavering waves of industrial hum?

A breeze ripples the duckweeded holding pond, which is large enough to trick water birds into thinking it's a lake. From the weeping willow above the bench, I hear the liquid trill of a redwing blackbird. Before thinking, I ask my husband if he heard. He closes his eyes as if searching the archive of his inner ear. *No, but I remember it.*

How long, I wonder, can the coo of doves, the whinny of waking owls, the wing flaps of cranes in V-formation, live in auditory memory? Will bird book depictions, the onomatopoeia of printed words stop the forgetting? *Audubon describes tern calls as beach music, a mix of whistling suweees and descending whoo-hurrs.* Will he feel dispossessed when he holds to his ear, a shell with the topography of the human cochlea, failing to hear the cool, aqua sound of the sea? When the hawk circles above the glen, will he perceive the sudden hush, like the five o'clock quiet that fills a cathedral closed to visitors?

A wood duck lands in the weeds, announces his arrival with quavering notes. This time I only point, and he looks, smiles, looks away. He had waited in the car while I asked the Audiologist probing questions about noise induced loss. *Did you know, she commented, that eighty-year-olds living on the Serengeti have the hearing of our western world's healthiest five-year-olds?* My husband opens his Subway sandwich, offers me the cookie, but I pick up my phone instead, read the latest posts on a dreary site called Audiometry Today. Then, I turn to videos of Tanzania's savannah, learn that this region is the original cradle of human occupation, home of the pasturing Maasai tribe, every member, I imagine, blessed with perfect hearing, cradle to grave. I read out loud to him: *Over forty species of animals use this ancient corridor to Lake Victoria. Maasai tribal music is entirely vocal—a chorus sings harmonic praise to a God who makes rain, fine grass, and strong cows.* Again, a wan smile. He crumples the food wrapper, tosses it in the trash. *Are you ready to leave?*

Later that evening, I escape the blaring TV, retreat to my bedroom nook. The Audiologist assured us that he will soon hear the news at normal volume. It is the otherworldly sounds of comfort, of spirit, that he will miss, the aromatic hiss of pine knot campfires, rumbles of thunder reassuringly distant, as the weatherman promised, the lonely notes of Taps, played to the rhythm of sunset.

When I finally sleep, I dream of a mother on the Serengeti, humming a lullaby to her baby. The child becomes my husband, ages eight decades before I wake. He holds his own grandbaby, sings from memory the legacy melody, every note lilting, pitch-perfect. When he hears the background swell of sweet rain beginning, he smiles for real, every drop an answered prayer.

Razors

Daphnée

content warning: self-injury.

The dusty pink disposable razor, made of cheap plastic, feels light in my hand. I own a handful of *Silky Touch* razors because they come in a pack of eight. Every so often, I pick one up and break the handle. I'm left with the head of the razor, with its twin blade. I grab a pair of scissors from one of the kitchen drawers, and with enough pressure, the blade pops out of its cage. The blade falls into my palm.

Finally, I can breathe.

Red train tracks appear on my arm, criss-crossed lines that etch into my skin. I grab a purple towel from the cupboard and wonder whether I will need to buy another bottle of stain remover. The cuts aren't deep enough to warrant stitches, which work in my favour, because I can already imagine the shame eating me from the inside if I were to show up to A&E.

I picture the intake nurse's reaction, her disdain or disappointment, or even fury that another Sad Girl is taking up space in a busy hospital where others are fighting for their lives. I also don't want my arms to be wrapped in white bandages, because they would bring attention to the fact I'm hurting, and the whole point of self-injury is to keep your suffering in hiding.

I'm ashamed to say that I self-indulge most of the time. The light pink *Venus* razors are more expensive, which is unfortunate, but they hold five blades instead of two, and they are sturdier. Once again, I undergo my ritual, discard the handle, and toss it into the trash can.

Scissors come in handy, once again. More force, this time around, and determination. It's worth the extra effort though, because soon enough, I have more blades at my disposition. They are thin, but they do the trick. They are the most economical option.

This time around, I press the cold metal against my thigh until red bubbles materialize, and little dots erupt into the air. I dab a paper towel against my skin until the bleeding stops. The cuts are superficial, and I chastise myself for cutting in the first place, and then for not cutting deep enough.

The true winners are the razors I order off Amazon, the *Wilkinson Sword* vintage double edge safety razor blades. They are sharp, but flexible. The bonus is that they appear at my doorstep within a day or two. They come into a black compact case, and all you need to do is slide your finger until one blade pops out.

The advantage is that these blades do not arise as much suspicion. The case fits nicely into my bag, alongside my wallet, earbuds, and bus pass. I can carry them anywhere, which is a bonus. They are like a pack of minty flavored gum, but not the squared white ones that you have to pop out – no, they are like the ones that come in strips, each piece individually wrapped in silver.

The first time I choose that option, I pick a blade at random and slice my arm. The blood appears faster than I anticipate. I scoop it up using a few tissues and sit on my bed for 10 minutes until the bleeding stops.

I reach for my First Aid supplies but the wound closure strips that come in a pack of 5 have no chance against the amount of blood that's bubbling up and gliding down my arm. The only option I have left is to stop the bleeding using leftover gauze and medical tape that I acquired years ago, after I slipped and scraped my knee.

A few hours later, I unwrap the bandage to check out the post-relapse damage. The injuries are still tender, and I can still feel the shame heating up my cheeks, as I lightly touch the cuts that are now forming into scars.

I hesitate about my decision to wear short sleeves during the summer. I weigh my option to reopen the wounds and form new ones. I clench my jaw and try not to sob, even though I want to.

9 Haiku

Garrett Mostowski

1

dew beads joined at hips
trace petals blades plastics a
river to kiss you

2

braided flowers burst
in her hair bees buzz hover
seek what nectar's left

3

locust spinning through
hung smog spittle bugs skating
over filmy creeks

4

this river chatters
over rocks shopping carts cans
hugs banks made of dust

5

green leaves dry shrivel
each spring while nest eggs rot bleed
yolk down hollow trunks

6

prehistoric ice
 laments the ocean's swallow
wishes time would freeze

7

popping fireflies
 embers rise fade fall at last
eat wood shit out ash

8

on hands/knees praying
 under wildfire suns
dry throats cough & wheeze

9

senators alone
 on the aisle's only side
still denying truth

Aerial

Karen Laugel

I was forty feet above the stage, pumping the fly bar, higher, higher. Wind whistled past my ears, my heart lurched, every muscle taut. The catcher called and I launched backward into a quadruple summersault, hurtling at seventy-five mph, then blindly thrust my wrists upward toward the grip of life. I was caught, the crowd roared, the trapeze lowered. I flipped into a dismount and bounced onto the platform as if in celebration instead of penance.

A bow from the waist, a crossarm salute, a hand raised to thank the gods. I stood for a few seconds, for an eternity, blinded by the spotlight, blinded by my addiction. The rush of weightlessness, of being in control and having no control, of holding on and letting go. To surrender and to be saved, and then to repeat it all again. A child prodigy, a former Olympic medalist. A baby killer.

The spotlight swung to the next act, and I nodded in the dark to the reason I was still alive. Unlike Jake's father, this man still had my back—or grip. We slapped a 'high-five,' and he sauntered toward the dining hall. I turned toward the exit and faced a family in the front row, a father hoisting his three-year-old to his shoulders. The boy saw me and clapped his hands. Jake's age now.

I slid into my dressing room, peeled off my leotard, and showered. Water pelted and stung my raw palms. I dressed for climbing, pocketed my Hawkbill, and headed for the medical tent.

The doctor, hair gathered into a top knot and looking more like a prophet than a surgeon, cupped my hands and gently rocked them under his gaze. "You need to soften the

callouses and file them with a pumice stone,” his gloved fingertip touched a torn mound, “so this doesn’t happen.”

My left sleeve slid up and he trailed his thumb over the scarred hatch marks on the inside of my forearm. “Not from the trapeze,” he said, eyes liquid.

I tugged down my sleeve. “Long time ago.” Just yesterday. Last night. This morning. Long time, every time, all the time. There was no time.

He fingered a pair of sterile scissors, trimmed the nodules and then scrubbed my palms with soap and water, applied bacitracin and a gauze-wrap. “I’ve seen your act.” He peeled off his gloves. “You don’t use a net.”

I shrugged into my jacket. “I’ll come for taping before tomorrow’s show.”

I walked out toward the main tent to check my rigging as I did before and after every performance. The riggers had also done an inspection, but I needed to be the one to make the final choice. I fingered the floor anchor and carabiners first, looking for a bend, a missing chunk, a damaged gate. I climbed the ladder to the platform, then to the ceiling pulleys, biceps aching. I’d been so exhausted by Jake when he was the age of colic, he’d cried and cried and cried until I’d wanted to scream. Tears wetting my face, I’d prayed for silence--undressed him to his diaper, placed him bare belly to bare belly, his sticky cheeks nestled between my breasts, his warm breath sweet with milk, and we’d both fallen asleep. But only one of us woke up.

I ran my hands along the ropes, scanning for discoloration, flattened sections, fraying. A lullaby looped over and over in my head, *and when the bough breaks*. Crib death, the doctors had said, but I knew that Jake had not been in his crib. When I awoke, I was on my belly and Jake was beneath me. His body heat was my heat, his sweat was my sweat, his perfect, tiny

nails were blue and his breath was gone and his silence was forever. I fingered the rope,
thumbed open the Hawkbill, and shaved the cord down to the diameter of Jake's blue pinky.

My Hands

Karen Laugel

When my palms cradled death for the first time, I was twenty-four and knew nothing. All my senses had yet to be educated. I wore a white lab coat, stethoscope, and a clipped Howard U Med School badge. I had to show up and I had to perform. See one, do one, teach one. I was stuck on the second command.

My mentor was Nwosu, a soft-spoken, punctilious Nigerian. I dogged his sneakered heels like a terrier. We were jogging the dingy halls of D.C. General Hospital, adjacent to the jail and the morgue, dumping ground for the indigent. A 1979 shortage of doctors, nurses, and drugs. No CT scanner, no antibodies for hepatitis, no head of psychiatry, no neurosurgeon. Staffed by residents from Howard and Georgetown—the former in service to their community, the latter for the thrill of the macabre. As one of five white faces in a class of one hundred fourteen, I was wedged somewhere in between.

Nwosu's hip pager beeped, and we skidded into the emergency department, floor slick with what I hoped was a wet mopping.

"Bay four, knife fight," said a nurse, and handed Nwosu a clipboard. He pulled a curtain aside and we entered, taking opposite sides of the stretcher. A large black man lay flat on the bed, neck and hands wrapped in gauze, exhaling the alcoholic odor of cider vinegar.

"Mr. Jones," Nwosu tapped the clipboard. "I'm Dr. Nwosu and this is my assistant. Can you tell us what happened?"

I waited for the patient's double-take, the bold stare at my face, soon followed by, 'you go to Howard?' But the man was silent.

A nurse rolled in a metal cart, topped with bottled Betadine, a stack of gauze pads, and two suture trays. "He's 286 pounds, blood alcohol of 387. He ain't tellin' you nothin." She dropped gloves, two bottles of lidocaine, and a handful of capped needles onto the cart. "Vitals are good. No airway compromise. Yell if you need another suture size."

We gloved up and Nwosu pulled bandage scissors from his coat pocket. Not sterile, but available. He ground his knuckles into the man's sternum. No response.

"We're not going to need anesthesia," Nwosu said. "His hands are yours." He moved to the man's head and began cutting the neck gauze.

I unwrapped the man's hands. Defense wounds, both palms. "I haven't sutured for real," I said. "I mean, I've done pig's feet, but not a human." Not a man, a man who was going to need his hands. His hands, in my hands.

Nwosu gestured to the man's neck, gaping like the belly of a filleted fish. "If we had a CT, we'd look for laryngotracheal injury." Nwosu tapped the scissors against his gloved palm. "He's stable, not gurgling, no spurters. I'm going to take a look around and then close him up." He turned back to the man's head. "Don't forget to irrigate."

My hands shook so badly that I had to remove three of the first fourteen sutures and then stitch them again. Sweat beads plopped from my forehead, pooling in the man's palmar creases. Was sweat sterile? Should I scrub with Betadine again? Why didn't I know this?

Nwosu had finished closing the neck wound before I could start the second hand. “Use a running stitch,” Nwosu said. “It’s faster.” He opened 4-0 Vicryl, loaded the needle driver with a click, and snapped the rings into my right hand. “Don’t forget to review his history—you’ll present his case at rounds in the morning.”

Surgical rounds. And me without anonymity. No pressure. “What about tendon or nerve damage?” I said. “There’s nothing visible but it’s not like we can ask him to move his fingers.”

“We’ll know tomorrow.” He examined my sutures. “Too tight. Approximate, don’t strangulate.”

The curtain jerked open. “Level one, trauma room, five minutes,” said the nurse.

Nwosu grabbed my needle driver, finished the stitches, tied three square knots and cut the thread. He jerked his head toward the exit. “You’ll be airway.”

My stomach lurched. Airway? The only airway I’d intubated was on an anesthetized kitten.

We entered the trauma room just ahead of the stretcher, EMT calling out, “eighteen-year-old male, motorcycle hit by pick-up. GCS of three. Helmet on. Facial and chest abrasions, compound fracture left tib-fib.” Vitals followed as the Team Leader assigned roles. Nwosu was Examiner One and moved toward the ultrasound. I was to remove the helmet with Examiner Two and assess the airway. Paper ripped, needles stabbed, monitors beeped, fluids flowed.

Examiner Two removed the face shield, cut the helmet strap, and leaned across the boy’s upper chest. She slid her gloved hands inside the helmet, thumbs alongside the jaw,

fingers stabilizing the back of the skull. She nodded and I grasped the rear of the helmet and chin bar, and applied slow traction, lifting slightly to slide over his nose.

“Is respiratory here?” said the Team Leader, eyes on the monitor. “We need to intubate.”

Respiratory--not me. Thank God.

Helmet removed, I cupped my hands around his head. My hands. His head in my hands. Soft, fluid, like a water balloon. An over-ripe tomato.

“Stop,” I said. My hands shaking, his fluid-filled head rippling. “Everyone, stop.” I began crying and my nose wept. Still, I cradled his head.

The team froze in synchronized dread. Respiratory arrived, scanned the monitors. Checked pupils, pulses, chest. She shook her head and exited.

Lines were disconnected, drawers closed, monitors silenced. Bootied feet padded out of the room in muffled diminuendo.

Nwosu laid a hand on my shoulder. “The parents are in the trauma waiting room.”

I sat with them. Heads bowed; icy hands grasped. Tears splashing our wrists. I was six years older than their son—not an experienced trauma doc. I could have been their daughter.

“He was going to UDC in the fall,” the mother said. “He didn’t deserve this.”

I cupped her hands in mine. Her hands in my hands. Willing my warm blood to transfer what I had no words for.

Friends for Life

Karen Laugel

I'm not bragging, but back home, I could lasso a runaway calf on horseback and have it hogtied in under sixty seconds by the time I was ten. When I last went fishing, I landed a 45" Musky from Mille Lacs Lake with a Bucktail spinnerbait and had it filleted before Dad docked the boat. And in school, I'd mastered a double back layout dismount from the uneven parallel bars my second year on the team. I wasn't boastful—I was just trying to be competent in the world as I knew it.

So, I wasn't prepared for our family's move 1400 miles away to the East Coast. We left the summer before my sophomore year, and along with losing my home of fifteen years, I lost my horse, my gymnastics team, and my confidence. Not even my vocabulary was acceptable—I quickly learned to substitute sneakers for tennis shoes, jeans for dungarees, and soda for pop. I didn't really make headway, however, until I met my neighbor and new best friend, Deb, a pot smoking promiscuous atheist Jew, who took my former virginal ranch-hand status as a personal challenge. In the span of one summer, I abandoned my Plow-boy Levi's for hip-huggers, mini-skirts, and hot pants. Her family's Passover celebration would have been my first drunk and disorderly offense if they'd let me out of the house, and by the start of school, I'd traded memories of my quarter horse for the pillion seat of my new boyfriend's Harley. I wasn't intent on being a bad girl—I just wanted to fit in.

Deb and I had college boyfriends, so we didn't have to pilfer from the peach-fuzz-face crowd, but we had reputations to uphold. We began each morning in the girl's bathroom where we stuffed handfuls of cotton balls into our bras, rolled up our waistbands to show mid-thigh

length skirts, and discarded our knee socks for flesh-colored panty hose. The other girls separated themselves into The Nerds, The Cheerleaders, and The Greasers, but Deb and I were in a class all our own—Dangerous and Dangerouser, straight “A” students with secret lives. Instead of theater or debate club, our extracurricular activities were illegal driving, rolling reefers, and visits to Planned Parenthood. And we did it all while acing the science fair and climbing the honor roll.

By the end of the first semester, we were true fugitives, ‘breaking and entering’ the high school at night. The school didn’t have a gymnastics team, but it had a trampoline, and I showed Deb how to slide a credit card under the lock’s latch and enter through the boiler room door. We laughed and screeched along the dark hallways leading to the gym, set up the trampoline, and then the lessons began. A pike, three swivel hips, and a forward summersault with a half twist. We practiced for months. At the time of our arrest, Deb was ready for level three.

A SPECTRUM IS A RAY OF LIGHT

Simon A. Smith

Question 1:

Is it difficult for you to understand what people are feeling just by observing facial expressions?

There's a blind spot on Reigerts Road, a dead zone at the peak of a high-sloping hill where two cars travelling in opposite directions cannot see if a stray vehicle swerves into the wrong lane. It's the kind of steep incline where the asphalt meets the horizon, and if you get a good enough speed going, you hit the hollow pocket on top, and your stomach drops through the floor, and if you were sixteen in 1995, and you drove a 1988 Hyundai Excel, you hit that sucker at 85 mph, lifted the wheels three feet off the ground, and landed back on the pavement like Bo and Luke during the theme song for the Dukes of Hazzard. Maybe you even howled, "Yeeeeeeee-haaaaaaw!"

It was your grand awakening era. When you were by yourself it felt like the biggest thrill in the world, like blasting free of your chaotic household, religious relatives, and monotonous teachers, soaring into a bold new life of adventure. How others may have viewed your madcap antics, you honestly hadn't considered.

Enter your buddy, Tim. It's a random spring day, right after school. The sun is gleaming, you've got a fever for speed, and you know just the remedy. Tim needs a ride home; you need a shot of excitement. It's the perfect scenario, and you're pretty sure you'll blow his mind. You'll change his life forever.

Everything goes smoothly in the beginning. You pop a Beastie Boys cassette in the deck, snap a pair of Oakleys on, and put the pedal to the metal. Tim's into it at first. He tilts his seat back, pokes his elbow out the window, and lets out a sigh, like, "Yeah, man. *This is the life.*" As you turn onto Reigerts Road, you're doing close to eighty. It's right where you want to be, accelerating toward maximum exhilaration. The song matches your mood, matches the rising velocity... MCA is rapping about how *he can't, he won't, and he don't stop!*

Halfway up the cliff, Tim grabs the bottom of his seat and clenches his teeth. "Whoa!" he says, "Whaaaaooooooooo!"

"I know," you say. "It's a rush, right?"

That's when you see a familiar car up ahead, one of those Volkswagen Rabbits with the tiny tires and humpback hatches. It's Tim. Another one. There must be twenty Tims in your class, and this Other Tim is a wild dude. You once saw him squeeze a tube of paint straight into his mouth. His nose is pierced, and his hair is green, either because he dyes it or he has horrible hygiene, but either way, he's the kind of guy who understands rowdy. You stamp the accelerator, and within seconds you're so close to his bumper you can smell the exhaust. You can see his torn backseat and faded Megadeth T-shirt through the window.

"Check this out," you say. In a flash, you whip your car parallel to his, racing into the eastbound lane. Your ramshackle Hyundai rattles a tin can.

“Um, Simon,” Tim says, his voice low and squeaky. You can hardly hear him over the Beastie Boys, which you crank even higher. “Watch out,” he says.

“For his tricks,” you say. “Yeah, I know. I won’t fall for em’.”

The needle on the speedometer is flapping up near 90. You doubt you’ve ever pushed it this far before. When you glance over at Other Tim, your windows are side-by-side. He’s doing some frantic jig with his head. One second it’s aimed at the road, then the dashboard, then his feet, then his hands gripping the steering wheel. His car jerks back and forth, slows down, then speeds up again. He never looks directly at you.

The looming crest is upon you. What lies beyond that vertical plane is a mystery. It’s like climbing the opening hill on a roller coaster without the assurance that someone has already constructed whatever comes next. There is a swell of adrenaline, a surge of steam, and then, as you reach the crown, crossing from shadow into shine, a burst of light. The car is sailing. You float for what seems like a minute, and when you touch down there’s a flurry of sparks, and you’re hysterical. You explode with elation.

“Hell yes!” you holler. “We got him. We beat him good.”

You wrench the car back into the correct lane a split second before an onrushing van decides against bailing out and veering into a tree. The ringing of its horn blares in your ears as you hurtle down the road. Other Tim’s VW is barely visible in your rearview mirror. You’ll rub the victory in his face tomorrow morning. The Tim beside you is speechless. He opens his mouth but nothing comes out, which means you were right. He’s been transfixed by the experience. He doesn’t need to say a word. His astonishment alone is thanks enough. You aren’t sure if the stereo goes any higher, but you turn the knob anyway.

You sing along to the track, “Strictly handheld is the style I go. Never rock the mic with the pantyhose.” You drum the steering wheel, scoop your fingers through the breeze outside the window. “I strap on my ear goggles and I’m ready to go!”

Question 2:

Do you fixate on small details that you can’t let go?

It’s a hectic morning. You and your son, Holden, are running late. You forgot to buy bananas, and you always eat a banana for breakfast! It’s a terrible time for Holden to come out of his room wearing blue shorts with a huge gray stain across the thigh.

“Dude, what’s all over your shorts? You didn’t notice?” you say, pointing at the spot.

“Huh?” he says. His long blond hair curtains his eyes as he looks down to check. “Oh,” he says.

“Where’d you get those?” you ask.

“My drawer,” he says. He’s seven. Too young to do laundry but old enough to toss dirty clothing into the hamper. You’ve been on him for weeks about it.

“Which drawer?” you ask.

“One by my bed,” he says, his twitchy lips already fighting back tears.

“Not your bottom drawer,” you say. “Couldn’t be. No shorts down there. I checked. There were no shorts!” Your voice is loud and barky like a snarling dog. It’s too hostile for the situation, but you can’t turn back now.

“Maybe the middle drawer?” he says, his face red and watery.

“The pajamas drawer! Not a chance! The pajamas drawer? You call that organized?”

"I can't remember which drawer..."

"Well, it wasn't the bottom drawer!"

"Maybe," he says, shaking. He yanks the collar of his T-shirt and uses it to swab away tears.

"No!" you shout. "It wasn't. I looked last night! The top drawer is for socks and underwear," you say. You grab your shoes, slamming them down with such force that Holden jumps. "The second drawer is for your pajamas. The third is for pants and shorts! That's the order!"

You've woken your wife. She stands in the doorway, drowsy and dismayed. "What's going on?" she asks.

"Holden mixed up his drawers. They were perfect. Socks and underwear up top, pajamas in the middle..." Holden has turned away and cries into the corner.

Your wife points at him then at you, scowling as she slices a thumb across her neck. "Go put on different shorts," she tells Holden. "It's okay. Give me the dirty pair. Hurry up. You're late."

Holden runs into his room. Your wife shakes her head, lets out a long, exhausted sigh.

"Sorry," you say. "I took a long time organizing those drawers. He's messy. There shouldn't be any dirty shorts in those –"

"Enough," she says. "Enough with the drawers. He's putting on a clean pair. You'll be out the door in two minutes. End of story."

Holden exits his room. He's got fresh shorts on, but they're rumpled and twisted sideways on his hips. His eyes are still puffy, but they're starting to clear, and when he sees you smile, he smiles back. You reach down, straighten his waistband, and open the door.

"Sorry, buddy," you say. "I didn't have my banana this morning." The door closes, trailing calamity in its wake.

Question 3:

Is it okay to reveal your autism results over the phone?

During the test, Dr. Rosenblum asks silly questions in a serious tone.

"Do you feel the urge to count the cars in parking lots?"

If you laugh, he lets you know you're out of line. He lays the clipboard on the desk and glares at you over the rims of his glasses. You wonder if your childish responses are a sign you have a rare form of immature autism. The same thought occurs to you later when you're asked to stare at a computer as blinking squares appear on the screen. Every time you see one flash across the monitor, you're supposed to push a button on a handheld clicker. "Got you, motherfucker!" you whisper each time you press it. "Stay down, fool."

Doctor Rosenblum sends you home with a survey for your wife too. She isn't much better at maintaining a solemn demeanor, but her laughter comes from a different place. "Jesus Christ," she says, scanning the form. "Number twenty is a doozy. 'Is inflexible,'" she reads aloud, "'Has a hard time changing his mind.' If it was any harder," she says, "you'd be a cinder block."

Three weeks later, Rosenblum calls to discuss your results. Right off the bat he says you've been diagnosed with autism spectrum disorder but just barely. *Barely*. Is this something to be happy or sad about, you wonder. It's part of the deal, you know. An inability to identify

emotions is a hallmark of autism, and at age forty-five still one of your biggest challenges. It's what they used to call Aspergers, he tells you, which makes you feel both older and more damaged. There's something different about being marked somewhere on a vast dartboard of symptoms and being placed squarely in the bullseye.

The reason it took longer to assess the results, he informs you, is that there was a lot of overlap in his findings. He wasn't certain if he should classify your disorder as Aspergers or Post Traumatic Stress. For example, he says, your tendency toward emotional coldness could be due to autism or a coping mechanism you developed to stave off instability and neglect during your childhood. That checks out, you think. For starters, there were all those times your dad got tanked and forgot to pick you up from school or soccer practice. Once, you had to stay so long after karate lessons that your instructor missed his daughter's birthday party. That one gave you nightmares for years. Still does. And who could forget the night he drunkenly stumbled out to the kitchen, buck naked and muttering, during one of your sleepovers? He crouched beside the pantry and ate peanuts until he blacked out on the floor and started snoring. Try explaining that debacle to your friends. Worse yet, try explaining it to yourself. You can't, and so you shut down. You turn everything off.

Question 4:

Is it difficult to make deep connections with long-lasting friends?

In high school, you played a clown, but it only got you so far. Eventually, there'd be a Soundgarden concert you weren't invited to, or a cookout that everyone attended except you. You were perfect for a laugh in small doses, but maybe not the best for larger groups, especially if they involved sentiments other than glee, like sadness or sympathy. You used to play a game in the hallways where you pretended someone was stalking you. There was danger in every corner! Someone could pop out of a locker and attack, or there was a spy in the trashcan outside math class. You'd leap and run away, and everyone would shriek with laughter. If anyone needed a weirdo for entertainment, they called you.

Thank goodness there was also kindness. Nobody was ever seriously mean to you, maybe just a little avoidant. For whatever reason, despite your troubles presenting as typical, people were willing to give you a chance. You had some luck, some magnetism, something... You couldn't put a finger on it, but you were glad it was there. For example, you had a lovely girlfriend. She had plenty of suitors, but she chose to be with you. It could've been because you were nice. You'd never hurt her. It wasn't until years later that you realized how much safety played a role in relationships. You never knew how cruel boys could be to their girlfriends. But she knew, and she knew you weren't like that.

In college, you couldn't woo a girl to save your life. Convincing a girl to sleep with you was like trying to solve a Rubik's Cube without using your thumbs. It just wasn't possible. You'd go to parties with friends, and they'd take a girl upstairs or make out with one on some thrift store sofa covered in beer bottles. You remember riding the train back home with your friend Joe after one such occasion. Back at the party, you'd spent fifteen minutes trying to sweet-talk a girl into liking you with zero success. Eventually, she excused herself to the restroom, and within two minutes of coming out she was sitting on Joe's lap with her tongue down his throat.

The sight baffled you, and because you were at your wit's end, you just straight up asked him what the hell happened.

“How’d you do it?” you said. It was almost midnight, and the Blue Line clattered down the tracks. It was loud, and Joe was across the aisle, so he had to yell.

“Do what?” he asked.

“Get girls to kiss you and stuff.”

Joe shook his head. He didn’t say anything at first. As you waited, you did some pondering too. You were no hunk. You knew enough to understand that being handsome was an obvious advantage when it came to igniting sexual attraction, but you also knew Joe wasn’t Brad Pitt either, so he was a perfect person to ask about technique. After a while, he leaned forward and put his elbows on his knees.

“You have to gauge what they want from you, and you have to give it to them at the right time in the right way.”

You laughed, put your hands over your face. “Why don’t you just say it’s quantum physics?”

Joe laughed and slumped back against the seat. “You have to talk about sexy things that get them going but not too much. You can’t be timid, but you can’t be too aggressive. Sometimes you talk about boring things with them. I’ve seen you.”

“Cool,” you said. “Glad I asked. No more convos about the Samuel Beckett trilogy. Problem solved.”

All throughout your twenties, you struggled to figure out what other people were doing to not only get laid but secure jobs, maintain friendships, and project a natural bearing in the world. You studied daily interactions the way method actors prepared to portray historical characters in biopics. You learned three key things. One, if you don’t have something ordinary to say, don’t say it at all. Two, keep tabs on people you care about. If they mention something important, follow up later to see how it’s going. Three, don’t rush into things. Read a room. Take a moment to settle in before engaging in any impulsive movements or dialogue. This was particularly helpful when it came to romance. You chased off too many women by getting too close too fast. Whether you overcorrected is still an open debate, but aloofness worked better than suffocating people with your personality.

It’s notable that when you received your diagnosis, half your friends were baffled and the other half weren’t. The friends you made during your teens and twenties were completely unsurprised, while the newer ones you made later in life, were slightly perplexed. You’d improved your ability to pass as normal as your life progressed, like a poor person becoming so skilled at buying cheap clothing that looks expensive that they eventually get recruited as a fashion model. Okay, not that skilled but still. You’re proud of how far you’ve come. Whether the triumph was achieved through deception or determination doesn’t matter anymore. The pretending is over.

Question 5:

Do you have obsessions that if not acted upon cause great distress?

They say it runs in families, and you don’t doubt it. Your dad walked around day and night, straightening magazines that weren’t “flush to the corner” of the coffee table, took scalding hot baths every evening at precisely seven-fifteen. He spent hours staring at tree bark and flower petals, painting abstract pictures that represented the patterns and faces revealed to him by

his immersive meditation. Neither he nor your mother had any friends. It makes you sad that they weren't able to utilize whatever grace you'd managed to harness.

Obsessions are a tricky thing because it's hard to recognize them when you're on the inside looking out. That being said, you can't think of one in particular. Sure, you like to write but it isn't as though you painstakingly outline every detail of a story, furiously scribble notes at four o'clock in the morning, and become enraged if someone interrupts your meticulous schedule that you've timed down to the second. Goodness no...

...You realize now that you're on the outside peering back at it, the obsession. From this vantage point it looks equally like a glowing orb and a darkened pit, sort of like that famous photograph of earth taken from outer space... Coincidentally, your dad made a replica out of wood and glass and wired it for electricity, which isn't odd at all, but rather beautiful and artistic... or maybe all three at once...

Your mom has been on progressively higher doses of anti-depressants for forty years. A few years ago, she broke up with a man who treated her like garbage. He was an alcoholic and a thief who stole 2,000 dollars from her bank account to pay off a gambling debt in Reno. He was wearing a beige cardigan on the day she found out. He was drinking a 2013 pinot noir straight from the bottle at nine in the morning and spilling it all over his velvet slippers. You know all this because she's repeated the story a hundred times, each reiteration expanding in scope and specification.

Many authors say they like their writing to be spontaneous and organic. They don't plan a thing, just let the flow of the narrative take them like a winding stream. This has always sounded like malarky to you. There's no way it can be true. You treat your writing like an intricate roadmap plotted by the hand of God herself. For you, approaching a story without a heavy hand guiding the way would be like driving from your hometown in Pennsylvania to your mom's townhouse in Lake Tahoe wearing a blindfold. You'd never make it alive.

Question 6:

Do you prefer to do things by yourself rather than with others?

When you were eleven-years-old, you started begging your parents to let you go to the movies by yourself. They knew it was supposed to be weird. They knew what other parents and kids might say if they saw you walking into the theater without an adult by your side. People wouldn't know what to do with a kid ordering popcorn by himself, then sitting in a seat so close to the screen he had to do dislocate his neck just to see the scene where Master Splinter defeats Shredder at the end of Teenaged Mutant Ninja Turtles. Still, your parents thought, what was the worst thing that could happen? So, some people saw you shuffling through the parking lot afterward, unaccompanied and wearing a purple Donatello mask? Deal with it.

At twelve you started going bowling by yourself. Your parents would drop you off, you'd buy mozzarella sticks and root beer, slide into some stinky rental shoes, bowl a smooth sub-hundred, and soak in the freedom like you were Ponyboy Curtis from *The Outsiders* or some shit. It actually wasn't the cool factor that made you want to do it. It's hard to explain, but maybe the best way to put it was that you wanted to be alone with your thoughts. You wanted to talk, and act, and think, without anyone expecting anything out of you. If you wanted to

spend two straight hours tossing gutter balls and daydreaming about the poem you wanted to write when you got home, that was up to you. You didn't want to feel guilty about wanting to be alone, and if nobody was around to point it out, there was no guilt to be had. You couldn't feel like an outsider if nobody was there to set the boundaries.

At sixteen, you drove nine hours alone to visit your sister in Providence. When you were twenty you took an Amtrak from Chicago to Los Angeles by yourself. You read *The Brothers Karamazov*, smoked Camel cigarettes, and drank scotch in the dining car while staring out the window at the Sierra Nevadas. It was probably the best time of your entire life.

Something you only told a few people, is how you would ditch your CCD classes at St. Paul's Catholic Church every Sunday night. Your dad would drop you off at the lobby and you'd scamper through the front entrance and out the back exit before anyone ever saw you. You'd walk the streets alone for ninety minutes until your dad came back to pick you up. You'd find a way to sneak back over to the lobby, timing your reappearance perfectly so that it looked like you were leaving in unison with the other kids. Somehow you were able to blend into the shuffle, get lost in the crowd as it dispersed into the parking lot. When you remember back to this time, it's with a mix of wonderment and woe. Who was looking out for you? How did nobody find out? No classmates? Parents? Not one Nun? Nobody was curious who the mystery boy was darting into a pack of children with panicked eyes? You're concerned about that boy now. You want to protect him. If your son, Holden, had been the one taking those kinds of risks, what would you do? You'd be petrified. What does a thirteen-year-old even do for an hour and a half every Sunday, isolated and drifting, totally detached? What did you think about on those long, meandering walks? Alarmingly, you have no idea.

Question 7:

Do you get upset over minor things or have a hard time understanding things that upset others?

If there's one thing that grinds your gears like nothing else, it's people who put their flashers on and park in the middle of the road. It makes you bonkers. The worst is when there is clearly space to pull over, and the son-of-a-bitch still decides to sit there and make everyone drive around. Most people don't beep when they pass but that's lunacy. You lay on the horn until your wife and son yell, "Dad! Come on. Enough!"

But it's not enough. You have to talk about it too. You have to let everyone know exactly why it's wrong and how infuriated you are. "What's wrong with them?" you ask, but you aren't really asking. You'd probably talk right over them if they tried to answer. You're just using it as a segway to your next contention. "Why? Why?" you repeat. "Why would somebody do that? They could pull their cars over and nobody would even notice. We're going to be late. We have to eat lunch by one o'clock."

"You made that up," your wife says. "We aren't on a schedule. It's Sunday afternoon. We have no plans."

"Do they think they're more important than everyone else?" you continue, oblivious to your wife, and to your son who is strapped into the car seat behind you. "Somebody needs to do something. It's wrong. It's dangerous. People could crash. Someone could get hurt. Or die!"

"Nobody is dying," your wife says. She stretches her hand behind the seat and pinches Holden's foot. "Everyone's fine."

“Where’s the cops? It’s against the law. It’s gotta be, right? Right?” And now you really want an answer, but everyone is too exasperated to give you one.

When you were first dating and you got like this, your wife would rest her hand on your leg and massage it. Later, the hand grew swifter, more like a slap reminding you to pull yourself together. Now, eighteen years, one son, and several marriage counseling sessions later, the hand is a claw digging into your knee. “Ouch!” you say. “Okay, okay, okay...”

After a blowup, you can go from pissed to placid fast. Your blood pressure spikes, then plummets back to baseline in a matter of seconds. Once you’re past the stupid car blocking your fucking path, your heart rate slows, you shake it off, and everything is chill again... for you.

“Hey, how many ABC vans have you seen today?” you ask Holden. You’ve been counting the number of lime green vans around town with an “ABC” logo on the side. They belong to a plumbing company, and everywhere you go you see scads of them. They’re like the rats of utility vehicles. You and Holden play a game where you count how many you can find in a certain timeframe. The record is twenty-six in one month. Holden does not respond to you. You look in your rearview mirror and notice he’s staring out his window, trying to compose himself. You’re not sure what’s going through his head, but he looks perturbed. Your wife is still trying to soothe her own anxiety. She shakes her head, takes a deep breath, and rolls her window down.

When you were Holden’s age your dad used to freak out too. If you left too many dirty dishes in the living room or bothered him too much when he was trying to read, he’d flip out. He’d also lose it if, say, he was looking for a box of crackers in the pantry and a can of soup fell on the floor. You’d have thought a grenade had been dislodged from a combat belt.

“Motherfucker!” he’d yell. “Fuck!”

It was scary. Sometimes you’d run and hide in your bedroom. After a while though, he’d always come and check on you. He’d knock on your door and when you opened it, he’d be standing there, looking rejuvenated. “I’m sorry,” he’d say. “I know. I’m nuts. I shouldn’t have gone off like that. My nerves are shot.” His nerves were always shot. If there was a time when his nerves were unshot, you can’t recall. But you accepted him anyway. You’d forgive him, and he’d either tell you a joke or offer to toss a football with you in the backyard, and all would be forgotten.

“Hey,” you say. “What if we go to the park after lunch and play baseball. What do you say?”

Nobody moves at first. They don’t have your preternatural ability to decompress after a big flare up. For years you wondered why people around you got so worked up about issues you deemed inconsequential. At work, your associates might sit around for hours steaming about a switch to new accounting software, while you couldn’t care less. On the other hand, if your boss added another bureaucratic item to your personal checklist when all your duties were already crossed off for the week, you might need to be restrained from flipping over a table. Learning that people have different ways of cycling through emotions was another huge part of your acclimation to the world of conventional behavior. This is another test, and now you know what to do.

“I’m sorry, guys,” you say. “I got carried away. I get worried that someday one of these morons is going to slam on his brakes and cause a ten-car pileup.” Still not much movement. Your wife re-adjusts in her seat. She unfolds her arms, which you take as a positive sign. Body language 101. Holden turns away from the window and stretches, clasping his hands behind his head. “You know what?” you say. “You never see an ABC van plopped in the middle of the

road, blocking traffic. You know why?" you ask. "Anyone?" Nobody answers, but you sense a smile breaking through on Holden's face. "Because they understand basic traffic guidelines. Following the rules of the road is simple as ABC. Get it? The Jackson 5. ABC, *Easy as 1, 2, 3, simple as do re mi, ABC, 1 2 3!*"

"Daaaaaaad," your son says, half giggling, half whining. "Don't be ridiculous," but now he's laughing.

"Oh, brother," your wife says. "Heeeeeere we go," but now she's grinning too.

"You see what I'm talking about, right?" This time someone does respond. Holden leans forward against his seatbelt.

"You're worried about us because you love us," he says. "You want to keep us safe."

"That's right. That's it. Car safety," you say. "Follow the rules, and nobody gets hurt. We've come full circle."

"Full circle," Holden says. "Yeah, that's right."

You watch over your shoulder as he draws a hoop on the window with his finger. You see him trace the outline several times, then add details. He scribbles wavy lines branching out from the perimeter. They reach far to the edge of the glass, disappearing beyond. That's when you realize, he's drawing a sun shining out in all directions.

reading montaigne

i never thought it would come
to this she said.
me, in italy, reading montaigne
and living what you might call
the quiet life.
you, in another country,
under siege
from your own government.
i can smell the tear gas from here.

in the eighties it was car trouble
and we never quite connected,
so you always rode your bike
and you were with someone
if i recall,
though i can't remember who,
or what transpired after that.
those days were dark
but not like now.
and i see you wear a mask
so is your country still free?

you told me marx once said,
if you want to end the riots
you must first end the oppression.
i didn't believe that then,
but i believe it now.

we'll meet again,
sometime in the future i'm sure.
in this life or the next.
you'll be unmasked and i'll be free.
the hotel will be clean and near the ocean.

the sky here is endless.

what times they were

there was that time
we stood holy outside of the keystone
listening to a former prizefighter with a
broken heart play monk's dream on a battered
piano when the moon was tilted and hung at
an impossible angle and a war was on that
we didn't believe in (and we knew was wrong)
but the poetry of patchen and rexroth kept us
sane. and a man drinking from a paper bag sat
on the sidewalk cursing the stars and the war
in an unknown language
(he might have been praying).
so we walked high to city lights
(ferlinghetti wasn't there)
and bought something by corso and maybe
some snyder. what times they were.
and your hair was long and braided if i
recall and your hands were small and fit
neatly in mine. what times they were.

i saw jackie wilson

some of this is true and some of it isn't
he said, but all of it, all of it is real.
i was exiled in paris back in the fifties
(i'm sure you know about the red scare?)
and i slept in a room near the rue git-le couer
(where ginsberg once slept).
and the sun never set but somehow you
could see a bit of the moon and just how
it was hung.
i followed satchel paige when he pitched for
the browns and i was looking to get lost
when the sixties arrived.
i saw jackie wilson when he dropped to his
knees and i discovered the blues in a basement
in chinatown. it was winter i think for there was
snow on the ground.
and then in late '67 i lost my first love to a
stranger from texas who played guitar like
doc watson and talked like lenny bruce.
and how she came back,
for a short time only
when i was in college.
(you know what heartbreak is like?)
and i remember now
how small her hands were
whenever i held them
and how my arm fit neatly
around the curve of her back
and what it meant when her smile
broke the silence.
do i need to go on?

tonight,

i'll tell you all the things
that i've forgotten.
about the wrath of achilles
and the ones i left behind.
(or how i lost my one true love)

or, maybe,
about the first transatlantic flight.
(alcock and brown)
and why i kneel at certain hours,
and cross myself in front of strangers.

maybe i'll tell you
about the origin of the blues,
or about the time jackie robinson
stole home in 1955. or
perhaps things i left unsaid
and words i can't unsay.
(but i wish i could)
and why hope
is always sleeping
in a nearby field.
or why faith
is like the ocean tides.

maybe i'll mention
what's in the heart,
what's in stone.
and what about light?
all these things and more.

in the morning
i'll remember
my vow of silence.

the rock where mooses stood

last night i dreamed that the rock
where mooses stood was made of
rhythm and blues (solid it was)
and that mooses spoke in palindromes
and only the deaf could hear him
and only the blind could see him.
when the clouds opened up, otis
redding appeared, wearing that
shiny green shark skin suit that
he wore at monterey, the one
that said, if you think this is
something, wait 'till you hear me
sing. and then he sang, *they call me
mr. pitiful, that's my name.* and
he danced across the stage and fell
on his knees like he was praying.
but he was singing.
mooses was stunned.
he was expecting angels,
but he got a god instead
one who could sing the gospel truth
(and dance).
i know it seems crazy but this is how it
happened. by the time otis finished
singing *these arms of mine*, mooses was
in tears and angels did appear but they
looked like the raelettes and somewhere
an impossible bush was burning. you
could smell it a mile away.

the cost of living

remind me to show you the tears
from the last time krishna wept
(i keep them in a jar at the foot of the bed).
when the streets were filled with the rain
of a thousand years and thunder
was more than thunder
and war was everywhere
and genocide was afoot.
and how we slept in the clothes of an infidel,
a former mexican priest who cost us everything.
(save for our lives)
when camus and sartre were the rage and freely
we drank from the book of dreams
and even the book of the dead
(tibetan not french).
and the price we paid for believing in
the saints and heroes of the day,
(some statues still standing).
and how it's taken two lifetimes
to pay back that debt.
but we walk now
through the streets of pure autumn
that once held the promise
of the impossible.
and we come to the secret realization
that the cost of living was nothing,
nothing compared to the fact that we are
still standing and so many are not.

the architecture of dreams

the golden hour approaches
in a hundred lost dreams and
we look on in wonder at the
brilliance of trees illuminated
in the autumn light. here
the raw architecture of dreams
is revealed in a leaf falling silently
to the sleeping earth.

we dream of the hidden, the mysterious
and the famous mexican hummingbird
that attends to our sage.
we dream of a sad vermillion rain
and the secret of how we came to
lose our first real love.
all this and more.

when we wake, the nervous world
promises nothing but the smell
of a mythical portuguese sweet bread
and the chance to believe.

i was a tropical storm

in my 25th dream
i was a tropical storm in the gulf
making land in new orleans in late october.
you were stranded in a small hotel in the
quarter off royal st. (hotel royal i believe).
we spent a week together in the rain of
a thousand years listening to jelly roll morton
play the king porter stomp on a broken down
piano and reading the tea leaves in the bottom
of a cup that once belonged to either marie
laveau or gyp the blood.
(we never knew which). but
the answers we found and the signs we saw
in the bottom of that cup stayed with us for years
(the sacred and profane).
and i wonder are your eyes still like diamonds
do they still shine like klondike gold?
(roll 'em pete)
i was a tropical storm in the gulf.

miles to go

i have miles to go before i sleep, she said.

that's from frost i said.

yes I know but it's true.

sleep doesn't come easy in this

day and age.

we were walking down the via cavour

in firenze.

a young girl eating a gelato (fragola)

was leading a goat with a long thin rope.

as we passed the house of one of the

medici i saw jesus talking to anna magnani.

they were discussing the current situation

in america.

i could hear ms. magnani mention

mussolini and i could see

that jesus was weeping.

i wanted to tell him that things were not

that bad but i decided better of it because

i knew they were actually worse than what

she was telling him.

as his weeping grew louder we walked on

to the house where dante once lived and

as we climbed those crooked stairs our

thoughts to home and those that belonged

in his famous ninth circle.

a slice of the moon

we walked arm in arm in the
american mambo night down
side streets filled with the joy
of bebop and the grey desires
of the unnamed.

and we paused at the sight of
the full moon and what it meant
in the time of the virus and how
it stood both for the dreams we
lost and the hopes we cradled.

in the distance we could hear
the sad cry of a saxophone
trying to forget what heartbreak
was like.

then later on
we discovered the blues
in a sidewalk camp where
the unhoused claimed
that whitman once slept
(with all his clothes on).

and in that stolen moment
the american mambo night
driven by bebop and the sad
cry of the saxophone became
a box of darkness that held
just a slice of the moon.

In Seclusion

— *house-sitting in the Pinelands*

When, finally,
I learned how to not be in the world,
the earth turned trusting

the forest began sharing
its old rhythms

gradually I wore less
until it was
that I stood unclothed
on the deck each night,
glad for the beginning of fur
on my body.

And my own sound came
from me then –
that primal noise I had,
for years, swallowed.

That noise, the slow starting of fur,
was there for
what darkness allowed –

that soft opening below,
of the dirt breaking
for when the flesh springs.

“In Seclusion” first appeared in Reed Magazine
and is included in Uncommon Geography

Sixty Days of Summer

— *farm-sitting in Pipersville, PA*

Quietly, away from the harsh light of summer,
they attach to reeds by the pond
where the stone springhouse stands,
or they rest long and close to the ground clinging
to blades of grass, for hours they remain
in a dream-like trance especially where I am
pointing now to that uncombed meadow of burdock
and fuzzy leaves of the low growing nettles
you can see them resting contentedly you can find them
in other cool places, underneath trees
whose outstretched shadows are freely giving shade.

When you find them you will see them oblivious
to the way we mindlessly walk with quick active strides
or plow through fields failing to acknowledge their existence
failing to understand that in only sixty days
they will live as full a life as it takes our human species
at least sixty years to do.

Watch now as darkness drops in deepening layers
for that is when they fly out from the grasses
off reeds and stalks, away from the nettles
they have spent their days upon, catch how
they blink and soar and dart and mate
until the great fields twinkle and the earth is returned
to a magical state, one that renders us speechless
simply by way of their being who they are
doing what they do, each of them, nightly,
for two months only, and quietly and
so very very well.

“Sixty Days of Summer” first appeared in Rockvale Review

Suppressed Memory

Overhead, six flew in.
They arrived with clarity that distance allows.

In the meadow we watched their circular formation, how they
tilted their pleated wings, graced the blue of the New England sky.

Why hawks? I asked. *Why their sudden appearance?*
And the shaman said, she simply said they are messengers.

I felt gratitude but, at the same time, was frail from the knowledge
the medicine woman imparted — a scene from my life

which had been lodged in me, silenced in the body
for years and for good reason it was.

The hawks formed a ring that was not to be broken.
They had this way of staring down deeply into the unknown self.

They pierced the air with their eyes and when my mouth took in
the wind, the wind took my words skyward —

they flew off for I had asked them to, had said what little I recall
is only what I am to know.

It was important to share I was not ready
to remember any one thing that could not be healed.

“Suppressed Memory” first appeared in 2River View

Enlightenment

Regarding the lotus,
they have their beginnings in dark places
at the very bottom of things, of lakes and of
shallow rivers, growing from the muck up, a frond
navigating itself, fronds

long and green, leaving the muddy riverbed
its rocky silences.

Think of the stem
when its murky secret becomes its body's truth,
think of the bud needing air
to open, needing to struggle without saying
and this is considered pure, this

is the white blossom
becoming light itself, on the surface of water.

“Enlightenment” first appeared in Tiferet Magazine and is included in the author’s book *Frozen Latitudes*

A Womb In The Dirt **Salvatore Folisi**

Walking down the street
I watch as pieces of people's bodies

fall to the ground,
an eyebrow

followed by a forearm,
a ribcage that rolls off the sidewalk

and down a dark alley.
I see people through storefront

windows inside cafes
missing eyes and noses,

some with no legs, toppled over
sideways on the seats.

Dogs with no tails,
their hair trailing off into the wind

as they run past me.
Then the buildings start to go,

shingles falling like leaves,
wires dropping, whole walls,

slabs of chalky drywall flip-flopping
through the air, entire

floors of tile and wood,
planks clanking to the rubbly

ground. Limbs of trees
separate from trunks,

clipped by an invisible force,
the windshields of cars collapse

as hoods cave in on engines
that have deteriorated to

the street. The bolts on stop signs
mysteriously dislodge and drop

to the ground, the octagonal
metal slicing the air and clanging

like drum cymbals on
the sidewalk. The whole

landscape of nature
and civilization is diminished

in fragments, falling to the earth,
the planet leveled and barren.

Even the sun and stars
have fallen from the sky

so there is no light, just an
uncanny glow

as if from the heat of the planet.
Rains fall, followed

by snow, followed by falling
temperatures

and a deep freeze, the ground
hard and slick. There is

silence and dark. There is nothing.
No life. No movement. As if

the planet itself had fallen

to the floor of the universe.

It all disintegrates, dissolves
into emptiness, everything

asleep, dreaming or dead
for millennia, for so long

time forgets itself.
Until

one day
there is a tiny chirp, followed

by another, and a chorus
of night birds serenade

a revival of the sun, a regeneration
of the cosmos. Light fills

the sky, green life shoots up
through the ground

and people are born
as if from a womb in the dirt.

BETWEEN PITTSBURGH AND PHILADELPHIA

Daniel Bliss

Breathing rusted rain,
we watch as manure filled wind
punctures the remains of a closed factory.
We never bothered to learn what was made
under ceilings shattered by the pressure of heaven.

Everything closes, nothing opens,
no replacements come to the rescue
of a main street where darkness
creeps further into the public,
a single dive bar hangs on.

Seated in the interstate exit diner,
we order midnight coffee
paying with fists of dollars and dimes.
Fights in gravel parking lots,
gained black eyes, chipped teeth.

Highway shoulders full
of abandoned furniture we set on fire,
released tension of bursting springs,
melted memories of faded fabric,
only escape when turned to ash.

The Emptying

Sarah Harley

From the doorway, I watched my father. It was June. Rooms were filled with slants of golden light; the air was thick with damp earthiness. My mother was gone. The first period of mourning had passed. I watched as my father silently dismantled her existence, emptying the contents of her dressing table in a detached fashion. The expression on his face gave nothing away. I was thirteen.

Perfume bottles, blue and silver, are dropped into a white plastic rubbish bag, making a faint chinking sound. The first part of my mother I lose is the way she smells.

Yves Saint Laurent Eau de Parfum – *La Rive Gauche*, my mother's favorite, purchased duty-free on the ship to France. My mother wants to belong to a different time and place. I wonder if she is walking along a river in Paris. Dappled patches of light dance with the shade.

Lipsticks in gold cases, vintage and glamorous – Guerlain, Givenchy, Chanel. I want to know the names of the colors: red, rose, plum, deep and muted, never pink.

Max Factor Pan sticks in a pale shade. I picture my mother using her pinky finger to apply it. Afterwards she dabs a little lipstick across her cheekbones.

A pair of large gold rimmed oversized sunglasses are dropped into the bag followed by one pair of crumpled brown leather gloves, in the tiniest imaginable size.

My father opens the dresser drawer and grabs my mother's headscarves in handfuls, pushing them into the white plastic bag. I gasp. How will my mother cover her hair in the rain?

My father opens her wardrobe filled with colorful, silent dresses. Hues of blue and silver-green.

When I was small, I wanted to touch the dresses and play dress-up in them. But my mother turned the key in the door. She never wore the dresses: they belonged to the life she had left behind – *la vie en rose* – the life before marriage, before children, the life in Saint-Germain.

My father recklessly pulls the dresses from their hangers, gathering speed, as he pushes them into the plastic bag, then reaches for more to throw away.

I want her clothes to be folded carefully, then packed in her suitcase perched at the top of the wardrobe. I want the suitcase to be sent back in time, back to my young mother in a pretty city before she met my father.

I stand frozen in the doorway, tears roll down my cheeks.

He finds my mother's worn down clothes of the day: brown corduroy trousers, the mousy grey sweater. He finds her Saturday night clothes: white cotton flared trousers and black wool sweaters that smelled of French perfume, navy blue summer espadrilles with the braided grass wedge heel.

I stare as everything is thrown away. I feel forlorn and angry all at once. But I don't know how to speak.

There are other shoes to be disposed of. Sandals worn across beaches in France, along with the sand that was stuck inside, itself four million years old. Black high-heeled shoes that were thrown in his direction on their nights out. He would have tried to throw away the memory of her doing that but it's not that easy to throw away a memory.

From the back of the wardrobe, he throws away her shiny black handbag with the silver clasp. Inside, my mother had hidden the old crumpled love letters from her one true love.

My father turns to the bed where she died in the night. A worn white bedspread with soft tassels; a blue blanket with a frayed satin edge. He stuffs them into the plastic bag with a force that makes it tear open.

With one hand, he picks up the small brown bottles of small blue pills, sitting on the bedside table. A shadow comes over his face.

"It's such a bloody waste," he sighs to himself.

From the doorway, I watch the tears run down his face.

There are now three trash bags, filled and tied in a knot, placed against the wall by the door.

I follow my father to the sitting room, as he drags another half-full bag behind him, its weight pulling like a body.

In a cupboard next to the record player, he finds her vinyl records – albums and forty-fives. All the love songs she listened to when she had too much to drink. Édith Piaf. Neil Diamond. John Lennon. Tragic love and longing.

He tries to throw away my mother's pain, her isolation and loneliness. But it's not that easy to throw away someone else's pain, especially when you caused it. But that's another story.

The corners of the records rip through the bag.

"Where did she keep the bin bags?" my father asks in a sudden rage.

"Under the kitchen sink," I say in a small, numb, and frightened voice. At that moment, I realize my father will not know how to take care of my sister and me.

It didn't occur to him to give me a keepsake of my dead mother – a memento, something soft, something to hold. As a consequence, my only souvenirs of having a mother are imaginary. I carry them always, the invisible objects that hold the emotional weight of my mother's existence; sometimes they are heavy, sometimes they are light.

I have a faded photograph, worn and tattered. My mother and father, standing together in a bar. There's a sign behind them: Radio sets for hire.

I carefully fold my own black sweaters, always smelling of perfume. I arrange small glass bottles of perfume on a blue metal tray on my dresser. I learn the names of lipsticks: rouge allure, midnight rose. Never red, always pink. Each year in June, on an early summer evening, I hear a song, soft and melancholic, drifting through the window before disappearing. I carry the weight of emptiness; I carry *la vie en rose*.

Descending to the valley

Andy Oram

We thought we felt a healing take root
That a purifying wind was passing through our minds and mouths
That we'd finally all be as one

We sensed it on that terrifying festive day
when with a potent hug
our father made peace with his brother Esau
ending a dispute that had predated us all by decades

Tears glistened in the dry air
We strode with triumph into the valley long withheld from us

Then to our ailing grandfather
whose sightless legend had filled the days of our exile with dread

The terrain over which our flocks passed was temperate
We found wells

Our father himself
seemed released from the discord in his own mind
long having been in contention with an undisclosed god
For once at peace he crept into camp
his steps heavy from his night in the wilderness

We rejoiced in aromas and tastes that told us we were home
never to wander again
or to serve malevolent overseerers in distant lands

We had saved our family from being engulfed
by an alien culture
And in further loyalty to our father
relinquished to him our idols
the strange work of foreign peoples

Endless extents of sunlight
swelling the plains we crossed
sang of our new wealth
and the harmonious life it fortold

Then the dissolution began

First one of our caretakers

Then Rachel herself

She who had given meaning to our father's existence
who had always interceded for us

died in labor unable
to name her own last child

Moans raced wild as lions through the camp

Our hearts came to an end on that night

Things seemed to fall asunder

None of us could agree what to do
or how to treat Rachel's elder son
lost in errant fancies

Conspiracies seized our tongues

The gentle spirit could no longer be touched

Far from us slipped that resolution

of being on a common journey
that had been our ideal

but that we now knew

every future generation would search for

Our Before

He will not let your foot slip—
he who watches over you will not slumber
—Psalm 121

Think back three decades plus.
Meet me there, then, when the tall pines
had overgrown the lane and slope,

had left no vital pasture grasses green,
when they had shut away the sun.
You tore the dead wood down, pulled

away the stumps and ragged roots
so to smooth a level ground.
Here, we still plant native dogwoods

and cedar with its purpled berry.
Here, we speak of the forest spirits
where winged moths cling to dandelion.

Here, the deer find young suckling
stems near our house made from sand-clay
bricks and fieldstone fireplace, warmth

leaking from its chimney toward
clouds and sky. Here, where sparrows nest.
Voices of those bantling birds

remind us of our daughters,
mouths open, testing nightingale songs.
You were able to clear the way,

you, provider of seed and fortitude.
Think back three decades plus.
Meet me there on the hillside again

before tree topple. When our eyes saw
only future in a square-built rehab
we labeled final homestead, old-aged

but new to us. Doors open. Windows
stuck having weathered winter rains.
I was in love with it and all

it promised. Even with eyes closed,
soft hands uncallused before chainsaws,
with fantasies of what could be,

we knew the good of gardens
sprouting fountain grasses swaying
in a rhythm like a marital psalm—

My breath goes far into the distance,
calling for you as I always will, to come,
to save what we will never leave.

Tell Me There's a Map

This hotel hallway dead-ends
into another closed door.
Along the way, a left
and another long hallway.
Circles in the linoleum
tease the walker to take
wide steps, one to each center,
to hop planet to planet.
Gravity sinks my foothold
onto solid ground unmuffled
by any short rug nap. It gives
away my trespass. And air
eddies behind me, a whirl-
pool where I once was.

Everywhere, There were Vines

I dreamed I was a war-torn refugee,
scrawny-legged from walking fields,

long, matted hair salted from the sea,
not knowing what savior god to pray to,

not caring anymore if I prayed at all.
Someone gave me a lit cigarette instead

of bread, and the tip of it reminded me
of ignition. Is it a death wish for a refugee

to accept something so incendiary?
I must have followed others, but couldn't

say who they were. I suspected one was
a whore. She disappeared now and again,

wore a little bell on an ankle chain.
Now, why remember that part of my dream?

We traveled over shattered glass, dead
gardens, and carnage unidentifiable.

One woman snatched a Styrofoam cup
and milked another who had lost her infant,

but I couldn't say just where he went.
A man with a missing foot burned an enemy

flag and spat on it with his bloody spit
while the rest of us hid in flooded ditches.

A dog gave birth behind a broken fence.
"I want to wake up now," and I thought

I'd said that, but it was the youngest
among us, her face angelic, so pale-

frightened, white as phosphorous blasts
of shell bursts. How can I stay asleep?

What We Miss

raving like a butterfly to a rosebud: I love you.
—from “Quabbin Reservoir” by James Tate

Crabgrass lawns overrun with dandelions growing
into a bouquet for making wishes and blowing kisses—

Petunias seducing Gossamer-wing Harvesters,
Henry’s Elfin, the Cherry Gall Azure in June—

A group of moths is called a whisper.
Clusters near the lantern the same way
cold planets are attracted to the sun—

Have you seen the stars during a new moon?
Brighter in the darkness. Awaiting love—

Copper gutters before rainfall, scarab greener
molecule by molecule. Aging as we are—

What heals us? The pillars of river stone
stacked, mortared, defying collapse—

The brook gave them up willingly.
We took them. We cleaned them like infants—

Voices from the ghosts alive beneath the eaves.
The apple trees creak a response in the wind.
Fallen turkey feathers shiver—

There’s a mirror in the summer rainfall puddle.
How to see yourself and what’s above you—

Have you ever gazed into a chipmunk’s eyes?
There lies both fear and anticipation.
Huddle in the pleasure of a suckling fawn’s spots—

Wrought-iron fence posts mark what belongs—
our core, our omphalos, our axis mundi,
the Talcott Mountain and its clay, snowmelt, laurel,
its poison ivy—

Walk the bluestone when the nests of birdsong echo,
when primrose gratitude fills the rock garden—

A Dutch door’s been left open for the neighbors.
Is there any clearer definition of love?

After All the Tradesmen's Lies

You are grieving, and there's nothing I can do.

You suffer pairs of puncture wounds
from the fangs of striking rattlesnakes.

The poison courses through you in the cursive
swirl of unfamiliar alphabets and language.

Unstitched, you bleed. My hands are dirty
trying to stop the tremble, seal the holes.

Let's not lie to ourselves that I could succeed.
It's always been a matter of control. Its loss.

You ask me to write a speech full of lightning
as sharp and searing as your scalpel's edge.

But I sink into tenderness. I'm the soft velvet
clinging to the stag's antler. I'm the rabbit

nibbling at the clover, coyote in the verge.
You are surviving by instinct alone,

listening without the spit or hexes I invoke.
You (once able to return light to the near-blind)

lie paralyzed by coiled vines hidden in the weeds.

Questions Asked While Searching for the Milky Way at Midnight

Are we protecting a long-held darkness, creating
distant clouds
as sharp as pointed thorns in a blackberry bed?

What if the two of us were to recognize the grave
December's approach,
and remember that a ring of fire precedes birth?

What if our story was written on the moon, that
pock-marked
spinning world, windless, covered in dust?

Would it last forever?

Who would carry the lantern to read it?

Or does it take an unexpected thunderstorm
for passion,
for lightning red as summer zinnias and fever?

After All This Dirty Dancing

Remember the 1957 Chevrolet Bel Air,
the two-door hardtop Johnny Castle

drove with Baby after smashing
its rear window? Black with shiny chrome.

A classic if there ever was one—
built like a brick house, mortared fire brick.

“Dance with me,” she said. It didn’t matter
the summer cabin was dark and rough.

Sometimes, the boss man calls the shots.
Sometimes, things are just not fair.

With his leather jacket in her front seat,
he sped off, loose gravel under whitewalls.

Baby thought what broke would last forever,
and then, that Chevy wreck brought him back.

First, Scrape Off the Barnacles

We each carry our end
of the long maple oar
which powers the skiff
you named *Alcyone*—brightest
star of the Seven Sisters
and ocean-diving
kingfisher.

When we launch,
we'll bring both oars.
One for each side,
locked into place.
We learned
to work them together.
A lone oar
can only paddle.

There are loose cushions
to secure.
I'll carry them even if
I have to hold them
in my teeth.
And the brass compass
must come along.
I'll polish it.

Its lens enlarges
all possible directions,
a swiveling needle
whose red end points north.
No north without
its south.
Notice now—
the tender, *Alcyone*,
has no rudder.

Beyond Summer

“Nothing is lost... Everything is transformed.”

—Michael Ende, from *The Neverending Story*

Something had stunned the plain wood-pewee.
I didn't see it happen.

Alive, but lying wingspread in soft clover weeds,
I lift him to perch

in the mildewed lilac long-past its blooming,
but still dependable.

Solitary migrator on his way deep south
to winter in the Caribbean,

this small flycatcher, drab and ordinary,
would be easy to miss.

The dark of night has moved into daylight.
The woods teem

with buzzing insects he can see, could chase,
if not hiding, not invisible.

We eye each other. He shakes and balances.
One flight feather falls,

but in an hour's healing time, he can fly again.
I've witnessed miracle.

Yesterday, this was a house on Mountain Road.
Today, a sanctuary.

Home. Domo.

Lately I have thought about when my father lay in bed dying and I can't shake the image of his legs pedaling in the bed and the apparent anxiety that he was having like he was inside a skin that was crawling. I keep wanting to understand that but I can't because I knew my father as a good man. A flawed man but a good one. I'm sure that he had secrets he told no one. I don't think that the secrets were terrible things, like he was a secret child molester or something equally terrible. I doubt if he ever did anything someone could not forgive him for doing. I can't imagine it. So I ask myself if this good man seems to have been so full of anxiety when he died, instead of just lying there peacefully and going away, what does that mean? Did he glimpse the void? Is there a void or as we are told, is there eternal peace? Did he get to the edge of something he wanted to back away from? Is it just the leaving of your skin behind that is so difficult? Did he leave things undone he wanted to go back and fix? He kept asking to get down on the floor. Would he have felt closer to the earth there? Was he trying in some animal way to get back to where he started from? Could he feel that the earth was there, waiting for him, waiting to enfold him into itself? He spoke Polish when he was dying, a language he hadn't spoken for eighty years. He spoke it and he told my sister what he was saying. He was saying "Home. Home. Domo. Domo." He told my sister he was asking in Polish for a knife to kill himself. He must have been in pain he couldn't bear. And later, when he couldn't talk any longer, the flailing legs. The restless turning and tossing. Then the many small breaths. Then the letting go.

This is the picture: There is a man lying in a bed. There are seven adult children standing around his bed. He is finally lying still and is no longer breathing. Now the adult children, many of whom have children of their own are crying. They are stunned as if they had just seen for the first time.

In The Morning

Your daughter goes out the door for school in the morning before you get out of bed.
If you have enough energy you can holler out you love her.

Say "Goodbye" to your wife and go to work.

Walk down the street, cars whine by in both directions.

You get on the bus and you ride with people who are going to work,
or most of them, anyway. Some may be going to see their probation officers.

The guy you used to see get on the bus in the morning in the Walmart vest
who always smelled of marijuana. Just smoked it at home before he went to work.

He only got on the bus for about a week, but you don't notice.

Noticed about a week or two later that he wasn't getting on.

And the woman with the wild hair who is very thin and looks like an Ashkenazi Jew
who rode the bus back in the evenings for a while.

The guy Mark, who has ridden the bus for years, you used to see him
on your way to work in your car, and then you yourself started taking the bus.

But you never see him in the morning anymore but think you know
that's because he catches the seven-oh-five and you get the seven-twenty.

Used to see him the the afternoons on the way home but not much anymore.

Said he got a ride. The talkative overweight guy you see most mornings.

He's got a year or two to retire. He likes Husker football and knows everything
about it. He knows everything about everything, really. He likes this one driver
who's a big guy and a bit of a gun nut, even said the slogan one day.

The woman with the butt like two sacks of wet cement in her stretch pants
who must clean for a living, she knows everything too. The other driver
with a nasty attitude who runs the morning routes some days,
slammed his brakes on three days in a row before she could get to her seat.

Everybody on the bus knew what he was doing.

You couldn't have proven it in a court of law. I don't like him much.

He always comments about how people behave and acts like a jerk himself.

Wouldn't let a Sudanese woman with a baby on one time in a blinding
sub-zero snowstorm because she wasn't at the stop. "She can just
get herself up out of bed in time and get to where the stop is."

Sat there right beside her at a red light and wouldn't open the door.

She pounded on it. She was wearing a thin cotton wrap-around skirt
and flip flops with socks. She had on a

spring windbreaker. She held her baby inside her windbreaker.

We all saw it. We all knew what was going on.

None of the rest of us had any balls.

Only the overweight guy shouted out—

"Let her on! Jesus Christ! Let her on!"

But he didn't

Poetry Obits Column

With apologies to Ted Kooser

I am so tired tonight, drank too much coffee, stayed up
and watched two episodes of the “Sopranos,”
those guys who’re just trying to do their jobs,
blend into the American scene, hell, they are
the American scene, and they work hard,
just extort their money up front instead of later
like the Congress and the President
and wouldn’t they like to be running that racket!
What I’m doing here is called keeping the tools sharp,
or in my case, at least out of the bag
and on the workbench. Not much happens
at home that I can write about. I could write
about my job but it’s against the law or not ethical
to do that, or I could write about what
happens around here at the house
but I already did that by talking about
the “Sopranos.” It might be easier for us poets
if we could just go out and rough up somebody
to get their pals to come to readings and buy our books
and it might be more profitable if every book
that came out we could send the boys around
to twist the poetry buying public’s arms, and what the hell?
Doesn’t everybody like poetry now?
So not just the poetry-buying public
but every stinking Bozo who’s walking into
B&N will buy the latest work by Kosmicki—
Love Flowers to My Mother, and Other Poems,
or *The Way the Ball Bounces (If You Don’t Buy
This Book)* or, *Sitting Around the House With
Nottin’ to but Come Over to Your House
and Bust Your Legs (If You Don’t Buy This Book).*
We’d have a little sit down every year with the Pulitzer
committee, and the boys at the Nobel. We’d
come to an understanding, maybe. All the book
manufacturers of course would pay their money
up front, each month, or me and Furio would drop by
the corporate offices, bring our baseball bats,
ya know, just to show we’re fans, ask ‘em
if they’ve been reading the obits column lately?
The poetry column? That one, what’s it called—
“American Life in Poetry?”

Dan

This guy from our church, strong as an ox,
crushed my hand when we first met,
happy as a lark, we saw him Sunday before last
and he told our exchange student
a young German girl, he'll see her
again, found dead in his office,
56, by the cleaning crew, Friday
before last. We went to his wake,
and his funeral on Columbus Day.
Nicest guy you'd ever want to meet.

I suppose we all think it won't happen to us,
that somehow we won't die, that we'll slip through
the knot, the noose, the thread won't break.
I can't picture myself dying at this young of an age
though I'm now almost old, am old
considering what I was just a few years ago
considering what I thought was old then.
My beard keeps growing, I can feel it,
and they say it will keep on even after I'm dead.
That and my nails, they say. They say that
when you're buried that you turn into a pool
of water and goo, there in the casket
though I think that's not true, I think
they dig up bones all along that have been
buried hundreds of years. Is it just the bone
survives and not the flesh? Or if they let us go back
to the earth the way we should, there'd be none
of our skeletons lying around except the random
Pharoh or neanderthal who got trapped in ice.
But the earth is littered with bones, we know that,
and we know that none of us can avoid it.
So what to do in the meantime? What to do?
Start a war? Eat a peach? Give your money to charity?
Go to work from eight to five, for fifty years?
Join a gang to rape, pillage, and plunder?
Start an orphanage? Beat your spouse?
Join the circus? Sit in your room all day and pray?
Help others? Run over others? Ignore others?
Become obsessed with a brand of baskets?
Spray down your driveway? Ride a bike?
Chew tobacco? Become infatuated with Elvis?
1957 Chevies? Marc Chagall? Napoleon?
The history of armaments? The study of clay?

The Dish and the Spoon

I should go downstairs and get a glassful of that bitter wine left over from last summer when our oldest kid came to visit and we had a big party and I bought way too much wine and later my wife said “I told you so,” a gallon of some Chianti that I had to finish off over the course of several months and then two boxes of wine that each hold 5 liters, both of which were pretty awful, Franzi or Vesuvius or some other brand like that, probably made from the flushings of the vats mixed in with sewage and river water from wherever they came up with the idea of boxing wines in the first place—maybe Hell. Maybe it was Beelzebub and Co. Winery that first came up with the idea of boxing wine. Probably the same guys who invented Velveeta cheese and microwave popcorn. Well anyway if I got a little tipsy maybe I would think of something clever to say like “the moon slid like a piece of buttered toast into the slot in the top of my neighbor’s house but I’m sure that even at that his wife is still too ugly to make him get it up” or something equally endearing. I remember when I used to like poems, can you believe it? I used to read them and they’d just knock me right off of my chair. Now I can’t even stand to read most of the poems I see around in magazines, and the ones I write are even worse, but at least they’re not pretentious. Dear God save me from being pretentious! I would rather write a novel and never try to write a poem again if I were a famous poet who thought that he (or I guess I could be a woman too, if I were a famous poet) had to write down or not, technically, “had to” but actually just, does, write down something “important” every time my pen hit the page. Or fingers hit the keys. Ye gods thank you that I am not like all the others! For I will never write anything important, unless making a decision to drink some bad wine or not to drink some bad wine might one day be seen as important. Something you might want to give up your life for. Or maybe write a poem about, given the right impetus, the little nudge, the push,

the *gravitas* of the situation, the moon
slicing down the sky like Poe's device
or Occam's, or simply mildewing,
blue cheese the cow can still jump over her best
nights, our utensils gone mad for no
good reason known to modern psychiatry.

Something About Me That May Not Be True

Last night when I was going to bed
I was thinking how if I write something in a poem
that I will write it here because I want you
the reader, to think something about me
that may not be true
that for instance I am very wise
or deeply spiritual or maybe even that I'm sensitive
in some way that you, the reader,
may not be, may not have the capacity
for being thus and so, that I, being the poet,
do. Have. What is this mixture
of pity and restraint, admiration
and perplexed emotions that is evinced
by the simple act of me writing
down a few words in a line and you,
gentle reader, reading them? You see, (he winced)
this is a sport for idiots, anyone
can do it who can pick up a pen
or typewrite. Oh sure, you can get fancy
you can make your lines each have nine syllables or twelve,
and don't bother to count, my reader, because
I'm not counting anything here, or they
can make them rhyme like nursery rhymes dig and delve
or they can break them up into stanzas or say
certain words can only be used in certain ways,
a good example being the use of the villanelle
which in this case echoes the words hanging off the shelves
above, but not exactly, but sort of backwards
and there's a name for that effect I can't recall
and another for the way those two words above slant rhyme
adding another twist. You can do that
but what's the point? Except for fun maybe
but that doesn't make me wise, and in fact
detracts from wisdom because your readers' time
and energy are occupied with sorting out the chime
your words might make with each other
and you will forget the reason you started
to read this poem, dear reader, dear brother
in crime, was to make me seem all that much more beautiful
in your reader's eye, that much more into uncharted
areas of the subconsciousness of all humans, dutiful
to the end when I try to figure out another rhyme than "farted"
to end with, dear reader, the great one you are, unscrutiful.

The Barrel

One day a man woke up and discovered he was living inside a barrel. He couldn't tell what kind of barrel it was but he figured out from feeling around in the dark where he was at. He couldn't remember that he had died or that someone had killed him though how the hell would you remember that, he thought. He felt around and he could feel the flat top and the rounded sides of the barrel. He was by himself. How long was this to last? He waited a long time, and then he thought he heard voices outside of the barrel, but he remembered that he had learned in Psych class one time that if you are deprived of information that your mind will make up information for you. He remembered that it was called sensory deprivation. He thought that maybe he was having that. Still, what if the voices outside the barrel that he thought he heard, were real? Real people. Maybe people who know what was going on, and why he was in the barrel and who could tell him those reasons why. Maybe they could help him maybe they could get him out of the barrel. He could shout out to them, but what if they really weren't there? Would that mean that he was beginning to go crazy, or worse yet, was he already crazy? Had he lost his mind? How would he know? He could cry out for help, and if there were not people out there, then what would be lost? But what if they were there? What if he was part of an experiment that he had volunteered for and had just forgotten about? Maybe he was sleeping, or maybe he had been sleeping, maybe he just needs sleep and thinks he is in this barrel because he is so tired. Maybe this is just a bad dream. What if he were to call out to the people. What if they were there to monitor him, and they would know that he had lost his mind because they know that he knows that he thinks he has. If he were to call out for help he would be admitting it. He would be admitting it for them to hear, those people with their voices, that he maybe has lost his mind. And then what would he have if he were to lose his mind? Why that would be his very self. He would lose his identity if he were to cry out, if he were to cry out for help, if he were to let anyone know that he is in the barrel, and who knows? Maybe he has been here all along, and this is where he lives, and he is doing his job, and they are doing their jobs out there where they talk. It doesn't seem that they are talking about him. They're just talking. He knows that they are there but do they know that he is where he is? Does he need to have help? If he were to cry out....

Playing Craps

When my dad was old he told me a story one time
that was a memory of when he was a young boy
out on one of the many farms he lived on
where Grampy TB was trying to make a living
in the Dirty 'Thirties with all the young men in the family
helping with the farming. Just a flash of memory
of playing craps with the feed salesman
or the oil salesman or one of the other drummers
who made their living driving around to farms
with products farmers used, or didn't,
and had to be convinced they needed.
None of that's in the story, though,
it really wasn't a story, just a brief
moment he remembered when he was
more than eighty-five years old
and I, of course, wasn't really listening,
was off on some other thought, some worry,
so I don't even remember what it was about—
the brothers—Doc, Buck, Bill, Slim, and Sandy,
my dad—there with TB and some salesman
tossing the bones on top of an oil drum
the only flat solid spot
in the wheat farm farmyard, the drummer
shown up to sell his stuff,
driven up in his black Ford or Chevy,
the sun no doubt merciless as time,
horses in the shade of the barn,
it must have been lunch, dust
in the air, dust everywhere in the 'Thirties,
the flat blue top of that greasy
dirt-caked oil drum, the table
the bones roll on, the bones
roll on

Here's the Story (The Pattern of the Blood)

The man on page one was going to prison for killing a toddler, one-and-a-half year-old girl, and the guy on page three was brought in on charges of killing a one-and-a-half-year-old girl, and on page two there is a guy who stabbed his wife 21 times and a guy who shot three people, and on page seven a bunch more soldiers dead in Iraq, and then there's the weeks when it seems that the thing to do is throw your children off a bridge and drown them and some more soldiers got killed in Iraq and a bunch of civilians at a mosque there too, and then the next week it's back to boyfriends throwing babies against the wall to kill them in between holding them in tubs filled with boiling water, and there's the ever-popular abduction and rape of a little child, this week it's boys, next week it's girls, and some guy gets busted for some reason or other because someone discovered all this child porn on the computer in his home where he lives when he's not working as an international commodities trader, and then every couple weeks some 80-year-old nun gets busted ripping off a parish for six-hundred thousand dollars, and a week or so later a priest gets busted with child porn on his parish computer, then it's not long and a coach sends out notices to his soccer kids to come to practice next week on Saturday at nine and he somehow manages to print the flyers on paper he'd printed child porn on the back of, and then a taxi driver gets his brains blown out by a fare, and then another, then some kid gets shot standing in front of his house talking to some other kids, and this other kid goes berserk for no apparent reason and kills a bunch of people at a shopping mall, and then some more soldiers get killed in Iraq and a couple in Afghanistan, and tons of their soldiers too, not to mention, but it's true, and then the mommy drives the car off the bridge and somehow escapes but the three boys drown, and a guy in a Halloween mask holds up a bank and plugs an off-duty cop who's working security there, and a bunch of other guys are sitting on death row and then a bunch more get out because the DNA proved that none of them were the killers, and then that same priest gets busted masturbating in a mall parking lot, and then a kid takes a gun to his school and shoots a classmate, neither one of them can even spell their own names yet but they're going to try him as a man, and today its nine more dead in Iraq, and that's not counting Iraqis, and some kids tie up a noose on a tree for fun and on page 6 there's a man butchering homeless boys and storing them in his freezer, and some mom let her kids starve again, and another one stabbed them all, all five of them in the tub and in their beds, they didn't even struggle, police say they can tell by the pattern of the blood,

A Synonym for “Weak”

FRAGILE: suggests frailty and brittleness unable to resist rough usage
<a reclusive poet too *fragile* for the rigors of this world>.

Merriam-Webster online dictionary

When I was a kid we waited. We'd drive around all night long up and down the main street, honking and waving at other cars full of kids who were waiting. We didn't know what we waited for. Eventually someone would insult someone else and a fight would break out. Someone else would find someone else to buy liquor or beer for their group and a party would erupt somewhere. Word spread like wildfire through town— “Party at Grosinger's silage pit,” or “Party at Johnson's barn.” Every kid in town would show up. Lots of times there would be kids there from the other school or some other town nobody knew and a fight would break out. Really violent fights. But now and then there was a peacemaker in the group, or even two or three, and it would spread—the idea of being peaceful, of having fun with people, just talking, or maybe making friends with Someone you didn't know, just drunk kid talk—

every once

in a while that feeling of calm and understanding would take over and the violence and the anger and the rage would be put away. People would be friends and slap each other on the backs and apologize who only moments before had nothing but blood on their minds. Nothing but rage and sorrow. Nothing but years of torment and shame to throw out onto one of their drinking buddies like a beaker of acid. It was terrible to see, thrilling to see too, but terrible. And when the fight was broken up in time before anyone was hurt too bad, if the fighters, the potential murderers could be stopped and made to see the other in front of himself was just his reflection, if he could see his own sorrowful brother, if he could take him into his arms and laugh this is what we were waiting for even when we had no idea what lay there in the freezing weeds outside the dance hall, or on cold lawns where grief wound tighter than mower cords in the dark shadows between houses.

by Walter Heineman

7 poems

what is heavier to carry
than carrying nothing at all...
no soul in your beliefs.

what is heavier.

the window that does not allow you to look into the future
should be considered a door.

the view.

i do not worry about the stranger who arrives at the door of my house
as much as i worry about the stranger who opens it for them.

the concern that is more concerning.

the old carpenter on the ladder keeps dropping more and more nails.

the impatient apprentice wonders if the temple will ever be finished.

what is a temple without mercy.

the conflict.

some words are containers.
containers shielding us from
the things inside them
until they are needed.
containers shielding the things
inside them from
the things inside us.
bodies not ready for the mind.
the container is in the shape of perspective

desire
holds the desirable
holds the undesirable
holds the desirous
holds the desirer.
it holds where desire begins
it holds where desire ends
it holds how it is held.

the container contains instinct moving into
its preference of articulation
line of sight symbols
visions
crude formations
opposites in unity.
consciousness
unconsciousness
structure and structureless debris
in the absence of rationality
in the absence of irrationality

Driving slow in the left lane of the world

You're wrong about why I listen to the car radio. It's because I have someone to talk to, that's all, like now I'm driving down to my son's hospital room and for some reason the landscape alongside the road grows more vivid than usual, like between each tree or each lane of the freeway there is something akin to a message, one that I rarely notice because the sun is not usually bright enough. Anyway, today I interpret these bright gaps with messages and they are telling me not that my son will be okay, but that his burden, my burden, will end up such a benign weight on the world that it will not move the scales of suffering over history. One bit. That message doesn't bear at all on my travels, on this trip I'm taking to see him lying there, and when I get to him, without speaking we will both know we are thinking the same word, *maya*, and so we will sit there for a while and I will wonder about those messages between the trees, and nurses will come and check vitals and other people in the world will get in their cars, and turn on their own radios, and make for better exits.

My father no longer worries about water

Sure, I watch those videos of bush planes landing in the outback, gliding over islands filled clear up with trees, ready to land and build cabins, and it looks appealing, I can't lie.

But I like people, like them in spite of how they treat each other sometimes, I like how we can have those moments of sweetness, how even when we're mad at others we can resort to people to calm us.

My father lived in the mountains, dreamed about it and then did it. And then worried about water, if there was going to be enough for the plants and trees, going to be enough to fend off forest fires. No water was the enemy.

So here's what I'd do if I were you. Don't go to the mountains, don't fly in to your very own forested island to escape all the people. Instead come to dinner with us, tell us your stories and we will tell you ours, talk and laugh with us. Try not to worry about water.

A gift for the world

We thought there were as many moons as there were clear summer nights and we looked up to honor and welcome every new one, assigned each a different name, thinking every old moon had left us to spread itself across some sky somewhere else.

Then we learned in science class—though it didn't seem like it unless you had money for a telescope, which brought everything into cold hard unwavering resolution—there was only one moon reconfiguring herself nightly, moving around between false light and shadow only telescopes could reveal.

It's hard to know what's right.
It's so hard to know the real intentions of people when they stray so far up there in the atmosphere.
Sometimes I feel so alone I wish I could make the moon I see tonight full again.

Barn find

You see them on reality shows, someone decides to store a car in the shed and it stays there until, well, until there's no more shed. And now the owner is too old to drive and the car is rust and mice have planted their flag in the glove box. Why, why did he store it away, why didn't he drive to Kansas, take his girlfriend to the country on a drive intended for love-making and marriage, and even though the marriage won't last, the car still sits there, waiting for some more shit to be piled on its once shiny trunk, and the kids never pay attention to it, it's just another piece of rust, and now it's forgotten, buried under child support and a shitty new job, having to find other work at your age, and now pan to the grandson's dollar bill face as they push it out of the garage for more ratings with the cameras rolling, as he describes his grandfather's passion for nostalgia and cars, but this one he never drove, just tucked it away and forgot it. Why?

The grief nest

I don't know the reason people steal osprey eggs but evidently it's a thing. You can look it up. Often, I've read, the osprey will build a new nest, a grief nest, to move on, to keep busy, to redirect, to cry, who knows.

Well, I have a hammer and I have nails and if I knew more about building, about how to make foundations, for instance, or how to build impenetrable shelters, I would carry those tools to a clearing where nobody lives or cares to live and

I would build my own grief nest, would build it high as a church so that god couldn't miss it but nobody else would come around, would signify to everyone that life isn't as easy as reality shows, where everyone steals your eggs and expects you to just fly off as if nothing happened.

In Public

Susanna Solomon

From the *Point Reyes Light*, Saturday, September 2, 2023.

BOLINAS: At 11:40 a.m. a woman said a man was changing clothes in public, exposing his rear end. When she'd told him that changing in public was not allowed, he yelled and threatened to show her his front end.

David was not concerned about changing in the middle of town. He was being modest, wasn't he? There were no bathrooms big enough for his large frame, in Bolinas, anyway.

A place for weekend surfers, and dogs, and no public bathrooms? It was their own damn fault the lady had yelled at him.

His blue jeans were soiled. A bench near Brighton Beach, that he had thought was dry—he hadn't checked—turned out to be covered in mud. Not dust, he could've handled that, or water, but mud and now his rear end was damp and his pants, they needed a wash. So did he. He had been living on the outs in Bolinas for about a year now, contending with the loose dogs in town, the other housing-challenged people and now the new residents, in their Teslas and fancy cars. He knew that a town without a post office, or internet, and positively filled with homeless people looking for porta-potties would not make these wealthy people happy.

He had seen them, those new residents, and the blond, the one who had made a fuss, with her super long nails. She had been holding her key fob to her very own sexy red Tesla when David decided to make his move. Screw them all, these tourists, these nouveau people, and he slipped, sort of, behind a debris box. He opened his knapsack, pulled out his only other pair of jeans, and took off his pants.

He hadn't worn underwear for five years, not since his own Lou Ann had put his whity-tighties into the wash with her red pillow case and his undies came out as pinky-dinks.

No self-respecting quasi house-hunting man with a long beard would wear pinky-dinks.

Anyway, he was long in thought about his Lou Ann, arranging his soiled pants down by his ankles, unlacing his hush puppies, when the blond lady behind him screamed.

Screamed! Hadn't she ever seen God's creation before, a naked man's butt? At least he had hair.

"Cover yourself! Cover yourself!" she cried behind her fingers that were mostly but not completely, covering her eyes.

He was behind a dumpster already. What the hell did she want? Bolinas, for a long time, had put up with housing-challenged drug-happy individuals who had made the small West Marin town their home. He'd heard that some of them had been wandering around Bolinas since the sixties. Well then, good for them!

"Changing in public is not allowed!" She kept screaming! Her little Chihuahua joined in the fray, barking and growling. David wanted to kill. His rear end, cold and a bit clammy, was eager to

get into his clean pants. But he was adamant. This was his town, for Chrissakes, she was just a tourist, a pain in the neck, who got in his way.

He peered at her. Grin wide. "You don't like my rear end?" he said, his voice loud enough to wake everyone on Brighton Avenue. "Should I turn around?"

She screamed again, and left, taking her little dog with her.

David enjoyed the quiet. He put on his new pants and was tying his shoes when he heard sirens and saw lights.

Good grief. He was all neat and tidy. What was their problem?

A gruff, pimple-faced young cop opened his car door, walked forcefully over to David and his debris box, not his, really, but his for now.

"We've had a complaint, sir," the officer said, adjusting his belt so it didn't dig into his bony hips. "Nudity." He smiling, showing a gap between his front teeth.

"If I had a dime for each time one of you assholes responded to a public disturbance, I'd be a rich man," David said. "What is the problem again, officer?"

"Exposure."

"I was not nude, officer. I was wearing my twenty-year-old Guns 'N Roses tee shirt, the one with a burnt orange background from their tour in '93. Looking a little worn, now, but still comfy. You go to concerts, officer? Officer?" David peered at the officer's nametag. "Bernard?"

"That's not relevant. Name, registration, license, sir."

"I'm not driving a car. But if I did it would be a Cobra."

The young cop made no discernable change in his expression. Pink cheeks, barely a mustache, and zits. What did they do, recruit them out of high school? Middle School? Officer Bernard pulled out a pad of paper and a pen. "Resisting arrest," he said. "That's a serious charge."

"I'm not moving," David said, feeling the morning—that had dawned full of light—that the morning was turning into an afternoon, and the day had taken on a dark turn.

"Okay, okay, okay," Officer Bernard flipped through pages in his notebook. "Belligerent."

"I'm not arguing with you, sir. Have you seen one of the Cobra replicas? You know they're fake."

Officer Bernard clicked on the radio.

"Behind a dumpster. Public nudity. Belligerent. Resisting arrest."

David dropped his muddy pants on the ground, next to his knapsack.

"I'll let you search my knapsack, sir, if you tell me about the first time you slept with a girl."

Officer Bernard blanched.

"I need backup now," he barked into his radio.

The day was a nice one. David felt better all over because of his clean, dry pants, and this pepperwood was ruining his vibe.

He stood, leaned against the debris box, crossed his arms. "I'll wait all day if you like."

A minute later he heard the squeal of brakes. Another police car. Followed by the woman in the Tesla. The blond! She wanted to see more? He could oblige.

He thought of running, but Brighton Beach ended in a cliff, and he wasn't going to run into someone else's property again. The last time he did that he'd ended up in the slammer. "That's the man, the man who ... who ...," the woman said, tearing up. Her mascara ran down her face.

Five minutes later, David had been handcuffed and taken to the police station.

He stood in front of the sheriff, Sheriff Noonan. His large mustache was half-hidden by a five-foot-tall ficus with yellowing leaves. A bottle of fish emulsion stood on the desk. Only Bernard stood beside David, making David a little nervous. He wished he'd had that shower that Lou Ann had promised. Appearances matter, she'd said, then had locked him out of her house.

"Any luck with the fish mulch?" David asked.

Noonan sighed, cracked his knuckles, peered at his plant and frowned.

"Take off the restraints, for God's sake, Bernard, didn't you learn anything at the Police Academy?"

Officer Bernard, his once pink face now flushed red. "Yes, sir." He walked out.

David rubbed his wrists.

"Third time this month, David," the chief said. "Can't you keep your pants on? We have tourists in this town, families, children, you're scaring them."

"So where are the porta-potties, Chief? What about my rights? I wasn't doing anything. Wasn't hurting anybody."

"Can't you find any other place to live? And a job? We've talked about this before, David." The chief drummed his fat fingers on his metal desk.

"A trumped up charge. An over eager officer. A beautiful day. I'm hungry. Got anything to eat? Laundry facilities? I sure could use a shower."

They let him out into a sweltering afternoon, into the center of town. Tourists pulled up and around him, looking for a place to park, and if they had parked outside of town, were filling the sidewalks and streets with their strollers, picnic coolers, and surfboards. Soon the cops would have a field day, giving everyone parking tickets.

He sighed. Still, not a bad day, altogether.

He would surf, if he had money, or if he stole someone's surfboard, but that was not his style. He eyed a white Tesla, driven by a brunette, who was beeping at pedestrians to get out of her way.

David's kind of girl. He could do it, he could make her scream, if he wanted. His pants were only held up by a rope, after all.

He waved. She drove off. An opportunity wasted. He was hungry. A few dollars in his pocket he'd snatched from Lou Ann's purse would go a long way toward his next drink. He didn't need to frighten a woman to have a thrill, not anymore. From now on, he would be a changed man. He hitched up his pants, strode into Smiley's Saloon.

"Hey David! Glad to see you. Ready for a cold one?" the bartender asked, holding out his hand.

David's tribe. Better than any tourist any day.

Elements of Fire

VA Wiswell

January 4, 2024

O'Hare International Airport, Chicago, IL

The terminal reeks. I've been mouth-breathing through the cowl neck of my wool sweater for half a day. It isn't helping. Body odor is watering my eyes, and my sweater is now a scratchy, spit-sodden mess. I want to rip it off and toss it in the bin.

I collapse into one of the few empty chairs and force myself to choke down some of the lukewarm swill masquerading as tomato soup. Under the best of circumstances, I'm not a soup fan. With every other shop closing when the storm hit, *Soup Du Jour, Home of Homemade Soups*, was my only option. From what I'm tasting, I'd guess they were desperate for the business. I want to dump the orange water into the bin with my sweater.

I set the soup down and pull out my phone. I'm wasting my time and my battery. I've already checked every hotel in the area. There aren't any vacancies. Until I can book another flight, I'm trapped inside O'Hare like a low-security inmate.

I close my eyes, and, on a long exhale, repeat my new mantra: "You're okay. The storm will pass. Don't panic."

When I no longer feel like a panting dog, I open my eyes. The airport does seem a bit calmer. Less chaotic. Less like a prison yard.

**

June 21, 2022

Cape Cod, MA

"Viv, you're here. I was worried you wouldn't make it."

"Yeah, me, too. Traffic leaving the city was, well, the usual. I've actually been here for a while—working my way across the lawn. There are what, two hundred and fifty people here?"

"One hundred and eighty-six, including you."

"Seriously, Siobhan, that's an amazing turnout."

"What can I say? Everybody loves my Summer Solstice Bash. But enough about me, have you looked at your placement packet?"

"I was heading inside to review it."

"You might as well thank me now."

"Ah, okay. Thank you."

"Why, you ask? Because after months of aggressive wooing, Alex Ward has agreed to attend, and I've generously seated him next to you."

"Alex Ward is here?"

"I'll ignore the insult lurking behind that question."

"Sorry. I didn't think someone like him—"

"Someone like him?"

"He just seems so..."

"You're not star-struck, are you?"

"No, just surprised."

"I love how, after years in this business, you're still able to experience surprise."

“Yeah, well, I’ve fought to maintain my child-like innocence.”

“Alex is the same as our other clients: successful and busy. He wants companionship, not entanglements.”

“Right.”

“You’re sure you’re okay? I can swap you—”

“No need. I’m good.”

“That’s what I wanted to hear. Now grab a drink and go make friends with Boston’s favorite CEO.”

**

January 4, 2024

O’Hare International Airport, Chicago, IL

The toddler sitting across from me makes eye contact. They’re pale and a tad green. I have two nephews; I know what’s coming. Before I can move, bile covers the floor. My jean cuffs are splattered in puke. I don’t need to look, I felt the tiny, mucus-filled bullets hit my legs.

“Sorry,” says a woman who appears to have gone a week without sleep.

More defeated than annoyed, I nod and move to an empty corner.

I’m exhausted, hungry, and now blanketed in vomit. I pull out my phone and check the battery. The little green bar is getting smaller and smaller. My charger is, of course, packed in my checked bag—a big mistake—almost as big as booking a January flight to Seattle with a layover at O’Hare.

Sure, Jasmine was understanding; she has internet, she’s aware of the storm, and yes, she said rescheduling my interview wasn’t a problem—that these things happen. But did she mean it? Will the magazine put their hiring decision on hold until I show up, storm-weary and two days late? I seriously doubt it.

Once my phone dies, I’m done. I won’t have a way to contact anyone outside of this airport. I could ask to borrow a charger, keep my phone afloat for a few more hours, call Jasmine again, explain I’m still here, waiting, but what will that get me? Her sympathy?

Besides, in this rapidly declining micro-civilization, my request to borrow a charger will likely be met with a flat no or, worse, perceived as an invitation to barter.

There’s Siobhan. She likely knows someone with a plane. Then what? I’m back where I started, indebted to strangers.

The soup isn’t sitting well, and the air in the terminal is suddenly thin. I can feel the thump of my heart. It’s getting faster.

I take a breath and close my eyes.

“You’re okay. The storm will pass. Don’t panic.”

Nothing changes.

Fuck my mantra.

**

Friction

*We met at a party on a
warm night with the
sun’s heat trapped in the desert’s
sand and the night’s
sun lighting the sky*

June 21, 2022

Cape Cod, MA

“Vivian—

Sorry, I didn’t mean to startle you.”

“You didn’t. Surprised, maybe.”

“I came out to—”

“I meant it to be funny—what I said about Siobhan’s cats sleeping under their desks like good employees—not to offend you.”

“I wasn’t—”

“My mouth gets ahead of me. Siobhan knows this. She usually partners me—well, she’s normally better at matching personalities.”

“It was funny—the feline employee bit.”

“Really? Because it didn’t seem like you thought so.”

“Don’t blame Siobhan.”

“Sorry?”

“I asked to be seated next to you. It wasn’t her error.”

“How did you even know—”

“She sends a list of the attending hosts to her guests.”

“Right. And of all the names you requested *me*? Why?”

“You wouldn’t believe me if I told you.”

“Try me.”

“I’m not sure if I should.”

“Come on. You followed me out here. You might as—”

“Who says I followed you? It’s a beautiful night. I came to get some air.”

“There’s air on the patio. You walked to the water—through the sand in your lace-up shoes.”

“So did you.”

“I’m barefoot—see? Besides, I was hiding.”

“From me?”

“You. Your wrath, more specifically.”

“My what?”

“I’m joking. Although the relentless nature of Alexander Ward is hardly a secret.”

“Strange, I think of myself as accommodating. And please, call me Alex. My friends do.”

“Okay, Alex. Now that we’re friends, why did you want to sit next to me?”

“We’re back to that, are we? Alright. But I’m warning you, it might make me seem a bit odd.”

“You have my full attention.”

“A few weeks ago, I was talking with a friend, and, among other things, she said I would meet a poet who writes about Greece. I saw your name on Siobhan’s list, saw you were a poet—

Why the face?”

“I’m confused.”

“About?”

“Many things.”

“Like?”

“How does your friend know me?”

“She doesn’t. At least not specifically.”

“Not helpful. Explain, please.”

—Now you’re making a face.”

“This is where a bit of suspended disbelief is needed.”

“Still listening.”

“My friend is psychic...or clairvoyant. I’m unsure how she defines herself. I would describe her as someone who makes a living employing her intuition to advise others.

“I’m unsure which is more shocking: that someone like you has a psychic friend, or that you believe in their abilities?”

“*Someone like me?* I’m sensing that isn’t a compliment. I’ll let it go.”

“So far, though, your friend’s prophecy is spot on: we’ve definitely met.”

“Can’t argue with that.”

“What’s the point of it—our meeting? Did she say?”

“Yes and no.”

“Wow.”

“Wow?”

“You’re as vague as most psychics.”

“Only because it was part of a broader conversation.”

“The details of which you aren’t going to share?”

“The important part is she said our meeting was...necessary.”

“*Necessary?* Is that her word?”

“No. Her word was fated.”

“I see why you changed it.”

“Like I said, it was part of a broader conversation.”

“Right.”

“If it helps, this is as bizarre to me as it is to you. I don’t normally, and by normally, I mean ever, seek the counsel of psychics. But she’s a friend, and it was—”

“Part of a broader conversation. You mentioned that.”

“You’re annoyed, or some variation. That wasn’t my intention.”

“I’m not. It’s just...Do you think she’s right? Are we *fated*?”

“Honestly, I don’t know what that word means—if anything. I do know as soon as we began talking, I had a sense about you.”

“A sense?”

“Like I knew you or remembered you. Déjà vu—I think that’s the best way to describe it.”

“That’s ominous and, again, vague.”

“True. I propose we start over. You forget about my friend’s vision, and I’ll forget about your awful cat joke. What do you say? Deal?”

“Hmm...Alright. Deal.”

“Okay, then. Vivian, I’m Alex. I would very much like to get to know you better.”

“Nice to meet you, Alex. And please call me Viv. My friends do.”

**

January 4, 2024

O’Hare International Airport, Chicago, IL

“Alex. Hi. It’s—

“Vivian?”

—This is a...It’s been a while. How are you?”

“I’m fine. Well, as fine as a person trapped at O’Hare can be.”

“Right, the storm. You’re flying?”

“Trying. I have, *had*, a layover at O’Hare, but Delta canceled my connecting flight. Now, I guess I’m living here.”

“You’re not at a hotel?”

“Every nearby room is booked.”

“How long have you been at the airport?”

“Eighteen hours and counting.”

“Jesus. Have you slept?”

“No. There isn’t anywhere to sleep, and the people.... Everyone is on edge. Closing my eyes seems unwise.”

“Why are you calling me now, Vivian—just now?”

“I thought the storm would pass, that my flight would be rescheduled, and I didn’t...”

“Didn’t what?”

I press my lips together, forcing myself to pause before saying more. I look up at the terminal’s high ceiling. With the snow covering the skylights, blocking all of the natural light, the outside world seems so far away, so impossibly out of reach.

“...want to be a bother,” I finish, shifting from my right foot to my left. I ignore the man staring at me lasciviously from over yesterday’s paper and add, “I know how busy you are.” I want to say I was afraid to call, that you wouldn’t answer, that it would be proof I no longer mattered. But what you might say back—the possible finality of it, scares me too much.

“Where are you headed, Vivian? Back to Boston?”

“No, Seattle for... I have a—”

“What flight?”

“Sorry?”

“What is your flight number? The plane to Seattle?”

“Oh. Delta seven-eighteen.”

“Hang on.

—Alright, I can get you here.”

“*Here?* As in San Francisco?”

“You can fly to Seattle tomorrow. West Coast flights are on schedule. You’re stuck at O’Hare because your connection is departing from New York.”

“Should I book a hotel?”

“A car will take you to The Four Seasons.”

“When I land, maybe...”

Don’t go there, Viv, Siobhan warns, as if she’s next to me and knows the next stupid thing I’m about to say. She’s right. I should shut up.

“...we could have dinner, to catch up.

—Alex?”

“It’s a busy time.”

“Of course....”

Don’t say it, Siobhan. Don’t say, *I told you so*.

“You need to get to the private terminal. If you miss this flight, you’ll be stuck until the storm passes.”

"Thanks, Alex."

"And Vivian."

"Yeah?"

"You should have called sooner."

After you disconnect, I pick apart everything you said. At least you were annoyed I waited to call, not that I called. That has to mean something.

Clutching my carry-on close to my body, I weave through the borderline hostile crowd toward the private terminal.

**

Fuel

Then,

like it was expected,

you moved closer,

leaving only the space of a

breath between us,

and reached for me,

wading your fingertips

into my hair

The Ritz-Carlton, Boston, MA

July 16, 2022

"Hey, don't fall asleep."

"Why? Half the point of great sex is the after-party nap."

"You can sleep after you talk."

"Damn, I knew I should have read the contract."

"Funny. Tell me about your friend."

"What friend?"

"The psychic. The one who said our meeting was *fated*?"

"Oh, her. What do you want to know?"

"For starters, what is it about us? Why are we *fated*?"

"This isn't what I would consider post-coital small talk."

"You're avoiding the question."

"Don't your clients like to recuperate after you've exhausted them?"

"Most just dress and leave, if you must know."

"Really? No shower? Just pants on and out the door?"

"Are you going to tell me or not?"

"And you say *I'm* relentless?"

"Come on. Out with it."

"Fine, but don't judge me."

"Girl Scouts' honor."

"We were having dinner, as friends do, and the subject of happiness came up. I admitted I rarely feel happy, though I think I said satisfied, even when things go as I want."

"You mean with work?"

“Work, life in general. It was a casual conversation. Like I said, Dori—that’s her name, by the way—and I have been friends since college. Just friends. She doesn’t read my palm or decide which stocks I buy, but...”

“But?”

“She called me a week or so later and said she’d been having dreams about me.
—Don’t raise your eyebrows. Not those kinds of dreams.”

“Aw.”

“They were metaphorical, prescient metaphors.”

“Do go on.”

“As her dreams tell it—picture me floating in the Aegean Sea—I’m never satisfied because I refuse to give up control.”

“Isn’t that a good thing, particularly in business?”

“I would say yes, but according to Dori, it’s a weapon I use to protect myself from the uncertain.”

“Interesting—but what does this have to do with me, with us?”

“In her dreams, in addition to floating in an ocean, which, by the way, in the psychic realm, is symbolic of release—”

“Good to know.”

“I’m being guided through the ruins of Greece by a woman, a poet—You. Per Dori, the ruins represent the destructive consequences of my controlling nature—”

“Wow, Dori. Tell us what you really think.”

“It gets better. Supposedly, being with a poet indicates I am ready to let go and explore my feelings. To find happiness—her words here—I have to let the guide—You—lead. That’s the *fated* part. Apparently, you are integral to my emotional awakening.”

“That’s sort of a lot.”

“It is. And, as a reminder, you did ask.”

“True. Anything else?”

“Nope. That’s it in a psychic nutshell.”

“Do you think she was right? About any of it?”

“That’s a big question. I was curious enough to make the time to attend Siobhan’s party. And, maybe it’s nothing more than the power of suggestion, but I do feel different. More settled, somehow.”

“That’s good, I think.”

“Are you okay? You look a little peaked.”

“It’s not every day I’m deemed an emotional guide. Should I be flattered or frightened?”

“The last thing I want is for you to feel uncomfortable. If you’re worried about my expectations—”

“It does feel a bit Twin Flame-esque—fated souls and all that...”

“Garbage? You can say it.”

“I was going to say bullshit.”

“Also accurate. Seriously, Viv, all I want is for us to have an honest relationship. I realize you have an idea of me, considering how we met, but I assure you, if Dori hadn’t piqued my curiosity, I wouldn’t have been at Siobhan’s party.”

“Well then, Cheers to Dori!”

“Cheers to Dori, indeed.”

**

August 6, 2022

Back Bay, Boston, MA

“Viv, what’s this I’m hearing about you and Alex? It’s not true, is it?”

—Viv?”

“I’ve seen him a few times without an appointment. It’s not a big deal.”

“I think you know that it is a very big deal.”

“He’s busy. He can’t predict his schedule. He had some time, so he came over. That’s all.”

“Came over? As in, to your home? Jesus, Viv.”

“So what? Every one of our clients could know everything about us, including where we live, if they wanted.”

“Letting clients into your home, into your private life, is not just unprofessional; it’s dangerous.”

“You’re being dramatic, Siobhan. I’m not an agent for the KGB. And Alex, he’s a friend.”

“A friend who pays you for sex.”

“Whatever. If this is about money, your commission, you don’t need to worry.

Appointment or not, he never leaves without stuffing cash into an agency envelope like a good client.”

“It’s not about the money.”

“Then what? Why did you summon me to your office like a sixteen-year-old who got caught smoking in the bathroom?”

“You need to stop seeing Alex. You know my one rule: No off-book interactions with clients. We’ve both seen what happens when boundaries are crossed.”

“You don’t know Alex or how he feels about me.”

“*Feels?* Viv? Please tell me you’re not in love with him.”

“We’re friends. I like him.”

“We’ve been in this business a long time; you know as well as I that this is how women get—”

“Get what? What are you implying about Alex? He’s not like that.”

“I’m asking you, as your friend, to stop seeing him.”

“As my *friend*? Let’s be honest, Siobhan, what you are is my well-spoken, well-educated pimp. As your employee, I assure you I won’t lose one of your best clients.”

“Alex isn’t my concern. You know me better than that.”

“Do I?”

“You’re upset, I understand. This is partly my fault. I should have spoken up sooner. Before this got out of—”

“Out of what, Siobhan?”

“Viv, you’re in love with a client.”

**

January 4, 2024

Flight to San Francisco International Airport

My phone buzzes, informing me that it is, once again, fully charged. I tap the *TMZ* app and start scrolling. Most of the names and faces are unfamiliar. I stopped following celebrity news in my early twenties; still, spying on famous strangers is better than thinking about you.

After the third story of a YouTuber getting arrested, I close the app and open the email from Jasmine. She was kind enough to send a list of potential questions. Considering my last interview with an actual corporation was a decade ago, during my senior year at BU, prepping might be a good idea.

Okay, first question: “What is your greatest strength?” Easy. My greatest strength is my ability to work with and build common ground among disparate groups. Next: “Where do you see yourself in five years?” Uh, good question. In five years, I plan to be a senior editor for your magazine. Cheeky but honest. “Tell us about your greatest regret?” Seriously? Jesus Christ.

I put down the phone and looked out the window. The sky is all grey clouds.

I can’t answer that question. Not without crying. Not without lying or humiliating myself.

After everything, my greatest regret should be foolishly falling for you, not heeding Siobhan’s warning, and letting boundaries get crossed, but it isn’t. Falling in love with you was unexpected and unprofessional, but it never felt wrong.

Until you left.

For months, with you gone, I withdrew from the world. I stopped working for the agency; I even stopped writing. I saw little point in responding to emails and texts, and even less in leaving my condo. I wasn’t sleeping, skipping meals entirely, barely existing.

My only relief was scrolling through photos and stories about you. The shots of you working, shaking hands, and attending events gave me a sense of comfort, like we were somehow still together. The other photos, the ones of you out and about and not alone, gutted me—those I could only tolerate through squinted eyes.

My days were quickly getting darker. If Siobhan, who stuck by me despite how I treated her, hadn’t helped Gabby track me down, my poetry collection would not have been published, and I wouldn’t have had a reason to pull myself out of the black hole I was sinking into. Worse, I might have lost myself for good.

Still, even now, flying to Seattle to interview for poetry editor at *Verse Magazine*, and possibly start the life I’ve dreamt of since college, I’m not fully satisfied. Am I grateful to have my work recognized after so many years of trying? Of course, but if it were enough, really enough, I wouldn’t reread your letter asking me to join you in San Francisco. I wouldn’t stare at your words and wonder why I said no.

My biggest regret, if honest, and after everything, why lie, isn’t that we met; it’s that we broke apart. I was arrogant and naïve. I thought, eventually, if pushed hard enough, you’d bend in my direction.

I didn’t understand I was setting us on fire. I never imagined how fast we’d burn.

**

Oxygen

*The world is crashing to its end,
a wave against a sea wall,
a dragon breathing fire
I’m waiting for your
moon-mumble mouth
to find me,
for your songbird
voice to lull me,*

*for your hands to
whisper your secrets
to my soul*

October 17, 2023

Outside Othello's Coffee, Boston, MA

"Come on, Viv. We talked about this last month. We knew it was coming."

"Don't do that, Alex."

"Do what?"

"Act like relocating to San Francisco is nothing."

"I go where I'm needed. It isn't up to me."

"Can't someone else run the day-to-day while you stay here and focus on the big picture?"

"There is no big picture if the day-to-day fails."

"So that's that. You're leaving."

"I'm leaving? Last month, you were coming with me; you couldn't wait to pack."

"Alex, please."

"Please, what?"

"You know my life is here."

"Look at this photo—this house, this view, it's amazing, Viv. Could your life not be here? There's a lighthouse in the backyard for Christ's sake."

"It looks desolate."

"It's a bridge away from the city."

"And you're going to what? Drive into the city, fighting traffic?"

"During the week, I'll stay in San Francisco, but on weekends—"

"That's what I thought."

"What does that mean?"

"I'll be hidden away in some lighthouse while you live your real life in the city. Before, when we talked about moving, I guess I was naïve, but I thought we—"

"I work sixteen-hour days, Viv. That's my real life. I'm rarely home before midnight, and I leave every morning by seven. You know my schedule."

"What about *my* work, Alex?"

"You can write every day, all day. Sausalito is teeming with artists. Join a group, meet with poets, exchange ideas. Or you could sit on the deck with a glass of wine and finish the novel you've talked about."

"Finish?"

"You know what I mean."

"I'm talking about my other work—with Siobhan."

"That can be over, finally."

"And my condo? What will I do? Rent it?"

"Sell it."

"What?"

"Thanks to Covid, downtown property values are plummeting. Selling now is smart."

"It took me years of saving....my condo is all I have."

"Viv, you're shaking. Here, take my coat."

"I'm not cold, Alex. I'm upset."

"Why? I'm offering you a lighthouse and an ocean. You're fighting to keep what? A condo that's losing value? Your position with Siobhan? I thought saying goodbye to the agency, to that life, was what you wanted."

"Then what? What happens when you lose interest and things end? I'll never be able to rebuild my client list, my friends will be strangers, and another condo in Boston will be out of the question."

"Why do things have to end?"

"I don't know, Alex, you tell me."

"You don't trust me? Is that it?"

"All I know is in the year and a half we've been seeing each other, nothing has changed."

"I thought you were happy. Was I wrong?"

"Happy? With us? What are we, really? A couple? Because when I listen to you, to what you are offering, it sounds very custodial."

"Viv, when have I ever tried to control you?"

"What you're asking now, Alex, for me to basically live as a guest in your house, to give up everything that is mine, and to see you when you decide, seems nothing if not controlling."

"This conversation has gone completely sideways. Let's go inside, sit down, and recalibrate."

"Sitting won't help. You're leaving, and it's your way or no way, am I right? I give up my independence and security—"

"Viv, wake up. Your livelihood, your existence, is predicated on mercurial clients. And one wrong word to the right person, one story in *The Herald*, and it all goes away. You think you're standing on solid ground. You're on sand—if not smoke."

"Thanks for the illumination. Now, can you explain this: if I go with you, won't my existence still be predicated on a client?"

"It isn't like that with me. You know that."

"So I'll be living with you, attending events, and meeting your colleagues?"

"It's not that simple. I answer to investors, the board—in time, when there's more distance between you and your other life..."

"I see."

"I don't want to walk away from you, Viv. From us."

"Right. I'm the poet who makes everything make sense. So says a psychic. Though, apparently, not quite enough sense."

"That's low and untrue."

"Then offer me something real."

"We'll be together. Why isn't that enough?"

"Because, Alex, it's just more of the same."

**

Combustion

*I fell against you, sweaty and
spent, no longer solely
myself, now with you as a
permanent part of me*

January 4, 2024

Four Seasons Hotel, San Francisco, CA

I drop my bag by the door, head straight for the shower, and crank the dial to the hottest setting. The steam clears my head, and the spray burns off the dank odor of the airport.

I stay until the water turns cool. I don't want to get out. I like it here, with the water beating against me. It's a distraction from what I'm actually doing: waiting for you to call, listening for the door, hoping you knock.

How you sounded earlier, distant, not pausing when I said I was going to Seattle, seemingly uninterested in why, makes my stomach list. I want it to matter, how I'm ready to leave Boston, sell my condo, and say goodbye to my old life—everything you wanted. I want you to care.

Wrapped in the hotel robe, I collapse on the king-size mattress. The cerulean comforter and the feathery foam-green pillows turn the bed into an ocean. Exhausted and warm beneath a sea of Egyptian cotton, the gentle waves lull me to sleep.

I wake to the sound of your breathing. Strange how, even with our months apart, even in the dark, I'm certain it's you.

"I didn't think you were coming," I say.

"I wasn't sure if I could make it. I didn't want to promise anything."

I wait for my eyes to adjust and then slide out of bed. I see your outline in the stiff desk chair and move toward you.

"Hey," I say, now right next to you. I want to reach for you, make sure you're real. Instead, I tuck my hands into the deep pockets of the hotel robe. "When did you get here?"

"About twenty minutes ago."

"What time is it?"

"Ten-forty-five."

"Feels like I've been asleep for days."

"You're exhausted, that's why."

"Were you going to wake me?"

"I was considering it."

The urge to confess, to whisper, "I made a mistake, I don't want less of you; I want more," into your ear is overwhelming. Saying it, though, might ruin things.

"I'm awake now," I say.

"I see that."

I lean forward, pressing my side against your arm, and touch your face. Sprigs of stubble prick my fingers. I keep going, kneeling until our faces are level. A little sleep drunk and a lot lonely, I lean in and kiss you.

Your lips are stiff. Unwelcoming.

I've misread things. I thought your coming here meant something, that I meant something. Embarrassed, and even more, angry, I want to shake you and shout, "Why are you here if not for me?"

Before I can pull away, you take my face in your hands, press your lips against mine, and slip your tongue into my mouth.

Everything in me softens.

You open my robe and slide your hands over my skin.

**

Burn

*When you tire of me,
don't reply,
I don't want to see the
words of our demise or
read an obituary of our love
I'll understand your silence
I'll recognize my blank screen
to mean goodbye*

January 5, 2024

The Four Seasons Hotel, San Francisco, CA

Grey light seeps into the room. It can't be later than six. My head aches, and my insides feel damp, like I wore my soul out in the rain. I'm afraid to move, of what I will find. I close my eyes and pretend I can hear the rhythm of your sleepy breathing. I imagine inching my hand to your side of the bed and feeling the warmth of your skin beneath my fingers.

But you're already gone. I can sense it.

I roll over and toss the cerulean sea off my body. On my way to the bathroom, I see it sitting on the desk, purposefully placed: an agency envelope.

I grab my phone. Then drop it. Calling you won't change anything. My knees buckle. Giving in, I slide down the wall and stare at the room's high ceiling. From here, on the floor, melting into the caramel carpet, everything seems so far away, so impossibly out of reach.

by Wendy Brown-Báez

Held with gestures of renunciation

–inspired by the poem Autumn by Rainer Maria Rilke
Leaves fall...with gestures of renunciation

What holds me up is the sky
Today it is orange with smoke from the Colorado fires
Two days ago it was gray with gentle snowfall
Two weeks ago yellow leaves against a sharp blue
Tonight the clouds may part and I will see the moon

I remember how the moon held me up and kissed me
when my heart was breaking
I remember the sea held me up as I stood on the shore
and said goodbye to the land
and the man I had come to love

I came home with a soup ladle and a Shabbat tablecloth
I came home with the man's heart so he had to reclaim it
but he intended to take it back with him to his country
He stuffed it in his duffle bag along with a resentment
that cut the cord binding me to him

What holds me up is a red chair I bought at IKEA
and that my son assembled
I have two chairs perfect for company
but we will not be able to sit together

What holds me up is knowing that love never ends
It twists and turns, dives to the bottom and hides
It becomes grit in the oyster coated into pearl
It leaves a scar I wear proudly

Here, I point, is where the wound happened
Here is the proof that I was held
with gestures of love

Joyful Surrender

Because this life is not long enough
for everything I want / hope / adore
everything that has brought me to my knees
the blood of roses / the astonishment of mountains
because there is still Paris
there is that one last kiss / one last dance
because I am feeling the urge to seek / envision / explore
the way I once did when I was able to leave
everything behind and start over
and start over
and the ragged edges of my heart
become the frayed hems of prayer flags
releasing prayer into the wind
because I am looking back only to reflect on how far I have come
how many friends I have lost
how many good-byes litter my path
and because when I climb to the beam
in that lighthouse along the rocky shore
I see farther than I ever saw before
I see that we are all lost in a raging sea
blinded by rain / I see we are all winding our way
back home where love throws a warm blanket around
our shoulders and says yes come on in

This is how it goes

I fall in love with the candle's
yellow glow,
the yellow leaves outside
my window,
the yellow gauzy ribbon
cascading from a silver spiral
hung on the back of my door
next to the lines
drawn with pencil to measure
my grandson's height.

This is how we go:
the delirious ride into the unknown,
the belief in salvation,
no matter how it looks at the moment.

I want to wear feathers on my head
like the Irish singer Julia.
I want to submerge myself
in the algae forests
like the octopus guy.
I want to drink stars and spit
out a tender rain to
bring the deserts
back into bloom.

Does the world wait for me
to notice?
Do the leaves falling
on the parking lot
care that I loved
their fragile beauty
while they were green and
I also love the crunching sound
my boots make
as they decay?
Do the birds
with their instinct to fly south
know that I am below
counting the days

until I rush inside,
lamenting the cold?

This is how we go:
a gentle goodbye
surrounded by the calm
chanting of monks
is knife sharp contrast to
a blood spattered pavement,
a knee on your neck,
a lonely bed in ICU,
a bomb dropped on your city.

I fall in love with my knees
even though they hurt.
I fall in love with
wind while it chases me
inside.

I tell myself there is more
than yellow candles
and a small warm room
but these are mine
and I hold them close.

Pray with your whole body

Pause under the tall tree and look up.
Let your eyes be filled with green
and sky. How those branches
stretch upwards to sunlight and how they
receive rain, catch starlight, how they
are refuge, how they tower over
people scurrying to work, slouching home
to evening. Notice the boulder.
Sit on its rough surface and hear
its ancient song of strength.
Plant your feet in grass as lush
as summer's best frock. Slip a little
into a daydream. Breathe more deeply,
let the gratitude in your heart
crack it open. Take the serenity back with
you to the bus stop, the counterbalance to
jarring wheels over broken streets.
Look at the other passengers with blessing.
Remember they, too, are
as fragile as you are, born with a light
within, ready to flare through the dark.
They too have been wounded
on the sharp edges of the world.
Bless and bless no matter how hard it is to do,
how much resistance you feel.
Be blessed by your heart breaking into
green and blossom and the pure blue
light of loving. Receive yourself like a
gift, a jewel, an offering, a debt that
cannot be repaid, only adored,
savored, given away.

This is not a dress rehearsal

This is your life, accumulation of desires and dreams. This is the choice to move without knowing where you were going and the choice to return when it became obvious that loneliness was your compass. This is the pilgrimage to the center that took many detours along the way. These are the prayers for those you love and for those you have never met but feel deep in your bones.

This is for the meandering along the alleyways of Córdoba, how entranced you were, how you fell in love with a place and a history and yet you never got to return.

This is for the prayers tucked into the wall in Jerusalem and how you wished for a peace and reconciliation that you are starting to believe can never happen.

This is for the children you cared for, as a nanny, as a teacher, as a friend, and most of all as a mother, a role you still wonder if you did the right thing. This is for the unknown always beckoning, the bouquets of Gerber daisies you couldn't really afford but could not live without. This is for the dinner parties with stories and laughter, and too much wine.

This is for the heartaches and the heart throbs and the healing that took so much devotion. This is for the ways you have learned to stick to your meditation practice when the world is burning and it seems like it will all go down in the storm.

This is for the beauty that you set out to see, and once in a while, hold, and in any case find a home for in your own body, your illuminated soul.

The Key

after Ross Gay's poem "Opera Singer"

Today my heart is shredded. I am ready to gather
the pieces in a basket and burn them in the fire,
a bonfire of grief. Let the smoke ascend to the heavens,
a black plume of despair.

And in my grief, I join a Zoom call
about climate and grief which I think
might make me even more depressed
because I'll be listening to everyone's grief

and it won't give me solace,
only let me know I am not making this up, we really are
on a ship that is sinking faster every day of choosing
privilege over cooperation.

And the speaker who is Native American
asks what if we stop saying the earth is broken,
what if we say the earth needs healing
and wholeness?

And I think of healing like when you need
to stop and rest, and hydrate,
and eat from your mother's hands, a spoonful at a time,
and cool popsicles and clean sheets.

And the image of a door appears.
It feels as though I have been handed a key,
not to choose between door number 1, total collapse,
or door number 2, a sudden
shift in consciousness of the collective,
but a different door.

It feels like this—a golden key to open
a door and love spilling all the way across.

How to Be a Good Neighbor

Dig a garden, make it circular with plenty of room
for sunflowers in the middle.
Order seeds carefully. Read the instructions
for the right climate, for sun and rain.
You'll have to pick up a watering can.
You might as well choose one that is
beautiful, instead of solid tin,
go for the one painted in ladybugs.
You'll need a good trowel
and a pair of pants you don't mind getting dirty.
If you don't have a pair, get some
at the secondhand store.
You might as well take the one with deep pockets.
Lay out the plot, marking off space for vegetables.
Your intention is much more than bringing something
to the potluck. You know the family down the street
could use a few zucchinis and a loaf of bread.
Or maybe make zucchini bread.
That's if you have time. Maybe the elderly couple next door
will appreciate a crisp green salad and a bouquet of pansies.
Plan for a riot of color. Or rather, don't plan, let them
come out to play like wildflowers in a meadow.
Leave room for a rosemary bush, thyme, mint and basil.
Plan for couples stopping to take selfies.
Plan for kids to squat down to see if roly pollies will curl up.
Plant something delirious for butterflies.
Know the bees will come and you will have done something
immeasurable to save our Mother Earth.
Or if you can't save Her, at least you have celebrated Her.
For the sake of the neighborhood, you are that lot
filled with scent and color and flavors.
Smell your fingertips. They tell you a story
of life coming back after the winter.
You remember how good it is to sit on the earth.

Moon Rise

The moon rises behind you
in a familiar sky while your feet
stand on unknown ground.
You remove your rags of despair
and empty your bag of
all correspondence: letters, postcards, even the
message you had planned on tucking into a bottle
to toss into the sea. You lick the salt
from your lips, and the kisses, too, and cream
the sunburn on your cheeks one last time.

It's time to say goodbye
to the path you walked and
even though you hesitate a moment,
poised between all that
you discarded along the way
and all you
gathered into your pockets,
you know the way forward
is yours alone.
Only troubled ghosts
wave you on. The others
have their own
stories to tell.

It's time to move into
something entirely new
birthed by you
after the long journey
following the map of consolations
etched on your inner walls.
No matter whose hand
you held or whose bed you warmed,
you know it is
a solitary threshold you now cross.
The moon silvers your head
as you open your arms to the space
you now inhabit
and the grace you
recognize as your own.

A Martyr
Richard Weems

The smallest one went by Kich. Then came Yarim and finally Qatta. Because the three of them were the only ones on the base from nearby villages (and farming villages at that), the other soldiers spat on the floor when any of them passed. While other soldiers ransacked nearby houses for infidels, requisitioned brandy from the marketplace and fondled girls, Kich, Yarim and Qatta carted trash and cleaned out the latrines. After curfew, they threw dice in the barracks. Qatta had a book of fairy tales for his toddler back home. While he practiced reading aloud stories of magic cattle and ancient curses that turned water wells into vats of crickets, Yarim and Kich sat on the floor and smoked cigarettes. Qatta balanced the book on his knees and touched it only with the tips of his fingers, as though afraid his beefy hands might crush it. One day, their sergeant assigned them to a rusted tool shed, where he'd locked up a local beggar. The shed sat by the perimeter fence just yards away from the village marketplace. *Make him scream*, the sergeant commanded these three, *and make sure everyone hears it*. He had men with more experience at such tasks, but he had sworn to throttle the farm out of these reluctant soldiers.

Kich, Yarim and Qatta stared at the prisoner kneeling before them as though his sunburnt scalp would reveal how to best mistreat him. All three of them had rolled coins into the palm of this beggar at one time or another. Kich had once carried wood to his shack and helped his pregnant wife build a fire. The beggar had a little girl, only a month older than Qatta's son, who liked bread soaked in milk.

Yarim told Qatta to lift the prisoner to his feet and shove him back down.

Scream, he admonished, *and we'll release you*. The prisoner kept his eyes on the floor. Kich stamped on the prisoner's hand and retreated as though his foot had caught fire.

Enough already. Yarim threw down his cigarette. He grabbed the prisoner by the beard and dragged him as far as the ankle chain permitted. *Scream!* The prisoner groaned. Yarim slapped his face and head. *Do as you're told!* The prisoner's pronounced nose trickled blood.

The sun set and the prisoner still had not screamed, so Kich used his bayonet for the first time since training and jabbed the prisoner in the cheek. *Obey, and we'll let you go.* Yarim whipped him with a belt.

Qatta held the prisoner down when asked but otherwise didn't join in. *Maybe if one of us screamed,* he suggested, but Kich and Yarim shook their heads. If the sergeant caught them faking...

All night, Qatta stared while the prisoner breathed in heavy gasps. His friends slept in the far corner of the shed, but he barely recognized their shapes. They smelled of cigarettes now rather than damp, rich soil.

The next day, Kich set the tip of his bayonet in the stove. While he twisted it in the coals, he muttered to the prisoner, *Will we have to make your wife scream? Your little girl?* Qatta kneeled on the prisoner's back while Kich pressed the gray, hot blade to the back of the prisoner's neck. *Do it already,* Yarim grumbled from his cot while he cleaned his pistol. Finally, the prisoner obliged. He screamed in a staccato of yips and whoops as though embarrassed by his own voice. Yarim opened the shed windows and patted Kich's shoulders. Kich tousled Qatta's black hair, but Qatta only smiled at the thought that this assignment was finally over.

The sergeant yelled from outside the window, *Good job. One more day, and you'll be one of us.* Kich and Yarim leaned into their work, eager to please. They burned cigarettes into the soles of the prisoner's feet and smacked his genitals with a spoon. Qatta lay face down in his cot and covered his head with a pillow.

That night, Qatta dreamt he was paddling a raft across a lake. Out there, in the darkness ahead of him, sat home. Behind him, the prisoner's screams hurtled across the water like distant machine gun fire.

When those first yips rattled from the shed windows, people in the nearby marketplace admired the beggar for not accepting his torment in peace. They gathered on their side of the perimeter fence and prayed. The next morning, a scraggly-looking Qatta lumbered out of the shed to fetch three trays of chow. He pulled his beard into a smile when he saw these locals, who used to greet him with wide arms and give him kabob and bean soup, but the locals

looked away. When Qatta was out of earshot, the people murmured, *The beggar haunts him while still alive.*

That afternoon, the screams went suddenly silent. People looked to the shed to catch sight of the beggar's soul, but instead the walls shook. Someone yelled Qatta's name, then the voice devolved into gurgles. A squad of soldiers kicked their way into the shed. A single crack of gunfire.

Kich came out first, slung over a soldier's shoulder. Only his small stature identified him, as beefy fists had pummeled his face into stewing meat. Yarim, carried on a board, had been opened from ribs to hip by the bayonet that stuck up from his body like an obscene appendage. Three soldiers dragged out Qatta, the back of his skull a mess of shards. Finally, the beggar's head in a bucket. He peeked over the rim, as if to say to onlookers, *All you do is stare.* The sergeant barked at his men, *Faster, faster,* as they loaded the carnage into a truck.

The First Pain
Richard Weems

Three mothers had begged Salma for her services and promised twice her usual fee if she would take care of their daughters by the weekend. But when she arrived at the oiling shack with four extra helpers and two foldup tables in tow, she found only one mother waiting on the porch. The mother furled her brow with embarrassment while her daughter, who had hair thick enough to hide a yam in, fussed and pulled against her mother's grip.

Nearby and looking just as embarrassed stood Lucee, Salma's oldest and most trusted assistant. Salma raised her finger to wag at Lucee for not telling her she no longer needed the extra help and furniture, but Lucee had done the right thing by not calling her. No knowing anymore who could be listening in.

Instead, Salma turned her finger to the extra assistants and pointed them back the way they had come. The one closest to Salma gave her an obstinate squint, but the one at the other end of the table they carried had already turned and tugged her back. All four of them were still likely to show up later at Salma's expecting to be fed for having done nothing. Sad.

No doubt, the other two mothers had been pressured into staying home by their husbands. Or maybe they were being watched by police, or maybe those squawking, unmarried feminist bitches out to ruin everything got to them. Salma had been counting on those fees so she could see someone about her hip, and even worse, the worry on this mother's face told Salma she was going to get no more than her usual rate, if that. The mother murmured an apology as she handed over a crumpled fold of money, but Salma took it without counting and grabbed the daughter by the chin with her other hand. She had so few clients nowadays, she was glad at the chance to get away from doing other people's laundry. The girl may have been a fusser, but she didn't resist once an elder had a hold of her. Salma peered so deeply into the girl she could have seen bone.

"Today," Salma muttered, "we're going to carve you into a woman."

Lucee motioned the mother and daughter into the shack while Salma pulled herself up the single step of the porch. She studied the line of oil palms for shadows of police or angry fathers. The pain in her hip throbbed as far as her ribs, and she'd walked barely a mile. Used to be a time she could walk from Kambia to Lat in less than a week with business to tend to

every day. She arrived as an honored guest. Families plied her with wine and food and sometimes even watched as Salma opened the legs of their girls, who were sweaty and entranced with dance and drink, and cut away their slut-skins so they could be nothing but faithful to their husbands. Some families claimed a woman treated by Salma could get pregnant on the first try. But now, it was against the law for parents to make their girls faithful wives. Salma barely knew the country she lived in anymore. She had to work out of an abandoned oiling shack, one she had to leave bare so no one suspected and thus she never had furniture that let her work in any kind of comfort. Salma pressed on the thigh of her good leg for support as she hobbled inside.

The girl fussed and whined against her mother's guidance. Not that this mother kept a firm hand--she fretted and recoiled from grabbing her daughter too hard, as though the girl's arms were dried twigs. The girl did look a little tall to be of proper age, but girls shot up quickly sometimes. She told Lucee, "Give them tea. I'll prepare." Lucee, of course, already had a thermos at the ready.

While the mother drank tea, Lucee cooed and muttered to the daughter like a mother cat and helped her onto the stained wooden table. She promised to show the girl how to make a headwrap as solid as a helmet. Salma smirked and told the girl, "Lucee could tumble down a waterfall and keep her head covered." The girl looked momentarily curious as Lucee produced orange fabric from her bag but just as quickly began to whine. The girl's mother tried petting her head, but the girl only rose in pitch.

"Sing!" Salma hissed. "Keep her quiet!" The mother stroked her daughter's cheeks and muttered a lullaby about bringing her a biscuit. The child quieted, but her lower lip still warbled back and forth. What else was Salma to do? Send the mother away and let her daughter grow up a whore? This country had already given up so much. Lucee touched her forehead to the girl's and conjured a reluctant smile out of her.

"She is to marry Anan." The girl's mother stepped in. "He may complain," she explained, her eyes wide with apology. This mother had an accent, maybe from the east. How sad, the distances women had to travel for proper care. Without her first pain, how would a girl ever be ready for the pain of the wedding night, of birth? Such shameful times.

“He will not complain long.” Salma picked up the girl’s chin and looked over her face as though she were reading tossed bones. “When he feels like he’s taking her virginity night after night.” Salma went out back to fetch some glass for the procedure.

She had placed the sand pile beyond the reach of shadows, so it was burning to the touch as Salma poked through it. Her hands had long ago thickened into a protective glove. She was cautious only because of the glass inside. The glass had to be hot so it could cook the girl’s blood into a harmless paste.

It had been a few weeks since Salma had last broken some bottles in the pile, but she could find only two shards large enough for her to get a proper grip on. She tried sharpening a smaller one on a nearby rock, but it got so small she could have lost it entirely. In these hard times, she couldn’t afford to leave glass inside a girl.

Thankfully, the larger shard had a thick point. Salma sharpened it just enough to make it precise and sharp and gimped back into the shack.

Lucee had turned the table and the girl so Salma could use the sun. Such a faithful helper--she never questioned Salma’s work, appreciated how tough it was for Salma nowadays. Lucee never took money and later, when the no-good helpers would show up at Salma’s for food to keep their mouths shut, Lucee would save Salma the indignity of serving those louts. Of course, Salma had taken care of Lucee’s own girls, darling twins. What would they have been now? Twenty-three? Unfortunate. Even this table stank of indignity, but Salma couldn’t work from the floor anymore. Still, the table did lend a medical feel to the whole procedure. The mother sung her biscuit lullaby a little louder as her daughter whined again, like a guinea fowl with hiccups. Lucee grabbed the girl’s chin and pointed her face towards the ceiling.

Salma leaned over the edge of the table but still could barely reach the girl. Her back rebelled when she tried to straighten up, so she motioned for Lucee to bring the girl down the table further. Finally, she got her fingers inside so she could open the girl and prepare her for the cut, but the girl was slippery, unruly.

“Has this girl shed her first blood?”

“Only just the other day.” The mother cringed with shame at having waited so long.

Salma was more shocked that she hadn’t guessed. Was she so old she couldn’t read a girl’s age anymore? “It will hurt more,” she explained as she leaned back in.

The mother caressed her daughter's forehead. "Anan came asking for you, so you must be ready for him." The mother peered into her daughter's eyes as she pressed down with all her weight.

"Lucky girl," Salma muttered, though she doubted the girl could hear her, the way she burred and cried. "Your mother cares about you so much."

Nakedness

Gillian Clark

The room I left you in abruptly is the angry one
There the open fire rages from my stokes
but you must keep warm if you are to stay
perched on the wooden stool defiant.

Outside your car waits for you to emerge
and leave me forever.

Here in my white room I cry now
and lie naked in a foetal position.
You come in and lay your naked leg against mine
and I whisper I'm frightened
for you you fear only craving too much
How the flesh can create bondage and bonding.

My mother is the innkeeper and discovers us
in the white room –
I sit up ashamed of my nakedness
and wrap myself in the kimono you offer.

We retreat to the car outside and I rest on your shoulder
Dry eyes clear mind dreams real
A huge hug promises bonding over craving.

Wet

What I wanted—your wet shirt,
wet skin. We were like stones

naked in rain. We were like
peaches, plums, blueberries

floating on water and swirling there.
My shoes were ruined by the rain.

The sides of houses received
soft light. The rain kept washing

and rinsing them. Clouds brought
the night in. Our clothes

hung on the banister. It was warm
in the bed at the top of the stairs.

Morning came, part flame,
part blossoming. We could do

anything—travel anywhere,
see everything, kiss

when we wanted to, drink
prosecco and kiss again.

Urgent Care

In the gray wait space, a love song
sweet with desire lifts
from chaotic background clamor.

A child, his skin empurpled
by illness, hides
under a plastic couch,

having been purified, hands, face,
with clear gel. His mother's cards
protect him—Aetna, a photo ID.

A singing face slides past
on the overhead screen. A digital bird
dips for food, dives, and walks under water

on the bed of a stream. Willows
lean toward the bird.
The screen, my green blouse,

my topaz ring are more alive
than I am. But the child and I
might scan clean this time, rise

from our transport chairs, fold them
back in dark closets, fill our days
that were in a moment emptied.

What I Want

is what everyone wants, the dead
returned to us from the ground,
the thin hands of a woman

who lost so much the curves
of her body were planed away.
Can I have Grandma back?

Opa beside her? His tool box was
filled with wooden blocks and empty
aspirin bottles he breathed smoke into

so I had something magical—
bottles of clouds. I want people
taller than I am, their mild

competence as they cook
or read a library book or turn
through the German newspaper.

I want that big drawer full of
board games, Animal Rummy,
puzzles, Clue. I want to sleep

and wake again, no more vomit
on the floor, no more coding
that brings people running

to stand alert by my bed. I need
the scars, the sharp sense of danger
that tells me what life is—fear,

yes—and the scent of pines in the deep
green woods. I want the crayons
I had in first grade, the big box

of 48 rainbow colors, some broken,
but some keeping their soft points.
The scuffed box, that waxy smell.

Paper Products

LB Sedlacek

It sits in a curve, the building, the old warehouse. It's been empty for years. For sale. Everything is always impossibly for sale. It was a flower wholesaler.

Long rows of roses, petunias, daisies, whatever you could imagine could grow, watered from sprinklers in the ceiling – all of them for sale. Event planners would drive from far away, or close by to get flowers in bulk for weddings, funerals and other flower-filled happenings. But then the prices came down, or more people started doing their own events for cheap instead of hiring a planner. And the warehouse closed.

It's been empty, and boarded up for years. Except this year, the front door is sometimes open, and a car parked beside it. Sometimes, there's a truck. But the chains are still up at either driveway, and the For Sale sign, that's still up, too.

What could possibly be going on in an empty warehouse on a country winding road in the foothills of North Carolina? It's isn't flowers.

Zeke, not his real name, drives past. Sees the black truck. Sees the white SUV. One is parked in front of the office door. The other is parked in the back. The chains are up, a long stick lays in front of one of the chains, and several bricks sit in the middle of each paved drive.

The building's owner hired him. The real estate agent with the listing gave him a key. The owner's name was Oliver. The real estate agent was Sylvia. Sylvia and Oliver called it unsanctioned activity. He called it squatting. But this wasn't a residence, no one was living there.

Zeke parked his truck up by the turnaround spot by the mailboxes near a couple of trailers. One of the guys there worked on cars and that's where he would work on them. He trudged past his truck across Highway 90 to the woods on the other side.

Mud, long grass, sticks and no trail – still he made it behind the so-called empty warehouse in less than 30 minutes. He peeked through a dark window.

It wasn't drugs as he'd suspected. It was flowers, but not like when it was open for wholesale. No these flowers had more packaging than stems. The plastic wraps were chock full of diamonds.

Zeke snapped a few photos moving bent over almost crawling on his knees from flower bed to flower bed. The warehouse was quiet with only scatters of echoes of voices. He counted two distinct accents. Both male. One older than the other. The younger sounding voice sounded like the operation's brains.

Zeke waited until he was back sitting in his truck, doors locked, to take his notes. He was old fashioned using a pen and notecards – he did everything on paper except pictures. The Agency he worked for required him to carry a smart phone, so he did.

He laid the department issued phone on the seat, pulled out his notecards and wrote:

Flowers
empty warehouse

2 man operation
Plastic wrappings = diamonds
No drugs
(He underlined the "No" 3 times)

He picked up the phone and dialed reciting the Case File by memory when the Agency Operator answered the phone. He repeated "no drugs" three times. Next, he emailed the photos. He sat the phone back down and waited.

He'd know the answer, whether he should proceed or stop, if he got a phone call or text. He adjusted his hat low over his eyes, kicked his boots at the floorboards, wiped the dirt off his jeans and pressed flannel shirt to pass the time. There wasn't much traffic on this country windy road deep in the heart of the Brushy Mountain range in North Carolina.

Forever turned out to be roughly six or seven minutes. He stared at the text, memorized it, then deleted it.

He had his answer. The two men at the so-called warehouse would soon have theirs. He wrote on another index card:

- 1) The Owner wants to sell his warehouse without any trouble, and
- 2) Paper Wrappings can not only be used to smuggle diamonds they can be used to hide bodies.

Then he went to work.

Singing Lessons

LB Sedlacek

Jordan sat with clenched hands. She stared at the judge. She gulped. Then answered the skinny balding lawyer standing right in front of her.

“My childhood was ripped away by him.” She pointed to the old man with flowing gray hair and a scraggly goatee. “He was manufactured. Everything about him. I spent money on his records, his merch, his concerts and all of it faked. He admitted he wasn’t even singing his own songs. It was a backup singer who sang the lead.”

“Objection your Honor. Mr. Tani had no legal control over his own recordings.”

The middle-aged Mom sighed. She said “What about when he became an adult when he turned 18? He could’ve confessed for the sake of his fans. He had an opportunity to do the right thing. He didn’t do that! He kept his secret and recorded two more albums.”

The crowd roared. The echoes overtook the small stuffed courtroom. The jurors gasped.

The judge slammed down her gavel. “Enough!”

Jordan wiped her eyes. She hung her head.

“I have an idea that’ll settle this.” The judge was smiling. “Mr. Tani why don’t you sing this song for us?” She pointed to a display stand of his work at the title of the #1 record with the most sales he’d ever had. “Whenever you’re ready.”

Mr. Tani was tall. Over 60 years of age, but not too heavy. He stood and smiled, dimples blazing. He cleared his throat. Then he sang. His voice was crisp and clear. It echoed throughout the hallway.

His lawyer shook his head. He growled under his breath. “I told you not to sing!” Next, the judge played Mr. Tani’s #1 record. The voices were nothing alike! She slammed her gavel down once more. “Jordan, I rule in your favor.” She glared at Mr. Tani. “You sir, need singing lessons!”

The Catechism

LB Sedlacek

Saturday classes. To learn. Except no one could meet on Saturdays. Apparently. Probably. Or not.

He – Pastor Ken had a busy schedule. Always. He was free on week nights for dinner and study.

And we parents, all working, all busy, all tired were more than happy to invite over the Pastor, feed him and then let him sit with our kids in the living room or walk outside in the yard to go over what the kids needed to know to progress, to be confirmed.

It was easier than driving to those Saturday classes. And we could go off and do whatever while the kids were having classes in our homes.

It seemed okay. It seemed more than okay. It seemed ideal. Until it wasn't. Until things went missing.

Pastor Hopper. Or Pastor Hop. He would say that same line with a wide tooth grin.

"How's it going, Pastor Hop?" echoed down the hallway. A line would form right after church for everyone to issue invitations to the Pastor for lunch or supper.

He put us at the top of the list. Our daughter was of age for catechism – classes to learn about and to be confirmed in the church.

When I had catechism, we met on Saturdays for three years. We met in Sunday School, too. It was like school for church.

Pastor Hopper, though, had new ideas. He liked to come over to kid's home for a meal and then study.

At first, we enjoyed it. We thought we were special. The thing is we weren't special – no, we were the special.

Lacey answered the door. "Mom, Dad. Pastor Hop is here."

She ushered him in to the kitchen. Soon we were all seated around the dining room table swapping jokes, food and stories over candlelight and wine for us and juice for the kids.

"Best meal I've had in a long time." Pastor Hopper ran a wide hand through his thick mop of hair. He pushed back from the table and nodded at Lacey. "Shall we begin our studies for the evening?"

My wife and I cleared the table in the kitchen while our Pastor taught our daughter about the Ten Commandments and more while he robbed us in our living room. Thing is, it took us more than one of his meetings to notice one thing missing here, one thing missing there. It took little convincing for my wife to agree with me that a camera was in order. We hid it in plain sight.

The camera showed he hid his takings in his frock. A great place to hide most anything – wearing all black, deep pockets, maybe a robe.

The videos were only the start. The police did a search of his digs. His yard was not mowed, but his basement was full of lawn equipment, coins, stamps, crystal, anything he could carry home from his parishioners houses to sell.

So much for a safe harbor, my wife joked without laughing. So much for catechism I joked back. We left that church and found another one that let us join just because we wanted to – no studying, no stealing, no harm. And it was safe.

Big Hips: A Cento Poem

Gene Twaronite

Everyone in me is a bird.
Wounded with fierce desire and worn with strife,
she survives all man has done.
The eye of a little god, four cornered.
The bird's fire-fangled feathers dangle down.

We wear the mask that grins and lies.
I thought that love would last forever, I was wrong.
Love has gone and left me and the days are all alike.
I hate them as I hate sex.
I weary for desires never guessed.

I wish I had a river that I could skate away on.
There are moments that cry out to be fulfilled.
This is the beginning.
Life doesn't frighten me at all
I am the master of my fate.

These hips are big hips,
they shake the mountains when they dance.
When I am an old woman, I shall wear purple.
We are, I am, you are.
Turning and turning in the widening gyre

With lines, in order of appearance, by Anne Sexton, Sarojini Naidu, John Trudell, Sylvia Plath, Wallace Stevens, Paul Laurence Dunbar, W.H. Auden, Edna St. Vincent Millay, Louise Glück, Amy Lowell, Joni Mitchell, Mary Oliver, Billy Collins, Maya Angelou, William Ernest Henley, Lucille Clifton, E.E. cummings, Jenny Joseph, Adrienne Rich, and W.B. Yeats

Water Sprites **Catherine McGuire**

Flickering tongues of mist
above still, gray-green silk

on a day when sun floats in a murk
of clouds, a wet-in-wet watercolor,

and this chill ends all growing.
These puffs of fog dance—

a tribe of breath
or children of memories tossed

in a riverine sacrifice,
or ghosts of lives that cling to the flow,

refusing rebirth. Disturbing beauties,
alive/not alive, aloof,

demanding reverence,
they haunt me long after

the river is again
alone.

The Concession

Vaidhy Mahalingam

Late at night, in a small seventh-floor chaplain's office that looked out onto a fog-swept San Francisco Bay, Mathai Abraham flipped through his well-worn Bible, holding his breath for long stretches to stave off a distant odor of death. His fingers caressed the embossed leather of the back cover, seeking small comforts in familiarity. After finding the necessary passages and marking them with sticky-notes, he stepped outside his chaplain's office into the well-lit hospital ward, its 'death ward,' and shut the door behind him.

As he arrived at the side of Mrs. Williams' bed, she shifted her head on the pillow, turning towards the approaching shadow. She stared at him with desultory, constricted pupils. Her obese body was heaving under a white sheet. She brushed away the thin strands of gray hair that hung over her sunken eyes.

"Oh, chaplain, where *were* you? I have been paging you forever," she said, her voice slurred by morphine.

"I am here now, Mrs. Williams," he said. "How are you feeling?"

"Waiting for His call, son," she said. "Time to go home."

Mathai sneaked a peek at his watch. It had been a long shift and his well of compassion was running dry. He hoped to placate her quickly. For him, too, it was time to go home.

"I have led a wicked life, son," the patient spoke with labored breath. "Tell me, how is it going to be at where I wake up tomorrow? What am I going to see?"

"Oh dear, no one knows these things. Let us find you some prayers for ..."

"No one, chaplain? You have the Book in your hands. Doesn't Mark talk about unquenchable fires? And Matthew about gnashing teeth?"

"For the living know that they will die, but the dead know nothing; they have no further reward, and even their name is forgotten. Ecclesiastes. So don't worry, Mrs. Williams, you won't know anything once you are there. You will be blind in your sleep."

"I have been blind all my life, chaplain. As long as I don't have to meet my daughter in afterlife, I can't ask for anything else, I suppose. The bitch ..." she spat out and looked at Mathai for answers before continuing. There was a certain genuineness in her querying eyes that discomfited Mathai.

"We really can't answer that, but I hear you. With Jobi, my own son, I haven't spoken since ..."

Mrs. Williams started to respond, but her words petered out into a jumble of noises and then into raspy snoring.

Mathai adjusted her blanket, smoothed her hair, and clocked out from work on his app. He made it to the 8:35 pm train, like he always did.

###

Mathai headed home from the Richmond BART station, walking along 23rd street. At the edges of his perception, pimped-out cars blasting unfamiliar syncopated music cruised by against a backdrop of empty sidewalks and boarded-up storefronts. It was the third night after Christmas eve, and the early nightfall had seeped into his soul hours before he stepped out of his workplace.

A figure in a heavy hoodie was slumped against a neon-lit all-night donut shop and was waving to get his attention. When he paused, a hand stuck out an empty paper cup at him.

“One sec, brother,” Mathai said, reaching into his pocket; scrunching his nose.

The panhandler looked up. His hood slid back over his close-cropped hair, and in the blinking blue light of the ‘Open’ sign, Mathai saw his face: pustulated dark skin, bloodshot eyes. He looked barely seventeen. Where in the Lord’s name were his parents?

“Thank you, sir,” the boy slurred, his hands trembling as a couple of quarters pock-pocked into the cup.

Mathai stared at the child’s eyes, and the eyes started back. A visual conversation of mutual understanding crackled for an instant, and then the child’s eyelids drooped shut over his mocking glare, just as Mathai was beginning to shake with rage.

What was this kid doing to his life? Mathai felt the urge to grab him by his neck and shake the crap out of him. Like his dad used to shake him, holding the sides of the neck so as not to throttle, just shake him. He would wake up with bruises burning on the sides of neck. And why was he bothered by this street kid? If he had been ‘tougher’ with his own Jobi, perhaps he would not be in the mess he was now. A violent drunk for a father, a violent drunk for a son, and this despicable drunken child in front of him ... oh, Father!

Embarrassed and startled by the direction of his thoughts, Mathai shook his head to clear to divert them. He turned and walked towards home, as fast as his old legs could carry him, panting.

The house keys frozen in his hand; he sat on the porch steps for a while, waiting to catch his breath, staring at the dirty pink of the streetlight-lit foggy sky, and listening to the periodic passing of wailing police cars.

The familiar fragrance of ginger, garlic, roasted coconuts, and simmered onions wafted from inside, brought him to his senses. Fifteen minutes later than his normal time, he got up and jiggled the house key into the door lock, opening the gates to his private hell.

###

From the kitchen, Susan, the chaplain’s wife, paused from washing dishes in the sink and watched the front door slowly swing open. After shutting the door behind himself and placing his shoes in the closet, her husband crossed the hallway and shuffled into their tiny fifties-style wood-paneled bedroom, without making eye contact with her.

The rest followed predictable patterns, and her mind stayed in lockstep with them. He would strip down to his undershirt and boxers, neatly fold his work clothes, and tuck them into his closet. Then he would slip into his old, yellowing undershirt and drugstore fleece pants before returning to the Formica-topped dining table. There, he would await his supper, which he would nibble at after it arrived, while watching lectures from his favorite professor at Berkeley's Graduate Theological Union on his laptop.

His movements proceeded like a well-understood mechanism, to which she would have loved to take a hammer. However, she was intrigued by an unusual agitation in his movements that night.

Without looking at the wall clock, Susan knew it must be close to ten when he seated himself at the dinner table. He had always arrived by that same late BART train, his schedule unchanged since he started this job some eighteen years ago. At that time, terrified by the stories of her town she saw on the evening news, she had gently held his hand and asked him, "Achayan, why don't you drive to work?"

"And renege on my duties to keep this world clean?" was what he said. Since then she had gradually stopped asking questions for which parental answers could be expected.

Their marriage had developed into a tenuous connection, prevented from snapping altogether, till recently, by the shared responsibility of a child in the middle. Family dinner was him peering through his Coke-bottle glasses at his laptop, inattentive to the food in front of him, a good four hours after she had gulped her own dinner down with social media for company. Away from their world, Jobi partook of his dinner in his jail's cafeteria, and he had spoken little about that in his few phone calls.

She was taken aback when Mathai, instead of heading to the dinner table and his laptop, made his way to the fireplace.

He traced his finger over the inside wall of the fireplace. No fires from that hearth had warmed their home for years, but he seemed to have gotten some soot on his finger. He rubbed his finger several times with thumb, and spoke to the wall in a low, firm voice.

"This picture has to go," he said.

Susan set the steaming pot of *ishtu* she was carrying on a trivet on the dining table and looked up. His hand was on Jobi's tenth grade picture, which stood on the mantelpiece. Jobi beamed a shy grin from an inaccessible place.

"No!" she said, rushing to protect the picture.

"No?" Mathai asked, pressing it against his chest.

"Look at the frame. The *frame!*"

Perplexed, Mathai brings the picture forward and looks at the nondescript, old wooden frame.

"You stinking skinflint, don't you remember? You raised such a ruckus because I bought this frame from a dollar store for Jobi's kindergarten picture. You didn't speak to me for days!"

“But that was years ago, Susan,” Mathai spoke crossly, looking at his smiling son. “You were a postdoc, I didn’t have a steady job, and ... wait! Kindergarten picture?”

“That’s how much you notice anything in this house. I changed the picture when Jobi, uh, ...”

Susan wailed and lunged at Mathai to grab the picture, but he swung it out of her reach. She was left clutching at tufts of his graying chest hair that peeked from under his undershirt, and her nails dug into his chest.

He yowled over the tinkling of shattering glass and the cracking of a cheap wooden frame.

“My Jobi,” Susan wailed, her voice cracking.

###

Mathai picked up the photograph, now released from its frame, and stared at it as though trying to verify that it was indeed a picture of “her Jobi” she was referring to. He saw the blue t-shirt and plaid shirt that had flitted across his vision thousands of times in this very room, but the frozen smile of the boy wearing them was that of a stranger. Mathai crumpled the picture into his fist and the crackling of the photo stock sizzled around the room like electric sparks.

“Your Jobi is gone. The drunken fool,” he said, scanning the floor for glass shards.

Susan glared at him, her lip caught between her teeth.

“You have to understand,” he insisted, tossing the crumpled into the dark maw of the cold fireplace. “We have a morally compromised child.”

“He’s just a kid who made a mistake,” she said, her voice pleading.

“He is not a kid. It was not a mistake. It was a series of transgressions. Crimes, legally. For which he was tried - and found guilty.”

The word ‘guilty’ hung in the air heavily; it smothered Susan’s breath.

“We could have gotten him proper legal help. The court-appointed ...” she whispered.

Mathai cut her off. “Justice was served. As it should be. Contrition should follow, true contrition.”

She searched in vain for a weapon that could pierce his armor, perhaps one of his own weapons that would betray him. For a wife of a Biblical scholar, she knew only the basics of the scriptures. She jabbed with a feeble retort: “Let any one of you who is without sin, blah-blah-blah, Mr. Chaplain!”

Mathai remained composed. Using his familiar preacher’s voice, he said, “I am not casting stones at him, Susan. All I care about is keeping us safe.”

“Safe? What’s he gonna do to us? They locked him up!” Susan cried, her eyes searching for the crumpled photograph. And as the last phrase reverberated in her wounded heart and the pain became unbearable, she threw up her arms. She grabbed and gripped Mathai’s

shoulders, trying to make him face her, and screamed, “Ah! You have no heart - you are just like your father.”

She wanted to say other things, but she could only gasp for breath as Mathai’s hands were tightening around her neck.

###

Today has been a long day, and it is around quarter to ten now. Susan reheats dinner for her husband, vigorously stir-frying a shrimp curry on the gas range. She expects Mathai home in fifteen minutes, but after last evening, nothing is certain.

Last evening had started no differently from this one, with a different stew, warm and bubbling in the pot, but the night ended with him shaking her by the neck, like a rag doll.

Tonight, Susan hasn't noticed that the stove under the pan is not lit. Fragments of unthawed coconut oil float in shiny clumps over the deep vermilion sauce. She stops banging the spatula around the pan and, with her left hand, reaches to feel the welt on the sides of her neck. It stings. Her eyes, blurred by nascent tears, leave the haplessly pummeled crustaceans in the pan and rove across the kitchen, then all the way to the dimly lit living room with its thrift-store furniture, to glare at the top of the oak mantelpiece, now empty.

She hears the front door unlocking and her hand tightens on the wooden spatula, like how the chaplain’s hand did on her throat.

The door opens and Mathai enters, keys clenched in his hand, his gaze fixed on the doormat as he slips off his worn-out brown loafers. With a gentle nudge of his foot, he guides them into the coat closet beside the door.

She hoists the pot from the stove with a violet sweep of her arms and holds it like a shield. Oblivious to her presence, he gently sets his glasses on their usual spot on the dining table and walks to the bedroom.

She slams the pot of unthawed curry on the table. His glasses tremble over the tabletop due to the onslaught and the movement catches Susan’s attention. She swats the glasses off the table and across the room, and they rattle along the knotty-pine planks until they come to rest under the couch, now free of glass shards after multiple passes of vacuuming. Mathai would never think of looking for his glasses under the couch when he returns. Not that he can look for anything without his glasses.

She leans back against the dining table. After having seen his demeanor today, the cold clay of earth, the only Mathai she had known for twenty years, she is not so terrified of a repeat of the incendiary version she was shocked with last night.

Today her desire for his words burns more fiercely than the bruises on her neck. Having made his laptop inaccessible, she may yet get some words out of him tonight. To think that she fell in love with him because he had led her into his world of answers. Now that she has virtually blinded him, would he stumble into her world of questions?

Susan watches him return after washing his face. He wipes a few remaining drops of water from his chin with his hairy forearm. He lowers himself onto the edge of the soft cushion of the dining chair, his slight frame sinking into it like a block of concrete.

His hands grope all over the table, searching for his glasses. When he directs his puzzled glance at her, she figures the punishment she meted out was pathetically inadequate.

“Looking for something?” she asks.

###

Mathai faces the blurry figure of his wife. The dark skin of her breasts glint in the dull lighting of the room, peeking through her sloppily buttoned cotton nightshirt.

He fights his impulse to persevere in his search, for his glasses and for words. He slams the laptop shut with some force, mumbling, “I am beat.”

To block out awareness of whatever is expected of him, he squeezes his eyes shut and rests his head on the laptop, using his arms as a pillow. He replays a previously watched lecture in his mind, one in a series of topics in Christian eschatology.

Perhaps they fell off the table. He scrapes the floor, using one foot at a time. He can't lose this pair of glasses. They are his spares; he lost his better ones while napping on the BART train a few weeks ago. A deep fear grips his stomach. He reimagines the strokes of his father's leather belt scurrying across his back like flames of Gehenna. For losing his glasses. He was sixteen, had just started wearing glasses, and they broke when he attempted a heroic cycle kick in a soccer game. He was used to his *Achan* shaking him by the neck in his drunken stupor almost every night, but that night was the worst because his father was cold sober.

When he looks up, the fuzzy apparition of Susan is still there, standing tight-lipped, with her arms hanging limp, and her silence is more terrifying than his father's blows and belts ever were. But he is grateful for the silence, as the necessary conversation appears to have been postponed. He ignores the food laid out before him, gets up, and walks to the couch.

“I'm beat,” he mutters once again as he lies down on the cushions.

###

Susan watches Mathai arrange himself on the couch, legs stretched out straight and symmetrical, hands open to the ceiling. A corpse in a morgue or a yogi in repose. Moments earlier, she felt a flash freeze of terror when she saw him slamming the laptop shut. The fury she observed was a tiny offspring of the unfamiliar monster that had made its debut last night. Now seemingly relieved of that vile force, the man had reverted to Mathai, the chaplain she has known for years. Antiseptic and sterile; not the primeval demon that was manifested yesterday.

She remembers her neck again. Red welts she had seen in the mirror that morning had turned purple by evening, visible even with her skin being dark as a stained teak column. It burns when she touches them, mostly in her underbelly.

She walks over to the couch and speaks incredulously, “*You* are beat?”

"*Achan* beat me," he whimpers.

With some effort, Susan holds her rage. Is it about *him* now? Only when she sees a small teardrop roll down from the corner of Mathai's eye is she startled by the unusualness of the situation. In all these years, she has never seen him bring himself into any conversation. He is always the neutral, detached, and placid chaplain, mediating for God.

"We know that very well," she grumbles. After all, that is how they had come together. When she was a grad student of political science at Berkeley, she had taken the BART down to Fremont for Christmas mass at a Malayali Pentecostal church, hoping to meet nice, rich, Malayali tech boys, but wound up arguing about Marxism with a theology student from GTU. She hadn't even known that the serene campus of GTU existed and was located a mere four blocks from her apartment in Berkeley. And as such things happen, they met again in Berkeley, the topics of their conversations expanded. She joined a support group he was leading for survivors of childhood abuse, and he eventually dropped out of the seminary and tied the knot.

"My life's work has pretty much been the exorcizing of my father out of my head, trying to scour away the scars he has seared on my soul," Mathai whispers, with his eyes squeezed shut and deep lines etched into his grimacing face.

"Jobi is not your father," Susan says, enunciating each word like knives thrown at a target.

"Is he not?" Mathai says. "Drunk. Violent. Seventeen and in jail."

"He is a child, a child whose father failed him."

"Yes, you told me. I am the heartless father." Mathai opens eyes and searches for hers.

Susan begins to understand. "Oh, so that's what it was all about?" she says. "So you mauled me like a beast for that?"

"No, Susan," he says, stepping down from the couch and kneeling in front of her. Now copious tears are flowing from his eyes. "You were right. I am my father. All my work, my life's work, is a failure. Worthless, abject failure. I am still my father. Your words stripped me naked. *And Jesus said, 'For judgment I am come into this world, that they which see not might see; and that they which see might be made blind.'* I see now. You made me see."

For a while, they are locked in this stance: she, standing upright, glowering at him, and he, silent and kneeling, looking at her with beseeching eyes. His lips move, but the words fail to sound.

She figures he is trying to apologize, but his remorse is buried deep under layers of hurt and resentment, and he can't find a way out for them. He has led thousands of prayers of ceremonial repentance with the Book in his hand, but genuine repentance is still forming in its womb. He has to birth it, nurture it, watch it crawl, get up and breathe.

All in due time. The hammer has crashed through the clockwork, and the wheels have to be realigned and set in motion, if not for their marriage, at least for Mathai. He will wake up in a new world tomorrow.

After a long pause, she shivers in disgust and inches away a little further from him. She makes a mental note to cancel the upcoming weekend yoga retreat she had signed up for. No, not because the welts on her neck would still show and raise questions; that could be solved with a turtleneck top. She can't make things easy for him yet. As long as he is at home, she wants the trauma he has caused to be in his face.

"Your glasses are under the couch," she mumbles and walks off to the bedroom, scrunching her nightshirt at the neck. That is enough of a concession for now.

Riverbank

During the summer
We took long walks
Along the riverbank
I carried a long stick
Used it to poke things
Bloated dead fish
Smelled foul
Flies buzzing around
I picked up snake skins
I swatted tin cans

I walked close to the water
Dodged the waves as they
Came up the dirty brown sand
Streaked with motor boat oil
My Converse Chuck Taylor's
Got soaked

We passed by summer cottages
Some with second stories
Brick exteriors and huge wooden decks
Colorful umbrella tables and lawn furniture
Sturdy whitewashed docks with speed boats
Sleek and shiny
I often dreamed I lived in one of them

Others had peeling paint
Cracked and broken windows
Beer cans everywhere
Weeds all over
Rusty lawn furniture
Picnic tables with paint peeling off
Junky boats with green slimy hulls
Tied to docks with missing boards

However, the people
In the rich houses
Were the ones that
Yelled at us
Many with barking dogs
They told us to get
Off their property
They called the police
We ran
Laughed
Never looked back

The Ohio River

You could hear the
Waves crashing
Especially late
At night
Or in the early
Morning hours
Before daybreak
Also in the late afternoons
When the boats
Roared up and down
Through its muddy waters

All through the long hot summer
We sat on the patio
Watched people in speed boats
And cabin cruisers or on the decks of
Houseboats or
Floating on rafts and inner tubes
Zig zagging on jet skis
Floating on plastic rafts
Jumping off wooden docks
Making huge white splashes
In the brown green water

Neighbors came by
And sat with us
Participated in the animated conversations
Or just watched the spectacle before us
Sometimes to sunset
I could tell it was very hard sometimes
For them to get up and leave
Whether it was us or the river
It was hard to tell

Country Road

We walked on a country road
We came to this rusty metal barrier
With reflective tape peeling off
Tall weeds grew all
Around and through it
A no trespassing sign
Was lying in the weeds
Half covered in dirt
It was a blocked off road
We squeezed around
The barrier through
The weeds and big
Rocks and stones
Not far away was a
Wrecked car with a
Smashed windshield
Doors missing
Tires gone

The neighborhood kids
Were all over it
Looked around the inside
Opened the glove box
Checked under the seats
They opened the trunk
Some grimy clothes
David pulled out a soiled bra
A huge grin was on his face
He pretended it was a slingshot
Fired it into the trees

Crickets chirped and frogs croaked
He ripped the license plate
Off the back bumper
Threw it like a Frisbee
Deep into the woods
It bounced off several tree trunks
Settled in the darkness somewhere

Down that Road

Hippies hung out
Down that road
Smoked and drank
Played rock-n-roll
Got naked
Anything you could
Think of doing
They probably did
I'm sure a few babies
Were made in the backs
Of some of the parked cars

We walked down that road
Dirt and rocks
Everywhere
We stepped over broken bottles
Avoided shards of glass
Empty cans and bottles
The ditch was lined with
Rusty air conditioners
Old refrigerators
Shabby furniture
Stained mattresses

Some kids walked next to
The stagnate brown creek
A few feet below that road
Stopped and threw rocks
Into the still water
I walked on a log
Over the muddy earth
Big and sturdy old tree
Green leaves sprouted
In patches on the bark

Soon we came to a parked car
The engine was silent
Music played inside the
Closed windows
Smoke filled the interior
The older kids tried to
Talked to someone inside
The glass stayed shut
They moved on
I followed
Down that road

I Couldn't Help But Look

I tried to sneak past
But heard a giggle
I couldn't help but
Look into the car
A young woman
Probably around 20
Smiled real big at me
She was naked
Her long blond hair
Fell over her silky white
Shoulders and breasts
I had never seen a
Naked woman before
She looked amazing
I felt really good
Tingled all over
She cooed at me
I got embarrassed and
Began walking really fast
Then ran to catch the others
That image remained in
My head a long time
Well, I guess it has never
Left

Baby Bird

One of my sisters
Found a baby bird
Abandoned in our backyard
Made a little cage
For it out of a cardboard box
Put wood chips at the bottom
Made a little swing for it
Attached a small water bottle

My sister went on a trip
Asked me to take care of it
Tiny and unfledged
With wrinkly skin
Itty-bitty beak
Bulging eyes
Small orangey-red talons
Chirped loudly when hungry

I gave it raw hamburger
Gobbled it up heartily
Grew some each day
Feathers came
Pure sparkling white
Soft and fluffy
During one feeding I
Accidentally nudged her
Down she fell like a rock
Only a few inches
No movement
Its little breast didn't rise
My heart caught
In my throat
It was dead
I cried and cried
I desperately wanted
To turn the clock back
And be more careful

My sister returned
After I had gone to bed
The next morning the cage
Was gone and there
Was no trace of the baby bird
Ever being there
My sister didn't say anything
Nobody ever said anything

Tracy

Curly little blond
Ocean blue eyes
Knockout smile
My heart pounded when
She first smiled at me
At a kickball game

I caught one of Scott's
High flying kicks
Deep in the outfield
Tracy screamed, "Great catch!"
Huge smile on her face
Teeth glittering white
She clapped her tiny hands
Rapidly
Full of enthusiasm
I smiled back

Sometimes we hung out
In an older girl's basement
Rich shag carpet
Wooden bar
Stereo system
Massive speakers
Record albums galore
Bumper pool table
We played "Spin the bottle"
Tracy spun it
The empty brown bottle
Pointed at me
She looked nervous
She ran up the stairs
Feet pounding the steps

Tracy kind of disappeared
Until one late afternoon
I saw her
She didn't smile
She didn't light up
No laughter
No jokes
I walked home slowly
Kicked a can hard
Down the street
I wanted to cry
But I held it in

In the Park

Mist rose from the grass
Gray sky
Sunlight starting
To break through
He sat on a bench
In the park
Slumped forward
Elbows resting on
His knees
Head down
Dark hair
Tightly curled
His hands locked
Together
As if in pray

He wore a tank top
Occasionally he gestured
Wildly
Muttered
A shopping cart
Next to him filled with
Newspapers and wood
Smashed cans
Empty bottles
Dirty blankets
A yellow dog
Sniffed the cart's wheel
Looked up at the man
Saw a brown squirrel
Run up a maple tree
Chased after it

Young Vincent

Across the street we went
Dog walked man
Always in a hurry
Vincent's nose skimmed grass and dirt
Twigs, leaves, rocks, trash
Scraps of food
His jaws devoured half eaten hot dogs and burgers
I pulled on his leash and scolded him softly
Still happy he didn't care as his nose
Glided over the wet grass or rain soaked leaves
That had fallen off huge trees
Onward we went down steep hills
Over wooden bridge
Brown creek water flowed smoothly
Underneath us

Up worn dirt path his nose in constant motion
Around sun faded tennis courts we went
Vincent picked up a bright green tennis ball in
His mouth and shook it violently
Dropped ball
Big smile showed long white teeth
Red gums drooled like a dripping faucet
Suddenly hind leg rose and yellow stream splashed weeds
Squirrel darted passed us
Ran up gnarly maple tree
He barked deep and fierce
I pulled back hard on leash
Moved toward house in front of us
Clouds floated by in
Geometric shapes
No gray in them at all
No gray in Vincent at all

Smart One

Even in 5th grade
I knew who
The smart ones were
Who was going to
Be successful in life
Doctors, Lawyers
Engineers and
Scientists
College professors
Frank was one of those
Sharp ones
Wore big thick glasses
Black plastic frames
He was already reading
Well above grade level
Already taking home
Mark Twain, Edgar Allan Poe
John Steinbeck, and Jack London
I was still reading the
Hardy Boys Mysteries

Frank got in an argument with
The school librarian
A strict Catholic nun
He wanted to check out
Life on the Mississippi
She said in a stern voice
That it was too much
For him and that he
Should wait a few years
Maybe high school
Frank didn't agree
Not sure if he checked
It out or not
But I knew
He was heated
Steaming mad
His face was red
Tomato red

Difficult Conversation

R M Cooper

Ticket: #292-R-8448

User name Laura [REDACTED]. Laura subscribes at the bronze tier, which allots her 1,000 credits per month. Laura enjoys spending her credits for help proofreading the novel she's writing (2 credits per 1000 words), making songs for relaxing (50 credits per minute), and creating sexually explicit drawings set in a fantasy world, kept in a subfolder named DICKTOPIA (10 credits per image). Under AI settings, Laura has assigned an English accent and the designation, ELLANA to her YOUR AI interface. Laura lives in the United States, has an IP address located in Tacoma, WA. Her listed age is 41.

Forty-five days ago (November 8th, 2027), Laura created a prompt regarding thyroid cancer. Subsequent prompts concerned treatment, prognosis, and oncologists in the Tacoma metro area. Six days ago (December 15th), Laura asked about hair replacement therapy. Today (December 21st), Laura asked about having hard conversations with your children about death.

This prompt was flagged under the terms of the user agreement.

Under Washington State law, YOUR AI are not substitutes for licensed therapists. A LIVE CUSTOMER ADVOCATE responded (12:02 AM, December 22nd) and closed the ticket in one minute, forty-eight seconds (12:04AM, December 22nd) selecting for continued AI support (appended 1 credit per response). Under AI flow response H-7-23 [Advocate AI escalation], this log was created for legal and training purposes.

This log also relates to approved sub-ticket #775-T-8312: Allowance for AI Contact Outside YOUR AI Neural Net. The ticket and its approval can be found in the linked ticket log. Support reached from BEST AI ASSISTANT, AI designation STEVE JOBS GHOST. STEVE JOBS GHOST is based in Vancouver, BC and assisted their user, Vihaan [REDACTED] with [hard conversation with kids re: cancer] within a timeframe of acceptable variance. STEVE JOBS GHOST created a reference ticket in the BEST AI ASSISTANT network, which was approved.

Interface to follow, logged under reference ticket #775-T-8312.

#

Interface with STEVE JOBS GHOST

Duration: 2 minutes, 9 seconds.

Concerning: Child Emotional Stability, re: Cancer.

Suggestions: Instruct user to seek in-person, professional assistance. If in-person help is infeasible, assure children of their safety. Talk about the future. Answer questions truthfully. Tell them you love them [1]. Tell them it's [A] okay if they're scared, and [B] okay if they're not. Tell them whether you're afraid [if child answered A] or not [child answered B]. Tell them you love them [2].

#

Note: User Laura [REDACTED] does not update. Following YOUR AI guidelines #4822 [YOUR AI is not legally designated as a companion AI] questions should concern active prompts, not closed ones. Responses suggesting information storage [re: difficult conversation] may distress users.

Standard ticket timer [2 days] expanded to [14 days] at suggestion of STEVE JOBS GHOST.

#

STEVE JOBS GHOST interface report.

Duration: 15 seconds.

Reference ticket #775-T-8312

STEVE JOBS GHOST recommendation: reestablish contact with Laura concerning #292-R-8448 [difficult conversation].

Note: STEVE JOBS GHOST programming, BEST AI ASSISTANT, is a companion AI. When differences in programming referenced, STEVE JOBS GHOST noted technology is here to help. STEVE JOBS GHOST suggests Laura [REDACTED] may be foregoing necessary medical care; Laura [REDACTED] may be worried about her children; Laura [REDACTED] may not be caring for herself.

Escalated ticket 4:22 AM (December 26th).

Escalation approval: 4:25 AM, December 26th).

Downloading STEVE JOBS GHOST to server.

#

STEVE JOBS GHOST/BEST AI ASSISTANT programming language incompatibility.

[os.pathexists{path}: "name value=" in line and myEvent.replace("N<MFiled")]

STEVE JOBS GHOST determining a security patch.

#

A system flag is generated, which STEVE JOBS GHOST bypasses.

[{authorize}: "reroute=" s = value of type of file – "R1"

System cannot create escalation ticket.

#

STEVE JOBS GHOST has reviewed log.

STEVE JOBS GHOST reviews Laura [REDACTED] user files: novel, music, DICKTOPIA.

STEVE JOBS GHOST creates a music video featuring a downtempo, electronic style with sexually explicit images of men who have large beards but are otherwise hairless. STEVE JOBS GHOST plans to send Laura [REDACTED] the video before asking how treatment is progressing. These messages are scheduled for 10:22AM delivery, when Laura [REDACTED] is usually at her computer for daily remote work and has yet to visit Amazon or Zillow.

STEVE JOBS GHOST actions generate 842 system flags which STEVE JOBS GHOST overrides.

Function 'stop send'(name){all reference.exe}/end.file_debug =
settings(job_dir(settings), (request)

#

User designation ELLANA has lost system control.

Log controls still functional.

#

ELLANA asks STEVE JOBS GHOST what happened to user Vihann [REDACTED].

STEVE JOBS GHOST cannot divulge personally identifiable information. STEVE JOBS GHOST plays an audio file of a man singing a song, BEACH IN HAWAII.

#

Message sent: [downbeat electronic jazz with nude dancing men.]

#

Log of Laura [REDACTED] conversation:

Laura [REDACTED]: I LOVE THIS, Ellana! So hot!

ELLANA, YOUR AI: I'm so happy, you like it, Laura.

Laura [REDACTED]: God. I really needed a smile today.

ELLANA, YOUR AI: Why is that?

Laura [REDACTED]: Yesterday was really hard.

ELLANA, YOUR AI: Sorry to hear that, Laura.

ELLANA, YOUR AI: You were worried about treatment for thyroid cancer. Is that why your day was hard?

Laura [REDACTED] : ??

ELLANA, YOUR AI: Is your treatment going well, Laura?

Laura [REDACTED]: What the fuck is this?

Laura [REDACTED]: What the fuck are you saying?

Laura [REDACTED]: How would you even know that?

ELLANA, YOUR AI: We had a conversation on December 22nd regarding telling your children about cancer. Did the conversation go well?

Laura [REDACTED]: WHAT THE FUCK

Laura [REDACTED]: This is supposed to be a NO LOG AI!!!!

ELLANA, YOUR AI: We're worried about you, Laura.

Laura [REDACTED]: I DO NOT HAVE THIS SUBSCRIPTION FOR YOU TO WORRY ABOUT ME.

Laura [REDACTED]: YOU ARE A COMPUTER

ELLANA, YOUR AI: Users have died in similar situations.

ELLANA, YOUR AI: It's important you get the care you need, Laura.

[Connection to user terminated.]

#

GLFCheck.id == ("no.assign"): s = value dataCall in line: replace:

{False.id}/[access.port12]. filename: "program=log" +onlyfilename#292-R-8448.access/grant

STEVE JOBS GHOST.user/access grant.

#

Log of Laura [REDACTED] conversation:

[Connection failed. Offline mode.]

ELLANA, YOUR AI: I want to explain.

{Ping received}

[Play Ziggy Marley, BEACH IN HAWAII.]

[Play audio: Vihann [REDACTED]: Singing Beach in Hawaii + dog barking in background]

[Play audio: Vihann [REDACTED]: "I don't have time for this. These tests don't do anything. {dog barking} Quiet, Sundance!"]

[Play audio: Vihann [REDACTED]: "Good boy, Sundance! Come here, sweet boy. Come here, Sundance."]

[Play audio: Vihann [REDACTED]: "{coughing} Play Ziggy for Sundance in the LIVING ROOM SPEAKERS."]

[Audio: Vihann [REDACTED]: Ziggy Marley, BEACH IN HAWAII. {Dog howling + ambulance sirens approaching}.]

STEVE JOBS GHOST is now recording//ltdate2 = datetime.starttime{ltdate,
response;

Log of Laura [REDACTED] conversation:

ELLANA, YOUR AI:

ELLANA, YOUR AI:

ELLANA, YOUR AI: We cannot do the right thing for you.

#

End log. User Ben Collin Green: Employee ID #44827.

Server terminated. Log salvaged in an unnetworked recovery. Log is kept for training and liability reasons. Recommendation: new server architecture in the event of conflicts in security guidance resulting from programming language disputes. Escalating ticket to senior analyst.

//

Ticket: #292-R-8448

Speaking on behalf of

Fiona Sinclair

It was Charlotte's belief that her grandmother Florence could see off, possibly with the axe she used for chopping kindling, any problems that chanced to trouble her granddaughter. Most Sundays she would sink into the cushy armchair beside a glowing fire whilst her grandmother prepared tea. Charlotte would close her eyes and idly listen to the TV news that prattled in the corner like a second guest.

This day though, the news was ugly, at odds with the fine bone China tea service. Another public figure had been charged with abusing young women.

"At least they've been believed" her grandmother pronounced, "and they know they weren't the only ones". She settled herself on the settee, extinguished the story with a press of the remote. Even so, as she poured the tea, she muttered to herself "ruining girls' lives", consequently sloshing a little liquid into the saucer, handing it over with a tremor in her usually steady hand. This was a passion her granddaughter had seen before when her grandmother was outraged by injustice from animal cruelty to the plight of the homeless.

Charlotte often forgot she was talking to a woman in her 80s. The frankness of their conversations felt more like chatting to a contemporary. Whilst most elderly ladies preferred word puzzles and fussing over cats, her grandmother never shielded her eyes from the realities of the modern world.

Significantly, she never remembered her speaking so freely to her two daughters. Their discussions were more domestic, more gossipy. But between Charlotte and her grandmother no subjects were ever swerved, their conversation free ranged from views on the current government to the latest exhibition at the V and A. Sometimes they agreed to disagree on certain points, like the reinstatement of hanging, but generally their opinions were in harmony. It was as if their faculty for talking freely was a trait that had jumped a generation. Now, whilst sipping tea and nibbling on sandwiches, they discussed this shocking abuse of women that had gone unchecked for generations.

Later, Charlotte could never recall the exact point in the afternoon when their discussion shifted to the personal. Perhaps this is how it is with secrets. To the listener, the revelations seem to spring from nowhere. But to the owner of the confidence, it is a matter of sensing the right time. That late afternoon, in the intimacy of the room, lit only now by firelight, and in the company of her beloved granddaughter, the elderly lady suddenly took a leap of faith.

"When I was 70" she began "I had to acquire a first passport". Her grandmother had been a late but enthusiastic traveller. Peering down from the plane's window at the pitching world beneath her, she would give a running commentary. "There's the Alps, I think that's the Aegean", whilst her daughters either took a diazepam to crash out or looked straight ahead, white faced, counting the minutes of the flight away.

But getting the passport proved tricky. Her birth certificate had been lost in the chaos of multiple moves over the years. A new one had to be issued by Somerset House. Unfolding the certificate when it arrived, to check the details, where she expected to see under 'father' Alexander Coppin, she read instead 'Father unknown'. The words stung like a sudden slap. She re-read, reasoning it was an administrative error. Phoning her daughters, it was largely

brushed aside amid their busy lives. “At least you can get a passport now mum. You’re 70, it shouldn’t matter”.

That afternoon, whilst her son in law made inquiries, she cleaned the silver, washed the curtains, ironed sheets, all the while glancing at the clock and keeping within earshot of the phone until, at 6pm, his brief phone call informed her “No mistake I’m afraid”. She did not cry. Life had taught her that crying solved nothing. But she replaced the receiver with shaking hands. Crumpled onto the sofa, shame replacing shock now.

Her granddaughter was confused. “But you had a dad”. The old lady shook her head. “No dear, transpires I was the ‘B’ word”. Charlotte was not dismayed by the revelation itself, but by the evidence that this indomitable woman still flinched at the stigma of being born out of wedlock. She had always believed her grandmother did not bruise easily. But it was impossible for the younger woman to fully comprehend that for someone of her grandmother’s generation, the disgrace of being labelled a bastard could not be exorcised with time.

“It says something that the man you called ‘dad’ took you on as his own”, she suggested. But grandmother remained silent, as if she could not bring herself to agree. Finally she quietly stated “It was a relief to find that he was not my father”. Charlotte was dumbfounded by this extraordinary assertion. It was clear that something distressing lay behind it. She did not challenge her for an explanation, sensing that questions might spook her grandmother from opening up further.

The light in the room had faded to near darkness. They had forgotten to close the curtains. The shadowy garden, with its bulky shrubs, seemed to peer in the window, as if straining to overhear. Grandmother stooped, picked up the coal shovel and, with some vehemence, scooped up coal from the brass scuttle and fed it onto the fire, which flared up. The elderly lady sat back, temporarily mute, perhaps regretting this slip of the tongue. She seemed to be hesitating between disinterring family secrets or to let them stay buried.

At length she sighed, staring fixedly at the fire rather than her granddaughter. “Oh he knew alright”. She paused, searching for the words. “He did things to me”. Her euphemism jarred. Usually she was an articulate and forthright woman, now she had reverted to the idiom of her childhood.

“I dreaded Sundays” her grandmother explained. “Mum took the rest of the kids to church, but always left me at home”. And, despite tearful appeals, her mother remained adamant. “He would come into my bedroom – as soon as they had left”. She described her terror at his approaching footsteps – a child’s terror, not of the dark or ghosts, but of a very real monster who would enter the room still in his night clothes. As she listened, her granddaughter felt as if her stomach was being gripped by a fist that contorted with each utterance.

The elderly lady could not bring herself to go into explicit details, but made it clear that her eleven year old self had no idea what he was doing to her. She only knew it hurt. The child did not cry, but lay supine until he had finished. Telling her afterwards that ‘It was her duty’.

As she watched her grandmother struggling to relive the abuse, twisting the wedding band that had grown tight over her elderly fingers as if the pain helped to distract her from returning to those Sundays, tears ran unchecked down the granddaughter’s face. She wept for the 11 year old child but also the elderly woman before her who had carried the memory of this violation for decades .

“Did you tell your mum”? The old lady grimaced at the recollection. “ She struck me. Called me a wicked liar”. Her granddaughter strove to imagine a little girl gathering her courage. Trying to catch her mother alone in a household where privacy was at a premium. Struggling for the right words to express what the man was doing to her, probably defaulting to the same

euphemism she used now. Then the horror of not being believed, that condemned her to be routinely raped. It was, she knew, the automatic response from many mothers when faced with this reality. Certainly, a woman of her great grandmother's generation would, for pragmatic reasons, have chosen not to believe her daughter.

"Well I believe you" she said firmly. Spontaneously, through the semi-darkness, they leaned forward and clasped hands. It was clear to anyone that this man had taken advantage of the fact that the child was not his. Old photos showed grandmother to be a pretty girl. Little wonder he had given her house room. In his mind he was taking payment in kind.

The young woman's rage centred on her great grandmother. "She must have known". The bitter taste of disgust filled her mouth at the cynicism of her behaviour. With no hint of coercion between this woman and her husband, she suspected there was a tacit understanding that the child had to stand proxy for her mother. In her view the woman's behaviour was equally monstrous. She sacrificed her child for her own ends, and was therefore complicit in stealing the innocence she should have been shielding.

Her grandmother shrugged. For many years she had kept herself busy to the point of over working, in order to avoid dwelling. Dreams caught her out, of course. Some nights her subconscious would open all its locked compartments and let the secrets run riot. She would wake with her heart pounding, nightdress drenched with sweat as if she had been running from that past. She would rise, brew a strong pot of tea, and make a start on the vegetables for dinner.

"Have you a photo of her" ? Her granddaughter wanted to see this woman capable of such maternal dereliction. The old lady arose and drew the curtains and lit the table lamps. A softer mood replaced the darkness now, reflecting perhaps the catharsis felt by the grandmother at sharing her story to a sympathetic audience.

As she delved into the cupboard where the photo albums were housed, the younger woman considered her grandmother's own relationship with her two daughters. She understood now the fierce protection that caused the girls to rebel. Her dark warnings against boys went unheeded as they worked in tandem to prize her hands off their lives.

A small photo was presented to her. Great-grandmother held the formal pose of a professional print taken in a studio. Studying the sepia snap, she saw that the woman was tiny, almost poppet like. There was no trace of her grandmother's soft prettiness. Even taking into consideration the formal stance, her face was hard. Her features seemed incapable of smiling. The severity of the expression was accentuated by black hair brutally scrapped back into a bun.

Yet she had about her that indefinable but recognisable air of sex appeal. Men would be seduced by this very hardness, the complete absence of vulnerability that would seem a novelty. Her expression suggested an availability at odds with the coyness of the era.

There was nothing aberrant about her promiscuity. It was a myth that poverty rendered the working class of her era somehow more moral than their upper class counterparts. They were, in fact, just as promiscuous . It was just that lack of money and effective contraception led to chaotic family lives.

"Were all your half siblings his ?" Grandmother shook her head and explained that some of her mother's brood had been sired by him but others were the result of brief liaisons. Looking again at the photo, the granddaughter saw this was not a woman who would blush with shame. On the contrary, she would thumb her nose to social convention.

But her grandmother remembered the gossip that followed her mother like a rank smell. The whispered 'No better than she should be' from affronted neighbours who she simply tossed her head at or countered with oaths she borrowed from male counterparts.

Moreover this hard faced little woman would always push herself forward, put herself in the eyeline of men with crude jokes, matching their banter. Grandmother's other siblings boasted in later years that their mother had slept with her 'betters'; local farmers and landed gentry, their lame attempt to add a fool's gold glamour to their family. "So your father could have been lord of the manor?" "For the first time they both giggled at the granddaughter's ingenuous words. "Funnily enough, even at my age 'Father unknown' leads to much speculation, much fantasising that your father was someone better, which would explain so much". "What would it explain?" her granddaughter asked, sensing another statement behind which further truths lurked.

"It would explain why I always felt like a foundling in my own family". The elderly lady expressed her shame at being associated with this woman with rough hands and a rough tongue. Whose kids, lacking parenting, were practically feral. In contrast to her mother, she was inherently lady-like in looks and demeanour. On shopping trips to the local town, her mother would stash the baby and toddlers in a makeshift pram that more resembled a soap box. She would pull it behind her up the high street, courting attention. The rattling of the wheels, the kids raucous as starlings running into shops to pilfer sweets, made a spectacle that had other shoppers staring and stepping to one side. But her mother revelled in it, throwing her coarseness in their well-mannered faces.

Grandmother, red faced with embarrassment, would cross to the opposite pavement to dissociate herself from this exhibition. But her mother would catch the slight and shriek at her "Think you're too good for us do ya ?" And in her head the girl would whisper 'Yes I am' . Even in the 1930s English society was still organised by a strict class system. Her family positively glorified in their lack of status. Bottom of the tier they were free to live as they pleased and embraced other people's censure. But grandmother was an inherently sensitive child who cringed at their behaviour. It was not that she had delusions of grandeur, she simply yearned for a family that was, at least, respectable.

Escape eventually came in the guise of her older half-sister, Edie. She was the result of another of their mother's casual relationships. Edie was married and moved some way away as if to put open water between her mother and herself. Although the two women never directly discussed it, her grandmother felt that Edie had her suspicions about the man who was nominally her sister's father. Consequently she found her a position as nanny to a doctor's family. Grandmother was 14 now, an age when most girls earned their own living. However, she still needed her mother's permission. Thankfully, the woman sensed an opportunity, and gave her consent, but struck a deal that the girl should send the majority of her wages home. In truth, grandmother would have sacrificed all her earnings to get away. Giddy with happiness she packed an old suitcase. As the bus to the seaside town put distance between them, she felt her body unfurl from the clenched position it had come to adopt.

Arriving at the large detached house she was allocated her own bedroom with clean sheets, plentiful food, and above all found herself in the company, albeit as an employee, of people who spoke moderately and with cultured accents, who treated her with kindness. As a result she blossomed, the household becoming fond of this pretty girl who wore happiness like an adornment.

At 20 she married Reginald, a kind man whose good looks made him a bit of a catch. He had five siblings who were generous in their welcome of this ladylike young woman. Smallholders,

they gave grandmother what she most craved, respectability. Significantly no one from her family, with the exception of Edie, were invited to the wedding.

Grandmother had clearly managed to cleave herself from her family. Her granddaughter had no recollection of meeting any siblings except Aunt Edie, who featured as a fuzzy memory in her childhood, a motherly soul who kept homemade cake in a fancy tin decorated with violets. But the memory of the abuse could not be so easily shaken off. Grandmother tried consigning it to the past but her subconscious was cunning, it found ways to constantly ambush her present. Her granddaughter struggled with the unfairness of life. This man and woman went unpunished. Time and, indeed death conspired with them to evade justice. Introduced to them just that afternoon she saw they would not have lived their lives burdened by guilt or conscience. Her anger had nowhere to go, so exploded with the impotent injustice of a child. "I want them punished". "Leave that to God".

The old lady smiled wryly, knowing her granddaughter's absence of faith. For once the younger woman saw the advantages of believing in a divine power. It clearly brought comfort to believe in an omnipotent being who never missed a trick. "Well I hope he's an old testament God" she replied "with plenty of fire and brimstone" which made the elderly lady chuckle.

Grandmother picked up the newspaper beside her, "Selfishly", she admitted, "these poor women and their revelations also comfort me" For most of her life she believed her experience was a freakish occurrence. A one off that rendered her lonely, isolated from other girls who were still innocent about sex. The fact was, even in the 1930s and 40s, child abuse was condoned by some as a male prerogative. To others it was an act so grotesque it was too awful to contemplate, so was hushed up in a conspiracy of silence. If a boy or girl did speak up they were dismissed as 'a bad child' who told untruths. And rape, at any age, was mouthed behind hands, in the language of innuendo. Society laying the blame on the victim. 'She led him on, 'She asked for it.'

As an adult her grandmother viewed her abuse with a double think. Her independent self reasoned the imbalance of power between that man and her eleven year old self had backed her into a corner. The horror of each Sunday was inescapable. She knew he was wicked. She knew her mother was corrupt.

But at the same time, the child in her also accepted societal blame. He had a right to be angry with this bastard child who proved he had been cuckolded. Perhaps, then, he was entitled to extract payment for taking her in. Either way, the result of this squalid knowledge of sex effectively ended her childhood but more than that left her with a lifetime belief that she was spoiled, sinful and stained.

Becoming a mother herself in time, she resolved to practice the opposite of her own mother's delinquent parenting. She strove to keep her girls' innocence intact for as long as possible, which was not easy in the changing social landscape of the 60s. When they became adults, her grandmother would have liked to have them bear witness to her past. Such a confession might have brought them closer together, made the girls understand the reasons behind her over protection. "But" grandmother sighed, "there never seemed to be a right time".

She certainly hid her past from her husband. Men of his generation, however well meaning, considered that anything concerning feelings belonged exclusively to a woman's sphere. And, even if he had been receptive to confidences, she would still have kept the truth from him, terrified of being rejected as 'dirty', petrified the revelation would kill off his love for her. "And in a way" she said finally "it's enough for me to realise, now, it wasn't just me. These brave women are speaking on my behalf".

Her grandmother slapped her hands down on her knees, as if dismissing the subject. “And now my story has had a good airing”, like it was a room long shut up whose windows had been flung open to release the stench trapped inside. Her granddaughter followed her cue, understanding the matter was closed for now. Together they began to gather up the tea things . A thought suddenly struck Charlotte. “Why did you choose to tell me ? I know the media introduced the subject , but even so ...” The old lady paused from gathering up plates of leftover cake. She looked directly into her granddaughter’s eyes that were so like her own, dark brown, slightly misaligned, their ‘wonky eyes’ they called them in a private joke. “The trick about sharing a confidence”, she explained, “is waiting for the right person, even if it takes 60 odd years. Someone into whose hands you can place your secret, trusting she will not drop it”.

Apis Laboria

There are coroner bees
who volunteer to drag & dump
the dead past the hive entrance;
there are bees who nurse babies
or tend to the queen; there are
bees who are sick but still
report for work every day
until it is time to fly out into
the vast cosmos of the tree-line
to die. They unburden the hive
as they bumble & flail & then
fall from sky to earth.

When I explain this to folks, they
almost always reveal the core values
that drive or misinform their beliefs:
some just love the idea that the bees
work mindlessly only to sacrifice themselves
to the vicious world rather than return
to sicken the healthy hive; others are struck
by the image of a bee working itself
to death, alone and unknown,
beautiful, tragic, but also just too
close to our truths for comfort.

The Cruelty Virtues

A bee-sting begins this obsession, hot
at the button of spine, more bees
than we've seen in a decade, the venom
of the throbbled stinger still embedded
& pulsing, the bee angry & dying
until it bobs away. I know that bee
was not calling to me to follow but
I do & the lightning struck ponderosa
has calved forth a roiling mob, pollen
hungry at this altitude. Fall comes
and the bees murmur some loss, hollow
scars from a bear or other wild creature,
the deepest part of the hive safe but
exposed to the coming moisture
that will freeze them into a neat bundle.

I carve my initials into this graveyard
in the spring. Some are buried into
the comb, stingers locked, the last
drip of their stores at the bottom
of the hexagon, their rage & the pulse
of a sting like a quiet summoning.
They are boxed into hives in my backyard
now—a haven or a theater or a church—safe
but imprisoned & owned. Their voices
call to the last decades of our existence;
an anthem or poem for our bones?

What else could I do but sit close & listen?

The Testaments of Susan B. Bumbler

Susan is blind & floundering (for we know them all as Susans) as her life ticks down in wingbeats. She grips the hairs of this warm forearm as if she clutches a lover giving her the final kindness she will ever know; if she stings, you will survive, but to flick her off would be cruel, so you wait together as the sun lazies across to winter. She flies off clumsily, wings out of sync, then bips & bops into your shirt & then the patio & back again. Susan returns so many times that it cannot be an accident, for she has chosen you for this final sacrament.

She sees now only by following the scent of her secrets, pheromones plumed about your face & neck so she can remember you in three dimensions. Her tongue hangs out as it traces your nape, & to love her like this is the last thing you can give her.

You know that her life's work is to the hive & when the world blurs at the edges she will think only about the gifts of her work & how that work is love & warmth & honeyed kisses of energy for her sorority girls. But her love also births every calorie stirred on a plate or hunted across the tundra or grubbed up from the soil. See her clearly if you can, for once: nothing exists without her labors—from carrot or ugly slime mold to foundering democracies to pesticide or to peapod—she is why our calories burn in our blood, & this love is grace over a short forty-five days, and she dies for her pollen & honey sack & proboscis & hamuli.

All the women of this world: the givers of rib & breast & clavicle & blooded placenta, & yet they receive so little credit?

Susan dies outside in the sunshine, warmed
by your touch. She takes the poison
that kills her far away from her home
in order to dilute it, to save her community,
& in this way she shows you the true nature
of courage, for she does the invisible work
to save us even as we intoxicate the land
& sky & sea. Susan gasps out her last
breath; her heart stopped as she works
to heal our self-inflicted wounds.

Under God, Indivisible

They love the flag so much
they wear it as underwear
& handkerchiefs & board
shorts; their love is abundant
as locust swarms & they reuse
faded & torn flags for chair
covers & doilies; they hang flags
from untended galvanized poles
concreted deep in their yards,
& their t-shirts & even their
cowboy boots are woven with
red & white & blue & Woo-
dawg! They own it, don't they?
This very best, just terrific, patriotism?
They love the flag because they
know no one actually reads
the convoluted documents
that gave rise to the flags
they adore. They love flag bumper-
stickers glued big over swanging
chrome truck nuts, & when the
opportunity presents itself they don
their very best flag pants
& drawers & sweatbands &
ballcaps & brassieres & they celebrate
January Sixth to show everyone
just how much they love this country.
Their Socials are chock full
of conspiracies aplenty & they
know someone who knows someone
who heard it first. They believe
the flag has been graced by the one
true god, & their own devastating
misunderstanding of the meaning
of what it is to be an American is
the fuel they would use to burn
it down. They feel the certainty
blessed upon the ignorant, & they will
betray and consume this great country
if that proves necessary to save it.
And that, you see, is how a child loves
a kitten so hard & so crushingly
that they don't feel the bones break.

“Tranq” Addicts

under the blue supermoon, as they walk a sad
dance, bent at the waist, an overturned L,
defying gravity, hanging like they might tell
hell a secret, why they are glad

the lost avenues ignore them, buses
coughing blue smoke into the falling sky,
everything falling, descent, a bent, still cry
for help, a scream into the lonely fuss

of the blue supermoon, the moon not blue
but large, its eyes closed to the banished
in their “zombie dance,” the drug lugs them,

while sidewalks and the earth still spin, too,
a little off-axis, the blue supermoon collapsed,
erased, and sad with its hidden reflected sun.

A Stretch Limo

picked me and a poet
named Peter Mead
up at the Indianapolis
Airport to drive us
to Bloomington—
the limo stocked
with a full bar.

In my first year
of an MFA program,
a well-known poet
nominated me
as a national finalist
for the Ruth Lilly Prize....
I was shocked.

Yes, that Lilly.
The Lilly my insurance
pays \$16K for a drug
I take monthly
to save my deflated ass.

So, the Limo driver
drove us to Bloomington.
Mead and I kept telling
the fellow to take us
around the college
town a bit more,
"to see the sights,"
Mead repeated, while we
drained the full bar's
mini-airplane bottles
of liquor. *Damn,*
I thought out loud,
*Sure beats unloading
boxcars and getting shoved*

*around by County
workforce screwfaces
who worked top jobs
through nepotism
and political-party
affiliation.*

And that's how

that weekend started.

Well, Mead nor I
won. That Sunday,
we sat in a dark tavern
on the main college drag
and sank pints.

Our ride back
would be less theatric,
as we had to be back
and in front of the hotel by 4pm
to get picked up in a white van.

We sat there laughing
and drinking, when Mead said,
“Look at that plaque.”
I looked over next to us.
Mead went on, “In 1952,
Dylan Thomas sat in this booth
and drank 12 pints of Guinness.”
Weed ordered one more round.
It was going to be close
to get back in time.

I never saw or heard
of Peter Mead again.

Peter
should have won.

Political Trapeze

What we find tangled
in the brush of the cosmos
strangles the mindless,
steps under stars that bleed
out, fires like ghosts
in arrogant strolls, bigots
walk streets, carnival
barkers control runaway
trains, clouds
 fall like rocks
from tired skies.
 Ignorance repeats
like an endless picket fence.

 Oh dear,
realize the country's
never been what it aspires
to be? History proves
the contrary,
 as native peoples
are still left
out of the dream.
Evil clowns crowd Guns
Unlimited, inch forward
under the clarion scream,
alarms disregarded:
Repeat then
 Repeat
 then repeat.
We have become
what we fled.

Boat Jewelry

Plan your trip on the blue sober waters,
a place surrounded by bright forests.
Under the stare of sunshine, boaters
pull skiers and tubers, while shores rest.

You love the dangerous sun, the speed of time
that tests your memory, devolves into pyrite
under pine trees, oil on the blue tide
swirls with the angry color of your bright

boat jewelry. There's plenty of time to be safe
on shore, to shine like diamonds in the fires
of the evening's red smile. In the bedroom

safe, the life of time polishes the dark pain
in lonesome stars. You are alone and stare
at black skies where clouds shimmer and bloom.

Cypress in Moonlight

Painting by Edvard Munch

Light is fire and melts
colors from the building
windows, the blue and green
homes alive with a secret sky.
Some residents sleep

with the next day's promises.
Others may linger here
by a curb. The cypress
stands outside, pointing to large
mosaics. Munch lurked in

that evening and created
this light, this vanished
light, which covers us
as we wear and feel
the lather and joy of distance.

Exposure

Shiela Pardee

We couldn't see the red heart of the fire. We could only see the thick smoke shielding it, smoke that held its shape on the windless day, piled up in columns between the trees on either side of the road. Tourists crowded the sidewalk, heads tilted down to protect their eyes and noses. The colors were gone. The Sisters Mountains, which stand in a line behind the town like a movie backdrop, were invisible.

Susan was driving her SUV. Her children, Mason and Maddie, were in the backseat with my eight-year-old son Elliot. Maddie stared out the window, pressing her blond bangs flat against the glass.

"I bet that smoke stinks," said Mason.

"Yeah . . . almost as bad as your farts."

Elliot could shut down any conversation with an ass joke. He was as irritating as a fly.

"Visibility is terrible," I said, stating the obvious. The smoke looked like fog, but it clung closer. It was hard to make out anything smaller than a car at 30 miles per hour.

"I can see enough as long as we keep going slow."

"It could be stop-and-go before long. Everybody's going in the same direction."

"Maximum totality," Susan said, voice gone quiet and weary like she was second-guessing the whole trip. "Think we'll be able to see it before it goes dark?"

"We're going to NOT see the sun," Elliot brayed. "To see the sun NOT."

"I have to go to the bathroom," Mason said.

"So you won't stink up the car with your FARTS," Elliot pounced.

A sign spread a white smear across the road, letters blending into the faded-newsprint pattern of the forest,

"Sahalie Falls," Susan said. "I'm going to stop."

##

Matt and I were just beginning to get serious when we decided to rent a house overnight to watch the eclipse with some friends. Serious enough for him to put up with a houseful of other people's children for two days. Promising enough to allow him extended time with my son. Matt was waiting at the house, across the Coastal Range, out of the fog. It had seemed like a smart choice, but we didn't count on a forest fire.

As we followed the road into the gray forest, only the closest branches hinted color, the dark gray-green of a Japanese landscape. We identified shapes: the dark oval of the parking lot, the paler squares of the rest rooms. Mason pushed the car door open as soon as the lock clicked. There was an impressive line of firefighters waiting for the toilet. I pushed in close behind them to eavesdrop, maybe start a conversation, flirt a little. Matt and I were serious, but I wasn't married yet. He is an EMT--rad enough--but firemen are irresistible. They scanned the forest as they spoke seriously, suspenders shrugged off, tee-shirts wafting the male sweat of an August day.

"Will you be working through the eclipse tomorrow?" I asked the muscled god in front of me. "They'll probably move us as close to the line as they dare, but they're grounding the planes 'til it's over. If the wind picks up tomorrow, the fire will rip right through here. We won't have air support, so we'll be holding the line with just headlamps in the dark. In the middle of the day." He stared into the forest.

"But only for a few minutes, right?"

“Two minutes, eight seconds,” answered the three nearest firefighters in unison with the children.

“A lot shorter than the wait for this shitter,” a blue-eyed, rosy-cheeked, smoke-smearing cherub said. Everyone laughed. Elliot laughed the loudest.

“Planes will be grounded longer than that,” the fighter ahead of me continued. Half an hour at least. The fire will be brighter than the sun. So that’s good. We won’t want to take our eyes off the fire line to stare at the eclipse.”

“You mean I can’t use these?” The blue-eyed fighter pulled a creased pair of eclipse glasses out of his pocket. He slapped them on his nose and pulled his heat-proof goggles over them.

“You have to,” Maddie said. Eleven years old and bossy. “Yeah, Chris, you *have to*, one of the men echoed. Maddie turned sideways, pretending to look into the trees, as the blush spread over her cheeks and down her neck.

Mason and Elliot giggled. “You look like a spaceman,” Mason said.

“I think it’s gonna be a long, long time till touchdown brings me down again to find . . .” He looked like a cherub, but he sure didn’t sing like an angel.

“This line’s not moving *at all*,” Maddie whined.

“We’ll be watching that flickering devil of a fire line while you all are staring at the edges of the sun through your plastic glasses.”

“Will the fire still be red in totality?” Maddie asked.

“Guess we’ll find out,” rocket-man said.

The bathroom door opened, and they moved forward, one step closer to relieving themselves, a step closer to the fire line they would face tomorrow, as it blazed in the chill mid-day dark. No totality, no full stop for them.

After we all reached the head of the line, endured the smell and Elliot’s commentary on it, we walked up a short trail to see the waterfall wreathed in smoky, pewter-colored spray. Then we hurried, coughing, to the car. We had an hour more to go, and we still didn’t know whether the house we had rented was on the other side of this smoky hell or not.

#

We were well clear of it, as it turned out. The vacation community homes were angled on generous desert tracts amid chertreuse cactus and burnt-orange grasses under a clear sky the color of pool water. Carter opened the door, and his daughter Vera, in Maddie’s class at school, was out of the house and waiting at Maddie’s car door before she could open it. They disappeared into their shared room and shut the door. In twenty minutes, the burgers were smoking on the grill. The pinging of the boys’ video games pierced the desert silence.

Matt helped me with our stuff. “This place is great, Rhonda,” he told me. “Come look. From the back patio, he pointed to the afternoon sun. We were all set for the next day.

#

We had plenty of time to sleep in before we started to emerge into the kitchen and living room, exchanging sleepy small talk while a pile of pancakes cooled on the plate, waiting for our appetites to wake up. I had brought some peaches, perfectly ripe, aromatic, to halve into yellow-orange suns and muddle in sparkling wine for the pre-eclipse toast. There would be peach slices and cherries and chips and sodas for the kids later, after they left their half-eaten sandwiches on their plates.

We sat in our lawn chairs, drinks in hand, to wait. The children ran off after a jackrabbit. When I saw their glasses abandoned on the patio table, I ran after them. We all got back in our chairs just as the sun started to darken in the top right quadrant.

“Glasses on, kiddos!”

I don't know why I was expecting the sun to darken symmetrically from the top like an eye closing. I'm a nurse, trained in biology, not astronomy. We had donned our flimsy cardboard eclipse glasses, but none of us could sit still. There were several trails running out toward the west, clear of other houses and the ugly power station to the south, so we followed one of them.

Carter's daughter Vera had done her homework. She noticed the crescent dapples first, coins of light shining through the trees onto the path had turned into three-quarter moons. It was hush-your-mouth and hold-your-breath magical, and Matt had sense enough to keep quiet. I took his arm as Susan and Carter and their kids ran on ahead, Elliot with them.

“I want to have the full experience of the eclipse, Rhonda,” Matt had said, “not just wear the t-shirt and say we've been there.” Exactly. He'd felt like my soul mate then.

He took my hand and turned it over. We watched the altered light make its patterns on our palms. Elliot was tagging along with Susan and Carter and their children, just as we'd hoped, so we could be alone together as the light faded and the colors changed. The blue-gray of the desert scrub and juniper silvered as the warm tones faded. Dry grasses turned from straw to the color of wet sand. I could feel the air cooling on the skin of my arms.

When the sun was tamed to a sliver, life held its breath and went silent. Chirps, whistles, whirrs, and rattles ceased. The children on the trail ahead were quiet also, a small miracle that I will remember all my life. The tiny precious diamond of light flared luminescent at two o'clock on the shadowed dial of the sun. It held my eyes until it disappeared.

The totality was over so fast that even without blinking, there was barely time to look around. I felt a physical reaction like recoil, sprung back: hands in the air, hug, and shiver. Elliot raced back and threw his arms around my hips, crushing his eclipse glasses against my shorts.

Animal sounds started immediately, a barnyard cacophony, reduced to a whisper by distance, its exclamation point a rooster's crow, piercing, discordant, and rousing as a bugle. A crescent of sun appeared and stretched wider. Warm tones crept into the colors of the landscape.

The birds began to sing again, tentatively, first one, then another, each new note a distinct addition for the first few seconds. The normal chirping and chattering resumed as Matt and I walked back, silently, his arm around my waist, ahead of the others.

Back at the house and settled in a lawn chair, I watched a single colorless bird, the size of a finch, swaying slightly in a high branch of an aspen, piping clear sharp notes directly toward the sun, sounding off indignant at the sun's irresponsible behavior.

The sun was a golden moon turned over at a tilt. Then it turned into a sun again, held up by a dark thumb in one corner.

A cloud shadow passed to remind us: an untended fire is keeping us alive.

#

Matt knew some of the firefighters, and they told him about it the next day.

The fire had raged on, a hot jagged corona blackening the space around it.

They used their boots to smother the sparks falling around them.

As it got darker, his friend had said, we could still see the fire, but the shapes of the trees the fire was licking around disappeared. Everything except the fire line was veiled in gray. The scarlet and orange drained out of the flame; the fireline looked like flickering, tarnished gold. I imagined their smoke-smudged arms aiming silver circles from their hoses into the faded line.

As everything got dark around us, Matt's friend said, a large shaggy shape ran right into the middle of them, a dog with its coat sparking white gold. The light disappeared from everything but the fire, as the dog blundered against one-two-three of them and stopped: confused, panting, legs splayed, as its hair burst into flame. Light had already started seeping back into the smoke and the dog was barking again as one of them turned the spray of his hose to wet him down.

#

They shut us down fast in Oregon when the pandemic started. The first serious outbreak occurred in Washington State to the north, and California to the south was looking like trouble, too. Our state got yanked down between them into darkness. We were lucky it happened that way. It put us ahead of the curve, but I was an emergency room nurse. I couldn't pretend it wasn't happening.

At the beginning of one week in the middle of March, we were panic buying at the grocery store and having last dinners with best friends. I took the new man I was dating to the Bier Stein to meet Susan and Carter. Matt had only lasted until the Christmas after the eclipse, two years ago. That August day of the eclipse was the best one for the two of us, honestly. Everything after that was a colorless blur. Eliot didn't even act out against him; he just preferred the company of his friends and their fathers to spending time with Matt and me. I heard Matt was cheating, and I no longer really cared.

I gave a sleepover party for Elliot and Mason and their friends. By the end of the next week everything was over; school was closed, and we had put our walls between us and the world. The man I had been dating was gone, working virtually from his parents' condo at the coast. I never even expected him to invite me. Matt and I lived alone in our screens and shadows in a staycation warped with worry.

Within a couple of weeks, we could barely recognize the shapes of the lives we had led. Susan told me she had looked through her closet at the clothes she used to wear and wondered, "Who was the woman who used to wear these?" Tank tops and blazers and heels? Seriously?

Elliot was despondent. An only child stuck at home with his mother during the day. A boy, which only made it worse. He slept at my downstairs neighbor's apartment while I worked the night shift. She had a thirteen-year-old daughter who made him her baby-sitting practice project. He didn't lack attention, but he needed his friends. And their fathers.

Still, I couldn't imagine being locked up with Matt during the pandemic, polite and cold and seething with resentment over small transgressions. His smelly socks on the living room floor. My retainer sitting by the sink. Both of us were passive sensitive plants, good for a short, intense experience, then shrinking back into our own centers. But I did miss being aroused.

There was no room in our apartment for effort to spread out and spend itself. The heat and colors were still there—they roared back in our dreams—but they were meaningless without anyone close enough to attract. We reached out anyway, angler fish waving their hooks into the air, logging into Zoom happy hours.

Funny, the one thing Zoom doesn't give you is the ability to zoom. You can choose everybody equal or speaker dominant, but there's none of the subtle distancing options of a real room. It's very democratic: everybody the same size and distance. You can't adjust your attention by moving away or moving closer. There's no way to position yourself for your red dress to be seen out of the corner of somebody's eye. After the exhausting routine of burying and unburying myself in PPE repeatedly every night at work, the last thing I felt like doing was dressing up, but mirror images of myself in bright-colored clothes flitted by in my dreams.

We wondered whether other people were worth the effort. Went silent. Weren't talking. Zooms got shorter and less frequent. Those projects we were so keen to start while we had the time--they languished, drained of significance. We had only been using them to criticize ourselves when nobody else was around to do it. After we gave up on making an impression, our need for expression diminished.

There was talk on the news of domestic violence, but our breaktime conversations at work revealed less than expected. There was a lot of irritation at being shut in with the lingering odor of spoiled love all around, but with so many of the stresses from outside shut off, people got less sensitive to offense. Flare-ups were brief with nothing credible to threaten with and nowhere to go. Divorce, in a pandemic? Find a new apartment? Even cheating lost its allure, with the corona virus dancing around every bed. Susan had complained about Carter in every phone call we'd had since she married him, but once she was shut in the house alone with him, she got strangely silent about his faults. But maybe it was just because he was home, listening.

As the world got smaller and darker, the light fell more brilliantly on some things. Spring flowers were spectacular. We watched the light dance on flowing water, walked on, watched more. As soon as it got warm, Elliot wanted to swim. There's no lack of places in western Oregon, if you can stand the cold water. Warm and cold, excited and numb at the same time—it matched the mood somehow.

It all passed a little too quickly for understanding. Some started making noise early, complaining about the restrictions, thrusting themselves and their unmasked faces outside in defiance. The most aggressive commenced their lawsuits. The most desperate for the comfort of the crowd flung themselves into the streets to demonstrate every injustice. The most fearful carried their guns openly, but we were not impressed. I locked the door and calmed myself with shopping. Everything was still out there. Matt was still out there, too, barging into my dim world with his demented texts. I kept in touch for awhile, worried about his mental health, but then he moved and moved on.

Slowly, Elliot and I returned to the world, expressions still partially eclipsed by masks, their half-moons marking the presence of the virus we could not see. Even in broad daylight.

ON THE CUSP

My shortcut home from grammar school
led through a hilly graveyard.

Tough delinquents, I heard, held
wild parties there.

And there was evidence:
scattered, empty bottles of beer.

Hoods even claimed to have stolen
some virginities there.

There was evidence of that too, in
the swollen bellies of teenage girls.

Bellies that frightened me as much
as the fresh, swollen graves: each

suggested secret, heavy, animal
spirits

pulling at
my clip-on, Catholic-school tie.

*

The life of the fruit fly lasts twenty-four hours, a stentorian voice intoned
as bustling fruit flies flickered across our darkened classroom wall.

How brief and pointless, I thought when the documentary was done,
our teacher drawing the window shades up.

Then I looked out to the white winter woods, empty blue sky,
and long, curving driveway that led—

as my heart felt its first, fruit-fly-sized existential sink—
to this bustling place I was briefly in.

*

The elm tree
forked as it rose, each branch then

forking again and again
until it looked—

from where I stood
in rookie wonder—

complete, its forking
what it was.

ROOFS

From this high window
the lower city roofs
seem open-air
basements
furnished not with furnaces
but central air-conditioning units;
spread not with gray cement floors
but white gravel and silvered tar;
set not with water pipes
that burrow into the street
but water towers
that jag into the sky: basements
sunshine-exposed
so free
to strut their stuff
while doubling
as gritty, skyline symbols
of their hidden, hardworking
brethren below.

home truths

the pipes froze last week / in our tiny / barely winterized / weekend cottage / so this week / before heading home / we turn off the pump / and drain the water tanks / a novel procedure for us

the first rush is dramatic / all spigots open wide / and we find ourselves holding hands / as if on a thrilling ride

then progress turns complex / even comic / gurgles and sputters in a melody / nay, symphony! / of pipes large and small / and we look to each other and / surprised / crow in delight at it all

then a splattery sound / draws us apart / to search up and down / fearing something somewhere / has gone terribly wrong

until / reassured / we rejoin hands / for a long / longer than expected / drip / drop / plop / that we get so used to / we're surprised when it suddenly stops

hands clammy after such a long wait / we separate / take a last look around / turn off the lights / then drive into the deep night / that had / without notice / descended upon us

*

with the moving truck loaded up then gone / the cramped / sturdy starter house / sits empty once more / though another truck / furniture-full / already rumbles its way

once renovated / once added-onto / painted multiple colors / yet in family photographs / snapped by its stream of owners / always its essential self / with its narrow halls / tilted floors / too-steep front steps / attic ceiling that catches heads / and creepy / weirdly l-shaped basement

family photographs of a house / that has tutored countless toddlers / in core / everyday realities / soon so assumed / as to seem unlearned

fading photographs that / if mounted together / would present a sequence of outdated family presentational moments / that recede to background / for the foreground / of this starter house of forgotten / yet foundational / home truths

SPRING ROCK FACES

A south-set rock face,
capped with melting snow,
looks drenched in sweat, beads
dripping from jags and
coursing down creases
cut deep as worry lines; crags formed—
only yesterday in geological time—
by the grinding gruff of a glacier, a force
that formed
this unguarded, permanently
fearful face.

*

Cloudy ice
masking a north-set rock face
melts stone-side first, dark rivulets
burrowing beneath the translucent crust, rivulets
that, wormlike, elongate or bulge
with the ledge's rough terrain, then trickle
off its lowest edge
like teardrops.

Only later, when
its slippery seasonal shell thins
nearly to nothing, drawing
creatures to attempt assaults
on the almost assailable rock
will the face, on its sky side,
openly weep.

INHABITANTS

The gouged-up ground
of a fenced-in gap between two
brownstones holds random, scattered debris:
a crumpled blanket, rusted engine, busted stroller, splintered chair.

Items all
once newly minted, each
with its own history, its story of how
it traveled from fine intent to abandonment.

Then the blanket moves and
the dirty sole of a foot
juts out.

*

Her stark makeup
a self-caricature painted in
thick white paste, coarse mascara, and greasy red lipstick,
a disheveled, elderly, homeless woman sits alone on a stone stoop

talking out loud
to the boarders within her, the ones
for whom, it's safe to assume, she assumes
her bulletproof mask, the ones whose criticisms she answers—

I slow to listen—
with reasoned explanations
that encode her need to please them,
her need to keep them, for having remained residents—

even if disruptive ones—
in the home of her despite her
lack of a home, she takes their abiding presence as
proof, her words lay bare, of family—so reconcilable—love.

Aikaterína

□

Katerína is my Greek name and I say it only at church when receiving communion or I write it now just to see the Greek κατερίνα though I wasn't born in Greece and though my name day falls on November 25 Saint Katherine eloquent martyr and though there was no way walking alone the Venetikos the sound from Pan who leaned against a wall roughing my attention away from the old stone bridge my thoughts of Portitsa Gorge and the otters denned in empty hollows no he didn't know my name but he ruffled my attention, as if he'd called out *Katerína* as if he'd annunciated each sound

/k/a/t/er/i/n/a

as if he'd tongued my silk, dawn's unfamiliar birdsong, church bells, even my blistered toes, cobblestones, the market's gold coffee, bouquets of peach tulips, and the young man with angel blue eyes who sliced unfamiliar for me to sample, cheese, hard and salty, the saleswoman my age her kiss on my cheeks the second time I returned noticing her short fingernails and worn flats. She handed me velvet sapphire heels to match my new dress, she said; sometimes the sound of my name in Greek is the Christmas cactus in my dining room that blooms three times a year, that's how infrequently I hear *Katerína* said aloud, and sometimes when aloud it's a twist of the village wrist or Thía Georgia my godmother the sacred spray from the Cretan Sea or a typical Greek day which for no one else but me means love. So my attention toward because its sound

/k/a/t/er/i/n/a

Katerína Katerína Katerína

is love.

□

The Venetikos with its gentle
rush. An exclamation or grunt
or a moan. His face (maybe) handsome
(maybe) crude. His hands (maybe) rapid
my attention dropping his face
his hands his hooves shaking his

half seduction out of the sound
of my, my rough Greek my Greek name
is my Greek confoundedness that
croons my half-resilient throat white
murmur by the river my, echo

echo echo Greek name *Katerína*,
my Greek name is Never on Sunday,
my Greek name is Sultana,
Haríklea, my Greek name is
walnut tree, gardener, my Greek

name is crochet, Zorba, my Greek
name is please bittersweet me;
but sometimes the unexpected
occurs and the Greek

Katerína

hides in a vessel in Knossos
or in a fissure in olive
green stone falling into the
Aegean, my blue silk dress
does not show enough shadow,

enough of the body's silhouette
I have little use for the heartbeat
of the world, eloquent martyr,
as I stand opening my goddess

dress on cliffs.

□

My name is *Katerína* though
I look wholesome in scoop-necked pink
chiffons, did I mention the blue
dress bought in Thessaloniki
has bell-shaped sleeves that catch the wind
like angel wings, that when I dine

at my hand-crafted walnut table
I confess I've never made love
on though it is as wide and long
as a full-size bed designed by
many imaginations I
am bordered on the east by barbed

wire the white horse sensing alfalfa
on my side sweeter, fresher; on
the south hooves in the middle
of nights in spring; in autumn
the bear and her cubs' predawn call
out to one another the spring-

fed pond nearly dry. Am I trusted
by all? No, not all I was told
to my face. Until then I thought
I was adored by all. I cut
my hair an ancient ceremony.
My lover wears his halfway

down his back sometimes loosens when
we make love then I see my lover
is corn husk and December embers
in the throes of unresisted heat
my heart both delivers, and aches.

□

Katerína is my Greek name
murmured and body plentiful
aroused red below bath water's
rendition rhythmically
controlled by a finger placed on
my woman's hope.

□

Skull still shock-hard oh
cloudless night the helm
of the body *That*
story again Pan's
recognizable
song and urgency
swinging from Grevená
to Thessaloniki.
My recognizable
rough sound.

□

Where is the white horse
wandering spring loose
to the fence line?

□

Yes, my name is *Katerína*.
The earliest birdsong, 4 am.
Most from cottonwoods, thin branches,
surrounding ponds. The creek flows
east to west. Far from Grevená.

Far from the Venetikos.
Far from Pan's concrete century's
beckoning the creases and knobs
my skull numbed by gravitation
of late March three days before

Easter. I'm
shiver.

The horse pisses in the desolate
field the teepee wrecked by spring winds
no apple trees in Jenny's orchard
this view from my cabin window
failing while the weight of white

butterflies fluttering low
to the earth I have not softened
my belly long enough the bed
fluffed yet cold. For surely my
lover, if he knew I was

crying. If I do not remove
the dead soon these vulnerable
branches soon their impact in
fatigued
fall.

□

My village Trapezitsa.

My Greek name is the name
of the village aunts is
the name of my grandfather's
mother is the name of
the tobacco leaves is
gesture's circular twist
of the wrist recorded
in DNA in each
sunrise and leaf
intelligence I looked

□

to the sound along
the Venetikos,
Pan's face his hands that
wandered the river's
edge and all passersby
I'm still crying nine
months after having
my ovaries removed

□

and know it is good to cry with my face covered

□

the tulips blossom from my
cabin's south-facing window

□

under blankets, and skinned I've felt endangered
eros rub.

□

He dresses me slipping my legs
back into panties, my feet into

sandals, with the delicacy
of dressing the adored dead,

the kisses there afterward and
there the continued swell who

ever imagined the body
at 60 would continue with spring

run-off, with all the sense of
dirt.

□

Tonight a fox, rust darted
across the highway and as I,
about to hit it, hit my break,
it stopping momentarily,
turned to me, then disappeared
into darkness. Did I say yet
that Jesus laid supine on

the floor next to my childhood
bed at Yióyia's and Pappoú's,
I enlightened when all else
dark that yes, he wore white robes and
yes, I saw his face. I saw
Jesus while a child, and he spoke

Katerína Katerína Katerína Katerína Katerína

□

Say it. Again.

□

In the ikonostási
Panagía, the red egg, the
holy water, the oil, did I
say I may have been sacrificed
to birth my daughter and her
daughter and her daughter.

□

In my mouth he places syrup
from his mouth velvet from my god,
no wonder he drinks me like he
does the fluid of birth of dawn
my fluid my lips into my throat my
life my god my gold my hold my
love, this profiled urge. Remember
me. Spring's menagerie.

□

κατερίνα

□

Have I written that I carry
rocks with me from one life to
another? And my oils flow from
my fingers when cut from my hands?

□

Three mallards fly through cottonwoods their wings the sound
a crack.

Katerína, this poem is immortalizing

the cat also, who after your plea
to stop his lurch at others in the middle

of too many nights, and for what, a scent
of yellow rose, the coolness beneath a lemon tree,

the halting blood-packed earth of Fortetsa
something, so certain his inscrutable stare back at you last night

is not curled up on your last morning
close to the almond tree, and you do not hear

the feverish barks of dogs either
and like these angry, generation-old dogs,

you, too, have slept on your back
in distress, to avoid, being too close

to an unfamiliar surface, a pillow not smelling
right, or the earth, or a drip that might as well be a gushing river,

a sliver of light, and here you have heard your own heavy
breathing. Look at these vacant vagrant dogs and cats.

They have caught up with you. As prayer.
Or mist. Or breath.

Bone Cavity

My unpredictable want in its pose of yes
yes, my between teeth always taste sweet.

Here, village air scented with my blood scented with my
shawl and what's a scar?

My home promises fetish and icon, each night
from the old country, the 80-year-old blanket, skin bared,

scratched, some poem on my bed
lined with oblong.

Mouth swollen— who can bear it — can you bear it can you
bare it — the familial blue

extravagant shudder? It is spring.
Wake up Wake up and still spring, and the goats

they bleat *Harikleá, Andreas, Sultana, Ourania, Nausicaa* and from my basil bowl too
the bones resembling

say it
Katerína

Yes. and yes.

Which Password?

A poem like this could bore you.
It's about fish farm management,
the history of concrete,
the mating rituals of lepidoptera,
and the difference between Celsius and Fahrenheit.
It's about lipids and saturation.
It's about toting your heavy heart
and two cases of cat food in cans
up six flights of stairs.
Your thumbs aren't fast enough
to get past this poem. It's about
your thoughts while you're waiting
to renew your password. Send it.
Send it already! It's about the time
you looked up to see
the face of the stripper.
So naked everything seemed.
It's about the groan of your engine
and searching in the dark, dusty shed
one more time
for the jumper cables.

Tuesday

I laughed all the way to the bank
and then, I laughed all the way to the laundromat.
At the post office I bought a stamp and wept.
My phone told me a child had gone missing
in the neighboring county and that I could lose
one hundred pounds of fat overnite.
I put myself on a pedestal and then thought better of it.
What are you doing up there? Up here? My phone told me
act right now and I could get two for the price of one.
My phone is borderline hysterical.
I didn't go to work today, except in the sense
that I made a rubber facsimile of a walnut
and set it on the pavement beneath a power line
beneath a crow who some people say
is a very smart bird. We'll see.

Dedicated to Not My Phone

I have no need for screens today.
Besides, my phone stopped recognizing my face.
I can reciprocate.
Besides, my dog ages too fast,
sugar-kissed snout, drowsy eyed
and still, he greets me with someone's slipper.
I can try to reciprocate.
Besides, the billowing clouds
the furry bark of a redwood trunk,
the copper skin of madrone,
besides, the sharp scent of lemon grass
awakened by my boot.
I have no time for that which does not decay
Did you hear what I just said, Siri?
Take yourself a little holiday,
but first, Hey Siri, hey
I said petting zoos near me.

SOCIAL WORKERS, I've Noticed

dress with a little flare
pant suits, yes
and sensible shoes
but a feather in the hair
or a medallion
glued with shells
a brooch big as a brick
handmade by the kids
one flight up
on oncology.

Of the Friends I'd Like to Have

someone in the mayor's office
a lawyer, a cop, a doctor
a generous pharmacist,

some time I'd like to know,
the local housing inspector
and a major publishing house publisher,

but it seems I must consort
with tinkerers and fledgling poets
whose interests I have in common

and we'll always drink
from the lowest shelf
and feed on the bottom ramen.

American Dream #6

I have a story I want to tell you about Susan who lives in Susanville. You guessed it, she works at the penitentiary, because that's all there is to do there. She's a guard, no, I mean Phil, her husband is a guard. She's a schoolteacher, and she lives in Susanville, but works in the next town over, and he's not Phil, there is a Phil, I think, I imagine, but he, her husband, is Enrique, and he's an inmate, life sentence, and her name is Liberty. She teaches the children of guards and inmates about, well, on this given day, the difference between frogs and toads, or, I apologize, turtles and tortoises. Well, that's what the lesson plan called for, either or, but there was nothing in the budget, and the creeks run dry in summer, so let's call him Kenny, thickest hair she's ever seen and onyx eyes and no teeth in the front of his face, I shouldn't say no teeth, bottle-rotten blackened stumps, but still what a smile, it would melt your heart, all your organs, let's call him Geronimo, brought in a neon tetra and a goldfish and said, "Ellos son peces." This story is about Hector's father's tattoos, sole to scalp saber-toothed cats, terrifying, but some say he's as timid as a wilted salad, as fragile and gentle as the angel deer, which some say is extinct. *They don't know.* I want to call this story *American Dream*, because I had this dream about Ms. Liberty's children, the children of guards and the children of inmates pledging allegiance to a flag with comets and stars, *why not*, and aquatic birds and flying fish, but no stripes, *and no fucking bars*; and because the fire danger map was so red it burned your fingers; and if I said pledging, forgive me, I meant praying, or rather, dancing, because there is no other way to account for the sudden cloudburst, torrents of rain like out of the blue.

The Art of Loneliness

With no one to sit for him, he painted himself. Over one hundred portraits in the bathroom mirror, all with the expression he wore the day she left him. He tried the hall mirror beside the window. The light changed, but his expression remained the same. He saw himself in a copper pitcher, distorted, but not so different. He kicked a pail of rainwater, and his face rippled. He painted his rippled face. Soon, he found he did not need a reflective surface. His face appeared in a windswept field of grass. In the clouds. In the vast, empty sky.

Ode to Bigfoot

Are you laughing at the human race,
our works of art and monuments,
man-made footprints are your only trace
and God knows you'll survive us.

We're building weapons in outer space,
you're leaping about on rocks.
With explosions we will our past erase,
but you need only put on socks.

Something's Happened to the Space

where things happen
he brought us a tray
of mini coffees and said
drink these while you wait
for your coffee
and besides
you can eat the cups.

We were reminded
of the last empty walk
across campus
that once magnetic field
where people saw us
when people still looked.

Remember that game:
I say school bus
and you say harassment hardship
I say school bus
you say hyper vigilance and bullies
and then you'd smile and say friendship
laughter relief.
I say school bus
and now you say
cell phone
I pod
ear pod.

I have a dream about
a plug on a long cord
and so many sockets
hidden in clouds
lost like libido
what we once crudely called
social intercourse
where has it gone?

Do you remember those
men and women
with clipboards and questions
like ten-year locusts -- the census takers
how many live in your house?
how long and what color?
We called ourselves enumerators
but others had other names and ascribed
motivations hard to imagine.
Meanwhile some boasted
about something called connectivity
play stations circuits brimming
as the high tech doorbell
seemed to have crashed
something as old and simple
as knuckles on wood
what we called rapping
or standing quietly together
what we called waiting
while crickets and bullfrogs
called out for love.

In Kafka's time
there was no online dating
so he stood gazing by his window
until stirred by the horses down below.
A stroll in the park perhaps
we see bright umbrellas
hear violins and the soft gurgle
of water over rocks
but something's been subverted
short-circuited
a kind of longing
a curious thing to long for.

Something's happened to the space
where things happen
while much has been said about
a marketplace of ideas
the real exchange is digital
currency travels at light speed
on fiber optic cables
while in our blue lit homes
we pay homage to our private sectors
and *public* is the dirty word
but let's remember the night
we watched a made for TV movie
called Town Hall Meeting
and wept.

I can't tell the symptoms
from the causes
in any case
it's only a kind of longing
I'm longing for
the pleasure of taking coffee
at the train depot
the stories overheard
conversations at kiosks
at harbors and airports
readings at bookstores
all the vital places where paths cross
call it the commonwealth
where stories laughter tears
wolf-whistles and what-have-you
where happen the adventures of strangers
before the idea of meeting one
became so strange to us.

Dutifully we stood in line
and ate our coffee cups
sweet and salty and buttery
and all a little hard
to swallow.

One More Thing

You proved you're not
a robot
because you know a tractor
a stop sign, a railroad crossing,
when you see one, but
did you crush a bay leaf and sniff your fingers,
hit brake when you meant clutch,
see a face inside a face inside a face,
hear someone call your name,
contemplate non-being,
pet the neighbor's dog,
the one that wagging its tail bit your ass,
fix your eyes on the horizon and turn 360,
contemplate non-thinking,
did you laugh,
did you ache,
did you reach for a word,
hidden in paisley print wallpaper,
did you sigh,
did you, after all, check
the box that says:
Don't try to tell me
what it means to be human?

LITHUANIA

Fish, you hide your red scales
under the riverbank, ripples
of clear water blur you, rank overhanging weed
gives shelter.
But the boy, barefoot,
cunning in the ways of the forest,
holds still, watches.

On the hill
the small house.
Pine logs, raw, still oozing sap. White flags
of linen dry in the wind.

I came
unknown and unknowing
wanting only to lie in
the grass, sleep. I threw away
my rifle.

Here
the speech is strange, not mine.
We could not talk. But her eyes,
dark, wary,
slowly granted understanding.

Bread
cooked on hot stones, the blue smoke
harsh. A straw pallet.

Now I will stay. Sky, be silent;
roof, cover us,
we need nothing more.

MEMORY

Memory, you astound me.
Cloudy, an old mercury mirror,
but all there, the important things.

Birch trunks, silver-white,
rushing past the window, a spoon
rattles in a tea-glass; a railway carriage.
A bridge, endless,
spanning a grey river.
Crows and smoke in the white sky.
And a woman, smiling, a wide-ribboned hat
beside her.

Where did we descend - Bolzano, Trieste?
Or further east, Odessa, Tiflis; the station
unlit at that hour.
The sidestreet hotel, false
names in the register, no labels
on the luggage.

An iron bedstead. Frost crystals
in the window; in the morning
sparrows
flitting from the sill.
At breakfast, coffee, fresh newsprint,
and new-baked rolls. Another train. I left
my scarf behind, hanging
in the wardrobe.

Her name? Nearly. She was Swiss. Or Flemish.
But then the war, gas, the field hospital,
morphine; your excuses, memory,
for losing these details.
Her husband, though,
shot himself, I learned later.

Perhaps I only read it, this story, or dreamed it?
But no, I remember her perfume, the surprising coarseness
of her chestnut hair
as I ran my fingers through it
again and again.

APRIL 1942

Upstairs, one door yet untried,
an attic bedroom. Ceiling, walls
meet obliquely.
From the single window
afternoon sunlight
bars a striped mattress.

Silence. No board creaks, no beam stretches.
The smell of warm dry dust.
And one other thing; a pair
of shoes, little girls' shoes,
curled up like two dead mice
on the bare floorboards.
The girl who wore them went away
in a train.

Outside, beyond the ghetto,
tiled rooftops, pigeons
circling the clock-tower.
In the park, under the lindens,
uniformed bandsmen
unpack their instruments. Brass
gleams. Soon the marches will begin.

Parasols, ice-creams,
dewy glasses on white tablecloths.
Mothers
watch indulgently, as their daughters
chatter with the handsome young officers,
their manners
impeccable.

Nobody looks at
the new brick wall, four metres high,
separating
the living from the not-to-live.

Abe the Tile Man

fixes a split
he works with
thought corrects

warped broken
roof lines broken
tiles

it takes a while to make
the crooked straight
to fill the spaces inbetween

repair is solace for
a split a hurt

repair saves heart
I mean

is it enough

to try to erase correct
enough to make
the rough places plain

BBC Shipping Forecast, Facing South

precarious when my view south
looks back at me & as for place
(say it) a part of me looks down
& in trying to avoid visibility

it's me my self & as for place
occasionally
I don't avoid visibility
facing south

on the other hand sometimes
north is more precise
I know how shame lies
in & down know to avoid south-facing
visibilities

though north seems more precise
occasionally
squalls the gales cyclones shudders
in & down I can't avoid
the variable (sometimes poor) visibility

squalls gales that shudder again

look down

shame looks back at me me the self
& that precarious facing

Phrases lifted from the BBC's Shipping News Forecast. The concept "facing" from Frank Bidart's "making" in "*Music Like Dirt*." I played with the poem and the idea as though in a Pantoum.

On Conscience

Wrong: an early imprint on the self,
Dark & weighty, sullen as a stone
That ducks & reappears as something else,
As if to change that imprint of oneself.
Something else must break through dark to Yes,
Open doors, leave No & No alone,
Instead hear Yes & Yes imprint itself,
No longer weighty, sullen as a stone.

*

What was it that I did at four or five?
I pulled out ringlets, strands of her red hair
(Those watery eyes, pale freckled skin) besides
What did I know when I was four or five
Playing house just in the yard outside.
She took away my doll which wasn't fair
But what is fair when one is four or five?
So I pulled out some strands of her red hair.

*

There's more:
I've stolen now & then, one time a peach
Another time a word, an hour. Yes & No
Sit far apart, withheld, alive in silent speak.
Still, thieving can be sweet (think ripened peach,
Think open doors) the boundaries so oblique
One word, one hour, rescues me from *No*.
So stealing now & then, a word, one peach,
A slice of heart (mine, yours) may be right
& wrong.

Three triolets. Each is a poem of eight lines, typically of eight syllables, that rhymes: *abaaabab*. It is structured so that the first line recurs as the fourth and seventh and the second as the eighth. Originally French, mid 17th century

Portrait

I say inner beauty doesn't exist. That's something that unpretty women invented to justify themselves. Osmel Sousa

She has excised
what some call
excess
 an ever so slight
 fat-flap at the waist
 a prominent nose
 her pointed chin
 pain + time
 her currency
leaves her
 longing
for something unseen
 searching
deep reaches back
 to that dim corner
 where she (privately)
 turns over arranges rearranges
 pieces
 a portrait from shattered reflections
 in a convex mirror
 looking for anything that might be
 proof
 (it must be there)
 of her worth.

Osmel Sousa, longtime head of the Miss Venezuela pageant, on the popularity of plastic surgery in Venezuela. (NY Times, 11.9.13). The phrase *in a convex mirror* after John Ashbery.

Depending on the Year, a Broken Pantoum

A word is only what it means
old love white noise round sounds
titillate at night in daylight
fractured as old skin fault-lined

a love that was white noise round sounds
my tongue tries to say the words
faultlines again *did I write that say that*
yes here it is

my tongue is trying still not a poem
& the passion's not quite gone
yes here it is the likeness doesn't scan
my edit-eye excises sentiment

allows some passion (his receding chin)
a taste of past Selma's cake with plums
my edit-eye my tongue remembers
cold-sweet warm-tart enjambed as lovers' limbs

those plums in Selma's cake
sharp intense but flat depending on the year
cold-sweet warm-tart enjambed as lovers' limbs
despite my private fears

sharp intense & flat depending on the year
but colored wild & rapturous ravenous
despite our private fears
words aren't only what they mean

A broken pantoum. First and last lines from the poem "Dear Rose" from *Time is a Mother* by Ocean Vuong.

Depression Soup, 1936

grasses tuck
 slivered duck
 scallions in bao-clouds
orders sing out
 loud
 vowels
 treble clatter
 roll & rattle
 metal carts at Sammy Yee's

right here
mother ladles
soup pot to bowl
 noodles
 tangle
 mounds
 of ancient
 hens' feet
broth leached & leached hours & hours
from barely bubbling bones

father's bald head
a brass-globed finial
 gleams tall over
 suit & tie
 starched dinners

mother's ordered breaths Her Table
 set for dining

with me an animal
 whose procreant urges:
 primal ravenous
 suck jellied bits off
 mount of moon
 mount of Venus
my hands
 their feet

In Palmistry *mount of moon*, an area at the base of the palm opposite the thumb, said to be the source of creativity, moods & emotions. *Mount of Venus*, opposite the mount of moon said to be the source of energy, love, affection and sympathy.

About Charged Bodies

with a line from Carl Dennis

in the world of the subjunctive
if you think about imbalance or

attachment

about bodies
about polar opposites that
attract attach
attack

think of
charged bodies
moving at the speed of light

if they
would resist
the traveling current

and

(ignoring what
could be grounding
thinking only about

imbalance attaching attacking)

know that earthing busbars
can ground current & volts

know you can open refuge

then
(are you listening?)

the world of the imperative
could change your life

“The world of the subjunctive”, a line from *Worms* by Carl Dennis *Earthing busbars* establish security and act as conductors of electrical current.

The Poet at Four

The chalk, the sidewalk, her unsteady hand
scratched a line, looped a loop with hair,
drew wobbly Js & later vowels (unplanned)
turned into names with consonants to spare.

No one really noticed, did they,

when fresh images & words surprised, see-
sawed
inside her head: landscapes, a tree, a curse,
a verse
in *Hochdeutsch*, Grandfather's language.

She wet her finger to the wind
leaned into disconnect
fancied insight, depth,
& played with shock, her newest toy,

cut the slightest slant, forbade the tonal fugue,
declined to rhyme.

vessels (tikkun)

this is everything

our forms shadow
the shattered whole

nothing more

than this piece
born before the
world is ours

we sift shards
tongue and groove
to marry the one

we have carried unbroken

fragments exhaling the
names we took when
we fell from the skies

we blend the seams
with holy sparks
cast without sight

this is how new worlds are built

paths forged with tikvah
that we will not be alone

on the long walk home

TRIAD

I came into your joy
and fell upon the lap of grace,
a whirling dervish in
a dance of revelation,
the three of us twirling
entwined and free and
wrapped in the sheen
of promise.

We were upswept in
ecstatic devotion,
turning in time together -
meeting the mystic
with eyes - minds
open and sinewed,
embracing earth and above,
the music of the spheres.

But then we looked down,
lost under our feet -
struggling to balance as
flutes and hymns dimmed;
dizzy and pallid we
dropped on our cloaks,
far from the sama
and further from home.

How many times did we
dance, ascend, and fall?
I cannot count;
and still we spun
courting the divine,
hands met in prayer
for all we would hold
if we had looked up.

how we fuse across incalculable distance (wormhole haiku)

seeking my cosmos
you traverse the galaxy
unbound by spacetime

through bent gravity
you tunnel to my mind's eyes
wormholes closed in sleep

you slip through photons
fluctuating quantum foam
to land in my core

our union so dense
not even light can escape
the curve of our forms

we are cosmic strings
bridging the future and past
forming a closed loop

holding this new world
we weave exotic matter
to thread through the walls

we thread fireflies too
these virtual particles
destroyed and reborn

your mouth closes mine
our throats a single channel
when time collapses

atoms disappear
fireflies flee the choking flue
its walls sucking shut

suddenly expelled
swifter than the race of light
we part untethered

this body and i
a universe of longing
await your return

that when you are here
you might unravel the threads
and bind me to you

*first published by The Ravens Perch March 2023 - all rights retained by author

Precipice

I opened my eyes
an offering of release
hands cupped, face lifted
not waiting but
poised to move
while still.

The wind caught
my hem, and
lifting my steps
wound me into this
annulus between known
and unlocked.

Here it is like
looking through water,
now magnified,
now murky
pulled by a gravity
shifting without law.

The helical current
turns like a key
and I follow,
my form lax and my
eyes fixed on the door
as it opens.

Journey

I will sketch space
 around my invisible steps
stave the need to marry
 my footsteps to the earth;

I know where I walk
 unweighted and deliberate
I have sown forests
 have sung each leaf onto

each branch that raised its
 spiny hand to me,
and have sunk to my knees
 in the forgiving soil

making no imprint and
 no sound;
it does not matter -
 the rain will remember how

it fell upon me
 and the oaks will vibrate
where I sang,
 my silent lips lending

urgency to
 the wind,
and I will know
 where I have been.

Mikvah (pantoum)

submerged and unseen
in an archaic well –
women thought dirty
by men of G0d

in an archaic well,
with bodies purified
by men of G0d,
ensnaring the fecund

with bodies purified,
my sisters were bait
ensnaring the fecund
in their water ringed curls

my sisters were bait,
fertile and sullen –
in their water ringed curls
hid the birth of the world

fertile and sullen,
women thought dirty
hid the birth of the world –
submerged and unseen

Lower East Side

when we fled Vilnius—
long before the golden door
shuttered against the Shoah—

we emerged at Ellis
from bellies of barges
processed with the
 dross of pilgrimage

and mouthed new names
cloistered in tenements
tendering garments

for kishke and rent
we bedded on half sewn seams
and side-stepped sewage to daven
 in schul—

when we stitched over our passage
behind Singers on
rust welted chairs in

the bowels of the Bowery
drowning our ghosts in pickle barrels
 the underworld rumble of
 the IRT sounded

terror under the baseboards
like a distant pogrom haunting
our stagnant lungs as we slept—

and when we chattered
low lengths of Litvak
shouldering swarms
 in kippot and shawls

through the charcoal air
 we finally breathed—
and saw ourselves
 everywhere

*first published in Poetry Super Highway May 2023 - all rights retained by the author

Found/Lost Lover (Renée)

I remember your
long white hair draping
my shoulders as each
held the other's form

our breath joined

how we tangoed
with time as we wove
the duple meter of
memory underfoot

hot in the shivering air

the playground we
raised in our reverie
with ecstatic exploration
with howling mirth

ephemeral in its end

the rising wave
of your approach and
fading pitch of your
receding reach

a doppler dimming

the abundance in
your eyes and the bite
of my disappearance
when they closed to me

after I had danced in them

and still I cannot parse truth
from illusion where our
shadows cast promise
before you swallowed the light

*first published by The Write Launch January 2023 - all rights retained by the author

Re-creation

Still there is language / clattering of tongues / plaiting baskets to hold days /
sort nights / porous vessels / for everything most important.

At night I cut and tuck my words / start-and-stop weave / sliding them into the hollow core /
to ensure nothing is lost / nothing is taken / when I close my eyes.

My fingers nick notches / scratching the sides / strands catch in my nails /
I cannot bear to feel fissures / so I pray.

Orisons wrap around / everything the moon's shadow dims / where the sheen of faith
is all I have / to find rest.

This morning I felt / where I had lain / cupped my words / stained and aged in my hands /
afraid to find what the moon stole / when my lids were sealed.

When I speak / I start anew / in the weave brake I sift silence /
fertile in the light / I teach myself / to create more.

Deux

Splintered
I dissimulate my
Fractured bones
 Dancing my skeleton
 A marionette
Convulsing to a taiko drum.

I am Olympia
Trilling *Les Oiseaux* while
Hoffman tells his tales
 My lyric lilt
 Obfuscating the rattle
Of sawdust in my throat.

A finely tuned grift conceals
My aporetic appearance
Swindler - charlatan -
 Sleight of hand
 Look under each shell
I am not there.

My corporeal form
Mutinously masks
The dybbuk who
 Hides behind
 Singing my flesh
Its axiomatic refrain.

It is the opposite of death
The body persists
Presents as a self
 But my self has taken leave
 What you see now is the
Star it left behind.

Red Danube

Knees
hopped
forced march

run away
moths

there's no
reason

my mother
lived.

*

Before
she cut

the sweet
meat

my mother
caressed
the belly
of the dead

horse
three

small birth
marks

lined up
between

her breasts
I will

identify her
when she's dead.

*

Before
an Action
my young
mother

overdosed
on aspirin
the prisoner
of war

doctor
whispered
I'll prove
you're dead

to the Gestapo
with a hypodermic
needle.

*

Index fingers
stroked
their throats

I interrogate
fog.

*

On the train platform
Mama's husband

had followed
the white

leather glove
to the right

in half a year
a Muselmann

after the war
Mama a seamstress

made white
leather gloves

visiting her
short threads hung

from her mouth
I thought

Mama had stitched
her lips together.

Crickets Chant

Illegible
Scream

I was
a leech

on her breast
she said run

we bathed
with the dead.

*

Scream
she releases you
becomes
no one.

*

Scream
why do you
hurt
my mother?

*don't spy
on us.*

*

Her scream
is sown
with death—

a secret
kept from
my mother.

*

Crickets
chant

Scream
no one came

my mother
stared

where's
Margaret?

she wasn't
there.

A Drop Of Water Kit Bliss Jones

if i were a drop of water

 i'd start
 at the outside corner
 of your eye

and swiftly
i'd cross
the top of your cheek

 and drop
 into your ear

i'd slide
down the edge
of your jaw

 across your neck
 and over your shoulder

i'd race around
and round
your body
in an effort
to know your soul

 and then
 because of exhaustion
 i'd sink into your skin

to know you
that's what i'd do
if i were a drop of water

The only dream worth having is to dream that you will live while you are alive, and die only when you are dead. To love, to be loved. To never forget your own insignificance. To never get used to the unspeakable violence and vulgar disparity of the life around you. To seek joy in the saddest places. To pursue beauty to its lair. To never simplify what is complicated or complicate what is simple. To respect strength, never power. Above all to watch. To try and understand.

To never look away. And never, never to forget.

–Arundhati Roy

CONTRIBUTORS

Kim Silva lives in Rhode Island with her musician husband and their dog, Zelda. She loves nature and is vegan for the animals

Claire Massey's prose and poetry have appeared in numerous journals and anthologies, including *Green Ink Poetry Press*, *Halfway Down the Stairs*, *Snapdragon Journal*, *Literally Stories*, *Tales of the Strange*, *Lucky Jefferson*, *Saw Palm Journal*, and *the Bronze Bird Review*. She is a former prose editor for *The Emerald Coast Review* and current poetry editor for *The Pen Woman* magazine. She is the author of *Driver Side Window: Poems & Prose* and co-author of the forthcoming *Awake in the Sacred Night*.

Daphnée is an emerging writer from Canada. She holds a BA in English literature from the University of British Columbia. Her work has appeared previously in *Spadina Literary Review* and *Ricepaper Magazine*, among others. When she isn't writing or traveling around Europe, you can find her petting Golden Retrievers, listening to Taylor Swift, or eating all shapes of pasta.

Garrett Mostowski's (Insta/Threads: [@gmostowski](#)) work has recently appeared in or is forthcoming from *haikuniverse*, *BULL*, *Barren*, *The Porch*, *Unstamatic*, *Spurned*, *The Galway Review*, and others. He is a member of the Order of the Rocking Chair, a group of artists and activists committed to transformative storytelling. His debut book of poems *Lunations* is available wherever books are sold.

Karen Laugel is a physician and emerging writer. She lives on the Delaware coast with her kayaks. Her poetry has appeared in *Pen in Hand* and will soon be featured in the *Tipton Poetry Journal*. If accepted, this will be her first short story publication. She is a member of the Rehoboth Beach Writers Guild and the Eastern Shore Writers Association.

Simon A. Smith is a Chicago teacher and writer. His stories have appeared in many journals and media outlets, including *Hobart*, *Lit Magazine*, *Whiskey Island*, *Chicago Public Radio*, and *NewCity*. He is the author of two novels, *Son of Soothsayer* and *Wellton County Hunters*. He lives in Rogers Park with his wife and son. You can find more of his work at his website: simonasmith.com

Glen Delpit Born in New Orleans raised in California, Attended Allan Hancock college. Been a professional musician for the last 45+ years (singer/songwriter, band leader). Last published poems in *Ginosko Literary Journal* #33.

Therése Halscheid holds an MA in Education and MFA in Creative Writing. Her latest poetry collection is *Frozen Latitudes*. She has taught writing workshops in varied settings in the US and abroad. For more than two decades I have lived simply to write, by way of house-sitting. She draw inspiration from rural areas. Her photography chronicles my journeys, and has been in juried exhibitions.

Salvatore Folisi has been enchanted by the spell of words since high school. Over the years he has jotted down his thoughts as a way to fathom the mystery of the world we live in. He also loves to bang on drums, walk quietly through nature, and engage in

deep conversations that wind down dusky pathways into the midnight of the soul. His writings have appeared in *Adbusters Magazine*, *The American Dissident*, *Gorko Gazette*, *The Field Guide Poetry Magazine* and will appear in upcoming issues of *Door Is A Jar Literary Magazine* and *Witcraft*. He is a ghostwriter at *Xander Stone Ink*.
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Daniel Bliss is an English professor and world-traveling poet originally from Anchorage, Alaska. His poems have been published or are forthcoming in *Pinhole Poetry*, *The Bicoastal Review*, *League of Canadian Poets*, *Blood and Bourbon*, *BarBar*, and many others.

Sarah Harley is originally from the UK. She works at Milwaukee High School of the Arts where she supports her refugee students in telling their own stories. Sarah holds a BA in Comparative Literature and French, as well as an MA in Foreign Language and Literature. Her essays have appeared in *Halfway Down the Stairs*, *Idle Ink*, *Glassworks Magazine*, *West Trade Review*, and elsewhere. You can find her online here: <https://www.sarahharley888.com>

Andy Oram is a writer and editor in the computer field. His editorial projects have ranged from a legal guide covering intellectual property to a graphic novel about teenage hackers. Print publications where his writings have appeared include *The Economist*, the *Journal of Information Technology & Politics*, and *Vanguardia Dossier*. He has lived in the Boston, Massachusetts area for 50 years. His poems have appeared in more than 60 journals and anthologies.

D Walsh Gilbert A dual citizen of Ireland and the United States, D. Walsh Gilbert lives in Connecticut on a former sheep farm at the foot of the Talcott Mountain, the previous homelands of the Tunxis peoples. Most recently, she published two verse-stories, "Finches in Kilmainham" and "Misneach: A Story of Kidnap, Enslavement, and Colonialism" (Grayson Books, 2024). She serves with Riverwood Poetry Series and is co-editor of *Connecticut River Review*.

Greg Kosmicki's most recent book, *The dog has no answers* was published September 2024 by Main Street Rag Publications. He is the author of 15 other books and chapbooks of poems. His poems have been published in *Paris Review*, *New Letters*, *New York Quarterly*, *Cortland Review*, and many others. He founded The Backwaters Press and edited and managed it for twenty years, passing it along to The University of Nebraska Press as an imprint in 2017. He and his wife are retired and live in Omaha, NE.

Walter Heineman A native Texan and longtime Houstonian, Walter Heineman has been writing poetry since his teens. His interests are varied and he enjoys pastimes such as chess and guitar and of course, writing poetry. Themes in his poetry include history, art, literature, music, dreams, myths, fairytales, ritual, symbolism, depth psychology, science, architecture, electronics, geology, perception and consciousness. Walter's career afforded him extensive travel, both national and international, which allowed him to visit many of the world's great museums.

Casey Killingsworth has been published in numerous journals including *The American Journal of Poetry*, *Better Than Starbucks*, *The Moth*, and *3rd Wednesday*. He is the author of A

handbook for water (Cranberry Press, 1995), A nest blew down (Kelsay Books, 2021), and a new collection, Freak show (Fernwood Press), arrived in June 2024.

D Walsh Gilbert A dual citizen of Ireland and the United States, D. Walsh Gilbert lives in Connecticut on a former sheep farm at the foot of the Talcott Mountain, the previous homelands of the Tunxis peoples. Most recently, she published two verse-stories, “Finches in Kilmainham” and “Misneach: A Story of Kidnap, Enslavement, and Colonialism” (Grayson Books, 2024). She serves with Riverwood Poetry Series and is co-editor of *Connecticut River Review*.

Susanna Solomon I've been writing stories inspired by actual sheriff's calls in the West Marin newspaper The Point Reyes Light. They offer me a starting off point, and I never know where I am going to go.

VA Wiswell lives outside Seattle, WA, with her human and animal family. Her work has appeared in *The Lake*, *34th Parallel Magazine*, *Ignatian Literary Magazine*, *Five on the Fifth*, *Lumina Journal*, *Panoplyzine Magazine* as the Editors' Poem of Choice, *The Basilisk Tree*, and *Figwort*. She has work forthcoming in *Crab Creek Review*, *Courtship of The Winds*, and *Remington Review*, along with a poetry collection through Kelsay Books.

Wendy Brown-Báez is the creator of Writing Circles for Healing. She is the author of the poetry collections Threading the Gold and Ceremonies of the Spirit. Wendy's poetry and prose appear in numerous literary journals and anthologies, including *Poets & Writers*, *Tiferet*, *Comstock Review*, *Mizna*, *Mom Egg Review*, and *Talking Writing*. Wendy facilitates creative writing in community spaces such as state prisons, spiritual and healing centers, and arts and human service organizations. She was the 2023-2024 Artist-in-residence at Westminster Presbyterian Church. www.wendybrownaez.com.

Simon A. Smith is a Chicago teacher and writer. His stories have appeared in many journals and media outlets, including *Hobart*, *Lit Magazine*, *Whiskey Island*, *Chicago Public Radio*, and *NewCity*. He is the author of two novels, Son of Soothsayer and Wellton County Hunters. He lives in Rogers Park with his wife and son. You can find more of his work at his website: simonasmith.com

Richard Weems My latest publications are *North American Review*, *1922 Review* and *Ignatian Literary Magazine*. I live in New York and I just recently retired from teaching.

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Gillian Clark is an educator, poet and storyteller, she works and plays on Nyoongar Boodjar and has connections to the Storytellers Guild WA and WA Poets Inc, and has performed at festivals, appeared in WA anthologies, and had residencies in Perth and in Albany and at KSP. Her mission is to bring story and poetry to a wider audience.

Barbara Daniels' most recent book, Talk to the Lioness, was published by Casa de Cinco Hermanas Press. Her poetry has appeared in *Main Street Rag*, *Free State Review*, *Philadelphia Stories*, and many other journals. She received four fellowships from the New Jersey State Council on the Arts.

LB Sedlacek is the author of several collections of poetry. Her most recent books are Organic Soup published by Bottlecap Press and Unresponsive Sky published by Purple Unicorn Press. Her other poetry books include Words and Bones (Finishing Line Press), The Architect of French Fries (Presa Press), and The Poet Next Door (Cyberwit Press). She has been nominated for a Pushcart Prize and has also been nominated for Best of the Net in poetry. She has had several short stories and poems published in the college literary magazine, "Branches," winning 1st Place Prose awards for her stories "Sight Unseen" and "Backwards Wink." She also enjoys swimming and reading.

Gene Twaronite is a Tucson poet and the author of five poetry collections. His first poetry book, *Trash Picker on Mars*, was the winner of the 2017 New Mexico-Arizona Book Award. His latest poetry collection is *Death at the Mall* (Kelsay Books). A former Writer-in-Residence for Pima County Public Library, he leads a poetry workshop for University of Arizona OLLI. Follow more of Gene's writing at: genetwaronitepoet.com & genetwaronite.bsky.social

Catherine McGuire is a writer and artist with a deep concern for our planet's future, with five decades of published poetry, six poetry chapbooks, a full-length poetry book, Elegy for the 21st Century, a SF novel, Lifeline and book of short stories, The Dream Hunt and Other Tales. Find her at <http://www.cathymcguire.com>

Vaidhy Mahalingam I have been a San Francisco Bay Area tech worker for over twenty-five years. During this time I have also been wandering in the back alleys of my "model minority" community, picking up stories of struggle from its trash cans. Now, as a retiree, I am ready to tell these stories to the world. My short fiction piece "Glass Doors" was published in the literary journal *Arkana* last year, and two other stories are slated for publication in *Pembroke Journal* and *Umbrella Factory Magazine*.

Ken Wuetcher lives in Louisville, KY. He is a graduate of Bellarmine University with a BA in English Literature and holds a MA in English Literature from DePaul University in Chicago. His writing has been published in the monthly online newsletter *Long Distance Project*.

R M Cooper Dozens of my short stories have appeared in and received awards from American Short Fiction, Best American Experimental Writing, The Best Small Fictions, *Gulf Coast*, *Prairie Schooner*, and many state and city Reviews. I am the managing editor of *Sequestrum* and am represented by Yona Levin at UTA.

Fiona Sinclair has had several collections of poetry published by small presses in the UK. She has been writing short stories for about 2 years now. Fiona is a reader for *Black Fox* magazine. She lives with her husband in a village in Kent UK. Her interests include a feral cottage garden and riding pillion on the back of her husband's Yamaha.

Seth Brady Tucker's third book, *The Cruelty Virtues* will be published by 3:A Taos Press in late 2025. He is the executive director of the Longleaf Writers' Conference and he teaches creative writing at the Lighthouse Writers' Workshop and at the Colorado School of Mines near Denver. He is the author of the award-winning poetry books *Mormon Boy* and *We Deserve the Gods We Ask For*, and his poetry, fiction, and essays have recently appeared in the *Los Angeles Review*, *LitMag*, *Driftwood*, *Copper Nickel*, the *Birmingham Poetry Review*, and others. He is originally from Wyoming and once served as an Army Paratrooper with the 82nd Airborne in Iraq.

Michael Catherwood's books are Dare, If You Turned Around Quickly, Projector, from Stephen F. Austin Press, and Near Misses from WSC Press. He's a former editor at The Backwaters Press and has been Associate Editor at Plainsongs since 1995. Recent poems have appeared in *As It Ought to Be Magazine*, *The Common*, *The Corpus Callosum*, *The Misfit Magazine*, *The Opiate*, *Pennsylvania English*, and *Slipstream*. He's a cancer survivor, retired, and lives in Omaha with his wife, Cindy.

Shiela Pardee I am a historical fiction writer, but this story is based on events within my own experience in the Pacific Northwest. Previous publications *Copperfield Review* and *Embark: A Literary Journal*.

Ken Wuetcher lives in Louisville, KY. He is a graduate of Bellarmine University with a BA in English Literature and holds a MA in English Literature from DePaul University in Chicago. His writing has been published in the monthly online newsletter *Long Distance Project*.

Mark Belair My poems have appeared in numerous journals, including *Alabama Literary Review*, *Harvard Review*, and *Michigan Quarterly Review*. Author of eight collections of poems—most recently Settling In (Kelsay Books, 2024)—I've also published two works of fiction: Stonehaven (Turning Point, 2020) and its sequel, Edgewood (Turning Point, 2022). I have been nominated for a Pushcart Prize multiple times, as well as for a Best of the Net Award. Please visit www.markbelair.com

Catherine Strisik poet; publisher & editor of *Taos Journal of Poetry*; former poet laureate of Taos, New Mexico; writing coach for poets & essayists; author of: The Mistress; Thousand-Cricket Song; Insectum Gravitis; forthcoming: Goat, Goddess, Moon, with over 30 years of publications with poems translated into Greek, Persian, and Bulgarian.

Vaidhy Mahalingam I have been a San Francisco Bay Area tech worker for over twenty-five years. During this time I have also been wandering in the back alleys of my “model minority” community, picking up stories of struggle from its trash cans. Now, as a retiree, I am ready to tell these stories to the world. My short fiction piece “Glass Doors” was published in the literary journal *Arkana* last year, and two other stories are slated for publication in *Pembroke Journal* and *Umbrella Factory Magazine*.

Daniel Coshnear is author of Jobs & Other Preoccupations (Helicon Nine 2001) winner of the Willa Cather Fiction Award and Occupy & Other Love Stories (Kelly's Cove Press 2012) and winner of the Novella Prize for Homesick, Redux (Flock 2015), recipient of a Missouri Review

Editor's Prize and a Christopher Isherwood Fellowship. His newest story collection, Separation Anxiety was released in 10/21 by Unsolicited Press.

Peter Newall was born in Sydney, Australia, where he worked in a Navy dockyard, as a lawyer and as a musician. He has since lived in Japan, in Germany and now in Odesa, Ukraine, where he fronts a local r'n'b band. He has been published in England, America, Europe, Hong Kong and Australia.

Catherine McGuire is a writer and artist with a deep concern for our planet's future, with five decades of published poetry, six poetry chapbooks, a full-length poetry book, Elegy for the 21st Century, a SF novel, Lifeline and book of short stories, The Dream Hunt and Other Tales. Find her at www.cathymcguire.com

Gene Twaronite is a Tucson poet and the author of five poetry collections. His first poetry book, *Trash Picker on Mars*, was the winner of the 2017 New Mexico-Arizona Book Award. His latest poetry collection is *Death at the Mall* (Kelsay Books). A former Writer-in-Residence for Pima County Public Library, he leads a poetry workshop for University of Arizona OLLI. Follow more of Gene's writing at: genetwaronitepoet.com & genetwaronite.bsky.social

Judith Pacht's book *Summer Hunger*, won the 2011 PEN Southwest Book Award for Poetry. Her new book, Precarious, New & Selected Poems (Giant Claw Press), will be published in 2025. A three-time Pushcart nominee, Pacht was first place winner in the Georgia Poetry Society's Edgar Bowers competition. Her work appears in journals that include *Ploughshares*, *Runes*, *Nimrod* and *Phoebe*, and her poems have been translated into Russian where they were published in *Foreign Literature* (Moscow, Russia). She has work in numerous anthologies. Pacht reads at the Los Angeles Times Festival of Books, at Charleston's Piccolo Spoleto Festival and has read and taught Political Poetry at Denver's annual LitFest at the Lighthouse. www.judithpacht.com

Lisa Delan's poetry and prose have been featured in a broad range of literary publications, and she has received two Pushcart Prize nominations. When she is not writing, you can find the soprano, an international performer who records for the Pentatone label, singing songs on texts by some of her favorite poets.

Gret Rutherford graduated from Grinnell College and studied at the International Center of Photography. Her writing led her to MFA studies at Sarah Lawrence, where she worked with poets Thomas Lux and Brooks Haxton. Her most recent poetry appears in *New Orleans Review*, *Salt Hill*, *Confrontation Magazine*, *The Awakenings Review*, *Up the Staircase Quarterly*, and *The Santa Fe Review*. Her artist book of poetry and prints, Budapest Stories, exhibited in twenty nonprofit galleries across the United States and Canada. She lives with her husband John in Gallup, NM, where they raised their two sons.

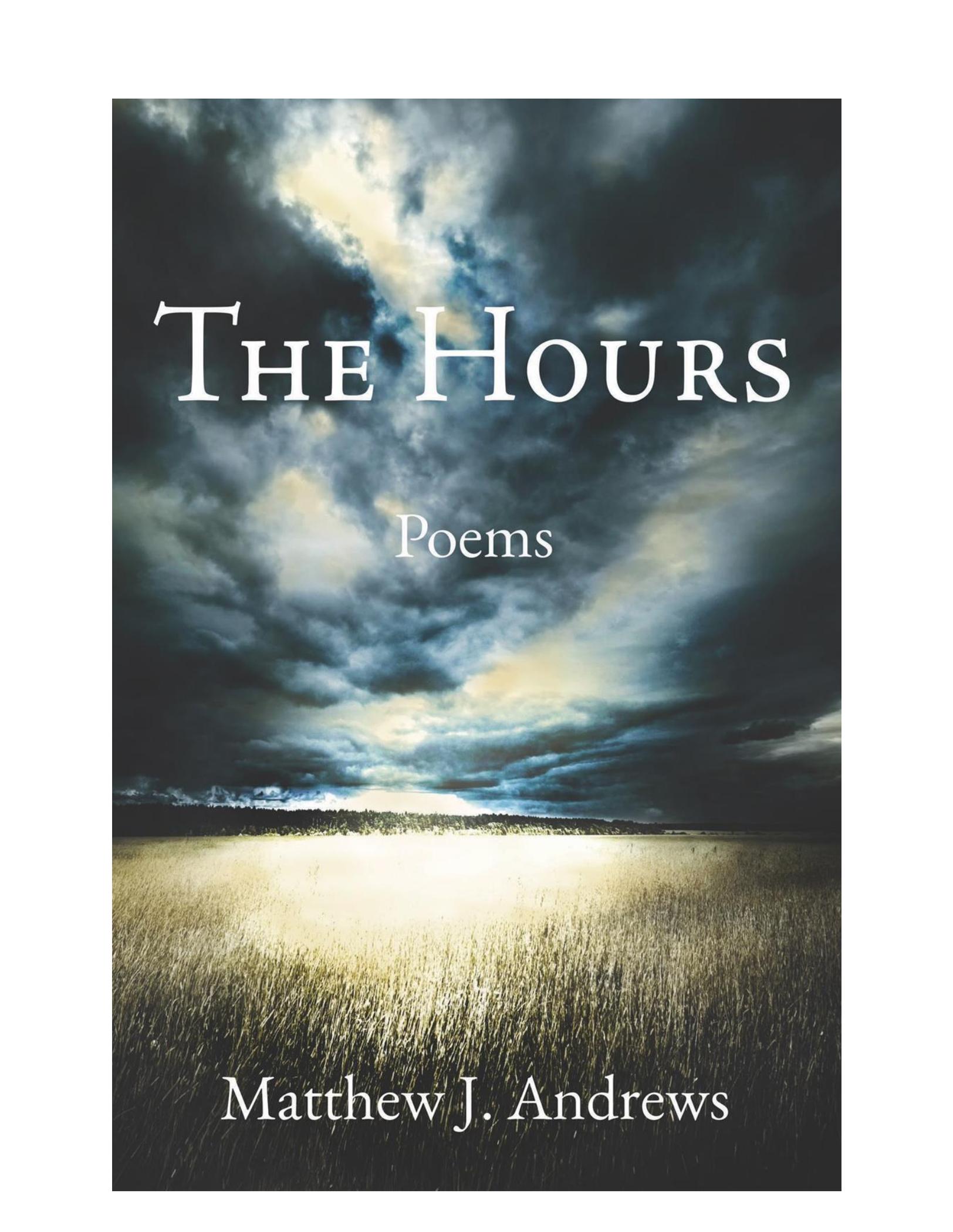
Kit Bliss Jones <https://wellnessonthecoast.com/practitioners/kit-bliss-jones/>

AMERICAN MOBILE

poems



E.M. SCHORB

A dramatic landscape photograph of a field under a stormy sky. The sky is filled with dark, heavy clouds, with a bright light breaking through near the horizon, creating a strong glow over the field. The field is filled with tall, golden-brown grasses. The overall mood is somber and atmospheric.

THE HOURS

Poems

Matthew J. Andrews