

# THE LAUREL REVIEW

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## THE SPECIFIC DEMANDS OF THE SITE

The quality that defines an orchard: that its motion is bounded by an image of stillness, like a fountain that brims and spills over by design, which is just like a city when viewed from above. Less harmful, we find, than such distancing, even intentions. For the first time, a-sudden, I noticed the form of the tempest where it shaped the urban thicket, like a bird discovered in the bushes wildly singing. This was while walking beside the river, a path meandering past unkempt fields and then through a neat woods, punctuated by bright red holly berries, and orangish berries which we always referred to as bird berries. The divine presence as felt in other centuries runs shattered through present perception. The ballad always points to an older ballad. I can't even imagine the frustration you're feeling, if it's even frustration, keeping in mind the partial experience of oneself in the impartial eyes of passersby. Perhaps this is so to emphasize the force of implication. As to say, "I'll take the brambly path of inarticulacy before I claim to know you who know me not, if to know you is to love you, and love is adjacent to loathing." Speaking of the road I stand beside, I'd say that the gutters say the rain has been abundant but by no means fruitful. All over the whirling city, children, adults, and elders are diagnosed as dying, or die with no diagnosis, while weather carries on with its process of growth. At every angle of impact, it is exact. Brightening today. Absolute tranquility, as poised as a thread pulled sharp and ready to plunge behind its needle into the pattern once more: that's the sensation just at the threshold of love. A pause so lengthy, even the birds have quit.

ANDY STALLINGS

---

## PATTERNS INTO WHICH ALL ELEMENTS CAN BE ENTERED

All down the shoreline, the concept “shoreline” holds sway, and it feels like I’m headed *towards water* instead of *behind the sea* or *away from my tendency to stand*. Spaces don’t fade, but light does; revelation is fresh; I choose each color for how it blooms or spills over, not what it hides. Even what sound has occurred awaits its echo, blue and dazzling about the summertime docks. What vantage, what view, which direction does not depend utterly on certain tales told in childhood whose purpose was to immerse the child in depths of a seeming surface, those lakes half-coated with ice. Meanwhile, each moment I hoped to remember precisely, I forgot the more entirely for having so hoped. From the heights of memory, each moment seems a privileged entity, not bound by the customs of speech. But they topple freely. There’s less sky to the sky when it rains, which accounts for the heaviness I feel on such days, days of perpetual, purposeless, saturating rain. In the puddles just after it stops, we can see the distorted images others see, within them a governing silence that leaves us abashed. This is the grand proposal of public space: that each life is beautiful in its habits, or that the concept “a beautiful life” delimits each life, if not equally, then visibly, or at least in terms familiar to the whole. The anonymous current of lives is a solemn sight. A light chill inflects each corner where we wait in the draft of passing traffic for a signal to walk across. Tomorrow’s regrets are already complete, though not yet identified by the names I will now rehearse. Dirt, furrows, ragweed, tractors, shrubbery, containers of paint. In division, claims; in categories, demands. But anything at all will burn.



SASHA WEST

---

## DOUBT

In the church  
I listened  
to a *faith*  
*haunted by trees.*  
From a tree  
had come  
our exile.

In my mind, death  
was a forest  
burned  
to ground.  
Carbon dug  
from earth started  
the blaze.  
I believed  
I could swallow  
difficult knowledge  
like the Eucharist—  
endure. I asked  
to know  
everything you  
could tell me,  
I swallowed the bitter

pomegranate seeds.  
Not Eve, I was  
Persephone  
whose eating  
keeps her  
underground. Half  
the year  
my mind rewilds  
itself deep in the coal  
mines, deep  
in the artic

blaze. The tree looks

to be  
living but *is*  
*mostly dead*  
wood—just a few  
*millimeters*  
*under bark*  
and leaves make  
what we see  
as life.

*Rest*  
*in the crucible*  
*of anxiety. It will*  
*destroy you. It*  
*will transform*  
*you.*

What I know has  
died inside me  
to make bone.

JEFF HARDIN

---

## ANOTHER DAY

Another day I've wasted,  
                                          though the sky has threatened rain  
and cooled the afternoon  
                                          so that my sitting here, at least,  
is somewhat bearable, a breeze to cool my neck.

Earlier, I was thinking I should choose  
a couple of words  
                                          to serve as poles of my existence—  
                                          a dialectic, some would say—  
and the tension generated between the words  
                                          might serve as my milieu,  
a problem requiring a resolution.

*Obsession*, for instance, on one hand,  
and *obscurity* on the other,  
                                          though understandably  
how such an arrangement might benefit the world  
I cannot rightly say.

Soon,  
                                          my mortgage will be paid in full,  
which all along I've likened to a forest  
                                          at which I chopped with my machete,  
cursing gnats, mosquitoes, and the unrelenting stifling humidity  
                                          in an effort to find a meadow  
—ox-eyes and daisies and jasmine and lavender—  
and to lie there on my back  
                                          staring at the bluest sky  
in recorded history.

I've sat here  
counting all the trees whose trunks  
                                          succumbed to creeping ivy,  
and so far the count is ten.

Yesterday, sitting behind an SUV,  
I read “MAKINIT,”  
                                          which is car-tag for  
                                          “I’m holding my own  
though I’ve given up dreams of something more”

and so the driver  
                                          wants to share in angst-ridden solidarity  
despite the cost of fuel  
                                          and ludicrous size of her behemoth  
which she can barely squeeze into a parking space  
at Wal-Mart,  
                                          or else she means “I’m raking it in in bucketfuls  
so get the hell out of my way,”  
which is short for  
                                          “in your face, loser.”

And I can’t stop thinking of the sleeping homeless woman  
two teenagers  
                                          out for a good time  
rolled into the river.  
Neither jumped in once he realized  
                                          she couldn’t swim,  
too much Darwin, I suppose,  
                                          or absentee fathers,  
too many video games, too much high fructose corn syrup,  
too little exercise,  
                                          whatever explanation does the trick.  
Even so, the woman’s body is being searched for now—  
hundreds of man-hours, boats, divers, sonar—  
when only a week ago  
                                          she mostly didn’t exist.

What anything has to do  
                                          with anything else  
gets harder and harder to piece together,

or maybe I've grown exhausted, or jaded,  
or maybe  
    the logic of cause and effect no longer works,  
or never worked.

I hope it finally rains and rains and rains tonight,  
    an answer to no one's prayer or forecast,  
something so torrential and scalding  
that when we wake  
    not even the poets can make a metaphor of it,  
for nothing will have changed  
and no one be aware  
    the swallowing waves have come for us.

ARTHUR VOGELSANG

---

## ANY DAY NOW

Empty hours are a blessing after razzamataz.  
By blessing I mean I was seven and I relaxed.  
Now there are pills so I can participate in the razzamataz  
Like everybody else and be as steady. Don't worry,  
The pills are weak and there's just two.  
I have a gift for participating with the people  
Since I was eight and developed my act  
For mimicking a priest. The act would be funny  
Even now to you, and spiritual even  
Now to you, a discerning listener, a famous  
Rightfully famous audience member, a professional  
Audience member. I take the pills  
To participate rather than dominate.  
But any way you cut it it's a strain  
And empty hours are a blessing  
But such an imitation of, and advertisement for, the end.

## ARTHUR VOGELSANG

---

### HOME

The canyon in low hills  
Contains a house,  
Mine among its neighbors—  
One of these sawing  
With powerful hired chain saws  
And men his powerful trees.  
The Australian trees, imported as babies to be lumber  
Forests in the 1800's,  
Eucalyptus, grew up too hard  
For commercial lumber (their soft hand saws then) and  
Became beautiful aggressive specimens  
Placed around such houses  
In such gentle canyons. Sharp,  
All day the metal monsters gargle and shout,  
Amputating the too wide, too tall trees, for their health.

There, noise number one explained.

Noise number two is someone on the phone

In my house—  
Little loud bursts and then a soft, complete paragraph—  
And together two noises (saw and voice) it  
Sounds like a singer without a mike  
Backed by drums and saxophones  
And on that stage a truck-sized wood chopper  
Being fed wood  
For an experiment in the philharmonic hall,  
Grinding against the beat of the sax—  
Thus the song may only hint at a story.

The canyon is shaped like a funnel and an open can  
Soldered end to end,  
A chamber both narrow and wide  
So peoples' voices are borne far in all homes  
In no wind as if there was wind inside the house—  
Like a feeling shredded to sawdust  
May dip and swirl across halls and alcoves and two rooms.

## GEARHEAD

I sprayed Versace Bright Crystal all over a sports bra and tossed it in the back seat of my Jeep so that when he opened the door the scent would hit him like a ton of bricks. I knew ahead of time where he'd be sitting—we were transporting a lot of old computers to a local elementary school in the city and the only free seat was on the passenger's side, second row. Knowing I'd have a captive audience, I also tucked the latest issue of Road & Track magazine into the seatback pouch. This issue had a cover story on my favorite car, the new 755 horsepower Corvette ZR1. He would see the magazine, smell the perfume, and think of me.

I hung around the break room at work one day last week pretending to drink tea because I knew he would eventually show up to get coffee. I got a cup of Earl Grey tea, which I hate, took it over to the window, pulled out my phone and pretended to read emails. I know when he's approaching by the sound of his footsteps. His tread is heavy and you can hear his loafers clomping. When he arrived, I hunched over my phone and began typing a fake text message. He mumbled hello, we chatted a bit, and I said a lot of stupid shit. Nothing came out the way I planned.

I wrapped my wrist in white first-aid tape and when he asked about it I told him I tweaked it while climbing rocks in Great Falls Park. I explained there were various rocks you could free-climb without much worry because if you slipped off the rock face you'd fall into the water. He said I was hardcore and I laughed and said not really, then I wondered what he would say if he knew I spent the day in Great Falls Park drinking wine, lying in the sun and watching people climb rocks.

I bought a new car with the idea that one day I would take him for a ride in it. This is not as extreme as it sounds. My Jeep is ancient and I wanted a manual transmission, something fun to drive. The car I bought is a black 2017 Honda Civic EX-T Coupe and it's perfect for my daily commute to east Baltimore. If you've ever been in east Baltimore you know it's like the Wild West in terms of traffic enforcement. I pretty much drive Formula 1 style through the streets and there are rarely any police around.



Last Friday after work I ran into him in the parking garage. He was on the phone trying to get an Uber because his car wouldn't start and he had to get home to meet the cable guy. I said forget the Uber, I will drive you. No joke, I actually stepped up and took control. We walked to the Honda and I tried to act normal. He got in and said it smelled new. I warned him that the ride would not be smooth due to the high performance nature of the Honda and I added that these types of cars were designed to go fast. I joked that there was a barf bag in the back seat and I also said he should consider taking a Xanax. He laughed.

As we drove I explained that my aggressive shifting was inspired by Formula 1 drivers. We got on the highway and I pushed it to eighty. He asked if my wrist injury bothered me when I shifted gears and I said the pain was always there. I lifted my right arm and flexed my wrist, noting that I liked to tape it in a way that restricted movement.

When we arrived at his apartment, he mumbled something about the repair shop being booked and his car having to sit in the garage overnight. I volunteered to give him a ride to work the following morning and he accepted. This was huge. I would now have a whole evening to prepare. I'd been thinking about a new story that featured me surfing in Ocean City during a thunderstorm. In addition, I needed to keep the wrist story going, and the best way to do that was to stand in front of a mirror and practice wincing every time I rotated my hand.

I drove away thinking that things could not have gone better. Tomorrow his car would get fixed and he would certainly spend some time thinking about me. I knew this instinctively. I also knew that I was getting closer to transforming myself into a one-of-a-kind, ass-kicking machine. Whether or not this transformation actually took place made no difference. The goal was to make him believe. If I could do that, I'd be in the clear.

DANA ALSAMSAM

---

## IMPRESSIONISM WITH PIGEONS FUCKING

In Paris even the pigeons are a nicer color  
mauve blue gray In Paris the pigeons  
are fucking on a wire so we're jealous of them  
too like the well-dressed women sipping wine  
A new friend drinks Sancerre with me at first  
we pour acceptable amounts into clear plastic  
cups but after some time letting our bodies  
retire we drink from the bottle the cold  
neck condensating into our hot summer hands  
He leans back looks slightly up at the Marais  
past the vision of the pigeons still going at it  
the Seine rushing beneath his feet his teeth  
white with buffering possibility There is  
the destined water the birds making smaller birds  
but we are not thinking about time static  
in our herenow discussing in French  
the insecurity of being too American for France  
of all the other selves Yes even those pigeons  
are a nicer color Across the river the bends  
of a fallen tree catalogue ruin the musician  
behind us plays slow covers of American songs  
we like The evening opens an indigo bloom  
above our heads we open with it towards  
what we had never known but feel now  
intimately a solitariness which is unacceptable  
for Paris one which does not lead to romance  
Even the fucking birds feel it when they knock  
from the sky forget each other's colors as dark  
becomes them The Marais above takes care of us  
we feel the lights becoming our many mothers  
Across the river lovers hold hands like they do  
in Paris exchange a smile My friend imagines  
them fucking like the pigeons his laugh skips a stone  
leaves ripples My heart tells me I must not  
have a right to such tiny beautiful things

JIM DANIELS

---

## OHIO TURNPIKE BLUES

You can drive a long way just by staying where you are.  
Or the reverse of that. Silo-space-ship rest-stops deja-vued  
across Ohio's endless flat straight unwavering mirage.  
Buckeye State of mind, an unrecorded Glen Campbell song  
zombified on the brain loop of the wandering caffeinated masses.  
You can't drive away or stray from who you are. Smash a penny  
in a machine to read Buckeye State. Buy a lottery ticket. Burn it.  
Limbo, Ohio. The dance, the trance, the pitch, the twitch. Take up  
smoking across the flat unwavering mirage of an exit from Ohio.  
You may see cows. You may moo. You may smash a bug. Or two.  
Buy a condom and blow it up. Twist it into an albino balloon cow.  
You long for who you once were. Sex drive? Where? Good boy. Stay.  
Even Cleveland radio fades. GPS? Mute. Sleeping. Vanity plates:  
R U AMUZD? Cruise control lies. Construction alibis. Can't talk now!  
You're crossing the endless flat straight unwavering mirage of Ohio.  
Some presidents were born here. Shoulders disappear. Life narrows  
to a single lane. Someone flips you off. You wave like a bon vivant.  
You can stay who you are and still drive a long way  
across the straight unwavering life—no mirages. Just Ohio.

DAVID GREENSPAN

---

## SOMETIMES LIFE AIN'T SHORT ENOUGH AT ALL

Difficult air, diet air,  
discount air, lemon air,  
scripture air my favorite  
of course. Seed swallowed  
air, small animal air,  
Detroit air. When I was a boy  
I delighted in delight, in running  
my hands through air and hair  
and really there's not much difference.  
I delighted in the sweet taste of creek water  
and those fat mushrooms who sighed  
when pressed especially hard. Drug store air,  
grocery store air, hardware store air,  
dog breath air. What can you teach me  
about riding bikes I didn't already learn  
two decades ago? What can you tell me  
about honeysuckle, rhubarb, nettle?  
I'm thinking of the Pacific Northwest,  
of rain air, of pine air, of the big one air  
and here we are fingers spreading  
like a particularly thick jam. I'll stop  
right now and admit I wasn't honest.  
I'm tin drunk and stuffed and stuffing  
all types of marbles into my pocket.  
Repeat after me "I did not hold my boot  
to his neck. I did not, I did not."

DAVID DODD LEE

---

## THE PLAN

It's the book of black and white dreams, with end notes

*What is the color of the day moon*  
*What is the color of November*  
*What is the color of prayer . . .*

Shame, it's appropriately winter again

What is the color of the keyhole

See "times you've felt thankful for the presence of others"

Something random, like a stranger offering you a glass of cold water

" " *the color of leaves under snowfall*  
" " *the color of April*  
" " *the color of the Book of Kells*

What do you know now that you didn't know an hour ago

*I feel myself burning in moony flames and sleep*

Or last week

*This city tends to disappear in cold weather*

(lines 13 and 15 are stolen from the verse of Philip Whalen)

## I'M SERIOUS

The drugs weren't  
very good. A luminous  
film about the after

life? I don't think  
I'm buying that either.  
I don't have to be high

to get we're all being  
screwed these days.  
And people are

delicate. But stronger  
than you might  
imagine. Of course you

don't need me to tell  
you that. I'm serious.  
I never expected you

to read this poem. But  
since you're here can  
you just give me a hug?

DAVID DODD LEE

---

## 11:20'S TWO BIG HEMISPHERES

Peptic, lachrymose, you create a file in real time,  
close several bank accounts

follow the clouds to the end of everything.

It was okay . . .

I mean the philosophy of shared disaster.

A landscape leading deeper, leading deeply;

The middle of the body's the dreamer.

Now I'm a believer.

Wanting it to happen over and over again.

Like when you're almost dog-fucked by the beauty  
of the thing you grasp and observe—fake goal posts.

WILLIAM VIRGIL DAVIS

---

## AT THE VERNISSAGE

We were wandering aimlessly around a largely empty room, drinks in hand, making small talk about the mostly massive constructions that seemed to litter the white space around them, when, abruptly, a rather disheveled man sauntered up to us and asked what we thought about it all. Without waiting for an answer, he dropped to his knees and began to rearrange one of the largest installations—a huge circular arrangement of wooden blocks which, we'd assumed, had been carefully positioned, either by the artist himself or by the staff, working from a detailed blueprint. When, twenty minutes later, the curator introduced the man as the artist, we were somewhat relieved. He explained what he had just done and said that he hoped this new arrangement would please us more than the earlier one. We politely nodded and circled the room once or twice again before going to dinner to discuss the pros and cons of modern art.



ELIZABETH DODD

---

## WHEN DID DENNIS HOPPER STEP IN TO HELP US WITH GRIEF'S PEP ASSEMBLY?

In the hospital we say *keep her comfortable*  
as if morphine soothes the cockroachy spots  
twitching her liver as if *breakthrough pain* is just  
light spotting that Lortab like Spray 'n' Wash stick  
can remove and fade and what the fuck  
with the pre-diabetic young aide at the door  
bringing Medicare's requisite lecture  
*Do you smoke, did you ever smoke*  
but Aunt Carol quit thirty years ago and she can still  
talk so goddammit *talk to her* but that poor girl for  
her flick-of-shit-minimum-wage has to stay in the room  
while my aunt closes her eyes and Maxine  
god-help-us-Pall-Mall fucking takes the brochure saying  
*I really should quit too* and every good thought that  
comes into her blessherheart head is as good as true  
oh as good as the gold standard Fentanyl patch  
but thank heavens for Kevin who spends at the end  
of a day at the salon a full hour combing out smoothing  
the dreadlocked knot where she can't lift her head  
from the pillow oh yesterday (sans lights sans camera)  
Erin and I looked over the sets (what the fuck with  
the social worker doesn't anyone know fuck about hospice)  
for the next scene to play out and as soon as we parked  
I remembered the place, dredged up one last afternoon  
in that mildewed lung of a low-ceilinged room  
where, a child, I stood with my mother while  
Grandmother Vi coughed out her life  
so Erin said *scratch this one from the list*  
*okay* I said *next* there was just one more next  
after the ambulance ride from the hospital after  
the first night in the oxygen pump's suck/thump/  
suck/thump now what do I do in the half-antiseptic dawn  
in the shift change in the suddenly mid-afternoon  
when Tom from PT and his cigarette stink have  
come twice already today to lift my dear dying aunt

as if she could sit up feed herself coughing she slumps  
first toward him and then me and then Tom follows me  
*honey* into the parking lot into the Oklahoma wind  
he thinks we don't know he wants for a moment  
to hug me he wants to have been of help he says *honey*  
*she's dying* and then we step back into the mandated  
therapy the shit-charade of recovery or—*regulations*—  
they'll move her out of this wing out of the private room  
into *god* said Robin *it's just a goddam*  
*holding pen* here he is sitting beside her  
*now Carol* bending her leg at the knee holding  
the porcelain flesh of her foot saying *Carol*  
*please try to push back*

ELIZABETH DODD

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## AND IT'S THE ONLY WORLD THERE EVER WAS. SO SAYS WILLIAM JAMES

Sometime in the night the psyche  
slipped outside. Was the screen  
in the window knocked ajar? Did she see

some crack in the foundation?  
I found her curled up, a sleeping  
tree frog the color of dry bark,

though this too is illusion, since,  
in point of fact, neither one of us had slept.

Last week she was a barred owl:  
baleful glare across the distance, into the house,  
and the wingbeat whuff  
as she left.

She'd struck the window pane in flight.  
Later I found feathers  
dropped to the dry ground,  
keratin husks and the velvet  
curve where the body stops  
and there is only air.

I imagine her casting them off.  
One less unnecessary.

In this the only  
world I know, the chemistry of stasis  
casts wild shadows  
while change ranges through its scales.

Or after dinner, set pieces and improvisations.  
One measure. Two. And rest.

A cuckoo knocks,  
wind-percussive,  
against the forest's shade.

CHRIS FORHAN

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## THOUGHTLESS

To uncoil and feel  
your unredeemable  
taut shreds of memory

soften and dissolve,  
to exist, for a minute,  
past blandishment and purpose,

thirst and worry: it happens,  
unasked for, unmerited—  
your look lifts, the book

slips from your hand.  
Something—a rustle  
in weeds, a creaking

high in the pines—  
lures you outside  
to stand, thoughtless,

amid the fierce delirious  
ungodly green that till now  
you called summer.

GRAHAM HENDERSON

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## THE PROUD PAINTED TURTLE

“I’m very proud,” the painted turtle says. It is November, and she’s basking on a pond stone. The sun cultures the milk white sky. The water darkens into polished onyx.

“And proud of it,” says the Heron. He has a family, yet a nest of precious eggs.

“Who could ever love an uneven colored stone?” the beaver said when shown a photo. And the turtle overheard, and was hurt.

BRAD RICHARD

---

## HOW ONE GOES ON

In the mornings, there is coffee,  
also four cats, and a huge bromeliad  
that has not bloomed in years.  
In the mornings, there is the kindness  
of the one who brought the coffee  
and set it on the nightstand—let the day  
wait while it cools. Over breakfast,  
there are planes crashing, flags falling,  
empty words. After breakfast, it is important  
to read several poems, even if they are bad,  
and to coo *goofy girl* to the Siamese.  
At noon, there is chicken, tomato slices,  
and the memory of your mother reading  
late at night with a cat in her lap.  
One has no choice in these matters.  
There lies the afternoon: it will be yours  
until it isn't. Will you pick up the shirts  
from the laundry, pay the bills, dig up  
the daylilies from the now too shady bed  
and move them to a sunnier one? (Five years  
since you dug them from her garden.)  
There went the afternoon: dirt  
clinging to the bathtub, the checkbook  
unopened on the desk, the green shirt  
you love on the kind one still waiting.  
Here comes the evening, with its poem  
you should have been writing, the one  
where the history of bad ideas yields up  
a face you can forgive. Not even words.  
Evening, with all its unforgiven faces,  
yours among them. A frog throbs, a night bird  
sings from the sweet olive by your porch.  
Night: grains of dirt under your fingernails,  
whiskey dulling your mouth, the box  
of her pulverized bones on a closet shelf.  
Where is the kind one? When will he be home?  
Morning: as if it will never come.

## MOONLIGHT VISION

I wasn't sure where to go. I walked to the sea as I always did, as if at some time there might be a track in the sand or a boat coming into port, & that's the nature of it, I guess, & why people would go away to it. Hope, I think, & I thought that perhaps that's where they went, all of them en masse walked into the sea, defeated though they went with honor—led by some strange final force to return to something unboxed & real. So they were out there, I thought, at peace at the bottom. I wondered if they saw some stars as they were going down, eternal, causing them to lose their courage for just a minute & flap their arms, but this was just a fleeting thought, & soon another image took its place & then another, equally dark, equally fleeting.

M. A. VIZSOLYI

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## SOUTHEAST HEADING

I decided to leave, & I needed a good boat—one with a great big room for me to sleep in.  
I wanted it to be a blue one. I wanted it to conquer the language of the sea

with its color & my thereness, & it would be almost blasphemy, the way it cut &  
tacked & haunted the storms in their work. To put it simply, it should mostly sail.

I wanted to go that way & no other way seemed right. I would be like a mother to it,  
leading it on into adulthood, letting it arrive there of its own accord, which is wonderfully

profitless & both common & uncommon like a poem in its own watery sphere,  
where nothing's for sure, neither the beginning, nor the end, though the child goes

on & on, & the mother still listens, sometimes smiling, sometimes her mind is elsewhere,  
maybe some faded image of the father carrying a green bag full of souvenirs from

somewhere he had been for a very long time. My boat would contain that mother, that  
father, & I would call the boat moonlight & on it I would write a book, proving what i

prove is nothing, though it will never be finished, written in a time that does not really exist—  
invented like me, where no people, nor wind, nor sky, before winter returned, & soft rains are.



MARCUS MYERS

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## RED-TAILED HAWK

After my family was torn apart I lived  
in a vector of death  
with nobody to share the shadow  
I needed a red-tailed hawk  
Like never before I needed  
to be seen from far To see myself from  
beyond the visible spectrum in keen binoculars  
whose yellow could look long and deep  
into my dying heat Before it cooled  
I needed to wear her  
the wide wings the copper tail  
the capped head and beak  
I wanted her talons her monotony of field  
and fence post

And I wanted what felt the most real  
the holding the pelt  
of the dying animal  
not too long  
the refusing anymore ever again  
to be the torn apart and dying one—I craved  
to feel her swallowing  
small bodies whole  
and grinding them into particles  
before untangling feathers  
and leaving land  
for air again To fly as savage  
and graceful angel  
To rise above To see the way  
forward To see the larger heat even  
at great distance To clutch the cold moments  
of this life To swallow and to gain  
a vitality from it

KATHLEEN PEIRCE

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## SILVER MOORIT

Could the bare-faced sheep, a Merino, in moonlight,  
say, with a moist mouth, *please, take my coat*,  
the coat would fall to the shearsman at morning  
the same. Could the spinning wheel sing the word *roving*  
while swallowing it, we would pray with the nun  
in her tub of warm milk, tray of fresh cookies just out of reach,  
or remember the stray into woods as a child, bear in hand,  
stuffed with wool, where a better child strayed  
on a different day, far away from the others enough  
to find odor of creosote private, like you,  
on the footbridge still waiting forever, like me.  
There could be more animal beauty to note, God to find,  
bear in mind, a sense of things moving, the feeling  
of cadence of feeling in thoughts, could be  
two notes played together on the staff of a score,  
a corral with a trough to encircle a fold.  
To have made something, end. To be made something of,  
some breeds have crimped fleeces so opulent, lustrous, so long,  
they have almost no faces, but a view hid by locks  
of a color of value called Silver Moorit.

KATHLEEN PEIRCE

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## BIRTHDAY EVE

Is it luscious there? Nightless, dayless,  
one made as a parallelogram is made, with no part  
not itself? Regardless, a visitor in visitor's quarters  
must come to the door, and soon. First,  
flex against an amnion ripe with angels  
singing with their breasts exposed, impossible to know  
as what red is, though all will be glazed  
and caught by reddening tomorrow, uncountable  
angels with their breasts revealed, milk-heavy,  
all the bottles empty, resting on their sides,  
the singing to return again inside the voices  
heard submerged inside a lake in time, as one comes  
to understand the peacock's feeling, opening out its tail  
of faces started in an infant's eggs, O effortless animal,  
O fruit-foot, O oblong, crown-down form  
so roped to form for good.

PIOTR GWIAZDA

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## MELANCHOLY BATS

The sun is bright, the coffee bitter.  
I have many reasons to live.

PIOTR GWIAZDA

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## MIXED SIGNALS

Don't blame the one percent.  
Blame the five and the ten:

creative intellectuals,  
"ordinary investors,"

the haves and the have-nots,  
even homeless people.

Blame the expectant mother  
and the heroic fetus.

KIM FRANK

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## REVIEW OF *MADE BY MARY* BY LAURA CATHERINE BROWN

Paganism and Motherhood, it is hard to tell which topic triggers the greatest response of depth and range of emotion. For the religious of the world, divisions and dogma have become so thick over thousands of years, that the Pagan roots giving rise to so many of the religious holidays we recognize today, have long been lost and mention of the connection considered blasphemy. Not too dissimilarly, the act of being a mother has been elevated to such a public and unrealistic role that the term “mom shaming” is actually a thing. The pressure and desire to be a mother, even among the thickest onslaught of how one should do it properly—with everyone an expert, is so celebrated in western culture that stating out loud that you do not wish to be a mother, when you are of child bearing age, is enough to bring any cocktail party chatter to a grinding halt.

Even as motherhood is expected and lauded, not being able to get pregnant, adopt or otherwise be a mother is a quiet agony. Best to mourn it alone. And, if you happen to also be a practicing Pagan, best to live in an isolated farm in a progressive state such as Oregon or Vermont. In fact, throw in a marijuana grow room to help pay for your 50-year old mother-witch to under go last chance IVF treatments so she can carry your miracle triplets when you don't live in a weed friendly state, and you've got the makings of a wild ride of a novel. Such is the case in *Made by Mary* by Laura Catherine Brown. Structured into four parts, each named for an element: Earth, Air, Fire and Water spanning from 1999-2000, *Made by Mary* does not shy away or make fun of the taboos around religion or motherhood, yet brings the reader on a journey deep into ritual, psychic complexity, and relational depth that avoids stereotypes in such a way as to encourage an open-mind.

At the novel's opening we meet Ann Slocombe, endowed with the birth name— Annapurmua Peace Moonlight, a straight as an arrow preschool teacher who has a gift for guitar and the supernatural but just can't seem to let loose enough to rejoin her husband, Joel's band or her mother's Pagan sisterhood. Joel is a free spirited musician with a day job in construction, a fine wood worker with a compassionate soul and a commitment to familial responsibility that seems to grow out of fear that he is not capable of long-term fidelity. Ann loves children, works with them all day long and deeply desires a baby, but she was born without a uterus and her vaginal

canal stops short for painless sex; she can not get pregnant. Because Joel has a long ago marijuana possession charge as an 18-year old, the newly married couple are repeatedly turned down as adoptive parents. Ann is trying not to hold Joel responsible for the grave mistake of his youth, but the resentment is building and shows in her tight and getting tighter demeanor.

Enter Mary, Ann's push every button, whirling dervish, practicing witch of a mother. Mary is a jewelry artist, a healer, and deeply spiritual hippie who lives in a house with a massive sunrise painted on it. Mary is earnest and well meaning, but as is the case with mothers and daughters, manages to step on an emotional minefield with every other step. When Ann and Joel are rejected by yet another adoption agency, Mary responds with misguided gems such as: "Why do you admit to the felony?" You have a right to lie! These fascist drug laws are out of control." And, "America's daughter's back in town. Did you know Cassidy had a new baby girl? Two kids now." Mary, baffled by the ways her daughter rejects her is constantly trying, and visibly falling short, of proving her maternal value.

As early as the first set of chapters, Brown deftly sets the stage for the swirling constellation of relationships to crash into one another, setting off meteor showers, yet somehow maintaining their core shape. It is clear that there will be nothing but trouble getting in the way of Ann's quest for motherhood. For example, immediately there is Jessica, the buxom young hottie, fired as a caregiver for Joel's mother, who makes her way into Ann's trailer living room couch on the promise of giving her unborn child to the couple. A vow that everyone but Ann seems to see is doomed to fail, but, not before midnight Pagan rituals, Ann getting fired from her job, and Joel succumbing to Jessica's seductive overtures.

By the time the adoption plan with Jessica goes awry, many strong and colorful characters, with opinionated voices are weighing in with solutions. While the cast of characters grows in scope and influencing complication, Ann becomes increasingly desperate. Desperate enough that when Jessica changes her mind, and Mary offers herself as a surrogate, to be injected with Joel's sperm and carry the couple's baby, Ann reluctantly agrees. A surefire recipe for disaster, and the fun doesn't stop there. Brown is

not shy to pile on seemingly insurmountable problems, each one more outrageous than the next: torrid love affairs with unlikely partners, elaborate Pagan ceremonies complete with blood and hallucinations, and a marijuana growing and selling scheme to help pay the bills. The latter, a secret arrangement, kept from Ann between Joel, her mother and a surly, unreliable, friend of Mary's named America.

At each turn, just when it appears everyone is on track and behaving in a way that will lead to success, something or someone threatens to trip it up. Such as Mary's chance meeting of a stranger named Peter, a British photographer who professes to fall in love with her, moves in and simultaneously acts as a loving caregiver and also takes massive advantage. Mary is smitten and risks her bed rest orders to please her lover with wild sex. When they decide to get married, his motives are questionable.

"...It's a bit of a quandary. I'm afraid I've imposed on you long enough, not to mention the dosh I still owe you. I may have to leave soon."

If he left, he's take the beautiful goddess with him, leaving Mary with the plain, plodding self nobody wanted. Her nerves fired. Electrical synapses coursed through her energy field. She felt herself proliferating.

"Let's get married!"

"You're mad." He put the camera down.

"Just say yes!" said Mary.

He prostrated himself, with his forehead on the floor in a child's pose. "I worship you, Mary, the almighty mother. I am your slave."

While the various scenarios leading up to the birth of Ann/Mary's triplets (yes, triplets) are, on the surface, veer to the uproarious, the devastating consequences are no laughing matter. Brown is unafraid to make her characters suffer magnificent loss. As a result, death and grief are powerful themes that *Made by Mary* explores head on, taking her readers on a journey that feels at once surreal and plausible, unbelievable and familiar. With depth in relationships that celebrate the chaos and imperfect love of mothers and daughters, lovers with lovers, and between friends, Brown delivers a beautiful and painful reminder that love often includes disappointment and failure, but also redemption and forgiveness. In the end, the human connection no matter how fallible, regardless of trappings of belief, is necessary for our survival.



XIMENA GÓMEZ

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## SEVEN POEMS, SEVEN SHADOWS

I watched as a yellow leaf fell into a ditch,  
Into the potter's field of dry leaves, into shadows.

•

The light cuts silhouettes: the cord of my lamp,  
The hanging lampshade, on my wall shadows.

•

Drizzle slides down my window, the lights  
On the dark glass, fireworks on shadows.

•

On top of the stereo, the sepia photograph of my mother,  
In her pale dress, in the afternoon light, shadows.

•

I dream of her in a room without a door,  
My father nearby, blurry and vague, a shadow.

•

Twilight, the sky gray, trees dark—  
I feel at ease in these shadows.

•

Through the streets, you and I, arm-in-arm.  
On the pavement, our enormous shadow.

*Co-translated by Ximena Gómez and George Franklin*

WALNUT

You've come away empty-handed and have a walnut in your hands.  
At first you squeeze it and conceal it like some magic trick,  
But then everything squeezes you and you know you must  
Respond, and thus kill the magician, to survive.  
In the center of the walnut there's a kernel, but you don't care,  
You need the solution written on the inside of the shell.  
The distress is too much, so you squeeze the empty fist and break it.  
The walnut goes silent, the broken signs become unfathomable  
And the answer sphinx-like, but you slip inside through the cracks  
And eat the kernel. Thus you carve out a space for yourself and become the kernel.  
And the kernel becomes You. You crouches and waits  
For the shell to heal around it. Like some fetus  
It crouches and waits, and in the walnut there's less and less light  
And fewer and fewer wounds. Slowly You can start to read the signs  
And the signs are more and more whole.  
You reads aloud, but when the ending almost arrives,  
The shell heals and night falls around You. Caught in darkness, You hears  
A white rabbit with murderous incisors hop out of a hat,  
Stop in front of the walnut, and stare at it.

*Translated by Brian Henry*

ALEŠ ŠTEGER

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## THE LORD SAID

The Lord said Mountain.  
Snow fell and covered the Lord.

The Lord called Spring  
And it came running out of the mountain.

The Lord disappeared into the tops of pines.  
Summer blazed on the surface of the lake.

The Lord watched a man  
Who bathed himself in the Lord.

O            E  
Murmured the Lord.

How much of the Lord has to pass by  
So that one solemn man becomes purified.

*Translated by Brian Henry*

ZACH SAVICH

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## FLYWHEEL

It has no purpose except it lets  
the motion go. It trades  
it in and trades in—see, here—  
misdirection. See that  
kid with a  
yo-yo? It'd mean the world  
to him if you  
cut it at its  
peak. A peak depends  
on falling. The trick is  
proving the peak is  
relatively higher once you  
drop by  
dropping further than,  
oh, the fallen sky  
of snow going unhurriedly down  
on this statue's lap. But first see this  
new trick this  
kid's been failing at. It's called  
Just Try Me. Then  
he knots up the string and it's called  
Forget Me First. Sarah  
is starting the eleventh grade.  
She says she wants a tattoo of the ocean,  
no waves.

## OTHER PROPHETS

There are things you need to hear that no one has said or could. It was harder to write a note to myself on the back of the eulogy than the eulogy.

In second-hand reports, whales were balloons (thus, *baleen*) of oil. A length of rubber could be applied to an ordinary gas burner to produce fun bubbles in the mouth. In the absence or imperfection of optical instruments, you could descend a telescopic pit.

It had the same effect.

The moon's light is fed by our exhaling.

If the swifts fly low,  
fair warning.

The train's on time, it just never stops.

## APHORISMS FOR A LONELY PLANET

1

I enter the photography exhibit and feel relief wash over me—no faces to contend with. Twenty-five portraits of high school students in uniform, girls and boys, high definition, all shot from behind. No eyes or mouths, only the backs of heads. No breasts or boyish chests, only shoulders and spines, sturdy butts and sinuous legs. What mercy, to be spared, for now, a Levinasian encounter with the other. For once, my empathy can lap at ankles and rise slowly, like the sea.

2

I write in the *now* about the *past* hoping to be read in the *future*. The uncapped pen is a time machine.

3

The pooch feels the leash only when it walks too fast or too slow.

4

During my morning stroll the day after Halloween, I keep my eyes peeled for fallen candy. In this block a Starburst, in the next a Milky Way. I unwrap each treat reverently, starved for the ineffable—cosmic bounty, a gift from the gods? I open my fat kid mouth and I chew.

5

If you move an animal's bones, its spirit will follow you home.

6

Spilled lemonade: the way ants gather, you'd think it was happy hour.

7

Crickets hop about as if they've won the lottery.

8

How needy I am. A sparrow lands on my shovel, and I brighten, as if I'd just been paid a compliment.

9

How can tossing coins in a wishing pond go wrong? Even if nothing

magical happens, some hungry kid will fish out your offerings when the guard isn't looking and trade your hopes for an orange creamsicle.

10

We almost never kiss our lovers' toes.

11

The hand has many appetites.

12

In southern France, I saw, by flashlight, cave paintings 15,000 years old. No rivers or oceans or trees, no dead gods, no miraculously resurrected gods, not even suns or moons. Mostly animals: bison and bear, mammoths and horses, and of course, the fleet-of-foot, elusive deer. Also human hand prints in red and black, some no bigger than a child's.

13

Falcons rarely fly just for fun.

14

In Google Translate, *I come in peace* offers options in Africans, Punjabi, even Esperanto. No translation in Navajo. So what else is new?

15

Mirage: ocular proof of the oasis that got away.

16

Some doors we close so we can walk away forever. Some we close so we can open them again in five minutes.

17

As a young father, studying anthills with my three-year-old son, I learned anew to love colonies, even if my son couldn't pronounce what he could point to. *Aye*, he said, instead of *ant*. Ten thousand teeming ant legs teaming—aye, indeed. Or was he saying *eye*, as in boy watching, or maybe *I*, as in I wish I was tiny. Perhaps even *Ai!*, a supplicant conjuring some lost deity by leaving out the consonants. This much I know, he

pointed and the world inched along in nibbling awe.

18

Emptied of children's cries, the park is more memorial than playground.

19

At the palace, a pinecone on each chair. I've never been told so eloquently where not to park my tush.

20

Vacations breed vacations—or dreams of them, often to escape the one I'm in the middle of.

21

To keep the dead alive, repeat their stories. To bury the living, set their stories to an Andrew Lloyd Webber melody and post it on YouTube.

22

A dog's loyalty is Victorian, a cat's is postmodern.

23

A starfish cannot count its own arms, a tea rose knows not its perfume.

24

Too much zen is rarely fatal.

25

A neighbor of mine passes the tedium of long Sunday meetings by taking out his capped pen and tracing the contours of his son's face. As much pilgrimage as ritual. Connect temple and cheek, circle each eye, slide down the nose, circumnavigate the plump acreage of the lips. This boy, if he were a cat, would purr. Ah, to be turned into a masterpiece and erased in the same loving gesture.



TOM PAINE

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## OLGA OWENS HUDKINS

wrote a letter to the editor of the Boston Herald  
on January 29th, 1958, read that next morning  
by Rachel Carson, during a ride to the hospital.  
The heartache of aluminum letters struck hard  
to a paste of ground trees. In rigid paragraphs  
Olga calls out Mr. R.C.A. Codman of Cape Cod  
for stating aerial spraying of DDT was so safe,  
as she abides on a marsh, and seven songbirds  
died. Birds that homed in her pitch pine trees;  
birds that trilled & thrilled. And next dawn three  
more beaks stiff in the leavings of the bird bath.  
While she scrubbed, two robins fell at her feet,  
bills agape and claws clutching their fired breasts

TOM PAINE

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## UNDER THE EUCALYPTUS

We sat under the eucalyptus tree as wildfires savaged to the south.  
the monarchs circled the big fires she whispers & squeezes my hand.  
we were huddling with strangers awaiting a new baby & butterflies.  
we drove all night around the fires to wait under this eucalyptus tree.  
and can't explain why we huddle here under this eucalyptus tree.  
why all these cocooning lies? a few monarchs cling in a fist of legs.  
to the black bones under the moon and I hyperventilate in grief.  
at sunrise one monarch lingered preened in relief on her red hair.  
oblivious to my obvious despair it signaled something with wings.  
under her coat I touch her belly my fingers singing to our baby.  
the monarch floated up into light and I cringe: I know she knows.

BRIGITTE BYRD

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**FROM “AFTER THE WAR TO  
END ALL WARS”**

4.

He had been a sickly child looking for birds in the magnolia tree when he heard a sad song on a mysterious instrument. *Una melodía de dolor* some would say. But the nurse said *Maurice, come along* and he followed her. Through the double doors. Down the staircase. He remembered to keep his hand on the ramp. The same aching melody grew louder and louder as they reached his father’s library. Doors wide-open. Mother’s stiff back in a dark dress. Father saying *Meet Mr. Fa-sol-la*. First, he saw the box-shaped instrument then a wiry man’s eyes rolled toward the ceiling. *This is an accordion* said the nurse. It is difficult to onomatopoeia in a medical uniform. And maybe the sound of it all was magic because he giggled without coughing. How else would he learn to release the notes in his head from a box?

BRIGITTE BYRD

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## PINK HELMET SONNET

If you look at her face, you think you see your child dressed up in a black velvet coat, neck hemmed in starched ruff, a lace detainee, waif extraordinaire inclined to gloat because she knows you understand each part of the picture by itself, but your mind cannot fit them together from the start. Now is not the time to look unrefined. Who strolls along the famous colonnade of the Palais Royal's gardens in socks as orange as the harvest moon, unswayed by the heat wave, en route for the Seine's docks? If Buren striped his columns black and white, should a girl in pink helmet look contrite?

## THE MISFORTUNES OF THE GOOD

Now hereafter is consigned to the page again,  
Not the white world held in glazed, glancing  
Light along long-worn pews. Rustling into seats  
As a refrain hollows out itself now among  
More or less still bodies, all quieting in deference  
To a single voice rising from the front.  
The voice tells of the Power that says  
Who has lived whichever kind of life is sorted out  
On a one-by-one basis. And, this is done as we are each  
Alone. But, then again, here we all are, waiting for Word.

In the dark, however, sometimes as crickets and other night  
Sounds falling down to us as we are—then, as we fall  
Asleep once more against our will for all yet to be done  
And in the face of much great silence that is sorrow,  
Its depths unplumbed—if then permitted we turn, page like,  
Against ourselves, admit the greater dark, who can say  
What burden is not dispelled.

HAINES EASON

---

## THE MOONBASE

This is how I was loved. Plastic blocks  
Dumped from a cardboard box,  
Plastic men in heads, torsos  
Legs and twisty hands. Finishing touch :  
The landscape's plastic base. Flat, gray,  
Perfectly machined rows of dots where  
To attach the pieces beside  
The formed-smooth hump-hill.  
A dune, touched with two craters to accent  
My bedroom's desolate scene.  
Spread by boredom's bomb  
On the carpet, the moonbase is a long way  
From completion. I remember not exactly  
Thinking I wished dad was there.  
There was something gone. There is no day  
Where I forget a pinpricking oxygenlessness :  
Sunday afternoons. It's funny, the gravitas,  
The weightlessness when what you want  
Is there and will not come near. The sun  
In space, on the moon, it must be that way,  
All heat when it strikes you, but in the interval,  
As its love crosses the pure blackness?  
Everywhere out there is the blacker for the sear of  
That cold nuclear love. I always dreamed  
The sun's plasma was a skin, a sky, and under it,  
Fiery lives lived as inverse to my cold doom.  
From the moon, the sun, if you could stare,  
Should be white. Hot, yes, but hotter than,  
And pure, all present, unfiltered.  
Without rooms and clouds, when it is, it is,  
And it must always be there.



**black**

black is the lack of all colors/ or otherwise a pack of dots and lines/ that pretend to be a kind of color/ though it appears to be dense and tense/ it's a shadow of something that does not exist/ black lacks its own self/ yet, it's not a nothing that's negative/ it is a nothing that both is and *is not*

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**WHITE**



**sun**



**white**

why white?/ while it hides the sun inside/ white blinds itself to be a color/ its empty core is as bright as the morning light/ its smooth surface is as warm as the sunshine/ white emerges out of nothing and stretches on for infinity/ it both creates and obliterates/ life begins and ends at white



KATHERINE DAVIS

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## THE SEASONAL BODY

Indebted to death, I made my body a burial ground  
For children's dreams, spectral firefighters, cops,  
Ballerinas, acrobats, just plain moms and dads  
Presiding over dinner tables with kids silent as dolls,  
Good pups lying underfoot. Springtime passes; raw  
Buds strengthen into blossoms, pollinate, leaves  
Gather dew and sunshine, are plucked by lovers,  
Deciphered like fortunes, shredded by trembling hands.  
From the dreams comes a tamarack tree, cold and tough  
As snowshoes, but bursting with yellow needles and  
Tiny cones. I am alive to seasons, sprung from a lake  
Of dried wishes, food for porcupines and hares.  
As I age, the tree turns metallic, a rust-proof street-  
Light with bright halogen bulb, illuminating sodden roads,  
Basketball hoops, glistening bicycles left in yards.  
From the distance, coyotes howl, but this is no  
Fairytale; children sleep, and I guard night for them.

**PASSAGE**

Time is not a grey house, settled on its foundation,  
Like a father penguin, brooding over his egg, feathered  
And iced, or its bare windows looking onto the car-pocked  
Cul-de-sac. Neither is it the local duck pond, where birds  
Paddle algae, scoop, throat, and swallow. Time is not fenced  
Or leashed, cuddled in a tiny bag with open, silver clasps.  
No, time is a child's fists gripping the jungle gym, swinging  
Torso and legs across a pit of sand, where squirrels play  
And magpies peck; no crocodiles yet, wait for the age's end.  
Time is a wheel on a semi delivering coffee and donut holes  
To the chainstore, where customers wait, half-hearted and  
Bleary-eyed, to start another day, tapping fingers against  
Change. Time is my body passing cracks in the sidewalk,  
And if energy were noise, I would move like a hurdy-gurdy,  
Louder than the infrequent ambulance siren, carnival barker,  
Organ player, calliope on a flatbed, neighborhood alarm,  
Jukebox, serenade of lovers kissing at the mailbox.  
Time is a barrel of leaves deteriorating in garage heat,  
With the stink of pizza boxes, dirty tissues, rotting peels.

JEN KARETNICK

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## SOIL TAXONOMY

In the entisols of childhood, I dig in  
the diverse, rocky layer of origin where the

base is unconsolidated, a setting for base  
parent material that doesn't match up. Our parents

never believed we'd inhabit this space grown, never  
saw the lack of affection for what it was: saw-

dust from the Ashkenazi family tree. Dust  
finds me daily now, keeps me lunar. When you find

me in dreams, it's to continue feuds with me,  
not resolve them. Often I let you. But sometimes, not.

*Jen Karetnick was a finalist for the 2018 Midwest Chapbook Contest*

## A THREESOME WITH TIME

Although I liked the attention, I hadn't considered Abigail as girlfriend material—the age of a legal adult stood between us. At least that's how I saw her thirty-three years to my fifty-two. "If you were closer to my age," she said, "I'd totally go for you." Our feet shuffled through fallen leaves, reds and oranges shimmering above, and I took a breath of crisp October air.

A week before at a lesbian get-together, a group of women had gathered around Abigail, the new girl in town. She waved her long fingers and brushed hair from her face and spoke about the politics and syntax of French surrealist poetry—the focus of her dissertation.

"You remind me of me, a mini-me," I said, both of us New Yorkers from the same Jewish stock, writers and professors. Abigail responded, "I'm honored to be the mini-you." My anxiety level shot up, the pleasant kind that leads to giddiness. I saw our interaction as a healthy flirtation, if not a little bit of an ego boost. At first glance, Abigail could pass for a teenage girl in skinny jeans. I even referred to her as "The Little Girl." Maybe I used this phrase so I wouldn't take her seriously, the same way my father referred to a woman he had begun to date as "The Lady," three months after my mother died.

Abigail decided to take a break from New York and check out the North Carolina mountains. A serious poet, she had written an award-winning book with blurbs on the back by three famous poets. I asked how she got such a glowing testimonial from one of the poets, a Pulitzer-Prize winner. Abigail said she learned where the poet lived, showed up on her doorstep and asked if she'd look at her poems.

I'm not sure Abigail was the mini-me; she was the most ambitious person I had ever met.

While Abigail and I walked in the woods and talked about poetry and French theorists, her stare slid the peephole of my heart open, but I looked away and said I had to get home and grade papers.

Amid reading student stories about dying grandparents, I couldn't stop thinking about Abigail. I texted and asked if she wanted to go to a pumpkin carving party. Thirty minutes later, she held a bottle of wine and hugged me, the bottle knocking at my spine. I pointed at a Japanese Maple tree in my yard, some leaves green, others orange and red against the blue sky. "Soon the tree will be on fire," I said.

We drank the wine, an Italian cabernet mentioned in a poem she loved. She had a copy of the poem and read it to me—maybe she had multiple copies of the poem and this is how she courted women. She started to pour more wine and asked, "Do we have to go to the party?"

“I already told friends I’d go to the party,” I said, and picked up my pumpkin. At the party, I stood close to Abigail, our backs leaning against outdoor deck railing, her fork swooping the last of my potato salad. We posed for a photo, our arms around each other, and after the camera snapped, we didn’t let go for a minute or two. We chatted with others but kept hovering back, and by the time I pulled into my driveway, by the time the engine quieted, Abigail hadn’t moved from the passenger seat. “I don’t want to leave,” she said. “I’m having such a good time with you.”

I opened my door. “I have to get to sleep,” I said. Abigail got out of the car and we hugged. She drove off.

At dinner the next evening, she told me about living on a small French island and staying alone in a haunted house. She couldn’t sleep but wrote poetry all night. She said she liked to put herself in uncomfortable situations. That made two of us, because the situation right then terrified me. She rubbed her leg against mine, touched my arm and said, “Would you sleep with me once?”

I spotted vague creases by her eyes, which made me feel a little better out in public with her. “Why once?”

“Because I figure,” she said, “that’s all I could get from you.”

Did she use those words on other women? Two colleagues walked in the restaurant.

I didn’t invite Abigail inside my house, but she followed me to my back door. “I was hoping,” she said, “I’d at least get a goodnight kiss.”

On my porch, I took Abigail’s hand and we sat on the concrete step, the Japanese Maple standing over us, hundreds of small delicate leaves with pointy lobes that spread outward like fingers on a palm. Hundreds of fingers creeping towards me, perhaps fingers that only wanted to caress me, and heaven knows I needed caressing. Was I letting a predator slowly break me down and manipulate her way into my life?

Abigail moved closer and held my hand in hers. “It’s getting cold,” she said. “Don’t you have a couch or something?”

I cracked up at her brashness. “Yes, I have a couch or something.” Unbeknownst to me, Abigail had left her computer in my kitchen before we left for the restaurant; she’d have a reason to come into my house, if the couch line didn’t work.

I tried to remain vertical but it didn’t take much to get me horizontal, with her on top. Right after we kissed, she said, “Do you want children?”

I lifted my head. “We don’t even know each other!”

She talked about her ticking clock and wanting to find a partner. She asked again if I had ever wanted kids. I told her there were times I did want children but it was more important to find a healthy relationship. We kissed and groped for the next two hours and then I didn't think she was such a little girl. We were two sweaty women on a couch, and it was getting late, and I told her I had to teach in the morning. She asked if she could stay over and I said yes, but she needed to stay in the guest room.

I reminded myself that I wanted to find a long-term relationship; I was too old to be messing around, even with a brilliant woman who spoke several languages. Moreover, I was never good at separating sex and love and admire those who can.

Abigail slithered under my covers at the crack of dawn and we held each other, and my morning was a blur of coffee and teaching and anxiety. Later that day she texted, said she had no doubt we had chemistry but the age difference might be too much. Still, she wanted to hang out, and we needed to be careful with our hearts.

In the big picture, nineteen years wasn't impossible, but when I looked at the smaller picture, the photo of us together on my phone—her smooth skin, little girl face and big head, against my crow's feet and worry lines, she looked so much younger. And why the hell did she go after me if she knew how old I was to begin with?

I cried on and off all day, perhaps because I didn't get much sleep the night before, or because I felt duped, or maybe because I mourned my youth—this was the first time age had been an issue in a relationship. After all, I have women friends who are with much older men and they are happily married, so might this be a gender issue?

Now I was in my fifties, and the last decade had snuck up on me. *Surprise! You're getting old!*

I ran into a colleague who'd been with her partner for ten years, a woman seventeen years younger. She said it was all a mindset and things were working out just fine. "But," she added, "sometimes people think she's my daughter. I don't bother to correct them anymore."

I talked to another friend who married a man twenty years younger—they'd been together for twenty years. She said he was the one with the health issues, that at seventy-five, she was fit as a fiddle. When the couple had gotten together, they taught at the same university. Her colleagues didn't believe her when she told them.

It was Halloween and Abigail sent me a picture of herself dressed as

a bumblebee. She texted: “Can we hang out later?”

Of course she dressed as a bee; she had a stinger and she’d sting me again if I let her.

Then again, she was brilliant, funny, sexy and creative, and she’d only be in town for a short while. Maybe I shouldn’t look at all relationships as potential marriage material. Was it possible for me to enjoy the moment? I loved talking about poetry and love and life with Abigail, and if something did happen, she’d be gone in a few weeks. That evening Abigail held my hand and asked me to kiss her. I kissed her. We hugged. “I’m leaving in sixteen days,” she said.

“You know we’re playing with fire,” I said. “Don’t you?”

She squeezed my hand. “Can we spend that time together?”

“Like a contained fire,” I said, “a controlled burn?” I caressed her neck, breathed in her rosemary-scented hair. “One of those fires intentionally ignited to clear the land and recycle nutrients?”

“That’s exactly it,” she said. She placed her hand on my heart, but I stepped back. A neighbor waved from the street, his beagle tugging him along.

We agreed to enjoy each other for the sixteen days she’d be in town.

As long as we set clear boundaries, I figured, we’d be okay, although contracts of the heart might be harder to abide by than, let’s say, contracts with a home inspector.

I gave her the key to my house, and for the next sixteen days, we shared stories and food and poetry and our bodies and we relaxed into that contained field, burning and bright. On a daily basis, we strolled at a nearby lake, our hips snuggled, my dog romping by our side. We ate expensive pistachio ice cream in bed and watched videos on YouTube. One morning she showed me her online dating profile and asked if I’d respond, and I said I wouldn’t have seen it in the first place—she was out of my age range.

Our contract worked, at least for the first week, although one morning I woke up sad; I felt part of a threesome, and Time was the other woman, my nemesis, my competition.

But if Time were the other woman, just then she gave me the option to enjoy, *to have at it*.

I heard that men date younger women because it makes them feel more boyish again. Abigail made me well aware of my age, especially when my gray roots started to show. I mentioned I needed to dye my hair. She went on about how she liked my gray roots and suggested I

go all gray. I said I wasn't ready for that, not yet. She said, "I have a few white hairs," and I looked and looked and finally found one. And when she ordered a glass of wine at a local bar, she got carded, and that made me even more aware of our age difference.

I played my guitar and sang for Abigail, and she said her heart burst open when I scrunched up my face and grinned. And I took her to my gym and she used a worn-out bathing suit a friend had left at my house, a little too small and it drifted up her ass in the pool, and we laughed and laughed, and the lone man in the pool laughed along but had no clue why. And every day I pointed to the Japanese Maple, the reds and oranges lighting up the sky, the tips of the uppermost leaves starting to fray, and I'd say, "That's our tree."

I couldn't imagine that a year later, I'd be comforting her, as her friend, when the woman she would get involved with broke her heart over and over, how we both would look at our experience as a re-booting, but not without a price. It took several months of emotional untangling.

Yet, as a male friend said, "The Little Girl delivered."

Abigail and I went on "a proper date," as she insisted. We went to the Sky Bar, its patio overlooking the Blue Ridge Mountains. She wore her slinky black dress and got carded, and it felt like porn when she flipped her leg onto mine, and we shared an apple cider froufrou drink. For a moment I felt like a middle-aged man with a prostitute. It didn't help that a gang of frat-looking boys were huddled in the corner. Abigail asked, "Are you okay with my leg like this." I told her I was, but really I wasn't. I never liked to call attention to myself, especially in front of frat boys. Yet there I was, in the place of discomfort, the place Abigail and I talked about, where the real learning happens, the place where I began to acknowledge my own aging process. From this place, I also learned I was still capable of attraction, of passion, of love, not only with others, but with my fifty-something body, and at times, even my graying hair.

Before Abigail drove off for good, we hugged and she wept and dabbed tears and snot with her jacket sleeve. Her car glided in reverse from my driveway, rolling over dried up leaves, leaves I would later compost into nutrients to feed next year's harvest. She put her car in drive, waved one last time, and stepped back into her life, and I into mine, a chorus of leaf blowers blasting in the distance.



## MEMORIES BY THE SEA

Imagine a forlorn child; conceive the sun  
that rouses the mouth of the universe. Imagine it  
disappearing into the throbbing throat of night—  
Imagine the dark seams, thick threads that bind voices  
to a giant vault of silence. Imagine me rubbing my fingers  
across your picture, trying to gloss your lips with words,  
dear child— as you wander off into the horizon.  
Imagine your face—still a sky paring down  
into my mind, now—imagine the sun  
as reverie— and there, by a sea,  
I'm leaning to fetch a bit of that firmament.  
Imagine this, when my mother says your shadow—  
it bedlams inside my body—  
a seashell swallows the wave back into its depths.  
Imagine looking deeply until my reflection convinces you  
you can exist as a fraction outside my corneas.  
Imagine you're a star trancing in my thoughts—  
Imagine I dispose those thoughts about you,  
in more thoughts about you. Imagine each time  
you feel like forgetting something about me— even if insignificant,  
imagine glaring the blue zenith boarded in a surface  
marred by tides— until the memories split apart  
by the sea reassembles like a solved puzzle-  
picture. How I wish you imitate that multiplicity  
and grow into the right  
places that would hold you whole. I hear the night holds  
on to your voice like a basket finally able to hold water.  
Imagine I press my feet against wet sand  
and slip through a footprint— here's a mystery  
close to the shoreline. A portal—  
Here's the distance, the vast sea  
between our bodies. Your voice still  
a light, wading through the dark—beyond  
the troughs of separation. Imagine. Imagine. Imagine  
how we'll communicate,  
here on— Grieving is the only way I speak of nothing.



S. CRAIG RENFROE JR.

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## THE TREE AND THE SCREEN

*Shun electric wire.*

*Communicate slowly. Live*

*a three-dimensioned life;*

*stay away from screens.*

*Stay away from anything*

*that obscures the place it is in*

*“How to Be a Poet” – Wendell Berry*

1

When our son was born, the American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP) recommended no screen time for children under two years old. My wife and I took this recommendation seriously, perhaps too seriously on my part, as if the pixels would burn our baby’s eyes right out of their sockets. I could see that image becoming literal, like all the other ways I saw him die, electrocuted by licking the sliding electrical outlet covers open, drowned in the dog water bowl, crushed under the pile of child safety gear I hadn’t gotten around to installing. What made children so bent on self-destruction? I had calmed down some now that he was older, but when I hear him wandering the house early in the morning, me still in bed, I can only imagine he’s building a toddler guillotine.

2

In our backyard is a giant tree. I am not going to do this tree justice. It is a willow oak. When the arborist there to check the health of the trees got to the back yard, he stopped speaking which seemed out of character for him based on our brief acquaintance. He said, “Oh my god,” with a kind of druid reverence. He assured us the tree had been here before us and would be here long after we were gone. Which was not all that reassuring in one sense. It was planted in the 1940s. We know this because the woman who grew up in our house lived down the street and told us she helped plant the oak.

It takes four six-foot-ish adults, hand-in-hand, to circle the trunk and that’s standing on the roots. People who’ve seen the tree say that’s a

surprisingly low number and would have thought it would take more. A small team of people to ring the tree. It is over twenty-nine feet when my wife and I try to wrap a tape measure around the root base.

If it were an ent from *Lord of the Rings*, it would have just punched Sauron in the eye and finished the damn thing straight off. It's no redwood, but for North Carolina, it's a monster.

3

I was a child of the screen. My parents admit as much, but it was back when TV as a babysitter was an added feature and not a dystopian fear. I grew into an addict who poured over the TV guide that came each week in the Sunday newspaper with a highlighter and notepad. I took my viewing very seriously, charting the possibilities, weighing all my options, because there was no streaming, no DVR, no VCR even. It was one and done. And if you missed it, then you missed it. Unless you caught it in syndication. Only if it made it to syndication. I didn't know the term "syndication" at the time. I called it "repeats."

A typical Saturday of my youth: I would set an alarm for Saturday morning cartoons. I was happy when I didn't like the earlier shows and could sleep in. The worst was when I had to make hard choices, two shows on at the same time. I would learn through experience to commit to one and catch the other once repeats set in, rather than try to flip back and forth between commercials. I could count on solid viewing to around eleven. Lunch break! Kung Fu Theater started at 12:30 and was immediately followed by the Big Monster Movie. If both those looked good, I was stuck inside until four in the afternoon.

My parents and the TV did a good job—I was a well-behaved child, mostly, as long as I had my programs. One time I lost TV privileges because I screamed for my parents who were working deep in the woods on our property. Though I was a child of the screen, we lived on twenty-one and a half acres of trees. When they got back to the house, panting, fearing the worst, I explained I couldn't find *Fangface*, a Saturday morning cartoon knockoff of *Scooby-Doo* about a werewolf. My parents having believed I was mortally injured unplugged the TV (an unnecessary flourish) and made me go outside. The real tragedy was that *Fangface* had been cancelled.

In Sunday School, I decided I didn't want to go to heaven

because there was no TV there—just a bunch of cloud-sitting, harp-playing, white-winged angels and some roads made out of gold. No, thank you. I preferred yellow brick roads and flying monkeys. And genies and nose-twitching witches—I ate lunch watching reruns of *I Dream of Jeannie* and *Bewitched*. As I was raised halfheartedly (on my parents' part) Southern Baptist, I kept this mostly to myself. It would have been enough to burn me at the stake like some nose-twitching witch. I assumed this was what they did at all the barbeques we didn't go to, my parents antisocial and me more interested in what was on. After all, there was all that talk of roasting sinners.

4

Hell for me is no longer being eternally hot, but having to make choices for my child with no clear criteria, other than the howling, soul-crushing screeds of proponents and opponents. But some seemed clear: we vaccinated him, for example. And limiting screen time seemed just as obvious. The studies said screen time:

- Caused childhood obesity.
- Limited empathy.
- Created irregular sleep patterns.
- Elevated stress.
- Reduced social skills.
- Interfered with concentration.

So we weren't going to give him our phones as a distraction. We didn't own tablets ourselves. And we were serious about leaving the TV off when he was awake. Okay, I might have watched the Battle of Castle Black on *Game of Thrones* while he slept on my chest, but he was asleep, all right? As he spent more time awake, TV time receded. We got it in as he napped and at night, and like all those sitcom parents, we spent most of that time passing out ourselves. But we remained committed.

5

We have a 65” smart TV—I wanted a 70”, but it wouldn’t fit.

6

The tree, what can I say about this tree, except that our son took to it almost immediately. If we weren’t watching TV, we might as well be outside. And the backyard, which we’d fenced, became our refuge.

As soon as he was able to walk, he was drawn to the oak. And he fit almost perfectly in the rough folds of the roots. And as he grew, we let him explore the tree. Once, while I had my face buried in my phone, doing something important like reading a *Salon* article about *The Walking Dead* not respecting the rights of dead people, he was playing on the tree. Only when he came back over to me, he was filthy and wet, despite the dry day. His clothes ruined, or at least unwearable after nap, his face streaked with grime, a little apocalypse survivor. How did he get wet, I wanted to know. There was a pool in the tree, he told me. The tree holds water, even days after a rain, so in one of the deep recesses he had struck a puddle of dark water. He was so happy.

7

Some FAQs on being screen-free until two:

Q: Did your extended family give you a fit?

A: No. They were surprisingly on board—maybe because this was the first grandkid on both sides and we were given some firster leeway. A strange cone of silence followed our son. It cut through the background TV-on-for-company we’d all gotten used to, leaving in its wake an eerie emptiness I had to adjust to, that I had to fill with human interaction, the kind that often hurts or is pitilessly boring. Passively watching people on the screen is much more pleasurable, on average, I would wager. The highs of real life are much higher certainly, “Hey, Daddy!” But the lows are much lower, me kicking off my bedroom slippers in a matching tantrum to his refusal to go to bed. Those lows have to sink the average, right? TV has such a pleasing mediocrity that asks nothing in return.

Q: Do you think you’re better than us?

A: I don’t know. I do know that I’m tired already of the judging

(“Oh boy, just you wait!”). I’m tired of being judged for judging when I have tried really hard not to judge. Though, there was a delicious superiority I felt this once watching other parents waiting for pizza who let their kids watch YouTube videos of kids playing. I imagine them leaving the restaurant and watching YouTube videos of kids riding in the backseat of cars. Then, at home, they’d watch YouTube videos of kids brushing their teeth. Above their beds on suspended iPads videos would play of soundly sleeping children. Later, I spin my elaborate screen-mediated childhood theory for my wife who tells me to quit being a jackass.

Q: Can you tell if it made a difference?

A: He talks more than I expected at two, has more vocabulary (“That’s impressive,” he likes to say), is curious about the world and people around him. But he might have been the same with more screen exposure. How would I know? Perhaps if we’d had twins....

Q: Did you quit using your cellphone?

A: No.

Q: Don’t you think that really compromised the whole thing?

A: I don’t know.

Q: I mean you could have given that up too.

A: We did what we could. And what we couldn’t do was stare at each other while he cried. So we stared at our phones.

Q: Do you think that’s a cop out?

A: No more questions.

8

A screen is a screen is a screen. But is it? When I was a young TV devotee there was no portable tube. We had no phones, no pads, nothing embedded in the backseat of vehicles. I was free as soon as I left the house. And I did leave the house. We had twenty-one and a half acres, mostly wooded with paths my dad made because that was what he did for fun, that and hand dig ponds. There were as many distinct kingdoms on those twenty-one and a half acres as there were in Middle

Earth—I read *The Lord of the Rings* the three weeks there was no power, no screen, after Hurricane Hugo. There was a wisteria that had taken over a whole tree at the side of the garden with ground running vines perfect, when cut, for the rope I used in booby traps. There was a thorn forest, where I would collect thorns for booby traps. There were no less than six excellent climbing trees that I climbed at least once a week, most of which I had tricked out with booby traps. I had seen a lot of TV shows with scenes that included booby traps.

9

Anything you set out to do as a parent, I suppose, is just an exercise in accepting failure. Restaurants are now, by law, required to have at least three TVs—the Sports Bar Ordinance. We mostly took him out to eat at Bang Bang Burgers—I loved hearing him yell “Bang! Bang!” It was the kind of place that advertises on their sign “local artisan buns” and only serves craft beer—my mother-in-law refused to drink in protest of their not having Budweiser. Even this hipster burger shop had three TVs: sports, CNN, and Nickelodeon. We’d think about highchair placement, the way generals position troops, but it didn’t matter. He’d crane his neck to stare blankly at the wall of video. Once a commercial for a Scooby-Doo cartoon came on and he lost his little mind despite never having been introduced to Scooby-Doo or cartoons in general.

Aside from the restaurant screen time, our son didn’t watch TV until he was over two years old, and then it was an hour of the summer Olympics a day. His response to this was to turn everything in the house into a diving board, so point taken. Or made. Or something.

10

He approaches the tree like a mountain climber. He can almost circumnavigate it without touching the ground, riding the swells and knees coming from the trunk into roots. Sometimes these become not obstacles but imaginary vehicles, “This one’s a digger, Daddy.” His first encounters with the tree were more in awe. I started out picking up sticks from the yard and putting them in the stick pile in the garden area, which turned into a favorite activity, with him taking sticks out of the pile if the yard was clean so that we’d have something to throw back on the pile.

And he would live in the backyard if allowed. One night, I tell him to come inside, but he ignores me. “It’s getting dark. We have to go



inside and go to sleep.” He tells me he’s sleeping outside and promptly goes to a pile of leaves and flops on his back. I call his bluff and go inside. I take off my coat and shoes and watch him out the back windows. He stays prone on the pile of leaves only occasionally kicking up one little leg. He calls my bluff, and I get my coat and shoes back on and go collect him.

11

My rude thought reactions to some unsolicited questions:

Don’t you think once he can watch TV he’ll just overdo it, stare at it, mindlessly. Like everyone else already does? He may rebel, sit on a couch for twenty years letting streaming video wash over him and erode any sense of place we hoped to instill in him. I’d rather the ground be there to begin with.

Don’t you think we live in a digital world and it’s pointless to fight it? Sure (Bang! Bang!), but we live in a gun culture too and I’m not giving him a gun either (bang, bang).

Don’t you think you turned out all right and you watched TV? I would rather wash the dishes than speak to one of my many cousins, and now with peak TV, the only way we’ll reconnect is over some clouds once we’re bored of harp strumming. But I would like him to care more about people than characters.

12

An image that gave me a strange comfort when I was young: the startup independent station Channel 46, which was the first addition to our five TV networks (my parents weren’t about to get cable), had a late movie that I would sometimes fall asleep to. When the movie was coming back from break, they would show a bumper where these small TV spaceships had gathered to watch a bigger TV floating in space. I was too young to know anything about postmodernism, never heard the word “meta,” so staring at these TVs watching TV wasn’t about an irony for me, but a warm feeling, a happiness, a communal sense of belonging.

13

I’m writing this on my laptop outside as he plays on the oak with a stick and some leaves. He gets cornered in the tangle of roots, his route unclear, and calls out, “I need help!” I’ll set my screen aside, even if only temporarily, and go to the tree.

14

When he was more portable, between baby-head lolling and toddler walking, I would hold him aloft in front of me and act as if he were floating in space. “It’s baby Sputnik!” I would make satellite boops and beeps. I would also hum a tune as I would sing his name. My wife wanted to know what song it was from. I had no idea. I’m bad at music anyway. It remained a nameless tune from my subconscious—I even kind of thought I’d made it up. Until, she heard a podcast guessing game of TV show theme songs. I had been humming my son, unknowingly, the theme to *Sanford and Son*.

15

Actually, they’ve changed the guidelines. The screen is too much with us. It really is unrealistic, they concede, to think we can keep them from it. The AAP still recommends no screen time for the first 18 months, but then they abandon any strict rule—it becomes a matter of “content and context.” Sure, watching *Daniel Tiger*, which has been shown to promote social and emotional skills in kids, is better than watching the latest *Fast and Furious* installment. And either of these is better if a parent is there to set the context: “See that bald guy has been betrayed.”

So maybe this screen-free time has been more for me. Even if I still won’t ever be that person who brags that we don’t even own a TV. And I look forward to watching him watch shows and films that I have loved. And I will be able to Google my way through his “but why?” phase, instead of saying “I don’t know” or “because I said so”—Because Google said so, that’s why!

All that said, I’m glad we tried. If only that it forced me to focus even slightly more on him, on the moment, him in the moment, the moments fleeting by and him changing, climbing out of our arms and into the tree. Sometimes when he’s on the other side of that tree, disappeared behind the trunk, it is like a version of the future, when he will be gone, and though I know I’ll be able to see his image in the new imminent and even more inescapable screens, it won’t ever be the same.

BENJAMIN BALTHASER

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## PARADISE

I heard today that Paradise is on fire.  
It's just a town in California, where  
people drove in their cars to escape

what we imagine mountains can cure,  
catarrh, offices, charred ends of days,  
as if Paradise were the alternative to fire.

The pine trees of Paradise float like burning  
paper even as the air freezes, the sun goes out:  
families burn in cars as they race to escape

on a single highway that must have risen once  
like a pale coil of dreams up the deciduous valley:  
autumnal, reddening: the imagination of fire.

I remember the road trip to Lassen, past Paradise  
and Butte Meadows, my parents older now, believing  
that people can drive in their cars to escape.

Time moves so fast the fences and houses blur;  
like a fire burning through your life, as though  
we never existed: Paradise is on fire, burning  
like the gas burning in cars we drove to escape.

## LOCAL MISSING GIRL FOUND DEAD AGAIN

I was there the night Katie Holmes disappeared. It happened ten years ago and I could still tell you what she was wearing down to her horseshoe stud-earrings. Of course, once the television news crews appeared in town, there was no shortage of people making that claim. Suddenly everybody knew her and everybody knew all along what had happened to her. Even the janitor at the bank had his observations regarding small towns and heedless violence. *Satan* has *condemned us*, he said, and became a meme that ricocheted around the internet for a minute. But I really was there and involved enough in what happened to want to hide myself in shame when the word came out they'd found her. You might say tragedy is like that; it makes powerless witnesses and confessors of us all, but some of us have more cause to tremble in the face of the truth than others.

To be clear, I didn't kill her. I didn't see it done. And I never wished harm upon her. In fact, ten years was long enough to convince me wholly of the fantasy she'd run off someplace better, a better place full of better people. I'd hoped and prayed she'd made good so arduously I'd even conjured an imaginary rich husband for her, an old coot who liked to dress her up like a star. But when I heard they'd found a body by the river—a bulging tarp nudged by a city excavator, a forklift dangling a leatherette purse stamped with the lyrics of a heavy metal classic—I knew straight away who it was. Katie wasn't a bad girl who'd made good. None of us are.

When I first saw her, I knew she wasn't going anywhere. We were seventeen and we were at school. She had her hair wrapped around a green plastic wedge and her jeans were pegged at the ankle. She was on one foot, then the other. I could see what she was doing: resting the bones of feet pinched into poor-formed shoes. There were spiral waves in her hair that began at the ear. A dead perm lingering. She was standing there because she had to be. There was no real desire involved. She didn't have ambition. She could have looked at me then and seen the same thing I did, but she didn't. A smile lit on her face like a tiny red wire charged and she picked up her bag. She had friends. They moved away together like bright toys.

Katie was the kind of girl you see going in the wrong direction fast and it excites you. She was beautiful, her face like a wide empty landscape, and a bit of an ideal to me. At that time, I considered myself something of a shit. I was learning how to roll joints as thin as toothpicks and I had a way of dressing that suggested a certain degree of experience with crime. It had come at me early, I wasn't pretty. This is how it happened: five of them lined up and beat me until I understood. It was one of those things. No child is completely innocent of all evils and some groups of children might be classified demons. I wasn't harmed in any way remarkable, but I

was disabused of anything like fancy. Put it this way: there are some girls who know what they aren't and aim toward becoming. They paint their faces and try to fit in. I went another way. I found somebody who had what I wanted and I started staring at her: *Katie, Katie, Katie*.

One day, she and I chanced to come into the woods behind the school track where I was spending gym class smoking. She lit a Virginia Slim and told me she'd seen a dog in those woods. Chalk white and great. Its eyes were ringed with red, its mouth foamy. No question the dog was sick, she said, but that wasn't the thing. The thing was that she had talked to this dog because she thought it might be a messenger from her boyfriend, whose nickname was Wolfdog. He was supposed to meet her in the woods and he hadn't. He'd never been late before, so she worried he might be dead. He was a reckless driver; maybe he'd taken his car into a bend too hard and died. When the dog approached, she thought maybe Wolfdog was trying to reach her through it, say something to her. She tried to listen for a message. In the end, though, the dog only nosed her. "Isn't that funny?" she said. "It was just a fucking dog." I thought to myself: *there is nothing I would not give to be you right now*.

Katie and I didn't talk again for years, but I never lost my awareness of her. She was a fascinator, an invisible pin over my heart. By the time I was twenty-four, the men I got around with were the kind who needed a girl they could treat like one of themselves so they could avoid becoming decent toward women and still appear straight. And I was the kind of girl too cheap for positioning among the other girls. We came together in our failures with women and a serious occupation with the lower forms of entertainment, a favorite of which was to sit together in parked cars and watch girls walking. We watched them like you watch woods for fire. You monitor, you wait. You do very little in the way of movement.

There were cunts and sticks, plastic college bitches and dirt whores. There were all varieties of asses, pork and rubble, tits like bing cherries and bowling balls. Girls you'd fuck for a dollar and girls you wouldn't fuck for a million dollars. The boys and I got ripped on canned beer and talked about how all of these women were wrong and sick, how they'd see themselves in this way someday and want to get down and die for it. We chewed up and spit out any female who chanced to fall beneath our gaze—all of them except for Katie. She was different. She'd stuck around in Athens for the same reasons we had—because it was all there was for us—and she was going at it harder than anybody. She was ruthless. She had the kind of back-alley celebrity that paid tabs in bars.

There were four of us then who could be considered regulars. Others

came in and out, but were only notable for certain strange meannesses of which they demonstrated themselves capable. Most nights it was me, Goldy, Ricky, and Terry. And Terry was the one you'd know, if you were there. The other two were odd appendages. They dangled, swayed, and sometimes hit, but Terry was the one so hard you didn't speak without him having a hand in your saying it. Terry was the one with the idea that if he could make a smile with actual knives in it, he'd be complete. He drew designs of this face of his with the measurements and exact angles of blades coming down for teeth. The rest of us were laughter somewhere in the room when he was there. We were the match struck, the door propped open when he was barreling through.

When I first fell in with the gang, Terry had me wasted on Amish fruit wine and standing on a table. He had a plan with this big ball of ace bandages. I held the ends while the bandages stretched to hard threads around me. He wrapped me ass to head, my arms clipped to my sides. I was blind and listing, breathing wet through the grippy rubber. "Now, make me laugh," he said. I ran through all variety of bits, but in the end he said I'd disappointed him. He put me in his basement, cut the lights, and told me to find my own way out. The laughing came later when Ricky said, forgetting, "Where's Laney?" and I wasn't there. I could hear Goldy's blast laugh, Ricky's glad weight leaning into the floor. Down in the cool rot of the basement, beneath the stairs, I was thinking about how, if I decided, I could vanish. Not like disappearing in a sulfur flash and not like offing myself, because that was overdone. Vanishing as in ceasing to exist. Failing to attend myself. Those boys would come downstairs and find a pile of elastic with nobody in it. But I didn't have that kind of power.

Despite the fact that Terry was a man I liked to think of as headed for death or jail once he left my side, we did have our moments together. He was never light with me, but whenever we were alone, he had a gentleness designed to make me feel protected. He took a gamble I'd appreciate that pose and it paid. When he came into my house, he'd do a look around. He'd flip out a deadbolt, flip it back in. He'd look to see if there was food in the pantry and ask me if I needed anything. Cigarettes, bread. In return, I let him in and I coddled him. He balled up in my bed with both my wrists in his crotch and told me he thought about things like love.

"It's something you don't need to think about to do," he said. "Like blinking. You just do it. And when you do think about it, it gets all fucked up."

"I'm not thinking about it," I said.

"You don't need to think about it. That's what I'm telling you. Do not

think about it.”

He was the kind of man who wanted a body all over him while he slept. He wanted a face in his ear and a woman’s legs twisted through his. Most nights, this configuration was of no risk to me. I was not fool enough to think of him as genuine, but I did feel a certain possessiveness borne of familiarity and I did appreciate the shield he put around me. I couldn’t have held off Goldy or Ricky on my own. I cherished the sight of his open hand taking one of them down for getting grab-ass with me. They knew not to try much—at least not in plain view—and together we made a lopsided facsimile of normal human friendship.

Generally, the four of us were lit on the weekends, drinking off our shit jobs and driving around the beltway. It took about half an hour to get all the way around the loop and if we didn’t have any ideas by the third rotation, my knees would start shaking. Worst-case scenario was Terry deciding he’d like to see me dance. I always felt like a genius when I remembered about a party, but sometimes I settled for suggesting they steal something for fun. I watched them unload cases of brand new baseball gloves from a high school gym. They tossed them into the river. Some nights they moved patio furniture from one yard to another; others, they plucked choice items from rental storage units; and some nights Terry went plain destructo. He broke windows, drove through those flimsy above-ground pools. It was all petty and pathetic, but it was something and something was better than nothing.

Near summer, we were out of ideas and had hunted the easy game. Terry got to rubbing his thumb under his chin while driving. He was bored and it was a fearful matter to think upon his unhappiness and what it could do to me. “It makes you want to die,” he said of the damp Ohio heat. He pounded his fist into the billows of cloth hanging from the ceiling between the staples he’d gunned up there. “There’s got to be something better to life than this,” he said. That’s when Ricky first had the idea of getting Katie involved. It came out of him like a fart. That easy. He was in the process of rolling up the window on his hand to see how long he could take the pain and said, simply, “We should go find Katie Holmes.”

“Go find her like how?” asked Goldy. He said this in his girl voice, lilting high on the end like his nose was closed off.

“I don’t know,” said Ricky. “Like drive around and find her.”

This idea of Ricky’s was no shocker. He’d had a story with Katie in it his whole life. It centered around a piece of gum she’d given him straight out of her mouth. They were going along in the back of the school bus and by some miracle she’d discerned his presence. “I asked her for gum because

I wanted to talk to her, but she gave me the piece she was chewing because it was all she had on her,” Ricky’d say. It his telling, Katie didn’t hesitate. She stuck the pink wad in his hand. “She’s good. You can see this about her. She’s better than other people.” All of us had stories like this about Katie. Goldy *and* Terry were hung up on a skirt she wore while climbing over a fence. They talked about this skirt like it was made of dream. There was nothing random or less than serious about our decision to find her. We needed her; she was the best thing any of us could think to want.

At first, we thought for sure she’d show at one of the parks, drinking like most of the local punks used to drink: sprawled out, watching cans and junk burn in a fire ring. She never was. We spent a couple of weekends lingering like we weren’t lingering there for her. Terry said he wanted to get solid with some people and he did some leaning into cars. Investigating, he called it. “I’m learning the lay of the land,” he said. “Katie, if you get my meaning.” He swung his bony hips in a wide arch and Goldy and Ricky went off like fireworks—the little kind you step on. He liked to joke about how fucking Katie was going to throw his bones out of socket and whenever he made this joke he always laughed straight through the laughter of his boys. He wanted to show them that he could keep going forever if he wanted; he had the balls and the energy to blast through eternity.

Once we had achieved a kind of quiet, Goldy said, “You know she’s got to be good.”

Ricky said, “She better be, after all the experience she’s had.” He tugged at the jeans wadded in his crotch.

“She’s perfect,” said Terry, gripping Goldy hard by the ears. “And you don’t get to talk about her.”

Later, he turned Ricky’s nose in his hand until his boy broke in a cry and folded—all the while maintaining eye contact with me. It was a little show designed to swell my heart.

One Saturday morning, Terry and I were having breakfast like normal people might do and he was talking about his boys like you see fathers doing on late-night pay-per-view. In those movies where the fathers give their sons the cash to buy their first whore, they always tell them not to worry, it’ll come naturally, they’ll know what to do. I moved his burnt-red hair around on his forehead while he stepped into the boots beneath my table. “Sure,” I said, and swiped at the dried egg on his face. “It’s human nature or whatever.”

“You don’t get it,” he said. “Some people, you have to teach them how to love. They don’t come out knowing on their own. Ricky and Goldy



are ignorant of it. I'm going to have to show them how to do it."

"You planning on giving them the first go?"

"The first go at what?"

"At Katie."

He pushed my head into his lap, held me there like that, like a pet he was pressing into submission, until his breathing slowed. "Don't be talking moral at me," he said. He released his grip and sat me up. "We're finding her and you're helping us and that's the end of it."

The most we'd heard of Katie after a month of looking and asking was that she'd been around. There wasn't a soul knew who where she lived or what her life was, but everybody knew her. After the parks were a bust, we scooted around the river sprawl, the usual garages. We hit the bars and we hit the markets. Nothing. And then there she was. In Chauncey. She was squatting low in one of those Plexiglas boxes they stick around so you can be contained while you wait for the bus. There was a picture of a couple eating chocolate-covered ice cream bars on the side and somebody slick had turned their treats into the word *shit*. Ricky laughed at this, pointed, and that's when we all saw her. Katie. I felt like a fist had gone down my throat and squeezed my lungs to pebbles.

Having had it done on me, I knew what these boys could do. In my mind, Katie was made of unbreakable glass, but when I saw her, legs white as the soft belly of a fish and bent against her chest, I imagined something great and foul in her future. The details were unclear, but I understood it would probably involve humiliation and light torture. Terry pulled a U-turn, so he could talk to her from the driver's side. He said, with his finger poking the sideview mirror as he pulled in slow, "What-cha doing out here alone?"

"I don't know," she said.

"What do you mean you don't know?"

"My friends left me. I didn't know where I was. I thought there would be a bus, but now I don't think so."

"Nope. No buses tonight."

At this point, Terry involved himself more fully in the mirror, getting at a strip of tobacco on his tongue. And then he decided to tidy his hair with the black plastic comb he kept in his breast pocket. The engine in his Pontiac was not keen on idling. It had the whole of the vehicle in a steady and terrible shake. But there we were, idling, while he preened. Ricky watched his beer get around in his can, ignoring Goldy's imploring gaze, and then Katie started to walk away.

"Say something, motherfucker. Grab her," said Goldy.

“You don’t just grab somebody,” said Terry.

“What do you do?”

“You wait, asshole. You be good.”

I considered this. *Good*. Good’s a lie told by many faces, but also the kind of word used by thieves when describing odds. Goldy bent the bill on his cap and pulled his spine straight in a line. “OK,” he said. “I got it.”

Terry pulled alongside Katie and said, “Hello, again, my lady.”

“Give me a lift?” she said.

And then she was in the back of the car, smelling like tropical punch. Katie did not look at me. No nods of assurance passed between us. No soft hello, and a little laugh, like women often issue when realizing themselves outnumbered by hard men. Her face flamed red in the light of the overhead. She smoothed her hair in the back and pulled her vinyl skirt over her thighs. There were zippers running diagonally on her top, which was an impossible puzzle, and she wore silver plastic bangles clear up to her elbows. Meanwhile, I was dressed in a pair of brown overalls. There was no comparing us. She was a full woman and no fraud. I was a sack of potatoes.

“Where you headed?” she asked. She was talking to Terry. Her voice was pointed straight at him. She made no notice of Goldy, turned in his seat, shaking a can of Schlitz at her, or Ricky with his knees bugging into hers. Terry held her eyes in the mirror. He’d re-arranged his features and was now wearing his nice-guy face. I’d seen this face before and I knew it could be persuasive, but not if he had to hold it for any great length of time.

“I’m just driving,” he said. He slid his hands along the wheel like he was demonstrating the concept of driving. Like he was showing her how it was done. “Just cruising along.”

“Right,” she said. “I get you.”

“Let’s go,” said Goldy. He hopped in his seat like a kid on a sugar binge.

“We’re going,” said Terry.

When he pulled onto old 55, headed into to Millfield, I knew the night was going to get mean on us. I knew it for a fact. Because one of Terry’s favorite places to go full on destructo was the mine disaster site. The collapse had taken out the men of the town in the early thirties and left it and its women near dead. Nobody knew anybody who lived in Millfield proper. Nothing there but abandoned brick stacks and a vacant post office. But there was a place at the head of the old mines to stand and remember the dead and rebar-covered holes in the ground. We only went to this place when there was serious drinking to do. Because you need a good hole to

scream down when you're dead drunk or near it.

There was a mist in the air as thick as cotton thread as the sun disappeared behind the hills. I looked across the car at Katie and she had a cigarette in her hand near her mouth and a pink lighter in the other. She held these two objects there and never brought them together.

"We're going to have some fun tonight, am I right?" said Terry.

Goldy hooted in his seat, punched at the dash like he was warming up for a fight. "What do you want to do?" he said.

"I don't know. Maybe take a look at some beers," said Terry. "You like beer Katie?"

"Sure," she said. "It's fine."

"Fine," said Terry. "Fine, she says. What kind of answer is that?"

"I don't know," she said.

"I'll tell you what kind. It's the wrong kind. The right answer is that beer is the best. It's the very best on a night like this."

"That's right, man," said Goldy. He rose his Schlitz to meet Terry's and they both sucked one down, crushed the cans in their fists, and pitched them into the black and swift-moving night. It was what they did, always, a tradition of sorts, but this time it had the energy of a charmed violence to it. Like we were building up to the New Year and the world was going to die. We pulled into the disaster site and Terry took the car up at an angle. He wanted the headlights where they would have an affect. And that they did. In the night, the old furnace stacks looked like arms and the trees behind like gnarled hands. It was enough to make my stomach turn and ache with acid.

Terry said, "Here we are."

What happened next happened quick, or at least it played that way in my head. Goldy whooped and screamed in the light of the highbeams. He danced like a goon, arms flapping big. And Ricky sat in the car, making like he wasn't there anymore, failing to attend himself. Terry had Katie out of the back and they were walking. He had her by the elbow and was going fast and Katie still had her lighter in one hand. I could see them in the light of the car and I moved toward them on instinct. I was scared as hell, heart beating up my throat. When they moved out of the light, I tracked with sound. The night in the woods is dense, but I could hear Katie talking. She said she'd like her arm back and Terry said *quiet*. He said *hush*. I'll kill him, I thought.

When I reached them, Terry had her down in the dirt and the leaves and was fooling in her skirt like he was shifting an old car. Katie and I were both screaming then, animal sounds all bound together and vicious. I was

on Terry's back, digging at his face and then my body was moving out and away, breath kicked out of my chest. I saw Katie get hold of a bar, a long metal rod left rusting in the weeds, and take it across Terry's face. There was a sound and it slapped off the trees and down into the mines, the deep recesses still filled with dead air. It was like a clap, a sharp spark of sound, repeated. I thought he was dead, thought she'd killed him.

When I reached her, her face was coming at me. Blank. Nothing there but the parts that make up a face. We collided and fell together in the dirt and leaves and started to run. Terry pounded after us. "Come back here," he said. Then his voice was high and strange. "Please," he said. Katie and I ran hard until it became a burden to move and then we leaned together into bark and the rot of bark. We didn't speak. We moved by urging each other on, pushing each other up into the hills and through them. The dark world was concrete and slow, the sound of our breathing the only I heard. At the top of the ridge, the cold air was so sharp it stung and this sting was the most wonderful pain I'd ever felt. It was my moment. The only one I ever got with Katie. The honest truth is that I was happy alone out there in the trees with her, feeling like we were both about to die. Happier than I'd ever been.

We made it to dirt roads and then we found a gas station with a phone. She begged a quarter off the attendant and then we waited on the berm for a town cab. Her legs were torn and red, her wide face was muddy, and she'd lost half of her press-on nails, but she was standing like she might for any ride she hoped to catch. Her hands fooled in her hair, arranging, and then she worked on her snagged and rumpled clothes.

"I remember you, you know," she said. "From high school."

"I remember you too."

"You and your boys were looking around for me. I heard that," she said. "Well, you found me. Here I am."

"I didn't want this to happen. I tried to help you."

"What did you think, we were all going to make friends?"

What *did* I think? Some time passed with truckers speeding past in the night and our shoes messing in the gravel.

"He your boyfriend?"

"I don't know."

"It's always somebody's boyfriend." She looked me over. "We're not going to be friends, OK?"

After that, we didn't talk and we didn't look at each other. I knew what I was to her and I knew what I wasn't. A cab pulled up in the chalky dust, she dropped me at my place without a word of farewell, and that was

it. I was alone and Katie fell back safely into mystery. And that's exactly where this story should have ended, but of course it didn't. Because time keeps happening. You can try to make life hold in a decent spot, but it never will. The other problem is that life always heads in the direction you've knocked it. Like the trash they dump in space. It'll keep on going that way forever unless it collides with something else.

The boys and I got on with pretty much the same routines, only they were obvious now as marred and strange. Terry tried to make it work, but he couldn't look at me. I was a reminder, as was the bent nose he wore on his face. He clung to the hope he might get Katie alone and repay her the sting she'd put into him, but the word on the street was that she was around with Paul Rose. They called him The Rose and he was as mean as he was lean. He could take a bottle and spin it into a person's head from a great distance and with great accuracy. He was a drunk as sharp as scissors or knives and a sloppy amateur like Terry could never hope to match him. I took it as a blessing that Katie and The Rose had found their way to each other. It meant she was protected—or, at least that's how I thought about it at the time.

Fall slid in and out and then winter showed up as wretched as ever and erased what little there was to do in Athens with white. Bands would come, though, when it got cold enough outside. There were five bars in a line on the street and they'd go down it. When they got to the end, they'd go back up. This was the sort of music nobody cares about now because it was only the grit who cared in the first place. Katie and I got into it, but not together. We weren't friends, weren't enemies. We were simply there. All of us. Terry was helping himself up the skirt of a barmaid at the Cat's Den, Goldy and Ricky still tugging along behind. We did our best to ignore each other.

Katie and I spoke maybe three times then. Leaning into my bangs with her cigarette once, she said, "Looks funny when you think about it," talking about the way the guitars hung and where the hands fiddled. *Funny*. That's all she said and then she drew back like a swung door. In the bathroom, she once held my beer while I pissed. Her nails made a beat on the glass that was counter to her boots in the water on the floor—like a sign of some vast disconnection. Returning the beer to me she said, "It's the least or the most I could do." Or, maybe it was the other way around. I don't know. I do know for sure that she told me I was dancing *like a fucking faggot* when I chanced to bash into her on my way through the moshing crowd. "Sorry," I said, and I was.

It was the night *Hard Rocket* was making a point of spitting whiskey at anybody close enough to touch them that Katie showed up in a dress made of pulled net, skin booming through in triangles. No question she was something in that dress, cigarette like a wand directing attention. Her hair was up in a silver cone, clipped at the back, and bird's wing of blonde sat on her forehead. Next to her The Rose looked like a stepped on smoke. He was dirty, bent in the knee, and his head leaned low on its pivot. He became more accurate in his paranoia when drunk. He could sense a shift in a room, a look hanging too long, or a step too quick, and he moved like light to correct such transgressions with a unique and terrible violence. And yet somehow it was still surprising when it happened, when trash finally collided with trash.

We could have passed that night, quietly stewing in our own private frustrations, and gone on from there to meet a dozen, or a hundred other such nights, the same place and the same people like a pattern repeating in wallpaper. But Terry came in with his open hand on Katie's lower back and that's what set off The Rose. Good old Terry and his big man routine, laughing it up over a beer he'd spilled in his crotch, saying he thought maybe she'd like to help him out of his jeans again. The Rose was on him fast, making his hand bend in ways so wrong it seemed free of bone. It was the kind of scuffle that didn't make logistical sense. A laugh came out of The Rose that made me think for a moment that it was a joke, the kind of wrestling men do when they're happy and half in love with each other. Like brothers do in the carpet over some sport on the television. But then he took Terry's pants down and made a bitter showcase of his sad underwear.

I knew Terry must have been mortified—not to mention in pain—but he pulled up his pants with one hand and made a crack about how he should have chosen some other line of work. "How in the hell I'm going to paint houses tomorrow is what I want to know," he said. Goldy stood there and shrugged. Ricky said, "Shit, man. Are you OK?" And Katie was on the floor in a pissed-off hiss that didn't jive with the blood getting out through her eyebrow, where she'd been hit somehow. She took things out of her purse and put them back in. She examined her lipstick and moved her house keys around in her hand. She shook a box of cigarettes near her ear. I had the very distinct thought that she looked like a child playing with her mother's bag.

It was clear she needed help. And I wanted to help. I wanted to get big. Bigger than anyone I'd ever been. I imagined myself as one of Terry's pictures of his re-imagined self. Arms the width and strength of fire hoses, a face hard as metal, eyes like bore knives. I imagined taking this big

me, this body made of broken glass and barbed wire, and going to her. I imagined cutting through them all, Rose and Terry, Goldy and Ricky, all of them. I wanted to sit on the floor with her and help. I wanted to pretend with her. Maybe we could both go back to the little girls we used to be. But what I did instead was nothing. Worse than that, I did nothing for a reason: I was afraid she'd recognize me. *We're not going to be friends, OK?*

The Rose got to her. He slammed her fake leather bag into her chest and straightened her out with a knee in her back. "God damned whore," he said. He carried her out of the bar like a doll and she was simply, impossibly gone. It wasn't like when she'd gone off before. You didn't hear of her having been here or there. You'd didn't catch word of the latest trouble she'd been into. A forced silence came down upon Katie and it stayed there for ten years. When they picked up The Rose for another, entirely unrelated matter, he confessed of his own accord, depressed over the life sentence he was already facing.

He was the reason no one ever saw Katie again, he said. He'd taken her outside the bar that night and hit her too hard. He'd covered her face with his hands until she'd stopped breathing. There were others there at the time, though nobody brave enough to speak against him. And then they had the body, buried in the dirt down by the river trails, exactly where The Rose had said he'd put it. "Local Missing Girl Found Dead Again." That was the improbable headline. Because she wasn't the first—she wasn't even the first named Katie. "What kind of place is this?" you heard them saying on the television, the news people in their careful shirts. All of us still rotting here know the answer. *It's home.*

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In the life I imagine for myself, I get to Katie that night in the bar, I make it despite who I am and who I'm not, despite everything. We leave, her hand in mine, and then we drive away. Now we're in a parked car, Katie and I. We're right here. This is the parking lot of the old elementary school. At night there's nobody here, so it's OK. She's got the window cracked for the cigarette burning near her thigh, sending up fists of smoke. You could tell her to pay better attention, but maybe she is and she doesn't care if she ruins her skirt.

"Did you know that I went here for school?" she says.

"Of course," I say. "We're friends."

She laughs like a thousand blanks shot and returns to her cigarette. She says she wishes I weren't so wrong. I say I wish that too. Soon, there is weather. It rips through the swings on the playground. Empty seats bashing, swaying. It looks like childhood, fast-forwarded. Don't worry, I tell her. We end up safe together.

## SOUR TAKE

Folks sure do love their sugar. Especially  
at pot lucks with all those cookies, cup cakes,  
and cream pies, everyone saying, “Oh I really  
shouldn’t,” then helping themselves  
to more. How we crave peachy sweet lives,  
have another slice. “Sugar in the morning, /  
Sugar in the evening,” sang the McGuire  
Sisters in 1958, as I was growing up on  
brownies, popsicles, ice cream, chocolate chip  
cookies, Milky Ways. Years later, I’d  
overload my Visa card following Julia Child’s  
recipes, *Charlotte Malakoff*, *Soufflé Rothschild*, *Tarte  
Au Fromage Frais*. What was dinner  
for friends without a heavenly dessert? But no  
sugar for me these days—my blood sugar levels  
soar, only to plummet, not into a fiery,  
but a limp, paralyzed hell. In a restaurant,  
everyone begging me to order the chocolate  
cream pie, the cheesecake, and they don’t  
get it when I say I really, really don’t want  
even one slippery bite. Sugar highs, then sugar  
lows. Reminds me of the low-down  
on the history of sugar cane, a tropical grass  
Columbus brought to the Caribbean, where  
slaves were shipped to bend their backs  
down over the fields. In our own southern  
colonies, slaves would plant 5,000-8,000 seeds  
to produce an acre of sugar, feeding  
the sweet tooth of their masters, who craved  
their Red Velvet Cake, Ultimate Hummingbird  
Cake, their Coconut Layer Cake. Sweets  
for the sweet. Eight times more addictive  
than cocaine, sugar. And what about candies  
folks love to suck on today? Milk Duds,  
Malted Milk Balls, Raisinettes, and Sugar  
Babies: all coated with a glaze made from beetle  
shit. May through November,



sugar cane leaves are burned off the stalks  
so harvesting takes less labor. More bang for  
for the owners' bucks. Air so bad  
people's lungs clog. Of course, I've  
got to admit, when my friend calls me "Sugar,"  
and my man calls me his own  
"Sweetie," I lap it up. "Be my little  
sugar, /And love me / All the time," sang  
that famous trio of sisters. But since  
I've the metabolism of a hummingbird,  
need fatty red meat to keep this body going,  
I'd rather be somebody's protein,  
sticking to the ribs, with staying power  
for a good long time. Yet I can't forget how  
cattle are rounded up, prodded  
onto trucks, run through chutes to have  
their throats cut, their bodies hung from  
steel hooks and carved into pieces.

## IN PRAISE OF STUMPS

Dumb as a stump, they say. My neighbor  
    hates stumps, and, after sawing down half  
the trees on his manicured acre, wants all  
    the stumps removed. Eyesores, they take  
up space on his lawn. Not an easy job,  
    stump removal. Grinders cost at least  
a hundred bucks a day to rent, and he'd  
    need goggles, a chain saw, a pick mattock,  
digging bar, and a shovel. Potassium nitrate  
    works, with a drill and kerosene. Years ago,  
I'd planned to rid my yard of its scraggly  
    stumps, till I learned the roots of trees feed  
each other, pump sugar into a stump  
    to keep it from dying and the stump will  
send out new sprouts that can lift into  
    saplings, and then, in time, into full-sized  
trees. I hadn't known that stumps provide  
    nesting sites for chickadees, titmice, owls,  
and woodpeckers, shelter for chipmunks,  
    shrews, salamanders, and foxes. But my  
neighbor's not the only one in this  
    suburban enclave with codes more rigid  
than a concrete slab: grass over six inches  
    high bordering the street and you're in for  
a big fine. I'm thinking of Hopkins'  
    "Long live the weeds." I like our grasses  
tall enough to ripple in the wind,  
    so native salvias can bloom and feed  
the butterflies and hummingbirds. Sick  
    of tidiness, the desire to emulate British  
country estates with our faux scaled-  
    down mini-mansions floating on green  
carpet no one ever touches, other than  
    a hired man on his ride-em mower who  
keeps the outdoors outside, keeps anyone  
    from taking too deep a breath, from any

Whitmanesque desire to go live with  
the animals, which I'm fantasizing I might  
want to do, but right now, I'll go out,  
speak to my dead trees, tell them I know  
their roots are alive, connected to all  
the leafy trees nearby, and I know they're  
signaling each other through an  
arboreal internet, their intricate fungal,  
mycelial network, maybe warning  
about our thick, dumb-as-a-ditch skulls.

BROOKE MATSON

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## ORIONID METEOR

What you call a shower,  
I call fire. I've come  
this close—

ice and dust and desire  
serrated against your cornea.

Friction is a terrible thing.

Trying to touch your face is like singing  
as you're burned at the stake—  
a colorful prayer  
of conversion—

a flaying

just to glimpse your back.  
Your catatonic blue. Your god-iris

almost in focus. A cold ocean to slake  
my incinerating question.

BROOKE MATSON

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**ELECTRON CLOUD**

*You tell me of an invisible planetary system in which electrons gravitate around a nucleus. You explain this world to me with an image. I realize that you have been reduced to poetry. —Albert Camus, 1955*

You could be anywhere—

after all, the hummingbird's wings  
flutter so fast only  
a flute of emerald

hovers among the trumpet vines  
Even the waspish leaves  
hum  
like tuning forks

All matter orbits what it adores

\*

Think of the blades of a fan—  
how they cease  
to be blades

and where they escaped

a ring

\*

Your palm presses  
between my breasts as I unbend  
from sleep my blood

begs like ravens  
but the bedroom I wake to is empty—

no—  
filled with light but the point is

you were here you  
could be anywhere

\*

Some days I pause by the rotary phone  
to spin the letters of your name

winding back time  
in the hum and clack

of the wheel—reeling you in

letter  
by letter  
Never mind

that it's not plugged in  
but I swear to god some days

I hear a crackling on the other end

like the time you called from the hospital  
still unable to speak  
after surgery

I stood barefoot on the linoleum  
listening to you breathe

even then  
I believed

BROOKE MATSON

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## ELEGY IN A STATE OF PORCELAIN

winter is a prism in reverse / colors  
reassembling into white  
snow that illumines  
the morning / kisses the dark  
needles of pine / the season  
before his death / it crusted the patio  
like porcelain from plates I split  
against it  
months later in my rage / all the delicate  
flowers arranged in jagged blue  
and alabaster triangles / a kaleidoscope  
of edges / fine powder  
lost between them / the drifting debris  
of dead stars / what I mean is  
I loved the brushstrokes  
at the corners of his eyes / little hairline  
fissures / what I mean is  
we are more than our breaks / what cannot  
be reconstructed from the bang  
or the plate before / spinning like a galaxy  
across the porch

## UNSEEN TIME

you know there has always been a crush  
of the unseen world upon our time-  
bent plan of horse-tramped chaparral  
and worn moss-rock.

Our moral coil  
chafes against the animal meat of  
our feet on the clay, suspicious

of the ubiquitous spirit-shadows.  
Drink deeply of the spirit inherent,  
Imbibe of the water from the proverbial

Stone. We all have that rock in our  
blood, which was once rock, the iron  
of our veins. An in each molecule,

A universe, a blade of gas spurting  
from the cut in the rock, the torrid  
ghosts of your ancestors, their

organic gold fueling all we do, their  
fire cascading down generations, un-  
remembered, unsung.

//

Each swell from  
you, a swell of wind from ancestors  
present even now in your cells.

They call and call. You only need.  
To act.

To actualize. To see unseen.



BRUCE COHEN

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## THE DEVELOPING ROOM OF UNRELIABLE SLEEPERS

In these eerie nineteenth century tintypes of the insane,  
Wispy ghosts superimpose, or float beside, the faces of the most disturbed.

Today's one of those crazy winter weather days when life-drunk boys  
Dress in cutoffs & t-shirts while the sensible-sane zip up in down jackets

& ears covered woolen caps. There are voices & sounds one never wishes to hear.

Is this why Van Gogh lopped off his ear? In that century, artists  
Spoonfed & stirred extra sugar cubes in the emerald absinthe  
Over blue flames.

Each night, disinterest multiplied & failed importantly  
To measure & monitor the amount of symbolic arsenic injected into bloodstreams,  
(Just enough for pleasant hallucinations)  
Like the cottony strychnine in the green apple cacti of fresh peyote.

Very few positive people admit when their lucky number is a negative number—

Or zero,

Or try to kiss the overexposed dark air for loveliness,

The filmy distinction between a life & a life lived.

For some reason, the insane love it when  
They can see through the page they are reading  
& get a peek at those transparent  
Unreadable backwards words on the next page,

This strange overlap, like conspirators, seeing the future,  
Like unreliable sleepers whispering over one another after the lights are off,

Waiting to overexpose some secret, mummifying behind musty curtains,  
Cannonballed knees  
Under sweaty bed sheets.

Because it's unseasonably warm the life-inebriated boys picnic in snow to impress the girls  
At the abandoned sanitarium—wind-frayed curtains only partially  
Covering the BB shot-out windows. In some rooms, windows no

Longer exist, have not for decades. Or doors. Hinges only. Or doors unhinged.  
The unhinged.

It seems someone is appearing then disappearing or vice versa.  
According to the ghosts

It's the emptiness between walls  
That give walls purpose, though walls, in general, are not necessary to hang family  
photos.

Patients were prescribed heliotherapy treatment—fresh air & sunlight—  
But denied both. Locked in,

Like the multiple people inside us, illogically dressed, overexposed

To weather, both internal  
& external, like being shocked by emerging faces one didn't see

In the original photos  
In the dark room while pouring harsh chemicals over the committed

Rectangular negatives of people who once or never existed.

HOUR GLASSES

Normally I math up my days= four pills every three hours,  
Count freight cars at railroad crossings, periodically check the flashing digital readout  
On the elliptical, finger tabulate under restaurant tables before ordering dessert,  
Calculate the number of steps it takes from my parking space to office;  
Yet there is a kind of uncertainty, stagnation, like a stuck zipper  
Which has no agenda, going up & down in its egalitarian fashion.  
My car idling at the railroad track has a curved windows  
Which we know as a windshield.  
I've never seen a house without windows.  
Although my birdhouse nailed to the tree does not have windows only a circular opening.  
There was a hurricane: trees toppled power lines.  
For a few days I lived in room temperature & room temperature was outside temperature.  
Confused blue jays flew in the house. Into windows.  
Not unbreakable windows. That morning, people gossiped about the weather in the supermarket  
But it was intersecting monologues. I don't consider that conversation.  
Before I lost power I responded to the weatherman on television  
The way I howl (vulgarly) at football referees even though  
I know they can't hear me through the television screen.  
I suppose I don't need to say a television screen is glass just like a window  
But doesn't function as a window.  
Nor did it shield the wind from the hurricane.  
You can see an entire world dramatically played out behind that glass.  
A day does not go by where I don't fret over the time that exists & the time that will never exist.  
In some way, a day does not happen where uncertainty doesn't blurt out  
An answer. An answer is not always a solution  
As thinking doesn't always happen exclusively in your head.  
**Fun True Fact:** since the advent of cell phones, 42% fewer people wear watches  
& those who do are no longer satisfied with watches exclusively telling time.  
People now like watches to tell them how many steps they take. Or play music.  
People have regimented rituals before they go to bed.  
Sometimes people get hammered & pass out on their bedspreads with their shoes & clothes on  
Without even remembering to brush their pearly whites or remove their makeup. Often  
They wake up having forgotten where they are, how they got there.  
Arithmetic can also be linear or abstract & time is measured but illusive.  
A person might look at his watch.  
He might look out the window to see if he recognizes his world behind glass.  
People stare at landscapes all the time in the hopes it might inspire them.  
Bring them back to a primitive self.  
Nobody wants people from the outside  
Looking in their windows though windows are non-judgmental, designed to look both in & out  
The way zippers are designed to go up & down.

Note: a good invention might be one-way unbreakable windows for houses.  
 In my favorite show, Law & Order SVU, one way mirrors exist in the interrogation room while  
     The other wall has a regular window with bars.  
 Nobody ever looks out. Even criminals understand the concept of the one-way glass:  
     People in authority watch vulnerable people answer questions. Confessing-  
     Justifying-Making up stories-Reciting horrible memories from their childhoods-  
 Blaming-Apologizing-Reliving. Lying always. Sometimes they fall apart & you feel for them.  
     In real life, it's called eavesdropping.  
 We like to hear others' secrets: water glasses pressed against shared hotel walls.  
     But the question becomes how to get people to tell the truth!  
 Dehumanize them. Humiliate. Take away eating utensils. Make them shovel snow off sidewalks  
     With gloveless hands. The world is a kind of snow globe anyway. Enclosed in glass?  
 Stomp on their reading glasses before handing over the instruction manual. The practice math  
     Tests that don't prepare us for anything in actual life.  
 Describe in detail the fundamental mathematical difference between certainty & uncertainty.  
     There will always be replacements & remainders.  
     Everyone will have grocery lists  
 But supermarket shelves will be empty as they are just before a hurricane.  
     People will always wake up having forgotten where they are,  
     How they got home. A friend once told me he woke up in his neighbors'  
     Bath tub fully dressed. The water, at that point, was tepid.  
     His first waking act was to look at his wristwatch.  
 Other people look at the tiny windows on their watches to calculate their position in respect to  
     TIME.  
 Some people pretend to look at their watches, though they have only a naked wrist,  
     To signify they no longer want to engage in the conversation  
     Or more precisely two monologues intersecting.  
 Some people point to the imaginary watch on their wrist to indicate  
     The other person should stop talking, that it's getting late.  
     To look vibrant take this tube of waxy red & smear it on your lips.  
     If you're a man, take white foam  
 & lather it on your face to remove follicles that grew while you were dreaming or passed out.  
     With a razor of course which could also kill you. Naturally your underwear should be the  
     Invisible kind,  
     Like the cleanest imaginable glass.  
 The trick to leaving the city before the hurricane: do your makeup in the rearview  
     But wait for a red traffic light.  
 At that intersection, when the train is passing, it's impossible not to fall in love with the word  
 Caboose, to feel the solitude of the passenger looking out the train window in the penultimate  
     Car who seems to be writing some message of hope on the fogged glass.

ERICA BERNHEIM

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## EVERYTHING WAS A YEAR AGO

It's not official unless it happens  
behind the airport, our invented  
euphemism for a bite wound  
inconsistent with the wax  
impression of the deep marks  
of an upward tooth. 1977 was  
also the last time it officially  
snowed in Tampa. Reel in, rules  
out. In my dream last night, the role  
of you was played by a small,  
sensible utopia. People there liked  
it a lot, especially all that fresh fruit  
before the sudden knowing that a body  
near you was dead. It takes more  
than strength to go on. Common  
symptoms include: a willingness  
to drink limeade in obscene volume,  
the cultivation of a stellar backyard,  
a place to fuck that is neither eco-friendly  
nor modern, has never been renovated  
in this sick turtle's lifetime, the sinister  
vegetation of the Florida undergrowth.

ERICA BERNHEIM

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## IMPOSTERS: WHEN YOU ARE NOT YOU

Your family will believe your foot was broken with a crowbar. You will tell them that you survived by eating insects, colonies of ants and villa manillae, musical chiggers, migratory locusts, death's head hawkmoths. No one will question this story.

You will notice how few people really do frolic in the rain. Voice stress lie detection tests will occur on Tuesdays and only sometimes you will notice the number of yesterdays that have taken place. The answer rhymes with "action,"

or maybe "pants." The a-brokening of a heart: my main goal in life is not to think of the cuckoo bird, the baby making its own nest, accepted by the mother. I can pretend to be hard. The new guard looks like the old guard.

I can construct a framework around what I hate:  
gladiolas, gladiator sandals,  
sundials, diaphanous windpipes,  
cunicular asophogae.

I can kill the bloom on a moonflower.  
I can carry garbage to a larger garbage container.

Dear Reader, I will never describe ink or blood as happening in pools, never will I include a dog whose name I cannot recall, lemons unless they are anything other than yellow,

covered in peel. I believe you know I know you know why I'm here.  
Nothing here will lead you to treasure.

## A BIT OF TRUTH

Jay crunched across the Eastside Tavern's gravel parking lot to the pub's shadowed door. He was late, purposefully, had even texted a false excuse from his cubicle at work, and he made himself slow his steps and look over the dusty cars that half-filled the lot, flattened and squat in the heavy humid evening. He wanted to catch Penelope and Justine unaware, in mid-stream, at their most natural—Penelope, his girlfriend of six months and fiancée of two, and Justine, Penelope's ex.

That morning, over her cornflakes and his orange juice, his chin stubble and her electrified hair, Penelope's spoon had landed on the table with a clink, and she'd said, "We have plans tonight."

"Yeah?" Jay asked without looking from his newspaper.

"Justine's back in town."

Jay folded the paper and put it aside. He interlaced his fingers on the Formica. He looked at Penelope with expectation, and she rewarded him with the kind of smile brightened by the laughter it concealed.

"Well, you know Justine," she said.

The thing was, he didn't know Justine. He *knew of* her in the same way you know of your buddy's impossibly hot neighbor and her tiny little dog, knowledge gained through the slow accumulation of light-hearted anecdotes peppered with occasional confessions about more intimate interactions, bits and pieces of a hot girl and a little dog—or maybe a mysterious ex—not informing you of a real person but, rather, impressions of a person, however distinct. Enough of these impressions in the proper ratio of earnest to entertaining, and that impossibly hot neighbor and her tiny little dog could become legend.

Justine was legend.

What Jay knew about Justine: she was alluring, sexy, and fun. She and Penelope had had a "thing" for almost two years that sounded like more than a thing to Jay. To Jay, it sounded like a relationship with a stint of cohabitation. One with all the trimmings. What Penelope didn't say became whispers in his ear. When Penelope mentioned that they'd fought regularly, Jay heard the banging headboard of makeup sex. When Penelope revealed that Justine had made light of her attraction to men, Jay thanked God he'd managed to avoid a similar mistake. When Penelope said, "Well, you know Justine," the vast unknown gaped open.

A few years before, Justine had left the country for some ambiguous opportunity on an unspecified continent. Penelope claimed they had broken up by then but provided no details about their demise. Jay speculated. And, now, Justine was back.

The pub was wood-paneled and dim, strident with air conditioning

after the warmth outside. Six large TVs suspended over the bar and in the corners provided most of the light. This was a regular place for Jay and Penelope given its location on a bus line home. Besides, the cook knew how to make Penelope's burger so rare it bled the bun a soggy red. Jay was partial to their "ten-alarm" buffalo chicken salad, felt acceptably macho sweating and sniffing through its consumption.

He scanned the main room, a sea of khaki-cladded men like himself matched with women in smart slacks or straight skirts, all drinking or eating or flirting with obvious and serious intent. Penelope and Justine sat at a square table in a corner. Penelope had her back to him but was instantly recognizable not only by her hair and the idiosyncratic tilt to her head but also by the starched way her blouse caught on her shoulders and back. And Justine ... Jay couldn't conceive of anyone who wouldn't feel an unsettling wave of desire at the sight of her.

Justine's face was not cute like Penelope's, had no comfortable softness to it. Her features were brash and aggressive, but they had a balance that tugged on the eye, a harmony that made gorgeous sense. When he and Penelope had started up, the thing most unforeseen by him were those moments when their eyes tracked after the same woman.

From a distance, his fiancée and her ex acted like old college roommates or sorority sisters, and Penelope might say they were both and a little bit more. They leaned toward each other but didn't touch, and Jay wondered what that meant.

When he realized with a queasy embarrassment that he could stand and observe them indefinitely, he unstuck his feet and worked his way closer. The thread of Justine's loud voice wove through the bubbling bar noise, and he watched her watch him skirt tables and ease past wait staff. He'd drawn only a few steps away when her thin right eyebrow raised one arched notch then another, and a sideways smirk appeared around her words.

He stopped behind Penelope, and Justine segued from her last sentence right into, "And you must be Jay. I didn't expect a blonde."

Penelope swung around and lit up their corner of the bar with ten megawatts of facial joy. Jay put a hand on her shoulder and shifted some of her kinky hair to plant a kiss on her neck, a gesture just this side of typical. Penelope's hair—the only remnant of her one black grandparent—was a soft, undomesticated nimbus around her sunny face. Justine's, on the other hand, was long and straight and thick, the kind of hair getting tossed around at the end of a commercial for a deep conditioner, the kind of hair a guy could lose himself in with absolutely no problem at all. An array of



clips and bands kept it from flying off her head in all its healthy abundance. Even in the darkness of the bar, it gleamed.

“Jay, this is Justine. Justine, Jay. Sorry we started without you. Justine wanted to wait, but I was famished.” Penelope delivered this rapid-fire while Jay shook Justine’s hand. She was eating the salad, he noticed.

Before Jay’s ass even landed in the chair between them, Justine resumed her long-winded story. As far as Jay could tell, it was nothing more than personal anecdote, but she was passing it off as an anthropologic study of cows in India. He ordered a burger and beer and let his gaze drift below Justine’s neckline. Her tits, glimpsed in part via the scooped neck of her tank top, were plenty nice, but Jay was partial to Penelope’s, whose heft and coloration defined how he had always imagined the perfect breasts to be. Justine’s endless forearms held thin silver bangles, and they tinkled audibly among the surrounding chatter with her every dramatic gesture. With that wingspan of hers, Jay judged she might match his six feet. Or maybe be even taller.

“Jay.” Penelope’s voice and the touch of her fingers on his wrist brought him out of his observational reverie. “I’d mentioned your flag football league before you got here,” she said then turned back to Justine. “These guys are cutthroat. Someone goes to the hospital almost every game—or at least treats the crowd to a nice ass shot when their shorts get ripped off with the flag.”

Jay was second-guessing his take-them-unawares tactic. Clearly he’d needed to be around from the beginning to set the right tone. The one where he ate the salad.

“Pen, that sounds right up your alley. Has Jay discovered your voyeuristic tendencies? Jay, has your girlfriend, oh wait, *fiancée* filled you in on her many delinquencies?”

Penelope launched a sugar packet at Justine. “Don’t even pretend I’m any more demented than you are.”

“God, no. But we certainly had that in common.”

That this commonality did not extend to Jay was obvious. Penelope’s responsible exterior—her success as a manager, her independence, her desire to co-parent two children in the near future—rode over waves of squealing unconventionality. Jay’s responsible exterior was mounted firmly to his responsible interior. He was even an accountant.

He hovered just to the better side of average in the common measures of attractiveness—looks, brains, money—and so had had the opportunity to break the hearts of a string of perfectly acceptable women before finding *the one* in Penelope. The reasons he divulged to others for

her neon-lit place in his chest were true but not honest. It was true that Penelope made him feel just enough wildness to appreciate how settled he was. It was true that, in Penelope, certain drowsy hours brought forward a calmness that snapped his heart into place.

But he also loved that she had a past, a murky one in which she'd sometimes had sex with women. Like Justine.

Somehow he was holding up his twisted left index finger so Justine could examine his flag-football-related injury. A hooked waistband could wreak havoc on a knuckle, but Justine's smirk told him this was doing no good. He took his finger from her hot grasp, picked up his dwindling beer, and remembered India and cows. "So, Justine. Sorry if I'm asking you to repeat yourself, but where have you been travelling?"

This bought him enough time to finish his burger, start another drink, and remind himself of the contours of Penelope's knee under the table. Justine went on and on, laying down country names like she was in the finals of a geography bee, all the while gesticulating in a way Jay became convinced was calculated to draw the most jangle from her bangles.

Then, hands suddenly still and gaze fixed on Jay, she said, "Give me one good reason why you deserve Pen." She shifted her hair from one side to the other.

"Jesus, Justine," Penelope said. "Don't be a bitch."

"Me? I'm not being a bitch. I just know how you are."

"So you say." Penelope flagged down the nearest waiter and demanded a double shot of tequila. What Justine thought she knew about Penelope was something Jay wanted to learn, especially since it made Penelope frown in a way he loathed to induce.

"Come on. She already buttered me up with what a great guy you are, but we both know her requirements aren't real stringent. Out with it. One reason."

Justine's vehemence made her correlation between Penelope's standards and his position in her life more fact than implication. Jay wondered if she were commenting on his physical attributes or something less tangible. This was not how he had imagined tonight going down. Something wasn't right about this woman. The way she perched there, staring without even blinking. Penelope was looking at him. Was this peek into Penelope's past possibly worth these four eyes glued to his internal junk?

Was there a reason he could produce that would satisfy both Penelope and Justine? Justine called for something wild and impressive, something unexpected and out of character and, so, completely untrue.

Penelope required something heartfelt and rock solid, something so essentially him she could have answered the question herself.

Balancing these accounts was impossible and yet they were waiting for his answer. He voiced his very next thought. "I've been told I'm excellent at giving oral sex."

Justine gave two lifted eyebrows to Penelope, who looked at Jay with a smile that didn't quite eclipse her surprise and said, "Not that it's any of your business, but that is one-hundred-percent true." She finished her drink and nibbled on a lemon wedge.

"Lucky you! Isn't that something to look forward to: a lifetime of being eaten out expertly. I mean, really, how many women can say that?"

Penelope grabbed Jay's hand under the table. Now she gets defensive? After hanging him out to dry on that question? He was perfectly capable of fending Justine off by himself, and this sub-table bristle of Penelope's prompted him to plant both feet in the game.

He asked, "How long after you two met did you sleep together?"

"Pen was the chronologer of our relationship."

They both turned to Penelope.

She huffed. "Like you don't know. You two are just ... fine. Not that it means anything, because it doesn't, but it was approximately forty-five minutes between hello and very nice to meet you."

Justine said, "I take it she made you wait a tad longer." Then she grinned widely, an expression Jay could tell usually increased her attractiveness.

Jay thought of thirty-seven excruciating but charged days. "Good things come to those who wait."

"Sometimes they even come to those who don't."

Penelope pointed at Justine with the full bottle she'd swiped from him, slopping a sudsy splash of beer on the table. "Oh, that was deep. No one cares that you plied me with liquor so you could get in my pants. I mean, does anyone really give a shit that I'm 'a woman with a past?'"

"Honey dear, of course we give a shit," Justine said. "With me in it, your past is one of your best features."

"May I remind you—" Penelope relinquished the bottle and raised two fingers. "Two to tango, babe."

"Of course. The only difference is I'm not ashamed of it."

The idea of Penelope ashamed made Jay sway. He cared deeply about Penelope's past that, for the first time, was being carved open and displayed right in front of him, but the magnitude of what he didn't know about his fiancée, but might now find out, made him swear off any more

beer. He watched Penelope pound another shot. Tequila was her only weakness, never failed to light her up, twirl her around, then dump her like a cheap date. She usually avoided the stuff.

Justine said, "Speaking of embarrassment ..."

"I thought we were talking about shame," Jay said.

"Mmm. I take it this engagement isn't based on full disclosure."

"Justine, like you'd know anything about it. You lie even when the truth is easier." Penelope swiveled to Jay. "Don't believe a word she says."

"Yeah, well this one has court records to back it up."

"You're irredeemable. What did I ever see in you? I plead the idiocy of youth."

Then Jay watched Penelope and Justine share a long look, saw one of Penelope's fingertips come to rest between bracelets on Justine's arm. For a moment, he pretended that he wasn't seeing this, that he couldn't feel the closeness between them that put him squarely on the sidelines. Who was the fiancée at this table and who the ex? Then, with an internal squirm, he wondered if there were a single woman he had dated who he could have a moment like this with. Who he could have had a moment like this with even while they'd been dating. No one until Penelope. He said, "Court records?"

Penelope blew a gush of dismissive air. "It was a fifty-dollar fine. I gotta pee," she said then disentangled herself from her chair with some difficulty. She hovered, eyeing them each in turn then sighed her way into the bar's sticky roar.

Justine said, "She used to be able to drink me under the table, and now look at her."

Jay and Justine were alone, and who knew what she'd say now—not that she seemed to have many reservations with Penelope around. Though Jay was at least a little concerned that he, more than Penelope's history, would end up scattered across the table at the end of the night along with lemon rinds and grains of salt, he waited for what Justine would say next. No matter how outrageous she seemed, and despite Penelope's admonishment, Jay couldn't help but believe what she said. Besides, every lie held a bit of truth.

She said, "Has Penelope given you her whole bisexuality briefing? You know, the 'I'm not dating a man I'm dating you' line?"

Love the person, not the gender, Jay had called it. A perversion of love the sinner hate the sin. He watched Justine swallow gulps from her long-ignored scotch and soda then said, "I take it you know this from personal experience?"

“Oh, yes. I think it’s code. I think it means ‘don’t be surprised if I dump you for someone with a dick.’ Or without, in your case. Or it could mean that Penelope can’t stand the thought of picking a damn side.”

“Or that she thinks sides are irrelevant.”

Justine’s laugh was a lurid complement to her features. “You’re one whipped dude. Best of luck, my friend,” she said and stole the last languishing fry from his plate.

What Jay didn’t disclose was that Penelope had given him that Justine-quoted line on the thirty-eighth day of their courtship, laid it down to end a discussion begun with the disclosure of her meandering sexual proclivities. In the thirty-seven preceding days, Jay had sometimes sensed something weighty and unsaid in Penelope’s gaze. Even though his conscious mind denied it, he was certain that this unsaid thing was love. How could it not be when this was the fuel behind the pounding in his own chest at the sight-sound-thought of her?

Then came the aftermath of their first sex. Pillows migrated to the bed corners, sheets tangled around Jay’s ankles, the box fan in the window buzzing a breeze against the small of his back. Penelope slid her lips across his cheek and sighed. “My sexuality is fluid,” she said, “but it’s really running away from me this time.”

So had begun the bisexuality briefing. Her disclosure was informational rather than emotional, which dug into him. But only so far. This unforeseen facet to Penelope, the unchanneled nature of her desires, made his own ardor expand. He became fifteen again, his dick growing hard at the merest hint of even the most innocent female-female affection, the hugs and kisses between women obviously married, obviously mothers, obviously not about to launch into the hot lesbian sex scene that had taken up residence in his fevered, unruly brain.

More than once in the weeks that followed, he’d been unable, due to a raging hard-on, to walk from his cube to the printer down the hall. The whole thing was uncomfortable on so many levels that his embarrassment turned first to frustration then to anger. Here he’d been considering himself enlightened, mature, with brain, heart, and dick in the appropriate hierarchy. But he was nothing more than a normal guy. Sub-normal, even.

But then, one day, he found his internal pornographic loop worn thin enough that he could finally see past it to a lurking admiration for Penelope. And not only Penelope but himself. Sure, this atypical gender blindness of hers was great, ultra evolved, but how inexplicably awesome that he had managed to snag her given her enumerable other options.

Penelope’s bisexuality was now as familiar as the rank smell of

her running clothes and the way her nostrils twitched when she detected someone barbecuing, but she had a nasty habit of personal non-disclosure. Jay knew the names of her exes, not all of which neatly tied to gender. Alex? Jessie? He had divulged a few too many details of his past relationships trying to induce Penelope to do the same, but the meat of her previous escapades remained mysterious.

Penelope was even faster than he was in the bathroom and could return at any moment, so Jay seized the opportunity. "What's her ratio?"

"Her ratio?"

"You know." He faltered. "Men to women?"

"You're too much." Justine finished her drink with a swallow as long as her neck and corralled an unruly chunk of hair behind an ear. "What makes you think I know?"

He stared at her.

"What, do you think we had some extra girl bond? You do, don't you." Her laughter warred with her bracelets.

"What'd I miss?" Penelope's hand was warm on his shoulder. "Are you two playing nice?"

"It's been most enlightening. Did you know, for example, that your Jay believes in a transcendental bond between women?"

"Well, that's why I love him." Penelope gave him a boozy smack on the cheek and slid into her seat. The tendrils of hair around her face were wet.

"But not as much as you could potentially love, say, me. Given my girlish nature and all," Justine said.

"Girlish nature my ass. Wolfish is more like it."

Now that Penelope mentioned it, Jay realized Justine did look rather lupine. Predatory.

"All the better to eat you with. Though that appears to be Jay's department these days. Do you still have the cape and basket?"

Penelope drained a tequila shot before answering. "I lost interest after the woods became too tame to bother."

"Do you remember?" Justine asked. "Forget the teeth."

"Those eyes were as big as pancakes," Penelope said.

"And not the silver dollar kind, either." They broke into raucous laughter that brought their half of the bar to a standstill. After a high-five and more chuckles, they seemed to remember Jay. He had no idea what his face looked like, but it couldn't be good.

"Inside joke." Penelope covered his hand with hers then dissolved into giggles.

Jay smiled and laughed along before asking, “Justine, ever been with a man?”

Penelope’s delight choked off.

“Sexually?” Justine asked.

Jay nodded.

“Even I was young and stupid once.”

“What about romantically?”

Justine barked a laugh and motioned for the waiter.

“Never? Not once?”

“No offense, but I’ve never found a man worth the effort.”

They all ordered drinks—Jay just a tonic. Justine did something complicated with her hair involving a knot and a band and a dangerous-looking clip. She appeared about to launch into something unrelated, but Jay snuck in before she could.

“So, basically, you’re saying that you believe in a transcendent bond between women, too. Otherwise why cut the pool of possible mates in half?”

“Believe me, that ‘pool of possible mates’ is cut in way less than half because of things other than what’s in your pants.”

“You didn’t answer my question.”

Justine glanced at Penelope, but Jay kept his gaze steady.

“Who said I signed up for a debate? What happened to idle chit-chat? Friendly conversation?”

Jay felt a hard squeeze on his leg, and the only thing that stopped him from shaking off Penelope’s grasp and going to take a leak was the fear of what might happen while he was gone. Maybe this thing between them was due to their long past intimacy. Or maybe it was because they were women and he was a man. Or both. Or neither. But it was there, and he wasn’t letting it out of his sight.

Penelope started a remember-when thread that gave Jay time to nurse his tonic and pick the tender bits of pulp from Penelope’s discarded lemons. Justine’s attractiveness was fading with the evening, but her understanding of a Penelope not his Penelope was both disquieting and tantalizing.

That morning, when Jay had deposited his dripping bowl in the dish drainer, Penelope had said the most conclusive thing to date about Justine: “She’s true blue.” Then she’d brushed his shoulder with her lips.

But he wasn’t to believe a word she said?

They’d had their engagement party at this bar a month before. It had been loud, drunken fun, and Jay had spent much of the long evening

watching Penelope wade through the crowd of friends and colleagues that had not yet coalesced from his and hers into theirs. Penelope was becoming more solid to him, her preferences and opinions predictable. Even so, Jay knew her huge crackling unknown was what had necessitated his grab for ever after.

Really knowing another person down to the dark corners of their being was impossible, and his marriage proposal had been based on the merest gist of the whole and assumed a laughable consistency. But that didn't bother him. What bothered him was that Penelope's acceptance, her reply of "most definitely," was, to him, as unsubstantiated as the proposal itself.

After the party, even though invitations had been ordered and a venue booked, Jay stopped Penelope on the sidewalk, looked into her bleary, happy face, and asked, "Why are you marrying me?"

She laughed. "How many shots did you have?"

More than he could count. For a block, he let the question be derailed, but then he took Penelope's arm too roughly and turned her to attention. "I'm serious. Why did you say yes?"

Penelope examined each of his eyes in turn. He wasn't sure what she could see of his baby blues in this gap between street lights, but hers were dark and unreadable.

"I love you and choose you, and if that's not enough reason, I can't help," she said with finality but didn't move.

"But how much do we even know each other?" The echo of his mother in his voice made his spleen hurt.

"I know enough to want to spend my life learning more." She smiled and took his hand, gently pulled him back into motion. "Besides, that's overrated. You make me want to try. Hard."

With Penelope tucked into his chest that night, breathing in soft inebriated whistles, Jay wanted to believe her. When she said things like that, unequivocal and simple, how could he not? But in the nighttime quiet, he knew she'd left out a lot. He thought about all the untold and even unacknowledged things in him and was certain something had the power to drive Penelope away. And though he couldn't admit it was possible, he wondered what in Penelope could do the same to him.

He sipped his tonic and watched Penelope smile while she and Justine reminisced. She was flirting and not flirting, exactly the warm, inclusive woman he'd just had to get to know when they'd first met.

Then Justine said, "I'm not much on straight etiquette—"

"Any etiquette," Penelope said.



“Whatever, but I guess I should ask about the proposal.”

“I proposed,” Jay said.

“On the bus,” Penelope said.

“The bus?”

“Yeah, the driver said, ‘Mayfair, next,’ and Jay said, ‘Will you please marry me?’”

Actually, Jay had asked twice, not having realized that Penelope had fallen asleep before choking out the first proposal. Penelope had an impulse for instant slumber when in motion, but it was to his advantage since that initial attempt had been garbled and feverish.

“But, on a bus?”

“When you gotta ask, you gotta ask.” Jay shrugged. The question had been irrepressible, had felt more inevitable than impulsive.

“I never would have gotten away with that. Pen and romance, you know?” Justine winked at Jay.

“Things change,” Penelope said.

“No one ever really changes.”

“Change is the only constant, woman.” Penelope reached across the table and poked Justine in the hollow under her collarbone. “When you get down to it, it’s the only thing you really have to know.”

“Only’s pretty strong.”

“Fine, but it’s in the top two. Or maybe one and a half.” Penelope laughed. Jay could hear again the earnestness in Penelope’s voice when she’d put her faith in trying over the importance of knowing. That and his sobriety made him confident for the first time this evening.

With the water, beer, and tequila, Jay could have predicted to the minute Penelope’s next need for the restroom. Although he had his own urge to find the closest urinal, he stayed rooted to his chair and was thankful for Justine’s cast-iron bladder. When Penelope left them, he made himself give Justine an opening to speak first, but her attention followed Penelope’s receding back.

“Did you break up with her or did she break up with you?” Feeling Justine’s sudden gaze, he waited with a calm he didn’t quite feel.

“I’m going to be a good girl for once and do what Penelope wants. She would say that it doesn’t matter, and she’s right. But it matters to you because you think I still want Pen, and you really like the idea.” Her long fingers walked through her bracelets, making each tick against the next. “You know, Jay darling, Penelope marrying you won’t make her straight. Don’t ask me why. Would you be more pissed if she cheated on you with a man or a woman?”

“Penelope won’t say it, but she thinks you left the country because of her.” He folded his arms and chewed an ice cube.

“Whatever. Who cares, right? But you’ve got to get her off that pedestal. She’s awfully good at disappointing.” Justine’s tone faded to quiet and personal and made Jay feel a sort of kinship. What she said was probably both true and not and besides the point. He wasn’t marrying Justine’s Penelope, he was marrying his own.

“No!” Penelope said when she approached. “Too serious. Whatever you’re talking about, knock it off.” She placed both hands with their bitten nails on the back of her chair. “I’m drunk and tired and may soon become crabby.”

“Now *that* I don’t miss,” Justine said then turned her face away. Jay felt puffed up, gladly paid their bill, and finally, desperately, hit the john.

They were in the parking lot when he emerged. Night had done nothing to dissipate the wet heat, and Penelope’s face was shiny with it. Justine stood close to Penelope, towering over her, her liberated hair soft and alive in the lot’s orange light. Their hands mingled between them, pinkie fingers linked. Then Penelope snorted, Justine laughed, and they separated far enough that Jay could walk closer.

Justine said, “Good luck with her tomorrow.”

He shook her offered hand, savoring the shared knowledge that it was his bed Penelope would be waking up in.

“Pen.” She nodded at Penelope.

“Jay-Jay,” Penelope said.

On the bus, with Penelope already folded against the darkened window, Jay knew he had only a moment before she succumbed to slumber. The fact that his name was a mere half of someone else’s term of endearment made him unable to repress this irrelevant question.

“Penelope?”

“Hm?”

“Did you dump Justine?”

“There was no dumping.”

“Then what happened?”

“It was just one of those things.”

“What, a girl thing?”

She laughed sleepily. “No, a person thing.” She turned away.

Over Penelope’s still head, Jay watched streets tick by. Humidity gathered in the glow of the streetlamps, making the air appear unusually substantial. Jay could tell Penelope wasn’t sleeping, but he knew enough to pretend that she was.

JASON TANDON

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## AT THE OFFICE

Auroral  
in the day's  
last light

a cluster of dust  
hovers above  
a succulent plant

in a too small pot  
on the sill.

JASON TANDON

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## THINKING ABOUT LAUGHTER

Evenings I shrink  
in a wingback chair  
crinkling the daily paper.  
“Don’t blame me,” my mother says.  
My father coughs and clears his throat.

ELAINE TERRANOVA

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## TAN ESPADRILLES

I am scarcely pedaling, the wind is carrying me off on my bike. Down the wide avenue. I detect a whiff of salt in the air, shore air. Tan espadrilles are light on my feet below beige linen trousers. A light shirt over my t-shirt flies out to the sides in the breeze I am making. I am propelled by sunlight, following you, weaving in and out of cars in the light traffic that edges the street. You are before me, showing the way. I try to catch up, with my loopy, less powerful legs. The bike and I are one fantastical creature, a hybrid, a female centaur. If I am any lighter, I will dissolve. Maybe we are back in Ocean City after so many years, islanded by water, nothing familiar, free to appear or disappear. Or I am lifting off into the sky of my childhood, in Logan, all the shops going by, the kosher butcher, the fishman, the bakery that makes cream puffs and streudels. But when I look for you, after you, you are gone. I turn off where I thought I saw you turn off, into a narrow, shaded street in Italy or California, and lean the bike against the white-framed, plate glass window of a pizzeria. I wander in and the men are in white aprons, taking a smoke, slouched in wooden chairs as they wait for the wood burning ovens to be ready. But I ask and they haven't seen you. I go back out and reunited with my bike, don't know whether to keep riding and leave to chance my hope to catch up with you somewhere or turn around.

ELAINE TERRANOVA

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## **MONKFISH. MANATEE.**

Monkfish, that looks to be more human than other fish. More human except for maybe the manatee which isn't even a fish but a mammal trapped in water and we don't anyhow eat them. Oh, I'm so happy I don't need to clean or cook it today, monkfish, fillet the texture and shape of our guts, with its thin, slippery membrane that should be pulled back and over like a pair of socks rolled into a ball. Though the membrane breaks down and melts in high or prolonged heat. When done, it could be any other fish even if tough and resistant un- or undercooked. I once saw a manatee rising from the shallow, dirty water edging Tampa Bay. It floated amid chip bags and popsicle sticks like a swollen baby. I can only imagine a monkfish alive, with its wide mouth. Both it and the manatee, with their similar bewildered, homely-man faces.

## MIRROR

I call her from our cabin in the woods. She says to me, isn't it funny? she's in the woods too. "It's all green outside. The kids have treated me to a holiday," she thinks, because they are like that. "Always doing funny things for me that will make me happy."

Can she go swimming where she is? Has she met the other people there?

"I've only been here maybe four days!" she tells me, so I don't think she's had all the time in the world.

She thinks the place is in Florida but in a strange part, maybe far away from where she lives. I ask if she got there by train. By car, maybe?

"Oh, it must have been car. But I don't know who drove me. (Isn't that funny?) They even brought my sofa. And I see all my books on a shelf. And some writing paper too," things to make her feel at home.

"But they can't have meant for me to stay. I'll call them and find out where I am. "

"What do you with yourself there every day?" I ask.

"What do you do where you are?"

"I take walks, hikes, really. Because it's pretty hilly."

"Me too! Do you wear hiking boots? I do, but they're a little tight so they pinch."

I agree. "And they are also very heavy."

"Mine too! I'll have to get a new, light pair if I stay here. Oh, I just looked in the kitchen and they even thought to bring my kitchen table so I can make dinner. Isn't that nice?"

## WHEN EUROPE MET AFRICA: POLITICAL COQUETRY AND THE ONTOLOGY OF THE MODERN

In writing the primitive European-African encounter, historians have struggled to relay a precise historiography that traces the schemata by which blacks became slaves. Anachronistically imbricating the modern and late modern concepts of political economy, consolidated states and race-based theorizations onto an earlier pre-modern era, writers have neglected the power relations that sustained Europe's early rummaging in Africa. In his re-reading of the early modern canon, this is expressly what Herman Bennett, Professor of History at the Graduate Center of the City University of New York, defends in *African Kings and Black Slaves*. His text sheds light on the elusive narratives that bypass the ontological moment that not only magnified the entrails of the Euro-African encounter, but also catalyzed the African diaspora and the Atlantic. Perhaps what is most seductive yet dissatisfying about Bennett's text is that it invites the reader to jettison the always-already notions of an economically and racially minded Europe without fully entering into, as the title might suggest, a balanced history that ascribes equal textual space to African sovereigns and slaves who, as Bennett offers, impelled Europe into the modern.

Bennett opens with a well-crafted argument that exposes scholarly attempts to conflate the 18th century understanding of political economy with the historical process of enslavement. The author peers into what existed before market-based economies and the modern nation-state: the intellectual, juridical and customary practices that undergirded European notions of the political. At least in part, the "political" upheld Iberian recognition of African sovereigns. Bennett highlights an initial ceremony in present day Ghana (then Elmina) where Portuguese traders observed an African sovereign, the *Caramançã*, welcoming the strangers while making it "clear that he held their lives in his hands" (Bennett 32). Although many historians have analyzed these rituals strictly for their cultural complexity, Bennett holds that the performances connoted the very political symbolism and substantiation of Africa sovereignty that shaped Europe's 15th century imperial agenda. In this way, Portuguese, and later Castilian traders, clearly recognized African power configurations that predated liberal rationalizations of human trafficking.

Positing the African political regime as a force that preexisted a racial and economic teleology of the chattel principle allows Bennett to



chart the European legal apparatuses that realized this sovereign power. In first instance, Bennett cites the sailors, merchants and missionaries who constructed Europe's first *episteme* of Africa. Wrought in those travelogues, papal bulls and treatises was the clear application of natural and canon law that bestowed *dominium* on the inhabitants within newly found lands and excluded encroachment and pillaging by Christian perpetrators. Additionally, much of the legal tradition promulgated by 15th century jurists and theologians found base in Pope Innocent IV's commentary that questioned Christian authority to seize land from Moslems during the crusades. Innocent settled that pagans and infidels could live in peace under their chosen authorities, even as the *extra ecclesiam* who existed outside of the Church. Given that Roman, canon and "feudal" law allowed competing factions to debate the legal status of the *extra ecclesiam*, Christendom had to determine sovereign African subjects who "valued freedom" and the legitimately unfree who warranted enslavement.

Elucidating this paradigm, Bennett's nuanced chapter titled "Authority" provocatively explores the European juridical and administrative response to African prepotency. Bennett sustains the idea that turning the sovereign-less into chattel slaves involved a framework by which conflicting European ambitions relied on legal writs (Roman law, canon law and natural law) to establish trade with those whom their conception of *polis* deemed as natural rulers. Accordingly, the Portuguese procurement of slaves invigorated the signifiers, *lordship*, *mastery*, *despot and tyrant*, which reified sovereignty and eventually absolutism in an early modern context. Thus, enslavement and the colonial process incarnated a household administration, an *oikos*, through a political transaction mediated by customary channels that enslaved subjects for the sustenance of the Iberian empires. Weaving this argument, Bennett adroitly highlights how modern theorists of power, Africanists and humanists have made the mistake of inscribing an always-already modern Europe extricated from this fusion of early modern *oikos* and *polis*. It was these medieval social implements, Bennett attests, that presaged capitalism and nullify the underwhelming "subject to chattel" reading of enslavement.

In tracing the contours of Portugal's approximation to Guinea's center, Bennet explicates the channels that sustained Europe's primitive

epistemological gaze at African sovereigns. After realizing that mere raids would not yield the number of desired slaves, Portuguese merchants, under the guise of theological benevolence, practiced diplomacy with those Africans who possessed mastery over their territories and subjects. Throughout this process, as Bennet closely follows the travel accounts of the Venetian voyager Alvise da Cà Da Mostro, the Portuguese delineated disparate African lands and peoples according to topographical traits and individual phenotypes. This incursion informed the designations that coined Africans as juridical objects with unique ethnicities. Bennet, quite anxiously, claims that this procedure conferred subjectivity to Africans although the names *lords and vassals* seem to have only provided an objective veneer of one's social caste within a political context. Nonetheless, Portuguese efforts to read, define, and trade with Africa point to Bennett's larger claim that the initial inability to palliate African sovereignty heavily molded Europe's early stratagem of its own national character.

In attempting to attribute subjectivity to African kings and black slaves, Bennet's work does go far in sketching Africans as executors of diplomacy and governance. However promising the title may be, this history, most devotedly, seeks to mark a Europe that discursively evades a *locus* (Bennett does specifically denote that the text is not Africanist in scope). Nevertheless, the work continues in a tradition that spreads "subjectivity" over Africans without plunging into the psychological, emotional or experiential complexity of African particularity. Whether due to archival considerations or a lack of sustained penetration, Bennett's historical claims about Africans, at best, substantiate a more sophisticated reading of the West. At the end of his narrative, Bennett writes, "As fifteenth- and sixteenth-century European travelers scoured Guinea in search of local rulers who would sanction and protect commercial ties, their understandings of dominion residing in a *polis* often shrouded the discrete meanings through which Guinea's inhabitants represented their polities and political practices" (Bennett 151). The attentive reader is left wanting in regards to how Bennett might have more sharply explored the slippage between Europe's political optic and Africa's civic traditions.

RICK BURSKY

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## THE HYDRA SPIRITUAL

There are not enough moons in the night  
Sky to light my bedroom window,  
Not enough space in the room for a man  
Like me to dance, but the time for that has passed.  
Though I shake my fist this never changes.  
No one enjoys a woe-is-me story more than  
The God who now only offers cut-rate salvation.  
What do I get in return for agreeing to the sacrifices?  
What? Two calamities and three broken bones,  
That crippled dog crawling like a frightened  
Soldier, and yes, yes, I am keeping score.

We are intricate details in the machinery,  
Nothing more. Time is the tongue licking me  
As I stand in the cold waiting for sunrise.  
I could be a glass door if need be.  
That I take my heart with me  
Everywhere is no longer a blessing.  
Clouds are bells waiting to be rung,  
And when they are some mysterious part of our DNA  
Will drive us to our duty stations.  
I forget which of us is on which end of the leash.  
In the right crowd, a leather-burn is a mark of pride.

RICK BURSKY

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## THE POEM AT THE FUNERAL SPIRITUAL

The ladders are failing us, even the new ones  
Built to last beyond every apocalypse.  
Everything's falling from the sky,  
What doesn't fall from the sky  
Isn't worth being hit on the head with.  
Just because something kills you  
Doesn't make it important. When I think  
Too much my eyes begin to swell,  
Does this ever happen to you?  
Picture me wearing dark sunglasses.  
Our suffering is a pipe bomb from purgatory.

Our suffering is the white drapes  
Hung from heaven's windows. We don't know  
We're about to die until it's too late.  
If only we'd been created with a clock  
Where the heart is. Scaffolding was once required  
For a successful life. Now it's ruin  
And prefabricated destiny, the craftsmen gone  
To another world leaving me  
To tap my toe to the sobbing squall.  
Around us, the clay melts.  
Everything is God's fault.

DANA ROESER

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## NOTES FOR THE HOUSE SITTER: ADDENDUM

There are a few  
things I thought I might add  
to the directions  
my husband already  
gave you: Please  
water the hanging plants  
every day. Literally,  
in this heat, they are trying  
to commit suicide every  
day. The little rose bush in  
the basket that Doug  
gave me after my surgery  
I've already killed. And the  
tiny geranium on the cutting  
board near the kitchen  
window that Marianne gave Don—  
well, we're working on it.  
The crown of blossoms is  
dead.

There are some projectiles  
around the house, the lime green picnic  
set on the front porch  
and the big blue  
table umbrella  
in the back. If a tornadic  
or straight-line wind  
storm is approaching,  
bring them in.  
Regarding swimming, use  
my pass from lap swim  
if you want,  
but I have  
to warn you, no matter  
your sex, the men displace  
a lot of water and

sometimes engage  
in pointless public remarks  
about the weather  
when you're  
hurrying across  
the parking lot to  
get to the pool.  
The trees at the top of the hill  
are pretty.  
Don't look at  
them or at the  
fluffy white clouds scrolling by  
while doing the backstroke.  
Even with tinted  
goggles it will feel  
like your retinas  
are screaming.

Regarding the House Beautiful  
kitchen. I'm a bit of  
a hoarder, an agoraphobe,  
and dislike  
its wide open spaces. The "Blushing  
Ivory" granite  
is cold and you could fracture  
your skull on it.  
I guess no heavy fucking  
("counter-topping")  
or dance parties on there.  
And oh, you can't  
spill dishwashing liquid, olive oil,  
red wine (not relevant  
to me), orange juice,  
or a myriad of other things  
on the counter because it is a  
*kitchen counter*

and cannot tolerate it.

No maple syrup on the  
counter for *any*  
purpose!  
Avoid using anything  
kitchen- or cooking-related  
on or near the  
surface. It is meant  
to demonstrate  
that we had the money  
to get the  
granite countertop and  
nothing more.

Netflix is the devil.  
I recommend  
you not go there. But, if you  
want to, you have the  
choice of Don's style,  
binge-watching till four  
in the morning  
and then getting up the next day  
at the usual time as though  
nothing has happened—or mine,  
wherein you divvy  
out the episodes  
one at a time  
every other day or so,  
making (hypothetical) Don  
backtrack and watch with you,  
then struggle to get  
out of bed in  
the morning, hours later  
than Don, and curse Netflix.  
Don't use my  
saddle. But that's

at the barn so you wouldn't.  
    And don't let  
my boyfriend enter the house,  
    which you  
wouldn't because  
    he doesn't know  
where the house is  
    and he's no longer  
my boyfriend (if he ever  
    was). He's pushy.  
I don't think he's trustworthy. He  
    has a tiny  
porkpie hat.

    If you look carefully,  
or even casually,  
    not that you'd be interested,  
there is an archaeological  
    representation  
of my historical past,  
    a documentary  
"paper trail," in the now-abandoned  
    "tote bags" strewn  
throughout the house. Just today  
    I found one  
with hot chocolate packets in a  
    ziplock along with  
Twinings English  
    Breakfast tea bags and  
God knows what else from my job  
    in Kansas last November;  
I'm afraid to look. Folded-back magazines  
    and newspapers,  
several in each, everywhere, because  
    I had an idea  
and I was hoping to get back



to it. Never  
mind! Just stick to your path.

Hang out in  
the posh, remodeled  
“family room.” The white leather  
couch I haven’t  
found a way to wreck. The Paul Klee  
rug (a few wine stains,  
courtesy graduate students).  
Between the efforts of  
my husband and the ghost of my  
mother, a couple of  
rooms are almost  
polyurethane-sealed and  
clean. You can slide around on patrician  
intentions/pretensions.

Upstairs, my bedroom,  
forget it! It’s hot!  
I just hung *Monk in Prayer*  
on the wall to the right  
of the head of the bed. It’s a copy  
of a painting in the Met  
by an anonymous French painter  
circa 1500  
that my step-grandmother  
made. She thought the Benedictine,  
with stubble on his round chin and  
black habit, looked  
like my moderate, long-suffering dad,  
so she gave it to him.  
It hung near him every day  
that I can remember.

Do not  
sexually cavort under the

monk or the  
San Damiano cross hanging  
on the wall opposite. There  
is ecstasy and grief enough  
in that one location  
already. Or under the oversized  
torso milagro in hammered  
silver that my friend, perpetual  
cancer patient Carolyn—  
who has outlived her Stage IV  
non-Hodgkins lymphoma  
prognosis by  
twenty-six years—  
gave me. Nor in sight of the “shrine,”  
at the foot of the bed  
on the right, a particle-board  
bookshelf  
with Al-Anon books, the memoir  
and novel of a left-wing  
Christian I adore  
and several books given  
to me years ago that I haven’t cracked  
topped by a photo of my  
having-a-good-day  
sarcastic mother  
grinning  
on the back  
porch of the A-frame house  
at the beach,  
lots of shells, and little  
frowning clay South American  
gods sitting cross-legged in a semi-circle  
(the cleaners’ doing).  
No fucking near them either.  
Choose one of the  
girls’ rooms—what happened/

happens in there is none  
of my business.

In sum, you do not  
have my permission  
to kill the hosta, I mean,  
“peace lily,” that  
the English Department  
gave Don when his mother died  
two years ago. (I was  
envious, as usual,  
as no one  
“official” gave me a potted  
plant when *my* mother  
died, whether she was a flaming  
bitch in life  
or not.) Don’s been trying  
to kill the huge,  
persistent  
plant all winter.  
But I got him  
to help me repot it,  
and it’s outdoors in the  
heat. Very hot  
but proud not to be  
dropping leaves in the house.  
So try not to forget about it.

Regarding the  
*New York Times*, it’ll be  
on the front door step  
with the pointless local paper—  
revenge killings by  
boyfriends and the like—  
in a blue plastic  
wrapper every morning.

Read *The Times*  
cover to cover,  
interspersed with a  
few poems  
of your choosing. Write  
down your dreams.  
Read only the advice  
columns and horoscope (read both Vedic  
and whatever the other one's  
called) in the local paper and avert  
your eyes from the "Op-Ed" page  
and the unbelievably  
benighted "opinions"  
and letters to the editor.

Carolyn Hax  
is good. She seems to have been  
in therapy and Al-Anon.  
The other one  
is even more conflicted  
and fucked-up than the  
previous two in that space.  
Like her predecessors she's  
the consummate example  
of passive aggressive. Her fear  
of honesty and assertiveness  
is such that she  
ties herself in  
square knots and half  
hitches trying to address  
the insipid quandaries. "Charming  
Vern, procured  
on Match.com, belches every  
five minutes on  
first date."

Put your phone

on Daily News  
    briefings if you really  
want to torture yourself  
    and scroll through the “day’s news”  
before you even get out  
    of bed. Feel superior; for,  
lying in bed, you’re  
    doing a lot less harm  
than our “elected officials.” Strip  
    down after your consult,  
pee and weigh  
    yourself on the bathroom  
scale. Don’t worry about  
    Danny and Felicia looking—  
they’ve long since learned  
    it doesn’t pay to look  
in the curtainless windows of our house  
    because *someone*—  
that would be me—  
    mistakenly thought  
that Danny was a sixties guy,  
    a hippie, when she first  
moved in.

    You can go to my  
twelve-step meetings  
    if you want. Watch out  
for my boyfriend. He’s pretty much stopped  
    going though. Don’t  
worry. You’ll know him in an  
    instant. He has gold  
shoes.

    I don’t recommend  
you try going out  
    to the stable to—God

forbid—hop on “Umberto,” the horse  
I’ve been riding. He’s calm,  
chosen specifically  
to help me rehab after hip  
surgery, but I have known him  
to spook over the tiniest  
ripple of wind  
in a blade of grass. If you need  
crutches or canes, they’re in  
the “walk-in” (good luck  
walking in) closet in the  
basement. The walker  
we rented, so if you need  
one of those, I recommend  
Midwest Rentals.

Don’s vibes in this  
house are so loud and explicit  
I don’t think you’ll need me  
to identify them. He’s always sighing  
at a deafening decibel  
level about his success or perceived  
lack thereof—or doing  
a brain séance to conjure  
his mother and report to her  
in metallic thought waves about the  
above. In the off moments,  
there are the tinny blasts of Fats Navarro’s  
trumpet leaking from  
his headphones.

Use a broom or the  
ash shovel to fight him off.

We’ve hung  
two mirrors that have  
come from my parents’ things.

One by the front door  
and one at the top of the stairs.  
Approach with caution. Avert your eyes.  
No matter how good-looking you  
are, they're huge and startling. And  
I'm not. I actually had a "trainer"  
tell me I walk like a cave man!  
And for God's sake, do not go  
in the bathroom when you've been  
working in your computer  
glasses and accidentally glance  
at the mirror. I don't care if  
you're twelve. You'll get the shock  
of your life. The resolution  
on your fine facial  
lines is a sight  
you'll never be able to forget!  
Do some back exercises  
for me and maybe  
get to the chiropractor.  
He'll zap the hell  
out of you with electrodes and  
might tell you some of his  
latest conspiracy theories.  
He must go to the  
same church as my  
boyfriend. They both have  
the "How can I be  
of service?" unctuous reflex. Also, big,  
competent hands.  
But don't overthink  
that. Just  
get in there for the  
adjustment. My back  
is terrible.

DANA ROESER

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## DERBY PARTY

I went to the party in my pajamas  
and a giant white picture  
hat that dominated me  
like an elephant ear.  
Don said my cleavage showed  
  
the entire time.  
I used the hat as a personal Japanese  
screen and had no idea  
who else was in  
the room. But when I ran  
  
into them, the other dowagers in hats,  
I stared them  
down. For *none* had hats  
half the size of mine.  
There was a three-tiered display  
  
of bourbon balls that contained,  
one of the Brians told me,  
walnuts that had been  
soaked in booze for two days.  
There were bushels of mint  
  
and simple syrup for juleps. The Brians  
should have had  
powdered sugar, and no one  
knew how to muddle  
the mint. I got into an argument  
  
with Pete in which  
he declared he used to see me  
on the street running  
like an old man. I punched him  
in the arm  
  
and said I ran for forty years  
and had to have my hip  
replaced. I said if he didn't  
quit it with his bicycle-bragging,



I'd take him to the stable and put him

on a race horse. That  
there was one I'd been riding,  
who last raced six months  
ago. Puffing up in my hat  
like a cobra.

My husband was panting with  
enthusiasm; God knows  
where my décolletage  
was in the "intimate"  
Free People white

lace negligee.  
My husband and I left early,  
drove ten miles north  
to the prairie at Prophetstown.  
We walked under a

lavender sky. Under  
Venus. Without  
much to guide us. I picked a fight  
about being neglected;  
the coyotes and foxes rustled through

the grasses. The  
birds sang all their songs in  
unison and backwards  
and weren't that pleased  
with my whistling replies.

I asked Olivia about Florida  
at the party.  
She wasn't wearing a hat. She said,  
It's simple. Google Man o' War  
and beaches and find out

which beaches don't have  
them. I said there was the day

in Key West when the  
stinging marine life purple flag  
flapped by

the guard house.

I was so freaked out  
by my giant-frame fat-tired blue bike,  
I failed to notice.  
I could have been goosed by

the tips of hundred-foot-long  
tentacles the whole time I swam.

I said I had waited three months  
exactly from the time  
I returned from Key West

for the weather in our

Indiana town to become  
decently comparable. But no one  
was listening. They perked up  
a little when I mentioned

my weekly injection. How I got an  
instant headache

and craved orange food items  
in boxes. My husband  
is cruel. On our walk he said

that it looked like

there were some people  
at the party I was  
getting along with. I told him  
I could count the number of

people I wasn't introduced to  
and the number of people who looked  
directly through me. I had a  
lucrative job once, that  
came with a four-story

house, window treatments,  
chandeliers, and gold  
faucets. I want to leave  
this place so badly I might go  
out in the fields and

join the coyotes, the  
foxes. Comporting oneself  
while being ignored  
is a special skill set. John  
almost started hyperventilating

about the amount  
my daughter will need to go into debt  
to pay for medical school.  
But he settled down  
as we picked through

the fruit tray.  
I fingered some criminally  
large strawberries and  
he had the melon.  
I was staring at the little

TV over the table and adjusting  
the volume on the remote. I looked  
at the horses in the paddock  
before the race and tried to remember  
how I used to

pick them. Saw Justify  
prancing next to the lead  
pony on his way to the track.  
The other guests, the bettors, were  
in the living room, assembled

in front of the flat screen. John  
leaned over to me, looking up, said,  
“It’s grotesque, isn’t it?” I said,  
“Yes, of course. Our new thoroughbred at

the barn—Beach—

didn't even know  
    how to eat an apple wafer  
when we got him. I have  
    since introduced him  
to carrots and real apples.”

    I said it was like he'd  
been at a boarding school.  
    Or an orphanage. The jockey  
who won, Mike Smith,  
    was it?, looked upward

and said loudly for all to hear,  
    Thank you, Jesus Christ.  
He said Justify had a good  
    mind. I was on the  
macadam path at Prophetstown

    in that huge field at nightfall.  
Venus and its starshine  
    scattering over me.  
I was on the deck at  
    the party, glints falling

through an oversized  
    picture hat. Larger than that  
elephant ear outside the back door  
    of my yellow clapboard  
shotgun in New Orleans.

    It would double  
in size overnight.  
    Larger wingspan  
than anyone  
    else's at the party.

## WE NEVER UNDERSTOOD EZRA POUND

Everyone was perfectly aware that T. S. Eliot had no choice but to write *The Waste Land* given the circumstances of the twentieth century which he perfectly understood but needed notes to explain. Carlos Williams was delivering babies and writing notes to their mothers that it was he who had eaten the plums out of the refrigerator. Robert Frost had to work the farm that day mowing the hay with nothing but the sound of sense and couldn't make it into town to offer support at the hearing, and, of course, Stevens was writing insurance contracts out of his imagination while trying hard not to think about God. But Ezra, in the beginning, had created Bloomsbury and Paris. And the evening and the morning were the first day. He wanted to make all things new, even if it had meant treason. The D.A. says Ezra hears Mussolini's radio through his teeth. A good attorney today could have got him off. Called them podcasts. "Judge, the defendant himself admits he botched the *Cantos*." But Ezra couldn't leave well enough alone and added like America had botched civilization.

PAUL DICKEY

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## CEREMONIAL HAT FOR EATING BOUILLABAISSSE (EILEEN AGAR, 1936)

She wears many hats. She has a closet filled with hats and shoes. The hats she turns into old men, but she wears the shoes when she isn't wearing hardly anything at all at the pool. The old men there wonder how they could speak to her appropriately. That is, without appearing to be, well you know. When they were young, they always said the wrong thing at moments like this. She is still almost young, although the young dudes at the pool think she is old and their girlfriends are not impressed in the slightest or even worried about her. They even laugh as the old men on old lawn chairs admire her and sip diet sodas, exposing their bony, hairless chests and their overly inflated tires they sometimes use for digestive purposes. This morning she wears this hat over her bikini eyes and the old men are speechless, the young dudes are aghast and confused about how their lives are working out, and the girls are afraid for the sake of their beauty.

JANICE MAJEWSKI

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## SAY IT SO IT IS

say  
you suffer  
from a burn  
and say it  
hurt the skin  
is gone or  
the skin is dead  
say it was  
serious so  
a length is removed  
from a healthy  
part of the body  
they'll take one  
piece of skin one  
thin layer like  
peeling a potato  
and glue it over  
the hole so  
you'll look and do  
better eventually  
you won't feel  
split or you will  
but your body  
won't reject it  
your body won't  
reject it since  
it's a piece  
of your own  
say

JANICE MAJEWSKI

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## UNFOLDING

a body in the middle of a room, not floor, lets you see how much air there really is, how much space beneath the body, between yourself and a body. this body is gold-looking, reflecting possibility, even you: body upside down but so are you when you look. it is arms and back arched back, an almost O except the ends won't touch, just continue, unfold.

a card reads: "arch with hysteria" and because two things are listed, there are two things.

you ask what is holding them there.



## THE COMPELLING VOICE OF AN UNRELIABLE NARRATOR: LYNNE LURIE'S *MUSEUM OF STONES*

Lynne Lurie's third novel is actually a lyric novella, that while not inviting the reader to explore anything like an accessible, navigable terrain, at the same time achieves an invitation to an excruciating exploration of the consequences of our collective fracturing of body, mind, culture, and privilege, somehow lived out in minds and bodies of a central narrator, her family and various North and South Americans in a harsh world they move through but cannot navigate. Seemingly in this landscape no one any longer knows how to navigate, only to endure, strangers in a dour and un-earthly land. More than a mere indictment of the well-understood ravages of cultural privilege and the emotional and spiritual emptiness that it has produced, *Museum of Stones* could nearly serve as the swan song of that indictment.

For this review, it is worthwhile to call out the substantial and pervasive first person singular point of view for what it is: not a study in depressive narcissism but a road map. The opening, external situation (throughout there is very little in the way of setting) is that a mother has given birth prematurely, to an extremely small premie. Whether or not the child will live, however, is not the tension point of the narrative, for within a few paragraphs she is relating his tendency to collect various articles he calls "matters important," and in fact, the tale she tells as she and her husband stand before the Lucite box that holds his miniscule body, that "neither of us has room for anymore sadness," in a traditional narrative would have come way too early and seem maudlin and captious—self-centered.

In this narrative, however, the information is neither superlative nor critical, and it is in this realization that the narrator is both recognized as unreliable and captures the reader's fascination. From this point on, such statements cascade with the regularity of the kind of ready intimate detail that everyone spends and that most of us squander. The narrator—whom we assume is a White American—is the kind of mother who seems to see herself as pressed into the service of others, and having made that bed, wants to help her son survive, but more than anything seems to want to sleep in the face of every obligations she has taken on. "I would have left," she says more than once in silent reply to one situation or another. Nothing new to see there, though, and so the reader who recognizes that the easy and recognizable lack of feeling that coats the surface of this

story early on is left, commanded, really, to keep digging for what is at the bottom of it.

The lynchpin may or may not be revealed in the title, which refers to a group of stones that for a while the narrator and her son built every morning, and took down every night, as if it were a mobile or travelling exhibit. “He knew where he found each rock and marked the spot on a hand-drawn map... We mounted the sign on a stake and planted it alongside the road so cars passing by could see it.” The son is distressed to find that “grandmother’s favorite” had been left out all night, the favorite of the narrator’s mother who has been presented by turns as compassionate, intrusive, and blatantly self-involved. But her “favorite” is important to the son.

Is the son autistic? It is very hard to tell. He ultimately obtains a dissertation, but his interests are in facts and the collection of evidence—he is the “son” of the hyper-empirical. The father is as typically absent as can be who have children with traumatic births and lingering illness and difficulties—bumbling, emotionally uneducated, probably trying to do the right thing but not trying particularly hard. The narrator’s father is outright vicious, the obvious icon of patriarchy:

As my father walked me down the aisle, I realized he had in a different decade unbuttoned the same dress. I tried to steady myself by digging my fingernails into my palm. The cut I made was long and deep. By the time I noticed it was too late to blot the red away.

The Latin Americans in the story—a good bit of the tale takes place in Peru and elsewhere in South America, and it is not clear if the mother is a doctor, an administrator of a clinic, or really what they are doing there—are hyper-real, as persons from other cultures tend to feel the Other to be, themselves outsiders when all the trappings of familiar culture fall away. In fact, one has the sense that the un-doing or fracturing of this family is in an important way the product of this encounter. But, like every other “tale” told in the novella, none of this seems to be more important than any other. The family relationships with the Latin Americans are important to them, but as with most people

in the story, even those whom the narrator and her son have known for years seem to skim along the surface of their familiarity. Also familiar is the sense that another culture is a refuge from the psychological prism of one's own, but on the other hand, it is never considered of what the refuge of the Other might consist. But again, Lurie here does not take the easy way out, that somehow material benefit or excess empathy is the answer:

Dig deep and there is water. Men wrapped in rags tend hectares of green tendrils in perfectly ordered rows. Then the green abruptly ends and there is sand...I never returned for the tagged trees, the red maple, the peach, and the apple that would have bloomed so beautifully in my backyard.

Finally, I have called this book a lyric novella, primarily based on the continuous structure of isolated paragraphs (broken up from time to time with single-line prose sentences—there is no moment in which the narrative lapses into recognizable poetic form). The structure takes attention and energy to follow, but allows for a remarkable handling of time and true stream of consciousness, attention darting from this issue, to that deeper consideration, to portraits of fear, to recognition of emotional exhaustion. It is a masterful use of this structure, as well as an intelligent balance of depth and movement.

As in a book of poems, there are riches in this novella that cannot be sufficiently counted or satisfyingly explored in a single review. My reading of the novella was difficult because I have come to reject narratives that paint an entire world without joy, but I was compelled by the mastery of Lurie's prose again and again. And indeed, I was compelled by the book's end, that although we are "trapped inside our illnesses," yet Lurie holds out for the face that even under force, remains the storyteller's own, seen with "no distortions or duplications."

## REFUGIADO

Mi alma en pedazos,  
Veo el alambre de púa  
rasguñando metal contra piel.  
Llorando lágrimas de sangre,  
Escucho disparos al vacío del silencio  
de la salva maratrucha.  
Lo empujo bajo la cerca  
pero llora mi hijo,  
aunque no importa;  
lo hago porque  
lo quiero.

Caminamos caminamos...  
horas por las vías podridas  
de los coyotes,  
días, semanas, un mes, mano en mano:  
vamos enfermos,  
sin comer,  
sin beber,  
sin hablar.  
O cuando hablamos es llorando,  
porque no hay energía para más.

¿Dónde se habrá ido la niñez de mi hijito?  
¿Cuándo la perdió?  
¿Será cuando vio a su tío caer por unas balas  
que le correspondían a su madre?

La eternidad del infierno  
ha pasado en frente,  
y cruzamos la frontera  
llegando al río.  
Atravesamos en balsas,  
yo muerta en vida  
con mi hijito en brazos.  
Nos damos por vencidos

en esa tierra de tinieblas  
y nos tiramos a sus pies —  
esas patrullas sin cara, sin rostro.  
Les decimos, susurrando,  
“tengo miedo.”

## II

Recuerdo los ojos negros  
de mi hermano,  
entreabiertos, glaseados,  
la sangre estallando sus entrañas,  
mi abuela gritando  
corre, niña, corre,  
eres tú la que quieren,  
es tu sexo,  
tu poder como mujer,  
tu manera de decirles *no*.

Oigo los disparos lejos todavía,  
y vuelvo a escuchar la voz de  
mi querida abuela:  
vete con tu niño antes  
que te maten, dice.

Y el presente rompe pesadillas  
que me trae aún más asaltos:  
percibo a un guerrero,  
llama en llamas...  
el choque me catapulta hasta la actualidad.

La policía fronteriza me pregunta,  
“¿Regresarás?”  
Y yo le digo, con sarcasmo,  
“Quiero ver mi patria,  
quiero oír los

troteos tormentosos,  
quiero ver las maras  
asaltando uno al otro,  
mata mata.  
Quiero ver mi hermano muerto,  
quiero ser luceros de mi abuela  
llora llora.  
Quiero ver la sangre deslumbrar  
lo verde en las montañas,  
las piedras de mis calles,  
el agua de los ríos,  
pero todo rojo rojo  
Sangre sangre  
Llora llora.”

*“Corre, niña, corre:  
eres tú la salvación.  
Llévate a tu hijo,  
líbralo de este horror”.*

Así es que oigo esa voz tan asustada,  
las palabras apocadas de mi abuela,  
pero no me quiero recordar...

¿Qué te pasa, chica?  
Pregunta el agente de mal manera.

Tengo miedo, Policía.  
Tengo miedo.

Pero igual, no me quiere escuchar.

III

Me agarra fuerte, recio,  
maltratándonos el hombre ICE.

Nos tumba, belicoso.  
Se cae de mi protección mi hijito tembloroso.  
Nos arrastra, ese monstruo,  
forzándonos hacia deslumbrantes luces:  
refulgentes, cegadoras,  
dando vueltas sobre un carro.  
Nos encarcela en el perrero  
con sirenas estridentes,  
con barrotes enrejados,  
¿ese furgón no es hecho para perros?

Pero no.

Entre ropas empapadas por el río congelado  
y el crítico engaño de un hueco reducido  
en que los vigilantes nos encierran,  
llegamos a una celda fría,  
insensible,  
aséptica, estéril:  
desinfectada de piedad total,  
y así nos hielan a los dos,  
abrazados uno al otro,  
mi hijito y yo.

El calor entre madre e hijo  
siempre es suficiente para quitar  
el frío inhumano de agresores asaltantes,  
pero no es suficiente para desarmar  
espíritus perversos,  
para darle miedo al más malvado.  
Me acurruco con mi hijo,  
y lloro lloro...

IV

Llegamos a nuestra celda

con otras madres, otros hijos indefensos.

Oh, las luces fluorescentes chillan  
día y noche.

Las comidas recuerdan asco.

No hay vida  
más allá.

Los guardias nos desprecian,  
tratan de humillarme  
como si fuera yo  
la que hubiera hecho el crimen,  
como si fuera yo  
la que hubiera herido  
a mi hermano  
en vez de la que corre  
por su vida...

Y presiento a mi hermano  
todo un hombre,  
un recuerdo  
con corbata de cielo azul,  
cerúleos susurros quietos  
vestido con traje de lino blanco,  
mientras camina él, despacio, inocente,  
con piernas de un roble eterno.

¿Pero será ésta  
la memoria de mi hijo,  
o es la de mi hermano vuelto en vida?

¿Será éste un sueño  
de aquí o de más allá?

V

Pasan meses en un sinfín



de agonías,  
una monotonía de días rutinarios  
donde nada pasa,  
porque todo es mentira,  
todo es artificial,  
todo es locura.  
Por fin nos toca hablar  
frente a un tipo comisario,  
oficial del maquiavélico ICE  
para explicar mi miedo.  
Este nos mira indiferente,  
me dice sin creermelo,  
¿Porque estás aquí, chiquilla?  
¿Vienes a robarnos la comida?

Y yo pienso en mi hermano,  
muerto sangre fría,  
un batallón de drogas  
despojando mis bellas tierras  
para llegar a este espacio libre,  
y yo pienso en la vegetación  
que ellos devastaron  
para hacer lo que arrasa  
hoy en día  
a mi país sagrado.  
Pienso en las tierras,  
en las vidas,  
en la sangre que me roban...  
en mi hijito,  
en mi hermano muerto,  
en las mujeres que nos violan,  
en mi pueblo amado,  
en mi patria destruida.

Y entonces veo a la *migra*,  
miro al funcionario,

ese hombre que trabaja para ICE,  
preguntándome con desdén  
si los pienso atracar,  
y les contesto, fría:  
Sí, ya que ustedes están aquí  
burlándose de mí,  
vengo justo para vindicarme  
yo de ustedes.

Vengo a que sufran admirando  
mi criminalidad,  
soportando esa culpa de comprender  
todo, todo mi dolor.

Fíjense:  
la mujer violada, su hermano muerto.  
Contemplan estas transgresiones,  
las amenazas, la miseria,  
las matanzas, la muerte en vida:  
ésto es mi país querido.

Y entonces, recuérdense de mí —  
detalle por detalle;  
reflexionen en lo que represento,  
y memoricen estas lágrimas de sangre  
cuando se rían de todo refugiado.

## REFUGEE

My soul into pieces,  
I see the barbed wire  
ripping metal against skin.  
Crying tears of blood,  
I hear gunshots in the vacuumed silence  
of the gang's Salva Maratrucha.  
I push him under the fence  
but my son cries.  
No matter:  
I do it because  
I love him.

We walk walk walk...  
hours and hours on the rotted roads  
of the Coyotes,  
days, weeks, a month, hand in hand:  
we go, sick —  
without eating,  
without drinking,  
without speaking.  
Or when we speak, we do so crying,  
because there is nothing left for more.

Where did my little son's childhood go?  
When did he lose it?  
Is it when he saw his uncle fall by a bullet  
meant for his mother?

The eternity of hell  
has bridged our path,  
and so we cross the border  
reaching the river.  
We travel in rafts;  
I am the walking dead  
with my little son in my arms.  
We give up

in that land of darkness  
as we throw ourselves at their feet —  
the faceless border patrol: no image, no semblance.

And I say, whispering,  
"I am afraid."

## II

I remember the black eyes  
of my brother,  
parted, glazed over,  
blood bursting his bowels,  
my grandmother screaming  
run, girl, run,  
It is you they want,  
it is your sex,  
your power as woman,  
your way of saying *no*.

Still I hear the distant gunfire  
as I listen to the voice of  
my grandmother once again:  
go with your child before  
they kill you, she says.

And the present shatters nightmares  
that produce even more assaults:  
I perceive a mercenary,  
burning flames...  
Shock catapults me to the present.

Border patrol interrogate me,  
"Will you return?"  
And I say, sarcastically:  
"I want to see my country,

I want to hear the  
raging shootouts,  
I want to see the *maras*  
assaulting one another,  
kill man kill.  
I want to see my dear dead brother,  
I want to be my grandmother's star of light  
crying crying.  
I want to see the blood bedazzle  
the green of my rugged mountains,  
the stones of my pebbled streets,  
the river water flowing,  
but all is red red  
blood blood  
Cry cry."

*"Run, girl, run:  
you are our only salvation.  
Take your son away,  
deliver him from oh, this horror."*

So I hear that panicked voice,  
my grandmother's dreaded words,  
but I want never to remember...

What is it, girl?  
Asks the agent, mean and foul.

I am afraid, Policeman Sir.  
I am afraid.

But still, he does *not* want to hear.

III

He grabs me strongly, with brute force,

bashing us, this bully ICE man.  
He knocks us down, thrashing, bellicose.  
My son falls from my protection,  
my trembling little boy.  
He drags us, this inhuman monster —  
forcing us toward the glaring lights:  
incandescent, blinding,  
their flare piercing round and round.  
He imprisons us in an old dogcatcher  
screeching sirens screaming,  
slatted with thick metal,  
Is this cop car made for dogs?

But no.

Cloaked in clothes drenched by an icy river  
and the key deception of the dwarfed hole  
to which the armed guards cage us,  
we arrive at a bleak, sterile prison:  
insensible, aseptic,  
sanitized of all damned godliness,  
they freeze us both  
while we embrace each other,  
my little boy and me.

The warmth of mother and son  
is always enough to take away  
the cold from smiting bastards,  
but not so when it comes to disarming  
perverse spirits,  
to striking fear in the most evil.  
I huddle closely with my son,  
crying crying...

IV

We arrive to our cell  
with other mothers, other defenseless children.

Oh, fluorescent lights wail  
both day and night.  
Meals reminisce disgust.  
There is no life  
beyond today.  
The guards despise us,  
try to humiliate me  
as if it were I  
who would have done the crime,  
as if it were I  
who would have hurt  
my brother  
instead of the one who's running  
for her life...

And I sense my brother  
all a man,  
a memory  
with blue sky tie,  
cerulean whispers  
dressed in bleached white linen.  
Then I watch him walk away  
slowly, innocently,  
with limbs of timeless oak.

But is this  
the memory of my son,  
or is this my brother come alive again?

Will this be a dream  
from here or from beyond?

V

We spend months in a cornucopia  
of agonies,  
a monotony of routine days  
where nothing happens,  
because everything is deception,  
everything is artificial,  
everything is mad.  
Finally comes the day when we talk  
to a commissioner,  
an official of that machiavellian ICE:  
we must explain our fear.  
This man looks at us indifferently,  
tells me, not believing,  
Why are you here, girl?  
Have you come to steal our food?

And I think of my dear brother,  
slaughtered, in cold blood,  
a battalion filled with drugs  
despoiling my sacred land,  
yet surfacing in this free expanse,  
and I think of the vegetation  
they demolished  
to undertake what ravages  
my country  
nowadays.  
I think of the land,  
of the lives,  
of the blood they steal from me...  
I think of my son,  
of my dear dead brother,  
of us — the women they have raped;  
I think of my beloved people,  
of my homeland — wrecked, destroyed.



And then I see the *migra*,  
I look toward the agent,  
those men who work for ICE,  
asking scornfully  
if I think I might assault them,  
so I tell them, bitterly:  
Yes, since you disdain  
to mock me,  
I come explicitly for vengeance.

I come so you can suffer  
delighting in my *criminality*,  
I come so that you understand  
that guilt, of oh, so much my pain.

Beware:  
the woman raped, her brother dead.

Contemplate oh these transgressions,  
the threats, the misery,  
the massacres, the death in life:  
this is my beloved country.

And then, remember me —  
detail by bloody detail;  
reflect on what it is I represent,  
and memorize these tears of blood  
when you laugh at every refugee.

## ABOUT MY DOG, THOUGH

I'm maybe six, and my dad is angry that I've forgotten, again, to feed my dog. Since I don't take care of it, he says he's going to kill it and goes to my parents' bedroom closet where he keeps his guns. Probably, I cry and beg that he not kill her, but I don't follow him outside. A few moments later, from the TV room at the rear of the house, I hear a gunshot in the backyard and somehow feel it in my chest. I could part the window curtains, but I'm afraid of what I might see. The back door opens and my father's bootheels thud as he crosses our small ranch house to put the gun away. Does he call out to me from their room, saying I have a mess to clean up in the backyard? I'm still crying, sobbing possibly, and I go through the front door, the long way around the house. When I turn the corner at the garage and open the fence gate, I find my dog pacing nervously in her pen.

Now, roughly the age my father was then, I've recognized in myself the latent impulse to teach my son hard lessons in hard ways, but up to this point, fortunately, for both me and him, it's remained dormant. Though I have an idea about what lesson my father was trying—imperfectly, *of course*—to impart, I've never asked him about it. I fear I've somehow fabricated the memory. He was—is—a great father and grandfather, a man who never let a day go by without letting me know he loved me, and I can't face his disappointment, for how could I ever think he'd do something like this? If you ever met him, I'm certain it'd seem as impossible to you as it does to me. Maybe a worse fear? That it isn't a false memory and in asking him about it, I'd be forcing him to remember something shameful. Either way, I'm not ready to put him through it, and even in this moment, I feel preemptively guilty for both the pain I'll cause him when he eventually reads this and for the grossly incomplete picture this essay paints of a man I love and admire.

Perhaps the impulse that led him to make me think he'd killed my dog isn't all that different from the one keeping me from asking him about it.

About my dog, though, we later gave her to our mailman.

ALBERT GOLDBARTH

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**FLYING OVER IOWA AT NIGHT**

a world of flashing neurons  
just to keep this single thought aloft

ALBERT GOLDBARTH

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## THE UNKNOWN

*Don't keep driving me meshuggah,  
shmendrick, or it's toodle-oo!*

--Irving Goldbarth

1.

1937. My father was twenty-three  
that year Amelia Earhart's Lockheed Electra E10  
revved its way across the airstrip at Lae  
in Papua New Guinea, headed for Howland Island  
2,500 Pacific miles away, and  
disappeared--as completely as if  
a slit had opened up in the sky  
and she entered it and it closed  
behind her, back to its usual flawless blue.

2.

While decades later my father  
--demonstrably, witnessed, empirically--disappeared

in the ground, in a casket...solid,  
walkable, mappable ground; I could lead you  
there today. We said the funerary prayers  
and tossed symbolic clots of soil on the coffin lid:  
there's no denying those hard *thunks*. But with Earhart  
it's all ticklish speculation (was she captured  
by the Japanese on occupied Saipan? or, bored  
with fame and marriage, did she fake her death?  
or did an ocean-connoitering flying saucer  
vacuum her in?), it's all compelling,  
legendary accessorizing (by now, the uninhabited island  
of Nikumaroro has offered up a partial female  
skeleton, a 1930s sextant box of the kind  
she would have carried, and the remains  
of a stylish cosmetics jar).

My father  
is dead, is verifiably dead; if we wanted,  
exhumably dead. But Earhart?--more alive than him  
for being an unsolved puzzle of death.

3.

In 575 more years, my father  
will be carbon-datable.

She's still here in the moment,  
waiting future resolution; she's more full of promise  
than most of my friends, who have settled by now  
into lives with futures so predictable  
--mortgage, retirement, health insurance claims--  
that a sphere of onyx could serve as a functional  
crystal ball.

The experts say  
that a language dies out every two weeks.  
*Every two weeks!*--a lullabye, a curse, a wow  
exclaimed from some orgasmic peak, a necessary word  
for the liminality where the shadow joins its body....  
Papua New Guinea, say the linguists, has 140  
endangered languages, alive still in their local cultural  
pockets of use, but braced against  
a final scattering wind. The language "Irving Goldbarth"  
was spoken in its heyday by only one person,  
and now it's as vanished from the planet  
as the dodo, shmageggie. Toodle-oo.

4.

The Papua New Guinea ropen is...what?  
A mythic flying lizard the indigenous peoples  
believe in, even though the ropen has never been unambiguously  
identified? Some say that it's really overexcited sightings  
of an atypically large species of the island's  
bioluminescent fruit bat. Some say hey, let's  
give a little credit to generations of local lore.  
It's...interstitial is what it is, akin  
to the maybeesque elements of quantum mechanics,  
here-but-not-here, here-but-there, akin  
to Yeti and Nessie in their famous  
indeterminacy

    --akin, that is, to Earhart  
in her murky hypothetical existence,  
on the sea floor like a creepy aquarium porcelain;  
or as a plume of atoms lingering over her castaway's shelter  
where the ball bearings were found, and the rusted zipper  
"possibly from a flight suit" ...such dramatic zeroes  
waiting to be filled in!

    --while my father  
and mother and auntie Hannah and Jeannemarie  
and Peggy Rabb and Robert King and the neighbor's baby  
are yesterday's obituaries, beyond redefinition.

-----

The truth is that the past is never real.  
We have our memories of it, sure,  
we have our Barnes and Noble history shelves  
with Pulitzer-winning studies, but  
it's all selective editorializing.  
We have pictures, we have excavated figurines  
the colors of weathered brick and bone, but those  
are only the centuries' way of turning





5.

“No man is an island,” John Donne says.  
I could agreeably accede to that--why argue  
my betters in public?--but today I’m saying no,  
we all *are*, each of us, an island; or at least  
we live on one.

There are times when the night wind  
crossing over the waters is a translation device  
--a certain kind of night wind, with the hints  
of earlier lexicons: tomato, chocolate, avocado  
from Nahuatl; from the Taino,  
hurricane, barbeque, hammock, tobacco, canoe;  
thousands of these refugees from oblivion  
aswarm in the air--and if I tune this  
carefully, and jockey the static and alien squawks  
enough, I can hear my father

saying a version  
of how everyone is going to work at age fifteen  
in the paint factory for a twelve-hour day  
and eventually grow fevered with lead poisoning; we’re all going  
to propose to Fannie (or be proposed to) one late afternoon  
in a rental canoe on the turbid lagoon at Humboldt Park  
in central Chicago, with the light so richly amber  
that we feel like a sediment of it, drifted lightly down  
to its bottom register, and partaking of its glow;  
we scrimp for our first car; we get boozily celebratory  
(shnockered, he’d say) when Albert is born;  
we take the blood-thinner faithfully every morning;  
we laugh, we pray, we connive, we weep, and  
then one day we find ourselves at the border,  
in our flying suit, and we lift off the edge into future  
so unknowable, it’s seaborne cloud.

ALYSE KNORR

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## HELLO

from the past, when the present  
was still the future—still a present

for a birthday you'd never had, from  
history itself, from when you had a name

and a face but not voice or breath,  
from a world as young as you once were:

age counted in good days when the sun  
made the lettuce grow big and green

and we were grateful, so grateful,  
for the world and the sun and the lettuce

in our bellies and the babies in our bellies  
and all their good good days to come

## CONTRIBUTOR NOTES

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**Jim Daniels'** recent poetry books include *Rowing Inland* and *Street Calligraphy*, 2017, and *The Middle Ages*, 2018. His next collection of short fiction, *The Perp Walk*, will be published by Michigan State University Press in 2019. He is the Thomas S. Baker University Professor of English at Carnegie Mellon.

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**Kim Frank's** work is published in *The Explorers Journal*, *Maptia*, *American Literary Review*, *Sidetracked Magazine for Adventure Travel*, *Shadowgraph*, *DuPont Registry*, *Blackbird Literary Journal*, *Colorado Review*, and in *SVPN Magazine* where she served as Editor from 2014-2017. A Fellow of the Explorers Club, Kim has recently completed two book projects, writing and editing, *Amaze* by SeaLegacy's Cristina Mittermeier and *Born to Ice* by National Geographic photographer, Paul Nicklen with teNeues Publishing.

**George Franklin's** most recent collection, *Traveling for No Good Reason*, won the Sheila-Na-Gig Editions competition and was published in 2018. A bilingual collection, *Among the Ruins / Entre las ruinas*, translated by Ximena Gómez was also published in 2018 by Katakana Editores, and his poems have appeared in various journals, including *The Threepenny Review*, *Salamander*, *Pedestal Magazine*, *Into the Void*, and *Cagibi*.

**Ximena Gómez** is a Colombian poet, psychologist, and translator, who now lives in Miami. Her poems have appeared in numerous Spanish-language journals, and bilingually in *Sheila-Na-Gig*, *Cigar City Journal*, and in *CAGIBI*, where one of her poems became a finalist for the 2018 Best of the Net award. A collection of her poems, *Habitación con moscas*, was published by Ediciones Torremozas (Madrid 2016). Her fiction has appeared in the *New Anthology of*

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**Aleš Šteger**, a Slovenian writer, has published seven books of poetry, three novels, and two books of essays. He received the 1998 Veronika Prize for the best Slovenian poetry book, the 1999 Petrarch Prize for young European authors, the 2007 Rožanc Award for the best Slovenian book of essays, and the 2016 International Bienek Prize. His work has been translated into over 15 languages, including Chinese, German, Czech, Croatian, Hungarian, and Spanish. He has published four books in English: *The Book of Things*, which won the 2011 Best Translated Book Award; *Berlin*; *Essential Baggage*; and the novel *Absolution*.

**Brian Henry** has published 11 books of poetry, most recently *Permanent State* (Ahsahta, 2019). His translation of Aleš Šteger's *The Book of Things* appeared from BOA Editions in 2010 and won the Best Translated Book Award and the Best Literary Translation into English Award from AATSEEL. He also has translated Tomaž Šalamun's *Woods and Chalices* and Aleš Debeljak's *Smugglers*. His translations have received numerous honors, including an NEA fellowship, a Howard Foundation grant, and a Slovenian Academy of Arts and Sciences grant.

**Zach Savich** is the author of six books of poetry, including *Daybed* (Black Ocean, 2018), and the memoir *Diving Makes the Water Deep* (Rescue Press, 2016). He directs the BFA Program in Creative Writing at the University of the Arts, in Philadelphia.

**Lance Larsen**, former poet laureate of Utah, is the author of five poetry collections, most recently *What the Body Knows* (Tampa 2018). He has received a number of awards, including a Pushcart Prize and fellowships from Ragdale, Sewanee, and the National Endowment for the Arts. His essays have made the Notables list six times in *Best American Essays*. He teaches at BYU, where he serves as department chair.

**Tom Paine** is a professor in the MFA program at the University of New Hampshire. His poetry is upcoming or published in *The Nation*, *The Moth Magazine* (Ireland), *Volt*, *Glasgow Review of Books*, *Blackbox Manifold* (Cambridge), *Fence*, *The Common*, *Epiphany*, *Green Mountain Review*, *Galway Review* (Ireland), *Forklift*, *Tinderbox*, *Hunger Mountain*, *Hotel Amerika*, *Tampa Review* and elsewhere. Stories have been published in *The New Yorker*, *Harper's*, *Zoetrope*, *Boston Review*, *The New England Review*, *The O. Henry Awards* and twice in the Pushcart Prize.

**Brigitte Byrd** grew up in France where she trained as a dancer before migrating to the United States. A transnational poet, she is the author of four books, including *Onomo*, *Flaubert!* (Ahsahta Press) forthcoming summer 2019. <http://www.brigittebyrd.com>

**Haines Eason** is a co-editor of *Bear Review*. His poems have appeared in numerous journals, including *Boston Review*, *New England Review*, *Pleiades* and elsewhere. A 2007 Ruth Lilly Fellowship finalist, he was a 2009 Chapbook Fellow with the Poetry Society of America. His winning chapbook is *A History of Waves*. Originally from Charlottesville, Virginia, he now lives with his wife Joni Lee and their son Jack in Lawrence, Kansas.

**Ai Aida** is a Japanese-born poet and playwright, who is currently an M.F.A. candidate and Creative Writing instructor at San Francisco State University. Her children's book *Öykü Denizi* (*The Sea of Stories*; wrote and illustrated) was published by National Geographic in 2013, and her work has appeared or is forthcoming in *New American Writing*, *Di-Vêrsé-City Anthology*, *Genre: Urban Arts*, *Fourteen Hills*, *Breathe Free Press*, among other publications. She is a winner of the Leonard Isaacson Award Browning Monologue Contest and The Austin International Poetry Festival 2017. Her plays have been seen in the San Francisco Bay Area.

**Katherine Davis** earned a Ph.D specializing in American poetry from Duke University. Her poems have appeared in *Weber*, *Stepping Stones*, *Wild Goose Review*, *Convergence*, *Sheila-Na-gig*, *The Oddville Press*, *Literary Heist*, and *Menacing Hedge*. She was nominated for a Pushcart Prize in 2018. After working as a writer and an editor around the U.S., she recently relocated to Alberta, Canada.

**Jen Karetnick** is the author of three full-length poetry collections, including *The Treasures That Prevail* (Whitepoint Press, September 2016), finalist for the 2017 Poetry Society of Virginia Book Prize, and four poetry chapbooks, including *Bud Break at Mango House*, which won the Portlandia Award in 2008. She is co-founder/co-editor of the daily online literary journal, *SWWIM Every Day* (@SWWIMmiami). See more at [jkaretnick.com](http://jkaretnick.com).

**Lori Horvitz'** personal essays have appeared in a variety of journals and anthologies including *Epiphany*, *Chattahoochee Review*, *Redivider*, *The Guardian*, *South Dakota Review*, *Southeast Review* and *Hotel Amerika*. Professor of English at UNC Asheville, Horvitz is the author of the memoir-essay collection, *The Girls of Usually* (Truman State UP).

**Saddiq Dzukogi** is a doctoral student at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln where he is an Othmer Fellow. He is the author of *Inside the Flower Room*, selected by Kwame Dawes and Chris Abani for the APBF New Generation African Poets Chapbook Series. His recent poems are forthcoming in *Kenyon Review*, *Gulf Coast*, *DIAGRAM*, *Spillway*, *Crab Orchard Review*, *Boxcar Poetry Review*, *Crannog Magazine* and elsewhere, while others have appeared in *Prairie Schooner*, *New Orleans Review*, *South Dakota Review*, *Best American Experimental Writing Series*, and *Verse Daily*. He was on the 2017 Brunel International African Poetry Prize shortlist and also a fellow of the Ebedi International Writers Residency'

**Michael Romary's** publications include *Spillway* (2018); *Spitball* (2014); *Barefoot Review* (2012); and *Passager* (2011). He has attended the Bread Loaf Writers' Conference and the *Kenyon Review* Writers' Workshop. In addition to doing research for authors, he was a university librarian at: Indiana University where he obtained his professional degree; Ohio State University; and the University of Maryland (UMBC). He did graduate work in English in Minnesota at St. Cloud State (University) where he wrote a creative thesis. He lives in Grand Marais, Michigan and Ada, Ohio with his wife Catherine Albrecht, a historian.

**S. Craig Renfroe Jr.** is an associate professor at Queens University of Charlotte. His work has appeared in *McSweeney's Internet Tendency*, *PANK*, *Hobart*, *Barrelhouse*, *Gravel*, and elsewhere. You can follow him on Twitter @SCraigRenfroeJr.

**Benjamin Balthaser** is a writer, activist, and educator who lives in Chicago. He is the author of *Anti-Imperialist Modernism* from University of Michigan Press and a collection of poetry, *Dedication*, from Partisan Press. His writing, critical and creative, has appeared in *Boston Review*, *Massachusetts Review*, *American Quarterly*, *Minnesota Review*, and elsewhere.

**Sarah Anne Strickley** is the author of *Fall Together* (Gold Wake Press, 2018). She's a recipient of a National Endowment for the Arts Creative Writing fellowship, an Ohio Arts grant, a Glenn Schaeffer Award from the International Institute of Modern Letters, the Copper Nickel Editors' Prize for Prose and other honors. She teaches creative writing and serves as faculty editor of *Miracle Monacle* at the University of Louisville. She lives in Kentucky with her husband, the writer Ian Stansel, and their daughters.

**Wendy Barker's** sixth collection, *One Blackbird at a Time*, received the John Ciardi Prize for Poetry and was published by BkMk Press in 2015. Her fourth chapbook, *From the Moon, Earth Is Blue*, was published by Wings Press in 2015. Her poems have appeared in numerous journals

and anthologies, including *The Best American Poetry 2013*. Recipient of NEA and Rockefeller fellowships among other awards, she teaches at the University of Texas at San Antonio.

**Brooke Matson's** second collection poetry, *In Accelerated Silence*, was selected by Mark Doty as winner of the Jake Adam York Prize and is forthcoming from Milkweed Editions in February 2020. Matson's poems have most recently appeared in *TAYO*, *Potomac Review*, and *Prairie Schooner*. She currently resides in Spokane, Washington.

**Grant Matthew Jenkins**, Associate Professor of English, teaches contemporary literature and creative writing at the University of Tulsa. He has published two books of poetry, *Joy of God and Other Series* (Blackbird, 2003), which was a finalist for the Winnow Press first book competition, and *Morphs* (Cracked Slab 2009) written in collaboration with Cheryl Pallant. Jenkins' novel, *Ivory Tower*, is forthcoming from Atmosphere Press.

**Bruce Cohen** has published five volumes of poetry. His most recent, *Imminent Disappearances, Impossible Numbers & Panoramic X-Rays*, was awarded the Green Rose Prize (New Issues Press). His poems have appeared in many literary periodicals including *The Alaska Quarterly Review*, *AGNI*, *The Gettysburg Review*, *The Harvard Review*, *The New Yorker*, *Ploughshares*, *Poetry*, and *The Southern Review*.

**Erica Bernheim** is the author of the poetry collection, *The Mimic Sea*, and of a chapbook, *Between the Room and the City*. She is currently Associate Professor of English at Florida Southern College, where she directs the creative writing program. Her writing has recently appeared or is forthcoming in *Denver Quarterly*, *DIAGRAM*, *The Missouri Review*, *The Kenyon Review*, and *New Reader Magazine*.

**Amanda Kabak** is the author of the novel *The Mathematics of Change* and has had stories published in *Tahoma Literary Review*, *Sequestrum*, *Midwestern Gothic*, *The Harpoon Review*, and other print and online periodicals. She has been awarded the *Lascaux Review* fiction award, the Al-Simāk award for fiction, the Betty Gabehart prize, issued by the Kentucky Women Writer's Conference, and multiple Pushcart Prize nominations. She holds an MFA from Pacific University.

**Jason Tandon** is the author of four collections of poetry, including *The Actual World* (Black Lawrence Press, 2019). His poems have appeared in *Ploughshares*, *Prairie Schooner*, *Barrow Street*, *Beloit Poetry Journal*, *Tar River Poetry*, and *Esquire*, among others. He is a Senior Lecturer in the College of Arts & Sciences Writing Program at Boston University.

**Elaine Terranova's** seventh poetry collection, *Perdido*, came out last year. She has new poems and prose in *Storm Cellar*, *Hotel Amerika*, and *Valley Voices*.

**Eduardo N. Dawson** has an M.A. in Hispanic Literatures and Cultures from University of Illinois at Chicago and M.A. in Special Education from Dominican University. He teaches Spanish at Northwest Missouri State University and is interested in African conceptions of group identity and subjectivity in colonial Andean civilizations.

**Rick Bursky's** most recent book, *I'm No Longer Troubled By The Extravagance*, is out from BOA Editions. His next book, *Where the Ocean Spills Its Grief*, is also forthcoming from BOA.

**Dana Roeser's** fourth book, *All Transparent Things Need Thundershirts*, won the Wilder Prize at Two Sylvias Press and will be published in September 2019. Her earlier books won the Juniper Prize and Morse Prize (twice). Recent poems appeared, or are forthcoming, in *Crazyhorse*, *Diode*, *Cimarron Review*, *Notre Dame Review*, *GMR Online*, and *Pushcart Prize XLIII* (2019).

**Paul Dickey** won the \$5,000 2015 Master Poet award from the Nebraska Arts Council. His first full-length poetry manuscript *They Say This is How Death Came Into the World* was

published by Mayapple Press in January, 2011. His poetry and flash have appeared in *Verse Daily*, *Sentence: A Journal of Prose Poetics*, *Southern Poetry Review*, *Potomac Review*, *Pleades*, *32Poems*, *Bellevue Literary Review*, and *Crab Orchard Review*, among other online and print publications. A second book, *Wires Over the Homeplace* was published by Pinyon Publishing in October, 2013.

**Janice Majewski** is a poet living in St. Louis. Her work is forthcoming in *Diagram* and *National Poetry Review* and can be found in *Hobart*, *Blackbird*, *Cincinnati Review*, and elsewhere. She holds an MFA from George Mason University and is the managing editor for *Guesthouse*.

**Adrian Koesters** is a novelist, poet, and nonfiction writer, whose most recent book, the novel, *Union Square*, was published in Fall of 2018 by Apprentice House Press. Her reviews have appeared in *Brevity* magazine, *Split Rock Review*, *Prairie Schooner*, and elsewhere. She has taught creative writing at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln and Creighton University, and lives in Omaha.

**Ana M. Fores Tamayo** advocates for marginalized refugee families from Mexico and Central America. She recently published in *Acentos Review*, *The Raving Press*, *Rigorous*, and *Fron//tera*, an international literary magazine from Spain.

**Casey Pycior** is the author of the short story collection, *The Spoils* (Switchgrass Books/NIU Press, 2017), and he was awarded the 2015 Charles Johnson Fiction Award at *Crab Orchard Review*. His work has appeared or is forthcoming in *Beloit Fiction Journal*, *Midwestern Gothic*, *Harpur Palate*, *BULL*, *Wigleaf*, *Yalobusha Review*, *The MacGuffin*, *Wisconsin Review*, and *Crab Orchard Review* among other places. He is currently an Assistant Professor of English at the University of Southern Indiana and serves as Fiction Editor of *Southern Indiana Review*.

**Albert Goldbarth** has been publishing books of poetry for nearly half a century, two of which have received the National Book Critics Circle Award. His latest is *The Now* from the University of Pittsburgh (November 2019). He lives in Wichita, Kansas. *Somebody* has to.

**Alyse Knorr** is an assistant professor of English at Regis University and co-editor of Switchback Books. She is the author of the poetry collections *Mega-City Redux*, *Copper Mother*, and *Annotated Glass*, as well as the non-fiction book *Super Mario Bros. 3* and the poetry chapbooks *Epithalamia* and *Alternates*. Her work has appeared in *Alaska Quarterly Review*, *Denver Quarterly*, *Columbia Poetry Review*, *The Greensboro Review*, and *ZZZZYVA*, among others.