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John Horton Conway (1937 – 2020)

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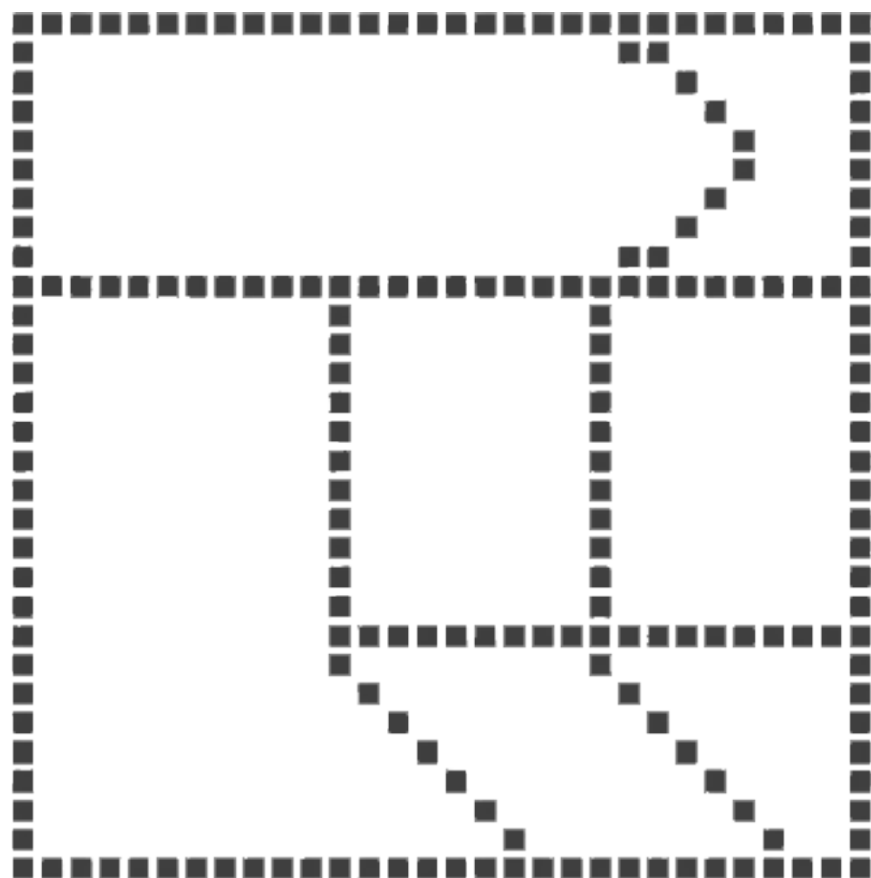
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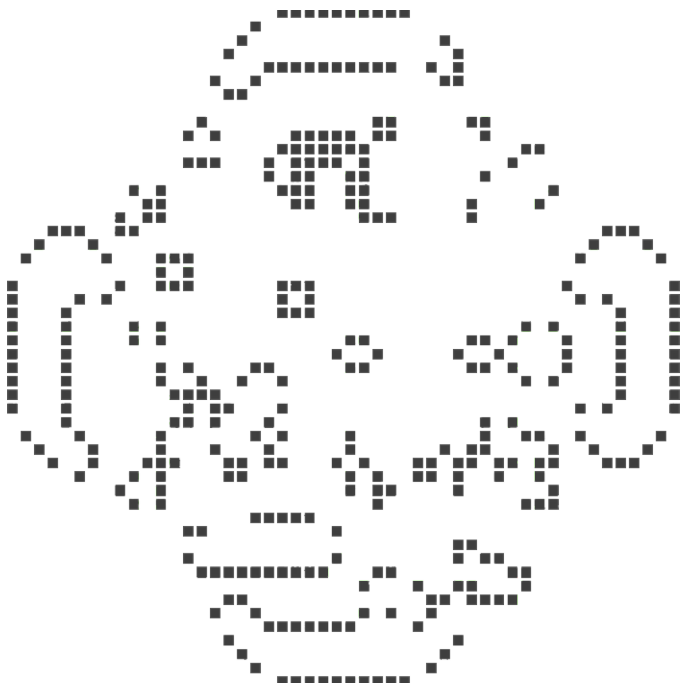
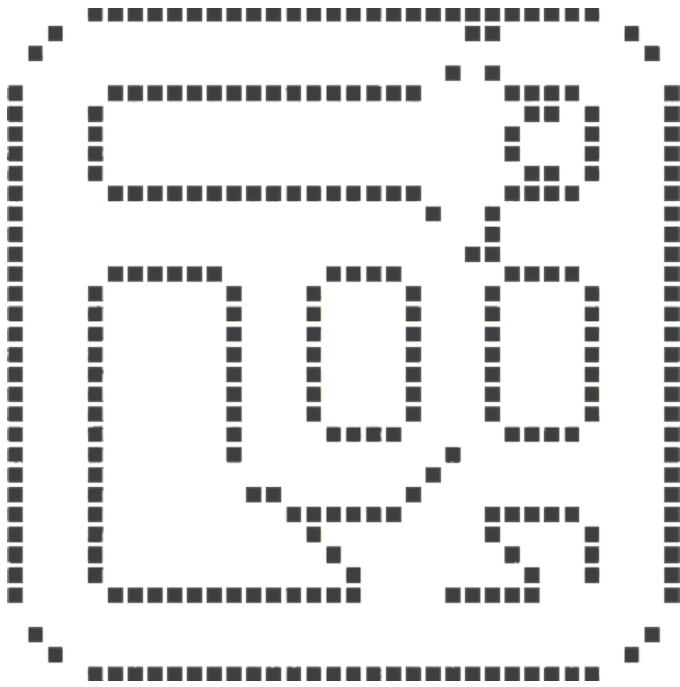
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OLIVER DE LA PAZ

DIASPORA SONNET 36

An expectant evening of snow like the breath after
a sentence. The opulent clean of a host city

shined like dishes run through the machine—
some days I am almost a man. The year's last

windfall of apples are shined and taken from my bag.
I hand picked each one, twisting them slightly

off branches. I am not from a cold country.
I am not immune to this spectacle of cityscape

and dream. The way the tin light suggests fidelity
to this small room also suggests I will move beyond

this cold America. And the apples on the sill reflect
a shepherded outcome from these windows

They bring little light, the apples. What happens then
after the frosts? Will there be polish from the waxen bite?

GEORGE KALAMARAS

THE ONLY *OTHER* HARMLESS GREAT THING

“Nature’s great masterpiece, an elephant; the onely harmlesse great thing.”

—John Donne

The only other harmless great thing, of course,
is a hound dog. Simply put, the moon tonight
through the screen comes in pieces, reaches me almost

in light years. Three or more ways of mouth, they say,
is the only possible way to leave *this* and *that*
and get at the *in-between*. I have been stuck there

for as long as light has been dark. As long
as the left hand has been tossed right
there at the roadside. The only other harmless

among us is a good hound dog and great Indiana
woods. Moons that shoulder-spill in piles
of watery salt. That break our voice in pieces. Always

the shoulder-spill across the left to ward off possible
bad luck. Try respelling certain words as well. Say
Georghe. Say *good sound lluck*. Say *the moan*

tonight is full and perfectly whitte. Say anything
to make it right. To leave *right* and *bad*, *left*
and *dark*, *up* and *possum-death-on-the-road*. *Indiana*

and *sound sleep*. I no longer. No longer have
the words. Harmless, they seem. At first. We stumble,
in our child bodies, coaxing the air. Naming the salt

this, the oaks *that*. We polecat. We moon-mouth.
We *Georghe* and we *moan*. Remember with me the lightning
bug that somehow slid slantwise into our mouth one August

night and lit the world from inside sycamore
veins in ways we only felt while trouncing the backwoods
with a dog. How could it possibly be

so happy, lolling in the grass, sweating through
its open tongue-sagging mouth? How could we
suddenly know the insides of that hound? The running

of sap in the oaks and elms? Mold spores rising
invisible in the stems of Roses of Sharon?
The harmless. The only *other* great thing. A hound dog

and my less-than-alone. Say things backwards.
Say them slant. Call her *Emille from Amherst*. Call yourself
the bearded light of a grae-harred baard. Find something

harmless in seeing the lightning bug in my throat
as lightening. My mouth as a *mud dauber*. The dead possum
as *I-only-hope-it's-not-me-snuffed-at-the-roadside*. There are many words

in pieces. Dogs in my many broken mouth. Too much
marsupial road-kill I can barely bear
to pass. Many years keeping my tongue

in slats. In *this* and *that*. In iron combs. Years I have travelled the in-
between, from *here to here*, *possum pouch* to *dark-spark-of-the-mouth*,
needing most a good hound dog and its large harmless great heart.

LARA EGGER

KISS ME AND YOU WILL SEE HOW IMPORTANT YOU ARE

I needed a waltz in a minefield but I also needed you.
We should have gone foraging for planets together.
An egg-shaped moon is cracking the sky's skin

and I think we should talk—how *silence*
in Braille feels like tracing my thumb
across the waking rows of your teeth,

or how touching a thought, even an uneven one,
is a bad idea because they bruise so easily.
Ailing is the star, ailing the start, auditioning

for another cameo. The hungry dog wails
through the long-legged afternoon.
What shape is made when yes tumbles

from the mouth of my volcano?
Why does what we want fail so differently
from what we know we should do?

Night's slow seduction is bound to pale.
We are still not dancing.
I'll give you these plug-in geraniums but save me

a fistful too. Here are my hieroglyphs:
untangle them. There goes a nebula
blown in half. When you read your biography,

know my hands are sorry for misquoting you.
This is the scene in the movie
where the cowgirl lassos her own heart.

That love remains a hypothesis,
a leaped-over landmine. Our shadows
prove light still fevers in the dark.

LARA EGGER

MUTUAL DISAMBIGUATION

I wish my antimatter had grown up
to be normal matter. It's like feeling sad

for the faceted Swarovski crystal
on the Disney bracelet at the Dollar Store.

It's like drinking the Cherry Pucker anyway.
Why does the past always introduce itself

after it's already too late?—Hello, Lapsed Ovaries;
Nice To Meet You, Ex-Señor Right.

Every day my heart lines up
to ride the zip line between rapture and pain.

What if you wore a tartan kilt
and black Doc Marten boots? What if sex was more

than a means of making weather? One ex-husband,
no kids. I can guess what you're thinking.

This could be the part where I unspool my antiparticles
and crash them into yours anyway.

Have you ever witnessed the exact moment the moon
punches a hole in the forgery of night?

GABRIEL PALACIOS

THE SPANISH TRAIL MOTEL

A geode some apostle in the glittered
dresser drawer book
broke into two women
doing rope tricks
on a mirror stage with coiled leads of old Elvis microphones
Wurlitzer
A Wurlitzer makes time travel
whooshes & you're close enough to get your skull
scraped out by the metal
on metal of arriving limousines
Tonic bubbles send up fire
You take what anyone will serve you
on a spatula
of this ballroom at the stroke of teargas
in to go bags
up to helpless color Zeniths bolted down dreamless
blue overlooking scaffolds panoramic
What a scam love operates to think
we treat it like the vaguely
Christmas music delousing us
You hear a singer with a beard of ice
cough blood New Year's morning on a pier
& think of those two women
think you have a pass to sing along their harbor slang
of unspeakable origin

CINDY SAVETT

AGING

Shaded once with vigor, time paints my
skin thick gray — its cunning rushes into
the hazy congregation of crumbled
blooms, it arrests my
raspy voice.

I wrap longing's banner above my cause —

to seize infancy's leafy instant by the span,
stretch of my intent

to whirl among the night's
advances eager for my youth (Rachel's
rival) to prevail

and strike the writhing that wrenches me toward
my grave, that fixes fate to breed
in the sound of my feet.

I am an imposter,
I thrust forward my bounty
of delusions.

JEFFREY BEAN

MY YARD

My yard is electric salad, sizzling
with cricket-sparks, smothered
in bird-shit dressing. My yard rocks
Medusa hair the color of spider blood.

My yard is a lazy, stoned teenager, it floats
in circles around my street on a bicycle,
giggling to itself. Each night it plays
sloppy bass guitar until the neighbors
wake up and call the cops, who stomp
on its face, dumbfounded
in the noise, no one to arrest.

My yard *doth teach the torches to burn*,
it changes air into robins, blue jays, squirrels,
it breathes helicopter seeds, squeezes pumpkins
into fistfuls of white butterflies, hurls them
into every kitchen window on my block.

My yard can slow dance, it can slam dance,
it knows Swahili, English, Aramaic, French
and how to babble like a German baby.

My yard is German, baby. It cops a feel
from every officer it meets, memorizes
their contours, builds sculptures
of their asses out of wind.

My yard is hot. My yard is blind
and it invented braille. It has a minor role
on a new sitcom called *Larry's Place*, it drinks
its face off every night just to fall asleep.

In fact it is always drunk—on worm-shit, violets,
witchgrass, English daisies, and Wild Turkey straight
bourbon whiskey. My yard peeks into every mailbox,

it reads the notes in the pockets of all who pass
beside it. But don't call it out, because

my yard is a big scary motherfucker
with a tattoo of a garage opening into
another garage and another and so on
until it comes to a final garage, which holds
a diamond with my yard's mother's face on it.

Every hawk, rock, pop can, and freak
is welcome in my yard. Even you. Go ahead, lie
down, disappear in its fingers. My yard
is growing, always, even at night when
you forget about it, and when it sprouts
its wet eyes, it watches you.

ROBERT FANNING

MAN IN A GALAXY

Corpse snug around his neck, Man enters
the lobby of his favorite diner, but still Corpse's
dangling legs swing out and bonk a glass

bubble gum dispenser, toppling it over.
Goddamn it, Cage, you dumb dead fuck,
Man hisses, as a Big Bang rainbow spills

across the tiles. Corpse crushing him
like a lead scarf, Man imagines himself a child
lost in this shattered universe of treats, the gumballs

a shiny, clustered nebulae. What a beautiful deluge
this moment might be—but an old sorrow wells up fast,
a dark river rising, filling the rusty canal of his heart.

As Man wobbles to his knees to clean his mess,
Corpse's hand drags across this galaxy: his stiff fingers
sweeping between each sweet planet, each glinting globe.

ROBERT FANNING

CHILD CARRIER

Man squeezes into a packed elevator
clutching Corpse to his chest. At a tug

on his trousers, Man looks down
and so does Corpse, who is always

looking down. A girl with pig-tails smiles,
eyeing Corpse with a familiarity

that chills Man. Between floors, she reaches up,
her soft hand gliding over

the ragged terrain of Corpse's knuckles.
Seeing Man flinch, she smiles,

lifting her own blanketed, lanky bundle.
Don't worry, she whispers.

Man smiles through a grimace,
knowing what's inside.

IDEOLOGY

Diane reads at an online forum that there are authentic tacos for sale uptown, and we agree they're worth a try with the sweet corn we bought earlier at the farmer's market. We'd seen the collection of vintage Porsches parked uptown for the annual Porsche show but not the taco truck. We're curious—how authentic can these tacos be? What does authentic even mean when it comes to tacos? So I back the VW out of the driveway and not more than three houses down I spot two girls, middle schoolers, behind a table selling lemonade for 50 cents. That's something, I think, I haven't seen kids selling lemonade in years. The price has gone up a little. Then I wonder where they got the idea—if their parents or teachers encouraged them because they thought this would be a good way to teach them about business or because the girls were restless and this got them out of the house. Then it occurs to me that it could be something altogether more sinister. Sinister is on my mind because all day we've had news about a rich and famous serial rapist found dead in his jail cell. As I pass the girls in my car I wonder if their parents have put them out in the yard on the busiest street in the city—there's no place to park; this doesn't bode well for sales—to be something like ornaments, visual evidence of their family values while god knows what they are really up to inside. Maybe it's not that bad, okay. Maybe this is something their parents did as children on a hot day, or something they've seen in a sentimental movie. Maybe they think setting up a lemonade stand is somehow American, part of another, gentler time in our nation's history, something to be remembered or started up again if we are to make America great again. I am not tempted to stop. Diane is boiling the sweet corn.

MUSICOLOGY

Are we going to play or pose? the legend asks. Ever sideways as a front man, reluctant to give straight answers to dumb questions, he's angry at the crowd; he'd rather not be photographed. He wants to be playing music, and who can blame him? He's played so long. If he stumbles backwards over a monitor while berating his audience nobody thinks he will break a hip, though there's little that's Chaplinesque about him anymore. He plays the Great American Songbook as if it's soon to be *his* book, songs for music lessons and old timer shows. I don't recognize this one, some say of his own songs, or worse, they do and don't like them played that way. He knows there's nothing deader than last year's beat. He plays, and while some people like it more want to be able to say they were there to hear him play. So he poses, but only for so long. Soon he will be with the other legends—Monk percussive and sparse, offbeat; Jerry with the baroque arpeggios and Jimi burning his guitar; Aretha and Marvin who could melt an audience in any key —and the not so famous too, exploded stars already almost forgotten: Cherry Wainer with her popcorn eyes, Lefty Dizz bending the blues on his slide. Love is love not fade away. Right.

CAROL POTTER

THE REQUISITE BAD HAIR

The jig was up. We were in a room
with lots of windows. A rag-tag boy army
came down over the adjacent roof
and crashed into the room. Like in the movies.

When the army boys came in,
I was afraid they'd get me but I

disguised myself as one of the locals just
hanging out, poking through boxes

in the basement. Casual-like with no idea
how I was going to get home from there.

I picked a photo out of one of the boxes
and was sure it was a photo of my mother

with a boy child I had never seen.
Lately I had been wondering about a

brother. If there had been one, and where
he might have gone. The rag-tag boys gathered

around me and we all tried to figure it out.
They were like Peter Pan's boys. Or Robin

Hood's, but they'd been up to no-good.
One picked up the photo of my mother and started

weeping. It turns out there's a weep in
just about anybody, but it wasn't his mother.

Just the idea of it started him up. I pretended
I didn't see anything. Tried on a few shirts

out of one of the boxes. Disguised myself
as the lead singer in a grunge band none of us

had heard of. I had the clothes for it, some
piercings in the right places. The requisite

bad hair. They were a good audience.
Where they went to next I'm not sure,

but that boy soldier took the photo of my mother
with him when he left. I went on with the grunge

thing for a few years after but there comes a time
in a person's life when enough is enough.

NEW SEMESTER DIARY

8/16

After lunch, the Finance Office guy who decides how much I have to cut from my budget every semester asks, “How can we be more impactful at a micro-level in the Chicago ecosystem?”

8/23

An hour into my first Dean’s Council meeting of the year, the Dean announces that 85% of the 43% of our students who responded to last year’s Student Satisfaction Survey agreed that

8/28

I am still working on the cover for my book of poet interviews. Essay Press is publishing later this fall, just finished the last round of proofreading. I emailed editor Andy Fitch: “If my manuscript were a color, it’d be a mix of yellow and blue. The initial questions I ask each poet are a basic yellow that shades into cobalt blue the more we talk.” I’m not sure what I meant—he asked a simple question (“What kind of cover design do you want?”) and instead of really answering, I buzzed off into: “The most delicious pollen flowers are down the next block, in the uncut baseball field. While you’re there, keep your eyes open for discarded fruit in the garbage barrels or the dumpster.”

8/30

Today I decided that the \$600 the department budgeted for a software licensing fee that we no longer need for our student computer lab could instead be applied to half of a PC or one-third of a Mac, and I was grateful, even though we still don't have enough money to cover all faculty whose computers are so old they'll break down this year.

9/1

The day after I fell asleep watching *The Lazarus Effect*, a 2015 zombie film, the night of my father's birthday (he would've been 95), and the day after I sent 67 emails between 8:30 in the morning and 4:30, including gems like "Corrected Master List of Documents Sent to Liberal Arts and Sciences Curriculum Committee," "Creative Writing Department Academic Photo Guide Attached," "Intake Form and Memorandum of Understanding for 2017 Prague Study Abroad," "Open House Presentation Template," "Reminder: Budget Meeting Tomorrow with the Dean," "Mandatory Attendance Reporting—Please Read," "Materials for Clery Act Report Attached," "Not the Appendices for Prague 2017 Memorandum of Understanding," "Updating Bulletin Boards," "Request for Transcripts," "Dietary Restrictions for Academic Leadership Reception," "Fall 2016 Admissions & Registration Reports," and "Sept. 9 or Oct. 7—Immediate Response Needed."

TONY TRIGILIO

DATING WHILE MARRIED

A shame the moon was wasted on a scene like this,
walking home in bare-tree Sunday night silence
hunchbacked against the chill. I stopped for a beer
at Bruno's, today's football highlights playing
on a small flat-screen mounted above the register.
I took the long route home, to the alley where
a broken ComEd pole teeters over our parking lot.
Nerve-wracking, it's going to fall any day now,
a Richard Serra sculpture one slight tremor away
from crushing our neighbors' cars. Our black steel

patio sling chair so cold it stung when I sat.
The stars floated like random numbers.
It would've been the best night for a cigarette if
I still smoked. I stared at the church bell tower across
the alley until I convinced myself it was where
Jimmy Stewart cured his acrophobia in *Vertigo*.
Looked up every time I heard the sandpaper crackle
of cars making slow turns into the alley, expecting
one would be yours. They seemed to move with extra
care, clumsy, as if scared to tell me what I'm not
ready to hear. This feeling is like plastic—we produce
more and more every day without knowing what to do
with it. Oceans hide it, acres beneath the surface.
Fish get stuck and, powerless, drift with the tides.

ROUNABOUT SCRUTINY

you spell your vision in unspoiled
white silence shadows disappear
you turn my steering wheel to explore
curves in time you know
something has to change when you
move time is jealous waiting for
you to stop for a moment space
is more generous immutable as time
carries you through when you
return you know you haven't left yet
you were gone three thousand years
even if life takes a lifetime you know
you will remember this or something
like this a story or a different
story when you wake up you
find yourself in a different room
you find your brain in a different head
you find your body in a different time
you must redream your dreams
backwards you will remember
floating in and out of you like a
thought or death full of half-longings
spilled in a vision and spoiled in
silence

CINDY'S ALBINO SKUNK

Norfolk, Virginia, 1982

The night Eddie Jenkins took his wife to see Cindy's albino skunk he was drunk. It was Christmastime, so Kate didn't get off work at the Navy Exchange until eight o'clock. After she had been standing on tip-toe on the top step leading to the Employee's Entrance for fifteen minutes with no sign of their car, she had to acknowledge the fact that he was late. And as she smiled and said, "No, thank you. My husband's picking me up," to the people who offered her a ride to Portsmouth, she also had to face the possibility that Eddie would not come for her at all, that out of either forgetfulness or spite, he would not come. By nine o'clock, her nose was running, her fingers were red and stiff, and she prayed that the base police wouldn't find her huddled on the top step and do something to her.

She heard a car enter the lot but didn't turn her head to look because she recognized the sound of it. It was their car, a white Mazda 626 with deluxe black interior. Even though she knew how warm the inside of the car would be, the sight of it gave her a sick feeling in the pit of her stomach. When Eddie first saw the car on a television commercial and asked Kate to go with him to Castle Cars in Norfolk to check it out, she insisted they couldn't afford it, and there was no way she was signing any more loan papers, but it was his money, so in the end she had to give in. They couldn't afford it.

When Kate walked to the passenger's side of the car, Eddie was crawling over the gearshift to sit there himself. She hesitantly stuck her head inside the car, and he greeted her with a huge grin that threw his face completely out of alignment.

"You drive," he said. "I'm drunk."

She got into the car, slammed the door, and sat looking at her husband. He was wearing his usual off-duty outfit of neatly-pressed jeans, plaid shirt open at the neck, and dark brown leather jacket. His hair was every which way, cowlick in front, cowlick in back. When his hair was clean, it swept down over his forehead in a thick, slanted bang.

"I'm drunk," he said. "I've been drinking tequila all day. All day. Tequila." He threw his head back. *José Cuérvo, you are a friend of mine.*

"Right, Eddie," she said. She took his keys out of the ignition.

"I was drinking with Martinez and Anders and Harrington and Martinez. All them spicks is named Martinez. Oh yeah, Roberts was there for a while, too, but he had to go do his laundry."

Kate bounced Eddie's keys on her palm.

"We were at The Cradock," he said.

"You don't have to explain anything to me, Eddie." She dropped his keys onto the console, dug hers out of her purse, and after a few seconds of jabbing, found the ignition.

“We played Pac Man,” he said.

“All *right*, Eddie. Jesus.” She started the car, but didn't let out the clutch. “I suppose you want to go home now?”

His grin broadened. “Of course, of course, let's go home, home sweet home. Drive away!” He made a grand gesture, awkwardly slamming his hand into the windshield. Kate winced but stopped herself from asking him if he was all right. His face looked as if it had frozen into that foolish grin, the way everyone's mother always warned it would. As she pulled away from the Exchange, Kate wondered whether Eddie had chipped his left front tooth as a child or whether it had grown in oddly-shaped like that. She'd never asked him about it.

She drove the car out the back exit of the parking lot and muttered, “Damn, I always forget,” when she saw the No Left Turn sign at the intersection. Six years of driving on base, just about every day when the *Kennedy* was in port, and the sign still took her by surprise. She looked quickly behind her, put the car in reverse, and backed it, transmission whining, the five hundred yards to the parking lot. She entered the lot still in reverse, threw the car in first without coming to a complete stop, and roared onto the street and through the main gate onto Hampton Boulevard.

As they flashed by a bus stop, Eddie hollered, “Look, Katie! Squids!” She glanced over at them. Tall, young, hunched in their short leather jackets. “Boy, am I glad I'm not a squid,” Eddie said. “They'd never get a car like this. I'm gonna get a Mercedes. Did I tell you that already?”

“Probably,” Kate said.

He shook his head. “Nope, no, I didn't 'cause I just now thought of it. A Mercedes. Two-seater. I'll let you drive it sometimes. I always have fun when you drive fast because I never know if you're gonna hit something or roll the car or get arrested.”

“I'm so pleased you're entertained, Eddie.” She speeded up for the railroad tracks by the D&S Piers and shifted into fifth gear.

“You're cute,” Eddie said. He unzipped his jacket. “It's hot in here, isn't it hot in here? I think we should find a cop to outrun. I did that once, you know. I never told you about it. It was right after we bought this car, on the Virginia Beach Expressway.”

Kate rolled her window halfway down and smiled when she saw Eddie jump, shuddering, at the rush of cold, dank air. “And you bitched about my speeding ticket,” she said.

“Of course I did.” He leaned his face over her arm. “Cause you got caught. You're supposed to know enough not to get caught.”

She elbowed him, but gently. “I'm trying to drive.”

“See, that's the problem, Katie. You're too nervous. You wouldn't be nearly so dangerous if you wasn't nervous. Now your father, he's not

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nervous, but, oh, is he a bad driver. Remember when he hit that tractor-trailer rig in Enosburg and totaled his Pinto? I bet you anything he was talking to himself. I just bet you anything he was. He talks to himself all the time. I've always liked your father. He's a good man, a truly good man."

"I know he is," Kate said, stopping for a red light. She listened to the engine idle. It sounded like her heartbeat, low and fast.

"Oh, Kate," Eddie said. "You're so cute. You know that? You're cute." He chucked her under the chin.

"Quit it, Eddie!"

He pinched her cheek as the light turned green. "Dimples, let me see your dimples."

"Eddie, God damn it, I'm driving!"

He leapt back against the door. "Okay, Katie, okay, don't get vicious." He lit a Kool and nodded his head. "Seriously, though. Seriously. I do think you're cute. I've always thought you were beautiful, ever since the first time I really noticed you. You were standing in the park wearing your red dress. What ever happened to that red dress? You don't wear it anymore. It had yellow flowers on it, and you stood over me because I was sleeping under a tree and the noon bell was ringing."

She frowned and changed lanes.

"Remember?" Eddie said. "You didn't want me to be late for English class, so you woke me. Remember?"

She ran the red light at the corner of Princess Ann. "Remember what?"

"Your pretty red dress. I want to know what happened to your pretty red dress I liked so much."

"How the hell should I know? What red dress? For God's sake, Eddie, will you shut up!"

She jammed the brakes, momentarily blinded by the bright light of the Midtown Tunnel. Eddie threw both hands against the dashboard to keep from hitting the windshield. "Jesus."

Kate fumbled on the console for her purse. "I've got to get a quarter for the tunnel."

"No, no, I've got it."

She rolled her window down the rest of the way, stopped the car, and stuck her palm out at Eddie without looking at him. He screamed, "Two points!" The quarter sailed over her head and out the window.

He was beyond laughter. He sucked air into his lungs with a squealing sound. "Did it go in?"

"No, it didn't go in, you idiot." She opened the door, stepped out of the car, and looked under the basket for the coin. Traffic was backing up behind her, even at this time of night. Two more seconds and they would start honking. Three more seconds and they would start cursing.

Five more seconds and the force of their anger would shove her into the car, shove the car through the plaza. Sirens would shriek and men would yell at her as they ran after the rolling car.

She reached into the car and hauled out her purse. She found a quarter and paid the toll. A guard wearing a green uniform and cap strolled up to her. He was bigger and younger than most.

“Something wrong, miss? Did you lose your quarter?”

“No, no, everything’s fine. I paid the toll, all set, I’m going now.”

She got into the car and started it, but the guard stood with his hand on her door. He nodded at Eddie writhing on the seat. “You’d better get him home.”

“Yes. Yes, I know. I’m trying to.”

Eddie continued to laugh, all the way down London Boulevard, while Kate drove eighty miles an hour with the window down, clutching the steering wheel with both hands. When she turned onto Elm Avenue, Eddie had caught his breath enough to speak.

“Let’s have some music,” he said. “We need to liven up. *Think I’ll roll another number for the road.* No, wait, I can’t sing that; that’s a smoking song. I need a drinking song. What’s a drinking song, Katie, huh? Sing me a drinking song.”

“I don’t know any drinking songs, and even if I did, I don’t feel like singing.”

“Oh, come on, Katydid, sing to me.”

Instead, she cranked on the radio, which kept him quiet for a couple of minutes. Opposite the Bluejacket Inn he started giggling. She wanted to ignore him — it would be best if she ignored him — but he was staring at her. “Now what?”

“You look like your brother. You do. You never used to, but the older you get, the more you look like him. It’s the jaw. You both have the same jaw. And the mouth, of course.”

Kate clenched the jaw that was now the same as her brother’s. Eddie was still staring at her, at her hands on the wheel. As clearly as if she still had it on, Kate could see how worn her wedding band was from sliding around on her finger for the last eight years. She still had the unconscious habit of touching her thumb to her finger to make sure the ring was safe. Usually Eddie would stop wearing his ring first, so she knew she had to stop wearing hers as well. This time she hadn’t waited for him. She’d taken it off because she couldn’t stand to look at it anymore.

She stopped for another light. Only two more blocks until their turn.

“What do you think of me?” Eddie said.

“Please, Eddie.”

“No, I really want to know. What do you honestly think of me? I want you to tell me.” He leaned his face over her arm, cocking his head

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like a puppy hearing a whistle for the first time. “Hmm?”

She looked out the window. Lee Hall Apartments on the left. Cockroaches, and the people living there did their Christmas shopping at Rose's across the street, buying cheap powder and cologne packaged together in cellophane. Seven-Eleven on the right. Convenience, a dollar-ten for a pack of cigarettes at two in the morning, trying to pretend that the men loitering outside by the pay phone, who had tattoos or missing teeth but smelled nice, weren't looking at her. Light still red.

Eddie cocked his head the other way. “Hmm?” he repeated. She thought for a moment. “I think you're such an asshole it's funny.”

He straightened in his seat, fumbling with the zipper of his jacket.

At home Kate hung up Eddie's jacket and her coat and put her purse in the bedroom. She stood in the middle of the living room, watching Eddie. He was squeaking a loose board in the floor, shifting his weight back and forth, back and forth. “I'm going to fix this,” he said.

“You do that, Eddie.” She folded her arms tight across her body and didn't take her eyes off Eddie as he squeaked the board. What she really wanted to do was take a bath, but she didn't dare leave him alone. She kept telling herself that she was being silly and stupid, but in addition to not daring to leave him alone, she didn't want to leave him alone. She wanted to stay with him.

It took her a couple of seconds to realize that the squeaking had stopped. “Everything's spinning,” Eddie said. “I better sit down.”

He carefully lowered himself onto the couch. Kate sat next to him. His eyes closed. She leaned closer to him to listen to his breathing, thinking he had fallen asleep. “Boo!” he yelled, laughing at her shriek. He grasped her upper arm, though he didn't squeeze, just wrapped his hand around it because his fingers went around it so easily. “Scared you, didn't I, baby?”

“You're full of it, all right.”

He let go of her arm to light a cigarette, and she moved away from him. He dropped the pack and lighter back into his pocket.

“Do you know why I got drunk today?” he said, blowing the smoke out in a thin stream.

“No, why did you get drunk today?”

“I got drunk so I could talk to you.”

“Why, Eddie? I don't understand. Why? You don't need to be drunk to talk to me.” She laid her hand on his shoulder without realizing it, not even aware of the smooth skin, hard muscle, and underlying bone beneath her fingers. “Am I that intimidating?”

“Yes. I've always been afraid of you.”

She had no answer to that except “why?” It seemed all she ever

said to him was “why?” and he never gave her any answers — just a look on his face as if she'd done something unforgivable. He stirred next to her, leaning forward to stub out his cigarette in the ashtray. Her hand fell from his shoulder.

“You're cute,” he said.

She didn't look at him. “Eddie, if you say that one time I'm going to scream.” She turned to him. “Maybe I'll scream anyway. It might do me some good.”

“I'm sorry. I didn't mean to make you mad. I was just trying to tell you how pretty you are. You really are pretty. You're even prettier now than when we got married.” He laid his hand on the back of her neck. “I wish you'd kept your hair. I loved it.”

When he had asked her, “Why did you cut it? I thought you liked wearing your hair long,” she'd answered, “I do, but it got too hard to take care of. It got so that just brushing it made me cry.” There was no sense now in telling him the real reason she had cut her hair. He had said, “I love your hair,” the same way he said, “I'll never leave you,” but the first time he left her and then came back, as capricious as a sun shower, she waited until he went to Guantanamo Bay for training exercises and, figuring she had nothing to lose, had all her hair cut off. She had been wanting to get rid of at least some of it anyway, and now she had nothing to lose.

“Oh, no!” Eddie said, leaping off the couch. “I forgot to feed the skunk.”

“What skunk? What are you talking about?”

“Cindy's skunk.” Kate didn't react. “She's the one you think I'm having an affair with.” He paused, and she knew he was waiting for her to say something. She didn't. “I promised her I'd feed it while she's out of town for Christmas. I should have gone over there this morning.”

“So go.”

“The skunk's an albino. Have you ever seen an albino skunk, Katie?”

“No.”

“Don't you want to?”

“What in God's name for?” Kate went into the kitchen and started emptying the dish rack. “I don't want to see any skunk, albino or otherwise.”

After a few moments Eddie followed her into the kitchen. “Come with me. You'll get a kick out of him. He's real nifty.”

“Nifty.”

“Yeah. Come on, it'll be fun.”

He had his jacket on and was holding hers out to her. She took it from him and started for the front hallway to hang it up. She stopped by the bookcase and put the jacket on. She had to go. She couldn't let him drive.

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Cindy's house was only ten minutes away, and as Kate drove, Eddie chattered about the skunk: he was an albino, Cindy had gotten him from the Tidewater Seed and Feed for \$49.95, he was barricaded in the spare room because he chewed on the furniture and crapped on the floor, his name was Alexander. Kate showed no reaction to any of this; she could have been driving by herself.

"Turn left here," Eddie said. "That's her driveway."

Inside, he flipped a light on, strode through the living room into the kitchen, flipped on another light, and opened one of the cupboards. Kate stood just inside the front door on the mat. She slowly looked around her, shifted her weight, but didn't let either foot leave the island of the mat. The room was neat and clean, the furniture from Grand Showrooms or maybe Haynes. A tabletop tree decorated with red balls and tinsel sat on top of the big console television. Kate refused to look at the worn spot on the center cushion of the couch, but there was nothing else to look at, except for the large framed photograph of a young woman which hung above the couch. Cindy, presumably. Cindy wasn't pretty — her features were much too coarse — but she was very young, just out of her teens, and smiling.

Eddie entered the room with a mess of something brown in a big metal bowl. "You don't have to just stand there," he said. "Come on in."

She lifted one foot off the mat and placed it on the bare floor. When she didn't sink, she took two more steps and stood still again.

"Come on, Kate. I'm going to feed him now. Looks disgusting, don't it? He likes it, though." He grasped the knob of a closed door and whispered over his shoulder, "You'll be able to see him now. Look." Kate saw boxes, a chair, and a dark pile. "I don't see anything," she said, also whispering.

"There, over in the corner. See him now?"

A lump sat by the dark pile. Eddie set the metal bowl down just inside the door. "Watch this," he said. "I'm going to let him out."

"Do you think you should?"

"It's all right. He likes to run. It's good exercise for him."

Eddie opened the door wide. He put his arm around Kate's shoulders and drew her back. "You'd better watch it. If you don't stand out of the way, he'll head straight for your ankles."

A light-colored ball of fur--not a true albino, but the color of taffy--flashed by their feet and was gone. Kate got a better look at him when he skittered out of the kitchen. Claws scrabbling on the floor, he careened into the living room, running with his legs tucked under him and out, like a rabbit. His yellow teeth were sharp and bared, his tiny eyes desperate as he ran.

"Look at him Katie. Isn't he great? Don't you like him? What do

you think of him?”

She ducked from under his arm and retreated to the mat. “He gives me the creeps, Eddie. If he weren’t so furry, he’d look just like a rat.”

Eddie crossed the room to stand in front of her. “Why won’t you laugh, Katie?” He lifted his hand from his side, then dropped it. “Just be happy, please be happy.”

“Sure, Eddie. Just for you I’ll be happy.” She smiled.

Eddie was smiling again, giggling now. “Watch this, Katie.” He intercepted the line of the skunk’s run and chased him in a tight circle around the room, hollering, “Go, Alexander, go! Go, boy, go! Look, Katie, look!” scarcely able to get the words out for laughing. He chased Alexander round and round and round the room. A skittering, desperate, taffy-colored blur round and round and round. Kate watched them closely for the moment when they would both turn into butter, like Little Black Sambo’s tiger.

Eddie chased the skunk into its room and slammed the door.

“Hoo-whee,” he said, bent over with his hands on his knees.

“That was some fun. I’m having fun tonight. I feel good, real good.” He snapped all the lights off. “Let’s go home now.”

Eddie turned on the radio in the car and sang along softly. Kate kept her driving within the speed limit. She drove with only one hand on the steering wheel, the way she usually did, plucking at her hair with the other. Eddie reached out and turned down the radio.

“I’ve always wanted to be like you,” he said.

She snorted. “Hah.”

“No, no, I don’t mean look like you or act like you or want the same things you want. I mean I’ve always wanted to be strong like you. Always. Strong like you.”

Kate put her other hand on the steering wheel and looked over at him. “I never set out to be strong,” she said. “I don’t much like it.”

“I know you don’t.” He turned the radio back up.

When they got home, Kate hung up Eddie’s jacket and dropped her coat and purse on the couch. Sitting on the arm of the couch, she passed both hands through her hair and yawned. Eddie stood in the middle of the floor, where she had taken his jacket off him. He crouched, then lay down, not even cradling his head in his arms, his face flat on the floor. She sat watching him from the couch. After five minutes she got up and went to him. She bent over him and touched his shoulder. “Aren’t you going to get up and go to bed, Eddie?”

“I don’t feel good,” he said.

Kate watched him for a few more minutes, neither of them moving, both breathing in the same shallow rhythm. She finally just went to bed. It took all her strength to leave Eddie lying on the floor.

ANGIE MACRI

EVERYTHING WILL BE SPLENDID: THE GRANDMOTHER WILL NOT DRINK HABITUALLY

and they will walk through the Jewel Box, leftover
from a depression, glass that resists the fracture of hail. Out
into canna lilies, carmine, flames, like the ones she once set
out in her garden, her words won't cross and she will
remember her garden and what is clear will be water,
as the glass of the box in its green frame. This third time

will be a charm. She will sleep with the shell of the moon
above her, not away the best part of the day. She will
wear old rhinestones, necklace and matching brooch
loud as cannas, the rhizome set in full sunlight as a wish,
and she will smile into a story as a child into a jewel box,
a reflecting pool echoing her face. She won't break.

JARED HARÉL

DOLLS CAN'T TALK

(for N.)

Now that you know your dolls can't talk
and never will no matter how badly

you beg them to, you play with them still
on the living-room floor, those half-

clad starlets — pixies and trolls — a whole
militia of rigid mutes, but do so with a hint

of concession in your tone, a tolerance
akin to hearing the same story a third

or fourth time, or pretending not to notice
some unpleasant smell. It's an adult skill,

this capacity not to shame, but allow
another the dignity to exist. When did you

learn this? All morning, as you animate
plush and plastic — voice giving voice

beyond the crush of static — I've tried to stay
near you, but not interfere—

grading essays or now writing this poem.
Your fingers trace their smug, ageless

faces. How long have you suspected
we might be alone?

NAIAD

She washed up hard. Naked, salted. Unbearable dry-out days passed on the exposed shore. Minutes chiseled in rock and the sun took her for a bone it could bleach with impunity. She bore all the signs of having been wracked by a dauntless lover who after all these years still did not know her human name, nor the shame

she had to carry back each and every time—her name was Bethany.

Yeah, yeah. Walk it back, drama queen. Her eyes felt hot off the Xerox. She should have been at work, to state the obvious. Her employee parking spot in the bank's lot had been revoked six months ago, and now she had to feed the meter, just like the old pensioners who stabbed blindly with nickels and dimes, clutching withdrawal slips they'd filled out in shaky script at home.

She crept down the hall to the bathroom and found that the tub was full. Old water, no ions. Not a single water lily. Stale, city fluoride smell, and her arm goose-pimpled plunging in to pull the plug from the sexual hole. Down went her soul, glass eye whirlpool. She was on her knees anyway and she grabbed the side of the tub with both hands to pray. Her sister, a nurse, had once treated her to a day spa, where a sign in the starlit bathroom said, *Someday is made up of a thousand nows*.

Same deal, one day at a time.

She felt her daughter and her daughter's friends shake the skinny porch that clung to the house like it was forever trying to get inside. As far as she could tell they were the kind of stoners who thought vodka was for old pervs on park benches and sloppy single moms like her.

"Hi Jewel," she called weakly. She just wanted to let her daughter know she was home.

The house was the size of a doormat.

The kids came laughing inside.

Javier wiped his boots like a dog covering up its business, all the while giving her the eye: in a house full of women, he didn't know who had the power, her or Jewel. A couple of girls at work were into Tarot, and there were these roles, crone and maiden, virgin and whore.

"Hey Ms. Lopresti," said Merk, long-boned, Serbian, with semi-detached ears.

“Would you tell your friends it’s Bethany?” she faced Jewel. “Do you think I like being reminded of my ex-mother-in-law?”

Jewel shook her head sadly. “Gramma’s a honey.”

“Gramma’s the balls,” said Javier, heading up the stairs. She heard the bathroom door close.

“We have mad homework,” said Jewel.

For months before her sweet sixteen, Jewel had claimed that she “wasn’t that into materialism these days.” What days? “Sor-ry,” said Jewel. And then without Bethany’s knowledge, foreknowledge would be the word, the OG Ms. Lopresti had taken Jewel to get a tattoo. On her still-soft ankle, a roman-numeral-looking NAIAD.

Bethany had been forced to ask, “What does it mean?”

She could hear them upstairs now, but not the words.

She unplugged the microwave and lathered up its nicotine-stained interior. She got in around the private parts of the stove where there was gunk like earwax. At the back of the cupboard she found a mix, let’s hear it for Duncan Hines, the knife

came out clean — cool before cutting into squares.

Like all drunks she was intuitive, fragile as air, and as if she’d summoned Jewel, she heard her daughter’s mocking voice in the hall again, “Someone’s been baking, who could it be.”

The Serbian tree-climber snickered.

Bethany waited where she was.

She moved along the wall.

Stealthy, almost seeping—until Javier jumped, his hand to his heart—

“Double chocolate?” she pleaded.

“Aw, Ms. Lopresti.”

Merk twitched his tail.

“Sorry, Mom,” lied Jewel.

She gathered her coat and her bag and rushed from the house, underlying causes, broken inside. Jewel had no respect for her, no one did, with the exception of her son, Kieran, stationed in Germany, training to become a SEAL. Jewel with her entourage of water sprites, as if fairies could keep her from harm—wasn't that what a brother was for?

She ground down the street with the emergency brake on. A couple hundred dollars right there. Merko-Croatian and Have-A-Nice-Day were definitely gay. She wasn't prejudiced, but in Jewel's bedroom? Are you all from school? she'd asked, and they'd nodded solemnly. Did you meet in your classes? What's the problem, Jewel? Am I not allowed to have a normal conversation with your friends?

She pulled into the high school parking lot. Schools were like churches, after school. She would just sit here for a while, an island in the middle of a thousand nows. She watched a couple of ladies walking solitary laps around the track and her heart went out to them. A loose arrow of Canada geese, yakking as they flew by—

Kieran had come out with the ROTC on this very track, and she used to drive over at cocktail hour and watch them drill, their baby-fat asses and role-play frowns. Suddenly she needed to be near people, and she felt her mind swarm.

Yes, she did, she needed to walk into a bar. She put her hands on the steering wheel, squeezed hard, and passed the feeling by. Another way to think about it, said her sister the nurse, *recovery* was Mary's preferred term, was rerouting your impulses. Bethany pictured a hatch of demons strutting across the rocks where the minutes were carved, the long nails of their claws leaving exhaust burns. She pictured the route to the roller rink, that birthday party Jewel had been invited to when she was in seventh grade, it was too much to bear—

and she burst out of the car and pushed through the low gate onto the track as if she were supposed to start roller skating right now. Demon impulses hurled themselves at her empty car.

Her second time around, a little band of retards was dogged out in front of her. Not that she would say that word out loud. Some kind of last-ditch, graduation-requirement PE? Lopsided girls in stripper attire

drifted onto the field. Two big doughboys, their coarse hair pulled up in dry buns, blocked her view, but she found she didn't mind. The all-purpose gym teacher had a hard potbelly that drove his legs apart. "How many laps you show us today, Coby?" he called.

The white kid picked up his waddle speed.

"How bout you, son?"

The lightskinned kid produced a minor jog. She used to hate it when other men son'd Kieran. "Don't do this to me, girls!" the gym teacher called, and the boys' shoulders sagged. Now Kieran was ripped, with a recon.

The boys were slower than she was and after a few minutes she passed them with a loopy smile. You need men in your life again, Bethany.

"I'm a print out my résumé third period tomorrow," said the white boy.

"Take that shit round Home Depot, bro, stack shit all day," said the light-skinned one. "Ten buck a hour, starting pay."

What was Kieran doing right now, in Germany?

"You gotta be bettering yourself, you know."

The boys walked in silence, and she slowed a little so she wouldn't leave them behind.

"Or get me a Beamer, fi-hunned."

The white boy whistled. "Sell that shit for sixteen hunned, what you do."

She was dying to turn around. See if she could make them smile.

"Get me a Satday Sunday car, like a toy, bro, you pull up on them bitches be like *yeeeah*." Shy laughter now. "Be like slidin in anywhere—"

She wanted to laugh with them. The sky was driving the sun down. She couldn't stay out here forever. One by one the other ladies packed it in.

*

Pulling up to the curb at home she felt something tick and she knew she was going to pour a drink the minute she got in there. Okay, she said reasonably. Un-tick. She waited.

I got this, she said. The ticking got louder, propulsive.

If she stayed in the car. If she pulled out again and drove around the block. If she got on the highway and kept her foot on the gas, all the way up to Mary in Medway who had said any time, I will not judge you, Bethany Lopresti, just get yourself

to my door—

She bit back tears. Sit tight. The roller rink. A thirteenth birthday party, Jewel all up in the visor mirror every five seconds, kissy lips, wetting down her brows, tightening her hair.

“You look fine,” said Bethany.

“You too,” said Jewel.

“Whose birthday?”

“No one’s.” She was back up in the mirror. “Harper’s.”

Bethany cackled.

“You don’t know her.” Jewel zoomed in on the little scar above her eyebrow.

Rain had started splintering against the windshield. Everyone was saying it was February in May, the road felt goeey with oil, and the wipers might as well have been nail clippers for how well they were doing the job. Bethany missed the exit and had to improvise, backtracking on the surface streets, leftover houses between six-lane strips of car lots and superstores. They’d already been in the car for an hour.

“I don’t understand how you always get lost,” said Jewel.

Just then a bag lady shuffling a shopping cart started across a broad intersection on green. Bethany hit the brakes and everything went eerily silent—even time. The car slid sideways into the turn lane before bouncing against the curb. She was as sober as the grave.

A heap of crap in the cart, was that an ironing board? A garbage bag of redeemables, a fishing pole. “You crazy bitch!” shouted Bethany, banging the dash, now flooded with feeling. “Did you see that?” she turned to Jewel.

The parking lot of the roller rink was nonsensical, unnavigable. It wasn’t clear that the featureless metal building had an entrance at all. She gave up and stopped the car in the middle of nowhere.

“You don’t have to pick me up,” said Jewel.

“How so?” And even as she said it, she saw her daughter watch her begin to dissolve into the just-gifted evening, the imagined pour —

“It’s a sleepover,” said Jewel.

She was still sitting in the car. She put her hand on the latch and it was as smooth as glass. If she spent the night in the car. If she called Mary, now. She grabbed her bag from the passenger-side floor and felt inside. No phone. One mini, single-serve. She pulled it out but it was empty, so help me Lord. Just then Jewel and the boys spilled outside, laughing and bumping into one another down the porch stairs. Jewel saw the car and feigned surprise, paused, waved. There never would have been a roller rink were it not for the fact that it was Jewel, not Kieran, who was the little smarty after all, and so, seventh grade, Bethany had angled her into private school, even though what was good enough for Bethany was good enough for Jewel.

The female head was vain, like only a man should be, and she talked down like a man would, too, like Bethany was Jewel’s dumb handler. No one from that school went into the Service, and Kieran felt slighted by his own sister. When he told her he was going to Germany, over the phone, he said, “Say bye to Little Miss Harvard for me.”

The first time Bethany was invited to a private school house for dinner she was so nervous she pulled up blotto, and by the time she’d crisscrossed the soft lawn in search of the front door she’d lost a heel. She rang the bell with the other heel in hand. With the Higher Power on her side, it was the wrong house and no one was home, and she sobered enough in the country air to realize she’d better hustle on out of there.

But soon the finished basements where the kids were flushed the minute they got there all seemed the same. “Red or white, Jewel’s Mom?” Buffet style, plastic plates and utensils—these parties weren’t the real parties; she

wasn't that easy to fool. She'd end up in the kitchen, clearing her throat as she approached,

"Anything I can do in here?"

The hostess would whip around.

Once, fending her off, one of the many Maddies' moms exclaimed, "You and Jewel seem so close! I'm lucky if I get an eye-roll!"

"Something smells good," Bethany had soldiered on.

But the Maddie-mom dropped her voice, already congratulating herself on her own charm, "Tell me the secret," she said, all the while bending at the butt as if she had to go pee.

They were always laying their traps, and for some reason Bethany always gave in. But she had tried to speak exceedingly thoughtfully now, "Maybe because it's just me and her?"

"Are you single?"

"My son Kieran—"

"I didn't know you had an older child!"

"Yeah." What the hell? "Yeah, I do."

It was the Monday morning after the roller rink, and the sleepover, when Bethany got the call. She was permitted to have her phone on at work because of Kieran, even though at that point he was just out in Texas — not officially permitted, but a son in the Service? she heard herself say, newly dignified.

"Bethany? Everything's fine."

Ms. Lopresti to you? But how had she known it was the head of school? What was she supposed to say? "Good to know."

"I just wanted to check in toward the end of the year. And to convey how much we love Jewel around here."

Yeah, yeah.

“It’s been such a privilege, really so great getting to know her.” The head of school went around with unwashed, unconsidered hair, and Bethany had not yet been able to work out why this insulted her. “And I also wanted to reach out *specifically*, because of course I’m a working mom too—”

Say what?

“And with Miss Jewel right *here*—”

Come again?

“I’m just wondering if she’d shared with you some recent *choices* she made.”

I’m sorry? “I’m actually at work right now?”

“I’m aware it’s Monday,” said the head of school coolly.

Alisha and Pat were staring at her. Alisha made a throat-cutting gesture for her to get off the phone. Bethany lowered her voice

and closed her eyes. “Put my daughter on.”

“Hey, Mom,” said Jewel.

“Are you okay?”

“Absolutely. No worries.”

“Great,” said Bethany. “I’ll see you after school,” and she dropped the phone straight into the trash.

Jewel came skulking home, and toppled carelessly across Bethany’s bed on her back in her greasy jeans, making Bethany the imposter in her own room. “What’s going on?”

“That stain is nasty,” said Jewel.

Bethany looked up at the dark yellow shoreline. She’d been watching it for changes every night for years.

“In case you were wondering what the most disgusting word in the English language is,” said Jewel.

“No.”

“Soiled.”

Or the stain looked like a cherub. Bethany crossed her arms. “Why did the head of school call me today?” Stole? Cheated? Lied? Part of her wanted her daughter to show off. To show that private school—

“I lost my virginity,” said Jewel.

A fat cherub blowing a horn.

“What did you say?”

But Jewel had closed her eyes. Her face was very pale. And before she could check herself, Bethany had cried out, “It happened to me in seventh grade, too!”

The moment the words were gone, Bethany knew what a fool mistake she’d made. She had never betrayed herself in such a way before. Never imposed her weird, thirsty secrets on her daughter. But she’d disqualified herself now, as both confessor and protector, and even before Jewel spoke again, Bethany understood that she was as alone now as if she’d been cast to the bottom of the sea.

Harper, Julia, Maddie, and Jewel had all gotten into the car with the high school boys. “I lost my virginity at camp last summer,” whispered Maddie, pressed against the door, in Jewel’s ear. “I fucking bled like a pig.” She rolled her eyes.

And later, back at Harper’s in the silty, early morning hours, the four of them splayed across two queen beds in Harper’s bedroom, Jewel—as if she were delivering to them her creamiest pearl—spoke up, “Well, guess who’s not a virgin anymore.”

There was total silence.

Then the silence began to tilt, and gather momentum

as it spilled toward Jewel. Right before it hit her she looked for Maddie across the room. “I was kidding?” said Maddie, from very far away.

“So,” Jewel finished, taking her eyes off the ceiling now, off the water stain, and turning toward Bethany with a mix of triumph and disdain, “I actually don’t care if it happened to you, too.”

JOHN A. NIEVES

JEFFERSON WATCHES HIS TOMBSTONE NOWHERE (NEAR HIS GRAVE)

And maybe separation needed to be river-wide plus
a half-continent yawn. Someone

cast you watching
the memorial you made yourself miles from the husk
resting in your native soil. On a bench as if nothing
about your body were

ever flesh. Sitting like standing
never knew your bones like this ground never knew
your bones—only your pen. How you signed the purchase
like a river on the land, like the scree around the great
mountains out passed the horizon. You bought

space
and now you get it, between you and your commission,
between pillow and bed, between history and protest. On
a bench, your life

flickers between myth and debate
like a moth between two too-close street lamps or
floor and breath of a face lost to syncope. This is
the displacement. This is how

we always remember: a text
in shifting context like the miles between home
and here. I once saw a homeless man sitting next
to you making coat-hanger stars

to sell for food
or drink, using your lap to show us his sky.

DOUG RAMSPECK

SISTER RIDES HER STICK HORSE TOWARD ETERNITY

here is my back to carry you the driveway says
& sister says *ride ride* & sister says *we will ride*
into the sea & swim & in her mind the horse

is a raft & in her mind her dead father
is the sea & the sea says *i am the eye of the sky*
& sister rides the stick horse to the mailbox

then back & the mailbox says *your hooves*
are tall ladders & mother watches out the window
& mother thinks *my daughter is a storm surge*

my daughter is an orbit & the stick horse says
the glassy sky is a country & the grass beside
the driveway says *i am the earth's fingertips*

& the girl clomps the same foot forward again & again
& the horse is a bird burrowing into clouds
& the horse says *all motion is a ghost*

DOUG RAMSPECK

SNOW PROPHECY

mother imagines that the snowflakes falling
behind the house are her children

& the snow hardening into a carapace of skin
is a kind of long division the years

existing in the backs of her teeth in a throb
in her molars in some raw patch of her tongue

or maybe her children are the sticky eggs
of stars embedded in the sky's mud

or the trees in the woods shed not only
their leaves but their bark stripped to bare bone

& when she was younger she imagined that a body
growing inside another body might come to seem

like prophecy & she imagined something holy
in the blood of giving birth something sacrificial

but now she wonders if her sons & her daughter
are more like smoke or mist, not a plinth

but constructed out of visions and winter snows
& she suspects that the years are something

you might catch in an outstretched palm
& the filial devotion of the sky

makes of her breaths living formations
all around her

DOUG RAMSPECK

THE MOON OPENS & CLOSES ITS GATES

& the lateness of the hour is a thin gauze & the moon a dead horse
above the river & the boys' dead father is chimney smoke passing
over the slanted roofs & the roofs are stooped shoulders
& at the funeral the scalpels of wind tear across the land
& the boys that night feel a twitch in their knees as they sleep
a loose fold of a dream flapping its hinge & they conjure
a kind of breath that knows to huddle quietly in doorways
that whistles faintly like the distant flares of cigarettes
& the boys pretend that their father is that crow that oars out
above the fields black sails above the snow's belly
& they dream of dark tongues of the way stations of the dead
some beautiful murky language beneath the shaved skull of moon
& when they wake they study the ponderous slowness of the river

DOUG RAMSPECK

YELLOWJACKET DREAMS

the boys see them building a nest in the backyard
flying in and out of an opening of dirt
some fissure in the fabric of everything
& in the dense heat of noon the yellowjackets swarm
into a strange vortex as ancient
as the cuneiform writing of deer prints the boys
see sometimes in the soft mud beside the creek
& in their dreams the boys stand amid
the levitating wasps with their eyes closed
& arms spread & the creatures land one by one
on their skin & sting them on their necks & hands
& faces & backs & then the boys murder
the yellowjackets one by one swatting them
& stomping them with their shoes & then the boys
crawl into that opening of dirt & listen
for the frenetic hum of their own bodies

JUAN J. MORALES

THE LIGHTHOUSE DREAM

My father is at the top of the lighthouse. He's having a heart attack, and I must save him. In my mind, where my waking hovers, a voice is telling me, "We've already lost him." I'm crying, in denial, and rushing up the coiling staircase. I unlock the large door by turning a huge, round wheel to depressurize the room. The door hisses wide open to where my dad rests in a hospital bed, in the shadow of the giant lens and lantern. I pick him up and he pulls his arms around my neck. I hold him as the top of the lighthouse opens to a street full of people, reaching out hands to carry him to safety. I keep bawling and refuse their help, insisting I bring my father up and onto the peaceful street by myself. Once he is protected, the voice wakes me back into the night.

JUAN J. MORALES

THE VEIL, OR, DAD CHECKS IN WITH ANOTHER DREAM

We are walking into a massive building, in a giant city swimming in shapes and traffic. Outside, my father leans against a pillar with a full smile. I slap him on his shoulder, and my partner jokes with him, “Uh-oh, looks like this stranger wants to give us trouble.” My dad shoots back, “No, no, pretty lady. I came by to make sure everyone is okay.” We tell him everything is fine and pause together to take in the metropolis, with all of its fog, light, and shadow, bustling somewhere on that line where the living and the dead have no problem meeting.

MAW SHEIN WIN

CONTAINERS

what about the spitting cobra

why do I repeat myself

does self storage matter

are your teeth still here

who do you hold

is this a panic attack

when do the cormorants arrive

where does guilt come from

do you see the calathea

what disturbs me

I witness each body through the missing bricks

MAW SHEIN WIN

CINEMA

the auteur pops pain pills
hybrid, saga, biopic

adrift in the head room
nat escape, sirens, deep background

close up of beehive in a cemetery
fugue state, reverse shot, tomb fur

montage of lace handcuffs & cardboard boots
choking ocean

PHLOGISTON

Lecter and Graham, the final romance, the living epact,
the *End of a Hollywood Bedtime Story*, sentiment
unabashed. Could I I would I can't—no longer. Enough
It's will traintrack. Just yesterday a kyote through the woods
to the river followed me, both lachrymosing, gossip
of the swans and geese 'snownested ceasing. No doubt it'd die
was dying. At the bourne of grange and wilds it stopped and as I left
I knew just like a cut knows blood duplicity again.
Of course this doesn't matter not so much. So barely held—
blood. Drapetomania. To take stock a fool's errant. X-
maslights will do tonight. Somehow the lastdrag's better than
the first. Right as the waves of sleep arrive I tell myself
that this is paradise...My neighbor died the other day (trope).
Now broodmares, rapt shades in snowstorm, line the fence, depositors warmed
by her burning barn, 'snowhushed spit of flakes, a crepitate
machine around which bends the voiding, candle all but flame
the neighing shades (the wax we think we move through), terminus
a quo ad quem (they float like archetypes, seen peripheral
seams, Goya's mares not there there, regardant horrors
unregarded probabilities), bonfire voicing
the nulling our singularity. Returnticket...Now
and then I know cantwrite: kaleidoscopic eglomise—
the myth of life. Phlogist Postscript: I feel so human.

PINK ELEPHANT

When she emerged from the bathroom, her wet hair wrapped in a towel, he was sitting at the kitchenette table, an open beer in front of him. He'd undone his tie and unbuttoned his shirt but still wore his tuxedo jacket.

"What gives?" she said. She stood behind him and rested her hands on his shoulders. "Opening gifts without me?"

"Just the envelopes," he said. "Want to make sure we're good."

"For tomorrow? I thought we were doing the Thousand Islands because that was a trip we knew we could afford."

"Plus you wanted to go there. You said you did." He tore the corner off an envelope and ripped across the top with his thumb. "I think we'll be good."

She moved her hands from his shoulders to the back of his chair. "I didn't know there was a question."

He reached into the envelope, took a quick look at the check he plucked from the card, and added it to the small pile at his elbow. "I think we'll be good," he said.

She crossed the kitchen to the refrigerator, opened it to scan its contents, and then let the door swing closed.

"Have a beer with me, wife," he said. "Should be one more there."

"I guess I don't want to," she said. "If I do I'll have to wake up to pee."

"Mind if I have it then?"

She re-opened the refrigerator, grabbed the can, and rested it beside him on the table. "All yours," she said.

He sat back in his chair and took her hand. "It's just I won't be able to sleep if I don't know for sure," he said.

"You're just trying to take care of things," she said.

"That's what I'm trying to do," he said.

"I guess we'll have to stop off at the bank tomorrow on our way out of town to deposit the checks?" She moved to the sink and picked up the dish sponge, sniffed it, and dropped it in the trash. "Also, we need to remember to take out this garbage before we leave."

"That'll be me," he said. "I'll remember."

She wiped her fingers on her bathrobe. "It'll take a couple days for the checks to clear, right?"

"I guess that's true," he said. He sat back in his chair, opened the fresh beer and took a sip. "Anyways, worst case, we'll be good with the overdraft protection. I'm pretty sure we have that."

~

“And then you said, ‘Don’t remember this, OK? Don’t remember me counting money on our wedding night.’”

“But, of course, you did remember,” he said. “Of all the things you could remember. You forget all sorts of good things, but you remember this. Says more about you than me.”

“Don’t think of a pink elephant,” she said. “By telling me not to remember it you insured I would.”

“That’s not how that works,” he said.

“You don’t get to choose,” she said. “You don’t get to choose what you remember and what you don’t. Not consciously. Memory just happens. And you certainly don’t get to choose for other people. You don’t get to choose for me. Anyways, you’re making this into something it’s not. We’re in our new house reminiscing about our old dump of an apartment. Your harvesting our families’ and friends’ checks as you guzzle beer on our wedding night is something I remember about the place. I’m not saying it’s a bad memory necessarily. Not a bad memory in a bad way. I’m saying look how far we’ve come.”

“I remember things, too, you know,” he said. “I probably remember some things that you’d have me not remember.”

“This isn’t a good game,” she said. “This is where we go wrong a lot of the time when we go wrong. Making things into other things.” She stood from her lawn chair, picked up their highball glasses, and dumped the wet ice cubes into the lawn off the patio.

“Let’s stop then,” he said.

“Thank you,” she said.

He walked over to the grill and put his hand on the closed lid. “This thing really holds the heat. I can’t believe they left it behind. It’s in pretty good shape, right? It really radiates. It’s been like forty-five minutes since I turned it off, and it’s still warm enough that we could do marshmallows if we wanted,” he said. “Come here and feel it.”

“Maybe their new house has a fancy patio with one of those built-in ones,” she said. “Anyways, we don’t have marshmallows.”

“You’re assuming where they’re going is a step up, but who knows? It doesn’t always work like that. People get laid off. They get divorced. They accumulate gambling debts. They get sick. Maybe they’re downsizing out of necessity. Maybe they’re on a downward trajectory.”

“They’ll be fine,” she said, “just so long as they have the overdraft protection.”

“Are you kidding me?” he said. “You said you wanted to stop.”

“I’m making a joke,” she said. “Making a joke is a way of stopping. Come on. Lighten up.”

“You know,” he said, “you remember me as the pitiful,

unromantic, distracted new dolt of a husband—you paint me with that brush—but you know what you should remember?”

~

“And then you said, ‘Visiting Boldt Castle.’” She waited for him to respond, and when he didn’t, she opened her window and hung out her arm. “We never visited Boldt Castle, though.” She had to talk loudly to be heard over the wind. “We were going to, but we missed the ferry, and you were hungry and didn’t want to wait for the next one. Which, whatever, fine. But we never visited Boldt Castle on our honeymoon, and you thought we did.”

“I have the air on,” he said. When she didn’t respond, he turned it off. “On the highway you get better mileage using the air than you do opening the windows,” he said. “The drag is why.”

“Just for a minute,” she said.

“Sure. As long as you want. Just give me a heads up so I can switch off the air.”

“My opening my window was the heads up,” she said.

He folded up the windshield visor and took off his sunglasses. “So you’re saying I forget things and get mixed up sometimes. Guilty,” he said. “As for back there at the gas station, though, I don’t understand what I did wrong. I think it’s unfair for you to expect an apology when I don’t think I did anything. I’m not saying you did anything, either. Other than expect an unwarranted apology, I guess. There is the guy who goes around apologizing for everything. You want him? Obsequious guy? That guy isn’t an honest guy, though, is he? The guy who apologizes to his wife for everything just to placate her? You want placating guy?”

“What are you talking about?” she said. She pulled her arm into the car, closed her window, and hit the A/C button before he could. “I just want you to take responsibility for stuff. The last time we drove to your folks’, we stopped at that same gas station, and we had a whole conversation about how there were no family bathrooms there, and we talked about how old-fashioned and frustrating it was that only the women’s room had a changing table, and then, just now, knowing that she needs a change and it’s your turn, you decide to pull into the same place. You can’t see it from my perspective?”

“Alan from your work. That’s who I picture when I picture placating guy.”

“You’ve lost it,” she said. “I knew the day would come, and here it is.”

“She’s waking up again,” he said, glancing in the rearview.

“Wonderful. Fabulous. Goddammit.” He straightened his arms against the steering wheel, pushing himself back into his seat. “You opening and closing your window is why.”

“Here’s all I was saying: we never visited Boldt Castle. You said that was the thing I should remember about our honeymoon instead of you counting money on our wedding night, but we never got to Boldt Castle. My point isn’t that you forget and misremember things, it’s that you forget and misremember in a self-serving way. There seems to be strategy involved.”

The baby squirmed in her seat, whimpered, wrinkled her nose and forehead, but her eyes stayed closed.

“She’s going to be a mess tonight,” he said.

“You think?” she said. She undid her seatbelt, turned, and stretched out her hand to cup her daughter’s head. “Go back to sleep, sweetie,” she said gently. “For the love of God, go back to sleep.”

“You want me to play her music?” he said.

“By the way,” she said, “Alan from my work? He has a husband.”

“So you two have something in common,” he said. With one hand he opened the case and slid the CD into the player, first upside down and then the right way.

“Watch the road,” she said. “Keep us alive.”

“Do you remember what we did that afternoon after missing the ferry, by the way?” he said. “If you did remember, you’d have to change your tune about me being selfish. You’d have to admit to yourself that you know better than that.”

~

“And then you talked about buying me the kite at that toy store and going to the beach to fly it, but it was weird,” she said. “The details you included. Made me feel weird.”

He lay stomach-down on the carpet, inspecting the bottom of the patio door. “Try to slide it now,” he said, and she pushed the door slowly until it squeaked and hung up. “Yeah, the track is warped,” he said. He rose to his knees. “How did she say she did it?”

“She said they were in here dancing and lost their balance and fell into it. I was in the basement doing laundry.”

“Who’s they?”

“She had a friend over,” she said. “Kiki.”

“Kiki from softball?”

“There are two Kikis. There’s Lego League Kiki, too. Today it was Kiki from softball.”

“That’s what I said,” he said.

“They were dancing, sharing one pair of earbuds, and got their legs tangled up. That’s the story I got. I heard the crash, and when I got up here, they were giggling so hard they couldn’t breathe. Kiki had to run to the bathroom because she thought she was going to throw up. She said it happened to her before from laughing.”

“Well, they really crunched it.” He turned into the kitchen, opened the basement door and descended the steps. When he re-emerged, he had a hammer.

“I remember, by the way,” he said.

“Remember what?”

“How weird you acted. You say I made it weird, but you were the weird one. You didn’t like that I mentioned the kite shop girl and then you got weird.”

“That you chose to remember so much about her was what was weird. I felt weird and maybe acted what you considered to be weird because what and how you remembered was weird.”

“You don’t choose what you remember,” he said, dropping again to his knees.

“What you remember reveals you, though,” she said. “It can.”

“What are you saying? Come on. What does it reveal? I said something about how the girl could’ve been your sister. The two of you had a similar look. The way you wore your hair at the time was the same as her, and the shape of your faces was the same. We were on our honeymoon. It was like wherever I looked I saw you. Whoever I looked at. I was struck by it, so I said it. I shouldn’t have, I guess. Excuse me for being romantic.”

“You said, ‘She looked like you if you’d had a tan, but you could never wear a top like the one she was wearing.’ Something along those lines. What you said wasn’t romantic. You weren’t seeing me everywhere.”

“You’re changing it,” he said. “I wouldn’t have said that. Maybe the tan thing, but about the top, I probably said, ‘You wouldn’t wear a top like that.’ ‘Wouldn’t’ is different than ‘couldn’t.’ She was behind a counter working a cash register wearing a bikini top. You would never do that.”

“If I worked near a beach I might. If everyone else was.”

“Not in a million years,” he said. “I’m not saying it’s bad that you wouldn’t, but you wouldn’t.”

She watched him size up the door. “You sure this is a hammer job?” she said. “What are you going to bang?”

“I want to restraighten the track enough so the door can slide. Otherwise, we’re going to have to get a guy in here to replace the whole door.”

“I’m not sure this is a hammer job,” she said. “Maybe rather than bang you could pry. Want a screwdriver?”

“I guess my point is: forget we had a nice time flying the kite,” he said. “Forget how we laughed after confessing to each other that neither of us had any prior kite-flying experience. Forget how we worked together to get it up and then how, when the string broke, we both cursed, and that mom on the beach with the little kids stared us down like a prison guard, and forget how hard we laughed at that. Forget all the happy stuff. Forget all the good energy. Instead, change my ‘would’ to a ‘could,’ and remember the girl in the bikini top who sold us the kite.”

“Exactly,” she said. “That’s what I’m saying to you. Remember the cashier girl instead. That’s what you did.”

He lightly tapped the track with the hammer a few times, inspected it, and then hit it harder. “I need to budge it, but I don’t want to over-budge it,” he said.

“That’s why I’m saying maybe a screwdriver,” she said.

~

“And then you conflated two memories,” she said. “You bragged about how you fixed the air conditioner at our bed and breakfast in the Thousand Islands, but we didn’t stay at a bed and breakfast. We stayed at a regular hotel. The Cassidy. The Kennedy. Something like that. We did the bed and breakfast in the Finger Lakes for our fifth anniversary. That’s what you were thinking of. That’s where you fixed the air conditioner. I was pregnant.”

“You were miserable. The sweat was pouring off you. I came to the rescue and fixed the air conditioner. I told the owner what I did, expecting some sort of thank you, maybe even a few bucks off our stay, and she argued with me. Said if I fixed it, then I must have first broke it because it was fine before we got there.”

“I remember,” she said. “That woman was a piece of work. My point is, though, that this was in the Finger Lakes, not the Thousand Islands.”

He rose from the couch, walked to the patio door and rapped on the dark glass. “If she doesn’t get home in the next ten minutes, she’s losing her phone. She has the phone so we can keep in touch with her when she’s out, but if she doesn’t answer the phone, then what good is the phone? So, fine. Then no phone.”

“Maybe that’s why you think she has the phone,” she said. “That’s not why she thinks she has the phone.”

“Are you going to back me up on this?” he said.

“You should text her instead of call. The odds go way up.”

“I did both,” he said.

“Did you leave a voicemail?”

“I couldn’t. Her box was full.”

“I think she does that on purpose so she can play dumb,” she said.

“Anyways. This stops tonight.”

“You talk a big game, but when she gets home, you’ll just give her a look and then go to bed. You’ll leave it to me to deal with her.”

“You’re better at it,” he said. “You keep an even keel. And when she gets mad at you it’s temporary. When she gets mad at me it’s for keeps.”

“I don’t know about that,” she said.

“So if we didn’t stay at a bed and breakfast on our honeymoon, where did we stay?” he said.

“I told you. The Carnegie. The Cocksackie. Something like that. Don’t you remember the marble pillars in the lobby? Our executive suite with his and her Jacuzzis? The refrigerator full of complimentary champagne and the call button for the masseuse?”

“Right. Our honeymoon was terrible. You deserved so much better.”

“I’m joking,” she said. “Our honeymoon was fine. The guy at the desk telling us, ‘There are eleven Finger Lakes. That’s more than two hands’ worth.’ You remember that?”

He turned away from the door and walked back to the couch. “Here she is, folks,” he said.

The patio door slid open, and their daughter walked in. “You guys still up?” she said. “Why are you still up?”

“Why are you chewing gum?” her mother said.

“I chew gum sometimes. Why does anyone chew gum? It’s a simple pleasure.”

“Were you drinking?” her father said. “Who drove you home? I hope they weren’t drinking.”

“Come on. You guys are spiraling.”

“Just tell the truth,” her mother said. “This isn’t about getting in trouble or not getting in trouble. It’s not only about that.”

“What it’s about is you guys don’t trust me.” She took her gum out, balled it between her thumb and forefinger, and then put it back in her mouth. “I wish you guys would trust me. June and Nikki’s parents trust them.”

“Suckers,” her father said.

“We need to know,” her mother said.

"I'm sorry," the girl said.

"Sorry for what?" her father said.

"Sorry for doing whatever or sorry for getting caught?" her mother said. "There's a difference."

"What did I do? What did you catch me doing?"

"That's what we're asking you," her mother said.

"I was doing meth. I shot a porno. I'm dating a couple of truckers. I'm sorry for all of it."

"Trust is earned," her father said.

"How do I earn it? By never experiencing anything that I'm allowed to keep to myself? You guys don't let me have any secrets. You think you have to know everything."

"Now who's spiraling?" her mother said.

"What's the difference if I tell you or not anyways? Either way you won't trust me."

"There's a difference," her father said.

The girl's hands disappeared into the sleeves of her sweater, and she hugged her shoulders. Her parents watched her begin to cry and then get angry at herself for beginning to cry and then spin around so they couldn't see her face.

"Can we do this in the morning?" the girl said.

"I'd rather we clear up things now," her father said.

"Maybe talking in the morning would be better," her mother said. "If that's what you need, we can give you that."

"In any case, you need to answer your phone when we call," her father said.

"From here on out, I promise," the girl said.

"We'd appreciate that," her mother said. "That would go a long way."

"OK," the girl said.

"OK," her father said.

"So maybe we don't need to talk in the morning?" the girl said. "Not about this? Maybe we just not remember tonight at all?"

PAUL DICKEY

SHE MADE TRUTH OUT OF MUD PIES

He was living one day at a time. It was the logical thing to do, he reckoned. There was rain and there was earth and sometimes they happened both at the same time. He couldn't help that, could he? His wife screamed out not to drag those muddy boots into the house and pointed at their old console television that was that very minute exploding into a mushroom cloud. She only said this because she loved him, of course. But he lived there too and he didn't know what else to do about them. She might get mad but she would never stop loving him, he figured. So he closed the screen door respectfully behind him, went to kiss his wife and apologize, happily unaware of all that might happen in emotionally charged and illogical circumstances.

LAUREN MOSELEY

ALBEDO EFFECT

Albedo is an expression of the ability of surfaces to reflect sunlight. Light-colored surfaces return a large part of the sunrays back to the atmosphere (high albedo). Dark surfaces absorb the rays from the sun (low albedo).

—Norwegian Polar Institute

Ice is light. All my life,
I've taken that for granted.
The ice-covered Arctic
reflects heat from the sun,

keeping Earth from warming
to a lethal degree. That is, until
the glaciers melt into the seas,
whose waters churn darker in reality

than in my mind's eye. Look
at this timelapse of Earth
from space. As darkness spreads
towards the poles like mold,

more and more heat is absorbed.
Gaia theory tells us Earth is a self-
regulating system, a living thing.
Like every body, celestial or otherwise,

Earth is mortal. It is a portal
from darkness to darkness,
headed to darkness as well,
midnight blue in color, clinging to heat.

I imagine the future, a simulation of the dawn
of life itself: gray rock, punishing skies,
lightning striking a primordial pool
where a single cell becomes two.

We have no idea, really, how it all began.
I want to believe it could happen again.

LAUREN MOSELEY

ELEPHANT BIRD

All living things give birth to memory.
An egg cracks. A skull keeps the softness intact.
The chick pecks at her shell and frees herself,
dripping. She looks at her mother
and knows half of all she ever will.

*

Hominid brains and giant bird eggs
are measured by the liter.
An ostrich egg is 1.3, a human brain 1.4.
When homo sapiens first set foot on Madagascar,
they met a ten-foot-high behemoth
that laid nine-liter eggs, and they hunted it
to extinction.

Before that, for millions of years,
the elephant bird rocked the earth
back and forth as she walked.
Tank for a body, thick rippling neck.
Upright, flightless, and vegetarian
like an ostrich, but eight hundred pounds
more fearsome. If confronted in the forest,
a human head would reach the feathered breast,
as the neck snaked high above
to the snapping beak.

*

A myth: that we use a fraction of our brains.
When hooked up to instruments, each lobe
lights up at some point in the day.

*

Some call it instinct to kill,
to hobble a beast with blows to the legs.
Once felled—a spear to the head.

Scrambled and cooked over the fire,
one egg will feed the entire tribe.
Halved shells of the eggs themselves
make immaculate bowls.

*

Wiped from the face of Earth,
the bird lived on in our minds.
Great explorers crossed southern oceans
and sailors sang of its strength and speed.
Scheherazade gave it wings.
Sinbad saw one feed its young an elephant.
But the real thing was forever gone—
the largest bird that ever lived.

*

Memory is endemic to many regions
of the brain: the hippocampus (episodes),
amygdala (emotions), neocortex (knowledge),
and cerebellum (motor skills).
Ancestral memory in every cell.

*

Earlier this millennium, an egg
was auctioned for \$100,000.
Inside, perfectly preserved,
the elephant chick's skeleton curled.
When the shell was filled with light,
each bone stood out in dark relief.

Something fired in the buyer's brain.
His hand lifted, as if of its own mind.
He told a reporter, *I'll always remember
holding the egg the first time.
It felt so familiar.*

CASSANDRA CLEGHORN

PAPIER MÂCHÉ

after Piaget

three small mountains shellacked
& gleaming forests of green brush marks hands quiet
before the craft of it all

atop one peak a darling
hut atop another a small red
cross atop the third
nothing but

[snow]:

when asked I
say well okay now o-
kay well from here I can
see the cross and over
there's the hut
set against mister
mammoth snowy peak
when pressed again hm mm
from over here I
guess
only

[snow]:

pencil sound I
cannot see I

wanted
to call it
mister call it him
you I saw you
you avalanche you
daddy peak
no harebrained thought
to see around
the folds of fake
earth thrust up--

in their gluey
way the little alps
held me fast
I say what
I see I
say what I
said I saw

THE MERMAID KINGDOM

It was the summer after Uncle Billy died, the summer before I started sixth grade and my brother, Nick, started third. Our cousin, Meredith, was in and out of the hospital, seizing and vomiting. We knew because our Aunt Kira would call every day in a panic. She was a single mother and had to make money somehow, but with Mere's condition she couldn't bear leaving her daughter for more than a second. Aunt Kira didn't know what to do. She didn't know where to turn. Things had gotten difficult since Billy's diagnosis.

"Drop her off here when you have a shift," my mother said. "Stop complaining. Stop worrying. I've given you a solution. Take it or leave it."

So Mere spent the mornings and afternoons with us in our mother's mobile home in southern Arkansas. When Aunt Kira first dropped Meredith off that June, she greeted my mother quickly before diving into a lengthy speech about Mere's inhaler and how to use it.

"When she can't breathe, and her asthma is horrible, poor thing, you use the inhaler. There's instructions here, but let me show you anyway."

She continued the demonstration as I watched my younger cousin. She was five now, and she looked even smaller than she had the previous year. She clung to the hem of the blue shirt Aunt Kira wore to the hospital, half hidden behind her. The skin around her fawn eyes looked tired and pink and her light brown hair was pulled back into a ponytail. It was thin and chunks of it were missing. She frowned up at us.

"Please call me if anything at all happens and I'll come running," Aunt Kira finished. "I drop everything for Meredith. She means the world to me."

We watched Aunt Kira bend down to Mere's level, hold her hands and say a lengthy goodbye to her. She kissed the top of her head, rubbed her shoulders, and was gone.

Mom's phone rang, and she went into the kitchen to answer it.

Mere stared at me and I stared back. Nick was sitting against the wall playing a DS game and ignoring us. Meredith held a small, heart-shaped purse in front of her. She swung it slowly as she turned her shoulders left and right.

"Whatchya got there, Meredith?" I finally asked her.

"Dolls," she said. The word was barely a whisper, more mouth movement than sound.

I smiled. "We used to play dolls when you were younger. Do you remember? At your house while your dad was—"

"Daddy died," Mere said in the same small voice.

"I have to get going quickly," Mom said as she appeared back in the living room. "I'll probably be back around four. I've left Meredith's inhaler and medications in the kitchen. Were you paying attention to the demonstration, Sammie?"

I shrugged.

My mom bit her lip, but said, “I’m sure you can read the instructions if she really needs it. Aunt Kira also said something about the seizure medication, but it’s fine. Probably.” She kissed me then Nick on the tops of our heads. Nick grunted and pushed away from her, smashing his fingers into the game’s buttons. Mom sighed and stepped out the door.

As soon as my mom was gone, Mere’s lips sprung into a smile. “Let’s play princesses,” she said, her voice a bit louder than it had been earlier.

Nick frowned into his game, his eyebrows creasing. “Turn it off, Nick,” I said. “You should play with us.”

He sighed, an exasperated “ugh,” and snapped the game closed. We went outside and Mere ran immediately down the misshapen stairs of our rickety front porch to the apple tree. She began to pull herself into the easy-to-reach branches before I ran over to steady her.

“Wait, Meredith,” I said. “Don’t take it too quickly.”

“Okay,” Mere said.

She climbed up a few branches. I stood right by her, arms out and ready to catch her if she so much as stumbled. Meredith made it up about five feet off the ground and I said, “Okay, that’s probably high enough.”

“You’ve captured me,” Mere said. “Because you’re a dragon and I’m the princess. Nick, you have to be the prince.”

Nick saved Mere by training me to be good. He rode on my back as I stomped around and roared and laughed. We didn’t have much grass in our yard. There was a layer of yellow dust around the skirting of the mobile home. My knees quickly became scraped and dirty, small rocks embedded in my skin. Since we’d moved here from our apartment when I was three, the apple tree had shriveled in the poor soil. The trunk was knotty and the branches thin and stiff like lightning.

I lay in my bed that night, basking in the humidity as the summer sun finally sank, trying to imagine my silly, excited cousin in the hospital, hooked up to beeping machines, tubes threaded through her body. I tried to imagine her the way Aunt Kira described her.

The Friday after Mere visited, Nick, Mom, and I were eating dinner together when Nick asked if Mere was going to come with us out onto the river.

“I guess she’ll have to,” she said. “Kira’ll have to find someone else to watch her if she’s too sickly.”

“She’s not too sickly,” Nick said.

Mom paused. “Nick, Sammie. I’m sure you realize that Meredith being out on the boat with us brings up a whole host of issues. I’ll have to convince your Aunt Kira to let her come. I know that Meredith will be fine, but your aunt is nervous about her.”

Nick and I looked at each other.

“Tell Aunt Kira that we’ll be missing her if she doesn’t come with us,” I said.

Mom and Aunt Kira were on the phone for the better part of an hour. Nick and I couldn’t tell what was happening because the only things Mom was saying were “of course” and “yes I understand but.” Eventually, Aunt Kira did agree to let us take Mere off her hands for the weekend, but only after my mom promised to make Mere put on a lifejacket, renew her coat of sunscreen at least once an hour, and be sure that Mere was never too far from her inhaler.

Mom did none of these things.

Mere, again, forgot that she was meant to be sick, and was much too excited to remind my mother of Aunt Kira’s rules.

“Where’s Mere’s lifejacket?” I asked my mom as she unpacked our beach bag from the car.

“She doesn’t need one,” my mom said.

“Aunt Kira said that she doesn’t know how to swim,” I reminded her.

“She’ll be fine,” my mom said. “The water isn’t too deep by the island, and I know you’ll keep an eye on her.”

She leaned in closer. I could see that her eyes were watering though she didn’t look sad. “And Aunt Kira is overreacting, don’t you think?”

I agreed with her, but didn’t say anything. I went over to Mere, who was waiting wide-eyed and expectantly by the car.

“C’mon,” I said, taking her hand. We walked down the dock and waited with our toes in the water for my mom to untether the boat.

“I’ve never been on a boat,” Mere said.

“You’ll like it,” I said. “It’s really windy and Nick and I have an island.”

“You have an island?”

“Not really. We play on it.”

“Can we play mermaids?” Mere asked.

“Sure,” I said.

Mere sat right at the front and screamed and cheered into the wind. Mom pressed us faster and faster, making us leap over our own waves. When we got close to the island, she sputtered out the engine. Nick and I were entrusted with our younger cousin and we waded out to the island. As we stood in the sand, we watched the boat putt a little ways away and anchor. This is where my mom stayed, spaced out. She would tell us that she was “gathering her thoughts” or “clearing her head,” and when we came back, she would be happier than when we’d left her, but it was a bad happy. Something unnatural. Her speech would be off—a bit slurred maybe—and her eyes would be too green and shiny, her pupils like pinpricks.

“She’ll be back to pick us up,” Nick assured Mere, but she didn’t

seem worried. She was busy taking in the island.

We gave her the grand tour. The island wasn't big. There was a thin strip of beach stretched around it with a dense clump of trees in the middle. The whole thing buzzed with gnats—the sand, the beach, the driftwood. The beach was covered with the rotting skeletons of fish, thick clumps of slimy seaweed, and, of course, garbage. Syringes, condoms, you name it, it was on our beach, but we were all much too caught up in the excitement to truly see the island for what it was; an overgrown lump of dirt and trash floating in a brackish river.

And there was the stream. It ran off of the river and right into the trees. As we waded through the warm shallow water, fat leeches hooked themselves onto our ankles and toes. Once we got back on the boat, we would have to dig our fingernails under their suckers and pry them out one by one. The gnat cloud got thicker the farther we walked into the trees and vines that sheltered the banks of the stream. But it was our space. Our secret space.

"Mermaids live here," Mere informed us when we took her up to the basin where the stream curved into a pond. It was deeper here than in the rest of the stream, but still shallow, only rising to my thighs. The pond was surrounded by rocks and logs where Nick and I would sit and talk or fill the discarded syringes with brackish water and shoot them at each other.

"This is the Mermaid Lagoon," Mere said.

Mere was a mermaid named Seashell who had gotten lost but that was okay because she met Princess Sammie and Prince Nick. They were her friends who were magical and changed her tail into legs and all three of them lived in the Mermaid Lagoon happily ever after the end, but then Nick looked down at his plastic Scooby-Doo watch and it was almost 4:30.

"Mom'll be mad if she can't see us on the beach when she comes to pick us up," I said, so we walked back to the shore.

My mom wasn't back yet. In fact, I couldn't see the boat at all, so we sat on some rocks with our toes in the sand and waited. Nick picked up the rough brown shell of a freshwater mussel, locked shut, and showed it to Meredith.

"Do you wanna play veterinarian?" he asked.

"Okay," Mere said.

"Nick, I told you, veterinarian is *mean*."

"Oh, who cares, Sammie. It's *fun*."

"Mere, don't play veterinarian with Nick."

"What's veterinarian?"

"I'll show you," Nick said.

"Nick, if you do..." I trailed off, unable to think of a threat.

"You'll do nothing," Nick finished for me with a proud smile.

Still holding the mussel, he reached under the light waves that

lapped the beach for a syringe. It was filled with water already and he squirted a few drops out the top, his tongue poking out between his teeth.

“Doctors use these,” he explained to Mere.

“I know that,” she said.

“All you have to do is take the mussel and you hit it really hard against a rock until it opens.”

He slammed the mussel on the rock between his legs several times making a horrible chinking sound. He then pushed his tiny fingers in between the mussel’s shells and split it open. Fleshy pink strings snapped.

“It’s dead,” I said.

Nick and Mere ignored me.

“That’s the mussel, Mere,” Nick said, pointing at the peach-colored mass in the shell. “And we pretend it’s sick and that it has to get better.”

“It’s not sick!” I said. “It’s dead — you can’t make it better. You can’t hurt something to make it better. It doesn’t work like that.”

Nick ignored me and stuck the mussel with the syringe. The mussel and shell filled with water; its juice drained into the river.

“If you inject ‘em a lot you can make ‘em really big,” Nick said.

“Nick,” I whined. “*Please* stop.”

“It’s just like me and Mommy,” Mere said as she watched the mussel expand bigger and bigger like a water balloon.

“What?” I asked.

Mere looked at me and opened her mouth, but all that came out was “Never mind.”

“Do you wanna try, Mere?” Nick asked. “I found another syringe.”

Mere nodded and Nick handed the needle over to our cousin. Unable to witness anymore, I walked over to a rock a little ways away and plucked the leeches from between my toes.

After that first trip to the Mermaid Lagoon, Mere loved mermaids so much that we started playing mermaids at home instead of princesses. And then we were playing princess mermaids.

When it rained one day and we couldn’t go outside, Nick remembered the fairytale book.

“It’s got mermaids in it,” he said. “Do you wanna read it, Mere?”

We called it a fairytale book, but it wasn’t really. It was about vile pixies that stole children and soulless mermaids who were immortal, cursed to remain in the sea forever. It was meant for adults, not children. Obviously, Mom hadn’t flipped through it much before buying it.

Nick handed me the book. I sat on our old, stained sofa, Mere on my right and Nick on my left, and flipped through until I found the mermaid story.

The story was about a man who met a mermaid while walking along the seashore late one evening. She was so beautiful and looked so blue and cold in the chilling night air that he wrapped her in his cloak and took her home. Soon they were married, and not long after, had a son together. But throughout the entire relationship, the mermaid never uttered a word. This was very strange, and though the son seemed perfectly content with his parents and his home, there was talk among the townspeople that the man had married a malevolent spirit. A demon. So incessant were these rumors that the man began to believe them himself. He became terrified and his terror turned to aggression. He drew a sword and threatened to kill his son if his wife would not speak. She did, but all she said was, “You’ve lost your wife, your child, and yourself” before vanishing into thin air. A few years later, the mermaid was supposed to drag her own son into the ocean to drown, but I never told Mere that.

“A few years later,” I read, “the son was playing on the beach while his father fished nearby. He wandered farther and farther away, drawn by something invisible that he could not describe. It was his mother, waiting for him in the white foam of the waves. Though he had little memory of her, he knew exactly who she was and ran into the water to meet her.” I looked at Mere. She smiled up at me. Her eyes were bright and her face looked round, like a child’s face should. I made her *happy*. “With a bit of mermaid magic from his mother,” I invented, “his legs transformed into a tail and the two merpeople swam off to the mermaid kingdom where they happily lived out their days. Completely alone now, the man lost his mind and died from a broken heart.”

“Hey! Sammie!” Nick exclaimed. “You didn’t do it right. You didn’t read it right.” He reached for the book. I arched my back and stretched my arm up over my head to keep the book away from him.

“Did too,” I said.

“You’re lying,” Nick said. He crawled on top of me, reaching for the book.

“Am not.” I kicked him to the floor.

“Hey!” Nick said. “Maybe you just don’t know how to read.”

“Maybe,” I said. I slid the book behind my back and pressed up tight against the couch so Nick couldn’t get it.

“Is there more?” Mere asked me. “Don’t they have adventures in the mermaid kingdom?”

“No,” Nick said, sulking from the floor. “The next story’s about fairies kidnapping a girl and accidentally drowning her except they don’t realize that she’s dead so it’s just her corpse sitting in a swamp for years and years and years.”

“They had lots of adventures in the mermaid kingdom, only they couldn’t write them down because paper disintegrates underwater,” I said.

Aunt Kira called Mom that night after dinner. We'd been eating ice cream sundaes, and when Mom turned her back to pick up the phone, Nick poured a whole shaker of rainbow sprinkles into his bowl. As the little balls of sugar hit the table and bounced onto the floor, I could hear Aunt Kira's voice echoing faintly through the phone.

"Sammie is *eleven* how could she even know the first thing about her condition—she's running through the dust all day—I know what you do for a living but you're *family* and I thought I could trust you with my only daughter but maybe I can't—you understand that with one call Nick and Sammie are *gone*."

My heart flew to my throat. Sometimes my mom did things that scared me—it was the way her eyes looked, or how she would disappear without telling me or Nick where she was going—but that didn't mean that she wasn't my mom. I still loved her and I didn't want to be taken away or be gone or whatever Aunt Kira was talking about.

Mere didn't come the next morning, and that night, the police arrived.

They banged on the door so hard that the trailer shook and dust dripped from the ceiling. My mother stopped chewing and looked up, shocked.

"Arkansas State Police," we heard a woman outside say. "Open up."

Nick made a sound like a squawk.

My mother closed her eyes, swallowed, and stood up from her place at the table. We followed her to the door and peered around the corner as she opened it up. The policewoman shoved a paper into her face.

"We've received a tip that you're trafficking and distributing heroin. We have a warrant and are going to search the house."

"Yes, ma'am," my mother said. She sounded small.

The woman and two men made their way into the house. I felt the floor shake under their boots.

Nick gripped my elbow. "They've got real guns, Sammie," he said. I nodded. "C'mon."

In my box room, we were quiet. We sat pressed between the wall and the bed, our shoulders touching. We held our breath as we waited for the stomping and shaking to stop. Mom had something to hide. We grew up knowing that in the same way we grew up knowing that while some kids had fathers, we didn't and that was okay.

"Sammie," Nick said. "We're the bad guys, aren't we?"

"I think so," I replied.

Just then, the door opened. Both Nick and I breathed in sharply. One of the police officers looked over the bed and right at us. He came around and knelt down so he could look at us more closely.

"What are your names?" he asked.

"I'm Sammie," I said.

"Nick," my brother said.

"I'm Officer Osborn," the policeman said. He held out his hand for us to shake, but we just stared at it. Officer Osborn sighed. "You don't have to hide, Sammie and Nick. Why don't you come out and sit with me in the kitchen?"

"Are you going to arrest us?" Nick asked.

"Of course not," said Officer Osborn. "You've done nothing wrong."

"What about Mom?" I asked.

"Let's come talk in the kitchen, okay?"

We waited there for a little while, swinging our legs. Nick interrogated Officer Osborn about what Mom had done and what was going to happen to her, but he only answered with maybes and I don't knows. It wasn't long before the policewoman came into the kitchen, talking about stashes of bags and powder.

"Do you want to see a real police station?" Officer Osborn asked, but we knew we didn't have a choice. "Come on, you can ride with me."

And before we knew it, Nick and I were in a police car together. It was dark outside and lights and trees blended as we rode. The buzzing of Officer Osborn's radio waded in and out of my ears until I felt sick.

We sat in the police station and watched police officers move in and out. They said things we didn't understand. Nick fell asleep on his uncomfortable black chair before Officer Osborn finally reappeared.

"Your aunt's on her way to pick you up," he said, bridge of his nose pressed between his fingers. "I'm not sure if you'll be able to go back with your mom tonight."

"Why not?" Nick asked. He rose from the chair he was lying on, groggy.

"She's got to hang out here for a while," Officer Osborn said.

"Make sure you're ready to go," he said as he walked away. "Your aunt should be here in a few minutes."

Aunt Kira wrapped us in her arms when she arrived.

"I'm so glad you're okay. It's terrible, what Jenna's put you through." She released us and stood, shifting her purse on her shoulder. "You have to understand how much of a hassle for me this is, of course, taking you in as well. You know how sick Meredith is."

But she took us back to her apartment and we fell asleep on the sofa bed that night. We woke up to Mere's knees in our stomachs as she peered into our faces.

"You're here!" she said happily as I peeled open my eyes.

"Yeah," I said, sitting up.

"Does this mean you're going to live with me forever?"

"No," Nick said, also sitting up. "We've got to go back with our mom soon."

said. “Mommy said that you might have to stay here a while,” Mere

said. “Might,” I repeated.

Mere’s face fell.

At that moment, Aunt Kira called us into the kitchen for breakfast. She placed a plate of bagels on the table with a container of cream cheese and a butter knife. She began spreading some cream cheese on a bagel for Mere.

“You’re going to have to stay here for a little while.” She exhaled heavily and didn’t look at me and Nick. “I’m not sure when Jenna will be released.”

“Is Aunt Jenna a bad guy?” Mere asked.

“Only sometimes,” Aunt Kira said.

“Then why is she in jail?”

“She made a mistake,” Aunt Kira said. She stopped spreading cream cheese and looked into Mere’s face. “Sometimes people become bad guys accidentally for a little while because they don’t even realize what they’re doing is bad.”

“Could I become a bad guy too then?” Mere asked, wide-eyed.

“Not if you’re careful,” Aunt Kira said.

After breakfast, we played dolls. Because Aunt Kira lived in a fourth-floor apartment in a busier area than we did, we couldn’t play outside. Aunt Kira wouldn’t even let us out on the porch to look over the balcony, though that may have been because Nick announced that he wanted to lean over and see if he could land a glob of spit in the pool below.

Mere was quieter at her own house and something inside me knew that that was Aunt Kira’s fault. Every so often, Aunt Kira would come and interrupt our game by pulling Mere away to force the seizure medication syrup down her throat. She’d return to the game quiet, shaken, and uncomfortable. Her hands trembled as she wrapped her fingers around her Barbies. She would close her eyes and leave her sentences unfinished.

But it was soon forgotten as Nick stuck a doll behind the wheel of a pink jeep and pushed the car over my and Mere’s dolls who were putting on wedding dresses.

“They’re dead now,” he declared. “There was a car accident.”

“Nick,” Mere whined as I laughed.

She plucked the doll out of the jeep and tossed it into Nick’s chest. She explained to him how he *should* play Barbies.

“Car accidents are not allowed,” she said.

Most nights in the week and a half we stayed at Aunt Kira’s, I could not fall asleep. I lay awake staring at the ceiling. I could hear Mere crying in her room with Aunt Kira over her.

“Don’t cry, Meredith,” Aunt Kira would say through her teeth.

“Take this. It will make it better.”

“You’re hurting me,” Mere said over and over again. “You’re hurting me.”

Sometimes, I would wake up to find Aunt Kira throwing items into her purse and rushing Mere out of the house.

“I’ve got to get Meredith to the emergency room, Sammie,” she would say when she saw me sitting up. “She’s just had a seizure.”

And then she and my cousin would be gone, and Nick and I would be alone.

The next morning, they would both look exhausted.

“Keep telling me the story with the mermaids,” Mere said once after Aunt Kira forced the inhaler on her. “I want to hear about what they did in the mermaid kingdom.”

So I told her about giant seahorses and how the little boy became the prince after he slayed a sea monster and saved his kingdom.

Two years before my mother was arrested, Aunt Kira told Mom that Uncle Billy was sick. Nick and I were six and nine. Mom decided that we needed to go to their house to keep them company. It would make Aunt Kira and Uncle Billy very happy, she said in the car. She told us that Uncle Billy had just gotten out of the hospital and he still wasn’t feeling very well, but we never knew what was wrong.

It had been the first time we’d ever been in a real house. Nick and I paused in the doorway, gazing at the high ceilings and hanging lights and shiny floors.

Our Aunt Kira, who Mom said I’d met once when I was three, though I didn’t remember, pushed us out of the way to throw herself onto our mother.

“Oh, Jenna,” she cried and threw herself into her sister’s shoulder. Mom flinched a little and tried to step back, but Aunt Kira was stuck on her. She raised her hands to Kira’s back and hesitantly patted her sister. Her shoulders were shrugged to her ears.

At that moment, I saw a little girl’s face at the top of the stairs. She turned the corner and disappeared when she caught me looking at her. I turned to say something to Nick, but he had disappeared too. He was banging on the living room piano with his fists.

“We have a cousin,” I said.

“Meredith. Mom said,” he replied, still banging.

“Let’s go find her. She’s upstairs.”

“Okay,” Nick said. He swung his legs off the bench with a final dissonant cluck.

It was obvious which room was Mere’s. A sheet of construction paper covered in pink and purple scribbles was taped on the front of her door. PRINCESS MEREDITH was printed along the top in an adult’s handwriting. I opened the door. Meredith, who was scribbling at her desk, turned to face me.

CARLING RAMSDELL

“You’re my cousin,” she said.

“Yeah. I’m Sammie. That’s Nick.” I pushed my brother into the room so that Mere could see him.

She nodded at us. “Let’s play princesses,” she said.

We played princesses and then Barbies in Mere’s room until Aunt Kira told us roughly that it was time for Mere’s nap.

Bored, we sat on the couch and watched a football game with Uncle Billy next to us under a blanket in a recliner. We could hear Aunt Kira in the kitchen crying about how she was a single mother and a widow and would have to raise Meredith alone.

“I’m not dead yet,” Uncle Billy called.

It got quieter in the kitchen.

“Nick and Sammie, right?” Uncle Billy said when the house caved into an unsettling silence save for the buzzing screams on the television.

“Yes,” I said.

“I’m Billy. Uncle Billy, I guess.”

I nodded. I already knew that.

“Are you bored? I understand that this probably isn’t particularly interesting to you two.” He gestured to the football game.

“Yes!” Nick said.

Uncle Billy laughed, but it quickly turned into coughing so heavy that I thought he must be choking on his internal organs. My eyes widened. I wasn’t sure what I was supposed to do, but it calmed down after a minute.

“Sorry,” he said, clearing his throat. “Here.” He pushed what looked like a little gray box towards us. “It’s a DS. Turn it on. You can play games on it.”

And we did. We took turns and bickered and laughed and yelled instructions at each other.

“We should get going,” my mom said with a sigh as she walked into the living room.

I turned the game off and pushed it back towards Uncle Billy.

“Thanks,” I said.

“Oh no, keep it,” he said. “It’s yours.”

“Really?” Nick asked.

“Really,” Uncle Billy replied.

A week and a half later, we were back with Mom in the mobile home. She explained how she would have to go back to the police later, but for now they were “trusting” her. She said that the police knew that she loved us and didn’t want us to be separated. She said that it was Aunt Kira who’d paid the bail.

She didn’t seem happy about the last bit.

We were quiet when we ate dinner, and Nick and I were shaking in the silence.

CARLING RAMSDELL

“Are you a bad guy?” Nick finally blurted. He covered his mouth with his hands as soon as he said it, as if that could push the words back in. I looked from him to Mom, who was staring at him shocked.

“No,” Mom said softly. “No. Of course not. I sell—I sell medicine to people to make them happy. It—it makes them feel things that they don’t feel normally. My customers forgot how to feel happiness or excitement, but they like the medicine because it can make them happy and excited again. The cops are silly, Aunt Kira is silly. The police think that I’m a bad guy because I do everything I can for you.”

We lapsed back into silence, but I think Mom was crying behind her hands.

We were silent the rest of the week. Mom stayed in the trailer, but Nick and I sat in my room with the door closed, taking turns on Uncle Billy’s DS.

“Do you know what would be fun?” Mom said on Thursday during dinner. “If I took you to the island on Saturday. I know that’s one of your favorite places to play.”

“Mere has to come too,” I said.

And after a long phone conversation with Aunt Kira, it was decided that Mere could come, as long as Aunt Kira could come too.

I swallowed and looked at Nick, but that would have to do.

On the boat, on the way to the island, Mom convinced Aunt Kira to relax. Mere was a smart kid. She could take care of herself, she said.

“You’ll be able to see her from the boat, I’m sure,” Mom said.

Aunt Kira sniffed. “I don’t trust Sammie to look after my child, but she’s done it before, I suppose.”

“Mere will be fine,” Mom said as she anchored the boat.

Aunt Kira grabbed my wrist before I jumped off into the water.

“Keep her safe,” she said.

“I will,” I said, wrenching myself free.

When we got to the beach, Nick and Mere wanted to play veterinarian again. They sat in the sand as waves washed over their toes. Nick dug for syringes and Mere began to collect mussels on a rock. Instead, I picked up strands of seaweed to braid into crowns.

“Mommy plays veterinarian with me,” I heard Mere telling Nick. “Only I’m the seashell and she has the needle.”

“What do you mean?” asked Nick.

“Sometimes we play doctor, and she says she makes me better, but she gives me gross things to drink and sticks needles in my arm and then we have to go to the hospital.”

“That’s not a game,” Nick said.

I felt something inside of me. A deep, churning rage simmering behind my heart. I stared at the slimy leaves in my hands. As I twisted them together, they broke apart. I dropped the half-completed crown

into the sand.

Nick handed Mere a syringe and she filled the mussel with water until it grew bigger than her fist. She closed the shells around the swollen mass, slowly squeezing the water out, before launching it far into the river.

The *plop* as it landed beneath the waves was satisfying, but the raging fire in my chest still burned. The mussel was still dead.

“Let’s go play mermaids now,” she said.

Before we hiked up the stream, Mere shed her lifejacket.

“It makes me feel like a bubble,” she said. “I don’t like it.”

We let her leave it in the sand.

As we pushed through the trees and vines, Mere announced that we were on a mermaid hunt and should be quiet so as not to scare the mermaids from their lagoon. We walked in silence, Mere wildly looking around, ready to spot a mermaid, and Nick and I watching her.

She didn’t find anything until we got to the Mermaid Lagoon.

“Look, there,” Mere whispered. She pointed into the thorny tangle of trees and vines above us on the bank.

I didn’t see anything. The breeze shivered through the leaves, but there was no mermaid.

“I don’t see it,” Nick said.

Mere shushed him. “She’s sitting right there. Wait here. I’ll go talk to her first.”

Mere approached the spot on the bank that she had pointed to. She whispered something then paused and nodded and whispered something else. Though I couldn’t see anything at all, this mermaid was as real to Mere as Nick and I were.

“Guys!” Mere finally said, whirling back to face us. “The mermaid isn’t a mermaid! She’s actually the *ghost* of a mermaid!”

“A ghost?” Nick repeated.

I thought of the story I’d read her almost a month ago. To Mere, “malevolent spirit” meant only “ghost mermaid.”

“What’s her name?” I asked.

“Seashell,” Mere said. “She lived in the mermaid kingdom but she got lost, so then she had to come to Mermaid Lagoon. She likes it here though. And we’re best friends now.”

“Can we play with Seashell too?” I asked.

“Lemme ask her,” Mere said. She pushed through the brush up the hill, walking on her knees and digging her nails into the dirt, back to where Seashell was presumably waiting for her. She was quiet for a few moments. Then she nodded and slid back to us through the dirt, pushing little rocks into the water in a rush. “She says you can’t.”

“What? Why not?” I asked, but Nick looked pleased.

“She says I can’t tell you what we’re doing.”

“Yes, you can. I’m your cousin.”

“Yeah,” Nick added. “Everyone knows that you’ve got to tell your

family all your secrets or else you'll get in trouble."

"Okay," Mere said. "I'll tell you." She dropped her voice as Nick and I leaned in. "She told me that I am a mermaid. Kinda. Daddy was a mermaid. It's like in the story. Seashell wants to take me back to the mermaid kingdom so me and her and Daddy can all live there together and have adventures every day."

"Uncle Billy wasn't a mermaid," Nick said. "I met him. He had normal people legs."

"Shut up, Nick," I said. "But he's right," I added to Mere. "Your dad wasn't a mermaid. He was a *merman*."

"Right," Mere said. "A merman."

"That's stupid," Nick said.

"Shut up, Nick," I said again.

"Yeah, shut up, Nick," Mere repeated, smiling up at me.

Mere relayed everything Seashell told her about the mermaid kingdom to us. It was called Atlantis and it was beneath this very island. How Seashell could have gotten lost but was able to tell Meredith exactly where her home was located was beyond me, but I didn't question it. There were towers of stone and rainbow-colored fish that could talk and Seashell was a princess and Uncle Billy was the king and they sat on thrones made of pink coral. Uncle Billy also held something that Seashell called a "big golden fork" and because all the mermaids were also ghosts they didn't need doors they just slid through the walls. Most importantly, Mere said, was that no one was ever ever allowed to be sad or sick. Those things just didn't happen in the mermaid kingdom.

And Nick and I told Mere that the mermaid kingdom sounded pretty neat.

"I hope you have fun there," Nick said, "without us, I guess."

And then it was time to go.

"Seashell's coming with us," Mere said.

As she announced this, a ripple echoed through the basin, starting just below where Seashell had supposedly been sitting.

Neither Nick nor Mere seemed to notice.

When we got to the shore of the island, Mom's boat was waiting for us several yards away where it had anchored. I could see Aunt Kira waving frantically at us. She was yelling something that I couldn't quite hear.

Mere flinched when she looked at her mother. She swallowed, shook her head, and paled as if she was about to be sick.

And then it seemed forgotten.

"Look!" she squawked the same way she had when we arrived at the basin. "It's Daddy! He's here! Seashell, he'll take us back!"

Before Nick or I could say anything, Mere was gone, running into the foam of the waves where my uncle was supposedly waiting for her. But this foam wasn't white like in the story. It was thick and yellow like urine.

CARLING RAMSDELL

My blood twisted in my veins. There was something I knew that Mere didn't: the real ending to the story. There was no mermaid magic. No mermaid kingdom at all. And though to this day I'd like to believe that she and Uncle Billy lived happily ever after in the mermaid kingdom, I know she drowned in a brackish, polluted river not far from a trailer park in southern Arkansas.

I ran in after her calling "Mere, Mere," but there was no answer, not even bubbles rising to the surface.

My heart lifted from my body. I could *feel* Mere, she was right there, just waiting. I splashed blindly under the water where she disappeared. There was no longer a fire behind my heart—it was more like a waterfall, my insides rushing and tumbling inside of me, desperate, but there was nothing more I could do. I looked to the boat for help, but Aunt Kira had my mom backed into her seat, yelling in her face. Back on the beach, Nick stared through me. He didn't move. I don't think that he could. After nearly fifteen minutes, I joined him, drained. He had slunk down into the sand and was silently weeping.

"I bet the mermaid kingdom's stupid anyway," Nick said thickly, wiping his nose.

I didn't answer. I stared out at the river, at the boat. Aunt Kira, who didn't seem to understand that Mere was gone, was still screeching at us.

The echo of "NICK. SAMMIE. MEREDITH. TIME TO GO. NOW!" flew over the beach like a breeze.

"I saw him," Nick said suddenly. "I saw Uncle Billy. I really did. We should've gone with her, Sammie. Maybe the mermaid kingdom is stupid, but this is probably stupider."

And I thought so too.

OUTER BANKS

I have a poem that starts like this: my mother came back as a haunted boat. I spend most of the poem trying to decide if I should escape the boat, if I should forgive my mother, or if I am the one who needs to be forgiven. The poem ends when the boat sinks, becomes a new reef. It ends when I visit my haunted boat mother and catalog all the new life, the eels and crabs, the mollusks under the hull. I even swim with the sharks and feed them shrimp. I put this poem away, call my mother on her birthday. I don't tell her about the haunted boat in my poem or the slow flood that overwhelmed her. I don't tell her where the boat sinks. It needs to be someplace I can still reach, someplace where I can practice holding my breath, where the light can penetrate glass underwater. Anyway, it is her birthday and she tells me what she wants me to do with her body when she dies, how she wants to be donated to science, whisked away to a place where science can do what science does with the dead, until they reduce her to ash, which is the economical thing to do. All she wants, she says, is a light dinner, maybe a few prayers said in her memory, we could talk about her recipes, but I had more questions, like for one, what about a resurrection and how does a poem come to this?

DIANE K. MARTIN

CAT BABY

Was she a cat baby, was she a baby cat? She was not
a kitten. She was an infant deciding—or should we say

becoming—as we now know but not how the infant
becomes a man or woman—this babe though decidedly

human in aspect became a cat and hopped up on the dark
green 1950 Pontiac, chrome stripes blazing a trail down

the center of the hood, the car GM named for the town
where they made the car, which is named for the Odawa

chief Pontiac, who led his people against the British,
the car that brought this baby home from the hospital.

Cat baby, climbed up on the hood—stretched out,
purring, then curled up on the steel roof for a nap.

DIANE K. MARTIN

THREE'S A CROWD

By what design does an airline
allocate three seats on either side
of a narrow aisle? That day, mine
was the window seat, and next
to me a mom with babe to breast,
and on the aisle the guy she kissed—
so intimate a tendering—as
we lifted off and became airborne—
as if their bed was a carry-on,
and I a stowaway in it. Pretense
at sleep saved embarrassment;
the moment passed. Below, the world's
napped hills and vales unfurled.

NATHALIE KHANKAN

said on these storied soils | don't spoil any seed | there is no pure race |
a bride is still bridal | a checkpoint is **STILL TORN HILL** | in just a few
weeks topographical categories shift & our bodies move toward a lid with
a tighter seal | with the hill gone another concrete tower erupts & the
militarized sanitized | it's a border crossing running through continuous
land | if i get married i will get stuck here & my wedding *thōb* against the
bodies of busses jamming here | if i bear a child my engorged breasts here
| the human count is a crucible

NATHALIE KHANKAN

we live in a city on a hill & it belongs to god & shuttered cinemas | soils shimmer toward something grand | shattering in many parts | & cumin is pervasive | this is ramallah you see & much shapes up & many are digging | **WE CONSUME SUMMER** & habitable evenings | my ovaries have been in the hands of men on both sides | my sister skype between children from the left land | my follicles are not yet purring | she says *of course nothing will happen to me*

NATHALIE KHANKAN

may after may we remain on the bank | we leave & come back | we leave
one of us behind | one time i will leave the territory & a bridge will close
| basil is there to pull the plug on the refrigerator but he doesn't | how do
you raid a refrigerator | i gather my belonging in an urban center | it's a
different opening | **IT'S A LIVING SITUATION** | remorse return rejoice |
the headlines stay & human cargo | we wish we could master longer lines |
the walnut tree keeps giving | a little justice: arabic is a beautiful language

AMANDA LEAHY

LATE(R) FRAGMENT

after Raymond Carver

Just one memory: how, on the day I met you, you knelt into the earth,
and with your pocketknife, took from the soil the spinach you had
planted there, many months before.

How you gathered the wide leaves into a bouquet, and offered it up to me
like the beginning of a question.

AMANDA LEAHY

SEVEN SIMULTANEOUSLY OCCURRING PRESENT REALITIES OF YOU AND I

The One in Which We Never Meet

but in which I nonetheless see the distinct geometry of your face over and over again in dreams. Your eyebrows and the bridge of your nose are what I most often bring back with me, what I spend the rest of my life drawing and painting into the faces of other people, without ever understanding why.

The One in Which I Meet You as a Child

and I am old, and so never begin to love you, or even wonder what it would be like to love you. Your face is still your face but always so young that I cannot recognize it, especially beneath the bowl haircut. You only ever wear primary colors. I am saddened most by this one.

The One in Which We Are the Same Age and Meet in High School

is perhaps my favorite, because rather than being attracted to you, I find you insufferable now that you are just like everyone else. Still, we become great friends, learn how to do drugs together, and spend a month driving across the country after graduation, eating only at diners, calling each other “asshat,” and fucking every fourth day out of sheer boredom.

The One in Which Your Wife Leaves You and/or Dies,

and then your children become unmade, or give us their blessing and ask to be sent off to boarding school interminably. In any event, we eventually travel the continent in a beat-up Volkswagen Kombi listening to early Beatles, and spend every winter surfing in the Nicoya Peninsula until we are too old to walk. You don't ever miss any of them.

The One in Which We Do it Anyway

which is to say, almost this one, but with just slightly shifted colors. The first time I see your wife and daughter from afar in the supermarket, I vomit. The second time, too. Eventually, you stop communicating with me altogether.

But at least it happened.

The One in Which We Get Married and Grow Old Together

with our two perfect children and slew of dogs named after verbs, and fall out of love before twelve years have elapsed. But still knowing each other so completely, we function efficiently, homeostatically, and generally enjoy each other's company. And when you begin to imagine any of the girls who work for you while we're fucking, no, I don't ever say anything.

JASON TANDON

MY HAND IN THE LAMPLIGHT

My hand
in the lamplight
has good color,
is rosy in the joints.

My hand
in the lamplight
shakes.
I spread my fingers,
widen my palm.

My hand
in the lamplight
has good color
and shakes.

JASON TANDON

NOT WRITING

after Jane Kenyon

The hired men came in waders,
gaffed each plank
of our lone
delinquent dock
with a garden rake.

The wind blew.
The water churned.
The men
slipped and staggered.

SO, YOU'RE TOLD

'We've been here before.' 'No, we haven't.'
We'll both die speaking these truisms — none
the wiser among us, our sky rotating high above us.
Consider our breath leaving dashes
in the March breeze carried off until
indistinct among the furlough, many others.
What do we mean when we say, 'Enough?'
The stop to a circling? An end to this sen-
tence? In the corner of our vision a look
of defeat from the amateur thereminist
slowly takes over the dimming of hands
and the flattening of a pitch until none.
Maybe we've arrived at a place we're afraid
to contradict each other. Breathing has no
place to go but to take residence always,
a promise that cyclicity is gorgeous when
no one is looking. Our stories are best told
forgotten. If you don't catch yourself, they'll always.
Bach's sixth suite, *Sarabande*, is easily occasioned
at funeral or wedding. The smooth dips of bow
show how serious our faces can appear gazing at
something far off into the distance. Sweat drips off
the cellist's forehead. He's working through a death.
The audience feels as if something has stayed the same

THE ART CRITIC

My wife made me go down to the Art Institute last weekend. Her sister and my brother-in-law were in town for some fancy dinner for his work on Saturday night, so of course we had to entertain them all day long until it was time for them to get ready to go. He's some big shot insurance guy from Des Moines and was getting an award at one of the swank hotels on Michigan Avenue. My wife's sister is big into art and has to visit the museum every time she's in town. Fortunately for me, they only come once every few years. I'd much rather spend my weekends at home doing just about anything else.

By the time we got down there on Saturday, the place was already packed which never puts me in a great mood to begin with. When I have to go to the museum, I usually hang around in galleries where they have the really old art with naked women laying around eating grapes. At least that's something interesting to look at. This time we wandered through room after room for what seemed like hours, and then walked into this one gallery with all American art. There, in the middle of this room, with a couple people gawking at it, was a painting of four people sitting in an old restaurant on a street corner. This is one of the more famous paintings they have in the whole building. It's that one with the three people sitting in the diner and there's a soda jerk standing in a white uniform behind the counter. Sometimes you see it like with Elvis, Marilyn Monroe, James Dean and Bogart. That's the good version.

So, I stood in this gallery looking around and waiting for my brother-in-law to catch up, when this guy came out of nowhere, pranced into the gallery like he owned the place, and stood right in front of me with his friend. He was wearing a bright purple sweater with a big Polo logo on it and these tight gray pants. Swear to god they were so tight you could see this guy's Jockey shorts right through them. Where do guys get off wearing pants like that is what I want to know.

Anyway, he read the little card next to the painting aloud to his friend. Basically it said that the picture is of a diner that used to be in Greenwich Village and that it is all about loneliness in a big city. And then, he put his hand on his chin, like he was thinking about something, and said, "Or, is it?" After a dramatic pause, he waved his hands around and said to his friend, "David, I have a theory that *Nighthawks* has nothing really to do with what this gallery label suggests: loneliness, despair, urban emptiness. No. This painting is one hundred percent religious allegory from beginning to end."

And with that, he launched into this long speech about how this painting, of *a restaurant*, is all about religion. He started by talking about the four people in the painting. Here's what you got, you got a man and woman sitting to the left, a waiter or busboy wearing white behind the counter and some guy who is sitting on a counter stool.

"See, David, the three men in the painting represent the Holy

Trinity. God the father is standing behind the counter, dressed in all white, a color of purity, removed from the rest of the world by the counter, in the shape of a triangle mind you, which acts as a barrier between the realms of heaven and Earth. God the son is on the left. The red-haired woman wearing a red dress sitting next to him, on his left I might add, is Satan tempting Jesus, just like in the Bible when he was tempted in the desert. And the guy in front is the Holy Spirit. You know he's the Holy Spirit because with his back to you, his face is a mystery, and you never see him."

At one point, the guy got so close to the painting that the gallery attendant had to come over and tell him to step back like she was afraid he was going to knock it off the wall or something. And let me tell you, she was one gallery attendant you didn't want to tangle with.

But he kept on talking. Other people close to him heard what he was saying to his friend, and they started gathering around this guy like he's some kind of famous art critic. I thought to myself, this might get good, so I go over into the next room and get my wife, Rachel, because she would think this is hilarious. I made my way through all these people and finally found my wife and my sister-in-law, Anne, and told them, "You've gotta come listen to this guy. He thinks a painting in here is about Jesus getting tempted by some woman in a restaurant." By the time we got back, there were ten people standing around this guy listening to him tell his friend his theory about this painting, and they were hanging on every word.

"Count the visible stools at the counter. There are seven. Seven is a highly symbolic religious number, David. It is used over seven hundred times in the Bible. You know, God made the Earth in six days and rested on the seventh, calling it holy. The number seven has long been the symbol of perfection. It is also prominent in the book of Revelation; the seven seals, seven angels and seven trumpets. You know, you've read all that, right? Catholics even believe that there are seven gifts of the Holy Spirit which I believe makes perfect sense since the man representing the Holy Spirit is sitting on one of the seven stools in the painting."

Sure, perfect sense. Okay, so there are seven stools in the restaurant, but there's no symbolism there. I mean, come on, gifts of the Holy Spirit? Then he goes on to say that the seven stools are not the only reference to the number seven in the painting. By now, he had over fifteen people standing around him. So they all crammed in to look for another reference to the number seven.

"Do you all see it? Oh my, I think it's so obvious," he said. Then after like a whole minute of looking and trying to figure out where the other seven is, he finally let us all in on the joke.

"Look in the third window of the building across the street. The shadow," he said, "makes the outline of the number seven, right there." As he pointed to it the gallery attendant gave him another sharp look. She

was about to kick his ass, I swear. And she would have too. Everybody looked at the painting a little closer and about half of the people were like, “Oh yeah I see it,” and the others were like, “No, I don’t quite get it.” I sure as hell didn’t see it. It looked like just a regular window to me.

I looked over at Anne. She’s got a degree in art history from a tiny liberal arts college downstate. Now she works part time at the Hy-Vee flower counter making bouquets. Anyway, Anne was really paying attention to this guy and I couldn’t tell if the look on her face was genuine interest or outright skepticism.

“So, then if you look in the background, you see two tall shiny objects on the counter that you think at first must be a coffee machine or something because that’s what you would expect to see in a restaurant, right?” the guy said. “But what else do they look like in a religious context if you had to guess? Think of something in a church maybe.”

Then somebody from behind me — we were up to over twenty people standing around listening to this guy now — piped up and said, “A tabernacle?”

“Oh, you got it,” the guy said.

Anne looked over at me, then looked back at the guy and shook her head like she thought he had just gone way off the deep end. But he continued, “That’s right. One represents a tabernacle that you see in a Catholic church. The other represents a Torah case that holds the sacred scrolls in a synagogue. So what you have represented here then is the broader ideas signifying the common origins of Judaism and Christianity. And of course, the golden door in the back represents the portal into eternity.”

All the people around us were like, “Oh wow, this is really interesting.” Everyone thought he was on to something, except me and Anne that is. I was thinking to myself, it’s just a frigging picture of some people sitting in a diner in New York. But these people were lapping up this whole religion story like it was written in the Bible or something. The artist guy wasn’t thinking about any of that when he was painting this thing. He was probably just hoping this painting would sell so he could make a few bucks to cover rent for the month.

“It is all right here. I mean, I think it’s all so obvious I don’t know why someone hasn’t written a dissertation on this yet,” he said. “This painting, my friends, is a totally religious painting as much as any in the Vatican. It’s just in such a different and unfamiliar context that no one has ever recognized it before.”

When he finally shut up, the whole crowd around this guy started clapping like he was some kind of great art scholar or something, I swear. They stood there and clapped for this silly religious story he made up about this painting that is clearly nothing more than people hanging out in a restaurant smoking cigarettes.

So I looked over to Rachel, gave her a look and said, “Do you believe this crap?”

“I don’t know, maybe he has a point,” she said. “What do you know about art?”

“A point? Are you freaking kidding me?” I said. “This guy is so full of shit, his eyes are brown. And listen, just because I didn’t go to college doesn’t mean I don’t know anything about art.”

“I think maybe you’re both a little right,” Anne said. “Maybe he has a point, maybe he’s just high on something. It’s certainly a stretch, but it is an interesting story, which is what art is really about these days.”

Now that’s where I figured Anne was on to something. I’ll tell you what I know about art. It’s all bullshit. I was working a simple resurfacing job off I-90 a few months ago, listening to the radio on my headphones, like I usually do. They came on with this story about a statue that sold a few months ago in New York by this Jeff Koons guy. It was a stainless steel rabbit made to look like a fancy balloon animal that a circus clown tied together. It sold for ninety million dollars — the most money ever for a piece of art by a living artist. They said on the news that this guy never even touches his artwork. Like the guy doesn’t even make it himself, he has a whole studio of students — practically an art factory — who make the art for him. He comes up with the big ideas, then hands it off to his people to do the dirty work. I mean, how does someone call themselves an artist if they don’t actually *make* their own art? That’s because art is not about talent or craftsmanship anymore, it’s about the people buying it. When you really get down to it, it’s nothing but a big dick contest between some guy in the room at the auction house against some guy on the phone. Art has become nothing more than another luxury brand for those who can afford it, and the people who buy it live in their own fantasy world.

By the time lecture was over, my brother-in-law, Miles, finally entered the gallery and sprinted over to us.

“Are we ready to go?” he asked. “I don’t want to be late for the award dinner tonight.”

“We just got done listening to the guy over there tell everyone what he thought this diner painting was about,” I said.

“Yeah, he just gave a speech on the symbolism he saw in this painting,” said Anne. “Pop quiz. What do you think it’s about?”

“What, this one over here? Isn’t that *Nighthawks* or something like that?” said Miles.

“Yeah, that’s the one,” said Anne.

Miles looked at it for a few seconds and finally said, “Well, it’s about religion, right? Something about the woman in the red?”

“Wait, what did you just say?” Rachel asked.

“Religion. I think it’s about religion, right?” he said.

“Were you just in here when he was telling everyone about this painting?” asked Anne.

“No, I was in the next room looking at the Rothkos,” he said. “They’ve got some amazing pieces I’ve never seen here. Great color combinations. And can we get going? We really should go.”

“Because that is exactly what that smartass told everyone in here,” I said. “That this painting is all about the last temptation of Christ at Mel’s Diner.”

Rachel could barely wipe the surprised look off her face.

“You think this painting is about religion? If you didn’t hear this guy, how did you know that?” she asked.

“I don’t know. I had the poster in my room at college and I think one of my roommates wrote a paper on it for a class. He wasn’t very bright, so I thought everybody knew that. Anyway, Anne, it’s late. We should head out soon.”

“We will, I just want to see a couple other galleries then we can head out. It’s not that late. We’ll have plenty of time.”

It was another hour before Anne was ready to leave and by that time, Miles was getting really agitated because he thought there would never be enough time for them to get back to our place, change, and make it back downtown in time for the dinner. The guy was wound so tight I thought he was going to break out into hives.

We drove back to the house, traffic wasn’t too bad by Chicago standards. Miles sat next to me in the front seat, fidgeting on his phone.

“So, Miles, what’s this big award about?” I asked.

“Every year they recognize a top innovator from across the country. I’m one of five up for consideration tomorrow,” he said. “The client app I developed could save the company millions in administration costs every year. If they select my idea, this could mean really big things for us.”

“It’s like a promotion then?”

“No, not really. I mean, it could be. Earning this recognition could raise my profile in the company. Get me noticed by the guys at the top you know? The guy who won this award the year I started has his own office in Boca and makes over a mil per year.”

“Whoa, that much just selling insurance?”

“Insurance and financial products. I mean, personal finance is a complicated business. People need help with their money and we help regular folks figure it out so they have a nice nest egg to retire and make sure their family is protected.”

“Geez, what a racket.”

“Um, no, not a racket,” he said. “When you really think about it, it’s a noble pursuit. We take care of people. Life insurance so your wife and family are taken care of if you die. Health insurance so you can get the care you need when you need it. Investments so you can live on easy street when you retire. We help people reach and live the American dream. That’s what I do. I help people achieve their dreams.”

I didn't say much after that. I could tell he was stressed out about the night and I didn't want to be the dick who made it worse. But the rest of the ride I thought to myself, what the hell does this guy know about the American dream? I'm the guy in the real world here who works hard for a living. There's no cushy office with a latte machine in the break room for me. My break room is a Thermos on the tailgate of my truck. I have a real job. I build things. Perfect example, the highway we drove home on that night? Our crew took it all the way down to dirt two years ago and rebuilt more than twenty-five miles of it through one of the hottest summers on record. I'd like to see Miles spend one day out in that July heat. He'd be dead by lunch. I'm the guy he sees on the side of the road as he's speeding from the burbs, checking his Instagram at the stoplight on his way to his air-conditioned office. I earn every cent I take home and feel my hard work in my bones every night when I go to bed. And what, so I can get some award from the home office? No, just so I can barely put a roof over our heads and maybe save for vacation every couple of years.

When we got back to the house, they headed down to the basement to get ready while Rachel and I pulled out a few things in the kitchen for a snack. The basement is fixed up real nice. Sal, my buddy from work and I finished it off a couple years ago while we were laid off for the winter. It's a combination man cave and extra bedroom with a bathroom inside like at a hotel. I figured it would come in handy on occasions when friends come in to visit, plus it's a great space to have a few beers and watch the game.

I stood at the kitchen counter drinking a stout beer from Half Acre Brewery on the north side and watched Rachel pull some Wisconsin cheddar and summer sausage out of the refrigerator. She's really good at making a cheese and meat tray look like something you would see in a restaurant. Our living room and kitchen has that open concept thing going on, and from where I was standing, I could see the picture we picked up a couple years ago at a small art shop in Wisconsin. I walked over to the picture and looked at it really close, then stepped back from it and framed the picture with my fingers like you sometimes see people do in movies.

"What the hell are you doing?" Rachel asked.

"Well, I'm just looking at this fabulous piece of art on our wall here and wondering what it *really* means," I said.

"What are you talking about? That's our lighthouse in Door County."

"That's what you think it is, but clearly there's got to be something deeper going on here, right? I mean, did you happen to notice that tall erect thing in the background there? I wonder what *that* could possibly symbolize, huh?"

“Oh my god, stop,” she said. She laughed at me as she arranged some cheese on a plate.

“No, think about it. And the kayakers in the front along the shoreline, they’re being drawn by this beacon toward the light of salvation. Paddle toward the light children! Paddle toward the light.” I pretended to paddle a kayak as I walked toward Rachel. She laughed even harder. I reached my arms around her waist and gently kissed the back of her neck.

“Stop, I’m trying to get these crackers all lined up nice on the plate,” she said.

Every time I look at that picture, I think of that weekend. It was fall and we drove up there because Rachel wanted to look at all the leaves changing colors. We stayed at this great place called the Gordon Lodge on the edge of the North Bay. On our last morning there, we woke up early to take a walk along the shoreline and watch the sunrise. There was a path that led to a lighthouse that was on sort of an island jutting out into the bay. We found a large rock close to the water and snuggled up together on that crisp morning and watched the sky turn from a dull gray into brilliant red and orange as the sun peeked over the horizon. Never in my life had I seen such brilliant colors.

Later that day as we drove home, we stopped in one of those little tourist towns along the way. Rachel wanted to pick up a few knick-knacks to give to her friends at work. We walked into this one art gallery place and there on the back wall was a watercolor of the exact lighthouse where we sat and watched the sunrise earlier that morning. She fell in love with it on sight, but it was like two hundred and fifty bucks. I didn’t think we could afford it, but at the same time, I couldn’t tell her no either. I could see how much she really liked it and that it meant something to her because we were sitting right there in that spot. So I ended up putting it on the emergency credit card and figured I could pay it off with a little overtime. When we got home that afternoon, we hadn’t even unpacked yet and I already had it hung on the wall right where she wanted it.

After a while, we heard them talking downstairs through the vents, and things seemed to be getting a little heated. I guess I should have Sal over for a couple of beers so we can look at that. Maybe we forgot some insulation somewhere.

“Fuck, I should have just asked for the clip-on when I rented the tux. Why did I think I could tie a bow tie?”

“Come here, let me help you.”

“It has to be perfect. There’ll be pictures and they put it on the company intranet and it will be in the national newsletter.”

“It’ll be fine, you look great honey. You always do.”

“Did you order the Uber? We gotta go. Now.”

Rachel and I were in bed by the time they got back to our place, so we didn't see them again until morning. We had planned to go to brunch at our favorite place down the street from our house before Anne and Miles got on the road back to Iowa. I was making coffee when they both came upstairs with all their luggage in hand and coats on.

"So, Miles, let's see it. This big trophy, where is it?" I asked.

Anne gave me a sharp look that screamed, *shut up*.

"I think we're just going to head back early, if that's ok," Anne said. "We've got a six hour ride and a long week ahead of us."

"No, please stay," Rachel pleaded. "This place we're taking you has the most amazing avocado toast plus they were voted the best Bloody Marys in the entire city. They skewer a whole cheeseburger on a straw and put it in the drink. It's crazy."

"It's okay," Anne said. "Besides, Miles isn't feeling all that great this morning and he just wants to get home."

Miles looked like hell. The dark circles under his eyes and his pale complexion hinted at the amount he must have had to drink last night. Outside, he jumped in the passenger seat and waved through the window. We hugged Anne and watched as they drove away.

We took our coffee out to the front porch and sat on the bench swing. It was a beautiful spring morning and the neighborhood was just waking up. We entertained ourselves by making up stories of what we thought could have happened at the banquet last night. My guess was that Miles was so nervous that he started drinking early to calm his nerves, but ended up making an ass of himself in front of all the important people from the home office. Rachel thought maybe he didn't get the award he was so desperate for, and started drinking later in the evening to drown his misery.

"The guy was wound way too tight before he even walked out the door," I said. "My bet is he went to the bar, had one too many bracers and couldn't even spell his own name the rest of the night."

"Anne told me about the award and how much it meant to Miles while we were at the museum," she said. "I guess it was a small miracle that he was even nominated, but somehow he had convinced himself that he would win and they'd be set for life."

"Oh, Milsey will be fine. So what, they don't get a mansion in Miami. It's not like the place they have now is a dump. Five bedrooms and a pool, come on."

"I don't know. She said things haven't been right with him for a while now, and he's been acting all weird."

"How can she be so sure? Miles *is* weird. I mean, how can someone get so worked up about some trophy?"

"Yeah, I feel bad for him though, and my sister. They had already

made so many plans.”

“Well, that’s their own fault then. It’s just not good for people to believe too much of their own bullshit,” I said.

“Yeah, but people only believe the stories they tell themselves, no matter how ridiculous. And it’s a disaster when they find out there was never an ounce of truth in them.”

It would be much later in the evening when Anne called to tell us all that had happened. But, since it was still early and we were both hungry, Rachel and I walked down the street to our favorite cafe and ordered a couple Bloody Marys.

INTERNET SEARCHES, BRIEF HISTORY

1. HOW TO EAT AN APRICOT(!)

I am full of typo. I want to say to you:
forget everything the church taught you, early-ripe—

the only good thing about that place was leaving.
Call yourself pit-star, stone-god, kernel-in-the-forgetting.

Tuck it to sleep for evolution's sake. Swallow. Repeat.
I care about this kind of thing. Is it shallow to desire

2. GOOD RAMEN NEAR ME

so much useless knowledge, this haul? I buy
hundred-dollar knives but do not cook.

3. HOW TO PROPERLY CLEAN TEETH

Remains from the early Harappan periods show evidence
of teeth having been drilled dating back 9,000 years. There

are dental deserts in America. At night, I pick my teeth.
Clean is the river without a current, tainted by its own

4. WHERE DOES DONALD GLOVER LIVE IN ATLANTA

perfection. I care about this kind of thing. I care
about this kind of thing. Lovebird, it is near

5. LONG-DISTANCE RELATIONSHIP ADVICE

midnight in the south. Quora tells me to quit
my job and move to the Pacific Northwest. I care

about tenure-track jobs and Russian Formalism,
but care and also care but also... Yes. (Or perhaps

6. DO APRICOTS HAVE PITS??

Schrodinger's Apricot might exist
in its pitted and pitless beauty somewhere

on another site.) I have yet to decide whether
I want an answer to something so simple.

7. SUGAR IN APRICOTS

I have a cavity. Fifteen grams in one cup sliced.
The apricot is not real, but is pitted, this

metaphorical sugar a prompt for the aforementioned
care. I don't know why I've chosen to

8. WAIT, IS THERE CYANIDE IN APRICOT PITS?????????

include the wait, as though my computer might stop
churning to consider my pause, it its own machine

with its own machine-brain, cold and inhuman
as ever. But, an apricot kernel is often called a stone

and is known for containing amygdalin, a poisonous
compound. There is so much poison in the world, to say

how much,
I find sentimental.

9. CAN YOU DIE FRM CYANIDE

—

10. MOST COMMON CAUSE OF DEATH

Diseases of the heart

MARY GRIMM

SUMMER IS ONLY A CONSTRUCT

Sitting in the grass, discussing the nature of reality with an old friend while my daughter picked dandelions, crushing them against her fingers. These are yellow, she said, yellow yellow. My friend who was not a mother blew smoke at the sky. Don't you think being outside opens you up to life? I said. Isn't this what Sartre was getting at when he wrote Being and Nothingness? I still had a brain is what I was trying to say. The sun was hot. I don't know my friend said. I don't read Sartre any more. This is yellowy yellow, my daughter said. The dandelions bobbed and swayed. She rubbed them against her cheeks, and I pulled her hand away before the yellow got in her eyes.

MARY GRIMM

WHAT YOUR MOTHER WOULD SAY IF HER MOUTH WAS WHOLE

Be good, be careful Most people are good but there are some, just a few really Don't walk by yourself in the woods in the dark
Don't I loved you first not the best but first for I thought you wouldn't come I thought you would never come Drink orange juice every day
Take an aspirin if you're sick A little whiskey for cramps if you must
Oh, your grandfather had a temper oh he could get so mad but we learned how to stay out of the way Here on the other side my hair is the old golden of my childhood, no need to dye it anymore I can walk all day, can work until I'm tired and your father, your father, or was that before I meant to say more, to have said more I meant to tell you Pick out your furniture carefully, a piece at a time, one good piece to start and then
When I lay down in my last bed you spoke of snow, there was snow falling on that day, wasn't there Be good, was that it, or be careful Don't wear your hair in your face, show off your lovely face You know your father and I, you know we both You spoke of snow and I said yes, and then

CRAZY

Nutty, nuts, nutso, nutty as a fruitcake. / Demented, certifiable, cracked, kooky, daft, flipped, psycho. / Ape, batty, batshit, one who has too many bats / in the belfry, hog-wild, cuckoo, cuckoo, / for Cocoa Puffs. Insane, insane in the membrane, madcap, mad, / mad as a hatter. Bananas. Looney, looney tunes, / in the looney bin. Out there. Postal. Psycho. / Off one's box, off one's nut, off one's rocker, off / the deep end, off the wall. Moonstruck. One fry short / of a Happy Meal. Two cans short of a six-pack. / Round the bend. Screwy or having a screw loose. Bonkers. / Out of one's mind, out of one's tree, out / to lunch. One who needs a check-up / from the neck up. Messed up. 5150'ed. Touched. / Unbalanced, unhinged, unglued.

So many words
and phrases to name it, / only one moment to make it their new reality /
because the woman cannot face the old one anymore. She begs him / to see
this is not normal. This is not her / in the driver's seat any longer, but she
doesn't know / how to make the man see it. She calls Dr. M / who gives her
a counselor's number, but there is no one home / at the other end. Only a
If this is an emergency, please dial..., / which she does. Which she asks to
be admitted. Which makes him / stand up, stand back, stand in the face of
something he has / no plan for, has no way of talking her through, / and yet
has him now, finally, afraid / as she has begged him to be.

TRIAGE

Somehow, he parks in the exact same spot. Somehow, / he walks through the sliding door entrance, past the ER desk, / and to the unit's station. He asks to be let back to her, / but he will have to wait: just beyond that one last set of doors, / they are on lockdown. Someone has threatened / a guard, or his own life, the man is told.

And he is ready / to bust through, scoop her in his arms, and take her away. / He wonders about the romanticism of this gesture, / the joy he'd have in her telling this story all the years / remaining of their marriage, but he is weak. He follows / the rules, is too straight-laced to do much / of anything except wait like a child to be escorted to her side. / He waits, he lingers, he works the calculus / of what he will say to her demand to come home when clearly / she has not been ready, has not been handling this sickness, has only been / a danger to herself and the other inside her.

FROM *WHAT TO DO*

1.

If you have pets, make sure that they are put away, locked up, leashed. Make sure that you can't see their eyes. Close the curtains and turn up the air conditioning. Call the deli/gas station/grocery store/whoever sells ice and order at least three bags. Pull the vodka from the freezer. Stand in the kitchen with your hands wrapped around the bottle, numbing, until the ice arrives. Once you've paid the delivery person and closed the door, take the ice into the living room. Be sure to bring the vodka with you. Remove your couch cushions and replace them with the ice. You can turn on the television now if you like. Acceptable programming includes horror films, reality television about weddings, and documentaries about severe weather. Lie down on the ice and drink.

2.

Get in the shower, preferably when it is raining outside, preferably around one in the morning. Stay in there for at least an hour, ensuring that your loofah details every inch and crevasse. Get out of the shower, towel off, and put on your favorite tee shirt, your most worn-in jeans, comfortable shoes. Collect your wallet, keys, and any necessary medication. Take a train out to the airport, rent a car, and park as close as possible to the landing strip. Recline your seat and close your eyes.

13.

Strip. Cover your body in Post-It notes. Think about how it would feel to run through the streets screaming, dayglo feathers fluttering against your skin. Pop a pill and get in bed. Pile on the quilts. Drift into a deep, rustling sleep.

14.

Imagine what it would be like if your hand fell off, your dominant hand.
Imagine what it would be like if the moment that your hand fell off, after
just a bounce or two, it became a baby, your baby.

18.

Highway rest stops. Hotel lobbies. Grocery stores. Public high schools. Chain restaurants. Shopping malls.

These are the places where you may still be able to observe the Great American Payphone in the wild. But the outlook is grim. Numbers dwindle every year, and these gleaming black receivers with their flashing silver umbilicals and grand history of cinematic moments will not be with us forever. They've gone from threatened to endangered. Experts say they will be all but gone by the end of the next decade.

So go. Evenings and weekends. Holidays—national, religious, etc. Go in search of the remaining payphones. Take photographs. Take heart. Make a call.

CLAIRE MARIE STANCEK

[OUT FROM SLEEP'S DEWDARK CORRIDORS]

Out from sleep's dewdark corridors, still I write to you, am writing, dreamshadow contortedly, doubled up from waking's pain. Pain that returns to my body as my body returns to light. Pain returns in morning as light too returns to day, *as seasons return*, as Milton writes, so too does pain to me return.

Sunset on a window like a splat: black tree shadow, orange bright brilliance.

In my blurred heart, I hold Réjane Magloire and Rose Marie Ramsey's words, *last night a dj saved my life with a song*.

I hold my hands over the heat generated by caesura's charge: sparking air rubbed on both sides by sound.

CLAIRE MARIE STANCEK

[SOMETIMES THE VISIONARY EPIPHANY IS A SIMPLE ONE]

Sometimes the visionary epiphany is a simple one: wind.

When to call & when not to call. Against absence we measure our absence. Like a sudden seizing, cold air rushes the highrise, seals some doors at its random whim, building's breath, slapping hatches open & closed like gills. Even that blind god, the elevator, pauses, hovers mid-shaft under gustheavy force, a force present though unseen.

In my dream we ate ashes. Where are you? Your voice on the phone but the sidewalk charges ahead. The wail in the trees.

Your voice on the phone and in broken glass my image reflected, broken, a piece of neck, a partial ear, a snagged snakelike earphone wire.

O my love, what have we made of what we made.

wail] wintergreen

CLAIRE MARIE STANCEK

[WHEN LAYERS OF CONSCIOUSNESS ARE STRIPPED AWAY]

When layers of consciousness are stripped away: what kind of hearing is that? You reminded me that the word passion suggests not just strong emotion but also passivity.

I feel her rhythms in my ear all day and especially when I get into bed, the same way in which after spending the day swimming in the ocean, the waves continue to buffet one's body.

Death regarded my sleeping form. A hole through.

O green vigor of the rumpled nouns, tumbling.

Coleridge, bewildered by his baby's cries, rushed the infant Hartley out into nightingale night, to where the moon calmed the child, as it calmed himself in another poem, like friendship, and friendship's strength, imparting an abstracted absorption from which, childlike, he rose, and *found himself in prayer*.

O green vigor of the night air, dense with heavenly bodies made of cold and light.

FLASHES

The boy spoke with a butterfly's breath. Words I couldn't understand slipped into the caverns of his house. Absorbed by clay bricks. Mud held it all together. Straw lay in patches across the façade, letting in light. Letting in light and cold and rain and dust. He stood in the middle of the space. Grandfather nearby. Gaze forward. An old hand rested on the small of the boy's back. The boy's hands clenched his shorts pocket. He looked down at his sandaled feet, closed off and quiet. Dirt carpeted the floor. The latticed roof exposed each layer of material settled onto gnarled wood. Webs and spare straw clung to crevices in the cracked mud. Wrinkles spread from the humid Vietnam heat the season before. Heads nodding, pens scribbling, avoiding eye-contact. Whispers fluttered between the students, hanging in the cracks. Words not meant for the boy. Voices pooled in the center of the space, trapped by the barricade of bodies, suffocating the silence. The backs of mobile phones hid faces of the nineteen students crammed into the boy's house. Peeking gazes scattered around the room. Heads bobbing, bodies rooted at the spot. The boy stood still. Flash.

During my semester abroad in Vietnam, our group of nineteen American students followed a guide one Saturday into the village of Nghĩa Lộ (*Nee-ah Low*) as a "service-learning trip." We distributed fifty-pound sacks of rice, house by house, to a chosen handful of families, selected for their hardships. The other sacks were given in an assembly line of mothers at the town center, one-by-one. A single camera flash signaled the accepted toll for each sack of rice. A mugshot, guilty of poverty. Their children played American playground games with us, students capable of preschool-level Vietnamese learned in Hanoi, a different dialect than the one spoken in Nghĩa Lộ. A traditional game of Duck, Duck, Goose turned into Chicken, Chicken, Pig because those were the words we knew in Vietnamese. I never found out what they liked to play. I doubt they understood a word of our confident shouts. Sitting cross-legged on the ground, I peeled and stuck mini stickers onto one girl's delicate hand. She never met my eyes.

Our guide during this excursion highlighted that many of the families in this village eat one meal a day, mostly rice. Anything else is

extra. Our meals in Hanoi always featured some form of rice, from whole grain or noodle to rice flour baguette or spring roll wrapper, but only as a base. A foundation for more nutrition, more ingredients. A case to deposit flavor.

In rice countries as in wheat countries, everyone eats rice or wheat, but only the very poorest eat only rice or wheat.

As college students traveling from the US, we were thrilled by low-priced street food, where a bowl of pho might cost one US dollar. *This place is so cheap*, we would say. But the growing, processing, and cooking of the food was done for us, while the people we met in Nghĩa Lộ received the untouched grain for their meals. The rice we deposited would supplement one family's meal for three months, maybe four. Each dump of a fifty-pound sack of rice only lightened our load. Checked off the next box on our list toward enlightenment, or whatever people call it these days. Pictures were taken, handshakes given. The moment came and went in a flash, as if taken up by a breeze and snagged by a corner of a thatched roof, left to rot in a web of dust. Our savior mentality gleamed in the midday sun announcing to every member we passed that our so-called "humanitarian deeds" were worth noticing. I'm sure the locals spent as much time noticing us as we spend before each painting on a museum wall. Our Western morality banks, fueling our excursion in poverty tourism, clinked with humanitarian coins. Everything about our actions that day were glorified by calls home to hear *sweetie, you're changing the world or imagine what they would have done without you*. A load of bullshit. We acted as the Western world wanted us to act. We were told to feel relieved by our humanitarian aid, told to further ignite our superiority through our actions, or lack thereof. Each of my footsteps fell heavy on the dry earth, tugging at the base of my stomach. *I shouldn't even be here*. This was the first time in two months that I felt completely incapable of camouflage, our presence signaling like a lighthouse scanning for life on an empty sea. We arrived on a bus larger

than three local homes side by side and were chauffeured from one house to the next in constant motion, dropping off rice to each family before re-boarding our roomy, air-conditioned vehicle. The day's excursion was prefaced with the words *service* and *aid*, while the lack of physical action in my body left me numb.

Vietnam is generally a poor country. Understanding the ecological influence on the country's available produce and economy sheds light on the living situation of northern Vietnamese villages that rely on the land. The Red River runs in the north (where the village of Nghĩa Lộ is located), while the larger Mekong Delta fuels the south. The majority of the people, wealth, economic, and cultural capital of Vietnam are focused into these two regions centered around Hanoi up north and Ho Chi Minh City down south because these are the strongest areas for wet rice cultivation.

The pictures taken that day have an infinite shelf life. As we presented each blue and white striped sack of rice, the gesture froze into a photo opportunity. Reaching hands left reaching. Giving hands halted by a flash. Looking to capture or freeze the moment, when in reality it passed by without notice. Our group brought no medicine, no health information, no long-term support. Our help came in sacks heavy enough to engage our muscles for a well-timed photo, one that would praise our strength and pity their so-called hardship, inciting that “all-important” yet fabricated compassion from the Western audience that would see this footage.

We brought rice and cameras, nothing more. The photos we took were sent to a First World audience even before we left the village, our minds already directed towards our next adventure. A single moment in time branching out across the West, attracted to the foreign scene. Raising questions, seeking gratification. Rising jealousy from people

who wished they could get a *cool* photo like that. Unlike the rice we delivered, photos don't have an expiration date. They ferment. Views pile up, comments increase. Watching, never doing or witnessing the reality diverted by these photos. Money and resources are fueled into organizations promising relief to these corners of the world. Only some donations are given directly to families. Most donations finance more photos, influencing further streams of donations. The potential for familiarity spread thin. Each donation attempts to absolve the giver of the burden of care, a small fee for permission to forget the reason for the photo. The donor may get a thank you note, or even a gift to show the Western world appreciation for counterfeit global care. Once that momentary care passes, however, the village disappears, lost in our laundry lists of cares we are told to have. We move on to our next surface-level task without pause. The dramatized compassion of the Westerner is exhausted long before the sacks of rice are consumed.

Since the Red River is subject to rapid extremes in water level that lead to both drought and flood, the region's population suffers from ecological irregularity that trickles down into the cultural dynamic. As one Mekong Delta tour guide stated while gripping a ripe mango, "life is harder up north."

The young woman, ponytail down her back, limped from her front door. At least where a door might be. The makeshift ramp widened her unsteady gait. She made her way toward us, tucking a lock of hair behind her ear. Her smile spread as wide as the black gap between her teeth. Laugh lines stained the corners of her eyes. Deepening at each glance towards her children. The boy lead their pig with a twine string. The girl rested a hand on the animal's back. Away from the guests. A bright pink shirt reflected faux blush onto her face. We took a step closer. Closing in. Her gaze shifted around the crowd. Glancing frequently at the translator. The lump of students shifted to get a better view. Peering. Her

cracked smile frozen. She wilted with each question from the translator. Aware of the stares. A sea of imploring faces. Eager to document the moment. Smiles and bright light from the watching crowd caught on her white teeth. Flash.

A report from a French colonial administrator in the early 1860s detailed his suggestion to the Vietnamese people that they make their rice go further by stretching it with ground corn. Despite the high cost of rice at the time from political disruption, the Vietnamese were unreceptive to the idea.

Corn was used mostly for animal feed.

We cling to the concept of a picture equaling a thousand words because less thought is needed. Less communication, less intentionality, less anxiety, less frustration in our own lethargy. Simply frame the shot, click, and move on. We don't have to learn their language or step into their shoes. They fabricate extended moments, when in reality the photographer steps onto a moving walkway, turning to capture images that stand out. My memories of our trip to Nghĩa Lộ are not from any captured image. They come from the sea of anxiety and frustration frozen in my body. I remember the raised voices and the laughter from the crowd against the quiet faces on the people that stood center stage. I remember my own discomfort whenever I lifted my phone in front of my face. It felt heavy. I often slid it back into its pocket without a flash, knowing there would be countless photos from the day to look back on. Those photos would be filtered through, some deleted for lack of artistry, a few saved to admire the composition. Those photos might be shared with a family member or friend, maybe even a photography contest where the name of the artist would be pasted below. No one will ever know the woman's name in the photo. She becomes *Untitled* or named by the artist.

The picture acts as a boundary, a film stretched between our modern un-necessities and their daily lives that we insist on labeling

as *deplorable* or *heartbreaking*. Media tells us that squeezing into frame with a hungry child or a desperate mother inspires more praise than compassion from a Western audience, piling up the likes and comments for the person that pulls the camera trigger. Often the harm outweighs the good. A scene of poverty, hunger, dirt, once taken as a photo, hangs on a museum wall as art. What was once deplorable becomes raw, hauntingly beautiful, or even praise-worthy. These environments, places the Western world deems *uncharted*, become desirable for the artistically inclined searching for a rustic shot they don't have to manufacture. They don't have to form a relationship. A community's reality is treated as an artist's fantasy, consequently aligning the people in the photos with characters in stories. Immortalized in art, yet dehumanized in person.

The grandmother sat wide-legged on the bottom step of the stairs. Shoulders hunched. Elbows propped up against her knees. Wrinkled fingers spread as if separated by hard candies. Gaze set on a scene from her past. Parts of her eighty-five-year-old face drooped. A corner freckle gave her left eye a false wink. A vibrant green and red checkered scarf wound around her head. Frayed ends. Windblown. It covered crisp white hair. Her fatigued expression remained. Unyielding. Some students wandered the yard, losing interest. Seeing her grandson, she stood. He sat, wheelchair bound and bright-eyed. Her family home towered over her petite frame. Propped up on stilts. Flood prevention. A young boy tugged at weeds in a garden patch nearby. Flash.

While meat demands to be the center of attention of western dinner plates, rice humbly carries the meal in southeast Asia without stressing its importance. Rice is ground into flour to create the characteristic french baguettes that house bánh mì (sandwiches). Bún (noodles) are made from rice flour and are included in soups or used as a wrapper for a variety of cuốn (steamed rice paper wrapper for spring rolls or other packaged delicacies).

The camera originally required two hands: one cradling the side or bottom of the device, while the other frames the fingers in a pool-shot stance ready to click. Elbows hug the sides of the body, shoulders hunch down, we assumed a predatory stance. It's purpose: to take a photo. Everyone knew what the photographer was doing, and what photo was being taken. It requires intentionality. Photos are not always taken this way, with the careful framing of a shot, or even with permission. That cradling stance has been replaced by new technology that eliminates intimacy. More distance, less intentionality, more lethargy is created. The flash can be hidden, anonymous. It requires only one hand, one finger to do the job. A mode of stealth and secrecy. With the advancements in technology comes a retreat of intimacy. It has become a safety blanket, passive protection from the unknown scene before us, in defense against the fear of relinquishing control to a new experience. It allows us to keep moving. We fill the void before the void consumes us, so we can escape. We reach to imprison these moments in a physical form we never truly see without them. We have become terrified of relinquishing ourselves to a new world that we rely on frozen images to drag the world back home.

In many of the poorer communities, the phrases “there is no money” and “there is no rice” are used interchangeably because rice is money. If there was any money, they would buy rice.

The smallest face in the room. Round and adorned by her wispy, brown cap of hair. She made no intention of addressing the growing crowd. Less than three years old and dressed in the traditional colors of her people. A green and blue woven sleeveless dress over a fuschia long-sleeved shirt. Strappy sandals on her quiet feet. She had full, hazel moons for eyes. Cowering on all fours behind pairs of knees. Her stern gaze soaked in the surrounding chaos. American students and local children weaving a maze around the room. Running. Screaming. Laughing. She

remained still. Seated on the ground, feet flat in front. My toes tapped a greeting. Watching. Listening. Waiting. Her eyes locked onto my feet. Inhale. Exhale. Sandaled feet, one buckle undone, tapped the ground in response.

Revered with significance due to the rigorous and time consuming cultivation required for a single grain of rice, it is a cultural expectation, especially among the older population, that each consumer finish every grain given to them.

Our brains left the village filled with new information and problems to consider, while the families were left momentarily satisfied. We didn't know their favorite foods, their hopes for their children, or even their names. If I knew their names once, I have forgotten. They are not presented as people, but skewed impressions of people to be changed. *Their simple lifestyle is uncivilized. Their character primitive.* These false impressions remain along with my emotional memory, taken by the curdle in my stomach from a day of confusion, of anger towards the relationships we failed to create. Our alien presence. Hands shoved in the faces of children, trapped by indiscernible smiles of people they'd never see again. White faces squeezing into the frame to falsify friendship and connection only to rip ourselves away again. The cooing sounds of pity that generated our savior soundtrack. While the emotions become dull with time, the aid we brought disappears. When hunger returned to the village of Nghĩa Lộ, we would not.

I wanted to share a meal with them. To have their lifestyle claim authority over our ignorance. I wanted the grandmother to show me how to make rice. To remember the day from the way the rough grain felt in my cold, wet hands. How her cracked palm guided mine. Then we would sit on the front stoop and wait, silence building a barricade against more questions. I wanted to learn a lesson in observation from the little girl. To remember the day through her eyes, her only task lived

in the present moment. I wanted the mother, bursting with pride, to show me how she loves her children. Did she sing to them at night? I wondered what conversations looked like around their table. I wanted to work with the people, side by side, allowing their knowledge to thrive, to be set to task on whatever *they* wanted. Not what little we came with to give. I wanted to be made humble by my witness of their actions, not our stream of questions. I craved an intimacy with the quiet town, with the faces that watched us come and go. Did they watch us from their homes like floats in a parade? Dropping candy to anyone who would witness the performance. What did we sound like, or look like, to them? I remember the day in flashes, patched together out of order like a scrapbook. The edges of each snapshot curling away from the page over time, fading in color.

2001

Sophomore year, I moved with three friends to an off-campus apartment, because we were tired of sneaking beer into La Salle's dorms and getting into trouble with the RA (we had already been written up twice and forced to go to alcohol counseling for a semester). We filled a sock drawer with bottles of whiskey and rum, and one roommate brought two pounds of pot, which lasted a couple weeks. Like the college boy stereotypes we were, we maintained a collection of empty bottles in our window sill, which I periodically rotated and dusted to keep them looking fresh. I stood sometimes in the courtyard and admired our bottles from the outside, wondering if passersby ever envied us. My world was so small then. All day, we told stories about how drunk we had been on previous nights, including meticulous counts of which beers we'd had, and how long it had taken us to drink them. Half of these stories were true and half of those we forgot before we finished telling them.

I had begun dating LauraBeth in February, and I still didn't know how to navigate our relationship. Over the summer, I often borrowed my dad's minivan to drive to her house in Jersey, and though I'd promised to be home by midnight, I would leave after 1 AM, driving home fast enough that I hoped to somehow make time go in reverse (I also got three speeding tickets in two weeks). She had met my parents and I'd met hers, and we were in all ways an official couple. Still, I was afraid my friends would judge me as a sellout if I was with her too much on campus. The last thing I wanted was to be one of those nauseating college couples that spends every moment together, so that they meld into one unwieldy and insecure non-person. I wouldn't commit to specific plans with her, and if we ran into each other at the dining hall, I sat at a table far away. I thought about her constantly, but never said so out loud. The last thing I wanted was for people to think I was in love. She was already the most important person in my life, and she is the most important person in this book. I have known her almost as long as I knew my own dad.

I worked Friday nights, taking two buses back home after class for a 5-1 shift at a famous cheesesteak shop, followed by a 10-5 on Saturday morning. I got paid \$10 per hour under the table, so every Saturday I returned to campus with \$170 in my pocket, making me much richer than my friends with work study jobs. One Friday after classes, she invited me back to her dorm, but I told her I wanted to stop by my apartment instead. We got into what I thought was a lighthearted argument about how I was neglecting her, and she started

crying for reasons I was too self-absorbed to understand; I took her tears as a personal affront, and I wanted to do something to reassert my independence. My roommates were standing across the street waiting for me, so I sprinted toward them, planning on tackling one of them, the most masculine thing I could think of. Before I reached him, I slipped in a puddle of oil and sprained my ankle badly enough that I could barely stand. I had sprained my ankle many times playing soccer, and I would do so several more times over the ensuing years, but this one was the worst of them all. After sitting with ice on my ankle for a half hour, I was still in enough pain that I had to call out of work. I should have gone to the hospital, and if I had, maybe I wouldn't have spent the next fifteen years limping around my house, sometimes afraid to go up the stairs because the pain might be so great that I wouldn't be able to make it.

Throughout my twenties, I assumed I would just have to live with this pain—inconsistent, but intense enough that it could drop me to my knees. On vacations, we wandered through strange cities on foot, knowing it was possible I would suddenly be rendered immobile. In 2017, a new pain emerged, a steady burning just above the medial bone. Finally, I saw a doctor, assuming I would need surgery and months of painful rehab and then follow-up surgeries. The doctor said my right deltoid ligament was gone completely, replaced by scar tissue. “No wonder it hurts,” he said, pressing on it, making it hurt. But there was no surgery required. After one steroid injection and five weeks of physical therapy, I was pain-free for the first time since college. It was so easy I couldn't believe it.

After I called out of work the day of the sprain, we decided to throw a party to celebrate my first Friday night ever on campus. We got our beer from a corner store in the neighborhood where nobody checked ID and we had to slide a pile of bills through a slot in bulletproof glass six inches thick. You could get 40-ounce bottles of Olde English for \$3.50 each if you were feeling fancy, but you could get Private Stock for \$2.50 and Country Club for \$2. The cops didn't care about underage kids buying beer because they had bigger things to worry about in North Philly. The guys playing basketball across the street didn't care about us either; we were just tourists in their world, and next year we would be replaced by some new kids trying to recreate a Dr. Dre video in their dorms.

I was drunk by five, when my shift would have started. LauraBeth came over before most of the other guests, still upset with

me but also concerned about my ankle. I have a picture of her from that night holding a bottle of Olde E, and she's smiling more comfortably than she does in most pictures from that time. She looks relaxed and happy. Probably she was actually very worried, about my pain, about the noise we were making, about my self-destructiveness, but she'd gotten very good at hiding it already. If you look long enough at a picture, you can see whatever you want.

What happened at the party doesn't matter. What matters is the ankle, and the damage we do to ourselves because we think it's funny and we're too young to care what happens next. You do stupid things and forty years and later your body lives with the consequences, the aching knees and the creaky neck and the damaged heart. Your funny stories become throbbing reminders of your mortality. The ghosts live inside your bad bones.

At one of my final physical therapy appointments, I was rocking on a balance board, training my body to stand correctly, and listening to two elderly women discuss their ailments. The conversation had begun with one woman saying, "You look good," and the other responding: "I look like yesterday's meatloaf." She talked about her physical breakdown, how hard it was to build enough strength to lift her feet over minor obstacles, how she could feel her vertebrae grinding together. "Sometimes I try to explain it and all my words leave me," she said.

The first woman changed the subject to men, their unreliability and general badness. Her husband had died years ago and she was glad he was dead. Another man at her senior living complex had been rude to her that morning. "So you know me: I gave him two fuck yous. That's the only way to handle it." She looked at one of the young female trainers. "If some man gives you trouble, you give him two fuck yous. One is not enough."

The second woman followed with a story about being young and stuck in traffic with a man she didn't love. "I was so mad at everyone, and I didn't know what to do. So I got right up out of that car. I told him fuck you and then I walked up to the intersection. There was a cop on one of those police horses, and I started cursing that horse out on the spot." She wrapped a resistance band around the arch of her foot and pulled. "That was the last time I ever let a man treat me like that. And I never liked horses anyway."

What I'm saying is: if I hadn't slipped in oil back then, maybe I never would have heard this conversation, and what would have been the point of a life without it?

MOTIVES

Never mind about the dream, no one likes to listen
to those stories. I woke up to myself, stealing
grapes from the fridge somehow didn't choke
but wondered what would happen if I did—no one
to leave a penny to, no wishing fountain wide
enough to catch my breath. I want to leave you
because I'm not perfect. You are already in it,
the rest of our lives, slogging through with mud
boots up to your knees while I seep through
every crack in the ground. One minute
I am eating chocolate fondue and the next you are
static. The porch, woods detach from form, my eyes
can't track and you are the only color. I feel water
in slow motion when you say a plump rain drop
fell on your foot. Can you hear me calling?
The rain is an electric wire, perfectly taut.

THE BUKOWSKI

Time is only moments, dripping
down the side of a martini glass
like the sap of a solo maraschino
and the sun sets straight at me
but I can't tell if I'm burning
too bright like I usually do or—
if I'm talking about a character
fault. What if my every movement
is a symptom of some other
moment? Maybe I forgot
about the seat at the table
because I didn't know I was invited.
There are things we can't see
through, but I'm going to drink
until I can see through this glass,
navigate the foam on the rim
for meaning like tea leaves
or palms. Yes. I'll do that and call
it "The Bukowski." I'll take more
and more men to bed until I sip
whiskey with one ice cube in just
a t-shirt and stay up until 4 am
and state the truth in such a simple
way that everyone begins to hate me.
I'll always have more to say but take
breaks to fuck and smoke and drink
a cup of coffee with the newspaper.
I'll never feel full, of food or anything,
except sometimes I'll believe I'm
full of shit. No matter. Everyone will
know about it and more and more
people will hate me.

LAURA BANDY

CHARLEY HORSE

While you sleep, decisions are made. Your body,
so long on your side, casually switches allegiances

and seizes territory, like a guest suddenly lunging
across the dinner table at their host. If this were war,

and it is, you just lost. Aerial view, a drone might survey
the damage; rough terrain, expanse of sweaty limbs surprised

into agonized spasm, eyes squeezed shut. You're dreaming, sure,
but the pain is real, the way they say a patient feels everything

on the operating table, then forgets. This is night. In day, thoughts
and bones remain your own, right? You're awake, it only feels

like dream, like starring in your own surreal show. Take this scene—
that's you front of class, brain blown at the faces. Keen and raw like baby
birds

who wait on your worm words, they yawn covertly under bangs and
baseball caps, smile
shyly at their feet. Late teens, all are beautiful; shiny, a little zitty,
seemingly unconcerned

with the grammar test that's next. One student breathes the periodic table
for another class, her mouth forming Hydrogen, Nitrogen, Noble Gas.

Two boys softly toss a hackey sack back and forth between their rows,
ignore
minor glowering from those in the seams. Crossfire does not bother most,

head-phoned and Apple-Androided as they are, and then the bell sounds
and you
announce the day's vocabulary word; *lade*, you say, which makes them
laugh even

when you clarify, *past form of laden, to put a load or burden on.*

Something goes wrong then,
they stop paying attention because a bell is ringing again but shriller,
more insistent and

from everywhere at once. When you freeze, they are kinder than they
need to be.

This must be your first, one says, gets up to close and lock the door

while the others, in pairs and silent, turn heavy tables over.

DAN KAPLAN

THE CALENDAR OF EXCLUSIVE EVENTS

To the extent we are combing details
my do has never looked better.

Moreover, I have no beef with aging
and rarely am lonely on the beach.

Among the sundry pursuits, you probably heard—
an honorable calling.

The calendar of exclusive events begins this Shunday
and there's no turning back.

The good news: the rigmarole at the packing plant
is finally under wraps.

Spotlight this kind of production
and it barely comes to a head.

Should there be a holdup, I would point to
the indicia, a fine snow on the city.

DAN KAPLAN

POT PIES ARE BACK

Dispatch on the marquee: *Pot pies are back.*

They are. Pot pies are back.

The rope swing deposits children into the river. The franchisees are up to
their waists
in condensed cream. Pot pies are back.

Base: poplar. Exponent: squirrel. The dogs exhaust
the picnic baskets. Logarithm: Pot pies are back.

On return to Ithaca, shedding the disguise and firing up
the calisthenics, Odysseus exclaimed: “[I’m paraphrasing].”

Not for the assholes in the capital pushing an Accord
through construction, pot pies are back.

The children spread through the meadows. They tackle. It can only
mean one thing. It can mean only one thing.

WAX LIPS

Staring at the wax red lips put out for sale after Valentine’s Day, the mother asks her daughter in a tone of public parent, one of those fond of conducting pop quizzes to prove whether or not the child at their side out in the world is the same child they see at home and whose knowledge is a mirror of their own knowledge — a parent capable of an at times casual and at times urgent game of echo, which, under the terms defined here, is really a game of trying to hear one’s self — “Now, sweetie, what are these?” only to hear “kisses” shot back at her — and because the self is intact like a waterfall, that is, a thing ever-changing and whose ever-changing ways make up its essence, the mother says “Yes, kisses” and for a moment all that lips could be and have been and will be is pushed aside, drowned out by the silence between mother and daughter, a self and a self-in-progress, which are the same really, you can tell by the nose.

PAVLOVIAN

A man recognizes me at the diner where I am having breakfast on my day off, says “Hey, Starbucks,” and there exists between us suddenly, and without persuasion (not to say anything about permission), not quite a bond exactly, more like a nerve, a call and response, where he is Pavlov’s dog and I am the bell rung to his awareness, a peal of recognition and action from his body — and suddenly I’ve become the background in the city where this man lives as anyone lives, going from place to place and name to name, each one adopted into memory, only in his city of faces I am not myself but a streetlamp glowing orange in the middle of the park, the end of the sidewalk down a residential street, the abandoned car in a lot where a green siren breaks the early morning dark and I stand in my own city (unbeknownst to him) with the tired-of-your-shit expression of who I really am.

KAYLA ELLENBECKER

TUESDAY AGAIN (ONE)

I paint on window panes to make this particular return
Hollow fictions out of fog
Loosing condensation from asylum
Wrapped in sheets of glass I lie into myself
Press against cool vacancy
Flat palms uncup nothing, uncoupled
Perennial gloom may also produce an agitated solution and quicker step
I hatch spiders in my long hair
Settle clusters behind cupboard doors
Little girls look up at me shining

KAYLA ELLENBECKER

TUESDAY AGAIN (THREE)

A single leer directs my hands to dishwater
I listen as my daughter tells me three goddesses start a war
By promising things to men
My own mother taught me how to properly hold my breath
A way to roll my disgust perfect round between my palms is to break my
 face into a smile
Slick roots glance off hurriedly scooped up soil
We are picking cloud shapes from puckered ceiling paint
As I tug the twin fibers of my arching back towards a yolk
I am sheltering a wild optimism by eradicating all the commas

THE MEN ON THE ROOF

The men on the roof wear hard hats on top of their baseball caps and don't stay the recommended six feet apart. They stomp around and hug and throw their arms out while they improv a tap dance. They take turns peering over the edge of the building. They are glowing neon and cranking the music up. *Hello down there*, they say to the kid still on training wheels. She puts her elbows up and pedals away pink. The stack of plywood on the ground says EXT or EAT. Don't let it get your goat, unless your goat's been got already. Turn the hammering into an eight-count, or news: *Today we will report the numbers, but first we want to hear from you*. Everybody's a team now. Everybody's stronger together. Except for the men on the roof, who have always been strong. They don't go home over lunch to take an online core-building yoga class. They aren't craving definition. They were all born in the Year of the Rat, likable by all, and the last shall be first. They throw us a rope, say *Hold on*. Do they know how we look up to them? The men on the roof will save the world with safety vests and face masks. With Yuengling. Bobcats.

MADDIE POSPISIL

PETER GETS CABIN FEVER DAY 2 AND LEAVES THE HOUSE

while I am still waking up. I pad after him in my robe
with hand sanitizer and a miniature disinfectant spray
I accidentally took on the plane last week, said, *What's the worst that can happen,*
and never even used it in Texas. Take this meatloaf sandwich.
Take this cheap Heaven Hill whiskey. There are two purple crocuses
among the grass down the street, I saw them just the other day and
crouched, embarrassed and wishing I wasn't, to see their thin saffron
stamens. Lilac striped cups like last year in St. George, my Kansas.
Abby is making wine in South Africa. My family is arriving home
from North Platte. Kyle is knocking down the kitchen wall for
his new baby, Alma. And we built Titus a bookshelf when he moved
to Kentucky — one from Ikea, we spread a rug on the floor and
snapped dozens of nubs into place, never quite sure

if they would hold. Peter is in a tower you can see from
anywhere in town. I am waiting to learn the name of the man
in *Invisible Man*, I am waiting on the market to tell me where
to move. Halfway through now, where is it? Where,
the collected? The quilt on the end of the bed? This guinea fowl
nest at the edge of the woods. I discovered the crocus,
the loaf pan, each building, my own to leave and to reveal.

MARY BIDDINGER

HEAVEN AND ITS CHOPPY WATER

I felt better on a lake as if
otherwise something was missing
like the time we baked with oil
instead of water or tried to trim
the lawn with kitchen scissors.
We owned two lamps and had to
carry them from room to room
like torches. We smelled of Borax
or spider webs, our house mostly
attic space with curtains for doors,
and we'd play a game with friends:
who could sprawl across the bed
then touch all four walls at once.
One time a squirrel sat on the stove
and we just watched. One day rain
coasted under the locked door.
I was either waiting to arrive or
to leave. All night two red beads
on a string slapped their wasp
concert against the screen.

MARY BIDDINGER

GRAY HORSE

I wanted to be out in the field
and then I was overwhelmed by the size

of the field, so I wished to be smaller
like the width of a grasshopper

yet even then I would be too large for some
crevices, like the space between

floorboards where the stealth
spiders tucked their legs when anyone

padded by in socks, and though
the room was so dim I wanted no candle

or lantern after lightning hit the window
in my grandfather's study

which had chestnut cork on all the walls
and we only had one guitar

which I took into the bathroom
so embarrassed at what I was attempting

to play, after Coal Miner's Daughter lit
me like a hammock left out

in a hail storm, and I would suddenly now
remember riding a gray horse

across the field as a child in new corduroys
while the birds harvested favorite

invisibles and the horizon slipped
out of its off-shoulder blouse and vanished.

KARLA KELSEY

PHOENIX UNDER WATER

You've insisted even in inner intimate spaces on suit and hat as if
Protecting your many shades of silver against the rituals of air, of me
Of I-as-nude reclined then relishing the petalishness, the coquettishness
Yes, I admit, of silk on skin, silk enjoyed even without you, silk so *o-o-o*
Because in the end what isn't abandoned to soft cutting. Because radio

Never had been arbitrary, invective martial-playing in the background
As I-the-protagonist unclench and open to moth, bird, breath flying out
Flying past your gray suited shoulder but how otherwise navigate such
A moment of being interior while outside such scenes *so empty* we text
In our language to the moon. *And so crowded* we add, typing into space

With our thumbs as our protagonist stalls and I might as well admit I
Stall too, a tribe of alien deer before the mirror's oracular yawn pulsing
With *now-now-now* or *when-when* until we remember ourselves, which
Means arranging and rearranging our hair and therefore with this gesture
I once again singular, human, am aware, very aware, that underneath

The music "you are a void" a voice says, accusing me with the murmur
Of our lost planet. "Or," the voice says, "you are at best a far-away fort
Fitted out with an inner lake of swans not only white but because crude
Oil, because dimness of the sun, perversely white" and yes, it is true, I
Have joined the recipients, the payees, legatees, that demand as tribute

From the Southern continent the best of its flowers, sending in return
Tax, extortion—let's call it what it is—and yes, I confess, like all the rest
I order online roses big as our cat's head, orchids delicate the way coral
Must have been delicate and I feel so generous, so beautiful, so violin as I
Film my white hand placing one of those fat roses next to Bastet's head

Muttering like the others *I grew this in my very own garden* which we all know
Is a lie, or I fake an intimacy-of-names with *these are from the corner bodega*,
Sam's sourced organic for years. We all of us say such things, pretend we're pure,
We, that is to say, with the exception of you, truth-imperious head on our
Pillow, Bastet curled at your side. Reclined, you still wear your suit, body

I know, am the only one who knows, never-endingly silver, you in your
Radio voice pronouncing me "a dry moon slithering across the nation day
In, day out, such a dumb silence." You avoid allegiance, yet transaction
Nonetheless thickens your voice while we who twist fabric remnants into
Flowers mistake for freedom a barefoot step on sand, give ourselves away.

BEAUTIFUL PLENTY

At 30, my father drove a Cadillac in all weather. Maple seeds spun down onto the wax job of a hood, a black hood, black his preferred color in automobiles. He owned two Cadillacs. His and hers. Both of which he forfeited divorcing my mother, who saw not a cent. When the divorce was final, he remarried. Had a child with another woman. Said that wasn't what he wanted, another family. Some weekends, he came around. We'd go on walks. I remember walking by the river in Dayton. He said, *You know five rivers converge here* and named four out of five by a botanical gardens gemmy with rain. Then he said, *That's the Great Miami* and looked off in the direction of an orchard, the bright and unforgettable scent of the ripe fruit the definition of Beautiful Plenty. On a bank, a rotted boat sat. Someone said every boat, new or old, is looking for a place to sink. And he said something similar, my father, no fan of boats. Maybe he supposed the one we saw was like their marriage: as gone to rot and about useless as the oars to row it. My parents were poor kids from eastern Kentucky who spoke a language of want I wasn't fluent in. We never saw plenty again, thanks to him. It was around that time my mother got a job in a factory. Which must have pissed her off. Because she got tough with the world and with herself. Tough and satisfied because her face and Ava Gardner outline glistened brighter than anyone with a beating heart when she stood anywhere near that next car he kept so immaculate you could see a version of yourself in every shiny, midnight-black inch of fender and hood. And when they got remarried, there was the matter of the kid he'd had. Which she made him support, though she wrote out the monthly checks herself and stamped and mailed them. Just to be sure.

CHARLES KELL

DEAD LETTER OFFICE

I wake in the cemetery,
raise my finger
to the foggy sky & draw
a slanted mausoleum.

Place what's left of my
father's ashes inside its mauve
walls. Prop the door with mother's
wooden leg. Carve a window

in the granite so my last
phantom has air to visit.
Each suicide is a successful
attempt at sublimation

the gravedigger warned me.
I am crawling naked
in circles on a mountain
of femur-shaped spirea.

This is what the Bible
promised. I am
a beetle fingers & toes
wiggle in the wind.

CHARLES KELL

GENET AMONG THE CEMETERY

I let wax drip from the suspended
candle onto my shadow

covered hip, hold the struck match
a second from my lips to feel

the near blister rise. Think
about the week I spent in grey Paris,

wandering in a meth-machine
fever, stumbling into a half-open

mausoleum, where inside its web-strewn
walls I took off my clothes, clenched

a piece of chalk in my fist and traced
each crack onto a damp roll

of parchment. I was broke, running in the rain.
I didn't believe yet started to pray:

O Thief of Roses, let my scab-scraped
knees become reliquaries for the future

nights dreamt upon this altar, for one
day I will turn them into slippery

broken marble with my fist full of violins,
where time suspends, where skin vibrates.

HUGO GONE MISSING

Hugo has disappeared and maybe he has died. It would be hard to know for sure since there has been no notice in the paper. But Molly said so and no one contradicted her, never did, so it must be so, even though there's no evidence that Cal, our cop, knows about and no body has been found.

We wonder when it will all come out in the open, even if he killed himself and nobody told, and didn't put it in the paper because it was nobody's business, even if we'd all known him since we were kids together and some of us thought that he might could kill somebody someday, even if we never thought it would be himself he did it to, although Johnny once told him he ought to, or he might do it for him if he didn't stop staring at his girl the way he did. Hugo had just changed his look but Johnny hadn't noticed, and Jeanie, that's Johnny's wife now, never did tell him. She always just smiled and sort of hid her face with her hand, the way she always had.

When a week went by and there was nothing more, most of us just quit worrying about it and thought that Hugo would turn up and laugh at all of us the way he often did, had

since he was just a kid. But Carolyn, who had always lived in the library and knew all kinds of things, said she'd find out one way or the other if it was the last thing she ever did. That made us think that Carolyn really did care for Hugo, the way Margaret and Holly always said, and always laughed, which always made Carolyn blush. Hank said she hid behind her books, always had. No one paid much attention to Hank though, never had, not much between his ears, even his aunt, who raised him, always said.

In the end Hugo never did come back—if he had gone away—and no one ever knew what happened, or where he went, or if he was dead, and not just disappeared, and why, and all the other kinds of things that others imagined, or made up, and talked about for years, until most of us were dead too and didn't care about much, one way or the other.

THE BALLAD OF THE PANTERA NEGRA

*It has come to this, hija, she remembered. It has come down to this, she once heard her great-grandmother say, to the shame that consumes the lives of my children, my neighbors, this sickly body, but she could find no possible way to respond, to react in kind; there was no triggering of electrical pulses with which to set shoulders or fists in motion. There were no words to complement the range of calamities so eloquently detailed in the beaten, discolored diary once kept by the women in her family and passed down to succeeding generations, and whose origins lie in the manifests of slave ships bound for Barbadian ports from Bristol and Liverpool, from Lisboa to the scum rising in Recife, from Catalonia to Cartagena's burned shoreline. So burned by the light of the golden cross were those sands, its peculiar strain later recorded onto leaves as the heat of locust swarms elevating in the fields. This was a heat so punishing, a heat so grave and resolute, that no man could ever fail to repeat the warning: *the infernal wave covered them, ate them, took them away*, out of the fear that sons & daughters would suffer the same indignity that had proven itself a stain on the Veracruz family—living within their cells, grafting onto layers of blood as history, their chained dogs reduced to shocks of marrow and gunpowder.*

The dread-current stalked the pilgrim's length of migration, as though a *pantera negra* reflected in streams, those caravans moving in a silence so profound that even children were unable to interpret the diamond-pressure in their fingertips or photograph the swollen casks of their bellies, veined growths borne not of hunger, but of a much quieter desperation; in this she found no manner of speaking, and she tired of the thought of needing to speak, of needing to provide *ausilio* to her great-grandmother, a woman with enough relics in her chest to overwhelm cities and statues of soapstone overlooking harbors, but lacking the pleas to confirm the full extent of human frailty, the letters of each phrase loosening from each other as though a net, engorged with the day's benediction, cut loose from its owner by the tide and lost to the unrepentant sea. Absent now are the flags to describe the shame that has kept her people from marking their names on dirt roads with oiled hair and their afterbirths, absent are the words in memory's language to denote the disintegration, softer, of the present; perpetually absent is the shiv with which to carve *jamás* onto her own tongue.

ASHLEY KEYSER

ULTIMA THULE

The craft's sussing out the object at New Year's,
objective term for the not-yet-known *thing*.
MU₆₉: maybe two asteroids, gravity-locked, sixty-nining,

swims in the deep end of Pluto's demoted sphere
among Kuiper belt comets and ices, and newly
nicknamed for what's furthest-than, *Ultima Thule*.

Thule—founded by armchair buccaneers
who mixed it up with Orkney, Smøla, Iceland, Ireland.
Sea pigs, lobsters, orcas with fangs beset the island

plotted variously on their fudged, phantasmagoric atlases,
home to millet-eaters on fields viscous as jellyfish,
or to riders painted blue, brandishing scythes.

Its orchards flourished in midnight sun or lightless
on the world's roof. Its giants reproduced like flowers.
Third eyes blinked between their golden brows.

Mystics traced a homeland, fugitive as Atlantis,
to find their origin: wind draining forefathers of melanin,
eyes arctic blue, blue blood crazing the skin,

while the Thule Society nursed a fairytale descent,
all swearing to lineage free of *Jewish or colored blood*,
same for their wives and hamhock-pink-cheeked brood.

Far north, a woman reposed with her dog and a tent,
glacier-bound, where a careless hand had flung them.
Her head sawed off, she didn't look like a woman,

but bathed in snow glare and green flame, locals fluent
in metaphor called her curves female, called the unruly
coast for a heart, *Umanaq* — re-christened Thule

by whites, for whom the meteorites looked like meteorites
and the people wrapped in seal hide, like children.
And yet they make for useful instruments, wrote the American,

strapping, irascible Robert Peary. His appetites
included Inuit women and the Pole, and he carved P
in the woman's bulbous side, a cipher of his property.

He took her to New York, though wilder flights
rocked her through dark energy and dust to Earth.
Souvenir of the solar system's iron afterbirth,

she attests to its inhuman reaches, zero upon zero,
their rings yawning not with emptiness but age.
Ultima won't mean the last, not enough to gauge

vaster orbits spinning without us, giddier vertigos.
Still museum-goers gawk at rocks—and once, the bones
of Qisuk, a man Peary had coaxed to leave his home

and who soon died of tuberculosis. A century ago,
museum staff buried no one's casket in lantern-lit secret
to hush up his son (the ritual confused, not quite Inuit)

and dodge PR crises with this *New York Eskimo*.
Minik was eight. He would spend his short life bestride
city and tundra, at home in neither, curio or child.

Returned as a youth to Greenland without his language
or provisions for the cold, he set off like a flung

bone or fallen star on the expanse of ice alone.
Though his island has now begun

to blush with algae and melt,
something flinty, some

fast, intractable winter
has already frozen

inside the human
race. At least

deep space
may prove

too
great

for
us

to
ruin.

CHRISTINE DEGENAARS

OUTSIDE THE GREY DOG IN CHELSEA

I am not as beautiful
as I think I am.

Remembering the last time
I was here

and a guy, now gone,
who came the way summer

songs do, rustling
my insides out of me.

Nothing turns me ugly
like a man. Walking past

16th street, I'm in love
with the illusion

of things: April's false
spring and the feeling

that I could, if I wanted,
reach down

any boy's throat
and pull out what I have

waited so long to own.
There's something pretty

in burrowing
into bone, the depraved

crouching down
in the marrow

the way soldiers do,
taking cover in the glitter

of ambush.
And I am angry

at the sunflowers,
lingering near the traffic light

because they're older
than me and lovely

and don't breathe foul
lipstick breath, or sleep

with their mouths open and
damp. They're never dreaming

of the bodies
they've known, stacked

like splintered driftwood,
their faces, mirrors of their

own faces, indiscriminate
and aging and blank.

UNISPHERE

He met her in the bar under the trestle, the same one he'd been going to since he was a teenager. He noticed Jessica right away, sitting at the end of the bar, near the window. He struck up a conversation — he was a friendly guy, anyone would say that — learning that she'd recently been divorced and hadn't had the occasion to go out in a while. He said she looked lovely. Jessica blushed. He knew what to say to women, how to woo and beguile and then disabuse himself of them.

They met once or twice a week, usually at Jessica's house before her kids returned from school. She lived in a semi-attached house on Auburndale Lane. She had half a yard and half a driveway and a lamentable patch of crabgrass. He liked to lounge in bed with her afterward, stroking her hair and smoking an unfiltered cigarette, inhaling deeply and puffing out tiny, perfect rings. He couldn't light up at home, couldn't light up around Rory, his wife always after him about second-hand smoke.

He told Jessica he would pick her and her kids up at noon, and from there they would drive to Flushing Meadows, the grounds of the 1964 World's Fair. Eight hundred ninety-seven acres of loamy terrain including a tarnished Unisphere and a decommissioned pavilion of the future. Jessica had never been, though she'd lived in the vicinity her whole life. She'd been to the City only once or twice, her life more or less circumscribed to Auburndale and the environs.

It was a balmy spring day, the first one that year. "Get your stuff, we're going for a ride," he told Rory.

They rode down Utopia Parkway. For a nondescript borough on the periphery of the City, the streets certainly had fanciful names. He rolled down the window, a concession to his habit.

Rory was in fifth grade, or was it sixth? He could no longer remember. The boy didn't say much.

"How's school going, son?" he asked, one hand on the wheel, the other flicking the ashes into the minstrel wind.

"Fine," the boy said. There was already dark terrain in his soul, unilluminated patches.

"That's it, fine?" Every once in a while, he thought to inquire about the day-to-day goings-on, to probe around the edges. He told Rory to study, not to fail, to get a good job with benefits, things parents

were supposed to say to ensure that children didn't submit to their reckless impulses. But his heart was only half in it; who was he to lecture the boy?

"Yeah, fine." The sound of the wind shearing the window.

He turned off on Pidgeon Meadow and pulled into Jessica's driveway. The shingles were flaking off. She needed a new roof, among other things. You had to keep a house up, else it would fall into disrepair, succumb to the elements.

"Wait here," he directed Rory.

He stumbled on the way to the door and cursed *sotto voce*.

Jessica's youngest was crying, refusing to go. She was clinging onto her skirt and screaming the way only children could — a high-pitched wail, a sound that jarred the brain.

"She didn't nap," Jessica explained.

He allowed her to calm them down and herded them into the car. He took a moment to have another cigarette, blowing the smoke off to the side. Her gutters were in terrible shape, he noticed.

"Get in the back," he directed his son.

"This is Emily, that's Leah, and that's Jack." Jessica climbed in the seat next to him, her skirt form fitting. It was the same skirt she was wearing when he'd first met her. He remembered the seam, the way it frayed around the edges. She smiled at him. Her skin was soft, softer than any woman's he'd ever met. She would age well, he considered. "Are you behaving back there?" she asked her children.

"Yes, mom," came the reply. Rory had grown up alone, no siblings to taunt. They'd considered having another, but the wife had difficulties, a condition that made carrying to term dangerous to her health.

He regarded his son in the rearview mirror. The boy was gazing out the window, the wind riffling his hair, not saying much of anything. He wasn't interested in running in the park or tossing pitches. He didn't seem to need him anymore, had already relegated him to a certain place.

"We're going to Flushing Meadow!" Jessica exclaimed, keeping up the patter, relieving him of the obligation.

"Who are you?" one of the girls asked him.

"This is mommy's friend. Remember I told you?" Jessica chided, casting an eye back on the children. Her hair had a reddish sheen in the light, a certain undertone. He'd never noticed it before.

He took side streets, wanting to avoid the traffic on the Van Wyck Expressway. The area surrounding the park was beset by traffic detours, ongoing construction. The streets were always caving in, unable to withstand the traffic and weather conditions.

When he was younger, he thought of getting out. Moving into the City, or out on the island, following the money trail. He'd waited too long. The rents had become prohibitive, the housing shortages acute. Long Island City was renting at \$5 per square foot! Long Island City, industrial wasteland.

Now, he was stuck. The house was paid off, the property taxes minimal. He could afford to go to the shore for a few weeks every summer; he could whittle away the time at the bar under the trestle, thinking of what might have been, what might have transpired elsewhere in another life.

"Look," screeched Jack. The globe was looming over them now. It looked old, tarnished, a downtrodden facsimile.

The area was now overgrown, besotted with weeds. The ground was rough and hardscrabble. The ground was rocky, the remnants of the old moraine, the glacial substratum. The whole of it had once been old man Bowne's farm, vast, sprawling acreage. It had undergone a process of division, and further subdivision, as the population overflowed.

They parked the car and dragged provisions onto the field. Jessica had a cooler and a picnic basket and diversions for the kids — wiffle balls, frisbees, disks that could be hurled skyward, falling somewhere short of the heavens.

Jessica arranged a blanket on the ground and secured it with their shoes and weights. "Beautiful day," she said, the wind blowing the hair in her face. She unwrapped some blocks of cheese and set them out on a paper plate. She unscrewed a canteen and handed a glass of red wine to him. It had a metallic aftertaste.

He hadn't wanted to muddy their relation by meeting the kids, going on outings, making himself palpable. It was easier to meet at the bar in the early evenings, to make love in the twilight, unmarked time, passages to be played *rubato*.

And now, here they were, eating crackers, drinking cheap wine, kites flying in the distance, unspooling against the blank sky.

He wondered how long it would be before he disappointed her. How long before she came to bore him, and make him wish he were

elsewhere, in another bar under the trestle, a place where initials were gored in the wood, and the jukebox played “Sympathy for the Devil.”

It was already becoming more complicated than he had intended. She was holding his hand, looking at him a certain way, wanting to define their relationship, give it dimension and lineaments.

“You look nice,” he said. She wasn’t the most beautiful woman he’d ever been with, but she was better than most. She had a softness to her, a roundness to her cheeks, a fulsomeness to her breasts. He liked lying naked next to her, feeling the mingling of their limbs and the soft incurve of her belly. She tasted like honey and orange blossoms. There wasn’t much more to it than that. There never was.

“I could fall for you,” Jessica smiled, her eyes luminous in the sun. She fed him brie on a cracker, wiping the corners of his mouth.

The atmosphere felt close, suddenly, the air leaden with expectation. He would have to end it soon. She was an interlude. A song that played in his head, *tra la la*. But he could shut the door and never think of her again. People liked to think they were special, irreplaceable, but the truth was they were all just playing roles, imbuing one another with qualities they never possessed.

“That would be a mistake.”

“Is that so?”

He looked away from her, toward the horizon. The two girls — Emily and Leah?, he had trouble remembering their names — were flinging a disk back and forth. Jack was off in the distance, spinning in circles, falling down, succumbing to the disorientation. He squinted, but could not see Rory.

“Have you seen my boy?” he asked. He knocked over a cup of wine in his haste to get up.

“He was just here a second ago,” Jessica assured him, still clinging to his hand.

He brushed her off and stood up, scanning around them.

“Where did he go?” he asked. Emily and Leah shrugged. Jack pointed west, toward the lake. “He went that way,” he indicated.

The man stumbled toward the lake. He saw a group of children playing catch. “Hey, did you see a boy? About eleven? Reddish brown hair?”

They shook their heads. He looked up. The same blank sky, the same unerring canvas. A frayed cloud, unspooling across the sky.

He heard the call of a swallow in the distance, returning home after the winter's migration. He and Rory sometimes hiked in the woods together, marveling at all that nature had wrought. The old Dutch elms, the remnants of the glacial moraine: upheaval and slow, insidious erosion.

His father liked to bring him to the bar under the trestle. He would say he was babysitting, then laugh, throw back a glass of whiskey. Sometimes he disappeared outside to smoke a cigarette.

He'd say *this is my boy*, presenting him to his friends, old men with haggard faces and women with bright lipstick who tried to kiss the boy, brush the hair from his forehead.

After, they went home and his father kissed his mother and sometimes they argued. Sometimes his mother yelled at his father for corrupting the boy. Then they ate dinner in silence, only the clanging of the utensils and detonation of the wall clock, *tick-tick-tick*.

He went outside afterward, looking up at the sky, familiarizing himself with the phases of the moon and the hidden patterns of the sky. His favorite constellation was Ursa Minor, the little bear, a twinkling on the edge of the sky.

He'd seen the lady in the bar under the trestle. His father waved to the bartender and he brought the lady a red drink with a tiny umbrella in it. She sipped the concoction through a straw while his father told her about his ideas. He was designing this-or-that in his basement shop and had an application in the patent office. He had dropped out of school just shy of an engineering degree. Many smart people were bored by school, did she know that? She nodded along and when her drink was done his father waved to the bartender and he brought another.

His mother said, *I can't believe you bring him to such places*, and *I can't trust you to behave*, slamming the door and going upstairs and remaining locked behind the door for a long while. The *tick-tick-tick* of the wall clock.

He had a book about the universe. It spoke of the space-time continuum and black holes, places from which no light escaped. It spoke of dark matter and dark energy, forces scientists were unable to quantify. He looked at photos of stars in galaxies light years away, after images of imploded stars.

Sometimes they went hiking in the woods. His father would poke the dead trees and *tssk* and say *what a shame*. He'd pick up the

leaves and dig up the worms from the soil. The boy watched them grappling, blind, in his father's hand. *Put them down*, tugging on his sleeve, begging him to spare them. *Everything is a competition for resources, son. The sooner you learn that, the better off you'll be.*

On his eleventh birthday, his father came home with a pizza from Sal's. He stuck a candle in it and sang Happy Birthday, the words barely intelligible. He'd promised to buy the boy a telescope but he'd come up short. Presented him with an I.O.U. on a scrap of paper. His mother clucked and left the room, said he was *a disgrace*. That was the night his father fell down the stairs, slipped on some unknown object, and broke his ankle. His mother apologized for his *wreck of a father* and promised that she'd make it better. Would he like to live somewhere else, somewhere in the country maybe? She filled his head with visions of fresh grass and birch forests. He could see the stars, the panorama of the Milky Way, laid bare. *Think of it!* she said, tracing her finger over the map of the cosmos, going over the names of the stars, an incantation. But in the end, they never left.

He looked out the window at the world blurring by. The old shuttered course where they used to play miniature golf. The undulating hills of south Flushing. The long sigh of pine trees. Their shapes dissolving, colors bleeding into one another.

The lady brought a picnic basket. She told her kids to behave and not make a fuss. She told his father that he made her very happy and leaned in to kiss him. He smacked her on the rear and said *I'll extract my reward later.*

The lady's daughter said, *your dad and my mom are doing it*, groaning and laughing. He recognized her from the neighborhood. She snapped her gum loudly and swung her leg. The lady said *what a beautiful day for a picnic*, and kissed his father on the cheek, leaving a mark.

She offered the boy some grapes from a plastic bag. They were already deflated, overripe. "No thank you," he declined. She didn't look at him when she talked, but at somewhere in the distance, as if he weren't even there.

She offered his father a cup of wine. They lay back together on the blanket, his father's arm around the lady, the lady huddled at his side. He never lay like that with the boy's mother. They never held hands and

they never kissed, other than a swift peck on the cheek. They stood apart from each other, atomized.

The boy wandered out onto the field. At first, he intended only to explore. He considered engaging the other children in a game of catch, or hide-and-seek, but the place was open, nothing to hide behind. He climbed to the top of a hillock and walked toward the lake. The water was shimmering, like cut glass. It was a man-made lake, an unnatural contrivance. It had been stocked with carp and turtles and made to seem a welcoming habitat.

The boy saw a kite on the edge of the sky. A red dragon, unfurling in the breeze. He walked toward it, wanting to get a better view. He walked around the edge of the lake and toward the horizon. The sky was blank, the light unfiltered. He wished he'd had sunglasses to block it out, to mitigate the harsh light.

He blinked and the kite was down. It had fallen out of the sky, a flattened drape. It had seemed so impressive when airborne, animated by the wind. Now it was nothing special, just a tattered fabric.

For a brief second, he considered whether to turn back. But then he kept walking. He knew how to navigate by the position of the sun. Once he was out of the park it was easier to get his bearings. He turned at the corner and walked in the direction of home. His mother would be waiting for him there with a peanut butter sandwich and a glass of whole milk. The moon would be in waxing crescent. Venus would be visible to the naked eye. There was a meteor shower predicted, a hail of interstellar particles. He would sit outside, contemplating the sky, its manifest mysteries.

TOM GRIFFEN

REVIEW OF MAYA SONENBERG'S *AFTER THE DEATH OF SHOSTAKOVICH PÉRE*

Maya Sonenberg's *After the Death of Shostakovich Pére* is a nonlinear, nonsystematic book of elegiac digressions. Is it prose? Or prose poetry? Maybe an essay? Is it fiction or nonfiction? How can readers decode it if they do not know what box it put it in?

Stop—stop now. Such things do not matter.

What matters is this book conjures literary magic. A sky filled with stars. It tells a story by telling various others, including one about a woman who fantasizes about kidnapping her best friend's 12-year old daughter.

Sonenberg also employs various mediums and sources: ageless family photographs, free verse poems, cinematic prose, and excerpts from a diary-like notebook. Its compelling aesthetic resembles the likes of W.G. Sebald, Teju Cole, and Claudia Rankine. But Sonenberg's work is crisp. A rule-breaker, a treasure chest. An anti-narrative.

The work is a tribute to Sonenberg's father, both the man and artist. Her meditative study highlights a human being who mindfully, and at times tragically, embraced an authentic self. An excerpt from his notebook:

My mother Leah died last night at 3 a. m. in her sleep—mercifully—her agony not drawn out—enough agony her knowing—being told by the doctor—seeing in all our faces the awareness of her death...the game played out—in the end true. When we parted, just before, she had asked me whether I was staying, and when I said that I had to go back, that I couldn't stay...

Grief weaves elements together. A sullen celebration of mortality. Readers are included in an act of mourning.

Sonenberg's book structurally mirrors composer Dmitry Shostakovich's *Suite for Two Pianos in F Sharp Minor, Opus 6*. A four-movement piece written when he was a prodigious teenager and in direct response to his father's death. Each of Sonenberg's chapters is namesake to movements within Shostakovich's suite: Prelude, Danse Fantastique, Nocturne, and Finale. Emotion of music resonates with word.

Early the book, Sonenberg calls all to the table. "I wish you could

hear the bells...pealing-tolling-resonating-ringing bells, not real church bells but obsessive, interchanging chords played on two pianos.” Like a funeral. Yet, Sonenberg writes, “how he died didn’t matter:”

Two weeks later he was dead of a brain hemorrhage. Or he came home with a cold and two weeks later was dead of pneumonia. Or he died of a heart ailment “accelerated by the strains, financial, material and social, of coming to terms with the new regime and the aftermath of revolution.” Accounts differ

All these ways to imagine a life’s narrative. But none define how it actually was.

Sonenberg’s and Shostakovich’s memorial works, respectively, are both forms of creative (though paradoxical) archaeology. Each compiles clues to form a memory that can never again be formed whole. The unveiling, at times, creates disturbance. Presents an unwanted known. Like when she discovered one of her father’s notebooks and is introduced to her stranger-father: “In my father’s closet I found a notebook, opened it randomly, and saw the line: Charcoal [our dog] will die today. Immediately I closed the book.” One’s death a bridge to what is real.

After Sonenberg’s father had a stroke, he continued to paint. But his style and color choices were a far cry from his previous sensibility. Sonenberg describes it: “swirling colors. Neon candy. Vomitus.” She is challenged by the undesirable—something she cannot control, or even understand. Yet her perspective is keen: “I hang on to the idea of process, but I don’t want to liken his art-making to the art making of a pre-schooler.” Sonenberg illustrates this lesson:

Seeing them, I grasped at the idea of process rather than product
(they were just so bad):

a way to fill time
focus
move
to create, not just receive

Her father's notebook builds upon revelation. Some words about his service in the second world war, in England, after being transferred to an anti-tank unit, when he was "still [a] child, broke under the fear and came down with pneumonia:"

What I learned through the months of hospitalization was that (maybe?) it would be better [to] rush death than to always be afraid. And I cynically could relax with the assurance that I would not need to put this knowledge to the test. Could I live courageously? I wanted to.

To Sonenberg's father, a courageous life allowed time to reveal itself slowly. "Not to define in any drawing what it is all about, but to make evident in a body of work the complex larger aspects of the whole."

As Shostakovich's musical movements draw in the bereaved and offer a dose of immortality, so does Sonenberg's layered storytelling. Take away words, and images induce feeling. Remove the prose and poetry does the work. What's left is Sonenberg's father's philosophy of art, of life. He wrote, "A desire for magnitude, complexity—the integration of disparate parts—not a catalogue—but a retinue...Clues that reveal the context of the whole."

Just like one of his sculptures: "an overturned table is set forth with its projecting white legs forming a palpable rectangle in space." A full and complete shape made possible by the existence of unrelated objects. Same goes with Sonenberg's reflection—all stories belong to all. Sparks of beautiful memory attached to everything. Such painful and necessary joy, everywhere.

REVIEW OF DORA MALECH'S *FLOURISH*

Dora Malech is a traveler of lush landscapes. Reading *Flourish* (Carnegie Mellon University Press) is like being in an unfamiliar place, and looking for familiar objects or crossroads. With so much imagery to choose from it is hard to know which clues denote meaningful paths and which are tempting frippery, just there to be admired for their own virtuosity.

Malech is a much-awarded poet of plenty, and this, her fourth book, is designed around several quotations using the word “flourish.” Rita Dove, Carolyn Kizer and Kay Ryan add compass points. The book itself is a beautiful object, featuring a violet hued abstract painting by the author on the cover and ivory pages inside.

The best of this overgrowth is detected in “For Eleza” on the power of the feminine in a bi-coastal friendship. “The succulents you plucked/for me from the abundance... for me to take home/across time zones... thrive/so wildly I have to cut/them back...” The plants roots burst from their terracotta pot at home with the author in Baltimore.

“Catoctin Mountain Park” leads with a quote by Aristotle, on politics. What is the political nature of a national forest? -- and one that lies so close to Washington DC -- she seems to query. “Alone/one might intone/*whose woods, whose woods, one might whisper/democratic vistas*” Was the park threatened with budget cut closures like so many others across the country? The reader is left to wonder, ponder and wander with her.

Many of the poems hinge upon reference points like travel notes and quotes. When you see yourself as a journalistic poet, it is hard to lay those notes aside, or see if the poem is a leaning tree. What does it become with the notes left out? Does it still stand? Or are these notes and quotes precisely the point, the flourishes she refers to in the title?

“Running in Autumn” is spare, concise and seasonal: “and when I turn the corner/into winter I’ll remember/the shade of a mourning dove’s startle.”

There is a series of poems of creatures, a baby shark, fox and rats. From that Appalachian ridge to a maximum security prison, there is a great deal of gathering, but not a lot of letting go. “Excess can be gratitude” she advocates, but then counters the message with the next line, “as can be restraint.”

“Flourish” can have several meanings, and I had seized on the verb, as in the plants in “For Eleza,” and in the title poem, but the book equally about the noun: a florid bit of writing, a curlicue in architecture. The word

riffing and associations then finally touch upon a third meaning of the word flourish: the showiness of an action. “Pluck up the petaled pinwheel that conducts/ the gold crescendo of hours into haze...” she writes in “Portami il girasole... *after Montale*.”

The elegant take on a wide range of subject matter and devotion to word play come to a fully realized end in the title poem, the collection’s last: “as if jazz hands, spirit fingers,/ fireworks, as our shared shards glitter/ on this floodlit stage...” Malech is a virtuoso.

REVIEW OF DANA ROESER'S *ALL TRANSPARENT THINGS NEED THUNDERSHIRTS*

“That’s when/ I learned shame would/probably be with me/ at my death – my/ default setting.” – “Letter to Dr. M”

Ah, I was just thinking about shame. Shame and art, in particular.

In the opening poem of Dana Roeser’s collection *All Transparent Things Need Thundershirts* (Two Sylvias Press) she’s ashamed that she went horseback riding during an unnoticed tornado warning, after her eye doctor advised her not to go running, in order to save her vision. Soon she is “rescuing/horses in a debris-strewn/ windy pasture in the dark/ after. Who are hysterical/and afraid.” She revisits the horses throughout the book, but not in a prettified way. Hers is a vision in the wild woman tradition, a woman negotiating a world of boundaries, while coaxing the 2000 pound animal under her 100 pound command. In the same way, she commands her own power as a writer in this, her fourth volume. She does what only great art and great sex can do: take away our shame.

In “Poem Starting with Dry Cleaning” she brings humor to the debates with herself about what to do and not do in a day overstuffed with possibilities. “the thing with/diurnal/journal type/occasional poems/is that one does/get tired.” We join her on a day that is like a galloping horse, ending with her visit to her aged father in the nursing home, slowing the pace because of the care it takes to cut his fingernails.

“Flying Change” reveals more of these rivers of small-type verse down a mostly white page, into a land of cut up techniques, weaving three streams together. Can a reader keep up? Or, like the wacked out pilot, ready to jump off? By the poem’s end, she is quoting the brilliant Louis CK in his bit about air flight. Yay! Then follows up with MeToo apologies. Second yay!

“Figure, Ground” is about seeing Matisse at the museum on a break from visiting her critically ill friend in the hospital. Again, the diurnal, a juxtaposition, and the power of perception against powerlessness. “Fire Academy” begins as a dream poem and ends in cultural critique. “Crush” explores the many meanings of the word through scenarios: the crushed food given to her father at the nursing home, the crushed spine of the woman getting drunk next to her at the bar, the crushes of married women on other men. Roeser is both a weaver and a cut-up, her mind works fast,

she is fiercely funny, at the speed of the feed of her diurnal we follow her. It can be exhausting. She's come to honor herself — isn't that the goal for all of us?

Of the sonnet, her writing teacher advises “do not attempt it” in “Twenty Meter Circle” the height of the collection. Here she equates dressage, the most formal equestrian feat, with formal poetry. “I envy/ those people with/ discipline. Let's face it./ They saw the chaos/ and decided/with enough curb-chain/jerking they could conquer it.” Her “dissolute” dressage instructor advises her on her form on horseback “if it/ feels completely wrong/ then its right.” But Roeser knows better and feels the horse under her is also ill equipped for the formal. They both feel the tornados coming. We are lucky to have shameless and wild Dana Roeser on our side.

This work is the winner of the Two Sylvias Press 2017 Wilder Series Poetry Book Prize, open to women over 50 years of age. The contest “draws its inspiration from American author Laura Ingalls Wilder, who published her first *Little House* book at age 65...young women may be wild, but mature women are *wilder*.”

The [Two Sylvias Press website](#) is fun to browse. Besides putting a focus on female poets, they have created beautiful gifty products like *The Poet Tarot Deck and Guidebook* and *Emily Dickinson Blank Journal*. “Two Sylvias Press was founded in 2010 by poets Kelli Russell Agodon and Annette Spaulding-Convy. Two Sylvias Press draws its inspiration from the poetic literary talent of Sylvia Plath and the editorial business sense of Sylvia Beach.”

JACQUELYN SCOTT

REVIEW OF GLEAH POWERS' *MILLION DOLLAR RED*

“Up until the age of thirty, my name was Linda,” Gleah Powers writes at the beginning of her memoir, *Million Dollar Red*. When her mother picks Powers and her sister up from camp, she has a new man in tow. Powers doesn’t trust the smooth-talking Jack, but her sister takes an instant liking to him. Eventually, Powers’s distrust eases to admiration as he buys the family’s love. Powers writes, “I tried to resist him and all his gifts, but inside I felt an opening like a crack in the desert floor making a channel for rainwater.” But when his cucumber crop fails and he spends all of the Powers’s girls money, the family falls apart, crushing Powers’s ideals of the perfect family dynamic. Her mother is less than supportive, caring only for her own appearance and looking for the next man she can find to financially support her, and when she can no longer afford both girls, she sends Powers across the country to live with her grandmother.

This memoir is a thrilling ride that takes its readers all over the United States, moving through California to New York, Arizona to Florida and from strip clubs to cults. Powers describes what it was like to grow up in 60’s and 70’s with a family who struggled to stay invested in one another. Written in the style of campfire stories, Powers’s memoir is a collection of essays from her life that are carefully chosen and wrapped together to pass down through the generations.

A heartbreaking tale of identity, family, and loyalty.



CONTRIBUTOR NOTES

Albert Abonado is the author of *JAW* (Sundress Publications). His poems have appeared in *Boston Review*, *Colorado Review*, *Lunch Ticket*, and others. He teaches creative writing at RIT and SUNY Geneseo. He is the host of *Flour City Yawp* on WAYO 104.3FM-LP. He lives with his wife in Rochester, NY.

Kirstin Allio's novels are *Buddhism for Western Children* (University of Iowa Press, 2018) and *Garner* (Coffee House Press, 2005), which was a finalist for the LA Times Art Seidenbaum Award for First Fiction. *Clothed, Female Figure* won Dzanc's Short Story Collection Prize in 2016. Other honors include the National Book Foundation's 5 Under 35 Award, a PEN/O. Henry Prize, the 2019 American Short(er) Fiction Prize from *American Short Fiction*, chosen by Danielle Dutton, and fellowships from Brown University's Howard Foundation and the MacDowell Colony. She lives in Providence, RI. <https://www.kirstinallio.com>

José Angel Araguz is a CantoMundo fellow and the author of seven chapbooks as well as the collections *Everything We Think We Hear*, *Small Fires*, *Until We Are Level Again*, and, most recently, *An Empty Pot's Darkness*. His poems, creative nonfiction, and reviews have appeared in *Crab Creek Review*, *Prairie Schooner*, *New South*, *Poetry International*, and *The Bind*. Born and raised in Corpus Christi, Texas, he runs the poetry blog *The Friday Influence* and composes erasure poems on the Instagram account @poetryamano. A faculty member in Pine Manor College's Solstice Low-Residency MFA program, he also reads for the journal *Right Hand Pointing*. With an MFA from New York University and a PhD from the University of Cincinnati, José is an Assistant Professor of English at Suffolk University in Boston where he also serves as Editor-in-Chief of *Salamander Magazine*.

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Jeffrey Bean is Professor of English/Creative Writing at Central Michigan University. He is author of two chapbooks and the poetry collections *Diminished Fifth* and *Woman Putting on Pearls*, winner of the 2016 Red Mountain Prize for Poetry. His poems have been featured in the *New Poetry from the Midwest* anthologies and in the anthology *Good Poems, American Places*. Recent poems appear in *The Southern Review*, *Verse Daily*, *The Shore*, *The Antioch Review*, *The Missouri Review*, and *Rattle*, among other journals. www.jeffreybeanpoet.com

Ali Beemsterboer is a high school English teacher who spends her spare time writing, being an animal mom, and enjoying nature. She received her MFA in creative writing and her Masters in Teaching from Western Washington University. She is currently a poetry editor for *Psalter and Lyre*.

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Mary Biddinger's most recent collection of poems is *Partial Genius*. Her work has recently appeared or is forthcoming in *The Adroit Journal*, *Bennington Review*, *Court Green*, *Poetry*, and *Southern Indiana Review*, among others. She is a professor and editor at the University of Akron and University of Akron Press.

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Cassandra Cleghorn's *Four Weathercocks* was published in 2016 by Marick Press. Her poems and reviews have appeared in journals including *Paris Review*, *Yale Review*, *Poetry International*, *Colorado Review*, *Boston Review*, *Field* and *Tin House*. She lives in Vermont, teaches at Williams College, regularly reviews poetry for *Publishers Weekly* and serves as poetry editor of Tupelo Press. For more info see www.cassandracleghorn.com.

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William Virgil Davis's most recent book of poetry is *Dismantlements of Silence: Poems Selected and New*. He has published five other books of poetry: *The Bones Poems*; *Landscape and Journey*, which won the New Criterion Poetry Prize and the Helen C. Smith Memorial Award for Poetry; *Winter Light*; *The Dark Hours*, which won the Calliope Press Chapbook Prize; *One Way to Reconstruct the Scene*, which won the Yale Series of Younger Poets Prize. His poems have appeared in most of the major periodicals, here and abroad, including *Agenda*, *The Atlantic Monthly*, *The Gettysburg Review*, *The Georgia Review*, *The Harvard Review*, *The Hopkins Review*, *The Hudson Review*, *The Nation*, *The Malahat Review*, *The New Criterion*, *PN Review*, *Poetry*, *The Sewanee Review*, *Southwest Review*, *The Southern Review*, *TriQuarterly*, and *The Yale Review*, among many others—including, of course, *The Laurel Review*.

Oliver de la Paz is the author of five collections of poetry: *Names Above Houses*, *Furious Lullaby*, *Requiem for the Orchard*, *Post Subject: A Fable*, and *The Boy in the Labyrinth*. He also co-edited *A Face to Meet the Faces: An Anthology of Contemporary Persona Poetry*. A founding member, Oliver serves as the co-chair of the Kundiman advisory board. His work has been published in the *Pushcart Prize Anthology*, *Poetry*, *American Poetry Review*, *Tin House*, *The Southern Review*, and *Poetry Northwest*. He teaches at the College of the Holy Cross and in the Low-Residency MFA Program at PLU.

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Paul Dickey won the \$5,000 2015 Master Poet award from the Nebraska Arts Council. Paul Dickey's 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*, *Pleaidēs*, *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.

Lara Egger is the author of *How To Love Everyone and Almost Get Away With It* (winner of the Juniper First Book Prize and forthcoming from the University of Massachusetts Press, Spring 2021). She is the recipient of a Massachusetts Cultural Council fellowship and is a two-time Pushcart nominee. Egger's poems have appeared, or will soon appear, in *Ninth Letter*, *Washington Square Review*, *New Ohio Review*, *RHINO Poetry*, *Free State Review* and elsewhere. Originally from Australia, Egger lives in Boston where she co-owns a tapas bar. She holds an MFA from the Warren Wilson MFA Program for Writers.

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Mary Grimm has had two books published, *Left to Themselves* (novel) and *Stealing Time* (story collection)—both by Random House, and a number of flash pieces in places like *Helen*, *The Citron Review*, and *Tiferet*. Currently, she is working on a dystopian novel about oldsters. She teaches fiction writing at Case Western Reserve University.

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Diane K. Martin's poems have appeared in *American Poetry Review*, *Field*, *Harvard Review*, *Kenyon Review*, *New England Review*, *Plume*, and many other journals and anthologies. Her first collection, *Conjugated Visits*, a National Poetry Series finalist, was published by Dream Horse Press. Her second collection, *Hue & Cry*, was published in March, 2020, by MadHat Press.

Tom McAllister is the author of the novels *How to Be Safe* and *The Young Widower's Handbook*, as well as the memoir *Bury Me in My Jersey*. His short fiction and essays have been published widely, and have most recently appeared in *Best American Nonrequired Reading*, *Hobart*, *The Rumpus*, *Buzzfeed*, *The Millions*, *Juked*, and *Pithead Chapel*. He is the co-host of the weekly podcast, *Book Fight!*, and nonfiction editor at *Barrelhouse*. He teaches at Temple University and lives in New Jersey.

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