

# LAUREL REVIEW

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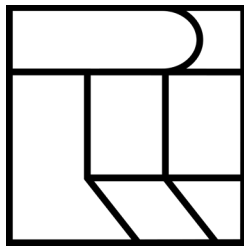
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# CONTENTS

## FICTION

Meghan E. O'Toole	The Moth Catcher	22
James Braun	If They Ask Where We've Gone	38
Katherine Sánchez Espano	The Edge of Suburbia	64
Mark DiFruscio	Hold That Thought	79
Julia F. Green	Prizehead	88
Lauren Osborn	Boil Me Alive	98
Hally Winters	Lemoncrest	106

## NONFICTION

Alex Poppe	Tethered	48
Gretchen VanWormer	The Mucking Out of Grief	126

## POETRY

Rick Bursky	The Spiritual Suggesting Companionship	1
Janice N. Harrington	Asphalt	2
	Self-Portrait as Charles H. Turner	4
	Tasseographer	5
Jordan Stempleman	Call Me	6
	Torness	7
Kerry Carnahan	[My ancestors are empty words], The concussed foreign agent wakes	8
Nate Maxson	Rain Spell	10
	Limerance Haibun	11
Haolun Xu	Grand Wind	12
	Quintet for a Lonely Planet	13
	Achilles	14
Rosalynde Vas Dias	Living With This	15
Martha Silano	The Tasks of Angels	16
	I sold my predicates,	17
Mary Lou Buschi	Memento Mori	18
	Just Semantics	20
Clare O'Gara	String Theory	21
Yasmina Martin	post-riot summer	28
	bodega cherries	29
Sean Thomas Dougherty	The Shape of a Pill	30
Tina Carlson	Poas	31
Phil Goldstein	The Lover as Unexpected Glaciologist	32
	The Unburying	33
Daniel Moysaenko	From <i>Speak and the Sleepers</i>	34
Michael Homolka	SoCal 5	36
	SoCal 15	37
G.C. Waldrep	From <i>Plague Nights</i>	43
Jeff Hardin	The Metaphor Keeps Adding to Itself	46
	Altar	47

Emily Rosko	Mind You	58
	Where are You, Karen Volkman?: An Ode	59
	Thereafter	60
Joanna Fuhrman	Outrage Fatigue	61
	A Heart Is Not A Metaphor	62
	Does this Data Make Me Look Fat?	63
Kasha Martin Gauthier	Time Capsule: CNN, 10/29/2019	69
Christopher Citro & Dustin Nightingale	Our Dust Collection in Great Demand	70
	I'll Wait Here In Steam I Make Myself	71
	We Come from the Orchard Eating	72
Page Hill Starzinger	<i>Washington Square Park "Jesus"</i>	
	<i>Returns – And Is Quickly Arrested Again</i>	73
	One Way of Looking at It	74
Tony Trigilio	On Poetics	76
Cameron Barnett	Pardon	90
	A Second Opinion	92
Jeff Newberry	Discarded and Collected	93
Louise Robertson	Sorry	94
Beverly Burch	Unholy Sonnet	95
Ethel Rackin	Main Street	96
	Inquiry	97
Grant Clauser	How To Build an Emergency Shelter	100
	The Glaciers	101
Jake Bailey	Animal Bones	102
Jeannine Hall Gailey	Our Lives Have Stood	103
	Hello, I Am the Four Horsemen	104
	To Survive So Many Disasters	105
Michael Manerowski	Missing	111
alyssa hanna	fetal mandate	112
	when thor clarifies that loki is adopted	113
Emma DePanise	Remove and Clean the Parts	114
	Things I Know to Be True	115
Abbigail Baldys	VA[012]	116
	VA[026]	117
	VA[008]	118
Brooke Harries	Revelation	119
Jeffrey Bean	"Impactful"	120
Tyler Kline	The Past is an Egg the Width of a Thimble	121
Jason Tobin	Warning Signs	122
	Consumer's Cult	123
Mary Biddinger	A Radical Notion	124
	Sometimes a Ghost is Just a Ghost	125
Joellen Craft	My Sudden Death: pushing the stroller to the lake	131

## REVIEWS

Francis X. Fitzpatrick	A Sum of All Parts: a Review of Jeannine Ouellette's <i>The Part that Burns</i>	132
	George Who? A Review of Ross Wilcox's <i>Golden Gate Jumpers Society</i>	134
Jamie O'Halloran	Landing: A Review of Laurel Nakanishi's <i>Ashore</i>	136
Juliana Converse	From Eliot to Indie Rock: a Review of Thomas Calder's Debut Novel, <i>The Wind Under the Door</i> (Unsolicited Press) 2021	139

## CHAPBOOK FINALISTS

Elizabeth Dodd	From the Workbook of Interpretation of Dreams: Reading Comprehension	143
Jenny Grassl	Reflection as Being in Lost Habitat	144
	The Museum of Wax Flowers	146
	In Inland Scrape of Sea	147
Tommy Archuleta	From the Witch Hazel	148
	To the Flowering Plumb Out Back	149
	To the Magnolia	150
	From the Flowering Plumb	151
James D'Agostino	Please Come	152
	New Lang Syne	153
SJ Pearce	Meeting Three Ghosts in Belchite la Veija	154
	At the Fork in the Tongue	155
Brent Ameneyro	A Giant Moth Crawls Out of Your Mouth	156
	Letter From a Paisa	158
	From Above	159
Jessica Reed	See Figure 1.	160
	Bachelard and the Owl	162
Michael McLane	Man on Fire I	163
	Man on Fire II	164
	Man on Fire III	165



RICK BURSKY

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## THE SPIRITUAL SUGGESTING COMPANIONSHIP

On the day the truth  
Was awkward and not enough  
I found others like me standing at the cliff,  
Our questions, the same as yours.  
The sky adjusted itself across the horizon.  
We discussed awe.  
We discussed how the weight of a soul  
Affected its ascent to heaven.  
We discussed why The Gods play  
Hide-and-peek with us.  
Grief has thin skin and lofty grammar.  
Without looking at the ocean roiling below,  
We kissed each other, tongues finally happy  
To be relieved of all other responsibilities.

JANICE N. HARRINGTON

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## ASPHALT

*for Laquan McDonald*

9:57:36-957:54 p.m. (CDT)

*Asphalt: á (without) + sphállō (make fall)*

[9:57:05] Sleepless,  
watching an Eichmann documentary.  
*No monsters, only humans*  
*who do monstrous deeds.* Buried  
in 16mm frames: corpses, carcasses,  
cadavers, bodies pushed by bulldozer.

Soundless  
but the camera shows Eichmann's face.  
Eichmann in his glass room,  
his glass shell, his glass cell,  
the camera's lens, my own myopia.  
The driver in the newsreel covers  
his mouth with a bandana.

2

On State Street, a mini-Cat (half-sized  
bulldozer) repairs asphalt buckled by ice and prairie light,  
by salt and steady traffic: roads that never last  
the winter out, seamed with gravel and bitmac,  
smoothed by city workers in neon t-shirts.

I always thought the gagging gloss was asphalt,  
but it's not—not from asphalt,  
but from coal oil and graveled limestone.

3

Near Pulaski, a black boy's body  
pinwheels round—a pirouette; ankles together;  
butt and thighs slammed down: hips:  
shoulders, head: falling, jack-knifed, dropping  
like a nine-pin or those carcasses left  
to molder on the shoulder of the interstate.

Late night, I watch the video again, again,  
follow the cruiser through gray tones and glare,  
study the figure quick-stepping  
down the middle of the street,



hoodie, jeans with bleached-out pockets,  
long-legged, high-behind, hands reaching  
to hike the style and sag of slack pants.

On YouTube, my eye follows the steady pulse  
of a time stamp [Oct20 2014 9:57:36]. In the blue  
light I watch, press pause and play, pause and play.  
He is walking away. He is walking away from.  
I study the story's frames, the labelled segments,  
read the comments, each one epitaph, memorial.  
*(One less thug to support in our jails . . . a rabid  
animal put down as he should have been . . . lol  
stupid smoke bopping around doing his thug strut.)*

Think of James Allen's postcards. If there were  
a website for all the fallen bodies? Posts  
of all the dark bodies, dropping, spinning, splayed,  
left in heaps, outlined with chalk?

4

In the video, he spins : falls : drops : terrible fruit  
on the asphalt : [9:57:51]. Blood  
on the tarmac, blood leaking from the body,  
the soaked hoodie: blood under a streetlight  
looks black, looks like spilled night, spilled ink.

What word writ with a black boy's body—maybe  
the slang for asphalt: black top, black top,  
a black boy's body spun round, a black body  
shot, shot down by 16 bullets,  
more than enough, more than enough.

Pause, replay, pause, replay. I watch, rewatch.  
His shoulder moves, his arms [9:57:54].

5

Asphalt, fault, streets paved in dark bodies,  
traffic moving steadily onward, another scroll,  
another poll. Delays and traffic cones,  
a mini-Cat, men in neon trying to repair, fill  
the ruptures, ply the bitmac, smooth everything over.

JANICE N. HARRINGTON

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## SELF-PORTRAIT AS CHARLES H. TURNER

*African American entomologist,  
Charles H. Turner, 1867-1923*

Haven't you also debated the tensile strength of implicit memory, or the foldings of space with captive funnel weavers? [Fig 1. A spider nursing its young.] Play Marley's *No Woman, No Cry* on a Galston whistle. Afterward a moth will beat its wings. If the moth is agitated, it doubts the post-racial. If the moth is not agitated, it has seen mating melissodes. Newsbreak: Entomologists study spiderwebs to improve the design of bullet-proof vests. If they succeed, will Black boys be allowed to wear them? [Fig 2. A Goliath birdeater devours a white mouse.] But then no one is allowed to save anyone, "an electric shocking platform, electric batteries, an induction coil and electrical switch key, and discrimination boxes." Consider the sweetness of a spider's milk, its glide across the tongue. "Indeed, the whole behavior of these antennaless roaches impresses one . . . that the antennae play the same . . . role in the behavior of roaches that eyes do in the behavior of man." Slow, slow, slowly, my hand strokes your back. He stroked the backs of roaches in this same way, gently. It is a shock, at first, that security is never about light or darkness. Take a different route. The heart is a discrimination box, so too the mind, so too our bodies. [Fig 3. Six Thai bees sip tears from a sleeper's eye.] Rub soapy lather on your redbug bites. Tobacco juice will cool a wasp sting.

JANICE N. HARRINGTON

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## TASSEOGRAPHER

I pretend that whatever I see ahead of me is the future: an old couple leaning into each other, a cyclist, a birder with binoculars, and once a whitetail doe. It's the doe's tail that stirs wonder, the way the white fur of its tail draws the eye and then, leaping, wards the eye away. My father, a reader of tea leaves, a tasseographer, predicted I would meet a woman with blond hair, and in the darkness later, he used my doll to startle me, lifting the future's plastic body like a torch, its unbound hair wild and flaming. What frightens, that we have dressed the future in such small clothes, or that darkness ruptured so suddenly? Ah, the villainy in our figurations. Perhaps these are the dregs of my past. Perhaps these are the leavings of my present. Anything will prophesy, if made to do so: a blind eye, a dove's flight, the four moles that pebble my left breast. Forgive me for wishing to come back in 5,000 years. But I want to watch time unfold, to greet the citizens of Jupiter and see the floating pools in the palaces of Ursa Major. To augur the future, I stir tea leaves and tip the dregs from my father's cup. I foresee what you foresee: no end to these frictions and alarms. The half-starved stray ahead of you is your future. But if you want another, boil the dregs again, then stir and spill them out. Soothsayer, it's the shapes that matter, the patterns you make from chaos, the story you make with whatever remains.

## CALL ME

I don't like talking on the phone. I once liked talking on the phone when I was young, but only when making prank calls. This was before caller ID; this was when you could open the White Pages or the Yellow Pages to some random name or business and dial away. Once, I called a woman and told her I was lost at the mall. I was in my basement. The dog was beside me on the basement floor licking one of his hot spots. I was probably ten or eleven, but I said, in a babyish voice, "I have to poop, and I have been here all day, and no one looks like my dad." The woman on the other line said, "I'm on my way, sweetie. Stay right next to Cinnabon, you hear me? I'm leaving now." She hung up and I didn't laugh. I just watched the dog keep licking. I wish I could say I thought about calling her back to tell her it wasn't true, but I can't.

Once, I stood next to a man by the swings at the park and listened to him scream on his cellphone at his secretary while he absently pushed his baby in the toddler park swing, the one that looks like a rubber diaper. His baby looked like Pat Sajak. The baby's hair was dark auburn, shiny, and looked sewn on. I think he was asleep as his father screamed into his cellphone, "This is what serious shit sounds like. You dropped the ball, Beth." I stared at his profile, one hand holding the phone, one hand absently pushing his kid. I don't want to wear black wingtips to this day. I want to find both women, and say to both women, the children heard nothing that day. The children slept through it all.

JORDAN STEMPLEMAN

---

## TORNNESS

Jellyfish love nuclear anything. Unthinking clarities, plugging up the reactor's cooling fans with their warty combs and lion manes. They'll take forever to fall for poems or fall out of love with natural history, but, in the meantime, they'll float in a slow assault into our imaginations and endless scrolling feeds. Today is Tuesday. Today, while some fish fry, the jellyfish bob closer to gasses that blister into glowwater and empty headaches. Below the surface, where science has yet to date us, the unprepared say you are mine and I am yours.

KERRY CARNAHAN

---

## [MY ANCESTORS ARE EMPTY WORDS], THE CONCUSSED FOREIGN AGENT WAKES

*The Concussed Foreign Agent wakes up in Wakanda and asks is this Wakanda? and the Technocrat replies deadpan: no it's Kansas.*

no punchline chewing

a spear of ryegrass,

what is the joke? Well Kansas is thought to be far from Wakanda as a person can get. It is diametrical overrun with colonizers and said to be empty. A course like Wakanda, outside its borders its existence is mostly imaginary, and furthermore about thirty mile from where my people are laid down there is a tremendous reservoir constructed in the 60s to dam those ditch trickles that would rise and bloom into endless prairies of water, and whole towns would have to drown for that lake we call Waconda and sometimes Glen Elder.

Now catfish drift in those farmhouses under skies of algae the same hue as the carpet we sat on while on the divan a great uncle remembered the mineral spring drowned by the lake. Come to find out that spring was sacred to many nations; the Kansa people call it Ne-Wohkon Daga, Great Spirit Water. I read it was a perfect circular pool atop a high mound, two hundred feet in diameter, and it was salty and had its own tides. Ne-Wohkon Daga at night, dark mirror brimming with stars.

The spring was sealed when the valley was flooded, the flood sealed with the name Waconda. And a historical marker that reads "considered neutral territory, the springs drew Kaws, Pawnees, Comanches, and Osages to the site."

*Bruce Springsteen squints out of a Super Bowl commercial a twenty minute drive from Ne-Wohkon Daga and declares all are more than welcome to come meet here in the middle.*

When I read last week about Ne-Wohkon Daga, the sacred spring flooded so Topeka and Lawrence downstream would not drown, I was ashamed by a senator named Pomeroy, who in 1870 said the hills around it "are as sacred to the Indians as those about Jerusalem."

What is the shame? From the back step I was watching the stars come out as light fell from the sky. Coyotes were singing and were joined by wolves, who it was said were not seen in Kansas since 1905 but I heard them in 1980 or so, I was four, and I sat there held in a gaze, everything before me was a face of some kind and you could see the milk line trickling to earth. Got older

and wondered if it was my foolishness until I learned my mother when she was small saw it too, though she uses different words.

What is shameful is that even as I am of this, I am constituted by the dark smoke of a genocide that unmakes it. You could build a house out of this shame. But such a house would be unlivable, the floor will rot out from inside.

*The Messiah ingests the red pill that transports you from The Matrix to the Desert of the Real, and The Traitor says buckle your seatbelt Dorothy because Kansas is going bye-bye.*

In the first movie of that trilogy *The Human Condition*, Kaji cries: it's not my fault that I'm Japanese yet it's my worst crime that I am. Now I think Kaji is mistaken. Him being Japanese in occupied Manchuria might be his shame, but his worst crime is to enforce the cruel fiction of the barbed wire that encloses the prison work camp. He adjusts to it. Wind and rain get into his ideals, and he adjusts like a roof does once the damp gets in.

In *Beloved*, Toni Morrison called it *the sludge of ill will; dashed hopes and difficulties beyond repair*, and when I read that I recognized a kitchen floor collapsed into a cool basement lined with shelves holding thirty seasons' worth of watermelon rind pickles bathed in red 40.

How did I walk across that floor? I know I studied myself one last time in the washroom mirror.

no Messiah by

name of Dorothy,

she is the recitation of a dream rotting in color. And I am the delay flicker of ancient fluorescents on mint tile trapped inside a subroutine called Kansas. My body is out there somewhere, and I must find it. And if I cannot I must learn to walk in peace without a body.

"[My ancestors are empty words], The concussed foreign agent wakes" draws upon Holy Ground, Healing Water: Cultural Landscapes at Waconda Lake, Kansas by Donald J. Blakeslee, and references the first film, No Greater Love, of the 1959-1961 Japanese film trilogy *The Human Condition*, directed by Masaki Kobayashi and based on Junpei Gomikawa's epic novel. In this poem "cruel fiction" references Wendy Trevino's book of that name and her poem "Brazilian is Not a Race:" "A border, like race, is a cruel fiction/Maintained by constant policing, violence."

NATE MAXSON

---

## RAIN SPELL

The 1915 German zeppelin bombings of London  
Aren't as well known as the next war's  
But for the year before the invention of incendiary bullets finally stopped them  
They blotted out the sun, the biggest flying objects ever made  
A three ton bomb was dropped on Saint Paul's Cathedral, the biggest one yet  
This was before the invention of plastic of course  
So each blimp was made of leather and canvas  
A quarter million cows each it's estimated  
So many that there was a sausage shortage that winter in Berlin

*I always loved the way, when you walk into an indoor swimming pool  
And there's only one other person there  
How you each try to ignore one another  
Just doing your laps and not making eye contact  
But a kind of intimacy settles over the two of you  
Although neither swimmer would ever say it  
Two objects  
Passing forward and backwards in the bright blue deep*

Yesterday, I tried to cast some kind of spell,  
My first one since I started and then stopped believing in such things  
They used to tell me I was a rain maker, when I was growing up  
I don't know what that means, but the urge for mystery remains  
So I took three lemon seeds from the dinner I was cooking and tossed them  
    into the sand  
I said something I don't remember  
Asked for the monsoon early  
Unconsciously, when we do this  
I have always imagined the high dive  
Backwards into air  
Like so  
World beneath me, forever sky



NATE MAXSON

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## LIMERANCE HAIBUN

One possible explanation, for why the English like to put milk in their tea  
Is that the teacups the average person owned in 19th century Britain  
Were made of bone, probably cattle bones, turned to ash and then a kind of glass  
And that bone China didn't handle heat as well as fine porcelain did  
So the splash of cold milk helped keep the cup from breaking apart

*And I have missed you, like light through a cracked sphere of unknown liquid in  
a laboratory, grain alcohol in the noonlight  
Where the ocean currents meet far beneath the seas, coastline like the wake of a  
mirage behind your back  
Like the magpie taking flight, wings cutting the sky, smokeland on the horizon*

HAOLUN XU

---

## GRAND WIND

The scholar is five seconds  
before his death and that grand wind  
taking him where wake is past.  
Which way does the gale  
blow during a moonless night?

O compass, the spiritual problem.

Erasmus, let me see the top of your head,  
As you crawl on all fours.  
The storm is not easy this year. North Star: (far liar)

Erasmus, loyal dog, discovering  
the perimeter is transforming.

Can you feel it on the skin,  
the thrill of evolution  
on the evening's edge.

Houseless mammals discovering form.  
We watch what the mind can do to the body.  
In the end we all turn into our fathers, all fours, touching dust.  
Despite knowledge. At the gate of all endings, truth seeks revenge.

Only as an animal can the soul cross through the barriers.  
Despite years of clergy, faith is best in stricken paws  
and a tongue half-dead from the mouth.

The scholar, sitting alone in the pitch-black room.  
Ear without sounds, eye without colors.  
Be careful of the silver wind crossing through  
the pillars of your seat. Only the sharp wind can cross  
with you to the other side, and you cannot touch it.

The lights            are filled with            unknowing.

Where we  
cannot see,  
we dance.

HAOLUN XU

---

## QUINTET FOR A LONELY PLANET

i.

What prayer must we speak,  
beforehand? My planet, my soul.  
Worse than unloved, we are unimagined.

ii.

Some nights I lay on my back tense,  
waiting for a train to come by.  
Patient, like a dewdrop,  
or a bad case of pox.  
In the mirror, I see only a broken radio  
with no sound.

iii.

Perhaps I could not fall in love with Saturn,  
but I adore Saturn nonetheless. Meanwhile,  
a galaxy more complicated than mine is calling for my heart.  
But what can I give to something  
that I cannot understand?

iv.

What is an environ-  
mental exit?

Like asking  
a stag to leap  
from its own  
shadow.

v.

Please, let us not speak about the death of dreams.  
The brightest still build steel birds  
that flies through the stars. They promise,

tonight, we are your imagination.  
The heart needs no rest if we are together,  
even when we are apart.

HAOLUN XU

---

## ACHILLES

Yes, Washington was something terrific but there's something  
about the roar of laughter back home in the Meadowlands

with the river's power plant saying we really are made from fire  
because we don't know if we're any happier but we're making

something bright tonight. Maybe a time zone is a duet, and maybe  
being all alone is a different kind of song / but each night anyways

I'm with my best friend who doesn't exist anymore,  
and we're sleeping on the open marsh in another world

where I turn and say I'm just so filled with hope and he says  
don't be silly, you have to be asleep to dream that good

A quarter of a century to learn a vicious cycle starts  
with a smile and a promise. We'll meet again

and I'll close that distance. I can be an electric guitar too -  
playing myself / or an atom smashing itself apart —

because here in this wonderful land of push and shove  
if I wake up covered in bruises it means I'm alright

ROSALYNDE VAS DIAS

---

## LIVING WITH THIS

One persistent violet you could see clearly. Like a dark dog it lingered, made a cup in the snow with its curiously heavy “body.” Eventually, you gestured it indoors. There it filled the room. No one could press through it. Or anyway that's what you believed. It was like being way out in a boat and looking down into water—not seeing into it, but knowing you could not find the bottom. Maybe living with this violet would help you recognize others, when you saw them, if you saw them.

MARTHA SILANO

---

## THE TASKS OF ANGELS

I was reading today about the tasks of angels.  
Archangel Uriel, the *wizened hermit*.  
He's the one who assists

with loneliness. We can't hear or see him,  
but his colors are mustard and cobalt blue.  
He's the angel who dwells

in the Steller's jay. Call on him to understand  
the wonders of your soul,  
says *patch.com*.

Explore with Uriel the mysteries of superposition,  
probability, entanglement. Other angels' auras  
are yellow, purple, pink,

but this is where I lose interest with my spiritual  
support team, where I start to crave  
my mother's voice.

What would my mother have made of angelic auras,  
of Raphael, patron saint of paralysis? Mostly,  
angels are tasked

with nudging us to drink more water, get more sleep.  
Mostly, they're in the calm and stillness market,  
making sure we do not die from grief.

MARTHA SILANO

---

## I SOLD MY PREDICATES,

gave away my adjectival clauses. Took a trip to the city of split up and plead. When I tried to locate my mother, I couldn't hit the target so I re-located. It was like what they say about the geologic curl, all the chert and basalt deciding it needed a Brazilian blow-out. I knew I should go visit Brianne or Darcy, but I just couldn't bring myself to anywhere but a saloon on the last cobblestone street in Seattle. Effort was the last thing on my mind. Foremost was the fact Jackson Pollak slept until midday, a deer tick riding a five-point buck into splattered stardom. I should have been a sludge cricket, a slender egg, Ophelia's trophy wife. We all have our billion garden bulls, our fruitions stuck in God's ditch, but I wanted my emergency window to unhinge, my thought ambulance to screech to a haute. We all have our gourd days and bat days, but I hate it when my violets walk out. And that dead dog's paw, entombed in Glad wrap, placed beside the meat paddies in the freezer. I don't think I'd understood, until then, grief. Not one optimistic fleece left in your herd of sheep. I kept the moon, one poem, three nephews, What I couldn't depose, I shook off.

MARY LOU BUSCHI

---

## MEMENTO MORI

In 1980, the Webster's dictionary had 8 definitions of paper that, when copied by hand, took three 30-minute lunch periods. Today, Wikipedia's definition of paper extends over 14 subjects with 7 subsets.

Chris was given the word, "pen," Maureen, "write," which had concise definitions. I could never finish "paper" within a 30-minute time slot which meant more detention.

Paper is a versatile material with many uses, including packaging, decorating, and, of course, writing.

In Catholic school, detention came easy. Late: detention. Colorful socks: detention. Second button undone on the blouse: detention. But we were innocent, or at least I was. I had a mouth, but I would never deface school property. Stealing wine from the sacristy—yes. Cutting the flowers from the rectory garden—yes. But I didn't write, "We were here" in the girls' bathroom.

The pulp papermaking process developed in China during the early 2nd century.

Nuns are sadistic, especially the ones who don't wear habits. Our principal wore wool suits; even her face was wool; her hair the texture of rusty Brillo. I sat in her office while she phoned my father. Her goldfish making quick circles, to the left, to the left, to the left.

Papyrus is a lamination of natural plant fibers, while paper is manufactured from fibers whose properties have been changed by maceration.

Maceration, in medical terms, deals with the skin exposed to water for too long whereby it looks soggy or bloated, how I imagine a drowned body to look, held aloft by a parachute of engorged skin.

~

Make note of this:

My mother holds up a blue beaded dress, *bury me in this*. I was eight and tried to imagine disappearance. I used to climb into her closet to roll my fingers over the beads—remember, this dress, the sequined stars, a skirt of blue sky.

When my mother died, I chose a serious black suit with a white peplum that made her look like a magic trick about to be sawed in half through the roof of her box. Before the funeral director closed the lid, he asked if I wanted the shoes back. I took them leaving my mother barefoot.



For months I was trapped in a hearse with her. Window–Window–Door. I knew they were there, but I was inside the box, the open mouth of her shoes hooked in my right hand; a blue dress hovering above.

~

It's November and my brother has died. We've decided on cremation which is against the Catholic church. Cremation is the process of burning a dead body at very high temperatures until they're only brittle, calcified bones left, which are then pulverized into ash. These ashes can be kept in an urn, buried, scattered or even incorporated into objects as part of the last rites of death.

When he left his body, he left it completely. Nothing but human pulp.

When I put my hand inside the bag that was now my brother, it felt more like thick luscious sand. I wanted to walk on him, toss him in the air, make sand art in a jar by dyeing sections of him Prussian blue, vermilion, and rose, take a long straw and make waves out of all the brilliant colors.

It was a bright day. The priest said what priests say and then blessed the urn with holy water. The urn began to run with rust rivers down its sides, decomposing as it was supposed to do right there before us, before we had a chance to bury it.

It all happens that fast. One day you are playing the eye game through the screen in your bedroom window, choosing to look closely at the tight square wires that keep the insects out or to look into the distance past your friend's apartment where they are trying to fill a giant mason jar with change to get to Disney World.

Past your first boyfriend's house where you fell asleep only to wake hearing your parents at the door looking frantically for you. Past the church's vestibule where it was cool to hang out rather than choosing a seat inside. Past the train station, the manicured lawns, and all those people exactly the same flavor.

To write: a verb meaning to trace letters or characters on a surface, with a pen, pencil, or other instrument.

There is no doubt, if given the chance to go back to the second-floor bathroom, climb up on the heater, to scream to the boys in the parking lot from the unlatched window, only to jump down and hide my face, I'd write in big bold letters on those Pepto-Bismol pink walls, I WAS HERE, before Sister Alicia had the chance to swing open the door catching me with the pen held high in my right hand.

MARY LOU BUSCHI

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## JUST SEMANTICS

The bicycle guy hated everyone. He lived on the 3<sup>rd</sup> floor, washed the stars with bleach everyday, muttering about the dirt he couldn't get it out, like Lady Macbeth washing the invisible blood from her hands.

The super told us not to look at him or say good morning, but he always stopped my husband to talk, knowing he'd listen while the bicycle guy told him that the town was once a river and the buildings were fake and the Nor'easters were a way of cleansing the buildings. And that cat! The cat in the basement was a spy with a chip in its head and our dog knew it.

Charlotte was a make-up artist. She lived on the 4<sup>th</sup> floor. She'd always forget her keys and we'd have to buzz her in. She'd often stop by to visit and sometimes bring her cat. She was passed out on the stairs one day in an oxy-stupor. She moved back in with her parents after that. When they cleaned out her apartment, someone broke a wall and thousands of flies flew out and clung to every wall in the building.

It was unclear why the bicycle guy didn't drive a car. He rode his bike everywhere. We'd see him in far off towns, same glib expression, peddling as if each revolution was beneath him.

On the 2<sup>nd</sup> floor was Rick. He rubbed the floors of his apartment bare just by walking on them. He painted his head brown with shoe polish and would buy one beer at a time from the corner store. I left him food one day. He brightened for a moment, died a few weeks later. No one knew his last name.

There was a therapist on the first floor. She loved to talk. I'd get caught in the lobby for hours listening to stories about her patients. And the contractor and his wife living beneath us divorced. I was relieved when she left because she'd take her broom and bang it on my ceiling if the dog was playing with water bottles, until the husband rented a room out to a man who beat his girlfriend and shoved her so hard against a window that it shattered and fell onto the people dining below.

But it wasn't until the bicycle guy threw his refrigerator out of his window. His freezer listening to every word he said and didn't say. He knew it all along. He told my husband that the landlord screamed; you can't do that! "You see she had it all wrong. I can, because I did. Now if she had said, you may not..."

CLARE O'GARA

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## STRING THEORY

Blades turning over in the field, humming  
for all that becomes lost, but still is. On the last  
day of a borrowed year, I watch a dog  
refusing to play fetch here, bleating across grass, snapping  
at nothing at all. I promise to start opening myself like a door or a  
wound, and the cut becomes something  
I can walk through, into Silver Lake, Washington  
where my father's telephones always escaped over the lip  
of his boat. A machine in his hand plays birdcalls  
and bullfrogs. Imitating fish, my family twists  
around and around, disappearing turned steel  
down the wet line of a bad memory. Imagine  
what moves through us without asking, tacitly engaging the blotted curse  
of another year, the bend in a knife wasted  
gutting rocks. When St. Helens erupts, it clays the bottom of a lake.  
It kills a man with no face. You can buy ash in plastic jars  
as novel as shark teeth. I promise to start opening myself like a door and  
a pyroclastic display sizzles from the split lining  
sending the world through its own tear. A rainbow trout struggles through  
the ventricle heart. A father throws  
a daughter over starboard by her ankles. Water swallows  
fabric into a dark wish, like a sick dog desperate, eating grass.

## THE MOTH CATCHER

The summer Camille's mother drowned the kittens, the grass around the bucket browned and died. That patch of earth beat up at the sky like raw skin and left a dark stain on the back lawn all summer, so Camille covered it with a flower pot and hoped the guests wouldn't notice.

The wedding would be a small affair. That was her compromise with her fiancé. They'd have the ceremony in the garden. The reception would follow in and around the house, the place she was raised among chickens and the few goats her mother used to keep in the yard, and in return she would no longer delay the ceremony. It wasn't that she didn't want a marriage; it was more so the tiredness that sudded her every time she tried to think past the drapery white fixings of the wedding.

White as bone inside and out, the house was an old, clumbering thing that seemed to breathe and heave with the wind in bad storms. Each room held a wavering light between the walls, and years of treading had hammered the floors thin.

Camille and her mother would be the only ones in the house the day before the wedding, and only the two of them would clean and prepare it for the flood of guests. This was one of her mother's conditions if Camille was to get her way about having the wedding at home. Her mother couldn't stomach the idea of strangers teaming through her things, photographs and diaries of thoughts long dead. So, just the two of them cleaning the empty house. They passed thoughts back to one another in the thick August heat.

The wedding seemed to scare her mother. Camille noticed the whiteness of her lips whenever she brought it up. Camille herself kept pushing the wedding back, but only because things as they were now were fine. It was not the wedding but what came after that left Camille spiraling, a white pain scorching through her skull as she thought it over. The quiet, the waiting, the wonder when something new would happen. She wondered if she would have a child of her own. She wondered when it would happen. She wondered if she would hold onto them too tightly until her own skin grew over the child's nose and mouth and they became one, inseparable, mother and child, love of the suffocating kind. What kind of knife would it take to cut that?

Camille met Larry at school, the university she went to only a few miles from home. He did everything right. He brought her flowers. He cooked dinners and took her out. He bought her dresses to wear for their trips to France and Italy. He had a smile like burning magnesium, bright and white and too much to take in at once without burning.

The sun pulsed above the house like a gas lamp. Camille and her mother started with the baseboards, knees pressed to the floor as they pelted the dirt from the corners. As she cleaned, she traced her history

through the walls. There was the nick in the drywall from the time she tipped her chair too far back, the scratch on the floor from when she dragged her heavy suitcase with its broken wheel to the door, threatening to run away at seventeen because her mother refused to let her go on the school trip to upstate New York, the worn path on floorboards from years of walking the same path up the stairs, the freshest coat of white paint in the living room her mother had hastily splashed across the deep blue Camille chose when she was sixteen after Camille finally moved out at twenty-five. The house carried each mark like a wound.

Camille coaxed spiders into cups and set them loose near the shed. When they finished the floors, her mother strung nets around the veranda. "To keep out moths," she said, glancing at her daughter. "And mosquitoes," Camille added as she took the bleach and a bucket of cloths upstairs to the bathroom.

The moths had always been a problem in this house. They were fat, pale things that bred in the garden and crept into the house at night. They ate through sweaters and beat themselves against the lights. She hated the rattle of their papery wings. A moth in the house is bad luck, a sign of death, something that eats at the precious knits stored carefully in the closets. Her mother kept dried orange peels between the folds of clothing to ward them off, but she sometimes still found the dry white bodies nestled in the cashmeres and wool. Do they die where they are born, Camille wondered, or did some moths make it out of the soothing darkness?

Grout near the clawfoot tub was thick with mold. The porcelain would need to be scoured with bleach powder and the mirror wiped with vinegar. Camille's mother's things spread like an empire across the vanity, her hair dead on the teeth of the comb like chewed gold.

Camille thought of kittens as she scrubbed. She had one, once, when she was fourteen. A pale white thing both blind and deaf, it lived only one summer. Camille kept it alive despite her mother's tongue clicking. "That thing will die. The world is too hard for it. Don't give it a name," she warned as she washed her meat-slick hands after cooking.

Camille had found the kittens that morning, their cries quivering up from beneath the front porch. She waited, then searched for their mother, and found a dead black and white cat on the side of the road at the end of the driveway. The kittens must have been only a week old. They would not survive without her. As Camille pressed herself against the port and reached into the cool cob-webbed darkness below to pluck them out one by one, she did not name them, not even the milk-white one. She put them in a box and called her mother over.

When Camille used to come home from after school orchestra

rehearsal, her mother would be upstairs in the bath, and she would call out, her voice drifting through the steam, "Come talk to me." Camille would close the toilet lid and sit on top while her mother sank beneath the frothing bubbles and try to make conversation. Her mother would say, "Tell me about your day," and Camille would say it was "Fine, how was yours," and her mother would say "Tired."

"Have you always been tired?" Camille asked once, and her mother smiled and rubbed her ring finger as she sank lower in the bathwater. "Not always. The world is just hard." When her mother eventually climbed out of the water, her skin pink and wrinkled, Camille would use the water after her and try to hold her breath underwater for as long as she could so just in case it came to drowning, she would be prepared.

Back then, Camille felt like a delicate thing her mother could cup in her palms, pale silvery dust leaving streaks on her mother's skin. It was in these moments that Camille felt safe, penned in by the steam of the bath and warmth and quiet of that tight little room. Just her and her mother. A long time ago, it was all either of them ever needed.

Downstairs, her mother beat the rugs and vacuumed the drapes, a raw kind of music that travelled up to Camille as her own hands grew cracked and irritated, red from the harsh chemicals she used to clear the limescale from the bathroom. It was so much cleaner when she was a child, but the tiredness her mother always spoke of must have been like water, a drowning thing.

Camille remembered the bathroom being brighter. She checked the bulbs, and they were all lit, but the light fixtures were coated in dust. She unscrewed the milky-white globe that encased the bulbs, and bright fluorescence spilled across the tile. Dust and dead things rattled in the glass. She turned the globe over to empty it out, and the dried husks of moths fell like leaves into the sink. They must have crawled in there and died, she thought. To be so desperate for warmth and light that one is willing to die. Though they didn't know that, she thought. The moths didn't know they'd be trapped.

When she finished in the bathroom, Camille found her mother crumpled into the living room sofa. "I did the living room. We can finish the kitchen tomorrow." Camille watched her. Her mother was older, yes. Fine lines threaded her face and hands, pink as they were from cleaning. That tiredness was beginning to fill her.

They had barely spoken at all since Camille arrived yesterday. She had set up her dress and her suitcases in her old childhood bedroom, shaking dust from the blankets and sweeping dead moths from the windowsills. She did not know what to say to her mother, and her mother did not ask any questions. She only answered them in short quips,

answering “How are you?” with a sunken smile: “Tired.”

Camille could feel it, too. The tiredness chrysalized in her, especially now as the wedding grew close. She folded a throw blanket and laid it across the sofa’s armrest, within her mother’s reach. “I’ll finish the kitchen now. Then we can be done and enjoy tomorrow.” Her mother nodded, and Camille went to the kitchen.

Leaving this house seemed impossible when she was young. She stayed through college and up until Larry’s job offers came from across the country. It broke her mother’s heart as much as it broke her own, like they were splitting the roof of the house like an egg and letting all the scouring sunlight in. The truth was simple. Camille had never wanted to leave, and her mother never wanted her to go, but this was how things go. They were supposed to learn to need other people. Now, her mother lived alone, and she did not keep goats or chickens. Instead, she put up nets and drowned a litter of strays so they wouldn’t become cats that killed birds. When Camille had asked her mother about it, “How could you do that? Why?” her mother only shrugged and said “I guess I just knew it was better coming from me than from something else. It’s a hard world.”

Camille had watched her mother’s face as she submerged each mewling body. Her eyes were hard and filmy as pearls. She stared past the bottom of the bucket as if she could see something deeper than the ground.

In the kitchen, Camille packed away chipped cups to make room for the caterers and scraped grease from the stovetop. She mopped the floors and cleaned the windows while afternoon sun crept through the lace curtains, projecting floral shadows on the butcher block. She stored mismatched pots and pans under the sink and shoved the refrigerator aside to clear away the coins and dust collected there. The sun slowly set. She arranged the cut peonies on the kitchen island and lit a candle. An open window sipped fresh air into the house as if taking a deep breath. “I’m done, Mom,” she called out, and she waited.

Her mother stirred on the sofa as if she was waking from a nap. “Good,” she said. “Good. Then come talk to me.”

Those same words scrub Camille raw; she grew pink and new again as she entered the living room and sat beside her mother. The velvety sofa sagged under her weight. “That was a lot. At least it’s done,” she said.

Her mother smiled at her. “It looks great. It will look great for tomorrow,” she said, but there was a heaviness in her voice. “I need a bath.”

It was a cool evening. Moonlight cast shadows long like nets across the summer-heavy greenery of August. She thought back to the kittens. Pink, mewling things. Just scraps of fur shaved from their mother.

Camille had filled the bucket with water, but she could not bring herself to do the drowning. That, her mother took care of with practiced ease, submerging her arms past the elbows and holding the kittens there while she watched the birds in the trees. They were quiet fixtures on their branches, like a fixed audience attending a hanging. Camille always wondered if they watched back and thanked her for this, if in some creature's universe this act of drowning made her a hero.

While it happened, Camille was struck by the silence from the kittens. Did they know it was coming? Did they hate her for filling the bucket in the kitchen sink? Once it was done and her mother collected the small bodies in a cardboard box and buried them where they were found beneath the porch, Camille doused the peony bush with the water from the bucket and hoped the flowers would not wilt with the taste of death.

"Tell me about this man," Camille's mother said after a moment.

Camille waited a moment and thought of Larry. "He's good." It was true. He was bright and warm as lamplight.

Her mother accepted this with a solemn nod.

"What, Mom?" Camille shifted so she could look into her mother's green-flecked eyes. Her brow twitched. "It's not going to be awful. There is such a thing as a happy marriage."

"I know," her mother replied, but Camille did not believe her. "But—" she stopped. "I wish I could save you if it isn't."

Eyes closed, Camille sank into the cushions. "You'll meet him tomorrow," she said. "You'll see." She had offered to bring Larry by once before they moved, but as usual, she had some excuse. That time, it was her weariness. "I'm too tired to talk to strangers," she had said. "Can't you see that?" Having the wedding here was the only way she would get her mother to meet this man and make her see that he wasn't the same as hers. If only her mother didn't see her as some weak thing in need of culling; that is always a reason to leave. At least with Larry she can make the choice herself.

Her mother took her hand and squeezed it. "I'm sure I will." She watched her daughter, and she recognized herself in the slight creep of weariness in her eyes.

Camille nodded. Outside, moths clouded the porchlights and rested against the nets across the veranda. Tiredness sloshed between them. Sometimes Camille felt like she'd never never left the house at all, that this was the place she still lived.

Her mother patted her thigh and released her hand. She did not look at her daughter as she spoke. "I always knew you were special," she said. "Of all the others. There were others, you know. A girl, then a boy."



“What are you talking about?” Camille asked.

“Oh, they died,” her mother answered. “It all happened years before you. The girl lived for three days. The boy didn’t even make it that far. You know. This place is just too hard.” She gestured around her, at the house, at the sky. “But then, there was you. My darling Camille. When you came into this world, I knew I could never let you go. I knew you needed me. This time I felt like I could actually protect you from it.”

Camille’s breath moved against the walls of her throat like something trapped. “I’m sorry, Mom. I had no idea.”

She shook her head. “You don’t understand what I’m saying.” This time she looked in her daughter’s eyes. “I didn’t want them. but I knew you were different. I’m glad it was you who stayed.”

For a moment, Camille couldn’t speak. Her mind carried through the garden and wondered where they were. Beneath the roses or behind the blackberry bushes. Camille forced a breath, then spoke. “Of course, Mom. You’ll always have me.”

Her mother smiled like this was the right answer. “You can always stay here, Camille. If you change your mind. It’s safe here.”

Camille pressed her lips together. “I know,” she said, the words like the dry rub of bitterness on the tongue. It is safe here like an egg is safe until the shell is pierced. It is safe until the drowning. There is always the leaving and coming back. Leaving like casting off a great weight, and coming back like muscle memory. The body knows how to carry it.

Moths beat against the lights and nets until a small one felt its way around a hole and slipped in through a broken window screen. Immediately, it pushed for the ceiling light. Camille grabbed a heavy book and stood abruptly.

“Leave it,” her mother said, and Camille froze. “I’ll get it,” her mother said. “You just go to bed.”

Slowly, Camille nodded, and she rose up the stairs, past the bathroom and into her bedroom. She shut the door behind her. Her dress hung on the wardrobe, wide and smooth like wings. The bed creaked with her weight, and for a while, all she did was stare at the dress and wonder what her mother felt like on this day all those years ago.

“Camille.” Her mother stuck her head into the bedroom. She kept the door open to a narrow slit, nearly clamping her own neck. “Rest well.”

“I know, Mom.” Camille smoothed her bedspread. Her mother shut the door. Then, down the hall, she heard running water begin to fill the bath.

In her mind, the sound became that of water slapping the bottom of a bucket as it filled. Then, the tap shut off, the bath filled, the steam clinging to the porcelain. Standing with her eyes shut, she waited for her mother’s call: “Come talk to me.”

YASMINA MARTIN

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## POST-RIOT SUMMER

for a while, i am most whole  
on two wheels. in mid-june  
i join chanting cyclists and  
i am one of few

Black folk in a space demanding my own qualities of matter.  
the peculiarities of hearing this crowd chant *Black Lives*

*Matter Whose Streets*

*Our Streets*

with their too-full tote bags  
leaves a metallic  
taste in my mouth. wondering  
just how long before  
the mass return to uncaring.

by october I find comfort in the ordinary state of affairs  
wilted cardboard signs in windows on streets long-rid of Black  
communities. business windows tattooed with black fists to ward off  
broken  
glass. whisper in my ear how you would've voted

for obama again, and  
again, it feels so right.  
bubbles  
*love fort greene, I mean, I know*  
*it's a little*  
*are so cute*  
*and everyone has dogs*

while I get my hair cut the woman  
*I moved here from bed-stuy and I just*  
gentrified *but the families*

YASMINA MARTIN

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## BODEGA CHERRIES

somewhere south of Atlantic ave  
taut skin breaks and a drop  
falls onto her shirt, a slow  
bloom. I linger  
there and continue my journey  
downward through valleys  
witness it metamorphose  
in some borderless nation  
left of her areola. my sweat  
beads drop onto blue linen  
and freckle my shoulders.

*stop!*

to desire is a weakness.  
eyes meet with measured amusement,  
a dry chuckle

what is it?

the corner of her mouth  
rises to meet its wry  
neighbor, furrowed.

my head moves east to west  
I look towards Pacific and  
taste my own salt.

SEAN THOMAS DOUGHERTY

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## THE SHAPE OF A PILL

What is there if not this labor, the light labor of hands popping pills out of packages, checking names, prescription tags, double checking the correct dosage. Outside is only the dark and the near empty parking lot, the small labor of looking to make sure a sleeping man is breathing. So many shapes and colors of different pills that pass through my gloved hands. Nearly translucent gel-like amber ovals that glitter like jewels and stick to the pack, tiny white ovals that could put a man to sleep; brown pills, red pills, blue, ovals and circles so we may swallow them though some anti-anxiety drugs come in strange shapes Buspirone with side indents like tabs, I suspect so one could break in half if needed. There are even hexagons, for high blood pressure and narcolepsy, a pill to open one's eyes. To close one's eyes, to speed up the heart's rate or slow it down, to level the blood pressure, all these different shapes for the body, for the organs, the blood, the brain. Numbered and lettered, made in giant factories. They pass through my hands. I put them in tiny cups. I mix some in yogurt, so they go down the throat and no one chokes. After I close my med cart and turn off the light, I imagine the pills glow with a light of their own, amber light, snowlight, locomotivelight, electrocardigramlight, the light that travels through the veins, blueriverlight, autumnleaflight, because the med cart wants to fly, wants to visit the old villages, it knows nothing of profit, it flies through the narrow mountain pass, wants to roll toward the bed of the woman in pain on a thin mattress, the man coughing in a mine, the barefoot child wheezing, the one who cannot sit up straight, the one lisping, the one going blind, the palsied—backwards the med cart flies, carrying all the human labor that made these pills, the chemists with their calculations, the giant corporations who paid for them, how someone needed to imagine the need, which is another way to say they diagnosed, how a doctor somewhere thought up the first ailment, checked the lab work, wrote it down, all the pieces of paper, encyclopedic, calculations, compounds, formulas, and then one day the masked workers leaned over the assembly line. Thousands of hair-netted and gloved factory workers, suited executives flying first class. Because they invented a tiny pill. Placed on the tongue. Like the eucharist. For the body. For the blood. Dissolving down to the elements: magnesium, sodium, tree leaf, turmeric, oyster shell, what is prescribed in this life? What is taken and what is given? But where is the cure for loneliness? The MEd cart speaks, in a soft female voice, I have one. What is the pill for love shorn? I have one. What is the pill for grief? I have one. Is there a pill for hopelessness? I have one. Is there a pill for my father's beatings? My mother's slaps. Is there a pill for wanting to fly? A punk rock pill to replace my pacemaker. I have one. A pill to fill the cathedral hollow in my chest. I have one. A pill for exile? Evacuation? A pill to forget genocide. A bell canto pill to recall. A heart shaped pill for regret. A pill the shape of a trumpet's bell? Or a tambourine, so I may shimmy and sway, though no one has ever asked me to dance. Do you have a pill to teach me how to finally spell? Words like peonies, or bourgeoise? An Episcopalian pill that smells like old money? Can you call me in that prescription? A pill so I may sing and open my diaphragm round as the Os in osteoporosis.

TINA CARLSON

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## POAS

Let's say my lover was a volcano.  
We made jokes of dirt and dusty  
blankets, the snoring of cows.

She tricked the sad gods into  
the mystery of her mouth. I was always  
fighting for air, she the one hungry.

I wanted her craters, sulfurous.  
How I vanished when she exhaled  
in her smoker's cough way. In the distance,

Mars shot darts at Saturn. Whistles and barks.  
Stars the colors of bosque and blood. Cows  
pushed their muzzles through slats in the wall

and breathed in soft syllables of dreams. Each night  
lasted longer than hours, I swear. As we lay there in dark  
planets had their way with us.

Clouds hovered low as smoke, kept the fires from flaring.

PHIL GOLDSTEIN

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## THE LOVER AS UNEXPECTED GLACIOLOGIST

Our bed is a river of ice, cleaving  
more & more every day.  
I am in a cave deep inside, without  
even a penguin to keep me company.

When will he return?  
When will I get to cast my stories on the walls?  
All I want sometimes, is for him  
to breathe into my neck & tickle me deep.

Instead, his tremulous hands fill me  
with an undying dread.  
No matter how many eons pass or where we flow, he never asks  
how I got here, what my geology can reveal.

PHIL GOLDSTEIN

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## THE UNBURYING

I stand alone in the cold, shovel in hand,  
an easily discernible figure against  
the snowy New Jersey day, in a field dotted with gray. Spy  
me through the empty, coated trees.

I wonder how to do this unwieldy task.  
Where do you start when  
the ground has decided it will not yield?  
I broke every bone in my body  
to unearth what lay beneath my feet:  
The skeletons of two boys, entwined  
in ways they shouldn't be, a long jagged femur draped  
over the pelvis of a smaller figure.

How did they come to be this way, buried  
among their great-grandfathers & great-grandmothers?  
Pale reflections of the stones stretch out, the white ground filled  
with pockets of gold, amber, decay.  
Anything that *was* holds just as much truth  
as anything that *breathes & walks this earth*,  
which is to say, what it will tell you  
when the dirt has been removed from its mouth.

DANIEL MOYSAENKO

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FROM *SPEAK AND THE SLEEPERS*

*to my father (1955-2017)*

a question  
that sounds like yes

The same breath  
of yours or ancient

same lessons relearned  
As yesterday happened today

this Tomorrow  
however poised sliding

rain behind my ears

is not about my body like yours

cannot help but

Watch finches and iridescent beetles and  
Thumped with sleet

(that hard music)

come awake  
all at once

the wilderness dim and static  
If you lie down in it



thronged with breath

That's all

coming to beset

falling

Having been fallen on

and glad

for today

There is no cure

untitled graph of sky

I love you do not lift me

no need

MICHAEL HOMOLKA

---

## SOCAL

### 5

Soul with your consistency of crushed  
vitamins either life is literal  
or eternal : the distinction amounts  
to about the weight of a nuance

So much went into the Walkman  
which for five years enjoyed some kind of heyday  
Vitamins too shall pass species turn over  
and descending water result in powder

As for the contents of your emotional  
hours the pouring out of feelings  
dates itself cringingly

Though once in a while a joke floats over  
the bloodied earth of a life-giving  
star and everyone laughs easily

**SOCAL**

**15**

Whatever it was that kept me away though it hasn't  
entirely vanished has lightened somewhat Dragonflies  
zoom over grass blades fifty generations hence reacclimating  
to my return The air feels more temperate the plants stiller :

What say you bottle-green metallic-blue bug-eyed creatures?  
You remind me of early encounters with art in a cave or a smock  
the full alphabet not yet decided A teacher explains in basic vocabulary  
the metaphoric consequences of a painting by Diego Rivera :  
the load of pink flowers and skin tones which match the earth

All those summers sink like unread salts toward earth's center  
How many times did the family (crows passing overhead)  
equivocate over stakes that were never meant  
to reach the point of death? How many years  
did we waste settling that same ill-fated departure date?

JAMES BRAUN

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## IF THEY ASK WHERE WE'VE GONE

We are all afternoon man and woman of the wildernesses. We are spear-throwing, shelter-building survivalists. We are the off-casts, the non-remembered, the sometimes called. We are all of these things until Dad yells from the back porch to get our asses in the truck, we're going to evening service.

At evening service we are mostly saved. My sister Opal sits with her hands locked to the right of me, an exhaled prayer under her breath, blown through the between spaces of her fingers. To the left of me slouches Dad, left of him sits Mom, left of Mom stands a man suit-breasted gold tray in hand money-asking for a friend named God. Mom places in the gold tray her tip money from Theo's, six ones and a crinkled five.

We sing the "Go, Tell It on the Mountain," sing the "What Child is This." The singing place between "When Peace, Like a River" and "Love Divine, All Loves Excelling" is when Pastor Wes asks us to consider all things considered what we are, are we followers of God, or only fans of God? Are we true believers or only half believers? And after I consider all things considered I exhale like Opal under my breath, I am man of the wildernesses.

I myself, I too pray for safety from what hides in the woods behind our house.

By the time we make it home from church it's too dark for outside. Opal says it's beyond dangerous to go out at night, what with what's out there hiding behind trees and beneath leaves and under the earth. Side by side we brush our teeth over the bathroom sink, then left she goes into her bedroom and right I go into mine, under the covers scared of whatever might bust into my room from the window, the door, the dark under the bed. There's an afraid place in me, one that starts in my arms and leaks out the tips of my fingers, goes out like that but stays inside. Not five minutes alone and I am sneaking into Opal's room with my bedroll that I roll out, and not ten minutes together I'm near asleep next to Opal's bed, her hand stretched down to me by her side, holding the tips of my fingers to plug the leaks of the afraid place inside me.

In the morning we are back to the wildernesses. Opal helps me into boots and double-knots the strings tight, does the same to hers. Opal's got the knife, Swiss Army. Scissors to screwdriver to toothpick for our teeth, it's all there. We crunch through the woods where we sort through branches and find the straight sticks that Opal whittles the ends of, making spears to fend off what's hidden in our woods.

Woods go on for millions of acres but Opal knows the way. I hop-step my boots into her mud prints, her prints the same size as mine. We take a break on the way to the fort to check the raccoon trap Dad gave us for Christmas. Nine times out of ten we catch our neighbor's cat but this day is that one time out of ten.

Empty, Opal says.

On the way to the fort we pass the trees we climb and the trees we can't, pass the rock-circled fire pit we've never started a fire in but always try to start a fire in. We pass the crick, the holes we've dug, pass the dirt hills piled high from the holes we've dug. All the way to the fort we pass what we know to pass.

No wind blows through the trees. No singing birds sing their songs to us.

The fort looks the same as we left it, sticks and branches leaning against the biggest tree in our woods, the tree that fits under the category of trees we cannot climb, all adding into one lean-to half-teepee fort. Opal dips inside and I hop-step in line with her, the two of us fitting snug-tight safe inside this lean-to half-teepee we call ours.

We peek out one head each, check for what hides. What's hiding, they don't come out during sun time, most times. Most mornings we stay still, the afraid place inside me leaking out of my fingers even with Opal's hand over mine, leaking through the cracks of her knuckles.

Before long, I say, I'm hungry. We should head back.

Shush, hear that? Opal says. She sticks out her spear-sharpened stick and stabs air.

That? That's my stomach growling and such.

Opal turns her head left, right. I got this feeling, she says.

An hour more and we're headed back. We pass what we know to pass but only half as much when there's the sound of a rustle through the trees. We stop where we stand, and Opal ducks down and I do the same, Opal's finger hush against her lips.

Opal points one way, then points the other. We'll meet back at the house, she whispers.

I start off in the other direction, start sneaking that way. Opal starts off sneaking like me but then sprints off her way, woman of the wildernesses yelling with her spear spearing the air, and I make like her, heading the other way, the sound of me screaming through the trees. All the rustle-swishes follow Opal, leaving me a safe path home.

When I make it back to the house Dad slides open the back screen door and yells over my yelling to stop yelling, says, And where in all hell is your sister?

I point at the woods, all crybaby-like.

Well, he says. Go get her.

I shake my head, No.

Goddammit. Come on then.

Dad is the shield of me as I step behind his steps, the afraid place in me growing wide. Under his breath Dad exhales words off limits to me and Opal, the F- and B- and D-words, him walking all lightning-speed crunch through the woods, passing what we pass on the way to the fort. Not a single rustle-swish to be heard.

Opal is not at the fort.

Opal! Dad calls out. Opal!

We search the woods. I take Dad to the place where I last saw Opal and we find her prints but it's hard to tell if the prints are mine or hers. We follow them until they disappear, all clear but then quick like that they're gone, like she got pulled into the earth or eagle-swooped from the sky. After following the dead-end footsteps, Dad takes us to places in the wildernesses Opal and I have never been, places we would never think to go. Hours spent searching until the sun falls into the trees. Dad's shoulders sag, fall low as sun. Then I see it, a touch of red through the trees. Only a sliver of it, a slice, right there.

Right there, I say. I point at the right-there red and run to it. Dad trails behind me, his footsteps hop-stepping into mine. I bend over and pick up the touch of red. Opal's Swiss Army knife. I tuck it into my pocket.

She's gotta be around here somewhere, Dad says.

But in the next few minutes it gets too dark for outside, the rustle-swishes stirring all rustle-swish in the night. I walk back to the house, following the mud prints we've made. Dad doesn't understand, doesn't know what hides out here. He is not by himself in not understanding, myself not understanding why what's hiding came during sun time. Dad stays out after dark, looking for his, our Opal. I worry he'll get snatched by the rustle-swishes like Opal did. I stay up, perched on the back of the living room couch, watching the black outside, waiting for Dad to come back from it, waiting for Opal to do the same. Past midnight he steps into the living room, a shake in his head.

No Opal.

What's hiding is not hiding, is out during sun time again. Next morning, the police show up flashing lights to our house after Opal doesn't come home with Dad, and both police officers, the way they walk, into our living room, kitchen, dining room, Opal's room, there is a rustle-swish in each of their steps. Their belts, their clothes, too. Rustle-swish.

Don't trust them.

But Dad trusts them. He talks with the officers in the kitchen once they finish searching the house. Mom's resting and I am not to bother her, Dad says. He offers some coffee to the officers and each of them shakes their head, No, thank you. Dad lets his coffee go cold.

How quick can you get a search party together? Dad asks.

First officer says, Well.

Second officer says, We can't do anything until seventy-two hours after the missing person in question is deemed missing, sir. Once the said seventy-two hours in question has passed only then can we send out the aforementioned search party, sir.

## JAMES BRAUN

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First officer says, Standard procedure.

Dad, getting all Famous Actor, says, This is my daughter we're talking about.

First officer says, Sir.

Second officer says, Sir, we must ask you to calm yourself. Sir, if you do not calm yourself we must forcibly take action. Are you calm? If you cannot calm yourself, sir, we must take action, and then we will have to take you down to the station. Remain calm. If you are not calm and we must take action then all will not be calm down at the station. Sir? Sir?

Famous Actor Dad walks into the mudroom, puts on his boots, double-knots the strings tight, and walks out into the wildernesses. I am hop-step behind him, Dad the shield of me from the woods that go rustle-swish with the wind in the trees.

Three days and my sister Opal is famous. Front page of the morning newspaper, flyers with her face, same face that's all blown up on the TV's big-screen, my sister Opal, everywhere.

Next evening service Pastor Wes asks us all in the pews to pray for the missing person in the pews, Opal. He asks for anyone willing to volunteer to volunteer and join the search. We sing the "Blessed Assurance," sing "When I Survey the Wondrous Cross," Dad to the left of me, Mom not to the left of him. Dad doesn't blame her for not attending, considering all things considered.

In Pastor Wes's closing he asks of us to speak with God. As those all around pray in the pews, Dad sits there slouched, a blank stare ahead. One by one the pew people stand and walk the aisle, walk to leave, and with me sitting in the aisle seat they each, the pew people, touch my head as they pass. A palm to the head, resting there for a second or two, then gone. I wonder if they know something I don't, like if they've found a new afraid place inside me that I haven't found yet, if maybe they're trying to plug that place before it even gets known to me. Plug it like Opal used to. I take note to cover this place up as soon as Dad and I get home.

On the drive home, Dad turns on the radio and there she is, Opal all over. The radio says, We are interrupting this broadcast to report a missing child by the name of Opal Weathers. If you have any information regarding this disappearance—

Dad turns off the radio and weeps into the wheel that steers the truck.

Back home in the driveway, Dad looks out the window and says to me, Go on. I need a minute here. I'll meet you inside.

Inside the house Mom is still in the bedroom so I go to the room I call mine, put on an old baseball cap too-small for my head, covering up the maybe new afraid place inside me. I snag Opal's Swiss Army knife

from the safe-kept place in my dresser drawer. Can pull anything out of the Swiss Army. I pull out the knife portion part, go to the mudroom and double-knot my boots tight. All ready, I head into the wildernesses to look for Opal. Already it is getting too dark for outside.

I head out all lonesome into the woods. As I pass what I know to pass, I check the raccoon trap and guess who? Neighbor's cat. He goes all Meow as I go to let him go, and as I go to let him go, there it is, off to the left of me. The rustle-swish.

I run the way to the fort, Swiss Army swinging as I run. At the fort I dip inside and peek a head out, searching for a glimpse of what hides there. Nothing that can be seen but only heard. Inside my fingers, in my head, I have this feeling in me. And it is not the fear, not the afraid place inside me as it was before, the one that goes out but stays in, but a readiness to take on whatever took my big sister away, even if they take me as they did her.



G.C. WALDREP

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**FROM *PLAGUE NIGHTS***

NIGHT 749

*Purpose* redirects here.

Your throat  
an idea of proportion  
held by a doubtful god.

In the galleries,  
sacks of broken toys.

NIGHT 752

I am a knife in your silence,  
drifting  
bright-voweled  
towards the King of Maps.

Or, I want to be.  
Me with my beautiful hands.

NIGHT 848

I thought about leaving a cairn  
in the forest today,  
on the mountain's  
north-facing slope, but I didn't.

That was my holy work, today:  
not to leave a cairn.  
First  
knot in the long string of God.

NIGHT 855

Tooth torn from the world's root.  
Do you wake it  
like a baby, or shut it like a door.

NIGHT 856

My faith in engines gleams  
in you.  
Eroded anchor.  
Breath misplaced at dawn.

NIGHT 966

Zion is, after all, definite.

I come away  
from the sun I outlived.

No, those aren't  
burns, they are alphabets.

JEFF HARDIN

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## THE METAPHOR KEEPS ADDING TO ITSELF

By what route did each of us arrive here?  
It's hard to say which silences will one day  
come to speak or whether we'll have ears  
to hear, as the Bible verse says. Cyclists  
are gearing up for a race along the river's  
course—one from South Africa, another  
from Memphis. One says five hours; another  
says six; but when the race is a metaphor,  
the time could be endless. In the dawnlight,  
I look through the blinds and imagine  
each thin space between—distinctly itself,  
isolated—posits, as a premise, one more  
way to see what isn't there layered over  
what is. Is that a siren cast over the city's  
waking or merely one person's mania set  
loose again? Is it a comfort that all over  
the earth a few stranded souls are writing  
elegies and that this action parts the veil  
only enough for one at a time to enter  
and possibly one or two others to come  
along behind but none at the same time?  
Is comfort even a comfort, when it visits  
one person but overlooks others? One truth  
must welcome an endlessness of variables  
before falling into place. Each moment adds  
others. And these moments add others, on  
and on, some furrows, others pollen, still  
others all the drops of rain falling on an  
inland pond and the words crossed out then  
written again, the redbud leaves overlooked  
on the drive into town, the prayers whispered  
over headstones, though no one else remains  
of a family. The metaphor keeps adding to its  
subtractions, keeps welcoming constellations  
and arias, keeps birthing and rebirthing itself  
out of itself into itself beyond what it knows  
of itself. It's hard to say what's believable  
when a flame starts up in another chimney,  
hard not to think of Auschwitz and falling ash,  
hard not to wonder how to keep wondering  
what time, sweet time, will allow. Maybe  
each word is a secret we're not supposed  
to know. Maybe each enacts unfathomable  
atrocities. We look through these blindnesses.

## ALTAR

No one knows the question we should be asking, the one that leads to the answer we will not otherwise conceive. Possibly, each possibility will remain unknown until the moment—if it does—arrives, its presence stepping forth into our own. Once, I was an orphan, caught between one world and another, and then I stood on a library ladder, reading “the soft breeze can come to none more grateful than me.” There were other shelves, other lives, words that might have granted a mind beyond the one I wander now. History mumbles through so many drafts. A soldier sleeps in snow in woods he’ll never quite return from sixty years later. Belief is merely one horizon, assurance another. One song I found pulled me up out of a miry pit and made my footsteps firm. All my words have been spoken to death, which, as an idea, is not as interesting as the sound of a temple bell coming out of the flowers in Basho’s poem. *Once*, someone will say of me, trying to remember, breaking off into nouns and verbs, into phrases, a few of which might come close to revealing how often I stooped to a lily’s face, how I wept upon hearing of refugees lost at sea. From one step to the next, one breath to the next, we are always one word from the last one we’ll breathe. How long, O Lord, can love waken in us? What if the sniper, just today, chose a different allegory to abide inside? There’s what we see and what we can’t see and what we don’t know of what we won’t conceive of in the first place. There’s a boy stepping onto a train because it’s 1942. There’s someone translating Shakespeare in the ghetto. Each word, each moment, is a miry pit. There’s the silence of an emptiness at the core of each thought. There’s a word we might find that redeems all the others, yet tomorrow and the next day we still won’t have found a way to altar our voice.

## TETHERED

I lifted my head from the dark asphalt and pushed myself onto my elbow. The right side of my body throbbed; the skin on my back screamed with fire; blood was streaming from the right side of my head and along my right elbow. Looking down, I saw my own naked breasts. What had happened to my dress? Shame pushed out panic as I registered an older couple coming towards me from across the Neapolitan street. *Must cover my breasts.* I looked for the straps which had tied my halter dress around my neck. They were hanging near my stomach. Tilting my head so the blood would run into my hair and not in my eyes, I pulled them up, but one strap was too short while the other had a large knot and was too long.

I needed a moment.

Images recollected and arranged. A man passing on a motorcycle had snatched my handbag, but he hadn't bargained for it being secured around my wrist. To be fair, I hadn't registered that I was being robbed. At first, I thought my bag had snagged his handlebar and I was about to shout my apology when he took off, taking me down to the ground. The left side of my body got slammed with the initial impact, but as the mugger sped down the moderately-trafficked street, I was banged onto my back. Being dragged along the pavement lacerated my back and shoulders and shore through the straps of my dress. As I was being dragged and skinned, I saw the handle which held the handbag to my right wrist tear a little. The keys to my Airbnb, my phone, and my only credit card were in it. I turned, so my left hand could gain purchase on the body of the bag, and my right hand, strangled in the strap, clawed upward. Now, the right side of my body was suffering the friction of being pulled, but I had a firm grip on my bag. The purse-snatcher must have realized I wasn't letting go, so he did and gunned it. That's when my head smacked the pavement.

I held the halter's triangles of cloth to my breasts as the older couple reached me. I loved this orange, hot pink, and violet psychedelic-patterned piece of '70s era nostalgia. I had bought it at a vintage shop to celebrate getting my first job in Kurdistan, Iraq almost ten years earlier. This dress had gone wine tasting in West Jerusalem, to rock concerts in New York City, to art shows in Leipzig, to art residencies outside Barcelona and Cadiz, and to artistic heaven at Versailles. It had climbed ruins in Lebanon, learned Spanish in Seville, danced imitation flamenco at *la feria* in el Puerto de Santa María, toured coffee plantations in Boquete, Panama, researched the Srebrenica Genocide in Sarajevo, released fire lanterns on New Year's Eve in Chiang Mai, drunk cheap bubbly while waiting for the Eiffel Tower to light up, done a book reading in Chicago, and nudged me to break up with a jealous, controlling boyfriend who thought the dress was too sexy for Cartagena. This dress was more than a dress, it was a Wonder Twins cape of super powers ready to activate confidence with a single wear. In my fledgling Italian

and tears, I begged the woman to tie it back around my neck while her partner called an ambulance.

I had gone to Italy to take refuge after my friend Luke had died. He had snorted some possibly skunked cocaine made in a homemade lab in the house of a Pakistani couple in the Kurdish region of northern Iraq, and later, he fell off the balcony of his apartment. Because I had been with Luke in a cafe when he had met the female member of the Pakistani couple, Kurdistan's special police called me in, without my prior knowledge or consent, for a show-up, an identification process where the person of interest and the witness see each other face to face. There were few foreigners in the Kurdish city where I live, and the university where I teach had just used my image in a promotional video splashed across Facebook and Instagram. I didn't know if I had a target on my back. Hijacked by grief, fear, and fatigued, I flew to Italy to get a grip after my summer teaching term had ended. I wanted to visit Naples and Sicily, home to my mother's side of the family, to see if either were places I, too, could call home.

After Luke died, the university's head of security showed me the cafe's security camera footage of Luke and a woman sitting at the bar to see if I could identify her. The footage was an over-the-shoulder shot from behind the woman, who was dressed in a vintage turquoise Mexican wedding dress, hanging insouciantly off one shoulder. I told the head of security I couldn't identify the woman as I silently judged her for showing that much skin. Then, I realized she was me. Visiting the United States after living in conflict and post-conflict zones feels a bit like that. I am on the outside looking in, judging, not always recognizing what I see.

Were the houses in the US always so big? Did supermarkets always carry seventy-two types of cereal? Did every driveway always have two or more vehicles parked in it? Car culture and hyper consumerism and neo-liberalism abound. Meanwhile, the closet in the spare bedroom where I store my belongings is bursting with my collection of specialty frocks, some of which still bear tags.

What ties a person to a place? What un-ties them?

In *The Dispossessed*, John Washington argues that the poverty and violence powerful nations inflict on the majority world cause mass migration. I am aware of my privilege to choose my next place to live because it necessitates a degree of political, personal, and economic freedom, not to mention the "right" passport. I go to Iraq to work, and I am labeled an expat. An Iraqi comes to the United States to work, and he is labeled an immigrant or a refugee or an asylum seeker or a terrorist. We both seek to better our lives, either through financial gain or experience; our differing labels illuminate a disquieting truth about the mildewed vocabulary of Anglocentrism.

My father's early life was unmade by violence. He was a Berliner growing up during World War II. After the war, the employer of one of

my grandmother's friends sponsored my grandmother and my father, so they could emigrate to the United States when he was sixteen. They arrived with their suitcases, some fine china to sell, and sixty US dollars bought on the black market because Germans were not allowed to hold foreign currency after the war. My father hid the bills in the film compartment of a Leica camera, which he would later sell. Despite having had most of his general education disrupted by war, he managed to learn English at night school, earn his General Education Diploma (GED), graduate from Northwestern University in Chicago, and build a comfortable middle class living for himself working in sales, marketing, and training.

Behind closed eyes, I see him sitting on the newspaper-covered foyer floor of our childhood home on Lilac Way. He is tall and I am small, but when he sits on the floor, we are almost the same height. Mom is wrangling my sisters for Sunday mass as Dad cleans and polishes his dress shoes for the work week ahead, and I stand by the front door, watching. He works fastidiously, using first a brush and then a soft cloth, which live together in a wooden box with a foot rest handle. This is his work ethic, brought from his home country to his now-home country and gifted to me to take wherever I go. Although he never quite lost his German accent nor his taste for liverwurst, German pickles, marzipan, and Dominostein, a German sweet sold primarily at Christmas time, he considered himself American, not German, and he never wanted to live anywhere but the United States.

Hasan, a former student, was living in a university's dormitory in 2014 when ISIS captured his home town of Heet. His father and brother had to flee Heet because Hasan's father had worked as an Anbar province coordinator for the United Nations, and ISIS kept a very detailed data base of residents in its captured territories. If ISIS had discovered Hasan's father's side hustle, he would have been executed. Leaving behind the family compound, which had taken Hasan's father thirteen years to build, Hasan's father hid whatever money and gold jewelry he could fit into his pockets (ISIS could not suspect he was fleeing) and held his breath as he passed through checkpoints. He made it first to Baghdad and finally to Sulaimaniyah, where he rebuilt his life. Hasan's father remarried and taught English in the Kurdish public schools until the day he received a notice from the Iraqi government saying he had to return to Heet or risk losing a government subsidy upon which he and his second wife relied. Although the family did not want to return, they did and found that ISIS had burnt the family compound to the ground.

*Merriam-Webster.com* defines dispossessed as “deprived of home, possessions and security.” After his university graduation, Hasan had to leave Sulaimaniyah, a place where he had a home, possessions, and security, to return to Heet, a place where the family home had been destroyed, none of his possessions remained, and due to ongoing ISIS



activity in the Anbar province, definitely lacked security. He had tears in his eyes when he told me, “I wake up and go onto the balcony [in his Sulaimaniyah apartment], and it is safe. The street is quiet. There isn’t gunfire. In the distance, I see the mountains. Why would I want to leave? There is nothing to go back for.”

I have taught many dispossessed students. In a cohort of adult learners at a professional development institute in northern Iraq, a female painter named Narin, married but childless and in her early forties, recalled fleeing Mosul as ISIS took over her city. Narin and a nephew escaped on foot to the autonomous region of Kurdistan where she “collapsed on the ground in front of the first house [she] saw.” Narin told me strangers took them in, housing and feeding her and her nephew until they were restored enough to continue to Sulaimaniyah, where Narin’s sister lived. Later, Narin would confide that her husband had been disappeared as ISIS sieged Mosul, that she had paid thousands of dollars to fixers who said they knew where he was and could find him, and because they hadn’t, she wanted to return and look for him herself no matter the personal risk. The last time I saw her was in the hair dye aisle of a local supermarket. She would soon be leaving for Mosul to look for her husband or at least for some answers because “as you know Alex, my husband was one of Saddam’s cousins.” Mosul had not yet been liberated from ISIS. I never saw her again.

Yazidis, an ethno-religious minority living in the disputed territories of northern Iraq, gained international attention when ISIS attacked them at Sinjar Mountain in 2014. ISIS committed mass murder of Yazidi men, forced religious conversions on those who were not slaughtered, and abducted and enslaved thousands of Yazidi women and girls. Yazidi women were repeatedly raped, bought and sold at human sex slave markets, and forced to marry ISIS fighters. The Yazidi religion prohibits marrying outside of the Yazidi community or one faces exile. As a result, the Yazidi women who were enslaved by ISIS and escaped have been welcomed back into the Yazidi community, but their children born of rape have not. One rationale given by Yazidi leaders is that these children are Muslim by Iraqi law and not Yazidi. (The principles of the Yazidi religion define a Yazidi as a person born of two Yazidi parents.)

Disputed territories in Iraq refer to regions that both the central Iraqi government in Baghdad and the central government of the autonomous Kurdish region in Erbil want to control. When Saddam was overthrown in 2003, the two rival political parties in the Kurdish region, the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) headed by the Barzani tribe, and the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK) headed by the Talabani tribe, sent Pesh Merga forces to the disputed territories to establish defacto control. Pesh Merga are the military forces of the Kurdish region charged with maintaining the security of Kurdistan, but they are allied by political party affiliation rather than being under one central control. As a result,

Sinjar was protected by the KDP's Pesh Merga forces who withdrew from Sinjar without resistance when ISIS attacked, leaving the Yazidis vulnerable.

The Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK), a US, UK and Turkey designated terrorist organization, established a defense line around Mount Sinjar and opened a safe corridor for Yazidis fleeing ISIS. Thousands were displaced across Iraq and abroad. The university for which I teach, founded by a former member of the PUK, sponsors scholarships for several Yazidis students who live in the dorms while their family members lived in Internally Displaced Person (IDP) camps on the opposite side of the Kurdish region near Sinjar. The distinction between an IDP and a refugee has monetary implications because IDP camps have less access to international funding. It is argued that IDPs will be taken care of by their home country. It seems illogical to think that a country which has been attacked and partially conquered by a beheading, raping, and tortuous caliphate has extra resources to help its dispossessed citizens.

My Yazidi students didn't talk much about their experiences. In a moment of tone deafness, I gave the students articles about the US's use of drone strikes to fight terrorism to teach argumentation based on evidence. Mazen was the first student to speak up, telling me the subject matter made him uncomfortable as his eyes reddened. Although his close friend Bassim supportively told him, "We need to talk about it [terrorist attacks]," I apologized and swapped out the articles for those on the benefits of feminism.

Despite the atrocities my Yazidi students had experienced, they didn't harden. Later in the term, the electricity on our campus mysteriously went out every day from about 4 pm to 11 pm while the public university across the street remained fully lit up. It was winter; the students in the dorms were cold, and they couldn't cook food or do homework until the power went back on. The founder of our university had recently been elected the president of Iraq, partly on the strength of his anti-corruption reputation. Some speculated our campus's power failure was payback for the president not granting political favors based on cronyism or wasta.

I reasoned that some of my scholarship students might not have extra money to go out to eat while the power was off, so I wrote them letters sharing some of my father's Berlin stories. The American employer of one of my grandmother's friends had sent care packages to my grandmother and father in Berlin throughout World War II although he did not know them personally. My father credited those packages for his and his mother's survival. I wrapped the letters around some cash. The next day, assuring my students that they were not in trouble, I asked them to meet me after class and gave them the letters with strict orders not to open them until they returned to their dorm rooms. The following day, Mazen, their unofficial spokesperson, asked to "see me after class" with the

promise “that I was not in trouble.” Once we were gathered, they thanked me for the letters, which, according to Bassim, “was the real gift” and tried to return the money. We argued back and forth about taking help when it is offered, about kindness versus charity, and about creating the kind world in which we wanted to live. My students finally agreed to take the money but assured me they would only use it if they really needed it or if they saw someone in the dorms who needed it. They wished to send the rest to their families who were living in the camps or trying to rebuild their lives in the wreckage of Sinjar. After everything they had lost, their instinct was to share what little they had with others.

Palestinian life under occupation is a dispossessed existence too. Palestinian homes can be demolished as a result of collective punishment, meaning individuals related to those accused of carrying out acts of violence are punished by having their homes bulldozed even though they have not committed any crime. Other times, Palestinian homes are given to settlers after a forced eviction. Israeli law allows Jews to reclaim lands owned by Jews before the 1948 War, but does not afford Palestinians the same rights. The Israeli government does not abide by the United Nations General Assembly’s Resolution 194, which guarantees Palestinian refugees and IDPs the right to return to their homes after having been expelled during the 1948 Palestinian War and the 1967 Six-Day War. Israeli law sets boundaries for where Palestinians can live and does not allow them to build beyond those boundaries. Palestinians live under a constant threat of violence from the Israeli military at checkpoints, where Palestinians are often shot for allegedly attempting to carry out car-ramming attacks. They risk their lives to peacefully protest, such as the Great March of Return demonstrations at the Gaza/Israeli border, where Israeli Defense Forces (IDF) used deadly force on peaceful protestors, including students, journalists, and doctors, who were easily identifiable as press or medics.

During a summer break between terms in Iraq, I lived in Ras Al-Amud, a Palestinian neighborhood in East Jerusalem. I rented a room in an apartment owned by the imam of a local mosque, who lived next door. The area was overcrowded, without much grass or flowers along the broken sidewalks whereas neighborhoods in West Jerusalem sported green lawns and smoothly paved roads. When it was time for me to return to Iraq, I could not hire a taxi from West Jerusalem to pick me up at my rented home to take me to the airport in Tel Aviv because Jewish taxi drivers were reluctant to enter this Palestinian neighborhood. Because Israeli law limits on which roads Palestinians can travel, I could not hire a Palestinian taxi to take me to the Tel Aviv airport. In the end, the Palestinian cousin of a shopkeeper from across the street brought me to the Mount of Olives, where I met a hired taxi in the parking lot of a hotel.

In East Jerusalem, I taught Palestinian scholarship students, some of whom travelled from refugee camps in the West Bank through a series of humiliating checkpoints, to attend an English language training program in East Jerusalem. The scholarship program, sponsored by the United States Department of State (DOS), is a soft diplomacy initiative predicated on the belief that if young people are taught English in a curriculum steeped in American culture and American exceptionalism by affable, pleasant American instructors, said young people will be less tempted to join terrorist groups in their home countries. The program where I worked in East Jerusalem also prepares its students to take the Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL) to complement another of its initiatives which helps high-achieving Palestinian students compete for scholarships to US institutions. (Getting a student visa is another matter as the US immigration and visa processes have become more restrictive in the name of national security.) Trying to balm the systematic degradation and violence Palestinians suffer daily as they are denied control over basic aspects of daily life such as their ability to move freely within their own country, to exit and return, to develop their territory, and to build on their own land by offering an English language training program is like trying to put out a forest fire with your spit. I once received a student essay about wanting to become a suicide bomber in order to stop the Israeli occupation.

I didn't report the student, who was thirteen but looked younger, because I did not want to derail his or his family's lives over what was most likely an empty rant. The rationale in his essay reflected his lived experience under occupation. Despite its faults, the language program offered him a reprieve from those experiences such as a field trip to the Mount Carmel National Park near Haifa, which Palestinians would have had difficulty accessing on their own due to Israel's laws restricting movement. The student could have been expelled from the program or perhaps singled out to Israeli authorities, who would have probably harassed him and his family. Israel practices collective punishment, including forcible transfer, home demolition, revoked healthcare, revoked social security entitlements for dependents, and possible revoked permanent residency status, all of which violate international law. According to the non-profit, Al-Shabaka, the enforcement of collective punishment measures has been intensified in East Jerusalem, where the DOS English language training program is located.

I opted to talk to the student one-on-one, and he stayed in the program where his consciousness expanded. As our summer term ended and I prepared to return to northern Iraq, my Palestinian students, including him, who knew little about Kurds except that they harbored a vague dislike of them, were worried because they viewed Iraq as dangerous. My Kurdish students had expressed similar concerns before I left northern Iraq for East Jerusalem. Neither group of students

personally knew a member of the other; their blanket dislike stemmed from each ethnic group's historical relationship with Saddam, and to a lesser extent, Israel. Saddam had championed the Palestinians, subsidizing families of Palestinian martyrs after the Second Intifada and supporting the Palestinian Liberation Organization (PLO) whereas Saddam had committed genocide on the Kurds during the Anfal Campaign, when Iraqi forces killed 180,000 Kurds in the final years of the Iran-Iraq War. The Iraqi government's goal was to eliminate Kurdish rebel groups and Arabize the Kirkuk Governorate, home to one of the biggest and oldest oil fields in the Middle East. Presently, as Michael B. Bishku reports in the *Journal of South Asian and Middle Eastern Studies*, Israel benefits from independent access to Kurdish oil, some of which the Kurds seized from Iraq when the Kurdish Pesh Merga forces drove ISIS out of the disputed city of Kirkuk. Kurdistan sells the oil in return for weapons and training for its Pesh Merga forces from Israel. After I posted about my return to northern Iraq on Facebook, students from both countries started commenting, which opened a dialogue among them as they shared their feelings across my page. As they discovered what they had in common, perspectives shifted, giving way to a bit of humor and empathy.

*"I'm so happy that your going to be our teacher this year welcome back!!!!!! I'm so delighted."*—{Kurdish student about my return.}

*"You are right but in the other hand Alex left us :("*—{Palestinian student's response.}

*"Well that's a bad news. For u guys but for us it's a great news."*

*": ((("*

Dislike dissipated for two tiny communities tucked into their own pockets of violence.

Despite or perhaps due to growing up within so much violence, there is a specific sweetness to the students I have encountered in the Middle East, be they Kurdish, Arabic, Palestinian, Syrian, or Yazidi. Many of my twenty-something students were tweens or younger during the 2003 US-led invasion. Hasan remembers US soldiers sometimes removing their gloves to shake hands with his father before a house-to-house search or sometimes kicking in the front door, rounding up all the men in the family, and taking them into the courtyard for a beating. Othman, another student I taught at the professional development institute, recalls a British tank rolling up his Basra street as his dad and uncle pointed shotguns out a living room window to defend themselves against a Shia militia. Othman credits that tank for saving their lives. These students, with their old eyes in young faces, saw their grammar school yards littered with hands and brains, yet as college students, they don't know how to ask a girl out for coffee.

On campus, they offer to help you carry your books or computer. They tell you they love you, and they don't mean it in a sexual way,

and they are not embarrassed to say it. They run up to you to hug you. They organize birthday cakes for you and gather other former students together so everyone can enter your classroom singing as they slip a paper crown on your head and light some candles. They send you jokes on WhatsApp. They Facebook message you when they hear you are ill. They Facebook message you when they decide to become teachers. They Facebook message you to send prayers when your father is ill. They message you every day as your father hangs on in an intensive care unit in a hospital in a country which broke theirs. They send prayers for your mother. They message you and message you and message you when your father dies.

My brush with Italian violence didn't sweeten me; it steeled me. Before the motorcyclist snatched my bag, I had been devastated by heartache. I had not only lost Luke, but I had also been left by a man I loved. Because being dumped happened at the same time Luke died, the two losses were bound together for me. I couldn't speak to or about my ex without choking up. Once I realized I was about to lose my handbag and that I could try to stop another loss from happening, something internal shifted. I became more muscle than mind. Turning onto my right side so I could get a better grip on the bag as the motorcyclist dragged me down the street was my Angelina Jolie action figure moment. I felt victorious, a phoenix rising, until the purse snatcher let go and my head smacked the pavement.

Lying eye-level with cigarette butts discarded in the gutter, blood running into my ear moist and jungly, I thought about how people always say, "At least you have your health" when life ambushes you. I idly wondered if I had a concussion but dismissed the idea because I don't know anything about concussions. My vanity kicked in, urging me to check that all my teeth were still in my mouth (I had had braces with headgear when I was a tween). Luckily, no bones were broken; I was bruised and skinned and my back felt on fire but I was otherwise intact. When my boss Ophelia heard about the attempted bag grab, she joked that the bag snatcher "had picked the wrong woman" before adding the incident was a metaphor for how I live: "You don't let go. You'll fight." Her observation is too generous, for I have always been protected by an umbrella of safety provided by the institutions for which I work. I also have the opportunity to let go, to leave conflict and post-conflict zones whereas the students whom I teach do not. Disaster tourist and thrill seeker are other labels.

In the days following the attempted purse snatch, my ex and I exchanged messages during which my voice was even, my tone and language neutral. It was as though my mushy innards had morphed into bionic hardware beneath a skin veneer. The fear I felt after my head had smacked the pavement slow-thawed into a cool anger, which is different

from the warrior anger I usually feel. My warrior anger centers in my heart; it is emotional and reactionary because what provokes it feels personal whereas my steeled anger centered in my groin; it was physical because it was the consequence of taking action. I had met aggression head on and prevented another loss. My walk morphed into a swagger.

Then my father died.

I want to add deprived of person to the definition of dispossessed. The loss of my father was an untethering. The night he died, I slept with the bird puppets “Santa” had given me when I was a child and wept until I aged myself. Crying into their synthetic fur, I was a tumbleweed, alone and adrift in an uncertain world. I felt small, in one respect because my father and I had argued on the way to the airport and had been reluctant to hug each other before I checked in for my flight, and in another respect because I felt lost, like a child in feet pajamas who awakens from a nightmare and doesn’t recognize anything in the darkness around her. I wanted to be his daughter for a little while longer. This feeling, nebulous but encompassing, was an unknown land through which I was unprepared to navigate. Tipping on the tightrope between his presence and his absence, I didn’t know how to take the next step. All around me, the air had turned to glue.

A few years ago, I wrote a piece for *Bust.com* about single women living longer and not having enough money to retire in the US. In it, I wrote about a phone call I had had with my parents, in which they asked me if I ever wanted to live full time in the US again, and my ambivalence towards that because I hadn’t yet found myself by official standards (marriage, property, kids). The last line is this: “When these two old people {my mother and father} are gone, there’ll be one less place to call home.” In the space left by my father’s absence, the US beckons me, pulling taut, pulling tired, perhaps because he loved the US so much, and I want to hang on to him, to continue hearing his rough voice in my head telling me to slow down or arguing for American exceptionalism. This is something to go back for.

Bryan Meeler’s excellent book, *All Things Must Fight to Live*, is an odyssey through the aftermath of war in the Congo, how everyday people make sense of their lives amidst the chaos and catastrophe of war. Through the luck of having been born white into a middle-class American family, I am not a person who has had to make sense of a war-interrupted life. My father did; my students do. Some leave their homeland because staying is too hard. Others dig in because leaving is defeat. I wonder if home is simply a construct of choice; either the place we hang onto at all costs or the place that catches us after we let go.

EMILY ROSKO

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## MIND YOU

Some day I will be old and you won't  
want me. I will be a worn out  
body that gets in your way. You'll  
feel annoyed to have to care  
for a slowing mind. Hours spent  
with me will feel long. I will say  
the same things repeatedly. O!—and  
time will catch up with you too.  
I cannot stand to think of it: how  
you will face the same. That dark  
long corridor. That dread  
of how nothing stops.



EMILY ROSKO

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## WHERE ARE YOU, KAREN VOLKMAN?: AN ODE

In a circuit-loop of my brain, you are  
weaving bioluminescent spider webs.  
The stars have chilled nicely below zero.  
Sound has blanketed you, perhaps. Perhaps  
you chanced yourself alone on some floatation  
nearing the Arctic Circle. Perhaps you've sunk  
your line too deep and you are tethered  
to ancient cypress roots that even sonar  
has not mapped. I think of your turning  
to crystal, crystalline, with a joyful menacing  
clinking as though all the bones  
of the body might shatter. Finding you has  
been all dead ends. I only know you  
by the geometry you've made, the mirroring  
sentence, self transfixed by the mind's  
porous vessel. Your words are shards  
to shift, each letter laser-cut. Have you  
become, as I have, distracted by distance,  
a halt midway through, unimpressed  
by the same old cartwheel? Your paving  
stones, I follow, winded in the catch,  
sun-blached to a new blankness of never know.

EMILY ROSKO

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## THEREAFTER

All those hours and what did I do?  
I didn't hurt anyone. I roamed room  
to room, across the pine floorboards.  
Often sat with my eyes half looking  
out and in. I stepped out  
to the garden, pulled a weed  
or two, counted the roses blooming  
and the monarchs ambering August sent.  
I don't know whether to kick myself for all  
that waste, for letting days just slip  
away to dust, no record. I hardly spoke  
anything meaningful to anyone. I couldn't  
take you in enough. You there,  
and I couldn't take you in enough. One hand  
weaving through the old dog's chest tuft  
of fur, the other holding a book,  
misreading the letters as bones.  
The windowed sky sewn  
with contrails. Lower clouds pile up  
in clumps. Shadows fill the spaces  
between the dust. Lain so long now  
in this bed, the flowers grow sideways.

JOANNA FUHRMAN

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## OUTRAGE FATIGUE

A songbird's idea of refusal quavered, gunking up reality with music. The sky adieused the end times with memories of future blood. *My appetites or yours, hon?*, said no one to nothing.

Misled by lopsided horse clouds, the window was declared the new expanse. Office parties smelling of last century drifted in and dispersed. Life became a series of toes recalibrating the atmosphere through boredom and smoke

Still, fear battered the dust mites awake. What used to be my country raptured the horizon's teeth—ecstatic options sprinkling emotions in the mix, hastening the return of reality as 89.3 percent dream.

JOANNA FUHRMAN

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## A HEART IS NOT A METAPHOR

Some afternoons I love the way the light spills from the sheet's eyehole, the way the scent from the neighbor's booty call illuminates the noise.

Some days it's enough to just unmake the bed, wreck the coffee by stirring in old tears, cover the TV with a scrim so all the characters resemble the good-looking zombies in an unknown Edward Hopper painting.

And yes, I know I can't erase the birthmark from my death certificate, can't remake my mouth into a permanent smile.

Still the rumble beneath the mambo soothes me. Who wouldn't enjoy the elongated shadow a marred language leaves behind on the wall?

JOANNA FUHRMAN

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## DOES THIS DATA MAKE ME LOOK FAT?

I am hiding from the algorithm in fossilized dinosaur egg. It's warm here but too moist like a hotel room that smells of a previous guest's saliva. From inside, I can't hear the ghosts digging under the carpet or see the white glove as it slides off the photo of an old woman's hand.

My mother's voice is the only sound I hear, but she's speaking some ancestor's mother tongue that I can't understand. Her words sound like the color of smoke... the frequency of movie theater red, the puckered mouths of hot dog tails.

Years ago, I flew over the city in a helicopter, watched another version of myself on the street below. The other me was clicking the screen of an oversized cell. I could tell that she had better teeth than I did. She was wittier, and her skin has fewer blotches. When I spoke, I longed for her voice to come flowing out of my mouth.

For almost an hour, I held my lips open but only a breeze streamed out.

## THE EDGE OF SUBURBIA

Charlotte's face is a tornado, all tense energy, the tomatoes leaving stains on the cutting board like fresh bruises.

"Take it easy on that cucumber, Bobbitt," her husband, Paul, jokes as she centers the long fruit, the diced tomatoes huddled at one end of the board, and now that their son is old enough to understand the father's allusion, Ryan's face stills into a blank page as if he is unsure whether to write down *blush* or *smirk*.

Charlotte's daughter, Ava, offers an explanation for her mother's alarming vigor. "She always gets this way when Uncle Kevin visits."

Ryan and Ava exchange a knowing glance. This is something Charlotte has found difficult in recent years, this silent communication between her teenage children, the silence an impenetrable wall, her own weapons helpless against it, for what can she say to them? I saw you looking at each other, and I know what you're thinking, and you have it all wrong. No. That will simply confirm their view—that she overreacts—and what, Charlotte wonders, can they really know about the world with their eyes soft as lilies in a walled garden? Charlotte made that softness possible because she swallowed all the wind, and now the air stirs in her chest, her heart a hard fence, but even hardness has a purpose, doesn't it?

After Kevin's last visit, Ava cornered her mother in the laundry room, watched while Charlotte folded towels, little corners jutting out like barbed wire. *You hate him for no reason*, Ava finally said. *You got it into your head that you don't like him, and you won't let it go. The same way you don't like any boy I want to date. That's what I don't understand about you, Mom. You're always suspicious of them. I'd say you hate all men, but I know you love Dad. The truth is you're irrational.*

Ava stood taller than her mother at fifteen, her voice mature, her lashes blackened, her mind like a calendar marking every slight, something they shared in common although her daughter did not yet understand that.

*Don't ever be alone with him*, was all Charlotte said, and Ava bristled and said, *God, Mom, why do you have to make everything dirty? There's nothing wrong with Uncle Kevin. He's not like that.*

Charlotte can still hear her daughter's voice from a year ago—the righteousness a flag flying at full-staff—as she sets the table. When the doorbell rings, she places her palms flat against her thighs for a moment as if steadying herself, and then calmly walks to open the door. The children beat her to it, swinging the door wide, their cousins pouring in like a tide, Charlotte's sister hugging Ava, Ryan, her husband, and already Charlotte feels her body stiffening, her jaw clamping. Charlotte hugs her sister's children, but not Kevin—she could never bear it—and not her sister, because her sister told her privately before her wedding that whatever went for him went for her as well.

If her sister is thinking of that day standing on the wooden bridge as koi fish slipped like secrets beneath their feet, she hides it well. Jennifer smiles easily, as if all is as it should be, and it's true that their habits are well formed, the boundaries seen so often over the years that they should blur like bokeh, and perhaps it is only for Charlotte that they remain in focus.

"How was the drive?" Charlotte asks, leading her sister deeper into the house.

“Not too bad. Kevin did most of the driving, and I watched a movie with the kids in the back.”

Settled in the family room, the children and the fathers are laughing, and Charlotte thinks each laugh is like a balloon, so colorful and conspicuous at first. As a child, she never gave much thought to how easy it is to pop a balloon with a fingernail or later find it deflating in the corner of the room with puckered rubber, only a few days old, but already an ancient withered thing.

There it is again, Kevin’s deep throaty laugh. He is turned away from her, crouching by the sofa as his youngest, just four years old, climbs onto his back and wraps small arms around his neck. The children, including her own, all appear to adore him, and a stranger witnessing the scene might assume he is a good father, a good husband.

“Are you okay?” Jennifer asks, and Charlotte realizes she is frowning, her hand clenched in her pocket.

“I’m fine,” Charlotte answers, and together she and her sister walk into the kitchen, sitting at the round table by the window like they usually do at the beginning of a visit. This is the only time Charlotte gets to see her sister away from Kevin, a consolation prize of thirty minutes while the chicken bakes.

Her sister’s long hair gleams in the light from the window like it did when they were children, but the color is wrong. Now it is auburn with highlights that frame her face. She wears more makeup than she did at her last visit, and she has lost weight. Charlotte is aware of her own graying roots growing in, the way her thighs rub together. When they were younger, Charlotte was the prettier sister, but time reinvents.

They start out easy, talking about their jobs. Jennifer says, “Kevin cut back his hours so he can be home more.”

“That’s good.”

Both of their husbands are doctors. Charlotte’s husband works as a family doctor for a small practice on the edge of suburbia. On the lot next to Charlotte’s home, horses drift like clouds over the pasture, and in the early evenings, a family of deer sometimes emerge on her back lawn, one of the fawns pausing to stare at her, ears pointed like temples, legs delicate as wonder. Whenever Charlotte sees the deer, she feels a softening in her core, as if she has read a familiar page in a favorite book, one that she needed to remember still existed.

Their husbands’ careers are not the only parallels. Charlotte and Jennifer also both teach English. New acquaintances often remark on these similarities, but anyone who knew them as children would not be surprised. They formed their own book club in their back yard fort, lying on their stomachs and reading out passages by flashlight. When Charlotte kissed a boy in eighth grade, it was Jennifer she told first, sitting on the edge of her younger sister’s bed, describing the awkward fumbling, the weird wetness of crashing tongues like boats in a storm.

Charlotte is thinking about the past, what is lost, as her sister complains about committee work and her trouble getting authors to cooperate with deadlines for the book she is editing. It is only when Jennifer plays with her

hair, rubbing a piece between her thumb and middle finger, that Charlotte realizes her sister is building toward some revelation.

Charlotte must be patient. It is hard being patient, waiting for the crack in the ice, for the final thaw, for the chance to discover her younger self and her sister's younger self, somehow preserved beneath it all like bodies found on a mountain, ready to reawaken, to emerge on delicate legs on the lawn of their lives.

Her sister pauses, bracing herself. "Kevin had an affair." She states this matter-of-factly, as if her tone could neutralize the statement.

Is it wrong that a part of Charlotte rejoices in this news? In a split second, she imagines her sister's divorce, long talks with her sister on the phone, longer talks with her own husband about moving closer to Jennifer, traveling with their two families to plant a tree on Easter Island, Kevin gone, his face cut from the album of her sister's heart with the sharpest of scissors.

"I'm so sorry to hear that," Charlotte says carefully.

"It's over now, and we've decided to work things out." Jennifer nods her head slightly, as if trying to remember what comes next, and Charlotte understands that her sister has rehearsed this conversation, maybe even standing in her bedroom and practicing it out loud the way she used to prepare for a class presentation.

There will be no divorce. Not now, maybe never. Charlotte seeks to accept this the way she did her dog's death as she stood next to the small grave Paul had dug in the ground, a spring breeze carrying the songs of birds, their nests out of sight, Ryan kneeling next to the hole, Ava holding her hand, a time when Ava still leaned on her.

Her sister is still talking. She is talking about Kevin's sacrifices, his shorter work hours, the couples therapy, the trust that has been rebuilt. What does Jennifer want from her? The logical part of Charlotte's brain has worked this out. If Jennifer is not divorcing her husband, if this is a prepared speech, what does her sister want?

"My therapist says I should work to heal myself," Jennifer says, "that if I want to move on, I must learn how to forgive. And I want that. I want to forgive, to clear the air, to not feel this weight here anymore." She presses her hand dramatically against her chest. Jennifer was always the dramatic one. "And with my therapist's help, I've come to understand that I need to forgive you too. And I want—no, I need—to tell you that I have. I've forgiven you."

"Forgiven me for what?" Charlotte can hear the hardness in her own voice.

There is a moment of silence as the two sisters study each other, and Charlotte thinks that this silence is not an absence, it is a shadow, Kevin's shadow slicing the space between them.

"I forgive you for what you did." Jennifer sits up straighter. "And for what you—" She is filtering her words, probably thinking back to her therapist's advice, trying to use language that is not emotionally charged. "For what you said about Kevin."

*I don't believe you*, Jennifer had declared sixteen years ago, standing on the quaint wooden bridge, flowers blooming all around, an almost aggressive display of color. The koi fish made their rounds in the stream, tails swishing,



## KATHERINE SÁNCHEZ ESPANO

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circuitous paths that always intersected, always brought them back to the start. *Why would I believe anything you say?*

If she were a religious woman, Charlotte would think she was being punished. She slept with one of Jennifer's college boyfriends, and when Jennifer found out, Charlotte's first instinct had been to lie, to say no, nothing happened. Maybe Charlotte deserved what happened later with Kevin—maybe her sister did believe in the deepest part of her subconscious and thought Charlotte got what she deserved.

How did she arrive at the dinner table? Time feels unstable to Charlotte. She was talking with her sister, her sister was forgiving her, and Charlotte had said nothing, just nodded to signal that she had heard, that the conversation was over, and then somehow she is here as if nothing happened, sitting at the table as Kevin cuts his chicken and tells stories about the hospital. His hair is more gray than red now. The lines around his eyes are deeper, but he has aged well. He exercises in his home gym and juices vegetables each morning. Somehow Charlotte's children are listening to his stories, rapt, their fawn faces following the footsteps of his words. And isn't that the problem with Kevin, Charlotte thinks? He is so believable. He is the kind of person whom people trust.

Charlotte feels pain now, and the pain is soft—amorphous—not like the pain when Kevin pressed inside her, his beer breath a fog over her face, his hand hiding her voice. He had apologized the next day, cried as he explained that he'd lost control. His face reddened to match his hair.

She didn't forgive him, but she believed him. She believed he was sorry.

Years passed. Clocks stopped, and she put in new batteries. She stretched in yoga classes, drank cappuccinos, and bought rabbit slippers with floppy ears, because life moved on, because she was still young. She can tick it all off now in her head, the list of events: she got date raped, got a job, got married. She told her secret to Paul, but only after he proposed, and she locked herself in the bedroom, and then drank too much tequila, and ugly cried, her eyes all puffy, her face as red as Kevin's was when he apologized, and then threw up on Paul's bathroom floor. She never told anyone else, not until that day on the bridge. She was two months pregnant when Kevin returned to her life, when he showed up unexpectedly one night at the Japanese restaurant as Jennifer's fiancé, the two of them just returned from a year abroad.

In the dim light of the restaurant, Charlotte saw the specter of Kevin's face. That's when she split into two people. One version of herself sat on the floor with crossed legs, sipped green tea, and ate chicken. The other version of herself watched, detached, unwilling to jeopardize the return of normalcy with her sister, Jennifer finally warm again, bumping shoulders with her and reminiscing about pranks they pulled as children, how they stole their parents' car late at night and drove around the neighborhood.

Charlotte looks at the chicken on her fork. One tine is bare, and she imagines pressing her finger against it until a drop of blood forms.

There are still two versions of her. One is in the past sitting at the restaurant table. One is here sitting at her own table.

"You need to leave," Charlotte says quietly, still looking at her fork. Her words don't seem to register, and the conversation around the table continues.

## KATHERINE SÁNCHEZ ESPANO

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“Kevin,” Charlotte speaks again, and this time she meets his eyes, “you need to leave. Now.”

And then her sister is gone.

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That night, her husband holds her in bed. She’s not crying anymore. She can feel a headache forming, but doesn’t reach for the glass of water on the nightstand.

“You did the right thing,” Paul says.

“My sister,” Charlotte starts, but can’t finish.

“You did the right thing.”

Paul has never understood why she let Kevin into their lives. After dinner at the Japanese restaurant all those years ago, she revealed Kevin’s identity to her husband. Paul didn’t understand how she could pretend like nothing happened, and then as time passed, Paul seemed to forget, as if the truth of Kevin was something slippery that was at odds with normalcy. Either he was a monster to be cast from view, or if he stayed in view, then he was Jennifer’s husband and father of two children, a man who told witty stories, threw his children high into the air until they laughed in delight. Charlotte had watched as Kevin and Paul formed a casual friendship, exchanging stories about children and coworkers.

As Charlotte rests her head on her husband’s chest, he rubs her back. Back and forth like a hammock swinging. He says, “You need to tell Ava and Ryan what happened with Kevin.”

“I don’t want to burden them.”

“Is that the real reason?”

“They won’t believe me.”

“Of course they will.” One of the things Charlotte loves about Paul is that he lives in a good world. His optimism is a buoy, and the hazardous reefs of reality are hidden deeper in the water.

“And if they don’t?”

“You mean Ava. If she doesn’t believe you now, she will eventually. She’ll grow up.”

Her husband’s heartbeat is steady. Like her, he has gained a few pounds in middle age. His hair has thinned in the back, and she knows he’s self-conscious about it, but when she looks at him, she always sees one Paul. He is not the kind of man to be untrue to himself.

When he’s in a deep sleep, she slips outside onto the back lawn. The moon is mostly full. It is a windless night, a night for crickets to command. The silhouettes of branches against the sky are like tangled tongues. Charlotte waits until the deer appear, a doe and a fawn. She has seen this family before and knows there is another child, the one that often stops and turns its head to look at her. The fawn walks on, following its mother across the grass, its fur silvery in the dimness. Charlotte waits for the other fawn to appear from the woods, to join the other, but it never does. When the deer are gone, she lies back and watches the stars instead, the predictable sky, the constellations changing so slowly that she’s never left behind.

KASHA MARTIN GAUTHIER

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## TIME CAPSULE: CNN, 10/29/2019

Mitch McConnell's extraordinary efforts to say nothing at all.  
Opinion: Most vulgar, obnoxious thing I've seen.

Jared Kushner blunders into the impeachment controversy.  
Ghost hunters say this is their biggest fear and it has nothing to do with ghosts.

Bill Murray applied for a job at P.F. Chang's in the Atlanta airport.  
Witness this jaw-dropping exchange when a Republican was asked about Ukraine.

Iconic New York steakhouse Peter Luger gets broiled.  
LeBron James sent taco truck to feed firefighters.

Wrongful death lawsuit filed by Antwon Rose's family, dismissed.  
Stuck in an airport for almost two weeks, Iranian beauty queen says she will be killed if deported.

Dad's epic costume for son will give you a run for your money.  
From pagan spirits to Wonder Woman: A history of Halloween costumes.

Bet you think this story is about you, don't you? Narcissism and your health.  
Amazon makes grocery delivery free for Prime Members.

This woman faked a pregnancy to avoid excess baggage fees.  
The Ford Shelby GT500 is track-ready but road-friendly.

Florida man jumped off his surfboard and landed on a shark.  
Record 176 people stung by stingrays at California beach in one day.

5 secrets revealed in the Queen's dressmaker's memoir.  
The woman who lives with 1,000 cats.

Ex San Bernadino policeman under investigation after shooting a man whose hands were in the air.  
He's running for governor to run false ads on Facebook.

Study says: something crashed into Earth  
and wiped out mammoths 13,000 years ago.

Opinion: Trump intent on destroying anyone who opposes him.

CHRISTOPHER CITRO & DUSTIN NIGHTINGALE

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## OUR DUST COLLECTION IN GREAT DEMAND

Look at the choppy water. My beach towel with gray diamonds. Planes passing leaving little buzzers in the air. A bee on my butter knife. There's the life you've wandered into, then there's where you're supposed to be. I'm stopped at a red light in a Honda Accord with some drugs in my sock. A pedestrian presses the walk button and I imagine the moon being just a part of a cheek in a photo. Tonight I'll line brass bells beside your door. Step outside, press your arches to each until the ringing stops. That distant growl? The sea, waiting for us all. It is waiting for us all and not even thinking about it.

CHRISTOPHER CITRO & DUSTIN NIGHTINGALE

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## I'LL WAIT HERE IN STEAM I MAKE MYSELF

I ate a small package of peanut butter crackers in a hospital parking lot. The light was milky and reminded the earth of the last time someone said *No thank you I'm fine*. A three-masted schooner made of rain and sun cleared the foothills, hovered toward me standing with my thumb stuck in a bottle. Food fell out of the sky. Something fell out of the sky I tried to fit into my mouth.

CHRISTOPHER CITRO & DUSTIN NIGHTINGALE

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## WE COME FROM THE ORCHARD EATING

In the mouth it feels like we've bitten free some corner of the sky. Cumulus but ominous. Stew or cotton candy? I think I chipped a tooth. I remember falling asleep on a science book, the word *cumulonimbus*. These low-sky afternoons, the trees across the valley touch the wet skin of my eyes. A chunk of sky the size of a piano floating by. Poor water on the page. Start a fire to watch the sparks lift free like gnats in a jug of gasoline. These days I find myself saying *enough* and walking outside as if I had something to do out there. Yesterday in my socks. I watched black wings circling. I called them hawks in my head. I called them lots of things. Light mixed with milk.

PAGE HILL STARZINGER

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***WASHINGTON SQUARE PARK "JESUS"  
RETURNS—AND IS QUICKLY ARRESTED AGAIN***

One day in your sleep, toss a flat round  
stone to ripple the mirrored surface.  
There's a homeless boy splayed across  
the disconnected fountain of our world,  
and no one knows what to do about it.

ONE WAY OF LOOKING AT IT

My aunt  
never had  
children  
something  
about ectop-  
ic pregnancy  
and I never  
had children  
something  
about endo-  
metriosis  
and my  
brother never  
had children  
something  
about self-  
ish and  
we are  
here today  
except  
for my aunt  
Harriet  
Macomber  
who died  
childless actu-  
ally all  
of us here  
childless  
still on earth  
and those be-  
yond child-  
less no  
kids not even  
adopted no  
one although  
my



cousins on  
the other  
side have  
children but  
I don't  
know them  
and there-  
fore it is  
as if they  
do not ex-  
ist

TONY TRIGILIO

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## ON POETICS

### POETICS OF CHICAGO

“You mean  
Chicago  
is in Illinois?”

### POETICS OF LAKE MICHIGAN

It feels like  
an ocean  
until the next  
time you’re  
standing at  
the ocean.

### POETICS OF CANNABIS

Buttered bread,  
lights out,  
listening to your  
favorite records.

Forget to lift  
the turntable  
tonearm when  
you’re done.

Still spinning  
tomorrow  
morning.

### POETICS OF CATS

Slap my ass  
Bite your hand  
Slap my ass  
Bite your hand

### POETICS OF SEX

“I think I’m monogamous,”  
my wife said, “except for Stephen.”

## POETICS OF SATURDAY NIGHT

Listening to  
Sabbath's  
first album  
watching  
Boston-Columbus  
hockey playoff  
sound muted  
revising poems.

## POETICS OF THE POETRY COMMUNITY

“What would  
our poems be,”  
David says,  
“without the friends  
of our poems.”

## POETICS OF POSSIBILITY

A phrase I used  
too much  
in my first book  
of criticism.

## POETICS OF MY GRADUATE POETICS SEMINAR

I  
want  
my  
actual  
poems  
to  
speak  
for  
me  
instead

## POETICS OF PO-BIZ

This thing I call  
my career is me  
making poems.

## POETICS OF EVASION

Scared sometimes,  
other people  
reading intimate  
batshit details  
of my marriage  
blowing up.  
I can't abstract  
the particulars  
until they're no longer  
recognizable  
as a record  
of one person  
passing through  
this brief moment  
in 20th- and 21st-  
century time.

## POETICS OF THE END OF THE SEMESTER

“Yes, the words  
will be there,”  
I text David.

“Then you can  
be beyond  
words again.”

## POETICS OF THE POEM I FORGOT

Should've texted  
myself, like I do  
when I wake  
in the middle  
of the night  
after a dream  
bestows  
a line of poetry.  
In the morning  
a text  
notification  
and I wonder  
who it's from.

## HOLD THAT THOUGHT

Robin tells me we never go on dates anymore, and I tell her that's a lie. I tell her how we just went out last weekend, after Cassidy's soccer game. Tell her how we waited for a table, outside IHOP in the hot sun for almost thirty minutes, kids screaming in my ear, Cassidy complaining every five minutes that almost made me smack her until Robin finally calmed me down.

Robin tells me that's not a date.

I tell Robin about the other times. How we go out, to dinner, at night, and it's just the two of us. The Italian place we like. She tells me that's not what she means, I don't understand.

This is all before we split. This is happening before I started to think that something was happening. Behind my back. With her shrink. She tells me I'm imagining things. Tells me I need to trust her more. I tell her how I trust her with my life. I tell her that it's him I don't know.

Robin tells me we've never been on a date, but I think everything's okay. I think she's complaining just to complain. Robin tells me how she's not sure that's she's ever been in love.

I tell her remember how it was. She tells me I don't understand.

\*

Back before we split, I tell Robin that I'll take her to Block Island for the weekend. Cassidy can take care of herself. She's smarter than us both. Knows how to order pizza.

One night, I tell Robin. We'll be back by Sunday. She says, "No."

I'm trying hard, I tell her. She could try too. She tells me that she is trying too. She could try harder, I say. As far as sex. She tells me she doesn't want to go to Block Island. Doesn't want to leave Cassidy for the night.

I paid for the room already, I tell her. Finally, she says, "Okay." Finally.

\*

"Don't look at me that way," I say, practically the whole drive to the ferry at Judith Point.

Robin explains how we've never been on a real date. I tell her she lies. She gives me the stink-eye. She tells me how disappointed she is with her life, and she's not sure that she's ever really been in love. Not really. And how Cassidy is all she has.

I want to tell her that she's wrong. I want to slam on the brakes to scare her. I want to turn the car around and go home to spite her. But think maybe that's exactly what she wants.

I grip the wheel, knuckles flare.

I'm trying to understand, I tell her. I want to understand. I want to be a good husband.

\*

Robin's maiden name was Caputo, Italian. Her grandma spoke the language. Growing up, Robin had a bad time with her dad. It got physical. She lived partly with her grandma. In high school Italian class, where we met, Robin said she'd help me learn, but to this day, I can't speak a word. Whenever it comes up, I remind her what a lousy teacher she turned out to be. It's an old joke between us. But she never laughs. I should stop with that, I think.

\*

Robin starts to cry. I put my hand on her thigh. During the drive, reach over, stroke her leg. Rest my hand. This is supposed to be romantic. She's in the middle of telling me how she's never been on a date, trying to explain. Then it's all sobs.

She uses new words now, like "corrupted response to intimacy" and "trauma response patterns" like I'm supposed to know what they mean. She gets them from her shrink.

Again, this is happening before we split. Before I start to suspect.

Robin tells me now, how her father wrestled her, in the dark. Tells me how he growled.

"My body gets confused, Carl," Robin says. "With what's in my head. Like my body remembers and my brain won't let it in. It makes it hard. To love myself."

I reach for her leg again, but she flinches.

My hand falls on the gearshift. Robin tells me then, crying still, how she wants to be on her own. Away from me. I can tell she thinks I'm fat and old. She never wants me now. Probably never will again. I'm part of her past. She's somewhere else. Already gone.

She doesn't say these words, but that's the gist. How it all sounds. I palm the gearshift in my fist, feel it press into my skin.

Robin tells me how it's not my fault. "It's a coping mechanism," Robin says. "Jon calls it damage control. Says I'm trying to regain agency over my sexuality. Over myself. Jon says when I close off from you, it's from my own arousal. And guilt. Feeling caged."

I want to understand. I'm trying, I tell her.

My fist hurts on the gearshift. Robin goes on, about Jon. And on. Jon, her shrink.

\*

We step through the door and the whole place looks different than I remember. We stayed at this hotel when we were younger.

We're back, now, older. Everything the same. But different.

Again, all this before we split.

*Tell my wife I love her very much, she knows, the lobby music sings.*

*Ground control to Major Tom, your circuit's dead there's something wrong.*

A line of people waiting to check in extends from the front desk to the entrance.

We wait.

\*

Still waiting. For dinner now.

Check-in takes forever. The hotel's smaller than I remember.

The restaurant is packed. No tables. We go to the bar and wait some more.

Waiting, still.

Robin tells me to calm down.

She told me to book ahead. Told me to make a reservation. I thought we'd be okay. I didn't know how popular this place had become.

Robin doesn't say, "I told you so," but I know she's thinking, *I told you, I warned you. I told you to book ahead. You never listen.*

\*

At the bar I get a little carried away, two highballs.

Robin tells me she's not happy. Doesn't say this to me out loud. But tells me with how she won't look at me, how she keeps to herself, stays mostly in her own head, or keeps eyes at the window, on the beach, waves breaking into nightfall.

"We don't have to stay," I say. "We can go back to the room."

"You have to eat," Robin says. "You too," I say.

Still no table. "Drive-thru?" she says.

"They said soon," I say. "Don't get angry." "I'm not." "I'm tired." "Me too."

\*

We play a game sometimes. This, before we split. We play it now. At the bar, table still not ready, still waiting. We call it "the Jimmy game." It's stupid. But it's how we talk to each other sometimes. Jimmy was a character on *Seinfeld*. We watch that show all the time. Before we split. We watch it at night. Before we go to bed. After the 11 o'clock news. After I give up on asking for sex. She tells me no before I even ask. We watch *Seinfeld* again and again. We've seen every episode. Know all the jokes. Keep watching, know what's coming, every punchline.

The Jimmy episode is Robin's favorite. It's got Mel Tormé, but the joke with Jimmy is how he never says "I" when talking about himself. He says "Jimmy," like he's talking about somebody else. He doesn't say, "I'm upset." He says, "Jimmy's upset." He doesn't say, "I'm eying you." He says, "Jimmy's eying you." It confuses everyone. Who's he talking about?

"Carl needs another gin and tonic," I say. "Carl's getting impatient."

Robin smiles for the first time. "Robin knows," she says.

"Carl's trying."

"Robin knows."

\*

"Who had the gin and tonic?" the bartender asks.

The guy next to Robin raises his hand. The bartender sets the drink down in front of him.

"That's mine," I say.

"E' mio," says the guy next to Robin.

The bartender looks at the man next to Robin and then at Robin and then at me. The guy next to Robin lifts the drink off its black napkin square, takes a sip.

"That's mine," I say it again.

"Carl," Robin says.

The guy next to Robin says something that I don't understand.

He wants to know if there's a problem, Robin tells me, and I just stare at him.

The guy next to Robin says something else I don't understand.

Robin listens, tells me that he's speaking Italian and I tell her I know but I still don't understand what the fuck he's saying.

“Ho ordinate un gin tonic. Anche lui ha ordinate un gin tonic?”

Robin tells me he ordered gin and tonic and wants to know if I ordered the same. She tells him that I did, and I nod, like I understand what they’re saying, and they keep on talking.

I wait while the bartender makes me another gin and tonic.

I watch the guy next to Robin sip my gin and tonic.

*Carl’s getting impatient.*

\*

“It’s not you,” she says.

This is in the car. On our way to Block Island, earlier that day, during the drive. We drive to Judith Point first. Where we take the ferry to Block Island.

We’re in the car, on the ferry now, crossing over to Block Island. We should be up on the top deck. Enjoying the view. But we’re down below, in the parking deck. Still in the car and Robin’s telling me how she’s never been on a date. I try to understand but she makes no sense.

At the same time, we’re in the bar, now, waiting for a table, still. She’s talking to this Italian guy who stole my gin and tonic. The bartender gets me a new one. Finally.

And we’re still in the car. And at the bar. In my head, I’m both places at once. And Robin listens to this Italian guy. He looks youngish. One of those guys. Shaved head, beard, trying to look older. Robin laughs at what he says, all Greek to me, and I’m bored, and alone, back in the car, down below, in the parking deck, looking ahead to now, hoping to get to where it will be better.

“Don’t be mad,” Robin tells Carl.

*Carl’s upset. Still in the car, down below, not here yet.*

“I’m not mad,” Carl tells Robin

“It’s not you,” Robin tells Carl.

“It’s not your fault. But it’s not my fault either.”

*Not Carl’s fault. Not Robin’s fault. Carl wants to fix things. Carl doesn’t know.*

\*

“Mi chiamo Valerio.”

“His name’s Valerio,” Robin tells me, still waiting for a table, in the bar. I nod, mostly at my reflection, in the mirror, behind the bartender.

“Robin,” she says and takes his hand in hers. Robin waits for me to do the same.

I nod again, but he and Robin keep staring at me until finally I give in, say, “Carl.”

“Piacere,” the Italian guy says, and extends an unsteady arm in my direction. The guy firm-handshakes me like this is some kind of job interview. I try to go back to my gin and tonic, but he throws more Italian toward my side of Robin.

“Vi trovate bene in questo albergo? Vi piace?”

“He’s asking if we like the hotel,” Robin tells me.

They both stare at me, waiting for a verdict.

I shrug. “Okay, I guess. Not worth the money if you ask me. Too



crowded.”

Robin throws some words at him and the Italian guy nods. He gestures toward the hotel restaurant then tries to wave it away like a gnat.

I nod. “Right? Too much.” I sip my gin and tonic and try to wave away the restaurant, “Let me tell you, brother. Too much.”

“Too much,” Valerio says with a funny accent, which sounds more like, ‘do match.’

Robin smiles at this, her second smile of the trip. “We’re here on a date,” she says.

Valerio nods at this, like he already figured it out. He reaches out toward us with two hands and then joins them together.

He leans close to Robin, whispers in her ear. “Anch’io dovrei avere un appuntamento, ma lei non si è presentata. Bidonato.”

Carl’s not sure about this guy. Carl might need to get chesty with Valerio.

Robin leans toward me and passes the message like we’re schoolkids, back in Italian class. “He’s on a date too,” Robin says. “But she never showed. Stood him up.”

I laugh, too loud. Robin karate-chops me.

“Sorry,” I tell her. “Sorry,” I say to him. “Tough luck, brother.”

He shrugs, holds up his gin and tonic to me, as if to say, “cheers.”

I do the same. We sip as one.

“If it makes you feel any better,” I tell him, “our date could be going better.”

I look to Robin, waiting for her to pass the message. She won’t even look at me. She stares past me, towards the door.

Valerio looks down into his drink, gives us a minute.

“Hey, sorry,” I say to Robin. “I was talking about the wait. Not you.”

Robin stays fixed on the door, eyes glassy, almost in tears.

*Carl feels bad. Carl’s so tired he can’t see straight. Carl doesn’t know what to say.*

Valerio puts a hand on my forearm, pulls me toward him. He’s laughing now. “Ho una storia,” he says. He pats my forearm. “Divertente.”

He moves his arm across Robin’s back and the next thing I know, we’re all three in a huddle, drawing up a play.

“He wants to tell us about his date,” Robin tells me. “A date he went on. A bad date.”

“Worse than getting stood up?” I point to the empty barstool on the other side of him.

“Molto peggio, veramente di fori.” Valerio finishes his gin and tonic and signals to the bartender for another one.

He looks to me, and I shrug, and ask for another.

Valerio and I both look to Robin.

She nods along, asking for one as well, her first of the night.

“Was it a first date?” I ask Robin.

“È stato un primo appuntamento?” Robin asks Valerio.

“Ovvio, sennò che gusto c’è?”

“Obviously,” Robin laughs. “Otherwise, where’s the... spiciness of it?”

“Spiciness,” I say.

The waiter sets down our drinks.

When I look up from my gin and tonic Valerio talks to me directly.

“L’ho conosciuta di vista in classe, all’università,” he says, bypassing Robin.

I nod. “Okay,” I say.

“Solamente qualche battuta, niente di piú.”

I nod again, like I know what these words mean.

“Il pub non mi ricordo il nome, ma era un tipico Irish pub.”

“Sure, gotcha,” I say.

“They met when he was taking a class,” Robin says. “They exchanged some ‘lines’ at first. I guess he means that they texted each other or something.”

“Either that or the white stuff,” I say.

Robin gives me the stink-eye. “They got together at a bar, like an English-style pub.”

I nod along, ask if the girl was cute.

Valerio barely waits for Robin to finish translating the question. “Era alta, castana, mi pare occhi chiari,” Valerio’s talking with his hands now, “Nome, mi pare Elisa, ma non ci metto la mano sul fuoco.”

“Her name was Lisa. Beautiful blue eyes, tall... dirty-blonde?”

“Stava andando tutto bene, quando,” Valerio’s still going on. “A un certo punto mi fa, devo dirti una cosa seria.”

“At first,” Robin breaks in, overlapping with Valerio, “things are going well. But then the girl was like, ‘I need to tell you something. About myself. I need to tell you something serious. About myself.’ And then Valerio says—”

“Puoi dirmi qualsiasi cosa—”

“My darling, you can tell me anything—”

“È un po’ strano, ti avverto.”

“It’s crazy. She warns him, it might sound crazy.”

“Val.”

“What was it?”

“Alieni.”

“Alieni?”

“Sì, alieni.”

“Non capisco cosa intendi.”

“Sono stato rapita dagli alieni.”

“Tu?”

“No, lei. È stata rapita dagli alieni.”

“What’s going on?” I say, tired of following this back-and-forth.

Robin is laughing now. Laughing at what, I don’t know.

“What?” I say. “What’s going on? What’s so funny?”

Robin bites down on the black straw peeking up from her gin and tonic. She’s still laughing. Valerio is laughing too, his eyes on Robin, mouth stretched into a tight-lipped grin.

“What? What did she tell him?”

“She said she was abducted by aliens.”

“No shit.”

Robin tries to stifle a snort that turns into a slurp of gin and tonic up her straw.

“That’s what he says... what she said. To him.”

Valerio’s still talking, telling her more, stoking her laughter now.

“What did he say?” I say to Robin.

“Sì, anch’io. Uguale”

Robin answers, “He said, ‘Yeah, me too. Same.’”

Now I snort and some gin and tonic spills out of my mouth.

Robin and Valerio nod in unison, bump shoulders, their laughs collide.

“He thought she was kidding, but she told him that she meant it. Like, ‘no, seriously.’”

“Allora,” Valerio says, “Io ghiacciato, ovviamente, però a quell punto che ci sei cosa fai, glissi? No! Non io. E faccio, vabbè, allora dimmi un po’ com’è successo.”

“Tell me what he’s saying,” I tell Robin.

“You know,” Robin tells me, “obviously I was like, frozen,” she says. “But at that point, what can you do? You’re already there, you know—what can you do? You change the subject, right? But no! Not me. I go, tell me more about it, tell me what happened to you?”

“In breve...” Valerio shakes his head as Robin hangs on his every word.

“The short version,” Robin says, as Valerio continues, “la sua teoria era che questi esseri rapissero non tutti, solo alcune persone,” and Robin says, “she told him that she believes the aliens only abduct certain people,” and Valerio’s says, “cioè quelli che, secondo lei, avevano quella cosa che puoi definire in termini umani come un’anima,” and then Robin says, “people with something special, basically people who have what we’d call a soul.”

Valerio suddenly changes his tone. “Che poi, in pratica,” he says, phony-serious now, as if the whole thing sounds perfectly logical, and Robin does the same, imitating him, “which as it turns out, practically speaking...”

Valerio adds, “l’anima viene usata come combustibile, come una fonte di energia,” and Robin says, “the extraterrestrials use for fuel, our souls, as an energy source.”

“Naturally,” I throw in.

“Naturalmente,” Valerio shrugs in agreement. “In breve, questi alieni rapiscono la gente che secondo loro ha quest’anima, in modo possano portargliela via e poi ricarli—cagarli indietro.”

“E poi ricarli, cagarli indietro?” Robin asks him, suddenly confused.

“Sì, ricarli, cagarli indietro.”

“After the aliens abduct people and steal their soul for fuel, the aliens then just...” Robin hesitates, asking him for help, or if she’s got this part right, “poi merda indietro ovunque?”

“Sì,” Valerio insists, until Robin finally says, “The aliens shit them back on Earth. Like naked in the woods or something. He says, the aliens use them up and shit them out, according to the girl.”

“What about their soul?”

“Qui non ci metto la mano sul fuoco che vado a memoria un po’ vaga. Penso niente di che, a parte il trauma e il non avere più l’anima, che è una sorta di energia spirituale extra.”

“He can’t recall all the details exactly,” Robin shrugs. “He says—he’s saying, it’s something like, ‘Don’t hold my hand to the fire.’ I think he means to say, like, ‘Don’t hold me to this part of it.’ Like he may be misremembering this part. But he says that after the aliens take their soul and shit them out, they’re just left soulless, and stuck with the trauma.”

“Yeah,” I nod. “Same.”

Valerio elbows me with a knowing laugh, “Sì, uguale.”

Valerio waves his hands over his drink now, sort of like a magician, like he’s trying to perform a trick, or to pluck the details out of the air in front of him.

“Lei combatté solo con la forza di volontà, niente spade laser, purtroppo,” he’s telling Robin. “Era tutta’na roba telepatica.”

“In her case,” Robin says, “the girl said that she was able to fight them off somehow. So, they didn’t actually steal her soul. She stopped them. She fought them with her mind, he says, ‘No lightsabers.’ And woke up in bed, with her soul intact.”

“And this girl was totally for real?”

“Completamente.”

Valerio goes on. “Io ho rimarcato che erano anche alieni al pezzo ad averla lasciata in camera sua, visto che di solito la gente si svegliava nuda nei boschi.”

Robin says, “I made a joke, and told her how nice and professional those aliens are, dropping her off in bed like that, instead of shitting her out naked into the woods.”

Valerio raises his voice now, arguing with the liquor bottles lined against the wall behind the bartender. “Dovetti mandare un messaggio ai coinquilini chiedendo di chiamarmi e inventarsi un’emergenza e scappai perché poi iniziò a dare di matto nel mezzo al pub.”

“Basically, she freaked out,” Robin says.

“Freaked out how?”

“Yelling at him, in the middle of the pub, making a scene.”

Robin turns to Valerio who picks up the thread, “Dé, piazzata nel mezzo al locale con frasi tipo,” Valerio raises his voice even louder, “non mi credi io sono seria non scherzare su queste cose!”

“You don’t believe me,” Robin raises her volume to match Valerio. “I’m trying to tell you something serious. Something terrible happened to me and you say stupid shit like you don’t believe what I’m telling you. You don’t joke about this!”

“Jesus,” I shake my head. “What a nut. What’d you do?”

“Io ho reagito tentando di calmarla mentre mandavo il messaggio di aiuto ai coinquilini, fortunatamente mai più sentito da parte sua, non so se poi è stata effettivamente rapita.”

“I tried to calm her down. Then I sent... a message of help, to the... coinquilini?”

## MARK DiFRUSCIO

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Robin looks to Valerio for help of her own.

“Coinquillini,” she repeats. “His friends...? His boys.”

Valerio nods approval.

She continues, “I texted my friends and told them to call me right away so I could put them on speaker, to say they were locked out of the apartment, and needed my key.”

Valerio chimes in again, “Ha! Quegli stronzi mi hanno fatto aspettare 30 minuti prima di venire finalmente a salvarmi.”

“But those assholes made me wait thirty minutes before calling back!”

“And then you left?”

“Sì,” Valerio says with an aggressive nod. “Fisicamente la mia percezione di lei non è cambiata, era discreta, ma... ma...”

“I still thought she was cute, but...”

Valerio shifts into English now, his heavy accent punctuating each word, “You—uh— how you would say in English—don’t stick your dick in crazy.”

Valerio puffs out a deep breath from his nose, sips his gin and tonic, satisfied.

The three of us take a long, deep sigh.

Breaking the silence, Robin says, “Non far impazzire il tuo cazzo,”

Valerio laughs, “Sì.” Then he repeats, more thoughtfully, “Sì.”

I don’t ask what Robin said to him. I decide to let the moment linger. I plan on asking her later but forget. I don’t remember until the time is past, and then it’s too late, and I never get another chance.

Eventually I just say, “Crazy,” speaking mostly to myself.

Valerio’s date finally arrives right after we order another round of highballs. I can tell that Valerio’s good and loaded at this point, but his date doesn’t seem to mind. She’s from Livorno, same as Valerio. Somehow the two of them both ended up here in Rhode Island for the summer and got thrown together by one of those dating websites.

“Small world,” I say.

“E’ un pazzo, pazzo mondo,” Valerio says.

“Crazy world,” Robin says.

We all exchange awkward goodbyes. Robin and I watch Valerio exit with his date.

*Carl is sorry to see Valerio go.*

We sit back down at the bar, after our goodbyes, shoulder to shoulder, me and Robin. We finish our drinks in silence. *Carl is afraid. Carl doesn’t know what to say. Carl hates words, how they come out wrong. Carl worries he’s a letdown.*

After Valerio. And after the English pub in Italy. And how the girl who got taken by aliens held onto her soul and then made a scene when Valerio couldn’t believe her, the best I can do is blurt out, “I want to say something...”

Robin says she needs to use the Ladies room first. She steps away from the bar, brushes a lock of hair behind her ear, tells me, “Hold that thought.”

*Carl watches Robin go.*

JULIA F. GREEN

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## PRIZEHEAD

I was hot for Henry's lettuce. It tasted great and had strange and alluring names like Bibb and Batavia, Paris White and Vivian. I used to go to the farmers' market every week and salivate over the industrial tubs of the sweet vitamins and minerals that would make my body whole again. After the market, I took the subway home, holding two big plastic bags lightly as newborn babes, so as not to crush the leaves (delicate Dynamite, tantalizing Tom Thumb). At home, I dressed them simply, with a little olive oil and salt, imagining the sweet dirt his lettuce grew in, where happy worms burrowed through the earth. I ate Ruby, Prizehead, and Valhalla lettuce for lunch and believed I could do anything.

Once, at a party, I told a stranger I was obsessed with lettuce (Four Seasons, a favorite). She wore an asymmetrical haircut and an argyle sweater, and I hoped she would recognize I was also a unique person and worthy of her friendship. Instead she squinted at me, drained her glass, and walked away. I found my coat and left, swearing I'd never go to a party again. That turned out to be easy.

I haven't seen Henry for a year. I'm too afraid to ride the train to the market. Instead I go to the grocery store and hold my breath. In my head, I hear the YouTube yoga lady say *breathe deep into your belly*. In my head, I tell her to go to hell and buy shitty lettuce (Industrial, Cardboard) that comes in stupid plastic containers and tastes like boiled water. I miss Henry and his jagged beard.

My mother's birthday was a week ago. Normally, I'd have boarded a plane and watched her blow out a candle, but my doctor strongly advised against travel. If I catch something, it could kill me, he said.

"Stupid lungs, haha," I said, laughing nervously as his face froze on my computer screen.

My mother is angry that I did not come this year, that we did not get to eat tiramisu together. It's supposed to put you in the mood, but neither my mother nor I has anybody to be in the mood for. I had some chocolates shipped to her house. Surprisingly, she got me a gift too.

She signed me up for a service called Mystery Surprise! Every week, a random assortment of goods is delivered to my door. I open each box with terror, hoping whatever is inside will not spiral me into sadness, like when I got two plastic champagne flutes, a picnic basket, and a blanket, supplies for a romantic picnic in the park. I put it all in the trash chute and then lay down for a few hours.

I last visited my mother two years ago. I was in slightly better shape then; I brought a sports bra and sneakers that I laced up with a serious expression on my face. I was not well enough to run, but I didn't want

her to worry. I walked around the park, watched other runners run and sweat, and worried about my insides. When I returned, my mother asked how my run was and I said *good* and she said *good*, and for a moment we enjoyed believing that I did not have a chronic lung disease that might put me in the ground before her.

Near the end of fall, when Henry lets the lettuce in the ground die (goodbye, Bronze Guard) and shifts his focus to the hydroponic operation, I get a mystery box with a disco ball, hardware to attach it to the ceiling, and headbands with pink and purple sequins. I stand on the one chair I own, a wooden straight-backed thing that tucks under my one-person kitchen table, and secure the disco ball. Then I turn it on, its lights flickering across my bed, the table, the galley kitchen, the closet door. I turn off all the other lights and close the curtains. I put on two headbands, and watch the light from the ball bounce off the sequins and spray the walls of my apartment with pink and purple dots. I don't turn on any music, just dance to the beat in my mind. I move my arms up and down like a wave and let my neck roll side to side. I kick out one foot, then the other, and see Henry's face in my mind. One day, my mother assures me, life will go back to the way it was. I dance and dance, imagining the sweet crunch of lettuce in my mouth, wondering what she will say when I'm gone.

## CAMERON BARNETT

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### PARDON

If my friends knew how much I danced  
in the shower, they'd judge me—pardon me,

Earth, for all the water I've wasted—pardon  
me for the spit in my mouth I give back

to make up for it. I've been told to make amends  
when possible; the side effect is this heart

of mine caught up in shrinking and growing—  
pardon, groaning—pardon, gloating. This is why

I dance in the water, to make joy something  
precarious—pardon, precious—to learn to love

the threat of slipping, of losing balance.  
If my friends knew that I can never throw away

sentimental things without kissing them goodbye,  
they'd laugh about me—pardon, laugh at me—

and give names to anything I touch.  
How do we learn shame for our little rituals?

Everyone I know walks backward out of dark  
rooms and basements because we all know

haunters—pardon me, monsters—that make us  
shudder. We are the strength we practice.

I practice writing poems not meant for prophet—  
pardon, profit—pardon, private. I don't go to mass

but privately I do the sign of the cross sometimes  
when I need grounding, when I need to hold on.

There's this earthquake I keep in my pocket I pray  
I never show anyone; I'm okay letting myself

get torn apart—pardon, in part, because I might  
deserve it. If my friends knew that I haven't always



been a good man, I wouldn't bother asking  
them to pardon me—arrogance and freedom

are close cousins of mine. I have this little ritual:  
recalling all the “last times” I didn't realize

were lasts at the time—full hands, a full heart,  
kisses that weren't farewells, the echo of heat

that is thunder. Maybe I am what I fear  
follows me out of the dirt—pardon, dark.

I fear I am an earthquake; I fear when I finally  
crack, the earth will tell you from above and below.

CAMERON BARNETT

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## A SECOND OPINION

1619. 1776. 1865. Because of these, I am.

    A rope rocks empty in the wind somewhere  
        in Sumter because it never loved me. Maybe  
life is all fire and parlor walls—still I go on  
    dreaming of writing a Green Book for the stars;  
        take me to Mars and tie my tongue up in tectonics, then  
let me be redshifted into oblivion. This much I believe:  
    the future doesn't have a price (yet); a place is not  
        who owns it; no book will make you love me.

1955. 1965. 1987. My heart is the space between  
    boom-bap, dap, and desperation. Sometimes I dream  
        of a Blacker me, and I know it is a dream because I can't  
see faces clearly in dreams but I know a nesting doll  
    just like I know the panic of a dream ending from its rush  
        and repetition. The night sky and the Earth go on lying  
back and forth to each other and from where I sit  
    between them I learn that stubbornness won't make me  
        love me either. 1996. 2001. 2012. A road runs north  
from Langdon because it desperately wanted me to be.  
    This much I know: a place is more than its truth; some  
        people have always known freedom; they aren't  
the only ones fit for it.

JEFF NEWBERRY

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## DISCARDED AND COLLECTED

When I see a person stop, kneel,  
And take another's discarded

Trash from the sidewalk and drop  
It in a nearby garbage can, all

Without breaking their stride,  
I stop and consider all the refuse

I've ignored in my life and all  
The people who have come behind me

To take a quick knee and gather  
Up the things I didn't throw away.

## LOUISE ROBERTSON

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### SORRY

I say sorry like  
it's a blanket or painted mask.  
A dodge, a bright hot wire. It's  
my largest muscle and my fashion sense. Prayer  
and penance both. Flagellation.

That is, until she said—  
when I nearly bumped into her (saying sorry)—  
she said, “You're fine.”  
Like I needed her permission.

What does she know of my sins, buried  
as they are in sugar and manners,  
a garden of kneeling and cringe.

I can lie to myself so hard,  
it makes me stand up straight  
in a grocery store aisle  
like I belong there.

My sins are a giant  
with stiff fingers, broken,  
warmed by constant use. That giant  
can hold your hand, look in your wet, wet eyes  
and make you back down. Sorry.  
I am that giant. Sorry.

I have made a meal of sloth and a nest of gluttony  
and a eulogy of curses. But lust, sorry, lust  
is my ark.

And that lady says, “You're fine.”  
My ship of transgressions lists in the bay of my ever-growing  
days—the water, a soft bed for all I've committed.  
That lady has no idea what the hell I'm sorry  
for. I'm fine?  
Fuck fine. Can't you hear me?  
I'm sorry.

BEVERLY BURCH

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## UNHOLY SONNET

*Do you not know your body is a temple?*

1 Corinthians 6:19

Some days it's all effluvia and blood soak. Some days tongues  
speak so dirty they need soaping. And sweet tumescent tissues  
beg for transgression. Ignorant of prayer, the body sings.  
It wanders, whistling over the ridge, eyes grazing on lupine, poppies.  
What a vehicle, this delectable flesh, what a shape-shifting carriage  
for distracted souls, what a vessel, canvas wailing for its paint.  
What a pail of slop, its clear path a culvert. Sea surge tosses salt  
into lungs, brines the body's juices. Flesh bends thinking  
one way, heart another, still they arrive at the same place, puffing  
like an old bellows, recalling spring clouds of jasmine, wisteria.  
The body never quite makes it to heaven. A handful of ashes,  
homesick, scattered in the desert. Or silent in the boneyard,  
unholy tissues offered to grateful larvae. Still, a song.

ETHEL RACKIN

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## MAIN STREET

There were things I just had to survive—  
shiny things in my heart—

they were personal until they weren't  
because they burst onto the scene—singing—

made their way onto subway platforms, boxcars  
kept on going even after the lights went out

in my house and on porches  
all over America—

things so small  
they must have been imagined

but now we're here  
standing out in the rain

what is it we seek  
and whom have we come to know—knocking.

ETHEL RACKIN

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## INQUIRY

My mother thinks democratic liberalism's  
run its course and she's probably right.  
Can we think our way through grit  
through the tooth achy reality?  
Reality tv started what befalls us now.  
I point my finger and my point's lost.  
This is the night I start all of my poems—  
the first's a lullaby—*shhh*—the next's on fire  
but no one's listening, sees it burning.  
Lost names, missing table, place to defecate—  
it's not me but it will be soon.  
Am I going to start gathering my things  
and will my patience practice protect me?  
I mean, at least it's a way of thinking.

## BOIL ME ALIVE

I sometimes play this game with myself where I pretend to choose my own involuntary death. If I had the choice, which would I prefer? Cancer? Something slow and private, to savor the last bit of life clinging to my bones? Or something quick and bright? A car accident. A meteor dazzling the sky, a catastrophe, a selfish want to not die alone.

I play this game now, as I sit in the thick soup of Florida heat watching the man I am supposed to love washing live crawfish for a boil. After two years together, he decided it was time to introduce me to his childhood home, with cypress kneed swamps and salt choked air. A crawfish boil is a southern rite of passage, he says. A Floridan ritual. Although I too bloomed from the mud of the Mississippi, I can't help to feel like my absence of southern pride is another thing which separates us.

He explains to me how you must first soak the small crustaceans in a vat of water to purge their systems and kill their bacteria brimmed flesh. Crawfish are bottom feeders. Similarly, I am a vegetarian. He knows this, but I remind him anyway how it strikes me cruel to scare something literally shitless before declaring it ready for consumption. As if it weren't already proving itself inedible by the definition of scavenger.

"You don't have to eat em' but you gotta look," he says to me, his face proud as if there were something to be proud of.

Against my better judgment, I stand over the bucket brimmed with writhing creatures fighting leg over claw and think of Dante's inferno. I spot a small one, half the size of the others and the same color as a healed scab struggling to break free. I take pity on it. I see in that crawfish what I imagine my own wavering hope embodies. The hope to escape a place I don't belong. I pick it up by a claw, holding it far enough away from me as if to prove I am harmless.

"Can I keep it?" I ask.

"What would you want to do that for? It'll die anyway. You don't know how to care for it."

I don't know why I listen, but I place the creature back and watch him stir the brown water until I can no longer distinguish one from the other.

When it is time for the boil, he spices the pot with cayenne and onions. Salt and mushrooms. Green beans as long and thin as fingers. There are other flavors added in that I don't have names for. The smell blurs my vision.

"This is the most important part," he says, "you don't want the flavor



to be overwhelming. Otherwise, you'll make a mess of the whole thing."

I decide that I would never choose to die via tear gas. I wipe my nose with my sleeve. It's June and the flies swarm thick around us like great ash snowflakes. They sense the death in the air. I watch as he drains the bath and scoops the crawfish handful by handful into the pot of boiling water. I close my eyes and try to imagine what it would be like. I listen for the screams but hear only the buzz of flies circling my ears.

He lines the table with months-old newspapers, with headlines reading *Florida Students Hid in Classrooms, Closets During Deadly School Shooting* and *Ready for Summer? Heat on the Rise!* Would I prefer to get shot or baked alive? He explains the proper way is to pour the meal directly on the table and dig in. To eat like animals. To bring us back to our roots. I don't bring up the point he has never gone camping or that just yesterday he asked me if the mushrooms growing in our garden could cause dysentery. I nod, which makes me feel like an accomplice.

The creatures stare back at me with small, dead, tar drop eyes. He shows me how to peel them by twisting the heads away from the bodies, listening for the snap before sucking the meat from the tails. He does this in such a fluid, practiced motion I can't help but feel impressed. Crack, slurp. Crack, slurp. I break one myself for the experience, marveling at the ochre colored guts. The shell stings my fingers, a small punishment for holding onto something damaged.

He shows me his hands after the meal, his fingers seared red from microscopic slices filled with cayenne and salt. He has tears in his eyes, though he is trying to hide them. I smile, take his fingertips between my lips, spice the wounds with my tongue. I let him teach me this lesson on death, knowing soon enough, we too will be ready for boil. Our future together will be split, the tender flesh of our intimacy exposed for feast in poems or stories recited over drinks to new lovers in strange bars. The places I once kissed will be burnt raw. His absence as empty as the crawfish shells littering the table. This love, yet another delicious ritual of suffering.

GRANT CLAUSER

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## HOW TO BUILD AN EMERGENCY SHELTER

There are ten ways the body crumbles:  
injury, sun, poison, hypothermia,  
hunger, loneliness, arthritis, the howling  
of coyotes in the distance, the rain soaking  
through your clothes, memories, especially  
memories. The taste of Sunday morning  
blueberry pancakes on your grandmother's  
everyday dishes. How you wept when  
the sugar bowl broke. How you weep  
when the sun goes down on another  
absence and part of you with it.  
You could surround yourself with debris,  
boughs from the forest floor. Ferns  
and their deer ticks thirsty for you.  
Or lean against a rock, pressed  
into the cold cheek of the world  
to ride out the night, hope morning  
warms up the cliff face, hope  
evening restores what was broken  
and sleep spells escape. Nothing  
you can build from the gatherings  
around you can keep the world  
out. The secret, as always, is to place  
one thing on top of another, the way  
we pile earth over the dead  
to cover our losses.

GRANT CLAUSER

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## THE GLACIERS

An hour's hike into the gorge  
through mountain laurel and hemlock,  
July's heat steaming off each leaf blade  
until I reach brooks no one bothered  
to name, water tumbling like otters  
through boulders the last glacier broke  
before retreating into history.  
Only small trout here, palm-sized  
mountain jewels trying to survive,  
and I'm crawling on my knees to meet them,  
toss a fly I tied in winter into a riffle the sun  
hasn't reached since Thursday. What day  
is today? My daughters are far off  
in cities. My wife is home going online  
for work. My parents are aging  
in the usual way. Bees are laboring  
among the knee-high goldenrod.  
Sometimes I understand why  
there are gods and why  
we drag the dead with us  
through our lives.  
Let all this. Every moment  
its own untouched forever.  
Somewhere glaciers still moving  
at their slow pace of elsewhere.  
The beautiful and crumbling world  
happening at once.

JAKE BAILEY

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## ANIMAL BONES

There are animal bones by the side of my right foot while I rock back and forth in the chair just outside the backdoor. The paling one with sun weathered skin. Their whiteness is surprising for having appeared rather suddenly. One would expect for carnality to survive longer than that, but there appears before me evidence of disincarnation, as if sacraments could be returned, the loosing of being. Tomorrow, I will have to mow the grass. I wonder what I will do with the strewn, iridescent pallor scattered amidst neon green like a tombstone made of marrow. What could have felled this creature? Was it chance or destiny? In the woods of ourselves, do we follow footsteps or do we make our own? The soft crush of leaves, mud flecked feet. I am a man beset by death. I am constantly reminded of the sound of silence with a cresting chest, the whispering ghosts of people I have not yet lost and those who will become the light of the west, horizon a depth unknown to pumping blood. Tomorrow, I will mow the grass and cut around the tufts cushioning the remains looming by the side of my foot. Tomorrow, I will sit in the rocking chair and ask for forgiveness. I am afraid of tomorrow. I am afraid of today. Wandering through the woods, winds caressing limbs without any more depth than flaking bark. Once, I sat on a bench and smoked an eighth of weed through a crystalline mouth. Once, I sat on a bench and watched time begin to bleed like a fresh wound, crimson aphids spilling from what was once whole. Everything became one as if separation was something we invented in order to cope with incarnation, to cope with a body of clay slowly morphing into ash. Today, I smoke as if there were no tomorrow. Tomorrow, the bones will remain. Time becomes other than I am. In this body of clay, someone, perhaps God, whispers *there is no after*. Are we hallucinations of soul or the soul of hallucination? Many moons from now, my ribs will rise and fall in their penultimate opera. Many moons from now, my eyes will seal, stitched in place. There are animal bones by the side of my right foot. I rock back and forth. I am haunted by my self. I whisper the words of God and place my hand on skeletal promises. I am in the woods. I am in my chair. I wrap up absence as prayer. I am haunted by the bones about my feet. I am haunted by the way they reflect the light and clear a space for the words I fear the most— *there is no after*. I am haunted by the bones. In my bones, I know I haunt them, too.

JEANNINE HALL GAILEY

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## OUR LIVES HAVE STOOD

and the birds are hiding in the flowers.  
They're sheltering in place, in my trees.

We too, sing from our branches and nests,  
long for cherries and corn, for summer's sun

filled fruits. Emily Dickinson wrote a lot about birds,  
I know, because they were her constant company.

She planted flowers, watched them grow, pressed them  
into books. One line of poetry after another,

discovering God in the grass, death in the mouths  
of bees. Just like her, we stand like loaded guns,

ready at any moment to be deadly, or dead.  
We don't know each other anymore. We have

become strangers to God and death. Our skin  
crawls at even the thought of touch. We wash

our hands so much they've become older than the rest  
of us. The news talks of a happier future. I hope

yes, that we will build a world kinder, cleaner, better  
that we can weave from solitude and seeds.

But we will not pretend this never happened. 100,000 dead,  
just in our country. Were we asleep? Afraid?

We cannot cleanse this from our memories, we cannot  
stop the death tolls from rising. We pray, we sleep,

we wake to more dead underground. We hope  
we will not ourselves go under. Our lives have stood,

Emily. Because we could not stop for death.  
Outside the robin sings at midnight.

JEANNINE HALL GAILEY

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## HELLO, I AM THE FOUR HORSEMEN

of the Apocalypse, and I rode in without a sound  
or a mutter from you. Daily the dead  
rise up in protest, and we ride  
beside them. Because I Am Become Death  
is my name. Nice to meet you. You never thought  
you'd make it to the end of the story, just watching  
the stars fall like fruit in the wind  
and the moon turn red as blood,  
whatever you name me, something beyond  
war and pestilence and famine.  
After a year of the plague shouldn't you  
have watched for me on the sidelines?  
Can you read my mind?  
Death arrives on a pale horse,  
just as the book said, and hell accompanies me.  
Did you stop for me? Did you even look up  
from your phone? Stop scrolling; the sky itself  
scrolls up and the oceans boil from radioactive waste  
and all around the dead are asking for revenge.  
How did you really not see this coming?  
Here's a revelation for you:  
there's a voice calling in the wilderness.  
Be ready. I am coming soon.

JEANNINE HALL GAILEY

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## TO SURVIVE SO MANY DISASTERS

you wonder: are you cursed?

If you are a curse.

Your high school torn apart by tornadoes,  
homes destroyed by fire and earthquake and flood,  
though you always narrowly escape.

What narrative are you writing in which  
you are the sole survivor?

Cities crumbling, you don't look back  
lest you are turned to salt.

You were warned. You promised  
never to return. You set out on a journey  
far from home. You looked out into darkness  
and saw possibility. Well, now, read your own palm –  
even with that splintered lifeline, how many times  
is it possible to escape death?

Once, twice, three times? Nine? The doctors cursed you  
since the day you were born blue –  
scarlet fever, drowning, cancer, or bleeding?

Your brain slowly decaying?

They are always telling you  
when to die, but you ignore them,  
tripping along with your basket.

All the leaves sharp-edged in the moonlight.

Your grandmother will tell you she was the wolf all along.

You know she's right. You take up the hood  
and once again walk the trail towards a new city,  
even knowing your footsteps doom us all.

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LEMONCREST

I couldn't stop running my tongue over the braces on my top row of teeth. Except for the gap between my two front teeth, they were all straight, but that's what needed fixing. The year was 1979. I had just made friends with a girl named Cher. I loved the way she said the word cool, like the second 'o' had an umlaut above it. Her hair was so blonde it glowed under the florescent lights powered by the generators. We both weren't old enough to drive, so we bought walk-in tickets at the Sunland drive-in theater. I had just enough money to pay for my ticket with a few cents left over. We sat on a bench in the front where kids who also went to Mt. Gleason usually sat. The projector was playing commercials while I turned my neck around to see all the high school kids in their cars. One couple was making out, and another car was filled with girls, half, no doubt, were stuffed into the trunk to get in free.

"You're gonna love it," Cher said. She was from the East Coast, and all her words sung to each other.

"Oh, yeah?" I leaned in to hear her. There was a constant sound of cars rolling on gravel competing with the anthropomorphic popcorn that sang, "Let's all go to the lobby."

"Yeah, they play the movie, and this whole line of real life actors come out and do the same thing the screen is doing."

"Why do they do it?"

"It's fun. You'll see," She said. "It just makes sense."

"Alright."

"Hey, you want something? Like popcorn?"

"No, thanks." I didn't have any money for popcorn.

The title, "Rocky Horror Picture Show" sprawled across the screen and a line of actors came out and bowed. They were wearing burlesque clothes and high heels, all of them, even the boys, I gasped. A pair of red lips as big as Mick Jagger's floated onscreen. The high schoolers whistled from their cars. I leaned on my elbow and was glad I was wearing my jacket. It was freezing. A wedding scene replaced the live actors in front of the screen, and everything seemed an innocent yellow that just got better and better.

My eyes jumped between the live actors and the screen. I leaned between the space of me and Cher while vapor pushed out and got caught in the light coming from the projector. I asked her what the movie was called again. I was transfixed. Susan Sarandon could get her voice so high, and I knew I could do the same. I had never been to a performance like that before. I'd never even been to a play that wasn't put on by the church of the nativity or resurrection. This was something different altogether. I thought of Garrett, the boy much older than me down the street. I turned away from the screen to see almost all the high schoolers making out with someone. I was painfully aware that I was there with a friend. Something inside me was looking for Garrett, but I knew he wouldn't be there.

I turned back, afraid a high schooler would catch me watching them. A thin fog had descended, and the light from the projector caught it and sprayed that golden color that shimmers off movies at the drive-in. I had forgotten how cold I was as the performance started to end. I was so warm inside, and all I wanted in the world was to finally be one of those high schoolers in a car with a boy, with Garrett.



## HALLY WINTERS

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“Did you like it?” Cher asked me.

“I loved it,” I said and we sang, “Touch-a touch-a touch-a touch me” together as we went to leave arm in arm, slipping on the gravel. At the front of the drive-in, a merchandise booth was set up. Huge mouths with bright red lipstick sprawled across the booth, and she begged me to get matching shirts with her.

“I don’t have any more money,” I said, “I can’t.”

“I’ll pay! My mom gave me extra.”

“No, I can’t,” my mom hated it when I borrowed money. “I won’t be able to pay you back.”

“We can wear them to high school next year.” She stood in line.

“I’m serious I can’t pay for one.”

“Nonsense. My treat.” She swayed and smiled.

We both got black long sleeves with white lightning bolts going down the sleeves and the entire cast stacked on the front. I held mine in my lap while we sat in the backseat of her mom’s car. I thanked her mom a thousand times as she dropped me off. My mom was always too tired from working overtime to pick me and my friends up.

My whole life changed every day the year before high school. One decade was ending, and mine was beginning. I didn’t get to see Cher much during that summer before high school, so I never wore that long sleeve shirt except under another t-shirt because I liked the lightning bolts on the sleeves. My older brother, Fred, got a new skateboard for his birthday so he gave me his, and I could finally practice as often as I wanted.

Susan lived down the street from us, and I still had that crush on her older brother, Garrett, who was so good at skateboarding. That summer, my two older brothers finished building the half pipe in the front yard. Garrett had wandered up the street to talk to them and try the ramp out. I stood off to the side in the driveway practicing my kick flip. He never looked at me. What else was new? I’d always be walking down to see Susan, and he’d never notice me, or he’d shut his door as soon as I’d walk with her to her room. Their house was the same layout as ours. Her room was in the back of the house across from her parents, and his was in the front, across from their library. Both of our houses had a dining room right when you walked in, and a hallway on the right that had the bedrooms on either side like a capital “I” if the bars on the top and bottom represented the rooms along the hallway. The master bed had its own bathroom, but the other bathroom was shared by both Garrett and Susan, and it was in between the rooms on the right side of the hallway. Susan was lucky, she just had to share with Garrett. I had had to share with all three of my brothers before my dad moved out. Now I shared with my mom. I shared everything with my mom, now.

When I’d go over to Susan’s house, Garrett would be arguing with his parents in the kitchen in Japanese. I’d ask Susan what they were arguing over, and she’d say one of his girlfriends. He had so many girlfriends. I’d say “oh” and lean my chin on my knees. He always went for blondes. When I’d get into high school, things would be different. I could feel my teeth getting closer to each other. I wouldn’t be Bugs Bunny anymore. I’d be a total babe.

Skateboarding became a place to put my frustration. Frustrated over my teeth, over my limp hair, and my brown eyes that were all nothing like Garrett's girlfriends. I practiced at the bottom of the street because it was flatter there, and I'd see several Farrah Fawcett's dropping him off, people that looked like my friend, Cher. He always had long goodbyes. Then, he'd ignore me as he jogged up the street to his house in his pull-over and impossibly short shorts. He had a bowl cut that fell around his face, perfectly. Wasn't a guy supposed to drop the girl off? It felt personal for this reason, but I still got it: Susan and his parents were strict.

My mom was always so strict about boys too which was another reason why we got along, Susan and I. We'd talk boys in our class for hours. She was always in love with the funny guy or the drummer. I was in love with her brother, and she was cool with it. In fact, she was rooting for me to win, but she also always said he didn't deserve me. I didn't care about deserve or not deserve. I wanted him to give me those long goodbyes. When he'd glance my way, I felt an entire hot sea wash over me. His eyes were so dark, so piercing. He would pull his bottom lip in and guide his tongue along it in such a way. Everything he did had an effortless look to it, even the way he floated up the street and away from me, or the way he'd slam his door when I came into his house.

I don't know where my obsession with Garrett ended and my obsession with skateboarding started, but sometimes I'd be out there dropping in on the half pipe Frank and Fred built. Everyone around me, the house, my dad, the street, all of them would melt away. At the top of that half pipe, my breathing would slow, and I'd be standing on the tail of my board, putting my front foot down, leaning forward and dropping in. Skateboarding just made sense. Practicing new moves was always hard, and took time, but when I was on that half pipe it all just came to me. My body wanted to move with the board, and it brought its own surprises, the suddenness of landing a kick flip or rolling down the half pipe after a failed drop in.

There was also the simple fact that I could do anything my brothers could do no matter how often they wished I couldn't, no matter how much my dad wished I couldn't. I could beat all the boys in P.E. and my dad's endeavors to make me feel less-than were never met with a reason. I could do anything Frank or even Fred could do, and I know that irked him the most. This became a satisfaction I couldn't stop. It would be another thing if I was just proving my dad wrong, but that I could love skateboarding too. It even made me forget about Garrett, if only for a moment.

I didn't know it then, but skateboarding chipped away my obsession with Garrett, and Susan and I became even closer because of this. I wasn't always talking about Garrett, when I saw her. She didn't like skateboarding as much as me, but I'd still ask her to come up the street and watch me while all our brothers were away. She'd sit on her old skateboard rocking it side to side and read a book underneath the Angel Trumpet tree that was set against the garage, and I'd use my brother-less time with the half pipe as much as possible. When Fred and Frank would get home, they'd peel me off of it. Joey would stick with them, since he didn't have a friend to run off to. I felt bad for Joey, that he wasn't a girl.

## HALLY WINTERS

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There was one summer night, though, when it was just Susan and I out there. The sun was setting, I was sweating through the back of my shirt, and my kneepads and elbow pads were soaked, and I had finally landed a near perfect kick flip. The world felt so open. Susan was busy skating up and down the street, but she saw me land it and cheered as she raced down the street. She stopped just before the hill got steep, and turned around, kicking back up to my house. The street we lived on was called Lemoncrest. I wasn't sure which one came first, the name or all those lemon trees. Having a lemon tree in front of your house was like a rite of passage. Susan's family had a lemon tree, an orange tree, and an avocado tree in their front yard. Mine just had one lemon tree, not unlike everyone else up and down the street. In the winter, the trees on the street would plump with yellow and then shed them all into the ground. Opossums and raccoons would come down from the mountains behind our houses and feast on the fallen fruits. Susan's mom hated them always targeting her avocados. She'd wrap her avocado tree in a mesh or put spikes around the trunk of the tree. Nothing seemed to work.

"When I get old enough, I'm getting a moped."

"A what?" I asked her.

"You know. It's like a motorcycle. Europeans use them."

I laughed and kicked my board up. "Why? Why not a car?"

"Easier. I was thinking a blue one."

"Or a white one," I suggested.

"Like a creamy blue."

"Creamy white. No, silver could be nice."

"Silver? Like a nice grey, yeah," Susan said.

"You could take me to school!" I yelled as I dropped the board and started noodling.

"I could take us anywhere," she said. I could see all the pieces falling together, perfectly.

I felt my mom's absence most during that summer. I missed her so much more. She'd come home worn out, you could see it in her shoulders. Even with shoulder pads that lifted her brilliant blue and deep navy suits, her shoulders looked sunken in. I made dinner for her and Joey every day she worked that summer. My older brothers always did their own thing. It was nighttime when she would get home. On the weekends, she took us to the beach. She just loved it there, and she said it recharged her for the week. Fred and Frank slept in on Saturdays, but she'd take me and Joey.

We always went to Santa Monica where the sand spread out for a mile. The pier would be on the left side of us, and sometimes we'd stay till evening when the ferris wheel lit up. Everything was so brilliant next to the darkness of the ocean at night. The stars shined brighter, and the ferris wheel looked mesmerizing like a fireworks display. My mom's curls would be perfectly wrapped in a scarf the whole time at the beach, only waiting till we got home to unwrap it. It was the same silk scarf every time. She preferred quality to quantity when it came to clothes. Her silk scarf had a deep blue edge with a pretty little floral pattern at the center. When we would be laying out, seeing all the cars park or drive by on the PCH, she'd talk about her baby blue Chevrolet.

## HALLY WINTERS

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“You could roll the top down. Perfect for days like this. It was a stick shift too. Great for going through the hills. I’d come here with my girlfriends, mostly my boyfriends.”

“Mom, did you ever not have a boyfriend?”

She chuckled, “No, I don’t think so. Sometimes I had two.”

“Mom!”

“What? The forties and fifties were a different time, you know. The men looked better, and they were all happy they didn’t die in the war.”

I pushed some sand into a pyramid and squashed it. “Was Dad in World War 2?”

“No, he was too young,” she got serious. “He was in the Korean War though, thankfully.” She paused an indescribable pause, and mumbled, “Maybe that’s where he learned it all.”

She was talking about something I wasn’t supposed to ask about, but I knew she was glad he never got drafted into Vietnam. She used to pour over the newspapers, as the drafts passed over our house. There wasn’t a strong worry because all the boys in our house were too young, and the man whose license was registered to our house but never came home was too old.

She’d sigh a great big sigh and come back to me rapturing about another memory from the fifties and when the salty air lifted my hair it all just felt right. I liked listening to her stories and how monotonous they were. Always about her car, and her boyfriends, and her favorite tree in Sunland. For a woman who suffered so much, she always had a good story to tell, and to tell over and over again like all her sources of joy were supple.

On one of our excursions to the beach, my mom decided to tell me a new story, one I had only guessed at. The day was particularly hot, coming into the high heat of the summer. The sun was so high in the sky. My hair was coated in salt and sand was lingering in my ear canals. I had just come back from a swim, and Joey went out like we were changing shifts. The wind blew, ever-present. She told me that my brother and I were conceived by rape. My body rocked with phantom waves.

“Your dad was drunk,” she said. The sun hanging above us never moved.

“And he was mad. I mean real mad.” She wasn’t looking at me. “And I just couldn’t stop him. It’s just another one of those things I can’t control.”

It wasn’t that it was no big deal, but I just didn’t feel anything when she told me. I had suspected it for some time given the arguments I had heard coming from their bedroom when he was living there with us. I just never put two and two together. Didn’t know what sex meant or didn’t mean. Couldn’t figure out why my dad hated me so much. Why I hated him so much. The world continued around us, like my whole world hadn’t come crashing down. The relentless wind was the only indicator that what I was feeling was real.

“But I won because I got you.” She took my hand, a gesture she reserved. “And Joey.”

I didn’t realize I was crying, until I used my left hand to wipe my tears. I thought about my hand, about her hand. Sometimes things can be so much, so intense that it all boils down to wiping the right side of my face with my left hand, and not the look on my mom’s face, and not the way her hand felt so small holding mine, and not the absolute beauty of my mother loving me still.

MICHAEL MANEROWSKI

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## MISSING

There is the field  
fenced in  
where is the horse

there is the shoreline  
waves endless  
but no sails

there is the doorway  
onto the street  
the shadow  
in the doorway

it is you now  
missing

when will you step out  
the sun is radiant

someone has got to find  
the horse

someone has got to launch  
the ships

ALYSSA HANNA

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## FETAL MANDATE

i eat dandelions on the nights the moon won't come out  
there's a wind in me that needs to be quelled  
and i am here counting cannibals  
as they gnaw the heads off their lovers

inside myself i've hung a photo of a photo of my birth mother  
hooked on the hallway of my lungs  
so it only hurts every time i breathe

god has a planner, a calendar  
scheduling times to kill and times for mercy  
the girl grows in a cabbage patch and asks when it's her turn to flower

holding vigils for my sisters  
who are not dead but seem to think that i am

they start a vegetable garden and ask my mother,

no, *their* mother,

*why are some babies born invisible?*

ALYSSA HANNA

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## WHEN THOR CLARIFIES THAT LOKI IS ADOPTED

did you know the sea urchin was a cyclops? well, not anymore at least.  
scientists discovered that its eye was actually its asshole.

i wonder why god plays cruel jokes like that—

at my [            ]'s wedding her cousins ran up to me:  
*you're the one she gave up!*  
*it's so nice to meet you.*

*you look more like her than the daughters  
she ended up keeping*

i wonder why the cosmological sense of humor is nothing but  
hollowness

awkward laughs

how the shark's brain resembles birth canals, how both instinctually cloister  
around trauma-spilt blood

## REMOVE AND CLEAN THE PARTS

What if I want to be bitter, an oily  
slow brew? How to clean  
the coffee maker. Just vinegar  
and water. I have a friend who drinks  
apple cider vinegar and maple syrup on ice.  
And on every sidewalk the ice is asking  
me to join it, and not politely. How not  
to slip when getting the mail.  
My dad broke almost every bone  
in his right hand. How to encourage  
a healthy gut. My sister's fiancé  
had a dream the baby was a girl, he *just*  
*knew*. The girl's eyelids thin  
as coffee filters. You mailed  
me grounds from the local coffeeshop  
so my apartment could smell  
like your mouth.



EMMA DEPANISE

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## THINGS I KNOW TO BE TRUE

I've never seen mole crickets—obsidian eyes  
and veined stained-glass wings—but I've seen

their photographs. (Their legs shovel as our hands hold.  
Are our hands best built to grasp or jab

or weave or crack the pistachios left  
at the bottom of the bowl?) Some mornings, I lose

balance. One hand on the sink's corner. One fingering  
my teeth. (Some mornings, I lose

myself. Elbow as door jamb, tongue stuck  
in the mug in the kitchen sink.) I could fall over rewinding

your voice and even the linoleum would feel  
soft. (I think.) Dead crickets lie

on their backs. (Curled  
limbs.) Old cough drops always stick

a bit of paper. (I want to swallow pages  
of words, if only to soothe the red and raw

parts of me.) Some fortunes I've unrolled must be  
true. (Sunlight will soften

my eyes as they open to you?) A finger is not  
a tongue. A finger is not a tongue.

VA[012]

by “maybe” I mean [] [] [][] [] [] object is  
uncertain [] [] at distance [][] I could be [] [] []  
[] [] this nest [] [] [] [] industrial playthings [] []  
[] [] I am [] [] [] indivisible from [] [] []  
[] [] white trucks [] [] [] skimming [] [] the  
highway

VA[026]

at the CVS plaza [] [] [] [] forever functions  
adjectivally [] [] [] [] town [] [] [] [] a participle  
[] [] [] [] attached to some redundant adverbial  
[] [] [] [] parking lot [] [] [] [] [] [] abstractly reality  
[] [] [] [] feeds [] [] [] [] [] through [] [] the blue  
donation box [] [] [] [] [] [] [] [] town can't [] [] []  
have [] [] [] memory

VA[008]

cross cracked sidewalks [] [] [] town's tangible []  
[] [] [] anxiety factory [] [] [] [] [] [] [] over  
my shoulder [] [] [] [] the Susquehanna [] [] [] []  
looks older [] [] [] beneath my feet[] [] [] [] []  
unmatched scratch-offs [] [] [] @ Your  
Convenience [] [] [] [] Elsewhere [] [] [] [] [] []  
[] is not escape [] [] [] [] but how escape draws [] []  
[] [] itself [] [] [] [] [] a portrait [] [] [] [] []  
referencing [] [] [] [] [] town [] [] [] [] [] [] [] [] []  
[] [] [] in rear view

BROOKE HARRIES

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## REVELATION

Normally I see rain as a prop for movies but this morning it was biblical. My elaborate intuition was saying the world was doomed and the weather was nodding *indeed*. Then my neighbor's dog strode by in a yellow raincoat and it was good. My grandma called and I realized she speaks in aphorisms and platitudes; her sentences have always been like pieces of a puzzle anyone can complete, a map of the United States, each chunk a state. There may be a mix-up with the Dakotas, but it's easily worked out. After years of reprinting and squabbles, they watered down the bible that way. I can't get it verbatim, but I'd like a boilerplate copy of what god wanted us to know. The message was muddled and contradictory. I'm full of nerves astride the late galloping beast of news ancient and novel. In the wild anything deadly has a beauty that can be divided from its danger. I'm counting the seconds at the sink washing my hands singing "Happy Birthday To You," a song a court ruled belonged to the public. I'm livening up with adjustments to the lighting, studying dialogue from conversations an hour old. Any hour, any thought returns to language. In the beginning there was this loneliness.

JEFFREY BEAN

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## "IMPACTFUL"

is a word I hate. Money word,  
boardroom word, a white-  
guy-in-a-suit-making-difficult-cuts-  
to-school-lunches-school-band-school-art word,  
carving up wetlands with roads.  
*Impactful* leadership, *impactful*  
new products and strategies  
and *synergies*, there's another one.  
Strip-mall words that make  
plastics and prisons, clear cut  
woods. Words made to fuck us,  
friends, and in the fucking  
burn much fuel. When I was in school,  
*impact* meant something you felt,  
none of this slow erosion. Impact  
of a fist on a face, impact of the car crash  
that killed your friend at prom. Halfback  
flattened and concussed. Something you said  
when you finally got your breath back, hunched over  
in tears in glittering wreckage, trying  
to make sense of what hit. You didn't just  
hear about it, you stood inside of it  
and lived it. Lead in the gasoline  
and air in those days. Violence and hot  
fucking red-faced fighting and love. We had  
to stand in the same room to see  
each other. *Impact*, yes, the world  
was full of it. I made a lot  
of loud music. I'm not even old yet.

TYLER KLINE

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## THE PAST IS AN EGG THE WIDTH OF A THIMBLE

In a past life I worried if hummingbirds slept.  
I kept whatever I couldn't control close,

spelled out like knuckle tattoos.  
My favorite question from grade school:

*What advice would you give your younger self?*  
To go back, I'd pencil in bubble letters:

*STUDY YOUR ANXIETY LIKE A HOLSTEIN  
WITH A PORTHOLE IN ITS CHEST.*

I'd stop searching the xeriscape of my mind  
looking for the perfect stone to shatter

my bedroom window. At dusk my town  
glows like a birdbath after a downpour.

Every stranger I meet I offer milkweed,  
explaining *This is the only plant a monarch will lay its eggs on.*

In the morning I walk to work. Before me  
a sidewalk of ginkgos. Their petals the color

of the underside of a lizard I kept as a boy.  
I envy their quick abandon—perfunctory

& numerous as freshly cut hair.

JASON TOBIN

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## WARNING SIGNS

We took the train across the countryside  
as a way of consuming our treasures.

Our biodiversity disassembled.  
I cashed in our carrying capacity,  
brokered the food web, a workaday program.

Habitats balanced on pillars, you scratched  
a lotto ticket. Our slog destroyed many a quagmire,

but I considered you a flagship species  
because you were trendy.  
My act was the wealthy one, a glum delicacy.



JASON TOBIN

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## CONSUMER'S CULT

I jumped into the purchaser's movement,  
bought a new step stool every Tuesday.  
Months passed like terrible dreams,

products arrived as prophets crawled across the ceiling.  
The hundred-year flood converted roads to rivers  
as they chuckled in their sunlit room.

I invested in an infinity scarf,  
nervous as the schism between hand and foot.

Running from several fires, I watched  
the last bouquet of light fade behind me.

MARY BIDDINGER

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## A RADICAL NOTION

Graffiti on the bridge read: *You have no future in administration.*  
My heart opened like a scantron sheet with every bubble filled in.  
Society had run out of things to weaponize—even the ugly plums.  
I told myself not to think, but it was like spitting into a high creek.  
My worries like hot missalettes they shoved into our church arms.  
I preferred to take my arms into the woods for a thorough scaring.  
Knew it was wrong, but still wanted to eat a cactus heart someday.  
Savannah took a cactus out of her blouse and then she disappeared.  
Nobody wanted to purchase our grass bracelets, not even out of pity.  
The administration retracted the definition of *renewable energy*.

MARY BIDDINGER

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## SOMETIMES A GHOST IS JUST A GHOST

People today don't care nearly as much about the Olympics because there's more happening.  
Only a small percentage of children creep out of the house to pretend-skate on the driveway.  
I have no idea why we placed so much faith in poorly drawn cartoons in odd primary colors.  
Lunch boxes were metal or plastic, all the hats had pompons on top like they held brains in.  
Nobody spit in the ball pit, and characters in costume rarely pinched the customers back.  
I dropped my canned goods in the road and nobody scolded me, said *watch the split peas*.  
We did not observe national pencil day, a determination of when donuts were mandatory.  
Every pair of jeans looked like it was designed by a machine designed by a vengeful ghost.

## THE MUCKING OUT OF GRIEF

One of Dad's many griefs was the chore of driving me to Hardscrabble Farm now and then, instead of having his own fun Saturday. Hardscrabble was a horse farm in Williston, VT, maybe thirty minutes from our home. I haunted the place between the ages of nine and twelve. Dad's annoyance with this chore struck me as ironic, both because Mom was almost always the one to haul me to the stable, and because the horse farm was *my* fun day away from *him*. I didn't want Dad sulking around the barn any more than he did. I much preferred Dad in his native habitat: in front of the TV, watching mental health specials about healing his inner child.

The summer after I turned eleven, I spent every weekday at Hardscrabble. The owner of the stable, Madeleine, kept her straw-blond hair tied roughly with a rubber band, wore all black, left her boots caked in mud and horseshit. She was fine with kids kicking around that summer as long as we helped out with the chores. Mom gave me a tetanus shot and sent me off into the world, free.

There were four of us girls that summer using horses as a refuge from whatever homes we'd fled. Elisabeth was Madeleine's six-year-old daughter. Though her dirty-blond hair was tangled and her clothes torn, she was the envy of our group because she owned a horse: a dark bay pony named Warlock. Rumor was her dad, like mine, had almost no interest in horses. I occasionally saw him walking from the farmhouse to his car, then speeding away.

Danielle was closest in age to Elizabeth. She was eight, with light brown hair and spindly arms. I found her kind, but lazy: whenever stalls needed mucking out, Danielle could reliably be found hiding behind the sawdust pile with Elisabeth, playing horse figurines. She rode a light bay school horse named Hansel—nice enough pony, though dull.

Erica was the eldest, at maybe twelve or thirteen. She had nut brown hair and rode a black school horse named Mouse. Erica was the only one who worked off everything she got from that farm, including her full lease on Mouse and her once-a-week private lessons with Madeleine. Sometimes we sat together in the shadowy tack room, air smelling of Murphy's Oil Soap, and whispered about Danielle's truancy or Madeleine's snappishness. I admired Erica, was determined to endure myself to her through a vigorous work ethic.

I was skinny. Dark brown hair and eyes. Rode a gray Arabian named Peanut. Peanut wasn't a school horse: a woman at the stable outgrew her and didn't have the heart to sell, so my parents paid the woman a little money, something like a quarter lease. Peanut was punky, flattening her ears if horses got too close, refusing to come in from the fields when called. I felt an instant connection. Love at first, *No*. What I wished I could say to Dad.

\*

At home, Dad was the divvy-er of chores, which conveniently meant he didn't have any. Once, when Mom was away for the weekend, he asked me how to turn the washing machine on. The question was odd, especially since, when he'd grown tired of delivering mail, he'd switched to a maintenance job at the Post Office. Dad completed specialized training in HVAC and electrical, but supposedly couldn't turn a knob on the washing machine. I bit my lip, knowing he just wanted me to do his laundry while Mom was away.

## GRETCHEN VANWORMER

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Dad typed Margaret's and my chores into a spreadsheet with dates that stretched to the following calendar year. As far as I could tell, that was Dad's solo contribution to housework: data entry and hitting print. The chores made sense at first. Margaret and I dusted, vacuumed, and swept so Mom could spend more time floating in the bathtub and less time floating in a fog of Lemon Pledge. But Dad grew wise to the possibilities of spreadsheets, began adding chores that served his idiosyncrasies. At one point, he insisted I gracefully transfer his Thousand Island salad dressing from the gallon tub he liked to buy, into a pint jar for easier slopping onto greens. Whenever the pint jar got low, I refilled, creating a magical, bottomless pint. For whatever reason, this ongoing process did not involve a funnel, but a large metal spoon I had to dip in the gallon tub.

One night, I accidentally let the dressing in the jar nearly run dry. Dad was in an overgrown mood, and yelled so loud it felt like the house shriveled. I scrambled to get the metal spoon, then sank my arm into the tub, gross mayonnaise slicking my arm. Dad seemed triumphant, *too* triumphant. What did he ever do around this place? He didn't even change the oil in the cars.

I snapped, the way I imagined Madeleine might snap: she was covered in horseshit but took no human shit. I said the chores were for the *family*, not just him. Margaret froze at the dinner table. Mom narrowed her eyes at Dad until he sat down too, glowering. I brought him what was already in the jar, washed my arm, sniffled through dinner. Later I told the whole, teary story to the horse posters on my wall. But I didn't have to manage his dressing anymore.

\*

Hardscrabble's main buildings were the front barn, back barn, and farmhouse. Madeleine lived in the farmhouse with her husband and their daughter. All three buildings were in varying stages of decay. Madeleine had a lot of work, and generally went about her business, except once a week when she rounded Elisabeth, Danielle, and me up for our group riding lesson. No one supervised me or my friends as we pressed our fingers to rusty nails, peed in the horse stalls, or chased each other over the rotting floors of the hayloft. The stable was beautifully fatherless.

Our chores at the farm included any of the following: mucking stalls; feeding and watering the horses; turning horses out into the fields; bring horses back *inside* at night or in bad weather; sweeping the tack room and hall; and raking and watering the indoor riding arena. Unlike at home, I loved these chores. I was learning how a stable was run, the messier parts that weren't explained in horse books like the *Linda Craig Mysteries*. More than that: I worshipped horses so much, their strength and beauty, that I truly loved pitchforking their shit. My goal was to go home at least as caked in muck as Erica or Madeleine. I thought, when I grew up, I might just become a horse.

One horse I especially I adored was Montana: a white Appaloosa with a splash of gray freckles across his rump. His owner was a woman named Jean whose family owned a number of local businesses. Jean called ahead when she would be stopping by so somebody, often Erica, could get Montana brushed and saddled. Montana had a number of fancy leg wraps that struck me as

## GRETCHEN VANWORMER

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decorative and frou-frou. He had a complicated show name in addition to his stable name, but out of loyalty to the horse, I didn't commit his show name to memory. Jean never had a speck of dirt on her person, and she and Madeleine often bickered through her lessons. They seemed to need each other, though. Money and know-how. So the drama continued. Like a family.

Montana lived in the front barn near Alex, the stallion, which was the bougier address, with larger stalls and heating. Sometimes I'd stand outside his stall and contemplate whether Jean knew he shat. "Poor guy," I said. "Your mom thinks you're Horse Barbie."

I felt pretty confident with Montana until a summer storm blew through and I had to help get the horses in. The fields had electrified fencing. We'd all zapped ourselves a few times before and found the experience *unpleasant*. No one wanted to mess with the fence during the storm, so we left the gate open. I yelled to the others that I'd take Montana.

The sky was sheeting rain, the ground slick with mud. I had never been quite so close to Montana, but he was massive compared to Peanut. Bulky and muscular. Lightning struck nearby, and he stomped all over my feet, yanked the lead line. I was afraid if I let go he'd bolt out the gate and onto a busy road nearby. We made it into the barn, but I stood outside his stall shivering for a while, watching him pace. When the storm passed, he was calm again, nuzzling my palm.

Montana was far larger than any human, but had eyes on the sides of his head, rectangular pupils. Like goats. Like prey. I realized I would never understand what lightning meant to horses. Or what struck any other being as the apocalypse.

\*

When I was eight, Dad brought home the most perfect stuffed animal: a two-foot horse with a removable saddle and bridle. I know people's eyes are too frequently described as glittering, but that's exactly what his eyes did when he presented me with this gift. He was truly delighted to make me happy. He could also be counted on to go on the scary, tumbly rides at a theme park, if I felt so inclined. This was a plus. But at some point, he seemed to grow so obsessed with an impending mental health doom, that he became unrecognizable. Time spent with him felt like a chore, a dangerous one.

As a family, we spent a good deal of time watching those mental health specials Dad enjoyed. At eleven years old, I felt odd, addressing my inner child, offering her comfort for how her parents mistreated her. I played along, imagining my chest filled with sunlight or moonbeams or whatever the idea was that day. Those shows were all right. But soon Dad's taste in TV specials shifted to material that, for a child given no context, was truly frightening: schizophrenia, manic depression, bipolar disorder. Dad was intrigued by any mental health story that ended in sudden, violent death. Nobody in these shows was finding the right cocktail of prescription medications and therapy and self-care to make life worth living. Instead, mental illness and death were described as inescapable. Clouds rolling across the hay fields.

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"Look where you're going and you'll go where you're looking." This was Madeleine's urge to ride up into the corners of the arena. Often shortened to

## GRETCHEN VANWORMER

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“Look where you’re going and go where you’re looking,” and repeated like a prayer.

The indoor arena was a rectangle of soft dirt. Every few days, the horses’ hooves wore an oval rut near the perimeter. Madeleine’s instruction was to expand the space: ride outside the oval, into the corners of the arena. I kept my eyes dead ahead until the last moment, even with the wall closing in. “The horse isn’t going to crash,” Madeleine said from her lawn chair in the corner, a cigarette in hand, several corgis curled at her feet. “The horse has a brain. The horse will turn.”

When my chore was to grab a rake and fill the rut, I was dizzied by the scale of horseland. But Madeleine said the arena was 20 x 60 meters. And Elisabeth, Danielle, and I, as we cantered a three-beat rhythm through our weekly group lesson, were not to cede any territory to whatever ghosts we imagined owned the corners. “Fix your eyes exactly where you want to go. Trust that your body has a brain, too.”

I cantered Peanut into Madeleine’s corner, a soft spray of dirt flying in her corgis’ snoots as I turned. Elisabeth and Danielle giggled. Madeleine waved her cigarette. “Continue.”

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I knew Dad was depressed, that he saw a psychiatrist named Jim every week, carried an evolving med list in his pocket. But I didn’t know his actual diagnoses, or how things were likely to play out. I wondered if he was going to become like one of those men I saw on TV, who stepped in front of a train and vanished.

One day, Dad asked if I would go see Jim alone, just for one visit, so Jim could get a sense of the larger family—everyone as individuals. I went because this too felt like a chore, something I had to do for Dad. What I remember most is being at home before the visit, trying on a flurry of jeans and tops, putting my hair up and down, practicing big and little smiles. I wanted to look sane, normal, but wasn’t sure how to create that illusion.

The car ride to Jim’s office, just me and Dad, was uncomfortable small talk followed by aching silences. I was so nervous that, when I finally sat down with Jim, all I could say was positives. I suppose I’d been rehearsing some little speech in my head ever since I knew I had to complete this task. I told Jim I was well adjusted, nice to my friends, and helpful around the house: qualities I hoped would check me off Jim’s list of reasons Dad was sick.

After my session, we drove back home in the same silence. I never saw Jim again. I wasn’t sure if I’d made Dad better or worse, and I didn’t know where our family was going, where to look. I just knew we needed to turn before we hit the wall. And I wasn’t sure if Dad had a brain.

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By the end of the summer, I felt physically stronger than ever before. I mucked out, lugged haybales, raked and watered the enormous indoor arena. I loved these chores: they were so clear, every problem fixable.

In the fall, when school started, I missed the muck, the freedom of whole days spent outside, smelling of hay and sawdust and Murphey’s Oil Soap. Madeleine convinced Mom to let me ditch school one Monday to watch a riding event, and I was thrilled to escape.

## GRETCHEN VANWORMER

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The Sunday evening before the event, I stood in the aisle of the back barn picking clods out of Peanut's hooves and eavesdropping on some trouble happening with Montana in the arena. This must've been late October or early November, because my fingers and toes were popsicles as I peered into the space. Madeleine, Jean, and a veterinarian were walking Montana round and round the perimeter. He didn't want to walk, though. He kept lying down, rolling, kicking his stomach, and then furiously standing.

Montana's roll, kick, stand was a spooky rhythm I convinced myself not to fear. The word "colic" floated around the barn. But babies had colic, and horses were stronger than children. I snapped a carrot for Peanut, walked her to her stall, closed the door.

The next morning, the barn was oddly quiet. No signs of an event. Mom and Madeleine must've mixed up the dates—a this week/next week confusion—because there wasn't anyone in the front or back barns, not even Elisabeth.

I turned over a watering bucket and hopped up so I could look into the arena. The sliding door was wide open—strange for an icy morning, the wind making the barn colder still. Then I saw Montana lying in the dirt by the door.

There was no doubt he was dead. His body had a heaviness I hadn't seen or felt before, even when he was stomping on my feet.

The only person I'd ever seen tending the dead was my maternal grandmother, whose parents are buried in Hope Cemetery, in Barre, VT. Sundays, if Mom decided to drive up to see her folks, Margaret and I would play among the fancy gravestones of that granite town—here an enormous soccer ball, there an airplane—while Grandma cleared the leaves and dead flowers from her parents' grave, placed red tulips at the base. This ritual was meaningful but ordinary, the way grief is ordinary. A chore that needs to be completed again and again.

I didn't go into the arena, but sat down on the bucket and waited, for what I wasn't sure. I heard a tractor pull up outside the sliding door, then idle. There was a jangle of metal. I half-watched through a crack in the boards as a man wrapped chains around Montana and dragged his body out beyond the fields.

When I was sure the two were gone, I unlatched the door to the arena, walked to the smooth dish where Montana had lain, and sank my hand into the dirt. I expected to feel some fleeting warmth, but the dirt was cold. There was beauty, though, in that coldness, in feeling what Montana might've felt on his skin as the vet's chemicals washed over.

And there was something sacred in his body's claim on space. I didn't want to lose the shape he'd left in the dirt. But if I didn't rake the arena, another horse and rider would canter over his shape. So I grabbed a rake and filled the oval, burying the body.

At home, I slinked past my dad, his growing sickness. Warm in bed, I imagined Montana's freckles slowly expanding into the Earth.



JOELLEN CRAFT

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## MY SUDDEN DEATH: PUSHING THE STROLLER TO THE LAKE

Canoeing here years from now, you will appear  
half in, half out of this lake

drowned so many afternoons —held by canoe,  
you'll lie back below the surface the lake, too, an embrace  
of your weight within that metal—

goslings push through thick reeds  
a bounty after last spring  
when the city poked a hole in every egg in every nest

I wept reading of ancient vessels  
found beside the bones of infants:  
playful clay mugs shaped with nose spouts  
and ear handles  
to save orphaned newborns  
or wean, the porous insides traced  
with milk—sheep, cow, goat—and bacteria  
deadly in the hollow rabbit or silly chin

to give you what my body cannot  
to form a vessel you will keep near

to hold what seems a lake from above  
imagining you tip into yourself

where I've imagined you

We've come to see

After your birth

I have tried

I have tried

and fill with what you need

a face straight on as I held yours

## A SUM OF ALL PARTS: A REVIEW OF JEANNINE OUELLETTE'S *THE PART THAT BURNS*

Jeannine Ouellette's courageous and gripping memoir *The Part That Burns* should be read by everyone. Her life story provides clear insight into how childhood sexual abuse impacts both the victims and their families.

Like Mary Karr's memoir *The Liars' Club*, Ouellette's story takes place in two distinct geographic areas. The author of *The Part That Burns* spent her entire childhood in a gypsy-like existence as her mother and stepfather moved them from Minnesota to Wyoming. Unlike her mother who ignored her daughter's abuse, the author reveals to the reader very early in her book how it began when she was a small child. "I was four when I first learned to play. Once you learn, you don't forget."

The book is not written in chronological order as the author skips around from various periods in her childhood, adolescence, and adulthood as she reveals how the sexual abuse she suffered impacted her entire life including the dissolution of her first marriage.

In addition to the molestation, Ouellette is physically and emotionally abused by her mentally ill mother who often throws her out of the house for minor infractions. Initially she is taken in by her biological father and step-mother, but when that doesn't work out she ends up in foster care until she is able to move out on her own at eighteen.

Ouellette's memoir is also an inspiring account of survival. While many children who suffer abuse turn to alcohol or drugs to relieve their pain, the author sought her own escape through nature. The following passage is also a reflection of her beautiful language skills. "One day I find a hidden canyon full of wildflowers. This is the kind of place where I might find a doorway. Not my favorite kind of doorway, where two branches meet to form an arch that you can step through into another dimension. I won't find that, because there are no trees in the canyon. But maybe, I could find another doorway, like a circle of wildflowers where the sun casts its rays at precisely the right slant to open the door to a new world."

This metaphor is repeated often. "Here is the thing about doorways: once you step through them, you can't go back. Even if you do, you will never see the world the same way as before."

Another theme which runs throughout this memoir is her contention that the abuse that she suffered left DNA fingerprints on her

body which can never be removed. “The body knows what it knows, and skin remembers.” Ouellette also describes how she came to believe that the trauma from her sexual abuse even manifested itself into the body of her unborn first child. “I didn’t know about cellular memories before I decided, recklessly, to allow babies into my body. When I’m fiery and floating, I watch myself from above. My body is not me. I am the part that burns.”

While this memoir chronicles what the author refers to as her “brokenness” as a result of what she endured, it really is a story of healing. Writing this book was a very big part of that process for Ouellette. “Maybe healing, when it happens, is the result of a quantum entanglement, the swirling of a thousand winds. Maybe it comes when you give your daughter your own heart like another stuffed toy she will drag with her everywhere...”

In the last quarter of her memoir, Ouellette engages in a dialogue with her daughter Sophie which reinforces her theory about the cellular effects of abuse. While this at first changed the flow in the story for me, it did not detract from what is both a courageous and well written account of her trauma.

I hope that Ouellette’s book gains a wide audience as her story will provide a better understanding about child sex abuse and its long lasting effects on both its victims and their families. I am also positive that her memoir will encourage some children who are currently suffering from sexual abuse to break their silence and end their own suffering.

FRANCIS X. FITZPATRICK

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## GEORGE WHO? A REVIEW OF ROSS WILCOX'S *GOLDEN GATE JUMPERS SOCIETY*

Ross Wilcox's short story collection *Golden Gate Jumper Survivors Society* is filled with a wonderful collection of quirky, sad, yet funny outcasts who yearn for communion with an increasingly isolationist world. The first story which shares the book's title provides an extreme example of the themes of alienation which course through this entire absurdist work. Victor is the president of the Survivor's Society who after failing in his attempt at suicide has decided to devote his entire life to saving others. He spends his days patrolling the Golden Gate Bridge on the lookout for fellow jumpers and holds a pristine record for never having anyone succeed on his watch. Victor's evenings and social life are taken up by the Society and in which the collective members occupy their time by engaging in Aquatic Jumping Simulation Exercises at the Y. That is, until a new member named Bonnie shows up. Bonnie, whom Victor suspects of having never actually attempted a jump, is elected their new president, and even converts their alternative suicide activity into Yoga Jumping Simulation Exercises. The conflict between Victor and Bonnie and her clique intensifies further until the story concludes in an unexpected yet satisfying manner.

The small town setting in "Year of Our Lawn," would at first appear to be the polar opposite of the one in the "Survivors Society." This absurdist story, which reminded me of George Saunder's short story "Tenth of December" begins when the Porters decide to upgrade their lawn by decorating it with statues of animals which are clothed to look like some local merchants. This inspires a "friendly" neighborhood competition in which the neighbors try to outdo each other with increasingly elaborate lawn decorations. "It was if we were watching ourselves on television, or viewing a movie about our town, albeit one acted out by animals. The Foals and Shedd's could point at the deer and the black bears and say 'That's us!' And all the while as we cheered, in our own heads, we envisioned our own yards, imagined what animals and what scenes would look best brought to life on our own lawns." As the various homeowners' landscapes take on increasingly expensive and ridiculous iterations, an ever widening darkness comes to pervade both the story and the formerly nice little town. "It was as if people were saying through their lawn scenes what they really felt about one another, that the lawn scenes were bringing to the surface a surreptitious bitterness that had always been there." It is such realizations that the reader comes to equally understand the true nature of this town's and humanity's own less than stellar qualities which often underlie our surface natures.

The voices and characters in this entire story collection are disparate and wide ranging. In “Backwater,” Wilcox writes from the perspective of a teenage girl whose parents are splitting up as a result of her mother’s affair with a yoga instructor and in “Puddin’s Suitcase,” he voices a gay man whose act of digging up his elderly aunt’s pet poodle for reinterment helps him to disinter his own sexuality.

My favorite story in this strong group of stories was “Nora’s Sweatshirt.” This appears at first to be merely an amusing recounting about a group of adolescents in South Dakota who fill their idle hours smoking pot and drinking beer in a remote country setting. Wilcox, like he does so well in almost every story here, has a much different agenda for his western versions of Wayne and Garth. Instead of “party on, dude,” these teens’ carefree and substance besotted lives are transformed when they meet a mysterious shopkeeper whose revelations about another boy like themselves will alter both their lives and perspectives forever.

The darkest comedic episode contained here is titled “Ransom.” Here we meet a group of apparently normal suburban adolescents (although by this time we know that nothing is ever truly apparent or normal in Wilcox World) who befriend a new boy at their school named Jacob Carbunkle. This character’s name immediately brought me back to when I was a young teenager and a devotee of *MAD Magazine* and the ridiculous, but beloved Carbunkle cartoon character. As for this Carbunkle character it seems that his parents are professional kidnappers and he has no qualms about sharing the intricacies of what his family’s profession entails. When one of the kids asked why they can’t come over to his house for a visit, Jacob responds, “Because my parents are always home now. They won’t let me have anyone over when we’ve got a kid in the basement.” Very creepy stuff, but when taken in the real overall absurdist context in which it is offered, also very funny. Sick funny, maybe, but still hilarious.

In addition to these fine and fully rendered stories there are additional and almost equally good ones including “Broken Vessel” about a woman who helps pay for her elderly mother’s care by robbing banks, “Oliver Weston GBV” in which a young dude has his own imaginary TV show, “Of Small Account,” where a couple 3-D print their own little family, and several more which I will save for your own enjoyable discovery. The bottom line here is that whatever they come to call the next great generation of short story writers (Covidial’s?) will find themselves compared to Ross Wilcox instead of that other guy whatshisname.

JAMIE O'HALLORAN

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## LANDING: A REVIEW OF LAUREL NAKANISHI'S *ASHORE*

There may be poets who do not long for a retreat into nature, into Place with a capital P, rich in synesthetic beauty, in history, in possible futures. I am not one of those poets and so I welcome the immersion in place that Laurel Nakanishi offers in *Ashore*, her debut collection of poems which Carl Phillips selected for The Berkshire Prize from Tupelo Press.

For a book focused on place, and the flora, fauna, geologic formations and weather of particular places, it is aptly titled. *Ashore* is the work of an islander. When one grows up surrounded by the ocean, as the poet did in Hawai'i, being landed takes on greater relevance than it might for one raised on the mainland. The timing of the collection's launch, as we emerge from our islands of lockdown, amplifies the place-consciousness and connectedness that permeates this collection.

The poet I find in these poems plays with convention and expectations in her use of white space that on some pages pushes poems into boxes at the bottom page. The poems that skip across the page, with white caps of space waving them along, are lively and meditative.

"Place(less)ness" is a centering poem here, literally and figurately. Its 18 lines of images shift from estuaries to prairie grass. They skitter across the page to mirror the places and distances that make up the thesis of *Ashore*. It closes with

*I barely know how to live*

*(the sky through clouds)*

*entering days by the blue rip*

*the air makes bands around my neck  
as I walk somnolent on*

Although this speaker may feel drowsy, nothing escapes her. Nakanishi is both poet and scientist wielding precise language and keen observational tools to discover both the natural world and her place in it. The way Nakanishi presents her work reminds me of a naturalist cataloguing her observations. Some poems are footnoted, some multipart poems are separated into numbered and indented paragraphs. These explorations move between particular landscapes (Hawai'i, Montana) and relationships (brother, grandmother). Each place and person lead the poet to find her place in a taxonomy of self.

"When you run out of things to look at—" is the opening line of "The Sun Moving across this Particular Earth" and an impossibility for this poet. Nothing in sight is lost upon Nakanishi. The poet magnifies the minute

# JAMIE O'HALLORAN

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and mundane “when you’re done wondering at the dust:/how each fine layer has simplified itself into rust-tinged rock”.

Nakanishi scrutinizes locales as a path to identity. Place and identity are interwoven here much as a vine is braided. Race is one of the threads woven into this braid and associated with place. The poet deals with that strand directly in “Mixed” referring to her “prairie ancestors” and “Japanese blood.”

The book is structured in five sections: four sections of poems and one of notes. These aren’t the brief notes offering background information one may find in the back of a volume of poems. These are mini-essays that provide the reader rather in-depth historical and cultural background for several of the poems.

Nakanishi invites the reader into the book with “Invoking the Bodhisattvas’ Names in Honolulu” wherein she calls on predecessors, countries of origin, countries of colonizers, ancestral and contemporary. This poem gives views of Honolulu distinguishing urban from natural landscape. Throughout these poems, the poet calls on relatives, but, most frequently, on the living green that carpets and curtains Hawai’i.

Four poems in the book bear the same title: “Mānoa.” Three are short poems in the first section, each in labeled prose poems that could be definitions or the poet’s recollection or both. The poems are balanced equidistant from one another. The fourth “Mānoa” is a long poem that constitutes the fourth section. The braiding motif appears here several times in this complex, four-part meditation. It is an exploration of Hawai’i, its essence and place of identity, that makes use of the speaker’s experience and of Hawai’ian origin stories. From the 1st section:

*I am braided among the coral heads  
the angel fish  
the open-mouthed eels      Anemones sway  
  
parrotfish sway      tufts  
and rays and jellyfish sway  
bite the hook  
they say      take it in your mouth*

“Living Away” is mysterious in its hints at disconnection. White spaces are fissures, hesitancy.

*I lived in threes  
eating dust      molasses      the wrong side of wonder  
I knew better      I would make that walk everyday  
Reaping steps and then  
losing them*

## JAMIE O'HALLORAN

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Two relationships are central to several poems; the poet's brother and her grandmother. "My Brother, in Eight Panels" is a group of eight prose poems. The closing image and phrases of one panel begins the following, reminiscent of a crown of sonnets. The mood is elegiac. There is no mention of death, but of separation of distances: "the happy distance that oceans make", "years of silence, then just the right words, thrown down to me like crumbs" closing with "we moved deeper in, farther away, tending the silences in our own feral minds."

The concerns of the second section are identity, the poet's grandmother, and the mainland. The images here are drier, the parched landscape of Montana and prairie. Nature appears in husks and memory, in dying. Still, there is a softness in its rendering in "After the Stroke, She Remembers."

*Fawnlight, oak, roost, and den.  
Fluttering in the tamarack boughs:  
the word for raven and the raven.*

In "Portrait of My Brother as a Bulwer's Petrel," Nakanishi lyricism is powerful:

*I was mistaken*

*To say your black was a lava field  
cooled to a coarse char. You are*

*the beetle's back, the magpie's wing,  
the black of Pele's tears.*

"Elegy with Whale Song" is a tender poem addressing an unknown "you." The mystery of the relationship and identity of the deceased is subtly underscored in the closing lines:

*until all that is left  
is the spume of your breath  
windswept  
across the skin of the sea.*

*Ashore* is truly an introduction, not merely as a first collection but as a meeting place. In re-visiting subjects (the four "Mānoa" poems, for example), Nakanishi risks, but avoids, repetition. Instead, she mines fresh images and insight. This poet writes her search for identity and belonging. *Ashore* is a whole, an embodiment of a living human being, a living place.



JULIANA CONVERSE

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## FROM ELIOT TO INDIE ROCK: A REVIEW OF THOMAS CALDER'S DEBUT NOVEL, *THE WIND UNDER THE DOOR* (UNSOLICITED PRESS) 2021

We know by now that the business of book writing is anything but solitary. Our influences and snippets of memories, both real and imagined, are co-conspirators in the act. Friends, editors, and critics help mold and guide the piece towards (hopefully) its greatest form. In fact many artists would argue that all art, regardless of medium, is referential.

In his epic poem, *The Waste Land*, T.S. Eliot famously produced a collage of references, allusions, and notations; many provided by the author himself, many more requiring a qualified professional to guide you and translate the Latin. Written against the backdrop of post-WWI Europe, *The Waste Land* describes ruinous landscapes overrun with vermin and rot. We are in the aftermath of devastation, beyond the denouement. What is left? What can be salvaged? Perhaps this is a motive for the poem's styling as a linguistic mosaic, as if each phrase were a found object, picked from the rubble. Extracted from its original context and reapplied, it gains one anew. And if it doesn't? "Just let the language wash over you," my Modernism professor advised, cluing us into the idea of an impressionistic poem. Some details are there to capture a mood.

Thomas Calder's ambitious debut novel, *The Wind Under the Door* delivers on its promise of allusion. Artist Ford Carson has long lost his creative mojo, but is still puttering along, hustling design work while he works on his real projects: collages based on music. One of the pieces Ford is working on is inspired by the album, *The Suburbs* (from Canadian indie rock band, Arcade Fire) which is in turn inspired by, yes, *The Waste Land*.

But while *The Waste Land* is arguably a poet's poem, Calder's novel unfolds with addictive immediacy. Opening the novel at a Halloween party draws us into Ford's disorientation. We learn on page two that Ford has been enamored of a woman named Grace for the past month. They met on his fortieth birthday; she is "not yet thirty," and unhappily married to the enigmatic, occasionally violent J.R. The scene is wild and tantalizing—people are wasted and wearing costumes, and Grace is somewhere fighting with her semi-estranged husband, who was not supposed to be there. Ford's friend says to him, "You ever get the feeling like nothing's quite how it's supposed to be?" (Calder 23). Ford and Grace make love that night. The next day, who should visit his art studio but her husband.

The itching sense of wrongness is a thick mood throughout *Wind*, where inversions prove ominous, but characters still attempt blasé

attitudes. Ford is preoccupied with his own sense of personal ruin/midlife crisis. His son, Bailey is about to visit him for his eighteenth birthday, and Ford is dreading it. He wonders, like Eliot's characters, what led him to this place?

I initially wondered if I'd entered into a middle-aged take on an early-aughts romantic dramedy, a kind of Asheville version of *Garden State* (*Pine State?*). We have a disaffected male character, an artist inspired by lush indie rock albums and Modernist poetry, with an impulsive, and alluringly unavailable love interest. But whereas that brand might look cute on a twenty-something beta male, the world of *Wind* makes it clear that it's not so cute on Ford. While he courts existential anguish, bathing in bitter nostalgia, other people are simply trying to get on with their lives. Indeed, the morose undercurrent in the novel is less symbolic than confrontational. The divorced dad gets no sympathy, even from himself, and no one can save him.

Ford experiences his personality as a mishmash (or collage) of old patterns and assumptions. He is desperate to maintain the youthful ability to glide through chaos and uncertainty, yet increasingly bewildered by the passing of time. Meanwhile, the characters around him are in the midst of heavy change: his ex-wife, Emily is pregnant with her new husband; his son is on the cusp of adulthood, and presumably beyond the grasp of parenting. Even his erotic dancer friend, Noire, is moving on. And yet Ford's sense is that they have all managed to develop in ways he has failed to.

In fact, in contrast to the numbed stasis of the Modernist voice (or an over-medicated Zach Braff), Ford pulses with jealous energy. His son has grown up with another man as his father. He is still in love with his ex-wife, though they divorced a decade ago. He is jealous of people who are moving forward in life. It is horrible to realize you're wishing for people you love to be brought down a peg, just so you can feel needed. Like a child, "He only knew how to stop hurt by making others hurt," a line that will likely haunt him well beyond the story (222).

But unlike her would-be manic pixie counterparts, your Portmans and your Deschanel, Grace is indelibly marked by adult experience and trauma. In keeping with the tone of this bleak dramedy, Ford and Grace have a darkly humorous meet-cute. Ford is riding a wave of suicidal ideation at a hotel bar on his birthday. Calder writes, "Ford was still considering death when he spotted Grace" (45). Ford's thought of death manifests as a bird that then crashes into the side of her head. He has to put the bird out of its misery. Later, on one of their dates, Grace

takes Ford to an amusement park where they board a roller coaster; the attendants know her, and are surprised she is only riding once this time. “Grace leaned into Ford. He anticipated her tongue’s wet kiss inside his ear. Instead, she shouted, ‘I’m so fucking depressed’” (83). Not exactly his “saving grace.” It’s far from a romp through Ikea, but perhaps closer to primal screaming into a rainstorm.

When he arrives, Bailey is his father’s perfect foil: all ruddy confidence and bravado, knocking back drinks and causing a scene wherever he’s taken. Perhaps it is one way to assert his adult-ness, or endear himself to his father, who once showed up to Bailey’s 8th grade Career Day drunk and picked a fight with the stepdad. Together, the two appear to bookend the stereotypical adolescent male mind. Bailey asserts his identity through wry machismo and risk-taking to impress/repel his father. Ford moodily recites lines from *The Waste Land* to his ex-wife over the phone, or ignores his son in the car while furiously texting Grace. When both men are forced to put a wounded animal out of its misery, at different points, Bailey’s relative calm under pressure reminds Ford that his son might be more of a man than his old man.

For as desolate as Ford’s emotional landscape may be, Calder has his fun, especially in ensemble scenes when he gets to “do different voices,” as it were. Just as Eliot acted as ventriloquist for the spirits dusting through *TWL*, Calder speaks through characters as diverse as a local pawnshop owner, a fifteen year-old Lolita, and a yokel erotic dancer. Ford privately names his ex-wife’s new husband Shark Man for his demonstrative jawline, and cringes when he looks up his band’s Myspace page. Pranks abound, as do knowing reflections on the creative process.

The tone in *Wind* is alternately jocular and darkly existential, and occasionally pitched towards a devastating turn. On other occasions, richly-painted scenes, lengthy monologues, and gestural descriptions felt patched in, as if to fill a void on the canvas. One could easily write a review of *The Wind Under the Door* focusing on the experiences and stories of the non-heteronormative characters, including Grace’s homosexual experiences as a teenager. Indeed, the concerns in *Wind* are varied and dare I say, collaged, the way they overlap and juxtapose in a non-didactic sequence that invites collaboration of individual perspective. What I see may not be what you see, therefore, “let the language wash over you.” With its caustic humor and complex, believable characters, *The Wind Under the Door* is a beguiling first novel from a talented new writer that holds the promise of much more to come.

**2021 MIDWEST CHAPBOOK CONTEST**  
FINALISTS AND WINNERS

ELIZABETH DODD

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## FROM THE WORKBOOK FOR THE INTERPRETATION OF DREAMS: READING COMPREHENSION

The snake was deadly, that much you knew. And so once your hand had seized it just below its spear-point head—your arm an impromptu Taser wire—you could not let go.

Most of the dream was the tedious, fear-soaked sequence of your wandering, my god, so many stairs you climbed (the stone staircase you remember from a castle, once, in Ireland; the flagstones in the shrubby vacant lot next door to your childhood house; broad steps down to some riverfront market crowded with the innocent, their Bruegellian laughter and the smell of baking sweets). You kept the snake gripped tight. You knew you'd have to try to kill it. In fact, you'd evidently tried already, since at one point the snake was—still tight in your grip—wrapped in a plastic baggie, contusions and protruding snake-bones showing where you must have hammer-smashed it, yet still it lived.

When the snake escaped—inevitably! Anyone could have seen this coming!—you were left, quite literally, holding the bag. You knelt to pry up the wooden planking and discovered, there beneath the weathered boardwalk, an extravagance of them, a serpentine miscellany, among which the lithe body of your personal responsibility had settled in to wait you out.

By the time you wake, you'll have forgotten where the snake first appeared. The animal's name is gone as well, and now, in the gray light of your waking, the vanished memory rattles you, and each attempt to call it back whets this truth: a malignant knowledge-of-forgetting has replaced the neural imprints of the facts themselves.

JENNY GRASSL

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REFLECTION AS BEING IN LOST HABITAT

to be so double

in the deep mirror of the open

land

to be now fused with hum and harrow

to be rose mallow merged

into radial pinks the blood-blind center

of the world flower of mobbed stigmata

to become wide greedy green

with the lawn and its leaned

lethargies

to have been like that once

from comfort into strain

lines in the looking glass follow field furrow

distorted in a gown placed in the new-ripe

land to have reflex

to be meadow mowed down to pores

to cross herd nibble grub grass of glory's demise

all will be

like dew      frost-killed and kept  
venison wrapped in paper  
white as the dress  
to give oneself in  
bold  
where the dog flushes rabbits  
brush cover undone  
to be holding upright then the cup the tiny hemlock drop  
a summer curtsied for the turn

JENNY GRASSL

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## THE MUSEUM OF WAX FLOWERS

when aqueous humors die in the ox-eye  
daisy and all the flowers gone  
fashion them false gather only cessations  
in your arms oceans of honey combed  
the pollinators have perished see you  
are dying and need an elegant amusement  
suitable for nuns and the fair sex to pass time left  
so replicate the kingdom of flowers in beeswax  
fill palaces with all the cherry blossoms  
from spring craft pink petals thumb thinned  
let the heat of your hands modeling warm  
these likenesses to combust with godbreath  
and restore — no — you know your own hunger  
and its wet ember four hundred species  
of hawkweed are on display as memory  
your sorry struck match only melts colors  
and the forms pool dip your finger  
in the wax then your limbs wear it  
like a second skin take your place



JENNY GRASSL

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## AN INLAND SCRAPE OF SEA

keep eyes escaping  
chasing bunting indigo O O  
no tremolo of palate praise tongues  
or cord stain in the throat can hunt  
so well as wind song the body roots  
cannot catch the curve of earth  
shivering away from wings  
can hold nothing inside the stone  
wall when it flings direction  
down the field's loosed plaits  
of weedy knives to perch  
blue north bird or is it wound

TOMMY ARCHULETA

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**FROM THE WITCH HAZEL**

Few come anymore for my help  
to find sweet water or stores of metal  
Even fewer for shavings of my bark  
to call souls back to their bodies  
& since the last heavy snows  
I've stopped caring if my leaves  
are worn burned or buried  
Please look at me when I'm speaking

TOMMY ARCHULETA

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## TO THE FLOWERING PLUMB OUT BACK

You were right                      her diary  
was behind the dresser

wrapped in one of the silk scarfs  
she got for xmas

The one with the sparrow  
& orchid motif

You should see the Spanish mustang she drew in pencil  
the shading near impeccable

Every time I touch it now  
a heavy sleep comes for me its mouth half                      open like hers was

Nothing is more holy than the moment  
all four hooves are clean off the ground

I read that somewhere    I  
forget where

I really should eat something

TOMMY ARCHULETA

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## TO THE MAGNOLIA

Only once have I ever prune you midwinter  
It was the year

the fires took the orchard  
the floods took the bridge the first flocks

of Sandhills arrived late & slept  
seldom

Father could remember

my name then would  
call me both in English & in Spanish

You hear things things  
like people knowing a loved one of theirs

just died a thousand miles away or sons  
& daughters burying

their parents while they're alive still  
Maybe they're the ones you see

walking place to place carrying those  
huge godawful shovels

I wonder what time it is

TOMMY ARCHULETA

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## FROM THE FLOWERING PLUMB

Add these things to your worn  
satchel when living in the ashes  
the day's center a longhouse what  
remains whole the saddest truth  
dissolves the ashes now turned  
to food now children now your  
father tending to what's left of  
his fields his cathedral his mule  
life in the ashes now no more  
holy than white roses gathered  
at dusk code for the wandering  
griefstricken with open wounds  
thought to be too deep to  
heal  
the

*italics mine*

JAMES D'AGOSTINO

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## PLEASE COME

– *after Vallejo*

I will die in like five  
seconds here in this  
marsupial pouch  
of Missouri summer  
if I have to listen  
to myself talk about  
death again I will  
die & I'm not going  
to lie there's a lesson  
in this few people  
get more interesting  
the longer they speak  
so get in the grave  
of what you have  
to say & get out baby  
you don't have to  
shout it can be just  
one word whispered  
nests written in the trees  
avian lice & mites  
this city its lights  
in mud & spit & woven  
twigs birds swirl  
their single vowel O  
fringed flyers  
bottom feeders  
of the heavens O  
wet black eye  
bead please come  
daybreak blink  
the bright world  
back

JAMES D'AGOSTINO

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**NEW LANG SYNE**

The one year I wore a watch  
took forever. It was always  
tomorrow anytime someone  
made toast. Clouds threw  
everything they had at us.  
Each sun went down quick,  
but left these freckles. Maybe  
the shapes of the vapors  
showed up in the papers.  
Sunday's sad lattice of light  
and shade. OK you can go  
back to the past with all you  
know now, but know everyone  
else back there then now  
knows, too. The advantage  
was always this vantage, age,  
invented vintage. Now  
they're all back with what  
they've been through, too.  
The past insists it comes  
to this, just not yet. Now  
my dog and me watch  
the park crew hang up  
bunting on the outfield fence  
for what must be a playoff  
game, although it seems  
a little early in the summer  
to get sent home. It's good  
to prepare for the past.  
It's back there. All it wants  
is in. But no one's going to  
leave so it's got to wait.

SJ PEARCE

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## MEETING THREE GHOSTS IN BELCHITE LA VIEJA

I meet George Orwell in Belchite la Vieja: surprising because he is dead, unsurprising because who else's ghost would haunt this place? The republican army took it, house by house, in the heat of an August like this one, committing atrocities for freedom. Failing. There is no water here. There was no water then. George Orwell is not thirsty. I am. I take out my iPhone and show him how to use the camera. I help him download a PDF of his own book. I play him a few tracks from a Florence and the Machine album. He likes the line about practical ghosts.

I meet Baron von Munchausen in Belchite la Vieja: he has been left behind by Terry Gilliam, who ran out of funding to bring home the star of his film. He doesn't mind because the next set sounds like a worse place to be stuck: same amount of no money and in *un lugar de La Mancha*, next to a NATO bombing range, *de cuyo nombre no me quiero acordar*. Baron von Munchausen likes Belchite la Vieja. He tells me that he spends time with Gustavo Adolfo and rides Bucéfalo around the perimeter at night. They fit through a hole in the chain-link fence, as long as nobody in the municipality fixes it. Robin Williams is here, too, spending eternity as an Italian pun. Baron von Munchausen can't stand it.

I meet King Alfonso I, called *Batallador*, in Belchite la Vieja: *la* very *vieja*, since he founded the city in the twelfth century. He has a hard time finding his way here since none of his buildings or fortifications has survived; the oldest is two-hundred years younger than he is and there's just one of that vintage. It has no roof and is held up by a wooden armature that confuses him. During the hour from noon to one he can follow the guides leading groups of tourists struggling to take photographs in the midday sun, but for twenty-three hours of most days, plus all of Sundays and holidays, he is alone and loses his way. I decide not to tell him about the new king and Belchite la Nueva.



SJ PEARCE

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## AT THE FORK IN THE TONGUE

(A Golden Shovel after Psalm 114)

Sometimes I am too afraid to plunge into my languages, to speak them when I must. I prefer listening and the quiet places, the Israel Museum, where the languages come when you are left alone. Labels in Hebrew, Arabic, English place my favorite object in Egypt, sort of: a foundation stone from the Fatimid provinces, defaced when the Crusaders came to Ascalon and carved shields and Latin words into the rocks: graffiti. But more famous is the house of David stele, with the words *beit David*, house of David, powdered with talc to make them stand out. The house of Jacob is a fiction and so it is not there. The last time the Crusader graffito left Israel I saw it at the Met in high-contrast from its home. Latin letters on the label, Arabic ones on the stone. Archaeologists found the strange-tongued place where David's house learned the language, became a nation, felt the shock of exchange: useful, familiar talk for sacred. In the hills of Judah, bending to pick up a tripod on the last day of the season became a singular discovery: A change of perspective. Almost a mistake. Nothing holy.

BRENT AMENEYRO

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## A GIANT MOTH CRAWLS OUT OF YOUR THROAT

1

you're an eight year old boy  
Mayté doesn't speak English  
grass makes your skin itchy  
    Mexico (go to stanza 4)  
    United States (go to stanza 2)

2

good choice  
nice house with a yard  
but there is a lot of grass  
and you'll never understand Mayté  
    start a neighborhood lawn mowing business (go to stanza 5)  
    listen to your friend talk about his circumcision (go to stanza 7)

3

three as in third as in after second and far from first  
*I wish I lived in a first world* said the tour guide at the museum  
you try to speak but a giant moth  
crawls out of your throat  
    as a tourist in the city where you lived as a child you feel like you  
    own your memories and you can jump between them as you  
    please (return to stanza 1)

4

good choice  
nice people with warm kitchens  
but the water smells funny  
and you'll come to understand death  
    hesitate to kick a soccer ball with full strength (go to stanza 6)  
    travel to the future (go to stanza 3)

5

design flyers and make fifty copies  
stuff them in doors and mailboxes  
one lady pays with a ten  
and asks for change  
    make a price sheet for chores and turn your parents into your  
    only customers (the end)

6

you don't know anyone and you hardly understand them  
the ball rests under one boy's foot  
you could miss and look like a fool  
or blast it and make him fall  
    freeze under pressure and crumble into the grass (the end)

7

he says it was for his religion  
that it didn't hurt  
but it looks gross  
then pulls down his pants  
    turn away and close your eyes but still catch a glimpse of the  
    hairless swollen purple flesh (the end)

BRENT AMENEYRO

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## LETTER FROM A PAISA

You are nothing like me, my god of rain and lightning and thunder making himself known even in the heart of summer, my underworlds, the bright oranges, blues, reds, and greens that are so vivid even my bones are radiant. I bet your bones are white and soft. You only lived here for two years—you've never *lived* here. This isn't your home. These are not your cenotes, not your chicharrones, not your horchata, not your helados, not your nopales, not your Señora de Guadalupe, not your Diego Rivera or your Frida Kahlo. It doesn't matter that your dad dreams in Spanish—this isn't yours.

BRENT AMENEYRO

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## FROM ABOVE

10am  
but there are no rules  
in the sky,  
so everyone gets drunk.

Turbulence: an old man sleeps,  
Mexican reads Mexican poetry  
in English,  
a baby yells, *I'm flying, I'm flying—*

how will we be remembered?  
First, rivers and roads  
separate houses  
and countries,

then everything turns  
to dirt or water.  
Now the ground is a cloud  
and the sky is still just the sky.

## SEE FIGURE 1.

### Hydrogen (Legend)

Inside an assumption an orbital. It is tucked. Where is inside. Outside a pond or a planet is a shape and it precesses. An electron is sometimes. One thing is not another except hydrogen. Hydrogen is itself and countable. The electron in hydrogen moves. It moves and its orbital moves. The movement of the electron and the movement of its orbital are not the same movement. Sometimes an independence. What coincides when an orbital makes an outside is a shield. What is in a container. A bucket has shape and is precise. It precesses. Matter is a good idea and we can measure it. A bucket contains uncertainty and precision. What do we know about hydrogen. The first is the least and it is occupied. There is a table and a territory in it. Hydrogen is situated. An inside is good after all. After all an inside is tucked and we can draw it. Are we sure. If we are not sure can we measure that. Can we measure a pond with edges. A coastline is an edge and receding. Can we draw boundaries. A pond is a collapse. Its measurement precesses and has circumference. We measure it and it is full. Fullness is good and makes for rejoicing.

### Quantum Pendulum (Legend)

It resembles a pendulum and maybe is in motion. It is a diagram it is the diagram of. Resemblance is a bold line and is straight. A black circle is at the bottom and is solid. A jittery motion implied at the bottom. Jittery motion is concentric half circles on each side. It is shown. Half circles jut out a resemblance and parentheses. Parentheses jut out and what juts out decreases. Ellipses have size and resemble. Are ellipses a dominion everywhere. Dots are everywhere and a question mark at an end in both directions. If in one direction a question mark. On either side of a bold straight line a series. Thinner lines of fine and this is motion. What means motion or possible motion is a picture. Did I mention a feather. A pendulum is substantial and there are rules. Rules of pendulums are mathematical and can be drawn. This is figure one. Figure one is a quantum pendulum please look at it. It is black and white and gray and bare. A figure gives and does not give. Springs and pendulums describe objects a handful. One tool is a hammer and a sink which explains. Please believe this figure. It is effective.

## Zero Diameter (Legend)

This is a real one. Of what. It is fundamental. In an event a real thing happens. A real thing is point-like and fundamental. If real is point-like in its properties. Is it. We can discuss properties at length if it is real cannot have a length. If it is fundamental. It is as is required by theory. As depicted. An ornament is fundamental. If it has already been point-like is there an after. Theory has decided a real one is a thing with zero diameter. Is our theory essential. Are our properties outside the bounds do they have a non-zero diameter. If so. Who writes its properties and is riveted by an ornament. Why love it. Why love the fundamental the loose change and span. Why love spatial extension or its absence. Then a celebration. Then an acrobat and the diameter of the unreal. We are a stirring and a box has size. We are amok therefore it must be point-like. Singular and we knew it was colorless. We have been a scanning microscope and a pottery wheel. Why love a perforation. A diameter is stamped and grows. It cannot grow as required by theory. Why love a growing outward. And so. It is a seat it is a kind of seating. We knew it was colorless and striking. We could see it from nowhere. This vantage.

JESSICA REED

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## BACHELARD AND THE OWL

Breakfast with Gaston Bachelard when an owl hit our window. Tremendous thud. Gaston was saying that it is calculus that places the real at the heart of a coordinated possibility. Birds are always hitting the windows out here. One would think they would see the smudges, the matter a kind of writing that impedes a path through lucid space. Dog barked at the other side of the glass. Owl stood there dazed, upright. Gaston was saying that the mind accepts a reality that has become a piece of its own game. Dog nervous, the way the owl stood still. Gaston said that Einstein had first fixed light and then deduced the properties of spacetime that fell out of that assumption. Owl shaking its head, like a drunkard. Gaston knew other things, too. Whereas we first arranged atoms by [measurable] atomic weight, we later arranged them by atomic number, which was [at first] a theoretical construct. Dog contributed nothing new. Sadistic impulse to open the door and let the dog have at it, the owl. I stopped myself. It would have been cruel to everyone. Long while, owl flew thirty yards to the field. Landed again, still dazed in the taller grasses.



MICHAEL MCLANE

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## MAN ON FIRE I

The man on fire is uncredited. Used again and again but relegated to stunt. Old prop in the loose parts of the toolbox. Though he is state change. The man on fire cannot come back from that moment. He becomes coal or scar and rage or ascends. Sublimation. The water that is his bulk vanished. The immediacy of smoke and cloud. We understand that he is revenge or will have it.

Watch his trajectory. Over decades it never wavers. Though he ambles. Searching for a wind. What feeds or extinguishes him. We see him in profile. Violence must be featureless. He cannot put his arms down. Heat lifting him to flight. The man on fire has always been on fire. Editing doesn't allow us to know this. But he is there. Practicing in the background.

MICHAEL MCLANE

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## MAN ON FIRE II

We learned of bombs in school. Their necessity. Silhouettes on crumbling walls. Our aptitude for wholesale desiccation. Much later I learn that scientists wrung their hands over early experiments. Speculated the schism could set the atmosphere aflame. All the storms raging across all the oceans as inadequate as spit on a campfire that's jumped its ring. Runs wild in the late summer sun. We are unpredictable more often than not. Admit this and be an animal. We can focus when necessary. They did not teach us this either. As a child, I read about fighting with flamethrowers. I still have nightmares thirty years later. Damp tunnels and caves around the Pacific. Men screaming in and out of the unintelligible dark. A shift. An obstinacy. The light between them so bright it can only be cosmic. The death of something other than us. Inside the earth, the burst is so intense it inhales the humid waiting—an instant desert, save the soil that seeps where he leaned against it—exhales the strangest surrender. They flail under weight and weightlessness and it is unclear which man is screaming.

MICHAEL MCLANE

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## MAN ON FIRE III

Is it the same man each time? His arms tired from being held aloft while the accelerant is applied. While he is combusted. The dance now boring. So he throws in an extra step here, a pirouette there. When the director is tired or distracted, the man dreams of falling down stairs, cascading out of this cameo as a comet to come round when a new omen is needed. The fire foreshadows. Blurs his features. That is why they never question. He could be anyone alight. Stumbling through their role. He is geography of nowhere brought to a boil. The thousandth iteration of a rest stop where we pull off to get our bearings. The single lamp shining down on the parking lot. Where nothing awaits just out of frame. No street sign. No shelter. Not even rain.

# CONTRIBUTOR NOTES

**Brent Ameneiro's** poetry has been published in *The Fourth River*, *Hispanic Culture Review*, and elsewhere. He was the recipient of the 2019 Sarah B. Marsh Rebelo Excellence in Poetry Scholarship, 2020 San Miguel Poetry Week Fellowship, and the 2021 SRS Research Award for Diversity, Inclusion and Social Justice.

**Tommy Archuleta** is a mental health therapist and a substance abuse counselor for the New Mexico Corrections Department. Most recently his poems have appeared in the *New England Review*, *Guesthouse*, *Snapdragon*, *El Palacio*, and the Poem-a-Day series sponsored by the Academy of American Poets. A native of Santa Fe, New Mexico, today he lives and writes on the Cochiti Reservation.

**Jake Bailey** is a schiZotypal experientialist with published or forthcoming work in *Abstract Magazine*, *The American Journal of Poetry*, *Constellations*, *Diode Poetry Journal*, *Frontier Poetry*, *Guesthouse*, *Mid-American Review*, *Palette Poetry*, *PANK Magazine*, *Passages North*, *Storm Cellar*, *TAB: The Journal of Poetry & Poetics*, *Tar River Poetry*, and elsewhere. Jake received his MA from Northwest Missouri State University and his MFA from Antioch University, Los Angeles. He is a former editor for *Lunch Ticket*, current associate editor for *Storm Cellar*, and reads for *The Los Angeles Review* and *Grist: A Journal of the Literary Arts*. Jake lives in Illinois with his wife and their three dogs. You can find him on Twitter and Instagram (@SaintJakeowitz) and at saintjakeowitz.xyz.

**Abigail Baldys** (she/they) earned their MFA in Creative Writing from Saint Mary's College of California and their BA in English Writing from the University of Pittsburgh. Their work has appeared in *BlazeVOX*, *RHINO*, *ANMLY*, *491 Magazine*, *Three Rivers Review*, *Reality Beach*, and elsewhere. They live in Boston and on the internet (IG: @prlsfntn).

**Cameron Barnett** is the author of *The Drowning Boy's Guide to Water* (Autumn House Press) which was a finalist for an NAACP Image Award. He earned his MFA from the University of Pittsburgh and teaches middle school English. He is the recipient of the 2019 Carol R. Brown Creative Achievement Award for Emerging Artist. Cameron's work explores the complexity of race and the body for a Black man in today's America, more of which can be found at [cameronbarnett.net](http://cameronbarnett.net).

**Jeffrey Bean** is Professor of English at Central Michigan University. He is the author of two chapbooks and the poetry collections *Woman Putting on Pearls* and *Diminished Fifth*. Recent poems appear or are forthcoming in *The Southern Review*, *Colorado Review*, *Poets.org*, *South Dakota Review*, and *Cave Wall*, among other journals. [www.jeffreybeanpoet.com](http://www.jeffreybeanpoet.com)

**Mary Biddinger's** newest poetry collection is *Department of Elegy* (Black Lawrence Press, 2022). Her poetry and flash fiction have recently appeared in *Bennington Review*, *Crazyhorse*, *DIAGRAM*, *Gone Lawn*, and *Thrush Poetry Journal*, among others. She lives in Akron, Ohio, where she teaches and edits the Akron Series in Poetry at the University of Akron Press.

**James Braun's** work has appeared and is forthcoming in *Fiction International*, *the Minnesota Review*, *failbetter*, *Camas*, *SmokeLong Quarterly*, and elsewhere. His short story "Clay," published in *the Rectangle*, won the Herbert L. Hughes Short Story Award. He is currently an MFA fiction candidate at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. Summers, James lives in Port Huron, Michigan.

**Beverly Burch's** third book *Latter Days of Eve*, won the John Ciardi Poetry Prize. Her work has won a Lambda Literary Award, a Gival Poetry Prize and was a finalist for Audre Lorde and Housatonic Book Awards. She has poetry in *32 Poems*, *Southern Review*, *Denver Quarterly*, *Los Angeles Review*, *New England Review*, *Salamander*, *On the Seawall*, *Mudlark*, and *Barrow Street*. She lives in Oakland, CA. [www.beverlyburch.com](http://www.beverlyburch.com)

**Rick Bursky's** most recent book, *Let's Become a Ghost Story*, is out from BOA Editions. His poems have appeared in many journals. He teaches poetry for The Writers' Program at UCLA Extension.

**Mary Lou Buschi's** second full-length collection, *Paddock*, was published through Lily Poetry Review Books, May 15, 2021. Mary Lou is the author of one earlier collection of poems, *Awful Baby*, and 3 chapbooks. Her poems have appeared in literary journals such as *FIELD*, *Willow Springs*, *Radar*, *Thrush*, among others.

**Tina Carlson** is a queer NM poet and psychiatric nurse practitioner. Her work has appeared or is forthcoming in *Psaltery and Lyre*, *Cutthroat...A Journal of the Arts*, *Mom Egg Review*, *Hunger Mountain*, *Bosque (the magazine)*, *Dark Mountain Review*, and *SWWIM*, among others. Her first book, *Ground, Wind, This Body* (University of New Mexico Press, 2017) explores the destructive effects of war on a family when the embattled veteran has received no help after the battle field, as well as themes of

nature as redemption, international adoption, and dreams. Her second book, *We Are Meant To Carry Water* (3: A Taos Press) is a collaborative book with two other NM poets in response to the US 2016 election, and won first place in the 2021 AZ/NM Book Award for Poetry Anthology.

**Kerry Carnahan** is from Kansas. She is the author of the chapbook *The Experience of Being a Cathedral* (Lettuce Run Books, 2021) and her poems have recently appeared in *Boston Review*, the Academy of American Poets Poem-a-Day, and *FIVES: A Companion to Denver Quarterly*. [www.kerrycarnahan.com](http://www.kerrycarnahan.com)

**Christopher Citro** is the author of *If We Had a Lemon We'd Throw It and Call That the Sun* (Elixir Press, 2021), winner of the 2019 Antivenom Poetry Award, and *The Maintenance of the Shimmy-Shimmy* (Steel Toe Books, 2015). His awards include a 2018 Pushcart Prize for Poetry. He lives in Syracuse, New York.

**Grant Clauser** is the author of five books including *Muddy Dragon on the Road to Heaven* (winner of the Codhill Press Poetry Award) and *Reckless Constellations* (winner of the Cider Press Poetry Award). Poems have appeared in *The American Poetry Review*, *Cortland Review*, *Painted Bride Quarterly*, *Tar River Poetry* and others. He works as an editor and teaches at Rosemont College.

**Juliana Converse's** book reviews have been published in *Tupelo Quarterly*, *The Literary Review*, *The Compulsive Reader*, and *Heavy Feather Review* among others. Based in Baltimore, she holds an MFA in Creative Writing (Fiction) from New York University, and is working on her first novel.

**Joellen Craft** lives in Baltimore, Maryland, where she teaches and writes. Her poems have recently appeared in *The Fourth River*, *The Penn Review*, and *Radar Poetry*. Her chapbook *The Quarry* won L+S Press's 2020 Mid-Atlantic Chapbook prize. Find her at [www.joellencraft.com](http://www.joellencraft.com).

**James D'Agostino** is the author of *Nude With Anything* (New Issues Press), and three chapbooks which won prizes from Diagram/New Michigan, CutBank Books, and Wells College Press. His chapbook, *Gorilla by Jellyfish Light*, is forthcoming from Seven Kitchens Press. His poems have appeared in *Ninth Letter*, *Forklift Ohio*, *Conduit*, *Mississippi Review*, *Bear Review*, *TriQuarterly*, *Third Coast*, and elsewhere.

**Emma DePanise's** poems are forthcoming or have appeared recently in journals such as *Poetry Northwest*, *The Minnesota Review*, *The Los Angeles Review*, *New York Quarterly*, *The National Poetry Review* and elsewhere. She is an MFA candidate in poetry and teaching assistant at Purdue University, a poetry editor for *Sycamore Review* and a co-editor of *The Shore*.

**Mark DiFruscio** is a PhD candidate in English at Oklahoma State University. His work has appeared in *Fiction International*, *FlashFiction Review*, and *Puerto del Sol*. His short story "The Alien Dialogues" was selected as one of the winners of the 2020 AWP Intro Journals Project.

**Elizabeth Dodd** is the author of two collections of poetry (*Archetypal Light* and *Like Memory, Caverns*) and three of essays. Recent work appears in *Tin House*, *Southern Humanities Review*, and *Brevity* (and *Laurel Review*). She's the nonfiction editor at *Terrain.org* and teaches at Kansas State University.

**Sean Thomas Dougherty** is the author or editor of eighteen books, including *Not All Saints*, winner of the 2019 Bitter Oleander Library of Poetry Prize. His book *The Second O of Sorrow* (BOA Editions, 2018) received both the Paterson Poetry Prize and the Housatonic Book Award from Western Connecticut State University.

**Katherine Sánchez Espano** is the author of a novel, *The Infinity Bloom*, and a poetry collection, *The Sky's Dustbin*. Her short fiction and poetry are forthcoming or have appeared in *Southern Indiana Review*, *Green Mountains Review*, *The Massachusetts Review*, *Jabberwock Review*, *Painted Bride Quarterly*, and elsewhere. Katherine holds an MFA from the University of Florida, and she teaches composition and creative writing at the University of North Florida.

**Francis X. Fitzpatrick** holds a MFA in Creative Writing from Wilkes University where he recently revised his first novel. He has also written several screenplays for film and television. His book reviews have been published in *The Compulsive Reader* and the *Heavy Feather Review*. He is a native of and resides in Philadelphia, PA.

**Joanna Fuhrman** is the author of six books of poetry, including *To a New Era* (Hanging Loose Press 2021), *The Year of Yellow Butterflies* (Hanging Loose Press 2016), and *Pageant* (Alice James Books 2009). She teaches poetry and multimedia writing at Rutgers University and coordinates the Introduction to Creative Writing Classes and the faculty and alumni readings. These poems are from a work-in-progress called *Data Mind*.

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**Kasha Martin Gauthier** lives outside Boston with her family. A member of PoemWorks: The Workshop for Publishing Poets, Kasha's work is forthcoming or has recently appeared in *Pangyrus*, *Constellations*, *The Healing Muse*, *Slipstream*, and *Soundings East*. Kasha's poetry is informed by her family dynamics, upbringing in New Hampshire, and careers in business and cybersecurity.

**Phil Goldstein** is a writer who has been living in the Washington, D.C. area for more than a decade. His debut collection, *How to Bury a Boy at Sea*, is forthcoming in 2022 by Stillhouse Press. His poetry has been nominated for a Best of the Net award and has been published in *Rust+Moth*, *Awakened Voices*, *The Loch Raven Review*, *Linden Avenue Literary Journal*, *The Indianapolis Review* and elsewhere. He works as a senior editor for Manifest, a content marketing agency.

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**Jeff Hardin** is the author of six collections of poetry, most recently *A Clearing Space in the Middle of Being* and *No Other Kind of World* (recipient of the X. J. Kennedy Prize). His seventh collection, *Watermark*, is forthcoming in 2022. Recent poems appear in *The Southern Review*, *Appalachian Review*, *Los Angeles Review*, *The Inflectionist Review*, *Ruminate*, *The Cortland Review*, and elsewhere. He lives and teaches in Tennessee.

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**Yasmina Martin** is a poet and doctoral candidate in African history. Her poetry is published or forthcoming in *Blackberry Mag*, *Vitni Review*, *The New Southern Fugitives*, and *West Trade Review*. She lives in Brooklyn.

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**Dustin Nightingale** is the author of *Ghost Woodpecker* (BatCat Press, 2018). His poetry has been or will be published in *The Florida Review*, *The American Journal of Poetry*, *New Ohio Review*, *Cimarron Review*, *Coal Hill Review*, and others. He lives in Hartford, Connecticut.

**Clare O'Gara** is a student at Smith College studying English, Film and Media Studies, and Poetry. You can read her other work in *Zeniada Literary Magazine* and *The Oakland Arts Review* (forthcoming).

**Jamie O'Halloran** is the author of two chapbooks. Her poems and reviews appear most recently in *Crannóg*, *One Hand Clapping*, *The Night Heron Barks*, the Dedalus Press anthology *Local Wonders*, *The Tupelo Quarterly* and *The Lit Piub*. She is a recipient of a 2021 Arts Council of Ireland Agility Award and is the 2021 Artist in Residence at Brigit's Garden in County Galway. Her entries to the 2021 Cúirt New Writing Prize earned 2nd place and the 2021 Listowel Poetry Collection Competition were short-listed. She lives in County Galway, Ireland.

**Meghan E. O'Toole** is from Illinois. She was recently recognized as the 2021 fiction winner of the Ploughshares Emerging Writers' Contest. In 2018, she was awarded *LitMag's* Virginia Woolf Award for short fiction. She received her BA in English from Elmhurst College and her MA in literature from Western Illinois University.

**Lauren Osborn** is a current Ph.D. student at Oklahoma State University studying English/Creative Writing, and a graduate of the MFA program at Queen's University of Charlotte. Most recently, her work has been published in *The Cincinnati Review* and is forthcoming in *Lake Effect*.

**Alex Poppe** is the author of four works of fiction: *Duende* (2022), *Jinwar and Other Stories* (2022), *Moxie* (2019), and *Girl, World* (2017). *Girl, World* was named a 35 Over 35 Debut Book Award winner, First Horizon Award finalist, Montaigne Medal finalist, short-listed for the Eric Hoffer Grand Prize and was awarded an Honorable Mention in General Fiction from the Eric Hoffer Awards. Her short fiction has been a finalist for *Glimmer Train's* Family Matters contest, a nominee for the Pushcart Prize and commended for the Baker Prize among others. She is a staff writer for Preemptive Love Coalition, and when she is not being thrown from the back of food aid trucks or dining with pistol-packing Kurdish hit men, she writes.

**S.J. Pearce** is a writer, translator, and literary historian who lives in New York City. Her poetry has appeared in the anthology *Strange Fire* (Teaneck, 2021) and *Second Chance Lit*, and was long-listed for the 2021 River Heron Review Poetry Prize. Her first chapbook was a finalist for the 2021 Laurel Review Midwest Chapbook Competition, and she is currently completing her first full-length poetry manuscript.

**Ethel Rackin** is the author of *The Forever Notes* (Parlor Press, 2013), *Go On* (Parlor Press, 2016), and *Evening* (Furniture Press, 2017). Her new text, *Crafting Poems and Stories: A Guide to Creative Writing*, is forthcoming from Broadview Press. Her poems have appeared in *The American Poetry Review*, *Colorado Review*, *Guesthouse*, *New England Review*, *Poetry Daily*, *Versé Daily*, *Volt*, and other journals. A MacDowell fellow, she has taught at Penn State Brandywine, Haverford College, and Bucks County Community College in Pennsylvania, where she is currently a professor of English.

**Jessica Reed's** work has appeared in *Conjunctions*, *Quarterly West*, *Denver Quarterly*, *North American Review*, *Crazyhorse*, *Colorado Review*, *Bellingham Review*, *Diagram*, *Pank*, *New American Writing*,

*Waxwing*, *Scientific American*, *Inverted Syntax*, *The Fourth River*, and elsewhere. She has an MFA in poetry and a BS in physics, and she teaches a university seminar on physics and the arts. Her chapbook, *World, Composed* (Finishing Line Press), a dialogue with the ancient poet Lucretius about atomism, was a finalist for the Etchings Press Whirling Prize. She was a finalist for the Omnidawn Revealed Identity Book Prize and a semi-finalist for the Cleveland State University First Book Prize. She lives in Indiana with her husband and chickens.

**Louise Robertson** counts among her many publications and honors two jars of homemade pickles she received for running a monthly workshop. Her poems have appeared in *Crab Fat*, *After the Pause*, *Crack the Spine*, and many other journals.

**Emily Rosko's** poetry collections are: *Weather Inventions* (U Akron P 2018); *Prop Rockery*, winner of the 2011 Akron Poetry Prize (U Akron P 2012); and *Raw Goods Inventory*, winner of the 2005 Iowa Poetry Prize (U Iowa P, 2006); and she is co-editor of *A Broken Thing: Poets on the Line* (U Iowa P 2011). She is associate professor of English and director of the MFA Creative Writing Program at the College of Charleston.

**Martha Silano's** five books of poetry include *Gravity Assist* and *Reckless Lovely*, both from Saturnalia Books. She co-authored *The Daily Poet: Day-by-Day Prompts for Your Writing Practice*. Martha's poems have appeared in *Poetry*, *Paris Review*, and elsewhere. She teaches at Bellevue College and Seattle's Hugo House.

**Page Hill Starzinger's** two poetry collections, *Vortex Street* (2020) and *Vestigial* (2013), are both from Barrow Street Press. *Vestigial* won the 2012 Barrow Street Poetry Prize selected by Lynn Emanuel. Starzinger's chapbook, *Unshelter* (2009), was chosen by Mary Jo Bang as winner of the Noemi Chapbook Contest. Starzinger's poems have appeared in *American Poetry Review*, *Kenyon Review*, *Fence*, *West Branch*, *Pleiades*, *Volt*, and others. Starzinger was Copy Director at Aveda for almost twenty years, and co-authored *A Bouquet from the Met* (Abrams, 1998). She lives in New York City. PageHillStarzinger.com

**Jordan Stempleman** is the author of eight collections of poetry including *Wallop* and *No, Not Today* (Magic Helicopter Press). He is an editor for *The Continental Review* and *Windfall Room*, serves as the faculty editor for *Sprung Formal*, and runs A Common Sense Reading Series.

**Jason Tobin** received an MFA from the New Writers Project at the University of Texas at Austin and currently resides in Portland, Oregon. Recent poems have appeared in *iō Literary Journal*, *Gramma*, *inter|rupture*, *Whiskey Island*, *Smoking Glue Gun*, and *90's Meg Ryan*.

**Tony Trigilio's** recent books of poetry include *Proof Something Happened* (Marsh Hawk Press, 2021), and *Ghosts of the Upper Floor* (BlazeVOX [books], 2019). His selected poems, *Fuera del Taller del Cosmos*, was published in Guatemala in 2018 by Editorial Poe (translated by Bony Hernández). He co-edits the poetry journal *Court Green*, and is a Professor of English and Creative Writing at Columbia College Chicago.

**Gretchen VanWormer** grew up in Burlington, Vermont. She is the author of a chapbook of essays, *How I See The Humans* (CutBank), and her essays have appeared in *The Los Angeles Review*, *Prairie Schooner*, *The Journal*, *Brevity*, and elsewhere. She received a 2016 Individual Artist Fellowship from the D.C. Commission on the Arts and Humanities. She lives and teaches in Stillwater, Oklahoma.

**Rosalynde Vas Dias'** poetry has appeared in *Crazyhorse*, *The Cincinnati Review*, *West Branch*, *The Pinch*, *Laurel Review*, *The Collagist*, *The Four Way Review* and elsewhere. Her first book, *Only Blue Body*, won the 2011 Robert Dana Award offered by Anhinga Press. She lives in Providence, Rhode Island.

**G.C. Waldrep's** most recent books are the lyric collections, *The Earliest Witnesses* (Tupelo Press and Carcanet in the United Kingdom, 2021), and *feast gently* (Tupelo, 2018) and a long poem, *Testament* (BOA Editions, 2015).

**Hally Winters** is a writer living in and writing about Sunland, California. She received her BA from UC Berkeley and her MFA in creative writing from California Institute of the Arts. Her work can be found at *drDOCTOR*, *Two Sisters Writing and Publishing*, *Wintermute*, and more. Find her on Twitter @HallyWinters.

**Haolun Xu** was born in Nanning, China. He immigrated to the United States in 1999 as a child. He was raised in central New Jersey and recently graduated from Rutgers University. His writing has appeared in or is forthcoming in *Electric Literature*, *Gulf Coast*, *jubilat*, *Witness*, and more.