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2016 was a difficult year.
2016 sucked, in fact.

We will continue to do what we can
and to make and present what art we can.

Troubled that you are not, as they say,
Working—
I think we try rather to understand,
We try also to remain together

There is a force of clarity, it is
Of what is not autonomous in us,
We suffer a certain fear

~

George Oppen

Janelle Adsit

As the News that Cannot Leave You

when you try to think back into time
to enter the pulse you had then
the rushed lunch hour, the sudden
news, the uncertainty of when to resume
the daily motions of biting and loving
the onslaught of sensation and the things
that have no call to be done
a tumult of headlines and words that cannot be said
let us lie down now and pray for a windless night
we can't help but look for them

Jeffrey Allen

An Obituary

Nose bleed. 6'0 ft., 190 lbs.
Reading Roderick Thorp's
The Detective. Leaves behind
His dog "Francesca" and turtle
"Roberto" (animals will be rescued
At estate sale). Wife passed
2006—broke neck eating
Dinner in a hammock. Melancholia,
Alcoholism, barbiturates.
TV LAND and TV dinners.
Arrested in 02'—exposing
Birthmark of Oklahoma
To crowd of Virginia Historians.
Intelligent, disingenuous, sly,
Remarried four times. Two
Died of natural causes—two
Missing. Platonism scholar.
Found in jogging clothes.

Jeffrey Allen

An Obituary

The way she leaned a chair.
The manner in which she danced
At her father's funeral. The club
Sandwich she spent ninety days
In jail for. Did anyone ever ask her
How she felt about the falling asleep
And waking up routine? –
Then the way her piss turned dark yellow.
Her children moved out
And SVEDKA moved in. Clumps
Of her golden hair in the shower drain.
By summer she looked like winter.
By winter she was nearly invisible. –
A broom stood on a front porch.
A floor lamp ate its dinner to the blues.
The way she took on the shape
Of a dehydrated fig tree.
The manner in which her teeth leapt
When she talked about grace.

Toby Altman

Arcadian Rhetoric ( )

scene: having tasted the law, Steelman unthreads himself, permanently.

Steelman: Tomorrow is insatiable April:
the ruined ear, expressing in broken
its voluptuous water. The fatal
glass, replete with you, which opens
a sharp misgiving in the tendon
and turns into torment and weariness:
mansion of form, tender and deep engine
that moves in nature to shape its less.

Still, I did not know desire: its dressing
in the dark. Its plastic craft. Brewing coffee
in bank and lung of the river. Its dwelling
in things where things unrest. For a body
  where April was spacious (and its lack),
  the question is: how to use pleasure as

[he dies]

et in arcadia ego

Ego: Is he unfolded—poor, foreclosed creature,
fraught with there is and heavy with forget?
Still, the harmony of his young compass
persists: a little milk to house the body.
And where he was: a ledge of nerve,
a swelling in the glass, still charged with breath
and dressed in sour curd of his inward
where love and I rest, April-heavy and wet.

Do I know the body now? I know its
loss: how love makes a sonorous nothing
dusk and stubborn, dome of man-colored glass.
Its language lingers in the eye, pregnant
with pleasure, crushed. Love was so early in us.
No writing can repair it. Love was so
evening in us. No thinking can frame its
exhausted making to song again.

How do we know the after making? "Making,"
he said, "the tent of blackberries in which
your sex is dressed. I sing its loss, its lack:
incessant oil, massaged into music.
Now if flows out of our hands and becomes
delicious reading: nothing without not,
thought without thinking, hugely politic,
exact in love. I find no trace of it."

Sally Ball

Who Would I Show it To?

[Merwin]

I so much trusted your capacity for delight.

Some suicide I've been able to see as an end of deep suffering. Your suffering was not to me invisible but outweighed by your curiosities, your sweet absorptions. Birds, nephews. Dancer pose.

I've tried, but I can't see your death as an extension of seeking.

Come back. I felt this also after my father died. *Come back.* Plea at the base of the diaphragm. Low-down. *Come back.* It frightens me, everything caving toward death's sealed halo. A halo in the gut—

Our last conversation was about my father's body in the hours after he died. Because I got to sit with him. And you described a moth you'd watched fold itself up for death. Am I an idiot? I found you cheerful, as ever your associative pluck and empathy and generosity alive between us.

Man of sorrows. Your white hands, your frail shins. Red hair but softly red, a shell-color.

One night I was cooking alone in the yard, small fire, small steaks. A nighthawk swept into the light between the trees, two sweeps, two lines it cut, and just as my mind flickered toward recognition, sending up your name, —it disappeared into the dark. If that was you, then why did my father send no sign?

Bruce Bond

Golden Ratio

It's in there, the fetal curl of the sea
in the shell. And the cochlea that hears it

fold, whitened under its own design,
and though the pattern collapses into shore,

the ocean keeps insisting on another,
drawn to what we understand to see.

*

The golden ratio has no water in it,
no Vitruvian posture, no animate

sunflower with its vertigo of seeds,
though it provides a language, not for one,

but for the many in the thought of one.
Not the blossom, but the blossoming.

*

Gold as the siren's call in the fog
of the physical, pleasure's rectangle

that frames the eye, the lips, the first teen crush
cut from a magazine. Gold the choice

that singles out the rare that would choose us
in return. The many in the thought of one.

*

To chose and be chosen is to be one
small gold breathing machine in the arms

of another. Long ago I was nameless,
and then one of a kind, and then both

and neither, and I lay my puzzled head
on a girl's chest in the silence after.

*

The gold rush of the mathematical eye
sees what it desires most everywhere,

in the helix of genes if you look hard
enough, zero in, make the connections.

Or in the mineshaft of the eye in eyes
it sees, loves, then does not see, then sees

*

more clearly. The abstract angel is no
evening in Kansas beneath the chirping crickets.

Let alone the girl I knew there. Gold
measures on the radio and in her ear,

they had no girl in them although I heard them,
incorruptible as angels, passing.

*

Satie wanted a music that counted out
beats in gold ratios among the portions,

his Sonneries for the Rose-Cross a mine-
field of seeds that petal when you touch them.

Gold as the first Rosicrucians imagined:
as the coming together of blooms and crosses.

*

Rose: the sexed ephemera of weddings
and funerals. Cross: the pin that goes

through them like a gold-plated number.
Oh, do not be so boring, says the music.

Beautiful, as mindless acts of kindness,
passing: singular and therefore nothing.

*

That girl and her radio keep shaking
off their principles. They are the youth

that gold frames. Eternity the headache
of some better tune. I once saw desire

as a piano whose hollow place would float it.
Then as the overflow in a bed of strings.

*

Satie knows. A light hand fills a room
with emptiness. The glasswork of voices

gives us the water to clarify our thirst.
Numbers that sing to one another, once

they were nameless, then a gash, pulled
through a cloud where the sunlight flowers.

*

The gold ratio of the crucifix
takes its measurements from one man.

You can go mad with the tiny nails
and hammers that pin a world together.

But something suffers. A man turned gold dies.
And then the stories. Changing. Into songs.

*

Where there is no God, there is always
her double. By design, the echo chamber

gives a sky in movies the voice of wells.
Satie knew the stitch of counterpoint

understands less than it knows. The gold
rose is only as good as it imagines.

*

It is neither rose nor dead. But unborn.
Like the death of a child in the singing

that a mother cannot bring herself to join.
It is hot in the chapel. Flies in the windows.

A candle weeps. It centers everything
for now. Most gold where the wax burns down

Maxine Chernoff

Untitled

"Runaway thought, I wanted to write it; instead, I write that it has run away
- Pascal

Not the day for the false alarm,

the robin-breasted moment,

the double entendre in the mirror.

Nothing spells knowing as a sea of foam,

dress of tears or is it tears?

How can we know, given your worried

eyes and surrogacy of words, dwindling?

Go with your clothes tucked

in a sack, your jewels hidden in sand,

your stale loaf that once smelled of creation.

What hammers you into a shape

is blunt and uninformed.

Hit or miss , our course of hours ,

planet carrying its load of stones and

tissues and small green notions.

Eyes closed to the view, you listen to

your thoughts spin lace. What you don't see

evaporates with the next cold breeze,

the next harm, positioned to descend

when least expected. What we endure

 is our story. Words,abjured, are

 a forest floor, thick with patterns,

left for seasons to bury as the dead

we know so well their breath is

outline and cold witness.

Christopher Citro

Right Like Yellow Along a Banana

The bird on the step is in shadow until
it twitches and suddenly parts of it are lit
a golden brown. Sometimes it's the tail,
sometimes the left half of beak and tail.
The clouds are rolling the wrong direction,
but I'm not going to be the one to say.
I had my usual nightmares last night, but
I'm not having one now, which I cling to
the way the atmosphere grips the earth.
Have you ever paid close enough attention
to the whooshing sound it makes rushing
into a vacuum-packed jar of peanuts?
When I woke this morning I immediately
felt pounds lighter. Upstairs on my side
of the bed now there's an impression
of me, dozens of pounds of meat-weight
pressing down that you can't see, but if
you place your hand there, you'll feel
the coolness of my absence. The bird
whose noise is making the noises
all the other birds do is behind me
in the cottonwoods above my shoulder.
Sunlight's landing on everything now,
my knees, my tea, the grass around me,
and it isn't making any noise as it hits,
not a plink, not a quiet little crush.

Rob Cook

In the Season Now Known as "Today's Shooting"

The boy making a commotion on his parents' lawn. At first it seems like he's playing. He's tearing up his mother and father's polite Bakersfield yard. Grass and dirt coming up in short, quick bursts. He seems to be concentrating on his digging, trying to get it right.

> What are you doing? his mother asks in the glow of her cell phone pod.

She has no idea what's gotten into her son.

> They said I would be safe, that nothing would change, he says.

Driving by, it doesn't look like much:

a boy ripping out the grass . . . he could be burying his gerbil, still blinking, or a dead molar, or live avocadoes, and not frantically digging a tunnel to the moon, muttering, out of breath . . .

There has to be something to breathe here.
There has to be something to breathe here.

But no one really looks.

He is not a boy.
He is thirty years old.

> And the moon is in the sky, where it always is.

> And the oxygen is in his head, where it always is.

Driving by, it's impossible to know how many days he's been digging.

No one digs anymore

There is no earth.

Just a phrase (taken from a blown-open or mostly evaporated document) for which no one takes responsibility:

"More and more rounds of flawed humans."

The son, sweating by now, digs beyond the point when nothing else is left to dig. And the mother, as soon as her son asks her, no longer knows where anyone is, though she says the sky and its lemon trees still seem real enough, straight above the torn-up landscape where they belong.

Rob Cook

Family

My mother calls me "Fred" all the time. My father's name is Fred. What am I to make of it?

My mother and I have a son. He is my father.

My mother and I have a son. He, it turns out, is not my father. But his name is Fred, and my mother lends me his name from time to time.

Even before we had a son together, my mother called me Fred, though only on Mondays and Wednesdays, especially if she'd said goodbye to him more than once during those particular days, or "I love you" or even "Why won't you ever listen?"

On some afternoons my mother has just spoken with my father and is thinking of him—his height, his favorite sweatshirt, his place at the table, his residue, which smells like the wrong words at the wrong time—and calls me by the name normally meant for him, except during this one moment that soon passes, this "all men are the same" moment.

Someone else's mother called her son by his father's name and it was unacceptable. The child, not the father, would have to go, the mother insisting that what we call each other is vital.

My mother does not tell me such stories. She just gets my father's and my name mixed up. It happens every day, and without fatalities. Since nothing else goes on where I am still allowed to stay, my mother calls me "Fred" and catching herself, corrects my name back to Robert, which it sometimes is.

Matthew Cooperman

32 Variations on Billy the Kid

Prairie and desert and prairie and desert

This shirt itches I stink

I smell a bank!!

---------->

I like to feel guilty since if I am guilty it all depends on me,
but hell and damnation and Missouri weather conspire

Wanna see my gun?

Trains are fast, but I'm faster, I'm

Billy the Kid!!

The inexorable line of conquest drags over me
like Frederick Jackson Turner

The lugubrious afternoon haunts the cattle

I sure could go for an Orange Julius

What are you looking at?

Is that a bagel?

++++++++++++++++++ I hate progress

Many people don't know I was born in the Big Apple

Trigger really likes this here short grama grass...

This steak's a little tough, but I love cattle!!!

~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~

Don't fence me in!

~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~

I thought you'd be taller too

That rope don't look that strong

ooooooooooooooooooooooooo

Many
a day

with

my head

down

in the tall

grass

Emily J. Cousins

OCT. (all night)

still won't sleep well anywhere but in the field desperate
want for want to be swallowed by open mouthed stars
then quiet like a blanket w/o a blanket like peace w/o
peace & then you say d*o you ever think about seeing someone again like when it gets bad?* b/c if we don't call it panic
it won't cause panic right? maybe we won't have to think
about that one time on the kitchen floor in the bedroom
at the grocery store that time I couldn't go into the mall
b/c the lights + consumerism + the crowds maybe if we
just stick to talk I won't be such a little mouse & how much
free will do we need to hang us the more choices I make
the more I hate myself too many turns in the maze & can't
tell which way is up but who cares b/c somewhere the sun
is shining when a shooting star parts grey matter w/o warning
it gives us the impression we exist then gives us the impression
existence is meaningful but who cares b/c somewhere there is
an ice cream truck just down the block I should really be
crunching numbers but it's nearly Sun. & I've written abs.
nothing in over a week I know something is wrong w/ me but
it's so easy to ignore between the stress & how angry I am
all of the time
        b/c really
                                what is the point?
maybe I will listen to vinyl & drink wine all
night stare at the ceiling all night pray to dream
of stars all night all night still won't sleep

Dinah Cox

Just Saying Hello

Bonnie and Ray were retired, though Ray took a side job selling small appliances at Sears, and Bonnie, though she'd worked at the public library for thirty years and was pretty well sick of the place, continued to work Saturday mornings doing story hour for the kids. Ray was at Sears one day when Bonnie decided to get in some exercise and take her bicycle for a spin out in the neighborhood, the "gayborhood," they called it these days, since all the same-sexers had moved in. They were fine people, really fine people, except for Davey and Jonas who had no children but greyhounds instead. Jonas, the younger one—she thought he was some kind of graduate student—was tolerable, friendly in a generic sort of way, but Davey, who worked in finance and made sure everyone knew it, was a creep. And they allowed their greyhounds to shit in everyone's front yard, and no one, not even Ray, who was ordinarily both bold and diplomatic, had the guts to confront Jonas and especially not Davey about the dinosaur-sized turds. The greyhounds were named Rebel and Saint, which Bonnie thought was stupid. Her own dogs, before they died, had been named Peaches and Harley, not perfect names, to be sure, but better than average. On her bicycle now, she saw Davey practicing his golf swing in his front yard. The big decision: to wave or not to wave. At the last minute, she thought of Ray working overtime at Sears so as to have extra money for their winter trip to Florida, and something about the vision of the white sands before her made her decide to go ahead and wave, but she immediately regretted it when Davey, though he was looking right at her, did not wave back.

Kristina Marie Darling

Salvage

Because I shouldn't have to say it—

You know the little arc your hand makes in the air. And when I look away, the smaller knife the paper

(No matter which room we're in, the
question just seems to multiply:

In the film version of this story, his mistress witnessed the second in a series of air raids. The plane refusing to land in that field. First the dead poppies, now the cut wires. The houses on the coast already gone dark.

The final scene actually shows the burning building, which had been waiting for her on the other end of a telephone. Through its wooden doors, we hear the sound a harp would make in a cathedral.

(Which is to say, of course there were
other fires that year

Kristina Marie Darling

Awe

From the very beginning, he wanted a house in which the landscape becomes dreamscape, each of the windows shot through with light:

Some men were born without that numbness in the hands, the little warning to tell them not to, so nothing they do should surprise us. What I meant to say is, I don't care, or I wouldn't care, if the word "ardor" were to mean something else entirely.

(That same day, the captain of the small white ship forgot to notify the harbor of his approach, so when our vessel was first spotted, the raid sirens went off and all of the houses on the shore darkened.

In the other version of this story, he was pouring a glass of water and the light then was only half light, striking the tops of the buildings with such intention—)

Kristina Marie Darling

Gorgeous Nothing

Though they met at the edge of a silver garden, hands tracing the curve of the gates, they never loved each other.

Which is to say: a wish not to continue on a moving train will eventually be granted.

When they speak over the telephone, she can't understand his pronunciation of the word "ghost." *Goest*. As in *thou*. As in buttoned past the graceful arc of the throat.

(Meaning, the breaths between
their words are long—)

Days later, he sends her a little book through the post. In a darkening room at the top of the stairs, she tries and tries.

Translation: The cathedral only refuses to open for *her*

* * *
* * * *
* *

{ }

Dennis Etzel Jr.

from My Grunge of 1991

Four-walled world. Fred Phelps begins with the signs in June on the corner of Gage Park. Fred Phelps faxes awful messages to any Topeka business he can find the fax number to. Fruit of the tree of such knowledge.

Sentence 1: Song title from Temple of the Dog's self-titled album released on April 16, 1991.
Sentence 4: From Rae Armantrout's poem "The Garden" from Necromance, Sun & Moon, 1991. Used with permission by author.

Dennis Etzel Jr.

from My Grunge of 1991

Galaxy's child. Garden. Gather the team for a talk. Gene Roddenberry passed away days before Halloween as a sign that old days are over. Give straightforward, high-energy performances to hide my low times.

Sentence 1: A title of a Star Trek: The Next Generation episode from 1991.
Sentence 2: Song title from Pearl Jam's Ten released on August 27, 1991.

Dennis Etzel Jr.

from My Grunge of 1991

Given the gap between feminist theory and everyday struggle, the utopian mode is both useful and logical for writers who self-consciously place themselves within a feminist (i.e., partisan) literary practice. Ground forces are not engaged, says George Bush. Grunge music, comic books, and Star Trek clothed me. Half a life.

Sentence 1: From Frances Bartkowski's Feminist Utopias (U of Nebraska Press 1991). Used with permission by author.
Sentence 2: From President George Bush's Desert storm speech, January 16, 1991.
Sentence 4: A title of a Star Trek: The Next Generation episode from 1991.

Dennis Etzel Jr.

from My Grunge of 1991

Hard to say where / this occurs. He commanded the great powers of the world to disarm their nuclear weapons. He Said, She Said. Here recorded voices are / coy about dismemberment. Here the sullen / come to see their grudge / as pose, modelling. High contrast / enhanced by expression. His history is replete with hostile acts. How about your defensive systems?

Sentences 1 and 5: From Rae Armantrout's poem "Necromance" from Necromance, Sun & Moon, 1991. Used with permission by author.
Sentence 3: A film from 1991.
Sentences 4 and 6: From Rae Armantrout's poem "The Panoply of" from Necromance, Sun & Moon, 1991. Used with permission by author.

Dennis Etzel Jr.

from My Grunge of 1991

Huge pine / a quarter-mile off / floats. I am committed to achieving these goals while meeting the basic human needs of all the people of this state. I am convinced not only that we will prevail but that out of the horror of combat will come the recognition that no nation can stand against a world united, no nation will be permitted to brutally assault its neighbor, says George Bush.

Sentence 1: From Rae Armantrout's poem "Necromance" from Necromance, Sun & Moon, 1991. Used with permission by author.
Sentence 2: From Governor Joan Finney's (D) first State of the State Address, January 22, 1991.
Sentence 3: From President George Bush's Desert storm speech, January 16, 1991.

Shawn Fawson

Night Comes On

Remember, we told stories
on the way to sleep. When the cat
left the room we felt the darkest dark
enter. Of the world's laments we heard
something elemental. Water trickles
on its own weight. Bees rework
the hive. In bonfires we age,
in lichen we stay the same.
Wind rises in the hawthorn,
and a dream comes true.
I saw a freighter stilled by small craft,
the night unbaling pepper
still warm from the East China Sea.
You saw a team of horses coming
to the field's edge to meet you
on your way home. Other nights
we woke to mistakes––in part
our own doing––leaving a door unlocked,
cutting off a phone call too soon
and saying aloud, *I've decided*
how I want to live and it isn't this
when we meant *don't go.*

Margaret Hermes

The One Who Left

The night before, Vanessa had gone to bed longing for children. She awoke certain she did not want Kevin to be their father.

While he had never raised a hand against her in the last eight years, Vanessa worried that x-rays of a child of theirs might one day reveal a hairline fracture like the ragged seam in the bathroom washbasin that appeared last week on the night she had forgotten to tell Kevin she was having dinner with the dean. That chilling speculation was the impetus to end this proximity that passed for a marriage. Vanessa congratulated herself on escaping in the nick of time. Had there been children, she might never have gotten away.

She had married Kevin straight out of college as a hedge against uncertainty. They had their journalism degrees in common; each had been raised Catholic; they both liked dim sum. Eight years later, they had evolved into strangers, their bed grown too small, the dinner table too large for the two of them. He had changed. Or not. Perhaps she was the transfigured one.

Kevin rose steadily in middle-management at the brewery, while Vanessa skittered from one job to another until landing comfortably in the admissions office at their alma mater. Kevin had argued for a postponement of children until he reached a level where they could afford to do without her salary. She had consented, able to envision and envy her own future. To speed its arrival, Vanessa centered their social lives around his job. Her dinner parties were designed to give him a leg up the corporate ladder. Kevin's taste ran to sushi and sashimi now while she had replaced Catholicism and her catholic diet with veganism, but she cooked against her principles when the situation demanded and she knew to serve good wine to the beer barons.

"It's like you're the judge," Kevin said that morning to her retreating back, "a hanging judge, and I'm not even allowed to speak in my own defense."

When crossing the distance separating her from her husband, Vanessa navigated warily. She suspected she was at the root of Kevin's too prompt anger when he cursed a poky driver or berated a waiter for failing to refill his water glass. Increasingly over the years, he lashed out not just at innocent but even insentient stand-ins: the halogen lamp next

to the computer, the fish-shaped vase with zinnias in its gaping mouth, the teapot from Occupied Japan that had belonged to her great aunt, the framed photo of his parents in their wedding finery. He claimed the breakage was never intentional. He flailed helplessly rather than struck out maliciously, which made him the victim really. And when the burst of fury or frustration was spent and the trigger examined in the afterhush, the fingerprints seemed always to be hers. Some unkindness on her part, some lack of consideration had driven him to desperation. The underlying message was that she should be grateful for his restraint.

"Like you're God Almighty," he added when she told him her decision.

Vanessa agreed she was unfair and decamped to her friend Holly's sofa-bed.

"Nobody had an affair. Nobody has any bruises. We just married too young, that's all. Before we were fully formed. We don't belong together." Having suffered through the divorces of her parents and two sets of neighbors, Vanessa resolved to say nothing more on the matter.

She had promoted Holly fourteen months ago to fill an opening in admissions and, soon after, recruited her to take a just-vacant apartment near their townhouse. "The landlord is great. We've known him since we moved to the neighborhood. Gay but still sort of old world. Bow ties and argyle socks. He lives in the building. Which is a good thing. The living room faces the park. Did I already tell you that? And we could drive to work together."

Holly reminded Vanessa of herself, only a little more impressionable, a little less guarded. She introduced Holly to cribbage and Holly returned the favor by teaching her backgammon. Most nights they lounged on the fold-out couch streaming episodes of *West Wing* with a bowl of microwave popcorn between them. The weeks she spent at Holly's were almost a reward—she found a sisterliness that had been missing from her only-childhood and a comradeship missing from her marriage. Holly even rode shotgun with her to the townhouse on her raids to retrieve her belongings. At first the younger woman tried gamely to help with the sorting and packing, but she soon caught on that she was valued more as buffer than assistant.

Kevin had declined to absent himself from these hurried invasions. As he told Vanessa in a clipped, manicured voice, the tenancy of their things was joint, their ownership debatable. So Holly's service was in chatting with Kevin while Vanessa deposited blouses and table linens and

books and CDs in stacks upon the bed. Occasionally, a dispute over the provenance of a candlestick or kitchen implement would flare, but not often, as Vanessa was careful to claim only those things she was sure he had no attachment to.

There was an urgency to this division of goods. On her first trip back, Vanessa opened her jewelry drawer and found her mother's pearl choker scattered like mothballs over the contents. After that, she couldn't shake the conviction that Kevin would soon begin systematically attacking her stuff in lieu of attacking her.

"It's really inspiring," Holly panted as they loaded Vanessa's car with plastic laundry baskets brimming with crockery nestled among socks and T-shirts, sweatpants and cardigans, "how respectful you two are of each other. I've always thought Kevin was a sweetheart, but he's the one who's been left and, honestly, I've been holding my breath—expecting to hear bitchy comments each time we've come over. Kevin and I have talked about the Cardinals. We've talked about bee colony collapse. We've talked about single payer health insurance. The one subject we never touch on is you."

"Glad to hear it," Vanessa said lightly.

"The only thing he's said about you or divorce or anything is that he hopes you find whatever it is you're looking for. I thought you'd want to know."

"Mmmm." Vanessa closed the trunk with a slam.

"And you never say anything negative about him," Holly added approvingly.

"What would be the point?" Vanessa turned the key in the ignition. "I've got what I wanted."

"Exactly," Holly nodded as she buckled herself in. "Once again, you are my role model."

As there was no dispute over property—he paid her a lump sum for her half of their scant equity in the townhouse and they each kept their own cars—and no children over whom to wage a custody struggle, the divorce was less complicated than most. She wasn't asking to equalize the value of their retirement plans or for a share of the restricted stock options he was so proud of, so he agreed to a quick settlement.

The morning of their hearing date, he called to suggest that he drive her to and from the courthouse. "Parking's impossible around there."

She thanked him but, haunted by a vision of Kevin steering the car into a lamppost, said she would be meeting a friend downtown for lunch.

"To celebrate?" he asked, and then, when the phone remained silent, closed with "So, I'll see you in court."

To counter the impersonality of the proceedings—after all, they had lived side by side since their junior year—she took his college yearbook to the courthouse. "I managed to abscond with your copy as well as mine," she apologized.

"Right," he said, and shoved the yearbook back into the plastic grocery bag she had brought it in, ending her fantasy in which they would flip to the page with the collage containing the photo of Kevin, undetected by the yearbook faculty advisor, rappelling up the mock turret of Brookings Hall, in lederhosen yet. As Kevin's photographer and partner in crime, she had imagined him turning toward her and sharing a wry smile before the judge formally released them.

Outside the granite and limestone building, Vanessa said goodbye and aimed herself purposefully toward a café several blocks away where she lingered over a cappuccino and biscotti until the coast could be presumed clear.

It had been a slow day at the courts and she had found a parking space in the municipal lot, as apparently had Kevin. Walking toward her car, Vanessa noticed a little flurry above the pavement, a swirling of paper stirred by a gust of cold air. And then she saw the cover, in the improbable school colors of red and green, ripped away from its contents and lying on the concrete beside a now empty parking space. She shuddered at the rage and pain needed to tear the yearbook asunder.

Some months back Vanessa had shifted herself into a flat in the De Mun neighborhood. She couldn't keep crowding Holly and she didn't want to stay where she was likely to cross Kevin's path. Besides, it wasn't her neighborhood any more. She had left all the old friendships to him—the unspoken part of the divorce settlement. She knew firsthand how hard it was to remain friends with both halves of a divorcing couple. And that it was natural for outsiders to want to be supportive of the one who'd been abandoned.

She saw Holly mostly at work since moving away from Lafayette Square. In fact, she saw few people outside of work these days. "Come with me to the Focal Point tonight," Holly coaxed. "There's going to be this great old blues guitarist. We can have dinner next door at the Maya Café."

"Sounds really nice, but I'm beat. And on a diet. I wouldn't be good company anyway. These days I even bore myself." The euphoria she had

felt when she first left Kevin for the giddiness of an extended slumber party at Holly's had evaporated, leaving a clumsiness in its stead.

Cut out of her customary circles, she enrolled in a yoga class and a bookbinding class in continuing education. She decorated her apartment, scavenging six mismatched dining room chairs from three thrift stores. She gave each a new seat cover of patterned crewel work that she made after teaching herself the stitches from library books.

She thought she was nesting, but came to recognize it as withdrawing, choosing solitary preoccupations to spare herself from having to venture out. At work, barricaded behind stacks of files, Vanessa kept people at a safe distance by email and the phone.

One morning she stopped at Holly's desk, thumping down a pillar candle she had bejeweled with dried flower petals glimmering under a rumpled sheet of wax, an apology for all the invitations declined or ignored that had finally ceased to be offered. "Holly, if you ever feel like going to a concert or a movie, even if it's last minute, just call me. It's time I bust out of this cocoon."

But the calls didn't come. So she extended invitations of her own, which Holly had an array of reasons, or excuses, for not accepting. Vanessa understood that she had wounded Holly by relying on her friendship and then retreating from it, much like the male dating pattern of approach-avoidance Vanessa had heard single women lamenting during the years of her marriage. Their interactions had become stilted, gone from whole hog to half-hearted.

She phoned Holly on a Saturday morning. "I've missed you," she said, sounding to her own ears like an estranged lover.

At first Holly unreeled a string of alibis that grew increasingly elaborate. Vanessa stopped her before she could produce witnesses. "It's my fault," she interrupted. "I've been what my mother used to call a Bad Friend. And after you were such a good friend to me. I don't have any excuses. Only apologies. I'm sure you're busy this weekend, but let me dazzle you with a home-cooked apology next Saturday night."

"I can't. Not Saturday."

"Sunday, then?"

Holly hesitated. "I've got a commitment on Sunday."

Vanessa could feel her cheeks flushing. "Well," she said, inflating her voice a notch up to hearty, "you're right to be cautious. I haven't done any real cooking in ages. All salads and carry-ins. Thank God for the deli counter at Straub's or I'd have starved this last year."

"Vanessa," Holly cut through the awkwardness, "if you can put it off another week, I could come the following Sunday."

"Great. Two weeks from tomorrow it is. Shall we settle on a time now?"

"Let's talk about it at work, a little closer to the date."

Vanessa wondered if she was being overly sensitive or if Holly preferred now to have most of their contact, even conversations, confined to the workplace. Well, she thought, Holly feels rejected. And a little self-protective. And so would I in her place.

At work, things were neither cool nor particularly warm between them. Tepid, thought Vanessa. She hoped to heat things up with the Moroccan stew she was making: chunks of turnip, carrot, onion, raisins, slivers of dried apricots, and pine nuts in a broth of fragrant spices. She wondered why someone didn't distill a perfume from cardamom.

When Holly arrived, Vanessa handed her a beer and took her on a tour of the projects with which she'd filled her time and her apartment. She showed off the gossamer curtains she'd made from a sari purchased at the Indian market on Page Avenue and the duvet cover she was fashioning from vintage tablecloths. "I've discovered the secret Martha Stewart within me."

"I'll say. Any stock market tips?" Holly asked in a stage whisper. Holly had made appropriate, appreciative murmurs at each stop on the tour. She took a long pull from her beer and said, "I've been busy, too. I know you thought I've just been making excuses lately, but, actually, I'm in a relationship now. And, well, it's taking up all of my time."

"Holly, I'm so pleased for you! I want to hear all about him. You never said anything. Not a word. Oh," Vanessa's voice dropped in recognition, "you were probably trying to spare the Newly Single from your coupled bliss."

"It's a little more complicated than that."

"You have every right to be angry with me. And hurt. But it wasn't you I was avoiding—it was everyone."

"I was angry all right. And I was hurt. But I also didn't want to have this conversation before I was sure it was a conversation we needed to have."

"And we need to now?"

"The guy in my life. It's Kevin."

"Oh." Vanessa turned off the flame under the stew pot. She wheeled to face Holly. "You aren't joking? This is real?" Vanessa dimly

remembered strange looks in the office and water cooler chat that died away at her approach.

"There didn't seem any reason to bring it up at first. I mean, at first I was just seeing him around the neighborhood. And then I invited him over for a couple of 'pity dinners.' After we'd stopped socializing. In a way," Holly said with some cruelty, "I suppose he was a substitute for you."

"Well, I'm back!" Vanessa said with a girlish, false brightness.

Holly shook her head. "At first I think I just missed going over to your house. Then I missed you. Maybe there was even some sort of crazy revenge mixed up in it, maybe I felt you'd dumped both of us. I'd probably have to go into therapy to figure that one out. But whatever my motives back then, it's different now."

"Different."

"It's serious now."

"I don't know what to say." Vanessa lifted the stewpot with oven mitts then lowered it back onto the burner as if she couldn't manage the weight.

"Maybe you should go with that."

"And say nothing?" She took off the oven mitts and wandered out of the kitchen.

With a sigh, Holly went to the stove and emptied the pot of couscous into a waiting serving dish and carried the steaming bowl to the dining room. Vanessa watched as Holly balanced the stew pot on a cast iron trivet equidistant between the two places set at the table. Vanessa sat gingerly on the creweled fabric, an uneasy guest in her own apartment.

Holly returned to the kitchen to fetch salt and pepper, in full charge of the situation. "I'm not looking for your approval," she warned, and dropped into the chair across from Vanessa.

"That's good," Vanessa mumbled ambiguously.

"*This* is good," Holly said, her mouth crowded with vegetables. "You know, until I got to know you, I thought anything 'vegan' had to taste like reconstituted astronaut food. Well, this time you've outdone yourself. I want the recipe for this."

"Sure," Vanessa said, stabbing a hunk of turnip. "What's mine is yours. Damn. Why did I say that? I don't think of Kevin as mine. Haven't since before I left."

They ate on in silence.

"Look," Vanessa ventured as their eyes stayed on their empty plates, "I have to ask: how serious?"

"Very."

"Do you know about his temper?"

"What temper?"

"It's why I had to leave."

Holly eyed her coldly. "That's not what you said at the time."

"I didn't want to talk about it."

"But now you do? You said you married too young. That you just weren't right for each other."

"That's true."

"And now you say it was because of his temper?"

"That's true too."

"Listen, I think I'd better skip dessert. I know this has to have been a shock. Maybe after a while we can get together again. Figure out some kind of friendship. At least a good working relationship. But we have to face the fact that we're not likely to be close again."

"You think I'm jealous."

"Why not? You're human."

But he's not, Vanessa wanted to say. Instead she protested, "I was the one who left."

"Yes, but people are pretty complex. Maybe you enjoyed the feeling of control that gave you. And now you're not in control. Maybe you're jealous not being the central figure in Kevin's universe anymore. Maybe you liked the idea of him out there pining for you."

"And maybe he's scary as hell." Vanessa thought back to their honeymoon. For the year and a half before they married, they had shared an apartment with a changing assortment of students and everyone had gotten along. But their first night in Puerto Vallarta, the first time she and Kevin were ever truly alone—without roommates, without family, without baristas who spoke their language—he had turned on her. Vanessa had laughed at him—at something he had said or done, a mispronunciation maybe?—and he had reached across the table on their balcony overlooking the Bay of Banderas and grabbed her long, loose hair and twisted it until she cried out. She had shivered through the first night of her honeymoon alone on the hammock out on the balcony. The next morning she stood over Kevin until he opened his eyes. She told him that if he ever laid a hand on her again, he would never get another chance. "Touch me once more like last night and it's over. I mean it, Kevin. Just once more and I'm gone."

She turned back toward Holly.

"We're getting married, Vanessa. It's better you don't say anything more."

Vanessa recoiled. *But isn't this when I should say everything? Speak now, or*—She held her peace.

Weeks went by, and accumulated into months. Vanessa had held herself—not aloof exactly, but apart from her officemates. She believed intimacy with staff complicated office politics. Holly had been the exception, and that turned out to emphatically prove the rule.

Vanessa felt a chill in the admissions office caused originally, she supposed, by her obvious preference for Holly. But by now the staff had probably all accepted invitations to Holly's wedding to Vanessa's ex and they were having their own problems separating the personal from the professional. Whatever the reason, Vanessa's response was to institutionalize the distance between her and the others, avoiding interactions until staff meetings, eating lunch at her desk behind a closed door.

She took up knitting, creating her first sweater in eye-popping combinations of texture and color. She adopted a puppy, a jangle of terrier and greyhound, according to the best guess of a vet who worked with Stray Rescue. Bartlett—the training of him, the walking of him, the conversing with him—filled most of the holes in her schedule, when he wasn't making holes in her belongings. She subscribed to the Netflix DVD service and made a practice of ordering three films by one director at a time. She had just finished Preston Sturges—her favorite was *The Lady Eve* with Stanwyck and Fonda—and was about to embark, warily, upon Jim Jarmusch. She had slipped *Night on Earth* into the DVD player when the bell for her apartment sounded. She pressed the intercom.

"Yes?"

"It's Kevin."

Vanessa was startled into silence.

The bell sounded again. She pressed the intercom again, this time without speaking.

"We need to talk," he said.

Vanessa hesitated, then pressed the button for the outside door.

No one had told her the actual date, but from the looks she was getting in admissions and the looks that took a detour at her approach, she calculated there was going to be a wedding very soon. So Kevin wanted to clear the air, start his new marriage with a clean slate. Who could blame him for that? She would rather have met him elsewhere. It was

probably childish, but she didn't want him to see how she lived, inspect her appliances, comment on the dog bed next to hers or the candles in her bathroom.

She opened the door to the hallway so he wouldn't have to knock. Then she went into the kitchen and poured some French roast beans into the coffee grinder. He must have come in and closed the door while she was grinding the coffee because she didn't hear him or see him until she turned to get a paper filter. He was standing an arm's length away. A little scream burst from her and then she laughed apologetically. "Coffee," she shrugged, as if explaining something. As she edged past him to reach for the box of filters, the balcony in Puerto Vallarta flashed through her brain. It suddenly occurred to her to be glad she was wearing her hair short these days.

She thought about that morning when she had vowed she would leave if he ever laid a hand on her again. That had been their contract. So, for the next eight years, he had laid his hands on substitutes and she had walked on tiptoe. But he had held to their contract and still she left him. She had made him hold himself in check and then she had left anyway.

His arms hung down at his sides, but she saw his fists opening and closing. Just as Vanessa decided to keep on going, through the kitchen and out of the apartment, one of those fists opened and took hold of her arm.

She stifled a gasp. "I don't think this is a good idea." She made her voice firm. She tried to shake off his grasp, but his fingers tightened around her upper arm. *Quicksand*, she flashed. Mustn't struggle. "Why don't we sit down?" *Make it normal*, she instructed herself. *Before it goes too far.* Kevin didn't move. "What do you want?" She regretted the question instantly, saw it as an acknowledgement of the supremacy of his wants, of his power. "Let go of me." She couldn't stop the escalation. "I'll scream."

"No," he said, "you won't. At least not more than once."

Vanessa froze, her blood turned to ice, unmoving in her veins.

Kevin bent her arm behind her and propelled her from the kitchen. She stumbled as he pushed her like a plow before him. They lurched through the dining room with its creweled seat covers, and she thought both *He can't even see his surroundings* and *I'm glad he can't see my surroundings.* And then she was furious with herself for wasting thoughts on anything but escape.

With her outstretched hand and one foot, she tried to brace herself

against the frame of her bedroom door, but Kevin twisted the arm he held until she crumpled against him, then he pivoted her forward and onto the bed. She strained to turn her face to the side, out of the smothering puffs of damask-covered eiderdown.

Bartlett awakened and leapt from his bed to join in the play. "Your watchdog?" Kevin said, his lips unbearably close to her ear. "Your protector?" She felt his body shift atop hers, and, though she couldn't turn her head, she could picture as clearly as if viewing a screen Kevin's leg shooting out and connecting with the puppy. Bartlett shrieked and scuttled out of the room, his nails scraping and clicking against the hardwood floor. "Maybe you should trade it in for a Rottweiler."

Still pinning her arm to her back, he raised himself and positioned one knee at the curve of her spine. With his free hand, he reached around beneath her and undid the tie of her drawstring pants. "No!" she shouted but stopped as the redoubled pain in her arm and shoulder and back took away her breath. He snaked the pants past her hips and then yanked her underpants down to her knees. "Please," she pleaded, tears squeezing from her closed eyes.

He settled himself along the length of her, his breath moving her hair. "Say it again," he whispered.

"Please."

He released her.

She rolled over on her back, wincing from the ache in her shoulder, and drew up her pants. She knew she should keep her mouth shut. "I'm telling Holly," she said.

"You won't say a word to Holly," Kevin said. "You won't say a word to anyone."

"I'm calling the police as soon as you're gone. Unless you kill me first." She saw herself as a victim now, of one thing or another—all the variations seemed strangely the same. Could she be any more violated? Lack of penetration was a mere technicality.

"This time, I'm the one doing the leaving," he said.

She could hear the dog whimpering in another room.

Kevin stood in the door frame where they had struggled minutes ago. "Holly knows I'm here."

Vanessa jerked herself up to a sitting position and tried to understand what he was telling her.

"I told her you called and asked me to come over. That you wanted to talk. Something about 'completion' or 'resolution' before the wedding.

Of course she wasn't really buying that."

Vanessa snorted.

"No," he continued, "she's pretty sure you have designs on me, what with the previous calls and all those invitations to come and see your new apartment."

Her mouth dropped open. "Lying bastard," she managed.

"At least you know I'm not the weak bastard you thought I was." He smiled finally. "And you're not the queen you thought you were."

"I-I'll get you."

"You won't though. Holly believes in me, but even stronger than her belief in me is her belief in you, in your queenly sense of possession. And the cops will believe me—and her—when we explain that you've made all this up because your attempt at seduction failed. And keep in mind, if you do talk to anyone, I won't be so easy on you –" he raised his eyebrows theatrically, expanding into the role –"the next time. I'll tell Holly I was able to resist you today even though you did come on pretty strong, but she knows I'm not a choir boy. She worries I might succumb to your charms in the future, as I did in the past. You ought to worry about that, too."

He left the doorway and moved off down the hall. She heard the apartment door open and close, but she didn't trust that he was gone. After several minutes of absolute stillness, she rose from the bed and went into the hall. As she inched her way along, she half expected Kevin to leap out from the entrance to the dining room or kitchen. When she reached the apartment door, she turned the deadbolt and hooked the chain, a sob wrenching her small frame. She pressed both hands against her abdomen to stop the wave of panic coursing through her.

The dog was silent now so she called to him in a thin voice, "Here, Bartlett. Here, boy. Here, baby," but he didn't respond. She found him in the living room, cowering behind the couch. Vanessa pushed the couch away from the wall with her hip and her good arm, and lowered herself onto the floor. The puppy was shivering, but didn't recoil in pain when she felt around on him, petting and probing. "Nothing broken, little boy. It's all right now," she soothed. "The bad man is gone."

But of course nothing was right, and she could feel Kevin's presence everywhere in the apartment. She had to think.

She couldn't let Holly marry that monster. But Holly believed that Vanessa had been chasing after Kevin for months out of—what?—spite? And she'd probably shared her outrage with the people at the university

who worked under Vanessa. If she went to Holly with this story just days before the ceremony, it would be passed around as a last ditch effort to destroy the happiness of the second Mrs. Kevin. Soon, perhaps only minutes from now, Holly would be listening to Kevin's vile story about her friend Vanessa. Her mentor. And still she would believe him. Vanessa willed her hands to stop shaking. All right then. She had tried to warn Holly. Holly made her choice. To hell with her.

For a moment Vanessa wondered if Kevin prized Holly more as a wife or as a weapon. She bent her head in an effort to suppress the bile that had risen to her throat and Bartlett took that opportunity to lick her face, returning some of the comforting she'd given him. "What about the police?" she asked the puppy in a voice neither of them recognized. "If I explained everything—the way he was while we were married, the way he's used Holly to get back at me, the way he faked calls from me –" Her words trailed off because she was imagining how such a story would be received. Nothing in the apartment indicated a struggle; she was sore but not beaten; there was no semen to be harvested as evidence; no neighbors had heard cries for help. After they talked to Kevin and Holly, the police would write her off as a scheming bitch.

She could just keep on. She could. Just. Keep on. Showing up for work surrounded by suspicions and disapproval. Coming home to this apartment which was no longer her haven but the site of her debasement. The locus of her fear. Her heart, which had been banging inside her ribcage, decided to skip a beat, then another. Her hand flew to her chest, trying to hold everything in place.

She would get a new job, a new apartment. Doing what? Going where? He would know she was running from him. Unless she left town, what was to stop him from showing up at the next apartment, or in the parking lot of her next job? What was to stop him?

She had never felt helpless before. She knew that feeling was exactly what he wanted from her.

She could kill him. Yes. That would be best for everyone. But she doubted she could get away with it. Suspicion would fall on her, his lies had seen to that. And how would she do it? Could she do it? She had always hated violence, hated it in him. Could she love it in herself?

She could kill herself. He'd claim that as victory, but she knew he would miss her. He'd feel cheated. She pictured herself dead and Kevin and Holly taking Bartlett to live with them.

Steadying herself against the wall, she stood and extended an open

hand to the dog, coaxing him out from behind the couch. Bartlett nuzzled her palm, following it like bait as she backed away. Vanessa nudged the couch into place and sat down on it, patting the cushion next to her. The dog jumped up and presented his belly for a rub. She stroked him for a minute or two, then reached for a basket near her feet and took up her knitting needles and a skein of yarn. The last shards of daylight filtered through the sari curtains, steeping the room in an orange glow. Vanessa switched on the harsh light of the lamp next to the couch, then looked down at the pointed metal rods in her lap, turning them over and over. For the life of her, she couldn't remember how they worked.

Lance Larsen

The Man Whose Blood

1

We followed the yells out of the Santa Lucia subway station to their source: a pair of shoe shiners on the sidewalk hurling obscenities at each other like knives. This was downtown Santiago, mid-March. Drunk shoe shiners—a category new to both Elder Pickering and me. As Mormon missionaries we'd seen more than our share of inebriated men, certainly, but never a pair fighting over clientele. A small crowd gathered to see this nonsense up close: just what weird turn would this Thursday take? Bleary-eyed, unsteady, they circled like circus bears, one wielding a bread knife, the other a bike chain. And screaming accusations. Something about squatter's rights and stealing customers, something about one hundred pesos, their tinctures and brushes and rags scattered as if a windstorm had zigzagged through the city. I may as well invent names for them. The stocky one, with a bread knife: Tito. The one wielding a bike chain, the drunker of the two, with oily hair that hung to his shoulders: Gonzalo. Elder Pickering made like he wanted to leave. "Hang on," I said. "But we have an appointment," he said back. Tito made a few half-hearted stabs. In response Gonzalo flipped the chain like a whip, catching then wrapping around Tito's knee. Tito bellowed. A taxi hurtled past, honking. Gonzalo looked away just long enough for Tito to pick up a spindly stool where his customers would sit and bring it down over Gonzalo's head. This street fight was nothing like Hollywood, with a pair of toughs trading death blows, each rising like an unkillable phoenix. The stool broke on contact, packing enough wallop to knock Gonzalo to the ground and opening a mean gash above his eye.

2

Gonzalo tightened his grip on the chain and tried to get up. No small task, with blood sheeting down the left side of his face. Nearby, Tito shook what was left of the stool, as if to say, *You come at me, I'll hit you again.* Where was a green uniformed *carabinero* with a machine gun when you needed one? Tito stepped closer. Before I could think it through, weigh implications, I jumped between them, these polishers of shoes. My back to Gonzalo, I faced Tito and held my hands up, an impromptu peace officer making things up as he goes. "*Oiga*," I said, "can you give him some

room?" And I motioned for Tito to return to his scattered supplies on the sidewalk, some twenty feet away. He looked me over in glassy defiance. I felt there were rats inside me trying to gnaw their way out. Slowly he stepped back. I turned to Gonzalo, the left half of his face a mess of red, more blood than I'd ever seen up close. It dripped onto his light blue shirt. He wiped at the wound and attempted to stand up. "*Tranquilo*," I said, "keep yourself quiet." I tried to use a missionary voice to hide my stammers. There must have been thirty, thirty-five people circling us now. I grabbed the cleanest rag I could find, folded it three times, and pressed it against the gash.

3

This was 1982, the ninth year of the infamous Pinochet regime, and Chile was awash in blood, if you bothered to look. Dogs lying in gutters in puddles of blood. Newspapers trafficking in blood, accidents and murders, new installments daily. Blood dripping from a butchered pig in someone's back yard. Blood and entrails in a rusted pickup sliding along the highway. A charm dipped in pigeon blood pinned to a baby's bib to keep off the evil eye. "Whose evil eye?" I asked, with less than a week in the country. My companion shrugged. "Could be anyone's, including yours," he said. "To a peasant mother, we're gringos, *extranjeros*, evil doers, wicked magicians. Look at the baby wrong, you could curse it for life, at the very least give it a bad fever." And underneath visible blood, ghost blood. Blood spilled by conquistadors, coup blood, blood of the new regime, blood of the *desaparacidos*. Blood a mere three blocks away soaking the turf at *El Estadio Nacional* where soccer greats once pounded the field and pop stars sang their lungs out, where in 1973, following the *Golpe*, Pinochet and his military *conjunto* herded dissidents into the stadium, then tortured and shot resistors—some 7000, by certain accounts.

4

When I re-tell the story of Gonzalo fighting Tito, I think, *This time, this time I will find the right narrative thread.* And then I attempt to sneak a loop around each listener's ankle and two or three loops around mine, tie the other end of the rope to the saddle, then slap the horse's rump, hoping to be taken for a tortuous ride from which I will extract clarity and wisdom. Maybe this time I will explain that splattering blood makes archipelagoes on the sidewalk or that in Spanish "hero" has three

syllables, *heroé*, and ends with an accent that leaves you with your mouth open, as if waiting for a fair damsel's kiss. But such flights violate linear storytelling, draw an audience dangerously close to bad poetry, not to mention my own narcissism—*Come to think of it, I've always thought of myself as a hero*—so I veer back toward straight narrative and reduce my conundrum in blood to mere anecdote. My listeners nod and say, "Amazing, amazing," as we've all learned to do, then they launch into their own anecdotes. That's when I want to shake them by the shoulders: *Wait, you don't understand. The man was bleeding, his blood like paint. He was so drunk he hardly knew life was gushing out of him. Two men without names, and I jumped between them, a gringo with an accent.*

5

Usually what passes as drama in a missionary's life hinges not on blood, but something embarrassingly mundane. Something like cologne. Rewind to my first Christmas in Chile, one year and three months before I'd laid eyes on the drunken shoe shiner I've come to call Gonzalo. No tracting or teaching on account of the holiday, so we visited church members instead. We dropped by the Ortegas, who complained at church that we had neglected them. True, I suppose. We didn't mind Sister Ortega, but Brother Ortega was the type who bears some grandiloquent testimony about God's goodness and an angel descending from the sky with a glowing book, then hours later he wanders the neighborhood plastered, confronting neighbors and cussing the bleary moon at the top of his lungs. Not exactly Let-your-light-so-shine material. Brother Ortega welcomed us to his house. "*Bienvenido*," he said. A tiny place dressed out in Christmas, but reeking of something god awful and spicy. Once we were settled, he left the room, returning shortly with a bottle. "Cologne," he said, as if we'd never heard the word. He unscrewed the top and splashed some on his neck. "Beautiful smell," he said, "try it." My companion declined, I declined. Brother Ortega offered again. Thank you but no, we said. He thought we were being polite. On the third try, my companion relented and allowed Brother Ortega to splash some on his neck. I felt myself gag, cloying spiciness everywhere. "*Muy bien*," Brother Ortega said. He tried to hand the bottle to me. "Beautiful smell, beautiful smell," he said, to which I said no thank you. Back and forth, till our exchange was not about cologne, but about my asinine refusal to christen myself with his gift. My voice climbed and climbed until something broke in the room. I wish it had been the bottle, which would have given me a

tangible mess to clean up. Brother Ortega retreated to the opposite side of the room, and Sister Ortega served soft drinks, but the broken feeling stayed. I knew in this life I would always smell slightly rotten to Brother Ortega—and myself. Why, why didn't I just dab on the damned cologne?

6

"*Hay un medico? Llame una ambulancia*," I yelled. "Call an ambulance." Why wasn't anyone helping us? "*Oiga*, Elder Pickering," I said, "I could use some help." Couldn't he see the rag was sopping with blood, squeezing out between my fingers and dripping down Gonzalo's face? He hustled over. "Get me another rag," I said, "a thicker one." He lifted one from the ground, as if it were diseased. Maybe it was. "Sure, that one will do," I said. "Fold it, now fold it again." What is it they teach in first aid classes—the skull is one of the most dangerous places to get hit? Straight bone under the skin. Pickering handed me the rag. I slapped it down on top of the first and applied more pressure. Had you asked me to begin CPR that afternoon or treat for shock, I would have proved useless. But apply pressure to a wound: that I could do. Newcomers stopped and pointed, Gonzalo groaning and trying to twist away from me. "*Está bien, hermano*," I told him. He calmed a little. Or perhaps he settled into a more mellow level of drunkenness. Let Elder Pickering and the others represent the Levite who crossed to the other side of the wounded man on the road to avoid getting involved. Not me. I pushed on the wound with one hand, pushed the back of his head with the other, and thought virtuous thoughts about myself.

7

One evening, a few weeks before that first Christmas when I refused to wear nasty cologne, we dropped by to teach a young family, only to find ourselves in the middle of a wake. The couple's first child, born prematurely, had thrived for weeks at the hospital, but had taken a sudden bad turn. Now neighbors paying their respects crowded the house, and curious children hung around the front door, eager and not eager to go inside. No bigger than a doll, the dead child lay in a tiny wooden box, with a piece of glass over the top, to keep flies off and the smell down. His body was filled with blood and the blood was going bad. Except for a hodgepodge of burning tapers, the room looked as it always had: a radio, a couple of chairs, a television with rabbit ears crookedly poking to the heavens, a re-touched marriage portrait built on contradiction—a couple

looking preternaturally young in an old-fashioned sort of way. Under glass, the baby appeared shriveled, as if rescued from a pond. I had been to exactly one funeral in my life: a grade-school basketball coach. What did I know about losing a child? I couldn't even say *grief* in Spanish. My Chilean companion taught an impromptu lesson on mercy and God's love, then on bended knee offered a prayer of consolation, and we slipped out of the house into the dark.

8

Oh, the rich paradoxes of blood. It flowed no more in this infant but carried forth in the parents, fueling the accusations they aimed at God. According to certain theologians, Eden fell into wilderness at the very moment that Adam and Eve partook of the forbidden fruit and blood replaced the celestial elixir in their veins. Not only did the Israelites believe that "the life of the flesh is in the blood," but they prohibited any eating of it—a pragmatic health restriction yes, but also a symbolic religious prohibition. To eat blood was to eat death. Isn't the Bible a kind of book of blood? Cain spilling what flowed in Abel's veins, first murder. Moses turning innocent water into ponds of blood and vexing Pharaoh's court. Believers smearing a little of the red stuff on the lintels and saving their firstborn. You sacrifice a lamb, you ingest the Lamb of God. Oh, Man of Sorrows whose shed blood swallows my blood, take us up and drink us as we drink you.

9

How many people gathered around the bleeding shoe shiner at Santa Lucia? Say thirty, a conservative estimate. Thirty adults times ten pints of blood, I'm rounding down for the sake of simplicity, so 300 pints gathered on a sidewalk in Santiago, Chile in March a few days before my birthday. Among us, men who cut themselves shaving, women who bled themselves fertile three or four days a month—in short, adults used to blood and the way it leaks out. We lamented it, monitored it, denied it, tried to stanch it, swore by it and swore at it, rinsed it away, walked around in public fueled by it. What were we but movable vases of blood, all that salty red stuff behaving according to rules—at least most of the time. None of us thinking: skin is a gift, skin lets me take my nine or twelve pints of blood for a walk, lets me buy hot bread at the corner bakery or stop at the cathedral to light a candle for my ill daughter, or canoodle with the one I love. None thinking, this skin in which I am wonderfully

wrapped keeps blood in and the world out. And yet, when a portion of one pint of 300 collective pints spills on skin and clothes and dirty cement and keeps spilling, we collect like sharks. My blood, we reason, knows enough to stay where it belongs, why doesn't his? What is it underneath suits and dresses, under lust and revenge and heartlessness and curiosity, underneath underwear, under skin, what is it inside our blood that gives blood pause?

10

One of my last assignments in Chile was to visit a different group of missionaries each Friday and give them gamma globulin shots—to curb racing hormones, local members believed. The truth was a good deal more mundane: to bolster antibodies and keep missionaries on their feet. I had expert training in this task, which is to say, another missionary gave me a needle and an old orange one afternoon and said, Practice with water till the orange bursts or you get it right. I debuted the next day. The task was simple enough: warm the gummy gamma globulin to room temperature, fill the syringe, get the air bubbles out, pinch the missionary's tricep, plunge the needle in at an angle, inject slowly, and talk up the work. "Hey Sister, you're really tearing it up in San Bernardo. Twenty-three discussions last week." Or, "Elder, you guys still playing soccer on Mondays?" Though I never liked giving the injections any more than missionaries liked receiving them, I fell into the ritual of it—small talk, rolled-up sleeves, the sting of the needle, tired jokes to scare off weariness. And underneath the camaraderie, a smorgasbord of blood: he blood, she blood, anorexic Sister Munoz blood with her fleshless arms, the blood of Elder Rock (his actual name), a weight lifter with cantaloupe biceps so big he had to take off his shirt for an injection. Blood smearing each cotton ball held to each arm, cotton balls collecting in a wastebasket at my feet. A, B, O positive, O negative, what are we, who will we become when we are beyond blood?

11

One of my favorite responsibilities: interviewing candidates for baptism, especially young kids. Beribboned or cowlicked, faces scrubbed, eager to say *yes* no matter what the question. Adults—a trickier lot. We talked about faith, repentance, white tunics, burying the old self in a grave of water, the Holy Ghost like sweet fire. I reminded them it was not me receiving their burden. I was merely an agent. Sometimes their

confessions bled from them in a torrent of tears and regret: violence, drunkenness, drugs, thievery, unfaithfulness, abuse. A woman who had three abortions, a man who beat up a rival gang member and left him for dead under a bridge—no idea whether he pulled through. I recall an investigator in her early twenties. After weeks of lessons and an interview, she was ready. Now, the day before her baptism, she turned jumpy and distressed and wanted to speak in private. Under a darkening sky, we stepped outside her parents' house. "Are you having second thoughts?" I asked. She shook her head no, she wanted baptism in the worst way, but there was this thing. Her hands turning in front of her like paddle wheels, this thing inside her. What thing? I said. This thing, *muy adentro*, she said, her eyes welling up, this *contraceptivo*, and somehow I understood she meant an IUD. She had gone to a clinic to have it removed, but her doctor was on vacation. Would she have to postpone the baptism, with this *mala cosa*, this bad thing nestled deep inside, like a crow's foot? Of course not, I said, you're as ready as anyone, and I thought of the woman in the New Testament, how she reached out her hand in a jostling crowd, and was cured of twelve years of blood.

12

The story of Gonzalo was a story of blood, but also other things. I first tried writing it as a poem. To create a little distance, I made the narrator an exchange student, not a missionary. Instead of scriptures, I gave him a violin in a black case. Instead of supplying a missionary to travel with, I let him wend his way home alone after a violin lesson in Las Condes. In the poem I never finished, the narrator, after holding a dirty rag to Gonzalo's head, drops into the subway and travels the bowels of Santiago to emerge in La Cisterna to study math with his sort-of girlfriend. She was filled with blood, and so was he, and their bodies were not broken and after he told the story of holding the bloody man, she called him a hero, her mouth partly open. I wanted to slow things down as they slipped outside. I wanted her to massacre English and him to stumble through the subjunctive. I wanted her to notice blood on his shirt and him to taste lemon on her mouth when he kissed her. I wanted him to follow the River Maipú back to his host family. I wanted him to stop to urinate and look up at the moon, the same moon spilling indifferent light on his house back in the States. I wanted him to add his water to the water of the river and laugh out loud at nothing in particular, then shiver against the cold.

13

I held Gonzalo's head for how long, five minutes, maybe six? I don't remember an ambulance pulling up, just two men in white carrying medical supplies. They nodded at me. Their nod said, *So you intervened, Pal. Big deal. Go back to your silly missionary life. Real help has arrived.* I held Gonzalo's head a moment longer. Part of me thought, No, I'll keep him to myself. But it was a small part of me. I stood up and walked away. Gonzalo said nothing, not thank you, not goodbye. The crowd stared for a moment, as if I were leaving a stage, then turned their attention to the *medicos* who were guaranteeing that Gonzalo remained the center of attention. When I replay this story now I don't think of myself as heroic so much as laughable. A boy, a young man, not used to blood. Laughable but lucky. I blew my first chance at embracing a country when I refused the smelly cologne of a drunken man, but not my second. I can still smell Gonzalo, his unwashed body and the seepy stink of alcohol, his mouth a gash of unbrushed teeth. As much as I recoiled, I also felt a fierce purpose, my hand pressing his forehead, keeping the blood inside him where it belonged. "You better wash up," Elder Pickering said. I must have looked pretty mangy—blood on both hands, splashes on my shirt and pants, great drops like toe caps on my shoe. We found a water faucet at a nearby park and I washed. The red disappeared from my shirt but left a halo, wet and pink. "Well?" I said. Elder Pickering looked me over. "Not bad," he said. We walked the three blocks to the bus stop, my shirt cold and wet against my skin.

14

When I think of Santiago in the early 80s, I think of towering glass buildings downtown and open-air markets that explode with trade each morning, I think of squatters and ramshackle slums and battered buses, I think of soldiers toting machine guns, I think of empanadas and the greening foothills of the Andes, I think of kids playing soccer in the street, and I think too of the hundreds of memorials to spilled blood dotting the city. These are cobbled-together affairs at best—more like cairns than monuments. Where the train tracks veer south and a freighter hit a child flying a kite, a tiny shrine. There in the field, at the base of a giant electric tower, three shrines. At a dangerous intersection, four or five shrines, each tethered to a different ghost, a different accident. We will not forget, these shrines seem to say. And in the process, these shrines convert victim into supplicant, supplicant into advocate, advocate into a local saint who

might curry favor with the Virgin and her wounded Son. A theology so primitive and naive that I can't help but feel drawn to it in memory. At night, a candle burning inside a shrine beside a picture of the deceased, kept company by a Virgin the size of a doll. I can fix you, says the candle. And take away your struggles, says the photograph. There's room for you here, says the Virgin. Shrink yourself down, she says to me, to everyone. Shrink yourself down and crawl inside this refuge station, curl up on a dollhouse bed, rest your legs, poor mules. Let someone so small He is immense rock you till morning.

Peter Leight

Small Scale

My room is big enough, and also small enough, I like to be able to touch everything in reach, of the four corners how many do we actually use? Sometimes I lean one way or the other, reaching out in order to extend my reach, when I touch the wall it's my wall-span. The light comes from the left, as in Vermeer's rooms. There is a window across from the door, on the opposite side of the room, before I open the window I close the door, before I close the door I turn on the lights, not all the lights but the lights that are normally on when I'm inside. Every day I move the furniture around until it's in the right place for that day, as if I'm moving in with myself. Telling myself *please move over.* My drawers are full of what I want near me but closed in, confined, things I don't use but can't bear to give away. I'm not even opening my favorites—sometimes I think we pay more attention when there's less to pay attention to. I have a program that cleans up all the other programs, making room for everything I need to have room for, for now I'm sticking to the basic exercises with broad applicability, the slide is an example, or changing positions. Picking a little, as when you deadhead the irises. Everybody knows the nuclear family has been split up.

Alex Lemon

But Being So

The veil between
Worlds is paper-
Thin—Home-
Made rooster
Coop vanished
Of chickens,
Untouched blow-
Torch whooshing
On, the bulk-bag
Of yogurt covered
Almonds smashed
To the finest
Powder—& some
Times the dead
Reach over to
Break & borrow
Our stuff, to lick
Our cheeks with
Frostbit tongues.
Each of us has
Something hidden
Beneath the layers
Of perfect lacquer
We've second-
Skinned our flesh
With—there is,
In us, a piece we
Can not get rid of
Or explain. No
One & everyone
Wants to be
Different, to find
Pleasure waiting
For them when
Their eyes open

In the morning.
It is perfectly
Fine if all you
Want to do is
Cry & you have
No idea why.

Alex Lemon

I am Thinking that You Are Thinking What I'm Thinking

The night sky is over-
Whelmed, bullying
With stars & I am gargling
A full hive of livewire bees

While I wait for the sacred
Blood & flesh to be
Administered. It is a dirty
Trick—this being alive—

But the body does not
Lie. Arthritis. Heart
Murmur. I am a room
With too-loud music,

With three doors, each
That open to a janitor's closet
In which an antlerless
Deer is snout deep

In a blood-winking
Apron, huffing.
My head explodes with
Light because I have

Allowed myself
To forget all of the trouble
My skeleton carries
Deep in its marrow.

The time is finally
Right—the blackberry
Brambles need to be
Rolled in, naked.

Jennie Malboeuf

Wilding

I should be able to recall
the reason I was touching
that cat. Daddy asked why
I did it. He told me not to.
I do remember where I was:
the little corner when the house
forms an L, before the addition
walked you to the outbuilding,
before the bedroom of our cousins'
countryhouse had caught fire—a dry pump
and bucket on one side and gravel lot
on the other. I always had a skirt on,
so most likely I had a skirt on then.
I squatted down, I know that,
held out my hand for her.
Thought I could gentle her fur.
She broke the skin; I tried to cry soft.
She looked full of kittens. Daddy said
we'd have to wait a couple weeks
to watch if she turned up dead.
To make sure I didn't catch something bad.

Oscar Oswald

From the Chapbook The Precepts (A Postscript)

Your renegade, in citrus buds she flicked
aloof, fled. And so a pox is wiped
across the lips of thousands for the first
of us to cleanse. Did she do it? This
will answer that and more: *the kerosene*
of coding. It's you, with the genders never
spawned. You rigged the opposition with
a sky, a public bathroom, and the rest:
The whimpering errata in the law.
Our acceleration. Our end, like stones
inside our throats. Our solitary nests,
scuffing space, your yield of many peaches
tossed into the air. *Immediate*
unconsciousness. Your puffing brow, a point
without a compass, directions billowing
through foggy rays. Calling battleships
to roost. *Good graves.* Patiently, to *press.*

Oscar Oswald

From the Chapbook The Precepts (A Postscript)

Hold on to what you spur, its future is
your chance, a precious droplet entering
a gallery from pleasant rain. *No*
description. Our satisfaction imitates
the being there, will suture to the world
we brook. *Torn angel, humbled by the grass*
growing underneath a flattened world.
I'm there, upstairs, acclimated quickly
like soldiers, selling sugary cartoons
of gravity. How can it feel to fly
away? To respect the dead, a kite
of right, a glitch? *The baritone of shrinking*
fetches sound to thinking (curfews from
the bank). But you read like empty women,
the milestone I was, frontier abruptly
privatized for fracking. Let's be vital
bonds, crystallized by freezing law.

Oscar Oswald

From the Chapbook The Precepts (A Postscript)

Asymmetrical star, vibrantly

renewed. In comparison to waking

up a cloud, or rather walking up

the street. There is no universe but ours

and theirs. Our common song is optional.

Holy puddle, distilling Adam's time

with Eve's collage. We will fail, like

a summer toque, one that falls below

the nose. Micro-moral. Paradise

of picked teams, in eeny meeny miny

rows. Away we go: Let's build it all

again. The vote will be announced in psalms.

Simon Perchik

L18

Not a chance! the gate
tries to open though rust
was already mixed in, drifting

till the Earth lay alongside
too weak to turn back
the way the lines on your palms

still flow close to riverbanks
and longing, struggle to pull
this mud soaked ironwork

into the darkness and turns
that stayed in the air
after it became the sky

even in the daytime
–you almost see the gate move
and with both hands, yell

you're working on it, yell
anything! how the latch
is just about to loosen, yell

so the fence breaks apart
wading in dirt no longer the rain
that never lets go all the way down.

Alex Poppe

Room 308

Sunlight streaked through the orange-red leaves, illuminating the dust motes hiding in the pale air. Bridget, the student nursing aide supervisor, was helping a chubby toddler feed the ducks in the artificial lake at the center of the grounds. Her gentle cooing skimmed over grass blades and floated up to the window, where I stood. My forehead was slick with a layer of oil. My scrub top was crusty with dried oatmeal, and my pockets were bloated with wadded Kleenex. Visitors' Day was winding down. On Visitors' Day, we got a lot of extended family and clergy and shiny people who came because the other people who came were shiny and felt guilty, and no one was too ashamed to cry big tears, and stay for a few hours to feel good about themselves and the time they had just put in, and they needed extra Kleenex from the student nursing aides who were always there.

I was watching Bridget skip across the soft lawn to deliver the child back to his mother. Like me, the mom stood apart, watching Bridget and her son. Beyond clarifying the intricacies of patient sponge baths, I never spoke to Bridget. We were separated by experience and by the fact that she pitied me. Bridget was twenty-four, which was four years more than my age, and we had spent every weekday of the autumn here. I did it because I was addicted to Xanax and Bridget did it because her brother was still deployed, and she believed that her helping someone over here would increase the chances of someone helping him over there. Bridget swung the toddler high before placing him at his mother's empty side and nodded towards the window as she walked back to the main building of the VA hospital. The mother bent down to retie her son's sneaker laces and her skirt rode up, revealing a dancer's legs. I left the freshly-cut grass smell of the open window and entered the Clorox air of the linen closet to check my stash, pausing to grab an alibi of bleached sheets. Bridget, trailing sunshine, passed me as I exited and crooked her finger for me to follow. Over her shoulder she told me there was a Teaching Point, a new patient, still unconscious from surgery, and we needed to monitor his vitals as he had just lost both his legs from the hip down. I didn't ask what'd happened to his in-between. She entered room 308 and led me into the stale dark. A fraction of a man lay in the bed. An endotracheal tube snaked past a faint harelip scar above his upper lip into his mouth, and even though

his eyes were closed, I saw that this head and torso belonged to my ex-commanding officer. I stepped into the bedside table and knocked over a silver-framed photograph of a beautiful mini-skirted woman with ballet legs holding a baby upright against her chest for the camera.

I'm sorry, I said. I was sorry I had said sorry.

Bridget's face wrinkled through a chain of causality. If A leads to B, and B leads to C; A results in C after which she said nothing, as if to say, Can you handle this? with an element of, You'd better handle this because he and others like him have sacrificed so much, so that you and I can stand here with our whole selves fully intact, so I said, It's okay, to mean I'm okay, I can handle this and so much more, so please continue to instruct me.

The next day was the start of Marine Fest, a three-day bacchanal during which thousands of marines would arrive and celebrate being marines in our very stately and very gracious town. On the last night of the festival, when the marines were decked out in their best Blue Dress A's, sipping cocktails in the Potomac Ballroom Library to celebrate the 239th birthday of the Marine Corps, I would be cleaning bed pans of loose stool because during that day and the one before, able-bodied marines would have visited their disabled half-bodied brethren and snuck them tastes of all they had been denied. During my rounds, the visiting marines would tell me to take extra good care of their boys, and they would laugh fatly to say, You are here to service, or they would wrap their fingers around my wrist to say, I could break you; except for those marines who exhaled briskly through their teeth as soon as they stepped back into the hallway. Those marines would slip me a fifty and say thank you with their eyes glued to their shoes and I would wonder at their imprudence and give the fifty to Dr. Bob, a fourth-year resident with a gambling problem and a liberated prescription pad. Dr. Bob lived in a high rise near the marina and claimed to know what every nursing aide tasted like.

Bridget knew about Dr. Bob but couldn't do much. She was small and Christian and dyed her hair blond and kept two extra pairs of ironed scrubs in her work locker so she could change if a guest had an unfortunate accident. She called the patients "guests" because she felt it added an element of optimism to the VA. The VA was very clean and very cold. Bridget led seminars on Turning and Positioning, and kept an eye on us. Most nights after her shift ended, she headed to the hospital chapel to log in a half-hour of prayer for the worst-offs. I overheard her tell an unconscious "guest" she did it to stock up brownie points with the Man

Upstairs, and would be happy to put a word in for the mummified man in the bed before her. She couldn't control the nursing aides in their free time, but she could make them clean bed pans on her time. All of the nursing aides did yoga and were blond and had Botox. Once a month, they pitched in and bought some black market syringes of filler and bribed a cosmetology technician to smooth their foreheads or plump out their lips and hands. Afterwards they'd hit Chihuahua's to sip frozen margaritas through extra-wide straws.

Dr. Bob rolled five marijuana cigarettes for a twenty in the dry-goods storage room behind the cafeteria in the basement, which is where Bridget would find us on the night of the Marine Corps Birthday Ball, and she would be in an uncharitable mood that evening because some of the marines who celebrated the Corps' birthday every year, a group of dog trainers for the Corps and not actual combat soldiers, husky, and raucous and braggadocio drunk, had cornered her by the hospital gift shop and sung her the Marines' Hymn with altered lyrics and Bridget had to smile like a girl unwrapping an expensive present she knew she was getting and shuffle over in her regulation shoes and thin cotton scrubs to shake each enormous calloused palm and gush You are our heroes! You are our heroes! and let the handshakes turn into full body hugs while each marine took his turn feeling her up. When Bridget found Dr. Bob and me lying across plastic-wrapped cartons of adult diapers smoking a joint, she would have some things to say about my blackened soul and some more things to say about my degenerate character, which was worse than a gutter-tramp's, and only one thing to say about the prospects of my future training as one of her Certified Nursing Assistants.

But this shift was winding down. I'd spent the last bit of it sitting with the patients who hadn't had any visitors, watching reruns of *The Price is Right* and betting on the over or under. Lance Corporal William Philips won a new car and my Caribbean cruise vacation in the Showcase Showdown, which made him happy because an ambush in the Anbar Province had taken his sight, so he didn't drive anymore. I fluffed his pillows during the commercial break and folded his fingers around a chocolate truffle because I remembered when I was a kid how excited I was when someone paid me a bit of special attention just because. The truffle was wrapped in fancy foil with a famous quote printed on the inside. When we were little, my sister had a desktop calendar with a fresh aphorism printed on each page of the year. Lying shoulder to shoulder on our stomachs with our bare feet dangling off the edge of her twin bed,

we'd look for meaning in the convoluted words. We'd look for significance in anything, we wishers upon eyelashes.

The truffles came from a store-within-a-store inside the hospital gift shop. They were sold by Sonny who'd spent four years in a federal penitentiary for drug smuggling, following seven years on the lam. A DEA officer spotted him in the background of a Bud Light commercial, which is how he got caught; and then a local church organization led by a former New Orleans Saints' cheerleader, thirty years past her prime, organized a petition drive, which is how he got out early, two years ago at age seventy. Sonny often asked me how I could eat so much chocolate and still be as skinny as dripping water. He'd ask, Where do you put it? In my pocket, I'd say, and this much was true, so I didn't say anything else. He'd tsk his tongue against the roof of his mouth, but put a few extra pieces in my bag. People who knew about Sonny's past compared him to Gene Hackman, and I think he liked that.

I righted the silver-framed photo which still had its worn price tag stuck on the back. My ex-commanding officer was my ex-adjudicator and had signed off on my discharge without benefits. He was once a strong and beautiful man. His wife, probably his wife, entered as I was recording his pulse and respiration rate. I say probably his wife because, although he wore no ring and had never had at the School of Infantry, Camp Geiger, she did. The two-carat solitaire caught the last rays of sunlight streaming around the edges of the blinds covering the window. I figured this ring to be a neon announcement of worth, a quantification of how much she was loved, to the world, and I felt sorry for her, and for myself, to be caring for my ex-commanding officer here, in this place of broken people, and for her to see that her handsome husband was now a half-man, and no amount of prayer or medical miracles or stored up good deeds was going to restore the other half. She was in a lose-lose situation because if she stayed with him, she would grow to hate him, and if she left him, she would hate herself, at least for a little while, and if she stayed and had an affair, then all his comrades-in-arms would hate her, unless the affair was with a fellow marine that her husband had pre-approved. In the right now, she'd need a robust mental Blu-ray collection because he would never again be with her in that way a man is with a woman, similar to but not the same as the way he was with me, which was why I was no longer part of the Marine Corps. I was an excellent misjudge of character; this ability was, in part, why a year ago I was nursing broken ribs and a bruised back

at the Camp Geiger infirmary.

I was standing with the patient clipboard against my chest. The wife slid into the spouse-spot on the window side of the bed. Bridget was watching to make sure I didn't upset her or anything else in the room, and I thought about excusing myself so I would not have to watch the wife's fragile shoulders move up and down like creased wings, but marines are taught to suck it up and move forward, and if I left now, Bridget would think I was delicate, and she had little regard for me as it was.

Bridget offered to check on the wife's toddler, who was probably being fed chocolate fudge brownies from the Get Well Soon! baskets that piled up in the nurses station, to give her some moments alone with her husband. Because Bridget regarded me as an extension of herself when she was teaching, I returned the clipboard to its naked tack and prepared to leave. But the wife blinked with incomprehension so I doubted she equated the still bundle in bed with her understanding of husband. She introduced herself as Ashley and said that we should stay, she didn't wish to inconvenience us, and we should go about our business as if she weren't there. Then she told us what good people we were to be doing what we were doing, and because I don't like to talk, Bridget said thank you and regifted her praise to all the men and women in uniform who serve this great nation and to God, who always got praised by Bridget in case he was listening. I don't think Ashley was on speaking terms with God because that's when she interrupted Bridget with a snorting cough and turned her eyes on me, looking at me for a long moment. Bridget followed Ashley's stare to the dried oatmeal dotting my shirt and suggested I excuse myself to change my scrub top.

I nodded at Bridget's advice and exited. I didn't want to feel sympathy for Ashley. I didn't want to fold her jeweled fingers around truffles wrapped in inspirational foil because she had been loved and cherished by my ex-commanding officer and he had broken me. I walked past the nurses station where their son was sitting on a desktop boxing with a Tweety Bird balloon tied to a gift basket handle. He cried Duck! every time he hit the bird's face, and it arced low to the floor before coming back for more, and the little boy would laugh a sound like splashing water.

Bridget probably knew I didn't keep an extra scrub top in my locker. No abandoned shirts lay on the changing room floor. I rubbed at the dried oatmeal with some wet paper towels, which shed a layer of soapy paper dandruff along the institutional green-colored cloth. Standing in my bra to wash my shirt in the sink, I imagined how Bridget and Ashley's

patient-care conversation would go:

New trainee?

Yes.

Any good?

No.

Think she'll improve?

Probably not, bless. But God never gives us more than we can bear.

I visited Lefty, an artillery gunner who liked when I read to him. We were working our way through *Something Wicked This Way Comes* when Bridget stopped by his open door and beckoned me. Bookmarking our place with a truffle, I laid the paperback beside his pillow and told Lefty I would see him later. When I stood, Bridget pursed her lips at the wet patches on my uniform top.

I thought I told you to always have an extra uniform at work.

I forgot.

Do you know the new patient?

I bent down to pick up some invisible lint so I would need to wash my hands. My scrub pants were too long, and where the hem dragged on the ground was outlined in a gray. I straightened and crossed to the sink. Over the sound of running water, Bridget recycled her question.

Do you know him?

No.

Bridget checked Lefty's chart and exited. I followed about half a pace behind.

I'll need to pray for him tonight.

Yeah.

After you do a bed pan check on the floor, you can go.

Okay. Great.

Are you going out tonight?

I don't know.

You've still got slop on your shirt. Since you're not going out, you'll have plenty of time to launder and press *two* fresh shirts for your next shift. I want to see them before you go on the floor. Am I understood?

Yes, I said. I wondered if Bridget was going out after her all-inclusive chapel stop and if she had any friends either. Even though she meant well, in her own way, the other nursing aides kept their distance. Bridget was pretty in that conventional style that women found reassuring and men found non-threatening, so she'd probably never had a locked and

loaded .45 held at the base of her skull as someone older and of a higher rank than she pulled down her pants against her will and made her cry. I could imagine Bridget marrying one of the charity cases in wheelchairs, an officer candidate friend of her brother's, someone with a short life expectancy and a generous pension payout, someone who told blond jokes and could not fuck his wife but actually liked women.

I went into the supply closet where I kept my stash. With the door shut, it was colorless and quiet inside, and I liked it because then I was just a person in a supply closet in a hospital. My fingertips grazed the stacks of starched, clean sheets, some of which were rough and some of which smelled like a Chinese dry cleaner's. From my stockpile of Xanax, I slid an orally disintegrating tablet under my tongue and waited for my blood to stop crackling and for my conscious mind to settle into that zone between drunkenness and consequence. I took only half the dosage, in case I ran into Bridget again, and stored the other half inside my bra cup.

To the bed pans. In Staff Sergeant Mohammad Aksari's room, a lively poker game was in full swing when I came in. Staff Sergeant Mohammad Aksari was a career officer with seven tours of duty split between Iraq and Afghanistan under his belt. Many of the marines who cycled in and out of the VA had served with or under him, and he was popular because of his knowledge of Arabic and his commitment to the Corps. He sat in bed with his knobby potato toes sticking out from under the blanket. Sometimes when I gave him a sponge bath, he'd tell me to do my duty and suck him off. I'd say, *Habir*, which I thought meant "dick" in Arabic but which I later learned meant "expert." The poker game cloaked me in invisibility so I left his bed pan where it lay before marking zero output on his chart and slipping away.

Dusk had shifted to stars. From room 308's doorway, I saw that Ashley had gone, maybe to take her son home or to get something to eat, so I entered. The room felt womblike. In its soft opacity my ex-commanding officer looked as dignified as he had on that first day of School of Infantry training. In the corridor, footsteps were ushering the full-bodied outside, back among the living. The headlights on their cars were guiding the drivers away from the VA hospital, probably towards the marina. At midnight, there would be amateur fireworks you could watch from the promenade. This was in anticipation of the Corps' birthday. It was part of the town's effort to make the visiting servicemen and women feel appreciated in a world grown weary of war. Since my discharge, I had

been living in a nearby beach town, renting a room from a medicated bipolar heiress who dabbled in interior design and was a devotee of face yoga. When her parents divorced early the next year, and her father's new girlfriends began refurnishing his many residences, she would find herself out of a decorating job and move to Los Feliz to try to break into stunt work. She'd try for movies, and then for television, and then for commercials, and finally for computer games. I'm still waiting to see her Claymation head being decapitated from her anatomically-enhanced body when I play Assassin's Creed on my PlayStation. I would like for something big to happen for her because she never said a word when I sampled from her bathroom's well-stocked medicine cabinet, and particularly because on the evening of the Corps Birthday Ball, when Bridget discovered my prone body across boxes of adult incontinence products, a Dr. Bob at my side and his joint in my hand, and after clearing out my locker and being escorted off the premises, I would arrive home to an empty apartment with full pill bottles which I'd empty, and because the emergency medical technicians would smell marijuana on me, they'd call the police who'd search the house and find my roommate's hidden cache which I hadn't known she had, which would make this the last autumn she lived in this beach town.

I settled into a chair in the corner of the room and marveled at where my ex-commanding officer's legs used to be. He had practiced martial arts and used to deliver a mean roundhouse kick. This man, my former commanding officer whom I would have risked my life for once upon a time ago, was so still, so motionless that I felt a certain grief. Because he was no longer the Man In Charge, he no longer owned the truth.

We'd met on the first day of School of Infantry classroom instruction. He epitomized the ideal marine: courageous, honorable, committed. He told me what to expect during the twenty-nine day Marine Combat Training Course and promised to impart the knowledge and ability necessary to operate in a combat environment. He made me feel at home and said he'd show me the ropes to get me qualified. Later, he spoke to me privately about not wearing makeup around the other recruits or running in jogging shorts because some marines viewed the women on the base as walking mattresses who were there only to be fucked, and I would be asking for it if I did either of those things because who doesn't capitalize on an opportunity that's presented to him, and I didn't want to be charged with conduct unbecoming did I, and to remember that boys and girls and alcohol just don't mix and from that point on only he would

be able to sign off on my qualifications and I should come to his barracks for those signatures. I might have sneered a little, I don't know because I can't control it, and in times of great tension or danger I sneer. That's when he started sleeping in my bed. I'd come in from training to find him sprawled across my mattress, and then I'd have to wait inside my car, which was the only place he didn't have a key to, until he woke up and went away. When I finally reported him to the higher-ups, I was asked if I had a boyfriend and was told that I was weak to complain about him just because I didn't like him. One of them suggested I was a hot little mess who was trying to destroy the Corps, and maybe I should be tested for a personality disorder.

The door to the room opened. I should have jumped up and pretended that I was doing something other than sitting in the semi-darkness with a rehearsal corpse, but that Xanax had kicked in so I didn't. It was Miss Patty the Tex-Mex floor nurse who was on husband number five and therefore impossible to surprise. It's bath time, was all she said, and then, Give me a hand. I filled a small bowl with warm, soapy water and gathered some supplies. Miss Patty leaned over the bed and pulled my ex-commanding officer towards her. Get the tie, she said.

I didn't want to get the tie because then I might touch him, and I didn't want to see a spread of flesh that was both strong and weak at the same time, and I didn't want to be close enough to smell his dead-weather smell, but I got the tie because that is what student nursing aides do, and more important, that is what marines do, and it wasn't as bad as bringing him his coffee after he kicked my legs out from underneath me when I had gone to his office to retrieve the supply closet keys so I could feed the station dogs as part of my nightly cleanup duty at Camp Geiger. Miss Patty gently laid my ex-commanding officer back against his pillows, then drew the gown up past his shoulders and chest. There wasn't much left of the area below his belly button. The part that wasn't covered in plaster and bandages looked like it had been through a shark attack. Tiny beads of perspiration formed above my upper lip and I used my lower lip to wipe them away. Ok, Miss Patty said, but she was looking at me, then Ok Handsome, and she was looking at him, We're going to give you a little spa treatment so you can rest more comfortably during the night, even though he wasn't conscious to hear her, and then she sponged at his face, neck, chest, and arms as one would a newborn. I took away the damp used cloths and gave Miss Patty clean ones before I rolled my ex-commanding officer onto his side so Miss Patty could clean his back. I was surprised he

seemed as heavy now as he had then, when he had used his body to pin me down on the barracks' floor, because there was so little left of him. Is there anything else you need me to do? I asked and when Miss Patty shook her head I exited into the mall-lit hallway.

Ashley had just stepped off the elevator and was walking towards my ex-commanding officer's room. Oh, you're still here, she said but she didn't sound surprised, to which I said, Yes, and then we stared at each other like two people who don't know each other and therefore have nothing to say. The whites of her eyes were hacked by tiny broken blood vessels. Well, I said and took a step around her, which she countered with, Wait, and then, I am so sad, which was said so quietly that I wasn't sure if it had come from her or me. I took a truffle from my pocket and held it out to her. This might help, I said. When she didn't respond, I explained, There's an inspirational message on the inside. Ashely didn't take the candy so I added, It tastes good too, and then lifted her left hand from where it hung at the side of her body and formed her fingers into a tiny cup. It might help with the sadness, I said as I dropped the chocolate into her palm and closed her fingers around it. I turned and walked away because I had just lied to her. Nothing eased the sadness.

Thank you, she said as she caught up to me. You must be tired after such a long day. Would you like to have some coffee? I told her I didn't drink coffee and needed to get going, which was another lie because there was no one and nothing waiting for me anywhere. She opened her mouth to say something, but her words got caught in her throat, which made her face look like a fish's. I smiled at this, and she must have taken my smile as reconsideration because she closed her mouth and swallowed and looked at me the way a pretty child looks at the new kid before she invites her to play. Then she said she would like, if it wasn't too much trouble, for me to sit with her in the hospital cafeteria while she worked up the nerve to enter her husband's room. She said she had asked me because she could see that I was a kind person, a good person, a person her husband would like, and my giving her the truffle had confirmed this. I kept my face very still, and tried not to think, as I followed her into the elevator and we stood side by side silently watching the floor numbers light up in descending succession, about what her husband might say if he knew his wife had decided to confide in me, or if he'd worry that I might share a few secrets too, or if any of what he'd done to me had affected his life at all.

I sat at an out-of-the-way table as Ashley stood in line. At this late hour the cafeteria was almost empty, and most of the kitchen staff were

smoking cigarettes in the alley beside the delivery dock as they played Frisbee with their hair nets. The place stank of tater tots. The chime of china shattering against ceramic tiles pierced the chicken-fried air. A litany of Spanish swear words rang out from the dishwasher. Across the fluorescent bulb dining room, Miss Patty momentarily lifted her head from the romance novel she was reading, and then sipped discreetly from a black chrome flask she kept tucked away within her ample bosom. She flexed and pointed her toes, which were propped up on the chair across from her. My stomach growled. I unwrapped a chocolate. *An eye for an eye leaves the world blind*, is what the wrapper read, which was said by Gandhi, which figured. I crumpled it into a ball and shot it across the table at the bottoms of Miss Patty's feet. Ashley returned with a coffee and a bottle of water. In case you change your mind, she said as she placed the water in front of me and slid into the adjacent seat. Thanks, I said but I didn't mean it.

I don't know why but I'm afraid to see him, she blurted.

Because you don't want to face what your life has become, but I didn't say that. Instead I said that it had to be hard.

You must see patients like him all the time. Does it get to you?

No, I said and for the first time I told her something true.

How not?

I lay the bottle of water on its side and spun it on the table.

Why do you work here? Do you have family in the military?

My father was a Chief Petty Officer and my grandfather retired as a Sergeant Major. Where was your husband deployed? I didn't tell her that the last time I had seen him was at Camp Geiger.

He went to Afghanistan seven months ago, she said, twisting her diamond ring along her delicate finger, as if to say, You made me a promise, but not very forcefully so as to say, You betrayed me; obviously you can't be trusted; obviously you failed me and your country.

C'mon, I said as I stood, Let's go. It won't get any easier.

We stopped shoulder to shoulder outside room 308. Do you want to go in alone? I asked to show her she couldn't back down.

No, she said. Could we enter together?

Ok, I said as I opened the door and gave her a little hard shove forward. I hung back as she approached my ex-commanding officer. His body added contour to the upper two-thirds of the bed, while the lower third of the bed was flat.

Ashley stood in the spouse-spot shaking her head.

What, I asked, but I did not go to her.

He doesn't look like himself, she said.

I wanted to laugh a little, but I didn't.

It's the facial hair. He would never let himself go like that.

This much was true. I had never seen him look less than recruitment poster-ready, not even when he grabbed his loaded .45 and chambered the round inches from my ear.

Do you think we could shave him?

I imagined holding a sharp blade next to his jugular.

Do you think you could show me how? Are you trained to do that? the wife asked.

I'm trained to do that, I said. I raised the head of the bed so my ex-commanding officer was in a seated position. Imagine if he had awoken right then. Imagine his surprise. I could not look directly at his face, but I thought about holding the skin under his jaw firmly and tightly as I ran a razor along it. I need to get some supplies, I said as I turned toward the doorway.

I exited.

I walked down the hall past the supply closet to the stairs.

Once inside the stairwell, I sat down on a step and pressed my sticky forehead to the metal railing. Then I extracted the other half of the Xanax from my bra and placed it under my tongue. I waited for a while, during which I am sure, Ashley found another nurse's aide to gather shaving cream and towels and a razor, and show her how to shave her half-husband.

I took the stairs to the garage park and headed for my car. As I was fumbling for my keys among truffle wrappers and used Kleenexes, I heard a familiar God-praising voice. I ducked down between my car and the next, just as Dr. Bob strolled by, ruffling Bridget's hair and then cupping her behind.

You did good today, he said.

Michael Robins

You Know It's Nearly Spring

I'm downright glad to be here with friends,
old & new, before you in this space &

when I say glad, what I mean are moments
back, one minute then two, two & three

you get the picture. You're a smart listener,
very good in understanding & when I said

here, when I say, I am of course writing
private, select clouds of my head & the best

mustering that I can into words. My lit
& scrolled phone is boring, I don't need it

I have poems & you are here, my future
with yours, your past brought out to answer

or to ignore. I have no convenient way
conveying Monday, how my dreaming swerved

& thinned to crying & thoughts of a beard,
not the child's, not my son who had awoken

but my chin pretending more sleep & not
numbering its days, nervous, my hand up

over my face. Hair out the door & like string
when it goodbyes the balloon, the balloon

its air. Watch it in the poem, small things
I've seen, more real than real. I stare out

among puddles, each floating dollops of snow
& save the image in a distant room. Morning

wakes from yesterday, the crown of the sun
peeks & melts what's focused, all I figure

I know, so little. Still I adore the objects
memory never lands, clipping from a head

at the barber pole, ball sprung & forgotten
by its bat, prayer invisible with oh god & yes

joining wishes wished but not yet blown
high between branches to the hawk, mid-halo,

one white field below & forever ignoring
happy strands of mice & rabbit, squirrel bone,

syllable of pillowed moss where a shadow
meets the ground & visited, revisited I'm there

& now its… Okay. I'm glad you're here
I truly am. It's Thursday, far from my son,

his sister & mother, closer to you, you who
lift your own private caption. I want our clouds

playing numbers, to warm in a single language
& saying hello, thank you, let's you & me,

us & everyone not be through, not so quickly yet.

Michael Robins

Without Streets We Can't Go Anywhere

This living could go either way. I have to say I
needn't say anything, merely time all grown
forward, in due course how we come to resemble
everything. No idea less than one invented in the sky:

blue pencil, pretend a rocket & after the strung plume
some moaning, someone found down the sand asking,
Do you smell burning, Does any fire exterminate
its shadow alone. Worth a swimsuit hung, I'm thinking

the airway, take it, should this like the tide settle
nearsighted. Or the wood & pieces of twine, enough
buoyancy to be always pelagic, beach in the shoes
of nine year olds hiking their sails after the show.

I was landlocked, lit paper bags for the lacking
fireworks, early stance in the way of me midstumble,
my hand in the stranger hand, flapdoodling his 20s
& sped crabwise toward the bridge. I'm lucky

being alive, haggard, terrified for liking only the week
floating six years ahead, teeny bikini I'd never had
much luck on my own before, now buttoned
to a collared, domestic life. Hard to pull the tattoos

off & no more I, kid speaking of posture, no girl
who knew in summer rain her chalked name blurred.
We'd a good party, stupid. I turned left & should've
right, couldn't yell myself to a bed that loved me.

Distraught, shy of 30, I drove through a second
idling car but this year, the cookie's fortune assures,
my highest priority will be family. I rock the chair.
I'm dwindling. I forget things the first time I am told.

Kathleen Rooney

Les Vacances de Hegel

Is the sky the pink-orange of a drink, or the orange-pink of a sunset? Is it Hegel's vacation, or Hegel's holiday? The black umbrella holds up the clear glass of water, okay, but what holds up the umbrella? While the master was working on this painting as the answer to the question "How to show a glass of water in a picture so that it is not uninteresting, fanciful or arbitrary?" Loulou the Pomeranian read all of Hegel. People doubt him when he says this, so then he has to add that the master sketched this same water-glass like, 150 times, and 150 times, he tossed down his pencil, unsatisfied. But he always put a mark on the glass, and in the 151st sketch—just as Loulou was memorizing his favorite of Hegel's sayings ("In art, as in all man's works, the content plays the decisive role.")—that mark expanded into the shape of an open umbrella. Loulou looked up from his book and laughed because it was so dialectic! And Magritte said, "Ah, my Loulou, I knew you would get it." Then they talked about how Hegel would have responded to that object with two opposing functions: to keep out water and to contain it simultaneously. Perhaps he would have been delighted, hence: the title. There is no such thing as thinking too hard.

Stan Sanvel Rubin

Apostate

Waking from fever doesn't give
the truth of what fever was,
reaching for you with weird hands,
wrapping you to its chest
the way a lover wraps
someone so tight the difference
between love and hate disappears,
the way scarlet peels from certain sunsets,
leaving only spent sun.
Nights of burning, days
of trance waiting for night.
What's left is aftermath, a cooling
where there was burning, the knowledge
that steamed through you
no longer needs you, so that
the only emotion is indifference
—the way a forest stripped
by a five-day fire lies waiting
for the next rampage, the new intruders—

Chris Santiago

Counting in Tagalog

isa

you say
each sound back to me
gliding up under ash & sycamore

dalawa

a game echolalia
I'm trying to make up
for lost time

[not time exactly but music]

[not your loss but mine]

tatlo

echolalia a kind of trinity—

a. echoes like yours; acquisition
b. ravings of the damaged or ill
c. a poet's obsession with sound

apat

I started teaching myself last week
& even called my mother
to say so.
But she said two was not dalawa
but duha.

Ilongo vs. Tagalog. Not mother tongue
but mother tongues.

lima

I try
too hard, overpronouncing,
I want to pass so you'll pass
but for who? When

I was five she brought home a colleague
a Polish RN with no family, who swore
profusely & well
& loved my mother dearly, especially her singsong
accent.
But you don't have an accent
I said. The way she said words
was the best way. The right way, the first.

anim

You're getting drowsy, & who wouldn't
the park still thick with night blooms
even though it's almost eleven.

Jasmine: sampaguita. Dad says
the scent reminds him of home:
not Minneapolis, but Samaploc

near the Dangwa Market in Manila.
They sell flowers there but I couldn't find it
working only from stories he'd told.

pito

A harder pity: sputum
a bystander hawks sideways

warding off bad luck
after crouching to peer in his face—

the struck biker, sprawled. My last day
in Manila. Mad traffic
brought to a standstill; even my lunatic
cabbie held his tongue.

walo

This close to wala—none, nothing.
Even extinct.

When we get to ten or eleven
something begins to slow
& harden in the mind

—if the organism does not receive
the appropriate stimulus during this critical period—

siyam

Soon I'll have to stop
or start over

switch to English, Japanese. Tomorrow
I'll figure out how to turn

1 into 11, 2 into 12, a formula
we'll both unpack as sound.

Nabokov lost sleep
because he couldn't stop counting his heart beats

& subtracting them from an estimated
total.

Wild parrots shriek past in a swarm.

I've never seen
how far I could get in this tongue.

sampû

You perk up, almost holler; you love the stressed plosive,
the stoppered air.

I can almost hear you pronounce the diacritic
a roof
pitched against rain

although I've gotten lost & looked
for taxis in it

although it doesn't fall straight & takes
more than cardboard, more

than a sheet of corrugated iron, & my accent
altered the fare.

Veronica Schuder

Alexandria

Prior to the burning, they kept themselves
occupied by huddling on candle tips
and resting in the flint of Caesar's Zippo
but gathering a breath and licking one
ship's mast they got hungry, wanted a taste
of everything in sight cypresses goats
half-timbered warehouses stuffed with swag grain
scrolls librarians snoozed over body
armor broadswords leathers chainmail
for the poor not to mention the armada

scattering its own ashes into the sea.
The world was small then and it needed stories
and that was a good one, especially the part where
Caesar said if I can't have it, nobody can.

Kent Shaw

The Definition of Curtail

The mirrors were inside the theater. Pointing at mirrors. They put in a sky.
And they painted the sky using a Marc Chagall that was the same color as Marc Chagall,
but more sky-like. It was Light! Which is a part of the theater community.
As are prepositions. And applause.
And the people attached to applause.
Imagine if Marc Chagall had painted a sky inside a theater.
And the theater was beautiful.

Would it be possible for me to have the name of the theater painted inside me?
Like I was a European. Or I had European inside of me.
Or I was spelling out all my possible shades of voice and demeanor.
I was projecting myself.
As in, that impression of myself that involves carving out whole parts of myself.

"That's where the sky is" is all that I'm saying. It's inside the theater
that is inside me opening out to the other people, glamorous people,
expensive people, anonymous people, too.
Mainly anonymous people. Maybe Marc Chagall.

Like if a mirror were pointed at other mirrors and what we were really trying to do
is see what our emotions looked like from every possible angle,
and at first it might seem like it's tragic or disastrous, because our emotions are such serious business,
but the emotions we think are possible must be more possible
when there are so many ways of looking at them. I am a theater. I am mirrors
on so many parts of my insides. And the audience loves me.
They love me so much, because they can see themselves while they're doing it.

*

I am a jealous man. I was grown a jealous man.
As in the seeds were planted early.

If psychology was a soil that grew continually darker and richer and evenly polluted as time goes on,
if psychologies grew into one anther like the knotted capital letters that begin an illuminated manuscript,
or the brasswork at the top of a capitol dome, or the murals on the under part,
where airs are circulating into each other,
and the airs are psychology for each other, holding each other when they need to be held,
for inside any psychology another psychology should be fit,
so psychology could be used to psychology the psychologies making psychology so difficult,
then everyone will feel at last a deeper side is really even deeper than they had first imagined.
The top soil is so rich in this country,
but that's only the beginning of a very long agricultural history.

*

There is a system of strings I have attached to my insides.
On nights when there is a performance, I organize them into a canopy coming out of my chest.
With all the other strings attached to those strings.
How would you feel if you heard a map was leading an audience into your insides
with diagrams describing consequences, and string sequences,
and tangents in all directions at the ends of strings that couldn't possibly be the same strings anymore
if they have that many places they're going to.
Aren't all strings engineered to come to an end?

I am someone who needs to feel like he's been connected to whatever is "backstage."
Maybe there's an elaborate grid back there that the strings are tied on to.
And that's how I'll find my way home, where it's just me and my wife.
We've been dealing with strings tangled beneath the sink.
And strings hanging above our mattress connecting me to the home that we're living in.
Can I bring the audience to this performance space? Have they been here all along?
Try waking up in here. All you can see is the middle of the night.
Try keeping track of everything living in this house.

It may be the strings aren't me connecting me to me as much as they are me pulling me closer
like a jealous lover. Jealousy is so smothering.
I am inside me. I am a ball of string. I am bundled with string.
I am one of those map-diagrams that keeps expanding so fast it might even surpass the three-dimensional capacity of the warehouse they're housing diagrams in,
so they're building a warehouse to house that one.
I assure you, there will be a Singularity, I will be there, with strings strung to even stronger strings and more capable strings,
and they'll be waving themselves at my face.

*

Most days you can find me at home filling out forms online.
They are so kind to me at the end. Thanking me with exclamation points!
How many new strings can I tie around my wrists?
And if the strings are phrased in the form of a question,
should it give me the feeling my life is rich with possibility?
I could be tied in a chair and held under house arrest.
I could be suspended above my life waiting for it to pass me by.
There is an audience inside me waiting to come out. I have locked them inside.
Please, audience, what's going to happen next?
Is it a comedy? A dark comedy? A tether that just keeps holding me right here the whole time?

Kent Shaw

What Happens to a Sentimental Animal These Days

I was left alone one night with a large machine. The machine was always moving.
Many parts were moving together.
They were very large but not living.
The machine was mainly an internal machine that was pushing other machines to get going.
With the larger machine staying in one place.
It kept me from going outside.
I was the one who would be required to move it.
Or ask it would it consider taking a little break.

This is one method for being lonely. My wife had left.
My living room had left with her.
The edges of all the pictures we had accumulated were trying to hint at the picture that was missing.
But, generally, all I noticed was the machine.

It wasn't an engine. Or it wasn't shaped like anything I am willing to describe.
Everything that I might have wished existed on the machine didn't.
Levers. Valve stems. A meter with readings that indicated "Level of Involvement."
I was trying to find something I could hold onto. I wanted to get closer.

Not that it's difficult to sleep next to a machine. But it is difficult to hold it inside you.
My wife is very tender. She's even more tender to me when she's so far away.
I can't tell her that I caressed the machine one night.
But it meant nothing.
I didn't know where it was sensitive.

"Machine." I tried to talk to it with my tender voice.
I tried pulling it inside me to get the attention of the smaller machines!
"Machine."

A large machine would make a little more sense if it looked like a human.
Preferably someone I know.
Or maybe a tall building. Or maybe a footprint.

Machines are inert. Even with a loud disgusting rutting-sound inside it.
A violence that I tried painting on the outside.
But the machine could not be expressed.
Machines are made of unusual metals that are more intense versions of whatever temperature is around them.

*

I arranged outings for my machine using an online profile. "Machine."
My wife would be glad I was concerned.
I showed the machine pictures of construction sites. Perhaps that would be interesting.
"Those machines are very busy."
They had lives to contend with. And large corporate concerns.
I tried to find petite machines. Big-voiced machines. Staged production machines.
Everywhere I looked other machines had already moved in.

One of the machines was programmed to crawl on its hands and knees wherever it went.
That was Cain.
And once I started to notice I saw Cain was everywhere.
An inert machine in one direction all its life multiplied by whatever the corporate world could afford.
Are we to be populated by Cain machines?
Are we to realize a direction of the world that is undeterred?
Are we to realize the idealism of undeterrableness?

Roger Sheffer

Warninger's Likeability Test

[Note to the 2013 version of the test: although Dr. Isadore Warninger died in 1977, of a mysterious head trauma, and although testing protocols have evolved since then, his likeability test has remained unchanged and useful, particularly to HR recruiters and counselors. It is important for test-takers to answer every question and not "over-think" their answers, nor should they try to come up with answers they believe will make them appear more "likeable," which would defeat the purpose of this test. There is no penalty for wrong guessing.]

1. Do you find me to be likeable?
a. Yes, I find you to be very likeable.
b. I don't know who you are. It's a silly question. I don't trust you.
c. No, I don't find you to be very likeable.
d. You seem desperate to be liked, whoever you may be. Why is this about you?

2. Let's say that a person is walking down the street—not necessarily in a clown costume (although he has that option), looking reasonably normal. He has just learned from the police that a gang of teenagers has robbed him of all his possessions, but he doesn't want anybody to know about it, and his neighbors and friends approach him and ask how he's doing. What should he say and/or do?
a. Keep walking, smiling, pretending he's deaf, or extremely self-absorbed.
b. Ask for help, in a sincere way.
c. The robbery never even happened, but if it makes him more likeable, he should tell people that it did.
d. None of the above.

3. Did the second question on this test make you like me more?
a. Yes.
b. No.
c. Maybe.
d. All of the above.

4. The neighbors seem to be quite concerned. They offer sympathy, casseroles, but no money. As a matter of fact, this very same thing happened to me—Dr. Isadore Warninger—not so long ago, and at first it seemed as if my neighbors, especially Tom (not his real name), were only pretending that they liked me. For example, Tom gave me an expensive belt made of alligator skin, but the belt turned out to be much too small for me. I am a portly man. Do you still like me?
a. Yes.
b. No.
c. I feel sorry for you.
d. I loathe you.

5. I am so portly that often, while I am walking down the street, in my normal tent-like garb (a one-piece oversize poncho printed to look like a gray suit, vest, white shirt, and tie), the neighbors will run inside and pull down their shades. One neighbor will even set off a civil-defense-type siren, which he believes is funny. He has a far-reaching raucous laugh, which long ago began to get on my nerves. I certainly found him to be unlikeable. Whom do you like more—that neighbor, or me?
a. I like the neighbor.
b. I like you.
c. I like you both equally.
d. I like the supposedly insincere person who gave you an alligator-skin belt that was too small for you.

6. A rock comes flying out of one of the neighborhood windows, like a meteor. It lands at the feet of the gentleman, somewhat portly, who is walking down the street minding his own business, grieving the loss of his worldly possessions. He may or may not be wearing a clown costume. He bends over and picks up that rock. Choose one of the following as the next line in this narrative:
a. He places the rock in his pocket.
b. He pulls a scientific scales from his voluminous pants pocket, sets it on the sidewalk, and weighs the rock.
c. He prays for the person who threw that rock.
d. All of the above, but in a different order.

7. With this question I am informing you that the person in the previous question was actually me, and that I did wear a clown costume that day,

including a red fright wig and honkable nose. I carried a seltzer bottle. Do you still like me?
a. Yes, I still like you.
b. Somewhat, although not as much.
c. No, but it has nothing to do with the clown costume.
d. No, because of the costume.

8. What would be the appropriate prayer to offer on behalf of a rock-thrower?
a. Since prayers are supposed to be private, I see no relevance to the issue of likeability.
b. I pray that he/she will eventually come to like me.
c. I pray for his/her soul.
d. I pray that the rock-thrower will always miss.

9. How about that alligator-skin belt, huh?
a. It might make a good noose, if your neck isn't too thick—in the event that you wish to put an end to all this misery.
b. It should be returned to the giver with an appreciative note, apologizing for your enormous girth.
c. Sell it.
d. Sell yourself.

10. At this time, I would like you all to take a ten-minute rest break. Lean back, close your eyes, and meditate. Try to block off the distractions of the every-day world, any financial burdens, health issues. Although I am not in a position to offer you a candy bar, I certainly would do so if I could. It would be dark chocolate, with almonds. Does this make you like me any better?
a. A lot.
b. Not much.
c. Not at all.
d. I resent having to answer this question during my so-called "break."

11. I was recently sitting in a coffee shop that faced a busy sidewalk in a medium-size Midwestern city not known for the quality of its coffee shops. Let's say that it was Saint Cloud, Minnesota. It could just as easily have been La Crosse, Wisconsin. Seated next to the window, slowly sipping, I was able to keep track of the foot traffic out there. Everybody looked

the same: bouffant hair, too much makeup, paisley aprons, a hundred pounds overweight. How does this observation affect my likeability?
a. It would depend upon whether this "everybody" you observed included men. If so, then I like you for your inclusiveness.
b. If you were using this question as a sneaky way of insulting women without being specific, then I hate you.
c. If you think being clever entails nasty observations about people who can't help how they look, then you're not very clever, but I like you anyway.
d. You woke up and discovered that it was only a dream, and you weren't sitting in a coffee shop in Saint Cloud, Minnesota, but lying on the ground somewhere outdoors in central Florida, inland, an abandoned cattle ranch or failed golf course. The paisley people did not exist. A vicious alligator was approaching you, head-on.

12. Do you need another break already?
a. Your empathy is not genuine. I hate you. What's with the "already"?
b. I like the built-in familiarity, but that doesn't mean that I necessarily like you.
c. I like you.
d. I would prefer more options.

13. The man who was referred to in several earlier questions (possibly an out-of-work clown, not necessarily me) continued walking down the street, not using the sidewalk (because it was in poor condition), carrying the rock in his pants pocket. The rock was so heavy that it made him appear lopsided and either likeable or unlikeable. There is a blank page at the end of this test where you may record explanations or elaborations of answers to any of the questions, or any problems you might have had while taking the test.
a. Thank you.
b. I'm fine with the short-answer format.
c. No amount of blank pages could satisfy me.
d. You didn't give me a chance to say whether the clown was likeable or unlikeable due to his lopsidedness, or due to his stupid decision to carry that meteor in his pocket when, clearly, it was the only reason for his lopsidedness, and he could have done something about it quite easily. I have no sympathy for people like that. I see them everywhere, dangling small dogs from their earlobes, growing their fingernails on one hand so long—after, say, ten or fifteen years—that the unequal weight dislocates

their shoulder. I am oblivious to how this statement might affect my likeability score.

14. A girl from the neighborhood, only sixteen, with just a learner's permit, pulled up in her bright red convertible—a recent birthday present from her stepfather—and offered a ride to the clown, who seemed to be struggling, genuinely disabled, and making very little progress on his walk through that neighborhood. Please choose one of the following as the next event in this narrative—from which the test evaluators will determine your likeability:
a. The clown removes the rock from his pocket and hits the girl on the head, causing a serious accident.
b. The girl removes the rock from the clown's pocket and hits him on the head, without serious consequences.
c. They aim the rock at a streetlight and miss, due to lack of arm strength and mutual cooperation.
d. They aim the rock at a streetlight and cause an explosion.

15. Thank you for spending time on this test. Please choose one of the following:
a. You're welcome.

Martha Silano

Address from the Konga River, Wild Waves Theme Park

The natives tattooed, profusely pierced.
On the left pec, *Nicole*. On the right pec, *Kris*.

All day my daughter shouting *Another belly*
button ring! In line for an ICEE, a woman's

back entirely inked. Too far away to read it,
but I'm betting it's Thomas Stearns: *Time present*

and time past / Are both perhaps present
in the future / A time future contained in time past

So many peach-fuzzed paunches. Innumerable
boobs, innumerable asses. So many flip-flops

here beside this river of pipes and cement.
I am the only person over fifteen without a tattoo.

If I had a tattoo what would it say? It would not say
Nicole. It would not say *Kris*. It would not be T.S.

Maybe it would be a page from *Roberts English*,
how to find books in a library: *A card is made*

for each book; these cards are filed in a catalog.
Maybe a review question: *What's the etymology*

of exit? Sometimes so much water drumming down
on our heads we cannot see. Sometimes longing

for the Big Gulp. Our human world pelts us with either/
or, with eternal present, the past foggy like a pair of goggles

in a steamy pool. We can't recall what our friend recalls,
why we decided not to apply to Barnard, doesn't know

the eternally present time past now future
of incessant like dripping water *you stupid dummy,*

insists what I tell her isn't true. Eliot is so right.
No wonder she suffered the needle for that tattoo.

I watch my daughter climb to the purple slide, holding
tight to her raft. It's almost unbearable, the sun

bearing down and no book: I had come to the house
in a cave of trees; sun and reflection wheeled by. I've never

seen so many men with stretch marks. It made my girl
so happy to ride in the One of Hearts, to gorge herself

on chicken tenders. Power-Ade and garlic fries. To ride
in front, hands above her head like a genuflecting wave.

The newborns and the lost, the just falling, the long-
married, the teens and tweens and middle-aged,

all waiting their turn beneath the convoluted tubes,
all entrusting themselves to the ones in charge,

all believing what's written on a body persists.

Ingela Strandberg

[In the Moment]

In the moment
between being and not being
the world appears in front of us
in a flat-bottomed boat

We dream that we are steering
it standing upright in ash suits

Even as embryos
we slowly move out of
swirling ashes

In the instantaneous
transits we soon notice
that we are completely alone

The animal runs beside

Our bodies are non-measurable

But something is sewing
our bodies together one after the other
The seams are beautiful
Fragile

And we will never know
when where or how long
we are human

Ingela Strandberg

[The First Touch]

The first touch
over the gear box

Tempting
Irresistible

The last one
when he sets my hand free
walking away
and I discover a ship
lying at the anchor

I have never seen
this ship before
and I know it will take him
away from me alive

And when we meet again

I´ll be a stranger
I´ll be a nobody

Just as I´ll be a nobody
before myself too
on a long long row of islands

Adam Strauss

Hapless Transport

I hope this
Interview with
Prediction becomes
One more day not
That of myth.

I resist wearing
Pig. No bladder serves
As vessel for poaching my chicken.

This cloth is all
Cheese: soft stinks
Stupefying stony.

This world is huge
Room I dither through—
Skip to my doom;
If lucky I'll
Prove gloaming's loom
Weaves Mach 7 carpet
Jets past Goblin Market.

Jason Tandon

The Engine Has Stalled

And here we are
in the middle of the bay,

the evening sun
like an egg
cracked on the mountain range,

the broken yolk
sliding towards
a couple bits of burnt fat.

Jason Tandon

Moon Poem

after Harry Martison

It hangs in the night sky
like a thumbnail—

the hand of God waving
to the other side of the earth.

Or perhaps the hand is elsewhere.
The opposite pole,

a parallel universe,
and this is a bit of His body

chewed off, spit out,
and lying on the bathroom tiles.

Kerry Tepperman Campbell

Dreaming of France #107

Windows. Windows that are doors, French doors. Since childhood she has admired French doors, equated them with gracious living and beauty, with a mysterious aspect of elegance. As a design element, they can function the way a turn in the path does in a Japanese garden, arousing curiosity and urging the viewer on.

The night her father died, she slept in the chair beside his hospital bed. He did not believe in God. For some, she knows, God is the French door, the glimpse, a partial view of what lies beyond. She could not exactly introduce her father to God so late in the game, but she thought a French door might be helpful.

That night she imagines she and her father are together in France, standing beside enormous French doors looking out at an ancient garden. In the distance she sees an armillary sphere centered in a perfectly square knot garden. Just beyond the door a sprawling lacecap hydrangea is partially visible. Its milky petals echo the moon. For her the desire to see the pale violet at the center of each petal is almost unbearable.

She and her father stand together at the door, but still he does not take the handle. She knows she cannot turn it for him. The room is suddenly cold. She looks down at their bare feet, side by side on the stone floor, and remembers how the likeness of their feet fascinated her when she was a child. When she looks up, a cloaked, hooded figure stands on the other side of the door. He holds a lantern in one hand, and opens the door into the garden with the other. "Hermes," she says.

This word nudges her father's memory, and she sees the sudden recognition as he grasps the meaning of a text read long ago. As he crosses the threshold, she is left alone at the open doorway. The fragrance of honeysuckle rushes in to cover her.

Tony Trigilio

Catholicism

The motive
wasn't loneliness.

It was silence
with a little

chastity, static
in the chasuble,

the choice to
hang the cross

facing the audience
or with its back

to us. Our table
clean of everything

but a spider plant,
its fronds pecked,

punctured by the cats.
A voice repeating

instructions through
the transistor radio.

Michael Webster Thompson

Yellow Jackets

Yellow jackets have dug a nest at the base of the low stonewall that edges the field across the street from the boy's home. He's known about the nest for weeks now, but today is the day he decides to attack it. Mr. Bruno, who owns the field, as it is technically part of his yard, left early this morning on a salmon fishing trip and won't return until Monday. He told the boy about the trip while they changed the oil on his vintage Mustang last week, the boy holding the drip pan.

Mr. Bruno is a nice man but boring, always fixing up his house and working on his car. He helps everyone with their lawns, fertilizing and edging them, making them nice and green. The boy regrets that Mr. Bruno saw his parents fighting and it makes him feel uncomfortable that Mr. Bruno told him he could come over anytime if he needed a "safe place."

The boy crosses the small suburban asphalt street. The newly laid crack-filling tar, melting in the late summer sun, sticks to the bottom of his sandals and suctions them briefly to the street before they slap up and hit his heels. Heat emanations wiggle in the air like transparent smoke trails. The boy considers scrounging for change in the couch cushions to buy a Mr. Misty at the DQ after he's done with the nest.

On the rise above the stonewall pink and white peonies teem with ants seeking the sticky clear fluid that drips down their stems. The boy hates these flowers, thinks they smell like sugary sweat socks. He wishes he could rip them all out of the ground, but he tried that once; his hands got all gummed up and he hated that more than the flowers.

So for now, they live. Maybe I'll come back with a bat, he thinks, or a tennis racket. A tennis racket would be perfect.

But today is for the wasps.

In the evergreens near Mr. Bruno's house the boy finds a stick about the length of his arm. He bends it over his knee, gently at first, then harder. It is strong.

The boy knows quite a bit about yellow jackets, as well as other wasps and bees. He had, the summer before, accidentally stepped on a mud wasp nest during a game of Capture the Flag at day camp. The swollen red stings dotting his legs intrigued him. For Christmas, his mother bought him *The Illustrated World Encyclopedia of Insects.*

The underground nest is most likely larger than a gallon milk jug this late in the summer. Yellow jackets are not only one of the most aggressive wasp species, but are also most aggressive in late summer and early autumn. Unlike bees, yellow jackets only infrequently lose their unbarbed stinger, which allows them to attack again and again.

From above the hole, he watches the yellow jackets fly in and out. They leave the nest in zooming diagonals, and return vacuumed back on the same erratic paths. Before leaving they look around as if the light blinds them and they need to get their bearings. They pause in a similar fashion when returning, letting their eyes adjust to the dark. Although the boy knows the wasps' eyes don't adjust to light, he likes thinking that they do, that the wasps are more like him.

The boy sits near the hole silently, listening to the yellow jackets zip past his head, imagining he can feel the vibration of the hive through the earth. The sun burns the back of his neck and his muscles begin to ache. He needs to move.

He stretches out his left leg and then his right, trying not to draw attention to himself. The act of slowly standing brings a rush of blood to his head. He tastes the metallic taste and his neck clenches. When the rush passes, he leans over the hole in the dirt.

With the stick he draws large circles around the hole. None of the wasps take notice and he begins to spiral in closer. As he approaches the nest entrance he begins to lose his nerve. Shivers run up his arms despite the heat.

Quit being such a pussy, he says to himself.

The boy wakes to the sound of glass breaking in the kitchen. He smells his sweat sunk into the mattress when he wakes. He flips his damp pillow. The humid breeze lifts his curtains but brings little relief. Normally, he would lie there and wait for it to be over, sometimes wrapping his pillow around his head to drown out the sound, kicking his heels into the mattress, listening for his dad's car to peel out of the driveway, or for his mother to lock herself in the bedroom and his dad to creak onto the couch.

But this fight is louder, more urgent, and he emerges from his bedroom and is embarrassed to be wearing only briefs and a t-shirt. Although his dad often walks around the house in his underwear, the boy doesn't want either of his parents to see him so uncovered.

"Get. Back. In bed," his dad says.

The boy just stands there, transfixed, unable to move.

His mother takes a few steps towards his dad. She shoves her index finger in his face. Her long hair thrashes as she speaks. Her voice, despite her trembling, remains calm.

"He doesn't have to listen to you. No one fucking listens to you, Randy."

His dad, equally calm, says, "I could kill you both right now, you know? I could burn this goddamn house down and sit in it laughing myself to death."

His mother moves in very close, so close his parents' noses almost touch. The boy backs into the corner between his and his parents' bedrooms.

She whispers, "If you had the balls to do that, which you don't, but if you did, maybe you wouldn't be such a fucking loser."

She spits in his face and some of the saliva clings to the end of his nose.

Slow motion. His dad grabs his mom by the shoulders and her eyes grow wide. Her feet leave the floor, his father's hands hooked under her armpits; he spins and tosses her through the full-length screen front door, the screen cracking loose from the doorframe and clanging on the concrete stoop.

Seconds later, she plunges back though the hole. His dad sulks, looks off into the kitchen. He doesn't see it coming. But the boy does. He sees her cock her fist, grab his father's shoulder, spin him around and punch him in the face.

A deep split gapes beneath his eye, disappearing as it fills with blood. His mother runs into the kitchen. His dad touches his hand to his face and a trail of red runs down his fingers and onto his arm. His mother returns and hands his dad a terrycloth towel.

"I didn't mean to," his mother mumbles. "This fucking ring." She takes off her engagement ring and places it on top of the television.

She approaches the boy, who is quivering in the corner, half-sitting like the endurance tests he does in gym.

"Put some pants on, baby, we gotta take Daddy to the hospital."

She tries to hug him, but he curls up tightly into himself, wedging into the corner. He smells the red wine smell on her breath. He squeezes against the wall, crab walks past her legs, and goes to his dresser for sweatpants. Catching a glimpse of himself crying in the window reflection, he wipes his tears. Then, for strength, he touches his fist to the

warping Darth Vader poster taped on the wall.

He pushes dirt into the hole. A wasp comes out and looks confused, like a dog climbing out of water, shaking itself off. When that wasp leaves he pokes more dirt into the hole. Five or six yellow jackets fly out at once and swarm his face. He runs in zigzags towards the shade of the pines, pin wheels his arms, slaps at himself.

In the trees he loses them. He inspects himself and finds a sting on his forearm. Not bad. He examines the bump for a stinger. Not finding one he spits on the sting and rubs dirt in the saliva. He waits there in the relative cool for the wet dirt to dry on the sting and heal it.

He decides that the sting wasn't worth merely agitating the wasps. The wasps deserve to be punished. What he needs to do is destroy the nest, so that he won't get stung again. To protect the neighborhood, to do something good.

At the very least, he should cover the mouth of the nest with enough dirt to make it a pain in the ass for the yellow jackets to dig themselves out.

Emboldened, he walks back across the grass.

His mother drives to the hospital quickly. Too quickly. The Explorer teeters around corners. At times it seems only two wheels are on the ground.

"Cool it, Sheila. Slow down. You're gonna kill the three of us."

"What would you care, Randy?"

"Just slow down." His father leans towards his mother, bloody towel wad pressed on his face, and though his teeth says, "You're drunk."

"So the fuck what?" She jams down on the gas, powering through a yellow light by the Jewel/Osco. "You're bleeding your face off and I want you out of this car."

His dad just stares out the window.

The boy knows about driving drunk. He remembers a party at his Aunt and Uncle's apartment. He was little then. Three or four. Throughout the party, he stayed with his cousins in a back bedroom watching Disney movies and eating microwave popcorn. All of the adults in the place were drunk and stumbling by the time they left. His dad drove home, using the curb to guide the car, his mother yelling at him the whole way: *You're crazy, Randy! You'll get us all killed!*

His mother navigates the Explorer towards the large red E hospital

entrance.

"Get out", she says.

"Love you, too, honey." His dad slams the car door behind him.

"Dad," the boy cries, opening his door. His dad leans in to the backseat to hug him before turning and walking through the automatic doors. The boy pulls the car door shut.

"I'm sorry for this, baby. All of it." She reaches back and runs her fingers through his hair. "Do you want to sit up front?"

The boy climbs over the storage console between the front seats and sits down, buckles the belt. Something cool touches his left thigh. He pulls at his sweatpants. There is a small crescent bloodstain. His father's blood.

His mother notices. "Don't worry. I can get that out," she says. They glide back home in the cooling late night air, windows down, listening to the oldies.

When they get home Mr. Bruno is working at their front door. The screen insert reattached to the frame, he duct tapes the torn bottom corner of the screen back into place. The boy watches Mr. Bruno pull one last length of tape from the roll and gently apply it to the screen.

"Why is Mr. Bruno up so late, Mom?"

"I don't know, honey. He's a strange man. Always trying to fix everything," she says, and he knows it's true. Mr. Bruno has a tool for every job. He helped his neighbors put up matching fences.

They get out of the car. "Everything okay, Sheila?" Mr. Bruno calls down the side of the house.

"Go home, Harry! It's goddamn midnight!" she yells back.

Mr. Bruno nods to himself, admiring his work, before switching off his utility light, picking up his toolbox, and walking back to his house.

As the boy is about to jam the stick into the nest's opening, he pauses. He tells himself that this will end badly, that no good can come of it. But then he jabs the stick into the nest anyway, not destroying the opening, but opening it wider. Yellow jackets pour out. He knows he has been marked, that now every wasp in the nest will be after him.

He retreats, alternating between pulling at his clothes and waving his arms around his head. The yellow jackets fly into his shirt. They sting his neck. They burrow into his hair.

He runs away in zigzags, pulling his shirt off and over his head while crossing the street, blind to traffic. He trips over the curb and falls into

his front yard by the maple. Dozens of wasps circle him and dive in to sting the bare flesh of his back and neck. They don't even hurt anymore; there are too many.

He pulls himself up and stumbles through the duct tape repaired screen door.

"Mom!"

"What is it?" she calls from her bedroom. Probably watching her stupid game shows, half asleep.

"Mom!" he yells louder, almost screams, his voice breaking.

Her bed creaks and she comes running out. "What's the matter? What happened?"

"Yellow jackets. They got me."

He stands shirtless, a few yellow jackets fly in circles around him. She grabs a magazine off the coffee table and swipes at him, brushing away the wasps.

"They're in my hair."

"What?" She pushes her own mussed hair down, using her free hand to try to work one side flat.

"The wasps."

"Come here. Come here. Sit down." She guides him to the kitchen table. "I'll be right back," she says, jogging away. "How did this happen?" she yells back.

He rests his head on the cool tile table, tracing the flowery pattern on the corner with his finger, like he did the night before while his mother and father told him they were separating. He had gone to bed and tried to cry, couldn't sleep, started fake crying. His mother told him to be quiet and go to sleep.

Sometimes he hates how well his parents know him and wishes he were more mysterious.

Life isn't fair. His dad *always* says that.

His mother returns with a brush and calamine. She scrapes the brush through his hair, pulls out a few yellow jackets that limp around slowly, unable to take flight, half dead on the tiles. The boy puts his thumb on the abdomen of a wounded wasp near his face and pushes down. The stinger and some greenish yellow guts squeeze out onto the white tile.

"Don't do that," his mother says, applying calamine to his stings.

"They fucking deserve it," he says, knowing he's crossed a line. He pushes down again, but the carcass is empty.

"What was that, Mister?"

"They. Deserve. It." He lifts his head from the table and stares at his mother angrily, but then looks away. He feels heat come to his face. His eyes burn and he knows he is going to cry.

"Baby," his mother says and leans down to hug him. He pushes her away. She grabs his arm and hugs him hard. His breathing strains under the pressure. He begins to sob, unable to catch his breath.

She kisses his hair where the wasps used to be. "They do deserve it, honey," she says. "I know they do."

But she doesn't know anything about yellow jackets.

Ross Wilcox

The Lights Are Always On Inside

I'd been in a week. I was the newest inmate, and at nineteen, also the youngest. I was in the dayroom waiting for a phone call from my parents that I was promised would come on my first night. There were only six other inmates in the Clay County Jail—seven counting Rob. They welcomed me by including me in the cribbage and rummy games, the *Monopoly* and *Yahtzee* playing. Everything was pretty good, except for the fact that my mom and dad wouldn't talk to me and I faced ten years in prison.

I obsessed on the ten years. They were holding me indefinitely until my sentencing—anywhere from a couple weeks to a couple months. I was just a harmless, nonviolent drug user, I reasoned, who'd been caught with some pot and pills. I was even enrolled in college, the hallmark of someone who intends to do something with his life. You don't send a guy like that to prison. Except that, with this last arrest, I'd violated my probation. Probation was my second chance, so this would technically be my third, were it to be offered.

As I said, I was in the dayroom, seated at the scratched-up metal table with the foldup legs, playing Doug Rummy with Chip, Manny, Jerry, and the game's namesake, Doug. Doug, who first showed us this version of Rummy, was a fat, bald, mustached man who was serving ten months for orchestrating a fraudulent Donate-to-Victims-of-Katrina scam. It was basically the same as normal Rummy, only with a bunch more wild cards. We were all reasonably clean, had showered at least once in the last three days—Clay County required you to—yet the dayroom still reeked of the stale, sour fumes of a men's locker room. The place looked like the year 1976 had chewed it up, puked it out, and left it to rot for the last thirty years. The carpet was half snotty green, half grubby blood orange. Brown lines of unknown origins snaked the yellowed walls like muddy rivers. A huge bookshelf full of Louis L'Amour paperbacks and *Maxim* magazines lined one side. A dust-covered treadmill stood erect in one corner, but it had neither a cord nor a plug-in. A stack of games rested nearby, among them *Risk, Sorry!,* and *Yahtzee*. The real centerpiece of the dayroom, though, was the old bunny-eared television. It was in the corner opposite the treadmill, and around it were a few padded chairs and one squeaky recliner. Chip, the lanky Lakota Sioux who, whenever we played

Risk, proudly chose the red figurines, was a fixture in that recliner, and he alone controlled the TV.

We only got channels 3, 4, 9, 11, 14, and 44. On a given night, Chip would put on some combination of shows—*The Shield, That 70's Show, M*A*S*H*—but always *COPS*. He loved to critique the criminals for taking wrong turns in high-speed chases, for hiding their drugs in overly obvious places within their vehicles, for failing to outrun or overpower a police officer when chased on foot. "That guy's so stupid he deserves to get caught," Chip would say once they'd snapped the cuffs on the man's wrists. He claimed to be the only guy to ever break out of the Pennington County Jail out in Rapid City.

Manny, who shaved his head and was the second-youngest after me, explained one night in our cellblock, "He broke out and led them on a high-speed chase. He made it down to Hot Springs before they got him." And then he said, with wonder in his eyes, "He's the only guy to ever break out of the Pennington County Jail."

"That's like a world record," I joked. "What happened after that?"

"He got sentenced to nine years in the pen. He was serving a sixty-day sentence."

"Jesus Christ," I yelled. "Sixty days?"

Manny shrugged. "You know you can make meth by filling a fish tank with charcoals and pouring formaldehyde on it. You cover it with a plastic sheet or glass or something and then after a while, it evaporates and crystals form on the top and then you just scrape it off and you've got meth." Meth was why Manny was serving six months.

Jerry was in his mid-thirties with thinning hair and a thick brown beard, and on that night he slapped his last set of three cards down on the table to go out and said, "Bam!" We all muttered "fuck" or "damn it" and counted up how many points we got dinged with.

I reached seventy when suddenly Chip said, "What the fuck is he doing here?"

I looked up and there was Rob, the guy who had molested his seven-year-old niece. At least that's what he was charged with and currently awaited trial for. He was in his fifties, a bit chubby, and had shitty teeth. He looked at us longingly, his brown eyes moist and hopeful.

Chip jumped up, knocking his chair over behind him. "Get the fuck out of here before I beat the fucking shit out of you."

I sat frozen in my chair, never having known anyone who molested a child and never having witnessed anyone beat the fucking shit out of

anyone. Rob looked at Doug, whom he shared a cell with. Doug nodded defeatedly, and Rob pedaled back to the door and knocked. In a few seconds, one of the jailers opened it and Rob told him he wanted to go back to his cell. Chip remained standing, poised to attack, and before the door shut he said, "Go fucking hang yourself, Rob."

Once Rob was gone, Chip sat back down. Jerry dealt another hand. Chip said, "That motherfucker is going to get stabbed in the joint." Chip was always fondly calling it the joint, because, he said, that's what people who'd been there called it.

I half-believed there would be some way I could just tell them, "Hey, my mom's a librarian at the school in Roosevelt. My dad works for the Department of Agriculture. Can I go now?" And they'd say "Sure, right this way," and there would be the sun and the trees and my mom and dad and maybe even cable television.

I half-believed that if I full-on-believed this, that it might actually happen—sort of like believing your belief can shrink a tumor.

The place was all concrete. Concrete floors, concrete walls, concrete ceilings. And it was this brownish-green concrete, like the color of expired guacamole. And everything was all steel. Steel bars, steel bunks, steel sinks, steel toilets. And it was all rusty, the grey paint peeling off in flakes. Sometimes when I was bored, I picked at it like a scab.

The base of each bunk was two soldered-together road signs, some diamond-shaped, some octagonal. Our mattresses were these tattered green canvass bags stuffed with something vaguely cushiony. The pillows were the same, only thinner, with less cushion. They gave us a spread to go over the mattress, a sheet, and a thin wool blanket. You had to have your bed made before you could go to the dayroom.

We'd all have our beds made well before 3 PM, the time they'd let us go to the dayroom. It seemed like we always had a long hour or so to kill. Someone had pulled out a *Maxim,* and Greg, the only one who wouldn't say what he was in for, was raving about a woman in an advertisement who had on a certain pair of blue jeans. Greg was in his fifties, the oldest among us. Soft-spoken, he wore glasses, was in good shape, and seemed like an all-around nice guy. Like he'd be a good father or something. For these reasons, he creeped me out.

"Right there," Greg said, his finger over the girl in the ad. She stood in a golden field with arms outstretched, her ass facing us. "That's what I like. A girl in blue jeans. Woohoo!"

"Really?" I said. "You see girls in blue jeans all the time everywhere. What's so sexy about that?"

Greg shrugged, his eyes on the magazine page. "It just does something for me."

"It's what he likes, man," Jerry said and slapped me on the shoulder. Jerry got caught transporting a bunch of guns he didn't have licenses for.

"I like a variety—black, white, red, yellow," Chip said, sweeping his hand from one side to the other across the spectrum of women.

"Yeah, we know you like a variety," said Manny, referring to Chip's practice of stashing and closely guarding the majority of the Clay County Jail's *Maxims* under his bed. From the ground, it almost reached the bottom of his bunk mattress.

"I've been trying to get that one with Christina Aguilera on the cover," Manny said, "the one where she's in the pool with the floaty thing and her big ass is sticking out of the water. But Chip won't give it up."

"I told you, Christina's my favorite," said Chip, smiling. "You can have it when I get out."

"We're never going to let you out," laughed Tiffani, the only female jailer. She was making her rounds, and she'd snuck up on us, her red hair tied in a bun. She always seemed to be half-flirting with Chip, making little jokey comments like that. She smiled at everyone and no one and disappeared.

"Come on, let me borrow the Christina mag for one night," Manny pleaded. Though we never discussed it among each other, nighttime was when we all jacked off. Of course, we were quiet and respectable about it, stroking at only a fraction of our full range of motion.

Being the newcomer, I had the one *Maxim* no one else wanted, which had Lindsey Lohan on the cover. I didn't feel as though I'd ascended the social hierarchy enough to ask someone for one of theirs that they'd, you know, stopped looking at. But in the one I did have, I'd discovered Kristin Cavallari. I didn't know who she was before, had never seen *Laguna Beach*. She was all I had, and there was a kind of fidelity we'd developed, myself and those pictures.

We were all silent for a bit until Jerry hit me on the shoulder. "Yuck, stanky ass!" he giggled, and waved the air in front of his nose. I'd farted silently, hoping it wouldn't stink. But Jerry sniffed me out, and he and the others cleared out of my cell.

Except for Manny. He remained, holding onto his orange from breakfast. "You know if you leave an orange set for like three months

or something it'll ferment or whatever and get all these psychedelic properties and you can eat it and trip balls."

"What?"

"Seriously."

Manny tossed the orange to himself and caught it. Then he left. There was no fact-checking in the Clay County Jail. You could say whatever you wanted and no one could prove you wrong.

There were hardly ever any female inmates in the Clay County Jail. But on this particular week, there happened to be two, and when that was the case, the jail's policy was to rotate the dayroom schedule each week between the male and female inmates. Normally, we'd get the dayroom from 3 PM to 11 PM, when all the good shows were on. But now we were stuck using the dayroom during actual daytime hours, from 8 AM to 3 PM, so that the women could have primetime hours.

"It's bullshit because there's only two of them and there's seven of us. Six not counting Rob," Chip said, though it went without saying that he didn't count Rob. Rob, who resided back in the second cellblock with Doug, hadn't set foot in the dayroom since Chip intimidated him. "We should get the dayroom at night. We're the majority. It's undemocratic."

"Part of democracy is protecting the minority from the tyranny of the majority," I said.

"I don't even give a fuck about the dayroom now," Manny said. "I'd rather sleep than watch Oprah."

And that week we slept like cats. Fifteen, sixteen hours a day. It's a weird way to experience time, being conscious only to eat or use the bathroom, read a chapter of a book and fall back asleep. We already had no sense of time because we never saw the sun or moon, just the constant buzzing of fluorescent lights. But it was an effective way to pass time, which is ultimately what we were doing anyway.

Despite the schedule switch, each morning, right after breakfast, Chip defiantly went to the dayroom to watch TV. For the first few days, no one went with him. On the third day, Doug joined him but came back after an hour or so and went back to sleep. The fourth and fifth days, Manny broke down and watched a few hours of TV with Chip. But on the sixth day, Chip was back to going it alone. That is, until I joined him.

I hadn't slept the previous night. My court date was coming up, and all I could think about was going to prison. It had all started innocently enough with a DUI here, a marijuana possession there. But I couldn't find

anything to do in South Dakota except go to college and try new drugs. And I couldn't stop once I started, not even when I started failing classes, not even when I got arrested, not even when my mom begged me, three times, to go to treatment. I figured I'd quit when I turned twenty-five or thirty or got a girl pregnant, whichever came first.

Possession of a controlled substance is a Class C felony, punishable by up to ten years in prison, and as I said, initially they were nice to me. They put me on probation for a year. They said if I completed probation without any hiccups, the felony would be wiped clean from my record. But I hiccupped. I got another DUI and marijuana possession. It's scary how unimportant drugs made everything else, but it wasn't as scary as the thought of prison. As a peaceful, skinny white guy, to me prison meant I would get my ass kicked and raped. I desired strongly to prevent this from happening. I needed sage prison advice, and Chip was the only one among us who had been.

"Hey, hey," Chip greeted me when I joined him in the dayroom. He was watching The Price is Right.

I took a seat next to him and launched right into it, "Chip, what's prison like?"

"Shit," he said, leaning back in his recliner, considering. "It ain't that bad. As long as you got someone putting money on your commissary. It ain't bad."

"What's commissary?"

"It's like the general store. It's where you get food and snacks and deodorant and soap and stuff."

"Speaking of soap, do they make you shower together?"

Chip smirked, sensing my fear. "Yeah."

"Fuck," I said. "I thought maybe they had individual showers by now."

"No, they still have the big communal ones. There's just rows of shower heads along the walls."

"Just tell me straight up. Is there really, like, any rape that goes on?"

Chip shifted his gaze to the television. This was an old episode, and Bob Barker, with his white ball of hair, was pointing at a red lawn mower.

"You know something funny?" Chip said. "All the soap, all the deodorant, all the toiletries in the joint are provided by Bob Barker."

"Really?" I said. Now Bob put his microphone up to the mouth of a contestant.

"Yeah. All the toiletries come in clear containers that just say Bob

Barker Soap or Bob Barker Shampoo in black lettering. You know what's even funnier? You can buy these shoes in commissary that look just like Converse All-Stars but they say Bob Baker All-Stars."

I chuckled because I imagined Kurt Cobain, instead of sporting his signature Converse All-Stars, jamming in Bob Barker All-Stars. But now a contestant was spinning the big wheel with the numbers on it and the uncertainty of which number it landed on reminded me of my own uncertain fate.

"But for real," I said, "is there any of that stuff that goes on?"

"What are you worried about, getting raped?"

"Yeah," I said, not meaning to raise my voice. "I'm actually really worried about it."

Chip shook his head. "Don't be worried about it. You're bigger than most of the guys who're in there."

"Really?" I said, examining my shoulders and chest. "I'm skinny, though."

Chip shrugged.

"What about gangs? I'm white, so does that mean I'm a target?"

He looked me over. "They'll probably leave you alone."

I nodded confidently. "So if I just keep to myself, I'll be fine, don't you think? I'll just read and that's it. I won't fuck with anyone."

Chip shrugged.

"I've never been in a fight," I said.

"Listen, when you go the joint, they put you in the hole first."

"The hole?"

"The holding cell. It's this big ass cell with all the new inmates. They put you in there while they figure out which cellblock to put you in. Now, they give you some clothes, a pair of sandals, some toiletries, shit like that. But they also give you a pair of long socks and a can of tuna."

"A can of tuna?"

Chip nodded. His eyes were widening. "They always give you one. Now, what you do is put the can of tuna in one of those big socks and tie the end of it. Then if anyone fucks with you, you just fucking whack them with that tuna sock."

I tried to imagine myself in the holding cell, which to me looked like a haunted psych ward in a horror movie. I'm lying down on my bed, just minding my own business, when all of a sudden someone gets in my face. They're talking shit to me about, I don't know, my haircut or something, and I reach for my tuna sock and smack them. Problem solved.

"That's what my cousin did," Chip explained. "He used the tuna sock. He's smaller than you."

A woman jumped up and down and hugged Bob Barker because she just won A Brand New Car! They zoomed in on Bob's face and you could see all the makeup caked on, so much that his skin tone was orange.

I said, "Chip, is it true you were only serving a sixty-day sentence when you broke out of the Pennington County Jail?"

Chip nodded.

"And then you got nine years in the pen?"

Chip smiled.

"What the fuck?" I said. "Why would you do that?"

He shrugged. "I don't know. Going to the joint, it's like a rite of passage in my family."

I wanted to tell him how fucked up that was. That in my family, going to college was a rite of passage. That, in fact, right in this very town was the flagship institution of higher education in the state of South Dakota. I, myself, had gone there for a semester and a half before winding up in here. Perhaps he ought to give it a shot. But then I thought, maybe these are the types of things white guys get beat up for saying. So instead I said, "Is it true they allow conjugal visits in the—"

But Chip cut me off. "Shut up," he said, nodding at the TV. "Judge Judy's coming on."

A few days later, unannounced, my parents came to visit in the morning. I hadn't seen them or spoken to them since getting locked up over a month ago. Tiffani woke me up and—with my shaggy hair matted and jutting in various directions, my body clothed in the baggy orange V-neck t-shirt and orange pants—led me down the dank concrete corridor to one of the visitor rooms.

Inside the seven-by-seven foot space, there was a beat-up wooden chair, a plastic counter, and yes, a black phone resting idly in its hook on the wall, its segmented steel cord coiling out like the body of a snake. The thick glass had those intersecting lines forming little x's and diamond-shaped squares all throughout it.

On the other side of the glass sat my dad, doing his best to muster a smile. His thin hair looked a bit whiter and uncombed, his typically well-groomed beard a bit scraggly. Behind his glasses, his eyes were tired, and bags hung beneath them, weighing them down, as if it were a strain to keep them open. I could tell he hadn't been sleeping.

My mom sat next to him. Her brown eyes moist, her lower lip quivering and enveloping her upper lip, she could barely hold it together. I thought she would lose it at any moment. She, too, looked a bit greyer as she had, for the first time I could remember, allowed her roots to grow in a quarter of an inch.

In addition to my parents, my Uncle Brad and his daughter Maria were there. They both gazed at me in what I could tell was an attempt to repress any signs of fetishized awe. There were only two phones on the visitor side, so I talked to my mom and dad first.

"Hey, Rossy," my dad said in a toothy grin. He called me Rossy on two occasions: when he hadn't seen me in a while, and to ease tension in the room. This time, it was both.

"Hey, dad. Hey, mom," I said, my voice low and froggy, the first words I had spoken that day.

My mom made a sound but didn't actually speak. Instead, she covered her mouth, set the phone down, and cried. I looked at Brad and Maria, angry and embarrassed that they'd come, that they were permitted a front row seat to me breaking my mom's heart.

And I knew that's why I hadn't heard from my parents. Because it caused my mom too much pain. I hated that truth, but there it was. She could love me beyond reason, and she did, but when I crossed the threshold—the threshold being my transformation into the demon drug phantom who appeared only on holidays or to ask for money—she had to let go, for that was the point at which, for her, loving me became a black hole she got lost in.

"How you doing in there?" my dad asked. "How's the food?"

My mom covered her face and shook her head. I could hear her sobs through the glass.

"The food's fine. They get it from Cherry Street Grille, you know that restaurant when you first pull into town? We've already had green bean casserole twice this week, though."

There was a pause. My dad didn't know what to say. I didn't, either, so I said, "They let us go in the dayroom for eight hours each day. There's a TV and a big shelf of books and some board games. Last night these guys buzzed each other's heads. It's funny, but we're always watching *COPS*."

My dad stared blankly at me for a moment, then chuckled.

I said, "We don't shower together, in case you were wondering. They have two individual showers in different locations that we take turns using."

He only wanted to protect my mom. He only ever wanted that, yet here they were. Somehow, he'd convinced my mom to come.

"That's good to know," my dad said.

My Uncle Brad picked up the phone from in front of my mom and said, "We'll miss you in Chile."

My mom, my Uncle Brad, my cousins Maria and Camille, and my Grandma Luisa were all going to my grandma's homeland for two weeks. I was supposed to go, up until I got incarcerated.

I shook my head. "I wish I could go," I said, "but my furlough didn't go through."

Brad nodded. Normally we laughed at the easy sarcasm in our exchanges. He handed the phone to Maria and she said, "I hope you're okay." She smiled at me. Growing up, in junior high and into high school, I felt like she always looked up to me. I was popular. I was good at sports. I got good grades with minimal effort. She used to ask me what were then the important questions about life, like what bands to listen to, what movies to watch, what books to read. But she had quit, a few years ago, asking me for recommendations or advice.

Nevertheless, I said, to assert my worth as a cousin, "If you need something to read on the plane, you should check out Mary Gaitskill. Anything by her is good. *Bad Behavior* in particular, though."

The conversation didn't last much longer. I told them how I'd learned to play cribbage. I told them how I'd read a book called *Ishmael* by Daniel Quinn and *Memoirs of a Geisha* by Arthur Golden, the only two books that weren't Louis L'Amour.

The last thing my dad said to me was, "It doesn't feel good going to bed at night knowing your son's in jail." The one and only thing my mom said was, "Please read God's word."

After they left, Tiffani escorted me back to the cellblock. She handed me two cans of Grizzly wintergreen long-cut chewing tobacco—courtesy of my dad—and a fancy new copy of the King James Bible with gold-trimmed thumbnail indexes.

I sat on my bunk and opened the Bible and found inside a little stitched-together green cross, accompanied by a note. The note said Ross, Take this with you in court. I love you, Mom. I stared at the cross for several moments before snatching it up and squeezing it. I closed my eyes and felt my mom near me. We were at home on the rose-patterned couch in our living room. We moved through the years of my youth and she sat on the couch and I was in sixth grade and she listened to me tell her that

I liked Amanda and later, in high school, when Jessica dumped me, she held me on that couch and she listened to me play a new song I'd made up on the guitar and she told me it was beautiful and she listened to a new poem I'd written and smiled and said she loved it.

I opened my eyes and my cheeks were damp. I stuffed the Bible under my bed. I laid back on my bed and clutched the green cross against my chest. I wished it was enough to deaden the fear.

I closed my eyes again and hoped that, when I opened them, it would be different, that I'd see the sun or the moon or some form of outside light, that I wouldn't be alone. But I kept them closed and realized that all of us were alone. Chip, whose family was back on the decaying, lawless reservation in Pine Ridge. Manny, whose meth-running buddies were still back in Belle Fourche, northwest of Rapid City. Greg, whose wife and son were at his home up in Parker. Jerry, whose homeland was Minnesota. And Doug and Rob, those of the second cellblock, I suppose they had each other. Chip called them butt buddies. Surely, though, there was someone on the outside who missed them.

Suddenly my head filled with everyone I knew and I wondered what they were doing at that exact moment—my friends Jim and Randy, my ex-girlfriend Jessica, my brothers Brett and Gabe, my cousins Maria and Camille and Allison and Lisa, my former teachers Mrs. Hawley and Mrs. Limoges, the girl named Samantha I'd slept with one night at USD and who hated my guts afterward, Jimmy Page and Thome Yorke and Isaac Brock and all my favorite musicians, my Grandma Mary and my Grandma Luisa, everyone.

I sat up, threw the green cross against the wall, and hissed fuck. I hated this place because I wanted to be anywhere else but this place. I realized this place was pointless because it wasn't out there and by extension I was pointless because I was in here and out there continued on.

And then I realized that's the fucking point of this place.

The Clay County Jail is actually just the basement of the Clay County Courthouse. On my big day, I put on my orange suit and Tiffani handcuffed me and rode with me up the rickety elevator to the third floor, where the courtroom was.

To me, the courtroom looked stately. High-ceilinged, lots of intricately-carved wooden columns, painted images of gesticulating Greeks in robes on the walls. The gallery was composed of several rows of

pew-style wooden benches, and I spotted my dad among those seated. The bailiff let me sit by him, a courtesy, I was told, the court didn't normally extend to inmates.

My dad smiled and said, "Hey, Rossy."

"Where's Mom?"

He shook his head, lowered his eyes to his lap. "She can't handle it."

Friday is felony day at the Clay County Courthouse, where, in addition to all the other cases on the docket, they hear the pleas of those facing prison time. Unfortunately for me, they proceeded in alphabetical order, which left me, of surname Wilbur, the very last one on the list. My dad and I sat and watched as they paraded each criminal up to face the Honorable Judge Art Rush, a handsome grey-haired man with a matching mustache.

There was a tattooed Mexican man who plead guilty to possessing five pounds of marijuana and got sentenced to twelve years in prison, a nondescript middle-aged woman who plead guilty to insufficient funds and was ordered to pay two-thousand dollars restitution, a beefy young country boy who plead guilty to reckless driving and was fined just short of four hundred dollars. They had a group of five people all facing DUI charges come up as a group and enter their pleas in near-simultaneous succession. At one point, the court realized it had made a mistake and that there was an inmate downstairs in the holding cell who was supposed to be in court. Judge Rush spoke into an intercom and ordered Tiffani to bring the individual up, which caused, in my perception, a seemingly inordinate delay.

Finally, after three excruciating hours, it was my turn.

I still don't know what exactly happened that day, or to be more precise, why it happened. I can't call it justice, and I don't like the word mercy either. I walked up the aisle, past the little wooden gate, and stood in front of the bench next to my portly, court-appointed public defender. I was given a chance to speak, and I gave the same speech I had twice before, "I know I made a mistake, but I'm serious about staying clean this time. I'm going to Narcotics Anonymous, and I'm going to get a sponsor. I want to earn my degree and become a productive member of society."

Judge Rush banged his gavel and said, "I sentence you to three years in the state penitentiary, to be fully clothed, fed, and cared for, for the duration of your sentence—to be suspended. In addition, I order you to attend and successfully complete a minimum thirty-day inpatient drug treatment program."

And that was it. My ears rung with the words I sentence you to three years in the state penitentiary, and I turned to my lawyer and he was smiling and he whispered excitedly, "Yes! That's what we wanted."

I said, "But he sentenced me to prison."

"But the sentence is suspended. That means you're on probation for three years. But you don't have to go to prison. Only if you violate again."

"Seriously?" I still didn't believe him.

The court adjourned and Judge Rush disappeared to his chambers. The stenographer and state's attorney packed up their stuff and jetted. The bailiff said, "Okay, show's over folks." My attorney led me past the bar, where my dad stood anxiously waiting.

"Is he going to prison?" my dad asked.

"No," I said. "I got a suspended sentence. I'm on probation again."

My dad shook hands with the public defender, thanked him profusely. I told myself over and over, I'm not going to prison. I'm not going to prison. It barely felt real. The relief came on in intermittent but steadily more intense waves, like the effect of a powerful drug slowly taking hold.

Was it because I'm white? Was it my speech? There was no good reason that Tiffani escorted me back down to the cellblock to await transport to a treatment center rather than the state penitentiary.

When I got back to my cell, I unclutched the little green cross and stared at it. It was bent now from how tightly I'd gripped it. I thought, Mom, did you do this?

I had to wait another week to be transported to Keystone Treatment Center up in Canton, just south of Sioux Falls, bringing my stay to an even two months. In that time, a skinny middle-aged man joined our cellblock. He committed arson. But not throw-some-gasoline-and-light-a-match arson. Elaborate arson. While his ex-wife was out of town, he burned her house down by setting little candles all around the house's base—one hundred and nine in all—and lit them, one by one. Then he stood by the sidewalk and watched the candles slowly burn until they melted into the gasoline he'd splashed all around the foundation.

When he told us that, I thought, You are fucking crazy, but what I said to him was, "Damn, dude." Chip just shook his head and chuckled, as if it all made perfect sense. Manny told the guy a way to make meth with battery acid and ammonia and some other shit from under your sink, but I tuned him out. By this time, Jerry and Greg had been released.

One of my last nights in jail was the night before Rob, the child molester, would face his verdict and, if convicted, sentencing. It was pretty late, past midnight, and I was playing Cribbage with Chip. The table in our cellblock was right against the wall separating our cellblock from Doug and Rob's cellblock.

"Hey, you guys," said Doug. "Does anyone have any chew?" Because our cellblocks were adjacent, we could slide stuff back and forth along the ground—games, cards, but most often chew. People were always running out, but I always had an ample supply thanks to my dad.

"Rob could really use some chew," Doug explained. "He's got his sentencing tomorrow morning and he's real nervous."

Ever since my suspended sentence I'd been giving stuff away—stamps, envelopes, a few dollars here and there, and plenty of chew. I grabbed my can of Grizzly wintergreen and stood from the table. But Chip stared me down.

"Tell Rob to fuck off and die," Chip said. He kept his eyes locked on me. I gripped my chew can. Chip had the same look in his eyes that he did that night back when Rob tried to enter the dayroom. I legitimately thought that if I slid this chew down to Rob, Chip would come at me. I thought: I could really use a tuna sock about now.

But I crouched down and held the chew on the ground just beyond the bars. I said, "Doug, I got some chew for you. Here it comes." I gave it a little push. It only had to travel five feet or so. It glided scratchily for a few seconds and came to rest.

"Thanks," Doug said, sounding more excited than grateful. "Thanks, Ross."

"No problem," I said, meeting eyes with Chip. The intensity in his face was murderous. "Have the rest of that can."

"There's over half a can here," Doug said.

"Keep it."

And then I heard Rob's voice for the first time. It must have been the first time Chip heard it, too, because the bad-ass, angry tightness on his face loosened into a perky curiosity. A high-pitched, gravely-from-disuse, peepy-sounding voice said, "Thanks, Ross." I stared Chip down for a few more seconds. I said, "You're welcome." And then I walked back to my cell.

The next morning, Rob got convicted and sentenced to thirty-five years in prison. We caught a glimpse of him as he was transported from the elevator to the jail's entrance, where'd he'd immediately be transported to

the hole (you know what that is) up in Sioux Falls. His wrists and legs were shackled, and two sheriff deputies gripped either of his arms. We probably saw him take five steps, and after that, we only heard the clanking of his shackles, and then the steely slamming of a door.

I don't know who found out Rob got the thirty-five year sentence; one of the jailors must've leaked it to us. Rob was fifty-six years old, had diabetes, and took medication for high blood pressure. Chip stated the obvious, "That motherfucker'll die in the joint."

Two days later, they released me to my dad. I climbed in the car and asked, "Where's mom?"

My dad shook his head.

He gave me a ride up Interstate 29 to Keystone Treatment Center, where I'd get help for my drug problem. The sun was beautiful; the trees were beautiful; the grass, the roads, all of it. It wasn't bittersweet to leave Chip, Manny, Kristin Cavallari, or any of them behind. It was just sweet.

Except that I sat in the passenger seat, and that seat belonged to my mom. All I had was this little green thread-cross, which I clutched tightly in my pocket. But she came up that first Sunday for Family Day.

She cried again, and I held her, but she was there. I glanced over her shoulder at my dad, and he nodded, hopefully.

Caroline Zeilenga

Two Hundred Words for Love

When Tony calls I am back home, standing in my mother's kitchen with my hands in a bowl of pastry dough.

"I thought you'd be at school," he says. "I was calling your Mom because I lost your number."

I haven't been in touch with Tony in months. I haven't even thought of him, not as much as I probably should have. He went to Iraq, I went to college. We wrote letters for a while, until I gave up on that.

"But where are you?" I ask. He tells me that he's in post-deployment, headed home for good in another week. I fill a pastry bag and pipe out dough in little kisses.

"How was sophomore year?" Tony says.

"It didn't work out." I feel like a derelict saying it. "How's Jess?"

He hesitates. "It didn't work out."

There's a noise in the background and then Tony tells me he has to go. Before he hangs up he asks if I will go with his family to the base next week, and he gives me the phone number at his parents' house. I pretend that I don't remember it from high school and write it down.

"I love you," I say.

Tony laughs. "Yeah," he replies, then he is gone.

When I hang up the phone, Tony's voice keeps skipping on the turntable of my brain. Hearing it jolts me backward in time: it's like the real world never happened, art history is just some other idiot's major to fail out of, and suddenly I'm living for free in my mother's house again. Instead of a letdown, life is just one big, blinding orb of possibility.

"You need to be careful," my mother says, entering the kitchen. I doodle on a scrap of paper so I don't have to look at her.

"They aren't the same when they get back," she says gently. "They want different things."

There is some story about my mother, some marine in California before my father. An engagement that fell apart before her marriage, which fell apart later.

"They want to be settled. They want something normal," she says.

"He sounds ok to me."

"That's not what I'm saying."

Pretty soon a cartoon arm is dangling over the side of a bathtub and there's a tiny quill pen. I've finished *Death of Marat* on the back of my mother's bank statement. The oven timer goes off and I set down the pen. I've never made gougeres, but I hope my mother likes them because there's no way in hell I'm going to eat them. Butter, milk, cheese—that shit makes you fat.

"It's fine," I say. My mother goes back to her desk in the den.

"I love you," I say to the empty room.

It's all over the local papers: *Deployment Drawing Down, 96 Troops Due Home from Iraq*. The evening news starts a nightly countdown: 5 days to go for guard! 4 days to go! 3 days! My mother hands me a sympathy card. *Thinking of you at this Difficult Time*, it reads on the inside.

"Here," she says. "It's for Maggie and Bud. Sign your name."

Maggie is a friend of my mother's from work, and sometimes on Sundays they sit in the living room knitting sweaters. Sometimes Maggie puts down her needles and wipes her eyes, and my mother holds her hand.

Maggie's son was deployed with Tony, then he was killed by a roadside bomb. The war was still new then, and casualties got people's attention. The newspaper articles didn't dwell on the specifics of the accident, except to say that he was driving in a military convoy. At the funeral, my mother and I stood on the football field with everyone else in town and bowed our heads while a minister's voice boomed out of some staticky speakers. The marching band huddled on the twenty yard line and the brass section played "Taps." Amidst a lot of official gunfire Maggie and Bud and the son's wife looked out flatly from their folding chairs, and beside them the state senators and the governor, and then a man in a dress uniform set off a cannon. When it was done my mother walked onto the stage to hug Maggie and they stayed stuck like that for a long time, while the snow wandered down and dusted their dark wool coats. The son was a few years older than Tony and I. He was not a man I remembered.

"Mom, I hardly even know them," I protest.

She looks at me like she is surprised by all the ways I can find to disappoint her. "If everyone's kid came home except yours, wouldn't you at least want someone to remember that?" she says.

Tony was my best friend in high school. Even after he got together with Jess we spent a lot of time driving around, watching movies, pondering cliché ideas about life in big, starry fields or the tops of mountains at

night. In a cow pasture, Tony taught me to sprint barefoot on my toes. We spent a whole summer hiking 4,000-footers in the dark. At the peaks, he showed me the different ways to make a fire—matches, sure, but flint and bow drills and wind and pelting rain, too.

"I'm going to teach you to survive," Tony said.

The hangar at the base is a stuffy sea of old couples and young women and some men and a lot of children, balloons and posters hovering above everybody's heads. Then they arrive, a river of sand-colored soldiers in their combat uniforms and the place is like a car speaker blown out with so much screaming and cheering. Tony hugs his mother first, lets her cry on his shoulder, and he shakes the hands of his father and brother and grandfather so fiercely he looks like he is delivering a mortal blow to some invisible thing in the air between their bodies.

His blond hair is much shorter than it was in high school. Having it cropped close to his head makes his face seem broader, his forehead taller, his dark eyes sunk back in his head. He looks like maybe life is starting to wear on him.

I stand back a little and smile because it feels like what I'm supposed to do, and then he hugs me so tightly my feet come up off the ground for a second and I like this weightless feeling. His neck smells like soap and sweat, and having his arms wrapped so tightly around me, just below my shoulder blades, reminds me that he used to do this at parties to make my back crack.

"Welcome home," I say into his scratchy shoulder.

He sets me back down and says with a big exhale, "Fucking-A, it is good to be here."

Everyone laughs and his mother cries some more while she is laughing, and as they move toward the car in one chattering mass I follow a few steps behind, feeling like the ghost of someone else.

You can tell what's important to people by how many words they use to describe it. Before I left school someone in my dorm told me this wasn't true, but you know the whole Inuit have 200 words for snow thing? Thin snow under fir trees. Windblown tundra snow. Dusting snow on sea ice. Love. If something isn't very important, there's probably only one word for it. Other than baking, this is my newest experiment: If we just have one single-syllable word, how many different meanings can I give it? For the last few weeks I've been emailing all of my friends just to tell them I

love them. One of them sent a reply asking if I was thinking about suicide.

When Tony calls a few days later my mother answers and invites him over for dinner. He's eaten at our table a thousand times before, but always in the way that Moms end up feeding any of the kids that are hanging around at suppertime. She puts on an apron, spends the afternoon rolling out pasta dough, marinating chicken. Things are getting complicated.

"Mom, this is ridiculous," I complain. "We could be eating frozen pizza. It doesn't have to be a thing."

But she smiles like she hasn't heard me—or worse, like what I have said is very amusing—and goes back to dicing peppers.

"Mom, are you high?" I ask for effect.

She giggles. "Oh wouldn't that be a riot."

"You do realize I'm not going to like *date* Tony, right?"

"Of course, dear."

So why is she still looking so pleased with herself? I picture me, and Tony, and try to imagine how my mother thinks about us.

"You think Tony's some kind of good influence, don't you?"

She looks up. "Well, you can't say he's a bad one."

My mother holds the pasta bowl out in front of her while Tony serves himself. He looks her in the eye when he says thank you.

"This is the most incredible pasta I've ever had," he tells her.

My mother's face glows pink.

"You should take lessons," Tony says to me.

"Sure, maybe that's what I'll do," I reply. "Live the American Dream through pasta."

"You could do that."

"I could," I say, "but I'd rather just live like a crazy person in my mother's attic for the rest of my life."

My mother laughs in that persistently good-natured way of hers. "At least you're learning what you *don't* want to do," she suggests.

I shake my head.

"Well, you *are* a good baker," she continues. "What about culinary school? Or illustration—whatever happened to illustration?"

"I think school is bad luck for me."

"Sweetie, you've got to make your own luck in this world."

There is only one word for luck, too. Suddenly I think I can't possibly shove even one of these rounds of bread in my mouth. Tony is watching

me and not saying anything and my mother's motherly optimism is hanging in the air above the candles, and I look down at my napkin and realize my eyes are watering. I am about to fucking cry over this plate of pasta. I consider pushing my chair out and running from the room like a little girl, or shooting my mother down with some quip about making the best pasta in a town that's not even on the map, but neither of these makes any goddamn sense at all so I just hang my head like Marat posed in the bathtub.

Finally my mother clears her throat at the same time that Tony says "Well, I will say one thing about this place, the roads are a lot more fun to drive than in Fallujah."

This doesn't quite work, but my mother forces herself to laugh and then asks him if he remembers the time he found her stranded on the side of Center Road; the time he slithered around in the April mud to change her tire while she picked cowslips in the ditch for him to bring home to his mother. Tony says it wasn't as bad as she is making it sound, but that his mother put the flowers in a vase on the kitchen table, and then everything is rolling again.

After dinner I tell my mother we're going out. She seems a little disappointed, but she hugs Tony and then she hugs me too, and Tony and I stand in the driveway looking back and forth from my beater to his father's station wagon, the same one we always rode around in.

Tony points to the wagon. "I'll drive."

"You sure?"

"I'm driving," he says, and I climb into the passenger seat.

"Where are we going?" I ask when we've been on the road awhile.

"Where do you want to go?"

I shrug. I wonder how many thousands of times these two questions have crossed in this car.

"I know," he says. I wait for him to go on but he doesn't, so I shove the dangling cassette tape in the stereo slot. It bursts into the dark space that is the two of us inside this metal shell: old and stupid noise not as tough as it sounds, the stereo turned up too high so that we both reach for the volume at once. Steppenwolf or some lame shit like that. I eject the tape and toss it dramatically into the back seat.

"My Dad's gonna be pissed," Tony says and we laugh.

I flip through the radio but it's mostly commercials. The only thing we find is some sad country song. Not one of the usual twangy ones about cheating hearts or poker but this man and woman crooning miserably

against each other over something big they have lost. It's better than silence, so I leave it on, but there's this weight on my chest and I keep thinking about the maple trees without any leaves on the cover of Maggie and Bud's sympathy card.

"If you want to, you know, talk about anything, I'm over here," I say.

"Ok," he says back.

The man is singing again, burying stuff in the yard. Memories or bottles or something.

"So do you want to talk about anything? That happened?"

"No." After a minute Tony says, "They make you do a lot of talking before you leave. They don't send you home until you're pretty much talked out."

"Oh."

Lullabies, funerals, pictures, something about drinking again. The woman this time.

"Do you want to talk about anything?" Tony asks.

"Nope."

"Ok."

The song ends and another one starts and finishes, and then Tony says with certainty, "You're gonna fly."

His words startle me. I've kind of forgotten about him. I was thinking about luck. What was the point of getting a degree or falling in love? What good was making your own luck if you weren't born with any? "What are you talking about?" I ask.

But Tony is already signaling into the parking lot of our high school. I haven't been here since the memorial service, though I'm not sure if Tony even knows where the service happened, so I try to think about the last time I was here before that, which would have been our senior year.

"No way," I groan.

"Come on," Tony replies. "You don't even know what we're gonna do."

"I'm not getting out of the car."

I unbuckle my seatbelt but stay put. Tony gets out without me, puts on a backpack he has stashed in the backseat, then comes around and opens my door. He pulls on my arm and when I still don't move he ducks into the car, wraps himself around my waist and hauls me out like he's removing a carcass.

"There's nothing left of you," he says disapprovingly when I am out. His hand lingers on my waist.

We stand under the streetlight, but I feel like a moth battering itself to death in this brightness and I am relieved when Tony takes my hand and tugs me across the parking lot, like this is the most normal thing we could do. And it is.

"Now!" Tony shouts, and I plunge the pole into the pit and kick my feet up over my head. I balance mid-air for a second, thinking the scales will be against me—I will slip back the way I came, brains splattered on the tar runway. But Tony is spotting by the pit below with both arms on the pole and he resists its falter. Then I am hurtling forward again, over the bar, plummeting down into the mat.

"Nice," he says. "Do it again."

I hold the pole like a jousting rod and jog back down the runway toward the dark oval of the track, and when I get to the end of it I turn and spring again, up on my toes like I am being chased. Like no matter what else happens, I will not be caught. Tony cues and I spear the metal pit again and arc myself upwards, but the timing is wrong and I barely get off the ground.

"Do it again," he says. "You can't hesitate."

I try a few more times without much success. I hate the fact that Tony is down there spotting, waiting for me to miscalculate and crash, but also I love it.

Finally, I get the speed and the timing and the push right again, and up high I curve my body like a dolphin, shove the pole away from me and land on my back on the mat.

"Perfect!" Tony calls. "That was eight feet!"

I am still sprawled on the mat, which smells like plastic and mildew, when Tony picks up his backpack and flops down beside me. He pulls out two cans of beer and hands me one.

"I can't believe you never did track," he says.

"Pole vault might be the best legal activity ever," I confess. "You used to do this, right?"

A floodlight is casting off the track shed, and in its dim twilight I see him nod.

"Maybe you should coach or something. You're good at it."

"Maybe," he says, downing the beer and opening another. "If I ever make it to college, maybe I'll vault then."

"You should," I say again.

Tony lies back next to me and I point out the big dipper, which is the

only constellation I know.

"You were supposed to get a book out on them," he tells me, though this is something I don't remember at all. "You were supposed to learn the constellations and then teach me on one of our hikes."

"Really?" I am doubtful. "I'll put it on the life list."

"Why did you leave school?" he asks suddenly.

It's like thrusting Steppenwolf into the tape deck, jarring you from one kind of moment into another, something loud and pointless you weren't expecting.

"I don't know." I want to roll off the mat and slink down into the sand of the shot-put pit like some kind of beach creature, but I lie there and wait.

"What happened?" Tony persists.

This isn't part of the plan. College is something that came and went, some otherworldly experience that we did not share.

"Nothing. It never happened."

"Fine," Tony says.

I sit up and reach for another beer, and when I settle back in Tony puts an arm under my head. If it were anyone else this would be some unspoken breaking point—get away now, before this turns into a mishap, or lean in and let things go like they sometimes do. But it is only Tony and I know this is just another word for love.

We talk some more about the stars, and about the people we used to know, and about the disadvantages of living again with our mothers. Tony smells like cigarettes, though I do not remember him smoking, and motor oil, like maybe he has been working on cars recently, and I lie still with my head on his arm. I can feel his pulse there, knocking on the back of my skull like he is waiting for me to answer, but we just lie next to each other until I am drunk and sleepy. Being back here with him is like reliving your first snowfall.

A couple of nights a week, Tony and I drink beers together away from our parents' houses. When he drops me off I sit up watching fireflies out my bedroom window, bursting into tiny explosions of light in the backyard.

"Did you meet any guys in college?" Tony asks one night. I know that he means did I meet any guys he would approve of.

"They're not real," I say, patting his knee reassuringly.

"You ever think about getting married?" he asks, and when I jerk my head around he must catch my expression, because he shudders. "Jesus,

not to me. I just mean in general. In life."

I shrug. "Doubt it," I say. "Then again, yes, I probably will. Unless I want to live in my old bedroom forever, it's probably the only way out of here. What about you?"

"Who knows. I thought I was going to propose to Jess when I got back. I don't really want to die alone."

"That would suck."

We are sitting on the steps of this old farmhouse where no one lives anymore. Kids have smashed out all the windows. I grind a shard of glass into the dirt with my shoe. Tony is looking out into the scrubby field like he's waiting for life to materialize there again, but it's so obvious the cows are all gone and the barn is collapsed in a heap behind us that I feel sorry for him.

"How about this," I begin. "If we're both still here at thirty, and we're both still single, we'll get married. So we don't die alone."

"Thirty?" he says.

Even at twenty, thirty is another world altogether, something so far away and unimaginable you're not even sure you'll live to see it.

"Thirty." I hold out my hand. He shakes it the way he shook the hands of the men at the base.

When July comes I paint the upstairs bathroom, which is what I promised my mother I would do last month in lieu of rent, and I go to my figure drawing class at the studio downtown on Friday afternoon. The model is a tall, slender man, probably early forties, with a long brown ponytail and a fascinating jawline. He stands with his weight shifted to one hip, a simple pose, but I can't get the shadowing right on his face and his feet won't stay planted on the paper no matter how many times I draw them. It is July 3rd, the day before Independence Day, though for some reason this is the date the town chooses to celebrate, and the streets are already filling with kids and flags and veterans in their customary caps. I have to hurry out of class to get my car down the main street and away from town before the parade starts.

The familiar little lump drops into my stomach on the drive home and I roll down the windows so that the wind shakes me alive, and I change the radio station a dozen times but still it doesn't leave. The house is empty when I get home. My mother has driven to Maine to visit her sister for the holiday weekend. I open a beer and drink it in four big slugs. I bake a batch of oatmeal raisin cookies to fill the house with something

that smells good. I put the radio on in the kitchen and turn it up loud, and when I still can't throw the feeling of failure I go outside to the yard. Darkness has fallen but I wheel the push mower out of the garage and yank it alive to hear something roar. After a while I let the handle loose and the motor coughs and the blades spin and spin for as long as they can but then they lose steam and are still.

I pick up the phone and dial my aunt's house. Who calls their mother on a Friday night? Even losers have plans on Fridays. I try to come up with a reason to call, some dumb question about the house or a message on the machine for her. I wish we had a dog so I could ask if she'd remembered to feed it.

"Hi honey," my mother says when my aunt gives her the phone. I hear the clink of a glass and my aunt laughing in the background.

"Hi."

"Is everything ok?"

"Fine."

"Just calling to chat?"

"Did you leave the stove on?" The words rush out of my mouth.

"What's that?"

"Because it was on when I came home."

My mother is slow to answer. She sounds confused. "I didn't even cook anything today. I left before lunch."

I am suddenly furious with her. "You could have burned the house down."

"Sweetie, are you sure?"

"Why would I make this up?"

"Oh my God," she says softly.

Some little triumph fills up in me and for a second I feel better. But then I look around and I am still standing in my mother's kitchen all by myself.

"I have to go."

"I'm sorry," she replies.

I put my palm down on each of the four burners, one after the other like I am giving a blessing. I let my hand linger there, tempting the universe to make one of them hot.

I go upstairs and open the bureau with the Hello Kitty stickers on it, which once again holds my socks and underwear. I am about to get high when I hear car tires crunching on the gravel drive. We don't live near a damn thing, and our driveway is so long no one would cruise up it by

mistake.

The darkness gets my mind sprinting, and as I walk downstairs my skin crawls. I remind myself about the chapters in the library books. I've been reading a lot about criminals lately—rapists, serial killers—and there seem to be two conflicting survival strategies when confronted. One: talk jovially and incessantly, to humanize yourself. Two: utilize the element of surprise. Step close and grab them by the throat before they can make a move. Pull their face in close to yours and scream threats. But both strategies say one thing the same—no matter what else happens, do not show fear.

I am decidedly on the side of the second strategy when the doorbell rings, but instead I find Tony on the step. I offer him a beer and he comes in and asks if my mother and I keep anything harder in the house.

"Yeah, nice to see you too," I say, but already he is following me into the kitchen and I am pulling a bottle of gin down from the cabinet.

"Your Mom's car is missing," he says.

"Oh is it? That explains why I couldn't find her." But the words don't seem to register with him at all, so I add, "she's in Maine with my aunt."

"Huh." He is looking out the kitchen window, so that I'm not sure if he's responding to me or thinking about something else altogether. He throws back the glass and asks for a refill. We get hopelessly drunk, sink into the couch and flip through channels on the television.

"Want to see something?" Tony asks. I shrug.

He grabs my arm and pulls me up. I follow him out the door, past the abandoned lawn mower to the driveway.

"Look," he says, but I already am. A massive silver truck is gleaming there, so polished the moon is reflecting off the hood.

"No way," I say, which makes Tony grin.

"I just got it today."

I step closer to the truck. A piece of paper is still fixed on the backseat window, and my eyes blur across a heading, a price, a list of words and numbers indicating fuel economy and four wheel drive and safety ratings.

"It's *new*."

"I didn't spend 18 months in the desert for free."

I circle the truck with a reverence that I can feel Tony enjoying. I wouldn't trust my rust-box to get as far as the highway.

"Joy ride?" he suggests.

"Fuck yeah."

"When did you turn into such a sailor?"

"When?" I reply, like I am just the me I have always been and there is no beginning and no end to anything. "Do you even know me?"
Tony opens the truck door. "I'm driving."

We cruise the empty back roads that skirt around the mountains, and when I ask him to, he guns the truck around the loose corners so that we skid and hang suspended between the shoulder and the trees before Tony steers us, fishtailing, back onto the road.

"Got a smoke?" Tony asks.

This surprises me, because as an entity Tony and I do not smoke. "A smoke? What kind?"

"What do you mean?"

"I mean what kind? Cigarette? Joint?"

Tony seems to consider this. "Does it matter?"

"I don't know. Would you smoke one and not the other?"

"I don't know."

"Well I have a pack of Parliaments in my bag, but that's all I brought. I didn't know you smoked."

"I don't."

"So why did you…" but I just give up. It's like talking to the Mad Hatter, which is not how being with Tony is supposed to feel.

He revs the engine over a little rise in the road, and for the tiniest instant we are airborne. I don't feel like riding around anymore.

In a few minutes we are heading down Center Road, past wherever it is Tony found my mother stranded beside her deflated tire, and Tony slows the truck. We turn into the dirt parking lot beside the big white village church, which is an ominous black rectangle in the night sky, and I think I understand why churchgoers always congregate in daylight.

"Am I gonna get saved?" I ask, but he just reaches into the back seat and doesn't say anything, and I decide it is a good thing we have stopped. Tony is too drunk to be driving this expensive new machine tonight.

"Come on," he says stepping from the truck, carrying something. I follow him, stumbling from the booze and the uneven ground, wishing I had a flashlight. We approach the church, but then Tony veers off the walkway and around the back of the building, and I notice the shadows of headstones spanning the yard like orchard trees, enclosed by a hedgerow so that the cemetery isn't visible from the road.

Tony walks a perfectly straight course up the line of graves, turns sharply in the middle and marches down another row in a way that tells me he has been here before. He stops at a stone, thick and round and non-

descript as the rest of them in this darkness, and sits down at the base of it. He looks up at me and pats the grass. I sit cross-legged beside him and try to see his face.

"Are we having a séance?" I ask.

"Shut up," he says.

I wait. Time passes. He isn't joking.

"Just shut the fuck up for once," he mutters. Tony leans away from me, fumbling with whatever he has brought, and then I hear a tiny snuff of explosion that my mind has to process because it doesn't make sense here. A streak of something hits the ground, rolls like a grenade, and I connect it to the sound—the popping of a cork. I hear the sizzle of champagne for an instant and then Tony sits back again and tilts the bottle to his mouth. He pulls on it for a while, offers it to me. That pop, that sailing cork, they are supposed to be all expectation and merriment and things are starting to feel so fucked up I don't even want to drink this champagne, but then I decide I better just do it.

I am pissed at Tony and maybe way deep inside a little afraid of the tone he has used so I sit silently and wait for him to make the next move. We take turns with the bottle and when it's empty he says, "We promised we'd celebrate when we got home, so that's what we're doing."

It sounds like something I would say, but I don't remember this promise—not in my letters or during that phone call or even way back before Tony ever left.

I look over at Tony, but then I look away because I am worried he will see how big and frightened my eyes must be. This is all wrong. I am supposed to humanize myself or scream deadly threats or whatever it takes to show I am not afraid.

"You know what the craziest part is?" he says.

I don't say anything, but I don't know if he even notices me anymore, and he goes on. "The craziest part is I was supposed to drive that day."

A rumble begins far off, and then there is a crack and Tony's dry, smooth face glows orange for an instant and fades out again. I look up and see streaks of color melting back down from the sky. The fireworks have started in town.

Tony leans against the stone and draws his knees up. He watches, the now-empty champagne bottle resting in his lap. Then he begins to laugh. He lowers his head onto his knees and I can feel his shoulders shaking beside me. I consider putting my hand on his back, but the way he sits there convulsing is like a fevered patient and I must be nervous I will

catch whatever he has, because instead I tuck both palms underneath my butt the way children are instructed to do when they cannot keep their hands to themselves.

He sits up suddenly, smiling. "It was like the Fourth of July every night."

Tony gets up and walks farther down the row of markers, shoulders straight, bottle dangling at his side, feet slow and careful in a measured line. When he is a good distance away from me, he turns and smashes the bottle against a headstone.

It is a lot of work to half drag, half coax him back to the truck. The fireworks are still going off behind us as I drive us away from the graveyard. Tony is slumped in the passenger seat and I don't know whether or not he is awake, but out of respect to the ride I am now piloting I steer around all of the potholes on the drive home.

It is also a lot of work to haul his big body, slumped and staggering, into my mother's house that night. I move the remote from where we've left it on the couch and cover him with a throw blanket. Then I go upstairs and watch the fireflies from my bedroom window. I must fall asleep at some point, because I wake at dawn to gravel crunching. By the time I open the front door Tony is gone.

The house has been tidied—the blanket folded at the end of the couch, the glasses from the night before coupled at the sink. My mound of flip flops in the entryway has even been straightened. It's the kind of thing you do to your parents' house after you throw a party you don't want them to know about. It's like removing all the evidence you were ever there. You ever existed at all.

I flick on a lamp in the shallow, grey morning light and bury my face in the couch cushions. They don't smell like Tony, just dust. My head is throbbing and I imagine my brain inside of it, flaking and melting like snow.

Suddenly I hear it, the tapping against the open window above the couch. I sit up. I wonder if this moment will change me forever. But when I look out it's only a June bug trying to fly through and reach the light bulb. It bounces against the screen and hovers for a minute and then it bounces again. Eventually it falls and lands overturned on the sill and I sit and watch it for a while, upside down on its big awkward shell, sticky legs waving around in a useless surrender.

Special International Translations

René Char

The Mana of Lola Aba

translated by Nancy Naomi Carlson

The narrow black cross in the grass was inscribed: Lola Abba, Age 17.
July. The night. This dead, drowned girl had been playing in similar grass, maybe she had been lying there, perhaps to be loved…Lola Abba, Age 17. Hard to forget, yet unknown.
Two weeks later, a girl appeared at the house: is my mother in need of a maid? I don't know. I can't answer. "Come back?" "Impossible." "Then will you please leave your name?" She writes something down. "Farewell, miss." The young body steps onto the path of the park, disappearing behind the wet trees (the rain has stopped). I examine her writing: Lola Abba! I run, I call…Why nobody, nobody now?
I have kept your somber clothing, rayed and old. Here is your poem:

Let me comb my hair, you say, as the wreath of love
left to the earth.

The charcoal is still confined to jail, yet its violet ashes are scattered.

Those with truly a taste for the void burn their clothes before they die.

And if gathering mushrooms after the rain is macabre somehow, I won't be the one to complain.

René Char

Poem*

translated by Nancy Naomi Carlson

Two people, both endowed with great sexual honesty, one day get proof that their mental pictures during orgasm vastly differ: continuous, graphic pictures with one; periodic, chimeric scenes with the other. They differ to such an extent that the layers of visions, as they are formed, have the power to bring about a series of mortal disputes of mysterious mineral origin, giving rise in the reign to a change where denial of completely insoluble love seems the natural expression.

"My saliva on your sex," shouts the man to the woman, "is still your blood that evades the control of my hands."

"The wind that begins to blow in your mouth has already crossed the sky of our awakenings. I no longer perceive the key line in the eagle's flight, great director of consciousness."

During this new phase of their existence, the lovers saw the start of an era of justice turned upside down. They withered crimes of passion, returned rape to chance, increased indecent assaults, genuine sources of poetry. The huge scope of their movements—hope passing through the one unmoved by the loved one's despair—expressed the accepted fate. In surrealism's realm that cannot be reconciled, privileged man can only be the gracious prey of his ravenous reason for living: love.

*There were two twin children in Germany; one would open doors by touching them with his right arm, while the other would close them using his left arm.

Albert-Le-Grand

René Char

The Climate of Hunting or How Poems are Made

translated by Nancy Naomi Carlson

My pure sob overcome by its venom: my love's brain
wooed by shards of glass.

Ah! May the one who rules in the house of eclipses,
retreating, bring on the darkness. We'll do well, in the end,
to keep in mind the direction some storms take in the rapids
of dusk.

In love, there is still the stillness, this giant organ of sex.

Late at night we went to gather the fruit essential to my
dreams of death: purple figs.

Archaic horse carcasses shaped like bathtubs pass and
fade away. Only the class of manure speaks, reassures.

When I finally take my leave for a faceless world, all the
pastimes of steam at the foot of the big orange tree.

In my extreme feverish states, a young woman, toadstool-
sized, appears, slits the throat of a rooster, then falls into
deep, lethargic sleep, while some meters away from her bed
flows a whole river filled with perils. Embassy carried off
course.

Love's defense violence
The diamond's insistent asphyxia
Paralysis wandering ease

René Char

The Female Historian

translated by Nancy Naomi Carlson

She who casts gold through the horn
That punctures the seed
Eats at the poles
Sleeps in the earth's fire

Terrified look on the quarryman's face
Hurled into quicklime
Asphyxiated right in front of a woman's eyes
His back with quivering veins
His lips of river
His exquisite climax

All that convulsively breaks away from the oneness
of the world
Released from the mass by the simple shove
of a child
And swoops down on us at full speed
We who don't confuse acts to be lived and
acts already lived
Don't know how to desire through prayer
Nor procure through pretense
And at night over the sleeping girl's shoulder
see
The day flowering in full delight

In an indifferent sky
The red bird of metals
Flies anxious to beautify daily life
The memory of love regains in silence
its place
Among the dusts

Yang Mu

Flowing Rhythm

translated by Göran Malmqvist

The evening sun recklessly hits a snowline, in the empty forest
a flock of crows beat their frozen wings and fly, stirring up confusion,
into the lost landscape; their dreary flitting to and fro
causes the light to be dismembered
like memories on a nightmare's thin coating
showing themselves as fleeting images of uncertain forms; suppose
I were able to master my own self and know all that I know
the entire set–up would suddenly be transformed, I would turn to fix my eyes
on parts as yet unknown, and allow my senses
to stock up contrarieties in time and space, or abandon them in a sense of frustration,
unresistingly follow the rapid current
and with flowing rhythm enter into the floodtide of the sea.

Yang Mu

As Yet Unattained

translated by Göran Malmqvist

Waking up with a start: if there are old matters as yet unattained
in a remote region somehow
never properly investigated and now disappearing without trace, one after another…
Half are empty thoughts in this barely awake state,
the rest form hordes and surge forward, their backs against
the gigantic darkness, tearing it apart,
just as fireflies disintegrate in early autumn
to gather again around the pools or
at the farthest side of an embankment where undercurrents are born.
Saffrons and the tastes of tropical fruits in brilliant profusion,
autumn ripeness so swelled that all senses tremble
—judging from my oblivious spirit, one way or another—
it's only that this time waking up with a start makes me hesitate: stay put
or pursue the remains as yet unattained at the very moment it has been foretold?
Stopping short, I turn and see myself, exhausted, confined
to suspended speed and inert metre
and raise my hand to assign the sluggish light to a place out of reach
just as the autumn fireflies twinkle faintly in the distance.

Yang Mu

On Meeting

translated by Göran Malmqvist

I wonder, that which left so quietly last night and was lost in the incomplete
parable, if it were able to manage the twists and turns of the road
and return, I might not be able to recognize it—
Just as two stray stars, having by chance encountered each other
on the slanting plane of the universe, without finding time to light up,
turned pale with anxiety and decided to rush to
an even more distant as yet unknown – but perhaps
they might appear on the scene at this very moment, bearing witness
that they had agreed to meet but failed to keep that promise.

Kjell Espmark

"If" in Spring

translated by Robin Fulton Macpherson

Crows keep their balance on bucking branch-tips.
Perhaps they imagine they're on rough seas.
If they imagine.

Soaked birch-bark glistens, imagines the sun
has chosen to smile on it, if sun smiles,
if bark imagines.

I balance well on earth that knows its place.
The sun gives, the sun never takes away.
If I imagine.

Kjell Espmark

Summer Without Words

translated by Robin Fulton Macpherson

In a grey part of summer I watch
a gull-shadow on harbour ripples:
an alphabet is splintered so fast
it could never be halted and whole.

In a sharp ochre part of summer,
with a taste of something that´s been stored
and a presence about to leave us
and another one waiting for us,

I watch a cypress twig-shadow write
on a red gable, a shaky hand.
There´s no alphabet for the writer.
There´s no alphabet for the reader.

Kjell Espmark

Summer Solstice

translated by Robin Fulton Macpherson

Earth leaned south so soon this year.
I didn´t have time to save
darkness, the good kind that heals
undiluted by the sheen
        of galaxies.

Earth leaned north so soon this year
and something like an angel
(unseen, of no fixed abode)
has balanced one more weightless
        stone on my cairn.

Kjell Espmark

Surface

translated by Robin Fulton Macpherson

Yacht masts are fidgety and zig-zag.
Crowding wings are black, belong to crows.

A world that can´t be still. And rumours

of an unspecified upper air
where the masts are straight, the crows are gulls.

Contributor Notes

Janelle Adsit is the author of the poetry collection *Unremitting Entrance* (2015) and the chapbook *Press Yourself Against a Mirror* (2015). Her poetry has appeared in publications such as *Sixth Finch*, *Confrontation*, *The Cultural Society*, and *Lalitamba*.

Jeffrey Allen was born in Cincinnati, Ohio. He graduated with a BA in Comparative Literature from the University of Cincinnati in 2013, where he was the recipient of the Taft Research Fellowship. He recently received his MFA in poetry from George Mason University, where he was the 2015-16 Heritage Student Writing Fellow. He has poems published in *Recap Magazine*, *New World Writing*, and *The Iowa Review*.

Toby Altman is the author of *Arcadia*, *Indiana* (Plays Inverse, 2017) and five chapbooks, including most recently *Security Theater* (Present Tense Pamphlets, 2016). His poems can or will be found in *Crazyhorse*, *Jubilat*, and *Lana Turner*.

Sally Ball is the author of *Wreck Me* and *Annus Mirabilis*, both from Barrow Street Press. She's an associate director of Four Way Books and an associate professor of English at Arizona State University in Tempe, Arizona.

Bruce Bond is the author of fifteen books including, most recently, *For the Lost Cathedral* (LSU Press, 2015), *The Other Sky* (Etruscan Press, 2015), and *Immanent Distance: Poetry and the Metaphysics of the Near at Hand* (University of Michigan Press, 2015). Presently he is Regents Professor at University of North Texas.

Nancy Naomi Carlson has authored six titles (translated and non-translated). *Hammer With No Master* (more of her translations of Char) is forthcoming from Tupelo Press this fall. A recipient of grants from the NEA, Maryland State Arts Council and Arts & Humanities Council of Montgomery County, as well as a BTBA finalist, her work has appeared in such journals as *APR*, *New England Review*, and *Poetry*.

René Char (1907-1988) was praised by Prime Minister Jacques Chirac as "the greatest French poet of the 20th century." His literary career spanned over sixty years. Influenced by the surrealists, his love for his native Provence, and social activism, Char is known for his economy of style, as well as the mystery and music that infuse his work.

Maxine Chernoff's 15th book of poetry will be published by Omnidawn in 2018. She was recently a Visiting Artist at the American Academy in Rome. Recipient of a 2013 Poetry Fellowship from the NEA and the 2009 PEN Translation Award, she is Professor of Creative Writing at SFSU.

Christopher Citro is the author of *The Maintenance of the Shimmy-Shammy* (Steel Toe Books, 2015). His poetry was shortlisted for the 2015 Booth Poetry Prize, a finalist for the 2015 *Arts & Letters* Poetry Prize, and he won the 2015 Poetry Writing Competition at *Columbia: A Journal of Literature and Art*. He received his MFA in poetry from Indiana University and lives in Syracuse, New York.

Rob Cook lives in New York City. Recent work in *Hotel Amerika*, *Birmingham Poetry Review*, *Epiphany*. He's published six books and has disowned all but one of them.

Matthew Cooperman is the author of, most recently, *Spool*, winner of the New Measure Prize (Free Verse Editions/Parlor Press, 2016), as well as the text and image collaboration *Imago for the Fallen World*, with Marius Lehene (Jaded Ibis Press, 2013), and *A Sacrificial Zinc* (Pleiades/LSU, 2001), winner of the Lena-Miles Wever Todd Prize. A founding editor of *Quarter After Eight*, he's co-poetry editor for *Colorado Review.*

Emily J. Cousins lives, teaches, and writes in Denver, CO. Her poems have appeared in *Word Riot*, *Saltfront*, *Sugar House Review*, *[PANK]*, and elsewhere.

Dinah Cox's first book of stories, *Remarkable*, won the fourth annual BOA Short Fiction Prize. Her stories have appeared in a variety of publications, including *StoryQuarterly*, *Prairie Schooner*, *Calyx*, *The Meadow*, and online at *Hayden's Ferry Review* and T*he Texas Observer.* She teaches in English Department at Oklahoma State University where she's also an associate editor at *Cimarron Review*.

Kristina Marie Darling is the author of over twenty books of poetry. Her awards include two Yaddo residencies, a Hawthornden Castle Fellowship, and a Visiting Artist Fellowship from the American Academy in Rome, as well as grants from the Whiting Foundation and Harvard University's Kittredge Fund. She is working toward both a Ph.D. in Literature at S.U.N.Y.-Buffalo and an M.F.A. in Poetry at New York University.

Kjell Espmark is a poet, novelist, and literary historian. He has been awarded a considerable number of prizes. Espmark has published 14 volumes of poetry, recently *Den inre rymden* (The Inner Space , trans. Robin Fulton Macpherson, Marick Press). He has also published ten novels, notably *Glömskans tid* (The Age of Oblivion), and ten volumes of literary criticism.

Dennis Etzel Jr. lives with Carrie and the boys in Topeka, Kansas where he teaches English at Washburn University. His chapbook *The Sum of Two Mothers* was released by ELJ Publications in 2013, and his work has appeared in *Denver Quarterly*, *Indiana Review*, *BlazeVOX*, *Fact-Simile*, *1913: a journal of poetic forms*, *3:AM*, *DIAGRAM*, and others. He is a TALK Scholar for the Kansas Humanities Council.

Shawn Fawson resides with her family in Denver, Colorado, where she hopes for change and the courage to confront structures of injustice, intolerance, and privilege. Her book *Giving Way* won the Library of Poetry Book Award, was published by The Bitter Oleander Press in 2010, and won the Utah Book Award for Poetry in 2011. She has an MFA from Vermont College of Fine Arts.

Margaret Hermes has stories in the current issues of *Statement Magazine* and *Art Times*. Her story collection, *Relative Strangers*, received the Doris Bakwin Book Award and second place in the Balcones Fiction Prize. Her published/performed work includes a mystery novel, *The Phoenix Nest*, and a stage adaptation of an Oscar Wilde fable, *The Birthday of the Infanta*.

Lance Larsen, poet laureate of Utah, has published four poetry collections, including *Genius Loci* (Tampa 2013). His essays have recently appeared in *Southern Review*, *River Styx*, *Gettysburg Review*, and elsewhere. He has received a number of awards, including a Pushcart Prize and an NEA fellowship. A professor at BYU, he will co-direct a theater study abroad program in London in 2017.

Peter Leight lives in Amherst, Massachusetts. He has previously published poems in *Paris Review*, *AGNI*, *Antioch Review*, *Beloit Poetry Journal*, *Matter*, and other magazines.

Alex Lemon most recent book is *The Wish Book* (a finalist for Best Poetry Collection by The Writer's League of Texas). He is the author of *Happy: A Memoir* (Scribner - a finalist for Best Book of Non-fiction by The Writer's League of Texas) and three other poetry collections: *Mosquito*, *Hallelujah Blackout*, and *Fancy Beasts*. Among his awards are a 2005 Fellowship in Poetry from the NEA and a 2006 Minnesota Arts Board Grant. He teaches at TCU and in Ashland University's Low-Residency MFA program.

Robin Fulton Macpherson is a Scottish poet and translator who has lived in Norway for many years. Marírck Press (Michigan) recently brought out his *A Northern Habitat: Collected Poems 1960-2010*. Poets he has translated include (from Norway) Olav H. Hauge (Anvil Press Poetry, London) and (from Sweden) Kjell Espmark (Marick Press), Harry Martinson, and Tomas Tranströmer (both Bloodaxe Books, U.K.).

Jennie Malboeuf is a native of Kentucky. Her poems are found in the *Virginia Quarterly Review*, *Oxford Poetry* (UK), *The Hollins Critic*, *Epoch*, *New American Writing*, *Hunger Mountain*, *New South*, and *Best New Poets 2016*. She lives in North Carolina and teaches writing at Guilford College.

Göran Malmqvist was born in 1924. He has translated some fifty volumes of Chinese literature—Ancient, Medieval, Modern, and Contemporary. He has also translated Swedish poetry by Ingela Strandberg, Kjell Espmark, and Tomas Tranströmer into English, and some English poetry (by William Blake and T.S. Eliot) into Swedish.

Yang Mu has published 16 poetry collections, 15 prose collections, and one verse play. *No trace of the Gardener: Poems of Yang Mu* (trans. Lawrence R. Smith & Michelle Yeh, New Haven: Ct. Yale University Press, 1998.) and *The Forbidden Game and Video Poems: The Poetry of Yang Mu and Lo Ch'ing.* (trans. by Joseph R. Allen, Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1993.) are two of his poetry collections available in English.

Oscar Oswald is a Black Mountain PhD Fellow at the University of Nevada Las Vegas. His poetry has appeared in the journals *Blackbox Manifold, Colorado Review, Denver Quarterly, Lana Turner, Volt,* and *Word For/Word*, among others.

Simon Perchik is an attorney whose poems have appeared in *Partisan Review*, *The Nation*, *Poetry*, *Osiris*, *The New Yorker* and elsewhere. His most recent collection is *Almost Rain*, published by River Otter Press (2013). For more information, including free e-books, his essay titled "Magic, Illusion and Other Realities" please visit his website at www.simonperchik.com.

Alex Poppe is a teacher and creative instigator. A former actor/business consultant, she has worked in Poland, Turkey, Ukraine, Northern Iraq, The West Bank, Germany, and The United States. These places and their people inspire her work. Her first story collection, *Girl, World*, will be out in late summer 2016 by Laughing Fire Press.

Michael Robins is the author of three collections of poetry, most recently *In Memory of Brilliance & Value* (Saturnalia Books, 2015). His recent poems have appeared or are forthcoming in *The Arkansas International*, *Diode Poetry Journal*, *Ghost Proposal*, *Hubbub*, *Map Literary*, *Pinwheel*, *Tupelo Quarterly*, and elsewhere. For more information, visit www.michaelrobins.org

Kathleen Rooney is a founding editor of Rose Metal Press and a founding member of Poems While You Wait. The co-editor of *Rene Magritte: Selected Writing* and the author of eight books of poetry, fiction, and nonfiction, her second novel, *Lillian Boxfish Takes a Walk*, will be published by St. Martin's Press in 2017.

Stan Sanvel Rubin's work has appeared most recently in *Ascent, Poetry Northwest,* and *The National Poetry Review.* His fourth full-length collection, *There. Here.*, was published by Lost Horse Press in 2013. He lives on the Olympic Peninsula of Washington state.

Chris Santiago has received fellowships from Kundiman and the Mellon Foundation/ American Council of Learned Societies, and nominations for Best New Poets and others. His debut poetry collection, *TULA*, was selected by A. Van Jordan for the 2016 Lindquist & Vennum Prize, and will be published by Milkweed Editions in December.

Veronica Schuder teaches composition and creative writing at Louisiana Tech University in Ruston, Louisiana. Her work has previously appeared in *The Formalist*, *Cream City Review*, and *Black Dirt*.

Roger Sheffer teaches writing at Minnesota State University, Mankato. His stories have appeared in *Third Coast*, *The Missouri Review*, *Cream City Review*, and other magazines.

Kent Shaw's first book, *Calenture*, was published by University of Tampa Press. His poems have appeared in *The Believer*, *Ploughshares*, *Bennington Review*, and elsewhere. He teaches at Wheaton College in Massachusetts.

Martha Silano's most recent books are *What the Truth Tastes Like* (Two Sylvias Press 2015), an expanded reissue of her first book; *Reckless Lovely* (Saturnalia Books 2014); and, with Kelli Russell Agodon, *The Daily Poet: Day-By-Day Prompts For Your Writing Practice*. She edits Crab Creek Review and teaches at Bellevue College.

Ingela Strandberg is a Swedish poet and the author of several volumes of poetry, among others, *I Dreamt About Sam Shepard Last Night*, Marick Press 2014, translated by Göran Malmqvist, and *Vid oro skog*, Norstedts 2016, a volume with poems selected from her works from 1984 - 2014. In 2014 she received the Bellman Prize from the Swedish Academy.

Adam Strauss lives in Fort Lauderdale, Florida. Most recently, poems of his appear in *Cricket Online Review*, *Word For/Word*, the anthology *Devouring the Green* (Jaded Ibis Press), *Interrupture*, *Queen Mob's Teahouse*, *Lute & Drum*, and *Prelude*. "Hapless Transport" is from a manuscript titled *Smoked Marrow Scream Cream*.

Jason Tandon is the author of three collections of poetry including, *Quality of Life* (Black Lawrence Press, 2013) and *Give over the Heckler and Everyone Gets Hurt* (Black Lawrence Press, 2009), winner of the St. Lawrence Book Award. He teaches in the Arts & Sciences Writing Program at Boston University.

Kerry Tepperman Campbell is a writer and educator living in San Francisco. Her first book will be published by Blue Light Press in 2016. Her most recent project is a series of prose poems based on the life of the famous British mutineer Fletcher Christian. She recently traveled by cargo ship to Pitcairn Island, second most remote place on earth, to meet Christian's descendants.

Tony Trigilio's most recent collection of poetry is *Inside the Walls of My Own House: The Complete* Dark Shadows *(of My Childhood)*, *Book 2* (BlazeVOX [books], 2016). His other books include, most recently, *White Noise* (Apostrophe Books, 2013), and, as editor, *Elise Cowen: Poems and Fragments* (Ahsahta, 2014).

Michael Webster Thompson was born and raised in the suburbs of Chicago. In 2013, he received an MFA in fiction writing. He lives in New Hampshire with his wife and two sons.

Ross Wilcox's work has appeared in *Gulf Coast*, *The Carolina Quarterly*, and *Nashville Review*. He lives in Fort Worth with his wife and two cats.

Caroline Zeilenga grew up in Vermont and earned an MFA at Cornell University, where she also taught writing. Her fiction has appeared in *Tweed's* and received honorable mention in the *Glimmer Train* Very Short Fiction Award. She lives with her husband and two big dogs in a tiny yurt in the woods.

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