

THE LAUREL REVIEW

Volume 50 // Issue 1 // 2017

Editors: John Gallaher, Luke Rolfes

Associate Editors: Daniel Biegelson, Richard Sonnenmoser

Editorial Assistants: Morgan Wagle, Korbin Jones

Content Assistants: Halston Belcastro, Anthony Procopio Ross, Leigha Chenoweth, Ashley Hawkins, Charlnae Spearman, Maddie Pospisil, Kennia Lopez, Hannah Kludy, Bailey Weese

Cover Design/Art Direction: Korbin Jones, Erin Verbick, Bailey Weese, Maddie Pospisil

Interior Design: Korbin Jones

The Laurel Review publishes two issues each calendar year. Online submissions accepted via Submittable. No manuscript can be returned nor query answered unless accompanied by a stamped, self-addressed envelope. U.S. subscription rates are \$10 for one year, \$18 for two years, and \$24 for three years. International rates are \$14 for one year, \$23 for two years, and \$30 for three years. Available back issues are \$5. Check or money order accepted. Address all correspondence to *The Laurel Review*, GreenTower Press, Department of Language, Literature, and Writing, Northwest Missouri State University, 800 University Drive, Maryville, MO 64468-6001.

The Laurel Review is indexed in *The Index of American Periodical Verse*, *The Annual Index to Poetry in Periodicals*, *Humanities International Complete*, and *The Index to Periodical Fiction*.

The views expressed in *The Laurel Review* do not necessarily correspond to those of Northwest Missouri State University, and the university's support of this magazine should not be seen as an endorsement of any philosophy other than faith in free expression.

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ISSN 0023-9003



GreenTower Press

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ON BEING TOLD PRAYER IS A CRUTCH

Marcus Wicker

So what if it is?
Clear days, I understand it,
molecules scatter azure

light from an in-his-feelings-
sun, & that's why
the sky is blue. We know

too much, or want to.
Not the bible, but the i-
Phone tells us so.

Devotion doesn't work
that way, but it does. Not
the path, per se, for me

though, a trail back to grace-
fully living with one's light
shone toward higher

axioms than I
can presently see.
It's the immediacy

of a just-thought
thought, thundering
into a device

of my own decided making,
prayer. You know it as, *Siri*.
I call it instant intimacy.

AS MUCH SALVATION AS ONE CAN BELIEVE

Al Maginnes

For George Looney

I should start this poem with a priest
pouring a shot of whiskey, but that would
make it one of your poems, not mine.
But now I've already begun, and I know
you could make me believe an angel
sits in a chair opposite the priest.
So I will give you the priest and add fire
rolling in the hills over town, smoke
black as a cassock filling the sky.
Black at noon, blacker still at midnight,
thin seam of fire visible and moving
above them. There are no angels
and, for now, no fires where I live.
I will tell you it has rained enough today
to drown any angels or any good intentions.
It's hard to consider salvation if
your first thoughts are safety or food,
or if you are shaking for the shelter
of a drink of wine or whiskey.
Just as I imagined the priest.
The way we both imagine lives
and try to fit them into crude boats
of song, somewhere they can float
safe from fire, the water deep
and slow as the motion of wings.
The priest is tired of promising heaven
with no strings attached. The angel wants
to fall into flesh and live in the world
he once scorned, to search for
a woman he danced with

on his last mortal night, when
he was human and owned a future.
Outside the dance hall, he wrote her number
and bent to hug her. When he recalls
the soft possibility of their bodies,
the lemon and honey smell of her,
the motions of clouds, of prayers
the priest has lost, of fire all
vanished into the flood of memory
and that rises with it, all
the salvation we can believe.

GRACE

Robert Long Foreman

GRACE IS GONE.

The last time I saw her, she was in the Nursery Room, feeding one of the baby dolls the museum staff keep there with a plastic bottle of simulated milk. She kept slapping the baby against the floor, pressing the bottle to its face. Waterboarding it, in other words.

I went into the hallway. It was loud in the nursery room, and I wanted to read the magazine I'd brought with me. It featured an article about the health benefits of long-distance empathy. A few sentences in, I was absorbed.

It must have been then that Grace left me, her mother, and walked out of the Nursery Room. When I went to check on her, she was gone.

I know she is still in the building. Children can't leave the children's museum without the adults they arrived with. There is a wristband system in place, to prevent abductions and runaways. The kids can't take the wristbands off, only the staff can take them off, and the door that leads outside won't open for a child unless she is accompanied by her corresponding grownup. Both of them have to have their wristbands on.

No one says out loud that the wristbands are worn to prevent abductions. No one says the word "abduction" to a parent—not until or unless one takes place, I imagine.

It must be a word that's used often, then. Once it happens, the abduction must be the only thing anyone wants to talk about.



When I didn't see Grace in the Nursery Room, I thought at first that I might be the problem.

I am often the problem. I'll be looking for Grace in a crowd of children. I won't see her, and I will panic.

"She's gone," I'll think. "Oh no."

But she's right there, I'll realize a few seconds later. She is sitting with a crayon or a block in her hand. I don't see her, somehow, until I'm half-blind with fear.

I go wading through the children, only to find her right there, where she has been all along. How did I not see her?

I spend half of every week with Grace, but somehow she blends in among other kids like I don't know her, like I have never seen a child before and can't tell them apart. It's not as if she doesn't have the same nose and ears I've been looking at in the mirror for 31 years.

But there wasn't a crowd in the fake nursery. There were two kids only, neither of them anything like Grace. I would have asked if they had seen Grace, but I knew they didn't know her. I wasn't confident they could speak clearly to an adult. Maybe they weren't confident, either. I turned away.



Shade Children's Museum, its name written in big letters along the hallway, is Grace's favorite place.

I often want to take her to a real museum, an art or history museum, one with minerals and dinosaur bones, or sculptures behind glass. Grace isn't old enough for that, so we have to settle for this other sort of museum, which is more of a playground for indoor kids. It was once an elementary school, but there was a gas leak. Some children didn't survive. They built another school, fixed the leak at this one, I imagine, and converted every classroom to an activity room. It is meant to be an educational place, as well as someplace fun.

"Your intestines would be 25 feet long if they were stretched out," read the writing on the wall in the hallway. "And that's how long this wall is!"

I thought I might see Grace there, in the hallway. On our way in, she had spent ten minutes catcalling the guinea pigs they keep there in a waist-high cage. But she wasn't there.

Two women on a bench in the hallway were talking. I didn't look at their faces, saw only the pale legs their skirts left bare. I heard one say, "The last time I saw a little boy piss himself? Yesterday. The playground. No one cleaned him up. No one *noticed*."

I went into the Art Room, where a lone boy's arms were covered with blue paint. Some of it was on his face. Maybe he belonged to one of the women on

the bench. Maybe he belonged to no one at all. He appeared to be painting a mountain made of too many colors to exist in the natural world.

He looked up at me and smiled. I didn't smile.

I left him to his mountain. I continued my search for Grace.



I didn't shout Grace's name. I wasn't there yet.

It would have been effective, or so I thought at the time. But it would have been abrupt. It would have drawn attention to me, which I try to avoid doing. Shouting Grace's name in a crowd is bound to make people frown at me and assume I'm a bad mother. They might talk about me later as an example of what not to do. Shouting for a child, anywhere but inside a house, is the last resort of all last resorts.

In the Farm-to-Table Room, children rummaged through groceries in the grocery store simulator, pulling fake produce off of shelves, stuffing empty boxes that once held Trix and Life into miniature shopping carts, pushing past one another and the blasted parents who stood watching them, desperate to reach the checkout.

At the checkout, a boy with black hair had cast himself in the role of Cashier. He rang up every item the other kids piled on his belt, which he had to advance by turning a crank. He did his work with great severity, punching numbers into the toy register like it was his real job, as if there were a kid supervisor looking over his shoulder.

I went into the adjoining room, with its artificial cow full of fake milk the children can coax out with their hands.

There were rubber chickens, plastic oranges, and stuffed bees that fit over the children's wrists. Two boys Grace's age were hard at work stinging one another with the bees, using the bees' heads for stinging, making no progress.

Grace wasn't with them. She wasn't in the alcove between the cow and the white plastic fence. She likes to lodge herself in just such places, where I must go in search of her.

I turned to see that a woman was watching me search. When I looked at her, she looked away. I carried on.



I don't want it to sound as if the whole of me were not in a state of mounting panic at the apparent, sudden absence of Grace from a place where she had been just

minutes prior.

But I had no reason to worry. The wristband system is foolproof. An alarm would have gone off, if Grace had tried to leave without me, or if she had been carried away.

I kept telling myself that. It helped.

The children's museum would close soon, anyway. Grace would have to show herself. The only way for us to leave was to go together, and we had to leave. As much as Grace would like to abandon me and our life together, and live out her childhood at the children's museum, it isn't an option. The food at the fake grocery store isn't even real. There is water, sure.



In the Water Room there were wet children, gathered by a fountain that stood a few feet off the ground. It rose out of a pool that had rubber ducks in it and other floating rubber things. There appeared to be an aqueduct running from one end of the room to another, made for the children but not by them.

Of the four elements water is the one Grace is most drawn to, but she wasn't in the Water Room. I walked across it to peer behind a misplaced easel and saw there was another room, the size of a walk-in closet. A curtain hung in its entrance, like a darkroom.

I parted the curtain, stepped through, and in the dim light saw instructions in black letters on the wall.

I was to stand against the wall and press the red button. A bright light would flash, and if I was very still in the moment it flashed I would step away to see my shadow burned into the white wall where I had stood.

When I looked I saw, or thought I saw, still impressed upon the wall, the shadow of a girl the size and shape of Grace, standing with her head turned to one side with her arm stretched out, reaching up to catch I knew not what as before my eyes the shadow faded from sight.



I passed the women on the bench again. One eyed me with alarm, the other with what I took to be disapproval. They were talking to one another while they looked at me. I didn't hear what they said, this time.

It must have been the sweat dampening my hair that made them look at me so. Or else it was the look I wore on my face, the way I kept clenching and opening my fists as I walked.

If Grace chose this to be the place, I thought, where she turned to dust and scattered, I would not be surprised. It would be her way of evading me at last and for good, she who runs from me in public places, every chance she gets, who doesn't listen, who seems to see in me an enemy, at least half the time.

She has both relied on and fought me since the day she was born. She has clung to me and pushed me away, and when she was born I felt something awake in me for the first time just as something else in me died.

It could be that Grace is more than merely out of sight. It could be she is really gone, not only not here but nowhere, having sublimated in a last-ditch effort to evade me once and for all.

Like the unlikely feat she performed by getting born, she became another form of matter, one I cannot see or smell, and the only way I can be with her again is to breathe her in the air where she resides, now, drawing her back into my body by inhaling the ether she diffracted into.



The Lego Room was crowded with children. One of them had blonde hair, another wore a dress identical to the one Grace had on. None of the children was Grace.

She came into my room that morning, before I woke up. She looked into my eyes as I opened my eyes, grinning with a full diaper, comb stuck in her hair.

Another girl in the Lego Room looked just like Grace, for a moment, until she turned her head to look my way.

A boy beside her held up a Lego man and said something no one could understand. He tore the man apart and scattered him across the table.



I heard an announcement on the intercom that in ten minutes the museum would close.

I made my way to the hallway again, past the children again. I was looking for someone who worked there. I hadn't seen one in a long time.

I could see down the hall, past the guinea pigs, that no one was at the front desk. Grace had not returned to see the guinea pigs again, as I thought she might, as I hoped she had. In their cage there were toys, food, shit, and shreds of newspaper.

The guinea pigs were gone. I didn't know where they had gone.

I had checked all the rooms, even both of the restrooms, but maybe Grace went slinking from one room to another while I searched them. It could be she is

playing a game, that she initiated hide and seek without telling me first.

By the time I returned to them, the women on the bench had become one woman. She looked at me half-smiling like Grace was sneaking up on me, like she knew something I did not.

“What is it?” asked the woman, still with her half-smile.

“I haven’t seen Grace,” I said. “My daughter.”

“She was here?”

I nodded.

“She was with you?”

“Yes.”

“How long has it been?”

I shrugged. “Too long.”

“What does she look like?”

“Like me,” I said. “Smaller, though. Younger.”

The woman laughed. I didn’t laugh. Parents filed past us with their children, some in strollers. They nodded at me, and smiled as I didn’t move out of their way, so that they had to find their way around.

“Where is your child?” I asked the woman on the bench.

“I don’t have one,” she said, smiling.



I left the woman’s half-smile and checked the Lego Room again, and the Water Room, the grocery store and the farm.

There was no one left in any of the rooms.

As I hurried, someone said on the intercom that the museum was closing in five minutes. I would have to leave. So, I guessed, would Grace.

She hadn’t reappeared in the Nursery Room. She wasn’t with the shadow I thought she had left in the closet.

Even the shadow, now, is long gone.



I returned to the front desk, where the woman is sitting even now. I made up my mind to wait by the desk for Grace to appear, or for someone to show up who could tell me where she might have gone.

If I could find someone who works here, I could ask if she has seen Grace. I don’t see anyone but the woman.

Grace must know that when the museum closes she has to come to the front desk. But then I can never really tell what Grace knows or doesn't know. She doesn't ever give me straight answers.

There are no children in the building, now, that I can see, not Grace nor anyone. The place is silent. There are only me and the woman who eyes me from the bench. She isn't smiling, now.

The emergency exits won't open for Grace alone. They will open for me, but I won't leave without her.

I am standing by the front desk, looking down the hallway at the woman on the bench, who is squinting back at me in the dim light.

I am watching to see if Grace will come out of one of the rooms. She may be hiding. I may have missed her.

I don't know what the woman is watching, unless she is watching me.

She can watch all she wants. I can wait for a day, or a month. I will not leave this spot by the door until I see Grace again.

WHAT HAPPENED TO STARGIRL?

Sandra Ramirez

Twinkle-eyed Jesus' girl
gathering your seaweed skirts
under the tarp of America

I last saw you feeding a seagull
by the deserted basketball courts
your dew-soaked ribbon hair half mast

Your eyes two pale dots
Scotch-taped slapped shut

You blew me glitter kisses
as bodies hovered
nearly out of air

and those birds frowned
Scolded me and my playthings

Come then, show me your face
near the water's edge
so I may wash your feet.

“IN SPITE OF EVERYTHING.”

– JACQUELINE LAMBA

Jeff Alessandrelli

At night we close
our eyes
not because we welcome
death but because
we cherish life
too much to
marry
our tempered
thoughts
to the blues, greens,
yellows and grays
of sight
for hours waking long.
To seek the gold of time,
as André Breton had engraved
on his tombstone,
is to nevertheless realize
that while attempting
such a quest
you might
one day get divorced
in Reno, Nevada
in a shabby municipal courtroom
on a stillborn dreary
Tuesday morning
as André Breton once did,
his marriage
to Jacqueline Lamba
a gradual darkness
married merely
to
revulsion, apathy,

disgust.
The surreal teaches us
that the beauty of the
mannequin
derives from the fact
that it is covered in dirt
and cum and blood
and not that
it was initially
rendered
in the shape of a human,
a woman,
a man.
We often fall
asleep
without falling
asleep,
without closing
our eyes.
The sight of such
an act
never startles.
On the street,
in the park,
passersby
meander and frolic,
the day so painstakingly
buoyant
after the pain-
staking beauty
of the night.

THE WEDDING IN CHARLESTON

Wynne Hungerford

JULIA WAS A SENIOR IN HIGH SCHOOL AND, BECAUSE OF HER age, she didn't think she was expected to stand up in front of everyone and talk about her older brother and his fiancée at the rehearsal dinner. Julia was seated next to the pastor, though, and the pastor was on his third glass of wine and dropping silverware on the floor and saying that Julia better volunteer to give a speech or else he'd do it for her. It had started as light teasing and then turned into a threat over the course of the blue crab dinner. He was a friend of her brother's, a young, progressive pastor who wore slim-fit jeans and a tweed cap. On his wrist was a copper bracelet engraved with the word "Grace." Julia glanced at the faces around the table and begged for someone to come to her rescue. No one did.

Her mother's chair was empty. She had been so excited and proud that she started crying early in the evening and it had undone an hour's worth of primping. The full tears tracked mascara down her face and then, dangling at the edge of her jaw, the tears dropped onto her dress and left Dalmatian spots. "Good Lord," Julia's father had said. "That woman." Then he'd received an emergency phone call from somebody at his contracting firm and had to step onto the deck outdoors. Julia watched him through the windows, his tall, stooped silhouette moving in front of the marina lights. Outside, the boats swayed in their slips. If Julia had ever gone to a school dance, she would have been like that, too, swaying in a corner all by herself, but she had never been able to bear the thought of it and always stayed home.

The pastor nudged Julia. He said, "Speeches are going to start any minute now," and he began to suck on the lemon garnish left on his plate.

Arms crossed and shoulders hunched, Julia tried to get small enough that she might be left alone. Giving a speech was the last thing she wanted to do. Earlier that year, the guidance counselor had told her that she was in line to be

the valedictorian for her graduating class, that she was ranked first out of nearly a thousand students in her high school. There was a moment when Julia felt happy, truly happy, and then she realized that being valedictorian carried the obligation of a speech. There was the podium and the microphone and all the hundreds of students that she would have to address, people who only thought of her as a bookworm and nothing more. She had intentionally answered questions wrong on her next Calculus test, lowering her grade for that class to a A- and taking her out of the running.



“Maybe you should jot down some notes,” the pastor said. “Me, I’m a spontaneous speaker. I stay up all night preparing a sermon and then when I go to church on Sunday morning, I feel moved to say something else and scrap the whole thing and just wing it.” He sucked his teeth, saying, “I bet you don’t wing anything.”

A team of waiters brought out plates of key lime pie balanced on their arms. They wove in and out of the tables and then slipped away in silence, like fish.

Julia said, “I don’t think I can do it.”

“Be a good sister. Give your brother a speech.”

He seemed more like a bully than a pastor. She couldn’t imagine him giving a sermon. She couldn’t imagine him praying over another person and meaning it.

“I can’t.”

“Why not?”

“I’m nervous.”

“He’d do it for you.”

Julia looked at Ryan’s table across the room. His fiancée, Haley, took the napkin out of her lap and wiped a stray dab of whipped cream from his lip.

The truth was that Ryan wouldn’t have given a speech for her even if the situation had called for it. Being eight years apart meant they never really knew each other growing up. By the time Julia was an interesting person, not just a shy, blank little girl, Ryan had moved to Charleston and gotten a job as the manager of the seafood restaurant where the rehearsal dinner was held, a place with exposed brick and modern brass light fixtures and a large, fiberglass marlin hanging from the ceiling. He had started going to a church with a young congregation, met Haley, and gotten engaged. They were strangers to each other, Julia and Ryan, and had never felt compelled, either of them, to reach out and get acquainted.

One of Ryan’s friends rose from his table and tapped a knife against his glass, announcing that it was time for the speeches to begin.

The pastor said, “Is it going to be you or me?”

“I don’t know.”

He said, “I see how it is.” Then he picked up his dessert fork. “This is some baby pie. Look at how small this pie is.”

Julia decided to volunteer herself. It was not what she wanted to do but it was the least painful of the two options: volunteer or be volunteered.

She had been raised to respect authority figures and because the pastor, although tipsy and young and looking decidedly unlike a pastor, qualified as an authority figure, Julia felt like she had to do it. She couldn’t slip away. She couldn’t refuse him flat-out. She obeyed all orders, which was easy enough if her mom asked for help with the dishes but was harder when her grandmother, say, at the Christmas Eve brunch, asked for Julia’s help going to the bathroom. It was the same with school. Teachers often grouped her with the slowest kids for projects, kids who had never bothered to learn the state capitals, much less memorize the Periodic Table. Her obedience made her a model young woman in many respects but it also crippled her in a way that could not be seen by the naked eye. When she didn’t want to do something, she suffered on the inside. She cried out for help. She begged to be left alone. She did her best to hide those feelings, though, because her parents taught her that it was rude to show them.

Ryan’s friend, the one who tapped the glass, gave the first speech. He worked with Ryan at the restaurant and made jokes about poor services they had weathered together. Julia couldn’t pay attention to his speech and plan her own remarks at the same time. She tried to remember things Ryan had done when they were younger. He played baseball on YMCA teams and wore the same lucky socks to every game. He got a pair of rollerblades for his birthday one year and began to skate the neighborhood. He knocked over the large ant farm that Julia kept in her bedroom. He took a can of spray-paint out of the garage once and painted “Fuck” on the fence in the backyard. She remembered her father grabbing a handful of Ryan’s shirt, right at the back of the neck, and leading him into the master bedroom to be spanked at the foot of the bed. He must have been thirteen then and being spanked as a teenager was the worst thing that Julia could have imagined. Her obedience stemmed from this moment, this moment when she learned that breaking the rules had consequences. It was not the physical pain that bothered her so much. It was the shame and embarrassment. From her bedroom, where she sat hugging her knees to her chest, Julia had been able to hear her brother crying. She had been able to hear the belt on skin.



Everyone clapped when the first speech ended. Julia found herself going through the motions along with the group, even though she hadn't been paying attention. Then Haley's college roommate got up and talked about how she and Haley had met at a Bible Study for freshman girls and how important those Wednesday night meetings had been. Julia couldn't relate. There was a group of girls she ate lunch with at school, in the far back corner of the cafeteria near the Army recruiter table, where nobody else wanted to sit. Sometimes the recruiters tried to get the girls to do pull-ups on a bar they brought and set up, but the girls, blushing, remained frozen. They never saw each other outside of school, never went to the movies or even to get pizza.

Julia's mom and dad took the microphone next. Someone must have gotten them from the bathroom and the deck, respectively. Her mother's makeup was fixed and there were damp spots on her dress where she had tried to dab away the mascara stains. Her father smoothed his hair, which had been disturbed by the breeze coming off the water. He started by saying how glad he was to see Ryan settling down and doing so well. "There was a period," her father said, "when we worried about Ryan. He went through a rough patch as a young man and we weren't sure what was going to become of him. He picked himself up, though, and met the beautiful Haley. We are indebted to you, Haley, for taking on this great challenge."

Everyone laughed.

Her mom reached for the microphone. She said, "Ryan was my little baby. I remember when he was born and the doctors had to put tubes in his ears. I remember seeing him in the little glass thing, the incubator, and I had to put my hand through a hole in the side." Talking about Ryan having meningitis as a newborn made her cry again. She picked up a cloth napkin from the nearest table and wiped beneath her eyes. She said, "The doctor who told me that he was sick had just finished her residency and it was her first day on the job. She cried when she told me that his spinal fluid was milky. That's a bad sign, you know."

Julia had heard the story before. It was no longer moving.

Her mother said, "He obviously pulled through, and for that I'm thankful. I'm so thankful."

Her father put his arm around her mother. She opened her mouth to speak but could not. After a moment, she gave up trying. She blew a kiss to Ryan and then handed the microphone back to Julia's father. He said, "We love you, son."

As everyone clapped, the pastor leaned in and said, with his wine-breath, "Your turn."

"Now?"

"You want me to volunteer you?"

“No,” she said. “I can do it.”

He said, “Okay,” and held his hands up. Then he winked and brought his hands down on the table. The hairs on his hands were dark red and his skin was covered in faint freckles. He winked and stood up. He said, “Attention, everyone.”

Julia was hot with embarrassment. She couldn't believe that pastor had jumped in like that. She thought they'd had an understanding.

“The sister of the groom would like to say a few words. And believe me,” he said, whispering, “she's a girl of few words.”

Julia didn't stand up.

The pastor took her hand and raised her from the seat. She thought if he had pulled any harder he would have dislocated her shoulder.

“Hop to it,” he said. “We're all ears.”

When Julia stood, her legs were unstable. She was wearing a brand new pair of tights and felt the waistband cutting into her stomach. She walked over to her father and took the microphone.

He said, “This is a surprise,” and her mother, clutching the napkin tightly in her fist, said, “Oh, honey.”

She still didn't have anything prepared. Her parents sat down and she was left all alone in front of a crowd of fifty. Some she knew. Most she didn't. When she thought about Ryan, whenever she thought about him, which wasn't often, the only thing that really came to mind was the time he almost got them killed. Her father had mentioned Ryan's “rough patch.” By that, he meant the change in Ryan when he went to college. He had started partying at USC, a normal enough thing, but his grades suffered as a result and he had been flagged as a student on the brink of failure. If he didn't bring up his grade point average within a semester he was going to be kicked out. During that pivotal semester, he came home for a long weekend. Julia's father couldn't take her to school that Friday and asked Ryan if he could drive her instead. Ryan said, “Sure.”

He went out drinking with some of his old friends who still lived in town, friends who went to Greenville Technical College, and he didn't wake up on Friday morning. Julia went into his bedroom and said, “You're supposed to take me to school.”

He wouldn't get up. She kept going in every five minutes or so, politely reminding him that he'd promised to take her to school, and he would only roll over and groan and say, “I'm awake,” even though he never opened his eyes. He wasn't wearing a shirt. Only a pair of basketball shorts. He smelled like beer and when he wrapped his arms around his pillow and hugged it, she saw the dark hair under his arms.

She touched Ryan's arm. She didn't want to miss school. Her attendance record had been perfect up until then and she had looked forward to receiving an attendance certificate signed by the principal at the end of the year. The school was too far to walk and there were too many busy roads to ride a bicycle. "I'm going to be late," she said, shaking his arm. "Please."

He finally kicked the blanket and sheets off of him and rolled out of bed. When his feet first touched the ground, he wobbled. He was still a little drunk but Julia didn't know that. She only knew that he stank and that he was angry. He grabbed his car keys and put on a pair of leather bedroom shoes. He said, "Let's go, then. If you want to go to school so bad, let's go."

Back then, Ryan drove a Dodge Durango. When he turned the ignition, rap blared from the radio at full volume. It was so loud it hurt Julia's ears. The words "bitch" and "nigger" and "cunt" smothered her and entered her body as vibration. She put a hand to her chest and felt her heart being tested. A visor embroidered with a scarlet gamecock was hanging from the rearview mirror and it swung violently with every turn. Empty Gatorade bottles rolled at her feet. He had a small beer belly that rolled over the band of his shorts. Whenever they hit an uneven spot in the road, it bounced. She knew that he was driving too fast. She held on.

When they reached the big intersection by her school, Ryan took a left on a red light. There was a cemetery nearby and the wind was picking up and bouquets of artificial flowers blew into the road. Julia saw that he was going to run the light and said, "Stop," but he gunned it. Oncoming traffic honked at them and braked hard. One car swerved so bad Julia could hear the rubber skidding on the asphalt and if she had looked back, she would have been able to see the marks the tires had left on the road, long and black and stinking of burnt rubber. In that moment she thought Ryan wanted to kill her. Of course, later, she realized that he was tired and angry and still drunk from a night out with friends. He wanted to be asleep in his bed. He didn't want to be taking his little sister to school. Still, it felt like he wanted to kill her.

They pulled into the carpool lane. Julia knew that she would have to run to make it to class on time, but she couldn't do it. She started to cry because she had never felt so hated by anyone in her entire life.

Ryan said, "Get out."

Her chest shuddered as she sucked in air.

He said, "Go."

She swung her backpack over her shoulder, heavy with textbooks and three-ring binders, and went into the school. She locked herself in the handicapped stall in the girls' restroom and stayed for the entire first period. When the bell rang for

second period, she had finally gathered herself and joined the current of students moving down the hall. She never told her parents what had happened, and she and Ryan never discussed it. He ended up going back to school and getting his grades up, even graduating, in the end, with his name on the Dean's List.



At the rehearsal dinner, holding the microphone, Julia couldn't look at Ryan because she was remembering the car ride. First she said, "I'm Ryan's sister," and a few people in the crowd, friends of Ryan's, looked surprised to hear that he had a sister. She began to talk about the few good things she could remember, such as going to one of his baseball games and seeing him catch the game-winning ball in the outfield. She talked about going trick-or-treating with him and him offering to test her caramel apples to make sure there weren't razorblades hidden inside. She talked about the time he let her try on his rollerblades and go down the driveway. She ended up falling at the bottom, skinning her soft, white chin. He'd let her try, though, because she wanted to. That was when she was little enough to be unafraid. She brought up these few moments that were not particularly special but they were the best she had. Then she congratulated Ryan and Haley. As if she was alone in the room and talking to herself, she said, "It's funny. He seems like an adult now." She had missed the transition from immature boy to grown man and found it hard to believe that Ryan had this decent life and this pretty fiancée and all of these friends who seemed like good people.

Back at the table, the pastor was slouched in his chair and yawning. He said, "It wasn't great but it wasn't terrible."

"Honey," her mother said, finally back in her seat, "do you need a tissue?"

Julia was crying, not because she was happy for her brother but because of the memory of that car ride. She was glad nobody knew the difference. Julia's mother handed over the napkin that was covered in the beige and black of her melted face.

The next morning, on the day of the ceremony, the wedding party had to take photographs on the dock at the marina. Under an overcast sky, the water appeared dark and gray. The bridesmaids stood together first. They moved carefully over the dock, trying not to let their pointed heels catch in between the wooden boards, because one of the bridesmaids said she'd had a dream the night before that she'd stumbled and fallen into the water, where she was cut by oyster beds. The groomsmen posed together next. They had been given fishing lures as gifts and the wedding date was on the side of the lure in silver, meant to flash in the water. They argued the merits of live bait versus artificial lures, finally all

agreeing that live bait was the way to go, and managed to be quiet long enough for the photographer to take a dozen satisfactory shots.

After the bride and groom took photos with their parents, Ryan walked over to Julia and said, “Let’s get one together?” He wore a linen suit with a pastel pink bowtie. He put an arm around her shoulder.

He asked, “Are you having fun?”

She nodded.

“Know where you’re going to school yet?”

She said, “I haven’t decided,” even though she had already sent in the acceptance paperwork to Dartmouth. She didn’t know why she lied.

The photographer said, “Okay, relax now,” and it only made her muscles tense even more.

Ryan’s hand was light on her shoulder. He said, “You could have said a lot of other stuff but you didn’t.”

She didn’t know what to say, so she didn’t say anything.

He said, “Thanks.”

She knew he wasn’t bad, that she had only seen Ryan at his worst and unfortunately that incident had colored their entire relationship. The memory and the pain it carried was not going away but she could learn to live with it. There could be other memories, better ones, made to off-set that pain. It would take time for her to know the person Ryan had become and for him to know the person that she had become. Time was what they needed and, being young, time was what they had.

When the photographer finished taking photographs of them, Julia noticed that the wedding party was pointing at something over her shoulder. Ryan noticed, too. He said, “Wonder what they’re looking at.” They turned and saw, at the very end of the dock, a cat reaching for something in the water that no could see, flexing its claws.

WATCHING *HOARDERS* WITH MY FATHER

Kyle McCord

Anne has fifty crates of antique cat's eyes
Ray says he invented the power source
for the Voyager 2 that's why
he needs fifty rusted junkers it's obvious
Doris can do without the swimwear
flamed lime with mildew thirty
Maltese puppies coiled in a planter
Jim lost his mother Chastity
drank a handle of Beam a day
mouthwash when cash ran out
you're a Nikon panning
her hallway fireworks burst
like blood from a buckshot wound
the night Cindy's son drove
off the overpass she keeps
his photo on the bureau
above forty pounds of diatomaceous
earth to ward away ants away
silver fish away roaches like careless
travelers on a highway
Don knows his wife
is leaving either way
Rhonda is just another
object with this filter Randy
is fifty pinball machines Smokey
is two teeth and a stained nightshirt
Dan can't imagine transcending
he is a cluttered cage
peppered with droppings
a ragged cast iron consider this
pan over Ron's kitchen
listen to this audio

where Wendy finally breaks
we'll splice this in the credits
she thought she'd die
in this house at a certain angle
she's just her hoops
we're this smoky gaze watching
the room fill up Anne draws the shades
to stop anyone from looking.

WATCHING A CIALAS AD WITH MY FATHER

Kyle McCord

The man adoring his wife adores her
more as she torques her hips to return the serve

she is regal as heat lightning seething from the court
I know how he feels wanting to work

each swollen muscle with his finger blunt
as a sculptor's pitcher but these aren't the hands

of Michelangelo they are the hands of a CPA
or a hospice patient or as the ad suggests a man

walking a terrier on a beach (jump cut
to a shot of their fingers twined against

the sun shimmering below the schism
of salt-veined sky and black stones)

their ordinariness is the point
so their problems are shadows of our own

but what is it that drives any of us
the words scrolling by sterile as sand can't say

whether it's ego or devotion
it can't answer whether what follows minutes

later under sanctity of doctor-recommended pills
is an act out of passion or rote practice

what proof can anyone offer
but these sweated sheets pentimento

of the most fervid sculptors
blind to all but what they make

HANDS

Bruce Bond

And weary of the long day at work,
he takes off his hands and lays them

like a belt of tools at his bedside.
Naturally the first one proves

easier to remove than the second,
but the mouth serves as a third hand

as it often does in times like this.
And as he lies with nothing to do

but think about the things he is
not doing, his hands crawl away

out the pet door into a yard
dark with stars and the howling moon.

Such, of course is the nature
of hands, to point at this star

and that, and in their pointing stitch
the stars together, piece the bodies

of gods who, like hands, would make
the world into a world they love.

Truth is, there would be no gods
if these lights had not been torn

from one another. Mother from child,
child from the child he was.

Always a body back there,
somewhere, a ghost that slipped its coat

from the armature of bone.
Sirens slit the chest of silence,

and dogs pour through with mating calls
or calls of warning. Hard to tell.

Say they are one call, that they turn
to the mirrors of each other,

like palms, and touch, shade to shade.
When a man wakes, disheveled at dawn,

he understands: sleep is work
that never quite begins or ends,

but calls the sirens of the dogs
together: the world is too damn far

from the world; words far from words
and the animals that made them.

Still there is a tenderness
to the questions answers long for,

a one-eyed star of joy that fades
so we who wake might dream of it.

It's up there. In there. I see it. These hands
like doves on the arms of day.

MONSTER

Bruce Bond

Say we start with the understanding
you are not real. You are in a movie

beside a window in the winter rain
and the only house for miles. Say

the woman whose car broke down is not real either,
though you fear for her, follow her because

you must, because every gaze pours through
a window in the dark. She comes. She rings.

And no, you have no telephone, no power,
but as she stands at your door, her hair ravaged

in the downpour that drugs the whole of nature,
your exhumed heart begins to pound a wall

somewhere, the way someone pounds a machine
that breaks, cursing it to make it work.

And the long loneliness of never being
here, never breathing the dead-leaf scent

of rain that makes a mist of late December
begins to dawn on the woman who sees in you

something of the wreck she left behind,
of the car and marriage gone to rust.

Someday, she says, machines will carry us
over the threshold of a house in the rain.

Whatever the nonsense or indiscretion,
you agree. Say we begin with that threshold,

and you are on the other side, opening
your heart. And the shovels in the yard

open theirs. Say we begin beside a river
where you drink. Then you turn from the water,

startled, blurred, and when the blind girl touches
the scar in your forehead, she opens a wound.

And the movie never gets better than this,
this hand in human darkness, this moment we swear

a real rain is just beginning. The mirror breaks.
A wind blows through the stillness of the screen.

THE GHOST IN THE SHAPE OF AN UNNAMED FLOWER

Bruce Bond

When Eduard Hitzig wired a living brain
and found a shock here raised an arm, there

a finger, he made a map and planted the flags
of native German into the strange new world.

If you are wondering what place does what,
come. Sit. The region that raises your hand

is the chair where the scientist is busy
shocking your brain. And his brain is shocked

in turn by the guy in the chair in his head,
the seeker you cannot see. No one does.

If you are like me, you are always in
the way. The old gods of the wind have little

on those of the blind heart beating in panic.
The anthropologist living with the natives

can empathize. He knows what it is like
to study the behavior of a tribe with some

anthropologist in it. What is a point
of view, asks the cortex. Where does it start.

And why does a shock in the pre-frontal
portion do nothing. Or nothing we observe.

Only a flash on a scan that could be someone
stranded in the dark. It could be Eduard,

now that we know him a little better,
and he knows us. It could be his research

agenda among the nocturnal flowers
where he snaps off his flashlight and lies down

weary with the scent. And though he cannot
see them, they see him, and like the grave

he crawled from, he opens his mouth a bit
wider the deeper he breathes. And breathe he must

as the red leaves breathe. And then sleep.
And the flames in thousands come tumbling in.

MANIFESTO

Bruce Bond

Dear History, you who are my first
thought each morning, my last each night,

my unmarked grave,
and though we've never met,

I've read your letters over and over,
until they became, in time, the ghost

whose imagined
figure is everywhere I

am and am not yet. All at once.
And the more I read, the more

I leave my body
to break down at the walls

of holy city after city,
name after name of those who fell there,

none of whom
are you. Dear History,

I confess, I am beginning
to lose faith in the old gods,

in the word's
power to fathom the human

face. I keep thinking of the movie
where they bring a severed head to life.

I see the torso
who kills to repossess it.

If a torso can be serious
a moment, it would tell you this.

What I see,
grieve, talk to in dreams,

appears as such in a distant mind.
But in the movie it says nothing,

like a broken
nation that has no mouth.

Life, we know, does not return.
Only the word *life* whose meaning

leaves a body
helpless, heartless, dead.

Only a head whose torso is out there,
lonely, scared. If a zombie can be

serious,
it would sit down with us

and confess what hunger does
when the soul is elsewhere in

another movie.
Dear History, I am afraid

of my *country*, though I know
the word is made of many heads,

many of whom
are severed. When asked how

history would judge, my president
replied: *History. We won't know.*

We'll all be dead.
And the awkward silence said,

we'll all be headless, heedless.
We, as one, will be the many

ships on a stone cold
sea, thrashing in the dark.

THEATER OF THE MIND: ON RECENT PERFORMANCE TEXTS BY KHADIJAH QUEEN & MEREDITH STRICKER

Kristina Marie Darling

IN THE *UNAVOWLABLE COMMUNITY*, MAURICE BLANCHOT considers the impossibility of fully apprehending another consciousness. If the other could be known, he argues, they would not be other. We are confronted with that which resists one's powers of understanding, a strangeness that becomes the source of great and terrible wonder. Yet this line of thinking could also be extended to the various parts of the self, none of which can ever be fully or satisfyingly excavated. What's more, these darkened rooms of the mind are furnished with artifacts that the other has left behind: a forgotten trinket, an old book, a bit of music.

Two recent performance texts fully and convincingly acknowledge the many ways that the other is contained within the self. Khadijah Queen's *Non-Sequitur* and Meredith Stricker's *Alphabet Theater* skillfully dramatize this ongoing dialogue between the various parts of consciousness, giving voice to the alterity that is contained within each one of us. Though vastly different in form and approach, Stricker and Queen share an investment in revealing consciousness itself as performative, as one assumes (and at the same time questions) the roles of the various archetypes, their voices, their personae, and their possibilities. We are presented with a consciousness that is divided, not always against itself, but in dialogue with its seemingly infinite and luminous facets. As each work progresses, we are made to see how conscious experience unfolds through this questioning, this conversation and exchange.

Though these performance texts might be read as purely interior dramas, we are shown that the world is contained within each of us. Indeed, Queen and Stricker envision the mind as comprised almost entirely of found material, ranging from Hart Crane's *The Bridge* to "the voice of Malcolm X." Through their

skillful curation of language, Queen and Stricker reveal the mind as a social construct, thought as appropriation, and every idea as an act of theft.



Queen’s provocative *Non-Sequitur* takes place everywhere and nowhere. We are offered a cast consisting of archetypes, what Queen describes as a “large group of abstract/conceptual characters and objects,” none of which give rise to a conventional narrative. Instead, Queen delivers “a shifting landscape” and “evolving interiors,” each conversation taking the form of an excavation of culture and the psyche. Every act, and every scene, contained within *Non-Sequitur* confronts a source tension that heretofore has remained buried, an unacknowledged violence that we soon find “engulfed in a spotlight.”

Many of the vignettes presented within *Non-Sequitur* consider the ways race and gender are performative, how these concepts of identity exist in dialogue and in friction with one another. Indeed, Queen calls our attention to the myriad ways that the “invisible institution” with its constant demands, “the white appropriation,” the looming “online payments” and the systems of valuation that they represent, are inevitably internalized. What Queen offers us is an externalization of the conceptual frameworks we have taken in; it is this visible and visceral rendering that allows us to see their reach more clearly, to understand that we are not only subjected to injustice, but it is an “aftermath” we carry inside of us.

Queen writes, for example, midway through the collection,

THE INVISIBLE INSTITUTION

Playing with children, playing with adults—same thing.

THE BROWN VAGINA (*points to a door*)

Someone left the door open—

THE ONLINE PAYMENTS

Reminder: Please send payment by the due date.

Here Queen portrays the competing systems of valuation that one must constantly reconcile in the mind: the economies of labor, texts, and goods that circulate round us, as well as their relationship to the physical body, particularly the ways difference is written onto the body. By giving voice to each iniquity, and

each projection, Queen reveals the impossibility of a harmonious and unified psyche. She suggests, skillfully and powerfully, that we have not only divided communities against themselves, but we have divided our own hearts and minds. As Queen accounts for each fissure, each cleave mark, she reminds us that even “intelligence is a kind of violence.”



Stricker’s *Alphabet Theater*, much like Queen’s work, considers the way that conscious experience is an essentially social endeavor. She shows us that “even in dead winter” the “immense bee hum” of a larger cultural imagination is audible. Culling language from a variety of lexicons, which include Senator Danforth’s speeches, the poetry of William Carlos Williams, and Milton’s *Paradise Lost*, Stricker constructs a theory of mind in which we are constantly reconciling the texts, images, and symbols that circulate around us. For Stricker, it is in the space between these received texts, in these luminous apertures, that the individual begins to exist. As Stricker herself reminds us, “The more a thing is torn, the more places it can connect.”

As the book unfolds, she reminds us thought is not as simple as “roses calling roses to mind.” Indeed, she catalogues the seemingly infinite forms an inner life can take, allowing the various modes of knowledge and perception—which range from lists, to dialogues, staging directions, performance scripts, micronarratives, imaginary etymologies, and photographs—to illuminate one another. As the reader traipses through this “still place,” filled with the luminous artifacts of an inner life, we find ourselves implicated in the process of forging connections, narratives, continuities. By involving the reader in such a way, Stricker shows us that to exist in culture is to enter a room filled with someone else’s belongings; we are always strangers in our own psyches.

Stricker writes, for instance,

the veins radiant in Thoreau’s leaf
or life—gladly, willingly—
desire of the world for form, arc to arc—bright white
we suffer from this bridge of lightening to loss

Stricker, like Queen, skillfully externalizes the conceptual frameworks—particularly the structures of meaning making, and the finite conventions of narrative—that we have taken in. By creating this distance, Stricker is able to

discern more clearly implicit assumptions contained in the “forms” we search for. She calls our attention to the ways culture has taught us to impose structure, to create the loveliest “arc” we can from the materials we are given. It is this distance, the space between Stricker and her subject, that allows her to reveal our predilection for meaning in all of its beautiful artifice.

Queen and Stricker, while differing slightly in form and approach, both render the inner life suddenly, startlingly tangible, dramatizing the movement of conscious experience. In doing so, they allow us to perceive the mind, its “shining” fissures and its “islands” in sharper relief. Even more importantly, these innovative poets make solitude beautiful and strange again.

MICHAEL BENEDIKT'S SUITCASE

Mike James

Michael Benedikt's suitcase of poems. His leather suitcase of poems. Michael Benedikt's off white, leather suitcase of poems. His crinkled, off white, leather suitcase of poems. Michael Benedikt's dumpster bound suitcase. A suitcase of poems, number two pencils, and paper clips. No magazine cut outs of air brushed gloss within Michael Benedikt's crinkled, off white, ketchup stained, leather suitcase. The one with the gray trim. A suitcase not out of place on a riverbank, engulfed in green grass and in the green daydreams of lawyerly voyeurs. A suitcase that stays full after a whole day and night and day of unpacking.

IN BOB DYLAN'S NEIGHBORHOOD

Mike James

It's hard to get Johnny out of the basement. He likes it there with his books and chemistry. If he were a pharmacist he'd mix up medicine. If he were an alchemist he'd try to make gold. Johnny's just a big kid with a chemistry set. He used to work at the factory. Now he's a laid off genius, smart as Aquinas. He stays in his basement with his potions and books. Johnny won't walk the pavement and the alleyways. He won't talk about the government. Says it just is. It's hard to get Johnny out of the basement, even to go see Maggie (his once and only love) who is always soot faced from her job and always talking and talking about leaving town for good. She says Brownville is not for her or for anyone with anything close to a soul. Maggie wants a place in the country, too small to even be called a farm, where she can wear sandals all day and use candles as the evenings only light. She says it's evening year round in some places where the sky is always dark or getting there.

THE APPRENTICESHIP

Eric Pankey

In the end, what could he do? He liked to play with matches, to close the cover and strike, to watch the spark turn inward, crackle, then flare, sometimes straight up into a flame, other times and, only for an instant, into a helix that unspiraled into a fiery teardrop. Sometimes, the matches, soft with humidity, bent and tore and would not catch. He apprenticed himself to fire. Heraclitus says, *All things are an exchange for fire and fire for all things*. He braided fuses out of rags, knew the after-mark of each accelerant, held his palm open above the candle longer than was needed, read biographies of the great arsonists. Jesus says, *I came to set fire to the world, and I wish it were already burning*. Bob Dylan sings, *You can play with fire, but you'll get the bill*.

THE BUSINESS OF BUSINESS

Kyle Norwood

There's so much you'll need to learn, but basically here is how you do it: you remove your mind from where it wants to be, as if plucking it with your fingers from a table top, and firmly place it where it needs to be: in a file drawer, say, or a silverware sorter.

You do this over and over, thousands of times a day if necessary. It's difficult, because very soon you are no longer interested in the materials you must transform, no matter how noble the task may have seemed in the abstract.

Or else you are responsible for preventing disorder: flying fish that jump from an open tank, stray cats escaping from an alley, oil from an ancient gasket, prisoners from a poorly guarded compound, and your job is to catch the strays, plug the leaks, stave off disaster—in which case, despite your boredom, you are probably too anxious to let your attention wander.

And there are always so many files, or forks, or fish, or leaks, or strays: hundreds, thousands, so that catching up even temporarily is unrealistic (and in any case, what a small victory it would be), besides which the management just laid off five of your co-workers and gave themselves big bonuses.

On an assigned day, you will finish up what you can, push the excess into a dumpster (bolting the lid shut), and write a largely fictional interim report. You will worry about getting caught, yet fundamentally you know you're doing what your employers want:

To have you actually do your job would cost more than anyone would willingly pay, and they are satisfied with your anxious semblance of achievement, which is cheaper and good enough to fool the auditors (who are overworked themselves), and if necessary they will blame it all on you: after all, it was your conspiracy of silence that allowed the shameful conditions that led to the inevitable catastrophe.

Once a month a fixed sum of money will show up in your bank account, which means you can keep eating and stay in your house. You are lucky, riding the river to oblivion in comfort. Others suffer hunger instead of boredom, watching flies settle on their children's faces.

Sitting slumped in your armchair with the lights off and the television turned up loud, the work you brought home still sitting untouched inside your 50-pound briefcase-on-wheels, you remind yourself that this beats the alternative, and anyway you're already nearly asleep, a half-eaten chicken leg dropping into your lap where your cat finds it, gnawing and choking, gnawing and choking, but surviving, like you, to do it all again tomorrow.

If you look at your hand, you will find you have already signed the contract. Feel free to keep the pen. We will end our little talk with the appropriate clichés: Go forth and make your country proud. Civilization as we know it depends on you.

BUTTERFLY GIRL AND MIRAGE BOY

Alan Robert Proctor

BEING A PLAYWRIGHT PAID FOR MY COFFEE. BEING A STAFF reporter for *The Omen* paid my rent. I lived paycheck to paycheck. Friends asked why I settled in upstate New York's Adirondack Mountains right after college. "No poison ivy," I'd tell them. Or, "Writers work wherever there's a corner desk." But it wasn't that. It was Sylvia.

Ever since I was a teenager, Sylvia distressed my dreams. A few weeks might've gone by without a nocturnal visit. But sooner or later, she'd be back. No matter where the labyrinths of sleep took me, two nights out of seven she'd show up—undulating against my stomach on an elephant as we shambled down WalMart's housewares aisle. Then, a week later, she's next to me in the car's passenger seat. I'm white-knuckle-driving down a steep and twisty mountain road without guardrails. The Honda sails off the road's edge. Sylvia screams, and I'm flung into wakefulness.

Actually, the infatuation began before I was a teenager, during my first year at summer camp. Even at the awkward age of twelve, I could tell this new girl, Sylvia—fourteen, lanky and just beginning to bloom—was different. When you're twelve, "different" is conditional. My biological maturity was just beginning, but I wasn't emotionally ready for the change. What young boy is? And I certainly wasn't ready for Sylvia. The following year she was back at camp.

"Weren't you here last year?" she asked me after breakfast the first day.

"You remember me?" I said.

"Uh huh." She looked me up and down, a halting appraisal. Throughout our four summers together, she grew from a rather scrawny kid into a striking young woman. I grew from a boy on the cusp of desire to a young man in the grip of it. The girls in my junior high and high school classes seemed ordinary, like canned green beans. Sylvia was seasonal and exotic—mango ice cream with sprinkles.

I knew when I returned to camp on the last weekend of June, Sylvia would be there with ironic quips about my physical or mental qualifications.

After four years, she didn't return to camp. She sent me a post card on my sixteenth birthday. "Happy Birthday," it said. "You're at camp. I'm in London. Cheerio." The following year, my last at camp, she sent a postcard from Paris. "*Enchante*," it read followed by three exclamation marks, no return address—as usual—never anything more specific than a city. I wasn't able to write her a witty reply.

Postcards followed, two or three a year while I was in college. I never had the nerve to call her up. The closest I ever came to rekindling my obsession was after I got my English degree and moved into the forested hills we shared in upstate New York. Post-adolescent chump, at twenty-two, that was me.

When she phoned me two weeks ago on Friday night—actually spoke to me after, what had it been, six months since calling about her split-up with the *I-got-married-too-soon husband*—I realized her latest postcard from Rome at the new Pope's inauguration was just a continuation of the original tease.

"Blast from the past, Doug. This is Sylvia, your summer camp girl friend. How's life?" she had said.

The lilt in her voice, the raspy edge to her consonants, made my scrotum clench. I don't remember what I answered to "How's life," probably something brainless. I sat down at my computer and circled the mouse on its pad. "Long time no see," I said into the cellphone.

"Yeah," she said. "My boyfriend showed me that piece you wrote for the paper about the bears that trashed Camp Pittman's kitchen. My boyfriend grew up around there, actually. We're getting married next month after my divorce comes through. I'll send a wedding invitation with an RSVP card. Guess who my fiancé is. It's Brad," she gushed without waiting for a reply, "your Camp Pittman *counselor* for goodness sake. How's that for a coincidence?"



My life as a bachelor was jelling. Even after my Trenton, New Jersey mother married my Poughkeepsie, New York father, Mom never lost her Jersey attitude. She wanted another grandchild ASAP. I tried hard to persuade her that my two previous and inconclusive college relationships had made me a wiser, if not happier, man. Maybe I'd find true love at twenty-three, I told her. Then it was twenty-four. Then, when I turned twenty-five last month, she began the cross examinations.

“You sit around all day at your computer. How can you find a nice girl when you sit around all day at your computer?”

“I’m a writer, Mom. It’s what I do.”

“Why can’t you be a husband and a father, too?”

She wasn’t finished. I waited.

“Betty’s nice. You know Betty O’Keefe. She’s pretty—in her own way. Nice, big Betty Boop eyes. Sincere, you know? You can tell sincere from the eyes. She works at the cafeteria, a manager no less. You met Betty when you took time out from your busy schedule to visit me over Thanksgiving. She lives down the street. Betty’s—”

“She’s a nice girl Mom, but she’s plain as Spam.”

“You want caviar, Doug? Caviar’s for men who drive a Lexus, have houses with his and her closets, and live on a beachfront.”

“Betty has bad teeth, Mom.”

“Ha! What do you know? She’s got braces now. The adult kind you have to get in close to see.”

I could almost hear the gears shifting in my mother’s head. “You know what the favorite meat in Hawaii is?” she asked.

Favorite meat? “Uh, Bluefin tuna?” I said.

“Spam, wise guy. Yeah, Simple Simon Spam. It was good enough to keep your grandfather fightin’ against Hitler in Europe. Don’t underestimate Betty Boop Spam, Doug.”



I lived in a tourist town. Winters were quiet, summer vacationers bled money, and the locals appreciated local art. The high school production of *Socks*, my latest play, wasn’t bad—for high school. The novel’s third draft was done and my agent rejection letters were beginning to roll in. Someday, I thought, I’ll go to Paris and all the other places Sylvia’s postcards waved in my face, rent a three-floor walk up with a knock-out lover, and write a Tony Award winner. Sylvia would be in the audience, of course, watching me give my acceptance speech. After the hugs and congratulatory praise settled down, she’d wait for me outside the back stage door.

DOUG: *(Exiting back stage and laughing lightly)* Sylvia, I can’t believe it’s you. How did you find me?

SYLVIA: *I saw Socks at St. Marks Place. I loved it, Doug. The director gave me your contact info. He told me you were up for a Tony.*

DOUG: *Did you recognize yourself? What did you think of the play?*

SYLVIA: *The language was so . . . rich. The character development so . . . subtle, but strong.*

DOUG: *I was ~~hoping you~~ I'm grateful the audience understood why Socks had to leave his jealous lovers and escape to Katmandu.*

I've been told you can never stamp out the flames of unrequited first love. The hurt smolders like a fire at the city dump. You can't see the hot core under all the trash and oily rags, but it's there.



Camp Pittman, where Sylvia and I first met, is a still-functioning fine arts camp twenty minutes up the road from my townhouse. *The Omen* assigned me to review their production of the American Indian legend, *Butterfly Girl and Mirage Boy*, written by somebody who'd been dead for a hundred years and probably never met a Native American, but I liked the play's name immediately: supernatural schmaltz.

That afternoon, Bryn McNeal, the camp's drama coach, had introduced me to the players over a hasty reception of Kool-Aid and Girl Scout cookies. He cast my too-shy nephew, Stewart, as *Mirage Boy*—a small part despite the play's title. This was Stewart's first Camp Pittman summer. Intense, geeky, my older sister's thirteen-year-old son kneaded his knuckles and contemplated tall, thin, fifteen-year-old Adele Dunn, who was playing *Butterfly Girl*, the lead. Earlier in the week, Adele had punched Stewart in the stomach when he suggested they do the nasty. I think Stewart thought it was new dance step. I could tell by the boy's spaniel look he thought Adele was the icing on the Halloween cake—succulent, but with a one-in-ten chance of hidden razorblades.

"Tonight," McNeal told his cast and crew, "the press will be watching. Let's impress Doug with our theatrical rrrr-resonance." He had obscenely rolled the "r."

In the shuttered half-light, the barn theater's seats filled with campers and parents like a rising flood. McNeal had reserved a seat for me up front and far house left where I'd be pretty much alone. The theater hadn't changed much since Sylvia and I were campers. And neither had I—inside. Outside, my paint was thinning and my teenage timbers were beginning to warp.

I turned to where the senior campers sat at the back of the theater and imagined Sylvia with them in the last row. The years that once separated the kid from the young woman wouldn't matter, so I conjured her up, twenty-seven now with silver earrings that flashed through a curtain of straight hair. She looked right at me.

DOUG: (Calling) I knew you'd come. You've grown even prettier.

SYLVIA: (Calling back) I'm not here, really.

DOUG: Of course not, but stay a while.

I left my windbreaker on the chair back, strolled down the aisle and took the wing stairs two at a time. Backstage, the play's butterflies were hovering everywhere, a dozen or so little tykes with droopy wings and bent antennas, their seven- and eight-year-old faces streaked with gaudy makeup.

"I'm a Swallowtail," a little girl said to me. "My brother's a Monarch." They fluttered away.

Adele quietly rehearsed her lines. She gestured in ankle leggings, an open lab coat, and body tights that hugged every inch of her. Construction paper butterflies spotted the coat inside and out. The twins, Macy and Mora, kibitzed each other like an old married couple. Mora fumbled an attempt to safety-pin her sister's hem. Macy paced and snapped the waist band that peeked above a multicolored Guatemalan skirt. On her brow, two feathers crossed one another in an X behind a rhinestone headband. I made a note on my writing pad: *The costumes, artfully crafted by fourteen-year-old Mora Lott—sister of Macy Lott, who played Butterfly Girl's sidekick, Burden Maiden—leapt off the stage into the appreciative eyes of the audience.*

SYLVIA: Leapt? Cute!

DOUG: Why did you leave your husband?

SYLVIA: (Sighing) He never really knew me, not the real me. I was lookin' for love in all the wrong places.

DOUG: (A beat) Go on.

SYLVIA: It was you I loved all along, Doug. I didn't know it at the time. You were so much younger—

DOUG: Do you have regrets?

SYLVIA: (Beginning to cry) Yes. I was so stupid!

When McNeal bounded onto the creaking stage, I headed back to my seat. "Ladies and gentlemen," he began, "Camp Pittman is proud to present the American Indian legend, *Butterfly Girl and Mirage Boy*, an allegory of love's power to transcend the earthly sphere through unceasing devotion."

DOUG: Don't cry, Sylvia. The past is kaput. We gotta move on.

SYLVIA: (Drying her tears) Did you ever learn to swim?

DOUG: Sure—the side-stroke.

SYLVIA: You were so cute in your bathing suit.

DOUG: You never told me that before.

SYLVIA: I could tell every time you got a boner—

DOUG: *Holy crap!*

SYLVIA: *-which was a lot.*

DOUG: *Where am I going with this script?*

McNeal waited for the crowd's attention and then swept to stage left. "Are we settled in?" He glared at his audience, daring them to misbehave. "Good," he said and retreated backwards into the wings. "And now Camp Pittman presents, *Butterfly Girl and Mirage Boy.*"

SYLVIA: *Remember the year we did As You Like It?*

DOUG: *On this very stage. You were a terrific Rosalind. I think that's when I fell for you. Was the play our beginning, Sylvia? The awakening of our hearts?*

SYLVIA: *(Tapping her chin in thought) You played one of the merry men in The Forest of Arden. Or were you the wrestler that got beat up?*

DOUG: *I was both. (Singing) Most friendship is feigning, most loving mere folly, then heigh-ho the holly. This life is most jolly!*

SYLVIA: *Shut up . . . Who knew?*

DOUG: *(Smiling) What?*

SYLVIA: *You've got a great voice. Sing some more.*

I was humming as the house lights blinked out. The stage-hand hauled the squeaking curtain apart. A flute melody sounded backstage. I scribbled on my tablet: *Daphne Tipps' flute added an unearthly musical glow to the evening's drama.*

Adele glided out with a large jug on her shoulder and four butterflies at her heels. "Yea, but I do hear thee, O flute-musician mine." She cupped her hands along an imaginary flute, bobbled, and nearly dropped the pot. "Answer," she said, "so I'll answer thee back." As the flute answered, Adele set the earthenware down. She scratched her left calf with the toe of her right shoe. Those leggings must have itched like hell.

"So each rosy morn, each fragrant eve, Butterfly Girl to the water comes." She eased the jug sideways with her foot and pulled her coat open. "See my butterflies?" The remaining squadron of butterflies swooped in from stage left and flapped around her in frantic circles. As Adele sashayed left and right, cape spread to display her butterfly cutouts, the insect-children scurried underfoot.

In the wings, I caught Stewart staring hard at Adele. She did project a kind of sinuous invitation.

"Oh, I have butterflies that I caught from Earth's six regions." One of the pinned butterflies fluttered to the floor. She scooted it away with her foot. "Butterfly Girl they call me, girl of the butterfly spirit, all because the white, winged-ones hover about me with light."

DOUG: *There was a kind of light around you in that two-piece you never got wet. What was that?*

SYLVIA: *Your adolescent longing.*

DOUG: *(Deep in thought) I projected my aching adolescence onto you like Phoebe's misguided love for the imposter Ganymede.*

SYLVIA: *I was Rosalind and Ganymede.*

DOUG: *Yeah, you had it both ways.*

SYLVIA: *I could have had anyone at camp I wanted. And did, including Brad, your counselor, my soon-to-be second husband.*

Butterfly Girl was pouting. "The village maidens mock me. They touch their brows as if to say featherbrains and fancies. Senses flown away!" She clasped her hands to her chest. "But they do not know what Butterfly Girl can see over the edges of the morning." Adele gestured to the butcher-paper pool and stamped her foot. "I do hear him," she said. Her entourage of Lepidoptera flogged the air.

"I do see him." She stamped her foot again, and her moccasin skidded in a wet patch the stage-hand had failed to mop dry. Her moist heel tore off the pool's shoreline. Butterfly Girl hopped one-legged, thrashing the scrap stuck to the bottom of her shoe. "I am Butterfly Girl and Mirage Boy is my lover!" She tossed the soggy shred into the audience. A kid in the front row caught the prize and held it up in triumph.

I noted: *Butterfly Girl, played by Adele Dunn, covered the only obvious technical error of the evening with theatrical poise. Her performance illuminated the purity of Butterfly Girl's spirit. Her butterfly minions, with expertise well beyond their young years, floated attentively at her side.*

Adele blew a kiss house right where Stewart, the play's Mirage Boy, waited in the wings for his entrance. My nephew snatched the kiss from the air and held it to his throat. I made a note: *Butterfly Girl's devotion to her idealized lover was palpable with every word and gesture.*

SYLVIA: *You don't get it, Doug. I was seventeen our last year together—*

DOUG: *How many others were there?*

SYLVIA (Laughing): *You never knew, did you? You were just a kid.*

DOUG: *I was old enough to love you.*

SYLVIA: *You loved the idea of an older woman.*

DOUG: *You're wrong. You were my Butterfly Girl.*

SYLVIA: *And you, Slug-Doug, were a mirage.*

I made a mental note this time: *With theatrical poise, Mirage Boy wrapped his hands around Butterfly Girl's throat and squeezed until her eyes bulged and her tongue lolled from her purple lips like an undercooked sausage.*

To summon Mirage Boy, Burden Maiden had joined Butterfly Girl on stage. The actors danced to the flute in klutzy circles. I noted on my pad: *The choreography, an odd pastiche of Stanky Legg and Cat Daddy The choreography valiantly attempted to adapt to the magical spirit of the evening.* When the music ended, Burden Maiden pattered across the proscenium, looked at Butterfly Girl, and, sounding like my New York City aunt, said, “Heah? Listnin’?”

“Nay, Burden Maiden, harkening.”

“What hear you besides the pool, a lover’s flute or somethin’?” She mugged to the audience; they enjoyed the ad-lib.

“Yes, my lover’s flute—”

DOUG: (Annoyed) Mirages don’t sing, Sylvia. (Singing) Though thou the waters warp, thy sting is not so sharp as friend remember’d not.

SYLVIA: (Feigning concern) Oh, Doug. I remembered you. I sent postcards. I even called you—twice—the first time six months ago after my turd of a husband . . .

DOUG: (Interrupting) You taunted me. Why couldn’t you just let it go?

Adele clasped her hands to her heart. “Oh, Burden Maiden, Mirage Boy is no specter. Hear his song. Now, and now—” The flute trilled.

Burden Maiden expelled all the air from her chest with theatric overkill. She turned upstage, back to the audience, adjusting her costume, I think. “What ears cannot hear, you hear,” and turned back to face the house. “Featherbrains and fancies. You are droll and quite useless, Butterfly Girl.” I made a note: *The actors’ vocal projections, while spotty, while uneven, while sporadically delicate, could easily be heard.*

DOUG: Even back then my basso profundo voice thrilled you. Piccolo to bassoon by the end of tenth grade. Admit it. You were impressed.

SYLVIA: (Using her hands in mock sign language) Mirage Boy stupid like . . . bow without arrow . . . like . . . wrestler . . . with tiny . . . pecker . . .

DOUG: This is the real you, isn’t it? You didn’t leave your husband; he couldn’t stand it, so he left you, didn’t he?

SYLVIA: (Caught) He did nothing of the sort.

DOUG: That’s why you called me six months ago and cried on my shoulder.

SYLVIA: You didn’t have a clue, Slug-Doug. Six months ago, you were still half-baked, a twenty-four-year-old child.

“Ah, Burden Maiden, could you but hear and see as I, lighter would be your heart, swifter your feet.” Butterfly Girl scrubbed at her leggings. “Hark! But I hear him. Come and see.” The flapping insects disbursed in all directions.

Burden Maiden drew her head back in affected surprise. “So like to the eyes of truth, almost you made me see!” She pointed to the closed double doors at the

theater's exit. Several younger audience members turned. Were they hoping to catch a glimpse of Mirage Boy?

Hands jointed, the two girls prowled forward. "Look, Burden Maiden, Mirage Boy comes hither to dance. Join us, Mirage Boy!" Backstage, somebody began rapidly thumping a tom-tom in four-four time. The frantic downbeat sounded like rear-ended traffic piling-up on the interstate. The girls struggled to synchronize McNeal's Native American version of the Mexican hat dance. I scribbled on my pad: *The play's director, Bryn McNeal, brought ample evidence of multiculturalism to the performance.*

When would this play end?

DOUG: *Not a kid anymore, Sylvia.*

SYLVIA: *So, what have you learned in your pitifully sluggish rise to semi- and locally-restricted fame?*

DOUG: *To paraphrase Burden Maiden, So like to the eyes of truth, now you make me see.*

SYLVIA: *(Her image is beginning to pixelate) You're a five-pound catfish in a farm pond, Doug.*

DOUG: *Better than a spring minnow in Lake Erie.*

My nephew, awaiting his cue, sneezed. He dragged his sleeve across his nose. The explosiveness of his breath startled me. As though slapped awake, I realized the counterfeit exuberance of the review I was writing. Stewart's pathetic infatuation, which mirrored my own for Sylvia, wobbled off its axis. The past was unspooling before me. I had been living my life backwards.

"Oh, the sweet music! Burden Maiden," Butterfly Girl was saying. "Was it not wonderful?"

"Nay, I saw and heard nothin'. You have made a fool of me, Butterfly Girl. I am ashamed of myself. How the others will laugh!" Burden Maiden threw her head down and thumped the back of her fist against her forehead.

"I am sorry," Butterfly Girl said. "Me you see. Me you hear and answer. But him, the brightest one, never."

Burden Maiden encircled her ear with a finger. "Featherbrains and fancies. We came for water, Butterfly Girl. Let us fill our jars." The girls bent down to the butcher-paper's flat blue pool and dipped their water jugs.

DOUG: *I gave you the best part of my summers, Sylvia.*

SYLVIA: *(Her image is fading) Summer's over, Doug.*

DOUG: *The summers of my discontent. (Suddenly remembering) Wait! That was the first summer I had Spam. Spam on white bread with mayo. Spam chowder.*

“How the living water is made beautiful with reflections, Burden Maiden. Visions are in it. And ripples of sweet song.” Both actors froze in position. The butterflies staggered to a halt.

Mirage Boy traipsed onstage to the largest boulder. My nephew placed an anointing hand on the paper mache prop. “Such are the,” he took a shuddering breath and continued, “natures of men.” He turned to Burden Maiden and gestured at the pond with wooden arms, “For the one, life is but a” (breath) “pool of chill and heavy water, a burden” (breath) “to be borne.” His pathetic delivery reminded me of a horse ridden too hard that needed water and a good currying.

The boy crossed to the pool’s other side where Adele hunched over the puckered paper. “For the other,” he curled his fingers into a claw, “like this pool,” and then the digits softened into benediction, “life mirrors the beauty of Heaven’s glow!” The lights came down on the motionless cluster of butterflies, boulders, waterfall pillars, and the three leads. Enthusiastic applause and whistling.

As previously invited, I headed backstage through the moldering curtain. While the props and insects peeled off their wings and assorted brown or green pajama bottoms, I sat down next to Stewart at the rickety table and clapped the boy on the shoulder, “Good job,” I said. Adele glanced at him; he tried not to smile. Best to just look cool, nod. “Forget the caviar,” I whispered in Stewart’s ear. “Check out the Spam.” His questioning look made me want to hug him.

While the director debriefed, I took a few notes as a courtesy. Stewart kept stealing peeks at Adele and then ducking his head. Gawking and ducking. She looked past him, regally mute. McNeal droned on to the cast and crew.

DOUG: *All the world’s a stage, Sylvia.*

McNeal’s patter and his players’ replies were incomprehensible to me, like radio news through floorboards.

SYLVIA: *And all the men and women merely players.*

I watched my nephew’s body language yearn for recognition. Adele’s silent, dismissive response.

DOUG: *Whining school boys with their satchels.*

SYLVIA: *The lover sighing like a furnace.*

I pulled Sylvia’s RSVP from my back pocket, smiled at her disappearing image, and ripped it up.

DOUG: *And so we play our parts.*

OUTTAKES FROM *THE NEWLYWED GAME*

Eric Pankey

In the crowd around the victim, she is the one who admonishes: *Give this poor person room to breathe*. He prefers a tender touch to an apology. She thinks he is the one who should apologize. They first met, he says, because he sensed the gaze of an unknown viewer. They met, she says, because she had always wanted to be a contestant on *The Newlywed Game*. Instead of scaring the crows, she reports, once he tried to make them feel at home; the crows left in a huff, nonetheless, over his inept hospitality. She insists that none of the resurrection sightings are authentic, but are a manifestation of a group hallucination that moved like a contagion among Jesus' followers in their grief. Fair enough, he responds, noting in his daybook yet another non sequitur on her part. Regarding *making woopie*, she compares it to an algorithm that collapses into randomness. He compares it to the water's surface: fugitive, ethereal, a depth without reflection. She shakes her head no and says, you mean it is like a fog illumined from within, aglow yet opaque. Yeah, he says. What she said.

*

Simon Perchik

To not hear her leaving
and though this snapshot is wrinkled
it's carried off in a shirt pocket

that never closes, stays with you
by reaching out as eyes
waiting for tears and emptiness

—you remember who filled the camera
except there was sunlight—a shadow
must say something, must want

to be lifted, brought back, caressed
the way a well is dug for the dead
who want only water and each other

—you try, pull the corners closer
over and over folded till you are facing
the ground, the dry grass, her.

THE STONE THAT EATS SOUND

Göran Malmqvist

In a glade somewhere in Wales there lies a stone that eats sound. There is nothing that stone doesn't devour—the roar of the storm when it tears through the forest, the bawling of stags in rut, the calling of birds, the rustle of snakes crawling through the tall grass, the eager barking of hunting dogs when they catch the scent of the fox, the patter of pouring rain on the tin roof of the forester's hut, the drone of wild bees, the tattle of a young couple seeking shelter behind the stone in order to make love in peace and the almost inaudible sougning under the wings of brimstone butterflies—all this is swallowed up by the stone. I like to believe that a wanderer who sits down on that stone to rest will enjoy the greatest possible silence.

A pregnant stone! A stone pregnant with sounds! What would happen if a poor farmer who decided to break fresh ground in that glade drilled eighteen deep holes in the stone and filled each hole with snail-dynamite. As everybody well knows, snail-dynamite doesn't explode. It expands sideways and causes the stone to burst. When that happens, will then all the sounds that have been hidden in the stone for hundreds or thousands of years suddenly pour forth from its belly? What would happen then? Would the leaves be torn from the branches of the trees? Would the wings of the brimstone butterflies be torn from their bodies? And all the animals in the forest, all the birds in the trees and all the reptiles on the ground, what would happen to them? The mind boggles.

I have never visited that glade in Wales and have therefore never seen that remarkable stone. But I do know that it is there. On the map of the world that the Jesuit father Ferdinand Verbiest (1623–88) printed at the end of the 17th century, when he served as Director of the Imperial Observatory in Peking, there are several legends, written in Chinese. From one legend, written on that part of the map that covers Ireland, we learn that there are no snakes on that island. That is true. There are no snakes in Ireland. Several other legends deal with matters that do exist in the material world. Why then should I doubt the veracity of the legend that says that there is a stone in a glade in Wales that eats sound? I want to believe in Verbiest who is said to have been a very learned and highly cultivated man. I would consider the world much poorer if I chose not to believe in him.

THE QUERENT

Louise Marburg

THOUGH WALLINGTON WAS CONSIDERED A SUBURB OF New Haven, barely a twenty-minute drive from downtown, the fixer-upper Joanne and Lewis bought there sat on eight acres of wooded land. There was a horse farm that offered riding lessons a couple of miles down the road, and a roadside stand nearby that sold local produce and pies. But I-95 was the same distance in the opposite direction, beyond which was a Walmart and a treeless development of modest homes. The village proper was further on toward the shore, a charming collection of historic houses, antique shops, a granite-faced little library; a post office, the town hall, and a triangular village green. Joanne and Lewis moved here from New York City three months before, when Lewis took a job teaching architecture at Yale. Neither were truly city people: Joanne grew up on the edge of Saint Louis and moved to New York after college; Lewis was from Maine. His plan was to buy a sloop in the spring, and sail it on Long Island Sound. Her plan was to get pregnant as soon as she could. She would be thirty-six in June.

Black-haired and fair, with rosy lips and jewel-blue eyes, her looks were the first thing people noticed about her, and too often the only thing: she had discarded a dozen fawning boyfriends by the time she finally met Lewis. He was as handsome as she was beautiful—blond and brown-eyed, her opposite match—but he seemed as insensible to her beauty, and his own, as she was conscious of it. He said he loved her, in part, because he thought she was intelligent, and she loved him for thinking so. That he was smart was obvious. She wasn't so sure about herself anymore. She couldn't make sense of the blueprints he drew up for the renovations on the house, and when he described how a room would eventually look, she couldn't truly envision it. She was alone all day while he was at school, the construction workers banging away. The living room was a forest of joists, cotton candy insulation exploding from its walls, and the room she privately

thought of as the nursery was filled with paint cans and planks of wood. Their foreman, Jake, a gargoyle of a man with a nose like a fingerling potato, spoke to her more casually than she liked, but she didn't want to say anything in case he got offended and quit. Instead, she gave him the cold shoulder when he tried to chat with her about anything other than the house, pretending that something required her immediate attention: a phone call, an errand, a chore left undone. "When will the house be finished?" she said as she and Lewis ate dinner in the half-dismantled kitchen. "I'm tired of having these guys all over the place. I'd give anything for a little privacy."

"By summer?" he said.

She smiled. "You're asking me?"

"No, I mean I'm guessing by summer. Hoping, anyway."

"That seems like an eon," she said. She twined spaghetti around her fork. A draft from a nearby window blew across her neck. She shivered and said, "I can't wait until it's done."

"You're reminding me of an Arab proverb I once heard," he said. "When a house is finished, death walks in."

"That's awful!" she said. "Where did you hear such a terrible thing?"

"Egypt," he said. "Or Dubai. I can't remember." He had worked for an international architecture firm before joining the faculty at Yale. "It does sound morbid, but I understand its meaning. A house can never truly be finished, there is always something more to do—or redo, like that mess of a pool out there." He cocked his head toward the window over the sink and the kidney-shaped swimming pool in the darkness beyond that hadn't been filled in years. It was old and cracked, moldy scum plugging its drain, its cement scarred by the skateboards of the former owners' three sons. "How they could stand looking at that ugly thing every day is a mystery to me."

"I look at it every day," Joanne said, then regretted it. She knew what Lewis would say next.

"How's the job hunt been going?"

"Pretty fruitless," she said. She had worked in public relations in New York.

"You might want to change your tack," he said lightly. "Maybe look for something a little different than straight up PR."

"I guess so," she murmured as she rose from the table and took their plates to the sink. She had made a stab at finding a job in her field when they first moved here in September, but since then she'd mostly been pretending to look, which she realized Lewis very likely knew but didn't mind enough to really press it. She'd been successful and energetic when they lived in New York, but a lassitude had crept over her the last couple of months, as if her thoughts were mired in the

shoe-sucking mud that led up to the back door steps. Besides, there didn't seem to be any point in starting a new job when her most urgent ambition was to be a mother. She liked hanging around in her yoga pants all day, cruising Facebook and shopping online, culling information from pregnancy sites. If she held her legs to her chest after intercourse, the sperm would flow freely to her cervix, and being entered from behind was more effective than any other position. She used an ovulation predictor called, hopefully, Fertile Friend, a plastic stick like a pregnancy test that read YES! in a little window on the days she was meant to have sex.

“So what’s your preference?” Lewis said. “Resurrect the pool or bury it?”

She looked out the window at the ghostly outline of the pool and imagined herself floating in it while a baby floated in her. “Let’s restore it,” she said. “I always wanted a pool.” She hadn’t, in fact, but now it felt true.



Instead of going to the gargantuan Stop and Shop and wandering the over-bright aisles like a zombie, she often drove the extra mile to Mike’s Grocery in the village. Seasonal fruits nestled in tissue paper were displayed in boxes in the window, and the only cookies Mike’s sold were various “biscuits” imported from England. It reminded her of a specialty shop in New York where she used to buy a particular brand of Indian chutney. Mike himself manned the meat section, a slim, youngish man who wielded his knives with incongruously brutal hands.

“Have you seen who moved in next door?” he said as he wrapped her grass-fed ground beef in white paper. “Where The Ivy bookstore used to be?” He rolled his eyes and pointed his thumb. “A fortune teller,” he said in a disgusted tone. “That’s what it’s come to in this town, a nice business goes bust, then they rent the place to any nut-job who comes along.”

Joanne wondered who “they” were, but understood that was beside the point. She paid for her meat and fancy cookies and walked through the February slush to her car. Squinting up at the empty blue sky, she felt a fleeting presage of spring. As she put the groceries in the car’s trunk, she looked at the storefront where The Ivy used to be. In New York, fortunetellers advertised themselves with blinking neon hands, but the only sign here was a small placard in the window. *Delia Mann, Tarot*, it read, *By Appointment Only*. A lace curtain obscured the inside of the store. Joanne took her phone out of her purse and dialed the number on the placard. After a few rings, a gravely voice answered.

“May I make an appointment?” Joanne said.

“Sure,” the voice said. “When would you like to come in?”

“Now,” Joanne said. “I’m standing outside.”

“Ring the bell,” the voice said. “I’ll buzz you in.”

Joanne pushed the door open when she heard a buzz. The bookshelves and register counter had been removed, and now the shop was an open room. A tapestry of a giant eye was tacked up on the back wall, while nail holes and pale patches where pictures had hung marred the glossy eggshell paint on other walls. The sunshine that filtered through the lace curtains dappled the room with jigsaw shapes of light. There was a sagging sofa covered by a flowered slipcover, a low, round brass table and a metal folding chair. The bookstore’s warm, papery smell still lingered in the air.

“Excuse the décor,” the gravelly voice said. “I just moved in last weekend.” A woman appeared at a door in the corner that must have led to a storage room. She was forced to step sideways across the threshold because she was too wide to walk straight through. When she emerged, Joanne suppressed a breath of surprise: as well as being astonishingly obese, her scalp was plainly visible beneath a sparse covering of downy red hair. She waddled over to the sofa and plopped down on it with a sigh. “And don’t pay attention to this ridiculous tapestry either, it’s covering a hole in the wall. She turned to scowl at it. “It was a gift from a grateful querent, I didn’t have the heart to throw it out.”

“What’s a querent?” Joanne said.

“You are,” the woman said. “I’m Delia, by the way.” Joanne sat down in the metal chair. She could feel its coldness through her jeans. She’d expected Delia to be a black-eyed wraith with a scarf around her head.

Delia picked up a deck of brightly colored cards and expertly shuffled them with bloated hands. Joanne felt a shiver of disgust. It was wrong of her, she knew, but she disliked unattractive people.

“So, Joanne. What can I do for you?” Delia said.

“Oh, nothing specific,” Joanne said. “I’m just curious. I’ve never had my fortune told before.” Delia put the cards on the table and dealt three. They had pictures on them, Joanne saw now.

“You’re not from here, are you,” Delia said. Joanne shook her head. “And you’re not so happy here, either.”

“Oh, no, I am,” Joanne said in a bright voice. “I’ve been here five months already. Everything is great.”

Delia handed her the deck. “Shuffle these a few times and give them back to me.” Joanne did as she asked. Delia laid out the first ten off the top of the deck in a formation like a cross.

“I see stasis,” Delia said. “Frustration. You want something you aren’t getting.” She touched a card. “Oh my, you really are in a funk.”

“No I’m not,” Joanne said. “Lots of exciting things are happening. We’re fixing up the house, and my husband has a new job. It’s all new, really. I’ve never lived in the country before.” She craned her neck to look at the cards. Delia waved her away.

“Listen. I can’t read your cards if you’re going to deny everything I say. You’re not happy now, but you were happy in the past. There’s a problem with your man, though he looks like a nice enough guy.”

Joanne sat back and crossed her arms over her chest. “I want to get pregnant. He doesn’t know I’m trying.”

Delia frowned. “Just out curiosity, why doesn’t he know?”

“Because he doesn’t want children,” Joanne said. She felt her eyes grow hot at the memory of the bitter argument she and Lewis had about his refusal to consider becoming a father. He was adamant. They almost broke up. He’d had a miserable childhood, his parents had neglected his simplest needs; he was afraid he’d be like them, and hate himself if he was. Nothing she said made any difference, so in the end she pretended to accept his decision while planning to eventually change his mind by giving him no choice in the matter. Her placid suburban upbringing had prepared her for a conventional life. Childless women were pitiable or selfish, and she didn’t think of herself as either. The face of their child appeared in her mind’s eye: her blue eyes and unblemished skin, Lewis’s golden hair, his mischievous, dimpled smile. Delia spread the deck across the table and asked Joanne to pick three cards and give them to her. “I will tell you what I see,” she said as she looked at the cards, holding them in her hand like a fan. “You will get pregnant soon, but not by this man of yours.”

“That’s impossible,” Joanne said.

“Some things seem impossible until they happen,” Delia said. “And even then they can be hard to believe.”

“Okay, for argument’s sake, say I wanted to have an affair,” Joanne said. “Who would I have it with? I don’t know anyone in this town except the workers at my house and the grocer next door, and I’m certainly not interested in them. I love my husband; I wouldn’t consider cheating on him. I’m not that kind of woman.”

“I can see that as well,” Delia said, placing the cards face down on the table. Joanne picked up her purse from the floor. She’d made a mistake coming in here, but she hadn’t had anything better to do. The afternoon yawned like a lazy cat. She would go home and eat her cookies. “What do I owe you for this?”

“This?” Delia chuckled. “Nothing. You haven’t been here more than ten minutes.”

Joanne zipped up her parka and turned to go. Delia called to her as she walked out the door, but she kept going as if she didn't hear. As she stood on the sidewalk in the blinding sunshine, she forgot where she was for a moment. Then she recognized her car, a forest green Jeep Lewis bought her when they moved to Wallington. Mike came out of his store wearing a blood stained white apron.

"Did I just see you go into that fortune teller's?" he said. "Why in the world did you do that?"

"I was curious," she said.

"So, what did you find out?"

"Nothing," she said. "She's a phony."



YES! read the Fertile Friend one morning in early March. It was thirteen days past her period. Swathes of brown grass had appeared in the snow, and the pool was half-full of murky meltwater and humps of rotten leaves. She wrapped the stick in toilet paper, buried it in the trash, and got back into bed with Lewis.

"Let's fuck," she said to his back.

He turned over and looked at her with sleep-crusted eyes. "But you hate having sex in the morning."

"Not always," she said. "Not today."

"I have to get up, I have an early class." Even so, he rolled onto her.

"That's what I'm taking about," she said with a laugh. He didn't take very long, but the weight of his body was satisfaction enough; pleasure wasn't the point. When he was done, he got up and went to take a shower. She pulled her knees to her chest and lay still for ten minutes. She had read on the internet that it could take a year to conceive, and her doctor said it might be difficult because she wasn't young and had never been pregnant. What the doctor didn't know was that she'd had an abortion when she was in college. Lewis didn't know it either. She was ashamed and regretful now that she wanted a baby so much: she could have had a teenage son or daughter. But the father had been her Ancient History professor, forty-two and married. He hadn't even been especially good-looking, but he was crazy about her and she'd had an urge to be wild. She cringed when she thought about how promiscuous she'd been in her twenties, reveling in her power to attract men. But she only had sex with the professor once. "Once is all it takes," the doctor at the clinic had said.

"Yeah, I wish," she said, remembering. Bespectacled and pimply-faced and embryonically young, he'd looked more like a math club nerd than a doctor. Elliot W. Graham, M.D. had been his name. She didn't think she'd ever forget it.

Releasing her knees, she stretched out her legs beneath the covers.

“You wish what,” Lewis said as he came out of the bathroom.

She thought a beat. She heard one of the worker’s trucks pull up outside. There was a whining creak, then a bang. “I wish we had the house to ourselves.”

Lewis looked out the window. He loved the house and the surrounding acres; he was proud of his renovations. “You’ll have your wish before the grass in that field is green. Even before then, if we’re lucky.”

“I’m lucky already,” she said. “I’ve got you, haven’t I?” She sat up in bed. “Do you love me?”

He grinned at her as he tucked in his shirt. “More than life itself.”

After he left, she got up, took a shower, and put on her yoga pants and a thick turtleneck sweater. She went to the kitchen and poured herself a cup of coffee, took her time reading the newspaper at the table. She had absolutely nothing to do until Lewis came home: the directions that came in the Fertile Friend box suggested she have sex at least twice on the day the test stick read YES!

A workman was installing the backsplash behind the sink with multicolored tiles she and Lewis had carefully chosen and ordered from a factory in Italy. She watched him smear grout on the walls with a flat trowel and place the tiles side by side. His jeans drooped as if they were barely tacked on to his narrow, bony hips. He couldn’t have been older than eighteen, she thought, and probably related to Jake somehow by the look of his dishwater hair and beady dun-colored eyes.

“Wait a minute,” she said. “You’re lining up those tiles in the wrong order.” She got up and went to the sink. “Look. They’re meant to form a picture of fruit in a bowl. First that one, then that one next to it—oh my God, this is all wrong.” She clasped her forehead and sighed. “Quick, take them off before the grout sets.” As he peeled the tiles off the wall, she said, “Where is Jake?”

“Out in the garage cutting molding,” he said.

She stalked out of the house, slamming the door behind her. Though it was only a short walk to the garage and the day was relatively mild, she was surprised by how windy it was and wished she’d put on a coat. She ducked low beneath the partially raised door and shouted Jake’s name over the high whine of the table saw.

He turned off the saw and removed his goggles. He wiped his potato nose with the back of his hand. “What’s the prob?” he said in the familiar tone that drove Joanne around the bend.

“The *prob*?” Joanne said. “I’ll tell you what the prob is. You’ve got that kid in there setting the backsplash tiles all out of order. Why didn’t you tell him how they’re supposed to go?”

“You’re sexy when you’re all riled up,” Jake said.

Joanne blinked and stepped back. “Excuse me? What did you just say?”

“I said you’re sexy when you’re mad,” he said

“How dare you speak to me like that,” she said.

He smiled as if they had a secret between them. “Tell the truth, Joanne, I know you’ve heard it before. I bet you get a lot of compliments.”

She stared at him in disbelief. She wished she had her phone with her so she could call Lewis. “You’re fired,” she said. “Take your equipment and go.”

“Oh, come on,” Jake said. “I’m just joking around. Can’t you take a joke?” He put down the molding strip he’d been cutting on the saw. His hands were gray with grime, the half moons of his fingernails black. “I thought we were friends, you and me.”

“I can’t imagine why you thought that,” Joanne said, and turned to go. She felt his hand on her shoulder. “Get off,” she said, pulling away. Her sweater was marked by a greasy smear.

“Aw, don’t be mad,” he said. “Truce, okay? You’re a nice woman. I’ve done a great job for you, haven’t I?” He squeezed her upper arm. His touch enraged her; she wanted to slap his ugly face, which had turned from genial to stony like a cloud passing over the sun. “Aren’t you the princess,” he said in a disdainful voice. “You flounce around here in your tight pants all day as if me and my guys don’t exist. But we see you, darlin’; you’re an eyeful. A cock tease is what you are, and I bet I’m not the first man to say so. Your shit doesn’t stink, that’s what you think. Can’t take the time to even say hello.”

“This is my house!” she said confusedly. “I can wear whatever I want.”

“Say, why don’t you go to work like everybody else?” he said. “You don’t do diddly all day. I’ve seen you fooling around on the computer. I bet you’re looking at porn.”

“What?” Joanne said. “Porn? Only disgusting men like you --” She stopped herself. His face was a mask, inhuman and surreal.

“You know what?” he whispered, pulling her roughly to his chest. “I think about you when I jerk off.” There was a sickly-sweet scent on his breath that brought a gag to her throat. The startlingly yellow whites of his eyes were shot through with crimson tributaries. He was ill, she realized; something was rotting inside him. His skin was colorless, his cheeks sunken hollows.

She turned her face away from the stench of his breath, truly frightened now, and said, “Stop it, Jake, please. I’ll pay you whatever you want to make up for the lost work, okay? I’ll pay your guys, too, you don’t have to worry.”

Abruptly, he reached out and wrenched up her sweater so that its turtleneck covered her head. He grabbed her wrists and pulled them painfully behind her back, kicked her behind her knees so she would drop to the frigid concrete floor. She couldn’t see and could barely breath through the impenetrable knit of the

sweater; she felt the heat of her own breath as she screamed. He pushed her head to the floor with one hand and dragged off her pants with the other. His sandpaper fingers rasped her hips. She crawled away from him; he pulled her back. Grasping at the concrete as if it were cloth, she flailed out with one leg and kicked him hard in the stomach.

“Cunt,” she heard him say through a groan. Something heavy hit the side of her head.

When she came to, he was gone. So was the saw. The floor was furred with yellow sawdust and littered with shards of wood. She touched her head and felt a pain so searing it was as if the skin beneath her hair was on fire; there was a sticky wetness between her legs that she didn’t immediately understand. With aching arms, she pulled on her pants, got to her feet, and pressed the button that lifted the garage door. Sunlight poured in; she stepped dizzily into the wind and felt an overwhelming urge to vomit. She took a moment to steady herself before staggering across the yard, a blur of gray snow and muddy grass, her ragged breathing the only sound. Her phone was on the kitchen table. With trembling fingers, she dialed 911 and recited her name and address. Now she would have to wait. Pressing her hands against her roiling stomach, she stood as still as a startled doe.

MARRIAGE AND

Gary McDowell

Wooden slats and a woman and.
Here is where the ocean moves,

linen as host, as roost—limbs
poured through. Mercenary is what

water is. Hug the lampshade,
gather in fists the below her

skirt. Don't be afraid—the walls
of this room wear moonlight and.

Even if you never never. The froth
made by hard rain stokes the miles

you walked to find me, the bridge
you crossed flecked with passers-by.

BE CAREFUL WHAT YOU DESIRE WHEN IN DESPAIR

Paul Dickey

No doubt he had asked for it. Though it is not the kind of thing one admits freely. If he were given a true choice, he would of course deny it all. He would say there were circumstances. He was a little down and out. No big deal. A wrong man sat in front of him on the bus and a woman had disagreed with him about a movie. He had dug himself into a deep hole. He was facing a brick wall, which was a cliché but that didn't make it any easier. He had painted himself into the famous corner. He had lost his own way rushing home in the rain. His mother had to be somewhere. It was just this job. He had made a poor judgment and what could he do? His father might own the stock market but that was no help. In retrospect he could see that it was just when things were starting to work out for the best, too—

when he found himself on the train heading for a suburb. He was sweating profusely, relatively speaking. It was totally Hollywood. He was a continent away from Hollywood. In some versions of the story recently discovered in his old manuscript files donated to the library after his death, there were noises of a frightful nature. It was enough to confuse anyone about things like love. Someone on a bench was writing a letter that we know now no one will ever read. Someone spoke in tattoos. A couple was obviously French kissing, but he is pretty sure he was not involved in any of that. A glass window kept asking the time. Oh yes, and there was a God who kept talking and talking, questioning him about what exit he might take. Or a Ph.D. committee wondered but at some point could stop wondering if there was an auto repair shop or perhaps a Dairy Queen close by. A story like this could go on forever and almost does. So a breathtaking but still a normal young lady—perhaps a goddess to him—and of some future is seen shortly thereafter and looks at him, it would seem to many, happily ever after.

THE LOW CRUMBLE OF DISTANT APPLAUSE

Christopher Citro

In this new house we're visited regularly by giants.
Some explanation. The giants, for one, are very small.
At least that is how they appear to us—so close to the sky,
etched against blue folded into clouds. And by visit
I mean, of course, watched over. But it can feel like
a visitation when, for instance, you are standing
on the red deck high above the lawn waking up,
and your new haircut flutters in the breeze.
From inside the kitchen, standing above greasy water,
I look through the screen and see you—frightening
in your precisely defined beauty, your white shirt
a sail catching and flinging back the sun and wind,
through this window screen, through the thin bone of
my forehead. And through the mile of heavy air
above us where the miniature people eating peanuts
look down and feel glad because of a fleck of light
against the red and green and do not even know
why. I know why.

THE VISITORS

Mark Halliday & Martin Stannard

(A humdrum big old house in a humdrum suburb. Brendie and Jock are at the kitchen table. The kitchen smells of eggs. Brendie and Jock are fifty-something.)

Brendie: Another egg?
Jock: I'm fine with just a bit of toast, now.
Brendie: I wonder if Percy will be down.
Jock: Sleeps later and later, doesn't he?
Brendie: If it's sleeping. When I pass his door . . .
Jock: Scoot me the jelly, love.
Brendie: He's talking, sometimes. To himself.
But in two voices, like.
Jock: A nervous sort of man. But he pays regular.

(Loud knock at the front door. Brendie is startled. She goes to answer it.)

Brendie: Gentlemen—what can I do for you?

(Enter Goldbuck and McCrum. They are large beefy men wearing dark suits. Their manner is casual and brusque.)

Goldbuck: It's a bed and breakfast, isn't it?
Brendie: Certainly it is. But—
McCrum: I adore breakfast. Favorite meal of the day.
Brendie: The thing is, gentlemen, I only have one room free,
as it happens.
Goldbuck: Because you have lodgers.
Brendie: Two lodgers, yes. Miss Adelaide, and—

Goldbuck: And Mr. Percy.
Brendie: Oh, do you—
McCrum: We're friends of old Percy, in a manner of speaking.

(Goldbuck and McCrum walk past Brendie and sit down in the kitchen, ignoring Jock who is uneasy, almost choking on his toast. Two hours pass, during which time Jock eats toast, Brendie making sure he has a constant supply of toast and jelly, and Goldbuck and McCrum sit silently.)

(Enter Percy, yawning and scratching his groin area. He is a small weasel of a man, around 45, wearing a teeshirt and boxers. He ignores everyone, although they are all watching him, and helps himself to coffee from the pot simmering on the counter. He stands sipping his coffee and staring out the kitchen window. Then he puts down the cup and exits up the stairs.)

Jock: He's not very sociable, I'd have to say.
Brendie: I do wish he'd put more clothes on if he's going to wander around the house.
McCrum: He's changed.
Goldbuck: He's lost a lot of weight.
McCrum: He doesn't look like the same person.
Goldbuck: Can people shrink that much?
McCrum: Well, losing weight I don't have an issue with. A man can lose weight over the years. But I never heard of a man getting six inches shorter before.
Goldbuck: So what you're saying is—
McCrum: Wrong man.
Goldbuck: That's bloody odd cheese.
Brendie: Is our Mr. Percy not your Mr. Percy, then?
McCrum: Not precisely.
Goldbuck: But he might do.
Brendie: Do? Do for what? All he cares about is the football scores and his pet hamsters. I can't think what he could do for you.
Goldbuck: He can go to a certain office, and say he's Percy, and deliver a certain bag, and collect a certain briefcase. That's what he can do.
McCrum: You talk too much.

(Enter Miss Adelaide, a tall angular woman who believes she has supernatural intuition and visionary powers. She speaks to Goldbuck and McCrum.)

Miss Adelaide: If you want my advice you'll abandon your dastardly plan and go straight, or it's prison for both of you. I can see it as plain as plain can be.

Brendie: That's right. Miss Adelaide is never wrong.

Miss Adelaide: I predicted Chernobyl. Months in advance. I could smell it, like.

(Goldbuck and McCrum glance at each other. They both pull large black guns from their jackets and place the guns on the table.)

Miss Adelaide: You won't be using those. I'm not frightened at all!

Brendie: She's never been wrong, our Adelaide.

Jock: Not once. I might enjoy a bit more toast, Brendie.

Goldbuck: You people don't seem to get it.

McCrum: We represent something. We represent dark forces. Dark forces lurk behind the façade of middle-class culture, in a manner of speaking. Like nightmares.

Goldbuck: Rising up.

McCrum: From the depths of the repressed.

Goldbuck: We are overwhelmingly ominous.

Miss Adelaide: Not to me! Because I know who's about to knock at the door!

(Two hours pass. Nobody moves.)

Miss Adelaide: I can't think what's happened. I was sure somebody was going to knock at the door.

Goldbuck: Now do you get it?

McCrum: If you don't get it I can spell it out for you, but I think you get it.

Goldbuck: You must get it now. We don't like having to explain it.

McCrum: Explaining it can get messy.

Goldbuck: And complicated.

McCrum: Very complicated.

Goldbuck: Words often seem inadequate when it comes to explaining it.

Brendie: It's a bit chilly in here, I think. Jock, is it chilly?

Where's my shawl?

Miss Adelaide: Shhh. I'm listening for a knock.

(A loud gunshot is heard upstairs. Goldbuck and McCrum stand up and move a step toward the stairs with their guns. A second gunshot is heard.)

Goldbuck: First one went askew, it might be.

McCrum: Had to tidy up, he did.

Jock: A nervous sort of man.

(Goldbuck and McCrum move to the door.)

Goldbuck: Think you can forget us?

McCrum: Erased, so to say it. Wiped clean. Like Jock's crumbs off the table.

Goldbuck: That's the ticket.

(Goldbuck and McCrum suddenly exit.)

Miss Adelaide: Upstairs—upstairs—

Brendie: Hush now, Adelaide. Your show comes on in five minutes. The day went fast!

CURTAIN

THE BADGER

Don Zancanella

LAST SUMMER I DISCOVERED A BADGER LIVING IN THE FIELD behind my house. If you don't know what a badger looks like, think of a small, flat bear with a pointy nose, razor-sharp teeth, and large front feet capable of digging fast and deep. Or maybe an ill-tempered, subterranean raccoon.

The house wasn't technically mine—it was a rental my husband Roger and I owned, into which I'd moved after he told me he was in love with a woman named Paige. I wasn't surprised to learn about Paige. I'd managed to marry a man who was self-centered and abusive, so why not add unfaithful to the list? Walking out on him felt more satisfying than letting him walk out on me, even if the place I went to was a crappy little two-bedroom bungalow on the edge of town. As for the badger, his burrow was in the vacant lot between the bungalow's back door and a stretch of blacktop where high school kids raced their cars on Saturday nights.

You can tell if a hole belongs to a badger simply by its size. They're usually about the diameter of a dinner plate, with a well-sculpted berm around the rim. The first time I noticed the one behind my house I'd been having trouble sleeping and had gone outside just before sunrise, hiking up the legs of my pajamas as I walked through the dew-soaked weeds. When I came upon the hole I looked inside but couldn't see beyond the first bend. I figured it must belong to an unusually large rabbit because I knew nothing of badgers and there is in the minds of most urbanized Americans a hierarchy of animals one can reasonably expect to encounter: first, dogs, cats, and birds; followed by rabbits and the smaller rodents such as squirrels and mice; or, if you live in the West as I do, prairie dogs. Which is to say, when you glimpse an animal near your house you'll consider many other possibilities before the word *badger* comes to mind.

I heard him before I saw him. It was a fearsome snarl, directed at me because he was coming home after a night of hunting and I was between him and his

hole. At first I assumed it was a dog but then I turned and thought “How novel, a badger,” and then, “Shit, I’m going to get bitten by a badger,” by which time I was backpedaling and trying to remove a flip-flop because I wanted something to defend myself with even if it was only a rubber shoe. As I retreated, he began to advance, moving in the odd, low-to-the ground manner I’ve come to think of as badger-motion, like a big hairbrush on wheels. I said “shoo” or “get away,” or something equally inane, and then, just as I was about to scream, he dashed toward his burrow and disappeared underground.

As soon as I caught my breath, my fear disappeared and was replaced by exhilaration. I don’t know anyone who doesn’t get excited about encountering wildlife, especially when it happens in or near town.

I think humans have a need to connect to the natural world that is seldom adequately met. You don’t have to be a confirmed nature-lover to feel it—just an ordinary suburbanite who stumbles upon a creature—not a moth or a mouse, but a creature of *substance*—running free.

At work the next day, I told Sue about the badger but she didn’t seem very interested. I wasn’t surprised. Hearing about someone else’s encounter with a wild animal isn’t much more interesting than looking at a photo in a magazine.

“Have you ever seen one?” I asked.

“I haven’t. Aren’t they supposed smell bad?”

“Like a skunk? I don’t think so. This one didn’t. At least not that I noticed.”

“What about rabies? You’ll be sorry if you get bit.”

“I don’t plan to get close enough for that to happen. I just thought it was interesting. Not fifty feet from my back door.”

During my break, I looked up badgers on the internet and discovered that they are “nocturnal, omnivorous, and reclusive.” So I felt an immediate kinship: for the last few months, I’ve been all three.

That night I went down to the burrow again but the badger wasn’t there. Over the next few days, in an effort to get him to show himself, I started leaving food. Half a peanut butter sandwich, some tuna salad, whatever I had on hand. I’d set the plate on the ground at dusk and then back way off, almost to the deck. Sure enough, he started coming out of his hole to gobble it up. However, before he ate, he always surveyed the area with great care. He was as aware of me as I was of him.

At first I wasn’t sure whether to call the badger *it*, *her*, or *him* but eventually I settled on *him*. I’m not sure why. Is there something inherently male about badgers? Roger was not at all badger-ish. If I had to liken him to an animal, it would be a cockroach. There was a particular hideousness about him. His jaws were like mandibles, his back was like a carapace, and when he was on top of me during sex, I often felt as though he had six multi-jointed legs, all of them

flailing. They say that when the human race has been annihilated by some human-caused event, cockroaches will inherit the earth. Centuries from now, after global warming has burnt us or boiled us or skin-cancered us to death, all that will remain are the descendants of Roger and his cockroach-mate Paige.

Once my nightly feedings had begun drawing the badger out of his hole on a regular basis, I placed my lawn chair halfway between his burrow and the deck so I could observe. I discovered he liked spaghetti best. It was quite a spectacle—he'd emerge from his hole, patrol the area, feast on the spaghetti with gusto, and then disappear into the trees that bordered the field—where, if the internet was correct, he'd hunt all night. His front feet were enormous. I wished I could see him dig.

In another life, I'd have been a good zoologist. Or better yet, a director of wildlife documentaries for public television. That would certainly have been more fulfilling than working in a paint store. "Which do you think is better, Apple Orchard or Sea Mist?" the customer would ask. "I'd go with the Sea Mist but you're the one who has to live with it," I'd reply. Compare that to hiking into the wilderness to get some footage of a pack of wolves.

So taken was I with my badger-watching that I could occasionally get through an entire evening without thinking about Roger. But then, almost as if he knew I was beginning to forget about him, he started coming to the house unannounced. The first time it was to mow the lawn.

"I drove by here the other day and saw the grass needed to be cut," he said. "It won't take long." He was standing on the front porch, still in a shirt with his name on it from work. I wanted to tell him to get off my property but he was part owner of it and telling him to get off *our* property wouldn't have packed the same punch. Instead I said, "No it's okay, I can handle it. I've been busy."

"Doing what?"

"Doing whatever I feel like doing. As often as I want." I didn't tell him about the badger so as not to invite ridicule. He'd have considered it evidence my life had gone off the rails.

"If this place goes to hell we won't be able to sell it," he said, shaking his head in disgust. "Of course if you want to stay here permanently, you can buy my half."

"Once the lawyers get involved, you may not have a half to sell." I had no idea if that was true but it was the sort of thing I thought one was supposed to say. "Don't be such a bitch," he said. Then he went to the garage, got out the mower, and started pulling on the starter rope in a manner I was quite familiar with—a manner that said, "Seeing as you're a lazy slut, I'm going to take care of this for you, but you'd best stay out of my way."

I stood on the front porch and watched him cut the grass, marching back and forth and muttering. I wondered what Paige thought about him coming to see me. Maybe he hadn't told her. Or maybe she was so secure in her position she didn't care.

After he was gone I went out back and looked for the badger. I didn't see him, but I could feel his presence. It occurred to me then that I liked having something Roger didn't know about, something that was mine and not even partly his, a secret animal friend.

Roger and I met when he worked at the paint store. But he didn't like the owner so he quit and got a job managing the plumbing department at a big home center. That's where he met Paige. I was first attracted to Roger because he rescued me from another guy. But that meant I didn't evaluate him as rigorously as I should have. By the time I figured out what he was really like we were married. I kept expecting him to mellow, but somewhere deep inside him was a reservoir of anger that was always full. For the last six months we were together, I was genuinely afraid. Split lip, black eye, sprained wrist afraid. After we separated, I felt a deep sense of relief. Therefore I was not at all pleased when I realized the lawn-mowing visit was the beginning of a trend. After work, just when I was sitting down to relax, the phone would ring:

"Is there a bag of fertilizer in the garage or should I bring one from the store?"

"I think there's some in the garage, but I don't know how much. I'm heading out to a movie so if you're coming over, I won't be here." I hadn't intended to go to a movie but to avoid contact with him I was willing to change my plans.

"By yourself?"

"By myself. But feel free to fertilize. Fertilize away."

When I got home from the movie it was dark, but there was enough light from the moon for me to see the white granules of fertilizer on the sidewalk where he'd overshot the lawn. Before our separation, when we'd rented this place to a young teacher and his wife, he hadn't cared what condition the grass was in. But now he seemed to have an unrelenting urge to keep it manicured and green.

The next day something interesting happened. I was talking to Sue about Roger and she said, "Guess what! I met Paige. It turns out she's taking the same exercise class as me. We were chatting and I discovered who she was. She said some pretty funny things about Roger."

"Like what?"

"I don't remember her exact words, but it was something to the effect that she started dating him because she wanted a man she could feel superior to. And

then as soon as she realized what she'd said, we both laughed. I think you'd like her if you met her. It sounded to me like she's over Roger or will be pretty soon."

"Ah, now I understand. Paige isn't working out. That explains his sudden obsession with my lawn."

"I'd stay away from him. You'll end up calling the police again."

"He comes over without being asked. The place is partly his so he uses that as an excuse."

"Can't you just go inside and lock the door?"

"That would really piss him off. He doesn't like obstacles. He hates being told what he's not allowed to do."

I was pretending to be unconcerned, but now that I knew Paige was backing off, I was alarmed. He was planning to come back to me, whether I wanted him or not.

After work, fearing he'd call again, I turned off my phone and drove to the public library where I asked the librarian if she could help me find some books about badgers. For some reason she assumed I wanted children's books. In a matter of minutes she came back with *Wind in the Willows* and a picture book called *Bedtime for Frances*. She was so pleased to be able to help me I couldn't bring myself to tell her they weren't what I had in mind. But it didn't really matter. The main reason I went there was to avoid Roger. The books were just to keep me occupied while I killed time.

"Do you want to check them out?" the librarian asked.

"Not yet. I'd like to sit down and look at them first."

"That's fine. If I think of any others I'll bring them over."

I started with the picture book. It was about a little girl badger named Frances who kept coming up with new reasons not to go to bed. Like many animals in children's books, Frances had almost no animal characteristics—she was simply a child with fur. Next I opened *Wind in the Willows*. Before I'd finished reading three pages, I realized I'd read it before, when I was a child myself. It all began to come back to me—how Toad tells Mole not to bother Badger because he's a recluse and a grouch, how Mole goes to visit him anyway and is welcomed into Badger's home, and how Badger eventually helps them defeat the weasels and stoats. Once again the characters dressed and talked like humans but in this book, I had a sense the author knew something about real badgers, acquired from actual encounters in the wild. When Rat and Mole show up at Badger's door, he says, "Who is it *this* time, disturbing people on such a night? Speak up!" But as soon as he realizes who it is, he welcomes them inside. It reminded me of how my own badger seemed suspicious of me at first but then became more tolerant of my presence. Of course I'd helped things along with plates of food.

Both books made me think about anthropomorphizing—how often we all do it and how difficult it is to avoid. My badger didn't wear pajamas and sleep in a human bed, but I certainly pictured him thinking about the world in ways not so different from my own. Surely he mused about the weather and about the tasks ahead of him on any given day. Surely he had memories of his past and, if not hopes in the human sense, then something like desires and fears.

When I got back from the library, Roger's car wasn't there, but the side gate was open. Once again, he'd been doing yard work. However, this time I wished I'd been there to stop him. For some reason he'd run the mower across the field almost up to where the badger lived, stopping only a few feet short of the burrow. I felt sorry for the badger. He'd probably been terrified to have such a loud machine come so close to his home.

I put out some spaghetti but he never showed. I hoped he'd gone hunting early, before Roger arrived. It occurred to me that even if a human had no lawn mower, no weed-whacker or rake, it still must be disconcerting for a creature to have its face at ankle-height. A big part of how we relate to others is based on looking them in the eyes. With a dog or cat we crouch down or pick them up in our arms when we want to really communicate. I wished I was brave enough to lie down in the weeds and approach the badger on his own level. But I was afraid I'd get my nose bitten off.

Later that night, when I was getting ready for bed, Roger called. I picked up because if I hadn't, he might have decided to come over yet again. He'd have said he was worried about me and I definitely didn't want that.

"Thanks for mowing the weeds," I said.

"You'd just let 'em grow, wouldn't you?"

"It's a vacant lot."

For a moment I considered telling him about the badger—I wanted him to feel guilty about disturbing it—but I knew that would be mistake.

"I suppose you were at a movie again," he said. "Maybe next time I can come along."

"Roger, that doesn't make sense. Why don't you take Paige to a movie?"

"Don't talk about her. *Do not.*"

At lunch the next day, Sue said, "Paige is coming here this afternoon. We're going to class together. This is your chance to see what she's like."

Before she arrived I spent some time in front of the mirror. I knew we'd be sizing each other up. But she wasn't as attractive as I expected. She had a pretty face but needed a more appealing hair style. On the other hand, compared to her I dressed like a frump.

“I’m probably more fascinated to meet you than you are to meet me,” I said as I shook her hand. “When you live with someone for six years you lose perspective. I’m curious about what another person thinks.”

At first she seemed taken aback but then she shrugged. “He’s okay. But we don’t share many interests. I guess I’m not even sure what his interests are. One thing I’ll say, he needs to get rid of that temper. I can’t imagine how you put up with that.”

After she was gone, I found myself feeling almost sorry for Roger. Paige was less tolerant than me, as well as better at perceiving his flaws. It seemed obvious she was nearly done with him. He wouldn’t take well to being told he didn’t measure up.

I went home looking forward to my upcoming day off. But when I woke up the next morning Roger’s car was parked outside. Apparently he’d decided that one way to keep me from avoiding him was to start working on the yard while I was still in bed.

He puttered around for an hour or two, cleaning out gutters and repairing the garden fence. Then just before noon I looked out and saw him uncoiling the hose in an alarmingly purposeful manner.

I opened the back door and said, “What do you think you’re doing?”

“I’m going to get rid of that badger for you. I plan to drown it out.”

I was shocked. I didn’t think he even knew about it. The casualness with which he spoke was pure Roger—vicious and nonchalant at the same time. I had a strong urge to get in my car and drive away. But I needed to think about the badger’s well-being as well as my own.

“You don’t need to do that. He hasn’t caused any problems. I like having him around.”

Roger pretended he hadn’t heard me—an unmistakable sign his temper was heating up. I watched in dismay as he dragged the hose to the burrow and shoved it down inside. Then he went back toward the garage where the spigot was.

I came down off the deck, pleading as I went: “Please Rog, don’t do this. I told you, he’s not hurting anything. Why do you care? You have no right.”

“I don’t want an animal like that on our property,” he said, opening the valve. “They carry diseases. It’ll get into the trash.”

By then I’d reached the hose and tried to pull it out of the burrow, but he jerked it away from me and shoved it back in.

“Goddamn it, stop,” I said. “You’re going to hurt the badger. I can see why Paige is losing interest. You don’t fucking listen and you don’t fucking care.”

I didn’t think I’d said anything remarkable, but it was enough to rattle him. He dropped the hose and came at me. “*You pathetic cunt,*” he said, grabbing the

front of my shirt. Then, just as I was beginning to consider how I could avoid getting hit, I heard a scrabbling in the undergrowth beneath the trees nearby, followed by a noise like a garbage disposal chewing glass—a noise that seemed to be coming toward us at a high rate of speed.

Roger's face was inches from mine and I watched his expression change. His eyes got wide and fearful as the muscles in his cheeks drew back. An instant later the badger made contact and Roger started to shriek:

“Get it off me, get it off. Jesus fucking oh my god get it off!”

His knees began to buckle and he flailed wildly as he went down. I wrenched his hand off my shirt and let him fall. What I saw when I stepped back was a brown ball of fur in a frenzy, tearing at the flesh below Roger's knee. Roger kicked and tried to scramble away but the badger kept at him. Then suddenly the badger released him and disappeared into his burrow.

Roger remained on his back, holding his knee with both hands. Blood surged through his fingers. “Goddamn it, get me something,” he said.

But at that moment all my sympathy was with the badger. He must have found it upsetting—horrifying even—to see his home being attacked. While Roger lay there quivering, I unearthed a stone and held it above my head. The stone was the size of a softball, just large enough, if I used all my strength, to crack his despicable skull.

“What?” he said.

“What? I'll tell you what. Leave the fucking badger alone.” Then I tossed the stone aside, turned off the spigot, and watched from the deck until he was gone. I hoped the water hadn't damaged the burrow much.

That evening Roger called. He said, “I spent half the day at the emergency room. I had to get eleven stitches. Now I need to catch that thing so it can be tested for rabies. Otherwise they'll have to treat me as if I've got the disease.”

“I've heard that can be painful.”

“So have I. And fuck you. I'll be over tomorrow with a trap.”

The instant I was off the phone, I drove to Walmart and bought a pet carrier, the heavy-duty plastic kind with a metal door. Then I cooked up a pot of spaghetti. I placed the carrier near the badger's hole, put the spaghetti in the carrier, and set up my lawn chair to wait. I wanted to be far enough away to avoid scaring him but close enough to get the door shut after he went in. I sat for a long time. It got dark and the stars appeared. I slept and woke up and slept again. Just as the sun was coming up, he emerged from his burrow. I'd been assuming he was off hunting, but Roger and the hose had upset the poor thing so much he'd remained in his half-flooded home all night.

As usual, he couldn't resist a plate of spaghetti. He waddled straight over to the carrier, spent a few seconds checking it out, and disappeared inside. I was able to sneak up, swing the door closed, and get it latched before he turned. Of course he was enraged. There was growling and spitting and snapping and such furious lunging I was afraid the carrier would break at the seams. But eventually he calmed down. I sat beside the carrier and spoke to him in a soothing voice: "What a handsome fellow you are. I'll take you out in the country, to a place he'll never find. If he figures out what I've done, I'll deny it." But as I spoke I could picture him coming at me, filled with rage.

Before I loaded the carrier in to my car, I looked at the badger through the door and made eye contact. It was intense. I felt like we were communicating, like he knew I cared about him and would do my best to keep him from harm. If we'd been in a fairy tale, he would have spoken to me then. He'd have said, "Now that we have vanquished the cockroach man, we can be together forever." And I'd have said, "If this is the point where you turn into a man, let me suggest an alternative. How about I become a badger? I feel I have the proper temperament and I'm curious about life underground."

DESERT HEART

Dana Roeser

Animals, I get. I feel
connected to every dog
on the street. I smile and
it smiles back. And I feel
guilty about the soft shell crab I
ate last night. With its
edible rosy shell, little
flippers in the
back, segmented legs, fat
claws; its searching
eyes. I know it scurried and
scuttled hard
to stay alive. Likewise,
the spider scaling the
walls in the bathtub of the rental
place. Little and black—it does look
nasty, but I wouldn't guess it's
poisonous. I leave it
alone. Maybe it'll find
its way back
down the drain.
Meds meds
meds—methotrexate
Macrobid—
is that's what's between me
and a love affair
with the land? I feel sad,
metallically so,
but, no, the sight
of a white
German shepherd in its
harness or a fuzzy furred
mixed breed lab in the surf
laughing away, delivering

its stick to *me* instead of
its owner
makes me
happy. So, no.
I just do not have
that lover, the land.
Or the land is not my
“fella” as it is to
the very old Weaver Jack
in Daniel Walbidi’s
film about his aboriginal
homeland, *Desert Heart*.
An artist, he is caught between
two worlds and none of the
elders he took back there
had grown up there.
Save one. And she wept a
an apology
to the land, and to Wilna,
the waterhole. Her homeplace
looked like more bush
to me. But to
her it was not only the
landscape
of her childhood, in every
variation of
plant, seed, and furrow. It was a
person—who had been
waiting for
her all those years
since she had been taken away
along with the rest of
her tribal group to
work at a whitefella’s
cattle station far to the northwest
many years before. Weaver Jack,
being elderly, was brought
in a helicopter. They all

sat under a
 canvas tarp with Daniel.
I would say they worked under
 his tutelage, but
every painting they made
 was expert, with its
five views of the
 source and parent
of their dreaming. Their
 storyline. Aerial, subterranean,
historical, metaphysical,
 and actual.
I saw Daniel's paintings
 at the Short Street studio
in Broome. One was foaming,
 effervescent, with yellow,
orange, pink, pearly white
 in kind of an upward
geyser or fountain. There were
 splattered dots of
pink paint. A fascinating riff,
 I thought, on the
more traditional diagrammatic
 patterned paintings
I had seen. I could see how
 it could be a map,
a storyline, a teaching. On this
 painting, as on his
other brilliantly colored
 paintings, there was a large,
incongruous, black spot.
 near the bottom. Circular
or maybe slightly oval,
 an anti-moon. I asked
the gallery owner who said
 that Daniel puts one
in each painting, as it is the waterhole,
 source of sustenance

and grief. I learned a snake
 lives there sometimes,
the Rainbow Serpent in
 Aboriginal mythology.
It can take bystanders who
 are standing near. I thought
of my own grief I am trying
 to touch, in hopes
of not hovering forever in this
 dry apprehension. The malevolent
forces it might be
 better to greet. It's
like an oversized burn from
 a cigarette. It's
that incongruous. That
 gorgeous. Daniel
Wilbidi will
 never abandon Wilna.
Without Wilna the people
 will quickly die
in the desert. I am
 at the ocean.
Thrush song follows me
 in the morning,
and at evening,
 twilight. I'm caught
surprised by the flaming
 sunset outside
my room. I smile
 at it, and it says hello.

SOUVENIR SAID

Meridian Johnson

Searching in another city for a face just like yours I wake and the ceiling droops
with cobwebs some spider poisonous leaks strands of web and weeps when the
sun strikes the weave I am captured a pillar of dust and sun one grain of fine sand
blowing gone to the breezes on this island on this mainland everywhere I am
blown apart like a war and I think of nothing to myself just that I am a hammer
lying still a tool waiting for the carpenter's hands nails and wood forget what I
have said beneath these ceiling boards it was love I threaded through the machine
my body—it was priceless

THE END OF PINK
BY KATHRYN NUERNBERGER
Maryfrances Wagner

NOT MANY POETS CAN MAKE READERS SHUDDER AND LAUGH, gasp and grieve, look away and peer deeply in a single poem. In *The End of Pink*, Kathryn Nuernberger does that over and over with sometimes brutally open admissions and observations like of a scientist. She examines carefully. She digresses. She speaks in metaphors. She tells stories. She finds uncommonly apt connections. She unites dissimilar topics, tones, and ideas, and these layered poems are about more than their apparent subject matter.

Fantasy, surrealism, folklore, debunked ideas, historical facts, and a cast of unexpected characters permeate these poems that convey painful truths and wisdom. Even though the reader encounters Bat Boy, Peter the Wild Boy, Saint Girl, peacocks, badgers, and a Fiji zombie mermaid, this is not a bizarre or quirky book. The *End of Pink* is a serious book of psychic struggle, grief and recovery.

Whether she's relaying the story of being a Teach for America cum laude white woman instructing a room of thirty-two inner city teens, a mother losing patience with a bouncy child and pushing her into a wall, the rituals of the Bacabs, or sitting in a bathroom, passing a delayed placenta, Nuernberger pulls readers right into the poem beside her. The details are stunning. In "Zoontological Sublime," while she tells about a time she allowed a lab assistant to "sucker [her] head with electrodes," she states that she wants to "know / how it is to be an octopus, / which keeps 2/3 of its neurons / in its arms," and the poem becomes a series of painful moments in the animal world as well as metaphors of her own suffering. She reveals the agony of lobster silence when their claws are bound:

To call for each other
they must clatter their claws
against surrounding stones and shells.
The plea rings through the waves

for miles. When dropped in boiling water
they beat their banded fists
against the sides of the pot.

In another moving moment a doe licks the face of her stillborn fawn:

and that nuzzle alone
should have shattered all the leaves
and all the stars. Deer don't have
great conch shells to slam their hooves against.
The doe made no sound, the air
filled with the small ripple
of her tongue passing across
those still eyelids.

In "About Derrida, If You're Into That," she parallels two stories—one of the ruthless badger who when weaning "brings a carcass back to the burrow/so she can cut at the faces of her pups as they try to eat," thus passing on her ruthless survival tactics—and one of Derrida, a student in her inner city classroom of 32 black students, who, like the others, isn't interested in the conjugation of French verbs as staplers and pencils fly across the room. Derrida already has to worry about her own daughter. On the last day of school, a fight breaks out, and when the police arrive, "Derrida was one of the students on the roof throwing bricks." The magnitude of this poem represents so much of the problem of inner city schools and the society that perpetuates the system, forcing students to become badger survivors.

A number of the poems in the first section are about trauma, loss and miscarriage—haunting moments of dealing with aftermath, of not talking about it, even to the point of not knowing there is an after birth until, in "Wonders and Mysteries of Animal Magnetism Displayed (1791) As What I Want Is," she is

having contractions you think are not,
because six weeks ago you were pregnant
and five weeks ago you were not, and what
you didn't learn in health class is everything
you would ever want to know like how big
a placenta is and how veined and how
purple and how when you birth it
in a bathroom outside the classroom
where you were trying to explain
the difference between logos and pathos

Everyone else does not think being
yourself a coffin is the only last act to do
for a child you couldn't . . .
I buried over a blue-and-white china bowl
with milkmaids and a maypole because it was
the prettiest I had, how they never stop dancing
around the center of it.

The second section offers a series of persona poems about The Saint Girl. The first section's poems are more narrative and stream of consciousness writing, and the second more distanced but still personally gripping. Here the Saint Girl learns to deprive herself, to suffer silently, to do without because the devils are always all around her with their pitchforks and "Without shame they skip, sopping wet and dripping peach, all over the piano keys, spark their nervy little tails in sockets, fornicate in cereal bowls. They "reduce themselves to the tiniest shoots of green beneath the snow of her winter garden." They follow her to heaven. Finally, she says:

Look up. You could say they infest the sky and clamber each other as
before, only with the ponderous slowness and weight of the world's
water in those puss-gutted bellies, but why linger over such a thought.
Their nacreous diffractions pearl across the lenticularis strosphere like
the rainbow of a happy ending.

The third and final section is a coming to terms with what happens in life, a leaving behind and moving forward. A few of the poems in this section are about her peacock:

I keep a white peacock behind my ear,
a wasn't, a fantail of wasn'ts
nevered feathers upon evered
falling all over the grass.

The peacock grows into a ghost of a peacock, "a tassel of grass/and a field, a wind, and also a flower./It was so sad when she left/and said, No more now." In this section she writes of burying her child and moving on, of healing, sacrificing, and forgiving.

There is much more to say about this accomplished book with its refreshing and varied styles and forms, but readers have to experience these poems themselves. While facing psychological struggle and grief in this collection, Kathryn Nuernberger also extends a hand into the well of all those struggling to get out.

THE SUN GOES DOWN AT LAST

Christopher Miles

You realize the thoughts you keep having aren't thoughts. They're sounds. There's a man in your head, and he's dancing, and the sounds are his boots hitting the floor of your mind. It's a wooden floor; looks like maple. But you hear no music. What is he dancing to then? Does this man in your mind have a man in his mind, and is it he who is making the music? Or is it a woman? And if it were, would her music be different from the man's because she once knew him? When she was younger? When they were lovers? Or maybe they were brother and sister and they fell in love with the same man, and this same-man rented porta potties and hauled them to and from his customers with a trailer behind a one-ton dually truck? I could use a truck like that, you think. But you're overtaken by the sound again. Only this time you don't hear it. You see it. In black letters on the ceiling. They appear to be cut from tissue paper. Now things are coming right. You return to mis-interpreting the sound as thought. You relax. To celebrate your relief, you open the window. You hear the crash of aluminum. It's the goats, banging the lid of their watering tank. In the morning, you will feed them ground corn. In the morning, they will eat from your hand.

“IF” IN SPRING

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.

SUMMER WITHOUT WORDS

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.

SUMMER SOLSTICE

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.

SURFACE

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.

ALONE WITH ONLY OUR THOUGHTS TO DESTROY US

Henry Israeli

We set the booby traps before the guests arrive,

trip wires, trap doors, spiked pit,
broadax suspended above the marked exit signs.

Much to our chagrin no one we invited

shows up. The elf owl perched on a maple
hoots out the cruelest obscenities

while clematis creeping across the windows
cloaks us in darkness... The pipes freeze.

My love, I am sorry to inform you, that even

the vodka and cans of gasoline have frozen.
By the time we set out to dismantle the traps

we've forgotten where we put them.

PALINDROME

Gary McDowell

On our backs planning envy.
The two of us in secret twice

every week, censoring
the good sense to fall

in love. How you dream your
religion, your midnight human,

but that I'm a part of how you
vowel, your tongue soft against

the roof of your mouth against
my fingers taken deep against.

This year, we keep winter,
meaning each other, company.

We aren't up in the mountains.
But last night, the violence.

MOUNTAINS HIDDEN IN MOUNTAINS

Elizabeth Jacobson

Always my right side tugging me on,
my right eye weeping,
the furious liver, shouting.

Always a rising,
a mountain inside a mountain.
Always an uproar
above the mountain.

The full moon
pulling everything through.

Always the vacancy.

I promised to be naked,
to walk on my knees up the mountain
and if the mountain doubts me,
I promise to take more off.

ON FOOT

Elizabeth Jacobson

I was staying at a farmhouse with no doors on the door openings, no windows on the window openings. Every night I slid a dresser behind the curtains hanging in the bedroom door frame, then rolled the heavy oil filled space heater behind that.

This was near the Rio Grande gorge bridge, and most days I went to stand on the pedestrian walkway. Crisis hotline boxes had been installed at every pylon with signs: *There Is Hope Make The Call*. Underneath the signs were big red buttons which lit up at night. It is tempting to push a big red button when you see one! I put my fingertip on it and circled the circumference. At the gorge bridge, the barrier is low and it would be easy to hop up on a cross rail and dive over. I thought of my friend who wrote a poem about standing at the spot on the famous bridge in Minneapolis where a celebrated poet had leapt into the Mississippi. When I travel a bridge on foot, I always consider jumping, even if it is a low bridge and I simply want to cool my feet. Most people I imagine have this impulse.

I know two individuals who jumped from the gorge bridge. One was a friend of a friend who left a note saying he could not find another way up. The other, a seventeen-year-old, called his mother from the bridge to tell her he was going to jump. He waited the two hours it took for her to drive there, and as she ran pleading from her car, he leapt. Now she is trying to get the county to raise the railings, but I don't see how it matters. Anyone can walk to the rocky ledge of the gorge and soar into the ravine.

Getting back into the car, I remembered what my friend told me about that poet who dove to his death from the Minneapolis bridge. At the instant of his descent, he caught the eye of someone driving by, and he smiled, and he waved.

CHRONIC AND NAMELESS

Kathryn Smith

The cat is dying—though I know we all are, since the day we're born or before that, when we're that cell-knot of an embryo, that hoped-for thing or mistake. But the cat is dying more so than usual, and I have become a person who follows a cat around the house with a handkerchief, hoping to catch the strings of snot that trail so pitifully from his nostrils since cats can't say what they need. *And they hate to breathe through their mouths*, the veterinarian says, and she emphasizes the word *hate* the way preteen girls do when discussing their morphing bodies. In fifth grade we all wanted to be veterinarians, but by sixth we were over it and planning our pop-star careers. *Discovered so young*, the magazines would say. By then we'd learned something about animals, but nothing about death, except that sometimes a father will leave a note that says *I didn't think any of you loved me anymore*, which they'll find with him at the beach cabin, the tide outside receding before it comes in.

DIRT EATERS

Eliza Rotterman

I asked the law if it knew anything
about gravity, osmosis,
women walking home at night.
Law was quiet as a pumpkin
then offered to buy me a drink.
When I woke, the light was orange.

Populist and free of irony,
trees employ special chemical processes,
transduce light into sugar, sugar into time.
Women labor to maintain
an aboveground appearance,
fresh and unstressed.

It's troubling what you might call
transcendence.
Or, it's winter.
Survival, a red bell
behind the sun.

The home in America
is the most dangerous place
for women. Pregnancy
when we are most likely to be kicked
slapped, pushed.

We grow towards it,
this out-of-body light.
The body of your mother
a frequency, a wavelength.
Her mind
glinting like a spoon in a drawer
in a wall made of wood.

A woman can't help but aberrate.
Just look what she does
in that glaciated bedrock.
She's practically naked.
Lactating
in the office
at eleven and again, at two.

I overhear two women remark
on the slaughter of horses.
But they're still good, one exclaimed.
Then, *Like sorry,*
thanks for all the work you've done.
You're no longer needed

I turn diagrammatic, margins, months.
A splayed anatomy book.
A pair of persimmons on the counter
is melancholic, depending on the hour.
It's 3 a.m.
Everyone is sleeping.

The town where the law grew up
wasn't anywhere special,
and the story, nothing beyond
the usual trajectory
of acquiring power through
incremental acts of self-deception.

I make a bed
beneath the table, remember,
a pair of shoes, their complimentary field.
Clicking rudiments,
fawns pulled from the highway.
Conclusions to suck.

The law spoke
as if the voice of reason
had found no truer outlet
The law wore khaki and light blue.
How old are you?
How old were you
the first time a man touched you?

A woman complains,
I wish I could pull *that* off.
A sensational dress that didn't fit
the occasion. She was seventeen,
twenty-one, thirty-four, fifty-nine.
She was walking alone
every night in America.

Bands of dark light waver.
I walk in the middle of the street,
singing for the same reason
a dog raises the fur on her neck.

Show me the marks, she asks.
I lift my shirt,
an anthem blazes above this orchard
I am pregnant and America,
you are pregnant with me/us.

THE ABORTIONIST'S DAUGHTER

Darren Dillman

THE FIRST TIME I SEE THE FETUSES IS THE DAY JIANG'S MOTHER comes into my father's clinic.

I'm seven years old, playing in the storage room of Zhongshan Women's Medical Facility Number 2. It's a Saturday in late December, and the weather has turned cold, but short of freezing. I'm snug in my yellow school windbreaker—which is part of my uniform—and my tight ponytail is pulling on my face. I've been skipping through the building as usual, trying to find something of interest. Dad is the kind of doctor who helps women with their problems. My mom, a nurse, is next door in the operating room, helping him perform a *procedure*. Even though I'm not allowed in either room, I've developed a penchant for breaking superfluous rules.

The fetuses are kept in thick glass jars that stand on a black laboratory tabletop. In each jar, peach- and plum-colored slivers of flesh, some more diaphanous than others, lie suspended in clear liquid, floating like single-celled organisms of the deep. I'm sitting on a stool, eyes glued to the jars. Even though I don't yet know what a fetus is, Grandma Lin, who lives with us, will explain it to me when I get home. Cold air is blowing from the standing air conditioner in the corner, and my skin has broken out in goose bumps. Despite the chill, I stare fixedly at the specimens, which sway in their own secret dominion.

"Ni Shi!" Dad says. "What are you doing?"

I flinch on the stool—I didn't hear the door open. Dad is wearing his white lab coat, surgical mask and gloves.

"Looking at something," I say.

"You're not supposed to be in here," he says. "Go sit in the lobby."



There are three patients waiting in the aseptic-scented lobby, which consists of twenty adjoined yellow plastic seats, a wall-mounted 32-inch LCD TV, a hot/cold water dispenser with paper cups, and a semi-circular reception counter. I sit in my seat doing my math homework, which Mom makes me finish before I can play games on her iPhone. Grandma Lin detests this because she says iPhones are made by Chinese slave girls who lack the skills to do anything else, and that if I don't learn how to do something useful—like hack into a computer or invent an ingenious method to reduce air pollution—I'll become a slave girl, myself.

I work on math problems until the numbers are practically howling at me. When I look up from my book, Li Jiang, my best friend, wearing the same green coat and pink snow cap she wears at school, walks into the clinic with her parents. Jiang stands at her mom's hip like a forgotten pet. Two men, one with thick sideburns and bulldog jowls, follow behind them. With the help of Mr. Li, her mother plods toward the reception counter like it's the guillotine, her face red as raw stew meat. The man with thick sideburns says something to Xu, the receptionist, and she starts to lead them into one of the examination rooms, but before reaching the hallway Jiang's mother pauses, closes her eyes, and begins trembling.

"I can't do it," she squeals, clenching her fists, and breaks down into shaky, horrible sobs.

Mr. Li clutches her with his arm and whispers into her ear. Awkwardly, Mrs. Li moves forward, no more comforted than before, disappearing down the hallway. Jiang takes a seat beside me while the two men plop down in front of the TV.

"What's wrong with your mom?" I ask.

"I don't know," Jiang says. Her sullen face looks pitiful.

I snatch Mom's iPhone from her purse behind the counter and hand it to Jiang, but the games don't interest her, and my subsequent attempts at small talk go nowhere. Jiang simply stares at the TV. The man with the sideburns lights a cigarette, but Xu tells him he can't smoke in the hospital. Nevertheless, he continues smoking for a minute or two, drops cigarette ash onto the floor, and puts out the cigarette, flicking it onto the floor, as well.

An hour later, when Mrs. Li comes out of the operating room, I've finished my homework and Mr. Li has an arm around Mrs. Li's waist, steadying her as she paces through the lobby like a zombie, her eyes dopey and distant.



At home I tell Grandma Lin about Jiang's mother and the fetuses. Mom and Dad are in their room, talking. The smell of ox bone soup wafts from the kitchen, the metal pot rattling from the burner. Grandma Lin, my mother's mother, is bony and stooped; most of her front teeth are brown and black, and I don't sit too close to her because of her breath, which smells like molded bread. Although she was the best student in her high school, she never attended university. She worked for many years as a seamstress. Her husband, my grandpa, died more than a dozen years ago of lung cancer.

Grandma Lin sets my bowl on the kitchen table, and as I slurp the broth from a porcelain soup spoon the warmth cascades into my belly. The tender meat falls off the bone as I bite into it, and I grin at the old woman, who sips from her own bowl and smacks her lips with approval.

"So what are they?" I ask, regarding the fetuses.

Grandma Lin groans, tightens her lips, and looks down at her soup. She acts as though she doesn't want to explain, which is unusual for her, since she always tells me everything—especially when I ask her a question.

"I don't know how to tell you," Grandma Lin says.

"Just tell me!" I say impatiently.

Grandma Lin groans and looks up from her bowl.

"You know where babies come from?" she asks.

"A woman's tummy," I say.

"Hm," she says.

"So?" I say.

"What you saw are fetuses," she says. "Babies who haven't been born."

My spoon stops in mid-air as I try to comprehend this.

"Oh," I say. "When will they be born?"

Grandma Lin gently shakes her head and looks back down at her soup.

After dinner, I ask the old woman if she will brush my hair and sing "The Emperor's Daughter," a nursery rhyme she and Mom have sung to me since I can remember. But lately Mom says I'm getting too old for it. We sit on the sofa, and I lay my head against Grandma Lin's shoulder. The old woman's voice warbles out the tune, and as the plastic bristles crawl along my scalp, I doze off and start to dream of Ms. Gronkowski, my English teacher from Wisconsin.



On Monday I see Jiang on the playground, sitting on a concrete bench in a bright green knitted sweater, her hair disheveled. My backpack is heavy from my math book and homework papers, so I heave it onto the space next to her and sit down.

The Zhongshan sky is hazy, and the scent of a fire carries in the cold air. Five kilometers away, thick gray smoke mushrooms from a shoe factory smokestack.

“Is your mom okay?” I ask.

Jiang gives me a blank look.

“She’s been sleeping,” Jiang says. “When she wakes up she starts crying.”

“What do you do?” I ask.

“About what?” Jiang asks.

“About her crying.”

Jiang shrugs. She gazes at the playground equipment. Her hair, usually done up neatly, hangs loosely and frayed, missing its jasmine smell.

Ms. Song, the dowager on recess duty, moseys by, her jade whistle hanging from her neck. She has beady black eyes and graying hair. She teaches sixth grade, and the older students say she’s the meanest teacher in the school and that she never married because she’s too irascible, instead of being amenable like women are supposed to be.

“Why aren’t you girls playing?” Ms. Song asks, her face expressionless.

“We’re talking,” I say.

Ms. Song shakes her head, mumbles something inaudible, and saunters past.

“Did you do your math homework?” I ask.

“No,” Jiang asks.

I think of asking her if she wants to go down the slide, but I know she’ll say no, so I just sit with her and listen to the hum of the wind. Finally, Ms. Song blows the whistle and we go inside.



In the afternoon, in English class, I’m staring at Ms. Gronkowski, who is wearing an amber cotton blouse and dark blue skirt. Young and beautiful, she teaches us twice a week. Because my English is poor, her undecipherable words flit past me like fireflies. Nevertheless, I’m mesmerized by her blue angelic eyes and shimmering glint of unbound blonde hair, which smells of honeysuckle. When she gives us worksheets, I constantly raise my hand for help just to get a whiff of it, and when she asks if I understand, when her eyes peer into me, I’m too dazed to answer. I just smile. Before she arrived, I’d never seen anyone with natural blonde hair. Not in person. I’d never spoken to a foreigner.

Today she is talking about something called an *infinitive*. As she drums amber chalk across the chalkboard, I lose myself in the hem of her skirt, in the pristine ivory of her skin, and I imagine she is my big sister, or my aunt, and she’s

lying on a large round bed, the kind I've seen on TV and once at a mall in Hong Kong, her hair silky and glimmering, just like the bed's comforter; but instead of teaching attire, she's wearing a lilac gown, and I'm lying beside her, snug in my pink cotton pajamas, my head cradled in the nook between her shoulder and breast; she brushes her hair with her hand, flinging it over my face.

My brief escape into paradise ends when Hui Min, the boy in front of me, passes me the new worksheet, dangling it in front of my face. I take one of the papers and pass the others behind me. Then, as usual, I raise my hand for help.



The next weekend I spend Saturday at the clinic. Not many patients come in; the place is deserted for hours. After I finish my homework I wander about the building, skipping along the hallway, happy to be free of math problems and Chinese writing. A mouse scurries down the hallway, away from me, and in an empty examining room I watch a black cockroach scoot through the loops of a pair of forceps.

Bored, I leave the room and meander down the hallway. The storage room door is unlocked, so I open it and turn on the light. The jars of fetuses, however, no longer stand on the tabletop, and the air conditioner is off. I turn off the light and step back out into the hallway.

The door to the operating room stands ajar, and a sliver of light, in the shape of a ruler, spills through the crack. I step closer to the door and listen. Cold. Quiet. The sign on the door says "Staff and Patient Only."

I step toward the adjacent examining room and hear Mom and Dad talking through their food, their words muffled. I traipse back to the operating room, push the door open, and step inside.

A pungent aseptic odor burns my nose. Glass cabinets and a counter lie against the opposite wall. In the middle of the room, against the wall, lies a reclining patient's chair with gray vinyl padding and rubber ankle stirrups dangling from two rods at one end. My little feet creep toward the chair, my heart pounding like the Haer washing machine at home. I don't know why, but it's something I have to do, something I need to see, even if it gets me in trouble.

A rolling metal table stands on the other side of the chair. On top of it, a tray of silver instruments: forceps, tongs, a scraping tool. Next to the tray lies a syringe and several ampules, and beside them stand dark brown vials of anesthetics and antiseptics.

I climb up onto the seat and lean back. The lights above flicker, humming their electrical song. Is this what the women see and hear? I wonder. I grab the

pair of forceps from the tray, hold them with my finger and thumb. Clamp them together. Release.

My parents' voices crescendo in the next room, their chair legs scoting against the floor, so I wrestle myself out of the chair and scamper out of the room.



Later, at home, Mom and Dad are yelling at each other in their bedroom.

Grandma Lin sits in a chair at the table, knitting, as I eat a bowl of rice with chicken, mushrooms, ginger, and watercress that she has steamed. The old woman cooks better than Mom, but I keep this to myself, unlike the story Grandma Lin told me yesterday—that Dad's frequent visits to Hong Kong when I was a toddler were due to a girlfriend he had there.

Mom and Dad don't fight very often. As far as I can tell, when they do, it's almost always because of Grandma Lin, and they always fight in Cantonese.

"That saber-toothed bat needs to watch her mouth!" Dad says. "If she makes one more dirty remark to our daughter, she'll find herself on the street!"

"Don't be ridiculous," Mom says. "She's my mom. We're responsible for her!"

"She's poisoning Ni Shi's mind!" he says.

"Since when is the truth poison?" Mom asks.

"There are some things you don't tell a seven-year-old!" he says. And so on. I look at Grandma Lin with humility.

"Are you mad at me?" I ask.

Grandma Lin laughs. "Why would I be?"

"I didn't keep your secret," I say.

Grandma Lin coughs up a laugh.

"Secret?" she says. "There are no secrets, Ni Shi. Everyone is into everyone else's business. Someone is always watching. The government knows everything about you. Someday they'll know what you are thinking."

I bite into a slice of ginger, and the juice burns my throat. I chew each bite of chicken slowly, seeing how long I can savor the taste. Grandma Lin asks about my school lessons, and I tell her that, in addition to math and writing, we're learning about Chairman Mao, the concept of unity, and that Taiwan is part of China.

"Mao," Grandma Lin says in gravelly disgust. "There's a true vampire. He drank more blood than a hundred Draculas."



During the next few days, Jiang starts to look like her old self. She dons her hair in pigtails and works diligently on the math worksheets, her pencil bearing down against the paper, knuckles clenched, with determination and focus. She brings her completed homework assignments on time and answers teachers' questions in class.

I ask her about her mom.

"She quit her job," she says. "She stays at home now."

"What does she do?" I ask.

"She watches TV."

I think about it for a moment.

"Then who did your hair today?" I ask.

"My auntie," Jiang says. "She's been coming over. And one of my older cousins helped me with my math."



At night I dream Mom and Dad are fighting. They're in the kitchen. Dad is holding a small sharp knife, and Mom throws a frozen chicken that smacks him in the nose. Suddenly Dad turns into a clown, his nose a big red ball, and he's riding away from Mom, down the street, on a unicycle.

"I'm going to Hong Kong!" he says. "My girlfriend's waiting for me!"

"What about your daughter?" Mom asks.

"Who?" Dad asks.

I wake up with a start. When I pull the comforter and blankets off, a chilled vacuum of winter air swallows me. I rise from the bed, step into my slippers, and pad into the kitchen, the cotton fabric of my pajamas clinging to my skin. A nightlight beside the toaster beckons. I'm thinking of pouring myself a glass of water from the water dispenser, and my hand is on the dispenser's lever, an empty glass beneath it, when the wan shape of a ghost glows from the living room.

My stomach sinks, and for a moment I'm breathless. My heart pounds away for seconds before I recognize the ghost as Grandma Lin, pacing in front of the living room window, the moonlight spilling a milky radiance onto her alabaster night gown, the soles of her slippers scraping across the wooden floor.

As I pour the glass of water, Grandma Lin turns toward me.

"Ni Shi?" she says.

I take the glass of water and join her in the living room.

"I couldn't sleep," I say.

I tell her about the nightmare. She stays quiet, looking at the floor. In the

moonlight her wrinkled face pales with a hint of contrition. I can tell she blames herself for my nightmare.

“I don’t know why I said anything,” she says. “When you get old, you’ve got one foot in the grave. You feel useless and say hateful things. Don’t pay any attention to me.”

I drink my water. We both stare at the moonlight.

“You’re my grandma,” I say. “You’re not useless to me.”

Grandma Lin hugs me and I reach my hands up and around her bony shoulder blades, her skeleton-like fingers clutching me.

We talk a while longer, and I sip the last of the water. Then, because of the intimacy and euphoria I’m feeling, I tell her my own secret version of the Moon Lady story.

The Moon Lady was American. Her hair was silky blonde, smelled like honeysuckle, and reached down to her waist, whipping around her hips like a pet cat. The other women, who were Chinese, had only black hair and, being jealous, banished the American to the moon. But because the American had a Chinese friend, a girl who she thought of as her own daughter, who brought her the greatest joy and comfort by brushing her hair, she visited the girl’s home regularly, in secret, flouting this most absurd rule and laughing during her days on the moon at her enemies’ inability to contain her.



The next weekend I’m in the clinic doing my homework. Xu is sitting behind the reception counter, huddled over her iPhone, texting. Two women are sitting in the lobby, and one of them starts having a seizure. Xu rushes to the woman and tends to her, helping her to lie down.

“Ni Shi!” Xu says. “Go get your dad!”

I shove my book and worksheets aside and spring from my seat into the hallway, toward the golden sprawl of light beneath the operating room door. Even in an emergency, I’m afraid to intrude upon my dad during surgery, and I briefly pause when I reach the door. *Hurry!*, my conscience urges, and I open the door.

A patient lies in the chair, in a white gown, her legs spread and holstered by the stirrups at the ankles. A fuchsia mask made of plaster covers her head. Dad and Mom are wearing white surgical masks and operating gloves, and Dad is holding some kind of probing instrument. Blood glistens against the silver tool, and the sight steals the breath from me.

My parents' eyes immediately home in on me: Dad's dark and serious; Mom's calm and attentive. Instead of berating me, Dad waits for me to speak, patiently holding the instrument.

Somehow I manage to get the right words out, and Dad hurries from the room, pulling his gloves off along the way. But I can hardly move—I remain standing and staring at the masked patient.

“Ni Shi,” Mom says with a tone of warning.

Finally, I back up and close the door.



At school I try as politely as possible to glean more information about Jiang's mom, but Jiang shows little interest in disclosing the details.

One day she tells me she's going home for dinner, and I ask if I can join her. It's been several weeks since I saw her mother at the clinic. Before that day, Jiang and I would visit each other's house often, at least once a week.

Jiang's house is in a smaller building than ours. The outside walls are grayed and discolored by mold, and you have to walk six floors up a cold dark stairwell before you see the red good luck sign in Mandarin attached to the front aluminum door. When Jiang opens it, a fresh aroma of steamed rice hits me, flirting with my palate.

“Dad, Ni Shi came with me today,” Jiang says, pulling her backpack from her shoulders.

“All right,” he says from the kitchen.

As I step inside, I see Jiang's mother sitting on the sofa, staring at the LCD TV, wearing a curt smile. Her feet rest flat on the floor, her hands folded properly in her lap. Her hair is coarse, and I notice a brown stain on the sleeve of her blouse. She briefly looks at me, then her head swivels back toward the TV.

“Hi, Mrs. Li,” I say. I lower my own bag of books to the floor.

Mrs. Li doesn't answer.

“Hi, Ni Shi,” Mr. Li says, appearing at the edge of the sofa. “Glad you could come over. Mrs. Li isn't feeling very well today, but she's happy to see you. Try to make yourself comfortable.”

Jiang sits on a cushion by the coffee table, and I take my seat in the corner of the sofa. Jiang grabs the remote and changes the channel to a TV show featuring child singers.

“Wasn't your mom watching something?” I ask.

“She doesn't care,” Jiang says. “She watches everything.”

Mr. Li serves the three of us bowls of rice with pork, eggplant, and seaweed.

Mrs. Li glances at her bowl, the steam spiraling like a genie from a lamp. Jiang notices me staring.

“Don’t worry about her,” Jiang says through a mouthful of rice. “She’ll eat it later when she gets hungry.”

Mr. Li eats at the kitchen table. Jiang laughs at a girl who butchers a New Year’s folk song. I take a few bites of the rice and pork, but like Mrs. Li, I suddenly don’t feel very hungry, although the food is palatable. I do my best to eat three-fourths of it, and then I set the bowl on the coffee table. While waiting for Jiang to finish, I notice a green hairbrush lying on the other side of the table. I grab it, sit closer to Mrs. Li, and begin brushing her hair. As I do, I sing “The Emperor’s Daughter,” smoothing out the tangles and massaging her scalp with the bristles. Mrs. Li seems to enjoy it and smiles just like she did before. When I finish, I set the brush down and lay my head against her shoulder. A minute later, she begins sniffing, and she looks at me with astonished, mournful eyes.

“Thank you, Ni Shi,” Mrs. Li says, holding my head against her. “Thank you.”

MISSION

Martin Ott

The blow-up alien dolls, one blue, one green, were a joke to represent middle management. They stare out from the old temp's workstation. Their eyes are the exact color and shape of despair. Without mouths, they observe the computer monitors and the creatures making love to them. The data is incomplete. The trash is carried away. The people wrappings are recycled. Offices hum in lights not unlike the distant sun cawing for them to slingshot home. The Chinese factory that "made them" was a ruse, deep cover. The aliens wheeze as the human breath inside leaks in the perambulations of routine. They learn that bagel Mondays do not fill the holes callously slathered and devoured. Movie trivia Fridays too often makes their own kind seem two-dimensional. At day's end, the sun pours through their torsos and swathes the creatures in the essence of grass and sky. Two aliens, two metaphors. The joke is karmic, for future generations. Every day the aliens wait, like the humans, to be saved.

WHEN THE DREAMS KNOW MORE THAN YOU DO

Emily Borgmann

I woke up dreaming of Play-Doh green hands
too soft to slap the pavement
I wanted to drum in noonday sun,

woke like nightmare crashed me, and it was,
but I don't recall fear that tasted so close to confusion,

like taller-than-me girl with braided hair
had stomped on my new jewelry-making kit,
and I was relieved before I was mad at her,

like my mother screaming at my father
when he wasn't home, surely she had reason to curse him,

but timing, like with betta fish, is always a factor,
my hands are solid as they've ever been,
but I need to let go, as they say, of the tooth I never lost,

the beaded bracelets I stopped making after the stomping,
the woman I didn't make myself into,
and these crumbling fingers are exactly right.

DIVAS' DIVISION

Carrie Shipers

When I was on the road I didn't eat. I threw up at every show, but no one seemed to notice. Your shelf life only lasts until you're 30. I was 26, spent half my pay on Botox and bigger lips. My implants made it hard to lift my arms. Women who came up on their own don't like us very much. They think we're getting a free ride. My trainer wouldn't teach me how to fall, said I was used to being on my back. If we don't know what we're doing, we're easier to fire. My bruises wouldn't heal. I covered them with makeup so I wouldn't look tough. Guys in the locker room aren't used to hearing no. When you get called a slut, you have to laugh it off. My angles always involved men—who thought I was hot, broke my heart or learned I was a whore. My boyfriend complained about my schedule, so the office let me go. They figured he'd just date another Diva. My hair was falling out. I took so many Xanax I got lost backstage. At the end of my first year, I couldn't catch my breath, move fast enough for matches. I was afraid I'd die if I kept going. Quitting was the hardest thing I've ever done.

DREGS WEEK

Mary Biddinger

It was like fashion week but without the threads, shark week minus the mouths. Most of the sponsored content was targeted at millennials, though every four or five channels aired an old fashioned sack race or historical think piece. I would describe my desires as typical click bait. How to fantasize about money without feeling like a punctured yogurt carton left in a backpack. How to remember your old body without resentment about your present state, which resembles an unclaimed free couch more than an egret landing in its home marsh. Dregs week avenged the mostly-used body wash, married the ketchups, mixed all the leftover uncooked pasta shapes (even the novelty dicks) into one boiling pot. It meant lunch with a least favorite colleague, the one whose breathing you can pick out from yards away, the one who prompts you to hide beneath your desk. Dregs week occupies only one cell in the spreadsheet, but it's maximized to fit all the exceptions and counterarguments. No week is more like a gorgeous blouse that shows blotchy sweat stains before it's even on. It's a new job that feels exactly like the old job except you never quit the old job, and who needs sleep, isn't it an abstraction rather than an action? All the photographers on the subway were headed to dregs week with their *jouissance*, which made the rest of us feel like caged bison. Gone were the charm necklaces of our youth, which weighed more upon our breasts than our breasts would ever weigh.

TARNISH

John A. Nieves

Ghost blood across your knuckles—
the sticky nostalgia of a sidewalk
prizefighter. I never dreamed curbs

as high as the one I'm on now, but
I know that on the other side
of my eyelids you are murmuring

obscurities in your sleep. Your teeth
and fists clenched. You hold me
like an auction. If there are bidders,

they're buried so far in the shadows,
the room's bitter corners, that they
border on myth. I see myself displayed—

a reflection on smoked glass. I am darker
than me, but translucent from both
sides. Outside, a buzzard pulls on

scraps in black snow. I catch its eye.
It sees itself in my chest, cranes its neck,
opens its wings. For a second,

I am an angel. They beat once
and leave me for soot-laced sky. Luckily,
stains don't show on black. The night

forgets me into daylight. Morning
erases me. Leaves a thin pane, a hairline
fracture and dust impersonating rust.

“THE MEANING OF LIFE IS THAT IT STOPS.” – FRANZ KAFKA

Jeff Alessandrelli

A great writer, Franz Kafka despised writing, often washing his mouth out with soap to prevent his linguistic trysts. Friend and fellow writer Max Brod discouraged this. But not understanding Franz Kafka's plight and wishing to write like him, eventually Max Brod too started washing his mouth out with soap, albeit with a slightly more expensive brand. Learning of this Kafka immediately discontinued the practice, soon perishing of tuberculosis. In protest Max Brod sulked and lamented and grieved. Then published the writing Franz Kafka asked to have burned following his death. "I am made of literature; I am nothing else and cannot be anything else," Franz Kafka, despiser of literature, once said while alive. An explanation isn't an answer. A word means neither its origin nor the dumb letters that contain it. Nothing is Kafkaesque.

REFLECTIONS AT THE END

Henry Israeli

and when they tore out your teeth no one cried
and when they removed half your organs no one cried
and when your veins came to the surface
swollen and pock marked, they dug still deeper into your flesh
and oh how they courted you, pretending to care
as you lay in your hospice bed
but under it all dreaming of what you would leave them
but you'll leave them nothing and were trying to tell them all along
that nothing comes from nothing
so they were nothing without you
but they laughed because they'd heard that a million times before
and cared nothing for false flattery
for you always managed to keep giving and giving
even after you lost the ability to feel pleasure
and grumbled and vomited and bled on the inside too
while you kept trying to explain how you were still young
as Keats in his little efficiency off the Spanish steps in Rome
coughing delicate petals of blood into a kerchief
while begging his doctor for just a drop of laudanum
to numb his lungs that hung like tattered rags
and still dreaming all the while of truth and beauty,
beauty and truth

WHAT IS THE PURPOSE OF YOUR VISIT?

Eric Pankey

To attend an uncle's funeral. To enter the precinct of the sacred. To have a boil lanced. To return an overdue library book. To track the Nile back to its source. To turn myself in. To seek asylum. To take monastic vows. To party. To destabilize the government. To see Paris in springtime. To escape a bad marriage. To claim lottery winnings. To take hostages. To negotiate the release of hostages. To restore a fresco. To catch a glimpse of the coronation. To evangelize. To see again Turner's "Rough Sea with Wreckage." To cut down a paratrooper caught in the highest branches. To donate a kidney. To experience firsthand a state of emergency. To use frequent flyer miles before they expire.

THE DEAD DON'T HEAR THE SONGS

Maryfrances Wagner

*Studies into human decomposition help answer
four questions: who is the victim, how did the victim
die, where and when did the victim die?*

~ Arpad Vass

On the lawn of the Oak Ridge Research Facility,
beneath canopies of trees and unfazed squirrels,
cadavers finish their death *in an outdoor natural
setting* with the help of forensic scientist,
Arpad Vass. At first, Vass turned them
face down, but he's long since hardened
to self digestion. The haciendas move
in a nice rice waltz below the surface of frenzied
fat eating. When he explains decay, he prefers
hacienda instead of maggots, *skin slippage*,
or *gloving* for when skin disembarks
from a hand. Bacteria colonies swell and canoe
through the body of food goo into bloat
until the body collapses into itself, seeps
into soil, and offers over 400 body vapors.
The vapors help identify clandestine burials,
so Voss wants to add a fourth *mortis* to *algor*,
rigor, and *livor: odor mortis*. The dead don't mind
the stench and the way *it stays with you*,
sometimes for months, or the Rice Krispie sound
of feeding maggots. Thrashers and warblers
stick around for blowflies and carrion beetles,
though it's doubtful the dead hear their songs.

“AT THE PRESENT TIME, IN ALL
HONESTY, I AM INTERESTED IN THE
LONGEVITY OF FECAL MATTER.”

- SIR RICHARD WALNEN

Jeff Alessandrelli

Night by dawn the stars

will never finish what they
st- art in my life-
time.

The world entire

I will
die

but only in one
geographically-destined place.

Certain piles of dinosaur excrement—

I mean dinosaur feces— I mean

dinosaur shit—

lasted for hundreds of years

on this earth.

Immortality's ephemerality exists

half as long.

And this month and this month only

it's National Truck Month

again—

I hope it lasts forever!

SPECIAL INTERNATIONAL TRANSLATIONS

{ *SWEDISH* >> *ENGLISH* }

KORT PAUS I ORGELKONSERTEN

Tomas Tranströmer

Orgeln slutar att spela och det blir dödstyst i kyrkan
men bara ett par sekunder.
Så tränger det svaga brummandet igenom från
trafiken därute, den större orgeln.

Ja vi är omslutna av trafikens mumlande som vandrar
runt längs domkyrkans väggar.
Där glider yttervärlden som en genomskinlig film
och med kämpande skuggor i pianissimo.

Som om den ingick bland ljuden från gatan hör jag en
av mina pulsar slå i tystnaden,
jag hör mitt blod kretsas, kaskaden som gömmer sig
inne i mig, som jag går omkring med,

och lika nära som mitt blod och lika långt borta som
ett minne från fyraårsåldern

hör jag långtradaren som går förbi och får de sex-
hundraåriga murarna att darra.

Här är så olikt en modersfamn som någonting kan
bli, ändå är jag ett barn just nu
som hör de vuxna prata långt borta, vinnarnas och
förlorarnas röster flyter ihop.

På de blå bänkarna sitter en gles församling. Och
pelarna reser sig som underliga träd:
inga rötter (bara det gemensamma golvet) och ingen
krona (bara det gemensamma taket).

SHORT INTERVAL IN THE ORGAN RECITAL

Tomas Tranströmer / Translation by Göran Malmqvist

The organ ceases to play and the church is dead silent but only for
a few seconds.

Then the faint humming noise penetrates from the traffic outside,
a greater organ.

Yes we are surrounded by the muttering of the traffic that moves
along the walls of the cathedral.

There the external world glides by like a transparent film with
struggling shadows in pianissimo.

I hear one of my pulses beat in the silence as if it mingled with the
noise from the street,

I hear my blood pulsate, the cascade that hides within me, and that
I carry along,

And as close as my blood and as far away as a memory from the
age of four

I hear the heavy lorry that passes by, causing the six-hundred-year
old walls to tremble.

Nothing could be more different from a mother's embrace than this,
yet right now I'm a child

who hears the grown-ups talk far away, the voices of winners and
losers blend.

A sparse congregation sit on the blue benches. And the pillars rise like
strange trees:

no roots (only the shared floor) and no tree tops (only the shared
vault).

Jag återupplever en dröm. Att jag står på en kyrko-
gård ensam. Överallt lyser ljung
så långt ögat når. Vem väntar jag på? En vän. Varför
kommer han inte? Han är redan här.

Sakta skruvar döden upp ljuset underifrån, från marken.
Heden lyser allt starkare lila—
nej i en färg som ingen sett . . . tills morgonens bleka
ljus viner in genom ögonlocken

och jag vaknar till det där orubbliga KANSKE som
bär mig genom den vacklande världen.
Och varje abstrakt bild av världen är lika omöjlig som
ritningen till en storm.

Hemma stod allvetande Encyklopedin, en meter i
bokhyllan, jag lärde mig läsa i den.
Men varje människa får sin egen encyklopedi skriven,
den växer fram i varje själ,

den skrivs från födelsen och framåt, de hundratusentals
sidorna står pressade mot varann
och ändå med luft emellan! som de dallrande löven i
en skog. Motsägelsernas bok.

Det som står där ändras varje stund, bilderna retuscherar
sig själva, orden flimrar.
En svallvåg rullar genom hela texten, den följs av
nästa svallvåg, och nästa . . .

I re-live a dream: I stand in a church-yard alone. Everywhere the light of
heather
as far as the eye reaches. Whom do I wait for? A friend. Why doesn't he
come? He is already here.

Slowly death screws up the light from underneath, from the ground.
The shimmer of the heather grows more intensely lilac—
no a colour that no one has seen . . . until the pale light of morning
seeps in through the eyelids

and I wake up to that staunch PERHAPS that carries me through the
tilting world.
And every abstract image of the world is as impossible as the
blueprints of a storm.

At home the all-knowing Encyclopaedia occupied three feet in the
bookshelf, I taught myself to read from it.
But for every person an encyclopaedia is being written, it grows in
every soul,

it is being written from birth, and onwards, hundreds of thousands of
pages are pressed tight
and yet there is air in between! Like trembling leaves in a forest. A book
of contradictions.

What is written there changes with every moment, the pictures retouch
themselves, the words flicker.
A well rolls through the entire text, followed by another swell, and
another . . .

BÄCKAHÄSTEN

Ingela Strandberg

Kom
ropar den svarta
hingsten I bäcken

Kom

Manen blåser ut
Hovhåret flyter

Jag lossar hans betsel

SJÖN

Ingela Strandberg

Tar med mig sjön hem
De långa våderna vatten
Tar dem med långt in i sömnen
Huvudet under mörkret
Nu syns jag inte längre

THE STALLION IN THE BROOK

Ingela Strandberg / Translated by Göran Malmqvist

Come
the black stallion
shouts in the brook

Come

The mane blows up
The hoof hairs float

I loosen his bridle

THE LAKE

Ingela Strandberg / Translated by Göran Malmqvist

Taking the lake with me home
The water of the long widths
Taking them with me far into sleep
The head covered by darkness
Now I can no longer be seen

SKOGSRÅET 1

Ingela Strandberg

Rået lärde mig
att dölja det svarta
hållet i ryggen där
allt djup förvaras

SKOGSRÅET 3

Ingela Strandberg

Rået lärde mig att kroppens
vackraste del är nacken
Övergången eller avståndet
mellan huvud och ryggrad
Där eggen sätts

Där ensamheten bor

THE SIREN OF THE WOODS 1

Ingela Strandberg / Translated by Göran Malmqvist

She taught me
to hide the black
hole in my back
where all depth is kept

THE SIREN OF THE WOODS 3

Ingela Strandberg / Translated by Göran Malmqvist

She taught me the body's
most beautiful part is the neck
The transition or distance
from head to spine

Where the edge is applied

Where loneliness lives

SKOGSRÅET 4

Ingela Strandberg

Rået lärde mig
att mjölka
Vi satt ute på fälten
med pannorna mot bågnande kött
medan den ljuvligaste mjölk
vätte vår hud blank
Vi stal både törst och mjölk
Sköljde sen våra kärl i
strömmande vatten
och drog oss skrattande
tillbaka in under barken

SKOGSRÅET 5

Ingela Strandberg

Rået lärde mig
tidigt ordet hora

Det lät som ett förlupet rop från göken
när den mäter ut maj

Därför vände jag mig om och log
när det första gången kastades
mot min rygg

THE SIREN OF THE WOODS 4

Ingela Strandberg / Translated by Göran Malmqvist

She taught me to milk
We sat in the fields
our foreheads leaning against the bulging body
while the most delicious milk
moistened our skin bright
We stole both thirst and milk
then rinsed our vessels in
flowing water
and laughing withdrew
under the bark

THE SIREN OF THE WOODS 5

Ingela Strandberg / Translated by Göran Malmqvist

She early taught me
the word whore

It sounded like a stray cry
of the cuckoo when it measures May

Therefore I turned around
and smiled the first time
it was thrown against my back

KÖTT

Ingela Strandberg

Jag ser på ett stycke kött
som vrider sig över elden

Det höll ihop en buk
en rygg ett huvud ett språng

i mörkt klirrande gräs
i en sluttning som frihet

Fångades hungrade kvävdes fläktes

Vid klingan
mindes det mig när jag
stod på vägen och såg
transporten gå förbi

MEAT

Ingela Strandberg / Translated by Göran Malmqvist

I look at a piece of meat
revolving over the fire

It kept together a belly
a back a head a leap

in darkly jingling grass
on a slope like freedom

Caught starved choked split

By the blade
it remembered me when I
stood on the road and watched
the freight pass by

Now black the soot
like the short message
through the grid in the morning
when all was already too late

LOCKET

Ingela Strandberg

Kvinnan under locket
avklädd allt räckhåll

Jag slår på trumman

Men all klang är myt

Jag väntar på att locket ska brista

Brist brist

I dörren står ljuset

MUSIK

Ingela Strandberg

Jag kommer att dö
som en långt utdragen celloton
Jag kommer att dö i A-dur

THE LID

Ingela Strandberg / Translated by Göran Malmqvist

The women under the lid
rid of all reach

I beat the drum

But all clang is myth

I wait for the lid to burst

Burst burst

The light stands in the doorway

MUSIC

Ingela Strandberg / Translated by Göran Malmqvist

I shall die
like a drawn-out cello tone
I shall die in A major

STAN

Ingela Strandberg

I den lilla stan som skvalpar
i havet sov jag om nätterna ute
eller i bilen

Vågorna lallade

Alla hotellrum
var fullbelagda

Jag bodde ingenstans

GENOM HOPEN

Ingela Strandberg

Stolt bar jag barnet
inne i mig genom hopen
men spetsades av medlidande
Fattig och utkörd
såg jag månen nå ända
ner till dyningen vid Subbe fyr
Lycklig fångade jag
ett splitter ur oändligheten
och stoppade det innanför tröjan
Sen lyste vi på katter
och onanister som vaktade
på hjärtats rytm i sina trånga källarhål

THE TOWN

Ingela Strandberg / Translated by Göran Malmqvist

In the little town that splashes
in the sea I spent the nights outside
or in the car

The waves mumbled

All hotel rooms
were taken

I lived nowhere

THROUGH THE CROWD

Ingela Strandberg / Translated by Göran Malmqvist

Proud I carry the child within me
through the crowd
but was pierced by pity
Poor and turned out
I saw the moon reach all the way down
to the swell by the Subbe lighthouse
Happy I caught
a splinter of eternity
and put it under my sweater
Then we shone on cats
and the masturbators who watched over
the rhythm of the heart in their cramped cellar-vaults

ATT VÄGA TID

Ingela Strandberg

I den lilla stan som skvalpar
i havet fanns ett litet rum
för upplysning och bildning

Där vägde jag upp tid

När jag gick över torget
hem var stan tom
En konservburk utan innehåll
Om nätterna ylade
stjärnorna som vargar
från en plats varifrån
man kommer ensam
och i splitter nya kläder smidda
av eornas smeder

Som jag längtade dit

TO WEIGH TIME

Ingela Strandberg / Translated by Göran Malmqvist

In the little town that splashes
in the sea there was a little room
for information education

There I weighed time

When I crossed the square
on my way home the town was empty
a can without content

In the nights the stars
howled like wolves

from a place where truth
and lies are the same

From there a man appeared alone
and in brand new clothes forged
by the smiths of the eons

How I wished I was there

EVANGELIST

Kjell Espmark

Ett dis som är genomlyst av sol
drar över Galileiska sjön
där vi står i den lutande båten
och långsamt, långsamt drar upp vårt nät.
Relingen farligt nära vattnet
när det sprattlande glittret far över durken.
Nej, det är inte fisk—det är människors själar.

Det här är det svåra året 1749
då min syn går förlorad bland smärtorna.
Det är då jag samlar all min fångst,
mina infall och andras glittrande tankar,
suckar, minnen och fjällig vrede
i en mässa som trevar efter rockskörten
på den vi i brist på ord kallar Gud.

Jag vet att när jag slutat andas
kommer ingen notis i de tyska bladen.
Och när senare plågade samveten
söker mig hittar man ingen Bach.
De vänner som strömmade genom vårt hem
tjatade på mig—Skriv ner dina minnen.
Begrep de inte att jag gjort det?
Allt jag varit och allt jag minns
har skrivits in i mitt partitur
som ett hjärta lagt i dömens golv,
som en bröstorg fogad i dess valv.

Ni vill pressa på mig en lärorik biografi,
en lekamen i styv peruk
och anletsdrag av anspråksfull sten.
Kalla mig gärna den femte evangelisten
men låt mig behålla blygsamma mått—
ni glömmer att vi var enkla fiskare

EVANGELIST

Kjell Espmark / Translated by Robin Fulton Macpherson

A haze shone-through by sunlight
hovers over the Sea of Galilee
where we stoop in the tilting boat
and ever so slowly drag up our net.
The railing perilously close to the surface
when the wriggling glitter spills on the boards.
No, they're not fish—they're the souls of men.

This is the bad year 1749
when my sight is lost among the pains.
That's when I gather all my catch,
glittering thoughts of my own and others,
sighs, memories and scaly wrath
in a Mass that gropes for the coat-tails
of what for lack of words we call God.

I know that when I've stopped breathing
the German press will not carry the news.
And later when troubled consciences
come looking they'll find no Bach.
The friends who streamed through our home
would nag at me—Write your memoirs!
Couldn't they see that's what I'd done?
All I've been and all I remember
have been written into my scores
like a heart buried in the cathedral floor,
like a rib-cage built into its vaults.

You'd impose an instructive life-story on me,
a body in a rigid wig
and features of pretentious stone.
You may call me the fifth evangelist
but let me keep my unassuming ways—
you forget we were simple fishermen

i tjänst hos den som kom över vattnet
och andades fram en rimlig värld.
Och lammen som sprang framför benen på mig
var vanliga lamm med jordiska lortar.

Mina sju exakta toner besvärjer
ett kaos av oljud och villrådighet.
Deras stränghet har nära till dansen
och säger upp varje lydnad
mot en alltför mänsklig överhet.

Det skymmer.
Europas karta är fläckad av blod.
Men violoncellen insisterar.
Och kören skapar den ordning
som världen har misslyckats med.

in the service of him who came across the water
and breathed forth a reasonable world.
And the lambs that frolicked before my feet
were earthly lambs with earthly droppings.

My seven exact tones master
a chaos of noise and irresolution.
Their severity is kin to the dance
and refuses all obedience
to an all too human higher power.

Darkness is gathering.
Europe's map is stained with blood.
But the cello insists.
And the choir creates an order
the world has failed to create.

KÖR

Kjell Espmark

De som överlevde Förintelsen
skulle mötas här vid Hotel Lutetia
där Rue de Sèvres korsar Boulevard Raspail.
Det var vårt motstånd mot historien.

Barackerna var ett språk från Bayern
som reducerade oss till hår och skor.
Våra tankar hängde brända på stängslen.
Sjok av himmel och landskap var borta
liksom varje begriplighet.
Men vår dröm om ett möte bortom tiden
fanns kvar bland de trasor som var vi,
sammantryckta i skitiga sovbås.
Också vi som var brända ben
drömde om den avlägsna dag
då vi skulle resa oss rasslande
och komma de andras ben i möte.

Nu är vi till sist på avtalad plats
och ser de våra nalkas på avstånd
med steg som inte brinner längre.
Men vi tror inte på deras verklighet än,
inte starka nog att känna igen.
Därför stirrar vi in i hotellets fönster
för att se dem komma i spegelbilden.
Vi måste möta varandra försiktigt
för att glädjen inte ska bli för häftig
för oss som så länge saknat den.
Till sist går vi mot varandra, beslutsamt
som ville vi skingrade som församlats
hjälpa den hejdade Skapelsen.

CHORUS

Kjell Espmark / Translated by Robin Fulton Macpherson

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sammantryckta i skitiga sovbås.
Också vi som var brända ben
drömde om den avlägsna dag
då vi skulle resa oss rasslande
och komma de andras ben i möte.

Now at last we're at our rendez-vous
watching our people approach from afar
with steps no longer burning.
But we don't believe in their reality yet,
not strong enough to recognise.
So we stare in the hotel windows
to watch their mirror-images arrive.
We must meet carefully
so that our joy won't be too great
for us who for so long had none.
Finally we near each other, determinedly
as if, scattered but now gathered,
we'd help Creation into motion again.

Efter ett ögonblicks tvekan
smeker ett svartnat fragment av en hand
en alltför länge saknad tinning.
Och rök som kan ha varit ett barn
kramas av rök med form av en mor.

After a moment's hesitation
a blackened fragment of a hand
strokes a temple missed for too long.
And smoke which could have been a child
is hugged by smoke in the shape of a mother.

SPRÅKET

Kjell Espmark

Döden, mästaren från München,
strök ut himmel, landskap och ansikten
ur en förtrogen bruntonad tavla
som trott sig stamma från Bonde-Bruegel.
Här och var ligger väven bar
med långa trådar som kallas lydnad.
Det är troligen här jag är född.

Kan främlingar erövra språket
som cancern erövrar våra celler
och vänder dem mot oss själva?
Tills det som en gång var vårt språk
fräter i lever och lungor.

Mitt armbandsur vet besked.
Medan jag flyter längs Seinen ur tiden,
med ansiktet nere i vattnet,
ligger klockan kvar på nattduksbordet
och tickar fram berättelsen
om far som dog av tyfus i lägret
och mor som sköts med ett nackskott.
Klockans dröm är att en dag få stanna
eller hellre: ha tillåtits stanna före historien.
Den har oxiderats av sina minnen.
Vad den vill visa är språk, inte tid,
språk som reser sig ur sin sjukdom.

Kan orden brinna?
Vår stora ordbok tvekar om svaret
bak ryggar nötta av erövrarna.
Här och var har den brandplatser,
ställen där ord har mist sin mening
och det som är mening är svårlästa flagor.

LANGUAGE

Kjell Espmark / Translated by Robin Fulton Macpherson

Death, the master from Munich,
blotted out sky, landscape and faces
from a familiar brown-hued painting
that claimed descent from Peasant Brueghel.
The canvas is exposed here and there
with long threads called obedience.
Most likely it was here I was born.

Can foreigners conquer the language
the way cancer conquers our cells
and turns them against us?
Until what was once our language
corrodes into liver and lungs.

My watch knows.
While I float along the Seine out of time,
face down in the water,
my watch is still on the bedside table
ticking out the story
of father dead of typhus in the camp
and mother shot in the back of her neck.
The watch has a dream—to stop one day,
or rather, to have stopped before history.
It has been oxidised by its memories.
What it wants to show is not time
but language rising out of its disease.

Can the words burn?
Our multi-volume dictionary has no clear reply
behind spines scuffed by the conquerors.
It has scenes of fire here and there
where words have lost their meaning
and meaning itself, near-illegible flakes.

Ett sådant slocknande ord är ”minne”.
Ett ännu pyrande ord är ”hem”.

I en sådan värld är begreppet “änglar”
ingenting annat än tystnad.
Som änglarna i Vézelay, i det översta rummet
med utsikt över korstågen:
mänskliga fåglar som fångats i putsen
med ansiktet vänt mot väggen, som jag
med ansiktet vänt mot flodens botten,
en uppgiven tystnad
i azurblått och slocknande rött.

Jag bröt mig ut ur mitt verk
som just brutits sönder bakom mig.
Jag hörde dess knotor och revben
rasslande pröva att resa sig
för att rasa ihop i depressiv stumhet.
Men det är en stumhet som inte ger sig.
Jag är på väg, virvlar runt,
sjunker och stiger,
flyter allt längre in i den glömska
som till sist är vårt hem.
Och vårt envisa språk.

One such guttering word is "memory."
Another, smouldering, is "home."

In such a world the idea of "angels"
is nothing but silence.
Like the angels in Vézelay, in the top room
with a view over the crusades,
human birds caught in the plaster,
faces to the wall, like me
facing down to the river-bed,
an exhausted silence
in azure blue and expiring red.

I broke out of my work
which had just broken up behind me.
I heard its knuckles and ribs
rattling, trying to raise themselves
to tumble then into depressive muteness.
But it is a muteness that won't give up.
I'm on my way, swirling round,
sinking and rising,
drifting further into the oblivion
which is at last our home.
And our unrelenting language.

CONTRIBUTOR NOTES

Jeff Alessandrelli is the author of the full-length collection *THIS LAST TIME WILL BE THE FIRST* (Burnside Review, 2014). His work appears or is forthcoming in *Denver Quarterly*, *The American Poetry Review*, and *Witness*, among other journals.

Mary Biddinger is the author of five full-length collections of poetry, most recently *Small Enterprise* (Black Lawrence Press, 2015) and *The Czar* (with Jay Robinson, Black Lawrence Press, 2016). She is a professor of English at the University of Akron and edits the Akron Series in Poetry at the University of Akron Press.

Bruce Bond is the author of 16 books including *For the Lost Cathedral* (LSU, 2015), *Immanent Distance: Poetry and the Metaphysics of the Near at Hand* (U of MI, 2015), *Gold Bee* (Crab Orchard Award, SIU, 2016), and *Black Anthem* (Tampa Review Prize, U of Tampa, 2016).

Emily Borgmann is a poet, essayist, and writing educator. Her poetry and nonfiction have appeared in such journals as *Salamander*, *Green Mountains Review*, *Skidrow Penthouse*, and *Alligator Juniper*.

Christopher Citro is the author of *The Maintenance of the Shimmy-Shammy* (Steel Toe Books, 2015). He won the 2015 Poetry Competition at *Columbia Journal*, and his recent and upcoming publications include *Prairie Schooner*, *Ploughshares*, *Best New Poets 2014*, *The Journal*, *Sixth Finch*, and many others.

Kristina Marie Darling is the author of twenty-seven books of poetry, most recently *Ghost / Landscape* (with John Gallaher; BlazeVox Books, 2016) and the forthcoming *Dark Horse* (C&R Press, 2017). Her awards include three residencies at Yaddo and three residencies at the American Academy in Rome.

Paul Dickey is the author of two poetry books: *They Say This is How Death Came Into the World* (Mayapple Press, 2011) and *Wires Over the Homeplace* (Pinyon Publishing, 2013). His work has appeared in *32 Poems*, *Potomac Review*, *Valparaiso Review*, *Superstition Review*, and many other journals.

Darren Dillman has published one novel, *The Preacher* (David C. Cook, 2009), and his short fiction has appeared in *Shenandoah*, *the Tulane Review*, *George Washington Review*, *Southwest American Literature*, *Consequence*, *the High Desert Journal*, *Prole*, and *Best of the West*.

Kjell Espmark has published fourteen 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. He has been translated into some twenty languages.

Robert Long Foreman is the author of *Among Other Things*, published this year by Pleiades Press, and a winner of the Robert C. Jones Prize. His essays and short stories have appeared in *Agni*, *Copper Nickel*, *The Cincinnati Review*, and *The Utne Reader*, among others. He has also won a Pushcart Prize.

Mark Halliday teaches creative writing at Ohio University. His sixth book of poems, *Thresherphobe*, appeared in 2013 from the University of Chicago Press.

Wynne Hungerford has had work published in *Epoch*, *Smokelong Quarterly*, and *Clackamas Literary Review*, among other places. She is an MFA candidate at the University of Florida.

Henry Israeli has three poetry collections: *god's breath hovering across the waters*, (Four Way Books: 2016), *Praying to the Black Cat* (Del Sol: 2010), and *New Messiahs* (Four Way Books: 2002). He is also the translator of three books by Albanian poet Luljeta Lleshanaku and the founder and editor of Saturnalia Books.

Elizabeth Jacobson is the founding director of the WingSpan Poetry Project which conducts poetry classes at local shelters. Her recent work has appeared or is forthcoming in the *American Poetry Review*, *Hinchas de Poesia*, *Indolent Books*, *Orion Magazine*, *Ploughshares*, *Plume*, and *Women's Studies*.

Mike James has been published in over a 100 magazines across the United States. Among his nine poetry collections are *Peddler's Blues*, *The Year We Let The House Fall Down*, *Elegy In Reverse*, and *Past Due Notices*. He has previously served as the Visiting Writer In Residence at the University of Maine, Fort Kent.

Meridian Johnson is the author of *Kinesthesia* (New Rivers Press, 2010.) Her work has appeared in *AGNI*, *Bellevue Literary Review*, *BPJ*, *Gettysburg Review*, *North American Review*, *NPR's On Being*, and elsewhere. She lives in northern New Mexico and is, among other things, a roller derby mom.

Robin Fulton Macpherson is a Scottish poet and translator who has lived in Norway for many years. Marick Press (Michigan) recently brought out his *A Northern Habitat: Collected Poems 1960-2010*. He has translated work by Kjell Espmark, Harry Martinson, and Tomas Tranströmer, among others.

Al Maginnes has published seven full length collections of poetry, most recently *The Next Place* (Iris Press, 2017) and four chapbooks. New or forthcoming poems are in *North American Review*, *Spry*, and several others. He is music editor of the website Connotation Press: An Online Artifact.

Göran Malmqvist was born in 1924. He has 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.

Louise Marburg has been published in *The Louisville Review*, *Briar Cliff Review*, *Cold Mountain Review*, *The Lascaux Review Prize Anthology*, *Day One*, *The Carolina Quarterly*, *Folio*, and others. Her collection of short stories, *The Truth About Me* (WTAW Press) is forthcoming in September 2017.

Kyle McCord is the author of five books of poetry including National Poetry Series Finalist *Magpies in the Valley of Oleanders* (Trio House 2016). His work has been featured in *AGNI*, *Boston Review*, *Crazyhorse*, *The Gettysburg Review*, *Harvard Review*, and elsewhere.

Gary McDowell is the author of a collection of lyric essays, *Caesura: Essays* (Otis Books/Seismicity Editions, 2017), and five collections of poetry, including, most recently, *Mysteries in a World that Thinks There Are None* (Burnside Review Press, 2016). His work has appeared in journals such as *American Poetry Review*.

Christopher Miles is originally from southeast Minnesota. His work appears in *The Cincinnati Review*; *Salamander*; *Sugarhouse Review*; *War, Literature, and the Arts*; and *West Branch*. From 2001 to 2005 he served in the United States Navy. He lives in Fairbanks, Alaska.

John A. Nieves has poems forthcoming or recently published in journals such as: *Cincinnati Review*, *Pleiades*, *Alaska Quarterly Review*, *The Literary Review*, and *Carolina Quarterly*. He won the Indiana Review Poetry Contest and his first book, *Curio* (2014), won the Elixir Press Annual Poetry Award Judge's Prize.

Kyle Norwood is the winner of the 2014 Morton Marr Poetry Prize from *Southwest Review*. His poems have also recently appeared in *New Ohio Review*, *Birmingham Poetry Review*, *Carolina Quarterly*, *Devilfish Review*, *Innisfree Poetry Journal*, *The Lake* (U.K.), and the anthology *Poems for a Liminal Age*, among others.

Martin Ott has published a recent book titled *Spectrum* (C&R Press, 2016). He is the author of seven books and won the De Novo and Sandeen prizes for his first two poetry collections. His work has appeared in more than two hundred magazines and a dozen anthologies.

Eric Pankey is the author of many collections of poems. A new book, *AUGURY*, is forthcoming from Milkweed Editions in Fall 2017. He is the Heritage Chair in Writing at George Mason University.

Simon Perchik is an attorney whose poems have appeared in *Partisan Review*, *Forge*, *Poetry*, *Osiris*, *The New Yorker*, and elsewhere. His most recent collection is *The B Poems* (Poets Wear Prada, 2016). Information, free e-books, his essay titled "Magic, Illusion and Other Realities" are available at www.simonperchik.com.

Alan Robert Proctor has had his work appear in *Chautauqua*, *Crosstimbers*, *Kansas City Voices*, *I-70 Review*, and others. His memoir, *The Sweden File: Memoir of an American Expatriate* (Westphalia Press, 2015), co-authored with his late brother, Bruce Proctor, was named by the *Kansas City Star* as a 2015 “best read”.

Sandra Ramirez received a Notable Mention in *Best American Essays 2014* for her essay “Stray,” which was published in *Free State Review*. Her most recent work can be found at *Puerto del Sol* and LARB online. She’s currently at work on a collection of poems and a memoir about driving for Uber.

Dana Roeser is the author of *The Theme of Tonight’s Party Has Been Changed*, recipient of the 2013 Juniper Prize, as well as *Beautiful Motion* and *In the Truth Room*, both winners of the Morse Prize. Her recent work has appeared, or is forthcoming, in *Poetry* and *The Southern Review*, among others.

Eliza Rotterman has had poetry appear in *Volta*, *Quarterly West*, *Colorado Review*, and *Poetry International*, among others. She has received fellowships from the Vermont Studio Center and she was the 2016 recipient of the Snowbound Chapbook award from Tupelo Press. Currently she lives in Portland, Oregon.

Carrie Shippers has had poems appear in *Crab Orchard Review*, *Hayden’s Ferry Review*, *New England Review*, *North American Review*, and others. She is the author of *Ordinary Mourning* (ABZ, 2010), *Cause for Concern* (Able Muse, 2015), *Family Resemblances* (University of New Mexico, 2016), and two chapbooks.

Kathryn Smith has had poems nominated for Best American Poetry and the Pushcart Prize; they have also appeared or are forthcoming in *Mid-American Review*, *Bellingham Review*, *Southern Indiana Review*, and elsewhere. A mini-chapbook, *Tracing the New Stars*, was published in *Rock & Sling* in 2016.

Martin Stannard is an English poet and critic. A former Royal Literary Fund Writing Fellow at Nottingham Trent University, he has been living in China since 2005, where he teaches at a university in Zhuhai. His most recent collection is *Poems for the Young at Heart* (Leafe Press, UK, 2016).

Ingela Strandberg was born in southwestern Sweden. She has published three novels, one short story collection, a children’s book, and eleven collections of poetry in Sweden. In 2014, she was the recipient of The Bellman Prize, Sweden’s highest honor in poetry.

Tomas Tranströmer won the Nobel Prize in Literature in 2011. His books sell thousands of copies in Sweden, and his poetry has been translated into 60 languages. He is considered one of the most important Scandinavian writers since the Second World War.

Maryfrances Wagner has written several books, including *Salvatore's Daughter*, *Light Subtracts Itself*, *Red Silk* (winner of the Thorpe Menn Book Award for Literary Excellence), *Dioramas*, and *Pouf*. Her poems have appeared in *New Letters*, *Midwest Quarterly*, and others.

Marcus Wicker is the author of *Maybe the Saddest Thing*, which was selected by poet D.A. Powell for the National Poetry Series and was a finalist for an NAACP Image Award. His second book, *Silencer*, will be released in 2017. He is a recipient of the Pushcart Prize and fellowships from Ruth Lilly, Cave Canem, and others.

Don Zancanella has published a collection of stories titled *Western Electric* (University of Iowa Press), which won the John Simmons/Iowa Short Fiction Award. He has also had a story appear in the O. Henry Prize volume and has one forthcoming in *The Beloit Fiction Journal*.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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The four poems appearing in this issue by Robin Fulton Macpherson are reprints. These were mistakenly printed in our 49.2 issues as translations.

