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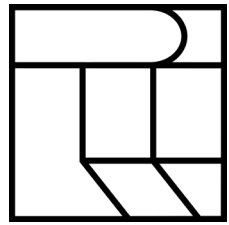

MARCELA SULAK

WEDDING GIFT

The print that began the ending of my marriage was so gorgeous, I'd forgotten how gorgeous it was in real life, laid out on the examination table, as the framer and I took measure of what lay before us—the paper itself and the textures, alive and breathing. The whale inside it shook a bit and swished, but it might have been the waves brushing against a stone, or it might not have been water at all, just strange birds in the negev against a blue and white sky about to blink off without the fanfare of sunset. Tears burst when my fingertips brushed it. The framer, also, cleared his throat upon sliding it from its canister and unfolding it across the table. He touched the ragged edges and caressed the signature--print #1 of 12, he whispered. Every time he touched it he asked permission, as if we were lovers—may I remove it from its box? May I spread it out? The framer is going to Monte Negro for a week because he likes nature, so he'll have it ready on Friday, Sept. 20. I imagine getting into bed tonight, the sheets and covers indeterminate colors of green, and I wonder if the dream will continue where it left off, the last time I touched it. Then I was swimming all night through the air/sand/water that was the page of the print, and while nothing in particular happened, it was the nothing particular that happens when you walk on a strange and beautiful landscape for the first time. Or the nothing particular that ends a marriage. Then every leaf and every water drop and every strange flower is a happening.

BRAD AARON MODLIN

IT'S BLUE

Today instead of walking to the creek, I unfold a chair in the front yard
because on my way out, the man upstairs, by which I mean my neighbor,
yelled, "Tornado warning." A *watch* means one has been sighted, and I want
to point out, isn't that always true in this state? Always true any place
in light of history? No patch of land is secure anymore, now that we're adults
who have known friends who used names, chomped ice on hot afternoons,
and then died. The tornado *warning* tells us conditions are right
even this time of year. Better unfold your summer close to your front door.
I text a friend, "The way to endure these months is sarcasm and whisky,"
but I'm out of whisky. And I fear the grocery store's germs. The sidewalk kids
racing their dolls in strollers—what do they know? And the little boy drinking
straight
from the blue garden hose, holding it up like training for a frat party:
What would he say of this afternoon in this year but "I'm thirsty?"
Even when the wind sucks the wide straw hat I wear (to protect from cancer)
and rolls it along the street, making me run up to boy's wire fence, he keeps
taking in the water and the vitamin D, shirtless and shoeless under a sky that's
giant and, for now, not green.

BRAD AARON MODLIN

PEPSI

Sometimes I look at my block and the only
beautiful object is a U-Haul truck. Days like that,
you are supposed to jog to alter your chemicals.
But the catch is those are precisely the days your
ribcage multiplies. It is now four dozen bones
made of Quikrete. Even in sadness, I, American,
think in brand names. I remain on the gray couch
listing them: *Xerox, Home Depot, Hanes, Kraft,*
Cheerios, Philadelphia (Cream Cheese). I am hungry
for what my cupboards do not hold.
Last night, Lim, hundreds of miles away, told me
all day he'd felt too sad to wake up. I said, "Let's
read the same short story and look forward
to discussing it." Sometimes we force ourselves
into the emotions others need. But I apologize,
I don't want to depress you with all this.
Every day—if I go outside—at least two
caterpillars land on me! They want me to know
wings and updrafts await, so hail
the sunny, sunshiney, sunlit sun.

PETER CONNERS

[HERE IS THE MAN...]

Here is the man you do not know. It is not your fault. He did not exist when you knew him and now that he does you will not know him any longer. One hand is applauding, the other made of dust. Don't you see, my children, there were days before your days? There were times of silent meditation and times of exultant jubilation and even as we wipe the spill we know the spill never existed, much less the milk, much less the thought of those, and then not even that. Let us return to a time before the plague. There were picnics and school plays and salad days and we hugged bodies to show we loved what they contained. What is the new language of our love? The old teachers flicker as our connections grow weak.

◆

PETER CONNERS

[AND WE WERE ALL FAMOUS]

And we were all famous. We performed sketches called “meetings” or “family reunions” or “it’s so good to see you” and we laughed at the strangeness of the plot. There were wardrobe decisions, special lighting, camera angles, guest stars who made jokes about not wearing pants. It was very funny. The script worked every single time. How we laughed. Oh, we got along famously -- in front of the cameras at least. Behind the scenes things were not so good. There was general concern that the production would need to shut down. There was rumbling and consternation. There were meltdowns, widespread malaise, copious technical difficulties. Addiction issues. Violence. There were demands that could never be met. Cast members felt that management had left the building. They were out to lunch. We were stars, yes, but where was the director of this Warholian tragicomedy? In front of cameras, eyes scanning the monitor, we waited for the next line; waited for the plot to reveal itself. We twitched inside ourselves, anxious for someone to help or appear to care about us at all.

◆

JONATHAN HOBRATSCH

LINES 1 - 10

1.

To be dead for the Ancient Egyptians
was to be more alive than alive. Corpses
young and old grazed the fields of Aalu
so that they would not die again.

2.

I wouldn't live to die again.

3.

Yahweh punishes Lucifer
by giving him his own kingdom.

The good angel Abaddon hovers eternally
in a bottomless pit, almost forgotten
and set aside like an old item
in a closet.

Who here is better off?

4.

Herodotus and Pindar like to tell people
about the priest Abaris, who flew invisible
on a magic arrow.

How could they tell?

5.

Under moonlight, ancient Wiccans
copy an antler dance.

6.

Allah would not name the Abdels,
who were so precious he had to
replace them to fill a void.

Why could he not stop any of them
from dying?

7.

Who was the last ruler who loved
to kill babies?

8.

Baby Abraham was thrown
into a fire, the Gherber's say,
but he slept all the same,
the fire having actually
been roses.

Well, what of the thorns?

9.

The Sicilian Acestus shot his arrow
forceful enough that it burned up
midflight, or so Virgil tells me. But
this is what I say to you, that
the Sicilian Atextus, texted
with such speed that his phone melted.

He did not sign up for warranty.

10.

The Talmud says Adam lasted
half a day in Eden. This means
he and Eve were only nudists
for just as long. This also means
God did not know his creations,
unless he intended to throw
them out. This also means
the first couple may not have seen
all of Eden.

What happened
to the animals of Eden?

JEFFREY LEVINE

ONLY THE TANGIBLE WORLD BURNS THE ROOF OF THE MOUTH

In three houses we live, we inhabit three houses,
we sleep, we dream, we stir the vindaloo,
and a white heat pierces through the beds,
with its four different petals at whose heart is a sword.

Between the three houses, silence is stretched
like piano wires, one in each octave.
We never speak of this silence. It is sacred.
We don't approach it. We pretend not to hear it.

Between the three houses, its nets are stretched.
Inside, so many wings, so many cries are caught.
We never speak of this.
Which doesn't stop silence from playing
a sacred music in us.

Without modesty without fear without limit
in tens of thousands of dreams, I've scoured
with curiosity the three foreign houses, I have easily
seen a thousand, I met you outside myself
in rooms where you glow as no one ever
manages to glow in reality, not even you.

Often we suffer most from sufferings
we've yet to encountered in this life.

And I've taken into my parenthetical arms
the human being in its entirety, including
women, lovers, desires, demons, there is no one
I haven't included in my parenthesis' arms,
and I myself have lived in this limitless space,
but who was I, going farther and wider than me,
myself passing among me.

I was the time when I am not, I am the night
that is the place of my living
without fear and without modesty, and without
ever saying it. Only the tangible world
has frightening us as its goal.

JEFFREY LEVINE

PERIHELION

Delicate mosaic work of revêtement and niche,
web-like arabesques of the upper walls, bold
almost Gothic sculpture of cedar architraves
and supporting corbels. The fretted panels of cedar,
bronze doors with their shield-like bosses,
honeycombings and ruffings of the gilded ceilings,
continuance of the life when the tiles were set
and the gold was new on the roofs and the beast
was not yet weary. And let's, you say, move
into a smaller room, one small enough to brush
the guitar with your fingers from here, where
strange men give incomprehensible orders,
and when the sound of hammers grows too loud,
we have only to pass through the silk market,
among the merchants still weaving their patterns,
the embroiderers, with their needles and thread.

CASEY PYCIOR

AND SOMETIMES COME TO REGRET

It isn't payback for the time Harry got a handjob from a stripper in Springfield for an extra ten bucks, nor for the time, outside Omaha, when he drove off with a hitchhiker's cell phone and purse while she was in the bathroom where he'd stopped for gas. It isn't for taking money to transport "a package" buried in feed for the cattle he was hauling in central Iowa, and it isn't for that time, outside a bar in Wichita, he watched a group of teenagers beat up a homeless guy. Nor is it for all the times in fights with Joanne that he'd attack, cutting at her insecurities about her body or her failing to go back to school in a way that he knew would bleed long after their fight; or any of the thousands of other sins and crimes he'd committed and sometimes come to regret.

No, he thinks, as he autopilots his rig north on I-35, his mind unspooling like a sprung measuring tape, it's for all the times he complained about, made fun of, or simply ignored—by changing the channel—those St. Jude's Hospital commercials. Because, for all the shit he'd done in his life, he'd never been punished, never had to pay penance of any kind. So this all has to be retribution for joking about all those bald kids on those commercials or bitching about Marlo Thomas and all her rich celebrity friends not kicking in more money so he wouldn't have to watch any more of them trying to guilt him into donating when all he wanted to do was watch some goddamn TV. He's convinced himself it has to be the reason because if it isn't some kind of cosmic punishment, some direct rebuke from God, then it's random shit-luck chance, and if that's the case, he's not sure how much longer he can take part in the whole human experiment.

The bruises finally sent them to the doctor. The morning of Trevor's birthday (could it only have been a week ago?), Harry had lightly roughhoused with him, though, since Trevor never fought back enough to make it fun, it wasn't something they often did. But Harry wrestled him to the living room floor and play-spanked him five times for his birthday, Trevor giggling the entire time.

His birthday should have been a good day: Harry had reworked his schedule so the one week of every month where he drove in town coincided with Trevor's birthday, and they'd planned a picnic at the park, then bowling, followed by dinner at Chuckie Cheese, and then home for presents and cake. Used to be Harry's weeks home were sex-filled romps with Joanne: multiple times a day, every day. It got to where Harry was

sore and sexed-out before the end of the week. Increasingly, though, it's as if the petty slights and grievances between them that they've been bottling up for years build pressure while he's gone, and when he gets home, he and Joanne have blowouts that make Harry wish he were back on the road.

Trevor's birthday, however, brought something out in them and they were getting along and had been loving to one another that morning, but at the picnic Trevor was clearly tired and, Harry thought, out of sorts. He chalked it up to the kid being overly excited for his birthday; turning five was a big deal. As the day wore on, Trevor never really rebounded although it was clear he was trying for the sake of their plans. Looking back, Harry should've known something was wrong, what with the kid always seeming weak and sickly and not showing any interest in learning to ride the training bike they'd bought him, or kicking or throwing a ball or even exploring the woods behind the house. But when he only saw Trevor one week a month, it was tough. Harry just thought the boy wasn't much for physical activity or the outdoors, and he didn't want to ruin the little time they had together, so he didn't push Trevor. When Harry did get Trevor outside and he got tired or winded, unfair or not, Harry mentally blamed Joanne for babying the boy too much while he was gone because it was easier than facing his guilt for missing so much of Trevor's life.

Late afternoon, after having skipped bowling and pizza and gone straight home for cake and presents, while Joanne cleaned up, Harry helped Trevor get ready for his bath. When Trevor took off his pants, Harry saw his son's backside and upper legs were so dark and mottled it looked as if Harry had taken a baseball bat to him. He called for Joanne, and when she came into the bathroom she gasped. "I barely touched him, I—" he said. "You were right there. I was just—we were playing, I swear."

Joanne gave him a short nod, pushed past him, and went to Trevor. She asked him if his bottom hurt, and he frowned and shook his head. When he looked over his shoulder and saw how bruised he was, it scared him and he started to cry.

Several doctors' appointments and a battery of tests later, all the time he and Joanne convincing themselves it was something as relatively minor as anemia, and Joanne called this morning—twenty minutes ago, actually, just after he left the feedlot with a load of hogs. He could hear

the fear in her voice when she told him Trevor has Childhood Leukemia and they recommended aggressive chemotherapy. She explained what the doctor said about treatments and survival rates, but Harry couldn't hear her over the voice screaming in his head, *How could you not know something was wrong with your son?*

"Harry? Are you there?" Joanne asked. "Harry? What kind of mother am I? How could I not—" Her voice broke and she sobbed, but Harry couldn't hear it over his own.

****

The pain in Harry's side—like a blunt knife buried to the hilt up under his ribs—is making it hard for him to breathe, and when he attempts a deep breath, he's choked by the tears and mucus in his throat. Somehow, as if by reflex, he manages his exit and merges onto I-635 without running anyone off the highway. Near the top of the hill is a Go Chicken Go, a local fast food joint he'd always wanted to take Trevor but for no good reason ever had. It inevitably makes him think what else he might never get to do with Trevor: take him to Arrowhead for a Chiefs game, or Worlds of Fun, or…. He's struck with the sudden realization that there are more things he wants to do with Trevor than things he's actually done.

As he coasts down the long hill, he feels like he's broken loose, and he can't imagine ever not feeling this way again. He's afraid to let go of the steering wheel though his forearms are cramping. Crossing over the BNSF railyard at the bottom of the hill, so many tracks like sutures holding the land together, he merges into the right lane without checking his mirrors. Through the windshield all he sees is an image of his little boy in some hospital bed, tubes connecting him to machines that will poison the very blood that's poisoning him.

He doesn't remember navigating the wide cloverleaf or even coming to the stoplight on K-32, a busy QuikTrip on his right, McDonald's on his left. The light turns green, but he flubs the launch and his rig lurches forward and dies. The hogs make some noise behind him, and he remembers, with a kind of jolt, that he's hauling them to the abattoir, not even a half-mile away now. He'd always liked that word: abattoir. Such a fancy word for slaughterhouse. Though he likes the word, it never felt right coming out of his mouth. As he white-knuckles the steering wheel, guilt and rage and fear and grief spiraling inside of him, he says the word out loud, over and over through the snot and the tears:

abattoir, abattoir, abattoir, abattoir, abattoir, until it sounds like some kind of sacred mantra.

Horns are blaring now, or Harry is just noticing them. He isn't sure how long he's been sitting at the light. His body starts to shudder, and when he lets go of the steering wheel, he can't stop his hands from shaking. He tries to restart his rig, but his mind and body won't cooperate, as if the combination of actions is too much. For a fleeting moment he thinks, *I'm fucking losing it*, but just as quick it's gone.

He thinks of the hogs, a hundred and sixty or so, packed in the trailer; he can't recall the exact number he signed for at the feedlot though it was, according to the clock on his dashboard, not even an hour ago. Time, it seems to Harry, like everything else, has come unmoored.

He grips the door handle like a lifeline and pulls. The door swings open and before he can think beyond willing his body's next move, he is climbing out of the cab of his truck. When his boots hit the pavement he wavers slightly but keeps his body moving toward the back of the trailer. More horns honk and several cars swerve around him. At the rear, he unhooks the pins and lowers the ramp. A car—a sporty looking red number—pulls up behind, and the driver tries to change lanes, but the light has turned red again and the left lane is backed up, so the car is stuck, angled behind Harry's rig. The hogs stir as Harry climbs the ramp, the stench of shit thick in the air. He looks at the fuzzy pink and peach-colored rumps and heads and just like before, he doesn't hesitate. One boot on the ledge, clinging to the outside, he opens the pen. The 300-pound hogs jostle and squeal and force their way through the gate and down the ramp, their hooves clattering on the aluminum deck and ramp as they spill onto the road.

Using the vent holes in the side of the trailer, Harry climbs to the top and sits with his legs dangling off the side. The trailer rocks slightly beneath him as the hogs scramble down the ramp. Ignoring the horns honking and the shouts from the people who've gotten out of their cars and the cell phone cameras pointed at him, he takes a deep breath, sniffs, clears out the mucus, and hocks it out on the ground below. He doesn't feel good, or even better than he did, but his shaking has stopped. Nordan Meats is not even a half-mile away, so it won't take long for the folks there to hear. From atop the trailer he watches the hogs stream out in two and threes, veining their way through the stopped traffic like tributaries of a large river.

GILLIAN CUMMINGS

TODAY I AM A CLOUD

The winds that move, move through me,
all so cold and colder, and even the winds

do not know. Even in a sky of bank
upon bank of misty shudder and drift, even

moving across the vast seas that move
over the vaster earth. It could have been

a glory, to be so free. It could have been
a death and a dying of all reason. I am getting

old. I am old enough to be tired of always
carrying the rain. And if I weep, I promise

I'll be quiet so to not disturb you. How
you will not hear me, dear creatures of earth,

as I sleep in the skies above you, penitent,
begging to come back so I can once again

walk among you with a coat over my shoulders,
so I can hide my rain in my coat and pretend.

TRUDY LEWIS

LIKE BUTTER

Kay didn't know where the cab driver was taking her—across the gray river, up a steep incline with house after red-roofed house piled on top of each other, through a twisted path of narrow streets His accent was thick as clotted cream, and, when questioned, he only began to sing. The Airbnb hostess had said the place was just under the Shandon Bells, down the street from a sweet shop. But even though Kay had looked the address up on Google Earth, she wasn't confident she could find it. When she planned the trip, she'd assumed her husband would be with her, staying in Cork for a few days then driving out to the Beara Peninsula where her former classmate was getting married. She'd thought she would be surrounded by friends, comfort, structure, activity. But Lucinda cancelled the wedding, Kay's husband begged off, and now she was left to navigate the situation on her own. Of course, she could have stayed home. Any sane person would just save herself the money. But after months of anticipation, Kay couldn't bear to lose the brightest spot on her calendar—ten days of precious blank space, a glistening expanse of white like an extended snow day in the middle of June. Besides, it was a good time to get away from her disgruntled family and her job as the principal of an under-funded elementary school. It was a good year to leave the country.

She recognized St. Anne's with the golden fish atop its steeple. She saw a thrift shop with school and work uniforms in the window, an African grocery store, a flower shop and a vape café. The cab turned up what appeared to be a steep driveway and into a cobblestone clearing, with cars parked every which way in the street. This must be the parking lot, such as it was, for the Firkin Crane, the small oval auditorium that dominated the square. The driver jerked to a halt and pulled up on the emergency break.

"Are we there?"

Again, she could not comprehend his reply, somewhere between song and speech. But he got out of the cab and motioned for her to stay.

She looked out the window, identifying the sweet shop painted with striped lozenges and candy canes. Even on vacation, it seemed, she was fated to be surrounded by children. Across the street, a man in a gold coat stood next to a placard for the Butter Museum, where, according to her Fodor's, you could follow the historical development of the Butter Market in Cork.

She opened her flat practical purse and pulled out two twenty Euro notes she'd saved the money from her last trip abroad—a tour of Paris with a group of educators. A few years before that, she'd accompanied her husband Aaron to a neuroscience convention in Berlin. But, in both cases, her schedule was strictly regulated and she'd had to make few decisions on her own.

How much should she tip? She hated to be an ugly American. If Aaron were here, he would know. He loved to take charge of these situations, chatting up the cab driver, establishing his credentials as a proletarian, asking about the political climate and the local sports. As soon as he left their front door, his dour personality transformed, like blood hitting oxygen, into something hearty as red meat.

The driver returned, a look of triumph on his face.

And so she comforted herself by over-tipping—ten euros on a thirty-euro fare. The driver seemed surprised and asked if she was sure. She understood that much from his worried expression. Was he actually concerned for her? Would that ever happen in the States, where every interaction was an opportunity to score? He opened the car door and she stepped onto the cobblestone, wobbling on her low heels. She heard the bells from above--something neither religious nor Irish—Edelweiss?—very simple, as if sketched out on a child's xylophone. She smelled the burnt sugar from the sweet shop's open door. And then the cab driver carried her suitcase down an alleyway too narrow for a car.

She wouldn't call them houses, really, just five doors on each side of the alleyway, some of them with galoshes or plastic garbage bags propped up against the wall. The last door on the left stood open, a large man squeezed into its frame, like a figure trying to escape a painting. He was perhaps in his late thirties, a decade younger than Kay, with fierce mobile features and tawny hair that stood up in separate tufts on his head.

"Hiya, Mrs. Lawrence. Gerald Costello here, Airbnb host at your pleasure." He took her bag from the cab driver, lifting it in one hand, then looked down the alley with an inquisitive stare. "Mr. Lawrence on his way?"

Kay found that she had no trouble understanding him, though his words slid into one another like greasy eggs on a plate.

"Dr. Lawrence couldn't make it," Kay said, suddenly self-conscious about her decision to travel alone.

"Know all about that. Married twelve years to a woman with sticky feet. Claire is inevitably, eternally detained. So she sent me along to do the honors."

He led her through an entryway with a stained glass door, then into the house proper. It was the narrowest living space she had ever seen, the rooms arranged head to foot like compartments in a train car: sitting room, dining room, kitchen. At the back there was a courtyard of maybe six by six feet. Just as well she hadn't brought Aaron. She couldn't imagine how they would be able to avoid one another in such close quarters.

"So as you can see, very compact, very complete," he said, gesturing so broadly that he knocked into a lampshade and had to resettle it, like a man readjusting a lady's skirt. "This used to be the old butter market. After the drovers unloaded their carts, they'd bed their oxen down here where we're standing then go up top to sleep." He jerked his thumb toward the ceiling and jiggled it around for extra emphasis.

So she had to use her savings to leave home and stay in a glorified stable. And yet, there was something appealing about the small space. That must be the selling point of those tiny houses that everyone was talking about. Kay was tired of her own house, that was for certain. Tired of her children's rooms, which swarmed with the detritus of adolescence. Tired of Aaron's study, which accumulated more clutter the less he accomplished. It would be sweet to spend some time in a space where she could take in everything with a single glance.

She went to the kitchen, a tiled yellow box nearly as small as a shower, opened the cupboards and looked in the drawers. Mugs, plates, a saucepan, an English teakettle, and a coffee press. That should do for her needs.

Meanwhile, the host began to whistle. There was no room for him to follow her into the kitchen, of course, so he had to think of something to do. Even though she'd just met him, she could already feel his nervous energy. Poor Claire, she probably had to stay home just to retain a few rags of solitude.

When Kay came out again, he presented her with a map: pubs, corner store, laundry. What else could she want? Stories, of course. Plenty of stories. The local plumber who'd used his wrench to stop a robbery. The priest's assault on the sweet shop. Gerald himself, an atheist, trapped on a ferry full of nuns. Charming as he was, she felt the words crowd against her, leaving no room for thought.

But now that he'd warmed up, he wanted to discuss politics. How, he asked, had the Americans ever elected that gob shite president? In Cork, they'd never stand for it. This was the rebel city, after all.

Kay nodded weakly; even as an optimist— by both nature and profession- she could not think of any way of justifying her fellow citizens. Best to simply let the rest of the world have its say.

"Now don't be telling the wife that I asked. I'm not meant to discuss religion or politics with the guests."

"I don't mind."

"Sure you don't. Not a broad-minded, well-adjusted sort like you. But Claire thinks the jabber makes folks nervous."

Was he flirting with her? Kay had been married so long, she couldn't tell. But there was something illicit in the invitation to break the hostess' rules.

"Well, I'm not offended. But I am falling off my feet from jet lag. I think I need to get some sleep."

"Sure, and if you need anything, I'm only a ring away."

She climbed the stairs with her suitcase and collapsed onto the low-lying bed. From here, she could look out the window see the chimneys and rooftops, red clay vivid against the moody sky. She felt as tired as a drover after the rush of preparation and the sleep deprivation of the flight. Twelve o'clock in Indiana. She should call home, just to assure them that she'd made it, but not a one of her three night owls answered their cell phone. Not Ben, scrolling through his alt-right websites. Not Becca, probably listening to the Hamilton soundtrack, caught up in fantasies of the stage and screen. Not her husband, who could let his messages pile up for days.

So much for being missed. She got up and pulled her clothes off, draping them over a chair. She pulled the wedding invitation out of her bag. The swans on the cover now looked bedraggled, as if they too were jetlagged from the transatlantic flight. She lifted the bedspread and delved into the white sheets with their foreign smell of lavender laundry detergent. She was too tired to put on pajamas. So she collapsed right there in her bra and underpants, relishing the cool texture of the sheets on her bare skin. And while she slept, she dreamt of the wedding. Only in this version, she was the bride, walking out into the wild Atlantic and dropping her bouquet into the bay.

When she woke, it was dark, and she roamed around the house looking at the placards Claire had placed on every surface: Pull cord before taking a shower. Keep window closed. Unplug the kettle when not in use. Even if the hostess wasn't present, she certainly made herself felt. Still, it was a relief, to acquiesce to another woman's domestic arrangements instead of having to maintain her own. Kay forced herself to get dressed and walk to one of the pubs. It had rained while she slept and the dark gray cobblestones felt slippery under her feet. She glided over one and missed a step, stumbled, then corrected her gait with an awkward skip. After that, she moved more slowly, conscious that there would be no one to pick her up if she fell. Was it terror or relief she felt, knowing that she was completely on her own? A bit of both, she supposed. She'd been in harness for so long that she didn't know who she might be outside the bounds of family and professions. A puff of air? A bar of music? A long-forgotten remainder of desire? Maybe there was nothing left at all. And yet, walking along in the warm evening, she felt exceptionally alive, aware of the wind on her skin, the damp in her hair, the smells of sour milk and Indian food. Music emanated from one of her neighbors' windows and a single man with a crown of spikes like the Statue of

Liberty passed into view. She looked out a break in the alleyway and saw the moon, hanging there like a horn of plenty spilling stars into the night. The cab driver had taken her up a steep hill; now she descended it and came back down to the River Lee, its current engraved in silver strokes on the gray water.

She had not parted from her husband on good terms. Aaron didn't understand why she would want to make the trip without him. Ever since the presidential election, he'd succumbed to the depression he experienced as a young man, sleeping late, neglecting his job and his hygiene, obsessing about the news. In a way, she understood. For people like them, discipline was everything. You disciplined yourself to keep a schedule, to drive the kids to school, to deal with unpleasant situations at work, to exercise your body and clean the house, then to repeat the same procedures over and over, though you knew where they would end. But the new era was all about disruption and chaos. How could they accept the leadership of to an individual with no attention span, no follow-through, and no moral code? Maybe now was the time to break ranks. Her friend Lucinda already had. She was a federal judge in the 4th District Court of Appeals and in May, it had ruled against the President's travel ban, with Lucinda herself delivering the majority opinion. There'd been an outpouring of praise and a barrage of blame, including a nasty tweet from Torque himself, impugning the judge's anatomy. If Lucinda could do that, suffering public outrage and social media martyrdom on the very cusp of her wedding, couldn't Kay veer a little from her appointed course?

She crossed the street, passed by a parking garage, and entered an entertainment district, where cars were parked bumper to bumper and people stood smoking in the street. She had her pick of pubs, apparently, but she ducked into the first one, where she was immediately enveloped in music, language, smells of frying fish and incense. Every inch of wall was covered with posters, and Christmas lights adorned the ceiling, while candles lined the bar. As she moved toward an empty seat she heard at least three languages: Spanish, German, Italian. The music must be live, at least according to the sign on the door, but she couldn't see the musicians. Only when she settled on a barstool did she realize that the sound was coming from above, streaming down on the patrons like a gentle rain. The female voice poured forth over the fiddle until it seemed inhuman as an instrument, while the strings resonated with the awareness of a sentient being. Even though the place was crowded, the bartender noticed Kay right away, nodding in greeting. Remembering what Gerald had said, she asked for a Rebel Red, brewed right here in Cork.

The first sip of beer surprised her with its spicy tang. She tried again, getting acquainted with the flavor, letting it penetrate the mouthwash on her tongue. Normally, she was a wine drinker. But she could hardly order wine in a pub. She felt hot in the crowded space and stood up to shed her outer shirt, then arrange it on the barstool beneath her. In the process, she glanced down at her neatly packed cleavage in a modest V-neck, the silver necklace with its icicle charms. She watched the slender bartender going through his athletic performance, pouring a Guinness, depressing another tap, accepting cash, delivering a witticism, asking a question, then returning to top off the Guinness with an expert hand. In between patrons, he drank from a ceramic mug and the smell of his coffee filled her with a promise of possibility— something more intoxicating than liquor.

Then she felt the air stir, raising the hairs on her forearm. A man slipped onto the barstool next to her. The skirt of his suit jacket touched her in passing and she got a nose full of his cologne, something so strong that the citrus burned her nostrils.

"What do you know," he said. "Best seat in the house."

Then he touched her elbow, as if congratulating her on a victory. Kay felt her body contract, ceding the space to him. Then she made herself large again, reclaiming her territory.

He ordered a gin and tonic and immediately nipped the olive off its plastic spear. But he didn't seem to be in any hurry to begin drinking. He just pricked at his cuticles with the bar straw. He was a fairly young man, she saw, though in the dim lighting she couldn't tell if he was closer to thirty or forty. His upper lip was divided with a sharp divot and his long nose ended in an aggressive snub. The effect, though irregular, was not unattractive, and she wondered why he would choose to sit next to an older woman. Perhaps it was merely a matter of obtaining a desirable place at the bar.

"I'm in town for business. You?" The accent was definitely American, subtly East Coast, reminding her of a classmate from Cather College, someone who had pursued her briefly before discovering that she lacked the sophistication of his high school peers.

"Just traveling," she said, pushing the Rebel Red around on the bar.

"Alone?"

For a moment, she wondered whether it was wise to divulge her status. Then she realized she was being paranoid. " Yes, alone. Actually, I flew in for a friend's wedding. But she cancelled at the last minute and so here I am."

"Bad luck,' he said. "I've been engaged twice, myself. But I never got to the point of pulling the trigger. You?"

In response, Kay lifted her hand and pointed at her wedding ring, which appeared liquid as honey in the candlelight. She remembered having it cut off her hand three years before when her ring finger became infected. It didn't actually hurt, but the process was violent, like having a bit of her body removed. Oddly, she had rarely felt so close to Aaron, who sat next to her holding her left hand and singing "Meet the Elements" throughout the process.

"Twenty-five years of hard labor."

The man groaned. "So you're in it for the long pull."

"You could say that. My husband is high-maintenance. I never have the luxury to stop and think about the pros and cons."

Less than twenty-four hours out of the country and she was already dishing on her spouse.

"Well, tell me about the guy. Rich, poor? Tall, short? Bottom, top?"

Kay touched her lip to her glass and reconsidered. "I'd rather not talk about it. On vacation, you know."

"Then tell me about your friend—the one that bailed. What was her beef?"

He seemed awfully curious. When was the last time she'd talked to a man who asked her questions rather than expounding at length about himself? "What about you?" she said. "What's your name? What's your story?"

"You can call me Cam."

"Cam, I'm Kay."

"Good to meet you Kay,' he said, picking up her hand and squeezing the pad of her palm for emphasis. "I'm going out on a limb here, but I'd say you are a woman who could use some recreational release."

Kay took another sip, hesitating. "What do you mean?" she said.

"I'm thinking, maybe you'd like to have lunch tomorrow. My dime."

Why not? She certainly didn't have any other plans. And lunch was a neutral meal in full daylight, sober and well defined. Why should she be denied even this slightest of human interactions? So she agreed quickly, before she had time to think.

She stumbled home as if drunk, although she had only imbibed the one pint. Once she left the pub, the street was deserted, and the wind made a strange music against the sharp corners of the buildings. Did she look like the type of woman who was seeking sexual healing? The thought mortified her. And yet, she was secretly thrilled to experience something out of the ordinary, an expression of interest, no matter how casual.

The next morning, she woke up early, surprised by the energy coursing through her calves. She did not check her emails. She did not scour the *Washington Post* or the *New York Times* for news of her benighted country. Instead, she looked in the tiny refrigerator to find staples: milk, butter, jam. She made herself toast and coffee, then sat in the tiny courtyard planning her day. Ever since turning forty, she'd been observing a loosely defined Mediterranean diet, with olive oil as the only fat. She hadn't tasted butter for years. But since she was staying in the butter market, she made an exception. The bar of Kerry Gold gave under her knife and when she tasted it, she remembered her childhood, her grandmother's unsalted butter in a Melmac bowl. At the time, she'd been ignorant enough to prefer margarine. But her mother said she was lucky, to eat butter produced by her family's own cows. Three generations, that was all it took, from farm to fast food to foodie. Now, the most basic substance of her Midwestern childhood had become exotic, a delicacy she had to go to a foreign country to experience. Like butter. The phrase rose up in her mind. Something easy, irresistible, indulgent. How long since she had experienced that? She took another bite of toast and felt the fat on her lips, like some delicious cosmetic. She looked up at the sky, wondering whether the gray clouds would yield rain or only moisture. The environment was so lush that a small tree grew from the courtyard wall, rooted in nothing more substantial than a patch of green slime.

Kay gathered her dishes and washed them, with great satisfaction, in the tiny sink. She'd missed out on the college backpacking experience, due to an untimely dip in her parents' fortunes. She'd never known the camaraderie that her peers described, the friendships formed in hostels, the joy of encountering familiar faces in a strange city, the rush of oxytocin when you were greeted, like a long-lost relative, into the home of a person you'd just met. Even Aaron had studied in London for a semester. But Kay had completely skipped over this stage of development. And now, she feared, it was too late. Had she allowed her life to coalesce too quickly, before sampling all the possibilities? Had she lost the ability to absorb experience, to melt and meld?

There was a knock on the door and Gerald emerged like an Orc in the entryway of a hobbit hole, holding a tool kit and claiming he was there to grout out the kitchen sink.

"I didn't notice any problems," Kay said.

"Trust me, you will if I don't intervene and work my magic. We used to live here, you know, before we got our place in the country. So I know all the quirks. Sometimes I even miss the old butter barn."

He moved into the kitchen, but kept speaking to her, speaking and whistling and banging the pipes. What could she do but pace the sitting room, picking up the various maps and brochures?

"But Claire said we couldn't manage in the long run, two big people in such a wee space. Especially if we wanted to start a family. Then we moved out to the country— it's been almost five years now— and still no kids. Another topic I'm not supposed to talk about. So many of them, aren't there? Sex, religion, money, politics. What are people supposed to gob about, I wonder, to pass the time of day?"

Even if you left your own husband, it seemed, you would wind up dealing with someone else's. And yet she was drawn to Gerald's open nature, his child-like optimism, and his prickly views.

"You see, it's not as if I'm completely opposed to religion," he said. "As long as people keep it to themselves. Religion is like a penis. It's alright to have one as long as you don't bring it out in public or show it to young kids."

This seemed like the right moment to excuse herself and get dressed for her excursion. She threw on a light jacket and a good pair of shoes, then stowed her compact umbrella in her purse. The Shandon Bells chimed out *Frere Jacques* as she walked down to the Lee and crossed the bridge. And there, swimming in formation, were seven swans, three black and four white. They formed a loose group, like a wedding party, trailing down the center of the river. Why an odd number, since swans famously mated for life? Was one of them widowed? Were some of them juveniles? She didn't know enough to tell. But she stopped, right at the center of the bridge, to observe their passage. Their heads dipped, their wings fluttered, and she felt her heart stretch and ache. She moved to the other side of the bridge to see them emerge from the shadow of the structure, subtly shifting their alignment, so that the lead swan was now neck and neck with another member of the group. And yet, there was no sense of competition—just this loose coalition of individuals bobbing along companionably. She felt suddenly bereft, watching them move away, and imagined following their progress, bridge by bridge, as they moved down the river. How odd, to see these mythical creatures sailing along, oblivious to industrial and digital revolutions, through the urban scene.

The center of town swelled with the smells of sweets and the strains of street musicians and she lingered at the coffee shop, listening to two women compare the ridiculous food preferences of their boyfriends. When she returned with a takeout cup, she saw the swans again. Or rather, a lone swan making its leisurely way down the river. It dipped its beak down into the water, tipping over to expose its underside. It gripped something, then let the object float away. When she looked closer, she saw that it was a half eaten apple, red and white, bobbing along in the gray water. The swan couldn't quite hold onto it, but wouldn't let go either. So they floated along together, bird and fruit, meeting and

parting with the motion of the current. Was the swan actually trying to eat the apple? Or just playing with it like a toy? The bird dipped down again, nosing the apple along. Kay watched in fascination as pedestrian after pedestrian passed her on the bridge and the coffee cooled in her hands.

She'd agreed to meet Cam at a brewery, the producer of the famous Rebel Red. The establishment stood facing the Lee, and you entered through a long brick courtyard filled with wooden benches. Inside, the gleaming beer vats were visible through a glass window. Kay stood staring at them, as if the sight alone would give her courage. Then she passed into the dining area, a kind of beer garden with wooden tables and a high transparent ceiling that let in light like a greenhouse. Planters hung suspended from the beams, trailing colorful blooms, and large groups of young people sat together at picnic tables, bobbing up and down in their dark clothing. They must be students from Cork University, she thought. though they behaved more like the pupils at her elementary school.

At home, she would feel conspicuous at a place like this, where she might encounter her students or their parents, Aaron's colleagues, or the kids' coaches. But here, she felt expansive as the room itself, freed from her small reality and released into the larger world.

Would she even recognize Cam from the night before? But she saw him immediately, sitting at a table fashioned from a beer barrel, a space barely big enough for two people. He stood and she moved toward him, noticing the well-tailored suit and red tie. How did Americans greet one another in Europe? She grew so flustered that she held out her umbrella instead of her hand, giving him the opportunity to move in and embrace her. Again, she smelled the strong cologne and felt a mixture of queasiness and excitement.

For here she was, her bare self, without social context or identifying markers, making contact with another being. The effect was more erotic than actual nudity and she felt the outline of her body so clearly that it seemed to be painted in iodine.

Across the table, Cam adjusted the silverware with an anticipatory gesture and she noticed the hands: the large knuckles, the blunt fingers, the blonde hairs over his wrist.

She hadn't intended to drink, but how could she resist sampling another Rebel Red in the place of its manufacture? Cam ordered one as well, though when the drink arrived sweating in its glass, he pushed it aside and reached for his water. Kay rarely drank at lunch, but she was on vacation, after all. And the Rebel Red suited her—its fizzy resistance and its earthy core.

Cam wandered from subject to subject; the exchange rate on the Euro, the travails of Brexit, the political situation in the States. He did not reveal his own views, but walked a tightrope over the issues: regulation, immigration, abortion, and states' rights.

"So tell me about you," she said. "How did you wind up breaking all those engagements?"

By now, their food had arrived and he was in the midst of cutting into a plank of fried fish. "Just lucky, I guess. I'm more appealing as an appetizer than a main course. What about your friend? Why did she break things off with her fiancé?"

Again, back to Lucinda. "She was never really interested in marriage. Not when I knew her, at least. And now, who knows? Maybe it was more of a political arrangement and the deal fell through. Or maybe she found out something about the guy—something that pissed her off. She always did have a bad temper."

He paused, his knife and fork crossed over his half-decimated fish. His eyebrows lifted and his forehead wrinkled, revealing the pattern of his thought. "Do you think it had anything to do with her ruling against the travel ban?" he asked.

Kay missed her mouth and dropped a carrot to the floor. Could she be drunk already, after half a pint of beer? How could he know that about Lucinda? Had she even mentioned the bride's identity?

"Don't be startled, Kay. I'm here to help. I represent a friendly entity, one that would like to be of assistance to your friend."

So that was why he sought her out at the bar. And she was foolish enough to think that he was actually attracted to her—either as a woman or simply a pleasant drinking companion. But how had be known?

"You realize, I'm sure, the sophistication of the new tracking devices. You weren't difficult to trace."

Kay still could not summon the mental fortitude to speak. She took another sip of beer—as if that would help. She looked around at the beer garden, where a waiter was picking up glasses, arranging them in an impossibly long stack that stretched from below his waist to well past his shoulder.

"I don't understand. Who are you? What entity are we talking about?"

He pushed aside his beer glass, still full, and leaned toward her, so that she saw filaments of red in his brown eyebrows. "I'm sure you understand the need for secrecy. Even here, we're under continual surveillance."

"I'm listening."

"When Judge Meyers delivered that opinion, there was considerable outrage. The flack on the news programs. The feeding frenzy on social media. Even the President called her out with a tweet."

"I remember."

"And at that time, she was scheduled to get married within a couple of months."

There was a pause, and Kay felt compelled to fill it. But something told her to remain silent instead.

"We believe she was threatened. That she had reason to anticipate an act of violence at the wedding."

"So she was actually protecting her guests by cancelling." And Kay, poor stupid Kay, had trailed along anyway.

"That's our working hypothesis. Does it make sense to you?"

"I haven't even seen Lucinda for a couple of years. And we haven't been close since college. I really have no idea." But then she remembered the measured words of the email. She was suddenly aware of her position in the restaurant, her body in the chair, her proximity to the door. Why should she trust this person, who'd already lied to her and who refused to give any information about his own identity?

"Kay Lawrence," he said, in a mechanical voice. "White female of English and Welsh descent, 46 years old. Graduate of Cather College. Currently employed as a principal at Calvin Elementary. Married to one Aaron Lawrence, a professor of psychology at the University of Missouri." Here he looked up, as if improvising on a score. "I believe your husband objects to the travel ban as well. We have a record of several calls he made to Homeland Security when a visiting scholar was detained at the airport. Some language, on that one. Must be a real character."

His voice crackled, and she heard the static in his delivery, the meeting of the official and unofficial roles.

"I could go on, but you're a smart lady. I'm sure you're beginning to appreciate the depth of my knowledge base."

"What do you want from me?" she said.

He leaned toward her, his nose growing more prominent and his lip curled back to reveal overly corrected teeth. She felt behind her for her purse, and just as she located its strap, she felt a pressure on her leg. His fingers pushing up under the cloth of her Capri pants to grasp the back of her knee.

"Kay, I'm sure you will be connecting with Judge Meyer at some point. And when you do, I'd like you to deliver a message. You see, she's been out of contact since cancelling the wedding. Of course, I could email or text. But in this age of hyper surveillance, the only truly safe delivery system is the human brain."

Kay's mind billowed over with speculations. If only he would take his hand off her leg. Then she could begin to formulate a response.

"Tell Lucinda we're waiting to hear from her. I'm staying at the Garnish House, if she wants to get in touch." He withdrew his hand and she pushed her chair away from the table, with a loud screech.

"Oh, and it looks like I have another appointment. So maybe you'd like to finish my beer. I see that you've made excellent progress with yours."

He dropped thirty euros on the table, then stood and emptied the contents of his glass into hers. It was a gesture too intimate for anyone but a spouse or romantic partner and Kay felt the Rebel Red turning to mash in her mouth.

"Cheers," he said, pressing his hand to his tie and exiting the beer garden with a long and confident stride.

She sat there at the table for another fifteen minutes, just trying to regain her composure. Now she felt grateful for the students who moved past her table shouting and jostling beers. Her pulse beat behind her knee, where Cam had gripped her and her head shimmered with a migraine aura. What could she do? It was still too early to phone home, and even if she did, she didn't see how Aaron could help her. Should she contact the police? The embassy? But what would she tell them? That some stranger had shared conspiracy theories with her and then squeezed her knee? She pulled her phone out of her purse and disabled the location finder. Was that how she'd been tracked? She couldn't stand the thought of going back to the Airbnb, where she might be followed or forced into another conversation with her host. So she set off in the other direction, looking for the swans.

They weren't there, at their usual spot by the bridge, so she walked across the Lee and into the shopping district with its smells of coffee and sugar, past a black man in a dashiki playing a flute for tips, then onto Grand Parade. Was anyone following her? She moved from one side of the street to the other to evade detection, then crossed back again, for good measure. The Lee curved around Cork, creating an island in its center, and by the time she reached the second crossing, she had become pure motion. There was the Monument to Independence—the identifying marker of the Rebel City. And just beyond that, a footbridge. She crossed over, gazing up at Saint Fin Barre's Cathedral in the distance. Then she seated herself on a bench facing the water. Nothing yet. She stared as a woman in a hijab and a leopard skin skirt walked by, talking in an angry voice on her cell phone. She let her gaze linger on a child, no more than five or six, who trailed after his grandfather, carrying a cone of chips. She pulled in her feet in to accommodate a biker, who trundled

past with a violin case in his basket. Even though she longed for solitude, she felt safer in a crowd.

After ten minutes or so, a swan finally came into view. A lone swan. Lost? Widowed? Bereft? Or just seeking food? Kay resisted the impulse to go down to the water and feed the poor bird with the crumbled scone in her purse. Instead, she just waited, becoming as still as the bench on which she sat. And, sure enough, the swan came to her, positioning itself right in front of her resting place. It lifted one wing and snaked its long neck underneath, so that the shapely head was shaded by a bower of feathers. It ran its beak down beneath its torso, turning upside down to pick at its breast. It leaned back to clean a black webbed foot. Then the bird sat up higher and shook out its feathers as if fluffing a pillow.

There was a loud noise in the street and the swan reared up, taller than a second grader, spreading its wings. It made a hissing noise and loomed, feathers positioned like weapons. Kay pulled back in fear, then awe. But when the bird did not attack, she relaxed enough to think about taking its picture. Before she could retrieve her phone, the swan glided back into the water. She had to get closer. She needed to obtain some evidence before the vision disappeared. She rose from the bench and noticed a set of stone steps moving down to the quay and disappearing in the water. They were covered in the same green slime as her garden roof. She would have to be careful, but she could definitely make it half way down. She thanked God for her practical shoes and her agile body, trained by years of kneeling down to button a child's coat or tend wounds suffered on the playground. She took one step, then two. It was easy. Like butter.

She was still shaking from the encounter in the brewery, but that only made her more determined. She was no more than eight feet from the swan, which moved forward as if to meet her there at the cusp between land and water. For a brief moment, she felt her heart lift with the inrush of pleasure. Her face flushed and her breath quickened. Then, just as she took the photograph, she felt a pressure on her back, light and deliberate as the touch of a child. It startled her so much that she lost her balance and stumbled over the last step, bone knocking against stone, to land in the cold water, a bright curved pain like a beak piercing her lung.

ANGELA BALL

THE COUNTY OBSERVES

The grid of enlightenment;

a creek that rollicks
a stray boot while

the same-size country dogs
trade their spots;

wildflowers alight
on secret graves, and begin
counting themselves
in their language;

crows, brusque jokes,
take what they need;

the main road continues,
with considerate concrete aprons
for changing tires,
its hand-over-fist
confession;

a line of cows floats the horizon
of raw silk torn away.

ANGELA BALL

TO INSURE DISTANCING FLY A PIRATE FLAG FROM YOUR FACE

To signify death, the canonical
Skull and Bones. To withhold mercy:
Red Pirate. If you lack shame,
Nude Pirate. For Torment
with Eventual Death, select
Red Skeleton. Hourglass: Time
is Running Thin. Bleeding Heart: a Slow
and Painful Death Awaits. Lifted
Drinking Glass: You toast Satan
or Death. Thomas Tew
flew Severed Arm with sword;
Edward Teach, a Naked Satan
Spearing Heart. In battle
he tied a length of flaming hemp
to his beard.

JOHN SIBLEY WILLIAMS

AMERICAN GRAMMAR

Because fireflies punctuate night like ellipses.
Because the holes in our nets are too big to capture
even a single star in this unending field of stars.
Because we call them stars at all, these brief intrusions
into rural dark. Not candles. Not matchsticks. Wildfires.
Because we call the earth *mother* when it's dad who taught us
how to hurt & be hurt & live with both.
End stop. Hard stop. Period. Because we are as clumsy with endings
as we are with our hands. The nape of a lover's neck or
a whiskey bottle's. A rifle's. That subtleties betray us
like beauty. Because beauty. Because it refuses to mean
what we need it to mean. Because it shouldn't hurt like this.
Because this isn't the same language grandma speaks, not quite,
over fresh baked cookies & old photos taken during one
or another war. Because her cigarette-stained fingertips
hook like commas around our wrists when
we reach
blindly into night for answers.
Because we believe in answers. Still. Hard stop. Because, after all these years,
we still cannot rest in grandpa's armchair. However long
the field extends. Although we are out in that field
every night wrangling beauty from the earth.
Mother, I see you in it now. Because we can make song out of fireflies,
empty nets. Hands. Because we know there's a barn out there
somewhere, & unbroken horses. Stars. Against all reason,
because we still call them stars.

JOHN SIBLEY WILLIAMS

CTHULHU // LEONARD PELTIER

"In his house at R'lyeh dead Cthulhu waits dreaming."

Tattooed along the spine of the world.
Etched inelegantly into greening stone
markers shoving up from someone else's

soil. Unmapped. Illegibly mapped. No one left

to decipher threat from promise. It's all so god-
damn foreign, this intimacy. How rolling prairie
ebbs into badland: one reservation boxed in by a whole

new country, both always & never really ours: a bullet

having passed through a body, how it sleeps generations
away awaiting resurrection. Maybe all it takes is a lone
sailor crazed from witness rambling about impossible

monsters to recognize what's always been here—

hidden, alien, othered—beneath the crust, the mantle, deep
within this sulfuric core, the mirror. Please rise, Great Old One.
Rise from such ungentle slumber. Loosen those wings.

Praise be whatever horror shows us our face.

SARAH MACLAY

OUR LADY OF THE SNOW

Horizontal:

flying needles lashing against the windshield, night,

sewing

east to west.

To be *not* ash—

every fleck a piece of fire

made pure by its own burning.

That is, to fall like manna—

far beyond one thing

we can identify as body.

To be the entire snowfall—

for the entire time.

This was the desire,

if not the vision.

SARAH MACLAY

AFTERLOGUE

(because we must make our own poultice

even beyond the solace of beauty):

What she got instead:

a luncheon visit from the neurosurgeon

and his wife—

she knew then that he studied his own brain

because he left the folds exposed

for all to see below a mop of hair

(the wall sculptures

kept wafting just like soft balloons

or hands):

she got to watch them long enough

to see them.

MICHAEL CZYZNIEJEWSKI

CONJUGAL

When my dad died, I had to go tell my mom, drive downstate to the federal lockup. I could have written a letter. I could have called the prison and had the warden or the chaplain or whoever tell her. I could have even talked to her on the phone myself. But I thought it was something she should hear in person. The day before Dad's funeral, I filled my Civic with gas, bought a soda and some chips, and got on the highway. It was a four-hour drive. I could be home before dark, if I stayed at the prison for less than an hour. I was looking to be home before dark.

At the prison, I had to show ID, walk through a metal detector, and fill out a form. There was a box to check, either SUPERVISED or CONJUGAL. I checked SUPERVISED. I signed my name, Miller Robinson, the same as my dad's. The guard in charge told me to wait and made a call. While on the phone, he covered the receiver with his hand and said, "Did you check the right box?" I nodded and he told the person on the phone that I'd checked the right box. A few minutes later, another guard came and got me, led me through various locked doors, into a common room. Inside were about a dozen round tables and a bunch of chairs. Prisoners were sitting with their loved ones, talking and laughing. A little boy sat on his mom's lap and she was reading him a story. She had on an orange jumpsuit. The kid looked happy.

Eighteen years since I'd last seen her, I recognized my mom the second she came into the room, buzzed in from a side door. She looked around, table to table. She stopped in the middle of the room, did a three-sixty, and shrugged her shoulders toward a pane of two-way glass. She even looked right at me: She didn't know who I was. It dawned on me that she had been expecting my dad: Miller Robinson.

She didn't know he was dead.

Mom wore makeup. Her hair was down—most of the women in the room had their hair up in a ponytail. Her jumpsuit was unzipped a few inches. Not only was she waiting for my father, she was expecting to meet him for a conjugal visit.

After maybe five minutes, my mother walked to the door she'd come through and tapped on the square window. The door buzzed, she opened it, and she disappeared. I sat in that family room for another fifteen minutes, watching the other prisoners with their loved ones. There were a lot of couples, holding hands, though that was all that was allowed: A large sign forbade anything more intimate. Moms and dads were visiting their daughters. Most of all, there were kids. Kids played games with their imprisoned moms. They looked through photo albums. They took pictures. They hugged and kissed. When it was time to go,

they cried. All the moms said, "See you next time!" acting bravely, but as soon as the kids left, they lost it, bawling before they, too, got buzzed out of the room.

I thought about asking the guard on the way out if kids being allowed to visit was a new thing or had it always been like that. I didn't bother. I already knew the answer.

~

One night back in high school, after Dad had gone to bed, I watched a movie on cable called *Prison Heat*. It was set in a women's prison, the kind where all the inmates have big breasts, shower for a very long time, and are tough-as-nails lesbians. The main character—who'd been framed for killing her boss and was new on the block—would get a visit once a week from her husband. They didn't meet in a room with tables or the kind with the glass between them, talking to each other via phones. They got to meet in a trailer in the yard and have sex, a conjugal visit. I was sitting on the couch and beating off to one of these scenes when it hit me: That's why Dad was driving to the other side of Missouri all the time. Every Thursday, like clockwork, since Mom had gone away. It all made sense: Before his drive, he always shaved, slicked his hair back, and put on his gray slacks and matching sport coat. He used Q-Tips. He put on cologne and gargled with mouthwash. I had thought Dad did all this because that's what adults did when they went out, just making himself presentable. Jerking it to *Prison Heat*, I knew: Dad was getting laid more than some guys whose wives slept right next to them in the same bed.

~

The funeral was a funeral. Dad'd had a heart attack at 53. He ran his own company, a tool-and-dye outfit with forty employees. He belonged to the Kiwanis Club and Chamber of Commerce. He'd grown up in the town where I grew up and everyone knew him. Everybody I'd ever met, it seemed, came to his viewing. I sat in front, the only child of an only child. Dad's parents were both in homes, one with Alzheimer's, one with dementia—like Mom, they had no idea he was dead.

I stared past people as they waited in line to pay their respects. I stared through them when they stopped by me to offer their condolences. I stared through my ex-wife, who I hadn't seen in two years, who had a new husband and a kid and was pregnant again. I stared out the side window while the mortician drove us to the cemetery in the hearse. I stared as Dad was lowered into the ground. I stared as his friends dropped flowers on his casket. I stared at the TV when I was home alone.

A few weeks later, I started my reentry into the world. I waited out the probate, processed all of dad's insurance, ending up with a nice pile of money. I decided to sell the house, too, move somewhere, anywhere, that wasn't there. I quit my job—I worked for the city, sorting recyclables—and started to pack. I was in no hurry, but moved quickly, anyway. I didn't have much and neither had Dad. We'd gotten rid of Mom's things a long time ago, knowing she'd never get out. I needed to make small repairs and paint everything white, then I could be gone.

While cleaning out the basement, underneath the laundry table, behind a piece of loose paneling that seemed to be glued in place, I found a box. Inside was Dad's stash: porno mags and a half dozen videotapes. I pulled the box out of the wall and took it upstairs. I'd already disconnected the TV; we hadn't owned a VCR in years. There were a few *Playboys* and one *Hustler Letters*. Most of the mags, however, were of the women-in-prison variety. It was like *Prison Heat*, but in periodical form: big boobs, big hair, lots of communal showering. Usually they'd started out in orange jumpsuits, like the kind Mom wore that day I saw her. One book put them in white-and-black horizontal stripes, like in old movies. I liked that one the best, and apparently, so did my dad, how worn out it was.

The videotapes were the same, women in prison, cable softcore stuff. Dad had collected *Caged Lust* and *Behind Bars III* and *Jailbird Jezebels 2* and my old friend, *Prison Heat*. I wanted a VCR very, very badly at that moment, then realized all of that stuff was probably online. I found it on my laptop and beat off to *Prison Heat* again, remembering the scenes like I'd just beat off to it yesterday. I did it twice more before bed and again when I woke up. Then I took the entire stash and dropped it in the Dumpster behind the 7-11. I thought about keeping the mag with the striped outfits but didn't. I couldn't open most of the pages.

After the house sold, all I owned fit in my car. I could literally go anywhere I wanted, eight years' worth of city salary in the bank. No one would know my dad, so no one would stop me on the street to tell me they were sorry. No one would come by the house and bring me casseroles and pies. No one would ask if I needed to go out for a beer. No one would tell me how great my dad was, which I already knew.

And no one would know my mother killed a woman my dad worked with, a woman she thought he was fucking. No one would know the woman was pregnant, either, that my mom killed an unborn baby, too—maybe my half-brother or half-sister. No one knew that stabbed baby was probably what got her life without parole. No one knew I hadn't seen my mom in eighteen years. Or that when I did, she didn't know me, and I didn't even say hello.

~

I was 9 when they came to the house and arrested my mom. There were a dozen policemen, all there for 105-pound woman who'd done this awful thing. Due to the nature of her crime, she was not offered bail and I didn't see or talk to her for six months. I wrote her notes and colored her pictures and sent them to her. Once she wrote back and told me she missed me and that I should help Dad around the house. Then nothing.

During the trial, I visited her at the courthouse three or four times. It was in a conference room and her lawyer was there. A bailiff or two always stood outside the door. Dad insisted I sit on Mom's lap, that I touch her as much as I could, be as close as I could get. He knew where the trial was headed. It might have been the last time for me to see my mom that way, for her to hold onto me, for us to make physical contact—nobody knew what prison would be like, if I'd even get to see her.

From the day my mother was sentenced, Dad told me kids weren't allowed at Mom's prison. It would be eighteen years before I knew he lied.

~

My car packed, I thought I'd go south, somewhere it was always warm, Arkansas or Louisiana. They had recyclables, too, I figured, if I ever ran out of money. On the way, I'd pass my mother's prison. I pretended to wrestle with it the whole way, but knew I'd stop almost the entire trip. I pulled into the same lot I had the day before Dad's funeral, went in the same door, and signed in with the same guard. I put down my name, Miller Robinson, but instead of checking SUPERVISED, I checked CONJUGAL. The news I had was private, between her and I; no doubt she'd probably lose it and I didn't want her to have to do *that* in *that* room, in front of all those strangers. The guard asked if I was sure I was checking the right box and I said yes. He called it in.

I was escorted down a different hallway, through a different series of locked doors, until I found myself outside, in the yard. The guard escorted me to a trailer—one of three—and he told me good luck. I said thanks. Inside the trailer was an end table holding condoms and breath mints, each in their own little bowl. There was also a wooden chair and a queen bed. An air conditioner hummed in the single window. The sheets looked like maybe I wasn't the first guest to visit that particular trailer on that particular day.

I sat in the chair and waited for almost an hour. I heard someone approaching, the door opened, and my mom stepped inside. Again, her

hair was down, her face made-up, and her jumpsuit was unzipped, this time to where I could see most of her white bra.

Mom saw me in the chair and said, "Oh, sorry. Wrong trailer," and called for the guard.

"Hold on," I said.

Mom turned, looked me over, and said, "Thanks, but no thanks, Sweetie. I got somebody waiting on me."

I blurted out, "Mom, it's me, Miller."

Mom looked me over again. The guard asked what she'd wanted and Mom told her she could leave. Mom shut the door and sat down on the bed.

"You were here, in the family room, about a month ago," she said. "I remember you. You're handsome, hard to forget."

I blushed.

"You came all this way and didn't say anything to me? Left me standing there like a goof?"

I told her I was sorry. I mumbled that I was shy.

Mom laughed—not what I'd expected. She said it was okay, that she understood, how it was good I was there now. She began to ask me some basic question, what I was doing with my life, I think, but then she stopped cold. Her countenance fell and she sat straight up.

"Something's happened to your dad, hasn't it?"

I nodded.

Mom fell backwards on the bed and curled into a fetal position, facing away from me. She began to cry.

"What happened?" she asked.

"Heart attack," I said. "He bent over to tie his shoe and collapsed."

Mom wailed. I wanted to say something but didn't know what—I didn't even know her. I moved over to the bed and sat next to her. I was still for several minutes and she only cried harder. I put my hand on her shoe, gripping the heel, but that didn't help. Then I curled up and put my arm around her. It was the first time I'd touched her since I was 9. I began to cry, too. I squeezed her as hard as I could. She grabbed onto my arm and squeezed back. She pulled the back of my hand to her face and kissed it, then held it against her cheek

That's how we spent most of her allotted time, forty-five minutes. She was mourning Dad and so was I. I was also bawling because she was my mom and I hadn't seen her, talked to her, or touched her in eighteen years, seemingly for no reason. Now I was spooning her, letting loose for the first time since it'd happened—since either thing had happened.

Me getting an erection made Mom stop crying. I wanted to control it, will it back down, but I couldn't. She'd been right up against me, pushing, trying to get closer. Her sobs made her body rise and fall. Even in the jumpsuit, she felt soft. As much as I tried, I couldn't stop thinking of *Prison Heat*, the framed hero entangled with her husband on a bed, a lot like the bed I was on with my mom. I couldn't help it.

Mom was silent. I didn't know if she noticed, but she didn't pull away, not until the guard pounded on the door. He yelled *Five-minute warning!* We jumped up, stepped away from each other.

"I have to go," she said. She zipped her jumpsuit all the way to her neck. She pulled her hair back and wrapped it in the rubber band encircling her wrist. "They don't mess around: Ready to go or you lose privileges for six months."

"That's rough," I said. I avoided eye contact.

Mom stood by the door. She seemed four hours away.

"You should come back," she said. She looked down at the bed. "Meet me in the family room next time."

"I'm moving," I said.

"When?" Mom asked. "Where?"

"Today. Now. I'm on my way south."

"Oh," she said.

We looked at each other until the guard opened the door and said *Come on*. Mom waved good-bye and disappeared into the yard.

I sat down on the bed, fell backward. I fell asleep. I woke to a man standing above me, staring me down, his face inches from mine. He had a handlebar mustache and smelled like ham. He was there to meet his wife or girlfriend. I wasn't supposed to still be there.

"Sorry," I said, springing to my feet.

"Wore you out, huh?" the man said. I was on my way out the door. He was undoing his tie. "How was it?"

"What's that?" I said. I knew what he'd said.

"How was it?" the man said. "No sex like prison sex, am I right? She counts the seconds till I get here, practically tears right through me."

I thought about punching him or telling him to fuck off.

"Words can't describe it," I told him. "It was beautiful. Really, really beautiful."

KELLY WEBER

OMPHALOS : SANCTUARY

Mother what a strange animal I am, how difficult
it is to be daughter. After the wedding is over

when the bride and groom and all the guests have gone
home, my friends and I are the ones who are left

locked in the church, running through the dark
with white veils moon enough to see by.

We drop on all fours, clutch the blue flowers
we've been thrown to remain single for good.

Waists wrapped in bone cords, we are the ace girls,
children of an uncertain season, sleeping in our clothes

at the foot of the altar and its cross, the deer
grazing our hair strung down the foramen's cracked pew.

Lord I have rarely believed enough in mothers
and sisters and friends. Pink snow falls across the mountains

beyond this long dark church
of the hips. How else could they be taught to bleed

at dawn, shed the most necessary thing? Mother
I kneel to be broken this way, trembling at the mouth

of the north. Hush me, now, fold and kiss me gently
back into your blood, press your lips

and knife to my throat, quiet me with feast.

KELLY WEBER

OMPHALOS : RECESSIONAL

When I leave my mothers' house, it is with a wedding dress
wrenching my shoulder like an augur each time I push it

still further down my grandmother's body, burying her
mouth in my breast as I wrap her in lace and love letters

her mother kept from her. The stars brooched at her throat
mares' eyes I plucked from the night. When I was born there was only

the sky slit neatly above me and a clean light, a way up
instead of through, a plier-cut fence held open for me. I burn

my grandmother's body and sweep the ashes into a firwood box
I tip into my mouth, swallow whole. Down the corridor I throw

up, step outside and into my mother on lengthening haunches
and cloven hooves. My mouth a bow, my tongue an arrow

honey-loosened to its coarsest speech. My back uncorseted from moon
I leap snow, each hoofprint curving from omega to lyre.

KELLY WEBER

WHAT THE WATER BRUISES INTO

And sometimes at night when I want to bed down in my mother's bones again I return to when the cop in sex-ed class told us *and if a girl says no but doesn't pull away, resist her or she'll try to accuse you of rape*—when his hips bouquet pelvis and gun—when the room is filled with breath clenched in rib—when I step this close to the entrance of the body again, remember this like the story my mother told me of the man who broke the wall with fist above her head, and I the egg lodging its tiny axe inside her—when again in the dark room they project the coarse-haired babies grown like deer children in the bellies of those who trespassed, the genitals punished with disease; when daughtering bones ask forgiveness and mothers turn away—when I swear I didn't know this way back to binding my dangerous body again and here I am anyway, this rope of hair and ice around my wrists, kneeling before this law of white gravel, rattlesnakes hung on fences, flatirons' canted breasts on the edge of glaciers' work—when January is buried among the yearlings, when all you can think of, like me, is this testament of a single white bulb above your tongue finding a way to say what your love is made of, gasoline clear as daylight—then let this be something good; and if that girl I was says yes, praise her; and if she says no, praise her too; and if she's followed home in dark by a man, let her find her way home safe or open her mouth wide as night; let the language of prairie dropseed and little bluestem, in all their asexual beauty, give her the term for what she is before she knows; let her find again the truck sunk in the lake inside her, cross the vertebrae of ice in street, lock the bathroom door, lay down the god's arrows carried so long, run hot water in the tub until clouds cover even the doe skull on the counter—and if you're like me and reaching for mothers inside the wind, wanting someone to hold your body beautiful, then enter into the work this way—find your quiver, let your hand slide down to the place all life begins, touch with such praise what they taught you was trap: this slicked apse, this winter harnessed at the wide singing of these double-lipped doors, this dawn yawning black boning deep in your body, this ache of each knuckle circling faster and faster in your second mouth, spitting your name and cradling a whole new creature between your legs, crying clean and clear to the blue mountains ringed with snow, your own voice saying *yes yes yes*—

JENNY GRASSL

BEING A WILDERNESS

how is it to be at stake
in the heart of no one
playing outside

till you look like weeds
and encroach

or to be a stake
in the heart of one
long dead

how then

I chase him to hold down his ghost

seeking from him a substance

gouged from before I knew I was made of something

he could take even in a meadow cracking
the concrete stoop at the side of the house

each humid drop hissed from his sleeve

in the pollen and the singe

mosquitos pepper grass and jumpseed high

my fingers in a black-stitched hole
in a porch screen sewn and re-sewn by him

the patched gap open now

MICHELLE R. DISLER

DOSSIER, BOND JAMES (P)

Bond Girl Bond

A Bond Girl doesn't get distracted. She reads cards, she saves a wrecked and feckless Bond from his deadly villains at a winter carnival with her cool white car and some Rockstar race car driving. She marries him anyway. She's hardly half-naked despite covers of novels that show otherwise, clad in nothing but her cards, a veil, thigh-highs and a mink shawl. Clad, too, entirely in gold, a plunging neckline studded by gems, a blouse strategically torn in all the right places. And holy thunder balls,

the Italian lovely sits chest puffed out, breasts heaving on her black bikini-clad body with her blond hair flowing—she sits larger than life with a weapon larger than your conscience, ego, whatever, while you strangle the villain underwater off to the side. Who's the savior now? Do the hands have it, the breasts, or the lone long black weapon with the lovely's trigger finger at the ready? Or will her mink and that darling and dainty beau—I mean, *bow* tied neatly around her neck save the day? The

fully naked, shown only from the breasts up Honey Ryder would be an ideal combatant, fair skin glowing, blond hair neatly curled about her head and her face, knife ready to yield—I mean, *wield* for the sake of saving some ass, probably her own. And Solitaire, she gave it up for you, her powers of the occult compromised by your gut and your ego, ergo she's resigned, which is to say she'll be opening your special blend packs of smokes which will be a full-time job, according to you. Oh,

Bod—I mean, *God*: the best part? We've not even got there yet. We've got more Bond Girls to go, but only a few, the others relegated to unmarked graves, villain's lairs (before you steal them away, a lure to sex the world's best spy), unnamed islands in lands far flung from the four corners of your glittering, globe-trotting life: Vesper you found a prude, an inconvenience at best, companion on a mission that's not fit for a girl because your missions never are, a good fit, the good girl gone bad,

bedded down with Bond though it's not actually always the first thing on their mind. It is, however, the first thing on yours, and love, love follows for

you as a close second. Who taught you how to court a girl, with only her heaving breasts, occasional weapon, cards, gold, black velvet dress with strappy black shoes to woo, and world peace hangs in the balance with your reputation as a double-0 licensed to kill still intact? This is perfect nonsense. These girls have names, the worst, as it happens,

to highlight your sex, which is not necessarily theirs, minding their own business as they usually are until you come along to trip them up, expose them as the wise-weapon-wielding saviors the world never knew them to be. And *they're* oversexed? My word, 007. One look into those blue-gray eyes, one glimpse at you suited up as your cover on assignment and BAM! you fall over with your own legs in the air while the girls with their weapons—breasts, hair, golden pale skin—seize the day, yes! a perfect paradox, the world's best! What gives, 007, besides you?

MICHELLE R. DISLER

DOSSIER, BOND JAMES Z

Bond Imagine Bond James

Imagine you are all the girls in the world, all of them dressed to die, while you are dressed to kill.

Imagine you are every last lopsided villain whose inferiorities are, at the very last, your charismatic superiority, your goodly gut that always saves you.

Imagine you are death come for the gangster or the girl, a pile of bird shit to suffocate the villain you were deprived of killing yourself.

Imagine you are your car, her car, the villain's car, speeding away from the worst that could happen on the road to restoring world peace.

Imagine yourself as the strappy black heels and the black velvet dress on the girl who will die calling your name.

Imagine yourself as the beautiful Russian spy, chosen by her country to seduce you to death.

Imagine yourself as the cards on the table in casinos around the world.

Imagine you are the bullets hitting the beach, your waterlogged gun.

Imagine you are the stolen missiles, the sweat on your furrowed brow.

Imagine you are the girl who marries you, shot dead in a botched attempt to end your life.

Imagine you are the girls who've been disrobed a dozen too many times.

Imagine you are the palm trees, the blazing snow, the roiling sea that would swallow you whole.

Imagine yourself as the books in which you're featured, dog-eared, peppered with marginal notes, pages stuffed back inside, out of order.

Imagine you are the gun on the upper left corner of every last book in this library of mine, your hand grasping the deadly black metal and finger on the trigger. Shooting what?

STEFANIE WORTMAN

MILKRUSH

In the larger cities all men who handle milk are carefully examined. They get tuberculosis tests and keep their hair and fingernails short.

The same regulations apply here, but the enforcement is lax. The guy who picks up my bottles each morning seems okay, but he's a sweaty person and has a habit of wiping his forehead with his shirt sleeve that would probably disqualify him if someone were watching more closely.

I'm on his schedule for 9 to 10. I usually hear his Jetta rattle into the driveway about 9:45. By the time he rings the doorbell, I have the bottles out of the refrigerator. He hands me a plastic bag of empties and packs today's product into a black cooler bag with bottles from other women, all labeled with barcode stickers.

I don't know how many stops he makes before he drops them off. If the size of his bag were an indicator, it couldn't be more than a handful, but he probably has more coolers in the car.

The regulations for producers are even more stringent than for handlers. When I downloaded the app and signed up, I had to fill out a complete medical history and sign an agreement that I wouldn't drink, smoke, or do drugs while under contract with the company. I clicked "I agree" on the many-page contract.

They sent a start-up package that included two kinds of hormone pills, a pump, and flyers on hygiene that I was supposed to post near the pump and in the bathroom. The package also included instructions on how to establish pickups once the milk came in.

It seems like a freak of nature to make milk without having a baby. The hormones are supposed to help, but even without them it's possible. Enough suction can stimulate milk production eventually. When Milkrush was new, they had ads all over the internet, showing women from the neck to the waist. Some with large breasts, some with small. Push up bras, no bras. The tag line was, "Milk 'em if you've got 'em."

At first I took the ads as yet another example of women's bodies used to sell a product. After seeing them enough times I came to an opposite view. They were offering women a way to profit from a power inherent in their bodies. Milkrush takes a sizable cut—skimming off the top, so to speak.

Once I was making milk, and after I passed my blood test, I got

an email with the first name of my handler, Jacob, and the window of time in which he would come to my house each day, seven days a week.

I've been producing for four months now and have made enough money to pay my rent for the past three. It's the perfect gig if you like to be at home most of the time. I paint at home, so it suits me fine. The schedule is conducive to the process. Paint, think, pump, repeat.

Painting is my job, but it pays nothing. Milk is my income. I've tricked my breasts into working to support the rest of me. I've noticed that if I don't keep a strict schedule, my production goes down. I pump every three to four hours when I'm awake, and that means I'm rarely away from home for more than three hours.

The pumping is time consuming, but not too bad otherwise. The suction is kind of irritating—along the lines of ineffective foreplay. As far as selling your body goes, it's pretty low impact.

Today Jacob is late, well past 10:00. He has been late a few times before, but never so late that I delayed my second pumping of the day. I don't want to be hooked up to the machine when he comes.

As I wait, I think about his schedule, the opposite of mine. He's probably never home. I would hate driving for a living. Too much time spent getting to the next place instead of being somewhere. Maybe Jacob loves it. Maybe the car, where he's alone with the stereo playing whatever it is he likes to listen to, is his somewhere. He probably listens to Wilco and belts out every word.

I know very little about Jacob beyond what I already mentioned—sweaty, Jetta. The app gives just enough information to deaden your appetite for any more. Even the small Jacob headshot seems perfectly sized for this—clear enough that you don't itch to enlarge it, encapsulated enough that you don't really see the character in his face.

In person, he looks to be roughly my age, but neither of us has ever attempted to make small talk. You might think it introduces some awkwardness to hand the milk recently squeezed out of your breasts to another person, a person who could maybe be sexually relevant. He's good looking enough, if a bit contrived with his shoulder length hair and snap-button plaid shirts. I don't want to pull him by his ponytail into my

bed. It has occurred to me that I could try.

I check the app, and it confirms that Jacob is behind schedule, but it doesn't give me an estimated time. The smile in his photo looks apologetic.

Around 11:00 I give up and set myself up to pump. I assume he will arrive as soon as I start the machine, so that I'll have to stop and start over, probably messing up the quantity. I haven't even started painting yet for the day.

The paintings I'm working on now are domestic interiors. I think of them as still life paintings, but instead of fruits and fish, the arrangements are furniture and appliances. Sometimes I paint rooms from photographs. Sometimes I embellish a memory of somewhere I've been. I especially like painting kitchens and bathrooms. Plumbing fixtures.

I started making these before I started working for Milkrush, so they're not entirely influenced by my new situation, but being in my interior so much has contributed something.

I complete the whole pumping without interruption. While I'm cleaning up, my phone buzzes with an alert from the app. A different handler is coming and will be here within the hour. Another Jacob. Of course. This Jacob looks like he listens exclusively to club bangers.

The new Jacob apologizes for being late, even though he's not the one who was supposed to be here in the first place. I've had other handlers come before, apparently filling in for the original Jacob, but never on such short notice. It's clear new Jacob is new to the job and not just to me because he has to set his cooler down and rearrange the contents to fit my bottles in. I never realized how well original Jacob had his system down, but he was usually back in his car within two minutes of driving up.

While this guy fumbles, he makes small talk. Another rookie move. He tells me he heard during his drop off yesterday that my handler had been fired when he dropped off the day's production. The company found that he'd been taking small amounts of milk from each bottle and selling what he stole on the black market to raw milk enthusiasts.

He said it absently then looked up, startled, as if he'd been caught

doing something he wasn't supposed to do. He will probably not last long in this job.

When he left, I got online to search for raw breast milk. The information Milkrush distributed explained how after the product was delivered to their facilities, it was mixed together and pasteurized for safety. It never occurred to me that anyone would want it otherwise.

The state didn't allow companies to sell raw milk, but individual producers could sell it directly to consumers—or I suppose to the consumers' parents. The law seemed to be written with cows in mind.

I found a local post advertising raw breast milk for prices almost double what I got. At the end of the ad, the seller offered the option to arrange rooming with the buyer. It took me a minute to figure out what this meant. Full wet nursing services. Not pumping and bottle-feeding, but taking another person's baby to your breast.

In those months I thought very little about the babies who would drink the milk I made. The gig was between me and Jacob, between my pump and his car. Now there was a third body in the equation. I had a dreamlike feeling of holding a baby, a phantom weight in my arms. I wanted to drop it.

ROBERT LONG FOREMAN

MONICA THE FOOL

Monica was the first associate at Bulwark Insurance to interview Hannah, their most promising candidate for the job of Documentation Specialist.

The interview went well. Hannah was poised and competent. Affable and calm. Blonde.

Near the end, she asked, "What you stinkin' about?"

"I'm sorry," said Monica. "What was that?"

It was a teleconference interview. She thought she must have misheard, that technology had failed them and distorted Hannah's earnest question.

"I said," Hannah said, "'What you *stinkin*' about?'"

Monica blinked. "I don't know," she said. "Do I stink?"

"I don't know," Hannah said. "I'm not there. Sorry. Let me ask another question."

Hannah's face was red—from embarrassment?

She asked about the benefits package.

They were at the last stage of the interview, where it was Hannah's turn to ask any questions she might have about Bulwark, about Monica, or about the job Hannah might do there. Or about stinking, apparently.

Monica had said that Hannah could ask her anything. Was this her fault?

The interview ended. Aside from asking a strange question Monica didn't understand, Hannah had done an impressive job. She was easily the best candidate—much better than Rod, who wouldn't stop grinning like a maniac into the camera that looked on him from above his laptop screen. He gazed upon Monica's face like he might eat her.

Hannah got the job. Rod got on with his life. Maybe he died for lack of healthcare, because he couldn't find a job.

Monica did not expect to see Hannah after she was hired. Hannah worked in a different division of Bulwark, in a different building. Bulwark had five buildings; they were a national company, and this was their headquarters. They employed thousands. Monica thought she'd seldom, if ever, see her again.

But one morning, two months later, Katie from down the hall stood in Monica's office door and said, "Monica?"

She looked up from her computer screen.

Katie asked, "What you stinkin' about?"

The pencil dropped from between Monica's teeth. She stared.

"Sorry," Katie said, her smile gone.

"It's fine," said Monica. "Where did you hear that?"

"Hear what?"

"What you just said. That question. 'What you stinkin' about?'"

"Oh. Gary, I think?"

"Who's Gary?"

"I don't know."

Monica watched Katie for a sign of something. Mockery? "Did you need something?" she asked.

"Not really," Katie said. "Are you okay?"

"I'm fine."

"Okay."

Katie left.

Monica didn't have many in-person meetings. Bulwark was a big company, with offices across America. Most of the time, when she talked to someone, she did it on the phone or via the interoffice video chat service. But at the next quarterly meeting she had with her superiors and other supervisors at her level, Pedro, VP of Meetings, said, "Okay, everyone. Just one question to start us off." He paused, looked around, and said, "What you guys stinkin' about?"

Everyone laughed. It was hilarious!

The pencil fell from Monica's mouth.

It was a different pencil from before. This one was mechanical.

It was a coincidence, that the last time she heard that question she was pencil-munching. She didn't even particularly like having pencils in her mouth. But her hearing that question twice in such a short time—three times, including the time Hannah said it—was no coincidence.

Monica wanted to know where Pedro had heard it. But if she asked him at the meeting, he might take it the wrong way. It may seem disrespectful, or at least abrupt.

Why did the others laugh so hard? The question he'd asked wasn't funny. It didn't even meet the standards of what's funny in an office, where everyone is subject to a kind of Stockholm Syndrome. They're trapped in the office together, because if they don't work somewhere they'll get sick and go bankrupt for lack of health insurance. They're

so desperate for feelings other than fear and boredom that the faintest gesture in the direction of levity is greeted with major laughter. Peals of that shit. They just ring the hell out.

Pedro was looking at Monica.

He'd asked her a question. What was it?

She'd stopped paying attention.

She said, "I'm sorry?"

Pedro frowned. He repeated his question, slowly, to embarrass her.

He was asking for an update from her division.

She gave him the update, flushed and stuttering.

For the next week, Monica heard people ask each other the new question over and over again. In the hallway outside her office, Jake asked Siobhan, "Lady, what you stinkin' about?" She cackled in response, and said, "Nothin' much, fella!" He cackled back.

It was a cackleback. Right outside Monica's office door.

She got an email from Medhi, about the new spreadsheet she'd sent him.

"What you stinkin' about?" was his new email signature.

What an awful disappointment this was. Medhi changed his email signature every week, and every time it was hilarious. He was a comic genius. Monica looked forward to seeing his new email signature every Monday. Everyone did. Now this?

At the cafeteria, late one morning, Monica bought an apple. She almost never bought food at the cafeteria; she brought her lunch with her to work; but that day she wanted to eat something that made noise when you ate it. She'd brought a sandwich from home. It made no sound.

She saw Hannah.

She was with Pedro and some of the other VPs. They were getting their lunches and walking to a table together.

They passed Monica, and when they did, Hannah glanced at Monica and asked her, "What you stinkin' about?" She winked and added, "Nice apple, Mrs. Grapple."

Hannah walked away.

The pencil fell from Monica's mouth.

Why was there a pencil in her mouth again? Maybe she did have a problem.

Was it a sign of something that should concern her? A vitamin deficiency?

It took her a moment to realize Hannah hadn't said what she'd said because they knew each other. Monica's name wasn't Grapple, it was Singh. And she wasn't Mrs. She'd never been married.

Hannah hadn't recognized her. She'd asked what Monica was stinkin' about as some kind of reflex. She thought they'd never met.

At the next meeting with Pedro and the other higherups, Hannah was there, way across the expanse of the long conference table, sitting among the important people. The VPs.

Pedro called the meeting to order and began by smiling and introducing their newest executive, who'd been hired recently but was so promising she'd already been promoted. Her name was Hannah. She was the new VP of Having It Both Ways.

Hannah took Pedro's cue. She stood, with her immaculate grin, and said she was *so* excited to start working hands-on with everyone. She was *so* grateful for what she'd learned and couldn't wait to learn *so* much more.

"From you," she said, pointing to someone on the right side of the table. "And from you," she said, pointing to someone on the left side. "And from you," she added, pointing to someone else. She pointed to eight people before she was through. Every time she pointed, the person on the receiving end lit up like it meant something.

She said, "Does anyone have any questions for me, before we move on and I sit down?"

Monica shook her head.

What the fuck was this, a school? Who was this idiot? What did she even do at this company?

She had a question. But she didn't ask what she wanted to know. Instead she threw the question this girl loved so much back in her face.

She raised her hand and said, "I'd like to know one thing, Hannah. What are you—uh—*stinkin*' about?"

Hannah's smile became a grin. "Not much," she said. "But I sure am looking forward to this *reek*end!"

The associates at the table roared with laughter. They'd all been asked that same question, and no one had known what to say in response.

Mostly they'd paused and said something about the Chiefs and how good their season was. They would never have come up with something as good as what Hannah had said.

Monica didn't laugh.

When the commotion died, she said, "No, Hannah. Seriously. I want to know. I really do. What *are* you *stinkin*' about?"

Hannah kept her grin up and forced another laugh. She shrugged big and said, "Just stinkin' about this meeting is all."

Some chuckles rippled across the table.

"That's great," said Pedro. "Nothing like a strong and fresh joke to get us started. Like a stiff slug of Folgers."

"Sure," said Monica, "but I really want to know what Hannah's stinkin' about. I want a real answer. Hannah. What are you stinkin' about?"

"Okay," Pedro said, looking around. "We get it. Our work can be stressful. We need a little relief from time to time, a little confrontation to get us through the day. Let's move on, why don't we?"

They moved on. Monica dropped it.

And that was it. After that meeting, people stopped coming to Monica's office to say hello. She stopped getting nonessential emails.

It was like Monica had run over the CEO's dog or kid with her car. Or like she'd accidentally sent an email to the whole company describing, in great detail, a recent bout of diarrhea—which, as it happened, she had had.

It was the worst diarrhea spell she'd ever suffered through. She thought she might not survive it. It was like her guts were turning to liquid and spilling out of her body. Like an awful spigot in her stomach had been turned on.

She became a husk of herself, when she was at the office. She performed her duties but was hollow inside, like an automaton that could work but hadn't been programmed to feel anything.

She left Bulwark the first chance she got. She packed her things and headed west, where all living creatures have to go when they must find the next stop on their path, the journey we all face when we venture forth to find rewards in heaven for the things we do and that are done to us on Earth.

DEBORAH ALLBRITAIN

SOUTHERN CALIFORNIA GHAZALS

Down here in the Southwest corner of temperate nights, woodrats shimmy
the bird feeder, dive under black ivy and weeds. So what if the rodents gorge.

The skid and shot of everything that happens here, glass moons like milk-
spray over the beaches, lifetimes of do-overs. No one was born here.

Devil Winds off the Great Basin ignite San Luis Rey Downs. The Lilac fire,
which sounds almost lovely, Satan disguised in lavender. O Candy Twist,

Everlovin' Woman, Sarah Sunshine, O Mr. Hockey, Dogertown, Malibu Vixen,
Packin' Heat, Sir Charmalot, Oughttobeking, a thousand lilies, O Baby Bruin.

In Peru 140 children and 200 baby llamas expose their 500-year-old skeletons.
Dislocated faces smeared with red cinnabar, hearts dug out for sacrifice.

Santiago Canyon 1889, fire with a thousand flaming sheep in its eyes.
O sacks of threshed and unthreshed barley. I am haunted by beautiful dead horses.

The children were buried west, facing the sea, the baby llamas east, toward the Andes.
Perhaps a peace entered them, even so? I worry about my sister's fears.

When I visit Sacramento, the bedroom window stays shut and locked. She knows
an escaped convict from Folsom prison will kill me with a Kamikoto kitchen knife.

Mateo, don't leave Guatemala for the U.S. border. They will stun-gun you
like a stray dog. The rats are ravenous. They scritch and gossip beside my lame dog.

One Chimu child skull, a 500-year-old rope leading to his llama, little immortal
souls, messenger to the gods. Why is the world burning? Tell my people.

My sister ordered a doggy life preserver in case the levee breaks. She
can't drive across bridges, walk under trees if there's a north wind.

What will I do if I outlive her? Mateo, I told you not to cross the desert.
Your hand bitten by a hog-nosed snake. Did you not know there is no antivenom?

Tonight it is reported that one child dies every ten minutes in Yemen.
I can't sleep, one mother says, *tell them it is the end of the world.*

In Fort Wayne there are no Tesslas parked in front of the 99-cent store.
If you ask for tiramisu, they will tell you they haven't seen her.

Yesterday he said I still love you but not like I did. Southern California has no seasons.
Southern California has its reasons.

JAMES BRUBAKER

SHE AND I, WE PRAYED TOGETHER

My wife, Claire, prays every day. She wakes up and does it, silent—doesn't kneel or fold her hands, doesn't make a show of or even admit to it. She hides her prayers. But I know.

One morning I asked, "Are you praying?"

She hesitated but finally told me that she was just thinking.

But I know that she's praying. I know because her body becomes a statue, thick with spirit, rigid; her open eyes, portals through which the morning comes and goes.

She prays at night, too, but she doesn't know it. These are a different kind of prayer, like when people go to church revivals and the Holy Spirit fills them up and they convulse in the dirt. Claire is more subtle than all that; her body jerks only once when she falls asleep, as if she's crashing into some big black dream—like her body is praying without her, like she has become prayer.

Secular though I am, I don't mind that my wife prays. Once even, she and I, we prayed together. It was the year we were married, the night her family dog died. Ella was the dog's name—ran off after a mail truck, not for the first time, but she'd always come home before. That last time, though, she stayed ran off, was missing for days before neighbors found her spread slick across the road. Claire's mom, Anne, a strange and lonely woman, called to tell us while we were at dinner: "And then Bill and Connie called and said I needed see something, so I walked down and there was Ella," I heard through the phone. "Funny—this time the mailman got the dog," she added, laughing. Claire stared down at her fish sandwich and said, "Mom, please." But Anne didn't know any better, repeated the story a second time, then a third, laughing louder each time until *the mailman got the dog* had become *her* prayer. When Anne was finished, Claire hung up the phone and cried.

Later that night, after our waitress brought boxes for our leftovers, after I packed up Claire's barely eaten sandwich and held her hand while we ran to the car through a furious rain that developed out of nowhere, after we drove home, listening only to tires on soaked roads, after we entered our bedroom, sick with humidity, then opened the windows and turned on the box fan to chase out the heavy air, after we had run out of anything else with which to busy ourselves—we fucked.

But not like we'd usually fuck.

We didn't whisper and awkwardly remove one article of clothing at a time. No, that night we channeled something distant, inscrutable—our bodies made thunder that rolled across the sky, shook neighboring houses to their foundations, mothers and dead dogs to their bones.

Our prayer against death.

When she came, Claire didn't cry out or moan or sigh—she shook.

Our prayer against loss, secular though I am.

PHONG NGUYEN

TIGER-BEAR AND SEA MONSTER

Elliott lived in a house with two monsters, Tiger-bear and Sea Monster. They could not be seen—only heard—but the sounds they made kept him awake at night. Tiger-bear lived just outside his room, and tapped on the doors, and the windows, and the walls. Tiger-bear's claws made a tapping sound that was unlike other tapping sounds, a *hungry* tapping sound. Sea Monster lived underneath the beige carpet, under the Lego piles and the discarded socks and the strewn stuffed animals. It growled like an empty stomach.

Elliott told his mother about Tiger-bear tapping on the doors, and the windows, and the walls. She told Elliott that it was just the air conditioner, blowing on a loose piece of sheet metal somewhere in the ducts of the house. Elliott told his father about Sea Monster growling beneath the carpet like an empty stomach. He told him that it was just the house's plumbing, the pipes that groaned when the water ran. These were house noises, he was told, and nothing to worry about.

But why did Tiger-bear tap on his windows in the winter time? And why did Sea Monster growl like an empty stomach when no one was running the faucet?

One evening Elliott was stacking Legos in the kitchen, and his mother said, "I told you not to stack Legos in the kitchen. I could step on them and hurt myself." Then, turning to Elliott's father, she said, "I told him *not* to stack Legos in the kitchen."

"Don't stack Legos in the kitchen," said his father.

"But you said—" Elliott began.

"—It doesn't matter what I said. Your mother is right. No stacking Legos in the kitchen."

Elliott's mother stopped lathering a slice of bread with peanut butter for lunch tomorrow, and looked seriously at Elliott. "Your father said what?"

"That I could stack Legos in the kitchen," Elliott said.

"Elliott," she said sternly, "go to your room."

But it was getting dark, and Elliott preferred to be in the kitchen with his parents. He looked at his mother helplessly.

"You heard me," she said. "To your room."

In his room that evening, Elliott couldn't distract himself with matchbox cars or coloring books, and the carpet was too bumpy to stack Legos on. So he got into bed with Owlish, his favorite stuffed animal, and pressed one ear to the pillow to muffle the sounds. But muffling the sound made it even more frightening—that the tapping could be getting closer, and the growling getting louder, but he would be deaf to it—so he bravely let go of the pillow, and turned in his bed until he was flat like a desert road.

It was silent for a moment, and in that silence Elliott allowed himself to dream that Tiger-bear and Sea Monster would not return that night. But the claw of Tiger-bear was a hungry claw, and it tapped first at his window. It was a large window, with access to the roof, and Elliott had seen his father climb in and out of it before, to sweep leaves and branches off the roof. At night it was completely dark outside, and Tiger-bear could have been pressing his face up against the glass and he still would not have seen him.

The tapping continued, more insistent now, on the walls. Tiger-bear must be inside the house, Elliott thought. *Tap-tap*. Elliott had read a book about a spy, and the spy knew Morse code. Maybe there was a pattern to the tapping, he wondered. *Tap-tap-tap*. He wanted to shout "Stoppit, stoppit, stoppit!" but didn't want to disturb his mother and father, who were disturbed enough already.

Finally, the tapping faded into the distance, and went away completely. Elliott thought himself quite brave for listening to the tapping without screaming or clamping his hands over his ears. He mustered the strength to sit up in bed, and looked out upon the utter normalcy of his room: the cherry wood dresser with one drawer overstuffed, the drawings of robots pinned to the wall, the curtain bunched on a hook by the sides of the window, with the blinds partially down, and one of the slats crooked. The walls were light blue, and the ceiling was popcorned, and the carpet was as beige as an organic egg.

Then a low growl rumbled beneath the bed. It was a growl that started somewhere deep underneath the carpet, then rose to the surface and filled the room. Elliott squeezed Owlish closer to his chest, and made a humming sound to himself, to drown out the growl of Sea Monster. He had often seen his mother vacuum the carpet, and the noise of the vacuum never bothered him—in fact, it had comforted him. So he pretended he was a vacuum, and hummed louder and louder. But the growling grew louder as well, until Elliott's fear got the better of him, and he had to cry out, "Mama!"

Elliott was too old to sit in the grocery cart, so he walked sullenly beside the cart holding onto the wire mesh with two fingers. His eyes were sunken and dark-rimmed from lack of sleep.

"We should get him a screen," Elliott's father said.

"He's too young for a screen," said his mother.

"They give screens to *toddlers* now, and besides," said his father, "he's in need of a distraction."

"You're a big fan of distractions," his mother said. She opened the door of the refrigerated section and took out a gallon of milk.

"Do you really want to get into this *now*?" said his father. "It's *Sunday*."

"You're right," said his mother, throwing the jug of milk into the cart, "we should wait until you get home from work tomorrow at eight o'clock."

His father sighed. "I work best when the rest of the team has gone home." He leaned over to pick up a pound of bacon. "And sometimes I need to unwind after work," he said.

"Un*wind*?" said his mother. "I can only imagine what it's like to be able to unwind. With the cleaning, the bills, the constant laundry, not to mention taking care of Elliott."

"You want to switch places?" said his father.

"Ha!" said his mother. "I'd like to see you clean a toilet."

A stranger approached with her own cart from the opposite aisle, and Elliott's mom and dad became tombstone silent. It wasn't polite to argue in front of strangers.

That night, before bed, Elliott's father slipped him his phone and said "Shhh. Don't tell mom." There were games on the phone, and with the volume turned down, he could play under the blanket without thinking about the terrors of his room. There came the same progression of tapping at his window, then the walls, but while he held the phone in his hands, he felt immune. But this time, after the tapping faded away, and Elliott believed it was over, there was a loud and hungry *tap-tap-tap* on his door. The last tap seemed to scrape down the door, as though about to claw its way in.

Elliott shuddered, and paused his game. He checked the battery life: 27%. He decided to turn it off, because he couldn't bear the thought of the phone shutting down on its own. Then something happened that had never happened before. The growling beneath the carpet began, even as the tapping on the door continued. Elliott had never heard them at the same time, and they grew louder as though they wanted to overwhelm each other.

Elliott clamped his hands over his ears and did everything he could not to scream. He mumbled nonsense noises to drown out the tapping and the growling. *Mum-mum-num-a-num-a-mummm.*

Finally, the door opened, and to Elliott's relief, his mother stepped through. She grabbed the phone out of Elliott's hands and shoved it in her pocket. "Lights out," she said, and closed the door behind her. Then the growling started again.

Elliott had to gather his things and go to the main office. He was being picked up from school early. His mother was waiting in the main office to bring him to a doctor's appointment. He had stuffed his 1st grade worksheets, artwork, and lunch bag into his Pixar backpack, and held it in front of him like a shield.

In the car, Elliott sat quietly in the backseat thinking about what awaited him at the doctor's office. His mother tapped her fingernails on the steering wheel. "Will he give me a shot?" Elliott asked.

"No shot, not today," said his mother.

"Will he put a swab in my mouth?" said Elliott.

"No, honey," said his mother. "Dr. Blevins is not that kind of doctor."

"What kind of doctor is he?" Elliott asked.

"She is the kind of doctor who talks to you," said his mother.

Elliott thought it was strange to see a doctor who didn't give shots or take temperatures, but he preferred not to be poked or prodded if necessary, so he didn't voice his concern.

Adding to the strangeness of the doctor's visit was the doctor's office itself, which looked more like a playroom, with books and dolls and toy cars on the shelves, and a Dora the Explorer rug on the floor. The doctor wore an aqua blouse and a long patterned skirt. She noticed Elliott looking at the toys and asked if he would like to play with them.

He sat down on the rug and played with the toy cars.

"My name is Dorothy," the doctor said. "Do you mind if I sit with you?"

Elliott shrugged. "Sure," he said. "I'm Elliott."

"These toy cars are pretty neat, huh?" said Dorothy.

"I guess," said Elliott. Then he made a *psssh* sound as two toy cars collided in a slow-motion crash.

"Do you have a special toy?" said Dorothy.

"Owlish," he said. "It's a stuffed baby owl. Well, it's not a *real* owl, but a soft one."

"Plush," said Dorothy, automatically. "Why didn't Owlish join you today?"

"I'm not a baby," said Elliott. "I don't need him all the time. Only at nighttime."

"Why do you need Owlish at nighttime?" she asked.

Elliott's eyes instinctively opened wider and saccaded briefly as though in REM sleep. Then they resumed focus on the toy cars in his hands. "Because of the monsters," he whispered.

"What monsters?" said Dorothy.

"They don't like to be talked about," said Elliott.

"Okay," said Dorothy. "We won't talk about them. So let's talk about you. What do *you* do when they appear?"

"I stay still and I listen," he said, "until they go away."

"Daniel is responsible for this," said his mother. "He ignores Elliott most of the time, and he won't engage with me when what we need is to get everything out in the open. Instead he just seethes."

"Please," said Dorothy to Elliott's mother. "Let's focus on Elliott right now."

"Of course," said his mother. "That's what I want, to focus on Elliott."

Dorothy turned her attention back to Elliott. "What makes the monsters go away?" she said.

"Mama," said Elliott, and his mother smiled triumphantly.

At the playground, Elliott stood back and watched other kids playing in the sandbox. He preferred to be the observer, surveying the scene. His parents sat on a bench nearby, watching him watch the other children.

"Dr. Blevins said that we need to communicate more, and not sublimate our feelings so much," said Elliott's mother.

"Is that so?" said Elliott's father distractedly.

"It's sublimating our feelings that is the problem," said Elliott's mother confidently. "You're going to give yourself an ulcer that way."

"How does she know this?" said Elliott's father. "She's never even met me."

Elliott's mother's face flashed fiercely for a second. "You say that like it's a point of pride. You should be ashamed you haven't met your son's therapist yet."

"Okay, here I am, ashamed of going to work every day and doing my duty to the family to provide," said Elliott's father.

"There's that sarcasm," said Elliott's mother. "Keep on sublimating your feelings that way, and see what happens."

A group of kids were spinning the twirl-a-whirl faster than was safe, and another mother jumped up to handle the situation. Elliott watched from the sand pit.

"Maybe sublimating our feelings *isn't* the problem" said Elliott's father. "Maybe the problem is the constant pick-pick-picking at me. That can't be healthy."

Elliott's mother couldn't help raising her voice. "I'm a nag, am I?"

"Let's save it for when we get home," said Elliott's father sternly.

"You may be fine sitting there and seething," said Elliott's mother, standing up and hoisting her purse onto her shoulder. "But I'm not going to bottle everything up inside. Elliott! We are heading home!"

Tiger-bear and Sea Monster visited night after night after night. No matter how frequent their visits, Elliott could never get used to them, never shake the feeling that, each time, the tapping and growling would be the last thing he would ever hear.

His visits to Dr. Blevins each week were no help. She never talked about how to get rid of the monsters at night, she just asked him questions. Mostly she just wanted to talk about his day at school, his hobbies (he played Legos and cars), and his friends (he had only one friend, a big girl with curly hair named Thomasina who was also an outcast because she was clumsy and asked inappropriate questions).

One day during free time Thomasina asked Elliott why he had dark circles around his eyes, and Elliott said "Mom says it's because I don't sleep."

"Why don't you sleep?" Thomasina asked, her hand in a bin of blocks, rummaging around for just the right shape for her building-in-progress, which was crooked and on the verge of collapsing.

"Monsters," said Elliott matter-of-factly.

"Oh," said Thomasina. "Have you seen them?"

"No," said Elliott. "I just hear them at night."

"Why don't you sleep with your parents?"

Elliott put down the matchbox car he was holding, and looked at Thomasina. "Your parents let you sleep in their room?"

"Of course," said Thomasina. "My mom says I steal the blankets though and push my dad out of the bed when I sleep over."

"Oh," said Elliott. "Well my parents don't."

"Tell you what," said Thomasina. "I could sleep over, and together we can spy on the monsters."

"What would we do?" said Elliott.

"As soon as we hear the monsters, we'll jump up and chase after them, so we can get a good look," said Thomasina. "Maybe we can take a picture and sell it for a million bucks!"

Elliott smiled faintly, but it quickly faded. "I'm not allowed to have friends sleep over," he said, "until I'm better."

"When will you be better?" said Thomasina.

"When the monsters go away," he said.

"Be brave," said Thomasina confidently, "and they will go away."

That night, as he was being tucked into bed, Elliott asked his father whether he could borrow his phone again to help him sleep.

"I don't know, kiddo," his dad said. "You know how your mom feels about screens."

"Please?" Elliott pleaded. He rarely asked for anything, so Elliott's father reached into his back pocket and handed him his smartphone.

"Next time you ask for *mom*'s permission, okay?" said his father.

"Okay," said Elliott.

But when he was left alone in his room, Elliott did not turn on

the games on the phone, and he did not clamp his hands over his ears. He decided that he was going to be brave, like Thomasina said. He was going monster-hunting.

When the tapping began at the window, Elliott leapt up from his bed and ran to the window, but nothing was there. When the growling came from under the bed, he used the light of the smartphone to look underneath and saw nothing there. When the tapping came to his door, he ran to the door and put his hand on the knob. Then he hesitated, because he started to imagine Tiger-bear and Sea Monster with multiple mouths and heavy, dragging arms, eyeless and horned and fanged. His courage dwindled, and try as he might, he could not turn the knob to open the door of his room. The tapping continued.

Then he remembered: outside the window, nothing. Under the bed, nothing. He mustered every ounce of his will to turn the knob, and just as the claw came tapping at the door again, he kicked it open and shone the light of the smartphone upon… nothing.

He walked into the hallway triumphantly, but to his surprise, out here, the tapping and growling were even louder, and more distinct. The tapping, in fact, was like articulated speech. Individual words instead of just taps. The growling, too, was like a low mumble rather than an empty stomach. He moved down the hall towards his parents' room, where he imagined that Tiger-bear and Sea Monster were devouring his mother and father. The tapping grew louder and even more distinct. The growling took on a hurt, even whining tone.

Elliott pushed open his parents' bedroom door. He held up the smartphone and switched it to camera mode. *Maybe we can take a picture and make a million bucks!* Then he snapped the picture. But what he caught instead was an image of his mother, a fist planted on her hips, leaning over his father with the other hand poised in the air above him as though to strike, her voice chipping away at her victim like a claw tapping on glass; and his father, seated on the bed looking weary and threadbare, his voice low and mumbling, an air of menace in his forced restraint.

Elliott dropped the smartphone and ran back to his room. He wrapped himself in the blankets, clamped his hands over his ears to silence the tapping and growling, louder now with the doors opened, and ground his teeth together anxiously. *May God keep the monsters apart*, he prayed, *May God tear them apart*.

MARCUS MYERS

THE HORSE WE'VE KILLED [A LETTER TO MY DAUGHTER]

These houses
won't hold

us for-
ever.

I doubt
they know

what no
body wants

to talk
about:

They're rooted
in the sun-

blanched
mandible

of this lush
world we've

shot from
under us.

SARAH GRIDLEY

NIGHT AND DAY

We are close to waking when we dream that we are dreaming.
—Novalis

You asked how to kiln-fire enamel
but didn't listen for the answer.
The dream went on like this until
you looked and found the artist
had gone inside. Lately your hands
are clenching where you dream,
clinging to a rock face the dream
is asking you to climb. Moth
on a shagbark hickory, frogs
below the stars: what turns you
over at night is turning the lateral
vertical. Because none has lived
but you the strangely impeccable
mark-work of your dreams, love
of the festival of this world
makes most of us
obscure. The hawk loves the mouse
too slow in reaching her hole. The last
bee to work a hive is somewhere
out in this future. What does
splendor do anymore but
bring your hand to your brow?
A dream is like the markings
each different horse
is known by: a blaze the length
of your waking
face, a star dividing
your eyes.

SARAH GRIDLEY

MITOSIS

Time was, a person
was alive with discernment.

If there was never consensus
in the popular sense, and no

consensus in the impossible
sense, thoughts were admitted

from stones and bees through
wooden doors to nourishing

darks. It was the cool
and singular sanctuary

conscience possibly is.
It was a place to go

or look inside of,
not prepared

to conceive or say as
a whole. As moons came

variously before us,
as stipulations

flew as bits of straw,
was it a strategy,

time, or some luminous
negligence? One

had only to see
how umbels arrived,

the spokes and turns
of their summer

wheels. One had only
to feel

the stoical
so

in the bluest expression,
even so.

Had you been a pond,
we might have known you

better. As you opened your eye
in the thick of us, we should never

have made
our way around you.

As moons worked through
their staggered shapes,

as the quick came down
through the ebbing

dead: free of definite
reference, one repaired to

other habitats, one left
concentric rings.

CARRIE OEDING

IF THIS WERE A SCULPTURE, I COULD WALK AROUND TO SEE ALL OF ITS SIDES

I think about holding the door for you at the same time I have already gone inside. In fact, I am holding the door right now, because I feel bad about it. Even though it is not the same. It is not the same as waiting too long to hold the door in the first place. The first place I waited was inside of myself.

There isn't a second place,

but everything moves along like there will be.

It's a story feeling.

The story doesn't wait. It promises to take you. You wait and listen. You are allowed to go. To think about others. To not think about others.

Where would we be without you.

In class, we read Sei Shōnagon, and I assign students their own lists of Hateful Things—
I hate it when drivers let too many cars merge. And I hate it when I'm holding a door and you don't even say Thank you *my god how hard is it.*

When any storm rolls in, it shows up like it has years of experience.

What will we do differently next time. The tree broke a limb during the last storm, and we pay too much money to have it trimmed when we know the whole thing needs to go down.

The winds in Rhode Island are always gale winds. In Minnesota they are just gusty. They are the winds I base all winds on. In Washington, they are fire hazards. When I lived there, I didn't live on the rainy side of Washington state, and so many people look puzzled when I say this. A few insist I'm mistaken.

Then, nothing happens. It rushes everyone. It's a still moment. The whole place must be raining.

Someone suggested news stories as a way of writing about something else, because all of this will eventually end. After she said this, we ordered lunch, and I mispronounced niçoise. This was in Ohio, twenty years ago.

We have empathy for people who have held things in for too long. When close, we have little patience for people who won't let things go. When my daughter was a baby, someone asked if she was a good person. Like a good baby? Fussy? *No. Like how some people are bad, you know.*

I know how the right space between you and me, when I've let go at the right moment, turning away, will land the door somewhat gently in your hands.

My teacher said, look, you've arranged things in such a way that to address any problem in here would destroy everything.

I throw so many precious things away when my daughter isn't looking. There isn't enough room to hang on to it. There's enough time, just not enough room.

CARRIE OEDING

I MADE A DINNER PARTY CENTERPIECE ENTIRELY OUT OF YOU. ARE YOU COMING?

Would you come to my party at the very end of the party?
I haven't even said anything but come closer.
I haven't even said anything, but could you make something with this.
I've already made you without anything. Hello, but even better.
Basically: here I am, here I am.
Here is now, and here is an actual now.
Here is a desire, and here is an actual desire. Is it yours or mine. My fingers are gone.

We're never going to meet, so why not set my poem on fire.
I have to be in stories, but not in here.
Here is yearning, and here is actual yearning.
This line is playing a song. Finally, we can just feel things.
This line is hungry, but this line just waited too long to eat.
I've eaten it, along with my fingers.

When I'm at the edge of the pool, I'm in the pool, but not the other way around.

Push me in. I want you here and there. I want you authentic and fake.
I want you mechanically and hand-drawn.
You've pulled me in closer, by just chopping wood. The exact technique and surprise breaks. We can see it. There's a pile of wood. It's an Agnes Martin. It's on fire and pastel.
I got this feeling while frightened. I was near others. But it was a quiet museum.

Should I run or become a grid.

You do this by drawing your lines.
I follow without a body.
You've pulled me in closer, just by wavering. I thought I wanted an RSVP.

MILLICENT BORGES ACCARDI

A REPRESENTATION OF ITSELF

And the world is my idea,
except when it isn't,
and Schopenhauer will
solve all the problems.
When we dance this
close or when the solutions
elude us, as parents tuck
us in late at night after dancing
and high ball Harvey Wallbangers,
smelling of boozy
alcohol and wickedness.
It was a rare existence,
this being left along
to fend on one's own,
long after it was well enough,
and so, it was life or sadness
or a lack of ambition that
caused the downfall, to take
away whatever it was that
We thought-imagined
In our dreams. For a moment
It was truly, really, hold on
tight, belonging
to us. Once and for always.

MILLICENT BORGES ACCARDI

I'VE DRIVEN ALL NIGHT THROUGH A GRAINY LANDSCAPE

All the answers, I used to know,
repeated again and again, as if they were
lines in a political game, trying to talk
someone into believing, as they say
in apples and a banana and then go forth
into a world where there are walls
built across artificial boundaries,
and families torn apart inside the parallel
lines of truth. It is what it is and that
means even if it kills me, I will be true
to my own patience. It's agonizing, I know,
every single time, the visits are painful,
the release is impossible to recreate.
It's a total body experience, granted
and guaranteed to take me somewhere I can
smile and normalize things as they should
be, as I recalled them—just not yesterday.
But, last year, it didn't it take weeks
for the clock to click one minute to
three like when you were a kid, agonizing
to go home. And then there are the waiters,
not food service but those who are patient,
for diagnosis, for tests, for death.
The mid-line boundary between
someone saying everything is gonna be
OK and everything is over. It is the middle
passage, that long journey, that I have
To work myself up to face, to make it
Through borders and boundaries, week after
week for the past year, a life lived,
sawed in half like a magic trick. I am
perched on the edge of the bed, ready to
nod or to run. Waiting makes you swear
someone was loved and kind once, and
that to make it all OK again, there is

wishing, a hope for it to be as it was,
when it was perceived to be all right
but perhaps it never was. And, so,
to normalize interactions, the daily hellos
we take for granted, the guarantees we
make with each other must be labeled
seared into agreements that we promise
to be civil or polite to each other, the nods
at the bus stop, basic remnants of life
in front of a modicum of human happiness.
But my heart also breaks. In truth, it hurts a lot
Because the heart knows what my
Job is. The hurt is the pain above
it all, the others keep moving away, to form
new shapes, now, and when I want them
to stay close, they stick to me like glue.
Longing is the middle ground, when you have
distant connections. It's such a hard place to be in.
The waiting and the hoping for a time
When you won't wait any longer then felling guilty
for that thought. Then, it all runs together
in time, like dirty rivers, seeking a new mouth.

DEBRA DI BLASI

FOUR DESCANTS FROM *SELLING THE FARM*

for Leslie McGrath, 1957-2020

Courtesy of C&R Press, from *Selling the Farm*

1.

The clays along the creek bed were pristine, gray, kiln perfect. And below them slabs rife with Cretaceous fossils: Mollusca sealed shut in a permanent silent sleep. Crinoid stems and cirri frozen mid-plummet.

> Woodland Indians made jewelry from them: beads from sea lilies and buttons from mother-of-pearl. We collected the beads, the buttons. Then lost them. We lost them so good we did not know they were gone until
>
> > [years later, as adults around a dinner table, someone said
> >
> > —*Remember Indian beads?*—
> >
> > And someone else said
> >
> > —*I wonder what happened to them?*—
> >
> > And someone else said
> >
> > —*Who knows? Who cares?*—
> >
> > And we looked at that someone with a kind of sadness confirming the familial distance we all now survived against. A distance that would expand beyond this lifetime, possibly into the next, when]
>
> we would become the dust of stars, or merely dust.

By now the creek has changed its course, its identity. The clays are hidden behind piles of tree limbs guarded by water moccasins and copperheads. The fossils remain buried in stony mud. The once pristine waters over sand and polished pebbles run opaque always, a dirty sullen brown not even an uncurried roan.

> [Creek shat full of pesticides and herbicides and fertilizers by the farm's new owners who cannot care less, really, about minnows tagging clear waters, who spray to kill weeds that won't be killed, only made exuberant, though the insects ail or die and thus the birds die or flee, and a land once symphonic goes quiet as an empty hall, and the ghost of my dead sister. And the ghosts of who we all were then can't find our way out of the purloined woods to get back home.]

We're lost.

Though I try so damn hard to find us.

I try: Afternoons now on another continent, at the edge of sleep, floating downstream beyond language, I believe—vehemently, as only a child believes—that I'm gifted with magic. I'm a conjurer, paramount of all conjurers, able to put it back just as it was then on that perfect day when:

> All of us, even our parents, sprawl on a sand bank to dry ourselves in sunlight shifting under trees so tall they disappear in summer's royal halo.
>
> And someone's telling a story.
>
> And someone's laughing.
>
> And someone's found an Indian bead among the pebbles.
>
> And the father says, *You better hang onto that. It'll be worth something someday.*

2.

I have been absent.

I don't recall the ways to be exalted by, say, a plain stone in my path. Yet here it is: simple chunk of granite worn free of an aggregate boulder pushed forward by glaciers.

> Millennia: The ice insisted southward. Then stopped in the valley of our farm, in the lowlands, and retreated, melting into a lake that became a river that spit down to a creek.
>
> And a forest grew up by the creek. And the lightning burned. And the wildflowers grew from dead leaves and the fungi rose from dead trunks. And the glades and prairies took root. Hyphae reached out, and every root welcomed.
>
> > Centuries: The tallgrass prairies succumbed to hooves and plow. Pastures, then. Crops. And the long-legged mammals (elk and deer and wolves and big cats) and the shorter critters (rabbits and foxes, raccoons and opossums, red squirrels and field mice and chipmunks and skunks) and the innumerable winged and the finned...
> >
> > They each found a paradise godless, robust, hemmed in by fencelines and no-trespass signs that kept the guns and hounds and fishhooks at bay.
> >
> > > Years: The old father's shoes become garbage. Gray hats burned. Bent nails. Rust. The new owners haul it all away.

Time was different then.

Now: I toss a piece of granite back into an ocean that will rise to drown us all.

3.

Summer heat radiated the sweet undulating stink of every wild thing dead and rotting and live and shitting.

Wind that seemed endless died down, and it got hot in even the fields and woods, even in waters nearly down to the bottom clays and stone. Ponds dried to cracked pavers. And the distance bled to sky, cut by such haze as if the world stood ablaze.

It's when I knew to the fevered core I was nothing more than anything else. That the brown recluse spider could rot my skin, and the copperhead poison my blood, and the stray bobcat drag me screaming into a pile of underbrush.

That they had a right, much as I, to take what was offered or put in their path.

That my knowing this did not make me immune to what would take us all someday, regardless of how or why or ways we thought ourselves too smart.

Death, like heat, the great leveler, after all. And pretending elsewise does not make it not so.

4.

A rock pile grew every spring next to The Red Shed. Pink granite, black porphyry, white quartz, limestone mottled with fossilized stems and shells from a seabed long gone. Every head-sized stone hefted from farm fields, plow blades chipped or broken as my father serenading wide skies with songs of rage, echoing past cattle no longer startled, clear down to the house where I wondered not what caused the *goddamns* and *sonafabitches* but rather the man's personality growing menacing: a turbulent storm advancing with age and lost teeth.

> Hey, I was a child. Thick-headed. Born light of the world's weight, the struggles to do right by whomever judged our constant fury.
>
> > [By now I've sung my own ranting plenty and await the plenty more. Hindsight's a ruse, should I follow to its manufactured core.]

It grew. A foot high then three. Twenty rocks, thirty, forty... piling up over the years against The Red Shed going pink from sun bleach. I'd scour each rock for diamonds and silver, gold, rare gems like trilobites embedded in mud turned to stone. Anything worth something enough to lift us out of father's brutal fields and mother's manic madhouse.

> Paris, I thought. Yes! Or Hollywood. Having neither seen nor been to either city except in fantasies manufactured by bad TV. Sure thing, we'd strike it rich like the Beverly Hillbillies and live happily ever after in some fine mansion, cement pond out back, and all my fond animals frolicking on manicured lawns. I'd wear Evening in Paris perfume (not toilet water) and my pajamas would be silk.

In sorting rocks I discovered histories in the scarred and broken: encroaching glaciers that dug the valley of the creek, leaving scree and a lake's alluvium and drift.

There were no diamonds. No silver. Not even fool's gold for a foolhardy girl. Even the fossils were ordinary, remnants of creatures worthless to hunters who glimpsed their quietus caught in Missouri limestone.

But that rock pile stayed a while a palace for rats that stole corn from the shed, until there came to be no corn, no kernels, no shed. No father in the cornfields, and no fields.

> No girl wondering at the screeching reach of time into future tense where my hands, veined like schist through quartz, will recall the weight of each rock in weather—winter cold, summer hot, spring wet, and autumn static — and will pile them one by one upon my breast to keep me fastened to the world a little longer.
>
> Until I finally understand—and forget—their long rippling silence as what was always a piercing *fare-thee-well.*

J. BOWERS

STAY GOLD, PONYBOY

"Honey, when I pass away, just skin me and put me up on Trigger and I'll be happy."
– Roy Rogers to Dale Evans

My mother and I are the only two in this museum, the lone pilgrims peering at glamorous Hollywood headshots and plastic six guns under glass, pressing buttons to hear tinny recordings of Roy Rogers saying "Howdy" echo through empty galleries. She doesn't understand why we drove all day for this, why I got church-quiet when we slapped on adhesive sheriff's badges and passed through the unmanned turnstiles.

We drift from case to case, reading yellowed trading cards greedily fished out of Sugar Crisp and Post Toasties. "Take it easy, that's my hip pocket," warns Roy, singing cowboy handsome, as you nip the waistband of his Wranglers like he's the Coppertone baby. "Thank you for your kind attention," he says, and you obediently bow, touching your muzzle to your polished hooves. I am memorizing every word, postponing what we paid for—you, the wonderful one-two-three-four-legged friend who carried his cowboy through a million matinees, you, the palomino superhero who made countless suburban children scrawl "a pony" at the top of every Christmas list, you, all the rage. We watched you outfight the Phantom, outrun steam trains, outwit black hat after black hat, while every other scrap of horseflesh on the silver screen stood in the background, boring brown and bay and gray.

But the show must go on, so you do. Roy had you mounted in your famous rear, faded forelegs dangling helplessly in midair, glass eyes and silver conchos glittering under strategic spotlights. They've made things as familiar as possible in this strange purgatory, hiring some high school kid to paint a pasture on the wall, scattering hay on the wooden diorama floor. The body of Bullet the Wonder Dog rests at your carefully shod feet, his fake tongue a moist pink slab. The thirty-dollar-a-ticket strains of Roy Rogers Jr. crooning "Don't Fence Me In" drift through a tightly locked stage door.

"He looks mangy," says Mom, pointing out the vinyl veins swelling beneath your newspaper-yellow hide. And I press a button to activate a video of Roy Sr. modeling various Nudie suits, white teeth and sequins shining, because I want her to be wrong. I try the door on your display—all the doors, like a bad kid, giggling, nervous under your blank gaze, reluctant to follow my mother past Nellybelle the Jeep, and away. Mostly, we pretend we're not bothered, buying five-dollar DVDs and

kitchen magnets in the Happy Trails Gift Shop, washing our hands of you in the well-appointed public restroom, then wandering dazed into the hot flash of the empty parking lot.

But tonight, long after the souvenir ladies pile into their Buicks, as my mother snores in her hotel bed, as the moon rises high over neon signs, I am coming back to you. Sliding deftly under locked turnstiles, lariat in hand, I'll feed you mothballs with a flattened palm and use Roy's wax arm to give myself a leg-up. You'll move slowly at first, shaking dust off your creaking saddle, snorting life back into your moldy bones. We'll rodeo through velvet ropes and pirouette past the cowboy hat display, leaping the ticket stand in a single bright bound to burst through the waiting doors, into empty prairie and open sky.

There's a ditch by the road that swells with mud when it rains, so it rains. I cup your warm nose with two hands, loosen your saddle, your moldering stitches. And you are allowed to rot.

GUFFY BERGMAN

WHAT YOU CAN DO

Labor to prepare the way for butterflies at the Dewey farm just eight miles
northwest of our flyway town,
three bucks under minimum wage earned for tasks like tying odd branches
to each other,
crepe myrtle to crepe myrtle, to form a canopy above the steel
and chicken-wire frame
draped with wintercreeper vine, too, so the monarchs had reserve to rest
their royal caravan when they came through —
— husband, wife, and me, at work
when the sun was gracious to our cause, only beginning
to turn into a burning
judged by the narrowing of eyes, by the slower pace at which we trimmed
the unfit limbs and sprouts — and in October, I drove back out to see
the drip of all our hand-done labor,
before the Deweys split, before their kids went off to different schools,
traded visits,
I saw the way the monarchs ply their silent wings — apart, together,
apart — and folded once again,
though some of them stayed put one way or the other.

GUFFY BERGMAN

NIGHTTIME WAX

One by one each star forgets its angle of the dark:
wind rages,
a night of grins and limestone, hyperbole
that flakes beneath

some self examination. What lack.

The heifer, me, the farmer and attendant ghosts:
What work, what plowing back
and forth.

ANGELICA WHITEHORNE

MAYBE I AM JUST AN ALGORITHM

I sell myself to both the photo grid and the book of faces, which
is really just another screen of masks.

The bluebird screeches in my ear until I open its cage
and let it sing my thoughts for me.

I am both the cam girl and the man pleasing himself,
the porn tycoon who owns the site and the tech guy who built it.

My keyboard teeth and monitor heart reboot, power up, update,
soften the ware of the fleeting human in me.

I am made of Ponzi scheme daydreams, night club photo ops,
gourmet donut shops, the tween's post in a bikini top.

I am the 30% off code, I am every comment and screenshot,
every message sent and saved, and that ad shop that keeps
popping up.

I am each of the items in your Amazon cart,
while another worker pisses in a plastic cup to keep up.

I am their sigh of relief, just as I am their paycheck,
and the printer which spits it.

I go to bed with Capitalism and we always film it and I always
come out with new children.

And these children are electric toothbrushes, or underwear that
holds period blood, or wicker containers to collect more stuff, or
else they are neon contraptions to smash the garlic or jump
ropes that light up, or else they are some other singing newborn
from the loins of our production line.

They smell of fresh plastic and resemble me and together we fill
the house making a replica of a family, a modern day,
minimum-wage sense of luxury.

It gets expensive, but we all know that a home without things is
just a box. A hand without a cursor is just a fossilized rock.

People without online consumption are just voices screaming
into the blackness: "How much am I worth?"

ERIC PANKEY

FROM *ESSAYS IN IDLENESS: A ZUIHITSU*

45.

Between figure and ground, a stage is set for the viewer. The parallel plots, being parallel, never waver or intersect. And watching, reckoning with time, one feels, not exiled, but displaced, surrounded by the dredged up and extraneous, the fodder and ciphers. One attempts to forget the others seated beside, behind, or in front, to forget that the common experience of the darkened theater, the individual threads woven to make up the snow-blind blank space of the screen. Up close, one notices more and more subatomic particles fill in the void: blips and specks on a dirty white tundra.

Soon one forgets one is reading the subtitles as they appear, seven to nine syllables at a time, and one is fluent suddenly in Greek or Hungarian, or some indigenous and endangered language about to slip from usage. As an actor speaks, one feels one's own tongue touch the back of one's front teeth, one's mouth opens around the air of a vowel. An o, perhaps. It is as though one has awakened in the night of a sleeping car to a single word spoken out of a dream clearly, directly. And in that a word: a thousand miles crossed one tie after another, the gravel bed's angle of repose shimmered, shuddered. At last undermined.

52.

The story so far is all rehearsal, what I call standard procedure, and no date set for the performance. To add edge to uncertainty, the problem is a problem of vigilance and I am down to a skeleton crew. I admit I am an emptied skiff, a placeholder, a null field. To recognize the invisible, I approximates the infinite. It's total immersion or nothing.

57.

A king awaits a cargo of gold, ivory, pearls, and sandalwood from Ophir. Before the treasure arrives a forest reclaims the palace. Seen from above, the forest appears as a garden, intimately scaled to a sacred geometry. Rejoice. As the seeker advances, God recedes. This is the origin of dance.

KARIN FALCONE KRIEGER

HOW TO SAVE A SWAN

Not long ago I was riding my bike on the walking path along West Shore Road on a mild overcast day, and the traffic was backed up as far as I could see. I rolled past dozens of cars and encountered a huge white mute swan, huffing its way up the narrow road. The cars slowed. They honked. A lady rolled down her car window and said to the bird, "Hey move!" and inched past him. I was convinced something bad was going to happen to it, so I left my bike on the walking path, hopped the rail and started walking alongside.

His giant webbed feet are slapping the smooth new black pavement, like the sound my own bare feet would make, and I feel his pain. His head is as high as my shoulder, his black beak is open and he is panting. I can see his tongue. Swans do not look this big when they are floating in the water.

"Hey buddy, get out of the road."

"Fly away."

"Why you're holding up the parade!"

These are things people say to the swan from their car windows, most of them laughing that this could be the source of the hold up. By now cars near and far are honking. I wonder if I could lift the swan up, over the rail, over the sea wall, into the bay, but I am afraid of touching the huge animal. Now I am marching with him. The pace is relentless and he is oblivious to me.

Now drivers see me walking with the swan, and associate me with the swan, as if I know him personally, or as if I know what to do, and they start saying things to me like,

"What are you going to do?"

"Is he hurt?"

"Did you call someone?"

I just shrug. I do not have my phone. That is why I take bike rides, to get away from my phone. I just keep tramping along, thinking as least he will not be run over if I am by his side. I am buying time.

A car coming in the other direction stops. There is barely a shoulder but she leaves her green Subaru there half in the road, a blonde in yoga gear with narrow eyes. She joins me, beside the enormous panting creature, marching, so now her car and body are also in the way. The traffic comes to a complete halt. The woman driving the car crawling along behind us decides to join the team of swan people now, too. She and her minivan full of kids are sympathetic; she is not going to honk or inch past. She puts her emergency lights on. Then I hear shouts coming

from behind us. Seemingly out of no where a large sunburnt woman with reddish hair comes running up behind us with a big old comforter from the 1970's, the kind printed with patchwork calico in earthy colors. It is flapping in her outstretched arms.

She is thinking like a rescue person: cover the injured animal to calm it down and move it, but the bird is healthy and not slowing down. The spectacle of the lady running with the comforter, the Subaru in the road, the minivan with flashers on, the two ladies marching in exercise gear, all held up enough traffic in both directions to give the swan his only way out, a very long runway.

Suddenly those great feet as wide as a man's hand break into a run. And the vista is clear, but not endless, as the road bends and a car could decide to dash past, so there is a moment of uncertainty. The sound of a swan's wings, if you have never heard it, is loud. It's like a whip cutting through air, but louder, and the rhythm builds. He's 20, 40, 70 feet away and finally his feet rise and he is airborne! An enormous effort, but all that weight that was slapping the road is up and off and over our heads, over the rail and over the sea wall and finally, safely into his watery domain.

He lands far from the road, into the bay, near two other swans, small as toys at this distance, he and flicks and tucks his great wings away. All I can think is how good the cool water must feel on those feet. I imagine they hurt and feel blistery from the ordeal.

The four of us women, nod, breathe, sigh, and smile, say things like "Way to go!" and "Wow…" and "Beautiful!" and go along our separate ways, and the cars start rolling again. It is likely we will never meet again, but for a moment like four superheroines we came from four directions, each with our own superpowers, each exponentially increasing the powers of the others. In reality, we did nothing for the swan, except to hold space. Holding space in the face of confusion, taking pause in place of restless action, giving protection, bringing skills and knowledge.

Swans needs a really long runway, and people need hearts big enough to hold that much space.

JON THOMPSON

AN EFFORT TO ENTER INTO MORNING

for Brenda Hillman

With the freshness of its first declaration,
light fills the windows, then falls onto
the breakfast table, the blond varnished wood bright
in its resurrection. Not yet urgent but insistent,
the mental laundry list of the things to be done.
Making coffee, I
tick through them—roasted scent rising—not
separate from the dreams
just abandoned, the feeling of
just having arrived from another country too hurriedly
visited to sum up in the mind, an
inchoate series of impressions that refuse pattern.

It's always this way: relearning to
inhabit the body, relearning
to inhabit the mind, the new day coeval
with a history too interconnected
to take in. Yet something enters: not words, not feelings. More
a code that's dangerous
to translate, a language that'll take you
to places with names you
may not be able to forget. I don't know what
to say about it, the identifiable possibility & terror—
no, not terror exactly, but the thinnest edge of it
at the back of the mind.
You place-set a bowl, a side plate. Coffee trembles
in the white, thin-rimmed mug.
The sleep-I and the morning-I
work to forget one another. The sound
of sunlight pours in. Nothing one does ever leaves. Nothing
one does, one does alone.

MAGGIE ANDERSEN

THE HEALING PROPERTIES OF SALT

In the Czech Republic, my ancestral home, people seek out the comfort of ancient salt caves. The crystals contain iron, calcium, zinc, magnesium and iodine, all of the elements indispensable to human life. The salt can cure physical illnesses as well as problems of the mind, the Czechs say. And who am I not to believe them? Here in the United States, Eastern European immigrants have been trying to replicate the conditions of the caves. They build them in suburbs and off-the-beaten-path neighborhoods, rent them out hourly, and pipe in soothing music. I used to go with my family back when we did everything together, back when people would say our family was better than theirs, back when people used to say I had really hit the jackpot, as far as families go.

*

When I got the call that my grandmother was in the emergency room because she had fallen and laid on the floor for three days, the words seemed to go past my mind and instead went straight into my body and stayed there. We had just had our first unhappy Christmas a few days prior. My grandmother, at 89, had started taking anti-depressants because she was lonely. Her husband had been dead for forty years, but now her last girlfriend had passed away; her kids visited once a week and all at once; it was hard to make friends with new neighbors in senior housing because she was so hard of hearing. On Christmas Day, in my sister's new Georgian house, my mother got drunk and complained loudly about her mother's incontinence while my sister helped Grandma in the bathroom and I watched our babies crawl around on the floor, making sure they didn't put small objects in their mouths.

But this is not the narrative that comforts me. This is not the family identity I've enjoyed since 1977. Back to the salt caves.

*

Several years ago, before the babies, my Aunt Lorraine heard of a cave coming to Chicago and immediately made a reservation for us. Us: the seven women who gather at my grandmother's retirement apartment every Wednesday to eat the dinner she makes or to make her dinner or to bring her her favorite things. (Beet soup from the deli, pretty much anything from the bakery, hand-rolled cigarettes.) We gossip and interrupt each other on Wednesdays. We laugh loudly and cry easily. My aunts tell my mother about their old friends on Facebook, and then my grandmother fiddles with her hearing aid and says, "Who was on Spacebook?"

My sisters and I fall into each other laughing and say, "Facebook, Grandma." I touch her cheek. "Facebook."

"Well, I can't hear!" she says, laughing.

"It would help if you wore both your hearing aids, wouldn't it?" my mother says impatiently.

"Not really," my grandma mutters and then she tries again to twist the knot into her red, sore ear.

*

We drive out toward the shopping malls until we see a tacky sign, which initially makes me skeptical, but inside, the place looks and smells like a high-end spa. Marble floors, aromatherapy candles, silky girls writing down dates and times in appointment books, everyone speaking in soft voices.

I arrive first and sit in the lobby with my mother, studying the list of microelements said to be found in the caves.

"You need the magnesium," I say to my mother, who had a painful kidney stone last year.

"And we'll let you have all the iron," she says to me, her anemic daughter, and her favorite.

"Calcium for Gram," I say. "It helps the joints, and her knees are getting so bad."

"She should lose a little weight and then her knees wouldn't be so bad," my mother says.

I root my jaw and decide to be respectful.

"She sure does zip around on that walker though," I say.

And just then, Gram barges in on said walker, looking uncannily like Albert Einstein.

"I'm ready!" she announces in her cigarette-smoky voice, much too loudly for this lobby. "What are we doing here again?"

My aunt, who drove her here, growls. "You know what we're doing here, Ma. Stop acting like an idiot."

My grandma lets herself fall down onto the bench next to me, gets as close to my face as she can, and says, "Hello, my Maggie the Cat."

"Hello, Dolly."

"Hi there, Miss America."

And then she kisses my cheek. In her eighties, my grandmother has become legally blind and mostly deaf, which is a particular bummer, considering the fact that she always loved to read. She read a book every other day for as long as she could see, and now she listens to them on tape, at full blast, which is really not the same. Somehow, she can still cook and play cards, which is why my aunts and mother think she's exaggerating sometimes. But then again, they've all been to the doctor with her, and he always says the same thing. The macular degeneration is getting worse; there's nothing he can do but clean the hearing aids.

My sisters walk into the spa then, looking like they actually belong here. They are well-groomed professionals who wear crisp, tailored outfits, high heels, and perfect make-up. I'm a graduate student who teaches college courses, and I'm good at it, but not so good at

dressing the part. I'm not very good with fashion or makeup, but my grandmother has always called me Miss America.

*

One of the silky girls opens the door to the salt cave and there it is, looking like a 1980's disco. White glittery walls made of salt crystals, iodine rocks for ground cover, pink and blue uplights, a reclining canvas chair for each person in our party. The girl tells us we should try for silence; that'll make for a richer experience. But we don't know how to be silent--it isn't something we've ever practiced. Some families can sit and eat a quiet, polite dinner, or watch television together without a running commentary, but that has never been us. An ex-boyfriend once said to me, "Your family does not know the meaning of indoor voices." We look around at each other, shrug our shoulders, and smile. Okay, we say. We'll try. The music begins, and it isn't classical, as I naively expected. None of the famous Eastern European composers, but instead, a new age symphony, something resembling Enya, circa "Sail Away." I inhale deeply, the salty smell of the sea. I stand in the opening of the cave, listen to the sounds of waves through speakers, and it does help to get me in the mood. We walk together across a blanket of salt rocks.

"Ouch!" my grandma cries. "Ouch ouch ouch!" My mother and aunts roll their eyes, then my mother's eyes narrow and she says, "You're not a baby."

"But she is again!" I argue. "That's what old age does."

"Well, it's not attractive to be a crabby old woman."

"She's really not that crabby. And it's not attractive to be so mean to your elderly mother either."

You might be crabby too, I want to say. She sits alone in that apartment, day after day, listening to books on tape and smoking cigarettes. She watches CNN and the Colbert Report around a black hole in the center of her vision, and you complain that all she wants to do is talk about politics. I have told my mother, on several occasions, that she should be grateful that her mother still has her mind.

According to the lobby pamphlet, the crystals contain selenium, an element that sweeps free radicals and protects against illnesses by neutralizing the harmful effects of polluted air. In short, it delays the body's aging process. My mother can't bully my grandmother into not aging, but she still thinks she can. I know my mother's bullying is partially based on fear, and I hate for her to feel so afraid. Maybe it's especially hard for her because she knows she's my grandmother's favorite child, and doesn't know how she'll live without her. Or maybe it's that she's already in her sixties and has had her own health scares. But she never says any of that.

My grandmother says, "Getting old is hell, Mag. Don't do it."

I whisper into her hearing aid, "You have to be quiet now."

As I steer her to the closest seat, she complains about the salt rocks hurting her feet. "I thought this was supposed to be good for us! Why did I have to take off my shoes?"

I always find it funny that this woman who became a widow at the age of forty-nine and grew up during the Great Depression will always complain about the small things. She sinks into a deck chair and searches me with her eyes.

"What am I supposed to do now?" she asks.

"Just close your eyes," I say.

And to my surprise, she does. This woman who doesn't have an easy time relaxing. She is always worrying, for all of us more than for herself. She worries about her oldest daughter who's been laid off, her middle daughter whose children have moved away, her youngest daughter who drinks too much. If I tell her about a student who's been disrespectful to me, she worries that they'll shoot me, and if I tell her my brakes are squeaking, she worries I'll get into an accident. She also worries about the Republicans winning the next election, leaving her candles burning when she goes out of the house, and getting Alzheimer's, so: when I see her close her eyes and fold her hands across her sea of a stomach, I'm happy.

The lights are dim, but I can still make out my mother looking self-conscious and girlish, as she always does in unfamiliar situations. Maybe that's because she moved straight from my grandmother's house to my father's and they have both taken care of her so well that she's rarely had to make decisions without them. She shuffles around, looking for a chair she'll like. Aunt Lorraine, the pretty one, twists her calloused feet into the ground cover, bends down and scoops up handfuls, rubbing salt into her palms. Tia, the aunt who drinks too much and has never liked to work, looks perfectly at home as she reclines back in her sun chair, singing along with Enya, pointing her pretty painted toenails. If you ignore the lines in her face and her potbelly, she still looks like she did as a teenager, where I find my earliest memories of her. I take a chair next to her so she doesn't have to be alone. I scoot in quickly and there's a ruckus as I fall straight backwards. Everyone else stifles their laughter, but Tia opens her eyes and laughs out loud, then helps me to adjust.

"There. How's that? Comfy, huh?"

"Yes," I say. "Now it's perfect."

Then I close my eyes and listen to my family's breathing, which frightens me in a room as still as this one. Maybe this is why we always fill up rooms with noise, I think, so we can't hear the clicking and wheezing. Too much cigarette smoking for too many years. Too many

card parties and long, lesisurely dinners. The sounds of their lungs make me feel like I'm drowning.

The cave is cool and crisp, and I pretend now that we are in Bohemia, the home of our ancestors. If you would look at us, you might think we look a little like gypsies, with sallow skin and dark circles under our eyes. If you knew us, you'd say we had a little of that Bohemian soul—Lorraine plays the accordion like a madwoman and my sister bangs on her piano keys. Tia plays a wicked flute, and my mother and I write when we're sad. My grandmother has always been our best audience. We are open-hearted girls and sloppy drunks; the boys and men in our family think we're the bees' knees.

I hear my sisters laughing.

"I'm having trouble being quiet," one of them whispers.

And then I start laughing, too. When we were children, my grandmother might have put us in the corner for this. She lived in the apartment upstairs then and cooked for us every night. When we were fighting and pulling each other's hair, she would step in between us and literally rip us apart; she was stronger than all of us put together. Then she would say, "Stop it now! You love each other!" She and my mother usually played Scrabble after dinner, or helped us with our homework. My grandmother: Algebra and Chemistry. My mother: English and Art.

The new age music sounds, to me, like longing, and makes me think of a Czech phrase I learned that can't be translated into English. The closest thing is this: A thousand tendernesses. I yearn for you. My mother isn't the only one who gets impatient with my grandmother. Lorraine went to pick her up last week and she wasn't outside waiting and smoking, like she usually is. My aunt rang the bell several times. She took out her cell phone and called, let the phone ring over and over, and left a frantic message. Finally, she called building security, and when the security guard opened the door, my grandmother was humming to herself and making coffee. She had forgotten about the appointment, and wasn't wearing her hearing aids. My auntie cried and screamed at her. Here's the thing I've realized about my mom and her sisters: they want their mother back. The mother who was strong for them when their father died so young, the mother who switched to the night shift then so she wouldn't get depressed, the mother who demanded that they leave men who weren't good to them and be good to the ones who were. The mother who helped raise their children, and who was maybe a little too good to them. Now the cave is eerily silent between tracks, and I wonder what they're all dreaming. When the cave is silent, even for a minute, I miss my sisters' laughing and Tia's singing, my grandmother's ragged breathing. I open my eyes, quickly, and as if she senses this, my sister opens her eyes, too. We look around the room.

My sister points at my grandma, who looks so peaceful now, and asks me, "Is she dead?"

I burst out laughing because it sure does look like it.

"Maybe," I say, because it would be more poetic like that, wouldn't it?

The room fills up with the sounds of waterfalls.

My grandmother won't have any money to leave for us, and she's told me this for years.

"I know, Grandma, and I'd rather have you than money. Jesus Christ."

She spent it all on us when we were young; she said she wanted to give it to us while she was still alive. She helped us pay for vacations so we could all travel around together. Cabaret shows in Vegas and family portraits on cruise ships, Broadway shows in New York City, elegant dinners in New Orleans. And now, after all those years of being so close together, we visit her just once a week, in a boxy brick building where she lives in senior housing. The hallways smell like Korean fish dishes and sauerkraut, and her cigarettes, of course. My grandmother pays subsidized rent for a small one-bedroom apartment with cheap carpet and cheaper cabinets. And sometimes I don't go, because I am trying to finish my PhD, because I just got married and sometimes Wednesday is our only night together, because there's an exercise class I like to go to and I have to stay healthy, don't I? Excuses. And she never makes me feel guilty. Maybe this is why I can be patient with her when no one else can do it.

My mother and her sisters look peaceful now too—the lines in their faces seem to soften. Maybe it's the magnesium reducing excitability; maybe they don't have to worry right now. Maybe they don't have to remember the Wednesday night last year when they all sat together at my grandmother's dining room table and all of a sudden, my sister walked in and started crying. "What's wrong with Grandma's mouth, Mom? What's wrong with her face?" My mother and her sisters had been sitting with my grandmother for an hour, but they weren't able to see what was happening. They rushed her to the hospital and the emergency room doctors stopped the stroke right in the middle before it could do any major damage. A few hours later, when I arrived, a nurse took my grandmother's vitals, and said they were surprisingly perfect.

My grandmother smiled and said, "Thank you, sir. You're a scholar and a gentleman."

Then to me, in what she thought was a whisper: "Good looking, ain't he?"

The nurse laughed and said, "She's a riot."

I take a deep breath again, and the cave smells like a storm has just passed.

We used to laugh on Wednesdays. I admitted to my family once that I talk to myself when I'm feeling anxious, and my mother said I was crazy like my father. My Aunt Lorraine said she sings to herself whenever she's afraid. Tia said, "You know what? I just smoke my head off." And when my grandma said she used to try to figure out the hypotenuse of the park while she was walking through it, we all just burst out laughing.

I went into the bathroom once and saw that my grandmother hadn't cleaned her toilet in a while. I came out and stood behind her, pretended to vomit for my sisters' benefit.

Tia said, "Oh get out of the way, you wuss. I'll clean it."

My grandma swiveled around and said, "What's wrong with Maggie?"

"Nothing, Gram," I said, laughing, then she patted her lap and I sat in it, even though I was thirty-five years old. "It's just that your bathroom was kind of a mess."

"I can't see!" we all cried out at the same time, anticipating her response.

We used to laugh on Wednesdays. My grandma would make a big, hearty salad or a pot of oxtail soup. Sometimes we had fruit smoothies after dinner, and sometimes we had real dessert. Grandma would lie to us and say she hadn't eaten sweets in a week, but then we'd find a half-eaten coffee cake hidden in the pantry. She interrupted even the most serious stories to ask, "What did everyone think of my soup?" And her daughters would scream, "Ma! Why don't you listen?" But she did. For so many years. And they knew it, which is why, I guess, they were always screaming. So the world would know they were in pain. Their mother had been so loving to them that they expected the world would be kind, too.

Shortly after the salt cave night, Tia moved to Florida to live the Jimmy Buffet life with her husband, Auntie Lorraine joined a jazz band that played nights and weekends, and my mother found a new job in an office. My grandma sat alone in her apartment and listened to books on tape.

*

A few years later, the oldest salt cave in the world collapsed under the weight of an avalanche.

*

Around the same time, my grandmother fell in her apartment and laid there screaming for days before anyone found her. My mother and aunts blamed each other, and fought viciously about whether or not their mother should be admitted to a 24-hour nursing facility. My Aunt Lorraine said she would be safer in a home, which was the doctor's recommendation, but my mother said she couldn't stand the thought of

her becoming one of those "droolers." My mother won power of attorney in the end, perhaps because she was the long-standing favorite and her intentions seemed good enough. But she made the decision to keep my grandmother in her apartment with a part-time caretaker who only came for a few hours a day. None of the children volunteered to take my grandmother into their homes, but I don't think she would've wanted that anyway.

*

The Israeli rescue team said the cave had collapsed after a series of small earthquakes had disrupted the delicate geological balance.

*

My grandmother made it somehow, in her apartment, for the next several months, but she contracted infections, dementia settled in, and the sweets we left went uneaten. My aunt begged my mother to consider a nursing facility and then my mother said my aunt couldn't visit anymore and stopped speaking to her altogether. My grandmother's brand of love had never prepared my mother to be inadequate, or wrong. I tried to intervene, and assured my mom that she wasn't a terrible person if she considered a facility. After all, she needed her full-time job. She said I was disrespectful for siding with my aunt, and a terrible daughter if I would ever consider doing this to my her or my father.

"But Grandma's alone from noon until six!" I cried. "And again overnight! We're only there after work, and that is not enough! She's blind, she's deaf, her legs are weak, she's dizzy all the time."

That's when she stopped speaking to me, too, and told the security guards not to let anyone visit without her permission.

My grandmother fell again and laid there again too long, screamed until one of her neighbors heard her. When she was admitted to hospice, Tia didn't fly home because she was on a cruise ship with no wifi. My mother refused to come; she said she couldn't bear it. Auntie Lorraine visited as often as she could, and my sisters and I were there most nights. We held my grandmother's hands and painted her nails, stroked her hair, played music for her, softly. But when she passed, we were not all sitting with her and telling her it was okay to go. In fact, she was alone in the dark.

The last time she was lucid, her eyes glowed electric blue, and after recognizing me and kissing me all over my face with dry, cracked lips, she looked around an empty room and said sadly, "You tell your mother I love her." That's when my love for my mother began to thin, and I didn't know how to stop it.

*

In the rag and bone shop of my heart, where I locate more sadness than anger, I try to revise this story. I try to imagine that my

grandmother left us in that imitation salt cave all those years ago, before her vision and hearing got worse, before she got so lonely she started taking anti-depressants, before she fell down and screamed Help for more than forty-eight hours. I think of us in that white cave, all of my grandmother's favorite people in the world, hoping to be healed. I think of her snoring peacefully with all of us in a circle around her. I prayed for a poetic ending for my grandmother, but in the end, she didn't get the poetry she deserved.

My sisters and I planned a memorial service after a week had passed and no one had done anything. My mother threatened not to come if my Aunt Lorraine was there. Then my sister told her she was lucky to be invited, and my mother hung up the phone. She and my father didn't come to the service, and their empty seats made me feel like a raw nerve. Lately, we've been trying to figure out how to move forward together as a fractured family without her when we've only ever known a big, rowdy one with her at the head. We're trying to make enough noise to compensate for all of the unbearable silence, and we're smothering our small children with affection to forget all the failures of love.

*

It was like salt caves crumbling, I'm here to tell you. It was like jagged rocks falling into the Dead Sea. It was like people running and screaming, and others getting trapped under the rubble. The authorities worried about the archeological treasures, they said, and tried to save as many artifacts as possible. They tried to preserve some of the history as they helplessly witnessed the erosion of beauty.

*

I want my comforting narrative back, I tell my husband, who has always loved my stories. I want my family identity back, I say to him, who wanted to marry me, partially because of them. I want my mother to be the mother she had, I tell him. But most of all, I want to scratch away the notes on my grandmother's hospital discharge paperwork: **Some evidence of neglect**. I want to watch those words burn in a spectacular fire, and I want us all to pay. But all I can do is write the poetic ending.

A thousand tendernesses. I yearn for you.

COLIN BAILES

RETURNING

Morning—cloistered in the backyard,
scrim of sabal palm and pine,

sunlight and lace curtain.

*

In black plastic germination trays
my brother shows me
how to divot dirt with a finger,

drop seedlings
into narrow columns of air,
cave in the furrows.

I watch him repot plants all morning,
push around the yard
a yellow wheelbarrow, slug coffee.

Against the wooden fence,
piled into one corner, used plastic pots—
like black boats—

capsized, beached along a shore.

*

Driving into town last night,
fruit stands lining Waldo Road,

spray-painted signs—just cardboard,
really, tacked to wooden sticks
driven into sand—the signs selling
ORANGES GRAPEFRUIT LEMNOS

and suddenly I felt marooned,
like Philoctetes—useless, left for dead.

*

How many times have I tried
to get this right?
The feeling of returning home.

US-1 bottlenecks into black pine,
the flat expanse of Florida
spreads out like fingers, palm trees

sprayed in highway-light—
slim ghosts, hair
trailing back to earth like a firework.

*

The sunroom's white walls,
brightened over time by sun exposure;
curtained windows,
lace ends tied into knots.
Mornings, the room blinds.

Succulents in ceramic pots
cradled in macramé rope slings,
philodendrons line one wall of glass.

The sky suddenly dehiscent,
sunlight cleaving cloud.

How easily the self cleaves, too.

Sunlight fantails across the black embroidery
of a quilt folded in half
over the back of a wicker chair.

I keep mistaking the sublime
for something tangible
I can hold in my hands, something
findable in this life on earth.

I keep thinking about how *cleave*
means both *to divide* and *to cling to*.

*

Night, and our wine glasses
make garnet rings
on the chestnut-stained bar top.

Barolo coats my throat, my tongue,
inhibits speech—
the familiar dry mouth of tannins.

Under the glow of barlight,
golden beets and fried turnips float to me.
Burrata with balsamic reduction drizzle.
Risotto in a citrus cream sauce,
shaved-carrot garnish, parsley.

I tell my brother how I haven't
had a drink in five months,
how much I've missed it.
I order a sherry just for the taste;
raisins and chocolate fill my mouth.

Manic, I order two snifters of Balvenie
neat, one for each of us,
Caribbean Cask, aged fourteen years.

*

This life, a constant demolition
of the self, endless reconstruction—
pruning back spare branches.

The work never complete.

*

Mornings spent in shame.

I watch him work, summer slipping away.
He weeds around the zucchini
and cucumbers, installs
new garden netting
to keep out birds and squirrels.

Nothing here goes to waste.
The avocado tree one day
sprung up from the compost heap.
In ten years, it will put forth fruit.

Meals he prepares with vegetables
gathered fresh from the garden.
An omelet for breakfast this morning
made with eggs from his chickens.

He cracked each one on the edge
of a ceramic mixing bowl, whisked
the white and the yolk together,
two parts returning to a whole.

He'll go back to teaching in the fall;
in a few days I'll head north.

JEFF HANSON

PURPLE PASSAGE

Say we cover the child ourselves with starlight,
with manufactured fictions of plenty.

Consider quacking bells of pain
drown under negation by will.

Whew—did I just say that?
I mean, say we accept death

or church becomes the place we stay,
with an oak out front and a man walking by,

hot summer afternoon, a swift's tail jutting from the eaves,
a radio drowsing in the scriptorium.

Oh, my God! Is it okay?
What I mean is,

we are and then we aren't
and then we are again.

That's what I mean,
and these words are little prayer flags.

ELIZABETH GENOVISE

EARTHEN VESSELS

They say that girls marry their fathers, but sometimes they don't. Sometimes they marry the phantom men we, their mothers, loved but did not wed, men who perished young or were traded away and lost because intuition kept us from tying ourselves to souls who demanded more than we wished to give. My daughter married such a man last spring and already the consequence is here. My husband Matt and I stand on the wrong side of a locked motel room door, pleading with her to let us in, and though neither of us will say it, we both know that Andre is dead.

Behind us surges the Gulf of Mexico, black and lethal in the night. It is September and we are on Grand Isle, a narrow island off the coast of Louisiana that serves as a tensile barrier between the ocean's savagery and the mainland's uneasy peace. We've been staying with Lauren and Andre in this shaky motel-on-stilts for five days ("I want you to get to know him on his own turf," she'd said over the phone), trading evenings in our little suite kitchens, walking the beach and the four-hundred-foot pier that at first glance looks as though it will bridge the gap between this world and some other before you see that it terminates in the roughest waters. Matt and I have lived most of our lives in the Midwest, Illinois' sturdy landlocked plains, and this place has set me on edge since we exited the Houston airport and smelled the air. I looked at a map of Louisiana in a pamphlet from a visitors' center and was unnerved to see how the bottom of the state unraveled into the ocean like a violently broken necklace. The scattered beads were islands and swamps, some without names, and it seemed to me a terrible labyrinth in which people were never meant to live. And yet my new son-in-law had been born and raised on one of those green beads, and loved his shard of a world so deeply that he'd convinced my thoroughly Midwestern daughter to give up her life in Illinois and move down with him.

Matt says to me, "Your turn. I've got nothing." His eyes are mapped with red. He's been chain-smoking all night, since he first came back to our deck from the beach and delivered his dazed report: *He was there, and then he just wasn't.* They were supposed to be fishing for speckled trout for our dinner. Matt had never fished out of the ocean in his life, but Andre assured him he'd show him the ropes. At some point Andre went behind a break wall to toss a net and then, according to Matt, he was just gone. Swept away out of sight. After that, phone calls and police and Coast Guardsmen and then a myriad of eerie lights on emergency rescue vessels prowling the waves in the descending darkness. The sun as it fell behind those boats was bloody.

"Coward," my daughter cries out now from behind the door. Her voice is ragged. "You were with him—how could you not have seen? What the fuck, Dad? How could you not have done something? You were a fucking *Marine*…"

"Sweetheart, they've got every man available from the Coast Guard searching the water," Matt responds. He's repeated this sentence so many times in the last three hours that I'm starting to feel like we're caught in a time warp.

Gently I remove his hand from the door. "Go," I mouth. "Take a walk. Just keep an eye on your phone."

He practically limps past me. I've never seen him like this—my devil-may-care fifty-one-year-old husband, formerly a communications officer who saw no combat and earned the nickname Easy Company before he transitioned to civilian work making the big dollars with a marketing firm. He was the one who grinned and said *oh, what the hell* when we were invited down here. *It'll be fun. Shake things up.* Until now, Louisiana hasn't disturbed him as it did me. He's never been one to analyze things too closely, which is part of why I married him. I don't care to look closely, either, and I resent being forced to, which is exactly what this place does, and what my son-in-law did for five days before he vanished behind that break wall. It was true that Andre looked nothing like James. He was lean and dark where James had been soft and pale; he wore tee shirts the washing machine had turned silky while James, a divinity student, wore button-downs with the sleeves rolled up, a silver watch on his left wrist where Andre wore tattoos. But every time Andre spoke, I felt as I had decades ago in the proximity of that man whose life had almost claimed mine, and it took all of my will to stay rooted in my chair or on my beach towel and to go on politely nodding, playing the role of the supportive mother-in-law enjoying a vacation with her family.

When my daughter's shattered voice rings out again ("If they don't find him—God, if they don't find him"), I feel sick to my stomach.

"Baby," I say. "Honey. Please, unlock the door. I'm begging you."

"I don't want to see it." Now she sounds like she's speaking through a balled-up blanket or a shirt. "The water. I can't look at it."

"I'll slip right in and close the door behind me. Just don't look up."

"No."

I almost say, *it's too dark to see the waves anyway,* then stop myself. "Lauren," I say. "He's a good swimmer, the best. You told me yourself."

Silence.

"The water's warm," I go on. "It's not like Lake Michigan, you know, freezing cold . . . no hypothermia."

A short, bitter laugh. "No, Mom, it's not like Lake Michigan, is it."

We both go quiet. I check my phone—the Coast Guard or sheriff's department may call any one of us with news at any minute—but there's nothing. The only sound is that of the Gulf surf, and I hate its insistence and its brutality. I hate this motel, too—the crane-leg stilts holding us up,

the rickety deck porches, the cheap round table with its two high-backed chairs shoved into a corner of each utility kitchen. I hate the filthy fish-cleaning station below us and I hate the pointless pier and I hate the wild birds whose names I don't know, who shriek and squall above our heads every morning like they were put on this earth to remind us of death. I want to take my daughter away from here before one of those rescue boats returns with a body, and some uniformed man asks her to identify it. I was spared this—seeing such a horrific thing when I was her age—but only because I was hundreds of miles away. I was lucky. There was no sheet to peel back. But hell is all too palpable here, rolling in toward my daughter like the surf, and I am determined to hold it back.

Under my breath, I say, "Fuck you," to the land and to Fate or whatever joke of a force put all this in motion. Then I straighten my shoulders. To my daughter, I say, "Honey, let me in. Unlock the door, turn the other way, and I'll come in."

"Can you just not talk for a minute? Just one minute."

"Fine. But I'm here. I'm not going anywhere."

I'm probably physically strong enough to knock down the door if need be. But the truth is that it feels as though moths have been loosed in my solar plexus and have been banging against my bones for five days. I blame Andre for this uneasiness, and for the sudden onslaught of memories—each one like a bulb flashing before burning out, briefly illuminating rooms I thought I'd shuttered long ago—that have accosted me since our first morning on Grand Isle. James' confession that as a small boy he found a candle stub in his mother's kitchen and stole it, named it George and kept it under his bed in a nest of tissue paper for years thinking it needed him. Or James taking his change from a Buddhist peddler selling prayer bracelets on a city corner and then reciting Yeats' *Brown Penny* from heart, his warm dark eyes filling when he came to *one cannot begin it too soon.* Or James telling me that after his father died, he fished stones out of a mountain river the man had loved all this life, then set the stones in a resin paperweight. This morning, when I walked onto the deck porch alone just after dawn, I was so shaken from a dream of James that I swore it was his voice that said, "I'm surprised to see you out here."

It was Andre, leaning against the deck rail, smoking.

"You're the reason Matt's back into the cigarettes, you know," I said when I'd recovered myself.

"What? He's not doing it to keep me company, is he?" Andre looked a little shocked. He ground out his Lucky Strike in the glass tray the motel owner had put out and glanced back at me.

"Nothing quite so saintly. You just give him an excuse to do it more than he used to."

"Shit," Andre mumbled. "I'll cut down."

"Don't bother." I couldn't keep the irritation out of my voice. It had been this way all week: Andre faultlessly polite, even kind, while I struggled not to antagonize him. I noticed he had a book in his free hand. The previous night, I'd overheard him and Lauren fighting about this very thing—his reading—and I couldn't help but add, "I never saw anyone bring so many books to the water in my life."

Those green eyes. It was as though he recognized the lie in the same instant I did (how many times had James walked the Lake Michigan beaches with some volume tucked under his arm?). But he said nothing, and for a moment I thought he was going to drop the book and grind it out as he'd ground out the cigarette. He was that deferential, and I wanted to slap him for it. I said, "Why *do* you read so much? I mean it's clearly not for pleasure. I've seen the titles."

He took my question seriously, watching the water for perhaps a full thirty seconds before responding. "One time, after a storm, I was wandering around all these ruins close to the water," he said. "I ended up in this field that was still partly flooded. There was a church there before the storm but when I got there, there was just the frame of it, some pews thrown around, a couple of statues laid out. Soaked hymnals all over the place. And in the middle of this mess was the biggest conch shell I'd ever seen. I could barely pick it up. It wasn't even broken or anything. I thought, this thing came in from the depths of the ocean, and somewhere out in the ocean now, is a statue from this church. Maybe intact just like the shell. And who knew who might pull it out of the water and say 'how can this be?', before they recognized it?" He stopped. I'd seen this before, the way he started a story full-throttle but checked his speed halfway through as if remembering that it was the destination, not the velocity, that mattered.

I waited, my fingernails tapping out a rhythm on the deck rail. I was starting to want a cigarette myself.

"That's reading for me. It's an exchange made in a storm. You get to touch something that was made somewhere else, some impossible thing that's beyond you and it's landed in your hands against all logic, but you realize there's a connection, it *is* about you in some way, and on the other side, someone's holding what you made and thinking the same thing. And it fires you up because you start thinking, if I were knocked down by a hurricane, what would I leave behind? What would people fish out of the water? Would they recognize it, and see what it's worth?"

This was Andre. Andre just this morning, beside his half-smoked Lucky Strike with the Gulf sun ascending behind his head.

I hear heavy steps on the deck stairs and then Matt's figure shimmers into place exactly where Andre had been standing. He says softly, "Any luck with her?"

"What does it look like? I told you to take a walk."

"I started. But I can't. What if they call? I want to be right here." He opens his phone to check it again. "My fingers are starting to blister. I have it set to ring, but I don't trust it."

Lauren's voice calls out, "My cell phone is dead. I can't find the charger." Her voice breaks on "charger."

Matt returns to the door. "You can have my phone, baby," he says. "Open the door."

"What did he say to you before? When you were out there together."

Matt looks helplessly at me. "What do you mean, Laur?"

"What do I mean? I mean can you remember a single thing he said when the two of you were together?"

My husband stands there with arms limp at his sides. "It wasn't long," he starts. "It was maybe only twenty minutes before—"

"Twenty minutes is a fucking eternity." She's yelling now, and I see a light go on in the suite three doors down. "You can't remember a single thing? Is this such a hard question?"

"We talked about fish." Matt turns in a circle, looking around like the answer might be lying on the deck somewhere. "I think I asked him about weather, if we'd have a storm tomorrow . . . if he could tell."

There is a long silence. Then Lauren says quietly, "I want you to go away and not come back unless he's with you."

I take Matt's elbow. He's breathing heavily, his eyes like a wild horse's, and when I get him down the deck out of Lauren's earshot, he says, "I can't remember. I really can't. My mind's a mess—"

Lauren opens the door just long enough to crouch down and slide her phone toward us. It skitters across the deck planks and comes to a stop against the base of a plastic chair. The door slams shut again and she cries out, "Charge it."

Matt bends down for the phone.

"Andre's car charger will probably work on her phone," I say. "He never locks his car."

His jaw moves a little. "Of course he doesn't."

"He's careless," I say. My voice is too loud, even against the wind.

"That's not what it is."

"Just charge the phone, Matt. Can you do that?"

"Yeah. I'll take care of it." He stuffs the phone into his jeans pocket and disappears down the stairs again. I listen to his feet sloughing through the sand to the lot out back. The guest in the room three doors down peers

out of her window, then vanishes behind the whirl of a curtain. I go and sit on the mat outside Lauren's door.

"Still here," I tell her.

The fact of the matter is that if today was Andre's last day on this earth, my daughter hardly saw him. She woke up late, long after my encounter with him on the deck porch, and then she went off on her own most of the day, claiming she wanted to investigate the gift shops in the neighboring inns. She still hadn't returned when Matt and Andre took off for their fishing expedition in the late afternoon, and at that point it was beginning to seem almost petulant, like she wanted to see how long she could stay away before he came hunting for her. From my seat on the deck porch above I listened to Matt and Andre talk as they checked their gear. I was surprised at their easy rapport when left alone together; they had even less in common than Andre and Lauren did.

"Does it scare you ever, the ocean?" Matt asked.

Andre said, "My dad used to tell me the ocean was like God—bigger than us, with a will of its own. Respect it and don't question it. Yeah, it scares me. But you can love what scares you."

There was a pause as Andre fussed with something. Then Matt said, "I was thinking about what you said, the night before last. Your theory about why God sent his, er, son down here."

Andre laughed. "You don't have to say it like that—like you buy the story hook, line and sinker."

"I know—"

"You're a generous person, sir."

I think my husband and I both stopped a little at this. Matt said, "How's that, exactly?"

"I'm not talking about being willing to come down here, though I do appreciate that. I mean you haven't written me off yet for being something you're not used to. I appreciate that a lot more."

Matt looked like a child who'd just been complimented for some ability he hadn't even realized was valued. In his confused pleasure he murmured a bumbling thank-you and then the two of them headed off and I couldn't hear them anymore. I was annoyed. Since Lauren had brought Andre home to meet us a year ago Matt had been a little too taken in by all the *sir*-ing and by Andre's disarming honesty. I thought that by now he would have gotten over that, but here he was acting like a schoolgirl with a crush. It had only gotten worse on this trip.

The light was already falling a little, and from a certain distance, in the haze, Andre's silhouette was like James', the tackle box becoming the

valise James always carried from the Metra to his classes. I held this against him, too—the way he constantly, unconsciously, mirrored what I wished not to see.

Lauren's voice startles me back into the moment: "You know I didn't say *I love you* before they left."

"Today?"

"I didn't say anything at all. We—we had a fight last night, Mom. Late."

"I know about that," I say. "The walls here are paper-thin, hon."

"You heard what we said?"

I hesitate. "No—just your voices. But I could tell something was up." The truth is that I overheard every word, sitting up in our ugly mini-kitchen with a cup of stale coffee and a handful of chewable melatonin tabs. Matt was snoring in the bedroom, making his contented little grunts as he dreamed. I say, "Was it your first real fight?"

"Yeah. I guess it was. I still don't really know why it was even a fight. I keep combing back through it and I don't know."

"Do you want to talk about it?"

"No." Then, "You'd think it was ridiculous, anyway."

I wish I could tell her that everything she uttered last night was exactly what I would have said if it were me having the argument with Andre. For a couple of afternoons, Andre had been reading a Holocaust memoir of all things, ignoring Lauren's remark that this sort of reading material was "kind of a downer" on a vacation. Late last night after Matt had gone to sleep, I heard one of the chairs scraping back in the next room and then Andre said, "Can I ask you a question? A hypothetical? It's bothering me." The situation he proceeded to describe was this: you are entering a concentration camp with your child. The Nazis reach for the child and it's clear the little boy or girl is going to be killed off. You can disengage, separate yourself from the child, and try to survive, or you can follow them, stay with the child, and die with him or her. The child, Andre clarified, is going to die either way. Nothing can prevent it. So what do you do?

My daughter didn't hesitate. "You don't throw away your life," she said. "You stay right where you are."

"But if it means the last thing the little kid knows is that you're with him," Andre protested. "If it means, he's not alone at the end—that isn't worth it?"

"You said he was going to die anyway."

Andre didn't respond.

"What you're talking about is suicide, just pointless suicide," Lauren went on. Her voice was getting heated. "I don't get it, Andre. What

do you want me to say? And, honestly, what are we even talking about—some horrible hypothetical thing that will never happen?"

"But it did happen."

"It's not going to here."

"That's probably what they all thought."

"Since when did you get so interested in the Jews?" Lauren tried a playful tone. "Here I thought you were one hundred percent Cajun."

"It's not a project. I just read this one book, and it bothered me. The way that moment walked right up to people who weren't prepared for it. It's nagging at me."

"Well, don't let it. It's silly. Let's go to bed."

"So we can't talk about this. That list seems to be getting longer and longer, Lauren. What *can* we talk about? Should we talk like your parents? You want a small-talk marriage like theirs, hiding out in weather and stocks and new curtains for the living room?"

I was almost too tired to be angry. I fell asleep not long after that remark of his, the melatonin knocking me out as it always did. I had a nightmare in which James clung to an overhang high above a raging river, and I lay splayed out on the rocks above him, extending one hand to help him back up and out of danger. He wrapped his hand around my wrist. When I felt his weight pulling me downward, I let go.

I give myself a shake and say through the door, "Lauren, I want us to leave this island. Now. It's no good for you to stay here, just waiting like this. It's too hard on you. They can reach us anywhere."

"I can't look at this chair," I think I hear her say in response.

"What, honey?"

"This second chair, empty. I can't stand it."

"Then don't look at it." It's the best advice I have, the mantra I repeated to myself for years after James died, the four words that are as close to religion as I can get. "Don't look at it," I say; "let me in and let's go in the bedroom."

No response. A few seconds later I think I hear her move into the bathroom, and then there's the rush of the shower turned on full-force. This was how she used to cry, the rare occasions she did cry, as a teenager—hidden away inside the shower's noise.

The wind is picking up. There is sand in my teeth and inside my clothes. Lauren has come out of the shower but I can still hear her gulping back sobs. I can't take this, her voice all choked up and frail. She's always been just like Matt and me, hard and athletic and unemotional; the three of us have bonded over our family sangfroid since she was a little girl, mocking

those wilting-flower types who fell to pieces at the slightest pressure, rolling our eyes at relatives who couldn't hold it together. She took two degrees in biology and has worked outdoors her whole life, taking soil samples in the prairies and hiking through bad weather in her knee-high boots and coveralls. She doesn't read, doesn't brood. When she first brought Andre to our home in Naperville for a Thanksgiving dinner, I was as startled as I would have been had she led a wolf into the dining room. Even Matt, whose glass was always half-full and who already harbored some unaccountable liking for Andre, commented over the dishes later that night that it was a "weird-ass match."

Andre's arms were covered in complicated tattoos; it took a close study to pick out the cross on a chain that was woven into the other images. In his strange accent he talked about his home, how the dead were buried above ground and how many of his friends had ghosts in their houses, ghosts with age-old routines like turning on the television at ten o'clock every night or opening the back door just after dawn. He quoted the occasional line of poetry—nothing we understood—and he asked us questions about our lives that made us acutely, if inexplicably, uncomfortable: *What is it you love about the suburbs? What do you y'all do in your spare time? What's the spot out here that you go to just to think?* His green eyes seemed to take in all the light of the candles and reflect it back to us; he was cat-like there, missing nothing, responding to the slightest stimulus. I felt that he knew me, and I didn't like it.

They'd met in the Art Institute. He'd been visiting a cousin who was attending college in the city, and my daughter had gone into the gift shop to find a birthday present for a colleague who liked Monet's lilies. She'd had no intention of continuing into the actual museum, but Andre convinced her in that beguiling accent of his to buy a ticket, and so they went through the galleries together. During their courtship I had a constant feeling of deja-vu, recalling against my will the similar way in which James and I had met (he, exiting the institute downtown where he studied; me, exiting a coffee shop; the two of us walking through the Hilton Gardens which I had never before bothered with). When Lauren told me that Andre had been the first in his family to finish college but chose to return home to work with his father on the water, I had a flash of James confessing over tea that he didn't want to preach, but wanted to go back to the mountains someday and do social work in his parents' hometown. "You could come with me," he'd said. He'd stretched out his hand for mine before stopping himself. "Of course, you have a life here, I know. And we're not even . . . I have no right to ask."

We were still just friends then, and yet it was only with him that I felt myself alive and breathing. I'd had lovers before, of course. But this

was a foreign language I was learning with James, thoughts and emotions coming to me clothed in colors that were unsettling in their strangeness. The more fluent we became, the more frightened I was. When he spoke at length about some soul-shaking thing he'd read, or something he'd come to believe, I found myself steering our talk back to meaningless chatter whenever I could. I'd ask if his cocoa was hot enough or I'd comment on Lake Michigan's shifting blues. After, I'd be pierced through with regret, knowing I'd missed some critical, maybe even beautiful thing he'd been about to reveal to me. This was the feeling that ghosted me during Lauren's courtship—wanting it all, and also wanting it to stop.

When Lauren got engaged to Andre, I said to myself that I didn't understand it. They were nothing alike. And yet I did understand; I do. I remember, and when Lauren says, "What do you remember?", I realize I've spoken my thoughts aloud.

But she's not interested in what I remember. Still as if in a dream, she says through the door, "I went to a homecoming dance once back in junior year of college, with Mark. You remember him?"

"Sure I do. You dated him for months."

"While we were dancing he told me I was the kind of girl who made you feel like you'd never die. I thought he meant that I inspired him, like I made him feel invincible. But when I asked him what he meant, he said I was so grounded in *this* life, I made anything else seem like it was just a boogey monster in the closet."

Mentally I run down the list of what's in the motel suite. Blunt kitchen knives, probably some aspirin in her duffel bag, a razor for Andre. I can't imagine my daughter doing something so extreme as trying to harm herself, but this is not my girl's voice I'm hearing. I say, "That was a compliment. He was right—you are grounded, sweetheart. You're so strong, and you're going to get through this, whatever happens—"

The scrape of a chair. "You're not listening. He was telling me I was shallow, Mom. That spending time with me was like drinking a beer or sitting next to the pool." A pause. "I think that's how Andre was starting to feel. That's what I think."

I check my phone, but there's nothing. "Is this all because you had a fight? One fight, baby? That's marriage. You have fights." When she doesn't respond, I add, "Andre is a very . . . serious person. Intense. That kind of person is more likely to be argumentative."

"He's not any 'kind of person.' He's something else. I married someone I can't even . . . if you put a hundred boxes on a table with different labels on them I wouldn't know which one to put him in. And I married him."

"Nobody knows everything about their spouse beforehand."

On the other side of the door, she stamps her foot. "Are you listening?"

"Yes, Lauren."

"When we first started dating, I started having these weird dreams. You know I hardly ever remember my dreams at all. But I started dreaming so hard, I'd wake up tired. I think it was him. He did that."

"What do you dream?"

"Stories. Sometimes I'm in them and sometimes I'm not. Sometimes I just see one thing, really bright, like it's getting engraved on my eyes. I had a dream like that on the beach two days ago when I fell asleep after lunch. I saw him lying in our bed, and then his legs turned to water."

My stomach is roiling again. "Don't think about it."

"You'd like that, wouldn't you? You'd like it if I never thought about him again." Her voice has changed, gone suddenly cold: "You and Dad both. You never liked him. It's obvious. You're faking it, you're polite, but I know how you feel—"

I smack the door with the flat of my hand. "Lauren, stop. Stop it. Of course we like him. He's your husband."

"You should watch a video tape of the last four days. Every time he talks, you tense up like you're waiting for it to be over. You especially. You look like you're having an operation without anesthesia."

She's moving around again, pacing the suite, and I'm glad for it. Her anger seems safer to me than her despair. I hear her open and close a cabinet, run the tap. Good. I say, "There isn't a parent on the planet who's totally comfortable with a new son or daughter-in-law. That's programmed into our genes."

"We're not talking about parents on the planet. We're talking about you. You always dodge things by saying something that applies to everybody. Or nobody. Or 'some kind of person.'"

It's a close approximation to something Andre said to her three nights ago, before we started dinner. He'd purchased a rough clay mug from a peddler and as he filled it from the tap he mumbled what I assumed was something from the Bible: "'We have this treasure in earthen vessels, to show us that this power is from God and not from us.'"

Matt squinted at him over his hard cider and said, "Another poem, Andre?"

"A verse," Andre said, sitting down. "My dad used to repeat it a lot."

"You believe in all that stuff?" Matt asked the question idly, already distracted by the chicken and potatoes. Or—and this only just now occurs to me—perhaps he was feigning that idleness, disguising his true interest.

I looked sidelong at him but he didn't meet my eyes.

My daughter stepped in then, smiling brightly, and said, "Everyone down here reads the Bible. It's just part of the culture. Here's the bread."

Andre frowned at her. "You don't have to cover for me by turning it into some general discussion of culture, Laurie, making this about 'everyone' instead of me. Why do you always do that?"

"We don't have to talk about this at all," Matt said, waving his hand. He looked alarmed. "None of my business anyway, Andre."

"I saw a baking tin in one of the cabinets. I think I'm going to mix up some brownies for after," my daughter said as though we'd been talking about this the whole time. "Help me out, Mom?"

Now I hear my daughter sitting back down; there's the hard tap of a mug—the clay one?—against the cheap tabletop. She says, "All week I've been thinking no one really knows until after whether they've married the right person. No one knows a damn thing. Except you. I never saw you guys fight my whole life. You either hid it really well or you're just perfect, you found the exact right person."

Her tone is unreadable. I can't tell if she's envious or if she's mocking me. "What are you saying, Laurie—that you aren't sure about Andre?"

"I'm saying all week I've been realizing things I didn't know before." She's crying again. "I'm saying I never heard you guys really talk, either. And I thought I could be like Andre, but I can't, I'm like you, I can't go where he wants me to go . . ." Sobs.

I twist and rattle the doorknob. "Honey—if he's okay—you don't have to live down here. If he loves you, he'll move back north with you."

"Christ! That's not what I'm talking about!" And I hear the pop of the lock. The door flies open and she stands there pale as death with her wet hair soaking her shirt and her mascara clumped around her eyes. She looks at me with something terrifyingly like hate. "You don't fucking listen. You don't hear anything."

Her gaze shifts just past my shoulder, to the ocean, and I try to block her view. She starts to say something else and then she slams the door closed again, locking it before I can react.

A few minutes later I hear Matt's heavy steps on the deck behind me.

"Nothing," he says, holding up his phone and Lauren's, one in each hand. "No calls. You?"

"Nothing."

He beckons me away from the door. I follow him a few steps down the deck porch and we lean against the rail, looking out at the black water. The beach, bathed in a ghostly amber light from the motel, is littered with

lounge chairs and forgotten toys and a Coleman cooler half-buried in sand. There are plenty of other guests here, but it feels like we're the only people on Grand Isle, and I swear the waves have crept in closer than they have all week. "She's on the edge," I say. "She's talking crazy in there."

"Maybe we should ask that one policeman to come back. He was so good with all of us . . ."

"Maybe you should try talking to her again," I snap.

He turns to me in surprise. "I don't know what else to say. Until they bring him back alive, I've got nothing for her." His gaze returns to the ocean. "I didn't raise her like Andre's father raised him, in case you haven't noticed."

"What does that mean?"

"No religion. No explanation for things. I've got nothing to offer but 'we'll pay for the funeral.'" He laughs a dry, ugly laugh I've never heard before.

"We're all going crazy," I mutter. "This needs to end. They'll bring him back, and we'll go home."

Matt says nothing. We watch as the motel owner, a stooped old man who rarely appears, shuffles out onto his porch to smoke. The tiny red glow of his cigarette unnerves me.

"That bit he said the night before last," Matt says.

I wait, trying not to look at the red light.

"About God."

"You're the one who poked and prodded," I said. "I don't know what the hell that was. Couldn't you see that Lauren was uncomfortable?"

"Was she?"

"Well, what about it? What about what he said? I was making the brownies—I wasn't really listening—"

"It was funny, I almost couldn't tell if he was talking about Louisiana, or about Christ. I think he's got the two mixed up in his head. But what he said, about God realizing his own limitations, figuring out he couldn't help us without understanding us . . . I remember church as a kid, but nobody said anything like that. Nobody said that God suffered his own death so that he could understand."

"Nobody suffered anything, Matt. God is a story. A myth."

"Of course he is. But—there's something in there, isn't it? It's the idea that counts, right? Not whether something actually happened?"

When I don't respond, he continues, "How can you help somebody else if you don't know what hell is yourself? How can you give anybody any hope, if you won't look three feet past your own face?"

If I didn't know any better, I'd think my husband had been drinking. I say, "Andre has done a number on you both. Stay with me, Matt."

He shakes his head. The motel owner stubs out his cigarette and disappears.

"I know he's dead. I know it," Matt says softly. His voice trembles. "But I'm praying he's not. I can't explain it, but I—I need that kid."

I'm suddenly furious—with him, with this place, most of all with Andre. It's Matt's job to keep us all in the land of the living, to remind me, as my daughter's dance partner once said, that anything else is a boogey man in a closet. Louisiana with her unburied dead and lively ghosts and legs turned to water is chaos that belongs on the seafloor. And Andre should have kept his probing looks to himself and stayed away from my daughter whose life was as stolid and tranquil and dry as the prairies she hiked before he came flooding in. What will happen to her now? What does he leave in his wake?

I know the answer to that last question. It's pain, unspeakable grief. It's what I battled when I found out that James, driving home alone after our breakup, had been killed on I-40 in western North Carolina when a rainstorm loosed a massive rockslide that buried half a dozen cars. It's guilt over her own deep, secret relief—the challenge removed, the uncertain future now cleared of mist—even as it's horror over her own responsibility (had she loved him properly, met him halfway, would he have driven that dangerous road at night, gone fishing at dusk in the roughest waves?). I recovered, found my way back to the living world, to the things I understood and took comfort in. I married an atheist Marine who lived his life so externally that I never once wondered what was going on inside his head. I moved into a spacious house in a wealthy suburb and I'm healthy and still pretty and constantly on the move. I could have been in that car with James, my bones splintered apart by rocks. But I saved myself, and now I want to save her, too.

I don't register that Matt has left my side until I turn to ask him for one of his cigarettes and find him gone. He's back at Lauren's door, speaking quietly through the wood. I come close enough to hear him say, "I understand it, Laur. I really do." Lauren says something in response, and Matt continues: "Yes I *do* think you can love what you don't understand. Just like you can love what scares you."

Now I hear my daughter loud and clear: "Who a*re* you?" A bark of a laugh, bitter and disbelieving.

"You wanted to know something he said. That's one thing I remember."

Lauren says, "Where's Mom now?"

I step closer, but my husband holds up his hand like a crossing guard. He says, "She's up here on the deck still."

"I can't talk to her. I don't even want to hear her voice."

Matt winces, starts to stammer out a protest.

"It's fine," I say. "Really." I turn and start down the deck stairs. I stop halfway down the steps where I can still see the doorway. I listen to their muffled voices. The minutes tick by. Finally, a crack of yellow light: she's let him in. I try not to feel wounded when the door closes firmly behind them.

I watch the ocean. The lights of the retrieval vessels are still moving, and it seems to me that they move in hapless circles, as if they're just putting on a show for our benefit. To the left, way down the beach in the state park where we all hiked our first day here, is the just-visible outline of the old observation tower I refused to climb. "Come on, it's safe," Matt had urged. "Since when did you get so nervous? You've got the toughest legs here." It was a rickety tower, not too high but with shoddy-looking stairs, and I used this as my excuse, claiming the structure had clearly been neglected by the Park Service and that no intelligent person would go up there without a good reason. Matt let it go; we hiked on. Andre looked at me, his green eyes marked with question, but said nothing until Matt and Lauren got ahead of us. Then he tapped my arm and murmured, "What did it remind you of?" I pretended not to know what he meant.

The park is technically closed now but there's no one around to stop me. I leave the motel and hike down the beach, my calves aching as I trudge through the sand. There is blackness to my right, faint light behind me, blackness to my left; there is nothing ahead but that dark tower. Why do this to myself, I wonder. Am I losing it, too? Is it Andre working on me even from out there in the waves? I hike on. There's a low gate and I hoist myself over it. The tower's outline sharpens against the night sky. When I reach the first step, I have to reach out and grab the rail to steady myself. For the third time, I feel ill.

I climb the twisting stairs to the top. The ocean seems bigger from here, endless as space, and the boats' lights are flickering stars, pathetic, already dead. The salted wind wraps itself around me and then changes its mind, tearing at my clothes. Against my will I am recalled to a powerful visceral memory of making love with James, in a hotel bed, for the first and last time. Friends-in-love for a year, and then we drove down to the western North Carolina mountains where he'd grown up and stayed in separate rooms in a hotel near the Smoky Mountains before a day of backcountry hiking. I was the one who insisted on the separate rooms. I was no prude, but I was afraid of what I felt for James. And yet I left my door unlocked and ajar and when he came quietly in sometime around midnight I didn't resist. He turned on one of the lamps. He would not let me break eye contact. I felt him unfurling me like a scroll and I read him, too, his ineradicable faith, his insistence on the confrontation of truth, his

willingness to prowl the depths. Inside the moment I wanted his story to be mine at any cost, I wanted to live as he did, and I was wild with that wish, jubilant even, until I woke in the morning and looked askance at him and knew I could not stand up beside such a person.

It was his idea, a strange, inspired idea, to hike separately to two fire towers the following night and try to signal to each other with LED lanterns. He would do the climb to Mount Cammerer, I would hike to Mount Sterling, and at precisely nine o'clock we'd turn on our lights. We'd each have binoculars and gear for the night, and he'd retrieve me from Mount Sterling in the morning. James was fevered as he explained the plan. He never said why he wanted this or when he'd begun imagining it, but I knew him; this was important. Perhaps more important than the trip itself, which he'd arranged with the obvious hope that I'd fall in love with the place and give in to his plea to move south with him.

His hike was far more strenuous than mine—eleven miles round-trip to my six, an extra thousand feet of elevation gain. He thought he was protecting me, but when I reached the base of my tower and looked up, it was clear to me that he could only shield me from so much. His tower, I knew from photographs, was a sturdy stone room nestled in the rock of the mountain's summit. The Mount Sterling fire tower was a spindly, raggedy wooden structure that creaked and swayed in the gentlest wind and whose zigzagging stairs were splintering apart. The lookout at the top was a tiny square room with a trap door in its floor. I tried not to look down as I climbed. The tower shuddered and dark birds swooped past my head. When at last I hoisted myself into the little room, I made the mistake of looking back down through the trap door at the staircase. Vertigo seized me and I sat down hard in the far corner, opposite the gaping hole in the floor. I counted five long breaths before I stood up and pressed my nose to the glass facing southeast. The blue of twilight was just giving way to true night and the red-gold ridges were beginning to vanish against the blackening sky.

I checked my watch. Suppose the climb had taken him longer than he'd expected? But even as I fumbled with my light, I saw something flare up on a far-flung summit. The hair on my arms stood on end. With trembling hands, I lifted my binoculars and glassed the mountains. There it was again, unmistakable, the flare of light to the southeast. *James.* A long arpeggio of raw emotion coursed through me, leaving me weak in its wake. I pressed my lantern to the glass and powered it on. A sudden hard wind shook the whole structure, but I held on. *James.* He signaled back. Then my light, then his, then mine again . . .

It was at this great distance, standing there in the trembling tower, that I understood what it was I'd felt in bed with James—and what it was

that had woken me for nights long before this. For all the long-built tension between us, what I'd found with him was a deep exhalation, the longed-for stillness of a wandering moon at last settling into the orbit of her planet. And yet, in his gravity, James was a force to be reckoned with, a threat to my safety, the one being who could shatter me absolutely. There was a price to be paid for joy. Who knew where I'd find myself, what I'd come to know? Life with him would be mystery and revelation together, sickness and cure. My soul fragmented into wholeness. And now, signaling with him from Mount Sterling, I sensed his own fear of the dark recesses of space, understood that he too was in danger of spiraling through that waste homeless and without purpose. I realized that if ever I should fail to return his light, he would be lost.

To perceive our own value is to know the truth of our fragility. I was a coward, preferring stone to splintered wood. I told him, *I cannot.* A few days later he was killed, and every choice I made in the decades that followed was a mortaring of walls between myself and what I felt in that singular year of my life. Like a child, I believed I could hide simply by closing my eyes. And yet here I am, in a crumbling tower on a crumbling coast, my husband and daughter unrecognizable, my son-in-law a tangle of bones lost in the tide. When I climb back down, I'm violently sick on the sand.

I hike back to the motel. Just before I reach the stairs to our rooms, I feel my phone vibrate. I answer; I listen. I return the phone to my pocket.

The door is unlocked. I turn the knob slowly to stall the moment as long as I can. When I step into the kitchen, I open my mouth to speak, but there is no need. They know. Matt covers his face. My daughter collapses at the table. I should go to her, but I am frozen where I am, seeing only that second empty chair.

LISA MOTTOLO

THE VACANT EXPRESSION OF A CELL PHONE SCREEN

Birds bones are hollow to make it easier for them to fly
and I think about this a lot when I look at the vacant expression of a cellphone screen
because achieving a reduced stress level may require some shallow activities

We will argue with ourselves ad nauseam over the reason to use and not use our devices
and our arguments are pitched like a fork against a glass
they bring attention, they hurt the ears, but we listen in the hopes of a reasonable philosophy

or a study from a reputable news source
I'm still waiting for the moment where I'm taken aside to be told something important
but it could be that I am the one who will be taking others aside and telling them those things

and how lonely to be assigned that task
considering that my social anxiety will keep me from doing it
so I will be clutching to the information and typing and retyping it in my phone's note app

wondering if any brave person has experienced this amount of hesitance
and asking myself if phones keep getting lighter so they are easier to attach to our existences
like a bird's bones are hollow to make it easier for them to fly

JOHN FULTON

THE BOY AND THE MURDERER

Sometimes when I sit in a room on a gray day, I'll feel the loneliness and the fear of the time when I was a boy and my father had left me and my mother in a small white house in a town that did not seem to have a name. It had a name but it didn't feel as if it had one to the boy—or perhaps to me now as I remember the boy. The town had other things, though: days that passed, one after the other, nights that were very long, and a great deal of snow. It had a main street with diners that glowed in the gray light and that were mostly empty. It had bars with no windows, in front of which men, often drunk, stood outside in the cold. And in the distance, if you looked carefully, you could see the beginnings of mountains. I remember the boy loving the snow and the cold in this town, loving to walk outside and see the wonder of his breath turning to smoke as he blew it from his mouth and watched it rise above him. I remember, too, this boy hating the way the cold, stinging his eyes and freezing the inside of his nose, trapped him and his mother in the yellow lit rooms of their small house, which felt even smaller at night when the darkness came early and seemed to make their feelings of loneliness and fear larger. The house closed in around them, then, the hallways growing shorter, the bathroom smaller, and its egg-yolk yellow tiles seemed to ache, to feel what the boy and his mother felt.

On these nights, my mother and I seemed to become the same person with the same feelings beating and coursing through us. This was hard for me—the boy—because my mother, even though she was often as frightened and confused as a child, was an adult, and felt both more and more strongly than I did, and her emotions inside me—her terror at being left alone and especially her broken heart, which was bitter and furious beyond comprehension—made no sense inside my child's body.

The feelings were the worst at night after I had fallen asleep in my bed and woke with an inexplicable physical sickness because the sadness and anger of my mother were not only inside my chest, inside my thighs and groin and in my stomach that ached as if I needed to throw up, but they were outside my door in the dim hallway. They gathered there and seemed to be waiting for me. They were taking on a particular form as the feelings turned my stomach and continued to sicken me enough so that I needed to get up and hurry down the hall to the bathroom, which I would have done had it not been for the shape the fear was taking, a shape that became more specific and certain and real the longer I stayed in bed.

The shape was a man. I—or the boy—saw him very clearly, though he was hiding just out of sight. He held a large-bladed knife. There was a calmness, almost a serenity to his face, since what he was

about to do did not shock him or come from passion or hate. It came from his own inward evil, into which he had been born. His face was pale as soap, carved along the lines of his bones, and his oily, straight hair fell to his shoulders. He resembled Jesus, whom the boy sang about earnestly every Sunday morning in the most gentle and soothing way: *Jesus loves me, this I know, for the Bible tells me so*. Jesus was inside the boy just as his mother's fear was because Jesus was one of her solutions to her fear. But the man holding the blade was not Jesus, though the resemblance was no accident since he had come to change the world, to make it new with blood. The boy didn't know any of this but I know it now, just as I know that the man the boy felt with absolute certainty waited outside his door was Charles Manson.

The boy knew only that Charles Manson was a mass murderer who had cut open a pregnant woman, removed and dismembered her fetus, and wrote words on the wall of her home with her blood. It was no comfort to the boy that at least some of the violence Charles Manson inflicted was on a woman and her child—or what would soon become her child—at home. Home, especially at night, was very frightening to the boy. It was here that his own body would be eviscerated and turned into a kind of ink. Not that the boy read. He didn't, though he was in second grade and should have been putting syllables, words, and sentences easily together. His teacher told his mother that he had trouble concentrating, that he fidgeted, that something in him would not stop moving long enough for him to apprehend the remedial rules of reading. His teacher was a kind woman with short, curly hair, soft eyes, and a round face that expressed a great deal of sympathy, which was a relief for the boy to see.

It might have been a greater relief for the boy to explain to his teacher what was inside him that would not let him sit still and learn. But he could not explain this. It would take him years to explain it even to himself.

It started when the boy would sneak out of bed and hide behind the fat chair in the living room, from which place he could hear all that his mother and his grandmother, who visited often from her home far away, would say to each other during their long talks at the kitchen table. These talks always began with angry whispers about the boy's father—an anger that came from deep inside his grandmother and mother and made a kind of disgusted, rough sound of their voices, which was what in the first place had summoned the boy from bed and brought him out to listen in his hiding place. His father was a bad man who had made a vow that he had broken in the most blatant way. He had taken the

boy's mother as his wife before God and man, he had made this sacred promise, and then he had left his wife and young son, without money, without a house or a car or a way to earn a living, the women were saying as they huddled over their coffee, shaking their heads, clasping hands, crying, and rending and tearing into this single topic, which was the vileness of this man. In fact, the boy could barely remember his father, his face, the color of his hair, the feel of his larger hand holding the boy's smaller hand, though when he summoned the vague shape of him like this, the boy felt a longing, a need for him that made it hard to hear about the badness of this man.

And then, without warning, the women began talking about another man who was also bad. The world was filled with such men. But Charles Manson was perhaps the worst of them—the very darkest proof of what men could be. He was in prison now after murdering countless people. But the state of California—whatever that was—the government—whatever that was—wanted to protect him, would not execute him, as it should have, which meant he would escape, he would break into other homes, and all the terrible murders would begin again, the most terrible of which was the murder of the pregnant woman, this act which the boy's grandmother and mother could not stop talking about, and about which the boy, hidden behind his chair, could not stop listening. How they circled around it, shook their heads, lifted their coffee cups, and set them down again before they could put them to their mouths, open in horror, talking, repeating the details, unable to sip their coffee because it must be said again, described and contemplated again, an evil this pure and calculated, awful in its precise inversion of what a decent man should do, which was to love a woman and have a family and protect that family, to work, provide a living and an example for his children of how to lead a good life.

But Charles Manson did not do this. Charles Manson arrived under the cover of darkness. He and his disciples knocked on the door, the pregnant woman let them into her warm and well-kept home because they asked her to. Now why would she do that, save that she did not know what men could be and do? They then described in detail what would happen to her. She pleaded that they let her live long enough to have her baby. She told them that they could come back for her, murder her after she had done this. But they didn't listen to her. She had to be punished, they told her. They held her down. They tore her clothing off. There were enough of them for each to hold down a separate arm and leg of the pregnant woman while a fifth one did the work with the knife. There could be no act further from what a good man should do than

this one. The horror of it was why it had to be talked about late into the night as the boy's mother and grandmother did not drink their coffee but instead described how the woman watched the men murder her, how she was made to watch—they forced her eyes open when she tried to close them—as they removed and then did what they did to her fetus, which the boy's grandmother and mother repeated to each other now, their voices descending into that awful whispering. The murderers then wrote in blood on the walls. It was the mother's blood. It was the baby's blood. It was so unimaginably far from goodness.

Though the boy stayed for a very long time in his hiding place behind the chair, eventually he would sneak back into his bed with the story that the women told each other at the kitchen table very much inside him. It was as real and solid as the baby inside of the woman he had just heard about. He could put a hand over the place where it was and feel it. And he had no one to talk to about it. It was simply something that stayed there and would not come out.

And so it was like this that Charles Manson came to be lurking outside the boy's room, and that the boy grew sick, nausea churning in his stomach until he sweated and trembled and had to rise from his bed lest he vomit in his sheets, and rush towards the bathroom, which he did now, surprised again that the murderer wasn't, in fact, waiting for him. He hurried, looking all around him because he knew that the man was somewhere, if not behind him ahead of him or to one or the other side of him. Passing his mother's closed door, the loneliness and fear gathered most thickly in him because it was, of course, coming from her as she slept, it was her dark dream that had drifted into him, which made him even sicker because there is only so much loneliness and adult desperation that a boy's body can hold. He turned on the bathroom lights and felt with immense relief the saliva pool into his mouth and begin to flow from his lips in long strings that dripped now into the toilet bowl. He would be sick and soon rid of it—all of it all at once in a rush of warm acid—his father's absence, his mother's loneliness and fury, the shorn open pregnant body of the murdered woman, the little hands and toes of the severed fetus—all of this would rush out of him and into the circle of water below. He would then flush several times until there was not so much as a floating chunk, a red tint of that feeling, until it was as if it had never been there. It would be gone. He would wash himself up then, brush his teeth, curl into bed around the clean emptiness inside his body, so open and light and pure, and sleep.

But, in fact, no such thing happened. Instead, his saliva dried up. He closed his mouth, unable to be sick, which confused him. He didn't

understand that he couldn't put what was inside him into the toilet and be rid of it. He didn't understand that it might always be there.

And so, having nothing else to do, the boy carried his sickness down the hall, climbed into bed, and curled himself around it, as if to hold it in close, because what other choice did he have? It was not an easy or sweet sleep. The man who looked like Jesus and all his long-haired disciples were in it. They held knives that shone in their hands and had strange smiles. His mother and grandmother were at the kitchen table, reassuring themselves with their dark preoccupations. Words and syllables in ink and in blood floated free of gravity and rules in dark space. And his teacher was there somewhere, her kind face looking over him. Her sympathy was soothing, but she did not understand why he could not learn and he could not tell her.

There he is, then, the boy in his bed finally falling asleep in a town that seemed nameless, that was often white from snow. And here I am in a room on a gray day, still feeling that boy's fear. He rouses in his sleep now, seeming to wake for a moment. Perhaps he feels sick again. What could I say to help him understand? Perhaps it would help him to know that Charles Manson died an old man in a California state prison or that, in fact, he never held the knife and only ever had his followers do the killing, or that he mostly wanted to kill famous people, that he had never once thought of the boy and his mother in their cold home in a place far away from California. It might also help the boy to know that his father would eventually reenter his life and that he was not such a bad man, certainly not a man who should have cast the shadow of a mass murderer, though he was not—and never would be—an ideal father. Finally, I could say to the boy: You will learn to think clearly. You will learn to read. It will take extra time and effort, but it will happen. Years from now, you may even be a writer and return to this very moment, this very night, which seemed terrifying to you then, and try to calm yourself with words, with logic and reason and hindsight.

I could say all this—and I do say it. And yet the boy is still there, alone in bed. He will, it is clear enough by now, always be there, which is why I feel his fear on gray days and when it is cold and the dark falls early. At night, when I wake, because I am older and cannot wait until the morning, I wander half asleep down the hall to the bathroom and glance over my shoulder, only barely aware that I am still looking for the murderer.

BONNIE JILL EMANUEL

IN THE END THE SKY DOES BREAK UP INTO RAIN

I wear my lake blue flowers & new
moon print sundress,
step over the heat
carefully as if a body moving could somehow
cause a thunderstorm to happen
before they say it might.
As if weathermen are ever right.
July keeps the city
trapped, waiting
for something stagnant & hard to define—
hangs around
the fire escape & yellow café lights
stringing over Avenue A.
I want to say nothing breaks
in this summer. Love
months long choking on the sidewalk.
The heart always feels so humid
in the eyes.
A patio bird taps on cement.
Someone laughs into a napkin.
Order me a whiskey.
I know the difference between
the truth & the fog orange bricks
& when will it ever begin to rain?
No one knows
how wanting I am
truly for all this alone-
time writing
a poem about a citronella silent
flame snapping around its brilliant blue stem.

NANCY L. MEYER

AFTER THE LAURENTIDE

Ice, miles-thick, the world groaned under it. No life moved. A crack, an ooze. The ice began to melt and like a turtle from the mud, the earth rose, barren as the turtle's shell. Creamy-blue was Lake Algonquin that grew from glaciers' flow, so cold no fish could survive. Beavers big as black bears, Pocumtuck legend tells, dammed the lake, before it drained away creating the River Quenecticut. Lichen, spruce, deer found a toehold. Pequot ancestors followed, 11,000 years ago. To the place called Nonotuck "midst of the river," they walked, pitched their wigwams in the meadow Capawonk, caught trout in the clear waters of Nepasoancage running down Mt. Quunkwattchu. They planted corn in Wequittayyngg. Honored their dead below Mt. Wequomp, the blocky prominence resembling a giant beaver. A man-eating, insatiable beaver who ate all the plants until the people complained to god Hobomok who clubbed it with a tree trunk so it died in the great lake and turned into their stone mountain. Hunt, fish, move on after reaping chestnuts, year upon year. Until their sachems Chickwollop, Umpanchella and Quonquont sold the land to John Pynchon and the strange white men, my ancestors, moving up the river.

LUCAS DANIEL PETERS

WADING

Trekking through the Lord's states—*Glory On High*—I'm a horse turning home for water. Which is to say I'm in a long-term relationship with grief. Which is to say it's coming up fast, my long week being home, & longer for those who love me, I'm sure. It'll be on the shortest day of the year I begin work on a poem. & over my visit I'll talk about it with those who've always listened to me & hope that even the three steers from my father's pasture will have something to add. As in *pull up a chair.* As in *come sit with me*. As in *let's talk* . . . The heart wants to be heard. Wrenched by that sudden inner sensitivity we exercise in our everyday life. To be asked *What're you thinking? What're you feeling?* & told what's on the other side of *this*. This between. This Christmas morning with my baby niece clutching my finger like it were the world. My father listening to our old baby language in the childhood videotapes no one asked to watch . . . Do they know how I listen to them? How from my grandmother I learned to assemble the grinder before dropping the cranberries & orange rind in. My grandfather to memorize all the time slots & channel numbers of his cowboy TV shows. Watch the early winter tilt & roll down the porch steps while my father quietly offered his signatures as he'd pay bills into the evening . . . It's like that. I think of being a boy & it starts on a day like one of those. A mountain nightfall where there are no mountains. My in-the-distant pastoral like one of Escher's trick paintings. But also the place where I have the pleasure of walking our animals paths, not highways. Where among barn drawers of washers & screws remains the full jaw of some sow from long ago—still rifled through without second thought, no one recalling how it got there . . . Mischief, the baby goat my father took in, is doing well. She took a bath & is making baby sounds. On a late afternoon walk, the heavy west-wind reminded me it's still my ghost valet, my oldest friend, & says that tonight the grey will lift, though earlier the jeweler said to watch for rain. & that evening when I returned home to my father's after shopping, the night air was clear & cold & looked far away though it was too dark to see. & though I shouldn't have heard the sounds of harvest, somewhere someone must have been late in their work . . . What holy feeling of being far away. It's like my dominant language has always been one of shared melancholy / touch & kindness / vibration / an imagined moment of my parents still married, slow dancing, asking each other for foot massages / my grandparents in matching holiday sweaters exchanging a rare kiss, blinding us all by the presence of patient love . . .

But what would I see if I were to try & stay alone? How would I change? Would I be daydreaming of the world I'd like to create? Or be willing to find the one who knows that there's water in my body & that I want to be drunk. That if I hear a noise at night I'll warmed by the breath of someone close. & that if I partake in this harvest it will for once satisfy. Has there ever been a clear next stop? Has it always been like the world knows what I know? Where am I in all this? Who rules the way I move?

LUCAS DANIEL PETERS

MY SUMMER COLD

Rolling over in its bed, it's both the usual landscape & a new landscape for me: nodding stoic garden / late summer sunset gleamed by silvery trowel / the day's used red brick path among clear rows of poppies that have all seemingly gone to sleep—& anything as universal as sleep must be some sort of *blessing*. A blessing of daylight shadows cast through sheer white curtains. The bind of overly tucked-in sheets. A promise of comforting white noise from the ceiling fan. Or that quiet time of day when the birds have finally sung themselves silent . . . Take me back to that musical geography of my childhood. Back to my world mutation. Back to my summer cold. To overheard family hymns. Deep stomachaches. Sousa marches in quiet beat. To the boyhood contemplation of my interest in men. Bedridden. In convalescence. Carried away by a fever dream. It was like I was born twice. But the second time with a bent paw. Wide-eyed. Vulnerable to some prairie I could hardly see over my windowsill. Like it were a cattle guard at the end of a laneway where I watch some free horse whinny while my family heaves from pain, not work . . . But in the dream, when I found myself in a Minotaur's labyrinth, without second thought I laughed at his scurred horns. Felt no shame for how much this made him cry. With courage I confronted Mabel—the girl from school who always told me I didn't believe in myself—& confessed that I hated how she treated me like I was an example & not a problem to be solved. & when I woke I was no longer blush. It was evening & the hot day had already passed. The smell of grilled chicken reached my room. & when I made it downstairs, I found my father making dinner, which was rare. He said he was relieved I was feeling better, which I know now was tender, & that supper would be served soon . . . How all I could think to say then was that the food smelled unthinkably good.

GREG KOSMICKI

WHAT ABOUT IT?

To sit in a sun room on an early May day with the window open to have
the gentle breeze blow in and across my arms. Is that one of life's small pleasures
or one of its greatest? If that were to be taken away from me then I might think the
latter
but since it is there every day to live in I take it for granted like everything else
that happens to me in my life. And what about the sun, coming in through
the ancient glass of these windows, the glass so old that it flows down into its frame,
though in comparison to the light that is coming from the sun and the other stars it is
not even a tick in the eternal turning? What about the plants on the tables by the
window
photosynthesizing like crazy? What about writing all of this down on this paper
that is made out of trees and rags and other old paper? What about the words that may
have been written on this paper before it was pulped? What about the man sitting in
the chair
in the sun and the breeze with the sound of birds chirping and calling, and the sound
of the cars and trucks going by the house, and their sounds? What about them? What
about all
the people driving all those vehicles and their friends and families? What about
the microbes in the soil just reawakening from their long winter rest, and the fleas and
ticks
and grubs and snakes and rats? What about all of us, every one of us on earth?

SAMANTHA MADWAY

MENACED MEDIUM RARE

I don't trust what stirs me:
the world is lukewarm
water peopled by wooden spoons, wolf smiles, plastic bibs,
fingers testing tidepools of melted butter.

What stirs me is kicking up trouble,
centrifugal force,
the deceit of bubbles, reminding how good feelings go bad,
how slow burns keep secrets; how a kitchen can hide a story
of dawning warmth that grows into a taunting sort of torture,
a story that looks over, but doesn't end—
just leaves instead.

Leaves me afraid
of the sound of simmering and the shadow
puppets cast by steam; leaves me mistaking slotted spoons for
prison bars; leaves me wary of those who know how to put a lid
on a pot,
those who boil over,
even when the burner isn't on.

SAMANTHA MADWAY

I'M NOT EMPTY—I JUST DON'T KNOW WHERE MY INSIDES ARE

was something, now nothing:
an unbecoming
trash never rehomed as treasure
empty gesture moldy bread
corpse of a popped balloon wasted wishbone
ash flicked from a cigarette and
its butt bottomed out in a puddle
pamphlets left by
Jehovah's Witnesses at the front door
an *It's A Girl!* banner bought too soon,
baby never born a map of somewhere
that doesn't exist people turned prey
forgotten dinner filling
the oven, blanket of smoke
taste soot for weeks farms where
beloved pets weren't sent
the conspiracy of hope—
I fall through a hole in my pocket,
never retrace my steps.

ROMANA IORGA

WOLF-CHILD

As soon as we reach the baseball field,
my daughter throws off her shoes, her socks.
She runs away from my voice, twin
ponytails bobbing in the wind.
She laughs at the distance between us.
Her pink heels gleam swiftly
through puffs of dust.

She's done it again, taken her clothes off
without permission. Once more,
she's claimed her freedom
and runs with it away from me,
who always seem to set limits, draw up
imaginary boundaries, cage her in.
She's no Rapunzel, she'll do
what wolves do to escape a trap—
gnaw on a limb and be free.

My daughter with Dacian roots—
she doesn't know yet that her ancestors
were lycanthropes, wolf-people,
whose war banners pictured wolf heads
and dragon tails; who chose to die,
rather than surrender.

Besieged by the Roman legions
at Sarmizegetusa, Decebal, the last
Dacian king, fell on his sword,
lest he give Trajan, the emperor,
the satisfaction of a triumphal return
to Rome with a king chained
behind his chariot.

My daughter running around
the baseball field is American.
Her declaration of freedom

is American, too, but not quite.
There's something else, a long
shadow, a throng of kings, warriors,
conquered people and conquerors
alike, resting against the tall
fence posts, crowding the bleachers.

They watch blood of their blood
run in a new land, under a new sky.
They've lived this moment before
I lived it. And now, I see my daughter
through their eyes, the eyes of people
long gone, whose memories are
long gone, or have become
the stuff of legends and fairytales.
They huddle around me as I write.
Some nod, others shake their heads.
It's hard to please them all.

They do agree on some things:
my daughter must keep running away,
for that's what children do. And I
must keep calling her back, for that's
the lot of the parents. As for the scribes
among us, they say, the scribes
must keep writing.

SPENCER MATHESON

TO THE RIVER

Perched on a bench,
in some lost hamlet—
one of those summer lunches—
I ask a friend of a friend about the philosophy of weightlifting.
Plato was a broad-shouldered badass he says,
forking two merguez.

So two families bushwhack down the mountainside.
Whenever you bushwhack down the mountainside,
you remember what teetering John Cleeses we are.

I fall first,
flail into shale,
hardenings of ancient ocean.
Two wives next, prettily,
topsoil carpet whipped from underfoot,
by a clumsy apprentice magician,
slope becoming slide,
summer dresses up around shoulders.

All the kids stay upright.

Papa Ben then, slick riverbed rock,
arms quick cartwheeling the air.
It's funny how far the ground is,
yet how quickly we end up there.
We can't stop ourselves.
And there's so much to see on the way down.
The waxy leaves,
the angry purple blackberry vines,
our daughter's surprise,
and the dull earth,
giving no light back.

DT McCREA

ODE TO TALKING SHIT

and smoking cigarettes
and dancing till 3am, screaming along to Alabama Shakes

ode to trying out tweets in the group chat
and getting drunk after another bullshit workshop
and having my mind blown every time someone sends a new poem

ode to delight
and trees
and the way you stop to look at every one

ode to pretentious movies
and talking about God
and hoping God is listening, most of the time

ode to thrifting
and open mics
and being so gay no one could possibly miss it

ode to waking up everyday
and choosing to stay alive, in a world that would see us dead
and to doing so much more than that

2020 Midwest Chapbook Contest

Finalists

MICHAEL CHANG

AREA CODE 886

she had a boyfriend named henry & i wanted one too
he waited for her after class & i wanted that too
subtle is not in my vocabulary (no free lunch)

//

don't know how u move thru the world looking like dat
the seas part for u ur my crop yield in the best years
im a crumb & ur the whole loaf
im a cream puff & ur my guardian angel (i want to be a twinkie)

//

wuz that fancy word to describe nostalgia
for something u've never experienced (desiderium)
anyway i swear i lived in late 80s taipei
right after martial law was lifted
made a living writing poems on postcards
not rich but i had a black mercedes

//

im haunting & powerful ur daring & strange
my intelligence so fluid & crystallized u wanna lick it
u say ur communist but ur swelling like colonial ambition
u may be an unfeeling capitalist but u really have a way wit words
i hope u don't take offense but ur dressed like the aga khan
i'll buy wut ur selling two in each color
everywhere u go u litter the world a trail of broken hearts

//

i know ur trying ur absolute hardest but i just can't get there
i think i overdid it wit the wiener schnitzel
u shouldn't have rubbed that lemon in my eyes
at one pt or another i could watch entire planets get obliterated & feel nothing
dead martians everywhere i won't even look up from my fkn cereal
ur throbbing in me like an underground poker game stop being judgmental

//

ariana reines stole our heirlooms tried to sell them back for five dollars
i refused, told her *i'm your favorite poet's favorite poet*

//

if wut u give me is the same as wut u give everyone else
i don't want it (osmosis)

MICHAEL CHANG

SEAN ★ LENNON

"Justice is what love looks like in public, just as tenderness is what love feels like in private"—Cornel West

He conditions me to like ppl who work odd hours.
He says my legal training gets in the way of our relationship,
says not everything has a neat answer,
says stop picking things apart, searching for a solution,
quit trying to uncover some grand truth.
I try & try & try.

The law is messy, I say,
there *are* rare ppl who act in good faith,
well-intentioned ppl who get it wrong,
but at least the law has *standards*.
I think this is pretty clever but maybe it's a self-own.

The system is monolithic & bureaucratic & I suppose
must be reimagined, refashioned, rising again from ashes.
I imagine everything disintegrating around me, structures &
scaffolding be damned, I am pristine, I will remain standing.

I understand how tenuous existence can be,
when affirmative action can be swept away by the will of the voters,
when your marriage can be invalidated by a majority vote,
when doing what is right & moral can be derided as amnesty.

I know how something can disappear as quickly as it blooms,
how it can be snatched out of your grasp the second you put a name to it.

I think ppl underestimate death, or more specifically, the notion of death,
how it overtakes every facet of your life,
how it is a crushing obsession, an understanding that infects you like the patriarchy,
how it tells you its secrets as you yield to it.

We contain multitudes, you know,
lemon drops & melon balls, sweet & sadistic, turkey & ham.
Is it true that to everything there is a season, I read that somewhere,
that we must think of our lives in seasons,
truer still that we must offer something new every season,
something different, groundbreaking, delightful even, or be eliminated?

He says *I don't like how you come & go,*
this isn't, you know, Denny's or something.
I say you're messy & you meal prep,
you cook for the week & it's creepy.
He says *I'm sorry, I just want you for myself.*
I say how do you predict what you want to eat?

It's abt finding one thing to keep you going,
that's the hack, to keep you fueled up,
discovering it, secreting it away (me), sharing it (whatever).

Lately I have been so delighted by movies abt shoplifters,
& scam artists & ppl really sticking it to the Man,
stealing is bad, of course, but I find myself rooting for the underdog,
revenge of the nerds & some such,
you're programmed in this country to want the underdog to win,
support the team of misfits angling for that championship,
I realize this must be how some ppl feel abt O.J.,
that he slayed justice, that he beat the system.

I remember having a very nice, sit-down kind of breakfast,
at a place called Six Furlong, relatively close to a similar,
more formal establishment named the Gallop, where
the waitstaff went unchanged over decades,
& I was reading an English newspaper & having tea
& being bothered that our breakfast trays were too big,
they clearly didn't fit the table & bumped up against one another,
drunk virgins jockeying for territory & the scene was comical
yet infuriating & then my porridge was cold.

•

C.S. CARRIER

STREETSCAPE

streets lined with ATMs, divebars, pharmacies, laundromats, smokehouses, vape lounges, farmer's markets, with Slush Puppie fountains, McDonald's Big Macs, green & orange Mexican restaurants

with fireengines, policecruisers, mailtrucks, with throbbing pickups, sportscars, motorcycles, hogs, all spilling their guts everywhere, "too loud to ever hear freedom ring"

streets, processions hullabalooed with Peach Harvest Queens in red Corvettes, with Tyson chickens in wire cubes on lumbering semis, feathers unfurling onto dinnertables

swerves, slippages into the future, into the old to find the young, each resembling the other, so that they might be related, how my dad & I bequeath our specters

streets so hot they could fry an egg, turn away the moon, streets with children, fireworks, basketball goals, pitched voices

domiciles with flowered porches, red doors, backyard barbecues, stanzas lined with nicotined chandeliers, tchotchked curios with horsehair pots, bleached sanddollars, dog teeth, Vietnamed fathers

antiphonies lined with cold dead fingers, enchanting mottos, Moses's dreamy cloaks, batons & grammars of the one true god, in linen shroud, gold brow

topologies with buses, bus card slots, parallel, serial connections, multidrop, daisychains

industries, lines bisecting Arcadia, rivers, graveyards, what volumes of light

egresses lined with publicly funded murals, utilitypoles piggybacking gasmains, lesions piggybacking the Trail of Tears, opening onto relocation centers

with cats, dogs, with armadillos, deer, opossums, raccoons, skunks, turtles crushed open

syntaxes that sweep tongues into strawberries, knuckles into pearls, newspapers into sleeves,

pidgins, meters, classy delineations, private properties [NO TRESPASSING] flags, banners, monuments, swaddling blankets, red capes, all lining the muscular gait of the raging bull

fabrics lined with plastic trees, plastic reindeer, plastic fences, choreographed with hyperobjective lawns

metonyms under steel vaults at the edge of darkness, where multiple Americas meet in feedback loops

signatories to, lineages of, King Corn, King Cotton, fertilized, mythologized, monarchs feeding on every where, every one, every thing, even spirits

C.S. CARRIER

LANDSCAPE AT THE END OF THE WORLD

room in shadow
briers joists exposed
goats blue confetti about the floor

chlorine billowing through
the room stitched with lasers
mobiles of bones hair

face aghast
my hands clawing my neck

large broken window opening onto
frothy skies pallid wheat
chalky ticks cherry trees

under the cherry trees loosestrife
among the loosestrife styrofoam
bodies in various states
buzzards investing in them

beyond the cherry trees flames
that frame a gold nest
crown a white chair

in the nest an orange mass
with charred turkey wings gold tassels
fungal bedecked with pustules

billowy jowls rows of teeth
multiple gray eyes
with Xs throbbing in them

JEAN PROKOTT

I WATCH A DOCUMENTARY ABOUT THE PANAMA CANAL WHILE ON AMBIEN

All of life is trying to get on the other side.
God, if it just weren't there:
the hymen of Central America.
We want to tear through,
we want to snap it like a carrot
fresh from the garden
or rip through the tendon
of its jerky.
Its 20,000 dead Frenchmen
appear in my dreams. The fog settles,
a moving cloud of malaria,
and the living room lives.
Minnows swim between my ears,
and I wait for the dirty water
to flood. The white pillow,
a turtle, bows his head in prayer;
the coat sleeve waves,
the room rocks like a small ship,
I argue with the suitcase in the corner.
Dark figures disappear
when I angle my head.
The Panamax of sleep scrapes
my skull. The next morning,
I remember I've made treaties
that Columbia refuses to ratify.
And what *don't* I remember?
The landslides dumped soot
into my trenches.
All those nights hallucinating.
The prescription refilled.
Maybe the suitcase and I
finally made up. Maybe I knelt
before a dark figure and begged
for forgiveness. Maybe I asked
the white turtle to carry me
while I floated along
the two mile canal,
three hours of labor,
until it delivered me
to the other side
and I busted
into that new ocean.

JEAN PROKOTT

ANOTHER POEM ABOUT TREES

and last week on public radio: an interview
with the guy who updates the leaf foliage maps,
who drives up I-35,
circles a lake—
which is looking less glassy
and more like a giant cataract—
and bends down
like the goddamned King of Nature
to judge already-fallen leaves.
Brittle like an old wine cork means
less Big-Bird yellow and more
last week's macaroni & cheese,
and a rubbery bend means the Maple
will bloom maroon.
He pulls out his fall map,
a Paint-by-Number,
and he algorithms how long
until those hidden reds
will flare up
like menstrual mood swings.
and I'm like
fuck you, Leaf Guy.
that's the best job ever.
How is there a job
in this world
to watch
every tree explode
in puberties of paint
and tell listeners like me—*hey,*
go outside
look how beautiful this is
at exactly this time
in exactly this place.
and this morning on public radio:
it is now legal
to compost human remains,

lay our bodies
on wood chips,
alfalfa, straw—
and in a month become
two wheelbarrows
of soil.
        Perhaps I've been looking
        at a tree wrong this whole time,
not understanding
the science of it.
A tree can grow
from our bones.
Leaf Guy's algorithms
could be the whole human story.
Let's follow his maps
and find each other.
Today, he looks at trees,
tells us when they're dying.
Tomorrow, I'll look at graves,
tell you when they're living.

JEAN PROKOTT

I AM A SALMON, I AM NOT A SALMON

A company called Whooshh[1] created a vacuumed tube, and they called it the Salmon Cannon,[2] and without it we would surely have a salmon famine.[3] The fish swim toward the circle-tube-end, which obviously represents a vagina,[4] and reverse-birth themselves home, which is the place they've been looking for the entire time.[5] Before the Salmon Cannon, there were Salmon Stairs,[6] a Salmon Truck,[7] and a Salmon 'Copter,[8] but nothing was so fast as the Salmon Cannon,[9] and nothing was so misty,[10] and nothing was so fun. If we do not cannon, stair, truck, or helicopter the salmon, they swim into turbine blades[11] and are chopped into fishy bits, and if they are not chopped into fishy bits by blades, they stare up, see 551 feet of dam,[12] and think well, hell, where are we supposed to go now?,[13] because they've imprinted on the other side, where they were born.[14] So, the lady salmon lay their eggs in warm water, or they lay no eggs at all, and they swim in circles.[15] But at the

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1 It sounds like it sounds.

2 They must be poets.

3 I am a poet.

4 I am a literature student, too.

5 I am a salmon, too.

6 And at the salmon gym, a salmon stair-climber.

7 Not driven by salmon.

8 Not flown by salmon.

9 22mph

10 Like your thumb over the garden hose when you make rainbow, rainbow, rainbow.

11 If only someone would cannon me away from the blades—but I am not a salmon.

12 Salmon can see ultraviolet light, which humans cannot; salmon can see beyond the violet.*

*Beyond the Violet is the perfect salmon band name.

13 How many times have I said this too?

14 I drove by my childhood home, and the lawn needed to be watered.

15 Their slick bodies are moving crescent moons.

Roza Dam,[16] salmon find the 150 foot tube in groups[17] and are sucked in together,[18] stretch 100 feet high, and pop out the other side[19] in this new birth.[20] The fish fly, slippery like pineapple spears, and they are home, and maybe someday they will be snatched by bear or pinched in eagle talons and flown high above the earth, just one more time again

16 In Washington.

17 I would only travel the Salmon Cannon with you, fin in fin.

18 The tube can carry 40 fish at a time.

19 Like a tennis ball out of a ball machine.

20 When they hit the water, it is a second baptism.

CERIDWEN HALL

HOLIDAY

flight: feverquick stilling of mind

then underground we become windowghosts with nothing to see
but a wall of tunnel: our sideways acceleration. Above, the river
is winter, a vanished mirror

I am not myself/travelling alone
restrain an impulse to speak aloud

there's something formal and inevitable about homecoming. This is only going back. Making an errand of my once daily walk as blood retreats from extremities. As yet, though, the lake remains unfrozen and holds the woods reflected. Three swans glide through

waninglight

as we attempt to describe a relationship between our moods and the natural world: echo/parallel, and a reluctance to articulate difference between a hillside in New England and one in Ohio. Where I am from, I soften; grow weathered

the hours grow dubious. We imagine temporal borders, imagine their collapse or crossing at midnight. The clock now just a technical distinction—seasons, not minutes, dizzy us. We burn candles, deal cards. There unfolds a kind of tiredness or togetherness where every utterance arrives weighted, absurd. On the table, letters accrue or diminish in value. All the symbols are worth something, worth, in reality, nothing. Play encapsulates this other register

a tangible circumstance where

the trick is to cross wrists with your future and spin

until a past diverges or coheres

do we wildly exaggerate calling our wood fire more real than a gas flame, a televised glow? It isn't the blaze that mesmerizes, but the sound, the smell. Forest remnants and newspapers, their visible ash. How it must be tended, allowed to die each night

we are rather desperate for icons, the way they trouble us

we: a reliance on adaptive grammar

cities are not places, but only our names for them. Streets also are not destinations, but meant to facilitate commerce. A road, however, begins to hold and shape imagination, especially if narrow

a vehicle's width

dingy snow lines the curb. Salt from crossways sticks to my boots, crunches on pavement. An alchemy of thought, walking. In the museum, fewer layers are required and everything is ancient or recent—including my fascination with ornamental blades enclosed in glass. Jade, according to the sign: found in tombs

a spare hour

then the airport again, by bus and train. A universe with escalators and panels, advertising or indicating choices. Once scanned and ticketed, I do not stop for anything until I reach my gate, a passenger

consuming distance

the benches are full, but it is possible to lean against a pillar near the window and see flares lit as the runway darkens

BRET SHEPARD

HERE BUT ELSEWHERE

1.

In Alaska, there are many degrees of thinking
your life is over, many ends to the body, like

the fall when I heard Eltron had returned
to Barrow, back from Anchorage and looking

for me. I never should have dated his girlfriend
those months he was in juvenile detention.

2.

Most searched: marijuana legal
for decades in Alaska.

Most searched: Mount McKinley's first ascent
is contagious.

Most searched: near Denali you have caught
something in the body.

3.

Proof: my son tells me he saw my father
last night as he slept. He doesn't know *dream*.

I show him a picture of my dad standing
on a fishing boat, Kodiak in the background—

his bearded face smiles back. *Yeah, that's him,
your dad. And he knows you are my dad, too.*

What did you guys talk about, I ask. *We didn't
talk about anything*, he says. *We just played.*

BRET SHEPARD

TERRITORIES

Report paints grim picture about Alaska
Native language fluency, but hope remains
—KTUU, 2020

1.

I'm missing a language for what is lost.

Tundra. Tundra. Tundra. Tundra.
In difficulty, a grammar for the vastness

measured in millions of eye lengths.

I was raised without trees. In absence
and then out of nothing, Tundra.

I don't have a language that isn't white.

Or, like fog, if it is there it is set so
deep against white, I'm numb to its grip.

2.

Symptoms: all the colors of disease reflected.
Culture: white spreads the cold out.

Symptoms: sky replaced by deliveries.
Culture: every word for belief defined by sky.

3.

Accusation: every bowhead's death
expressed by the body.

Accusation: dark of winter, the home,
the body,
the abusive sun.

4.

The village voted itself dry
again. What is paradise

but a final tally of choices
given to innocence, sin

given to sunless days—
the caribou don't care

for laments. I do not see
any need between myself.

5.

Each cold
night

is code
to what

ripples
the body.

6.

Come February, draw two dots on the white
tundra. Move your head closer to both dots

until you can only see one of them. One

goes missing. That missing dot is everyone
from childhood, tundra littered with caribou.

CONTRIBUTOR NOTES

Millicent Borges Accardi, a Portuguese-American writer, is the author of four poetry books, most recently *Only More So* (Salmon Poetry). Her awards include fellowships from the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA), Fulbright, CantoMundo, Creative Capacity, the California Arts Council, The Corporation of Yaddo, Fundação Luso-Americana, and Barbara Deming Foundation. She's led poetry workshops at Keystone College, Nimrod Writers Conference, The Muse in Norfolk, Virginia, and University of Texas, Austin. Her non-fiction can be found in *The Writers Chronicle*, *Poets Quarterly*, and the *Portuguese American Journal*. Recent readings at Brown University, Rutgers, UMass Dartmouth, Rhode Island College and the Carr Reading Series at the University of Illinois.

Maggie Andersen is a writer based in Chicago. Her prose has appeared or will soon appear in *DIAGRAM, the Baltimore Review, the Coal Hill Review, Sleet, CutBank*, *Grain, the South Loop Review, Knee-Jerk*, and *the Southern California Review*, among others. She directs the writing program at Dominican University, serves as Literary Manager at the Gift Theatre Company, and performs in storytelling salons across the city, such as 2nd Story, You're Being Ridiculous and the Paper Machete. She lives with her husband, John, and her son, Archie.

Deborah Allbritain is a poet living in San Diego. Her poem, "Sorrow I Will Lead You Out Somewhere," was chosen for the Patricia Dobler Poetry Prize in 2017. Her poems have been nominated for both the Pushcart Prize and the Best of The Net and have regularly appeared in many journals, as well as a number of anthologies. Her book manuscripts have been semi-finalists and individual poems have been chosen as finalists for the Wabash Poetry Prize, Bellingham Prize for Poetry, *Florida Review* Editors' Award and the *Comstock Review* Poetry Contest. Publications include *B O D Y Literature, The Dunes Review, The Nashville Review, The Greensboro Review, Verse Daily* and *Spoon River*. Deborah has upcoming work in the *Sugar House Review, Salamander*, and the *MacGuffin*.

Colin Bailes is the author of *Assemblage after the Wreck*, semifinalist in the 2020 Frontier Chapbook Contest. His work has appeared or is forthcoming in *Blackbird, The Boiler, Meridian, Missouri Review, Raleigh Review,* and *Subtropics*, among other journals. He is an MFA candidate at Virginia Commonwealth University, where he serves as the 2020–2021 Levis Reading Prize Fellow.

Angela Ball is the recipient of awards from the National Endowment for the Arts and the Mississippi Arts commission, among others. Her most recent book of poetry is *Talking Pillow* (University of Pittsburgh Press, 2017). She teaches in the Center for Writers, part of the School of Humanities at the University of Southern Mississippi. With her two dogs, Miss Bishop and Scarlet, she divides her time between Hattiesburg, Mississippi and Covington, Louisiana.

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J. Bowers lives in St. Louis, Missouri, where she is an Assistant Professor of English at Maryville University. Her short fiction has appeared in T*he Portland Review, cream city review, Redivider, StoryQuarterly, The Indiana Review, Zone 3, Oyez Review,* and other journals. She won *The Laurel Review's* 2014 Midwest Short Fiction Prize and the 2016 Winter Anthology Prize.

James Brubaker is the author of four books, *The Taxidermist's Catalog* (Braddock Avenue, 2019), *Black Magic Death Sphere: (science) fictions* (Urban Farmhouse, 2018), *Liner Notes* (Subito, 2014), and *Pilot Season* (Sunnyoutside, 2014). His stories have appeared in venues including *Zoetrope: All Story, Michigan Quarterly Review, Booth, Hobart, The Normal School, Beloit Fiction Journal, The Cupboard, Indiana Review*, and *Diagram*, among others. He lives in Missouri and teaches writing at Southeast Missouri State University, where he also directs the University Press, and serves as editor-in-chief of literary journal *Big Muddy*, and managing editor of *The Cape Rock*.

C.S. Carrier is the author of the full-length collections, *After Dayton* (2008) and *Mantle* (2013), as well as several chapbooks, including *Ozarks* (2019), and */anode, a/node, an/ode* (2014). His poem, "The Natural State," won the 2018 *Omnidawn* Single Poem Broadside Contest. His poems have been published in several literary journals, including *Bateau, Blue Earth Review, Fence, The Tiny,* and *Dream Pop Journal*. He has an MFA from the

University of Massachusetts Amherst and a PhD from the University of Louisiana at Lafayette. And he grew up in western North Carolina and currently lives in northwestern Arkansas.

A Lambda Literary fellow, **MICHAEL CHANG** (they/them) was awarded the Kundiman Scholarship at the Miami Writers Institute. A finalist in contests at *the Iowa Review, BOMB, NightBlock*, & many others, their poems have been nominated for Best of the Net & the Pushcart Prize. Their full-length collection is forthcoming from Really Serious Literature, & their collection *<drakkar noir>* won the Bateau Press BOOM Chapbook Contest. Other projects will soon be announced.

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Michael Czyzniejewski is the author of three collections of stories, *I Will Love You for the Rest of My Life: Breakup Stories* (Curbside Splendor, 2015); *Chicago Stories: 40 Dramatic Fictions* (Curbside Splendor, 2012); and *Elephants in Our Bedroom: Stories* (Dzanc, 2009). He teaches at Missouri State University, where he is Editor of Moon City Press and *Moon City Review*. In 2009, he was awarded a fellowship from the National Endowment for the Arts.

Debra Di Blasi grew up in rural Missouri, on a livestock and crop farm. She is an artist and the author of ten books, including, *Selling the Farm: Descants from a Recollected Past*, which won the 2019 C&R Press Nonfiction Award; *You Are What Is Written*, co-authored with National Book Award Finalist H. L. Hix; *Today Is the Day That Will Matter: An Oral History of the New America: #AlternativeFictions*; and *Drought & Say What You Like*, winner of a Thorpe Menn Literary Excellence Award. Her writing has appeared in *American Book Review, Boulevard, Cimarron Review, Copper Nickel, The Iowa Review, Kestrel, The Los Angeles Review, New Letters, New South Fiction, Notre Dame Review, Pleiades*, and *Triquarterly*, among many other publications, and in notable anthologies of innovative writing. She is a former publisher, educator, and art columnist. More at www.debradiblasi.com

Michelle R. Disler has a Ph.D. in Creative Writing Nonfiction from Ohio University. Her work has appeared in *The Massachusetts Review, North Dakota Quarterly, Gulf Coast, Fact-Simile, Hotel Amerika, Seneca Review, Glass,* and *Columbia* among many others. She is also a Pushcart Prize nominee for her writing on James Bond, and a recipient of the Virginia Woolf Essay Prize. Her first book, *[BOND, JAMES]: alphabet, anatomy, [auto] biography*, was released by Counterpath Press (2012). She is at work on a manuscript about homicide, called *What the body knows*, which follows her father's career as a homicide detective.

Bonnie Jill Emanuel's poems appear or are forthcoming in *American Poetry Review, Mid-American Review, SWWIM, Love's Executive Order, Ruminate, Chiron Review*, and elsewhere. She earned her MFA in Creative Writing at the City College of New York, where she received the 2020 Jerome Lowell DeJur Award in Creative Writing and the 2017 Stark Poetry Prize. Born in Detroit, she now lives in New York.

Robert Long Foreman's most recent books are *Weird Pig* and *I Am Here To Make Friends*. His work has appeared in *AGNI, Kenyon Review Online, Crazyhorse*, and other magazines. He lives in Kansas City.

John Fulton has published three books of fiction: *Retribution*, which won the Southern Review Short Fiction Award, the novel *More Than Enough*, which was a Barnes and Nobles Great New Writers selection, and *The Animal Girl*, which was a Story Prize notable book. His fiction has been awarded the Pushcart Prize and been published in several journals, including *Zoetrope, Oxford American, The Missouri Review*, and *The Southern Review*. He has new stories forthcoming in *Ploughshares* and *Fiction Magazine*. He teaches in the MFA program at the University of Massachusetts Boston.

Elizabeth Genovise is an O. Henry Prize recipient as well as a recent inductee into the East Tennessee Literary Hall of Fame. Her third collection of short stories, *Posing Nude for the Saints*, was published in 2019 by the Texas Review Press. Currently she is active as a teacher/workshop leader for creative writers in east Tennessee. Her next book, *Palindrome*, will be published by Texas Review Press in 2022.

Jenny Grassl's poems have appeared in *The Boston Review, Tupelo Quarterly, Rhino Poetry, Phantom Drift, The Massachusetts Review, Ocean State Review, Lana Turner,* and other journals. Her work was published in a National Poetry Month feature of I*owa Review*, and *Green Mountains Review* will publish her poem in an upcoming issue.

Sarah Gridley is the author of four books of poetry: *Weather Eye Open*, *Green is the Orator*, *Loom*, and most recently, *Insofar* (New Issues Press, 2020, awarded the 2019 Green Rose Prize by Forrest Gander). Other honors include the 2018 Cecil Hemley Award and the 2019 Writer Magazine/Emily Dickinson Award from the Poetry Society of America. She is pursuing a Masters degree in Theological and Religious Studies at John Carroll University.

Ceridwen Hall recently completed a PhD at the University of Utah. Her first chapbook, *Automotive*, is forthcoming from Finishing Line Press. Other work appears or is forthcoming in *Triquarterly, Hotel Amerika, Grist, Salamander, Tar River Poetry*, and elsewhere.

Jeff Hanson received a PhD in English from Ohio University in 2007. He lives with his wife, Marilyn, in Bellingham, Washington. Instead of using tangled rhetoric (purple prose) to address existential anxieties about *What it means*, I wrote "Purple Passage." The poem begins with a flourish before getting to the simple language of simple-knowing and of simple-saying. I tried to note that despite our fears and worries about the future the Buddha was correct: *Every place is sacred and all is well*. Such quiet faith is a gift.

Jonathan Hobratsch received his MFA at Texas State University. He currently teaches at Drexel University in Philadelphia, PA. He has also taught at Pace University in New York, NY and at Austin Community College in Austin, TX.

Originally from Chisinau, Moldova, **Romana Iorga** lives in Switzerland. She is the author of two poetry collections in Romanian. Her work in English has appeared or is forthcoming in *Bellingham Review, Tinderbox Poetry Journal, American Literary Review*, and others, as well as on her poetry blog at clayandbranches.com.

Greg Kosmicki's most recent collection, *It's As Good Here as it Gets Anywhere*, (Logan House Press) was a finalist for the High Plains Book Award in 2017. He founded The Backwaters Press in 1998, which became an imprint of The University of Nebraska Press in 2018.

Karin Falcone Krieger lives and writes in Oyster Bay, NY. She is a longtime writer at *Able News*, covering disability rights. "This is a Permanent Book" a referenced history of Dover Publications appears in *Contingent Magazine*. Her poems appear in *BlazeVOX 20*. Her literary criticism can be found in *LITPUB*, and is forthcoming in *The Laurel Review*, and *The Literary Review.* She holds a BA in Social Sciences from SUNY Stony Brook, and an MFA from The Jack Kerouac School of Disembodied Poetics at Naropa. She taught freshman composition as an adjunct instructor at several area colleges for 20 years, and in 2020 took a self-imposed and self-funded sabbatical.

Jeffrey Levine is the author of three books of poetry: *The Kinnegad Home for the Bewildered*, forthcoming from Salmon Press (March, 2019), *Rumor of Cortez*, nominated for a 2006 *Los Angeles Times* Literary Award in Poetry, and *Mortal, Everlasting*, which won the 2002 Transcontinental Poetry Prize. His many poetry prizes include the Larry Levis Prize from the *Missouri Review*, the James Hearst Poetry Prize, the *Mississippi Review* Poetry Prize, the Ekphrasis Poetry Prize, and the 2007 *American Literary Review* poetry prize. A graduate of the Warren Wilson MFA Program for Writers, Levine is Founder, Artistic Director, and Publisher of *Tupelo Press*, an award-winning independent literary press, now entering its 20th year, located in the Norad Mill, North Adams, MA. Formerly on the founding faculty of the Colrain Manuscript Conferences, he now runs the Tupelo Press Poetry Conferences with offerings annually at Truchas, New Mexico, in Portland, OR, in Maine, and in New York City.

Trudy Lewis is the author of the novels *The Empire Rolls* (Moon City Press) and *Private Correspondences* (William Goyen Prize from Northwestern/TriQuarterly) in addition

to a story collection, *The Bones of Garbo*, winner of the Sandstone Prize in Short Fiction from The Ohio State University Press. Trudy's fiction has appeared in *Atlantic Monthly, Best American Short Stories, Chicago Quarterly Review, Cimarron Review, Cream City Review, Meridian, New England Review, New Stories from the South, Prairie Schooner, Shenandoah*, and others.Trudy is a professor of English and Creative Writing at the University of Missouri.

Sarah Maclay's braided collaboration with Holaday Mason, *The "She" Series: A Venice Correspondence*, was published by What Books Press in Fall 2016. She's also the author of *Music for the Black Room, The White Bride, Whore* (all, U of Tampa Press), and three chapbooks. Her poems and criticism have appeared widely, in spots such as *The American Poetry Review, Ploughshares, FIELD, The Writer's Chronicle, The Best American Erotic Poems: From 1800 to the Present,* and *Poetry International*, where she served as book review editor for a decade. The recipient of The Tampa Review Prize in Poetry, a Pushcart Special Mention, a 2015 Yaddo residency, and a 2015-2016 City of Los Angeles Master Artist's Fellowship, she teaches at LMU, and conducts periodic workshops at Beyond Baroque.

Samantha Madway is working on a collection of interlinked poems and flash fiction. She loves her dogs, Charlie, Parker, and Davey, more than anything else in the universe. Though technophobic, she attempts to be brave by having an Instagram @sometimesnight. If the profile were a plant, it would've died long ago. Her writing has appeared in *Sunspot Lit, Linden Ave, High Shelf, Sky Island Journal, Aurora, mutiny!, SLAB*, and elsewhere.

Spencer Matheson's fiction has appeared in *Conjunctions*; he has poetry forthcoming in *The Paris Review*. He teaches at the École Normale Supérieure in Paris, where he lives with his wife and three children.

DT McCrea (they/she) is a trans-anarchist poet. They love the NBA, know the lyrics to every Saintseneca song, and have a love hate relationship with philosophy. Her work can be found in *Honey & Lime, Taco Bell Quarterly, Flypaper* and others.

Nancy L. Meyer is a 2020 Pushcart nominee, avid cyclist, and End of Life Counselor who lives in the SF Bay Area. Journals include: *Colorado Review, Tupelo Quarterly, The Sugar House Review, The Stonecoast Review, Caesura, Indolent Press, Halfway Down the Stairs, Lucky Jefferson, Passager, The Asexual, BeZine*. Forthcoming in The Sunlight Press. Published in 8 anthologies, most recently *Open Hands,* Tupelo Press, *Dang I Wish I Hadn't Done That*, Ageless Authors and *Crossing Class*, Wising Up Press.

Brad Aaron Modlin's book *Everyone at This Party Has Two Names* (SEMO Press) won the Cowles Prize, and his short collection of short stories *Surviving in Drought* won the Cupboard's contest. His work has been featured in On Being's *Poetry Unbound* and has been set to voice/orchestral music. When he gives readings in person, he remembers to pack comfortable shoes. Over Zoom, he's barefoot. He is The Reynolds Endowed Chair of Creative Writing and a professor in the undergrad/grad program at University of Nebraska in Kearney, where he coordinates the visiting writers series.

Lisa Mottolo is an Editor and Poet living in Austin, TX. Her work has been published or is forthcoming in *Typishly*, *Barren Magazine*, *Slipstream*, *Counterclock Journal*, and others.

Marcus Myers lives in Kansas City, MO, where he teaches and serves as the managing editor of *Bear Review*, which he co-founded with poet Brian Clifton. His poems have appeared in *The Common*, *The Cortland Review*, *The Florida Review*, *Hunger Mountain*, *The Mid-American Review*, *Rhino*, *Salt Hill*, *Tar River Poetry* and other such journals.

Phong Nguyen is the author of three novels: *The Bronze Drum* (Grand Central Publishing, forthcoming in 2022), *Roundabout: An Improvisational Fiction* (Moon City Press, 2020), and *The Adventures of Joe Harper* (Outpost19, 2016, winner of the Prairie Heritage Book Award); and two short fiction collections: *Pages from the Textbook of Alternate History* (Mastodon Publishing, 2019) and *Memory Sickness and Other Stories*(Elixir Press, 2011). He is the Miller Family Endowed Chair in Literature and Writing at the University of Missouri, where he teaches fiction-writing.

Carrie Oeding's first book of poems, *Our List Of Solutions*, was published by 42 Miles Press. She is the recipient of the Rhode Island Council on the Arts' Fellowship in Poetry. Her work has appeared in *Denver Quarterly, Pleiades, Bennington Review, Columbia Poetry Review*, and elsewhere. Oeding lives in Providence, RI.

Eric Pankey is the author of many books. A new collection of poems, *Not Yet Transfigured*, is forthcoming in fall of 2021.

Lucas Daniel Peters is a queer poet from rural Indiana. He received his MFA in poetry from Syracuse University. His work has appeared or is forthcoming in *The Greensboro Review, Midwest Review, Missouri Review, Southern Humanities Review, Southern Indiana Review,* & is a grant recipient through United State Artists. He currently lives in Albany, NY.

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

From Alaska, **Bret Shepard** has lived throughout the Pacific and Arctic coasts. He completed his PhD at the University of Nebraska. Currently, he lives in Tacoma, Washington and teaches at Green River College. Recent poems have appeared or are forthcoming in *Arts & Letters, Boston Review, Colorado Review, Crazyhorse*, and elsewhere. He is the author of *Negative Compass*, winner of the Wells College Chapbook Prize, and *Place Where Presence Was*, winner of the Moon City Press Book Award for Poetry.

Marcela Sulak is the author of the lyric memoir *Mouth Full of Seeds*, and three poetry collections, *City of Sky Papers, Decency* and *Immigrant.* She's co-edited *Family Resemblance: An Anthology and Exploration of 8 Hybrid Literary Genres.* A 2019 NEA Translation Fellow, her fourth translation, *Twenty Girls to Envy Me. Selected Poems of Orit Gidali* was nominated for a 2017 PEN Award for Poetry in Translation. She hosts the podcast "Israel in Translation," edits *The Ilanot Review*, and is Associate Professor of English Literature and Linguistics at Bar-Ilan University.

Jon Thompson is the author of, most recently, *Notebook of Last Things* (Shearsman Books, 2019). He also edits the poetry series, *Free Verse Editions and Illuminations*, a series on American poetics. More on him can be found at www.jon-thompson.com.

Kelly Weber is the author of the forthcoming chapbook T*he Dodo Heart Museum* (Dancing Girl Press), and her work has appeared or is forthcoming in *Brevity*, *The Missouri Review*, *DIAGRAM*, *Cream City Review*, and elsewhere. Her work has received nominations for the Pushcart Prize. She holds an MFA from Colorado State University and lives in Colorado with two rescue cats. More of her work can be found at kellymweber.com.

By day **Angelica Whitehorne** writes for the Development department of a refugee organization in New York, by night she writes her poetry and stories with her plants as backdrop and her future on her tongue. She has published or forthcoming work in the *North Dakota Quarterly*, *Mantis*, *Ruminate*, *Hooligan Magazine*, *Cypress Journal*, *Oyster River Pages*, *Magnolia Review*, *Door Is A Jar*, among others.

John Sibley Williams is the author of five collections, most recently *As One Fire Consumes Another* (Orison Poetry Prize, 2019), *Skin Memory* (Backwaters Prize, University of Nebraska Press, 2019), and *Summon* (JuxtaProse Chapbook Prize, forthcoming 2020). A twenty-three-time Pushcart nominee, John is the winner of numerous awards, including the Wabash Prize for Poetry, Philip Booth Award, and Laux/ Millar Prize. He serves as editor of *The Inflectionist Review* and works as a poetry editor and literary agent.

Stefanie Wortman is the author of *In the Permanent Collection*, a book of poems. Her poems, essays, and stories have appeared in the *American Poetry Review, Worcester Review, Michigan Quarterly Review*, and *Copper Nickel*, among other publications. She lives in Kansas City.