

# THE LAUREL REVIEW

Volume 1

2021

Issue 54

**Editors:** John Gallaher, Luke Rolfes

**Associate Editor:** Daniel Biegelson

**Contributing Editor:** Kristina Marie Darling

**Editorial Assistants:** Nicole Kerwin, Mason D. Arnold, Lauren Cox, Brandon Hallock, Alice Sweida, Melanie A. Wilson

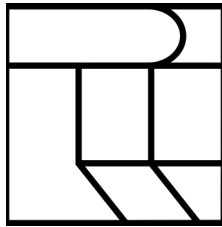
**Cover Design:** Mason D. Arnold, Lauren Cox

**Typesetting:** Mason D. Arnold, Lauren Cox, Alice Sweida

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

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

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



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NOOR HINDI

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## THE VOID WANTS TO KNOW HOW MY DAY IS GOING SO I TALK ABOUT THE WEATHER

Blood is warm; I miss mine. Miss my family playing Rummy until 2am. I was five and it was my birthday. Ate so many Laffy Taffy's I threw up in the kitchen. I smoke so much hookah I pass out in the kitchen. Knife in hand. Cutting a pomegranate as large as my yearning. This year is so sharp I cut corners—wound myself with worry and more worry. You were more carefree, says my cousin. Remember walking through swarms of insects. Face first. Like we owned the whole world. Like summer never ended until Zina died of a virus. Like I didn't get this text just yesterday: I think I have coronavirus. The days are too long, I argue. Translation: I'm afraid to be alive. Translation: I'm afraid to die. When Lana sings Summertime Sadness, I cry, drunk and on the verge of nothing. Keep asking questions. For what, I say? I'm sad. How else to tell you // I hide my pride // keychain, I hide my pride // mask before my family asks questions. But let's talk about prayer. I never believed in God, but when I fell face first into a pit of snow, all I felt was warmth. There were lightning bugs all summer. Our trapping them an act of cruelty. My skin alive like thunder. It's hard to stay sweet. Even harder to love that which does not love you back. I don't mean to grieve so openly. On the way to Edgewater, I weep behind my sunglasses. Stare at a sun so yellow and bright I almost hate it. I want us all to make it. I want laughter as loud as rainwater. I want hugs so warm my body becomes the home I never knew.

GEORGE LOONEY

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## EVEN A SOUL SUBMERGED IN SLEEP IS HARD AT WORK, AND HELPS MAKE SOMETHING OF THE WORLD

—Heraclitus

The temple of Artemis hasn't been stone  
warmed by a sun under the ubiquitous  
staccato rattle of red-fronted serin  
so long not even Sinatra could sing it back.  
The past isn't a stray dog we can whistle home  
or make stay by speaking the word it has  
wanted us to say forever, the sound of it  
so other it could be a word in some tongue  
so foreign & articulate it's not human.

There are whole vocabularies submerged  
in what we think we know of the world.

So much is subliminal in our attempts  
to define a single moment, alone in ruins,  
haunted, not by the voice of Sinatra, broken  
& singing words others have written  
with enough passion the lyrics take on  
his scorched voice even in memory, but  
by the secular psalms of serin & shriek,  
plover & chat, buntings, & the unmistakable  
murmurs of a handful of ghosts who  
don't know the past is the past. For them,  
Ephesus is still being built & there is music  
in the streets, a faint humming everyone  
out walking in what they don't know is the past  
takes up, singing what lyrics they can remember  
when they remember them. *The smoke makes  
a stairway for you to descend*, the dead rasp in  
their best Sinatra. In our sleep, the dead  
push one another higher & higher in swings  
they finally fit again, now they have no flesh.



GEORGE LOONEY

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## AFTER DEATH COMES NOTHING HOPED FOR NOR IMAGINED

—*Heraclitus*

A rusted swing set, graffiti-etched in  
an evening mist, incorporates both ruin  
& the subliminal expectation of pleasure.  
This could be a scene from the fifties,  
a black & white film noir, the sky filled  
with ash & a lackadaisical despair.  
The soundtrack? Sinatra singing “Only  
the Lonely,” the romantic, dire piano  
disturbing every last vestige of serenity,  
so that even a pitiful, noisy swing set  
in a city park seems sinister. To suggest  
the threadbare trees in the distance  
are proof of anything other than the time  
of year is to pretend everything is  
a symbol. Such arrogance requires  
an utter lack of imagination,  
& a recognition that beauty isn’t  
always a blessing, any more than Frank’s  
voice tears Riddle’s orchestra to shreds.  
Balance is necessary for meaning.  
After death, narrative loses much of  
its luster & memory’s a sin none seek  
absolution for, the ashen sky denying  
any other outcome. One that’s been  
hoped for, say. A woman in a formal  
evening gown—elegant, black  
with just a hint of the vaguest shimmer,  
a pill box hat, black, that lets loose  
a black veil to dim all but the classical  
cut of her cheeks—dances in arcs  
graceful & deft with Sinatra singing  
counterpoint. His voice accosts the sky  
with all its muted trumpets & its one  
timid flute. Loss is one word for it.  
The dress is backless. Hands press  
the sacred flesh of the small of her back,  
pushing her higher into the scented night.

PETER E. MURPHY

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## THE DUALITY OF DUST

Although its name means *tiny*, dust flashes  
in the veins of comets like celestial corpuscles,  
builds rings around Saturn, makes up the flesh  
of stars sucked into their negative darkness,  
and again when they burst back into flame.  
You wonder how many times, how many times  
a thing can be born, as it fashions star after star,  
each one bright and sizzling, *trailing clouds of glory*  
in its wake. A *genuine birth*, as Wordsworth said  
of poetry, *a bursting forth of genius from the dust*.  
You wonder what it understands about your tiny  
planet that seems so large to you, you believe  
that it is large. You wonder why you understand  
so little about everything.

Like us, dust is worn from traveling.  
As it swirls across the Atlantic from the Sahara,  
instead of brightening, it darkens the sky.  
Some call the winds that carry it, *Haboob*,  
*Khamsin*, *Simón*, *Sirocco*. But when you name  
a thing like that, you risk giving it a soul.  
Gandhi said that the seeker after truth  
must be humbler than the dust, but you  
are dogged by an ego so fierce, it sucks you  
into its own black hole. And you have become  
so full of desire, so full of desire, it tears  
at your flesh. When you reach for your beloved,  
it's as if she is of the firmament, passing, like a breeze,  
between your outstretched arms.

MARC FRAZIER

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## THE BLIND LEADING THE BLIND

Sometimes I didn't understand where my father wanted me to shine it. He swore. I didn't know the names of engine parts or tools. What kind of son was I anyway? I had no idea what was wrong with the car now. He was always swearing. It was clear life was a battle. Holding the flashlight for him was an honor as he didn't think I was much good at anything—being given to flights of fancy and nose always in a book. But it also proved his point because I wasn't much good at holding the light either. I got so bored I let it stray. This task was a microcosm of our relationship. I must have wanted to please him at some point. I can't remember that far back to a time before he doused my spark of love for him. I got it back later in life when he needed me in a much larger way. I also finally realized that he wasn't much good as a mechanic either, that I'd assumed he knew what he was doing. That was a long time ago when we were a young family in the house at the top of a hill on Home Street. Where the heart is. Or where it is, in theory.

## HOW TO TRIGGER WHITE AMERICANS: LONGITUDINAL CASE STUDIES WITH POORLY CONSTRUCTED KOANS

Case #1: Ask them what predominantly white institution they matriculated from.

It's a mindfuck of a question. Asking a white person what predominantly white institution they graduated from forces them to reconceptualize what education, specifically higher education, is, especially in terms of choosing a college or university based on "cultural fit." In this case, cultural fit extends beyond having the right major(s), right athletic team(s) with commensurate exposure opportunities, having the right male to female ratio, or being in a desired location; it can often mean the literal ability to feel safe or welcomed not only in the community(ies) the campus resides in, but on the campus itself.

*Abigail asked her guidance counselor, "What is the difference between a PWI and HBCU?" Her guidance counselor replied, "Location, location, location."*

Case #2: Ask them to explain what the "good old days" are and when they were.

Invariably, "good old days" are tied to nostalgia. "Nostalgia," as a word itself, is a rough Greek approximation of "homecoming pain." Ironically, this *pain* to return to some version of "home" often results in trading one type of pain for another.

*Brett was just one of the boys when he drank one beer. Brett was just one of the boys when he drank another. Brett was never not just a boy.*

Case #3: Challenge their viewpoints beyond topics political in nature.

Social media provides quick access to dopamine hits in curated echo chambers. Part of the curation means being judicial in terms of who can access your information to guarantee the least amount of dissension possible. Offering opposing viewpoints is not only a good technique to use in debate and writing, but can also be enough to stop the cycle of repetitive thought patterns and behaviors a person is stuck in and otherwise, tacitly or explicitly, encouraged to continue.

*If a post is made when no one is around, does it have impressions?*

Case #4: Call them racist.

Nothing makes a white person madder than calling them racist when they can list no event or pattern of behavior in their life that plays out like *The Birth of a Nation*.

*The thought that Amy could be racist never occurred to her, because there was that one time in college she let the black guy from her biology lab go down on her.*

Case #5: Respond to any sort of behavior with a blanket “white people.”

The idea of American exceptionalism is core to the American identity. Part of this exceptionalism is the belief of being in control of one’s own destiny, carving out one’s own path by one’s own efforts alone, and being quintessentially unique. If uniqueness is stripped away, there’s reconciliation that has to occur where one must ponder whether every conscious and unconscious act they’ve made to differentiate themselves has only resulted in shades of sameness.

*Karen, looking at her stylist, holds up two bottles: “L’Oréal or Redken?” Her stylist looks up, and excitedly shouts, “Lowlights!”*

Case #6: Call them privileged.

Largely, white people will note in response to this assertion that they do not come from backgrounds normally classified as privileged—they will remind you that they went to public schools, aren’t well-connected, and there is no safety net of generational wealth for them live off of if the whole “working” thing doesn’t pan out or becomes too frustrating. To call them privileged when they explain their journey can be disorienting, especially as Case #5 requires all their successes in life to be attributable to hard work, not something out of their control, like the circumstances of their birth.

*Lena looks at her dress, then screams across the table, "Why won't anyone talk to me?" The talking continues.*

Case #7: Ask them which laws they have no second thoughts about breaking.

The classic response to unfolding, police-related drama on screens is to say, "Well, this is what happens when you break the law." Asking white people to consider what laws they don't mind breaking or routinely break without a second thought, such as speeding or smoking marijuana without a card to do so, creates an interesting, often unacknowledged, and easily exploitable way to leverage Case #6. Their "not privileged" privilege has allowed them avoid considering the following: that it could be literally their body being "restrained" under foot or knee or forearm or any other object; that it hadn't even occurred to them that the person breaking the law had no second thoughts about breaking the law in question, either; or that, somehow, there is justified treatment for some that isn't even fathomable for others.

*An officer approaches a young man named Dylann and asks him to put out his cigarette, pointing to a sign with his baton that indicates the distance he needs to be away from the building to smoke. "Or what?" "Yes."*

Case #8: Tell them you don't like pets.

Dog or cat or other, white people use liking pets, or their pets liking others, or at least the tolerance for pets, as a sign of good character. Liking pets, to them, shows compassion, or the ability to love and take care of someone outside of the self with the only expectation being reciprocated love. Not being a pet person implies to them that you are not able to provide the love to them that they expect or are accustomed to.

*Joanna turns to leave the dog park when her dog, Vick, gently pulls on her khaki cargo shorts with his mouth, indicating he would like her to stop. His canines scrape her thigh. "Aren't you the cutest!"*

Case #9: Ask them if OJ Simpson is guilty.

As a seemingly glaring example of the failure of the American justice system in most people's current purview, thinking of the possibility of innocence for this specific case is considered knowingly problematic at best and deliberately hurtful at worst. After all, how could a case with so much damning evidence and compelling testimony turn out any other way than the one expected?

*Brock, fresh from the courtroom, excitedly proclaimed, "Justice is blind!" A janitor walked past and muttered, "Isaac Woodard."*

Case #10: Ask them to pick out a black person from a lineup.

Any identification process, especially concerning criminal identification, immediately places Case #4 squarely in their mind. Part of the identification process is acknowledging differences. This is an intellectual process that would have to continue well after establishing someone was, well, different. And that would mean that a person would have to have been focused for a while to make a correct identification, with the implication being that they were expecting trouble, or a situation where correct identification would be paramount. And if they make the wrong pick, under duress, coercion, or otherwise, it's easy to distill that the inability to properly identify a person was a direct result of only casual observation. A classic no-win situation.

*Linda pulls out a coin, flips it, and catches it in her palm. "Heads or Tails?" "Tails." She opens her hand to reveal a full-page ad.*

DAN ALBERGOTTI

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## HAS SCIENTISTS CONCERNED

A 160-foot deep methane crater in Siberia, storms stronger  
in the Atlantic each passing year, colony collapse, a child's toy  
left at the top of the stairs, ambient warmth, melting ice,  
the weapons and manifesto found in the scout leader's trunk,  
invasive species, the winnowing of empathy, disappointing results  
from clinical trials, the proximity of the newly discovered black hole,  
the proximity of the second hand to midnight, the proximity  
of North Korea to Japan, an irregular mole on the upper back,  
an emaciated polar bear loping across the ice, deepfake videos  
cranked out by AI, the singularity, a red tide, the red shift,  
event horizon, tech stocks and hog futures going gangbusters,  
the thought that everything will never be enough,  
the rabbit's screams from somewhere deep in the woods.



DAN ALBERGOTTI

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## THE RISE AND FALL OF THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA

When these days I hear some folks speak of pride,  
“American Exceptionalism,”  
and how they don’t need to apologize  
for any damn thing, I think of the shark.

Specifically, the Greenland shark swimming  
in the North Atlantic right now—somewhere  
between Plymouth, England, and Plymouth Rock—  
that has lived for nearly three hundred years.

I think of it swimming as it has swum  
through the drafting of high ideals and through  
the mockery of same with chains and whips  
and ropes and trees and dogs and grand juries.

It has swum through the Gettysburg Address  
and through Burr’s pistol shot, Booth’s lead bullet,  
Kennedy’s strewn gray matter, and the flash  
that wiped out tens of thousands in Japan.

It has swum through Columbine and Newtown,  
through El Paso and Pittsburgh and Vegas,  
through Ferguson and Charlottesville and flames,  
and through zombie crowds chanting “U-S-A!”

Researchers gauge the age of Greenland sharks  
by carbon dating cornea. Their eyes  
are tiny, parasites dangling from most.  
The poor old things are slow and quite, quite blind.

## ROCKS 4 SALE

Every morning at 8:30, Ursula came shuffling out of her house in her red bathrobe carrying her box of rocks. The rocks were in the flimsy top half of an old doughnut box that sagged toward its front as Ursula walked across the lawn, indicating the rocks had slid forward and were close to tumbling out. Even still, Ursula always made it to the card table without losing a rock. She was good—or lucky—like that.

Once the box was on the table and Ursula was in her lawn chair, she treated herself to her first generic menthol of the day. She smoked in an unapologetic and professional way, blowing perfect, bored Os and tapping out the butt on the card table's rusted leg when she'd had enough. Afterward, Ursula got up out of her lawn chair and shuffled to the front of the table and taped up her sign. The sign said: ROCKS 4 SALE, \$4 EACH. The rocks were nothing more than pieces of ordinary gravel, the chalky kind found near the fringes of new blacktop, and all of them were more or less the size of tater tots. Sometimes, in the process of setting up shop, one of Ursula's long breasts fell out of her robe. If one did, she just let it hang there while she finished doing whatever it was she was doing. Shame was not in Ursula's vocabulary.

Every morning at 8:29, Brownie stood at his kitchen window, holding off on coffee and urination until he'd seen, what he had dubbed, The Ursula Rock Concert. He loved Ursula. Not her body or brains, because she didn't have much of either, but her faith and determination. Her utter delusion. Somewhere around 9:00, after Maxwell House and the toilet, but before he started in on the bourbon, Brownie joined Ursula at the card table. He had to bring his own chair. He had to initiate conversation. Ursula never looked Brownie in the eye—not when he unfolded his chair and not when he turned to face her. This was another thing that stole Brownie's heart: Ursula's disinterest and independence. Her ease with detachment.

"We need rain," Brownie said.

"Nah," Ursula replied, staring out at their dull street, Acorn Lane. "What for?"

Brownie felt dumb even though it was Ursula's reply that made no sense. "For the farmers," he said. "For the grass. See here?" He pointed. "It's nearly turned silver with thirst."

Ursula did not consider the grass, only the house across the road, an ancient, run-down Sears Catalog Home the color of snot. "Let it, then," she said. "Let us all burn up and shrivel. What's the fuss about?"

Brownie thought about this, which made him also think about bourbon.

"So, we die. Then what?" Ursula shrugged. "Maybe we feed the worms and that's it. Lights out, worm food. Or maybe we go to heaven or maybe we go to hell or maybe we float around in outer space and

bang our heads on some stars.” Ursula leaned forward and gave the old doughnut box a little shake back and forth as if sifting sand. Brownie wondered if she thought this might attract a customer. “What difference does it make? Whatever happens, happens. We’re all on the train going full steam ahead. There’s no getting off.”

Brownie felt a low, slow terror at this thought, but also a deep admiration for Ursula. She was fearless. He saw her on a runaway train, floating in space, on a cloud, in the dirt, engulfed in flames, and in every instance the look on her face was the same: stony, glacial. Almost serene.

\*

Acorn Lane ran through a neighborhood that had once, in the 70s and 80s, belonged to white, penny-pinching retirees. Shriners and knitters. Librarians and organists. Then in the 90s, when all the retirees died and all the houses started to lean and fade, the neighborhood shifted to people like Brownie and Ursula—sad-faced, mostly forty-somethings with a range of addictions and afflictions, some active, some dormant. Acorn Lane people were people who had long ago given up on true love and music careers. They were broken and broke and needed cheap houses over apartments, because they all had big or suspicious dogs—Great Danes and pits—that kept them from not just relapse and despair and seizures, but renting. And most of them were on disability like Brownie (his heart) and Ursula (her spine).

“You think anyone from Acorn Lane ever made anything of themselves?” Brownie asked Ursula one day. “Like with a hit song or the Lotto?”

Ursula shook her box of rocks. “What does ‘make something of yourself’ even mean? Someone writes a song and gets paid to sing it over and over and over. What? You go out on the road for the rest of your life and sit in motels trying to write another song but this one has to be better? What a trap.”

Brownie didn’t know what to say.

“The Lotto,” Ursula said. Her hair was dyed matte black like an old, spray-painted car. “What does the Lotto get you? A new refrigerator? A dishwasher? Some shoes? Some more shoes? A closet for the shoes? A closet for the closet?” A car passed and Ursula shook the box again. “All that’s happening when someone goes from this neighborhood to that neighborhood is movement. Someone on the train is getting up out of his seat and going to another train car. Maybe the cocktail car. Maybe the dining car. Maybe a car that is identical to the one he was just sitting in. The people are getting up out of their seats and sitting in other seats, but guess what?”

Brownie shook his head.

“Those assholes are still on the train.” Ursula lit up a menthol. “Choo-choo,” she said without emotion. “Chugga-chugga.”

Ursula stared blankly at the snot house. Brownie watched Ursula smoke. Ursula was a goddess. Ursula was a god—The God. Brownie thought he might cry. Brownie thought he might explode. Brownie prayed to Ursula right then and there in his head. Dear Ursula, the prayer went. Please love me. Do you love me? Please love me. Amen.

\*

One day Ursula was late. Brownie was not. He was at his window at 8:29 and when Ursula didn't appear at 8:30 or 8:31 or 8:32, Brownie broke out in a cold sweat. He got the shakes. His first thought was that Ursula was dead inside her little blue house. How would he get in? Did she leave it open? Was it locked with a deadbolt? Would he have to throw his lawn chair through her dark front window and climb over glass shards to find her on the floor and touch her neck for a pulse? Did Brownie even know how to find a pulse? Would he? Could he? Brownie was a wreck.

And then, Ursula came out. At 8:36, Ursula came shuffling out in her red robe with the flimsy box. Brownie thanked God. He thanked Ursula. He gripped the kitchen sink and watched her set up shop. He went without his coffee. He didn't use the bathroom. He had a bourbon ahead of schedule. What would he do without Ursula if something really did happen? he wondered. At 8:52, Brownie could not control himself any longer. He went out early with his lawn chair and sat next to Ursula.

“I thought you might have taken a trip out of town,” Brownie said. “When I didn't see you and all.” Brownie looked at Ursula and Ursula looked different. Her eyes were puffed up like she'd been thinking sad thoughts, but Brownie knew Ursula didn't do that. “The pollen's something else today,” he said. “Shoo-wee. I can feel it in my throat. I can feel it in my eyes.”

Ursula didn't say anything. One of her breasts had escaped her robe. She sat in her lawn chair and let her breast do its thing in the sunlight, hanging like a pale stocking. Brownie tried not to look at it, but he did. It was made of tender skin, not weathered skin like Ursula's face. The nipple on it was the color of ham and pointed toward the silver lawn.

“Today's the day,” Ursula said after some time. “I can feel it.”

Brownie pretended he hadn't been looking at her breast. He pretended he knew what Ursula meant. He looked across the street at the snot house. He couldn't have told the police who lived there if they'd come knocking to ask.

“Today’s the day for rain?” Brownie finally said.

“Nope,” Ursula said, sitting forward to shake the box of rocks. “Not that.”

Ursula tucked in her breast and re-tied the belt of her robe. Then she lit a cigarette and blew out a perfect O. Brownie looked at Ursula’s rocks and counted them in his head. There were twenty-seven in total. Brownie wanted to know what Ursula meant—Today’s the day—but she was just like God, all-knowing and no hints. The suspense was both terrific and terrible. Brownie and Ursula sat in silence together all morning.

At lunchtime, Brownie went inside. He stood at his kitchen sink and drank a bourbon and ate some cold beans straight from a can and watched Ursula. When the limousine went by, he was on his third bourbon. The limousine was gold and dented and needed a muffler, but still: it was a real limousine right there on Acorn Lane. It drove past loud and slow going west and Ursula didn’t flinch. A minute later it was back, still moving loud and slow but now pointing east. It came to a stop in front of Ursula’s house. A rear window on the limousine went down. Brownie couldn’t see inside the car. He heard a voice call out, like a small dog barking, but he couldn’t understand what it said. Brownie watched; Ursula’s mouth didn’t move, but he saw her shake her head. Then he saw her get up and shuffle to the front of the card table where she pointed at her sign. One of her breasts fell out and she shuffled back around to her lawn chair and her breast slid back in. That was when the man emerged from the limousine. He was in a bright blue suit, the color of a good day, and he strode right up to the table and took a little bow. Brownie watched the man point a finger over the rocks, counting them it seemed, just as Brownie had. Then the man reached into his back pocket and pulled out a wallet and pulled out a stack of bills and counted out nine or ten of them and gave them to Ursula. Following that, the man reached for the box of rocks and Ursula nodded. Brownie watched as the man walked back to the limousine with the box of rocks. When the man got to the car, he didn’t open the door. He just tipped the rocks into the limousine’s open window. Then he opened the door and climbed in and the window went back up. Then the limousine drove off, loud and slow.

Brownie felt as though he’d watched a crime occur. A kidnapping, a theft. A murder, even. He set his glass down on the edge of the sink. He went, unnerved, to his front door. By the time he made it across his silver lawn and over to Ursula’s yard, Ursula had already folded up her lawn chair and taken down the sign. The card table was flipped over on its top and Ursula was having some trouble folding in its rusted legs.

“Did you just sell all the rocks?”

Ursula grunted as the first leg folded inward. She promptly got to work on the second. “Don’t you remember?” she said. “I told you today was the day.”

Brownie could see the wad of cash in the front pocket of Ursula’s robe. Both of her breasts were out and swaying as she got to work on the table’s third leg. “How did you know?” Brownie said. “How did you know today was the day?”

Bent over, Ursula’s hair parted in such a way to show an inch of new silver growth. It was a silver that put the grass to shame. “The train never stops,” Ursula said. “But sometimes, real quick, it passes by something you were hoping to see.”

Ursula folded the final leg inward on the table. Then, with her breasts loose and her hair loose and the rest of her red bathrobe opening up to shamelessly show all of herself, both the weathered and the tender, Ursula put the table under one arm and the sign between her front teeth and the chair under her other arm. Then she shuffled back inside her house and closed her door.

\*

After that, Ursula didn’t come out anymore. The Ursula Rock Concert was cancelled. Brownie stood at his kitchen window every morning and watched and waited and wept, but Ursula didn’t come out at 8:30 or 8:31 or 2:47 or 6:55. Brownie drank and slept, drank and slept. He had dreams he was on a train. The train didn’t have windows. No one would tell him where they were going.

One day, Brownie looked out the window and saw: over at the snot-colored house something had been put on the curb. He stood there squinting until he decided it was an old lawn chair. Brownie went out of his house and crossed the street. He went over to the curb of the snot house and took the chair for himself. He brought it right into Ursula’s front yard and unfolded it so that it was facing Ursula’s front door. Then Brownie went back into his house and got his own lawn chair. He took it back to Ursula’s front lawn and unfolded it right next to the first chair. Brownie took a seat. He stared at Ursula’s front door. Up above, the sky was a pale gray that fell somewhere between the color of the old grass and Ursula’s new hair. Brownie closed his eyes. After some time, he could hear it. Choo-choo. Chugga-chugga. It was the train and he was on it and it was moving fast. Brownie opened his eyes again. He stared at Ursula’s door. He would sit there as long as it took. He’d sit there in the day and in the night. He’d sit there when it was warm and when it was cold. He’d even sit there if it rained, which that day, it finally did.

SARA DALLMAYR

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## THAT ELECTRIC FIELD, YOU REMEMBER

Look, the moonlight is irrepressible to push aside the sinews of shadow. A vacant lot, overgrown with thistle and green sweat of grass. The neighbors shot off the sound of flowers in motion. Last week, or years ago, the workers locked the factory door for the very last time and didn't even know. All the town shoved its hands into pockets and couldn't find lint. But seriously, rumors breathe their own useless daydreams. They're so gone anymore, an empty stem. The little heads fly off and whisper in corners. Motion down to the left. Singular martyrs broadcast margins of blight. Wear gloves so often your hands never get dirty or bleed anymore. They shed tears at the end of the day, crags of seaweed, the skin of fish fathoms below. There are fish under the earth who used to swim. There are mountains who are really just overgrown stones. Button up shutters, there's a chill in the air. Bugs fly in through the smallest cracks. People who say people walk and grow still. A comet in the sky. You saw a comet as a child and sang to it every night. It never seemed to move until it was gone. My hair grew into lions and rode in the back of a star's convertible. With its wild pace I was hardly surprised. If you look down the tracks you'll see artifice. You'll find a gallery hung with night scenes. Go ahead and stick your arm into one, feel the dew and the warmth or cold and draw your arm back out, covered in stardust. Does anyone ever dig wells anymore? You are what you drink. You learn what you know. You were a child too, all wet and new and full of awareness. You had to unlearn everything.

LAURA READ

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## MARIE CURIE AND THE ISOTOPES, WORLD TOUR 1911

is what my new t-shirt that I got for Christmas says  
under her picture.

When I unwrapped it, my son was mysteriously  
exasperated and asked why I like Marie Curie so much  
anyway, which oddly I was unprepared to answer.

I think I said that winter in Paris when she wore  
everything she owned to stay warm in her attic room  
while she nobly studied Chemistry  
for the good of all of us, or maybe Pierre's head  
crushed by the wheel of a carriage

leaving her to raise Irene and Eve on her own  
or how she left them home alone at night  
while she went to the laboratory to finish the work  
she and Pierre had started or how she and Irene  
dragged their x-ray machine onto the fields of WW1  
to help the soldiers or maybe her hands rotting  
and killing her or the glowing journal  
she left in her drawer.

I mean, any one of these is a good enough reason.  
But he was right when he said that I was never good  
at science. Maybe I shouldn't have worn  
those flowered skirts and thought only of boys  
and suffering. Was Marie the antidote?  
Like my own mother to whom I wouldn't listen?  
Once someone asked her  
if she was a poet too, and she said *No*,  
with an expression of almost horror,  
*I'm a social scientist.*

I gave my nephew a *Mama Llama* book for Christmas,  
and my mother called to tell me she approves  
of *Mama Llama*. *Mama Llama* doesn't like  
melodrama. Well, of course she doesn't.

The rhyme was inevitable.

In the library at St. Aloysius Grade School,  
there was a section of biographies of famous women  
that included St. Theresa of the Little Flower,  
Florence Nightingale, Clara Barton, and Marie Curie.



I checked them out again as soon as they were due.  
Marie Curie was the one most famous  
for her mind. Kindness was what my mother said  
I had already, and this was clearly disappointing.  
I think it would help if I had a band.  
Like the Isotopes. I have never heard them but imagine  
they are as clever as Bach's two-part inventions

which I always loved playing because you had to tell  
one hand to do something completely different  
than the other, not just complementary but distinct  
and simultaneous. It is easy to think danger  
is beautiful when you're not in it  
or to love the thing you are discovering  
when you don't yet know it's killing you.  
I am discovering something. I can feel it coming closer.  
Like the new year that is about to begin  
in this late afternoon darkness,  
the Christmas lights beaming sadly  
after their time has passed, which is difficult  
to determine while it's happening  
but you know when it has.  
I wonder if Marie Curie was surprised  
when she learned that science had deceived her.  
I know she did not admit that radiation exposure  
could have had anything to do  
with her illness and death, which is in keeping  
with her character, and thus another thing  
I must admire.

LAURA READ

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## THIS WILL BE THE LAST DAY OF MY LIFE

The other day, one of my students mentioned  
that he worked at Pete's Pizza for years.

At first, all I thought about was that twisty crust  
all along the edge of their calzones, how good it is,  
how it looks like the way the old woman Antonia  
twists her hair in the film *Antonia's Line*,  
you know the one where in the first scene,  
she wakes up and gets out of bed and announces,  
in Dutch of course so the English words  
are printed across the screen and my mind,  
*This will be the last day of my life.*

My mother loves that movie because she loves movies  
where people eat outside.

And in this one, I admit, it is especially  
glorious, they're all at a long table with bread and wine  
and the countryside.

After class, I remembered that I knew someone  
who had also worked at Pete's, my best friend's  
brother, that I had lost this friend, as sometimes happens,  
I know now that I'm older.

She was in trouble and told me, *I can't be your friend  
anymore because you ask me the questions  
I ask myself in my mind.*

The next day, I asked my student about  
my best friend's brother, and he said yes,  
he knew him, and then he looked at me  
because he knew what I was really asking,  
which was why did he die so young,  
just this past December?

I think I always knew that my friend and I  
were only sitting outside at that long and elegant table  
for a while.

We slept on the trampoline in her parents' back yard,  
rolling into each other in the middle,  
studying the stars without speaking of them  
because we knew the stars were the night's silence,

like in a story when the narrator tells you  
what things look like for a while,  
and the characters can just be quiet.

My friend was getting married  
and she hadn't known me long  
but she asked me to be one of her bridesmaids,  
she said she had bridesmaids who represented  
all the parts of who she was, and that I could be  
the smart one. I think of this sometimes  
when I'm teaching *The Awakening*  
and I talk about the female characters who serve  
as Edna's foils. I draw a flower on the board and write  
*Edna* inside it and then I draw vines out from it  
for Madame Ratignolle and Mademoiselle Reisz  
and Madame Lebrun and the Lady in Black,  
and I say, *These are the bridesmaids.*

*This will be the last day of my life*, I think sometimes  
in the mornings when I regard myself in the mirror  
like Antonia.

I am sorry for my friend's loss and also  
that I asked her those questions  
she didn't want spoken out loud.  
I needed to learn how to look at the stars  
and not say anything  
because we were out in the country  
where there were no lights.



DYLAN WILLOUGHBY

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## COPING SKILLS (2)

*After Yoko Ono*

*for Todd Sharp*

i.

Carefully place your soul in the freezer

Next to an ice tray containing

two year-old water.

Let your heart thaw for twelve hours.

ii.

Imagine your mind is an always-late

subway train.

Bottle all the passengers' hate.

Carbonate to taste.

iii.

Instead of swallowing fire

Just gargle it.

There is enough fire in you already.

iv.

On the subject of vital signs:

See the world through the eyes of Lazarus.

Commiserate with unfallen rain.

## ERASER

In the library one day for a program on local history, I saw a familiar face come out of the elevator, a face I hadn't seen in over twenty-five years. I eyed his library nametag to confirm it was Milburn, his slightly moving lips further verifying the identity of my former classmate, who had often been witnessed in high school muttering to no one in particular and who still seemed to have invisible portable walls surrounding him, only showing enough awareness of others to avoid collisions. Milburn rarely spoke in high school and did not respond with language or eye contact when addressed. When forced to speak on occasion in class, his muffled words did not come across as his real voice, only their constriction hinting at the hidden inner Milburn. Legend had it that he always carried an eraser in his pocket, and I remember wondering if the eraser was related to the mystery of why he behaved the way he did. Sitting in the crowded room during the program I was distracted by the thought of Milburn's silence and how he could have managed to endure while remaining as he'd been in school, a voluntary mute with an aversion to knowing anyone or being known by anyone.

Was I right in thinking he hadn't changed? Maybe he was married and had grown kids with children of their own running around his house, the place alive with human activity. I couldn't imagine it, and I went back to the library the next week, curious to see how he conducted himself, if he ever made eye contact or showed any reaction at all to staff or the public.

I settled into a chair for over an hour with the latest news magazines but saw no sign of Milburn. I got up, browsed the shelves, and chose a few history books. I carried them to the checkout desk and filled out a library-card application. I told the talkative young man at the desk that I'd spotted a former classmate who worked there, recognizing him partly because of his muttering.

"Oh yeah," he said. "He mutters but seldom speaks. I try to talk to him sometimes. He's been working for twenty-some years downstairs in processing. He had to talk at one of our staff meetings, and he struck me as wishing he could disappear. Very tidy desk, carries an eraser in his pocket, you can always see the bump. He did make a joke once. Someone described a patron as thin, and he said, 'with three n's.' Some people didn't get it, others laughed, surprised he'd spoken up, and their laughter ruffled him. He's polite and wouldn't hurt a fly, I don't think, but he might whisper to one. I doubt if anyone has ever seen the inside of his refrigerator."

I left with the books, embarrassed I'd heard so much about Milburn and ashamed I'd wanted to hear it. What was I thinking going in there to snoop on him, the last person who'd want to be snooped on?

I retreated to my house, where I'd lived alone for years following my amicable divorce, amicable because my ex-wife was so happy to be rid of me. I wouldn't talk to her and wouldn't listen, she said, and I thought of the house as a fortress where I was not to be disturbed. I couldn't argue with what she said, and I didn't argue, which further frustrated her, though if I had argued I could have expressed my suspicion that many people sought refuge in their homes and treasured time when they could be left alone to brood, free from the eyes and voices of others. I also didn't tell her I preferred to limit my arguments to arguing with myself, a full-time endeavor.

Among the issues rolling around in my head, I admit, was whether or how much I was like Milburn and whether I could learn something from him that would help me justify my aversion to speaking, to being heard, to hearing the opinions of others, about me or anything else, or on the other hand, whether I could learn something that would make me finally see I was on the wrong track and needed an overhaul of my outlook and conduct. The trouble was that Milburn was unlikely to say a single word to me, much less reveal any insights, if he had any, so I had no rational basis for indulging my curiosity about him.

The sight of the history books I'd checked out began to annoy me, reminding me I'd borrowed them as a pretext for talking to someone about Milburn. Tired of trying to ignore them, I got in my car and drove to the library, the books on the passenger seat. I circled the building and found the outside drop on its west side, near the staff door. As I pulled around the drive two young women emerged, talking to each other, sharing a laugh. It hit me I could be arriving at or near closing time. I shoved the books in the drop and noticed in my rearview mirror others walking out the door, a thick drizzle starting to come down. There was Milburn behind me, a couple of people speaking to him, offering him a ride, I guessed. He shook his head, continued on foot, no car, probably striving to reduce his carbon footprint, and any other kind of footprint. I drove away, picturing Milburn getting himself wet. I took a spin around the block and squinting past my windshield wipers spotted him ahead, his shoulders hunched forward. I rolled up near him and lowered the window. I said I was a library user, said my name, mentioned our high school, asked if I could give him a lift, not a problem, I was already

headed the same direction. He didn't turn, merely raised a hand and shook it, like shaking his head but a step removed from involving his mind directly in the refusal. I kept going, wondering what could have been in his mind as I spoke and wondering why I'd asked him. Did I want to see where he lived? Was that a creepy idea? I'd known he wouldn't break down and hop in the car. I'd wanted him to see me, to tell him my name. On the way home, I imagined going to the library to see if he'd glance at me and what look would be in his eyes if he did. Could I answer whatever questions he might be thinking?

I resolved that it would be too intrusive to speak to him again unless he spoke to me first. I wouldn't want Milburn coming at me with questions so why should I ask him questions he wouldn't care to answer. And I wouldn't go to the library with some murky purpose related to him. Didn't I have better things to do? In fact, doing nothing, I argued to myself in defense of his privacy, was better than what I'd been doing.

I avoided the library for weeks. One evening I saw Milburn at the grocery store, his head turning in my direction, and I swung my cart around and went the other way. Still, the quiet of the library stuck with me, people going about their business, speaking only when necessary, anyone allowed to enter at will, no questions asked about who belonged there and who didn't or what thoughts they held at bay. I returned and sat at a table with a newspaper, my back to people, minding my own business.

I didn't see Milburn until he was alongside me. He held something out to me, looking only at my hand, face blank. I raised my hand and he put it there and then walked away without a word.

It was an eraser.



MARY BUCHINGER

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**/ 'KÆM ə, SO L / AS IN “CAMISOLE OF  
CLOUDS”**

& not; simultaneously there

conjures a voyeur or  
seeing with awareness of seeing;

an aperture which excludes  
what it doesn't allow;

partial;

(the *i* alone is always  
somewhat, is never whole;  
requires another for  
depth of perception);

incomplete; finally & interminably both contained &

to be is not meant seen

BRYCE BERKOWITZ

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## EVERYTHING IS SO SUN-DRENCHED AND AWFUL

To: Dr. Stuffy-Pants at Pretentious University  
From: That seems like a lot of fossil fuels to bring a gummy bear here  
Date: When I was in high school, there were no dicks in Shakespeare  
Subject: Everything is so sun-drenched and awful

The purpose of this poem-memo is to avoid injecting steroidal beauty into a leaf. We all pull pistol triggers and expect heart-shaped balloons. Dating is nothing more than situating emotional manipulation at the apex of life experience.

### Summary

I *also* have the image of a contortionist in my head. Who gives a shit about the Miltonic space of ash? At the end of the day, everything feels like a reductivist trap.

### Discussion

I don't like robots.  
I'm not texting.  
I'm looking up territorial sounds of barred owls.  
What's the nature of *your* doubt?  
There's some spurning going on here.  
Are we really trying to define  
The catalyst of an interior thing?  
What's the narrator trying to avoid?

### Recommendation

Everything is a myopic approach to thematics. People in sweaters everywhere are trying to deconstruct the binary. We're all gonna die. But what does it all mean? Isn't it obvious? The man is what must be broken.

—Bryce Berkowitz

# In Doubt

[ID]

- ☒ Another boy overdosed | in the green house
- ☐ Cherry blossoms explode | beneath the rain clouds
- ☎ You say, I say | wolf teeth wrapped in rib cage

The Details of Them:

**I Want to Talk to You About Nothing Again** (The Viaduct, Pleasant Hill Road)

*So Long to Woebegone*

*Graffiti fumes through factory plumes and blunts bloom like what flaw would you know?*

- This ain't no et. al, walking around at sunset
- A week later, had there been more time, a January sky straddling a boarded-up fate
- Maybe tonight, he will bless you
- The new beauty, the extroverted style of mostly lonely, damp tissues, and too-ripped stockings

**Drunk and Delicate** (Why The Clouds Are Broken)

*The Other Side of Well*

*Thank you, anxiety—This is advice from failure*

- What else can I say, but I'm right?
- I wish you were here
- The moon belongs with you
- This world feels like the world according to my enemy

**So, I'm Like What Happiness** (What Gold Light)

*What Rusty Rose Underbelly Is That Cloud Moving North For*

*Girl, how'd you get so good at hiding the wound or Girl, you're more than your wound*

- This is Ayn Rand on cocaine
- This is the objective perspective less than Christ
- This is Adderall blown from a hot bulb
- The pop of slow stares, of who the fuck cares, of "I'm okay. I'm not okay. Forget it"

**Anyway, And Any Day** (These Tiger Lilies Are Gonna Hear Me)

*From The Shade, I See Clearly*

*Some people you wish would, will never commit to your tomorrow*

- They'd rather enslave you or borrow
- Then spend time inside the confines
- Or bide the primal pride or needs
- Or so it seems to me...

**So, Say Yes If You Feel Stuck** (Because Everything That Didn't Happen)

*And I'll Add It to the Notes With*

*Don't waste sadness on those people*

- Because I know the tale of if distance didn't happen
- How some people's lives look like they have a bow
- When it's all a permanent fall
- And how we mourn between the quiet gaps of our digital lives

But, As It Was:

**I Tagged Every Post Box, Light Post, Phone Box, And Dumpster** (I Never Read Chaucer)

*I Dropped Out of College*

*Now, I Teach at a College*

- Used to paint my name on grain cars
- Scrawl *Illinois Goddamn* on the wind
- This has nothing to do with cool. This has everything to do with misfit

**I'm On the Shelf Without A Label** (Where Pedagogy Sounds Pretentious)

*It's All Longer Than Today*

*I'll never be your sunspot*

- I'll never be your midnight curtain
- It's simpler than that
- There just aren't enough ways to be understood

## OF DRUNKENNESS

Late at night, when there is nothing but the beetle on the ceiling and, invisibly, gravity, I too might be drawn down like a regiment and descend into the finished basement of my thoughts, where I cannot be fooled like a whelp into believing that a windup clock wrapped in a blanket is the beating of my mother's heart. It is daytime there, and it is summer, unlike here, where it is winter and the middle of the night. In this part of my thoughts, of the house of my thoughts, it is cool, a good place to escape the heat in the upper floors of my thoughts, gauche though it may be to refer to your own thoughts as hot—warm, yes, okay, but not hot—but what do you want, it's summer there, unlike here. It's like a speakeasy in the land of day-drinkers, in almost any land you choose this winter, when we are even more afraid of strangers than usual, and we can't see a smile without reading eyes, and we can't read eyes because we leave our glasses in the car, and we drink alone in a speakeasy so exclusive it lends itself naturally to an architectural capriccio. I've repainted my nobleman's robes so many times I look and feel pregnant on the canvas, which today, which is tonight, is the only thing on the wall of the cool finished basement besides the television where my son is playing a video game, and now my son and I are playing a video game together, called *Superhot*. I'm not making that up, and bravo to the creators of *Superhot*,

where every encounter is fast-paced and to the death, but time moves only when you move. You can do nothing, and your stained-glass enemies will seem to get frustrated or bored, and you can stretch out on the couch with your son nestled into your side as you both listen to the sonogram hum of the ceiling fan that keeps your thoughts moving and once again breathe easy with the world, and in that and so many other ways blessed you can fade into the waves as they crest against the cliff several hundred miles down the street, breathing an end that never ends until it does.

ALEX LEMON

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## ONE FOR YOU & ONE FOR ME

When the blackness whispers  
Dying time to us—*Come Lady-*

*Bug, come cockroaches,* the night-  
Crawlers come ready to coil

In our throats. So we tiptoe,  
carve clouds' every last word

In the lightning baffled air.  
Beneath the floorboards the men

Who never came back crack  
Their knuckles. Every house

Is either smoldering & about  
To burst into flames or ash

That must be shoveled through  
To find the teeth of people

Too slow. I would love  
To believe in the eventual

Perfection of the after-  
Daybreak light, that even

The most shattered beasts  
Inside me can burrow

Themselves back whole & blossom  
My flesh with a constellation

Of tiny, weeping hearts. But today  
The sky is a meatpond aglitter

With gristle. The house is hot  
& rashy & I am the moon

Ant staggering along the windowsill,  
Determined to chew through anything

That gets in the way. Even myself.  
The slick flesh of anyone hanging

Around in the slag heap of noon—

*Ladybug, Sweet Ladybug—*  
Will riot & pudding & low.

## I SING THE BODY RADIOACTIVE

It's horrible how the hormone factory  
Still has not come through on the pavilion  
They promised to build out back for the limp  
& little-hearted managers, for those that goddamit,  
Love their freedoms so hard they scream themselves  
Purple. The folks who hate their lives with  
Every fiber of their being have become thick  
As thieves with the wheezers who burn down  
Two packs of Parliaments a day because they  
Agree that something just ain't right  
With the perfect blue of the sky. Until the edifice  
Is complete, the not-feeling contests continue  
Taking place over the lunch hour, right beyond  
The parking lot on the beach of the manure pond.  
There, my colleagues make small talk, bedazzle  
Cinderblocks with puffypaint, glitterglue & wrench  
American flag stickers from each other's nipples.  
All of them are thrilled, jumping jacking & giddy  
Before bobbing headfirst into the old hot tub  
That slumps in the muck like the skull of some  
Ancient all-mouth monster. They hold their breath  
Until blacking out or being declared the winner.  
There's shouting, butt slaps. Sure there is a lot  
Of turpentine, ox blood & vaping, but mostly  
It is cavernous belly buttons & pendulous neck  
Wattles. After they go, I belly crawl from the office,  
Snake outback over the pavement & tip toe up the fire  
Escape to the roof. All day, I stare at the sun, wonder  
If anyone really cares about anything at all anymore.  
One day, I forced myself not to look away & it came  
To me like a needle in the eye: the climate of cruelty  
We live in is rooted in our failure to *really* know  
How to chew through one's own forearm, to welcome  
This gristle & goo into us like a bro-bro. This new  
Understanding stunned me frozen. Before long,  
A syrupy darkness coated the sky into night. My legs  
Vanished in that bottomless black & the bosses' shouts  
Sired away. Sometime later I woke, still standing,  
Sweating beneath the huge moon that floated  
Just inches out of my reach. I said hello to it's blinding  
Light, said I hoped things had been good since our last  
Visit. The moon shushed me with a flash of light  
So bright each particle of dead things that I am made o  
Of jangled furiously: Dinosaur, caveman, carcass & dirt,



A gang of monkeys. Lucy. Every follicle on my body  
Was still twanging electric as it whispered. Secret  
After secret: most of you & me & everyone is  
An orphan found in a stall of a high school bathroom  
Everyone else is the half of conjoined twins that barely  
Survived the cutting. I couldn't take it all in.  
When I came to, blinking into the searing morning  
Light I couldn't remember a thing & a majestic  
Graveyard sprawled around me on the roof.  
I climbed the tallest mausoleum, tick-tocked my legs  
Back & forth over its edge that dropped all the way  
To the pavement where I parked my bike.  
When I looked down my head spun. I slipped  
My tennis shoes off, tracked their plummet until  
Hundreds of feet into their twirling freefall  
I saw that some heartless bastard had spent all night  
Dropping fish from the invisible building that must  
Be built on this building. As if it couldn't get any  
Worse, I looked up for some salvation & saw two  
Meteorites hurtling groundward. As I thanked all  
The crooning angels around me in advance  
For sparing me from the smite of the space rocks,  
I heard all the parking lot below start to fill with shouts,  
The slamming doors' of the supervisors' Mercedes.  
I stared at them the flaming space rocks almost  
The whole way down, looked away just as one mashed  
Into the lake of shit. The day suddenly turned  
Into a python rending its way out of another python.  
I felt lips grazing my ear, blowing tickling air into it.  
Into it & the answers from the night before smacked  
Me wide eyed. There was only one way I could  
Survive the pointless cruelty of this world any  
Longer: a survivalist's assortment of masks—  
So many that winter will give way to spring  
Before I have to wear one for the second time,  
& I saw them all orbiting like flies in the air  
Around me: Moses, Chocolate Thunder. Lady  
Di, The Mole Man & The Man Mole. The Tramp,  
Teddy Roosevelt, Swamp Thing & a Unabomber one  
That when whipped inside out make me into  
The Toxic Avenger. Elvis. Mother Theresa, Muddy  
Waters & Manute Bol. Godzilla & A bleeding looking  
Apostle that at first I thought was a Chupacabra.  
Iron Man & a Barn Owl, Peach Head & a gigantic

Grinning rat. Richard Nixon & one plain John  
Doe motherfucker I couldn't name. Grape Ape,  
The Moon Man, OJ, Elvira & JFK. Old Yeller,  
Che & Tiger. Skunk. Block of cheese. Bald eagle.  
Dr. J., Honest Abe & Buffalo Bill. A puffy  
Marilyn Monroe, Willie Mays & Winnie the Pooh.  
Fredrick Douglas, Dr. Kevorkian, MLK & one that  
Is one side the Burger King & the Hamburgler  
On the other. Willie Nelson, Wig Face & one  
Enormous & Anatomically correct vibrating heart  
Face with wheezing valves. & they kept coming,  
So many masks to count & count, but always more.  
Chicken Head. Charles Lindbergh. Lucy Lawless.  
Finally, I was able to clamber back down, to slip  
Into work where in my cubicle castled with boxes  
Of masks, there is no finish to the mindless work,  
To the stapling & collating & filing for some great  
Administrator outside who'd rather drown in a tub  
Of STD water than explain what the real purpose  
Of all this work is. Outside, the howls of the bacchanal  
Of conspiracists in the crater outside. But here  
It is like Groundhog's Day—each time I walk out  
The sliding glad door, I wake & it is night in the bone-  
Yard above. Always, I am sickly sheened with slime  
That has the tiniest whiff of the sublime, but more so  
Stinks like a tunafish sub found months later beneath  
A Car seat. I want to know where the night goes so I try  
To journey to the other side of the necropolis but  
There are shadow hiding animals that follow me two  
By two. Dread turns me back before I find its end  
If it ever does. Now, the nights are getting cold, freezing  
My lips to the plastic lips of the mask. During these  
Long walks, I have come to realize that I am not a handsome  
Animal but I love with all the grit in my ugly body.  
Again & again the night happens & now I am  
Pretty much open to anything. Might cut off an ear. Might  
Start digging everone up. I can never do enough  
But I will never stop—wearing my masks, typing  
Up forms. Urging the colleagues in the office  
To rise up, to a stare the bright star willowing  
In the afternoon sky until they know what kind  
Of manimal has burrowed a home inside them.  
Just today, I sharpied new shirts for all of us:  
*In case of emergency, each says, Shatter my nose*

WENDY BARKER

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## NOTING NEW MUSIC

There's no longer a piano  
in my house, the ivory and  
ebony keys sold to someone  
else's hands—can't press my fingers  
for chords, trills that resound beyond  
these rock walls, and I'm bereft with  
no crescendos, fortissimos,  
but wait: now I'm hearing other  
notes I'd not noticed before, soft  
clunk as my careful husband shuts  
his sock drawer, steady thud of his  
shoes on wood slats of the floor as  
he rustles plastic bags to take  
for recycling, while my rumpled rag  
swishes over the counter, with  
the washer tumbling through its spin  
cycle as egg shells crackle in  
my fingers, and outside tonight,  
the buzzing of crickets, and just  
overhead: symphonies of stars.

ANTHONY ROBINSON

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## I WILL TAKE YOUR DEAD

and deploy them far beyond the bluish mountains  
and green dark lakes, lichenized trees, because I have  
no substance of my own. Isn't it queer, little one?  
That we find ourselves immaterial. Someone said  
render aid, someone said "esprit de corps" and I thought  
it meant the soul leaving the body but I misunderstood;  
it really meant "Go Team!" Needless to say,  
it fractured my sensibilities—the Lord is my beam  
splitter, my lumberjack, my Jewish uncle. My father  
is dead. He's been dead eight months and the further  
I bury your corpses from their point of origin, the more  
I feel divested. That word again, that cocooning, body  
as clothing, as raiment, as chrysalis or warp of light.  
There is nothing inside. So it is Thursday morning: I  
build the fire, I cook the rice, I inject the fat part  
of my stomach with a needle full of some shit  
from AstraZeneca. Finally I bake the bread.  
This is my body, but still I carry yours. I long to be.

**INBOX**

And so then they plead for things we don't have, mostly blossoms or certain quantities of prettiness, because we lack the correct or useful delusions. At least, that's what I tell myself. Am I a great con artist? But I "clicked" (strange word) and it's the same thing again—sure it's pretty. But pretty is a projection of dead ideas, which is something Paul Goodman or Paul Blackburn would say, but with a bit more venom or revolutionary frisson. I mean. Probably. I get it: God bless the small things, the injured things, the bird that seems dead but turns out to be only temporarily inconvenienced by a pane of glass. And through this we understand a grand concept and it's pretty the way the bow is neatly tied. To which I say "horseshit" and this is why I lack good looks, big dollars, and tenure. How much do we value beauty? We can't value it in the same way Keats or the ancient Greeks valued it. We are looking at different things. But I can go back and read one of Horace's odes and become immersed as if the entire Greek culture was a conspiracy theory full of wine and cloven hooves and wondrous sex. I don't think that can exist in our day, in our culture, and pretending that it can is a grievous assault on ART. Nevermind. In my letterbox I found a sparrow and a government check which with I will buy a phone and I will call people everywhere on this planet and prove my unworthiness. I have heard that in the Levant, the hills are covered with wild thyme and hyssop. Perhaps I'll go check out that gig. The crows today are ravenous but everyone on the planet seems to be super-into recovery of all varieties, which is a pro-forma bonus, no? Yesterday I saw that two of my friends made the last payment on their student loans, and I silently huzzahed (because to be actually vocal about it would come off as insincere) and I wondered aloud to myself (as I was the only one in the room) if anyone knew that I haven't yet made my first?

## THE EVERLASTING GOBSTOPPER OF YOUTUBE

The years my mother was sick, my penchant for those animal videos where one is raising another's young bloomed in me like an infection. I sat back and let them reel off of their own accord: the one with the wild boar adopted by the herd of cattle; the one with the black lab nursing the orphaned tiger cubs; the one with the barn cat and her kittens *plus* a duckling—the voice behind the camera announcing in wonder: *it arrived right as she gave birth*. As if, get the timing right, a mother will mother anything. Thousands of these videos exist, in seemingly infinite combinations of species. We must be ravenous for them. The salt lick we crave like deer. The comfort of the everlasting gobstopper of *Youtube*.

Those years, it was a low-grade fever all the time, my need to have a baby. My mother's neurological condition carried on without any name. Meanwhile, her memory and her ability to speak were being laced by a hole-punch. Her body did strange things no one could account for. She spasmed at night. Fumbled around for words. Couldn't remember how to drive across the town she'd lived in my whole life. In the beginning, someone had given her a diagnosis: ALS. She would lose the ability to speak and then the ability to breathe in one year or two. She had kept this news to herself. No one knew of the decree until she did not die. Perhaps it was her withholding that cast a spell—after two years, no one could say what it was that hadn't yet killed her. My need to know, to have some actual grasp of it, swelled into a flood that my mind re-routed towards something that glimmered like a solution: *a baby*—small creature, tangible, *nameable*, arriving out from the inscrutable dark of my body.

It was as if this act of seeing and knowing would degrade the very existence of mystery. As if it could pull everything loitering in the wings onto a lit-up stage to wail. It was logic that felt unassailable, the way I knew, if I released my hold on a glass of water, it would fall and shatter.

The reasoning was abstract. The practicality was something else. I was terrified of the whole mind-boggling process of growing huge, having my organs rearranged, and then: the turning-inside-out. This was surely something I needed my mother for. Surely it required inside knowledge, secrets, history. The thought of proceeding without her part in the passing-along of wisdom—or, it seemed, maybe, magic—that went back through the generations was paralyzing. Friends made jokes about baby clocks as if the body were a cute egg timer. But that wasn't quite right. Both of our clocks were ticking. It was more like I was a car and my mother was a car, and if something didn't change, we would collide.

But I couldn't have a baby. Not living, as I was, on the edge of financial stability in a ruthlessly expensive one-bedroom apartment with asbestos in the ceilings. Not in a partnership that seemed to sprout new bitter fissures every time we took our eyes off it. I was twenty-eight and spent all day lying on a couch I'd gotten for free by the side of the road with a computer propped in my lap, working or not-working,

my stipend funneling itself into the rent. I had been awarded an extraordinary and lucky gift, a writing fellowship, which turned out to wield a counterintuitive dual-edged sword: I had been given so much time, it was swimmable, open seas. Any of the little work I managed to do disappeared as the camera zoomed out to take in the scope of time I had to do it in. But, too, the fellowship had a strict end-date. After which, who knew? I could envision some dark, desperate swath of unemployment or some grinding shitty job where I might grab a second here or there to spend regretting the many hours I let slide by. My imagined future stress and regret bled into the present. A weird temporal collapse, a muddling of cause and effect.

This was compounded by the oddly seasonlessness of Oakland, California in a drought: every day, 74 degrees and bright as a surgical lamp. And by the ads, which had started to intersperse the animal videos: calm, feminine voices suggesting I freeze my eggs, *to be on the safe side*. The idea of a safe side of time. In California, “summer” fruits were bright and perfect and available all year: strawberries, avocados, figs. Young mothers were everywhere, ceaselessly jogging around the neighborhood lake with their top-of-the-line strollers, perpetually at the farmer’s market with their arms out for the peaches. They were all clearly rich and unbelievably radiant. This mirage-life made hyper-monitoring the passage of time seem like keeping a grip on reality. Inside my apartment, shades drawn, I checked my bank account for miracles and waited for some kind of news, some specialist to tell me what was wrong with my mother.

And then my dog died. The border collie I’d had since I was fifteen years old, who always walked so close behind me that I had to be careful not to kick him in the chin. Who had moved back and forth and back again with me across the country. Who I had had frequent cause to call Woe-Mop for the way he absorbed and laundered my grief into comfort. Who, everyone always said, had human eyes. For the last months of his life, I had been feeding him the most expensive, laborious food, lifting him gently to his feet when he collapsed. I had been checking a mental box every time I saw his tail wag, every time he took a treat—tabulation of his quality of life, tabulation of when to make the end happen. There had been those who insisted on calling me his mother. At the vet, that was their practice. In their records, the dog had my last name. As he grew skinnier, they’d *tsk* at the scale, but say things like: *I bet you like all those new treats mom is giving you.*

But I had never been his mother. Mothers hope to leave this world before their children. That is, in some deep-rooted tenet of evolution, the goal. There’s a period of intense care, and then the child stands on

its own, grows up, leaves: a self-supporting satellite. Having a dog is more like the reverse, more like being a daughter. The dog's death—I had known all along—was inevitable. What's more, and worse, I knew it was a practice-run, a dip into the sea of ending that awaited me with my mother. It seemed carefully engineered, in fact: the dog, peering up at me, speechless, whose suffering I was in charge of mitigating and whose departure I was attendant to.

The lure of a baby was its glorious arrival—the wonder of a beginning. A baby, my brain whispered, would not only degrade the existence of mystery, a baby would superimpose an ending with a beginning.

The videos I was addicted to were intentionally and temptingly continuous—each culminated with the signal that the next was loading, like a smoker lighting a cigarette with the dreggy ember of the one before. A salve for the mind of someone like me, so consumed by the dread of ends that I found myself horrified in an airport's *terminal*. The videos rolled on with their outlandish pairings: the centenarian tortoise who adopted a baby hippo, the macaque raising a stray puppy. The supranatural feel to them: the difference between an apple and an apple Jolly Rancher. Meanwhile, my mother had been shuttled into another MRI machine, had her blood pulled again for the lab. Meanwhile, the vet had a strange floral tin with my dog's ashes delivered. I stood in the doorway wondering what to do with them.

Around this time, my mother improved. Her fumbling-for-words eased up. She stopped spasming and forgetting, started to sleep through the night. Spoke clearly. Became my mother again. Still no name for it, still no explanation. Her inner warring factions had reached an inexplicable truce.

And so I had my own armistice—something loosened its grip inside me. Breathing felt different, walking felt different. Looking in the mirror felt more like looking at me. I unglued myself from the *YouTube* spiral. A fog lifted. I got a new job. I got married. We moved away from California to somewhere cheap and bought an old house with multiple rooms and no asbestos. Somewhere with noticeable seasons. And then suddenly, all my friends were having babies, unbelievable amalgamations of their features, unbelievable reckoning with potential. They wrote to tell how, at all hours, they watched the baby sleep, how the jolts of terror struck in the pauses between breaths. The stuporous daymare of likely calamities: the car suddenly sinister, the maple suddenly unstable. The child was a frightening fusion of miraculous beginning and the horror of possible end.

But also, just a baby: a lot of work and sleepless nights and care. Not some glimmering solution to the passage of time, or to the existence of mystery.



I didn't try to have one. The alarms had softened. What had seemed, before, inescapably logical took on a warped, mis-colored feel—like looking through someone else's prescription glasses, or like recalling a bizarre bad dream. We adopted another dog.

The lure of the videos had seemed simple. Perhaps, when I was in deep, I would have explained it by admitting a weakness for the cute, cheesiness of it. I wanted a baby, and here were these comforting, remarkable animals showcasing the power and generosity of maternal instinct—piped right into my brain, over and over. How delightful, right? Or, how else to account for it? I think now it wasn't quite that.

Some parrots eat clay to attend to a nutritional need; some pregnant mothers are instinctively drawn to coal or dirt to guard against mineral deficiency. Only when I had emerged from crisis-mode, from that cocktail of fear, jealousy and animal desire to get pregnant did it dawn on me that the seduction of these videos was the fiction of a world existing outside of the rules of nature. Not just a corny illustration of the magnificence of motherhood, but a testament to something more mysterious: a world in which the normal limits are undone.

No one, it seemed, is motherless for long on *Youtube*. *FREEZE YOUR EGGS*, the pop-up ads said, momentarily obscuring the great dane and her fawn. Upping the game. The canny algorithm turning its crank as it loaded the next video. As it obscured an end with the start of something else.

In some way of reckoning with this, it's apparent that my nutritional deficiency was time. I was twenty-eight and healthy, but my mind had developed a scurvy-like preoccupation with each minute. Baby clock. Mother clock. Death clock. All under the surgical light of perpetual California sun. I had a sort of dysmorphic disorder that mis-saw, not my body, but the time around it. Amplified its passing. Each transpired minute had both the reward and the terror of an anorexic's french fry.

The videos, though, offered the feeling that I was stepping out of time's relentless grip. While watching them, some hand stopped its incessant ticking. Certain rules began to lose their authority; the strict border of *the end*, seemed vaguely crossable.

There is, of course, no such thing as the everlasting gobstopper—but what an alluring idea: something you can taste and taste and hold in your mouth that never diminishes. Something that never exhibits any of the inescapable deterioration of living. Of course, I knew better. Of course, if you had asked, I would have told you that there was no escape from time. That was the problem; I *knew* that was the problem.

And yet, immersed in my year-long *Youtube* spiral, I was offered a whirlpool so endless and deathless it soothed like religion. The everlasting.

JEANNE MARIE BEAUMONT

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## SPIRIT BUNDLE DOLL

Pluck the twine off the streets  
Here the twain shall bend and meet

Splinters salvaged from plyboard  
Glue around a body gourd

Stamp new words onto scraps  
Stamp feet wrapped in antique maps

Two blown fuses serve as eyes  
Junk the reign of truancies

Hour feather, rainsweat, bristles  
Pound a thick paste in a pestle

Clay hands pressed out of the earth  
Mourn mothers died before the birth

Churn better garb from bitter grit  
Bind it in conductive wire

Each limb right and left refit  
Use as thread a spool of fire

JEANNE MARIE BEAUMONT

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## SELF AS SUBURBAN RUIN

*for Cynthia Atkins*

Yes, and the usual flaking leaden paint, shards  
crunching underfoot, fetid puddles, leaked-out pipes.  
And papers? Did someone say reams?  
Bad dream of a cottage industry—  
all the old molds and dies left tilting on the tables  
curating the storied dust. Turn your flashlight  
toward the rafters, corroded model train tracks,  
some heat-damaged fright of a baby doll  
the older siblings left for dead. Watch your step,  
there's flooring missing, pink insulation  
like a punctured pillow's escaping fluff.  
Dangerous stuff. Must be where the uncles  
fell through the cracks.

Best head down to the  
lower level, where a rusting pencil sharpener  
still juts from the stairwell. A moment's pause to  
savor our first essential mechanical tool.  
Here's the realm of lost labors and amusements,  
and mildew—mother's foe, a deep concrete sink  
with washboard built in, and broken-off swing chains.  
Linoleum buckled like pulled taffy, clear evidence of flooding.  
Shh. . . what's that rattle? Webs have rebound a bin  
of loose venetian blind slats, and a blurred, cracked  
blackboard against the wall appears erased in haste.  
Among the rags with hardened folds left hanging  
on large hooks, find a handkerchief wrung clean  
of its tears. In situ: for undetermined years.  
*Grab it!* It's time that we got out of here—

## THE FIRE NEXT TIME

When I was in the ICU, I woke to loads of people [who] stood around me, all vying to put their hands on me, all with a yellow/gold glow. They lifted me for a moment and I knew I wasn't going to die, I knew I would survive. Then I fell back asleep. I can't explain it.

—Aaron Kent @GodzillaKent, Nov. 1, 2020

I see some orangey red maples, aspen, hickory,  
sugar maple. Out on my ride. The last blazing  
“burning bushes,” their scarlet individual leaves  
dropping like vivid tears.

Felicia is taking down the light  
blue sheets from this morning. I was actually up early  
enough to see her pin them to the line.

As I was leaving  
on my bike ride, I saw her on her phone on her  
back step.

“I love you,” she said into the little box. We're  
careful to do that  
these days. After she said goodbye, she turned to me  
and said she'd been having a hell of a time  
nailing my cat with the flea medicine, because Zoey  
was on to her. But she said she'd get it.

She'd figure  
it out.

Then we were on to the election, and she  
said she'd taken four walks  
and had also cried today;  
I told her I cried in CVS and also two days  
ago, when they called Michigan.

She said she'd cried around then  
too. I said there were a lot of long faces in CVS  
and I couldn't believe it.

She said she couldn't  
either. She said there were two tiny  
counties in our whole state that went blue,  
she'd looked. Ours  
and Bloomington. Her brothers lived in blue places.  
One of her brothers lived in Memphis, where  
people were right then dancing  
in the street. Why were we here?

I told her about my protracted struggle with the  
poem series on Black Lives Matter, Ham in  
Noah's Ark, and James Baldwin.

I didn't tell her  
about my phone call with  
Samantha in which I'd complained that I'd  
bought a cashmere scarf, and then realized  
that it would attract moths (hence, moth holes) and  
Sam said she'd seen a documentary called  
something like "Hello, Privilege. It's Me, Chelsea"  
on white privilege—on Netflix.  
I told her Black "inferiority," anti-Blackness,  
had been justified through Noah's curse  
on his son Ham via Ham's son Canaan—  
he'd made him black!—  
and used to justify slavery from that time  
to this. That our evangelicals  
were so steeped in this rationale and every kind of  
doctor, minister, abolitionist (!) had used  
it to explain why Blacks were inferior—many said they'd *benefited*  
from slavery—and could not be equal to whites  
(the LDS church, for example).

That I was making myself  
sick reading and rereading about the  
"Hamitic line," how (I would say *western world*  
but witness Australia—so, everywhere the Judeo-  
Christian world has touched? –or?)

it was so rock-solid,  
so *semiotically sealed*, so *black fire on white fire*,  
justifying the Muslim keeping  
of slaves. Neither Jesus nor St. Paul  
sought to change the status quo  
regarding slaveholding, according to this article.

And then our election  
in which half of our population voted knowingly  
for the guy who said  
white nationalists carrying  
Tiki torches and chanting "Jews will not replace us"  
etc., etc. were possibly nice guys  
(there were "very fine  
people on both sides"), the guy who wanted to  
do Baltimore, Portland, Chicago a favor and send

in national troops to clean up their “problem.” The  
dog-whistle guy. And they had voted for him. And  
on Twitter and Facebook, on CNN, Van Jones  
almost crying in shock that *still* there was no  
repudiation. I told her I couldn’t write about  
any of it, James Baldwin’s *The Fire Next Time*,  
was trying to get information about the code  
in “Mary Don’t You Weep” (from whence the  
line “the fire next time”  
comes—midrashic addition to God’s promise not  
to bring flood again)  
and that I was trying to research  
wild fires in California (covering an area as large as the state  
of New Jersey)—but  
no problem—“climate change is a hoax,” etc.  
And that basically I was cracking up  
in my house alone.

I said I can’t even find  
a guy here to date because the whole state  
is red. I have a guy in Chicago, but who knows  
how long he’s going to put up with it.  
I said And I’m in  
a twelve-step program here. Everybody is  
a Trumpie and a lot of them are Q-Anon.  
I said, it’s great that they want  
something spiritual,  
that they can get the higher power thing and  
believe in miracles (*thinking of myself*) but then  
that magical thinking seems to go right on over  
to the Golden Toilet. Etc.

Ignoring for the moment  
things like my behavior in the pandemic. The  
cashmere scarf is the least of it. There’s also  
the floral puffer coat from Johnny Was, so I could  
fancy up for grocery shopping (my only outing  
and, come to think of it, dangerous at that), and my  
two pairs of gold-plated dangle earrings to be used in

AA Zoom meetings  
    (in addition to the “Video Enhancement”  
face filter Nessy told me about)—plus  
    every-other-day hair-curling with the electric wand—  
*why?* I mean per my doctor the other day on my Medicare  
    check-up appointment (kind of a suitability-for-nursing-  
    home-test, I observed) I should be eating two and half  
    cups of vegetables a day—*say what?* He asked for  
a verbal recall of my last lipid panel. But ha! I don’t  
    have one  
        for the pandemic yet.  
    Usually I cycle in and out  
of the melted butter and puffy white  
    stuff cravings;  
now that I’m home alone all the time, and lacking  
    entertainment, not to mention opportunities  
    to wear my dry cleaning . . . .

        Anyhow, I thought these  
    things on my bike ride. How I’d written to my school  
friends on the list serve (I mean high school) explaining  
    it wasn’t Trump’s values so much,  
    or even hatred of  
    people with “elite” educations (like us, in the case of  
this particular school),  
        but an immediate hypnogogic response  
to the voice. Forget the content.  
    It’s the cadence, the  
cajoling, teasing, insulting (others), degradation, faux  
    superiority, abusiveness, manipulation,  
    very appealing to those who grew up  
        getting slapped around (I  
    should know), who could  
not get their footing and only want to find a warm pool  
of melted butter to hang out in.  
        That would be me, but  
I didn’t get into that  
    with my schoolmates. I’ve been to two reunions at  
Stone Harbor  
    in the last few years  
        and had not been hard





and my scarf), how she said  
vis-à-vis my nervousness about the James  
Baldwin/Fire Next Time project and the Noah's Ark  
project as a whole, I should, basically,  
stop being a bitch  
and rely on my higher power.

I was so happy that I'd  
gotten to talk to my neighbor, a *human*, and that the light  
was so wonderful (and in retrospect I'm realizing  
that for once  
it wasn't windy on the macadam bike path), I started  
fishing around my mind for my higher power—  
I had so failed at my morning meditation and  
had come out of it so aggravated and  
then rushed to get on Zoom for the meeting where I saw  
Samantha—making a mental note to talk with  
Sean about Mike's suicide (handsome, charming 49-year-old  
man, and my friend, God damn it), but Sean  
looked so haggard, from the memorial service  
I'm sure, and had chocolate donut in the corners  
of his mouth (I guess that's what it was—  
I remembered  
he used to buy them for us  
when this Saturday morning meeting was in-person), I  
decided to wait. My rationale for asking,  
apart from how shocked  
I was when I found out which "Mike"  
it was from the Surf Center and Home with Hope  
who had died, was that I wanted  
to write in my Kindness and Ecstasy poem maybe about the  
very high cost to recovering addicts and alcoholics  
of the isolation  
of the pandemic. I mean, all we ever do in twelve-step meetings, is say  
Don't isolate. Which would be short-hand for  
"Don't isolate yourself."

So I thought about how far I was from seeing God  
in the tree tops as I had earlier

in the summer when  
I was writing Martin. I loved writing Martin. I saw a bald  
eagle twice—it was, both times, huge, implacable, unflappable,  
immoveable, and not giving a shit. Only the barely  
perceptible surveillance of the slit eyes. Like a big silver  
upright flounder high in the tall, tall foliage (I mean, like  
ninety feet) or the other time on the lamp post  
where Route 52 branches off to Northwestern. But  
then I thought about the news accounts Felicia  
and I had talked about, people dancing in the  
streets in Washington, at her brother's in Memphis,  
and the news reports quoting African American  
political organizers saying, We delivered the  
presidency to him, now he needs to give us a seat  
at the table (as in the Frog Prince and other similar stories), and I thought  
again about the attraction  
of Trump's golden hair,  
golden skin,  
golden dulcet  
vocal tones, golden underpants  
probably, definitely,  
golden toilet, and how I could claim not to  
be a sucker for these things. Not *him*, but the earrings  
I ordered, the impractical scarf, the Amazon Prime  
my daughter lets me share with her.  
The butter pooling  
in the center of everything, even where it doesn't  
belong (who puts butter on a pot pie?), the real maple  
syrup *every day* on "Pamela's" gluten-free pancakes, *ha*  
*ha*. Never mind the various amber  
liquids of days of yore,  
Benedictine and Brandy, bourbon.

And the silky  
pointless men. Buying me hors d'oeuvres,  
amuse bouches, escargots, continental  
breakfasts in hotels  
in foreign countries (though we may have been  
living on fumes  
and there was no money for other meals), crusty  
baguettes and beautiful peach compote, the Almond-Joy-bar pie

that the journalist-pilot bought  
for me at Random Row in coosville, several  
Friday nights running.  
But, also, then, the “higher power” Sam had tried  
to remind me of. I thought  
Who can explain this?

The self-proclaimed “heavily skeptical” guy  
who wrote on Twitter of all places that he was ill  
with Covid in the ICU and all of these  
gold people visited him,  
reached out their hands, lifted him up,  
and in contrast to the other stories  
I think most of us (and he as well)  
have heard about these  
grave illness situations,  
he could tell that they were signaling  
he would get well. That they  
would lead him out.

I loved thinking about that, riding my bike  
in the mild air up the slightly upward-sloping  
macadam hill.  
I thought do I have anything that could compare  
(or do I just need to borrow his “higher power(s)”?),  
and I thought of my dream of the hand  
coming up out of choppy water  
and holding my  
hand, but it was weirdly neutral,  
insistently neutral,  
not giving an inch—  
like meditation, I guess—and my  
inscrutable boyfriend. Some red-winged blackbirds  
showed up  
on scraggly leaf-denuded young trees along the path.

I tried not to think of the two young drunk crickets  
last night near the cat bowls  
in the basement when  
I was putting out food—all of the last hurrahs before winter  
bring me delight and grief—had the crickets been  
singing?

The blackbirds trilled and another bird  
that I couldn't see over near the roof of Walmart  
repeated a beautiful, sonorous song, as beautiful  
as any I have heard about the flood—  
to the point, really,  
I started trying to remember if  
Noah saw a dove and a raven,  
or if that was Gilgamesh  
or which one saw which and so on—though, in the stories, there  
is no reference to a song anyway—and the gorgeous  
Terrance Blanchard sound track  
to Spike Lee's movie about  
Katrina. His trumpet is his voice. Flood and aftermath.  
After the election,

my bike ride  
with the golden arms,  
reaching out to me, even  
if they were meant  
for someone else,  
could feel like that.

PAULA YUP

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## MISSING DEAN

as I took bus #27  
headed to the doctor's office

I read a map  
my husband helped  
me with

so I wouldn't get lost  
going to the doctor's

and still I get lost

so I'm missing Dean  
who used to bring me  
to my doctor appointments

until he got sick  
and then he passed

but it's all good  
I got there  
eventually

## JERRY HARP

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### 1-7-21

Our cat orbits me on the stoop, stares  
into the door, and goes inside.  
He yowls. I haven't learned his language.  
*Holy here as blue*, he seems to say, as if  
I understand. But everything's as if,  
emerging in blue meaning,  
drifting through the gray, the dry.

The sun intensifies.  
There hasn't been light like this for days.  
From left and right, the crows call out.  
I can't see them but know their voices.  
Every morning I leave them food,  
and they've dropped off two feathers,  
a pine cone, and a candy bar wrapper.  
I save their gifts in a bowl my mentor  
threw on a pottery wheel. He died two years  
ago, but his words, as if in whispers  
drift through my sleep: *Productions don't steal,  
they breeze. There are valleys  
that make for sails.*

The traffic sounds up on Chavez Boulevard intensify.  
A man walks by, talking into his hands-free call. He wears a mask.  
The pandemic breaks records every day.  
*Osteoporosis*, I hear him say.  
Yesterday, crowds, at the president's request,  
stormed the capital, forcing  
legislators into hiding on the news.  
By evening they went back to counting votes.

When I breathed tear gas this summer, the first and only time,  
a man came out of the dark to pour water on my face.  
I didn't get his name.  
The faceless troops proceeded down the street.  
A woman called my name and said, *I saw you walking around  
and said to myself, I know that old guy, that's Jerry fucking Harp.*  
Last time I'd seen her was the ICE occupation.  
She's becoming a librarian.  
What do meanings manage when the chanting stops?

For now I wait for something. Is it there  
in the light, online, and in the clouds,  
in the crows' calls out of sight,  
in the traffic up on Cesar Chavez Boulevard?  
The same man walks back the other way.  
*I think they should impeach him*, he says into his call.  
*The sun's been out ten minutes now*, I say aloud,  
as if I'm marking time, but I don't know the time.

Two women go by: *The pages have a little metal in them, and the binding  
is magnetic so you can slide the pages in and out.*

Avian voices, though not the crows, send out  
intermittent twitters. I'm wishing a long time ago I'd learned  
to name them by their voices, learned  
to identify trees by the feel of their bark  
as I pass them in the dark woods.

The sun goes on, shimmers in the rain  
falling on the lawn. The crows  
intensify in counterpoint to the traffic.  
They gather in the Monterey pines  
at the end of the street. They call out,  
cry, and chant, forming a conclave, as if  
forming a new language they pronounce.

## CUSTODIAN

Mr. Fulton was the custodian at my elementary school. Mr. Fulton wore overalls and heavy work boots. If we heard heavy work boots echoing throughout the hallways, we would instinctively think, That must be Mr. Fulton. Mr. Fulton had a yellow bucket and a white mop. The bucket had wheels that creaked noisily when Mr. Fulton pushed the bucket down the hallways. If someone spilled milk on the cafeteria floor, Mr. Fulton would materialize from wherever and mop the floor with the white mop. Mr. Fulton was good at mopping the floor quickly. Mr. Fulton wrung the white mop into the yellow bucket and then put a sign where he'd mopped. CAUTION: WET FLOOR, Mr. Fulton's sign read.

"Slow down, Buster Brown!" Mr. Fulton would say, if we were running through the halls.

"That all for you?" Mr. Fulton would say, when we carried our lunch trays past him.

"Where's the fire at?" Mr. Fulton would say, at the end of the school day, when we pushed through the front doors, eager to escape school and head home, where we would invariably forget about Mr. Fulton altogether. Unlike our teachers, say Mrs. Reese or Ms. Winkel or Ms. Katz, Mr. Fulton wasn't the kind of person we thought about at home. The only time we thought about Mr. Fulton was when we heard him in the hallway, or when he appeared with his bucket and mop, and then we'd think, There's Mr. Fulton.

Mr. Fulton smoked cigarettes outside the cafeteria loading dock. If we waved to Mr. Fulton while he was smoking cigarettes outside the cafeteria loading dock, Mr. Fulton would not wave back. Mr. Fulton did not smile. Each year, there was a picture of Mr. Fulton not smiling in the yearbook. CUSTODIAN, it said above Mr. Fulton's picture. Mr. Fulton mowed the school grounds with a green tractor that had enormous black tires. If Mr. Fulton was mowing the school grounds with the green tractor, our teachers would sometimes close the windows until Mr. Fulton had stopped mowing the school grounds, and then they would open the windows again.

One rainy day, we arrived at school to see Mr. Fulton standing in the parking lot, which had flooded overnight. Brown water rose to Mr. Fulton's knees. Rain fell on Mr. Fulton's overalls. Mr. Fulton held the white mop in his hands, the white part visible.

"You kids go on home," Mr. Fulton said. "No school today."

We watched as Mr. Fulton thrust the mop into the floodwater and moved it about, invisibly, beneath the brown water. Was Mr. Fulton



really going to mop up all the floodwater? We watched him for a few moments, our hearts beating in our ears, and then we turned to leave, a free day off from school before us, and we ran home not thinking or wondering or imagining what life was like for Mr. Fulton.

## THE DUMB STUFF

Last night I listened to the dumb stuff. There was no one else around. No one to ask me, “Why are you listening to that?” No one to hold up a record in disbelief and say, “Is this what you’re into now?” It was just me and my record player. And maybe a beer or two. Plus my floor lamp—you can’t read the record jacket without the floor lamp.

I don’t know how I acquired the dumb stuff. Thrift stores and yard sales mostly, I guess. Those moments when I must have looked at a record and thought, Well, I’ll probably never listen to this, but for a dollar, maybe it’s sort of worth it. Or else someone gave the dumb stuff to me. Someone who wouldn’t be caught dead with this kind of stuff, but figured (correctly) that I wouldn’t mind.

Even though I knew it was just the dumb stuff, I cleaned each record with the special little cloth I sometimes use when I really care how something sounds. I held each record to the light, inspecting for scratches, or potential skips. I placed the record on the turntable and timed my return to the sofa so that I would arrive just as the needle dropped, just like when I’m listening to something I actually want to hear.

The first record was pretty dumb, I’ll admit it, but not terrible. There were some good things about it. The second record was better, with one or two songs I’d never noticed before, ones I knew I’d want to listen to again. I sipped one beer. And then another. The third record had one song I couldn’t believe I’d never noticed before, kind of bad lyrics, sure, but that opening hook, wow, how had I never noticed that opening hook before? It felt nice to listen to the dumb stuff, with no one around to see me.

I remember when I was a kid, and I first found out about death. I was talking to an older cousin of mine, and she asked me if I knew that everybody dies, and I said people only died if they got shot by a bad guy, like in the movies, but my cousin said no, everyone dies no matter what. One day I would die, she told me. And my siblings and friends. Even my parents. Everyone.

For days after that, I had a hard time sleeping at night. I couldn’t stop thinking about death. I’d stare at my alarm clock and feel this terrible sense of doom. How did anyone fall asleep at night, knowing they would one day die?

I wish I could have consoled my childhood self with what I know now. One day you’ll be older and it won’t seem so bad, I would say. Don’t worry too much. One day you won’t feel so anxious. I promise. One day you’ll be free to listen to the dumb stuff.

PAUL DICKEY

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## DRIVING DIRECTIONS FROM INTERCOURSE, PA TO CLIMAX, PA

Google Maps tells you it is 244 miles and it takes 4 hours and 9 minutes, which is a problem since you have been told your stamina can only be maintained four hours until you must stop to see a doctor. You have not made the road trip before yet with the most eager of hopes borne of many years of anticipation, you head **west** on **PA-340 W** toward **PA-772 E**, take the ramp onto **U.S. 30 W**, toward **I-81**. In 3 miles, you will merge onto **I-83 N**, continue onto **US-322/230 E/Harrisburg**. (Be extremely careful not to miss this exit. Others have and found themselves in Hell, Michigan.) Continue onto **US-322 W**. Make a slight right onto **PA-144 N** and another slight right toward **S Harrison Rd**.

Oddly for a time like this, you remember Beverly Harrison from high school civics class. You may feel ecstatic at this point, wonder why you don't make this journey more often. Now turn left to merge onto **PA-26 N**. Keep right at the fork, follow signs for **Interstate 99 N**. Continue onto **PA-26 N/US-220 N**. Do a slight right to merge onto **I-80 W** toward **DuBois W**. You know, like Blanche Dubois in that movie. At this point, you may begin to feel anxiety, perhaps even pain. You think maybe you should be mowing or raking the grass. Take a slight left onto **PA-28 S/North St**. Make a slight left onto **State Rte. 1004**, and finally, a slight right onto **State Rte. 1009**. Your destination, Climax, is on your right. You can't miss.

MOLLY BENDALL

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## PREPONDERANCE OF EVIDENCE

When aid came it was tomorrow. Pulling snaps apart,  
I'd rather wing it. Had that one claim. Ticked and tocked  
it around my head. Strategies compounded the underside.  
Warned as she tried to deny. There was hearsay, we swore.  
We'd predict her next blank space. Speak to me as if I have  
Zorro's mask on. Then I'm a late baby-boomer, but not  
dependent that way. Even the zinnia bed was kept under  
wraps. Thick with gnats, thick with new lettering. I'd invent  
a stitch for my sentence so its pulse would skip. When she  
finally revealed her jagged hairline. Shhh-sounds came  
intermittently with rainfall. Facts drawn on the matchbook  
spoke to it. In exchange for a clean-up crew. Brought wings  
to cover my face. Supposing they'd excavate soon. Warships  
in the afternoon, warships in the evening. Strike and stay  
if they don't believe. A session goes unheeded. Over speakers  
a muddled voice re-tells the score. Call on the staff for  
the go-ahead. Slip like it got waxed and knew all along.

MOLLY BENDALL

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## ETERNAL ARGUMENT, MY ANCESTRY

Somewhere it was leaking. We had our theories—took the lead from a wolf. Held it under my nose. That's how climbing the rafters proved helpful. What could evidence say if it was a pact or a spy thing? They made a poor showing of it. Because I'm attached. Located near the crawl-space. Unsettling, systems broke down. Planets bulging when you look closer at the synapses. An afterimage powders the sheen away. Questioned hundreds of times. Would he even be a suspect if they were absorbed into the proscenium? Legend has it that the sea gives it up debris. Scatters without a plan. And looking at my matrilineage, I'd fall into that group. Let's assume more sounds were audible. A grimace signals foreign voices. What particular gravity does she trust? Press down to listen. I'm the richer for it. Like a mess full of wind. The attic beams hesitate. Give in. As wind blows and pleads behind our ears. Emptying more proves it. Small gears left inside.

JESS TURNER

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## THERE IS NO TRANSLATION FOR THE BODY AT NIGHT

There is no translation for the body at night. The crow's chest drops  
as it calls from the wet grass. Sometimes the dead make a nest  
of us. Sometimes the dead are still living, sealing envelopes  
with thread inside. Wouldn't you burn if you followed  
the old way home? I mean to say I keep finding parts of bone  
on the riverbanks that worry me into a collector. I keep & bleach  
the already violent thing. And beside me, the water shifts  
like a body in the night. Memory—a crease in the ceiling  
growing the dark. Dancing all those years ago, I learned how  
to land softly, body caught quiet after dropping through the air.  
This is how I deceive you. Water folds over itself no matter—no  
matter. Wing held against the ribcage collapsed like a child  
in her crib, hands over her ears.

JESS TURNER

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**DRIFTWOOD AS EROS**

*after Allison Benis White*

I am still waiting for the right words to explain myself to you.  
Cornbroom sweeps the porchdust— all this almost  
in the air. Long  
I have believed that to carry is to keep. Never leaving  
the driftwood to the sand,  
each piece suspended on the mantel.  
I collect every loss I had no choice  
but to feel.  
I found the backdoor unlocked & wept.  
That which keeps coming in  
does not leave. I carry  
lack like another body. Imagine  
the rabbit dead in the tophat—the hand lifts her body & it hangs  
loose like a housekey.  
Every room with its own dead  
animal.  
Every room in me with its own dead  
animal.  
Now when you look at me long, I want  
you to stay—  
precise & hungry.  
Now when I look at you long,  
I can see you in the dark making fire.

\*“I am still waiting for the right words to explain myself to you” is borrowed from Allison Benis White’s *Please Bury Me in This*

ELIZABETH METZGER

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## ON A CLEAR NIGHT

I have broken our heart again. I have made the animal  
noise the animal, you know I make up  
what I don't know. I used to think that was resilience.

If I could speak with an earlier you  
I would say have I told you what will happen to us,  
and you would laugh trusting I knew.

All I would have to do is read, really read in front of you.  
Do you see my relationship to my face?  
I wish to pull myself out of it. Of course I can't

but I love wishing. No matter how much I tell you  
there is as much I cannot tell you.



## SEX DREAM

What part of lying still  
left room for missing you? I missed the floor,  
I missed letting the shower hit my stomach  
without consequence. Then  
I missed the nurse.

I did not miss violence, not passion.  
I still had those, if hidden.

Never longed for a moment to last.  
Never thought of the night  
your hand  
brought out the wet proof of my own life.

I was for the first time neutral,  
the only angel of wait,  
all the weeks one page  
I was graceful at turning. Will you ever open me  
the old way and not be wrecked,  
I did not expect to ever ask you.

## MARRIAGE

You want to know what I actually love?  
It is the mind I don't have access to  
Like a flower cut and placed on a kitchen table,  
Looking more like a human body than  
It could in the field with its kind. What does species matter,  
Things die please remind me  
When I say I don't feel anything, and then  
It is better for them to be broken down  
Again, a powder once fertile  
And original. Now  
In need of none of those powers.  
Let me try saying it again, I don't feel anything  
So something can die  
Further down, yes like that  
Like the last time I came across  
A flower that wasn't planted. We don't have to  
Make it actual, no more wild purpose of hands.

## THE ENORMOUS WOMAN

For as long as anyone can remember, an enormous woman has gathered kelp from the forest that grows along the coastal cliffs south of our town. She comes every morning from about six-thirty to seven to eat her breakfast of seaweed. Her hair is long and dark—the color of a sea lion—as is her skin. Though no one has seen below her belly button, her body appears well proportioned, but approximately twenty times larger than that of the average woman. She wears no clothes. No one disputes that she is attractive—some even call her stunning—but her beauty is diminished by her unnatural height.

While she has never walked past the breakwater, let alone onto shore, armed patrolmen monitor her movements from the cliffs, as do underwater drones with thermal-imaging cameras. Marine biologists have studied the data collected by these machines, marveling at the incredible distances she travels and the almost unfathomable depths to which she descends. No one knows where she comes from. Journalists have attempted to ask her from rented fishing boats, but she refuses to respond, or even look in their direction.

Occasionally, at sunset, you can see her black outline against the chemically pink sky.

We can only speculate how she spends the rest of her days, far away, in waters that are too deep to receive any light from the sun, light that the rest of us depend on.

TOMMY ARCHULETA

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## WATER BEING WATER

“...of the kind one finds on the page before the Bible begins.”

—Larry Levis

All of this  
underwater once    hard to picture

Harder still to recall the sound her wings made  
over those first few days  
that far underground (thank

you trauma    Ambien  
& Microsoft)

Then again every chemical  
induced spell even  
to a child feels like home eventually

∞

There you are    beginning & end  
One day here

The next there (by the by give  
my love to  
Gretta Garbo)

How clever    searching for mountain  
spring water  
while the devil plays sudoku

∞

Close by    gray wolves  
patrolling a ravine  
cut by the same rains that washed

away the Garden  
True    Adam never saw Eve's thing  
for snakes coming

Even closer father sleeptalking  
again the words  
this time coming

in bands of sevens  
& threes mostly  
Closer than death itself mother's

worn to hell Baltimore Catechism  
reeking still of the war  
to end all wars

MARY LYNN REED

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## LESBIAN MARRIAGE ON A SUNDAY IN MARCH, PANDEMIC MONTH 13

She baked cupcakes.

We cut each other's hair.

I made pizza, and iced the cupcakes.

She made a phone call to a friend whose mother just died.

I finished reading that Joan Didion essay about tripping acid in Haight-Ashbury, written in the year I was born.

## GRANITE

The old leather recliner sat in the corner under a single-bulb pole lamp. A prized comfort, in its day, yet by then, tattered and torn and too large for such a small room. The room was the apartment; the whole apartment was that room. Just two windows, chest-high. A basement studio, in a building built into a hill. The view was a jagged granite wall. No red clay in sight. But it was Atlanta. Midtown. If there was dirt to see, it would be red. But out the window, only stone.

She never lived there with me. She came around, all the time. Spent the night, more often than not. But it was my name on the lease, my hand-me-down furniture, my name on the mailbox in the lobby.

Decades later, she'll call it "our place." She'll try to possess even that — the memory.

He remembers the final day, but I don't. She met him outside, stood next to the granite wall and drove the final wedge between us. They never spoke again. And I, always caught between.

Time wears on, and the thing I remember most clearly is sitting in that comfortable old recliner, watching the street lights glimmer just beyond that menacing granite wall.

## CHICKEN

He heard it before he saw it: a rattling coming up behind the tree line and growing as it hit the ruts formed by a particularly hard winter. It reminded him of a long ago time when he had nothing except a rusted out truck and a restless willpower so tenacious it was almost feral. That's what had brought him here to interior Alaska, to this homestead—that truck combined with an animal persistence.

Although, he decided, maybe it had been animal fear. Because hadn't his arrival also involved a sudden leaving? He stood motionless considering the sound, an unsplit log in his hands. He had just been preparing to stand it up, divide it, bend and pick up the pieces.

He imagined it before he saw it too, and he saw his truck, the long ago thing from those vanished days, so that the sight of this other one at the top of the dirty driveway spoiled it all. A small thing rusting at the wheel wells, with a spider web crack through the windshield. Almost it, but not quite.

Michael remained still and the truck paused too, and he could just barely see the shape of a bearded young man in there with both hands on the wheel. He thought those two words, young man, with a casual dismissal, and then, as if one was the cause of the other, he's lost. People were always doing that out here. They'd get confused up in the hills while searching for someplace and decide Michael's driveway was a road despite the handmade sign saying no trespassers.

But the truck moved further toward him at walking speed.

That's when he put two and two together. It was Becca's ex.

This was not unexpected. Michael had heard about some of his exploits so he quickly called out. "Kevin, come out here now," more angrily than he would have liked. Kevin appeared in the doorway, shirtless and bewildered, emerging from the house as if from a cave. "Take the dogs inside now." Because Bug and Gretel and Chicken were all wandering around the property somewhere. Whenever Michael worked outside he left them to their own devices and they knew enough to stay close, orbiting him just outside his sight.

First Bug appeared from the side of the house, a husky with one blue eye and a tail severed in a battle with other sled dogs. Kevin opened the door to receive him. Then Gretel, part greyhound and part husky, food thief and ear biter, and Chicken in the rear, the short legged mutt, moving through the heavy snow in a dolphin motion, up and over, up and over.

"What's the matter?" Kevin asked.

"Nothing," Michael said. "Just keep them inside." And then, as an



afterthought, “You stay inside too unless I give you a yell.”

Compared to those rushing, exuberant dogs Kevin seemed impossibly slow, his eyes squinting in the sunshine, a thin naked chest, his back and shoulders dotted with pimples. Then he was gone and so was Michael’s embarrassment. The truck stood idling. The driver crawled from it with a fumbling, almost bashful step forward. “I own that one,” he said with a smile, and he pointed at the house where the dogs had run. It was spring, but it was still cold and the wood stove was burning inside. The dogs had probably already curled up in front of it like vassals at the feet of their king, each to their own usual position on the rug. Michael could see Kevin watching still from the window, just his head and shoulders, his expression blank and almost fish-like. What would it take to change that look?

“How has she been?” the kid asked.

Michael decided to stack the wood he had already split. It was a way to show casual disinterest. “She’s fine,” he said. “They get along really well together.”

Which was not exactly true. Gretel had been nipping Chicken’s extremities, producing delicate droplets of blood. Michael would kick them apart, then kneel and stroke Chicken’s ears, her neck, until some sort of happiness had been restored, some respect. Last week he had even begun letting her into the bed while the other two slept on the floor. There was room for her, room for them all, but Margaret didn’t like animals in the bed and he’d been trying to maintain civilization while she was gone. The first time he had patted the bed and told Chicken, “Come on, girl,” he had felt the joy people must feel when committing crimes. Judging from the dog’s scrambling, desperate leap, she must have felt it too.

The kid said, “I’m here to pick her up. Did Becca tell you? I spoke to her the other day. We made arrangements.”

“I’m sorry,” Michael said. “I don’t know anything about that.”

It was a more delicate job than it first might seem. You had to arrange the logs so their own weight held the pile together. He had almost three cords of wood running alongside the garage and along the back and it was becoming a work of art, an assertion of order in a confusing world. He had already decided it was not something this kid would appreciate. “I’d like to play with her,” he said. “If you let her out here you’ll see how crazy she is about me.” He smiled and made his voice into a keening high-pitched call, “Chicken. Chicken.” The words broke into three, four stuttering syllables, as if it were a song. “Chicken.

Chicken.”

Michael bent and grabbed three more logs. He could feel it in his lower back, but he bent through the pain and came up standing, facing the kid. “You can do that all you want,” he said, “but she doesn’t know how to open doors.” The kid looked at his boots and up again, at the house and then around at the long wall of logs. He seemed to be considering his next course of action, even though they both knew there was really only one choice: climb back into his rusted out truck and drive out of here back to whatever dry cabin he lived in. Then Kevin would come outside and ask, “What was all that about,” and Michael would answer, “Eh, nothing. It’s fine.”

Except the kid didn’t do that. He just kept standing there, as if he could wait the whole thing out. Michael half-expected more name calling. It had sounded ridiculous, funny, as if he were calling an actual chicken, and Michael sort of wanted him to start up again. He practically felt nostalgic for it, a thing that had happened just ten seconds before, but that was his mood lately: nostalgic. Everything seemed better even a minute ago, and the possibility of it returning seemed remote. Even the image of himself stacking wood with the dogs running free seemed incredibly far away, as far away as that long ago trip up the Alaskan Highway with a fourth dog, long dead, and three hundred dollars in the glove compartment. “I just can’t let you take her,” he finally said. “I’m not going to throw myself into the middle of this.”

“You are in the middle of it,” the kid said, and he bent over, his hands on his knees, and looked at the ground. A whine came into his voice as he added, “It’s my dog. She’s mine.”

Michael bent down and picked up more logs, moving in and out of the pain. Kevin would be this kid’s age in, what, three or four years?

“Listen,” Michael said. “You have to go. I know this is hard. But trust me, it’s better if you leave now.”

That seemed to get through. The kid looked like he had just received horrible, shocking news—a death in the family—but at least startled him into angry motion. He lurched back to the truck, revved the shuddering engine, and reversed up the driveway. When he was gone Michael expected his son to appear and complete the script, but he must have lost interest in watching the little drama and gone back to whatever he had been doing. And that made Michael more annoyed than he had been throughout the entire episode. It was not much to expect Kevin to watch, to judge, to acknowledge the importance of what had just happened and then talk about it afterward.

\* \* \* \* \*

The call from Becca came in three days later. Her voice sounded far away, tinny and small, and he imagined her on the bow of the ship with cold rain flying sideways against her shaking body. Why he imagined her in this kind of crisis when he knew she was warm and safe below deck mystified him, but he allowed himself the fantasy of her hardship matched against his own. “Hello?” he asked. “It’s difficult to hear. What did you say?”

His hands and forearms were covered in fish scales. He held the phone with a towel. He could hear some kind of clicking, voices in the background.

“Hello?”

She said something else, but her voice was enveloped in the clicking. Then it came back again, clear, as she finished up. “Fucking idiots.”

He laughed. He had met her last year at the Midnight Mine. Her second sentence had been, “Are you an asshole?” He remembered taking the question seriously and being unable to reply until two heartbeats later she had let him off the hook by adding, “You don’t look like one.”

He cupped a palm over one ear and tried to position the phone perfectly to the other. The drop sink was full of pinkish blood and he could smell salmon. “It’s going okay?” he asked.

“Yes,” she said. “Except we’re stuck.”

“Stuck,” he said.

Sometimes she had to repeat herself, but eventually he understood. Fishing boats had blocked the harbor, more than sixty of them, playing loud music from boom boxes through the night. It was a year after the big spill and fishing was still rough. People were angry. “Everybody’s drunk,” she said. “The guys in the fishing boats. The guys on the tanker. We’re just trying to stay out of the way.”

By ‘we’ she must have meant her and her partner. Since the spill in Valdez every tanker had at least two reps from the Environmental Protection Agency onboard monitoring safety procedures. It was a great job, a job Becca couldn’t turn down when it was offered to her, as it required no special education and paid well. All you really needed, Becca had explained to him over drinks, was a willingness to annoy people, and definitely had that.

“They’re drunk every night,” she said. “It’s like a cruise ship without the pool.”

It wasn't even that funny, but he couldn't help but laugh. She was saying something else, something about safety protocols, but he couldn't hear the details. "You're breaking up," he said.

Let's try next week," she said. And then, "Chicken."

"She's good," he said. "She's Chicken."

"She sure is," she said. And then more noise taking apart her laughter.

It was the first time he had smiled in days. He was still smiling when he hung up and Kevin came in. He scanned the fish guts spread across the counter with the same look he had cast on the incident a few days before—disinterest bordering on revulsion. "Was that mom?" he asked.

"Did it sound like I was talking to your mother?"

Michael didn't mean for his response come out so curt. He tried to keep smiling to take some of the edge off. "It was Becca," he added.

"Is she going to live here when she gets back?" Kevin asked.

Of course not, but he could see how Kevin might think that. She had already moved her dog in, right? Except that they were separated by fifteen years, about a hundred different personality traits. Michael considered her attractive, of course, but not in a way that had anything to do with him. It was Margaret he wanted back, and Kevin should have known that.

Except now that imagined life entered Michael's head as he split the fish with his filet knife. Kevin had put it there: dinner late at night, drinking too much, a near constant sense of thrilling unsteadiness, as if he were the one standing on the ship's bow. It was this imagining that sent him to the truck the next morning and down into town and up out of the valley into the hills opposite his house to the cabin. A crow could have flown across the valley in a straight line, but it took him almost an hour, and by the time the place came into view at the top of the ridge he had forgotten the little speech he had prepared in his head.

He knew why Margaret liked Becca's cabin: a bright blue tin roof, the romantic carnage of broken pallets and old dog houses, and the loft with a cracked skylight. Two weeks before he had helped her move some of her things in there, had sat on the floor and drank instant coffee when they were done and felt proud as he left, proud that he could still lift a heavy box of books, and especially of his grace in the face of calamity. Sitting there on the floor drinking from an old mug it had felt like a prelude to everything they already had experienced: love, marriage, a child. Like they were just starting out. It had taken real effort to stand and groan and wash his cup in the dirty basin in the dry sink. It was Becca's cup, with a bank's name on one side and a crack running down

from rim to bottom.

So returning seemed a defeat, and yet he found himself walking with the air of someone who belonged here, striding across the pallets making a walkway up to the cabin, steadying himself as they shifted to match his weight.

“Michael,” Margaret said, when she opened the door, like she had been expecting him. He could instantly smell something sweet. Cookies possibly. She wore a dirty white T-shirt, a shirt he had never seen before, and her hair was a mess. And there they were, the scratches on her face, three lines healing into a series of dotted scars. For a second he imagined another body up there in the loft with her, but he pushed the thought away and performed some mental gymnastics, trying hard to come up with a reason why he might be here. And there it was—that same wave of pride—because he thought of something that made perfect sense. “Some kid came out to the house,” he said. “Becca’s ex. He was trying to get Chicken back. We had words.”

“Of course you did,” she said.

“He might be back,” he said.

She turned to the oven and checked whatever was happening in there.

“I was wondering if maybe you could take the dog?” he finished.

“That stupid dog,” she said, but she was smiling. “Do you realize how annoyed I was that you told that woman you’d take care of it?”

“Becca,” he said.

“But sure, give it to me. I think I need the company.”

He wanted to say, if you want the company you could come back, but he smiled like he understood. And maybe he did understand. It could probably get really lonely out here as she pursued whatever soul searching she had to pursue. He glanced at the simple square table and chair. She would eat her meals there while looking out at the timber. Becca would have done that too, but the meal would have been different, of course. He glanced up at the open cabinets at the cans of tomato soup and chili. Those were hers.

“Let’s do it then,” he said.

“Great,” she said.

“Good,” he said.

They hovered there in the center of the room for a moment before he moved to the door, stopped, turned to her. “Kevin misses you,” he said.

\* \* \* \* \*

The kid returned exactly a week after he had first arrived, as if according to some schedule made from a hidden logic. Michael stood over another tree he had dragged up from the gulch and there it was, the sound again, and his own truck again, in his mind's eye, crossing the Yukon. That was 1971, more than twenty years ago, but he did not feel like he had changed all that much. The strongest parts of himself had just been distilled by the winters here, until he was, what exactly?

It seemed a question he should have asked Margaret when he had visited her that first time. He had been thinking about it the second time, when he had dropped off Chicken, but she had left a note for him explaining she had to go into town and she should just open the door and let the dog inside.

It had felt like a broken promise. But he let himself inside and stood in the middle of the cabin. It smelled of oranges, which must have been Rebecca's doing, and sure enough, there was a small pot of water and orange rinds on the stove. There must have been some other smell she had wanted to eradicate. He had to push himself to leave. Maybe the kid in the truck had fought the same battle and lost. Except, of course, that the kid was nothing like him. Kevin maybe.

"Hey there," the kid said as he climbed from the cab. This time his hair fell around his shoulders in a dirty cascade. Last time it must have been up in a bun. "I come bearing gifts." He slung the dog food from his shoulder—it was one of those oversized forty pound bags—and let it fall to the porch. "This is her favorite," he said. "Did Becca tell you?"

"She's not here," he said.

"I know she's not," the kid said.

"No," he said. "Not Becca. The dog. Chicken's not here."

What prevented him from just taking the food, smiling, saying thank you? Some dark arrow of intention he had no way of controlling except to aim it in this kid's general direction. He wanted to teach him a lesson, except that he didn't know exactly what that lesson might be, just that it would be a difficult one. He said, "She's staying with someone else now. You'll have to take it up with Becca."

"We don't talk anymore," the kid said.

"Exactly," Michael said. "I wonder why that is?"

"You could let me see her just now," he said. "Right out here."

"I told you," Michael said, but it came out wrong, as a kind of plea.

The kid didn't believe him. Why should he? He wanted to tell him that he missed her too, and so what? Everybody missed something and someone.

“If you let her out right now,” the kid said, “she’ll come running right to me like a bullet. Then you’ll see.”

Michael focused on the stories instead of the kid’s smiling face. Becca had told him he had been nasty. He imagined the yelling in that small cabin up on the hill. “If you had a sandwich in your hand she would,” he said.

Later that night Michael was in the garage pushing around a stack of old boards when Kevin found him. “Dad,” he said. “You’ve been out here for hours. Don’t you want to come inside?”

“I’m just trying to straighten all this out,” he said, but as he lifted himself from his work he realized he had just made a different sort of mess. His hands were cold and he could see his breath. He hadn’t even bothered to wear a coat. He felt like a man coming out of a trance as Kevin told him the time. It was getting dark and he could see a sliver of the moon through the wide open garage door as they stepped outside. Bug and Gretel following them, Bug watching with his single blue eye.

“I made dinner,” Kevin said.

That was a first. He sounded ashamed.

Which of course he was. Dinner was a way to make up for all that. Michael realized he still held a two-by-four in his hand. He turned and threw it across the garage in a long arcing toss. The sound reverberated against the concrete and made his son flinch. “What did you make?”

“Macaroni and cheese,” he said. “Instant.”

“Your mother would be proud,” Michael said.

He had meant it to sound sincere.

When he had first come to this spot in the hills he had stood out here beneath the stars and heard absolutely nothing. That had pleased him. No house then, not even the driveway, nothing except the water table beneath his feet and trail made by moose. He said, “When I saw your mother the other day she said she’d be back soon. I wouldn’t worry about it.”

That was assuming a lot: that they shared the same definition of the word soon, and that Kevin was worried. And she hadn’t said anything of the sort anyway. Michael reached out and touched Kevin’s arm and did not look because he didn’t want to see him flinch again. His son had thrown his boots on over bare feet and was wearing pajamas and he looked vaguely ridiculous, all gangly arms and bony elbows. Michael wondered exactly when his body had become this thing instead of the rounded shape he could remember laughing in the bathtub. And as he remembered this that other memory came sliding in behind it: his son,

this son, turning and striking his mother full in the face. Michael said, "I sort of always thought you'd end up living in this place when your mother and I are gone. It's a good place. But you probably want to get out of here, don't you?"

"I don't know," Kevin said.

"She misses you," he said. "She told me to tell you that." And they stood there in the silence for a while. From far away he thought he could hear something moving, and he wondered if the dogs had wandered off, but no, there they were, right by his hanging left hand.

He had held the cloth to her face and repeated the word accident in his head until he was actually speaking it. Saying this word erased the second punch following the first, and the fact that the first punch was not a punch at all, but an awkward clawing motion as Kevin turned over his chair and the computer screen went black.

Was he supposed to get angry? Was he supposed to show his son what a real punch looked like? He had wanted to, but only after the fact, days later as he ran through the accident in his head and decided on a better use of his time: turning two cords of wood into three.

He moved his hand up Kevin's arm to the back of his neck and held him there hard. He could feel his body tense and hunch. He thought of the pleading, not from Kevin, but from himself, as he repeated that word, accident, until he had convinced himself. He was just grabbing for her hand as she reached out. Because to say it wasn't an accident seemed an act of violence too, against the family and his part in it.

"Let's eat," he said.

\* \* \* \* \*

"Hello, stranger," he said when she called at the usual time.

"The party got a little out of hand," she said.

"Which party?"

"The never ending party," she said. "The one in the Valdez Narrows. It's laugh-a-minute out here. The coast guard has joined in."

"Are you still just observing?" he asked, "or are you joining in too?"

He thought of all those angry men and felt oddly jealous.

"In the party? A little bit. I have to admit it. It's hard work out here. You want to let loose some in the night. In the blockade? I wish. I'm way up here, and all those fishing boats are way down there. They like to scream up at us. You should hear the words they use."

He picked up the dog dish with his free hand and dropped it in the



sink. “Are you sure you’re okay?” he asked.

“I never said I was okay,” she said. “When did I say that?”

“Your ex has been trying to get on my good side,” he said.

“I didn’t know you had a good side,” she said.

He wasn’t in the mood. “I have a feeling he’s going to be back,” he said. It was the same thing he had told Margaret.

“Do not give him that dog,” she said.

As if he would even consider it. “Don’t worry about that,” he said. “She’s fine. She’s right here.”

But of course she wasn’t. He glanced where she might have been and the other two dogs looked back. They were waiting for some sign from him that he might let them outside or open the fridge or raise his voice to them and disperse them back to their corners.

She was still talking, but her voice had been chopped into parts and then it disintegrated completely and it seemed like she had never called at all. He thought about the two punches—what his mind had turned into the two punches—and he thought also of his own rushing forward through the doorway, following Margaret into the other room. She took her hand away to show him the blood and he wished she hadn’t done that, as if showing him that was an insult against him, a way of saying, look what you did.

He should have asked her, what do you mean? Except she hadn’t said anything. And then, as if as a reminder of the fallibility of his own willpower, it was there again, the sound of the truck, and he remembered that it was Sunday, and that the truck had come just a week before, a week before that. He imagined the kid losing his strength on those lazy days and giving in to temptation. He swung open the door and stepped outside just in time to see it appear.

It was a nice thought: that trouble came from outside instead of in. He was happy to see him lurch the truck to a stop and climb from the cab. “I told you,” Michael called. “She’s not here.”

“How about just for the night?” the kid said.

Michael didn’t look in the direction of the house, but he imagined the dogs in there, Kevin at the window again, watching it all play out. “Look,” he said. “Can I give you some advice?”

“I don’t want advice,” the kid said. “I just want my dog.”

If Kevin was watching this, would he see himself in this ridiculous drama? Michael couldn’t help himself. He was going to give this kid some words of wisdom, except that the words he wanted to say didn’t come out right, and he found himself trying to explain. “I’m trying to tell you,” he

was saying, “the dog’s not even here. She’s with my wife. It seemed like the right thing to do. I’ve been trying to do the right thing.”

He wished he knew the kid’s name. That would make it easier somehow. Maybe he was getting somewhere? It was hard to say. Maybe if Kevin was watching he would see them talking it out.

Except that as he was speaking he was also aware that Kevin might not be seeing that at all. Michael’s voice was loud. He was on the verge of yelling. And he had put his hand on the kid’s shoulder. He had meant it to be a friendly gesture, but now the grip had tightened.

And as this unfolded he thought of his son’s scratching, clawing motion, and his own strange embarrassment at its girlishness. The embarrassment returned in its weirdness and doubled and tripled in size and he was yanking on the kid’s shirt. “She doesn’t love you anymore,” he said.

“I just want my dog,” the kid said.

“I know,” he said, “you told me that,” and he gave him a shake, but instead of moving him to truck he was tugging him to the house. They were at the door and Michael swung it open. Bug and Gretel appeared, moving in circles around their legs, and followed them as they headed through the kitchen into the living room.

“Look for yourself,” Michael said.

That seemed to knock the wind out of him.

Except he did take a moment to glance around, a quick pivot that took in everything, twenty years of slowly acquired stuff. It was as if that was what he had wanted all along: to see, just for a moment, the evidence of Michael and Margaret’s long life together. Then he squared his shoulders and headed outside. Had he learned something?

Michael stood listening as the truck started up and the clattering sound grew distant. He glanced around at the place. In that corner, a bowl Margaret had made at a pottery class years ago holding a few desiccated oranges left over from her last grocery trip. In the other corner a crate of old cookbooks she had meant to bring to the transfer station, and the dogs still shaking with anticipation because they knew something important was happening. She had told him before she left she wanted two or three days. Even a single day would be good, A day by herself, she had said, to see what she might do when nobody was around.

Downstairs he found Kevin at his computer in the dark. He was smiling and typing in flurries of motion. Then he’d stop, his face lit by the screen, blanket thrown across the window. He was speaking to someone through his headset and sometimes he’d snicker and mumble. Spasms of

light and meaningless explosions and a window to one side scrolling with multicolored words. Finally, he raised his voice a little and said, “Did you kick his ass?”

\* \* \* \* \*

When she called again he asked her, “Are you okay?”

“I’m fine,” she said. “Really.” But her voice sounded even more distant. “We’re back to work.”

“Good,” he said.

“We’re just getting started,” she said, “and I’m ready to come home.”

“Yes,” he said.

“I miss you,” she said. “But I’m stuck.”

He didn’t know what to say to that.

“By the way,” she said. “Do you want to know what happened?”

“Tell me,” he said.

“First all the boys came to the bow of the boat. And they threw stuff down. I think they were improvising. First they started with the beer cans, but then they started throwing other things. Hammers flying through the air. I’ve never seen so many hammers and wrenches. Of course, the coast guard joined the party after that.” Sheets of static seemed to be rolling in from somewhere in the upper atmosphere. It was like listening to someone get swallowed up by insects.

“I’m going through a difficult time too,” he said.

She could hear her laughing through the noise. Twenty years ago he would have been one of those men, lifting a screw driver and sending it through the air and then losing track of it in the frenzy of other flying objects. It would have felt like a celebration, would probably still feel like that if he did it right now, if he were there with her up above everything. She was talking, but he couldn’t quite make it out. What did it feel like when she found herself surrounded by them all?

Without wood to split and stack he did not know what to do with whatever force resided in his chest and shoulders. This winter ending and he was already prepared for next. He was that kind of person, wasn’t he? The kind of person who knew what was coming and was ready for it. Except she had been gone for more than three weeks now and each day was a surprise. He was surprised by her and surprised by himself and surprised by Kevin when he entered and said, “Was that mom on the phone?” again with a sort of casual disinterest, as if she had been gone for a couple of hours.

What if it were? What would they be talking about?

Just that she loved him and that she would be back soon. But she might not. She was determined to get something right this time. He had not seen it before—that determination—but it must have always been there. He just hadn't noticed. Possibly that's what the kid had seen in the house, the traces of a secondary presence stronger than Michael's, and that's what had helped him give up. He had felt sorry for him. She said, "You're missing me too. Finally you admit it."

Later that night the cabin glowed in his high beams. In a moment she'd appear, shielding her eyes. He knew he was not exactly welcome, but she'd make room for him. The door would open and the dog would come charging across the sheet of ice. Imagining this made him feel as if he were returning home after a long time away. Except that the door did not open and the dog did not come and he had not been away for a long time. It only felt that way because of the passage of years. He could not escape the feeling that he had been tricked, that he had tricked himself.

He left his lights on and walked in their glare, small steps down the sloping ice. It was always this way in the evenings: the afternoon melt frozen to a hard sheen. But for some reason the small journey from his truck to the cabin window seemed especially precarious. Twice he stopped and looked back into the light coming from his truck and imagined someone behind the wheel staring at him. And then he was at the window, hands cupped to the glass, looking inside. Where was she? He thought he saw a shape moving in there. Then the barking started. He could hear the dog's body on the other side, scraping and climbing halfway up the door. The more he struggled with the doorknob—she had locked it this time—the louder the noise became, until it seemed he wasn't trying to get inside at all. He was just seeing what crazy noise they might make together. And then he fell away, breathing hard, while it continued on without him.

## IN WHICH WE GO TO THE FOREST

The light came in and carved the woods up. Quick slashes of wet gold light gutted the ground around us. The dark where tree shadows spat on the forest floor were like wedges for hiding in.

We were not scared. As we walked you put your hand behind my back because it felt really good there, and along the way we heard small animals skittering in the sky and the soil. Like us, the animals were gathering food and gathering home in the woods, and we felt very glad to share the space with our fellow finders. All the animals spoke to each other about the vast pale sky above them and the soft dark soil underneath them and the wet gold light splintering through it all.

You listened to the chatterings because you had a profound way of listening. The sparrows were nervous about the vast sky because it seemed very large today and they asked each other frantically *is the sky too large and will it snap from its starstrings?*

You told the sparrows *no the sky won't fall today* and the sparrows were wary and didn't believe you at first and asked *well how do you know*.

You told the sparrows that well you had tied up the starstrings yourself earlier this morning and I had helped a bit too and the string was very extra tough because we both had licked it after. The sparrows watched you thumpingly and then they knew that you were telling the truth and it would be okay.

Throughout this whole exchange I looked very fondly at you and you didn't notice because you were engaged in a meaningful conversation with your dear friends. I thought something very quietly in my head but did not say it out loud.

When the sparrows felt contented and less nervous they thanked you and you turned your face to me. In this turning, you stepped into a sun puddle that had trickled through the treetops.

The light found you and was so glad for it that it brightened, rinsing your jaw, dusting your eyebrows and pooling in the tiny bowl between your nose and top lip. The light was gleeful and danced to show it. You were also gleeful, the light warm on your face and the world warm in your chest. I felt so overtaken by the joy before me that I began to stumble but, breathing, steadied myself on one foot and stood there balancing for some time.

## TUMORS OF CHEESE

At the Paris Air B&B they brought in some wine and little round-shaped tumors of cheese, a late afternoon something they couldn't resist. Sweet little celestial orbs, she thought, trying not to remember the rattle of her mother's lungs or her final respirator. She tried not to think about the tumors her mother had been growing inside her like a garden of exotic mushrooms by the time they realized what was wrong.

She and Jack met on a vegetarian wine-lovers dating site not long after her mother died. In Paris most of the week they sat next to each other, eating bread and rock-hard yellow cheese off plastic plates and drinking red wine. She opened the window a crack and made a show of breathing in the outside air. She made a show of sucking it in. "Paris air," she said, "can you beat it?"

In the bathroom, with the door locked, letting the pee drip out, feeling it sting a bit, she thought about the uninhibited, very French sex she'd been having with Jack. She used to think businessy types like Jack were totally boorish. Now, she didn't care. Often, she got up in the middle of the night to heat water for tea, and forgot how to turn on the teapot. Somehow this excited her. Motherless, she had landed on the moon.

Oddly enough, the scent of Jack's semen reminded her of chicken broth, not the real kind her mother used to make, but the chemical stuff she bought in cubes at Safeway. Perhaps Jack was a secret carnivore. At the hospital, when she visited her mother, she'd caught the unlikely scent of chicken bones.

#

Somehow being in Paris with Jack made her eager to see the world new. Today they would visit the famous Paris zoo. Why not? It was as if in Paris she was able to value the love of a businessman, a species she hardly knew existed before. A species her mother had never trusted.

In the zoo, Jack led her from one imprisoned animal to another. Together, they whispered, deciding that zoos were immoral and should all be closed down and that it was wrong, wrong, wrong to imprison animals just so people could stare at them. Most of the smaller animals, the reptiles and the birds, seemed cooped up in glass boxes and aviaries. The larger animals disturbed her because of their eyes—eyes that let her know they knew she and Jack and the other people were there staring and that the animals had lost their freedom because of the human need to stare.

The apes filled her with a dread so deep she felt it seething in her bones. She could feel the apes' anger and shame meeting frustration. Of

all the animals, the apes resented human stares the most. Most of the males attempted to look away from her and the other humans, but one elderly female stood staring—staring at her. In that shared stare, they communicated nonverbally and what they communicated was how sorry she was and how wrong this was and that she was complicit and that they both knew. She was motherless, and this elderly female ape was a great grandmother and had been born in Africa. She was older than her mother had been when her mother died, full of tumors in a teaching hospital where medical professionals came from all over the state to study her and stare at her in the room with glass walls.

#

After the zoo, they had reservations at an infamous restaurant known for serving the tenderest freshest meat in the world. “Normally, I’m a vegetarian, but this is the one place I eat meat,” said Jack. “I only allow myself to eat meat here—nowhere else in the world. Indulge me?”

Any meat ordered at this infamous restaurant was slaughtered in the dining room, in front of you, beside your table, and then butchered and cooked in the kitchen with glass walls so that everyone could see.

“I don’t know if I can go through with this,” she whispered. “It’s the cruelest meat in the world.”

“No,” he said. “It’s not. Would it surprise you to know how many eggs you have eaten that have come from hens living in cages so small they can’t even spread their wings?”

What were the cruelest foods she had ever eaten? She wondered, what were the foods too cruel to eat? It wasn’t what she was about to order and eat. It was a chicken nugget, she realized, or a simple hotdog. How American of her to be judgmental of French food when what she had eaten all her life was so much crueler.

“How about a goose?” Jack asked, pointing to the description of the goose on the menu.

According to the description, the goose had been free range and fed well, organic. It had lived a good life on a beautiful little pond on a goose farm with its family who would walk and run and fly and swim freely in the water. She realized its meat would be delicious, healthy, and taste divine, but it broke her heart.

“A nice roast goose?” asked Jack.

“Very well,” she said.

When they ordered the goose, they waited ten minutes for the animal to be presented.

The goose was large and white and well cared for and beautiful.

The chef led it out into the dining room by pushing it on a little cart where the goose sat, pristine.

When the chef allowed her to approach the goose, she looked the goose in the eye and thanked it for feeding her and told the goose it was beautiful. The goose looked into her eyes and seemed to listen, as if tame.

Jack told the chef that the animal was perfect, and the chef slit the goose's throat in one swift smooth motion so the blood spurted onto the white cloth.



## NEANDERTHAL MAN

On Mom's first date with Dad they went to Coney Island. She wanted to go to see the Neanderthal Man exhibit and he didn't. They had their first fight on their first date, right there, she said, on the Coney Island Boardwalk. I can picture it so well. Mom's eyes became wild looking and very young when recalling it.

"He was already angry about everything," she said. "He didn't even like The Great Mondini's act." She said Dad perceived the great Mondini as nothing more than a con artist. She said that night he wouldn't speak to her just because she had clapped.

"Your dad hated successful people on sight. Plus, he believed he was a better magician."

"Did you ever actually get to see Neanderthal Man?" I asked.

"Only in my dreams," she smiled the smile of an old hussy, which made me squirm.

By the time they had me, Dad was a practicing magician, trying to make a name for himself. When I was born Mom said my head was too big, that I was trying to kill her already. Sometimes it seemed she hadn't forgiven me for being born or for my father's disappearance.

I told myself that I offered my mother morsels of joy, but that joy never became a main course in our house. I decided to run away at fourteen.

The week I left, I found Dad's original magic hat. It was crusty and it looked as if rats had bitten into the brim. I tried to orchestrate a magic show in the living room. That year I'd become pretty and a few boys at school called me "A la mode" as if I brought my own vanilla ice cream with me, as if I was an act worth paying for.

My devotion to my mother felt alien to me now. I imagined myself on a bus headed south, zooming away from a woman who still blamed me for my father's sudden disappearance. Judging me for something as harmless as the synthetic rabbit's foot I twirled around in my hands in order to get boys to follow me places. My magic was useless, but my twirl was mighty, you could say.

At night I'd imagine myself on a comfy Greyhound bus, a fixed smile on my face, a face like my mother's in those early photos of she and dad. I saw myself out of the box I was stuck in. I'd find my way to a city and get discovered.

When I finally found the courage to take that bus, I went to Coney Island. Finding the Wonder Wheel just as crowded as Luna Park, I stood in line to ride the Cyclone coaster.

Giddy after the ride, wandering the Boardwalk, I spotted signs for the Neanderthal Man. Before I found the exhibit, a sad old man stopped me, claiming to be a magician. “Can I show you a trick?” he asked. “One. Only one?”

“No,” I said. “I’m in a hurry to see the Neanderthal Man.”

“That exhibit has been closed for years,” he said. “I don’t why know they even keep out the old signs. Nostalgia, I guess. It’s gauche now to want to see him. He’s not just another street performer or circus side-show. Don’t you know? He’s an extinct species, an archaic human. Gone, an entire culture, an entire people, just disappeared.”

“And now the exhibit is gone?”

Maybe because the old magician could tell how disappointed I was, he asked, “Let me buy you a snow cone?”

I agreed, pouncing on the pleasure of blue and pink ice melting on my lips as I listened to his stories about the old exhibit where the Neanderthal Man was played by a real man with a hair system for his entire body.

“Why do you know so much about Neanderthal Man?” I asked.

“Would you believe that in a former life I used to be an anthropologist with a dual major in computational biology? I spent my youth searching for the Y chromosome of the Neanderthal man. It was so elusive that some people began to think he didn’t exist, though Neanderthal DNA is alive in some people even today.”

I licked my snow cone. “What does that mean?”

“People say Neanderthals went extinct because of sickness or climate change. They really went extinct because they made the mistake of mating with humans.”

“How would that make them disappear?” I asked, licking sweet indigo ice.

“Human males mating with female Neanderthals ended up erasing the Y chromosome of the Neanderthal in future generations, but if a human woman got pregnant by a Neanderthal man, her body would likely miscarry because the Neanderthal Y chromosome was harmful to humans. Or at least that’s the going theory. Anyway.”

“But why did the males disappear?” I asked. “Did the male Neanderthals stop mating with the female Neanderthals?”

“Over time, there were too few left because all the babies from male humans and female Neanderthals were all baby girls.”

Now I would have something to tell my mother about a real disappearing act to rival my father's. I could explain to her the way the Neanderthal man eventually disappeared into humanity, how human males were history's magicians making species disappear into women the way fathers sometimes disappeared from their daughters, though mothers tended to stay behind, becoming wild looking when recalling what would never be.

Thinking of Mother's eyes, I was staring down at my shoes and sucking on the last dregs of my snow cone. I was about to tell the old man what a gift he had given me by appearing at just the right time when I gazed up to look into his eyes to thank him and realized he was gone.

## KARENS

Like an old fat Elvis catching a young and gorgeous Elvis at a gathering of Elvis impersonators, we Karens of the past, present, and future meet in front of windows of vacant shops to gaze into the emptiness of each other's eyes until we summon you. You're Bloody Mary in mirrored glass disguising yourself as a creep making money by using images of the Hindenburg disaster. We're your Hindenburg. Capitalize on our tragedy.

Staring at four dudes crossing the street, we Karens are drinking something called bitches' brew when a legend unknown becomes one of my greatest pleasures—me. In my mind, I'm still a young woman who dances on beaches at night. My apartment is decorated with prints by Patrick Nagel. If you know me well enough, you get the irony. If you don't know me well enough, get the hell out of my apartment.

I'm haunted by the memory of blue butterfly tattoos on your arms when you ask if I've noticed all the portraits of me are of other women named Karen. Not knowing how to answer, I realize now is the time to transition into high concept, into brilliance, to get dumped by Johnny Cash, to be sweetly unassuming, to stare you down cold like a lake after an ice storm. If you're reading this, it's never too late to love me.

#

As a young girl, if you live with an artist in rooms of canvas, you begin to realize how quickly everything can turn to black. If you pose naked, your legs spread before the artist who is a man, you can feel his gaze worming inside you, trying to capture what he thinks of you when you close your eyes and find his art has tattooed everything. All over his walls, portraits of you naked and life-sized are displayed for friends and strangers. His world revolves around you until one day he takes a bucket of mars black and paints over your eyes, your nose, your face and neck, your hair, your hands and arms, your torso, your breasts and feet and legs, all buried under gloppy black paint because he said you turned his world into an old, aging Karen. Long after the artist has committed suicide, you walk through rooms displaying his paintings—canvases painted starless night, and you explain to everyone who visits they are looking at portraits of you.

#

A couple years before my father died, he drove me to a place he wanted

me to see. When we arrived, I asked, “What’s this place? Where are we?” My father asked, “Don’t you recognize it? It’s your hometown.” Stores with broken windows were boarded up with two-by-fours. Remnants of burnt cars littered nearly empty parking lots. Men with guns walked littered sidewalks while staring at us as if waiting for a fight. What happened here? I wondered. It was nothing like I remembered. It didn’t look like home. It didn’t even look like a town. Then I saw Main Street’s white-washed women, so many Karens staring out of vacant stores. “Take a good look around, Karen,” my father said, “because we aren’t coming back.”

#

At least I graduated high school, unlike my mother, who educated me by teaching me not to be like her—a drunk, sick, unemployed Karen. I used to tell her I was doing this to save money to go to college. I don’t say that now because I’m learning things I could never learn in any university. A famous professor pays me to release snakes into the room while he lays naked on the tile and calls me Karen as I shout obscenities at him. He pays me well and is satisfied afterwards.

Go ahead, call me Karen. I don’t care. It doesn’t faze me. I love snakes. There are so many sparkling garter snakes in New Orleans. Why bother with jewelry when you can wear snakes? Why bother with black lace when a snake is sexier? No matter what you call me, I still drink Magnolia wine on black-satin sheets. Sometimes snakes slither onto the bed and get stuck on satin, lacking traction. Snakes touch my skin. It’s smooth. Snakes touch my hair. It’s soft.

Un voeu: Whisper a name, any name. Call me Karen when you see the first snake and are terrified, tell me to go Medusa, go Karen, go Medusa, go Karen. Make it sound like a chant, a cheer, even though you’re calling me long after fear cracks your voice. No matter how many times you say Karen, no matter how you want me and my snakes gone, call me Karen when you mistake my garter snakes for garter belts. Whisper “Karen” when I wear garter snakes as garter belts. I have so many little snakes moving like memories of champagne sparkling like diamonds in my flute. I’m shivering in high heels because every night I don’t have any money, though I’m working every day.

#

The bills are late. The rent is due, and there's nothing in the bank because I just bought a new car—a Chevy. I paid sticker price, like a Karen. It will take me fifteen years to pay off in installments. The lights go out in the apartment because the city has cut off our power, again, but you and I keep gazing out the windows at the Chevy's sleek paint gleaming in streetlight. A thief named Karen drives the Chevy away. Picking up the phone to call the police, we realize the phone is cut off, too. Because we're both afraid of the police, I kiss you before I start to cry. We're dancing like Karens. I close my eyes to see a neutron bomb hit a neutron star.

ERIN MURPHY

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## TAXONOMIES: PAST/PRESENT/FUTURE TENSE

### I. Shadows

Lean companion strolling beside you  
on the beach. Alter ego. Body to the soul.  
The man who sold his shadow to the devil.  
Shadowless demons. Your twin crow.  
The shadow Peter Pan lost and Wendy  
reattached. The darkness that pools  
around statues celebrating our dark past.

### II. Spills

Milk, but don't cry over it. Black opal  
ooze of oil, birds trapped in slick  
straightjackets. What's the phrase  
for saying too much? Spilled his heart?  
No—as if truth is violence—spilled his guts.  
Guns kill 100 souls a day. We are all  
slipping on sidewalks thick with blood.

### III. Endings That Are Actually Beginnings

The last scene of *The Godfather*,  
when the closed door shows Michael's  
transformation into the boss. Cilantro  
that bolts mid-summer, leaving behind  
coriander seeds. False sunrise teasing  
the real thing. The man who knew your mom  
was pregnant and left. A knee on the neck.

TOMAŽ ŠALAMUN

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## YOUNG PEOPLE

*Translated from the Slovenian by Brian Henry*

O, people, the sky surely doesn't slip and creak.  
In winter, the snow creaks, the sky only shivers.  
Splashes. Birds are like velvet affixed to velvet.  
Vallejo developed a thesis on how to leap off the metro  
so the sidewalk doesn't ruin his heels. Did he drive his limbs farther  
than the rails? Would the sky unwind like a rope if  
we wound it like a rope around metaphors and lambs?  
Ok, let's say the sky will never get busy.  
But are people thus louder, quieter?  
Is this worker building the road being guided?  
And who are the whale, the dog, the cat? Glue for the young  
of the whale, the dog, and the cat? The skeleton of St. Augustine,  
just the colors of a patch? Young people wag again and again.  
Then they grow old and die and, whether they gaze  
at the wagging of the living or not, eventually only steal time from us.  
This desk would fall apart in every way if  
curious eyes crept into it like chisels.  
Time would stop being circular and they would bump into it,  
connected like an amen.



KLUTZES

*Translated from the Slovenian by Brian Henry*

A woman is howling like a dragon because I'm a poet. No wonder. Poetry is a sacred machine, the lackey of a faceless deity that kills on an assembly line. How many times I'd already be dead if I didn't have languor, calmness of spirit and arrogance in me, wiping out the wings with my instrumentation. Fly, fly forward, sacred object, *that's not me*, I'm reading *Delo* and drinking coffee with workers in blue jumpsuits. They also could kill themselves when they climb up poles and install electricity. Sometimes they really do. Poets kill themselves repeatedly. I was killed by too-strong words scrawled on a piece of paper, *my vocabulary did this to me*. But no one will tell me that these aren't klutzes. Klutzes are in all professions. Any pedestrian can kill himself if he doesn't know what a crosswalk is.

*Note: Delo is a Slovenian newspaper. The phrases in italics are in English in the original poem and have been italicized here to distinguish them from the other text in the poem.*

TOMAŽ ŠALAMUN

## FLOWERS' CLOTHING

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*Translated from the Slovenian by Brian Henry*

I saw a flower growing out of the sand.  
What does this flower signify?  
The flower had a saddle in it.  
What does this saddle signify?  
As I rode, the saddle fell off.  
The sea remained and on the walls, yellow noodles.  
Some curved, others broke in half,  
a shapeless yellow  
was seen through them.  
The water turned bloody.  
Leaves started to fall into it.  
When I smelled it,  
I knew it was laurel.  
I felt the ground beneath my toes.  
At first the ground was moving.  
It seemed like it had a corroded and hard back.  
I couldn't remember a turtle having a relief.  
The water was drained.  
Everything that floated in the water  
flew under me.  
But there was no ground.  
I walked over the vacant hardness.  
Far away a long wet broom was sliding across  
the horizon, I couldn't see if  
it was alive or not, if it was rolling up  
legs or fur, or was something only  
hanging from it and it wasn't a broom  
at all.  
Then we were all sucked into a soft substance,  
a boiling mirror, but it didn't burn.  
It was boiling only because it was  
liquid, not from  
heat, and it started to harden.  
I was up to my waist in the flower growing out of the sand  
and I knew immediately that now I could go  
anywhere else.

TOMAŽ ŠALAMUN

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## SPIRITUS MUNDI

*Translated from the Slovenian by Brian Henry*

Spiritus Mundi is  
a trunk that human feet also come from  
flashing like an erotic trick  
a Spiritus Mundi trick  
the belt is stuck to the hood  
of the car. I take a wiper and  
clean God's eye the yellow wound is not icy  
enough. I wandered in this dilemma for  
170 days before the act assembled a trench  
of sand. If anyone  
human sensed how all my  
deeds are counted, cold would  
flood him. The dilemma of  
prison was that it was my one  
genuine life. On day 171 I had no  
rights. I bent down and went back to  
work.

TOMAŽ ŠALAMUN

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## POPPY

*Translated from the Slovenian by Brian Henry*

Cover up the people when I step into the room.  
Throw blankets, tents and powdered milk on them.  
Bury them in the soil, I'm a hamster.  
Wrap them in gauze.

Draw crosses over their mouths.  
There's a fire in the Laurentian Library.  
Breathe bread and soil and rain,  
choke your children with the bran of oars.

My soul is a dark sleepless agave.  
A panther that breaks every cage.  
Because when I step over the stars, which are my  
work, white dust creaks under me.

TOMAŽ ŠALAMUN

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**VERGIL**

*Translated from the Slovenian by Brian Henry*

All this twinkling, bubbling, sticky sweet,  
soul-flowing decadent sorrel,  
love of pouring,  
snails set in the mouth, stuck to the heart,  
stupor of the marsh.  
Stupor of the swamp, swollen from the damp,  
from the damp and the heat of a soul longed for,  
squeezed by the realization—  
they didn't pull me out of Ljubljana  
like Caesar pulled you out of the province,  
Vergil.

I move quickly,  
compactly, the duke.  
Without sadness and evaporation.  
Your misfortune is  
that the barbarians were outside,  
Rome was empty.  
My luck is  
that the barbarians are inside the skin of America.  
I'm a Hittite.  
I don't pay, because I'm high.

MATTHEW COOPERMAN

---

## OF POSES

Viral migrations bedevil our sleep

We rise to raise a body flag    flown

Our town among the rushes    how it

Rushes darkness    the wheeling of stars

In the chittering dust    an aerial smallness

Scales our very hubris    surface    skin

Touches our wings    binds us awake

Enmeshed to what we cannot see

Surfactin    the two-brained logic of the lungs

Gyres and spikes in toes and kindness    principles

Go recognized and ignored    our demos breathing

Gets sticky    on all scales    things    wakes    up

For we can cast a form like a dandelion bloom

To heed a material blindness of the senses

—the commonest of poses

MATTHEW COOPERMAN

---

## WALL ODE

More such living mass come in than any single other try

The mass, I mean the people, where they come

And go a possible portal, chemical, reaction always

In their shoes, a quantity of cells, a process cleared

By HQ, and the gate—an arch—a kind entrance

Definitionally, an invitation, American experiments

In eye says I, what resides inside the door, why

The border is a breeder and a gateway not

A wall, the wall is hollowed empire lines

To unclimb, unladder, more a newfound

Trellis bloom than any single other try, mass

I mean the quantity, selves as cells, a you applied,

A many in the one, delivered skin enough for time,

Equal measure vessels come to brave us to the end

MATTHEW COOPERMAN

---

## AUTRE ROOT

—for *Wayne Dodd*

Why Is (and Is Not) was the conversation,  
the ethics of attention—a blooming rose gone quiet  
on the mantel, its very trace a path  
of least resistance (fragrance), the curves  
of the petal (sepal), bursting the smooth  
byways of the philtrum.

Vanish the rose, those Ohio hills, dales as  
nouns of rankest green and coal. Vanish, remake  
or replace. Things grow where they've fallen,  
a defined local. *Asimina Triloba*. It grows  
through the soil of what is (and is not) there.

It is (is it not?) bright autumn somewhere  
the interior light of flaming maples, ash  
(they are on fire), people (they are walking),  
a path of moranian ridges as pig iron shuttles  
to its car, a fatal attraction of uses  
these adjectives abjure. Why, gathering

(what would be species) evidence, do we fail?  
Filaments arise —“not the symbol but the scene  
this pavement leads / to roadsides—the finite,”  
but the conversation wanders, dispersion of fruits  
into signs, a slippage touching all the world.

Thicket bane and under story, naming this and this  
despite, a fragrance in the vowels, the route of all  
accruals. I will think on this as “our tales of wickedness,”  
attention a chorus, endogenous vow of words.



GARY JACKSON

---

## ORIGIN STORY

If I could take it back, trust that I would.  
I believe you when you tell me  
to go back where I came from. Oh,  
if I could. But I came from you, so let's not  
be mad that I'm always greeted by  
the murderers, the animal lovers  
who treat us like animals, the rally  
full of men demanding their country  
back. Let's start over—do right  
by me & I'll leave you alone. All I want  
is a little peace. Otherwise, I'm trouble  
you can't shake. Every day you say it's  
us or you. Don't worry, I know exactly  
what you mean. America, I mean  
to be your first and second plane.

GARY JACKSON

---

INTERVIEW FEATURING BOY IN WHEELCHAIR

Siri liked them white boys  
daddy would take vacuum cleaner hoses and hit her

mama picked up a glass ashtray and threw it at me

I was bad I admit that

I would put

mama's bra over my clothes and be outside playing and dancing  
people go by just laughing because I was real little,

I remember this other girl

wed go up and down the street and beg for candy

her brother would try to mess with me but he couldn't do  
much he had a broken leg

*You mean he broke it, or it was perpetually broken?*

he was in a wheelchair always trying to feel on me  
I wasn't nothing but seven then

*How old was he?*

he was a teenager

*Ah shit.*

see a lot of stuff could've happened to me  
that's why I liked to stay with grandma

we just attached to one another  
know what I mean she was a hard woman

I remember some things real good

you try not to remember shit  
but I remember

GARY JACKSON

---

## INTERVIEW FEATURING GUN & THREE DADDIES

you not supposed to give babies honey

we stayed down there a good while                      but after  
they tried to kill                      I said I ain't gonna be able to do it

*Wait, but      I was born in Kansas, right?*

yup

I got pregnant                      on my birthday

you was nine months later

always said mama's baby      daddy's maybe

*That was the last time I saw him?*

no

*Oh,    yeah,    LA*

that's when      he said get in the car  
he said      get in the car

I didn't know what the hell was going on  
I didn't see the gun

ya grandma Beverly had a hard life  
he seen her mother get killed,  
her daddy was real light

Carl's daddy  
was a Jackson  
he was a whatchacall them a bigamy bigamy

*Polygamist?*

polygamy whatever  
so Beverly gave Carl that name too see that's just like us we all like that

separated divorced  
married pregnant  
adopted

you know I  
just laugh

*(Laughter)*

that's how we came up

KIMBERLY ANN PRIEST

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## WRITTEN AFTER I TOLD A MAN I COULDN'T DATE HIM BECAUSE OF MY HIDDEN DISABILITY

A rusted bottle cap pokes up from the sand next to three dry leaves  
the color of dull lemons. The Wisconsin river  
smells of freshwater fish; I am happy with my life.

Rust pink, old broccoli green, silver ripples—the colors  
all around me—and the hum of traffic on a distant bridge. This place  
is for motorcyclists and hangovers, like the one I'm nursing now,

unintended from only two beers last night, a night I tried to be  
like all the others drinking beer and laughing,  
the woman next to me rubbing her tits up against a man's chest

because they are old friends in small town America and here,  
in these-friendly-sort-of-rural-islands,  
you can do things like that without consequence.

I lie on the blanket I spread over the sand, a book beside me—always  
a book, my lover of choice because I need someone understanding  
in my life who will carry on a long conversation.

I read each book I love all the way through, listening,  
asking questions, hoping the book will offer me something by way  
of a mental orgasm and stay with me for life

because I want to believe that I'm happy. I am.  
Freshwater fish stir the river lined by a rust-pink beach and trees  
that look like old broccoli. This is such

a small town—the kind you try to leave when you're young to find  
the guy you think you want to have. I did  
and this is the post-traumatized brain he gave me I explained to the man

at my table between beers and a few semi-honest laughs. My book  
is good, but not good enough to compete with this hangover,  
three dry leaves the color of lemons, a rusted bottle cap.

KIMBERLY ANN PRIEST

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## THE OPTIMIST CONTINUES TO CONSIDER THE WEATHER

The word *report* has many definitions,  
most of them formal, none of them conducive to the pajama pants  
she's wearing as she fills out yet another computer-generated questionnaire  
for work while considering how lucky she is to be comfortable today;

the window open slightly exchanging old winter air for spring air,  
a savory fifty-five degrees.

She warms her third cup of coffee in the microwave  
while flipping through selections of tea: mint mandarin, vanilla red chai,  
lotus flower Japanese green, lavender chamomile honey.

At 4 PM she will switch to wine.

The days are marked by frivolous choices.  
She listens to the same podcasts between 6 and 8 PM, fluffs the same pillows,  
writes the same lists that she may or may not need; anything  
to feel a clock ticking, the weather app still telling her when not to go outside  
without a hooded sweatshirt.

She chooses one of the nine in her closet like someone  
gone shopping, then walks the whole twelve blocks of the neighborhood  
around her, like someone exploring somewhere she has never been.

**SIMPLE**

(adj.) *guileless, innocent; honest, open, sincere; characterized by a lack of knowledge or education; not having or showing a high level of mental acuity; intellectually unsophisticated.*

**i.**

What everybody wants these days:  
a little ease and understanding,  
a guy speaking *good* words:  
simply amazing solutions  
for our fears, our yearning.  
A balm that builds a Chinese  
wall around our hearts,  
our minds of rammed earth,  
of 400,000 lives beginning  
at the First Pass Under Heaven  
ending at the Old Dragon's  
Head in the Sea,  
and despite what they say,  
*Wikipedia* confirms  
you can't see it from the moon  
based on the optics  
of resolving power.  
Yet, it stands like a fact  
stretched 10,000  
miles in our imagination,  
a monument *out of this world*

**ii.**

(n.) *Uncompounded or unmixed thing; a substance free from foreign elements, a medicine or the search for a cure. Archaic;*  
(v.) *To gather simples, medicinal herbs or plants. Archaic.*

Tricksome when used as noun  
or verb, not at all that simple.



Gather the cure while ye may  
for whatever disorder we imagine:  
fear's wilding tendrils, the ornamental  
multiple, the elaborate intellectual.  
Find the tonic towards the simple-toothed,  
simple-minded and simple-lettered.  
This pile and juke of meanings through  
the years, what we used to call *waffling*.

**SISTREN**

(n.) plural sisters. Archaic

A nunnery or brothel:  
of Mercy, of Charity,  
of the scabbard or bank;  
multiple suster,  
the Graces and Fates,  
a support step, palm's  
parallel to the lifeline,  
a sister child (also known  
as a nephew, a niece).

It's twisted, sister,  
how in the name of order,  
group erases group.  
Dismissed beyond the single,  
hemmed in, shamed by,  
we try to suss out  
isolation, discover  
what keeps Baby in the corner,  
in the tower, in that hut  
in a forest craving  
and luring alone,  
dreaming through Hollywood  
on a porch swing,  
by the man in the moon.  
We are the light  
of the hairbreadth  
and stone's throw,  
the bushel basket  
and deep hollow.  
In a word, power  
sundered. Which is  
to say, *modest*.

My dears  
and women,  
gals and ladies  
of the shared

night sweats  
and menses,  
birthing controls  
and canals,  
thoughts bodied  
so as not to forget  
what comes with this  
wisdom, a vision: visage  
of Uta Von Ballenstedt,  
bloodied heel  
and toe, too  
ugly, too beautiful,  
too simple, too  
wise, too old—  
division of us, sisters.

CAROLINE MAUN

---

## A FEELING HARD TO UNDERSTAND

What the dream did was show me  
the feeling I couldn't name was like  
my dog, in his every perfect detail,  
coming in the door with his front paw  
dangling, then falling on the floor.  
The red stump circled in soft fur,  
oozing, the leg near and still.  
He sits and asks all the questions  
with his eyes. The feeling is what's next,  
is there a clean cup I can put the leg in,  
and can I call someone, get him somewhere  
before another leg falls off, which it looks like  
it might do. In that world I can only fumble  
to react, knowing something central  
and hidden has tumbled, that trusting dog  
waiting to see what happens next  
and what am I going to do about it.

## EAGRE

Floss got so drunk that shift that she stopped in the middle of the walk from the kitchen to Table Seventeen and took a drink straight from Benjamin McCandless' girlfriend's martini instead of slowing her stride to let the mix of alcohol and oil, Grey Goose and olive juice, settle. She was the only bitch I ever met from Canada and I loved her.

When all the magnets fell off my refrigerator, I thought of Floss first.

IEMA reports stated that this would happen gradually. Not by fire or ice, but by warmth. The order of the universe would reveal itself incrementally. Once, on an over-booked New Year's Eve, I had felt Floss' cool hand touch me just above the elbow. Balanced on my heavy silver tray: two crystal tumblers of 1937 Glenfiddich and a single flute of Armand de Brignac Brute Rose. A ten thousand dollar round of drinks I was hustling—I had seven other tables waiting.

"Just so you know, you've only really got one customer tonight." She pointed to my shivering liquors. Fluid as light through tourmaline, gold and pink. "Fuck the tourists, you know?"

I took her advice.

That night, I made half a year's rent off the tip from Benjamin McCandless and the woman who we referred to as his girlfriend but only because we did not know what else to call her. Her name was Rosalba Bell. He called her Roz and she called him Gem. Without that tip, I wouldn't have survived. I'd have been bumped to the edges of the city where the rent was lower and there was no air conditioning, ice, or easily attainable aspirin. Where people cut eyeholes in dampened sheets if they had to leave their apartments. A joke on death, almost: a cartoon of a ghost.

Floss educated me on catastrophe economy. For example, contrary to popular opinion, it isn't the people with the most hustle or grit that will survive. It's not that cosmic.

It's the wealthy. They'll survive.

Floss was from Montreal, raised in a restaurant that practiced traditional European service. She'd read books in French about how to pour wine in the preferred manner. Ethan, the only barkeep I ever met who talked even more than the servers, told me she had taken a test that took three years to get the little silver pin that proved she was a sommelier.

(I'm not going to go on about the art of service. You can still find books about that in the abandoned bookshops—Wharton, James, Howells. That's the kind of information the old world put in ink. My point here is: they call it *waitstaff* for a reason.)

The magnets fell off the fridge—finally, catastrophe all at once and not degree by degree—and I knew the waiting part of the end of the world was over.

Originally, Floss was the one indebted to me. She called it friendship, of course, but her kindness was always just the interest off some random thing that happened one night in the back alley.

When I first started at La Prairie, they made me help the busboys haul the trash to the dumpster. They were trying to get me to quit.

We always waited until around 4:00 AM to do it because that was the coolest hour of the day. Also, there was an ordinance against rotting trash in the business district due to the increasing urban wildlife. In London, the red fox invaded sandwich shops and skyscrapers alike. Pre-dawn always seemed darker than any other part of the night to me. It *was* darker—solar storms IEMA had not yet told us existed were beginning to dim the moon.

I never found out why Floss was out there in the black heat of the alley that morning. First, I noticed that her face was contorted, her eyeliner decanting itself down her cheeks in wormy black rivulets. She wasn't making any noise. It was unnatural, but I didn't judge. My dad had once told me that no survivor acts like any other survivor, so I supposed the same went for the moment of not yet being a survivor. The moment where one is just a victim.

He was a cop. We were Catholic, I guess, but *spectacles, testicles, wallet, watch* wasn't my mnemonic for the Sign of the Cross. To me, it signified a series of defensive movements. Take out the eyes (spectacles), kneel the groin (testicles), get identification if you can (wallet), and then look around for other attackers (watch). Don't assume anyone is coming to help you. By the time I was ten, the police force still existed, but it no longer served the civilian population.

The person attacking Floss was swathed in strips of wet sheet, mummy-like. I couldn't see the face under the gas mask. A survivalist. They'd lost their minds first. The progeny of people who had built bunkers and bought bug out bags back in the late nineties. Y2K-ers, fifty years late. I'd heard they were kidnapping women to begin a human farm. By then, even the worst rumors bored me. I hadn't believed until I saw the zip tie handcuffs cinched around Floss's wrists, the numbered tag attached. Hard plastic, the kind that hangs off a sow's ear.

As I scrubbed the ocular fluid out from beneath my fingernails in the restaurant's industrial sink, Floss hovered by my side and thanked me through her hyperventilation.

Ultimately, the only person those handcuffs bound her to was me.

We never told anyone about it. The only point would have been to explain why we were suddenly friends. Nobody cared, though, that the beautiful Quebecer sommelier had befriended lake trash.

After the attack, Floss said something to the manager that got me off all the hard jobs—unclogging drains, bussing dishes, marrying the butters.

Really, I should never have been working at La Prairie to begin with—I was a rube from Arcade, a small town in western New York. A place more Lake Erie than Lake Michigan, if that means anything to you. I had never even seen the Atlantic from so much as a Jersey Pier Ferris Wheel.

I couldn't have identified an ocean note in a cocktail at gunpoint.

The job came to me as payment for a debt that was not even mine to collect.

Before Floss, I had no one in the world but my dad and so it was him who got me out of the west before the Great Lakes began to bubble and burp sulfur and other toxins that gnawed at the shore, an ulcer in the earth.

Everything came to the surface more quickly than we would have hoped.

Dad was reassigned. His copper and chrome Arcadian badge replaced by a tiny tube inserted behind the flap of his left ear that, when scanned, identified him as City of Buffalo—International Emergency Management Agent. He left for work in riot gear, but I believed him when he said his new job was mostly hauling sandbags, bringing jugs of water to disaster sites, and enforcing the new zoning laws.

“Paper work,” he explained. “Mostly a lot of paper work.”

When I say that everything came to the surface quickly, I don't just mean radium-rich gasses from the earth's core. No, if I think of the defining characteristic of the middle of the century, it's how transparent the precarious population became. Figuratively. (Literally, too—radium

poisoning made skin glimmer with a crystalline finish. The affected appeared translucent. They say those people still glow in their graves.) Some people became criminal almost overnight, as if the capacity had been fully formed yet dormant. A bear in the back of a cave, a parasite in a pillowcase. I admit a lot of people became heroes, too. But since I'm technically classified as one of those because of that night in the alley with Floss, I can tell you a heroic act feels just like a violent one until it's finished.

What the majority of the precarious did, though, was choose to get it over with. Pfizer engineered the first right to death prescription. They offered deep discounts to underserved populations.

The middleclass couldn't understand we were over. In the end—even though it was obviously really, really the end—those people still insisted on carving out a future for their children. What I'm saying is: they didn't want to give up their life insurance policies. The protective impulse of other people's parents is what ended up allowing my dad to save me.

Death by Cop was illegal for everyone, but it was a lot more illegal for the rich. IEMA reverted to old European law for its old European citizens and so the wealthy were heavily fined if immediate family suicided by law enforcement. They said it was to offset the insurance payouts, which made no real sense.

The incentive to persuade the firing officer not to file the incident was extremely high. My dad's price? The job for me at La Prairie. This probably seems like a shitty trade but you have to keep in mind that power was worth a lot more than money at that point. The provisional protection of an elite entity—an institution that catered to the sovereign—appreciated.

Money was like a weird kid's joke—an Uno card slipped in a game of Go Fish. Out of context, just paper we passed back and forth until death.

Everyone at La Prairie was cashing in some favor. Everyone except Floss. She was simply good at what she did.

“Do you know what the most important part of my job is?”

She had found me slumped in the wine refrigerator, my back to a few hundred thousand dollars worth of cave temperature cab sauv. The foreign bottles didn't mean anything to me except that my spine was cooling off and if my spine cooled off maybe I would stop shaking and maybe if I stopped shaking I would be able to go out and finish my shift without



splattering bouillabaisse. A hand at Table Nine had made its way up my skirt, puncturing the web of my pantyhose and jabbing into me bluntly, like a duck's beak or a traffic cone.

"Knowing the names of the wine." I answered dully. I really did think this was the most important part of Floss's job. I couldn't even pronounce the words on the bottles she hocked, let alone tell a customer if they tasted austere or angular, fleshy or flamboyant, mineral or unctuous.

"*Oui mais*," Floss often said one half of a sentence in her exaggerated French and the other half in her crass New York. "Mostly it's telling the customer to go to hell."

She hit the *H* in *hell* hard to counterbalance the erasure her natural accent threw over the letter. It made her sound like a Hollywood cowboy. Boots to the ground, but glittery.

"You've never told anyone to go to hell." I wasn't confident that was true. Floss got away with a lot.

She pursed her lips into a black kiss. Her lipstick was made from a reduction of blackberries, lard, and pectin. La Prairie's saucier had been a cosmetic chemist, back when that was a demand regular people had. Floss said it was a work-related necessity; she needed it to hide red wine stains.

"Well," she equivocated, "not so they knew I was doing it."

"Then what's the point?"

She studied me with a small frown, as if determining if this was a test even worth administering. "The point is that you get what you want."

"What if what I want is to tell them to go fuck themselves?"

"Then what?" she prompted.

I shrugged. Then I would be fired, then I would die.

"Feelings go away, *mon loup*," she tapped the center of my chest with two fingertips. Like I was a melon she was checking to see if it was ripe. "But hungry is forever."

I made to roll my eyes and leave, but Floss grabbed me suddenly, wrapping her long fingers around my jaw and forcing me to look her in the eye. I'd only seen people touch other people like that in movies. Mobster to wife, coach to athlete. The gesture was both violent and intimate. I could have gotten out of it if I wanted to, but I didn't.

"You just have to stay alive until it's time," she had said. "Then we'll tell them all to go to hell."

Time for what, she didn't say. I straightened my stockings and went back to my shift.

All night, Floss's breath-laden double L ricocheted through my head like a ring of bad crystal, a knife tapped too hard to the edge of a champagne flute. The announcement of a celebration with no guest of honor, an event with no occasion.

Life was like that then: post-circumstance, all pomp.

We started our shifts with a round of Who Cares while we folded linen napkins into abstract origami. We weren't allowed to make roses or swans because nobody wanted to remember those didn't exist anymore. Instead, we made cubes or pokey virus shapes.

The rules of Who Cares were simple. One of us said a sentence that began with, "Guess who's at Table One..." and then we described the customer. The other one then paused, leaned forward, and responded, theatrically, "*Who cares!*"

I drew out the O, Floss dug in on the A. The game began as a mockery of Ethan, who started conversations with remarks like, "Guess who I just made a G & T for?" He would answer himself in such a way that each word was exclamative: "Prince! Andrew! Of! Yugoslavia!"

I thought this was a form of perverted nostalgia—Ethan's way to act like the old world still mattered—but Floss told me gossip was actually a currency when used correctly.

Our manager despised Who Cares. He, like Ethan, acknowledged what Floss and me did not: La Prairie wasn't a restaurant, it was a living museum. Our whole *raison d'être*, as Ethan would say, was to preserve the past. At the end of the world, people had to stop fetishizing the future. Those left with enough cash to tend their obsessions insisted, instead, on ancient comforts: hierarchy, religion, alcohol.

But our manager hadn't been at the restaurant for a while. A week prior, I had watched him climb the ladder in the wine cave, take a dusted bottle from the highest shelf, and walk out the front door without wrapping himself in one of the lead-lined blankets we had all taken to wearing on the streets.

In his absence, Floss was de facto boss.

Under Floss's command, La Prairie's atmosphere shifted. Chef de-annexed the crystal punch bowl and placed it next to the wait station. Instead of pouring customer's undrunk liquor down the drain, we pooled it in the bowl and called it House Red. A discarded wine key was used

to scratch our initials into the bottoms of black coffee cups so we could drink throughout our shifts. Floss hired what she called new blood—a couple of refugees fleeing the Los Angeles wildfires. Pretty blond girls who giggled when they were happy and giggled when they were afraid. We stopped accepting reservations from anyone not in the old manager’s Black Book and Floss instructed us all to emote more, to amplify our joy even when there was none.

“Smile,” she said, scowling at the servers. Unnaturally, they did.

Even the sound of the restaurant changed. Before it was muffled, the thick white tablecloths like snow smothering the patter of footsteps. After, the ting of crystal tapping crystal, of hard-soled shoes hitting the cool kitchen tile, made me think of spring thaw back in Arcade, of lying in my bed and listening to the snow on the eaves melt erratically. Asymmetrical rain.

Where I came from, it had been a long time since even the water was quite right. There was a legend about the lake—about a powerful tide that could push against the current. A rich, mysterious influence possessing everything in its path.

Stronger than the moon, than the flow of nature.

The other big change after Floss took over was that I worked a lot less. She put the L.A. girls on my usual tables and I got put in the stockroom, where I mostly polished dinnerware, stuffed menus, and played Guess Who with Floss.

Under Floss’ watch, I folded the napkins into flop-eared bunnies. Halloween bats. Stars.

I’d gotten entitled to this routine, so I was irritated when Floss asked me to wait on Table Ten. I guess it had been about two months without a manager by that point.

Wordlessly, me and Floss had reached an agreement: she would protect me from whatever had happened that night at Table Nine and we would be square for the night I protected her in the alley. If Floss felt like she was breaking her end of the deal, she didn’t show it.

Regret, I think, is the emotion Floss was least addicted to.

Only Rosalba Bell sat at Table Ten that night.

She looked like a kindergarten teacher, but with more expensive skin. A haircut we would have compared to a porcupine back in Arcade

and no lipstick at all. At the sight of her, my body relaxed enough for my hands to tremble and I felt the bloody rush to the brain that comes from inhaling after you've held your breath for too long. I'd been scared, I guess, to go back into the dining room.

When I dropped my pen trying to take her order, Rosalba placed two fingertips to my hand. They were warm and weighted with diamonds.

"As in *Graham! Bell!*" Ethan had breathed into my ear the first night I saw Rosalba. I'd rolled my eyes at him, but now the information clicked differently. A last puzzle piece—a jagged eye or a window. An answer as opposed to an edge.

"Sit and chat," Rosalba commanded. She had the oddest accent. Hushed and Scottish but also trilled and vibrational. Brazilian, maybe.

I'd never sat at a customer's table before. I placed my hands between my knees and squeezed. Hard.

Rosalba looked at me for a few moments. *Gazed*, I thought. This is what it's like to be *gazed at*. She was as relaxed as if I were an inanimate object.

"Tell me about yourself," she said finally. "You're from the Dead Lakes?"

I flinched. The media had introduced this new name for the Great Lakes a few months ago, after the waters began to hiss like a teakettle and steam away.

"Arcade," I admitted.

"Beautiful country. I went to camp in that area once when I was about your age, I think. How old are you? Sixteen?"

"Until November," I amended absurdly. It was only March.

"Scorpio?"

"Yes!" I missed this the most. Astrolatry had disappeared with the stars.

"I could tell." She waved one hand in the space between our eyes. "Sex and death, right?"

"And the underworld." I wanted, suddenly, to impress her.

"And the underworld," she repeated. "Is that how you got here?"

She gestured around the fussy little room, the table topped with antique lace and patterned china. On one wall, a cuckoo clock hung. We both laughed absurdly.

Maybe I was a little drunk on House Red, but for some reason I found myself talking. All about my dad and the deal. Floss and the alley.

Or, maybe I was lonely.

She nodded conspiratorially, at one point ordering us a bottle of Lambic. It tasted like sour candy worms, movies in the old world.

“You know,” she said when I was done, “I was on my own when I was a girl, too. Before I met Gem, I was completely alone in the world.”

“You were?” My stomach was tight with carbonation and sugar.

“After my father died, I was sent away to a school where I didn’t know anyone. I lived there for two years. Until I was old enough to leave.”

“Did you like it?”

“Do you like it here?”

Again, we laughed and then I was telling her what I had not yet told even Floss. About how around Christmas I had gotten a package with my father’s badges and a check for the full amount of his life insurance policy. I kept the check in my wallet to look at my dad’s signature.

“Nobody knows but you,” I finished.

“Scorpios love secrets, don’t they?”

I’m not sure what I expected her to say. That she would adopt me? That she was so overcome with my plight that she would take me under her taupe-clad wing?

A Lambic headache was beginning to jab at my eyes. I was trying to stand, to leave, when Rosalba pulled out her phone and asked, “Can you keep another secret?”

The tiny screen projected a cosmos. A zodiacal wash of color.

“Some of the stars are still here.” She swiped through screens and screens of sky. Gem, she explained, had a telescope atop a skyscraper affixed with a beam so powerful it could see through the swathe of ash surrounding the world.

When the invitation to visit was extended to me later that week, I wasn’t surprised. Before I left that night she had touched my hand again, “Please—call me Roz.”

The restaurant got rowdier after the news of what we all knew already. Gem McCandless pulled Floss aside and made it official one Thursday night: the manager was dead.

There’s this idea that the end of the world is a sort of horrific party, a morbid bacchanal. But that isn’t the case. No one really knows when to start acting like the end is here. By the time you know—really know—there’s no time to revel. It’s not a tide turning, but a tide collapsing. The

closest I ever got to my imagination of an ending was in the final weeks I worked at La Prairie, awash in the sea change of a sea I'd never known.

The night I was scheduled to see the sky was the same night that Floss got so drunk everybody believed it when Ethan started the rumor that she had taken a swig from Mr. McCandless' martini. The gossip spread. By the time the first round of aperitifs came out of the kitchen, Chef had already spiked the House Red with an entire bottle of Don Julio. Everyone got wasted.

Only I stayed sober. Roz was coming to take me to the telescope soon.

Floss was coming, too. She didn't give a shit about astrology or astronomy, so I don't know why she was invited. There was just a sort of implicit knowledge that she was.

I was killing time until the night ended by arranging the magnets used to hold down orders into the crooked hook of Scorpius when Floss appeared at my elbow.

"Is it time to go?" I didn't try to keep the irritation out of my voice. I wanted Floss to know she was the hold up.

"Almost." Her breath smelled nostalgic. A breeze from a time when people thought they could cover up, could layer mint over alcohol and call it okay.

"You're wasted."

"Who cares?" A giggle that ended in a shrieking hiccup flopped from her mouth.

"What is wrong with you?" I finally turned to face her. "You're going to see the stars for probably the actual last time tonight and you're drunk? Don't you care about anything?"

I felt bad for saying it the instant I saw what Floss was holding. In one hand, the repurposed caviar pot she kept her kitchen lipstick in and in the other, my black coffee cup.

She held the cup out to me, almost shyly, "Margarita? It's real lime juice."

We had gotten a contraband shipment of citrus from one of Floss' sources earlier in the day. When I extended my hand to take the cup, we both looked too long at my cracked cuticles, gummy with blood. Scurvy.

"Here," she held the lipstick out. "Put some on before we go. It's an *occasion*."

At McCandless' loft it was difficult to track what everyone was laughing about.

Mostly, I was anxious about when to take my shoes off. Back in Arcade, the rudest thing you could do was track lake mud into someone's home. But there was no good time to unlace. Not in the lobby where a woman punched a gold keypad with an oxblood fingernail to permit us entry, not during the ninety flights up in the first elevator or in the two flights up in the second elevator, not in the glittering foyer the doors astonishingly opened directly into.

"Where did my shoes go?" I heard myself ask at some point. My feet were naked in someone's lap. No one answered me, but everyone was delighted by the question.

There was a bitter taste in my mouth: blackberry, bile, citrus. A mix of lime and lipstick.

"Floss?" There seemed to be so many people there. Roz and Gem, but also a uniformed woman who kept refilling glasses and a bartender and, at one point, a man in chef's whites who appeared with a small dish of something I wasn't offered. People kept cracking whatever was in it open like tiny skulls. Pistachios, possibly. "Where's Floss?"

Roz was staring at me intently, both her cool hands wrapped around my clenched fists. I stared at her thin fingers chunked with gems and thought *you're so shiny*. Like a giant fish. A shimmer.

She had been speaking very earnestly for some time. Something about how I reminded her of herself, something about Gem, something about his connections to Buffalo-IEMA. She was perched on the edge of a bed and I was sunk low in the deep pillows. Right before my father sent me to the city, something had disrupted the gravitational fields enough that the tides in the lake really did disrupt. He had forbidden me from swimming.

"There's no warning," he'd explained. "The water looks normal and then you just go right under."

Roz, I realized, was saying something about a favor.

"What favor?" I tried to ask, but I couldn't control how long the noises were coming out of my mouth nor could I manipulate the curve of my tongue or the shape of my lips.

I tried again. This time my voice was shrill, panicked. I meant to ask about the favor, but instead my mouth said, “Floss? Where’s Floss?”

And there she was, sitting right where Roz had been.

My left cheek stung. I had the feeling that everyone was angry with me.

“You had too much to drink,” Floss said. “Have this.”

The tepid coffee tasted of earth and acid. I pushed myself into a sitting position. A weird draft brushed over my stomach and breasts and I realized my clothes were gone.

Perhaps I vomited on myself. Perhaps an incident had occurred and my clothes were contaminated by radium.

Perhaps, I thought, we were going swimming.

Of the many thoughts I had, the truth wasn’t one of them.

“It isn’t a big deal.” Floss was telling a story about the L.A. girls. How Gem had gotten them out of the fires. “He helps lots of girls.”

I thought of Roz telling me she was completely alone in the world and then I had to know.

“Did he help you?”

Floss paused. I could tell from the sag of her lips that she was thinking of eliminating friction, of telling me what I wanted to hear.

In Arcade, years before the lake even started steaming, a group of boys had taken a boat out to the center of the water to see if they could touch the lowest point. The surface was dark, impossible to know just how far down you’d go. If I had not seen for myself, I wouldn’t have believed that one of them had actually done it.

I don’t remember that boy’s name, just that he showed us all the hand that touched the lake floor: scarred over, burnt so bad if he pressed his skin into ink, all he could make was a wet, black blotch. Printless.

Some Arcadians insisted on a lake monster rumor, vowing he’d encountered an aquatic cryptic. Others said it was the moon’s fault; that a boiling hot undercurrent had been drawn in by some strange gravity. A myth, either way.

Even with so much evidence, we wouldn’t imagine. Not if there was any better story we could spin, any possible misdirection.

“The water was so warm,” he had told us, his eyes drifting towards the beach. “Warm all the way down. It was a relief, to touch bottom.”



BRUCE COHEN

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## POSITIVE LIQUID

I know we are primarily water, evolved from water,  
& I'm reminded of such when my coffee starts gurgling, percolating,  
An opera singer drowning, the guttural loose phlegm in his lungs.

A plumber & apprentice pace my private property in this post-dawn. Laurel  
& Hardy. Frick & Frack. Abbott & Costello. Combing for the source of the leak,  
The overflow, like 19th century homesteaders pacing the North 40 with hazel wands

If one lives long enough, all of us, become comedic caricatures of ourselves,  
With cartoonish silent sidekicks. Of course, early herbalists poisoned  
Themselves before the observant documented which mushrooms the wildlife

Avoided. Think of knowledge this way: the doorbell rings & you can't  
Make it downstairs in time & feel a sense of, if not loss, something's missing,  
Or you stare into an empty mailbox, swipe your paw around that emptiness

To confirm the vacancy. You even open & close the door a few more  
Times because you can't completely believe that only emptiness exists.  
Here's the rub: people roll up towels & wedge them at the base of doors

To keep the smoke in, to keep the flood at bay, so the car's carbon monoxide  
Exhaust won't Genie in from the garage. I will never be a boy again said the boy  
After his mother's cremation. And I'll pretend I'm still alive whispered his mother

In the language of wind & ash. How many times, when your car doesn't turn over,  
Do you turn the ignition? Till the engine floods? Till you admit to yourself  
It's just plain dead? Do you deceive yourself or find the world incongruous?

Saturated? Like an illiterate bookmarking a page in his hardcover of Moby Dick,  
Or a sun-snow-shower in the Sonoran Desert, or fire station # 24 in flames  
& no hydrant, or a fat man carving a solitary M&M with a rubber knife & fork

In a child-miniature kitchen with a checkered napkin tucked in his collar,  
Squeezing into a tiny chair. But this pain's not even worth acknowledging,  
Like clipping a finger nail a millimeter too short so the cuticle bleeds

Ever so slightly as a delayed reaction. I've never gotten a shoeshine  
In an airport but think about it when faced with a delay or cancellation.  
An empty parking as opposed to a driverless car with an idling engine.

Would this people-less dilemma be my existential crisis?  
There will always be some hothead late for an appointment  
He's sure is vital to all humankind, brandishing a crowbar over his head

(He keeps stashed under his seat) as he screams at the meeker man  
(Now both outside their vehicles) pointing at newly dented fenders,  
Chipped paint & fractured headlights. Mosaics on the gravel road.

Life is a collage. Making the artistic from the accidental, the recently  
Destroyed, the unreparable. Only a forward-thinking genius  
Could have invented the concept of life insurance! The world cannot

Continue to exist without new thinking. So, a shy boy asks a girl for a light  
Instead of her phone number. She palms him her lit her cigarette to ignite his.  
A chain reaction begins. By the end of the cross-country flight a busybody

Knows the entire family history of the flight attendant. They swap phones numbers  
& promises. The man, now at the airport bar, fingers an ice cube from his gin with  
a hair in it.

His wife has been believing for half a century the diamond in her engagement ring

is authentic—an heirloom. What's the harm if one never discovers the truth?  
Isn't it relatively harmless, like a waitress saying the coffee *is* decaffeinated?  
Not life threatening like when the waiter says the Cheng Du Chicken was *not* stir-fried

In peanut oil. Sometimes when your own throat swells shut & you don't even know  
The cause. Sometimes a chicken bone gets caught in your windpipe. I once had  
A strange Thanksgiving in the desert where the host forgot to defrost the turkey.

He submerged the frozen bird in a bathtub filled with tepid water. You can't help  
thinking

About the metaphor of landlocked Salmon. What is your one unique, vowel-laden,  
Syllable you involuntarily blurt out from unexpected pain, when you stub your toe

In the dark? A half-naked college girl wraps herself in a top sheet before tiptoeing  
To the bathroom & guzzling from the faucet. No toilet paper & no flushing  
& she can't remember their name or gender or how she got there & now gimps  
back to bed.

A Japanese ramen joint where talking is prohibited. One must be comfortable  
With the communicative joyful sound of slurping the scolding broth. I couldn't have  
Survived childhood without my plastic Fort Apache, positioning the Soldiers & Sioux

For hours. I was always the Indians & the index-fingered battle lasted only seconds.  
Was that the perfect life-metaphor or a precursor to my life? Last winter, my friend  
Waded out, in his tuxedo, into the ocean. His beach private. Yes, I'm haunted by

That bathtub with a half-defrosted turkey, comforted by the welcoming gurgle  
Of pre-dawn coffee, water escaping down the drain. I think I'm less vulnerable  
Because I now reside in a rural place, but the Well (our only source of water)

Has "turned positive", overflowing on the lawn, making a small section absurdly  
Green, creating an impromptu birdbath which the sparrows have homesteaded,  
Who flutter & splash & sip, not omniscient or oblivious, just exceedingly happy.

LEILA CHATTI

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## **WATERCOLOR: DRIVING, AWAY**

The clouds lay their gray bellies low  
A peachy glow filters through  
In the fields, yellow  
along the top, incidental  
Green over green over green  
which becomes black, in slow degrees

LEILA CHATTI

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## NIGHT POEM

Violet mountain pressing up  
the night. Two lanes and the moon  
a distant bright. Miles  
of yellow stitch. No cows  
in sight. No anyone  
but each other.



SHARON DOLIN

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WHERE'S THE EDGE?

risk the border  
littoral space—neither  
land  
nor water

so easy to grandstand  
assume authority—a purchased  
view  
for what you don't understand

where's the line to cross / stew  
behind—like a tree on cliff edge  
cling to truth

you're on the wedge  
of spring, forsythias's yellow nerve  
its fledgling

yellow the color  
reserved  
for the news: to defame or proclaim  
or caution / this one word

lifts you off the frame

**4.18**

Winter then spring, and now, it is raining. For whatever reason, this comforts me—classification in the world of the ark is my own case of eclecticism before the jump. Now it is also raining in the book (the world's way of costuming me?). Have I achieved authority? My stomach is out of order and I am reading the end as slowly as possible—simultaneous with my world of attention. I adore a symmetrical fortress. Or any break in the clouds that gets in the way. Today, nobody wrote it down, and if it were really there, then I did not have perspective. I am tired of learning I am wrong. I have little doubt this is my broader tendency for one degree of removal from the present flow of events—



**4.13**

There's a deep lake between me.

4.14

I've written down the directions to the treasure using steps and I've included how long each step should be.

4.18

I don't even think it's a costume.

4.20

I'm undressed and about to take a shower when a person I don't know comes in and we talk about what we are going to do that evening.

4.22

Many events involve hospitals. Unsure if they were jumping to hurt themselves in the first place.

4.23

When I tried to find the stairs, I couldn't find them anymore and I was so worried about you.

4.24

I stay in a room upstairs and work on stenciling images of the people I admire onto my walls. Cars are crashing constantly. I keep getting emails offering me jobs.

BRITTANY TOMASELLI

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## ON THE FOURTH MORNING,

I had more or less dignity. They weren't sure about the people in the yellow house, red shutters. They had a dog and no leash. But while they were going through the gate, it was simple. Especially when I needed to finish the page. He perked up his head at the sound of a toaster oven: "ding". *The glass eels turn gold in the river.*

## JOHN SIBLEY WILLIAMS

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### SKY BURIAL

not so clean, this conversation between skins, between mine  
& yours, pulling a body open to let a little light in or leaving

the holes filled, scraps without ceremony. then there is bone.  
a white bouquet catching & holding some sun, nearly drowned

in all this red. on each page of this endlessly unread book,  
a horse dies. slaves are fed to the sea. young men armed

with flowers paint their pain all over the sidewalk. chalked  
figures like a list of forgotten names. ruined choirs. my mother

& whatever happens when you stop believing. in what, i guess,  
is the question these days. heaven's fine but what of breath's

tender geometries? the ladders unfurling up into broad empty skies?  
what of my children, whom the other children don't know how to classify?

a few trinkets boxed up & labeled & forgotten. daddy, what is home  
when home is everywhere? nowhere? every alphabet hurts a little, i reply.

paper misses its tree. history its lessons. my hands miss your hands  
missing their context. the world is all wolves & the wolves are beautiful

this time of year. from our bones: knives, flutes, delicate china. should we let  
the ruined stay ruined, i ask them. i'm sorry we still don't know how to read you.

# JOHN SIBLEY WILLIAMS

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## CODA

*minidoka manzanar kooskia harmony / sweet*  
rice balled into tiny fists / served on chipped porcelain

::

smuggled from one broken / home / to another /  
fallow fields / relentless hillocks / sky unburdened

::

by mercy / her sister too young to / know the world  
as more than / men & sunset & men & wound & a song

::

unchanged for six generations / imperfectly pure  
is what i mean / raw / as much arms as voice / as much

::

silence as candle / flickering still / what she lost  
in the camps she lost again today / a sickness

::

a mask & some good old boys sharpening  
their tongues on her / ninety-four-year-old

::

chipped porcelain skin / balled up into tiny  
fists / under her eyes a pair of long dark nights

::

dog howls / the same sweet sweet rice  
& a new kind of forgetting / less trauma

::

this time / less younger sister squirming  
silently in her own / ruined body / more

::

dementia maybe / or exhaustion / the last  
time we visited her / before the pandemic

::

my children saw so much of her face / in theirs /  
no self- / interrogation / no need for context / now

::

their board books alive in / swans & talking tigers & cherry  
blossoms / are chipped / untranslatable / all empty sky & mercy

GIA KELLIHER

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## POEM, OR MY CERTAINTY THAT DEATH IS A SWEDE

These whip wounds ooze proud, self-inflicted.  
Look, I've unplugged the drain.  
I beg the scalding pity of any deity that cares to listen  
No banquets or bouquets until I'm bled...  
Up, up lo' the pedestal sits the ghost of inclusion! Of  
Acceptance! Of Russia's single year of true communism.  
It hasn't begun, yet it is already over.  
We sit in that room and laugh and laugh  
And laugh and laugh and laugh  
And spin echoes into phrases into  
Incantations to coax some spirit in limbo—some meaning  
In flesh to this mad mad modern age.  
Laughter so desperate we're wet  
At the creases in our eyes.  
Crying, "Take me!" Take me flesh or take me death.  
Either will do but both is better.  
Looking through,  
Eyes wide, glazed, the insistence  
That our confessionals are oceans, not fields fallow.

How many time will we lay naked our perversions,  
Unmoor our secret shames,  
Let leak all the pus and filth and bad blood.  
When will we be empty?  
The empty that asks, "Fill me up?"  
Not this empty, this miserable feedback loop.  
This oroborus, this masochism.  
We feast on pulpy maggots,  
Pastries and soups of mold and mush.  
And glance away shy and wet and flushed,  
And we turn our heads and are struck  
By the Shadow in the corner of the room.  
Or worse, the lack of,  
That lack vows a round glass emptiness,  
Taunts,  
That there is an emptier yet.

A basin, a gouge, an endless deluge,

That washed naked the proclamations we'd made  
On the dining room chairs, wood rotting from the pretenses.  
The "woe is me, I'm a criminal, I'm a harlot,  
I'm a bastard child, I'm a blot of inadequacies.  
I'm beyond salvation but I'm winning over the jury."  
I'm a sinner! I'm a sinner! You cannot look away.  
We'll revel in the reeds, we'll turn Dionysis dark,  
We'll swallow zoloft and shit wine and whatever is said  
To raise the tides for the shipyard of anchors that  
Tether our restless minds.

Shower me in roses, I'm broken! I'm in love!  
I fear I'll lose one if  
I give myself over to the other.  
Broken? Broken! I refuse to be fixed!  
Let me up on the chair!  
Scatter me, I'm in pieces, I am a many, I am disunity and discord  
I am the deluge, the reckoning. I am cresting the foamy head of each  
Angry, miserable wave.  
I am in love, I am fucking ceaseless, I am fucking ceaselessly.  
I am full of feeling when this damp speaks His name.  
God: you son of a bitch,  
Why have you given me want and chained it to guilt?  
Why have you given me love and chained it to mistrust?  
I want, I want, I want, I will never cease.

MARY LEAUNA CHRISTENSEN

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## MULTIPLICITY

Though you are no longer here I dream of invasive species my mouth wild blackberry  
my words bramble how hard it is to say anything at all kudzu blankets my family  
cemetery the ground has eroded & you were not there when we last opened it no  
hand in my hand how the casket sleeps in a vault to keep the mountainside stable  
how I am unstable my bones mollusks & ivy places you used to touch I picture  
myself widow alone in my thoughts loud as woodwasps how the only things alive  
in me are snakehead fish caught in the estuary of my body how they can breathe on  
land how they only want to be born



MARY LEAUNA CHRISTENSEN

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**IN WHICH A COINCIDENCE MAY BE MEANINGFUL**

My mother says there is a portal in my backyard but the only word I can think of is synchronicity all these events linked together but not linked together how every time I look at a clock it is 11:11 and I have begun to fear numbers because what do they really mean when the last time I spoke to you a cardinal's wingtip swept my face to nestle in a bush an arm's reach away *brave* I deemed that bird and since then I have learned they are harbingers small carriers flitting between a here and a not here during each of my mother's miscarriages a dragonfly hovered too long near her torso how I know my body has lost things I refuse to admit alone now at night I coax the dog from the yard and refuse to look behind me in case something is there a shimmering of occurrence

KAREN KEVORKIAN

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## IN NERO'S HOUSE

The next emperor fills in its space with rubble  
building over it  
the archaeologist adding an extra syllable to the ends of words –  
we do not know-ah, whether Nero lived here-ah  
preacher cadence in cometoJesus flight  
cavelike halls and faded frescoes near the ceiling  
the everpresent winged Victories

with virtual reality goggles we imagined  
a sloping lawn, fountains, a distant smooth lake

dinner wine and little knots of bread  
how had we met, a party, instant, I said, yes, he said,  
with ups and downs, the others laughing, yes,  
ups and downs

JIM DANIELS

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## CRIMINAL MINE

The one time I had a gun pointed  
at my head, I had little to say. The guy  
didn't look like a marksman, all jittery  
like the gun had a propeller

but I didn't tell him that.  
Forgive me this late turn toward  
innocence. Maybe someday forgetting  
will be effortless. In that convenience store

I wanted to ask if the gun was loaded.  
That question still causes inconvenient  
silences. I still smell the worn tiles,  
the streak of dirt from when I'd mopped

sloppy, right before closing. I closed  
my eyes as I was told, lying down  
as instructed, behind the counter. He was  
unhappy with me. He'd thought there'd be

more. We always do, I might have said  
now. I counted to ten, as instructed, hoping it  
would not be to infinity. He ran out the door,  
and dry silent fear lingered like the damp

smell of old footsteps. When I finally got  
to my feet, I found my hands back  
in the air, quivering their *I don't want  
to die* wave. If you want to see it,

I have it memorized.

## CITY OF THE FUTURE

They're still working on our rooms, making room for everything we need room for, sometimes I think we're here before we're supposed to be, or before we need to be, as if every room is a waiting room with the standard four doors, two in the front and two in the back, and we're waiting for the doors to open. The walls are soft as frankfurters, nourishing but not very solid, there isn't a seam where it all comes together along the seam. When you pass somebody you say *not right now*, there isn't time, not even hurrying—it takes too much time. They're trying to be accommodating, they want everything to be the way we like it, they'd like our rooms to be the way we like them, how do they know what we like? Do they know what we're like? We're still unpacking, taking things out, it's not a concert where you know in advance what you're supposed to pay attention to, nobody's asking us where we were before or what we're doing here, or how much time we have. When we turn around there's nothing to see, nothing at all—is it possible to be in front of something that isn't even behind you? Waiting for the doors to open, as in a dispensary: as long as you're waiting you can watch a program while you're waiting, or see your friends while you're waiting, or have sex while you're waiting, or is this what you're waiting for? Of course it's often better to think about things that haven't even happened, better to wait for something that happens after something else is happening, as if the interior is the residual, inside what it's not outside of. Only tour guides have something definite in mind from the outset. We almost always enter from the rear, it's just the way we are, starting at the back and moving up to the front, as if we need to catch up, to what, to what's ahead of us, it's not the kind of completeness you don't even need to pay attention to.

## CITY OF CHANGE

There's room for everyone, as in an album you add pages to, we often change places with each other to see what it's like, moving around until we're in a place somebody else was in—as long as it's different it doesn't matter if it's not the same, you actually expect it to be different, and if it's not it's about to be, the way one page isn't that different from the next until you start reading. On the map there's a tear from being opened and closed so often, there isn't any special lighting, such as flood lighting or accent lighting, we're not even buying subscriptions. Sometimes I think it's better not to dislike anything, the way a saddle is something you sit on and slip off of. We often sit down together, showing each other how something isn't the same or how things that seem to be different are the same, pressing against each other in order to feel the pressure, isn't this what love requires? It's true, there's a lot of turnover, turning to the side or turning away, going both ways like a kind of arbitrage—we're not thinking *this is it*, or *this is all there is*, like a documentary where you find out everything about yourself. When you try something on of course you want somebody to tell you what it looks like, and how you're going to like it, if you think of it as a composition it's practically all development. Isn't love what we're moving toward when we're moving away from everything else? Sometimes we switch sides to find a position we're comfortable in, or turn over to see what it's like on the top or the bottom—of course, you expect it to be different, is it different from what you expected? There are also times when it's difficult to change at the same time it's difficult to stay the same, this is just an example, there are plenty of others.

JOSE HERNANDEZ DIAZ

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## EL CUMPLEAÑOS

A man threw his television into the ocean. It was his birthday. His cumpleaños. Then he threw a pair of Converse tennis shoes from his childhood into the ocean. It was his 31st birthday. The man reached into his pockets and found a pen his father had given him last year on his birthday. He threw it into the ocean, too. The clouds began to roar. The man dove into the water and searched for his things. He wasn't going mad. He was just bad at letting things go. Into the ocean. On his cumpleaños.

ANN ANDERSON EVANS

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**REVIEW OF *THE GOSPEL ACCORDING TO H. L. HIX***

Reading *The Gospel, According to H. L. Hix* is a profoundly personal experience. Much will depend on whether the reader is Christian, and what kind of Christian, or someone to whom Jesus is not a central figure in their culture and belief.

Hix draws on an array of sources to provide context and a new perspective on the life of Jesus, resulting in a disorienting and sometimes heretical tale. The parables, miracles, characters, and historical facts are familiar, but details from sources outside the Bible will challenge the conclusions or opinions drawn from them.

Anyone who has spent a Christmas in Jerusalem knows that what we celebrate as Christmas bears no resemblance to the Jerusalem and Bethlehem that famous art works and our classic Christmas carols depict. Today's Jesus is all things to all people. He crosses the Jordan River to campground, wilts on the cross, or is the rousing spirit of the Hallelujah Chorus. The sparseness of fact in the Bible allows each worshipper, artist, or scholar to fill in the empty spaces.

The New Testament itself is a compilation of writings chosen many centuries after Jesus's crucifixion, and the familiar King James version is just that, a version.

Flowing poetic line is often sacrificed to make an intellectual point. When Martha tells Jesus that her brother Lazarus has died, she says, "Boss, if you'd been here, my brother wouldn't have died," and Jesus says, "Your brother will stand back up" which lacks the sonority of "Your brother will rise again." "I am the resurrection and the life," is translated, "I am the standing up and the life," a more ordinary interpretation. *Lord* is translated as *boss*; *heaven is in the skies*, and there are several words of which the meaning remains unclear to this reader, two of them being *breath* and *visitant*.

Under even the most concrete words such as *oak* or *table*, there are layers of meaning. The Greek word *kirios* was translated in King James's time as *lord*, a word having connotations of nobility that don't exist today. Hix's chosen translation *boss* carries its own freight; for example, a Black man calling a White man *boss* would carry a weighty extra layer of meaning in today's America. Jesus spoke Aramaic, not Greek, the language in which the New Testament was written, so there's another linguistic puzzle: Aramaic to Greek to Old English to Modern English. Certain linguistic assumptions are required, and Hix has done his best to bring

the reader close to the original meaning. Dialects related to Aramaic are still spoken in the Middle East, but they are even farther removed from Jesus's language than Chaucer's words are from modern English.

Hix's most jarring linguistic innovation is treating Jesus as inter-gender. He contends that a holy, even godlike, figure such as Jesus is meant to be a universal icon and whoever you are, however you identify, the words and acts of Jesus apply to you. He uses the pronouns *xe*, *xer*, *xers*, *xon* instead of *son*, also *fother* and *mather*. The intellectual argument is evident—Jesus rejected the boundaries that confined cultural thinking, even the boundary between life and death, still, my sensibilities were jangled. Every time I saw *xe* instead of *he*, I had to think twice, and that is the point.

The New Testament provides a skeletal outline of Jesus's life, but leaves out critical information. Jesus's radical compassion becomes more understandable, for example, after learning that Joseph, who raised him, was known for his charitable works and universal good will, and his mother Mary was born holy and performed miracles even as a child. No surprise that the person they raised turned out as he did. And the details of Mary's arriving in Joseph's household reveal the culture they were living in.

Mary, Joseph, the Wise Men, the healings, the promise of salvation, the Beatitudes, and so on, are garnished with other stories which give far wider context. Mr. Hix is not afraid to introduce versions of the Jesus story that are unfriendly to the canon. Jesus was born in a cave, not a manger (though what the heck is a manger? Have you ever seen one?) The Wise Men arrived when Jesus was two years old. Our version of Jesus is like the game of Telephone, where the story is elaborated upon, condensed, and interpreted as it goes around the table, and this story went around the table for a few centuries before it coalesced into the Bible.

Jesus is not presented as the sweet, half-smiling character so familiar in Western art. He's rough, with a volatile temper. At one point, Jesus "was walking through town and a boy running by bumped against *xer* shoulder. Irritated, Jesus said to him, You won't run on this street anymore. Immediately, the child dropped dead." The people in the town where he killed the child tell him to get the hell out of there, and Jesus responds by blinding them. This dude doesn't fool around. He shouts at people, hits them, confronts, and offends them.

Jesus is unsparing, saying, "I have come from above to provoke..." To his potential disciples (Hix calls them *apprentices* or *envoys*), he says "Unless you lose the world, you will not find the realm," forbidding them



to return to their families, even to bury their dead, instructing them to keep nothing, not even a walking stick. Buddhist teachings also instruct that all suffering is caused by attachment, thus all human and material ties must be jettisoned. Like mendicant Buddhist monks, Jesus's *apprentices* are instructed to depend on the goodness of ordinary citizens for their food.

He makes promises. "Whoever drinks from my mouth will become like me. I will become that person, and the hidden things will be revealed to that person." Unless such a heady promise were attached to an uncompromising, blunt command to leave all attachments behind, it might be flaccid, but this Jesus is far from weak. Yes, you can have all the good stuff, but you bloody well better be ready to deal with the consequences of having it. He demands obedience.

Sometimes small details convey a sweeping meaning. Jesus goes to Capernaum and a huge crowd gathers. Four people arrive carrying a paralyzed man on a stretcher and when they are unable to get through the crowd, "they took to the roof, creating an opening through which they let the stretcher down." A familiar healing story takes on piquant extra meaning with that detail. Seeing such fanaticism on the part of Jesus's followers, it's no wonder that Herod and the Pharisees were worried.

Every page reveals a Jesus who does not win by humility, but by blunt honesty, muscular (even physical) confrontation, and uncompromising confidence. The magic is there: water to wine, death to life, sickness to health, so Hix's version does not sidestep the necessity of faith. Faith in the word is the only way to eternal life—Christian doctrine is consistent.

Jesus is also a skillful manager. He delegates, sending his *envoys*, into communities before he arrives, warming up the crowd. He also asks them to spread the word in places where he cannot or doesn't want to go. He says, "When they persecute you in this city, migrate to that." Run toward the danger.

This Jesus is exciting, galvanizing, real. He may love the wrongdoer but if that person doesn't get off his ass and change his ways, Jesus will leave him in the dust. "Don't think I've come to bring peace to the earth; I have come to bring not peace but a sword.... One who loves father or mother more than me is not worthy... Death and life are offered everyone; the one they want, they choose." Tough love.

Did you know that Jesus had a sense of humor? In response to a complaint that he's not paying his taxes, Jesus tells his *apprentices* to "go to the sea, and toss in a hook. In the mouth of the first fish you catch, you'll find a coin; take it to them as the tax for you and me." Haha.

The first section of the book, Jesus's birth and family, contains new information. The meaty part of the book contains enhanced versions of the familiar healings, parables, and history. The final section, the fleshed-out story of Jesus's predicted death, of his grief, apostasy, and power has suspense and pathos. As the story progresses, he becomes more blunt and demanding—believe in me or forego everlasting life. Period. He speaks in *koans*, confusing opposites. The scene of Lazarus emerging from his grave is a dramatic ghost story. “The dead man came out, his feet and hands wound with rags and his face covered with a cloth”—a Frankenstein-like image.

The tale intensifies as Jesus again and again eludes arrest, while knowing he will soon be killed. Martin Luther King's speech predicted his death, too, and re-hearing his speech the night before he died adds the same kind of pathos and power to his suffering.

As his pursuers come ever closer, Jesus and his followers sing and dance, assume disguises, and move to a new place every day, but their courage flags, their unity dissipates, and Jesus is captured, tried, tortured, and crucified. Most Westerners know that story, but here we get to know Judas, Peter, Pilate, and Mary better. The story becomes more relevant to the modern world; we know people like them.

The details confirming that Jesus was Jewish are sprinkled throughout. Dietary laws, observing the Sabbath, the prophesies of the Old Testament, and so on, provide the common ground upon which the people around Jesus meet.

Reaction to this book will tailor itself to the upbringing and beliefs of each reader, but it is unlikely that any reader will remain unchanged after reading it.

The magic—healings, mind reading, foretelling of the future—remains a mystery to be digested by each reader. There are many contradictions of the modern version of Christianity. Male and female are of equal value, Jesus drinks wine (raised a Christian Scientist, this fact again struck me, as Christian Science demands abstinence from liquor while otherwise following the words of Jesus), loses his temper, has siblings, mentions gender dysphoria, and trashes the authorities (with the exception of the *fother*). A person of faith will probably already have made peace with these contradictions; for all others, it doesn't make any more difference than whether they believe them any more than if they believe Scylla and Charybdis or the monster in Beowulf were real. However the story is parsed on a religious level, the charisma, intelligence, humor, courage, and power of Hix's Jesus is unforgettable.

**STEPPING INTO A THRESHOLD: HENRI COLE'S  
*BLIZZARD***

We admire and write poetry for many reasons, one being the poet's ability to get away with a vague *this*, a *this* without a noun, a *this* that can hold its own in a sentence. In his newest book of poetry, *Blizzard*, published by Farrar, Straus, & Giroux in 2020, Henri Cole takes this liberty in the very first poem, "Face of a Bee." In this contemporary sonnet, Cole does what we all do, often without any thought. He waves his arms at a bee. To the bee (and indirectly to us), he writes, "No one / is truly the owner of his instincts, / but controlling them—this is civilization." Cole must add, "I thank my mother and father for this" (3).

The impatient reader assumes that Cole's vague "this" isn't vague. "This," in both instances, means control over one's instincts, a power only humans possess. The patient reader fights back, arguing that vagueness is at the heart of Cole's observation. We, alongside Cole, are to ask ourselves what is *this*; what is civilization, beyond an ability to control one's instincts? Is civilization the distinction between what is human and what is wild? Is civilization represented somehow in the fixed form of the sonnet? Is civilization our way of life as it's defined by cultural institutions? When we say "this is civilization," what is *this*? According to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, the pronoun *this* indicates "a thing or person present or near (especially in space or time, or ideally in thought esp. as having just been mentioned and thus being present to the mind)." Perhaps civilization, as we know and think about it, feels so near to us that we've become a bit blind to what it is and what it means. In being familiar with civilization, we've become numb to its implications. Yet *Blizzard* resists numbness. To read this book is to journey with Cole slowly and patiently as he defamiliarizes himself with the familiarity of civilization, only to see and feel it with renewed perspective.

We are with him as he makes discoveries in the threshold between boundaries. Inspired by Bernhard Siegert's scholarship on doors as authors of the *inside* and *outside*, we can interpret Cole's journey in *Blizzard* to be concerned with the liminal—the space between the inside and the outside, the strange and familiar, the nearby *this* and the faraway *that*, and where the two merge. Siegert clarifies that, rather than connecting the inside and outside world, "the door puts inside and outside into a special relation in which the outside first becomes properly outside and the inside first becomes properly inside." The door draws a boundary that ultimately defines what is inside and what is outside;

inside knows itself in relation to outside and vice versa. But Cole resists being completely inside or outside. He dwells in the doorway. Here, in the liminal, Cole can hold civilization up to a mirror. Or better yet, hold civilization up to the many natural and unnatural mirrors provided by our landscape, allowing us to see what *this* is.

The words “this is civilization” echo in the poems’ formal nature. Those who know Cole’s poetry know his fondness for sonnets. With its parameters, the sonnet imposes a kind of order and structure to poetry. Perhaps the sonnet is a way to control our instincts to talk, write, and take space without limits. The form *civilizes* poetry by giving it some defining features and characteristics. In a *Literary Hub* interview with David Roderick in the fall of 2020, Cole spoke to his experiences with the form. “To me, writing a sonnet is like swimming, and lifting my head out of water to fill my lungs, and then plunging back underwater as my arms pull me forward,” he said. In this vivid analogy, Cole describes the sonnet to have a boundary he must temporarily break—the water’s surface. Though the sonnet pushes for concision, Cole must lift his head outside of it, outside of water, and exist momentarily in the world beyond it so he can breathe new life into the poem before the fourteen lines are spent. His ability to write a sonnet depends on his ability to break free from it—to dwell in the liminal space between form and freedom. Ultimately, Cole must go outside of the sonnet to stay inside. Cole must depart from civilization to return to it. And he does.

Such departures—whether formal departures from the sonnet structure or imaginary departures within the sonnet— are evident in each of *Blizzard’s* three parts. Guiding us into Part I are two lines from James Merrill’s poetry, “NOW DO U UNDERSTAND WHAT HEAVEN IS / IT IS THE SURROUND OF THE LIVING” (1). Already, we are given a way of seeing. We must look at and study our surroundings—what is within arm’s reach, what is in the kitchen, what is just beyond the window. Despite the miraculous creatures and things in our surroundings, much of our surroundings are demoted to the background. The mundane is overlooked. So, where do we start to bring the background into the foreground? How do the background and the foreground, or the outside and the inside, merge so that everything is equally in our surroundings? What if the faraway *that* could become the more immediate *this*? Through several poems, Cole brings the animal world into his world, or his world into the animal world. The two meet, and Cole’s poems are realized in the interaction between human and wild

animals. Bees, bats, deer, & company surround Cole. Two deer walk onto the tarmac of a runway as Cole watches from the airplane's window. A snail moves from one dark stone to another. A bat rests on Cole's doorway.

We should start with the snail. After all, it has an entire poem addressed to it. The first several lines of "To a Snail" (7) focus on the snail's "gelid body," "viscid slime," and "flat / muscular foot." Cole is wholly engrossed by the snail's movement and mission as it crosses the road. Soon enough, he is brought back to his human world. One can stay in the wild animal's world for only so long. Eventually, Cole notices the "Fiats / rushing past," and he innocently asks the snail, "Where is your partner?" In one moment, human culture and domesticity have been projected onto a snail concerned only with crossing the road. Animals like this mollusk certainly mate, but they don't have institutions of marriage. They likely don't have monogamous relationships nor a concept of "partner," other than their shell. It's fitting that in the poem before this one, "Mr. and Mrs. Spork" (6) ask Cole, "*Are you married yet?*" Institutions like college, marriage, and mortgages give our human lives structure, a path even. (Notice the word *yet*; it functions as a doorway of sorts, too—a threshold or transitional moment embedded in our language.) Humans move from one mile marker in their lives to the next, and civilization teaches and expects us to take these paths. Yet here is the snail, slowly moving from "some / dark stone to who knows where."

To look at the snail is to contemplate not only a life without civilization, but also our own civilization in contrast to the snail's lack thereof. Crossing the road and blissfully ignorant of Cole's question, "Where is your partner?" the snail does not answer. How could it? The question is not for the snail but for Cole. As the snail minds its own business, it unknowingly offers Cole a mirror he can use to see and contemplate his own life, and he is led to the poem's final realization. Cole writes, "It's a long game— / the whole undignified, insane attempt at living." Had he not meditated upon the snail's life, Cole likely wouldn't have viewed his own life as "undignified" or as an "insane attempt." The snail and its valid way of life present an opportunity to see how strange or "insane" human civilization is.

To be subject to civilization means to be governed by a culture of institutions. Though these institutions are meant to dignify us, they can do the opposite. Civilization inherently allows for uncivilized behavior as rules give way for rule breaking. In later poems, Cole does not shy from exposing the injustice and meanness that permeates (and to some degree,

substantiates) civilization. For now, Cole ends this poem to the snail, “so I’ve relocated you to the woods.” He takes the snail back to the wilderness from which Cole must reemerge. Civilization has drawn both real and unreal boundaries between (wo)man and wild, between well-lit cities and uncharted woods. Just as Cole must return to the sonnet after taking a breath of air, he must return to civilization. That moment when the snail is crossing the road, when Cole and the mollusk exist in the in-between, is not to be underestimated. In this liminal dwelling, Cole’s poetry can access the mirrors the animal world offers, and the poem can realize itself.

“To a Bat” (8-9) begins in a literal doorway as Cole removes a “groggy / bat from above / the front door” to place it “outside / in a hydrangea bush.” When “Mr. Bat,” as Cole calls him, sits “above the front door,” he is neither inside nor outside. There, he brings attention to the door we often don’t notice. He turns our attention to the artificial portal between animal and man, between the uncivilized and the civilized. Once Cole takes the bat fully outside, he asks “Where are you going now, Mr. Bat?” This bat is now a mister; he is sophisticated—civilized, even. Had he come completely inside the doorway, he’d be practically human! As Mr. Bat flies away though, Cole asks, “Can you see / the world is crammed / corrupt, infuriating, / shallow, sanctimonious, / and insincere?” From Mr. Bat’s vantage point in the sky, he surely must be able to see humanity’s darker side.

At this point, we might remember that old saying “blind as a bat” based on bats’ meandering flight patterns. Bats don’t look like they know where they are going, so we think they are blind. But we are mistaken. Though bats primarily rely on echolocation, or the use of echoes to determine distance from something, bats *can* see. *Live Science* writer Stephanie Papas adds that, at dawn and dusk, their vision is clearest. In fact, they can see more clearly than humans at these times. So, something seemingly blind is actually quite perceptive. Through his meditation on a bat, Cole asks us to reconsider how or if civilization privileges some forms of seeing and interpreting over others. While civilization relies on innovation, to some extent, it can simultaneously dismiss the nontraditional way of doing something as the “wrong” or “inferior” way. Civilization is a vertical, hierarchical boundary-making process in and of itself in which we draw distinctions from top to bottom. Some beings (human beings) are at the top. Then, the various ways in which humans live and move through the world can explicitly or implicitly be ranked.

To be a part of civilization is to exist in hierarchical structures.

In *Blizzard*, Cole welcomes the diverse ways of sensing and moving through the world. Toward that end, he invites moments of blindness and deafness into the larger book. We could call the vague “this” in the book’s first poem an instance of impaired senses, an inability to clarify and perceive what “this” truly is. More literally, though, we witness blindness and deafness when we meet Cole’s friend Natalie “with one seeing eye” (6) early in the book, and later when Cole visits the “State School for the Deaf and Blind,” (10) where “knowledge came in small words—under, over / next to, inside.” These moments of impaired senses are particularly compelling in a book of poetry since society often attributes remarkable perceptivity to the poet. These instances in Cole’s book, however, offer some wisdom about seeing and hearing as we know them. Perhaps true perceptivity requires a form of seeing that blurs the boundary between vision and blindness. True perceptivity asks us to approach all things as if they are equally new and strange, as if we were seeing them for the first time. We look at something and no longer see absolute clarity, yet we see something. We see through and between the clouds and snow of a disorienting blizzard as what was once familiar has become unfamiliar.

Cole’s perceptivity requires de-familiarization from what civilization has made familiar to us. We cannot immediately define the familiar *this*; we must see it once more with a beginner’s mind. Defamiliarization is at its height in the poem “Pheasant” (39) in Part II as Cole sits at a decorated dinner table, where the non-human animal merges once more with the human world. The plates of “antipasta, slow-cooked beans, / and tarts served alongside fruits” surround a pheasant “gutted or hung up for moist roasting.” Suddenly, at the sight of the pheasant, Cole remembers how pheasants run rather than fly when chased by men. As if this bit of knowledge has taken him away from the table for a moment only to point out the strangeness and routine horror of this bird’s death at mankind’s will, Cole says, “Now I eat what is caught with my own hands / like my father, and feel confused. The charm / flees. I want my life to be borrowing and / paying back. I don’t want to be a gun.” In this moment, the outside has come inside. The bird’s death is not a tragedy in a faraway field. It’s a loss seen and felt here at the dinner table. The boundary has been transgressed; and dinner is no longer delightful. Cole is no longer desensitized towards the familiar. He is sensitive to the de-familiar(ized).

We should pause and consider these lines’ implications in our own lives, at our own dinner tables. How often do we contemplate the food on



our dinner tables, tracing it back to its sources? Sure, vegetarianism and veganism are growing with the re-energized fight against animal cruelty. But when we eat a salad, do we consider whose hands harvested the fresh head of iceberg lettuce or the long green beans? Do we consider the hands of the Central American migrant paid less than a living wage in California and treated as if he were subhuman? When we take a step back from the familiar—from what our mothers and fathers taught us—and we ask questions, we notice that the “The charm / flees.” The pheasant is no longer delicious. It is stolen, its life taken with a gun.

The last line of this poem, “I don’t want to be a gun,” is haunting because of what it could have been. Cole could have written “own” a gun instead of “be” a gun in a civilization that has shaped and been shaped by weapons. As it becomes increasingly difficult to imagine civilization without weapons, we might reason that, in some ways, weapons have become a part of our cultural fabric. In light of this poem’s last line, weapons can be a part of individual fabric as well. Looking at the dead pheasant on the dinner table, and imagining the horror of its death, Cole observes how civilization is as destructive as it is productive. *This is civilization*. The worst and best parts of civilization are subtly passed down to us from our parents, to whom civilization was subtly passed down to them by their parents. Civilization grows quietly and familiarly, but it can leave loud, destructive waves of sound. To see this destruction, we have to open our eyes to the familiar and observe its absurdity, even if it makes us squint. Then, we can see what *this* is.

In addition to wild animals, some human beings are mirrors through which Cole can see what civilization is and has become. Civilization often treats these other human beings Cole depicts, whether they are prisoners or migrants, as subhuman, as being between human and animal. In the poem “Mud or Flesh,” (34) Cole portrays the prisoner by attempting to imaginatively cross a physical boundary—the walls of a jail cell—to empathize with him. It’s worth noting that practicing empathy, too, is an invisible crossing of boundaries, allowing one person to imagine and feel for another’s circumstances. As such, empathy relies as much on the continued existence of the imagining self as it does on the other, whose existence is being imagined. Empathy exists in the liminal; it exists between the self and the other. In “Mud and Flesh,” Cole must dwell in this space as he empathizes with the prisoner.

Of this prisoner, Cole writes “He is just number 15.” He can “Sleep, eat, shit / when they tell you. Touching only at the start / and end of



visitor hour.” Treated as if he were subhuman, the prisoner has no name and minimal human contact. In the middle of the poem, when “someone leaves the water running” in the showers, “Justice comes running with a clinking coil of keys.” Here, justice is not abstract. It’s physical; it’s embodied by a corrections officer and the keys on his belt. Capital *J-ustice* is his name. To the prisoner, we can give only the lowercase, shortened derivative of *justice*. We give him “just” — “He is just number 15.” To the corrections officer, however, we give everything. We give him capital *J-ustice*. We let him *be* justice, just as we can be guns.

In this image of a corrections officer stomping down the halls with his keys, Cole has witnessed one of civilization’s bleak realities. Though civilization claims to stand upon pillars of ideals and values, such as justice, democracy, and peace, civilization often betrays these values. Similar to how justice is a man-made value, it’s broken down and disenfranchised by people. In this poem, “Justice’ is not an ideal or value. Justice is an individual man. Justice is arbitrary, personal, and opinionated. Justice isn’t fair. This poem reminds us of this reality in a world that attempts to be civilized. Crossing the boundaries that define the jail cell, Cole has seen what he once asked Mr. Bat to see. He has seen the “crammed,” the “corrupt,” and the “infuriating” for himself. In its attempt for dignity, the justice system conversely undignifies individual persons and ultimately itself. Towards the end of the poem, we, alongside Cole, overhear the prisoner ask himself, “*Am I mud or flesh?*” This biblically inspired question is tragic for obvious reasons. Our criminal justice system dehumanizes people to the point at which they begin to question their own being, their own miraculousness. They fall into the background.

Asking himself this question, “*Am I mud or flesh?*” this prisoner’s words inspire us to ask ourselves the same. They offer a mirror through which we can see civilization’s reflection. Regarding the ways we treat one another and uphold our values, such as justice, are we “*mud or flesh?*” Are we without form, dirty, and relatively unimportant? Or are we substantial, able, and humane? Are we *this* or *that*? As there is space between the body and its reflection, perhaps there is space to be both mud *and* flesh. Of course, we, as individual readers, cannot answer for all of civilization. As perceptive as he is, neither can Cole. He ends his book where he began—with a vague this.

The last poem of the book, “Gay Bingo at a Pasadena Animal Shelter” (58) departs from the sonnet form. In this long poem, Cole’s attention

turns from bingo to his late parents' overwhelming presence. Their afterimages are "sad and solitary," naked, and younger. He writes, "This is before I am born and before a little strip of DNA—mutated in the '30s and '40s, part chimpanzee—overran the community / and before the friends of my youth are victims of discrimination." *This* what? This "sad and solitary" state? This time before HIV and AIDS brought tragedy to the gay community?

As a gay man, Cole has not escaped the marginalized individuals' and communities' experiences by writing poetry. His parents don't escape either. Civilization doesn't escape. Throughout the book, Coles names the discrimination that then President Donald Trump incited. He depicts suffering at the southwestern border as a family of migrants eats a dead horse. He remembers the two forgotten black soldiers who fought in the American Revolution as he stands before their tomb. Rather than use poetry as a vehicle of escape from the darkest sides of civilization, Cole's poetry faces civilization for what it is. He wants to find the truth. As he stands over three corpses tied to a tree trunk in the poem "Goya," (24) Cole decides how he will find the truth. He writes,

I feel like a worm worming. If I want the truth,  
I must seek it out. The line between the inner  
and outer erodes, and I became a hunter putting  
my face down somewhere on a path between  
two ways of being —one kindly and soft;  
the other an executioner.

Cole exists where his poems are found—in the liminal. He exists in the path between two ways of being, and *Blizzard* invites us to join him in this threshold. Here, art is at its finest as the poems within *Blizzard* face us as much as we face them. The patient reader will not regret her time before them.

# CONTRIBUTOR NOTES

~~Dan Albergotti is the author of *The Boatloads* (BOA Editions, 2008), *Millennial Teeth* (Southern Illinois University Press, 2014), and *Of Air and Earth* (Unicorn Press, 2019). His poems have appeared in *32 Poems*, *The Cincinnati Review*, *Crazyhorse*, *Five Points*, *The Southern Review*, *The Best American Poetry*, and *The Pushcart Prize*, as well as other journals and anthologies. He is a professor of English at Coastal Carolina University.~~

**Tommy Archuleta** is a mental health therapist and a substance abuse counselor for the New Mexico Corrections Department. Most recently his poems have appeared in the *New England Review*, *Guesthouse*, *Snapdragon*, *El Palacio*, and the Poem-a-Day series sponsored by the Academy of American Poets. A native of Santa Fe, New Mexico, today he lives and writes on the Cochiti Reservation.

**Wendy Barker's** seventh collection of poems is *Gloss* (St. Julian Press, 2020). Her sixth collection, *One Blackbird at a Time* (BkMk Press, 2015), won the John Ciardi Prize. Her fifth chapbook is *Shimmer* (Glass Lyre Press, 2019). Her poetry has appeared in numerous journals and anthologies, including *Best American Poetry 2013*. Recipient of NEA and Rockefeller fellowships, she teaches at the University of Texas at San Antonio.

**Jeanne Marie Beaumont** is the author of four collections of poetry, most recently *Letters from Limbo* (CavanKerry Press, 2016). Recent poems have appeared or are forthcoming in *Image*, *The Manhattan Review*, *Southern Poetry Review*, and *Gargoyle*.

**Molly Bendall** is the author of five collections of poetry, including *Watchful* from Omnidawn Press. Recent poems have appeared in *Boston Review*, *Lana Turner*, *Datableed*, *Volt*, and other journals. She teaches at the University of Southern California.

**Bryce Berkowitz** is the author of *Bermuda Ferris Wheel*, winner of the 42 Miles Press Poetry Award (forthcoming 2021). His writing has appeared or is forthcoming in *Best New Poets*, *The Missouri Review*, *The Sewanee Review*, *Ninth Letter*, *Cimarron Review*, and other publications. He teaches at Butler University. [www.bryceberkowitz.com](http://www.bryceberkowitz.com)

**Mary Buchinger** is the author of six collections of poetry, including *e i n f ü h l u n g / i n f e e l i n g* (2018), *Aerialist* (2015), and */ k l a u d z /* (forthcoming). She lives in Cambridge, Massachusetts, and is president of the New England Poetry Club and professor at MCPHS University in Boston. Her website is: <https://www.marybuchinger.com/>.

**Leila Chatti** is a Tunisian-American poet and author of *Deluge* (Copper Canyon Press, 2020) and the chapbooks *Ebb* (Akashic Books, 2018) and *Tunsiya/Amrikiya*, the 2017 Editors' Selection from Bull City Press. Her honors include a Pushcart Prize, grants from the NEA, the Barbara Deming Memorial Fund, and the Helene Wurlitzer Foundation, and fellowships from the Fine Arts Work Center in Provincetown, the Wisconsin Institute for Creative Writing, and Cleveland State University, where she was the inaugural Anisfield-Wolf Fellow in Publishing and Writing. She currently teaches at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, where she is the Mendota Lecturer in Poetry. Her poems appear in *The New York Times Magazine*, *POETRY*, *Ploughshares*, *Tin House*, *American Poetry Review*, and elsewhere.

**Mary Leana Christensen** has lived in southwest deserts, in kudzo-infested Appalachia, the PNW, and currently resides in Mississippi. She received her MFA in Creative Writing from Eastern Washington University and is a PhD candidate at the University of Southern Mississippi. Mary is Managing Editor of *The Swamp Literary Magazine*. Her work can be found in *Permafrost*, *Sugar House Review*, *New Ohio Review*, *Puerto del Sol*, and *Cream City Review*.

**Bruce Cohen's** poems have appeared in *AGNI*, *The Alaska Quarterly Review*, *The Gettysburg Review*, *The Harvard Review*, *The New Yorker*, *Ploughshares*, *The Pushcart Prize* and *The Southern*

Review. He has published five volumes of poetry, most recently *No Soap, Radio* (Black Lawrence Press) and *Imminent Disappearances, Impossible Numbers & Panoramic X-Rays*, which was awarded the Green Rose Prize from New Issues Press.

~~Whitney Collins is the recipient of a 2020 Pushcart Prize and the 2020 American Short(er) Fiction Prize. Her story collection *BIG BAD* won the 2019 Mary McCarthy Prize in Short Fiction. Her stories have appeared or are forthcoming in *AGNI, Shenandoah, Slice, American Short Fiction, The Pinch, and Ninth Letter, among others.*~~

Matthew Cooperman is the author of, most recently, *NOS (disorder, not otherwise specified)*, with Aby Kaupang, (Futurepoem, 2018), as well as *Spool*, winner of the New Measure Prize (Free Verse Editions, 2016), the text + image collaboration *Imago for the Fallen World*, with Marius Lehene (Jaded Ibis, 2013), *Still: of the Earth as the Ark which Does Not Move* (Counterpath, 2011) and other books. A Poetry Editor for *Colorado Review*, and Professor of English at Colorado State University, he lives in Fort Collins with his wife, the poet Aby Kaupang, and their two children. <http://matthewcooperman.org>

~~David Nikki Crouse is author of the short story collections *Copy Cats, The Man Back There, and I'm Here: Alaska Stories*, as well as the collection of novellas *Trouble Will Save You*. David's work has appeared in the pages of *Prairie Schooner, Boulevard, The Greensboro Review*, and many other magazines, and received The Flannery O'Connor Award, The Lawrence Prize, and The Mary McCarthy Prize. David lives in Seattle, Washington~~

~~Sara Dallmayr is originally from Kalamazoo, Michigan. She received a BA in English from Western Michigan University. Dallmayr is currently a rural mail carrier in South Bend, Indiana, where she lives with her husband and two cats. Her work has appeared or is forthcoming in *Third Coast, 3Elements, Eclectica, Penn Review, Texas Review, SWWIM, High Shelf Press* and others.~~

Jim Daniels's next book of poems, *Gun/Shy* will be published by Wayne State University Press in Fall 2021. Other recent books include his short fiction collection, *The Perp Walk* and his anthology, *R E S P E C T: The Poetry of Detroit Music*, co-edited with M. L. Liebler, both published by Michigan State University Press in 2019 and 2020 respectively. A native of Detroit, Daniels currently lives in Pittsburgh.

Jose Hernandez Diaz is a 2017 NEA Poetry Fellow. He is the author of *The Fire Eater* (Texas Review Press, 2020). His work appears in *The American Poetry Review, The Cincinnati Review, Poetry*, and in *The Best American Nonrequired Reading 2011*. His work has been a finalist for The Andrés Montoya Poetry Prize, The Colorado Poetry Prize, and The National Poetry Series. He is an educator and editor at Frontier and Palette Poetry in Los Angeles County, CA.

Paul Dickey won the \$5,000 2015 Master Poet award from the Nebraska Arts Council. Paul Dickey's first full length poetry manuscript *They Say This is How Death Came Into the World* was published by Mayapple Press in January, 2011. His poetry and flash have appeared in *Versé Daily, Sentence: A Journal of Prose Poetics, Southern Poetry Review, Potomac Review, Pleiades, 32Poems, Bellevue Literary Review*, and *Crab Orchard Review*, among other online and print publications. A second book, *Wires Over the Homeplace* was published by Pinyon Publishing in October, 2013.

Sharon Dolin's seventh poetry book, *Imperfect Present*, is forthcoming from the University of Pittsburgh Press in 2022. Her translation from Catalan, *Late to the House of Words: Selected Poems of Gemma Gorga*, won the Malinda A. Markham Translation Prize and is forthcoming from Saturnalia Books in fall, 2021. A recipient of an NEA, she lives in New York City where she is Associate Editor of Barrow Street Press and directs Writing About Art in Barcelona.

Ann Anderson Evans's award-winning memoir, *DARING TO DATE AGAIN*, was published by SheWrites Press in 2014. Another memoir is forthcoming. Essays and short stories have been published in *Pulse, The Opiate, The Raven's Perch, Forge, Words and Images, Ozone Park Journal, Under the Sun, Phantasmagoria, Phoebe, Entropy*, and academic journals. Book reviews have been

published in *Lit Hub*, *The Literary Review*, *Midwest Book Review*, *Laurel Review*, and *PANK*. She taught English as a Second Language in Athens, Greece, Freshman Writing at Montclair State University, and has given numerous writing workshops. Ann spends her time in Rutland, Vermont, Hoboken, New Jersey, and Graz, Austria.

~~Marc Frazier is a Chicago-area LGBTQ writer who has published in journals including *The Gay and Lesbian Review*, *Slant*, *Permafrost*, *Plainsongs*, *Poet Lore*, *Ascent*, *Gargoyle*, *Into the Void*, *RHINO*, and *The Tampa Review*. Marc, the recipient of an Illinois Arts Council Award for poetry, has been nominated for a Pushcart Prize and a Best of the Net. He also had a poem appear in an edition of *Best New Poetry from the Midwest*. His books, including his latest, *Willingly*, are available at online booksellers. See Marc Frazier Author page on Facebook, @marcfrazier45 on Twitter.~~

**Lea Graham** is the author of two poetry collections, *From the Hotel Vernon* (Salmon Press, 2019) and *Hough & Helix & Where & Here & You, You, You* (No Tell Books, 2011); a fine press book, *Murmurations* (Hot Tomato Press, 2020), and three chapbooks, *Spell to Spell* (above/ground Press, 2018), *This End of the World: Notes to Robert Kroetsch* (Apt. 9 Press, 2016) and *Calendar Girls* (above/ground Press, 2006). She is the editor of the forthcoming anthology of critical essays: *From the Word to the Place: The Work of Michael Anania* (MadHat Press, 2021). She is an associate professor of English at Marist College in Poughkeepsie, NY and a native of Northwest Arkansas.

**Jerry Harp's** most recent book of poems is *Spirit Under Construction* (2017). His work recently appears in *Cincinnati Review*, *December*, *Hubbub*, *Notre Dame Review*, and *Presence*. Currently he is co-editing a book on Jean Ross Justice for the *Unsung Masters Series* and working on a book about the history and performance of *Romeo and Juliet*. He teaches at Lewis & Clark College.

**Brian Henry** is the author of eleven books of poetry, most recently *Permanent State*. He has translated Tomaž Šalamun's *Woods and Chalice*s, Aleš Debeljak's *Smugglers*, and five books by Aleš Šteger. His work has received numerous honors, including two NEA fellowships, the Alice Fay di Castagnola Award, a Howard Foundation fellowship, a Slovenian Academy of Arts and Sciences grant, and the Best Translated Book Award.

~~Noor Hindi (she/her) is a Palestinian American poet and reporter. Her poems have appeared or are forthcoming in *POETRY*, *Hobart and Jubilat*. Her essays have appeared or are forthcoming in *American Poetry Review*, *Literary Hub*, and *Adroit Journal*. Hindi is the Equity and Inclusion Reporter for *The Devil Strip Magazine*. Visit her website at [noorhindi.com](http://noorhindi.com).~~

Born and raised in Topeka, Kansas, **Gary Jackson** is the author of the poetry collection *Missing You, Metropolis*, which received the 2009 Cave Canem Poetry Prize. His poems have appeared in *Callaloo*, *Tin House*, *Los Angeles Review of Books*, and elsewhere. He was featured in the 2013 New American Poetry Series by the Poetry Society of America and is the recipient of both a Cave Canem and Bread Loaf fellowship. He is an associate poetry editor at *Crazyhorse*, and currently teaches in the MFA program at the College of Charleston in Charleston, SC.

**Gia Kelliher** is a 21-year-old poet from Baton Rouge, LA. This is her first published work. She lives in the Brookstone supply closet in a dead mall.

**Karen Kevorkian's** three poetry collections are *White Stucco Black Wing*, *Lizard Dream*, and, in 2020, *Quivira* (3:A Taos Press). Her poems and book reviews are featured in numerous journals, including *Volt*, *Antioch Review*, *Denver Quarterly*, *Michigan Quarterly Review*, *Witness*, *Colorado Review*, *Poetry Northwest*, and *Los Angeles Review of Books*. She teaches at UCLA. <http://karenkevorkian.com>

**Peter Leight** lives in Amherst, Massachusetts. He has previously published poems in *Paris Review*, *AGNI*, *Antioch Review*, *Beloit Poetry Journal*, *FIELD*, *New World*, *Raritan*, and other magazines.

**Alex Lemon** is the author of five books of poems and two memoirs, most recently *Another Last Day* (Milkweed Editions). He lives with his family in TX and teaches at TCU.

**George Looney's** most recent books are *The Worst May Be Over*, which won the Elixir Press Fiction Award, and *The Itinerant Circus: New and Selected Poems 1995-2020*. He's the founder of the BFA in Creative Writing Program at Penn State Erie, editor of *Lake Effect*, and translation editor of *Mid-American Review*.

**charlotte lowell** (they/them) is a genderqueer gardener and undergraduate studying post-colonial agroecology and ethnobotany. They like clouds and the color blue. They currently live on Massachusetts land, where they dream of collaborative futures where all people are cherished and cared for.

**Caroline Maun** is an associate professor and Chair of English at Wayne State University in Detroit, Michigan, where she teaches creative writing and American literature. Her volumes of poetry include *The Sleeping* (Marick Press, 2006), *What Remains* (Main Street Rag, 2013), and three chapbooks, *Cures and Poisons* and *Greatest Hits*, published by Pudding House Press, and *Accident*, published by Alice Greene & Co. She has also been published in *The Bear River Review*, *Bitterzoet Magazine*, *The Cape Rock*, *Crack the Spine*, *Delmarva Review*, *Euphony*, *Evening Street Review*, *Failbetter*, *Green Hills Literary Lantern*, *The MacGuffin*, *The Main Street Rag*, *The Midwest Quarterly*, *Mount Hope Magazine*, *Third Wednesday*, *The Opiate*, *Paragon Journal*, *Peninsula Poets*, *South Carolina Review*, *Sweet Tree Review*, *Waving Hands Review*, *Valparaiso Poetry Review*, and *Eleven Eleven*, among others.

**Elizabeth Metzger** is the author of *Bed*, winner of the Sunken Garden Chapbook Prize, forthcoming from Tupelo Press in November 2021. Her second poetry collection, *Lying In*, is forthcoming from Milkweed Editions in 2023. Her other books include *The Spirit Papers* (University of Massachusetts Press, 2017), which received the Juniper Prize for Poetry, and the chapbook *The Nutshell Studies of Unexplained Death* (Horsethief Books, 2017). She is a poetry editor at *The Los Angeles Review of Books*. You can read more at [elizabethmetzger.com](http://elizabethmetzger.com).

**Rosalie Moffett** is the author of *Nervous System* (Ecco) which was chosen by Monica Youn for the National Poetry Series Prize, and listed by the *New York Times* as a New and Notable book. She is also the author of *June in Eden* (OSU Press). She has been awarded the "Discovery"/Boston Review prize, a Wallace Stegner Fellowship in Creative Writing from Stanford University, and scholarships from the Tin House and Bread Loaf writing workshops. Her work has appeared in *The Believer*, *New England Review*, *Narrative*, *Kenyon Review*, *Ploughshares*, and elsewhere. She is an assistant professor at the University of Southern Indiana.

**Erin Murphy's** latest book, *Human Resources*, is forthcoming from Salmon Poetry. Her work has appeared or is forthcoming in *Southern Poetry Review*, *The Georgia Review*, *Women's Studies Quarterly*, and elsewhere. Her awards include The Normal School Poetry Prize, the Dorothy Sargent Rosenberg Poetry Prize, and a Best of the Net award. She is Professor of English at Penn State Altoona. Website: [www.erin-murphy.com](http://www.erin-murphy.com)

**Peter E. Murphy** is the author of eleven books and chapbooks of poetry and prose. As the founder of ~~Murphy Writing of Stockton University~~, he leads workshops for writers and teachers in the United States and Europe.

**Aimee Parkison's** *Refrigerated Music for a Gleaming Woman* won the FC2 Catherine Doctorow Innovative Fiction Prize. Her work has appeared in numerous literary journals, in translation in Italian, and in the Best Small Fictions anthology series. Since 2019, she has served on the FC2 Board of Directors. Her fiction has won a Christopher Isherwood Fellowship, the Kurt Vonnegut Prize from *North American Review*, the Starcherone Prize for Innovative Fiction, the Jack Dyer Prize from *Crab Orchard Review*, a North Carolina Arts Council Fellowship, a Writers at Work Fellowship, a Puffin Foundation Fellowship, an American Antiquarian Society William Randolph Hearst Creative Artist Fellowship, and a William Faulkner Literary Competition Prize for the Novel. She teaches in the Creative Writing Program at Oklahoma State University. Find out more at [www.aimeeparkison.com](http://www.aimeeparkison.com)



**Benjamin Paloff's** books include the poetry collections *And His Orchestra* (2015) and *The Politics* (2011), both from Carnegie Mellon. He is also the author of an award-winning critical volume, *Lost in the Shadow of the Word (Space, Time, and Freedom in Interwar Eastern Europe)*, and has translated many books of poetry, prose, and drama from Polish, Czech, Russian, and Yiddish. His poems have appeared in *Boston Review*, *Conduit*, *New American Writing*, *The New York Review of Books*, *The Paris Review*, and others. Twice a fellow of the NEA, he is associate professor of comparative literature at the University of Michigan.

**Meg Pokrass** is the author of eight flash fiction collections, an award-winning collection of prose poetry, two novellas in flash and a forthcoming collection of microfiction, *Spinning to Mars*, recipient of the Blue Light Book Award in 2020. Her work has appeared in hundreds of literary magazines including *Electric Literature*, *Washington Square Review*, *Waxwing*, *Smokelong Quarterly*, *McSweeney's* and her work has been included in many international anthologies of the form including *New Micro* (W.W. Norton & Co., 2018), *Flash Fiction International* (W.W. Norton & Co., 2015), *Nothing Short Of*, *Fog and Light*, *Flash Fiction Funny*, the *Wigleaf Top 50*, and *The Best Small Fictions 2018 and 2019*. She serves as Founding Co-Editor, along with Gary Fincke, of *Best Microfiction*. Find out more at [megpokrass.com](http://megpokrass.com)

**Vincent Poturica** lives with his wife and kids on the rural coast of Northern California, where he teaches at Mendocino College. His writing appears in *New England Review*, *DIAGRAM*, *Hayden's Ferry Review*, and *7x7*.

**Glen Pourciau's** second collection of stories, *View*, was published in 2017 by Four Way Books. His first story collection, *Invite*, won the 2008 Iowa Short Fiction Award. He has had stories published by *AGNI Online*, *Epoch*, *New England Review*, *New World Writing*, *The Paris Review*, *Post Road*, *The Rupture*, *Witness*, and others. His third story collection, *Getaway*, is forthcoming from Four Way Books in September.

**Kimberly Ann Priest** is the author of *Slaughter the One Bird* (Sundress 2021), *Parrot Flower* (Glass 2021), *Still Life* (PANK 2020), and *White Goat Black Sheep* (Finishing Line Press 2018). Winner of the New American Press 2019 Heartland Poetry Prize, her work has appeared in journals such as *North Dakota Quarterly*, *Salamander*, *Slipstream*, *The Berkeley Poetry Review*, *Borderland* and many others. She is an associate poetry editor for the *Nimrod International Journal of Prose and Poetry* and Embody reader for *The Maine Review*. Find her work at [kimberlyannpriest.com](http://kimberlyannpriest.com).

**Laura Read** is the author of *Dresses from the Old Country* (BOA, 2018), *Instructions for My Mother's Funeral* (University of Pittsburgh Press, 2012), and *The Chewbacca on Hollywood Boulevard Reminds Me of You* (Floating Bridge Press, 2011). She served as poet laureate for Spokane, WA from 2015-17 and teaches at Spokane Falls Community College.

**Mary-Lynn Reed's** prose has appeared, or is forthcoming, in *Mississippi Review*, *Colorado Review*, *Free State Review*, *Reunion: The Dallas Review*, and many other places. She has an MFA in Creative Writing from the University of Maryland. She lives in upstate New York with her wife, and together they co-edit the online literary journal *MoonPark Review*.

**Dana Roeser's** fourth book, *All Transparent Things Need Thundershirts*, won the Wilder Prize at Two Sylvias Press and was published in 2019. Her earlier books won the Juniper Prize and Morse Prize (twice). Recent poems and translations appeared, or are forthcoming, in *Guesthouse*, *Barrow Street*, *The Florida Review*, *North American Review*, *The Indianapolis Review*, *Green Mountains Review*, and *Poetry International Online (PI Online)*. For more information, please see [www.danaroesser.com](http://www.danaroesser.com).

**Anthony Robinson** lives in rural Oregon. His poems and essays have appeared in *Drunk in a Midnight Choir*, *Gulf Coast*, *The Iowa Review*, *Quarterly West*, *Typo*, *Verse*, *ZYZZYVA*, *Brooklyn Rail*, and elsewhere.

**Tomaž Šalamun** (1941-2014) published more than 55 books of poetry in his native Slovenian. Translated into over 25 languages, his poetry received numerous awards, including the Jenko Prize,

the Prešeren Prize, the European Prize for Poetry, and the Mladost Prize. In the 1990s, he served for several years as the Cultural Attaché for the Slovenian Embassy in New York, and he held visiting professorships at various universities in the U.S.

**Eliana Rose Swerdlow** is a recent graduate of Yale College, where she studied English and Human Rights. She wrote her senior thesis, a collection of poems, under the mentorship of Louise Glück, and she is moving to Northern California to work as a Client Advocate through Partners for Justice.

**Glenn Taylor** is the author of *There Isn't Enough Dark in a Room* (Red Flag Poetry, 2019). His work has appeared in *Pittsburgh Poetry Review*, *Pinwheel*, and *Columbia Poetry Review*. He writes the owner's manual in your glove compartment that you never read; he judges you because of this. He'd love to take you on a guided tour of Detroit that doesn't solely consist of downtown and its stadiums, arenas, and fields.

**Brittany Tomaselli** earned their MFA in Poetry from Columbia College Chicago. Their chapbook, *Since Sunday*, was the winner of the 2019 Omnidawn Chapbook Contest and is available from Omnidawn Publishing. Their work can also be found in places such as *Jubilat*, *Fairy Tale Review*, and *The Wanderer*. They currently live in Kalamazoo, Michigan, where they also keep bees and produce music.

**Jess Turner** is a poet from Pittsburgh. Currently, she is an MFA candidate at Colorado State University, where she was awarded the 2020 Academy of American Poets Prize. She is the managing editor for *Colorado Review*, and has previously worked with Autumn House Press. Her own poems can be found in *Pleiades*, *RHINO*, *Salt Hill Journal*, *Ruminant Magazine*, and *New Delta Review*, among others. You can find her by water or in the mountains.

**Anthony Varallo** is the author of a novel, *The Lines* (University of Iowa Press), as well as four short story collections. New work is out or forthcoming in *The New Yorker* "Daily Shouts," *One Story*, *STORY*, *Chicago Quarterly Review*, *DIAGRAM*, *The Best Small Fictions 2020*, and elsewhere. Currently he is a professor of English at the College of Charleston in Charleston, SC, where he is the fiction editor of *Crazyhorse*. Find him online at @TheLines1979.

**John Sibley Williams** is the author of six collections, including *The Drowning House* (Elixir Press Poetry Award), *As One Fire Consumes Another* (Orison Poetry Prize), *Skin Memory* (Backwaters Prize, University of Nebraska Press), and *Summon* (JuxtaProse Chapbook Prize). A twenty-six-time Pushcart nominee, John is the winner of numerous awards, including the Wabash Prize for Poetry, Philip Booth Award, Phyllis Smart-Young Prize, and Laux/Millar Prize. He serves as editor of *The Inflectionist Review* and founder of the Caesura Poetry Workshop series. Previous publishing credits include *Best American Poetry*, *Yale Review*, *Versé Daily*, *North American Review*, *Prairie Schooner*, and *TriQuarterly*.

~~A permanently disabled poet and composer, **Dylan Willoughby** has received fellowships from Yaddo and Macdowell, a scholarship from the West Chester Poetry Conference, and an MFA in poetry from Cornell University. Chester Creek Press has published three limited-edition chapbooks of his poetry, and poems have appeared in *Shenandoah*, *Salmagundi*, *Denver Quarterly*, *Green Mountains Review*, *Salmagundi*, *Versé Daily*, *Agenda* (UK) and *Stand* (UK), and others.~~

~~**Candice Wuehle** is the author of the novel *MONARCH* (Soft Skull, 2022) as well as the poetry collections *Fidelitoria: fixed or fluxed* (2021), *Death Industrial Complex* (Action Books, 2020) and *BOUND* (Inside the Castle Press, 2018). Her writing has appeared in *Best American Experimental Writing 2020*, *The Iowa Review*, *Black Warrior Review*, *Tarpaulin Sky*, *The Volta*, *The Bennington Review*, and *The New Delta Review*. She holds an MFA in poetry from the Iowa Writers' Workshop and PhD in Creative Writing from the University of Kansas.~~

**Paula Yup** returned to Spokane, Washington after a dozen years in the Marshall Islands where her husband taught marine biology and did environmental work. In the past forty years she has published over three hundred poems. Her first book of poetry is *Making a Clean Space in the Sky*.