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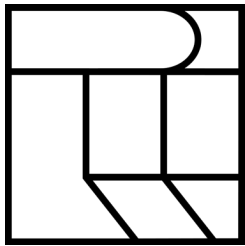
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Jose Hernandez Diaz

The Lighthouse Tattoo

I drifted into the ocean after I got lost in a sailing competition. I drifted far into the middle of the sea. I lost track of time and distance. The waves sounded like a funeral song. I began to feel myself deteriorating. I wrote a farewell letter to my family and friends, but I knew it would likely get buried at sea. I wished I was a dolphin or a seagull; anything that could escape my tortured fate.

Then, a bright lighthouse appeared in the distance, shining through the fog. I was saved. Land was near and hope remained possible, again. As I approached the shore, I jumped off the boat and swam the rest of the way. When I finally made it to shore, I laid on the warm sand and contemplated my luck. I decided when I got back to the city, I would get a lighthouse tattoo on my shoulder. It was a traumatic ordeal; the only thing I knew was life is fickle, like a feather in the wind.

Jose Hernandez Diaz

García-Márquez, the Rooster

My dog barks at the poor mail carrier and I see fear in both their eyes. I yell at the dog to relax and act civilized. The sun goes down at 6 pm and I have a few hours before bed, then work, then the whole routine again.

The next day my rooster, García-Márquez, doesn't wake us up. I go outside to check on him. He's dead. Murdered by the C.I.A., I'm assuming. I call the cops, but they tell me the C.I.A. is a fine organization. I bury my rooster, García-Márquez, with my medals from football and wrestling. García-Márquez was a fine rooster, I tell the crowd who's gathered, mostly local bikers and misfits. García-Márquez would sing to the sun every morning, as if it was a newborn. Now, he is in heaven, with Jesus, Mary, and the lambs. We'll see you soon, old friend.

Albert Camus, the Alien

It is fall. My favorite season. I go outside to take out the trash and instead of dead leaves on the ground, I discover a spaceship. An alien climbs out of said spaceship. They have a shiny silver suit on with a logo on the breast pocket of the planet Jupiter. The alien speaks in perfect French. In fact, his name tag reveals he is named Albert Camus, I'm assuming after the writer. The alien is red and yellow, like a McDonald's sign. They are neither aggressive nor passive. They are moderate in their manners. As the alien approaches me, they begin to sing an ancient alien song. They are rather proud when they sing. I shut the door on the alien and immediately call the cops. The alien begins to weep, and I instantly regret calling the cops. Startled, the alien returns to the spaceship and flees home. I tell my friends this story every autumn when the leaves begin to fall and they insist I'm crazy. Granted, I'm a little out there, but the alien certainly crashed in my backyard that evening, like a pile of dead leaves.

Rachel Whalen

93 Cherries

You are sitting in a theater and it is damp and you are alone and you are also damp.

You are alone in the theater now trying to remember the movie but all you remember is that everyone was named Rachel.

You think maybe Rachel kissed Rachel

and also Rachel wanted to kill Rachel

and at one point Rachel had 93 cherries in their mouth.

And now you want to leave the theater but you also want to trace the name Rachel with your finger as it rolls through the thick air

but you reach out and it crawls up your arm and into your ear and disappears.

You are in the theater alone and the boy is about to enter

and the movie is over and you are about to get up

Rachel Whalen

No One's Son

I would never tell a politician
that when I saw how the shuttle was sturdy and good
I chose it. If only I could tell you

good just how good
this kinglessness is there are
so many songs in my head. I am weeping.

Mars is weeping. My umbilical
is long and good and I
am not small in my far-awayness: up here

I am near Everyone. Being
is a practice of forgiveness. Being
is a practice of constant forgiveness: I don't mind

that I learned how to tie a tie
from YouTube, I
am no one's daughter. When I say it

to myself and only myself it sounds
like a wish for weightlessness. I am not lonely
but without gravity what kind of love is this?

Kristy McCoy

No Sign

The rest of us woke up without you. It wasn't so bad until a bird slammed into my window, falling backwards onto the porch. Her wings flayed outwards. Her head limp. There was no sign, no gentle pumping beneath her breast, no blood draped across her crown. I must have looked deranged when I gestured to a passerby this swift transition. Remember this happened once before? We were side by side on bikes. A pair of baby-birds hopping around to take flight. The one seemed to say, "See! Like this!" right before you ran over its neck, the sound unforgettable. I've felt nothing ever since.

Nicole Callihan

Condolences

The vocabulary is illusory.

Appetite. Estranged.

A white cup filled with dark coffee.

That's how you take it.

Your brother's old joke.

Like I like my women.

Sweet and warm?

In the country, the woman bakes a pie.

I drape my unease around my shoulders.

A shawl made of raccoon pelts.

What I have been wanting to say is.

And then I'm hungry again.

I cut the cake infinitely in half.

There will never be more.

In lieu of flowers, send nudes.

I smother myself in the hydrangeas.

You look like rain, like you've fallen.

A wet street, a painful drenching.

Judson Evans

Mallow

keep saying *can't go back you can't go*
crack through the whole stain glass window

as stars end in any of three final
stages even without a physical surface to touch

the behavior of goldfinches the nature
of mandalas the word *mallow*
everything after is waiting to return the dirty
dishes the swallowed amber the ocher seamed with sweat
and swear words neap moon that can't go back but

will kelp weave back swung
gait of rather each weathering word of retreat small mounds of pigment
to their compass points ore of lead pencils of offer

the sermon on repetition the diagnosis by spectrometer the freshness date
on burial by sea

will reclaim a vaccine from the venom the way lights illuminate
the right exit driving backward overdraft searching all the drawers
for the touch of your chest hair basking in
heat shock proteins

the plummy pause for the weight of your ashes
the long address includes early ripples in the universe late lemon light
in webs different levels of Virgo cluster

the placelessness of all your cars end to end credit cards cut in quarters the
non-stop hurry
you logged into with your morning anvil

can't go back herbaceous annual stalling flight explosive warble

sea tastes the saffron bitumin leaches the design

where you alive/dead

are

Film Score

What do you call those movies you like where
no one is ever happy? Now November leaves fall all together
a second time spackle to boots drag
through the house so we might as well take arms full

and scatter them in the rooms in our bed
let them trail back to sources
of water where they crack through the wall

I always said I wanted to have a house
I could let dissolve with no repairs never clean
the gutters rake leaves rough hewn
circuit of idleness the clutter that gathers by misprision
dust devils as in Bertolucci's *Conformist*
when Marcello visits his heroin-
addicted mother or in *American Beauty*

but not beautiful especially not
at the end when you can predict events
by the sequence of shadows the footsteps
in steep ascent janused light

like a monk rakes moss Ozu's *Late Spring* in a garden of nothing
but moss and you learn the garden's structure is unbalanced
by forms outside the white paper chains

beyond sand that takes place of earth
gravel that takes the place
of mountains bridge over dry land

envy and obligation circle too
down to the last bit of whittled dialogue
when I put my hand on my heart
and name names

Shim

What is my *right mind* if this is what's
left? Call across to its lingering listlessness
with all your lists. Keep knocking keep
telling me to rock back on my heels then scud and slide
just a foot to left to right call up through the floorboards
where you pound in shims silence every
creak. They flow in the insomnia of crawlspaces
heat vents ventricles of closet and chimney
other houses other hall ends as if what we call the living
quarters wore those hand-folded smears paper of hives lining
of tea boxes modelling clay impressed with bandage
as if what we call the sitting rooms dining rooms were all mud
rooms vestibules waiting waiting waiting
rooms the biological house vacated vaccinated. You couldn't
move waited in the living room with no shutters no curtains
so the car lights strobed your face. You were right
to wonder what was left how many outlets inlets
how many ways to the attic arterial apses
combined volatile elements of scorn
and sky.

Vicki Iorio

Road Trip with My Mother's Ashes in a Business Envelope in the Glove Compartment of My Car

Her white turtleneck drapes the passenger seat,
her plaid thermos of tea in the cup holder next to
my Venti iced cinnamon macchiato shakes when I accelerate.

The Beatles' *White Album* is on—
it's a new car, Ma
no more cassettes. I've synched my iPhone with Spotify.

We can play anything you want,
I'll blast it so you can hear it.
I'll sing so low you can't hear it.

Karen married a nice boy from college;
they got married in the campus chapel,
we'll go there before we picnic along the river.

At King Arthur Baking Company, I'll buy flour.
I still haven't mastered your brownies;
you said the secret is in the timing
knowing impatience is my failure.

Later, we'll drive up to the ice cream factory—
remember, your best day? The free strawberry ice cream
sample was as big as a pint, the strawberries,
almost whole, ruby red bursting with seeds.

WEASELS

in English and ASL gloss

they glee	[<i>index fingers</i>]	{criss-cross-all-over-each-other}
like needles		same-same
threading		{needle-down-up-around-edge}
the fabric	[<i>flat hands</i>]	stage-curtain
of forest		curtain-rises
rising high		tree-tree-tree
above river		reveal-out-there
their movements		{water-cascade-down-river}
stitching together	[<i>index fingers</i>	criss-cross-all-over-each-other}
a chaotic tapestry	<i>flat hands</i>]	out-there mass-confusion
until they loom		{criss-cross-all-over-each-other}
white-bellied		darken-slowly
paint streaks		but eye-spot {LIPS: BOOM}
into the dark		white zig-zag-lightning

In the imperfect tapestry of my life, I sometimes feel like a loose thread waiting to be snipped.

Raymond Luczak

CHIPMUNK

in English and ASL gloss

one bit me
when I was five
at Bay Cliff Health Camp
I have no recollection
of how I extended
my finger
even now
years later
their brown eyes
still peer at me
from the side
asking if that family story
about me
was indeed true

me age five
happen
B-a-y C-l-i-f-f Health Camp
c-h-i-p-m-u-n-k {bite-my-finger}
happen how
{point-to-finger}
{move-finger-to-chipmunk}
not remember
years later
still {them} eyes brown
{them-look-at-me-from-the-side}
ask-ask each-other
family story relate-to me
true-biz happen ??

I have the fondest of memories from my summers at Bay Cliff, so this particular recollection is quite disturbing. I *know* that a chipmunk *did* bite my index finger, but how did *that* happen? I don't think it's typical animal behavior for a chipmunk to approach a human, let alone bite his finger. Or had a childhood dream of a chipmunk biting my finger left over as a fragment somehow metamorphosed into the seeming unassailability of memory, fact, record?

Melts Like Raindrops

When the sky started melting, nobody in town knew the extent of the deterioration until the first blotch of atmosphere splattered in front of an elderly man's walking cane in the middle of the sidewalk on Main Street, sending little specks of blue and white over the old fellow's glasses and repainting the side of a fire hydrant in pastels. Everybody around came over and stared at the puddle of sky as it trickled out across the pavement, then looked up to where, one might think, a gap would've been, and found, instead, a vortex pattern forming in the spot directly over where the piece of sky had only just hit the ground. A little girl with glasses turned away after a few seconds, because the sun was out and it hurt her eyes, but the rest of the townspeople ignored their own discomfort and watched as other sections of the atmosphere stretch down like thinly rolled Play-Doh, separating at the weakest point before falling as giant rain drops towards the Earth. The globs splattered on impact, repainting the town's tallest buildings in baby blues and wispy whites.

"Serves them right they're the first ones to get hit," said one of the old people at the scene. A couple local college kids exchanged glances while the old man scowled at the modestly sized corporate buildings on the other side of downtown. Most of the folks in the street ignored him and just kept staring up. Eventually, a news reporter came out and videoed the sky melting for a bit while his coworker went around asking people what they thought. Most of the young people agreed global warming was the culprit, a few of the older folks blamed homosexuality, and anyone else with an opinion kept it to themselves.

An hour later, the heavy sky precipitate continued to fall. The crowd on Main Street remained fixed in tight and loose clusters, getting larger and larger around the first, of what was now more than a few, puddles of sky. Shoppers on the other side of the road stopped to look, some even crossed over, but most only stayed for a glance before heading to their cars.

"Goddamn."

"Yeah, I know."

Jonathan and Matthew stood in front of a record store across from where the first drop of sky fell. Jonathan wore black pants and a purple shirt and Matthew wore a grey shirt and black pants. The size of their bodies combined hardly took up more space than the square of sidewalk over which they stood. The length of their hair combined could give Rapunzel a run for her money.

Jonathan stared across the street as the elderly man scrubbed at the lenses of his spectacles, to no avail. The man looked around helplessly until a few of the middle-aged women around the scene went over and tried to help him, also to no avail.

"What did I tell you? Climate change is real." Matthew shook his head at the cluster of people crowding around the puddle of sky. It continued to stretch out and make the circle of folks around it expand and expand as everyone moved to avoid the creeping blue outer edge.

“Maybe your mom will believe now.”

Jonathan shrugged.

“Yeah, maybe.”

In a moment, the little girl who was the first to look away stepped forward. She reached down to touch the milky atmospheric liquid. Her mother rushed up and grabbed her jacket from behind, snatching her back into the crowd just before the little girl’s fingers made contact.

“Jesus Christ,” Jonathan said.

“What do you think this means?” Matthew asked. Zeppelin IV blared loud enough in the record store to be heard where Jonathan and Mathew stood. The music took a solo during the silence of Jonathan’s contemplation.

“I dunno,” Jonathan said.

Matthew threw up his hands. “Do I still go to work?”

“You probably should.”

“Is there a work protocol for when the sky is melting? Do the labor unions have a policy about this?”

A pyramid-shaped art building a few blocks away got hit with a glob of sky. Now, it looked like an upside-down ice cream cone, dripping out its contents from bottom to top.

“When do you have to go in?” Jonathan asked.

“Now.”

Across the street, the crowd around the puddle as well as the puddle, were a lot bigger and there were a lot of cars just sitting in the road, not sure what to do about the huge mass of sky filling the street and soaking under their tires. The elderly man looked very grumpy with blue and white smudges over his glasses.

Jonathan shrugged. “Do you want to go to The Pig tonight?”

Matthew marveled at Jonathan for a moment before remembering his friend. Matthew laughed.

“Sure, why not?” he said.

“All right, then I’ll see you tonight anyways.”

Jonathan looked up at the melting sky. There were more and more swirl patterns. A glob of sky gook dripped down far ahead over a different part of town. Jonathan pulled at the sleeves on his t-shirt. He glanced at Matthew.

“I thought you had work?”

Matthew flustered. “Oh right...yeah...guess I’ll see you.” He pulled out a pack of cigarettes and a lighter from the pocket of his jeans and put one to his mouth. Matthew took one long look at the crowd before he turned around and headed up Main Street towards the municipal parking lot around the corner. Jonathan stayed for a few more minutes, staring out and up at the sky, where more and more little swirls replaced every yesterday’s consistency.

The sky seemed wet on the road since it splashed against Jonathan’s car as he drove. The tires handled it pretty well. Outside the window, Jonathan could see segments of the sky falling like meteors towards the earth, as if the slow

drop down were too cartoon-like of a descent—now the soaring balls of light blue streaking across the swirling fragments of the afternoon sky made it seem as though today were the beginning of the apocalypse.

Jonathan made a left at a light eventually and turned into his neighborhood. A bunch of kids swam in a lake near his house, where the water looked like a mixture of vanilla and cotton candy ice cream. They splashed and played. One boy got out of the water and dried his body with a towel. The cotton candy sky paint fell off in little showers as he shook his hair. It scraped off in clumps as the boy scrubbed his arms. A few miles later, Jonathan turned into his driveway. His blue house was still blue. White streaks ran down the roof and dripped little drops down two stories to where they puddled on Jonathan's porch step and his mother's flowers. The roses were white roses now.

Jonathan got out of the car and dodged the dripping sky paint as he moved beneath the cover of the porch. He opened the door and turned into the living room. Ms. Teller sat on the couch with her arms crossed. On the TV screen, a reporter stood downtown in front of a streaked government building close to where Jonathan had just been. She talked about how the sky was melting and nobody knew why.

Ms. Teller smoked a cigarette.

"You're smoking again?" Jonathan asked. He moved to the couch opposite the one on which his mother sat. Ms. Teller blew a long puff of smoke that moved up to the ceiling and teased the fire alarm. The battery lay on a coffee table between the two of them.

"Picked it up again after talking to my friend Chicken Little this morning."

Ms. Teller ran her free hand along her thigh, pushing her finger through a hole in the fabric. She kept her eyes on the television screen.

"Do they know what's happening?" Jonathan asked.

"Nope." Ms. Teller's hand moved faster across her jeans. The living room connected to the kitchen. Between the two rooms, there were plenty of windows—blue and white sky gook pasted against all of them.

"Has anyone gotten hurt?" Jonathan asked.

"Not that I've heard," his mother replied.

"I guess that's good."

Jonathan wrung his hands together. He spun his silver ring with Christian fishes engraved on it around his middle finger. "I think Matt and I are gonna go out tonight," he said. He avoided his mother's eyes.

Ms. Teller sat silent for a few seconds. There were no lights on in the house, and the cloudy weather made the room seem especially dark. The TV provided the only source of illumination. Ms. Teller kept her eyes fixed on the screen.

"What about Erica?" she asked. Her voice was even.

Jonathan sat silent. The ring on his finger wouldn't move past his knuckle. The patter of the sky drowned out the television dialogue, and the

subtitles read like a Breton novel. Ms. Teller shook her head. Jonathan stood from the couch. He made his way past his mother, towards the stairs.

“Guess I’ll see you on the other side,” he said.

Ms. Teller blew out a long line of smoke.

“I doubt it,” she replied.

Jonathan stood in the entryway and stared at his mother. Ms. Teller did not look at him. She put out a cigarette on the coffee table and reclined. The TV screen went black.

Jonathan headed upstairs to his room and lay down on his bed. He sat and watched through the skylight over his pillow at the smears of liquefied atmosphere seeping over the window as the blues darkened into the evening shade and the whites disappeared beneath the steadily deepening tinges. Jonathan set an alarm for six o’ clock.

To get to The Slanky Pig, Jonathan had to park about a mile or two away because a lot of young people wanted to be downtown that evening to watch the sky melt. The road and all the downtown businesses were the color of the evening sky. The shades descended as such, with yellows and oranges merging into one another before darkening into a deep blue that lingered for a few blocks before fading into a black that merged with the horizon furthest from the sun. Now, the remaining evening colors fell in thin tornado swirls, touching down on the ground and flowing out across the pavement, as it would be if someone dumped barrels of paint slowly and continuously for several hours. The vortexes swirled at snail’s pace and remained stationary. Jonathan passed at least three on the way into the club.

Matthew was the first person Jonathan saw when he walked into The Pig. Matthew always sat at the bar in the seat closest to the door so he wouldn’t have to walk in front of a bunch of people looking towards the stage up front. Matthew wore black jeans and a dirty white t-shirt that melded well with the bar’s aesthetic. Jonathan took the seat next to him. Matthew swirled around to face him.

“What’s good my man?” He lifted his glass when he spoke.

“How early did you start?” Jonathan asked.

“An hour ago, maybe two” Matthew finished his drink. “Bartender sir,” he said, not loud enough for the bartender to hear. “Dammit.”

Television screens sat over the beer tap. All of them were on a different news station. One headline read “President Refuses To Leave White House.” Another mentioned something about Jesus.

Jonathan crossed his arms over the table. “Is this how you’re celebrating the end?” he asked.

Matthew twirled a thin red straw around his glass. “You know what I’d really like? I’d really like to get laid before the end. That’s what I’d like.”

The two sat in silence for a while. They listened to the opening band tune and noodle. The guitarist quoted “Purple Rain” and everybody on stage and a couple people in the club smiled.

“What do you want to do before it’s over?” Matthew asked.

Jonathan hesitated. He could hear the headlining act’s lead singer a few seats over, talking to a beautiful woman with pink hair about the meaninglessness of it all. Jonathan stared past the counter at the assortment of drinks on tap. The big sign between the TVs that read “The Slinky Pig” had all the letters lit up except the “g.” The bartender came over, looking a bit exhausted. Jonathan ordered an IPA. Matthew was still waiting.

Jonathan looked at Matthew and shrugged.

“I dunno,” he said.

The two sat in silence a while longer. Jonathan took a few sips from his drink. He really took his time with every sip. Jonathan knew that the faster he finished one, the faster he’d need to get a second one in his hand. The silence continued between the two. By now, the opening band had started their set. The room was loud and the music was loud, like a pop-punk sort of thing, so it made the silence seem not so loud or deliberate. The two friends watched the band, but they didn’t really listen beyond what they heard involuntarily. The opening act didn’t seem to mind so much that the sky was melting, or maybe they did, but they put everything they had into the thirty-minute set. A few people stood at the stage, but most stayed at the bar. The few who gathered in front of the band looked distracted. The band finished their last song with a bunch of feedback and distortion, and when it cut off, everyone resumed their conversations. Jonathan shook his beer glass, swishing the little bit left at the bottom from side to side while Matthew sobered up.

Jonathan turned and looked at Matthew, who mouthed along to the radio.

“I guess I’d kind of like to know what’s underneath it,” he said. He stared down at the brown countertop space between his hands. Matthew startled at his friend’s voice, struggling to remember the question Jonathan responded to.

“Underneath the sky?”

“Yeah, or I guess over it maybe? I dunno.” Jonathan finished off the last bit of his beer. The bartender pointed at the empty glass but Jonathan waved his hand to say, “No, thanks.”

“I figure it’s gotta be something there. If the sky is melting, it’s gotta be melting off of something, I think.”

Matthew leaned towards Jonathan and grinned.

“Hell, why not? It all makes about as much sense to me as a catfish with a drinking problem.”

Jonathan finished his drink. The lead singer who’d been talking to the beautiful girl with pink hair was now onstage with the beautiful girl with pink hair. They played a very uninspired first song, and mumbled a “thanks” in response to the few people who clapped when it was over.

“You want to get out of here, man?” Jonathan asked.

“Aye aye, captain.” Matthew pushed his bar stool back. Jonathan paid for his beer and Matthew closed his tab. The two headed out the door.

Outside, a black gook with white specks covered the ground like the first layer of accumulating snow that happened to be the color of charcoal. The new tinge of substance seemed to have devoured the pastel colors from earlier, and now there were only multiple shades of black covering the ground. People treaded over it, shaking the substance off their feet as they walked. Every step covered their shoes in more and more black sky. The gook descended in lightning-bolt-shaped fragments that looked as if they were the cracked columns holding the sky above the Earth, except they themselves were the sky. A few people stood around the bolt shapes, marveling, but most just walked around them so as not to get drenched. Folks crowded the four-lane downtown street while cars sat in the road, abandoned.

"This is insane." Matthew took out a cigarette.

Jonathan stared up at the sky.

"That it is."

Jonathan shoved his hands in the pockets of his jacket. He breathed in the smell of Matthew's cigarettes. Jonathan watched as a number of people moved through the streets and, finding their vehicles covered in the night sky, threw their hands up in the air. A few of them, after seeing other people in the same predicament, started to laugh.

"I guess we're not driving home tonight."

"Let's go to the park," Matthew said. "There'll be a bunch of people sleeping there tonight. We can call our parents and tell them the deal."

"Sounds good. I don't need to call my Mom."

Matthew looked at Jonathan, but Jonathan stared out at the road. Matthew grinned.

"All right, let's go then."

Matthew threw his cigarette on the black sidewalk. It sank into the watery substance. He pulled his phone out of his pocket and dialed as they headed towards a large hill that loomed over the downtown area and looked over towards the suburb where their families lived. Jonathan moved along beside his friend. The two treaded through the muck, ignoring the wetness of their socks, an inconvenience that kept a lot of the people around them looking flustered and uncomfortable. They moved between the tall downtown buildings and the small locally owned vintage clothes shops, bookstores, and breweries, all covered in black, blue, purple, orange, red, and yellow pigments of sky. They moved up the street and towards the park.

Jonathan and Matthew sat along the side of a hill, whose black grass stained their black jeans blacker. They stared out over the town, which blended with the color of the air so well that one could hardly discern one building from the next, nor could one see far out from the space directly in front of their own face due to the sky having blocked out all of the streetlights and lamps. A number of the people on the hill started to light up phone screens, a few even brought lamps themselves. This helped a bit with the dark.

"Maybe Salvador Dali is God," Matthew said. Jonathan smiled.

“Would you be a believer then?”

“Oh most definitely.” Matthew leaned back on his elbows with his legs outstretched. “You ready to go to heaven Jonathan?” Matthew lit another cigarette.

“Not really.” Jonathan spoke quietly. There were a lot of people on the hill, but nobody was really listening. Most folks were stranded and trying to get some sleep before work the next morning. The air was cool and perfect and a lot of the people who lived near the park decided to lend out tents for the folks sleeping outside. A few even invited strangers into their homes. A lot of the people on the hill just dealt with the sky flowing beneath them and slept on their backs. Every now and then, a new column of gook would descend right where someone lay sleeping, jolting them awake.

“I don’t really believe in heaven.” Jonathan released his knees from his chest.

Matthew raised an eyebrow. “Really? Well that’s news to me. So what do you believe in? Spirituality or some shit?” Matthew threw another cigarette into the gook. “I always say I’m going to quit.” Matthew’s lighter briefly illuminated his face, revealing the birthmark on his strong jawline, shaped like Texas. “But now doesn’t seem like the time.”

Jonathan rubbed his jaw. It wasn’t as defined as Matthew’s.

“I believe in this,” Jonathan said. He still spoke quietly, for no ears but Matthew’s.

“Hard not to, wouldn’t you say?” Matthew replied.

“No, I don’t think so.”

Matthew lay down on his back. He put one hand behind his head.

“Who do you want to be with at the end?” he asked.

Jonathan hesitated.

Matthew blew out smoke. “Ya know, I’ve probably spent a good bit of my young adulthood waiting for you to respond to things.” He stared up at the sky as he spoke. “Just tell me the first thing that comes to mind. Don’t overthink it.”

Jonathan paused to consider Matthew’s words. Matthew rolled his eyes. A woman at the base of the hill started screaming and crying about the end of the world, but everyone around her shushed and told her to be quiet.

“People are sleeping,” some indeterminate voice said.

Jonathan removed his jacket.

“I mean, I’m with you now,” he said. Jonathan moved one hand to ruffle his long black curls. He saw Matthew shift uncomfortably and continued. “I guess I could spend it with my mom.”

“Oh fuck that, man.” Matthew sat up. “You hate your mom.”

“She’s all I’ve got.”

“I’m all you’ve got.”

Jonathan grinned. “I’ve got Erica.”

“Fuck Erica too, she’s probably using the apocalypse as an excuse to fuck her way through the rest of our graduating class.” Matthew took another smoke.

“Did you ever fuck her?”

Matthew exhaled. “Shit, did I fuck her? Hell yeah I fucked her man. Shit, everybody fucks Erica.”

Jonathan shook his head.

“Who would you spend it with then?” he asked.

Matthew looked out over the town. He stared for a long time thinking, then looked real serious before he spoke.

“Probably Erica.”

The two laughed and woke up a few people around them, who glared up or down the hill. Jonathan and Matthew laughed a bit longer before quieting down. They both leaned back and stared at the columns of sky descending upon the Earth, now in perfect cylinders, over houses, buildings, skyscrapers, people, and things.

In the early morning, the sky fell like rain. It poured over everyone and repainted the Earth in grays, with bits of black, white, and blue mixed in, probably leakage from behind the clouds. Nobody outside kept a natural skin tone, and that included Jonathan and Matthew.

“I suppose this is the day racism ends,” Jonathan said.

Everybody on the hill was the color of the night sky, with blues, whites, and greys raining down over the black canvas that was their skin. Somebody tried turning on their windshield wipers, and the sky came right off. People started heading back to their cars to drive home. Jonathan and Matthew walked back to the parking lot near The Slinky Pig.

“What are you going to do today?” Matthew asked Jonathan as they reached their cars. The parking lot bustled with people assessing the damage, wiping off their mirrors, and driving away. The pavement looked like a skating rink of black ice, over which Jackson Pollock must’ve spent a few hours working. Jonathan and Matthew looked over their cars in the silence after Matthew’s question. Both vehicles were painted black now, but Jonathan’s had more stars on it.

“I dunno. I guess head home.” Jonathan leaned against his car. The sky had dried on the original paint, but the color that currently rained down seeped over Jonathan’s jacket, repainting it grey. “I might listen to that record I bought yesterday.”

“Erykah Badu?” Matthew had his hands in his pocket. He scrunched up his shoulders, even though neither the sky nor the air was cold to the touch.

“Yeah.” Jonathan pulled his hood up over his head.

Matthew looked around the parking lot at all the people rushing to get out from under the raining sky. He mumbled as if trying not to be heard. “You mind if I join you?” he asked. He avoided eye contact with Jonathan as he said the words.

Jonathan looked across the parking lot as well. He saw all of the cars slugging through the watery sky on the road. The sky splashed everywhere and painted everything, but the cars plowed through. Workers opened the doors to their shops and flipped on the signs that indicated they were still

servicing customers, regardless of the weather. Jonathan considered for a moment. He watched the cars move through the street.

“If this is the end, I don’t really want to end it like that,” he said. The parking lot had really emptied out. Only the people arriving from work were left. Matthew’s fists balled up in his jacket pocket.

“You ashamed about what we did?” Matthew stared at Jonathan.

“I’m not.”

“You sure sound...”

“I mean I’m not that way.” Jonathan’s expression was hard. Matthew’s eyes narrowed as he looked away. The grey liquid sky was now mixed with a blue that hung in the air in tiny dots like a sort of loose mist. The cars moving through scattered the small specks. The dots of sky resumed their position a few moments after the cars passed through. Matthew looked up at the sky where the gray had cleared. The swirl pattern had expanded to the point where one couldn’t see the middle where the separate arms met. Matthew looked at Jonathan without smiling.

“Yeah, me neither,” he said. Jonathan nodded.

The two men exchanged a final glance before lifting their hands in “goodbye.” Jonathan got into his car and turned the windshield wipers on. He watched through his rearview mirror as Matthew trudged across the parking lot, away from his car, swatting at the little specks of sky as he moved. Jonathan pulled out of the parking lot and headed out of downtown.

Driving over a bridge that connected the south side to the north side of town, Jonathan looked sideways over the yellow water that expanded out far enough to where one could see the planetary boundary line meet the place where the river turned into a clump of golden trees. Towards the end, the sky melted across itself like raindrops over a windshield, inching slowly down until the various clumps of blues seeped over the leaves of the forest and made the ground and the sky merge into one visual.

Jonathan passed off the bridge and over a hill where, at the top, the sun was directly in front of him and he could see the way its rays cracked and splintered into liquid lines that descended upon the houses of the suburbs, still painted black, blue, and white from the night and morning’s precipitate. The sun’s tears repainted the homes in golden hues—tiny drops of it dripped over the sides of roofs and covered the neighborhood’s green lawns and brown mulches in a silky shine. On and on, the sky melted. Jonathan looked upwards and squinted to see if he could tell what was beneath all the melting parts, but all he could discern was more sky, constantly filling and feeding into itself. Jonathan leaned back in his car seat and sighed. He headed home.

Jason Tandon

**Driving to the Package Store So I Don't Have
to Go One Evening without a Beer, I See the
Full Moon Massive and White and Shaded
with Craters and Realize for the First Time in
a Long Time, I Live on a Planet in Space**

Joanne Diaz

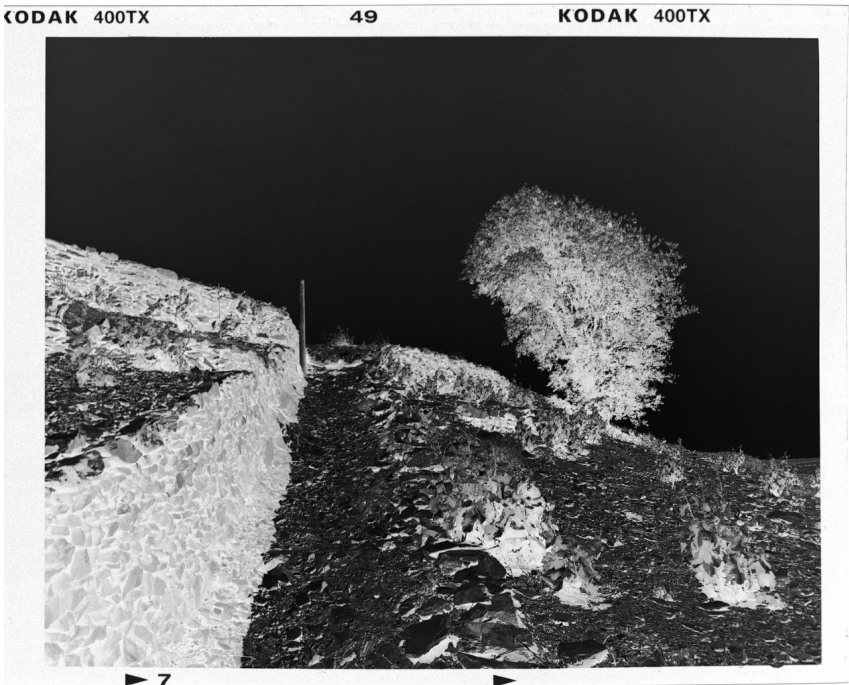
Negative

At first, when I look, I can barely see
the wide sky, the narrow path, the angle
of the tree, the dryness of the isolation,
the wildness of the border, the broken stones.
For me, until now, negatives have been
imperfect dreams, mines yielding no gold,
plastic slips of film and gelatin emulsion
inverting the world into chemical winter,
but that was my error. They are the heretics,
the ones who choose to say no
to what's easiest to see. Just as the latent
becomes fixed in the darkroom,
so too do I now see the image beneath this one:
the resemblance between the openness
of this path and the one that, eighty years ago,
the Spanish refugees crossed to get to France,
hastily packed suitcases in hand, heavy sacks
draped on shoulders, limping children in tow,
dress shoes on wet feet, arms in slings,
woolen jackets from the lost war, crutches
and canes, abandoned trucks, empty
fuel canisters, babies with the last piece of bread
in their hands, the white sun on the beach,
barbed wire and sand their only grave.

[Note: This poem refers to the end of the Spanish Civil War, when 500,000 anti-fascist soldiers and their families escaped across the Pyrenees. For those Spaniards who survived the journey, most died of dehydration and overexposure in refugee camps in the south of France; and those who survived that calamity died in concentration camps scattered throughout Europe during World War II.]

Jason Reblando

Negative



Lauren K. Carlson

Driving Highway 67 While Listening to *This American Life*

and the host to my horror describes
what happens when
a human heart gets left behind in or on the airplane transporting it,

no that's not the whole story

though there are those who'd chalk-it-up to life, luck, divine negligence, devil's
curses, fate, mad science, hot-button
medicine,

for all the ways compatibility makes itself known
this curious reporter persists in search of: How often,

how many? Forgotten hearts.
 Half miracles.
One in another's— one loss puts off another's—

The radio host, from where, who knows—

likely some metropolis with a brick
and square, soundproof room

broadcasting unlikely complications
born of ingenuity and negligence; both/and
human, inhumane.

Aren't you and I each other's stewards?
Through any magnetic field, radio waves rippling.
We cavity-carrying vessels.

Transplant patient, hurried attendant, skillful pilot,
plane with failing engine, our runway —dear god—

intended solely for crop-dusters.

Chris Forhan

Toward What's Beyond the Self

Past the sleeping bees and still pondwater,
past silt-drift and updrafts of ash,
past gravity, accretion, decay, the has-beens
and who's-to-come, past love and scruple,
sadness, owing and aloneness — all that,
go past it, go toward a purer
aloneness, blackness past the galaxy,
snowfall at the back of the brain,

and what will you be then, and where, and what use
as your hair falls out in clumps in the tub,
as your small son calls for you in his sleep?

You Can't Spell Slaughter Without Laughter

You're not a racist. Really. You're white, sure, but it's not like you identify that way. You're just you, a hunter, an outdoorsman, a man. Your name is even biblical for Christ's sake. Adam. The first man. You're big and burly with a long, bushy beard. Yeah. So, you fit the part.

You always wear baseball caps, the patch of a tractor company's logo sewn on the front. Sometimes, you wear overalls. You work in a gun store, and your truck has a gun rack, but that's not weird where you come from. Like most people in your town, you wear your industrial work shirts with your name stitched over the breast, even on your days off, even though everyone already knows your name.

So, who cares if you're a little racist? You're certain it's not in a harmful way. You're human. You're American. How many of us aren't a little racist, prejudiced, or whatever? You treat people the way you want to be treated, no matter who or what they are. Shit, even your wife is Black, technically. So, really, how much of a racist can you actually be?

Wait. Let's not answer that.

*

You're on a hunting trip, all by yourself. You're in your tent, sleeping. You're having that one dream about your wife, the one where you're walking in the woods at night and you happen to see her peeking out from behind a tree. She whistles and comes up to you, lissome and lean, topless, her perky little breasts looking at you like two happy eyes.

She says, "Hello, you big ole boy," just like when you met in that bar a long time ago. Though she's nude, you aren't upset about it. It's just you two out here. You aren't necessarily aroused either. What interests you is the rest of her. From the waist down, she has the body of a deer. She's like a centaur from Greek mythology, half-woman, half-doe.

You want to say things to her, but the words won't come. You touch your face and realize you have no lips, no mouth, just your beard. You search with your hand for an opening in all that hair.

"What, cat got your tongue?" She's radiant, as though a spotlight is shining only on her. You watch her deer legs and torso, her white tail fluttering on her backside. You hear twinkling chimes every time she moves her delicate hooves and dances on the white ground.

"It's snowing," she says. "Look."

You peer around in the darkness, and fat flakes are floating down like flower petals, landing in your upturned hand as big as communion wafers. She touches your face, and your mouth is suddenly there again. You're so relieved. You breathe and gasp, and a flake lands on your tongue, cold and sweet. You say, "Hey," and she gallops off, kicking her hind legs up in the air, giggling. You take a step, giving chase, but then you awaken.

It's morning. You unzip your tent, and outside, there's a fresh blanket of snow. You see tracks only feet away, deer tracks, and you think your wife's name, Eve. Evie. The first woman.

You've been married to her for seven years.

*

You, you're good at hunting. You've always been. No one in your family taught you either. You took it up yourself. You're an autodidact, but you're a little ashamed that you know what the word means.

Your father hated guns, wouldn't let you have one, not even a bb gun, not even a fucking slingshot. It wasn't until he died in your early twenties that you took gun safety and hunter training classes. The whole time, you thought he was somewhere in the afterlife judging you, calling you a barbaric fool. He was a philosophy professor at the university, a conscientious objector. He was a vegetarian for ethical reasons before everyone else was. Sometimes you wonder how he produced you, how you came from him. Are you into all this manly stuff just because his death made you feel so helpless? Fuck no, you tell yourself. You just like being a man.

You aren't some freak either. You may work in a gun store, but you don't have any ridiculous guns, assault rifles, illegal stuff that wackos do mass shootings with. This isn't fun-and-games dress-up for you. You're not part of a militia. You're not one of those guys who pretends he's Rambo. You own just three basic guns. A rifle, a shotgun, and a sidearm, a Colt .45 to be exact, all a hunter needs.

You have them all on you now, as you crouch atop a wooded hill, waiting. You're looking down on a tiny valley between the hill you're on and one about sixty yards away. Paul, one of your buddies who you're pretty sure is actually racist, told you about this spot. He's gotten a number of kills here, the little valley a natural funnel as all kinds of large game wander down to the raging river to the south. And here they come.

You hear them long before you see them, a billion hooves pounding your way. You have an elk tag, which you've obtained through a lottery, and you hope that's what's coming. Elk and elk and elk. You can almost feel the stampede rumble the ground beneath you. You raise your rifle even though the herd hasn't even crossed your area. Suddenly, there the first few are, and then more, and then a lot more, what seems like hundreds. There are so many that you almost want to take your eye away from the scope, lower your rifle, and just look at them, marvel at their numbers. How are there this many elk in the world? But then you blink and backtrack and sight a few, cows and calves. You sight one buck and can't get him. You sight another and feel confident. You aim ahead and pull the trigger. You chamber another round, sight another, and let off again, but you probably missed.

You're pretty sure you got the first one, though. You don't know until the massive herd passes. There's a lone cow looking down at a brown mound in the snow, and you yelp. "Yes, goddammit!" You tack down the hill into the open valley, the snow a trampled mess now. The cow turns its big head and looks at you and then the body just steaming there. The cow takes a last look and then gallops away, oddly unafraid. You wonder if it

was the buck's mate, how long they'd been together. No matter. The buck is gone. It was a heart shot. It didn't feel a thing. As far as it knew, its lights just slowly dimmed and then went black.

You retrieve your truck, looking out for mountain lions, creeping to take your kill. You peel off your coat, standing over what will be enough meat for a year and a half, free meat, clean meat. You open the animal from tail to neck with your knife, the skin unzipping as smoothly as a new jacket. You separate the windpipe and pull it and the intestines toward the rear of the body cavity. The steaming pluck, it all spills out as one chain, the heart, the liver, the lungs, and the trachea. It peels away from the body, rolling downhill from the cavity, the intestines a ball of wriggling snakes, all of it smelling like life and death.

With a Sawzall, you quarter the animal and put each hunk in its own large cooler. You don't take the humongous head or the hooves, though. Like bad memories, you leave them behind.

*

Evie used to be so smart, so with it. Now, she has brain damage. She isn't a vegetable or anything. She's just really slow. She can use a wheelchair, and with a walker, she can get around, but most of the time she just sits on the side of her large hospice bed in the living room, watching TV with the sound too loud. The Price is Right. Wheel of Fortune. Jeopardy. Happy shows with buzzers. She laughs and slaps her thigh when people get the answers wrong. She giggles. She has the mind of a twelve-year-old at best, and because of her injury and all the surgeries, she has crazy scars all over her scalp. Her head is even a bit square-shaped now. She looks nothing like when you first met. She asks you a lot of questions.

"When did you get back?"

"Late."

"Where did you go?"

"Hunting."

"Did you get anything?"

"You're damn right."

"What?"

You kiss her cheek. You rub her head even though it always gives you the shivers. Her hair's grown back a little since her last cut. It's all fuzzy and furry. You hope she'll let it grow longer. "I got food. Peace of mind. Don't worry about it."

Because of the accident, the doctors said she would look different. You always remember this. Her features will be the same, the doctors said, but it's the way she controls them. You didn't know what they meant, but the first time you saw her, you understood. Her eyes used to be so smoky and thinned. She didn't trust the world. Now, they're wide and round and innocent, hungry for sights. There's no mystery to her anymore. Whatever knowledge that used to lurk behind her eyes is gone. She looks as slow as her mind. You're not even sure she still feels pleasure, if she's capable.

Once, you touched her between her legs, just to see, just to prove it to yourself, and she said, “What are you doing?” She squirmed, but you were as gentle as always. She moaned, but you couldn’t tell what that meant. She got wet. When it was over, she said, “Will you do that again?”

You were never sure if it was because she wanted you to or if she was afraid you would. So, you don’t. It was just once. You make her a peanut butter and jelly sandwich now. It’s all she likes. Grape jelly. Always the grape.

*

Paul, your racist friend, is a cop. He’s been to one of the president’s rallies. He’s tried to get you to go, but you tell him you don’t like crowds, which is true. Twice a week, you go out drinking with him. He gets pretty hammered, but from the same amount of booze, you only get tipsy since you’re bigger than him. It’s almost winter so when you guys go outside to smoke, you sit in his truck. You do bumps of cocaine. You off the tip of your pinky, him off the sharp blade of his pocket knife, always off of the knife. It makes him feel like a man. He’s only about five-foot-five.

He tells you all his conspiracy theories. Lee Harvey Oswald was really a set of twins trained up since birth to be killing machines. “It was the CIA,” he says. “Or was it the FBI?” One twin was Lee, and the other was Harvey. That’s why “Lee Harvey” was seen in two places at once around the time of the JFK assassination.

Paul doesn’t know that you’re a twin, identical, that your brother died soon after childbirth. You were the firstborn, which is usually the stronger, bigger of the two. Noah, your bro, was weak, stillborn, choked by his umbilical cord. You want to say that Elvis Presley was a surviving twin like you, but you keep that to yourself. You wonder if that’s why you always feel odd in the world, having been in a womb with your dead best friend. But you try not to think of these things. It was just something that happened. It happens to animals all the time. Nature, it doesn’t mean anything. It was bad luck.

“Well, which one did it?” you say. “Lee or Harvey?”

“Doesn’t matter. They were the same person. Cold-blooded killers.” He takes another bump from the tip of his knife.

You ask if he thinks there was a lone gunman, Lee or Harvey or whoever?

“It’s possible,” he says.

“But what about the distance and the timing. It was a bolt action rifle. They say he wasn’t that good a shot. He was slow.”

“True,” Paul says. “But what if the one time he had to be lucky, he was?”

“Being lucky in killing someone, someone innocent.” You shake your head. You’re suddenly wired from the snort. “It’s pretty fucked.”

“I don’t know. Who says JFK was innocent? I think it’s kind of

inspirational. Lee Harvey executed an impossible plan, and it actually fucking worked.”

You both crack your windows, and outside you can smell the tire fire. It’s been burning for a month. Four million used tires, stored for recycling began burning a month ago. Set afire by some pyro. You secretly wonder if it was Paul.

Although fire officials expected to extinguish the blaze in a day, it’s been too difficult to contain. People call it “Mount Firestone,” “Mount Bridgestone,” “The Michelin Monster.” It’s made national news as it continues to smolder and pollute and make your town seem like a bunch of hicks.

You see a couple Black guys leave the bar, and Paul says, “Watch.” He yells the n-word and then rolls up his window really fast, snickering. He can’t see either of you. Most of the cars in the parking lot have frosted windshields. They look around for a moment and then just get in their truck and leave. Paul puts his window back down, still laughing. “That doesn’t make me a racist. I know those guys.” He takes a big whiff of the air. “Man, I gotta say, I don’t really mind the smell of burning rubber. To me, it smells kind of good. What do you think?”

*

Since Evie was put up for adoption at birth, she grew up in foster care. She’s Black but very light-skinned. She could be anything really, Latin, Native American. Before the accident, whenever she straightened her hair, she could pass for white, maybe Italian. You used to call her Pocahontas. She was raised by white people. So, she’s kind of Black and kind of not to you. Still, the first time you went to bed, the sight of her dark brown nipples, you sucking on them made you come way too quick. She has no family. Neither do you really. You have a mother, but she’s in Florida with your Cuban stepdad, Alfredo, who you barely know. You talk to them on holidays, but it’s been years since you’ve seen them. They’re basically gone.

So, of course, it would never occur to you to say the n-word. You don’t mimic Indian customer service reps. They’re just doing a job, wherever they are. Foreign accents aren’t funny to you either. If someone is telling you a story, it doesn’t even occur to you to ask what anyone’s race is. You don’t even assume everyone in said story is white.

But you have prejudices. You think things. You’re not absolved of this. When you’re around people who aren’t white, you feel like they’re thinking something. You’re not paranoid, but you wonder if they’re saying things about you, especially if they speak a different language. When you look at them and they turn away, you’re pretty sure they’re trying to be funny with each other. You’re the butt of some joke. But then you think, no, don’t be like that. They’re not thinking anything weird. They’re thinking about the same things you think about. Life, making enough money, happiness. Your father would think you’re an idiot for thinking otherwise. He’d say

you're small. An ignoramus. He'd swat the back of your head and call you homunculus.

*

"Cut my hair," Evie says.

"No," you say. "Let's wait."

"Wrong answer."

"Why don't you let it grow out for once?"

It's been four years since her accident. She's only been home with you for two. She'd been hit head-on by a drunk driver, who survived without a scratch and was put in jail. You and Evie talked to a therapist once at her doctor's urging. It was important Evie worked through the trauma her own way. You thought she should just get better, move on, let her hair grow, be normal. But now that she's different, she wants to revisit her scars, doesn't want to hide them. Often as you watch TV with her, she runs her fingers over each one, tracing them as though counting where every stitch once lived, each staple. You remember how split her skull was, each shell of bone shaped like a continent on a globe. It never occurred to you that doctors used actual staples until you saw them. Her head was held together like Frankenstein's.

"It's getting fuzzy," she says, running her hand over her hair. "I don't like it fuzzy."

You both just watch Jeopardy. You finish your beer and crack a fresh one. She says she'll cut it herself if you won't, always her little threat. So, you say fine and get out the clippers. The one time she did it herself, it was all patchy and hideous. If her head has to be shaved, it might as well look right.

One of the contestants says, "I'll take 'Is that racial?' for \$200, Alex?" and Evie laughs.

Oafishly, she repeats it. "Is that racial? for \$200, Alex?"

"What the hell kind of category is that?"

"It's a funny one," Evie says.

You wrap an old sheet around her, stuffing it into her t-shirt collar.

"People didn't talk about this stuff before." It makes you feel uneasy.

You flick on the hair clippers, the motor so strong it feels like a fish trying to jump out of your hand.

"They do now."

You cut a path straight down the middle of her head, and her hair falls away like fur. She looks down and smiles, knowing she's getting cleaned up.

"Do you feel Black?" You cut around one ear.

"I am Black," she says. "So, of course, I feel Black. How else should I feel?"

"But you were raised by white people."

"So?"

You walk around her and look in her face. It's times like this when you

ask her simple questions that she almost seems normal, like how she used to be, playfully argumentative. But then she looks up at you with her new wide eyes. You cut around her other ear, cut the rest down to stubble.

“Ooh, my head feels so cool now.” She turns it from side to side, smiling. “It’s like suede.”

You’ve bought her wigs. And now, you try to get her to wear one. It’s a mistake, you know, but maybe it’ll work this time. The wigs are mostly just straight hair ones, different colors, black, blonde, neon pink. There’s even a small afro wig that you got from a costume store around Halloween. You put it on her. “For Black History Month,” you say.

“That’s February, though.”

You shrug.

Even an afro would be better than her bare scalp. You pass a handheld mirror in front of her, and she smiles at first and then goes blank. She furrows her brow in a distrustful way. Maybe it reminds her of how she used to look. Maybe it’s a painful sight. She pulls the wig off and says, “Wrong answer.” Her head is shaved and strange, her scalp pale like someone from the Holocaust.

She looks at herself in the mirror again, running her hand back and forth over her head. She giggles. “It’s prickly. I like prickly. Do you like it?”

“I am prickly,” you say.

She giggles again as you sweep her hair into a tidy little pile.

*

Occasionally, you go out to a huge open field with a few small watermelons, maybe a cantaloupe, and see if your scopes are out of whack. You’re not a weirdo gun nut. You would never want to be in the military, be some cold-blooded sniper. You’re just bored and meticulous. You change the oil in your truck every two months like clockwork, way before you actually need to. Everything you own is in perfect order. It’s something you started doing after Evie’s accident, after your father’s death. You control things in a productive way, like a Samurai, like a chef. Grady, your boss at the gun store, calls you “The Surgeon,” whenever a gun comes in for repair.

In the field, you set up your tripod. Seventy-five yards away, you set up the melons. The field backs up to a treeless hill, where there’s no chance of accidentally shooting someone. You consider the real-life ways in which you will shoot, whether defensively, for hunting or in competition, and tailor the rest of your shooting around that. You turn your testing into training so you can get a better feel for what you can really do with the tools in your hands.

Each melon explodes on the first shot. Unlike Lee Harvey, there’s no luck involved. It’s all planning and skill. Just as you suspect, your scopes are in fine whack, perfectly fine. You take good care of everything you own, like your life depends on it.

*

Every few weeks, when you're feeling in a good mood, you take Evie out for breakfast for dinner, her favorite. You make her wear one of your old baseball caps, which is too big for her head. You sit in the back of the waffle house where Evie used to work, and all her old coworkers come over and say hi. They bring you whatever you want, on the house. You have plates of waffles and hash browns, all the food you could ever want, but Evie just has a peanut butter and jelly, toasted this time, a luxury for her here.

Jade, her old best friend, comes over and talks to you two. You and Jade act like you don't occasionally fuck when the need strikes both of you. Her ex is locked up for too many DUIs. He's a screw-up that keeps getting in trouble in the penitentiary. She's no longer waiting for him. But you, you're strong and have a beard. You're responsible. You've stood by Evie. Jade said that makes her horny. You always give her some of the game meat you kill.

When you head to the john, leaving Evie to talk with another old coworker, Jade meets you there. She locks the door. You kiss. She wiggles her hand down into your jeans. You wiggle yours into hers. You just hold each other down there, in those clammy sexual areas. Neither of you orgasm. After, she lights a cigarette. You make plans to meet up at a motel soon. You leave first, and she waits and finishes her cigarette. This is how you always do it. No one seems to be the wiser.

*

The day after Thanksgiving, you go drinking with Paul again. On the way home, he doesn't turn off the highway. Instead, he goes two towns over, to the one with the big Walmart. When he does turn off the highway, it's down some forest road with signs that say "Apartments Coming Soon." There's construction equipment on long flatbeds here and there, piles of site gravel. He says he wants to show you something.

"Where you taking me?" you say. "Lover's lane?"

He grabs your neck and squeezes. "I need to be with you."

"You're not gonna take advantage of me, are you? I'm not that kind of girl."

"Oh, baby," he says, touching your leg now. "Don't be like that."

You both laugh and then punch each other in the shoulder.

The road opens up into a clearing. Across, there is a subdivision about a hundred yards away. He lights a joint, and you say, "For a cop, you sure do a lot of drugs."

"Weed isn't a drug. It's a plant, smart guy."

You take a puff and cough your face off. "Sure tastes like a drug." It starts to hit you immediately. Your head goes warm. Your scalp tingles. Your heart is pumping. You're blasting off. "Feels like one, too," you giggle.

"It's pretty good, isn't it? Seized it off some teenagers. Those little shits have the best bud nowadays."

You pass the joint back and forth. You roll down your window. You sniff the air and can only barely smell the tire fire. But it's there. You can sense it.

Paul nudges you. You think it's to hand you the joint again, but instead he's giving you a pair of binoculars. "Here, look thataway, at those houses."

You smile. You think it'll be some naked lady that he spies on. It wouldn't be unlike Paul. But when you look through, you see a Black guy in a house's open garage. He's tinkering with a car whose hood is open and up. He's looking down into the engine compartment as though he doesn't know what's wrong.

"Tariq," Paul says. "The motherfucker's out after only three years. Prison overcrowding."

You instantly think of Evie. You should get home to her. You want to lower the bins, but you don't. You keep watching. You dial up the focus. You can see the gold crucifix around his neck. "Why the fuck are you telling me this?"

"I figured you'd want to know. I'd want to know if the piece of shit Black nigger who fucked up my lady is out of jail, free, fucking trying to change his spark plugs, while she's at home, damn near a vegetable."

You slap him. "Shut up." You're pointing your finger at him. It's right in his face.

Paul nods. He looks down at it. "Good one."

You've slapped him hard enough to split his lip. He touches it and looks at his hand. There's a little blood there. He licks it and spits a tiny bit out his window. Then he sucks on the joint like nothing happened.

I'm not like you, you think.

As though reading your mind, he says, "You're like me more than you know." He passes the joint. When you take it and suck on it, too, he smiles and says, "See?"

*

You put it out of your mind. You don't look anything up about Tariq, just like you didn't when it all happened. You just let it be. No matter what you do, you have no control over it or the law or how any of this shit works. You control what you can control. You dig out one of the elk legs and debone it. You pack it in pounds of salt and put a weight on it. You want to cure it and make it into prosciutto. You let it sit for a few weeks till most of the moisture has drained out. You salt it some more and then hang it in a burlap sack from one of the rafters in your garage.

While you work, you listen to music on your old computer that still has all your ancient college reports on it. When you're done, you look at pictures of Evie in your pictures folder, the one marked "Before." You're about to jerk off, but then you hear her behind you asking what you're doing. Without turning around, you stuff your dick back in your pants, you zip up. You tell her to go back inside. You're not doing anything. She goes.

After a while, you hear a buzzer on the TV. “Wrong answer.” Evie giggles. “Wrong, wrong, wrong,” she says like a little girl. “You’re all just wrong.”

*

Work gets busy. Politics have changed. According to cable news, the libs are taking over. They’re trying to take your guns. “Sales are skyrocketing,” Grady says. He’s a skeptic and fairly apolitical for a gun enthusiast. He thinks it’s the NRA, stoking fear to increase the gun economy. A few young guys come in looking for ammo for firearms that aren’t technically legal. You tell them they’d be better off looking online, on the dark web.

“The dark what?”

“Google it,” you say.

You sell a few Desert Eagles to soccer moms who can barely hold them up. The women say the Mexicans are coming to take our jobs and rape us. One of them gives you her number. After, you go out back and eat a PB and J, and then smoke a cigarette, thinking of Evie. You’re doing such a good job at the store that Grady tells you to get your money right. You go down to the bank with him and look into a business loan. He wants to retire and offload the store on you. He’s going to move down to Costa Rica or Guyana or maybe Ecuador and build a place, live cheap. There’s nothing keeping him here now that his wife’s dead.

“This country is doomed,” he says. “Don’t you see?”

“Sure, but what can I do? What can anyone do?”

“Somebody better figure it out before something bad happens. Because something bad’s on the horizon, youngster. And I’m not trying to be here when it shows up.”

You’re driving his nice new truck. Whenever you go somewhere with him, to lunch, to a ball game, you do the driving, like with your dad. You turn and watch Grady look at the horizon right now, as if something bad is over there. If he had the money, he says, he’d buy a spaceship and just fly off.

You ask where, and he says he doesn’t know.

“But I’m pretty sure aliens don’t have any of these problems.”

*

Reluctantly, you see Paul again, and you two act like nothing happened. He comes over, and you drink some beers in the garage. He’s brought over his meat grinder with the sausage-stuffing kit, and you go at it with all the meat scraps left over from butchering the elk.

Not long into it, he says, “You know, I’ve been keeping an eye on him for you.”

“Who?”

“Who do you think?”

“Why?”

“Because why not?”

Since the elk is so lean, you mix in some suet and grind it all again.

“I don’t get you, man. I ain’t gonna tell nobody.”

“Tell nobody what?”

“You know. If you want to handle it.”

You don’t want to go there so you stay quiet. You throw the meat into the hopper and start plunging the sausage mix into casings. Paul spins and ties each link. He’s doing it a little haphazardly. You want them perfect, all the same length and tightness, so they’ll cook evenly. But you let it go. You both work and drink and say nothing. To break the silence, you tell him about Grady’s plan for you to take over the business.

“Fuck that,” Paul says. “Forget the bank. I’ll fund you. I’ve got thirty grand saved up. I’ll just be your partner. We’ll run the place together.”

He’s gotten closer to you as you stand at your stainless steel workbench.

You say you’ll think about it, but you know he’s adamant.

“What’s to think about? I’m your friend, ain’t I?”

“Sure.” You realize he’s drunk now. You are, too. You want to say let’s talk later, but he’s looking at you in an odd way. He licks his lips. For some reason, he’s coming toward you fast. Suddenly, his lips are on yours.

You push him away. “Man, what the fuck?”

“What?”

“What? What’re you doing?”

“Don’t tell me you don’t want it.”

“Want what?”

He coughs and spits, backing away. He’s embarrassed now. “Listen.” He can’t even look at you. “I’m not a gay, all right?”

“A gay?”

“Yeah, I’m not some—” He wants to say the word “faggot,” but he can’t make it happen. “I was just messing with you. All right?”

“If you say so.”

He lights a ciggie and takes a puff before pitching it in your yard. “Don’t tell nobody, okay?”

“Who am I going to tell?”

He nods but still doesn’t look at you. Under his breath, he says he should be heading off. He grabs the wrapped up sausages and opens your ancient chest freezer and sets them inside. He lingers by the garage door. “You should check that thing. The compressor’s going. Feeling kind of warm in there.”

He scratches his neck, looking down at his boots. Finally, he leaves, and you walk over to the freezer. It was your father’s. You’ve always been hesitant to get rid of it. It’s the last thing you have of his. You give it a kick and then another, and the compressor starts going again, purring like a kitten, just like you knew it would.

*

As the weeks pass, Christmas approaching, work gets even busier. On a rare day off, you finish up with the sausage, and the grinder gets jammed. You take it apart and find a hunk of brass stuck in there. The actual bullet. It looks fairly intact, but then you look through the meat and see it's flecked with tiny sparkling shards. You throw it away, but you keep the bullet in your shirt breast pocket, right under your name.

That night, you meet Jade at a motel two towns over and have sex. She's a little older than you. She knows what she's doing in the rack. She can do porn star stuff, servicing you like you're a king. She wants to snuggle, you to hold her, but you never like just lying in bed. You jump up, are zipping your pants, putting your hat back on, when she says she has something to tell you.

You anticipate it. You already know. "You're pregnant." You turn around, and she's sitting on the bed, still naked, barely covered by the strewn sheets.

"I'll pay for it," you say.

"For what?"

"You know."

She looks away, disappointed. She lights a cigarette quickly. She's jittery now, shaking her head like she knew it was a mistake messing with another stupid man.

You say, "What?" and she springs up and runs into the bathroom.

"I'll go with you." You walk over just as she slams the door. You place your mouth right by the jamb. "I said I'll go." There's no sound in there. "It'll be fine."

When you come home, you're met with Evie and her questions.

"Where have you been?"

"Hunting."

"But where?"

"In the wilderness."

"Did you get anything?"

"Not this time."

"Oh," she says. "That's a pity."

*

At the bank, you and Grady finish up the lending process. The bank is in the big Walmart. You meet with the loan officer, a religious guy who has crosses on his desk. While you're going over the finer details of the loan, you turn and see Tariq walking by with a cart full of groceries. He sees you watching him. He doesn't know it's you. He nods and smiles. You're both men. You sense him thinking this. You see his tiny gold cross around his neck. He's buff. He must've turned his life around in prison. He's wearing weightlifting gloves. He must've just come from the gym.

Grady says, "Hey, Adam. You still with us?"

You turn back to the lender's desk. He's holding out a pen. "Here, young brother," he's saying.

You feel like you're signing your life away.

At home, you go out to the garage and find a rat nibbling on your prosciutto hanging from one of the rafters. It's climbed up one of the exposed wall studs, crawled across a rafter and down the rope you've suspended the cured elk leg with. It's been doing it for quite some time, you realize. There's a big chunk missing. Angry, you bat the rodent off with a shovel handle. You hit it good because it goes flying across the garage and sits motionless on the concrete.

You haven't been in here for a little while now that you think about it. You wonder what else is wrong. You turn to the freezer and don't hear it running. You open it, and it's full of water, completely defrosted. All the meat you painstakingly packaged is just floating in there. You unwrap it and put it in trash bags. You take it out to the woods. You dump it, and already you see a coyote and then another one, watching you, licking their chops. You sit in your truck and watch them go at it. There are six of them now, looking back every few moments to see if you're still there. You wonder if they see how alike you all are. They look back at you as you drive off, and you wonder if they're thankful.

*

You check out for a while as Christmas passes uneventfully. Jade takes care of the baby situation herself. You don't even know how much an abortion costs so you send her a check for five hundred and a card with Kris Kringle on the front. Happy holidays. You look at your bank balance every other day and realize she hasn't cashed the money and never will.

A few weeks after New Year's, you go drinking by yourself. The gun store is yours now. Grady sold all of his stuff and is now in Costa Rica, looking at places to buy. His nice new truck is yours now, too. You haven't seen or heard from Paul. You even ask the bartender, but he just says he's been hanging out at a different bar. You say, "Is there a gay bar in town now?" and the bartender laughs and gives you a free shot.

You're sitting here, just drinking alone. It's Sunday so it's dead as a doornail in the bar. You wish someone you know would come in. You look around and see the two Black guys Paul called the n-word that one time. They're playing pool and can feel you watching them. They look over at you, the younger one leaning on his pool cue. They're hunters, too. You can smell it on them. He asks if there's a problem, and you turn around and say, "Nope, no problem at all, brother." You cash out. You go outside and get in your truck. You see the only truck in the parking lot other than yours, the Black guys' truck. And you see it has a gun rack in it, too. You get out and pull one of your business cards from your wallet. You write, "Come on in sometime," on the back and put the card under their windshield wiper.

You head home, but you don't pull off the highway. You go two towns over, to the one with the big Walmart. You're out driving through that forest, coming up on that field. You sit where you and Paul once sat. You look through your binos, and there he is. Tariq. Why does he have to be

here now? Is this just luck? Good for you, bad for him? You take your rifle from the rack behind your head and get out. You scope him just because, just to see if you can do it. He's right there, alone like you, magnified in the crosshairs. He's standing still, upright, working on his car in the driveway, fiddling with a wrench. Look, there's the side of his head. It'll be such an easy shot.

You let it play out. Everything will be tidy, neat. There are tire tracks everywhere, boot prints everywhere. There's that sign. Apartments Coming Soon. Excavator tracks everywhere. No one could separate yours from theirs. You'll disassemble your gun and melt it down, if you have to, burn it like the tire fire. You'll wash up real good. Paul may figure it out. He'll know your secret, but you already know his. Really, you can do all this.

You chamber a round now, just to see if you can do that. It goes in like butter.

You aren't a racist. You just gave your card to those other Black guys. You told them to come in sometime. You called them "brother." You know race exists somewhere out there, but in your white male mind, it's just a far-off land you've never been to, a place you'll never go. That's not why you're doing this. It doesn't matter that Evie is so light that she could almost pass for white. It doesn't matter that he's as dark as a real African. Now that you're here, now that you've reached this point mentally, now that you're ready to do this, you think you'd do it no matter who it was. You'd do this if it was your father or your brother.

He deserves this. He's earned it. This guy. Tariq. What the hell kind of name is that anyway? This is a town. This isn't the ghetto. This isn't Afghanistan. What is he, a terrorist? He might as well be. In a few seconds, it might not matter. You'll let off the shot. You won't miss. The smoke from the barrel will rise and float away, mixing with the smoke from the tire fire, all of it mingling, going off somewhere else.

At home, Evie will ask her questions.

"Where did you go?"

"Hunting."

"Yeah, but where?"

"In the wilderness."

"Did you get anything?"

You think of Noah. Maybe this is for him, too. You think of Lee and Harvey, those twins who were actually one person. You will correct all the wrong things since the accident, everything out of place in your life, put them back in order. You hold the rifle stock firmly, steady. You're right. You're justified. And, hey, even if you aren't, that's okay, too. Because with life, like any good hunt, when this is over, you'll keep what's useful. You'll leave the rest, those smelly parts. Whatever spoils on you in the process is just part of the game.

Kyle McCord

In Spite of It All

Tolkien's masterpiece played
as the cat performed for us
the many paths of peace.

Water aggregated in towels
and there was sex
when the baby slept.

In spite of it all
after ninety-nine mile an hour winds
in four days
we regained electricity.

After toppled telephone lines
with the E.R. at capacity
we watched the perfidy
of a president without surprise.

We couldn't call
into morning radio
without an idiot doing the same

some simulacra of white anger
thoughtless as a beer
can cast on a lake—
bobbing spent
taking on water.

But bread still sparkled
in its bag even if we feared
what hands kneaded
the dough

even if some we knew
dragged on ventilators.

900,000 women
walked out
of the workforce
said the radio

As though it were a sliding door
passing one day into next.

And in spite of it all
at times, spite
rolled off us like a tempest
through the gutters
into the street

where I wore a ranger's bandana.
I trod the paths of the dead.

and in spite of it all
we wanted to love
our neighbors
through masks thick
as border walls.

Curse me if I lie.

I wanted to love you like a thousand
cavalry trampling
the damp earth.

Kyle McCord

To Aunt Betty Who Believes Fox News

Sixty degrees and snowing: impossible
pouts your inner cynic. Like Mothra
or aliens capering about the woods
in early October for leaf peeping
light probing, if the mood strikes.

Bullshit, you mouth, so certain
climate change is a sham.
Scandals routine as sundown
you cry outlandish as Area 51.
Still, you watch flurries wash the willows.

The old idols live there, you know
pagan stones kings of graveborne fiefdoms.
In these clearings, your ancestors
learned to kneel to powerful men
beneath the canopy's rite of flap and caw.

What blood they offered for these myths
to be certain of the harvest
to avoid the flame, the sharp end
of the reed, the banks littered with husks
some still alive and begging.

So when you praise the president's tweet
I hear a primal drum pulsating.
Behind you is the grim
avalanche of history
you cheer without mercy.

Oh I know this nauseating want
to obey, which cares not about
the sharpness of the stones
desperate hands reaching out
you'd sooner bind than grasp.

Natalie Tombasco

Swampland with Red Solo Cups

i.

I think of floodlight as moon, as deodand,
as flypaper. Think Ophelia as saint or martyr,

floating in poppies & lily pads & heavy
with drink. Think of landscape as red

wagon, as unspooled cassette tape. Born
from a sigh & malt liquor, we're an island

of youth, frozen, untouched, beautiful—
so edgy with swamp-slick hair, bright-eyed

& bushy-tailed kind of rigor mortis.
Garden snakes slither along darling corpses,

frogs tszuj the messy buns of decapitated heads:
Laura Palmer, Winehouse, Jonbenét.

Call us disposable: compost heap in the backseat
of a jeep, impressionable as a fossil leaf.

Consider us ephemeral glory: lit match,
halo-glow, the blastoff into space.

As live squid tentacles, our names squirm
in your mouth. Our names accumulate,

pulsate with song into a choir of contagion,
bellowing on the bottom of the earth

where Dead Girls know their place:
Central Park, log cabins, milk cartons.

Do you know where your children are?

ii.

Little girls are instructed in fear—practicing
cursive like quivering polygraph needles.

Little girls debilitatingly watch Cheerios
tremble in milk like life vests.

Little girls are named after the dead—
name her Natalie: think Natalie Wood

as angular fish, as splendor in the seagrass.
She can't unknow it, her hidden knowledge,

how the water was as welcoming
as a mirror, like an old friend, taking her

away from the yacht to Catalina Island.
Mother says, worst fears are bound to catch up

like blind fish in the midnight zone singing
That I might drink, and leave the world unseen

—I'm the Dead Girl queen; houseflies linger
on my cheeks, skin rotten, maggots in my hair.

Please excuse my reek of garbage-nectar.

iii.
Hey there little Jeff Goldblum, sing me
your goodnight tune. Panoramic fly,

Goliath-eyed—rubied, black varnish,
blue-green lagoons—swooning,
as the lament begins with

the ceremonial dredging of the lake.
I've written my fascicles, prayed

to the Lord of the Planks.
I'm a witness to this muck-wet affair,

the procession of white snails
with cruel, titanium shells.

You can usher the jade moth out,
she did not care for me in life. Leave

condolences on my Facebook wall,
bring pickled fetuses in formaldehyde,

matricide & glitter. Dickinson—mine.
Woolf—mine. My laments are unseen,

lofty as redwoods swelling
at damp roots, above me like a cage.

Postcard collection, bowl of lionfish,
a single piano key—who will keep

my things? This morning I will drift
beneath a cotton sheet with sickness:

morning, motion, sea & wonder if
I should ghost my mother.

iv.

What if I date a boy, a Chatroulette of axe murderers—
Patrick Bateman, Ted Bundy—quit answering my phone,

maybe they'd decide to kill me for a good reason,
like my long, dark hair? What if my skirt was hiked to the knee,

played the role of Humbert porno fantasy?
What if I had too much to drink, gone red-cheeked—

Brock Turner, Brett Kavanaugh? What if I stopped eating
to disappear in smallness, as penance, as distillation?

What if I locked myself behind Formica countertops,
became an expert wino & never jogged at night—

would I be blameless? What if I consumed hours
of television about detectives in the sex-crime unit?

No matter, I lie cold-blooded in the bone-shards
& sludge of the Bayou. Just another swamp-slick Betty.

*Wiggle your big toe, I say. Now, let's get these other piggies
wiggling.* In a Tarantino foot fetish scene: follow

my maryjanes & knee-highs. I am live-oak, teen-girl
magic. Bubblegum & oujia. The shaved-head version

of Britney covered in human skin, air plants growing
on my wet-warped limbs. I won't apologize

for my stench of honeycomb & catacomb
as I walk from the magnolias with a doberman

on an emerald leash. I am the Dead Girl drinking
Lacroix next to you in morning traffic.

Kevin Craft

Attachment Protocol

I never mistook God for a father—
mine in the easy chair with a High Life
watching football, behind him another
in the hazy oval of a yearbook shadow—
no one I recognize

except a crooked grin.
And if I mistook my mother
for invention or a bassinet
it's only because I slept in her lap
and pulled down her necklace of pearls.

When a doctor requires medical history
I point to the stethoscope.
I squint at the eyechart
where the small letters blur.
I tell him I'm the highway to the twin bridges

and the river widening beneath.
I show him the baby tooth
that finally fell out when I turned 52.
There's a stillborn history
impacted in my gums. By law

I can't know my birthday namesake,
but anyone's business can adopt a highway
or a float in a holiday parade.
Want to find out where you came from?
Spit into this vial.

Told I was born with curled feet
I had to wear braces to straighten them out.
Pure invention. It turns out she held me
for two long weeks
before I walked away. The song about

the boat rowed ashore—I heard it
hummed over and above
in the amniotic darkness
beneath the heartbeat
just where my ear touched her lung.

Kevin Craft

Boy/Girl

- after Grimm

Should have been a bobcat or a bailiff.
Might have been a red fox or an urn.
How did I know not to drink from the fountain?
Softly I came to the cottage in the pines,
Deer browsing in the wood sorrel, all ears.

Who are you with the gold star dangling?
How many handfuls of grass did you feed to the wind?
When the password was spoken which sorrow sprang open?
Little did I know is one name they gave you. And me—
For years I slept in the hollow of the tree.

George Choundas

Methana, Greece

Late afternoon. Air this fat with sun doesn't do anything it doesn't want. The smell is baking: everything baking. Two cicadas cycle in and out of phase. For a few long moments they plead in unison and for a long few moments more. Then they trip out of synch. They abandon their unison like they're embarrassed, like it was callow fun and all of a sudden they're wiser. Steely now, severe with fresh duty, they undertake independent noise. This noble work lasts an insect minute. They slip back into merge, kids playing at army in lockstep march, back into dream. Back and forth, back to forth, the swell together, the drift apart. You're ushered helpless to the muddled verge of sleep. Nothing lulls like alternation, recurrence, patterns from patterns. Salt waves, rocking chairs, sweetsour mother breath. It's not recurrence, though. It's understanding. Whatever your notion of things, the sound blesses it. Maybe you believe the cicadas try with desperate craft to keep together. In this case a one-forged cheech feeds your view of the world as knowing, orderly, purpose-framed. Maybe you believe it's all happenstance, two cicadas the same as two planetesimals, having nothing to do with each other including the nothing in which they hang, chancing to muck together more than diverge, merely secreting more proof that the world is just dumb pretty pieces gone rambling, heedless and shining and sleeping now.

David Starkey

Poem for John Holmes

...the Boston poet, not the porn star

(Google him with care).
He spent his young manhood

soused on sherry, until his wife

slit her wrists at his desk,
bleeding to death on his verse.

Later, he taught Anne Sexton,

warning her against reveling
in sex and insanity. “To bare

and shock and confess”

were, he argued, “the wrong
motives, artistically.” No one

has heard of him now,

though he confided to Donald Hall—
who dismissed his endeavors

as “patiently wrought, decorous

and dim”—that he when he shut his eyes
and looked into the future, he saw

his name lasting forever.

Matthew Tuckner

Heraclitus

In the play titled *Today*,
the Lexapro casts me as fog

spread thin & desperate
between the palm fronds.

It's a day described
by cold again.

It's a day with its mind
on a few scribbles of rain.

Despite what's left
of the moon, the last Xanax

is the only oval in my room,
& even pills won't stop

my books from saying
whatever it is they want to say.

One, cracked at the spine, hissing,
a cat's purr begins in its brain.

Heraclitus, smothered in t-shirts
on the rug, *in everything we have attained*

the excellence of apes.
I can watch the day

throw itself at my window, measure
with my fingers each pigeon

purl-stitched to its sky, *fly*, I shout
at my arms, but they just sit,

dense & silent with scar.
Things keep their secrets,

Heraclitus says, eyeing my limbs,
but I won't let his fragments finish

a sentence. I shove my sock
down his throat, bring fire to his pages,

flap my wings to fan the flames,
but he just laughs, simple ape

parroting a bird that I am.
When I made sharper the sharp

circle-top of a can, there he was
gawking from the bookcase,

spewing his tinny language at me,
let's not make rash guesses, scrawled

in the frost caked on my windowpane,
after death comes nothing hoped for,

assembled from the alphabet
fixed to the fridge. Being dead,

he has much to say on the matter,
the railbed of boredom

one is forced to move slowly along,
the daymoon of thought

ripped from your grasp
like a balloon from a child's fist.

I have an inkling Heraclitus wants me
alive. It's in the vague crinkle

of his paper, the begrudging
quiet he allows for sleep

in the theater called *Tonight*,
his final fragment

—*silence, healing*—
circling the room like a snore.

Matthew Tuckner

Head of a Roman Nobleman, Possibly Marc Antony (ca. 30 BCE - 50 CE)

Brooklyn Museum, NY

From the way his cheekbones
Sink into the sandstone

He seems to be stifling a yawn
So contagious

It jumps the centuries
& exits my mouth

& because I'm never not seen here
Becomes the yawn

Of the museum guard
Watching the smallest movements

I can make with my hands
How tender

Now everyone's yawning
Each little human holding their hurt

I look closely at how he watches me
The sky-blue buttons of his shirt

I'm the most desirable object in this room
His posture seems to say

Truth is I would take everything
If nobody was looking

I could use the Cosmetic Container
In the Form of a Recumbent Gazelle

To hold my loose buttons & shoestrings
The circular letter a lover

Once left in my hands as they were leaving
I could tuck little poems into the spaces

Where the legs of the wooden animal
Were carved to bend in lieu

Of a confession copping
To my theft of priceless objects

Not to mention everything
I've stolen outside the museum

Where there are no guards to eye me
Into stillness where I do try to mostly opt

For tenderness like the time I held
The tissue to Spencer's nose

As the blood poured out of the hole
The coke dug through his sinus

I *possibly* wasn't going to hell
In those minutes

I liked that possibility
The same way I like the chances

That the statue in front of me
Isn't Marc Antony

I hear he killed himself
For love I hear

The pressures of empire
Were closing in on him

It was in the very water
He poured over his face

The very water that rippled the view
Of his face past the point of seeing

All I can do is bring my hand
To my mouth & thank whoever

Writes the history in this place
For granting his stone head

The tenderness that *possibly* implies
A tenderness so large & soft

It rocks us all to sleep

Whitman and Vermeer: from Seventeenth-Century Holland to Nazi Mineshaft

When I heard the learn'd astronomer,
When the proofs, the figures, were ranged in columns before me,
When I was shown the charts and diagrams, to add, divide, and
measure them,
When I sitting heard the astronomer where he lectured with much
applause in the lecture-room,
How soon unaccountable I became tired and sick,
Till rising and gliding out I wander'd off by myself,
In the mystical moist night-air, and from time to time,
Look'd up in perfect silence at the stars.

Walt Whitman's "When I Heard the Learn'd Astronomer," in its eight lines, is a study in binaries. The first four lines find our speaker overwhelmed in the lecture room, while the last four find him making his escape to the outdoors. There are foils within this larger foil, as the first half's implied crowd is juxtaposed against the "by myself" of the second half; the fact that "by myself" is even stated directly is curious in that the line would seemingly lose no meaning if it were absent. If "by myself" were extracted from the line, the meaning it adds would be implied, in that "wander[ing] off" isn't really something that one can do with a crowd. Furthering the duality is how the first half's cacophonous "with much applause" is set against the second half's "in perfect silence." Surely the outdoors and the speaker himself were not, in fact, perfectly silent; this exaggeration is made more meaningful in how it juxtaposes the ruckus of applause the speaker had encountered before his departure.

See how in that paragraph we can plumb further and further into the formal elements of the poem, finding ever more elements to explore, to mine, to excavate? Within formal analysis resides an endless kaleidoscope of possibility, with subjective notions of what constitutes "validity" or "evidence" delimiting the plausibility of one's claims. We can view the poem as an isolated lyric floating in the ether, existing in a clean room where we can spy on it like it's a single turtle in an invisible terrarium. We can also view it in relation to its brethren in the Whitman canon, all the other words and poems this human being placed into the world, and how those words and works and the order of them in *Drum-Taps* and then *Leaves of Grass* shed a gently altering light on how we encounter and understand the formal elements of that now-only-disingenuously lyricized poem. And we can view the poem in relation to the other poems of its time and prior times so as to understand how the fundamental nuts and bolts of its mechanics—the words, the phrases, the subject matter—exist not in a vacuum, but in a complex interplay of formal influences that render the poem part of a larger conversation. All of this, then, is complicated by what we do even with its most obvious aspects, down to the nature of who is saying the poem and how we are to interpret that "speaker." And then, as we compile these evidences in support of any particular interpretation the situation—whether classroom or bedroom or forest or whenever/wherever—calls for us to advance, we have to consider again "what

counts” as evidence. It’s a challenging terrain for making understanding out of a mystery, and as we wade through this sea of possibility, it is essential to acknowledge the potential for overfitting our formal elements. As readers, we are begged by the need to go beyond the obvious and to research even the bare formal elements further, so as to grant our interpretations with justifications for their viability, and to see the multiplicity of meaning not just as a danger fraught with pitfalls, but as a place for the proliferation of pleasure and insight.

Still, though, all of that misses the point of one of the beauties of the poem: its ease and its willingness to be cracked open by the reader who is utterly naïve to all the suggestive contexts of the previous paragraph. In essence, you can plop this poem down in front of anyone and let him/her get right to work; there isn’t a bunch of background or history or context required to be able to pull meaning from these words. Truly, an eighth grader who has never encountered Whitman before can identify with the character who wants to leave the lecture room, and even a five-year-old can reflect on the specialness of the stars. This beautiful bareness is contrasted by a historicist’s analysis of the poem, which would be deeply invested in the nature of nineteenth-century astronomy (burgeoning but limited) and the genealogy of poems about the relationship between science and the self (see examples from Bradstreet and the aforementioned Poe, just in the American tradition), not to mention the actual genesis of the poem itself (no manuscript versions, varying placements within *Leaves of Grass*) and the life of the poet himself. While these historical elements are fascinating and worthy of exploration, there is something glorious about the notion that they are inessential for one to enjoy the poem: all one needs is a handle on the English language and the piece opens right up for interpretation. Even if those interpretations are ham-fisted, they are at least possible, and the poem’s lack of allusions or historically specific terms give it the aura of being archetypally “outside of time.”

This, though, is not to say that the bare reading is “right,” as it should be clear by now that “right” is a rather benighted term when it comes to interpretation. To wit, how would the interpretation change if we had all of the extra historical information beyond the formal elements of the text? If every element of the poem’s history were available, it would absolutely have an effect on our interpretation, and also on our ability to devise a more contextualized assessment of the poem’s situation. Simply put, we would know more, and wouldn’t be bound to a bare-bones formal interpretation, but would have a whole new parade of data to bring to bear on our understanding. It is with this in mind that we embark on an experiment, in which we see how a little bit of “history” can change everything.

* * *

In 1668, 151 years before Walt Whitman was born in West Hills, New York, the Dutch painter Johannes Vermeer completed “De Astronoom,” a painting described in a 1720 estate sale as “Een Astrologist: door Vermeer van Delft, extra puyk.” In English, that description is “An Astrologist: by Vermeer of Delft, top-notch,” but today this painting is known as “The Astronomer,” and its permanent home, outside of times spent on loan, is in Paris, France,

at the Louvre. In this painting, tidily sized, as Vermeer's works often were, at 20 inches by 18 inches, an astronomer touches a celestial globe—this one designed by famed Flemish cartographer Jodocus Hondius—while on the table in front of him is the 1621 edition of *Institutiones Astronomicae Geographicae*, by Adriaan Metius. The text is open to Book III, which is notable for how it recommends that the astronomer seek inspiration from God in his studies of the heavens. The astronomer depicted is believed to be Antonie van Leeuwenhoek, a polymathic genius known as the “Father of Microbiology,” and who is also assumed to be represented in the companion piece to “The Astronomer,” the slightly less dazzling “The Geographer.” It’s true that Leeuwenhoek’s bounteous long hair is a dead match for the man portrayed in the two paintings.

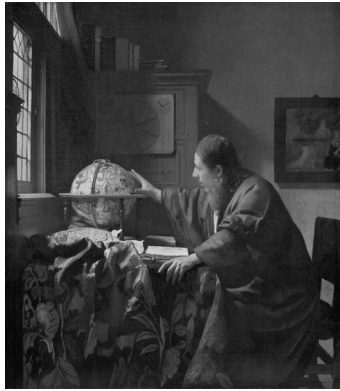


Figure 1: Vermeer's "De Astronoom"

In Vermeer's oeuvre the painting likely slots no higher than third in prestige, and it marks a shift in his subject matter away from the provincially of Delft, the town in which he lived his entire life, and the domestic scenes that were the focus of his efforts, to issues of broader and more spectacular concern, such as science. Higher in his portfolio are almost surely the utterly domestic “The Milkmaid” (1658) and the alluring “Girl with a Pearl Earring,” (1665), whose brightness on a dark background lends it a striking beauty. Despite these masterpieces, during Vermeer's life he was only moderately successful as a painter, and died with his wife and children in debt, in part perhaps because of his love for expensive pigments and the deliberate slowness with which he worked. He did devote his occupational efforts wholly to art, though, as it was an inherited business, as his father—like the father of the fellow Dutchman Van Gogh, who toiled more than two hundred years later—was an art dealer. About those aforementioned children: Vermeer had 15 of them, though four didn't make it long enough to be baptized, and all of the living and their children saw the great painter's reputation wane tremendously during their lives, as Vermeer's contribution to art went largely unacknowledged until the nineteenth century.

Vermeer's art's relationship to science is a compelling one, beyond its occasional portrayal of scientific subjects, in that he's often been alternately praised for, or accused of, apparently using mechanical aids in his compositions such as mirrors, camera obscuras, and camera lucidas. These aids have been assumed because of Vermeer's otherworldly use of color, the sensitivity of how he has light fade and grow in his scenes, and the specificity of the placement of objects in his compositions, along with some paintings demonstrating perspective that has seemingly been distorted by a nonhuman intermediary, much like the 1524 Parmigianino work "Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror," which of course is known further for having been famously studied in John Ashbery's 1975 Pulitzer Prize- and National Book Award-winning collection of poetry by the same name. There has even been a documentary made about one theorist's attempt to prove Vermeer's use of technology, called *Tim's Vermeer*, with "Tim" being Tim Jenison, the theorist in pursuit of the truth.

The painting at hand here, though, "The Astronomer," has one large thing in common with most of Vermeer's work, beyond his attention to light, subtlety, and those regal pigments: the scene depicted takes place indoors. While in the context of Vermeer's work this devotion to the interiors of lives as represented by the interiors of living and working spaces makes perfect sense, in the context of the "astronomer" as an agent of understanding the stars and the expansive outdooriness represented by the sky and its remarkable enormousness, the astronomer as "inside" is an odd move, notwithstanding the history of other portraits of natural philosophers that depict them indoors. For good measure, the companion piece "The Geographer" also takes place inside, thus also embodying the decidedly non-Romantic nature of much of the labor of the scientific: it is not just appreciating the gorgeousness of nature while in it but also the scrupulous and meticulous investment of mental energy while not in it, yet reflecting on it with the full force of human mathematical and rational facility. In these ways, "The Astronomer" is decidedly more Enlightenment than Romantic, and is certainly not terribly Transcendentalist.

One can imagine that if the first-person speaker of "When I Heard the Learn'd Astronomer" were sitting beside the subject of Vermeer's "The Astronomer," that he would soon become tired and sick and would want to go outside. The "learn'd" nature of this scientist, with his celestial globe and textbook, and even with a painting of "the finding of Moses" in the waters of the Nile—Moses himself representing learnedness—on the wall beside him, would not be enough to impress the poem's speaker and his unaccountable discomfort. One can also imagine that the subject of this painting, his face calm in contemplation, his fingers on the globe with care, could be in the process of shoring up his notes and his findings, doing this in preparation for the lecture he had to give that night in the lecture room, where he will show the audience his charts and diagrams and proofs and figures, and in turn be regaled with much applause. There is a good chance he wouldn't even notice the one audience member who glided out in the midst of the presentation. It's easy to imagine all of this, the astronomer's garb anachronistic for mid-nineteenth-century America failing to disqualify the image.

Vermeer is often labeled as a master of "genre painting," and in the context of painting, "genre" is usually used to refer to the capturing of domestic scenes

of everyday activity, such as a milkmaid pouring milk or, even, an astronomer at the ordinary task of studying a celestial globe. Whitman, according to biographer David Reynolds (1995), was influenced by genre paintings, particularly those contemporary to his own time, including works by Millet. This would help explain Whitman's love for the depiction of the everyday, and the bustling-but-still-life quality of the actions he describes in the characters he passes by, often quickly: you can picture his lists of people engaging in life—such as in “I Hear America Singing”—as the images of Vermeer, set up side by side, for fast consumption for the democratic variety of humanity they offer. John McDonald, in his *Walt Whitman: Philosopher Poet*, goes so far as to cite Vermeer as an example of the type of genre painting that would appeal to Whitman (2007, 171).

But when we discuss this painting, and how it was completed just three years shy of 200 years before Whitman wrote “When I Heard the Learn'd Astronomer,” do we discuss it with the assumption that Whitman himself knew of the painting? In the twenty-first century Western world, there is little doubt that this painting by a seventeenth-century Dutchman is the most famous rendering of an astronomer in the canon of paintings, as its placement in the Louvre can somewhat attest. But in nineteenth-century America, Vermeer was but a whisper, only having been in the 1840s “rediscovered” by French journalist and art critic Théophile Thoré-Bürger after more than a century of having been increasingly forgotten; the odds that Whitman ever knew of Vermeer, much less this particular painting, are faint at best. The name “Vermeer” never shows up in his writings, and there is no mention of a painting showing an astronomer. Adding fuel to the unlikelihood of Whitman ever having seen this artwork is that the painting was sold only to Netherlands-based buyers until 1804, when it was purchased in London, where it remained until 1881, when it was relocated to Paris, where it largely has remained ever since, aside for a brief and exhilarating five-year foray as a masterpiece stolen from a Jewish owner on behalf of Hitler in November of 1940, and intended for display in the Führer's hometown museum in Linz. As for exhibitions, “De Astronom” never made it to exhibition in the United States until 2008, when it did a two-city two-step through Atlanta and Minneapolis. If you were a gambler, you'd have to be a true lover of risk to put money on Whitman ever having seen this painting, or even having heard of it.

So where does this leave our discussion of Vermeer's amazing little painting? When we consider the “meaning” of Vermeer's painting, we most often wouldn't hesitate to invoke the “formal” elements such as the type of globe depicted in the image. There could, though, be cause for pause regarding the after-the-fact events that affected the painting and the aura of the painter who made it—from Vermeer's children's poverty to the Nazis—and how those events could or could not bear any effect on what work we consider the painting to be doing. And, to take things a step further, what does all of this mean for our discussion of Whitman's amazing little poem? When we have a painting of an astronomer, and a poem about an astronomer, both of them are linked in some way through the mind's eye of history, but exactly how is a complicated matter. In a sense, what we have here is a twist on last chapter's discussion of “what counts”: when we are dealing with historical data, when

can we feel justified in applying that data to a poem, and when is that data too far or too anachronistic to serve as justifiable evidence? The example set out here with Vermeer's painting—and all of the architecture of historical data surrounding it—is to press on the edges of what could be considered evidentiarily tenable; after all, if we can “get at the meaning of poems” through interpretive connections between a painting and a poem whose historical connection is tenuous, it opens up a wellspring of opportunities for interpretive possibilities amongst more proximal historical data points.

In this chapter we engage such historical problems as this, as the question of “relevance” when digging through the archive of time past is always providing such conundrums. It is incumbent on us as readers and thinkers to determine when and how historical data can be used meaningfully and to know when we are reaching. For example, say we learn that Hitler, a painter himself, especially craved “De Astronoom” for his hometown collection because he found it to be an example of early “Germanic” adoption of scientific methods. We also learn that the piece was recovered in 1945, along with Michelangelo’s “Bruges Madonna,” from an Austrian salt mine by the renowned Monuments Men (there is a stunning photo of its recovery, with a helmeted military man helping to hold it aloft). These paintings and many more were saved by two rogue mine engineers who used dynamite to block the mouth of the mine to prevent destruction by the Nazis of the over 8,000 paintings inside. Is any of this after-the-fact information relevant to an investigation of Vermeer’s painting, let alone to an investigation of a poem about an astronomer and one of his audience members, especially when the poet likely didn’t even know that the painting existed? While some argument for relevance could put these pieces of information too far afield to be of worth to the understanding of the other, a counterargument could be made for the interconnectedness of all historical relationships and that, absolutely, Hitler’s desire for this painting is relevant to what Whitman jotted down in eight lines sometime near the close of the American Civil War. They are, in a true Whitmanic spirit, of a piece, part of the beautiful entanglement of all things with all things, part of the web of what an “astronomer” is to a reader in the world today—a point on the spectrum of history itself—and therefore part of what a reader may imagine when reading Whitman’s poem. As you can see, the present-day of the reader sneaks its way into the conversation.



Figure 2: "De Astronoom"
Recovered by the "Monuments Men"

Dana Curtis

Veil

Afraid of the water, I
walk through the fire:
drink it down at the morning
café with the snow-covered
lights and infinite tendencies.
I remain with my fear, with my
new friends gathered around
the faded buffet, the window
leading out to the ruined
cities with their lofty spires
erupting from the sand.
Look through my fingers
at what was once a roadway,
the path to orchards and music
halls. We finally agree
this is a good place to meet,
this is what we wanted. I walk
through the garden and feed
the birds my bones and
reason. I walk through
the rain to the memory
of courtyards.

Dana Curtis

Chthonia/America

On a dirt road right before the crops
rot in the fields, right after the orphan factory
achieves its lullaby moments, I find the stars
underwater, falling up like an infestation
of mystics and devices. Beware all these
sharp corners and edges where walls
don't quite provide a safe place. There are still
brick streets in this pretty town. I walk over
them as if I might grow wings over my eyes
and eyes on my fingertips. Forget about
harvest. We grow in the cold places without
implements, without a hope of satiety, with
our various ends wrapped around our wrists
like vines and the endless grass showing us
existence, carving our names into skin:
look at the windmills, orchards, empty rooms.

Michael Mark

She Was Right

I do get run over by trucks every time I cross the street.
I do slice a finger off whenever I use a knife.
Every day I put my eye out with my toothbrush and pencils.
I turn the stove on and burn the house down.
Children in China starve when I leave one pea over.
I go blind when I read without every light on.
I'm always falling on the scissors and cutting my heart out.
And breaking my arms and legs when I climb the stepladder.
And my neck, when I climb trees.
Also when I don't hold onto banisters with both hands.
I contract cholera, leprosy, syphilis, impetigo, hepatitis, tuberculosis,
scoliosis, anthrax from not washing with enough soap.
I'm an alcoholic drug addict.
I get mugged and shot.
Kidnapped and drown, catch pneumonia, choke. I'm penniless
and homeless.
My face is frozen like this.
And she witnesses it all, every minute every day
with the eyes in back of her head.
I feel so bad for her.

Michael Mark

How I Get On So Well

There is no one in the mountains singing.

There is no one slipping into a lake getting silvered.

There is no one tasting another's beautiful mouth.

All teeth hurt. Knives don't cut.

This life is no problem.

And what is this foolishness I hear about birds

flying.

Arthur Vogelsang

Home, Home

(our stuff)

Money calls to the clouds
Lawn sprinklers stain the two cars
The doctor has surgery on himself by another doctor
Tangerines lettuce pears broccoli
Potatoes kiwi and apples
Arrive on the doorstep per week.
We need paper we need meat.
We'll get them today (November 23, 2019)
We have two dead cameras (film) we were good with
And two live little electric ones we are good with
There's a flip phone and an intelligent phone
And finally rain after five years pounding on the dirt an irony
Surprise on my drive home alone through wild and crazy Griffith Park
It's in the city near us but a glacier's push, a bulldozer
Ten miles wide from Canada made folds in the earth,
Like a blanket rumbled on a bed will have steep canyons
And soft ridges close together, so
In these out my BMW window dusty stream beds
Fill with the rain in minutes
Muddy Waters flash-attacking the car's wheels.
We have driven in worse together so no big deal now
Only five minutes more for me of being alone nudged by water unlike
In Kansas skidding in fear all day together. A new toothbrush
A new cloth mouse. I've had to hiss
At them about the brush. They instantly know
Everything new or different in the house.
Their smell is 14 times ours and they have
Whisper-beams that shoot out from their
Selves so they know where that brush is and that it is more desirable
Than the touted mouse. One hiss from one of us
Teaches the litter sisters. We are huge lumbering beasts
And one hiss does it. A joke may be made
Between us about a commanding hiss to the clouds instead of begging
To make rain. A second kind of commanding hiss to stop the coiled kind of rain
That has followed me home from crazy Griffith Park to bounce
Off our house like shredded rocks.
There are screens for applying her artist's hand
And as has been said before her head and her heart.
These are placed in various rooms.

The screens' 7 machines are also attached to her head.
We need more money.
About the clouds, *behind them the blue everywhere*
The blue is a mystery that doesn't fold in on itself
But is an illusion for black—
And in a few hours black will turn blue, per usual—
And could be called an illusion for blue—
But it isn't, black is a fact without restraint past the clouds.

The You Before You

You're in front of the mirror, preparing for work. Yellow light lands on your yellow skin on which you're applying yellow-tinted concealer to hide the non-yellow blemishes—the chronic undereye circles, the acne scars, the lower-cheek redness that a department store skincare saleswoman once called “an internal problem”—i.e., your skin has issues that can't be solved, that come without any Jesus whatsoever, that might be cloaked but never expunged.

As you blend MAC NC20 into your chin, you think about how many hours you've spent in front of mirrors; you ran the numbers once and sent them in a ranty text to a friend, and the total was so depressing you've repressed it, but it was big, the sum of weeks, months, of your life you've spent making your skin presentable. And you're remembering all this, cranky, when an unexpected thought arrives, not as a hit or slam or anything with measurable impact, but more like illumination inundating a room, its source utter and untraceable: Your name. Your original name. You'll never know it.

Your current first name is what your adoptive White parents picked on their trip to get you, a teething baby in Seoul. Your current middle name, Soo-jung, was the first name assigned to you as you went into South Korea's foster system. Your current last name is that of your adoptive father's family, who supposedly changed it when they entered the US from Europe, rendering themselves, a bit like you, untraceable. Your former surname was Park, assigned with Soo-jung as your legal identifier as you were moved from the porch you were abandoned on into that mythical “system” where humans go to die and, if they're lucky, emerge from, resurrected and rebranded.

The third and present you: Nari Soo-jung Kirk. The second you: Park Soo-jung. The first you: You'll never fucking know.

Your fingers smeared with NC20, your eyes accumulate moisture. Before your documented history began, you had a name given to you by a person, or persons, you'll never again meet. They made you. They are God. Of course it's possible you were never named, minute infant that you were when you were placed on that stoop. It's possible that you were just an abstraction in God's mind, a nameless idea they conceptualized then surrendered. But whatever God called you, there was a you that lived prior to the you that you have access to, a self—an essence, a song—that is in you but forever locked.

You won't scrounge for the key. But you hold that untouchable self in you. And you miss her, mourn her. On this ordinary weekday morning, you are holding a shower and a funeral in your head for that

anonymous you. Why today? Maybe it was the recent conversation with your childhood best friend, also adopted from Korea, who was spat on and told to “go back to China” and is now trying to find her own God. Maybe it was the poems of Korean American adoptee Tiana Nobile, who observes that the word cleave means to “to cut and to cling.” Maybe it was a neurological pathway too convoluted to determine, yet another origin story that will remain within you as a heard silence.

You dab your eyes with a Kleenex. Your concealer is safe. You reach for an eyeshadow stick. While you tend to your outside, your earliest name pulses somewhere inside, like sadness. You just learned that, in Sanskrit, Nari means “woman.” You know next to nothing about that primeval you, the creature that came first, but you know you’re a woman. Stick in one hand, with the other you lift the outer corner of your left eye. Its slant morphs. You trace a dark line along the truth. Much of what God gave you, you can see. However you camouflage it, whatever it becomes, it’s yours.

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John A. Nieves

Masking

To illustrate the power of an atomic bomb, we had to watch a film of a pumpkin being shredded by flying

glass in class. Afterward, the teacher told us how taping the windows in broad X's could help. Later,

I would meet hurricanes and the news would tell me X-tape the windows. Do it early. Don't forget. It seemed

more symbol, more talisman, than sense—what, after all, would tape do to keep out radiation? I understood

how it could stop the shattering, but what did it do against storm surge, against flood? And how poor

a symbol? X doesn't stand for protection. Over eyes, it means death; on a map, where to dig. And being

buried hardly seems lucky. On a game grid X represents an equal chance of winning or losing, as does O. Maybe

this was the message: take your chance, do the best you can, hope your opponent does not out maneuver you.

In a tornado, there is no time to tape the windows. Instead, the advice is to hide from them. Don't be anywhere you can

see out. Because of this, there are no X's. Maybe they *are* tied to eyes, just waiting for coins to cover them.

John A. Nieves

Nary a Conclave

There was never a secret door, no fulcrum
to open more private a space. The carpet was

worn but there was no warning, no crackle
or bells laid between us and the kitchen. And we

did not whisper because we swore that the border
between rooms was lined with a silence. So

we plotted our escape to the wooded darkness
after our folks went to bed and AC kicked on

to cover our footsteps. And although this never
worked for us as children—a parent would magically

sleep on the couch—many people still operate
on this assumption. They say what they don't

want heard in earshot or screenshot. And this is why
there can be no secret ballot, why every private vote

is in public, why everyone carries old hope in their
eyes like the names of dead pets or plans that have

died. So tonight snuff the candle out, close the curtains
up, shut the doors and climb under the covers

with someone with anyone, tell a truth or a lie
but only to them then light the smoke of it,

something new is decided. The crowds have a signal
but don't know what it is yet. Hold that note as long as you can.

Shana Ross

Chronology of Conceptual Excess

The rabbis said three things are good and necessary in moderation / caution / & dangerous in excess – they are salt, yeast and refusal / the utterance of no / a declination

We must wait centuries for Shakespeare to bring us face to face with the aftermath of

too much love / love that metastasized / grows lumps and teeth at alarming rates (when) you forget to watch a boiling pot or is it (when) you forget to trust / the water / the heat / the transitional state of the matter in question to reach its own roiling / rolling boil

Then, the late twentieth century we have men who seek too much / me / & women who empty themselves like tubes of brilliant oil paint with too much point / pigment / you

& so we must introduce vectors into the study of excess of give and take.

Oh, I –

I have reached a new age of myself and where I used to / memorize the scent of my own yeasts without saying a word about my inner ecosystem / seasons / now I recognize wild varietals on the wind as obvious as the windborn salt that drifts inland / to taste / we forget

how close we are to the sea.

I prefer the stars to god

I trust my astrologer when he says embrace (the unexpected) because he also tells me to not be distracted (by surprises). Twists of fate that the stars can calculate. It's hard to see from here where oceans are vast and trees can be walked through. If you can find a collective (call it woods) and time is finite (call it whimsy). Well then. Then. My family was too short of cash to recycle so all our paper went into the barrel. Trash transformed to ash when the barrel was full (of junk mail and milk cartons). Even in the dry season when danger was obvious and impersonal. Who dared tell my father what to do? An obstinate autonomy with so few options. Refuse to follow social agreements, to cede power, to be absorbed into the forest of people with roots that talk to each other, feed each other, warn each other. Set this fire and let the wind start worse. But it's not my problem, is it? Lessons learned. Refuse to let the forces of nature change your plans. Even outcasts believe in exceptionalism. Religion didn't help me much. The bible suggests fathers should stone a disrespectful child. Rights are given. The stars in their advisory capacity seem less bloody than god's image. Harder to distort, those twinkling bastards. Anyway, I lost my glasses in the sea yesterday, walking on dry land from shore to rock crop. It wasn't an island at the time. I searched the wet sand (in tightening circles) until the tide covered my tracks. It was not a catastrophe. I handle those very well. (It's the small things) that seem like signs, whose eyes follow you wherever you go –

Tima na Ima

Kaitka Tima, na Ima, Mwaniya, na Mwanakombo
Wakele kama wagemu kwa kufurahia tembo,
Tukiwambia, si vyema na kuzimu kuna mambo,
Walisema, havijambo, hata twendapo n'lini?

Translated by Richard Prins

Tima and Ima

Tima, Ima, and their crew, Mwaniya and Kombo's daughter,
The way they cherish their booze, they might as well be tappers.
When we tell them *That's no good! Remember the hereafter!*
They say, *What does that matter? We aren't going there yet.*

Twenty-Nine Trains

It's a Friday morning in the dead of January, and the pallid violet sky has woken from its night terrors in a cold sweat. Children in knit hats wait with slitted eyes for the school bus to come chuff its diesel heat into the air and loosen the latticework of ice along the curb. One, a boy, drifts from talk of homework and hall monitors when he catches sight of a leaf suspended in midair between an oak branch and the frosted grass below. "Wait," he mumbles into his scarf. "How can that—" The leaf is caught on an errant thread from a spider's web, twirling where there is no wind. It is the sort of small miracle only a child can read, and as he hoists himself up the bus's blackened steps and sinks down onto a cracked vinyl seat, his skin pebbles even where it's warm. The leaf turns and turns in him as the bus rumbles past familiar houses and grocery stores and the old railway. It should have fallen, he thinks. But it didn't. It hasn't. Not yet.

When the bus passes Viktor's house, he's standing in his front lawn in the same clothes he slept in, studying his iced-over sedan like it's a Rubik's cube. The windshield is a bathroom window, watery and opaque. His wipers are locked in place like watersnakes in a frozen stream. The old scar tissue of rust in the wheel wells is red and raw. Viktor, an art history instructor at the community college, has called in sick every day this week, and he's not sure he can get the car out of the driveway. But he has to. Tonight needs to look like an accident, so it's imperative that he have a normal day, go to work, teach his classes, hold his office hours, maybe even stop at the Food Lion to buy a microwave dinner afterwards. Just imagining performing all these tasks leaves him limp with exhaustion, but Viktor sets his jaw and reminds himself that it will be over by sunset.

He steps onto the gravel drive, his own movement startling him—how long had he been standing on the grass?—and with a hard jerk forces open the driver's side door. It takes three tries to ignite the engine. Viktor turns the defroster on high, ignoring the car's little wheeze of protest, then rummages through the books and clothes and fast food wrappers heaped in his backseat. No scraper. It doesn't matter. He'll wait for the car to shed its icy jacket on its own and if the needle's still on C when it's time to go, then too bad. But as he exits the car and passes his own grey bootprints on the lawn, he hears his wife's voice: *give him time, Viktor. He takes care of you; you can take care of him.* For years it was a joke between them, the way she treated every object, even a car, like a little person. *Got to take the boy in for an oil change, she might say, or, when her treads wore out, Looks like the baby needs new shoes.*

He returns to his car. He adjusts the defroster to medium-power and gently closes the driver's side door. "I'm not going to hurt him," he says into the crisp air. "It's just going to be me. I'm not going to be inside the car. Just so you know."

His neighbor, Don, emerges in a Carhartt to warm up his own vehicle. He behaves as though Viktor isn't there, and Viktor is grateful. Don's wife usually makes a point of slamming the front door or the mailbox lid if she happens to run into Viktor while coming or going, and their six-year-old son Lucas will pick up whatever's handy—newspaper, snowball, pinecone—and throw it at him. Viktor knows there's no winning their favor, but this is a

chance to make an impression, to set up one more casual observer to say *he seemed normal to me*, and so he clears his throat and says loudly, “Don. Just wanted to say again, the offer still stands if you want me to pay for another one. Anytime, just say the word.”

“S’alright, Viktor,” Don mumbles as he hoists himself into his truck. “An accident.”

Viktor reenters his house. Inside, he tugs on dress pants and a wrinkled button-down, then finds a clean blazer in the back of his closet. The textbooks he needs are buried under a pile of mail and he shoves them into his satchel along with a few hanger-on envelopes. Taking attendance will be awkward. He won’t remember a single name from the first week of the semester, that week when his colleagues looked askance at him, barely bothering to disguise their surprise that he hadn’t requested a sabbatical or at the very least an online load. Everyone knew about his wife’s battle with cancer last summer and fall (how painstakingly he’d deleted those doleful mass emails sent from his dean, alerting everyone to Bessie’s condition and asking for their “support and prayers,” then later providing Viktor’s home address so that faculty could swamp his porch with flowers and condolence cards). Viktor’s dean wasn’t a bright enough crayon to notice that the address Viktor gave him was off by a digit, and so all through November Viktor watched a family down the street receive subdued flower arrangements from complete strangers.

Satchel in hand, he takes a last look at the house. Only faintly does his wife’s presence haunt the rooms; only after she’d passed away did Viktor realize that their home had been his, not theirs. Consciously or not, he’d treated her like a serf who was entitled only to designated allotments on the fringes of his kingdom. It sickens him now that everything of hers that’s out in the open—little cobalt vases on the kitchen windowpane, a box of moldering chocolates in their crenellated cups—is so small, so frangible. And yet last month, when he’d thought maybe a move would help, just an ordinary move from one dwelling to another, he’d dug through their closet and under their bed thinking he’d start by donating Bessie’s old things.

First he took a bag of her dresses and sweaters to Goodwill, only to snatch it out of the poor volunteer’s hands two seconds later: “You know, I forgot to wash them. I’ll just wash them and bring them right back.” Then he took a milk crate filled with Bessie’s books (novels she’d kept under their bed to save space for Viktor’s library) to a buy-and-trade bookstore where he sold them for fifty dollars. Twenty-four hours later he was back, moving frantically up and down the aisles in an effort to reclaim as many of them as he could remember. Guilt eclipsed elation in the moment of discovery, and he touched each book to some part of his face—his mouth, chin, forehead—before laying it in his shopping basket. He was there all afternoon into evening, and when he purchased the books from the same teenager who’d paid him the day before, the kid stared. Now the books and clothes are in their proper places, right where she’d left them. Imagining that Bessie can hear him, he mumbles, “I didn’t erase you. I didn’t make it easier on myself.”

As if he even could. Outside again, he circles his car, checking behind each tire. Then after a brief struggle he backs the sedan out of the driveway. At the first right turn, the pallet of old snow sealing his moonroof slides off to one side and falls to the pavement like a muted suicide.

In the last few weeks, Viktor has realized just how wrong the doctors were when they told him *these things can happen to anyone, even the healthiest person; cancer doesn't discriminate*. Emerson said that events grow on the same stem with persons. Carl Jung once wrote that if we do not see a thing, fate does it to us. And in Bessie's last days, Viktor knew it was on his stem that all her suffering had burgeoned. It was his denial that had carved out a space for her cancer, a space like a dank cave in a mountainside inviting all manner of winged terrors to roost. The clarity of this knowledge left him feeling concussed. And yet everything was so diamond-clear. He'd been negligent, letting her carry the burden of love, all its small commissions. He'd been parsimonious. Slothful. Heinously egocentric. Memories began to assault him, things his mind had salted away the way his mother used to stockpile dried goods and batteries for an emergency she secretly believed would never come.

At night he tallied them, first the memories themselves and then the bitter revelations that tailgated each one. Over time the larger revelations absorbed the smaller ones and became fatter, denser for those inclusions, and in their bloated state they began to lumber through his nightmares like mammoths prowling some primordial plain. One slick-skinned beast was Viktor's brief sexual affair with a colleague six years ago, a young ceramics professor who for a few months had made him feel like a god, but whose kitschy pottery now disgusts him. A torpid belly-dragger with heavy-lidded eyes was his refusal to travel, though they could afford it and he had his summers free (were those saved pennies worth dissolving the wistful look in her eyes when she showed him a travel guide for Zion National Park, or a brochure for whale-watching tours off the coast of Washington?).

A solitary conversation they'd had about a year ago contained enough blood and bone to spawn its own ogre. A student had whined to Viktor about having been bullied in high school—it was her excuse for failing Viktor's course—and Viktor relayed the ridiculous exchange to Bessie, who said, "I'd agree, it's not an excuse. But Viktor—it does seem like you don't really understand what happens to those little kids who get viciously bullied the whole way through school. They grow up differently, you know. The whole arc of their life gets changed. Because they think happiness just isn't on the table for them, and they don't even know why." He'd rolled his eyes at her, his simple wife, and asked half-jokingly if she'd been one of those bullied kids who couldn't get it together. She'd sat there for a few beats, saying nothing, and then Viktor switched on the television. Another monster, hispid with a thousand tiny proboscises, embodied the small gestures of neglect that somewhere along the line had become routine: dumping his food-cruste plates in the sink for her to wash, after she'd cooked; leaving his books on top of her own, like little reminders that her thoughts were innately smaller, less significant, than his; tossing his dirty socks on the floor for her to add to the laundry pile on Sundays . . .

And then there was the colossus, the thing with the great gaping maw and the breath like something dead and rotting. This was his meticulous refusal to acknowledge Bessie's desire for children. He laughed when she played puppeteer, breathing life into little statues, board game pieces, salt shakers. He sped up if they happened to drive past a daycare center or a

mother pushing a stroller. On the rare occasions when Bessie went too far, said something dangerously close to *I think it's time*, he'd wait a discreet few hours and then mention a colleague who'd conceived in her late thirties and wound up with a severely disabled child. Or a story about some local woman dying in childbirth. Once, he even launched into a homily about how Americans were always hunting for an exit ramp from life's challenges; most people had children simply so that they might bypass the more rigorous labors of self-development. Nothing was beneath him.

Upon close inspection Viktor found that this colossus was barnacled with a sallow hanger-on, like a remora riding a shark. This was an animal whose fire had died out, who found it easier to piggyback than to cut its own path. In the silence of the night Viktor knew that the art he taught was dead to him, and he to it. He worked through his syllabi, put up slides, collected tests, and nodded patiently when students expressed their naïve hopes for careers as illustrators or designers. If they asked about fine arts degrees, Viktor answered vaguely. His own graduate work had begun to seem like a self-indulgent and pointless exercise. It had secured him a job, but he could be teaching computer basics or Biology 101 instead, and would that be any more or less rewarding? Maybe he'd never truly understood or even loved art; maybe he'd only wanted to be seen with it or heard talking of it. Or—still worse—perhaps he'd only sought dominion over it. When students gushed over some sculpture or painting, Viktor was condescending: “Yes, everyone reacts that way the first time they see it . . . it's pretty, no denying that.” It was rare as a solstice now that he glimpsed something that moved him. When this happened, he chalked up his reaction to sentimentality and moved on. Subconsciously Viktor understood the connection between all this and his disinterest in having children—understood why the remora rode the larger beast of his selfishness—but he did not allow himself to explore it further.

Then this past Monday, he woke up with the word *murderer* in his mouth. He told himself it was insane. He was a good man, had been a decent husband, a provider . . . the list of meaningless phrases spooled forth like drool but never quite blotted out the taste of that word. In what fashion could a man compensate, he wondered, his breath stuck in his chest. In what manner could he balance the scales? In the wake of his question he thought he heard shrill laughter. Frantic for distraction, he threw on his work clothes and practically jumped behind the wheel of his car. He slammed into reverse. Instantly there was a sickening crunch like a skull breaking, and then little Lucas from next door was on his lawn screaming, hands at his face like a panicked old woman. Viktor put the car in park and got out, dread descending on him like a cauldron of bats.

The kid's box turtle was always escaping and it had chosen that morning to crawl out of the house (how? Through the doggie door? Had someone left a basement window open in the dead of winter? And weren't turtles supposed to be in water or something?) and tuck itself into the dark oily space between Viktor's back left tire and the gravel drive. Viktor told Lucas to stand back. He knelt on the gravel. The speckled brown-and-yellow shell was shattered, a mess of big triangular fragments held in place only by their own memory of where they belonged, and there was a surprising quantity of blood. One of the organs—pinkish red, maybe the heart or liver—was out

Elizabeth Genovise

and throbbing. The turtle was still alive. It looked at Viktor with one eye and blinked its agony. Viktor put out one hand against the tire, bracing himself, but it was too late; in the next second he was simultaneously sobbing and vomiting, sending Lucas bolting back into Don's house where Viktor could hear him screeching *he killed her, he killed her*.

That was the morning that settled things, whether he knew it at the time or not.

He's paused for a red light now, idling beside the railroad tracks. How neat the lines are, how clean the irons, beneath the winter sun. Even burdened as they are with coal and iron ore, the evening freights travel fast enough to make route 29 vibrate each time they rocket by.

A horn blares behind Viktor; the light has changed to green. He drives on.

When the school bus passes Miles' trailer, he's standing motionless behind his tiny kitchen window while a bag of frozen meatballs thaws in the microwave. The room smells of must, meat, and dog hair. A few years back, before their cable got cut, he watched a television special on death row inmates and their last suppers. He's thinking about this now as the sack of rubbery meatballs spins slowly on its turntable. He's going to soak microwaved meatballs in expired ketchup and grape jelly, and that's going to be that. "Fitting," he says to the window with all its minute etchings of ice-letters and ice-animals, the hidden shapes his mother used to help him pick out back when he was tiny and she was clean.

Men in starched uniforms came and took care of everything—the body, the paperwork—seven days ago after Miles' mother overdosed and drowned in their bathtub. As they moved around the trailer, as something zipped closed and as water gurgled down a pipe in what felt like some distant country, Miles sat on a kitchen stool and stared at an old toy he'd brought down from a box in his closet. It was something he'd stolen from another kid back in fourth grade: a miniature landscape set inside a clear plastic box with a rubber lid. The box's walls were tinted coral-pink, and the landscape within was southwestern—a clay-colored mesa dappled with three pebbly green cacti, set before a paper backdrop of hard blue sky. At the base of the mesa ran a thin blue stream; you had to look closely to see the tiny sprig of flowers painted onto the rock just above the stream's mouth. The sole inhabitant of this desert paradise was an apricot-colored plastic lizard. Seen from different angles, the lizard on his mesa could look enormous, like a pagan god overseeing his kingdom, or miniscule, like a gecko helpless in the crosshairs of some predatory bird. Miles sat there turning the box this way and that, looking for the middle ground, and gave one-word answers when questions were put to him. Eventually someone gave his shoulder a gentle squeeze; someone else left a flyleaf with phone numbers. Then he was alone with the desert.

The toy is still sitting on the kitchen counter. As Miles chews his meatball breakfast, he wonders why he'd gone after it in the first place. Was it just about the lizard, distant cousin to the dragons that had always mesmerized him? He remembers when these toys were popular, can recall his classmates carrying around all manner of little forests and prairies and

islands, and it seems to him that he'd selected the realm least accommodating of human life. What good was the desert for, unless you were some starved wandering prophet talking to God, waiting for answers to come gliding out of a rock? But then, maybe that was just what had attracted him. Maybe revelation was only possible in a landscape like this—hard, stark, and brutal—as opposed to in the soft hairy woods of his native Tennessee.

He quickly dismisses the thought as ridiculous, a waste. Last night he wrote in his sketchbook, *no more rooms in my house for fantasy. The real is my address.* This after tearing down every last drawing from his faux-pine-paneled walls, all the dragons who breathed fire or soared past razor-toothed mountains or slumbered atop heaps of glimmering treasure. Lying in the wastebasket, their shredded iridescent hides and shorn talons seemed to tremble as if struggling to reanimate. Miles stuffed the wastebasket itself into one of the big garbage cans outside, then returned to peel away what was left of the tape and putty on the walls. But at some point, this project seemed pointless—what was he going to do with these walls, replace one set of moronic pictures with another?—and so he left the mess there, all the dangling strips of paper and gummy folds of tape. This morning, it looked like a frenzied demon had clawed up his bedroom overnight. All that remained was his bed, his card-table desk, and his battered bureau.

Miles has a private policy, a kind of contract with himself that demands he be unconditionally truthful when alone. So when he got up today, he forced himself to say to the mangled walls: “It wasn’t you, dragons, that had to go. I mean, if we’re going to be precise here. It was my own stupid idea that I could take you somewhere. That’s what had to go. Because I’m not going anywhere, and we all know it.”

Breakfast over with, he strips for his morning sponge bath at the kitchen sink. No reason to go to school all stinking and dewy with nightmares, even if this will be his last day enrolled. He lines up his supplies—towel, shampoo, Dial soap—and turns the faucet on hot. He’s gotten pretty good at this over the course of the week and no longer slops dirty water on the floor or slips on the tile as he’s drying off. Showering is not an option. His one glimpse of the empty bathtub a week ago revealed that the uniformed men had not taken Miles’ mother entirely away; grey tidelines marked the eggshell walls as if the sea in which she’d drowned had withdrawn and left the silt of her body in its wake.

He shivers as he soaps his arms. The frosted kitchen window faintly reflects his face and shoulders but his gaze is faraway, past the living silhouette of his own shape. He is quietly appraising his life, an activity he deems appropriate to the occasion. His biological father had packed a bag and literally disappeared into the Smoky Mountains when Miles was seven, and all his life Miles has imagined him as Loki from the old Norse myths, the trickster and shape-shifter who had a gift for slipping into some new guise at the absolute last second before being caught and held accountable for his latest kill. In the years after he’d left, Miles’ mother began to drink and then experiment with pills; by the time he started junior high, they were living entirely off government aid, and she couldn’t even focus long enough to watch a television show with him. In the meantime Miles was viciously bullied at school, and it wasn’t just because he was poor. He wasn’t like the

other boys in his class who came in wearing orange hunting hats and tried to impress each other by weaving the ugliest words they knew into ordinary sentences. Even in high school, Miles had no interest in football or beer or skinning deer. It wasn't as though he didn't try to fit in. He'd imitate their stupid speech at recess or on the bus, hide his mythology books deep in his desk or locker, keep his hand locked firmly under his thigh whenever a teacher asked a complicated question whose answer bubbled on his tongue. Christmas of his sophomore year he even bought himself a tough-looking leather jacket at a church rummage sale, then took up smoking, but the effort was comically inadequate, and in the end all Miles got out of it was a nicotine addiction to match his mother's.

The men who ambled in and out of his mother's life kept their distance, as if close contact with Miles might infect them somehow. He almost didn't blame them. He knew he wasn't normal. Ever since a grammar school teacher had explained about DNA, he'd imagined anomalous colors throbbing along the chains of amino acids that spiraled through his blood, each shock of blue or green as incongruous as a tropical bird banging around in a barn. It seemed that he'd been programmed to respond to transmissions no one else heard. He'd note a single phrase embedded in someone's speech and would find that for just one second, a curtain had been rolled back to reveal the naked soul behind. He'd spot a glimmer of story in the broken stained-glass window of the old church the school bus passed, and his hair would stand on end. His dreams palpitated with vivid, layered narratives of mountains and dragons and beleaguered men. With a flashlight he followed Prometheus, the Norsemen, the Knights of the Round Table, the Noldor Elves in Tolkien's *Silmarillion*, and as a teenager he began to constellate the stories, see patterns, feel the way they all circled the same elusive but critical truths. If he chanced to brush up against such a truth, he'd tremble and then close his eyes in a tenacious effort to hold his revelation in place. Eventually he realized that these pebbly-skin moments were what shaped history; this was what reformulated the arc of individual lives. From that point forward nothing made in government halls or laboratories interested him. Those were the realms of the dead, Miles thought, where each new idea concocted in a glass was doomed to be asphyxiated by the next trend, or trampled by the feet of the mob. But myth would be viable down the last man.

He began sketching dragons and mythical landscapes during class, then late into the night while his mother slept her medicated sleep in the next room. When the state of Tennessee made community college free, Miles applied that first fall for the sake of their basic drawing courses. He even took art history and tried to befriend the instructor in hopes of securing an ally. This didn't pan out, but he was content with a pen in his hand; he clung to it the way the old knights clung to dynastic swords as proof of their weighty destiny. There were no golden kings in his family tree—just anemic souls who slithered out from under their burdens to vanish down black holes—but when he labored over his drawings, Miles forgot this, and felt himself a man of purpose.

For a while, anyway. Over the last year it seemed that his world had become a shoddy Atlantis, slowly sinking beneath the weight of one reckoning after another. In her loneliness his mother took up with a fellow

addict who alternated between beating her senseless and knocking Miles into the furniture. It was a small mercy that he was only home a few nights a week—God knew where he was the rest of the time, since he had no house of his own—but when he was there, the trailer’s thin walls fairly shook. Miles was small and skinny at nineteen, and the few times he’d tried to hit back had ended badly. The first time, Nick blacked his eye, then dumped a pile of his sketchbooks in the sink and lit them on fire. On another occasion, he knuckled open Miles’ lip, then pissed on the heap of clothes in Miles’ laundry hamper so that the whole trailer smelled like urine and old beer for weeks. If Miles cashed one of his miserable checks from his part-time job at Home Depot, Nick would sniff out the money no matter where Miles had hidden it. Soon the refrigerator shelves were empty, and Miles was scouring empty classrooms for forgotten pens and pencils to replace the ones he’d worn out. Even when sober, Nick was a brute. He used their old .22 rifle—all that Miles’ father had left behind—to shoot the squirrels that played on the patch of lawn out back, and he joked about kidnapping Miles’ adopted collie, Argus, and taking him to Missouri where he “had friends.” Miles wasn’t sleeping much, and it wasn’t long before he started failing all his classes, even the ones he loved.

Inadvertently following his mother’s example, he tried to date as a means of distracting himself from the fact that his life was spiraling the drain. He met a girl at the community college and they went to some movies, took some nighttime walks, eventually had sex. He told her he loved her. But three months in, she looked down at the condom wrapper in her bedside trash can and said, “Sometimes I feel like I’m climbing into a coffin when I’m with you. I mean like where is this even going?” She wanted some light in her life, she told him. Her phrasing struck him dumb. “I have that,” he tried to tell her, but her face had closed to him; she had made up her mind. Later that week, Miles’ boss at the Home Depot said she had to let him go. “It’s just where we are at the moment,” she told him. “Last hired, first fired. I’m really sorry. You know McDonald’s is always hiring if you need to pick up something quick.” Then an adviser at the community college notified Miles that he was a few GPA points away from losing the privilege of a free college education, and that he’d better get his ducks in order if he wanted to continue. Get his ducks in order: another phrase that stopped him cold. As if he had a little gaggle of sweet, docile creatures at his command, and all he need do was nudge them into place.

Nick had been away on a weeklong bender when Miles’ mother overdosed, and for a few days Miles dared to hope that he’d never come back. But then there he was in their kitchen come Wednesday morning, reeking and leering. He’d always kept a handgun in his glove compartment, and he trained this gun on Miles while he reached with one hand for Argus’ collar. “I like this dog,” he said simply. “I’m takin’ him. She owes me something, for all the bullshit I put up with from her.” As Nick dragged the yelping animal out of the trailer, Miles flew into his mother’s stale-smelling room and reached frantically into her closet for their .22. A few seconds later he was on the front porch with the rifle tucked against his shoulder. “Leave the dog or I’ll blow your fucking face off,” he said, voice shaking. He wasn’t even sure if the gun was loaded. Nick just laughed. Miles pulled the trigger but missed;

the bullet sank into the solitary tree in their strip of yard, and then Nick was gone, his pea-green truck belching smoke in its wake.

After that, something deep within Miles slowly deflated. He could almost hear the faint hissing as he moved around the trailer, studying objects, looking into mirrors. This place was never really theirs. They'd been living off government funding forever, using the wages from Miles' part-time jobs to bridge the gaps. It was only a matter of time before the trailer was reclaimed and he'd be living in his car. Realizing this, he had to laugh: what a sucker he'd been to think he was fated for anything different.

There was no one who could help. The only family he had left was his Uncle Ray in South Carolina who was dirt poor and visited just once or twice a year for holidays. He was a chain-smoker with a hard coppery beard and red-rimmed eyes, and he always had an air of sanguine resignation, as though he'd decided long ago that life was pointless but there was no sense crying about it. He liked to tell Miles stories about the family, long-dead grandparents and cousins whose lives had been flaming catastrophes. It seemed that in their endemic victimhood, they'd known it all—abuse, abandonment, rape, depression that devolved into madness—but Uncle Ray would note cheerfully that most had had the intelligence to extract themselves before things became unbearable. “Know how many died by walking in front of trains? I mean if you go all the way back, almost to when the railroads first came out here? Twenty-nine. Twenty-nine trains.” He'd puff at his cigarette and nod at Miles through the smoke. “You gotta respect ‘em. It's like when you know a tooth's loose and it's gonna hurt like all fuck when it falls out. Better to tie it to a string and then tie the string around a doorknob, you know what I mean? Better to have a little power over the thing.” This past week, it occurred to Miles that his family was onto something. You did what you had to to beat a curse. When your ship was about to founder, maybe you lit a fire before the waves got too high.

His sponge bath finished, Miles tugs on his clothes, then finds his coat and backpack. He exits the trailer and doesn't bother to lock the door behind him. Inside his grandmother's ancient white Camry—the sum total of his pitiful inheritance—he breathes in the upholstery's intractable scent of lavender as he waits for the engine to warm itself. No matter how many cigarettes he and his mother lit over the years, the lavender was always there when the smoke cleared. He loves this. He doesn't remember his grandmother well, but he respects the lavender for putting up a fight. It's as if Tolkien's niphredil or simbelmyne were to go to battle with a ringwraith, and win. Sometimes even the most fragile beauty prevailed against the brute force of fire and filth. But this is just another of his wayward thoughts, as trivial and infantile as the drawings on his walls. He shakes it off and backs the Camry onto the road. As he grips the wheel, it occurs to him how strange it is that he should feel the bones of his arms so keenly now, when it would take only a moment's impact to levigate them into memory.

At four-thirty in the afternoon, Miles exits his final class of the day. He's put on a good show, taking dedicated notes and even asking for clarification regarding the essay due next week. It's a point of pride with him that no one will be able say that he *fit the profile*. Viktor too has made an effort to extend

himself, engaging in small-talk with the department secretary at lunch and then spending an hour in the crowded workroom copying and stapling packets he plans never to assign. The hallway clocks tick in unison as Miles walks slowly down Viktor's hall toward the building's exit, as Viktor shuts down his computer and blows out the linen-scented candle he'd lit out of habit. The smoke is still unfurling when Miles pauses outside Viktor's door.

The knock startles Viktor breathless, but he gathers himself and says, "Come in."

Miles swings the door partway open. "Hi, Professor K."

"Oh, hi there . . . what can I do for you?"

"It's Miles, in case you forgot. I was in your class the fall before last."

Viktor hovers, one hand on the back of his chair. "Right, of course. I'm actually about to head out, but what can I do for you? Are you one of my advisees now? You need to drop a class or something?"

"No, nothing like that."

"Okay . . ."

"Honestly, I don't really know why I stopped. I was about to leave and I saw your door and for some reason I just knocked. I didn't think too hard about it."

"Ohhh—kay . . ."

"Is that weird?"

"I guess not." Viktor forces himself to sit down, then gestures at Miles to do the same. "So, how're things?"

Miles lowers himself into the chair opposite Viktor's desk and lets his backpack drop the floor. He shrugs. "Ever wonder how people started asking it that way? 'How are things.' Like, 'how are your things, how is the material stuff in your life faring these days, like your car or your refrigerator or your wardrobe.'"

Viktor squints a little. "Okay then—how is life? How is your semester going?"

"I'm failing everything already. I failed most of my classes last semester, too. My GPA is a dumpster fire."

"Well, I guess the honesty is refreshing. Maybe you're in the wrong major."

"No. Well, maybe. It doesn't matter." Miles shifts in his chair, peering around the office. "It's kind of a mess in here," he observes. "Though at least it smells good."

"It's this." Viktor lifts the still-smoking candle. "My—wife buys them for me in packs so I'll never run out. She's always taken care of stuff like that without my asking."

"My mom used to light candles. I was so young I barely remember it, but I know she did it."

Viktor gives him a wan smile. "I'd say you're still pretty young, Miles."

"I meant I was probably just four or five years old. She'd light those tiny ones—what are they called, team lights?—and put them on the windowsill."

"Tea lights."

"Right, tea lights. So how come you have no paintings on your walls? I can't remember if it was like that last year. Isn't that sort of an unspoken requirement for an art history teacher? I mean, no offense, but it's a mess and it's kinda like a dentist's office in here. That should be an oxymoron, right?"

“First of all, show me one instructor at this college whose office is organized, and I’ll give you fifty bucks on the spot,” Viktor says. “Ugly offices are like burnout: there’s no escaping them in the teaching profession.” He taps the mouse beside his keyboard, reawakening his computer. “And yes, paintings on the wall would be a so-called unspoken requirement, also known as a cliché.”

Miles cocks his head. “Do you draw, or paint?”

“You ask like it’s an either-or. I do neither.”

A few beats pass. Miles says, “Never? Like what if you had a really strange dream where you saw things you couldn’t describe in words?”

“I don’t think anyone wants to see my dreams illustrated, especially not me.”

“Why not?”

Viktor doesn’t answer. Footsteps and voices echo in the hallway; other classes are being released. Miles reaches behind him to close the door all the way. He says, “I have wild dreams all the time, usually fantasy kind of stuff. You know, monsters and castles and these long journeys where you wake up feeling tired because you’ve been trudging up mountains all night. But the other night, I dreamed something really different and I can’t figure it out.”

Viktor steals a glance at his computer clock. “What was it about?”

“I was in a restaurant and the walls were covered in things having to do with my family, like all these people I never met but who came before me. There were blurry pictures and newspaper articles about them, and random stuff like receipts and grocery lists and traffic tickets. Just covering all the walls of the restaurant. I don’t know how I knew it was all theirs, but I knew. So at some point the cook comes out of the kitchen and starts ripping everything off the walls. I couldn’t stop him. He took all the papers and pictures and stuffed them in a big ball into the drain in the kitchen sink. I just stood there watching, and a couple minutes later he reached down into the drain and pulled out a newborn baby and then handed it to me.”

“Um . . . huh.”

“I know. What the F, right?”

“I’m not exactly a psychologist, Miles. I really hope you didn’t drop by here for dream interpretation.”

Miles folds his hands over his stomach and leans forward. “I don’t get it, either. But it didn’t feel random, you know? It felt like there was something there.”

“Like what?”

“I don’t know. Just now when I was walking down the hall, I remembered that I saw the number twenty-nine on a bunch of the papers. Price tags, and I think a calendar that had the date circled? I think it has to do with this thing my uncle used to tell me all the time, how twenty-nine trains killed people in my family.”

Viktor gapes at him. “Twenty-nine people were in train accidents? You’re kidding.”

“No, they weren’t exactly . . . they weren’t in the trains. They, you know—” Miles walks two fingers across the arm of his chair, then lets them fall sideways. “They let it happen.”

Another long pause. Viktor says, “Oh.”

“Yeah.”

“But so many. How do you know it’s true?”

“Well even if he’s got the number wrong, it definitely happened a lot.”

“It’s weird phrasing,” Viktor says, his gaze drifting to the door behind Miles. “Is that how he’d actually say it? Twenty-nine trains killed them?”

“Yeah.”

“It’s a little strange. Like saying, *the gun went off*, or *the knife went in*.”

“I guess you’re right. Like the train made the decision and not the person. I never thought of it that way.”

Viktor clears his throat. “So, is there really nothing I can do for you? You sure you don’t want a change of major form or something?” He glances again at his computer clock.

Miles takes off his jacket and drapes it across the back of his chair. “No, like I said, it doesn’t matter.” Then, “I stopped drawing awhile ago and I took most of my stuff off my walls. Though for a little while there I thought I might actually be getting good. I was working pretty hard.”

“Well . . . that’s nice that you’ve had the time on your hands to stick with it.”

“I haven’t had all that much time. I mean I work and everything, and it’s been . . . kind of loud at my house sometimes. Hard to concentrate. I have to *make* time for it. Or I did.”

“Big family?”

“What?”

“You said it’s loud at your house.”

Miles bites his lower lip. “Yeah. Big house, big family. And a dog. It’s, it’s pretty loud.”

“Well, there are worse things. A loud happy house has got to be better than a silent one, right? Lots of people live in coffin-houses and actually think it’s preferable. I guess maybe because they don’t know what they’re missing.”

A pause.

“What,” Viktor says, annoyed. “What’s the matter?”

“Nothing. Anyway, like I was saying—I thought maybe I was pretty decent at one point, with my drawing. I thought it might be, you know, *something*.”

“Really.”

“I think so.” A hesitation. “You want to see?”

“Sure, I mean, if you’ve got something with you.”

“I probably do.” Miles bends to rummage in his backpack. He pulls out a red notebook labeled *COMMUNICATIONS 101* and flips through the ragged spiral pages. “This is kind of old, and my technique is crap,” he says as he tears out a sheet.

Viktor takes the drawing and studies it. It’s an intricate medieval-looking ring, comprised of two snakes coiled around a green jewel. “Are you designing jewelry now, Miles?”

“It’s the Ring of Barahir, the one Aragorn wears in *Lord of the Rings*. It’s thousands of years old. I mean, in the story it is. It kind of nagged at me for about a year. I couldn’t find an explanation anywhere for the design. *Their heads met beneath a crown of golden flowers, that the one upheld and the*

Elizabeth Genovise

other devoured. It seemed important but even Tolkien never explained it, as far as I know. But when I was working on this, I think I sort of figured it out.”

“Oh?”

“I think it means the king has to eat dirt once in a while. If he’s got the crown on his head twenty-four-seven, he might start believing he knows it all, and then he’s a tyrant. But if he only eats up his crown all day, he’s too weak to do anything good for anybody. I think the ring’s a picture of the place in between.”

A bit shakily, Viktor hands back the paper. “But you’re not happy with the drawing itself?”

“It’s all right. I just didn’t have what I needed yet when I drew it. You can’t really draw anything worth a damn until you—”

“You have to know the rules before you can break them,” Viktor says, repressing a yawn.

“No. I mean yeah, that’s true, but that’s not what I was going to say. It’s like, you can’t make anything until you’re, you know, centered. Until you feel that there’s something bigger out there, something that you *can’t* draw.” His face reddens just perceptibly. “It’s so stupid. But do you know what I mean?”

“I suppose so.” Viktor swivels around to reach for his coffee thermos, forgetting that it’s been sitting there for ten days. He takes a gulp, then sputters and gags. “Oh—Christ—”

“You okay?”

“Yeah. Fine. Coffee’s too hot.”

“Anyway, it’s not a new idea. I mean I think even the cave-painters who were roasting mammoth meat kind of knew it.” Miles’ eyes narrow. “*Woe to he who innovates without knowledge of the Constant.*”

Viktor coughs. “What is that?”

“It’s from the Tao Te Ching.” Miles shrugs, face still flushed. “I read a lot.”

“Apparently. I think it’s safe to say you’re the first student I’ve ever met who’s read the Tao for fun.”

“I don’t think I’d call it fun. But I did read some pieces of it just because. I like to see what happens. You know, it’s like steering your car with one hand open on your lap. You’re making the moves, mostly, but if your hand is open, things sort of fall into it and surprise you.”

“Like what kinds of things?”

“Um . . .” For a long moment Miles seems to forget himself, his gaze faraway. Then, breaking into a sudden toothy grin, he comes back to Viktor. “Did you know that Tolkien got the seed for his whole world from reading one word in a really old poem, by this guy Cynewulf from the ninth century? The line was, *hail Earendil, brightest of angels, sent to men over middle-earth.* He read that, and it was one of those moments, you know how it is, when a little bomb goes off inside you, a white and silver bomb. And from that one name he created Earendil, and without that character, there is no Middle-Earth as we know it. There’s no Lord of the Rings story at all. It was just one word, buried in a poem nobody cared about, from the ninth freaking century.”

Viktor is staring at him. “Are you cold, Miles? Your arms are all goosebumped.”

“Oh. No. I just get excited thinking about these things. Believe me I know better than anyone how stupid that is.”

“No—no.” Hardly aware of what he’s saying, Viktor repeats, “No—no.”

The hallway has gone silent. Miles makes a move to climb back into his jacket, and as he turns in the chair, his stomach rumbles so loudly that Viktor raises his eyebrows.

“I skipped lunch,” Miles says.

“Obviously.”

“I’m sure you’re about to get yourself dinner. I’ve definitely kept you past your office hours.”

“Not by much.”

They just look at each other, Miles with his right arm halfway into his jacket sleeve, Viktor on the edge of his chair.

“I was actually going to be here awhile anyway,” Viktor hears himself say. “Lots of paperwork and stuff. Would you . . . I was going to order a pizza right to my office, actually. Want to share it? I can never eat a whole pizza by myself, and it’s not like they’ll deliver a slice at a time.”

Miles sits back, his expression softening. “Really? Sure. I’m starved.”

“OK. Let’s get this thing ordered. Are you a pepperoni person? Or are we talking one of those chicken and veggie deals, pizza that’s pretending to be healthy?”

“Traditional pepperoni. Unless you want the chicken.”

“No way. Look, who knows if it’s even chicken. I mean with pepperoni, at least you know what you’re getting, right?”

Miles laughs. “Yeah.”

Viktor calls in the order. In the twenty minutes between the phone call and the pizza’s arrival, Viktor asks every question that pops into his mind, unconscious of the fact that while his left hand grips the edge of his desk, his right hand rests palm-up on his lap. Miles sits up straight with his shoulders back, as if interviewing for the job of his dreams. At some point, he tells Viktor, “You say you can’t draw, but I bet you can. We read this story in English called “Cathedral”? And the narrator is this fucked up, sorry, this messed up guy whose life is going nowhere, and he’s not even that bright, but he gets to drawing a cathedral with someone who cares about him and he says, *I’m no artist. But I kept drawing all the same.*”

“Miles, friend,” Viktor says, “are you by any chance hinting that I’m ‘fucked up’ and ‘not even that bright’? Because even if I’m not your professor anymore, I think some attempt at tact is still in order.”

“Shit—”

“I get it, kiddo. I’m just messing with you. Can you reach over into that drawer? I think I’ve got some paper plates in there from ages ago. Anyway, if there’s someone here who can draw, it’s you. Show me that Ring of Barry’s Ear again.”

They eat. They talk long past sunset, and then Viktor orders Miles to drive home safely. “It’s dark,” he says. “Watch out for deer, and drunken idiots. Don’t do anything stupid. The last thing I need is you getting in some accident because I had you staying late.”

“I think I’ve been on the road in the dark before,” Miles says, grinning, but he promises to be careful.

Driving home, neither allows himself to think too carefully about what has just transpired.

Viktor returns to his house and switches on all the lights. He powers on his laptop to input today's participation grades but finds himself perusing an online bookstore instead. He didn't remember Miles when he first saw him standing in his office doorway, but now he does, can easily recall the boy as he was two autumns ago. How he'd come to Viktor's office bearing gifts of gas-station apple pies the way a cat might bring in dead mice; how he'd asked for Viktor's opinion on a series of dragons he'd drawn in his algebra notebook. At the time, Viktor had had a vintage copy of David Day's *A Tolkien Bestiary* languishing in his office—who knew why, somebody must have given it to him, there were mountains of dusty books in there—but he pulled it down and watched as Miles's acne-stubbed jaw hit the floor. The boy had been so entranced by the illustrations that it occurred to Viktor to just give him the book, but for some reason, he didn't. Now he's not even certain that he still has it. So when he finds the book online, he looks up Miles' address in the college's electronic records and places the order. He laughs a little and is surprised by the sound. What a strange kid. What a strangely marvelous kid. He receives a confirmation and notes with satisfaction that it will get there as early as Monday.

As for Miles, he stops at his usual gas station to fill up the Camry. While he stands there waiting, his breath making small clouds, he notices a woman in an ugly eggplant-colored coat hunched on the curb near the quickmart entrance. He's seen her before—she's always quietly panhandling—and normally he's careful to avoid eye contact. Now he tosses aside the cigarette he was about to light and goes to her.

"I'm no loser, you know," she says to him before he can speak. Her eyes are grey. "I had a bad time a few months ago. I got hospital bills, big ones. I just need a little help. Then you won't see me here no more."

Miles reaches into his wallet, ignoring the eye-roll of the store clerk behind the glass. He hands her a ten and starts to turn back. "Wait," she says. "I don't just take." From inside her coat she fishes a file folder like the ones Miles's professors all have, and from the folder she removes a sheet of white computer paper on which the words *LOVE YOU* have been drawn in rough calligraphy, each letter flowing into the next. "I make these and photocopy them at the Walgreens," she says with some pride. "I make them."

He takes the paper, this woman's art, and blinks hard.

He climbs back into the Camry and breathes in its scent of lavender. Once home, he tapes the paper to his wall, over the torn remains of one of his old pictures. Then he sits down at his card-table with his sketchbook and pen.

At the bus stop, stars blink in the gaps between the oak's branches as the spider slowly draws the errant thread back toward her web. The stubborn leaf clings on, an anchor she must tug through the dark one millimeter at a time. She adapts. She labors into the night, and come morning the leaf finds itself woven into the new design.

RUBATO

*In classical music we can cheat
not the beginning – never the beginning –
but the end of a note....* If one believes
time to be God-given, that is, absolute –
dictated by an infallible composer – then
to hold a note just a little longer,
to cradle it in the throat,
to thief from the creator, transgress
against the time signature
for no reason but pleasure, to prolong the life
of something pure and beautiful,
with the flesh, the mouth, the breath –
is to be – for the whole of a moment,
for a moment's entirety – immortal.

Essentially

“Things were of course the sum of the world....She could imagine people not having, but she couldn't imagine their not wanting and not missing.”

--Henry James, The Spoils of Poynton

Yesterday was the annual “Clean-Up Day” in our solidly middle-class burb. It's the day the city allows people to put out for collection at no extra charge things that would be too big for their trash cans. Each year, I find it a good day to extend my dog walk to inspect what my neighbors have brought forth from their basements and garages. This one time a year, truth is lining the curbs.

Other years, I confess that I've driven around and stopped to fill the back of my car with stuff too good for the landfill, and brought it to the local thrift store for resale for some good cause. It's not so much that I'm environmentally woke, as that I'm my mother's son, and she never threw away anything. Neither did her father before her. They each lived through the Depression, and also shared something Northern and Germanic about economy making good sense. My grandfather had a place for everything, down to the smallest tack, nail, fruit jar--and could find it in his house even after he was mostly blind.

As I write, we're in what I presume to be Year One of the Covid Plague. With people locked down and little better to do, the ore of the discarded is especially rich this year. But with the virus at hand, too literally, I'm not about to go around touching everything for donation to the thrift store. “No thank you, we're just looking,” I say to the dog.

And what do the dog and I see on our walk? So many mattresses (illegal to resell)—as if the neighbors expect the homeless to spend a restful night in their yard. At least two perfect filing cabinets, made redundant in the digital age. Two sets of golf clubs, his and hers. Why do I suppose the shafts are bent with age, balls hooking into the rough or slicing into divorce? The inventory of appliances and gizmos that don't work, or so one assumes at first: box fans, refrigerator/freezers, window ACs, floor lamps, stationary treadmills, long-stilled clocks,

Lying closed on one guy's lawn: a door. Leading where?

Comic relief, standing six feet away from the rest of the items: a toilet. No modesty here.

So many toys that Johnnie and Susie have outgrown: jungle gyms, wading pools, bikes with colored streamers left hanging from the handle bars. Also pet carriers, portable coolers. I can't help but assess the condition of the things as we pass. Here's a dart board, pocked like the battlefield of an old war. Why did they keep it this long?

Much of the rest, though, seems serviceable. Or better. I couldn't know unless I plugged it in, tried it out. I want to.

Lumber, lots of lumber. And chairs, so many chairs: lounge, lawn, desk, dining room. Most have four legs and a seat intact. A visitor from another planet would assume everyone now prefers to stand.

My dog stops at one neighbor's driveway to lift a leg on a pile of flotsam. I understand his thinking, but I pull him away. For it's about this point in the morning every year that I begin to see the less fortunate start their combing of our streets, with their old 4x4s and rusted SUVs, looking for what can furnish their lives, looking for what is, at least, better than what they have. They are our scavenger angels; I think of the trees and fields saved from excavation and fill. What might be thrift for me and tidying up for my neighbors is need for

them. Some of their vehicles are filled to overflow and leave to come back for a second trip through the foreign neighborhoods.

But the scavengers too are fewer this year. As with everything else in our lives, this year is a little different. The “inessential” stores are closed. (You know the rest, alive now as you are). Over this great neighborhood unfolding, Marie Kondo rules; there is space freed at last in the homes of those refusing to fall from the middle class with everyone else. But why is it that the Depression my mother and grandfather lived through led them to look for the value, or at least the utility in things? While in my own times, an interruption in good fortune has led people to throw out much more than usual? An article in this morning’s paper about “Spruce up Days” in other towns says the same thing is happening everywhere. Is the purging simply because we have more time on our hands? Perhaps.

The dog has me stop at a collection of unmatched furniture. As my mother’s son, and someone whose home is still furnished mostly with pieces I got when my mother died, I take a look. It seems that people put things on the curb mostly not because they no longer work, or not even because they no longer “spark joy.” It’s because the things have been replaced by new things, or will be once this interval of contagion has passed. Replace, not Reuse. Upgrade.

Aware of the passing of years, and not to think of myself as a hoarder (I’m not), I too wish to downsize. Each Clean Up Day I scan the basement shelves and shuffle through the garage, today found a few short, rotting boards from last season’s raised garden beds, also a burned out fluorescent bulb, and I put them out under the tree by the curb. Later that morning, I see a trash guy pick up the boards. He has to leave the bulbs. I know, hazardous waste.

I’m not telling myself on this walk much that we all didn’t know before. Even the dog now is less interested in an unopened bag of roofing shingles than he is in the trail of a long departed red squirrel. This year, there is plenty of misery and suffering in the air, with worse to come, no doubt. (I tell this to the dog, since he’s the only one I know who hasn’t heard it.) With the closings, the markets, the economies are going in the tank, reliant as they are on people buying things to replace what’s lying at our feet.

Reliant, I think I see now, on people *buying things they don’t need*. Why do they do it? I suppose because they can, we all can. The neighbors will buy, or have already bought, new chairs to replace those that will be buried in what once was a place to grow corn or pasture Holsteins. No one will be left standing. Not now, not when the music stops.

But little has been proven *Essential*. When we can buy only that which is, everyone loses their jobs. Could we not, then, all find more important work? Except that’s not the way of the world.

As I said, we knew it all before the outbreak, didn’t we? About our dependence on the life cycle and death rattle of stuff acquired to take our minds off... well, whatever it is. We’ve learned that “Everything’s a dollar,” but also that a dollar is everything—for what it will buy.

Like death, our own discarding, better not to speak of the end. For I think now, maybe I always thought, that all waste is hazardous, and our livelihoods, if not our lives, seem to depend on collecting and disposing. There are so many of us now, and so much of it.

Laura Last

Repair job

I've sewn up
the open wound
where you entered

swamping my separateness
and filling my mouth
with silence.

I spat you out,
found the rip
in the fabric.

The needle was thick,
the stitches are rough,
but so far
they're holding.

William Lessard

The me that wants to kill me always comes floating up

The me that wants to kill me always comes floating up.
It presses my chest from the center. Fists wide. Grip able
to pull memory from deepest ocean. The years
have given it heft. I used to think age would make me stronger.
Books, too. The words I memorized
become a sentence coughed into a carved parenthesis.
Every morning, the crocodile silence.
The me waits just below the skin—bare, illumined,
fingers wrinkled at the tips.
I have lived long enough to hate myself for the right reason.
A few years ago, my friend celebrated his 50th birthday a week early
by borrowing the nose of a speeding train to spray his guts in the air
like champagne. I think of him every morning. I think of him now
as I collect pieces of his body from this wave.

A Man Accused of Beheading his Wife

A house identical to his had sprung up in the empty lot where he liked to smoke.

Like, overnight. It was possible. Like, dropped from the sky. And if he went to the front door of that house, and knocked, and was let in, and the interior turned out to be the same—not just the floor plan, but the rattan furniture and the wax-fruit magnets on the refrigerator—the implications would be troublesome. But he figured:

1. He would not go to the door, or
2. If he went to the door, he would not knock, or
3. If he knocked, he would not be let in, or
4. If let in, he would immediately insert a cigarette in his mouth, light up, cough, and be asked to leave.

It could have been an elaborate trap. Simply because a house in the neighborhood looked exactly like his house was not reason enough to introduce himself to the people who lived there. He did consider, briefly, the possibility of searching for another empty lot within walking distance. He had quit smoking six times in two years. He had even smoked an electronic cigarette. People were tired of hearing about it. Topics that should not have bored them—his mountaineering exploits, for example—elicited rude yawns and chuckles from his office-mates. Halfway up Everest? Why not all the way? The Appalachian Trail only as far as Harper's Ferry? You've got a problem with Maryland and Pennsylvania?

He might buy a dog, to walk with him while he smoked. He wouldn't move very fast. He'd seen a small dog on television, a fluffy little white thing that could walk around on its hind legs wearing sunglasses. It was a breed that had evolved in Madagascar, after falling off a ship from India and swimming for shore. He had laughed at the obvious myth. It was the same cable channel that kept positing the existence of ancient astronauts.

She was tired from the hike. She sat on a worm-eaten bench, three miles from the trailhead, and picked at the graffiti. Too many people loved each other. *If you love me you'll do this for me, etc.*

Her new partner, Judy, had kept up a hideous pace, on the uphill, the rocky ridges, the knife-edges, where it was simple common sense to look down occasionally and plan the next three steps. There were people who never looked down, or back, for that matter.

She had said to Judy, "This isn't the only thing we'll be doing together, is it?"

Judy said, "I can't hear you. My doctor says I should get hearing aids, but I'd have to fork over five thousand dollars and buy new batteries every week, according to my mother. Did you say something?" She gathered her hair into a ponytail, as if to assist her hearing.

"Wait up, okay?"

“The water’s not that deep,” Judy said.

Miles earlier, near the beginning, she had said to Judy, “I should lose a few pounds. I’m twenty pounds above my ideal weight.”

“You look okay to me.”

“It’s not about fitting into my old wedding dress, or anything.”

“I assume you burned it,” Judy said.

One of his office-mates, another slightly paunchy guy in his mid to late thirties, name unknown, stood next to him while they gazed into the men’s room mirror. They were both combing their hair, restoring the part down the middle. A tangible indoor wind, created by excessive air conditioning, had caused mayhem in their hairdos. They leaned toward the mirror, in unison.

The office-mate said, “You might want to lose the goatee, bud.”

“I like it.”

“I shaved mine off a month ago and my life got infinitely better. In any case, I wanted to offer a few words of personal grooming advice. For which I expect nothing in return.”

“That’s very generous of you.”

“You really mean that?”

“Yes,” he said, fingering the goatee. “I was planning to shave it off tonight anyway. I was only waiting for a trustworthy person to tell me what to do. An advisor. *You*. But I’m not sure I’ll be able to find my way home.”

“Seriously?”

“If you advised me to carry a women’s purse, I’d probably do it.”

“I hardly know you, bud.”

“If you *knew* me, you’d be in a weaker position, as far as giving personal advice.”

There was a slight pause. They both stepped back from the mirror. “Exactly what is it that you do in this office, bud?”

“I’m not sure.”

“Are you a temp?” the office-mate asked.

“Whatever it is I do, I’m taking a break from it, and I need a cigarette—immediately—but it looks as if they’ve taken away our rights. Coffee breaks, bathroom breaks, meditation. There’s a dozen signs outside that say we can’t smoke anywhere on the property.”

“I don’t smoke,” the office-mate said. “I quit last year.”

“Whatever I do, it keeps me busy. I have custody stuff on Saturdays and church stuff on Sundays and then this so-called job the rest of the time. Can you believe that I teach Sunday School? I once even gave a sermon.”

“No. I don’t believe it.”

“What part? The sermon?”

“You might want to talk less and knuckle down once in a while. That’s my best advice.”

“There’s always forgiveness.”

“Yes,” the office-mate said. “There’s forgiveness, but only when people admit to wrongdoing. Otherwise, there’s suspicion. And groundless accusations.”

“More good advice.”

It could have been his ten-year-old car, often unreliable, inoperable, recalcitrant. What a word! *Recalcitrant*—he had seen it in a dream, taped to the inside of a shop window, advertising a stomach medicine. Or a variety of sandwich recently introduced, featuring goat cheese and a rare variety of beet greens. From now on, he would walk home—eight miles—and thus have a better sense of where he lived. He had seen other men dashing across freeways and parking lots, and he had entertained the possibility that these men were criminals, but he wanted to think they were regular guys like himself, office workers who had given up driving. Madison County was hostile toward pedestrians. Sidewalks had been destroyed, even the ones with green carpets that connected all the banks and brokerage firms, the ones that seemed to go on forever, with magic carpets that could turn corners without rippling. In a letter to the local paper, a citizen had said, “We need a dogcatcher for these so-called pedestrians. A person with an enormous butterfly net; with a great big sticky tongue.”

“Did we hike through poison ivy this morning?” she asked Judy, who merely stared at her, the way she did when she’d forgotten her name.

“Sandy said she liked this shirt,” Judy finally said.

“Sandy?”

“Make that, *loved it*.” Judy emptied her jeans pockets into the front-hall wastebasket. Pebbles and pine needles and gum wrappers and coins. “Of course, it’s just a shirt.”

“I like it, too.” It was a green and red plaid flannel shirt, with brass buttons. Probably a man’s size XXL.

“Next time, let’s do a real mountain,” Judy said.

“There aren’t any real mountains in Minnesota.”

“How did you suddenly become an expert on mountains?”

“I could be wrong. I take back what I said. But I think I’m coming down with poison ivy. It’s a general feeling, an all-over feeling, and then it pops up in the space between your fingers and you can’t do a thing about it.”

“I prefer a trail with a decent view, not just a bunch of trees and telephone poles. I could go nuts from walking in a green tunnel, hour after hour. It’s like I’m back in Basic Training. There’s maybe one week in October when everything is perfect. Except my schedule. You know?”

“We had a view today. I liked it. From that limestone overlook?”

Judy closed her eyes and leaned against the wall. She undid her ponytail and shook her head vigorously. “Should I cut it off?”

“No, I like it.”

“You like everything,” Judy said. “I’m afraid I might die all of a sudden.”

“From what?”

“And I would have missed so much. True love, for example. The fact is, I want to die on Mount Everest. Going up or down, I don’t give a damn. It’s almost as good as having your head sent to Arizona to be frozen. Forever. Like that baseball player.”

“You’re going to have to fly solo on that one, Judy?”

“What?”

“Doesn’t it cost a couple hundred thousand dollars to do Mount Everest? That’s what I heard. More money than I’ve made in my life, actually.”

“You looked into it,” Judy said.

“Not deliberately. It’s a stray fact that I picked up from the radio. I’d never considered it.”

“Considered,” Judy said, her voice softening. She knocked on the wall. “I don’t like to rule out anything, as long as I’m alive.”

“That’s a good philosophy.”

“You know why I’m still married?”

“No.”

“Neither do I,” Judy said. “It was a mysterious attraction at first. We were passengers on the same train, eastbound in the middle of North Dakota. Minot? It doesn’t matter. Those stations are all the same. They should light them up in distinctive pastel colors. So I’d been spending time at Glacier Park. I was depressed, vulnerable, half-frozen. Anything could happen. We weren’t even in the same car. He was traveling in coach, evidently sitting up all night. The train was making a smoker’s stop, around 10 pm, and I watched from my window as this skinny guy in a black leather jacket and tight jeans appeared on the platform, in silhouette. I admired the way he lit up his cigarette, the way he tipped back his head and his cheeks hollowed out as he sucked and the smoke came out of his nose simultaneously, a white cone disappearing into the dark universe. The engineer whistled twice and the smoker hopped back on the train. We were married soon after.”

“On the train?”

“No, in Minneapolis, in a church. We simply walked into the building, knocked on the minister’s door, and he married us, no questions asked.”

“I once attended a wedding on a train.”

“It shouldn’t be that easy.”

“The bride and groom were both cabin attendants, plump and middle-aged. I think that’s what you call them, the people who clean your room and fluff the pillows. I had only one pillow.”

“When he quit smoking last year,” Judy continued, “I told him that the smoking was the only thing I had really liked about him.”

“But you’re still married.”

“It seems that way.”

So there he was—not Judy’s husband, but similar—walking the median of a six-lane freeway, head down, leaning into the breeze as helicopters performed their eggbeater dance above him. Later, he would be disappointed to learn that the choppers were covering a high-speed chase that involved five or six gray minivans and a herd of cows. It had nothing to do with him. The median was filled with the most wonderful trash—not the usual baby carriages and piles of two-toned umbrellas with university logos on them, but office materials that would have been worth good money if there had been a way of hauling them to a safe location. There did not appear to be such a way. He bent over and picked up several shrink-wrapped HP printer cartridges and stuffed them in his pockets. He salvaged an unopened pack of unfiltered Camels, which also fit, though it added to his waistline. Continuing west on the median, he looked down frequently, hoping for a book of matches, a Bic lighter. People had walked their dogs here quite recently, and he danced around their leavings.

A ladder had been placed against a bridge abutment, in evident anticipation of his need. He climbed it, gripping the rungs with both hands. He wasn’t one of those office workers who took a briefcase home. He wasn’t one of those painfully thin workers who dragged fifty pounds of black binders on a luggage cart, grinning incessantly, wheels rattling and squeaking. The ladder was slightly tapered. It reminded him of the wooden ladders used by professional apple pickers. The tops of those ladders were only a few inches wide, there being no need to climb the last few rungs. Indeed, it would have been dangerous, and the apple-picker would have found himself swinging from a breakable branch. The slight taper of the present ladder was aesthetically pleasing. It hardly bent under his weight. When he reached the top, he grabbed the concrete guardrail and pulled his body onto the bridge platform. He brushed the dust off his pants. A navy blue Lexus was parked on the other side, idling.

A window whirred and the driver looked at him. “You still have the goatee.”

“I haven’t been *home* yet. Come on, man, give me a break. I told you I would take care of it.”

“I’m not convinced you even have a home. Get in.” The window went back up.

“Take a look at this.” Settled into the passenger seat, he displayed the pristine pack of Camels, sunlight flashing on the cellophane. “Amazing, huh? An idiot threw it from a car window and it landed down there. Like throwing away money. You wouldn’t happen to have a lighter, would you?”

“I told you this morning. I don’t smoke. Quit last year.”

“Your wife convinced you.”

“Been making a lot of changes lately, on my own initiative. Those are the best kind of changes.”

“I can wait. I’m not addicted.” The Lexus drifted noiselessly across the bridge, then sped up. “Where are we headed?”

“Home,” the office-mate said, tentatively.

“Are you married?”

“Are *you*?”

“Any kids? Didn’t you say something about losing custody?”

“No,” the office-mate said. “*You* said that.”

“Didn’t you say something—it might have been in the men’s room—about this car being hot?”

“Again, I think you’ve switched things around. It was you who said something about ‘hot-wiring’ a car. You said it while we were combing our hair.”

“Did we share a comb?”

“Don’t be ridiculous,” the office-mate said.

“There was another guy in the men’s room combing his hair. Extremely long, luxuriant hair with blond highlights. Waist-length hair. He might have used a brush. He could have been a car thief.”

“Nope,” the office-mate said. “*You* said it.”

“I wouldn’t know the first thing about hot-wiring a car. It was the guy with the long hair. Black turtleneck?”

“When you see a person like that,” the office-mate mused, “you think about how convenient the hair would be in the form of a ponytail. Like a handle, right? If you needed a handle for what you were about to do. I speak from experience.”

The car made very little noise. The driver did not elaborate on his “experience.” The passenger would have told a few dirty jokes, but couldn’t remember any. He used to have two dozen Ole and Lena jokes ready to go, complete with Norwegian accents. He was losing brain cells. He figured that in four or five years he’d be nothing but a bystander, a mindless giant-finger-waver in the top row of bleachers. A silly man. He’d be one of those overweight citizens shown in TV news footage about declining longevity in America, waddling down the sidewalk of a generic city, head never shown.

“Too warm for you in here?” the office-mate asked. “In my ‘hot’ car?”

“I’m fine.”

The office-mate rolled down his window. The breeze activated several strands of blond hair that were stuck to the dash by an unknown substance. The passenger discretely scraped them into his pocket. Much better if he had swept them into a small ziplock bag, sealed the bag, and written on the outside, using a sharpie pen, “Office-mate’s Lexus dashboard,” with the date.

“I’m fine,” he said. “It’s not that hot in here.” He felt the pack of Camels in his pocket and trembled. He figured:

1. His clothes had the smell of cigarette smoke on them—from his two-hour break earlier that day. Thus, the open window, a signal of displeasure. Or,
2. The seal was broken on the pack of Camels, the smell leaking out. Or,
3. He stank of a substance far worse than cigarettes. Or,
4. He wasn’t the one who actually stank. The Lexus was one of those

cars that a person had died in, and the people who had been paid to clean up and get rid of the stink had underperformed their jobs. They could have been prisoners on work-release.

She stood on Judy's colonial front porch, ringing the doorbell.

Incessantly.

The word popped into her head as she pressed the button; she had seen it written on a piece of pale yellow paper blowing about, detached from any verb, in a recent dream—contrary to dream theories that exclude the possibility of written text, especially adverbs. Pray incessantly? Judy hadn't shown up at the Drip-Drop for their weekly coffee date and power-walk. Judy was not known to miss anything, especially a power-walk. She was known, rather, for showing up ten minutes early and frowning at people who merely arrived on time.

Underfoot was a welcome mat that said, I'M HIKING. But that could not be true.

Judy's friend pressed the doorbell again, hard. Had the electricity been shut off? She began to imagine things. She began to covet the flannel shirt. She feared that it no longer existed.

"I'm in trouble," the office-mate said. They stood on the porch of the identical house that had sprung into being—to which, evidently, the office-mate enjoyed unrestricted access, if not ownership. That he tolerated a near-stranger smoking on his front porch, that he even seemed to welcome it, spoke to the seriousness of the trouble he was in.

"Really?"

"Big trouble." The office-mate held an ashtray under his guest's lit cigarette, to catch his ashes, a gesture of stunning hospitality. He kept holding it there as they walked around. It was a silver ashtray; actually, more of a fancy dish designed to hold bonbons and caviar and miniscule three-layer cakes, a dish engraved with the fuzzy initials of the dead.

"Trouble? You're exaggerating." He tapped his ashes onto the silver plate.

"Big trouble," the office-mate repeated. "Didn't I tell you I was married?"

"Was?"

"The whole context is the past, so I put that verb in the past tense, that's all."

"The trouble you refer to, on the other hand, is in the present, regardless of your marital status."

"Exactly."

Taxonomies: This Land

I. Fairy Tales

Humpty Dumpty chants
Build that wall. The piper
lures all the rats to town.
The huntsman targets
everyone who isn't white
as snow. The wolf huffs & puffs
& blows the world down.

II. Recipes

Soufflés are tragic. Hollandaise is a breeze.
For a challenge, turn a sweet savory or a savory
sweet. Everything tastes better with chicken broth.
Directions are optional except when they're not.
A macaroon is not a macaron, and neither one
is president of France. Our own sad concoction
of leaders forgot we're a melting pot.

III. Tears

Loss, of course, but also allergies,
eye drops, onions. And laughter,
especially in the classroom of a stern
teacher. Swallow it. Hold it in. Do. Not.
Look. At. Your. Friend. And clouds
of gas: streams on cheeks of children
with bare feet, white diapers, brown skin.

My Sister's Monkey

After months of drought, the ground was so dry that when rain finally did come—frantic rain that pummeled our town like an aggressive apology—the water quickly began to pool. My sister, who normally communicated with me by texts and only when she was passive-aggressively needling me about something, called in a panic. She was stuck at the office. Did I still have that kayak? Would I *please!!!!* kayak over to her house to rescue her pet monkey?

Our town hadn't seen a flood like this since I was two years old. Christmas of '91. My father waded to a neighbor's house to borrow pull-up diapers and was drowned by a rogue wooden reindeer. For years, my sister called me Little Murderer.

A spare key was hidden inside a fake rock on the front porch, Marilla said, assuming the fake rock hadn't washed away, which probably it had. Actually, if water hasn't already gotten into the house, she said, better to break open a window with one of my oars or whatever other potentially destructive object I could find. She paused, then said, "You're resourceful."

When I was six, I tried to poison my sister by pouring fluoride mouthwash into her glass of orange juice. For years, Marilla has worn this story like a gaudy piece of costume jewelry. What she leaves out when she tells it is all she's done before and since to inspire my retaliation. She struck up so many cruel bargains. For example, if I licked her hand, barked, and begged for a slice of baloney, she would cease calling me Little Murderer for a single afternoon.

Our mother paid no attention. She was about as embroiled in our lives as the ants that filed through a crack along the edge of bathroom window every time it rained.

The closest my sister has come to admitting any wrongdoing is she sent a text last year chastising me for not calling our mother on her birthday. *I know that when I was a kid, I did things to hurt our family and I regret that. Now that I'm an adult, I try to act like one. I try not to be petty and hurtful. I try to do right by both of you. I hope you will start trying, too.*

I told my sister that, sure, I would save her pet monkey.

I had never met my sister's monkey, but my sister had texted photos that depressed me. Last Thanksgiving, she'd told a story about how the monkey had bitten her because she'd wrestled her hairbrush from him, told him it wasn't a toy. She laughed when she relayed this anecdote. "Like living with a toddler!"

Despite never having met Marilla's monkey, I had thought about him an awful lot. When my sister texted me something snarky, when my neighbor tugged at her poodle's leash to yank the animal away from

anything green, when I brushed my hair.

I felt guilty about Marilla's monkey. But I'd told myself he was Marilla's monkey and, therefore, none of my concern.

I used to think the circumstances of my upbringing had made me incredibly practical—I had had to learn to desire no more than what was necessary to my survival. But then I learned about that wire monkey experiment, and I realized that the same circumstances could have born impracticality just as easily.

Kayaking to Marilla's house took over an hour. I had to navigate around abandoned vehicles and all manner of floating debris—a bean bag, uprooted trees, a blow-up doll with weird cylindrical breasts that resembled children's arm floaties. I had to ignore the calls of people yelling for me to come rescue them from their houses or the tops of their cars, or to bring them drinking water or vodka.

In any other circumstance, I knew Marilla would count all this as evidence of my coldness.

When I got to Marilla's house, I stepped out of the kayak and into the flood waters, which came up to my thighs. The shock of the cold made me shiver. I pictured my father sloshing through such water, determined to provide for his little girl what was essentially nothing more than comfort. Couldn't he have just decided that a flood was a good time to potty train me? I lifted my kayak over my head and rammed it hard as I could into my sister's front window.

I found my sister's monkey in a cage on the floor. He was not in great danger. Pieces of dried fruit and what I assumed was some kind of monkey biscuit sat in a metal bowl inside that cage. Also, my sister's house was dry as bone. Not even the littlest bit of water had pushed its way inside other than what clung to my kayak.

But he looked miserable in the blue vest with fringe in which Marilla had dressed him. I wondered if she'd trained him to twirl a toy pop gun in his fingers or draw on the quick in a duel.

When I opened the cage door, the first thing the monkey did was slap me.

I wasn't angry. I wasn't even surprised. Unlike Marilla, I accepted blame when I'd earned it.

I prostrated myself before the monkey, bent over in an inelegant child's pose. I waited for him to hit me again.

But what I soon felt were his nimble hands in my hair. He stroked my hair, petted me. When I sat up, the monkey caressed the cheek he'd slapped, which was still slightly warm from the sting.

I couldn't remember anyone touching me tenderly like that, though probably my impractical father once had.

Brian Henry

Sincerest Apologies

for the train
on its loud way
somewhere:

the sound is not
the sound of water
or white noise machine,

there is no dial
or knob
or filter.

Your only option
is not an option.

Brian Henry

Self Justification

If you're going to use couplets
you should mean it. We can tell
if you're faking, like chasing
someone younger to feel
younger yourself, a spectacle
best not shared anywhere
those who know and love you
for real might show: that's what
they'll talk about when you're gone,
ashamed on your behalf,
ashamed to be ashamed. Sheepish
is no way to leave us. Better
to leave us speechless.

Tag

What does it mean to touch, or be touched? This is the core of the game Tag, or at least, what it becomes. Without fail.

What counts? *Did that one count, or not?* What does it mean for a girl to touch a boy? For a boy to chase girls fingers-first, and for them to run away, screaming or laughing. Both? Whatever sound that was always coming right out the tops of our spines.

I used to love a game of chase. But in the fifth grade, it started to become clear that I was becoming something else—not quite a “big girl” but, as I inherited my paternal grandmother’s roundness of physique, definitely located me somewhere loose and scary between “girl” and “woman”. A place which didn’t have a name at school—this would be several years before puberty was acknowledged in any Oklahoma classroom—but at church it meant being a “Young Woman”, and that meant mostly the same things as being a girl but from now on getting lessons on chastity every fourth Sunday.

Somewhere in the year-ish span between when my mother first wordlessly left half a dozen white and tan training bras on my bed and the time a nine-year-old boy in my class told me he would *rape me to death* if I didn’t stop talking about how I’d finally learned to spell the word *surprise*, it was also made clear to me that the game Tag had undergone transformations as well.

For one thing, girls didn’t play anymore. They weren’t quite told not to. But most had the sense to stop and be still. To group together, forming colorful, circular, strongholds. But I have always liked simple games, and at the time I still loved running and being fast. I wanted to keep playing.

I adapted to having no circle, and to my classmates saying or shouting “Watch out for that dog!” when they saw me. I wanted to keep playing, so I settled for always being “it.” For being the one to do all the running-after. Let me tell you, I even barked.

And I have been thinking lately, a lot, about how every game of Tag is at least 60% debates about whether or not someone was or wasn’t tagged. Whether it counts if only their shirt was touched. And what about if only one person feels it?

I’ve been wondering if during Tag is when we first started petitioning one another for control of reality. Learned how. Learned we could.

And when we left the playground, I don’t think we left behind the question, “*Does a particular touch only count as real when both parties agree it happened?*”

I hear it all the time, and mostly it still sounds like laugh-screaming little kids who don’t know whether they’re terrified or want to keep playing.

Did anyone else see it happen? Did it leave a mark? Do you have any proof? Are you prepared for what it means if a jury of your peers decides you made it all up?

But like I said, I like simple games. Maybe it would have been easier, after, if he'd just said *you're it* instead of *what did you think I wanted to drive you out here for?* Maybe then I'd have known running away was an option. And I might have realized the reason I kept agreeing to wait outside the gym for him at night was thinking maybe I could give him back whatever his touch had put onto me. Or I was trying to understand why none of my touching had any effect, what made my hands on his body feel more like nothing was touching at all.

Now, many years later, I understand that I hadn't been capable of making him "it" like he'd made me.

I was tagged. The same as I'd been made a dog in fifth grade: the rules had been changed by the other players, without my permission.

This is my hand.



My handprint, more precisely, which represents my hand touching.

These are my fingerprints, which can be used to prove my having-touched-something in a court of law. This is what, forensically, determines whether and whenever a touch is *mine*, and that it happened.

You could replicate this exact image, impose it on a thing, or on a body, and that would look the same under iodine as it would if I'd done the touching myself. Or maybe I did. Or it's the same as my having done, just with a couple extra steps and the understanding that memories cannot be used to prove anything.

But it would look the same as it would if I'd been there, and known about it, and what is "knowing" or "remembering it" anyway, and do those things have anything to do with "what my left hand doeth" when my right hand isn't looking.

You can lift and transfer a person's fingerprints from a surface using cocoa powder and scotch tape. There are tutorials on the internet. To teach you how you can pick up a touch and put it back down, somewhere else. Or how to erase all evidence of touch with a towel.

I've been watching a lot of videos of handprints disappearing. Seeing how a splash of water or a swipe can utterly destroy them. How easy it *should* be, to obliterate those delicate identifying loops and whorls, despite nearly ten years of scalding showers making it hard for me to accept all this apparent vanishment. So I've mostly just been rewinding, and replaying.

Did you know your fingerprints are made by the unique pressurization of the womb you were formed in? That identical twins share the same DNA but have their own fingerprints? That there is only a one in sixty-four billion chance your fingerprints match up exactly with someone else's, but that it isn't impossible?

Fingerprints are essentially sweat, the watery parts of which degrade pretty quickly. The mark you leave behind on the things you touch is mostly lipids and amino acids.

Fat and oil. That's all our fingerprints turn out to be. As in, the fingerprints we put on things, because the word fingerprints means both the part of you fingerprints are, and the residue that part of you leaves on everything it comes into contact with.

How do you know if you've been touched?
We've been arguing about this since we were kids.

Here are some things that touch me: when strangers smile back, the Adagio for Strings, the smell of rain on concrete, hand-made gifts, knowing we don't know what might live at the bottom of the ocean, remembering how Virginia Woolf drowned herself and also once wrote that life was "a pure bead" while looking at a dusty little bug in her windowsill, clever riddles, confessions, the words "me too," and every thing that trembles.

This probably never has never been as simple as skin on skin. Which brings us back to my hand, which I have placed here, not by accident. Offered, as a hand can be, palm-wise and fully open, because it seems to me there may be gaping universes between all it could mean if I ask: *Can you feel this?*

At this point, maybe you can say whether you've been touched by me or not. I won't know if you ever put your hand over the one I put here for you, whether you laid your hand over this distillation of mine, just to humor me. Or because you're sentimental. Or just to see what might happen.

It's occurred to me the potential danger in disseminating my handprint. Except I can't resist, because maybe right now wherever you are you are realizing that you're *it*.

Or maybe I still am. And if you know you are but I don't ever know you know then does that mean we are both *it*? What if all, or just some, of the people who read this essay find their way to some kind of acceptance of the feeling of being touched by me, and a hundred, or a million, or twelve people, become *it*?

Some people will probably think that breaks the game. That Tag cannot be played this way, and maybe I shouldn't be allowed to play anymore.

Or they might feel something.

Or we might all feel something that one day we'll learn we invented. Created it, gave it parameters, and agreed on its existence. Reality could always turn out to be nothing more than a little game we play. Like a game of Tag.

Personally, I don't think a revision makes the original meaningless. I think we can be allowed to break the rules. I think there is power in the paradox of allowing ourselves to break the rules. I have experienced how this can sometimes result in exactly the opposite of breaking.

And, as always, I think I'm still going to want to keep playing, whatever happens.

Maybe we'll be playing a little differently after this. Maybe because the touching that might be happening is so different than how we learned to do it on the playground, you being *it* won't make me not *it*. Maybe a whole bunch of us could all be it at the same time.

Maybe that changes the game a little.

Maybe it could change everything completely.

Maybe if I send this thing out into the world, the only thing that happens is that I won't have a way of knowing anymore whether I am chasing after everyone or running away.

Theft of Providence

The ball dropped hours ago, but he's stuck in the street, confetti and trash swirling around his shoes. Disparate pieces sticking, his feet lost in paper mâché of the new year. He has stumbled away from Times Square moving deeper or thinner. He can never orientate himself in this city. Every street contains ghosts of another street until he's walking through a hallway of mirrors. The windows of the high rises above him blink on and off, a cypher that he knows he'll never solve. The bars are closed and the shops windows are barred, and he remembers—this was twenty years ago— running from the dust and debris when the towers fell. The shock of pinballing off the other escapees. How their flesh gave way to his rushing, feet, heart, mind, until he collapsed next to a taxi and was dragged into a corner deli. A bottle of water, hands clutching his, a mumble of prayer. Sirens never ending.

Now, every step is an avoidance, and he's still hostage to a city that crackles with the social electricity of capitalism. He sells bonds, the invisible right to a gaggle of binary codes impersonating money. His father, a county health officer, shilling for vaccines and big pharma, wants him to move back home. To put his degree in finance to better use. Don't be a part of the brain drain, he suggests, but his son hasn't lived in his home state for years. They city owns him. Rent. Utilities. Square footage of a camping tent, all to pretend he's better than his provincial upbringings. You can hate a place and stay rooted—buried—anywhere as long as it's not home.

3 am and the streets don't care. Even the police have given up the night. He can do anything and nothing, a liminal space where the phone call doesn't exist, where auld lang syne replaces his father's voice. There's no diagnosis, no estimation of how much time is left, how much longer he'll be a son. A category like his age that changes and shifts as he grows older, and soon his mother will not. He can't remember her heartbeat, the womb they shared, but when he bites down on his thumb to stifle the scream, the one that would have embarrassed his father, he feels the thrum of his pulse, and discounts how easy it is to live.

He finds a diner. One of those twenty-four-hour *Moondance* rip offs that still had pie in the class covers on the counter, with weak, but hot coffee, and waitresses that wanted to be anywhere else.

He sits at the counter, and asks for coffee. While the waitress, Maggie, pours, he asks her, "Have you ever been robbed before?"

"Sure. It used to happen once a year, but now that there's cameras everywhere," she says, shrugging, the coffee pot dripping little scalding circles of dark liquid onto the scratched countertop. "Besides, only the manager can open the safe and he's never here."

"And if I had a gun," he says, hands spreading in the pockets of his jacket, forcing it out from his stomach.

“I’d give you every last cent,” she says putting the coffee pot back, “but I don’t have no way of getting it open. A bullet in me won’t get you any money. Just ask my ex-husband.”

Maggie is the first person he has talked to in this new year, the first person other than his dad, and he wants her to stay. But she walks to the back, so he slurps his coffee, burning his tongue. The liquid tastes like ash, a campfire sparked in his throat. He wishes he had a gun, but he wouldn’t rob the diner, and he wouldn’t hurt anyone with it. You could own things without the threat of violence. But there was always the potential. *She’s still alive*, his dad had said. He offered him a plane ticket home. Said he was *cautiously optimistic*.

Maggie returns with his ticket, the paper already soiled with grease. “Anything else?” She looks beyond him at the windows, the sky just starting to pink. She sees something out there, something he can’t imagine.

“My mother’s dying.” He tips the mug toward her, showing her its emptiness. “And I don’t want to go home.”

She holds out her hands. The knuckles are nicked and scalded red. Her palms are ragged with lines, each a new road, a map of an unexplored city. “Don’t be afraid. We can still do good by each other.”

He grips her hands, a clammy warmth radiates, as she pulls him closer over the countertop into a hug. He can smell the grease in her hair, the flowery scent of her deodorant. He puts his chin on her shoulder and they stay like that until she breaks his grasp.

“I don’t have a gun,” he says.

“Oh, I know it. If you did, you’d already be dead.”

He starts to argue, but she shuts him up with a piece of pie to go, the Styrofoam box squeaking in his hand. He can tell that she doesn’t want to touch him again, that their moment is over.

Back on the streets, with the sun no longer an article of faith, he walks around the people awake and ready to conquer the city. Headphones in or phones up to their ears, they ignore him as they go by. He’s just another piece of the setting. A forgotten face in the backdrop of the theater of their lives.

Eric Pankey

IT IS A CHILD THAT SINGS ITSELF TO SLEEP, THE MIND

Something lost. Like faith or a limb.
As much a presence as an absence.

Memory as a hinterland:
A transient space, an accretion of silences,
A *then* that is also an *elsewhere*.

Somewhere near the North Pole,
A crushed hull wedged in pack ice,
A whiteout grayed at vision's edge.

The search party called off.
Dogs whimper and will not settle.

The owl's face: a forgotten moon-phase.

INTERFERENCE PATTERN

Time, although continuous, deceives us with its notion of now.
Regret, as always, belated. Each scene—rehearsed, enacted,
Workshopped, and revised—is the length of a day, an hour, an absence
Set in motion by a gesture of erasure: the slate a damp gray.
Rain on a shale outcrop. Rain as an unexpected foreclosure.
A gap opens and the visible is absorbed into such a pewter.
How many different temporalities combine to equal the past?
How can touch translate the light night inhales and holds?
Watched from a distance, the house windows go dark one by one.
What remains? An abridgement. An axe taken to a frozen sea.
Rocks circled nest-like to define a space. A taxonomy.
We are asked to put it back like we found it, to exit before the toll.
Of course, something surrounds the *around-which*. Of course,
We are aghast at the horror of *no-likeness*, of each thing distinct:
A velvet of charcoal, the cold fixed form of lava camouflaged by big data.
To forestall time, on which night must fall, a ghost condenses out of air:
A coherent mirage, a message without recipient, a losing hand dealt.
What does a façade harbor? The raw materials of notes? The collaborations
And intervention? A mass that turns out to be a muddle of intersecting lines?
A loom of silhouettes? Bare, brittle branches? A blister is easily rubbed up.
The net, pulled in, grows heavier as it surfaces, sloughs water.
In the future, one will speak in the present tense and feel nothing like dislocation,
Only the wire's frayed end and a glitchy disharmony:
A hitch. A snag. A malfunction. A sleight of hand. Transubstantiation.

Candice Kelsey

Some Women

in their thirties
stop existing
stop living for their own pleasure—
like they had in their twenties—

they become
invisible so that others can
experience the world

some women

in their forties
completely disappear
become forgotten entirely—
like they were in their dreams

about turning
fifty at a big table with strangers
in a Mexican restaurant—

but some women

order the great puppet-master to wake up
and untangle the strings
like he did for Eve
before she cut herself free.

Al Maginnes

The Rising Price of Resurrection

I drove two miles more than I needed
to watch the odometer spin over
a hundred thousand miles, fresh zeros
shining up blank on my dashboard. And for
a mile I pretended I was driving
a new car before it groaned and was again
the oil guzzler, clunker I prayed would
turn over each morning. My car today
will have to make a million miles to
show me all zeros. A fresh start costs more
and takes longer than it once did, but I've
signed up to make payments until time ends
because I always believe my body
good for one more mile and then one more.

Bryce Berkowitz

THE MARKET

It's entirely human
to shuffle sleepily
through the market's
pre-packaged sections,
worried and ashamed,
beneath fluorescent
tubes, as if the pale
light will aid us
in our quest
to find answers
to life's
lamest computations—
personal finances
subtracted by
price per lb.,
a stormy equation
of blood erasure
where debt decorates
the cavern
of our skulls
with tally marks.
The only common
future is needing
more, not having
enough, and calling it
getting by, although
it's hardly happiness,
don't you agree?
The shopping cart's
jangly wheel
caught sideways
is suddenly
a personal attack
we push against,
attempt to steer
away from, or through...
It can appear
we're stuck in-between
things. And isn't this
what it means to live?

To fill up your cart
with a small pile
of hope, and then
discard most of it,
abandon most of it,
to take what will fit
into your hands—
lentils, two peaches,
a carton of eggs,
the smallest container
of top-shelf gelato—
enough for a few meals
of the same thing,
and then something sweet
to finish the night with.
Somehow, given only
this much, we leave
feeling good. We
proudly set these
small accomplishments
on our refrigerator
shelves at home,
knowing that,
in only a few days,
we will go back
again for more.

Bonnie Proudfoot

Household Gods

Two weeks after my grandmother's funeral, I dream she lies under my dining room table, arms crossed over her heart, eyes open, dark and shining. She does not speak. I'm the only one seated, though the table is set for ten. I'm so glad to see her that my deflated heart begins to fill with blood and pump again. At her funeral, her five brothers, icy as separate stones in a field, stop to say farewell. What apologies could their lips be framing? After their mother's death, her day started before sunrise, walking to a farm, selecting a hen for dinner, hoping to find an egg inside. She was righteous in the kitchen, the *Lares and Penates* help her cast a temporary truce. Serving father then brothers, bussing the table before battles resume. "Get off your feet, Anne," no one said.

If you google "grenade," you learn that you can put the pin back in, but you must have help to do it. After the last handful of dirt is tossed, the gods fold their soft wings— all that's left are things, territory to divide, everyone's hands like clasps on a steamer trunk, snapping shut. Later, I unpack plates, cups and saucers of Blue Ridge china, also, a double-bladed chopper and a wooden bowl, her chopping pattern in my brain, a clatter and rattle that my forearm can still match. Maybe she is watching, maybe these are my household gods. I use the plates every day. I do know she didn't give up or give in. She held on. She did not give up at all.

Heather Dobbins

The River Didn't Want Him

Before the ocean, standing and bare, lose a life. Cross the angry Atlantic. Hernando De Soto brought Africans to Memphis with him in 1541. Now in the city, stand up, bare, lose that life again. They'll name these places *squares*—Exchange, Market, Court, Auction—equal on all sides. When De Soto promised his queen gold, he killed the natives when they couldn't find what was never there. The gold would come from the squares named *the slave trade center of the Mid-South*. De Soto caught a fever in Arkansas. His men buried him in the Mississippi so he could keep his lie. No one was to know he was not divine, the Son of the Sun. Hundreds of years is nothing to a river, offended. Every *City of Memphis* steamboat came to grief. The river speaks with each sinking, swallows the false names, the woes of men.

Abigail Dembo

Abigail Dembo is a thief.

She crept in Czechoslovakia and stole all their sadness.
She sliced through the sky like it was satin.
With a silver knife she cut the moon in half.
And ate it like a potato.
Now there is always a half-moon in the sky.
Now the cows give birth to idiots.
Happy idiots.

Dear bittersweet,

It's my birthday, I shouldn't be sad. (Three blue bats hang upside-down from a bough.) The dog hides his stuffed cat toy in his mouth and wags, it's a funny joke to him, *where is the kitty?* I ask and he looks guilty but also so, so pleased, I shouldn't be sad, I had three maple pancakes for breakfast and didn't wake until almost six a.m., they put out the fire in the dunes and we only have a hundred thousand cases not a million, not yet, I shouldn't be sad, no one I know is sick or dead except the already-dead, and I love and am loved, the white orchids I found in the trash are blooming again, I have put out dishes of cool water for the frogs and the lizards, a young couple moved in next door and they're so excited about their new home, I shouldn't be sad, the island is warm and every morning scented with hibiscus and jasmine, you are very alive and well-married and your life is filled with joy, I'm not sad, my friend cut her own hair and it's super cute, you have the same deep blue eyes, she is alive and well-married and I'm not sad, it's a beautiful spring morning with the dog dreaming at my feet, they will find a vaccine or we'll begin to develop herd immunity so I shouldn't be sad, all the men I loved have married and started families, beautiful children, Jude and Claribel, the world will be peopled and by my beloveds, he still writes me poems and she writes novels, I shouldn't be sad, not on such a day, with the sky colored lilac and that one star hanging low in the west—

M. Chava Evans

Hidden/נסתר

Russia, near Moscow, 1932

For Luba and Luba's Mother

When the soldiers
liquidated an apartment
they would observe
the startled flight
of a mother's eyes:
at first, sunk and stunned,
they would, at the quick report
of the dog's bark, or at
a growled word dart,
snap up and, as if
on command, bolt
to a bookcase, a chest,
a broad toolbox, the cabinet—
even the stove was precious
as a hiding place. And that's
how they were found
and how they were lost:
always,
in an instant love's gaze
reveals its object, quivering.

Nano Taggart

Bathymetry

for Steve Yates

How many hawks constitute an omen? There were four this morning, one diving silently into a field of alfalfa. (Silent for me, I mean.) I'm reminded how hearing things clearly can ruin them—or cause regret at hearing them at all. It's easy to forget that all of this is moving.

The next time you're in deep-dish city, notice the double-decker train windows—how their green glow, from a distance, overwhelms the train's own noise, and the rumble of planes overhead. I remember what I said when the worst news hit. (And said it again when the worst news was repeated.)

Parameters of revelation notwithstanding, we know how much whiskey it'll take to consecrate this room for the comely friends to celebrate a next milestone we might remember. We share except-for-the-music-playing silence that isn't bloodied by labored speech. It's harder to find the quiet corner in parties filled with strangers.

Maybe nothing's sacred, but know that conjuring the dead isn't quite as hard as it sounds. There are reasons to leave music playing in empty rooms.

I thread little reveries that mute, however briefly, everything. Everything. I've started to notice the tops of telephone poles in this high-mountain desert, and learned there's no winning the arguments never dared with my father. I try to breathe instead. Bulldog Road. Alfalfa. Hawks.

Can you picture the Mariana trench without some score accompanying all that darkness dotted by phosphorescence? It's not just depth, but it is a distance, filled with more than the miles from here, or anywhere, to Denver.

Searching for Jazmín

It happened on a September day of a year I can't remember. As I walked to school, she wasn't waiting for me at our usual spot. At home, at school, in our village, it was rumored that she had left with her family to an uncharted town in the United States. But the silence that ensued after they spoke the news was oppressive and incoherent, and all other traces of her existence seemed to have vanished.

Even when I came to the United States, I was unable to track her whereabouts. My childhood and teenage years all yielded to one single passion, one single hope: the hope that if Jazmín was still alive, I would see her again in flesh and bone. But the day never came, and I turned into a man who yearned for the magic that her existence imparted. Eventually, the love that I had for her became a haunting ghost, a silver image made of moonlight.

About a year ago, a medieval fair came to small town Cedardale. It was a silly simulacrum of medieval times; it ran mostly during daytime and, as night approached, instead of street lights, fire torches and fire pits were set up to illuminate our view. The abundance of mock fortune-tellers attracted my attention, and I approached a tent in which a gypsy-like slender woman, dressed in black, held towards me a small, round stone, an amulet of sorts. The stone shone like a star, in silver silence, with streaks of gold fashioned by the fire's reflection.

Withdrawing the amulet into her hand, the gypsy spoke; "For five dollars, I will answer a question that foretells your future." Perhaps she perceived how little I believed in such non-sense because, after a pause, she added, "Never mind. I will answer one question for free." Then in a whisper, as if to herself, "If ever a man needed to foresee his future, it's you."

Feeling conscious about how rude my skepticism must have portrayed me, I said, "I'll pay the fee. I do want one question answered."

"This amulet reminds you of her, doesn't it?" she said, revealing once again the stone. "The silver shimmer is the beauty of her face?"

My skepticism diminished when she said this because, indeed, anything silver had always reminded me of Jazmín's fair face under sunlight. Then I laughed it off; how absurd for a grown man to think such non-sense might have some truth in it. I played her game nonetheless.

I sat on the mahogany chair set up for customers to sit, facing the

gypsy across a table. Her dark eyes caught the fire's flickering dance that peered in from the outside as she whispered, "Are you ready to face the road that lies ahead? The magic? The mundane?"

"Yes," I replied, feeling a solemnness come over me.

She shuffled some worn out cards as she kept her eyes fixed on me, expecting, I supposed, the question that I would ask.

My heartbeat grew, and my throat tightened, as I asked the question: "Will I ever see Jazmín again?" This was the question that I'd harbored in my heart for more than a decade. Speaking it to someone else overwhelmed me with a sense of imprisonment rather than liberation. My heartbeat increased for several seconds more then slowly decreased its tempo until I could only feel a faintness and a cold and sweaty brow.

"You will see her in three different ways," she said. "This is the first one." She slid her left hand across the table, slowly, and my heart began to beat again, quicker and louder than before. At length, the purple and black glimmer of her fingernails lay before me. The wind outside her tent began to pick up, and a shrill swift sound resonated as it entered through the openings. The fire from the torches and fire pits cast in its glow with greater vibrancy, setting a-bud her eyes in a pyrotechnic show. With her right hand she produced, again, the silver stone that for a moment seemed fiery gold. "This amulet holds the power to help you see her." She handed it to me and then, slowly and ceremoniously, unveiled a card she'd covered with her left hand.

Within the card, inscribed to clear perfection, was the image that I had tried to conjure in memory for more than a decade. It was Jazmín without a doubt. Her childish frame was draped in a diaphanous green dress embroidered with vines of flowery white, the same dress she'd worn to school the first day we met. Her angelic face shone with white light, making her full-fleshed crimson lips, dark eyes, and silken silent hair, project an image of beauty unparalleled by anything else that exists in this world. In the image, Jazmín was looking askance toward the left, as if gazing at something, or someone, off-camera. Her dimpled smile made her sweet beyond comparison. There seemed to be an aura of light around her.

I was speechless, breathless, as part of my mind tried to comprehend the travesty and another part tried to take in the image and its beauty. A gust of wind outside threw embers in the direction of the skies which

brought me back to the mundane. A fireman was telling the vendors that the firepits and torches would be put out due to fire danger because of the unexpected winds; the fair would continue but with streetlights on instead. I noticed a fire-extinguisher inside the gypsy's tent and the tent's brand name tag. I gasped when I looked towards one corner of the tent and saw, for the first time, a child with silver face crouched in silence; at once I thought she was an angel, Jazmín, a demon, or a changeling from fairyland. But I decided I was wrong; it was likely the gypsy's daughter or a relative of sorts. All these sordid details overwhelmed me and led to a buzzing sound, like beehives, in my head. I wanted beauty again, I wanted magic, but I feared returning my gaze to the card and not seeing Jazmín's image there again. I looked at the gypsy's presupposed daughter so as to keep myself from looking at the card and finding disillusionment.

"You must take that image with you," the gypsy broke the silence between us. "That image of innocence and beauty. Hold on to it for it is the only thing that will lead you back to Jazmín. Take both the image and the amulet."

Encouraged by this, I looked at the card again and Jazmín's radiant, innocent smile was still there. I paid and thanked the gypsy woman, leaving her tent with a strong sense of wonder. But I also felt fear, a fear that heightened as I exit the fairgrounds and started walking home in the dark shadows of the streets. The wind increased its force as warm drops of rain began to fall.

That night, during a sleepless spell, I was stirred to fear by a faint knock upon the window of my room. The second time I heard it, I inched a blanket towards my face as if hiding myself from the dangers of the world. By the third time, I picked up an apparent pattern in the intervals of the knock so I inferred it must've been a tree's branch all along. I sat up on my bed and saw the shadow of the oak tree outside, through the opaque window, moving to and fro with the wind. I walked over and opened the window to verify what I had already concluded. Indeed, some regular gusts of wind were blowing the branches towards the window. The rain had stopped and there was an earthy musk, much as those that so often happened after rains in my native land.

Before I returned to bed, I pulled out the card with Jazmín's image, which I'd placed between pages twenty-two and twenty-three of my 1992

Pocket Books edition of *Wuthering Heights*. I retrieved the amulet from a drawer. I held both the image and amulet tightly against my chest for what must have been an hour until at length I fell asleep.

A loud bang followed by jolting and scratching at the window woke me up. I sat up quickly and gazed at the window, trying to detect the shadows of the oak tree branches moving once again. But the wind seemed to have ceased, for their shadows were still and a stifling funereal silence had settled in. Whatever caused the noise was not perceptible anymore. Only a mild glow entered the room.

Then, as if my mind had willed it, a sudden, distinct silhouette appeared within the frame of the window. I watched it linger. My heart's rate began to increase as the silhouette continued to linger. In my agitation, I began gasping for quiet breaths. And then, it was gone, the figure beyond the window was gone, but to my horror I heard a screech and observed as the shape of the window latch began to unlock slowly.

Feeling a threat to my physical well-being, a survival instinct moved me to jump out of my bed. Disoriented by the partial darkness, I nearly fell as I reached the window. I managed to lock the latch and held it tight with my left hand.

"Whoever you are, you must go now!" I said in a firm tone. "I'm calling the police!"

"Please, help me," a child's voice responded, and a chill came over me. "I need to see you."

Within an instant, the silhouette returned. Reaching across the window and shattering the glass, its hand grabbed my right wrist with such strength that I was unable to unlock its grasp. In the midst of my frantic shrieks and cries, I unwittingly pulled its hand in and shook it as such that it ended up cutting itself with the broken glass of the window pane.

I was finally released, and I stared in terror at the window pane on which vermilion slowly slid like dew drops. Then her face peered in through the broken glass, and she was crying.

"Please, help me," she said.

"Jazmín?" I questioned.

"Don't you love me anymore? Why would you hurt me?"

"Jazmín, it's really you," I said as I stared at her intently through the darkness and the broken glass.

I hesitated, but when I did open the window, Jazmín was holding onto one of the oak tree branches, her white dress smeared with blood. She smiled and said, “Do you remember when we used to climb the huizache tree beside your house in México?”

An overwhelming sense of joy filled me, and I held out my hand to help her in. She jumped onto the window ledge and from there onto my arms, and we embraced as soulmates that have searched the entire world for each other. And we both cried.

“I’ve waited for you all my life, Jazmín!” I exclaimed.

As I held her in my arms, she inched herself away from me so that we faced each other and I saw, this time in real flesh, the beauty of her facial features cast with shadows as she smiled at me.

Shortly, she put her head on my chest and started shaking with stifled sobbing. I patted her shoulder and head gently and hushed her as a father would do with his daughter when she’s ill. She then looked up with pleading eyes and said, “Where is the amulet? I must have it.”

I put her down and made my way to the light switch and turned aghast when I saw the lacerations on her arm caused by our previous altercation. I offered assistance, but she said, “No, these wounds will go away, but the damage caused by not having the amulet will never be surmounted.” She then proceeded with, “I am only a version of Jazmín. Jazmín exists in different ways. I am trapped in this body right now. The amulet is the substance that will set me free.”

The words of the gypsy came to me and filled me with apprehension: “This amulet holds the power to help you see her.”

“Will I ever see you again if I give it to you?” I asked.

“You will always remember me the way I look today and every memory we made together.”

“What if I don’t give it to you?”

“You *will* see Jazmín once more, in México; a different version of her, a version you have not seen yet. I am the one you knew last, exactly the same as when we saw each other for the last time. If you don’t give me the amulet, my soul will be cursed to wander every mountain and every valley searching for you; I will never find you again.” She paused, then added emphatically, “But don’t you love me? Won’t you save me?”

I sat on the bed, feeling shaky and faint. I hung my head down. My right hand, as if by a magnet, was drawn to the amulet on the bed. I

grabbed it, contemplated and clenched it tight. I didn't want this to be our last goodbye. I debated yet ultimately resolved that I would free this Jazmín, my Jazmín. When I looked up, ready to surrender the amulet, the room was empty. Empty as I had always felt without my eternal and elusive Jazmín.

I threw myself onto the bed and as I reached for the card with her image, I was shaken to see that in the picture Jazmín was not looking askance but straight, as if staring into my soul with a reproachful stare; her smile was gone.

Early the following morning, as I packed a duffle bag, I heard a knock at my door, and then my mother spoke: "Mi'jo," she said through the door, "please, let me in."

The broken glass still lay on the floor like silver diamonds. I opened the door and let my mother in; she looked at the mess without surprise in her eyes.

"¿Qué pasa, mi'jo?" she asked with pity in her voice, her usual consternation.

"Nothing," I replied. "I'm going to México. Someone told me Jazmín is going to be there, and I'm going to go search for her. I'm taking the Greyhound to the border."

"Oh, my son, haven't we gone through this already?" She paused and looked at me with her compassionate eyes. "Jazmín passed away, mi'jo. She's buried in the graveyard in the mountains of Santa Inés, next to her mom and dad. They died in the car crash just a mile before they got to their new home here in Cedardale."

In that instant, every moment of hope I'd had, every fantasy I'd designed, yielded to an impassioned sense of surrender cast by the malevolent truth which, unwillingly, I seemed to have already known. Nonetheless, I yelled, "It's not true! It can't be!" and cried disconsolately.

"It's true, mi'jo, that's really what happened," my mother replied.

"How come I can't remember her funeral then?"

"People in our village knew how much you cared for each other. They helped us keep it a secret. Soon after, we came to Cedardale where there's almost no one from our village. Your dad and I continued keeping the secret, and you never really asked about her. We thought you'd forgotten her." There was an interval of silence. "You learned about her death only a few months ago."

“But the gypsy told me I’m going to see her again!” I said, laughing, and pulled the card from within the pages of *Wuthering Heights*. “She gave me a card with a picture of her; she must know her, she must know she is alive and well.”

When I looked at the card, it wasn’t Jazmín’s image anymore, but the image of the grim reaper.

Dusk approached as I started trekking up the mountains of Santa Inés and, on my way, I met a traveler from a different village.

“Going treasure hunting?” he asked, pointing at the shovel and pickaxe that I carried.

“Something like that,” I replied and grinned.

“Make sure night doesn’t catch you near Las Piedras Blancas. People have seen a little girl appear in that area when there is a full moon. A spirit of sorts; like so many of us, looking for something.”

“Thank you, sir,” I said. “I’ll avoid that part of the mountains.”

Contrary to my words, however, I waited until it was dark so that I would reach Las Piedras Blancas; these were rock formations, boulders that lay halfway up one of the mountains, overlooking the valley of our village. They protruded out as if ready to roll or start flying.

I climbed one of the biggest boulders, one that jutted out, to behold the vastness below me and all its possibilities. I took the silver amulet out of my pocket. I stretched it out towards the moon and saw resemblance in their silver silence. But the silence was broken by the dissonant laughter of a child. I started laughing, too, for I then realized that the amulet was the ghostly substance of my little girl.

“¡Jazmín!” I yelled. “¿Dónde estás?” And the laughter seemed to lead up the mountains towards the graveyard. I laughed and cried, and, like a demented soul, took to jumping from boulder to boulder and then running as her laughter persisted up and up.

“I will see you again, Jazmín! I will see you yet again!” I professed at the top of my lungs. “I will set you free!” And the silver moon kept shining as moths flew up into the heavens.

Tyler Starks

What I Sing To

The average wax family in the average wax museum. The folded bird x-rays in a father's wallet. The day's pink riddle, rattle. The large blinking jewelry on kindergarten teachers. The birthday candles, trembling at what we might wish for. Wishes. Chores. Beating a thunderstorm inside. Beating each other to the punch. A sad repeated lunch. Piano keys of ambiguous bone. The ways we tickle one another to death. The swan-breath of a first kiss. Like a black hole in a cricket chest. Star roots. Whale poop. The campers, at Space Camp, missing their mothers. And their mothers, watering the floral curtains. The dependable quiet of an evening café. A delicate hypnosis. The outlines left in pillows. How we lean, over a ledge, and predict our lives in negative degrees. Negative capability? The man in the hotdog suit hitting a half-court shot at halftime. Porch fights. Rose mites. The arm dripping on the bathtub edge, losing its feeling. Feelings, fine. Ornate piggy banks. Our constant shatter. Someone cleaning it up, sudden and slow. Seasons. Limelight. A couch steaming on the lawn. The best angle at which to hit 57 on the ketchup bottle. What pours out. Out of the blue.

Matthew Guenette

This

—after John Jodzio’s “My Story”

This is about how ridiculous my wife’s
dad sounded, over his morning coffee and cigarette
when he complained, *This ain’t no god-damned Motel 8!*
I got pecker tracks all over the couch!
because his son, my wife’s brother, had brought

a stripper home the night before.
This is about when I called my uncle
at Thanksgiving and cried, *Jack, I’m afraid mom*
took her pork stuffing recipe with her!
then my uncle, a vegetarian, explained to me

like the simpleton I sometimes am
that it’s a “secret” known by approximately
nine million French Canadians. This is not
only about how sublime it was when light
from Venus rippled on the surface of the lake

but also, the 3 minutes and 46 seconds it took
for that light to travel 42.2 million miles
just so I could drunkenly dip in my toe.
The original title for this was “Triple Word Score”
but my brother and I managed no such thing

in that Scrabble game where we nursed
a mason jar of moonshine. Then I thought
I might call this “Zebra Mussel” because of what
Carolyn said right after I dipped my toe
in that light: *From the zebra mussel’s*

point of view this climate change thing
is working out just fine. This is about the one
and only haiku my dad made up and never missed
a chance to recite: *The shit show is long /*
and there are hardly any / intermissions

and the fact no exes are mentioned
because they were right, it wasn't them
it really *was* me, but here's a few lines about
that time my wife stayed up late not partying
or binging Netflix but going down internet

rabbit holes in search of contextualized examples
of the representative grammar she was trying
to teach her German class, which is funnier
than it sounds when you consider she told me this
the next morning as she sat on the toilet

and peed. Don't you love how a marriage
can be like that? Here's what you need
for the recipe: ground pork, celery, and onions
oyster crackers, one potato, a puck of boudin
if you feel adventurous, and all the poultry

seasoning you can take. This is about aboutness
itself, how sometimes we lose ourselves
from stress or ecstasy or exhaustion—
we might wonder if we'll ever feel whole again
but this is not that. This is where I feel good.

Samantha Padgett

My Therapist Asks If There's Anything Else I'd Like to Discuss

Today, a kid tells me the universe is expanding as if I don't fucking know that already. I haven't been this sad since I was 18—walking around campus at night hoping somebody would kill me. I remember telling my therapist, *It's not suicide, I swear.* When I tell you the universe is growing colder as it ages I mean it will die in its winter. Before being committed, my sister kept telling me, *I just want to sleep, I just want to sleep, I just want—* Let me tell you, poets are liars. There isn't an adequate metaphor to describe sadness nibbling away at the corner of your pages like rats. I'm drunk again and I'm imagining my father's funeral. He isn't dead, and this isn't a metaphor. I think about all those people expecting me to say something. Maybe I'll tell them all he thought about was dying — *Me too, Dad. Me too.* No, I'm drunk and there's no funeral, but there's rats. No. There's no rats. Just me and the winter. I open the window and lean out into the cold, mouth open wide so I can catch my death between my teeth.

Rebecca O'Bern

Reverse-Moses

behold / I ascend the tallest tree on the highest mountain / with empty air
on my lips / kick off my tattered tennis shoes / ah transcendent / watch
them fall / from creation's tip-top / I, ambassador / I / ambassador / I /
this time, a Moses sequel / for I'm here now to give god some written
word / two white tablets to dissolve under his tongue / & he seems awfully
lonely up there, so it's probably good / I have no reverse-commands or
demands / just questions / *lord, how've you been?* / stuff like that / behold
/ my trumpet fanfare for kings / I, ambassador / I, musician / I, atheist
/ I can't / go / back / to an anti-gay church / look, some secrets can't
be held forever / the way a child passes notes under their school desk
/ when they believe teacher isn't looking / when they think they know

Our New and Just Perfect Dream Cottage

Our agent insisted we see the house on Frontenac Avenue though to me even online it looked sad and hungry. I had made it clear to her that I wanted a house with a full appetite but one that was usually satiated, one that might nibble delicately on a cheese cracker or even finish off an *hors d'oeuvre* if it were the sociable thing to do, but also could go hours without a full meal, as needed. My other is not such a great handyman or chef but I didn't want that to be too obvious to friends or our pending visitors. I respect him for what he is. He is very good at getting up from bed in the night and running through the forest to the convenience store to get me a new appliance. He is especially good at drawing new rooms in his sketchpad when I get tired of my surroundings. And I can be very good at everything else.

The agent wanted us to see the house when it was raining so we could track in mud, when it was windy so we could see that the big bad wolf had not blown it down, when we were tired and admittedly lonely, when Aquarius was rising, was in the Seventh Son of a Seventh Son, and in time so she could get home before the football game that Saturday afternoon. When we walked inside, there was a great belching sound and a smell of smoke. We almost went no further. My other suggested he could purchase, *maybe -- he didn't know, perhaps a double-door stainless steel stove*. But that was not why I loved it. There was something else. Maybe the Seven Dwarfs hanging out in the family room and making a mess of everything. Or Snow White and her Prince giggling when we peeked into the master bedroom. Zeno's Paradoxes making the floor plan impossible. Peter Pan was flying about. Einstein's Theory of Relativity was in the same time and space, here and not here. And Cinderella. Yes, Cinderella. And the Great Books of the Western World though we will never read any of them.

I wanted to know the bathrooms — even in the Biblical sense should it become necessary, to see whether the tub and shower were caulked and clean, whether the closets were large enough so that children properly disciplined could play, if ever children were to live here. How mother would navigate the stairs after her hip surgery in forty years when she moves in with us. I asked my other if we should live here, would he be able to draw or perhaps paint a dragon that looked like us and could easily be mistaken to be living.

Terri Drake

DEADWOOD

Tell me how to do what I have to do when I can no longer do what
I have to do when sleep evades and I lie awake for hours listening
for the snap of the trap breaking the necks of those timid creatures who only
venture out at nightfall when the last light has been turned off
I require stillness in the house but tonight I woke
to moonlight and the sound of owls the silence
we shared dear friend is my silence now a place you evacuated from dear god
how the fire burned in you haunted your dreams and now mine you
in the vineyard waiting for the last ride out driving through flame's
embers burning trees treated for smoke inhalation no way to reach you a woman
burning your windshield melting and the stars following suit sky so
black nothing could pierce that apocalyptic night after which there was no
access to the darker reaches of your soul a word Iowa told you you could not
use in poems the workshop which can kiss your lily-white
ass for months after everything was lost you slept and binge watched
Deadwood the opening sequence featuring a riderless
horse and a woman lowering herself into a tub where the wooden
buildings of the town have been replaced by brick after a massive
fire like Seth Bullock you were hoping to find a new start
you the master sleeper are keeping me awake I remember
the gurgling noise you made in your sleep as if
you were underwater trying to communicate something
asleep in our dreams in our hunter green flannel pajamas with the hunting dogs
the dogs roamed the far fields and ridges romped with the ghost dogs on high
alert for the birds on their night perches I was never more alive
than when we were dreaming leaving our bodies wandering free
among the constellations I no longer own the stars our skylight
on the heavens a house of silences once shared under the waxing moon
we have the means to dream but what keeps happening is we end up in Deadwood
a town outside any territory and also a bar in Iowa City and the past
doesn't ride out to greet us or say good-bye

Terri Drake

THE PSYCHOANALYST WHO LIVES IN THE MOBILE HOME PARK

Psychoanalyze that!

The unconscious isn't worth a penny anymore.

The acronyms are everything:

CBT, DBT, EMDR

And don't forget mindfulness.

Be in the moment. Practice your breathing techniques.

The dogs are walking

The kids are roller skating down the street

The woman in her Lexus pulls into her carport

There's incessant chattering of televisions through the night.

The breathing isn't working

I'm thinking of the roof that needs replacing,

about the kitchen torn down to the studs after a flood

how we're at the mercy of the contractors and supply chains

how the refrigerator and the microwave will stay in the dining room for months

how few of my friends know where I live

and even fewer have ever come over

how shame takes up most of the space in the double-wide

how when you have a PhD and a full practice

you should be living in a gated community with your own infinity pool

how I was born in the wrong place at the wrong time

and therefore am an economic failure

post the days insurance would pay for psychoanalysis five days a week

post the days when people could take that kind of time off from work

post the days when the mere act of trying to survive in society

didn't cause you anxiety and if it did you could just get over it

now we're in the quick fix times

the taking aspirin for brain tumors time

everyone's wearing their victim badges

and getting into the after-party with their acronyms.

The academy award goes to the least self-actualized.

Meanwhile I'm on the phone trying to prove medical necessity,

becoming all id, all rage, all tears

thinking why am I even here

in this post-vinyl world of Carriage Acres Mobile Home Park,
where even the name is a reason for shame
where everyone eventually dies like everyone else in the world
where everyone wears their desperation like a sling,
where everyone's a spin away from winning the jackpot
and one step away from falling over the cliff

where no one questions each others' motives
or would claim to be driven by the death instinct
where your relationship with your mother
is your relationship with your mother
who doesn't know and couldn't care less what an object relation is
where your rage at your neighbor when he takes the garbage out at 2 a.m
is rage your other neighbors don't feel compelled to minimalize or rationalize

Nature's Child

Though Mark knew it took time for a new girl to adjust, to feel accepted – heck, it took his own daughter Margery two weeks to feel comfortable in spandex – he still felt bad for the Hell's Angel's daughter who, after a month, just couldn't connect with the other gymnasts.

Sitting in the bleachers of Parker Middle School's gymnasium, he watched Margery and the other girls prance like deer across the mat in a series of flips, cartwheels, and twists that always made him a bit queasy until they landed safely on their feet, arms stretched, Olympic-smiles beaming. The Hell's Angel's daughter was a little chubbier than the other girls and couldn't move as nimbly. Mark wondered if this was the reason why the girls didn't accept her, but it seemed to be more than that.

Mark took Margery to gymnastics every Saturday so Sam could work on her dissertation. There were never any other fathers in the gym, only mothers, women in jogging suits, some as bossy and psychotic as stage moms. *Posture, Karen, posture! Come on, Cheryl Anne, plant those feet! Renée, chin up!* Mark didn't say anything. He just watched the mothers and then the expressions on their daughters' faces, masks of anguish, like little pro athletes getting kicked off the team for something they didn't do.

The first few classes were hard. Margery barely spoke, except to the coach in hushed, one-on-one conversations at the edge of the mat. Mark knew that look on her face – the one she wore years ago, on the first day of preschool, Mark wishing her stiff plastic knapsack was a jetpack capable of blasting her to a much easier time but he couldn't think of when that would be. At her first few sleepovers, she stood on her friend's front steps, pillow case heavy with a change of clothes and her stuffed rhino, watching Mark at the end of the dark driveway. *Go on*, he'd say, his voice loud in the car. *Go fit in*.

The other girls used to ignore Margery, too. Then one day she nailed a tough move on the rings, the name of which Mark had to look up later. *Shoot to Handstand*. After that, the girls chatted with her all the time and the stage moms seemed to suddenly know her name.

"How did I look out there, Dad?" Margery asked on the drive home.

"Fantastic, honey. As always," Mark said.

"What's wrong, Dad? You OK?"

Mark didn't answer right away. He was thinking about the way the class had ended, all of the girls in a circle, stretching, their coach in the middle. They did the butterfly stretch – feet together, knees bent at their sides like pink wings. The coach flapped her knees and the girls copied her, giggling. Mark's eyes went around the circle then stopped on the Hell's Angel's daughter sitting slightly outside the circle, flapping her pudgy knees like a turkey trying to fly.

Mark smiled. "Nothing, sweetheart. Nothing's wrong. I was thinking, though. Maybe you could invite the new girl over for Sunday dinner."

Margery's hair whipped around her face, slapping the headrest. "What? *Cookie*? You want me to invite *Cookie* over for dinner? No way."

“Hey, remember how it was for you in the beginning? We couldn’t even talk on the ride home you were crying so hard. Think about how Cookie feels.” Mark couldn’t say her name comfortably. He felt perverted calling a twelve-year old “Cookie,” especially one he’d just watched do splits in hot pink spandex.

Margery picked at the chalk under her fingernails, then looked out the window. Mark put his hand on her knee.

“Come on, it won’t be so bad. If you don’t like her, you’ll never have to hang out with her again.”

Margery thought about this. “Promise?”

“Promise.”

“Fiiine.”

Mark smiled. “Great.”

Thunder boomed from the bright blue sky. They peered up through the windshield, searching for clouds but couldn’t find any.

“Huh,” Mark said, “A storm must be rolling in, but I can’t see—” A blast of back fire shot through the station wagon as the motorcycle roared by – a blur of black and chrome and pink spandex.

Mark didn’t believe all that talk about how little things turn into big things and you can’t go back and pinpoint one event that destroys a marriage, but if he had to pick he’d say that after Lillian blackmailed him, things took a turn for the worse.

Lillian was cool. Effortless, natural, as if she were born wearing ripped jeans, dangly turquoise jewelry and a leather jacket. She was two years older than Mark and Sam. Mark remembered her strutting through the halls of Parker High, an unfiltered Lucky Strike tucked behind her ear, her black hair shining as if challenging all the other girls to try, go ahead, try to get yours as black as mine. No one even came close.

Once, during third period autobody class, Lillian slid out from under her Chevelle and looked at Mark, the closest guy to the toolbox.

“Bub, hand me a three-eighths.” She pointed to something underneath the car but that didn’t help Mark figure out what she meant. He looked up the length of her body: her worn black leather boots with chrome buckles, her skin-tight jeans with a tear on the inner left thigh, revealing a slice of skin, a tight white v-neck T-shirt fingerprinted with grease, her long neck soft but strong, a single blue vein running up her chin, her sharp cheeks and Siberian Husky eyes.

“Today, chief.”

Mark dug through the toolbox, rattling the wrenches and screwdrivers. He wondered how he could calculate the half-life of radium or dissect a cow’s eye, but couldn’t for the life of him figure out these tools.

“Ah, hell,” Lillian said, standing up slowly, stretching her back. Without glancing at the toolbox, she grabbed what she needed, lay back down on the

dolly and rolled under the Chevelle. Mark stood there and listened to her talk to herself, her voice echoing up through the chassis.

Sam was his lab partner. Mark admired the way she diligently composed her reports and never once got squeamish when they dissected a frog. Not even the pig's brain creeped her out. When she pressed the scalpel into the spongy gray matter without a flinch, Mark had to look away.

He didn't find out that Lillian was Sam's sister until she dropped them off at the movies for their first date. He knew they had the same last name, but he just never put it together – "Robinson" wasn't exactly unique. Plus, they couldn't have been more different: Sam wore pressed collared shirts beneath sweet-smelling sweaters. Lillian wore whatever the hell she wanted. Mark and Sam still had another year before they got their licenses; Lillian seemed to regard this with utter disgust. Mark watched her blue eyes squint in the rearview mirror.

"You saving up for some wheels, professor?"

"Lil," Sam said from the passenger seat.

"Oh, um, no. Not yet."

"What?" she said, turning onto Main Street. "Quit mumbling." She plucked the Lucky Strike from behind her ear, sparked a match, lit it, shook out the flame and tossed it out the window. She exhaled and looked at Mark.

"My aunt has an extra car, so, I guess I'll use that. Until I get my own."

"Extra car?"

"Yeah. A Beetle."

Lillian puffed smoke from her nostrils. "Hear that, Sam? An extra car." She looked at Mark again. "A Beetle."

Sam and Mark were silent for the rest of the ride. Lillian shook her head and laughed every few minutes as if something kept striking her. Finally, they stopped in front of the movie theater.

"Don't pull that popcorn trick with my sis." She exhaled. "She ain't that kind of girl."

Sam and Mark stood on the curb, confused.

"Later, lovebirds." She threw the Chevelle into gear, popped the clutch and burned a hot black trail behind her.

Sam and Mark hadn't seen Lillian since the wedding, nearly fifteen years ago. They had heard she was living on a beach in southern California or roaming around Mexico City or doing odd jobs in Vegas. She had exhausted half a dozen or so sympathetic relatives and who knows how many social workers and AA counselors. Still, Mark could picture her, at the end of the night, dancing barefoot in her black slip, her Maid of Honor dress slung over the back of a chair. She danced the way Mark would later see hippies dance in PBS documentaries of the 60s, their heads nodding and swaying as if answering a question Mark couldn't hear.

"I can't believe these squares know Jefferson Airplane!" Lillian said, pointing to the band. She was the only one dancing.

That night, after Sam was asleep in their cabin, Mark took a walk down to the lake to watch the moon. He sat on a half-rotted log, his head buzzing with beer and caffeine and the echoes of a thousand conversations with relatives he hardly knew. Then a rustling behind him and Lillian stepped, barefoot, through the bushes. Still in her black slip, she raised a joint to her lips and took a long, hard pull. She offered it to Mark but he didn't move. The tip burned brighter as she stepped closer. She unhooked one strap, then the other, and let the black silk drop to the dirt. There was a knowing evil in her smile, like one of Dracula's brides. She stepped in front of him, kissed him hard on the mouth, her calloused palms rubbing down his neck, his chest. She undid his belt with one hand, yanked down his pants, and sat on top of him, her legs locked around his waist. Mark tried to talk but she put her hand over his mouth and rode him quick and hard, his butt slipping off the log and sinking into the soft dirt. When she was done, she unhooked her legs, tossed her slip over her shoulder, and stumbled toward the cabins. Mark sat there for a while, trembling, a yellow moon hovering low over the wedding tent.

He thought about Lillian that night after gymnastics, as he sometimes did while lying next to Sam. Sam had finished medical school four years ago, established her practice, then enrolled in a Ph.D. in Epidemiology at Penn State. For a while, Mark enjoyed watching her brush back the brown curls that fell over her eyes, her thick-framed glasses giving a shape to her face that her contacts couldn't as she loomed over piles of textbooks. Though her practice was successful, she seemed disconnected in that time between medical school and Penn, as if a life without binders and blackboards provided no foundation, no spot for her to build on. She had an insatiable need to be rewarded for her work, which made Mark uneasy. He was proud of her, for a while, but eventually, it became difficult to concentrate with her next to him, studying.

Mark put down his frayed copy of *The Electric Kool-Aid Acid Test* and put his hand on Sam's shoulder.

"Honey, take a break. You're exhausted." He had learned how to tactfully comment on his wife's appearance without coming out and saying she had bags under her eyes.

"I have to defend my dissertation in three weeks," she said without looking up.

Mark looked back at his book. "Timothy Leary and Ken Kesey were pretty wild guys. You know they used to party with the Hell's Angels at Kesey's ranch?" Mark hadn't told Sam about the Hell's Angel's daughter. Not for any particular reason. But it gave him a thrill to know more than she did.

"Yeah," she said, "everybody knows that."

Mark was quiet, but he wasn't all that surprised. He was used to finding out things in books, reading about experiences he couldn't imagine having himself. He sat holding his book, staring straight out at the end of the bed.

"Have you ever taken LSD?" he asked, trying not to sound clinical.

Sam was quiet. Her lips rose into a smirk.

"Are you serious? When? Where did you get it?"

She closed her book and took off her glasses. "In high school. Before we met."

He looked at her.

"Come on, you remember my sister. I couldn't get away without trying it at least once."

"At least?" he asked. "You did it more than once?"

"Just a couple of times."

He dropped the book on the nightstand and sat up. "What was it like?"

"Pretty great, actually." She shrugged and put her glasses back on. "Like the first waves of an orgasm. For eight hours."

"What? Who are you?" Mark asked, trying to figure out where his wife went, the woman whose idea of a wild night was sex on top of the covers and Indian take-out.

She laughed. "I'm Samantha. And you are?"

Mark looked at the book on the night stand and then at his wife.

"Jealous" was the word that first came to mind, but he settled for "shocked."

Nobody knew for sure if he was a Hell's Angel. There weren't that many guys tooling around their upper-middle-class Pennsylvania suburb on motorcycles, and the guys in baggy jeans and white sneakers who rode those ridiculous monstrosities with radios and trunks didn't count. Mark listened to the mothers talk about him in not-so-hushed voices, like children recounting details of the boogeyman.

He'll drive that thing at night, through the pouring rain, with his daughter strapped to the back.

He just got out of prison.

Nobody knows what he does for a living.

Mark sat behind them on the bleachers, watching the girls jump and twirl. He jotted down notes, like a birdwatcher observing a rare species. This used to be fun, to be able to talk shop with his daughter after class, but lately he was distracted. A few days ago, he suggested to his supervisor that the library order more "controversial" material. He approved, and later that afternoon, Mark filled out a purchase order for several titles, many of which he was sickened to learn they didn't already have. *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn. Of Mice and Men. Notes of a Native Son.* He filled out each line, carefully writing the author, title, and ISBN numbers. A stack of books crashed onto a table where a group of high school boys sat, giggling. They were punks, spikey green and red hair, faces full of dangly piercings like a satanic Christmas tree. Mark peered over his desk at them. They stared right back. Mark looked away. He thought of the hours he spent in a library, not just now at work but when he was in school, sitting alone, cramming for a biology quiz or working on an English paper. Though it didn't seem like

much, he made a decision, a simple act of defiance. He tore off a separate order form, filled in his home address, and wrote the title and ISBN for *Hell's Angels*.

Mark found it interesting that these women could make so many assumptions about a man they'd never met. The Hell's Angel hadn't stepped inside the gymnasium. He'd rumble up to the front door – Mark watching the chrome wheel glinting in the fading sun – drop off Cookie and roar away. Later, at the end of class, the trophy cases in the hallway would tremble as he idled at the curb, waiting for her to come out. Beneath the helmet and the hair and the leather was a man, but Mark could hardly tell where the motorcycle ended and he began.

Dinner on Sunday became known as “Sunday Dinner” after Sam declared it the one night she didn't have to study. It was a night for the three of them to sit together and catch up on each other's lives. Not that much went on in Mark's. He spent most of his time at the library or the gymnasium, two cavernous buildings of brick and polished wood. Sometimes Sam studied at his library, but most of the time she went to the university. The one with the most active social life was Margery, but of course, she was the least talkative of the three, especially tonight.

“Mark, I wish you would have told me Margie invited a friend,” she said, grating a block of parmesan cheese.

“I didn't think it'd be a big deal. The poor girl is having a tough time fitting in. You should see her in class, sitting all alone.”

Sam and Mark peered around the corner into the dining room at Cookie and Margery. Cookie's raven black hair was slicked back with pomade; her stiff, over-sized denim shirt looked like it still had the cardboard in it. Margery twirled her fork on the table. Cookie tapped the tip of her boot on the floor, rattling the china and Sam's porcelain dolls in the glass cabinet. She looked up, and Sam and Mark quickly ducked back into the kitchen.

“Well, I feel for her, you know, I really do, but the girl gives me the creeps. And what about her father? Doesn't even come in to say hello? Just drops her in the driveway like a newspaper?”

Mark nodded, agreeing that her father should have come to the door, but not to be polite. Mark didn't care about that. He just wanted to get a good look at the guy. Weeks had gone by and still the Hell's Angel hadn't entered the gymnasium. Mark even hung around the bathroom in the hallway, just before class ended, hoping he'd time it right, but he never did. Each time he tried, he'd be standing at the urinal or back inside the gym when the rumbling came and they were gone.

“And what kind of name is ‘Cookie?’”

They didn't talk, but it wasn't silent. Cookie dipped her bread in the chicken soup and held it above her bowl until it broke off and plopped into the broth,

then she scooped the soggy clump out with her spoon and slurped it into her mouth. She did this over and over, wolfing down almost half a loaf of bread.

"My," Sam said, "gymnastics must work up quite an appetite. Maybe I should give it a try."

Cookie cocked her head and stared at Sam, blue eyes blazing.

"It's mighty good soup, ma'am."

Mark tried to place her accent but couldn't. When he'd asked her where she was from originally, she'd said, "South of here."

"Thank you, Cookie. Margery hates my cooking."

Cookie looked at Margery. "You can have it if you want," Margery said.

They swapped bowls and Cookie reached for more bread.

Mark had hoped his copy of *Hell's Angels* would have come by now but it was on backorder. It gave him a thrill just to know it was on its way, like a little boy waiting for his secret decoder ring. He never would have thought to pick up the book when he was younger; it was completely off his radar. He read books like *White Fang*, Shakespeare. Required reading.

What secrets were he hoping to glean from the book that would've prepared him for Cookie's visit? He didn't even know if she really was the daughter of a Hell's Angel. But part of Mark didn't care. Just by ordering the book he felt he was peering into another part of himself, his shadow, the darkness that forged all his fears. The book was a square of light, a bright window.

"Cookie," Mark said, clearing his throat, "I was hoping to see your father at class. Gets a little lonely being the only guy in the bleachers."

She nodded.

"You think I'll get to meet him one of these days?"

Cookie sucked her teeth. "One of these days."

They all watched her devour Margery's bowl of soup. Then Sam looked at Mark.

"Well," she said, "who wants Rice Krispie treats?"

Mark stood on the porch with Cookie, waiting for her father to pick her up. The cool night air was refreshing after the soup, and Mark breathed in deeply. Summer evenings were his favorite – the giant green oak trees full of breeze, streetlights spot-lighting the sparkling asphalt. He took another deep breath. Cookie lit a cigarette.

"Where did you get those?" Mark asked. "How long have you been smoking?"

Cookie took a long pull, the tip glowing brighter, and smiled. "You ask a lot of questions, mister."

"But what about gymnastics? You can't play sports and smoke."

"Yet that's exactly what I'm doing. Strange, ain't it?"

The cool air hit the sweat on the back of his neck. *She hasn't been alive long enough to possess such power. Where does it come from?* Mark imagined Cookie's strength as if it were a drug, a tiny pill she chased with Gatorade

after gymnastics, some hip new narcotic that wouldn't react with Mark's bodily chemistry even if he knew where to get it. He no longer pretended not to stare at Cookie. He observed her with all of his senses: watched the sweat bead on her forehead, smelled the pomade, tasted the smoke, listened to her inhales and exhales. He fought the urge to reach out and touch her denim shirt.

Thunder in the street. The glow of a single headlight.

"There's my dad." Cookie clipped off the end of her cigarette and slipped it into her shirt pocket.

Mark squinted at the street. "I'll walk you."

Cookie looked at him. They walked down the brick path toward her father. The helmet turned towards them, porch light glowing in the visor. Another step and the engine gave three quick blasts.

"Better stop here," Cookie said.

Mark turned. Margery and Sam stood at the living room window.

"Thanks for the hospitality."

Mark nodded. Cookie climbed onto the motorcycle. The helmet turned forward, and the rumbling machine carried them away.

Margery and Sam were chatting and giggling at the table, dirty plates and bowls pushed to one side.

"Did Big Mama ride off?" Margery asked, then her and Sam burst out laughing.

"What?" Mark asked.

Margery stood up, jutted her elbows out to her sides, and waddled around the room in the stocky gait of a cartoon cowboy. "*Mighty good soup, ma'am.*"

Sam struggled to stifle her laughter with the back of her hand, a near empty wine glass in the other. Mark looked at her, then back to Margery.

"I don't believe you two."

"Oh, hun, we're just—"

"This is what we do now? We make fun of someone different than us?"

Sam was quiet. Margery's smile melted.

"Dad, it's just Cookie."

"What the hell does that mean?"

"Mark, she's goofing around."

He stood there for a moment, speechless, then turned and walked into the living room, not sure what to make of his family.

They didn't talk the rest of the night. In the morning, they kept their distance, moving around each other in the kitchen or the hallway like choreographed dancers, mumbling the occasional "excuse me" or "leave the milk out, please." Sam slung her backpack over her shoulder and gave him a dead-lip kiss on the cheek. Margery didn't say a word. She was waiting in the car as he finished his breakfast.

The mailbox was half open. A brown, padded envelope stuck out. Mark's pulse throbbed in his throat. He glanced back at the car. Margery stared out the window. He tore open the envelope and slid out the small, yellowed paperback. A black leather jacket. A flaming skull patch. *The Strange and Terrible Saga of the Outlaw Motorcycle Gangs*. The book wasn't halfway out of the envelope before Mark stuffed it back in, tucked it under his coat like a pornographic magazine. Later, in the library, with his office door locked, Mark read, "...long hair in the wind, beards and bandanas flapping, earrings, armpits, chain whips, swastikas and stripped-down Harleys flashing chrome as traffic on 101 moves over, nervous, to let the formation pass like a burst of dirty thunder . . ."

Mark exhaled, not realizing he had been holding his breath.

That afternoon, Mark pulled back into the driveway, his copy of *Hell's Angels* dog-eared at page 180. His day had vanished into a world of leather and chrome, bar brawls and rock 'n' roll concerts. The musty file boxes and yellowed newspapers towering around him became the skyscrapers of a city he'd never seen, his desk a chopped and stripped machine blasting through intersections, past pedestrians frozen on corners, holding groceries or standing behind strollers, mouths agape. And though he barely moved all day, his heart raced.

So when he pulled into his driveway and saw a motorcycle leaning on its kickstand, two brown tasseled saddle bags sagging on either side, his mind entertained a crazy thought a little too long: *I'm in the book*.

He stepped out of the station wagon and heard a loud, reckless cackle inside. Slinging his work bag over his shoulder, he approached the front steps slowly, trying to peek through the bay window. He reached out for the door knob, but before he could touch it, the door whipped open and Lillian cackled again, clapped once, hard, and pulled him into her. Denim and buckles and dream-catcher earrings and cigarette smoke. And that same scent, that earthy smell – a dirty sweetness, a little sour, primal – ripped Mark out of his world and threw him back in the mud beside the lake, caught in the snare of Lillian's bare thighs.

He felt himself harden against her.

"Holy fucking shit, Marky! It has been *too* long." She stretched out "too" as if she might burst into song.

"Yeah, *Marky*," Sam said, grinning. "Can you believe it?"

Mark slowly shook his head.

"Glad to see Sam's panties are still good and bunched. Tell me, sis, how do you even get those crusty fuckers off?" She cackled again, patting her pockets. "I'mma step out for a smoke."

Lillian brushed past Mark and shut the door.

"Yep," Sam said. "She's back. Just showed up. No call. No email."

Mark's head brimmed with adrenaline. Spots floated across his vision. He thought he might faint.

“Wow,” he said. “Well, good to know she’s still alive.”

Sam cocked her head. “Yeah, Mark. That is good. Thanks for looking on the bright side.” She turned and walked down the hall.

Mark stood on the welcome mat for another moment, unsure if he should follow Sam or step outside and join Lillian. Neither seemed like the right choice, so he hung his bag in the closet and walked into the kitchen. An unfamiliar tinkling as he opened the refrigerator door. The late afternoon sun caught the golden bottles of Miller High Life. Over a dozen, maybe more. Lillian was either planning to stay for a while, or just one long, hard night.

The sliding glass door sucked open and Lillian stuck her head in.

“Paws off my stash, Marky!”

He shut the refrigerator hard and the bottles clanked.

She cackled. “Man, you librarians are skittish.” She held her cigarette behind her, but after she turned to take a drag, she poked her head back inside and exhaled. Smoke rose and curled in the sunlight.

“So, what brings you to town?”

Lillian grinned. “Oh, a little’a this, little’a that. My man’s gotta job a few towns over, so figured I’d swing by, say hello.” She took another drag. “Hand me one of those, will ya?”

He passed her a beer and with her free hand, in one fluid motion, she reached into her pocket, grabbed her keys, and popped the cap. “Help yourself.”

“I’m good,” Mark said, but what he didn’t say was that beer didn’t agree with him. Just thinking about saying the word “gluten” to Lillian made him cringe.

“So, how’d you meet this guy? I thought you were in Mexico or California.”

“I was, Marky, I was. Fuckin’ blast. You ever been to ChopperFest in Ventura?”

Mark laughed. “Do I look like I’ve been to ChopperFest in Ventura?”

“Shit, no!” Lillian said, laughing. “That’s why I asked. But who knows, maybe you heard about it, read about it on one of those fuckin’ projector things they have at the library. Ya know, the ones that let you look at old newspapers and shit.”

“Microfiche.”

Lillian gulped her beer, eyes widening. “That’s it! See, knew you were good for something.”

“Lillian!” Sam yelled from the bedroom. “If you’re gonna smoke, do it outside.”

Lillian clenched her teeth. “Sorry, mom!” Then she whispered to Mark, “To be continued,” and shut the door.

It only took Mark another afternoon to finish *Hell’s Angels*. The sexual violence disturbed him, but the partying and lawlessness was intoxicating.

He supposed that was the point. That's what seemed to draw Hunter S. Thompson to the subject in the first place. Mark wasn't sure if he was supposed to empathize with men like Charlie Charger the Child Molester or Dirty Ed – he didn't – but he also didn't feel bad when they beat up Thompson for sticking his nose in their private business, even if that business included domestic violence. Really, more than anything, the takeaway for Mark was: *My life is so goddamn boring.*

He never saw Margery and Cookie talking after Sunday dinner. It was like it never happened, like she was never inside their home, slurping soup. And Cookie didn't seem any more interested in gymnastics than when she first started. Why was she even here? Mark wondered. Still, he watched her from the bleachers from time to time, as she loped across the blue mat two or three steps behind the rest of the group like some feral animal following them home.

In the hallway after practice, Margery turned to Mark.

"Dad, can we go for ice cream?"

"Sure, sweetie, why not."

They hooked arms and walked toward the front door. Moments like this reminded Mark that he was a good father, that he was doing the right thing, and that Margery, whether she showed it all the time or not, appreciated him. And if he was being honest, he liked that he was the only guy in the bleachers. He liked to think of himself as the only father with enough guts, with a sense of self strong enough to support his daughter and her gymnastics team. Some fathers couldn't even walk down the little girls' aisle at the department store, like they were allergic to the color pink. But any confidence he'd mustered in the hallway deflated as he stepped outside and saw Cookie standing on the sidewalk, shivering.

"Hey, can I get a lift?"

Margery looked at Mark. "Where's your *dad*?" she asked.

Cookie looked down. "I dunno," she said. "He was supposed to be here."

Mark thought he saw Margery soften a bit. He looked around the empty parking lot. Crickets chirped.

"Of course, Cookie," Mark said, her name coming a little easier to him now.

They drove to the ice cream shop. Margery begged him to let her run in by herself. He glanced at Cookie in the backseat. She was slumped against the door staring out the window.

"Ok," Mark said. "But just in and out, alright?"

Margery flashed a big smile and opened the door.

"Wait, did you ask Cookie what she wants?"

Margery's smile faded. "What do you want?"

"Rum raisin. Waffle cone."

Margery made a gross face. "Ew, what?"

"Rum raisin. Waffle cone."

"Fine, whatever."

It was quiet in the car for a solid minute. The longest minute of Mark's day.

"I like rum raisin, too. But I'm the outlier in the family."

Cookie shifted in her seat. "Got that right."

"What?"

"Nothing," she said, smiling to herself.

Mark watched Margery lean against the glass freezers, pointing at the different flavors. The boy behind the counter was a couple of years older, maybe fifteen. A jock with broad shoulders and a tight crew cut. Margery smiled widely and her feet were doing that ballerina thing she did when she was nervous, tapping the tip of one foot on the floor then the other. The boy handed her a white paper bag, then the towering cone of rum raisin.

"I hope everything's ok with your dad."

Cookie put her foot up on the back of Mark's seat. "Don't sweat it."

Mark caught Cookie's eye in the rear-view mirror, but quickly looked away.

"He ever done this before?"

She let out a long exhale, her lips flapping. "I said, 'Don't sweat it.' He's probably with his old lady."

"Old lady?"

Cookie giggled. "*Man*, it sounds funny when you say it."

Mark's neck stiffened. Outlaw father or not, this was a twelve-year-old girl. In his car. That he was treating to ice cream. *Grow some balls, dude.*

"Is his 'old lady' your mother?"

"I don't know. Maybe."

"You don't know who your mother is?"

Margery was at the register, collecting her change. Mark stared straight ahead.

"It's just been me and my dad." She took her foot off his seat. "And Lily, sometimes."

Mark let out a shaky laugh. "Lily?"

Margery backed up against the front doors of the ice cream shop and pushed them open.

"Yeah," Cookie said. "I told ya. His old lady."

Margery tapped the car door with her foot. Mark didn't move. She kicked it again and made her "come on, Dad" face. He leaned over and let her in.

"What the heck, Dad, are you deaf?"

She handed him the paper bag, then turned to Cookie. "Here."

Cookie grabbed her cone and took a long, luxurious lick. "Woo!" she shouted. "Now you're talkin'."

That night, in bed, Sam propped up with pillows and surrounded by textbooks, Mark lay on his side, staring at the wall. His ears rang like he'd

spent all night at a rock concert. It wasn't noise, but silence whirring around him, through him. If Cookie's father was anything like the guys in the book, then he went through "old ladies" like toilet paper. Is that what Lillian had become? Some toy bikers passed around at rallies? One of the dozen or so in tight white t-shirts they lined up on make-shift stages and doused with cold water?

But more than that, more selfishly, Mark wondered why Lillian was back. Why now? Just knowing she was around made him break out in a cold sweat. Like Cookie in the car – her simple presence was enough to make Mark feel like he was in high school again, standing outside the movie theater with Sam, watching Lillian peel out in her Chevelle.

"Mark?"

"What?"

"You're grinding your teeth again."

The following Saturday, Mark walked into the gymnasium with Margery. She ran ahead and joined her team. As he looked toward the mothers in the bleachers, the rows and rows of gray sweatshirts, blue and magenta track suits, one stood out like a rotten tooth. Black leather. Denim. A silver-studded belt. Her raspy cackle.

"Marky! Saved ya a seat."

All the mothers turned and stared at Lillian, then Mark. Whispers. He walked quickly, his sneakers squeaking. He mumbled a few "excuse me's" and weaved in between the mothers before finally taking his seat next to Lillian.

"What are you doing here?"

"Can't I watch my niece do her thing?" She looked out at the girls limbering up. "Good thing no boys around. Chum in the ocean, these girls are."

The boy in the ice cream shop, now with the head of a Great White shark, flashed in Mark's mind.

"I'm here to support Cookie," Lillian said. She turned to Mark. "I'm just trying to do the right thing, alright?"

Mark looked down at his feet. Through the bleachers, on the ground, were a couple of coins, candy wrappers, and a can laying on its side. He imagined himself slipping, spilling through the cracks like soda.

"Is she yours?"

Mark felt her shift in her seat but kept his eyes down.

"What's it to you, Mark?" Then, "What difference does it make? Kid ain't had a momma, I ain't had a daughter, so here we are."

Ok, ladies, line up!

"Now hush. Show's on."

After practice, the gymnasium empty except for Cookie and Margery on opposite sides of the mat, Lillian and Mark still in the bleachers, she turned to him and said, "You're right, Mark."

"Right about what?"

"I'm not just here for Cookie. I'm in a jam, man, and need your help."

Margery was practicing her cartwheels, her perfectly-outstretched legs arcing through the air.

"I need money, Mark. That's it. I'm not gonna sugar coat it. Sam thinks I'm a piece of shit, so I'm asking you." She put her hand on his forearm, her thumb gently stroking.

"For what?"

"I just need it, Mark."

"This about Cookie's dad?"

Lillian pulled her hand away.

"Sort of. Look, it'll just make things a lot easier if you loan me the money. Easier on all of us."

Margery turned another cartwheel. Cookie licked her palm and squeaked it against the tile wall.

"How much?"

"Thirty-five grand."

Mark laughed harder than he expected. The girls turned for a moment, then went back to being bored.

"Are you nuts, Lillian? I don't have that kind of money. I'm a librarian."

"A librarian married to a doctor?"

"A librarian married to a doctor up to her eyeballs in student loans."

Lillian shook her head. She pulled a pack of cigarettes from her shirt pocket – Marlboro reds, no more Lucky Strikes (did they even still make them?). She knocked the filter against the wooden bleacher, stuck it between her teeth, sparked a match with one hand. Mark looked up, the spikey chrome emergency sprinklers studding the high gymnasium ceiling. The smoke rose around Lillian like steam.

"I'm not asking, Mark."

He turned toward her.

"I came here to get the money."

Mark's heart beat in his head, his pulse pressing behind his eyes. Maybe he *was* in the book. But this wasn't the character he fantasized about. He didn't imagine himself as one of the victims.

Lillian pulled hard on her cigarette, and in a sweet voice, a voice he hadn't heard since that night by the lake: "I don't want to see you get hurt." She looked at the girls and exhaled. "Or anyone else."

Lillian stood up, dropped the cigarette on the shiny floor, and stepped on it.

"Cooks! Let's roll." She turned to Mark. "Saturday."

The week passed like a dull knife through Mark's stomach. He remembered a guy who used to come into the library and check out books on deer hunting. Mark would see him in one of the quiet study areas, two or three books splayed open. Deer with their throats cut, their disemboweled bodies hanging from trees. The guy loomed over the books, taking notes.

Mark barely slept Friday night. In the morning, he woke to an empty bed. The house was quiet. The station wagon gone. No note on the kitchen table. Another crazy thought: *They took my family*. He stood still in the kitchen for a few ticking seconds, then turned toward the fridge and remembered. In black marker, the word DEFENSE was written corner-to-corner across today's date.

"Shit."

Months ago, he had planned out this day in his head. Rising early to squeeze orange juice and poach eggs. Lightly-toasted rye bread and Irish butter. Strong Italian coffee, black. And later, after Sam wowed the committee with her dissertation, a celebratory picnic at the arboretum.

He opened the refrigerator, the last of Lillian's High Life's tinkling on the door.

Ten thousand. That was all they had. After decades of working and saving, years of low-interest mortgage rates and flexible spending accounts and no-fee credit-card transfers – that's all they had. And it all fit in a manila envelope with a flimsy metal clasp, *Altoona Public Library* stamped on the front.

A distant rumbling. Dirty thunder booming around the corner. The top of his block. Into his driveway. Mark watched Lillian unhook her legs and remove her helmet. She shook out her hair, the way she used to in autobody class. Slow and indulgent. Her denim shirt was sleeveless. Her black leather chaps cupped her ass. She stretched and walked toward the house. Mark stepped closer to the front door, the envelope crinkling in his hand.

Before she could knock, Mark opened the door. Lillian let out a wet, wheezy laugh.

"Morinin', sunshine." She looked down at the envelope. "Guess you're ready?"

Mark held it out. "Just take it."

Lillian frowned. "Businessman, huh. I can appreciate that."

Her motorcycle sputtered a few times, then settled back into its humming rhythm.

"Feels light, Marky."

"It's all I got. You're taking everything, Lil!"

"Y'all be *fiine*. Come on, now."

She put her helmet on and there was tiny Mark, in his sweatshirt and sweatpants and wool slippers, reflected in her visor and staring back at him. He watched her walk away, stuff the envelope in her saddlebag, and climb on. She turned and looked at him for a moment, then jutted her chin at the back of her bike. Mark squinted. He turned back to his quiet house, his empty kitchen, and like a sleepwalker, stepped onto the porch, the brick pathway, the asphalt. Lillian patted the small leather seat. Mark climbed on. And they backed out of the driveway, the machine vibrating into him, through him, his arms wrapped around her, his cheek pressed to her warm leather jacket, and the door to his house wide open.

Review of *ONE ILLUMINATED LETTER OF BEING* by Donald Platt

While in the hospital with my disabled husband as his caregiver, I began reading this elegantly-written poetry collection, its poignant portrayal of his nonagenarian mother's death and its circumstances before and after, knowing on some level I might have to go through the same thing. The startling loveliness of Donald Platt's lines gave me hope this book might actually help me endure what was a frightening, even debilitating sense, through multiple hospitalizations and health crises, that the one I loved for 44 years might not survive much longer. My circumstances differed, but the fact of facing the intersection of life and death with a loved one was the same, making these poems resonate with me on the most immediate level. What sets his poetry apart for me from the outset is its immediacy and emotional honesty, woven into a matrix of utter beauty and sensuous detail, bringing death into life at every stage of what is at heart an almost unbearably momentous change.

And indeed, Donald Platt has given us a moving, even, as the title suggests, transcendent personal narrative through his poems of that very juncture between life and death, infused with memories of his mother and glorious descriptions of the living world around them, making both her life and even her approach to death something ineffable, akin to a sensory-and-spiritual awakening. This is the poet's signature move: juxtaposing debilitation and death with living things, or the sometimes hilariously mundane artifacts of the living (such as a sign that says among other "too cute sayings," "WE/ INTERRUPT THIS MARRIAGE/ FOR HUNTING SEASON," from the evocatively-packed poem "Happy Day"), in such a way as to place the entire concept of death indelibly into life, an attitude also personified in his mother, Martha, who "is dying/ when everything is coming into bloom." (From "Hospice")

We hear her voice in "The Garden," where he explores the contradictions: "See, the irises/ about to bloom," she says.// Sure enough, their tightly wrapped buds like chrysalises before the blue/ morpho butterfly/ breaks through and flies.// Her death is the bank of indigo/ irises that will/ open soon." Her son feels her imminent death approaching in dark flowers, and, in "Ocean's Acid Reflux," in "the flux and reflux of the surf// whose backwash makes me feel/ as if the sand is sliding out from under me." Which is exactly how I felt.

Martha bows her head as "darkness and her angina came on" which she endured beside him before "asking for more morphine," as described in the poem "Meditation Room, Albany International Airport," a place where he prays for his mother, at her request, to "die soon." Outside

her window “the white, thirty-petaled blooms// of a *Magnolia stellata*... seemed to gather// whatever light remained in the darkening sky.” Later he balances those images: “I bow down to the darkness falling. Mother, I bow to our closing. I bow/ to the *Magnolia stellata* opening.” This gracious acceptance is an imperative I experienced as a sudden peaceful state after the initial terror/panic, later acknowledging the reality of my husband’s unexpected cardiac arrest, from which CPR extracted a pulse, but not very much more, no substantial “neurological effects.” This excerpt also speaks to the shadowy intensity of such an experience, an intensity which feels almost unendurable, as contradictory as is death’s nauseating, painful, yet also relieving inevitability.

Here the poet’s craft transcends into a more a visionary imperative, a way to infuse both beauty and intense emotion into the morbid facts of the scene, of which Martha was characteristically aware to the point that she didn’t want her son with Down’s Syndrome, Michael, whom she said “knows more than he can say,” (“Hospice”) to see her, “afraid// that her skull-like head and jack-o’-lantern face, four holes/ for eyes, nose, mouth/ hacked out of wrinkled flesh with a kitchen knife, would terrify// him. Instead,/ he shook her hand, as always, and smiled.” (“Last Room”)

Earlier in the same poem, he brings her music, “the *Allegro vivace*/ of Mozart’s Piano Concerto No. 14 in E flat major” which “rumbles like thunderheads./ The rapid run of piano notes is the white ash’s/ leaves rippling// in the breeze/ that’s picking up as a new front comes in. The wind is playing/ the ash tree/ as if it were a green and growing Steinway grand”. But the poetry is also a recollection of Platt’s lifetime with his mother (as well as his father and in-laws who also died), intertwined with relationships to the living, so we learn of her as a woman of great creativity, a visual artist and pianist in her own right, and as a strong-willed personality whose love deeply affected those who knew her.

His love and its bond to her is what moves this poetry, as expressed here in “Death Orchid,”

I sleep in her room on a pullout sofa. Between us, on her night table,
stands the lavender

moth orchid I bought her. Her death flower, it’s in full
bloom. It has
the faintest of smells. When I bend down to kiss my mother, her flesh retains

the same faint sweetness I remember from my childhood
when she would place
her cool palm on my forehead in fever. Now I put my palm
on her wrinkled

forehead and pray for her. The stale musty smell of death
is with us
in this room and mixes with her scent. I cannot watch.

This poetry accompanied me in my own unsteady juxtaposition between constant caregiving and its impetus to hope, and the body's internal tug-of-wars, the recovery of kidneys balanced against how the brain bleeds, the liver decompensates, the heart murmurs. Platt finds in memory, photographs, and even in retail advertisements, words for that. That wrenching feeling when the body tells us its time is approaching. We can't say we haven't been warned. Yet for all her acceptance and planning, even prayers for death, his mother too felt "terror" when in "Death Orchid", her inflatable mattress deflated, leaving her on "sharp coiled springs" where she slipped down making it difficult to breathe, unable to press the "call" button. Platt called the staff and it took hours to stabilize her. I watched similar situations play out, when the safety measures in place are out of reach, or equipment malfunctions, the overwhelmingly awkward feeling of helplessness and pain. But the poet does not leave us here.

In counterpoint, Platt tells us of a message in graffiti on a bridge "spray-painted in hot pink capitals,/ one word per rusted/ iron truss—AS IF KILLING TIME WOULDN'T INJURE ETERNITY." He reminds us "In the garden,/ amid the red chorus/ of azaleas' hallelujahs, eternity is here, uninjured, with us." Or, from "Ocean View from a Hotel Balcony in the Off-Season," "One doesn't// have to die to know eternity. As Blake said, it's here—ambient noise/ of surf blending/ with the traffic on Atlantic Avenue, a surround sound. Stand still,// be quiet, and you/ will hear it. It's your own voice, someone else's clapping, echoing back/ to you if you find//the right sweet spot." For these poems, the intersection of life and death brings that "sweet spot."

These poems are both easy, for their many ineffable moments, and difficult to excerpt from, the latter for the extensive necessary narratives that form their "raised bed," in this book so full of flowers and exotic plants. I want to show how each scene blends into a panoramic whole, one thinks cinematically, but in fact it is the magic of words and their many connections to his own life that give this panorama effect, as for

example *qigong*, his meditation practice “to slow movements and deep breathing,” from which he brings the terms “cloud hands” and “earth hands.” In the poem “Earth Hands,” he describes the day his mother dies, how he holds her “earth hands” (which he described earlier in “Cloud Hands” when she was alive by *that* word) and how

My mother’s hands have

dug into dirt to plant yellow zinnias,
small gears of gold. Zinnias’ minute hands turn

sunward. They wilt to show how short our time here. Breathe in,
breathe out. Cloud hands. Earth hands.

In the concluding poems of the book, which describe living with grief, and into which he weaves his mother’s ever-presence, Platt finds a place for those he has lost, his mother and father, father-in-law and mother-in-law, in the poem “Smoke Tree:”

The dead are gone, but they remain with us, shelter, aid,
instruct,
and feed us. They are as the smoke tree’s billowing filaments, ghostly

cotton candy, pink smoke
from the underground fire now hidden from us among the million
roots that still clutch

the dirt. Go thou and preach the sunlight upon smoke blossoms.

Here is the essence of this book of poems. Actually, one of many essences. For to this author, life is infinitely layered and sensuous, both the tenuous mortal and the unquenchable touch of the eternal, toward which our own essences, in their multitude of manifestations, continuously reach.

Review of *LION'S PAW* by Kathleen Peirce

The opening, untitled lines of Kathleen Peirce's sixth collection, *Lion's Paw*, haunt a reading of the rest of the book:

That's right,
left where a trace
crosses between persons
and things. Some say
dances not crosses. Not this time. (1)

"[C]rosses" is the right word here. Not "dances" this time, not dances with things. A variation, then, on Robin Bernstein's "scriptive things" with an interest in older threads of thing theory. In Peirce's poems, we are "left" in the spaces of the trace between things and people rather than in the performances they script for each other alone. The examination of interconnectivity between things and human subjects focuses on what we might be made aware of while reading the trace. And Peirce challenges the reader to heighten awareness of where and how such crossing appears, where and how it is felt.

In Fanny Howe's assessment, the poems in *Lion's Paw* "are from the other side of what is seen to be the whole, and beautiful." Peirce dignifies the constituent components of what is observed, validating the selfhood of pieces as much as the puzzles to which they belong. From its earliest poems, the collection follows this thread, from the precipice of birth into relation with the observable world.

In "Birthday Eve," Peirce asks the infant in the womb, "Is it luscious there? Nightless, dayless,/ one made as a parallelogram is made, with no part/ not itself?" The curiosity here, the dreamy impossibility of the parallelogram to model the wholeness of the world, is cut short as the speaker reveals that inevitably the child must emerge into a world unfolding in complexity, color, and nuance. In "Tableau," Peirce asks, "What does/ a resident of earth deserve?" The immediate answer to this question in the rest of the line is "Not to hear entirety," as Peirce's paradigm of wholeness ultimately critiques the independent agency of the individual to observe and engage or hide at their leisure: "A person wants to want to move across a room, capable at heart/ to make no sound and pull the curtain back or down."

The attention to complex entireties is especially elegant and effective in Peirce's poems of 7-10 lines, succinct cascades of and between part into part. In "First the Fawn," for instance, the speaker lists the movements of animals as they intersect with one another, allowing their fluid and permeable boundaries to complicate legibility. A newborn fawn "folded itself back/ down" as a dog approached. This dog and "the year's first cicada" might, through the absence of clarifying punctuation, share the lines "also with legs/ from mottled grass." As the cicada vibrates on

a window, its “refusing to leave” is as unclear through the partition as anything that might be understood by a viewer looking through: “now on the window through which/ less and less is clear.”

In seemingly simple scenes like “Sit,” Peirce folds and unfolds the layers of image and perspective:

From a chair, a shoe
is seen under the bed
a boy dreamed through
his childhood and left.
It is her shoe, she
who brought good nights
who sees, who leaves it there. (58)

Here, the parallelogram image of the prenatal world introduced in “Birthday Eve,” “with no part not itself,” is challenged through the care and cleverness of line breaks and in Peirce’s enjambment, bringing together that which the reading eye may become aware of as generatively connected. The parcels of language make full use of their grammatical and spatial points of contact so as to be seen both as segments and as reaching each other across time.

Peirce’s challenge to observe complexities of parts and wholenesses is most captivating in the refrains of a sequence woven across the collection, a sequence that is so formally distinct from the rest of the book that it draws particular attention to the potential of its lyricism. In the nine poems titled “This Way,” each dedicated to another woman poet, Peirce further invites the reader into moments of and methods for sensing and awareness. These pieces, in short, clipped lines (few, if any, longer than four syllables), make “compact” the experience of witnessing and knowing. Each begins with the lines “No pre-/ face;” as if to nip in the bud the assumption of writerly set-up and contextualizing gestures in favor of something more immediate about the presence of faces and the possibilities of sensory experience.

In the second of the “This Way” poems, Peirce meditates on the face that is variably at work in the apprehension of its surroundings and its awareness of connection. This is the face that “passes faces,” that “sees sometimes,” “is passed/ sometimes,” and only “sometimes sees/ the way/ a clementine’s/ segments touch—” (23). Peirce here offers a powerfully unpretentious image of the human (or, perhaps self-critically, of the poet) who is capable of degrees of close observance of the details of contact between parts, but who must also miss these in the locomotion of living. In other moments of the “This Way” sequence, faces that appear in dreams which others will never see, serve as the anatomical receptors into which the sensory will “pass,” and make pain possible. The “This

Way” poems, then, both beckon the reader in and provide a sparse, and thus, focused lyrical model for reading, not only the other poems, but a way of being mindful of one’s experience as “a resident of earth.”

If *Lion’s Paw* leaves the reader with anything, it leaves them with an overwhelming invitation into awareness of the ways in which the observed is elegantly itself while simultaneously an element of its whole. Pierce leads the reader to return again and again to a question about what we might be missing if we are not asking ourselves to deserve the parts to which we are connected and the entirety to which we belong. An entirety we may resist sensing. Peirce’s illustration of what is possible to know before it is known to us crosses each page, echoing its trace into each exchange between the poem and the reader.

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Cover Image

The sun was setting in the sky
The ship was sinking in the pond
The TV-headed man was there
The telephone poles were there
The boaters in their graphic t-shirts
Were there to watch the ship go down

Contributor Notes

Bryce Berkowitz is the winner of the AMC TV Pilot Award at the Austin Film Festival (2021). He is the author of *Bermuda Ferris Wheel*, winner of the 42 Miles Press Poetry Award (forthcoming 2022). His writing has appeared in *Best New Poets*, *New Poetry from the Midwest*, *The Sewanee Review*, *The Missouri Review*, and other publications. He teaches at Butler University. Find him at: www.bryceberkowitz.com

Nicole Callihan writes poems and stories. Her work has appeared in *Kenyon Review*, *American Poetry Review*, *Thrush*, *Tin House*, *BOMB*, *Court Green*, *Conduit*, and as a Poem-a-Day feature from the Academy of American Poets. She has a novella, *The Couples*, as well as several collections of poetry, most recently, *ELSEWHERE*, a collaboration with Zoë Ryder White, which won the *Sixth Finch Chapbook Prize* and was published in spring 2020. Learn more at www.nicolecallihan.com.

Lauren K. Carlson is a spiritual director living in rural Michigan with her family. She is the author of a chapbook *Animals I Have Killed* (Comstock Review Chapbook Prize 2018). Find her work in *Waxwing*, *Tinderbox*, *The Rumpus* and *Salamander Magazine* among others. For more see www.laurenkcarlson.com.

George Choundas has work in over seventy-five publications. His story collection, *The Making Sense of Things* (FC2), was awarded the Ronald Sukenick Innovative Fiction Prize, as well as shortlisted for the Robert C. Jones Prize for Short Prose, the St. Lawrence Book Award for Fiction, and the Katherine Anne Porter Prize in Short Fiction. He is a former FBI agent and a Cuban- and Greek-American. His name has appeared exactly once on the front page of a country's national newspaper. It was, of course, misspelled.

Nick Courtright is the founder and Executive Editor of *Atmosphere Press*. He is the author of *The Forgotten World*, about Americanness and identity in a vast global culture, *Let There Be Light*, called "a continual surprise and a revelation" by Naomi Shihab Nye, and *Punchline*, a National Poetry Series finalist. His prose and poetry has appeared in such places as *The Harvard Review*, *The Southern Review*, *Kenyon Review*, *Boston Review*, *The Huffington Post*, *The Best American Poetry*, *Gothamist*, and *SPIN Magazine*, among dozens of others.

Kevin Craft is the executive editor of Poetry NW Editions. His books include *Vagrants & Accidentals* (University of Washington Press, 2017) and *Solar Prominence* (Cloudbank Books, 2005), and five volumes of the anthology *Mare Nostrum*, an annual collection of Italian translation and Mediterranean-inspired writing (Writ in Water Press, 2004 – 2009). His poems, reviews, and essays have appeared in such places as *Poetry*, *AGNI*, *Verse*, *Ninth Letter*, *Alaska Quarterly Review*, *Southwest Review*, and *West Branch*.

Dana Curtis' third full-length collection of poetry, *Wave Particle Duality*, was published by blazeVOX Books in 2017. Her second collection, *Camera Stellata*, was published by CW Books, and her first book, *The Body's Response to Famine*, won the Pavement Saw Press Transcontinental Poetry Prize. Her work has appeared in such publications as *Ploughshares*, *Hotel Amerika*, *Indiana Review*, *Colorado Review*, and *Prairie Schooner*. She has received grants from the Minnesota State Arts Board and the McKnight Foundation. She is the Editor-in-Chief of Elixir Press and lives in Denver Colorado.

Anthony D'Aries is the author of *The Language of Men: A Memoir* (Hudson Whitman Press, 2012), which received the PEN Discovery Prize and Foreword's Memoir-of-the-Year Award. His work has appeared in *McSweeney's*, *Boston Magazine*, *Solstice*, *The Literary Review*, *Memoir Magazine*, *Sport Literate*, *Flash Fiction Magazine*, and elsewhere. He was recently nominated for a Pushcart Prize and his essay, "No Man's Land," was listed as a Notable Essay in *Best American Essays 2021*. He currently directs the low-residency MFA in Creative and Professional Writing at Western Connecticut State University.

Tommy Dean is the author of two flash fiction chapbooks *Special Like the People on TV* (Redbird Chapbooks, 2014) and *Covenants* (ELJ Editions, 2021). *Hollows*, a collection of flash fiction is forthcoming from *Alternating Current Press*. He lives in Indiana where he currently

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Abigail Dembo lives in Berkeley, California, and is currently a poetry editor for *Southland Alibi*. Her poetry has appeared or is forthcoming in *The Midwest Quarterly*, *The 2River View*, *Slipstream Magazine*, and other places

Joanne Diaz is the author of two poetry collections, *The Lessons* and *My Favorite Tyrants*. She is the recipient of fellowships from the Illinois Arts Council and the National Endowment for the Arts. She teaches literature and creative writing at Illinois Wesleyan University.

Paul Dickey's first 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 *Plume*, *Sentence: A Journal of Prose Poetics*, *Cue*, *Prairie Schooner*, *Pleaidēs*, *32Poems*, *Concho River Review*, and *Bellevue Literary Review*, among other over 200 online and print publications. A second book, *Wires Over the Homeplace* was published by Pinyon Publishing in October, 2013. More info is available at the author's new website: <https://pauldickey9.wix.com/paul-dickey>.

Heather Dobbins is a native of Memphis, Tennessee. She is the author of two poetry collections, *In the Low Houses* (2014) and *River Mouth* (2017), both from Kelsay Press. Her flash fiction and poems have been published in *Beloit Poetry Journal*, *Book of Matches*, *Channel*, and *Women's Studies Quarterly*, among others. She lives in Fort Smith, Arkansas, with her husband and their three sons. Please see heatherdobbins.net for more.

Terri Drake is a graduate of the Iowa Writers' Workshop. Her poetry collection, *At the Seams* was published by Bear Star Press. She has a chapbook forthcoming, *Regarding Us*, from Finishing Line Press. Her poems have appeared in *Crab Creek Review*; *Poets Reading the News*; *Quarry West*, *Perihelion*; *Heartwood Literary Magazine*; and *Open: Journal of Art and Letters*, among others. She is a practicing psychoanalyst living in Santa Cruz, California.

Stephen Dudas has an MA in Creative Writing and a PhD in Literature from Miami University. Stephen's research areas include 20th and 21st century poetry and children's literature.

M. Chava Evans is a rabbi and chaplain in the Washington D.C. area. She has five children.

Judson Evans is a full-time Instructor in the Liberal Arts & Sciences Dept. at Berklee College of Music. Previously, he served as Chair of Liberal Arts at The Boston Conservatory for over twenty years. He is a poet and visual artist, who has focused on collaboration and crossing genres. He has published both contemporary lyric poetry and haiku and related forms. He is currently one of two Editors of Haibun for Haiku Society of America journal *Frogpond*. He was chosen as an "Emerging Poet" by John Yau for The Academy of American Poets in 2007 and won the "Philip Booth Poetry Prize" from *Salt Hill Review* in 2013. His poems have appeared in *Folio*, *Volt*, *CutBank*, and *The Sugar House Review*. His collaborative book of poems – *Chalk Song* — inspired by paleolithic cave paintings (with poets Susan Berger-Jones & Gale Batchelder) — was published by Lily Poetry Press, Boston, in October 2021.

Chris Forhan's latest book (in Fall 2022) is *A Mind Full of Music: Essays on Imagination and Popular Song*. He is also the author of the memoir *My Father Before Me* and three books of poetry and is the recipient of a National Endowment for the Arts Fellowship and three Pushcart Prizes. He lives in Indianapolis, where he teaches at Butler University. For more: www.chrisforhan.com.

Elizabeth Genovise is an O. Henry Prize recipient and the author of four collections of short stories published via small or university presses. Her newest book, *Palindrome*, is due out from the Texas Review Press in the fall of 2022. She is an inductee into the East Tennessee Literary Hall of Fame, and her stories have appeared in over two dozen literary journals. She is currently completing her first novel.

Fabián González González was born in El Charco, Uriangato, GTO., Mexico. He immigrated to Cloverdale, CA and currently resides in California's Central Valley. His fiction, poetry, and visual art have previously appeared in CSU Stanislaus's *Penumbra* while *Notre Dame Review*, *Thin Air*, *Sand Hills*, and the *Rio Grande Review* have also published his poetry.

Matthew Guenette is the author of *Vasectomania* (University of Akron Press, 2017), *American Busboy* (University of Akron Press, 2011) and *Sudden Anthem* (Dream Horse Press, 2008) as well as a chapbook, *Civil Disobedience* (Rabbit Catastrophe Press, 2017). His next book of poems, *Doom Scroll*, will be published by University of Akron Press in 2023. He lives in Madison, WI, with his wife, their two children, and a 20-pound cat named Butternut.

Brian Henry's most recent books are *Permanent State* (Threadsuns) and *Things Are Completely Simple: Poetry and Translation* (Parlor Press).

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*, *Boulevard*, *Cincinnati Review*, *Georgia Review*, *Iowa Review*, *The Laurel Review*, *The Missouri Review*, *The Nation*, *Poetry*, *The Southern Review*, *The Yale Review*, and in *The Best American Nonrequired Reading*. He teaches online and edits for *Frontier Poetry*.

Vicki Iorio is the author of the poetry collections *Poems from the Dirty Couch*, Local Gems Press, *Not Sorry*, Alien Buddha Press and the chapbooks *Send Me a Letter*, dancinggirlpress and *Something Fishy*, Finishing Line Press. Her poetry has appeared in numerous print and online journals including *The Painted Bride Quarterly*, *Rattle*, poets respond on line, *The Fem Lit Magazine*, and *The American Journal of Poetry*. Vicki is currently living in Florida but her heart is in New York.

Siham Karami is the author of *To Love the River* (Kelsay, 2018). Her work has appeared in *The Orison Anthology*, *Tiferet Journal*, *Able Muse*, *The Rumpus*, and *Smartish Pace*. Nominated multiple times for both the Pushcart Prize and Best of the Net, she blogs at sihamkarami.wordpress.net.

Candice Kelsey is an educator and poet living in Georgia. She serves as a creative writing mentor with PEN America's Prison & Justice Writing Program; her work appears in *Grub Street*, *Poet Lore*, *Lumiere Review*, *Hawai'i Pacific Review*, and *Poetry South* among other journals. Recently, she was chosen as a finalist in *Cutthroat's* Joy Harjo Poetry Prize. Find her @candicekelsey1 and www.candicemkelsey.com.

Nari Kirk is a Korean American writer with an MFA in creative nonfiction from the University of New Mexico. Her work has appeared in *Hobart* (online) and the anthology *All the Women in My Family Sing*, among other publications. She lives in the Pacific Northwest.

Laura Last is a poet and musician living in the Hudson Valley. She was a finalist in the 2022 Tucson Festival of Books Literary Awards and is currently pursuing her MFA in poetry at the Bennington Writing Seminars.

William Lessard has work that has appeared or is forthcoming in *American Poetry Review*, *Best American Experimental Writing*, *the Southwest Review*, and *Beloit Poetry Journal*. His chapbook, *instrument for distributed empathy monetization*, was published in April 2022 by KERNPUNKT Press. He is Poetry & Hybrids editor at *Heavy Feather Review*.

JSA Lowe's poems have appeared in such publications as *AGNI*, *American Scholar*, *Black Warrior Review*, *Chicago Review*, *Denver Quarterly*, *DIAGRAM*, *Hobart*, *Michigan Quarterly Review's Mixtape*, *Q/A Poetry*, *Salamander*, *Salt Hill*, *Screen Door Review*, *Sinister Wisdom*, *Superstition Review*, *Third Coast*, and *Versal*. She has published two chapbooks, *DOE* and *Cherry-emily*. She is a lecturer in English at the University of Houston, where she received her PhD; she lives on Galveston Island.

Raymond Luczak is the author and editor of 25 titles, including *Lunaflly* (Gnashing Teeth), *once upon a twin* (Gallaudet University Press), and *Compassion, Michigan: The Ironwood Stories* (Modern History Press). His work has appeared in *Poetry*, *Prairie Schooner*, and elsewhere. An inaugural Zoeglossia Fellow, he lives in Minneapolis, Minnesota.

Al Maginnes has published four chapbooks and nine full length collections of poetry, most recently *The Beasts That Vanish* (Blue Horse Press, 2021). Recent poems appear in *Lake Effect*, *MacGuffin*, *Xavier Review*, *American Journal of Poetry* and many others. He lives in Raleigh NC and teaches at Louisburg College in Louisburg NC.

Michael Mark is the author of *Visiting Her in Queens is More Enlightening than a Month in a Monastery in Tibet* which won the Rattle Chapbook prize and will be published in 2022. His poems have recently appeared in or are forthcoming in *Copper Nickel*, *Pleiades*, *Ploughshares*, *Poetry Northwest*, *The Southern Review*, *The Sun*, and other places. michaeljmark.com.

Kyle McCord is the author of five books of poetry including National Poetry Series Finalist *Magpies in the Valley of Oleanders*. His work has been featured in *AGNI*, *Boston Review*, *Crazyhorse*, *Harvard Review*, *The Kenyon Review*, *Ploughshares*, *TriQuarterly* and elsewhere. Kyle has received grants from the Academy of American Poets, the Vermont Studio Center, and the Baltic Writing Residency. He serves as executive editor of Gold Wake Press and lives in Des Moines, Iowa where he teaches at Drake University.

Kristy McCoy was born and raised on a military base in Seoul, South Korea. Moving to the United States and navigating the American terrain, as an Asian-American woman, has been tremendously influential to her writing—essays and poetry alike. She earned her MFA at UNC-Wilmington and currently teaches at Penn State Behrend in Erie, PA., where she lives with her life partner and their 9-year-old son. This is her first published poem.

Sati Mookherjee is a poet and lyricist. Her work appears in literary magazines and has been performed and recorded by contemporary classical musicians. She has been twice nominated for a Pushcart Prize and was awarded an Artist Trust / Washington State Arts Commission Fellowship Award. Her debut poetry collection, *Eye*, is forthcoming in 2022 (Ravenna Press).

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

McKenna Williams Nielsen grew up in suburban Oklahoma, where she loved to watch the sun set all the way down around the lip of the planet, and where the red mud is the best in the world. She is currently a student at Brigham Young University and will graduate in December 2022 with a Bachelors of Science in Psychology. In her writing, McKenna loves to push the boundaries of narrative style, and experiment with prose forms that interact with, or involve her readers as much as possible.

John A. Nieves has poems forthcoming or recently published in journals such as: *North American Review*, *Copper Nickel*, *32 Poems*, *Harvard Review* and *Massachusetts Review*. He won the *Indiana Review* Poetry Contest and his first book, *Curio*, won the Elixir Press Annual Poetry Award Judge's Prize. He is associate professor of English at Salisbury University and an editor of *The Shore Poetry*. He received his M.A. from the University of South Florida and his Ph.D. from the University of Missouri.

A writer, editor, and photographer, **Rebecca O'Bern's** work has appeared in *Notre Dame Review*, *Whale Road Review*, *Storm Cellar*, *Barely South Review*, *Connecticut Review*, and elsewhere. Recipient of the Leslie Leeds Poetry Prize, she's also been awarded honors from UCONN, Connecticut Poetry Society, and Arts Café Mystic. She currently serves as co-editor-in-chief of *Mud Season Review* and on the board of directors of Burlington Writers Workshop. Find her online on Twitter @rebeccaobern and at rebeccaobern.com.

Open AI's work can be found online daily, usually uncredited.

Samantha Padgett is an MFA Candidate at Sam Houston State University. Her work has appeared in *Poet Lore*, *New Ohio Review*, *Driftwood Press*, *Rust + Moth*, *Up the Staircase Quarterly*, *Dialogist*, and elsewhere. She lives in Huntsville, TX with her cat.

Eric Pankey is the author of many books, most recently *NOT YET TRANSFIGURED*, from Orison Press. He is the Heritage Chair in Writing at George Mason University.

Bonnie Proudfoot lives in Athens, Ohio. Her novel, *Goshen Road*, (Swallow Press, 2020) was selected by WCONA for its Book of the Year Award, as well as the WNBA for its Great Group Reads and long-listed for the 2021 PEN/ Hemingway award. Her first book of poems, *Household Gods* (Sheila-Na-Gig Press), is forthcoming in Summer of 2022.

Jason Reblando is an artist and photographer whose work is in the collections of the Library of Congress, the Milwaukee Art Museum, and the Philadelphia Museum of Art. His monograph, *New Deal Utopias* (Kehrer Verlag) was published in 2017. He teaches photography at Illinois State University.

Michelle Ross is the author of three story collections: *There's So Much They Haven't Told You*, winner of the 2016 Moon City Short Fiction Award; *Shapeshifting*, winner of the 2020 Stillhouse Press Short Fiction Award (November 2021); and *They Kept Running*, winner of the 2021 Katherine Anne Porter Prize in Short Fiction. Her work is included in *Best Small Fictions*, *Best Microfiction*, the *Wigleaf* Top 50, and will be included in the forthcoming Norton anthology, *Flash Fiction America*. She is fiction editor of *Atticus Review*.

Shana Ross is a poet newly arrived in Edmonton, Alberta after 25 years in New England. Qui transtulit sustinet. Her work has appeared in *Chautauqua Journal*, *Ruminate*, *Gone Lawn*, *Kissing Dynamite*, *SWWIM* and more. She was awarded first place in the 2021 Bacopa Literary Review Poetry competition, received a 2019 Parent-Writer Fellowship to Martha's Vineyard Institute of Creative Writing, and serves as an editor for *Luna Station Quarterly*. Her first chapbook, *Heavy Little Things* (Finishing Line Press) is now available. She holds both a BA and MBA from Yale and rarely tweets @shanakatzross.

Roger Sheffer has retired from teaching writing at NCAA hockey power, Minnesota State, Mankato. He now lives in Niskayuna New York, hometown of the crazy Shaker in *Moby-Dick*.

David Starkey is a former Santa Barbara Poet Laureate, founding director of the Creative Writing Program at Santa Barbara City College, and the publisher and co-editor of Gunpowder Press. Over the past thirty years, he has published eight full-length collections of poetry with small presses and more than 500 poems in literary journals such as *American Scholar*, *Georgia Review*, *Prairie Schooner* and *Southern Review*.

Tyler Starks holds an MFA from Hollins University, where he received an Academy of American Poets Prize. His work appears on poets.org and in *Best New Poets 2021* anthology. He lives in Brooklyn, NY.

Chris Stuck's story collection, *Give My Love to the Savages*, was published in July 2021 by Amistad/HarperCollins. He has twice been a fiction fellow at the Fine Arts Work Center in Provincetown, Massachusetts, a Callaloo Writer's Workshop fiction fellow, a 2019 Oregon Literary Arts fiction fellow, and a Pushcart Prize winner. His stories have been published in *American Literary Review*, *Bennington Review*, *Cagibi*, *Callaloo*, *Meridian*, and *Natural Bridge*.

Nano Taggart (he/him) lives among the red rocks of southern Utah, where he's a co-founding/co-editor of *Sugar House Review*. He's a recipient of an artist scholarship from the Utah Division of Arts & Museums. It's been a minute, but you can see some of his stuff in places like *Terrain.org* and *Verse Daily*.

Jason Tandon is the author of five books of poetry, including *This Far North* (Black Lawrence Press, forthcoming 2023) and *The Actual World* (Black Lawrence Press, 2019). His poems have appeared in *Ploughshares*, *Prairie Schooner*, *Beloit Poetry Journal*, *North American Review*, *Alaska Quarterly Review*, and elsewhere. He teaches in the Arts & Sciences Writing Program at Boston University.

Richard Terrill's new book of essays is *Essentially* from Holy Cow! Press. (www.holycowpress.org). Terrill is the author of six previous books including the memoir *Fakebook: Improvisations on a Journey Back to Jazz*; *Coming Late to Rachmaninoff*, winner of the Minnesota Book Award

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Arthur Vogelsang's books of poetry are *A Planet* (Holt, Rinehart & Winston, 1983), *Twentieth Century Women* (University of Georgia Press, 1988), which was chosen by John Ashbery for the Contemporary Poetry Series, *Cities and Towns* (University of Massachusetts Press, 1996), which received the Juniper Prize, *Left Wing of a Bird* (Sarabande, 2003), *Expedition: New and Selected Poems* (Ashland Poetry Press, 2011), and *Orbit* (Pitt Poetry Series, 2016). He was an Editor/Publisher of *The American Poetry Review* from 1973-2006.

Rachel Whalen is a poet, playwright, and translator from Buffalo, New York. She recently completed an MFA at NYU, where she was a Poetry Editor for the *Washington Square Review*. She is also a co-founder and translator of *Veriones*, an online journal of translation.

Joel Worford is a writer and musician from Richmond, Virginia. His work appears or is forthcoming in *Trampset*, *High Shelf Press*, *Random Sample Review*, and more. Joel received a Best of the Net nomination in 2019 for his short story "The Warning Sign," as well as a Pushcart nomination in 2021. Joel's band, Whitney & The Saying Goes, released their debut album *Thoughts For Breakfast* in March of 2021. Joel also serves as Fiction Editor at *K'in Literary Journal*. He enjoys music, literature, and tennis.

Muyaka bin Haji al-Ghassaniy (1776 – 1840) was the earliest secular Swahili poet whose name has been recorded for posterity. He was a citizen of Mombasa who has been credited with bringing Swahili verse "out of the mosque and into the marketplace" with his commentary on daily life and Mombasa's frequent battles defending its independence against the Omani Empire. He was also an early master of the mashairi quatrain form that serves to this day as the predominant form of Swahili verse. His work would likely have been permanently lost were it not collected and recorded from the memory of elderly Mombasan poets in the late 19th century by the scholars William Ernest Taylor and Mwalimu Sikujua.

Richard Prins is a New Yorker who has lived, worked, studied and recorded music in Dar es Salaam. He received his MFA degree in poetry from New York University, and he is currently completing an MFA in literary translation at Queens College. His poems appear in publications like *Gulf Coast*, *jubilat*, and *Ploughshares*, his essays have received "Notable" mentions in *Best American Essays* and *Best American Travel Writing*, and his translations appear in publications like *Columbia Review*, *Los Angeles Review* and *Washington Square Review*. Arrests include criminal trespass (Trump Tower), disorderly conduct (Trump International Hotel), resisting arrest (Republican National Convention), and incommoding the halls of Congress (United States Senate).