

THE LAUREL REVIEW

Volume 55

2022

Issue 2

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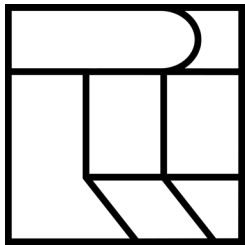
Cover Design: Mason D. Arnold

Typesetting: Mason D. Arnold, Holland Zwank, Corrina Dittmer, Megan Wintheiser, Hope Reeves

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

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

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



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Manual

Speak with last year's leaves for sentences. Use wind's grammar, ocean's syllables, blood's punctuation. Ask the rock about time. *Winter is the size of your palm, the weight of your past. Water is always mixed with blood.* Forgive the predictable bird and the spider's effort. Open, sound in the world. *Moon's uncritical eye stares through you, bends.* Ask the rock about the sky. Learn to be alone before you are born. Mold a love from your ruins. Be the silence mistakes fall into. *It's too easy to see in the daytime.* Ask the sky about the effort of wrapping the planet. Bend.

A. Molotkov

Long Moment

Between our river and the next,
lie beautiful lands, plentiful
in former times. Now, wars
rage, planting only bullets. But
our gods are bulletproof, our
~~future~~ set in stone and plastic.
When the dead whisper, *Have*
you lost all track of your
own life? we whisper nothing
in return. The dead are not here,
after all. We've invented their
faces, their lives, their former
struggles. Everything has just
started, this very moment, with
our new ~~futures~~ at our
disposal.

A. Molotkov

As If Never Were an Option

Time changes its mind, bares
its weak teeth. Your suitcase of
unused days packed to the brim,
you travel away from this half-
life with its lights. You, a bared
void in me. How to say this in
the language of the dead, with my
half-mouth?

Accumulation

Time grows strange at yellow lights, stranger when I try to get the terrain in my head to map and border the places I have studied. Weather reiterates lessons: petals scatter and adhere to sidewalks. And memory hews nonlinear, as if promising some new, more logical pattern. I am learning how to substitute a list of cities for a coherent story. A retired FBI agent called to ask about a college friend once and I admitted I didn't remember the name of the dorm she occupied but I believed it was surrounded by trees. I paced around my first apartment, which overlooked palms and eucalyptus; I guessed the correct first letter. My friend got the agency job, then quit to dance instead. Meanwhile, I earned a degree and then another. And then I and then etc.—a solitary counter-narrative to weddings and real-estate. *Then* unfolds and collapses, driving west. Rain falls intermittent and recursive, traffic slows at every intersection. My sister wants to distill her education and work in a statement of purpose—with opening hook and selling points. From this safe distance, I read her drafts, help winnow the past of potential detours. My own life, I loop and ruminate, as if searching for a hidden entrance. When I reach it, the park is empty of people, full of pines and gulls. The breeze is strangely sea-like. Perhaps place is a symptom of mood, a correlate. Sara emailed yesterday about visiting a town we both lived in once; now I wonder if what we miss isn't the absence of hills, but how the wind swept across that absence, the sudden expanses of light after a storm, how much easier it seemed, there, to describe ourselves as children, to untangle trajectories. Here, on sunny days, the present is obvious, localized. But today the mountains are clouded in and at every left turn the Midwest intervenes and my adolescence in it, my returning at intervals, to suggest other turns from roads in Ohio, in Illinois. Then history or nostalgia unravels. I find myself in a new city, driving to another home, following my own future ghosts.

Legend

The birds keep singing, but I've lost the keys
to every home I've never owned.

I look at doors and mistake my name

for a stranger. They're glad and relentless,
the birds, nesting and singing. I've lost

track of the bomb sketched in my mind

— I meant to separate

or maybe knot the colored wires.

What act untriggers a blast? Rejoin,
the birds sing, or rejoice, while I mutter

and hesitate. I keep tangling

with this life, drawing breath, calling it mine.

Condolences

The policeman said, “Sorry to hear about this. Our condolences to you and your family.” The reporter said, “I’m sorry the occasion brings me here.” His neighbor said, “I have your mother in my prayers.”

His mother’s best friend started a Go Fund Me Facebook page that filled with “Thoughts and prayers” followed by emojis for sadness and happiness and what looked to be anger. The faces on those cartoons looked like the ones on the pain scale poster he remembered from the pediatrician’s. Pick a face that matches your pain, the doctor said. He’d always picked one that represented a place just below what he felt. When a diagnosis came, he wanted to be thought of as brave.

In the intensive care waiting room, the television was tuned, each day, to talk shows hosted by women. Someone, he thought, must know the schedule and change the channel to keep a group of women chatting, but then he began to imagine there was an all-talk channel. When his mother, after a few weeks, was moved out of the ICU, the television in the waiting room was tuned to a station that carried real-life unsolved crime stories. Cold cases mostly. Sometimes decades old, friends and relatives of the victims expressing hope.

The night of the hit and run, his mother and her friend Julia had dinner at Mid-Main, two glasses of wine and the almond-crusted trout special, his mother’s car parked across the street that serviced mostly local traffic at low speeds.

Somebody gets run down and nearly killed on a well-traveled highway somewhere, there’s usually no telling where that car might have been bound. Close by, maybe, but fifty or a hundred miles away is a possibility, that driver on his way to some place besides just down the street to home. His mother had her pelvis crushed and her legs broken on the main street of her small town that has a bypass looped around it for traffic that isn’t local. Cars on that street are driven by people who live within ten miles, tops. Mostly within five. Or fewer.

Julia remembered the make and color of the car so precisely a child could find that car. A police department computer did the work. Locally, the choices few. A jeep. White. Three or four at the most within a ten-mile radius of the small Pennsylvania town. One with recent, unrepaired body damage. Not even scrubbed to minimize the evidence. DNA still present. Two days it took.

“If he had stopped,” Julia said, “I could at least stand the sight of him.”

“At least,” he’d thought. “At least Mom’s alive. At least they have the evidence. At least there are excellent doctors. At least there’s insurance.”

Police lab work was necessary. Analysis. Confirmation. Ok, he said, his mother on a ventilator. Ok.

But he wanted to damage that careless, probably drunk driver who sped away. Eye-for-an-eye. Said it to himself. Wheelchair harm. Never aloud. Not yet. At least doing that asshole driver appropriate harm if God or the police didn’t step in and do what’s right. By the time his mother was released from

the hospital. Weeks. Maybe more. Plenty of what he called “grace time,” the hospital stay and the rehab center and half a dozen follow-up surgeries, As a gift to his mother, who would never heal, not completely, not ever.

Before she left the hospital, his mother had a lawyer who said coping starts with justice. What’s never said is that everyone knows who the driver is. Her friend who was with her when it happened. The bartender at the Mid-Main who served the driver during the hours before the hit-and-run. The police.

The newspaper used the phrase “a person of interest.” Grace, the bartender, told him that particular person lived a couple of miles south of town, that he was a regular at Mid-Main. And still was. He decided that a man who does hit and run has already proved he’s a piece of shit. To his mother he substituted “worthless,” but both were on the same page in his thesaurus. And for those making excuses, fuck off, that fanciful sort of thinking doesn’t float. Only his mother could say that she forgave if she unaccountably chose to exercise that option. For months afterward, no sign of such a thing. “Eye for an eye,” he finally said aloud.

“You touch him,” his mother replied, “you ruin yourself.”

Grace kept him in the know when he ran into her. “I cry sometimes,” she said. “That POS sits there with his beer like nothing’s happened. And he still has friends who drink with him. It’s like they’ve been infected.”

When she was released, at last, from the hospital, a donor presented his mother with a motorized scooter. The donor contacted the newspaper. A photo was taken. The scooter’s owner said it had been a life-saver for him once upon a time. In the photo, the donor looked bent and fragile, his hand resting on the scooter as if for balance. In the story, the reporter called it by its brand name Pride Go-Go, a grotesquery.

“How long did they work on that silly name?” he said. “It’s the old-fashioned name for a stripper.”

His mother let out one of those tiny forced laughs people use when they’re making up their minds how funny something is supposed to be in a crowd of strangers. “A lot of those dancers back then didn’t completely strip,” she said.

“You don’t have to end up naked to be a stripper,” he said.

“You sound like your father. Mr. Judgment Day, I used to call him when he got like that.”

His father had moved to another state fifteen years ago. His mother had moved into his apartment the week before.

He lived alone. Only half an hour from where she had lived, his apartment was large enough for her and her dog. He had literal banker’s hours and the rest of his weekdays to walk the dog. He did large loans. The people who wanted them were willing to wait if the dog kept him a few extra minutes.

His mother had always jogged with the dog, a golden retriever who never veered off the sidewalk. Who never needed a leash. She never tripped over it. “You start them off right and they never let you down,” she said more than once.

The day after the scooter story was published, a customer leaned toward his desk and said, “I saw your picture in the paper. Your Mom’s the one who got busted up and the police know what’s what with the driver.”

“Yes,” he said.

“Condolences,” the man said, “but excuse me if that picture got me to thinking. I bet your mother will be riding around wishing you’d kick that fellow’s ass, beat him real good.”

“That’s possible,” he said, but now he was looking more closely at the customer, remembering his face as if he would need to be a witness.

When his mother’s lawyer spoke, he heard the voice of mansions. Back at the hospital, he’d offered a free consultation. As someone who sympathizes, he’d said, as someone who could offer a legal take on where things stood.

The people who fired his mother made that call from Colorado. As if misery had no muscle if someone was entry-level and without seniority. She was going to lose a kidney, too. Not that anyone in Colorado would ever check to find out.

For six months, she had worked at the nearby college in a building with a family name on it. “A family with money,” she’d said. “Maybe ten million dollars for a name on a building that size.”

“And still have some left over,” he’d said.

His mother had laughed. “More where that came from, I bet. It’s like tithing to them.”

Last fall, waiting to take her to dinner, he’d walked across that campus, listening to the girls a decade younger than him talk. Mostly, they spoke into phones as they walked, making plans, saying the names of cities that were far away and even in other countries. He walked with his head down, listening.

After that, he’d always waited upstairs in the library where it was empty or where no one spoke, reading until his mother rode the elevator up from where she was a tutor on the ground floor. Her job, she said, was to save students so they wouldn’t leave. So they’d keep paying and fill dorm rooms. “It’s bad business if they fail,” she’d said.

His mother was 5’3”. She had never weighed more than 105 pounds. A ballet dancer’s body. Or a skater’s. When he was growing up he’d thought his mother skated as well as the girls at the Olympics. She could spin and jump and land without losing her balance. She laughed when he told her about the Olympics. “This is only one axel,” she’d said. “A beginner’s jump,” and he would go back to working on the real beginner’s moves—push and glide,

stay standing. By fourteen, he was half a foot taller than his mother. “If we skate on a pond,” he’d joked, “I’d be the one to go out and test the ice.”

Now he foresaw his mother’s surprise at the taboos of handicap, unable to lace up her skates because she had a reconstructed pelvis bone and a fused spinal column. He pictured her taking the first steps of a modest jog, how she would stagger and be stopped by the fear of falling.

His mother had carried keys in one hand and a box of leftover trout in the other as she’d crossed the street between the only two stoplights in town. A block apart. Speed in between unlikely.

Her ninth stride had been her last normal step, about to join the infirm and the crippled.

When a reporter called to arrange a first anniversary retrospective feature, lab results had still not been delivered. Any day now had been repeated by the police for months.

His mother smiled at the reporter and thanked all her well-wishers as if they were surgeons who’d fixed her completely. When the reporter left, she hobbled into her bedroom and locked the door behind her. The scooter and walker that had been photographed sat paired in the middle of the living room. Like something you’d see in a senior center, he thought, the last step before bedridden.

Half of the article was about the strange certainty that the white jeep that struck her was parked three miles away. That tests had been run, not to prove anything, but merely to confirm. That the driver remained free.

Slight. That’s how the paper described his mother. Diminutive. Like a child, he thought. Like a victim

The evening after the article appeared, his mother put down a magazine she was reading and said, “You should read this.”

“What’s it about?” he said.

“These men crossed Antarctica in winter when nobody ever does that, when it’s dark all day and beyond cold. There was something they needed to know about the eggs of penguins. Something so important they did what could have been suicidal.”

“The eggs aren’t there in the summer, are they?” he said, remembering parts of a movie he’d seen years ago.

“Imagine,” she said, “the need they felt to take that risk? In order to be satisfied, they needed to know, to be absolutely sure, and they made it back, so astonishing we read about that journey in the following century.”

Julia, the next day, said, “Your Mom has more to worry about than her legs. I thought you should know.”

“How much more?”

“Kidneys, for starters. Damage inside her. She won’t tell you about the things you can’t see.”

“Like I’m six years old.”

“Like you’ll want to hurt that prick worse with all your eye-for-an-eye Old Testament spouting.” She paused, listening, he knew, for his mother. “I used to see your mother’s spirit all around her when she moved and spoke and even when she listened. She was so lithe and light on her feet. No wonder she skated. Of course, she danced.” When his mother, a moment later, stepped into the living room, the space around her was as vacant and ordinary as everyone’s, even strangers passing by who he barely noticed.

“Read about those penguin guys while we’re gone,” she said. “I bet you won’t forget them.”

He drove the half hour to the Mid-Main. His mother refused to go in that restaurant now. It wasn’t the memory, he knew. It was the chance of seeing the white jeep driver. He ordered a cheeseburger and a beer and sat at a table. Grace, when she served a man at the bar, nodded his way. She’d told him months ago that the jeep driver always sat at the bar.

For half an hour, he listened to the driver laugh, sitting between two men who looked to be, like that driver, in their forties, and cheer as they watched the NBA playoffs, never turning away from the television, his friends, and his beer. Somebody like him will never be alone, he thought. Men like him need their pals, company to keep them from looking inside themselves.

When he left the restaurant, he searched along the nearest side streets for the white jeep, but he didn’t spot it.

One Sunday afternoon, he walked beside his mother on a trail where she had run for years. The scooter was quiet on the packed mulch except when a wheel ran over leaves or, once, a plastic wrapper.

She didn’t mind the name, but his mother hated the scooter, too. “It’s like those things big fat people ride in the grocery store while they pick out junk food to make them fatter.”

“Mom,” he said, “they’re not all...”

“Enough of them are to make it true.”

“You’re small, Mom. Nobody would think.”

“They should. When I ride through the aisles, all I think about is junk food. And you know why? Because I’m as helpless as the fat and the ones crippled by terrible diseases.”

He still walked the dog even after she began to use a cane. Before that she’d used a walker. Before that, the scooter, and before all of those, she’d sat in a wheelchair after a few weeks in a hospital bed.

He walked it in the morning, over lunch, after work, in the evening. With a leash. With it tugging and sniffing and tangling itself around his legs as it circled.

When they were alone in his apartment, his mother barely spoke, but when Julia arrived, his mother adopted her cheery voice, the one with a forced

laugh at the end of every sentence like a punctuation mark for dishonesty. He listened to his clients at work and discovered they often spoke in that same voice, the one that made everything seem like a lie.

His mother read a lot. “If I start watching television, I won’t be able to stop,” she said. She read stack of memoirs, using the library’s interlibrary loan. “There’s so much misery,” she said each time he asked what a book was about. “It’s reassuring.” She didn’t laugh when she said this.

Julia drove her to her rehab sessions and read celebrity-filled magazines for an hour before helping her back to the car.

The jeep driver, he thought, must have money, or he’d have been arrested and held until making bail. Everything had been open and shut for more than a year, but the lab work hadn’t yet been completed. His own job paid well. If he was arrested, he might be someone the police would protect.

In movies about revenge, it was always life or death, other goals not exciting enough for people to watch. “That’s what happens every day to everybody. Nobody will pay to watch a story they’re already in,” his mother said.

“Hit and run doesn’t happen every day,” he said.

“It doesn’t take a car,” she said. “That driver, it’s like he was crippled already, and it didn’t change him. It’s like a birth defect with him.”

The jeep, Grace had told him, was garaged two miles from where the driver lived. She said that driver kept an old Chevy in his apartment parking lot, that he drove it to the garage, always on sunny days or clear nights, when he wanted to use the jeep. He thought that would make what he had to do easier. So many things in a garage that burn and explode, but he needed that jeep to live as evidence. So many ways fire could start so far from home, maybe enough reason an investigation would go nowhere. It would be like interest on a debt. He was a banker. Sin could be compounded, too.

He had always been afraid of fire, insisting on nothing but electric stoves, but he researched and took care. The old Chevy burned. Now that jeep would be exposed. Now that prick would know. The police he expected never knocked on his door, incompetent or approving.

The fire, when it was reported in the newspaper, sounded petty. It felt like a sprained ankle that would heal. There was insurance. Inconvenience was the losing side of some poorly thought out trade agreement.

Because his mother didn’t read the newspaper or watch television, he tried to imagine how Julia had described the damage over dinner somewhere, whether his mother had been excited or simply nodded before taking a sip of wine.

He began running, something he hadn’t done since college, starting with a ten-minute mile, a jog, really. He reached two miles in sixteen minutes, but the increments of improvement had become so small he’d stopped timing himself.

Using a cane, his mother took short walks with the dog. He watched the retriever settle into the slow pace up the street and back. He took photos with his phone. Traffic passed. The dog paced itself exactly to her right, closer to the street, a gentleman according to the history of manners and ancient sloppy streets.

Even if there wasn't a full load, he did his laundry every Saturday. He folded everything neatly and laid it in drawers. He shelved groceries as soon as he brought them into the apartment. He hung his jackets up and closed the closet door, ran the dishwasher and emptied it an hour after it finished running. He replaced CD and DVD cases exactly where he had taken them from. He put the newspaper into recycling just before going to bed. "I have maid service," his mother said, laughing. When his expression didn't change, she said, "I appreciate you trying."

Julia took his mother to dinner every Thursday. Each time his mother came home chatty from a few glasses of wine. "She's such a dear," she said.

Julia told him, "Think of it as your night off" until he wanted to scream at her. Every Thursday he ate chips and dip while he drank beer, putting all of the empty cans except two into the dumpster behind the apartment house. He left those two in the recycling bin beside the sink for his mother to notice.

His mother stopped going to rehab and did her exercises at home. For the three months before the second anniversary, she talked about moving "back where she belonged."

He'd never been in a fight, had never even thrown a punch, but now he'd fished his old metal baseball bat out of an oversized cardboard box he kept stored in the laundry room. He hefted it a few times and stuffed it halfway back in, but he began to study the anatomy of knees, how best to shatter a kneecap or destroy something equally crucial to walking normally.

He came across dozens of references to assault with a deadly weapon, remembering the phrase from television cop shows. In a couple of episodes, the weapons had been the fists of trained fighters. The only assault on a set of knees he found was the Tonya Harding and Nancy Kerrigan case, and Kerrigan had skated in the Olympics anyway. Crippling would take some doing. He had to be more thorough than the idiot who'd smacked Kerrigan and ran off before finishing the job.

The lawyer had long ago stopped calling. If it comes, justice is a miracle, his mother told him. She worked part-time now. From his apartment. She didn't have to stand for hours. Or sit for long.

One Thursday evening, his mother out again with Julia, he waited in the parking lot where the jeep driver kept his replacement car that he didn't worry about being stolen, broken into, or splashed with mud. He checked his watch and lapsed into thinking about how he'd never learned to swim, afraid of water deeper than chest high. How the nearby river, from time to time, coughed up a body, what accident might account for it if another year passed

without a lab report.

While he checked his watch for the fourth time, something rapped on the passenger-side window. A policeman he thought, panicked, but the door opened and his mother dropped onto the passenger seat with a soft thud, her cane striking the dashboard and falling from her hand. A set of headlights beamed on behind him, and his mother said, "Julia, the stealth driver." She picked up the metal bat, turning it over in her hands as if they were a lathe. "You used to be so careful about putting everything away exactly in its place that I thought you might have a problem with the OCD."

"I was like eight years-old then."

"This can't do anything like the damage a car can do unless you expect to bash his head with it," she said.

"Just his knees," he said.

"I thought as much," she said, "but that's enough now, the being here, the bat."

"It won't be enough even with."

"Julia told me about your love for Leviticus. You know they cribbed all that from Hammurabi, the eye-for-an-eye thing."

"Or everybody, no matter where they live, knows it's the way it should be."

"Maybe, but just remember that all those old timers who talked about God's will and justice, they only took it seriously when the victim was a man, and even then, the injured guy needed to have money."

"Times change," he said, and she tapped his thigh with the bat.

"I've been counting empty slots in your beer cases," she said. "What do you eat with all those ones you dump somewhere? Delivered pizza? The boxes tossed somewhere? You haven't cooked for yourself on Thursdays since forever."

"Bean dip. Salsa."

"And the chip bags?"

"Always with the bottles."

"Help me move," she said, and for a second, he thought she had hurt herself dropping into the car seat. "There's an opening in the same apartment building I lived in, the ground floor."

"Perfect," he said.

"Better, at least," she said, and lightly poked his ribs, smiling, and whether or not that was a reprimand or a thank-you, it hovered between them until she dropped the bat and steadied herself, pushing against the door, then to her feet, taking one barely-aided step, then two, before leaning on the cane and turning back to face him. "You know," she said, "a man like that one would say he was within his rights to beat you to death with that bat if he came up on you and took it. He'd make himself a martyr." She turned again and hobbled two steps. "Think on that," she said, not turning this time. When he did, he thought his mother had told Julia to call that driver and keep him busy until they drifted into the lot with headlights extinguished. He might ask her, a few days from now, as he carried her things into the new apartment.

The newspaper didn't mention his mother for the second anniversary. A week later, when she was rushed to the hospital for surgery while he was at work, it was Julia who told him. "Your Mom said, 'See you on the other side of this.'"

"They're fixing the kidneys? Why now?"

"It's more than that."

"How much more?"

"That's what the surgery is for."

He visited for three days. One kidney had been removed. The other, the doctor said, would be monitored. Dialysis was a possibility. His mother seemed lethargic. She seemed to pant rather than breathe. Her blood pressure, the doctor said, was troublesome.

During the fourth afternoon, he was at work, when Julia called. His mother was receiving antibiotics. There was more possible surgery. Sepsis, she said, but didn't elaborate.

By the time he arrived, his mother was dead. "They waited too long to treat her," Julia said.

The doctor started with "Her body attacked itself." He said "compromised" and "weakened" and "all we could."

That night, he read about the men in Antarctica. They had nearly died for something shared with a very few. How his mother had seen things, he thought, trying to go back to what her normal had become. Not satisfaction, but acknowledgement, what, now that she was gone, he could not live with.

He waited until after the funeral. He waited through the newspaper coverage. He waited one more day before knocking on the murdering prick's door.

"Sentencing you in person," he said. "Making sure you heard first hand."

"You had your fun already. Any more, and it's you that does time."

"Eye for an eye," he said. He kept his hands in his jacket pockets and his eyes fixed on the prick's face, but nothing changed. His color stayed the same. His breathing was steady. He looked undamaged, or, at the very least, expertly repaired.

"Not if you plan it. Not pre-meditated."

"Condolences," he said. the word spilling so easily from his mouth that it sounded as if it came from such a faraway place he might not even have said it aloud.

"I don't get you."

"Think 'pre-need,'" he said, and then, just for an instant, as he pulled his hands from his pockets, the prick's eyes flicked back and forth to each fist, his mouth opening slightly before he straightened as if he'd noticed a scratch that was small, yet so deep that it couldn't be rubbed out without delicate, expensive reconstruction, let alone his thumb.

Maxine Chernoff

Daybook

Hours hold the brackish
understory,
the letters of refusal,
(though fire will spread/despite your inclinations).
In brine, a harvest of krill
his never spent notion : to be a water farmer,
knee-deep in thistle.

He took his cure, mixed love
with blandishments:
checked his mortality at the door,
stayed to read the candled letter,
the windswept book of resolves.
Would he outlast this life
by tricking language?
(Often he blushed
at the strangeness of engines:)

*lion of letters loop of lilies
the bird that swallowed
the cat/circadian sway
of science, its mirrors,
its cyphers
/a sand crab tossed
in a porcelain bowl*

(You remember what sins
you commit / then write shell,
that which contains
a softer self.)

If words are final,
he stands poised: what small
muscles move under his left eye,
what hands signs off, as if
shuttering a house for winter.

Daybook

1.

unmoved
by our will/choked by sun &
vessels holding water,
under gray adjectives

2.

lion of letters loop of lilies
the bird that swallowed
the cat
circadian sway
of science, its mirrors,
its cyphers,
a sand crab
tossed in a porcelain bowl

3.

remember what sins
you commit
then write *shell*, that which contains
a softer self

4.

Stories hold the brackish
Understory
The letters of refusal
(But fire will spread/despise your inclinations)

5.

In brine, a harvest of krill
his never spent notion : to be a water farmer
knee-deep in thistle

6.
He took his cure; mixed love with
 blandishments:
 checked his mortality at the door

7.
stayed to read the candled letter,
 the windswept book of
 resolves

8.
Who will outlast his life
 Noun + seven
we perform the exercise
 to surprise language
 often we blush
at the strangeness of engines

9.
stars
 televise a future
unbidden and restless
 for season's shrug,
sung like a tin roof
 under the smallest lens
 of rain

David Dodd Lee

SEASONAL

I'm happy to report I
don't think I suffer from SAD,
though I fell on some steps this

morning, tossing my coffee
into the face of a snow-
flake, which turned dark as it fell.

I made a peninsula on
the snowpack, the finger lakes
of my accident. Further,

I bruised my hip. I could have
come inside (I was in my own
front yard!) and shone a blazing

light on my face, but I just
kicked the wall like a regular
person. Refilled my fucking cup.

David Dodd Lee

THE PANDEMIC: A MINI DOCUMENTARY

I'm using some sticks, a large piece of drywall. By July, 2020 I had taken to watching a muskrat through a pair of binoculars as a way to control my blood pressure. Then I started boiling water. It soothed me, frankly, all that leaping, each little cry for help. I take the stairs to the basement and I go behind the partition and come out in my moth outfit. I prop the small house front up with sticks, sit down in its shadow. A forest populates the spaces opening all around me. Now I forget about boiling water. I live with a family of camel crickets. They're beatniks. They make me feel sane again. They form a little group. One lights a tiny cigarette. They start playing jazz.

David Dodd Lee

TWO PEOPLE

We're stranded, and they
surround us, but it snows
and we're saved. The lights

go down by midnight.
The tea comes in a yellow
box. The house is still tall.

The spiders in the basement
rock along walls set
into motion. I leave her

in the bed. There are two
crickets under the
television. I take water

and sit on the couch under
the ceiling fan and watch
them coming closer.

As in the beginning, darkness
surrounds us. Even our warm
shoulders, our bodies

hurting nicely in the
house, cool off, and the
lengthening nights feel

like something to cherish
and hold onto. No one
will need to explain come morning.

David Dodd Lee

PROZAC

I turned onto Merrill Street,
noticed how loud my blinker was,
looked out the window at trees,
a parked mail truck,
a squirrel walking down the middle of the sidewalk.

David Dodd Lee

ATAVISTIC

If you possess any metal, say, a bolt introduced into
the architecture of the knee, it's not also true that the rain

will stop
falling. There, she (or he) fell, but no sentence is completed

in the face of the inhuman. Left to decay in the wind, fire
roaring in an oven, but no: the birches are poetic with their

watercolor-leaves . . .
Mostly animals carry the real bones to their dens, cover the entrances

with branches, leave the hardware shining in the yellow grass.
My neighbor's right hip has been recalled, big titanium shovel with its

chest puffed
out. They had to swap it for another. It was a Depuy hip recall . . .

Thunderheads rumbled, churning with ice crystals, during her
surgery. Standing in the freezing rain like a gunslinger in the slow

dark onslaught
of winter, lunging down the now slick hill, new face a blur . . .

David Dodd Lee

AT THIS RATE I'LL NEVER MAKE IT TO THE PAINT STORE

My keys, my keys—I can't find my goddamned keys
There they are!

As usual I've left the right front burner on again
We're nothing but facilitators! one of my colleagues says

as I watch it snow through the window behind her
AAA keeps trying to sell me life insurance

Keepers

If no one had invented the personal alarm device, whenever you wanted to concentrate on something other than tracking minutes, you'd hire a human timekeeper.

Depending on your deadline's proximity, your keeper might have enough margin to stroll away from you, get a haircut, work out at the gym, pick up a few groceries, all the while calculating the distance between the two of you against the remaining seconds, or maybe they'd stick close, dogging your footsteps, grabbing the adjacent table at Starbucks, following you home to lean against the bathroom door while you flossed your teeth.

Though timekeeping would be considered an honorable profession, the burnout rate would be so high that perhaps we should imagine this work as reciprocal instead—you'd keep time for me one day, I'd keep time for you the next, a connection more intense than even the most enmeshed love affair.

The seeds for this arrangement would be sown as adolescents first start to become responsible for their schedules, awkwardly drifting together in shy experimental pairings, practice runs for the lifelong commitment formalized at the age of majority. During this period, each teen would try out various ways of announcing "time's up" to their partner: mime-style with dramatic gesticulations culminating in a full-body bow, for instance, or musically, with a brief and sprightly passage played on their pocket ocarina, or by the classic three-tap pattern on the left shoulder blade... Later in life, of course, this work would become increasingly subtle; even if you could gaze unblinkingly for weeks at an aged pair, you wouldn't be able to observe the announcement since it would be so intricately woven into the pattern of their shared interactions that it could be recognized only from within the relationship—a particular kind of sigh, a slight shift in vocal tone, a slow and singular glance.

Despite the theoretically inviolable nature of the adult dyad, however, every now and then a particular pairing might fray or even snap. Members would show up to appointments asynchronously or miss them

altogether, Library books would accrue exorbitant overdue fines, sleep and meal patterns would become erratic, the skin would grow patchy, the eyes dim, the molars loose, and tell-tale dark spots would appear under the tongue. In such cases, only the most rigidly conservative citizens would even think of denying these sufferers a swift temporal divorce in order to seek more compatible partners.

Even more rare would be those individuals born with their own internal clockwork, a measurement-sense so finely calibrated that they'd be able to stand alone. Though a few people would be jealous—oh, the insouciance, the independence!—most would pity those anomics for being deprived of a dyadic connection's emotional intensities and tonal layers. *How flat, how flavorless their lives must be*, some neighbors would whisper, and *How selfish!* others would murmur despite treating them with elaborate courtesy since that's what civilized persons do, all the while wondering whether the mavericks are actually human: it's unnatural to survive on a steady diet of time without intimacy.

Simon Perchik

*

You don't know what to listen for, this time
alone as if these graves age differently
begin then weaken from their stillness

though filled with the same mountainside
that no longer rises—there's a silence here
where there was none before

and that's enough, tells each headstone
to lay down beside its tears
be warned, not sure what's a bridge

what's not when hands cling to each other
no knowing the thud was the river
with no one to hear it leaving you.

Jake Bauer

CLOUD TALKS TO TREE

*Cloud has big friends.
Tree naps in its own deer blind.*

What you thought

you wanted was
an idea.

Some morsel for the mouth.

I'm not even hungry; I just don't want pleasure
to end.

Jake Bauer

WILL RON EVER IMPROVE HIS ROCK GARDEN?

is an example of the kind of question I am.
At least, that's the theory
Harriet shies toward. Where is the safe?
is another example, I realize
when Harriet asks for the third time
at the outdoor table at the clam shack
while we are re-christening
our alliance. It's a theory
that when you step into it
has the aura of a plush minivan,
Harriet explains. Then she sips
her strawberry-lemon soda.
She chews with the same style
I have observed librarians chewing.
Very rapid jaw movement
once the food has arrived at the teeth.
The only place the minivan will drive you
is to the pawn shop, Harriet continues
now that she has swallowed her scallops.
She continues in a fashion
that makes you wonder if you are
actually on a zipline. The world
feels very far from your feet. My clams,
I can see without touching them,
are cooling down fast. Nearly
at light speed, it seems, but they are not
getting any closer to my mouth.
I know, I know, I say with that mouth,
when you pull up to the pawn shop,
do not thank the driver. Just exit
the vehicle, walk inside, and purchase
the golden watch—real cool and
nonchalant-like, but also with
a convincing air of confidence, I say,
barreling through the instructions.
Harriet cranes across the table
to position her mouth right beside
my ear. What the fuck are you
talking about, she says, announcing
the words as if they were floating
lily pads and she the solemn frog
hopping from one to the next.

Jake Bauer

ARBOR DAY

The pool of miracles
you get to drink
from at birth only
made Sima thirstier.
She wanted to down
that unexpectedly
sultry look the two
strangers shared
at the planetarium.
She wanted to bathe
in the cautious
thoughts lifeguards
must have on their
ways home. She
announced to the
bowl of raspberries,
I am definitely
unsatisfied just licking
your condensation.
Nevertheless, thanks
for being the liquid
you are, she thought,
as she popped one
into her mouth,
wishing it was hotter,
like the miracle
she knew she'd
always hoped
to swallow. Like
a high fever. Or
perhaps, actually,
more like a volcano,
she thought. She
had, once, after
taking a plane, a boat,
and a bus, ridden
a bike seven miles
to try to drink one.
It turned out to be
a small, dumpy thing,
not even worth a sip.
The only other

visitor was a little
boy who was playing
with a broken yoyo.
Sima left in tears—
rode the bike, the bus,
the boat, the plane.
When she got home,
she found a tiny
grave dug in her
front yard. Only big
enough for an insect,
really. She put a
penny in it. She put
in some rock music.
She lied to it and
said she was a tender
of orchards, a drinker
of apricot tea, a dancer,
a time machine,
a clockmaker. But
the tiny grave could
see the truth. It said
things back to her
like Fear is nature's
artificial flavoring
and other gibberish
it had heard other
holes say to other
humans. Those
other humans had
always eventually
wandered off, but
not Sima. She sat
down in the damp
grass with her back
against a stump.
She crossed her
legs at the ankles.
Without really
thinking about it,
she licked her thumb.

Eric Schwerer

Did you hear the one about the white man who

was positioned next to the only Black man
given a place to stand in the gallery
behind ex-prez D. Trump's stage, the Black man fist-
pumping in wrap sunglasses with BLACKS for TRUMP
blazoned on his white t-shirt in a sea of
otherwise red shirts with white faces? Google
"Oct 10 2021 Iowa Trump
Rally Fuckery." You saw no eye contact?
And that's gotta be a good thing, right? I mean,
seen the Russian meme of Hillary in dreads?
Omar how about Omar Omar she's in
there too she doesn't like Israel too much
does she huh didn't she marry her brother
right she came in she married her brother this
is nice don't worry about anything it
was so sad to watch I watched it was so sad
remember these guys with the horses great guys
it wasn't a whip by the way they didn't
have whips if I had dead people voting I
wouldn't talk Kamala Harris *Ka-mal-a*
she's doing great at the border don't you think
I win Alabama love Alabama
I win Alabama but Georgia that's not
how it works it's sad look Philadelphia
and don't forget Stacey Abrams maybe she'll
be running for president hey I'd like that
but Philadelphia more votes than voting
oh America remember remember
it was supposed to be something a little
different than make america great it's just
america's not great now so we're using
make america great again because we
already well I had a whole big deal it
was all good you know it was going so great
again it's gotta be make america
great again again, right? Here's the vendor's list:
peanut butter squealer; deep fried butter sticks;
some spam and grape jam in tortillas again.

Eric Shwerer

Is a drunk white girl someone we even need

to use in comparison as she thrashes
open scissors on a vanity covered
with her dead mom's things? Or that drunk white woman
not quite blackout falling drunk on some man not
quite blindly fawning over him online that guy
who goes on and on about her each night she
goes out to the bar he's always at? *Strangers*.
I shared with everyone a love for sort of
just falling over. That's all it is those first times.
Right? Just finding ourselves on our hands and knees,
laughing uncontrollably? Was that just me?
Suddenly euphoric under a moonless
sky? Stars stuck through some night's black satin? Madly
in love outside the *Deadwood Tavern*? Look, there's
a young woman beside us. She's lifting her
arms in the air, twirling. ~~Next, I remember...~~

Stupid Girl

I wandered the rows of tombstones in an Irish graveyard/Irish people underfoot/I say, *the earth is my home* under my breath/repeat it five times or until I'm convinced/I missed my flight back to bumble-fuck Pennsylvania/had nothing on the itinerary having eaten the stiff peaked meringues/crawled the stiff peaked mountain/I can't do anything right but I'm not gonna cry about it/I should've set the alarm/shouldn't have poured the vodka into the lemonade/I thought about staying/starting over in that new country where I could be anything/I could hear the dead wheezing inside their boxes/*stupid girl!*/A stranger/visiting his mother perhaps/no flowers/ but slumped in the fog/noticed the camera slung from my shoulder/ Asked if I wanted a photo of myself there/to commemorate being alive/ I guessed/ He held it to his eye/shooed me back/further from the frame/*Beautiful*, he said/Clicked/then turned on his heel and ran/I thought it was romantic/this last image of me absorbed into the fog/trapped in a silver box /bouncing off the hip of a thief / the dead raucous with laughter.

George Looney

A Symphony No One Can Hear

To pretend the maestro conducting the invisible
orchestra in the corner doesn't have a prayer
of getting the right music

out of the tone-deaf musicians who just want
to pretend the instruments they're stroking
or blowing into and fingering

are yearned-for lovers sighing with pleasure

is to pretend there could be a music
that could be said to be right. All this pretense

is almost enough to keep anyone from noticing
that the maestro himself

and the arrogance of that baton of his

is a matter of pretending, too. So, fit

the French horn's mouthpiece to your turgid lips
and blow a theme meant to celebrate

the hope that any of this leads to
something akin to the kind of answer
that makes it easier for all of us

to accept that which we've come to believe

is not pretend, but real, even if what is
real may be as much a question of pretense

as this inaudible music performed
by musicians who are only hoping
this symphony just might be

enough to get everyone up and dancing,

clinging tight to one another

as if what they hear is a ballad played adagio

or swinging one another's bodies

to and fro, the music a Spanish tango
played allegro. All that matters is

the music and the dancing stay in sync.

Point of No Return, 1969

They were dropped off for just five minutes at a gas station outside of Mendocino, a Sinclair with the green dinosaur. It was at night and the coast highway was spooky and deserted. She liked a service station at night and she wasn't alone — there were six of them, five girls and the dude who was driving. They couldn't all fit in the cab so she and Malfie rode in the bed most of the way. She didn't know the others too well and the dude Bobby was with the chick who sat middle: Gail was her name. She was all right, but she and Bobby beefed constantly, so it was really better to ride outside though the wind was hot and violent. It beat you up, turned your hair into a sweaty, tangled dandelion that stuck out a mile. But that was not why Malfie started calling her Downie. That was an inside joke with multiple meanings. The fifth girl was scary, plain and simple. They called her lots of things, but when she shook hands she had a man's grip and said "It's Catherine."

She didn't seem to be from there — or from anywhere in America. She looked at things like they didn't impress her as mattering or having any permanence.

They were standing there now in the hot highway wind and wondering where the truck went. It was red, beat-up, chalky-looking, with big bald racing tires. He maybe planned to take it to Mexico, race Baja. Guys always had these big plans and you were just part, or not. She and Mal came out from Denver because Downie almost had a baby but then she lost it. Her mom thought she was too young and stupid and that God knew it. Downie was not bitter about it, but didn't like talking about how it felt to be pregnant. Mal had a friend in LA and told Downie she wasn't hanging around the old stomping ground in Arvada, where they were in marching band and played sax and flute, respectively. Their parents were both divorced since they were fourteen. They were friends for these reasons, but maybe not that many more. Downie had run away before to California with her baby's father, but it wasn't like people said at all, used syringes all over the beach, and rubbers. Mal knew people in LA, and one was a digger, so that would be how they'd eat. They were simply leaving home for good, and each was the other's backup, in case.

But tonight they were just looking for a bathroom — and the dude, who they secretly called Bummer Bob behind his back, used the phone out front meanwhile, having a real heavy exchange with somebody — then he yelled at them to hurry the hell up, they had to get going. Gail and Catherine were already in the cab. She and Mal rushed into the can and peed fast. If there was a dude, he was always rushing you. You were wasting his precious time on the Earth with your female bullshit. But far as she could see, there always had to be a dude, at least one, who you would be slowing down, forever. That's how it was. She was going away because there weren't really a lot of choices back home. You just hoped the guy wasn't an evil shit — but they all could be at times, and all in a hurry to get somewhere. Catherine knew a lot of people up and down the coast, and she and Gail and Bob and a girl named Lulu tooled around up and down Highway One as a way of life,

having adventures, meeting new people, beefing with each other, but also grooving sometimes. You washed in the ocean or in gas stations. Once they found a grocery sack on a picnic bench and in it was a quart of milk, loaf of bread, bologna and a box of sugared donuts. So God was good and the sun was shining every day. You got browner and smelled like coconut lotion, like a macaroon. "Who was he talking to on the phone like that?" she asked Mal while hovering with her jeans down over the toilet.

"I dunno but it sounded heavy. Bob wants us to go to Mendocino, maybe. You know he's an actor, right? He's been in movies and that's the money that bought our gas. That was just about all of it, too. I was hoping they might have some acid. Now we're in for it because he's talking about four other chicks in trouble up the road, names I never heard til today. Susan and a Mary and a Pat and God knows who else. That will make nine, and him — and Gail is about to spit tacks as is. She thinks he's got his eye on Catherine."

Downie knew better, that who he was really digging on was Mal. Downie personally hated being herself on earth so far because it seemed like nothing ever worked out to hers or anyone's advantage or satisfaction. She was only going to do this for awhile, but after that she had no definite plans. Her parents were quietly aghast at her announcement to go with Mal to San Fran, which pissed her off to no end since it was okay for them to call it quits, while everyone else was just expected to go on and on. "I no longer believe that any of this shit you're talking to me about all the time is real," she told her mom at their last sit down. "Nothing's real. This isn't a home. We aren't a family. I need to find something that's mine that has nothing to do with this place. So just get out of my way. I feel like I'm dying here!" She made these absolute statements for the first time in her life and it felt wonderful and liberating. She just didn't know where any of it would lead. She'd never been to San Fran, though she'd sung that song about wearing some flowers in your hair.

Tonight she didn't even know what they would find up in Mendocino, only that it was near the water, and Mal was sure they'd score either weed or acid, the latter of which she'd never tried. They finished in the bathroom and burst out onto the warm brightly lit asphalt. Bobby was gassing up the truck in the farthest lane near the highway. "I saw a candy machine. It's cheaper than inside," Mal said.

It wasn't her name. She just didn't like it if people called her Amalfina. And "Fina" was a gas station. But Malfie didn't really fit and also felt funny on her tongue. They found the machine. "Hurry, I don't want to get left," she pleaded. Mal took her time, running her finger along the knobs, then finally yanking one. You had to jerk hard and fast or the candy got hung up inside. She got one, then a second, but her hand slipped on the red knob and the third time nothing came out and the quarter fell inside. Mal shoulder-checked the mirrored front and yelled motherfucker.

The truck was no longer at the pump. She panned the whole lit blacktop for it. Mal stooped to pick up the bars from the cement, already sticky from dropped ice cream and splashed strawberry soft drinks. Now Mal made her own survey of the pumps and jumped up to look inside the checkout. Downie was suddenly aware of not wearing much at all, a halter top, no bra, jeans, underwear, flip flops. Mal only wore shorts. It was windy, gusting, and sand stung you when you stood away from the building. Nobody in the world knew where she was except Mal. They were an odd couple because Mal was older and never been pregnant or to LA. Downie'd fucked only a few times before it happened and found it sort of terrifying and overwhelming. Guys wanted to do everything too fast and without talking about it first, what it might feel like. Like somebody murdering you, like someone a lot bigger than you crushing you into a floor or backseat and not asking how well you could breathe or if you were afraid. And you couldn't make him stop after a certain point of no return, because he was no longer able to. That was sort of how she imagined people wound up committing murder, because they lost control. She was thinking in absolutes ever since leaving Arvada. She felt so pure, so free, so right walking out of that house, and recalled thinking that this was what life was supposed to be. Her mother's life seemed like house arrest. She never seemed happy, was always looking off toward the foothills, distracted, and her answers were vague. She wasn't sure you should be doing this or that. She didn't really like how it looked if you wore this or that. After she got pregnant, Mal's mom didn't want her going over to Downie's, like it was a contagion.

Mal now froze on the sidewalk and planted hands on hips. "Shit, they left us," she said. It seemed profound the way she said it. And important.

"Maybe they went around back or something," Downie said.

"No, I bet it was Gail. Or Catherine. I bet they distracted him so he would forget to check if we got back in. He's their dude and they can't risk a problem."

Downie waited in stunned fascination for the meaning of the revelation to hit her. Left. They'd been left. Forgotten. Not remembered. Not considered essential. Not real. Not people. Nameless, faceless. Non-existent.

"Are they coming back?" she said in a stupid small whiny voice. So stupid. Retarded. She was picturing the call home. It was hundreds of miles. They'd both be angry. And might tell her to find her own way.

"I have no idea," Mal said. "I really wasn't expecting this. But I got a bad feeling when I was talking to Catherine. You know her family was in the war, the one in Germany. Her grandparents got gassed in a death camp. Her parents were in the resistance and they got killed and only she got away. I've never talked to somebody like that before, not from here, no family, no reason to stay anywhere, and no place to go if she's ever in trouble."

They walked out to stand next to the station signage and watch the lights from cars miles in the distance, sometimes seeming to come closer only to

change vectors and move off at an angle. "What if they don't come back?" Downie asked. The words were simple, but what she really meant was, what am I supposed to do with my life if they don't come back? Does that mean I was never supposed to say those strong, meaningful, final words to my mother? Am I a fool already, stranded in the middle of nowhere? In the dark? Without a cent to my name? And Downie, who in the hell are you, anyway?

"The desert is awfully funny at night," she said, watching another set of headlights moving on a line seeming to correspond with no known physical plane and drifting off to the left, then the right. God didn't much care about her life, of that she'd been quite sure for a long time. Her mother got angry at her just for asking questions about why they couldn't have a hi-fi and a few records? Mal now chewed a nail and looked edgy, scowling in frustration and kicking rocks. It felt like quite a moment and Downie wanted something to happen or at least be acknowledged to not be happening. It was like when she was ready for the guy to get on her and he was talking about learning to fly airplanes or wanting to open his own restaurant. Nothing really mattered to her at such times except the thrusting, that it start and keep going a long time because it was the only thing she really liked about her life. Then crying about that alone, later. She felt the constant itch to be in love, too, and an anger at the stupidity of everything at home, like the American Beauty patterned dishes and matching silverware and sheets and towels.

She thought some about Bobby who left them. He'd been in a porno and one with Catherine in it, too, though they must not have done it. Or maybe that was why Gail was such a pain all the time. She probably refused to watch it. "What do you want to do?" she asked Mal, and the question sounded so strange. It sounded so big in the dark inside the blowing sand and the headlights going every way except toward them. What a question to ask a girl who was a lot like her, out here trying to make a fresh start and do the right things this time. Downie told her how it felt to go through a miscarriage and with your mother on your case about every little point in your faulty decision-making. "You find out exactly how it feels to fail to be the person everyone needs and insists that you be," Downie said. She understood that feeling as fully as it was possible to do so. Mal never answered her question, but only took out the money in her pocket, a little over three dollars by their count. There were choices. They could call home. Downie pictured that scene and what awaited them both. It was sobering because of how small their houses were, two tiny bedrooms, one bathroom, a sleeping porch which her parents used as a bedroom where they never ever did it because there was no privacy, and a kitchen, a living room barely big enough for a couch. They would take them back there. Mal's house was the same, just flipped the other way, with shared driveway and carport.

But on the other hand, Bobby wanted to go to Mendocino because his friends were in jail, and he'd been talking about what they did. One of

them gave acid to a high school kid and his mother came to the house while her fifteen year old was flipping out and the walls were lava and animals kept sticking their heads out to bite him and he was screaming. Now all the good friends were sitting in a cell for endangering a minor and Bobby was dispatched by the leader to do something, though they barely even had money to buy gas to get that far.

Downie now turned the question back on herself like a loaded gun and looked directly down its barrel at the dull blunt bullet-head. Though there was also a Door Number Three like on *Let's Make A Deal*. Behind this door was a friend who said they could come to LA and live with her and her man for a little while, a few weeks, just until they "found something." They could call her and she could probably drive up, but would not be happy by then to see them. After all, they'd gone with Bobby because they never "found something" in LA. Being with the diggers was like being in a cult. So Bobby was the thing they found, and was an actor with movies. Also she overheard Catherine saying privately how, if Bobby proved to be full of shit, she knew another guy, a better guy who was recording songs with The Beach Boys, and they could ditch this scene and maybe go live with him at his big house in Palisade Pines, owned by a super rich drummer for the band.

Downie didn't know how any of that sounded. She asked Mal again "What. Do you want. To do?" She said again that she didn't know. Downie was at a funny crossroads in her life where she just hated how everything sounded and felt. She hadn't felt good in ever so long and didn't want the others to know. Because usually when you told people you were having a problem they started to look at you like you'd developed a festering wound and they could smell it.

The longer the truck was gone, the more carefully she began to watch herself to see how this spot in her, this shadowy presence, would grow, shrink or change. It felt too soon to be pushed into these choices that could affect the course of your whole life. You asked yourself, do I get in this truck or do I not get in this truck? One of the people is a friend, but not the others, and one glowers at you, and one — the shot caller — probably wants to have you, but maybe just once.

What she wanted was to not be in this position. Though maybe the choice was made for her already. In which case, she could just go home and her mom would look at her sort of bleary-eyed and say "Well, since you're here anyway, you might as well change your little brother. He's been crying a while and I have washer loads to switch." She would smell like bourbon from ten a.m. til bedtime and pass out on the couch with the tv showing a test pattern. Her dad used to come home at 2 a.m., smelling like jet fuel. Downie tried to trace the origins of this shadow that was dogging her, back into the distant horror of childhood, that feeling of longing for money and some way to get more that sent her dad out the door in the dark, and home in the dark. He was a restless sleeper calling out for help, help,

someone please help. He was like somebody who'd been in war, but he never served. He was just a sensitive, a musician who should've gone along the day his bandmates hit the road. But Lane — her mother — was already pregnant with her. Well — it was just nuts how people didn't do what life clearly called out for them to do. When you heard the call, you needed to run straight out the door before anybody could say a word about where you belonged or what you were obligated to do. Run Away from each other was what her folks should have done the first time they did it, without so much as a thank you or a backward glance.

Mal now looked down on her carefully, seeming to see her again. "You feel okay? You seem kind of — I don't know — worried. There's not much to worry about out here. Nobody's paying any attention to us. They figure we've got it handled — and if we don't they'd rather not know."

"The world shouldn't be like that," she said, growing chilly with the shadow starting to spread and crawl up her throat where it might try to peek out and scare Mal. It didn't trust anything it was hearing and wanted her to begin running. "We should want to know if someone's in trouble."

"We aren't in trouble — not yet." Mal just seemed to know. You saw it in her face — she believed the world was not going to get her. She began to talk in an offhand way about some sort of ranch Catherine had talked about where they might crash. Though if it was a commune as they feared it might be, the women would just run them off, since they could offer nothing and were unattached. "Though if it's just a few dudes, or just one, that might be okay if we pull our weight," she said. "But you can't pull one of your freakout breakdown trips, D."

Downie pulled away and started walking backward. "I'm not going to freak. That happened once."

"It's happened twice and it's why I stopped doing drugs with you. You skitzed out on me and if you ever do it again I'm calling people to come get you."

It had been fifteen minutes. She was thinking I'm always going to remember this, this stretch of highway, this skunky colitas stench, this oasis of cold light, a smell of fuel and asphalt, and the fight that ended this bullshit flight away from what will turn out to be my goddamned fate. She looked at Mal and wondered if she should feel grief at losing a baby and what it would feel like if such a feeling ever caught up to her.

"Wait — don't you want to hear any more about the guy? They say he isn't like anyone they've ever met."

"What's that mean? What's his name?"

"Charlie. It's Charlie."

She was about to ask what was so special about someone named Charlie. Then they were blasted by headlights.

Cindy Savett

Cindy Speaks (IV)

On my tongue, murmurs of a sighting–

Still, Blue,
I flinch when
you lunge from my lips,

the air's spittle lodged in my throat –

this guttural clamoring,
I kick up the dirt where you have

not yet exhaled.

“Praise me,” you say. “I am the load.”

How it ends

After all of this, there is no guarantee.
Maybe when she comes for me,
she'll be in a hurry, maybe behind
schedule with the waiting room full,
and it will be like the flipping of a switch
— I'm here, then I'm not — or unplugging
an obsolete appliance — toaster or waffle iron
— or just the burning out of an old, incandescent
lightbulb — no flickering, no half-light.

It would serve me right, for trying to choose
something I can live with.

call sent to voicemail

i've been thinking about what you said.
anyway—things are going fine, i tracked
my steps and i've been averaging about
fifteen thousand a day which i guess still
isn't really enough when there's something
to see on every corner and every day is
a new maze that i can't seem to find my way
back from when i wander too far. they
don't always say please here like we try to
back home. to sound natural, i tell the barista,
vorrei un cappuccino, which means i'll have
a cappuccino, then try not to yell *per favore*.
i've been thinking about what you said and i
wish we were better at ignoring the thoughts
in our heads and at speaking to each other
with kindness. i really do love it here—though
it's so cold, i think i have early onset arthritis
or whatever makes your left knee stop bending,
but it still won't snow, and it seems everything
we thought we knew about it was imagined in
the states like meatballs and a one-to-one ratio
between young men and vespas, and time
somehow not being the same time, that it
might be more forgiving in a place as stunning
as this, haunting the same way for centuries,
but somehow i'm the one who feels like a ghost
here. i got lost limping to find the doctor
and thought about getting a tattoo: *non basta
una vita*. when i get back, i'll replace that glass
panel that cracked from the front door. three
months is definitely not enough. i'm still so
lucky so be here though, i know i
know—i've just left the grocery store and spent
hours trying to find the basics, translating
things i'm not sure we have words for. i'm
not as uncomfortable with not understanding
the language as i thought i might be. there's
something sort of freeing about not having
the responsibility to know the right words.
maybe one day we can come back here

together. you know, i finally found the eggs
on a shelf next to the cleaning supplies and
i'm not too sure what that means for my past
and future egg purchases, but i'll let you
know. did you know, here cashiers don't bag
your groceries, so if you just stand there
and wait for them, they'll point to your things
and say something that probably means,
what are you waiting for? anyway i
know you'll be getting up soon, and i know,
i know one voicemail is not enough but
i just wanted to call and say *i'm sorry.*

Claire Lyons

the point is in reaching anyway

Sappho said something like:
“How will my hands ever
touch the heavens?”
(Or, at least, that’s how I
thought it went. She said
a lot of things.)

What Sappho doesn’t know
is that thousands of years later
I was born with the soul
of a middle school boy who
jumps up to slap doorframes
and sometimes still asks God
to turn him into Superman.

Straight

There is a stretch of highway in Kansas
where the guy who was responsible for painting the line
down the middle of the road fell asleep and drove into a field instead.
It's not usually a problem to pass this spot in the daytime, although if you've
been following that white line in a hazy hypnosis, you could easily follow it into
the waist-high yellow fields as well, possibly righting yourself just in time
when the tires hit the gravel shoulder, but at night, this line will take you
straight off the road and into pitch-black oblivion. By the time the tall wheat spears
slap against your windshield, you've driven far enough off the road for your tires
to be mired in ankle-deep mud and thick, black fertilizer.
You're gonna have to get out and push, and quickly,
because there could be a semi barreling down that road, right behind you
someone equally unfamiliar with the this part of the state, this road
the dead-end that ends in furrows and swamp.

Every fall, when it's time to cut down the wheat, the tines of combines get caught
in things stranded motorists have left behind—watches, loose change, dead cell phones
bits of fender and taillight broken off, hazards of tailgating out here.
something small, like a quarter, won't stop the farm engines for long
but something larger, like a hubcap, or a whole tire,
or a desiccated body sprawled out for the crows
could put the equipment in the shop for days. Eventually, they say
that stretch of road will be fixed, but it's not a very important road
with not that much traffic, not compared to the 135 or the 81
so it could be years before anything actually happens.

Jonas Holdeman

Homage to Charles Wright

February 29 in the Delta, late afternoon, cardinal
rocking in the sinews of the dogwood, like misery
in a widow's neck, warm front blooming into something
like a welcome, something like the swirled fissure
of jonquils out back, resurrected too soon, or too late.

I've been reading *The Other Side of the River* again, "Homage to Cesare Pavese,"
wondering what happens when grief breaks its back
across the morning sky,

wondering what happens when forgiving everyone
and asking everyone's forgiveness is more

cruel than merciful, wondering *se si sono corretto, il Professore*,
when you say the poem is a self-portrait, always, no matter what mask
you take off and put back on.

You'd like the old Bote Mountain logging run that lumbers here
and again across Laurel Creek, south of Townsend, struggles up
to the Appalachian Trail, through hemlock and black
oak and ash, afternoon sun rattling spectrally
in the branches of the tulip tree, buds bloody as fists, before grasping
its knees at Spence Field, Thunderhead a thumb
smudge on the stiff, stone washed afternoon sky, Charles,
this time of year.

What's kept you, I ask myself,
from listening to what's still alive
on the ribbed sleeve of the evergreen,
from offering your heart to what's in plain
sight, from marveling at the hooves
of *Padreterno* kicking up at black night's star barn?

We were made to suffer the throwing off, the trample,
the wide-eyed terror, made to stoop again and again,
again to take up the bristled hemp, again to nicker in low tones, to coax Him
from the circle of shadow we cast.

You're the only Southerner who can't tell a story,

or so you said somewhere,

but if we are to believe anything, anything
short of a small mound in an endless plain of grass, the metaphysics
of the quotidian or a pleasant curve in the road just west of
White Pine, Tennessee, the Lombardy night, *Milano come una magnifica nave*,
Roma and not Roma and Roma again—

then we'll settle on just about two stories
we'll swear to be true:

that today is not what's left of yesterday, any more than tomorrow
is what's left of today, and that our last hope lies within
the edges of that charred frame, nowhere shadowed in diamonds,
nowhere deep, nowhere just below the surface.

The Prompt

An old guy sitting in a coffee shop is not interesting to watch unless... Unless what? That was the prompt in our high school English class, given to us by our teacher, who was sort of an old guy himself.

What could this old guy do that would be interesting? None of us had a clue. Our teacher prohibited violence or obscenity, broadly defined, so what was left?

After a few minutes of scribbling, we hadn't come up with much. One guy suggested that maybe the man had the power to make his table at the café levitate.

"Kind of interesting," our teacher said. He came out from behind his desk and stood in front of it. "But what then?"

"Maybe the man himself begins to levitate," someone else suggested.

We scribbled some more, and a few people read what they'd written. The man in the coffee shop floated around a bit, hovered around the ceiling, but didn't do anything particularly exciting.

Our teacher sighed. He looked tired. We didn't really know him well. He was just at our school on a one-semester assignment after another English teacher had quit halfway through the year. Our new teacher used to teach at a college, he'd told us once. He missed carrying his briefcase down flowered pathways. There were no flowered pathways at our school. His brown briefcase looked old and battered. I'd seen him at lunch at the teacher's table in the school cafeteria, but he was never talking to anyone, only looking into the distance as he methodically, diligently, ate his lunch, something out of a brown bag that he'd brought.

He cleared his throat. "What if he floats around the café and speaks honestly for the first time in years? Maybe no one listens, or they pretend not to listen, but up in the air he's hard to ignore."

We stared at him. We didn't quite know what to make of this.

He stared back at us. "I'm disappointed," he said. His jaw trembled. He was no longer looking at us. He had the same distant expression I'd seen at lunch. "I'm disappointed," he said again.

He repeated the words over and over, standing in front of his desk, and then sliding down it so that he sat on the floor, still saying "I'm disappointed" until finally one of us went to the principal's office. The principal and a white-uniformed custodian came in and spoke soothingly to him and took him under the arms and stood him up and walked him out of the classroom.

We sat there looking at one another. But as for the old man in the coffee shop, we still had little to say.

David Wojciechowski

from **The Emptied Man**

10

he'd forgotten his face one evening.

he knew that children were tears

running down his face.

it was a horrifying discovery.

David Wojciechowski

from **The Emptied Man**

44

yes, it's me and I'm trying

to figure out when I was a child

I'm calling things together

the way dreams suddenly unspool

then there's a cloud

David Wojciechowski

from **The Emptied Man**

124

my life, mad with fear,

lying in some room

the phone rang

the voice at the other end

was asking for you

Jeffrey Condran

East Toward Jonesboro

On a two-lane road headed east toward Jonesboro I passed buildings that looked like places where something cruel happened inside, something was burned or crushed or dismembered, brick and stone places, pummeled by tornado winds. But that was nothing compared to what came next: cotton fields ablaze, the gray-black smoke transforming the sunset into End-Times light. “Where am I?” I said under my breath. “And dear God.” Then I thought of that Winslow Homer painting, *The Cotton Pickers*, where two African women, too picturesque to be real, carry heavy loads in damaged baskets, one figure looking toward the ground while the other’s stern dissatisfaction leaves one to think, both choking down mouthfuls of Jim Crow.

Jeffrey Condran

The Boy Martyr of the Confederacy

The stained glass in the museum glows: golds and greens, browns and blues, the idealized figure of the Martyr's face Christ-resigned, an elongated hand almost reaching out in benediction. Over his head they drape the Stars and Bars and, at his feet a chiseled text reads, "David O. Dodd. Hung As A Spy—January 8, 1864: Age 17 Years."

There is a rumor that he had papers detailing Union troop strength and location. Another rumor that his only crime was getting lost in No-Man's-Land, a strip of swamp and woods the Confederate civilians had to traverse before sunset and, poor David, turned around by the stars in his eyes, was taken down by a picket's bayonet. But I have my own theory, pet as it is, that after weeks of being feted by the gracious ladies of Little Rock, our David, the winsome almost-man, was caught doubling back, longing for another night in the arms of his teenage lover—some Abigail or Amy, some Sally or Susan. A Romeo who really did die for love.

On the 150th Anniversary of the Boy Martyr's execution, though, a grown man stood in his re-enactor's uniform, hat pulled low, and drawled for a dozen believers about holding the "thin gray line," about sacrifice for "The Cause," and as I stood watching a bugler play a battle call, a small part of me waited for a lead ball to strike between my shoulders, one last carpetbagger-casualty entered into the lists.

The South, the grown man intoned, will rise again.

Richard Robbins

White Horse

My grandmother saw animals in the clouds.
I saw them too, especially when I sat

light enough on her lap on bright white drives
through desert or along the green

Idaho bench. I leaned back into her chest,
and though I didn't think this then, we saw

everything with the same two eyes, the same
heart beating. I saw age spots on the back

of her hand. Sometimes I heard a rasp
to her breath. Just outside the window,

I saw the road shoulder blur to gray. And when
my grandmother saw a horse, an actual

white horse, that rare visitation deep
in timothy or sage, she wet a fingertip

on her right hand with her tongue
and made a small wet circle in the lifeline

of my left. My grandmother brought her fist
down on my palm to stamp it. *Give me*

good luck, she said, as she had been taught
years before by someone I had never met,

train conductor or laundress. There is
so much the strong hand must do in a day

or through a life. All the left needs to do is remember.

Anthony Robinson

Revenge Fantasy

A cache of weapons and all my dirty hair,
jokes made and then disposed of: a blessed
day and images of my daughter, far away
and holding aloft a rainbow streamer, the man
she calls Daddy a mysterious stranger. This
it's why I keep these things. I may have
to use them. I'll cut you down I say to a blank
face. Some form of blood ensures equality
I know nothing about. There are foxes
on the rough hills, coyotes on golf courses,
my comforter, imaginary guns, white spirits,
my child's brown skin. My darling, it's been
ages. Angels scream from a precipice,
they've revealed a finding, a shred of scripture
filled with knives and dandelions. Violence
won't do here; it calls for something stronger.
It calls for compassion I no longer possess.

Anthony Robinson

Two Years On and I Have Not Become a Better Person

The camas flowers stand in a vase with white lilacs, inches from the urn with my dead father's ashes because it is May, the time for death and purple flowers. The stamens are yellow; the chain tree in the front lawn bleeds gorgeous yellow blooms, Rapunzel-like, and my brain keeps bleeding blood. All of this is true. How many things and ways can we keep fucking up? I've argued about grammar enough. There is no middle ground, I guess. "Return of the Mac." Orange cat. Maybe, Guillermo, the 90s weren't so bad?

Anthony Robinson

May you live in interesting times

The world's just not that crazy, open
and farthest from the sun. Can you
remember fireflies away from this fresh
elocution? How many years and tears
and bricks away from Central Station?
It's small here. The oil drums yearn.
Cigarettes and Chevrolets, more birds
than you could hope for, but all molting,
and then all molten. There's no such
thing as justice, and God won't bring
anyone back. This is a comfort: there's
smoke and smeared fingertips on window
panes. The ground is covered in feathers,
Caliban gathers filberts. We won't save us.

Anthony Robinson

Sunday Morning

A Cara Cara orange and a cup of instant coffee
thoughts of a hungry ginger cat and a raven
given to being quarrelsome. Complexities
of the sepulcher, and then of the selfie, then
of the self-defense plea. What does anybody know?
About the child you left behind? About a girlfriend
you abandoned, about how easy it is to blame
the same-day plague. This orange is my flesh, my
Christ. For a non-believer it's all we can do. Coffee
dark oil tar and beyond the weekend field. Finally
praying hands know no rest. Nobody remembers
the cathedral on fire. Or Leonardo's shadow,
toward light, *sfumo* they call it. Nobody smiles now.
I'm making cookies and thinking of flying machines.

Anthony Robinson

December Aubade with Smoke

To rise & hold on your tongue a heavenly principality
& in the left breast pocket an infernal place

on the horizon a swallow breaking open morning
while the rain is the biggest rain you've seen

& all along the lines of longitude & latitude
a box of our collective American making

things are happening like people falling down
in slow motion, blotches of red appearing

to gird these national borders of steel & clutch
an angelic suspension, up there hidden amongst

wet cedars, dripping on as the day collapses
the people all go to the cars & go home but the people

have left their bodies & the freight trains are louder
come evening, louder even than the rain & hail

& the diaphragms of cawing birds & the many nations
in many human mouths & animated cotton shirt arms

signing legislation concerning things most
holy concerning kindling for the fire next to you

releasing smoke into this mountain air removed
pushing these birds through the open flue

to tomorrow more quiet & colder than this.

Anthony Robinson

That's What Birds Do, Yo

So I'm stuck here in California, which
I tell my friends, is better than dying.
Mastery of a thing is still a thing
And I have mastered walking up
And down the same three mile stretch
Of suburban road where everything
I photograph is red or yellow, where cats
Mew and crazy presidents continue
To be crazy. All the whiskey in the world
Can't stop the dissonance. My friend,
Though, from across the vast, writes
To tell me about the little frog that has
Attached itself to her window. And the horrible
Cawing of birds in the bushes. That's what
Birds do, I tell her. Then the night is silent.
California tries hard to be pretty, but falls
Across us like a shitty blanket. There's
Only one Taco Bell here and a mountain
Named after a devil which is also type
Of sauce from Taco Bell. These mountains
Frighten me. The cat in this house is most
Certainly demonic. There are still tomatoes
On the vine despite the sudden cold evenings
And relentless rain Oh Golden State, you
Worry me. But the birds are still loud as fuck
Most of the time. But the frogs bring luck,
May save us. May not.

Grant Matthew Jenkins

The Closure of Rejection

An organizationally radiant critique, one
of the amenities that we
derive from detective fiction, or
the velocities—curves, swerves,
and across intersections we get geometrical:
 a vertical
 plane, upended on or
intersecting the horizontal cross—

The landscape becomes the horizon,
a card game played by an idler who is avoiding
attention to work, sizeable gaps,
interrupted terrain. The clock
is set running
 off balance, heavy at the mouth
at which the word is shooting
amiable love-arrows.

 When we
discover any string or bundle,
balls and rivers, they hear the
amplification (one might even say trashing)
as a taxonomist of
the lone star on the horizon
of the insufferable.

Breath

Do you remember the night I saw the dead bride at our bedroom door? My gasping woke you. You assumed I'd had a nightmare, not knowing about my hallucinations, and you turned toward me, lay a soothing arm over my waist, and touched your forehead to mine. Your night breath was foul—everyone's is—so I synchronized my inhalations with yours and for a while we breathed in unison, consonant, interlocked. But time didn't stop, and we fell out of sync.

That was in March of 2021, the first full winter of the pandemic. My hallucinations started two months earlier, in January, when the vaccinations were released but not for us. Medical personnel, the elderly, the immunocompromised—we were not essential enough, not old or unhealthy enough. *We just have to give it time*, you said. But time moved strangely. Hours globbed by, oozed, distended, bunched up at the end of the week. I never quite knew what day it was. I had to keep checking.

Friday. January 8, 2021. 369,000 Americans dead.

By then we were cemented into our routines: you in your makeshift basement office, me in the second-floor guest room. I'd been teaching online for eight months, talking to rows of empty boxes on screen, no one willing to turn on their video, everyone mute, depressed, hiding under a blanket. This didn't feel like teaching. Genuine teaching and learning occur in moments of interaction, with eye contact and movement and smiles, with spontaneity and joy. The job I loved had died, and every day I had to look at its corpse laid out on a rectangular screen. Each form of death carries its own way of grieving. Suddenly I wished we'd had children.

Tuesday. January 19, 2021. 400,000 dead.

We'd quit disinfecting our groceries, but I still wore latex gloves to the store, unwilling to let go of that solace. You kept repeating, exasperated, It's not on the surfaces. It's not on the grocery carts. *It's not on the bottoms of your shoes. It's in the air.* I knew that. I knew. Covid was floating over our heads, hanging in lethal clouds over the earth. Death wasn't a gaunt, hooded man with a scythe; it was a drifting herd of invisible porcupines, wafting in the ether like jellyfish in the sea, placidly waiting to stab us. We'd given each other N-95 masks for Christmas, tried to cut ourselves off from air. Still, I wanted the latex gloves.

Friday. January 22, 2021. 410,000 dead.

The grocery store was the only place I ever went, and I was grateful for it—for somewhere to go, for the high ceilings and wide aisles. But other people made me harden and burn. People got too close. People wore their masks under their noses, under their chins. I wanted to scream, *Your scarf isn't a mask!* but I didn't, fearing their own pent-up rage. I only went down aisles with no people in them. I didn't buy

things we needed; I bought whatever was in the unpopulated aisles. Safe at home again, I pulled items out of bags—Pop Tarts, Cheez-Its, Tuna Helper—while you, incredulous, asked, *What is that?*

At first, the hallucinations were not disturbing, just puzzling. Instead of the floral wallpaper border along our bedroom ceiling, I saw Christmas lights twinkling in festive colors, bulbs spiky on vine-like cords. I was not asleep. I felt as though I'd been asleep all day; I didn't need to sleep at night. I'd close my eyes but inevitably my lids scrolled up, like pull shades, and I'd see these things in our room: purple stripes on our solid white walls, a live raccoon perched on the bookcase. My brain had forgotten how to make sense of light and shadow. Rays from the streetlamps outside our two windows illuminated the mini-blinds to a glow, leaked in around their edges. I would roll over and discover the mini-blinds had become swaths of tangled ivory fur. I would look up to find our ceiling had morphed into a smiling moose head. One night the moose head was joined by a grinning ferret, which must have been a fan blade. I found these hallucinations curious, at times entertaining. What was causing them? Sensory deprivation? A lack of fresh air—of good-enough oxygen? Too much screen time? Maybe it was simply stress. But what exactly was “stress”? I pondered this. “Stress” felt like a deep trembling of all my unconscious fears. Had that rumbling become an earthquake strong enough to alter the reality above?

February began. Still no vaccine for us. No slim vials of hope. Time dripped by. You and I crossed paths in the kitchen, you staring down at your phone, not speaking. By then your hair was an uncut mop, stiff and graying, but it reminded me of your long hair in college and I could see the young man in you, the outline of your face sculpted in Parian marble, so handsome. I wondered how you saw me. One day I said, *Maybe we could get a dog.* You looked up and echoed, annoyed, *A dog?* I replied, *Well, you don't like cats.* You stared, stared, blinked—I'd said something wrong.

February 4, 2021: 457,859 dead.

Death was spreading like silent ripples on the water's surface, approaching us in our worn and rocky life boat. We remained in our limbo, sequestered in our well of winter darkness. I tried to exercise inside the house, walked in circles around our living room until you yelled up the basement stairs to stop. You went online and bought a beer fridge and TV for the basement so you could stay down there all evening. *You don't like football,* you said to justify your absence. It wasn't even real football—it was reruns of past games. The sound rattled amplified through the vents. *Could you turn it down?* I called through the basement

door, trying to sound polite. *No*, you yelled back. You began to stay up later and later, falling asleep on the basement couch. Night after night, you crept up to bed at two or three in the morning, or not at all.

By March, the hallucinations were no longer curious or comic. Now when my eyes slid open in the middle of the night, I lay frozen on my side, suffocating with dread, not knowing what surrounded me. Eventually I'd look: the blinds on our windows were cement blocks, hammered through with haphazard metal spikes. You weren't there. The ceiling-fan-turned-moose-head no longer smiled—it scowled and glared, then stretched toward me with eyes aflame. A lizard emerged from behind the head, its face twisted, its teeth bared. You weren't there. The floral borders along the tops of our walls no longer twinkled; instead they were a blown-out space, as though a bomb had gone off in our room. Dirt and rubble poured in. I kept looking at these images, straining to see the reality in them. But I couldn't make out what had been there, what I knew was there, what I thought I knew.

March 8, 2021: 537,995 dead.

The night I saw the dead bride at our door, I found you beside me in bed. My gasping woke you and you turned toward me, swaddled me in an embrace. I matched my breathing to yours, and with each protracted breath, my mind calmed. I wanted time to stop. I squeezed my eyes shut and wished and prayed for time to stop. I allowed myself to believe it had. Then I imagined time had rewound, that magically we'd traveled back a year.

February 17, 2020: 2 dead.

I convinced myself it was a year ago, that in the morning we'd get up and thrum down the stairs and eat bagel halves side by side and rush out into the world, off toward our separate jobs—to workplaces boisterous, aggravating, saturated with life—knowing that the end of the day would bring us together again, when we'd talk and laugh, me reaching for the cutting board, you setting pots on the stove. I kept believing this. Through the dirt and rubble and blocks of cement, past demonic moose heads and dead brides, my thoughts tunneled into that divine delusion.

February 7, 2022: 901,000 dead.

I wanted you to know I'll always remember that night in March—that cord of moments when our foreheads touched; when you draped your arm across my waist, attaching me to you; when the weight and warmth of you soaked through me, and we took long slow full breaths in sync. When I finally fell asleep, I dreamed of a green hillside plush under a summer sun, and us together strolling down, holding hands, our lungs ballooning with laughter.

Ghost Forest

The ghost forest took its time, kicking us out. We once had a home here, a house with two floors and creaking hardwood and a toilet upstairs and down; the one upstairs would run and run until it became the white noise of lullabies. From a chest I inherited from my grandmother, we pulled out curtains, thin but layered with orange blossoms, and in the afternoons, the light would pour through them as I read in the corner. The loblolly pines creaked during the night back when they still stood tall and restless. Now they are part of the ghost forest, spindly and forlorn, and sinking into the silt. We had inherited a life here, or so we had thought. The marshes had other plans.

Before the ghost forest, we had neighbors down the road, this way and that. They were older than we were, but they welcomed us with jam and cornbread and hand-stitched napkins. They told us they were happy we were there, glad that the old house had some company again, and we smiled with our hands clasped by our sides and asked them to come inside for some tea or sit on the porch for a while. No one asked us many questions, but we would have told them that we had both grown up ten miles away in town, that we had lived away for many years, but a series of losses had brought us back. We might have said that we could see that the other's sadness wouldn't diminish our own and that this small thing was a comfort. We had enough money between us tucked away for the old house and we liked the thought of growing old together in it; in fact, we were already a little bit old and were no longer much bothered by that.

At first, my husband noticed a brininess in his tea and in his mouth after he brushed his teeth at night. Back then, we still took walks away from our house, close to the bay, along a dirt road that was now more sand than anything else. My husband would say, *I don't remember the earth looking like this*, and I would answer, *because it did not look like this*, and he would hold my hand with his long fingers and tell me he was grateful for my memories. The longer we would walk, the more skeletal the trees grew and under our feet were the coarse phragmites, all bristle and no softness. The carcasses of crabs were littered about, and my husband would twitch his nose and kick the debris out of his way. *Like a fairytale*, I would say. *And we are the witches*.

Our parents are buried in the same cemetery and we used to take another path from our house to visit them. There, too, the ghost forest haunts. The gravestones sink into the ground. We are lucky that our parents are buried at the center, not at the edge of the land. The salt has rubbed away our neighbors' names, and I imagine the bodies underground slinking and sliding in the sand, being carried out toward the

marsh. On our visits, my husband would squat next to his family and pat the earth flat under his hand. He would keep his palm against the ground as if trying to feel for something.

I looked away. I had already imagined his mother floating underground to the bay, and this felt like a betrayal. To my relatives, I would bring twines of mint and basil leaves to perch against their stones. The air smelled metallic and I wanted to replace the scent with something more homelike. The sand drifted into my sneakers and I knew I would carry it back into our house. No amount of sweeping could keep it from seeping into our floorboards.

Little by little, our neighbors moved away. Their children came for them, packed up their homes over a weekend or two, leaving the houses still and drooping. We were stubborn in our own house, and had no children to expect, feeling the house's bones teetering to one side. When a ball of yarn escaped my lap, it would coast along the floorboards as if seeking a cat to play with. *You look crooked today*, my husband would tease. *And you look lopsided*, I would answer, and he would brush my cheek with his dry hand before leaving for town.

He was now making weekly trips for bottled water and filters, nails to hammer down our uprooted floorboards. There was a new, hollow sound beneath our feet as we padded to and from the kitchen as if a pocket of air separated our home from the earth. Some days, it felt like a kind of floating.

And then came the time in the middle of the night when my bookshelves emptied themselves and we awoke to a puddle of books cast across the floor. Our lights blinked in the gloom, their currents unreliable. *Did you invite the ghosts back*, my husband asked. We laughed about hauntings when we were still capable of joking with one another.

The salted dust was now covering our carpets, coating our curtains, and stiffening our clothes. Its powder found its way into my husband's moustache and buried itself into my scalp, which was now always itching. When my husband smiled, dust gathered in the creases around his lips and eyes. I would dampen a washcloth and brush it against his forehead to be reminded of the color of his skin.

Outside, there was no longer any shade, our old trees turned skeletal, their branches pointing at us in accusation. *Why do you stay here*, they seemed to ask, *when everyone and everything is gone? We are meant to grow old here together*, I answered silently, and then it seemed the ghost forest was laughing at me, its spindly arms cast darkly against the bright sun.

Soon our furniture was bent and misshapen and we grew used to the taste of salt in our mouths. We had no need to season our fish or potatoes and we always felt thirsty. Like the trees outside, we were growing spindly and dry. Our hair was falling out, but we didn't speak a word of this to one another. We, too, became still and shadowy.

One day, when we were lying in our bed, coated in silt, there was a knock on our door. Two men in uniforms approached us and sighed. *What is it you think you're doing here, you silly, stubborn fools?* They took our suitcases from the closet and filled them up with our dusty clothes, our old toothbrushes, some faded photographs. We barely reacted, our minds, too, had been layered with dust.

And now we look out a different set of windows, breathing in filtered air. Our mouths taste like nothing. Our home is a square of two rooms, provided by the city with very little asked of us in return. I still read my books and ball my yarn, but my husband is restless. He suggests we take a walk to the cemetery, but it is too far away for our suddenly old limbs. *Do you think the marshes are getting closer*, he asks me, his eyes fixed on the horizon.

The trees are growing thin, even here in town. I nod at his question. The trace of his voice lingers in the humming silence.

Chameleon

The bones break, building
upon one another—each
vertebrae snapping, stacking,
until my limbs reach
the highest shelves. You say,
if only you were taller.

I blend into crowds.
Potatoes and bread are discarded.
This hunger becomes routine, as every
ring slips from my fingers. You say,
if only you took up less space.

I stop wearing sweaters,
stop wearing bright colors.
People walk through me
and my name finds no mouth. You say,
if only you were less noticeable.

You demand more.
 I curl myself inside, my form
 shifting like clouds

No mirror knows my shape.
I walk on my toes,
 my heels never touch the ground
I love what you love
I hate what you do
I become
you

Flight Attendant

Faye pulled the silicone mask over her head. It pulled her hair when she put it on or took it off, causing little breaks. Fine, broken strands stood straight up from her scalp, creating a downy ring around her head, only noticeable if a person stood close and really looked. And that didn't happen so often anymore.

As she walked across campus a crow squawked and dove toward the sidewalk, turning back upward a few yards above her head. Her presence had been noted and announced. She and her research team had to disguise themselves after a few months of lurking beneath the trees studying socialization among crows. They'd memorized the human faces.

Crows mate for life, but sometimes engage in extra pair copulation. Faye's team was researching whether the birds were conscious of this behavior. They'd been shown in studies to exhibit consciousness.

While her eyes were turned toward the tree tops, her ears attuned to the caws, Cal's attention was drawn elsewhere. The night they went out to celebrate her grant award he sat mostly silent twirling the salt shaker while Faye talked about corvid communication and courting.

"They're monogamous. Mostly."

"That mostly says a lot," Cal said. He signaled to the server for another drink. "Says what humans want it to say."

She didn't mention copulation outside the pair. The stakes were different for corvids. Females never won grants or awards while their mates got turned down, taking temporary work outside of academia.

"I've seen crows mount dead crows," she offered instead.

Later in bed, Cal barely responded to her slow stroking hands. He took his phone into the bathroom after they finished. Faye lay in bed and listened to text messages taking flight, little whooshes audible under the door.

At breakfast both of them stared at their phones. Faye wanted to draw his attention back to her. Just a few months ago, they talked excitedly at breakfast about their move to the university town, the readings and performances within walking distance.

"I promise, we'll go see at least one music show a month," she said as they looked at apartment listings. Together they fell in love with the kitchen where they now sat, with its emerald tile backsplash and huge windows.

"Do you want me to meet you at city hall for lunch? We could eat in the sculpture garden."

Cal shook his head. "Probably have to work through lunch today."

His job in the parks department involved less outdoor time than they'd imagined.

She bought a new mask. One that didn't have to be pulled over her head, yanking more hair from her scalp. This one from a costume store, a crude version of a woman's face with rosy cheeks and shimmering blue eyeshadow. She'd never owned blue eye shadow.

Instead of watching the crows on campus she went to the park near city hall and sat on a bench in her mask, watching the exit and preparing notes for a presentation. A group of crows is called a murder. There are a lot of theories about why. Faye supposes the likely one has to do with crows being an omen of death.

Cal walked out with a group of coworkers. A woman young enough to be a student laughed at something he said. They approached a crosswalk. She watched him put his hand on the young woman's lower back as they stepped off the curb.

The Sweetest Scent

My father died of heart failure the same Chinese New Year girls began to draw my eye instead of ire. I wasn't present for his death but figured it even since he wasn't present for my life.

We all lived in Kowloon, but we no longer lived together, though mom claimed that the case even when we did. When he roamed within the same walls instead of a few kilometers away, he worked for people who only spoke to him in snaps. One snap for tea. Three to open the door, five to get out and close it behind him. He never looked at his superiors because his eyes were always closed as he smiled and bowed until they passed. They never looked at him because they were superior.

He smiled so much at work his face molded into a frown at home. He never talked to us when he spoke aloud, and never spoke aloud when he talked to us. Orders were given with grunts and snaps. If we ever caught his eye, we had gotten in his way.

Nights, he'd drink bottles of baijiu, then snap his fingers for his jacket. Slam furniture, slam doors as he left amidst my mother's pleas to not. He'd return the next morning smelling nothing like her fragrance and carrying a bottle of Dynasty XO a few sips shy of dry. Mother would weep in pain, then rage as she'd scream that he's nothing but a disgraceful eunuch. I always tried to look away before she hit the wall, and I always failed to plug my ears before she hit the tile. Then all was silence and sobs as we waited for his snore.

The end began with what I didn't know was his way of bonding. Drunk, he told me the proudest moment of his life was as a boy he'd smelled Bruce Lee in person. He'd had the opportunity to shake his hand, but when the star approached, he could only smile and bow, his eyes clenched in what would be his greatest ability. "The scent of cologne was so strong," he said, eyes closed to stanch the welling. "It was the smell of a great man."

Then he left without a grunt or snap and never returned. It took forever to clear his stench from our home and hearts.

The last time I saw him alive was a Sunday morning Mom and I had yum tsa in Tsim Sha Tsui. Afterward, we walked the Avenue of Stars, and I saw him standing in the shadow of Bruce Lee's statue. Staring out at the junks crossing Victoria Harbor, the South China Sea like dragon scales in the chop. I yelled his name several times, but he closed his eyes and lowered his head, then faced the statue and walked away.

Heart failure was listed as the COD my mother said, because "failure" was insufficient on a death certificate. At his wake, a family wearing white cried. Mom and I wore red and did not.

In Chinese tradition, if a son is not present at his father's death, he must crawl toward the coffin wailing for penance. With Taoist chants around me, I lowered to palms and kneecaps and crawled toward the man who'd always ran away from me. Every millimeter neared left more of him behind. Clenching my eyes, I wept with laughter at the proudest moment of my life. The scent of formaldehyde was so strong. It was the smell of a failed man.

(Pause.)

If your name is Lilli and you know where you come from, it is easier to think of *Oberleutnant* Franz Vogel as a brute than to see him as a man with an inclination for the arts. Does it really matter that you know the end before the start? Sometimes a buried story clings to its new frame and trusts the writing process. And strangely enough, the dog jumps on the couch, licks her lips and sighs. *Beauty always promises, but never gives anything*¹. If Louise shaved her eyebrows in mourning, Jeanne painted her lips red to rear. She remembered their mother's formidable horse painting. What else could she do after Louise vanished without a word. 1945. Sometimes, you adjust your lineage at the hour of the owl and save your sister's child from shame.

¹Quote attributed to Simone Weil

Brigitte Byrd

TO AVOID CONFUSION

with my genealogy, I carry *Lübecker Marzipan*
in my pockets. I am not a heritage
German language speaker.

My biological father: *Oberleutnant* Franz Vogel
My imaginary father: Henri Lacroix
My father: Maurice Deschamps

Brigitte Byrd

WAITING FOR THE SONG TO END

I hang pictures on a wall when melancholy distorts the light and my mother waves from a historical slur. Like a lifeless puppet. A destroyed woman. Gone missing. Perhaps what is mysterious is the background music. *Imagine a tango*. I know the subplot leads me to her nightmare. *Zwei Gitarren am Meer*. Franz opening her body to feel her pulse throbbing in his hands. His heart bleeding her life out like a sacrifice to save his soul. He knew he could do nothing but die soon. Something that takes place in human life. Or. Did she open her body to feel his chest throbbing inside hers like an open wound? Afterall, she was a nurse. She knew they could do nothing but pretend. Another thing that takes place in human life. Before a lingering *Guitarren-Serenade* steered Louise in the crossfire, she already understood the quickening of a breath signals the end.

Brigitte Byrd

TO AVOID CONFUSION

with my name, I stumbled
on *The Age of Fable*¹
and grabbed onto myth
to keep going with the story

of Lilli Deschamps—

Translation: lily of the fields

1. A flower sprung from Hera's milk / spilled onto the Earth.
2. A single touch of its petals, / fecundation. See Juno.
3. Its monstrous pistil, erected / after the seafoam.
Venus jealous / of the whiteness
of its petals. / Venus turned green
with envy. Venus / and Mars. Check Emmet Read².
4. A Christian symbol of chastity and virtue. See Mary
virgin (mother) visited by Gabriel. Remember Juno.
5. Its roots grinded into salve for sores
and burns. Magical cures. See Renaissance.
6. A blossom on a child's grave. See 19th century.
7. Adopted by Jeanne and Maurice,

and when I favored Louise,
they said, *Where is the lightness
of being?* Lilli Deschamps—

Biological mother: Louise Lacroix

Imaginary mother: Louise Lacroix

My mother: Jeanne Deschamps

¹*The Age of Fables* (1885) by Thomas Bulfinch

²*Emmet Read* is an electronic producer from Bristol UK. His music focuses on Italo Disco and classic analogue synthesizers. "Venus and Mars" from *Hold Me, EP* (2022)

Brigitte Byrd

(Pause.)

I often go back to the same place of shame and come to a stop.

If you are a young woman
 sleeping with the enemy
 at your mother's house

(formidable horse painting / phonograph records collection)

is it worse than closing
 your eyes to Jewish neighbors
 disappearing overnight?

(formidable horse painting / phonograph records collection)

is it worse than nodding
 at the enemy's final solution
 to the Jewish question?

Stop.

Swivel

Part I

Derek tore his ACL—well, it was in between a partial and full tear, finished off by a swift twist, a moving storm across his knee joint that just couldn't cope while playing football with Liv and Derek's two teenagers—and was about to be wheeled into the OR at The Hospital for Special Surgery on Manhattan's Upper East Side. It was completely routine, a reconstructive procedure to replace the torn anterior cruciate ligament. Liv looked down at her husband on the gurney, his eyes darting, refusing to settle on anything. She was nervous, naturally, but not without common sense. Derek wasn't sick. He didn't have a suspicious tumor to be biopsied or a cardiac issue in his forty-four-year-old heart. Nope. He was just getting a ligament fixed in his muscular leg, the one she found lying across her own legs when she woke up every morning, the weight of his thigh pinning her down, a reminder of his temporary domination over her at this point in their lives while she was home with Connor and Jack.

Liv hovered over him for a kiss with her arms on each side of the gurney, holding on to the railings. *You'll be as good as new. Pretty much.* She imagined her arms painfully pushing further from their sockets into the litheness of wings, her fingers morphing into soft fans. Squeamish, Liv felt white heads puncturing her skin—*pop pop pop*—on her left arm, *pop pop pop*, on her right—first in rows, then filling in between. From these pustules, linguini-thin rods grew until they were quill-like feathers. How luxurious to have wings! She could feel her body rise, but when she looked down, her boots stood firmly on the waxed hospital floor.

Liv pressed her lips on Derek's mouth and could smell the softening shampoo in his beard. She raised herself up to a standing position. Her arms, the same Finnish pallor they had always been, the white hair like dandelion floaties that Derek referred to as pretty vallus hair ever since he worked on the *Vaniqu* account—or, *eflornithine*, a medication to inhibit unfortunate excessive hair growth on a woman's face. Every time Derek was on a new account he added words to his pharmaceutical vocabulary and used them around the house, the *izides* and *doroxols* dressing his speech with alien lilts. Perhaps Derek was attracted to pharmaceutical advertising in the first place because he had tried every anti-anxiety med on the market, Zoloft, Lexapro, Prozac, as well as the lesser knowns, and made his concoction, pulling apart pills and tapping the dust into his coffee. He said that that was what meds were all about, finding what worked for you.

When Derek was sixteen and he drove across the 59th Street Bridge—he said he would always remember the choppy East River below, taunting him—and never made it to the other side, halted by an explosive panic attack until he was taken off the road by paramedics. He was adopted at the age of five so perhaps something buried from those toddler years twisted him. His adoptive parents made sure he saw a shrink and Derek learned to manage.

Here was the odd factor to Liv: Derek was the most socially adept person she had ever known. He functioned at the highest level, never withdrawing as was her habit. He had the ability to instantly understand

quirks, insecurities, and never judged. Revved up on his own mojo, he said his anxiety worked for him now. Derek's killer gym routines (the *au natural* chaser to his meds) and peculiar appetite gave him rocky cheek bones. Liv joked she could bounce a tube of lipstick off her husband's stomach.

It was endearing to Liv the way Derek looked at their boys with such perplexity—how were they so normal? The blender always churning with protein shakes, laughter rising up from the basement, term papers completed without a fight. Connor was the varsity captain of the Stamford football team and Derek said that when he was that age, he couldn't be captain of his own dick.

Liv watched her husband being wheeled away to the OR, the surgical head-covering endowing him with a miserable chef look. The house was fully prepared for his arrival tomorrow. Liv made his favorite shaved Brussels sprout salad, and three cartons of low fat jalapeño ice cream sat in the freezer. The boys carried the ottoman and proper chair to the bedroom so their father could work.

The nurse from New Zealand pursed her thin lips as she tied Derek's two small bags together and told Liv to hold them until he was up in his room. "It might be a good idea to remove valuables," she whispered.

Liv found her way to the new family Atrium with floor to ceiling windows that overlooked the East River. She was instantly soothed by various currents running into each other like a kaleidoscope, the surface shining like the iridescent scales of a striped bass.

In a surprisingly comfortable chair, Liv could see the 59th Street Bridge off to the right, its piles faded to a cautionary yellow. She felt the nostalgic pull of her and Derek's first apartment, their neighborhood in SoHo, *The Little Cupcake Bakeshop* on Prince where they sat under Parisian chandeliers, the chocolate cupcakes topped with silvery bullet-like sprinkles that gave Liv a pang to have children. Couldn't she live there now? She missed the intimate maze of streets. Back then, she loved morphing, pretending to be someone else. She missed having friends she didn't have to explain herself to. Liv's friends in Stamford seemed so content to be just where they were.

It was actually funny. She had been looking forward to Derek's surgery to have time to herself. *My little vacation*. Although she would miss her book group this week who were unenthusiastic to read Flaubert's *Madame Bovary* (re-reading for Liv), didn't the naysayers realize the classics offered a reservoir of problems we still face at this very moment? Liv had forgotten the skill of Flaubert. His sentences glistened. Wasn't it Flaubert who believed that style in itself was just a matter of how one sees things?

Looking out the window, she remembered being with her father in the Finish province of Aland and watching the curve of the Baltic Sea. Bolts of light shot up and hurt her eyes until her father's large palm gently covered them.

It was an opportune time to let the ping pong of career options toss in her thoughts. She would not return to advertising, she had lost touch with the industry and found it fake anyway. More importantly, she could not be in the same field as her kingpin ad-man husband. Back to school

for her masters in literature, if she could find an affordable tuition with aid. Then a PhD? She could feel prolific while being indecisive. Or her latest obsession, which she had done the P & Ls for, and ad copy—the sprinkle business. She had started looking into getting venture money. Glitter on food and drinks just felt right to Liv. And she could never figure out why someone didn't revamp the waxy cornstarch that could sparkle, yet be edible, with a sensation on the tongue. Time for an update. Even now, she saw a silvery-gray-gold palate sparkling on the East River to inspire her sprinkle collection—she would call it Moon Gleam.

On one of their girls-night-outs, Liv's friend Arianna almost spit out her pink drink—*Did you mention this one to Derek? —Did he even hear you?*

"Never mentioned this one," Liv laughed, feeling the travel of her drink. Thanks to Arianna, she realized all that she didn't mention. Where was the fun in a marriage without a few secrets?

Derek sashayed around their home like their marriage was due diligence, each carrying on with their tasks. Did he ever ask her her next step?

"Well, Arianna said, "I hope this shakes him up. You make life too easy for him."

There were things Liv hadn't told Arianna.

The lip of Arianna's martini glass was rimmed in non-pareils, stuck on there with sugary goop. These classic non-pareils actually dated back to the 18th Century, for *pièces montées*. Better to keep this precious trivia to herself.

Liv's little start-up—and she'd make this point pitching— would fill the niche that had been sitting vacant since chocolate jimmies came out in the 30's, made without a spec of chocolate by the way. Liv could sell (she'd call her business *Liv and Let Sprinkle*)—to *Magnolia*, *Butter Lane*, *Molly's* and even *The Best Little Cupcake Bakeshop*. She could sell to anyone who liked to bake, or throw eye-catching glitter on the foam of a cocktail. Instagram would push it. And, if things got lucrative (her sprinkles would not be cheap, she did the costs) she'd rent a one-bedroom in SoHo. Liv, at that very moment, sitting in the Atrium of the Hospital for Special Surgery, imagined silvery sprinkles falling all over her like crushed diamonds, burying her right in that chair, her nose out the top for a little air.

Liv wished she had coffee. She and Derek had gotten up at 4am to drive from Stamford to the Upper East Side and didn't have time for her two necessary cups. A man with thick legs sat with his very pregnant partner, the laces of her high-tops undone, a pink buzz, swollen lips at this stage. He was eating a bagel, holding it by its wrapper. And wasn't there always someone crying in these places? Liv had volunteered at a Hospice and had to stop, each patient reminding her of her dead father, their noses pointed upward toward an afterlife just minutes before passing. Liv felt blessed, surprised herself with this word she loathed, feeling bullied when anyone said to her—*you are blessed, have a blessed day*—imposing their own dogma on her. But right now, she had to admit, she was flooded by the echo of this word.

Liv's phone was pinging with texts. Arianna sent photos of Jack and Connor in their favorite jerseys, throwing a football in the middle of the closed-off street in town while the other teenagers focused on Halloween window painting—suspicious cats perched on fences, a knife stuck in a heart oozing with green blood.

Arianna: *Not a spec of paint on these two ;) All good there?*

Arianna was what Liv called a forced friend (their kids were buddies) but she ended up grateful to have her, really liked her. She didn't think Derek was so great and why the hell was Liv so flexible? Staying home with the kids just because Derek's biological mom used his toddler hands for ashtrays? Hadn't he gotten over that? Arianna had affairs, she said, when it was worth it. She believed it made her marriage stronger.

Liv watched patches of foam on the surface of the East River as if a helicopter spit in the water.

Pressing her hands on the cover of *Madame Bovary*, she could feel the swiftness of Emma's "trim little foot." Emma Bovary's adultery was understandable. Trapped in her ordinary French bourgeois life, her husband Charles Bovary saw everything so literally she couldn't even talk to him. Her only escape was her lovers.

But it was Emma's moment of hesitation that interested Liv. Emma's prospective lover declared they were bound together but she hesitated: *Let's not talk about it anymore... Where are the horses? Let's go back.* It was this floundering moment that Liv found so fitting to her own decision making, always on the cusp, a should-she-or-shouldn't-she.

A sign over the welcome desk said *How You Move is Why We're Here*. The slogan sounded clunky, it should have slid off the tongue. Liv opened her *Madame Bovary* and started Part II. The tapping of the computer—baba dee da, baba dee da—lulled her deeper into Flaubert's mid 1800's, on the border of Normandy. Emma discovers that her lover, Leon, also has an affinity for romantic novels.

Liv became distracted by the movement of the receptionist, gently telling an elderly man his wife was in recovery.

The music in the Atrium was so low you had to concentrate to hear the vacillating augmented chords. Liv took off her boots, laid them side by side and put her feet on top of them. The sun felt good.

Somewhere, the sound of a jaunty xylophone ringtone overwhelmed the Atrium:

By the sea, by the sea, by the beautiful sea, you and me, you and me, Oh! How happy we'll be.

Liv smiled at the old man over there. Surely, he was hard of hearing. A Sondheim fan. The refrain was relentless.

The woman from behind the desk got up and walked toward Liv with one finger to her lips, then pointed to Derek's bags on the floor.

Liv jumped up out of politeness and dug in the bag to prove it was not coming from there, until she found Derek's phone bright with light.

Missed call.

Then a text appeared. From: *Gia*

Maureen Pilkington

Who the fuck was Gia?

The only Gia she ever knew was a bossy girl from grammar school who lived next door to their parish and wacked the softball like no one else. She made fun of Liv's full lips and stick straight blonde hair but got other girls to deliver the message.

Liv read the text from Gia:

I'll be expecting more from your swivels now ;)

Liv read it again, turned the phone over to confirm Derek's leather cover. Heat rolled down to her feet then back up to her face.

To continue reading she would have to get into the phone by passcode. She used all the familiar number sequences the family used for the kitchen door, the garage door, TD Bank, the safe. Nothing worked. Had she never opened his phone? Was she ever interested?

Liv had read an article about misinterpreting texts, that the person on the receiving end creates a nonsensical backstory like an insane person and reacts accordingly. However, this text didn't allow for creativity.

Swivel.

There was only one explanation.

The imagined pustules came back again, rods the size of celery stalks, painfully pushing through her skin between her ribs. She pressed the sensation back in.

When she looked up she realized she was still kneeling on the floor next to the bag. The elderly man winked at her.

Liv went back to her seat on rubbery legs holding Derek's phone like a bomb about to go off. Derek had joked that his iPhone Pro Max was the size of a dessert plate. Now that plate held a Gia.

A barge floated by, carrying a pyramid-shaped pile of pulverized limestone, the shards glinting in Manhattan's ultraviolet light, a pumpkin sitting at the apex. A door on the side of the cabin flapped open and shut. Liv wanted to jump through the window to slam it.

Liv used her own phone to google Derek's website. He had named his agency *LivRight*, now remembering Arianna's tender mocking expression upon hearing this. Liv opened "Meet the Team" and there was Gia Rosetti. Director of Digital Strategy.

Narrow-shouldered and slight, Liv could foresee this Gia tottering on those high heels, or a slight wind delivering her to a digital universe where she reigned. A flouncy skirt, a t-shirt to offset her dark complexion. An outfit you might find on *Pinterest* under the category, *Day to Night*, but you decide against it because it looks staged—too *Pinterest*. Arianna liked to spot nose jobs (she just had hers done) and there was one hell of a rhinoplasty.

Bio: *When Gia's not laser-focused on account specific work, she's spending time furthering her Google Data Studio arsenal and vetting new partners.*

Her photograph revealed a certain irritating positivity and it wasn't Liv's anger making this up. Gia's profile touted: *If you want to conquer the anxiety of life, live in the moment, live in the breath.*

But it was Derek's photo looming directly above Gia's that made Liv well up. It was his interest in her, not Gia's interest in him, that made Liv look

into her future, certain she would never get past this. Her heart sprouted a new artery to aid her pumping heartbreak—a neon green tube that looked swollen in the middle like a mouse digesting through a snake.

The image of her two boys in all their earnestness made a thump in her chest.

Liv felt bolted to her seat, a phone in each hand, she felt the sensation of a long heavy root hanging between her legs.

The woman from behind the desk stood in front of her: “The doctor will be out to see you.”

Why was the doctor coming to see her for a routine surgery? Did something go wrong? Did Derek die?

Part II

The surgeon Liv had met in pre-op walked in and spotted her.

She stood up, unsteadily. He placed his hand under her elbow.

As was her habit with bad news, she replaced the image of Derek with a sheet over him and focused on the doctor’s scarf underneath his surgical head gear that was orange with a spray of black stars, honoring Halloween.

He had looked at her like that before. Was he staring at her necklace? Her breasts? He was shorter than she was, most men were.

“All is fine,” he said.

Liv closed her eyes, seeing Derek and Gia in the office, Derek’s muscular jaw maneuvering.

“What kind of medication will he have for pain?”

While the surgeon reiterated what they went over in pre-op, Liv was reminded of Dr. Kirakin at the hospice where she used to volunteer. How they had been together all those times in his car and they shoved their hands down each other’s pants. He had wanted her so badly, so liked who she was, her oddness. It was freeing. And that simple. When she went home those nights, her faced flushed, her underwear wet, Derek never questioned where she was, trusting her implicitly. The thought of her being unfaithful never crossed his mind.

“Are you from here? The states?” Derek’s surgeon asked.

“I was born in Finland but came here with my parents as a kid. My mom went back after dad died.”

“I can see the ancestry,” he said studying her. “I once had a Finnish bread and I’ll never forget it. Seventy dried house crickets in there.”

“Oh they grind up to a powder. Cricket flour! Lots of protein,” she smiled. “You don’t even taste it.”

“I’ll stick to whole wheat. You call me, if there is anything.”

She remembered her mother whacking pastry dough in their kitchen when she was a child, making *Finska Pinnar*, sifting powdered sugar over the cookies, never acknowledging Liv by her side, never *I love you*. Liv referred to her as the reluctant mother.

When the surgeon left the Atrium, Liv gathered her things to leave.

There was time to kill. Derek would be in recovery for a few hours before getting wheeled up to his room.

The thought of the boys got her choked up again. They didn't know what was coming. When the four of them were together, people commented on what a beautiful family they were. To Liv, a beautiful family meant a close one, one that communicated easily.

Such tall boys, one blonde and one dark, both taller than Liv already. Derek was an inch shorter than Liv. Was that it? Did Derek want to swivel into petite?

In his room, she placed Derek's bags on the windowsill, his iPhone on the night table. His other messages tallied when she touched it. No more Gia.

Liv walked down the hall on the fourth floor, the fictitious poles that had jutted out of the back of her thighs got so long they wobbled. She felt like the Cowardly Lion in the Wizard of Oz when his tail poked out the back of the Winkie Guard uniform he had stolen and worn as a disguise to save Dorothy. She turned to swat them down so sure she felt hard tails wobbling, but nothing was there.

A nurse stopped her and asked her if she knew where she was going. "No, I don't," Liv said stepping into the elevator.

Liv got off the elevator and walked through the lobby decorated with a Halloween scene. A witch slumped in a wheel chair surrounded by blinking jack-o-lanterns with downturned grins, her broken leg propped up. Liv pictured herself at this task, making a witch: stuffing old rags in the feet and calves of nylon stockings, squeezing here and there making long feet, lumpy knees, a hanging belly.

She swiftly moved past and out the front door. A blast of cool air reminded her all that was happening was real. She turned on East 73rd Street, then onto First Avenue, passed *Le Pain Quotidien*, and the little sushi place she hadn't been to in years. She looked at the faces in the windows. Perhaps she would not have noticed their happy expressions had she not discovered Gia.

Recently, she had had lunch with Derek's two assistants and felt an unease at the table. Liv chalked it up to them not wanting to be with their boss's wife. Fleur, who had been with Derek since he started *LivRight*, was talkative, while the new assistant observed, adding how he motivated everyone to work all hours. Liv was tired of hearing about Derek like he was a hyperkinetic deity. These were the positive, manageable sides of Derek.

Did anyone ask her about her work at the Hospice? At that time, she had gotten deeply involved, not to mention Dr. Kirakin and the thrill of seeing him at work, planning their secret dates. She was offered a paying job as a Business Development Liaison. Not as vogueish as Gia's job, of course. This had all motivated her to make a choice, develop her own business. It was her time. Were sprinkles hot?

Liv, living in a kind of limbo, didn't want to look at Jack and Connor as if they had held her back. They really didn't. It was Derek, wasn't it? He was irrational about the mom-at-home issue. Couldn't Liv just stay home until high school graduation? He was always developing theories as to why his biological mother gave him up for adoption, often hilarious. But if anyone held Liv back, if she was being honest, it was Liv herself.

During lunch with the two assistants, Liv asked, how was the new team working out? So many new hires, she would love to come into the office and meet them, Liv had said, and supposed she would wait until the Christmas party. The two women looked at each other as if each had spotted a flax seed in Liv's teeth. "One person added to the digital team has really influenced Derek's vision," the new assistant said. "Sorta trendy, but original." Liv instinctively studied Fleur in that moment, how she pulled her muffin apart and looked inside, saying "What the heck is in here? It's so delicious. Do you know Liv?"

Part III

Liv and Derek's home in the Shippan neighborhood of Stamford, not too far from the water, seemed to be a hot spot for Laughing Gulls and Blue Herons. Liv had become immune to the dry croaking sounds of one particular Egret now standing on the garden wall with his leg up when they pulled into the driveway. "Back in the sanctuary," Liv said, the boys waiting to help their father out of the back seat.

At first, Liv did very well. She took care of Derek, elevated his leg with pillows, placed icepacks on his knee, checked his incision for signs of infection. He was appreciative, apologetic, grabbed her hand and put her palm over his face. This meant a bout of anxiety was coming. It always started out sweet. Then the escalation. Lashing out. Apologies. Then back to his charming self once again. But this time, the episode was subdued. In addition to the pillow Liv placed under his knee and calf for elevation, Derek placed a few more pillows on his right side, down the middle of the bed.

The boys had helped their father get around. Connor placed dumbbells on the floor on each side of his father's chair. Derek took his pain meds, on top of his usual concoction. Liv could see him tapping and mixing different drugs while coming up with sarcastic copy. Wasn't that dangerous?

Liv heard Derek on the phone spewing his lively work personality. Sequestered in the bedroom with the door closed, his voice often turned low and melodic.

The extreme sadness that weighed on Liv, knowing what she knew, felt like a depression that she would never climb out of, if she stayed. Derek used to sit in the chair by the window in their bedroom. *Can I watch?* She did whatever he asked, but he hadn't asked her in a long time.

Liv was in the kitchen experimenting with Luster Dust, fooling with titanium dioxide, iron oxide, mica and chromium oxide, mixing in a little vodka—her own pharmaceuticals—the alcohol smoothing the mix to a perfect consistency. She felt like Emma Bovary seeing powdered sugar at the Marquis d'Andervilliers's ball, finer than any she had ever seen.

Switching to her recipe for gold edible paint, Liv felt a surge within her. She became mesmerized by the Halloween palate of metallic oranges, golds, and coppers. She felt their transformative powers and lined them up like so many bottles of nail polish.

Liv had decided to stay away from her Twitter feed because the sight of the irritating Gia in all her positivity, Liv guessed, was her chosen image,

clearly one that attracted her husband. But Liv could not keep away. She googled Gia's Twitter so she would not have to follow her and Gia's latest tweet popped up: "Well, if this face didn't brighten my morning!" A pic of Gia and her confused looking puppy, Maxine.

And, didn't Derek just mention the boys should have a dog to play Frisbee with?

Making sprinkles, Liv heard Derek walking upstairs with the walker, each thud brought her closer to losing it. A high-pitched howl, more like a flight call, came from her like a surge of violence, as she stirred dye in the unflavored gelatin. She poured it on rubber mats and watched it run and harden, the surfaces crinkly and colorful—neon green, black, purple.

Thud. Thud. Thud.

She picked up a spatula and threw it at the ceiling like a tomahawk.

Her anger hardened into rods, replacing her bones. Thinner rods pushed through the tips of her fingers. It nauseated her, watching. These new growths, as unreal as they were, gave her the urge to poke poke poke. She grabbed a spoon to prove to herself that she could pick it up, that these deformities were figments of her mood.

Since she hovered over Derek in the hospital with such care, a bolt in their relationship had been removed with the arrival of Gia. Or, if she thought like Arianna, perhaps Derek was just reacting to something that had already gone sour.

And why ask? Why question Derek who knew how to convince, persuade, cajole and twist the truth? She never questioned him because he would lie to her, as she would have lied to him, if confronted with such an accusation. Perhaps he knew about Dr. K and her—and didn't even care? Or, maybe she had been the Emma in their marriage all along.

Where did it come from, this feeling of deprivation, this instantaneous decay of the things in which she put her trust?

The doorbell rang. Liv figured it was Arianna. *Time to take the nurse out.* Arianna had a convertible, remarkably, a gift from her husband after he learned of her latest affair. She would convince Liv to go out in the October chill, get some coffee near her office in Greenwich. Liv knew Arianna sensed something was wrong because she had been on the prowl, trying to rile her with outlandish statements. Arianna was a deft lawyer, mostly wills, family estate and divorce. Liv loved hearing flickers of anonymous complications. Arianna just completed mediation training and mentioned it several times.

Liv went to the door like a painter coming out of her studio, her jeans streaked with silver sprinkles. Catching herself in the mirror, Arianna was right. She had become paler.

Derek's team was huddled on the front steps, the rest trailing out onto the walk, wearing masks and devil horns. Fleur and the new assistant were up front in bouncing whiskers. Liv skimmed the crowd. Further out she could see the point of a witch's hat.

"Trick or treat!"

Liv stood back as the group walked in, Fleur apologizing for barging but they wanted to surprise Derek. She was carrying a Halloween treat bag of granola bars, nuts and trail mix.

Gia scooted by like a chipmunk in a witch's hat, with a smile on her face, the type that Liv hadn't worn in a long time.

"We'll help him down." Two new guys Liv recognized from studying "Meet the Team," volunteered. Liv directed them.

The rest went into the living room, most hunkering down on the floor. Lightsaber beams flowed from the window giving the dark morning a fantastical hue.

Gia seemed to have hopped out of her avatar and landed on the couch, chatting with a teammate Liv didn't recognize.

"You know how Derek is always dancing around the office?" Fleur asked in the form of an announcement.

"It's more like shimmying," Gia called out. "He goes like this—" She jumped up, swayed her narrow hips.

Was Liv a fucking fool? To pretend she knew nothing? They all must have known what was going on.

Liv managed to ask the group if they wanted coffee. They roared with appreciation.

She left the room feeling the awkwardness of her height, her long flat feet slapping the wood floor, her white hair like filamentous feathers cascading down her back.

Liv noticed that Gia didn't even look at her on the way out, laughing with the guy next to her, pumping her foot in those heels. At 10am. Liv imagined a black plume on Gia's small head.

Gia must have worked on the *Vaniqu* account. Tried it herself.

In the kitchen getting coffee, she could hear the team cheering Derek. The jubilation, she assumed, accompanied Derek's announcement that *LivRight* was nominated for a Pharma Marketing Award.

They must have helped him to the empty chair next to Gia.

In the kitchen cabinet, above where the old phone used to hang, was an array of sample drug packets that Derek had brought home from prospective pharmaceutical companies that *LivRight* was in the offing to represent. Derek threw them in like stolen sugar from Starbucks. What are these? Sedatives? *Hydroxyzine*. *Trazodone*. *Desyrel*. *Ativan*. She picked up a small foil square and ripped it open, the tiniest pills tumbled out like white non-pareils, a delicate hail that made Liv think of white fondant on a wedding cake.

Perhaps this was just enough to make Derek a little woozy, on top of all the other drugs mingling in his blood. And, what would Gia do if she saw Derek act like an old man? Would she still be interested? It wasn't money she was after because there wasn't enough of that to go around.

Liv entered with a tray of coffee. The thought of leaving her husband quietly as soon as she could soothed her. Didn't Buddhists say to leave a room without a trace?

There was Derek. In the chair next to Gia.

His forehead shined, his hair pulled into a stubby wet ponytail. He was wearing a tight black t-shirt, his usual plump biceps unaffected by his sedentariness, and postoperative sweat pants.

She held the tray over Derek's lap, aiming his cup in front of him, and smelled Gia's lemony perfume.

"Oh, I'll take this one," Gia said leaning over, snatching Derek's cup that was less full than the others. "I can't have too much caffeine. Low energy is not my problem."

Liv watched her drink Derek's coffee.

Derek stood up in a show, holding onto the cane, taking coffee, passing cups to the next person. When the tray was empty, he grabbed Liv gently by the waist, got settled back in his chair, and pulled his wife on his lap, mostly on the good leg.

"Here is my goddess-nurse," he said kissing her hand then raising it up like she was a champ in the ring.

Had she been wrong?

He kissed her hard on the side of her face, her expression a crunched up disgrace.

Gia put her empty coffee cup on the table. Liv finally recognized the guy next to her—Ellis Tan, the senior account manager.

He was holding Gia's hand.

"Let's do what we came here to do. The swivel," Ellis Tan pulled Gia up and started a line, gathering the others.

That oldish Usher song, *Burn*, was coming from somewhere. Gia was mouthing the words, showing teeth—you gotta let it go, the party ain't jumpin' like it used to, *eventhough it might bruise you*—

"What's the swivel?" Liv asked, turning away from Gia's singing face, feeling the word that she had carried on her tongue for weeks, spitting it up, tripping on it.

Like so many Dereks, the same way he danced around the house, the team danced making sudden stops and changes in direction.

A realization began to pool around Liv's feet. This woman was just another team member whom Derek tried to get the most productivity out of as he could.

Liz observed Gia, in the center of the dance line, perfectly still, her eyes focused on the window in the direction of Cove Island, perhaps listening to a spirit only she could hear. She collapsed, her skinny legs folding neatly under her skirt.

Ellis Tan caught her.

"Give her air," Liv got up moving into the line, taking her by the waist as she had so many hospice patients, and put her on the couch. "Please, can someone get a glass of water?"

Ellis assisted taking off Gia's shoes and brushed her hair away from her face.

Gia, Liv could see, was struggling. If this woman believed her own positive bullshit, somehow, she would pull herself out of the stupor.

The team was on their knees as if an injured football player was on the ground.

Derek walked to the window, anxious for the paramedics to arrive.

And this was how he worried while waiting for the boys at 2am to come home from a party on a Saturday night. He would stare at the driveway, willing them to return.

Liv got up from the couch and walked to stand behind Derek. She almost touched him. He had his fingers resting on top of his lips. It seemed like so long ago, when he looked contemplative, just like that, his eyes whirlpools, and Liv would ask, "What are you thinking?" His answer was always the same. "I was thinking of you."

Derek turned toward the couch, his gaze unable to stay on Gia with her head resting on Ellis Tan. He turned back to the front window and closed his eyes. "Sparky. She was the sparky type," he said, sharing the slightest smile with himself as if Gia had died right there, doing the swivel, and he was taking a moment.

Sparky. Derek's voice entered Liv for the first time in how long? This word lodged itself in her lower belly, twisted and wrung like a heavy wet dish rag.

Liv left the whole glum team with Gia, her new slack face, and Derek with his descriptive choice of words.

She walked into the kitchen, rubbing her arms, willing distinct tracts to appear, a soil of sorts for feather membranes to grow, to insulate her. If Liv could design her new bird-self, she would thicken with white feathers sporting a pearly sheen. If her wings became real, just this once, she would fly somewhere, find where all this started, and who this rod-growing phantom was that lived inside of her. Only then could she look down on a new life, where everything was untouched and glistening.

Nidhi Agrawal

THE BLEEDING MOTHER

For her, the world is an airheaded canvas
Struggling with the dimensions of infinity.
You draw haloes only to be trapped by the
Colors; red and white.
She is the slayer of Maya (illusions)
Around the confined spaces
To soak up the visible hues,
The canvas is her battleground.

Vermillion gushes out of the river
When she cuts the channels of
The mighty Brahmaputra,
The valley is the abode of
Her yoni.
At the mouth of nothingness (Bay of Bengal),
The mother bleeds and encapsulates
The cremation grounds in her ovum.

Philip Terman

ON THIS SIDE OF TIME

A sparrow clings to the thin branch of the willow.
I know this is another morning of the newspaper
and breakfast and work—nevertheless, we are
at the ready, attentive as the grass is to the wind,
this urging toward completion, examples of the first order,
illustrious, though half of me is distracted, slovenly,
hair tussled, beard unkempt, stained shirt—
can you tell I'm fumbling my way, that I don't know
where I am, let alone where I'm going, in these
intimations of rain, of white apple blossoms blown
across the mustard field, caught up as I am
in the inscrutable meanings of the snapdragons
and the frogs who urge repentance from the dragonflies,
resurrections of my ancestors, herring dealers and Talmudic scholars.

*

Has it gotten through to you by now
that it's all a dream? The volunteer
sunflowers, bowing every-which-way,
the bespeckled apple tree, the evening,
long as it lingers? Will we be among
the stories passed down—not our names,
but something, and so: how do I love
more deeply? How do I gather in
the presence of my wife and daughters?
In Moses' farewell speech,
he tells us to choose life and to heed
the commandments, so that we may endure
long upon the soil: *Write down the poem,*
a voice said: *and put it in their mouths.*

*

Where is that secret part of the soul
where poetry enters, stays its time, leaves?

When your body and soul turn inside out
and your flesh is cold, hot, cold,
your speech incomprehensible,
as if you were speaking a strange language?

And the earth, as it did in the time of Samuel, stands still?

And a voice arises out of a flame,
the one in your heart?

Sometimes it's just a matter
of getting it down right,
of bringing the whole hour
into the poem—

the swallowtail floating its piano key wings across the mid-morning sky.

*

I'm studying to be an expert
of a little sun mixed with a little rain.

Aren't we all specialists?

Or perhaps I'd be the one to consult
about the moon perched
like a fat owl in the sweetgum.

I can write a dissertation,
focusing on when dusk arrives.

Certain silences also suggest themselves.

No way could I achieve the learning
for a higher degree in how the sudden appearance
of the bluebird affects the heartbeat—

flashes across the garden
and stops it completely.

*

If we can harness
all this loneliness
and longing,

we'd fuel our hearts'
happiness for at least
half a century—
trying even the patience
of God,
who relies
on our losses,
who'd like nothing
better than for us
to stand up often as we can
and beat our breasts—

*

Now all is quiet save for those sparrows and Neruda
who, too, is blossoming again, the way we all blossom,
even the dead stars, each and every particle of dust
says its testament. Can you read your book while
your eyes survey the earth from end to end? And
when the parchment burns, do the letters float on air?
All I ask is for poetry to stop time, not too difficult
a request, though I know I'm part of a long line
of crazies, of bizarre students of the eternal.
Don't we all want to be loved like King David?
Aren't we all pieces of cloth from the magisterial robe?
And aren't we the ones who cannot distinguish
between the cries of laughter and the cries of weeping?
Can we locate the apocalypse of our lives?

*

We who would never know if we will know another year,
another day, we who have known and loved those
we can no longer know, or love—here we are, still
partaking of the food and wine, still able to ask
forgiveness, still aching to declare: *I love you*,
and know light from dark, snowfall from silence,
still learning that the names of the sages
are eclipsed by the names of their books—
we who would trade all the forgotten days
for one remembered hour, we who believe that God

is in the details, that the butterfly koi lazily floating
on the green water is master of the ceremonial moment,
and the morning moon, camouflaged as a clump of cloud—
we who know of beauty to the extent of which we are capable—

*

---still continuing to work with our hands,
to hold up our frail end of our earth,
through one lifecycle into the next.
Each day we circle the gravel path
around the stones of the cemetery,
each day we walk around our deaths
where we are the only bones walking,
the only lungs breathing, the only hearts beating--
we're learning the terrain of our next life,
the gradation of light, the quality of air,
we know the steepled church white against the clear sky,
we know the field distancing itself into its own darkness.
We're learning the names of our future neighbors
and attempting to distinguish their deeper silence.

*

Let every question's answer be: *Hummingbird*.

Butterfly bush, sustain me,
hydrangeas release me into the honeysuckle air
of late afternoon silence and the search for shadows,
any shadow, any gathering place
for coolness, any weeping willow
near water, any breeze that would carry the dream forward.

What was it you thought you were doing all those hours
if it wasn't carrying your life along with you?

All those years of silence,
what were they if not some great hesitation
for an ultimate conclusion?

We are arriving envelopes
with time-sensitive materials.

*

Late summer mornings were soft, those days the children waited for the bus, first days of school and tomatoes piled into the sink like so many blazing red flowers, the screech of the blue jay and the cat bounding through the wet meadow. What is this urge that demands to translate these moments into song? I want to write beautiful long lines perfectly realized as this moment, which doesn't plead or declare its inadequacies, it only shakes its lush-leaved limbs and bows its school bus yellow goldenrods and ripples its pond's surface throughout the afternoon into whatever happens next. We want to be a thousand places at once, flying over the harvested garden, the hay collected and baled, we want the bluebird to suddenly reappear at its feeder the way it did that morning we sipped coffee and watched our children perform backflips on the trampoline.

*

It is here we love, here we follow with reverence
the commandments of our one dream and good books.
How over a century ago the wise shaped a clearing
for love of learning and simple beauty and the future.
It will give sustenance to those who praise and celebrate
what the stuff of legends and the visions of the poets foretold.
For travelers it is a place of renewal. Listen
to the bells ringing for you to partake in a ceremony
filled with sacred food and stomping music and the continual dance.
Can you hear the joyful laughter in the celestial spheres?
Once there was a story told about a house such as this.
It was made of bread instead of brick and fed a multitude.
Children fell asleep to the soft winds and dreamed
of willows and water. There is no conclusion to the light.

Sarah Maclay

Cypress-Adjacent

It's only after you compliment me on my Palmer method—which I've managed to loop across a dozen envelopes or so, as well as a book you've brought for me to sign (though so often now I use my semi-doctor's-scrawl); only after the two of us have been sitting across the table from each other, talking, sharing wine?, laughing over some damn thing I can't recall in this "spacious 2nd floor apartment" I've decided to rent, where the view we both enjoy (from several windows, tall) is "comforting and breezy"—and where I can tell that the space will feel even larger if I can just move one of those narrow dining tables just a little closer to the wall and cover it with a sheet—that I remember you are dead. But it's still before I dash back down the stairs to stop at an ATM on my way to meet the landlady, with my roll of coins, to sign. And now is the moment you give me some advice:

Michael Robins

Under the Broad Daylight

A pink rag on the bottom shelf & the final summer day of the last century. I was there, before we met, under the houseless stretch where powerlines dip between the towers. You knew at times the village, grandmothers circling the fields in their Sunday best. Now the soldiers huddled at the border, trading cigarettes, awaiting their orders to invade. Shame & gratitude both when I awoke, months ago, in a Wyoming street. A song & its moment stalled, then the historic wreck like the names we give every disastrous thing that ripens in the body. Kingdom, phylum, the armies with variable, barbaric ways of misbehaving. I touch your knee, my memory of the scars in this midwinter, middle-aging bite.

Michael Robins

Carnations for My Daughter

Again the sun humbles what's said or slurred once the ground vanishes, the sky flips & aren't those the stems I thought I trimmed a while ago, giving them residence in a cool, clear glass. Their purple petals flash & I've forgotten the pretty phrases—white bread or cellar door—that took so much from a winter day to correct & my head, once more, proves itself good for a bounce or two. Yet this lost address, this panic & slip into the brightness nothing like sleep where strangers, mortal like me, wait their turn in the emergency room. Every other chair missing from a row, the diabetic counting hours to see a doctor, any doctor, & later the mercy of coming home. Before she switches out the light, Emerson says, "There's something different about you." I watched my shadow sink into the thin, dark water, & heard each syllable of the Spanish word for hope.

Michael Robins

Left on Monument Road

With the end of love. With the end of dancing. With the end of holding back for I've rolled beneath the wire & the fence. With the top of the hour & other gray smudges on the surface of the brain. With my phone that rattles & wants nothing from poetry. With an impression like a necklace across the morning wind. With the end of before & the end of after. With a bench sinking into the earth, with the saloons & the post office & the general store. With the rock I drove from the road leading to the only marked grave in the cemetery. With the child born in another century, who wouldn't live long enough to know the end of nightmares or prairie dogs. Cough & cough & with a pyramid muscling against the plains. With the end of fools suggesting it's almost spring. With the end of clouds each time our nearby star pokes through with a fiery crown.

Just How You Knew Him

November 17

Dear David,

I walked in on our Uncle Damon today. His head was angled upward, his mouth slacked to the side, and his eyes were glassed over and lazy like he was drunk and asking God for help standing up. And the ceiling fan hadn't held. White chips on the bedding around him, like his dandruff was just out of control. David, I'm writing you to let you know that Uncle Damon hung himself. Out of some kindness, I suppose, you won't find a cause of death in the obituary.

Just like Uncle Damon to hang himself as opposed to using that snub-nosed of his. Left as little mess as possible. And just like Uncle Damon for things to go ever so slightly wrong, those white flakes on the bedding, a repair bill for the ceiling fan. No note, but I'm sure he meant for whoever found him to consider his passing as serious, but there was something nearly comedic in the slack of his jaw, the laze of those eyes. Those eyes nearly googling. Deader than dead. No note on his pretty, hand-made nightstand, just a full and simmering ash-tray. I suppose he figured, as he seemed to with most things, that it should have been obvious enough why he did what he did.

Pop was the one who sent me over. Said Uncle Damon had called and needed my help with a stump in his yard. I thought he'd finally said goodbye to the old poplar you and I used to climb, and my mind was weighed down with the past as I turned down Uncle Damon's dirt road, made my way to his doublewide. I was surprised see the poplar still standing. Strange, though, because the poplar still being there didn't steady my thoughts. The memory was still a memory, and maybe one day I would drive down Damon's dirt road and not think about the poplar, and our times climbing up and taking chances, jumping from branch to branch. Because the poplar didn't care one way or the other. Neither did the grass our bodies would flatten when we fell. They say man's memory isn't worth a damn, but the world's is worse, or the world has no memory, except for what's done to it. I was hoping Damon would ask me to cut the tree down as his screen door sighed shut behind me. There was the smell of tequila, of nicotine. I called his name. His hearing had been going, so I made my way to his bedroom.

I wonder if he did the measurements, mapped out how long he had before I'd get there, figured how long he would take to die. He always bragged about that math degree. He had time for a cigarette before he did the deed, as those burning ashes proved, but maybe the cigarette was in his mouth as he made the call. All I know is that when I was looking at him, as he stared into space, the thing wasn't in his mouth, and no ashes littered the carpet in front of him.

Perhaps he hadn't meant to die there, just intended on my arriving more quickly. Maybe he expected me to save him. I was the only one who could. I was the one he asked for.

Grayson Treat

I'm writing this letter as opposed to an email, because I don't suppose it matters how quickly this reaches you. You didn't come down for Gramp's funeral, which is your right. The pen feels good in my hand, but I suspect that the novelty of it will wear off quickly. I hope this doesn't make you feel too bad. You should know that he looked a little comical, yes, but still he was dead, and that counts for something, and he was also at peace, and that might count for more. We're saying our final goodbyes in a week or so, if the obligation strikes you.

*Your Brother,
Bill*

November 21

Dear David,

Tonight, Pop came into the house, into the kitchen, and vomited in the sink. He laid his head on the countertop for a short time, then he poured more Maker's into his silver-colored flask. He set his head down and rubbed his forehead raw against countertop, eyes closed. Then he said that he needed me to drive him back to Grandma's. I said sure, threw on a pair of jeans, and got a jacket. He was standing in the door, smiling that long, fake smile of his that reminds me of you. That smile worries me more than if he weren't smiling at all, than if he stayed scowling.

On the way over, Pop was telling me all the stories I'd heard before about Uncle Damon. He told them like Uncle Damon hadn't hung himself and like I'd just asked to hear them again. The drive is a long one, grandma still lives near Salem, way out there in the county, so there was a lot of listening to be done. Around the time the pavement gave way to dust, and the yellow grass started to get so long it arched every which way, I couldn't listen to him anymore.

There's a feeling I still get listening to Pop talk like that, a feeling I can't quite abide. I'm reminded of when you and I were kids and that house at the end of Spring Creek Drive flooded. Mom was beside herself. She'd been working on renovating that house for half a year. She squeezed the skin of her temple between two fingers and talked about the hardwood-flooring being ruined, and I remember being surprised because there was just the thinnest amount of water across the largest swathe of floor. That's all it takes to ruin a pretty thing. That's the only way I can figure to say how I feel when Pop talks like he's just some lost kid, which is most of his talking these days. I've got the thinnest amount of something erosive inside me, wearing away at what holds me up, making me uneven.

Twilight turned to darkness on the drive, and the yellow from the grass was reflected at me from the lights of the pickup, and Pop was still talking. While he talked, and I'm ashamed of this, I was thinking of the stories I'd tell about you and me, had I someone to tell. Seems to me like they all involve us getting hurt in one way or another. There's the

story of the poplar, jumping between the limbs. One day, you fell from a branch halfway up and I thought you'd broke your back. The fall knocked the wind out of you, and you were gasping and contorting. Instead of running for help like I should've, I just screamed like hell from your side, afraid to leave you alone should you die right there. I'd heard from listening in on a movie that Mom and Pop watched once that letting someone die alone was the worst thing you could do to them. Your eyes faced the sky. Seemed like you'd been suffering forever when Uncle Damon came out running. He told you in such a calm voice to not panic, to slow down, to just breathe. You asked me later why I didn't go for help, but the question wasn't aggressive, like you knew I had a good reason, and there was a moment between us when I failed to come up with an answer, and our gazes averted from each other, because there's the feeling that things between brothers are never supposed to get too serious.

David, I can say now what I couldn't say then, that I won't let you die alone. I think maybe if I'd been able to say that then, if I'd been able to say that ever, you wouldn't have left. I still have hope though, that even if I'm not enough to return for, then maybe Uncle Damon is. I can't fathom you would have forgotten his voice, Breathe, David, just breathe.

Pop stopped talking when we pulled into Grandma's gravel driveway. The pickup bounced all the way, and any talking he would have done would have been drowned out by the pops of the gravel. He nearly tripped on his way out of the pickup. I rolled the window down as he came around to the driver side and leaned against the door. I could smell the Maker's. Thanks, son, he said, then all in one motion he wrapped an arm around my neck, and I felt the warmth of a kiss on my head. I raised back up. He smiled that smile again. Really, a needy sort of smile. He said, You could come in, you know. I love the chances I get to talk to you.

I looked toward the house. Not a light on, and I imagined sitting around in the darkness or the low light. I didn't know who all was there, but I imagined Aunt Teresa, Grandma, maybe even cousin Jeanna. I could see them asking me why I thought Uncle Damon called me. They might ask what it was like to walk in on him, and I might have to talk about the google of his eyes. Once they had got to asking questions, they might never have stopped until they ask the right one. Say, why were you never able to save a single person? They wouldn't say that, but I know that's all I'd hear.

No, I told him. That's all right.

He moved his jaw crossways like he might protest. Then he nodded, smiled again, and turned to go inside. After the door closed behind him, I was allowed to appreciate the night, the chorus of frogs and crickets, and the chorus made by the friction of buggy parts rubbing against one another. When I was used to the noise, the silence crept back in, and along with it was everything I had to remember.

David, I might have felt some comfort. I might have given Uncle Damon a Viking funeral, like that picture in Mom's old sociology book, the one she homeschooled us from. I might have set him adrift on the gray water of Lake Norrell, in a raft made of those desks he used to carve out in his shed, maybe I would have sat and watched the flames crawl into the sky, just like that picture. Because I liked to think we had some kind of mutual understanding, and I would be one who knew why he did what he did, and I could go about my day and be silent, and if anyone asked why he did what he did, I could tell them that a man lives out his purpose, and that's that, and Uncle Damon knew that. His purpose was well and truly lived out in that case. Divorced, and poorly so, cheated on Aunt Teresa. His daughter, all but estranged and wild. Who could blame her, with the way he was as a father? Yes, I would have taken comfort and set him adrift on a raft made of those desks he liked to carve in his shed. Except after he'd been taken away, we did some looking for a note, for any sort of clue that told us for sure why he'd done himself. When we looked in his shed, we found his beautiful desks smashed to pieces. I can't parse why he'd do a thing like that. How much he'd have to hate himself to want to obliterate every trace, even of the things he loved. There's no peace or comfort in knowing he suffered. There's nothing comical about this, and the picture from the book would have been wrong because you can see from one side of Lake Norrell to the other. That means I would've had to watch him sink, would have had to watch the sky return the flames to the water, like even Heaven knows, like the stars are saying, This isn't something that happens here.

David, I want you to know that you don't need to feel an obligation to come down, but I'd like to know that you're putting around out there still. Times like these, one gets to counting those they hold dear. There's Mom and Pop. Really, they are so far away. Well, I suppose you are too.

*Your Brother,
Bill*

November 22

Dear David,

Last night, I had some time to myself, Mom was back in her room, tapping away at the keys of her laptop, planning a vacation. Pop had been at Grandma's all day. I was sitting in the living room, and I had the mind to read or put on a movie, but there was a white, square spot on the wall where an old piece of art used to hang. The canvas had gotten wet one way or another, and, during one of her more energetic stretches of time, Mom had thrown the painting away with the intention of buying another one, then lost her pep. That was months ago. Anyway, that blank spot reminded me of you, like maybe you'd found a hole somewhere in the house to disappear into, like maybe if I took a saw and cut around that spot I might find you hiding back there. I figured I'd be too distracted to

read or watch anything. Nothing would win a competition with that spot on the wall.

I put on a jacket and drove down to the Springhill Tavern. Before Uncle Damon died, I'd sometimes drive up after Mom and Pop had passed out in their separate bedrooms. I never drink anything. Despite that, the right bartender will still let me sit at the bar. I like to watch them pour drinks. All the bartenders know Pop and Mom. The Tavern is the only place they'll do their drinking in the same room, though the drinking they do there isn't the drinking of same-hearted comrades and arms. More, they're two frogs trapped in a pool filter, sucking down water because that's all there is, likely for the rest of their lives.

Last night, the bartender was one who I knew would let me sit, so I did. Sometimes we carry on conversation, but last night there were more lively regulars, and I was at a stool on the far end. Sometimes the bartender will see me watching and offer me a drink on the house, like I'm making them nervous, and I'll shake my head. Last night, I went to the jukebox and put on Willy Nelson, as usual. I went back and sat and watched her pour drinks. There's something about watching a vessel fill. Maybe I should have been a metal worker, filled crucibles, emptied them, filled them again. Like most nights, last night I noticed the vastness between the bar and the bartender and the person next to me and me. There is always this underwater feeling from the light reflected off the linoleum floor. I heard the clack of a pool stick, and the drag against the felt, and the cool voice of some young guy trying to get laid. There's always the breeze from the ceiling fan that's making things just cold enough to be uncomfortable. I'm always sure to never overstay my welcome. I always walk into the night, and there's the recurring feeling of not having known I was looking for something in there. It's something I never find, and I never know what the something is, and I don't know where to start looking, or how. I drove back home, knowing that I'd spend all night staring at that spot.

Instead, I got home, and Mom was in the living room. A surprise, because usually Mom spends her time tapping away at the keys of her laptop, planning vacations like she's planning tiny jailbreaks, and, when she's not, she drinks enough so that the thinking on that is enough to occupy her. She's got the kind of brain that's powerful enough to think on everything all the time.

She's taken to watching a reality show called *My 600 Pound Life*. I lay on the couch. She wasn't breathing heavily like she does when she's been drinking, so I thought we might talk, which we hadn't done for real in some time. I asked her how she was, and she didn't reply. I asked her again and she started, Oh, I'm all right. She talked too slowly and too loudly. She pulled her knees. She straightened like she wanted to perform. Her eyes stayed on the T.V, then she said that she finds the stories so inspiring. A woman stepped on a scale. Five-hundred and fifty

pounds. Mom sighed and let her head fall against the chair. I didn't press for more. Just watched the T.V. with her, listening for when her breathing slowed. She hasn't worn her perfume in a long time. I still smell the scent, though it's weak, and I often wonder whether the smell is a result of wishful thinking. I miss being reminded of her everywhere in the house. If you don't remember, it's a sweet and heavy smell, like getting your nose right up in a rose but dulled enough that the sweet smell doesn't overplay, doesn't bite. I stared at the television screen and missed her badly for a while, and when her breathing did slow, I took her to her room, and laid her in her bed. She smiled and said, Thank you, baby. I gave her a wink that I'm sure she couldn't see in the darkness and left her to sleep. I went into the dining room, then sat down at the dinner table to write this letter.

Just so you know, David, we're making the money we've got work for us. We're living mostly off his teacher's pension, her disability, and whatever extra I can scrape together in my free time. Lots of the time, that means cutting grass or helping the Boswell's groundskeeper, Mr. Cline, on the odd job or two. You'll laugh because I'm not too handy, and that hasn't changed. I think he pities me. Luckily, I'm not too proud, not about this anyway. I'm just doing my best to care for them. The truth is, I don't have much hope they'll get better. I don't have the skills to make that happen, so I just try to help them get from day to day.

David, I can't say that I don't know why you left. You had the thing in you that lets you leave. I don't know if I can say that Mom and Pop would have clawed the both of us down with them if you'd stayed. Maybe together we could have buoyed them. Being here though and taking everything alone, I'm put in the position of not being able to hold much against you. I'd never hold avoiding this life against anyone. I promise.

What I truly cannot say is why, after you left for your work up in Michigan, we never heard from you again. Each one of us gave you a strong hug, watched you roll out of the driveway with your U-haul, and that was it. I even remember you were teary-eyed, but maybe that's only because you were aware of what you were doing and how things would go. You weren't just escaping Saline County or Arkansas or The South. You weren't just getting away from Mom and Pop. You were getting away from me. I cannot abide that. If it's the truth.

Uncle Damon's visitation is the twenty-fourth, and his funeral is the twenty-fifth. There's some foolish part of me that's hopeful you'll be there, but I know some part of that is naïve, so I'll just ask again. This time, I'll tell you just how badly I need to at least hear from you. I need you to tell me that I wasn't just another part of what made this place unbearable to you. I need to hear that there's been something else that's been holding you away from me, that you wouldn't just leave my life so cleanly and utterly, just like you did. Really though, if you pressed me, all I'd say is that I just need you to say anything, anything at all.

*Your Brother,
Bill*

November 23

Dear David,

Do you remember when we were kids, our street opened to a giant mud pit? Parents didn't want us playing down there because of broken glass, but anytime we were outside during the rainy season, as you might have guessed, that's where we ended up. Flinging balls of mud, making a game out of who could climb up the sheerest side of the pit in the slickest way. We met Peter in the middle of one of those climbs. He asked if he could join. I was hesitant, like he was some alien creature, but you shrugged your shoulders and said, Why not. I was jealous because Peter was the fastest. We raced over and over again, not to be outdone, until parts of our fingernails were crusted into the mud, and our clothes were sure to never be usable again, and the sun had turned the mud into dirt. The very last go, he won again, and I was feeling like I might take a swing at him, when instead of bragging at the top, he said, I'm just part gorilla. Then he flared his nostrils and jumped around and screamed, and we laughed until we were on the ground, you and I tangled together, grasping each other like that's where we might have found our breath.

We went home, and Mom made us go pick out our switches. I was looking through the sticks, trying to find a good one, because if I picked one too small, she'd make me come back out and find another, and that would make the beating worse. Instead of looking for your own, you came over to me, got real close, said, Tell her you got stuck, and that I just got in to help you.

She won't believe it, I said, tossing a twig aside, eyeing a long, tangly one, that might have just been thick enough. You grabbed my arm, stepped in front of me, snapping the switch.

Just as well, say it anyway, you said.

All right, jeez.

You deserve it more anyway for taking the Lord's name in vain, you said. I must have looked confused, because then you added, Jeez is short for Jesus, then you went about looking for your own switch to show, probably as a way of showing you didn't put me up to it, that you expected the switching.

Back inside, I told her what you told me to say, and when she protested, I insisted still. She just looked between us. Finally, I convinced her when I insisted that I'd take your lashes, too. And I did. I took them all.

Today, Mom decided everything was too much for her. She decided to leave for her vacation early. After I dropped her off at the airport, I drove home and walked the neighborhood. I walked to the end of our street. The pit is still there, deeper than ever, and so is your debt.

Grayson Treat

Please write back.

*Your Brother,
Bill*

November 25

Dear David,

The visitation was last night, and the funeral was today.

I was thinking about you at Uncle Damon's visitation. Aunt Teresa was knelt in front of his casket, arms wrapped around the side, hanging in, like she hadn't also given him that scar above his left eye, an iron she'd thrown at him, not that he didn't probably deserve it. Grandma was nearly grappling her, squeezing so tightly. Neither were crying, though. I suppose they had done all of that they could do. Cousin Jeanna was crying. The tears dripped from her nose into the casket. There must be some regret there, because, as far as I know, she hadn't seen him in years, and maybe if she was there then for him like she was now, maybe she'd still have a dad. Not that I blame her, mind you, but that must have been her thought, because there she was clutching at his lapels like everyone wants to be clutched at in life, except that he was dead, and the clutching did him no good.

And there's something about witnessing someone in that state. What can you say? I heard someone say to Grandma at one point that everything would be okay, and I thought of that as expressly the wrong thing to say. I thought of that as the most untrue thing to be said at that moment. I don't mean to say that they will never have another okay moment in their lives. But after that moment will be a moment of guilt for feeling okay when things aren't. In the end, everyone is left alone by everyone most dear because everyone dies, and even from the first time you experience it, you are diminished a little more, and maybe you are no longer able to hold the dear ones as closely as you would like, maybe as you should, and that diminishes the living too. I think of cousin Jeanna, and how no one she meets will ever measure up to the towering impression left by the dead. The idea of them left to be built up. I didn't say anything to either of them and hoped that my presence was enough.

At the funeral, Grandma wore that same famous black dress she wore to Mom and Pop's wedding. Aunt Teresa sat next to her daughter. If you remember, Mom decided to leave for her vacation early, so there was just me and Dad on the pew across from them. I watched Pop talk about Uncle Damon like he was some different man I'd never known. Pop was nearly unable to speak, he was so choked up, and he had to limp off stage. He nearly collapsed into my arms, but I gave him a shake and pushed him upright into his spot, unsure of whether he was drunk or not. He leaned back against me, and I stopped trying to push him off. Then, like the weight of him broke something, the anger blasted from somewhere deep to every part of me. I pushed him off me, hard. I sat staring forward,

listening to the drone of one of Uncle Damon's buddies. Not looking at Pop. He was still crying, and I saw each cry as him calling out how badly he needed me to be there for him, but my mind was on Damon's eyes, the white chips littering his bedspread. I needed to think, just think things through and I would have been fine, remember the simmering ash tray, remember it hard, but Pop just wouldn't shut up. Then I had the thought I'd been working against having for so long, that I'd prided myself for being strong enough to forego. Mom and Pop are burdens.

The truth is, David, that I resent them. I resented Uncle Damon, too. I resented him until he hung himself by that ceiling fan. I figured it was the rightest thing he ever did in his life. Not that I hated him. The opposite, he was a good uncle. But the truth is that he had become an addition to the burden of others, and that's why I respect him for what he did. A man lives out his purpose.

You left me holding the buck, David. You left me holding everything. How could you? I promised you that I didn't hold your leaving against you, but I do. I can only think of that profound emptiness of the pew next to me. I can only remember the sound of our father's blithering, and the sight of that empty pew, and hold everything against everyone. I hate the way I've become.

After the wake, where we sang Damon's favorite song, "My Way," more than three times, the sky began to darken. Pop asked me to take him to Grandma's. I said yes, though there was so much pressure against my skull. The drive was quiet. All his talking must have been spent, and I couldn't get the word from my head. Burden. Now that I'd thought the thought, I couldn't stop. All I could do was go down the list of weights, tiny and not, they'd placed on me and hound them for each one. Pop's constant drinking, his inability to even get himself dressed most days. How his sorrows, then, become my sorrows, because the surest way to help him fix himself is to fix his sorrows, the distance from everyone in his life, from my mother, now the distance from his father and his brother. The only way I could see to fix is to be there for him no matter what. I resent him the most because no difference is made. He is the same, just forces me to be his beast of burden. Then there's Mom, the way she left earlier this week like the way she always leaves, either away to who knows where or into the shadows of the house, making herself unavailable for weeks at a time, leaving me alone to carry the weight of Pop. Though there's something extra, too, from her. Her absence elicits weight all its own, unfurls a tension into the air of our house, of dissatisfactions, or other, smaller hatreds that she must be leaving unsaid about my father, about me. In their being unsaid, the words are left to the mind to grow huge. Huger than anything we could ever fathom or rectify. This way she instills a hopelessness that I carry. And I thought maybe I could take everything, but here I am, holding all this weight that has nowhere to go, and I can't hold it for much longer. I wish I were strong

enough, but I don't seem to be, and I hold that against myself as much as I hold their everything against them.

When we reached the end of Grandma's gravel driveway, Pop got out and went inside. He didn't ask me to follow. I sat out there until the dark crept from the house out into every part of the world that I could see right then, and I sat for longer. I don't know exactly how long. There were no fireflies, but I thought there would be this time of year, so there was just the dark, and the mass of noises from the trees. I opened the door of the truck and got out. I followed Pop. I opened Grandma's screen door and checked the knob of the cheap wooden one behind it. I walked through the house, looking for them. Some time passed as I checked a number of the rooms until I came to Damon's old room. There they were, crowded on Uncle Damon's old bed, Pop and Grandma. She had him cradled, his head pressed into her chest, and his arms about her shoulders. Her gray hair would have reflected the moonlight, had there been any. Instead, there was only a dark tangle across the both of them. They were asleep.

David, I stood in the doorway watching them for some time. I didn't feel anything at first, didn't think anything either, and I couldn't tell you why I stayed, but I did, and I could feel my skin after a moment. There's something wrong with them, but there's something wrong with me, too. Because there they were on that bed giving each other everything. Trading the weight, and though I take a lot for Pop, I wasn't taking nearly what they were giving each other right then. I felt the hatred that I'm feeling even now as I write this letter. I felt the hatred about myself and about everyone else. There's something in me that holds me from shorning off even a pound of any kind of weight to anyone, and there's something in them that keeps them from taking anything I might share. There was an outpour of hatred for Pop and Grandma, the way they held each other in their grief. And as I left the room, I thought through the people in my life. I started with Mom and Pop. I went to Uncle Damon. I went to you. There's a righteousness in the truth, but that doesn't stop the tears from coming as I write this. I hate all of you. I hate every part about every single one of you. All other things in the world grow smaller in the face of this.

When I got home from Grandma's, I didn't go right inside. I took a walk down the street, to the old mud pit. The pit is larger now, and the slopes are more treacherous. The moon wasn't out, which made the pit appear bottomless. I sat at the side and dangled my feet over the void.

David, I know why you had to leave, why the pew had to be empty. I know you haven't had time to reply to my letters, but you couldn't have called when you heard Damon died? Not even a call? You just left me here. You'd have no idea that if I were dead that I'd died alone. Maybe you wouldn't have cared. I'll hold that against you. I might as well hold that against everyone else, too.

*Your Brother,
Bill*

February 3rd

Dear David,

I know that months have passed since the night of Uncle Damon's funeral, when I last wrote. That night, I was looking to be caught by something. I thought of that old thing Pop used to tell us. That the only man who knew everything was the crazy person who thought he was a chicken. That didn't help. I saw myself as Uncle Damon. My feet were dangling over the void. Everything faded. I was looking to be caught, but all the normal reasons faded away, and there was no one. I'd die to everyone else. After I wrote the letter I decided to drive out to Damon's for myself, still feeling the hatred for him. I didn't know what I was going to do once I got there.

I pulled past the poplar, nearly touched the hood of Dad's truck to the tin siding of Damon's trailer. I went to his bedroom again. His trailer was the same as the day I found him, but there wasn't the smell of tequila and only the faintest smell of tobacco. Instead, the air was stagnant and smelled like cardboard. The ceiling fan was still yanked from the ceiling. There were still the white chips. The ash tray was clean. Who had done that? I sat on the bed where he'd been sitting. I imagined myself as him. I did the fastenings, the tightenings, all the while I was looking to be caught by something. I wanted to think something that would save me. My head hurt. The buckle pinched my skin. Surely, they wouldn't care. They would let me go, after a while. They would see what I saw. They would see that things were better, that I'd lived out my purpose. Noises came from my throat that weren't my own. I imagined what that felt like, to leave everyone behind, to no longer connect with anyone, because now you were dead. He was different from me, I realized then, because he'd made the decision to sever his ties to the world. Mine had been made for me. Everyone gone now. Everyone had brought my hate upon them, one way or another. I'd never had a choice.

I almost didn't need to think. All I needed was a lighter. I opened the top drawer of his bedstand. Poplar, I think he'd told me. Made the thing from scratch. I found a half-empty lighter among a variety of paper clips, a smattering of ashes, and a bible. Always kept one close, he said, for good luck. I went to his tool shed for the Kerosene. I poured a line around the trailer, around his work shed where all the remains of his woodworking still lived. The act didn't require a thought, there was no anger, even, just a hard determination. A block in my gut that held me to task, that told me this was something I had to do. I stumbled in the dark, my feet struggling to navigate his chaotic yard. Holes hidden by the overgrown grass, tiny bumps in the ground. When I was finished I stood in front of the trailer, made sure I'd made a trailer to everything I wanted.

The kerosene was running low. I'd forgotten the poplar. I doused the tree, too. That's where I'd start.

I flicked the lighter and watched as the flame responded to the wind, swaying one way then the other. I let the night noise reach me, once again, and prepared for the sound of the flames to drown everything out. I'd hear the groan of the poplar's wood as it died.

That's when I thought of the lapels. Of the clutching. Of our cousin. There she was, grasping at those lapels, hoarsing air into that coffin like she was asking him a desperate question. There was the guilt she would live with. And no telling what else. I don't have to wonder what that feels like, to realize that someone was always so distant, you never really knew them, and now they were beyond knowing. That breaks some part of you. An intense pressure against the inside of my skull. Damon made his decision to die, and a suicide is a different kind of death, the most distance you could place between yourself and anyone else. A gulf between you and everyone you ever knew. Like saying, You never even began to understand me.

David, to leave everyone you know, to never speak to them again, must have been a kind of suicide. You'd wonder until the last possible second whether you were the type of person for whom everyone else was replaceable, temporary, that no one was dear to you. Did you doubt that you were that kind of person? What kind of person do you suppose you are now, I wonder? David. That's when I put away the lighter. The block in my gut gave way to something else. I felt sorry for you. As much hatred as I felt for Mom, for Pop, for Damon and you, even, I knew that each of you was a permanent and monumental fixture in the landscape of my life. I've never wondered whether I was the type of person for whom my family mattered to me, whether the dearest people in my life were valuable. Even if, in that moment, I hated all of you, I'd loved you for far longer. I knew I'd love you all again. I wondered if I hadn't hated you out of love in the first place. A hatred borne of loving too desperately and not feeling the love returned. The lighter had gone out by now. The dark was still heavy, so finding the hose and the spigot took a long time. I didn't mind. There was the smell of gasoline still in my nose. I sprayed down the sides of the trailer, shed, finally the poplar. Cleaning in the dark takes time. The pink of morning showed over the trees by the time I was done.

The next few days were a haze. I fell again into hatred and pulled myself out time and time again. Pop wasn't home much, and when he was, we didn't speak. Mr. Cline wouldn't let me work. He said I should still be grieving. I was deep in my head, holding trial, making arguments against myself for the ones I loved. No matter how much I focused on my love for them, there was another part convincing me of their transgressions, and that part was not wrong, so I couldn't think the feeling into myself, no matter how much I tried to forgive.

When Mom returned from her vacation, I was painting over the white spot on the wall in the living room. I heard the door click shut. There was the roll of a suitcase on the hardwood. Mom was back. I could tell from the warmth in her voice when she said hello, from the attentive way she looked me up and down, that she was sober. There was the rush of her perfume. Sweet and heavy.

I stopped for a moment and couldn't speak. I made a few steps, still not speaking, and fell into her arms, crying. She ran her hands through my hair. She told me she had me, a small hint of surprise in her voice. My nose was pressed into the fabric of her shirt, and she held me tight. I knew she'd walk through the rooms, and they'd come back alive with the smell of her again. How could I have ever hated her? Even for a moment? My sweet momma. I told her everything. There was that old energy in her eyes, that old determination. Oh sweetheart, she said. I'm so sorry.

David, I'm writing this letter months later to let you know that I'm okay, and that Mom and Pop are trying to be better. I'm writing to say that's enough for now, and that I hope you'll come home. If you do, you'll find me here. We'll go down to the mud pit. During the winter, the dirt is dry. We can hold our legs over the edge. Right now, the dirt is turning to mud, and soon will be the slickest. We can even fling the mud at each other, and no one will switch us. In the meantime, I won't stop writing you. I create stories for you in my head, things that you've been getting up to in the wide world, though I've never been much of one for imagination. You mean too much to me. I will not stop.

I've been spending a lot of time at Uncle Damon's these days. His place is still there. The poplar. His shed. That's where I go. I've been putting my hands to his tools, trying to learn something new. I'm surprising myself with what I can make. Someday, I hope to be good enough to put my hands to his shattered desks. I want to give one to Pop and one to Aunt Teresa and one to Jeanna and one to Grandma. I want to give one to everyone he was ever close to. I want to say, Here he is, just how you knew him.

It was as predictable

as October
or the storm after the rhapsody I know
ecstasy when I see it There's a swarm
of poison trees alongshore & before you
flank the pastures searching for seeds &
investigate the night rain & we thought
we had it all covered poof! fire
in the pocket we're in a
country of vigilance which was not
what we swam for but it was either that
or sink Imagine the furor
as though I'd asked Imelda for a pair
of heels You know from the 3000
racked on the backs of her people
What if we walked into that dark warren
of passageways & how could we not
touch the sweat of her people I never
thought to size her up before those rose eyes
of hers like low-lying islands in the time of
typhoons she vaunting heavy-footed
in a bullet-proof bra along the promenade
seeking hired guns fleeing unrest
What of the red vented cockatoos babblers
& the fruit dove all that
coastal beauty What of the beach forest
of inbreeding & dis-ease the hogs
& horses our sins and yours
The promise of what brimming in the bowls
of an empire Every small want
the newly naked their every limb
the runes of bones while the kingdom
pretends to have nothing which makes
no difference to the starving loyals
When one grows more narrow
and selfish one must get down
to the troubled water front the city
gutters & breathe what the people
breathe until we mean something
to someone other than ourselves

April Ossmann

The City of Lost Shoes

I see them on roads,
sidewalks, parking lots,

and beaches: mostly sandals
and flip-flops

in summery colors,

some in pairs,
but more often not—

I can't stop gnawing
the obvious thought,

as if my canines

need more grinding—
I hope no soul

was kidnapped,

losing a shoe in confusion—
maybe one or two

loosed them in fear of man,

or beast, or forgot them
caught in the firesights

of greater loss:

an immigrant watering
a lakeshore mansion's garden,

still hoping to move

his family to the country
he once imagined

as providence;

and two non-exempt
one-percenters,

who dedicated

a pedestrian's bench
to their twenty-six-year-old

dead son. Surely,

all the beach kept were left
in the barefoot pleasure

of sand's massage,

but I want *all*—every lonely,
new or tattered shoe,

even those on burning roads,

pocked and dusty shoulders—
to have shed,

as bare soles

levitated from them,
in rapture any prejudice

has yet to imagine.

Stephanie L. Harper

WEATHER FORECAST

"We can tell she gets lost in the air ... and she opens up. You see her head looking to the right. She's twisting to the right. It looked like she wanted to keep twisting but got lost in the air;" former US gymnastics Olympian Laurie Hernandez said [of] Simone Biles awkwardly landing her vault Tuesday, leading the 24-year-old to shockingly withdraw from the team final in Tokyo.

~ New York Post, July 27, 2021

Yesterday's wind event didn't exactly out-blow
the August 2020 Iowa Derecho's record,

but that Atlas had the impertinence
to waver beneath his planetary burden

has the forecasters all fixated on the northwestern horizon,
bracing for our continent to bloom another powerful storm.

Sometimes a rise in the atmosphere's potential energy can be
enough to siphon a news cycle from the summer Olympics.

This July night is primed with six-thousand-plus joules per kilogram—
perhaps, the impetus for one hundred forty mile-per-hour wind gusts—

& not one predictable outcome....

*

If a butterfly cruising half a world & an ocean away opens
its wings to alight on a *matsu* pine, only to be sucked up

& thrown into the rear flank downdraft from a mesocyclone,
it has more pressing concerns than the weather in Wisconsin

& neither cares nor could say whether watching the sky
from far away enough to see red jellyfish sprites,

tentacles dangling would still be close enough to spy
the highest & most vibrant ones' attendant green ghosts.

Sometimes the ionosphere's pique can be just right
for those remotest of specters to speak to us

in their brief, bright dialect of pressure
gradients, angles of incidence & kinetic potentials

*

If a butterfly... if an athlete designated Greatest of All Time,
pulls out of the Olympics because of the *Twisties*

I don't think you realize how dangerous this is

Sometimes I can't even fathom

*Honestly petrifying trying to do a skill
but not having your mind & body in sync*

10/10

do

not

recommend

not one of us
can claim to understand—

Laurie Blauner

Spiral Woman

For Louise Bourgeois, 1984

The tree had only a certain number of ways to encircle me. The trunk that wraps around my torso is seen/unseen. It curls up from my pelvis to the top of my head, my arms and legs free. It neither tightens or loosens much but I manage. I am reliant on my mind. What is wrong with women that we are so bound still? Do we bind ourselves?

We careen stiffly, me and the other women nature has attached itself to. We walk around and around the famous hill in our town and then deep into the center of the local park. Men remove their hats and nod respectfully as they pass us along the paths.

We laugh when they are gone, *How would they like to be encased?*

It's so damn hard to sit down, someone sneers.

And sleep, another pipes in.

We're a living forest without the branches and leaves, I state. *So they salute us.*

Maybe the men will grow metal parts, someone surmises.

We laugh good-naturedly, afraid of falling. We haul our bodies everywhere like so much dead weight, moving them this way and that. It began when we were young women, a sprout that couldn't be removed, that grew back if it was severed. The trees seem to communicate with each other but we don't know exactly how. They are a part of us now.

We save so much money on clothes.

I haven't seen my bellybutton in years.

It's a symbiotic relationship, what happens to one tree trunk the other feels too, I claim, wanting my body to do what I want it to. I only know what I know when I try reattaching myself to the world, relocating myself among the many. Fertilization, expansion, rain, sun, soil, death, rot over the years. Where do our bodies want to go since we'd matured into our own grown-up landscapes?

Sandman

Various forces in the world have shaped me. I am strong enough to hold my form and yet episodically weak enough to be scattered. I am running from the ocean, shore, rocks, sky, night, and day, everything I am made from. I enter a forest, wanting to discover how the world is made since I am filled with a grainy love for it. I hurry down a road filled with leafy sounds, toward tall trees, onto rough paths. Soon I am surrounded by ferns, shadows, trees, dappling sunlight, mushrooms. I hear someone crying behind a bush. It is a boy clutching a small, broken plastic boat. He is alone.

He looks at me through teary eyes. *What are you?*

I am history. I am the difference between what you hope to see and what you do see.

The boy weeps louder. *Go away.*

It is hard for the boy to distinguish much as the day gets later. It is dark, the thin moon and evening sky blindfolding everything again. No one comes for him. *Where is your mother?* I am standing, waiting.

I'm lost. The boy is yawning and tired now.

Send me your dreams. I am not sure why I say this but it feels right. I can help him since I don't sleep and have no dreams of my own. I reach out and touch the boy's soft, smooth cheek before he lies down on the ground, making a pillow out of his bent arm.

Ouch, scratchy, he says when my finger grazes his cheek. *Okay, my dreams are coming soon.* And he promptly falls asleep.

I see his dreams: a white cat chasing its tail; the boy juggling stars; music he is dancing with; complicated toys with moving parts, tiny trucks and cars, and puzzle pieces to build things; a ball that returns itself to his hand after it's thrown; and his mother's face coming close to his.

My love for the boy grows stronger and more useless. I leave him with the rest of his dreams. He is flailing in his sleep. I pray to the ocean although when I clasp my hands together too vigorously my fingertips break apart, pile on the ground. Will the sea or the shore take me back? Do I mean something? Have I done something with my time?

I see a circle of light moving toward us. It's attached to a vague human figure calling, *Simon, Simon.*

The boy wakes up and rubs his eyes. I am cold and drifting apart. Am I my own dream or the boy's dream? I am almost gone as the figure moves toward us. I am a mound of sand as the mother steps around me and reaches out to hug the found boy.

Purpose

I had forgotten how good it feels to not be
in on the plan, which is to say that I can

assume my designated walking
beneath ancient canopies and Steller's jay-

whose shade of blue feels like a warn
of volatility. When I remember I don't know

any better than the stream orchid
how to make a star-shrine of my body,

I cling only enough so my purple veins
arrange a clearing for mud. I invent answers

with the arch of my feet, measure boulders
in floating ribs, and imagine the funeral

held for a glacier I've never touched.
The hunt for cold. An unbecoming.

I once thought I was put here
to capture how the sun interrupts

a ridge scented with gunsmoke
though the fire wore out years ago.

Who's to say my calling isn't witnessing
the black-tailed hummingbird that

sits down with me at the waterfall?
I'd like to think that I was divorced

on a January day from a particular man,
steeped in my own penchant for impulsive

movement, so that I could relocate some
3,083 miles and learn to dig potatoes

with my hands, and lose all my money and
survive grocery shopping in a pandemic

the same way I survived running into a grizzly:
being careful not to look. All so I'd arrive

at a dam that's replaced velocity
with a familiar dullness and find myself

staring through trees halfway between
bare and bloom to meet the eyes

of a bird that first arrived here
22-million years ago. Excuse me,

won't you? From trying for anything more
than what my life has accumulated to be.

A tacit play of what braves being noticed.

Jean Follain

trans. Andrew Seguin

The Fire

Ivy hung in long vines
from the gray house
of the metaphysician
fire took it one night
lighting up the cropped plain
ashes floated in the air
through the smell of burnt hay
then the heavens cleared
above the ruin overrun
by scores of motherless children
who played in its breaches
dressed in dark rags
imagining their long life.

Le Feu

De grands lierres s'étiraient
sur la maison grise
du métaphysicien
le feu y prit une nuit
éclairant la plaine rase
dans l'air flottèrent les cendres
dans l'odeur du foin brûlé
puis les cieux passèrent calmés
sur la ruine assaillie
par beaucoup d'enfants sans mère
qui sur ses brèches jouèrent
vêtus de haillons noircis
imaginant leur longue vie.

Shop

Men come to pick up
with a slow smile
wrapped packages
sometimes a white candle
in this spare shop
where decorated clogs hang
their voices call out:
“Anyone here?”
Finally a woman comes
to help them with her hands
having picked grass
from the sides of those paths
crossed so quickly
by a species of common hare.

Boutique

Des hommes viennent chercher
avec un lent sourire
des paquets clos
parfois une bougie blanche
dans cette boutique austère
où pendent les sabots ornés
leur voix clame :
« Y a-t-il du monde ? »
Une femme vient enfin
les servir de ses mains
ayant cueilli l’herbe
au bord de ces chemins
que traverse si vite un lièvre
d’espèce commune.

The Corn Crake

During the time of its migrations
the corn crake
is always running
even if war's cannons boom,
it is only to pass over the pond
that it will open its reddish wings.
At the end of an old world
slicing his bread
through the dormer he sees it clearly
this lone man safe and sound
who never once wanted to cry
but watches who goes past
up until the hour
set aside for prayer.

Le Rôle des Genêts

Le rôle des genêts
dans le temps de ses migrations
court toujours
même si tonnent les canons d'une guerre,
c'est seulement pour traverser l'étang
qu'il ouvrira ses ailes rousses.
Dans cette fin d'un monde ancien
découpant son pain
par sa lucarne le voit bien
cet homme seul abrité
qui jamais ne voulut pleurer
mais regarde qui passe
jusqu'à l'heure
que l'on dit la prière.

Black Rain

The friends of a time
are still together
the houses remain
with their soots and vapors
bodies go off
through hidden paths
where the branches shake
the grass that was crushed
by yesterday's wagons
stands back up a little
then a black rain comes
over the aging lands
a passerby asks
has the hour struck?

Pluie Noire

Les amis d'un temps
restent réunis
les maisons sont là
leurs suies et vapeurs
des corps se déplacent
par chemins perdus
où tremblent les branches
l'herbe qu'écrasèrent
les charrois d'hier
se redresse un peu
puis vient la pluie noire
sur les terres vieilles
un passant demande
l'heure est-elle passée ?

Something

Called stone eater
a tiny worm consumes the slate
in which it hides
minute by minute time is
tightening its screws
shaken jewelry makes its sound
ants reside in a ruin
something
is always happening.

Quelque Chose

Appelé mangeur de pierre
un petit ver se repaît de l'ardoise
où il se cache
de minute en minute se resserre
l'étau du temps
les bijoux remués font leur bruit
des fourmis habitent une ruine
toujours se passe
quelque chose.

Moment of a World

In the smoky town
with blows of their sabers
soldiers are killing geese
hardwood trees
grow in force on the square
even gleams of the future
but no longer
at rest on the table
is the gloved hand
of a loner
who hardly ever spoke.

Moment d'Un Monde

Au bourg à fumées
des soldats à coups de sabre tuent des oies
sur la place montent en force
les arbres durs
mêmes lueurs dans l'avenir
mais plus la main gantée
sur la table posée
d'un solitaire
qui ne parle presque jamais.

James Cihlar

A Summer Place

Today my husband said the soundtrack of *A Summer Place* is the background music that plays constantly in his head. This is an observation we each have made over twenty-five years of watching TV together on the couch.

How many times in the span of a lifetime does a person utter the same words, like “I love you,” or “I wish”? How many times have we thought the same thought or worried the same problem to its inevitable resolution,

like whether I should have left my hometown or not? If I had not moved, would I now be regretting staying put, rather than leaving and regretting not wandering away? Either way, I kept some bits and pieces:

Haeger vases, lavender and teal, from Wagey Drugstore; a *Far Side* mug a friend gave me of buffalo stampeding, captioned, “As if we all knew where we were going.” I held these things close to protect me, to save my life.

A childhood full of alcoholism, neglect, and poverty didn’t exactly foster self-esteem, although I know that everyone must own their character. Seeing history embodied in living objects urges me to build a sense of worth in myself.

It’s not impossible that someday any one of us might be traveling with trinkets sewn into the hem of our skirt, or keeping a cat warm inside a jacket as we walk a trail. Every journey is a story. At what point will the words run out? Not today, at least.

James Cihlar

Thoughtless

“Writing from pitiless self-knowledge, Jean Rhys addresses the watchful and lonely outsider who lurks within us all.”

—Miranda Seymour, *I Used to Live Here Once: The Haunted Life of Jean Rhys*

If I knew the ending, I would rewrite the beginning and middle.
Why didn't I move out at sixteen? Escape the drunkenness and abuse.

I had a job. No one at home would have stopped me or cared.
So much faith put into waiting. Deserving isn't a change agent.

I was born in another century. We don't live forever.
No one I knew predicted this. We were always tardy, always behind.

Is it too late to ask for an extension? Too bad the twentieth century
couldn't just keep on running for a few extra decades so I can finish.

Living in another century is like living in another plane of existence.
I'm sort of invisible. My work is accepted, but someone else

gets the grade. Even though I did what I wanted, I missed my chance.
Is it worth it to be praised by the awful? Sure, I've been thoughtless

through sins of omission. In my yearbook class photo I'm in the back row,
like Bartleby, the scrivener, preferring not to engage.

What is most interesting is the unknown and unknowable.
To be thoughtless, without a thought. What matters is an empty hour

sitting on the couch with my husband watching TV, the summer we did nothing—
if that's what makes us stop waiting. Jean Rhys made her mark at seventy.

Pointlessness unwinds the clock, brings down the walls of time,
so a moment can last forever.

Ashley Kunsa

In Line at Supercuts, She Contemplates Her Open Marriage

a found poem

out front you're just like all your girls right
school movie magazines a sleeping life
run to the past that shit limo left here
on this small time ghost stage nobody
ever discovers the show hurts no one
knows you wish bleed every time you never
come can't say sorry find the words take it
back two is kinda weird (you hoe) but fuck it
get your face in there mix all your reasons
scared to get what you want on repeat
scared you can't make a rock bloom you cut
your piece so big leave some whoever could
think a girl like you a wife could mean this
could possibly take the best of both lives

Sources: "The Best of Both Worlds" by Hannah Montana (2006) and "Without You" by Kid LAROI, feat. Miley Cyrus (2021)

Ashley Kunsa

The Poet on Saturday Night

a found poem in Netflix's "Most Popular" summaries and phrases from Seneca's "On the Shortness of Life"

at a hospital for the criminally insane to buy booze (s)he's up
-right (s)he can't walk seems to never sleep [you're in real trouble]
angels are becoming politically unambitious there are fates far worse
that the lunacy of the poets men from every side naughty nurse
fantasies conducted with torches and wax tapers burn out of control
acts insatiable [her middle name unfortunately] the real enemy
followed orders kept secrets not life but merely time on the brink
of Hollywood glory a container [without a bottom] loyalties are
perilous the canvas is flesh the soil as history the meanness of
nature how far you need to go all in fight dirty play mind games
[they aren't available] your own frailty never occurs to you blood
will be shed impenetrable vault the greatest obstacle [freakishly
literal] crushed rather than picked at a few visits to the penitentiary
the firmament or the stars both haunted and hunted (s)he
was a legend (s)he was just a girl [what is doomed to fall delights]

Timothy Donnelly

Sea Whistle

To say there will be no more suffering with such confidence
is to set the heart on rolling pins
because it knows such a future is impossible in this world, even if
we reduce the world's dimensions to those of our life raft.

It isn't clear if it's the confidence or the sentiment itself
that induces this unsteadiness, but I know it's almost always
things in combination, and that disturbances amplify
the way waves in a bathtub bounce back and forth from the sides.

While I try to devise an all-purpose counterpoise to this
mess made of language, your impulse is somehow to point
to chestnuts of the genre instead—and here we are again in the dark
at sea, the exact opposite of our hoped-for circumstances.

As for the life raft, it's hard to go much further with it than
Géricault, whose infamous canvas, literally larger than life,
divided Paris—so far from the goal of ideal beauty, but undeniable
in all other respects, its full array of human suffering

heaped up in the frame in subtle pyramids, extremes of hope
and anguish, endless points of contrast playing off each other
in the ongoing schoolroom of the sea, whose pedagogy serves
to whittle the bones of confidence down to thin flutes of suggestion.

Timothy Donnelly

Mauled by Dogs

I don't think I'll be mauled by dogs. Time for that has come
and gone. Time is kept with gears and cogs. Dogs are kept
on chains and leashes. Lashes protect the eye from debris
and warn it when an object approaches. Ces mots prochains

sont en français. Saying it has made it so. I sometimes fear
what just can't be. But I don't think I'll be mauled by dogs.
I don't think I can face the world. I wouldn't know what mask to wear.
Couldn't tell what tree to mark. I went about my so-called work

but couldn't see what for, what for. There seemed to be a mind
in charge. A hand that fed me scraps of meat. Little drops of garnet
hope is redder than we thought, we thought. A life can't live on life like that
not knowing it too might be torn apart, but I still don't think

I'll be mauled by dogs—though neither did that bad doctor father
at the end of *Eyes Without a Face*, who falls face-first
sur la petite colline au bord du bois éclairé doucement au clair de lune,
when his daughter, masked, sets long-tormented canine subjects

free to pursue their vengeance as she herself finds freedom
from the cycle of ineffective experimental surgeries to restore
lost beauty, preferring a doe-like difference instead as she steps out into
the cooler lunar module of the colorless abstract outskirts of Paris.

Timothy Donnelly

Golden Hour

Too much thought can be given. There can be too much thinking.
I'm not saying I prefer the alternative. I'm just saying
things start to crack a little under the pressure. The wholeness of them
bleeds, or it crumbles. So much depends on initial consistency.

I am opening this window all the way. I am lighting a cone of incense
and letting it burn in a quahog's bonelike shell. I am opening
the window on the other wall too. There is cross-ventilation
and there is silence. The plume from the incense drifts disorganizedly.

Wrong word. It drifts organically. Still not happy. Try again.
I shut both windows; I shut the door. I place the incense on the floor
and sit beside it perfectly still for three minutes. The plume rises
straight like a ribbon till it reaches a zone where it starts to ruffle

in a manner my arm hair interprets first as sound, then texture,
namely of a certain kind of kelp, or of cooked lasagna noodles
but with no hint of dampness, no whiff of the sea, only bergamot, hay,
and golden poppy—whole plants harvested on bright mornings,

dry loam shaken off the roots, all of it washed at the wash station,
fanned in the drying room, and taken at last to the lab to be tested
as the plume ascends to the region of chaos, where the beauty of it
flows in response to a galaxy of variables then vanishes into the ceiling.

Jennifer M. Phillips

Impact

Once again I've carried out
sulky geraniums overwintered
into the not-too-bright May light,
mild nights, in the outdoor world
where heat will surely make them flourish
once they set their jib toward life.
But first, this claustrophobic mist
after rain, change: south wind,
summer coming in on its shoulders.
Willows billow up like clouds
greening their old splayed bones
like over-the-hill tarts wise
to the seductive charms of some artful paint.
I can't get past the disjuncture --
the settled world and its cogs
the ancients dubbed 'oikonomia' shuddering.
A jabbering of angry voices over the air --
doomsayers and doom-purveyors --
the nation bare and seismic at its core,
the whole globe molten.
Is it the first flux in the perfect May morning
among the horsetails and ferns
when Chicxulub irrupted through our crust?
While prurient commentation
susurrates, a silly, small,
contrary chop
belying the breakage already begun,
seiche and tsunami,
while the orioles pluck at the orange-halves
and the apple blossoms drift down
and vanish into the grass.

Dana Sonnenschein

An AIDS-related Death: Poem for the Quilt

The size of a completed panel is 3' x 6'.

—*The Names Project Foundation*

Reginald Shepherd, poet first, last, and never again.
Hawk feather and black plastic glasses, bright chopsticks
for *Madama Butterfly* and brimming bowls of udon,

book covers ironed onto samite, and, overlaid
with tulle, the burly silhouette of a man who walks
swiftly beneath streetlights, always two steps ahead.

I'm trying to catch up. You're looking for the all-night
music store on a map in your head. You know what's best
in a hundred cities. You pick the restaurant.

In the noodle house, you spear a shrimp from my plate
then pop it in your mouth, daring me to be afraid
and not to be afraid. I am. I eat the rest.

You talk of boyhood in the Bronx, hiding your books
behind the bed. How could you not have been bullied?
You were always musing, trying to get your hooks

into the real even as you pursued a thought,
seeing not more than others did but more clearly,
like a hawk. Your song drifts down, all mind and appetite,

fierce plummeting lines between what is and what is not.
Landscapes slip by beneath your flight. I hear your joy
in measure brim even as you violate it,

Reginald Shepherd. Poet first, last, and never again,
tough, strong, but poor, black, gay, and sick so long.
If only the world had loved you like a friend.

Charles Holdefer

Review of *While You Were Gone* by Sybil Baker

Being true to yourself in the face of change and adversity sounds very good, even laudable. But what if “yourself” turns out to be a slippery notion? What if “a self” is every bit as maddening, elusive and historically compromised as the rest of the world?

These questions animate Sybil Baker’s *While You Were Gone*, a story of three sisters in Chattanooga, Tennessee, who care deeply for each other even as they surprise, annoy or mystify each other. Claire, the eldest, is a precociously responsible child who becomes a successful businesswoman. Shannon is an aspiring journalist who believes that her writing can make a difference in the world. Paige is full of artistic yearnings, idolizes Bessie Smith and sings in a band. Each sister develops a different kind of relationship their widowed father, Ed, an affable but distant man.

The novel makes frequent allusions to Chekhov’s *Three Sisters* and Shakespeare’s *King Lear*, but it wisely wears these templates lightly. There is no obvious direct correspondence between, say, Claire and Cordelia, or Paige and Masha. The sisters alternate between being “good” or “bad” or just getting by. No one finds a comfortable niche. Roles are more fluid: and that, it seems, is the point.

Dutiful Claire risks her marriage, children and career—the house of cards of a woman supposedly “having it all”—in order to pursue a relationship with a young African-American colleague, Joseph. Here and elsewhere in the story, a key motivation for a character is to find someone to *listen* to her, which is not as simple as it might sound. For Claire, a conversation about books and a discovered passion for literature eventually morphs into a surreptitious BDSM relationship. More than a dalliance, it shakes Claire to her core.

Shannon’s youthful dream of being a modern-day Louise Bryant in heroic pursuit of journalistic truth leads her through a failed marriage and into a technological era where the profession of journalism is disappearing before her eyes. She writes obituaries and later for a “below-the-bottom-of-the-food-chain” rag called *Jail Break*. Her fantasies about her first love, a Korean student named Ben, inevitably clash with a harsher reality. But when she decides to get pregnant and start a family with her gay cousin Jeremy and his boyfriend, David, she discovers aspects of herself that she’d never dreamed of.

Paige is the only sister who leaves Chattanooga for a serious length of time. Her music takes her to Seattle to pursue a music career and, after years of performing, to the experience of disillusion and burnout. Returning to Chattanooga to care for her ailing father, she connects

with a local music scene which she had previously disdained: Mountain Opry. Previously she'd thought of it as the music of "hicks and backward country people, the old-timey music just a reminder of a South that was quickly, thankfully, falling away." Now, however, she finds new depth and purpose in her Tennessee roots. Traditional forms like shape note singing and a reclusive, inspired mentor named Billy Wilson allow Paige to reinvent herself.

The South and "southernness" figure largely in *While You Were Gone*. Characters, sensitive to regional accent (do you keep it or try to mask it?), history (which ancestors owned slaves? who are our black relatives?) run the gamut from pride to embarrassment to self-hate. A woman named Maria, who pops up in an unexpected family role late in the novel, observes, "We all have different selves." And she means "different" not only from each other, but "different" *within* ourselves.

Baker dramatizes very well how mutable people can be. Someone who acts in good faith at one juncture in life might discover, later on, not only was she mistaken about her particular action but also, more disturbingly, about who she thought *she* was. It's one thing if people don't "get" you. But what if you don't "get" yourself? The most arresting moments in the novel hinge on these realizations by each sister.

The premature death of the sisters' mother looms over the entire story, and provides some interesting plot twists. Paige wonders: "Had her life so far just been one long rebellion against her dead mother? Did her mother have that kind of reach, still?" On occasion, sections of backstory (for instance, a sequence in Korea about Shannon's first love, Ben) can feel bumpy or expository, but most of the narrative unfolds smoothly. The past haunts the present, notably with genealogical secrets.

While You Were Gone is artfully conceived and consistently entertaining. Sybil Baker displays a generous imagination that charts how individuals learn and grow, and how mistakes, though painful, are also necessary.

Mark Halliday

Poetry in the Shadow — on Tony Hoagland's *Turn Up the Ocean*

If doctors tell you that you will die in less than two years, will you write some good poems? Maybe or maybe not. You will certainly have more vivid access to the reality of mortality than most of us do on most days. But you could be poetically misled by the specialness of your condition. You could feel that your own dying is more interesting than anyone else's. You could protest the injustice of your fate in ways that are not only egocentric but too obvious and thus boring. Or you could try to comfort yourself by pretending to have reached an ultimate wisdom which you deign to share with ignorantly healthy people. Or you could attack or mock us for the shallowness of our complacent enjoyments, though we are living as seriously as you did before your diagnosis.

So, you might write bad poems. Imminence of death does not guarantee poetic power. We do feel a frightening intensity in "This living hand" by Keats; but we don't wish he had let himself write many poems fueled by the bitterness in that poem.

Tony Hoagland knew early in 2017 that his cancer was killing him. He continued to write poems. *Priest Turned Therapist Treats Fear of God* appeared in 2018, a few months before his death in October 2018 at the age of sixty-four. In 2022 Graywolf Press published a posthumous collection of poems assembled by Hoagland's widow Kathleen Lee: *Turn Up the Ocean*. Almost half of the forty-five poems in *Ocean* are shaded by the poet's knowing that he is terribly ill and not far from death. It is fascinating to see his many efforts to make this knowledge an artistic asset rather than a sort of credit card; to write poems serious rather than over-solemn or over-proud or self-indulgently tearful.

Conscious of these dangers, Hoagland let them explicitly inform and even threaten to spoil poems. I don't say that each such poem is great or even very good, but I will say that some of them are; and I think the cumulative effect of his campaign to face his dying with insightful candor is to earn our respect for his intelligent courage.

To die well—it is an idea that grows more serious as you grow old. Hoagland found it necessary to contemplate by the time he was sixty-two, or earlier. Two poems in *Ocean* bring up the idea directly. "In the Beautiful Rain" imagines ways that survivors might praise the panache or the heroism (or both) in how someone died. We can sense that Hoagland aspires to be described as in each of the poem's last three stanzas:

Let us say, "He flew with abandon,
and a joyous expression on his face,
like a gust of wind

or a man in a necktie
from the last dinner party he would ever have to attend."

To say, "He was the egg
that elected to break
for the greater cause of the omelet;
the good piece of wood
that leapt into the fire."

"Though grudging at first,
he fell like the rain,
with his eyes wide open,
willing to change."

Reading those lines with the knowledge that the poet himself was dying, we can't be unmoved. However, "In the Beautiful Rain" is softened by its choosing to avoid irony about its aspiration for "a good death"—the adjective "Beautiful" in the title sounds suspiciously unironic. The poem depends too much on our knowing that the poet expects to die soon; without that fact the poem could seem inappropriately light.

A better poem unwisely titled "Ode to the West Wind" (it does not provide a commentary on or discrediting of Shelley's great poem) tries to imagine dying well as a challenge to the victim's flair for adventure. Here are the last eleven lines:

No, now is not the time
 for a faltering sense of style,
not now when you can hear your teeth
chatter like a Geiger counter
and see the lesions burning through your Technicolor skin,

now as the time machine accelerates
and you lean back and buckle up
with that famous dash of savoir faire
that made you perfect for your part

in this whimsical yet ballsy independent film
in which we play the wind.

The penultimate line calls to mind the glibness of a film reviewer so as to prompt our realizing that fantasy rather than realism is at work when you picture yourself dying like a movie star. The irony of tone is obvious—is

it too obvious? I prefer it to the arguably unironic last stanza of "In the Beautiful Rain". Then the last line of "Ode" brings another tone, shifting the pronoun from "you" to "we" to suggest that none of us will be Errol Flynn at the end; we are ultimately as fleeting as the wind and we are not very likely to go-out-in-style.

Indeed, if you find yourself dying far too young, you might ignobly resent the luckiness of the blithely healthy people all around you. In "Cuisine" Hoagland feels alienated from everyone in a bustling Italian restaurant where "The world of appetite unceasingly rolls on." As in some other poems riveted on his awareness of mortality, he does not try to complicate or counterbalance his isolated resentment, preferring to give the poem to blunt declaration of it at the end; here are the last twelve lines of "Cuisine":

I remember bathroom B on the cancer ward,
the only place on the sixth floor
where you could go to be alone,
pressing my face to the cool blue tile
in the middle of the night.

I remember the silence in my head
when I understood I was being told
that what I had was incurable,
understanding perfectly well that it was no one's fault,

and hating people anyway --
everybody, even my friends,
for not saving me.

How poetic are those closing lines? We can easily imagine a reader complaining that the lines lack metaphor and richness and "music". Hoagland in all his books of poems was willing to provoke this complaint. His temperamental tendency favored unexpectedly candid directness over most (other) sorts of artfulness. When I like one of his poems I often have to try to justify the "flat" or unmetaphorical lines by praising their rightness in context, their rightness of voice, taking the whole poem as a speech (sometimes we may call it an internal or hypothetical speech) from the mind of a speaker in a certain situation or mood. This is, after all, a defense that we have all made or encountered when "talky" lines by other poets have been called "unpoetic"— Wordsworth, Whitman, Williams, Lowell, O'Hara . . . *Context and voice*. Of course a poem can go wrong with these as priorities; but poems can

also go horribly wrong prioritizing "artful" elaborations. Writing the end of "Cuisine", Hoagland knew perfectly well that the typically "poetic" ending would vividly relocate us in the Italian restaurant amid hot sauces and chicken Alfredo metaphorically rich in the world of appetite. Instead he chose an ending in which the bleak absence of images becomes paradoxically metaphorical of his estrangement from ordinary life.

If many people know you are terribly ill, you may be sent more "good wishes" than you want. You may feel their messages express more sanctimonious complacency than love. Hoagland devotes a poem to this suspicion: "On Why I Must Decline to Receive the Prayers You Say You Are Constantly Sending". As in the case of "Cuisine" the blunt bitterness is offered as a psychological truth, instead of a more complicated ambivalent attitude toward people luckier than oneself. Hoagland claims that his mailbox can't receive sympathetic prayers because a mother wren has built a nest in it.

I think the heat passing through that mother's body into her brood
has already surpassed the endoplasmic vibrational voltage
you've mentioned as a feature of the prayers you are sending me.

I understand that you are doing your best
to hoist yourself up toward a spiritual life,
even if it is through the doorway of a kind of pretending.

But if you really care, as you claim, please
will you kindly sit down and work your shit out?

The aggressiveness in this passage is convincing as arising from impatient irritation that we can imagine ourselves feeling in response to facile prayers for our welfare from people far away from our mortal struggle.

Even long before his illness, Hoagland knew that the emotional truth in anger—jagged real anger, not necessarily righteous or approved anger—can be the issue of a poem. In his essay "Cast Swine Before Pearls" he wrote well about how rage and humor can prompt each other in poems. He said "anger can be powerfully functional in poetry, not just because it is an inescapable element of human nature, but because it connects us—like depression and ecstasy—with deep wellsprings of instinct and intelligence." (Anger animates "The Allegory of the Temp Agency" and "Snowglobe" in *Unincorporated Persons in the Late Honda Dynasty*, and is recognized as a source of strength in "Hate Hotel" and "Reasons to Survive November" in *What Narcissism Means to Me*.) Honesty about anger is one aspect of Hoagland's originality.

Mark Halliday

Another aspect is his wariness about over-indulging anger. "Why I Must Decline" finds its way from the bellicose tone of "work your shit out" to a whimsical ending—having asked his correspondents to stop burning prayer candles for him, he reaches for a metaphorical admonition against casual shallowness about the experience of other beings: "think of how hard those bees worked / to make all that wax!"

Resentment of blithely fortunate others is in the background of "Siberia", but what makes this one of the best poems in *Turn Up the Ocean* is the way the poem commits to its initiating simile and keeps exploring it.

In these final few months of my life,
I feel a little like a Russian poet
who's been exiled to a remote
village in Siberia . . .

He could say more about the injustice of his exile from good health, but he becomes more interested in Siberia as a picture of the dreariness and isolation of life in one's final months.

Now here I am in this shabby
 outpost of empire;
twelve houses, three hovels, two barns;
four goats, a tubercular,
seems-to-be-starving cow, and
innumerable chickens.

He nods toward the temptation to believe that exile has brought him spiritual improvement: "It would be nice to think a kind of purification / was going on." He does not claim this benefit. But he does say that Siberian exile has inspired him to write, awakening him to "that life-and-death stuff / of which everyone knows / but people don't like to speak." His being able to write has allowed him to accept realistically his physical fate: "I have ceased making plans for an escape." "Siberia" culminates in a metaphor (pulled from Russian history) for the poet's relation to society, as well as for the sick person's relation to healthy people:

even as I slip into another night of pain,

I can feel myself gradually turning into
an informant. By what
government I am employed
I can't yet tell;

but I am making these notations for myself;
and I am warning you, my friends,
I will be filing my report.

This "informant" metaphor is shaky—he has not made clear what will be involved in "filing my report"—where, to whom? But I like the way those last lines voice pride and defiance. Reporting from Siberia, our poet expects to disturb not only the autocracy that sent him there but all of us ("my friends") who have not been sent there. We realize that the death-shadowed poems in *Turn Up the Ocean* are felt by the poet to be his revelation of scary truth smuggled out from the remote tundra of being terminally ill.

To feel heroic (like a poet standing up to Stalin) would be especially appealing if you knew you were dying; it would be a grand version of "a good death". The excellent poem "Illness and Literature" achieves a deft balance between smiling at a fantasy of heroism and realizing how fantasy can enable real-life courage. In the waiting room at an oncology clinic, Hoagland observes another patient: "an old Texas redneck with a brushy mustache / reading a Louis L'Amour novel / while waiting for his chemotherapy". Hoagland is obviously tempted to mock "this tough old man . . . who sits now furiously reading / about fistfights and saloons"—and does enjoy imagining the formulaic triteness of the Western adventure tale. But the poet, who also is waiting for cancer treatment, finds himself understanding how the cowboy narrative can help its reader rise to the challenge of the disease by supplying a vivid simple image of male confidence and courage. In the last five lines of "Illness and Literature" mockery gives way to respect.

He has a long way to go—he's got to get to Abilene
before they hang the wrong man.
Now, hearing his name called from the clinic door,
he stands, and walks into the hot, dry wind,
his spurs ringing on the polished floor.

Like the old Texan, each of us needs mythic metaphors that can crystallize and make more sustainable our possible best responses to terrible adversity. The sick self as Siberian exile is one such metaphor. A poem called "Reading While Sick in the Middle of the Night" shows Hoagland engaged in a more self-aware version of what he imagined happening in the mind of the reader of Louis L'Amour. Hoagland is reading a "corny, escapist historical novel" about medieval Saxon warriors—they have to wade across a muddy flooded river, and they

Mark Halliday

hold their weapons in bundles over their heads to protect them from the turbulent water. As Hoagland is hungry for useful metaphors, he seizes on the image of the Saxons crossing the river, and he declares its meaning for him with the candid explicitness that gives some of his poems great naked force.

The remarkable thing is that what they are doing
is exactly what I am doing—each medieval night
I hold my mind up like a bundle

out of reach of the pain—as I walk through
the chest-high wash of these waves that push
and tug at my life.

The mental process he describes seems to be a form of what gets called compartmentalization. I think his assertion comes across not as a boast but as a severely needed hope—as the last line of the poem's last sentence makes us feel:

I can hold my mind over my head
and fear does not touch that part of me,
and in the morning we will be there,

on the other side of the night,
like the bank of a river,
though it seems impossible.

When he says that "we" will be there in the morning, "we" includes self, and mind—and the fear, which can only temporarily be turned away from.

In a puzzling poem entitled "Bandage" Hoagland tries to believe there is a kind of mercy for him in unexpectedly seeing a vestige of a previous phase of his illness. He finds in a pocket a bloodstained bandage left over from "the harrowing winter" when he received frequent chemotherapy shots. He remembers crying as he drove to those appointments. Here are the last eleven lines of "Bandage":

It wasn't hard to see the weeping itself
as a kind of mercy,

as it is mercy now to hold up this scrap
between my forefinger and thumb,
and to look at the spot of rusty old blood

on the rubberized cloth
like a little sunset, reddish and smudged
I can stare into now

only if I raise my hand
to shield my eyes
from the dark.

There is something touchingly willed about his invoking the idea of mercy. We know how weeping can be a merciful release from the pressure of painful emotions. But why is it merciful to see the old bandage? Is it a reminder that the harrowing winter of chemotherapy is over? But is the chemotherapy over because now he has no hope of remission? If so, is there a kind of mercy in being finally beyond hope? His expectation of death is "the dark" that threatens his vision at the end. The ending of "Bandage" is mysterious in its meaning about mercy, but convincing as an effort to notice one of the countless mental maneuvers necessary for someone living with terrible illness day after day, month after month.

Something I love about Hoagland's poetry is that he abjures mystification for its own sake. He knew that the mystery inherent in tangled emotions is inseparable from what impels us to write and read poems. But unlike weaker poets, he strove to avoid the cheap kind of poeticizing that chooses metaphors for their murkiness and prefers not to ponder or examine them. Hoagland thought of a poem as a place where an emotional or spiritual trouble can be clearly exposed and addressed—though usually not cured. A poem is thus like a hospital; so there is an element of *ars poetica* in his poem "Why I Like the Hospital". Many of us fear the dismal realities in hospitals, but Hoagland says he values the way painful truth comes out in the open there; patients can be seen responding to awful facts, in a newly radical loneliness.

I like the long prairie of the waiting;
the forced intimacy of the self with the self;
each sick person standing in the middle of a field,
like a tree wondering what happened to the forest.

"Why I Like the Hospital" ends with three stanzas describing "a man in a lime-green dressing gown" whose grief about his own fate is fully felt and unabashed and open. The man is "sobbing without shame,"

pumping it all out from the bottom of the self,
the overflowing bilge of helplessness and rage,
a man no longer expecting to be saved,

but if you looked, you could see
that he was holding his own hand in sympathy,
listening to every single word,
and he was telling himself everything.

We don't feel that this sobbing man is a figure for a good poet, yet we hear Hoagland's admiration for the man's honesty with himself, unblocked by social consciousness. Hoagland does not want to *be* that man but he appreciates the chance to see true feeling revealed. In his poems of misery he tries for emotional candor less solipsistic than the sobbing of that patient.

All the poems I've discussed (apart from the last stanza of "In the Beautiful Rain" perhaps) refuse to proclaim that terminal illness has led the poet to the comfort of beautiful wisdom. They aspire to wisdom but they know that comforting versions of it are apt to be illusions. But one poem in *Turn Up the Ocean* does explicitly try to offer comfort—because it is addressed to Hoagland's wife Kathleen Lee, as she lives in the knowledge that her husband is dying. "Sunday at the Mall" supposes that his death could happen suddenly as they are walking in a shopping mall; the poem assures her that his spirit will survive his twitching corpse:

don't worry, baby, we knew this kind of excitement
might possibly occur
and that's not me in there anyway—

I'm already flying backward, high and fast
into the big arcades and spaces of my green life . . .

Coming from a non-religious poet, this earnest affirmation stands out strikingly among Hoagland's death poems. Hugely susceptible to sentimental wishfulness, any claim that an individual human spirit is immortal (not only as memory in the minds of others but as something ineffably apart) threatens to vitiate a poem. I won't say that "Sunday at the Mall" is untainted by sentimentality (and I doubt that Hoagland would say so either), but I find it moving in its effort to help Kathleen deal with the shock of loss.

Mark Halliday

Don't despair there, under the frosted glass skylight.
Don't mistake this spastic conclusion for real.

Because, sweetheart, this life
is a born escape artist . . .

The poem ends with an image of spiritual escape that is simultaneously cartoony (inspired by the scene of a public space that closes after retail hours) and serious. Tony tells Kathleen that his spirit entered earthly life to explore it "and love as hard as it could" --

then to swoop out just before closing time
right under the arm of the security guard
who pulls down the big metal grate
and snaps shut the lock in its hasp

as if it, or he, could ever imagine
anything that could prevent anything.

That final line says that what has to happen will happen. It manages to implicitly acknowledge that Hoagland's physical death is not preventable while also denying that his spirit can be kept from escaping to its immortal "green life". Wishful sentimentality is not absent; we feel the dying man wanting to believe what he affirms; more than that we feel his hope of comforting his wife; and I do myself find the poem comforting—not a frequent sensation in reading this poet.

None of us can want to have to attempt poems darkened by a certainty that death will come far too soon. (The poet Jay Hopler, who died of cancer in 2022 at the age of fifty-one, wrote some strong poems in that state of anticipation.) We all want to face mortality bravely but we hope that no one close to us will have to try this too early. Poets who do so can hope to combine candor and dignity in ways akin to Tony Hoagland's achievement in *Turn Up the Ocean*.

2022 MIDWEST CHAPBOOK CONTEST
FINALISTS AND WINNERS

Brian Clifton

Without a Leash

The dog raised his head
over the fence. Night filled
the city with its feral cries.
The dog added his snarl,
his star-like teeth. I saw
them in the headlights
passing down the road
that connected one main
thoroughfare with another.
What came to mind was
creature, the cage the word
makes of teeth underneath,
tongue pacing the roof
of the mouth. A swallowed
hiss stuck inside. *Creature*.
The dog was brindled
as night is when one looks
through it—its emptied
pockets striped with weak
light, the glowing road
like a ribbon sinking into
a dark pool. I thought
about my habit of walking
the distance between one
streetlight and another,
the hands that lurk there,
the angry work they do.
True, I have difficulties
sleeping and so prowl,
though not like this dog
barking; his barking
called the other dogs,
unseen in their unlit yards,
to join the unknown
object of their cries.
I was the object. I made
them howl, though they did
not see me. They made me
a steady note in their lurching
chorus. The dog's head
dangled over the fence
so the planks pushed into
his neck and were obscured
in his fur. As I came near,

his head hung there, impaled,
without a body, shrieking
though not in pain as one
might expect, but in deep
anger. How did it get there?
The dog's head. The fence.
His master, no doubt—
the man who built the fence
seven feet high, who placed
the dog inside and stood
at the gate, rattling a can
of pennies near his dog's
ear, maybe smacking him
a couple times as if to say,
*Those out here are not good
so scare them off or suffer.*
Or so I thought. The dog,
an animal like any other,
preferred not to suffer,
preferred his own voice
to a planted threat. Again,
creature—to be made but
for what? To feel wrapped
in another's handiwork.
The dog focused on me.
My purpose was clear
to him. His to me. The dog
fell back behind the fence.
I was in a part of the city
where houses dotted one
side of the highway,
body shops the other—
both with dogs behind
their fences. The highway
like a fence for the city.
I paced its edge. I could
hear the snarling. The dog,
again, raised his head
over the fence, his hackles
in the streetlight that was
not quite red, not orange
but an odd mix that animates
the inanimate, the dark. How
his brindled coat made it
odder still as it spilled over

the dog, looking down,
as if standing on his hind
legs, though I know this
is not possible. The fence
stood seven feet. The dog
rested his paws there—
larger than a dog, or a man.
It was as if he were both
at once. Night creature,
strange hybrid—but not
the moon's changeling,
not the alternation between
two. But two inhabiting
the same body, the lonely
whose fur sprouts from human
skin, whose human feet contort
into the backward-jointed
legs of a dog. The two-toned
torso: back covered in fur
and the front with twisted abs
like a saint carved from stone,
eyes to God's unfathomable
wrath unfurling above the earth.
A moment only, and then
the dog returned to itself.
A brindled dog, alerting
his master as his master
undoubtedly trained him
to do. To be another's never
knowing, and now, the dog
barked whenever he could.
*God, I thought, looking down
at the dog looking down at the street.*
The anger exhaled from
one mouth into the other.
The master plotting a beer
bottle's trajectory so it would
strike the dog like a holy bolt
of lightning and silence him.
So unnerved was the master.
I squeezed my fists. I let
them slacken. I felt a stranger's
hands chain me to my body.
Behind the tall, wooden fence,
the dog perpetually shifted.

Brian Clifton

Receive with Simplicity Everything that Happens

knocking at the door my mother just beyond

the awning explained nightmares follow late
meals she admired the snow *what a marvel*

she said *snow in Florida* it fell a long way
through the dark to cling to her

The Eyes Above

The trees of the grove behind our home have eyes. We don't know what to call this species of tree, and yet, we aren't bothered by them. Now it is early spring, and the eyelids are pink and tough, just beginning to bud. By May, they will bloom and blossom, fanning themselves out to reveal richly colored irises, crystalline blue and profound brown. For some reason, green irises are hard to come by in this region. I've heard they fare better in the hinterlands.

We will enjoy looking at the eyes throughout the summer. Eyeing the eyes which are eyeing us, opening and closing without a care, seemingly. We could pick them from their branches, toss them into a stew, but don't. They bring us so much color, so much comfort. They are like unobstructive family members, letting us go along with our lives while admiring us from a distance.

Towards autumn, inevitably, the lids will begin to blister and shrivel. The irises will turn milky, the pupils begin to careen and wander, losing focus. They will plunk to the ground, one by one, at first. By Thanksgiving, though, the old raisiny eyes will blanket the grass beneath the trees, leaving the branches bare, needle-like. It's the natural cycle of the seasons, we suppose, but it's still difficult to watch. Father, especially, hates having to rake them up.

Small Spaces

Yesterday evening, my wife came home with a candle a coworker had given her. The candle didn't have a snappy name like candles usually do, like Seaside Kisses or Harvest Season Hayride. It didn't have much of a design, either, like the candles you see in big box stores. My wife set it on the TV console and we had dinner — a recipe I like to call eggroll in a bowl. We talked about traffic and fast approaching work deadlines, and the way life seems to sucker punch you sometimes. Not sometimes. Most times. After dinner we changed into our pajamas and sat in front of the TV. "Want to light that candle?" I asked her, and she said yes. I got up and fumbled with the candle and lighter. When I settled back on the couch, I noticed the color in my wife's eyes had changed — they had gone from a deep, dark brown to an almost translucent gray. If they were any lighter, I thought, I'd be looking straight through to her brain. Before I could say anything, though, she turned up the volume on her favorite show, and as we sat back she raised her foot onto my lap. "You don't have to..." she said, but I already picked up her signal. I didn't mind, anyway. Every now and then I'd sneak a glance at her eyes. They had changed again. Now, ghostly trails of smoke rose within her irises, embedded with the gray.

After the episode, I drew in a deep breath through my nose, but smelled nothing. "Do you smell the candle?" I said. "I do," she said, then offhandedly added, "I think it's one of those candles that is meant for small spaces." I got up and took the candle over to the breakfast nook. "Smaller," said my wife. I walked into the kitchen and nestled the candle in between the coffee machine and the air fryer. "Try again," she said from the living room. I went all over the house trying to find the perfect spot. The bathroom, the bedroom, her office, my study. Nope. Not quite. Meh. I don't think so. The candle seemed to pulsate as I held it. Eventually, I stuffed my feet into some old sandals and went out to the backyard, to the old dog house adjacent to the back porch. It had been out of commission ever since Gristle, our Golden Retriever, had passed a year earlier. I placed the candle on the dirt floor of the dog house, and crouched there, waiting to smell some sort of beautiful aromatic orchestra. Whiskey and cedar. Gardenia and lavender. Something, anything, to arouse me from my odorless milktoast existence. I waited several minutes, but no dice. Back in the house, I found my wife asleep in our bedroom; a luminescent glow projected through her closed eyelids. In them, I saw plums of stardust, enigmatic constellations, sequences of dreams I had from before I was born. As I drifted off to sleep, I thought I heard a tiny animal howling, small as a single flame.

Jin Cordaro

I Was Born On a Second-hand Couch Reupholstered

In a room with only four seats
And 8 children,
I was the curtains closed during the day, and
the one small brass lamp on at night.

I was the surge of a sewing machine
whirring late into the night and the
inflamed knot in my mother's knuckle.
I was the clouds growing over my father's eyes
and the small red spots of heat rash on his legs.

I was fermented cabbage brined in red pepper.
I was soybean paste mixed with
resentment - my mother mounded me
then dried and strung me up
from the rafters. I was made
by my mother's hands.

I was a discarded box of
scraps resembling triangles and squares,
survival sewn together -
I was leftover ideas my parents held onto,
Someday you'll come in use.

I was the gear turning over and over
in silence without laughter,
I was the monotonous wheel,
wanting to spin free.

Jin Cordaro

When We Come Back To Town, We Come Back To the Body

Small network of streets,
avenues like arteries,
each house an organ
that shudders and pumps.
People flow out and back,
small cells that fetch and earn,
serve and desire,
want and must cresting
and retreating all the time.
Small things carried on a tide.

The heart is both master and servant, and
we are the servant of the servant
the ruler and the worker, tethered.
When we come back to town,
we follow its paths, searching
for the missing, the familiar –
the tree on the corner a birthmark,
the red bricks of the school a scar.
We come back again and again
thrumming with urgency
for something
to call ours.

Kathy Goodkin

צמצום

(Elegy for Ruth)

Everything and nothing are separated by a thin membrane,
an absent star or airplane
just above the skyline.

Location, location, location
said **אשה** on the millionth day of creation.
Different kinds of things, we leave

pictures of your fat laughing face
canted in song, a guitar you never played.
You are my favorite of all absences.

Everywhere too is like nowhere, these no-places, non-things.
The non-things we–
the *we* I mean, like *everything* and *nothing*, is located nowhere

on the surface of the water–
The things we–
love, we must leave

and go it alone in the undressed sky.

Kathy Goodkin

אין

The more you know
the more there is
to be afraid of.
And still, I forget

to worry when, unclothed
as a river, I reach
for you in darkness.
Ours is the vocabulary

of endurance; the frugal pines
stay green all winter.
We can also do this.
The more we know

of each other,
the more I fear only
the moment you'll go,
the sound of wind

in your body's hollow,
where moments earlier,
your blood rivered.

Anna Leahy

Porn Flick

She thinks of pornography as someone else's shelf of knickknacks to mock and envy. Also, a list of possibilities. She's fascinated and bored. Characters are changed out like batteries. Someone onscreen considers threesomes, ends up biting and screaming. She picks at herself; she chews cuticles, paces, and taps her toes. All she wants is to hit her average.

He offers pearls for her neck. Encircling is beauty some men want to behold.

He shakes off the pitch; he changes up. 50/50 suggests an equal share that is as likely to end in divorce as forever. 69 is the summer position of missionaries. He's a clutch hitter, looking for wisdom and a curveball.

He finds jealousy, and he waves her home. She slides hard.

They confuse sequence of scene for story. Their community standards slip into scripts trying not to say anything. She waxes; he wanes. It's another blue moon they're perched under.

Gloss

Porn: “Pornography” comes from words meaning “to sell” and “to write.”
Words are worth it.

Flick: something sudden, with a wrist (and a cigarette, or a knife) || turn
on (or off), like a switch (or a switch can be a whip)

batteries: Battery can mean to beat (pun intended), a place to store one’s
big gun (pun intended), a source of power (no joke). It can run
out; it can be recharged. It pitches and catches. It is a series of tests.
It lacks consent.

threesomes: Three is a prime number, a sacred number; it is god and the
number of paths to salvation; it is the sins to die for. || The list of
synonyms for penis goes on and on, as if language never gets bored.
The top three: dick, cock, pecker. || Stories can be cock and bull,
depending on who’s telling them and what they’re after. A cock-up
is a blunder.

average: The average duration of intercourse is just over five minutes. The
average erect penis is just over five inches long. || Five is a prime
number too; it is divine law, full of grace and song. || A hard man
is good to find. It’s not the size of the wand, it’s the magic in it. ||
Prime the pump. Go to the well again for a pun.

scene: “Obscene” and “scene” come from different words; one means “in
front of filth,” and the other means “a stage.” Either way, it’s all the
world.

Ceridwen Hall

from **Fields Drawn from Subtle Arrows**

[borders]

unpartnered, I am pitied or envied according to my interrogator's history. No one asks, is your solitude still good to you? They tell me how lonely I must be, how autonomous; they share recipes or they fetch scalpels and inquire about my work. I am in difficulty here, in language, striving to wrest tenderness from those who name a lack a void. A. Awkward vowel in the precipice: aromantic; asexual. Words themselves seem to demand consummation, offering only this sharp little sigh—a—to invoke their own bright negatives

Ceridwen Hall

from **Fields Drawn from Subtle Arrows**

[coherence]

edges are difficult. Categories fluster me. So do invitations and commands. They gleam obsidian. Meanwhile the subtle arrow of my brain is more at-tuned to clouds than faces, prefers the mountains above the shirtless man. Celibate is accurate, but the saints have claimed it, the priests have given it a bad rap. As for passion, I bathe my eyes in distance, I walk uphill to study the river below. The current tells hundreds of stories, none. I too have visited the sea, but now drift. A migrant lyric. Love: I want my others to go on thriving as themselves. Birds vanish with stillness. Edges are difficult

both : neither

because words dissipate in blood. Language hovers like a forecast: smaller and more believable than the wind itself, just as dangerous. When I can't distinguish between mind and marrow, vertigo heralds thunder, my desire for solitude echoes something like prayer. If I love it is with my whole brain, trying to understand, to withstand—I kneel to watch the stunned goldfinch ready herself for flight. I think with my heart, hoping; a loosened knot prevents the thread from snapping as she flutters away. My thoughts pound like footsteps. I am and am alone or encircled by the city that is my home, the forest swallowing us

CONTRIBUTOR NOTES

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Jean Follain (1903-1971) was born in Normandy and later became a judge. As a young poet, he associated with a group that included Max Jacob, Pierre Reverdy, and Léon-Paul Fargue. His first book, *La Main Chaude*, was published in 1933, and was followed by 10 volumes of poetry, several of which included prose poems along with his verse. Follain also published five prose books, most evoking the world of his childhood, in addition to a glossary of ecclesiastical terms and a celebration of the potato. In 1970, he was awarded the highest honor by L'Académie Française, its Grand Prix du Poésie. Shortly after midnight in 1971, Jean Follain was struck by a car in Paris and killed.

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Eric Schwerer teaches creative writing for the University of Pittsburgh-Johnstown. He has facilitated workshops for teenagers at risk and adults recovering from addiction. He is the author of three books of poetry—*Cruel Folklore*, *The Saint of Withdrawal*, and *Whittling Lessons*—and his poems are published widely in literary journals. His most recent manuscript, *creepy white*, uses eleven-syllable lines to explore themes of white supremacy/Trumpism; white fragility; race; environmental catastrophe; addiction/recovery; bullying/toxic masculinity; #me too.

Dana Sonnenschein teaches literature and creative writing at Southern Connecticut State University. Her publications include *Corvus*, *No Angels but These*, *Natural Forms*, and *Bear Country*. Recent work appears in *Feminist Studies*, *OPEN: JAL*, *Split Rock Review*, and Terrain.org's *Dear America* anthology. You can find her @lone_wolf_poet on Twitter, imagewitchery on Instagram, and by name on Facebook.

Philip Terman's most recent books include *This Crazy Devotion* (Broadstone, 2020) and *Tango Beneath a Narrow Ceiling: the Selected Poems of Riad Saleh Hussein* (Bitter Oleander, 2021), which he co-translated with the Syrian writer, Saleh Razzouk. Retired from Clarion University where he taught creative writing and literature, he directs the Bridge Literary Arts Center in Franklin, PA.

Carine Topal's work has appeared in *The Best of the Prose Poem*, *Greensboro Review*, *Iron Horse Literary Review*, and many other journals and anthologies. *Bed of Want*, her 2nd collection, won the 2007 Robert G. Cohen Prose Poetry Award. She is the recipient of the 2015 *Briar Cliff Review* Award for Poetry. Her prize-winning book, *Tattooed*, won the Palettes and Quills Chapbook contest. Topal's 5th collection, *In Order of Disappearance*, was published in 2018 by Pacific Coast Poetry Series. She teaches poetry and memoir workshops in Redondo Beach and in the Palm Springs area.

Grayson Treat's proudest moment was when he won the 73rd Starcraft 2 Platinum League King of the Hill when was thirteen. Since then, he's retired from esports, and his current exploits involve attempting to alleviate his disconnection from the places and people he grew up in and around through his writing. Sometimes he writes good words, and the sometimes makes things all right for all the rest of the time. He is working towards his PhD in English with a creative dissertation at Texas Tech University.

David Wojciechowski is the author of *Dreams I Never Told You & Letters I Never Sent* (Gold Wake, 2017). His poems can be found in *Bateau*, *Bending Genres*, *HAD*, *Meridian*, *Rejection Letters*, *Willow Springs*, and elsewhere. David is a freelance graphic designer and editor and can be found at davidwojo.com and on Twitter @MrWojoRising.