



the red fruit, wild,

common,

and Waiting

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The Magnolia Review

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Welcome to the second issue of The Magnolia Review! We publish art, photography, poetry, creative nonfiction, and fiction. The Magnolia Review publishes previously unpublished work. We publish two issues a year, deadlines on November 15 and May 15. The issue will be available January 15 and July 15 online.

While The Magnolia Review will not have physical copies at this time, the editors may compile a print version if funds become available.

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Explorers

To critique reason
I want to find
The one small door
The heart believes in.
The aperture between worlds.
I want to enter it, as one would,
A cavern after dark:
Small light, gentle fear,
A sense of deep beginnings.

Circle of Perfection

Let the cycle return
the bones of stars
and faces of the dead,
show the past as the next step.
Let spiderwebs of galaxies
tangle in their arms of light.
There in the mirror, round faces
show the future behind us.
For a moment along the circle,
the short life of perfection
arrives where it began,
leaves where it ended
to seek itself again.

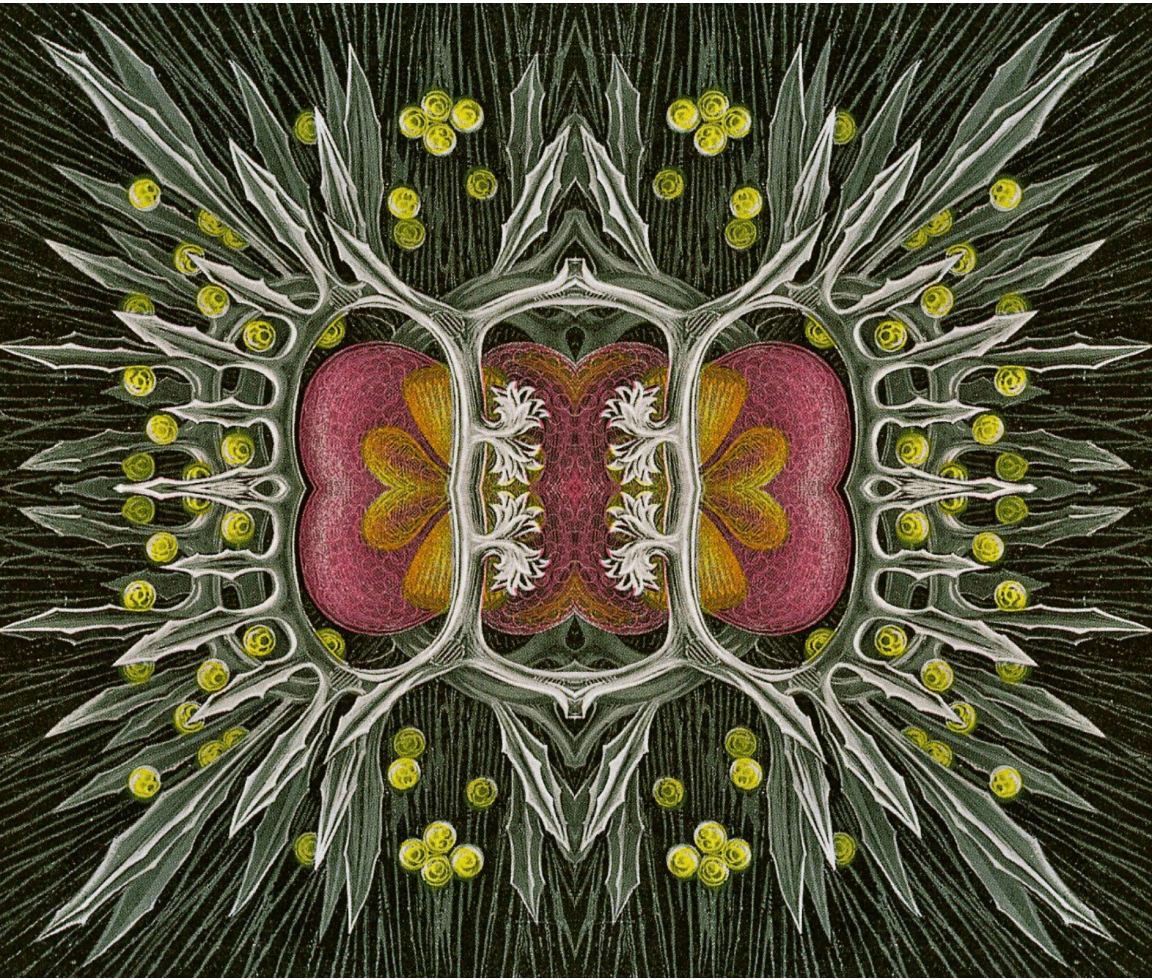
Robert S. King

The Mote in Her Eye

There is a second universe.
It's tiny and nameless
and stays hidden
without effort.
It does not equivocate
or compromise.
It is a secret compartment
where miracles
pass like ordinary time,
a limitless breath
to exhaust
all the world's pain.

This is the
one lasting place
where what you are called
is not your identity
but a measure of your soul.
Where a kiss is returned
not because a debt is owed
but because it is
the sweetest of all movements,
the one undeniably
pure act left
in all the diminutive world.

Whoever Loves



Bill Wolak

5

at the hairdresser
before
her first day of chemo...
she picked up one shorn curl
from the floor

Flushed



Allison Rosh

Before Surgery

I take out the trash under a full moon
wreathed in cloudy shawls, wispy
silks. I think I see Orion
(three stars, an almost straight line?)
so I make a wish—just one—
can you make one wish on three stars? Surely
if the universe is infinite, finite
rules need not apply.

Tonight the farmer's field behind me
smells of chicken shit—
better hay, fatter cows, more methane—
the steak you and I will share
when you come to visit
if you come,
that is, if wishes on stars
are not a lie.

My book has a picture of Alice Walker,
her one blue blind eye
and I wonder
if I'll have courage
knowing there is no backup,
no plan B,
just velvet dark
with a dim memory of constellations.

Elegy for Aidan

"Swaggering through that celestial door"- Yusef Komounyakaa

You spoke basketball
 last time I saw you, cramped
between two point guards, the out-
 of-bounds line. Your parents
couldn't recognize the funeral procession,
the losing team lining up
 to shake hands. I never realized
how similar you look
to my brother. The scoreboard
 turned off, I could see
your shame—a missed free throw—
your childish pout, as you made
plans to have a sleepover. A poppy bruise
 tumor on your cheek from where
you took the captain's elbow. Before
I could say sorry for the loss,
you dead-legged me, teasing
 that I brought my girlfriend—
you were chunky, big-boned,
spry enough to sprint
 through that celestial door.

Domenic Scopa

You Should Be Happy

Last Friday, just before 4th period, Grace appeared while I was tending to an 8th grade boy with chocolate jimmies in his right eye. I almost never see a jimmie case, but Grace visits the health office at least once a week. She always arrives alone, even though most students are escorted by a herd of their friends. She's tall, gaunt, and rail-like, with brown hair tied back in two pigtails. Even her eyelids look emaciated, if such a thing is possible. In the past, Grace has come in complaining about colds, stomachaches, and a mysterious rash that alternates between elbows. She's come in with a sharp pain that felt like a "roof nail" in her left heel. Once, she came in because she was "fatigued from the waist up." When she appeared last Friday, she said, as she always does: "Miss Severino, why don't you wear gloves with me?"

"I do," I said, smiling at Grace and nodding at the boy.

"No, you don't."

"Grace, I have to put on gloves with everyone." This wasn't true, since I didn't wear gloves with Grace. I held up my hands, which were covered by the latex gloves I'd put on for the jimmie boy. In my right hand, I held a Q-tip.

"What if someone comes in for a hug?" she said, walking over to the sink and washing her hands. "Do you have to put on gloves?"

"Who comes to the health office for a hug?" the boy said.

"Is that what you want?" I teased Grace. "A hug?" That was my first mistake, although I didn't realize it at the time.

Just then the boy sneezed. I stepped away from him and nodded at Grace, who dried off her hands and passed me a fresh Q-tip. As long as she washed her hands, I let her help with minor jobs, like dispensing Q-tips and handing out Kleenex. She helped with other tasks too, such as stacking paper cups in my cabinet, counting boxes of cold compresses, and doing a cough drop inventory.

"Just a sec," I said to her, turning back to the boy. I plucked the last jimmie out of his eye and showed it to him. It was the size of a piece of pencil lead. "There you go."

He blinked. "Thanks!" His eye was watery but not red, which reassured me.

I removed my gloves and discarded them in the step-on can. It was only 11 o'clock and already the can was half full of used gloves. The boy gave me his hall pass, I signed it, and he disappeared. Most students disappear as fast as they can from the health office, except Grace.

I picked up my logbook and turned to her. "I'll be right with you."

Grace sat down in her favorite chair, which was under the space-ship nutrition poster. "Launch Your Day With Breakfast!" it said.

"Why do you have to document every student's visit?" she said.

"It's the rule."

"What do you write about me?"

"I write: wonderful girl, excellent student, a mother and father's dream-come-true."

Grace gave a sorrowful laugh.

I made a brief note in the logbook, put it in my tray, and turned to Grace. "What seems to be the problem?"

"I'm worried."

"About summer vacation?"

She picked up a box of tongue depressors on the counter next to her. "When did these come in?"

"You'll be fine."

"It's so *long*. I don't know what I'm going to do."

"You should be happy. It's summer."

She sighed. "How many toothbrushes do you own?"

I looked at her. "One."

"I have three. One toothbrush for each place I live."

I put out my hand to feel her forehead. "Wait!" she said.

"What?"

"You need to put on gloves."

"Grace, we've talked about this before."

"You put them on with everyone else. Why don't you put gloves on with me?"

"If I put on gloves every time you came in," I teased her again, "I'd run out after a week." That was my second mistake, and I don't know

what got into me. I suppose it's because with boys, it's okay to use humor to cajole them out of a bad day or a hurtful comment, but girls are more complicated.

"No, you wouldn't. I've counted your boxes of gloves. You have thousands."

I reached out to touch her forehead again.

Grace gave me a worried look. "I don't want you to get in trouble."

"Don't worry about me," I said, laying my hand on her forehead. I hadn't touched her forehead in several weeks, and it felt faintly warm but also more bony than I remembered. In my experience, there's athletic bony, nervous bony, and sad bony. Grace's forehead was definitely sad. Sometimes when she visits, we'll chat for a bit and then I'll send her into my office to have a snack. Crackers. Cheese. A little cup of apple juice. I leave the door open a few inches and watch her sit at my desk and eat. Sometimes, she reminds me of a small animal: she looks so hunched-over, needy, and furtive.

"Sit here and I'll take your temperature," I said.

"Can I go in your office?"

There are three rooms in the health area—the examining room, my office, and a back room with two cots—and I went into my office and checked to make sure I hadn't left any papers lying about. "All right."

She sat in my desk chair, I tucked the digital thermometer under her tongue, and I pulled up the folding chair and sat next to her. I like my brief, thermometer-moments with Grace. She's quiet, I'm quiet, and we can hear the exuberant bustle of the school around us. I hope it reminds her that healthy life is going on, and she can be part of it if she wants.

"Where's the photograph?" she said after thirty seconds.

"Which one?" I have photos of my parents, my sisters, and my nieces and nephews on the desk.

"Your fiancé." Her throat was so thin that I could see the peristalsis when she swallowed.

The thermometer beeped and I removed it. "99.7," I said. "That's elevated but not enough to send you home."

“Remember the last time?” Grace said.

“Yes.” The last time I called Grace’s parents to pick her up, neither of them could make it. Her father was in the middle of a trial, her mother had a crisis at her hair salon, and they weren’t on speaking terms with each other. And Grace’s back-ups weren’t available either. So she had to sit by the nutrition poster and listen to me trying to convince four different people to come to school for her. And then, a few minutes after I’d tried the last person, two knee lacerations walked in the health office, followed by a bent wire on a pair of braces, followed by a severe case of nausea, all in the space of 15 minutes. The latex gloves were flying out of the box above my sink and Grace ran in the back room and got me another carton.

“How about if I take your pulse?” I reached out for her wrist.

“Wait!” she said. “You’re not prepared!”

“Yes, I am.”

She pointed at the box of gloves on my desk. “They’re waiting for you.”

“Grace,” I said. “Why do you keep asking that?”

“You can’t touch someone without putting on gloves.”

“Are you afraid I might infect you? Is that it?”

“Of course not! You’re not sick.”

“What is it then?”

“Because I shouldn’t be touched by a bare hand.”

“Grace! How can you say that? *Of course* you should be touched by a bare hand!” I looked at her. “Don’t your parents hug you?”

She closed her eyes, which is when I noticed something shine on her eyelids.

“What’s that?” I said.

“What?” She opened her eyes.

“The glitter.”

“We did it in the bathroom after 3rd period.” She shrugged. “Mr. Rafferty made us write an essay in English about it.”

“What?”

“Why-Do-Girls-Need-Glitter.”

I laughed. "I think he's got a point. Why *do* you need glitter?"

"I don't know. All I know is that Julie put more on me than anyone else."

There was a knock and then the front door opened. A red-haired boy holding his mouth entered. Bits of vomit leaked between his fingers and dripped onto his Simpson's t-shirt.

"The bathroom is right there!" I said, getting up and opening the door for him. Grace watched.

The boy ran into the bathroom, closed the door, and vomited. The retching went on for over a minute and then the door opened. "You got any mints?" the boy said. "My mouth tastes awful."

"Sit here," I said, pointing at the chair by my examining table. "Let me take your temperature."

I pulled two gloves out of my box and started to put them on. I had no trouble getting the glove on my right hand, but for some reason the left glove wouldn't cooperate. There are no lefts and rights with latex gloves, nor with nitrile or vinyl gloves, but this glove was sticky, or faulty, or something. I pulled too hard and tore it. So I grabbed another glove and it went on smoothly. I didn't look at Grace when all this was happening, but just the same, I could tell that she was watching me. No, "watching" isn't strong enough. She was studying me. I gave the boy some mouthwash and, after he'd rinsed, put the thermometer in his mouth.

"Would you like some ginger ale?" I said. "That soothes the stomach."

He looked down at his t-shirt. There was vomit in Bart Simpson's hair. "Will this make a stain?"

"It should come out if you put your machine on pre-wash and soak it for an hour," Grace said.

"How do you know that?"

"Everyone knows that."

"Do you cook as well?" the boy said to Grace.

She nodded. "I'm getting tired of the microwave. Isn't there some other way to prepare meals?"

I removed the thermometer and checked it. 97.9. “At least you don’t have a fever,” I said to the boy. “That’s a good sign. How do you feel?”

He stood up. “Can I go? I’m missing PE.”

“As long as you take it easy,” I said. “At lunch, stick to gentle foods, like ginger ale and Saltines. And come back if you feel sick again.”

He waved goodbye and went out the door.

I took off my gloves, put them in the trash, and picked up my log-book.

Grace sat in her favorite chair. “Miss Severino, what would make you put on gloves with me?”

“If I answer that question, will you stop asking me?” I said this in a gentle tone, but now I wonder how Grace heard it.

“Yes.”

“Promise?”

“Promise.”

“I’d wear gloves if you were covered in vomit, which I hope you never are.”

“Me either!”

“I’d wear gloves if you had something stuck in your throat and I had to get it out.”

“I hope that never happens!” Grace closed her eyes for a second, which is when I noticed the glitter again. It shimmered and gleamed and made her look as if she were being prepared for a special ceremony.

“I’d wear gloves,” I said, making my third and last mistake, “if you had blood on you.”

Grace started to say something in a timid, faltering voice, but just then there was a tremendous bang on the door, two boys with black eyes walked in, and the 5th period bell rang.

First Aid

Perhaps repair requires
ice, a certain lack

of motion, maybe air.
The ocean seals above me

and never shows its wound.
The ocean drives

toward nothing, curls
stones to sand where it strikes.

There is air in the vault
before it breaks. If you know

where to look, and when.
So if there is no scar—and

there is no scar—it is
because skin can't form

and even in winter
rock and salt conspire

against freezing.
A coil, a movement,

some days a hint of brine,
and everything helplessly open.

These Avatars I Hold in My Hands

These antique Spanish coins were seized from the temples of Aztec Gods,
for Mexican volcanic earth was seeped with gold.
And under their sculpted ferocious faces,
those pitiless gods gladly witnessed human hearts
seized, ripped out, and pounded flat.
The conquistadors in turn tore down the Aztec golden idols.
Then those god killers melted and minted the deities into Spanish coin,
cashing in the gods' immortality with a conqueror's greed.
This Mammon divinity of many monikers was birthed
from one of the millions of Nova stars belching out that seductive metal.
From the cosmic heat of an expiring star, to Aztec fire, to a Spanish kiln
and the hammering of idols flat into coin, there exists a chain of bloody hungers.
Mammon, that Golden God, seductive in his beauty, is his own evangelist.
Even now he preaches a sermon of avarice to me.
The antique dealer lets me hold the coins, but under his watchful eye of course.
These avatars I hold in my hands,
if only the merchant would for just a moment turn his eyes from me.

The Lonely Cemetery



Andrew Lindquist

funeral procession
gobbled up
by a sand storm...
your last exhale kept home
in a red balloon

99 Word Immortality

Not Shakespeare but fascinating to me and probably to many others,
this pixel presented poem, "BLUE SQUILLS" by Sara Teasdale, 1884-1933.
She died young by today's standards but was a wise old lady by ancient ones.
Of course Wikipedia is only a click away, but no,
these few words are all I need know of her,
myself not being a scholar but only a happenstance devourer of verse
who has just spent twenty unregretted minutes of my life perusing her 99 words.
And at the bottom of the poem a paean denied to almost all of us,
"This poem is now in the public domain."
Copyright, the life of a poet plus seventy years
give or take a lawyer's dotted i's or crossed t's.
I don't know if somewhere she's angry at me,
for enjoying her words but paying her heirs no fee.
But her poem about eternity made it to the public domain
rather than to a waste basket or a computer folder named delete.
I'm reading it now and so will many others
for an eternity beyond a lifetime and seventy.
We readers have paid her a precious rare royalty,
a small annuity of postmortem fame.

Balances

There will be those days
when the world opens,
a concerto of sorts
raining down
from the excited sky
to light the keystrokes
in the darkened cellar,
or to give the roots
their radiant well-being.
There will be those days
when heaven is no sleight
of Hand
but a landscape, sure before you.
when what is lost
comes back, and the windows
fill with grace.
But these days too: dark manger of the clouds,
little love,
someone passing out
while the shot glass shatters.

Leafless



Common garden.
Giving Trees:

Leafless, Treeless,

gone.

paralysis
in remission —
tempting the ants
to climb
my leg

Car Crash

Solar flares, black holes,
ant farms, magnifying glasses,
Noah and the Flood.

Pop Rocks, the ice cream shop
in Burlington, the preschool
sing-a-long.

The baby's casket buried
at Hart island, the American flag
half-mast over Potters Field.

Leaves turning in New England,
sleigh bells in West Texas.

Divorce,
the odd silence of a walk-in closet,
when his finger no longer keeps
the rhythm warm.

The rising hum of a swarm
of wasps, my father
cleaning out rain gutters.

And between the curves
of my breath, I notice
that it is snowing.

Snowing.

Can you believe it?

Dylan Debelis

magnolia buds
across the window
shape
a sudden snow layer -
preemies born room

A Chimney Swift of Early Fall

Above my boyhood they swirled
in circle eights each day
around their chimney home.
Twittering loudly in play or argument,
they seemed a permanent streak on the sky,
an energy with wings and wind,
well above me who dreamed of fighting
the crimes of gravity.
Then from formation one fluttered
down, gasping and twitching.
No blood, no bones protruding,
but no less in flight from this world.
I called on my superboy power,
cupped it in my soft hands
before it went limp and still
but for the breeze lifting its feathers,
its beak open in surprise.

snowing constantly
for three days ...
a cassock makes path
to my neighbours
through the snowdrifts

Winter



Brian McRoberts

Miles

Nasty dreams of nasty things—
 Gilded armor too tall to reach,
 old rag in hand, extending
 for the helmet as you
sit around and glare

Cat curled on the hood
 of a bus we sit inside of

I panic, move to chase
stopped by a gentle hand,
your voice soothing that
 Little Shea will be alright

 Never mind that I don't know
 who Little Shea even is

And then, in that aisle,
 the scent of General's Gum Erasers
 that reminds us of our mothers—
the teacher and the artist—
 and summers of

old math workbooks, view of the bridge,
old canvases, river rising fast and high

 Faces blurred, voices,
 submerged, whispering

i don't think he said my name,

“miss monopoly” he said, that’s what he called me,
he was the banker and i was the race car, he was
the driver and i was the girl holding the plastic trophy
with some yellow paint slopped on,
i was purple, i was periwinkle, he was dark blue,
he was jail, he was an empty space, i was a bus ride,
he was a stop sign, we were both a little blurry, he was
excited, i thought about being present, he thought about
lace, he thought about stone, i thought about cramping,
i folded, his grip slipped, i held us up by my elbows,
he slept and i wondered how he could possibly sleep,
he didn’t dream, i didn’t dream, i pressed, he didn’t do
a thing, i wondered if anyone was ever going to be able
to feel my thoughts through my skin, he woke and i
pretended to, he grinned, i thought about pretending to,
i crawled, i stuffed, he was mister monopoly, i didn’t exist,
he walked me to the bus stop, he forgot that he was
the bus stop, he said “you’re taller than i thought you’d be”
and i thought about cutting off my feet but i didn’t think
he’d get the reference, i thought about trying to tell him
that his hands were nothing like my father’s but i didn’t
think he’d get the reference, he saw the bus, he let out
the breath we knew he was holding, i wondered
when i’d meet somebody worth looking back for, i thought about
offering him a pomegranate seed but i didn’t think he’d get
the reference, maybe he waved as i left, he probably waved,
i held my breath, i thought about throwing my clothes away,
i thought about throwing my phone away, i thought about
how i throw my body away and how it always comes back,
my body is the herpes in my life, his hands are
the unloaded guns in my life, his name is the cork board,
his house is the swamp, his face is the smudge, he called me
miss monopoly, i lost his number, he doesn’t exist, he is jail,
there was no free card, he is an empty space

Jessica Robinson

Subway Stops

ten years how the snow
sank beneath her foot

french fries late night
dressing sponges

teeth for thirty-six
hours of when the
stories rolled into
fishing for what
happens next in
dreams in this

sheets that are
quiet and left
to flesh made
whole in tenuous
light from a bar
sign one thousand
miles away when
go is the moment

recognition and yes,
I remember your
name and how
talented your fingers
are but not your
drink of choice

Holland Harbour



Andersen Reece

Blue Train

I don't go in our sunroom anymore
and dust has finally settled along the windowsill and toy trains
like a veil. Jackson walks in there sometimes, to clean up after
the spiders and chipmunks that squeeze themselves under

our doors and make homes out of abandoned
newspapers and old Chewy wrappers we've left,
crumpled and forgotten. He says it's bad luck
to forget about toy trains, teeth-marked and spittle-stained.

He doesn't blame me, I say, late at night when he's out at work.
He doesn't blame me. I repeat it drum-like, droning it same
as the hum of that toy tank engine to remind myself
there are better things to bear than tears. I want a redo,

a do-over. As if by pretending a double can sprout
like Mendel's seeds, I can sow that Saturday into something
else that could burst through the dust along that windowsill
and bloom, once more.

Red Fruit



Sally Deskins (text by Laura Madeline Wiseman)

Good Times

Miss Ellie who's all of ninety-two
early on into this coming May,
climbs up on a kitchen chair to do
some chore or other, maybe reach for
a can of peaches she favors in her
cupboard or to clean off the top
of her icebox – that's what
she calls it when she forgets
what generation she's talking to –
but I tell her, Miss Ellie, there's no
need for climbing like that at your age,
just call me over when you feel some need,
& I'll do the fetching for whatever it is
you'll be needing, but No, she
says, climbing puts me in mind of
times when I was three or mostly four
& reaching high to where I wasn't
supposed to be, reaching for
my mamma's cookie jar.
Good times, she says,
those were real good times,
& I'm aiming to have a few more.

2

moaning
about my misspent
youth ...
galling rhythm on his cup
with the teaspoon

Cult of the Star-spangled Bottle Tree

We vaulted the wire right-of-way fence at the end
of our street. Climbed an old hoary honeylocust; a tree
The Audubon Society Field Guide to North American Trees,
Eastern Region says loves limestone hills and flourishes
throughout Ohio. This one wasn't long for this world.
Had probably felt the vibrations from the Wright Flyer
as Orville or Wilbur put their machine through its paces,
performing for locals, soaring, risking looping maneuvers
above venerable trees and hills and rivers and more trees.
Mid-crown in the locust, we nailed rough pine boards

and padded the boards with bundled rags. Built a fort.
An enclosure wherein an hour could be some part magic.
After school, we climbed like going up that ancient tree
was a ritual we had down pat. We'd catch our breath.
Confide things. Talk dirty. Tell lies. Smoke cigarettes.
Once or twice, a girl braved the climb. And only once
in a skirt. Beth Vines climbed the honeylocust in a skirt.
Beth Vines who taught me to ride a bike and not look back
to see her swimsuited, carrying Johnson's Baby Oil and
a beach towel with a Dayton Flyers logo. In summers,

the tree bloomed leaf-bottles from the ends of branches—
Philips Milk of Magnesia bottles budded a firmament-blue,
bulb-necked whisky bottles sparkled. In spring, we'd find
string or ribbon that birds left in the hollows of the locust.
Some of the ribbon was as red as movie blood or cardinals.
High up in a tree like that, in Dayton, you thought of flying.
Sooner or later. I did. And if I didn't, I'd remember Beth.
Starting up before me, not thinking or maybe knowing
exactly what she was doing. And then I'd feel happy.
Above an orchard and backyards of hung laundry.

Roy Bentley

Don't Blame Me (A Country Tune)

The devil's getting a bad rap today.
A woman stabs her mother
And it's the devil's doing.
He's inside her, he's taken over.

Honey, next time you give me any lip
I'm gonna sell you down the river.
You deserve it, but even if you didn't
Don't blame me. Blame it on the devil.

The devil's getting a bad rap today.
A mother drowns her children
And it's the devil's doing.
He's inside her, he's taken over.

And if I should ever walk out on you
Without so much as one farewell,
Don't slam the door behind me and curse,
And don't blame me. Blame it on the devil.

The devil's getting a bad rap today.
The children shoot their parents
And it's the devil's doing.
He's inside them, he's taken over.

Oh, and I know what you're thinking:
You'll sue me, take me to the cleaners.
But when I refuse you one red cent
Don't blame me. Blame it on the devil.

The devil's getting a bad rap today.
The parents poison their lovers
And it's the devil's doing.
He's inside them, he's taken over.

And should I ever come begging you
To take me back and you tell me
Not now or ever, and to take a hike,
I won't blame you. I'll blame it on the devil!

The devil's getting a bad rap today.
The lovers burn each other
And it's the devil's doing.
He's inside them, he's taken over.

Notes on Form

Free verse represents the maturity of humanity
pissed away
(like other corporate and public treasures)
on inappropriate
neuroses lovers themes and wordplay
in regretted lifetimes on corrupt isles

It does not experiment What looks like experiment
is persistent negotiation with a superego
to get it to accept
lax as taut arbitrary as central
and the eternal
as personal or historical or the reverse

Of myself I say only
I was a Beat Classicist
whose occasional blank verse line
was a ruined column
like the I itself or resentment
of the solitude that fed it

and aged me to a point, then kept me young.

Attrition

From her office, Judy watched him lope through the elevator doors to the call center floor. He didn't seem rushed, and even paused to wink at the receptionist. When he reached his desk and donned his headset, she checked her watch: three minutes. She documented the time in his file and marched it down to Dale in Human Resources. Judy paused in his doorway and raised the folder above her head. "Josh Newman."

"For?"

"Tardiness. He's on a final, final, final warning."

"What's his start time?"

"Nine o'clock."

Dale checked his watch. "It's only five past."

"He was three minutes late."

Dale took the folder from her and flipped through page after page titled Warning, Warning, Warning. "So fire him."

"Can I? For three minutes?"

"Then don't fire him." He handed back the file. "I'm not sure what you want."

"I want him to come to work on time."

Dale braced his elbows on his desk and rested his nose on his thumbs, so that all Judy could see were those flat dark eyes staring at her over the bridge of his fingers. He held this pose for an awkward ten seconds while Judy shifted from foot to foot. Finally, he unlocked his hands to show them to her, palms up. "I don't think he's going to do that," he said.

She was now deaf to their tears. There was a time when Judy wept in sympathy when they cried (and they always cried) even though they were guilty (and they were always guilty.) When she escorted them down to Human Resources, they were defiant until Dale used the word "termination." He had a way of slipping it into the discussion before it actually

happened, the way a doctor swabs your arm before he jabs you with the needle. And once they heard that word, no matter how tough or combative, male or female, they grew husky-voiced, blinking and distracted. Some attempted a deathbed conversion, while others bawled a string of invective as saliva dripped off their chins. Judy now watched these performances with no lump in her throat, no rise in her pulse. Her employees had exhausted her sympathy.

It wasn't always this way. Her first termination kept her up nights silently rehearsing her resignation as a call center manager. On the day she was promoted, a kid on her team lost his temper with a customer. Judy heard his voice rising and arrived at his desk in time to hear him threatened to come through the phone and bitch-slap someone. The kid was angry when Judy removed him from the call, argued all the way down to Human Resources. "You shoulda' heard the stuff *he* was saying," he said. When the t-word appeared, the kid buried his face in his hands and shrugged his shoulders with the force of each sob. Judy was grateful that he hid his face so that he could not see her own wet cheeks and quivering lips. She would think of that boy often in the weeks after: his broad thin shoulders, the anguish on his face as she walked him to the exit, the way he apologized before he staggered to his car. He paused at his car door and took a long last look at the building, his expression full of regret. It took all her strength not to chase him through the lot and beg him to return.

Her husband Karl, an art teacher at the community college, was sympathetic. She called him afterward with her office door closed and cried so hard that her voice became a high, thin squeak. Her face was still ashen when she arrived home that night. Karl hugged her in the doorway, and said, "There, there. It must have been awful."

Karl didn't hug her much these days, but he still felt it was awful. "How can you do it?" he'd ask each time she told him they'd lost another one. "What about their families?"

"Hey, they do it to themselves," she replied. This was her mantra, adopted from Dale. She knew which ones had infant children, troubled

marriages, demanding parents. Her weekly one-on-ones had become *de facto* counseling sessions where they confessed to her their problems at work, then the problems affecting their work, and finally their problems, period. She heard harrowing stories of binge drinking, abusive relationships, anonymous sex. A surprising number were gay. A heavy Hispanic girl tearfully confided that she wanted desperately to lose weight. Would Judy help her? Judy hugged this girl tightly, said, Of course, of course I'll help you. Two months later, Judy escorted Bonita, now eleven pounds lighter, down to Dale's office to fire her for applying a thousand dollars in fraudulent credit to her new boyfriend's account.

Dale had taught her a lot in her three years on the job. He had coached her gently after that first termination that it might not be a good idea to cry more than the people they fired. She would cry later with her office door shut and the lights off, sob into her palm for the expression on X's face when s/he was told s/he was fired. She resolved that first year to reform them against their unemployable natures. It started with a heart to heart. Failing that, she would coach them, give them verbal warnings, then write them up, place them on a Final Written Warning, then another Final, to seem fair, then another Final, because she dreaded the prospect of letting them go. And still, they'd act so surprised when they were finally asked to join her for a discussion with Dale, push their chairs in too hard and snap their coats off the hanger for the benefit of their friends. They'd argue their innocence in the ride down the elevator, carry this belligerence over to Dale's office, make their excuses, even tattle on their peers until they were shown the documentation, warning after warning, which they had signed and dated every time. This brought the tears, followed by promises or threats, ending with the too-long death march from Dale's office to the lobby doors.

On Friday, Judy had to fire a woman who was circulating racist jokes through company e-mail. The girl wailed as Dale broke the news, while Judy calmly thumbed through the printed e-mails and grimaced at the highlighted passages. After she escorted the girl from the building, Dale gave Judy a playful clap on the back. "You've come a long way," he said.

Josh Newman entered her office the way he entered the building, or break area, or conference room: smirking. “Hey Boss Lady,” he said, and flopped into the seat opposite Judy’s desk. Since joining her team the month before, Josh was one of the few who did not confess to her at their performance reviews. In fact, she knew almost nothing about him beyond what others had told her. He had dabbled in office romance, left a trail of broken hearts among the administrative assistants. He was rumored to be on his way out until his previous supervisor resigned to “pursue other opportunities,” the e-mail said. He spoke like a kid with some education, but wore the bemused sneer of a student who couldn’t be bothered to graduate. Judy thought of Karl and his eager student disciples, the way they hung on his every word.

Judy leaned forward on her desk and clasped her hands under her nose, her Dale pose. She sat there a moment to let the silence linger. “Why do you think I asked to speak with you today?”

Josh crossed his arms and shook his head. He leaned back as though to put his feet on the desk, then remembered where he was. “Beats me,” he said.

Again, the long silence. “You were late.”

“The clock in the lobby said nine o’clock.”

“We’ve discussed this, Josh. It’s not enough that you’re in the *building*. You have to be at your *desk*, ready to work. Your *computer* is your time clock. What time do you think you logged in?”

Nine-oh-three. That was the answer. She had already run the login report to confirm what she observed, had stapled the printout to the Final Written Warning. This was another trick she had learned from Dale, one of his unimpeachable rules of employee relations: *you should already know the answer when you ask a question*.

Josh tilted his head back to calculate the time it would have taken him to travel from the lobby to his desk. As he did this, Judy studied his

face. It was gaunt and angular, with heartthrob cheekbones and bee stung lips. She could see how the girls around the office would be lost for this guy, even if he was a fuck-up. Especially because he was a fuck-up. He had that combination of unkempt good looks and casual cruelty that drives young girls to distraction. Watching him, Judy was surprised to feel a light, buzzing anger. Here he was, a bright, gorgeous kid. He could have been anything, could have written his own ticket. Instead he's sitting here playing dumb about the three minutes he shirked with his entry-level job on the line.

"Josh, tell me," she said. "Do you like having to meet with me like this?"

"Yeah, kinda." He smiled at her then, an open, toothy smile without a trace of sarcasm. And Judy heard Dale's voice in her head, saying, *you should already know the answer when you ask a question.*

Judy thought about that smile on the drive home, thought about it more as she removed her pants suit to change into shorts and a t-shirt. She assumed Karl was still at school, then found him on the backyard deck holding forth with a dozen of his students. Some sat in chairs around him, while the rest sat on the railing or Indian-style at his feet. They were drinking beer and laughing. She had asked him before if it was appropriate to develop social relationships with people he would have to grade. He dismissed her question as beside the point. "We're *human*," he said, as though that justified his shaky professionalism.

Judy took a call from Karen, one of her peers at the center. They weren't so much friends as friendly. They talked about their employees, Karen's kids, their plans for the weekend. Judy wouldn't have felt comfortable talking to her about Karl, how things had changed.

"I see Josh Newman lives to lie another day."

"Yeah, three minutes. I got the feeling Dale wouldn't drop the hammer for that."

“Yeah, well, he’ll get his,” she said. “You saw what he did to poor Stacy.”

“Stacy? I thought she resigned.”

“In avoidance.” Josh hadn’t just dated a supervisor; he had dated *his* supervisor. Which would explain her sudden resignation. The company had strict rules against fraternization.

“How did they know?”

Karen was quiet on the line. “He must have told,” she said.

“But why? That doesn’t seem like him.”

“Why are you defending him?”

“I’m not. I just...don’t think he would do that.”

Through the glass of the patio door, Judy watched Karl speak to a pretty coed, the last of the hangers-on. He was gesturing wildly, stopping occasionally to point or trace his finger around the outline of her sketch pad. She nodded as he spoke, and there was something in the arch of her eyebrows and the shape of her open mouth that expressed complete agreement. No, not agreement: *amazement*. Something he had just said to her had been a revelation. She was laughing now, shaking her head *no*, like she could not believe what he had just said. Was she in love? Could she look upon this bearded hipster twice her age and feel something? Judy too had been charmed by Karl’s observations once, was flattered by his praise and encouragement. Their courtship was like that: he had pushed her to pursue her promotions, coached and counseled her through her doubts. There were former students too who would call or visit, until they stopped abruptly, cast out, it seemed. He would assure you, against your protestations, that you had talent, until you had the gall to agree.

You could do this job for a thousand years, and your employees would continue to invent ways to get fired. Of all Dale’s maxims, this one proved unimpeachable. Judy had coached, disciplined, and fired people for

insubordination, fraternization, performance, theft, fighting, drunkenness, fraud, harassment, and hygiene. She fired one representative when a security camera caught him masturbating in his car, and another for smearing feces on the men's room wall. But by far the biggest contributors to attrition were tardiness and absenteeism. Her younger employees simply could not grasp that they were required to arrive at the same time every day for a fixed number of hours. They approached their jobs the way they viewed going to the grocery store, or getting a haircut: they would make it if their schedules and moods allowed.

She was relieved to see Josh step off the elevator at 8:58, but he paused to speak to the receptionist, and to drain not one but *two* cups of water from the fountain. He logged into his computer with just seconds to spare. She was about to say something to him but thought of another Dale maxim: *Don't congratulate people for doing the things they're supposed to do*. She decided to drift by his desk just the same. Judy liked to touch base with employees after they were disciplined, to see if they would smile or say hello. It gave her a sense of how they were taking it.

When Judy passed his cubicle, Josh swiveled his chair and shook his head with a comic double-take. "Wow," he said.

"What?"

He gave her an appraising head-to-toe. "You look *great*."

Judy closed her office door and balled her fists on her desk to keep them away from his neck. She was angry that he had flirted with her so brazenly. Too, she was embarrassed that the compliment had left her blushing and flustered in front of a half dozen grinning subordinates. She knew she would have to address it with him, but decided to wait until the blood left her face.

She didn't have to wait long. She heard a soft knock, and then his head appeared inside her door. "Do you have a minute?"

She nodded.

He turned sideways and jerked his thumb over his shoulder. "Hey, I just wanted to say that I'm sorry about what happened out there." He

offered her an easy smile that was equal parts sincere contrition and goofy embarrassment. “I meant what I said, but it, uh, probably wasn’t, you know. *Appropriate.*”

With her mouth shut tight, she nodded her head. “I would agree,” she said softly.

As he back pedaled, he raised his palms in a gesture of surrender. “Won’t happen again,” he said.

She was relieved it was addressed so quickly, and saw no need to document the event. Still, she caught herself checking her clothes in the reflection of her computer screen, and thought, *He’s seen me wear this a dozen times.*

When Judy returned home that evening, there was a naked man reclining on her living room floor. His robe was draped over a dining room chair. Twenty students were littered around him in a half circle, their eyes fixed in concentration as the coal worked their pads. Judy had to tiptoe through them on her way to the kitchen, and was amused at the varying interpretations in their respective drawings. The pretty girl from the deck was clearly the best artist, though her drawing bore little resemblance to the man on the blanket. Her rendering was both thinner and more muscular, with none of the model’s patchy body hair. The girl beside her seemed to dwell on these faults, exaggerating his rolls of belly fat and the curly black hairs that centered his navel. One of the male students had devoted all of his artistry to a title: *Douchebag in Repose*. Judy raised her hand to shield her eyes as she walked past him, but not before peaking at the naked man’s expression. He looked bored.

She was still stranded at the kitchen table when Karl entered to grab more beers from the fridge. “I wish you wouldn’t do that here,” she said.

Karl rolled his eyes. “Oh grow up,” he said.

“Where did you find him?”

“Who?”

“Michelangelo’s David in there.”

Karl sighed. “We place ads on message boards. We pay them \$25 an hour, and whatever we can raise by passing the hat.”

Judy didn’t want to navigate the tangle of students to get to the bedroom, so she sat at the kitchen table and peeled the label off a beer bottle. With nothing else to do, her thoughts returned to the man in her living room. She couldn’t understand how someone—someone so *unattractive*, yet—could so casually remove his clothes for strangers. Who does that? As she considered this, Judy absently pinched her collar to her throat.

Judy spent a portion of every week monitoring random customer calls from her office phone. She would complete a checklist to discuss with each employee during their performance reviews. As she listened in, most of her representatives offered a robotic efficiency, with crisp “sirs” and scripted appreciation for the callers’ continued business. Others were chatty and took every opportunity to digress from the task at hand to talk about sports, the weather, and family. Judy sometimes had to walk to their desks and remind them that customers were waiting. They all seemed reluctant to release a sympathetic voice.

When it was Josh’s turn, Judy reviewed his previous checklists and saw that Stacy had failed three of his last five monitors, citing his inability to follow company call policy. It amazed her how the employees who were most convinced they were above this kind of work often had trouble meeting its most basic requirements. Judy dialed his extension, and a tone let them both know she was joining a call in progress.

“That sounds good,” he said. His voice was soft, almost a whisper.

The woman laughed. “Doesn’t it?”

“It sure does.”

“Where are you?”

“I’m in —.”

“Well, darn,” the woman said, with what sounded like genuine disappointment. “You’re, like, five states away.”

“Maybe you could meet me halfway.”

The woman giggled. “You’re *bad*,” she said. Judy could imagine the woman smiling and slowly twirling the phone cord around her finger.

Judy rose and opened her office door, but Josh was not facing his computer. Instead, his chair was turned toward her, and he was leaning back with his legs spread wide and his fingers laced behind his head. When their eyes met, he winked. She let her gaze drift to a spot just above his head, and then slightly to his left, and then she pretended to scan the call center floor, looking for someone. Disappointed in her pretend search, she returned to her office and closed the door.

She read her notes on the monitoring form and considered walking it down for a consultation with Dave. Instead, she carried the form to the copier room and placed it in the bin marked SHRED. A minute later, she retrieved the document from the bin and returned it to Josh’s folder, where it rested on top of his most recent Final Written Warning. Finally, she removed it from the folder and shredded it herself.

In bed that night, Judy replayed the exchange in her head, over and over. *He knew I was listening*. She couldn’t decide if Josh was seducing a customer while Judy listened, or if he was seducing her with a customer on the line.

She thought Karl was asleep, so she was startled when he suddenly spoke. “Something wrong?”

“Not really,” she sighed. “Just work.”

He was quiet a long moment. “Do you ever think of them?”

“Who?”

“Those kids. The ones you fire.”

Now it was her turn to be quiet. “Sometimes,” she said.

Karl clucked his tongue and rolled heavily away from her. She was grateful he didn’t pursue it.

At 8:58, she experienced a mingled sense of excitement and dread as she watched the elevator doors. Her pulse quickened at 8:59, and when her watch rolled over to the top of the hour, she swiveled her chair around to examine the highway from her office window. There wasn't any sign of congestion, with smooth sailing off the exit. She studied the sky and saw no sign of weather that might have delayed him. She checked her e-mail and voicemail for messages and found none. When five minutes passed and then ten, she returned to work with a distracted eye toward his empty seat. Finally, at 10:20, he stepped through the elevator doors. And stopped for a sip of water.

He made eye contact with her as he crossed the floor. He turned toward her office, but she pointed to his desk. She didn't want him to say that she had delayed his recorded start time. She opened her top drawer and placed his file on her desk. She read the warning she reviewed with him just three days before, and then fanned the dozen or so warnings that Stacy delivered. She looked up to find him looming in her office door looking uncharacteristically shy.

"Can I talk to you?" he said.

"You should probably save it for Dale."

He took the seat opposite her desk and clasped his hands at his chest. "Judy, please," he begged. "My car wouldn't start."

She softened her tone, to counter his. "If this were the first time, Josh, I'd work with you. But there's a pattern here." She tapped his folder. "You know that." As she said this, he nodded his head and, much to her surprise, began to blink away tears.

She studied his face, which was contorted with regret. She realized that this would be the last time she would see him, probably ever. As a married woman, she never frequented the places her employees went. She had dismissed more than a hundred people over the past three years and had run into maybe five in her travels around town. And then, for reasons

she couldn't explain, she felt her throat constrict. Before she knew it, he was on his feet and around her desk, his arms extended. She rose and, despite herself, let him hug her, let him hold her there for just a moment as she attempted to blink away stubborn greasy tears. He placed his chin on her head and patted her back softly. They swayed slightly like slow dancers at prom, their weight shifting subtly to the left foot, and then to the right. "It's okay," he whispered.

She took a step back but raised her hand to her brow, like she was shielding her eyes from the light. "I'm sorry, she said. She barked a quick, embarrassed laugh. "This happens sometimes."

"I understand," he whispered, his voice husky with emotion. "Can I at least clean out my desk?"

With her eyes squinted shut and her fingers pinching the bridge of her nose, Judy nodded.

When Josh left, she stalled to let the swelling in her eyes and face subside. She consulted her compact to wipe away mascara. She blew her nose. When she finally emerged from her office, her employees watched her sideways, the way they always did when someone was in trouble.

Josh was not at his desk. She hoped he had spared her the trouble by collecting his things and bolting, but his coat was still draped over the back of his chair. She walked a slow lap around the call center floor to find him. She visited the break room and paused at the men's room door, listening. She then began a second lap that stopped at Karen's desk.

"Have you seen Josh Newman?"

"Why?"

Judy pinned her thumbnail to her neck and dragged it across her throat. But Karen was studying her face. "Have you been crying?"

"No."

After twenty minutes of searching, Judy finally passed Josh as he was leaving Dale's office. He grinned at her, sneered in fact, without a trace of the contrition he had shown in her office. As she stood in the doorway, Dale motioned for her to enter and rose to shut the door behind her. He picked up his phone, dialed an extension, and said, "She's here."

After an awkward silence, her boss Michael opened the door and closed it discretely behind him. He took the seat beside her while holding eye contact with Dale.

Dale braced his elbows on his desk and stared at her a moment over the bridge of his fingers. “Why do you think I’ve asked to speak with you today?”

Dale watched the expression of alarm that crossed Judy’s face and read it as an admission of guilt. In fact, she wasn’t thinking of handsome Josh Newman and his strategic hug. She wasn’t remembering that first young man she had fired from this very seat, or the hundred she’d terminated in the years since. She didn’t even think of Karl, and the affection he would surely show her now that she’d been disciplined or fired. She was startled to find herself suddenly flashing on that nude man in her living room, the one who exposed himself to strangers, to their lust, their ridicule, their *judgment*, and all for a couple of bucks.

Advertising Slogans: A Poem about Word Power

—A Mind Is a Terrible Thing to Waste

When there is no tomorrow
The happiest place on earth, or
The last place you want to go is
At the heart of the image, where
Between love and madness lies obsession

When you care enough to send the very best
Think big, or think small, for nothing is
Impossible, just as impossible is nothing
Make believe. Save money, live better
Eat fresh. Twist the cap to refreshment and
Reach out to touch someone

When the world zigs, zag
Get N or get out. Expand your mind
Change your world. Fly the friendly sky
Share moments, share life.
Let your finger do the walking
Just do it and have it your way

If you want to impress someone
Put him on your blacklist, as it
Keeps going and going and going
And make the most of now
Because you're worth it

See what we mean?

Yuan Changming

Groomed and Mangled



Allison Rosh

Unmasking Unwanted Underground

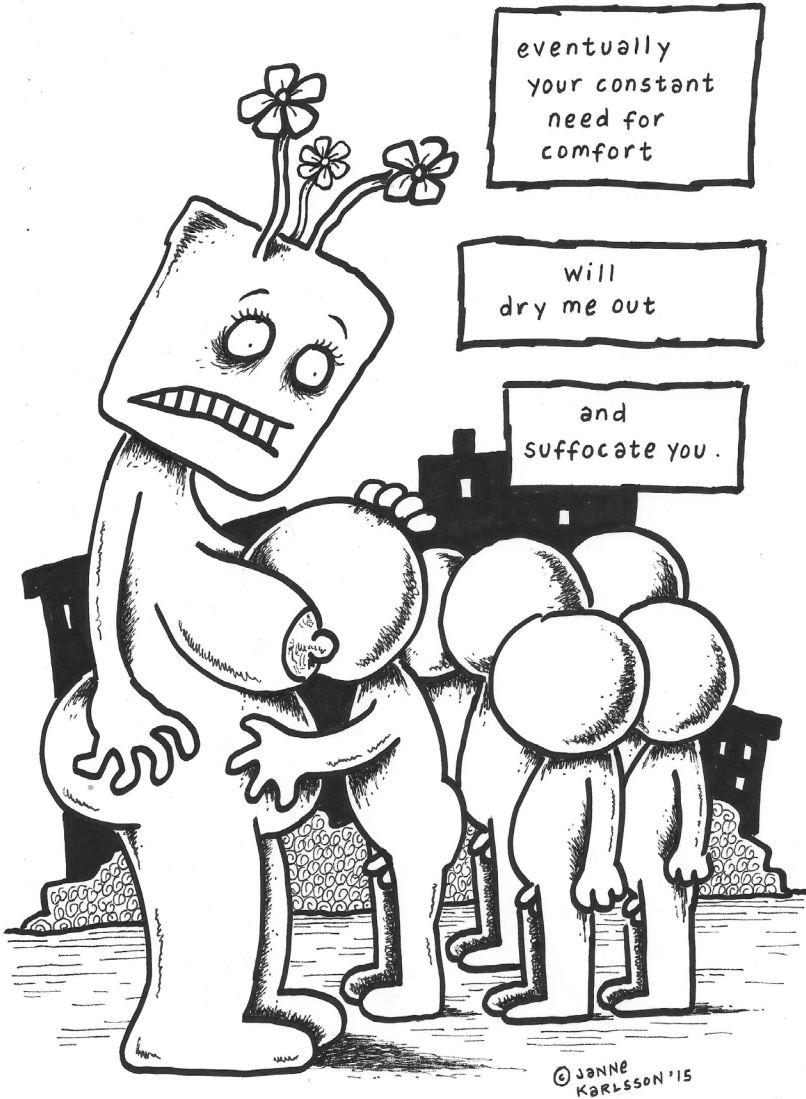
Hell is a form of recognition.
I know a few
who are even beyond that.
They should be stripped naked
and whipped like an unwanted messiah.
Their bloodied bodies pushed
in front of a spinning propeller
at the local airport.
Their parts devoured by vicious vultures
drunk on the distaste of death.
For those who harm children
—this is my prayer.

Does Giving Nourish



Sally Deskins (text by Laura Madeline Wiseman)

Comfort Need



Burn

My stamp collection was something I could control when everything else had gone out of control—American stamps I cut off envelopes, nothing exotic, except the stamps that came from my older brother in Viet Nam. He was quite a bit older. I was a “late surprise.” When the army man came to tell us my brother had exploded, I didn’t say a word. I just went out and put my stamp collection in the burn barrel.

Later, my father went out to burn. I saw him pull the matches from his pocket. Then he paused. He leaned forward and gripped the rim of the fifty-five gallon drum. The tail of his shirt was out of his jeans. He looked into the drum, studying what was there. Finally he lit a match and threw it in, and set the iron screen over the top so sparks wouldn’t escape and set the fields on fire.

Red Brick Reconstructed

A flower shop nestles in the belly of red brick
where an Exxon gas station still blooms
in my memory.

Gas pumps amputated, stench
of exhaust and oil purified from the air.
Still I remember.

My father's hands forever wore a skin of gasoline.

*Between pay days, my mother coaxed change
from the piggy bank on my bookshelf.*

*I dressed in clothes unfolded from a cardboard box,
walked to school with a crumpled, free-lunch ticket hidden
in the front pocket of hand-me-down jeans.*

I step from a rented blue Chevrolet,
avoid the shopkeeper's eyes, and follow
my child self to the weedy asphalt lot
where my sister and I built sand castles
and gravel cities for caterpillars who showed us how to escape.

Tucked behind the broken garage
with empty window eyes,
my fingers read the scars of old wounds
carved memories in the peeling bark of a white birch --
proof that I was here.

In the upstairs apartment,
above the pots of irises, daylilies, and roses,
perhaps new beige carpet muffles the memory
of my father's weary footsteps.
White semi-gloss walls conceal
the ghost smudges of a child's careless handprints.
Dingy squares of glass once shrouded
by my mother's tatted curtains
are finally clean.

I meet the shopkeeper's gaze,
read the questions in his eyes.
I could recite a thousand memories,
but I walk to the Chevrolet.
The red brick has been reconstructed,
and finally...so have I.

Rusted Out

My first car, a '49 Ford named Henry,
was old when it was new to me,
was a chain smoker and an oilaholic.
The seats had holes to match the butts
that wore them out. Even when parked,
something rattled.

The gears complained, the clutch
stuttered, and the speedometer always
sat on zero, but it was too old
to speed anyway.

The muffler had a big mouth.
The exhaust pipe backfired
from both ends. Young Henry
was a bootlegger, then a rehabilitation,
restoration project that couldn't be insured,
like me needing a new engine,
brighter headlights, and
cosmetic surgery to patch holes,
hammer out dents and wrinkles.
But the rust bucket was finally good
for something again: spare parts
(and I'm an organ donor)
from the junkyard,
no warranty but high mileage
with nowhere else to go.

Layover

Moments before the engines sucked up a flock of gulls and fan blades cascaded their snare over Virginia's sprawling farmlands, Matthew Parsons was thinking about killing the baby directly behind him. "Where is your shoe? Where is your little shoe?" the mother sang with a back-beat of hollow claps. The baby giggled. His little feet joyfully hammered Matthew's seatback. And then seconds later, without warning, the right engine erupted into blazing, dark flames. The plane lurched on its left side. An oxygen mask dropped in his lap. Deafening screams crawled over the main cabin. They were going down.

Matthew shared this story with me. It's hard to believe we were simply strangers.

On the afternoon before our lives unexpectedly crossed paths, I struggled through another uneventful day at the office, cold-calling roughly a hundred CFOs and Treasurers, and force-feeding my spiel about the benefits of a new manufacturing software system. I normally ate a modest lunch at the artisan deli Stuffwicked, or the daily specials at Fullers' Tap and Grille, Saigon Bistro, and Burrito Palace. I'd grown weary of Peking Sushi's rude staff, the dim lights and endless mahogany at Lester's Lunch Lounge, and the obnoxious wall of televisions at Wings & Flings—these were my only options nearby. It was already approaching two, I'd sold nothing, and the overwhelming pressure coiled around my neck. I needed money. This wasn't just about me anymore.

My wife Clarissa was seven months pregnant. We'd rented a one-bedroom apartment in American Gardens, a complex bordering several others with names like Greenfield Commons, Colonial Gates, Plantation Hills, Mulberry Square, and Pines Landing. American Gardens was no different in size or prize from the others, except the tenants—mostly middle-aged men who traded girlfriends and stories about mischievous cousins—drove loud trucks plastered with Confederate flag bumper stickers. They never maintained employment for more than two months at a time, and everybody in the world owed them something. Clarissa and I often joked about how we were better people; mocking them from under

the covers where our frivolous stereotyping roamed freely—but rednecks were our neighbors. They lived among us. Most I'd encountered, like Lonnie Sherman, who occupied the apartment below us, referred to the Civil War as "The War of Inconvenience." He smoked Marlboro Reds, his mullet spawned a greasy tail, and he persistently drank Budweiser, offering me colorful pleasantries in passing, like "Keep your dick up" instead of "Have a good day." In short, American Gardens wasn't the life Clarissa and I dreamt about. We wanted more. And there was nothing wrong with wanting more.

Everyone at StemLine Solutions, where I'd worked the last seven months, shared a collective misery on the dreaded Monday. This was followed by a spirited camaraderie on Wednesday, and all conversations on Thursday discussed the anticipation of Friday. But Tuesday, depressing and meaningless, idly hung in the week's void. Almost three-thirty, my rejection notes stood in chaotic stacks I'd erected on my desk. I considered leaving early, but I knew Clarissa would shoot me her infamous death-glance when I strolled through the door, a frustrated look that said, "In two months you'll be a father, our apartment is a shoebox, our checking account is dwindling, we have no savings, and you, Marcus Goldwyn, are solely responsible for making our lives better."—it's a loaded glance, one I'd felt in my bones ever since the 'incident' happened at our previous employer, BioFlex, forcing us to reevaluate our lives. So I continued to hammer the phones, combing through lead sheets. Change was coming—I could feel it.

Charles Becker was the CFO of Twist-Ease, a high-end manufacturer and twist tie distributor; since the early 2000s, their system operated on an old Linux platform, and with expansions in motion, a new hardware and software system was inevitable. Potentially I was looking at over ten thousand dollars in commission. I took detailed notes as Charles described his company's needs—he was my Moby Dick, the baby Jesus, and John Lennon all rolled into one. He required ninety-five new desktops, a client-tracking system, automated voice command technology for the plant

floor, and three days of training workshops from our specialists in Richmond.

This one potential client, who was buried in a call sheet I'd best described as a graveyard, would change everything for my family, carving out a better life—away from the bass thumps buried in mournful classic rock ballads playing on Lonnie Sherman's stereo, and heartbroken stray dogs we'd heard moaning through our apartment's paper-thin walls, all the while wrestling with the bedspread, our choices, and insomnia, yearning to erase the life we'd unknowingly submitted to by living at American Gardens.

"I've put this off long enough," said Charles, and he meant it. "Ideally I'd like to go over more specifics and aim for..." he was searching, "...implementation as early as next month."

"That won't be a problem at all," I said, silently worried about the timeline. "When's a good time for us to sit down and discuss?"

He thought for a moment, anxiously breathing into the receiver—we were both ready to move on this. We were the same. "How about thirty minutes? There's a Roy's Burger and Ribs Saloon on Route Four."

I hated Roy's Burger and Ribs Saloon ever since I'd witnessed a boy roughly seven-years-old dip his entire left arm into the pudding tray at their lunch buffet.

"Perfect."

It was almost four. By six my life would be changed. And tomorrow, the last several months since the 'incident' would be something Clarissa and I laughed about, insignificant like American Gardens or Lonnie Sherman and his loud music.

On the drive to Roy's Burger and Ribs Saloon, I kept the radio at a low volume. Typically I listened to bands like *Arcade Fire* and *The Shins*, cranking the volume until the speakers bled, but today was different—I needed totally concentration. The traffic on 54 was crawling. A distressing anxiety stirred in my heart, and my eyes drifted to my wristwatch, five minutes slow, its battery drained yet again. Weaving in and out of lanes, all the cars suddenly halted, and I slammed on the breaks.

Black smoke swallowed the sky and gushed in the distance.

Past the endless farmlands lining Route 54, beyond the sparse shopping plazas and obnoxious fast-food chains, a rash of blazing flames drenched the atmosphere, thick plumes of black smoke washing over the sunset. I smelt burning fuel and chemicals—something wasn't right. I flipped on the local radio station: Flight 709 out of Charlotte had crashed, more details were forthcoming, but current reports indicated unknown engine failure and an unsuccessful emergency landing one mile west near an open dirt stretch beside the corn maze at Hillside Farms. Paramedics and firefighters struggled to access the limited roads leading there, and as a result, most interstates would be slammed for the next few hours.

When I reached for my Blackberry to phone Mr. Becker, I realized—after all my vigilant note-taking during our phone conversation—I'd left my notes and his contact information at the office. I hastily pulled up the Twist-Ease website and called the main number but was redirected from one automated voice menu to another. It was well over forty-five minutes since we'd chatted. This was my fault. This was fate. The ripples of the 'incident' still followed me, from Delaware to Virginia, from one failure to the next. It was classic Marcus.

Before Virginia, American Gardens, and my unpromising future at StemLine Solutions, I worked up north in Laurel at BioFlex International, a manufacturer and distributor of silicone materials for prosthetic limbs. It's where Clarissa and I first met. My sales team was on the verge of closing an enormous deal with a panel of doctors (in secret we called them The Magnificent Seven) who sat on the advisory board for five reputable prosthesis research hospitals. To describe the office as tense would be an understatement—there was a lot riding on this. Clarissa and I finalized PowerPoint slides for the final pitch meeting. Douglas Winters, a senior sales associate, returned from ExPress Beanery where he'd purchased a bag of Columbian Reserve; we'd recently learned one of The Magnificent

Seven, in his spare time, blogged about exotic coffee blends. We'd investigated everything. This was business. But we were up against Plastec Innovations. The Magnificent Seven were meeting with us in the morning and then catching the red-eye to Denver for an afternoon sales-pitch with our West Coast competition. There could be no mistakes.

Clarissa was an exceptional research analyst. On my first day at BioFlex, I fell in love with her and we married one year later. The lease for our two-bedroom apartment in Laurel would expire in four months, and recently, when we permitted the warmth of our dreams, we kept tabs on a renovated two-story colonial resting on three acres in an upscale, quiet suburb forty miles north in Haddonfield, New Jersey. Today was our seven-year anniversary. After work we had reservations at Giordano's, our favorite Italian restaurant where we'd celebrate our love and, anticipatorily speaking, a fuckload of money, roughly twenty-thousand dollars, all from this one potential sale.

Our fate rested in the hands of The Magnificent Seven.

"Just relax," Clarissa said, rubbing my shoulders. "We'll be fine."

We sat at the worktable in my corner office, hovered over the laptop, made final cosmetic adjustments to the presentation's format, double-checked cost projections and the implementation timeline. All was perfect three days prior, and it was perfect now, but anxiety loomed over me like an unsupportive parent listing the endless possibilities of failure.

"There's so much riding on this," I said, advancing to the next slide, my eyes glued to the screen.

"Look at me," she said, placing two fingers under my chin and lovingly turning my head toward hers. "The presentation is flawless. The numbers are correct. Plastec can't compete with our customer service. I'm telling you, we'll be fine."

"I just wish I could relax," I said, palms pressed against my forehead.

She tenderly rolled her eyes and removed a hair tie from her purse.

"Maybe a blow job would help."

Clarissa always sustained the ability to make me laugh during stressful situations, but she was serious, her glance dipping to my crotch.

“Right now?”

“We have fifteen minutes,” she said, fastening her hair tie.

“I only need four.”

“More like two,” she said with certainty. “Honestly, you need to calm down. Let’s go to the copier room.”

“I’ll return the favor tonight.”

“You better.”

We casually ambled across the main company floor toward the copier room, Clarissa, professional in her navy Liz Claiborne business suit, the right amount of sexy and confidence, not to mention affordable, and me wearing an understated charcoal Perry Ellis suit and the expression of a child entering Disney World for the first time. Clarissa and I were label whores, and although we couldn’t afford Gucci or Hugo Boss, we desperately craved their imported Italian fabrics and meticulous designs. The majority of our work attire, midlevel brands, came from retail outlets, clearance racks—surprisingly, we loved clothes shopping together. It was a rush whenever one of us found an undisputable deal, but even the most attractive midlevel purchases never eliminated our thirst for Armani, Canali, or Brino.

We were halfway across the room when Raymond Rivers called out, “Mister and Misses BioFlex.”

Raymond was a junior sales associate who joined BioFlex four months prior. He maintained a heated attitude toward Clarissa and me. Though Clarissa wasn’t in sales like the majority of us working with The Magnificent Seven, corporate had asked her to join, based on my recommendation since the company needed a brilliant analyst to research five-year trends, double-check long-term projections, and bring a little alchemy to the project—she was the right choice. But Raymond held a different theory; though he briefly worked for BioFlex, he’d felt passed over for this project, so much that he filed a nepotism complaint, arguing the unjust dis-

tribution of potential commission since Clarissa and I were married, and when these claims fell on deaf ears, he pulled the race card, highlighting the lack of color on the salesforce responsible for the company's largest potential client. He was a bottom-dweller who sought after shortcuts, inappropriately utilizing any approach to advance, and everybody owed him something—he was no different than Lonnie Sherman or the other rednecks I'd eventually meet at American Gardens.

Clarissa ignored him, but I couldn't help it.

"Enough, Ray. Not today, okay?"

"Oh," he said, stepping out from his cubicle and heading toward us, "that's right. It's the big day. I wouldn't dare distract either of you on such an important day. Tell me," he continued, craning his head at the florescent lights above us, "what will you do with all that money? I can only imagine." He was looking beyond the lights, it seemed. "My little girl needs braces, you know? Think about her teeth when you cash those *checks*. Did you notice that, Marcus? I didn't use the singular there."

"Grammatically factual, yes," I said, walking away from him.

"Please excuse us."

"Where you hurrying? You know I'm just playing."

"Just ignore him," Clarissa said, taking my hand.

We shut the copy room door behind us. The smell of toner, paper and cardboard dulled the air. Clarissa swiftly pushed me against the back shelf, dropped to her knees and hastily undid my belt. Seconds later she took me inside her mouth, and there was nothing subtle or gentle about her technique—these were not wifely duties; it was business, focused and solely therapeutic. I clutched the cold metal shelf's edges behind me, her pace quickening, and when she somehow managed to go faster, I finished, well under two minutes. The anxiety I'd felt earlier seemed ridiculous, erased by euphoria. I drew a deep breath and zipped up my pants.

"That was under a minute," she said, rising to her feet.

Both of us laughed like children who'd stayed up past curfew at a slumber party. I took her in my arms and held her. I loved Clarissa more than anything. She believed in me, in us. Her jaded death-glance I'd

eventually meet at American Gardens could never surface in these perfect, loving eyes. My chin rested on the crown of her head. We swayed for a moment, both of us thinking about the future, about the life we wanted and were now moments from securing—our two-story colonial, a vegetable garden, a privacy fence, a swing-set for the children we'd eventually bring into this imperfect world, and inside our warm palace, his and her matching bathroom sinks, heated tile floors, granite countertops, state of the art Le Crueset cookware, and out back, a screened-in porch where two rocking chairs waited for our days to finish. Before her, my idea of love was different; I was searching for perfection in another person that never existed, but after meeting Clarissa, I realized our collective imperfections could harmoniously exist. There was nothing to hide from her and no one to be other than myself. I'd learned the true meaning of love—at the end of the day, she was my best friend, and most importantly, the person I imagined beside me in the rocking chair, and she would be the only one I wanted there until we gracefully aged and left this world. It was really that simple.

A knock rapped on the door. "Marcus? Clarissa? You in there?" It was Douglas Winters. "The Magnificent Seven are here! I started brewing the coffee. I sent Allyssa Myers from accounting down to Kleinman's for extra pastries...hey, what are you guys doing in there?"

Clarissa backed away and examined me. She slid her index finger across the front of my hair and fixed a rogue strand. "Do I look okay?" she asked, speedily removing a compact from her purse.

"You're beautiful," I said.

She clasped the compact shut, shook her shoulders loose, and then threw up her hand for a high five. That was Clarissa, brilliant, full of fun and dorkiness, and life.

"Let's do this," she said with a wink.

The Magnificent Seven were already seated in the main conference room. Douglas Winters, along with four other members from our sales and marketing team, even Allyssa Myers who served no real purpose other than the tray of pastries in her hand, but adorable in her three-button New

York & Co. sweater, made light conversation with them. Clarissa and I split off. She entered and immediately lit up the room. Each doctor, seven incredibly successful men, stood up and shook my wife's hand. Her infectious warmth and ability to comfort others won their attention in seconds. I smiled, watching her from afar, and scooped up the USB thumb drive from my office. On my way to the conference room, I saw Raymond Rivers standing beside the water cooler; he didn't say a word, sipping from his paper cup and wearing his angry black face I'd grown to hate over the past four months.

Looking back now, I should've known. I underestimated his anger, and if I'd taken two additional minutes to double-check the presentation before pocketing the thumb drive, my life would have turned out differently.

I was the last to enter the conference room. I surveyed the faces of The Magnificent Seven. Collectively, they were men in their mid-fifties: four with graying bears, two with kind smiles, one with crumbs on his shirt from the midflight snack, but all of them brilliant and appreciate of our company's high-end prosthetics. Our molds and materials, combined with the genius of these seven men, would irrefutably change lives.

Douglas Winters began the presentation. He summarized the company's mission statement, provided detailed material costs, turnaround time for delivery, our familiarity and experience in the healthcare industry, and he effortlessly discussed solutions for anticipated problems before The Magnificent Seven voiced a concern. Clarissa handled the next few slides and summarized five-year profit projections, dazzling the medical professionals with assurances and a concise plan for the future, a true visionary. She conveyed the importance and value of relationships, the potential for significant growth, her passion and accuracy rewarded with collective nods and smiles, guiding us toward the foreseeable finish line. And now it was my turn to close, although our products spoke more eloquently than anything I could ever tell them.

I nodded respectfully at Clarissa after she finished. She handed me

the clicker, our fingers touched, and I felt the electricity between us. For a fleeting moment, my mind replayed the blow job in the copier room. I took my place beside the screen. Douglas and Clarissa had already laid the groundwork. Everyone in the room, The Magnificent Seven included, knew pricing was similar at Plastec Innovations. This wasn't about costs—it was about a partnership, one we all felt strongly about. Today a sale would be made; either we'd sell them on yes, or they'd sell us on no. We'd covered our bases—friendly, confident, engaging, credible, relatable, and incontestably trustworthy. Clarissa and I had earned this opportunity, the stars were aligned, and our hard work was about to pay off. This commission, combined with our savings, would secure the down payment on our dream house and maybe a designer suit or two for the closet.

I advanced to the next slide, prepared to deliver my remarks about customer service, but a collected sigh gushed over the room. The Magnificent Seven's fourteen eyes punched me with one demoralized glance, Clarissa covered her mouth, and her beautiful brown eyes hardened. Alyssa Myers dropped the pastry tray. When Douglas Winters blushed and clenched his fists, I heard his college alumni ring cutting off the circulation in his fingers. During those awkward seconds before I turned around to face the screen, I wasn't thinking about what I'd find there, but about how the disillusioned look on each face in the room decisively confirmed the destruction of my dreams, months of strenuous work and careful preparation all collapsing around me. I stood dumbfounded with my finger on the apparent trigger.

An ongoing slideshow of amputee-fetish pornography ran on a continuous loop. The first image: an overweight Hispanic man posed naked on a mattress beside a green dumpster, and his prosthetic arm bore the head of a penis instead of fingers, a hard shell taco perfectly balanced on the tip. The second image: a legless woman who appeared in her eighties was spread across a flower-patterned couch and pleasuring herself with a plastic foot. I couldn't react, none of us could, all except for Clarissa, the first to snap up, flip on the lights, and then yank the projector cord from its

socket. The screen went blank, but it was too late—those images would permanently remain with each of us. The meeting was over. The ‘incident’ demolished us.

Douglas was the first to speak. “If I can be honest,” he addressed The Magnificent Seven, nervously flattening the lapels of his suit with his sweaty palms, “this account means everything to us...and, uh,” he was struggling now, “I can assure you...this is not—”

“I think we’ve seen enough, Mr. Winters,” said the most Magnificent of the Seven. “Thank you for your time.”

Douglas clammed up. We all did. None of the seven shook our hands goodbye. No one helped Allyssa Myers pick up the pastries. They walked out. It was over.

By day’s end, corporate shareholders weren’t interested in the truth, how Raymond Rivers had discreetly slipped into my office while Clarissa and I were in the copy room and singlehandedly altered the PowerPoint, bitter about his daughter’s crooked teeth, huffing about nepotism and the color of his skin, fueled by tenacious certitude about how the world owed him something, and if he couldn’t steal success for himself, then none of us would have it. It took every fiber in my being to resist lashing out with the n-word, the only time I’d ever wanted to unleash and drill the word’s ferociousness into his ears until it was all he heard forever. None of that mattered. All of us involved with the Magnificent Seven were fired.

It was after six. Clarissa and I couldn’t find the motivation to leave the office plaza. We sat inside our Honda Accord, a light drizzle sprinkled the windshield, and we silently watched the rush hour traffic consume the freeway in the uncertain distance. Seven years of marriage, and while we still had each other, we’d lost everything else. Our stomachs growled, but we could not eat dinner at Giordano’s, we would not buy our dream house and laugh in our rocking chairs anytime soon.

“I’m pregnant,” she said, taking my hand.

We never took our eyes off the traffic, looking beyond those metal

coffins on wheels, past the waning horizon line, clouds generously pouring now, the moon offering us its ugly face and misleading warmth.

When I arrived at Roy's Burge and Ribs Saloon, the happy hour crowd was swarming, the rich scent of charred beef and barbeque sauce held my nostrils hostage, and between the old west décor and screaming children who picked their noses beside the dessert bar, I remembered how much I loathed this establishment, but this wasn't about me—I kept reminding myself. Charles Becker had requested we meet at bar tables near the back since it was quieter than the main dining room, but today nothing was quiet—the dulling traffic jam had spawned a mass pullover, or maybe it was the allure of the eighteen spice dry-rubs. The setting wasn't ideal for me. For Charles, maybe it was paradise.

An hour had passed since our phone conversation. I scanned the congested room and found him at the furthest corner table—I had to admit, it was the best seat in the house. He was sitting alone, an untouched glass of water resting in front of him, and judging by the condensation rings, he'd been waiting there for a while. As I approached, struggling to conjure up something witty about the traffic, pointless small talk to break the ice, trying to shake off the 'incident's' ripples, my concentration crumbled. Carnivorous moans from overweight men leapt up from steaming plates of brisket and ribs, jubilant children devoured their chicken finger baskets, and women at the bar clinked their glasses over flirtatious laughter. I felt witless and vulnerable, a casualty of sensory overload. It was best to humbly apologize for my tardiness.

Focus, Marcus, I thought to myself. This was business. We were businessmen on a beautiful day.

To my surprise, he appeared in his late thirties. His Docle & Gabana suit was exquisite, a charcoal wool-silk blend, lapels with flat front panels, and all of it custom-tailored to his broad shoulders. Even his five-

o'clock shadow emitted a brilliant shade Hollywood actors effortlessly wore after seven-thirty. My unkempt Tommy Hilfiger blazer and dark gray slacks from Banana Republic were unworthy of occupying the same table. Why did Charles Becker choose this meeting place? I suppose certain men sought after a superiority of space, taking pleasure in knowing they were the richest men in the room, and comforted by others, like myself, striving to exist in their world. He was tall, a 42 Long, and his chestnut-colored hair revealed a natural dishevelment I failed to intentionally create in the mirror each morning. Worried he's see right through my desperation, I grew nervous, visibly out of league, worried a man this polished would see right through me.

"Pardon me," I said and cleared my throat. "Charles Becker? Twist-Ease?"

He nodded. When his glance briefly met mine, his eyes glinted, and God, I admired the way other men unknowingly introduced their confidence in a single look. Granted, the whites of his eyes had gone red and, to my surprise, he nervously touched his glass of water but never took a sip, but even his white dress shirt—spread collar, brass rivet opalescent front button—was worth more than my entire outfit.

"Do you know what time it is?" he said, and I sensed anger in his tone.

Unsure if he wanted me to sit, I stood beside the chair. "I'm very sorry for being late, Mr. Becker," I said hesitantly. "There was an abnormal amount of traffic, but I worked up a few scenarios based on our conversation today."

Was he even paying attention to me, I thought. A country ballad cried on the overhead speaker system. A busboy lingered near the bartender and they intensely watched a bull riding competition on one of the televisions. Charles Becker seemed completely unfazed by our surroundings.

He nodded at his water. "What time is it?"

My wristwatch's battery was completely dead. So I guessed. "It's a quarter past five."

When he examined my left hand for an extra beat, I was exceedingly self-conscious of my Kenneth Cole chronograph wristwatch. Clarissa had purchased it for me at the Tanger Outlets in Myrtle Beach two summers ago, and on the same afternoon as we devoured a soft pretzel at the food court, she endlessly raved about finding the watch for under a hundred dollars, especially since it retailed for nearly two. But Charles Becker had never been to Myrtle Beach, nor would he ever grace a retail outlet; I knew this because he shook loose his left arm and examined his masterful Bulgari timepiece, its beautiful face resting just below the decorative four-button cuff of his sleeve.

“A quarter past five,” he repeated, and he wanted me to see the diamond-crusted numeric engravings.

Maybe this was a pissing contest, but God, his Bulgari was gorgeous. Later I would learn it retailed for over eighteen thousand—the Diagono X-Pro: titanium and black steel casing with a sapphire dial. But still, he wouldn’t look me in the eye, only at the glass. His expensive style, ambiguity about time, and reserved demeanor, only made him more intimidating.

“Mr. Becker, sir. If you’ll allow me to sit down for a moment, I’d love to tell you a little about our previous successes with manufacturing companies like yours.”

It was important to stress *multiple* successes.

“So sit,” he said tonelessly.

As I launched into my spiel about StemLine Solutions’ shipping and receiving software and the assessment features that analyzed sales and inventory trends, his disinterest was apparent. My lips were moving, as if programmed, but there was nothing personal about my pitch. I was failing. I needed to reach him. But how could a man like Charles Becker, more magnificent than any of the Magnificent Seven, find excitement in anything I had to offer? He only saw me as someone who showed up late, wearing a cheap suit, and an outlet wristwatch, peddling empty promises and motivated by a selfish agenda.

My Blackberry vibrated inside my suit pocket. I sensed Clarissa's infamous death-glance on the other end but didn't take the call. Later she would understand, I thought. I wouldn't allow another failure, not after the 'incident' at BioFlex, not after Raymond Rivers and his daughter's crooked teeth. Charles Becker was just a man. We were both men. We could help each other.

"If I can be honest, Charles—"

"Please do."

"Sir, I know a big part of this decision rests in your hands, and I know you're responsible for evaluating new systems and then making your recommendations to corporate. I promise you we're a company—"

"Do you know who you are?" he interrupted, glaring hard at me now.

"I'm...I don't quite understand the question."

He finally sipped his water in a way that suggested he'd intentionally prolonged his thirst, and now, he finally allowed himself to indulge in such unpretentious pleasures.

"It's a simple question," he said, fingers still crimped around the glass.

"Yes...I know who I am."

"Then tell me, if you're most certain. Tell me who you are."

I cleared my throat and straightened up. His eyes held onto mine and anticipated my response, as if securing our future together depended on my answer. "I'm the man who won't sleep until your company's system is running exactly the way you envision it."

He let out a short laugh and cupped his left hand over his mouth, masking the sardonic cackle and covering his pearly white teeth and once again flashing his Bulgari in such a way that suggested I wasn't even worthy of staring.

"You're a horrible salesman. Do you know that?"

He was smiling, mocking me. He was a total prick. I'd almost had enough. But sometimes one must suffer through the company of pricks in

order to obtain a better life.

I drew a deep breath and relaxed my shoulders. “And who are you, Mr. Becker?”

“Who am I?”

“Yes, who are you?”

“I don’t have the slightest clue,” he said, and then nonchalantly took another sip.

I wanted to murder him right there. Poor Mr. Charles Becker in his three thousand dollar designer suit, a successful asshole unable to appreciate the fruit of his labors, just another head case fumbling through an identity crisis, probably paying some Harvard-educated therapist for all those childhood hugs he’d never received.

But I withdrew the possibility of trading insults. This was business.

“Maybe you’re working too hard,” I said, catering to his ego.

“Maybe some time off to rethink things, take stock, a vacation...that sort of thing—”

“No. you’re missing the point,” he said, and then he leaned closer.

“I don’t know who I am. I thought maybe you recognized me and came over. I thought something would click, but nothing’s clicking.”

I thoroughly examined him now. Dried blood was coagulated on his knuckles, his fingernails were filthy, and his charcoal suit that I’d admired at first glance now revealed a tear at the shoulder and fresh dirt stains.

“You’re not Charles Becker, CFO of Twist-Ease,” I said, more factual than a question.

He shook his head no and started rambling. He was frantic, his confidence somehow unable to sustain itself. “It was horrible,” he said apprehensively. “We were going down, and I just wanted the baby to stop crying. But he couldn’t. I wanted to kill him. And now I’m being punished. I can’t remember anything before. I’m being punished! Do you understand?” He slammed his fists on the table, prompting the waitress’s attention; strawberry blonde hair and a face caked with acne, she was no

more than seventeen and taking orders at the table behind us. She ogled us for a moment, and I apologetically shrugged.

“Just slow down,” I said, extending my hand across the table and then my palm rested on his shoulder, and while he briefly allowed the comfort of this gesture, I marveled how the silk-wool blend felt against my skin. “You don’t know who you are?”

“Everyone’s dead. They’re all dead,” he continued, almost laughing, and I realized that while maybe he was a total prick, he was also helplessly delirious and instinctively trying to reclaim the confidence he’d exhibited on any given normal day. “The plane crashed. I was on it,” he said with a ghostly smile. “We were going down. And I wanted to kill the baby. He just wouldn’t stop crying. And we were going down—”

“Slow down now,” I said. “Can I buy you a drink? Let’s have a drink. Let’s relax.”

The guilt he felt was not lost on me; countless times I’d flown beside families inventively trying to calm their unmanageable children with rattling toys, barf bags fashioned as puppets. Once I saw a mother wearing a playful hat made of pages from the Sky Mall catalogue, while the father, seemingly on the verge of murdering his crying son, clutched a small head pillow and blankly stared beyond the seat rows.

“Vodka,” he said, like he just now remembered that he drank vodka. “I’d like a vodka.”

I flagged down the annoyed waitress, ordered two vodka tonics, and peered up at the four televisions above the length of the bar where the newscast about the plane crash, I now realized, held everyone’s attention, event eh busboy and bartender who seemed genuinely committed to the bull riding competition moments ago.

“You were on that plane,” I said, pointing at the newscast on the screens behind him, “the one that crashed barely an hour ago?”

“Yes,” he said.

“And you...walked away from the crash site and came to Roy’s Burger and Ribs Saloon?”

“Yes, I was walking. I kept walking. I don’t know why I’m here. I don’t know—”

“Slow down, I’m sorry.”

I looked deep into his manic eyes. He wasn’t lying. Or he was selling me on the strangest bullshit I’d ever heard.

April the waitress, according to her name tag, set down our drinks and asked if I wanted to try the Guns Blazin’ Jalapeno Cheddar Poppers or the Texas Beer-Battered Onion. Her smile was forced; she only acknowledged me and looked somewhat unsettled by the sobbing man across from me. I was about to ask the man if he wanted something to eat when April saw my name and StemLine Solutions logo on the front cover of my binder.

“Marcus Goldwyn,” she said, like she’d won a prize. “Someone was just here looking for you. Charles Becker.”

“Becker.”

“Right,” she said, followed by playful girlish laughter that probably enthralled boys her own age.

“Is he still here?”

“Afraid not. You just missed him.”

“Did he leave a message?”

“Why would he leave me a message?”

A million belittling replies, lingering on the tip of my tongue, prepared to launch, but April didn’t deserve them; none of this was her fault—it was mine. After she left us alone, I glanced at my Blackberry: four missed calls from Clarissa, and one disappointing email from Charles Becker, who was not the man sitting across from me, but someone who’d tolerantly waited at the bar, unable to secure a table, thinking and rethinking and forming an answer before he’d heard my pitch. I’d unknowingly walked past him, carried by ripples of the lingering ‘incident,’ all of my focus on the nameless stranger who now generously sipped his vodka tonic in his expensive suit, physically unscathed from a fiery plane crash.

The email, like an unsolicited reminder of my failures, scrolled

across the tiny screen:

Dear Mr. Goldwyn,

While I appreciate your willingness to meet me, unfortunately I am unable to wait any longer.

I've researched StemLine Solutions, and I do not think we're the right fit. To my understanding, your office hasn't handled a business of our size, and quite frankly, that worries me. There cannot be any mistakes, and I will be seeking other solutions at this time.

I do apologize we never got the chance to discuss this in person, and I sincerely hope your absence this afternoon wasn't the result of an unforeseen emergency. I wish you the best of luck with all of your future endeavors, and thank you for your time on the phone this afternoon.

Sincerely,

Charles Becker, CFO Twist-Ease

“Are you even listening to me?” the man asked, growing more disillusioned.

Though I couldn't fathom the horror he'd gone through, the helplessness he felt now—unable to remember his own name, his life—or the complicated road that lay ahead of him, he was still a prick. This little game he'd decided to play cost me everything. To be honest, I didn't know him, and I didn't care. Maybe that made me a horrible person, but I should've been with Charles Becker, selling him on yes, instead of reading an email that force-fed me no.

But I'd come too far now, and I would remain invested until the situation's end, no matter how many backhand insults this strange survivor threw at me.

“Do you have your wallet? Any identification on you at all?”

“Don't you think I would have checked? My wallet is likely ashes.”

“Were you travelling on business? Judging by how you're dressed,

can you remember if it was a business trip?"

"I'm not sure," he said like I'd momentarily broken through, "but I feel like I do travel often. Business. I must have been on business."

"What kind of business do you run?"

"I don't fucking know! I can't even remember my name."

"Are you married?"

"I don't know."

"Are you wearing a wedding ring?"

"A wedding ring," he repeated and then examined his finger. It was bare, but I caught a glimpse of that white circle, the skin tone was lighter. Maybe he'd been married, or maybe he was pretending to be single in the airport before the flight, or for all I knew, perhaps the ring fell off sometime in the crash's aftermath. "No, I'm not wearing a ring."

But the precious Bulgari on his wrist kept ticking; what a genius marketing idea never actualized—the wristwatch that survived plane crashes and worth every cent.

"Check your pockets," I demanded.

"I already checked."

"Check again!" I said sternly, and this seemed to resonate with him. Maybe his father had yelled at him as a child, or maybe he was one of those sex freaks who enjoyed being dominated by others. "Just do it," I repeated.

Buried inside his left suit pocket was his boarding pass. Even as he flattened the crumpled paper slip, revealing his name, Matthew Parsons, flight 709, his seat number: 23A, and the airline confirmation code, all of which I keyed into my Blackberry, combing the airline's website and then providing him with his home address, email, and cell number. We sorted through basic information; he'd checked two bags, and though he was coming from Charlotte, his original flight had left Orlando this morning—all of this, I told him, reading from my Blackberry screen and watching him every few seconds, waiting for the memories to wash over him, but they never did. He recited his name over and over, and I said it back to

him, and I reread his address, but nothing registered. He sipped vodka tonics and ordered another round without missing a beat, a sign that he was unconsciously comfortable at the bar and getting his way, money never something to worry about, but not a single detail came back to him. He said his name. I read his address out loud. This continued over the course of another drink. Still nothing.

The more I failed to help him remember, the longer I committed to remaining by his side, drinking and searching for his memory, each time, the tiny pieces of Matthew's life never coming into focus. How could a memory have such a definitive starting and ending point? He remembered every nuance of the plane crash, and he painfully recounted the details aloud, hashing out each second as I sat there in horror, growing more interested in him and less concerned about my own life.

As he'd mentioned, over and over—they were going down. When the oxygen mask dropped in Matthew's lap, the plane was in the midst of a freefall. His stomach rose to his throat, he gripped the seat arms and fought for air as the mask slid between his knees and then vanished somewhere beneath him. His eyes closed, his mind fought to tune-out the panicked voices surrounding him, but he still heard the baby, unaware of death's hand punching a hole in the sky and shaking the plane like an unwanted toy.

"We were going down," he kept saying like a mantra, "and all I could think about was killing the baby behind me." Matthew selfishly wanted quiet in his final moments, but the baby was robbing him of his last wish. The latches on the overhead storage compartments snapped open, and luggage spilled into the aisles. When he opened his eyes for a fleeting moment, the refreshment cart darted down the aisle, struck the cockpit door, then bounced back and landed in the first row where it crushed an elderly gentleman's thighs.

Matthew was sitting on the aisle, the middle seat was vacant, and in the window seat beside him, a young professional in his early twenties was praying, head buried in his knees, his interlocked fingers forming a

perfect steeple. “Please, God,” he said desperately. “Please get me through this and I will work to help others in your name. Let me do your good work, Lord Jesus.” The cabin lights flickered on and then permanently off. There was an enormous backfire, the plane lurched on its left side and began a ferocious, final descent. Matthew’s skin was crawling, his palms held tiny pools of sweat, and the screams around him were directionless, all except for the baby’s, reaching a high-pitched, almost inhuman tone, and more piercing than anything he’d ever heard. There were no updates from the captain. There were no calming words, only the assurance of death, patiently silent and ready to collect.

Later I would read in the local paper how shrapnel shot out of the blown engines immediately after a flock of gulls struck, and these fiery pieces crushed the hydraulic systems, sending the three-hundred and forty seat commercial airliner into an unrecoverable spin, and without the use of flaps and slats, it was impossible for the pilot to slow down. They were spiraling at deathly speeds toward the earth, and when the aircraft touched down on the half-mile stretch of dirt beside the cornfield, its body broke in three. The smaller front end skimmed along the dirt path and exploded shortly after, killing the entire flight crew and all first-class passengers. The middle section caught fire and tumbled into the fields, where everyone seated in rows nine through twenty-two, directly above the fuel tanks, suffered a death from smoke inhalation. Matthew—seated on the aisle row twenty-three, located behind the traveling edge of the wing, the emergency exit row ironically never manually utilized, as a result of God’s sense of humor, coincidence, or some magical luck—was hoisted in the air once the plane split, and dumped roughly a hundred feet from the wreckage. There was a one in eleven-million chance of being in a plane crash—the probably of dying in my car on the way here was much greater—but to be the sole survivor was even more improbably. And Matthew Parsons was the sole survivor. Everyone else on flight 709 was dead.

“I guess I blacked out for a few minutes soon after,” he said, staring at the melting ice cubes in his glass.

He awoke, coughing up dirt, a seatbelt, not necessarily his, wrapped around his right leg and shredded at the ends, fresh blood, definitely not his, smeared over the buckle resting above his kneecap. And that's the beauty of his expensive suit: blood, oil, fire, and dirt, maybe even death, hardly stained the European fabric. Smoke paraded over the fields as he rammed through endless rows of stalks, carving out a path, making his way back toward the wreckage. The rear end of the plane, roughly the last fifteen rows, was inverted, and the passengers, many of them still strapped upside down in their seats, burning, all of them beyond dead, melted away, only their bones remaining. Matthew stood there amongst the flames, watching, for how long he didn't know. The mother, overturned and even in death, was still holding the baby he'd wanted to kill. He blamed himself while crediting God for leaving him on this earth to forever carry the guilt of such vicious thoughts about an innocent, helpless child.

In the interest of full disclosure, this is the part I still find incredibly difficult to think about, the detail I refused to share with him that evening.

According to his flight itinerary, he wasn't travelling alone, and after I checked the other seat assignments and the special instructions column, I forced myself to remain quiet—it was too much for me. I wouldn't be the person to relay this information; Roberta Parsons (who I'd later learn was his wife) was listed as the second passenger. Special Instructions indicated they were travelling with a child, Trace Parsons, their son, fifteen months of age. Since flight 709 from Charlotte was full, Matthew was reassigned a seat in the emergency exit row and Roberta sat behind him, Trace in her lap; certain rules preventing children from sitting in emergency exit rows. It wasn't personal. It was safety. It was business.

I imagined their conversation at the airport, how Roberta had probably argued for everyone to sit together, and how Matthew selfishly wanted time alone. Maybe he and Roberta had taken Trace to Disney World, and perhaps this poorly planned Orlando vacation failed to meet Roberta's

expectations. Who took a fifteen-month old to Disney World? There was no point—Trace was too young. But Matthew most likely attended a business conference, something of importance, while Roberta and the baby stayed by the resort’s pool, anticipating that Matthew would finish early, and then the two of them, as new parents, would push the stroller through Fantasyland, maybe Adventureland, and Roberta would make funny faces at Trace, telling him to smile for Mickey or wave to Goofy. And later that evening, Matthew, in Orlando with his family and Mickey and Goofy, wouldn’t have the time to indulge in late hours at the resort’s bar, where he’d confidently dazzle and falsely charm the simple lives of anyone he preyed upon. So, at the airport, moments before the connecting flight left Charlotte, Matthew preferred to sit alone. It was quite a choice.

Or maybe Orlando for the Parsons was nothing like my imagination. Maybe Disney never happened. Maybe they were visiting relatives. I couldn’t think of Matthew as simple, nor did I want to see him as anything other than a prick, because his family was dead, he watched his wife and son burn, and whenever he finally realized all of this, I wanted to be as far away from him as possible.

I remained silent. We’d explored all the basic facts and logistics: name, address, phone number, and nothing jarred his memory. He swallowed the final sips of his fourth vodka tonic and then slapped down the glass and slid it to the center of the table.

“I live in Alexandria,” he said, not as if he’d remembered a life there, but because I’d read his address aloud almost a hundred times.

“Yes.”

“Forty-seven Pikeview Lane?”

“Yes.”

“Drive me home,” he said decisively. “Please, I just...please take me home.”

I drove north toward Alexandria and Matthew said nothing the entire time. He was shaking, clutching the seatbelt like he was bracing for impact. The GPS brought us down Route 16, a business road where the Whole Foods, Tri-Water Pharmacy, and Salino's Pizza didn't register with him. I selfishly felt relieved. He randomly examined these businesses, searching, always searching. There were so many questions I should have asked about his life, about Roberta, about becoming a father, something to ease my own fears about fatherhood, only a month away now, and without the miracle of Charles Becker, I was back to square one. But did it really matter, I thought. I was alive. That meant something different now. I glanced at Matthew, struggling to stay awake, and all the questions I held would remain in unformed breaths.

It was approaching midnight. The streets were quiet. My BlackBerry was dead. His family was dead. There were no more facts for us to uncover, and no more words to exchange. When the buzzing neon lights of fast-food chains, lining the streets like prostitutes, disappeared in the rearview mirror and, coming into view, a stretch of luxury homes—hidden behind meticulously manicured front lawns and winding driveways, privacy fences lining backyards and forever vowing to keep all of their secrets—erased the loudness of the ordinary world behind us, the houses on Pikeview Lane, unreachable tiny mansions where families like the Parsons slept in posturepedic beds, never felt more out of reach. If Clarissa were next to me, she would say, "Can you imagine?" And I could imagine. All I could was imagine. And maybe that's what snapped me out of bed each morning.

There it was—forty-seven Pikeview, a storybook unknowingly opened to its final chapter. Solar lights illuminated the wide walkway, stepping stones passing under an arbor to the magnificent double front door with dark wooden frames and gold hardware. The first floor's front windows held flowerboxes where yellow and pink colors splashed in the darkness.

After sneaking only a small peek, I refused to look any further. I couldn't look. I'd seen and heard enough.

“Are you coming in?” he asked like we were friends now.
But we were still strangers.

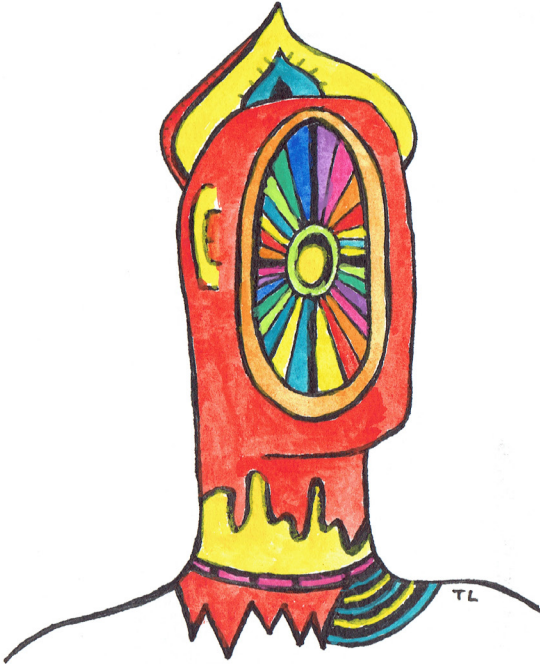
I never considered following him inside, not even for a second. I couldn't utter a reply. I shook my head no, knowing the moment he walked through the door—greeted by unfamiliar smiles in family photos, the corkboard above the refrigerator where a calendar listed Roberta's yoga classes, his and her sinks in the master bathroom, the personalized nursery and all of Trace's toys, the rocking chairs that waited for no one—when all the subtle histories inevitably destroyed him, I would be home, sleeping beside my pregnant wife, holding her through another night of Lonnie Sherman's loud stereo, and the next morning would wake up and continue to fight for the life Matthew Parsons was about to realize he'd tragically lost.

Code Word

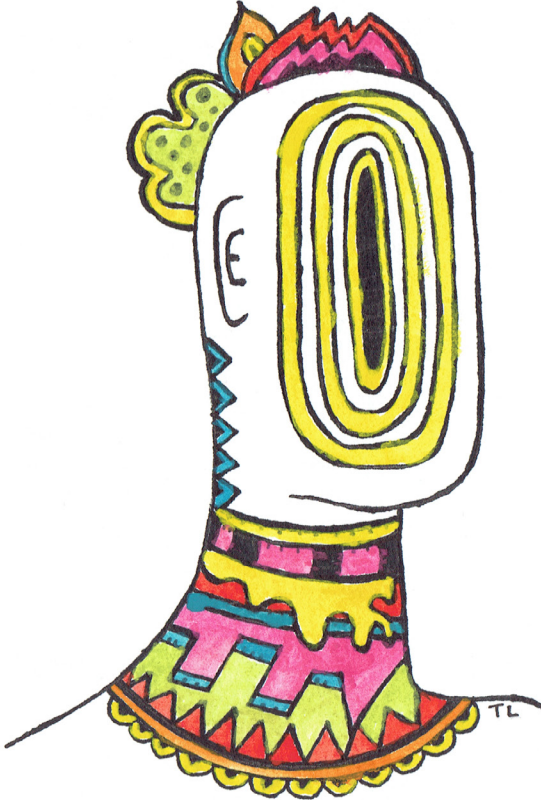
Our kitchen breaker inexplicably tripped
for the eightieth time. Its reset switch kept in a box
in the dark back alley in a city made famous
for breeding gangsta rappers. I slip on sandals, unlock
the door, and the importance of having a code
word with Jessica in case of emergencies
of the *life and death* variety comes to mind
for at very least the tenth time this year.
What plans are already in action under our noses?
There are hundreds of reasonably plausible cases—
anything from being chased by a carload
of screaming mad white supremacists,
to being forced at gunpoint to get her to open
the door after being kidnapped as I left work—
or, or—the more likely: tailed by a CIA spook
because a Norwegian superspy has the same name
as I, and just happened to have flown into LAX
only hours after government contracted geneticists
isolated the exact gene that... did something or another
I never managed to hear, as every monologue
is interrupted by the point blank headshot
by an attractive double or triple agent.
A cyanide tablet might be a bit much, but code word.
We'd definitely need one, and one that's short
in case I was tied up in the dark backroom
of a warehouse stacked roof high
with identical manila cardboard boxes
as anonymous, but clearly European, henchmen
played cards under a hanging bare bulb,
and I had to text message it unseen in my pocket
so the goons didn't know I'd slipped my hands
out of their flaccid knots and am working on my ankle ropes
a little every time they looked away from my

enclave of boxes when pizza was delivered,
or someone got five aces and the table's overturned.
And it would have to be a combination of letters
we'd never put together in a normal conversation,
so the SWAT Team wouldn't bust in
on a poetry class, sub-machineguns out,
under the impression that a mad gunman
was holding us hostage until we listened to,
and praised all of his so called 'pieces.'
In the alley there're no suspicious
unmarked white vans or gang of miscreant
juveniles brandishing skateboards and wallet chains,
no matter how hard I stared out of the corners of my eyes.
Eef might work, that's weird. But spoken it might sound
too much like *Beef* or *Leaf* which relate to dinner
and trees respectively, and theoretically could
come up in many inane conversations about
picnics in the park, or dinner on the Prado's patio,
and to ruin such an event with a 911 call would just suck.
Besides, E and F are attached to the same number
on the phone's keypad, bringing up the technical
difficulties in the *texting the code word in secret*
under the table or in the pocket category of
emergency super-secret code word uses.
And even though we don't actually have said code word,
I still look left-right-left down the alley longingly
before closing the security door behind me,
listening to the slow pulsations of my heart, the slow,
steady sponge-squeezing that's only slightly
quicker than it is when sipping a glass of distilled water,
tying my shoe, or lying on the concrete, eyes closed
not moving a single muscle.

Stained Glass



Warp



no más

You left the week following the Giants'
improbable Superbowl win.
Remember how we cheered?
Me because the Patriots' perfect season
had been ruined,
you because having witnessed the impossible,
a sliver of lightning shot through the darkness:
*Perhaps I'm not as fucked
as my brain has led me to believe.*

But you also left a few days after
our second wedding anniversary and that
was difficult not to take personally.
Granted, the day had passed between us
like a shared kidney stone.

And you left just a handful of days
before Valentine's — ordinarily, a move
I would have applauded
but you took all of the chocolate.

And some months later, I heard
you'd stolen the Afikomen at Passover;
your family still waits for its return —
in fact, your father died
waiting.

Then Easter came and I ran
into Jesus who said He hadn't seen you
either but not to worry, He was sure
you'd come back.

The fuck you know? I asked.
Fine, be that way, He said.
And I haven't seen Him since.

On Memorial Day we all sat around
and remembered,
even though it was more comforting
to forget.

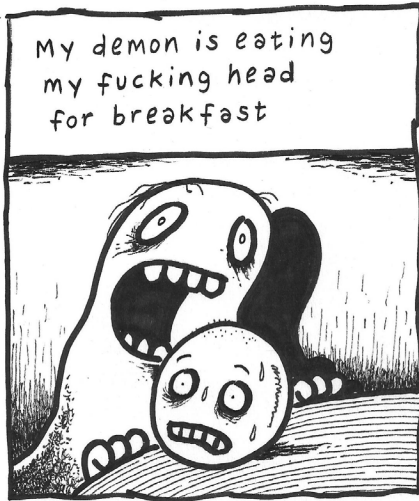
Then the 4th was upon us and rains came,
torrential & flooding,
shook you loose
from your underground lair;
but the skies cleared at dusk, the moon
gave a knowing wink, and everyone
was looking up as you floated
down the Hudson taking all the fire
out of the works.

On Labor Day conversations began
Seems like just yesterday it was Memorial Day
and that got me to thinking about
how most people found reassurance
in the mundane,
while for me it was yet another chasm
of sadness I'd learned to negotiate;
and there was a chorus of *Time flies*
and somebody had the nerve to say *Carpe diem*
and I said loud enough so that even
your dead father could hear,
One clichéd door closes, another opens.

You left
and now it's that most wonderful time
of the year — except you took Thanks,
you even took Giving.
And I can choke down dry turkey
for days on end but the tragedy
of the Dinner Roll That Could Have Been
— golden brown on top, burnt
to a goddamn crisp on the bottom —
breaks the heart.
And, as I mentioned earlier,
Christ up and left in a huff and even if
He were here now, arms outstretched,
singing, *O come, all ye faithful*,
I'd have strength enough only to say,
No más. No más.

Demon's Breakfast

DEMON'S BREAKFAST



devouring
any possible hope
i might have



afterwards i'm
whispering from
inside of the demon:
you are what you eat.

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The Cloud in My Mind

My
mind
is
a
cloud

so
I
poke
a
hole
in
it—
with
a
pen

letting
the
sun
shine
in.

I am Told

Death is a fantasy in this machine we call life,
which rolls on, gears clicking
as it turns through the seasons,
across empty lawns,
down alleys,
past the train station whose conductor
raises a blood-stained hand—
And shouts,
 all aboard for the sing-along!—
Past the chuckle from the happy wino,
the hair spray salesman who,
while saddened by belief that he has become nothing
but that wasted life lying in a hammock at Duffy's Farm,
demonstrates his product
on Pete his dog—

 Then it's past the grave
of the dead rockers
on which empty beer bottles
and loose change wait for me—
Past the lakefront and empty lots,
where,

 I am told,
it is raining,
and the sound of it
is the slow march of many men
walking forward as one—
Hands outstretched, eyes closed,
pockets overflowing with money,
all shuffling forward, forward
in the deepening soup line.

Excavating Dream From Nightmare

Know your place those that dare to dream as the fall is heavy with wonder over your sense of entitlement that asks what makes you so special pummeling against a suffocating rim in ecstatic abandon jubilating in the peculiar sense that surrounds you inside a suffocating plastic womb as you listen to the fluctuating wails from the tendrils of the wind slithering along ancient pitted walls to the mating ritual meoldy of romantic waltzes and pelvic thrusts that vibrate and stretch in angelic writhing unleashing a gale of erotic energy as percussions of sound carry you through different symphonies of movement that creates a longing for touch until such a need builds to echo your name inside the dark synthetic tunnel slick with sweat fighting to grasp the luminous bursts of light just beyond my reach as I fill my lungs again and again gasping for air while I dream of your hands and my memory of you in the ripple of a dance and the smell of sunshine that sends a thread of pleasure aching for contact until I can only pant in short gasps that threatens to smother me before I can implore you to come back to me and save me by taking what is already yours given freely under a liberating light of hope and passion you refuse to extend.

Mark Blickley



Amy Bassin

Contradictions

I am a tidal wave, crashing into your shoreline
With all the gentleness of a tsunami

You are the moon who regulates the tides
And keeps me from destroying everything in my path

My bones are made of glass

You are made of iron
With aluminum blood
And the strength of mountains

My parched insides resemble
A cracked desert that stretches out for miles
And when I speak, dust erupts from my throat
As if I swallowed a summer drought

Flowers used to grow between my ribs
And ivy once climbed my veins like a trellis

You are the blooms that pop up
On the side of busy highways,
reminding me that
Life still sprouts in unexpected places

I am a ship that has sunk
to the bottom of the ocean,
A home for others who
Crawl amongst the wreckage

But there is nothing left to salvage

Dive into my depths and
Light up the dark
So I can find my way home

Rip

Sometimes, I'm told, you have no choice
but to stand on the shore. There might be

a child out there. It might be your child.
You cannot see her. And if there are men

with boats and other men holding you
close with the boulders of their hands

and if you can only hope she is stronger
than you seem to be as the current pulls

and she allows it, if others love her
and are also held, then wait with them.

Someone has a boat, a pair of oars—
someone's shoulder muscles bunch

and straighten. Sink into them instead,
but not so deep you think about muscles

at work to dig or where you will cast yourself.
Almost always, someone has a boat.

The Tow-Boat Captain

A craft adrift with no one aboard,
registration numbers removed,
spotted off Seaside, Oregon.
Satisfactory back-story
sometimes fails to fill in holes
that phantom crafts pass through.
Rescue isn't on the way
without missing persons reports,
without information
on the accident or act of nature
that cleared a crew, unspecified,
unknown port of origin.
Out there on Pacific swells,
latest ghost ship in a series
that I've towed ashore
to claim and salvage
when the owners don't step forward.
We don't know who's
presumed drowned out there.
We can't always know.

Water Kinesis 3



Beach Mouth

Invisible winds beat the pulse
from the pinnacles of mountains—
west we aspired
without moving.

I ask what you want to do—
vodka tongue foams desire,
teases with gentle
hums, seclusion. . .

With burrowed pearls,
the taste of screwdrivers
remained acidic.

Water Kinesis 1



Maria Picone

Oceanic Atmospheric

The boat and the waterline are nearly even. Bailing's buying minutes at best. How are you with swimming distances? Any shipwrecks in that compendium of life experience? Well, now you have one. Tell me again that theory, how we ripped the hull on coral this far out to sea. Five miles, I say, bailing with both hands, the furthest I've swam. Then I was a healthy young man with lungs and energy who could hold breath a full two minutes. Today, I hate to tell you, we will break those personal best statistics, out here, out of sight of land. We're self-distracting, buying minutes just to make time pass.

Petrichor

It rises along the dirt road
to your skin, from the low

vinca beginning to blue
the edge of the woods.

From the asphalt and
the hood of the car

half-concealed behind
an overgrowth of azalea.

From the caterpillar leaves
that drop like mantises,

still too green to be dead
but broken and riddled,

meaningless in separation.
The compost in need

of turning. The crumbs
of a stepping stone. It lifts

like every hope or bluff.
It meets me like your

summer mouth, rain
washed and fleeting.

Wild Bones

Wild Woman writes in blood on the desert sand,
tossing poems to the dark spaces in my soul
like lovers' kisses to the moon. Song -weaver,
eternal seamstress, sewing blankets of stars and wild grasses,
she wanders the horizon with flowers in her hair
and magic in her veins.
From the red canyons at the edge of the world she calls, "Come to me."
Throw away this gray life,
strip down to the golden moon skin, rainbow droplets falling
on the sunlight shimmer of my hair, touching,
kissing the dancing trees, who tremble
beneath the touch of the wind, whispers of desire.
I am the goddess, the gypsy dancer, flower child
poet caught in the steel teeth trap of a safe life,
beating, pounding, thumping
against the cellar, attic door.
I will be born.
My voice howls down the darkness.
My words breathe life, summon the tides,
echo like the whippoorwill in a summer field.
Dance with me. Make love to me
behind the meadows in a sacred grove
where the rain will cleanse our passion
and baptize or love.
We are the dreamy-eyed gypsy women,
singing to wolves as we dance our naked
and wild bones to life.

Water Kinesis 2



Maria Picone

The Inconstant Blue

Down beyond the sound

the noise of red draining
out of a black pendulum

I have taken you
without a kiss

fallen without motion in wintry arms
to night's serrated margins.

Without a kiss
I have taken you

into the latticed javelins of night,
moonbeams of roguish shine.

Taken without a kiss
I have you

out beyond the ruins of change
the inconstant blue and white sphere.

Without you
I have taken a kiss

Thoughts

Like a root hidden under the fallen leaves, they grab me,
I stumble, fall, then get back up to walk the trail.

Or like poison ivy, insidious, clinging, growing up the oak.
Other times, they float down gently as an autumn leaf

drifting to the ground. Maybe they are a dry leaf
torn by the wind, blowing far from the poplar.

Or perhaps hanging on the beech branch until spring.
But most times, they strike like lightening to the pine

and split me down my trunk leaving a long black scar.

Nine Months of Conflict Taught Me How to Say “No”

Between buildings, a gust passes through me. I’m spectral, thin like a cool exhale lost in a vast meat locker. I can’t think about each step since my thoughts now pool. Again I fall into my heavy state. And I’m tired of it all, tired of thinking and not thinking.

After she heard us laughing across the hall, she slammed our door. On the whiteboard outside it she wrote, *Love one another as I have loved you.*

No I get 7 to 8 hours of sleep at least four nights a week
No I feel organized and in control
Yes I recognize stress symptoms

September before last, someone photographed me. I wonder if other people noticed my clearer skin then. I wonder if they notice my acne scars now. I wonder as I use corrector, scrub, astringent, and caffeinated moisturizer. My skin’s a mutiny.

In times when I had less control over my thoughts, I’d hope she would assault me. Then they’d see. Then they’d let me leave. Once, I dreamt she climbed to the top bunk and swing. I hit her with a hairbrush—I don’t own a hairbrush. Another time, I threw the first punch, a left hook. I missed.

- No I have at least one person who lives nearby whom I can ask a favor
- No I am able to speak openly when angry, stressed, or worried
- Yes I recognize I am not coping well under pressure

Cabled between caramel, flax, and strawberry hair, the strands of white appear no longer than the length of my last knuckle to my fingertip. White signals events the way tree rings berth a lifetime. Y cross-section unfurls not black but white.

This is what they said to do—if someone offends you, tell the person. If the person offends you again, tell an impartial third party. If that person keeps offending you, tell authority. Well I did that. All that. Authority told me I was a bad example.

She's singing, *What if your blessings come through raindrops, what if your healing comes through tears?* So she thinks I'm her raindrops, too.

- No I confide with at least one person around me about personal matters
- No I have regular, calm conversations with the people I live with
- Yes I am engaged in interpersonal conflict with a roommate or close friend

Too quickly, I say I'm tired, and step on the scale. The stress feels heavy, yet I've lost weight. Perhaps my body has not lost weight but my spirit. Yes, it seems my spirit shrinks.

Two wolves pursue me as I sleep. The handler, a titanic Canadian, instructs me to hide with a booming gesture and a quick voice. From the balcony of a two-story hotel, passive, I observe the first sink like a snapped mast, slide against snow in a plow blade-wide path. The second ascends a man's spine before four men reclaim their captive. I hold fast my crow's-nest view. When I dream of wolves, I flee.

Ruth E. Towne

Skulls and Lightning Bolts

Last Tuesday I bought a ribbed tank top
and a loyal bandana.

I went to Victor's salon and I ordered
skulls and lightning bolts;
then I took my new ink to Broadway Pizza
and I made those skulls dance.

The Spanish girl at the counter gave
me some new found respect.

I knew she was thinking *hey,*
there is one rough dude and
he's got colors to boot.

Today I'll invite her to the club
over TJ's garage and I'll let her
walk my Pit Bull. She don't
really know me yet. She might
just suspect that I'm as dumb
as a stick. But she won't care.
I got skulls and lightning bolts.

Good Boy

Sloane's decision to sleep with him wasn't what upset her. It was that she'd slept with him for a B. A freaking B. Sloane had put in the work for the A: worn makeup and heels to class when all the other girls wore sweats; met him out in public, smiled and drank, laughed when he'd wanted her to, rather than a quick bang in a cheap motel. Hell she'd fed and let out his slobbery, farty rat terrier for him when he was gone. In all honesty, it would have been easier to do the work for the class. She went to class almost every week and she wasn't stupid, but Barry, Dr. Lewis, had told her that she was brilliant, and that he'd give her the extra edge she needed to get into UCLA School of Law. And she did get in.

But what was he saying? Was her performance only worth a B? Was he trying to give her some kind of complex? He had his freaking doctorate in Psychology. How could he not see how potentially damaging this could be to her?

She swiped blood-red lipstick across her lips and smacked them together with a loud pop. Sloane adjusted her pushup bra, vowing this to be the last time she'd have to wear it on a weekday before 9 p.m. until next fall when she'd start her first year of law school. She took both hands into her thick blonde hair and roughed it up enough to look like she hadn't cared to fix it but didn't just roll out of bed. She knew Barry liked her hair the best. The way she let it fall over her shoulder when she bent over his desk looking at homework. The way loose pieces kissed her cheeks when the rest was braided back. The way he could wrap his hands around it in bed.

She curled her eyelashes one more time each, puckered her lips, and pressed each breast up and together to the point where they were almost falling out of her black sweater, not, like, porno-school girl, but just fingering the line. Surely, when he saw her today, she could talk him into an A.

When Sloane arrived at Barry's office in the Arts and Sciences building at the University of Nebraska at Omaha, the secretary said she

would have to wait. Sloane sat in one of the blue plush chairs in the reception area. The secretary left her desk. Sloane could see the door to Barry's office around the corner. It was closed and decorated with pictures of Mickey, the slobbery, farty rat terrier.

Sloane choked back vomit as she remembered her first time at Barry's old Colonial in Dundee. Mickey had watched them hump, growled when Barry came, and taken her spot in bed with his naked owner when it was time for Sloane to leave. When Sloane tried to grab her underwear from the floor, she found that Mickey had eaten the crotch out.

Sloane checked her phone. Five minutes had passed. What could he possibly be doing that could make her wait this long? She opened Tinder and swiped right for a 21 year old who was less than a mile away—obviously a student. He had full lips and a complete V cut at the hips in his shirtless picture. He sent her a message a moment after the swipe. “hey beautiful,” he said. Sloane smirked. “whats up stud?” she typed back.

“Miss Taylor?” The secretary was back along with the Dean of Arts and Sciences.

Sloane set her jaw when she lifted her chin. Did they know? If they thought they knew anything, she wouldn't give anything away in her face.

“Miss Taylor, there's something we need to talk to you about,” the Dean said.

Sloane bit the inside of her cheek and stood up from the chair. Sitting made her feel vulnerable.

“Dr. Lewis passed away on Monday,” the secretary said.

“I didn't do—wait, what? Dr. Lewis died?” She'd been so ready to deny, deny, deny she didn't think “there's something we need to talk to you about,” could be anything else.

“Yes, Dr. Lewis had a heart attack on Monday night in his home. His housekeeper found him Wednesday morning,” said the Dean.

Sloane nodded slowly. Her heart thudded in her ears. Guess there's no chance of changing that grade, she thought.

“And, Miss Taylor, normally, this isn't something that's discussed

until a will is read, however, since it concerns a living thing—” the secretary paused, took a big breath and then dropped the bomb: “Dr. Lewis had written instructions that you were to have care of his dog, should anything happen to him. He said you had watched the dog for him on occasion and that the dog was quite fond of you.”

What. The. Fuck. Sloane’s gaze flew to Mickey’s photos on Barry’s office door. Motherfucker. What was she going to do with a panty-munching dog? Of all the things—money, anything else, really, that could be sold for money—he had to leave her his dog?

“Dr. Lewis doesn’t have many family members,” the secretary said. “There’s no one to care for the dog right now, and as I’m sure you know, Dr. Lewis cared very deeply for his pet. His housekeeper took the dog to the vet after she found Dr. Lewis, and we want to respect Dr. Lewis by carrying out his wishes. The dog has been there for two days now. We were hoping to contact you sometime next week about it, but since you’re here, would you like me to take you to pick the dog up?”

“What? No.” Sloane didn’t want the dog. How dare they assume she’d just take it? “I—I needed to discuss my grade with Bar—Dr. Lewis. He—I—what about food? I live in a condo. Where will he pee?” More vomit. Maybe if she puked all over the floor they wouldn’t make her take the dog. Sloane’s curled eyelashes were hitting her eyebrows. She couldn’t breathe.

An hour later Sloane rode with the secretary, whose name, Sloane learned, was Joyce, back to her downtown condo, her lap full of dog toys, treats, food, a leash, everything but a bed. Because Mickey slept with Barry. Like, in the same bed.

Mickey snorted around the backseat until he found a comfortable position to look out the window.

When they got to Sloane’s place above M’s Pub, Mickey made himself right at home by pissing on her couch.

“You may want to get him fixed, dear. That’ll stop his need to mark his territory,” Joyce said.

“Like take him to the vet? That costs money.”

“I’m sure Dr. Lewis left you the means to care for Mickey.” Joyce smiled, like caring for Mickey was going to be the joy of Sloane’s life. Sloane had means. She just didn’t plan to use a cent of them on a stupid dog.

When Joyce left, Sloane threw a towel over the pee and texted Amy, her cleaning lady, to make sure Amy was coming the next day. Sloane’s condo was the same one she’d grown up in with her mom before Sloane had been sent to live with her aunt and uncle in Oklahoma. Her cleaning lady had had to spend a whole day before Sloane’s Nebraska Furniture Mart order arrived dusting the place after six years of disuse. It took a while for Sloane to get used to living in the condo again. It did not take long for Sloane to get used to using her trust fund.

Sloane resumed her conversation with the Tinder guy while Mickey sniffed around her condo. Mickey didn’t pee again. Thank God.

Tinder Guy’s name was Rob. After they both requested more pictures and had determined each other to be sufficient entertainment for the evening, he asked if Sloane wanted to meet up for drinks around ten that night at the Hive, a bar a few blocks from her place. Her makeup and bra were on, her hair was fixed, and the Hive was trendy enough that plenty of people would be around if the date went south, so Sloane figured her ego could use a little boosting by this Rob.

Mickey followed her to her room while she changed her clothes into a peach lace Nicole Miller dress that hugged her tiny body tightly. Mickey followed her to the kitchen while she made a vodka cranberry. She propped her hand on the counter while she sipped her drink. He sat on the floor with his bat ears sticking straight up. They stared at one another. “So I guess you’ll have to, like, pee and eat, huh?”

Barry fed Mickey wet dog food from a can that smelled like barf and looked even worse. Sloane held her nose and gagged as it slopped into Mickey’s bowl. After he slurped down the puke, she fastened his leash to his collar and took him out to the sidewalk. Sloane led Mickey to the nearest tree coming out of a hole in the concrete. Mickey sniffed it and

didn't pee. Sloane rolled her eyes, tugged on his leash, and pulled him toward the crosswalk. They walked down the block and across the street to the green space she'd never really noticed on ConAgra's business campus. "You have five minutes," she told Mickey. After smelling every bush, he took a huge dump right in the middle of the yard at the same time someone else was walking by with her dog. While Mickey crouched and shook to push out his shit, the other owner watched Sloane.

"Do you need a poop bag?" the woman asked. She was wearing sweats and t-shirt, holding a plastic bag she'd pulled off a roll.

"A what?" Sloane shifted in her platforms. Surely this lady didn't mean—oh, yes, she did. The lady stuck her hand in the bag and walked Sloane through the process of picking up poop without getting her hands dirty (even though Sloane could feel the poop ooze through the bag's protective cover), while Mickey sat three feet away and watched. Maybe she could just let him free in the park, Sloane thought. She and Mickey walked home, and she told him not to touch anything when she shut the door, leaving for her date.

Rob was OK. Not as hot as his pictures. Mostly full of boring small talk.

"What do you want to do with your Psych degree?" he asked.

"Well, go to grad school, law school. You can't do a whole lot with just Psych bachelors." Duh, she thought.

"Well, yeah, but why Psych? Do you want to help people? Or do you have a weird obsession with the mind? Or do you like spending time with crazies?" He smiled at her over his drink.

She dropped her eyes and swirled the ice around in her vodka soda. I wanted to know that I'm not the one who's fucked up, she thought. "Help people, yeah." She nodded. He looked at her, waiting for more. "My mom was schizophrenic." She lied to keep him interested. Her mom was dead. Car accident when Sloane was twelve. It was her uncle who raised her that was messed up.

"Wow. And your dad?"

"Not around." She shrugged. This was true. Kind of. Her mother

had decided men were all idiots and wanted to raise a baby on her own.

“And you’re going to graduate with a Psych degree in four years. Amazing.” His eyes were big. They were, like, bugging out of his head in amazement at the miracle of Sloane getting into and through college. It’s not hard when your dead mother was the Dean of the College of Fine Arts, left the school a nice chunk of change in her will, and that’s the obvious plan your aunt and rapist uncle assume you’ll follow.

Sloane practiced reciting the symptoms of schizophrenia by “describing her mom” to Rob. It was far more entertaining than the first half hour of the date when they had danced around the oh, your picture this and that Tinder crap and where are you from blah, blah, blah. Boring as he was though, he paid for the drinks and let her walk home by herself with no pressure to drive her and no game to get her to go home with him.

Sloane came home to find Mickey snoring softly in her bed. She shoved him off, went through her nighttime face and teeth cleaning ritual, and crawled under the covers.

The next day was the first day of June. Sloane woke in the morning with Mickey curled under her right arm like a teddy bear, smiling in his sleep. He smelled like garbage.

Sloane had wanted to do nothing but drink out on her condo’s deck all day long, but Mickey wanted to cuddle. And play fetch with her shoes. And follow her into the bathroom. Rob had asked for her phone number the night before, but she’d avoided giving it to him. He messaged her on Tinder to see if she wanted to meet up again that night—“maybe for a more intimate hangout”—but she hadn’t responded. God. Thankfully she was done with this college bullshit. On to law school. More sophisticated things.

After the fortieth time of Mickey dropping a ball in front of her, Sloane couldn’t take it anymore. “What do you want?” she asked him.

Mickey wagged his tail and smiled.

“Are you hungry?”

Mickey pawed at her foot.

“I just fed you. We just went out for the bathroom. What do you want?”

Mickey barked at her.

Sloane remembered Barry talking about taking Mickey to a dog park. She sighed and pulled out her phone to Google where one might be. Hanscom Park. Driving there wouldn't take long. It wasn't the deck, but she could probably take a drink and get some sun there, too.

Sloane grabbed a magazine, her phone, and Mickey's leash and the two headed out to the car. Mickey settled into the passenger seat like he owned it. She was twenty-two. Not the age to be going to the park. “I'm an adult, you know,” she said to Mickey as she fastened her seatbelt. “This is not my idea of a fun Saturday afternoon.”

Holy shit. Where had she heard that before? Aunt Meredith, when she'd had to take Sloane to any kind of school function. God. This dog was to Sloane what she was to her aunt and uncle. Unwanted. A burden. Dropped into their laps.

“Just because we're both orphans doesn't mean I like you,” she told Mickey.

Mickey smiled, wagged his tail, and drool dropped from his tongue onto her leather seat.

When they got to the dog park, there were dozens of dogs and their humans running around. Mickey pulled against his leash to get to the gate. Maybe he'll strangle himself, Sloane half hoped. They entered the gated area and Mickey pulled harder against the leash. The ground was uneven and full of holes, and the gate was at the top of a hill. She was wearing wedges with white shorts. A group of dogs rushed over, surrounding her and Mickey. Mickey jumped and yelped and wound his leash around Sloane's ankles. She slipped and slid down the hill for a few feet on her butt.

She let go of Mickey's leash, and he ran down the hill with the other dogs while Sloane sat in the dirt for a moment gathering herself.

“Hey are you OK?” Someone slipped his hairy arms under Sloan's

armpits and hoisted her off the ground. She turned around to find herself face to face with an old man with a lip full of chew.

Sloane wondered what she did in a past life to make God hate her so much.

“Want a drink?” the man asked. He waved a tumbler in her face. Sloane had to smile. Looking around the dog park, there were mostly pretty straight-laced-looking people playing with their dogs, and she’d managed to find the one person also needing a booze fix.

The man introduced himself as Steve and pointed his dog, Herman, out to Sloane. Steve and Sloane sat together at a bench. Sloane read her *Vogue*. Steve yelled at Herman to quit trying to mount the other dogs. “Herman’s a project,” Steve told her. “I rescued him from a shelter. He needs a little extra love and work.”

When Herman mounted Mickey, Mickey whipped his head around until he found Sloane. His eyes begged for her to save him. “Come on,” she called to him. “Stick up for yourself.”

What was wrong with her? The words echoed in her head, and her heart slammed with a memory of her Aunt Meredith saying the same thing after hitting Sloane across the face when Sloane had told Aunt Meredith about a boy in her class who’d asked her to flash him. It was only a month after her mom had died, and Sloane had moved to Oklahoma City to live with her mom’s stepsister and her husband. She’d been twelve. They were her only living relatives. Sloane had been young and weak and naive. Aunt Meredith’s lessons always came with a smack to Sloane’s face to “knock the stupid out of her.”

“Your mama thought she was so smart with her grandparents’ old money. So much better than everyone else because she could buy anything she needed.” More of Aunt Meredith’s voice echoed in her head. Something Sloane hadn’t heard since her eighteen birthday, when she was officially eligible for her trust fund.

Sloane felt sick. “Mickey!” She called, wanting to save him from the humpfest. She set her magazine down and hopped up from the bench. “Mickey!”

Mickey wiggled out from underneath Herman and scampered over to Sloane. His whole body wobbled back and forth with his tail. His tongue flopped out of his mouth. He sat down at her feet and farted as soon as his butt hit the ground. He jumped up and looked behind him searching for the source of the sound.

“Jesus,” Sloane muttered.

Mickey sat back down at the sound of her voice and stared up at her, smiling.

“Aw, look,” Steve said. “Did you know when they look at you like that, it’s their way of hugging you.”

Sloane stared back at Mickey and shook her head. If only everyone would just hug you with their eyes, she thought.

“We’d better go,” Sloane said to Mickey or Steve or herself; she wasn’t really sure whom.

Mickey pranced behind Sloane as she marched back up the hill she’d slid down on her ass.

Sloane had planned on picking up sushi at Blue on her way home from the dog park, but with her ruined shorts, that was out of the question. At her condo she changed into a pair of coral Guess jeggings and a MaxMara silk top. She called in a sushi order and walked the block and a half to Blue. A group of guys who were day drinking outside whistled as she walked past.

She smirked, moved her ass a little bit more as she walked. Gave them something to look at. In public she wasn’t afraid. And really, who could hurt her any worse?

Sloane got back on Tinder while eating her sushi. After ignoring Rob’s message, she flicked past a few guys’ photos, and then a match popped up from a guy she’d swiped right for a few days earlier. His jawline was more chiseled than a statue of David, but there was a good chance he plucked his eyebrows. Oh, well, she thought, a little hygiene never hurt anybody. He was 22 and two miles away.

“u went to coachella this year?” he asked. One of her Tinder

pictures was a selfie of Sloane wearing a floral Saha bikini and florabella hippie pants and crowds in the background. One of her best pictures of all time, thank you. She'd had an almost religious experience at the show. It must have been something with the stars lining up or the pot she'd smoked.

"ya i was so turnt most of the time but it was amazing," she responded.

"sounds like a blast. Ur pic is hot too."

Sloane smiled. This was the part she liked. They always said she was hot.

That was why she'd dated Barry. He had been persistent. Told her she was beautiful and smart, that she could go anywhere she wanted with her brains, her mom's money, and his letters of recommendation.

What to say next? She flipped back through New Tinder Guy's pictures. He was cuddling a big black dog in two of the six. "ur dogs cute."

"you like dogs? his name is max. wanna come meet him?"

"Ugh," she said to Mickey. "I don't want to meet his flea covered hair ball any more than I wanted to meet you."

Mickey's tongue fell out of his mouth while he panted and smiled at her.

Ugly mutt.

"nah. I have my own dog," she typed back. "how about drinks at liv?" Liv was a bar near campus. She'd have to drive there, but she needed to get away from downtown tonight. Sloane and Barry went to dinner downtown most Saturday nights. Going to one of their normal places without him would feel too weird today. Liv was always busy so there would be plenty of people to see her. Sloane also realized the first decent aspect of acquiring a dog: Mickey provided her with an automatic out and an obvious reason why she couldn't ever go back to a guy's place—her dog was waiting for her to let him out and feed him.

That was really going to be the problem with not dating Barry anymore. Dating Barry was for a grade and recommendations, but it was

also safe. Dating Barry meant dinner and drinks only if she wanted them. Smiling at the right time, but if she didn't, there was no risk. Sleeping with Barry was quiet and methodical. It was caresses with soft old man hands and murmurs of adoration and appreciation. Maybe sleeping with her prof was gross, but there was never the risk of waking up in an unknown place or pissing someone off and being shown the consequences when she was with Barry.

“yeah, girl. time?” New Tinder asked.

“930.” she typed. With a period. Definite. They talked a while more about Coachella and dogs while Sloane danced around her bathroom getting ready. She gave brief answers to him so that they'd still have something to talk about when they met at Liv. He didn't ask her if her carpet matched her drapes. He did ask her sign or if she liked threesomes. There was nothing, really, at all that freaked her out.

New Tinder Guy's name was Callan. He wore dark wash jeans, a tight beige V-neck that showed off the fact that he worked at a gym (he had told Sloane this during their first in-person introductions), and a forest green knit beanie, which looked perfect next to his olive skin and brown features.

He'd lived in Omaha all of his life and never planned to leave. “Why would I leave the top city for young professionals?” he asked without her prompting. He leaned back in his chair, cocky, cool, like she was a tool for knowing there was a world outside of Omaha.

“I'm leaving for law school and never coming back.” Sloane shrugged and scanned the room. It was full of the usual basic girls in rompers and hats and dudes in bro-tanks and aviators.

“Where are you going to go?”

She shrugged again. “Wherever I get a job that's not here.”

He knew music and festivals. Callan's style was more House, as far as EDM went, or even live bands. Sloane liked Trance. In addition to Coachella, which was not as much her thing, she'd been to Lucidity and Spin Summit already this year.

“How can you not love Trance?” she asked. “You just uh, uh, uh, tsk. And it builds and builds and God, I have goosebumps.” Callan had hit a nerve. This was, maybe, the one thing Sloane cared about.

“I don’t know. It’s OK, I guess. I mean, I love a good rave, but I can’t do just Trance, like, the whole time. Maybe I’m not hardcore enough.” Callan winked at her and handed her another drink. The fourth martini he’d bought her in the last, oh, barely over a two hours. “I just don’t get Trance,” he continued. “What’s the point? It’s just beats building and falling. You have to be stoned out of your mind for it to mean something, but maybe that is the point.”

Duh. “Hence the name.” She winked back at him.

“Go figure, a psychology major is going to lose control of her mind during her free time.” He leaned back in his chair and adjusted his beanie flexing his smooth arms.

Sloane narrowed her eyes. Was he flexing on purpose? What kind of rise was he looking to get out of her? “So what? You go clean?”

“Clean body, clean mind.” Callan sighed and checked his bicep. “So where do you live?”

“Condo above M’s Pub.” Crap, she thought. It slipped out before she could think. Why would she tell him where she lived? She’d still been trying to figure out how to respond to the clean stupidity.

“Holy shit. How do you afford that?” He leaned back toward her, eyeing her clothes, her jewelry, her everything more closely. She wished she had worn something with sleeves.

She scanned the crowd again. It was getting late. She wondered if Mickey was stinking up her bed again. Damn. She’d spent a good two hours here forgetting she had that stupid dog.

“How’s anybody afford anything? Debt? My rich parents? I’m a world-renowned porn star? A trust fund? What’s it matter?”

“Touché.” He nodded at her, taking her in again.

Ugh. It was time for this to be over. He was hot, but the questions and judginess had to stop.

“Well, it’s getting kind of late, and I’ve got to go let my dog out,”

Sloane said, checking her phone for the time. “It was nice to meet you.”

“Seriously?” He frowned and narrowed his eyes at her. “It’s only been a couple of hours. What’s wrong with your dog that he can’t hold it?”

“Nothing’s wrong with him. I—I just don’t want him to have to hang out alone all night.” Wow. What I’ll say to get out of things, Sloane thought.

“I’ll give you a ride.”

“I’m fine,” she said. She grabbed her clutch and tried to stand and the martinis hit her. Hard. That couldn’t be four drinks could it? Or was it more? What was happening?

Callan slipped his arm around her, and Sloane’s eyes opened wide.

“See, I don’t think you can drive, sweetie. Let me take you home.”

No. Hell no. This was not what she did. Sloane never got this drunk on a date. She could handle a lot, too. Those few drinks should not have done this.

She let Callan lead her out of the bar. At least they were close to home.

She put her seatbelt on. She checked for her keys, her purse, her phone and then checked for them again and again. When the car rounded the corner at 11th and Harney, she pointed out where he should drop her off.

“I’ll walk you to your place,” he said as he pulled into a parking spot in front M’s Pub.

“I’d rather you not.” She stumbled a little out of the car, slipped the Sergio Rossi stilettos off her feet she and wobbled to her door. Thank God I’ll never see that guy again, she thought. How embarrassing. White girl wasted.

She climbed the stairs to her door. She reached for the handle when Callan’s voice came from behind her. “Let me help you inside.” Close behind her.

Sloane’s body tightened and an alarm went off in her groggy mind. She held her breath and the key to the doorknob.

“What are you doing here?” she asked, not turning to face Callan.

“Coming to help you,” he said.

“I told you I didn’t need help.” She slipped the key between her index and middle finger. She’d learned this in the self-defense class she took when she moved to college and told her uncle she was taking her trust fund and never coming back. Never coming back for him to rape her.

Callan was big though. One big dude against one drunken girl with a key.

“Unlock the door. I’m surprised you’re still standing. You had a lot to drink.”

Her legs started to crumple beneath her.

He put his hand around her from the back sliding it up her stomach, holding her up. He then ran his fingers along her breast. She tried to throw her elbow into his ribs, but he held her too tight. She thought about trying to kick a heel up behind her into his crotch but the thought could barely get through her head, let alone all the way down to her foot.

There was scratching from inside Sloane’s condo. Mickey could hear them. Sloane’s eyes started to flutter. God, please, if she could just hold them open. Sloane’s blood pounded in her head. Her brain knew to be scared, but her body couldn’t respond. Her breath was shallow. Her heart slugged slow.

Callan started kissing her neck. She felt him grow hard against her thigh. He was still holding her upright. He slipped the keys from her hand and into the door.

Mickey was on them the moment Callan dragged her into the room.

“Shit!” he yelled as Mickey bit Callan’s leg and wouldn’t let go. Sloane fell free, her head hitting the carpet. Callan kicked Mickey again and again, but Mickey fought, screeching and barking. Callan yelled and swore, and Sloane silently begged someone, anyone, for Mickey to be OK.

When Sloane woke the next morning the door was still open. Mickey was curled in a ball at her chest. She was gripping him tight. He snored. She got up and shut the door. When she turned back toward Mickey, his tail thumped against the floor, and he smiled, still curled in his ball, waiting for her to lie back down on the freaking floor.

She knelt next to him. He rested his chin on her knee. Mickey looked at her with big eyes. Sloane slowly stroked his head all the way down to his tail, his eyes glued to hers. “Good boy,” she said. Mickey’s tail thumped again, and he rolled onto his back for Sloane to scratch his belly. When he turned upside down, his tongue lopped out of his mouth, and he smiled, his eyes trained on hers. Sloane almost wanted to hug him back.

Tabloid

When the new issue comes,
I go to work right away,
vainly determined to make it flat,
folding & refolding back the crease
through the middle of the page,
leaving some words in shadow
and others in light, like me,
bending & pushing, over & over,
trying to make it smooth & even
believing that I somehow
have a say in the matter.

The Makeshift Carrier

It wasn't until after Michael moved upstairs that he and Eric realized that the attic bedroom was not connected to the house's main duct work. As a show of good faith, and to keep ice from forming on the inside of the window, Eric purchased an oil-filled radiator off Craigslist. It only cost \$20, but the on/off switch was broken, which meant Michael could use it running full blast or not at all. This made winter a balancing act for Michael—the radiator inhabiting the far corner of the room near the door and the tiny window next to Michael's bed cracked open whenever the radiator was running.

More often than not, if Michael was reading or doing homework, he kept the window closed and the radiator off, relying instead on the heat from the main part of the house to rise and warm the floor where he sat.

Less a knock on the door and more a brushing of knuckles against the pressboard roused Michael from his favorite section of *A Christmas Carol*, when young Ebenezer Scrooge was reunited with his sister, Fan.

“Come in.”

When Claire opened the door, heat and the moist smell of cooking tomato sauce rushed into the room.

“Are you busy?” she asked.

“I should be.” Scattered around Michael was a tumble of Dickens novels in various stages of decay—covers creased, pages highlighted and dog-eared. Most sported the bright yellow USED stickers from the university bookstore, with the stickers on *David Copperfield*'s spine three layers thick. “My final is next Wednesday.”

“I can come back.”

“No. It's all right.” Both of Michael's knees creaked when he rose to his feet. “I've spent the last hour rereading *A Christmas Carol*, and that's not even going to be on the final.”

Claire's hands withdrew up her sleeves. “It's cold in here.”

“It's not so bad closer to the floor.”

“Do you have any wool socks?”

Michael shook his head. “So what's up?”

“We got a flyer in the mail from Super Pet Mart. You can get a free

picture with Santa with any seven-pound bag of Healthy Kitty Krunch. We needed to get food for Monkey anyways, and I thought I could surprise my brother with the photo.”

Eric’s cat Monkey was so named because her howling sounded like a viral video of screaming chimpanzees that had been circling the Internet around the time Eric found her roaming homeless in the neighborhood. Monkey was all white with blue eyes and completely deaf. Eric’s Googling found that cats with this coloring were 3-5 times more likely to be deaf than other cats.

It was Monkey’s penchant for screaming that inspired Michael to keep the door to his frigid bedroom closed, and even though Google didn’t concur, Michael believed her howling sounded so awful because she couldn’t hear it herself.

“You need a ride?” Michael asked.

Claire nodded. “If you don’t mind and have the time.”

Michael glanced out the window—snow was swirling and thick, frosting the cars in the street like uneven layer cakes. His Cavalier parked out front looked like a snowdrift.

“You round up the Monk and I’ll start scraping.”

* * *

Eric and Michael had only been living in the house for a few months that summer when Eric came home from work with a six-pack of Grolsh. They’d always been a Budweiser can house, and Michael knew by the condensation fogging the green glass bottles that something momentous was coming. When he took a drink of his beer, he relished the flavor—more complex, with a slight bite that wasn’t present in cheap American beer. The bottle’s top clinked against the side in a satisfying way.

Instead of taking classes during the summer semester, Michael was doing roofing for his uncle. The work was grueling but satisfying, tearing the degraded shingles off the house, laying new tarpaper, and layering on the new shingles. In the evening, after a shower, Michael baked himself a cook-and-serve lasagna, or he and Eric split a bucket of Church’s Chicken.

They watched television until bed—reruns of *X-Files* or Eric's DVDs of *Monty Python*—the pain in Michael's upper back and shoulders dulling steadily to a mild ache, so he could climb the ladder to the roofs the next day.

Eric was still wearing the bright blue polo shirt and khakis of his Best Buy uniform. From his place on the couch, Michael imagined he could smell the air conditioning and ozone of new electronics coming off Eric, just as potent as the sunshine and sweat baked into his own clothing.

"I talked to my mom today," Eric said, taking a drink from his beer. "Claire-Bear's boyfriend got her pregnant."

Michael knew what this meant for Eric's sister Claire. It was a common story--she and her boyfriend would buy a small house in Taylor or Trenton with dirty aluminum siding, they would work several part-time jobs to make ends meet, they would scrimp and save to send their children to the same Catholic school they'd gone to, the same school where Michael and Eric met, played hooky, and graduated. Like many of the girls in Eric and Michael's graduating class, Claire would never leave Downriver.

"What'd your mom say?" Michael asked.

"She and Claire've been fighting nonstop. I mean, Claire wasn't planning to go to college or anything, but at least before she had options."

Michael hadn't seen Claire in years—not since he and Eric had moved out to Grand Rapids, Michael for school and Eric for a change of scenery. After a year, Eric liked it so much that he sunk his savings into a house, and now Michael was renting from him and paying half the utilities. Michael remembered Claire as scrawny—all bruised legs and bony wrists, a crooked front tooth.

When he and Eric were in middle school, before drivers' licenses could open up their world to include coffee shops and the mall, the two of them explored on Huffy mountain bikes with sturdy steel frames. They never went far—to the park attached to the elementary school, to Rick's, a corner liquor store where they spent their allowances on candy, pop, and little cardboard boxes of Super Loud Bang Snaps.

One time, a nine-year-old Claire wanted to join them, and when

Eric told her “No way!” she cried to their mother.

“Just let your sister ride bikes with you. It won’t kill you,” his mother had said, exasperated. Tired.

As Claire peddled furiously to keep up with them, Michael watched how her thin blond hair fanned out from her head, not like the white and purple streamers in her bike’s handle bars, but like threads of delicate silk, her scalp showing pink in places. He tried to imagine her pregnant, but the image wouldn’t form—she had the skin, bones, and nakedness of a baby bird too delicate to support another life.

“Anyway,” Eric continued, “that’s what I wanted to talk to you about. Claire-Bear’s boyfriend still lives with his folks, and his Taco Bell job won’t be able to support them any time soon. Mom asked if Claire could stay with us for a while.”

“Of course. I mean, it’s your house.”

“Yeah, I know.” Eric put his beer on the coffee table, an alley find with scarred legs, brass hardware, and milky rings from sweating beers. He rose to his feet and paced, but Michael knew it wasn’t in an effort to find the words, but to find the courage to say them—knowing Eric, he had probably spent all afternoon deciding what he was going to say. “I know I technically own the house, but we both live here. I don’t want you to agree because you have to. I’d like you to be okay with it.”

Michael resisted the urge to smile. Earnest pleas were one of the things he appreciated about Eric. Eric’s tone and furrowed brow had been exactly the same in ninth grade, when Eric asked Michael if he could take Sandy Jenkins to homecoming, the girl Michael had had a crush on in middle school.

“Dude, I’m okay with it.”

“To be honest, I don’t think things are going to be that different with her here. And once the baby comes... Well, my mom says Claire won’t want to be away from home once the baby comes.”

“Man, that’s weird. I mean, it’s one thing to think about your sister being pregnant. It’s a whole other story when you think there’ll be a baby where no baby existed before.”

“Tell me about it. Mom says Claire’s boyfriend is an only child, so they’ll probably ask me to be the godfather when the baby gets baptized. How’s that for a trip?” When Eric resumed drinking, his forehead was still crinkled with worry, but Michael thought he saw a far-away smile in-between sips.

It was decided that Claire would take the Mega Bus from Downtown into Grand Rapids in two weeks. It was enough time for her to get her things in order and for Eric and Michael to prepare for her arrival, which included Michael moving his things from the smaller ground-floor bedroom into the attic room and dragging the futon up from the basement to serve as Claire’s bed.

The move upstairs had been Michael’s idea, and when Eric protested, he insisted.

“Pretty soon she’s going to be carting a lot more of herself around,” Michael reasoned as he and Eric negotiated an old queen mattress up the stairs. “She shouldn’t have to clomp up and down stairs when she’s all pregnant.”

“But it’s hot up here.” The differences in their jobs was apparent—Eric’s face was bright red, his breathing heavy, while Michael had hardly broken a sweat. A mattress was nothing compared to a seventy-pound bundle of shingles.

Michael shrugged. “I’ll be fine with a fan. And all the more reason not to put a pregnant lady up here.”

“Pregnant little girl.”

“Pregnant anything. If Monkey was with child, I wouldn’t want her padding up and down stairs.”

“If Monkey was pregnant, she’d have to, now. How else would she have her litter in the middle of your bed?”

“Funny.”

“I’ve got a million of them.”

When Claire arrived, she didn't look pregnant. And after a month of living in the house, she still didn't look different. Not until the three of them sat in the living room for dinner, spaghetti with meatballs Claire had spent all afternoon preparing, that Eric finally said something.

"You think you should go to the doctor? You haven't gained any weight and that can't be healthy. I can take the day off and drive you home if you want."

Michael had had some of the same misgivings, but found himself unable to ask. His image of Eric's little sister was not who had moved into the house—Claire was a stranger. An eighteen-year-old woman had grown out of the baby bird, and she was filled with quiet secrets. In the bathroom, Michael didn't touch her bottles of strawberry shampoo and conditioner, her purple toothbrush. When she left her clothes in the dryer, tank tops and tiny scraps of cotton underwear, Michael did laundry on another day. Once the semester started, Michael was able to spend all of his time at school or in his room, avoiding her almost completely.

He watched then as Claire sighed. She placed her plate on the coffee table, wiped her mouth with a paper napkin, and folded her hands in her lap.

"I'm not pregnant."

"You made it up?"

"No. I was pregnant but I'm not anymore."

"You mean, you got an abortion?" Michael saw Eric's incredulity turn to disgust—eyes narrowed, lips pulled back. Claire's face remained calm.

"Technically, yes. But it wasn't that dramatic. It was just two pills."

"Just two pills? You were having a baby and now you're not, but it was just two pills?"

"And this is why I didn't tell you. I knew you'd wig out." Claire's face was still impassive, but her chest bloomed ruddy and the color started to crawl up her neck.

"I think my little sister, who lives in my house, having an abortion

is reason enough for wiggling out. Does Mom know? What are you even doing here, then?"

"Dan and I broke up. I was fighting with Mom all the time—I needed a place to stay to figure things out."

"Sounds to me like you already figured things out." When Eric put his plate onto the coffee table, his saucy fork clattered to the floor. An untouched meatball rolled across the table and made a splat when it hit the blue carpeting. Eric stormed out of sight into the kitchen, but Michael heard him grab his keys from the counter and go out the door. Moments later, his car went barreling down the driveway, and Eric was gone.

Claire, meanwhile, had resumed eating her spaghetti, but she had lost her composure—her entire face was red, eyes wide and teary. Besides her sniffing, she and Michael ate in silence.

When Michael's plate was almost empty, Claire asked, "Can I get you more?"

"Naw, I'm good."

"But Eric's spaghetti already has cheese on it." Claire's voice cracked and suddenly the tears were more than she could blink back, huge tears that left snail trails down her cheeks, falling one after another onto her plate when she didn't wipe them away.

"I'll eat it." Michael picked up Eric's cold plate of spaghetti and began shoveling nests of noodles into his mouth. "See? It's fine."

Michael didn't know why Claire was so disturbed by Eric's left-over pasta, but to Michael's relief, she stopped crying and seemed to calm down as he ate it.

* * *

Despite the weather, Super Pet Mart was swarmed with people. Michael and Claire stood at the end of a very long line crammed with pet owners holding cat carriers or with their dogs on leashes, sweating in their winter coats. Michael saw one dog licking at a salty, dirt puddle forming around its owner's shoes and had to look away.

“Couldn’t you find Monkey’s carrier?” Michael asked.

“I looked and looked and didn’t find one,” Claire said. She held a blue plastic laundry basket to her chest covered with a towel held in place by a bungee cord. Monkey’s face was pressed against the side, her pink nose poking out and quivering. “Besides, I thought this was a pretty clever makeshift cat carrier.”

“You want me to hold it?”

“Not yet. We’re probably going to have to be here awhile, and I might ask you to hold it later. Besides, you’ll have to carry the food.” Claire poked her head out of line to count the people ahead of them. “I had no idea it was going to be this crazy.”

“I guess everyone had the same thought you did.”

“But what’s Eric going to do with all those pictures of strangers’ pets?”

“Funny.”

“I’ve got a million of them.” She looked at the line in front of them once more, as if to be sure that there really were that many people ahead of them. “If we’re real late, I won’t have dinner ready before Eric gets home.”

“What’re you cooking tonight?”

The moment Claire arrived, she took over the kitchen, making use of the pots and pans that previously had been purely decorative. Eric and Michael hadn’t ordered pizza, or picked up Church’s Chicken, or eaten take-out burritos in months. Claire threw out the frozen meals and cans of Spaghetti-Os, replacing them with blubs of garlic, bottles of olive oil, jars of olives. She made pasta puttanesca. She made beef stroganoff. Once she roasted a whole chicken, served it with mashed potatoes and pan gravy, and made soup the next day from the carcass.

The Santa line inched forward.

“Well, I made a fresh pot of sauce today, so we could have pasta,” Claire said. “But I also have some capers and thought it might nice to try making chicken piccata.”

“I don’t even know what capers are,” Michael said.

“Sure you do. Little green berry-type things? Taste briney?”

Michael shook his head.

“Well, they’re delicious,” Claire assured him.

“If we get back too late for the chicken, I’m sure the pasta will be good. Or we could order in. You don’t have to cook all the time, you know.”

“I like it. I like feeling like I’m taking care of you guys. Especially when I’m not working yet. I might as well play ‘happy homemaker.’ I can get some high heels and pearls and vacuum Donna Reed-style.”

“How do you even know who Donna Reed is?”

“Internet memes.”

Michael knew it bothered Eric that Claire remained jobless. Eric was biting his tongue in the hopes Claire would decide to go to school. That didn’t keep him from snapping at both

Claire and Michael when he got annoyed. With the holidays approaching, he’d been home even less, picking up extra shifts to stay out of the house.

“Can’t you play up college to her?” Eric asked while he and Michael did the dishes one night. Eric was washing while Michael dried and put away. During dinner, Claire had been inspired to bake an apple pie, and she was out at the store to pick up the ingredients. “Tell her it’s a great time.”

“A great time?” I think college is one of those things you have to want to do.”

“Well, at least if she goes to college, one good thing will come out of this whole abortion fiasco.” Eric dried the last fork, dropped it into the tray, and slammed the drawer closed.

Michael pulled the sink drain and wrung out the sponge, placed the sponge on the special antibacterial holder Claire’d purchased. “I don’t get it. It wasn’t good when Claire got pregnant. But now that she’s not pregnant, it’s still not good?”

Eric, his lips pursed, went to the refrigerator, took out a Coke and

cracked it open. Michael wondered if maybe he was too angry to say anything, but Eric finally said, “It’s just why she did it, you know? She breaks up with her boyfriend and decides she’s got to get an abortion. Know what it did to my mom? She’s told she’s going to be a grandmother and then she’s just not anymore?”

Michael nodded.

“But you know what pisses me off the most? Claire couldn’t trust us. We’re her family, we would have been there to help her. Me, mom—Christ, even you. All these people, but she thinks an abortion is her only option.”

Michael spent the rest of the evening in his room reading *Oliver Twist*, but he heard Claire return from the store and begin baking the apple pie. He had no idea how late she was up working on it. In the morning, the whole house smelled like baked apples and cinnamon, the buttery-comfort of pie crust—and the realization of how he’d been avoiding Eric’s sister since she moved in coated his tongue, the guilt thick and heavy in his stomach.

* * *

The line moved forward again. From where they stood, Michael could just make out the towers of seven-pound bags of dog and cat food flanking the photography station.

“Hey. Have you ever thought of doing culinary school?”

Claire turned to face him, her eyes narrowed. “Did my brother put you up to this?”

“No. He’s hoping you’ll choose college. And if you’re interested in college, I think you should do it. But if you’re not, you seem to like cooking. That might be a good match for you.”

“Huh. Maybe. I do love it.”

“Did you learn it from your mom?”

“No. I learned it because of my mom—her idea of cooking was

to mix together a can of Campbell's soup and noodles and bake it in the oven." When she wrinkled her nose, her pale winter freckles disappeared in the grooves.

"Hey! No knocking tuna noodle casserole. That's the only home cooking we had before you showed up, with your capers and your pasta."

Claire hitched Monkey's basket closer to her chest and fell silent. Michael went back to noticing how the Christmas carols playing over the sound system sounded tinny and the fluorescent lights made the overcast day outside look darker. As they inched forward, Michael could see Santa, sweat shining around his beard. The store was steamy with wet dog and snow-melted hats. Michael took off his wool coat and pushed up the sleeves of his flannel shirt, but didn't feel any more comfortable.

"I know that Eric thinks I got an abortion because Dan and I broke up."

Michael's attention snapped back to Claire. Her head was down, as if she was seriously considering the balding towel thrown over Monkey's basket. When she looked up, her eyes were twinkling and fierce. "But he's wrong."

"Um." Michael didn't know what to say. He didn't want to have this conversation, but walking away and leaving her didn't seem like an option. He wished he was home, alone, in his chilly bedroom. He looked up at the drop ceiling, stained brown in places where the roof had leaked.

"Dan wanted to keep the baby. I didn't. And I'm not home because my mom wanted me to give it up for adoption."

The redness had started to crawl up Claire's neck, but Michael didn't know if it was from the hot store or because she was upset.

Michael felt like it was his turn to speak, and worried about what would happen if he didn't. "Why didn't you?"

The line moved forward.

"I just couldn't. I couldn't give away my baby. Just leave it? But I'm not ready to be a mom. Not yet. So I went to the clinic, even when I knew the outcome—Mom not forgiving me and Dan not wanting to stay together."

“Did you tell your brother all of this?”

“I shouldn’t have to.”

For Michael, it was like fitting the last piece of a puzzle into place, or a camera lens auto focusing, or reading the final chapter of a mystery novel, when it becomes clear how all the clues fit together. Both Eric and Claire were operating within the confines of their own understood reality, and neither was willing to let the other in, and he could see it because he was outside of both. He wanted to tell her, but didn’t know how, and before he could summon the words, they were at the front of the line, and the moment had passed.

“And who do we have here?” Santa’s elf was a Super Pet Mart employee named Sandy, a striped white and green Santa hat with attached elf ears perched on her head and candy canes lining the pocket of her apron.

“This is Monkey,” Claire said, removing the bungee cord and towel from the basket and lifting Monkey out. “She’s still got her claws, so you’d better let me handle her.”

Claire cradled the usually-cantankerous Monkey, who seemed content to sit quietly in her arms, despite the strange surroundings and all the dogs around.

“She’s a beautiful cat,” Sandy said, and steered Claire into position on Santa’s left. “And you can stand here,” Sandy said, motioning Michael to Santa’s right.

“Oh, no. I’m just the ride.”

“Come be in the picture,” Claire protested.

He didn’t want to be in the picture, but he was aware of the line teeming behind him, and didn’t think arguing about it was the best idea. So Michael shrugged, dropped his jacket into Monkey’s carrier, and took his place on Santa’s right side.

The Super Pet Mart elf snapped the photo without warning. While Claire recaged Monkey, Michael grabbed one of the bags of cat food and made his way to the cash register at the front of the store, hoping that he hadn’t ruined the photo by blinking or wearing a stupid face.

“I put Monkey in the basket and bungeed the towel in place before

I realized that your coat is in there,” Claire said when she caught up with him in the checkout line. “Wanna help me get it out?”

Michael peered into the side of the laundry basket—Monkey was curled peaceably in the folds of his jacket, and he could already see a fine coating of white hairs against the black wool. She was purring.

“Nah, let her keep it. It’s so hot in here I’m looking forward to being cold.”

“Hey, I love this song.”

Michael listened and could just hear children and John Lennon singing that the war was over if he wanted it before crossing through the super-heated vestibule out into the unusually-dark winter afternoon.

By the time Michael and Claire returned home, Eric was already there, the door of his bedroom closed. Counting Crows could be heard, muffled but distinctly, even in the kitchen.

Claire abandoned her capers, but scratched her cooking itch by slathering sliced baguette with a homemade garlic herb butter and using the broiler to melt parmesan otop. She piled the garlic bread on a platter that Michael had never seen before and set it in the middle of kitchen table, which she had cleared of the pieces of junk mail, papers, and other various bits of their lives that usually didn’t have a place to go.

Michael watched as she spooned the spaghetti with her tomato sauce into elaborate nests on three plates, folded paper towels into triangles, and put a fork and spoon at each place setting. She then took a seat, motioned for Michael to sit, and cast a stricken look toward Eric’s door--forehead creased as she chewed her bottom lip. He had obviously heard them return home as clearly as Michael and Claire could hear Adam Duritz singing, but he hadn’t emerged to say hello.

Michael only deliberated a moment before striding over to Eric’s room and knocking loudly.

“Yeah?” Eric asked when he opened the door.

“It’s time to eat, man,” Michael said.

Eric’s eyes narrowed, and Michael wondered if he was going to be difficult. Instead, Eric walked back into his bedroom, hit the power button

on his ancient stereo, and followed Michael into the kitchen for dinner.

As they ate, Claire didn't say anything about the trip to Super Pet Mart, so Michael didn't, either.

* * *

On Christmas morning, Claire woke before dawn to make cranberry white chocolate scones and mulled cider. She lit the multi-colored Christmas lights that she'd hung in the living room right after Thanksgiving, and woke Michael and Eric from sleep by blasting the Mormon Tabernacle Choir's version of "Joy to the World."

"You're nuts. You know that, right?" Eric said, but accepted a scone from her just the same.

Michael watched as the pat of butter he'd put on the still-warm scone melted into its crumbly depths. He ate it slowly—the richness of the white chocolate, the tartness from the cranberries, and the salted creaminess of the butter mingled on his tongue in a way that tasted, to Michael, the way all Christmas mornings should taste.

"It's hard to sleep when there are presents to open," Claire said, her mug of cider warming the underside of her nose.

Claire's present to Eric was wrapped in bright gold paper that Monkey stalked after Eric tore it from the box. Inside was a wooden frame with the words *My Family* painted across the top. In the picture, Claire was smiling brightly, Monkey cuddled close to her face, with Michael standing austere on Santa's other side.

Michael thought about how, before long, he would have to take a shower and drive the two and a half hours to Taylor, to have Christmas dinner with mom, dad, and grandma. His family would ask him about living with Eric and Claire. They would have heard about the abortion—at church, in the line at Kroger—because it was the kind of family secret that leaches into the water of a Downriver community. Michael imagined their righteous indignation eclipsing even curiosity about school and what he planned to do with an English degree.

Michael wished that he could stay—Claire couldn't go home, and Eric was staying with her. She was so excited about the pasta maker that Eric and Michael got for her for Christmas that she was going to make homemade ravioli for dinner, stuffed with pumpkin and cooked with sausage and sage.

“Are your hands clean?” Claire asked.

Michael set his plate down, bare even of crumbs, wiped his hands on his pajama pants, and took a lumpy package from Claire.

The present was a pair of socks that she'd knitted herself—not out of wool, but out of a soft gray acrylic yarn, which Michael wore until the yarn, fuzzed with age, started to pull and run. After that, he kept them balled up in the bottom of his sock drawer.

The Country of Not-knowing

First off, you're in an off-duty cabbie's Chevy. In the front seat. And a fogbound field is boundary between past and starting over. Through the seam of the windshield, night hovers in all directions. He's said that *that* bus doesn't run anymore, but he'll get you there. He's failed, he says, to make clear the fare for the thirty-mile trip. Seems not to care this is your first full day after military service.

In an air-force-issue duffle fat with civvies, you thought to pack—hopefully within reach—a Swiss army knife as weapon. The blade one of many things that can answer someone stroking your leg. It shouldn't require a sixteen-hour-long Greyhound bus ride and That Look to displace you from stumbling around young and innocently anesthetized, but it does. Anyone can understand

making use of exchange to get some of what you need. Cabbies may be the Henry Kissingers of the night. Aficionados of detente. But you say *No* and he reaches under the seat. So you get scared. You exit the car. Hit the pavement. And roll. What you know to do, in addition to sacrificing your field jacket, the knees of your Levis, is to keep rolling like the postal sack of Stupid you are at twenty.

The Value of x

will never be the capitol of New Jersey
or a signature on the Magna Carta.

X will never equate
to internal combustion
or something shaped
and molded
by talented young hands,
will never be built
with sand and mortar.

The value of x
is part of an obtuse world,
beyond the grasp
of the creative mind
that draws an intricate butterfly
on a piece of scrap,
that creates a complex circuit
of wires or words.

The value of x
cannot improve the arc
of a curve ball or
a three pointer.

Unlike
a rainbow's spectrum
or the brightest star you see,
the value of x
cannot be remembered.

From the Country Called “Abroad”

... many developing countries find that their most lucrative export is people. The foreign workers and their families must grapple with an inevitable trade-off: emotional loss for material gain.

– Cynthia Gorney, “Far from Home,”
National Geographic, January 2014

Our Filipino priest says remember
why we’re here: for plywood roofs, better schools,
clean water taps; for every daily thing
our homes depend upon. And I would say
a TV set to babysit my kids,
new store-bought clothes they’d call their own,
a wife who longs to have me by her side,
not in this heat 4000 miles away.

He preaches faithfulness. His holy vows
comfort him, but here there’s little comforting.
By day we burn our hands on Dubai steel.
By night, eight bodies in one room. We sleep
in shifts. Four narrow beds. To save on rent.
Recruiters call this promise land “Abroad.”
We call it “the prison of remittances.”

Each year my daughters grow more womanly,
my sons play on the edges of the law.
They promise they are missing me, but end
our Facebook chats too quick. They run to friends
they care about more than they care for me.

We can't go back. Our family needs.
That's what my father always said.
So here I sit and listen to the priest
who drones about a fixed-up house
I wouldn't recognize, a family
who believes this stranger will provide.

I fold my callused hands and look at
the Jesus in the desert-blown stained glass.
I can't find words to pray. Instead, I ask myself,
So what's a color TV worth?

There are answers I can't stand to hear.
A kid who maybe isn't mine.
A lover who consoles my one day off.
Unfaithfulness on both sides of the world.

As Bells Echo in the Distance



Bill Wolak

When *X* left, *Y* announced he was moving

Somewhere like Lithuania

or Romania.

Somewhere unfamiliar,

colored only by stereotypes.

Long beige grass

against the grey of old

stone and mortar.

A partial

blackened wooden fence.

Basketball backboard

but no net.

No rim.

Sun setting decrepit

and orange

less like an orange than something that was green once.

Somewhere where

big bushy beards never went out of style

and dark, professionally thuggish men openly carried sub-machineguns.

Where *wifi* ceased interfering with bee and swallow-song.

Where each sidewalk square is fenced by knee-high weeds.

Green and tan

together again

to make a retch-brown.

A bourbon color.
Scotch. Whiskey.
Not the clear
and potent liquor they'd *have* to drink,
he said,
caramel coloring a luxury like ice or shoes.

Somewhere where he could be unreachable
which correlates to *unattainable*.

What a place for togetherness.

The Poem is the Same as the World

In the alabaster-colored kitchen,
the green tea in the glass cup is on the counter, all brewed up,

in the morning, the soft tones of the geese
flying low outside the window, going south, each in tow

of the other, I listen to them like the sound of the wind,
as if they are the sound of the full moon setting and all that

is sad from loss because there is no place to go, and happy
because there will be another place, full of the sound

of the wind, deep Santa Ana stuff and the light
exploding on all of us, today is another day like this.

I'm rising to meet it, walking across the wild desert grass.
The blackbirds are rustling the thick dry palm leaves,
out back, the long walk to where I start out, and the trip back.

The poem is the same as the world, everywhere is home.

Dear Madame Castigliano

Thank you for letting me use your apartment. I've greatly admired its panoramic view of Angers. Fantastique! Daily I've awakened looking out the bedroom's sliding glass doors and felt as if I were among the clouds or nestled in an aerie with the city and its people lying below at my feet.

On the balcony outside, the geraniums you left are blooming even so late in the year. They are so inspiring, I hope they'll also be in full flower upon your spring return. As you see, I've come to appreciate your tastes and have developed a fond appreciation of you as well.

The photos you've hung on the living room walls tell me you had three children, two of whom have their own places far off. I recognize an African city and think the other is somewhere near the Andes from the South American Indian-looking people in the background and the snow-covered peaks.

I congratulate you on your marriage. Your husband was handsome, and I can tell you enjoyed your trips together. The formal dinner for your 50th anniversary shows you had a long marriage. I'm sorry he is gone although I don't know the date or cause.

You can see you've left me clues about yourself, and I haven't pried into drawers. Things left in the open introduce you. You were a cute little girl and a beautiful young woman. You probably grew more sensitive as you aged, as suggested by your paintings. I've enjoyed the ones you've done and the ones you've bought. All landscapes, romantic, sentimental, idealized scenes of Italian towns and of lake resorts in wooded hills much like the paint-by-numbers things my father's brother did. When he passed on, his family found a bedroom stacked to the ceiling with completed art. He was so sentimental, he couldn't bear to give away his visions. I'm guessing you have a stash of your work hidden somewhere.

The books in the cases, CDs, DVDs, and videotapes all bear French or Italian titles so I've passed on them, but they show you are like my mother, a Sound Of Music kind of viewer.

The pledge to forego chocolate magnetized on the refrigerator door made me smile. I mentioned it to your daughter who rented me this

place and works two blocks down the street in a *chocolaterie*. She has sold me several sack-fulls of sweets and said she overly loves the products of her work. As you did apparently. That you used to own and run the place explains a lot to me.

Maybe someday we will meet, passing on the street. If I see your tall body and erect posture, I'm sure I will recognize your beauty beneath the disguise you've affected, the old *madame* in these pictures. Therefore, if a strange man embraces you, kisses your cheeks, please don't be flustered. It'll be the American who slept in your bed for 21 days.

A Dance with Demons, and Other Melancholies

The Magnolia Review Editor Kristin Brooker interviews Abigail Cloud, author of *Sylph*, winner of the Lena-Miles Wever Todd Prize.

Kristin Brooker: What inspires you to write?

Abigail Cloud: Image and senses. There are events sometimes that inspire me to write poems, usually something personal that I want to capture. But my driving force always seems to be images that take over my mind's eye. I also love the intermingling of words and how they sound together, which keeps me going. Not just the consonant and vowel sounds, but their relationships and revisions. And that ultimately is why I'm a poet—I have lots of story ideas, but my attention is so fixated on the small that I always go back to poetry. That's why I am such a fan of Marianne Moore, in poems like "Paper Nautilus." It's that obsession of turning an object over and over and defamiliarizing it. I love that.

KB: How long have you married poetry and dance? Has there always been an interplay between the two, or was it something that you discovered?

AC: The interaction between poetry and dance is something I have struggled with a long time. They were once completely separate—like two halves I couldn't choose between but never combined. In college, though, I learned about "text studies," with choreography set to texts. That intrigued me so much I did my Honors thesis on the text study, and choreographed a program of dances set to my poems. My dancers and I did a Q & A with my advisor and guests after the program and it was wonderful to talk about some of the deep layers of the process of putting the two together.

I continued to marry poetry and dance this way in grad school and also choreographed a few pieces around others' poems, which helped me memorize them for class. I still do Mary Ann Samyn's "The Chimney" from time to time, just by myself. I wrote a few dance-based poems before I came to graduate school, but then stopped for a long while. I don't know why. It just didn't seem right. The two halves idea came back, I guess, with only occasional breaks. But then I was in a workshop at Winter Wheat: The Mid-American Review Festival of Writing, with Mary Biddinger, on manuscripts. Something she said jolted me so hard that it fused those halves back together and *Sylph* was born—dance poems then became the driving force for that book, almost like a new discovery.

KB: How long has *Sylph* been in the works? What were the challenges, if any, to putting together a collection of works?

AC: I actually had a full collection crafted before *Sylph* existed, and had even sent it to some contests. It was a decent collection, with a good central focus and themes, but I

often felt like it wasn't quite finished. After the aforementioned Biddinger workshop, I sat down and looked at my poems for the rest of the festival day, really re-saw their themes and dynamics, and started puzzling over a whole new idea—to craft a collection “organized” by the acts of a romantic ballet, which would be called *Sylphide*. That's the actual title of one of the ballets, and a character that embodied much of what I wanted to do with the book. The title later became *Sylph* because it's more holistic but also easier to pronounce.

The idea wasn't quite that fully formed then because I was going from my memory only. I did research later to confirm and relearn the conventions I wanted to use, specifically what order different ballets used and what happened in each act—the types of dramatic turns, characterizations, magic, movement, etc. A lot of that is peripheral to the book, sort of an unspoken backstory important mostly to me during the act of creation. Much of the original collection is represented in the new one, but their new arrangement gives them different layers and undercurrents, and finding those new meanings was certainly a challenge.

I had a good number of poems still to write to make the whole thing work, to tie the non-dance poems together in their proper places. That was actually joyful, writing poems around characters from these old 19th and early 20th century ballets, characters I'd grown up with and thought about so many times. “Mad Scene” was the first, from one of my favorite ballet scenes ever, from *Giselle*. And then I kept going. I manipulated their stories, used new perspectives, filled in side stories, even “invented” a new ballet on a fairy tale that hasn't been done yet (that was the last poem I wrote for the book, after it won the Lena-Miles Wever Todd Prize from Pleiades Press, and actually now I really want to create the ballet as well—that's one of the challenges, getting distracted). I didn't always know where those poems were going to go, writing instead to represent the voices and themes and, most particularly, *images* I had stored in my conscious and subconscious.

Organizing the whole thing was one of the biggest challenges. I had so many different permutations of poem order. I went to BGSU's Jerome Library many times, using a few of their long tables to place and re-place poems over and over. I actually really liked doing that in public. It kept me on task and became a sort of performance itself: The Poet at Work will now perform the Dance of Ordering. And then I did the whole thing again after it won the prize. Judge Dana Levin, who is lovely and gave beautiful advice, told me to try reordering it after the necessary extractions and additions. The amazing people at Pleiades Press emphasized that this book was my own and I could make whatever changes I felt were needed, so I got to repeat the ordering process. As much of a challenge as the ordering task is, I really love it. Some things just fit next to each other, and solving the problem of which ones don't is really like a puzzle. I am a puzzle-solver by nature so this

was really part of my instinct. And, in fact, most of the poems in *Sylph* ended up right back in their original places. That was a good feeling.

KB: In your opinion, who is your intended, or ideal, audience? Who do you write for?

AC: I'm not sure anyone has ever asked me this! That's nice. My poems, or at least the poems in *Sylph*, seem to resonate best with people who have deeply imagistic minds, who sense and store images without even realizing it. People who can give over to their unconscious.

There is an intense femininity in *Sylph*'s poems, but that doesn't mean they're limited to a female audience. The binaries and power dynamics of romantic ballets are intentionally on display and explored in some of the poems, and those are relevant to all of us since they still pervade our stories. Other poems are more neutral.

When I'm writing, I'm thinking about the images, the sounds, the connotations. Readers who prefer logic in narrative and/or crystal clarity are thus not going to be as interested. I don't write for a particular or intended audience, but I do think readers who like to see and feel their way through poetry are more ideal for *Sylph*'s work. That's not untrue of the ballets—they are narrative, but include a lot of dream/otherworldliness and, like the fairy tales they inspire, some nonsense.

KB: There have been many articles published regarding the routine of various authors and poets. What is your routine for writing?

AC: I've read some of those, and they always fascinate me. I have no routine! I know writers who write every day, or have particular setups for their space or preparations they do. I have nothing. It's a little sad, really. I used to write only at night, quite late, when the world outside is very quiet. I used to write outdoors. I used to write in a particular journal or in any journal at all.

Now, I am so busy, my schedule so varied, and my mind so full that I don't do any of those things. I participated in an Intensive Writing Week set up by one of my grad students earlier this summer and I made it four days. I do like to participate in these because they get me writing new work and thinking about other ideas, but it's not my habit to write daily. I am giving myself a good, long writing retreat this summer to work on some projects, and I'm excited about that.

I can write anywhere, which is a blessing. I love writing at hockey games, for instance, during intermissions. Several *Sylph* poems were written that way, allowing the buzz of

the arena to block out the mental editor and unimportant thoughts. Especially if I'm doing something with meter it helps. I also "write" quite a bit in my head while walking. Writing twists me up and I have to bolt and go for a walk; if I'm smart I bring a pen with me, though then I sometimes end up writing on my arms. But I use the rhythm of the walk to help jostle images and words loose. I also do still sit outside, with birds or traffic or whatever, listening and thinking. Sometimes I'll write a couple of lines, do some stretching while thinking about what's next, and go on that way.

I write poems mostly by hand before going to the computer, preferably with a cup of tea handy, and that's about as routine as I get.

KB: Can you tell us a bit about your love for dancing? How long have you had an interest in it, what is it that inspires you to dance, what is your favorite form of dance, etc.?

AC: I've always loved dance. I need to move, and dance was also so good for my memory. My mom can always tell when I need to dance because I get very cranky—it's sort of like the movement version of "hangry" (hungry/angry). The artistry combined with the athleticism of dance is unparalleled, but what draws me I think is more primitive. There is something primal in the way we move our bodies with intention through a space. Movement is also my natural reaction to music or musiclike sound. (I'm listening to a soundtrack of nighttime crickets while I write this, and it's as good a dance music as any.) Sometimes I'll come across a piece of music and become obsessed with it, listening to it over and over and choreographing with it in my head. I once crafted most of a dance piece in the Malpensa Airport in Milan—we were there overnight, it was freezing, and my natural reaction was to work through dance stretches and craft a piece, solving the boredom, stiffness, and temperature problems as well as feeding my obsession with a piece of music I didn't even have with me. There you have it: dancing as problem solving.

I have been dancing for such a long time—I have a beautiful and artistic older sister who took dance and who started teaching me moves when I was about two. I began dancing with Theda Assiff at Assiff Dance Studio in East Lansing when I was four and stayed with that studio until I graduated college, adding college dance classes at Michigan State and classes with Mark Taylor, who now has Mark Taylor School of Dance, and whose recitals I help out for backstage each year. I am a recital junkie. He recently invited alumni back to do the traditional tap finale, and so I had what I called my "triumphant return to the stage." It was an absolute joy, because I hadn't danced onstage for years. In addition to the dancing itself, I love the mingled senses of stage and backstage life, the tension combined with the familiar sounds and smells, all the preparations each individual has.

I have done a lot of forms of dance, but when asked my favorite, I usually say cancan. It's an unusual choice, but at my studios the cancan dancers have been the elite: There is a traditional cancan every year, and only the most skilled "senior" girls get to do it. I grew up watching them and then did it for several years myself, even doing the training for new girls for a while. I now "consult" for Mark Taylor's cancanners, which mainly means I advise (holler at) them at rehearsals. Cancan has a mystique around it, but also a rowdiness that I love. You get to craft a character with the cancan, which appeals to my creative writing self. Every dance is a story, a way of expressing feelings and images, but the cancan is so unusual and inherently character-based it gets right into my soul.

KB: If it is all right to ask, are there any projects you are currently working on? Anything we can look forward to seeing from you?

AC: Certainly! I am writing poems for two books right now, one based around the concept of divination and one more homestyle. Whether those poems will actually land in those books is never sure, but once *Sylph* was done I took a look at the remaining poems and saw emerging patterns that went in two different directions. Dana Levin was so very kind and told me this is completely normal. She was advising me to take a few particular poems out of *Sylph*, which I did, and save them for another book, and that really did start an idea for one of the new books, while I was already working on the other. It's a long-haul process, but it's exciting to have a few particular projects in mind. It keeps me more focused and more productive. I can write a poem just to write a poem, but if I have a need to write and no particular idea, I can look to the themes of the emerging collections.

KB: Do have any advice for aspiring poets?

AC: Forgive yourself.

Mind your own writing process and speed, not that of others. You may have to write for school, which is fine, but you should also be cultivating your own best practices.

Allow yourself to write bad poems.

Learn your progenitors. Read Modern and Contemporary poets and find affinities. Find favorites.

At the same time, don't feel like you have to read everything. Similar to the writing process point, you will have your own reading process as well. It's good to know who is out there publishing right now, and a little about their work, but give yourself a break and don't inundate yourself to the point where your own imagination is stifled.

Abigail Cloud

Reviews

The Bones of Us by J. Bradley and Adam Scott Mazer. Portland, Oregon: YesYes Books, 2014. 76 pages. \$18.00, paper.

In *The Bones of Us*, J. Bradley is the poet with art by Adam Scott Mazer. One hundred and thirty-eight funders on Kickstarter made this illustrated graphic poetry collection possible. According to KMA Sullivan, Publisher of YesYes Books, “*The Bones of Us* is an experimental project. Not since Blake has a full-length poetry collection been released first as an illustrated collection.”

The poems are handwritten. In “Immunosuppression,” the lines of the poem are on organ pipes. The titles of the poem are in different styles. The setup of where the title is in relation to the stanzas of the poem and the accompanied illustrations varies throughout the collection in a pleasant way. In “Knife Show,” the title is at the top of the page with the letters mimicking a knife. The three stanzas are next to three small illustrations as the wedding ring begins round and then melts. Mazer’s use of white space is perfect for balancing the text and art.

In the poem “Primer”: “I think about my target, filling in the what and the where before I wear the powder burns on my palm. Anything related to weddings or marriage is off limits. There’s an obviousness about shooting the married couple standing on top of the edible steeple. Anything related to us is out too. And shooting God in the face is ridiculous; we had a secular ceremony.”

“Are We The Dining Dead?” is a mini comic as “The elderly couple sitting three booths away from us cuts through the piped in music” and the husband tries to get his wife to eat the chicken.

The title of “Pictures of You” is at the bottom of the page, with a hill of grass and at the top of the page, a figure walking over the hill with the poem in clouds next to him.

The Bones of Us is an invigorating read that engages the reader with the text and images. This collection is a must read for the possibilities of more poetry collections conversing with art that would showcase the talents of both.

—Suzanna Anderson

Sylph by Abigail Cloud. Warrensburg, Missouri: Pleiades Press, 2014. 71 pages. \$17.95, paper.

Abigail Cloud, who currently is on staff at Bowling Green State University, has woven together a beautiful collection of haunting poetry in *Sylph*. Her book, which won the Lena-Miles Wever Todd Prize for 2014, showcases the interplay between dance, human love and loss, and madness. It celebrates everyday tragedies using demons of annoyance, while also delving into the depths and inexplicable nature of human suffering.

Sylph, pulling from Cloud's background in dance, is broken into four acts: Prologue, The Black Act, The White Act, and the Apotheosis. The prologue sees the birth and handling of everyday demons:

“Mother / knows the baby will make damage / stronger than these, and then forgets / it ever existed, leaves it to lie / in a cold puddle. The baby / builds its own hot cave, whispers / its own new name. It chooses / a future like a low-burning headache.” (4)

Also buried in this act are fairy tales revisited from more humanistic angles, such as Sleeping Beauty in “The Christening,” to Cinderella in “Before the Glass Slipper.” We are privy to the discomfort, the suffering of those who take center stage in these pieces. The Black Act brings the small tragedies these demons wrought alongside the misguided machinations of humanity's own doing. This act transforms people into something akin to the demons born at the genesis of this collection, shows them becoming

instruments to their own suffering, as well as that of others. It showcases men who strip their loves of the means to fly, men who are afflicted with love throw themselves into suicide, angels who binge drink, and other such situations.

The White Act seems quiet following the former, delving into the psychological side of suffering. This is where the reader tours insanity, desperation, and depression. “Water at the Lunatic Ball” and “Lunatic Note, 1838” are laid out, literally in the latter’s case, as case notes to review, little pockets of erratic and unusual caricatures. One poem in particular, “Letter to a Suicidal Man,” serves to not only disquiet the reader, but also to illustrate how life can transform when you least expect it (and not always for the better):

“Once there was a man who went / into a mine and he was heavy / and stayed there. They say / his wife packed him a lunch / and he left it on the kitchen table / and that’s where she found it / before they told her.” (51)

While demons are still present, they grow smaller in number. The Apotheosis is the uneasy calm after the shock. This act is disquieted contemplation; it is resolution, but left lesser due to prior actions. Here the reader will encounter characters making tough choices, characters reflecting on fate, others vying for what they feel is theirs. It all ends with a burial, whether metaphorical or literal.

To experience *Sylph* is to open Pandora’s box and bear witness to the suffering that spills forth. To miss out on Cloud’s first book of collected poetry, *Sylph*, would certainly be a tragedy in its own right.

— Kristin Brooker

I Will Love You For the Rest of My Life by Michael Czyzniejewski. Chicago, Illinois: Curbside Splendor Publishing, Inc., 2015. 139 pages. \$14.95, paper.

Michael Czyzniejewski's humor from his first two books, *Elephants in Our Bedroom* (Dzanc Books, 2009) and *Chicago Stories: 40 Dramatic Fictions* (Curbside Splendor Publishing, 2012) is still ever present in *I Will Love You For the Rest of My Life* (Curbside Splendor Publishing, 2015). The stories of love and falling out of love are told with humor and grace and unexpected surprises. Characters pawn engagement rings for medical hearts, a woman propositions sex with a man allergic to peanut butter, rigging an election instead of getting married, and so on.

Czyzniejewski is a master of the short fiction form with fascinating situations and characters that I love even though the introduction is brief. He is experimental with "The Braxton-Carter-Vandamme-Myers-Braxton-Carter Divorce: An Outline" with the story set up as an outline with the characters' introduction, the rising action, flashback, climax, and resolution. "The Plum Tree" has thirteen numbered sections: "3: You say plums remind you of our wedding, and when I ask how, you remember it was apricot compote filling our cake, you insisting apricots and plums are basically the same fruit" (86). In "Plagues of Egypt," each plague is named and accompanied with a verse from Exodus. The plague of frogs, "We find the dead frog in the bottom of the coffee can, three weeks after breaking the seal, explaining why our coffee has tasted putrid, why we've been getting sick, even why you'd gotten that wart on your finger. The coffee company doesn't believe us when we send a picture, accusing us of faking it so we can cash in, but then six more cases surface that week..." (89).

The language is tight and moving. In "You Had Me at Zoo," the story begins "Connor's first-ever blind date is at the zoo. He meets Melanie at the gate, where she buys both tickets, plus passes for the amphitheater,

dolphin show, and train ride. She also springs for meal coupons and a fifty-dollar certificate for the gift shop. She tells Connor that she used to work there and still has her discount card, so it's all on her" (70). But the date isn't going so well and "When Melanie suggests lunch at the cafeteria, shaped like a giant birdcage, Connor decides to leave afterward" (71). The story "Space" is about a man who brings a woman home while his wife is in space, and unfortunately she saw her husband bring the woman home. So he "...spent all his time in their yard, just hoping Meg would be spying on him. Miller splayed himself out on the back lawn, lying there for hours at first, then entire days" (85).

Czyzniejewski is worth reading and rereading for the humor, characters, imagination, and language that is both laugh out loud funny and a twist in the gut.

—Suzanna Anderson

The Opposite of Loneliness: Essays and Stories by Marina Keegan. New York, New York: Scribner, 2014. 208 pages. \$23.00, hardcover.

Marina Keegan graduated from Yale in May 2012 magna cum laude. She died in a car crash days after graduation. Her parents, friends, and teachers collected her stories and essays. Anne Fadiman, Keegan's teacher, wrote the introduction and her parents, Tracy and Kevin Keegan, wrote the acknowledgments.

Her teacher Anne Fadiman asked for a list of personal pitfalls, aspects of writing to work on. Some of Keegan's were "Too much polysyndeton. Watch it!" and "Similes must actually be capable of doing their thing. You can't 'curl up like a spoon'" and "THERE CAN ALWAYS BE A BETTER THING!" This is a wonderful exercise that I will do for my writing, a checklist to become part of my editing process. The hope that a piece of writing can always be better and improved.

The title essay “The Opposite of Loneliness” showcases Keegan’s talent for wordplay, and the essay begins “We don’t have a word for the opposite of loneliness, but if we did, I could say that’s what I want in life. What I’m grateful and thankful to have found at Yale, and what I’m scared of losing when we wake up tomorrow after Commencement and leave this place” (1). She goes on to give examples of the good times she had at Yale, building a community and friendships. But regrets come back: “Of course, there are things we wish we’d done: our reading, that boy across the hall. We’re our own hardest critics and it’s easy to let ourselves down. Sleeping too late. Procrastinating. Cutting corners. More than once I’ve looked back on my high school self and thought: how did I do that? How did I work so hard? Our private insecurities follow us and will always follow us” (2).

“Against the Grain” is about Keegan’s experiences as a Celiac. I am gluten intolerant myself, and Keegan’s story touched me. Celiac Disease is “... an autoimmune disorder manifested in an intolerance to the proteins found in wheat, rye, barley, and other common grains. Upon exposure to gluten, my enzyme tissue transglutaminase modifies the protein, and the immune system cross-reacts with the small-bowel tissue, causing an inflammatory reaction that truncates the intestine lining and prevents nutrient absorption” (158). She was an ill baby, not gaining weight with “...stick-thin limbs and distended stomach” (158). Growing up with Celiac, Keegan’s mother would make sure Keegan could join her classmates: “On school field trips, she would call ahead to my teachers, dropping off a gluten-free cone I could have when the class stopped for ice cream....At home that night I’d yell across our kitchen’s floors, Why would you do that? Why wouldn’t you ask? Why do you always embarrass me?” (161).

Keegan’s stories are masterful in the prose and development of characters. In the story “Reading Aloud,” Anna reads aloud to a blind man, but “Each week she peels off her garments one by one, arranging them beside her chair with practiced stealth” (49). Anna’s husband went back to work after being retired, and Anna used to dance at the Met. Then Anna is told to

find purpose and routine when her knee hurts and the nausea beings, and “Sometimes, in the shower, or in the car, or loading the dishwasher, Anna would wonder what would have happened if she had offered to read to Martin. Offered her eyes to cable-box directions and instant-soup instructions, unpaid bills and pages from his law books. *I’ll be your glasses*, she would have said. *That doesn’t say milk, it says cream*” (54).

As an aspiring writer, reading *The Opposite of Loneliness* is a gift, a reminder that life may end sooner than I expect. It is important to be yourself and do what you love. What will I do with the time I have left?
—Suzanna Anderson

Praying Drunk: Stories, Questions by Kyle Minor. Louisville, Kentucky: Sarabande Books Inc., 2014. 209 pages. \$15.95, paper.

This story collection has two sections. The first is “I Wish My Soul Were Larger Than It Is” and the second is “As I Fall Past, Remember Me.” In the acknowledgments, “The section titles are taken from the Andrew Hudgins poems ‘Praying Drunk’ and ‘Heat Lightning in a Time of Drought,’ both collected in *The Never-Ending* (Houghton Mifflin, 1991), which all readers should immediately seek out, buy, read, and treasure.” There are four completely black pages that further separate the stories. There are two “Q&A” stories, one in each section. There is a note to the reader opposite the table of contents: “These stories are meant to be read in order. This is a book, not just a collection. DON’T SKIP AROUND.” I highly recommend reading the stories in order as they reference and build on each other in a way that I would have neglected to notice if I skipped around. And the black pages separating stories also affected me by visualizing the darkness in the stories and taking a moment to pause before starting the next story.

“You Shall Go Out with Joy and Be Led Forth with Peace” originally appeared in *Twentysomething Essays by Twentysomething Writers* (Random House, 2006). The twelve-year-old Minor is standing beneath a starfruit tree as the “...Sonshine Fellowship ... meets every Wednesday morning at 6:30 to pray and sing the happiest of songs all in major keys, except the songs borrowed from the Jews, which are in minor keys and which speed up as they go along and which, when played on acoustic guitars, are faintly reminiscent of sad country songs. And those happy songs make me happy, truly happy, for brief and ever briefer periods of time, but it’s those Jewish songs—*You shall go out with joy and be led forth with peace. The mountains and the hills shall break forth before you...*—that really slay me, because there is something *earned* about that joy; it has come from a place of great pain” (9). The starfruit is carried throughout the essay, from the fact that Minor has been picking them “...for all the years I have gone to this school, ever since I was four years old, and I know how to pick one that is sweet enough but not overripe....It is truly amazing to me that I am the only person I know, student or teacher, who picks from this tree (16).

The story “Seven Stories About Sebastian of Koulèv-Ville” won the 2012 *Iowa Review* Prize for Short Fiction. The story has seven titled sections, like “1. The First Day I Met Sebastian” and “2. Before the Earthquake.” In “5. The Third, Fourth, Fifth, and Sixth Curses,” the narrator and Sebastian are in a Jeep at night. Sebastian “...reached under his seat for his water bottle and took a sip. ‘Why are people so bad to each other?’ he said. ‘There was this crazy woman. She always came into town with this mongrel dog. She only had one friend. He was a crazy person, too. A line of drool always hung from his mouth. He had gums instead of teeth. Sometimes he stole some food for her dog. I never saw her eat. She was always looking for food for her dog’” (73-74).

In the first “Q&A” story, the questioner asks “Why do you often tell the same story two or three different ways?” The A responds, “It’s not done

with me yet. I forgot something important, or I hadn't learned it yet" (87). The Q then asks, "You still believe in something as old-fashioned as meaning-making?" A responds, "Maybe the biggest fiction I want to create is that it all matters. It matters so much. It matters and matters" (87). I am curious to ask and respond to questions as a writing prompt.

The story "In a Distant Country" is several letters by different characters to other characters. The first letter is from Rev. Samuel Tillotson to Mr. Leslie Ratliff. Rev. Tillotson is in Haiti at a Baptist mission. He opens the letter, "Technically, Leslie, and in keeping with the practice we're supposed to maintain around here, I'm supposed to be writing to thank you for visiting last month with your graduating seniors, and for the gifts toward the 44 cubic ft. refrigerator for the mission and the new stone cistern for the village and especially the ionized oxygen allotrope gas (IAOG) water filtration system, which, I'll admit, this place has badly needed for as long as I can remember" (123). The story centers on the love story of Samuel and Sheila.

The stories have strong images and compact language. My soul is imprinted with these stories. I hope my fiction can be as stirring and powerful as Minor's stories. Kyle Minor is the author of *In the Devil's Territory: Stories* (Dzanc Books, 2008).

—Suzanna Anderson

The Great Glass Sea by Josh Weil. New York, New York: Grove Press, 2014. 474 pages. \$27.00, hardcover.

This novel was my life for the Amtrak ride from Toledo to Boston. I joined the twin brothers Yarik and Dima as they grew into men, pursued their dreams, and trudged to work.

The Great Glass Sea is about two inseparable twin brothers, Yarik and Dima. Their father's death prompts them to live with their uncle on his farm. As adults, the brothers work in the largest greenhouse of the world, Oranzheria.

The story begins with Yarik and Dima rowing to the island. They are hunting the monster Chudo-Yudo, and "They stood thinking of their father, and how he must have tried, and they passed between them the truth that he had failed, and that they would fail, too, and they wondered again, silently, the thoughts they had wondered aloud in the night in their beds at Dyadya Avya's—where in them lived their souls?" (5).

The description is detailed and exquisite: "Vast hectares of panels stretching across an endless scaffolding of steel, it spread northward from the lakeshore, creeping over the land like a glacier in reverse: the largest greenhouse in the world" (9). Yarik is at the lake with his boss Bazarov, and "The wind blew lake spray across his back and brought a memory with it: the way Dima, crouched on his shoulders, waiting to dive into the lake, used to signal he was ready to be launched. And Yarik, under water, would echo the count back with his fingers against his brother's feet. Tap, tap, tap" (158).

What is love? Dima tries to understand "...the chase everyone else seemed compelled to make, the way everyone seemed to need to dilute their love. Lust, he could imagine—Yarik's trips to the dockyard women, his nights with the dance club girls, the way something in the urge seemed stirred by newness—but love? ... No, he could not understand how in the end it could make anyone more happy than they'd been when they began" (103). Yarik marries Zinaida, and they have two children, a son, Timofei, and a baby girl, Polya.

The theme of dreams and what it means to work and be a consumer weave throughout the novel. Dima dreams of buying the uncle's farm and re-

turning to work the land. Yarik works at Oranzheria to provide for his family: “‘Well,’ he said aloud, ‘sometimes you don’t get what you want.’ He watched the tip of the cigarette burn. Sometimes, you have to choose between what you want and what you need. He ashed over the window ledge, took a draw, held it in his lungs. The problem was sometimes it wasn’t so easy to tell which was which” (211). Dima saves money to buy his half of the farm, sells the things he doesn’t need, and finds things around the city. Yarik asks Dima, “‘...how long do you plan to survive on a dream?’” (252). But having dreams means making choices, to pursue them or choose a different dream to pursue. Yarik questions himself, “Had any of the choices he had made been right? To sell their father’s boat. To marry. To have a kid, another....What right did he have to think the choices Dima had made were wrong? What right did he have to choose anything for Zina, for their kids?” (365).

Weil drew each chapter illustration. For example, the chapter “What Else Is There for the Devil to Eat?” looks up at a bedframe with clouds and a bird. My favorite drawing is the first one, with the moon on the lake as the boys row to the island with the church Nizhi in the bottom part of the frame.

Weil is also the author of *The New Valley* (Grove Press, 2009), the winner of the Sue Kaufman Prize for First Fiction.

—Suzanna Anderson

Contributors

Michael Albright has published poems in various journals, including *Stirring*, *Rust + Moth*, *Tar River Poetry*, *Pembroke Magazine*, *Cider Press Review*, *Revolver*, *Moon City Review*, *Pretty Owl*, *Uppagus*, and the forthcoming chapbook *In the Hall of Dead Birds and Viking Tools* (Finishing Line, 2015). He lives on a windy hilltop near Greensburg, PA with his wife Lori and an ever-changing array of children and other animals.

Amy Bassin is a New York based fine arts photographer and co-founder of the international artists collective, *Urban Dialogue*.

Daniel Barbare has recently been published in *Doxa*, *Blood and Thunder*, *The Santa Clara Review*, and *Lost Coast Review*. He attended Greenville Technical College.

Roy Bentley has earned fellowships from the NEA, the Florida Division of Cultural Affairs, and the Ohio Arts Council. He has published four books: *Boy in a Boat* (University of Alabama Press, 1986), *Any One Man* (Bottom Dog Books, 1992), *The Trouble with a Short Horse in Montana* (White Pine, 2006), and his latest, *Starlight Taxi* (Lynx House Press, 2013).

Mark Blickley is a widely published author of fiction, nonfiction, drama and poetry. His most recent book is the story collection *Sacred Misfits* (Red Hen Press, 2004), and his play, *Bed Bugs & Beyond*, is currently running in NYC.

Katarina Boudreaux is a writer, musician, composer, tango dancer, and teacher—a shaper of word, sound, and mind. She recently returned to New Orleans after residing in Texas, Connecticut, and New York. She has been published in *The Bacon Review*, *PANK*, *SNReview*, *Blueline*, *New Jersey Underground*, and *Calliope*. New work is forthcoming in *Corvus* and *YAY!LA*.

Barbara Brooks, author of *The Catbird Sang* (Finishing Line Press, 2004) and *A Shell to Return to the Sea* (Finishing Line Press, 2013) chapbooks, is a member of Poet Fools. Her work has been accepted in *Avalon Literary Review*, *Chagrin River Review*, *The Foundling Review*, *Blue Lake Review*, *Granny Smith Magazine*, *Third Wednesday*, *Shadow Road Quarterly*, *Indigo Mosaic Muddy River Poetry Review*, *Boston Literary Magazine* and online at *Southern Women's Review*, *Poetry Quarterly*, and *Big River Poetry*, among others. She currently lives in North Carolina with her dog.

Queens, NYC native Audrey T. Carroll is an MFA candidate with the Arkansas Writer's Program and graduated with a BA in Creative Writing from Susquehanna University. Her work has been published or is forthcoming in *Fiction International*, *Hermeneutic Chaos*, *Foliate Oak*, *Writing Maps' A3 Review*, *The Cynic Online Magazine*, and others. She can be found at <http://audreytcarrollwrites.weebly.com> and @AudreyTCarroll on Twitter.

Yuan Changming, eight-time Pushcart nominee and author of five chapbooks including *Kingship* (Goldfish Press, 2015), is the world's most widely published poetry creator who speaks Mandarin but writes English. Growing up in a remote Chinese village, Changming began to learn the English alphabet in Shanghai at 19 and published several monographs on translation before moving to Canada as an international student. With a PhD in English from the University of Saskatchewan, Changming currently co-edits *Poetry Pacific* and runs PP Press with Allen Qing Yuan in Vancouver. Since mid-2005, Changming has had poetry appearing in 1029 literary publications across 35 countries, including *Barrow Street*, *Best Canadian Poetry*, *BestNewPoemsOnline*, *Cincinnati Review*, and *Threepenny Review*.

Dylan Debelis is a publisher, poet, performer, chaplain, and minister based out of New York City. A candidate for Unitarian Universalist Ministry, Dylan embodies his faith in praxis through his pastoral care and

social justice activism. In sermons, writings, and worship, Dylan weaves grotesque worlds, loving embraces, and an off-kilter wit to lead the audience or congregation in a very unorthodox prayer.

Christine Degenaars has had work published in several Boston College affiliated magazines, including *Stylus*, *Laughing Medusa*, and *The Medical Humanities Journal of Boston College*. Outside of Boston College, she has had work published in *Hermeneutic Chaos*. She also has work forthcoming in *Plain China: Best Undergraduate Writing* and *Red Paint Hill Publishing*. She has also been the recipient of two Bishop-Kelleher Awards and was an honorable mention for the Bennington Award.

Sally Deskins is an artist and writer focusing on the perspectives of women in art including her own. She has exhibited nationally and published her art and writing internationally. She is founding editor of *Les Femmes Folles* and illustrated the 2014 book, *Intimates and Fools*, with poetry by Laura Madeline Wiseman. sallydeskins.tumblr.com

George Drew is the author of *The View from Jackass Hill* (Texas Review Press, 2011), 2010 winner of the X. J. Kennedy Poetry Prize, Texas Review Press, which also published his chapbook, *Down & Dirty* (Texas Review Press, 2015), and forthcoming *New & Selected, Pastoral Habits*, in 2016. His sixth collection, *Fancy's Orphan*, is forthcoming in 2017 from Tiger Bark Press. He is the winner of the 2014 St. Petersburg Review poetry contest.

James English fiction credits: *Florida Review*, *Harvard Advocate*, *Glimmer Train*, *New Delta Review*, *Sonora Review*, *Nebraska Review*, *Hayden's Ferry Review*, *Writers' Forum*, and *The Tishman Review* (forthcoming) and Honorable Mention, *Glimmer Train* (July 2012, September 2014, and May 2015.)

Richard Fein was a finalist in The 2004 New York Center for Book Arts Chapbook Competition. A chapbook of his poems *The Required Accompanying Cover Letter* (Parallel Press, 2011). He has been published in many web and print journals such as *Cordite*, *Cortland Review*, *Reed*, *Southern Review*, *Roanoke Review*, *Birmingham Poetry Review*, and *Mississippi Review*.

Ruth Foley lives in Massachusetts, where she teaches English at Wheaton College. Her work appears in numerous web and print journals, including *Antiphon*, *The Bellingham Review*, *The Louisville Review*, and *Sou'wester*. She is the author of two chapbooks, *Dear Turquoise* (Dancing Girl Press, 2013) and *Creature Feature* (ELJ Publications, 2015). She serves as Managing Editor for *Cider Press Review*.

Erin Darby Gesell is a writer, personal trainer, triathlete, yogi, and lover of chocolate, dogs, and all things fictional from Omaha, Nebraska. She obtained her Masters of Fine Arts in Creative Writing from Antioch University in 2014. Gesell has written for a few women's blogs and non-fiction magazines including *Nebraska Entrepreneur Magazine* and *Mav Daily Deal*.

Mitchell Grabois has had over eight hundred of his poems and fictions appear in literary magazines in the U.S. and abroad, including *The Magnolia Review*. He has been nominated for the Pushcart Prize for work published in 2012, 2013, and 2014. His novel, *Two-Headed Dog* (CreateSpace, 2013), based on his work as a clinical psychologist in a state hospital, is available for Kindle and Nook, or as a print edition. He lives in Denver.

William A. Greenfield began writing poetry in college, and thanks his daughter for giving him the spark to start writing again. His poems have appeared in *The Front Porch Review*, *The Storyteller Magazine*, *The East Coast Literary Review*, *Down in the Dirt Magazine*, and other publications. He resides in the Catskill Mountains of New York with his wife, son, and a Springer Spaniel.

Zebulon Huset teaches a community creative writing class in San Diego. His writing has recently appeared (or is forthcoming) in *The Southern Review*, *The New York Quarterly*, *The North American Review*, *Harpur Palate*, *The Cape Rock*, *Pinyon Review* and *The Roanoke Review* among others. He was once nominated for a Pushcart Prize. He also publishes a writing prompt blog (Notebooking Daily) posting new writing exercises every day at 12:01am in a variety of categories.

James Croal Jackson lives for art, adventure, whiskey, and music. His poems have recently appeared or are forthcoming in *The Bitter Oleander*, *Glassworks*, and *LEVELER*. He was born in Akron, Ohio, but currently lives in Los Angeles. Find more of his work at jimjakk.com.

Seth Jani originates from rural Maine but currently resides in Seattle, WA. He is the founder of Seven Circle Press (www.sevencirclepress.com) and his own work has been published widely in such journals as *The Foundling Review*, *East Coast Literary Review*, *Big River Poetry Review* and *Hobo Camp Review*. More about him and his work can be found at www.sethjani.com.

Janne Karlsson ... is he that over-productive Swedish artist who draws that surreal and edgy stuff, who is constantly going on about people having to buy all his books and crap at Amazon or Epic Rites Press, and tries to lure good and honest people into his poorly updated website www.svenskapache.se? Because if that's him, I will have nothing of it.

Robert S. King, a native Georgian, now lives in Lexington, Kentucky. His poems appear in hundreds of magazines, including *California Quarterly*, *Chariton Review*, *Hollins Critic*, *Kenyon Review*, *Main Street Rag*, *Midwest Quarterly*, *Southern Poetry Review*, and *Atlanta Review*. He has published eight poetry collections, most recently *Diary of the Last Person on Earth* (Sybaritic Press, 2014) and *Developing a Photograph of God* (Glass Lyre Press, 2014). Robert's work has been nominated for

Pushcart and Best of Net awards. He is editor of *Kentucky Review* (www.kentuckyreview.org).

Monique Kluczykowski was born in Germany, educated in Texas and Kentucky, and currently teaches at the University of North Georgia. Her most recent poems have appeared in *The Woven Word*, *The Stonepile Writers' Anthology, Vol. III.*, *Third Wednesday*, and *StepAway Magazine*.

Lavana Kray is from Iasi, Romania. She is passionate about writing and photography. The nature and the events of her life are topics of inspiration. Her work has been published in: *Haiku Canada Review*, *Asahi Shimbun*, *The Mainichi*, *World Haiku Association*, *Daily Haiga*, *Heron's Nest*, *Frogpond*, *Eucalypt*, *Acorn*, *Ardea*, *Ginyu*, *Presence*, *La Revue du Tanka francophone*, and others. She was been chosen for Haiku Euro Top 100-edition 2014. This is her blog: <http://photohaikuforyou.blogspot.ro>

Thom Kunz received his MFA in fiction from the University of North Carolina at Wilmington where he studied under Allan Gurganus, Rebecca Lee, and other inspiring talents. His recent fiction is forthcoming in *Twisted Vine*. He has also appeared in *Other Voices*, *Ellipsis*, and *Slow Trains*, as well as essays for the *AWP Writer's Chronicle*. He currently lives in Wilmington, NC, with his muse Olivia and a memory-challenged cat named Roxy.

Charlene Langfur is an organic gardener, a southern Californian, a Syracuse University Graduate Writing Fellowship holder and my writing has appeared in *The Stone Canoe*, *Literal Latte*, *The Adirondack Review*, *The Hampden Sydney Poetry Review*, most recently in *Cold Mountain Review*, *Blueline*, *Earth's Daughters*, an essay in *Stone Voices*, and forthcoming, poems in *Poetry East* and the *Spoon River Anthology*.

Christine M. Lasek is a Visiting Instructor at the University of South Florida, where she teaches creative and technical writing. She also serves as the assistant to the Creative Writing Program Director. Her fiction and

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Andrew Lindquist studied 2D-Studies (Drawing) at Bowling Green State University. Interests include woodworking, painting, and digital art.

Taidgh Lynch is a poet and an artist from Ireland. He enjoys comics and making mail art. He blogs at: ragingplanetfire.blogspot.com.

Carolyn Martin is blissfully retired in Clackamas, OR, where she gardens, writes and plays with creative friends. Her second poetry collection, *The Way a Woman Knows*, was released in 2015 by The Poetry Box (www.thewayawomanknows.com). Since her only poem written in high school was red-penciled as “extremely maudlin,” she is still amazed she continues to write.

Brendan McDonnell lives in Camp Hill, Pennsylvania. His stories have appeared in *The Monarch Review*, *Storm Cellar*, *The Mulberry Fork Review*, *The Bookends Review*, *The Griffin*, *Crack The Spine*, *Foliage Oak*, and *Beginnings*.

Michael P. McManus has published poems and short stories in numerous publications. These include *Louisiana Literature*, *Texas Review*, *Atlanta Review*, *Rattle*, *Prism International*, *The MacGuffin*, *Pennsylvania Review*, *The Dublin Quarterly*, *Texas Review*, *Burnside Review*, and *O-Dark-Thirty*, among others. He is the recipient of an Artist Fellowship Award from the Louisiana Division of the Arts. His poetry has received Pushcart Prize nominations as well as *The Virginia Award* and *The Oceans Prize*.

Brian McRoberts first began studying photography while attending Bowling Green State University while he worked as an intern for student publications. After college he worked with a local artist

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Todd Mercer's digital chapbook, *Life-wish Maintenance* appeared at Right Hand Pointing in 2015. Mercer won two Kent County Dyer-Ives Prizes, a Palm Beach Poetry Festival Prize, the William J. Shaw Prize for Poetry and the first Woodstock Writers Festival's Flash Fiction contest. Mercer moderates the Writers Squared Series at the Great Lakes Commonwealth of Letters. Mercer's poetry and fiction appear in journals such as: *Apocrypha and Abstractions*, *The Camel Saloon*, *Camroc Press Review*, *Cheap Pop*, *Dunes Review*, *East Coast Literary Review*, *Eunoia Review*, *Midwestern Gothic*, *Right Hand Pointing*, *River Lit*, *Spartan* and **82 Review*.

Abigail Parlier is a student at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, lover of words, and aspiring humanitarian.

Michael Passafiume is a Brooklyn, NY-based writer whose work has appeared or is forthcoming in *The Alembic*, *The Blue Hour Magazine*, *Dirty Chai*, *Drunk Monkeys*, *KNOCK Magazine*, *The Louisville Review*, *Meat for Tea*, *Minetta Review*, *Poetry Quarterly*, *SLAB* and *The Subterranean Quarterly*, among others. His chapbook, *Archipelagos*, will be published by Blue Hour Press in Spring 2015. Michael was co-poetry editor (2012-2014) at *Lunch Ticket*, a literary journal from the MFA community at Antioch University Los Angeles.

Richard King Perkins II is a state-sponsored advocate for residents in long-term care facilities. He lives in Crystal Lake, IL, with his wife, Vickie, and daughter, Sage. He is a three-time Pushcart nominee and a Best of the Net nominee whose work has appeared in hundreds of publications including *The Louisiana Review*, *Bluestem*, *Emrys Journal*, *Sierra Nevada Review*, *Roanoke Review*, *The Red Cedar Review*, and *The William and Mary Review*. He has poems forthcoming in *Sobotka Literary Magazine*, *The Alembic*, *Old Red Kimono*, and *Milkfist*. He was a recent

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Maria Picone is a writer, painter, and photographer who lives in Boulder, Colorado. She studies fiction writing at Goddard College. She loves to volunteer and travel, most recently having done both in a rural village in Cambodia. Her website is mariaspicone.com, or you can follow her on Twitter @mspicone.

Frederick Pollack is the author of two book-length narrative poems, *The Adventure* and *Happiness*, both published by Story Line Press. A collection of shorter poems, *A Poverty of Words*, forthcoming in January 2015 from Prolific Press. Has appeared in *Hudson Review*, *Salmagundi*, *Poetry Salzburg Review*, *Die Gazette* (Munich), *The Fish Anthology* (Ireland), *Representations*, *Magma* (UK), *Iota* (UK), *Bateau*, *Main Street Rag*, *Fulcrum*, etc. Online, poems have appeared in *Big Bridge*, *Hamilton Stone Review*, *Diagram*, *BlazeVox*, *The New Hampshire Review*, *Mudlark*, *Occupoetry*, *Faircloth Review*, *Triggerfish*, etc. Adjunct professor creative writing George Washington University.

Andersen Reece is a writer and photo hobbyist who discovered the magic of photographs through the lens of a Brownie Box Camera. She sometimes misses the gritty feel of the old photo albums, their black photo corners on black pages, but enjoys creating digital photo books for her family and friends.

Jessica Robinson is a young Canadian writer based in “The City Above Toronto,” who spends her time watching people and trying to do them justice on paper. She has had poetry published with *Soliloquies*, *Belleville Park Pages*, and *Room Magazine*, among others, and is currently a contributor for *The Lambda*, the Laurentian University newspaper. You can find her on Twitter @hey_jeska.

Allison Rosh received her Bachelor of Fine Arts from Bowling Green State University. Her work is an exploration of skin and the body through abstraction, mimicry, and layers of color. She is interested in science, nature, and dance. Currently she is pursuing her Master of Fine Arts with a focus in printmaking at the University of Iowa.

Mark Antony Rossi's poetry, criticism, fiction and photography have appeared in *The Antigoni Review*, *Another Chicago Review*, *Bareback Magazine*, *Black Heart Review*, and *Collages & Bricolages*. His most recent play *Eye of the Needle* was produced by Grin Theatre, Liverpool, England and its YouTube recording is available at <http://markantonyrossi.jigsy.com>

Terry Savoie has published more than three hundred poems in the past three decades. These include *Poetry*, *The American Poetry Review*, *Ploughshares*, *Black Warrior Review*, *The Iowa Review*, *Tar River Poetry*, and *America*. He attended the Iowa Writing Program in the late '70s and is now retired from teaching and living in Coralville, Iowa.

Domenic Scopa is an MFA candidate at Vermont College of Fine Arts, where he studies poetry and translation. He is a two-time Pushcart Prize Nominee and the recipient of the 2014 Robert K. Johnson Poetry Prize.

Ruth E. Towne is an emerging author from Southern Maine. The Literary Yard recently featured her piece "Four Passages" on their website, and Blotterature published her short "This Is More Than Homesickness" in their Winter 2015 issue. She currently studies Professional Writing and Information Design but loves creative writing. When she is not working, she loves to visit her family's camp and explore the New England woods.

Bill Vernon served in the United States Marine Corps, studied English literature, and then taught it. Writing is his therapy, along with exercising outdoors and doing international folkdances. His poems, stories and

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Terri Hadley Ward has a B.A. in Creative Writing from Eckerd College, and recently completed her first poetry chapbook, *Songs of the Wild She*. She gains creative inspiration from being in nature, and her poems have appeared in *The Greensilk Journal*, *The MOON magazine*, and *When Women Waken*. In addition to writing poetry, she nourishes her soul through yoga, meditation, painting, gardening, and hiking.

Bill Wolak is a poet, photographer, and collage artist. He has just published his twelfth book of poetry entitled *Love Opens the Hands* with Nirala Press. Recently, he was a featured poet at The Hyderabad Literary Festival. Wolak teaches Creative Writing at William Paterson University in New Jersey.