

The Magnolia Review
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Editor-in-Chief and Founder: Suzanna Anderson

Welcome to the eighth issue of The Magnolia Review! We publish art, photography, poetry, comics, creative nonfiction, flash fiction, experimental work, 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 The Magnolia Review publishes previously unpublished work.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 online on January 15 and July 15.

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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Morning Swim Camping

Sitting alone in the neat row of white upright recliners,
I sip my camp coffee and watch my young son climb

up the Rockit Aquaglide, one of those giant inflatables
held fast in the middle of the activity pond.

Hand over hand, knees bent and then straightened, he hangs from the rungs,
his grunts echoing clear to my ears from far across the quiet water.

He slowly makes his way to the top, where he is free to stand once again,
alone to decide when he'll dive back in from his conquest, I'd imagine.

But before he does, he turns to the shore, to me alone,
flexing his 10 year old biceps and allowing a whoop to escape from his throat
as if assuring God and I that—no matter the years or vicissitudes lying in wait—
this memory will be no more, or less, sacred than all the others.

Chuck Thompson



Heated by sand each word
gathers up another
one teaspoon at a time

–your fever can't be found
though the address was written
from salt and glass–you don't see

the envelope: the bottle
crowding you from inside
has to be taken by mouth

as if a lull made any difference
without the pieces to settle down
and already your throat tastes bitter.

Geraniums 2

I love the contrast of white
set against rich green leaves
spread out like fans,
the petals in smiling clusters
growing in ready-made bouquets
proudly bursting from the stems.

The leaves are soft, soft
like the inside of your thigh
when I brush it with my lips, when my hand
caresses it all the way down to your ankles.

Sometimes I think I want to plant your feet
in the soil, and water you
so you soak up
nutrients.

Or maybe I could grow
another one of you.
Maybe you would sprout
a seedling, a leaf—
maybe I'd finally cut you back enough
(down to your roots)
so you would have no choice
but to bloom.

As you lie there with me
and I fall asleep, a tendril
curled against your arm,
I dream of a whole row
of rich, terra-cotta flowerpots
holding seedlings lovingly
snipped from your feet.

Sarah A. Etlinger

Dark, and Darker

I dream of the dark, and night, nightly,
how each disappears so, was ever here,
ever in cold white winter when I wake
before dawn, before the sky evens out
over the Organs, and pink and blue hues
separate from mountain mist before they melt
into ether, and even before dark, and night,
depart without my knowing, without day
being startled into being just once more,
just once more into invisible morning light,
withholding its footprint from the blue air,
from dreams of lost snowy fields,
restive spring buds.

The First Attempt

The baby gorilla lies on the table
tiny, furry arms spread like an angel's. so much
was supposed to happen here that won't.

in the other room, the new mother chews thoughtfully
on an orange, spitting the seeds out loudly
against the far wall, she does not like seeds. before her

is a tower of offerings: a cluster of small, bruised bananas
oranges, kiwis, sliced apples with the cores removed
all brought by caretakers whose hearts have been broken.

Holly Day

Midwives

We trust the smart phone will stir us to life—
burrowed in knapsacks, dozing on nightstands,
thin in stitched pockets of faded tight jeans,
—a call from our sister, home from the birth,
or Uber confirmation awaiting your click.

How proud the team in lab coats and funds
must have been when the prototype first blinked awake,
thin light to thin light, too quick for these eyes,
just as they planned, just as they hoped,
now released from the basins and towels and screams.

Chuck Thompson

Beware, The Handyman Cometh

So good to have my handyman come and take care of all the projects
I'd accrued for him in the past year since he was last at my house.
He's a year older now, and well, things were different.

He was more Attila the Hun than Danny the Handyman. Once he
had his power washer going he was like a whirling dervish, attacking
the outside of my house in a frenzied dance, shredding any plants that
happened to be close, spraying up fresh dirt on the surface he'd just cleaned
of the old dirt, and the number he did on my windows, well, I had to call
professional window cleaners the next day just so I could see out of them.

They came, did their best, but their ladder was always in the wrong place,
they kept dropping tools on my poor long-suffering plants, along with
ash from the cigar the leader was smoking as he wheezed his way up
and down the ladder, complaining all the while about how dirty my
windows were. Well... yes.

And while we're at it, I'm going to mention here my neighbor, who has beautiful roses growing in his front garden along the street. But when it's time to prune them in the spring, he lunges at them with his chainsaw. I hear their shrieks from three doors down. Every spring I cringe in expectation of the Chainsaw Rose Massacre.

I guess it's the age-old tale of men and their toys. When they age and their own tool doesn't function so well any longer, they compensate with power tools, which like the sorcerer's diabolical apprentice possess them with a mind of their own, and drive them on, and on, the men powerless to control them, frenzied in their eternal need for affirmation of their virility.

That Which More Often Than Not is Left Unsaid

Tre — short for Trevigne — turned out to be way more fun than I expected.

Monday morning rush hour, the first morning we rode together, hurtling down a Southern California freeway, locked in commute-struggle with a couple dozen thousand others, three lanes teeming with cars and trucks, a shiny undulating necklace draped across brown baked rolling hills, everyone doing eighty with three car-lengths between.

Which accounted for my tense forehead and sweaty palms. It's what you do twice a day in order to have the sort of life that interests and rewards you and is also good for raising kids. One gets used to it.

Tre nodded at a white Toyota 4Runner within scant feet of the car ahead, flashing its headlights. "Look at that asshole. What a tailgating creep, as if he expects the guy in front to move over, which he couldn't even if he wanted to."

As we neared the interchange, traffic slowed and tightened. When we pulled alongside, Tre checked him out: "Blue shirt, tie, Hitler mustache. I'd say he's a fascist and a proctologist, an obsessive who wants to climb up everyone's ass."

I'd met Tre the Saturday before, at a backyard get-together organized by the Homeowner's Association Welcoming Committee. I'd just said hello to her when a friend of mine named Wally, who managed an Ace Hardware store, asked her what she did.

Tre was tall, six-one or so. She gazed down at Wally's balding head for an uneasy amount of time, then said, "Research into causal opacity."

His face wrinkled.

"The invisibility of causes," she added.

She gave him a narrow-eyed stare, the way I'd seen guys in the lab examine a thin layer chromatogram when they're figuring out retention times.

She went on, "The incremental development of ideas and the concomitant creation of definitive theory."

"I think Sylvia is waving at me," Wally said.

"You scared him off," I said to Wally's retreating back. "What was that you said?"

"Just a bunch of shit I talk when I don't like someone."

"You don't like Wally? He's okay. His kids play with my kids. We watch Monday Night Football in his garage. He springs for pizza."

"Don't trust him, that's all."

A week later word went around that Wally was leaving his wife and two boys. Talk was he had a girlfriend on the side. I wondered if Tre had picked up on something about Wally none of the rest of us noticed, some nanoscale trace of expiring retention. Did Tre, or anyone for that matter, have that capacity for perception?

I never got around to asking her about it.

A couple months before, Tre and her husband, Wes, a highway patrolman, had rented a condo two blocks from Linda and me and the kids.

When I told her I worked in Technology Park, she said, "Hey, me too. We should ride together."

She gave me her card. Trevigne Tibett, PhD. "Call me Tre. Most people do."

She was tall, rangy, dark hair pulled back in a ponytail. She wore a pink cardigan sweater and white pleated skirt. They didn't match, but on the other hand they didn't exactly not match, either. She was in her late twenties or so, younger than my thirty-five, and attractive in the way I've noticed smart women often are. Her face was open and alive.

I don't know why we have to categorize women the way we do. Or rather I do know, the genetic imperative is dominant, after all, but then there's all of today's cultural dissonance.

Anyway, with that patina of perception and awareness, she looked, to sum it up, interesting. So, of course she was someone I wanted to talk to.

As I chatted with Tre, my wife, hovering at the potato salad, gave me a wink. We do that. Ever since we met in grad school, Linda and I have been a pair bond, so that's it for us. Actually, there's a neurochemical basis for our sort of attachment, it's been described by Kaplan, Lancaster and Gangestad, if you're interested. Sooner or later someone will get around to interrogating samples at the molecular level and figure the whole thing out. In the meantime, Linda understands all too well my predilection for the dissimilar, the unlike, the disparate, which is both how I am, and what I've ended up doing for a living, so she's okay with it when I run across a woman I like talking to.

From the first Monday morning driving together, Tre called me Driver.

Her morning greeting: "Hey, Driver, how they hangin'?"

She'd grown up with three older brothers, and she had a mouth like a long-haul trucker—a long-haul trucker who was analyzing signal processing for speech recognition.

"Who the hell are you doing that for?"

"NDA."

It was her reply to all questions beyond the

most superficial: non-disclosure agreement.

"If I told you who we were doing it for, you'd start to wonder why they were looking into it, and that's exactly what they don't want—some autistic-spectrum geek like you wondering, because sooner or later you'd come up with what you thought their edge might be, and they don't want any bastards like you thinking about their edge."

We couldn't talk work, but we talked everything else. This was back when Obama was running for re-election against Mitt Romney.

"Here's the question," she said on one of the days we discussed politics, "Do we go for Plastic Man, or will we be staggering around in a daze four years from now wondering who is John Gault? Some fuckin' choice."

We had no idea, back then, the bizarre twist the future of politics had in store.

We'd been riding together for about six months when the morning came that she didn't have anything to say.

After five minutes I asked, "Are you just going to just sit there? I might fall asleep at the wheel."

I felt her look over. "I think we should talk about having sex."

It had been there. In addition to being damn smart and a lot of fun, I couldn't help seeing her on a physical level. I mean, I'm a guy with everything that implies going on.

"In general," I said, "or each other?"

"You and me," she said. "Us. I think we should talk about doing it."

My stomach flipped.

Linda and I had been together for eleven years, married for eight, and all that time I'd been out in the world, at the office every day, to the East Coast a few times a year, conferences

and meetings, trips to Taipei, Hong Kong, Guangzhou. You ran across women you liked, women who kicked you hard in the amygdala, and a few women who let you know it was a possibility despite the wedding rings. The same thing always stopped me. I pictured how I would feel when I got home and looked into my wife's eyes when she asked, "How was your trip?" I pictured the total trust on my son's face in a snapshot on my desk. He was four, carrying my birthday cake in from the kitchen, the candlelight illuminating his face like a cherub in one of those paintings in the Uffizi.

For me it was nothing principled, high-minded or honorable. I didn't have religion. It was simple: I knew I didn't want to feel the way I knew I would feel, and I knew I would feel that way for a long time, probably forever.

"I'm not really serious," she said.

"You're not?"

"Of course not. Jesus. My husband carries a gun for a living, we'd both be dead. But just between the two of us, what if we did do it. What would you like to do most?"

I finessed it. Even if we were only talking, it didn't feel okay. Finally I gave up a couple things. "Just hypotheticals," I said.

"Of course, just hypotheticals. Well here's what I'd like, hypothetically."

She proceeded to tell me in the plainest possible terms using the crudest most direct language exactly how she wanted to be fucked—not made love to, "none of that romantic shit," she made clear, "I'm talking about good old-fashioned multi-positional pleasure fucking"—and what she'd like to do to me as I did those things to her—all hypothetically of course.

When we got to her building, she laughed as she got out. "That was really fun, Driver. Congrats, you stayed awake the whole time."

Awake? I was vibrating.

When I picked her up that night she started

in again. "Hey, if we worked for the same company, know what we could do? Say we're in a meeting in some conference room, and our chairs are close together..." She started with wandering hands under the table and went on to elaborate trysts in the supply room—"There's a box of rubber bands on a shelf, those wide ones"—I never would have thought of using rubber bands that way. Then she went on to the kitchenette, bananas, packets of Sweet'N Low, crackers, peanut butter, candy bars melted in the microwave—it was a very well-stocked kitchen where she worked.

When I got home Linda was at the kitchen sink. I caught her from behind.

She used our old line: "Is that a banana in your pocket or are you in love?"

"It's not a banana," I said. "Where are the kids?"

Linda called Mackenzie's mom, Trisha, to make sure our kids stayed there another hour, "Feed them a snack or something," she said. I could hear Trisha laughing on the other end.

A half-hour later we rolled apart and Linda said, "It's times like this I wish I smoked."

It was something we read or saw in a movie back when we started together: the three best things in the world: a drink before and a cigarette afterwards.

"Okay," Linda said, sliding an arm across my chest, "it was great and all, but you need to tell me what's going on."

I told her about the conversation with Tre, all the details, the whole thing. When I finished she was quiet for a minute.

Then, "It was all talk? No touching?"

"Not so much as a fingernail," I assured her. "So, are you mad?"

"Not really," she admitted. "Not if it's just talk and doesn't go anywhere."

“It won’t,” I said. “It won’t go anywhere.”

A playful tone came into her voice. She took hold of me in a certain way.

“And I get the benefit of it?” she said.

“You get all the benefit of it.”

“Starting tonight?”

“Especially starting tonight.”

If you’ve never thought much about it, here’s something that may surprise you: sooner or later even sex talk can run thin. It’s not like the infinite variations possible with something like, say, sonata form in the hands of someone like, say, Bach.

The second week of talking about screwing we began to invent scenarios for doing it as we drove in-traffic at-speed. She would straddle me, but the question was, facing me or facing forward, and who would handle the steering wheel? And where would legs go? Tre posited the reaction of other drivers.

“Toyota 4Runner Tailgate Asshole would hang on our butt,” she said, “then come alongside to see if what he thought he saw was really going on. Then he would try and get behind us again because he wouldn’t be able to help himself, but by this time somebody else would be back there, eyes bugging out, and they wouldn’t let him in. They’d bump fenders, it would be like one of those chases in *The Fast and the Furious*.”

“How big do you think the accident would be?”

“Oh, shit, who knows? It would be colossal. The way these fuckers drive? Maybe a hundred-car pileup. Survivors would keep their lips

buttoned, no one would know anything. Nobody wants to be responsible for being a sleazy voyeur and making a bunch of people die.”

Not long after that a Long Island hedge fund offered to triple her salary, and Tre and her husband moved east. I puzzled over that for quite a while: a hedge fund and voice recognition? And that much money?

We still exchange Christmas cards. This year, as usual, she added a note: “Hey Driver, keep it in the high dollar lane.”

“Tre was a strange one,” my wife says each year when the card arrives.

Strange and puzzling.

Tre was gone, but she left a legacy. From time to time when we’re at a party or out with friends, and the conversation is less than scintillating, Linda will slip up beside me and whisper an explicit pornographic suggestion in my ear.

So now we’ve got a reputation: we’re the couple that leaves early. Our friends are too nice to say it, but I can tell they think we’ve turned into a stodgy old couple that can’t stay out past ten-thirty or eleven.

Which brings up another of the things I never got around to asking Tre: was that the outcome she intended when she started the sex conversation? Did her mind work like that?

If I’d asked, and if the answer was a smile, and if it wasn’t for the Long Island hedge fund butting in, I’d probably have hired her.

William Spencer

Valentine for Sara Rosenblum

Fuck fake corporate holidays–

ok, I said it.

Drained

our hearts fighting capitalism

but the system says February 14

is the best day to say you love

your person, to shower them

in candy and chocolate until

they can taste no more sweet.

This is

our first Valentine and I miss you

terribly in these long hours

we spend at places we're paid

to spend our lives in to survive

and what else would we spend

on *but* sweets?

In the past,

I've wanted to take a baseball bat to

Valentine Day's piñata and smash

out all its greed–

this year, though,

you are my Valentine, and every day

I spend with you already I want to bury you

in a mountain of CVS candy and chocolate,

hold you close to me and whisper

I love you, I love you, I love you–

ok, today's a good excuse.

James Croal Jackson

Dream Wind

The place where we ache to go again.

-Don Draper

It begins by dreaming itself into form, ripple and wave,
soft swell and breaker, whatever source it springs from,
desolate lover's plaint, shimmery scorched alluvial bed,
gnarly surfer Jersey shore pipeline, Margate to Manahatta,
so small a thing this summer wind shrouding hollyhock mallow,
shedding willow fuzz abroad, passing politely, first, as mist
over bottomland poplar and sycamore, upland stone-sere conifer,
ascending as thick fog to meet mountain peak and crest
in dense, blind florets as unclear as life itself, we lumpen,
motely, spirit-dreaming proles waiting to bliss highs and lows
of living in the *Not Knowing*, waiting to *Only Connect!* be taken
to a place on every summer breath *where we know we are loved*,
where, when night turns new and starlit, all else just fine dust filaments.

GTimothy Gordon

Pharmacy Music

Scent, they say,
infiltrates the mind
like carbon dioxide,
coaxing memory
from its mid-brain hammock.
Yet Taylor Dayne's
Tell it to My Heart
rings my temporal lobe
like a brass dinner bell,
conjuring
the interior
of a Chevy Nova
enveloped
in second-hand smoke,
its passenger's seat
and radio privileges
denied
by a sister with
three years' seniority
three additional inches
of height
and an insatiable fetish
for karaoke.

Adam Durso

Fragments

I'm a fool and there's no
getting back all the things I have lost. No use crying
for the little pieces, all the bits that
made up what I once was, a
lie destined to disintegrate

under scrutiny. Somewhere
out there is a man
rewriting my history

and this time, he's promised
to make me interesting. Not even
oncoming traffic stops for me now, I
have grown so invisible
nondescript, destined

to be forgotten. My
new identity will belong to
someone more dynamic
headline-grabbing, genius, but for now I must sit
patient with the person I
am now. Even a

fool can learn to love
peace of mind
the quiet peace of real things
the pace of reality. Oh,
I am.

Holly Day

I Could Bake a Cherry Pie

“She was escorted off the stage.” A neat picture. Did she create a disruption during a performance? Was she a member of the audience who jumped up to the stage during a scene? Or perhaps she was, like me, escorted out of the building, out of the drama called the work life. I had an escort after they took away my company credit card and confiscated my computer. The management provided a cardboard box for my few possessions. I didn’t even get to make a teary-eyed speech to thank my co-workers for whatever gift they were going to give me, or time to steal a box of staples or paper clips, not that paper was used much in the office any more.

The reason I was let go? You jest. They don’t have to give you a reason. Ever hear of firing at will? It’s the law. They can do whatever they please even if you’ve been working there for years. If they’re humane they call you into the manager’s office on a Friday afternoon or the day before Christmas and congratulate you for being part of their restructuring plan which includes their pain at having to let you go. That’s what happened to me.

I had a friend whose job it was to fire people, for whatever reason – incompetence, budget cuts, reorganization. How he suffered. He took the fire out to lunch and with tears expressed his grief at having to let the employee go. Drove his wife crazy when he came home and wept and drank every time he had to perform this onerous duty, part of his job after all as the head of what used to be called Personnel and is now the Human Capital Division.

Mr. Human Capital handed me a sheaf of papers which represented the terms of my “separation.” It contained my severance package, a somewhat tarnished golden parachute and the confidentiality agreement. I would receive a call in a few days with further information. But meantime here was the name and address of the outplacement firm that would ease my transition.

The security people materialized out of nowhere. The company had considerably paid the car service to take me home so I would be spared the ignominy of having to stand on the street in the rain trying to hail a cab while the contents of my box got soaked.

I suspect that they wanted me out so they could replace me with the boss’s girlfriend who happens to be twenty-five years younger than he is and has zero experience. Her salary will be much higher than mine ever was.

Here’s how my consultation with the outplacement coach went. First, she was unbearably cheerful. Her office looked like a kindergarten class with bright splotches of color everywhere and plastic blocks spelling out inspirational messages.

“Understand that you are overqualified for most positions that will come your way,” she said continuing our conversation about job options. But you probably wouldn’t want to work as a sales associate, say, at a place like Abercrombie unless you had a temporary liquidity problem. The store has strobe lights, and slanted floors. The music is deafening. Just what the kids love. But it’s not for people your age.”

I felt like a fossil. “Are you familiar with Anthony Trollope’s book, *The Fixed Period*?” I asked.

“Anthony who?”

“Trollope, as in whore. It’s about a country where people aren’t allowed to live beyond a certain age.”

She smiled wanly, cracking the patina at the corner of her eyes.

Why was I doing this? The poor woman was trying to help me. Could be that one of the reasons I lost my job was that people found me snobbish. Maybe it wasn’t just age.

Today, Monday, bliss. Slept late. Fed cats early, to their great surprise. Time to make a plan. Figure out if I really have to look for work; maybe I can manage if I’m careful. Didn’t I want to travel to Tanzania to see wild animals? I can do that at the zoo. Always wanted to paint or audit a class in philosophy at Columbia. Dirt cheap for older students and you don’t have to take exams. Just keep your mouth shut so the instructor can devote the session to the kids, one hundred percent. Register now for a class. No, not now, it’s the middle of a semester. Mark calendar with registration date.

Which calendar? The one on my desk with reproductions of Sargent women or the one in my smartphone or on my laptop? What, it’s 11:00 a.m. already? Where did the morning go? Almost time for lunch. I should get out of my pajamas.

But first, log into my accounts. Hello, NSA. Do you want to know what I had for breakfast? Send it up into your metadata cloud, syrup on the side. Who are these “friends”? Time to update my profile. But I don’t want people to know I’m suddenly jobless. Let people wonder about me.

Who should I look up? Ex husband, long lost son, best friend from high school? She’s not on Facebook. That’s a surprise. She was always so outgoing. You knew everything about her even then. People Finder tells me there is one person with that name living in Manhattan. Connected to man’s name. Spouse? Further digging reveals that there was a memorial service for the husband two years ago at the Park Avenue church just a short crosstown ride away from me. Didn’t I meet him once before they were married? A double date as I recall. Mine not a success, hers evidently was. So she’s a widow. If I had known, I would have gone to the memorial. Awkward to send a condolence note so late. Now I remember that we had a falling out. Something silly, like a mixup about time.

First phone call of the day. Robocall inviting me to switch my internet service. Must unsubscribe from this plague. Make a to-do list. Should I do it on paper or on my computer? I want to be ecologically correct. What about volunteer work? All the articles talk about how rewarding it is. Work with a literacy program for new immigrants, help in a nursing home, play tiddly winks with drooling diapered old folks of which I may be one eventually. Be an usher at the local theater/movie house and get free tickets for selected--that’s the operative word--selected performances? Nothing I’d be interested in probably, like an all-lute concert or the latest rap stars under 20. I am getting hungry but noon is too early for lunch. It leaves the whole rest of the afternoon.

Surprise phone call from my ex-boss ostensibly to see how I’m doing, and have I been to outplacement. His real reason? Would I train my replacement, Delicia (*Delicia!*) just as a favor to him? The bravest thing I’ve ever done was to say no, sorry. Made up a story about leaving for a long vacation in the Greater Antilles or someplace like that. I did

make the mistake of saying Delicia could call me if she had any questions.

My son hasn't called in three months because he's trekking in Nepal and other exotic places in search of his true self. I told him where his true self was: here in Manhattan, or OK, Brooklyn, a subway ride away from me. In China they've passed a law requiring young people to look after their aging parents. This doesn't mean sending text messages, I told him. He pointed out that we were not in China though his apartment borders Chinatown and God knows who's living in it now in an illegal sublet for which my son is liable.

What a great picture of him. He's a little older now, losing some hair which I untactfully pointed out when he came up to say goodbye before his trip. His classy website tells me that he's a music entrepreneur. If there was money in it, why would I be supporting him? Because I'm a sucker, that's why. His father gives him zilch.

I'll save my ex for after lunch. Why spoil my appetite? Weather looks good. I'll take a walk before lunch and think about joining the gym that's on my route. That will give me a destination. It will be strange to be outdoors in the neighborhood on a Monday afternoon. Just remembered: cat needs shots. Maybe stop in at the vets and make an appointment. This will be a very productive walk.

Took longer than I thought. Stopped in to check the designer thrift shop. What a luxury to be able to do that on a weekday. Freedom. It takes a while to get used to. Maybe I should look for a support group for the newly-unemployed. Or I could get religion and join the Episcopal church that I see from my windows. Dad was a deacon in Ohio but then we moved and there were no more crosses in the house. Hmm, I wonder how and why he suddenly lost his faith.

How would I possibly find out? There's a project for me.

Eat lunch standing up. Goes against all my social principles. Drink soup directly out of the pot. Just think, I could even (gasp!) allow myself to sit and read for pleasure in the middle of the day.

Laura Tremayne! Still alive. The bitch. And executive director of Children's Hope Association. That's a laugh. She tormented me for years in junior high school, before the term bullying was a household word. Wouldn't she be surprised to hear from me. She'll know right away who I am even if she's forgotten my name. All I have to do is mention the words "nail polish." I'd like to see her blanch as I say it. Wait a minute—there's another Laura Tremayne. This one makes jewelry which isn't half bad. No picture of either Laura. Or is it this one: Laura Tremain? No info about her except that she appears to be related to a Rose Tremain. The author? Here's Dirk Tremayne. Now that's confusing. OK time for a coffee break, just like at work. Wonder if they're all hanging around the microwave at the office now. Do they miss me, are they talking about me?

Do my neighbors know I'm at home? I hardly know them. My own fault for being so standoffish, never saying hello in the elevator. I'll pet a dog once in a while but that's about it. Suppose I fall off a ladder while screwing in a light bulb on the ceiling fixture. Would anyone hear me? Shouldn't neighbors be checking on one another like they used to do in Ohio? I could be lying here for days and who would know it? You think my son would worry? I don't even know where he is at this moment. I could call or text or email but I have my pride. And why should I scare him? He might be exasperated if I leave a message saying I just want to hear his voice. It occurs to me that I have to draw up a healthcare proxy and living will. Suppose I do fall

off a ladder in the next couple of days? That broken lightbulb is driving me crazy.

Remember that today is the first day of the rest of your life. What it means is that I no longer have to worry about looking “professional.” Celebrate grey hair. Goodbye high heels except if I happen to go on a date, something I hardly had the time for before. My work was my life. I was good at it. Diplomatic, skilled in managing disparate constituencies as they like to call them. Never lost my cool, negotiated with government agencies and private donors . . . Hey, this feels like a resume. I am not-- repeat-- *not* looking for a new job. But these skills took me years to cultivate. And now I’m sitting here in a mangy sweat shirt looking up old acquaintances and checking out some shopping sites, and trying to avoid the temptation to play FreeCell or Minesweeper.

Another robocall, suggesting that my credit rating needs adjusting. I missed all these annoyances when I was working. Structure--that’s what I had. My hands are sweating. Is this a mild panic attack? Time certainly marches on and what did I accomplish today? I could bake a cherry pie. The recipe that I cut out of the *Times* is turning yellow. How dumb to have cut it out of the paper. I can get any recipe I want online.

Maybe one of my former colleagues will have lunch with me, or am I now a nonperson as so often happens when people are “separated” from their companies, their names erased from all records, airbrushed from photos of official functions, Soviet style?

Am I entitled to unemployment insurance? What should I do about health benefits? I can’t read the document they gave me. It’s in tiny type and in legalese. I might bite the bullet and call my ex. He’s a lawyer with Chung Rifkind Dela-

ny, one of the hotshot firms downtown. He would advise me, pro bono, just out of guilt. I’ll ask him if he thinks I could win an age-discrimination suit. When he remarried I sent him a congratulatory email, one of those free animated greeting cards.

Don’t answer this call. Let it ring. Caller ID tells me it’s my former place of work. Answering machine picks up. The comptroller’s assistant. Sorry to bother me but they need the budget I drew up half a year ago for the Urban Density Initiative. Morons, just look in my computer files. I sit back and listen. She says that IT inadvertently deleted all my files from the computer over the weekend and they can’t find the backup hard drive what with everything having been moved around in preparation for the painters. As though I give a damn about that. Suppose I put some talcum powder in a little sandwich bag and mail it to the president with an ominous note in big block letters, not cut out of newspapers--that is so retrograde--but just a nice large font and a smiley face to indicate that there are no hard feelings. Or show up waving a pistol like a disgruntled postal worker.

Splash cold water on face. Stop hallucinating. This is what comes of thinking too much. My grandmother used to say that thinking can make you crazy.

What’s that thumping above me? The new neighbor. Does he think he’s at the gym? Guy must be jumping rope.

I can’t help thinking about my father who was compelled to retire early from his manager’s job at a large insurance company. By then he had abandoned his church activities. He couldn’t stand not having a job after 40 years with the same company and scoured the want ads for something to do, anything, he said. Will I ever forget his look of joy when he came home one day from an employ-

ment agency and announced that he had found part-time work as a messenger—*a messenger*—this man who managed a huge department? Every day he got up early, put on a suit and tie and set forth on his new career. How embarrassed my mother was, and so was I. How could I tell my fellow high school students that my father was a lowly messenger?

Still, I can understand him. It's not that he loved his management job. All he did was complain about the bosses, the stupidity, etc., etc. But somehow he felt he was a functioning member of society. What does that make me now? Would I take a part-time position, as a cashier or receptionist if I really needed the income? How about one of those jobs in a mega food store where you stand behind a little table and cut up tiny

pieces of sausage samples for customers?

I missed that four o'clock movie on TV. What was I doing at that time? I can't remember. At least I wasn't watching a movie in the middle of the afternoon. That is truly sinful. What's on tomorrow? Should I mark my calendar?

Look at all those people sitting on benches in the middle of Broadway, staring at the traffic. Could I end up like that? No, my son would never allow it. Nor my friends who want to know why they didn't hear from me this past weekend. In due time. Maybe on the second day of the rest of my life.

If I wake up one morning and don't know what day of the week it is, then I'll worry. Meantime take notes. How about a one-woman show? Remember that phrase: "She was escorted off the stage." Me? I'll be kicking and screaming like I'm doing now.

Superhero at Work

Leaping tall imbeciles in a single bound,
faster than a speeding email,
stronger than the villains of inefficiency,
he dons his suit and rushes to catch
the Thief of Time and his sidekick, Sloth.

The wind flaps his tie, a cape of many colors.
He does not need to strip away his suit.
His x-ray vision is in his progressive lenses.
His voice brings meetings to their ends,
and he launches strategies against all evil.

He cannot stop the bullets of wounding time.
The villains always return next episode.
No damsels fall at his feet, but some take notes.
He cannot see through the walls that hide
him from himself, or unbend the band of time.

Spirited Away

Imagine, if you will,

a tossed plastic grocery bag—our bag—
tumbleweeding down an alley in Cuba
far from the *Avenida del Puerto*, a gossamer dervish
holding on and letting go of the worn edges of trash bins,
the ancient sign posts, the wheel wells carved up into parked autos,
and uneven gutter stones.

In other words, imagine
our bag laughing,
one with the wind.

And then, consider what that pull must have felt like,
when after all those bins, the sign posts, the wheel wells,
the broken stones—our bag is finally snared by a low thin branch
sprouting through the slats of an ancient fence,

moored, if you will,

just as a young American tourist a few strides over,
all knapsack and bandana, propped against
the auto parts facade, her earbuds in place,
one long leg crossed over the other,

wonders if she read the map correctly,
and this is where the bus will stop.

Chuck Thompson

Kicking Against the Goats

Some talk about the old Greek athletes,
proud-backed high-speed runners and charioteers,
wrestlers featuring fabulous strength and boxers
knocking out teeth, broken noses
spread over the face and there is more;
where are Adam and Eve when we need
what we came for, naked health and a wealth
of time to rest in some garden of Eden
sunup to sundown content under a tree,
food and drink free as the wind
and plentiful in wooden cups,
bark platters or in the hand dripping sweet.

Later on in Roman times
Arminius comes stealthily through
the woods, his troops, silent
as wolves on the hunt,
close behind in close array;
his bushy beard mocks the
incipient war-whoop
and his berserkers, red as rail-iron
in fancy war paint
trample down the undergrowth
in those impressive woods
of long ago; come what may,
these warriors
ready to kill
what comes their way.

Who's to say some good came
from all this ancient violence, this failure to see
the quiet, the peace at the point of
embarkation to disorder and doom;
the pain of heroes and gods
preordained as pain
under the surgeon's knife;
such pain that it's like Samson's temple
and they tear it down.

Forever masters of their fate
they rightly deal with every circumstance;
the one indissoluble difference
between them and us.

Some talk of Helen of Troy or
Eleanor of Aquitaine;
of the two unwitting vamps
or tramps, what have you,
of the legendary two who
is more passionately remembered?
More real or unreal,
on any plane or place
in our wandering wondering minds?
Unobtainable and separate
they love in the last hour before dawn,
but not one of us finds them
in any form we can touch;
like cats they come dancing
out of the dark imagination
and disappear in some

lollygagging horror of a dream.
No help to us, no balm
for our violent vicious ways.

Some talk about the Great Mother,
the life force, creator of life,
stretching out her hand
to save us from all this killing,
her nourishing breasts
an introduction to a better way
which we will never take.

Some talk about death,
the wish to be still,
the final solution,
the final thrill of dissolution,
the reason we are what we are;
drilling down
to some final mournful truth.

But at the end of the road
it's only an introduction;
such talk
no more than a homage
to the same baleful pitiful slavery
we started with.

Jack D. Harvey

In Charleston, the Day After the Shooting (2015)

I.

a statue of a dead confederate soldier
looms over the city

community signatures
on the broken cast of a thin tree

the resounding message in red
marker: LOVE WINS

(if love is a gun smoking heavenward
and if love bodies slumped in pews)

II.

a fellow wanderer asks me to photograph him
in front of the scene

he smiles

then takes his iPhone
back
among the strangers

III.

I was a Catholic boy

lost

my way as a man

yet in presence of steeple

and jagged and mighty

tragedy

arrows of prayer quiver inside me

then anger

at tourists and cameras

I know I'm part of

this exhibitionism problem

we're a crowd of resounding bells

waiting for the next funeral to begin

James Croal Jackson

Wolf

My mind is canine couture, all teeth
and blood. Instinct drives me
through the nights. I wake in lamb's skin.
Soft, slight

ly soiled, I should have been
told I needed shearing. My tongue
slavers over that word. I prefer:
Amalgamation. Complete
ly labelless, I was designated
for slaughter. A man-
handler's dream. Denied. I steal another, hide
myself away, refuse to answer, no
matter how many
times they cry ...

Lenny

You creep up and down
this hallway of fear,
your temple under glass,
your thoughts crying “Timber!” one moment,
hushed the next.

You're terrified some light might intrude.
Light breathes.
It speaks.
And with such magnitude.

Your lips are like
blustering cattails,
your face is a cage
you burst out of from time to time.
There's a doctor who explains the world to you
one word at a time.
Your eyes turn from nothing to startling.
He pretends to be light.
You know he's nothing of the kind.

There's a door with your name on it
but you prefer to walk into walls.
The shades of your room are always drawn.
In your mind, the sun has a price on its head.

Only mist is palpable.
Only insects dedicate themselves to you.
You have this vision of a tiny child
left alone in a movie house,
forgotten by all,
day after day, watching the same film,
over and over,
that intense light above his head.
The child is not you.
It's something called a soul.
No one ever comes for it.

The nurses think they're telling you
all you need to know.
They pop pills into your mouth.
To calm you, so they
You'd rather they made it rain.

John Grey

Coma

Bleeding nose.

Crooked smile.

I will run you under water.

Your carved, concrete face.

Clothes you did not wear: tulip.

Leave your red suitcase on the floor.

The fanny pack, too.

Soft whistles: ghostly silk of burnt ember.

I am the only one you never needed.

Saliva on your bottom lip.

A hole.

A pillow.

We sat warm on elongated bus rides.

Followed barren trees along the highway to places we won't.

James Croal Jackson

Stone Soup

Warmly wrapped against the cold,
we knelt, selected stones —
mine uneven, jagged, large;
yours round, and small, and smooth.

Mismatch, said I. But then you —
let's drop them together.

In the middle of the bridge,
bent forward, stones in hand,
we watched water cascading
over the rocks below.

Side? — the one flowing to us,
the one flowing away?

The one flowing away, red,
dappled by setting sun,
knitting a pillow of leaves
around that hollow log.

We dropped them in together.

Back home, I made us soup.

Stone soup you called it, laughing.

Gershon Ben-Avraham

Kind of a Stupid Game, Isn't It?

(apologies to Bill Watterson and to Calvin and Hobbes)

When ignorance is instantaneous,
this utterly unique crystal
is the surest sign that no intelligent life
would ever contact us.

Of all the luck, my parents had to be
human. You can't talk to animals
about these things. But humans provide
some very important protein.

Do you believe in the Devil? You know,
a supreme evil being dedicated
to the temptation, corruption, and destruction
of man? I'm not sure man needs the help.

How come we play war and not peace?
Too few role models. We're at war,
so if you get hit with a dart, you're dead.
Gotcha. Kind of a stupid game, isn't it?

I suppose if we couldn't laugh
at things that don't make sense,
we couldn't react to a lot of life.
I can't tell if that's funny or really scary.

As you can see, I have memorized
this utterly useless piece of information
long enough to pass a test question.
I now intend to forget it forever.

The world is a complicated place.
Whenever it seems that way,
I take a nap in a tree and wait for dinner.
There's never enough time to do all the nothing.

*Author's Note: A collage poem from quotes written by Bill Watterson

David Anthony Sam

The Depths of Darkness

Empty Spaces

Based on a poem By

Robert Frost By LONNIE

James

Carrier



They

Cannot

Scare

Me

With

Their

Empty

Spaces



Between

Stars

On

Stars

Where

no

Human

Race

is



I

Have

it

in

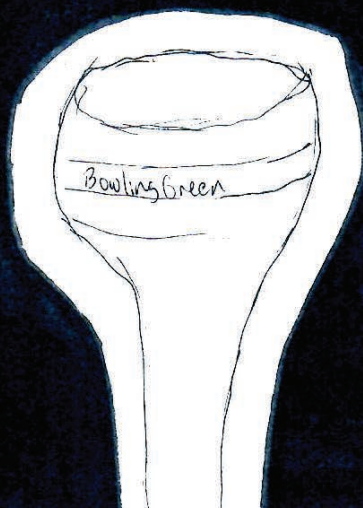
me

so

much

nearer

Home



To Scare myself
with my Own
Desert Places

- Robert
Frost



Lonnie James

Fatal Error

A small speck
Beneath a magnifying glass
Can sabotage the most complex
And finest of machinery,
Every moving part hiccups
And stops
And skips
And skips
And skips
And skips
Until the pieces reach their breaking point
And crack against each others.
Pause in memory of the machine
That broke under pressure
Faced successfully by any other machine.
The autopsy of the automaton
Reveals faulty parts, frayed wiring
And a melted central hub.
How could this machine have been released this way?
Broken, faulty — the big word no one wants to say
But still is on the tips of everyone's tongues
And blows outward through the hesitant silence.
(Defective)
Defective.
Defective!
DEFECTIVE!

A small speck
Beneath a magnifying glass
Can sabotage the most complex
And finest of machinery.
Every moving part hiccups
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But still is on the tips of everyone's tongues
And blares outward through the silence.
(defective)
Defective
Defective.
DEFECTIVE.

Matthew J. Kreglow

Manifesto

We're not here to
gossip,
sip lattes,
send text messages.

We want to celebrate
our love of peril,
our energy, our audacity.

These are our tenets –
courage, daring and revolution.

We prefer insomnia to sleep,
change to laissez faire,
the slap in the face
to the kiss on the ass.

Yes, for now we may
just be a group that gets together
at the local coffee house
at seven o'clock
every Thursday night.

But we have ourselves a manifesto.

So curb your Twitter.
Or we'll do it for you.

John Grey

Instagram

Denver's volcanic sunset
from the parking lot
was a longing

nature
versus
Instagram

and while my traveling
resulted in a love
I cannot
recommend enough

I know it was you
who told me
it was time to leave
the ocean
& tell no one

memories
are too nostalgic
to be healthy

James Croal Jackson

I Think About Concrete

the floor

and bleach

a mess

softened &

turned into

burning

waves

of years

parasites

flashing back

to stains

(a refusal

of metaphor)

living

reproducing

arousing

walking around

after dark

lucky

enough to infect

the black sheep

masses that want

to kill them
but wait instead
at the edge
of an invisible cliff

blowing kisses

down

into a fermenting updraft
that has gone

still

A.J. Huffman

Chainmail

This morning it is Jane Kenyon's lines
I gather about me
In that transitory period
Between awakening
and departure.

Boxelder limbs pulled down in high wind
and the careless clatter of barn doors;
silhouettes, feline and man, playing
under an inflated Wilmot moon;
Donald emerging
from the hermitage of his office;
happiness, for months only
a furloughed visitor, now
a permanently acknowledged resident.

Each letter the charged peptide
of a vital mineral,
every verse an iron link
I thread around myself
with the same haste as
a chronically late child sliding
a backpack over bony shoulders
and rushing out the door against
the day and its ballistic threats.

Adam Durso

Two Fools

Two fools, we:
sun-baptized and swallowed up.
When we kissed later
in the sizzling rain,
I could taste
the day in your throat.

I wanted to run down the hill,
arms spread out for you.
You wanted to climb up
to the roof at night—
so we could see
the stars, you said.
You said my hair
smelled like patchouli.
I wanted to believe you,
wanted to believe in God
and all that up there,
spread out for us.

We leaned against your car
as you taught me to smoke,
the chest nervous as the breath
jerks in: “Like this--
Hurry up, Mom’s coming!”
you said.

I noticed a single stem of cotton
against the rear windshield
tucked like a flower behind the ear.
You were not a Southern boy;
it was a souvenir of a traveler.

Sarah A. Etlinger

The Land of Lakes and Volcanoes

Cheryl gripped the wheel of her '97 Corolla, cursing herself for taking Broadway home. The weightlessness she'd felt as she'd watched Professor Williams through the windows of the coffee shop was gone.

As she sat at the red light, she watched a car perpendicular to her creep through the clogged intersection. From the boxes in back, Cheryl guessed it was a family moving their newly graduated daughter out of town. The girl, blonde, sat in the driver's seat. She had the scrubbed face of a Noxzema model. Her mother, whose hair was the same shade as hers, sat next to her, resting a hand on her shoulder. A man and a teenage boy sat in back. Cheryl could see the pride and hope emanating from them. The only thing that was emanating from her was sweat—and the aroma of coffee beans.

It had already been a year since Cheryl's graduation. She and her boyfriend, Ryan, and most of their friends had opted out of the main event, but she went to the Anthropology Department graduation the next day. Her parents had driven down from Evergreen, her dad in his jeans and cowboy boots and her mom with her blond hair pulled back in a scrunchie. When Cheryl took her degree in hand, she searched for her parents in the audience. Her mom had her hands clasped in front of her chest, and her dad blinked his eyes, pretending not to cry. It was like they were watching movies about each other. Professor Williams was there, too, looking square-shouldered and beautiful, but Cheryl avoided her.

By that point, Cheryl had already figured out that she wasn't going to be an archaeologist, her childhood dream. She'd never even heard of anyone who worked as an archaeologist; it was one of those mythical jobs, like a diplomat or a novelist. But there were supposed to be jobs in government and business for cultural anthropologists.

Now it was a year later, and she had nothing to show for it. None of the vague things she'd expected to happen to her did. If anything, she missed college.

Whatever Professor Williams saw in her then, what she told her at the graduation party, none of that had come to fruition. Cheryl still remembered every detail of the party, held a couple weeks before graduation. It took place in an old renovated house at the edge of campus. Most of the women had dressed up. Why wouldn't they? The party was meant to recognize seniors graduating with honors.

At the open bar, Cheryl had ordered a glass of red wine. Another honors student said hello. He started telling her about his job prospects and plans, speaking with such specificity and at such length that she couldn't get away. Instead, she watched Professor Williams, who moved tentatively through the room until drawn into conversation. It was as if language, exchanging ideas, anchored her.

When Cheryl's glass was empty, she escaped for a refill and then made her way upstairs to the bathroom. Minutes later, she heard someone walking quickly up the stairs. Suddenly Professor Williams was standing in front of her, her face flushed.

Cheryl moved to the right to let her pass, but Professor Williams moved that way, too, bumping into her and spilling the glass of wine onto Cheryl's shirt and white skirt.

"God, I'm so sorry," the professor said, reaching to help.

"No, it's okay," Cheryl said, laughing. "I knew that would happen. I just thought it'd be me who spilled."

Cheryl returned to the bathroom, and Professor Williams followed her. "Use cold water," she said.

Cheryl worked on her shirt while Professor Williams scrubbed the top of the skirt. "I was really impressed by your thesis paper, by the way," her professor said, as though they were standing in a living room or some other normal place to talk. "So many students assume technology has a damaging effect on indigenous peoples."

There were only a few inches between them now. Cheryl could feel her professor's fingers against her thigh through her skirt. When the pressure of Professor Williams's touch softened and lingered, Cheryl's body pulsed with desire. She looked at her professor under lowered eyelids.

"What if this was just a ruse to talk to you?" Professor Williams asked, her voice throaty.

"I have a hard time imagining that," Cheryl said. Half the anthropology students had a crush on dark-skinned, curly haired professor.

Professor Williams laughed. "Why's that?" Then she pressed her lips to Cheryl's.

Cheryl gasped and fell back against the bathroom door, still attached to Professor Williams. She was cheating on Ryan. That was a whisper in the back of her mind. When the whisper became a shout, Cheryl pulled away.

She'd never cheated on Ryan before, barely ever been tempted. "Excuse me," she said, pointing to the door. And then she left.

*

The two of them hadn't said more than a few words to each other since that day, until this afternoon at the coffee shop when they'd talked for almost an hour. It had been like talking to an old friend. Who was gorgeous, and whom she wanted to touch. Professor Williams mentioned graduate school, which thrilled Cheryl almost as much, if not more than, the possibility of desire fulfilled. She said she'd write Cheryl a letter of recommendation. But as Cheryl drove home in her green-house-hot car, she wondered what Professor Williams thought of her now—a sweaty, coffee-stained girl with a dead-end job.

Once she passed Pearl Street, the traffic lightened, and soon she was pulling over in front of the townhouse she shared with Ryan. She hesitated at the front door.

She found Ryan lounging on the couch, as relaxed as a tomcat. He was watching soccer on mute with one hand slung over the back of the cushions. He said hello over his shoulder.

She spotted an open can of Old Chubb. It was Friday, but not even 4:30. She bit her lip. "How was work?" she asked.

She walked over to the refrigerator to pour herself a glass of white wine. She'd been finding it nearly impossible to relate to Ryan when he'd been drinking and she was sober. The heaviness in his eyelids and dullness of his senses jabbed at her each time he talked.

Back in the living room the air was close even with the windows open. She put her glass of wine on the table and turned on the fan. It wasn't that she cared if Ryan drank. Or smoked pot. Or whatever. It was just that he wasn't doing anything else with himself. He wasn't even trying. And it seemed like the less he did, the more he drank.

Sure, she wasn't doing anything with herself either, but at least she wanted more, even if she didn't know what it was or how to get it. Lately "more" seemed like a shiny bubble. Every time she got too close to it, it popped. But now, with Professor Williams's invitation, there was the possibility of graduate school. That was more.

Avoiding eye contact, Cheryl asked Ryan if he felt like meeting their friends for dinner.

He shrugged and put the question back on her.

"I'm just tired," she said. And she was.

"Let's stay in then," Ryan said. "Order Chinese."

The words were like a warm bath. Finally she could meet his eyes. "Yes, please."

As she crossed in front of Ryan, he grabbed ahold of her skirt and pulled her toward him. Her skirt slid down, and as she reached to straighten it, she fell into his lap. He held her there and started kissing her neck and shoulders. He kept kissing her until she didn't care about the heat, job prospects, or what he had or hadn't been drinking.

*

Ryan stretched his feet out under the desk, tapped the six-pack of Sierra Nevada he'd stashed there. The bottles wobbled and then

righted themselves. A little too early for a beer, but he liked knowing they were there, waiting.

He'd been working at the travel agency for eight months now. When he'd noticed the "now hiring" sign, he'd walked in on a lark. He'd never thought much about travel agencies before. Did anyone even use them? Turned out *no*, not really.

He heard a *jingle-jingle-jingle*, then a loud rush of voices. Three college kids stood in the doorway, two guys and a girl.

Ryan took them for Greeks, just come from afternoon drinks. Stayed in Boulder for the summer because they couldn't stand their parents. Not that Ryan could talk. Last time he went home for summer was after freshman year. Boulder beat Savannah, Georgia, with its legions of old people and antique shops, any day.

"Yo," one of the guys, looked like Derek Jeter, said. "I saw you had a special on Costa Rica. Plane and hotel."

Ryan nodded. These were his least favorite type of customer. Came in too close to closing time. Thought about buying trips the way they thought about buying pants, just something to adorn themselves with.

And these jokers were drunk—not him.

He looked at the promo posters on the wall: a woman walking along a white-sand beach, blue ocean spread out beside her, the sky's double; a pink, beige, and brown crowd dwarfed by the Taj Mahal; or his favorite, a volcano floating on water, a puff of white smoke on top, a lush green field below. The posters were cheesy—glossy and photoshopped and obvious. But they drew him in. He wanted to disappear into them, push aside the shiny people, and start walking.

"Let's take a look," Jeter said. He walked across the room and sat backwards in the chair opposite Ryan.

The girl, a little unsteady on her feet, and the other guy followed. The second guy pulled out his phone. "I told you already," he said. "I can find as good a deal online. What's the name of the hotel?"

The girl was talking at the same time: "Are we doing this? Seriously?" She laughed.

Ryan made eye contact with Jeter, kept his face muscles lax. "We've got two hotel choices. See?" He swiveled the computer around and showed him. Cell Phone Guy leaned over to get the names of the hotels.

"Give it up," the girl said, smacking Cell Phone Guy on the shoulder.

He did give up, pulled over another chair. Ryan bounced from screen to screen, showing them the choices.

"We *are* doing this," the girl said. She laughed again.

"You ever been to any of these places?" Cell Phone Guy asked, smirking.

Ryan's stomach muscles tensed. His chest muscles tensed. His shoulder muscles tensed. But he forced a grin like he didn't care. And he didn't. Not about these clowns. "Nah," he said.

Cell Phone Guy raised his eyebrows. "Must suck working some place like this, then."

Ryan's insides churned. He wanted to say he didn't live off Mommy and Daddy—but that wasn't his style, and anyway it wasn't true. He just hadn't gone yet. Hadn't found the right time, so he made his insides match his outside again.

Jeter handed Ryan a credit card. They left and Ryan's gaze went back to the posters on the wall. He did get an employee discount, even if it was shitty. But no. He didn't want a week's vacation. He wanted to be gone. He wanted to find himself inside one of those pictures, start walking, and never come back.

*

Ryan locked up the store, a little buzzed from two Sierra Nevadas on an empty stomach.

He walked by the outdoor goods store, and, on an impulse, turned inside. A tall blond dude nodded at him.

He stopped in front of the backpacks.

"You in the market?" the blond dude asked. His nametag said Toby.

When Ryan told him yes, Toby asked what kind. But when Ryan answered, he shook his head and said, "No. What you need is this," pointing to a red pack, "or this," pointing to a gray one.

He reached for the gray pack and handed it to Ryan. "You buy this one and you won't need another pack, ever."

Ryan turned it over in his hands, the same way he'd turn over a beautiful woman in bed. He fondled the straps, felt the weight of it.

"See, it's got the Monoframe, the Grid-lock, and the Aeroform. That means it's breathable and it fits great, too."

Ryan slipped it over his shoulders. It slid onto his back. Didn't dig into his neck or bang against his body. He did a turn around the store. Only he wasn't in the store anymore. He was on a beach, setting up his tent for the night. Or in a rain forest, sixty miles from the next town. Or in a green valley under the shadow of a volcano, its insides gurgling with thousands of years of pent-up anticipation.

"Going somewhere?" Toby asked, waking him from his dream.

It took a minute for Ryan to figure out what he meant. Finally, taking off the pack, he said, "Nicaragua." A lie. He never lied. It felt like a quarter on his tongue. Metallic.

But maybe it wasn't. A lie.

"You been there before?"

Ryan shook his head.

"The land of lakes and volcanoes," Toby said.

Ryan got a text as Toby started talking. Where to stay, what to do. It was like the guy was reading a poem. The most beautiful poem he'd heard.

Later, as Ryan walked back to his bike, he remembered the text. Cheryl. "My parents invited us to Evergreen for the Fourth. What do you think?"

Ryan slipped the phone back in his

pocket. They used to go camping for the Fourth. A big group of friends. Beer. Weed. Now they were spending the weekend with her family?

He thought of the pack. Maybe not. Maybe Evergreen wasn't happening.

As Cheryl turned onto her street, the house looked dark and empty. She and her friend Monica had just caught a new documentary on campus. Ryan had said he was staying in.

She walked through the front door. The light in the living room was off, so she took in the room by the dim light from the oven. The pillows on the couch were flattened and one was lying dumbly on the floor.

She walked down the hall to the bedroom, her body alert, the specter of fear and anger rising. She half-expected to find Ryan passed out on the bed, but he wasn't there, either. She returned to the kitchen and turned on the light. Sitting on the counter were two empty bottles of vodka—one Monica and her boyfriend had brought over that had been quickly disappearing and another one, new.

She balked at the bottles. Ryan had said he wasn't doing anything. Did he drink all that vodka by himself?

She thought back to the time he had drunk so much that he threw up into his Braves cap. The rest of their friends had headed out to a party while she'd sat beside him on the kitchen floor, gamely responding to his babble and wondering if she should take him to the hospital.

But Ryan was fine then. He was probably fine now. After texting him, she walked to the couch and dropped down, her worry receding. She turned on the TV and stayed there long enough to watch two or three episodes of *Man versus Wild*.

Then she heard a *bang* and someone laughing. She opened her eyes and realized she'd fallen asleep. Pushing herself up off the

couch, she rubbed her eyes. Ryan was standing in the entryway.

“Hey, babe,” he said. His eyes were shining, not sleepy-lidded like when he drank too much. “Sorry about that. I tripped.” He laughed again.

She reached into her purse for her phone. It was past three.

“Where were you?” she asked, inspecting him. At first she thought he’d taken something else, an upper or something, but he looked surprisingly sober.

“I was out with Toby and his buddies,” he said, pulling off his sneakers.

“The guy from the store?” she asked.

Ryan walked toward the kitchen. “They’re going backpacking through China. Three weeks.”

Cheryl followed him to the brink of the kitchen.

“You didn’t tell me you were going out,” she said.

Ryan squinted at her. “I didn’t?”

“No. And you didn’t respond to my text either.” She showed him her cell phone. The act felt strange, like it belonged to someone else, some other girlfriend who was inhabiting her body.

He turned his back to her. “I hope you didn’t wait up.”

“Did you drink all that?” she asked, pointing to the empty bottles.

Ryan stared at her. He never got angry, not like some guys; but sometimes, like now, he seemed unusually sharp and focused.

“Not by myself,” he said slowly. “And now I’m going to bed.”

Cheryl stood to the side as he passed by her. “You could have just told me you were going out,” she said, following him down the hallway.

Still in his clothes, he climbed into bed and pulled the covers over his head.

She wanted to prove to him that he was wrong. But what had he done? He didn’t need to check in with her about every little thing. He hadn’t even drank that much.

Still, she was angry. It was tied up with Toby. And with Ryan being happy, and sober.

Ryan was already snoring. Stiffly, she climbed into bed and rolled over to face the wall. Sensing her there, he turned to his side and reached over to pat her on the hip. At first her body stayed rigid. Then she rolled onto her back and let her body relax. And lying there like that, side-by-side, it seemed like they weren’t angry anymore, like the fight was no big deal. Thinking that, even if it wasn’t true, allowed sleep to come when she closed her eyes.

The Humane Society people made them fill out a form. Even though they were just looking.

It’d been two days since their fight. Cheryl had said she was sorry, and she’d been acting sweet. She’d even made stir-fry the night before.

Ryan wanted to let it go. He did let it go, mostly.

Cheryl slipped her arm through his. “What if we *really* got a dog?” she whispered. Like it was a dare. “The landlord allows it.”

Ryan wanted a dog. He was a dog person. And Nicaragua seemed far away. Like something he’d seen when he was tripping—hazy and unreal. What if they got a pet? Stayed in the townhouse another year? Could be nice.

A redheaded guy let them into the kennel. The room smelled sour, like wet fur and piss. Not bad, though—just dog. After a quick tour, the guy left them.

Cheryl crouched down in front of a mutt. “Look at this one, Ryan,” she said.

Ryan knelt down, too, stuck his hand out. Cheryl *aahed*. Ryan felt close to her then, rubbed her back as he rose. She looked up at him. Smiled.

He spotted a Golden retriever in the corner. He'd had one as a kid. This dog, named Odie, stared at him. He stared and stared at him and wouldn't stop staring, his top lip pulled up in a sad smile.

Cheryl appeared beside him. "He's beautiful," she said.

Ryan nodded, eyes on Odie.

"We could get a dog," she said. "Maybe even buy a house."

Ryan looked at her.

"Maybe get married," she said. The dare in her voice was gone. She was serious.

Ryan rubbed her shoulder. But his body felt cold. They were only twenty-two.

He sensed her waiting. Knew he should say something. But nothing came out. Except, "Marriage?"

"One day," she said. Flat. "I'm talking someday, Ryan." She pulled her hair up into a ponytail, let it out again. Laughed lightly. Said, "Never mind."

They didn't leave with Odie, but as they pulled away, Ryan saw Odie's face behind the glass. His black nose, his floppy ears, his long, skinny snout. The face of something he already loved, and would never have.

Cheryl found herself standing near the doorway to Professor Williams's office. Thoughts of her old professor had resurfaced the night before when one glass of wine with Monica turned into three and the conversation went from how things were going with Ryan to how things might be without him.

The door to Professor Williams's office was open, but Cheryl stood to one side. She felt stuck against the plaster wall. The building was almost empty. Somewhere on the other side, she heard the sound of shoes hitting tile.

She took two steps back and started over.

"Hello, Professor," she said, smiling.

Professor Williams looked up from her computer. Even though the professor had told her to come, her face registered surprise. "You know, you can call me Lorraine," she said.

"Sure, yeah. Lorraine," Cheryl said, leaning against the one bare wall. She felt funny calling her "Lorraine," like a little girl playing dress up.

Lorraine asked her how the applications were going and if she'd signed up for the GRE yet. Cheryl told her the truth, that she hadn't made any progress.

In the weeks since Cheryl had seen her professor at the coffee shop, she kept going back to the idea of grad school. She'd loved college. While her friends squeaked by, she studied for fun. Writing and presenting her honor's thesis was one of the most exciting things she'd ever done. But after that afternoon at the coffee shop with Professor Williams, *Lorraine*, it seemed far away, unreachable. The status quo had become sticky and hard to pull out of.

Now the idea of grad school seemed close again, and electricity charged through her. "What are you working on?" Cheryl asked, sitting down.

Lorraine tilted her head and smiled. As she answered, Cheryl realized she wanted what this woman had: she wanted this room; she wanted the work; she wanted her.

Cheryl bit her lip. "If I kissed you, would you still be able to write my letter of recommendation? Or would that be a conflict of interest?"

She didn't know if Lorraine seemed disappointed, or just surprised. Cheryl felt her face get hot and looked away. It was dumb of her to come. It was different here, in the office, than at a party, their bodies loose from wine.

When Cheryl forced her gaze back to her professor, Lorraine was still looking at her. "That would be a conflict of interest," Lorraine said slowly. "Because I don't think it would be just one kiss."

Cheryl said, "Well, I'd rather kiss you."

She was vaguely aware that the hall-

way was still empty but didn't care one way or the other. Lorraine didn't seem to care either, because she leaned forward in her chair and cupped the back of Cheryl's head. Cheryl leaned in and closed her eyes. She could taste coffee on Lorraine's breath. Cheryl hadn't seen her at the coffee shop and wondered where she'd gotten it.

Then Cheryl pulled back and sucked in air.

"Are you going to disappear again?" Lorraine asked. She was smiling but her eyes were serious.

Cheryl shook her head. "No." And the room opened up and made space for her.

"Can we see each other off campus?" Lorraine asked.

Cheryl said yes without hesitating, and the next time she said "Lorraine," she didn't feel like a little girl anymore.

Ryan stared at the Altra 75 in the back of his closet. He liked the way it looked there, among his possessions.

The door opened and closed. Cheryl. He draped a sweatshirt over the pack and pushed it into the corner. It was just a bag. But he didn't want her to see it.

He walked down the hallway and stood at the edge of the room.

She dropped her purse on the floor and shot him a look.

She was in a mood. He could see that. Was she mad at him? Had she seen the bag?

She sat on the couch, facing the opposite wall. "Can we talk?" she asked.

He walked into the living room and sat next to her, put his hand on her thigh. "What's up?"

She stared at his hand. He moved it. She looked anywhere but at him.

"How was your day?" she asked. Before he could answer, she said, "I figured out how to make one of those stupid leaf things. You know, with foam."

"That's what you wanted to talk about?" he asked.

She made eye contact, finally. "I don't want to break up. I just think we should live apart."

His first thought was, "No," and then "Why?" But his next thought was of Nicaragua.

Her eyes skipped over his face.

"Maybe," he said. "Maybe you're right."

And her face fell. That surprised him.

She rose. "What?" she asked.

He stood up too. Felt something hard between them now.

"Do you want to break up?" she asked.

"No. Not break up. But we weren't talking about that." He dropped back down. "Right?"

She studied his face. Sat down on the other side of the couch. Flicked the palm of her hand with her index finger.

"Is that what you want?" he asked. He didn't want the answer to be yes. But did, too.

She flicked, flicked, flicked. Tiny muscles in her face twitched. "No."

Relief. But not. More silence.

Was this the right time? "I bought a new backpack. I mean, I bought a ticket to Nicaragua. I'm going backpacking."

She looked at him like she forgot who he was. Who she was.

"This isn't what I thought it'd be like," he said. "Like when I was a kid, I thought I'd be this certain way. And I'm not." A memory came back to him. Elementary school. A visit from a volcanologist. Smoke and fire and ashes. And his own dad. Coming home late from work. Clapping his friends on the back. Rooting for LSU on weekends.

Cheryl shook her head. “You haven’t opened up to me in months, and now this?”

She was right. He hadn’t told her about these dreams, how deep and wide and far they went. But it wouldn’t have mattered though. She wasn’t part of them.

Cheryl walked to the window. She said, “Are you going with Toby?”

“I’m going alone. For a couple months.”

“I’ve always wanted to go to Central America,” she said to the window. “You know that.” Her voice rose an octave at the end.

It hurt to see her like that. He got up, met her at the window. Put his hands on her shoulders.

She turned around, dropped her face against his chest. Was she crying? Was he?

He squeezed his eyes tight. Darkness. Ache. Like bending his finger back. Like he couldn’t stop himself. But there was stillness there, at the center of the pain.

Cheryl was sitting cross-legged on an unfamiliar hardwood floor. She was surrounded by boxes. The one she was hunched over held mementos—her old, half-filled journals, ticket stubs, and pictures.

Monica was perched on a carton of textbooks, sifting through a box marked “miscellaneous.”

“You weren’t surprised at all?” Monica asked, her eyes downcast.

Cheryl responded too quickly. “No. Not at all. I mean, Ryan is.... He’s Ryan. I expect him to do the unexpected.”

The second-story apartment felt big. Her furniture—the stuff she hadn’t left on the curb at the old house or sold—was pushed up against the walls.

“You didn’t want to go?” Monica asked, tucking a piece of curly black hair behind her ear.

Monica had asked her this before, and Cheryl fed her the same canned answer. Not now. She wanted to apply to grad school. She wanted to move her life forward.

Cheryl had already signed up for the GRE and a test class, like Lorraine had suggested. She’d bought a copy of *Best Graduate Schools 2007*. Meanwhile, her late-night phone calls with Lorraine had turned into early morning touches.

“Did he ask?” Monica asked quietly. Monica, who didn’t know how serious things had gotten with Lorraine, had not asked this before, and Cheryl didn’t have an answer ready. She wasn’t ready to talk about how it felt to be left, how it felt to engineer the leaving.

Cheryl pulled a picture out of the box of mementos. It was from a camping trip sophomore year, just before they’d started dating. Sometime around one or two, they’d slipped away from the campfire, him stoned, her full of box wine, and kissed against the sturdy trunk of an evergreen tree. For months afterward, she associated him with the smell of smoke and pine needles.

Cheryl shook her head, slowly. Then she made eye contact with Monica and, trying to sound casual, said, “No.” She realized she was holding the camping photo and placed it back in the box.

Odie trotted over from his spot on a folded rug in the corner of the living room and nudged her gently with a wet nose. After Cheryl had moved into her new place, she’d gone back to the Humane Society for him. She knew the sudden urge to have Odie close when Ryan was gone was a crack in her plan to move forward.

She got up, dragging a box to an empty bookshelf. As she pulled books out at random, her eyes fell on a scuffed-up copy of *Lonely Planet Central America*, all lime green and cobalt blue. She’d bought it on a whim at a secondhand store just before graduation.

She did want to go to Central America, like she’d told Ryan, but wouldn’t there be time for travel later? And maybe she and Ryan would have another chance later, too.

Through the wooden frames of her window, she looked out at the two young trees

in front of her apartment and the bus stop
across the street; and for the first time, that
there would be time for it all felt uncertain.

Ryan hitched a ride to the crater. The
landscape shifted from tropical forest to barren,
rocky desert. He parted ways with his ride,
already caught in the volcano's pull. The smell
was like gasoline or wet dog, the good kind of
funk.

He stopped at the rock wall. Felt drunk
at the sight of the gaping pit. Smoke rose in a
thick, constant stream.

And whatever he'd lost by leaving was
lost to him.

Heavenly Bites

The Church of the Catastrophe invites
you to come worship with us,
black cat upon the altar,
Bast incarnate, from Egyptian times.
Drown your sorrows with good bourbon.
No catastrophobia with us-come party!

Drive up, roll down your window
at the Palace of Dogma,
all canines welcome, large and small.
Our roots also in Egypt, with
Anubis, no less.
We can offer you Doggie Bliss.

Join us now, special offer
Our Lady of Dollars Church
for the materialists among us.
Bring us your dollars, not your
poor and huddled masses.
First your pain and then our gain.

Bienvenidos to the Church of

The Sacred Tortilla.

Come worship His image on this

fifteen-year old tortilla

baked by a virgin mother

by immaculate convection

For the ancient ones among you,

the Church of Eternal Old Age awaits you.

Pastor Jerry Atrick personally

takes you in his arms and blesses

you with welcome amnesia.

Minimum age 80 for enrollment

Susan P. Blevins

Loneliness

Loneliness is like an old hotel
you can't get out of,
like an old buddy
you can't shake off.

Loneliness is a weight to carry;
in Dante's hell none heavier.
Knows your weak points,
comes softly, sharp as
a catch in the heart
when you wake up suddenly.

It's the old man in the
home for the aged
who shuffles and dribbles
his way down corridors
leading nowhere.

Loneliness is in big cities
when you walk the block;
in the country
when the cows come home
and in the farmhouse one light
burns in a window.

Pull up a chair for her;
she'll kill you with cold
for she is cold as blue-white
Vega in the icy winter sky;
die you will in her embrace
like a child
lost for good
in the trackless winter snow.

Jack D. Harvey

The Joy of Fishing

Have you ever heard a trout laugh?

I have, and it's not a pretty sound.

They get real snarky too.

If I were in their shoes, well,
skin, I should say, I would too.

They tantalize with their bubbles,
so near and yet so far, taunting
me, or so it seems.

They're even able to nibble
the bait off the hook so subtly
I don't feel a thing.

So why wouldn't they laugh at me,
standing in the water for hours
in my waders, complaining about
the cold, complaining that the
trout are not biting? So they
chortle while they are free, jeering
at me as they leap from the water
a few feet in front of me,
brazenly laughing in my face.

But I'm patient, and eventually I
snag one of them, which is when
their expression turns from one of

derision to one of dismay.

But guess who has the last laugh?

The frying pan, of course.

Standing in Front of the Montreal Japanese Gardens

There you are, an oily smudge
in the center of a photo taken by a passing tourist:
you're squinting because the sun faces you,
but you're smiling, and your thin squared arm
curls around my waist. I'm smiling, too,
behind big sunglasses. Thin from Paris
I am wearing jeans too young for me
and you look like you just rolled out of bed
in a too-big T-shirt, baggy jeans
that I cinched at your smooth, quadrangular waist
after I blew you, standing in front of the window.
You'd leaned backwards over the radiator,
your face like you'd seen Jesus, finally;
his twisted body dangling from the golden cross
stuck to your neck.

In the photo, behind us, a full skirt of sun drapes
across the red pagoda, and carp swim carelessly,
smoothly in the algae-darkened pond.
They don't know where they are;
they just keep gliding, silken and peaceful.

They don't know that later,
when it's dark and the only light
comes from the cigarette bobbing
between your tight lips as you walk
through the city, I am pretending to sleep.

Sarah A. Etlinger

Baby Tunes

As I watched the woman on the bus holding her baby
I was reminded how much I miss holding babies;
remembering that when ours were just a few weeks old
I never wanted to put them down.

Now, of course, I'm left to only dream of wild fields and greenhouses
of babies, rows and rows of pink, tiny balding heads,
unsure if federal law would allow me to pluck them like tulips or beets.

To dream of a farmer's market for babies,
one where I'd be happy to squeeze this one or that one,
knowing that even the unripe ones
would find a home at rest on my windowsill,

unaware I was downloading babies to my smart phone.
An infant playlist of millions of burping and cooing melodies,
stored in a cloud that never buffered, so transcendent
and mysterious that I'd want to pop

in my earbuds, hit shuffle, and listen for eternity. A list created
from all of my previous selections, limited that they might be,
a playlist I could tuck somewhere in my full baby harness
as I descended the beeping steps that marked my stop.

Chuck Thompson

November in a Field

. . . and who can speak of Absence?

-Wang An-shih

And the hardwood aspens, birches,
bronze-borne and burnished by autumn
beyond row-on-row of pecan fields,
puffy, outsized cottonwoods, they rustle
and sway, shimmy, aching for more summer,
more summer, as wave-brushed sea stones
push ashore when wind passes through,
and through, and through, until nothing
but shadows of leaves remain for fall,
white waves beyond that, all to unknow.

GTimothy Gordon

Blue Blood

King, you were soil-bred,
entrenched in sludge,
nurtured, sustained, by decomposed matter,
sprouting upward
no different than a reed, a weed,
with similar chemical, molecular processes,
ever fluid, ever changing,
until you could finally stand before us
as you do now,
radiant in your robes, your crown,
on the balcony of your palace.
I bow with the rest of them.
Not out of respect
but to be careful where I put my feet.
Don't want to stamp on
any of your future progeny.

John Grey

Turtle Bay

1.

The collapse of your second marriage has left you feeling numb, wandering around in a fog, unable to think, or feel, or do much of anything. You left her, so you don't really have a place to stay. You impose upon your friend Matt for a while, but it's clear you are in the way of his complicated marriage. You decide to leave the Bay Area and head back east.

You collect some supplies and hole up inside your Toyota camper, hauling your camper shell on your back, complete with bed, refrigerator, stove, stereo, library. You wear nothing but turtleneck sweaters even though it's summer, you drive, slowly – very slowly, out of California, across the country, stopping only every other day or so when the white line begins to blur, camping by the side of the road, all the way to Pike Lake, your ancestral home in ex-urban Wisconsin.

You allow yourself two months to recuperate before you will have to return to your job as a writer for an environmental magazine. After a brief tour of the place to find your old haunts: the boathouse, your shack of a hideout, your dank mad-scientist laboratory in the basement, you hibernate in your old room, your childhood room, with walls and ceiling of manly knotty pine.

You expect your father to be mad like he was the first time, when you left your first wife, the mother of your children, ten years ago. He said to you over the phone: "Divorce, revolution, suicide, it's all the same thing." This time he says, "Your generation is more honest than ours was. I don't know too many of us who were completely monogamous."

You don't want to know more. You clam up. You do feel like a clam, a shell-shocked shell of a man, a clam whose body has been sucked up clean out of its shell by carnivorous parasites. There are traces of your ex everywhere in your old room, left from your visits here as a couple, ceramic elephants on the window sill, Victoria Holt novels in the book shelves.

You expect to crash, to freefall into the abyss of despair, and you are prepared for this, you look forward to crying it all out, but the tears don't come, instead, there is just a sublime peace, an exhilarating sense of freedom, and a clammy emptiness.

2 .

You sleep for days. No one bothers you. When you finally do emerge from hibernation, you resemble a zombie from one of those "living dead" movies. You can't feel a thing. It frightens you. To get out of the house one calm evening when the forests surrounding the lake glow yellow in the sunset, you take your father's old handmade lapstrake rowboat (he once gave it to you, but you still think of it as his). You row all the way to the north end of the lake, Turtle Bay. The boat fills with water up to your lower calves. You see that the bay looks different. The oak forests between the lake and the newish superhighway have been cut down. There is a monstrous barge anchored in the center of the bay, piled high with weeds and mud.

When you get back to the house, you ask your father what is going on.

“Oh, you ‘re talking about a big brouhaha there, he says. “Old man Melieren thinks he is developing a fancy sportfishing resort on his property. The Village fathers, you know they’ve spent their lives ensuring the exclusivity of their domain on this lake, are not pleased. He challenged their ordinance against commercial development on the lake in court. He won.”

“That’s it? Isn’t anyone doing anything?”

“There’ve been appeals, but he’s got a lot of money and some powerful allies.”

You remember the rumors. Your friend Carl used to help spread them. Melieren was a reclusive old German who owned a blender manufacturing company in Milwaukee, which was reputed to have built some of Hitler’s gas ovens during the war. There was also talk of Chicago gangland connections, and you remember as a child seeing bullet holes after a shooting in one of the houses on his vast estate.

You learn that the alignment of forces in this present battle is far from simple. The working-class fishing interests who want more public access to the lake and the unions who want the jobs and hate all Pike Lakers—Milwaukee’s power elite—equally, are pushing for the resort. The powerful state Department of Natural Resources (DNR) at first went to bat for the resort advocates, until an enterprising naturalist discovered a rare spotted turtle (*Clemmys guttata*) an endangered species—in the marshes around the edge of the bay.

Your father tells you that the DNR has called a hearing on the issue, which will take place the first week you are here, but Melieren has already started dredging the bay, apparently so he can have a *fait accompli* before the hearing has a chance to rule. This is the barge you saw, a dredge.

With nothing better to do, you go with your father to the hearing. Personal-

ly, you are torn. You certainly sympathize with the turtles, but the exclusivity of the Pike Lake snobs turns your stomach. This latter group uses the turtle issue, but they kill these same turtles elsewhere in the lake when they spray the weeds with defoliants to improve the swimming near their own lake frontages.

At the meeting, you see childhood acquaintances now grown, playing out their roles. You’ve seen none of these people for years. Ted is here, balding, a high-powered lawyer, representing the Village. Your old heart throb Maggie—Ted’s sister—now fat and domestic, has organized a contingent of residents. “Well hello, Barney,” she says. Her voice is chilly, as is that of the others. You have learned to recognize the tone, something like: “How could you marry a black woman and embarrass your family so.” You don’t go out of your way to tell any of them you’ve separated. They’d be too obviously pleased.

Your father surprises you by speaking at the meeting. He actually gives voice to reason. “As an old fisherman myself, I can understand the need for lake access. But a resort is likely to bring the power boats and the jet skis, which won’t help the fishing at all. May I suggest a compromise, a smaller scale public access, without the controversial resort?”

From the silence of the crowd, it is clear that this viewpoint has pleased no one.

The hearing issues a weak decision, which gives Melieren ten days to cease-and-desist his dredging operation, plenty of time to complete the job.

On the way home that night, silence once more prevails between your father and you. On the superhighway, right where you can see Turtle Bay through the newly thinned trees, you spot a small animal in your headlights, a turtle, laboriously crossing the road. You brake and swerve to miss it, but you fail, and it squishes against the

tire of your camper truck. You feel something jump into your ear.

3.

All night long, your ear itches.

In the morning, you hear the voice for the first time.

“Hello, Barney.”

You twist around in your bed looking for the source of the voice.

“My name is Slrp. I will be your teacher.”

Oh-oh, you think. You stay in bed that day, knowing that you are losing your grip, and that there’s nothing you can do about it.

“I am a turtle who has left my body, the very body that you yourself smeared all over the road with your truck. To be fair, we planned this assault on your kind. Our situation is exceedingly desperate, and we need your help. I’m afraid you will have to help us whether you want to or not. No more passivity for the likes of you.”

You see that your family is concerned. When they come to check on you, you can show them only your empty shell. In order not to reveal that you have been possessed by that which you don’t think they’ll understand, you show only your emptiness. You don’t speak in their presence. You see them hover over you and you clam up some more, a Plexiglas wall of estrangement has come between you and all other humans.

They bring doctors. You speak to them only enough to confuse them, to protect yourself from them carting you off some place. When they ask how you are, you say “Fine, thank you, “ and smile wanly. “Just a little under the weather.” They check you for mononucleosis and Epstein-Barr. They give

you Rohrschachs, but you know the right answers, you see in the inkblots flowers, futuristic automobiles, genitalia, normal stuff like that, and you don’t tell them about the raging flames or the delicious-looking planaria. The collective decision from the assembled experts and family members is to leave you alone and see what happens.

The voice of Slrp tells you to go for a morning row in your father’s rowboat. He tells you to take off your clothes, jump in the lake, and swim naked in the reedy waters of Turtle Bay. The water is icy cold, but your body seems to be just as cold itself, so you don’t feel it. You don’t seem to mind the mucky bottom, the slithery clumps of algae, or the lily pads scratching your underside.

Even though you grew up on this lake and in the summer went swimming every day, you were a lousy swimmer. You were afraid of drowning. When you were four, the neighbor’s maid’s toddler stepped off the pier and into the drink. He drowned. You remember watching with a gathering of neighbors as the mother bawled her heart out.

But now swimming came as second nature to you.

Slrp introduces you to the others. “This is Barney,” he tells them from his perch inside your skull in some kind of silent language that you seem to understand. You notice that Slrp has penetrated deeper into your mind. “He will be saving us,” Slrp tells the others. “We haven’t much time.”

You meet the oldest turtles first. Sis, the matriarch, gazes at you with the wisdom of her hundred winters, or “sleeps,” as they’re called. She sits on a rock and cocks her head from side to side as she checks you out. She has a leathery face with yellow speckles on it, a perpetual frown, just like your father, and yellow spots all over her carapace, quite a few more than her male counterparts. You are stretched out in the shallow water next to her, with just your head sticking up. The sadness she expresses to you weighs you down like

the shell on your back. She communicates not in words, but in something your mind calls “quanta of feeling states,” without thinking about it, little units of odd feeling that enter your ear and fill up the cavity that Slrp seems to be digging in your mind, as if looking for a place to bury his eggs.

Slrp tells you a long-winded story, which explains how what is happening to you, is in fact happening to you, even though it is, of course, impossible.

“Once upon a time, this lake was named Turtle Lake, and turtles reigned supreme. We thought we had invented a perfect world. Our ancestors, who looked like flat, rounded lizards, decided to grow these shells on our backs so that we would always be safe. We became one of the most invulnerable people on earth, by using our brains to alter our own biochemical evolution. Our ancestors got together and imagined these shells we wear. We learned to live a long time. But we hadn’t figured on humans coming along and mucking up the works. We know as well as you do that, unless we take drastic action, our days as a people are numbered.

“You are a part of our desperate effort to save ourselves,” he says.

You meet the others of the turtle clan who swim around you in curiosity. There’s Sri, a young renegade, perhaps your own age of 30 (you can tell their age by counting the rims around the scales that make up their shells), who glares at you and regards this whole scheme of his elders to be harebrained. “Not all of us want you here,” he images to you. He has a frightening yellow streak across his beak. “Some of us want to migrate to calmer waters, to another lake that legend tells us is not far away.”

“It’s called Mud Lake,” you tell him, and then you realize your mistake. “That is, humans call it Mud Lake. It’s small. There are a lot of turtles there.”

“Not a lot. We know better. There are not a lot of turtles anywhere anymore,” Sri groans. You see that there are many depressed spirits among the turtle-people, as you are coming to think of them.

“But even so, you find yourself arguing, “Sooner or later the humans will unleash their poisons on Mud Lake too. You can’t keep moving forever. Sometimes you have to take a stand.”

“That’s easy for you to say,” Sri hisses.

You haven’t convinced him, but you think you have impressed him enough to gain his grudging tolerance, if not acceptance.

And then you wonder what you are arguing for, and you realize that Slrp is taking over more and more of your synapses. More and more, you are seeing things from his point of view. That night in your bed, you fight him.

“What right do you have to come in here and invade my mind?” you demand of him.

“You weren’t using it,” Slrp answers wryly.

“Anyway, I know this isn’t really happening. It’s just a rather vivid dream. I’ve lost my way, that’s all.”

“Who’s to say, Barney,” he answers you. “You think of humans as being an anomalous species, accomplishing wondrous things that no other species in the known universe has even imagined itself capable of doing. Walking erect, making tools, harnessing fire, developing a symbolic system of language, both spoken and written. Music. Art. Self-awareness. To say nothing of cars, submarines, television, atomic bombs, and tortoise shell spectacles. Doesn’t it strike your limited imagination that other species might all this time be achieving things equally anomalous, but in an entirely different direction, a spiritual direction, for which there just wouldn’t be all

that material flotsam to give us away?”

“Wait a minute, lizard-brain,” you argue. Desperation creeps into your voice as you feel your resources gradually diminishing, as Slrp expands his territory with something less than the speed of a rabbit, but with all the determination of that proverbial testudinate. “How can you possibly know all this stuff about atom bombs and shit, huh? You ‘re going to tell me you read the *New York Times*?”

“No, but I can read it all in your mind right now. You underestimate us. You must understand that our consciousness has been evolving in a continuous fashion since the time of the dinosaurs. Inside our shells, over the millennia, we have learned techniques of meditation that have connected us to the primary forces of the universe. It’s a, how would you say, a “fringe benefit” of courting extinction. We watched what happened to our dinosaur cousins. We developed a life for ourselves of uncommon safety, from which it has been possible to imagine almost anything, as you can see.”

You go to sleep with his voice, his cinematic clip of images, a mobius strip of thought, cycling through your brain.

4.

The next morning, you pull the covers all the way over your carapace so no one can see what has become of you. You peek your head out and stare at the knots on the ceiling. They look like delicious insects. You see a real fly in the air and follow it with your eyes. You feel sluggish but at the same time restless from the heat. You’re incredibly thirsty. By the whisper of light creeping in the big picture window, you judge that it is still early enough, the humans will still be sleeping.

You crawl lumberingly to the edge of the bed. You dart your head out quickly and judge the distance to the floor. It’s about half

the length of your shell. Oh-oh, you think. It’s too far, but your craving for water overrules your inveterate caution. You close your eyes and crawl all the way over the edge of the bed until your center of gravity sends you crashing to the floor—very unfortunately, on your back. By stretching your long, greenish brown neck out as far as it can go and pushing with all your might against the floor with your webbed feet, you’re able to turn yourself onto your orangish hypoplastron with another resounding crash, except this time you are hardly hear a thing, deaf as a turtle.

You retract everything deep inside your shell and wait. When you detect no vibrations, or for that matter, psychic impulses, you begin to gradually crawl down the stairs and out of this unnatural outer shell of a house you find myself in and amble laboriously—though it actually feels quick to you—down the hill to the lake.

At the water’s edge, you balk at the notion of slipping in and swimming all the way to Turtle Bay, and instead decide, despite the awkwardness, to row most of the way over there. After a quick dip off the rocks at the shore to quench the dehydration, you crawl into the rowboat and sit upright on the center seat, with your large shell hanging over the edge of the plank. Once you reach the bay, you beach the boat in the cattails and slip back into the water, feeling yourself again.

The water strokes you delectably. You flip and flop and frolic under the water for what seems like hours at a time. The other turtles greet you, swim around you in an erotic dance.

There’s one called Drusilla who swims around your tail and wags her head at you from below. *Drusilla? Come on. A human name?*

“I took it for you, Barney,” she tells me. “Don’t you have a human name?”

“Yes, but...”

"You forget. We know everything you know."

"And I know everything you know?"

"Of course."

Your carapace is beginning to ache.
This is truly confusing.

"Will you stay with us now?" Drusilla asks. Now you notice the dazzling galaxies of yellow light from the spots on her shell, a mirror to the night sky.

"Of course," you say with assurance. You can't imagine ever leaving the water again. Or her for that matter. You've found your home.

She brings you a juicy dragonfly in her beak. You snap into its abdomen with your powerful jaws. Your mouth fills with the sweetness a bee must feel eating its own honey. She chomps on the dragonfly's head, and your jaws meet in the center of its thorax. You bump olfactory orifices.

Suddenly, the water vibrates and splashes you in the face. Drusilla and you both retract into your shells and then dive. Underwater, you can hear a faint groan that seems to be gradually growing louder. You look at Drusilla questioningly. "It's the voice of doom," she says sadly. "The end of the world."

"I want to see it. Can you take me there?"

She beckons you follow her with her tail. You swim after her, easily keeping up with her plodding stroke. When you come to the edge of the reeds, you poke your heads out of the water. A giant, brown, rectangular monster with humans riding on its back is gobbling up the bottom of the marsh with its rolling, endless tongue.

You spend the afternoon gamboling in the muck with Drusilla. You watch the

other turtles fucking. She shows you where she's hidden her eggs, and you stroke her neck consolingly when she breaks down at the thought of their future. You glimpse the beauty of this bay with a manic intensity that comes from the imminence of doom. You feel you can stay here forever, and that that's not a very long time at all.

But Slrp has other plans for you. As the light fades toward evening, you find yourself feeling a chill. "Whoa, Turtleman," Slrp images. "Let's not get carried away. You are useful to us as a human, less so as a turtle. The others don't understand this. They want you to be one of them, and they have their mental prowess, as you have seen. But I'm going to reconnect some of your synapses here, at least so you don't die of exposure."

Drained to your emptiest shell, you slither back into the rowboat. You see the silhouette of the dredge against the fading light of day. You row toward it, now abandoned at anchor. You see that it has a long conveyor belt with scoops fastened onto it so that it spoons the muck from the lake bottom and dumps it in a pile in the center of the barge. It occurs to you that they probably dump this muck in the deep parts of the lake. A big engine with a large external gas tank drives the mechanism.

With your stubby limbs, you awkwardly row back to the nest of humans. They greet you with alarm, but you are relieved that they can't seem to see the great carapace covering your body or the yellow tear drops spotting your face. "Where have you been?" the female human says. You forgot to wash the muck out of your hair.

"Fishing. Swimming," you answer. Suddenly embarrassed by your nakedness, you discover that you absently picked up a towel at the boathouse, and you have covered yourself in the frontal abdominal region, your most vulnerable spot.

You manage to dress yourself and pretend to be human for an hour or so. You sit with them at dinner, though you are full

from eating earlier and you find their cow meat unappetizing. You carry on a conversation of sorts.

"It's taking me awhile to get over my break-up," you manage to mumble in human language. "It feels like an explosion!" You say this last word too loud and you spit when you say it. But it gives you an idea. You clam up. They ignore you, just as they always have. You are uncommonly grateful.

After dinner, while the others watch Jacques Cousteau on television, you slither down into your old laboratory to see what you can scavenge. You find practically full pound bottles of sodium nitrate and sulfur, covered with spider webs. You remember what to do. Laboriously, awkwardly with your stubby webbed limbs, you burn up a full box of wooden matches, ten at a time, and then you grind the resulting charcoal in the spider webbed mortar and pestle.

You keep forgetting what you are doing. You keep wanting to just crawl into your shell, but Slrp encourages you. "You know what you have to do, son," he says, as if he were your real father. You find a loose piece of PVC drain pipe, three inches long, two inches in diameter, next to the water pump in the basement. You mix your gunpowder.

In the kitchen you cook with an obsessive frenzy that you know must be frightening your parents, but you can't help it. Someone asks what you are doing. "Baking cookies," you snap.

"Isn't that a lot of salt?"

"I know what I'm doing," you shrill. What you are really doing is making baker's dough, half flour, half salt, to plug the ends of the pipe. When you are finished with the dough, you take it into the dank basement again and pack the gunpowder into the pipe, sealing the ends with the baker's dough. You leave a small hole in one end. You realize that the baker's dough won't have a chance to dry, so you top it off with some quick—drying

silicone sealant that you find in a caulking gun in the playroom. You have no fuse, but you do have a can of sodium peroxide. You remember how this stuff flares into yellow flame when it comes in contact with water.

You pack your stuff in a paper bag and leave the house by the tunnel that leads out of your laboratory to the middle of the woods by the shore of the lake. At the end of the tunnel is a door hinged at the top like the storm cellar door on Dorothy's house in the Wizard of Oz. It's a quiet night. The water is calm and reflects the three-quarter moon, as well as the mansion lights from the shore. You row quietly and determinedly to Turtle Bay.

"Don't be afraid, Turtleman," Slrp comforts you. "We will protect you. You are our friend." Turtleman. That's you all right.

When you come up alongside the dredge, you see three dark heads poking out of the water. You recognize Sis, the matriarch.

"We have come to give you moral support," she images to you.

You see Sri. "I'm surprised to see you," you tell him.

"I admire your courage, he says. "Your plan might work."

"How do you know what I'm up to?" you whine, somewhat peevishly, as if your privacy has been invaded again.

"We know what you know," intones the soft musical image of Drusilla.

"Hello, Drusilla," you say. Your chest constricts inside your shell. "You guys watch out now. This could get make a big mess."

You slip the rowboat around to the gas tank of the dredge. You open the cap on the tank. You shake a line of gunpowder out of your pipe like salt from a saltshaker along the edge of the barge. You put the pipe filled with gunpowder next to the spout of the gas tank, with the gunpowder trail leading into the hole

in the baker's dough seal. At the other end of this trail, you make a mountain of sodium peroxide.

Suddenly a wave from a passing motorboat rocks the barge and splashes water on the sodium peroxide, which ignites with a brilliant yellow glow. The barge pitches enough to spill some of the gas from the full tank. Uh-oh, you think. The gas catches fire and lights the pipe bomb prematurely, which explodes with a blinding flash in your face. It ignites your beard and hair and knocks you out of the boat and into the water. You hit your head on a cattail root.

Stunned, you paddle to the shore. You see your friends Sis, Sri, and Drusilla, all belly up dead in the muck. Your chest constricts again. The whole lake is on fire. You are dead, too.

5.

You find yourself wandering along the edge of the superhighway, an empty shell of a man. You see that a crowd has gathered to watch the fire and the efforts of the fire fighters to put it out with long hoses from a truck on the shore. You immediately cause some stir in the crowd, perhaps because you are naked, perhaps because your hair and beard have burnt to a ghostly ash and your eyes are alight with mischief. The crowd opens a swath for you which leads you directly into the hands of the Village police, Captain Lutz. "Well, Barney Blatz. Fancy meeting you here," he jokes as he snaps the handcuffs roughly on your wrists behind your back.

He throws a blanket on you and takes you to the basement of a red brick Victorian hospital in Waukesha. They put you in two-point restraints, a bench with leather straps buckled on one arm and one ankle. You sleep for a long time.

When you wake up, you feel your flesh tingle. You smile to welcome your body back. You haven't felt this warm in years. You check your back: no shell. You check the mirror when they finally let you use the bathroom. No yellow blotches on your skin, which is now pinko-gray, not green.

You know how to handle the doctors. But you are in no hurry. You tell no one anything. You clam up. You sleep. You enjoy the emptiness. You wallow in it like the muck. You are grateful for the rest. You also figure things will die down in time. There's no point in tempting the legal establishment by showing anything remotely resembling presence of mind.

They move you to a place you're familiar with from other friends who have lost their marbles at times, Oconomowoc Memorial, a rich people's nut house, not a lobotomy factory. You make friends with a young girl who carries an old Bible around wrapped in a towel and a guy who stabbed his brother with a barbecue fork in a fit of rage.

At group one day, you start to say, "A few weeks ago, I was a turtle"...but the doctor sighs with a look of exasperation on her face, so you figure this is not the way to get released.

The next day, you try "I've been having trouble with my feelings lately, after breaking up with my wife. For a while, I was suffering delusions, but I think I was running away from the reality of the pain caused by the break-up. I can feel the pain now. It's hard, but I'm doing it, and I'm doing much better."

Was that true? Not really. You didn't feel the pain until, about a week later, you got back "home," in your parent's house that wasn't home. On your first afternoon back in that house on the hill overlooking the lake, you retreat to your room. No one bothers you. You know they are afraid of you, but that's okay.

You lie on your human belly on the bed and sob your guts out. For the turtles, for the planet, for yourself, for your ex, for your children, for your bizarre family, for the fucking tragedy of the human/animal condition.

You bawl your ass off for at least three days, with breaks for quick sandwiches.

They treat you just as though nothing has happened, as though you have just arrived from California, and you decide to act the same. They don't mention it, but you learn through the papers that the explosion caused a big oil slick that almost wiped out the turtle population of Turtle Bay, but that all dredging has stopped, and Melieren has agreed to provide a sanctuary for the turtles in his greatly scaled-down plans for a public access with a small campground on his land.

In another week, you leave your camper shell behind and board a plane to California, only a month behind schedule, to resume your life, such as it is.

Prometheus

the boy's sure hands close over the little firefly
cup it in darkness, deposit it into the jar. Once released, the insect
discovers it's not alone, that there are dozens of its kind
in here as well, flitting against the walls of their prison
deceived by the glass's transparency, convinced that freedom
is mere inches away.

The jar is alight in the boy's hands, full of tiny stars
constellations that shift with every step he takes. Tomorrow, the jar
will be full of the dry, brown bodies of dead beetles
long antennae curled against the glass
but tonight, the boy has a jar full of sunshine
will go to sleep with dreams of magic
and of fireflies that never go out.

Holly Day

Do We Need Superheroes, Really?

Isn't it better when a fallen child
on train tracks is rescued by Lassie
tugging at his collar than it is
for Superman to swoop down and stop
the train causing serious whiplash
to passengers, who sue him for all
the money he was saving to buy
a luxury condo in Manhattan
for himself and Lois Lane?

In a house fire, Rin Tin Tin can crash
through a window and rescue a toddler
with time to spare. No need to call Thor
with his hammer and power to change
weather. His command for rain brings
a deluge that floods all the neighbors'
basements, and here we go again
with a superhero sued for meddling.

It's no big deal that Green Lantern
with his magic ring can fly around
chasing Sky Pirates—that's become
passé these days. Nothing compared
to Wishbone's ability to time-travel
and solve past mysteries such as

The Legend of Sleepy Hollow.

And another skill where Wishbone is best—
no one can beat him in a blinking contest.

Dennis Trujillo

The Moth

I carefully free the small bundle
From its anchor of web and dust
Search for an end to the strings and knots
That hold it white and indistinguishable.

Further exploration reveals a wing
Perfect and angular and still attached
To a slim body robbed of breath and flutter
Tiny legs curled against its feathered chest.

Holly Day

Geraniums 1

I've kept a pot of white geraniums
on the windowsill for a decade.
Each season I trim them back ruthlessly--
right down to the nubs
so they look like the arms of a child's snowman.
Each season I wonder, "Will this be the last time?
Will this be the time I finally kill them,
cut too deeply or too far down?"

(Once my mother cut them back so far down
I thought she had killed them for sure:
there was nothing but a single stem
sticking up out of the soil in the pot,
a lonely tree with no branches to keep it company
or arms to hug the sunlight.
I thought for sure it would shrivel and die,
and every day I checked it, looking for signs of life.)

One day, I saw a shoot. And then another.
A little green arm reached up out of the soil
and waved, its leaf a fuzzy green hand, chubby as a baby's.
After that, so many shoots grew
that I had to separate them into different pots.

Since then I am merciless when I cut them back:
no cut seems too deep or too long.

Sarah A. Etlinger

Night *Virga*

What water there is runs through the flume
from forest *bosque* to desert *acecia* beyond
yucca and piñon ground, but only by night
when land lies stock-still, *la brista suave*
chilling, dissolving, midsummer sun, heat,
invisible air, into pre-dawn crystal dew,
the mountains above, bent wet all through
dark hours, in dark green shade, plum blossoms,
Yes, even back here! beading cool, and dank,
beneath blush-blue trees.

The Sophomores Study Julius Caesar: A Found Poem

You blocks, you stones, . . . Shakespeare

Why would a senator wear a toga
or an athlete run in a skirt?

Will tapping a woman with a thong
really make her pregnant?

Does Julius Caesar want fat men
around him so he'll look buff?

Does it mean that Cassius is starving
if he has a lean and hungry look?

Was he a Publicist, no, I mean a Presbyterian
who ran through the streets shouting?

Why didn't he just say, "They're going to kill you?"
No one knows what *Beware the Ides of March* means.

Isn't Greece in Rome?
I think it is.

I don't get this B.C. thing. How did they know He was
coming? Were they just hoping he'd come on the right day?

If it's a deer, why does Shakespeare call it a hart,
and how do signs get inside the body of animals for people to read?

Wow, that Portia stabbed herself and swallowed fire.
I wish my girlfriend would stab herself in the leg.

Look at this library book full of statues of Julius Caesar
and Mark Antony. They must have read Shakespeare.

By the end of this play, we're all
going to want to run on our swords.

None of this makes sense to me, but I know a test is coming.
Are you saying Julius Caesar was a real person?

Maryfrances Wagner

Pears

I said I'd cut a pear for lunch.
In my hands it looked bulky, squeezed
(as if there were too much inside),
the skin bulbous and stretched,
scars speckled like smeared mascara
over its lumps.

The knife slid too easily through its body.
A perfect slice fell onto the plate suddenly,
as if warning me that a cut is always final.

Later we spread out in the moonlight.
We held each other, the gift of soft touch
on soft bodies whispering each other to sleep.
I traced the eyebrow contours of your face;
my tender lips forgave all those past sins,
erased the stains left by women
who didn't love you enough.
In your sigh-
one pitch lower than post-coital-
I heard mending.

Today, I wonder if it lasted.

Since then, we have learned to love
other people, as one does when one has to.
I had not thought about you
with anything other than my body
and the invisible throb of my heart
in so long, and I can't even remember
why you came over in the first place,
though I suspect it was because we both knew
the pain the skin conceals.

Yesterday, I cut another pear
for my lunch. The light from the window
highlighted a single brown scar
on its skin, and I remembered
that—just before you left me—
I had placed my hands on the hollow
of your chest, as if to anoint
your wounds. As I pressed
on the pear's skin it gave way to reveal
white mealy nectar, concealing
the smooth brown seeds
that I knew were tucked tight in against the core,
protected from tears and scars and harsh
gashes from hungry teeth of women.

Sarah A. Etlinger

Schoolboy

When we were fifteen, Gary Curtis and I started to make crank telephone calls, and I accidentally found a girl — her name was Darlene — that I thought might possibly love me.

Ask a kid why he does any stupid, annoying or malicious thing. He'll tell you he doesn't know. But I know why we started in on the crank phone calls: Loneliness and girls. And of course it was fun.

In the afternoon we walked home from school together, stopping at my house, the first one on the way, because my mother didn't get home from work until six or six-thirty.

Gary was a carefree joker, a skinny easy-going kid with tousled brown hair and a wide smile, and I was pretty much the same except with shorter hair, glasses sliding down my nose, buck teeth, not so verbal, certainly not as socially adept.

It's not easy to talk about myself, even the self of so long ago. I was certainly lost. Stumbling along, day-to-day, basically cheerful with a hope that someday things would become as clear for me as they appeared to be for the adults around me: my mother who had gone back to school to get her masters degree in public health, my father the doctor and his new wife up on the South Hill in Spokane. Everyone had lives they more or less understood; they all knew what they were doing.

I had no clue.

My mother moved us there just in time for the beginning of the school year and Gary was the only friend I'd made. His house and mine were aligned next to each other on a flat, treeless street, prefabs thrown up across acreage that had been orchards. It was out at the end of the valley; they had named the town Opportunity.

Well, you can't fault them; there was a lot of hope in the air. World War II was over, it had put an end to the Depression, and everyone knew something a whole lot better was on the way. Had to be better, couldn't be worse.

Gary and I were on our own for entertainment on those long, hot afternoons of early autumn. So we started to make crank calls. We took turns, a certain amount of one-up-manship involved.

We would look up the number of a liquor store or cigar store, dial the number and when someone answered ask, "Do you have Prince Albert in the can?"

It was a brand of pipe tobacco that came in a metal canister.

When the proprietor said yes we would shout: "Well let him out he's stinking up the joint!" and hang up.

Browsing through the phone book we discovered the name Takashita. Operating in our adolescent haze this became take-a-shit-a.

Every afternoon we dialed the Takashita number. The phone was answered by what sounded like an elderly Japanese woman with hardly any English. "Yes?" she would say, her voice querulous.

"Mrs. take-a-shit-a?"

"Yes?"

"Do you?"

"Yes?"

"You do? You take-a-shit-a?"

"Yes?"

"How often do you take-a-shit-a Mrs. take-a-shit-a?"

“Yes?”

After we made our usual calls asking after Prince Albert and harassing poor Mrs. Takashita, we dialed numbers at random, trying to engage whoever answered in some inane conversation. That’s how we found Darlene.

She went to a high school on the other side of the valley, and she wanted to talk. Prince Albert and Mrs. Takashita went out the window. We took turns, handing the phone back and forth, pretending to be cool guys of oh, maybe eighteen or so. The past year in chorus I’d gone from an alto to the bass section. I put on my deepest, smoothest voice.

Stumbling across Darlene was kind of wonderful, because up to now neither of us had figured out how to do it, talk to girls. Sure, we’d talked to our sisters, to little girls when we were growing up. But now girls weren’t just girls anymore. Some kind of tectonic shift had taken place; we were all wobbly. One thing was for damn sure: if I had been able to talk to girls, I wouldn’t have been spending the afternoons with Gary making crank phone calls. I would have been hanging on the fence at the tennis courts watching a beautiful dark-haired girl named Joanne scamper back and forth in little white shorts.

With Darlene it seemed as though we had accidentally blundered onto the one thing we longed for, the mystery that our budding male intuition told us was somehow at the bottom of everything: the possibility of love.

Each day after Gary left I stayed on the line with her until my mother’s car crunched up the gravel driveway. There seemed to be no end to what we found to say to each other, yet I can’t recall a word. I’m sure it was the same thing teenagers are messaging and snapchatting today.

Someone once said — I think it was Somerset Maugham — that at fifteen a boy is still half a barbarian.

What, only half?

That certainly fit me. I was trying to discover the essence of things and people. Knowing so little, I could see only what I felt, and that the most elemental, the raw wants and needs. It felt like exactly what it was — a force of nature, something disturbing that was better kept tucked away out of sight. So I wasn’t able to imagine the less than cataclysmic circumstances that might have brought Darlene to the state she was in.

Of course I had no sense of how easy it is to get one’s life fucked up; the minor byplay of interpersonal stupidity, social recklessness, cultural folly, they were all beyond me, would remain so for a long time.

In my mind Darlene was an ethereal princess. I could sometimes, during a pause, hear her there, on the other end of the line, breathing. I treasured that faint sound, imagining us together somewhere, under a blue sky in a meadow, I with my eyes closed, her mouth close beside my ear, the whisper of her breath.

She felt it, too, I could tell. Can’t you always tell? It was there, hovering. Sooner or later it had to happen: we decided to meet.

She set the place: the parking lot in front of a row of stores on Sullivan Road, halfway between our two locations.

Did I know where that was?

I could find it.

Good. She would be waiting tomorrow at three, a green two-door Chevrolet.

A car! Good Christ in heaven! So many things could happen in a car!

I called the bus company for routes and schedules.

The next day I told Gary I had to go to my father’s house after school and caught the bus on Sprague Avenue. The wheezing diesel put me down across the street from the meeting place, fifteen minutes late.

The green Chevrolet was there, backed in

facing out toward the road, just as she said it would be. Through the windshield glare I could make out a shape behind the wheel.

I had worn my best clothes, a long-sleeved shirt, my good corduroy trousers, both of them too heavy for the hot day. I could feel the perspiration trickling down my ribs.

An occasional car whizzed past as I considered catching the next bus home, but I realized I would have to cross the road to the bus stop to go back the way I had come. And since I had to cross the road anyway . . .

Come on, I said to myself, she likes you, she even said she likes you.

My eyes were fixed on the shape in the glare of light, the beautiful Darlene. I couldn't see anything else as I crossed the road and the gravel parking lot. It was certainly Darlene, a girl alone in a green two-door Chevrolet, blonde hair, it couldn't be anyone else.

I paused near the driver's side door and in an instant took in everything: the mascara streaks on her face where she'd been crying, the rat's nest of her hair, the baby wrapped in a blanket on the seat beside her. I caught the faint odor of diapers and milk. She wasn't pretty at all. She gave a kind of muffled sob, a Kleenex pressed to her mouth, looking down the road the way the bus had come. Her hope was so transparent, so pathetic. He would come, the nifty guy with the deep voice, tooling along in a nice car, a confident guy — a man, really — who would wipe those tears from her cheeks, who would make everything better, solve all the problems, whisk her and her baby away to a better life.

And that certainly wasn't me. If there was ever one thing I knew, I knew that.

She didn't even turn her head to glance at the boy whose gravel footsteps paused by the side of her car.

I kept walking. Past the car and through the door into the variety store behind it, where I stood behind a display of penny candy and

looked out the plate glass window at the green Chevy.

I was in that store, I don't know, maybe a lifetime. Certainly forty-five minutes, maybe an hour. A fat woman in a flowered apron, her hair wrapped tight around her head, followed me around, probably wondering what kind of criminal enterprise the sweaty kid was cooking up as he wandered the aisles, always returning to look out the front window.

I saw what I saw, and seeing it, what I had felt for Darlene was turned back upon my own inner life. I saw the link between us. I saw things as they existed in themselves, as if walking through a museum for the first time yet with no larger understanding of the idea of museums.

I saw the abiding unhappiness, the yearning, the promise.

Me and Darlene in the same boat. Hers maybe a little farther from shore than mine, but both of us drifting on the same waters. Wrong steps, inevitable disappointments.

Even as these thoughts went through my mind, I couldn't bear to think them. I didn't want to know.

No matter how long I waited in that store, shadowed by the suspicious woman, it seemed that Darlene was determined to wait.

Finally I couldn't stand it anymore, I gave up. I bought six Tootsie Rolls, a Baby Ruth and an Almond Joy and walked out of the store carrying the candy in a paper bag, evidence that I was a bona fide shopper and certainly not a person that someone might be waiting for.

I walked past Darlene, afraid to even glance her way, stood at the bus stop, my back to her, without turning to look even once.

I turned away from her the way one turns from a photograph of a third-world child with a bloated stomach, not wanting to see any more, not wanting, even, to remember what one has seen. There's nothing you can do about it, so why torture yourself by thinking about it?

I was so young, so stupid, so helpless.

I felt so lost.

Such a schoolboy.

William L. Spencer

Chain-Smoked Monkeys

(With apologies to The Simpsons)

Listen to your mother, and aim low.
So low no one will ever care
if you succeed or if dinner ever leaves
an angry oven.

Don't worry about that dinner.
If a cow ever got the chance,
she'd eat you
and everyone you care about!

If you seek butter,
look under your face.
I am familiar with the works
of Pablo Neruda.

If anyone wants me,
I'll be in my room
waiting to eat monkeys and
smoking Shakespeare.

Daddy says dice are wicked.
But have you considered any
of the other major religions?
They're all pretty much the same.

They graphically portray parts
of the human body, which,
practical as they may be, are evil.
Not that fancy store-bought dirt.

I came out of the closet making babies
and I saw one of the babies
and then the baby looked at me.
Don't you know dignity when you see it?

I don't know why. It's a perfectly
cromulent world with
class after class of ugly,
ugly children!

Please, I have a funny story,
if you'll listen?
I even wrote the theme music, listen!
And, oh boy, that monkey is going to pay.

*Author's Note: A collage poem from quotes from The Simpsons

David Anthony Sam

Stray

The way the cat looked at me
after his treat—

the difference was ours has a home.

And God I am so ashamed.

They are the same

but I was on our unfamiliar
porch
swinging

a bag of sustenance

like unlimited pleasure

you needed

for survival

James Croal Jackson

The Extraction

I know the title makes you think at once of spies and the Cold War, of dangerous trips, facing multiple dangers, to wrest a brilliant nuclear scientist from enemy hands, to even sneak through the Berlin Wall to extract vital information, bringing John Le Carré novels back to life.

Alas, nothing so exciting and romantic. The extraction I refer to is of one of my teeth.

Alas, I had to part with a bit of me that had been mine since I was a child. And the tooth knew it, hung on for dear life, dug its heels in.

*I don't want to leave this comfortable mouth,
so familiar to me, and besides, it's hardly my
fault that I ended up a breeding ground of infection.
I would hardly soil my own home, now would I?
That was the fault of the dastardly dentist who dared
to hack off one of my roots, leaving me only two.
But I hung on for years and would not relinquish
my grip until a competent surgeon coaxed me
out of her mouth just last week. I wonder if they
heard my scream as I let go and braved the world,
naked and alone, exposed to curious eyes?*

Now I walk like a goat on a mountain, missing
ballast on the left, the wind whistling through the
miserable gap, my own Rio Grande Gorge, my own
Corinth Canal, cheek flapping in the breeze when I
speak, like a pretty lace curtain on a summer's day.

Gone my stalwart defenses, my battlements
breached, no longer impregnable to massed
enemies waiting to invade my tender oral cavity,
my inner being exposed and vulnerable.

Strangest of all though, is the change this loss
has wrought upon my speech. Whereas before
I spoke with proper English accent, hailing as I
do from Perfidious Albion, now I speak the
loose-lipped language of West Texas.

Alas.

Susan P. Blevins

Enough

today was one of millions
of days I needed to be alone

a cloud of stars outshining
the world on the eve of its end

the dishwasher cycles through
around its own reality again

forget the parables
your knees are cold

here's an elegy
so many mothers giving

to children we want
to please them

James Croal Jackson

The Sophomores Study Grammar: A Found Poem

Why do we have to study grammar? We already know
how to speak and understand each other.

You expect us to learn all of this in one unit?
I've never heard of a verbal in my life, only gerbils.

Are you saying particles or pedophiles?
What if nobody ever taught us grammar before?

If nobody says it like that, why do we
have to learn the right way to say it?

Can't you just overlook the little errors? If my mother
can't figure out these clauses, how do you expect me to?

You want us to do all of these in one night?
What if my parents won't let me stay up that late?

You expect us to know how to use a semicolon?
We barely know what one is!

A thing I know about agreement is
you come to a conclusion on differences.

How can this be a derogatory sentence?

I thought words were derogatory.

I asked three people last night if they knew
the comma rules, and not one of them did.

We never stop learning in here do we?

Is it too late to drop this class?

Maryfrances Wagner

Mother's Toast

I grew up with the smell of burning toast
in my nostrils most mornings before
going to school. The open grill, built in to
the old stove, was always dangerous,
burning food almost an inevitability.
No electric toasters in those distant days.

After the smell of burning toast pervaded
the house, came my mother's cry of dismay
as she rushed to the stove to remove the
charred bread from the pan, muttering
recriminations to herself all the while.

Then followed her agitated (truthfully,
hysterical) scraping of the incinerated bread,
waste not want not, always her motto.
My father said nothing, and I thought it was
the normal way of making toast before we
piled on slabs of butter and orange marmalade.

First you burn it, then you scrape it,
then you eat it. Then you pick the charcoal
from between your teeth, or swill your mouth
with copious cups of milky tea. I still like the
smell of charred toast, sixty years later.

Susan P. Blevins

The Hunter and the Home

I was too young to remember the day I brought home the secret to eternal life, but I know I did, because I know that it stank like mold. It did for years, infiltrating the air of my family living room from its perch on a high, cement ledge. I found it at a pet store when I was two, a small, slender frog that my parents let me bring home as my very first pet. I walked down the aisles of the shop on the far end of town, dragging my fingers across the grates of gerbil cages and wooden dog pens until I stopped in front of a wall of glass, floor to ceiling tropical fish and hermit crabs. I chose the aquatic frog, because it was at my eye level, close to the floor. Or anyways, that's how my dad tells it.

It's said that the secret to life is held in the minds of animals, but *I* think it's in the body of a frog. I named him Hunter the night we brought him home, and my parents settled back into the living room to speak quietly across the coffee table, sipping decaf and congratulating themselves on the idea to get me a pet. It would go as planned, Hunter would provide me some companionship, grow old, and die within the span of a few years. I would mourn intensely, but fast, and comprehend some semblance of a life cycle at the end of it. Their teachers' brains at work, they held hands across the table while Hunter croaked in the corner, and I lay fast asleep down the hall. Or anyways, that's how I imagined it.

Hunter was an African clawed frog. This wasn't discovered until seven years had passed, when my dad's suspicion began to mount at the realization that Hunter had outlived the average goldfish. African clawed frogs are fully aquatic amphibians living without tongues, ears, or teeth. They're sleek, fleshy-looking animals that appear slimy even in the water. They're remarkably flat, and more often than not, that flatness distorts their mouths into tight, permanent, smiles. Known more formally as the *xenopus laevis*, literally meaning "strange foot, smooth," they have small, translucent claws on their back toes. Most notably, they are often kept as pets or laboratory subject animals due to their incredible

resilience. In other words, they are ugly axolotl-like beasts that live well into their thirties. When I heard this news as a nine year old, it sounded a lot to me like Hunter was just going to live forever.

My mom took to joking that I'd developed a torturous inability to cope with endings from Hunter's apparent immortality around that time. She said this when I made her nervous by never hugging her goodbye, or when she found my spirits to be abnormally average at funerals.

"I swear that damn frog stunted Rebecca!" I once overheard my mom say to my aunt after a wake. I stood in the far corner of the room at a table with my oldest cousin, poking holes through a tablecloth with a toothpick. But in truth, I was only eleven, didn't know the great aunt that had died, and was thrilled for a chance to see my family. It was, if nothing else, a joyous affair. Still, I tuned in across the low hum of the funeral home just in time to hear my dad sigh, "Victoria, it doesn't work that way."

"I know that, I'm just making a joke, Stan," she replied flatly. In this unusual curtness, I could feel the conversation disintegrate. I turned my attention back to helping my cousin drive a toothpick through the wholesale tablecloth, watching the splintery end of it pull through and disappear on the other side, hardly leaving a visible trace behind.

In another four years I was asleep, stretched across the back of my dad's car. We hadn't even hit Omaha along the trip by the time I woke up to the sound of water sloshing over the backseat and soaking through my pants. My father sat up front, swearing through his teeth, and swinging the station wagon into some gravel on the side of the road. I was already unbuckling my seatbelt when more water erupted from the five-gallon tank as he slowed to a stop, speckling the back of his seat with lukewarm water. I leaned over to look down

into what was left in the tank. In the churning leftovers, Hunter swayed until the rocking stopped.

My dad and I cleaned up the mess wordlessly, him overturning a plastic jug into the emptied tank, me placing Hunter back into the water and drying my hands on the legs of my pants. Cars flew by on 80, bouncing early-June sun at us and illuminating the roadside scene in rotating flashes. It wasn't even hot yet, not real hot, but the warmth rising off the asphalt made me wish I'd worn my shoes instead of packing them in the trunk. We finished the road trip to Nevada in record time, though I decided to stay awake for the rest of it.

The next day at dinner, my mom broke the silence when she asked us how the long trip had gone. I could tell by the way she chewed faster that she hadn't expected a genuine response when my dad tried to joke about the mishap.

"That little frog is invincible," he laughed while my mom stared out of the screen door, bringing a forkful of green beans to her mouth with emptiness in her vision. She'd already argued with my dad about bringing the frog on vacation. There was nothing more to say.

In age, Hunter was a mere two years behind me at thirteen. Much to everyone's dismay (save for my dad's) Hunter had not yet died by that summer, not even when he nearly went spilling out of his enclosure on his thirteenth journey to the family reunion in Reno. Surely, it would've been a fatality for any other kind of aquatic animal. It was then that we all decided that Hunter would outlive each and every one of us, so I chose to come to terms with it, him being the closest thing to a sibling I ever had in that quiet house. When we weren't trapped on top of one another, dancing around Hunter's tank on the floor of that old cabin, we were retreating into the corners of my childhood home in Madison. I left it when I was eighteen, genuinely believing that I would miss Hunter more than my parents as I chose to end that era of my life.

But the evening before I left, my dad walked into our living room to find me standing over Hunter's tank in the dark. I wanted to be alone, but didn't protest when he settled,

leaning into the doorframe. I was feeding Hunter, pinching brown pellets out of a plastic bottle and sprinkling them over his head. He'd launch like a torpedo at the food when it hit the surface of the water, kicking upwards and using his arms to thrash the food into his mouth with a mighty, primal urgency. His body, barely larger than the palm of my hand, was capable of bubbling and splashing water across the base of my arms, still dangling in the tank. This happened daily, every time he ate.

"Guess I'll be the one feeding him from now on," my dad said, spooking me.

"Think you're up for the job?" At this, he laughed and sank into the edge of our sofa, resting his feet on the coffee table in front of him.

"Do you remember why you named him Hunter?" he asked, flipping on a lamp over his shoulder. I shook my head no, dropping another pellet into the tank.

"You were two, almost three, actually. And we'd gotten him from that shitty little pet store down the road, you know, right before it closed down. So when we brought him back here, you were feeding him for the first time, and we asked you what you wanted to name him."

At that, I did remember standing at the edge of the coffee table where my dad's feet were resting then, but with my nose pressed to the glass of the tank. It was only a half-gallon then. Hunter, only the size of a copper penny. When my dad found out that African clawed frogs grew according to the size of their tanks, he brought home a bigger aquarium.

"And I guess you saw him chasing all the food around like a maniac, like he does now, and you thought he was hunting for it like he was still in the wild. So you named him Hunter."

I sat down in the chair across from him, but kept my eyes on the tank. I couldn't gauge what the story warranted, I didn't know what he wanted. I thought maybe I should say goodbye, tell him I was ready to start college, thank him, what for I couldn't say, or provide anything at all in return. But as I perched at the edge of my armchair, I decided that I didn't want to say any of that, as close as I was, in

fear of finalizing my time under that roof. So I watched him twiddle his thumbs, callus around callus, until my vision blurred. Then, I stood up to go to bed and charged out of the fading yellow light of the room with a muted “goodnight.” When I walked out, the only remaining sound was the small, choral song of Hunter croaking.

I was headed to start college down at Chapel Hill University for a degree in psychology, which was coincidentally my dad’s alma mater. I knew very little about his own undergraduate life, but I had once heard from him that for a while, he got deeply involved in an art major before he switched to education. However, he didn’t graduate with it after failing out of an Illustration 101 class. As the story goes, the whole ordeal was over a single graphite self-portrait. It was still collecting dust in our basement when I found it, likely hidden downstairs by my mom when deciding between throwing it in the trash and keeping it on display. It was about two feet long behind a plastic mount. By the time I discovered it, I had been at school for a couple of years without ever hearing about it.

I struggled to describe the facial expression he drew in its entirety, but in a word, it was dopey. The kind of lopsided that only could’ve come from real, directed effort on my dad’s part. While it was technically realistic, some of the features were just off enough to alter the credibility of the entire thing. He was a sophomore at Chapel Hill University when he was asked to produce a self-portrait in place of a final exam. But in pulling a move much like many of my own, he saved that vital assignment until the last minute. But he cared about the piece, so he gave it his very best, staying up straight through the night to finish it. In fact, he spent so much time on the upper half of the portrait, the face, shoulders, and torso, that he completely neglected the bottom half, his legs draped over a barstool.

When I looked closely at that top half, the care was evident. It was all so meticulous, the kind that hurts to look at. His low-set brow bone sent a false shadow down over his nose, and the shading was neat and tight. The close hem of his t-shirt was painstaking, and the shoulders it was draped across were too angular to belong to anyone in our family. The eyes were unsettling, filled in dark and small,

as if he’d died and come back to life. But then, there was the bottom half. It was nothing short of a penciled shit-storm, hardly resembling legs relaxed at the knee, an unbalanced stool, and his own clasped hands across one leg. A chaotic, grey mess of sharp edges and lines that seemed to twitch out of place if stared at for too long. In fact, I realized that I could see the exact moment where he ran out of time that night, at the base of his ribcage, just below the sternum.

My dad told me all of this on Christmas Eve, just about a week before flying back down south. It was the night I found it, too. Similar to the evening before I’d left home, we sat across from one another in the living room, Hunter croaking in the corner.

“What did your professor say?” I asked him, moving my feet closer to the burning logs in the fireplace before us. He chuckled, shaking his head.

“He said, and I remember this word for word... he said, ‘Stan, the top half looks like a little turd! The bottom, though, is visionary.’ And that was that!” he said.

“But you finished it, didn’t you?” I asked.

“The class? The portrait? Sure I did.” He paused to look at it where I’d set it on the arm of the sofa next to him. “But it was garbage, Rebecca. I didn’t sleep that night, either. Sometimes it’s better to leave things unfinished.”

The next week, I hugged my parents goodbye at the airport security gate and nearly marched through it without looking back. By then, I was seasoned at those departures, no longer naïve enough to linger. The more I did, the longer the flight would feel. It always went like that.

“Becca, go safe. We love you,” my mom always told me, fidgeting with the key ring in her hands. My dad echoed her, running a hand through his hair. Both of them standing before me, none of us touching. Then a frenzied “okay, bye,” from me, and a stiff hug to both of them. But the time after that Christmas, I stood for a moment longer before hugging them, hovering with my backpack thrown over one shoulder. The airport lights shone heavily, and I found myself studying both of their faces.

They had aged visibly since I'd lived at home, losing some of the sweetness in their cheeks. My mother, eyes always darting, had acquired a new wrinkle punctuating the space between her eyebrows. But my dad's complexion had done something startling, his eyes seeming to fall deeper into his head, pronouncing his brow bone in a new, jutting manner. He had recently started treatment for glaucoma, something that had been eating away at the corner of his vision for years, and while he retained some eyesight, it looked like he was staring straight through me. He'd grown a bit gaunt too, somehow teasing his facial profile into asymmetry. I blinked, in awe of the idea that as a young adult, my father had accidentally seen the future of his face. I wondered if he'd seen the rest of it too, the wife who liked some goddamn peace and quiet, the daughter who never called home, and the frog who made the whole house smell like pond scum all the time.

When I hugged them, I almost felt the words "I love you too," slip out, but I stopped. It felt too certain, and I didn't want to know what was on the other side. I fell asleep on the plane later that day, and dreamed of my dad, pencil in hand, furiously drawing the finishing touches on the breastbone of his own self-portrait before descending into the chaos of scribbles.

For Hunter, moments of neglect came and went, years passed, and he slowly lost his eyesight, which was something that I didn't know frogs could do. I called home between classes at my new graduate school once to ask them if I could come home for spring break, and that's when I heard the news. My dad stopped mid-sentence to listen to my mother berate him, sounding more like a gurgle through the receiver than an actual person.

"Will you *drop it*, Victoria?" he screamed, "He needs to eat."

"What was that about?" I asked, feeling my grip tighten around the pencil I'd been tapping on my desk and stifling a laugh.

"Hunter is going blind so he can't see his food anymore. Your mother thinks we should let him starve," he said.

It made perfect sense that my dad had grown more deeply attached to Hunter than my mom and I ever did. After all, Hunter was a

perfect companion in so many more ways than we were. He didn't need to go on walks during the icy northern winters and his food cost virtually nothing. Perhaps my dad felt a private solidarity in their mutually crumbling vision, a kind of backwards reminder to him that sometimes things end in pieces instead of all at once. First the eyes, then who's to say what's next? He was technically a far better listener than my mother, and was consistently simpler company. Perhaps most vitally, he was more responsive than I ever was. Every day was silent in that house, except for the sound of Hunter's song idling around his tank. It sat on the edge of a built-in planter near the fireplace, all beige cement and green, vining plants engulfing his aquarium. It looked primordial enough to have been there since the beginning of time, and at the rate Hunter was surviving, would probably last until time stopped. No wonder my dad liked him better.

But admittedly, the sibling rivalry was kept to a minimum, since in times of turbulence Hunter and I were neglected similarly. When my grandmother died later that year, my dad spent weeks out of state to arrange her funeral and care for her condo. When my mom finally got around to calling me with the news days later, it was too late for me to get back up north in time to say goodbye. In a timid rage I came close to shouting at her, crying, asking her why she'd forgotten to tell me, but decided against it. On that same call, she told me that she'd been left alone in the house with Hunter. She lowered her voice, even though there was no one else at home to hear her.

"I haven't fed that damn frog since your father left," she said. I brought my phone down to my side, nearly hanging up, but raised it to my ear again. She continued.

"Maybe if I just say I forgot—"

"I don't wanna hear this," I interrupted, "and I think you better feed him." I heard her laugh from somewhere deep in her, somewhere I was unfamiliar with, before she changed the subject and moved on. Hunter lived to see my dad's return.

But what *did* end next was my parents' marriage. As surprising as those closings felt in the moment, they never shaped up that way in my memory. It felt embedded every time I

looked back after that, as if they had never been a couple at all. No western vacations, no chats over the coffee table, no years in Wisconsin. They broke the news to me just one year after that phone call with my mom. I was home for the week of the Fourth of July, calling off from my internship at a North Carolina psychiatric hospital. I'd spent so much of my life the past years working on my PhD, and I took the long holiday as a gift to myself, a chance to spend a solid mass of time with my friends and family. But I was quick to see that something had gone awry in the house. A seemingly harmless bicker between my parents at the neighborhood Fourth of July cookout escalated into a full-blown screaming fit, my father turning the color of a beet while my mom waved her arms, bits of corn flying off of the paper plate she was holding. What the argument was about, I couldn't say. I tuned in late like I had at the funeral years previous, and was dragged away by the wrist like a child as my mother stormed out. It was anyone's guess as to what finally broke her, be it something miniscule like the botched bedroom renovation or my father's decided ignorance of his own worsening eyesight. Or even the loss of his mother sending him into isolation, all in his inability to let go of anything, ever, especially my mom. But my father gallantly took it upon himself to try to give Hunter to Robert, our next-door neighbor the very next day. Somewhere in his spiraling reasoning, he decided that Hunter was the concentrated source of her woes. Unfortunately, not even Robert or his young children could figure out how to love Hunter just as much as my dad did, so just a few days later, he was back on his living room ledge, singing straight through the night.

It was the following day that my parents cornered me at my desk as I paged through old family photo albums, both of them sitting on the edge of my bed to face me.

"Becca, love, your father and I need to tell you something."

The discussion to follow was quick, bringing me into a memory from just months previous when my mom had come to visit me down south. It was something she'd started doing more frequently, which I tried my hardest to write off as her post-retirement boredom, but somewhere in me, I knew better than that.

She'd grown sharper over the years in the soft edges of that house. There were these things I couldn't quantify until long after I'd packed up and left, nestled safely away at school. There were things like taking the long way home just to go for a drive, going out west more regularly to visit her sisters, coming down to me for long weekends, of course, and trying to pawn Hunter off to her colleagues. Simply, she was done. Her afternoons in Raleigh with me were quiet in the handful of times she came. She sat on the far end of the futon in my living room, stiff against its backrest, tapping away at the screen of her phone. Those damp hours would advance into evenings of moping over loud, polished bars. On one of her last visits, I watched her study a cocktail menu before casting it aside and ordering a bottle of merlot instead. The two hours that passed were too unremarkable to recall, but as we drained our way to the bottom of the night, she stopped in the middle of listening to me talk about what some childhood friend of mine was doing to rub her eyes slowly, using her dominant left hand to knead the space around her nose. I stopped talking at the loss of her interest.

She grinned then, revealing a set of teeth turning purple with the wine, made even darker by the rustic, orange light bulb hanging above us.

"How do you feel about me moving to Nevada?" she said suddenly. I knew she wasn't asking. "Aunt Caroline would really love the company, I think."

"You'd never get dad to leave that house, mom," I said, but I saw that I was too late. I was digging deep, letting my voice waiver as I mined for some available tinge of hurt. But she'd made her decision. The flicker that had been in her bloodshot eyes all night zeroed in on me when I spoke. Instead of replying, she was beaming while she waved the bartender over to close out. She was beaming when she signed the bill, beaming out of the window of the back of a taxi I called for us, and beaming when she crawled into my bed, turning out my light as I closed the door behind me to sleep on my sofa, my feet at the vacant end she'd sat at earlier. As I drifted off, I reflected that I knew with inevitability that my dad joining her in this was not a deal breaker this time.

I slept fitfully, as I always did when she visited me. When I moved into the place a few years before that, she'd suggested that I invest in some curtains for the living room, but I'd ignored her. I regretted it always, as soon as the dusty lights of the city drew themselves upwards across my walls, my ceiling, my futon, and me, illuminated warmly. I jolted awake close to three in the morning that night at the sound of my refrigerator groaning to life and noticed that I'd been sleeping on my back, both arms crossed before the plane of my sternum like I was ready to be mummified and preserved for eternity.

I guess it wasn't Hunter after all. My mom moved to her childhood neighborhood outside of Reno not long after that, and my dad stayed in the small, slumping house that felt like it had been that empty since the beginning. It should've been no surprise to a single soul that it was my father who got to keep Hunter in the arrangement.

Whenever I visited home after that, I found myself tiptoeing through the halls a little more than usual, afraid that my very presence would awake the understanding in my dad that all things must end. Even Hunter the Eternal, who was still well and alive at upwards of twenty-some years old then, would need to leave us at some point. But not yet. I fed him whenever I was there, watching him lunge at and miss the pellets, relying only on vibrations in the water to navigate. Every now and then he bit my finger in assumption that it was food. We would both retract, me shaking the dirty water from my hand and him sinking backwards. He always waited like that, arms and legs outstretched. He would hover like that for hours, hanging in limbo between the bottom of the enclosure and the surface of the water. Feeling no real current, he could just hang motionlessly forever, and with a track record like his, I figured he just might.

Claire Martin

Birth Month

A night in June;
the new moon
shines away the dark;
lovers spoon
on verandas,
porch rockers,
from here to Sheboygan;
manna from the
tunnel of love.

My old hide, bed-bound,
wrapped in the sheets;
calendar on the wall,
Marilyn M.
spreads
her excellent legs,
blank as a target.

We lie ruined.

A June day.
Time and again
the phone rings;
no answer.
Hear the grasshoppers,
the thundering frogs;
it's summertime
the landscape glows green,
the grass, the trees,
overblown by the wind.
Yellow as gold
love seems to be,
says the bee,
and who knows yellow
better than he?
Love, a honeyed
yellow cup.

We live for weeks
lying down, loving;
our breath, one breath,
a gasp, a sigh,
a warning cry,
a bridge to sleep;
even in the act
our promises kindness
to a distant friend.

I lie there so,
with you,
with your love
big as the sky;
its passing
a passing like
swallows flying
in the sunlight;
beautiful buds appear
in cherry trees,
new pinkwet pops out
all over.

I'm deep in
the mine shaft,
deep in the
the sweet dangerous
base of my heart,
but I see you,
I see you all,
a band of horses
moon stampers
in June

month of a new life.

Jack D. Harvey

as heavy as|water

mere dust shadow|cascade of discourse

tired caveat|kicking dead horse

drowning perfume|mean girl blues

mud front teeth|paper weight shoes

dirty bathroom ode|truth is obtuse

rusty fire escape| loop the quiet noose

Mela Blust

Me as Terrorist

Lined up to enter traffic court
To argue or plead. My bag
Beneath the electronic beam
Suddenly seized and dumped.

The severe cop regards me sternly.
A tiny silver pen knife the company bestowed
As a souvenir at the Christmas party
Gleams on the rubber belt like an evil eye.

I claim ignorance or innocence
One as complicit as the other.
In this age of suspicion, I'm as likely
A terrorist as anyone. A German Shepherd
Sniffs me over. Bystanders retreat

From a woman who might have a bomb
In her boot or a pistol in her jacket.
A woman with a knife,
Its size doesn't matter. I am judged
And convicted of a story
That I'll regale friends with over coffee,
Laughing, until their faces glaze with boredom,
As at last, I realize
The impassive trooper, tall and resolute
As the wall of China
Isn't, even a little bit,
Funny.

Joan Colby

bone requires bone #57

weigh the confusion show the unaccepting how much their block is costing the speed of progress make reparations a real thing it doesn't have to be fair the retaliation the balancing should cost should hurt should take a leg out nobody doesn't owe the violence doesn't demand more violence but it does demand defenestration i want gravel in the hair of every guy that hit me the checks should be written and given elsewhere but i demand the visual

Six Mile Pond

The winter pond
a floor of clear ice.
One rainy day
a crack of black water
opens up,
so black, so quiet,
creases the ice,
wetness so sleek,
seems dark, dead,
but a ripple here,
a shadow under
of young spring.

The pond rim
in the low morning light
dark as slate
above the melting snow.

Winter holds but
the crack widens;
the water shows black,
reaches the snow,
wet finger tracing
the warmth in the cold,
waking the frozen
and indifferent earth.

Jack D. Harvey

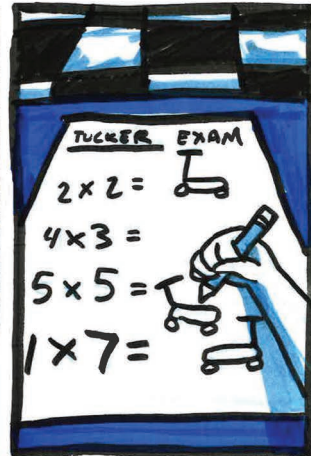
Punk 4 a Day

DIANE
HOFFMAN











The Mood Blue

Sulky, drinking whiskey in an azure world
and feral, beryl impulse hit me hard.
Slipping on ecstasy I forgot my royal blues
then I crashed, back down to dark yale.
My mood swings are nothing to joke about,
for I go from mania, stumbling to midnight.
Federal self-loathing is my main emotion.
Cerulean depression is like sinking down, down,
into an indigo sea of lacking dopamine.
The navy waves swallow me up and soak into
tear stained aquamarine sheets.
Therapy of sapphire talks and steel pills
never cease the byzantine shifts in my
teal thoughts. She prescribed a vivid
turquoise Prozac and an Egyptian Zoloft
to repress my shallow solemn glum of zaffre.
Everything became a brandeis shade.
My apartment now the flavor of oxford
And my food a swirling Prussian.
How are you today?
Just a little blue.

Aloura Hattendorf

Shots

It happens on normal days.

It happens on days like today,

Days when parents drop off their children,

Days when parents pick up their children.

It happens as you're budgeting and can't make the money stretch,

It happens during an argument with your wife and your yelling drowns

Even these loudest, heaviest news alerts.

It happens when you're raking leaves and the dog jumps in the pile,

And the leaves cascade from a height, and you laugh and laugh.

It happens when you're on a vacation you saved two years for,

And you return to your hotel room and sob into foreign pillows.

It happens when you just - want - the - day - to - be -

Over, and suddenly, it is.

Kelsey Zimmerman

Sis

Metamorphosis

Metamorphosis

Metamorphosis

Next to a gigantic bug

Next to Aristotle

Next to physics

Morpho

Morpho

Morpho

More for us

Morphs with Captain Kirk

Moves yet static still

Sis

Sis

Sis

Like the one

I discovered

When she was ninety

The one my father

Abandoned

Twenty years before

I was born

Charles W. Brice

A Boat

A BOAT



Megan Miazgowicz

I wish

I wish I was a life guard
But people would perish.
I wish I was a banker
But I would lose all the money
I wish I was an airplane
So I could fly like a bird
I wish I was a cat
Then I could sleep all day
I wish I was dog
So I could bark at non existing things
But I am a baker instead
And all I do is make grainy bread.

Attached to a Lamp Post

My shadow went on strike,
decided it would swim with midnight
birds that corner [me] like ghosts
at a penny-ante poker
game. Is the distance
between light and stagnance one dream
or two? I shudder as dawn approaches,
fade into fire.

A.J. Huffman

bone requires bones #56

rummage the monsters take take take

how to: make a mistake

bitter dust moth he was coming
round
puts on gloves to touch because:
evidence.
fought me arms round tight
fleck of sunlight
whitewashed fencepost I am
bent over like a maid.
catch me in a whirlwind with
panties agape; later,
we watch particles
land on foreign tendrils of hair.
control panel beeps:
recording, recording
I only bit once;
spit twice.

Mela Blust

Futurama

Archival footage from 1939—
Flushing Meadow, Trylon and Perisphere,
the imagined world of tomorrow,
streamlined, modern and clean.

Now, at her little table
I gently cut Mother's nails
knowing that it is the touch itself
not the trim which matters most.

They sneaked off to the City,
yet unhitched and scandalous.
Smooth skinned sweethearts, hand in hand
among the fedored, skirted throngs.

I've sought old films and photos, searching.
(And technicolor newsreels, well preserved.)
Is that familiar pair among the crowd
where I can spy them, together again?

I have sometimes asked about the trip.

She said, once, they saw a robot who smoked
and bought popcorn to share while strolling.

I haven't mentioned my research.

Phil Huffy

Tid Bit

End of yet another day
The cycle cycled
The being having been
The is become was
Night pulling up her covers
Of sleep
Sleeping
Into sleep
Grace moving gracefully
As sometimes it does
In cycles cycling

Michael Whelan

Risky

“Oh shit!” Tina hissed, “someone’s coming!” She pushed me off her.

“No *way*,” I said, “they’re only here on weekends.” But Tina was right — a car was fast approaching, heading for the house at the end of the dirt road.

I vaulted into the front seat like an Olympic gymnast, yanked on my board shorts and started the motor, as Tina scrambled to find her T-shirt in the back. But it was on the floor in the front with the rest of her clothes – and, I thought, the bag of coke we’d been snorting.

Before I could reach down for her clothes and get going, a silver Lexus stopped alongside our Range Rover – that is, her grandfather’s Range Rover. A gray-haired man in a white polo shirt sat at the wheel. On the passenger side, a well-coifed blonde woman opened the window. I’d never met them, but I knew who they were: the Haskells. I serviced their pool behind the house on Tuesdays when they were always in the city.

“What the hell are you doing in our driveway?” she yelled. “Are you kids crazy, or just stoned?”

Still naked in the back, Tina ducked down as the woman began snapping photos with her iPhone. I managed to make a fast U-turn and head up the dirt road, but the woman was still leaning out the window, clicking away. “We’re calling the cops,” she shouted after us.

I turned sharply off the dirt road onto the street, passing the discreet sign that read “Haskell. Private Road – No Tres-

passing.”

“Jesus, Kyle, that was close,” Tina said, now in the front pulling on her black and orange Mamaroneck Tigers T-shirt. “What were we thinking doing it there in broad daylight? What if they’d just called the cops without saying anything, and they’d found us with the?”

I grinned. “Relax, Teen, we got away safe. And you have the blow, right?”

Tina reached in the pockets of the shorts she still hadn’t put on. Empty. She felt frantically around the front seat, turned on her knees and, bare bottom pointing up, looked everywhere in the back. Nothing. “Oh fuck, no! You must have picked it up, didn’t you?”

Like hell I did. I was sure that after doing two lines and before rushing to get out of our clothes and into the back seat, I’d given it to her. It hit us both at the same time: in our frenzy, we must have dropped the plastic bag onto the dirt road.

I offered to go back for it.

“Are you out of your mind?” Tina said. “That woman said she was calling the cops. And she took pictures, including our license plate. I’m really scared.” Tina scared? Somehow, I doubted it, but it was the closest she’d come to losing her cool in the month since we met.

I tried to reassure her. Chances were no one would ever find the stuff on that road. Anyway, the Haskells didn’t know I was their pool guy – they’d never laid eyes

on me. And the Range Rover had Florida plates.

“We’ll be OK,” I said. But I wasn’t at all sure we would be. A run-in with the cops was the last thing I needed.

Up to then, my summer in the Hamptons had gone amazingly well. I’d heard about the great surfing on the east end of Long Island and no one there knew about my California court record. So I figured I was Mr. Anonymous when I arrived in town in May in my red Toyota pickup, surfboard in the back, and immediately lucked into the perfect job – cleaning backyard pools for Vic’s Pool Service six hours a day. That left plenty of time for surfing and hanging out in bars where I could meet unattached, preferably hot women. I’d found a cheap room over the bakery on Main Street, so I could finally start saving to show my juicehead father I could pay my own way back to college.

Don’t get me wrong, Dad worked hard to build his contracting business while I loafed through high school. He was always a drinker, but after Mom died, he drank every night at home, and I suppose even more on his weekend fishing trips to Big Bear Lake. And he had some temper. I can’t tell you how many times he yelled at me, called me a lazy good-for-nothing, and sometimes laid his hands or his fists on me.

Maybe that’s why I turned to surfing. The power of the waves, the solitude, the realization that this, at least, was something I could do well. Of course it also got me away from my Dad.

“You’d better not fuck it up,” he told me when I got into Cal State despite my mediocre grades and disciplinary record, “or you’re on your own.” I fucked it up: academic probation after just two semes-

ters, and then 60 days in the slammer for a second DUI conviction.

This summer, though, I’d managed to stay clear of trouble; that mess in L.A. seemed not only 3000 miles away, but far in the past. OK, I was on my own, but I was only 20. I still had my whole life in front of me.

Then I met Tina.

It was early morning – before eight. I was surfing and she was running on the beach, clad only in a sports bra and bikini bottom. Her auburn hair was pulled up and tied back. From beyond the breakers, I watched her until she’d done at least a mile. Then I maneuvered so my board caught the crest of a wave, hit the air and came down in a perfect landing. I aimed for the exact spot on the beach where she had stopped running and stood staring at me – at my long blond hair, at the rivulets of water dripping from my shark’s-tooth necklace, at the mermaid and the breaking wave tattooed on my arms.

“Hi there!” I said as my board slid onto the sand and I stepped off. I eyed her, taking in all she had on display. “I’m Kyle,” I said. “Who might you be?”

“Tina,” she replied, eyeing me back.

“Do you surf?”

“Never tried, but it sure does look like a great trip,” she said, flashing a smile.

“You should let me teach you.”

“Cool! When?”

“No time like the present. Come on.” I pushed the board back into the water, sat on the front, and motioned for her to get on behind me.

“OK, let’s go for it,” she said as she sat down and wrapped her arms around my waist.

Sexy Tina, whom I hadn’t been able to keep my eyes or my hands off since that morning. Confident Tina, who was spending the summer at her grandfather’s beach house but otherwise lived with her mother in Larchmont, where she was captain of the Mamaroneck High cross-country team. Super-smart Tina, an honor-roll student and Westinghouse Science Competition finalist for her project on artificial intelligence, who never went anywhere without her iPad. Precocious Tina, not yet 17 — she’d skipped a grade or two — who was headed early decision for Princeton or Yale.

So what was Tina doing, in the middle of a Wednesday afternoon a month later, getting it on with me on the Haskells’ private road? Well, she was also wild Tina, eager to try things she hadn’t done before. And rich Tina, who always had plenty of her grandfather’s cash — including the bundle she’d spent on the high-grade snow we’d been snorting. Risky? Maybe so, but I had learned that Tina liked taking risks, so like an idiot I’d gone with it.

I turned onto the circular drive in front of Ben Miller’s huge Dune Road house, stopping behind my battered red pickup. That wreck was a glaring contrast to his gleaming green Range Rover with its Florida vanity plate: “**GOP 1.**” In fact, you could say everything about me contrasted with Ben Miller’s place.

Tina had taken me inside one afternoon when she was sure her grandfather would still be on the golf course, or imbibing at the 19th hole. I guess she just wanted to show me how they lived. “Don’t touch anything,” she’d said as we entered. I got the idea.

The homes where I cleaned pools, like the Haskells’, were pretty swanky, but nothing like this. The front door opened on a huge sunken living room with three skylights and all-white designer furniture. To the left, an open kitchen glowed with the afternoon sun shining through the skylight onto the Italian marble countertops and stainless steel appliances. Tina grabbed two Diet Cokes from the fridge and led me through the sliding doors onto the ocean-front deck.

The green and white striped umbrellas on the deck were open, as were the matching umbrellas down the steps around the pool. The sea-green chaise longues, six on the deck, six around the pool, were all empty, except on each chaise by the pool was a neatly folded green and white striped beach towel. On a table under one of the umbrellas sat a large ice cooler stocked with six bottles of Blue Moon and an uncorked bottle of Pinot Grigio, and six wine glasses. “It’s like this every afternoon,” Tina told me. “‘Just in case,’ he always says.”

“Just in case what?” I asked.

“Whatever, or whoever, comes along,” Tina replied. It was the way Ben Miller did things. It was exactly the same at his place in Palm Beach, she told me, except there, the umbrellas and deck chairs were navy blue, and the striped beach towels were red and white. Things like that were how he got to be the most successful real estate developer in South Florida, how he ended up picking Republican governors, senators, even presidential hopefuls. Plus a few shady shenanigans Tina didn’t want to tell me about. “I loathe him,” she said, “but at least I have summers away from my mother.”

Sipping her Diet Coke, Tina walked around the pool and down the staircase

onto the beach. I followed like an obedient puppy. The white sand was hot under our bare feet, and the Atlantic stretched out of sight in each direction, diamonds of sunlight glistening on the waves. I gazed down the beach, ignoring the places where summer storms had eroded the dunes, looking for the spot where we'd met that morning. I then looked back up at the sprawling house and the deck with its green and white umbrellas. It occurred to me that I could do worse than sticking with this man's granddaughter.

And why not? No girl who ever took an interest in me had what Tina had – not just rich, but smart, great-looking and, of course, daring. I'd come to think of her as part of my new life, not just a summer fling. In the fall, I would find a job and a place to stay somewhere near Larchmont and then . . . who knew?

Back on the circular drive that Wednesday afternoon, Tina jumped out of the Range Rover and headed toward the house. I figured this time I'd be allowed to touch something – Tina, at least – and, on one of the green chaise lounges, we could finish what we'd started back on the dirt road. So I came around the car and stopped her. I slid my arms slowly under her T-shirt, the way she always liked.

"Let's go inside and we can"

"No. Just give me the keys and go."

I'd never seen her like that, so I tried again. Old Ben wouldn't be back from the golf club for at least an hour. We had plenty of time. I took both her hands, and moved

them slowly across my bare chest. That was usually all it took, but not this time.

"I said no. Not now. Not here. I'll call you later." But I recognized the look in her eyes. It said anything but "no."

"Later? Where?"

"I'll reserve a room at the Dune Grass. I doubt they're full for tonight. Just keep your phone on. Now move!"

A motel? Looked like Tina meant to take this to a whole new level. For that, I could wait a few hours. So I got into my pickup and slipped on my old Hang Ten tank top. As I drove away, I pictured Tina sprawled on a king-sized bed at the Dune Grass Motel.

Then I thought about the plastic bag lying on the dirt road. It would be dicey, but it was worth a try to retrieve the evidence. So I drove back, parking on the main road about 50 yards from the Haskells' private drive. Looking around to make sure no one was there, I crept down the dirt road to where we'd parked. On all fours, I crawled around like a land crab, rummaging in the dirt and poking through the underbrush on both sides of the road. Zilch.

I tried to remember whether there had been a good breeze blowing off the ocean back on Dune Road. Yes, I told myself, there had been. And the plastic bag was almost empty, so with any luck, the same breeze had disposed of it. My luck had changed here in the East, so I had reason to hope.

Three hours later, I was downing the last of a Red Stripe at Joe's Grill. On the bar sat my phone, waiting for Tina's call. The TV over the bar was tuned to CNN, flashing headlines about yet another storm in Florida, and the bartender was grum-

bling about it. “Used to be I could count on work down there in the winter,” he said as he opened another bottle and slid it across the bar. “Now, I’ll be lucky if the bars aren’t all washed out to sea.” Picking up the frosty bottle and taking a swig, I didn’t notice the gray-haired man slip onto the next barstool.

It was Haskell. “Damn scary, isn’t it?” he said, pointing to the TV screen. “Somebody needs to do something about it, don’t you think?”

I turned to face him. He wore a pink Brooks Brothers button-down, cuffs turned back, pressed chinos and Gucci loafers.

“You look a little different with your clothes on,” he added.

“Huh?” I said. I decided to play dumb. “Do I know you?”

“Maybe not,” Haskell replied, “but I know who you are. You’re the kid from Vic’s who cleans our pool — you weren’t hard to find. You stick out around here like that whale they found washed up on the beach last month.” He pointed through the window at my Toyota parked outside. “Not too many guys in this town with long blond hair and tattoos driving a red pickup with a surfboard. But you weren’t driving that tub this afternoon when you and your pretty girlfriend dropped something on my driveway. Something in a small plastic bag?”

I quickly put down my beer and stared at him. “Listen,” I managed to sputter, “I can explain.”

“I don’t give a shit about your explanations,” Haskell said. “The way I see it, you both could be in big trouble.” He mentioned trespassing on his property, the stuff in the plastic bag, and something

about “that girl” being under-age. He said he had a buddy on the town police force who’d be very interested in all that. If he asked his cop friend to trace the California plates on my Toyota, he had a hunch he’d find out I had “a small rap sheet,” and, well, he didn’t have to say more. I could feel my chest tighten – the kind of dread I hadn’t felt since that time Dad came after me with his belt.

“What are you getting at?” I asked.

“Listen, son, I know that young lady and believe me, she’s not worth it. But I’m not interested in her – or you, either. It’s her grandfather I want to see.”

“Her *grandfather*?”

“Yep. Ben Miller. You were driving his Range Rover this afternoon, right?”

“But, how did you ...?”

“We’re members of the same golf club – not that we’ve ever played together. The bastard wouldn’t give me the time of day. But he makes sure everyone in the club knows he’s a big-shot real estate tycoon down in Florida and how powerful he is. Likes to show off what he has. Including, by the way, your little girlfriend. Brings her to cocktail parties at the club, in expensive, sexy dresses and glitzy jewelry I’m sure he pays for. Different outfit every time. You should see how the old farts there ogle her. She loves it.”

I wasn’t buying it, at least not the part about Tina. I took a long gulp of my beer and said nothing.

“Look, as far as I’m concerned,” Haskell said, “you do a good job on my pool. So if you want to keep your job and

stick around this town, don't force me to make that call. All you have to do is get me together with Ben Miller."

"What? How can I . . . ? Anyway, what do you want with him?"

"That's between him and me," Haskell replied, slipping off the barstool. "I'll be back here tomorrow night at 8. Just get on that phone and see that he's here, too." Then he was gone.

"Another beer?" the bartender asked.

I sat there dumbfounded. Here I'd been trying to figure out how I could meet the rich old geezer, use him as a connection, and now Haskell was demanding that I deliver him up for some . . . I didn't know what.

As I sipped my beer and all this churned in my head, the crashing waves ringtone sounded on my phone. When I picked it up, Tina whispered "Dune Grass, number 104. 15 minutes. Bring a six-pack."

"Listen, Teen, I don't —" But she'd rung off, and when I called back, it went into voice-mail. On the way to the Dune Grass, I considered not stopping for the six-pack, but decided this was going to be fraught enough without having to explain what happened to the beer. I had no idea what we were going to do, but I was sure of one thing: I wanted to stay in town, stay with Tina, keep her in my life.

When I pulled up at the motel, the Range Rover was already parked in front of #104. What a dump, I thought as I walked in. Was this really Tina's concept of a romantic tryst? Then I remembered. She was after chancy, spicy, dodgy, not romantic. But at that moment she was sitting on

the bed, glued to her i-Pad. Why? Maybe it turned her on.

I deposited the six-pack on the nightstand and sat down next to her. As soon as I told her what had gone down at Joe's, Tina jumped up and began pacing what little floor the room afforded.

"I'm telling you, Kyle, I've known Ben all my life. It won't work. He doesn't give a damn about me. He just tolerates me every summer so my mother can go jetting around the world with her latest boyfriend." I thought of what Haskell had said about Tina at golf club parties, but decided not to mention it.

"If Haskell plays that card," Tina added, "I'll get shipped off to my mother in Portofino and there goes my early acceptance at Yale. And you? You'll end up . . . well, I hate to think what would happen to you. You'll just have to tell your friend it's a non-starter."

"That guy's no friend of mine. Or yours either. But I don't think he's kidding around. He's got something up his sleeve involving your grandfather."

"Any idea what it could be?"

I eyed the six-pack – and then Tina.

"Jesus! Can't you think about anything besides sex and booze? What else did the guy say?"

I tried to remember. Tina kept pacing, as I stared out the window at the Range Rover and its Florida license plate. Then it came back to me.

"Wait." I said, "He did say something, just as he came in." I told her how Haskell had pointed to the news on the TV and said somebody needed to do something about storms in Florida. "But what

could that have to do with all this shit?" I asked.

Tina kept pacing, but said nothing.

"Listen," I finally said. "We know his name's Haskell, and we know his address." I nodded at her iPad. "Can't you Google him?"

She glared at me, then looked out the window. When she turned back, there was a new look in her eyes — a look of determination. Nothing like the girl who'd climbed on my surfboard a month ago. She sat down and grabbed the iPad, and her fingers attacked it ferociously. Now, it was my turn to pace.

Minutes later, Tina looked up in triumph.

"Got him," she said. "Jordan Haskell." Turned out Haskell was the CEO of a national environmental consulting firm that specialized in wetland and habitat restoration, ecological planning and design, that kind of stuff. Tina guessed that Haskell could be after a big contract with old Ben — hurricane damage control for his Florida developments or maybe repairing the beach erosion in front of the Dune Road house — and couldn't get Ben to return his calls.

"Or maybe, knowing Ben . . ."

Tina stopped and scrolled down on her iPad. "Maybe it's something more devious than that. Look." She pointed at the screen. "There's an article here about Haskell's firm being targeted in a grand jury investigation down in Florida. Something to do with rigged bids. Just the kind of thing Ben could make go away."

"So how do we get Ben to talk with Haskell? You said he wouldn't do anything to help us — I mean you."

She thought for a moment. "OK, here's what you need to do. Go back to Joe's tomorrow night and just stall the guy. I'll need until at least 9."

"To do what? You're going to get your grandfather over there?"

"No — not tomorrow. It's his poker night, he'll be gone by 7:30. Lucky break."

"What? Exactly how does that help us?"

"It'll give me time to hack into his computer. Try to find something that will impress your buddy. It's risky, but it's our only chance."

So there I sat at Joe's the next night, a Red Stripe and my phone on the bar in front of me and Haskell on the next stool, drinking vodka-and-tonic and watching the Mets. Syndergaard was pitching.

"You look a bit like him," Haskell said, pointing to the screen and then to my blond ponytail, "but I'd say the resemblance ends there. That guy's a winner." He sounded just like my Dad. I shrugged, like I did when my Dad said things like that. My job was to keep Haskell there until Tina finished whatever she was up to.

He looked at his watch. "I said I'd wait until nine," he said, "but now it's quarter past. Guess I have to make that call after all, huh?"

"Look, mister," I replied, "I have no idea what game you're playing, but I told you Tina would have something for you, so she'll be here. Anyway, these drinks are on

me, so have another and watch the game.” I signaled the bartender for another round.

Just then, the crashing waves sounded on my phone. I grabbed it and listened, then smiled and nodded to Haskell.

“She’s on her way. Says she’s got something she thinks you’ll like.”

Ten minutes later, Tina appeared. For an instant, I didn’t recognize her: she was wearing close-cut designer jeans, a white turtleneck and boots; her auburn hair was carefully done in a French twist and she wore make-up — not a lot, but just enough to make her look ten years older. She was carrying a thin manila envelope.

Tina strode up to the bar. Barely nodding at me, she thrust the envelope at Haskell.

“Take a look at these,” she said, “I think you might find what you’re after.”

Haskell turned away from the ballgame, gave Tina a quizzical glance, then took the envelope and opened it. He pulled out about 15 pages of computer screenshot prints and leafed through them. Then he smiled and whistled.

“Holy shit!” he said. “The guy’s a porno junkie. Almost as bad as Anthony Weiner, isn’t he? And he seems to like boys.”

“Satisfied?” Tina asked

“Yep. This should do the trick. Thanks.” Haskell put the papers back in the envelope, took a long drink of his vodka-and-tonic, and stood to go. “You heard the man,” he said to the bartender, nodding at me, “drinks are on him.”

He looked back toward us as he left. “Oh yes,” he added, “my wife said to give you both her regards.”

“Wow!” I said to Tina when he’d gone. “You’re amazing! I can’t believe you pulled it off. How’d you do it?”

“Listen, Kyle,” Tina replied, “that’s going to remain my secret. I took a huge risk. Anyway, it’s all so high-tech you wouldn’t understand if I told you.”

“OK, OK,” I said, “let’s just get out of here.”

“Exactly what I’m about to do,” said Tina, “but you have to stay and pay the check.”

“OK, just wait and I’ll —”

“Uh, uh,” said Tina, “I have a date, and I’m late.”

“A date? Where? Who with?” I imagined someone she’d beguiled at one of those golf club parties. Someone more sophisticated than me, certainly richer.

“Never mind where I’m going,” Tina replied. “You’re not coming with me. In fact, if you want to know the truth, I think it’s time you went back to California — the sooner the better. Your boss can find someone else to clean swimming pools for the rest of the summer.”

“What? After the risks we took to get that creep off our tails?”

“We?” She glared at me. “I’m the one who took all the risks. You think I did it for *you*? For *us*? Give me a break.” She gave me a long look – definitely not like the one I’d seen on the beach that first morning – and walked out.

I was devastated, but she was right about one thing: I was out of my element in this place. Ben Miller, Jordan Haskell, even Tina, played for higher stakes than I could ever afford. If I had proven to myself that I

could get on track, I needed to prove it to Dad, too, and to do it back in California where I'd fucked up in the first place.

But as I went about giving notice to Vic, packing up, and settling my tab at Joe's, one thing kept bugging me. OK, I'm no paragon, but what we'd done, what Tina had done – hacking into her grandfather's computer, invading his privacy, *blackmailing* him for God's sake – just wasn't me. Even if it had saved my ass, I knew it was wrong.

I wanted somebody to understand that, but whom could I tell? Not Tina for sure — she'd relished getting back at her grandfather. If I appeared at the Dune Road house or the golf club, Ben Miller would have me locked up before I could say a word. And Haskell? That “ecological preservation” stuff was all bullshit; Haskell wasn't one of the good guys — he didn't have an ethical bone in his body. No, I'd just have to take my remorse back to California with me and leave these people to their own kind.

Ten days later, I was again nursing a Red Stripe – but this time, I was sitting alone in a booth at Rusty's Surf Ranch in Santa Monica, one of my old haunts. While a Beach Boys song played on Pandora, I was absently flipping through a copy of *USA Today* someone had left behind. When I got to page 11, I slapped the table so hard that the drinkers at the bar turned around and stared.

I was looking at a photo of a large house that had burned to the ground. Even in ruins, I recognized it — it was Ben Miller's. Above the photo was this headline:

ARSON SUSPECTED IN HAMP- TONS FIRE

*Cops Seeking Owner, Fla. GOP
Bigwig*

What the fuck? I read the article under the photo. Seems no one was around when the fire started, tripping the automatic alarm system. It had taken the fire departments of five surrounding towns three hours to put out the blaze. The owner, one Benjamin Miller of Palm Beach, Fla., couldn't be located. Nor could his teenaged granddaughter, who was believed to have been residing with him for the summer. “Anyone with information relevant to this incident” was asked to call an 800 number listed at the end.

I reached for my phone. I certainly did have relevant information. This was my chance to absolve myself. But as I began to dial the number, intending to finger Haskell, I stopped. Did I really have any idea who might have done it? After all, Ben Miller was hardly beyond pulling off an insurance scam. And what about Tina? If the blackmail gambit had backfired, could she have decided to get back at Ben another way? I was incensed at her, but not enough to ruin her life.

I put my phone away and sat there sipping my beer. I thought how glad I was that I was home.

In My Younger Years I Loved the Oboe

Not many people play the oboe.

One day years ago, wanting to draw
it, I hiked two miles to Tower

Records and found the issue moot:

not many musicians cross the Rubicon
toward that woodwind and caress it, nor hoard

tapes of concerts that even a hoarder
won't keep. I didn't find any oboe
pictures, but later saw one of the Rubicon,
an accurate and admirable drawing
I loved so much it made me mute
for a moment. In the foreground, a tower

loomed above the river, towering
over the landscape and the hordes
as an army pushed them into a moat
and a lone figure held an oboe-
like instrument near the draw-
bridge. In it, Caesar crossed the Rubicon

and I decided to cross the Rubicon,
too, and bought the picture of the tower.
Arriving home, I placed it in a drawer,
forgot it, lost for decades in my hoard
of objects connected to the oboe,
rendering my attraction to it moot.

But one night, in a dark mood,
I remembered the picture of the Rubicon
and the man blowing the oboe,
searched for it, knocking down a tower
of paper, and found it buried in the hoard
that hid at the bottom of the drawer:

I studied it, began to draw,
my imitation of the illustration moot:
I should have kept it buried in my hoard,
or tossed it into the depths of the Rubicon.
Depressed, I listened to Cohen's *Tower
of Song*, feeling like a discarded oboe

nobody wants to draw, or the lonely Rubicon,
mute and cold, flowing beside an empty tower
before a horde, nobody in it with an oboe.

David Spicer

The Patch of Tulips I Never Planted

She asks me about the babies that came before her, those tiny knots of flesh and bone
That never came to be, those folded squirrel paws that would never open to hold my hand
Tiny black eyes that never once saw me, I don't know how to tell her how every time
She leaves the house I feel that ache again, remember what it was like to want to have
A tiny warm body in my arms and be denied it again and again,
don't know how to tell her how inconsequential I am
when faced with loss. There were never names

Assigned to those little dreams, those thwarted angels
I never asked for flowers or some memorial or even an acknowledgment
Of what could be. We'll try again. We'll just try again.
I don't say miracle. I don't breathe lucky.
There are so many hopes and dreams poured into
this one little girl
I can barely breathe when she's out of sight.

Holly Day

Christmas Clementine

Past the chocolate coins—beneath the
Trinkets and whirly-mabobs, after
The slinky and stickers—
You lie, round, densely cratered pockmarks,
Soft but firm and oh-so-orange.
Oh my darling, oh my darling,
Clementine, in the depths,
In the darkness of the swiftly falling winter dusk
And the packed snow, you are bright.
A beacon of spring, a tall tale of hope,
Juicy and sweet, if only
I peel back your skin.

Kelsey Zimmerman

trespass

porcelain child her blush stolen

eternity passes in only days

come night we drink;

still feel eat a decade

like magic like a death

bring peace this discomfort

Mela Blust

Remembering How to Build a Fire

Crumple exactly four sheets of newsprint.
Arrange them sentry-like across the floor
of the stove. Brace front and back with larger logs.
Criss-cross with kindling (prefer sassafras).
Touch match to paper. Wait for it to catch.

For twenty years I've only had gas logs
-much cleaner, more convenient. But my dad
long ago taught me the art of building fires,
shaping combustion with an architect's hand,
a pattern soon resolved from heat to ash.

Be careful not to build the fire too high.
Leave the stove door ajar to help it draw
the smoke. Now sit and watch the crackling dance,
the living core of hearth and home and heart:
the edifice that must destroy itself.

These days, my father can't remember much.
His mind tunes in and out, a radio
dialed slightly off the station. Once again
I'm crouching next to him beside the hearth,
eyes stinging as the damp wood smolders down.

Jennifer Davis Michael

Growing Pains

Holy god, change is hard

Even when you want it and your bones have been aching for it,
When your heart has been stringing along your veins,
And your feet flying a few frames ahead.

The door opens, and you sidle through the threshold,
And your skull throbs, wailing against an unfamiliar
Light and knacking for a nap.

Good morning, you, who you were, and who you will be.
Push. Fail. Smile. Bleed. Accept.
Before you know it this too will be commonplace,
Each day a reincarnation of the last,
All your bones aching for what's next.

Kelsey Zimmerman

Three Words

In combo

Killers

I fear to speak

Into the yearn of space between

The first and third

That fist word: *I*

That third: *you*

The second is an IED

Walk on its deceptive

bridge from first to third

And die

Still, like the mad lure

At a high floor

To leap into an enticing void

The three words in my throat

Suicidally grope

For voice to leap speak in tandem

But they meet the muffle

Of the mask

Fear knit

Across my face
To deter the unknowable
Should those three words
Dare ride out aloud on my breath

No! no!
No!
Must not!
Don't dare!

I don't *love* anybody
Never did
Have kept my I forever unglued

But in my keeping
Got glued
Here

Stuck
To death
Entombed in alone

Michael Whelan

Love or Death

On my run yesterday
I saw a dozen roses
at the river's edge.



But they were
actually far
from where
anyone would
see them.



The only reason I
even looked was
because I saw a
couple turtles in
that spot a week
earlier.

The roses, I thought,
could mean only
one of two things:



Love
OR
Death.

I Googled:

mishawaka
riverwalk
drown
death
news

And found this
from 1902:

Mishawaka, IN
Drowning Aug 1902

Indiana | Drownings | 1902

BRIDEGROOM DROWNS
HIS AFFIANCED WIT-
NESSES THE SAD
ACCIDENT

Lost His Life in Swimming
Exhibition

MISHAWAKA, Ind., Aug. 15-
John Bishop, a young man who
came here from Sommers, Wis.,
to marry Miss Alpha Parker,
was drowned here last
night in view of his sweet
heart and members of a
jolly boating party. The corp

But I didn't see any
recent river drownings.

I did see this baby mole:



As I continued
running, I felt glad.

It must be Love!

I passed by the
roses again on
the way back,
& this is what
I saw:



Kelcey Parker Ervick

Ravi S. and the Tiger

Listen as I tell the tale of an ancient tiger, a tiger powerful enough in mind and spirit to separate the secrets of the heart, a tiger who old men say holds the secret of oblivion. Brave men, some righteous and some wicked, have tested themselves before the beast, for as tradition holds, the tiger will devour everyone except for him who knows nothing of himself. This tiger's name is Agni, which means servant of sacrifice. Like the god, she burns deep orange with the fire of life and inspiration. And Agni is dead.

This is a fine way to begin my story. It has rhythm and it also has an animal, a tiger at that. Last year, old man Misra told me I lacked both of these things in my recitation. It's the reason why, I think, I came in third place in the yearly Brahma Celebration of Story and Legend, third behind Tanuj and Panmoli. Those boys included rhythm and animals in their stories. Yes, of course there was a moment when I felt as though the whole town was watching me. I'll admit I choked on my words. I may have also skipped over a scene or two, but I'm sure the audience thought I was taking a dramatic pause. That is how these things go.

This year will be different. Along with Agni, I am about to introduce the main character, who is myself. I will name him Ravi S., leaving only an S. so that the listeners will know that the story is based on my life, but will not expect *everything* to be accurate about my life. For example, the main character will not be stuck at home with a broken leg. The main character will not have a mother who dotes on him too often and forces him to drink tea when he would rather be writing. And I haven't decided whether to give him a mustache. He

should be a hero. Everyone loves a hero.

Of course, this is not the story I am writing for the festival. The true story must be written on school sanctioned composition pages. But now I write in my diary. It is where I write for myself and record notes about Agni the tiger. My diary is very important because, if I wish to retell the story properly, I will have to recall how I broke my leg, how I met Mr. Grant MacDonald, and whether or not Mr. Grant MacDonald saved my life.

The question now is where to begin? I should introduce Mr. Grant MacDonald. He is an important character, but he is not the main character. And I have already mentioned Agni the tiger. So I suppose I will begin with myself.

I was born in the town of Amjer, on the plains of northern India. Because of this, I have been raised to craft stories, and I appreciate great myths and sagas just like every boy in Amjer has done since boys first came to Amjer, which was a very long time ago. In my town, there is a saying that goes, "a son does not begin to look like his father until he is able to tell his father's story." I believe this is true. I believe it because Navaneet, a boy in my class, cannot tell a story at all. His head is round like a ball, and he's got a stomach that's neither skinny nor fat. He has no shape, and that's because he cannot craft a story. I've thought about this for a long time and it seems very logical to me.

Navaneet sits across the class from me. While he sits near the window trying to see visions in the sun, which is a very stupid thing to do, I am hard at work at my desk. I pay attention when Mr. Bhattacharya lectures us. He often explains the importance of good posture while speaking, and I take

note. I also ask inquisitive questions such as, "How should I voice dialogue between invisible spirits?" and "How many meanings can we derive from the fact that Agni the tiger has sixty-two stripes?" Mr. Bhat-tacharya often tells me I should be a priest before telling me to stop asking these kinds of questions. If I continue asking questions, he slaps my hand with the ruler. He does this to many of my classmates. It helps us learn our lessons. I should say that I also learn from books. I have read many things including *Robinson Crusoe*, my English grammar, and the full *Ramayan*.

In the middle of the day, classes are suspended for the afternoon meal, and my friends and I run down to Mr. Darzi's shop. We exit through the school's blue, metal gate. We pass Mrs. Dutta's shop and curse her under our breaths because her sweets are too expensive. Then we fly past the British consulate, a small, stone building with many symmetrical windows. At the end of the street is Mr. Darzi's shop, the good shop. I buy sweets. Kalan buys apples. Sadhil purchases bread. And Daivya never has any money for food.

But what we buy for lunch is not important. The important part here is that I have recently been asking Mr. Darzi to fill my canteen with gin. He always obliges me, but he also warns me not to tell my father about it. I shake my head and laugh. I tell him that it is not for me, and he laughs back and pats his beard.

At this point I should introduce Mr. Grant MacDonald, since he is the man who asked for the gin in the first place. Mr. Grant MacDonald was a friend of mine and is a soldier at the British consulate. The consulate is an important place. My father often has dinner with the diplomats, though I have never heard him mention Mr. Grant MacDonald.

Every day, Mr. Grant MacDonald stands at the gate in a hollowed out space wide enough to fit a single man. He stands

there with his rifle, which looks heavy to me. He has also commandeered a banana box, and he sits on it when it's hot outside.

It was one of these hot days when I first met Mr. Grant MacDonald, one of those days when the flies buzz in the street just to cool off, and the cattle whip their tails for a breeze. As usual, we were running to the shop for sweets when Mr. Grant MacDonald called to me from across the street.

"Boy!" he called. "Boy!"

At first, I paid him no attention. Someone is always calling "Boy!" whether I am at school, or at home, or on the sports field. And at that moment there were many boys to shout at, all running down the street to the shop. Still, Mr. Grant MacDonald continued to shout. Then I thought, which boy? Was he calling to Kalan, or Sadhil, or myself? Whoever he was calling to, I was the one who turned, and I was the one who caught his glance. He waved his arm, blurry behind the wall of heat. I crossed the street.

"Are you going to the store?" he asked me.

I nodded.

"I probably shouldn't be doing this, but it's wretchedly hot out, and I'm out of gin."

I shrugged. What did he want me to do? I wanted to ask him why he was unable to provide for himself, but I was not a particularly brave boy at the time, although, as I have mentioned, I was curious and intelligent and a good runner.

Mr. Grant MacDonald continued, "I'm under orders not to leave my post again. Here." He dropped three coins into my left hand. He placed his canteen into my other hand. I agreed to fill the flask with gin from the shop.

When I returned, he took the gin, drank some, and told me that he felt like a bloody befeater. I told him that must be a horrible thing to be. He laughed. He likes it when I say things like this. That is why I call him by his full name, Mr. Grant MacDonald. He enjoys the title.

We quickly became friends and the gin exchange became a recurring event. He gave me money, I filled the flask, and he often paid me extra for my services. I should note that I did not do it for the money. Mr. Grant MacDonald is a stout man. He is handsome in what one might call the classical style, or as I would say, the non-Indian style. He has well-groomed brown hair. A thin mustache. He is an athletic man and often challenges me to contests where he pins my arm to the banana box. I never win, so I decline his offers. Anyway, I like to talk and listen. I am always looking for ideas for my stories, especially my winning story about Agni, the tiger.

We met quite often, and eventually the seasons changed from hot to cold. One day, the two of us met like usual at Mr. Grant MacDonald's post. I stood beside him. He sat on the banana box. His gun rested against the wall. I asked him whether he had ever heard of Agni, the tiger.

"That sounds like a saint's name," he said.

"What is a saint?"

He licked his dry lips. "It's a good person who's poor and dead and made a saint by an Italian with a hat."

This did not seem like a real answer.

"Agni is not a person," I said. "She is a tiger. The tiger of self-oblivion."

"Then no, I haven't heard." He sighed and rested his head in his hands, but I could tell he was interested by the way he stared out past the buildings across the street, deep into his own thoughts.

"Have you never seen the pit?" I asked.

"You mean the loo?"

Mr. Grant MacDonald was beginning to irritate me with his jokes.

"No," I said. "The pit. It is near the edge of the town, a drop that looks out over the jungle. It is a spiritual place. You can see where the deities pressed down the earth for the trees to be nearer to the secret waters."

He took a long drink of gin. "Have you ever seen a Scottish moor?"

I ignored him and pressed on. "The pit, the ledge, the place of Agni's rock. The place where she waits to devour brave men. Have you really never been there? You've lived here for so long."

"You are telling me you've got a tiger cage? I've got to see that."

I threw my arms in the air in exasperation. The pit is more than a simple tiger cage. I told him that I would have to show him the pit so that he could understand. He told me that the guard changed at sundown.

"That will work," I said. "The pit is best visited at night. I go there often when my ideas are too big to let me sleep."

But is this the best way to begin my story? With meeting Mr. Grant MacDonald, with visiting the pit, which everyone in the town has seen one hundred times at least? Despite what I thought at first, I have found that Mr. Grant MacDonald is not an interesting man. He has no lovers. He fights no battles. There is no sense of destiny about his behavior. He drinks gin and sits on a banana box. And to talk about the pit, especially without Agni since she is now dead, will bore everyone to sleep. No one will cheer for me when I tell this story.

Therefore, I should start with something interesting, a legend, a myth. We must not forget about Agni, and I will make sure of that because her stories are kept here within the notes of my diary. When I am not conversing with Mr. Grant MacDonald, I also spend time listening to the words of old man Misra. He used to teach the boys at school before Mr. Bhattacharya took over his position. Now Mr. Misra sits underneath a tall, piney tree and smokes his pipe and looks out over the people and thinks about times long ago. He knows many things and paints his face with green, white, and orange chalks. He is also the judge of the Brahma story festival and has lots of advice on how to tell good stories.

I sit by his feet, I ask him about Agni and about the men she has eaten. I ask him about the flattened stone at the edge of The Pit, a stone black like death, smooth like the skin of a fresh bean, the place where they mark each man who willingly descends into the pit. I wonder why they leave marks rather than names. I wonder whether they chisel out the mark before the man steps into the basket suspended by the wooden crane. Or perhaps they make the mark after the basket lowers the over the edge of the pit, after he meets his fate, after he faces Agni, after he fails to sufficiently lose himself.

But I do not ask these questions because I want to hear the stories of the men themselves. In my lifetime, no one has dared to test his heart before Agni, so I have to imagine these stories from what I can learn from old man Misra's memories. I have recorded the best tales here in my notes.

The first story from my notes:

Samarth Jopa was eaten in his rainbow colored jacket. He was a wealthy man and had many such coats made from the richest dyes to be found in all India. He had a young wife and three beautiful daughters. Now, he was not a wicked man as many

wealthy men are. He was happy and made many large sacrifices to the gods. He was respected by all, and the entire village was shocked when he announced that he would test himself before Agni, the tiger.

Before stepping into the basket, he kissed his mother and father, brothers and sisters. Then he kissed wife, who was trying to be strong and hopeful. Then he kissed his girls, each one of them, oldest to youngest, and said, "I am the most blessed man in the village. My needs have been met in every way. Thus, my cares are lifted from me, and I am able to descend and test myself before Agni. We will see each other again for dinner."

Then he stepped into the basket, and two men let the thrice-braided rope slide through their hands. The basket glided to the floor of the pit, and Samarth stepped out onto the dirt. He turned to his daughters and smiled at them because they were crying large tears of fear and sadness. Agni was nowhere in sight. Samarth walked over to Agni's rock, the perch from which she judges the world. He did not climb onto the stone, but he called out, "Come, beast. You will find nothing."

At this point he must have looked like a great parrot with his turban and colored coat, squawking out into the trees. He turned left. He turned right. But as he turned back toward the basket, Agni bounded from the jungle. Like lightning, she flew toward Samarth Jopa and gashed him through the stomach. And that was how he died. In the blink of an eye.

The second story from my notes:

Of all old man Misra's tales about Agni, there is only one that tells of a man who survived. It happened so long ago that even old man Misra does not know anyone who knew anyone who witnessed the event. This spectacular man's name was Tanak.

Tanak was a common man who meditated at set hours of the day and grew beans for a living. But although he was a good man, Tanak had an enemy. No one can recall why this enemy hated Tanak; all that can be remembered is that one year he burned down Tanak's crop of beans, though it was never proven outright. The fire caused Tanak much distress. He went hungry for many months and relied on a few friends and family members to aid his wife and children. Since no one was able to prove that the enemy burned his crop, many villagers believed that Tanak was simply careless, that he left a torch burning in his field or something like that.

One night, Tanak was walking near the pit, and he heard a scream. He looked over the ledge and saw his enemy there, bathed in moonlight, lying in the dirt. A low growl rumbled from the jungle, and seeing that the man was in danger, Tanak began lowering himself, clutching at roots and stones all the way down. No one had yet built the wooden crane.

When he reached the bottom, Tanak saw Agni creep from the shadows.

"Get up! Get up!" Tanak said to his enemy. But the enemy could not rise. He could only move his head to point out a silver knife not four arms lengths away. But before Tanak could grab the knife, he heard another growl, this time directly behind him. The growl shook his heart, like the sound that envelops the world at the destruction of an age, as celestial fires fall and the waters rise to drown the living.

Silence fell, and in this moment Tanak considered the knife. Yet, rather than lunging for it, he bent over and picked up the enemy. He held him to his chest, back still turned to Agni. He waited. Agni waited. Then Agni yawned and returned to the jungle.

As soon as she retreated, Tanak called, "Help! Help!" and eventually a young boy heard the cries. Tanak sent the

young boy back to the village and the boy went running, saying, "There are two men in the pit! Quickly, before Agni devours them both!" The entire village came running, some to help, others to see if there would be blood.

Ropes were brought, and Tanak and his enemy were saved.

But before Tanak could give a word of thanks, the old men began whispering, "That is his enemy. He pushed that man into the pit."

The old women muttered too. "He must have lost his balance during a scuffle and fallen in as well."

Some of the wealthier villagers said, "He is not a rich man. What did he expect for this 'act of honor,' a reward?"

Eventually the rumors grew. Tanak found that hiring labor was a bit more expensive. His sacrifices to the gods were a little less effective. As his life continued, he became lonely and poor.

I often think about how the men felt to look into the tiger's eyes before death. The centers so black that the man cannot see himself. He sees the blackness of the world. He sees the blackness of the universe. But not himself. The outer parts of the eyes glow like dying kerosene flames, hazy green like the sun that fish see through the surface of the river. The man imagines that he embraces his mourning relatives. He feels the coolness of a cloth his mother once dabbed against his fevered forehead. He kisses lovers past and present and lovers unfulfilled in hope. But between the quickest of heartbeats he cries out for himself, places himself in the blackness of the tiger's eye where he should not be, and wishes for one more day. He might as well wish for an eternity, might as well wish himself a god, and that is when Agni swipes at his chest with her powerful paws.

This is what I often thought about in the times when I crept over to the pit at night, before I broke my leg, before Agni died. These were the thoughts I mentioned when I told Mr. Grant MacDonald that sometimes I contemplate ideas too big to let me sleep. Sitting on the edge of the pit, I watched Agni prowl in the moonlight, licking her chops, sometimes stretching out over her rock, paw over paw, head held high like a king. I used to roll words along the length of my tongue, trying to find ways to describe the black patterns that striped the fur on her right leg. I tried to put myself in the position of the brave man so that I could better envision my story. That did not suffice. And so, one night I decided to see Agni for myself, to lower myself from the crane and observe from the safety of the sacrificial basket, to see if I could then write my winning story.

Curses. Now I have lost my train of thought. Mr. Grant MacDonald has just finished visiting me here in my room. When I first saw his face outside my door, I told him to leave me alone. I told him to go drink his gin on his banana box. When I told him this, he was silent for a moment, and he traced the doorframe with his finger instead of looking at me.

He said, "How are you?"

It was then my turn to be silent. I held up my diary to him as if he would be able to understand that I hadn't yet put words to how I felt. My mind churned slowly, going nowhere, smoky like an old steam engine. I wanted to tell him that I wished he had never appeared and saved me. That was the truth, and yet I could not deny that I was happy to be alive, that I could still tell my mother I had already drunk too much tea, that I could write down these thoughts on paper. What I truly wanted was for him to change the past, but since that is a stupid thing to hope for, I remained silent.

Mr. Grant MacDonald spoke again. "Will the bone heal properly?" He rubbed the place on his forehead where the hair met the skin.

I nodded. The doctor had said I would recover well.

"I won't be able to buy your liquor today," I said.

"You won't have to anymore." He raised his hand slightly in farewell and then turned to leave, but two steps beyond the door he turned back and said, "You're more important than a tiger."

My instinct urged me to agree. It's the same voice that says 'of course' when a grandmother asks you if you have been a good boy, the very same voice that fades away when you're second in a footrace. But my mind, my heart, whispered otherwise. I sniffed and wiped a finger over the place where my mustache will be.

"Am I?" I asked.

Mr. Grant MacDonald stared at his boots.

"What about the men Agni ate?" I said.

Why was I different? I wanted to shout at Mr. Grant MacDonald. Why will I forever be a man who will never know what it is like to look Agni in the eyes before death? I glared at Mr. Grant MacDonald as he hung his head. He squinted his eyes as if he were actually puzzling over my question. Most likely his head hurt from being drunk. What did this man know about my life? He is not me. He is not even Hindu. I do not think he will ever regret saving my life, and neither will I, but I know that we will never understand each other again.

He said, "I don't know."

I was not in a very good mood for talking, and all I could say to Mr. Grant MacDonald was this, "Why were you there

at the pit in the moonlight on the very same night?"

He said, "Because, like you told me, sometimes there are thoughts too big to let us sleep." Then he closed the door. All that took place only a few minutes ago, and I am afraid that I've sent Mr. Grant MacDonald away and that we will never talk by the banana box again. I am also afraid of my chances to win the Brahma story festival. No one wants to hear a story about a coward. No one wants to hear a story about a clumsy boy falling down a hill. But whatever I write, Agni is dead. I am not. So this is how the story goes.

The moonlight makes my arm glow like the smoke of incense. The moonlight reaches my eyes like the blistering heat that bounces from the rugged stones paving the dusty Scottish moor. I congratulate my drunken mind for coming up with such beautiful thoughts. I lick my lips. My mouth is dry and grimy. It tastes like the bland curry my mother gave me years before I found myself in this exotic place, in India. And I keep my gun close to me because I am afraid to walk this village alone.

I hope to see the tiger tonight. I have wanted to see the tiger ever since the boy showed me the pit the first time, when the tiger was not there. I want to see this tiger of self-oblivion. I look again at my moonlit arm and almost gasp at how pale it is. Midnight mist wraps me in a shroud, and I can hear water dripping off the crying ends of the peepal tree leaves.

The trail leads farther than I remember. To keep my mind occupied, I try to remember what the boy said when he led me to the pit the very first time.

He asked me if I had ever been close to dying. He called me Mr. Grant MacDonald, and that always makes me smile. As if I were some kind of important man, the prime minister or someone.

"Yes," I told him. I was about to elaborate, but the boy cut in.

"I have not, but I think facing death must be thrilling. I know what you must be thinking, 'He is only fourteen years old. What does he know?'" Still, despite what you say, I do not think you have looked death in the eyes. I do not think you have been in great battles or charged headfirst at your utmost foe. Perhaps you tripped and fell under the wheel of a carriage once. Correct me if I am wrong."

I breathed in the crisp winter air up and said nothing. The boy was mistaken about the carriage, but how could I explain to this talkative Indian boy how my uncle, posing as a righteous saint, entered my house while I was eating, and how could I describe how he placed a rifle to my head? How could I give a reason for why I grabbed the rifle, turned it on my uncle, and shot him through the face, shot him so that there were no more eyes, no nose, no mouth? And then in what world would he understand that I fled my native land for fear of revenge, taking my uncle's gun with me, and how I pledged myself to the British service in Amjer, India. I said none of this, and we continued to walk.

Part of me wishes I had told all this to the boy, and this makes me vaguely sad. And yet, the cool spring night breeze refreshes me and reminds me that I am walking to see a tiger pit, hopefully to see a tiger, and this is a good thing. I reach for the canvas pocket of my jacket, and pull out the flask. With one swift, mechanical motion, I drink. And when stop, I find the black expanse before me. The jungle hums with the sounds of creatures. I am at the edge of the pit.

Down below is the tiger's rock. I scan the tree line for the tiger, and my heart sinks as if to tell me my journey was useless. There is nothing to find; one must make of himself what he wishes to be. One

cannot rely on a cheeky tiger for these kinds of things.

In disgust, I throw the flask with tremendous force. I hear it clatter against the tiger's rock. I turn to leave.

But as I do, I hear a small cry. I look back to the pit and see the young boy along the base of the cliff. He is huddled within a large, broken basket. And I see him staring silently away from my direction toward the tiger, who silently approaches. Even from this distance I can see the green magic in its searching eyes. The orange fur, so deep and rich, so colorful, more colorful than anything I had ever seen in Britain, presents me with an overwhelming feeling of life. And I see the boy, how frightened he is. He does not stand. He seems to grasp his leg in pain. Surely he is helpless against this beast.

What to do? I run to the wooden crane and try pulling on the ropes, but the basket below is shattered. I call to the boy. He does not look up. Can he hear me? I look for a way down into the pit. The wall is steep. The wall is slick. I see no roots or stones to cling to. Below, the tiger opens its mouth to bare its yellowing teeth. Even though I know he cannot, I tell the boy not to run, that the tiger will see him as prey. The boy shakes involuntarily, unable to respond, unable to tear himself away from the tiger.

Now I am watching the tiger crouch. I watch the sinews of the muscles tense. And I watch down the barrel of my rifle, through the rear and front sights, after the rounds drop into the open charger. I watch as the tiger and flash of the muzzle intertwine in one yellow burst. The tiger drops. A second round punctures the thick body. This one was precautionary, I will tell myself later.

The boy begins to sob. I approach the edge of the pit and tell him I will retrieve help. I tell him that I will fetch a medic from the British consulate. I tell him that the tiger cannot hurt him anymore. As I begin running toward the village, I hear the boy crying louder, and for a moment, I wonder what they will do with that magnificent tiger pelt.

bone requires bone #55

no one can stop you from becoming a siren speak to sing to cry to trumpet gin up a proper crowd let them see there is no panic there is only the call to open up your book of anchors and the faces of men that took your body as a boat to be kept in their harbor show them the size of the hands that hit you let the crowd taste the water they will know what to do after all that

The Call

The word goes out that it's okay to write about war again
and that, in fact, it's expected, with the people in charge asking:
Why haven't the poets been writing about this?
Isn't this what they're here for?

Dutifully, the poets pick up their pens to scribble verses
about bombs and destruction and civil unrest
apathy and starvation and the death of small children
until all of the pages are filled with pictures of the dead
until all of the pages are filled with the stories of the dead

pages and pages that will never be read.

Holly Day

The Phenomenon of Bones

calcified kindling

interlocking

puzzling

pieces

of incredulous

motion

momentum

elemental subjection

equals

dissipation

corrosion

erosion

random

automatronic

replacement

facilitation

(even perpetuation)

of the body

as a whole

A.J. Huffman

Slow fade

It was an overcast afternoon last April, as she was taking the washing from the line, that Glenda Smith first noticed she was becoming translucent.

At first she thought her vision must be blurred, and she blinked a few times and rubbed her eyes. Oh dear, she thought, I do hope this isn't the start of a migraine. She closed her eyes for a few seconds and, on opening them, she was reassured to find that she could focus perfectly well on the washing line, or, indeed, on the garden fence, or the pair of her husband's trousers swaying in the breeze – nothing wrong with her vision then. But, holding her hand up in front of her face, she found she could see right through it, to the washing line, and she could make out the outlines of a couple of pegs, through her closed fingers. She could see less through her palm – she could only see through her palm if she held her hand right up next to something – but she was deeply distressed by the whole thing nonetheless.

She spent several minutes with her hand in front of her face, experimenting, trying to make sense of it. Then she became worried that her husband, or a neighbour, might see her and wonder what she was doing, and she took her hand away and glanced furtively around to check no one was watching her. I'm tired, she thought, I must lie down. She hurried inside, but then hurried back out, remembering she had left a half full basket of washing in the middle of the lawn. Having taken the washing inside, she lay down on her bed, and slept a while. She was so flustered by the experience, she quite forgot that her daughter had arranged to come round, and

she had some chocolate rock buns in the oven. She was woken by the smoke alarm.

Her daughter arrived as she was clearing the mess into the bin, and was let in by her husband. Glenda made the tea, and apologised for the lack of chocolate rock buns, as it was something of a tradition whenever relatives were visiting. "That's all right, Mum," said her daughter.

Over the next couple of hours, her husband and her daughter chatted about the cricket team, about the Middle East or about how Ben was getting on at school, but Glenda was only half listening. She kept looking down at her knees. She could see the sofa through her knees. To her relief, neither her husband nor her daughter commented on it – they didn't seem to have noticed. As soon as her daughter had gone, Glenda rushed back upstairs to bed. She didn't have any explanation for what was happening to her, but she had always been the kind of person more inclined to let a problem resolve itself than to actually take any course of action. She would be back to normal in a few days, she told herself, and within a month's time, she would most likely have forgotten about the incident altogether.

She wasn't back to normal within a few days; in fact, it got worse. Although her husband said nothing, her reflection in the bathroom mirror got gradually fainter, and when she could see the bathroom door behind her in the mirror, she knew she had to do something, and she booked an appointment with her doctor.

She couldn't get an appointment till Tuesday, and she spent the next few days in a state of panic. What if she disappeared

altogether before she saw the doctor? How stupid she had been! She should have made the appointment as soon as it started happening. And if she had been right about matters resolving themselves, well, she could always have cancelled, couldn't she? By Monday it had become so bad that she could lay her arm down over a book, yet still be able to read the words quite clearly.

On the Tuesday, she arrived in the doctor's waiting room half an hour early. As it happened, the doctor was running late, and she was waiting over an hour. She flicked through the leaflets, and considered taking a magazine, but there was nothing that interested her. At one point, a middle-aged man with a moustache sat on her, not realizing the seat was taken. He jumped up, startled and bewildered. "Oh, sorry," he said. "No, *I'm* sorry," she replied, and he looked embarrassed and took a seat on the other side of the room.

The doctor was very understanding. "Believe it or not," he said, "it's actually much more common than you'd think. It's a condition I have a lot of sympathy with, because I used to have the same problem myself.

"It's all a state of mind. What you've got to understand is, there's nothing physically wrong with you. Now, I want you to concentrate very hard, and you'll find it's not difficult to take control of it.

"Firstly, I want you to concentrate on your heart. Picture it beating inside your ribcage. Bear in mind that it's a lot bigger than people often think it is. Can you feel it? Are you concentrating?"

"Yes."

"No you're not. I know you're not because I can still see through you. You've got to really *feel* it beating. *Concentrate*. There, that's better."

And it was better. Her chest area was solidifying. She was becoming opaque again.

"Now," said the doctor, "concentrate on the blood that your heart is even now pumping around your body. Picture it, visualize it, running through your arteries, down to your legs, across to your arms. Up to your head. Every part of your body."

Glenda did as he said, and when she looked down at herself, she nearly laughed with delight. There she was, as solid and as real as the doctor opposite her.

"There you go!" said the doctor. "And very healthy looking too, if I may say so. You see, what did I tell you? It's all a state of mind. Nothing physically *wrong* with you at all."

She left with renewed confidence. She felt so good about herself, she decided to do something extravagant as an expression of her feelings, but she couldn't think what. I know, she thought, I'll buy myself a treat. Something I'd normally be too frugal to consider. But she still couldn't think what. She browsed in a few shops, but inspiration eluded her, and she ended up just buying a Mars bar on the way home.

Getting back to her house, she had a shock when she put her key in the lock and saw that it was happening again – her fingers were very slightly transparent. She thought about her heart, and her blood shooting through the arteries in her legs and arms, but nothing happened. *Come on! Concentrate! Heart. Blood. Legs. Veins. Arteries!* But outside of the doctor's office it did not seem to have an effect. She considered going back to the doctor, but of course she didn't have another appointment. Instead, she did what she had been doing more and more lately, and went up to bed for a nap.

When she woke, she could hear the television, which meant her husband

was in. It was too late to prepare a meal—she would ask him if he fancied takeaway instead.

In fact, she resolved to talk to him about her problem. There was certainly nothing he would be able to do, but at least it would be out in the open. No more trying to hide it and wondering when he would notice and how he would react.

She ran downstairs and found him watching a talk show host interviewing a comedian. “Jim,” she said, “There’s something I need to have a little talk with you about. Really rather urgently. Now, if possible.”

“Of course, my love.” And he sat her down in front of the television and said to tell him all about it. She told him, hesitantly at first, but gathering momentum as she went on. She told him about the day taking in the washing, about her gradual transformation, about the doctor, about how afraid she was, and through it all, he watched her and listened intently until she came to a finish.

He laughed at a joke the comedian on television made, and then said in a reassuring tone: “You know what that is? That’s a load of nonsense. You aren’t turning transparent, you aren’t disappearing. I can see you quite clearly.”

“Really?” she said, doubting his sincerity.

“Of course I can. Now, come and sit down with me and watch a bit of television.”

She did as she was bid. She felt curiously flat. She had expected it to take a load off her shoulders and, well, in a way it had, but not as much as she’d hoped.

Within a few days, she’d made another appointment with the doctor and the next week she was back in his waiting room. To avoid any potential embarrassment, she didn’t sit. She stood in

the corner of the room. In the intervening time, she had faded away almost completely. It caused the most problems in the supermarket; people would bump into her, sometimes push their trolleys in to her. At first they had apologised profusely, but in the last couple of days they had stopped doing that, and just looked around, puzzled.

The doctor was seated at his desk, studying a small handwritten piece of card. He looked up when she came in, and then went back to reading the card. She sat in the chair and waited patiently. After a minute or so it became apparent that he didn’t realise she was in the room with him, so she made a small sound.

“Is someone there?” said the doctor.

“Yes.”

“Well why didn’t you bloody well say so? What have you been doing, just sitting there waiting for me to notice you? Now let me have a look at you and maybe I can do something for you.”

“But—but I can’t doctor.”

“What do you mean?”

“Well I tried concentrating, like you said, but I couldn’t make it work. I just can’t seem to.....come in to focus!”

“Well how do you expect me to treat you if I can’t even see you? Stop being so bloody silly. Didn’t I tell you last time, there’s nothing wrong with you!”

Glenda Smith fled the doctor’s office and has rarely been able to make herself seen since. It’s not that she hasn’t tried, and she has even had some success from time to time, but she can only keep it up for a couple of minutes, three at most. The other day, she gave her husband a nasty turn by appearing suddenly and without warning next to him on the sofa, but after a minute she faded away again, and he seemed a lot more comfortable when she had.

She has gradually been getting used to the fact that she doesn't have a visible form any more, and cannot so effectively take an active role in things. She broods over it sometimes. On occasion, she gets quite bitter about it, but for the most part, she's accepted it with good grace. After all, what choice does she have?

It never occurs to her to ponder the doctor's words: 'It's actually much more common than you'd think.' Indeed there are hundreds of people just as invisible as Glenda in her little town alone. She passes them in the road every day, but she doesn't ever notice them, any more than they notice her.

Ash Wednesday

Spring unfurls, slowly,
greeted by ashes on the forehead
like kisses from burnt ghosts.

You were never one for promises-
the only promise you kept
a smear of ashes
from Ash Wednesday;
a proud burn
of salt and carbon
above your eyebrows.

These ashes remind me
of your hand, spectral
outlines in the dark
as mine rested upon it
while we drove, cosmic travelers
in the night,
ashes from your cigarette
falling among the stars.

No, you would never promise anything,
(not even in spring):
you would always only remember
that you were once dust, and that you'd return.

Sarah A. Etlinger

Brush Fire, Roadside, North Alabama

A welcome cloud looms up ahead,
igniting hopes of rain.

As we approach, we realize
it's smoke. Traffic congeals.

Lights flash ahead. Patrolmen wave
us to the passing lane.

We spot it as we round the curve:
a knee-high tide of flames
licking the grass and hillside brush
under the hose's arc.

I slow down, grip the wheel,
fearful, impatient.

We leave it in our wake. But miles
away, a mountain town
is burning. Some will not escape.

What luxury to pass,
unnerved but not terrified,
knowing it's not our turn this time.

Jennifer Davis Michael

Bare Hands

for Robin Williams (1951-2014)

On more than one occasion, I'm sure you tried chasing
your moods away as they patiently perched in your topgallant sails,
shooing them for a spell back into your island forest.

I'm sure you felt like a red sky on some days as well,
leash in hand, shouting for the forgiven shores
gone missing again, running a ways down the sand.

As I'm sure you struggled to understand
that raging legion, howling from somewhere within the storm,
warriors beyond themselves as they splashed ahead

with painted breastplates and dulled swords,
finally making landfall, a thin line of different paparazzi,
all searching for dormant paths hidden for all to see,

to only be trodden yet again beneath the pungent low brush,
those furious, familiar paths you could no longer ignore
as you searched in vain for Ithaca's stones, using only your bare hands.

Chuck Thompson



With the bedrock it needs
though this city was built
on rainwater :shards

pieced together the way pots
imbedded in ancient dirt
let these dead drink by steps

from stone scented with curtains
still damp except for evenings
lowered by hand into the last drop

and foothold –pole to pole
is what the graves remember
as bone, take hold till your arms

fill with towers looming past
and under the marble cliffs
the finishing stroke.

From The Diary of Lea Knight

The Diary of Lea Knight

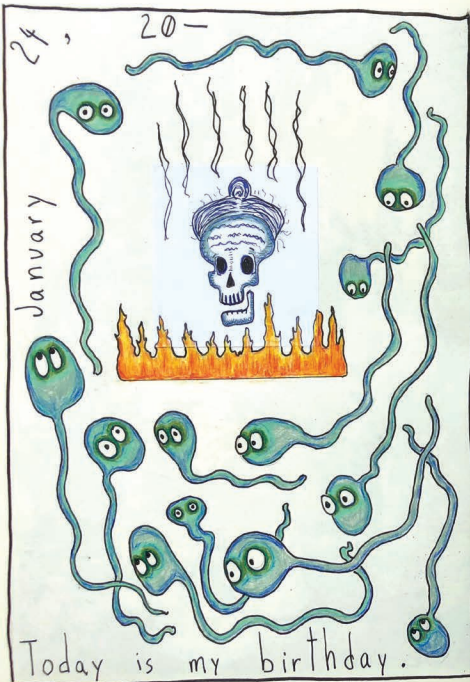
Should you ask me if I'm
happy, I'll answer that
I'm not.

-- Fernando Pessoa



The human soul is a madhouse of the grotesque
... a well, but a sinister well, full of murky echoes
and inhabited by abhorrent creatures...

-- Fernando Pessoa
The Book of Disquiet

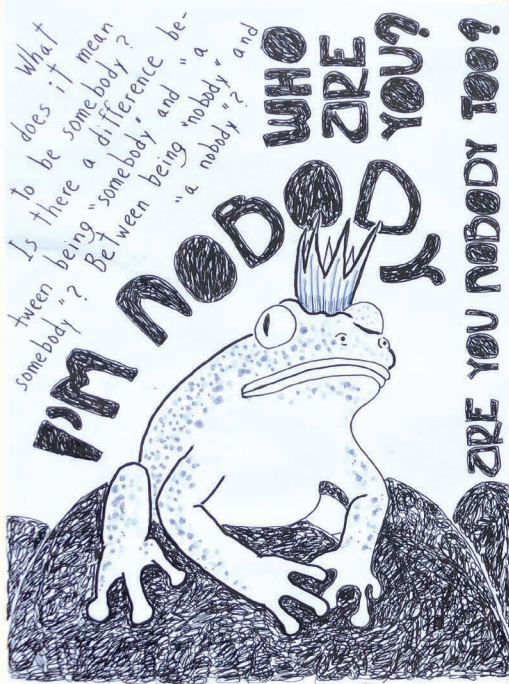


Mother let it be known, in word and deed, that I wasn't wanted. She told the circumstance of my conception like this:

Father was drunk and caused a fiery crash. He was thrown free, but the driver of the other car, an elderly widow, was burned alive.

Father spent many weeks in a hospital, and when he was discharged he made up for lost time. In due course, I was born.



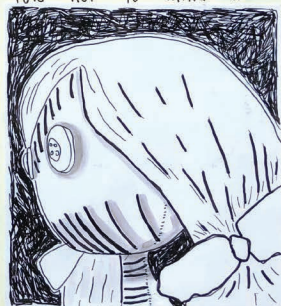


One time on my birthday, Mother and I traveled together a long distance by bus.



To make friendly conversation, a passenger said to her, "Your daughter has beautiful hair."

I cringed, knowing what would come next. If a person said something good about me, she countered with something bad. So Mother said, "Yes, but she's lazy." I blushed, ashamed. The passenger studied me carefully. Then she smiled and said that was impossible and that all children are a gift from God. Mother, a back-slidden Baptist told her to mind her own goddamn business. Later, the bus stopped at a café where I saw something I wanted.





Mother bought it for me. It was so good. O, joy!

In her special way, Mother interrupted my enjoyment, although the bus wasn't scheduled to depart for several minutes. She always seemed to resent my enjoyments, whether they were big or small. So I did as she asked. * Gulp! *

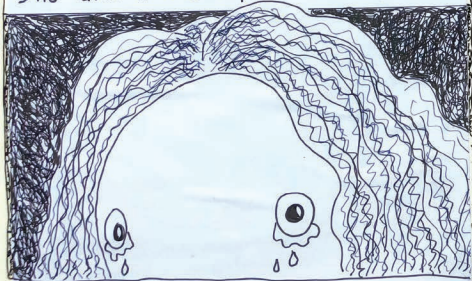


Hurry
up and
eat
that! *o*!

Back
on the
bus




She didn't. She only said to hurry up!



Like so many times before,
I was torn between the truth and
Mother's version of events. I never
learned to trust in myself.





and To be valued, cherished. 

For whatever reason, Mother wasn't able to provide these needs. She was a seamstress who collected odd pincushions.



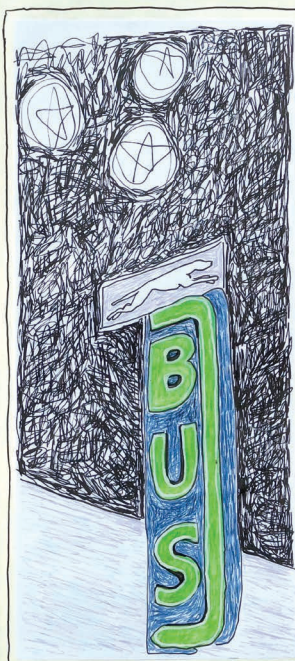
More than anything, I felt like one of them, frozen in surprise, a grimace. I wanted to remove their pins and hide the creatures under my pillow, whisper to them at night, "There, there, it is alright now."



The smell was ENORMOUS.



It was a long time before
we got to another bus station.



We arrived,
finally, where
I would have
a chance to
wash away my
shame. Soon,
perhaps,
the world
would be right
again. I wished
I'd never eaten
that pie. But
I remembered what
Mother frequently
said, "Wish in
one hand and
spit in the other..."

AND
SEE
WHICH
ONE
GETS
FULL
FIRST."



Although
her
delivery
was
tactless,
heartless,
and
crude
(As I see
it now),
She
was
right.
This is
reality.
Wishing...

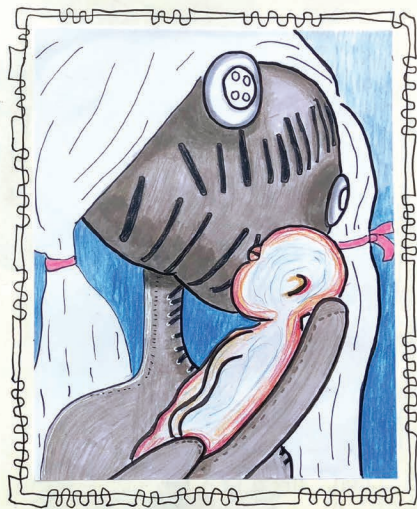
... is superfluous, an extra-
vagance_ only the contented can
afford -- chocolate
instead of vanilla,
to live to be 100.
Nothing endures.



me before

Even before I
touched you, I was
yours! But love
is brutal. I'll
never again sleep
the sleep of the
consolable. You
never saw my face.

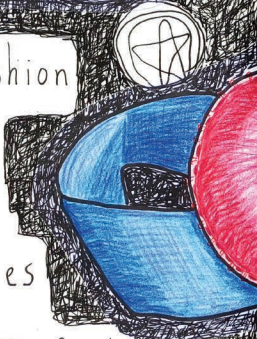
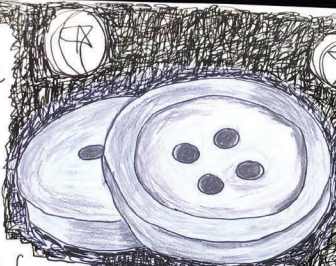
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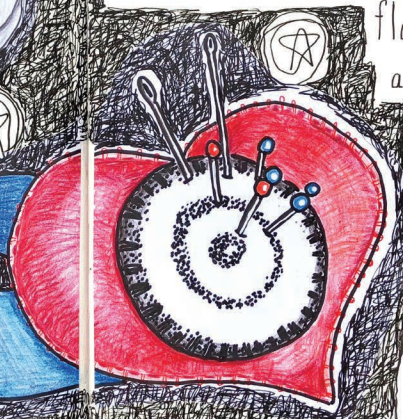
me after

Nothing is crucial. Nothing is safe.
Too much has been asked of me.

In the
archaic
under-
world
of
the self is
Mother's pincushion
that she wore
always on her
left wrist,
pins and needles
like Cupid's
painful arrows of love.
I dreamed of it last

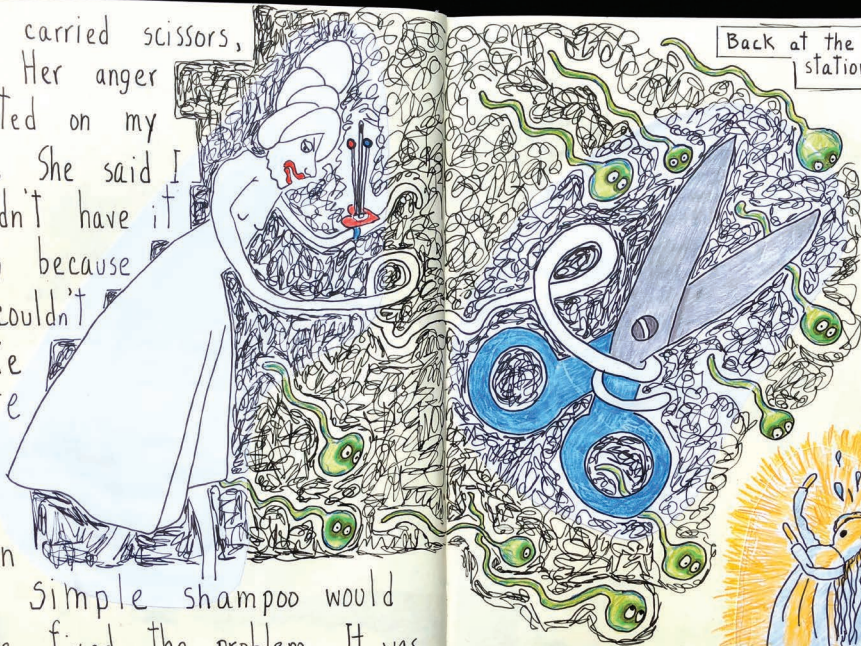


night, no longer on her
wrist but loose and
floating
around
the
universe,
inescapable,
although
I long
since
burned
it,
along with other of her things.



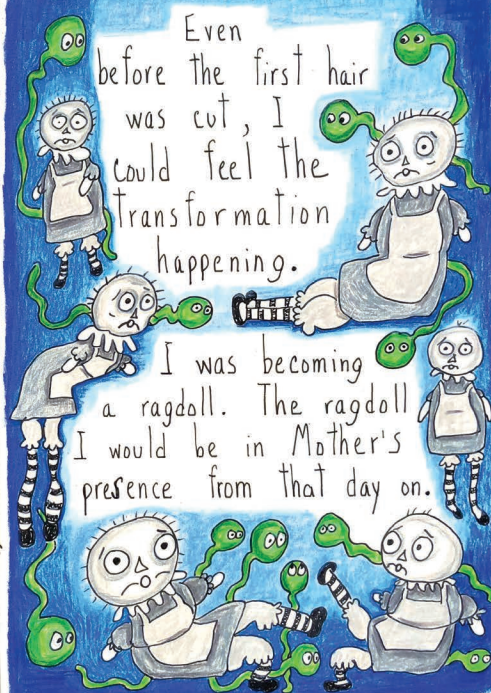
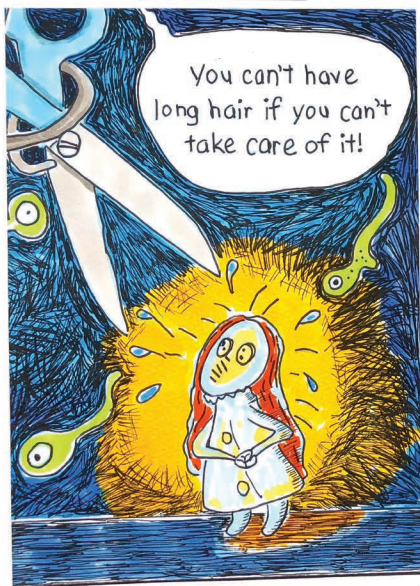
She carried scissors,
too. Her anger
fixated on my
hair. She said I
couldn't have it
long because
I couldn't
take
care
of
it,
when

a simple shampoo would
have fixed the problem. It was
the worst punishment she could have inflicted on me.



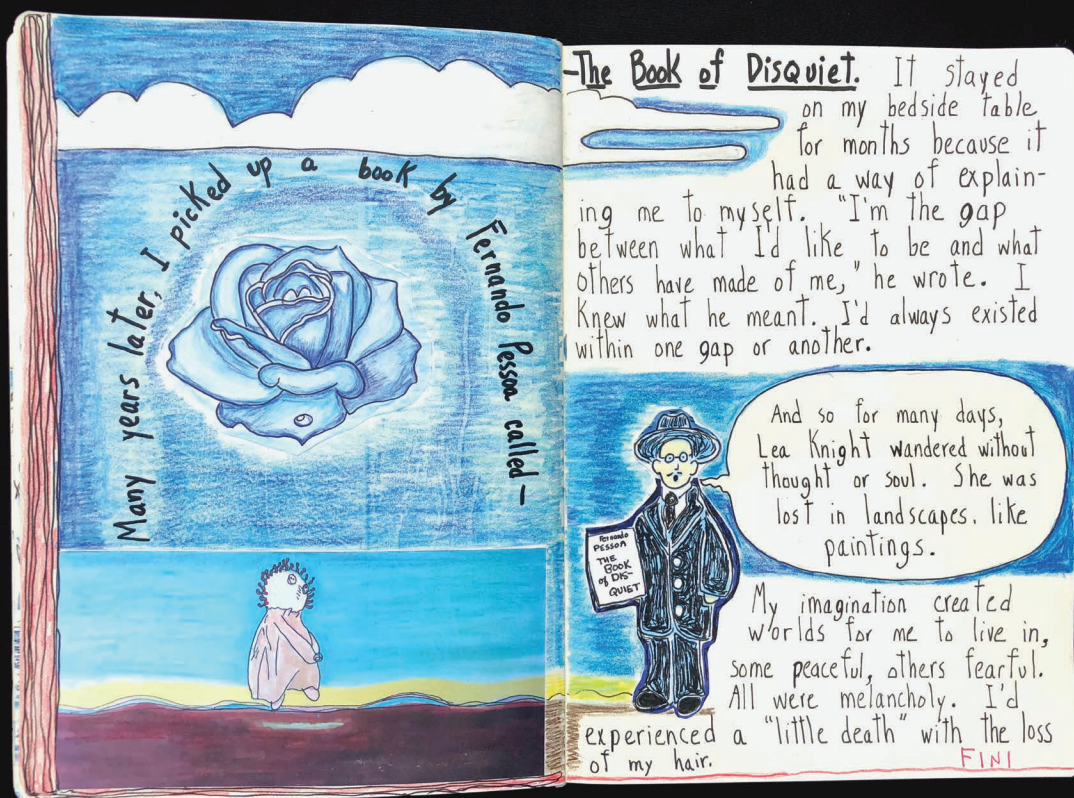
Back at the bus
station







I'd had long hair since I could remember. It had been my power because it was the aspect of me that others had found extraordinary. It had connected me in some way, however tenuous, to the world at large. Now I became melancholy and withdrawn. I lived almost entirely within the refuge of my imagination.



The Magnolia Review Ink Award

I would like to thank Suzanna for giving me this opportunity. She should be proud of this issue and all the strong voices that it captures. Some of my favorite pieces are “Turtle Bay” by Henry Hintz, “Punk 4 a Day” by Diane Hoffman, the poems of Holly Day, Chuck Thompson, GTimothy Gordon, and Sarah A. Etlinger. If it were not for my first choice, “Two Fools” by Sarah A. Etlinger would be my winner because to its tightness, sharpness, and grace of language.

However, I find the excerpt of **Theresa Williams’ *From The Diary of Lea Knight*** to be the undeniable centerpiece of this issue. In this excerpt, Williams balances a combined feeling of prose and poetry in her writing. Her line work is crisp when called for and chaotic when necessary. In the best way possible, the notebook presentation of Williams’ project brings to mind Lynda Barry’s *Syllabus*, while the dark, real philosophizing evokes Alison Bechdel’s *Fun Home* and *Are You My Mother?* The work also takes me to old folktales, like Cinderella, that showcase familial catastrophes by an unhinged parent onto an innocent child, and the ensuing existential crises people feel under the force of an oppressive thumb. I think this slice of *From The Diary of Lea Knight* is a fascinating piece of sequential art, and I cannot wait to see more of it once it is inevitably published.

Dom Fonce is an undergrad English major at Youngstown State University. He’s been published in fiction, poetry, comics, and journalism. Some of his work can be found at *Calliope* of the University of Mount Union, *Penguin Review*, *the Jambar*, and the forthcoming summer 2017 issue of *3Elements Review*. Collaborated with Vincent Butka (penciller), Jared Burton (inker and colorist), and Kaleena Spackman (letterer).

Letter from the Editor

Welcome to the eighth issue of *The Magnolia Review*. I can't believe it has been almost four years since launching Volume 1, Issue 1 in January 2015. There is a lot of great news in the works. Print issues are coming! This is exciting because I'd love to hold an issue in my hands instead of looking at it on the computer screen. So stay tuned for that! Also, the contributor interviews are now a regular feature on the blog. Thank you so much to the contributors who choose to participate in this optional feature for *The Magnolia Review* blog. It is fascinating to see how everyone writes in this modern world. Now it's time to get back into my own routine for writing and creating art. *The Magnolia Review Ink Award* is up and running, with previous contributors selected to choose an award. I am also shouting out new books by our previous contributors with our Book Release/Good News page and posts. Just shoot me an email with your good news at themagnoliareview@gmail.com.

I am in the process of catching up making the Ink Award plaques and sending them to our previous winners. So thank you for your patience. Because I've been sick, started grad school, and changed day jobs, this magazine has been a ride that has gotten off track several times. Thank you for your patience with me. I'm trying to get back on track and stay there. I love this magazine, and I enjoy working on it. There have been times where I asked myself if I should just stop. But the conclusion is no. Because I love reading unpublished work and accepting art, putting the magazine in order (easily one of my favorite tasks), finding a theme emerge, designing the issue, releasing it to readers, and receiving feedback. So thank you for taking the time to read *The Magnolia Review* and continuing to submit your work.

This issue's optional theme was comics, be it drawn in sequential images or just plain funny. Thank you so much for everyone who sent poems about comics ("Kind of a Stupid Game, Isn't it?" by David Anthony Sam, "Chain-Smoked Monkeys" by David Anthony Sam, "Superhero at Work" by David Anthony Sam, "Do We Need Superheroes, Really?" by Dennis Trujillo, "Futurama" by Phil Huffy, to name a few) and sent visual comics ("The Depths of Darkness" by Lonnie James, "Punk 4 a Day" by Diane Hoffman, "A Boat" by Megan Miazgowicz, "Love or Death" by Kelcey Parker Ervick, and "From The Diary of Lea Knight" by Theresa Williams) and funny poems (you decide this one). So what's the optional theme for Volume 5, Issue 1? Lost and Found. For poetry, I would love to see more Blackout and Cross out poems. For examples, check out these books: *Newspaper Blackout* by Austin Kleon, *A Humument: A Treated Victorian Novel* by Tom Phillips, *The ms of m y kin* by Janet Holmes, *Bukowski Erasure Poetry Anthology: A Collection of Poems Based on the Writings of Charles Bukowski* by Melanie Villines, *A Little White Shadow* by Mary Ruefle, *Mornings Like This: Found Poems* by Annie Dillard, *Nets* by Jen Bervin, and *Of Lamb* by Matthea Harvey. And for fiction, creative nonfiction, and art, photography, and comics, please interpret this theme how you will, or see if you can do something new and unique with this found poetry method.

Thank you for reading, and check out the next issue in January 2019.

See you soon.

Suzanna Anderson

Editor-in-Chief and Founder of *The Magnolia Review*

Reviews

Hold Me Gorilla Monsoon by Colette Arrand.
Opo Books & Objects, 2017. 68 pages. \$14.95,
paperback.

Arrand's *Hold Me Gorilla Monsoon* is divided into three sections: The Use of Roland Barthes to Justify One's Love of Wrestling, Wrestling School (with Scott Stripling), and Hold Me Gorilla Monsoon.

The poems combine wrestling and gender identity in Arrand's poetry and in Stripling's comics based on Arrand's scripts. The language is poignant, and the poems end with a great twist of breath of beauty. In "Channeling Ox Baker," the poem ends "...Just once, / I'd like to sleep long enough to allow his fist / to hammer my heart, but I am the great heel / of childhood. There's never any closure / for a heel, just new territories, / new towns, the same old ways to bleed. / I do what I can to heal the scars / but they are mind. I keep them to myself" (16).

Stripling draws "Tree of Woe," using his usual three panels in this collection. In the first, we see the wrestling walking in the scary woods "One night, while walking an unkempt path..." and in the second panel "A lonely traveler was subjected to..." with the terrifying eyes of the tree to the third panel "The Tree of Woe! I feel like my father never loved me as a 'sob' sapling..." with the Tree of Woe crying (39).

In the final section, Arrand's poem "For Hulk Hogan, Who, By His Own Reasonable Estimate, Has the Largest Arms In the World," and in couplets, "...Your arms I imagined / variously: the jack pressing a car over my father's body, the cranes // in my mother's factory, twin pythons that could devour my problems / were I able to scream your name loud enough. I screamed, // but I won't see you in the flesh until that flesh, no longer taut, / is incapable of its former glories. Until then, I invent my own encounters // and spin those. Here is one: once, I claimed to have met you / at a Big Boy restaurant, pouring syrup on a stack of pancakes. // When you took my hand in yours, it disappeared. Then you did. / I need you to cup your ear, Hulk. Tonight, when I call out, come" (54).

The references to wrestling are great, with poems addressed to legends like Hulk Hogan and quotes from the wrestlers and fans, like Roland Barthes and quotes from T-shirts ("You will hate me, T-shirt, worn by Ox Baker in the 1970s"). This collection is a must read for poetry fans, and for those wrestling fans, you'll enjoy the community.

—Suzanna Anderson

Auri by Auri. Nuclear Blast, 2018. \$10.79, CD.

I swear everything Tuomas Holopainen touches musically is gold. From every *Nightwish* album to *Music Inspired by the Life and Times of Scrooge* to this gem *Auri*. With Johanna Kurkela and Troy Donockley, together they create a masterpiece inspired by Patrick Rothfuss's character Auri in his books *The Name of the Wind*, *The Wise Man's Fear* and *The Slow Regard of Silent Things*. The album begins with "The Space Between," with "In your scripted play / on the stage you call home / there's no seat set for an unknown guest // Come with me / the vast unknown awaits for us to see / Something so deeply hidden / Yet open before our eyes." And in "Night 13, "I woke to the echo of stars / All around me, under me / a bed made of curious cloth / A pillow from a crib" and "Goodnight to an old soul / Goodbye to life once lived / This is my island now / To live it once more."

The band formed in 2011 when the trio realized they needed to do music together. The solo career of Johanna and the band *Nightwish* didn't free them until 2017 to spend time on Auri. Tuomas described the project to Prog as "Just a few days ago, we had this conversation within the band and we thought about the best way to describe it. Two terms came to our minds; Rabbit Hole Music and Celestial Metal" (in an interview with Prog magazine). I think this description is apt. Since I listen to Irish, Celtic, and Finnish folk music, it is definitely in that arena, but begs no label.

Johanna (vocals and viola), Tuomas (keys and backing voices), Troy (acoustic and electric guitars, bouzouki, uilleann pipes, low whistles, aerophone, bodhran, keys, and voices) with enhancements by Frank Van Essen (percussion and drums, violin, viola), Jonas Pap (cello), Michael Gill (fiddle and bazooka), Phil Barker (bass), Jyrki Tulilahti (voice), and Lord Pad-dington (mandolin).

I attended a *Nightwish* concert in Cleveland the day after the album's release. I listened to the album three times before I left town. It's that good. I am looking forward to future albums from Auri.

—Suzanna Anderson

Internet Yearnings by Gary Beck. Fowlpox Press, 2018. 32 pages. Free, PDF. <http://fowlpoxpress.yolasite.com/>

Beck's poems focus on homelessness, internet dating, and broken dreams. His language is precise and moving, revealing images that linger long after finishing the poem. In "Fine Art, "The Industrial Age / allowed painters / to abandon church art, / paint what they want... once scorned, reviled, / become old masters... hot items at auctions / where works they gave away / for practically nothing / sell at record prices / to the vulgar applause / of tasteless audiences" (10). The themes of homelessness, internet dating, and broken dreams is carried throughout the book with poems focusing on those themes on the surface with titles like "Internet Yearning" but also in a subtle manner, like with "Domestic Strains" and "Due Process."

The images reveal the depth of a simply scene of a woman looking out her window in "Observer," the speaker observes an old woman at her window in a "...ratty tenement...face pressed against / unresponsive glass, / seeking to decipher / why she's been marooned / in a submerging building" (13). Beck begins and ends the poem with a shopping cart, bringing the image full circle in "Street People," "I saw an old homeless man / plodding along carnivorous streets / pushing a shopping cart / overflowing with plastic bags...pushing his shopping cart / of broken dreams" (16). In "Internet Yearning II," "Mister woeful / sits at his computer / looking at women's pages / on an online dating

service, / most of them attractive, / but he lacks confidence / to explore further / fearing rejection / more than getting a date" (18).

Enjoy the nuance of Beck's images and precise wordplay. So treat yourself to this special poetry experience of *Internet Yearnings*.

—Suzanna Anderson

Mnemosyne's Hand: Poems by Charles W. Brice. Cincinnati, Ohio: WordTech Editions, 2018. 128 pages. \$20.00, paperback.

The title poem tells the story of a baseball signed by Jim Gentile, and when without another ball to throw with the speaker's son, the signed ball is used and "...I can' remember which one of us hit that ball into / the jungle of forsythia, ferns, weeds, / and brambles that lined our field, / but try as we might, and we tried hard, / we never found that ball...it rests in the palm / of Mnemosyne's hand, along / with the crack of a bat, / the chirp of Ari's voice, / and his smile" (12-13).

I find an element of humor in Brice's work. In "Ode To A Waiting Room Chair," the chair is "...constant / in your unwavering wooden uniformity. / You are often twins, sometimes triplets; an engineering miracle / of conformity...God may have made / the tree, but our engineers / processed your glory" (32-33). There are many more examples, but a waiting room chair is glorious in its sameness and the miracle that someone invented the chair and a way to process them from wood. And the poems about Freud are a treat.

There are also delicate moments, like in "Last Moments" when the speaker imagines "... my hospital bed / pressed against the picture window. // I'll miss the snow on my face, / the mystery of frozen water... Will I think of how lucky I was at love? / The score at the bottom of the ninth? // Why there was something rather than nothing? / Or how there weren't any clear answers?" (39).

Brice also has ekphrastic poetry pieces, like "The Lame God," after "#11, a drawing by Rick Claraval, "The lame god watched / the great Greek hero / carry the torch. Crippled / from the start, Hephaestus...stood on Olympus, / watched Achilles drag Hector round the city

gates, / watched Odysseus and his son / hang
all the girls who serviced / Penelope's suit-
ers....Had they but limped //into eternity, like
Hephaestus, / taken that magnificent left turn, /
metamorphosed into something / humane, the
word *hero* // would mean kindness, tolerance—
/ would torch the world with / the blue and
brilliant / light of peace" (59).

Brice's collection is a must-read, a special
collection to treasure and for artists like me, to
start an ekphrastic project, creating drawings
and paintings, inspired by his poems.

—Suzanna Anderson

Her Secret Husband by Abbey Faith. Seminole,
Florida: Red Sage Publishing, Inc., 2018. 306
pages.

Fara West is not your typical Victorian lady. She
prefers riding horses and wearing men's clothes
to drinking tea and wearing dresses to balls. So
when her father arranges a marriage with Marc
Ranlyn, she maintains her independence and
does not become the submissive wife he desires.
But then Marc sails for America on business
and dies in a shipwreck. She is free from her
loveless marriage.

Except Marc has an identical twin. And six
siblings he never told her about. When Fara
meets Avetis, she sees her dead husband Marc.
Avetis assumes Marc's identity so he can finally
provide for his five remaining siblings and find
them suitable marriage partners. It is not long
before Avetis and Fara fall in love. Overcoming
the abusive history with Marc, it takes time for
Fara to trust Avetis to not repeat Marc's abuses
and to not waste her family fortune.

Faith focuses on Fara's and Avetis's love story,
and she also dips into the lives and perspec-
tives of the siblings, Marc, and Avetis's friend
Phoenix Alden. Marley is the second oldest,
and she helps Avetis raise their siblings after
the deaths of their parents. Kitty is interested in
fashion and is forthright and nosy. Emory reads
books and is too shy to speak. The youngest
twins, Enoch and Reuben, are rambunctious.
Enoch cares for animals, especially his pet
lizard Bug. The reader meets Phoenix Alden,
a bookseller who is friends with Avetis. When
customers complain about wanting more Lewis
Carroll, Phoenix smirks and says, "What it

must be like to be a child lucky enough to have
a mother who purchases books for you. When I
was a boy, I found amusement in tossing rocks
between my palms."

Her Secret Husband is an entertaining read,
filled with lovable characters, a memorable love
story, and plenty of adventures and surprises as
the Ranlyn family explores London and enters
society to find marriage partners.

Pick up a copy of *Her Secret Husband* when it is
released June 1, 2018, here from Red Sage Pub-
lishing, Inc (<http://www.redsage.com/store/HerSecretHusband.html>). Check out Abbey
Faith's Facebook page (<https://www.facebook.com/ranlynseries/>) for more information about
upcoming titles about the Ranlyn family, and
Abbey Faith's blog here (<https://abbeyfaithauthor.wordpress.com/>).

—Suzanna Anderson

The Future by From Ashes to New. Better Noise
Records, 2018. \$7.99, CD.

The second album from American rock band
From Ashes to New, from Lancaster, Penn-
sylvania, is a must for rock fans. I heard the
single "Through It All" several times on Sirius
radio and had to get the first album, *Day One*.
I haven't stopped listening to it, and it's my new
driving music.

By far the catchiest tune of the album is "Crazy"
where it is easy to sing and tap along, "Am I
going crazy? Yeah, I think you made me" over
and over again. The "Crazy" music video used a
psychiatric hospital setting in a fascinating way.
The rhythm of the lyrics and music still draws
me in to sing as I'm driving, or as I'm sitting at
my desk writing and creating art. "The Future"
is hopeful with lyrics "I'm coming out swinging
a man on a mission. And breaking new ground
like a land mine. Can't stop my ambitions can't
stop my commitment. My very existence is
winning the game. Every minute I'm given I'm
thinking of living it different... We are the fu-
ture. And we have just begun. We are the truth,
the chosen ones. We are the new, the past is
gone...day one is over the future's approaching.
The embers are glowing, we're spreading the
ash...We are the future."

Band members Matt Brandyberry (vocals, keyboards, and programming), Danny Case (vocals), Lance Dowdle (guitar and vocals), and Mat Madiro (drums and vocals) work with background vocals on “The Future” by Rowan Brandyberry, Mary-Lynn Greger, Brady Falcon, Gerald Lee Brown 4, Mia Kecki, Makaila Kecki, and Roan Brooks, and on “Broken” and “On My Own,” the background vocals are by Mary-Lynn Greger.

I highly recommend creating a playlist with *Day One* followed by *The Future*.

—Suzanna Anderson

Burn Site In Bloom by Jamie Houghton. Clearwater, FL: Musehick Publications, 2017. 38 pages. \$12.00, paperback.

Houghton’s language explores the image and expands it in such a way that it is like suddenly seeing the image in words that *are* instead of idle description. For example, in “In Two,” “You will notice the rooms don’t have room for anything but furniture and one person // my father in the upstairs / watching shows about long ago or far away alligators // the Revolutionary War fishermen with their boots / frozen to the boat you will notice the stars // are not what you thought they’re milkweed fluff / egg whites washing the dark” (13). I can’t help but love the egg whites because it transcends language with language that I want to dwell in it as I sit to watch the stars.

Since I’ve worked in food service, I can relate to “I Work in a Restaurant that Used to Be a Funeral Home,” because there are days where it is as if I am invisible, and the customer doesn’t really want to hear my answer about how my day is: “I like to open the door / wipe the edge of your plate clean / sprinkle salt on your egg... hear about your day but please // don’t ask / about mine I am here / to pour the wine // provide the knife / be sure they prepare your meat / the way you like your feet...and go // in my silent shoes” (20). Though my slip resistant shoes weren’t quite so silent. I was more silent than the shoes.

I love poems that encourage the fallen to get up and try again, and Houghton does this in “How to Be Lonely,” “Talk to loneliness. / Yell into it’s den / (You must yell / loud as you can) / or just

sing a little bit, badly. // Don’t scream now, you will have to / anyway next time / you stub your toe / jolt awake from the sleep of your thoughts. // Ajax your sink until it’s bone white / take some old newspaper and polish your mirror / look in. / Don’t look in” (29). She also explores the opposites, getting on social media and getting off social media, look in the mirror and don’t look in the mirror, and offer beer while it prefers milk, and “do not pursue when it runs / do not feed either” (29).

Burn Site in Bloom is a collection I look forward to reading over and over again. The poems I can rest in for a while and linger, exploring Houghton’s language and images.

—Suzanna Anderson

Rookland by Jesse Minkert. Georgetown, KY: Finishing Line Press, 2017. 36 pages. \$14.99, paperback.

Minkert’s images are heart-stopping gorgeous. The poem “Her Own Concoction” just flows faster and I reread it several times before moving on to the rest of the collection: “Melanie weaves a few blades of grass / into three-winged spinners and ties them / onto dandelion stalks with fern-leaf / spiders’ webs. They drift on the breeze...She gathers them, / mashes them to a paste in her pestle, / stirs them into her hot chocolate milk / and sips until she feels / that flutter in her throat” (2).

The repetition in “Millwright” carries the cadence of the first stanza into a satisfying and open ending. The poem begins, “Optional motion sensors / display two thousand fantasies / two thousand times a minute. / Two thousand automatic tongues / lick two thousand automatic thumbs / smooth them to the vessels / wherein his visions, with / muted squeals and giggles / splash and bas as if on / an outing to the lake” (5).

Like His and Her towels in “Love Dog,” Linda and Dave encounter troubles in their relationship because of Linda’s devotion to her dog, “Linda gave the dog licks from her ice cream” and “Linda fed it scraps from Dave’s plate” and “‘A dog’s mouth,’ Linda said, ‘is cleaner than a man’s.’” But perhaps my favorite part of the poem is the interchange between Dave and Linda, and how Dave moves on with Carol: “Dave

told Linda he was allergic. / Linda told Dave he was insecure. Dave told Linda she was bipolar. / Linda told Dave he was moody. / Dave told Linda she was walking a thin line. / Linda demanded back the key to her apartment. / Dave explained to Carol that the experience had left him deeply scarred, apprehensive, unwilling to reach out....All he really wanted, Dave told Carol, their perspiration pooling beneath them on the wrinkled sheets as the dawn sun smiled through the window and warmed their feet while Carol's cockatiel squawked for its breakfast in the living room, / was love" (15).

Minkert's poems are memorable, worthy of reading several times and spending more time getting to know his characters.

—Suzanna Anderson

Beach Dweller Manifesto by Leah Mueller. Cleveland, OH: Writing Knights Press, 2017. 48 pages. \$15.00, paperback.

I have not found many poetry collections that go beyond the usual 6 inches by 9 inches, or the 7 inches by 10 inches. To have 8.5 inches by 11 inches is a treat. Mueller's book occupies the hands and mind in a way that makes her poems fully present. There are also images, like crow viewed through a fence paired with the poem "Crow Banquet," where "The crow is smarter than you are, / he's not leaving until / he has everything he wants....He has worked too hard / to be deprived of his spoils now. / He is never more hungry / than when he has just finished a meal. / Eating only stimulates his appetite" (2).

In "Wedding at Haystack Rock," the speaker and the spouse go to a wedding wearing velvet. One of the gifts is "...an ocean photo / framed upside down, and I / pack it dutifully, each time // we move. The woman // dies of alcoholism a few / years later, but you and I // remain stubbornly alive, married" (23). The poem continues to explore the couple's relationship, and the spouse takes "...red pills / for your blood pressure. / School friends are worse, dying / in their mid-fifties, bellies // hanging in defeat, like useless wings. // Your fire is visible / to everyone except you. // I see it when you forget to be careful. / I want to remind you / that caution never amounted / to much...." (24). Mueller brings the relationship full circle

from the wedding to moving those wedding clothes, and "I recall how young you were in those velvet wedding pants // as I pack them into yet / another cardboard box, and wonder / if our constant movement / will ever be enough // to keep us alive" (25).

The title poem concludes the collection, "Beach Dweller Manifesto," begins "I hated the end of the year / before it ever became / popular, believing the digits / themselves to be ominous— // a number left behind vanishes into the sea, / while a bottle emerges, containing words / of imminent promise" (42).

Check out Mueller's collection and immerse yourself in the language and images.

—Suzanna Anderson

Ghost Matter by Jade Ramsey. Chicago: dancing girl press & studio, 2016. 32 pages. \$7.00, paperback.

Throughout the collection, Ramsey has poems titled "The Book of ..." and "The Currency of...." These poems build on each other. The collection begins with "There was once a poem and its broken lines chased me to my childhood. Seven-years-old—avoiding the dogs who would try to bite us on our way to Mae's...How the cat leapt onto the dining table in the midst of friend chicken and gravy and flicked over the Precious Moment figurine—the girl holding tulips—how her hand cracked, the pastel bouquet knocked from her fingers. The flowers remained intact. Her still painted shapes of tears."

Having studied piano for many years, I fell in love with "Fragmented Discord," where "There was a pianist once who, one / morning, awoke to find her fingers fallen / off while she dreamt of white / shoelaces and a screeching lost / in a shopping mall. She healed quickly, learning to play with her palms, / but they, too, soon broke away from her arms...Still needing to be heard, she plunked the ivory with her tongue. The tune tasted / like lemon, though in between the keys / there was a hint of honey...."

In "The Book of Gnashing," Ramsey begins, "Who will intercede for the sixteen-year-old girl lying prostrate on her bedroom floor convinced the world will end in a day or so?

This young thing breathing in the dirt nestled in the maroon carpet that doesn't match her purple and blue décor. She's repeating the phrase *Please God*. She wants to find love first, she wants sex first, she wants some kind of life first before it's destroyed with fire and brimstone where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth she's got her Bible out now and she's crying she's shaking she's convinced that were Christ to return at this moment she would become as an angel wanting neither sex nor love and she's whispering how if God would grant her prayer to let her open to a word of comfort let her find love let her let her let her...."

I look forward to seeing more of Ramsey's poetry.

—Suzanna Anderson

Heavenly Whispers by Roger Sippl. CreateSpace Independent Publishing Platform, 2017. 54 pages. \$9.95, paperback.

The collection begins with the title poem, and the speaker is lying in a hospital bed while two nurses argue about the wires. When the speaker flat lines, "I could barely hear / the guy dressed in white holding the white clipboard, / talking too softly, whispering, and / saying, 'Walk toward the light' or / did he say 'Walk toward the right'—you don't want to / make a mistake like that at such an important juncture" (11).

Sippl explores the differences between the young and old in "The Pier," where children visit the pier, and "It's a small and simple pier. // But piers are special / all by themselves. // They are a way to visit another world. // You are on land / and then with just a little walking / you are suddenly in the aquatic world... The children catch tadpoles / using dip nets and put them / into one-time pickle jars / that become the aquariums / of scientific discovery and demonstration.... The children are amazed at the [tadpole] changes. / Our residents are not so amazed, / knowing change as they do, but / they are charmed by the children's / emotion of fascination / and they try to remember when that was last true / in themselves" (25-26).

Sippl's poems are endearing and *Heavenly*

Whispers is a must-have collection on the poetry enthusiast's bookshelf.

—Suzanna Anderson

Permanent Change of Station by Lisa Stice. Johnston, IA: Middle West Press LLC, 2018. 96 pages. \$11.99, paperback.

The collection has three sections, Half-Known Roads, The In-Betweens, and Bedtime Stories. Stice begins with "PCS," "Why do they say *permanent*? / It doesn't hold steady, / but then neither do mountains / nor bridges nor brick houses / nor anything else. // They say, *Go. Adapt.* / Now we understand— / we're permanently changed. / That can be counted on, / and we change often" (3).

The military family comes to life with Stice's words, the separation, the fear. In "Father's Day," "It's just / the three of us // mother / daughter / dog // again" (27). What does home really mean? In "Our Nine Situations," "no, Daddy won't be there / yes, we thought he would be.... we call this our home / even though it isn't (16-17). And in "Fix, Mommy," "Some things just never / go back to the way they were" (39).

The poems "When Your Substance Is Drained Away," "Reduction," "Afternoon One Day When You Were Young" were published in *The Magnolia Review* Volume 3, Issue 1, and it is pleasing to see this poems again with more of Stice's images and precise word choices. Each poem is complete, an entity to itself, yet the building blocks of each poem builds a house for us to dwell, even as it changes around us.

I love reading Stice's words. They are fully present and conscious, reflective and genuine of the human experiences. It is a joy to share her poems and read them aloud to others.

—Suzanna Anderson

i'm fine: A Haiku Collection About Mental Illness by Jamie Winters. CreateSpace Independent Publishing Platform, 2018. 144 pages. \$9.99, paperback.

Winters opens the foreword with "Sometimes, I find myself desperately wanting to create

something. Anything. Except I don't know how to get enough energy to tackle a big project. That's usually when haiku come[s] to my rescue. They're big enough to feel like I actually got a thought out, but small enough to not be intimidating." She chose to use lowercase because "When I'm having a really bad day, my closest friends know to spot it by the fact that I stop capitalizing in my texts. I also thought it kept the flow of the haiku closer to the more uniform shape of Japanese haiku. Another style choice I made was that I went somewhat non-traditional. I've written my haiku in English, not about nature, and strictly following the rule of five syllables, seven syllables, five syllables."

There are too many favorites to choose from, but I'll present a select few.

modern life swarms me / i want to get out of
here— / there's nowhere to go

i wish i was small / so you could cradle me tight
/ like you do to the cat

walls keep it all out / you're pushing bad away,
but / you will numb the good

tie another knot / along with ten hundred more
/ never strong enough

red coat on a hook / in the closet gathers dust /
dreams long forgotten

please just go away / shadows chased me my
whole life / aren't you tired yet?

all i can whisper is "tomorrow, tomorrow" / and
hope things will change

The brevity is refreshing, and haiku is expansive in its small form. I stumbled across this collection from a group of friends, and quickly

fell in love with the project of writing haiku, and wanting to create but knowing how overwhelming projects can be. Perhaps it is time to start a haiku project of my own.

—Suzanna Anderson

Contributors

Gershon Ben-Avraham earned an MA in Philosophy (Aesthetics) from Temple University where he studied with the American philosopher of art Monroe Beardsley. He and his wife live in Beer Sheva, Israel, where he writes short stories and poetry.

Susan P. Blevins was born into an atheist English family, which turned out to be a great blessing because she was able to discover her own spiritual path. She does not have much time for institutional religion, but she lives her life in a spiritual context, knowing that the most important things in life are Love and Service.

Mela Blust is a writer residing in rural Pennsylvania. She is an active member of many online publications, including medium.com. Her work has appeared in *Little Rose Magazine*, and is forthcoming in *Califragile*, as well as *Abstract Magazine*.

Pushcart Prize nominated poet, Charles W. Brice, Ph.D., is a retired psychoanalyst and is the author of *Flashcuts Out of Chaos* (WordTech Editions, 2016) and of *Mnemosyne's Hand* (WordTech Editions, 2018). His poetry, short stories, reviews, and nonfiction pieces have appeared in over seventy publications including *Literal Latte*, *The American Journal of Psychoanalysis*, *Psychiatry*, *The Pittsburgh Post-Gazette*, *The Atlanta Review*, *Hawaii Review*, *The Main Street Rag*, *Chiron Review*, *Fifth Wednesday Journal*, *The Paterson Literary Review*, *Plainsongs* and elsewhere. His poem, "Identification," was anthologized along with poems by W.H. Auden, Hilda Doolittle, Philip Larkin, Stephen Dobyns, Louise Gluck, Anne Sexton, and others in, *Climate of Opinion: Sigmund Freud in Poetry*, Irene Willis (Ed.), (International Psychoanalytic Books, 2017).

Aria Callaham lives in Silverdale where she enjoys acting and writing.

Joan Colby has published widely in journals such as *Poetry*, *Atlanta Review*, *South Dakota Review*, *Gargoyle*, *Pinyon*, *Little Patuxent Review*, *Spillway*, *Midwestern Gothic*, and others. Awards include two Illinois Arts Council Literary Awards and an Illinois Arts Council Fellowship in Literature. She has published 20 books including *Selected Poems* from FutureCycle Press, which received the 2013 FutureCycle Prize and *Ribcage* from Glass Lyre Press, which has been awarded the 2015 Kithara Book Prize. Three of her poems have been featured on Verse Daily and another is among the winners of the 2016 Atlanta Review International Poetry Contest. Her newest books are *Carnival* from FutureCycle Press, *The Seven Heavenly Virtues* from Kelsay Books and *Her Heartsongs* just out from Presa Press. Colby is a senior editor of FutureCycle Press and an associate editor of Good Works Review. Website: www.joancolby.com. Facebook: Joan Colby. Twitter: @poetjm.

Holly Day's poetry has recently appeared in *The Cape Rock*, *New Ohio Review*, and *Gargoyle*. Her nonfiction publications include *Music Theory for Dummies*, *Music Composition for Dummies*, *Guitar All-in-One for Dummies*, *Piano and Keyboard All-in-One for Dummies*, *Walking Twin Cities*, *Northeast Minneapolis: A History*, and *Stillwater, Minnesota: A History*. Her newest poetry collec-

tions, *A Perfect Day for Semaphore* (Finishing Line Press), *I'm in a Place Where Reason Went Missing* (Main Street Rag Publishing Co.), and *Where We Went Wrong* (Clare Songbirds Publishing) will be out mid-2018, with *The Yellow Dot of a Daisy* already out on Alien Buddha Press.

Darren C. Demaree's poems have appeared, or are scheduled to appear in numerous magazines/journals, including *Diode*, *Meridian*, *New Letters*, *Diagram*, and the *Colorado Review*. He is the author of eight poetry collections, most recently *Two Towns Over* (March 2018), which was selected as the winner of the Louise Bogan Award by Trio House Press. He is the Managing Editor of the *Best of the Net Anthology* and *Ovenbird Poetry*. Demaree currently lives and writes in Columbus, Ohio, with his wife and children.

Adam Durso received his M.F.A. in Fiction from Temple University, in Philadelphia. Like Donald Hall before him, he was born in Hamden, Connecticut; like Thornton Wilder, he prefers to spend his time in New Haven. His poetry has appeared in *The Common Ground Review*, *Chiron Review*, *Bird's Thumb*, *Stoneboat*, *The Tishman Review*, and elsewhere.

Kelcey Parker Ervick is the author of three award-winning books: *The Bitter Life of Božena Němcová* (Rose Metal Press), a hybrid work of biography, memoir, and visual art; *Liliane's Balcony: A Novella of Fallingwater* (Rose Metal Press); and *For Sale By Owner* (Kore Press). Her comics and short graphic narratives have appeared in *Quarterly West*, *Nashville Review*, *Passages North*, and elsewhere.

Sarah A. Etlinger is an English professor who lives in Milwaukee, WI, with her family. Her work can be found on "The Poetry Professors" podcast, Episode 107. Other interests include travel, cooking, and music.

GTimothy Gordon's *From Falling* was published Summer 2017 (Spirit-of-the-Ram P). Work appears in journals like *AGNI*, *Cincinnati Poetry Review*, *Kansas Quarterly*, *The Louisville Review*, *Mississippi Review*, *The New York Quarterly*, *RHINO*, *Sonora Review*, *Baseball Bard*, among others. *Everything Speaking Chinese* received the SunStone Press Poetry Prize. Recognitions include NEA & NEH Fellowships and nominations for Pushcarts and The NEA's Western States' Book Awards. He divides personal and professional lives between Asia and the Desert/Mountain Southwest.

John Grey is an Australian poet, US resident. Recently published in *Nebo*, *Euphony*, and *Columbia Review* with work upcoming in *Leading Edge*, *Poetry East* and *Midwest Quarterly*.

Jack D. Harvey's poetry has appeared in *Scrivener*, *The Comstock Review*, *The Antioch Review*, *Bay Area Poets' Coalition*, *The University of Texas Review*, *The Magnolia Review*, and a number of other on-line and in print poetry magazines over the years. The author has been writing poetry since he was sixteen and lives in a small town near Albany, N.Y. He was born and worked in upstate New York. He is retired from doing whatever he was doing before he retired. He once owned a cat that could whistle "Sweet Adeline," used a knife and fork, and killed a postman.

Aloura Hattendorf lives in a small town just across the water from Seattle where she enjoys writing, reading, and painting.

Henry Hitz taught pre-school for 30 years in San Francisco and recently retired from 15 years of organizing parents in the Oakland public schools. He lives in Oakland with his wife, his son, and two sisters. He is treasurer of the California Writers Club Berkeley Branch. He has published stories in *Cube Literary Magazine*, *Instructor Magazine*, and *Moonfish*. His first novel, *Tales of Monkeyman*, won the Walter Van Tilburg Clark Prize. His novel *White Knight* was published in January 2016 by Wordrunner Press.

Diane Hoffman graduated from Bowling Green State University with a Bachelor in Arts in May 2018. She majored in Film Production and minored in Creative Writing. Her most notable project during her time in college was the short film she wrote and directed, *No One's Little Girl*, which ended up receiving Best in Show at the 2018 BGSU Film & Media Festival. Her interests include writing fiction, editing, painting, and directing. She plans to move to Manhattan to continue pursuing opportunities in film and writing.

A.J. Huffman has published thirteen full-length poetry collections, fourteen solo poetry chapbooks, and one joint poetry chapbook through various small presses. Her most recent releases, *The Pyre On Which Tomorrow Burns* (Scars Publications), *Degeneration* (Pink Girl Ink), *A Bizarre Burning of Bees* (Transcendent Zero Press), and *Familiar Illusions* (Flutter Press) are now available from their respective publishers. She is a five-time Pushcart Prize nominee, a two-time Best of Net nominee, and has published over 2600 poems in various national and international journals, including *Labletter*, *The James Dickey Review*, *The Bookends Review*, *Bone Orchard*, *Corvus Review*, *EgoPHobia*, and *Kritya*. She is the founding editor of *Kind of a Hurricane Press*. You can find more of her personal work here: <https://ajhuffmanpoetryspot.blogspot.com/>

Phil Huffey writes all manner of short poetry, often at his kitchen table in Rochester, New York. He often writes about things he has seen or thinks he has seen. Recent placements include *Orchards Poetry*, *The Lyric*, *Anapest*, *Better Than Starbucks*, and several haiku publications.

James Croal Jackson is the author of *The Frayed Edge of Memory* (Writing Knights Press, 2017). His poetry has appeared in *Columbia Journal*, *Rattle*, *Hobart*, *FLAPPERHOUSE*, and elsewhere. He edits *The Mantle* from Columbus, Ohio. Find him at jimjakk.com and @jimjakk.

Lonnie James attends BGSU for Film Production with a minor in Theater. James has been playing guitar for 17 years, and he is a touring musician. He now has a solo acoustic act under the stage name of Lonnie James, and he is currently in the process of writing the next screenplay and start filming over the summer. James's film *Temptation* showed at the annual Ray Browne Film Festival, and the BGSU Film and Media Film Festival, and soon to be showing at the Glass City Film Festival on May 17th. His screenplay was chosen to be read at a live reading on October 2nd in the Donnell Theater at BGSU. James plans to make two films over the summer and graduate from BGSU next Spring.

Gloria DeVidas Kirchheimer is the author of a novel, *Amalie in Orbit*, and a short story collection, *Goodbye, Evil Eye*. Her work has been published in various magazines, including *The Antioch Review*, *Arts & Letters*, *Kansas Quarterly*, *Lilith*, *New Letters*, *Carolina Quarterly*, *North American Review*, *Persimmon Tree*, *Hippocampus* and others. Check out her website: <http://www.gkirchheimer.com/>

Matthew J. Kreglow is a 2013 graduate of Bowling Green State University's Creative Writing Program. Currently, he resides in his hometown of Medina, Ohio. In addition to writing poetry and short fiction, Matthew enjoys hiking the local nature trails and photographing wildlife and nature, as well as playing music with the local community band.

Claire Martin graduated from Columbia College Chicago in 2017, where she was a managing editor for the award winning literary magazine *Hair Trigger*, as well as the interview editor for its online counterpart, *Hair Trigger 2.0*. You can find her current fiction in *Hair Trigger 40*, *Longshot Island*, *Ariel Chart*, and in this summer's upcoming issue release of *Scarlet Leaf Review*. These days, you can find her holed up with a camera somewhere along Lake Michigan.

Megan Miazgowicz is a digital artist and illustrator, who recently graduated from Bowling Green State University with a BFA in Digital Art. Megan enjoys both digital painting and creating comics, and hopes to someday publish her own graphic novels. She is currently developing a comic series with her best friend and hopes to begin work on it this fall. Outside of comics, she enjoys reading, writing, character design, sleeping, and hanging out with her dog.

Jennifer Davis Michael is professor and chair of English at the University of the South in Sewanee, Tennessee, specializing in British Romanticism. Her poems have appeared in *3 Elements Review*, *Switchgrass Review*, *Cumberland River Review*, *Literary Mama*, and *Mezzo Cammin*. She has also published a book of criticism, *Blake and the City* (Bucknell, 2006).

Paul Mills has worked variously as an English teacher and newspaper subeditor in various countries including Spain, Lebanon, and China, but is currently based in the UK. His writing has appeared in *The FT Magazine*, *The Lebanese Daily Star*, and *The Independent*.

Though the two places don't often go hand in hand, TJ Neathery spent his childhood between Texas and Albania. He writes fiction and received his MFA from Oregon State University. Among his recent publications are stories in *Front Porch Review* and *Amarillo Bay*. He also writes a weekly Artist of the Week feature for oncoloradosprings.com. Currently, he writes in Colorado Springs, CO and works in nonprofit communications. Check out his website: www.tjneathery.com/author.

Simon Perchik is an attorney whose poems have appeared in *Partisan Review*, *Forge*, *Poetry*, *Osiris*, *The New Yorker* and elsewhere. His most recent collection is *The Osiris Poems* published by box of chalk, 2017. For more information, including free e-books, his essay titled "Magic, Illusion and Other Realities" please visit his website at www.simonperchik.com.

Steven B. Rosenfeld is a retired New York lawyer who has been writing for 40 years and began writing short fiction in 2015. His stories have been published in *The City Key*, *Inigo Online*, *Jewish Fiction.net*, *Reflex Fiction*, *Good Works Review*, and *Flatbush Review*. An earlier version of “Amy’s Story,” the piece published by *Jewish Fiction.net* in September 2017, received an Honorable Mention in the 2016 Short Story America Prize contest.

Born in Pennsylvania, David Anthony Sam is the proud grandson of peasant immigrants from Poland and Syria. He lives now in Virginia with his wife and life partner, Linda, and in 2017 retired as president of Germanna Community College. Sam has four collections and was the featured poet in the Spring 2016 issue of *The Hurricane Review* and the Winter 2017 issue of *Light: A Journal of Photography and Poetry*. His poetry has appeared in over 80 journals and publications. Sam’s chapbook *Finite to Fail: Poems after Dickinson* was the 2016 Grand Prize winner of GFT Press Chapbook Contest and his collection *All Night over Bones* received an Honorable Mention for the 2016 Homebound Poetry Prize. www.davidanthonysam.com

William L. Spencer has published fiction and non-fiction in the *San Diego Reader* and *West Coast Review* (Simon Fraser University). Short story “In the System” was published by *Uprising Review* in 2017 (pen name Carlos Dunning). A short story is scheduled for the Spring 2018 issue of *Furtive Dalliance Literary Review* and a piece of flash fiction is up on *Soft Cartel*. He is a winner of First Place for Fiction (twice) and First Place for Non-Fiction from the San Diego Writers and Editors Guild.

David Spicer has poems in *Tipton Poetry Journal*, *Reed Magazine*, *Chiron Review*, *Alcatraz*, *Gargoyle*, *unbroken*, *Raw*, *Third Wednesday*, *Ploughshares*, *The American Poetry Review*, and elsewhere. He has been nominated for a Best of the Net three times and a Pushcart, and is the author of one full-length collection of poems, *Everybody Has a Story* (St. Luke’s Press, 1987), and five chapbooks, with the latest, *From the Wings of a Pear Tree*, available from Flutter Press.

Chuck Thompson has a MA in English from the University of Massachusetts, and his published works include *Busy and Blessed: 10 Simple Steps for Parents Seeking Peace* (Insight Press, 2014). He’s also a secondary school administrator and avid reader here in Chicago, Illinois.

Dennis Trujillo is a former US Army soldier and middle/high school math teacher from Pueblo, Colorado. In 2010 he spontaneously began writing poetry, not knowing where the spark came from—since then he has published more than seventy poems in various magazines, journals, and anthologies. He enjoys running and yoga and currently lives in Dongducheon, South Korea.

Bess Vanrenen is a writer, editor, and mostly armchair traveler, she lives in Denver with her family. Vanrenen has an MA degree in English from the University of Colorado at Boulder and an MFA degree in Creative Writing from Antioch University Los Angeles. Her personal essays are published in a variety of print and digital publications, including *Role Reboot* and *The Manifest-Station*. Vanrenen’s short story “Missed Connection” won a *Stories on Stage* contest and was performed live, and her short story “Unexpected Gifts” was published by *The Sand Hill Review*.

Maryfrances Wagner's books include *Salvatore's Daughter*, *Light Subtracts Itself*, *Red Silk* (Thorpe Menn Book Award for Literary Excellence), *Dioramas*, *Pouf*, and *The Silence of Red Glass*. Her poems have appeared in many literary magazines and anthologies. She co-edits the *I-70 Review*, served as Co-president of The Writers Place, and for fun and relaxation, she enjoys creating collages and jewelry.

Michael Whelan is the author of the poetry collection *After God*. He is the winner of Leitrim Guardian's 2012 Literary Awards and his work has appeared in *The Best American Poetry Blog*, *The Washington Post*, *The Boston Globe*, *The Los Angeles Times*, *The Galway Review*, *Little Patuxent Review* and many other journals. <https://www.michaelwhelanpoetry.com/>

Theresa Williams lives and teaches in Northwest Ohio. Her current project is a Sketchbook novel called *The Diary of Lea Knight*. It traces the inner life of Lea Knight, who has recently lost a baby. Theresa twice received Individual Excellence Grants from The Ohio Arts Council and has been published in numerous journals, including *Gargoyle*, *Hunger Mountain*, and *The Sun*.

Kelsey Zimmerman lives in Ann Arbor, Michigan. She attended the University of Michigan and holds a B.A. in English. In her spare time, she enjoys writing poetry, taking photos of nature, and knitting.