



The Magnolia Review
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“Red” by Charlotte Edwards was first published in Spill Words.

“Afterwards” by Hanna Komar was first published by the Blue Nib.

Welcome to the twelfth 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 The Magnolia Review publishes previously unpublished work and reprints of previously published work. We publish two issues a year, and we accept submissions year-round. 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. Sales of physical copies are part of fundraising efforts to pay for two free contributor copies and mailing costs for each contributor.

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For more information, please visit www.themagnoliareview.com or email us at themagnoliareview@gmail.com.

Dedicated to
Joan Colby

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The Race

I did not wish to participate in this particular race. It was obvious in the beginning, because I got off to a slow start. There I was walking as everyone ran around me, occasionally I would see someone glance and smile at me. They seemed to be as resistant to this particular race as I.

It has been about five years now and I have begun to keep up with everyone else. I have become less approachable, because I'm moving so fast; less tolerant, because I'm moving so fast; less understanding, because I'm moving so fast. I am moving so fast that I can barely recognize myself. This is the race in which I did not wish to participate. There appears to be no end.

I am tired and I have no time to stop and experience the things I love. I have no time to spend alone time, quality time with You. I am missing You in that special way, because I don't take time anymore. I am running this race in which I did not wish to participate.

Today

It is too much for a person
to unpack happenings
in the space of a day.

Yet each of us do it
invariably independent
of everyone else.

Deep breath.
Look—

Road Trip

I always confuse *a part* and *apart*:
a part a part of one thing,
apart separate from another.

I love to play with *paradox*:
where I park my two boats
or the shoes I wear onboard.

But after this road trip,
I'll never forget *apart*

and the pair of docs I need to see
about my shattered heart.

Portland

In Portland
hesitating dew
from a sycamore
drips on the car
I'm waiting for
something to tell me
not to go and this
seems like it
and rain
We've packed
bags and flown
My youth so distant
along a braided, wet highway
61 miles to go
through Sandy
windmills and streudel
now Chevron and Arbie's
that don't fascinate me
like my loneliness
is a story I can't follow
because everyone who drove this
road is disappearing into
fog prickling along pines
passing east along
rest areas and day use parks
I look for Tang at the store
but they don't sell it anymore
my tongue sours
on what's replaced the things
that made me
with the things
I don't know
in ZigZag there's now a
whistle stop karaoke
and a pinball bar
quiet, quick snow falls

footprints on my window pane
spreading stars
speeding past.

High Places

I.

When Crown burned and coke sizzled,
About two days back
When I was young,
I loved you.

Way back when country songs told me how to feel,
When Captain Morgan and I sat around the fire,
I dreamed of you.

Back when I thought smoking was cool,
When Jose Cuervo bought me cigarettes for sex,
The stars were made of you.

I pretended to look out that window and see you standing by the fire.
I took myself beyond the darkness, beyond any fantasy my mind
could stir.
Months were filled with smoky figures and shooting stars, none of
them real,
At least not until I spoke your name.

II.

So,
I traded my Captain for that smile—threw out my Crown for that
butt.
Fire jumped from the pit, catching my heart as I caught you.

III.

But,

Falling was for dreams.

—I woke up and realized I jumped.

Reality beat my consciousness.

—I convinced myself feelings weren't real.

I convinced myself that it's easier to wear a Crown and love nothing.

—to sit with a Captain and burn everything.

—to fuck Jose than to reach for stars.

An Open Door Is an Invitation in the Same Way as a Closed Box

1. The troubles had been packed in
squished against each other
so thick they could hardly breathe.
At that moment, the lid opened
and air rushed in.
2. During their time in the box
the troubles had forgotten
what it was like outside.
They huddled together on the sidewalk, homeless.
3. One of them saw a person pass by and jumped.
He waved at the other troubles
standing there wringing their hands
from his perch.
4. The man was coming home from work.
He felt a weight
that he didn't remember that morning.
A bad day, he thought.
5. The other troubles scattered
in search of people.
Once they looked around
there was no shortage.
It was easy to jump
onto a swaying arm or leg
a piece of clothing
or catch a foot or toe
hoist up from there.

6. The troubles liked to climb
as far up as possible.
It seemed strange to them
that people didn't brush them off.
That's how they discovered
they were invisible.
7. They found they could survive
on the crumbs of what people ate.
8. In time people became so used
to carrying troubles around
that they couldn't remember
a time when they hadn't.
9. They grew bonded.
So when a trouble was removed
when it fell or was scraped
off by circumstance
people felt they had lost something
and mourned.

Icarus

Three men stood before a fire. One man thought he was broken. One thought he was whole. And one we don't really care about. The fire wasn't legit. It was made with wood that came plastic-wrapped from a convenience store, snapping without enthusiasm in a decorative metal bowl that came from a furniture store, and it wasn't giving much heat or light.

The three were outcasts, escapees from the Halloween party thrumming inside the house before them. Through the large windows beyond the wan firelight they could see the revelers inside, talking, laughing, bouncing to the mix of music – Doobie Brothers now – clenching red cups of flat beer from the keg on the porch.

Among the revelers moved a doll, or perhaps a clown, or perhaps Proteus himself, though in the form of a woman, whose identity shifted before each set of eyes. The flounce and vibrancy of her skirt and petticoats, the clutch of her bodice, the carmine circles on her cheeks, her golden hair caught in two pigtails. The crimson tips of her fingers touching this arm or resting on that shoulder as she danced among the bevy of costumed partygoers. All of it, every bit of it that the broken man watched from his vantage by the fire, was new, was seen as though for the first time by eyes that he'd been sure had seen her essence.

The broken man, standing in the darkness below, with a pair of cardboard wings shoelaced to his back, a white bed sheet girded precariously about his loins, watched. White feathers fell from his wings, insufficiently fastened for the rigors of party going, leaving themselves here and there. "Are you Cupid?" he had been asked, and as he hadn't been sufficiently sober to reply with annoyance nor sufficiently drunk to reply with mirth, mumbled only, "I am Icarus."

Icarus watched her now as though a stranger, the reality not yet dawning on him that, in fact, she was. She'd never shown such jollity, such spontaneity, around him. Toward him she was always sunny but also distant; she was friendly but never, as he had thought right, as he imagined inevitable, with any of the life-giving warmth he was certain smoldered within her. The first time he'd seen her –

dashing across a finish line, sweaty and red faced, her hair escaping her ponytail, so completely in her moment – he thought she was the sun. More than metaphor, it seemed to him in that moment as though the spark of creation burned more brightly in her than in other mortals. And so it had been ever since. She was made of sunlight; of this he had been certain, and he needed to tell her so. For showing her that he had noticed would make all the difference.

He took a fortifying gulp of lukewarm beer, tightened the knot of his dishabille, then wended the path of paving stones in the garden and ascended the porch steps. As he opened the door to enter the house, Cheap Trick poured out.

From below, the two men watched as Icarus moved through the crowd, pursuing a woman in her arc of ceaseless movement.

The brief conversation that ensued was its own variation of words exchanged uncounted times in the lives of disappointed infatuates throughout history, though now this first time in his own life. Nor was his response unique, as crestfallen as any, as sputtering and apologetic as most. The fatal stab was mercifully quick, and he mumbled back to the false fire in the yard, doleful Bill Withers now pouring forth, his frail wings buffeted by all that was in his way, fallen feathers marking his retreat.

Icarus gazed through the windows, the woman untouched by his lofty profession, by mere words that could neither stay her course nor alter his orbit. She stood in the light, radiance itself, and resumed her revels.

The three men remained before the fire, silent. Icarus, spurned, and burned, watched the woman. His friend watched Icarus. The third man watched them both.

Presently, Icarus turned and left the firelight; the soupy, liquid darkness swallowed him.

“What’s his story?”

“Poor Icarus is late coming to understand what I have been telling him for weeks.”

“And what is that?”

“The woman in there, the one he bared his soul to just now, is his sad obsession. He imagines her to be not only the ideal woman for himself but that she secretly feels the same about him. Or that she will once she realizes it. But she is not so much ideal as

idealized. He has projected all of his desires onto her, imagining her the sun and he a planet forever in her orbit, and he is so blinded by this image that he doesn't see his doomed fate."

"An old story."

"Recounted throughout human experience." He sipped his beer, neither cold nor warm, and continued his tale in the firelight. "He sees her every week at our club's runs. A smile on the trail. A few words exchanged over beers afterward. Even a lunch together once. She gives him little bits of attention, and he knows it to be love. But he doesn't love this woman. Not her. Not really. He's projected too much perfection onto her. He's in love with a woman who not only doesn't exist but who *cannot* exist. He loves his idea of her, of warm closeness, of a relationship that fills some void in him. That's what he doesn't realize he is truly after, and now, he's come to see that what he thinks he wants isn't going to happen. Perhaps he'll eventually come to see that it was never real."

The beer was not particularly good, but it was loosening his tongue.

"You tried to warn him?"

"I took him under my wing, as they say."

And so he had. In the fraught and futile way of best friends through the ages. In snatched running conversations or beer-soaked contretemps in noisy bars or with breathless words on the basketball court.

"She's a Pentecostalist, you know."

"She's not!"

"Yeah, she is. She's Jewish. She's a Jehovah's Witness. A Tridentine Catholic. A wiccan. A Moonie."

"She none of those things."

"And you don't know what she is. Or isn't. This fundamental quality about her and you have no idea what it may be, but you're sure you're in love with her!"

Icarus harrumphs, is unswayed.

"You're not in love with her. You're in love with an idea of her. The person you have projected on her."

“You don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“Think so? Well, is she a donkey or an elephant? What kind of music does she like? What’s her favorite color? Her favorite movie? Cats or dogs? Dark chocolate or milk chocolate? Star Wars or Star Trek?”

Icarus sips his coffee or changes the channel or clicks his pen as he does his best to not listen to these words.

“She doesn’t use the Oxford comma. She puts two spaces after a period!”

“Now you’re just being mean.”

“In this moment, what do you think is on her mind? What’s she thinking about? Is it you? Is she sitting alone in some coffee shop wondering how you are doing? Is she wishing there was some way she could spend her hours with you? She’s not! Of course she’s not.”

Icarus only stares ahead at the big game or his burger or the sunset.

“So consider yourself instead. Imagine some woman you know in passing, who you run into occasionally and have a nodding friendship with. Maybe you’ve shared a few casual words with her. And further imagine that this woman is pining for you. At this very moment. She secretly loves you and takes even the most minute gesture from you as a confirmation that you share her love but can’t, for some inexplicable reason, acknowledge it. What would you say to her if she confessed these feelings about you?”

“But that’s different!” Icarus insists as he takes a pawn or pays for their beers or stops at a light.

“She is not the sun. She is a flame. And you are not Icarus. You are a moth.”

The party thrived. The fire struggled. The two men stood in the darkness, in quiet reflection.

And then Icarus returned. Without a word, he unlaced the remnants of his wings and dropped them onto the flames. Then he turned and left a second time.

“Moderation in all things. One must imagine Icarus happy.”

Paul Lamb

Not Waiting For the Mothership

Instead,
I opened the door
and walked barefooted
to the starlit field
beyond my street
and watched a dozen
yellow moths, drunk
on summer wind, diving
in the silver grasses,
wrecklessly alive,
making their own lanes.

M(ark, ilwaukee, anchester, artha)

those words
scraped off her tongue
like skin
from my knees
as they hit
the pavement.

my whole world was Mark
careening in his car
down a frosty
Milwaukee freeway;

i was in Manchester and i wasn't
thinking
about flight tickets
to the states
or
'will they send him home?'

i was thinking of Martha;

she had heard
the phone ring while ironing
my flannel nightgowns
on the kitchen table
over which hung my husband's
final photograph.

they'd told her where my son
was found:

spread out—
beside a guardrail
in a red pool
spattered with
tempered windshield glass
and snow—
like the tears over my cheeks.

Martha brought in
the bad news
scraping off
her tongue

on my way
out of church
one quiet Sunday afternoon.

From a Prescribed Distance

Everybody's looking, watching to see
what everyone else is doing.
Waiting for the slip, the error.
So easy to make, new actions not yet routine.
Outrage and satisfaction of witness.
Who was that masked/unmasked man?
Who took the last container of wipes,
threw down gloves in the parking lot?
Who blocked the aisle, went down the wrong way?
Is it possible to go around and come back
to make it right or is the insult impossible
to remove? Calculating the odds of distances.
How many of these folks are shopping for themselves?
How many are mercenaries, sent to fetch a list?
Who coughed in their bed last night?
Who runs a secret fever?

Red

To the Next Red Riding Hood
They will tell tales of what he did to you
How he swallowed you whole
And told you “Red never looked good on you anyway”

They will say, It’s not my fault
That my teeth look like his teeth
That my hands still remind you
Of the bruises he let bloom on you
That my breath reminds you of his breath
With the same rotting smell
As if he were still picking out the pieces
Of that little girl between his teeth

They will ask what you were wearing
Whispering of how red was the wolf’s invitation
They will tell you that you deserved it
How that’s just what happens to girls who climb in bed with
monsters
Why didn’t your mother teach you better

They will question
Why were you in the woods in the first place
It’s like you wanted that wolf to find you
Didn’t your father ever tell you
The woods is no place for girls anyway

And if you think
They will give you the title of
Victim or Survivor
Expect neither

Rather you will become the horror story
They tell their daughters
Passed down like second-hand wisdom
Taught in the silence of too many witnesses
The moral will become
Don't talk to strangers
What they don't say is there are wolves
That pretend to be men
They won't show you how to tell the difference

And even if you take control of your tale
The price for their sympathy
Will be all the gory details
Of how the wolf ripped you open
Made a feast out of your body
Claimed you as his own
And they still call your story a fairytale

To the Next Red Riding Hood
If there's any advice I can give you it is this
Do not listen to them
Wear red even if they don't like it
Tell them it's a metaphor

Know that there will be days
Where you can't sleep with the lights off
Some nights you will wake up screaming
Dreaming of him finding you again
And in that moment
Your room will look exactly like the middle of the woods
And suddenly you're that little girl in the red hood again
You could have sworn grandma was already dead
There's no woodcutter to save you
Sometimes there is no escape from him

And I know you think that there are
too many wolves in this world
for it to not happen again

but they're right
Not all of them are dangerous
However, remember
The scariest part about being the next red riding hood is
Most wolves wouldn't call themselves one

Skimming the Water

This morning I swim laps, startle when heavy bird wings shudder overhead.

Looking up, a flock of squawking Canada Geese. *So like Mother*, I say aloud.

I ran alongside such a skein, the morning she died. Late fall in Ohio, cold.

They honked for five minutes, me feeling their ruckus in my shoulders.

Sensing mom's spirit flying away with them, my feet almost left the ground.

They skimmed the pond across from her house. I ran beside, then under them

until I ran out of breath, blinking hot tears on chilling skin. Next to a frozen

field of dried corn stalks, rattling.

Today, draped across the lane line in the blue pool, I cry for her early leaving,

her open talking to her sisters, all of them together, these thirty years of missing her.

5.17.19

8.05 a.m.

52 degrees

Placidly gray, still enough walk across, the polliwogs
ordain the surface with the pop of their one tiny
noun, capture a bead of air and drag it through the
doldrums to the bottom where it feeds their diminutive lungs.

In the Dark

Flannel nightgown up to my ears,
I walk outside, autumn dawn.
Through the garden, wet earth
squished between my toes,
to the last tomatoes
before the first frost.
Noises from the barn draw me closer.

Stay out. Don't come in here.
Grandpa's voice a vice, sharp, cold.

I had glimpsed enough edges
long white slats
to see he was skinning
or slaughtering a deer.

No lights on. A four-paned
window over his left shoulder.
He stands behind an animal,
using something sharp
again and again. In his barn.

I want to think
he's currying a horse
but this shadowed shape—
smaller, more delicate.

A terrible smell of rotten
something comes from the barn.
It slides up my nostrils
And won't come out.

How can he be doing that
in the place where our horses
sleep and eat their breakfast?

Dropping tomatoes, I run
back to kitchen warmth,
Grandma's soft apron.

Donna Emerson

Balloon Letters

May 23, 1995
Paris, Texas

Dear Mr. LeBlanc,

Or should I say *Monsieur*? Your letter arrived last week while I was still taking finals. When I got home, Sherry, my mom, told me a hot-air balloon landed in the front yard, then some funny-looking balloon guy skipped to the front door and said, “Marie LeBlanc?” Sherry just shook her head and was all, “She’ll be home from college in a couple days.” The balloon guy talked a bunch of “Hinky dinky parley voo” (her words), then shoved this letter in her face. At least it’s something different, right? Only Sherry didn’t see it that way. She was like, “Real cute,” giving me the evil eye. “Tell your friends to call before they drop by.” What can I say? She’s always so melodramatic! But then she whipped out that letter (your letter!) and shoved it in *my* face.

Pretty cool we have the same last name, right?

So I’m glad you finally wrote, but your timing’s not the greatest. Seriously, what took you so long? This whole pen pal thing was a project in my spring French 102 class. I thought I explained everything when I sent my first letter, but maybe your English is worse than my French! I almost had to take an F for the assignment, but my friend Heather, whose family hosted an exchange student from *gai Paris* until her parents caught them half-naked in the pool room, picked up your slack. I wound up with a B+. Maybe you should send Heather something by way of thanks? Chanel No. 5 perfume or Bordeaux wine, Gauloises cigarettes or a hot young Frenchman? Your choice. I’ll get you her address.

I didn’t understand much of what you wrote, I hate to admit, but I’m still pretty tired from exams, plus my friends took me out partying last, so now I’ve got the *gueule de bois*. Is that right? Mouth of wood? Heather told me that’s how you say “hangover.”

Anyway, thanks again for finally writing. Better *tard* than *jamais!*

Your new *amie*,
Marie LeBlanc

P.S. What does *par ballon monté* mean? That's about the only thing I could make out on the front of the envelope.

June 2, 1995
Paris, Texas

Mon cher Guillaume,

So I thought Sherry was out of her mind with all that hot-air balloon BS, but about 11 o'clock this morning, while I was lounging on the couch, eating Honeycomb and watching *The Young and the Restless*, another one landed in the front yard. I was still groggy. Sure, I heard this obnoxious hissing noise, followed by a thud, but what did that have to do with me? I figured it was just the neighborhood urchins smashing into somebody's parked car with their bikes or baseball bats. (My Mustang's in the *garage*, so not to worry!) But then there was a knock at the door. I could make out your balloon guy's blurry image through the frosted glass. All I had on was a ratty old Beastie Boys t-shirt, so I scurried off to my room to find a pair of khaki shorts and pull my hair back.

Anyway, your balloon guy pounded on the door again, and Sherry started going ballistic, calling me "Queen Marie" and shouting if I wasn't too indisposed executing my queenly responsibilities, perhaps I could come down from my throne for a moment and answer the dang door. She's a writer and works from home and can be a cranky bizotch when she's got a deadline. She's always working on something, articles, books, whatever. Mostly historical stuff. She's writing about the Franco-Prussian War as we speak. I know who Franco was (Spain, *n'est-ce pas?*), but what's a Prussian? It's all pretty dry and boring, if you ask me.

So it turns out your balloon guy wasn't what I expected. Seriously, I was thinking a short, squat man with a bald spot and bad teeth, but not this guy. Maybe he was a bit *démodé*, what with the handlebar mustache, plus the boots and frock coat and little hat. But what a hottie! Tall with thick dark hair and a charming smile. And those tight pants! I almost lost it! When I swung the door open, he was leaning against the doorframe, all dashing and debonair. I was tongue-tied for a moment, so good thing he was on a mission.

"Marie LeBlanc?" he said.

"Uh..."

"*Alors, c'est vous?*"

It was the perfect opportunity for me to practice my French, but what came out was: "Yep, I'm your girl."

He flashed me a half-smile, then reached into this really great leather satchel and passed me another of your letters. I was delighted to hear from you again, but to be perfectly honest, I was even more into your balloon guy. He'd already turned on his heel and begun swaggering down the walk to where his giant balloon bobbed in the breeze. The thing was getting all saggy and droopy, and I had a sudden vision of him smashing into the steeple of the First Baptist and plummeting to his death.

"*Excusez-moi, Monsieur?*" I said.

Impressive, right?

He glanced over his shoulder. An electric surge crackled through me.

"*Voulez-vous boire un café?*" Why anybody'd want coffee in this heat was beyond me, maybe it was a French thing, but it was all that came out.

Your balloon guy spat some gibberish I took for yes, then followed me inside.

Dad was the coffee drinker, and when he moved to California he took the French press and the *savoir-faire*. (Look at me!) So I grabbed one of Sherry's frappuccinos outta the fridge and took a seat next to the balloon guy on the sofa. In her office Sherry was shrieking along to Alanis Morissette. I took a deep breath and tried out my best French on him, only I didn't get past, "*Quel temps fait-il?*" before the strangest thing happened. From the closet under the stairs, a second balloon guy emerged. He looked just like the

one on the couch, only taller, darker, and more handsome.
“Where’d you come from, beautiful?” I asked, but no one was listening.

“Jean-Pierre?” said the guy on my couch.

“Jean-Michel!” said the other one.

Then they gave each other a big man-hug and hearty handshake and some French kissy-kissy (super hot!), launching into a crazy conversation I couldn’t begin to follow. I just sat there, watching, admiring, showing some leg. Once the reunion was over, I grabbed them some Mrs. Baird’s honey wheat and Kraft Singles and a six-pack of frappuccinos from the kitchen, then led them upstairs and hid them in the guest bedroom.

Laissez les bons temps rouler!

When I got back downstairs, I passed Sherry in the hallway. She was like, “Glad to see you’re finally up off the couch,” but I just rolled my eyes. I was about to burst, I was so excited, only I couldn’t let on anything. She’d just tell me guys upstairs were off-limits.

I took a peek out the front windows, and by now Jean-Michel’s balloon was almost totally deflated. I wasn’t surprised to see the neighborhood urchins hauling it off in wagons and wheelbarrows. At least now we know what became of Jean-Pierre’s balloon.

Sorry to ramble on so long! I haven’t even told you about Paris (Texas) or asked you about Paris (France). *La prochaine fois, n’est-ce pas?* (I think this pen pal thing is gonna be good for me!) Anyway, I look forward to actually reading your letter soon.

Cordialement,
Marie

June 14, 1995
Paris, Texas

Bonjour, Guillaume!

Thanks for sending another letter—and a new balloon guy! Jean-Pierre and Jean-Michel were both thrilled to see Jean-Paul. It's all I can do to keep them quiet so Sherry won't discover them and go into conniptions. They look so much alike, I can't really keep them straight. All three are excellent kissers! But I guess y'all (means "you all") invented French kissing, so it stands to reason. Good thing Sherry's so busy that she hasn't noticed how quickly all the food and, especially, wine are disappearing. I've been doing the shopping, as well as the upstairs cleaning, and Sherry keeps thanking me for being so "helpful" and "responsible." She says she's impressed by my "initiative." I figure, let her think what she wants to think. No harm done.

I read through your last two letters a couple times, but I still didn't get all that much. (Sorry, I'm working on it!) I think you're trying to tell me about what Paris is like. I caught the word *siège*, meaning "chair," but what is the *Siège de Paris*? Is that some kinda huge chair, where the king sits, maybe, like his throne? Tell me more! Also, thanks for working in a little English, but I couldn't figure out what you meant by *chair de cheval*. Chair of horse? A horse chair? Is that a chair made from a horse? Or for a horse? Either way, we don't have those here, so maybe you could send a *photographie*?

Anyway, Paris (France)! I've seen tons of photos, and I love French movies like *Les Miz* and *French Kiss*. Have you seen them? Aren't they amazing? But I still have so many questions. Is everyone in *La Ville Lumière* thin and beautiful and well-dressed? Do people wear all black, even in the middle of summer? Are there poets on every street corner and novelists in all the cafés? Is the Eiffel Tower beautiful from the top? Are you an artist? Is everyone an artist? Are the Louvre and Musée d'Orsay full of your paintings and sculptures? Do people really walk everywhere? Does it ever snow? Does everyone smoke? Gauloises or Gitanes? Are French poodles super-popular? Do *Parisiens* prefer red wine or white? Do

they still guzzle absinthe like water? Do they ever drink water? So many questions!

One thing I noticed on all your letters is the date. You keep writing 1870. What's the deal? Probably, I'm just having a hard time deciphering your handwriting, what with all the sharp slashes and odd curlicues. It's got this weird slant to it, too, like maybe you're a southpaw. Not that there's anything wrong with that. Be proud! You're different! Anyway, I'm sure you know it's 1995—unless you're some wacko in a nuthouse. By the time I graduate, it will almost be a new century! Can you believe that?

Sorry to cut it short, but I can hear Sherry in the kitchen, and the balloon guys are drunk on Cab and walking around shirtless. (So hot!)

Your *copine*,
Marie

June 23, 1995
Paris, Texas

Salut, Bill!

I can call you that, *n'est-ce pas*? I did a little research, and it turns out that *Guillaume* is French for William. So the sky's the limit: Will, Willy, Bill, Billy. Pick your poison!

I haven't told you much about my Paris (Texas), have I? It's my hometown, love it or leave it. (Trust me, I'm already working on my escape plan!) There's not much to speak of, truth be told, especially when compared to your Paris (France). We're in the northeast corner of the Lone Star State, about fifteen miles from the Oklahoma border and a hundred from Big D (Dallas). We stole your city's name, and we have a *Tour Eiffel*, too, except ours is only sixty-five feet tall. There's a funny statue in the cemetery of Jesus wearing cowboy boots. We've got a rodeo and a Tour de Paris bike race. There's a *lac* just outside town (Lake Crook; don't ask me why), where people like to fish, camp, and party. Let me think, what else? I don't know, it's small-town Texas. What can I say?

I finally puzzled out *par ballon monté*. Don't ask me why it took so long, obvious as it is. Maybe French isn't my forte? (Just ask Professor Naudeau!) Anyway, it means something like "by hot-air balloon." I'm still stuck on the *monté* part, so maybe I'll have to check the dictionaries at the junior college library. At least I figured out the balloon part. But I get stuck there, too, because why balloons? It's almost the 21st Century, right? So don't you have aeroplanes (or however you spell it over there) in France? That Concorde supersonic jet, *par exemple*? But maybe you're Old School, Bill. *Vieille École*. Maybe slow and low is your tempo.

On that note, I've wondered if any of my letters have been getting through to you. My first one came back stamped RETURN TO SENDER, *je ne sais pas pourquoi*. (Look at me go!) I paid the dollar postage and sent it in one of those air mail envelopes. I thought I got your address wrong, but then it dawned on me that maybe I need to send my letters by balloon, too. So I went down to Blow It Up, our local party supply store, and bought a helium balloon. Jean-Pierre, Jean-Michel, and Jean-Paul watched, blathering and gesticulating all the while, as I tied the balloon ribbon securely around my envelope. Naturally, I understood almost nothing. Which is frustrating. I've got this golden opportunity to get really fluent, what with the native speakers hiding out in the upstairs guest bedrooms and all. At least I caught the gist.

"*C'est ridicule!*" said Jean-Pierre.

"*Pas possible!*" said Jean-Michel.

"*Non, non, non, non, non!*" said Jean-Paul.

The newest balloon guy, Jean-Jacques, just looked wan and wagged his head.

So I went back to Blow It Up and bought thirty more helium balloons. That's all that would fit inside my Mustang. I almost crashed three times on the way home.

While I was gone, my second letter to you came back RETURN TO SENDER, too. So I'm enclosing the first two, along with this one, in hopes my balloons, like yours, will carry these words across the wide Atlantic—and half of America.

Write soon!

Toute mon amitié,
Marie

June 30, 1995
Paris, Texas

Cher William,

I still don't know what to call you, since you didn't mention it in your most recent letter, or maybe you did but I misunderstood. You keep signing off as *Guillaume*, so I guess that'd be a safe bet. Still, kinda boring, *non*?

With your latest balloon letter, I'm now harboring *five* balloon guys. Jean-Claude is a real charmer, too, though he looks almost identical to his fellow aeronauts. Same handlebar mustache, same boots and frock coat and little hat. But there's something about those green eyes. I almost lost it when he waltzed up and knocked on the front door. So hot!

Lucky for me, Sherry had to go out of town. Some boring book convention, followed by the first few dates on the promo tour for her latest tome. (Not the one about Franco and the Prussians, since it's not done yet.) She'll be away for a couple of weeks, so that should give me some time to figure out what to do with all these beautiful men. It's scorching hot outside, so at least I don't have to worry about them parading around the neighborhood half-naked. Paris (Texas) is a small town; people talk. But the balloon guys have turned the thermostat down to sixty-five, and they won't stop walking around shirtless and looking gorgeous. It's killing me, Bill. If Heather were here, she'd already be flat on her back, but I have more dignity than that.

So a couple days ago this guy up in Shawnee, Oklahoma called the house. I was like, "*Shawnee*? Is that an actual place?" He sounded like a perv, and I almost hung up on him, but then he started going on about helium balloons and a packet of letters. Said he was out fishing when he went to cast and hooked a bunch of party balloons floating overhead. He reeled them in, read my letters, and looked me up. "You read them?!" I said. "Isn't that illegal?" But he Fed-Exed them back, and they arrived this morning, so I guess I should be grateful.

Désolée, Guillaume. I'll have to come up with a better solution!

Looking forward to your next letter.

Bien à toi,
Marie

July 5, 1995
Paris, Texas

Bonjour, Billy!

Thanks for your most recent letter. I'm working on making sense of it, but I still haven't had a chance to get over to the junior college library. Maybe I should buy a Larousse of my own? I mean, I'll probably need it next year in French 201 anyway, *n'est-ce pas*? I'll have to ask Sherry about it when she gets home.

Sorry it's taken me a few days to write. *Excusez-moi!* I've been busy feeding the balloon guys stuffed cheesy bread from Domino's and trying to keep them in wine. They don't eat much, but at the rate they're downing *vin rouge*, they're gonna drink this town dry!

Plus, yesterday was the Fourth here, probably there, too, but we make a big deal of it. In case you don't know, it's Independence Day, the one day of the year everybody gets together and shouts, "Thank God we're not British!" Maybe you can relate? Anyway, we splash in the pool, have a cookout, and go to a parade. We also brave the summer heat to take in the fireworks. Do you have those *en France*? I assume so, since they're all made in China.

So the parade's what got me thinking. Here in Paris (Texas), the Powers That Be go all out where the parade's concerned. Everybody does. Matter of civic pride, I guess. You don't want to miss it, or you'll be gossiped about for a week! The high school marching band leads the charge, followed by the mighty Wildcats football team, and every organization in town, from the Rotary Club to the Book Club, has a presence. To be *honnête*, it's a wonder there's anyone left to watch! Anyway, it's just like any other Fourth

of July parade in small-town America, except for the humongous parade balloons, *à la* Macy's Day. Instead of Mickey Mouse, Papa Smurf, or Grover, we've got all this wannabe Paris (France) stuff: Eiffel Tower and Arc de Triomphe, Notre Dame and Sacré-Coeur. It's totally ridiculous, but everyone gets a kick out of it, I guess.

I bet you can see where this is going, *non*? It took a lot of high-volume, slowly-pronounced explanations (that's the only way to get through to foreigners), plus lots of exasperated miming, but I managed to enlist the balloon guys' help. We went out early on Independence Day morning, stealing down to the warehouse near the *hotel de ville* where they inflate those jumbo balloons. It was only 7 in the a.m., but already those balloon crews, mostly busybody housewives and enthusiastic retirees, were milling in the stagnant air, bragging about whose balloon was biggest. Air compressors clattered. The warehouse stank of burnt coffee. We grabbed the closest unguarded balloon, a replica of the Louvre's glass pyramid, and scurried back to my house. Nobody even noticed!

That thing is way more awkward than it looks. Seriously. Lucky there was no wind. We tied it down to the backyard patio furniture so it won't float away. I'm grilling hot dogs (even as I write; sorry about any grease smears), and the balloon guys are frolicking in the pool ... in their underwear! So hot! I'll wrap up this letter before they splash me and the Louvre balloon flies away.

Amicalement,
Marie

July 14, 1995
Paris, Texas

Cher copain,

I'm sorry my latest balloon idea was such a bust! Here you are, sending out letter after letter, holding up your end of the bargain, and I can't even manage to get a single one to you. You must be wondering what's going on. But you're not sending your letters into a black hole, I promise. Not that I really understand all

that much, since my French is definitely a work-in-progress, but still. In your latest, I caught some stuff about pigeons. Do you use them as messengers? I'll have to look into it! Plus, some more stuff about chairs: donkey chair, dog chair, cat chair, rat chair. Y'all must be real animal lovers over there—or is there something I missed?

Thanks for the latest balloon guy, Jean-Luc. The others welcomed him like a long-lost brother. When he strips to the waist, it's clear he has the best muscle definition of the lot. Plus, those deep blue eyes. Super hot!

So, as I mentioned, the parade balloon didn't work out. It was nobody's fault really. With the balloon guys' help, I stuffed all my letters into a Ziploc freezer bag, then secured the bag to the inflatable Louvre pyramid, no problem. There was no trouble with lift either. In fact, it took all six guys to keep that giant balloon from carrying me off to Paris, too!

Which, by the way, wouldn't be so bad, *n'est-ce pas*? You could escort me through the Tuileries, buy me Nutella *crêpes* in the Quartier Latin, and introduce me to the wonders of absinthe in Montmartre. After we got loopy on that green liquor, you could take me shopping in all the high-end boutiques on the Champs-Élysées. I could even bring the balloon guys! Are you a balloon guy, too? Are you as hot as them? Hotter?

In the end, the Louvre pyramid balloon didn't carry me off to stay with you in your chic apartment in Saint-Germain-des-Près. Instead, it shot right up into the sky, letters in tow, just like we'd planned, more or less. That was just this morning. (The balloon guys convinced me to keep everything on the down-low for a few days since we'd borrowed the balloon without permission.) But I neglected to consider the Bastille Day Jamboree. *Le 14 juillet*. Folks around here are nuts! They think because the town's name is Paris (Texas), it's cute to celebrate all things French. Probably, it's just an excuse to shoot off more fireworks. Plus, the air show. How could I forget about the stupid Blue Angels? They were blasting this way and zooming that way right when Jean-Pierre yelled, "*Lâchez tout!*" and we let the balloon go. We watched the Louvre pyramid bob and dance in the hot swirls of southerly wind, thrilled at our success. I taught the balloon guys to high-five. We all

hugged and kissy-kissed in triumph. I made out with Jean-Pierre, then again with Jean-Claude, who groped my *derrière*. We'd finally done it!

Then came the incident. I don't want to go into specifics right now. Let's just say my letters were chewed up in one of those screaming jet engines, and they sprinkled onlookers like confetti at a tickertape parade. Plus, the Blue Angels won't exactly be beating down the mayor's door to perform at the next Bastille Day Jamboree.

That's all for now. The balloon guys and I are drinking Cab in the AC and moping. I still haven't figured out how to get this letter to you, so I'll hang onto it for now.

Je t'embrasse,
Marie

P.S. I used Sherry's emergency American Express to get my own Larousse from Waldenbooks, and I looked up *chair*. Turns out, it means "flesh." I know you eat some weird stuff *en France*—frog legs, snails, etc.—but are you really into donkey flesh, too?

July 18, 1995
Paris, Texas

Salut, Bill!

I may be down, but never count me out! The wheels, *mon copain*, are in motion. The balloon guys laid out their plan in excruciating detail, most of which I couldn't follow. But I'll tell you this. I'm making the most of this surprise immersion experience, which is way better than study abroad—though I still hope to spend my junior year *chez vous*. Anyway, I managed to decipher *ballons* (balloons), *gamins* (kids), and *voleurs* (thieves). From what I gleaned, they plan to track down the neighborhood urchins and take back what's rightfully theirs. Assuming, of course, those ragamuffins haven't wrecked the balloons. Then we'll use them to send my return letters to you—though hopefully the balloon

guys will stick around, at least until Sherry reclaims the castle. They're out skulking around the neighborhood as we speak. Wish us luck!

I don't blame you for not writing, by the way. I'm not sure I would either, putting pen to paper and pouring my heart out, then sending my misdated letters via hot air balloon into the void. You haven't received word one from me, and your balloons and balloon guys have gone missing, too. Still, I wouldn't mind hearing from you. Although it's already crowded house, and if Sherry finds out I've been letting six hot guys crash here without her permission, she might ground me till the end of time, one more wouldn't do any harm, *non*? A Jean-François or Jean-Marc? With hazel eyes and a thick head of wavy brown hair and a smile that melts me like *du beurre*? (See that partitive article magic? That's what tripped me up on the final exam, but I've got the hang of it now. *J'aime le vin* but *je voudrais du vin*: "I like wine," but "I'd like *some* wine." I owe it all to the balloon guys, the sots!) By the way, does butter really cost 45 francs a pound in Paris (France)?

Hope all's well, and you're not eating too much donkey.

Grosses bises!

Marie

P.S. Heather taught me that, too. Hope it doesn't mean something weird like, "I want to bear your children" or whatever.

July 31, 1995

Paris, Texas

Bonjour, Billy!

A lot has happened since I last wrote—not that you've read my letter. How could you? I still haven't sent it! Not for lack of trying, mind you. My heart's in the right place, and your balloon guys made a truly valiant effort. *Un effort véritablement vaillant*, according to my Larousse.

They tracked down the neighborhood urchins, who they caught with all six hot air balloons. (Turns out, by the way, those balloons aren't strictly speaking "hot air," after all. There's no burner thingy. They're fill with hydrogen. Another shocker, they're made of oiled calico cloth. *Bizarre, non?* Don't you have rubber *en France?*) Of course, those little twerps had dismantled all six of them, using the wicker baskets to create a mini Ferris wheel, an elevator for their tree house, and a gondola from one urchin's second-floor bedroom to another's. When I heard the balloon guys shouting and jeering, I came running and witnessed the whole thing with my own eyes. *Quel dommage!* Insult to injury, the neighborhood urchins all sported badly cut tunics of oiled calico! Soon as they spotted us, they scurried away, giggling and flipping us the bird.

On the bright side, I learned lots of new cusswords (*gros mots*)!

I have to admit that I expected more mettle from the balloon guys. Maybe that's unfair, but it's true. I mean, they all sailed from Paris (France) to Paris (Texas) in tiny baskets dangling from hydrogen-filled sacks of oiled calico through all kinds of weather with nothing to eat but a moldy hunk of Camembert, so you'd think they'd show some resiliency. Maybe rise to the occasion or whatever? But no. They folded up like a card table after a church potluck, retiring to the pool and drowning their sorrows in endless bottles of Cab.

So now it was up to me. Which, in the end, made sense. Still, I wanted to blame those beautiful balloon guys. I even dumped Jean-Michel and Jean-Jacques off their rafts in a misguided effort to motivate them.

"But you are crazy!" said Jean-Michel.

"This is your business," said Jean-Jacques.

The rest of the balloon guys agreed.

"It is your wish to learn *français*," said Jean-Pierre.

"These are your letters," said Jean-Paul.

"We already know French," said Jean-Claude.

"We *are* French," said Jean-Luc.

Other than the fact that they're lazy luses mooching off Sherry, the balloon guys are right, sort of. This is my thing,

Guillaume, and it's up to me to get through to you. I owe it to you. I owe it to me. In a weird way, I even owe it to Professor Naudeau, that *salope*, since I duped her in a big way and feel pretty bad about it. I may be many things (lazy, entitled, unfocused; just ask Sherry), but I'm not a quitter. So here's the plan. I'm gonna track down a real hot air balloon, the kind with the burner thingy, to send all my letters to you in one go. And I know just where to find one!

À la prochaine,
Marie

August 4, 1995
Paris, Texas

Cher William,

My whole plan went belly-up. Before I could make my way down to 93.9 KKUR ("Today's Hottest Country!") and borrow (again, *sans autorisation*) their rainbow-striped hot air balloon, who should show up unannounced and ruin everything but Sherry, my lovely *maman*. By now, there was no containing the balloon guys to the upstairs guest bedrooms. They'd basically taken over the house. They were wandering around half-naked in the living room, half-naked in the kitchen, and half-naked in just about every other room. Jean-Paul and Jean-Luc were skinny dipping (*so hot!*), and Jean-Jacques was taking a nap in Sherry's bed, buck naked.

"Marie?" called Sherry. "I'm home!"

Only I was upstairs, bare-chested, making out with Jean-Claude, so Jean-Michel, who was lounging on the couch, goes, "*Elle est en haut, Madame,*" all polite and everything.

But Sherry had to let her true shrew shine through. She was like, "Who, pray tell, might you be?"

Jean-Michel, whose English is the pits, just turned back to *Days of Our Lives*. Only Sherry wasn't about to let it go. Who knows what she was thinking? Nothing good, I'm sure. That's when the yelling began.

"Who the hell are you? What'd you do with my daughter?"

I made myself presentable quick as I could and skittered down the stairs, forcing myself to smile. When I saw her, I was like, “Sherry! Welcome home!”

Hard lines emerged on her forehead and at the corners of her mouth. “What on earth is going on here?”

“You’re home early. What happened?”

Then she gets this disgusted look and goes, “Can’t I trust you anymore?”

“It’s not what it looks like!”

“Good thing,” she said, all sarcastic, “or you’d be headed straight to Daughters of the Sacred Heart.”

That’s a convent, Bill. Can you believe her?

“They were stranded, Sherry. They had nowhere to go. They needed my help.”

For a split second, she looked vaguely sympathetic, so I launched into a rambling explanation, emphasizing how far the balloon guys had traveled and how haggard they were when they arrived. I made it sound as if I’d nursed them all back to health. I blew their courage and sacrifice totally out of proportion, as if they’d laid their lives on the line for the sole purpose of delivering me your letters.

For a moment, as Sherry stood there at the foot of the stairs, absorbing everything I’d said, she went all quiet and got that glazed, reflective look. I thought I’d convinced her. Though I couldn’t imagine how it all might end, I really thought I was gonna get away with the whole thing.

But that’s when Jean-Jacques decided to traipse out of Sherry’s bedroom, stretching and sporting nothing but a groggy smile. “*Bonjour*,” he said, yawning. Sherry and I barely heard him because we were both staring at his humongous *queue*. Maybe Sherry started getting ideas (you can bet I did, Bill!) because all at once the spell was broken, and she was herding Frenchmen. She fished them out of the pool and rounded them up from the upstairs guest bedrooms, hollering, “Party’s over, gentlemen! Put your clothes back on!”

And that was it, Guillaume. With lightning efficiency she ushered them all out to the garage and wedged them into her Beemer sedan.

“What are you doing, Sherry?”

“You understand they can’t stay here, right?”

I wiped sweat off my forehead and pouted.

“They’re French, honey,” said Sherry. “They belong in—”
“Paris!”

“Exactly.”

She didn’t see the irony, Bill. “But we’re *in* Paris.”

“That’s cute,” she said. “I mean *the* Paris.”

I could’ve pouted some more, but instead I tried to slip into the backseat. I would’ve had to sprawl across the balloon guys’ laps, but I was willing to make the sacrifice! Only Sherry wasn’t having it.

“No, ma’am!” she said.

“But—?”

“You’re not going anywhere, young lady.”

I folded my arms across my chest. “Fine.”

“Consider yourself grounded.” Sherry adjusted the rearview mirror, possibly to check out the balloon guys, who were muttering amongst themselves. “We’ll discuss it when I get home.”

She put the car in reverse and backed out into the driveway. The garage door was already coming down when I sprinted out into the hot sun and pounded on her window. She put it down, lips pursed, forehead creased.

“Where are you taking them?”

“Straight to the airport. Six one-way tickets to Paris Charles de Gaulle.”

I felt this weird grin smear my lips.

“What is it, Marie?”

“Nothing, really. Just don’t be shocked if they freak out a little. Jumbo jets and all.”

“They’re from *Paris*, sweetie.”

“Still, they’re what you might call *behind the times*.”

Sherry gave me this funny look, then pulled out of the driveway and disappeared down the street.

Et voilà.

It’s a long way down to DFW, four hours roundtrip without traffic, so that should give me plenty of time to finish this letter and dart over to the P.O. before Sherry gets back. I’m sending the whole

lot of correspondence—or what remains of it after the Blue Angels incident—to you *par avion*. Maybe it'll even work this time; fingers crossed! Drop me a line when (and if) you get my packet. Sure, I haven't been the best *correspondante* in the world, but not for lack of trying! And thanks to your letters (and balloon guys!), I've been making real progress with my *français*.

Avec toute mon affection,
Marie

Nineteen

It was a hot day nineteen years ago
a string quartet played
and we signed on the dotted line
then family and friends gyrated
to Motown and funk
and the photographer snapped away.

Since then we've learned how
two different personalities coexist
how to compromise on driving styles
how to kiss hello, goodbye
and those in-between kisses.
How to season the ratatouille.
How to raise three boys.

Eventually things get easier:
we finish each other's sentences,
tag team for curfews.
Now there's more time for
cocktails on the patio
The boys pass by and chat,
though never for long enough...
the sun, still high in the sky,
moves lower.
Clouds blush on the horizon.

Island

To have a skin loose enough to shake
is something to aspire to.
The dog carries his clothing on his person.
Everything he needs except traffic sense.
Every time you walk out the door
you're making a prediction.

In the bowl of your hands
water drains through.
Leaving the bean, the seed
flower that in the hand blooms
then slowly dies.

On the other side of the ocean
trees bear oranges and coconuts
bougainvillea climbs.
A bird is flying.
Sun coming out of clouds.
Place both real and in the mind.

You Know Who You Are

Those that are different must be strong
to move against the machine.
They do not fit.
The rasp of the ratchet didn't catch them;
they were tossed off to the side
trying to exist where they're not supposed to be.
That is the real and earned victory.
It is why you are here ignoring the others
their eyes undimmed by too much reading
their minds untroubled with thought.
They have learned to live without friction;
you are shaped by the wind.

In August, Afloat

If all above is
reflected below, then
are there mirror images
of you somewhere in this
sea? Can I bathe
in you? See my feet
through you? Swallow
you by the mouthful? I want to
wear you back to
my towel where we dry
and you stick
to my skin.

This way, when
I'm unsure, I can lick
you off the top of
my right hand—that
soft spot
below my row
of knuckles—and
use you to move me
through the veil
of time that we
shake like a blanket
covered in grass.

I'll ride
that flick of the wrist
that itches with
wanting to be
free of the
extraneous space
trash that clings,
indifferently; I'll
you-powered bore
and land in the core
of a September apple
where we'll wear
housecoats and high
heels all day and sleep
in a barefoot bed
and easily slip between
then-and-now-sheets.

Park Abuse

The tiny park
is bursting
with all kinds of life,
birds, squirrels, tourists,
all moving in their own cycle
transitory
with little impact
on manicured surroundings,
except litter deposits,
some natural,
some artificial
until inundating
the limited capacity
to remove waste

Prāṇ

Fallen asleep on the couch, I awake
startled by a lawn mower
outside my open window, yanked to life
on the first pull—my heart

rancored by the two-cycle insult
to my inner ear and inner
life, punctuated with reports, like gunshots,
for each exposed root struck, or pebble hurled
by the blades. Oily exhaust

rankles my nose into a memory
of its opposite—incense
drifting from the temple
at *Asan Tole*—which in turn
reminds me the last time
I was awakened

from a nap, this very couch
and open window, I could hear
what's called *the leaf-blower*
among the oaks and maples,

a spirit

moving the leaves,
I could feel it—across my cheeks,
prāṇ—‘breath,’ breeze.

David Hargreaves

A Borderless Life

When I was a boy, I often lost my breath if it was windy. I had the feeling of drowning in air.

Until my late teens, I was often afraid of suffocating, that is, not having enough space to breathe freely and unlimited. All that changed one particular day, when I met a person in a prison who taught me about meditation. My anxiety vaporised like the damp on a mirror after a hot shower.

Breathing has always played a key role in meditation practice. It is a simple but effective way of connecting yourself to the present moment.

Most introductions to meditation begin by focusing on breathing — typically for no more than two or three minutes, several times a day. I was an inmate for twenty days, which gave me some time to practice. Time and place was right. During those days, I experienced how my span of attention could be lengthened gradually. My focus moved away from breathing and around into my body or out in the world around me. Widening my attention.

In between my daily tasks such as fixing towel heaters, training and reading compulsively, I meditated. I noticed that breathing is mobile. It changes just like life. For the same reason, meditation is not about relaxing, but about concentrating and sharpening your attention. Instead of staring at a spot on the tablecloth, or the tattoos on the guy in front of you, breathing can be helpful to fix your attention on something that is always present but never stationary. It can be reminiscent of the dynamic balancing act of trying to make your life worth life.

An inhalation followed by an exhalation. An exhalation followed by an inhalation. An exhalation ... The simplicity suited my life at that time. Breathing has its own life. It's a question of rhythm. The word *rhythmos* in Greek means 'wave-like movement'. The ancient Greeks placed emphasis on the last part of the word: movement, progress or flow. Almost as old, the ancient Romans stressed the wave, the moment or peak that is repeated. Some people count their inhalations and exhalations, others count the hours

before meeting their sweetheart. Most people enjoy celebrating the number of years they have lived with an annual birthday party. But an overly rigid and addictive approach to measuring life (e.g. counting followers or Likes on social media) can also spoil life's more narrative flow.

No one breath is identical to the one before or the one after. When each breathe is a unique, the breathings of all living beings create a mixture of simultaneous voices; a polyphony as the literary scholar Mikhail Bakhtin said.

As a schoolboy in Denmark, I used to pretend I was a cool cowboy who smoked. As my fictional cigarette, I would tear off and roll up a piece of paper from my notebook that I then puffed away on. The cold air meant that I could see my own breath. And even more importantly back then: perhaps other people thought I was really smoking!

Most of us have probably blown on our sunglasses to clean them. But imagine now that the glass does not fog up. How can you be certain that you are actually breathing rather than just having a battery in your neck?

I thought about that, while being inside. I didn't want to continue being afraid and angry. And I didn't want to live my life fighting with it. I wanted to participate. To write. Breathe it all in—the good and the bad. However, unlike Buddhist's, I don't believe life is suffering *per se*; it is, but is also full of joy, kindness, and love.

Breathing is a way to learn about immortality and fellowship. Every breath is fragile, because it is dependent on oxygen. Very few people can breathe for long on the top of Mount Everest. Most mountaineers have to be helped with oxygen. Without oxygen, no one can kiss or make love. Without oxygen, no one can eat an organic salad or enjoy a juicy hamburger.

Breathing also activates basic gratitude for the same reason. It teaches us to be generous, since no one can hold his or her breath forever — not if you want to keep living at any rate. Breathing clarifies that we are connected. Breath, wind, weather... where does it come from and where is it going?

Breathing in a prison is no different than from breathing elsewhere.

Inside versus outside, man versus women, old versus young, thin versus fat, black versus fat ... all these dichotomies comes from a closed mindset. Today's identity politics repeats itself as a way of clinging on to its own egoistic prejudices, whereas our breathe reminds us that the most fundament in life is different, strange and weird.

Breathing promotes humility—at least that was my experience—because we learn that even if we do not know where it is coming from and where it is going, breath will always come again. Humility is also connected to an awareness that — to a certain extent — I can control my breathing, but that sometimes it takes over automatically. If I faint, that doesn't mean that my body will stop breathing.

Breathing is a reality check. If a woman or man causes me to lose my breath, it could be because I am hit by their beauty—mentally or physically. If I start to hyperventilate every time I am in a certain situation, or with certain people, I can try to minimise such situations, or at least prepare myself mentally.

Unlike what some might claim, breathing doesn't have to be an navel-gazing activity undertaken from a pillow in your local Buddhist *sangha*. The attentiveness you train through the practice of meditation can clearly indicate when enough is enough. It can help you act responsible in society. Explicitly say no to abuse, oppression, greed, violation, and hate. Paying attention to life can help establish the bond or faith between all human beings and this one world. This particular bond is something, I believe, we have lost.

Breathing is the witness to the fact that I do not own life; it comes and goes. Life passes by me like the wind that passes through my living room when I am airing out the house. Breathing is formed and unformed, recreated and uncreated. It is and it isn't. Breathing is constant. It opens us up to an awareness of a metaphysical process or change in which nothing lasts forever. There are no guarantees here in life, apart from knowing that one day it will end.

Still, and this might be the place to say *hold your breathe*. What holds life together is not breathing, but something even more fundamental: love. Love is what makes life worth breathing. As the philosopher Søren Kierkegaard once said: “Loving people is the only thing worth living for.”

Then, what’s the point of all this breathing. First, it keeps us alive; second by breathing consciously we can become more attentive. “Attention consists of suspending our thought, leaving it detached, empty, and ready to be penetrated by the object”, writes the philosopher Simone Weil in *Waiting for God*. In order to receive life—which always comes from the outside—“our thought should be empty, waiting, not seeking anything, but ready to receive the object in its naked truth.” Paying attention is a practice of waiting to receive what is happening, without judging what is happening *beforehand*. If you just pay attention to what you need or hope for, you are actually not yet ready to be penetrated by life. For that reason, it was very illustrative that I learned about meditation in a prison, and not at the local Buddhist center.

Later in life, I came to the conclusion that although meditation can help cultivate our capacity to live more attentive, being more alert, it doesn’t tell us what to do in life. Instead it is a way of enhancing the space in-between what affects us and how we might respond in a more wisely fashion. To avoid any kind of spiritual automation, I think that attention have to be combined with critical thinking. In that way it becomes ethical, that is, a form of life that tries to be worthy of living with what takes place, how the world affects us. The combination of attention and critical thinking leads to a more curious explorative and experimenting form of life. What is happening? What is also possible? How can I also relate to what takes place?

Such kind of hyper-attentiveness makes things appear clearer, almost as if they happened in slow-motion. I have sometimes realised that I was on the verge of overreacting, doing something stupid, just as I have also recognised when I would have to draw a line in the sand—right here and now. I truly believe it is better to be honest than polite, which does not mean you should not treat people with respect; rather that if you are too polite to be honest, then you are not really living your life. Too be honest, it was

politeness that brought me to prison, not honesty. I was too well-behaved to say, “I don’t want to play tough.”

With honesty comes the tears, and the laughter. Both are characterized by how one can lose his or her breath.

Breathing, therefore, is more than respiration. It is a lifeline. It is my connection to life and everyone else. Yet, conscious breathing is not a panacea for ethics; solely a powerful way of training our attention—not as a resource, but—as what constitutes experiences. Attention is love; attention is the key.

I used attention to unlock myself from prison and take a step into a borderless life. Full of love.

In the Sickroom, Again

In January they dragged me
from my shell, dull
and moth-eaten, a ghost child. I
recall the smell of putrid flowers
The cold, white fire of the
great infernal circle to
heaven and back to
hell, before I enter
rows upon rows of miniature
prisons, and seep into
the amniotic silence.

My flesh-vessel is a celestial
body, the doctors
signed it. By now I think
Fear is a god
planting hexes, willing
constellations to burn across my skin
as the IV drips go on
pouring, pouring in, live
serpents burrowing holes with
their crystalline tongues
gleamed clean.

Across from me I'm seeing
some things are borrowed
A phone call, a wig, a skinny arm
clutching onto the other
Batteries crackling like a
fuse in the water. Finally we
are made to rise and
fall together, dominoes
fully disciplined in this
realm of stillborn
pity, where Fear is known to
eat Love quickly.

A Saturday Evening in January

We're sitting in the living room:
my wife, our three sons, and the dog.
Everyone is reading something

(except the dog)
and I can't suppress my pleasure,
as if I'd won some kind of bet.

She and I each have a glass of wine;
the boys have cocoa and popcorn.
A fire murmurs in the grate

and I think our dog believes
her contribution to our literary evening
is to twitch at our feet in dreams.

Sunday

Sunday morning rises
like bile in my throat,
a harbinger of the end
of a fleeting era,
a brief revolution
carved out
of a sprawling epoch
that rolls
like a ripple
slipping its way across
the surface
of the ocean
too big to be fully seen
too subtle
to ever raise our heads high enough
to draw our wavering attention
to the slapped on transparency
of time over our lives,

Sunday morning rises
with its staccato
clarity
that skitters
in and out
like a restless dog
carrying in its mouth
the distant understanding,
an out of body observation,
that me or him
or whoever sits at the small table
with the big cup of coffee
and the light filtering in
through the drawn blinds
illuminating dust like snowflakes,
that hunched over person,
wearing fatigue like a bathrobe
is cocooned in false security
and tomorrow will come with its hammer
to shatter all his hard work
and send his shell crashing to the earth.

Scilla

Cars taper to a halt.

Doors open and childhood faces emerge.

Library quiet, doors close and voices whisper,
avoid disturbing

the surprising number of patron bees.

Question turns to smile. A rippling pond of blue,
a few whitecaps

mingled here and there. The grass just beginning

to think green. Most have no idea what dainty flower
braves the March chill.

Shoves impatience to knock on spring's door.

Whets the appetite for daffodils and tulips.
For warmth and laughter.

Hope to shrug winter's cold shoulder. People linger,

unable to let go. Phone a photo. Return buzzing
to the hive of their car.

The Mystic

for Meera Bai

I have returned
to the town of my birth
where my skin itches

and a friend tells me
the pollen count is high:
dogwood, elm, juniper.

It is spring, and this
is certainly a new life.

My grandfather is ashes,
my grandmother is in a home,
and my mother paints

her mother's nails in a way
that reminds me of how
she painted mine and how

I do the same with my
daughter now, but before

the lacquer dries, Grandma
has forgotten why her hands
are raised. The smell of

juniper makes me think of
sickness: medicine and alcohol.
My plane leaves in a few days.

* Meera Bai (1498-1547; India): poet and mystic of the Bhakti
movement
Lisa Stice

Branch

Falls across my window like a sprig in a Japanese vase.
Last summer's leaves, cured light tobacco, folded like petals.
All winter they've remained, drape casual, shapes suspended.
Twenty-three winters I've looked out this window.
I do not remember seeing old leaves hold on like this.
Perhaps I am forgetful or never bothered to notice.
Within a month, buds will appear and with their swelling what happens?
Will the dead leaves drop one by one or all at once? Either way, will I notice?
Are they crowded out by new growth?
I stare out the window when I am stuck or thinking.
Leaves dark in May turn green in August, yellow in November.
In September we sweep the patio of puckered casings,
relieved of their nuts by squirrels.
The branch holding the words I am trying to form.

Trading Orbs

Cecilia walked into the market of Guilia with two memories she wanted to trade. Memory merchants gathered around at sunset in this city and sat on old shipping pallets and mounds of hemp sacks discarded from the vegetable stalls. They collected here only on the longest and shortest days of the year, so she felt lucky for picking the right day. Some were already there, talking between themselves. Some wore fancy silks in colors she could not recognize, while others looked more casual in jeans and hoodies.

In the pockets of her jacket, she had two memories. In order to sell the memories off, she had whispered stories into little balls of glass about half the size of her fist, leaving nothing out. The first ball was a memory of when she had first met her dog Lucia as a puppy. She was a Labrador raised from a puppy for almost twelve years before falling asleep and not waking again. The two of them had grown up together, but she felt the need to part with that memory now. It was of no use. It served the same function as cobwebs in attics or books in foreign languages, beautiful but meaningless. Lucia was gone, and Cecilia didn't need that particular memory anymore. Life would go on fine without it.

In her other pocket, she had a memory of when a quiet man named Portis had asked to eat lunch with her. She had agreed because he was cute in a lost sort of way. He had long hair that he played with when he talked, but then he had vanished after lunch. She had asked around about him, but no one had heard anything about him. Whatever that had been or what she had thought it was did not matter anymore, and she wanted that memory gone as well. She wanted to trade that hopeful moment for another one. Surely, all hope felt the same. For her, she knew how that story ended, and she wanted something else.

As the sun started to settle down, the merchants took their places and started to arrange their bags of little balls, ready to trade if the memory seemed ripe enough.

Cecilia walked with her hands in her coat pocket, feeling the warm glass of the little orbs. She rolled them around in her palm as

she looked from merchant to merchant, trying to find the right one to speak to about a trade. There was no cash used in this market. Memories could only be traded for other memories, and with something like the past, money felt rather useless.

A man in a straw hat called her over to his area. "Want to hear about the time that I survived a hurricane?" he asked. "There's a funny moment with some starfish." He held up a small orb. She tried to look into it, but he rolled it around in the palm of his hand. "You have anything to trade?"

She looked over the man and his pile of small orbs, but nothing about him called to her. She tried to look into the orbs next to him, but she only saw her reflection. "Thanks, but I'm going to look around."

"Your loss," the man in the straw hat said. "You can always come back, and I can tell you about the time that I got lost in the forest and had to sleep in a pile of snow. Some kids mistook me for a snowman in the morning. It'll turn your mouth into a boomerang."

She smiled at the pitch, but she turned and went to the next stall where a woman sat in a folding chair, folding paper into little animal figurines. She did not look down as she folded, and instead, focused on Cecilia as she walked up. "I doubt that I have what you want," she said.

"Why do you say that?" Cecilia asked. "I'm open to everything."

"You're looking for a happy ending, and that's not what I have."

Cecilia rolled the balls in her hands. "I'd be happy with just a little hope. Who knows how it all turns out?"

The woman finished folding a frog and placed it on the table and poked it to make it hop. "Kids always love the hoping frogs," the woman said. She turned back to her stores, and she selected a small orb and placed it in Cecilia's hand. "Give it a glance."

Cecilia brought up the orb to her eye and looked into it. She saw a girl sitting under an umbrella at a cafe in the rain, staring at her book but not reading it. She was dressed up well and waiting for someone. She looked at her watch. She looked all around her as if the person would appear any moment. For a moment, the girl seemed to see someone, something, but then the memory stopped.

The woman snatched the small orb from her. “Want to trade?” the woman asked.

Cecilia brought out the memory of her ill advised lunch with Portis and offered it up to the woman. “Want to see mine?”

The woman plucked up the memory and replaced it with the girl sitting at the cafe. “After enough time, you know the kind of memories you'll get from someone.” She folded Cecilia's hand around her new memory. “This one is yours now.”

Cecilia tried to smile, but she couldn't quite manage it as she turned and headed out of the market. She thought about the other memory, but she had already traded enough memories for today. She wanted to see her new memory, but she would do that later. For now, she rolled over the old memory of her dog in her hand and tried to think back to that time she met a man for lunch, but she couldn't remember his name, and maybe it was dinner. She wasn't quite sure anymore, but she would worry about that later.

Long Shot

fourth-tenths of a second
all we have is a prayer

coach diagrams hope
on the whiteboard

but his voice is weak
his eyes empty

the same abyss
in the doctor's eyes

forty years later
we're children

miracles do happen
on sportscenter and twitter

even in medical journals
why not a high school gym

in the middle of nowhere
why not a hospital chapel

glowing with statues
at three in the morning

why not
the long shot?

Barry Peters

Act II Interlude

It must be meant to be,
Me being a writer,
Because my life has been just so *literary*.

And, by that,
I mean that when I tell people how I spend my time
They tend to think I'm just testing out
Another story.

Even to me,
The past sometimes seems like a dream,
All that we see or seem,
But when I wake up
The protagonist is only me.

Hide-and-Seek 2.0

your tiny body
strong as your bones
weak as your skin

crouched behind trees
make yourself small
18, 19, 20
Time's up

a seeker comes
peers around corners

waiting is hard for you
patience is elusive

it's okay to lose this game
there will be another

Until the school doors lock
the alarm sounds
and it's not a game anymore

Emerging from Below

Hope,
fall flat,
scatter on the scaffolding
of my shocked mind,
my reset brain
left to rest
on stabbing springs,
the middle ground
between fantasy and fear
where feelings
well like storm surges
and urges
stir
soft but persistent,
pernicious
glass blown balance
of heated best wishes
between us
boasting our maturity
and emotional intelligence,
our advanced hardware
and self-generated awareness,
lost in the substance
of living a life
suspended
unfinished
spun like a silk worm trellis
holding the hinges of a door
hanging from the ceiling
climbing and falling to the ground
too tired to look at myself again.

Kevin M. Scott

Give Me Blue

Brown is earth and comfort food
chocolate hearts, but

beige, its pallid cousin, is tract housing
and don't make waves. I prefer

gray, soft as the purr of the tabby cat
seated in the window

or green, forever reinventing itself,
surprising as the iridescent head
of the mallard male.

For excitement, choose yellow,
like clang of cymbals,
the flash of tropical fish.

Use with caution;
too much can make you mad.

Try orange instead, the color
of courage, the tiger's roar.

Red is, of course, love, sex,
Chinese weddings, fire,
blood and royalty.

Purple dreams itself
mysterious as fog.

But as for me, give me blue, pale
as a clear sky, or dark as midnight.
Give me blue.

Dana Robbins

Pure



Fabrice B. Poussin

Last

Something settled, sand bleeding into
a hidden chamber. A runnel, then a roof
collapse; or maybe aware of an old
geography, unexplored. Lips whetted,
she adjusts; how well I know her
to open a throat of cherry steel
and blast tears from my eyes.

I made toast, burnt appropriately
and we drank coffee, black on the rug.
A moment, an egg balanced on end.

Seeking Comfort in Oak

Thick unwavering trunks
bolted to the ground
insulate me from the wind
that batters their giant bodies,

outside this primordial
protective layer
it is winter again
and frost comes with the breeze
skipping like a stone over the water
and whipping
my uncovered legs
admonishing me for ever leaving
the safe stare
of the wooden statues looming behind me,

there is beauty
in this gray overlay
hanging heavily
on the lips of the river
and the waves
rushing against the shore
in syncopated whispers,
softly singing over weathered rocks,
a muted bell ringing with a dark truth
that the sun often neglects,

the sharp air,
bitter with salt
and the frigidness
of a life in perpetual unrest,
shakes my lungs awake
and burns the sweat
lining my eyes,
turning my face
a chafed red
as if I were embarrassed
to keep company
with something
so powerful
so full of life,

I turn my wind burnt eyes outward,
away from the trees and beyond
the undulating horizon of the sea,
waiting for the hand holding the old silver mirror
to settle into a clear reflection,
and with restless anticipation
I feel the melancholic drip
of being alone
but existing anyway.

Kevin M. Scott

Moons of Jupiter, Rings of Saturn

Moons of Jupiter
rings of Saturn,
spin in the midnight sky,
brought into focus by astronomers
through amazing lenses,
who, like pearl divers,
sift the starry heavens.
invisible gravity holds them,
imperceptible causalities,
a spider's silky web,
keeping a certain distance,
not too far from the core,
nor collapsing into it.
The moons are hugged, as children
cluster around their mother at the playground,
not losing the safe anchor
of their play.
Joy of spinning, toward and away
from the sunlight on our backs,
and then into the light shining
on our faces, in our eyes.
We can imagine letting go,
and floating like smoke rings and marbles
out into the midnight sky,
dispersed in shimmering stardust.
Or diving into the mother lode
with gravity,
buried in the primordial skirts of Earth
and hidden from the sky.

Martina Nicholson

Supermarket

Supermarket, Part I

When I'm in the supermarket and I see a little girl
With hair the same thick blonde as mine,
I wonder, in some nonsensical,
Yet almost semi-logical way whether she's lost too,
Searching for some so-called "identity"
In the memory of smoke and a blurry face.

Supermarket, Part II

When I'm in the supermarket and I see a little girl
With eyes the same green-ish blue as his,
I wonder, in some nonsensical,
Yet almost semi-logical way whether she's lost too,
Searching for answers and apologies
In nightmares and flashbacks and dreams.

In the Air

Dispossessed
of ancient mysteries
we fly

above the clouds
they cast their shadow
as do you

a white wing
reaching out
to blue hills

a ripple of breeze
on the waters
the quivering thought

of whatever god is
carrying you off
in one fell swoop

into the unseen

in midair
amidst the laughter
of passengers

on their way
South where
the birds have gone

for the winter
We'll look up
at those pelicans

and see your strong wings
your beak that carried food
for us and would have

pierced your own breast
to feed us
in the early years

Later you learned
to protect yourself
your flight
into your own delight

I-81 South

I toggle the volume to find the sweet spot. It's somewhere between sixteen and twenty-four—always even, don't ask why—as loud as it can go before the tinny screech of 's' sounds and cymbal crashes sting my ears like metal fork tines scraping a clean porcelain plate. Two-hundred-some more miles on eighty-one and I'm getting delirious, noticing things like my middle finger is longer than my palm—is that normal or just me? I've always been told I have fingers long and slender enough to play piano. I never learned but take pride in the option. Is it bizarre that Pennsylvania borders New Jersey and West Virginia? The Blue Ridge Mountains really are blue in the distance; so long and far, the trees resemble sprouts of wool on a warm woven blanket, draped over a jagged wall to form the peaks and valleys. Tire tread decorates the shoulder like road kill, though a deer carcass does too—bits of its organs strewn like shattered ornaments. Stomach acid rises to my throat; I can still taste the coffee stale in my mouth, caffeine pulsing through my body. A white cross towers over me like a skyscraper as I cross the border to Virginia, planted in a wide open field. It feels like more of a threat than an offer of salvation.

Gun Safety

This gun is flesh and blood and blood
ready to explode
unwilling to bow before the barrel

Young voices, not the cacophony of war
but booms of cannons firing in succession
a call to action, movement --
a generation ripe for change

Slicing bullets drowned out
by children chanting
marching, pushing for love
Life
Potential
Promise

No longer bystanders
No longer victims
Soldiers you never saw

Viewfinder

It was always a treat to get a quarter,
Pull myself up to look through
As the lens cleared and black
Turned to fog and gloom.

Sometimes I couldn't pay,
But stepped up anyway,
Looked through to that expanse of black.
You never knew when the fog might shine through.

things i want to tell mom but can't

i'm tired, mom
but tired isn't the
heaving of my chest
nor the beads of
sweat trickling on
my collarbone

tired is the voice
in my ear
telling me to stop
running
the flicker of crimson
traffic lamp gleaming
on my face

don't worry, mom
i'm doing my best
to be okay

but nowadays the
word okay seems to
be more like a privilege
paid for one's own
comfort and my budget's
running low

Money Talks

It's difficult for some
to understand
inequality
in the land of the free,
that is only free
for those who can afford freedom.
The rest of us worry
as opportunity diminishes
that things will get worse
and the little we have
will evaporate
faster and faster,
leaving an insufficiency
for continuation.

Better than Water

This is where the poor people live in slime.
Gnawing bones and roads with holes,
a skinny child sucking on a dime.

This is where your broken men go,
yelling at their own minds.
And women wearing wrinkled clothes
cook trash and
curse at the passerby.

A packet of sage in the pocket
keeps the ghosts away,
but what about the tax man, also ivory,
with hands strong and pulsing; getting paid a wizard's wage
to make things disappear?

And what to do of the eviction notice,
and mental illness, and dirt that piles up
on damp and peeling hard wood?

What do we wave around for that?
Something green but not from ground—

“Cold hard cash,” the neighborhood man,
old and ailing, spits out in spite.
“Bury me with it,” he says,
“a load of it, or leave me rotting on this here corner!”

And if we had it we'd stuff our titties full
and shake it like rain over his head,
over our children's heads.

And they'd reach out their tongues and drink it,
and it would taste better than water, and
our grass would grow the other side of green.

Oak + Second



Kristin LaFollette

After Winter Rains

Walking the burned earth behind Hannah's house
after the Santa Rosa fires, after soaking rain,
I see a buckeye thrust
its pippin shoots straight up, as if to say
"Here I am!"
right beside the black, burned trunk
of its mother tree.

Its closed leaflets, yellow-green at first,
open wide like a hand spreading its fingers
eager for fresh air, sun, and rain.

Then come flowers that grow only after fire.
Baker's globe mallow with its rose-purple color
holds seeds needing fire to germinate.
They can wait up to a hundred years, dormant,
before bursting into blooms.
Sundry stamens radiating from a long tube
command us to stop and savor.

I need to walk our hillsides of new poppies,
purple Canterbury bells, monkey flower, ceanothus,
scarlet larkspur. They give us carpet,
colors to satisfy the eye, irrepressible
life beyond wildfire.

How to Continue in the Rain

Sodden dark umber leaves
a thick loft over earth
foot
press
in

soft winter ground
a pressing into

patter pot pot ticking
patterning
so much lost
gone

But in that corner
over vine maple stems
in the green-lit
in the gloom...that space

tick
pat
patten pat pat...her voice

And back over there
a fall of
falling
fallen...his step

They first formed
first showed...
and still!

...this.

Madelon Bolling

Minnesota

When we were young, I loved to watch you skate.

I left for a long time

And when I returned it was summer and the city

Was on fire with passion and with pain and you told me

You didn't carve rhetoric into the cold anymore.

You couldn't recognize me

But you told me how your mother had melted

Into the milkweed.

How you had promised her you wouldn't

Make those beautiful lines, crossing foot-over-foot

In continuous loop of smooth blade into dull ice.

I pretended I believed that you had never skated beautifully

And agreed that hockey was a cruel and artless game.

Caroline O'Connell

Forgotten Touch

Someone I have touched
but I can't remember touching

his skin leaving no memory
on my palms

thoughts of him evaporated as if
never known

and yet, the language that I can't
stand is used to describe him

and it is somehow comforting.
Maybe because it's all I have.

Advanced Communication

The portable telephone
revolutionized existence,
for mindless chatterers
no longer housebound
able to go anywhere
(as long as we had reception)
and babble to our friends.

As phones got smaller
more powerful
we could talk longer
uninterrupted
by breakdowns of service.

Then the internet provided
data and diversion
adding to distraction
as we walked the streets
absorbed in conversation.

Then texting arrived
and we walked along
eyes glued to screens,
thumbs working away
at meaningless messages
only disrupted
by fatal collisions
with a distracted driver,
also texting.

Gary Beck

A Man's World

The first person I ever punched was my brother. I was thirteen and Robert was twelve. We were at home, arguing outside the bathroom. I don't remember what we were arguing about. After I punched him, a left hook to the side of his face, he went silent and looked at me, mouth open, frozen, completely stunned. I was stunned, too. The rest of my memory of the event is not good. For a long time, I thought Robert was holding an iron bar and was threatening me with it. I never questioned why there would be an iron bar lying around the house. Now, I wonder if I put it in his hand in order to justify my action.

Two years ago, a boy who was attending the school where I worked as a psychologist came to see me because he was disturbed by an incident that had happened at a party. He had punched another boy in the course of an argument. He was seventeen years old. After he told me about the incident, he kept saying,

“That isn't me. That isn't who I am”.

I thought, “Yes it is. At least, partly.”

I didn't tell him that. I should have. I should have talked about it with him.

When I was eleven years old, I started staying up late watching television in the living room after I had been told to go to bed. My mother was in bed and my father was in his study. I sat close to the television and kept the volume low. It was difficult to concentrate on whatever I was watching, as I was listening for the sound of my father's study door opening. When I heard it, I jumped up and turned the television off and ran across the room and snapped the light off and hurried down the hallway to my bedroom. Sometimes, I didn't hear the door and by the time I heard him

walking through the house it was too late. I braced myself. He yelled at me for staying up late; I'd be too tired to do my schoolwork the next day. Did I know how much money he spent on my education? He said he'd throw water on me if I didn't wake up in the morning.

At these times, or whenever I did something that angered him, he often yelled, "You're an idiot. What are you?"

I'd look down. "I'm an idiot."

Whenever I have tried to write about my father's physical presence in relation to me, I use the word "loomed". I can't recall a time he raised his hand at me, and he never threw water on me if I struggled to get out of bed in the morning, but when he was around, I felt that there was the possibility of violence. Sometimes, I think it would have been better if he had just hit me. Then, I wouldn't have spent my childhood waiting for it, fearing it.

But maybe I would have become more desensitized to violence.

Some of the boys who are bullied at the high school where I work are too scared to say anything to the teachers about the bullying; they fear it will get worse and others boys in their class will think they are a "bitch", the greatest insult for a boy their age, and possibly for a man of my age. Some of them ask me not to say anything: Isn't everything we talk about confidential? Not if they are being harmed. I talk them around, tell them it is OK to seek help if someone is being aggressive towards them, that they don't have to put up with it, or accept it as normal. I tell myself that despite their protests, at some level, unconsciously perhaps, they have told me what is happening because they want the bullying to stop and they know I will say something. In my first session with every student, I tell them that everything is confidential unless they are doing harm to themselves or someone is doing harm to them. I want them to feel empowered, but I wonder if I am disempowering them through my coercion. But what is the option? Let them be victims of violence?

I went to an all-boys high school in Perth, Western Australia. It was over a hundred years old. The vision of its founder was to create a school based on the English public school system. In my first year there, I visited a friend who was in one of the school's boarding houses. Going into a boarding house without permission wasn't allowed. Two older boys caught me. One of them bent me over the bannister of the stairway that led to the second floor while his friend went off to get a wire coat hanger. He straightened out the coat hanger and whipped me with it. I didn't say anything to anyone. I can't recall if the boy who had held me over the bannister kept holding me, or realised that he didn't have to.

The only fight I ever got into at school happened that same year. It was with three boys in my grade level. There was a lot of pushing and my clothes got ripped, but I don't recall any punches being thrown. I remember pushing back. By the time I got to the school car park, my mother was already waiting to drive me home. She demanded to know what had happened.

"Nothing."

She insisted on knowing, and when I continued to refuse to tell her she went to the school's main reception and asked to speak with a teacher. The receptionist found Mr Green, and he and my mother demanded that I tell them how my clothes got ripped. I told them I'd been in a fight with an older boy. No, I didn't know who it was.

I don't remember much about that fight, what it was about or exactly what happened, but for a long time I was proud of the fact that I was in it, that I didn't back down.

But it didn't change anything. Other students didn't start fearing me or respecting me.

It was years before I asked myself why the three boys had decided to pick on me.

In my early twenties, backpacking around the country, I spent a year working on a traveling carnival, helping out on a stall where people tried to sink three basketballs through a hoop to win a fluffy zebra or monkey or giraffe. The hoops were smaller than regulation size. The fluffy animals sat on a shelf at the back of the stall, too far away to see the dirt stains on them. One night, while we were doing a show in Kalgoorlie, a large group of us went to one of the pubs on the main street. This night, in addition to the strip shows, there was an “all you can drink for ten dollars” special on offer. I drank all I could drink. My fragments of memory of that night are that one man, who had worked on the carnival for years, was arguing with two young men I had become friendly with, backpackers like me. He started to push one of them and I pushed or punched him in the face.

The next morning, I woke up alone in the caravan I was staying in. My t-shirt was covered in blood. I could tell that the man who had beaten me up was right handed because there were six or seven points of sharp pain on the left side of my head. I heard people walking around and talking outside the caravan, getting the rides and stalls set up for the day. I didn’t want to leave the caravan. I felt humiliated.

When I started setting up the stall I was working on, I saw the man who had beaten me up working two stalls over, smiling at me. I looked away, or maybe I forced a smile in return.

When I was thirty-three, I started training in Brazilian Jiu Jitsu. I’d studied martial arts before, Karate and Kung Fu for one or two years; these martial arts involved learning a few moves and repeating them over and over to improve technique. Sometimes, you punched or kicked pads held by a partner. I can’t recall getting hit or hitting anyone myself in any of this training. Brazilian Jiu Jitsu is different. From the first day, you grapple with an opponent. You try and beat them. You try and dominate them. You snake your arm around their neck, threatening to choke them unconscious, or hyperextend their arm so that with a little more pressure it will break. Your opponent acknowledges the threat and submits, verbally

or by “tapping out”. It felt like I was learning something that would be effective in a fight.

I had been training in Brazilian Jiu Jitsu for two years when one day I was at a petrol station in a queue of cars behind the pumps. When I was at the front of the queue and a car drove off from one of the pumps, another car cut in front of me and took the pump. It was hot and my windows were down. So were the windows on the other car.

“Hey,” I called out as he drove past me, “I was next.”

Another pump became available a few seconds later and I took it. When I got out of my car, the man in the car that had cut in front of me was walking towards me.

“What the fuck did you say?” He wasn’t very tall, but stocky. His body was puffed up, his arms spread out a little from his side, as he walked towards me. He looked like he was ready to fight.

I said, “I just said that I was next.”

It sounded like an apology. I lowered my head, the way that dogs do when they are showing submission. The man went back to his car.

For a long time afterwards, whenever I thought about that incident I hated myself. I wished I’d hit him.

At the school where I worked, a boy was referred to me for counselling for his “anger management” issues. He had beaten up another boy in a fight. He explained the other boy had bullied him for two years.

I asked, “Does he still give you a hard time?”

“No,” he said. “He doesn’t give me a hard time.”

He smiled.

I was probably supposed to tell him that he should have found another way to solve the problem. I smiled back at him.

In high school, I wanted to be more like Justin. He'd get into fights with older boys who tried to push him around, until they stopped trying to push him around.

When I was working on the carnival, I wanted to be more like Marcus. One time, he got into a fight when a man he shared a caravan with took his pillow and refused to give it back. "Let's go outside." Marcus beat the man to the point of surrender pretty quickly, and then went back into the caravan and took his pillow back. I'm certain I would have let the other man keep the pillow, and just as certain I would have spent the night trying to convince myself that it was just a pillow.

I wanted to be more like my Brazilian Jiu Jitsu instructor, Piotr. He was muscular, in the way where the physique looks like the by-product of years of athletic activity, not the sought after end of lifting weights in the gym. When he grappled it seemed like his body was doing what was natural for it. He said that he avoided fights by looking at anyone who was aggressive towards him and saying, "I'm gonna' cave your fuckin' cunt head in."

I knew I could never say it as convincingly.

Eight years ago, when I was forty, I arrived at my local pub late one night and a woman I knew said that a man was hitting on her. She wasn't interested in him. The man was at the bar buying her a drink. She asked if I'd pretend I was her boyfriend. Sure, I said. The man came to the high table where she and I were standing. He was about my height, maybe a little shorter. There was nothing intimidating about him. The woman placed her hand on my forearm while we talked. The man stood with us for about a minute. We both ignored him. Then, he pushed her face hard and threw the drink he had bought for her at me. I punched him in the face. He went back a few steps. Within seconds, one of the pub's security guards had grabbed me and was dragging me outside. I didn't resist. My memory is that before the security guard grabbed me, I was standing still, just looking at the man I had hit, not feeling much of anything toward him. The next day, I told myself that under the circumstances it was OK to do what I did, but I couldn't convince myself. After the

man threw the glass, he didn't show any sign that he was going to attack me or the woman. Perhaps he had even started walking towards the pub's exit. I could have let him walk off. But I suspect if I had done that, I would have had the same difficulty trying to convince myself that it was the right thing to do.

You Asked Me for a Less Clichéd Way to Describe Love

~~It's *good morning* giggled at noon on a Sunday.~~
~~It's a choked sob when you kiss the back of my neck.~~
~~It's feeding each other poems about oysters and grapefruits.~~
~~It's how your cheeks rise and fall steadily~~
~~as the sunrise light seeps into your apartment.~~
~~It's watching your hands while you play guitar.~~
~~It's washing the fruit while you fry the eggs.~~
~~It's breakfast on the roof under the sun.~~
~~It's a confession lodged between the shoulder blades.~~
~~It's finally getting to dip you in a dance.~~
~~It's letting you touch my softest parts under rivulets of water.~~
~~It's buying you unopened flowers~~
~~so you can watch them bloom in your window.~~
~~It's your legs wrapped around mine while we sleep.~~

It's learning how to cut an avocado:
you slice away the skin, tenderly scoop out the meat,
and smear it onto the corner of my mouth.

Ivy Marie

The Fall

There, in the moment before the streetlights shiver awake,
When the day is too dark without a light, but the night
Is too light still to turn on a light, and the atmosphere wanes,
While dinner cools, waiting for the children to run through the back
door,
I flip a page; the city is taken. The emperor submits and as Eden has
fallen
countless ways through countless centuries,
It will continue to fall, handing us always into a new cycle of grief.
I turn the light on in the kitchen, but the children have not come
home.

To Havana or Not to Havana

Humanity is not quoted on the Stock Exchange.
– Wilhelm Liebknecht

Old Nick, the shabby latent tubercular
has had a devil of a day
in the Round Reading Room of the British Museum
critiquing his own *Critique of Critical Criticism*

leading the rest of the world to conjecture –
at what point and which ideas
will he abandon, before loss of appetite, high fever,
night sweats and hellish coughing

force the hand of the ‘cigar connoisseur’
to kick the habit that is most probably killing him
and give his wretched lungs
a chance to breathe freely in the liberated air?

Depths Do Not Leave Us

Once as I walked before dawn, a clouded sky
reflected the faintest pink tinge; muted night,
offered to comfort all life held
under harsh straight lines and hardened surfaces.

As though a great weight had lifted from the world,
the western mountains ranged massive and simple
under late moonlight in clearest
night: void, still. Out there loomed the ocean, out there!

Just so, a high cupboard shelf once held for me
some secret I needed to know, though I was
too small to see it for myself.
If someone had lifted me up then to peer

into that obscure space, I'd find it empty
but for dusty shelf paper and an old jar
of matches or bits of candle.
Yet from my own place close to the ground, that space

always murmured: up here! there's something up here!
On the morning I stalked over wet hillsides,
keen for some distant clarity,
four eagles rose and disappeared to the west.

For a moment I stretched upward—but then knew
it was no visible vastness I longed for.
Surely that far land-ending edge
held only waves, stars, and sand-blown surfaces.

Yet from my own place if I would close my eyes,
there was a dark without end: charged, dizzying.
I balanced on the merest brink.
A wren's peep nearby pierced the obscurity:

pierced but could not give it shape. The night ocean
is wholly unknown. Twice the wild geese passed close
over my head. Their wingbeats whisked,
whistled, told me nothing: *whiss, whiss* said it all.

Blinking, I moved to walk on again, saw stones,
tree trunks, empty streets, savored damp chilly air;
walked on, walked through these untold depths.
What is but cannot be seen, can not be seen.

From the Steller's Jay in Your Backyard

Here's the truth: you are not a favorite.
The way you prance around the yard elated
that your slug bait worked over night
rattles me and make me want to squawk.

And so does the wimpy bush
that used to be a sugar maple tree
and the fountain you turned into a flower pot.
What's your gripe with shade and water falls?

You've been hoodwinked to believe
I bully sparrows dining on suet cake.
The fact? I'm loosening that hunk of lard
so little beaks don't strain so much.

As for the raccoons tearing up your lawn:
you never applaud my pre-dawn raids
where I save five dozen grateful grubs
and clumps of mossy grass.

In spite of ... something about you attracts.
Maybe it's how you cite me in your poems
although you cannot spell my name.
I'm a *Steller's* not a *Stellar Jay*.

Please correct and then rewrite the one about
the feral cat that watches me nip nuts
from clueless squirrel. You sit her on a *catbird seat*:
a prejudicial term implying feline superiority.

One more thing: consider a new birdfeeder.
The tinny one at the backyard fence sways
and my wings fatigue when I try to pick out
sunflower seeds from multi-grains. By the way,

good choice: Audubon's a top-shelf brand.
Ten-pound sacks are on sale at Backyard Birds this week
along with the Squirrel-Be-Gone Country House
and the Perky-Pet Deluxe Chalet.

Gray Feelings

- I. I say *gray* / I say / there is a fog / in my brain / and when I was younger / I would have described it as / zombie weather / the way the gray / settled thick on the streets / and the pasture behind my house / so I couldn't see / the cows / or even my hands / but I'm older now / and this body / is too heavy / to pick up / to perform a silly sight test / so when my therapist / asks me / *and how do you feel this week?* / I tell her / *gray*.
- II. Depression Room Checklist: mugs half-filled with days-old coffee, wrinkled t-shirts, toast crumbs, mounds of unwashed sheets, forgotten assignments, plastic water bottles, yellowing tissues, dried pens, spilling trash bags, tossed books, empty tupperware containers, three left shoes, mismatched socks, chipped dishes, mysterious carpet stains, miscellaneous cords and remotes, loose batteries, odd pieces of lint and paper, clumps of dirt, a few friendly roaches.
- III. [LOADING MEMORY]
[ERROR ERROR ERROR]
- IV. The sun is back in the sky in the evenings.
This means the oranges will erupt soon. This means the birds will be chirping celebration to spring mornings. Lovers will walk through parks, fingers entwined. More flowers. More blue light.
Why aren't you happy, too?
Why aren't you happy, too?
Why aren't you happy, too?

Riding Bareback

Molly dared me to ride without the saddle.
She was leading the mare behind the
stallion, wanted to gallop on alone.

Pushing out thoughts like *I have no shoes on,*
I've never done this before—Sure.
She always challenged me, expected “no.”

Molly laced her fingers, palms up, to help
hitch me up. I jumped like a jackrabbit,
almost slid clean off the horse's back.

Squeezed my knees in time to feel brown
muscle warm from her ride to where
I was, while the mare at once flew after her mate.

My legs around her belly felt slippery,
my teeth rattled and I saw only blur
of wheat and tree as she cantered, then galloped.

This is what no control means—this is flying high,
this is being bounced to crashing, my hair straight back
my head swinging, Mom running out to the road

as my small body veered down toward horse legs,
the dusty dirt of the road below us. I grabbed
the ends of the mare's long black mane, pulled up,

leaning tight into her neck, more like dragged along,
hoped for a few more yards of life, sputtered
out *Whoa*—

She stopped short and I fell off,
air knocked out of me,
onto the front lawn beside the well.

To the Night



Fabrice B. Poussin

[untitled haiku]

fluffy strands of hair
curls sitting atop smooth skin
tiny blonde toe beards

Memory Care

at first it held hairpins
and pennies
tucked into the nape

her brain

missing

spaces

read between the lines now

walled
time whipped
clean eyes
standing blank inside

her baby's

vessels, passages, crescent cookie recipes,
fingers on the rosary

is anything lost

or just never found?

with piano playing and
crossword puzzles
and garden book

varieties of
opened pasts

Unfound
confound

tessellate
separate

or just hold hands
and feed on AMC and
see

n

n

in between now and then

Playing Second Violin

It's none of my business but, sitting near
the first violin, I can't help but feel
the confidence that never fails Mozart's score
or the appeal of her swaying arms, shoulders,
and hair to the maestro who bows through applause,
turns to shake her hand, and asks her out for drinks
before the first French horn begins his climb
over flutes, oboes, and clarinets
to offer her the same but she's packed her bow
and violin for an evening beyond
the pit so, when he arrives at her chair –
his brass muted with regret and defeat –
he glances down at me and brushes by
while I hum to myself I've been here before.

Marx Eulogy

This is not Eleanor Marx.
This is the old man without any hope of a drink
before the insurrection.

This is a poem then without Eleanor Marx.
This is the old man breaking away, striding
away, going it alone.

This is the old man doing a runner, renouncing
responsibility, his rightful place in the Parthenon
of prophecy.

This is the old man trying to ignore the rebellion
in his own backyard, which has begun just
in the nick of time.

This is the old man emendating his own proscriptions.
No use to collaborate, corroborate, or cry wolf
with Baroness Jenny.

This is the end the old man wanted, sacrificed
his family for, relented like a true victim
of terror.

This is not Eleanor Marx.
She is dressed in bridal ivory.

This is not Eleanor Marx.
She is beyond inconsolable.

Mark A. Murphy

Is this the worth of us?

Travis Barksdale, Makiyah Wilson
the latest to fall
Wards 5, 7, 8
EMTs, police all too late

Summer of murder
“*D.C., shots fired*”
100 down

the children
buds flicked to the ground
smothered by heels

blood and flesh splattered
coloring the community
in violence.

Beyond dense cordite fog
children rise
shadows to haunt us.

The Children, Waiting for Someone to Fall

There are coyotes on the playground today. The children hang from monkey bars, climb backwards up the slick metal slide. The children understand, more than their parents do, about survival of the fittest. They leave the slow ones behind, without regret.

Last week, there were antelope on the playground. Little McKenzie Snow got kicked in the head by one. The children remember how her glasses snapped and flew into the air, how McKenzie's body made a sound like paper crumpling. Little McKenzie Snow was taken to the hospital in a sirens-blazing ambulance, where she lingers still in a coma. The children were made to make cards for her one day instead of doing their regular studies, with glue sticks and cutout hearts and *get well soon*.

Mrs. Snow hasn't left her daughter's bedside. When the other parents think of it, they bring her doughnuts from the commissary, croissants with butter. They are unnerved by Mrs. Snow's silence, chatter on about the weather, politics, television shows. Mrs. Snow tears the doughnuts apart with her hooked hag fingers; Mrs. Snow sits in crumbs.

Before the antelopes, there was a plague of voles, crunching under the children's careless feet, Joseph Birdinground picking one up, *what's this, some kind of mouse*, and getting bit on the inside of his ring finger. After school, the custodian came out with a black plastic bag and thick gloves. The children peeked over the fence from the sidewalk. The children watched him pick up the voles one by one, throw them into the black plastic bag.

Joseph Birdinground hasn't been back to school since he was bitten, *an infection*, says his father Carlo when he calls the principal. The children make a recording of themselves singing a song in music class about John Brown's baby and the cold upon its chest, and Mrs. Packard the music teacher sends it to the Birdinground family on a cassette tape. Her handwriting on the envelope is bubbly and charming. The note inside says *thinking of you*, and Joseph Birdinground's little twin brothers unspool the tape while their mother lays cool washcloths on Joseph's forehead.

Before the voles, it was a herd of cattle and Tammy Sue with a crushed pelvis, the children made to sign her cast on their field trip to the hospital, Tammy Sue, the prettiest girl in school with her perfect afro and green eyeshadow that none of the other girls' parents would let them wear.

Tammy Sue is raised by her grandparents, the parents say, who must not love her enough to keep her from wearing green eyeshadow.

At the hospital with Tammy Sue, the grandparents look very old and small and tired.

They say *thank you for coming* to each of the children, like they have been throwing a party.

Before the coyotes, before the antelope, the voles, the cattle, it was fire ants and Tiffani with an i speckling like a polka-dot dress, harsh-gasping till the school nurse shot her up with epinephrine; copperheads and Taylor Kroft's bare bitten leg, and the children still remember how he screamed, high and long, *like a girl*, said some of the boys later; quarrel of sparrows with their pecking little beaks, Elijah Barnes and his feather-clutching fall from the metal playground top; little brown rabbits and broken-backed Charlene, stuck in a bed, blinking yeses and nos; and before that and before.

On the playground today, the children are being menaced by coyotes, dusty-furred, pointy-toothed. The children are watching each other hanging from the monkey bars to see whose arms are trembling the hardest, watching with predator's eyes.

The teacher on recess duty, Miss Kelph, only in her first year and with a gap between her teeth large enough to stick a pencil through, is blowing on a whistle and scooping up gravel to throw at the coyotes.

Some of the children are wearing helmets, shin guards. Some have first aid kits tucked in their backpacks by fussing mothers.

My parents, they say to the other children, *my parents made me*.

The children know it won't help; none of it will. The children know there will be no rescue from the coyotes.

One of the boy Madisons loses a shoe to a coyote, but it's okay, he says to one of the girl Madisons, because he never liked those shoes anyway. His parents made him, he says.

The boy Madison's arms are shaking like the other children's. They want him to keep talking; they want him to wear himself out. They want it to be him this time.

It has to be someone, they whisper to each other.

The children hang from the monkey bars. The children wait for someone to fall.

To Paint a Horse

“Paint a horse,” the teacher says
but I don’t want to paint a horse
or a cow or a donkey.

I want to paint the warmth of a hen
on her eggs, a lonely tree on a
windswept plain.

“When I grow up, I want to be
a painter,” I announce at ten.
“You’re too smart to be an artist,”

Mother says, but colors fill
my brain. I want to draw
the veined insides of the tulips,

the elegance
of the apricot rose.
In the basement, I magpie

pieces of tissue paper
magenta and plum, to collage
a bowl of lush grapes.

One day, the paper is gone.
“You didn’t want those old
scraps, did you?” Mother says.

A dutiful daughter, I became
a lawyer, my life a manila
file filled with

methodical arguments.
As for the painting,
it remains unfinished.

He Who has the Youth (has the Future)

for Aiden McGregor

For you we will share our secret life
with Eleanor Marx
and invite you to confess

your heart's desire. For you
we will admit shame
in a century of wars and civil wars.

*

For you we will remember those days
when it was enough
to be enthralled

on walks
in Little Stacey Park
and the future was hardly thought of.

*

For you we will not talk in riddles
when we meet again
but as one rebel to another – equals

in all but age. For you we will march
on the Winter Palace
and join as brothers in St Petersburg.

*

For you we will dance the Tarantella
in a last act of defiance
and final farewell to childhood.

For you we will share our secret life
with Eleanor Marx
and lay waste a universe of hate

in favour of care, courage and curiosity.

Afterwards

the bird flies out,
the nestling
watches her from its nest:
the swing of her wings,
the turn of her tail,
the air yielding under them.
horizon is tilted,
the world around
gets tightened in an egg.
if she doesn't come back
the shell will be its home.

Enduring Goodness

The good, the decent, the kind
persevere despite disorder
assisting others, giving
of themselves, the little they have
to alleviate the suffering
not out of guilt
but genuine compassion
as some have always done
in the painful history of Man.

5.18.19

9.11 a.m.

57 degrees

Plunging toward the water, the red-tailed hawk is onto something;
he tries to
outfox the snake, and rises with the snake flowing like a thin banner,
stunned
nob, from the hawk's talons. The buttercups have bloomed, and a
single feather
dry and smooth is left after the fray. I marvel at its softness, use it
as a bookmark.



John L. Stanizzi

Under Glass

The Bonner House B & B's website claimed it was famous for its extensive collection of dollhouses, but I chose it because it was cheap. My father, who I had not seen in close to fifteen years, was going to be in Wichita for his company's annual convention, and as hotel rooms in even the smallest cities were beyond my Cheerios and ramen noodle budget, Bonner House seemed to be my best bet if I wanted a glimpse of his human form, even if it was nearly fifty miles from the city limits. Plus, the room came with a pancake breakfast. My feelings about my father might have been somewhat conflicted, but my feelings about pancakes were quite solidly in favor.

When I arrived, I was greeted by the clang of a bell against the top of the door and a disembodied "Hello!" from a dim center hall cluttered with a maze of dollhouses perched on wooden stands and covered by large glass cases. The dollhouses also filled a room to my right. To my left was a room with several round wooden tables, each with a small glass box in the center.

I approached the dollhouse directly in front of me. The furnishings were intricate and interesting in a cutesy, predicable sort of way: Miniature tassels hung from miniature curtains on miniature windows, shrunken books lay on tables the size of postage stamps, and chintz pillowcases encased tiny pillows on tiny beds. What you would expect. But the dolls were odd. They struck odd poses and didn't seem all that doll-like. Downstairs, a man-doll in a rumpled jacket sat on the couch with his head back and his eyes closed, tie loose at the neck. Upstairs, standing next to an unmade bed, a woman-doll wore a bathrobe that was crooked and coming untied at the waist, nearly exposing one breast. Although her head was bowed and eyes her eyes downcast, her tiny face was blotchy.

A woman and a man drifted through the dollhouses like balloons in the Thanksgiving Day Parade. Both of them had essentially the same shape, round middles that tapered off into small heads and feet. They had white hair and doilies of red capillaries coated their cheeks. As I introduced myself and explained that I had

booked a room, they did a lot of nodding and smiling. They seemed sweet in an old-fashioned sort of way, like two peppermint hard candies.

“Like that one?” the woman asked, indicating the dollhouse I had been looking at. “It’s one of my first. Did it after my grandmother passed.”

I didn’t have time to answer because the man, I assumed the husband, waved her off. “There’s time for the tour later,” he said. “Let’s get you settled in.”

In the back of the entry hall there was a kitchen table that doubled as a desk where he took my credit card. Mary opened a massive guest ledger for me to sign, which seemed redundant given that I had made my reservation online. Just when I thought I was free to go upstairs to contemplate the insanity of driving halfway across the country to see a father who hadn’t even offered to get me a room at the conference center, Mary noticed I was from Gainesville.

“I modeled one of my houses after a guest from Gainesville! His name was Marty. Marty Something-with-a-B. Wore the most entertaining shirts.” She looked at me, waiting. “Ring any bells?”

“Do I know a Marty with entertaining shirts?”

Mary nodded.

“No, I don’t know any Martys.”

“Too bad,” she said. “He was such a particular sort. Only ate plain pancakes.”

The house she showed me was called *Tornado Warning*. In it a family was running from the dinner table, leaving behind a scattered mess of tiny bits of chicken, peas and mashed potatoes. There was a crack in one of the front windows. The shrubs around the house ducked sideways close to the ground, and, heading out the back door, there was a balding man wearing a short-sleeved Hawaiian-style shirt with surfers on it. He had the cellar doors open and was waving his panicked family inside.

My father was a pharmaceutical salesman who lived in Portland, Oregon. He was remarried and his two other kids were nearly teenagers. I had seen him sporadically in the early years after my parents' divorce, but time, distance, and an apparent lack of interest had whittled those visits down to a few increasingly awkward phone calls and then an ongoing silence.

Then a year ago, my mother died of breast cancer. Although she was young—a real fighter, everyone said—the disease was quite settled in by the time she discovered it. At the end, when my mother was in a hospice facility that tried and failed to pretend that there could be any comfort a world of bed rails and morphine, she suggested that we reconnect.

“It’s not that you need a father,” she said. “But maybe you need answers. To whatever questions you have.”

I hadn’t spoken to my father since I was ten, so long ago that I couldn’t remember our last conversation. That part of my history felt fixed, a movie I’d seen so many times I could recite the lines by heart. It was my future that was a mystery, an empty house I couldn’t locate on a map. A father who lived next to a different ocean didn’t seem like much of a navigator, but the suggestion nagged at me.

It didn’t help that even after death, my mother was everywhere. Her chunky crystal necklaces snaked through my drawers. Her coat shadowed my closet. Her shoes seemed to climb on top of mine in my closet. Her name remained on the “favorites” list in my phone, taunting me. Her Facebook feed kept popping up with notifications. Then my father commented on the death announcement I had posted on her feed.

I hadn’t known they were friends.

I wasn’t meeting my father until the following night, so after I put my bags in my room I found a Circle K and bought a microwave burrito for dinner. As I sat in the car, I scrolled through my father’s Facebook posts on my mother’s phone for the hundredth time. What could we say to each other? Would he recognize me? I stalked own

social media accounts, looking at my photos, trying to imagine myself through his eyes.

I reread the messages my father and I had sent each other right after the funeral.

ME AS MY MOTHER: It's been a long time.

MY FATHER: Yes, it has.

ME AS MY MOTHER: Well, hi.

MY FATHER: I'm so sorry for your loss.

It took a long time to get past that. As my mother, I found it difficult to ask any questions at all, and we seemed to exchange blunt statements of fact.

MY FATHER: I guess you have your own place now.

ME AS MY MOTHER: I share an apartment with two friends on the other side of town.

MY FATHER: That's good.

ME AS MY MOTHER: Yeah. It's close to work.

MY FATHER: I could give you my phone number if you want to reach me.

ME AS MY MOTHER: Great.

When I suggested that we meet, he didn't seem opposed and although I accepted his friend request on Facebook and stopped communicating through my mother's account we had not called. I had not heard his voice and I was nervous about what he might say. After all, my mother was not perfect. She liked to socialize. She drank amaretto sours, sometimes to excess. When she was angry she could drag the silent treatment on for days. She hated grocery stores so we ordered a lot of pizza. She was terrible at remembering to pay bills and never put more than a few dollars of gas in the car at a time so we were always on empty. All of this was true, but if my father said any of it? Now? It didn't seem fair to speak ill of the dead.

The next morning, I woke up to the sound of someone singing "God Bless America." While not unpleasant, it was extremely difficult to ignore and since I didn't have anywhere to be until dinner I saw no reason to start the day any earlier than absolutely necessary.

Nevertheless, I put on a pair of jeans and went to the top of the stairs where I could see that the center hall below was full of people circulating among the dollhouses, pressing their fingers against the glass and talking animatedly about the scenes within. The room had a salty, meaty smell and, as I got lower, the singing was partially overtaken by a general conversational hum.

“There she is!” Mary’s husband called from the bottom of the stairs. “Thought you were never going to get up. We’re out of chocolate chip. Do you like blueberry or banana?”

The field of faces below turned up toward me, awaiting my response. I said “banana” and they nodded in general agreement.

Mary’s husband resumed his tour of the dollhouses.

“This one here is called *Lost Things*, because, you see, the family has lost their dog. But if you look carefully...” he walked around to the front of the house and pointed at the bushes, “...over here, the dog is lying under the front porch!”

Mary’s husband moved on to the next house, where a cluster of people tried to guess its name. One woman called out, *Birth of a Child*! Another said, *Winter Coming*? A third guessed *Keeping Warm*, but Mary’s husband corrected them with a smile. “Close, close. That one is *Broken Furnace*.” The group let out a collective “ahh” moved on. At the next house, the same process ensued, with people guessing *Announcing Their Engagement*, and *Grandma’s Visit*, only for Mary’s husband to laugh and say, “No, this one’s *The Separation*.”

“God Bless America” paused for a call of “Banana up!” and I went to the dining room where Mary put a plate heavy with pancakes and bacon on the table for me. She stopped singing and put both hands on her hips.

“Late riser,” she said, and couldn’t tell if it was a friendly jab or an accusation.

I thanked her for the pancakes and apologized, even though my phone said it was 8:30.

“It’s fine, dear, but eat up. You’re going to want to clear out of here before the next group arrives. If you start now there’s still time to get a personal tour.”

Mary started singing again and I ate. In the center of the table was a glass-covered diorama of a woman taking a black-singed

turkey out of the oven. The group bubbled their way out the door and into a bus parked on the street. Mary's husband shuffled over to sit at my table. I wondered if I was the only actual guest, but I was afraid to ask.

"Good Lord," he said. "These tours wipe me out."

"Oh, come on. After this one, you're going to go home and take a nap," Mary said, putting a fresh plate of pancakes in front of him. "I'll still have all the cleaning up to do around here."

I looked at Mary's husband and with my mouth full of pancake said, "You don't live here?"

They looked at one another and burst into laughter. Mary slapped the table with her oven-mitt.

"No," he said. "I live with my wife. She likes to be closer to town."

"You're not married?"

Again, the laughter and the slap of the oven mitt.

"Bob's my brother, crazy child!" Mary said, leaning her face in to be next to his. "Don't you see the resemblance?"

Which, of course, I did. But what I didn't see was how I could be so awful at identifying what was right in front of me.

As I lay on my bed listening a crowd circulating downstairs, I texted my father.

ME: I'm here. All set for tonight?

I stared at the phone waiting for a response. I had thought about texting him when I arrived, but I didn't want to be overbearing. But why was this on me? Shouldn't he have thought to check in on his own? I couldn't get away from the feeling that I was waiting for a date to call me back, which made the whole situation feel dirty.

I took the clothes I had brought out of my bag. My dress was wrinkled, but I couldn't find a hanger to put it on. I lay it on the end of the bed and smoothed it out. The pattern that had seemed cheerful and optimistic at home now looked thin and misshapen, like flowers pressed in a book. I wished I'd brought something else.

Then there was this: I was angry that my father wasn't more invested in our meeting. Yes, he had told me he would be here, but when I'd texted him the address to the B & B, he'd answered with a thumbs up emoji. When I told him I was leaving Gainesville to start the drive here, he'd sent a GIF of Fozzie Bear driving a car.

I had no idea what any of it meant. Did it mean that he was willing to play along out of guilt but would be more than happy to just leave it alone? And, if so, could guilt be enough? I had guilt, too. Everyone had guilt, even though I couldn't pinpoint exactly why I should. What had I done to create this situation? At home it felt like I didn't have questions, but now that I was here I realized that I didn't have one big question, I had hundreds of tiny ones that itched like chicken pox. I paced the room and rehearsed speeches to say to him, every single sentence tainted with blame and resentment. Eventually, I realized that one question kept bubbling to the surface, a corollary to all the other questions. It was: *Would it have been so hard?* Just then my phone pinged. My father had sent the address to the restaurant. He'd written: See you there.

The restaurant was dark. The tables had white tablecloths and heavy wooden captain's chairs. The walls were burgundy and the carpet repeated an urn-and-flowers pattern. There was a large salad bar moored like a cruise ship at the back of the room. The hostess gave me a sympathetic smile and pulled two menus the size of cafeteria trays out of her stand. I had the distinct impression that she assumed I was here for a break-up date.

"My father is meeting me," I said, possibly too defensively.

She nodded and her mouth moved as if she was saying something, but no sound came out. At the table, I ordered a glass of white wine. When it came, I took a sip and put it down. I looked at my phone, took a sip again, and put the glass down. Even though I repeated this pattern for nearly ten minutes, I was still startled when he arrived.

"Rachel," he said, holding out one arm. "It's great to see you." I stood up, banging into the table and nearly toppling my glass. I put

out my opposite arm and we leaned into each other, hugging without really touching.

“Dad. Hi.” Then, after a pause, “It’s good to see you.”

I worried that I had sounded accusatory, or maybe less than enthusiastic, but he didn’t seem to notice. When the waiter came, he ordered a martini on the rocks and laughed, inexplicably, as though the idea that such a thing should exist was funny. There were some awkward “you look great” and “you, too” formalities as we positioned our menus like shields in front of us and pretended to read as we glanced over them tentatively, checking one another out.

He was older, obviously, but by and large the same. Perhaps a little heavier, a little rounder, although it might have been that his suit was a bit tight. He had used something in his hair that made it look stiff, and the pink of scalp that showed through seemed raw and afraid. The truth is, he didn’t look like my father or anyone’s father. He looked like someone on a job interview, and I felt a little bit sorry for him.

His martini came and in one breath he said, “I am so sorry about your mother. She was much too young.” Then he drank.

I nodded. “Thanks, yes,” I replied, and downed the last of my wine.

We ordered (I, the lamb, and he, the strip) and our conversation wove through a series of choppy exchanges about mom’s cancer, the things in Gainesville that had changed or stayed the same, the dull responsibilities of my administrative job, and whether I was dating anyone like they were an obstacle course necessitating a series of sprints and stops, tumbles and climbs. Once we had completed the circuit all that was left was the lingering sense that there was a cockroach the size of a dinner roll crawling across the table, with both of us afraid to alarm the other by pointing it out.

My father had ordered a bottle of red wine to go with the meal, but I was already feeling off center from the glass of white on an empty stomach so he drank most of it, pantomiming topping mine off every time he filled his glass. I tried listen to him talk about his kids, but it was as though anything he said about them was in another language. I had seen photos of them on Facebook, but I couldn’t conjur them as living beings in my head. It took me a minute to catch up when he shifted gears and began reminiscing

about taking me to the playground outside my nursery school. He said we used to play detective.

“I’d told you about the Pink Panther, you know, from the old cartoon? We’d play this game where I’d hide something—a water bottle or a sweatshirt, whatever we had—and you’d tiptoe around pretending you were the Pink Panther looking for clues to find it. You were very serious about it. Looking here, looking there. Me pretending to fake you out—get you to look behind the slide or under a bench. Then you decided you wanted a Pink Panther doll for your birthday and I looked everywhere, but I couldn’t find one. I went all the way to Jacksonville looking for anything Pink Panther, but the only thing I could find was this big roll of fiberglass insulation with his picture on it. For some reason the Pink Panther was the mascot for an insulation company or something, so people kept sending me to hardware stores. Obviously, *that* wasn’t going to work. I mean, come on.” At this he laughed, hard, until he started coughing. I almost thought he was choking, but then he was fine again. “The funny thing is that we have this giant, stuffed Pink Panther in the house now. Someone gave it to Sadie. Maybe when she was sick. Anyway, I see it every day. You can get anything now with the internet.”

I didn’t remember liking the Pink Panther. I knew which playground he was talking about, but I couldn’t specifically recall going there with him. I told him it was a funny story even though it wasn’t really. He nodded. Yes, funny. When the waiter showed up to clear our plates, I passed on dessert and ordered coffee.

“I’ll have a Sambuca,” my father said. He held onto the ‘s’ like a hand sliding down a railing. When it came he offered me one of the three coffee beans floating in it.

“They represent health, happiness and prosperity—or something like that.”

I declined.

The end of the meal pressed in like nightfall. In a matter of minutes, I would finish my coffee, he would finish his Sambuca, and we would part ways. I’d accomplished what I came for, but the hostess might have been right. The whole meal felt more like an awkward blind date than a reunion. Would I see him again? Probably not. Not anytime soon, anyway. But maybe what my

mother wanted me to do was have closure. Maybe I needed it, if that's what this was.

"It's been a really long time," I said, mostly to break the silence.

My father slid his Sambuca glass forward and back, making circular impressions in the tablecloth.

When he finally spoke, his voice hurtled across the table. My palms were damp and I wiped them on my napkin.

"You know," he said, "I'm doing a tour of the research facility tomorrow. It's really a P.R. thing. They make us wear lab coats and look in microscopes and whatnot. All for show, really. But you could tag along. You know, if you like."

I said that might be nice, unable to read the sincerity of the invitation. Did he really want to have to explain to his co-workers who I was? It seemed unlikely. He tossed back the rest of his Sambuca, crunching on the last coffee bean. Then he scribbled a signature in the air with his fingers. Across the room, the waiter nodded and scurried away.

"This was mom's idea," I said.

My father slid a credit card inside the bill folder and handed it back to the waiter. I briefly wondered if he was writing the dinner off as a business expense.

"Really? That surprises me," he said.

"I think she thought I had questions. About the divorce or something."

I saw his eyes go to the full glass of red wine still in front of me. I took it and drank, gulping until I felt acid rise into my nose. He tapped his index finger on the tablecloth.

"Do you?"

"Do I what?"

"Have questions?"

"Well, no. Not really. I mean, nothing beyond the obvious why not stick it out kind of questions that every kid has."

"Your mother told me she was in love with her boyfriend and asked for a divorce. It wasn't really an option to stay."

I was still shaking by the time I got to the highway so I pulled into the parking lot of a Cracker Barrel and spent some time screaming at the cosmos and my dead mother for setting me up. I shredded memory after memory trying to find hints of the other man, but the truth is there were too many of them to pinpoint just one. My mother always had one boyfriend or another and all I knew was that my father had gone away. Absence had made the blame grow stronger.

When I finally rubbed my face dry and started the car again, I took a few deep breaths to assess whether or not I was too buzzed to drive. Aside from a dry throat and a heaviness over my left temple, I felt all right, although the rushed and awkward goodbye I had had with my father repeated on an endless loop in my head, etching a signature of shame and embarrassment on the evening that didn't seem to want to go away.

At Bonner House, the parlor and dining rooms were dark and the dollhouses and frozen families were hidden inside their glass monoliths. When the bell banged against the door, Mary emerged from a room at the back of the house where there was a light on. A faint singed smell hung in the air.

"There you are," she said. "I was starting to worry."

"Working on a house?" I asked, peering at the open door.

"Just tinkering. Thinking, mostly."

I headed for the stairs, but at the banister was a house with a little girl looking up through an attic window, her chin in her hand. I paused. I had a question.

"Do you ever change the houses you have? You know, move the people around?"

"Oh no. Once we put the case on they have to stay the way they are." She tipped her head sideways and rocked back and forth with her hands behind her back. "Are you all right?"

I nodded. "Good night. Thanks again."

I slept badly, but in the morning I felt better than I expected. I was still angry at my mother, but there was also a new sense of clarity about the whole thing. She'd trashed her marriage and never

bothered to tell me the truth. Coming all this way certainly seemed like the hard way to manage relaying that information, but in some ways I was glad to know.

When I went downstairs Mary and her brother were busy cleaning the fingerprints off the glass cases.

“Good morning!” she said, smiling at me. “It’s nice and quiet this morning. We don’t have our first group until this afternoon.”

She led me to a table in the dining room. In the glass diorama was a little girl doll sitting at an old-fashioned school desk. She had a book open and was leaning forward with her hand raised in the air. I searched the little scene, looking for the twist in this tiniest of plots, but couldn’t find one. She seemed hopeful. Earnest. Just a kid wanting to give the right answer.

“What kind of pancakes can I get you?” Mary asked.

“Chocolate chip,” I replied. “I mean, why not, right?”

“Exactly,” she said, and went into the kitchen, her wide hips waving her skirt in a cheery sashay.

While I waited for the pancakes I called my father to let him know I was heading home. I listened to the phone ring, confident that he really hadn’t expected me to come. He would be relieved.

“Hello?” A woman answered.

“I’m sorry, I was calling for Ian?” I said, adding, “I must have the wrong number,” even though I was sure I didn’t.

She told me to hold on, and I heard the airy scratch of someone covering the phone with their hand. I’ll admit that my first thought was that my father was having an affair while away on business. I imagined him carousing in the hotel bar, consorting with conference attendees.

“Is this Rachel?” the woman asked.

I said yes and she explained that she was my father’s wife. She had just arrived that morning.

“I know we haven’t met,” she said, “But you should come.”

I turned onto the highway too fast and the Styrofoam container slid across the seat and cracked open, my pancakes flopping onto the floor like pockmarked tongues. My father’s wife, Mel, had been

vague, but it appeared that there had been some kind of situation last night. Something involving my father.

“I’ll explain when you get here,” was all she would say.

I had no idea what to think, so I kept coming back to the coffee beans swirling in Sambuca. The martini. The wine. I felt drunk on the memory of these things. Did he get a DUI on the way back? Did he pick a fight with someone in the hotel bar? Should I have stopped him from drinking so much? Taken care of him? Mel had said, “He’s been under a lot of stress.” Was I the stress? My chest felt tight. A spot over my left ear burned with pain. I tried to concentrate on the traffic, squinting at the sun bouncing off the cars ahead.

When I pulled into the hotel complex, I looked at the glass building towering over me. She had said she would meet me in the lobby. I imagined myself walking toward her, this stranger that was my father’s wife, with my hands and stomach as empty as my mother’s house. She would ask me questions. Want to know things about me. I imagined myself walking across the shiny marble floor, past the potted trees and the uniformed bellhops towards her. She would be on the phone, but when she saw me, she would tip it down, away from her mouth. The shiny face of the diamond on her engagement ring would roll down on her finger like an embarrassment. She would look me over, her eyebrows rising and falling like nets cast over water.

Then I would see the mascara smudged under her eyes. She would be wearing a black hoodie, the kind my mother refused to wear that zipped up the front. Mel would say my name and I would not recognize it. She was not my family. My father was not my family. Their life was not my life. This much, I knew, was not in question. My mother had made that clear.

aspartame

my earliest memory of my father is that he smelled like fruit
strawberry mojitos cherry vodka apple schnapps *like* fruit

but more sour the kind that leaves your mouth tasting bitter
and your hands dry instead of sticky with juice *like* fruit

that has been sitting cooking under the sun in a wooden stand
all day and red sweaty children buy it because they like fruit

but they don't know this fruit has been poisoned its seeds
coated in shiny toxin and it makes their hearts crack like fruit

with hard shells the kind my mother would slam to split open
while dad was drunk at family picnics off cups shaped like fruit

and she said to me *be careful of people who hide their rotten
core they are not what they say they are not sweet like fruit*

Ivy Marie

A Much Better Mistake

I set myself up for a mission
to decide on the difference
between apples and oranges,
Mars and Venus: You
sat across from me, arms
folded. And as you asked for
a drink of water, I sat
there stolen

By your lips, the blush
pink slipping into burgundy
The curve of Cupid's bow
rising and falling to the music
of Sappho's lyre, I figured
this time I was predisposed
to luck

When I saw you down the
street walking, and that
degenerate heart of yours
swooped in for blood
off my marrow, the words
beginning to bleed out
by the minute—I asked if
you were free on the morrow

For a little time with a good
sire, though I was far
from it, a maiden like yourself
instead.

The Future is an Elusive Lover: You Know She is Coming but She Will Not Show You Her Face

Here I am. See-through,
inconspicuous, cutting at your kitchen wires.
Undetermined, hazy, mouthing at your temple
from sixty or more miles away.

I am your car keys, your gas tank, the mileage
you speed away each Sunday saying:
“I can’t start a new week in this old town.”

I am the black before the black, the sun before the day,
covered in lace and tempting,
hiding in the wrong side of your mind.

Somewhere a gaggle of women, rotate their bangles
and try to tell something of me—
to worried men and mothers for a price.

But I am concrete-less, untranslatable.
Every day upon waking sweat locked and screwed from fitful rest,
you will feel me gnawing from the distance.

Every hour I will bang at your front door and run
before you get the chance to answer.

You will spend a lifetime poorly prophesying,
fantasizing my dimensions,
reaching for my silk skirt;
but like a woman,
I will turn away, before you can touch it.

Angelica Whitehorne

Listen

And when you talk
to me I wish
I could not
dress it
in mom's and
dad's suits,
nor dye it
in childhood,
nor decorate it
with *experience*.

Not turn it
midsentence,
not switch it off
at a pause.

Not rub it
into snot,
not flush it down
the toilet,
not sweep it
in a pile,
not burn it
over the gas.

Not run it
over with a truck.
Not drag it face
down on asphalt.

Not imagine,
not guess,
not know it.

I wish I could
hear only
what you say.

Walnut Hulls

Peeling the hull from the walnuts
blackens her hands,
hands of struggle,
hands of inequity.

Old sun browned hands
with bulging blue veins,
hands of Aztec ancestry.

Trying to make her way,
trying to act strong,
trying to open the door
of the dancehall,

pleading, "Look at my hands,
they are black from walnut hulls.
I worked in the fields all day
Please, let me in."

Congestion

Cities in America
mostly grew before the automobile
filled the streets
in ever increasing numbers,
traffic jams
a daily occurrence
with insufficient room
for buses and trucks
to do their business,
crowded by private vehicles
always in a hurry,
getting more and more impatient,
until road rage incidents
are commonplace

Invited



Fabrice B. Poussin

Growing Pains

If you go wandering in
the woods, the dormant
city or the barren country,
You shall find a maiden
pretty, though sullen, for
the diamond on her finger
is quite missing.

If you ask she'll tell you
about the long winter, of
stitching the black and the
blue together
And of staring back
madly, most deeply
into the dark of an old
lover's caress

But no sooner will it be
Spring's arrival,
sprouting its colours under
the grip of the fire
And the pinks, greens and
yellows shall make their
appearance, the red on
the cheeks now
fully blossomed
For there is something
wonderful about this
season, as the birds lay
nestled in twig-houses
And Love opens
wide ahead like a
road forged anew

Juliana Mei

Defending Eve

for Aemilia Lanyer

Adam didn't have to eat,
and his cruelty is far worse.

To have some speculate
Shakespeare would cast you

in the shadows, well, who's
worthy to be judge of all?

I say no one. To be the first:
the only crime committed

here. To ask *why should men*
disdain our being equals:

the sin that cuts at the heart
of the matter. And so the only

lesson learned then is to fear
women and serpents, banish us

to the ground to be stepped upon?
You knew then, centuries ago,

they had it wrong. When she
took that bite, Eve set us free.

* Aemilia Lanyer (1569-1645; England): poet (*Salve Deus Rex
Judæorum* / *Hail, God, King of the Jews*)

* italicized words borrowed from "Eve's Apology in Defense of
Women" ("why should you disdain / Our being your equals")

Lisa Stice

Tiger Lilies in the Dell

The path wanders left, right; brushes against
root and rock. At the edge: ferns, Dutchman's-
breeches, a blue cascade of larkspur.
There is a thick green scent of spring,
with a frisson of electricity. Rumbles
of thunder threaten the uneasy calm.
Off the road, in the dell below
the great earthwork dam of the lake,
the caretaker's cottage folds
further into itself each season.
Orange tiger lilies outline the foundation.
The telltale of a woman's hand brightening
the home. Her work lives here, longer
than the cottage, beyond forgetting.
Trail signs say, *Please stay on the trails.*
Offenders subject to fines and court costs.
But I must go where beauty requires.
If I do not, who would see the lilies?

Changing Winds

load, pack
move fast
disconnect
pull the plug
off the lights
strap on the oxygen mask,

wait, hesitate

put off what you're doing
until the next minute
when the winds could change

hurry up, gotta leave
before the roads close
before Armageddon comes,

hopefully not
if our debt has been paid
if grace has been saved

in the event that things change
however
remain optimistic
keep the faith
things may turn
as quick as the yellow
of a faulty traffic light

listen to the news
heed the alerts
follow the police car's swirling red
slowly up the hill
down the snaking curve

to safety, hopefully

the billowing black smoke will blow over
leaving
a vague shimmer of sun light
in a mostly gloomy day.

E Volution

The performing arts
are diminishing
as we grey out.
Opera, ballet,
serious theater without singing and dancing,
high culture departing
and truth be known
it's not meant for all.
Few enjoyed The Flight of the Bumblebee
in grade school.
As writing becomes more elective
e poetry mags proliferate,
some read by more than
mothers and girlfriends.
Most mags profess
aesthetic motives,
never realizing
this may be the last chance
to reach readers about issues
before the oligarchs
take control of the internet,
order our reading,
nullify independent choice.

Resettled

From the moment I walked into the high-ceilinged, brightly lit room I knew it would be a day to remember. But I didn't know how much the experience would change me. In one of the classic buildings of San Francisco's Mission Dolores neighborhood, March's midday sun streamed in through the tall wood-framed windows, brightening the space as if an angel were present. I sensed excitement in the faces of the volunteers seated around the room. Julia, a petite soft-spoken woman, had organized the gathering to inform and recruit volunteers for a special project. I leaned forward in my chair, listening carefully, not missing a beat of her musical voice.

"In less than a year, one thousand Tibetan refugees will arrive in the United States from India and Nepal. Sixty will stay in the Bay Area. But before they're allowed to board the plane, we need proof of jobs, healthcare, and housing," Julia said with a wise smile. She had helped others emigrate to the United States and knew the enormity of the task. I had encountered the Tibetan culture on a trip to Nepal a few months before the meeting. After learning about their exile from Tibet and subsequent escape to India and Nepal, I yearned to spend more time with the fabled culture. So taken was I with Julia's sincerity and the cause she represented, I signed up that day to help the grassroots organization known as the U.S. Tibetan Resettlement Project.

In 1990, more than thirty years after China had invaded Tibet, the United States government had designated one thousand visas for Tibetans living in India and Nepal. The move acknowledged the danger posed to Tibetans during the Chinese invasion of 1958 when over one million Tibetans were killed, their villages burned, and their temples ransacked. The government had stopped short of designating the Tibetans as refugees to avoid conflict with China. The Resettlement Project was created to fill the aid gap and provide the financial and practical support necessary for refugees to make a successful transition to a new country, a new language, a new way of life. While Julia's message was sensational,

her voice was calm. A forceful but approachable woman, she understood Tibetan culture from her years living in Nepal.

A few months before...

On a bright November day in 1989, my fourteen-day trek had begun in a Nepali village located between Kathmandu and Pokhara. When the crowded bus stopped, and no one else got off, I felt we had made a mistake in choosing the lesser traveled route. Maybe small crowds of like-minded tourists would provide a better support system. This regret occurred to me as I watched the back of the bus disappear while we stayed in one place, our bags gathered around us like lost sheep.

My travel companion, Melanie, our two porters, and I began our trek following a gravel road. Our guidebook, *Trekking in Nepal* by Stephen Bezruchka, instructed trekkers to hire a truck and reduce the three-day walking journey into a six-hour jeep ride. Too late, we learned the porters chose the slower method of travel to bring our business to their friends and family living along the gravel road and ignored by jeep traffic.

The first three days along the dusty path were long and my mood low. I developed blisters on the balls of my feet from the new orthotics slipping inside my Avia high tops while Melanie seemed to float in her red Converse with her long shiny hair sashaying from side to side like an advertisement for feminine products. At night, I read and re-read *Trekking in Nepal*, trying to imagine a trip more like those described in the book. On the fourth day, we made it to the village where the official trail began. Off the wretched gravel, we walked along smooth grass lined paths with poinsettias growing wild along villager's open yards. The beauty and serenity surrounding us felt as if we had entered an alternate universe. My mood lifted as we climbed higher along the twisting switchbacks affording expansive views of the valley below and snowcapped mountains ahead. During an afternoon break, an American man and his Tibetan guide appeared around a corner. As the only westerners within days of the area, our two groups greeted each other like long lost friends. I recognized the man from somewhere.

"I'm Stephen," the tall stranger said, smiling.

"Did you write the book about trekking in Nepal?" I said.

“Yes,” Stephen Bezruchka said. Stephen and his guide weren’t traveling with a group and joined ours for a few days. They would lead our porters on the best paths to take. It was Thanksgiving in the United States and we had much to be grateful for in acquiring a private tour guide. That night we celebrated with a feast of lentils, green vegetables, pumpkin, and a homemade barley-based beer called Chung. I was getting accustomed to the steady diet of lentils and rice and the Chung alleviated my apprehension to the rustic conditions.

When I had decided to take the trip to Nepal, I was at the beginning of my career in Silicon Valley. As one of the first female design engineers at 3Com, I felt like an outsider in the male dominated field of integrated circuit design. The other engineers were friendly and accepting, but on a personal level, I didn’t have much in common with them. Our lunch conversations were about the latest chip set, or component spec sheet. My personal interests were hiking, eating Italian food, and watching movies with subtitles. I also felt deflated by the reality of an ordinary life, working nine to five, and going home to an empty apartment in Palo Alto. This loneliness had been with me since I lost my parents. My father died of heart failure when I was eight and my mother died of cancer when I was fifteen. As a child and teen, I had experienced loss at a scale that only an orphan knows, or someone who has been exiled. After losing them, I became an outsider for the pain I carried. At age twenty-eight when I finally graduated from college and joined the workforce, I was still an outsider only this time it was my gender. While pursuing a bachelor’s degree that took me seven years to complete, I didn’t have time to notice the loneliness. I ran from work to school to home and back again. It wasn’t until I had only work that I noticed my empty life outside the office. In search of a passionate pursuit, I attended a talk by a woman mountaineer. Her stories of adventure and cultural intrigue in Nepal inspired me to seek the same. My parents had loved the Montana Rocky Mountains. Our camping trips instilled a passion for the outdoors. It made sense that, to find peace in my life as an adult, I should seek solace in the majesty of the mountains. After the talk, I read several books about the Himalayas such as, “Annapurna: A Woman’s Place,” “The Snow Leopard,” and “Nanda Devi.” These books

contained captivating real-life traveler's tales, opening up a new world and instilling the drive, or really the need, to see the world's highest peaks.

As our joined groups trekked into the higher elevations of Nepal, the faces and clothing of the people changed. Their cheeks became rosier, and their jaws more defined. They wore multiple layers of thick dark wool that seemed to be kept on for the duration of winter. Married women wore colored half aprons tied around their waists to inform others they were taken. The Tibetan beast of burden, or yak, started to appear in greater numbers, their long hair and large stature added to the wild look of the place. Above the tree line, the terrain became rocky and in place of the lush green underbrush, piles of beige, white, and gray boulders decorated the sparse mountainsides, contrasting with the blue sky. We started to see clothesline with colored handkerchiefs strung together, waving in the cool breeze. Stephen explained they were Tibetan prayer flags.

"The writing is a prayer. When the wind blows, the prayers on the flags send blessings into the air, bringing good luck," Stephen said.

An old Tibetan woman with deep weathered lines etched into her cheeks pushed wooden handles on metal cylinders lined up in a row, releasing more prayers written on rolled pieces of paper inside the drum into the air.

"Ohmanipadmayohm," I thought I heard her say.

"Om-mani-padme-hum is repeated to bring enlightenment to the person. Tibetans everywhere say it," Chandra Pal said.

I tried saying the mantra. The repeated pattern of soft sounding "Ms" had a calming effect, as if I had a connection to the air and sky. The foreign place felt friendlier as I imitated the chanting woman.

The next day, Stephen, Chandra Pal and I got ahead of the slower moving group. Melanie and the two porters preferred a more leisurely pace which gave her time to ask: "What's the Nepali name for ____?" When the three of us in the faster group walked past a home at the edge of a Tibetan village, we heard chanting inside and were drawn to approach. As we entered the yard, a woman came to greet us.

“Tashi Delek,” she said, the standard greeting of Tibetans which has several meanings, but the intent is to give blessings and good luck to another. I began to understand that in these parts all anyone really wants in life is good luck. The woman explained in Tibetan that her daughter was being blessed by the local holy man. While I could communicate with smiles and nods, it helped that Stephen and Chandra Pal spoke Tibetan. The kind woman invited us inside where a monk sat cross-legged on a pile of wool Tibetan carpets. The man’s eyes danced as he swung the smoking incense burner with the ease of someone who had performed this ceremony many times. A lighthearted person, he encouraged me to take pictures and record his deep throaty chants. After the ceremony, we enjoyed tea and a small snack.

Friendliness seemed to define the people living in the high country. When passing a Tibetan home, we were often greeted with a smile, a wave, and a shout out, “Tashi Delek.” One time, we were invited in for Tibetan butter tea, an acquired taste. Sitting comfortably on a pile of carpets with our legs crossed meditation style, being careful not to point the soles of our feet at anyone, we watched as our host went through the involved process of making the concoction, brewing black tea, churning the filtered tea with salt, yak butter, and yak milk. I winced at the flavor that reminded me of salted gamey fat with a hint of cigarette smoke. She laughed and glanced at Chandra Pal, the two seeming to enjoy my failed attempt at being polite.

During these daily encounters, I was struck by the happiness of the person conversing with us, their confidence which I measured by their willingness to look me in the eye, and the silent intelligence that can be felt but is difficult to describe. With Stephen and Chandra Paul as interpreters, the hosts smiled and laughed, making simple jokes about my wide-eyed look or asking if I wanted to buy the fur hat that I had earlier admired on someone’s head. Sometimes, the conversation became more serious as we discussed the plight of Tibet. Each home had a picture of the Dalai Lama posted above their Buddhist shrine along with bowls of water for thirsty souls and fruit for hungry ones. I admired Tibetans for a quality that I describe too simply as “They don’t take life or themselves too seriously.” A better description might be to say they had a gracious attitude towards life.

Even the youngest members seemed to possess the wisdom and emotional maturity to let go of the things that cause anger and gravitate towards those that bring joy. While a culture cannot be wholly defined by some of its members, the Tibetan people I met impressed me in this way.

When I returned home from Nepal, my apartment life felt emptier for having left my heart on the other side of the planet. The thing no one tells you about life-changing experiences is that, at first, they leave the adventurer feeling alone, directionless, sad. Not even chanting “om mani padme hum” alleviated my isolation. I was driven to find a connection to Tibet. I searched the yellow pages for organizations with Tibet in its title. I found Bay Area Friends of Tibet. Then I found Julia and the Resettlement Project.

On April 17, 1992, two years after I met Julia, the first seven Tibetan refugees landed at San Francisco’s International Airport. Group 1 was the first of twelve pods that arrived over fifteen months. We had to work swiftly because the United States government had placed a moratorium on the visas which would run out sometime in 1994.

Greeting the new arrivals was a big occasion. Each incoming Tibetan had a sponsor and a volunteer who gathered along with the program director, volunteer coordinator, and friends and supporters. Our extended group of well-wishers unfurled the Tibetan flag and the Program’s Banner, signaling “Welcome.” At eight feet high, the project’s gold banner displayed a maroon Buddhist knot while the Tibetan flag displayed two snow lions - symbols of home. Visible from a window above the arrival’s level, the spectacle provided a festive welcome for the travelers from halfway around the world.

The Tibetan Resettlement Project had ambitious goals. We had three years to assimilate one thousand Tibetans across ten cities. Employers and regular citizens committed resources to people they had never met. Businesses of varying sizes from large corporations such as Hyatt hotels to family run operations like Chez Panisse in Berkeley, wrote up legitimate job offers to total strangers. Sponsors committed rooms in their houses, one landlord provided three

apartments rent free for a year, and still others donated money. By the end of 1992, defying the improbable, thirty-five Tibetans had successfully emigrated to San Francisco.

Of the three Tibetans I sponsored one stands out in my mind as having taught me the most about Tibetan spiritual practices. While the last name of reincarnate lamas is often “Rinpoche”, the first name varies. To keep his privacy, I’ll call him Jigme.

Jigme Rinpoche arrived in the San Francisco Bay and started living with my husband and I in the fall of 1993. Over time, Jigme told me the story of how he was discovered as the reincarnation of a head lama. The group’s leader had died, and his followers were guided to search the Tibetan countryside for his successor in the 1950s. When the lamas came upon Jigme’s parents’ house in Tibet, they saw a peach tree blooming in winter while snow rested on the frozen ground. This impossible circumstance gave a sign to the lamas that the reincarnation of their beloved head lama could be living in the house.

“Well, you know, hahaha, they came to our door, hahaha, and well, you know, they asked to meet me hahaha,” Jigme said. He often injected a nervous laugh into his sentences when speaking about his auspicious past. I wondered if telling his story felt like boasting for this humble man or if he simply liked to laugh.

“The monks emptied a bag with their lama’s belongings and some of their own, you see. Well, you know, I selected only the items belonging to the Rinpoche haha. They gave me more tests after that until finally, they said I was their spiritual leader haha,” Jigme said. He was four years-old at the time. When the Chinese invaded Tibet, Jigme was six. At this young age, he led the monks, his family, and people of his village across the Himalayas to India. He made decisions on which path to take, where to cross the river, how to find food, and where to locate shelter.

“One day as walked along a narrow rock path carved into the side of the mountain, I saw a cave to the side of the trail. Well, you know, I led the group to it. Haha. A little while later, you see, the Chinese soldiers passed by us. Haha. They never found us,” he said.

Sometimes our conversations turned to Buddhist philosophy.

“How did you learn Buddhism?” I said, swallowing a bit of the curry chicken he had made for dinner. Our conversations were often had over a meal he had cooked.

“We have a sort of debate about our lessons. When I was being tested, I stood in the middle of a circle with the other monks around me. Like this, haha,” he said drawing an imaginary circle on the table with his right forefinger and pointing to the middle.

“We made statements about some part of Buddhist studies, then slapped our hands together to make a sound when finished making our point, you see,” he said.

“You clapped for yourself?” I said, thinking self-congratulations didn’t seem very Buddhist.

“Hahaha, not really, we slap our hands to signal we have finished with our argument,” Jigme made a muffled clapping sound with his soft hands.

“You can only lose what you cling to,” I repeated a saying attributed to Buddha while gently clapping my hands.

“Haha, yes, you see how easy it is. But then the other monks can argue against your point. Eventually, there is some sort of conclusion, you know, and we break for tea. Hahaha,” he said.

Being raised Catholic, I was taught to believe in a God whose presence was justified by simple analogies, “We know Hawaii exists without traveling there and so we know God exists without seeing Him.” God was responsible for good things, but when bad things happened, He wasn’t to blame or “it was His way, and for the best.” I doubted that it was “for the best” to have lost both parents before I graduated high school. I doubted it was “for the best” that my mom suffered unimaginable pain her last six months of life. I doubted anyone with any kindness of heart would leave a fifteen-year old without a home. I doubted God. The Buddhist way attracted me for its acceptance of doubters, and its use of questioning to gain a better understanding. Exposure to Tibetan Buddhism helped me reconnect to a belief system I had abandoned the day my mother drew her last labored breath. While the absence of miracles to save my father and mother had caused me to reject false hopes instilled by my religion, Buddhist philosophy provided for the existence of something greater than myself without attributing this presence to a particular creator or deity. This left no

one to blame for an unfortunate past and no single entity to receive credit for all that was good. It was my parents' path, independent from my own, that brought them short lives. Prayers from their youngest child couldn't change their journey. This way of looking at the past helped me find peace with their loss and my inability to do anything to save them.

The Resettlement Project, led by Julia, successfully assimilated sixty Tibetans into the Bay Area. This group eventually brought their families and formed an active community dedicated to preserving Tibetan culture. In keeping with their core beliefs, the Tibetan community has never forgotten the help received from the Resettlement Project. Even the younger generations and new arrivals take the time to express their heartfelt gratitude whenever they find the chance.

It still gives me wonder to think about the sequence of events leading up to the chance encounter with Stephen Besruchka and the introduction to Tibetan culture that followed. The blisters I endured have left no scars. The trace that remains is the deeper connection made with a culture that rejuvenated my desire to pursue a spiritual practice. I wish I could report that I found inner peace, that I meditate every day, and that I have achieved self-actualization multiple times. Closer to the truth is that I discovered what many have known for centuries, the struggle is the journey. We all face mountains, some are made by nature, and others are made by ourselves, our lives, our conditions. Tibetans taught me peace comes from acceptance, which takes patience and practice. While I cannot declare total victory over the negativity that sometimes creeps into my mind, I can say I've been touched by the people of Tibet, and I'm a slightly better person for having had this blessing. I found a new way to look at life's challenges and acquired a few tools for overcoming them. I too have resettled.

Cyndie Zikmund

a self-portrait of all the things poets have said about their lovers

& my body is a collection of constellations & my body is stardust /
star stuff / a magic star & my body is a summer's day & my body is
golden dawn and sunlight in motion and blue twilight and a night so
clear you can see every single star & my body is the sun and the
moon at once

& my body is delicious and soft & my body is milk and honey & my
body is sweet ambrosia & my body is wild strawberries smeared on
the fingers & my body is a pair of red cherries & my body is a cool
drink of water & my body is spring

& my body is pomegranate seeds i consume greedily & my body is
enchantment & my body is paradise & my body is an enchanting
paradise & my body is heaven / heavenly / a religion for which i am
both priest and worshipper & my body is that of a goddess's

& my body is a dream & my body is food for desire & my body is a
flame and a wildfire and passion burning & my body is an elixir &
my body is angelic & my body is more than language & my body is
home & my body is lovely and sweet & my body is a gift

& my body is beautiful is beautiful is beautiful & my body is pure &
my body is all the portraits in the world & my body is electrifying &
my body is the sea & my body is mine & my body is bewitching &
my body is tender & my body is a poem / is poetry & my body is
music

& my body aches for my own gentle touch & my body is the smell
of lavender & my body is every flower and every petal on all the
flowers & my body is velvet & my body is longing & my body is
the whole world & my body is salvation & my body is a love note &
my body is

Lessons for a Young Witch

Alchemy: I read it all, understood it.
I grew out of myself
a voice, but it was
muffled, I didn't like it.
I barked, I screeched, I tried, still
Nothing. All a witch could hope for is
a chance to be buried...
For your silence
It condemned me
to the flames, and
I swallowed my voice back in—
You impressed your eyes upon me and
Cupped my face in your hands, whispering
“Listen, a woman's place is at our mercy.”
Then I heard the noiseless
purring
Of a thousand kingdoms, of queens
crying for me
Rattling in my brain like a sick tune, inside
there was a gnawing feeling—I remembered
Mother once said,
“Give a girl a map she'll thank you for it,
But give a girl a book and she shall find
Her bearings
Across the lucid, blue seas of Ulysses
Over the grassy, green fields of Keats
She shall find the secret of her history
in magic.”

Replaying the Lethe Myth

I never liked it.
Where's the comfort
in a rowboat full
of discontents
who can't agree on
a landing place or price:
the underworld,
Nirvana, heaven,
oblivion?
A coin, enlightenment,
a good life?

I'd rather ride
a life-chasing yacht
and claim the bow –
a Kate
with short hair
shouting to any Leo
who'll hear
I have the currency
to drive
across
wild-waved history.

And when anchored
at my last port-of-call,
I'll sift
through crates
of braided memories
and bless each
misstep, mystery,
victory, loss,
belief, and mis-belief
that forged the first me
into the last.

Carolyn Martin

Calla Lilies in Watercolor

Alice was destined to dip her brush
into a small tub of water,
and to naturally dab an array of pastels
onto a small white canvas
and paint Calla Lilies
in gentle brush strokes,
curves like a woman's figure,
long sloping stems,
moon-colored petals,
leggy filaments,
and a heart-shaped ovary
ready to flower life
in the corner of a quiet
coffee shop.

Sit

Sit in the seafoam blue chair I found on the street
and notice my belly puffing from behind and between my bra and
jeans

There's a spot of sauce on my skin
and half-dead bugs litter
the recently painted windowsill to your left
the chipping wood still visible beneath the white varnish

Do you notice how it's quiet white noise-ily

The AC hum and the fridge like cupping and releasing your hands
quickly around your ears

Here,
I think this might be the greatest moment of my life.

Together in my space
there's a soft assuredness
that your ass in my chair is where we must be
here now
so that the next mili-moment of our life can find us
Here now
and pick us up cradle us in its hands and glide us to the next
half-second
still together, in this room, a shade more contented
with the roaches crawling across our feet

Emily Unwin

Ten Turtles Seen Mid-March

Nine turtles in the spillover pond,
all facing south, basking in the spring sun.
Closer to the north shore, in the shallows,
the platter-sized shell of a snapping turtle,
gone belly-up. It was a hard winter.
A young couple passes by, walking
a red hound. They are tall, lithe,
and absorbed in themselves.

Self-absorbed? I prefer to walk alone.
My father's ghost often joins me
to continue our argument of forty years.
He is with me this morning. I ask him again
why he loved my dead mother like a saint,
but denied my stepmother, Alice, that love.
The woman who accepted my brother and me
and loved us as her own. He surprises me
and turns the table. *Why can't you admit
you're like me? You always held something
back from Alice. Why?* I have no answer.

He does not need me to forgive his sins.
Perhaps I need to forgive my own.
I turn from that thought quickly
and retrace my steps toward the car.

The wildflowers are slow to bloom this year.
Yet, there, on the north-facing bank,
green and golden-brown spikes. Trout lilies.
A profuse return, a spring greeting.
In this moment, I am thankful and forgiven.
Then a sudden peal of children's laughter nearby
tugs me back into the world. Into my old self.

A moment's grace now feels more than I deserve.

Oak + Second



Kristin LaFollette

A Prescription for Madness

The thing that links heaven to hell itself is
a bridge crossing over to the finish line
on either side, towards “The Big Sleep”
carved in cursive, rolling off the tongue
after nights and nights of endless sighs

The writer plants words like seeds to grow
into ladders, for he suspects the pleasure
in piercing the eye of the heavens, because
Time is guarding the impossible
distance from his one life to another’s

But instead he must consider living
by the minute: To feed a burning desire
so elemental he must light one more candle
before the page is printed, and fall again finally
into the hours of endless, endless sighing

The Continuum

Jobs—the real number field (unlimited digits between two dreams). Your hard work amongst the wolves—howl-at-the-moon simulations, projections of progress. Semantics, dynamics. You needed to feed yourself systems: fluid flows, fluctuations, heartbeats, celebrity. Your models are based on the old scientists, to whom greatness we all equate (implicit assumption of a linear progression, your rate of desire in lieu of time, space, and all its constraints). Traditions are the equations to overcome.

Conversion Tactics

The woman with the big white cross
that hung loosely from her breast
kept reminding me of the power she possessed.

Here's a free King James, she put forth
and highlighted a passage from Zechariah;
appearing forthright and sincere
when she sacrificed her soul
for a box of Girl Scout cookies.

I wondered if religious strangers really care,
or are they more concerned with their place
in the spiritual hemisphere?

I told the woman that I had my allegiance,
although slightly different than hers.
It gave me the wisdom to know
that he's the only deity for me.

Nonsense, she said, implying that I was misguided.
Everybody needs to hear the truth,
and not from those phony saviors
that advertise on billboards and ghetto walls.

We'll dip you in holy water, she promised
and give you the full Monty of Hosts;
we'll offer you a job in the parish
and a free ride every Sunday to the church.

I appreciate your devotion, I said,
but your cross is too heavy for me to bear.
I'd rather carry my own hymn book
and practice my faith elsewhere.

Mark Tulin

Red-Tailed Hawk Comes Calling

The red-tailed hawk rocks on his feet,
unsteady, his back to the glass door
he just hit hard. He leans back
on a prop of short tail feathers.
Turns his head slowly left, right.
Yellow eyes blink. A camera shutter
at half speed. I rattle the door behind him.

He jumps three inches forward.
Leaves a green smudge of surprise
on the red brick.

He opens his wings stiffly
and flaps once, twice, then flees
three feet to the holly tree near the door.
Rests on a low branch until
a mockingbird hovers above him,
squawking and fluttering its alarm.

The hawk surrenders; flies to a pin oak
across the yard. His layers of feathers
darker than an adult's. Densely banded
brown. Camouflaging him against
the gray mottled and gnarled oak trunk.

He sits until he is no longer there.
Disappearing during a break in my attention.

That was years ago. Now, when a hawk
circles lazily in the summer sky, I wonder
if that is him.

I know it is unlikely, but smile at the thought.

Kevin Norwood

In Florence I Saw the Sun Step on the Earth & Leave the Sky Behind

when i turn back the stones of time
i never learn anything new. different verses
of melancholy all sound the same

when sung alone. my feet do the steps
on their own now & before the river
washes away their shallow prints, they beam

up at me like a new star. when i lost my name
i didn't realize it had been stolen. i didn't know
you could do that to yourself. stringing up lights

in an empty house, open mouths filled
with nothing but the night.

The Open Jaw

The man came through the trees with a small drum beneath his arm, tapping on its taut skin two times for every step that he took. *Tap tap, tap tap, tap tap*. He was barefoot and dressed in a threadbare red polo shirt and a skirt made from hundreds of small variegated patches. The man crossed into the yard, climbed the porch stairs, and strode to the sliding door. He pressed his face against the screen and peered into the living room where a chubby boy sat on a couch watching television.

“Hey,” the man said.

“Hey.”

“I’m George.”

A cereal commercial come on the television. The boy glanced at it—*Boo Berry*, terrible stuff—then back at the man.

“What’s your name?”

“Christopher.”

“What are you doing?”

Christopher shrugged. “Nothing.”

George tilted his head, peering into the other rooms. “Anyone else home?”

Christopher shrugged.

“Your sister, maybe?”

The boy shook his head. “She’s selling frozen lemonade.”

“And your brother?”

The boy thought a moment, then said, “He went to college already.”

George ran his finger along the ligament binding the skin to the drum. “Ok. Do you want to go sailing?”

Christopher considered this, then shrugged again.

“Have you ever been?” George asked.

Christopher thought about it, shrugged.

George tapped on the drum: two times long followed by three times quick. *Tap tap, tap tap tap*. “Well,” he said, then straightened up and looked out through the trees toward the distant ridgeline of

clouds, the wavering sun. “My sailboat is anchored down the street. I have to move it to a friend’s mooring. Do you want to come?”

Christopher turned off the television. He sort of wanted to go sailing but mostly didn’t. And if he were to go, he thought he should first call his mother. She trusted strangers, even in skirts, and would tell him to go. Christopher thought maybe he should call his father instead, as he would not trust strangers in skirts, even if they were neighbors.

“I guess so.”

Tap tap, tap tap tap. “Do you have swim trunks?”

Christopher brushed crumbs off his belly and gave a half-nod.

“After you change, meet me at my place. Bring a sweatshirt too. Might be chilly out on the water.” George tapped out something wild and rapid—*tappity tappity tap, tappity tappity tap*—as he crossed back to his own yard, the drumming audible all the way into the empty, sprawling house in which he lived alone.

Christopher hesitated. The summer would be over soon. At school, what would he share about his vacation? Two sunburns, endless television reruns, a half-finished tree fort. He rose and went to his room. After changing into his swim trunks he pulled on his high-top sneakers and double-knotted the laces, then slid on a sweatshirt. He stopped at the telephone but didn’t call anyone. He pulled open the junk drawer and took out a piece of paper and a nubby pencil but didn’t write anything. He no longer wanted to sail. He wanted hang out at the edge of the pond where warm foamy water settled against a tiny beach, drink some Slice, and throw sticks at the snapping turtles.

Christopher sighed. Life and all its decisions made him sad.

The windows were down on George’s huge old maroon Cadillac. Christopher looked around, then climbed in. It smelled like patchouli, which is what his older brother’s girlfriend slathered on her neck and armpits, and fresh paint. A picture of two young boys was taped to the dashboard.

“Hey,” a voice said, and a black plastic garbage slipped through the window and over the boy’s head. Christopher yanked it off and began to sweat. “Whoops, sorry,” George said. “You’ll need that, so don’t tear it.” George had his own garbage bag, already half full. “We don’t need the car though. We’re walking.”

The boy was still panting, and he chuffed out his words. “I—I—my knees hurt if I walk too far.”

“It’s just down the street. That ok?”

Christopher shrugged.

“How about this. If your knees get tired, I’ll tell you some jokes. Jokes cure everything.”

George opened the car door. He had on old canvas sneakers with no laces, toes breaking through the ends. Before the boy could answer, he started walking.

Christopher followed him down the street, around the corner, and past Old Man Bell’s mansion. From there they could see the boat anchored a short distance from the beach. The boat looked small at first, but as they descended the hill it pivoted and now looked enormous and foreboding, its single mast pointing at the sky like the steeple on the church Christopher’s mother dragged him to every Saturday night.

“That’s her.”

At the edge of Bell’s beach Christopher stopped. No one was allowed there. The old man would call the police or send his ancient maid after trespassers. George didn’t care though. He cut right across it, sand spitting out the back of his heels. His legs were tan and muscular and a long white scar rode down the center of his right calf. George noticed Christopher staring at it and said, “I got that in the Marines.”

“Were you shot?”

“Nah.”

“Were you stabbed?”

“I was transporting some supplies with a buddy. We were a bit tipsy and crashed into a ravine.”

“Tipsy like a wobbly boat?”

George laughed kindly. “It means drunk.”

Christopher hurried to keep up, sand pouring into his basketball sneakers. “Are we going to get tipsy?”

“Do you want to get tipsy?”

The boy shrugged. “I don’t like wine. We have it at church. It tastes like, I don’t know, rotten fruit. And medicine.”

At the water’s edge George set down his garbage bag and kicked off his shoes.

“How are we getting to the boat?” Christopher asked.

“First, put everything in the bag.”

“Everything?”

George stripped down to the type of swim trunks Christopher’s mother wore and stuffed his clothes and shoes in the bag. Christopher was sweating more profusely now. He sat in the sand and carefully unknotted his shoes and took off his socks and rolled them up and put them in his shoes and pushed himself up and took off his sweatshirt that he’d just put on minutes ago but hesitated before taking off his shirt.

“If you don’t do it this way, you’ll be really cold out there.”

The shirt came off. Christopher’s white stomach and breasts jutted into the sunlight.

“Now,” George said, folding back the top of his garbage bag, “put everything inside and blow it up about halfway.”

George blew reams and reams of air into the bag, then tied off the top and tossed it into the water. It floated. Christopher got to work on his own bag. He blew and blew and panted and wheezed and blew again until finally the boy looked like he was going to faint. He made a crude knot and tossed the bag into the water. It mostly floated, but the drifting bags looked to him like Portuguese man o’ wars that’d been set on fire.

“Ready?”

Before Christopher could answer, George was wading into the water. He pulled the bag against his chest, leaned forward and started kicking. Christopher followed in cold increments—ankles, knees, crotch, heart, jawbone—then grabbed hold of the black creature, the plastic sticky and weird against his skin. He kicked harder than necessary, churning the sea into foam, while George slid through the water like a manta ray and pulled ahead by leagues.

Soon Christopher found himself alone in a swath of great darkness, for he had reached Bell’s legendary kelp bed. Six-foot-tall leaves, sinister and quavering, dragged across his legs like tongues or tentacles or worse, much worse, if one can imagine, as Christopher could. Still, on he kicked, and as he did so the boat pivoted on its mooring and he could read its name now: The Open Jaw.

George tossed his garbage sack onto the deck, then pulled himself up. He slid on his skirt and went about unfurling the sails and tugging on ropes and tossing things around. He didn't seem to notice the struggling boy, not even when his sack began to sink. The boy tried to call out but couldn't. He flailed atop his rapidly deflating sack o' war, picturing the kelp wrapping itself around his thick ankles and tugging him into its underwater prison. Just when it seemed he had no choice but to give in, George extended a hand and pulled the boy out from the water with ease. Christopher was surprised. He didn't know that a man who wore skirts and played little drums could be so strong.

"Take your time," George said, settling the boy onto the deck of the boat.

Christopher tasted salty vomit at the back of his throat. A long while passed before he summoned the strength to open his sack and pull his clothes over his wet skin. After shoving his feet into his sneakers and double-knotting the laces, he studied the boat. It had no cabin, only a little engine house with some cushions and junk inside. From it George pulled a stiff and moldy life vest. "Put this on. No arguing."

While the boy wriggled into it, George turned on the engine. It belched black smoke and made a terrifically sister-like whining sound. As the boat motored forward and the land receded in their wake, Christopher turned back to look for his home, but all he saw was the wavering edge of Bell's beach.

George squatted before him with his arm hooked over the tiller. "You ok?"

The boy nodded.

"Listen. What we do today, you shouldn't tell anyone about. This is private and special."

"I can't even say that we went sailing?"

"That's ok. But let's keep the rest between us." He touched the boy's knee. "Ok?"

The boy nodded.

"Now close your eyes."

"Why?"

"I have a surprise."

Christopher took a deep breath.

“Now open your mouth.”

“What?”

“*Enh enh enh*, eyes closed.”

Christopher pinched his eyes shut and waited. Sea breezes rushed down his throat. He heard clothes rustling. He thought it was a joke. But suddenly something cold and sharp like a cube of glass landed on his tongue. A moment later it dissolved sweetly.

“Rock candy?”

George set a few more pieces in the boy’s hand. It was made locally by an elderly woman with a lighthouse for a mailbox. “Save some for later.”

The wind pulled them into the ocean. George leaned back and operated the tiller with his foot while beating out a rhythm on the bench: *whap whap, whap whap whap*. When it came time to tack, he and Christopher ducked beneath the boom and swapped spots, and each time the boat leaned viciously and Christopher thought he was going to pitch headlong into the water and drown and be picked apart by sea-things. But he did not pitch headlong. Sea things did not breach nor lurk. The sea surface was textured like tissue paper and in general was not threatened. Soon his arm was dangling over the gunwale, his fingers dipping in and out with the crest and fall of their progress. The surface was warm, and though a sea-thing could have latched onto his arm and pulled him under, that didn’t seem so plausible now.

George removed a large brown bottle with a swing-top cap from his bag and took a swig. He started to hand it across but stopped. “Maybe I shouldn’t. It’s pretty strong.”

Christopher waggled his fingers. “I’m thirsty.”

“Might make you feel funny. Perhaps even—*tipsy*.”

“Come *onnnnnnn*.”

George handed it over. Christopher swung the top open, sniffed it, and took a pull. His face crumpled. The stuff inside was warm, sweet, and frothy yet earthy and unfamiliar. “What is it?”

“Tea.”

“Oh.”

“With milk and sugar.”

He drank more. This was nothing like his mother's tea. George gave him some crackers too. They were dry and plain, but out here on the ocean, so discordant with the setting, they tasted like Christmas food. Christopher thought that if he were lost at sea and had nothing to survive on but these tea and crackers, he would be ok. And he thought that if he drank tea instead of Sprite and ate crackers instead of Oreos, he would grow strong and be able to take on Aaron Fountain, the largest boy in his class who helped his father build houses and who did not celebrate Christmas. And he thought he would then become popular with girls like Couri Davis and he would soon—

“Get ready! Smack it! High five it!”

The boat was veering toward a red shoal marker.

“What?”

“Tag it. Say hello. It's a ritual.”

There was no time to equivocate. Christopher leaned out and tried to swipe the big metal tube that, for some reason, he was quite afraid of. He missed by a few inches.

If George was disappointed, he didn't express it. “Have some more tea,” he said, “while it's still warm.”

Christopher tipped the bottle back and pictured himself juggling hammers.

A short while later they passed through the shadows throw off by the crumbling northern, cliffs and the ocean changed from whale-blue to bad-dream-gray. Here boulders lined the shores and choppy white-capped waves reached into the boat as if seeking refuge. The Open Jaw rocked and leaned. It was tipsy. No tea could make this better, though it was all gone anyways. The candy in Christopher's pocket was sticky and furry with lint.

“This is sailing! Beautiful, isn't it?”

The boat's rhythm against the waves, *slap slap, slap slap slap*, made the boy feel ill. “I'm not ok,” he told George.

“I'm pulling up to that dock to visit a friend. You can get your feet back under you, alright?”

Beyond the dock sat a sliver of beach fronting a long green hill leading up to a sprawling Victorian with tall pillars. George dropped the sails and slid The Open Jaw up against the pilings and roped it off.

Once on land the boy had to relearn to walk. He burped up some vomit and tasted the entire morning again. George carried him up the hill on his back and set him on a hammock.

"The house is so big it doesn't fit in my eyes," Christopher said, squinting.

"Indeed. Later I'll show you the elevator. The first in the country—here!"

The boy shrugged. "I'm hungry. Is that why the boat is called The Open Jaw? Because you're always eating, like a whale?"

"The jaw is our family's sigil. We've always craved adventure."

"What's a sigil?"

"An emblem of power. Now take a nap. I'll bring out some food shortly." George gave the hammock a push, sending the boy back into the rhythm of the water.

He woke an hour later. Clouds collided overhead, and though night was hours off, the air was dim and close. On a nearby chopping log sat a plate of chopped vegetables, bread, a chocolate bar, and a tall glass of lemonade. He ate it all, even the vegetables, while listening to the boisterous drumming emanating from the house.

After eating he pursued the music up the porch and up the long dark stairs. As he got closer the drumming grew faster. He smelled sweat, more patchouli. At the top he craned his head around the corner and saw a mostly naked woman gyrating spasmodically in the center of the room. Her bangled wrists swiped past her bare breasts, up and down, up and down, while George tilted his head back and smashed a frantic beat into a drum nearly as large as the boy. The woman pivoted toward Christopher, her shiny skirt throwing starlight all over the room, and his heart paused. Her breasts taunted him, both summoning him closer and chiding him for being there. A cold storm welled up a place below his stomach, and he fled down the stairs, out the door, past the hammock, and down the hill. His feet had never moved so swiftly. He thought his sneakers might fly off and into the outlying briars, while blood pooled in his hands like congealed oil paint.

As he neared the beach he spotted a small fire burning at the far end. Before it a man sat with his arms around his knees and a pipe in his mouth. Christopher stumbled over and dropped into the sand, drawing in huge lungfuls of cattail-scented air. When he could breathe again he asked the man, "Do you live here?"

He nodded.

"Who is that woman?"

The man said nothing but suddenly seemed agitated, looking around and patting his pockets. "I can't find my Promises."

"Your what?"

"You heard me."

The boy swallowed hard. He felt the ocean in his stomach, green and undulating, and the woman in his heart, Hades-hot. "I may have heard, but I don't understand."

"Listen to me." His bearded face leaned over the fire. The man didn't say anything else though. He just spit into the flames.

Up the hill the door squealed open. George stepped out, stretched toward the sky, then strode toward the beach.

"What do you mean, 'promises'?"

"You're too young. Forget it."

"I'm not too young."

"Then I'm too old. You know what they—" The man's face brightened. He reached into his sock and pulled out a pack of Promises tobacco. He smiled and waved it around, but when he opened the sack it was empty. "Hell upon hell!" he shouted at the ocean before rising up and kicking sand on the fire.

George slipped past the scene, hopped onto The Open Jaw, and set the boat free. The Promises man stepped into the reeds and with a cough and a series of mumbles disappeared. Christopher stood there, sweat running down his temples, until George gave a toot with an air horn.

Christopher hurried along the beach and down the dock's dry brown planks.

"She was pretty, wasn't she!" George called out. He extended a hand, but the gap between the man and the boy was too great. The boy quickened his pace, his face-fat jostling against his bones. "I'll cut close at the end. Take a flier there."

At the dock's terminus the boy shaped his hands into wings and hopped into The Open Jaw and fell to his hands and knees.

"Why didn't you wait?"

"I knew you'd make it."

"I don't like jumping."

"You leapt like a fish."

"What if I missed?"

"You miss this one time but never again."

The boy donned his life jacket and sat on the bench. "We need more tea. And crackers."

"Ok," George said.

"But better ones," Christopher said.

"Alright."

In the early afternoon they motored into a small cove the light blue of holy water. Creatures darted beneath them like pets in their own private menagerie. George bade Christopher to man the rudder while he stood shirtless and shoeless on the bow, the sun behind him in such a way that he appeared to be in flames. "Cut toward the dock," he said.

Christopher blinked away some salt. When he looked up again, George was jogging along the dock.

"Spin her around and run past again!" he shouted.

"What? I don't know how."

"You can do it."

Christopher pulled the rudder toward his heart and carved the boat in a wide arc as George hopped from boat to boat until suddenly vanishing from view. Christopher worried that George might not get back on. The Open Jaw was probably stolen. The gas would run out and the boy would drift without tea and crackers or rock candy. Sea-things would rise up and attack. His parents would wonder. His sister would claim his pillows and new pencils for the upcoming school year and—

George hopped back into the boat, panting, and turned off the engine. "Remember what I said." He winked and set down a large, red, cloth bag.

"What is it?"

"Treasure. Of sorts."

"I don't believe you."

"Well, I don't know that I can trust you."

Christopher pull the rudder hard, sending George hopscotching across the desk, his arms swimming. The look on the boy's face was downright thespian, the anger-furrows as deep as the crevices in the seafloor. The wind played out that same rhythm with the halyard: *slap slap, slap slap slap*.

"Ok, ok." George opened the bag and extended a hand with a palm as rough as an old boxing mitt and a thumb much shorter than it should have been, showing Christopher:

"A stinky old quahog shell?"

George wiped it clean. "Look at that wampum. So purple!"

The boy adjusted the rudder. "Boring."

"And some other things."

"Show me."

George dumped the contents onto the deck. "You can pick something."

"Wow."

From a pile containing:

a golf club head

a hunk of rust in the shape of a pistol

a non-working watch head

some old nickels

an axe head

and many other indiscernible objects

the boy selected a gigantic knife with a strangely shaped blade.

"A machete?" George asked. "It's not very old. And it smells funny."

The boy put his nose to the metal. It indeed smelled of old seaweed and fish. "Yeah. Definitely the machete."

George sighed. "Ok. I guess."

"Now let's get drinks."

"Oh, you're the captain now?"

"Aye. Distribute the booty."

George laughed. "Do you know what that means?"

The boy shrugged. He'd heard the older kids at the moped rental shop saying something like it.

An hour later they pulled alongside an oily concrete pier. The sun was effulgent and the water smelled like ancient mud. The two sailors tethered the boat like old tars who'd traveled the world together and climbed up.

Their shoes made squishing sounds until all the seawater was expunged. They were only couple miles from home, yet it felt to Christopher as if they were on the opposite of a magnet. He also felt that people were looking at him differently, knowing that he'd sailed all this way through waves taller than him with a scarred-up ex-Marine. But they weren't looking at him, he realized. They were looking at George's skirt, the folds twisting in the wind, *flap flap, flap flap flap*.

"I don't think they want that machete in the store."

"I'll stand guard."

"Good idea."

Passersby, upon noticing the little sentinel there with his miniature sword and hard-boiled gaze, stepped back or gasped. Christopher smiled inwardly, wishing Couri Davis would stroll by and see him with the machete resting against his shoulder.

He lowered the blade. Perhaps she'd think him mad. He wished he'd chosen an old coin instead.

Back on the boat the day grew hot. The yells of swimmers and sunbathers carried across the water to The Open Jaw, where the sailors sat drinking from glistening bottles of dark fruity tea. George picked up the machete and studied the blade. "Needs honing." He held it firm and mimed a few half-hearted strikes to an invisible foe. "You ever kill anything?"

The boy shrugged. "A crow. I cried afterwards and ran home to tell my father."

"What'd he do?"

"He said that if killing things made me so upset, I shouldn't kill them."

"I guess he's right."

"But there's this kid in my class who I would like to take care of. Aaron Fountain. He says I'm a fat-ass."

A motor boat passed closely, its wake rushing up against The Open Jaw, *slap slap, slap slap slap*.

"I was chubby at your age too."

“You were?”

George nodded.

“Am I chubby?”

George shrug-nodded in an attempt to soften the truth. “But don’t worry about it. Chubby people know what it means to strain against the world. Like these ropes.” George plucked one like a fat guitar string. “All that tension carries you places.”

The boy closed his eyes and wrote himself into a song.

The breeze picked up again. They sailed.

The water’s hue deepened the further they went from shore. The boy felt his mood darkening along with the water. If he focused on something pleasant, like television or snacks, he could extinguish the darkness. But sometimes he didn’t want to. He wanted to let it wash over his skin like cold soap or fresh snow.

He wondered what it would be like to sail in the winter. Would his fingers freeze. Would the waves turn to ice and pierce the hull. Would George wear a skirt. Would the dancer be there. Would they fend off sea-things and greasy old pirates in rotting fishing boats. Would they lose limbs and drink saltwater. Would there be tea. Would they die. Would they die.

The sun, keeping its promise, headed for tomorrow. George said they would be arriving soon, and they did. He lashed the boat to a little dock nestled into the far side of the lagoon. Stowing the sails and tidying up took an hour. It was boring and hard work and the boy only wanted to lay down on the grass and slice apart the chewy-looking clouds overhead.

“Ever hitchhike?” George said. Behind him the sun was blistering on the horizon.

Christopher shook his head. “It’s dangerous.”

“Like sailing, right?”

The boy shrugged.

“You have a machete now. Anyone messes with us and *ghhhh*, off with their head.”

Christopher liked that. The neighbors took one last look at The Open Jaw, which to the boy looked tiny and unpromising now, then strode to the edge of the road. No cars came. They started walking. Christopher’s knees hurt and his skin was pulsing with a light burn,

but along the edge of the road were many cattails to behead and bits of flotsam to stab.

“Are any of those Aaron Fountain?” George asked.

The boy pulled a soda bottle off the machete and tossed it back into the weeds. “I’d only do it in the winter. All that blood spilling out across the ice like fire.”

“That’s very poetic.”

“I’ll probably be a writer someday. Hey, did you kill anyone when you were in the Marines?”

“I never fought in a war.”

“That’s not an answer.”

George raised his stubby thumb at the sound of an approaching car—a roofless jeep with one dim headlight. It screeched to a halt on the sandy pavement. The driver’s curly gray spilled out of a baseball cap and he wore droopy yellow sunglasses. “Evening.”

“Just heading back to Meadow Ave,” George said.

“Hop in.”

They did.

“Woah. Look at that chopper.”

“It’s a machete,” Christopher told their host as he pulled himself into the back seat.

“I can see that. Been hiking in the jungle?”

“We sailed all the way from East Point.”

The man put the jeep into gear and they bounced forward. “Sounds like a fun day.”

They rolled along for a while, only the wind talking in their hair, until the driver said, “You guys related?”

“Just met,” George said.

The man looked at George over the top of his glasses.

“We’re neighbors,” George explained. “I moved out from California a few months ago.”

“Whereabouts?”

“San Diego.”

“No shit. I grew up in Oceanside.”

“Nice. You surf?”

“Here? Only after Labor Day. It’s not worth the wax before then.”

“But in the fall—”

The man laughed. “Hurricane season. It’s fucking insane, but it’s exhilarating. Pardon my French.”

The men continued their banter. Christopher became annoyed. He wanted to relive the day at sea. Off to the east, gulls smashed themselves into the water’s surface. Someone else was still sailing, the orb atop their mainmast blinking red against the horizon.

“The ocean is like a grave where many things live,” Christopher said as the jeep wend around a corner.

The men turned in their seats to look at the boy sitting there with glowing eyes and a machete in his lap. “I suppose that’s one way of looking at it,” the driver said.

“Christopher has grown more philosophical as the day has progressed.” George said, then winked at the boy. “Hasn’t he.”

Christopher closed his eyes. He decided he needed to be more like the sea: to flow and sway no matter what was upon or inside him.

He climbed the porch steps in the dark. His skin was pink and his eyes red and his mouth salty. “Welcome home,” his sister said with a sneer as he entered the kitchen.

He set his machete on the counter.

“What. The hell. Is that.”

“George gave it to me.”

“Who is George?”

“The neighbor who wears skirts. We went sailing and hitchhiking and I saw a naked woman.”

“Mommmm! Daaaad!”

His parents appeared.

“Where have you been?” his father asked. “It’s past eight o’clock.”

His mother pulled off Christopher’s hood and brushed the hair from his eyes. “Look at you. Have you been at the pond all this time?”

Christopher shook his head and kicked off his shoes and filled the kettle with water.

“He’s been out with the guy in the skirt,” his sister said.

“George? The new neighbor? Who said you could do that?”

“There was no one around to stop me.”

“That’s no excuse.”

“We all need something to strain against.”

His sister said, “What’s he talking about?”

“Rachel, leave us alone.”

Christopher’s mother placed a hand on his forehead. Her son seemed to have ripened while she was gone. “Are you feeling ok?”

“Just hungry.”

His father asked, “Have you eaten today?”

“The belly dancer made me a nice lunch.”

“If something had happened to you, we wouldn’t even know where to begin.” She picked seaweed out of his hair, then noticed the huge chopping tool. “What’s this?”

“A machete. In the morning I’ll take it down to the pond and clear some paths and create a nicer vista.”

Their eyes were cold on his red brow. “What’s the rush?”

“Summer’s almost over.”

Christopher went to the cabinet and removed three mugs and three tea bags. When the water was hot he doled it out, then took his mug out to the porch. He stood in the dark, listening to the sound of drums drifting through the night. He took a deep sip, then set mug down and put his hands together.

Clap clap, clap clap clap.

Out of the Cradle

for Rhoda Coghill

Note by note, separate sounds
ease their way to song, B minor,
with the chiffchaff at the window
in harmony. Sing some more,
sweet bird, and let the robin,
thrush, blackbird join the chorus.

Compose spring's orchestra—
sway of grass, scent of fading
primrose, grazing sheep and cattle.
And years from now, that melody
travels still, each time wind twists
its path through sycamores.

* Rhoda Coghill (1903-2000; Ireland): composer, poet (*The Bright Hillside* and *Time is a Squirrel*), and translator (*Angel Songs/Engellieder*. translated from the German of Rainer Maria Rilke)

* title borrowed from *Out of the Cradle, Endlessly Rocking*, rhapsody for tenor solo, chorus and orchestra, inspired by poetry by Walt Whitman

Lisa Stice

5.19.19

6.28 a.m.

51 degrees

Performance of the wood-thrush, chimes and chimes and chimes,
and
overhead a pair of chipping sparrows weave themselves together in
an aerial
nuptial, all tied up together and rising, as the silent explosions on the
pond
denote the labor of tadpoles crafting their lungs one breath at a time.

Christmas with the Devil

I've been a bit of a
professional, though my
pockets still hang out
empty, even after waiting
between the whirring of the
locomotive, serpent bending
into every nook and cranny
and the broken
symphony of children wailing
down the street, calling out
for Mommy. It was rather
Celebratory, I felt it
through my
frostbite skin crawling
as I passed each string of
colours dotting the
sidewalk's perimeter, and
waited outside your
doorstep at dinner, to
exchange my calloused feet
for a new pair of wings.

Reflection of My Inner Self

I looked at my yoga mat,
the one I worshipped for the past ten years
and could see a reflection of my inner self.
I saw much struggle and anxiety,
the daily imbalance and insecurity.
I felt the neurotic energy of my collective consciousness
on the molded rubber plant atop a hardwood floor,
and realized how much I strive to live forever.
If only I could let go of mortality.
If only I could enjoy life's
sweet catastrophe.

Miles from Burgos

A glance to my right and I'm stunned
that I've arrived at the exact location
the sun rises in August
perfectly aligned to catch the wide patient gaze
of six thousand silent sunflowers
like a room of small children
with blank curious stares

I offer a small wave
under the pressure of my attentive audience

For the very first time
I have stage fright

Anniversary

Dear Allie,

Your mother called last week, and after convincing me that she was well, I felt the familiar mix of joy and grief which comes when we talk. We often just send cards these days, simple, unchanging messages reaching out across the miles, “thinking of you on this day.” I had sent mine early this year, and when your mom’s note failed to appear through my letter slot in return, I worried that the milestone had crept up and overwhelmed her.

It wasn’t a habit of mine to tally up the years, either, but the local news had run a special feature for the 30th anniversary. An old elementary school photo of you, one I’ve seen many times, caught my attention from the corner of the screen. The matching plaid polyester outfit you wear dates the photo, and makes you seem younger even then you were. The clip airs little new information, mostly a rehash of facts about the people involved, the leads followed by our small-town sheriff’s office.

All of us neighborhood kids had been reminded back then to be careful. Long Islanders still felt the shadow of the Son of Sam. In my recurring nightmares, a man would appear suddenly, rising from an elevator car as I wandered in the dark woods, clutching at me, dragging me down below ground. Yet, walking through our middle-class suburban neighborhood by the light of day, we didn’t really believe anything harmful could come to us.

We spent almost every day together that last summer, you and me. The trail that we took across our yards trampled my father’s perfectly manicured grass, leaving a path so worn that the dirt appeared to glow at night, lighting my way to your house. Years later, after your family moved away, newly planted grass seeds struggled to take hold, leaving a ghost image of our old route.

It had been an unusually warm August. We alternated morning bike rides with afternoons inside your house, teaching ourselves poker, poring over jigsaw puzzles, or sprawled on your bed, talking about the future. In your loftiest dreams, you bloomed into a full-time artist, supported by a benevolent, wealthy, patron. Children were always in your long sights, more so even than a husband, and I, undecided about motherhood, admired your clarity on the subject.

My memories of that day have blurred with everyone's retelling, as we sat together afterward calling up the details with a solemn and sympathetic police officer. Now, when the episode unreels in my mind it plays in its entirety, rather than the disconnected sights and sounds I must have actually witnessed. My mother and I had been arguing earlier in the morning. She'd insisted I stay home from school one more day, unwilling to risk another asthma attack. Feeling left out, I came to the window as kids begin to gather at the bus stop and checked to see if you had arrived. You were always the last one, running around the corner out of breath, the bus driver slowly moving through the cul-de-sac, patiently waiting if you were late.

It is a single detail from the news, the sound of a backfiring muffler, which alerts your father as he changes for work in the front bedroom. He calls out to your mother, who almost instinctively perceives the danger, and hustles out of the house, calling your name. The scene in my mind shifts to my mother, who is checking on my brother when she sees you walking alongside a strange car, talking to the driver. A woman is in the passenger seat. When the car door slips open, my mother bursts out of our house, screaming, and the other kids finally look up from their conversations to see what the fuss is about. It is too late, though, and you are gone in a screech of tires.

Over the years, our little support network has dwindled, with your sisters needing to move on with their lives, your father and my parents passing. It is your mother and I who retain our need to mark the day. In our conversations, I keep from her my feelings of guilt and shame. I can't remember when your birthday is anymore. My phone, which sends me anniversary reminders for friends and colleagues, is unable to reach back and retrieve yours.

Worse yet, it is difficult to admit a part of me relishes a friendship forever unsullied by the messiness of adulthood. If I hadn't lost you that morning, would we have navigated our early friendship through high school and college, through dating and family life, or would we have drifted slowly away from each other? The brutal cut-off of our friendship has for me distilled the best of my memories, capturing you in time, a treasure trapped and preserved in amber.

Your mother doesn't speak of guilt, either, but instead shares small memories, and asks after my girls, who have just begun their lives at college, and who know you only from stories and photographs. A favorite, kept on my dresser, shows us on an unremarkable day, standing in your driveway, arm in arm. You are wearing a hand-painted 'Imagine' sweatshirt, and our smiles project both shy reserve and the confidence of youth with limitless possibilities.

Always,
Your Viveca

Mary Sophie Filicetti

Brain Waves

Interspersed with beautiful clear waves, there are
black holes in the pattern of thought,
like cigarette burns in the folds of the party dress;
a brain can shrink
within the hard shell of the calvarium,
and alcohol helps pickle it.
None of us wants to admit that we just drove
the figurative car off the imagined cliff,
not to mention ran up the credit card debt,
or bought some expensive purple shoes
with the toes too tight—what was I thinking?
The Cat in the Hat
has lost a leg, and the hands are drooping.
The sun is shining on the sea
but I have less energy to walk along the shore.
My boat is drifting outward, onto the silvery shimmer.

You Three and Saraswati

In a boat you were halcyon,
blue, like the traveling light
behind eyelids. A man
named_____, hunted
flowers for you,
and while he,
ring-fingered, unfolded,
you fell, ever
so slightly,
in love.

Peacocks in the Afternoon

Madrid, Parque del Buen Retiro: 2012

We stroll checkerboard walkways
lined by alabaster columns,
delighting in the scent
of freshly sheared cypress.

Peacocks preen in the plaza
before the green pavilion,
their raspy shrieks dominating
the late afternoon conversation.

Strutting and fanning their tails.
Iridescent blue necks proudly high.
Tails a chiffonade of pale green.
A hundred eyes of lapis lazuli.

They are brighter than all flowers.
This will always remain of our day.

Tell me

the story of the night
i crawled to you on all fours
burrowed into your arms
asked why the air felt thick
asked why your skin smelled
like sugar water and copper
asked why daddy wasn't there
to check on me too

how my questions
made you so angry you put me
to bed on a pile of coats all night
i listened alone to voices below me
music coming through the floor
vibrating with the rumble
of mother-hunger
in a tiny girl

how i already knew better
than to go looking for you.

81620

I find you in all the spaces between rocks and grass
I feel your sunlight easing snow
your sunlight on my wet right sock
from stepping in a creek at tree line
your sunlight on my black SUV
and on the bottom of the rec center pool
as I count 8, 12, 66

Not daring count the ways I know you
near the desert
near a train
and in White River
where moonlight melted bark
where pines halo
in a crown too bright and too heavy
for a young prince

Dreaming



Fabrice B. Poussin

A Moment of Silence

She slipped out in the night like a folded white envelope passing through the mail slot. She slipped out, a cooling shade fleeing the ascendant sun, a devouring black hole self-engorged: Million lifetimes of stars silenced upon you. Never sending a message; the universe is not the post. She took the lace tablecloths, the costume jewelry, left you the weeds assassinating the roses, the ants obliterating the honey, your dad's sobs and just-before-moldy sandwiches. What if she had brought you out to the tree swing where you took your last family picture? What if she had told you, *without words we have no regrets* under that spinning, silent sky?

Vigor of Thought

for Margaret Fuller

transcend your place and time
free from the vice of sweetness

direct sincerity, such a new taste
an unexpected dessert of words

*inward and outward freedom
not yielded as a concession*

a right to write and speak
vigorous thoughts, to gather

converse, learn, work, teach
exist self-reliant, self-respected

* Margaret Fuller (1810-1850; United States): journalist (*The Dial*, *Daily Tribune*, and *New York Tribune*), critic, abolitionist, and women's rights advocate (*Woman in the Nineteenth Century*, first major feminist work in the United States); first full-time American female book reviewer in journalism

* Title borrowed from Fuller's obituary in *The Daily Tribune*: "but as a whole [her works] must commend themselves mainly by their vigor of thought and habitual fearlessness rather than freedom of utterance."

* Italicized words are borrowed from *Woman in the Nineteenth Century* by Margaret Fuller: "Yet, then and only then will mankind be ripe for this, when inward and outward freedom for Woman as much as for Man shall be acknowledged as a right, not yielded as a concession."

A Morning Perfect for Birds

Where are birds when cold weight bears down
and fills the spaces between spruce needles?
Do they suffer in the thrash and whip
while flakes collect to dunes?
Do they tense and freeze
the way I brace when my neck is bare?
I can remember warmth.

Do they wish for fresh sun?
Or do they persist
while the clumps and slabs dampen the roar
until clouds float on and collapse to rivers?
The world waits with wide beaks
until wings and feathers ease
into a crisp and easy sunlight
on a morning perfect for birds

A Visitor at Dawn

Over city-streets
and landscapes, that dance
between predator and prey,

the communion
of talon and muscle,
a liturgy of survival.

Whisper-soft, broad backed,
eyes full of reckoning and hunger,
she surveys her kingdom.

Finding A New Home

Flee to Egypt, and remain there until I tell you; for Herod is about to search for the child, to destroy him. —Matthew 2:13

Egypt lies before me, unfolded,
on the floor. An aviation map:
Egypt and the Sinai from 1941.
Brought by an uncle for no reason
other than the chance to drink
with my father, as if thirst
were not sufficient in itself.

Back then, I was still learning to gauge
my father's moods and temper.
Weighing smiles against a cocked
eyebrow or hard stare, a relaxed
cigarette against clouds of smoke
and the clink of ice in a glass.

The men were drinking highballs—a big slug
of bourbon over ice in a tall glass,
topped with ginger ale. Mom joined
them after a while, drinking a lighter
version of the same. Dad jokingly fixed
me a highball too, a glass
of ginger ale and a maraschino cherry.

Better to get them started at home,
said my uncle. *Right, Dwight?*
Dad grinned. Mom shook her head
slowly, sitting tight-lipped. Silent.

An hour passed as they drank,
while I stared at strange names,
crossed lines, and blank spaces
on the map. I wondered what
I would hear in the desert—
silence or the sigh of blowing sands?
This as the voices in the kitchen grew louder,
jittery, a pressure cooker about to blow.

The men were starting to argue.
I heard Mom ask Dad in a halting
whisper, not meant for me to hear,
Don't you think you've had enough?
Then I heard it. Dad slapped her.
Like I had seen him do before.
Followed by Mom's muffled sob
and a glass shattering on the floor.

I turned back to the map; carefully
plotted my course halfway around
the world. Took compass, penknife,
a flask of water. Walked away
quietly, dreaming myself into Egypt.
Daring myself to be seen no more.

Pumpkin Seeds, My Mother, and Other Dangers

Silver crutches

They appear on the bus before the shiny black army boots. A loud, chatty voice follows. It's the voice of someone seeking an audience, fellowship, loneliness, in its rising eagerness, its overdone familiarity. I've heard that crescendo before. Perhaps in my own voice.

The man slowly emerges. He leans heavily on his crutches. It's obvious there's something wrong with his legs. Too much work, he says, as he places a token in the ticket-box. It's getting difficult to get around. The man-with-the-silver crutches looks to be around forty. He's neatly dressed in army-fatigue pants, a black leather jacket, cropped black hair, a faded green army knapsack on his back. There's something clownish, disoriented, in his movements, a touch of anger, a smothered violence, perhaps, behind the well articulated words.

My knees quiver, while the rest of my body stiffens slightly. An old reaction.

Am I imagining things?

Rush hour, the Bloor 49 bus going from the Kipling-subway station to the border of Etobicoke and Mississauga, is full. There's only one free space on one of the frontal, horizontal seats, next to a young man in slim black jeans, black shirt, the new faded hair cut. He's holding a Smartphone. As the man-with-the-silver-crutches sits down, the young-man-in-slim-jeans gets up and walks swiftly to the back of the bus, like a cat sensing danger.

Hey, the man-with-the-silver-crutches hollers. Come back here. He lifts one crutch and points it at the back of the young-man-in-slim-jeans. An angry parent chastising a disobedient child. You... You, I'm talking to you. There's plenty of room on this seat for both us. The young-man-in-slim-jeans continues to face the back of the bus, Smartphone in hand, as though he hasn't heard a word.

Voices on the Bloor 49 never rise above whispers. We're polite in this part of town of weed-free lawns and double garages.

A whirlwind of tension seems to kidnap the air in the bus. Weekly murders and stabbings amongst Toronto's gangs this summer have swelled our discomfort, our fears.

The tremor is spreading from my knees to the rest of my body. I cross my legs, hoping to curtail the shaking.

Is it only me? I look around. Passengers stare at their cell-phones or the floor. I gaze out the window at the descending darkness.

Measles

The red blotches followed the high fever, the chills, the cotton-candy floppiness of my limbs.

The timing was wrong.

The yearly religious festival in Atalaia was taking place on Sunday. Today was Thursday. Washing our faces in the holy fountain before sunrise to protect us against evil, the procession down the cathedral's grand marble staircase, Santa Atalaia decked with zinnias and asters and carnations and red, green and yellow ribbons (the colours of our flag), were events everyone waited for all year. After the washing and the procession, there was the picnic under the eucalyptus and pine trees and, later, fireworks, dazzling our expectations. My mother had been preparing for a month. She'd made plans. New red beads on a white blouse and matching red lipstick for her, to enhance her sallow complexion and her almond-shaped brown eyes. A new white and red polkadot dress with dirndl skirt and scooped neck, for me, making me look older than thirteen. Manuel, the boy my mother had lately designated as my boyfriend—she forbidding me to flirt or dance with any other boy—was to meet us there. Secretly, of course. It had to be. Since my father left for Canada a year ago, my grandfather, my mother's father next door, a man who saw dancing as a trick of the Devil to lead us astray, disapproved of my mother's comportment. That's what he'd said, I don't approve of your comportment. She'd started inviting Manuel to our house after dinner every night to play cards. Last week, my grandfather called her a whore.

Manuel was only sixteen. One day she said, He's the funniest, most affectionate man I've ever met. He'll make a perfect husband for you. My mother was good at making plans. Wavering from them was never her way.

Pumpkin seeds

The man-with-the-silver-crutches places his knapsack on his lap, leans the crutches against the steel panel behind the bus-driver's seat. Then, he takes out a small brown paper bag from his knapsack, just as the driver manoeuvres the bus out of Kipling station. Two girls, long hair, mini- checkered pleated skirts, likely Catholic-school uniforms, sit across from him. They whisper.

The bus jolts. The pumpkin-seeds spill out of the brown paper bag, spreading all over the floor and seat. The girls giggle.

Fuck, fuck, fuck, the man-with-the-silver-crutches hollers. Fuck everybody, fuck Iraq, fuck my wife, that rotten bitch.

The girls stop giggling. No one looks at one another. My knees are trembling so badly I fear the woman sitting next to me notices. The bus-driver says nothing. Why doesn't he say something? The man-with-the-silver-crutches might have a gun? A knife? A bomb? I think of my sons, my husband —my tiny family, my mother having nothing to do with me since I walked out on Manuel years ago.

The man-with-the-silver-crutches uses one crutch as a broom, holding it with one hand, trying to gather the pumpkin seeds into a pile. The bus sways; the seeds keep rolling. More fall off the seat. He can't control the crutch, hitting the legs of one of the girls sitting across.

Sorry, sorry, sorry, he says. I'm trying to clean up the fucking bus. Your fucking bus. He hits the back of the driver's seat with his crutch, letting the driver know he's talking to him. No, he hollers, this is not my bus. Nothing is mine anymore; the bitch took it all. All. Even Freddie.

The bus-driver remains silent.

The bus-bell rings. *Dundas Street*, the female recorded voice announces. The young-man-in-slim-jeans stands on the back step ready to get off. Dundas Street is the first stop. The man-with-the-

crutches hurries to place the knapsack on his back, using his crutches to stand up. I'm off too, he says to the bus-driver. Sorry for the mess, man.

Hey, hey you... The man-with-the-silver-crutches yells, as he steps off the bus and hops along the deserted and dark sidewalk with his crutches behind the young-man-in-slim-jeans.

The bus doors close.

The bus accelerates; my body un-tightens.

I'm sure I hear a collective exhale, like the breathing of some large animal in the forest.

I stare at the seeds. They loom large and white against the black vinyl seat and grey floor.

The waiting dress

The white-and-red-polkadot dress with dirndl skirt and scooped neck waited on a chair by my bed. You... You'll see, my mother said after my refusal to get out of bed, claiming I was still too sick to go anywhere.

She touched my forehead, hand clammy, heavy, swift. Your fever is gone and so are most of the blotches. You're doing this on purpose, aren't you? Spoiling my day. You'll see...

The front door shut with a bang. Atalaia was waiting and somewhere in it was Manuel. She hadn't told me where they'd arranged to meet. He made her laugh, she claimed, churning her into the young girl she'd once been. The fourteen year old girl with intense brown eyes and long, wavy hair in the small photo on her night table. Yes, yes, he *churned* her, like cream turning into butter, soft and smooth and moist, melting the perma-frown she'd always worn before he came along. He reimagined the world for her, she'd once said. I worried as to where I fitted in that new, reimagined world of hers.

The dress seemed to stare at me. It'd grown, now filling the room, the house, my tomorrows, the red polkadots, brighter, larger, blinding. You, you... the dress seemed to call out, You bad girl... You ungrateful daughter. You'll see...

Was my mother right? I lifted my hand to my forehead. It was cool.

She returned the following day, the August sun already high and scorching. Snuck in through the back door, avoiding my grandfather. White skirt soiled and creased, long hair tangled.

Did I imagine this? The red lipstick made her mouth loom large and fiery.

This is Where

In sheets, I catch it. After
returning light expands
the ribs of morning,
before winds sound passage, there
is a something, nothing—a space
between the day's in-breath
and out, where
the sun, slyly, inches
away, where the leaves loosen
their grip. This is
where I wait.

Prop

You treat me like a prop, an empty
mug never intended to be filled—
the grip of handle in your hand,
the weightlessness as you lift
to lips and pretend to sip
a sea of words and phrases,
candy hearts and greeting cards
of fake, floppy arms, limply
reaching toward me.

Mission Statement

I feel a deep and imminent need
to show you the city is a forest
Please understand the pressing urgency
with which I firmly and slowly
fold warm clay into your heart
Have courage, and know
that I do not love you
but I love all the ways I know we could be
I am painting your eyes with feathers and feet
I am feeding you colors that do not exist
I am drawing six jointed legs from the back of your throat
I am hearing your voice so loud and so scared
until water drips quietly onto a leaf
You wake up in the middle of the night
and wonder where you've been the whole time without it

The Rule of Wealth

The Founding Fathers
never believed
that all men are created...
equal,
or they would have made sure
there was a way
to protect the rights of everyone,
not just the few,
reminding us democracy is absent
when we are ruled
by the one percent.

Still Life at the Beach

The world became flat and dead, a still photograph
of awfulness that could not be erased.

They could not put her body back in the water
and have her emerge, minutes later
smiling and happy and perfectly alive.

Nobody could erase or rewind
the last few minutes. She would not

ever move again, there would be no
CPR miracle, no random prayer
settling in just the right place
to bring her back to life. I watched
from the beach, afraid to join the crowd gathered
around the dead little girl, my sandwich half-eaten
on the towel beside me. There was nothing I could do.

6.1.19

6.53 a.m.

53 degrees

Preceptor of stillness—the water snake—coils his fatness
overtly and eyes my own stasis with suspicion. The hydrilla,
nevi on the pond's surface, ambles toward a place
defunct of oxygen, wild, uncontrollable and deadly.



Still

for NS

The stage set is the same, the tree that still
says *Africa*, pale blue and strange white forms
that float across and break apart in storms
slow motion, silent, in the gypsy will
of sky. The dead see through our eyes, as close
to us as skin, their voices echoing
like smoke. This is not anything we chose.
We are the earth they're buried in. They cling
to us, as patient as a field of stones.
I hear my mother's voice, my father's too,
but Billy's pale, while Stan's the man I'd known.
He smiles and shrugs. His death is still brand new.
The sky is still the same though all has changed—
new shapes are born, destroyed, then rearranged.

Harmony



Fabrice B. Poussin

Tell the Story

First grade. He didn't look famous,
dressed in khakis like any other male
teacher, but I remember the shiny
chestnut fall of his hair as he bent
down to us, a forest of six-year old
lumps, telling us he defined writing
and living as the same: passion

Later that year, I wrote a picture book
on multicolored construction paper
bound with haphazard staples.
I proclaimed, "This is a children's book,"
eyeing my target audience, my
classmates. (I could read chapter books.)
Each image-phrase, I raised
the stakes for my protagonists:
confused plants out of season.

Like primitive nature myths, I used
elementary technology, stories,
to explain witnessed phenomena.
To me, even at six, bushes
flowering in a New England
autumn seemed futile, hopeful,
poetic.

unconvincing entertainment

there you are, isolated, restful against the doorframe you watch me
throw colours onto canvas, throw together a cocktail of colours

for your eyes to drink merry bartending
i barter with your eyes:

more pink?
more red?
purple?
berry colours

juiced and syruiped, decanted
into the vodka whites of canvas seams.

and when the colours fail to erase your sobriety,
my legs and voice entwine they foxtrot along

a spiralling path, a perfect ballroom pair,
legs trailing the tulle gown timbre of voice.

but not convinced, your eyebrows furrow,
and i

 dance faster
 sing louder
 smile

maybe you're waiting for the day my legs abandon me
to dance to their own tune my voice shreds away

like it's wood beneath a chainsaw all the colours I know
are in a murky marriage, dolloped onto all my canvases.

that's the day you'll believe me when i say

i am happy.

Highland Square

early decade of adulthood
the waning hours of youth
again at Zubs eating a
gourmet garbage sandwich
after rousing our wildness
at The Matinee a home
for scavengers raccoons
staring up at night into
the ether of everlasting
noise a comfort stuck
inside our guts like I
know it's 3 AM I don't
want to leave not now
until this moment I
cocooned inside my shy
quills alive in sensitive
jurisdiction I witnessed
within me a shooting
star on the verge of
traversing three
thousand miles of
plain songs to desert
you was not
cake I will stuff
myself sick hunch
over the toilet and
pray tonight tomorrow
I will be home

James Croal Jackson

september thirtieth

every time i see something
that reminds me of your grim smile

my throat closes up and
my stomach burns-
an allergy of the most sinister kind.

but no one told me that
everything - everything-
surrounding you,
and that day
would make me body tense-

a mention of ed sheeran,
names that sound like yours,
the yellow of that peeling bridge,
the rattling sound of balto-slavic languages,

these flashes are hard to remember-

crying in the shower, hoping i could
reclaim my body with tears
because it didn't feel like
mine anymore

my clothes thrown on your bed
your face inches from mine
my pleas and my mind screaming
something isn't right here

and for a few months i smiled
even laughed about it
but when i heard about
how you'd done this to other girls

my face curled into a frown
when i realized it
wasn't my fault
but just your greed

that took my peace
and made me doubt myself, my power,
and i've been trying to reclaim it
ever since.

First Sign

I am letting you turn
my water to wine

to whispers
to wishes
to whistles

to waste
to war
to worry

to widows
to windows
to wind

to wombs
to wounds
to women

poring over pages explaining
how to trim away our own flesh
as though dressing down a deer
no one remembered to thank for its sacrifice

Shut Me Down

random memories scrawl across the knuckles
of a clenched fist pounding its way into my house
drunk. a recitation of past traumas and imagined
slights, the story of my life reduced

to a single scrap of paper.

at twenty, with my newborn son, huddled
in the back of a closet, listening
to the angry breath of the man
on the other side of the door,
panting and wheezing as if removed
from a much-needed incubator, wondering

who is this person I'm leaving
how did we get here?
I could barely tell my mother
anything, I remember saying something
about all the wrong people
who fall into my life.

Chiaroscuro

Roslyn knocked on my door six days ago. If I could open it again and see her standing there, wan and tear-soaked, boho-hipster blouse smelling of armpits and tangled purple hair of scalp stank, I'd send her packing. Ever since Andy did his thing, though, I've grown fond of thinking that deep inside me there's still a nice person. Reconnecting with a long-lost, sad half-sister is the kind of thing a nice woman would want to do, so on Day One, I pulled her into the house, held my breath, and hugged her.

"Where the hell have you been, kid?" I asked.

A year ago, she'd given the finger to college and her mother, my father's second wife, by running off one morning. She'd taken a suitcase that had belonged to our father and stuffed it with all the clothes that Gina, her mother, had ever bought her. Gina had woken us with a call at 7 a.m., spluttering with rage.

"If she contacts you and Andy, you tell her to *get her ass* back here and I won't press charges for theft!"

It was unclear to us whether Gina was referring to the luggage and clothes or some other offense. I didn't really know these people. I'd been twenty and out of the house already when my father remarried. What little I knew of Gina and subsequently of baby Roslyn came to me in phone calls. 'Rosly sleeps through the night now. Rosly likes mashed prunes. Rosly cries at sad commercials on TV. Ros brings home sad stray animals. Ros brings home sad stray people. Ros and Gina fight about Ros's oversensitivity to sad stray people.'

The phone calls passed away with my father.

Maybe she's pregnant and in love, Andy and I had speculated after Gina called. Maybe she's on drugs and/or mentally unstable. Maybe she's very sensible and has her shit together and landed a sweet job in another state. Maybe she's being coerced.

On that first day, I learned all the *maybe's* had been wrong except for 'in love.' Roslyn had been the guy's waitress. He'd told her he had a house in L.A. and that someone as cute as her could find an acting gig out there easy-peasy. That was exactly the word

she said he used—easy-peasy—and I found it informative of my sister's personality that she'd fallen for a man who used corny words like this.

He'd been telling the truth about the house except for the part where his wife and kids lived in it, but the part about the easy-peasy acting had, of course, been complete crap. They'd found a place to live with a bunch of people closer to Ros's age than his in a sort of semi-permanent Air B-n-B. They'd all cooked a lot, done each other's hair, played pranks on each other and uploaded them to the Internet, went birding in Coachella Valley. And then it all blew up in Ros's face.

"He's burnt food," I told Roslyn. "A mullet. A tasteless prank. A blue jay. Those are awful birds, and *he's* awful."

"But he was so nice about it, Freda. He was. He really felt so bad. He was like, 'Baby. I am so. sorry.'" Ros's face pinched into a tight, ugly expression of pain and she began to outright sob.

Finding herself in just this situation, a nice woman would never say, '*Not sorry enough to want to stop sinking it into your easy-peasy housemate, am I right?*' so I didn't say that. Instead, I patted the stinky head that had landed on my shoulder and tried to remember all the platitudes thrown at me by well-wishers in the past five months. This is what I told her:

"You're going to heal from this, but you've got to have faith that you're going to and that you deserve to. No lie: It *is* going to hurt a while, and it will seem like it is *not* going to stop, and you're going to *hate* that nobody knows how this feels for you because pain plays a different note in every single persons' heart. But you have to believe that note is going to fade out. It'll never really go silent, but you just can't sit and listen out for it twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week. Am I right?"

"Yes," she'd said. She squeezed my hand and looked at me like she knew she'd come to the right place. Then her smile faded. "Freda. I'm really sorry about Andy."

"Ah. Well." I patted her head and stood up. I rolled my shoulders. "Thank you. Me too."

I left her alone to ponder this stoicism of mine, this older-sister wisdom, that 'fading-out note' bullshit. Turning the corner, I found myself standing in my living room for the first time in God

knows how long. I froze as if I'd walked into the men's room by accident and seen a little something-something I wasn't supposed to. In this case, the something-something consisted of condolence cards lining the mantle and the entirety of Andy's clothes and shoes, which I'd piled on the hearth on top of huge plastic sacks in the hope that they would come to life, bag themselves, and scuttle over to Goodwill while I was out.

The biggest something-something was a jarring cliff-hanger sensation that permeated not just this space but every room of the house. Houses are like kids, I'd realized after Andy. They couldn't understand death. They couldn't grasp that the other inhabitant they'd sheltered for so long had no need for a roof anymore. This poor house was still talking about him in the present tense. Five months, and those clothes still hadn't bagged themselves.

On Day Two I went into my office, ostensibly to work, but really to call Gina and tell her Ros was back. "She's healthy but heartbroken," I said. Gina and I conversed as stiffly and politely as we ever had: we had nothing in common but a dead man and a runaway girl who had come to me instead of back to her. She did ask me how I was doing after the whole Andy thing ("I'm coping, thank you") and how my work was coming ("I'm easing back into it.")

The first stand-up routine I did after Andy was last week. It was half-hearted, much like the audience's laughs. I shouldn't have been there, prancing around onstage making jokes about someone-like-my-dead-mother's frosty reception to someone-like-my-dead-husband, both of whom I was pretending weren't dead. It was the first time my routine felt 'insincere' and not just 'creative.' Who were these people in the jokes? Some comics draw from their real lives. Me, I'd never been comfortable with that.

Someone in the front row must have gotten up to pee while I'd been impersonating my mom washing dishes because there was suddenly this empty seat right in front of me, a key structural piece gone in the architecture of *as-it-should-be*, an absence as foreboding and apocalyptic as a missing eyetooth in Kylie Jenner's mouth.

I'd stopped mid-sentence and stared out at the audience. Heads turned to whisper to the heads next to them. I distinctly remember someone coughing and the whirr of an overhead light seeming way too loud. *Fix that light*, I remember thinking. *It's gone haywire.*

On Day Three, I'd been sitting in my kitchen since dawn with a pen in my hand, trying to push past the inconvenient truth that nothing made me laugh anymore. I had just written a sentence that seemed like it might be trying to smuggle something funny into my life when Roslyn came in and sat down next to me.

"Do you paint?" she asked.

"I do not, in fact, paint." I wondered why I'd answered like that— 'Do not, in fact—' when it would have been more natural to say 'no,' and 'why?' Maybe I wanted her to wonder about it, too, and to forget why she'd brought it up.

Roslyn's face froze in a half smile. Her gaze moved to a corner of the ceiling like she'd just been asked an almost-answerable trivia question.

"Okay," she said to the ceiling. "So are you seeing a guy?"

"Whoa." I dropped my pen, made an X with my forearms. "Personal questions to be reserved for post-coffee mental states."

Roslyn twisted in her chair like someone either very apologetic or very itchy. "...It's just I noticed there are men's shoes by the front door? With socks inside? And a razor on the bathroom counter? And an easel and paint on the back porch? Like, if you're seeing somebody, he can come over, you know. Don't let me mess up your groove."

In Roslyn's penitent contorting, her foot brushed against something under the table. She bent down, gasped and came back up with a decayed lily.

"Holy cow, Freda, did you know there's a bunch of dead flowers down here?"

I did know. I'd stuck them all under there in the hopes that I'd forget about them and could someday throw them out without knowing where they'd come from.

"Oh, those," I said, and looked back down at my paper. "They're from Andy's funeral. The shoes and the razor and the easel are his, too, by the way."

A well-played response with impeccable timing. Roslyn's look of horror was the first thing that made me really smile in a long time.

On Day Four, she appeared next to me in my office. I'd been sitting for two hours and had written one paragraph. That sentence I'd thought to be smuggling funny? It turned out to be innocent. I'd had to let it free.

"Did Andy paint this?" Roslyn asked, holding up a painting I hadn't seen in five months.

"No," I lied. "Someone left it here." But I grabbed it from her and pushed past her into my bedroom. I leaned the painting face-down against the wall and collapsed onto the bed.

Before I knew it, Roslyn was there again.

"I'm going to take a nap," I mumbled.

"Freda, I just want to say that I'm really, really sorry I didn't come to his funeral."

I rolled over on my side and found her standing in the doorway, head bowed, hands clasped. "Has that really been on your mind?" I asked. "Don't give it a second thought. You were gone. It wasn't expected." It was amazing, I thought, this ability of the young to believe themselves relevant to all their acquaintances in all situations.

She mumbled something that sounded like 'could've sent flowers.'

"They'd just be dead and under the table if you had," I said. "Thank you for not. Seriously."

"What happened to Andy?" she asked, and then rushed to say, "I know it was a car accident, but that's all I ever knew. Did somebody hit him?"

"Nope. He was just driving on this empty road one night, and he slammed into a tree outside a sharp turn going fifty. No alcohol in his system. Maybe he was messing with the radio.

Maybe he fell asleep. I don't know. I wasn't there, obviously. Nobody was. I don't even know why he was out there on that road."

As a joke, Andy once painted this portrait of an alien. Big green alien head, bulging black eyes, slit mouth, neck like the stem of a wine glass wrapped in moss. But it was good. It looked like it could have been done by Rembrandt, if Rembrandt had smoked something funny. Andy had made it look like the alien was sitting in an interrogation room under a light bulb. The background was all dark. Half its face was in shadow, the other half in light. This half was so detailed that I could see sweat beading up in its pores.

"Chiaroscuro," Andy had said in the crisp, spare way that intimidated his art students. "Contrasting light and shadow. Technique made famous by Da Vinci."

Every time I'd looked at the painting, I thought 'Chiaroscuro, technique made famous by Da Vinci,' and I laughed so hard that I cried. Andy had treated something so ridiculous with such gravity and respect. It was the best humor I'd ever seen.

After Roslyn left my bedroom, I got up and went over to where I'd left the alien lying against the wall. I turned it around and squatted down in front of it. *Chiaroscuro*, I thought, along with the rest of the magic words. But funny had left the building.

All those times I'd laughed at the alien's face, I'd never realized that Andy had painted tears in its eyes. I'd never seen that its mouth slit was held at an offended angle, like it was thinking, *You people. How can you laugh when there is such pain in store for every member of your species?*

On Day Five, I was exactly like that alien as Ros and I stood on the second-floor landing outside this Nila-person's door. The laughter coming from behind the slab of wood felt offensive, ill-advised, fey. The light in front of the adjacent apartment was burned out, and my half-sister and I were a scene in chiaroscuro (technique made famous by Da Vinci) as she rang the bell. She was partly in

shadow. I was all in the light. I could hear it buzzing. *Somebody fix that light. It's gone haywire.*

We were soon pushing aside bead curtains and breathing air thick with Greek food and incense. A giant painting of an eye hung above the couch. Twittering, fretful music played from speakers I couldn't find among stone elephants, gargoyles, pillows, and lamps scattered over rugs. From his corner, a cardboard Captain Kirk frowned at something in the vicinity of the kitchen-- a hostile cabinet, perhaps.

Roslyn bounded over to Captain Kirk. I was left to face the pale sylph of a woman whose bracelets jangled as she closed the door.

"Hello, hello" she sang. "Welcome."

Nila was a connection from Ros's runaway days, a passerby who'd stayed in the infamous L.A. house. I was just thinking that maybe I could turn the tables, pawn Roslyn off on Nila sometime soon, when Nila tossed her long, ironed hair over one shoulder and grasped my hands. Her black-rimmed eyes closed and her face turned up to the ceiling. She squeezed my hands gently and brought her head down next to mine. "It's going to be okay, honey," she whispered to me. "You've just got to hold on a little bit longer."

I pulled away and grimaced at her with my chin tucked into my neck, what-the-hell style.

Nila came in close one more time, repeating, "It's going to be okay."

"I think you're mistaking me for someone else," I said, and Nila scrunched up her nose, grinned, and shook her head.

"I know things," she explained, and giggled self-consciously. "I don't know how I know the things I know, but I don't question it." She brought her fingers close to her face and did a jazz hands wiggle. "Like, 'okay, universe,'" she said, "I hear you! You can stop yelling at me!"

"That sounds very distracting," I said, "but-- sorry, I'm a little foggy today-- are you saying you're psychic?" It was starting to make sense. *It's going to be okay. Just hold on a little bit longer.* I mean, really. Who over age thirteen wouldn't find that pertinent to themselves? Cute trick.

Roslyn stared at her feet. Nila smiled at me with patient amusement, like I was someone else's four-year-old who just stuck my finger up my butt at a soiree. "I refer to myself as 'sensitive,'" she explained, "vulnerable to specific energies. But yes. In the sense you mean, I am conventionally what people would call..."

"A psychic."

Nila's nose scrunched up again over a tight smile. "I'm not actually fond of that label? You know?" A little colder now.

There was a crestfallen silence, the moment before the four-year-old, who proceeded to dip that special finger in the caviar, got a spanking. I braced myself for the open palm, but it never came. A towering, dreadlocked man wearing suspenders without a shirt appeared and saved us from discomfort with a well-timed round of hugs and an offer of drinks.

Dinner was a trial. The food was good, but I was the alien again as Nila and Roslyn caught up. They had very few shared acquaintances or interests, it transpired, but they were both people-people and got on together like houses afire. Nila's boyfriend, Dave, was left out in the dark like me, but he was a person, and as people-people they were hard-wired by nature to include him.

"Let's play a board game," Nila said after dinner. "We *love* board games. We have forty-one of them."

For some reason, she directed this last statement at me, so I pushed out my lower lip and nodded as if impressed. "One for every year of my life," I remarked pointlessly.

Nila peered into a closet, scanning box after box of what, in fact, did appear to be forty-one board games. I could see Apples to Apples pulling her in like a vortex, and I just couldn't, so I sidled up close behind Nila and said to her very softly, over her shoulder,

"Ouija Board work pretty well for you, considering you're uh....sensitive?"

"It does." She half-turned her face to meet mine. How intimate we must have looked. "But aren't you a skeptic?"

I said the perfect thing. I said: "Honestly, Nila, I don't know what I am anymore."

Nila and Dave shared the board on their knees. Roslyn and I kneeled on the floor near them, quiet and thoughtful per the instructions we received in reverent tones: 'Remain calm. Remain serious. Be respectful. Concentrate.'

After a while, their fingers slid to the word 'HELLO.'

Nila began to breathe quickly. "Who's there?" she asked. "G-U-S."

Ten minutes later, we'd discovered that Gus died in 1951, that he had three sons, and that Nila's mother in Vermont was currently taking a nap. This must have been hard work on all three of their parts, because Gus suddenly said a hearty GOODBYE, and Nila, breathing hard and wiping her face, asked if we would like to try.

I pretended to debate with myself over the question. There was no doubt, though. It was a once in a lifetime opportunity, for God's sake. I side-eyed Roslyn and shrugged. "Want to?"

"Oh, I don't know," Roslyn mumbled.

"I can tell you want to." I grinned at her. "You're wiggling."

We put the board on our knees and spent a good while with nothing happening. Roslyn, Nila and Dave kept their eyes half-closed, breathing deeply. I was waiting for the moment just before the dullness got awkward—the magic moment. I'd memorized where the HELLO was and I now closed my eyes and pushed the planchette toward it with as much subtlety as I could.

I cracked my eyes and frowned at Roslyn. "You doing that?" I mouthed.

She gave me a you're-kidding look. I gave her a no-YOU'RE-kidding look.

"Who's there?" I asked, and I helped the planchette tell us that J-U-N-E was with us and taking questions.

I opened my eyes wide and whispered to Roslyn, "You're doing that." We volleyed soft accusations at each other for a few more seconds while Nila waved her hand for our attention.

"Y'all are gonna scare June away!" Dave whispered, and at last I gave Roslyn the alien look: the tears, slit mouth, exhausted disapproval.

"Screw it," I said. "If there's really someone there..." I swallowed loud. "June," I said, letting my voice tremor on the rising

inflection. I lowered my head and sniffed with abandon. Then I raised my face to the ceiling. "How did my husband Andy die?"

Nothing for a while. Then:

"T-R-E-E."

Roslyn whispered, "Oh...my...God."

"We already *know* that, June," I said. "But what made him... what...how did he lose control of the car?"

I waited and then made my move.

"D-O-D-G-E-D"

I gave Roslyn the what-the-hell chin tuck grimace.

"I don't understand," I said. I sounded angry. I *was* angry. I shut my eyes and glared into the darkness. "Are you saying he dodged something in the road?"

"YES"

"What did he dodge?"

"A-L-I-E-N"

I let my face twitch in surprised pain. "Like...an...*illegal* alien?" I asked.

"NO. E...T."

Someone turned on the lights. I blinked and glanced around to find everyone staring at me with contracted brows and open mouths, like I was some local tragedy on the national news. I burst out laughing, but no one said a word.

"Oh, come on," I said. "It was funny. You know it was funny!"

"No, Freda," said Roslyn quietly. She shook her head.

Dave leaned back in his chair, eyebrows high, and watched for Nila's reaction. Roslyn put her elbows on her knees and her hands over her mouth. I looked at Nila's stunned face, her wide eyes, and more laughter erupted from me. I clapped my hands over the source of the noise, but the laugh went on and on. *Somebody fix my mouth*, was all I could think. *It's gone haywire*.

On this day, the sixth, I wake up to find the mantle bare and the hearth empty. The absence of the trash bags hits me harder than the absence of the clothes. Andy's earth-toned wardrobe had blended

in nicely with the brick if I didn't look directly at that area of the room. The black bags, though, had been like a pool of tar that never moved, never grew, and never shrank. For a stagnant mass of plastic, it'd had powers that hovered somewhere between therapeutic and lethal.

"Where are you?" I say to the air.

"In here," the air says to me.

Roslyn is half under the kitchen table dragging out the last of the funeral flowers. I sit in a chair and watch as she finally gets the thing into plain view, sits back on her heels, and appraises it.

"It appears to be dead," I help.

Roslyn throws me a look and is about to take it out to the backyard when I stop her with a hand on her arm. "What happened to all the stuff?" I ask.

"Huh?"

"The *stuff*."

She looks at me with wide eyes. I've had my fill of wide eyes. "The cards are in your desk drawer. The rest is all out here in the back. I just bagged it up for you and figured you could do whatever you were going to do with it."

"You figured that? All by yourself?"

She goes out the backdoor without answering. I follow her out there and I'm about to give a lecture about having respect, but I say something else instead: "Why did you *do* that?"

Roslyn's jaw drops. She searches the wall behind me for the right answer, her ankle wiggling in time with the vacant bobbing of her head. "I was trying to help you. You obviously need some help."

I have been found out, I think in a panic. *Humor and clichés are useless here. Avoidance is past its use-by date*. It is in this moment that I wish I had never let her into my confused, child-like house.

"*Help* me?" I cry. "By making him *disappear*?"

A very deep, dark hole opens up right in my chest, and I know instinctively that this is *the* darkness at last come for me. This is the old pain of the human realm, both the source of all agony and the pit we sob it back into. This is what Andy's alien knows lies waiting inside all the creatures that love and laugh.

The darkness inhales to breathe me in, and I think, *Uh oh, the back porch has just realized Andy's never going to paint on it again*, so I jump down that hole and choke on its darkness, heaving it into and out of my lungs, clutching at it with my fists and pushing it away, barking it all down my face, out my eyes and nose. Without words, I think, *it's got me, this is the end of me*. But when I realize I can feel Roslyn's arms around me, can smell her hair, I know that this is only *one* end, not *the* end, that I'm still connected to something out there in the light.

6.2.19

8.03 a.m.

57 degrees

Predator as delicate as lace—the emperor dragonfly—
odonata, ancestor of protodonata, it hovers, it flits
nimble on the air, and a bullfrog, predatory too, rests on a
divan of hydrilla, waiting patiently for his meal.



John L. Stanizzi

Hope Of Storm

I do not mind, in fact I like the storm
gray that succeeds the night. Not every day—
no, no—but when the day before's been torn
by craziness, a soul that's lost its way,
let's say, so many years ago that all
it has is venom in its brain and fear,
suspicion's acid edge. And what it calls
its humor is plain nastiness. It cheers
its desiccated, homeless heart to
pick a fight, accuse, insult, and talk
behind another's back. This is not new—
the maimed have been with us since we first walked.
So, yes, the world closed in by hope of storm,
explosion bigger than the mean and worn.

When You Want Me Least

You, who are so different, can't be
expected to agree on anything
with me. I just need you to hold me long enough
to understand what is written on the small tag attached
to my toe, and then you can go.

There are streamers and iridescent ribbons
for you to reflect on
while you sit here with me, in the dark
a newspaper with your name written in black felt pen
over the original headlines
memories of what we could have had
if you had only become the president, or the Pope.

The real memories
are still here, somewhere, as well as
the rest of my heart. You
can wrap them all to go
if you want to forget.

Stamen and Pistil

I bordered on a random choice.
 Circumstance and the weight of time
 the bird sitting on the egg
I took from you
 And you did not object.
 But I didn't think I stole,
someone else must have been there first.
 A check-off on the to-do list.
 That spot on the compass
the arrow doesn't point is pure chance,
 a flawed precious stone.
 A thorned branch holds a rose.
A peony bows its head. A bee indulges itself.

Fabergé Egg

Porcelain, thin as an eggshell
covering the pain
I want to wrap quilts around me,
I want to find a silk cocoon.
The clockwork mind,
which used to be competent,
is winding down.
I hear the chiming of the hours
from the clock in the hall.
There are longer silences
between the notes,
but I still hear harmonies.
Traceries of gold
and small jewels
light the surface
Breathing deeply,
I take delight;
the drop of fragrant rose oil
in the silver rose

Migration

I turn to you, your body recessed into blankets,
your face aglow, the focus in a Rembrandt
masterpiece. You're drawn deep
into the dreams you never remember;
I am awake. All the light clings
to your cheekbones, in our darkened
space. The song in my half-awake
consciousness is a fledgling's compulsion.
If the birdsong got lost in a polluted
smoke, choked out in the Colorado
altitude, I would withdraw.
You would sense the wrongness
through your dreams, and come back

to the surface of consciousness. You would know
what had happened; you would ponder the depressed
shape, a mold where my body had rested.
What tiny eggshells, fragments sticking
to my hands, would flake off as I ran
out into the wideness, the sparse oxygen,
the cold?

The Kippah Drawer

The drawer was stuffed.

When he tugged at the wooden knob, a fluff of velvet and satin bulged out. It always happened when he opened this drawer, one of only two drawers in his small dining room. He never emptied it. He'd only overstuff it, which required him to kneel down, his 89-year-old knees crackling like dry twigs as he picked up the escaped yarmulkes, kissing them gently before packing them back in the drawer.

Except for the one he had on his head for that evening.

Yossi lived alone and only wore his yarmulke on the Sabbath, but his drawer runneth over with not one or two or three of these skullcaps worn by Jews to show their reverence for God. He had dozens upon dozens, his drawer a time machine of simchas, happy occasions.

There were nights, now more than before, when he couldn't sleep. He'd been alone for so long, but he felt it more keenly in the past year. He wasn't sure why. Perhaps it was his bladder, waking him in the middle of night now frightening him in some way. Or maybe that large bed that he once shared with his wife was getting bigger as he got smaller and so when his leg stretched to the vast emptiness on the other side, the chill from the untouched sheets would startle and jerk him awake.

On these nights he would lie there hoping, praying, that he would fall back to sleep. When it did not happen, he'd get out of bed and tread the cold floor of his apartment to the drawer. And with the thin light that hung above, he'd dive his hand into the drawer and swim it around as if he were picking out a raffle ticket. He'd open a yarmulke and hold it up to the light, stretching his arm and pulling it close to read the names and dates of the people imprinted on the inside.

There was only one that needed no reminding. One navy blue kippah with gold trim and the date June 26, 1950. It was the lone remaining artifact from his wedding day. It was the one he wore most often and the one he could find, by feel, in the dark.

When a Jewish child turns thirteen, the family buys a set of 100 kippot and imprints them with the name and date of the event. Every time a Jewish couple gets married, another hundred or so get printed. Sometimes Yossi wondered why he didn't go into the kippah business instead of the accounting business. Some guests would take the head coverings and wear them for the service, others dropped them in a box outside the sanctuary when the service was over, some never picked them up. Still others absently left them on their heads or stuffed them in pockets to be found the next time they put on a suit.

Yarmulkes come in many flavors. Soft knit ones that only stay on with a clip. Others are velvet, hemmed in by a lace border, grabbing the head whether covered in hair or freshly shaven.

And while Yossi and Malka never had children, thereby never having the extra seventy-five or so yarmulkes from a simcha of their own, he had not missed a Shabbat service in fifty years. He had seen hundreds of B'nai Mitzvot as boys and girls walk across the bimah and make their case for being an adult in the eyes of the Jewish people. He'd pocketed dozens from weddings.

So each week as the guests filed out of the sanctuary for the free food, sweet wine, and small cakes on doilies, he'd put a skullcap in his coat pocket.

And Yossi's collection grew.

"This is what you decided to collect?" Malka said one night as he filled the drawer. "Fabergé eggs wouldn't work?"

But for him the collection was a symbol of many things: his Judaism, his friendships, his years. For Yossi the filled drawer was like a collection of mitzvot, of good deeds, that built on itself over his life. This was the physical manifestation of all those prayers which made his life worthwhile.

"How do your fancy friends measure their worth?" he'd once asked Malka after a service where the Bar Mitzvah "theme" was some kind of video game, where the children dropped their kippot on the floor and the grandfather stumbled through an indiscernible rendition of the Motzi.

"Their assets, is that the measure? Their bank account, their houses? The vacations, the deals from long ago? They don't tell their story," he'd said.

They couldn't go into a dark room and watch the movie of their lives in a way that was as fulfilling as sitting on the floor recalling all the days of his life in synagogue. Maybe others had some ledger of good deeds, but for Yossi there was his drawer. It wasn't just that he'd attended all these events, but they represented days he'd spent in prayer, words he'd chanted over hundreds of hours of ancient texts. This was a visual representation of all he'd done.

"But none of them are ours," Malka would say.

"They are all ours," he said. "We've been to every one of these."

"We didn't matter," she said.

"Without us maybe they wouldn't have had a minyan," he said.

When they were younger Yossi and Malka would invite friends to their Friday night table. Malka would prepare the same dishes her mother had cooked from some recipe brought from the old country, scrawled on small slips of paper and stuffed into notebooks. And Yossi would pass out kippot to his guests, trying to find ones that might interest them. He'd find the wedding of a mutual friend or the Bar Mitzvah of a child they once knew. He wasn't sure if people ever noticed this planned coincidence, but sometimes it made for good conversation. Occasionally guests would walk away with a kippah by accident; it was the only time his drawer ever got smaller.

But inevitably he'd find them and remind them that he wanted it back.

Now Yossi stood at the synagogue Shabbat table with his thimble of Manischewitz wine, looking at the faces, as he had for years. He and his friends used to congregate near one end of the long, sweets-filled table. They would edge out the children who reached for handfuls of cakes.

But slowly his group dwindled. Yoni stopped coming when his wife got sick. Isaac had been missing since he fell six months ago. Moe had stopped driving. But most of them just died.

And now he'd go to the end of the table, less interested in pushing the kids out of the way. He felt the distance from everybody, even the Rabbi, who would come over and shake his

hand, saying, “Good Shabbos.” But it was the new Rabbi, not the one he knew for all the years. Not the one who buried Malka. He referred to this Rabbi as the CEO of the synagogue, who always looked past him, spending more time with the people whose names graced the building’s walls.

Yossi looked down at the carpet between his feet and the long, white tablecloth, remembering the mark his friends had left. The big, faded stains from where his friends had spilled wine or crumbled a cookie under their feet or where frosting was driven into the carpet. There was nobody left in the room to remember these men who built this synagogue not with their money but with their attendance. And one day they would replace the carpet or get new linens, and there would literally be no sign left of the people who stood in these places for all those Saturday mornings.

At the other end of the table, away from the wine, was a group of kids, friends of the Bar Mitzvah boy, all with matching yellow corduroy yarmulkes, the ones that the family had given out that morning. And they were dropping them on the floor without kissing them, spilling grape juice on them. One used it as a napkin to wipe the frosting from his mouth.

And it was this moment that he knew it was time. He knew those kids would never have a drawer because they didn’t understand the power of ritual, the respect of the velvet or the corduroy or knitted cloth.

And so he put his small cup down and walked to where the boys were roughhousing. They stopped when this old man stood in the middle of their pushing. Yossi knelt before them picking the yarmulkes off the floor, kissing them and placing them on their heads. But there were six boys and only five kippot. So he reached into his inside pocket and took an extra one he had brought, and gently planted it on a boy’s head.

The boys said nothing, then slowly walked away, but not before grabbing another piece of cake.

Later that day as he ate his lunch alone at home, Yossi reached for his kippah, but it wasn’t on his head. It was June 26th, and he was looking for the blue one with gold trim. His own private anniversary celebration. He reached into his pockets then looked at his drawer, but nothing. His chest tightened, he grabbed his glasses

and looked again, tilting his head to one side then another to let the light pass him by and illuminate the darkened corners of the drawer. But it wasn't there.

The sweat formed on his forehead and dripped into his eyes. He got up, a bit too quickly, banging his head on the opened cabinet. He reached for his head but couldn't tell if it was sweat or blood, but he didn't look. He hurried to his room, thrusting his hands into his jacket pockets, one then the next. It wasn't there.

He feared that in his moment of generosity he had given it away. He grabbed his tallis bag from the counter, and there he found it.

Yossi went to the bathroom to check on his forehead and the damage he may have done.

Late that night he couldn't sleep and found himself on the floor in front of the kippah drawer. He dug down to the bottom and played with the oldest ones. He opened them slowly as some had not seen light in years. He realized that most of the kippot were of people he no longer knew or who had died some time ago. He remembered not so much the specific event, as they all ran into each other after awhile, but his memory and this memento of his friends and the couples who used to grace his Shabbat table were all he had. The only thing he had to spark their memory was this piece of cloth resting at the bottom of his darkened drawer.

These were his photo albums, his home movies, all waiting just for him. What a waste to sit in the dark for all these years. He realized one of the only things that would spark a memory of him, or of Malka, might be this blue kippah he held in his hand. It was time to empty the drawer.

It wasn't sad thoughts that drove him to his decision. It wasn't the empty bed or the quiet Shabbat table. There was no diagnosis, no threat, external or internal. It didn't happen in a doctor's office or a hospital waiting room. Standing over this drawer he found the strength to dispose of his one remaining asset.

And so he set out to give away a kippah a week. But his small synagogue didn't have enough events. It would take him years, which he knew he didn't have.

Each week the *Jewish News* arrived at his apartment, and he'd find the announcements and then he would show up, whether

he knew the family or not. And then, like sunflower seeds, he would plant a kippah on the heads where they were needed.

He no longer went with one extra kippah in his pocket. Now he walked around, his pockets full.

As usual he would show up early, find a seat, especially in these unfamiliar synagogues, participate in the service, watch the ceremony—the baby naming, the mitzvah, maybe stand and say Kaddish for somebody, anybody who had nobody saying Kaddish for them. And then he would wait for his chance.

Yossi was content being there, “in the bleachers,” as he would say, but apart from it all. So happy not being the “entertainment.” But when Malka was alive and they would attend events, it always bothered her.

“I don’t like being part of the chorus,” she would say. He had no interest in being center stage. The stress of pleasing all these people, the expectations were too much for him. He never understood why it was important for her to mingle with these fancy people who turned sacred services into social events.

So instead they would go to the service but leave before the Kiddush or the reception. Yossi felt disconnected from this world, but for Malka those three hours during the service, she felt like she was one of them. And isn’t that what these special occasions were meant to do? To make you believe you are who you want to be, and so she wanted to be them and could be. He didn’t possess the power to fool himself.

But now all alone he was a guest of the best. He was at the biggest ceremonies and sometimes even stayed for the most lavish parties, mingling at the buffet, walking through the ballroom with a glass of red wine, a handful of challah he’d pulled from the middle of the loaf.

No one questioned the old man in the dark suit. He knew it would make Malka happy as he walked the floor, his wedding kippah on his head.

And he’d look for his opening, finding a boy with his head uncovered. Yossi would grab a kippah from his pocket, kiss it, and place it there.

For months he would go to events to which he wasn’t invited, landing kippot on the heads of unsuspecting children.

He did not know where these kippot would end up, who would drop them on the floor, who would let them fly off their head in the parking lot. But there were some young men in that group who might reach for them one time or see them in the mirror when they went to the bathroom that night, maybe even put them in a drawer in their home as a reminder of an event they never attended. These kippot were less time machine than eternal life. As long as someone wore that kippah and saw the names inscribed, then those names mattered. Week after week Yossi would dispense the kippot around town at every event where he could find a barren head. All throughout the summer and fall and into the winter, he followed this pattern as his drawer emptied. Soon he could open the drawer without anything jumping out, and finally he was digging around the bottom finding old, faded ones.

On Friday nights he would open the drawer and decide which ones he'd give away the following day. In some way he was saying goodbye to these old friends before he sent them to a new head, perhaps a different house and an empty drawer.

The morning after he got the diagnosis, he stuffed all the kippot that were left in his pockets. The pants pocket, the outside jacket pocket, the inside pocket on each side, and he put the blue one on his head for the last time. He walked a little faster than usual, and maybe a little faster than a man his age should, that morning.

The Beckendorfs were having a Bar Mitzvah. When he arrived he saw a spread of lavender kippot on a wicker plate. Yossi took the plate and shook out all the lavender kippot into the wooden bin by the door. And then with great care he took the remaining kippot from his pockets, looking at each name before he lay them on the tray.

Eternal life, he thought, that's what he was giving these long-forgotten members and their moment in time before iPhones and Snap stories recorded everything, when the only memories were in the minds of the people, most of whom were gone. But now someone might take these kippot with them and perhaps read the name and at least ask the question, who were these people on these dates so long ago?

Yossi sat in the back and could feel his heart grow watching the rows of children, their heads covered with the random kippot from his drawer.

When the service ended Yossi made his way to the Kiddush, but not before stopping at the wooden bin to take for himself one of the lavender kippot the Beckendorfs had so carefully chosen.

Instead of standing in his usual spot, away from the partygoers, Yossi stood down amid the Bar Mitzvah boy and his friends.

The young boy who was now a man stumbled, tripping over one of his friend's feet, his lavender kippah frisbeeing to the floor. The boy reached down, but Yossi was faster.

"Let me help you," Yossi said. And with one move Yossi placed a blue velvet kippah with gold trim on the boy's head. He held it there in place for a moment and closed his eyes.

The young man looked up at the old one but said nothing.

"Thank you," Yossi said.

And the boy ran off, one hand holding the kippah in place.

No Fear Here

Mistaking giver for river
I used my body as a dam for the nation
to under god me into so many stars
it took Bowie with a twelve string and bright orange hair
to tell the ground it had no control,
to tell the sky it looked better at midnight
all bruised & rouged like a drag queen moon,
all made up like Momma in the morning,
sprayed & smeared with *No Fear Here*
the latest scent from ravage me quick,
before supper burns softly and Daddy's mouth
lights us up like candles.

A Year too Late

She hovered
on the edge of the bed,
half-naked
covered with a blanket,
back turned and
chin quivering
as we apologized
for how fucked up we are
and offered wishes
to the bare ceiling
for the love
we never expressed,
the compliments
we never paid,
and the times
we let our fears
run away with our mouths.

neck

when the universe has
wrapped her cold clammy fingers
around our necks too many times

we beg,
no, let me go,
like the ancestors fed up
up with the soft and sharp
glinting guillotine love
of dagger battalions

one trained hand preemptively
ready in defense but

we say,
no, not today,
acoustic spirits fighting
their way out into the open
noteheads stronger loops
than hand-braided wool

color returning, we are
lighthouses in midnight

we proclaim,
no, i live to see another day,
pillars balancing the
weight of possibility
materializing to rise above
a chilling sour-poison fog

we declare,
no,
this is not the end,
and this is not the end,

and instead it is our
day of victory.

Spring

ice melts in noisy rivulets
resumes descent on muddy river banks

poking its greasy snout out of the water
a bullhead lumbers out of torpor, floats to the surface

frightens newly-hatched crawfish and water striders
small sand crabs hiding in the silt

Frosty

you say when you are sick you get treats
I type while you talk and you say *I bet*
you're writing about chickens and when

you look at the screen you say *people call*
anything a poem these days you need smooth
silk to coat a sore throat silence is borderline

death when next I need a doctor to peek inside
my nose with light I wonder what she'll see
stuffed inside after I blow snot into dead trees

I too shall combat that system of escape
with corporate desires as in how much ice
cream we need our nuggets a false meat

equivalent to blood pressure levels crashing
waves with bongos of beating hearts that turn
harmonic within four walls of Wendy's

Oak + Second



Kristin LaFollette

Out in the Distance

The ground welcomes me, even though
I'm still alive, even now
I am just another something
that sends out roots wherever the dirt
is soft enough to receive me. I can feel the flowers
growing under my skin
can feel them struggling to break free
to sing out under the sun.

You can put your own roots out, too
spread out over the soft grass with me,
shake loose your skin
let the earth in. Eventually, we might
grow as high as trees, thick trunks and limbs
twisting around one another in a frozen embrace
blooming in a garden

of our own making.

Act 3

I lean in, pull away, flit around you,
Canary-ing,
Incessantly chirping,
Tangled in the twigs of a nest you made
Hatched eggs of, *It could get better*,
Snap my ankles

You drop
Hope and
Pre-digested scraps
Through the metal rungs of a cage I
Wasn't privy to

But I worship
The fingers
That feed me

Morning Walk

Pale and lifeless as a Byzantine coin
the moon lingers in the morning sky.
Everything we had or hoped for
unraveling like the contrail from a passing plane.

The dog pulls on her leash anxious to be moving on
and I cannot not tell her why we stopped.
To meditate on the moon when it is only metaphor?
Or on Life, an abstract noun?
Or Love, another with no correlative
unless it be pale bracts of bougainvillea blown by the wind
or a lake in Chapala dried to mudflats and festering lilies.

The dog tilts her head as if listening
to some far way voice she once knew.
So we head home, passing through the garden
where I cut a newly budded rose
and place it in a vase by our bedside.

What use is poetry anyway, if it cannot break your heart?

i reached the mountaintop early

that day i reached the mountaintop early
i sat on a bench awaiting my friends' arrival
and observed Austria's first composer:

sunlight shines on the
Shöckl summit, warming up
to pluck the string of her horizon
ever so gently as an ethereal guitar

melody notes ricochet softly over
dotted green fields of tuned dandelions

an alpine cow's sweet solo
the honeybee's soprano buzz
a small squirrel's rhythmic patter
the land's bass-like hum

mountain chords play a little longer
to orchestrate a symphony of the Alps-

her song runs parallel to the grand staff
dividing periwinkle and forest,
the batik-blurred space
between heaven and earth

Crucifixion

You reach through the roof
grab the wolf moon

howl at gold Jesus
hanging above the bed

the shiny crown
the wiry muscles

remember the day your father
drove a nail into the stud

you prayed then
you still pray

all hackled up
not me, Lord, not me.

Migration of the Broadwings

Kettles of broadwings ride the thermals
Over the river, stalled by a front.
In thousands, they mottle the sky
Like a flock of asterisks
Referencing the great migrations.
Something seizes a colony of thought, that's
How mobs form or schools of philosophy.
Below barges ply the river with commerce.
The locks lift their loads like spirits
Of dispersal. We are going somewhere
We can't imagine sitting here
On the banks of the Mississippi
Watching the hawks circle aimlessly
Awaiting a shift of weather
With its chill annunciations:
That to leave is necessary,
That nothing can ever stay.

Butterfly Kisses

There's a children's book called *Butterfly Kisses* that my father read to me until I was around age four. Every night ended in fluttering eyelashes against one another's cheeks. And like the book said, *that's how it started.... butterfly kisses*. I hadn't learned yet that his voice wasn't always so sweet, that his actions weren't always as gentle as the flutter of butterfly wings.

He slapped my mother across her cheek often. I never really knew what for. I'd hide under the table, eventually with my brother in tow by age five. Everett was two. If we were brave enough, we would yell for him to stop. But there's not much you can say to a man like my father when alcohol is in his veins, when his cheeks become red and his breathing heavy. But you will—and still do—feel confused about how hands can be both so gentle and unkind.

Rough, smooth. Rough, smooth. My father would take my hand in his and rub it across the coarse hairs of his beard and then the softness of his cheek. He would do the same to mine, his callused hands like sandpaper. I would be sitting in his lap, able to smell the liquor and cigarettes on his breath. He wore it like cologne.

My father used to lay blankets outside and watch the stars with me and my brother. There would be crickets and lots of giggling, grass scratchy against our skin. He would point upwards and show us where the Little Dipper and the Big Dipper were. When it was time for bed, he would gather us in a blanket cocoon and take us inside. I remember thinking how strong he had to be to carry two children at once.

I learned he was strong enough to lift my mother up by her neck and pin her against the wall. The muscles in his arms and the veins of his forehead would bulge. Dark brown hair sprawled across the mint green wall. He raised his hand at me when I was sixteen, too. I dared him to hit me. He didn't. He wrapped his hands around my brother's neck at seventeen, and Everett hit back three times: for him, for me, and for our mother.

Butterfly kisses. He still says it before he hangs up the phone, waits expectantly for me to say it back.

Psyche

Gold glows, which means that it cannot last long,
day's chrism for the newly woke.
For when we learned the morning's song,
we named the sweet fragility of hope

the butterfly, a *flutterby*, we said,
inventing language as a joke
to understand why gold had fled
and knew the sweet fragility of hope.

The great philosopher in elder age
without his wife discovered grief.
What did he know though he was sage?
How had he overlooked that Time's a thief

that gives us all the whole, entire world,
the seas, the sky, our heart's delight,
our mind, our history, the pearl
of love, and that it's all, *it's all*, a sleight,

a Three Card Monte quick-move game, a scam
that one should only fall for once.
But who does that? Is there a man,
a woman, who has felt the Midas touch,

the crashing storm inside our veins from Love
and thought, *I know that this must end?*
All that we want is that the flood
will never, ever cease, so we pretend

or we "forget," or simply are amused
that Psyche is a butterfly,
and when it's time we have to lose
who is prepared as Love just flutters by?

Ed Hack

Shudderfly

I wanted to tell him he was quoting a country song
—and not very well.

Still, I had to capture the moment,
put it on a shelf until I find the perfect frame.

And I never will find a perfect frame,
so it will get stuck between the pages of a book,
maybe another book I've written,
but it will say

They were together, if only for a moment.

Elements: Lead

Paradox: soft and heavy.
Malleable as a Rubens goddess
Whose myth shapes history.
Mauled easily into the courses
Of the water bearer. Vessels of
Rome's decline. How the small boats
In the blood sank comprehension.
Bullets molded into an extrapolation
Of extinguishment. Galena
Hacked out of earth into an exquisite
Window of a Victorian turret. Powdering
The face of the good queen, breathed by
Printer's devils, a neurotoxin children
Scrape from painted sills. Sinkers
That plunge the bait deep
In dark streams where a red bobber
Of betrayal floats upon the surface.
Shoes of drowned mobsters, adulterant of
Wine. Ordinary as grief weighing in the pit
Of the stomach like an ungainly
Loveless heart.

My Jazzy Poem

Featuring Nancy Wilson

During the morning TV news, I'm watching you,
still seeing the halogen glitter in your eyes.
It's a stupendous few minutes. I don't think you're
in love with anyone else, or ever have been.
When I was eighteen and you were a year younger,
we rode the elevator up, up, to the fabulous
Rainbow Room. For about 15 minutes, if that, we saw
the New York City skyline, that crystal-clear room
of mirrors. Nancy Wilson took us to the alter
with her magic mike. The lady sang, all jazzy, honey-
eyed. Her flashing, frosty-lace gown had an embroidered
collar and hem. No, we weren't Brooklyn-bred
that day, not in any housing project fumbling at
a last door, maybe a yard away from a roof to nowhere.
We slid down that pebbled, piss-stained brick wall
of silk and satins. It was Maestro, Please. Go Nancy.
To the piano's overture, our golden bodies swayed,
hands unsure, madly lost. The frankincense of your
cheerleader's cottons took me. I felt the very soft
yellow and scarlet letters, that voice catching fire.

“Congratulations,” the opening salute from your first choice college had said earlier. We didn't need a crystal-ball. Full scholarship. You'd make the Honor's dorm, be Homecoming Queen. But our celebratory story, turned heaven-less in days. After that night of splendor you believed, for weeks, that you were pregnant.

I did the math,
considered the angles, elasticity of your Baby Blues.
It was highly unlikely that anything had been consummated. In 2014, you called, sounding fluted, touchable. “You won't believe this!” The Rainbow Room had reopened—with its cocktail lounge, revolving dance floor. And maybe, we could still find Nancy in one of the rooms with mirrors. High, on the 65th floor, we'd do a garlanded two-step, almost flying. I'd stare into the halogen glitter of your eyes. Every moment was stupendous. Only after our toast and champagne, would you tell me, like a poet, what my chances were.

*Nancy Wilson: Feb. 1937 – Dec. 13, 2018
Isaac Black

Schaeffer and the Stones

The stones, slate brown
With black stains that look like veils,
Have been here since muskets were fired.
Some are tilted. Letters and numbers
Are more visible on some than on others.
Beneath the stones lie remains of those
who died during the American Revolution,
Schaeffer was told, though he forgets
Who told him. They died of typhoid
And small pox, he supposes. He wonders
What dances people danced back then,
To what music. If he unearthed a stone
And with a spade threw gusts of dirt
Over his shoulder, what would he come to?
A coffin? A skeleton in tatters?
The road is tilted. One drives down
To get in, up to get out; it lies between
the graves and the baseball field.

The Truth About Luaus

It was about 5 feet 9 inches tall—my height.
I found the huge box outside our apartment
in Denver, a monument to my mother's
inability to keep even her own secrets.

She'd let on that she was giving us a
grandfather clock as a wedding present.
We, of course, pictured a stately mahogany
piece with complicated works, a pendulum,

and a haunting chime that evoked a sense
of mortality and lines from John Donne.
Imagine my surprise when I opened the box
and found a monstrosity made of compressed

tiki wood. It was a grandfather clock all right,
but one you'd find in the Luau Room at
a Holiday Inn or Howard Johnsons. The
“works” consisted of two bent metal “hands”

powered by a 9-volt battery behind the
clock face. Little cubby holes lined with
fake orange fur—like you'd see on a
Kewpie Doll at a carnival—pocked the front

of the clock. It looked like a totem designed
to keep the pancake gods happy. Mother,
who owned a restaurant supply company,
clearly bought it out of a catalogue, at cost.

When she called to ask how we liked the clock, I gently said it didn't go with much of our furniture. "You shitass," she replied, "You'd complain about the color of the ink

on the checks!" After our wedding we held a garage sale. A biker fell in love with the clock and bought it for \$50. I helped him strap it on his back. "Thanks dude,"

he said, and took off on his Harley.

To the South



Fabrice B. Poussin

Dissolving into Dark

My hand seemed to reach
deep down inside
where part of me still lies
into the wet, the cold,
snagging that empty loop,
that burgundy string that pulls
the chosen color in our bouquet.
A ring tries to enclose,
encircle a planet or a star,
a finger.
But this loop demands and grows,
grumbling in its hunger
devouring more and more around,
a stomach selfishly refusing to fill.
My skin must be chapped,
cracked to make it so,
grabbling to sooth and reconnect,
but loop after loop starved
they fall away,
champagne bottles burst
bubbles escape my body in a loud belch.
You cannot stitch nor catch
when all that is left dissipates,
dissolves into dark,
disappearing like a garter tossed
or nothing but gas.

Breakdown

The morning after, here's our tale of woe:
on a mountain pass the motor died.
We made the exit on the downhill side
and called all afternoon to find a tow.

The final day of our thousand-mile trip,
our neatly planned return to the hotel
morphed into an all-day logistics hell,
the RV owner giving us the slip.

Sure, we could keep complaining, but let's not.
Just eat the hotel waffles while they're hot.

darkplace

if I sometimes feel like
I'm still in the middle of
a war, that's because I am.

if I sometimes feel tired
it's because the past and
the future are wrestling
for my attention.

if I sometimes don't talk
it's because I wouldn't be
able to hear myself over the
noises in my head.

if I sometimes seem rushed
it's because there simply
isn't enough time.

if I ever pause before I say
I'm fine, it's because it is
exhausting to lie.

if I seem okay
that's because I usually
am, but it only takes

one appointment
or one memory, or one
reckless thought, or
one throwaway comment

to throw me into
this darkplace.

Sam Rose

Magnify Me Not

The sun is putting some of us to death.

—Kathy Nilsson

Even if what happened didn't,
& beauty's story in failure's seed
welded by a nuclear quill,
scorches the husk of moral skin
peeled from the wayward self,
does it mean we're done, does it have to be?

When the body shuns the bridal light,
refusing to betray its original love
for dark, unacceptable things,
can you at least admit being tempted
by waves of heat scrubbing you raw,
like a lizard on a rock in Vegas?

Submitting softly to a predator's stare,
measuring the tip of hunger's wing
back to a scavenger's claw, could
that convince the day to fade,
the one with me dying in it?
Burn warnings call me smoke.

Aspirational Desire

As Balika was hurrying out of the Indian grocery store she happened to catch a glimpse of her own reflection. She stopped cold for a few minutes, grotesquely fascinated by the stranger in the glass window, her shoulders slightly hunched, her neck curved despondently, the shirt bunched up at strange places where it stuck to her sweaty skin. Short squat women hurried around her struggling with their own bags, and she stood anchored, wondering if in a few years she would be one of them. She raised a hand to her face to ensure the reflection was her own. It did not seem plausible.

She resumed her walk, itching under her clothes. She had not realized how she looked when distracted from thoughts about her outward presentation. When she returned it was eleven-thirty and her mother was at the kitchen counter. The dog laid at her mother's feet licking at its paw. It had been scratching itself for a week and Balika nudged its head away from its foot in discouragement.

"Do you think I move strangely?" she asked, setting the grocery bags on the counter.

"Don't you have anything better to worry about?"

"It's a real concern for me."

Her mother stalked across the kitchen to the bags, a tall searching crow wrapped in her shawl. She did not respond.

Balika looked down at their lunches on the counter. Of the liberties she was permitted at home, preparing her own food was not one. "Can you take some rice off?" she asked, dismayed. "My portions are always too big."

"You will eat what I ask you to eat," her mother said. "You girls these days are so worried about the silliest things. The width of your own bodies. When I was little I came home every day from school and ate rotten scraps and prayed for something, anything more."

Her mother turned her back. Maybe she wanted to ask what all this was really about but did not particularly want to hear the answer. She served both their lunches then sat across from Balika

and ate forcefully and quickly, the television talking softly over the silence.

Balika remembered what her roommate had said on the last day of the semester. Hunched over the sink, Anjana had wiggled her septum piercing around and smiled grimly at Balika in the mirror. She was keeping the ring in, even though Balika had tried to dissuade her otherwise: “We all disappoint our mothers sooner or later.” Somehow despite herself, Balika knew she was unable to wholly commit to the act. It was not that she had no freedom—only, her mother had many preferences that were particular and unyielding, and when Balika came home from a whole semester of facetious and aimless American collegiate fun, one of them had to give in to the other. Both knew who was softer.

After lunch as her mother slept in the next room, Balika spent a few minutes in front of the bathroom mirror moving in slow rotations, trying to consider herself from all angles. She studied the soft black hair on the back of her neck, her short, thick-knuckled fingers. She clenched her fist and watched the veins in her wrist bunch and define. She tipped her head back and observed the dark column of her throat. She began to feel her college sheen once more. She determined she would try to feel more at home in her own skin, even here.

She stretched her arm out and felt the muscles tighten, then did the same with her leg. Her mother’s breathing was distant and regular from the other room and Balika, in her own body, felt she herself had just been awoken from a deep, satisfying slumber. She walked across the living room, savoring the cold floor on her soles, her hips as they thrust and fell back, the straight tense line of her back. Then she ran, then she danced. As she stepped forward and sideways through the silent dead air, all of a sudden she nearly tripped on the dog, who was stretched out on the cold tile still violently licking at its own leg. Balika hopped aside and bashed her foot on the sharp corner of the wall. She cursed and flailed onto the sofa. The pain was enough that she had to writhe around, pinching other parts of her body to ensure they were not similarly affected. Eventually the foot went numb and slack and she stared at its limp brown mass as the ankle began to swell. The dog continued licking its paw with enthusiasm, emitting rattling sounds like a radiator.

Balika hobbled over to the freezer and procured an ice pack. She pressed it to her foot and sat in the kitchen, mortified and cowed back into stillness. She thought about Anjana, who was part of a classical Indian dance group. Once Balika had been invited to watch one of their late-night practices. The girls spun and glittered in their sports bras and black leggings, swift and precise, their motions pointed with purpose. Their tan bodies fit into space and slipped out of it seamlessly, and Balika could only watch and yearn.

By sunset, the swelling was no longer noticeable. Balika left the house for her daily walk. Her hometown's mood was mercurial at night and the sky had become misted with fog. Balika had known these sidewalks her entire life but through her strange limbs and her muddled head they seemed coldly foreign and disjointed. She thought she would give anything in the world to be in someone else's body, walking down the blue street, looking back at herself, finally understanding how her form fit into this world.

To distract herself she glanced at the bright windows of the houses she walked past, catching glimpses of men in armchairs, women reading, cats stretching. She wondered if they ever looked back at her. She wondered if they admired her. The thought made her straighten and feel charged through her fingertips. She felt she was gliding down the streets, almost beautiful. If anyone from her high school saw her surely they would be astonished. Perhaps she was unrecognizable from back then.

Then under the pale buzzing of the streetlights, she felt a prickling on the back of her neck and turned. In a yellow window, the black silhouette of a woman watching her. Balika was certain of it. The woman was watching her, standing very still. Balika turned back and moved faster and her ankle began to throb. The wind picked up as if there were no buildings to be met. She glanced down at herself, at her thighs and her clenched fists, her jerky motions. She felt eyes on her from the houses she blew past, eyes everywhere. It was no longer nice to be looked at. It was absolutely unbearable.

Safe inside her house she crumpled back down to earth. She kicked her shoes off and found herself walking into the kitchen, where her mother was waiting expectantly, militantly on schedule.

"It's late."

“It’s too much,” Balika said softly.

“What?”

“It’s too much. On the plate.”

“Alright,” her mother said coldly. She lifted the plate of rice, mung dal, fried cauliflower, chicken thigh, and swept it into the trash. She brushed past Balika and Balika looked down into the white crumpled lining and felt a sour, unnamable fear at the thought of her two lives, her two bodies, her two selves being drawn together into one.

She turned to find her mother but instead found the dog, panting up at her. She looked down at its paw and saw a raw mass leaking dark liquid. She realized the itch had been scratched to completion. The dog lowered its head and looked at her reproachfully.

A Day to Twenty:

When I was a kid, I always looked forward to the future. By the age
of eight, my mind was fixed
on an image of myself as a teenager, and it stayed there, unbudging,
a cow tethered to a pole.

This would be it. This would be me.

I wished for maturity to seize my baby bones and give them a hard
shake. Adolescence was a

boiling bath on a winter night, asking me to jump right in. And I
believed the days to come

would be coloured warm—colours like those that splash across
the sky as the sun sinks behind the skyline, hiding from noon,
welcoming dusk. Days of a sepia future.

Thirteen, and I'd have grown tall.

Fourteen, no longer afraid to venture into convenience stores all
alone, bold enough to meet the

eyes of the cashier while I pay the bill.

I believed I would look like those girls posing between the pages of
my mother's magazine.

Lean. Lithe. Caramel hair. Fuchsia lips. Fashionable. Fifteen.

Sixteen would feel like occupying the frothy bubbles of chilled
orange soda—neon-vivid,

daringly refreshing. Lipstick stains on the rims of glass bottles.

Romance with passers-by.

And I knew, between my seventeenth and nineteenth birthdays that
things would be just fine. No

more third graders pushing me off playground swings. No

more finding my voice backing away

into the darkest corners of my throat—a lark with no wings, buried
in a cavern—when I most needed it.

But I'm one day to twenty, and I know now how time works. Each
unit of time is a runner in a

race with no direction, running as fast as they can anywhere their
legs take them. And that's how

they collide. Seconds collide into each other, falter into minutes,
then tumble together into days
that look nothing like the ones you cooked up when you were eight.
And these days are usually
grey. Some of them are so grey that they disappear, ripping away
huge chunks of life.
You're forced to watch the grey play out like found footage from a
1940s B-movie. It's not a
terrible watch, but it's not what you wanted. It's not sepia.
I'm one day to twenty. One day to thin down to a size 4. One day to
meet new people. One day
to find someone with a crush on me, sneaking glances at me from
the other side of the room. A
day to stop my heart from violently thumping every time my mom's
not around to answer the
doorbell and the phone calls. A day to head out into the sticky
Madras summer and buy myself a
popsicle from a roadside stall without feeling the eyes of strange
men bore into my back.
But a day isn't enough for such things.
One day is just enough for me to look forward to the future.

Like Everything

The sun, as bright as broken glass, burnt through
the frozen air. It's now a silver glare
impossible to watch, like something true
that hurts too much but you're glad that it's there—
at last, at last your soul can breathe, at last
a reckoning, at last a startled peace.
Storm's on its way. Like everything, unasked.
Like everything, a seizure then release.
Four days until we're home again,
until that other world of summertime,
another sun and other truths and friends,
the wounded from their years who couldn't find
a way to not wind up alone. Four days
to go. But first the storm must have its say.

Earthly Conundrum

Dark strand of melancholy, approach.
I feel you as bedrock beyond the years
and can only spread these fractured pagan wings.
You and the sweet swamp are the earth on which new paradigms
will be built,
as feathers touch land in the way of a dream's breath.

Once, on a sacred lake of all found gentleness and gratitude,
in the snow were the toed indents of crow
and the striped swishes of wings lifted,
movement captured in glistening grains.

This flighty dance is one in which I am trapped.
Yet as long as my splayed feet keep their wanton rhythm
and as long as you absorb the vibration as proof of your existence,
then the unseen around us will pound weightless feet into mud,
and the winged ones will screech their ascents.

The Truth About Rumpelstiltskin

That day, so cold, exhaust fumes
turned to crystal, I found warmth
in the mid-eastern restaurant near
the University of Pittsburgh—
gloried in the steaming lamb shank,
dazzled by baba ghanoush, it's cozy
spices soaking peta bread.

At meal's end I donned my heavy coat
and my Russian furry wolf hat,
the one I'd admired for years
because worn by my father-in-law,
a man whose warmth and kindness
evoked in my mind Chagall
crimsons and blues, hues
of his Jewish history, colors
of belonging and care.

A young woman approached
at the cash register, a smile
on her face. "I like your hat,"
she said. "Thanks," I smiled back.
"But I bet it looked better
on the animal it came off of,"
her countenance now angry, nasty.
My hat, each follicle of which wove
a grey eminence into my life,
had fallen prey to this woman's cause.

I was supposed to feel guilty
for wearing it on this gelid day
in Pittsburgh, but I didn't. "No,"
I said, "I think it looks better on me."
She actually stomped her foot
on her way out of the restaurant.
Rumpelstiltskin in winter, I thought,
and pulled those furry muffs
over my ears.

Manifest Destiny

I ask him to leave,
as if goodbye
will send him out the back stairs,
 down into the street, vanishing into the umber streetlights.
But he will not be dismissed. Will not let himself be
forgotten.
After all, he is the hero of this story –
and so again, I watch the dust follow his footfalls as it stirs
around the soles
 of his sneakers.
He comes and goes and the same dirt
 misplaced 200 years ago,
falls victim to the whims of another man –
 let the stars burn themselves on their wishes.
I will not
 Become
 the last frontier.

Caroline O'Connell

The Blues Again



Fabrice B. Poussin

The Last of the French-cut Green Beans

This afternoon I finally ate the last can of French-cut green beans. Planted in another state, a dozen years ago, they have been reclining sideways in my temperate basement, vigilant as a dog-eared page in a book you forgot to finish.

The lid after this long wait was still flat and taut, the patient water spilled out clear, without guile, smelling only of righteous wet green. They were honest beans. Exactly as labeled. They don't make beans like this anymore.

The empty can is suddenly light in my hand, after holding it together all these years. The round top, relieved of duty at last, stands jauntily askew—its newborn edge a sunburst rising over the mouth of the can.

Picked before there was an iPhone, these beans emerged into this afternoon with a few firm twists of the wrist. They have a lot to say, these limp green strips lying there, dazed and triumphant in the bowl.

They speak of a well-watered world with more than enough beans. They testify of the staying power of the unwelded, double-seam rim. They sing of a surprising stretch of good luck, my belief in the rainy day.

They came all this way to meet the hunger of this peaceable afternoon, this much closer to the end of the world, to keep me alive against all the terrible odds.

reversed day one

to unlove the feeling of emptiness
that started then:

the sadness goes back down my throat,
settles in my stomach to be digested,

a wail and a sob return to
find their place in my vocal cords

my head lifts itself up from the
porcelain that reflects the sunlight,

body stands from a slouched huddle
on the floor of the bathroom,

and the toothbrush goes home
to the holder by the sink.

hair leaps out of the quick messy bun
to settle back onto my shoulders,

and my footsteps run downstairs to the
room from which they came,

guilt and shame and disgust
and loathing disappear into thin air,

brown irises turn away from the mirror,
feet step off of the looming black scale.

blooming red heat leaves my face
and fists unclench as my legs

walk back to my seat at the dimly lit dining table
in front of a heaping plate of food,

my hand releases the vice grip on the fork,
and tears crawl back into my eyes.

Baldwin 7-1387

Except for this one,
I've forgotten
all my past phone numbers

and I can't recall
what my face looked like
looking back at me

from the bathroom mirror
in the house I grew up in
on Charlotte Street, although

I can still remember
my address, Two-Two-Five,
the first I ever learned

the only one I can still recall
having lived in too many spaces,
so I use it for all my passwords

and each night lying in bed
with my monkey mind,
I dial the old number

over and over
no one answering
until I fall asleep.

David Hargreaves

Dangerously In Love

At Holts Landing State Park, DE., 1995

On the hiker's trail, we watched the ladybird
beetles fly out of our Doves of Peace T-shirts
(thank you Picasso). But hadn't someone predicted
rain? I felt a blessedness -- tasted peaches
in your eyes. You looked like Beyonce, I teased.
Likely the birder we saw beside the Bald Cypress
was thinking the same thing. He gave
us a thumbs up. "Going to explore, yeah?"
His wolf's stare had roaming hands. You looked
fruitful, barely seventeen, maybe every man's
mid-life fabulous. Tip-toeing away, we counted
larks bursting by in watercolors. We tried to
balance over a bubbling stream, got soaked
over our Frisbee-sized rocks. "Baby, Look,"
you purred, passing one gleeful oak with its
heartfelt signatures...

of carved hearts.

After noon, we found our white cottage (that wasn't
there). You danced, sang Dangerously In Love too
violets, double-flowering Zinnias. It was endearing --
how each sudden breeze peeled away our Picasso
T-shirts. You tossed spicy underlings to every pastel.
But it was the bathing -- and the hail of chilling
teardrops that caught us by surprise. Steam rose,
dear God, from "forever" dips and cruves. I saw
everything, even your heart-beats. The canopy of treetops
shook, turned very dark, almost black. We could barely
see. If we'd taken only a few steps, we would've made...

a thousand false turns.

It was bittersweet. How we'd come back years
later, reminiscing about that birder's eyes.
“Aaah,” he sighed, “Let Me Show You the Way!”
His beam of bright light found the delicious.
Turn here, there. We couldn't tell you what happened
next. You tried to cover your personables.
The danger was unspeakable. Would that Chef
Du Jour tie us up? Feast on the fruit?
In your diary (in italics), his “Holy Shit” kept
echoing over the trail. But you never saw a shovel.
I thought someone was only looking to rescue us.
You swore the birder would never forget—
“the music.”

Even after a merciless rain, he did a merry-go-
round for over an hour. His trumpeting ruby-red
eyes were as bright as any beast in the forest.
He wasn't blind. He took the longest way back.

Transubstantiation

A steel plate screwed in one thigh,
The other knee: titanium
Like the right wrist
Or the restored molars.

Your metal boutonniere
Tucked in your chest-pocket.
Three wires in your heart.
We are smelted from ore.

Like the tin man more and more
Of our essence has been transfigured.
A click as I walk, rub of steel on bone.
Your breath paced by a copper battery.

How can we keep on loving,
We who looked upon
Medusa's face and changed.
The snakes of time

Clothe our progression
From flesh to shine.

Grow-a -Father

Don't have a father? Use the Grow-a-Father! This product is for those who have found that their fathers have disappeared. But no worries—now, they will be with you!

Instructions:

Just add whiskey and watch this product grow, grow, grow! Use Crown Royal for best results.

Warning:

1. Adding too much liquor can cause figure to dissolve. Use the specific amount required in the instructions.
2. Placing a Grow-A-Woman near a Grow-A-Father can stunt the growth of your figure or potentially cancel out its presence. For best use, especially avoid the Grow-A-Woman: Redhead and Fifty version.

What do you do with your Grow-a-Father?

Use this figure for absence on holidays, birthdays, graduations and other special occasions. Does not include weddings or birth of children.

He is equipped to:

- Be there to teach you how to change a tire, grill a steak, or pour a strong drink.
- Listen to your problems and say *I am here for you*.
Exception: cannot provide comforting gestures such as hugs.
- Pose for pictures--if your Grow-a-Father has rosy cheeks and glassy eyes, attempt picture at later time, this means your figure needs to be recharged.
- Be a drinking buddy—can offer pleasant conversation. When figure tries to drive, take away keys. Warning: can offer loud protest, force you to drive instead, spew out insults, or begin to cry.

He is not equipped to:

- Remember your birthday—*Why didn't you tell me Happy Father's Day?*
- Give advice—*Don't trust anyone, sissy.*
- Support you—*Why do you write lies about me?*
- Love you—*Sorry, I haven't spoken to you in a while.*

*No return policy. Cannot be disposed of and/or recycled. Product disintegrates itself based on: own interests, hardship, and better options.

Product expiration date: unknown

god rides a lawn mower

there are poppies now
in between the road

and between

lupine rising in
my wildwood lungs

where I swear garbage
grew as thrown grace

into pits

of chip bags
and striped straws

the poppies have a
forcing strength

like the lucky poor

tarantula with eyes
that can not see

but feels wind
in his silk hairs

unless

the gardener
rides a tractor

slicing poppies and
lupine with

a thick blade
and headphones

making me think

all the spaces
between

us

it's what it is
to be and
nothing more

At Good Samaritan—Nightsong

Sycophant of pain, each needle rests
In its holster. Moonless corridors clashing
With carts. Jabber in Spanish, Polish, Tagalog,
Night shift confidences, charts that command
Nothing by mouth. Each room of despair the same
As each room of recovery in its incidentals:
Bed, chair, screen hung high with distractions.
Slow hand of a wall clock bearing the weight
Of the sleepless until time lumps in the throat,
Secretions thick with how goddamned neverending
Living has become. Code blue, soft soled runners,
Paddles: *clear*. A line on the monitor burps
Into a succession of foothills or remains flat
As the Great Basin. Skulls of cattle by bad water,

6.3.19

7.23 a.m.

55 degrees

Phantoms of fall in the cold grass this morning,
omens of winter, and my bare feet feel the
nippiness of October on this June morning; even the
dazzled ripples on the pond have taken on the look of cold.

Lesser Captures

I walked this morning
into a room that wore the pulse of me
once—
on a floor, a doorframe, a desk

now, the wars leap out in scents,
painting the ridges of patterned walls
as the door pushes,
dulling and dampening
reentry
like a clenched fistful
of mausoleum air to the throat

guilt-drenched little pieces—
shards—peek out of places
unfound
by eyes, by sun, by anything but the piling of dust
slit, once, by the fingertip
of a maybe-living body
maybe months,
maybe mindsets,
ago

letters, aspirations, lines
that served as proof enough of future, once—
stale, now, like the pale rings on glass coasters
gone tacky, translucent

Passions, Beliefs—abstracts—
once as tactile and sustaining as a chipped mug
steeped in 6am dark roast,
taming the cold for the Brave face
of Afraid—

no lesser tidied away
now
by the indifferent dab of a cloth

Elephant Feet

Elephant feet beat.
Swatting flies in metronome and bony tail.
The gibbons scream
For all these thirsty roots and souls.
There's little water here.
Dehydration and stampede
The plains recall their weight,
Pounded out layer on layer,
Until earth tears its hardened skin,
Offering hooves from ancient tombs.
They will not let me ride.
Nor crawl upon their concave hide.
No cooling with their mighty flap.
Affection packed in trunks.
I am left alone and stray.

November—II

Spent verdure bows to gravity
while last crisp ships sail breezily earthward.
What wild wind will whip forth
sending dry crackles into tiny tornadoes?

In the forest Doe stands spherically vigilant
stillness and caution married,
alone but for those unseen who seek her as meat,
and pronged ones who smell her as heat.

Who will arrive to shatter this statue,
inner pulsing ardor in contrast to immobility?

She awaits in the frozen
 consistency of unsafe,
knowing the chilling
 illusion of alone.

Oak + Second



Kristin LaFollette

First Time In Days

The sun, first time in days, though it seems weeks.
Vast fragile dome of blue and light like love
that wants to heal by being what you seek.
As rare as that the radiance above
that glows against the window now, sets off
the mirror's silver sparks and streaks the walls
with alphabets whose meanings have been lost,
like words in dreams we heard but can't recall,
a something just beyond we know is there—
our shadows are a hint of it—a world
we glimpse and can't forget, a leaf in air
blown by October winds, a flag unfurled
against a dawning sky your eye just caught—
like what life means that came to you unsought.

Crone

after Emily Dickinson

Sole crow bestows the diadem,
ruby of eternal feminine.

Flash of jewel reflects
tides of grief,
lost decades of sensual reign.

The sway and tilt,
each ripe movement
a plum.

Oh sweet sizzle to bursting--
Had only a mother found the seashell
of my ear and whispered thus.

Yet now crow.
Crumbling,
I don the crown.

butter

i didn't love her
but i loved the way she'd call
as soon as she woke up and
before she fell asleep. i loved the way
she'd call me 'baby'
as if the word was meant to dribble
off of her tongue and pour into
my ears.

she had a way
of making my body melt;
butter on warm bread.

i didn't love her,
not even when i told her i did.
but i loved the way
she'd make me want her
and then take it away. the way she'd make me think
i stood a chance
even though my knees buckled,
when she pulled me in
by the belt loops
of my jeans.

i didn't love her,
but i loved the six months i spent wondering
if she loved me.
and even when she told me
she didn't,
i loved to dream
of the day
she'd change her mind.

i love the voicemail she left
two weeks later, a string of continuously empty
sorries. but i especially loved
when i realized
i didn't love her. i never did.
not at all.

The War to End All

wars. Caught between fraternal
twin catastrophes: the king
& the beast, the great armies
of earth against the orphaned stars,
the blind eagle soaring above the world
imploding below, the European war
ends here momentarily. Long enough
to shift the dead, to offer prayer
to the sulfurous air. To sing
a liturgy no ear can bear to hear.

Fallen headstones might argue
with the earth's sudden embrace
as the yellow moonsong
slices the blue forest,
and accepts the quick marriage
of earth and body, the sudden death
and the silence of the living.
But the dark river slips past
the foundering heart, hunting
for truth in Babylon.
White morning waking

My horse slept well last night
on a bed of fresh hay, rightfully,
no different than an officer.
And woke to a full day
with frost heavy on everything,
and stars shining brightly back
at the village in snow below.
Not a day for an obituary
for August, my friend who refuses
to die in my heart-mind,
whose death permanently bruises
the blackened earth. Soon enough
we will ride together
and make another embankment.

Today I have volunteered.
Again! I hear you say. Dear one,
hear me out. Tonight
I will be St. Nicholas.
Only my knowledge of French
qualifies me to wear a long gray beard
and my best Bavarian fur coat
to scare the local children
with a bag full of chestnut offerings.
Rest assured, I shall be the best ever.

Spring here should be the same there
as everywhere shouldn't it?
Shouldn't the wind pardon us?
Forgive our fear? Our disbeliefs?
Our nettled doubts?
Shouldn't the sun seek us out
and perhaps massage our shoulders?

I welcome the ceasefire of winter
and can only wish it would spread
in a snowstorm slashing across Europe,
and even Russia. But I drift
too far from this hardened world,
the whirring whine of shells overhead,
heading North, heading South,
East or West. Always above.
Deadly stars. Always too damn near.

Tonight the river seduced the moon.
Who knew it was Christmas?
Or the New Year? There was snow.
It fell and gathered and we admired
its faith. Our vision blurs
as we look to the distances,
edges white as overpaint, pulled
towards the new constellations.
We blush to remember now
how white we too became, how warm
we were in our blankets of each other.

The River Beneath Us

This thing we call life is permeable.
As Heraclitus knew, it flows invisibly, inexorably
sometimes so quickly those we love are lost before we miss them.
Like the hapless fellow in Florida asleep and dreaming
when the bed, the dresser, TV and cell phone disappeared
(along with him) down a bottomless sinkhole.

First responders saw no sign of a victim
just an endless hole.
They heard no sound of life below
so
over his brother's curses
(who could hardly accept "one cannot
step in the same river twice")
they collapsed the house and poured ten tons of gravel
down the hole which grew deeper even as it filled.

This earth, geologists say, is mostly *karst*
a kind of Swiss cheese masquerading as solid
with underground tunnels, forgotten rivers,
abandoned lakes and seas, full of deceased sea creatures
from eons and eons past.
Sinkholes swallow up houses and patios,
municipal pools and tractor trailers. Once an oil rig.
Another time a child playing in her back yard.

Don't look for meteors burning the night skies
or North Korean rockets ratcheting the end of things.
We'll simply fall through and not come out again
our heartbeats echoing down an endless hole
until there's no one left to hear.

Michael Hogan

Head in the Clouds

Benji's mom was a fighter-pilot. Night after night, ever since he was born, she would tell him stories of her missions before he went to sleep. One time she told him how she assisted ground forces in the process of capturing a very dangerous man; another time she told him how she once navigated a bomb-drop (in a disclosed location). Once she even led a team, single-handedly, to the discovery of a stolen weapon arsenal and received a badge of honor for her efforts. Whenever Benji heard these stories, he would picture his mom sitting in her airplane with a big smile on her face, heading further up and into the sky.

Benji's dad was not too happy to hear her tell these stories to the young boy—*he* was one of those uptight, number-crunching accountants—and whenever he would stand in the hallway, arguing with Benji's mom about the recent story she just told the boy, Benji would toss and turn in bed, wondering what his adventure-seeking mom found in his overprotective, boring dad at all.

When Benji got older he begged his mom to take him for a spin in her airplane. She, of course, agreed, though his dad needed more convincing. They decided Benji just needs to be better prepared before the flight. And so Benji's mom brought him the airplane's manual and other safety instructions, and they would read and study them almost every night. Benji's dad protested again and said, *If he would only dedicate that much energy into his school work, maybe something good will turn out of him*, but then his mom would intervene and remind his dad she never went to college and look at her today, and maybe that's why she and he get along so well, because of their differences and not in spite of them. And then she would smile her famous smile, and all the anger Benji's dad felt seemed to disappear.

During his "training" Benji's mom treated him like any other rookie soldier in her unit. She would wake him up in the middle of the night to ask questions like *How do you check the air pressure in the cockpit?* Or *What do you do when the engine lights begin to blink?*

In the early hours of the morning, they would go out for a run around the block before coming back home and getting ready for school. This physical and mental “training” took a lot out of the young boy—he went to school exhausted and often fell asleep in class. Needless to say, that made his parents argue more, and his dad even threatened to go back on their original deal and forbid Benji ever getting near an airplane as long as he was still in school. This made Benji’s mom very angry, but she agreed that, for a while, the “training” needed to stop.

One night a few days later, Benji’s mom woke him up again in the middle of the night. He was still half-asleep but began to recite the different parts of the airplane he had memorized, thinking this was just another “training” session. His mom smiled and signaled him to be quiet. She told him to get dressed fast and follow her. He looked at his bedside clock, confused; the time was 4 a.m.

“Are we going running now?” he asked.

His mom smiled and said, “Sort of. We’re going on a little adventure.”

Sometime after his first flight, Benji’s mom got called away on a mission. She couldn’t specify where she was going and when she would come back. Naturally Benji’s dad worried but Benji was excited, and maybe a bit jealous, that his mom got to take off somewhere else and leave him alone with his dad.

When they received the news her plane went missing, Benji’s dad fell apart. Benji, who was ten years old at the time, didn’t understand what the big fuss was about.

Missing in Action—that was the term the army used. Benji’s dad explained it referred to soldiers who disappeared during combat. Ironically, Benji quite liked the word “disappeared.” It made him hopeful. After all, things that disappeared tended to reappear in his life quite often—he remembered how his dirty gym socks disappeared every morning and then the next day reappeared in his sock drawer as though by magic, neatly folded and clean. That made him certain his mom would reappear soon, just like his gym socks, all washed and cleaned.

She would come back, he strongly believed and repeated this mantra to himself whenever he felt tears accumulate in his eyes.

But this is not a story about Benji's mom or Benji's dad—this is a story about goggles. More specifically an old pair of aviator goggles Benji found when playing in the yard behind his house one day, a few weeks after his mom disappeared. These goggles, he knew, were sent to him by her from way up in the sky, and because of that they were magical; they could bring her back.

He knew his dad wouldn't understand, and so he kept it a secret; he hid the goggles underneath his pillow and would take them out only when he knew his dad had fallen asleep for the night. He would put them on, lie in bed, close his eyes, and imagine he was back on that airplane with his mom, her scarf flying in the wind before him, just like in an old movie.

As the years passed Benji never forgot about the goggles and kept them hidden from his dad. When Benji was accepted to a private middle-school out of state, his dad decided it was time for them to move—a *fresh start* was what he said, though Benji had mixed feelings; excited for the future ahead but still living with the memories of his mom in his head. As Benji and his dad packed up their old lives in boxes, all of a sudden Benji's dad discovered the old pair of goggles. He confronted Benji and asked him to throw them away. Benji refused and, in turn, explained how he got the goggles and why he kept them.

"These are childish dreams," his dad exclaimed.

"Not to me!" Benji replied and snatched the goggles from his dad's hand. "You do what you want to do, but I will never forget her!" Benji declared. He then placed the goggles around his neck and, ever since then, never took them off.

Despite constant harassments from his preppy middle-school classmates, Benji kept wearing the goggles all day, every day. By the time he got to high school, he was known as the "weirdo" who

read aircraft handbooks and manuals for fun during lunchtime and watched films like *Twelve O'Clock High* and *Top Gun* religiously.

One day, during recess, three upper-class boys started calling out to Benji, making fun of his appearance. He paid no attention to them at first, but then they began following him down the hall and approaching his locker just as he was putting together his textbooks for his next class. Two of them shoved him toward the locker while one of them grabbed him by the neck and yanked the goggles.

"Give it back!" Benji cried, mad. He tried to reach the goggles, but the two boys were still holding him pinned with his back to the locker.

The boy who took the goggles held them up in the air and laughed.

"What's the story with these?" he asked Benji. "Why do you always wear them?" He then turned to the other two boys and said, "Hey, guys...how much do you think it's worth?"

"Give it back!" Benji shouted. "You don't know how to use them!"

"Use them?! Hahaha..." the boy laughed. "Last time I checked we were on the ground and not high up in the sky, although..." He looked at the two boys and then back at Benji. "You are probably way up there..." He waved his hand in front of Benji's eyes as though to check if he was conscious.

"You have no idea!" Benji said. "They...they..." He hesitated before continuing, "They can find lost things."

"You don't say." The boy looked at him, amused.

"You don't believe me." Benji smiled. "Try them on!"

"You're serious?" the boy asked. "He's serious!" The three of them started laughing.

"If you're so tough—do it!" Benji teased the boy confidently.

The boy stared at him, angry, and looked at the goggles he held in his hand. He signaled the two boys to let go of Benji. He paused for a second, giggled, and then put the goggles on.

"I don't see anything different..." he declared.

“Take a step back, look around,” Benji guided him. “What do you see?”

The boy looked around the hallway. It was crowded and busy with students coming and going. However, for a brief moment, he felt as though time stood still; the crowd parted ways and he could see two boys down the hall, tossing a football with a gold star stitched on its side.

“Hey!” he called out, “that’s my football! I’ve been looking for it for weeks!” He took off the goggles, gave them to one of the other boys, and ran fast toward them.

The two boys stood across from Benji, who seemed a bit confused. One of them put on the goggles and looked around. All of a sudden he declared, “Dude!” He referred to the other boy. “My water bottle! What’s it doing in your bag?”

“I borrowed it?” the boy hesitated.

“I’m gonna kill you!” The other boy took off the goggles, furious.

“Let me see that.” The boy grabbed the goggles. “Hey! Look there,” he changed the subject. “My kid brother—he’s wearing my sneakers! I told him a million times not to take my things. Let’s get him!”

The two of them began moving fast across the hall, leaving Benji with a smug look on his face. He picked up the goggles from the floor, brushed them off, and placed them around his neck again proudly.

He hurried home that day, eager to spend the rest of the afternoon searching for his mom in the sky. He had never seen the goggles work so fast before, and he figured they might be ready now, *he* might be ready now, finally, to see his mom—to find her.

Benji came into his room just as his dad was folding the laundry. He had placed Benji’s clean clothes, underwear, and socks neatly into their separate drawers.

“I’ll be out back.” Benji tossed his backpack on the bed.

“Good day at school?” his dad asked, but Benji just waved and headed out.

Out in the yard Benji lay flat on the grass, put on his goggles, and looked up at the afternoon sky. He would do that from time to time, whenever he needed some peace and quiet. His dad followed him with his eyes from inside the house.

An hour passed and Benji still lay there on the grass. Suddenly he felt someone standing above him.

“No homework today?” his dad asked.

“Later. I need to check the goggles,” Benji answered.

“What happened?” His dad sat down on the grass next to him.

“They worked today! Three times!” Benji replied, excited. “I know they’ll work again. I just know it!” His dad was silent.

“You don’t believe me...” Benji sat up next to his dad. “No one ever believes me...go ahead, try it yourself!” He took the goggles off and handed them to his dad.

His dad held the goggles, admiring their weight and features. He glanced at Benji, who stared back at him with a hopeful look in his eyes.

“I don’t need the goggles, son,” his dad said, with a smile. “Because I see Mom every day, I see her *in* you.” He handed him the goggles.

Benji gripped them tightly.

“What do you see?” Benji eventually asked.

“I see her kindness and her courageous heart,” his dad replied, “her beautiful smile and mischievous eyes...” He pinched Benji’s cheek fondly.

“But don’t you ever wonder...?” Benji looked up, still holding onto the goggles.

Benji’s dad lay down on the grass and Benji joined him. They lay side by side for a while without speaking. The skies had changed colors before their eyes. They could see the clouds clearing out as darkness grew and took over the light.

As the moon revealed itself and the first stars came out, Benji's dad turned to Benji and asked, "What do *you* see?"

Benji hesitated for a minute and touched the grass underneath him. He then put on the goggles and closed his eyes. For the first time he could feel warm tears going down his cheeks, fogging up the glass.

Your father and I are trying to figure out why you watch so much TV these days

I.

Drunk charcoal-eyed propped up atop a gas stove
[how'd she get up there?] from on high not a
friend in sight a party full of strangers breathing

This kitchen is a coal mine, and he's the canary
more bottles than people more people than light
bulbs carbonated forgot my head
lamp He rides my bus must
live on my block parks
in front of the stove lights
up
[how'd he get in there?]

Nothing after that. Headlamp out.

I could fill in the
space between the stove and the bathroom floor
and the cold tub and the *stop get off* and
the
[how'd they get in there?]
But it's all dark until cold on my back
He's crushing my lungs he's turning on the light

II.

When they kicked me off the cross-country team
senior year for drinking at a party I came home
at 3 every day and watched hours of the *Food Network*
on the 10-inch TV in the kitchen propped on a chair
between the stove and the spice cabinet my legs folded neatly
under my body
my body folded neatly under my head

If only I had small porcelain bowls filled with salt to pinch
If I knew what coriander is for green, green, white,
silver, knives
If there had been wide countertops wide enough for steel
vats of steam
uniform containers gleaming unctuous wine flushed the right
amount of heat
If only a well-lit kitchen all the ingredients pre-
pared
and a ravenous audience then maybe

III.

Archival research and investigative reporters [what was she
thinking?] all find
a used condom in a small silver trash can in the corner of the
bathroom
for the record [how'd it get there?]

stop get off then alone again in someone's bedroom
a fan for ventilation and a cold
play song on loop lights
will guy I- I- I- I'd-
you home

IV.

Follow the recipe clues in the archive:
[we're trying to understand]
 4 hours a day 5 days a week: *Food Network*
 3 ways to say: *slut*
 2 versions of the story
black (lungs lights out)

Anniversary

Not what you wanted
 but you took me anyway.
 Not a leftover
but second choice
 to an ideal idol.
 The stones on the path
hard as the belief
 it will never end,
 harder than
understanding how it began.

All Is Absolute Perfection

The scholar-philosopher,
white-haired ghost of a life radiantly lived,
speaks at the borders of language,
his last talk ever
in a room with folding chairs
under a rose window—
shards of broken wisdom,
jagged edges sending light.

We strain to hear
through his deafness;
he has wrestled so many gods
and ideas of gods—
now he's back
in the soul of his first God,
drifting in innocence,
joking with the Unknown—

It fills the room
he smiles through his own impending death
and ours
to reassure us in the tangle
of microphone wires and amplified distortions—
that in this single moment
we are free.

lace for grandma (4/20/18)

fingertips of light
cascading into white,
waves of feather-like strands
collapse into shapes,
breaking off into shapes:
infinite fractals
of flowers and roses
and everything dainty,

but everything but dainty,
as these geometric repetitions
give way to minuscule tendrils,
lines of cotton
less than a hair thick but
stronger than steel,
even a widow's meticulous webs.

laid on the trims of blouses,
adding tiny detail to the
most mundane of cloth-
posterboy of bright femininity
lines domestic existence,
and here we find
patterns folding into patterns,
with secret strength falling
into reserves of more strength.

even when ripped, the delicate
is repaired seamlessly,
incongruous motifs reconciling
with pressed edges,
no matter how long it's been.
together they preserve their
vanilla-sweet power to hand down
as a beautifully resistant
heirloom of reminder...

my mother's mother
leaves to us
one last smile,
squeeze of the hand,
laid back on sheets donned
with pink-white flowers
as my mom kisses her
reclined forehead a final time

in lace,
mothers beget daughters,
geometric multiplication
of generations, linked
with lace-like lineages,
fractals of stories
and truths of matriarchal threads
passed on layer by layer,
through swirls of spiderlike fabric

in lace,
i remember the women
who have come before me,
history and smiles wrapped
in cotton art that
shines when held up to light

in lace,
i see,
i love,
& i believe.

Foreshadow

My cheekbone wants so badly to meet the collar
of your shirt, standstills in a private war—
only the smell of detergent can yield this intimacy,
new iterations of the same forgetfulness.
I try to draw you but can only capture your thumbs,
dark and wintry, the selfish economy of things.

*Stop forgiving me for giving up.
Stop letting me believe there is a choice.*

In the moments before I fall asleep I worry
about the things I consumed that day, like while
I sleep they will all catch up to me, break
my insides hard and clean like stale toast.

on the first day of quarantine—

i wane every spring,
for some reason,
which is strange
because i love
when the air warms
& the ducks plump,
heads nestled & resting
in their bodies' round cradle.
the ends of my hair
are like burnt hay,
or straw, something
that could be used
for kindling, probably,
if we were left out
to forage in the wilderness
& could find rocks
smart enough to bash together.
the light golden-honey
outside. your throat sore
& coated with tea i made—
not an act of kindness
as much as self-preservation
because if you get sick
then what will be left of me?
i'd be the left wing of a butterfly
on a splintered thorax.
i'd be the spore under a microscope
collapsing into heat.

That Last Day



Fabrice B. Poussin

Slice of Life

We should know by Page 10
that the gat of Gatsby has no chance
against the cannon of Buchanan

but we miss the foreshadow,
no matter how obvious or ominous,
even in our own plots.

Razor nick of chin and calf.
Sickled moon. Edge of highway.
Trembling leaf over blade of grass.

We walk through the day
holding cups of coffee,
paper shields against the world.

Fifth Avenue Courting Ritual

I sometimes say that every suitor needs to take me
to my favourite place, just so I can see their reaction
amidst the Windex-clean glass cases
filled with sparkly things out of our price range
and polished maybe-mahogany guarded by men
in suits so neat they might as well be military.
If they can survive a trip to Tiffany's,
then maybe we're meant to be.

Martyr

Lucy opened the passenger door of the ancient, baby blue Jeep and was immediately met with the threat of stale vodka. She suppressed the urge to slam the door shut, march back into house, and never look back again. But she knew her mother-in-law was waiting for them. God forbid she keep that woman waiting. The smell could not shock her anymore, but it still had the power to make her sick.

“Nick, where have you been? It smells like a bar in here. Let’s just take a cab. We’re already running late.” She hesitated another moment, steadying herself on the door before climbing in. Lucy hated driving in the snow, despite living in the Northeast. She especially hated driving her husband’s old truck. She already noticed a few stray flakes making their way toward the driveway.

“Hun, I am fine to drive. I just dropped off Johnny. He’s been drinking over at O’Malley’s all day. You know how it is for him around the holidays without Kate,” Nick said, and he grinned that toothy smile which had once left her defenseless and now just left her drained.

“You better swear you are good to drive,” Lucy sighed but she was already in the passenger seat. Lying came as easy to Nick as ignoring his lies came to Lucy. She struggled to pull the seat belt across the swell of her belly. The last time she had been in the car with Nick, her belly had barely been a bump.

Nick drove excruciatingly slow, white knuckling the steering wheel, like he always did whenever he was overcompensating for how much he had to drink. Or trying to convince Lucy otherwise. He chatted about nothing—who he ran into that afternoon, how excited his mom was to see her, what Johnny bought his nieces. But Lucy was not listening. She had grown adept at disappearing when he was like this.

As they pulled off their street, Lucy sniffed another more insidious smell circulating the car. Mouthwash. That was the telltale. Minty fresh tingled up her nostrils turning into shame that crept up the center of her body until it settled firmly behind each eye. The

faint beginnings of a headache. The baby kicked her tiny heels into underside of Lucy's ribs as if she, too, could feel the shame. Maybe she could, Lucy thought. Lucy didn't just worry that her baby would come out with some rare disease or missing a toe. But that her daughter would enter this world already hating her for all the decisions she made before she was born.

Lucy knew she should make Nick pull over. But she imagined the argument that would ensue, and she knew that one of them would end up going home. And Lucy had a plan she had to carry out that night that revolved around both of them getting to her mother-in-law's. She weighed both evils for a millisecond. And she said nothing.

Exhaustion had hit her hard this last trimester. She sat back deep in her seat, resting her head on the window, Nick's voice becoming a dull buzz. He had promised to "try" for the holidays. He had promised to "try" for the sake of the baby. "Trying" meant drinking vodka instead of whiskey—clear alcohol made him talkative instead of sad.

Her breath formed a cloud on the window. She doodled a lone stick figure. A self-portrait.

"Hun, are you listening? What do you think? Hun?"

Lucy came to and scribbled *fuck you* on the window and thought, *that's what I think*. She quickly wiped it away with her fingers.

On cue, snow began to fall as Nick carefully navigated their suburban, cookie-cutter neighborhood. The type of made-to-order, vinyl-sided hell where only a magnifying glass could differentiate each house. A neighborhood where young couples found sanctuary and safety in the sameness when they were ready to start a family and escape city prices. Just as Lucy and Nick had done so many years before. Except when the neighborhood quickly filled with baby carriages, Subarus and the echoes of weekend BBQs, Lucy and Nick's home remained still and quiet. Lucy grew to hate it, but she never hated it as much as in that moment. It looked like a snow globe. And she wanted to smash it.

As Nick droned on, she felt around in her jacket pocket for her new pink Rosary beads. They were a heavy-handed gift from her mother-in-law, Nora, when they found out they were having a girl.

Lucy discretely fingered the Hail Mary's. This was all still new. Praying. Like full-on *in the name of the father, the son, and the holy spirit, bless me father for I have sinned* praying. And she did not like Nick watching. Nick was not religious. Lucy wasn't even sure yet if she was religious. Or just desperate.

With the news of the baby, Nick had set off on the twelve steps for the umpteenth time in his life. Nora took the news as an opportunity to smother her long-lapsed daughter-in-law in Catholic guilt.

"The little one will need to be baptized, you know."

"I've had Nicky's Christening gown dry cleaned. I have to fix the stitching on the bonnet, oh, but it is still beautiful."

"If my son is at church, dear, then you and my grandchild should be too."

Nora had continued to dig until low on hope and excuses, and sick of trying to explain that although AA was held in the church basement it was not actually Church, Lucy joined her mother-in-law at St. Cecilia's one Sunday morning.

To the shock of all, probably even Christ himself, Lucy took to the whole prayer thing quick. She had no patience for the antiquated world views preached during Mass or her mother-in-law's blind devotion, but she thrived off the ritual and promise of forgiveness. Lucy found peace in the cavernous space where her whispered sins and desires felt small, manageable.

In the Jeep tonight, Lucy went over her script again. She needed to speak her mother-in-law's language. The simplified language of Christ and doom. Her mother-in-law was a devout Irish-Catholic who blamed everything on God. Lucy's three previous miscarriages were "God's will, bless their souls." Everything was simply "God's will." Which is to say, everything was black or white. And although Lucy would never agree with her, she knew she needed Nora's help. Lucy hoped confronting her tonight, with imminent birth of Jesus and her own grandchild, would compel her to action.

As they pulled up to Nick's childhood home, an unassuming but pristine brown raised ranch at the end of a cul-de-sac, Lucy readied herself. She pulled down the visor mirror and cringed. Tonight, her face was so bloated that her once-adorable freckles

were more like irregular moles splashed across her cheeks. Her skin looked sallow and brittle as if the baby had sucked all the pigment out of her. Wiry white hairs climbed her dirty-blond temples. A toxic combination of anxiety and insomnia had wrung her out. She spent all her time managing the racing queue of unanswerable questions playing at the forefront of her brain. Would she be a good mother? And what does it even mean to be a good mother? Was she too old? And what to do about Nick.

She snapped the visor shut and forced these thoughts to the farthest corners of her mind. She had to concentrate on her plan.

“Nick, ninety minutes. Tops. You promised, remember?” Lucy said turning to her husband.

“Lucy, lighten up. Jesus Christ. Ya, ninety minutes. It’s Christmas Eve. Can we take a break from your anxious bullshit for one night?” Nick slammed the car door, grabbed the few gifts from the back seat, and walk towards the house without waiting for her.

Nick’s mood swings were getting worse. Lucy refused to cry. She knew if she started now, she wouldn’t be able to stop.

When she entered the house, she was immediately met with the synthetic smells of Christmas. Balsam, gingerbread, forced cheer. The fanfare was already underway in the kitchen.

“Nicky, you look too tired honey. Are you getting enough sleep? Honey sit down here. Nicky, I cooked your favorite, honey baked ham. Are you eating enough? Nicky, you look skinny. What is she feeding you these days? Let me pour you a drink....”

Lucy hated when Nora called him Nicky. No one called him Nicky.

Per usual, Lucy found Nick’s stepdad on the worn, checkered couch in the living room, watching some game. He grunted a hello as Lucy walked through. Lucy found him pleasant even if they didn’t speak. A pleasantness entirely attributable to the fact that when he came along a few years back, he relieved the brunt of her mother-in-law duties.

She had to walk by Nora’s prized Nativity scene to get to the kitchen. Spread across the entirety of the living room console table, it was gaudy, far-too ornate for the homely décor surrounding it but even Lucy had to admit it was beautiful. Nora set it up every year with a surgical precision. No one was allowed to touch it, lest a wise

man or shepherd stand out of place. Nora would know. The scene was outfitted with real hay, giving the living room an earthy smell. The farm animals in the scene had a felt fur that had worn thin over the years. Mary was adorned in a real cloth robe, standing adoringly over the little Jesus figurine.

Lucy confided in Mary a lot, because she was a woman and maybe she would understand. At first, Lucy had prayed for the modest, run-of-the-mill things—her baby’s health, her husband’s continued sobriety, world peace. As her comfort grew so did her pleas. She asked forgiveness for feeling a constant sense of disappointment in her husband, herself, and her life. She told Mary about the emotional affair last year. How it never turned physical but maybe that was worse because now Lucy struggled to compartmentalize this obligatory guilt. How the flirtatious, graphic texts excited her just as quickly as they disgusted her, sending her running back to the comfort of her husband and resulting in the pregnancy. Surprise.

“It’s beautiful isn’t it?” Her mother-in-law asked, sneaking up behind her.

“It is something, Nora. Merry Christmas.” Lucy and Nick hadn’t even bothered to put up a tree this year.

“Thank you dear. I am so happy you are both here. Was starting to wonder what was keeping you.”

They were seven minutes late.

As Lucy turned to embrace her mother-in-law, Nora yelp and jumped back with theatrical bravado, “Gracious, dear. You are big as a house! Are you sure we haven’t twins growing in there? We have to get you fed.”

“Ha. No, just the one Nora.” Lucy swallowed a scream and followed her mother-in-law into the dining room.

It was just the four of them at dinner. As Lucy’s family disappeared over the years— first her father (cancer), then her mother (cancer, again), and finally her sister (a job across the country) – Lucy found herself in the company of her mother-in-law with alarming frequency. Nick was a devoted mama’s boy and a hopeless only child. He was a good son, really. Patient, attentive. Lucy shouldn’t fault him for this, but she did. She had hoped that over the years, this attachment would fade as they formed their own

family. Lucy's own mother had been overwhelmed by the simplest tasks and asks of motherhood. She sought solace in gin martinis and painkillers, always keeping Lucy and her sister at arm's length. Nora, on the other hand, doted on Nick with a feral maternal ferocity, still. Lucy always felt in the way.

"Now, isn't this nice." Nora stood at the head of the table with her arms spread wide, surveying her three-person kingdom. She nodded and they sat. "Now, I bet you don't have meals like this at home. Eat up. My Nicky with his appetite," Nora said to Nick but for all to hear.

"Next year little Helen will be here with us waiting for Santa. God willing," Nora continued.

"God willing, ma, God willing," Nick replied. He was barely paying attention, busy loading his plate.

"We have not settled on name, Nora," Lucy managed. It came out stiff, rehearsed. Because she had rehearsed it. She knew her mother-in-law would bring up the "Helen" thing again and Nick would do nothing to stop her. Helen was Nick's sister who died as an infant, thirty-years ago. Nora was hell-bent on naming their baby, Lucy's baby, after her long-dead daughter. It was demented and infuriating, and Lucy could not get caught up in this argument tonight. She had to stick to the plan.

"Well, dear, there is still time yet to decide," Nora responded, unphased.

Nick shot Lucy a glance, eyes narrowed, meant to keep her quiet.

"Lucy, here's more mashed. You are eating for two now, you know." Nora slopped another spoonful of clumped potatoes on Lucy's plate with exaggerated flourish. Lucy nodded, feigning gratitude as best she could. As if she could forget she were eight months pregnant and could barely push her chair into the table.

"Well, anyways. You two must be so happy. So much to be thankful for this year. A baby finally."

No one answered.

Nick and Nora chatted about nothing as Nora kept his glass full. Lucy allowed their useless words to thicken in her head as she picked through mushed peas and overcooked ham. Nick's stepfather ate quick and excused himself. Only Lucy seemed to notice.

Lucy busied herself trying not to count the number of times Nora refilled Nick's vodka cranberry. It was useless—twice. She decided the third refill would put her plan into motion. Three would be her signal. The woman refilling Nick's glass was also the only woman Lucy believed could help Nick. Save him. This was not Nick's first time falling off of sobriety. Which is to say, it was not his second or even his third. Only this time, there was a baby. As his sobriety steadily vanished, the baby continued to grow. At eight weeks they had heard the baby's racing heartbeat for the first time and Nick cracked a celebratory beer at dinner. Nick missed the 12-week ultrasound, insisting he had a stomach bug, but Lucy knew better. By the twenty-week mark, her baby was kicking non-stop, Nick was back on whiskey and Lucy knew she needed help.

While Lucy awaited the signal, she focused on the wall across from her, behind Nick. A shrine to her husband's thirty-seven years on earth. His framed face smiling back at her from three decades. Newborn Nick in his first photo swaddled in a hospital-issue receiving blanket. Little League Nick swinging an oversized bat squinting into the sun and missing his two front teeth. Prom King Nick, hair gelled up at an impossible angle, hands casual in the pockets of his first suit. And then, off to the far-left was wedding-day Nick, young, carefree and beautiful, smiling down at his beaming, golden-haired bride. Their smiles so hopeful they looked fake. But they weren't. It was the only photo of Lucy in the whole house. That used to bother her. Tonight, though, she was grateful to avoid reminders of their past. Reminders of when they were happy. A lifetime ago.

Nick's glass smashed to the floor dragging Lucy back to the present.

"Nicky, don't you worry yourself. I'll pick that up. You know where the glasses are," Nora said. She was already on her hands and knees, cranberry juice spreading out around her like a pool of blood. Lucy never understood why people said vodka had no smell. The noxious, chemical smell had already filled the four corners of the dining room.

This was her signal. It had to be.

"Sheesh, I'm sorry ma," Nick said as he headed for the kitchen. Lucy got up to help Nora.

“Nora, I’d like to talk to you about something. Well, I’d like to talk to you about Nick. His drinking, really.” Lucy began slow.

“What’s that, dear?” Nora asked from the floor. Lucy often marveled at the frankness of her mother-in-law’s feigned ignorance. Lucy knew this would not be easy.

“Nora, I am fed up. He will not change for me. I have tried. He needs to quit. For me. For the baby. He listens to you. Please. Please talk to him. Tonight.”

“Oh, Nicky seems fine to me, dear,” Nora said as she continued to collect jagged pieces of glass. Twenty years dutifully standing by her own indulgent husband did not make Nora a loyal or even a sympathetic ally. Long since dead, Nick’s father had been a cruel drunk who spent Nick’s childhood taking out his insecurities on his family. Lucy knew this and pushed forward.

“I’ll leave him. I will do it. I swear.” Her jaw tightened as she realized the truth in her words.

Nora finally looked up from the mess. Her eyes were wide, full of something Lucy could not quite place. Whatever it was, Lucy had never seen her mother-in-law look so naked.

“I told him he has to stay.”

It was guilt. Nora’s eyes were full of guilt.

“Excuse me?”

“He came to me a few months ago. Before the baby, of course. He told me he was going to leave you. I told him I’d never forgive him. Neither would Christ. Straightened him right out,” Nora explained, matter-of-fact. Whatever guilt Lucy had thought she’d seen in Nora’s eyes was long gone.

Lucy was overcome by another bout of shame so intense her vision distorted until she was viewing the room through the wrong end of the telescope. Shame that the woman in front of her knew more about her own life than she did. All her praying and planning for this moment had failed her. She had nothing left to say.

Before she could manage to get out of the room, Nora called after her.

“Lucy, dear, you’d be amazed what you could live with. That’s exactly what I told Nicky too.”

Lucy looked back at her mother-in-law on the floor, fully dedicated to mess of shattered glass around her.

The old Jeep's heat blew furious hot air straight back into Lucy's face, matting her hair to her forehead. She knew it was useless to try to adjust it. She cracked her window. Cold air kept her present. She had climbed right in the driver's seat this time. There had been no discussion.

You'd be amazed what you could live with.

Watching the lifeless highway pass in front of her, she was overcome with sadness and fatigue but also a certainty. Certainty that she was driving towards something new.

As the highway turned into the back road, the snowfall picked up and she began to feel sick again. She began working at the Rosary beads in her lap. The physical pain of this pregnancy had turned unrelenting in the last few weeks — the violent stream of morning shits, the never-ending heartburn, the swollen feet she couldn't see when she looked down. At least the pain kept her alert, distracted even from the exhaustion. Exhaustion so complete sometimes she spent the day splayed the floor of the master bathroom just to conserve energy between pees. She kept a pillow in the tub. When she did get around to closing her eyes, she imagined herself holding the baby growing inside her, her tiny daughter. She never imagined Nick there. Now at least she understood why.

"Nick, wake up. Nick. Goddammit Nick." She reached over and nudged her husband in the arm.

"What? Luc, what's up?" His breath smelled medicinal and spoiled across the car. He used to chew gum to cover the smell. He didn't bother anymore.

"You were going to leave me." Her voice shook with effort.

"What? Shit. Nora had too much to drink again." Someday Lucy would have to teach her baby the difference between the truth and a lie. Right and wrong. She no longer had the strength or the desire to teach her husband, too.

Nick reached toward her belly. She flinched at the shadow of his hand looming toward her. She pushed it away.

"You'd be amazed what you can live with. *Right?* Isn't that right Nick?" She couldn't control her voice. She wouldn't.

“Huh?” Nick sighed, combing his fingers through his unruly curls, once a silken brown, now the color and texture of dryer lint.

Then so quiet, in case the baby could hear her and understand, “Nick, do you even want to have this baby?”

When he didn’t answer right away, Lucy turned to the man sitting next her—a man vaguely resembling the Nick she fell madly and ignorantly in love with fifteen years ago. Except this version of Nick was faded, fuzzy around the edges. With charcoal smudges under his red-rimmed eyes. And a swollen belly hanging where there once was a taut muscle. Hands littered with liver spots and veins she didn’t recognize. She did not recognize any of it. How could she live with this?

She was dizzy now. This pregnancy, the cycle of becoming and unbecoming had left Lucy in a constant state of vertigo. Self. Woman. Wife. Sister. Daughter. Mother. Person. Nick wouldn’t change. But she would. She already had.

“Nick, answer me. Now.”

And as soon as she said it, there was deafening *thud* against the front bumper. The sound of something dense hitting metal at a high speed. At least that’s what it felt like and she felt it before she saw anything. A hulking shadow filled the windshield as it cracked down the middle. The Jeep’s headlights only catching it for a moment before it was swallowed by the bumper. Two more *thud*, *thuds* underneath them, reverberating up through the floorboards, into Lucy boots until she could feel the vibrations in her heart.

Lucy threw the steering wheel at an ungodly angle to the left but it was too late. The truck skidded across the median then the entire left lane. A snowbank materialized and they were air born. The Jeep landed delicately, somehow, within inches of the tree line.

“Fuck. That was just a deer, right?” Nick finally exhaled. Silence filled the car like a prayer as snow pixelated the windshield.

Lucy squinted out into white night, the metallic scent of shock stinging her eyes. She took a quick inventory of herself. She slowly rotated her neck in a circle. She rubbed her stomach and the baby kicked to assure her she was okay. Her heart was pounding in her ears, but she felt fine.

The silence sharpened between them.

“I guess I’ll go check it out,” Nick finally sighed. He opened the door, letting in a bitter gust of snow and a selfish sense of relief. Lucy looked down to realize she was still clenching her Rosary beads.

Within seconds, Nick ran back to the car and Lucy rolled down her window.

“Poor dumb son of a bitch. Think we need to call animal control?”

“You still haven’t answered my question.”

“Are you fucking kidding me Lucy? You just almost killed us!”

She was met with the bitter stench of stale vodka. Again. Lucy exploded into laughter. Deep, guttural, laughter that shook the entire car. She laughed like she hadn’t laughed in years.

She continued laughing as she put the car in reverse and eased it over the snowbank and back onto the road.

She continued laughing as she thanked the deer for its sacrifice in saving many lives on that night.

She continued laughing as she realized that Nora was right. Lucy was amazed with what she had lived with. And she didn’t want to be amazed anymore.

Nicky would understand.

under the surface

if visible at all
as body heat
unfolding
from the eye,
the salt waters
miscible

how long before
even that difference
is lost?

we burn inside
quenched we
are relieved
and no longer
struggle in the
flame

fire, the magnet
source of all love
drags me sopping
through the surface

World Amnesia

A wet August. Rain
Sluices deeper into night,
and night struggles
against its resolve
to remain mute. Blue
spikes of freedom
bloom on the throat.
Sound is sight given free reign
and pardons no pun.
Wind's fasting becomes memory
in glowing amber.

The tiger must wait,
must wait until light turns
its back, and the distance
between colors, yellow flames
and scarlet waves, ignites
in the open veins of a tree.
It would have laughed at the idea
that the world could or would
be changed, rendered better,
or made new. Reimagined
into something that accepted
my small part as a piece
of its new self.
The collapsing lungs
that exhaled me
might open a door,
might unhinge my hands,
my dark staring eyes
and suddenly two rivers of light
would merge in the color of amber
and the kinship of memory.

Richard Weaver

After The Argument

Whatever, you say
then say again
Whatever
as if there were some wit there
not mere pettiness.

I drive away in the car and
in the concrete dungeon of downtown traffic
lose myself amid bumpers and odors of exhaust and cacophony of
horns
even as decorative gas lamps and fountains relieve the eye.
Then orange trees along the boulevard
the opening up of the country road and sweet wind at last.

I know some people merely do what their power permits them to do
even if it steals light from another's eyes.
How good it is now to feel your presence melt away
and music fills the car
as if your words were the spume of an ocean wave
evaporating in the sun
so that I can forgive
so that the ordinary will once again
become miraculous
and spirit percolate through all the narrow spaces.

I return past the redundant lawns of our neighbors
watching their sprinklers shine in a dozen rainbows.
I shall tell you all this in wonder.
Shall I?
Whatever.

Michael Hogan

Hunger

Sometimes Mother
I see
your delighted eyes

at your Chicago
apartment door Sometimes
you're so gone

I'm hanging in space Empty
and so hungry What is
Mother hunger when one is 74?

Ache for familiar flesh
the warm soup with egg noodles
a slice of *apfel kuchen*

In my dream
I'm in a grief circle
letting it all hang out

I throw my hair about
long as it used to be
in one fell swoop

I rub your ashes on my face
I cry out "Rip cloth
Rip skin"

*Unsinn! You've lived without me
since you were seventeen Stop acting
like your father all that Russian*

*drama may be good for poetry
but not for living
Write me a poem*

*because you must But don't disturb
my wanderings I need to learn how
to be dead*

Everything Upright Can Speak

Everything upright
can speak in the city.
See how the
stacked bricks
and steel bridges
curse into our windows
as we glide by.

Look how the
big-lipped women
drape down the glistening
flanks of the sky
scrapers, sharing their
beautiful secrets, suspended
from the hooks
of newly minted desire.

Down where we walk
the shallow windows
tell their bright stories
using faceless dolls
who have stopped
in their tracks
mid-sentence
in their matching outfits—

Flat-faced buses
hiss and rumble between
us, their broad flanks
urging us on
to dinner and a show,
the best divorce
attorneys, craft beer,
funerals, cheap
flights to somewhere else.

Tattered blue flyers
for last week's
moving sale
fringe the lampposts
and are beginning
to dissolve
in the nearby gutter.

A homeless man, dozing
in a square of
borrowed shade
is wearing a Nike shirt.
Just Do It
he urges, as we pass.

Susan Chock Salgy

Escape

The bedroom door opened, and a faint sliver of light drew a line over Abigail's squeezed-shut eyes. She kept them closed as the door opened wider.

"Abby, are you ready?" Christine whispered from the hallway.

Abigail threw off her blankets and jumped out of bed, spreading her arms wide to show off her already-buttoned coat. Christine shot a glance over her shoulder, then smiled and raised a finger to her lips. Abigail mimicked the gesture.

Christine entered the room and kneeled in front of Abigail. "Remember where we hid your bag?"

Abigail dropped to her hands and knees and dragged a small suitcase out from underneath her bed. Christine reached in and retrieved another, larger suitcase. With her other hand, she adjusted the collar of Abigail's coat.

"Alright, let's go," Christine said, standing and taking Abigail's free hand in hers. "Quietly, okay? Tip-toe."

The two walked toward the cracked-open door, and Christine jolted to a stop as a low rumbling sound broke their silence.

She turned back to face Abigail. "No, no, baby, hold the bag up, don't roll it."

"But it's heavy," Abigail said.

"I know, but you have to be big and strong, okay?"

Abigail nodded and hoisted the bag up, holding it straight-armed above her head.

"Alright, good job. Hold it up until we get to the car. Don't let go of my hand."

"Can we say bye to Daddy?"

"No, Daddy's with his friends right now. Do you remember what to do when they're here?"

"Stay away."

"Good. No more talking now. Let's go."

The two moved hand in hand through the door and down the hallway, long, careful strides taking them over creaky patches of the

floor. They descended the stairs one at a time, feet separating and joining back together in a steady rhythm. Christine peered around the corner at the base of the stairwell, and, turning to look into Abigail's eyes, tapped her lips a few times.

They turned the corner. Down the hall, adjacent to the home's entryway, light bled into the darkened passage from beneath a closed door. Men's muffled voices laughed and spoke over one another from behind it.

"Mommy," Abigail said as they crept closer.

"Shh."

"But—"

"Hush, Abby."

Christine kept her eyes glued on the door as they approached. Her grip on Abigail's hand tightened as they passed. She placed a hand on the front door's handle and slowly turned it, careful to avoid any rattling. As she pushed it open, a loud clunk echoed from behind her. The men's voices silenced. Abigail stood, arm still extended upward, looking down at her fallen suitcase.

"What was that?" a voice asked from inside the room.

"Relax, it was probably just the wife," another replied. "Let me go check."

Christine threw the door open and scooped up the suitcase. Pushing Abigail in front of her, she rushed outside, kicked the door shut, and made her way toward the car that was waiting beside the curb.

Christine tossed the suitcases into the back seat, looked back at the house, and grabbed Abigail by the shoulders. "Lay down on the floor of the car," she said. "Don't get up until I tell you to."

"I'm sorry, Mommy—"

"Now, Abigail!"

Abigail crawled into the car and laid down, curling into a ball and covering her head with her hands. The car door slammed shut behind her. Christine straightened and turned to face the man walking out of the house.

"Sorry, hon," she said. "I didn't mean to be so loud."

"What are you doing?" he asked, stopping in front of her and crossing his arms.

"Danielle invited me out."

“I don’t know Danielle. Why are you leaving so late?”

“It was a last-minute thing, you know...” Her eyes darted to the side, then back to him.

“Don’t fucking lie to me,” he said, leaning closer.

Her body stiffened. “I’m not lying! You can call Danielle if—”

“I’m not going to call Danielle. I don’t know who the fuck Danielle is.”

“Okay, okay, don’t call her, then.” She took a long breath and placed her hands on her hips, releasing the tension in her muscles. “We’re just getting some drinks downtown. I’ll be back in a few hours.”

As he opened his mouth to reply, another man leaned out of the front door and yelled, “Ned, come on!”

Ned turned and waved a hand at him. The man swung his arms upward in frustration and disappeared into the house.

Turning back around, Ned pointed a finger at Christine and said, “Be back before midnight.”

“Okay. I will.”

“Fine.”

Christine stood and watched until he returned inside, and as closed the door behind him, she jumped into the car. After fumbling with the keys for a moment, she turned the ignition, drove around a corner, and parked.

“Abby?” she asked, twisting to face the back seat.

Abigail pulled her knees tighter to her chest.

“Baby, it’s okay. You can sit up now.”

Sniffling, Abigail pulled herself into the seat and wiped away the tears running down her face. “I’m sorry, Mommy, I didn’t mean to drop it.”

“Oh, honey...” She smiled and ran a hand over Abigail’s hair. “It’s okay.” Turning back around, she crossed her arms over the steering wheel and rested her chin on them. The empty road stretched out before her. “We’re okay.”

What is it Like?

*I'm in the dark
behind dark above
dark below*

*dark Nothing
comes in many shades
and masses Is thick*

*is thin is one
fell swoop is many
gusts is still*

*is bright
Is known
is unknown*

*I have never been here
I have always been here*

Dickinson—and *Triumph*

If I could find you now
in the whispered crevices of fallen timbers that surround,
in the stench of spent oil or blackened rubs on knuckles
I *would* cry
and not the hollow kind of before,
but heaving, ruptured,
shaken loose from vibrations that have sored wasted muscles,
locked joints in arthritic clasp on the trigger so long that at last
there is *only*—alone—left
in a mind that remembers
your drums, your dead
your prospect tasting of retrospect
and the tyranny—my own
contrition now of bayonet

Citations:

Emily Dickinson, *My Triumph lasted till the drums* (F1212 A)

Robin Long

White morning waking

My horse slept well last night
on a bed of fresh hay, rightfully,
no different than an officer.
And woke to a full day
with frost heavy on everything,
and stars shining brightly back
at the village in snow below.
Not a day for an obituary
for August, my friend who refuses
to die in my heart-mind,
whose death permanently bruises
the blackened earth. Soon enough
we will ride together
and make another embankment.

Today I have volunteered.
Again! I hear you say. Dear one,
hear me out. Tonight
I will be St. Nicholas.
Only my knowledge of French
qualifies me to wear a long gray beard
and my best Bavarian fur coat
to scare the local children
with a bag full of chestnut offerings.
Rest assured; I shall be the best ever.

Spring here should be the same there
as everywhere shouldn't it?
Shouldn't the wind pardon us?
Forgive our fear? Our disbeliefs?
Our nettled doubts?
Shouldn't the sun seek us out
and perhaps massage our shoulders?

I welcome the ceasefire of winter
and can only wish it would spread
in a snowstorm slashing across Europe,
and even Russia. But I drift
too far from this hardened world,
the whirring whine of shells overhead,
heading North, heading South,
East or West. Always above.
Deadly stars. Always too damn near.

Tonight the river seduced the moon.
Who knew it was Christmas?
Or the New Year? There was snow.
It fell and gathered and we admired
its faith. Our vision blurs
as we look to the distances,
edges white as overpaint, pulled
towards the new constellations.
We blush to remember now
how white we too became, how warm
we were in our blankets of each other.

Schaeffer Lights a Candle

In St Bartholomew's Church a stained glass window
memorializes Carmine Zisa,
a farmer who hanged himself
after a portion of his land was sold to developers
who built split level houses on that land.
But all the land wasn't sold, part was still for farming.
Schaeffer wonders why Carmine wasn't content
to farm the remaining land. He wonders
if the farmer hanged himself because of the land
or for some other reason.
The candle Schaeffer lights is in the front of the church,
the stained glass is in the back.

bad habits

she asked me why i let my fingernails grow.
aren't you afraid they're going to break?
she asked.
why do you let them grow so?

i let them stretch out
i said,
nice and long
and pretty so someone will find me beautiful.
and then,
i continued
even though she opened her mouth,
let it gape
trying to eat my logic.

i will trace the outline of their jaw with them
and dance them down their back.
i'll paint them their favorite shade of love
and grip their waist with them
as they grip my core
with swirling sanctuaries of their mind.

we'll sigh whispers of gold,
of love and the fear of it
until our breath gets tangled.

one day they'll wake with sleep in their eyes
and scars on their chest
for my nails will have sunk in too deep.

i waited to break the intrigue
in her eyes.

and then they leave;
my hands will meet at the center of my chest
and start to prowl, shred.
my pretty little fingernails will
claw their way
to the core; will unroot
the love they planted nice and deep.
they'll splinter each branch and splatter
its blood
until i'm hollow and messy
and my nails
are just nubs.

Madison Barlow

Amherst

I wonder often
if through once-photographed-fields and rolling wheels—
the radio gone silent for the sounds of scratching pavement,
narration—
if Recollection finds,
and like overturned leaves
becomes a tumbling column

a soft tornado
of our papered decay
that sooner dies away at deciphering,
entering, touching the spin
Remorse's fingertip whim, you might imagine

but there is no eye left to reach
to relive, to redo
no sacred space saved in the gliding chaos
we created—unaware

so you straighten your back
and steer—steady—as the white lines tick past
and the upturned dust floats in your wake—
suspended—safe, there, in the reflection of your mirror

where it will be captured, gathered,
packed and pressed
to the earth again

Robin Long

confessional

i don't feel God when i go to church.
i don't feel spirits rise and sink
within the marrow of my bones
and blood of my veins
the way the priest says i should.

sometimes, though,
when i'm being blanketed
in salty sheets of foam that
carves out the coast
of my home, i see a sun
that melts into a seaside horizon,
painting a stretch of sky
with watercolor shades of pink.

here, my body bobbing in rhythm
with an ocean hymn,
i allow the tide to move me,
the waves carry me.
and sometimes,
they carry me to God.

A Thousand Candles

lit for this,
so, the Doctor
renewing her vows
with the flame
on the altar of my chin,
can calmly locate
where love should strike,
where scalpel & spark's
romantic spin
on the dancefloor of my face
can do what her eyes
told them to,
open & close
the window made
by my dark &
flickering self,
remove suffering's
gorgeous cells
before the next
song begins.

A Day Spent

Afternoon lingers
on the minute hand
of the quiet clock,
time slows,

I live an hour
in a second,
everything is still
everything is settled,

I see past and present
side by side
silently slipping
into an overlain image
where color paints
the lines between
the wrinkles
and yesterday's eyes,
sallow cheeks
fill with peach
and the quivering
corners
of my frown
loosen

I see light
rise from behind
my bunched shoulders,
a silhouette
of snapping sorrow
stretching out
on the yellow-green ground
as afternoon slips
into cool orange dusk.

Kevin M. Scott

Yahrzeit Candles

I know she's here
by her presence
in the light.

I know she's here
by the way
the red glow flickers.

She always loved
watching flames
of Yahrzeit candles.

It makes her feel
loved and near
to the people
she left behind.

Even in death
she still needs
a candle to burn,
to keep her warm.

Like a moth
attracted to light,
she spends her departed days
close to the flame.

Mark Tulin

Vespers Beneath My Window

for the unapologetic I have and continue to love

At five to midnight, will you ask to be saved—
all your mistakes redeemed as you dash

from one soul to another in a shedding
from old to new, to become more pure

shaped from alabaster and pearls?
But it will still be you beneath that translucent

gypsum veil. You say you don't believe,
that there is no higher power, no sleeping

God languishing above the clouds
in some orthodox place called Heaven.

If I am already there, in the moonlight,
and hear your prayer, it will be enough

to know that at least, you
asked to be saved.

Too Late



Fabrice B. Poussin

In the Jungle

In a world without you
a jungle world
you never saw you come in

closer than you did
in life translated
into the still

green palm fronds
drinking in the sun
as you used to

turn your face up
in one fell swoop
like a flower

I find you
in the humor
of objects all over

this Casita Celestial
the fierce eyes
of the owls rendered

in wicker the roosters
in full cock walk
on the sunny side

of the house You would
declare this place
“too fancy” but I can hear

your laugh at the sun's
sweet face hung just so
over the toilet

your gasp of delight to see
the great crescent moon
over the bed its rays

that reach into my sleep
and render you dancing
a hot boogie-woogie

in New Orleans
or trudging the stones
of Jerusalem

head covered you are
a witchy crone girl or
a sturdy Arab woman

in my dreams
you give me
a long silver chain

with turquoise beads
It's way too long
It doesn't go

with my dress Mother
what am I supposed to do
with your gift?

Naomi Ruth Lowinsky

Silence Suspended

Smoke hangs in suspension,
lingers like a solid
condensed in the humid heat
of heavy hometown dawn,
mist and fog
filling space
like gelatin,
a world too thick
to move or breathe in,
where every word
dies from my lips,
dropping
like a shotgunned bird.

Artist

I place at the empty center
my most personal of pronouns,
surround it with angels
and ghosts of angels
flying and playing their instruments

then I add hearts,
some metallic,
others sporting victory wreaths
to match the angels
then I float blossoms all around
and hope they stick

then I add an eel,
more blossoms and hearts,
a few translucent stems
reaching somewhere I want to be

then I put police tape around the whole thing
and wait for love.

When the new world wakes

Today you would have thought me crazed
or at least reminded me to act my age.
I did think of you as I stood atop a pyramid of hay bales,
12 feet above ground and painted 9 Kandinsky's.
Since the war began I've had no supplies,
or time to paint. But today I painted,
not to reveal, not to know, but to hide
and conceal. My canvasses were the outer walls
of military tents. My "goal" -- such thoughts
are never with me when I'm home in my studio,
my goal was to create camouflage, a way to hide
our artillery positions from aerial flights. Is it ironic
the word for disguising or hiding such things is French?
One of our pilots will fly over tomorrow for pictures.
I will be happy to report what effect my pointillistic
Kandinsky's have from 2000 meters away.
I see my work as a direct line from Monet's Haystacks
to Wassily's 1913 compositions. Remember when
he told us of first seeing Monet's works, and later
reading the Show Catalogue, and being stunned,
pained I think he said, because he could not remember
seeing a haystack? The colors had overwhelmed him.
Objects had disappeared in a blaze of impression.
And now I 've come full-circle painting from haystacks
in France. When I wake from this desperate dream
the sky will be clear for tomorrow's pictures.

Kairos II

The night exploded
Into muted stars, pumping
Blood to the vein'd moon-

On the stair
 You suddenly turned and our faces collided
 A little off center,
 Your hair against my cheek,
 Your breath in my lungs
 Warm and strange.

Then you evaporated
And I conquered the night.

Afternoon at ease,
Bird's soft Satie tone poem soothes
The fate of the day.

On the couch named
 Infamous
 I drank you-
Sipping minutes, hours from
 The wall clock
 Bright orange, tangerine.

Before the Meteor Shower

It's colder than Wisconsin out here tonight
and the horizon is about to crumble.
We drove 90 miles to watch the sky
come apart like a tantrum. The air tastes
like cremation and I relax slowly,
think I can smell wolves skulking.
You were afraid at first, but I told you
there's nothing to fear this far from home,
because this isn't really happening to us,
just parallel-universe us. I told you
I only feel real when I'm in my childhood bed.
You tried to argue, but I wouldn't answer.
I think of when we used to mess with the anthills
behind the baseball field, bombing them
with clumps of sand. Now, when meteors
punch the earth, it feels like retribution.
I'd like to open my arms and take one into
my chest and cradle it like an old lover, accepting
all the damage it can do, absorbing radiation hungrily,
like I haven't been touched in years.
I look over at you but you don't notice,
you're squinting at something far away.

Friends and Lovers

“How could she just back out like that at the last minute?” I asked my mother.

It was 1965, I was in high school, and my friends and I—a tight-knit group of eight girls—planned to see one of our teachers perform in a play. It was a special excursion, requiring us to borrow a couple of our parents’ cars to drive to a neighboring city. We had gone to some trouble to set it all up, but a few days before the play one girl backed out—she was going with her boyfriend instead.

“She gave us her word—she should have kept it,” I complained.

Mother smiled and shook her head, giving me that look she always did when she was chiding me for being naive. “You make plans with your friends,” she said, “but when your boyfriend calls....” She shrugged. I knew what the rest of the sentence would be. In my mother’s world, a woman’s life revolved around her husband and her family; her friends were not a priority. It obviously did not surprise her when a similar dynamic played itself out among my teenage friends.

I thought about that incident often during my young adult years in the 1970s. The women’s movement washed over like a tsunami while I was in college, leaving so many changes in its wake, especially for those of us who didn’t follow the standard path and marry right after graduation. Sisterhood, we were told, is powerful. We shouldn’t place the men in our lives above our friends.

But in the messy world of real relationships, it wasn’t always so easy to follow that advice. Single men were in short supply in the conservative town I landed in after college. So if a particularly attractive one asked me out at a time when I’d already made plans with a girlfriend, I wondered if I should I tell him no. The rules of my childhood told me one thing, my feminist principles another. It was a divide that became even more apparent in the early 1980s, when I met Rita.*

By then, I’d suffered through many stormy relationships and was the single parent of a son whose father chose not to be part of

his life. I had moved two thousand miles to Seattle to start over at the age of thirty-five. I'd found a job and an apartment, but I knew almost no one; with a child to look after, I couldn't run out to social events anytime I wanted to; finding friends was difficult.

But one evening I managed to attend a meeting for professional writers, hoping I'd find some like-minded people. I remember feeling awkward as I sat in one of the straight-backed chairs facing a speaker's stand. Then Rita sat beside me and said hello.

She had long blond hair and she wore glasses that night, along with a business suit much more stylish than mine. I couldn't honestly say she was pretty—her nose was long and there was a slight gap between her front teeth—but her Barbra Streisand-like eyes were an arresting shade of green and her smile was warm and inviting, making it easy for me to respond to her greeting.

We began to talk, and then, like a couple who fall in love at first sight, we just seemed to click. I don't remember what we talked about, or much else about the evening, but at the end of it she handed me her business card, and I—having no card—gave her my phone number.

Rita called me soon after, offering to come over and make a meal for my son and me. She knew it was hard to go out in the evening with a young child, she said. Her husband Brad played in an amateur rock band and was frequently rehearsing evenings and weekends, so she was alone for dinner.

I accepted gratefully, watching her bustle in that night with all the ingredients for a more savory spaghetti sauce than I was accustomed to making. As we stood next to each other in my tiny kitchen, I noticed that she was nearly as tall as I was. Her squarish hands were adorned only with a wide, plain gold wedding band, and when she wasn't using them for food preparation, she illustrated her words with broad gestures. She was infusing my perpetually cold basement apartment with warmth and liveliness.

After dinner, I loaded the dishwasher while Rita lay on the floor and played with my one-year-old son, showing more patience than I did. By the time the evening was over, she knew all about my life and I knew about hers. She worked as a writer for a Health Maintenance Organization —producing articles for its consumer

magazine, while I wrote reports for a market research firm. Neither of us was satisfied with our current jobs; we dreamed of writing books. We talked about those dreams as weekday evenings at my place soon expanded to weekend evenings out to dinner or to a movie. Once, we even took an overnight trip to Port Townsend, a small town on the Olympic Peninsula.

“It’s full of artists,” Rita told me, “people who’ve escaped the daily grind.”

I smiled. It was something she and I discussed often. “It’d be nice to get back to real writing,” I said, remembering my days as a newspaper reporter.

“You will.” She nodded to emphasize her words. “I’m going to get you an assignment with my publication, remember?”

So Rita became a professional mentor, even while she also seemed like a member of my family. It was not unusual for her to spend long afternoons just playing with my son as we talked; sometimes she even babysat when I had to go somewhere.

My relationship with Rita was far different from the ones my mother had with her women friends while I was growing up. She only saw them occasionally, at events for the service clubs she belonged to, or she might talk to them briefly on the telephone. Since I overheard most of her conversations, I know she wasn’t sharing anything very personal about herself or—heaven forbid—her problems, and she would never have dreamed of going out with a friend in the evening, much less on an overnight trip. For my mother, family was her duty and she could not vacate her post. I scoffed at that attitude, unaware that my newfound friendship with Rita was about to unravel.

It started with a call from her in the middle of a work day, about a year after we’d met.

“I have a problem with Brad,” she said, “and it’s serious.”

My stomach turned over. “What’s happening?”

She took a minute to answer, and I could tell she was crying. “Brad’s having an affair,” she said. “It’s been going on for a few months. He told me last night.”

I didn’t know what to say. I knew she must be devastated. She and Brad had met in college, had married at age twenty and had essentially grown up together. Now, ten years later, she was in

danger of losing it all. I listened as she poured out her feelings and invited her to come over that night to talk.

Once we got off the phone, I began thinking about Rita's situation, and judgment crept in. I hadn't spent a lot of time with Brad, but based on what I knew, I had a fairly low opinion of him. He smoked nonstop, for one thing, and when I came to their house, he sat silent and withdrawn while Rita and I talked. Maybe he was jealous of me, or maybe he was just shy—I couldn't tell. Rita had told me that he hated his job but that he refused to leave it, even when she assured him she would support the two of them while he found a new career. Instead he'd been fooling around with a band that was going nowhere—playing out the rock star fantasy at least ten years too late—and now he was fooling around with another woman too—someone he worked with, Rita said...

At first I kept my negative opinion to myself, but as their rift deepened over the weeks and months that followed, I couldn't hold back any longer. One night when she was staying at my house, I said, "You know, Brad's not such a prize. You deserve better."

Rita plucked at the sofa arm, nodding slightly.

"I mean, look how he's treated you—going off with his rock band and then taking up with another woman, for God's sake. If he'd put that much energy into getting a job he liked better"

Rita listened quietly, not denying what I was saying. But when she spoke she sounded more lost than I'd ever heard her. "We've been together so long," she said. "I've never really lived alone."

I smiled and laid my hand on her arm. "You'll never be alone. You have so many good friends." I was far from the only person in her social circle.

She nodded. "But that's not the same as a husband."

I didn't reply, but I couldn't help thinking that we were back to high school, where having girlfriends was all very well, but the ultimate prize was a steady guy.

In the end, I wasn't surprised when they reconciled. Didn't the husband always win? But I *was* surprised by what happened next. No sooner had she moved back in with Brad than Rita became much less available to me. When I invited her to get together, she

always had a reason to say no. One day I finally asked her what was going on.

“I can’t do that anymore,” she told me. “Brad and I had a talk, and we decided that part of the reason he had an affair was that we had grown apart. We just didn’t spend enough time together, so we didn’t feel close anymore. Then he looked somewhere else for closeness.”

I felt inexplicably angry, as if Brad had said this to me rather than to Rita. It seemed to me that he was blaming *her* for his affair, and by extension, me, so he had to cut me out of her life. “And now you can’t go anywhere without him? Is that how it is?” I said. I was aware I sounded like an adolescent but I didn’t care.

“I think I need to concentrate on him right now,” Rita said firmly. “And he and I need to make some couple friends.”

“Couple friends,” I repeated, painfully aware that I couldn’t qualify. “Well that lets me out.”

She hastened to say, “You’re welcome to come over and be with both of us anytime.”

Then I exploded. “I don’t want to be with *him*,” I said. “It wouldn’t be the same. *He’s* not my friend. I don’t even like him.”

When I heard the sharp intake of her breath, I wanted to lasso my words out of the air like a cowboy with a rope. I’m not sure what she felt—anger, pain, disappointment—but one thing was clear: She thought she was being asked to choose between her husband and her friend. So of course, she chose her husband.

I saw Rita rarely after that. I missed her so much that months after it all happened, I invited her to have lunch with me, which she considered permissible because it was during the workday. Sitting at a small restaurant where we’d shared meals many times before, I brought up the subject of our relationship.

“I’m really sad that we don’t get together anymore,” I said. “I miss our talks. I miss being with you. I’m sorry if what I said before hurt you.” Tears came to my eyes and I struggled to keep them from spilling over.

Rita looked uncomfortable and glanced out the window as if she expected to see something interesting on the sidewalk outside. “We can still see each other,” she said. “I told you before, you can come over any time.” Then she began chattering about something

that had happened at work. I felt dismissed. A line had been drawn. I could be in her life only if I stayed within limits—limits set by her...or by Brad?

I decided those limits were too painful, that it would be better to just not see her at all, so I stopped calling her, and I stayed away from events I thought she might be attending. When we did run into each other we were always cordial, but she couldn't forgive me for rejecting her husband, and I couldn't forgive her for abandoning me. As I saw it then, it was no different than what had happened to me in high school: this was one more case of a woman valuing her relationship with a romantic partner over her relationship with a friend—regardless of which one had treated her better.

So I moved on and made new friends, focusing on single women—many of them single parents like myself. I would give up, I decided, on that unfair competition with someone's husband, declining to be the odd single woman out in a world of couples.

Three years after losing Rita, I finally got married at the age of thirty-nine, and discovered myself in an odd position. It suddenly seemed wrong to spontaneously call up a friend and say, "Hey, let's go out and have a few drinks tonight." I'd ask myself if I should invite my husband, or if his presence would interfere with the confidences that friend and I were accustomed to sharing. And if I didn't invite him, would he feel shut out of my social world?

Over time I began to sort my friends. I tried them out with my husband to see whether they would become family friends or remain my friends alone. If the latter, I saw them at lunch, or on evenings when my husband had other plans. My life suddenly became more complicated: seeing my friends alone now required an advance appointment, along with some calculations about how my husband would feel about it.

Funny, but I couldn't look back at that point and see Rita's situation more clearly. I was still too hurt, too caught up in my feelings of rejection. But I see it now, decades later. I see that Rita felt she'd hurt her husband by spending so much time alone with friends. And I see, too, that when she agreed to a reconciliation, she had to find a way to reclaim her trust in him. That meant she couldn't admit into her inner circle a friend who had said point blank that she disliked him — a friend who knew the whole sorry story of

his infidelity. It was easier for her to start anew without that baggage to carry.

Maybe if I had been more patient, more understanding at the time, Rita and I might still be friends today. She might have had her cocooning time with Brad, then loosened up to admit others into her life again. But I was alone with a child then, and social evenings with couples only reminded me of what I lacked. I longed for quiet times with women to whom I could pour out my heart, knowing they would understand my feelings. So I guess you could say I needed Rita too much—so much, in fact, that I couldn't see what *she* needed. I lost a friend because I put friendship and love on opposite sides of a chasm and assumed they were locked in an unfair competition, with friendship always doomed to lose.

The women of my generation sought to change the relationships we had with men, and more importantly with each other. We wanted to claim our own worlds, separate from the tight circle of our families. We wanted to value all our relationships equally. We wanted to change the rule from “a male partner always comes first,” to “friends and male partners rate equally.”

But the real problem is the rules themselves—whether they're the rules my mother's generation followed or the ones my generation tried to set up in their place. Relationships aren't easily bound by rules. Nobody—whether spouse or friend—gets automatic priority in all situations. Although I feel lucky to have had female friendships that remained close after my marriage in a way my mother's could not, to have had a husband who didn't complain when I spent time away from him to be with those friends, I know I could have found myself doing what Rita did if circumstances had been different.

I'd like to report that Rita and I became friends again, but that didn't happen. She and Brad eventually sold their house, less than a mile from mine, and moved away. When I walk to a nearby park sometimes, I pass their '50s rambler and I give it a glance. Had things turned out differently, I wonder if Rita and I would have passed lazy summer evenings on the front stoop, drinking wine, while our husbands were out back attending to burgers on the grill. Or perhaps we would have sat around their well-lit kitchen enjoying a game night or talking about the film we had just seen.

But sometimes the what-ifs are just too much to bear, so I keep walking, head down, the ghosts of our friendship just a flicker in my vision.

*Rita and Brad are pseudonyms.

brain lice

the nits that cling to neuron nuclei
hatch pale nymphs starved for grey matter
they crawl from powdery eggshells
remnants of their incubating straitjackets
scamper along axon strands
winding and tangling into dendrites
that bear their parasitic bites
the itch begs for a comb but
the nymphs have already hibernated
cradling their bulbous bellies
they resurface as grown lice
nesting in the brain.

Addiction Cure

When you said, *make silence boredom's god,*
 make my unthinkable, enigmatic mess into
something miraculous, I tried to extinguish

the emotional flames with a trembling cup
 from the wind's cold hands. I made breath
a lover seduced in public, an erotic, spontaneous

shameless display of lung slapping tongue,
 slapping pain in the face to remind me
who's in charge. We made courage by letting

a drop of blood swim from your hand to mine,
 to feel the blade, do what it does best, there
in my chest, in the valley of regret where

you laid your head at the day's bitter end.
 You listened to forgiveness sing harm to sleep
as the heart's little snare beat away.

I wept. It never got a break.

Ascension

That snatch of beauty
on the near-perpendicular slope—
we climbed so high for it—
the chorus of lupine and alpine roses,
the peaks' white silence piercing
the birdsong blue of sky,
then—look out—
the dazzling green plunge of valley,
the lake a thousand feet below:

that's when Heaven shows itself
in that single instant as we turn away
scurrying down the safer trail
for the lower places,
fearing otherwise we'll fall.

The Piano

You may listen, I say to him
as I finger my eighty-eight keys,

beautiful trinkets that create an aria
softer than breasts. But I say no when

he wants to play my music uncaringly.
I'm out of tune, bored with banalities

and on those days, I close my lid, his ears
still wanting some kind of rapturous sound.

I've got too much weight to carry
around without wheels, I say, I'm tired

of moving to the wrong house. I need
at least three men and a harness each

time to hoist me up and pass me through
sunlit windows. I need to be placed in just

the right spot where light reflects off my polished
harp. Once I've arrived where I finally belong

you'll have my roomful of sound, my rim bent
to a body of notes, melodies that ricochet off

walls. I'm a complicated instrument of twelve
thousand parts. And you are just one player

for the time I'm willing to be played, while you
staccato me into oblivion, a crescendo of musical

stars flung across dark through Heaven's echo
into a cloudland, sweet as a songbird's tune.

Song for Tussy

i choose to love you like a poet
for in poetry i find no preconception

i choose to love you from the C21
for in my century you are whole

i choose to love you in the moonlight
for in the moon we all find amity

i choose to love you like a musician
for music can be love for a while

i choose to love you as a human being
for as humans we are both as one

Nature Morte



Fabrice B. Poussin

Fossil Fish

Where did the ocean go
when it abandoned you here
thousands of miles inland
from the known shoreline?
These geological ribbons
dark and light,
with imprints of shells,
snaking over the ridge,
where seasons lasted eons,
millions of years laying down bones,
before we even got to the first mammal
hiding in the bushes
And after millions of years
those dinosaurs eating grass
suddenly
fell into the swamps
as maybe a very small star fell into the earth
these tiny fish bones
etched into the rock in my palm
I found with shells in the dirt on the ridge
here in the middle of nowhere,
where there must have been an ocean.

Time, as a dinosaur

diplodocuses disgust me

their necks sprawl like years textured
granular graphite—black and bumpy,
they are now behind me

but they swaddled days that
swallowed me whole—as the gullets of
big-necked behemoths often do—
in their enzymatic seas

and laddered me down to leathery bowels
i knifed open before digestion.

I don't know where she lies.

The hospital is sterile, a strange place to find a stream of
mosquitos,
passing down the hallways, to retract their legs, furl themselves
and wriggle through the tightest window edge, door gap,
crawl into the dark where the thin and wrinkled woman cools.

Uncurl your proboscis and shoulder a place in the host,
pierce the skin and suck till there is no more to swallow,
carry her water back to the shadows under the trees

you ants in pencil lines, settle upon her, snip with your scissors
her into tiny parcels,
carry her out across the white tiles and the plaster walls,
back to the earthy nests between the roots.

I picked June-drop apples from the bare ground under the tree
at the back of her house, in the shade, and dinged them underhand
with a cat-cut racket over the roof, out into the world.

Nadir

The problem wasn't that I stopped at a Steak 'N' Shake for dinner
on the way to your party,
but that near Cleveland I couldn't help but crack open the Great
Lakes IPAs I had bought
at a 7-Eleven near the Steak 'N' Shake and the headlights became
shooting stars on 71 but
I hadn't considered meteoric impact and the crater I would have left,
a vast hole – I hope—
in my loved ones' lives and I now know I have to sometimes be
depressing to climb out
of a rut (today included, this long ladder up), to remember vehicular
impact affects more
than me but that this world runs on an oil field of sad things
happening and I am trying
my best to prevent the potential to die every day and I have eluded
it, as you have, and
I love you, I love you, and must remember you might love me, too.

James Croal Jackson

Six

—It has been six years since
my concrete tally of
in and out. My baro-
meter of goodness. Or
of shame. Do not exceed
thirteen hundred kcals.

I wonder who I could
have been, without my eat-
ing disorder. What sort
of artist I would be
like. If I still would have
taken the straight and nar-

row. Or if I would have
burst out like a kalei-
doscope of vibrant— Num-
bers keep me glued. Change the
architecture of my
mind. A floating digit

attached to all objects.
People. How much can they
provide me. In exper-
ience talent laughs time.
Quantified by their wor-
thinness. Because I have

none. So I take and rip
meaning away from others.

*—One medium apple
Ninety-five calories
Twenty grams of sugar
Two milligrams of salt
35 bites, 9 chews
Three-inch diameter—*

What would my life be like
if I had not wasted
six years of seeing love
based on who could make me

disappear the quickest—

Understanding

Earth is waiting & ready to soak up
what the day sends down

The sky is waiting for the wind
blows a progression of clouds across its face

Wind races across the face of earth
coming around on the other side

Ocean waits for pull of tides

Leaves wait for light to open
roots for water they will ferry up

Blossoms open to insect feet
& from that teasing form the fruit

Day stretches tired in the afternoon

Spring waits for summer, summer for fall
Fall falls into a blanket of winter

Underground waits for thaw
feeds on root sugar and grows

Rivers wait to rise return to sea

Days can be counted but what sets off movement
down the canal

Young wait to pull sense from sounds
in the waiting repeat them

Later they will make their own
using palate tongue teeth & lips

& waiting still for something else
burrowing to ground

Slipped between passing clouds
sucked up through roots to bloom.

Tomatoes

Mal gave me the last batch of tomatoes in August, never knowing that they would outlast her. They made it until September. She only made it until August 29th. I lost my taste for tomatoes after that.

Mal was an extraordinary gardener; life simply sprung from her fingertips. I was a certified brown thumb, but I liked to sit with her while she gardened. “I’d better not touch anything,” I’d say. “I wouldn’t want to unleash a plague upon you.” She would laugh and ask me to plague the dandelions, please. We would sip tea if it was before noon and margaritas if it was after noon and talk about anything and everything.

Her house was a few streets over from mine. The day we met, she was tending sunflowers in her front yard and I stopped to admire them. I walked a lot that summer, trying to find some life in a life that felt trapped and airless. Those sunflowers were enormous, towering over me, and I had never seen anything quite like them. “Oh, these are nothing,” she had said with a laugh. “Wait till you see the backyard.” We were friends instantly. I started walking by more and more, trying to catch her in her garden. Eventually I just started knocking. It turned out she couldn’t bake for anything, so I would bring a warm loaf of something (usually sourdough; it was her favorite) and she would pull something fresh and delicious from her garden. We would sit on her patio—feet up, cool beverage in hand—and talk and laugh.

I learned that she came from Minnesota. The winters had been too cold there and she hated the snow. During a week-long blizzard, she pulled up Google and typed, “Where the fuck can I move where there isn’t so much goddamn snow?” Eventually, she found Oregon and liked how many things seemed to grow here. She jumped in her VW station wagon, drove out, found the little house on Solman Way, and became my unwitting neighbor.

I loved tomatoes, so when I came over in the summer Mal sent me home loaded with them. I started taking a basket whenever I went by. Later, at home, I unloaded the fist-sized ruby gems into a

big bowl on my kitchen counter. I joked to her that I would eat them like apples, they were so good.

July and August were unseasonably warm that year, and Mal's tomatoes exploded like fresh, juicy little bombs.

"You should start a booth at the Farmer's Market," I told Mal.

"No way," she responded. "They're far too valuable for that. How else would I get any company?"

Mal gave me the last basket of tomatoes at the beginning of August. It was my birthday, so she stuck a candle in one and sang to me. We cut that tomato up and made caprese. I took the rest home and tucked them carefully, just like usual, into the big bowl on my counter. The next day, Mal told me about her diagnosis. I knew that something was up when I got to her house and she wasn't wrist-deep in soil. Instead, she was sitting on the porch, looking like she was trying to figure out what to do about something. "It's pancreatic cancer," she said. "It's very aggressive. They don't think I have long."

We didn't garden or eat or drink or laugh that day. We didn't even talk very much. We just sat on her patio and held hands and cried.

Mal wanted to tear out the garden. "I'm not going to have the energy to take care of it," she said. "I don't want to watch it go to pot." She had a plan. She would set up a will: Loretta, her sister who was still in Minnesota, would take care of the house; her brother, Daniel, would take her old VW wagon and manage the finances. When she couldn't take care of herself well enough, or when the pain got too bad, she would go into hospice. Her doctor had told her about a home across town with hospice beds and a sunny patio with flowers. It sounded nice, she said, but she wanted to stay at home as long as she could.

"Don't worry about the garden, Mal," I squeezed her hand. "I'm nearby. Why don't I take care of it? You can teach me."

I started coming by every day instead of a couple of times a week. Mal lost her appetite so I left the bread at home. I set up a folding lawn chair near the garden beds - one of the long, chaise lounge ones - and she sat and pointed, telling me about each of the plants, its harvest season, and what it needed to thrive. She had razor-sharp eyes for weeds, even the tiny ones, and she would point

and shout, “There! There! Two inches to the left! No, the other left,” while I rooted around for the tiny criminal before victoriously pulling it out by the roots.

As Mal ate less and less, I brought more and more produce home with me. I ate salads by the pound and sautéed squash for dinner. I baked so many carrot cakes and loaves of zucchini bread that I started wrapping them in cellophane and bringing them to work, shoving them into the hands of friends and coworkers before they could even think about politely declining. I needed to share as much of Mal with the world as I could before she was gone. It was as if maybe, if every person in the world nibbled on a carrot Mal had grown, she would be everywhere. Never really gone.

But I never touched that last bowl of tomatoes. They sat on the counter like a prize. Sometimes I would pick one up and squeeze it and then set it back down again. I didn’t want to think about the last of Mal’s tomatoes. I didn’t think I could eat one without crying and I didn’t want to cry, so they sat there, supervising the kitchen, overseeing the chopping and dicing and roasting of their vegetable companions.

Toward the end of August, Mal got sick enough to make the move to the hospice. They could provide better pain management there, she explained to me. She loved being at home, but the pain was starting to eat into that love like locusts. Her last day at home was a beautiful one. Passing clouds painted over blue skies dappled the world with shadows. We sat on the porch for a couple of hours, looking out over the garden. I was thinking about our friendship; how it had sprouted up like spring corn, how it had brought a breeze and air and life I had craved. I wondered about the root system, and the empty space that would be left in my life when it was gone. I don’t know what Mal was thinking. Finally she closed her eyes, took a deep breath, and said, “Okay.”

I nodded. “Okay,” I said, too.

I helped her into the front seat of my Prius. She only had a couple of bags. When I had asked her if that was it, she laughed wryly. “I won’t need more than that where I’m going, sweetie,” she replied.

I visited her every day at the hospice. The doctors had been right; her pain was much better managed. She made it out onto the

patio every day, the nurses told me. Her eyes brightened; she laughed more. A part of me wanted to take it as a turnaround, as a regrowth. Maybe they were wrong, maybe she would be fine, maybe all she needed was a big rest, like the soil needs to be turned over at the end of the season so that new life can spring forth. But it wasn't a turnaround. She kept getting thinner, and weaker.

"I'm tired," she said one day while we sat on the patio of the hospice. "I'm really tired."

The patio was nice, but not quite right. It wasn't hers. It wasn't ours. I reached out to her. "I know, Mal."

She leaned her head back and closed her eyes. "Tell me about my garden," she said. "Have you murdered it yet?"

I hadn't, surprisingly. I told her how I'd found slugs in the cabbage, but the man in the garden center had sold me a good repellent and it seemed to be working. I told her how high the sunflowers had gotten. "So high, Mal. Remember the day we first met? Just about that high. Almost."

"Good," she said, smiling. "I like to know things are still growing."

I usually went to the garden before visiting Mal. The morning light was fine for working and I liked to know how things looked so I could tell her about it in the afternoon. But that morning—another blue-skied one, with dappling clouds—I woke up feeling like I should go see Mal first. The door to her room was closed when I arrived, and when I went to investigate, they told me that Mal was gone.

"I'm sorry," the nurse said. I remember her name was Jane. We had talked a few times about the unseasonable warmth, about our readiness for a little rain. "She passed in the night. It was peaceful. She wasn't in pain."

I nodded, suddenly needing to leave that place, needing to find a breeze and openness. I drove back to Mal's house. I parked in the driveway, next to her old VW wagon. I thought about jumping in it, like she had done. Rolling down the windows and driving until I found a place for my own roots. But I didn't. Instead, I sat down in the middle of the garden beds, criss-cross applesauce, a way that I hadn't sat since I was a child. I dug my hands into the soil and scooped up a big handful of earth. It was laced with roots, fine like

angel hair. A worm wiggled through it. I put the handful back down. A rain started fall, lightly speckling dry earth. In the soil, I spotted a dandelion, just the beginning little leaflets of one, and started to pull.

Desire

Hot metal adrenaline on tongue
cayenne of my blood
no need for refueling in this half-mortal state.
Light and precise each movement,
I dance scarlet day into existence,
howl at no-shadow of noon,
and stomp patterns onto a cardinal sunset.

At night I lie burning under stars
with the legion of the wicked,
tweaking firelight from nail tips,
flashing thoughts that spark others to wake.

The Living Desert

for Mary Austin

creosote, Mojave sage, sand
after a rain, flashfloods cut
a dangerous swiftness here
reminiscence, recollection
jackrabbit burrowed, listen
yucca blooms, hummingbirds
palo verde reaching out in
roundness, familiar comfort
in this cold night, cold stars
a whole sky punctuated, pause

* Mary Austin (1868-1934; United States): nature writer (*The Land of Little Rain*, *The Flock* and *The Trail Book*), novelist (*Santa Lucia*), playwright (*The Arrow-Maker* and *Fire*), and memoirist (*Earth Horizon*)

Lisa Stice

R O R

The present and the past
are a cocktail mix stirred by memories'
possible rewrites: nails
pounded into the knots that refuse like
a two-year old. The mind
dives from the cliff into the muddied
contaminated waters of the
sixties and seventies. What difference does
it make ferments. An
infatuated taste the tongue cannot abandon.
Bygone never forgone
or long gone. Denial the dog that will not
come. Time's surf fails to
erase footprints in the sand. The hourglass
never turns over. Never
am I released on my own recognizance.

The War Comet

“Are you eagerly looking at the war comet? I discovered it for the first time when I went to Strasbourg and was quite excited, because I could not understand why no newspaper mentioned it. It is always very near the Greater Bear in evening hours. Have a look and think of me”.

—FM letter to his wife, Oct. 13, 1914

The most war-like on this earth
may believe they can sacrifice
young gypsy dogs to a chained statue,
but no one on the battlefield
believes it is a privilege to die.
Neither French, nor German.
The air buzzes as shells fly
from safe distances. A war
of attrition; can it be called
honorable? Can such carnage
be looked upon otherwise
except by those with dark minds
and nocturnal hearts? Foot soldiers
to be walked upon, to be left
behind, to be swallowed
as the shells lift and land, reduced
and unnamed bodies rendered
to fertilizer. Are these luckless days
ours to never forget? Is this a gift
we can accept? A star portending
we will feel the wind's swift cut,
and the bullet's quicker mercy?
Wild minds want us to believe
that every amputation is an offering,
a gift, that every man is anyman,
and all blood remembers its birth
and relishes returning to earth.
Are we so eager to believe in the comet

we can clearly see in the night-sky
near the honey licker, the Greater Bear
thirsty messenger of good will?
We see them high, above it all,
but never dropping low towards the sea.
Like us they can stand on two legs
and kill. But are we too afraid
to call it by its name, and risk
becoming its prey? I wonder.

A Photo Just Surfaced

A photo just surfaced
of my father and mother,
cigarettes in hand,
leering at the camera.
Dad winks
at the photographer
but Mom coolly stares
over her drink,
daring whoever is taking the photo
to do something
anything
even record this moment
for her children
fifty years later
who could never otherwise
have imagined it.

No Regrets

Prologue:

Ten years after the affair ended, Carl mailed Maya the photograph he'd begged her to let him take late one afternoon. On the back he'd carefully written, "Any regrets?" Maya stared at the younger woman; she stared back, coquettish though shy, leggy and childlike, with soft, brown curls falling almost to her shoulders. Maya was riveted by the triangle of pubic hair, darker than the rest, shamelessly uncovered. The openness of the pose and expression astonished her. She tried to rub out the face with her fingernail. She was about to crush the photo in her hand, when, on impulse, she reached for a book, one she would remember, and placed the photo between random pages of Erica Jong's *Fear of Flying*. She moved it once years later—to Sylvia Plath's *Ariel*—when she received news of Carl's death.

It fell to the floor like a dry leaf when Sandra lifted the slim volume of poems from the bookshelf and blew the dust off. She knelt to pick up the small black and white photograph, stared in disbelief for a split-second at the image of her mother's nude body, and dropped it into the pocket of the jean jacket she had thrown on to ward off the chill. Her brother Andy was in the next room. They were there packing up the few things left in Maya's apartment. Most of the furniture had gone to auction, the rest of it to the Salvation Army. There was nothing left, except for the personal stuff they were sifting through. She looked around furtively before sitting down on one of the boxes and taking the photo out to look at it more closely.

Sandra was shocked. Maya looked so young and vulnerable. Probably in her thirties. She could barely make out her mother's features; the face in the photo appeared to be smudged or something. The pose was what was most striking. It was both provocative and shy. The kind of thing a woman would do for a lover.

Andy popped his head into the study. "I'm almost done in the living room, and I've already hauled out a ton of trash. How're you doing? Hey! What's that?" He snatched the photo out of her hand. "Oh, wow! Think that could be Mom?"

"Must be. It fell out of one of her books. Do you think Dad took it?"

"Who else?"

"I don't think he would do that."

"Oh, come on. Remember that photo he took of your pre-teen butt when you mooned him? That's exactly the kind of thing he got off on. They were probably messing around and he snapped it."

"Why would she have kept it?"

"I don't know. Maybe to remind her of what she looked like when she was young."

Sandra dropped the photo back into her pocket, bent down to pick up a handful of books, and stacked them into a box she would be taking to her place. "I think one more day should do it," she said, looking up at him. "Same time tomorrow?"

She didn't want to get into it with Andy. Right now, all she wanted was to finish things up and get out of there. Maya had warned them when she moved into the spacious Upper Westside apartment a little over five years ago that the next packing job would be theirs, and, as always, she was true to her word. Sandra had found her on the floor in the entryway six months ago, her half-full shopping cart beside her. She'd rushed over when her mother didn't respond to repeated calls and text messages; Maya loved her iPhone and always answered within minutes.

Andy held out a hand to help Sandra up. "I can't make it until late afternoon tomorrow. Meet you here at four-ish? It shouldn't take more than a couple of hours to get it done."

They locked the door and walked out together. Andy was parked in a garage on 81st, between West End and Broadway. With luck he'd beat the traffic and be home for a family dinner in Nyack by 6:30. Sandra was meeting a friend at the Met to catch Renée Fleming in one of her final performances of *Der Rosenkavalier*. She walked her brother to the garage where they kissed goodbye and went their separate ways.

At 66th Street Sandra looked at her watch. She was much too early to meet Diana. She crossed Broadway and made her way to Bar Boulud for a light dinner. When she was seated at the bar, with a glass of Chablis, she took the photo from her pocket and stared at the image of her mother. She swept a finger over the face, as if to clear away the blur. How beautiful she was. Sandra felt herself tearing up. Her mother's death was still fresh. She missed talking to her every morning over coffee and getting her quirky take on things

Sipping her wine, she was trying to figure out where the family would have been when the photograph was taken. "Wait a minute," she said to herself. "Mom's hair didn't curl up like that until we moved from Salt Lake to Westchester. It must have been taken when she was over forty. Geese. She was stunning at forty." Sandra looked down at her hands and checked them for age spots.

From the moment she discovered it, even before she'd flipped it over and read the cryptic question, Sandra knew her father couldn't have taken the photograph. No woman looks at her husband that way after years of marriage. Finding it took her back to

the advice that her mother gave her years ago when she'd agonized via a transatlantic phone call about a potential affair of her own. "Sometimes you have to give yourself permission," her mother had said. "Be discreet and bide your time. You'll know when you have to make a choice."

Sandra had been in Paris at the time for the entire month of July, overseeing the global launch of Xenôpalin, a mega-drug, which was anticipated to have five or more indications when it was fully rolled-out. France had been the outlier in market research for the campaign, and the agency had dispatched her there to make sure the launch came off without a hitch. It was a hot and lonely mission. To compensate, they had put her up at Le Pavillon de la Reine on Place des Vosges, her favorite hotel in her favorite part of Paris. She could walk across the square to her office in the Marais. But the real reward had been Julien, the young account executive who was her designated escort for the launch and who had quickly become her ally and, eventually, her lover.

Of course her mother had been right. And, best of all, she'd never asked any questions. But Sandra did. Months later, months after the decision had been made to stay with Mark, she'd asked her mother whether *she'd* ever had an affair. "You're my daughter," Maya said. "It's better for us not to talk about certain things. Okay, sweetie?" Sandra smiled now, realizing the generosity of it.

She spotted Diana waving to her from the head of one of the lines at the bar in the lower Met lobby and crossed over to meet her, refusing the glass of champagne she offered. "No thanks. Already had a glass of wine with dinner. I was early." They air-kissed cheeks.

"Let me look at you," Diana said, stepping back to take her in. "Hard day?"

Sandra had freshened up her makeup in the lady's room at Bar Boulud and changed into the silk shirt and Celine ankle boots she'd brought with her. But she was still wearing her standard jeans, and her hair was pulled back in an elastic band.

“I did my best. Andy and I were packing up Mom’s apartment.”

“It isn’t the clothes.”

“Maybe I’ve taken a few too many hits lately. I haven’t been sleeping well.”

“Sorry! Any progress with the divorce? Are you sure it’s what you two kids still want?”

“Look, I know you’ve always thought Mark and I had the ideal marriage.”

“Maybe not ideal, but I had the impression there was something real going on between you. Most of us gave up on intimacy a long time ago; you and Mark still seemed to have it. Anyway, that’s what I thought.”

“Yeah? Well it’s not that way anymore. Lately, we can’t even be in the same room together.”

They went inside at the warning chime and were seated as the lights dimmed. Sandra was still annoyed by Diana’s intrusion. *Why couldn’t her friends leave it alone?*

She loved Renée Fleming, and although she went infrequently to the opera, she had bought tickets for this performance because it was supposed to be Fleming’s swansong from life as a diva. Like the Marschallin, the character she was portraying, Fleming had announced that she would symbolically yield the thing she loved best to a younger woman and accept the passing of time, the fate of growing older, and the inevitable inconstancy of life. Sandra had embraced this grand gesture with the weight of her own longing to bow out gracefully from her present situation and begin another life. She was prepared to feel vindicated, but, ironically, by the end of the performance she was feeling depressed. The Marschallin’s decision, though impressive, now seemed like forfeiting vitality for some vague notion of *noblesse oblige*. Sandra felt hollowed out by it. When Diana suggested a drink, she begged off, pleading fatigue and an early morning meeting.

Home in her Flatiron penthouse, Sandra poured herself another glass of wine, hit the playlist button labeled *Billy Holiday and Friends*, lit some candles, and slipped out of her clothes as she drew a bath. In the soft light, she studied her reflection in the mirrored cabinets over the sink; then she stepped back to study her body in the full-length dressing room mirror. She could see some puckering of flesh here and there, but her skin was otherwise firm and her body lithe and muscled at forty-seven. She hung her terry cloth robe on the hook at the end of the tub and climbed into the lavender-scented mousse, carefully placing her iPhone into the stand on the tray table that straddled the tub and held her washcloth, loofah sponge, lotions and bath oils.

Sandra lay there quietly and patiently in the candlelight. She tried to feel happy, but everyone seemed so far away from her right now. She picked up her iPhone and scrolled through the gallery of family photos. She and Mark still looked happy together on their fifteenth, just over a year ago and months before the beginnings of their angry divorce. And the kids. Wending her way through photos of Jesse's last few years, she was struck by the burgeoning of her daughter's maturity. In her most recent photo, Jessica at fifteen could have passed for eighteen or more. She was tall and model thin. Her eyes were widespread, her lips ample and soft. She had a shy smile in contrast to the assertive blue eyes that called you out for staring at her. For a moment, Sandra held those eyes, promising Jesse she would be okay in spite of her parents' acrimony. The twins, Simon and Abby, smiled at her from the next round of photos, waving from their camp bunks in some and performing goofy gymnastics in others. Summers were always the best, when the kids were happily away at camp and she could focus on her work without guilt. Impulsively, she speed-dialed Jesse.

"Hey, Mom! What are you doing up so late on a weeknight?"

Sandra was jolted to attention by the time flashing at the top of her screen. It was 12:30 AM. "Oh my God, Jess! I'm so sorry! I just got back from the Met and I was excited to tell you about Fleming's performance. I didn't even think about the time. Did I wake you?"

“Duh! Of course not. I’m at Dad’s. He lets me stay up as late as I want. Remember? Sukie’s here and we’re binging *Game of Thrones*. Can I call you back tomorrow?”

“Sure, sweetie. No problem.” She tried to say it casually. But there must have been some residue of disappointment because she heard a brief, muffled conversation on the line before Jesse’s bright voice came back on.

“Hey, what’s up, Mom? You never call me this late.”

“Oh it’s nothing. Guess I was kind of blue. I was cleaning out Grandma’s apartment today.”

“It’s okay, Mom. I’m here for you. I told Sukie to binge on and I’d catch up later. I’m in another room. Let’s talk about it.”

“It’s really nothing. I found a photo of Grandma when I was going through her things. She looked so young, and it made me think about how quickly time passes. I remember her when she was that age, and it seems like yesterday.”

“How old were you when it was taken?”

“A year or so younger than you are, I guess. Why?”

“Because I think about that sort of thing all the time when I look at our family albums.”

“Really?”

“Yeah. And I wonder what you were like when you were my age and what I will be like when I am yours.”

“You do? I don’t remember thinking that way when I was a kid.”

“I don’t know. Maybe it’s because people take more photos these days. Maybe it’s Facebook. I feel like I’m always looking at pictures of us from this year compared to last year and the year before.”

“I guess that’s true. Anyway, seeing that photo made me think about my mom and about what’s special between mothers and daughters. I guess that’s why I called you. But it’s really nothing. We can talk about it another time. Now go back to Sukie.”

“Don’t be sad, Mom. We’ll all be back together soon.”

Sandra wondered what she meant by that. It was true that the twins were coming home in a week or so and Jesse would be with her in New York on Saturday, but still. It was a peculiar thing to say. “Okay. I won’t. See you soon. Love you.”

“Love you back. Night.”

Sandra hung up as Jesse was saying *good night*. She pulled the plug and watched the water drain around her. *What on earth did Jesse mean?* she thought. She got up and wrapped the robe around her. “We’re doing terrible things to the children,” she said aloud, as if Mark were there with her.

The past year had been tough. In early January, she and Mark had starting bickering—not once in a while, but every night. When she couldn’t take it anymore, she confronted him, as they got ready for bed.

“Hey? Why’d you just take my head off? What did I say this time?”

“Maybe it’s because I get more respect from anyone else, even our fucking cleaning lady,” he said. “Why is it that I come last on your list? Have you ever asked yourself?”

“Where did that even come from?”

“I don’t know. Maybe from the fact that you contradicted me thirteen times at dinner. In front of the children. Don’t even try to disagree. I counted.”

“Mark, what’s this about? I feel the same about you. I didn’t count, but I bet I’d get the same number.”

“Okay. We might as well have it out. I’m tired of begging you for even a scrap of attention. And sex is out of the question. So I’ve been exploring other options. And you know what? It feels good.”

“*Exploring other options?* For God’s sake, Mark. If you’re having an affair, just say so.”

“Cut it out. I’m as fed up with *this* as you are. I figure you’re hanging around for the sake of the children. So I’m doing the same. Work. A flirtation here and there. And going through the motions at home. No time for an affair. Just a little innocent fun.”

“Holy shit. Has it really come to this?”

Mark glared at her. But he didn’t answer. They both knew it had gone too far.

In the months that followed, they spent a fortune on couples counseling, which only succeeded in making it easier for them to carp at each other.

“*He says he’s exploring other options.*”

“She’s completely cut me off.”

“He’s talking about me behind my back...even to the children.”

“She’s making fun of me in front of the children.”

Each would deny the other’s accusation, and the session would end in a screaming match, with Lily Rayburn, their therapist, sidelined and unable to referee.

Finally, they found a point of agreement: It was time for a trial separation with alternating weekly child custody, which would probably move them toward divorce while allowing the children to get used to the idea.

That was when Sandra volunteered to get an apartment in New York and hire a driver to ferry the kids to their school in Scarsdale when it was her turn to have them with her. This proved to be an ordeal for everyone. After about a month of dealing with tired, angry children, they had abandoned the idea. The kids stayed with Mark during the school week and her on weekends and holidays. All of them complained endlessly about the arrangement. Then, to make matters worse, Maya, who had always been the family compass, died suddenly, and they were thrown into total disarray.

The phone rang again. “What’s going on? What’s the matter?” her husband asked.

“Mark? What are you doing up at this hour? Aren’t you supposed to be operating tomorrow morning?”

“No. I’m not. Anyway, what’s going on? You scared Jesse.”

“Oh, come on. Nothing. I got a little blue packing up Mom’s apartment. Lost track of the time and called Jesse. No big deal.”

“All right then,” he said. After a pause, he added, “I’ll drop Jesse off on Saturday. Let’s chat over coffee.”

“Sounds great,” she said.

“Great.”

Hanging up, she walked through the apartment, and unease flickered through her. “You should have said ‘no,’” she told herself. Almost three weeks had passed since she had seen her husband. This didn’t feel natural or right to her. But when they saw each

other, the same acrimony bubbled to the surface and she would end up asking him to leave. And then she'd ask herself, "What was that about?" and realize they'd been fighting like children. And God knows, they no longer were.

In fact, when Sandra saw Mark at the door to the apartment on Saturday, she could not believe how tired and old he looked. Every one of his fifty years seemed to have frayed him like the shabby clothes he wore. He was unshaven and in bad need of a haircut. "Got some espresso?" He looked over her head at the state-of-art countertop machine. She stepped back and allowed him into the kitchen. "Sure. Help yourself," she said, watching him push multiple buttons.

Jesse gave him a gentle shove from behind, pecked her mother on the cheek and ran past them to her bedroom, her iPhone in one hand and a small overnight bag in the other.

"Spoke to Andrew last night," Mark announced, staring intently at his filling cup. He told me you guys finished packing up Maya's apartment in no time yesterday."

"Yup. It's all done." She pointed at some cartons and odds and ends in the corner of the foyer. "I brought some stuff home. Picked out a few things I thought you and the kids would like to have. I'll get to it soon and bring them over."

"Thanks. That'll be great."

He picked up his double espresso and followed her into the living room.

They sat on opposite sides of the coffee table where he rested his cup.

"So? What did you want to talk about?" she asked.

"I guess I wanted to see for myself how you were doing. Sounds like you had a pretty rough week."

"I'm okay. We've just got to get through all this and on with our lives."

"What can I do to help? You want more of the kids? Less of the kids? Let me know. I'm here for you."

“Thanks, Mark. What will help is to get our situation settled one way or another.”

“All right. So the lawyers are ready. Let’s start the real negotiation.”

She looked at him. “What?”

He repeated what he had said, but he turned away as he said it. Then he looked directly at her and said, “Sandra, are you sure that’s what you want?” She stared at him for what felt like a full minute before shaking her head, walking around the coffee table and sitting down beside him.

“What do you want?” Mark asked her.

“What do you mean, what do I want?” Sandra looked across the room to where she had been sitting, then back at him.

He took one of the hands that lay limp in her lap and gave it a squeeze until it came to life. “It’s been over eight months now that we’ve been sitting on this. So I’m asking you, do you want a divorce?”

She withdrew her hand, but the tears welling up in her eyes told another story. “I don’t know. I feel like I’m losing myself bit by bit.”

He put his arm around her and drew her to him. “It’s Maya. I miss her too. But I’ve got to tell you. I miss us even more.”

Sandra needed to stand up. She needed to stand up and walk away. She had expected acrimony. She had not expected the kindness her husband was revealing or the feelings of sadness and loss that were enveloping her. “I’m so tired,” she said to him without getting up, and Mark said, “I know. I am too.”

Then suddenly they were talking. Talking as they used to and hadn’t in years. Mark was sprawled out on the couch and she was sitting at his feet. He spoke of the traffic getting down here, even on a Saturday, their last Christmas together and what they were going to do this year, their friends, and even his job at Mount Sinai. How it was getting to him, all the early hours and the politics of orthopedic surgery. She wanted to hear all of it, but she also wanted to tell him about the pressure she was feeling at work and the anxiety of staying on top in the ad game.

They were interrupting each other and laughing and they didn't even notice when Jesse said from the doorway, "For the bloody third time, what's going on in here?"

Sandra looked toward her daughter. It took her a moment to trust herself before she said, "I don't know what you mean, Jesse," even though she was wondering the same thing herself.

Then it was the three of them talking and laughing, and Jesse said, "Yeah. What about Christmas?" And Sandra said, "It isn't even August," and Mark said, "It's never too early to make a plan."

Sandra didn't sleep a wink that night. She kept going over her conversation with Mark and then the plans they had made with Jesse for their family vacation in Los Cabos. They had let Jesse pick the spot, and she had immediately suggested they go back to Mexico where they had had so much fun two years ago. Sandra repeated to herself every bit of their conversation realizing how much she had missed her family, and, yes, him! When she finally awoke from what little sleep she managed to get, she heard Jesse in the kitchen. She got out of bed, tossed some water on her face, and made her way to the kitchen to find her coffee already prepared in her favorite mug and her daughter busily researching Los Cabos resorts online.

"Well hello," she said, brushing her daughter's forehead with a kiss as she reached for the mug. "Thank you!"

"Told you we'd all be back together soon," Jesse said, accepting the kiss without looking up. "But I didn't realize how soon when I said it. Thought I'd get an early start on the reservations before you and Dad change your minds."

Sandra ignored the comment. She sat down next to her daughter at the kitchen counter, sipped her coffee, and stared out into space. Finally she said, "So how's Sukie doing?"

Jesse said something she couldn't quite make out or wasn't quite sure she had heard correctly.

"I said she's bulimic again." Jesse looked directly at her mother and pronounced bulimic in three syllables as if she were sounding it out phonetically—*bull-ee-mik*.

“She’s *bull-ee-mik*?” Sandra pronounced it in exactly the same way.

“She’s been doing it for months. She’s punishing her parents.” Jesse said it matter-of-factly.

“What an awful thing,” Sandra said. Then she added, “For all of them.”

“I guess. Except she needed to lose weight. And she’s looking great in her new clothes.”

“Jessica!” Sandra was genuinely alarmed.

“Oh for God’s sake, Mom. Why do you want to talk about Sukie now?”

From the corner of her eye, Sandra saw that her daughter was laughing at her. This girl, this woman, where had she come from? From them, of course. Jesse had Mark’s sense of humor and timing and her people smarts. “All right. Okay. So let’s talk about it. You’re right. I do have cold feet this morning. But my advice to you, young lady, is to stay out of it and let us work it out in our own way. Deal?”

“Deal,” she said. Then she added, “By the way, Sukie’s not really bulimic.”

Sandra and Jesse made it through another three days and nights without talking about Christmas vacation, the twins, or Mark’s and her marital situation. Sandra was exhausted. It preyed heavily on her mind. But she was determined to keep Jessica out of it. And Jesse, for her part, did what they had agreed, though she stared at her mother intently whenever she thought Sandra wasn’t looking.

When Sandra dropped Jesse off in Scarsdale on Thursday evening, Mark came out to the car and invited her to come inside. He had called a few times during the week, but Sandra was always too busy to talk. He looked anxious as he stood there on the driver’s side leaning into the open window.

“You girls have a good time? Any shopping marathons I need to know about?”

Good. He was keeping it light. She'd do the same. "Nope. No surprises. Listen, I'd love to come in but I can't stay. I've got a big meeting tomorrow and I'm totally unprepared."

She could almost hear Mark and Jessica talking immediately after she left. "*Did she say anything about Christmas?*" he would ask. Of course he would. And Jesse would tell him they'd agreed not to talk about it, so he would know she was having second thoughts. The ball was definitely in her court. He knew what he wanted, and he knew she knew what he wanted too. He had not played his hand deftly. But she knew that was intentional.

It wasn't until Sandra was back home and she saw the bangle bracelet Jesse had left behind on the bedside table that she felt something close to regret. She picked it up and, impulsively, put it on her wrist. She walked back into the living room to the spot where she and Mark had sat. It came to her then, not with the loud crescendo of opera but with the quiet whisper of truth: She had a family and she wanted to be with them. She saw the images of Jesse in recital clothes and suddenly a prom dress, of Simon, gap-toothed and smiling, and Abby, beautiful little Abby, in her flowered bikini two Christmas's ago, and the one of Mark and her beaming at each other across some nightclub table somewhere. She almost got up to look for the photo of her mother, but she closed her eyes instead. She could see it perfectly anyway. She smiled and opened her eyes again. She would do what her mother had done all those years ago. She would stay with her family. She picked up the phone and called Mark.

Aftermath

What is it about the sun
on a late summer afternoon
that speaks of loss
even when the day has been more than expected?
The water gently cool
somebody else's children playing in the sand
elongated features of waders.
Everything sparkling as if
one's soul were connected to the angle of light.
Then the sky darkens a deep purple
like the velvet lining of an ancient music box.
Rolling waves carry the day away:
the last green light flashing into the sea.

And you are still gone.

Kairos III

Dreams of ladders- of
Stairs, stars and fish; seeing wheels
And bushes and clouds.

It is the still breath of the wind,
Walking to work Monday morning
 Crickets signaling
 The receptionist's smile
 The student's simile.

Very near when I
Hear, "The Whole of the Moon," and
Slowly close my eyes

And laughing, crying
 In the dirt road's tick tock
 Of each step
Volcanic mountains
 Blanket our vastness
Everywhere on the clock
 A stone on a stone
 Because you are here.

The complete is found
In orange autumn leaves'
Sacred chlorophyll.

The Fire Elemental

I have been to the sky and back
Today

Pierced the gray overcast from this dour office block
Seated

Between the drops into the blue above the rain
Soaring

What I am made of: water, electrons, energy: circulates
Splitting

When I share me to the trees and cement and you and the sun
Subtle

If I'm lucky I come back to myself though I may stay forever
Today

How to Solve a Riddle

for Tillie Olsen

first: set some time aside

you will find the minutes
in between waking and leaving
for, then again between
returning and cooking dinner,
then again between eating
and bedtime routine, then again
between routine and sleep

second: write a novel

or if no time for hundreds of pages,
begin with a chapter or consider
a short story or if truly pressed
for time, poetry is a good option

third: listen for the answer

you are the only one who has it,
and it's often in the writer's block
or in those evenings that you were
just too tired to even make a grocery
list, but I assure you it's there, and
when you find it, it will change your life

* Tillie Olsen (1912-2007; United States): short story writer (*Tell Me a Riddle*), novelist (*Yonnondio: From the Thirties*), editor (*Mother to Daughter, Daughter to Mother*), and feminist

Lisa Stice

The Life of After

When my mother took her last breath
a sadness was heard as if the whole

world cried to the sound of wreckage
that drowned me in a sorrow so deep

I fell to a state of Grace—a hush
that emptied eternity from mirrors

with pantheism, its reflection. I am
in awe of a daughter who can live

beyond her mother's death—a loss
so devastating each night, I dream

of being with her, of seeing her,
of telling her, we've both died—

until I wake in morning unable
to know the difference.

Carol Lynn Stevenson Grellas

Dear Mister Yesterday

— After Iztok Osojnik's "Mister Today"

Mister Yesterday would like to speak
with Mister Today about matters yet

to be resolved. And Mister Tomorrow
is lurking in the halls ready to do

the same hoping for a less stressful
assignment, creating an infinite blame

game tossed back and forth like a hot
rock never landing in the hands of anyone.

Meanwhile, Mister The Buck Stops
Here looms near the eclipse of eternity

waving at Mister End of the World.

The Magnolia Review Ink Award

To Be Announced!

Letter from the Editor

Welcome to the twelfth issue of The Magnolia Review! This is our largest issue to date with 84 contributors and over four hundred pages of content! Wow! I am so excited to reach these milestones.

I do apologize for the delay of this issue. The pandemic has not been kind, and I have a higher respect for everyone who is in a master's program and has completed their master's degree. I will endeavor to return to the regular schedule and bring two issues a year in 2022. Since this issue was delayed, instead of January and July, the issues will be released in July and October 2021. Thank you in advance for understanding.

2020 has been an interesting year, and 2021 will be better. The Magnolia Review will not tolerate racism and discrimination language or the perpetuation of racism and discrimination in our pages. The deaths of George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, Ahmaud Arbery, Elijah McClain, and too many more show that we must come together to advocate for change. I am supporting #BlackLivesMatter by reading and promoting antiracism literature so that I may begin my own journey toward an antiracism lifestyle. The Magnolia Review will post information about how to support #BlackLivesMatter in blog posts and make reading recommendations. The theme for Volume 7, Issue 2 is How to Be Antiracist. We are actively seeking writers and/or artists who identify as Black, African-American, and/or BIPOC who would be interested in assisting the editors with the submission process. Please contact themagnoliareview@gmail.com for more information.

Coronavirus-19 (COVID-19) has altered our work process here at The Magnolia Review. I wish to extend wishes of healing for everyone affected by COVID-19. Please do your part to keep yourself and your families safe during this global pandemic. Remember that wearing a mask is a precaution that could save lives and prevent the spread of the virus.

I am pleased to announce that David Anthony Sam, Aretha Lemon, and Cyndie Zikmund are assisting me as editors in selecting work. Thank you so much for your help! I would also like to thank Kelsey Courage for choosing The Magnolia Review Ink Award for this issue. I also look forward to her help with the reward plaques.

In other news, I have further streamlined the issue's finishing process, including design and website updates. Physical copies of the archives and website updates are my next major goals. My goal is still to make physical copies available in order to raise funds to pay for two free contributor copies and mailing costs of every issue of The Magnolia Review. I will continue to work on the archives in physical form.

If you would like to donate, please check out the Donate page on the website (themagnoliareview.com) and/or contact themagnoliareview@gmail.com for more information.

There are still physical copies of Volume 4, Issue 1 available. I am offering them for \$5 per copy with free shipping. Please contact themagnoliareview@gmail.com for more information.

Current status of fundraising:

Volume 1, Issue 1, January 2015, 41 contributors: \$0/900

Volume 1, Issue 2, July 2015, 51 contributors: \$0/1100

Volume 2, Issue 1, January 2016, 35 contributors: \$0/800

Volume 2, Issue 2, July 2016, 41 contributors: \$0/900

Volume 3, Issue 1, January 2017, 30 contributors: \$0/700

Volume 3, Issue 2, July 2017, 51 contributors: \$0/1100

Volume 4, Issue 1, January 2018, 48 contributors: Complete!

Volume 4, Issue 2, July 2018, 40 contributors: \$0/850

Volume 5, Issue 1, January 2019, 50 contributors: \$65/1080

Volume 5, Issue 2, July 2019, 43 contributors: \$0/980

Volume 6, Issue 1, January 2020, 67 contributors: \$0/1340

Volume 6, Issue 2, July 2020, 84 contributors: \$0/1680

This issue's theme is A Defining Moment, and the optional theme for Volume 7, Issue 1 is Significant Phone Calls, Texts, and Letters. Volume 7, Issue 1 will be available in July 2021, and Volume 7, Issue 2 with the theme How to Be Antiracist will be available in October 2021.

Keep writing, keep making art, keep reading, and keep creating.
Thank you for reading, and check out the next issue in July 2021.

Suzanna Anderson

Editor-in-Chief and Founder of The Magnolia Review

Reviews

Dark Fathers and other poems by David Anthony Sam. American Fork, UT: Kelsay Books Inc, 2019. 93 pages. \$18.50, paperback.

Sam's book of poems contains two sections, Alleles and Atonement. The title poem "Dark Fathers" describes the photograph of the speaker's grandfather, and Sam's lyricism "He left only his image / fading with the photographer" (p. 18). The poem "Returning Home, Late" contains Sam's beautiful word choices with "Silences kept a cold burning / like the stars in the night above / the hills of western Pennsylvania" (p. 24). The poem "Betrayals" begins with a storm and

The dark mist,
the deep rumbling
suit me fine. Now,
it's better to rant a storm
all out of proportion
than murder love.
Being a poet is
a smaller crime. (p. 28).

Sam shares memories and photographs in "Photos Lying Apart," "Journaling," and "At the Edge of Stars." The themes of illness and saying goodbye when fathers die hit home on many levels as I deal with my own father's health and reflect on his stories and my memories of the past. Sam's collection is a wonderful testimony of fathers and father figures. Sam deftly weaves images and language to share his experiences with fathers. It is always a gift to read his words. I highly recommend Sam's work.

—Suzanna Anderson

(My Life and Other...) Famous Train Wrecks of Ohio Bill Abbott.
Hamilton, OH: Milk and Cake Press. 41 pages. \$17.00, paperback.

Abbott's language is sharp and humorous in "Epiphany" about needing to put the trash out for weekly pick up and

Life. life works like this.
It lures you in,
makes you feel secure,
then shows your shortcomings,
to you, to everyone else. (p. 2)

The poem "Another First Date" the speaker is attempting to "try to spark. I push to spark. I only / manage to combust in front of her." (p. 10). I enjoyed "The Abyss" where the speaker friends the abyss on Facebook and

The abyss notices that you haven't responded right away, and it doesn't want to come across as clingy or anything, but it is really curious what you want out of this relationship." (p. 14).

Abbott's work is a thrilling collection waiting to be read aloud with themes of train wrecks, life and death, love, words, urban animals, references to Ohio's history and places in Ohio, and cheeky humor.

—Suzanna Anderson

Contributors

Serena Agosto-Cox, Suffolk University alum, writes more vigorously than she did in her college poetry seminars. Her day job feeds the starving artist, and her poems can be read in *Broadkill Review*, *Dime Show Review*, *Baseball Bard*, *Mothers Always Write*, *Bourgeon*, *Beginnings Magazine*, *LYNX*, *Muse Apprentice Guild*, *The Harrow*, *Poems Niederngasse*, *Avocet*, *Pedestal*, and more. An essay also appears in H.L. Hix's *Made Priceless*, three poems in the *Love_Is_Love: An Anthology for LGBTQIA+ Teens* (2019), and a Q&A in Midge Raymond's *Everyday Book Marketing*. Serena also runs book review blog Savvy Verse & Wit and founded Poetic Book Tours.

Charles Joseph Albert lives in San Jose, California, with his wife and three children, where he works as a metallurgist and writes poetry and fiction on the trolley to and fro. His work has appeared recently in *Amsterdam Quarterly*, *Collective Unrest*, *First Lit Review*, *The Apeiron Review*, *Asissi*, *The Ibis Head the MOON*, *the Lowestoft Chronicle*, and *The Literary Nest*.

Madison Barlow was born and raised in Newport, Rhode Island. She received her Bachelor of Science degree in Integrated Marketing Communications at Ithaca College where she also completed a minor in Writing. She describes herself as an amateur adult, coffee fanatic, and "The Office" superfan. When she isn't writing or working as a Marketing Coordinator, she enjoys yoga, spending time with family and friends, and a glass of red wine.

Gary Beck has spent most of his adult life as a theater director and worked as an art dealer when he couldn't earn a living in the theater. He has also been a tennis pro, a ditch digger, and a salvage diver. His original plays and translations of Moliere, Aristophanes and Sophocles have been produced Off Broadway. His poetry, fiction and essays have appeared in hundreds of literary magazines and his published books include 26 poetry collections, 10 novels, 3 short story collections, 1 collection of essays and 1 collection of his one-act plays. Published poetry books include: *Dawn in Cities*, *Assault*

on Nature, Songs of a Clerk, Civilized Ways, Displays, Perceptions, Fault Lines, Tremors, Perturbations, Rude Awakenings, The Remission of Order, Contusions and Desperate Seeker (Winter Goose Publishing. Forthcoming: *Learning Curve* and *Ignition Point*). *Blossoms of Decay, Expectations, Blunt Force, Transitions, Mortal Coil and Temporal Dreams* (Wordcatcher Publishing, Forthcoming: *Redemption Value* and *Fractional Disorder*). *Earth Links and Too Harsh For Pastels* (Cyberwit Publishing: Forthcoming: *Severance*). His novels include a series *Stand to Arms, Marines: Call to Valor, Crumbling Ramparts and Raise High the Walls* (Gnome on Pig Productions). *Acts of Defiance, Flare Up and Still Defiant* (Wordcatcher Publishing. Forthcoming: *Until the Bell* and *Pirate Spring*). *Extreme Change* will be published by Winter Goose Publishing. *State of Rage* published by Cyberwit Publishing. His short story collections include: *A Glimpse of Youth* (Sweatshoppe Publications). *Now I Accuse and other stories* (Winter Goose Publishing) and *Dogs Don't Send Flowers and other stories* (Wordcatcher Publishing). *The Republic of Dreams and other essays* (Gnome on Pig Productions). *The Big Match and other one act plays* (Wordcatcher Publishing, Forthcoming: *Collected Plays of Gary Beck Volume 1* and *Four Plays by Moliere*—Translated and Directed by Gary Beck). *Plays of Aristophanes* will be published by Cyberwit Publishing. Gary lives in New York City.

Isaac Black, an MFA graduate of Vermont College, has work published or forthcoming in journals like the *Beloit Poetry Journal*, *Boston Literary*, *Callaloo*, *Fjords Review*, *Pittsburgh Poetry Review*, *Modern Poetry Quarterly Review*, *San Pedro River Review*, and *Spillway*. He's also a recent Solstice finalist for the Stephen Dunn Prize in Poetry (2017 & 2018), and winner of the Joy Harjo Poetry Prize from Cutthroat Magazine (Cornelius Eady was the judge). A Pushcart (6) and Best of the Net nominee, Isaac's a recipient of poetry fellowships from the New York State Creative Artists Service Program (CAPS) and New York Foundation of the Arts.

Originally from Texas, Robyn Blocker is a writer and EFL teacher who has lived in Asia for nearly ten years.

Nichole Brazelton is an MFA Candidate at New England College. Although she lives in Pennsylvania, she was raised in the Midwest and her heart belongs always to the woods, fields, and lakes of her youth. Her poetry often reflects this longing and memory in both the images she draws upon and the landscapes she prefers. Her most recent work has been featured in *Beautiful Cadaver Project*, *For Women Who Roar*, and *Pretty Owl Poetry*.

Holding doctorates in musicology and clinical psychology, Madelon Bolling has edited and contributed to academic and professional books and journals in various fields. After having taught and performed classical music most of her life, she worked as a landscaper, promoting and teaching home composting, sustainable agriculture, and Permaculture design. Eventually she became a psychologist and studied poetry with Nelson Bentley. A long-time student of Zen, she currently works as a psychologist in Seattle.

Charlie Brice is the author of *Flashcuts Out of Chaos* (2016), *Mnemosyne's Hand* (2018), and *An Accident of Blood* (2019), all from WordTech Editions. His poetry has been nominated for the Best of Net anthology and twice for a Pushcart Prize and has appeared in *The Atlanta Review*, *The Magnolia Review*, *The Main Street Rag*, *Chiron Review*, *Permafrost*, *I-70 Review*, *The Paterson Literary Review*, and elsewhere.

Heather M. Browne is a faith-based psychotherapist, recently nominated for the Pushcart Award, published in the *Orange Room*, *Boston Literary Review*, *Page & Spine*, *Eunoia Review*, *Poetry Quarterly*, *Red Fez*, *Electric Windmill*, *Apeiron*, *The Lake*, *Knot*, *mad swirl*. Red Dashboard published two collections: *Directions of Folding* and *Altar Call of Trumpets*.

Ankita Chatterjee is a student at UC Berkeley studying biology and creative writing. Her work has appeared most recently in *Barren Magazine* and *Anti-Heroine Chic*.

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 22 books including *Selected Poems* from FutureCycle Press which received the 2013 FutureCycle Book 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 poems are included in numerous anthologies, the latest being *Poets to Come*, which will be published in accordance with the Walt Whitman Bicentennial Convention, May 31-June 2, 2019. Her newest books are *Her Heartsongs* from Presa Press (2017) and *Joyriding to Nightfall* (2019) from FutureCycle 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.

Jennifer Christgau-Aquino is a fiction writer, poet and journalist who focuses on the strength of the human spirit. Her byline has appeared in the Huffington Post, Forbes, Houzz, the Six Fifty, BrainChild, and, most recently, *The Dime Show Review*. When not writing, you can find her trying to kick her coffee addiction, running or wishing she could be reading.

Holly Day's poetry has recently appeared in *Asimov's Science Fiction*, *Grain*, and *Harvard Review*. Her newest poetry collections are *Where We Went Wrong* (Clare Songbirds Publishing), *Into the Cracks* (Golden Antelope Press), *Cross Referencing a Book of Summer* (Silver Bow Publishing), and *The Tooth is the Largest Organ in the Human Body* (Anaphora Literary Press).

Megan Duffey is a first year MFA student at Georgia College and State University with a concentration in creative nonfiction. She works to give the incarcerated a voice in the world and draws attention to the connection and lasting effects associated with family violence, addiction, and prison life.

Donna Emerson writes poetry and prose. She is recently retired from college teaching and her practice as a licensed clinical social worker.

Robert Fern is a professor of translational neurobiology who lives in Plymouth, England. This year he has published or had accepted for publication pieces in *Between the lines* press, *The Fortnightly Review*, *Isacoustic*, *Blue Unicorn*, and *the Chiron Review*. Other than that, his publication record is purely academic.

Mary Sophie Filicetti writes fiction in the myriad coffee shops around DC, and has discovered a love of flash fiction. Her first publication appeared in *Everyday Fiction* in January. She is also a contributing author to *Building on Patterns* Preschool Braille Curriculum.

Vanessa Frank is a poet who lives on a mountain in Minturn, Colorado. She has a BFA in dramaturgy from Carnegie Mellon University.

Robert Granader's work has been featured in *Washington Post*, *Washingtonian* magazine, *New York Times*, and *Mariashriver.com*. He has won writing awards from *Bethesda Magazine* and *Writer's Digest*. Granader has attended various workshops at the Writer's Center in Bethesda, MD, as well as the Key West Literary Seminar and Writer's Digest Conference in Los Angeles. He has a BA in English from the University of Michigan and a JD from The George Washington University. Granader has published more than 350 articles and essays in over fifty publications, and he is now the CEO of *Marketresearch.com*.

Carol Lynn Stevenson Grellas is a ten-time Pushcart Prize nominee and a seven-time Best of the Net nominee. In 2012 she won the Red Ochre Chapbook Contest, with her manuscript, *Before I Go to Sleep*. In 2018 her book *In the Making of Goodbyes* was nominated for a national book award and her poem *A Mall in California* took 2nd place for the Jack Kerouac Poetry Prize. In 2019 her chapbook *An Ode to Hope in the Midst of Pandemonium* was a finalist in the Eric Hoffer Book Awards. In 2020, two of her sonnets were given

Honorable Mention in the Soul Making Keats Literary Competition. Her new book *Alice in Ruby Slippers* is forthcoming from Aldrich Press. She has been the featured poet at countless venues, most recently, Mezzo Cammin and Verses Daily. She is the Co-Editor-in-Chief for *the Tule Review* and former Editor-in-Chief of *The Orchards Poetry Journal* and a member of the Sacramento Poetry Center Board of Directors. She is currently enrolled in the Vermont College of Fine Arts, MFA in Writing program.

Ed Hack started writing poetry because it seemed the only way to make sense of the world that he experienced. Hack wrote free verse for years, was published here and there, and then, six years ago, he turned to the sonnet, wanting the discipline of form. Hack moved from the sonnet, though he still believes in the form, to a freer verse, though he still uses rhyme.

David Hargreaves is a poet and linguist (by profession) living in Oregon, born in Detroit. His *translation of The Blossoms of Sixty-Four Sunsets, poems by Nepal Bhasa poet, Durga Lal Shrestha, was published in Kathmandu in 2014*. His own poems have appeared in *Passages North, Naugatuck River Review, Hiram Poetry Review, The Potomac, Pacifica Literary Review, Poets/Artists, Himalaya Journal, The Sow's Ear Poetry Review, The Modern Poetry Quarterly*, and elsewhere, including *the anthology The Art of Angling: Poems about Fishing (Penguin: Everyman's Library)*.

Angela B. Harris was born into a family of healers who chose to live out their vocation through the medical profession however; she was guided toward alternative healing. Her journey included twenty years in the U.S. Navy, motherhood, service as a missionary in Brazil and caregiver for multiple family members. Clearly her journey was and is one of service. Having a strong willingness to serve, Angela has pursued opportunities to discover, develop and enhance her God given gifts. Aside from traditional studies in business administration, she discovered Reiki, a spiritual healing technique. In 2012 she received certification as a Reiki Master. Answering the call to become a spiritual director, Angela completed a rigorous two-year course and was certified by the

Spiritual Direction Institute in 2012. Although Angela gained many tangible skills, her journey also encompassed many intangible skills, such as patience, compassion, kindness, empathy and an incredible calmness. Her quest has led her to many people, places and discoveries—life preparation to become an instrument of healing for mind body and spirit. Angela is also an artist who enjoys discovering the healing power of art. She sees herself as one of the Creator's paintbrushes. The connecting journeys of life and the transformation of ashes to beauty are what inspire her. Find Angela online at <https://www.aspiritualcove.com/>.

Alison Hicks is the author of poetry collections *You Who Took the Boat Out* and *Kiss*, a chapbook *Falling Dreams*, a novella *Love: A Story of Images*, and co-editor of an anthology, *Prompted*. Her work has appeared in *Eclipse*, *Gargoyle*, *Permafrost*, and *Poet Lore*, and has been nominated for a Pushcart Prize by *Green Hills Literary Lantern*. Awards include the 2011 *Philadelphia City Paper* Poetry Prize and two Pennsylvania Council on the Arts fellowships. She is founder of Greater Philadelphia Wordshop Studio, which offers community-based writing workshops.

Michael Hogan is the author of twenty-six books including the *Irish Soldiers of Mexico* which was the basis for an MGM film starring Tom Berenger and three documentaries. His work has appeared in numerous journals including the *Paris Review*, the *Harvard Review*, the *Ohio Review*, *American Poetry Review*, the *Agni Review*, *New Letters*, and others. He currently lives in Guadalajara, Mexico, with the textile artist Lucinda Mayo and their Dutch Shepherd, Lola. Margot Hughes' short fiction has previously been published in *Gandy Dancer*. Currently, she is pursuing her MFA in Creative Writing and Literature at Stony Brook University. She holds a BA in English with a concentration in Creative Writing from SUNY Geneseo, and she formerly worked in television production at Comedy Central.

Mark Jackley is the author of several chapbooks, most recently *On the Edge of a Very Small Town*. His work has appeared in *Sugar House Review*, *Fifth Wednesday*, *Natural Bridge*, *Talking River*, *The Cape Rock*, and other journals. He lives in Purcellville, VA.

James Croal Jackson (he/him) is a Filipino-American poet. He has recent poems in *DASH*, *Sampsonia Way*, and *Jam & Sand*. He edits *The Mantle Poetry* (themantlepoetry.com). Currently, he works in film production in Pittsburgh, PA. (jamescroaljackson.com)

Finn Janning is a Danish novelist and philosopher. He has studied philosophy, literature, and business administration at Copenhagen Business School (CBS), and at Duke University. He earned his PhD in philosophy from CBS. His work has been featured in *Epiphany*, *Under the Gum Tree*, *South 85 Journal*, and *Foliate Oak Literary Magazine*, among other publications. His most recent publication is the book, *A Philosophy of Mindfulness—A Journey with Deleuze*. He lives in Barcelona, Spain, with his wife and their three children.

Marc Janssen lives in a house with a wife who likes him and a cat who loathes him. Regardless of that turmoil, his poetry can be found scattered around the world in places like *Penumbra*, *Slant*, *Cirque Journal*, *Off the Coast* and *The Ottawa Arts Journal*. Janssen also coordinates the Salem Poetry Project, a weekly reading, and the annual Salem Poetry Festival.

Christina Kapp teaches at the Writers Circle Workshops in New Jersey and her work has appeared in *Passages North*, *Hobart*, *Forge Literary Magazine*, *The MacGuffin*, *PANK*, *Pithead Chapel*, and elsewhere. Her fiction has been nominated for Best of the Net awards and a Pushcart Prize. She welcomes you to follow her on Twitter @ChristinaKapp and visit her website: www.christinakapp.com.

Hanna Komar is an award-winning poet and translator based in Minsk. She has published two poetry collections (*Fear of Heights* in Belarusian and a bilingual collection *Recycled*) and a collection of Belarusian translations of Charles Bukowski. Her book *Fear of Heights* (2016) was described as “some wild, unrestrained expression – the sound and the fury (to use Faulkner’s metaphor) – returning to [Belarusian] poetry.” Hanna writes in Belarusian and translates her texts into English.

Kristin LaFollette is a writer, artist, and photographer and is the author of the chapbook, *Body Parts* (GFT Press, 2018). She is a professor at the University of Southern Indiana and serves as the Art Editor at *Mud Season Review*. You can visit her on Twitter at @k_lafollette03, on her personal website at kristinlafollette.com, or on her photography website at lsphoto1020.wordpress.com.

Paul Lamb lives near Kansas City, but he escapes to his Ozark cabin whenever he gets the chance. His stories have appeared in *Aethlon*, *Bended Genres*, *Foliate Oak*, *Workers Write!*, *Heartwood*, *Nassau Review*, and others. He keeps a blog about his writing and other oddments at [Lucky Rabbit's Foot](http://LuckyRabbit'sFoot). He rarely strays far from his laptop.

Robin Long is a queer poet, writer, and writing professor in Austin, Texas. Her poetry can be found or is forthcoming in *the Art in the Time of Covid-19* eBook by San Fedeles Press, *The American Writers Review*, *The 2021 Texas Poetry Calendar* by Kallisto Gaia Press, *FEELS Zine*, *The /t&mz/ Review*, *Alexandria Quarterly* as a First Line Poetry Series finalist, Brain Mill Press as a 2020 National Poetry Month Editor’s Pick, *8 Poems*, *Twist in Time*, *Literary Yard*, and *45 Magazine*. She is currently expanding her original fiction thesis on the life of Emily Dickinson, *The Other Dickinson*, so she can be found at theotherdickinson.com or in social media as @theotherdickinson.

Naomi Ruth Lowinsky's poems have been widely published, most recently in *Serving House Journal*, *Ginosko*, and *Stickman*. Her poem "Madelyn Dunham, Passing On" won first prize in the Obama Millennium Contest. She has also won the Blue Light Poetry Chapbook Contest. Lowinsky's fourth poetry collection is *The Faust Woman Poems*. Lowinsky is a Jungian analyst in private practice in Berkeley, CA and the poetry and fiction editor of *Psychological Perspectives*, which is published by the Los Angeles Jung Institute.

Lisa L. Lynn has been published in the *Coffin Bell Journal*. She has a Ph.D. in Clinical Psychology from the University of Rochester, and works in both private practice and Equine Assisted Psychotherapy.

Shwetha Mahendran is a student at Loyola-ICAM College of Engineering and Technology, India. She is currently pursuing a bachelor's degree in Computer Science but wishes to take up her postgraduate education in English Literature. Her poetry has never appeared in publications before. Her interests include speculative fiction, independent films, and pop music.

Ivy Marie is a student at Mercer University studying English Literature and Creative Writing. She was a 2019 winner of the Dan Veach Prize for Younger Writers and has been published by Porkbelly Press and Glass Mountain, with work forthcoming in the Agnes Scott Writers' Festival Magazine and The Allegheny Review. She interns with Macon Magazine and Mercer University Press and edits for The Dulcimer and The Mercer Cluster.

From associate professor of English to management trainer to retiree, Carolyn Martin has journeyed from New Jersey through California to Oregon to discover Douglas firs, months of rain, and dry summers. Her poems and book reviews have appeared in publications throughout North America, Australia, and the UK, and her fourth collection, *A Penchant for Masquerades*, was released by Unsolicited Press in 2019. She is currently the poetry editor of *Kosmos Quarterly: journal for global transformation*. Find out more about Carolyn at www.carolynmartinpoet.com.

Barbara McHugh is a poet, novelist, and longtime Buddhist practitioner. Her work has been published in the *Berkeley Poetry Review*; her novel, *Bride of the Buddha*, will be published by Monkfish Book Publishing in 2021. She edits fiction, teaches courses in Buddhism, and enjoys world travel and chasing total eclipses of the sun.

Juliana Mei is an English Literature major at Nanyang Technological University, expected to graduate in the spring of 2022. When she isn't reading or writing, her interests include playing the violin and engaging in personal projects usually tied to photography and design.

Meg is an aspiring writer. She attended Boston University School of Law and Vanderbilt University. Currently, she is taking a break from practicing law to work on her writing and renovate her houses in the Catskills and Miami Beach. She lives in Brooklyn with her wife and her dog.

Peter Mladinic has published three books of poems: *Lost in Lea*, *Dressed for Winter*, and *Falling Awake in Lovington*. He is on the English faculty at New Mexico Junior College and lives in Hobbs, New Mexico.

Marlene Molinoff is a former university literature teacher and marketing strategist, and has traveled and photographed extensively in Africa, Antarctica, the Middle East, and South America. Her short stories, many of which are about the countless transitions made in life, either by will or by chance, have appeared in *The Alembic*, *Amarillo Bay*, *Crack the Spine*, *Ducts*, *EDGE*, *Evening Street Review*, *Forge*, *Good Works Review*, *Green Hills Literary Lantern*, *Litbreak Magazine*, *Steam Ticket*, *Sweet Tree Review*, and the *Iowa Summer Festival Anthology*.

Daniel Edward Moore lives in Oak Harbor, Washington on Whidbey Island. His poems are forthcoming in *Weber Review*, *Cultural Weekly*, *Tule Review*, *Poetry South*, *January Review*, *Plainsongs*, *The Cape Rock*, *Artifact Nouveau*, *Panoplyzine*, *The*

American Journal of Poetry, and *Gyroscope Review*. Moore's chapbook *Boys* was recently released from Duck Lake Books. His first book *Waxing the Dents* was a finalist for the Brick Road Poetry Book Prize and will be released in February 2020. Visit him at Danieledwardmoore.com.

David Morris is a psychologist, living in Melbourne, Australia. His previous work has appeared in *Monkeybicycle*, *Word Riot*, *Dogzplot*, *Cordite Poetry Review*, and elsewhere. He has been a finalist in the Best Small Fictions anthology and longlisted for Wigleaf's Top 50.

Mark A. Murphy is the editor of the online journal, *POETiCA REViEW*. His poetry collections include *Tin Cat Alley* (1996), *Our Little Bit of Immortality* (2011), *Night-watch Man & Muse* (2013), *To Nora, A Singer of Sad Songs* (2019), and *Night Wanderer's Plea* (2019). His next full length collection, *The Ontological Constant* is due out in June 2020 in a bi-lingual German/English edition from Moloko Print in Germany.

Caroline O'Connell is studying creative writing at Northwestern University. In her poetry, she is interested in exploring liminal spaces—spaces of change, spaces of controversy, of displacement and home, and of fear and desire. She is currently an unpublished, emerging writer.

As a retired Ob-Gyn, Dr. Martina Nicholson has been most interested in the interior landscapes of women. She has published six poetry books through Old Mountain Press. She is fascinated by cross-cultural issues and language, as well as growth and healing.

Kevin Norwood is the winner of The Porch Poetry Prize 2020. He is published or pending in *Litbreak*, *Nashville Review*, *Natural Bridge*, *Tulane Review*, and studied creative writing with Peter Taylor and John Casey. Born in Philadelphia and raised in Virginia, he is a long-time corporate attorney with a law degree from William & Mary. He obtained Bachelor and Master of Arts degrees in English from the University of Virginia. He is the father of two and currently lives with his wife in Brentwood, TN.

Ada Pelonia is a writer from the Philippines. You may check some of her works at adapelonia.weebly.com or on Twitter @_adawrites.

Barry Peters lives in Durham and teaches in Raleigh, NC. Print and online publications, some forthcoming, include *The American Journal of Poetry*, *Best New Poets 2018*, *New Ohio Review*, *Poetry East*, *Rattle*, and *South Florida Poetry Journal*.

Maria S. Picone has an MFA from Goddard College. Her work appears in the *Homestead Review*, *Vine Leaves Literary Journal*, *GTK Creative*, and, of course, *The Magnolia Review*. Her photography documents the interesting and unusual places she's been, including Cambodia, Uganda, and Australia. Her Twitter is @mspicone, and her website is mariaspicone.com.

Fabrice B. Poussin is the advisor for *The Chimes*, the Shorter University award winning poetry and arts publication. Poussin's writing and photography has been published in print, including *Kestrel*, *Symposium*, *La Pensee Universelle*, *Paris*, and other art and literature magazines in the United States and abroad.

After a long career as a lawyer, Dana Robbins obtained an MFA from the Stonecoast Writers program. Her first book, *The Left Side of My Life*, was published by Moon Pie Press in 2015. Robbins' poem "To My Daughter Teaching Science" was featured by Garrison Keillor on the Writers Almanac in November 2015.

Sam Rose is a writer from Northamptonshire, England and is the editor of *Peeking Cat Poetry Magazine*. Her work has appeared in *Barely South Review*, *Scarlet Leaf Review*, *Rat's Ass Review*, *The Bitchin' Kitsch*, *Haiku Journal*, and others. She is a three times cancer survivor and is studying for her PhD, researching the role of poetry in psycho-oncology. Find her at her website <https://www.writersam.co.uk> and on Twitter @writersamr.

Christopher X. Ryan is the author of the novel *BOGORE*, forthcoming in 2020 from J.New Books. In 2019 his stories appeared in nearly twenty journals, and he earned second place in the 2019 *Baltimore Review* winter contest. Born on the island of Martha's Vineyard, he now lives in Helsinki, Finland, where he works as a writer, editor, and ghostwriter. He can be found at www.christopherXryan.com.

Susan Chock Salgy studied creative writing at Brigham Young University, and she writes poetry, essays, and non-fiction articles. She also operates a small business providing user experience research and consulting to some of the world's largest software companies. Her fascination with the interlacing of human beings and the digital world informs much of her work.

Carmelinda Scian emigrated to Canada from Portugal. She graduated with a BA and an English MA from the University of Toronto. Her stories have been published in *the Malahat Review* (won The Open Seasons Award), *The Fiddlehead*, *the Toronto Star* (won first prize), was Runner-up in the University of Toronto Short Story Contest, published in *Litro*, *Belletrist*, and *Prairie Fire*. "Yellow Watch" was nominated for the 2018 Journey Prize. She was the Final Judge for the 2018 Malahat Review's Open Season Award and won a scholarship toward the "Writing the Luso Experience," 2019.

Ashley Scott is a writer of short stories and flash fiction. She loves writing that packs a lot into a little. Now settled with her family in the Pacific Northwest, she has lived enough places to appreciate the quirky people and temperate climate.

Kevin M. Scott graduated with his degree in psychology from Penn State University and is starting to pursue his love of publishing poetry again after a lengthy hiatus. He enjoys spending his free time hiking, buying used books, and cooking mediocre but exciting meals.

Juliette Sebock is a Best of the Net-nominated poet and writer and the author of *Mistakes Were Made*, *Micro*, *How My Cat Saved My Life and Other Poems*, *Three Words*, *Plight of the Pangolin*, and *Boleyn*, with work forthcoming or appearing in a wide variety of publications. She is the founding editor of *Nightingale & Sparrow*, runs a lifestyle blog, *For the Sake of Good Taste*, and is a regular contributor to *Marías at Sampaguitas*, *Royal Rose*, *Memoir Mixtapes*, and *The Poetry Question*. When she isn't writing (and sometimes when she is), she can be found with a cup of coffee and her cat, Fitz. Juliette can be reached on her website, juliettesebock.com, or across social media @juliettesebock.

Shruthi Shivkumar is an avid writer of poetry. She is an undergraduate at the University of Pittsburgh double majoring in English Writing and Biology, and she loves blending perspectives in her writing. At any given moment, you can find her creating, singing, or spending time with friends and family.

Emma Staffaroni is a high school English teacher at Phillips Academy in Andover, Massachusetts. When she's not consumed by boarding school life, Emma loves to write in her journal, take long forest walks with her dog, lose at complicated board games, and watch trashy French rom-coms.

John L. Stanizzi is author of *Ecstasy Among Ghosts*, *Sleepwalking*, *Dance Against the Wall*, *After the Bell*, *Hallelujah Time!*, *High Tide – Ebb Tide*, *Four Bits – Fifty 50-Word Pieces*, and *Chants*. His poems have appeared in *Prairie Schooner*, *American Life in Poetry*, *The New York Quarterly*, *Blue Mountain Review*, *Paterson Literary Review*, *The Cortland Review*, *Rattle*, *Tar River Poetry*, and many others. Stanizzi has been translated into Italian and his work has appeared in many journals in Italy. He has read at venues all over New England, and his newest collection, *Sundowning*, will be out later this year with *Main Street Mag*. Stanizzi teaches literature at Manchester Community College in Manchester, CT, and he lives with his wife, Carol, in Coventry.

Lisa Stice is a poet/mother/military spouse. She is the author of two full-length collections, *Permanent Change of Station* (Middle West Press, 2018) and *Uniform* (Aldrich Press, 2016), and a chapbook, *Desert* (Prolific Press). While it is difficult to say where home is, she currently lives in North Carolina with her husband, daughter, and dog. You can learn more about her and her publications at lisastice.wordpress.com and at facebook.com/LisaSticePoet.

Adriana Stimola is a non-fiction literary agent, content consultant, mother, and ever-aspiring poet.

Leela Srinivasan is an MFA student at the Michener Center for Writers at the University of Texas at Austin. Originally from the Jersey Shore, she holds a BA in Psychology and MA in Communication from Stanford University, where she wrote and published a collection of psychological poetry as her undergraduate honors thesis. She currently lives in Austin, Texas.

Dr. Ryan Thorpe is an assistant professor of writing at University of Michigan-Shanghai Jiao Tong University Joint Institute. He founded and directs the Shanghai Writing Workshop, and is the editor of *The Blue Tiger Review*.

Phelan Tinsley is a Master's graduate from Radford University. Teaching is his passion because he loves to hear what students are thinking. Whenever he writes, whether that be a book review, essay, poem, or fiction, students' futures inspire every part of that work. The goal is to create a better future and writing, as he teaches, can certainly help. He spent the majority of his academic career studying LGBTQ+ literature, using queer and feminist theories to analyze literature, as well as creating fiction and poetry around LGBTQ+ characters.

J. T. Townley has published in *Harvard Review*, *The Kenyon Review*, *The Threepenny Review*, and other magazines and journals. Townley's stories have been nominated for the Pushcart Prize and Best of the Net award. He holds an MFA in Creative Writing from the University of British Columbia and an MPhil in English from Oxford University. To learn more, visit jttownley.com.

Mark Tulin is a former family therapist from Philadelphia who lives in Santa Barbara, California. Mark has two poetry books, *Magical Yogis* and *Awkward Grace* available on Amazon. He has an upcoming book of fiction, *The Asthmatic Kid and Other Stories* available in August of this year. Mark has been featured in *Vita Brevis*, *Amethyst Review*, *Poppy Road Review*, *Family Therapy Magazine*, *New Readers Magazine*, as well as anthologies, magazines, and podcasts. You can follow Mark at [Crow On The Wire](http://CrowOnTheWire.com) (crowonthewire.com).

Cathy Ulrich used to have a dog that terrorized children on the playground when she was young. Her parents said that dog went to a nice farm to live, but she's not so sure. Her work has been published in various journals, including *Craft*, *Cheat River Review*, and *Threadcount*.

Emily Unwin (she/her) is a queer woman who works as a yoga teacher, freelance editor, and eating disorder dietitian in Athens, GA. Her poems intersect mind-body connection, combining her passion for somatic healing with storytelling and the physical shape of a poem. She recently completed her master's degree at the University of Georgia, and she has spent the past months studying poetry and narrative history under Natalie Eilbert, author of *Indictus*.

Doug Van Hooser's poetry has appeared in *Chariton Review*, *Split Rock Review*, *Sheila-Na-Gig*, and *Poetry Quarterly* among other publications. His fiction can be found in *Red Earth Review*, *Flash Fiction Magazine*, and *Bending Genres Journal*. Doug's play, "Here Ye, Hear Ye", will be performed this summer at McKaw Theatre in Chicago.

Richard Weaver lives in Baltimore City where he volunteers with the Maryland Book Bank, CityLit and LightCity, the Baltimore Book Festival, and is the Writer-in-residence at the James Joyce Pub. Other publications: *New England Review*, *Vanderbilt Poetry Review*, *North American Review*, *Poetry*, *Pembroke*, *Adelaide*, *Conjunctions*, *Crazyhorse*, *Southern Quarterly*, *Barrow Street*, *New Orleans Review*, *Triggerfish*, and *The Magnolia Review*. He is the author of *The Stars Undone* (Duende Press).

Angelica Whitehorne studied creative writing, women and gender studies, and international studies at The College at Brockport. She currently writes poems at her desk with 5 of her 20 houseplants as backdrop, but she hopes to one day write full time (preferably with even more houseplants as a back drop).

Nancy Wick is a journalist who worked for many years at the University of Washington in Seattle. She writes personal essays and other nonfiction and also loves working as a developmental editor—helping other writers make their work the best it can be (www.EnlightenedEdits.com). Her nonfiction has appeared or is forthcoming in *Minerva Rising*, *Persimmon Tree*, *Summerset Review*, *Longridge Review*, and the anthology *Triumph: Stories of Victories Great & Small*, among others

Casey Woods is a creative writing student currently living in Orlando, Florida. They love narrative video games, tabletop role playing games, and just about anything else that tells a good story. They think that there is an endless amount of ways to tell the story of being human, and they are excited to explore as many as they can in their writing. Their work has appeared in the *Scarlet Leaf Review*.

Orit Yeret is a writer, artist and teacher. Born and raised in Israel, she currently lives in the U.S. Her work recently appeared in *The Voices Project*, *The Borfski Press*, *Ink Pantry*, *Drunk Monkeys*, *Crack the Spine*, *Blue Lake Review*, *Evening Street Review* and *Steam Ticket*. View more of her work at: www.orityeret.com.

Cyndie Zikmund is a graduate student in the MFA Creative Writing program at Queens University of Charlotte. Currently, she is the CNF editor for *Qu literary magazine* and has been an assistant editor for the previous two Qu publications. By day, Cyndie works as a Group Marketing Manager for VMware. Her personal experience blog (teetia.home.blog) hosts more of her adventure-seeking stories.