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*Note: Jack D. Harvey's "Little Liza" and "Ravishment" first appeared in
Zombie Logic Review

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 The Magnolia Review publishes previously unpublished work.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

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

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

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Stephen Crane Looks Down On a White Chrysanthemum

I stood upon a hilltop
and saw while looking down
a flash of white intermingled
with the other foliage
covering the ground.

I stumbled down to it,
boots scraping the earth, making
a racket out of dirt
that had remained silent
all these years and found

it was but one flower,
blooming in a shrub of buds,
the scout, the explorer,
the one who leads the way
and plucked it out,

tucked its stem into
my lapel as we two were one
taking turns to forage
forth with truth our badge,
the better part of courage.

Resolutions

are easily lost in the laundry hamper
and grocery lists and visits to the doctor

they work their way out of my pockets
and fall to the ground between car and school

wafer thin, they float away with a slight breeze
easily mistaken for a dry leaf or robin feather

this time around, I will press them together
into a hard stone to fill my palm, a weighty

reminder



There's still the smell from salt
–you bathe this pebble, sure its pulse
can be found close to shore and nourished

feel its way through a shallow sea
thriving on unhatched eggs from a stream
long ago extinct –you scrub side to side

as if all rock remembers hand to hand
a darkness starting to swarm in a sky
not yet breathing on its own, no stars

though what you hold up goes on to become
a death, bit by bit driven into the ground
covered over with running water and candles.

Bathers

An excess of sequins follows in each unkempt bather's wake. At ease, the creek holds their sun touched limbs up to the light as if they were diamonds finished with princess cuts.

Pebbles and detritus beneath a wave's crest are reminiscent of a supple body which, having bucked the abscesses of experience, is stripped naked and polished to a fine sheen.

It can be said that a stain becomes the selfsame item it besets, that ichor can be both water and the glib film skirting its surface.

The existent self can be found somewhere between what the water is and is not able to scour off. The skin of lithesome bathers at once becomes inundated with the stream as water parses what is dirt from what is left.

Recipes for Damaging Books

When book sellers ship books to me, they might assure me that they will package them well. Days later, I will not be surprised if the book arrives damaged anyway. It seems to be fifty-fifty with the odds leaning toward how delicately the mail carrier handles the package.

Mail carriers drop things all the time. The postal people on my route don't bother placing the packages before your door. They drop them from standing height; I can hear the thud from the other side of our home.

The most remarkable package I ever received was a box that was large enough to hold two comforters. Because the book was sixteen inches long, I recognized that it was a challenge to package. But when the thing came in, I was confounded. Not only was the box way too large for the book, it wasn't properly packaged. The seller seemed to have put everything in, even some random paper towels, to try to fill it, in vain. In the end, the book certainly came damaged, and I contacted them, and I remember being none too polite about it.

I almost always contact a book seller when a book doesn't make it to me intact. I take it on

principle that if I buy the book new, it should arrive new. Most book sellers don't care what condition your books arrive in. Most of them assure you, but they only do this as protocol. They know most people don't complain. Many booksellers do no more than place them in padded envelopes. Some of them do even less than that. When a book seller responds to my request for packing the book well and the book arrives in a padded envelope, I understand that they might mean well, but they don't know what they're doing.

Most people might think a padded envelope is sufficient for a book to make it without damage. A padded envelope only protects against superficial damage, like attrition or light bumps and knocks. It does not protect against impact damage. Most people would assume that the hardcover endures such mishaps better, but that's wrong. Impact damage affects hardcovers more. If it falls on one of its four corners, the corner will get mashed. If it falls on any of its edges, the edge will get notched.

Softcovers, because of their pliability, receive little damage by getting dropped, unless in the unlikely instance the book falls at a

particular angle on one of the two corners connected to the spine, or when the length of the spine hits an edged object. So, padded envelopes almost always work for softcovers but not for hardcovers.

Sometimes, you get a book that has no packing. It may come in a sturdy box, but the book is allowed to slide around, bending all corners. When you get a group of books, the smaller books are used as packing against this kind of shifting, allowing for some of the books to make it okay at the expense of the others. Every once in a while, you get the serendipitous situation of a book fitting perfectly in its box. It is fortunate for the packaging person who thinks they do not need to deal with any packing material to fill the box, but regardless if it were packed or not, if that box falls on its edge or corner, that means the book fell on its edge or corner.

Outside damage is outside damage, but these incidents will hardly ever harm the interior, which most people would argue is the important part of the book. I understand that in the broad scheme, the book's cover is inconsequential, regardless of how new you happen to buy it. But I can't get past this, at least on books I buy new.

What is the best packaging for books? This is the question that I never heard asked in any circle of

book lovers. But it is one that should be asked, if you love the book you're packaging, say, when you are about to move. A book is a highly stable object when it is closed. If you drop a closed book, it might receive the impact damage I'm talking about, but it is just as likely that it won't.

Have you ever thrown a book across the room? I have, and how it survives such a callous, desperate act depends on how it takes its flight. There are so many things that can happen before it collides with something. Usually a thrown book ends its arced trajectory when it hits a wall or piece of furniture. If it sustains its shape during flight, it may get no more than the damage I have mentioned so far. If it butterflies, the effects might be more complicated. Softcovers that butterfly can corrugate an entire cover, and the pages, since they are only glued, can get pulled off the binding. Hardcovers have less of a tendency for this because the pages are almost always sewn; such pages might get tears but they never come off. On the other hand, if the book does not butterfly, it becomes more of a stable object, which flies faster because of the lower friction, and this might give it deeper dents or even a warped cover. The book I am thinking of looked like it had been mashed by a runaway printing press.

Small books are stronger than larger books. Larger books are a burden on themselves. Think about how much easier it is to snap a longer twig than a shorter one. I have a book on comics that would need its own table in order to be used. It is about the size of a headstone, and it weighs almost as much. I have tried reading this thing. You can't merely lie on your stomach and read it; the top edge would be too far away from you. You can't set it on your lap because it has the tendency to tip away from you, if the sheer weight of it were not a discomfort. How would you read a thing like this? The answer is that you don't — not for any considerable amount of time. It was not intended to be read. It was intended to be displayed, either in some grossly proportioned bookshelf or on a pedestal made specifically for it. Since I don't take any time to read it, except for a while during the Christmas season (which means two pages a year), it spends almost all of its time behind the closed door of a bookshelf. Every year, when I dig it out, I notice more warping on the curve of the spine. It is like being overweight and how the human spine might get damaged by carrying that excess weight. Large books will need to sustain more strain than smaller books. Smaller books are tight and compact.

Though I am focusing on impact damage here because that is the kind that usually happens to books damaged in shipment, there are other types of damage a book can receive en route to you. I have thought of a few.

Water damage. I knew someone that soaked scores of books on purpose to get an insurance claim. I saw these books in the dumpster later, and I peered closely without touching them. (If toilets are the easiest way to drench a book, I was wondering about the water they used.) The pages curled. This would not be disastrous if you don't have mold. I think I have owned one or two books that did incur water damage, and once dry, the book was still readable, and since it was no longer new, it was interesting to hold and page through in its own way.

Tearing a book in two. (This is not likely to happen in a shipped book, but it could get stuck in a piece of machinery on its way to you, and hence get shredded in some inconceivable way.) I have found that there are a number of books that might arguably deserve such a fate, though we never talk about books on such terms as destroying them on purpose. My mother told me to never throw away a book, though there are a great many books out there that

are no better than disposable TV. The lesson came in loud and clear one Saturday when my brother and I cleaned out our closet, and she found all our kiddie books in the trash. She made us take them right back and told us that one should never throw away books, ever! I have followed her commandment ever since because I understand where the veneration for such objects comes from. But in a way, it goes back to the question if the book as an object is important or what is inside it. If we forget about the book as an object and solely concentrate on what's inside, then crappy books do in fact deserve to be trashed.

Pulling out pages from a book. There are two reasons why I've done this. You get books at your door about some spiritual well-being, and I quickly needed a scrap sheet of paper. The other reason is I bought a secondhand book at the thrift shop for the sole reason of making it into post-modern art. I tore apart and reconstructed this poetry book so that I can show it to my critique group seminar. Again, if the book is glued rather than sewn, it is easier to tear out discrete sheets. Otherwise, you get diagonal tears across the pages. Remember that book pages are folios that are folded in half, and that is the reason books need a page count divisible by four.

Sometimes when you tear pages from a book, you can get the whole folio instead.

Setting a book on fire. I have never seen this happen, but I have seen the aftermath of a fire, and I can safely say here that if the packaged book is subjected to a fiery calamity, the remains will be indistinguishable from the remains of the packaging.

General attrition. There was a famous Dada work of art that was a book where the artist put a sheet of sandpaper on either side of the cover in order to wear away the two books standing next to it on the shelf. I suppose it was some form of statement against established ideas that come from musty libraries. Some attrition does happen to a book that is sliding around the inside of a box. It is most notable on books that have fancy covers that display glossy surfaces or a special finish like a foil embossment. Sometimes, an honest bookseller will admit in the book description that the book has some shelf wear or scuffing. This takes me to the idea of the safest bookshelves in which to store your books. Bookshelves made of cheap wood are usually smooth enough to have them do no damage by attrition. When you go to a bookstore, you'll find that they use the cheap types of bookshelves made of particle board and formica.

These shelves may bend under the weight of the books, but they hardly ever break, and they cause no such wear. These cheap shelves are always perfect as long as you don't overload one shelf and bring it into danger of cracking and having all the books collapse. One of my bookshelves is a fairly nice one made of oak that actually wears away the bottoms of books because the wood on the shelf has a grain to it that acts like the sandpaper used in a Dada work of art.

Because I have received hundreds of books by mail, I feel I am somewhat of an expert on packing books. I have sent numerous messages to booksellers delineating the finer points of packaging; I know this sounds audacious because I am informing people who earn their livelihood from shipping merchandise. These people usually don't respond or give me a tight thank you before dismissing me. Though they may have sent hundreds of thousands of books through the mail, they will never know how their packaging reaches their customers until one of us gives them the situation. And like I said, they base their success on the fact that most people won't complain, and so their economics is based mostly on convenience, which means they don't bother with any type of packaging that is too elabo-

rate because it is more practical to send them out as quickly as possible.

Notwithstanding all these concerns about prolonging the perfect condition of a new book, there is an intimate esthetic to old, worn books. Here, I am talking about the kind you find on a book at a coffee shop that has been riffled through by countless people. With such books that are worn and softened by use, I find it pleasurable to flip through the pages and hold this fuzzy object that does not oblige you to treat it carefully. It is an object that has had a history, and this idea becomes present when you find a few loving words in some stranger's handwriting on one of the first pages.

I take an old backpack with me when I go to a coffeehouse or other place to linger. I like lingering in places that have windows and serve coffee, and I take my backpack stuffed with things to do at such places. This dirty old book bag only takes my dirty old books. I would never stick a new one into it. At a lingering place, I do not have to worry about spilling coffee on such books. This shows that I have two sets of standards when it comes to the conditions of books. If the warm fuzziness is to be expected, I welcome it with open arms. Otherwise, I have a hard time accepting a

new book that is marred, especially before it ever reaches me.

My mother bought me a leather bound edition of a favorite book of mine for Christmas. I was looking forward to it. When I opened it on Christmas Day, I realized that she had taken the one copy among three (a one-third chance) from the one bookstore from about four in the area (about a one in twelve chance) that had the printing error: when they cut the pages, one of the pages was folded, and so if you unfold that corner, it extends beyond the dimensions of the book. I had seen this copy at the bookstore many times, wondering who would ever buy such a thing since it was obviously blemished? That Christmas morning, my mother was trying to convince me to not return it, that it wasn't worth it, that it was special. "It's one of a kind." How could I keep a blemished copy of one of my favorite books? I was going to return it but never got around to it and eventually shrugged it off. The byproduct of this inconvenient situation is that every time I go through my books and find this one, I go to that page and bring back that warm memory.

I know that my exacting standards may actually be a personal problem. Could I go beyond such superficial notions like the

condition of a book and get to what is more worthy?

I don't know, but I'm trying. I understand what's the correct way to look at things. Yet, there are certain books that by the nature of their beauty can only be seen in the best conditions, like that book on comics that may be massive but whose cover and whose pages glow with the transparent colors of old newspaper strips from one hundred years ago. This is a difficult object to casually drop on the floor, even if it does weigh almost as much as a headstone. In spite of this, when you take in a paperback that had already been beaten up, you not only accept it, but you might even find it in your understanding to elevate such a second-hand object to that of beauty. This sensibility comes from the same place in my thoughts that looks back at the very first books I still have in my possession and are now practically falling apart and yet more meaningful—by decades!—than a newly-arrived book in a perfect state.

A GOOD RECIPE: The ideal way to pack a book is to use a box with greater dimensions than the book. Place padding on the bottom and along the walls of the box. Place the book in this padding. Place padding on top. Make sure every-

thing is snug enough so that there is no movement. Seal the box. Shake well to test it.

If such a package falls on its corner, the padding from the box's corner should be sufficient to prevent the book from receiving any harm. If it is under a ton of other boxes, it should hold well with the padding at the top and bottom. There are variations on this. Try what you think makes sense and see if it works!

Little Red Riding Hood



Birds #2



Rational Exuberance

In deference to supernatural sensibilities, the hooligans of tiddlywinks may paint their face and seem surreal as those who tickle spiders' webs are doing spiders favors as they are not schizophrenic and can't do that work themselves. If yellow is their favorite color, when there are two sinless vigilantes, which will cast the stone? On any other planet this would only be the first few days of life.

The Fractured Wor[l]ds of Willem Kleist

*A story should have a beginning, a middle and an end.
But not necessarily in that order.*

Jean-Luc Godard

In the theater of war
only the tenderest will survive.
Snowflakes. And ladies
with fashionably slender cigarettes.
Paint brushes
in empty olive jars.
And sudden yellow hats
in silent stairwells

hiding

from the rain.

*

“Well, we’ve pretty much discussed your poetry, Mister Klein. Fine poetry it is too. But here’s a kind of a light-hearted wrap question. Just to finish off. Who do you rate the greatest pound-for-pound fighter of all time? And what’s your opinion of Sugar Ray?”

A pause while Kleist taps the ash off his cigarette.

A longer pause.

“James Joyce. Maybe Jack Dempsey. Gene Tunney. The only person I ever met be scared to go fifteen rounds with is Anais Nin. Also Isadora Duncan. Whom I met only one time, briefly. You mean Sugar Ray Robinson? Saw him on TV against La Motta. Like reading Kafka through broken spectacles. Writers go fifteen rounds every day against a typewriter and a stack of paper. Fuck boxers. Fuck interviews. That’s all.”

*

Roosevelt Elected For Third Term!

Basil Rathbone

Boris Karloff

Bela Lugosi

in Son of Frankenstein

*

“The most perfect work of art I ever saw was Natalia Goncharovna’s brassiere hanging from a hotel door-knob, reflected in the bathroom mirror while Natasha herself was taking a shower. It would have been impossible to replicate the impression it made on me in any sonnet or cinematograph. The circumstances, moreover, were somewhat unusual. I observed the scene closely with a telescope from the basket of a hot air balloon during an (unsuccessful) attempt to circumnavigate The Eiffel Tower.”

*

Even when Birgitte
sucks my cock
I am obsessed by the absinthe
of a blue giraffe.

*

“William Klein? Yeah, sure, of course. Paris nineteen twenty-five. Or maybe it was San Francisco? Nineteen sixty-eight? Sorry, son, my hearing’s not – Oh, *Kleist*. William *Kleist*. Hell, no, never heard of him. Charles Bukowski, heard of him. Richard Brautigan. Mowed his lawn once. Used to be a gardener. Knees not what they used to be. Nobody listens any more. Nobody speaks up. Whole world going deaf. Mind you don’t spill that beer, son. Linoleum’s like grease on a bear’s ass get it wet. I should know. Owned a bear once. Yosemite nineteen thirty-seven. Or maybe Yellowstone? Nineteen fifty-three? Sorry, what was that, Willem who? Never mind, son. Jus’ you mind that there linoleum. Slicker’n a penguin’s flipper. Slicker’n rain.”

*

The ceiling
of the Café Kafka
is the color
of the underneath
of an antique postage stamp.

The bears rattle their chains
on the cobblestones
of the streets
of the Black Light Theater.

The cigarettes of the tram drivers
Burn in the darkness like knives.

*

“All this stuff about the nineteen-twenties is so ridiculous. We were just kids then. With new toys. Not geniuses at all. Bunuel with his movie camera. Man Ray inventing the nude. Jesus, I only wrote poetry because I was too shy to paint myself blue and stand on a dead chimpanzee in the Bois de Boulogne.”

*

There is no silence
like the silence
of a penguin's orgasm
in a wide-brimmed straw hat
during a matinee performance
of *Pelleas et Melisande*.

*

Willem Kleist (b. Prague 1899; d. New York 1983) was an expressionist / surrealist film-maker in the nineteen-twenties and then a poet whose work was designed to be popular with the mannequins in the windows of fashionable boutiques [as well as with mothers who stuck pins in their children to inflict pain on their dolls].

*

The matador's dead

on a blood-stained Sahara.

A whore wearing blue spectacles.

A cop like an aubergine.

An aubergine holding a parasol.

A parasol holding a lady on a street in Paris illuminated by the sun reflected in the wing-mirror of an Indian motorcycle somewhere between a town in Texas and Albuquerque, New Mexico.

White toreador pants and a red cotton shirt.

Dead matadors ten.

*

“It was at one of those Manhattan cocktail parties for Leonard Bernstein. This old woman, eighty-seven eighty-eight years old, wearing incredibly red lipstick, started asking me about typewriters. I told her I owned five, but that my favorite was a 1928 Royal with perfectly round silver-rimmed ivory keys. She said, ‘Do the keys have letters on them?’ She was holding an empty martini glass still containing the olive. My immediate impression was of senile dementia, exacerbated by alcohol. But then I got this beautiful sense of joy. A typewriter with blank keys! What a great surrealist image! I immediately ’phoned Sigmund Freud. Something I would have been much too shy to do were he still alive.”

*

Six naked whores
in a Chinese elevator
are as impossible
as a purple typewriter
on a butterfly's wing.

*

“The most perfect work of art I ever saw was a car smash in Berlin. Blood everywhere. Black metal. Broken glass. The white face of some fat bastard's wife framed in a twisted window. Red paint in her fish-tank empty eyes. Her damaged breasts spilling out of her sheer silver gasoline-ignited opera dress. *Flapper-flapper-flapper-flapper-flapper*. The way a movie is when the spool runs out. *Flapper-flapper. Flap-flap*. Nice teeth. Decent bone structure. A split bitch screaming. Machete watermelon. Behind the flames.”

*

Monsieur Buerre-Couteau

dived through the tropical blue of Balenciaga

indifferent to the seagulls and shop-girls and Boris Karloff impersonators,

oblivious to the derision

of his wife and their three children and their local coal merchant (M. Brique-Noir).

Oblivious to everything (in fact).

Oblivious even to the excessive slurping noise of M. Le Mosquite sucking the blood out of the blue-tinged oxygen-starved suspender-sanctified thigh of a No. 83 London bus conductress in a Shanghai noodle shack.

Oblivious.

Ob. Livious.

Ob.

FIN

Silence

From behind the bars a prisoner
awaits the sun, for years — it is all
there is,

to him; he doesn't name it.

From a distance, a stonekeeper
breaks the window to free him;

when asked, he speaks nothing.

The forest shimmers, like a candle,
like fire ants in wind, hiding the sun;

they look at it, it makes no sound.

The stonekeeper was a prisoner too,
he learnt what was wrong, he collected
stones;

no one knows this, the story is untold.

In a corner there is a man with a scar
across his face, silent, nearly dead;

when it happened, he didn't cry.

The stonekeeper remembers him
from the army, held captive on
foreign land;

he walks up to him, they do not talk.

When the moon is up, high, they
kill an animal to put on fire;

its eyes are open, they do not see.

On a wall somewhere, there is
a clock, it is one before morning;

the clock doesn't tick.

The sun is still too far; its amber
brilliance from behind the clouds,

there's no sign of it.

In a dead street they build fire again;
the dead animal's bones burning

to ash, like everything else.

With the sun, they leave for a distant
land; when they look back, with

tears, nothing remains the same.

Deliver Us

after Last Judgment by Hieronymus Bosch

1. from paradise

where we pay \$3.50
for an avocado

where bees carry poison
back to the hive

where the trees are so
beautiful they bore us

2. from earth

where I am less afraid
to send my husband to war

than I am to send
my daughter off to school

where we hurt
and are hurt

3. from hell

where hate pokes
and prods and burns

where fear puts
us at odds

where we forget
we are no longer on earth

An American Love Story

Shelia and I met on Halloween, the night a guy lit himself on fire at Murphy's Tavern. He had walked in with each foot sloshing and left wet footprints on the dancefloor. He scanned the crowd for his lost lover, just wanting one more embrace and a spark, for her to feel his love and its heat.

Cued before he came in, the DJ left her mixer and headphones behind. The amplifiers' green and red LEDs pulsed as she found the backdoor and sanctuary in the alley.

The bouncer moved with the speed of a pass rusher and swept the guy away. Only vapors remained. Shelia and I looked at one another and shook our heads. "Can you believe that guy?" She asked.

Through the window we saw a shadow on the street, and then it turned to dancing light. Arms and legs jangled to an unheard melody. We sat there, beers going flat and mouths agape. Shelia's eyes twinkled yellow, orange, and blue.

Like everyone else in the bar, we poured out onto the sidewalk. I held her as EMTs, police, and firetrucks flooded the street in lights of red, white, and blue.

Our love was born in the crucible of madness, and there it remained.

Two months later, Shelia listened to "Father Figure" on repeat for days on end, besieged by mania while I huddled outside in the winter wind. Flurries caught in my hair as my heart pounded on her door. George Michaels sang to her and I froze on the porch.

In the New Year, I built an impenetrable wall that she attempted to scale with apologies and promises. I wallowed in self-pity and impotent rage.

We stayed together even though February brought no pink hearts or candy, and spring's eternal hope withered in April as the world bloomed.

By Independence Day we found courage enough to separate, and heaven showered light upon us in affirmation. Her eyes glistened green and gold with each celebratory explosion in the sky. Our hands fell by our sides, and we stood together, isolated in the darkness, wondering when the finale would end.

Pompeii

When a city dead under ash and obsidian is
found, it is the most perfect image of ruin,
like a body, picked from grave, bitten to cavities;

the city has cavities the size of women, and men,
bent in rituals – making love; it must have had
a big heart, now a bowl of dust all the same –

it must have taken all of it to love when
the Vesuvius flowered. In sleep the city read
the pages in air, in soot; it has touched the snow

for ages without anyone knowing. The Vesuvius
stayed; its victim half-dead, unquivering. At
a distance a woodpecker pecks at a tree stood

on ash; the woodpecker doesn't know this, it
keeps on. Let it.

Changing Seasons

The sea and the clouds are
 changing shape while we
watch. The weather in my mind
 and body morphs.

The bystander
 on the seashore watches
from a steady state everything
 that arises

and dissolves. Like the mist
 melting in the sun,
a wave
 disappears
leaving behind
 a dampness.

The green gets greener
 and the asphalt
darker. The mercurial
temperature of a Southern autumn

reins in the open leaves
 and showers petals
swirling and settling down
 into the ground.

The sun sets earlier and rises
later each day, finding
ourselves sitting in the dark soon
before evening once was.

Still rising in daylight into the fall
darkness lingers longer
around the edges
of the sunrise.

Mars and the moon shone
one night as two
sending moonbeams,
an ineffable appearance.

As the seasons change,
our lives change.
A rendezvous with fall
turns us with the leaves' descent.

Reverie

Will you stuff my hair into your pillow
and dream of me tonight?

Will you play a love song with my heartstrings
to lull yourself to indulgent sleep?

Will you curl your body into my comma
and let me surround you with my love?

Or will you leave me stranded
on the island of my loneliness?

A period, sobbing
on a blank and empty page?

Nakba

Nakba, Great March of Return,
Back to Palestine. Seventy years
Since we had our houses, villages, lemon groves.
*Early in the day, coffee in my cup,
Sunlight caressing our tabletop.*
Burning tires, throwing stones, setting kites afire.
Green print Hamas headbands for jihad.
Gasoline fires, billowing black smoke, wailing voices.
Shouts, protest signs, anger boiling onto desert.
*Sublime morning, light through scrub oak tops,
Red rocks backlit by slow rising sun,
Golden and transparent at their edges.*
Rockets and drones lobbed to an enemy,
Hating, hating, hating, hopeless.
Tear gas grenades and bullhorns.
*Easy talk on recent reads, kisses traded,
Laughter about goofy political news.*
Bullets and rubber bullets fired into crowds,
Into our desperation, our poverty.
*Warmth, pleasure, expectancies,
Gratitude for this life, this sunlight, this love.*

You say there is a God who ordained this?
I have not earned these riches.

The Mist Between Foghorns



Sketches of Sun

Close on the back of our goldfinch
the sunlight rides, as it tumble-slides
headlong from glowing orb
to purls of waves, glistening lake
and rivers, near—
far beyond;

its sparkle reflects, refracts
and catches the call of red-wings—
the blackbirds, I mean—
their high-sweet scratching quick
to announce that elegance arrives
on wings,
their epaulets of scarlet and gold,

though the fishermen say
that only the dazzle
of a water lily—
over-under silent ripples of pond
can claim
such a key to brilliance of rays,
their blessings of sun.

Dorade Entire

Violette debones the fish
in this alfresco bistro snug
in a Medieval hilltop town
in the South of France,
doesn't guillotine the head
with a sudden chop but slices
it as smoothly as a barber
shaves a beard with a straight
razor.

She dexterously trims
the dorsal fins and tail
off the dorade then cuts
the body in half the long
way to expose the delicate
white bones and lifts them
off the fishmeat all in one
piece like taking a silver
and turquoise Santa Fe
necklace out of a jewelry
box.

Violette discards the bones
on the side dish that already
holds the head with its glassy
eye and feathery fins
then poises her utensils
at the side of her plate ready
for her first bite.

Angelic Hearts

Smiling sweetly
like the saints above,
my virgins
even after poking
were always whole,
always intemperate;
like holy candles
they held swelling pricks
to their breasts and thighs,
stroking affirmation of life
with their small white hands.

Like chaste Lucretia, like
the maidens of the lamp,
they saved the best for last,
the final confession of sin;
leaned against the grey mullions
of stone framing the windows,
smiling sweetly at Diomedes
and his knights
passing on horseback
in splendid and gaudy order;
such were my virgins,
smiling sweetly, secretly
and in greeting
waving their small white hands.

Such were my virgins,
never swerving from
the path of devotion;
to their own hurt
never allowing
the promised seed
to fall on barren ground.

My Father as Cartographer

kept track of his shares when they rose
and fell as reported in
the *Wall Street Journal*. A series
of lines and dots plotted on
graph paper, like some seismic
recording of earthquakes and
volcanic explosions that
just happened to occur in some
remote corner of the world.

He tried to take the long view,
like stopping at a scenic
overlook on the Blue Ridge
Parkway, the way the valleys
tucked themselves out of sight
and the ridges, blue as the grid
of rigid squares superimposed
upon the paper, snuggled
with the clouds overhead.

Similar to the way those
machines beside his hospital
bed measured his heart rate
and all those other aches and pains
reduced to peaks and plateaus,
the pale blue dot pulsing,
surging ahead. He tried to keep
track of them, too, with the straight edge
of the slide rule inside his head.

In the Morning, They Disappear

The passing of my grandparents was my first experience with death. When they died, I wondered what the last things on their minds were. I was told that grandpa's last words were "I'm tired." What was on his mind then, while his family stood around the bed, tears in their eyes as he said that? No words passed grandma's lips before she departed; they must have stayed inside, lost forever. I wondered if sometimes death happened so quickly that a person's last thoughts were what they would have for lunch.

The same thing struck me as I recalled the loud bang of metal crashing into metal. I swerved the steering wheel to the right but it was too late. My thoughts at the time were "oh no, oh no, oh no!" but before that, it would have been about buying a cabinet. That was six years ago. At twenty-eight, it became one of my passing memories. The only feeling that lingered around me was fear. Fear of death. Fear that I almost died alone that day.

Those worries took a detour, as there were more important things I focused my mind to. I lay in bed next to someone I wanted

to have a future with. Getting past my teen years, I had evolved into a solitary individual. I spoke to my family a few times each month. My parents always told me to be careful, as the world wasn't often nice to a girl like me. Rarely, a person came into my life who would pull me out of these rings of silence. Dani was one of those few people, and she was here, sleeping next to me. How I looked at her with adoring eyes; her long, ash brown hair cascading over the sheets, the subtle freckles on her cheeks fading in the winter light. The gentle smell of jasmine that perfumed her golden skin reminded me of the home of my childhood. Around us, in that small space we now shared, were antiques and other secondhand items I had collected over the years. They stood out against the bright, minimalistic furniture we'd picked out, purchased not for style but practicality. There was no pattern to the items in my collection, just as long as it caught my eye.

At night, those old items would come to life. Their souls came to me in my sleep, the ghosts of their previous owners offering me some of their memories. These pass-

ing memories, sometimes pleasant, at times heartbreaking, rarely were nightmares. Some were hesitant to share their stories. Days or even weeks would pass until they entered my dreams. When I told Dani the first time this happened, she hesitated to believe me. Understandable, as ghosts couldn't be real.

"The coffee place was a butcher shop?" Dani was already dressed in her white and blue scrubs while brushing her hair. "How'd you know that?"

In my hand was a small wooden box with geometrical carvings on the lid. "It was like in the sixties or something. Anyways, this was the money box the owner kept his extra earnings in!" I pointed at the box. "I saw it in my dream!"

"Dream?" She finally looked at me. "Jess..."

"You'd never guess the place was a butcher shop before, but the owner was there. He opened this exact box." I pointed to the box again. "His ghost showed me!"

"Ghost?" She put her hand on my shoulder then brushed my short black hair. "Get ready for work. Let's talk about it later."

We lived together for two years near a college neighborhood outside of downtown Seattle. In that time, Dani became accustomed to these dreams of mine. On the nights I was visited by an item's owner, I told her the very next day. It be-

came part of our morning routine. The dreams ranged from wealthy old ladies who had no children to inherit their collections, to couples who found the item during a trip to Berlin. I don't think she believed the stories, but she liked hearing them. We talked about them even as we headed off to our commutes—hers to the university hospital, and mine into the mess of downtown.

My interest in collecting antiques grew even more after that. I didn't think the antique shops I despised most in my childhood would be the places I couldn't do without. The first time my parents took me to one, I was ten years old and found the place uninteresting. No toys in sight, and it smelled like a closet full of old clothes. Knick-knacks on shelves that reached the ceiling. I was told to keep my hands in my pockets, but the sheer difficulty of going to an antique shop during the winter was navigating the narrow aisles while wearing a puffy coat. There were figures, tea cups, empty jars, all of which looked like junk to me. These days, nearly everything appealed to me. It was a matter of deciding which item would tell a better story.

**

Things began to change when I came across a vintage tennis racket. At the shop I frequented, it hung on the wall behind the counter. It hadn't been there the last time

I visited, and it caught my attention. I didn't buy it, seeing that my collections had no space for sports memorabilia. Yet, I kept thinking that someone else would get their hands on it first. The next day, I returned and purchased the racket. It was in surprisingly good condition, with a few scratches and dents on its lacquered surface, and the details of the wood still visible. The strings were tight, but the grip had some stains that I assumed was mold damage and regular wear and tear.

Dani furled her eyebrows when I came home with a tennis racket in my hands. She knew where I had been but expected an item on the fragile side.

"Why'd you buy a tennis racket?" she asked, expertly cutting green onions like the chefs did on TV.

It was mid-January and the sky said 8 pm, but the clocks read 5. She was cooking dinner. Tofu and vermicelli noodle soup, like the kind my mom taught me; in turn, I also taught it to Dani. The hot chili singed the air and the sesame oil warmed me up. I almost forgot that she'd asked me a question.

"It told me to buy it," I finally answered.

"Told you?"

"Not really, but I couldn't take my eyes off it." I spun it by the handle. It slipped from my hands and fell to the floor. "Anyways, if this tells me anything in a dream,

it'd probably be a fun memory."

Unfortunately, nothing came to me in my dreams. I was stuck with a relic of a sport I didn't play. It wasn't the worst eight dollars spent. The racket sat in a box by the bedroom door, and I eventually forgot about it.

A few weeks later, the silence broke. There in my dream was a young woman, running through a dark, narrow hallway. Out of breath, she hid around a corner. The moonlight flowed in from the small windows. In the corners of her eyes, every shadow struck her with fear. Someone could be hiding there. Heavy footsteps trudged up the stairs. She ran. The footsteps sped up. A door up ahead brought her relief, but on the other side was a closet. She was blocked in. All she could do was wait. Hiding in a corner, she grasped onto anything within arm's distance. In her hands was a wooden tennis racket. The footsteps slowed and then stopped. Silence. Her whole body trembling, she couldn't keep her breathing steady. The door opened. She hushed her sobs. The figure loomed before her. A hand reached out and grabbed her neck. Dropping the racket, she screamed.

My head and chest were hot. I thought my heart was going to burst like a volcano. The room was dark and all I could hear was the blood pumping through my ears. I shot out of bed. In the box, I rum-

maged around for the tennis racket. Carrying it out to the living room, I shoved it into the back of the coat closet.

“Jess?” Dani stood behind me. A robe draped over her shoulders. “What’s going on?”

“I... I thought I heard someone outside.” I lied. “Did you hear anything?”

She shook her head. “I thought you had another of those dreams,” she said. “Sometimes they keep you up at night.”

Dani took my hand into hers. My cold fingers melted into the warmth of her palm. We returned to bed. She ran her fingers through my messy hair then kissed me on the cheek. The clock read 3. Dani went back to sleep. I lay awake until the sun came up. While getting ready for work, I didn’t bring up the dream to her. Not all of them would carry happy memories, but I didn’t expect a murder. Even I grew skeptical of the dreams I’d had, since I didn’t want to believe that in my possession was the last item someone touched before they died. Yet I wanted to keep it. The dream it brought to me—no, it felt more like a nightmare, was unheard of. I still wish I knew what my grandparents’ last thoughts were before passing. There were no items of theirs to remember them by. At least in this other way, I could see the truth of one death as it happened. I wanted to see and understand what they

saw and thought about in their final moments. Maybe I could come to terms with this inevitability instead of fearing it.

**

A few weeks later, I entered the apartment carrying a maroon box. I straightened my plastic framed glasses, reading the words written in French on the faded label. Dani looked up from her laptop. The dream with the young woman was out of my system. Instead of forgetting about it, I continued to feed my insatiable curiosity in the search of more dreams like it. Opening the box, Dani saw the contents and was ready to leave. A porcelain doll with a cherubim face and red-brown hair wore a black and brown dress with a pair of Mary Janes on its feet.

“Sometimes I think you’re stuck in traffic.” Dani was already dressed in sweats and a t-shirt. She cleared the blanket off the couch. “But you went and bought a creepy doll instead.”

I sat down then set the doll on my lap. “At least it’s in good condition,” I replied, fixing the frills on its dress. “And the face isn’t scary like other dolls.”

“Whatever scary means to you.” She leaned in and examined its face. “Don’t the eyes freak you out a little bit? So realistic in a bad way.”

Inside the box was a key with a label attached to it. The

label read that the doll was one of two hundred made, and the song it played was “Parlez-Moi D’Amour.” That wasn’t something to be alarmed about. I put the key into the doll’s back and wound it up. Dani inched away, saying that it might start moving or talking. When the music started playing, she curled up on the couch. Her eyes never left it. I let the music play until it stopped, then placed it back in the box.

Dani shuddered. “If that thing starts playing music on its own, I’m throwing it out.” She gathered her things then went to the bedroom.

Understood.

Contrary to horror movies, a doll was simply a doll. It carried with it no feelings of revenge, but only the markings of affection when it was so loved by the child who owned it. My mind was set on thinking along the horror route that I was disappointed when the doll had no dreams to share. It could have belonged to a child traveling with her family across the Atlantic, or it was an expensive gift, maybe it was stolen. Nobody visited me in my dreams to tell me. I took it to a shop and never saw it again.

**

The following months, I found boxes full of things I had no use for. From wind up “killer robot from outer space” toys to shadow

boxes with stiff lace, ceramic jewelry boxes shaped like eggs, brass candelabras, a glass paperweight globe, and things I didn’t remember buying. Our apartment now smelled like an antique shop. Dani kept the windows open and spent more of her time in the bedroom. The boxes piled up as I spent more time obsessing over the stories these items might hold. We were running out of space in the living room, and she told me to sort through the boxes and take the uninteresting ones back to another antique or second-hand shop.

Sometimes the dreams offered small snippets of a memory, but not their final hours. My sleep often went interrupted as I woke up in the early morning. Like an automated sorting machine, I got out of bed, took the item in question, and dropped it into a reject box. This went on for some time.

I once fell asleep on the bus and missed my stop. Sometimes I nodded off at work, my forehead nearly knocking over the computer monitor. If I snapped at a coworker, or one of those poor interns, I apologized immediately. Exhausted, I came home feeling revitalized after seeing Dani. Her beaming face lit up my dreary afternoons. And the fragrance of jasmine lingered around me like a tropical garden. If this lack of sleep made me cranky, I couldn’t feel that way when she was around.

When I had dreams of robot toys and jewelry boxes, I continued to share them with her. It was disappointing, however, that these weren't witnesses to any last moments. Then she would tell me again to take those back to a shop. But those brass candelabras, dull and grayish-green, looked promising. They had yet to offer me a glimpse into their past. My dream instead told of a couple that owned a small restaurant. There was a war and the husband enlisted. The candelabras were soon locked away in a basement. But I didn't care. That wasn't what I wanted to know. Before the memory could tell me the importance of rationing, I woke up. The candelabras sat on the floor by the couch. I picked them up, went outside, and threw them onto the pavement below. A couple of dogs barked as the brass clanged and echoed across the street.

**

Coming home from work, I noticed three familiar looking boxes by the trash bin. Inside were the items I'd bought weeks ago. Why would Dani dare throw these out without telling me? I trudged upstairs with one of the boxes in my arms. When she saw what I brought in, she sighed.

"How could you just throw these out?" I dropped the box onto the floor. "You should've asked me first."

"The place is full of boxes!" She motioned to the rest sitting behind the couch. "You don't do anything with them anyways."

"I'll get rid of it myself when I need to." I told her.

"You've been saying that for months." She opened the closet and pulled out more boxes. "I left you this even though I don't care about antiques."

The boxes scattered around the room looked as though we just moved in.

"But this is just too much." Her arms were crossed as she looked around the room. She bent down to open a box.

"Don't touch them!" I pulled the box away from her. "I know what's valuable in these. You'll just throw them all away again."

Dani pulled her hands away then locked herself in the bedroom. We didn't speak to one another the rest of the day. I sat in the living room until night, sorting through all the boxes while she slept alone in bed.

I couldn't smell the jasmine in the air. It smelled like an old empty closet and felt a little less like home.

**

Some days, I took the tennis racket out of the closet and examined it. Was it the memories of the original owner or the one who last possessed it that I saw in my

dreams? Maybe it didn't make any difference. I looked closely at the grip; the mold damage on it might have been blood. I dared not tell Dani. She still didn't know about the dream. Even if I wanted to, I spent more of my time sorting through boxes of old stuff than speaking to her. Our morning routine became sparse with words. She didn't ask about my dreams, and I stopped telling her. How could I get rid of these items when they never changed? Dani was different—this place had become unfamiliar.

After some dreams didn't give me a glimpse of what I wanted, I became aggressive. Vases shattered on the floor, pages in old leather bound books torn out, Pierrot marionettes ripped from their strings. Nobody questioned the candelabras I threw out weeks ago. Somebody took them without a word.

"What happened here?" Dani stood over a shattered jar. She then grabbed the wind up tin car from my hands and placed it in a box.

"You don't understand." I got to my feet. "None of these tell me anything."

"About what? Where these things came from?"

"No! How the person died!"

Dani stopped. She didn't understand. How could she? It's not like she had those dreams I had. I showed her the tennis racket from the closet.

"Remember this?" I told her. "The person who last owned this was murdered."

She inched back. "How do you know that?"

"It was in my dream. That's why there's all this stuff." I continued picking through one of the boxes. "Any one of these items could let me see what dying is like."

"What will that bring you?" she asked. "Why are you so obsessed with death? Those dreams don't mean anything, Jess. They're all just coincidental—"

"There's something in those dreams." I grabbed Dani's shoulder and pulled her closer. "You want to get rid of these when some of them haven't told me anything yet?"

She slapped my hand away and took the racket I held in the other. She placed everything that was laid about into the boxes. "I was fine with it when it was just a harmless hobby," she said. "It wasn't hurting anyone, not even you. And now... now you just buy things and break them when they mean nothing. What's next?"

I took the tennis racket out of the box and clutched onto it. There was a hopelessness I remember seeing in Dani's eyes. She closed the box and asked for the racket. I refused.

"If you want to get rid of these, fine," I said. "But just let me keep this. It's the only one that showed me the owner's last moments."

Dani shook her head. "I would be okay with it, if that wasn't the thing that started this mess."

I held onto it like a child keeping his toy safe. When she tried to pull it from my hands, I kept my grip firm and felt the strings dig into my fingers. She insisted I let go but I wasn't going to give up. In the struggle, I lost sight of everything and pushed her into the wall. She wailed out as I pinned her. The racket dug into her chest as I held her there. She gasped as her stomach inflated then deflated. No, I didn't want her to die. I let go of the racket and it dropped to the floor. I wanted to help her, but I suddenly didn't dare lay a hand on her. She pushed me away and told me she didn't know who I was anymore.

I didn't know who I was either. None of this was familiar to me, and in my fears and fascination, I had filled this place with useless items that changed everything. I had killed this home.

These possessions had taken possession of me.

**

Surrounded by secondhand items I will never use, the ghosts of their original owners visit me in my dreams. They offer me a glimpse into their lives; I see their happiness, their regrets, sometimes their final moments. My own regrets are temporarily forgotten. I am overjoyed by their company if only in my mind. In the morning, they disappear. At night, I sleep alone.

Death Sonnet

On a night when we were so many families in someone's basement, and recognised each-other only by voices, a church had been bombed; we went to Christ's burial the next morning.

With heads bowed down – both in reverence and in fear – we looked at his hands: bleak as human's; from the corners of our eyes, we checked the colour of the skies. God's marble

had broken: we stood around fissures; and it took us some time to believe that we were all that we had, back every night in the same basement, – faceless – for long, retelling the tales

all of us knew something about – tales in which god never appeared; in which deathbirds circled dark cities every night – where even a little light meant death. In light, we walked

to god's tomb one day, laid down more soil; so that when each of us died, with a bowed head, he could lay us down to rest.

Falling in Love

To be totally true
to my value system

I had to
reorder the logic

by which women
are typically
characterized

by first
uncovering
the appeal of her
irreducible nature
and spirit

and then
comparing this

to the singularly
aesthetic form
of her outward appearance.

Lucky for me,
they matched.

Spatiotemporal

The spatiotemporal object has three features, each with teeth, so take the name of every other god in vain and to be extra geosynchronous let down your carbon-fiber hair. Of decency-releasing analgesics, I say may they be deployed in human pyramids and marching bands. A picture worth a thousand words was sold for half that. Now its provenance is known. Now there's a shape I need not take today – how kind of you to not rescind the offer!

Why Bother?

I read a poem with the line
that someone's pain takes the exact
shape of my words, which makes me think
about all the cramped muscles, scraped
knuckles, blisters, and calluses
I have collected while writing.
The headaches, heart burn, blurred vision,
those imbedded indelible
ink stains that will not wash away
and will not keep my fingers from
curling, refusing to unfurl.
It's almost enough to make me
stop this frantic scribbling that could
end up as unintended scars—
deep lesions—in someone else's brain.

Legs



The Selkie

She hoped for a flood
that the window would melt
to liquid and spill her out
into a forest of kelp.

She imagined her skin
growing seal fur, white,
spotted, her arms and legs
flattening to flippers.

She dreamed of swimming far
away, of speaking with whales,
of rising to the surface after
hours of holding her breath.

The Causal Chain

The opposing thumb said I'm entitled to my own opinion and to my own facts and someone has to spend the rent on scratch-off tickets and that someone could be me. My counterweights misplaced, my eyes are open and I'm horizontal. Don't dare call me Ishmael – my eyes are open and I'm horizontal. Are not gravitons today the size of tennis balls and twice as yellow? If there's justice then there are no body parts in here, there's just us solvents and us pigments. Once a generation's educated, future generations have no choice.

A Loose Bottle of beer eludes

the hand of the man on his knees,
clutching a watery brown paper bag
of broken glass to his chest
in the shadows of a parking lot.
At long last his disembodied hand
succeeds in gathering in its treasure.
He staggers upwards and outwards,
trophy in hand, bag tight to his ribs,
homeward down the block, head down,
feet shuffling, drunkenly determined.
Home appears. He's in luck. The door's
not locked. Entering the kitchen
he calls out to someone, unclutches
his bag and drops it in the sink
with the dirty dishes, then shambles
down the short hall where the bedroom
waits, its large naked, pee-stained
and cigarette-burned mattress
welcomes him back from the long war.

Rubicons and Metaphors

This poem has been written before.

This ain't even the best version of it.

It ain't even about dramatic shit.

Caesar crossed the Rubicon 2,000 years ago.

I wasn't there.

But this, this poor time-suck excuse for literature,

this ain't about nothing magnificent.

I ain't even couching it in nice language.

Y'all should here me sometime.

I can write nice.

Metaphors and all.

Metaphors are a governor on a driver's ed car.

They are super delegates at the DNC.

They throttle the speed of emotions.

Forcing our comprehension to a crawl.

Too afraid we'll succumb to populist mania.

It's calling zero "love."

It's a way to gate keep ideas.

Here's my idea you've heard before:

Life is hard.

I know mine ain't the hardest.

I know it could be worse.

But it's hard.

I have dreams. I know we all have dreams, and I know fuck my dreams, why should my dreams be better than yours, why should you hear my dream when you got a dream that you wanna live, why are you standing here listening to my dream when you could be living your own?

Because we all feel this. We all feel this fear, this fear of failure that fuck what we thought was gonna be our right, our struggle given right of success, is gonna be smashed under struggle like a piece of chicken under a meat cleaver by a grubby handed short order cook.

Metaphor for y'all. You're welcome.

My point is: if we all feel it, if we're all scared, then somebody should say it. And maybe, maybe my garbage version of it, maybe it ain't gonna make it.

Maybe I ain't gonna make it.

But somebody will. And they'll say shit like this. They'll breathe this shit.
And we'll taste that shit too, cuz we ate it for breakfast every day until we
became one with our own beautiful dysentery.

And that shit won't be privatized

That shit will be public fertilizer.

Irrigated by a Rubicon we diverted to grow wheat, not to ford on our
march on Rome.

When I turn on Spotify, and hear those warrior poets crooning "Tramps
like us, Alea iacta est," I ain't jealous.

Ok I am jealous.

But I shouldn't be.

Cuz it's my song too.

John's Oven

John never considered the possibility his oven would stop working. So it was a shock when he discovered grated mozzarella cheese on his nachos remained unmelted after ten minutes. He looked closer. Not even a faint orange glow emanated from the broiler. The heating coil along the base of each oven wall was also grey and cold. Damn it! Laura would've shouted but John wasn't about to start cursing, he was too confused. For as long as he'd lived there, the old oven proved reliable. He thought of all those elaborate dinners Laura used to make – roasting pork, baking casseroles – the oven was always trustworthy as. . . .

Well what, John wondered, was as trustworthy as the oven? That window?

The small kitchen window never wavered from its purpose of allowing daylight into the narrow room. It loyally provided fresh air and a view of the outside world – that the next building was so ugly, and so close, wasn't the fault of the window. No, the window did exactly what a window should.

Then again, maybe not. Sometimes it frosted over in cold weather and was impossible to see through. There was also that time, last winter, when Laura burned a batch of chocolate chip cookies, filling the apartment with acrid smoke. The window was frozen shut. John watched helplessly as she

tugged the small handle. Cursing as smoke thickened, the flesh beside her right eye flickered with tension.

"Don't just stand there," she shouted. "Take the batteries out of the smoke detector!"

John was placing a wooden chair beneath the beige disk when the alarm sounded and the piercing wail set off another round of profanity from Laura. In the ensuing decibel war, John judged the winner to be the smoke detector, but it had the advantage since it was directly overhead, while Laura was down the hall.

The more John thought, the more obvious it became nothing around the apartment was as trustworthy as it should've been. Baseboard heaters sometimes failed to work—usually on the coldest nights of the year. The water had been shut off at least twice, and he remembered being awakened by Laura shouting: "Fuck, fuck, fuck," from the bathroom. She soon appeared in the bedroom doorway—lips white with toothpaste foam—reaching for the thermos of water kept on the night stand. Light bulbs burned out, as well. Laura always found them first. She'd walk into a dark room, flip the switch, and get nothing more than a bright, brief flash, then darkness.

"Oh, shit!" she would yell.

John sighed, looking at the oven and the failure within. Maybe nothing was reliable. Lifting the

pizza tray from the useless chamber, he considered the microwave, but the tray was too large to fit inside. Not that it mattered. Laura, he kept forgetting, took the microwave when she moved out, three weeks earlier.

In the dining room sat three of John's friends—Mark, Paul, and Steve. Following a late movie, they emerged craving sushi, but every restaurant had closed for the night.

"What about pizza?" Paul suggested.

Enthusiasm was minimal. Only Steve seemed interested, but he preferred Little Caesar's and Paul was a Pizza Pizza fan.

That's when John figured he could scare up a decent plate of nachos. They were simple and shouldn't require much effort, but now he deeply regretted inviting his friends over.

Looking at the greasy pan in which he'd fried the ground beef, onions and peppers, John wondered why the stove worked but not the oven. It didn't make any sense.

Shaking his head, John went to the doorway. "Another beer, anyone?" All three friends accepted. He was buying time. Another round gave him a few more minutes to think of how to melt that grated cheese.

The neighbour's oven? No. Even after five years in the building, he didn't know anyone well enough to ask a favour so late at night.

The frying pan? Why not melt the cheese in that and pour it on? Somehow he couldn't see that working.

The hairdryer? Absurd.

Of his three major appliances, the oven was oldest, by far. Probably as old as the building. Forty, fifty years, maybe. Who knew when the original fridge broke down? The oven was due to go. John should've known.

He looked at the white console which harkened back to a bygone era, one of simplicity. There were four elements on the stove (John used only two but Laura frequently had all four on the go) and four black knobs in the center of the console. Each had six possible settings: Off, 1, 2, 3, 4 and 5.

Symmetry was lost with the placement of the oven's silver dial. It should've balanced out the stylized crown of the manufacturer's logo but was an inch closer to the black knobs—leaving room for the single electric socket into which John's toaster was forever plugged.

Fiddling uselessly with the silver dial, John realized even when the oven worked, it was unreliable—especially where Laura was concerned. The temperature settings wore off years earlier, but their absence never troubled John. As far as he was concerned, an oven needed three settings: Off, On, and Broil. What more could be necessary for reheating pizza, cooking fish sticks, or warming samosas? Yet Laura never saw it that way.

"Umm, John, how do you use this thing?" she asked after moving in.

He found the question baffling and stared at her. "The handle is right here," he finally said, laughing nervously as he opened the oven door. "And there are two racks inside for setting food on. See?"

Her expression was of someone enduring a bad and tasteless joke. “That’s not what I mean. How do you know when you’ve got the right temperature?”

He shrugged. “Usually, I just turn it to about there.” He gave the dial a three-quarter turn.

“And what temperature is that?”

John remembered getting asked questions in grade school, when the answer seemed so painfully obvious he was sure it couldn’t be right. At last he replied: “Hot.”

For two years that featureless silver dial antagonized Laura and compromised her reputation as a cook. Her mother was a caterer, and Laura grew up with toy kitchen utensils and appliances. By age six, she was baking cakes in her Betty Crocker oven. Before her tenth birthday, she was expert enough in a real kitchen to make linguini or broiled scallops. But those burnt chocolate chip cookies were just one example of the trouble caused by John’s oven. Her soufflés kept falling, the top layer of lasagna often had a dark crispy edge.

Not everything she tried was ruined. In fact, she normally achieved perfection but only after a long drawn-out war. Opening the oven door, various pans or trays were lifted from the dark, windowless chamber and held up to the light, to judge whether appropriately browned or sufficiently roasted. A bit of prodding with forks, toothpicks, or even fingers, ensued before the food was returned and the oven door slammed shut for another three

or four minutes, when the process began again.

She once tried using a thermometer and a felt-tipped pen to mark where the temperature settings should go, but that failed and a whole tray of chicken wings was sadly blackened.

Only now did John understand all the cursing Laura directed toward his oven. It must’ve been maddening when the thing didn’t cooperate, especially with dinner guests expected. Thinking of his friends in the next room, waiting, losing patience, John felt pressure. He felt failure—the same failure Laura must’ve known while living with him.

Before moving in together, John and Laura sorted out what household duties each would undertake. She agreed to do the cooking, and John washed dishes. He also did most of the cleaning but neither had especially high standards. Vacuuming was done every other week—if that often – and neither cared about dusting shelves or polishing furniture.

Yet, after two months, John bought a dishwasher to ease his workload. In a single meal, Laura easily dirtied five times the number of dishes he used in a typical day.

The bright new appliance made John feel he was no longer pulling his weight around the apartment, so he looked for ways of making it up to Laura. Since he finished work half an hour earlier, it became part of his evening routine to meet her at the door, lead her to the big, comfy black chair and massage her feet, shoulders, and temples. Depending on how poorly

her day at the bank had gone, he would draw a hot bath for her, as well, and present her with a glass of burgundy as she sat back, buried beneath a mountain of white, soapy bubbles.

“Need a hand in there?” Paul shouted from the dining room.

The offer was insincere, and John didn’t reply. Instead, he wondered why he hadn’t bought a new oven. It was within his means and would’ve solved everything. Since one came with the apartment, he supposed he had no right bringing in another. Could he have asked the landlord to replace it? Maybe. But the whole oven wasn’t the problem, just that stupid dial. The landlord might’ve had spare parts lying around, but John never thought of that before.

Considering how much Laura loved cooking, the preparation of the evening meal should’ve soothed her more than any foot rub or hot bath, yet John often noticed her state of relaxation slipping away the moment she touched that silver dial. It took until bedtime for her edge to wear off.

That was John’s favourite time with Laura. Bedtime. He had no television when she moved in, and she also gave up hers since she hardly watched it. Instead, a few hours each evening were filled with music and conversation before they turned to books. Novels. Laura preferred reading in bed, but John favoured the living room, where he could sit in the big, black chair and rest his feet on the footstool.

Getting drowsy around eleven, he treaded softly down the

hall to find Laura sitting up in bed, pillows all around and the thick, grey and maroon quilt folded over her legs. Stepping into the room, she closed her book, placed it beside the thermos on the night stand and removed her glasses, setting them on top of the book. Crawling into bed beside her, John took her in his arms and asked what she had been reading. Laura then delivered him into her world, telling him about characters she met, places she travelled, and things she learned. Once finished, John did the same for her.

Those nights were perfect, he thought. So warm and beautiful. He wanted to shuffle down the hall now and find her there—waiting for him, glasses off, book sitting on the night stand—but the only people in the apartment were his three hungry friends, and he could no longer delay informing them of his defeat.

“Sorry guys,” John said, entering the dining room, arms raised in a gesture of surrender.

He explained the problem, but everyone was hungry enough to overlook unmelted cheese. As they ate, John remained apologetic. “It never occurred to me the oven would stop working.”

Paul told him not to worry, yet John felt betrayed. Every cold bite humiliated him.

After the nachos were gone, John, still embarrassed, said the same thing again. Only it didn’t come out right. What he said was: “It never occurred to me Laura would leave.” But no one noticed; they’d stopped listening to his apologies.

The next day the landlord repaired the oven but, a few weeks later, a neighbour's appliance hadn't been so lucky. John came home from the office and found a discarded oven sitting in the alley beside his building. It looked dead sitting there among black garbage bags—its door ripped off, elements missing.

Taking a closer look, the model was the same as his but the console was different; the oven dial was silver not black—and temperature settings were neatly etched into it, white and easy to read. His silver dial wasn't original but had been dredged up to replace an earlier one.

John looked toward the street, then up at his building to see if anyone was watching. Satisfied the coast was clear, he removed the dial and put it in his pocket, intending to install it on his own oven, in case Laura ever returned.

Clown

Clown solid sad, wandering around
circus grounds in his clown suit,
bright redwhiteblue paint
on his face;
children give him
popcorn, fruit, laughter,
cheap candy canes, not enough
to make him smile, make him
forget his lonely life,
a nomad's life, a weary way
over highways, back roads,
empty lots; the very stones
lying on the ground
have more pride of place than he,
sitting alone on the rolling wagons,
the speeding trains,
going somewhere, anywhere,
nowhere.

So why do it? The people
and their kids
come and go, but nobody
wants clowns close up, in your face,
on the doorstep, in the circus ring
begging for laughter, showing
the sad slapstick grace of absurdity;
the little clown car never small enough
to hold our attention for long and
we already know the clowns
will all come out, one by one.
Is this trick or any other worth trading
for the fleeting smile, the little laugh
bartered on the cheap?
The meed of the performer
nothing more than
plain and simple recognition
of his existence?

So it must be and lonely or not,
he knows that for one moment
he was there, plain as day,
and they knew it.

Eat

in memory of Anthony Bourdain

Scrape up all those nasty bits,
those caramelized onions, that

stuck on beef, the unidentifiable
charrings. Pour in the broth

made from lamb bones, carrot
tops, the ugliest vegetables.

Born from centuries of kitchen
knowledge, now as rote as

breathing, as instinctual as
blinking. Stir it all to boil then

to simmer, draw all that flavor
out. Let us rip and soak the bread,

piece by piece, chew the goodness.

Reflection

She knows / who she is / the crescent moon: / curvy / slender / never
fully there / floating / so Ophelia / & dragonfly-like / just as damselflies
hover a frog / riding nymphoides / waiting / for drunken mosquitoes / She
breathes / as water striders & backswimmers do / thriving on the surface
/ She rejects the day / in the way / leeches & segmented worms shun
sunlight / rarely to be seen / mirror, mirror on the water / She is mother
nature's daughter / if only we could see /

our / Reflection / in such a way / pure / raw / hovering / over & above /
self-deprecation.

Vox Clamantis in Deserto

On the radio today, a physicist bemoaning
our loneliness on this planet:
Fermi's Paradox, "Where are all the others?"
Could it just be dead moons and methane seas?

Donne said no man is an island
yet here I am, dictating into a dumb computer,
a fox cam and dessert toe.
(Even voice-recognition doesn't understand me).

I seek the tender and lyrical—
elements usually missing from my world—
and shouldn't the loneliness we all feel
be redeemable in these places?

An astronomer peering in his telescope
looks for no more than that grace
a child feels in the arms of his parent,
or of two young lovers learning each other.

Surely this *agape* is what the teacher seeks,
the true mark of the diligent student—
even for the disobedient student
clowning for his peers.

And you, reader, dear other,
UFO somewhere outside of my coordinates:
aren't you after that sense of presence?
Aren't you here now in search of it?

A Night Alone







As if your death is not yet the same weight
traps count on though you are leaning back
putting dirt in your mouth while to the last

pebbles come by to shelter you, lie down
–you will have to die some more, brought
this far by what moonlight has to say

about holding on –you have to eat from a hand
that’s opened till your grave is too heavy, fills
broken into for each goodbye hidden away

as the breath clinging to footstones that wander
past, throwing a cloud over you, boarded up
as mountainside and so many deaths at once

–here even rain is comforted to keep you dry
–whole families sitting down, waiting for you
to walk in, forget something somewhere else.

Drops of Gin

The taste of gin grows bitter when
The friendship turns
On a sip, a slip of a phrase
Which quickly burns.

Like gin, gulped down without a chase,
The acid stirs.
Mistake spews forth froth garbled sin
On rabid curs.

Snarling, gnashing snouts full of spite
Let loose grudges.
Teeth bared at soft throats, poised to bite
No one budges.

Blood pools from our wounds, seeping pain
In drops of gin.
Pyrrhic scars of a friendship slain:
The price to win.

The Temple

God's done with the holiness of your hands, in the temple,
before, in the name of God, your holy hands ruin the temple.

It took Him years to tell you *you are mistaken*, you stand to say
that *as nothing, but the land of God* have you seen the temple.

It took you years to build one after another, in numbers; you say
you've loved Him, but – only once again – you re-begin the temple.

You said to me once that His prayer was music, "*all those chants*."
In time, what have you made of that place – all the din – the temple?

Someone told us *you don't struggle through the beads, "lose
yourself!"* – that way you win God, even before you win the temple.

When Meera loved Krishna, she became, in person, Krishna;
in His absence, she, among all, alone did sheen the temple.

When you told your brother, in derision, not to visit the church,
he thought you'd believe him when he said *it's akin*, the temple.

In contempt of another, you've made even God a reason of division,
you begin from mosques, until there you've been – the temple!

God must be sick of being told what He means to say, He
asks *which place is the most engulfed by sin?* – the temple!

The last time I talked to Him, He said that He never existed, that
before you die, Jayant, set fire to my said home, in the temple.

Uber Driver

When I tell the Uber driver that the friend I had a bowl of French onion soup and half a chicken salad sandwich with at McNamara's is dying of pancreatic cancer, he tells me that his son died of cancer last year, that he hasn't been able to pull himself together since then, crying uncontrollably while buying milk and eggs at Jewel, so his therapist suggested that he drive for Uber.

We join the traffic on Chicago's I-94 which is busy already at two o'clock and I reply that many men wouldn't have the courage to do therapy. He tells me that he's a product of the projects. As he continues to talk, we co-incidentally drive past North Avenue and Halsted. He nods to the right where the projects used to be, then nods to the left saying, "I went to Lincoln High School," and then I understand why his speech is so articulate.

He continues the saga of his life saying, “I got involved in gangs and ended up in penitentiary;” he doesn’t say jail but penitentiary. As an ESL teacher, I am intrigued by his vocabulary as well as his pronunciation, but suddenly wonder if all of this is a scam to get a better tip now that you can tip Uber on their website.

When we get to my high rise on Lake Michigan, “the one with the awning,” I reach to the front seat to shake his hand and wish him luck. I tell my doorman about how the Uber driver has down-loaded on me. “Do I have a sign on my forehead that says TALK TO ME?” I ask. Harold says, “No, but maybe you could think about becoming a bartender.”

Seams of Peppermint and Sherry

Eggshell-colored paint chips stick to the bottoms of my bare feet as I enter the old room I haven't been in since childhood. My eye catches the red, woven blanket draped over the rocking chair in the corner. I pick it up and gently rub the fabric against my right cheek. It still has faint hints of cigar and peppermint wrapped throughout its seams. My father used to sit me on his lap in the chair, careful not to blow the cigar smoke in my face. We would read the same books over and over all curled up in the red blanket. Most of the stories featured a little toy train or an adventurous puppy.

The small blue bucket I would stand on to see out into the yard still rests on the floor in front of the window. I was never tall enough to see out the window before I had to leave to go live with my Aunt Laney, but my mother would always sit there with me while we counted the birds that flew by. Normally, it was in the afternoon after my father had gone to work, and their angry whispers about money and bills had stopped for the day. That was the only time my moth-

er ever really spent time with me though. The rest of her days were spent draped on the sofa, drinking sherry.

Aunt Laney's house didn't have the same windows, blue bucket, or a red, woven blanket, but it did have fancy mirrors and a rocking horse. I used to sit in front of the mirrors for extended periods trying to learn how to braid my long hair. Sometimes Aunt Laney would try and show me, but she often got too frustrated and walked off. The frustration didn't always stem from my hair though. I think most of it came from having to care for someone other than herself.

I used to take the rocking horse outside when Aunt Laney was at work. She would've smacked my bottom hard if she knew I'd taken it outside again. I would pretend I was Annie Oakley in the West, shooting the bad guys, and finding gold in the rivers. It gave me somewhere to be and a purpose to be there, even if it was only for just a few minutes. Other times I would imagine I was going on a journey to find my father. I liked to think he was somewhere expensive, somewhere better

than staying with me. It would be a better explanation than plain abandonment. I think, though, he would have liked the rocking horse if he had ever gotten to see it.

My father never came home after an argument with my mother that ended with a smashed sherry bottle and a broken lamp. I didn't exactly know what the fight was about, but I wouldn't be surprised if it stemmed from my mother's drinking. The last time I saw him that day was before work when he draped the red, woven blanket over the back of the chair and kissed me on the forehead. He put one of the books we read in his bag and left. No words were spoken between us and all that was left of him was the trail of peppermint leading out the door.

It was only a couple weeks after that, when the neighbor stopped over to check on things and found my mother sprawled out on the kitchen floor. Her face was covered in her matted hair and there was white foam coming out of her mouth. I had been outside playing by the creek that ran under the bridge into town. Her empty eyes are an image that hasn't left my nightmares.

I sit down by the doll house that's still in the middle of the room on an old circular rug. The little house is dusty, and all the dolls are

still asleep. The kids are in their bed with their puppy. The mom is asleep out on the sofa, and the dad is asleep in their bed. For the longest time, I thought that was how things were supposed to be when people fought. They'll stay in separate rooms until the fighting is over and they can make up again. But my mother would never make it upstairs before she passed out. My father didn't care enough to keep carrying her up the steps.

I stand up and stretch, taking in the room one last time. My mother will be home again in a few days. She hasn't been here in years, but I won't be here when she gets back. I hope she stays sober this time, and I hope she finally fixes the broken lamp in the living room. I hope she gives Aunt Laney a call, and thanks her for looking after the house. I hope she doesn't ask about me or how I've been or what I've been making of my life. I hope she doesn't try to find me or try to take care of me like she should have before. I hope she sits beside the blue bucket on the floor and decides to count the birds. I hope she imagines me there beside her, giggling and trying to find the Blue Jays. I hope Dad watches us from the rocking chair with the red, woven blanket spread out on his lap. That's what I used to imagine anyway, just like a perfectly built dollhouse.

Calendar Senior, aka Captain Miracle

Of course he was a superhero to Jimmy
when he was a little boy, the firefighter father.
The old man disliked discussing the lives saved
but the son knew it was several. The man's hands
pulled desperate people out windows
of buildings too involved for salvage.
Who faults a child for thinking their Dad
stands ten feet tall? The old man
turned out too strong to bend, too brave
to preserve himself. The last rescue,
the hinge he swiveled on: he emerged burning
and his workmates converged to extinguish.
End of the career. Of course he was invincible
while Jimmy was small and needed
a benevolent demigod to put his faith in.
The old man in forced retirement
disliked explaining the burn scars. He'd stop
his car if he happened on a fire. 'Til he passed
in his sleep one night, he still wanted in.

Sound Effects

Flute, sitar, drum, guitar
meditative music bends
and travels in between mind waves
speaking on a level beyond thought.

The whining whirling swirling
snatches unwind the heart; nurture
the soul. Arising in the background
a harmonic minor flush,
abiding until new chattering from
the guitar arises and the subsiding
is replaced by a thin drum beat;

almost tapping hypnotically disguising
the beats in between woodwind melodies
that swim up and down until resting;
floating in the stream. The major thrust
drops out suddenly with the mournful
metallic pluck of the sitar.

Discernibly, basso continuo drones
constantly behind everything.
The mellow quartet asks: Where are you?
What are you? Are you real?
All proposed with no doubting only
an impartial hazy curiosity.

When You Turn

When you turn to love, turn slow,
let her wings beat soft against your lashes—
let her words caress your nestled thoughts
and turn inside your nectared glass of dew,
your resting solitude.

When you turn to love, think in dreams
my love, let her wishes catch your magic
by surprise, bathe your fingers, their sight
with only the freshest of raindrops, falling
in lithe loops of daffodils, their white

and parchment wings. When you turn
open your eyes, my love, to grab all
that they will hear—

The Performer

You're a song

& you're also a person

but you're a song.

he said in a 3 a.m. DM,

firewater veins flowed

through his brain -

he moves me from *allegrezza*

to *con duolo* in two meters ,

he does things like that:

he tunes my hair,

strands in hand,

& plays vibrato until he hears

a quiver then stops, *start me up*

& I never stop. I don't.

I keep going, repeating

Chants / Gregorian

in mystical properties /

echoing inside my ribbed nave /

a fool / I confess sins to him,

repeat the same sins for him,

but he is a fool, too:
I am the only song he craves,
the only chords he can finger
& he plays me over
& over & then cries
like Christian Ferras
bowing a violin.

The Radiance of an Unforeseen Delight



A Divided Highway has closed itself

without authority or previous approval
from the Federal government. Much is at stake.
Many travelers are inconvenienced. Contractors,
unCivil Engineers, cement companies. Grate again.
An alphabet of entities see their excessive profits
disappearing. Unbalanced sheets swooning.
Workers on the lam racing back to South America.
Latin America. Any America except this one.
A human wave of exits. Surely, white minds think,
this can't continue. It's again the laws of science
we deny. No way can roadbeds reproduced,
or concrete clone itself already cured. Much less trees
and mountains, rivers and gorges, and the occasional
gated community, step aside to allow generous passage.
The end has begun. Civilization as we have shaped it
to fit our whims and transient ways. Our Interstate arteries,
Dwight D's autobahn, have grafted and regrafted,
and are spreading wider, generously offering to pave
the earth without charge, free of toll, in perpetuity.
Leaving us asking – whither are the hovercraft of yesteryear?

Cenotaph

There is a depth
of dark
that shallows
torches.

No voice
floats free
of its data-crushing
weight.

Solitary

Sometimes, I see that poor corpse as a token,
of doubt's sure twin, and double-mindedness,
of certainty, the countervailing guess—

Thomas Lynch, *Libra*

But how do I know my own, my decrepit
corpse, whose decay within and by subterfuge alone
wends its furtive way through sinew— alas, too quick—
and even rots my bones?

The pain jabs, shoots, then stabs, its rasping rhythm
harsh, always eager for the repeat of bars that miss
a melody of song, even a hymn of hate. It slithers in,
defies and then deceives

its unsuspecting prey, as, too keenly focused
on the ticking hour, the delight of day,
I'm all too ready to indulge each
second with certain hope, with full abandon—

but then it strikes, severs
the minutes to shivering shreds, shards
of doubt, ever without a countervailing
guess, a thought of a solitary hour.

Give, Not Take

Kristy's sister died ten years after she'd left home and two years after we'd broken up.

Kristy was living in an apartment in Brooklyn that smelled mostly like her cats, with a good dose of Febreze to try and mask it. The place was filled with knick-knacks—signs with corny sayings, ceramic bowls with nothing in them, a bobble head of Princess Leia I'd bought for her our third Christmas together. The walls were yellow in the living room and kitchen, and maybe even in her bedroom and bathroom, but I never went in.

I'd been there, only once, when we were still pretending we knew how to be friends.

We didn't.

We'd sat on opposite ends of her beige couch, the one I'd given up in the amicable breakup, even though it had been my great grandma's. There was a red stain on the middle cushion, from when she'd spilled hot sauce one morning while we were watching cartoons. Her hair had been long still, up in a bun, and I'd made her scrambled eggs, a whole bowl, more red than yellow from all the Sriracha.

She chopped her hair off, 3 days later, didn't even bother to tell me, and let the stain dry.

It was weird when she talked because she still sounded like herself, thick, Georgia accent, soft drawl, high pitched—but she didn't really look like herself. The haircut made her even smaller, and she was already small, five foot one and one hundred and five pounds. She was like one of those big, fluffy dogs after you give them a bath; she seemed so fragile and tiny. Shaking, sad, wet.

When I went to visit her new apartment, her hair had grown out a little bit, but not much at all, just brushing over her ears. Somehow, her voice sounded different too, like you had to strain to a little to hear she was from the South. Like you'd have to ask, "Oh hey, are you from... you're not from New York, I know that! Are you...?"

It had only been six weeks since we'd broken up, but it seemed like a lifetime. I'd never thought about how many times we'd fucked on the couch until after we broke up. It didn't seem like fucking when we were together. It was just love; nothing dirty about it.

But sitting on the couch during my one and only visit to her new place, I squirmed, remembering the noises she'd made on my great grandma's old, beige couch.

I laughed when she laughed, unsure what we were even watching or why I'd agreed to this in the first place, how we were pretending five months of barely talking before we broke up didn't matter. How eight years of loving each other and everybody else (way too much), had ended with us on opposite ends of the couch.

When she'd cut her hair, I'd looked at her like she was a stranger, like I'd flinch if she tried to hold my hand. But we were telling people the breakup was amicable because we hadn't screamed at each other, and I gave her my great grandma's couch without a fight.

I saw Kristy cry about our breakup once, when we told my (our) best friend James and he hugged her too tight. I had met him three days before she had, at a bad dorm party my first week of freshman year. James was nothing if not loyal and a firm believer in first come, forever served. We had all just figured it would be the three of us forever, especially after we ended up in New York after graduation. The rest of our friends had spread around the Midwest, some staying in Chicago. We commented on

each other's Facebook posts and got together once a year to sing karaoke in our favorite Lincoln Park bar. But beside from that, they were mostly just memories, fuzzy images of wine stained lips and bitter, Chicago snow. Kristy, James, and I had been the closest anyways, and when we all landed our sort of dream jobs (me in publishing, Kristy in music licensing, and James at a model agency) it seemed like fate. Me and Kristy would get married, have a couple of kids, and James would be Uncle James, with his constant string of boy toys who our kids would most likely never meet.

But that's not what happened, and after it ended, we were desperate to convince everybody we could at least maintain the friendship. Fuck, for a minute, we had even convinced ourselves. But James had been right to hug her that way. We couldn't do it.

On that one and only visit to her apartment, I left before the show ended, without a goodbye. Kristy kept laughing at the TV, turning on her side to lay on the whole couch.

I stood in the doorway, trying to think of what to say, but the saddest part was that there wasn't anything. I wasn't even holding back, there was just nothing there. I walked out of her apartment and went home.

Two years later, her sister died. She called me while I was at James' apartment in Manhattan sitting on his toilet.

"Kristy?" I answered, mid pee.

"Yeah," she answered back, so quiet she was practically whispering. "It's me."

"Oh... wow," I stuttered, shrugging my shoulder up to hold my phone in place while I wiped. "Uh, long time no talk. How are you?"

A pause, so long I thought her phone might've died. I held the toilet paper at my crotch, scared if I moved I might miss her. Her voice had been tense, all throaty, and my stomach clenched. I could picture her, phone pressed so tightly against her ear that her hand had gone red.

"My sister died."

I cleared my throat. I blinked. My skin felt tighter, my head lighter.

"Kristy..."

"My niece called me," she continued, voice clipped now, like she was reciting lines. "I don't know if you remember her very well—"

"Of course I remember," I answered gently.

"Tess, she called me and told me she'd died. I mean, I've only ever seen the kid at holidays, but she called me to tell me instead of letting me find out on Facebook. That's

sweet, isn't it? She's 15, she shouldn't know to do that."

"She always seemed sweet," I muttered, standing up and zipping my pants.

"She died in a car accident. Drunk driver. Isn't that funny?" No laughter. "Drunk fucking driver killed a recovering alcoholic."

"Kristy..." I repeated, leaning against the sink, hard and cold against my back.

"Do you... do you want me to come over?" I asked, biting my thumbnail. "Are you living in the same place? You still in Brooklyn?"

"Yeah, I'm still here. Just me and the cats. We're here."

"What do you want from me, Kristy? Whatever you want," I said, voice cracking.

"After Tess called me, I came out here," Kristy replied, voice far away, like I hadn't said a word.

"Where's here?"

"My fire escape. I'm sitting on my fire escape."

"Be careful, please," I sighed.

"I sat on my fire escape, closed my eyes and tried to pretend I was in the barn, you know, I mean, do you remember my thing about the barn?"

Of course I remembered the barn.

Growing up, Kristy had sat in her family's barn any time she'd gotten upset. It all started with a

misheard lyric in her favorite Joni Mitchell song, "Case of You."

It's a really beautiful, really sad song. It's the kind of sad you get when you remember someone you used to love, who knew all these little things about you, like what side of the bed you slept on and that you were really self-conscious about the weird birthmark shaped like Alaska you have on your back, and now doesn't even know where you work or that your Starbucks order changed.

Like, that ache you get, right in your bones and all the way through to your heart, because you heard somebody who has the same laugh as them or ate something they used to cook for you. It's that kind of sad. Not a fleeting sadness, but a sadness that's just kind of always there, and sometimes gets worse, so bad you can hardly breathe. That sad.

Anyway, it was her favorite song, and at the start of the song Joni sings,

*Just before our love got lost
you said*

*I am as constant as a north-
ern star and I said,*

*Constantly in the darkness
Where's that at?*

If you want me I'll be in the

bar

Bar. Bar. Like the place you go to drink alcoholic beverages. But when Kristy was little, she thought the lyric was *barn*. She thought that when Joni Mitchell and her boyfriend got into a quarrel, she went out to the barn and sat on a haystack, staring up at the stars, thinking about how stars being constant was a bunch of bullshit: they're already dead, stars, they're gone before we have a chance to know them, false advertisement.

So when Kristy listened to "Case of You," she heard barn, every time. If you want me, I'll be in the barn.

And every time, she thought about her barn, 100 yards from their white home, with the porch swing and bright yellow door and a mailbox that had more dents in it than it ever had letters.

So every time Kristy's big sister came home too late, after she'd been out at the actual bars, Kristy would head to the barn.

She would sit on the floor, listen to the horses' chew, and she would imagine she was a girl (scratch that, a *woman*) like Joni Mitchell, who could take everything inside of her and mold and squash and divide it until it was something beautiful, that made you ache, the kind of ache you feel in your bones and then all the way in your heart.

She would close her eyes. She wouldn't bother to look at the stars (false fucking advertisement) or try and sing the song. She would just be.

She'd try and forget her sister stumbling into the house, with the yellow door and creaky porch swinging, drunk, careless and waking up mom, who was probably already crying about her dad, who'd died the year before.

He'd been a big man, a farmer with a hearty laugh and a story you always knew was half a lie, but you asked to hear anyways, sometimes wishing the lies were grander.

He was a drunk, though, and he screamed. Not the good, funny stories, but the gunk in him, dark and ugly. He would scream it at Kristy's mom, pound his fists on the table, turn red. He'd cry, too, and turn red, blotchy, from the tears. It was the same red, though, red from pain both ways, and he died in a car crash, that was his fault, a different red all around him.

One time, when they were kids, Kristy and her sister, Bree, had snuck a bottle of whisky into the barn and taken a handful of swigs each. It burned, Kristy remembered, down in her stomach.

Bree had puked it up, had run out of the barn and over to an oak tree a few paces away, with their initials carved into it. Kristy had

stumbled out of there, fell down next to her, and rubbed her back.

"Pinky promise me... never again," Bree said to Kristy, back against the tree now.

Kristy sat next to her, crossed her legs and stuck out her pinky.

"I promise."

But promises don't really matter when you're a kid, so years later, after their father drank himself to death, Bree started going out, breaking her promise. She'd come in, at three or four in the morning, practically fall through the door, face red with laughter, loud.

Kristy, who was always sitting in the living room watching infomercials, just seventeen years old, face still round and hair still long, would try to calm her down.

"Be quiet, Bree," she'd hiss, making her way to the front door where Bree would be trying to shrug her coat off.

Bree would brush her off, laughing louder, until they both heard their mother's footsteps coming down the stairs in her big robe and sagging cheeks, staring at her daughters.

Every time Bree would fall silent when she saw her mother, would sink to the floor like a little girl playing dress up, mascara running down her face as she began to cry. High heels slipping off her feet. Ashamed.

Kristy would look away. Her mom would say nothing, bug eyed and shaking, the way she got when her husband used to drink and whatever she said was like screaming into a glass case, just stuck inside of her.

Kristy would leave her sister downstairs. "Come on, mom," she'd say, taking her hand and leading her back up the stairs. She'd put mom back to bed, kissing her on the forehead and promising her it was just a bad dream, really, just a bad dream. Sometimes her mom would puke from the anxiety, and Kristy would clean it up, wipe the sweat from her mother's cheeks and convince her it hadn't happened in the morning so she wouldn't be embarrassed.

When she came back down the living was clear, the TV still on. She'd head out the back door in her pajamas, barefoot (so her feet itched) straight to the barn.

She would just be, in the barn, like Joni Mitchell, trying to escape something inevitable.

Every time it was the only thing that could calm her down. Pretending to be somebody she wasn't with powers she didn't possess in a barn that smelled like horse shit and whose roof was always leaking.

When we had met, years later, Kristy had become the kind of person who took care of everybody, like she took care of her mother.

But she was haunted by the ghost of her sister, what she couldn't do, what she hid from, long before she'd passed away. She had been the only person Kristy hadn't known how to take care of, and she'd never figured out how to forgive herself for that.

"Kristy, of course I remember your barn," I said to her finally, back still against the bathroom sink, hoping I didn't sound too choked up. "Stop asking me if I remember things I obviously remember."

"We forgot a lot when we were together. I don't know."

I could practically see her shaking her head, imagined her hair was still long, and it was hitting her cheeks, red from crying.

"I remember the barn," I said to her, swallowing down a lump in my throat.

"Well I tried to pretend I was in the barn, but I couldn't, because I couldn't hear the horses chewing, I mean, I know the horses are gone anyways, it's just a barn now, nothing's even there, mom couldn't take care of it anymore, but still, I could just hear honking, and it made me feel so far away from everything," she told me, her voice the way it used to be, thick accent and all.

"So what do you need Kristy? Just tell me? My car?" I pleaded.

Silence.

“You got my car.”

Two hours later, sipping wine out on James’ balcony, back against the railing, I said to him, “When I throw up, I throw up like a dyke.” It was the first thing I’d said since, “Kristy called me.”

James stared at me blankly, folding his hands together. He needed a haircut. He always spent the three months after he broke up with a boy not getting a haircut. He smelled like Chanel cologne, which he insisted on wearing, even after I told him she’d been a Nazi. He had a terrible view of the city from his balcony, basically just the backs of buildings, but we both liked it anyways.

“You are a dyke,” he said, voice flat. “You do everything like a dyke.”

I waved him off, sipping cheap wine out of a mug with a pig face on it. It was one he stole from a house party in Wicker Park when we were kids still living in Chicago and thirty was lightyears ahead of us and not approaching us swiftly.

He had a phase where he was obsessed with stealing things at parties. Souvenirs, I guess, though there weren’t many parties I cared much about remembering. He must’ve found meaning in them that I didn’t, couldn’t.

He took mugs, candles, bowls, sweaters—a framed picture, once, of a girl and her boyfriend, cheeks pressed together, goofy grins, both with dark curly hair and big, blue eyes, so similar we thought they were siblings until we stalked her on Facebook.

That one, he felt bad about. But not bad enough to give it back.

“You know what I mean,” I said, rolling my eyes.

“I really don’t,” he said, matter of fact.

“Like, when I puke, I get it all out in one go, just get it all out in one or two hurls and I’m good. Like a dyke.”

He laughed at that, really laughed, the surprised laugh he does when you catch him off guard. Not the fake, beautiful laugh he does for boys he’s trying to impress.

“That’s so true,” he turned to me. “You puke like a fucking dyke.”

I smiled at him, taking a sip out of the stupid pig mug.

“And you throw up like a fucking fag, just a little bit at a time, so delicate.”

He laughed even harder at that, grabbed me by both shoulders and pulled me into a hug, so I could feel him vibrating against me, warm and happy, and he didn’t even notice I’d started to cry because we were shaking the same way until he must’ve felt his shirt starting to get

wet so he pulled me away from him, put his fingers under my chin and pushed up, so I was staring at him, eyes red and cheeks flushed.

“What’s wrong, hon?” he said, voice doing that weird thing where it was loud and soft at the same time, like a stage whisper.

“Kristy called me today. I know I said that already. But that’s what’s wrong.”

“Yeah,” he said to me, putting his hands back on my shoulders. They were cold, like the sink. Everything was making me cold, even though it was 75 out, and I was in jeans and a cardigan.

“That was her joke. About puking. You know because we were always... we were always on the bathroom floor with people.”

See, me and Kristy had met in college, two weeks into our freshman year, her with that long, blonde hair and the thick, Georgia accent that James had spent the eight years we were dating trying to imitate.

It was at a party, probably not in Wicker, but somewhere off the blue line.

I had gone with James, who I had met only three days before, and he spent the whole night talking to some guy who looked like a young Tom Cruise.

Two hours into the party, a girl I had met only twenty minutes before was drunk, very drunk, and

I was carrying her to the bathroom, smoothing her hair and promising her we’d get her to a toilet before she puked.

Kristy, on the other end of the apartment, had a drunk, very drunk girl she’d met only twenty minutes before, under her arm, whispering to the girl that it was gonna be okay, it was gonna be just fine.

We’d met at the bathroom, both of us needing it, staring at each other, until finally all four of us went in—me and my drunk girl at the toilet and Kristy and her drunk girl by the sink.

Me and Kristy found out that was our thing— we’d both sat on more bathroom floors than we could count, rubbing backs, and cleaning up puke. We couldn’t help it. People found us and wanted us to take care of them. And honestly? We wanted to.

See, my great grandma taught my nana (her daughter) that the best thing you can do in life is give—your food, your time, your heart—you give until you bleed, and then you sew up your wounds yourself.

You come last in your life, after God, family, friends, lovers, co-workers, and strangers. My great grandmother taught her daughter that women make themselves big enough to take care of everybody,

and small enough so nobody notices it's you fixing all the problems.

My great grandma was a small, Italian woman, born in Sicily. She'd come to Chicago with a thick accent and a Hollywood smile. She'd married a butcher from a neighboring town in Sicily, and they'd lived in a small apartment with brick walls and a leaky sink, with one daughter, who my great grandma gave her heart to and everything she had learned.

So my nana, only an inch taller than her mother, with a crooked smile and chapped hands, passed those lessons onto my mom. And then, well, my mom didn't teach it to me. She didn't want to. She had given so much of herself that when she laughed it sounded like she was trying to hand the laugh to somebody else—like her laugh was just a bit to make other people laugh, not like she ever thought something was funny.

Like her grandma and mother, she raised me in Chicago, in a small home in Bridgeport where I learned to ride my bike and tame my frizzy, curly hair. But unlike the women in her life, she didn't try and teach me to be completely selfless. She let me laugh so hard I pissed off our neighbors. She let me ask my friends to borrow their toys. She let me ditch school and wander around the city, craning my neck to

see skyscrapers actually brush the sky. Once, when I was eleven, we wasted the whole day playing video games, my hands orange with Cheetos dust, and I heard my mother laugh, for real.

My mom, she wanted me to be whole. She didn't think it was fair, what her grandma taught her mom, what her mom taught her. That women were everybody and therefore, nobody, selves lost in the pieces they gave to God and friends and family and lovers and coworkers and strangers. She was a kindergarten teacher, with that Hollywood smile like her grandma's, and a knack for remembering everything you ever told her about yourself. She was beautiful, but she wanted me to be happy.

But then she got sick, when I was just twelve years old, still with scraped knees and braces. Cancer, they told me, my mom and dad, sitting on that beige couch, the first piece of furniture my great grandmother had bought as an American citizen. She'd given it to her daughter, who'd given it to her daughter, who would one day give it to me, who would give it to her ex-girlfriend. My head spun, my bones tightened.

The thing was, my dad didn't have it in him to give the way I did. He did all he could, and it was more than most, but he wasn't a woman

and he wasn't the great granddaughter of Philomena Russo; he didn't have it in his blood the way I did.

Somewhere, unfairly so, I learned that I could give myself, and do for others, and forget who I am in it. I learned how natural it was for me to give my time and my food and my heart, the way my great grandma Philomena Russo had.

She taught my nana, who taught my mom, but it was just in me.

So I sat with my mom while she puked, almost every day, and I let her cry on me, even though it made the air sticky and my heart beat too fast, and I was too young to understand cancer, or anything really at all. I took care of her. I missed school and told nobody. I made up the work anyways. I kissed my mother on both cheeks every time I left and entered a room so she'd know I wasn't scared of the cancer. I stopped laughing too hard, afraid I'd disturb her sleep. I stopped asking friends to borrow their toys. I was too busy to play games. I stopped wandering around downtown. There was nobody to take me. My nana, who had died the year before, would've dedicated her life to keeping my mother healthy. So I took her place.

When my mom got better, after chemo and getting her tits chopped off, she tried to undo the

damage. She tried to teach me the opposite of what her mom had taught her. But it was too late. I had become my mother and my grandmother and my great grandmother.

It felt like a curse, to take care of everybody, to love so much my heart was constantly on the verge of splitting wide open. To forget what I needed or who I was. But my freshman year in college I met a beautiful girl in a bathroom who loved and gave like I did. It seemed like fate. It was in her blood too, and we would love each other so much the earth would shake.

We fucked for the first time in that bathroom, in the apartment I can barely remember. The bathroom smelled like lavender and the shower curtain had small roses on it, pink. It didn't feel like fucking though, even on that first night. It was always love with us, even with other girls' puke on our clothes. Maybe, especially, with other girls' puke on our clothes.

She told me, later, on the blue line going back to our dorms, that lesbians and gay men threw up in the exact opposite ways—and she was so right, I almost cried.

James stole a loofah from that party, but he gave it to us the next year, when we told him we'd fucked in that bathroom, in that party the second week of our freshman year, in the apartment we

couldn't really remember. I still have it in my bedroom closet.

The thing is, we loved each other so much. That's the kind of people we were. We loved, and we gave, and we took care. We sat on bathroom floors with people, let them cry to us. We held people, and we solved problems, and we loved so much, it sometimes burned.

And for years, so many years, everybody thought we were it. The couple. The definition of true love. But one night Kristy got food poisoning, and I tried to come into the bathroom with her and she said to me, so matter of fact:

I don't need you. I can take care of myself.

I realized, then, that I'd never even seen Kristy throw up, and I doubt she'd ever seen me. I'd do anything for her, and she'd do anything for me, but we weren't.

Because what we didn't know how to do was *be* loved. We were giving love to one another, but nobody was ever receiving it; for eight years we'd just been high off the mutual feeling of love, love, love, without ever taking the love we'd been given.

Kristy had told me her big sister was the only person she'd never learned to take care of, but the truth was, she hadn't learned to take care of me either. It wasn't her fault. I didn't let her, and she didn't let

me. We took care of everybody else while we were together, and we felt so good about it, what good fucking people we were, but we didn't know how to be needy, how to ask for help, even with each other. We'd gotten so used to taking care of ourselves, we hardly noticed it was killing us. We thought our love was just easy, but we just didn't know how to deal with the hard stuff: taking from one another.

Back on his balcony James tried to console me, but somehow, within ten minutes, I was talking to James about his breakup instead, and he was crying on me. It's not his fault. I don't want you to think he's selfish. He's not. It's me who's selfish. I only know how to give love, so I made him. I had us switch places. I pushed him to talk so I could be the one hugging him, and wiping his tears, and putting him to bed with a kiss to the forehead.

I sat in James' kitchen then, and I cried, quietly, so he wouldn't hear, and I imagined that maybe I'd ask Kristy if I could come with her to Georgia. I imagined we'd talk and we'd laugh and maybe (hopefully) I'd get carsick on the way there. We'd pull over into a gas station and I'd let her come into the bathroom with me and hold my hair while I puked, rub my back, kiss my cheek. We'd sit there in silence. We wouldn't

have to say anything else. Her hair would be long, or longer than it had been last time, long enough to put in a ponytail, and she'd be wearing a pink sweater. We'd drive and we'd listen to our favorite songs, some Joni and Norah Jones and Stevie Nicks, and eventually we'd get to her barn and we'd sit there, wouldn't tell her mother we were there yet, and she'd forgive herself for not being better with her sister, and forgive her sister for not being better to her. And we'd somehow end up so close to each other, hands grazing, hearts beating, until she started crying. And she'd let me hold her, let me comfort her, get her snot on my big, yellow sweater. And in the barn that had given her so much as a kid, we'd figure out how to be loved by each other, and we'd both figure out how to be loved in general. The next day, we'd go to her sister's wake, hand in hand, with our hair pulled back, and I'd give her small smiles, and they would mean the world.

Instead, Kristy called me at one in the morning, after I'd just gotten home and into my bed, and told me she didn't need my car anymore, that it was silly to drive from New York to Georgia, that she couldn't take my car for that long, she'd just book a flight, and it was so sweet of me, but really, it was all good.

"Okay, Kristy, yeah, that sounds fine," I sighed, crawling deeper into the covers. "Good night."

"Wait," she said, voice flying out of her, like she was scared I'd leave. "Hold on. Can I tell you something about my sister?"

I scrunched my nose.

"Yeah I... of course you can."

She was silent, like she needed time to figure it out. I could almost imagine her, staring into spaces, biting her chapped lips, gears in her head spinning.

"When I'd go in the barn I'd always fall asleep in there. But I'd wake up in the morning in my own bed. I never asked who carried me back to the house. No I... I never wanted to know. Because I'd have to admit somebody was doing something for me. That my sister was doing something for me."

It was my turn to be quiet. The fan on my ceiling whirled. I felt dizzy watching it.

"I'm sorry, Philomena," she said, voice full.

"What for?" I croaked out, but we both knew.

"I wish I'd let you carry me, sometimes," she whispered, like she was telling me a secret.

"I wish I'd let you carry me sometimes, too," I whispered back.

I hung up the phone.

Siren Song

Open the door, start your adventure.
Escape the cursed confines of the everyday.
Quotidian be damned and left behind, I say.
Come away with me to sail the Carib seas.
Believe me, I am a true pirate of the Caribbean.
Leave your ordinary, humdrum habits where they live.
We'll sail to St. John's, Tortola, Peter Island, Norman Cay.
Sleep on the deck of the little sloop that's sailed round the globe,
Beneath stars of other worlds glittering in indigo sky.
On a fine day you'll sun bathe in the foot of the sail—

It's a classic Kodachrome moment.
Can you hear the steel band playing, people singing?
Row ashore in that tiny dinghy to get provisions.
Stop for rum punch at the bar on the beach.
Watch the palm tops bending wildly, fronds rustling, in the wind.
Hold the tiller steady with your full weight in the gale.
Straight through the Windward Passage, then the Narrows.
Bury the gunwales in the whitecaps.
This is romance! I am inviting you!
Come away, come away!

Now go over the side, your face in the water,
Schools of blue tangs, shading navy to aqua as one.
Military striped sergeant majors move as a shoal.
Dusky damselfish hurries forth to protect her home of coral,
French grunt doing what they do best, glinting and grinding their teeth.
Through a thousand silverlings a large, solemn, dark red eye looks back,
Octopus glaring, hoping you just go away.
Hermit crabs lifting their repossessed shells, skittering to safety, shutting in.
A circle of squid suspended motionless, colorless, in sunlight below the surface,
Effortlessly moving off together in line, transparent sides ruffling.

Brittle stars, purple sea urchins, waving sea fans, elkhorn coral,
Parrotfish and box-shaped trunkfish, barracuda and dark angels,
Flame scallops dangling from the reef, siphoning, siphoning,
Elongate trumpetfish hanging vertical, so still, leopard rays flying
 soundlessly, ominous,
A sea turtle, bashful under its front fin beneath a vast brain coral.
Spiny West Indian fighting conch inching across the floor, pulled by its
 black velvet ruffled snail.
A second octopus gallops across the tall eelgrass sand flats.
Lookdown fish, silver jacks on the hunt, four-eyed butterflyfish, spotted
 groupers lurking,
A little jawfish smiles, showing his many babies in his mouth.
Black durgon outlined in blue-silver iridescence, wafting along as if there is
 no tomorrow.

Hurry. Open the door, come away with me. The islands and seas are calling.

beer and burrito

with her carefully arched
eyebrows, and her satin skin
of milk and honey

when ms. kaur said
“it is a trillion dollar industry
that would collapse
if we believed we are beautiful
enough already”,

a 10-billion dollar
self-improvement industry

silently beams a cynic grin.



And though it's your hands that are cold you sleep
with slippers on, weighed down the way shadows
change places to show what death will be like

before it gets dark –even in bed you limp, the blanket
backing away and you hang on, want to be there
still standing yet you can't remember if it's more rain

or just that your fingers are wet from falling in love
and every time they pass your lips it's these slippers
that save you from drowning, let you go on, caress

something that is not dressed in white, disguised
as the warm breath thrown over the headboard
smelling from cemeteries without moving your feet.

Her





Crimson Time

after the painting, Elizabeth Reading, by Auguste Macke

She wears her hair like a thinking cap,
parted in the middle. With eyes and brow
downcast, she sits, oblivious, with one hand
cupped below the elbow of her other arm

that holds the little white paperback.
Meanwhile, the spider plants and Boston
ferns have taken up stations in the corners
of her room. Another large plant peers

over the contents of her mahogany
secretary desk and its stack of paperwork.
Behind her is a large expanse of blue
as if a window has been opened to let in

all the air or a door has been left ajar
to let in all the neighbors, too. Only
the late afternoon sunlight comes pouring
through, casting its ocher glow upon

the curtains and the floor. No breeze
shifts about the room. No leaf, no sheaf
of papers, not a single page stirs. Hovering
between the white of her square collar

and the pages of her book, the red bow
tied at her throat explodes like a fiery blossom
or a crimson bird, like some deep dark secret
spreading its wings, about to take flight.

clutter

The biking gloves you carelessly left to dry
on the alabaster bathroom windowsill look
treacherous as falcon talons scaring wrens
and hummingbirds away from the flowerboxes
filled with geraniums but what can I say given
that I've left possessions on the bedroom
windowsill upstairs repeatedly, cluttering
your space with the scattered marbles of my life
but you've never complained about my

red and green rubber workout bands
purple hand weights, travel shampoo plus
conditioner, books I haven't read for three years.

I have tried to be tidy, folding laundry and packing
it carefully on shelves when I've seen other people
just stuff their underwear and socks in a drawer after
they wash them and let objects accumulate around
the house like Whole Foods shopping bags. So,
meanwhile, I'll forget about the biking gloves though
they scare me when I get up during the night, since
you have considerably turned a blind eye to my clutter.

Coming Home to a Racket

How amazing! Panting
and nervously shopping
from a long list, wobbly knees
as I stumble to the checkout lane.

Only to arrive home to the sound
of hammering construction next door.
My cat is meowing, the noise
increases my anxiety.

Take pill, feed cat, sit in chair
surrounded by pandemonium
gazing outside at the heavy heat,
my breathing slows.

Suddenly, unperceptively, a calm
comes over me, welcome
and joyful relief. My cat and I
retreat and close the door.

The hammering is muffled. Turning on
meditation music, we settle
in and for a long time, I stare
at the trees and blue sky.

A Marriage of Convenience

Doris Butterworth was widowed very young. Her good-for-nothing husband got himself killed one night on the way home from the pub, where he went every night. Run over by a drunk driver, which seemed appropriate to her. He left her with three daughters all under the age of five, and no money, thus ensuring her a life of hard work taking in washing, and cleaning house for other people for the foreseeable future.

England in the early '50s was still very much post-war, and rationing was not completely over until 1954. But Doris always managed to put food on the table for her daughters, and as the years passed, they all grew very close to one another, the older ones finding work as soon as they were old enough, to help lighten the financial burden on their mother's shoulders.

The ideal solution to their hardship would have been for Doris to marry again, but by this time, already turned forty, and looking a care-worn ten years older, men just didn't look at her any more, and anyway, so many men never came back from the war. England was a country of widows and damaged

men suffering from shell shock. Her poor daughters were even less attractive than she was and had consigned themselves to the thought of being spinsters for the rest of their lives.

Doris learned from the local butcher that the priest at St. Anne's Catholic Church, on the corner near the semi-detached house she was renting, was looking for someone to clean both his quarters and the church, so she hurried over and spoke with Father O'Donnell, and he was happy to give her the job. He couldn't pay much, but it was steady work and she was grateful.

She started going to work at the church twice a week, on Mondays and Thursdays, and after she had been going there for a little while she met Alfred. Alfred had lost his entire family one night when their home in London took a direct hit during the Blitz in 1940, and that is when he lost his eyesight. Father O'Donnell felt sorry for him and had created work for him at the church. First, he was given the task of answering the phone in the office. Next, he was given the additional task of organizing and leading a weekly group meeting for the

blind, held in the church hall. Later still he was asked to start counseling troubled youths as well. They really respected him and heeded his words of wisdom, particularly since his life was as difficult as theirs in many ways. Alfred was not too much older than them, in his early thirties, and was a pleasant looking man, with an athletic body, and some education. He became their role model and inspiration.

He was not paid much for his services, but it was enough for him to start looking for a room to rent in a house near the church, so that with the help of his white cane, he could walk to his employment every day.

One day he was chatting with Doris as she was cleaning the sanctuary, and he mentioned his situation to her. She didn't say anything at the time, but when she arrived home in the evening she spoke to her daughters, and asked what they thought about having a paying guest living with them, to help with their expenses. They thought anything for a change was good, so agreed to vacate one bedroom so he could move in. That meant that the youngest, Audrey, now seventeen, would share her mother's double bed, and the older ones, Maureen and Felicity, would share the other bedroom.

Alfred moved into the house, and it was a success from day one. They were happy to have some male energy in a house full of women, and he was happy to feel part of a family, and to have clean lodgings and a good meal every evening. They all got on very well together, and their house began to ring out with happy laughter.

One evening, after Alfred had gone to his room, all the girls came into their mother's room and sat around her on the bed, and told her they had a suggestion to make.

"Mother, why don't you marry Alfred? He's nearly ten years younger than you, but that doesn't matter, he can't see you, and you know how much he likes you."

Doris thought about it for a bit, touched that her daughters had come up with this idea, and decided it would solve a lot of their problems if she married him. So she started being rather more affectionate with him than previously, brushing up against him when she served his supper, touching his arm warmly when they were talking. He felt the change in energy and was not slow to make a move. After living with them for six months, he asked Doris to marry him, and she accepted.

Their lives improved, and the girls' imagination started to turn in other, more unconventional directions. Alfred had now moved into their mother's room, and the girls were back in the same arrangement as before. The three girls saw the happy flush on their mother's face when they met her over breakfast each morning, and now their hormones kicked into overdrive. Sex was on their minds all the time, for there was no privacy in the house, and they heard their mother's moans of pleasure every night. They wanted some of what she was having, so they came up with a plan.

Doris and her girls were all about the same build, medium height, a bit chunky, with similar hair lengths, and similar voices, so one night, while Alfred was out leading the weekly group meeting for the blind, the three girls gathered round their mother once again and made a proposal.

'Mum, we're all young women now, and need our own sexual experiences, but you know we're never going to be lucky enough to find three men, so why don't you share Alfred with us? He's blind, doesn't have a clue what we look like. He knows us all and is comfortable with us, comfortable enough to perhaps be confused about who is in bed with him. Why

don't we all take turns wearing the wedding ring he gave you?'

Doris was a generous mother, and heard her daughters' pleas, so she agreed. From then on, the ring was passed around just before bedtime without a word being said, and the designated girl went into her mother's bedroom with Alfred and closed the door.

The years passed, and the newly structured family lived very happily together. Their neighbors on the street had no idea of what was going on behind the lace curtains, though they had noticed how much happier and livelier the girls looked.

"What a happy family lives in number 12," they remarked. "I wonder what their secret is."

Alfred knew all along, but he wasn't letting on.

master of all fuck-ups

life is full of disappointments,
i overheard
an old man in a bar

i could not agree more
when i think of all the sneezes
which chickened out
at the last moment,

the time when i
stepped on a puddle of water
in my kitchen
with my shocks on

and when i ran into
a glass pane thinking of a door
in a local-bar

and the other time,
when i accidently did my laundry
with dish-washing detergent.

but the good news is: the master
of all fuck-ups keeps
on going, and it goes like
mr. lance armstrong on corticosteroids.

Comedy of Errors

Your honor, my pedestrian date began taking her prose off even before we dated, insinuating she'd like to pay a visit to Shakespeare in the Park. She had already investigated his loft at the Open Air Theater in London's Regent Park. She hankered to see some drama there and, in lieu of that, we flirted with one at Clapham Common. My suggesting to her doing, "As You Like It" wasn't rebuffed. Nor would I try to beset her with an intimidating Lear. It also didn't hurt her sensibilities for me to spike her thinking with "A Midsummer Night's Dream" at Richmond Park. But she was wide awake when she lay on the grass with me. Yes, there was indeed a beam of pleasure in her eyes - for Shakespeare's sake, not mine. But I swear your honor, The Tempest wasn't in my breast, but a downpour that came after the Twelfth Night with her. And, notwithstanding "The Taming of the Shrew" in Victoria Park, "A Winter's Tale" was the only one I'd get, when we went together to Hampstead Heath. It's true, she seemed to yield to my come hither look when I attempted to take her to my treasured "Hamlet". Unfortunately, close to our departure, while understandably drunk on pentameter, the girl said no. Of course I was disappointed. But when a girl says no, your honor, she means no. And so, I let her go, holding a copy of Love's Labour's Lost, which I'd given her a week before. And that was the extent of it. So it's all Much Ado About Nothing.

Ravishment of the Holy Wisdom

Ravishment of the Hol
With a heroic cry, I throw myself
on thoughtful Her, the fount of all,
whose Platonic shoulders hold up
a host of philosophers searching
for that hard stone,
Sophia, Sapientia,
the Greeks and Romans called it,
that aspect of God as wisdom;
the edge of Him
we think we can know.

My profane logos,
Christ's intact loaf
on its base erected,
invades, invokes
the opera singer in Her
and striving to hit high C
while diving into
Her sea of prolixity,
She cracks the shaky dome
of Byzantium's Hagia Sophia;
Hers and Hers alone.
Her legions of words
become its stones,
thousands of precious pieces,
beaten down by time to ruins
and rebuilt and again rebuilt
to pure light immanent
from the enormous trembling dome.

In varied embraces and poses,
to break the routine of rapture,
I assume the aspects of saints and
eremites, sinners of note,
palsied misers, lawbreakers,
kings, popes, emperors,
royal oafs of some distinction;
anything to keep Her attention.

I don't have it and she
dismisses my efforts, tells
of the sunrise of earlier ages,
concerned architects, geometers,
on their rounds meandering
through the Hagia Sophia,
peering through the keyholes,
seeing more than
what is in plain sight;
sensing dilapidation and decay
behind the walls, tapping, tapping
the hidden vulnerabilities
of stone and mortar.
Far from the wisdom
heaving down from above,
they picture this
holy massive ruin renewed,
revived in glory for all to see;
its substantial presence
bringing God down,
beneath the dome
for all to worship.

Meanwhile, we two
lose the thread of discourse,
flop around among
the dead blossoms of Plato's
prose, trying to find something
we can use, a fragment
we can bring to bear
on the problem at hand:
the Son of Man in the second seat.
The Holy Wisdom sees no sense in it;
the church is Hers, but
Jesus, incarnate
forever debases Her power,
Her feminine wisdom sublimely
rendered irrelevant, out of place.

Graceful, practical,
softening under my tuberous
ponderosity, losing
interest in the labor at hand,
She sighs about sacred words,
sacred works, incisions
brought down from on high;
the sharp light of grace
brought down in a narrow beam,
divine insights piled on a plate;
John's severed head opened up
to show how close he was
to the one who brought more
than water could bless.

So we sit under a portico
someplace or other
in Byzantium, where we started,
in the warm spring
discussing God the Son,
the Father, the Holy Ghost.
The sun sinks below the horizon,
the cold moonlit nights progress
and in Byzantium
the dome will rise again.
She bites my ear
in a moment of exasperation;
I don't care.

We will build again.

Larger than life beside me,
she tries to bind me to her reasoning;
in her passion shaking her head,
animating her white neck to
splendid anatomical disarray;
I lie long hours with her
like a sled dog after a hard day's run,
putting forward my reckoning;
we get nowhere at all.
My faith in the Holy Wisdom
corrupted by my doubt in God incarnate,
tainted by my failure to see
God's wisdom as love.

I complain to Her about
the imperfect complexion
of God's justice, his unjust
power to tip the scales
any way he wants.
She smiles and looks askance.
We push and pull, like sumo wrestlers,
in this battle that never ends.
The discourse goes on
and we are no nearer the truth
of the Holy Wisdom, the sense of it,
the intent of God and His angels,
lost in the vault of heaven, the intent
to tell us something, impart something,
a vision, a divine process,
constructed again and again on ruins.

But it's not at all like that,
that's the little we do know;
the painful bit in our teeth.
Never, never will we know more
than the divine coruscation,
the decorations that leave us cold
to the core, caring no more for
a fake cake that is all surface;
a pretty thing with no heart
that we can see.

Caring no more for wisdom,
holy or not, that we
cannot take in our hands,
bring to understanding in our minds
and make one with our human flesh.

Grown Lily



Veil

after Naomi Shihab Nye

Morning comes to me under a veil,
the sun hiding behind the clouds
but the horizon says it is there.

Below the black sea becomes the sky
in no time; to learn this I move away
a thousand kilometres from home,

To a place with no snow, with a sea
at hand, with a sun over it — vividly
and uneventfully. Whatever happens

Is a daily phenomenon, known to
everyone — even the moon.

At a distance, I see uniforms; that

Tells me the boundary is near, before
it dissolves. In a corner, the men
in uniform are antagonised, adored

In another. Ambiguousness stays
in each corner, verily mapped. In
an image, a pigeon flies past

The boundary; and I wonder how
the boundaries are famous to the cities
and cities to them, never the pigeon

That flies past time with no uneasiness
— what stays back is a broken feather
that decides for its existence, the way

The rays decide for the sun's, which is
famous to both the cities and the
boundaries, but never the other way.

The veil is famous to me and the sun,
until day, when it comes from behind
the clouds; when it shines, no

Boundary remains, no city does.

Charitable Erasure

An erasure poem after Rimbaud "Les soeurs de charité"

The young eye shining
body of years–naked,
copper-bound,
unknown genius–

Impetuous
black stubbornness–
the seas crying
beds of diamonds.

Before the ugliness,
resentful heart,
eternal wound
desires its charity.

But mercy,
never the ever,
sleeps a red shadow
beautifully formed.

Blind awakened,
embrace one question:
Is it you who hangs us?
We cradle–grave.

Your hatreds, your failures,
the brutalities suffered,
give us everything
excess of blood.

When carried a moment,
life call, action song.
come the green justice
to tears from obsession.

Endlessly altered and calm,
the implacable moaning
tenderness after science, alms
bleeding bloom.

Black alchemy and holy
wounded, dark scientist;
he feels the agony–
beautiful coffin,

[BREAK]

believes vast ends,
immense nights of truth–
her soul sick,
mysterious death sister.

Bar Rat's tab is longer

than his scrawny tail, which is shorter
than his cousin Rattus Rattus, but the tab needs
constant gnawing, attention must be paid,
else both will chew through his brain.
He's sworn off cheese no matter how fragrant
or moldy, how hungry his belly.
He's also given up drinking the occasional
spilled Guinness in his bar of choice. He knows
too well the lure of black traps, even though
he is brown or mixed dark grey, and the traps
are sometimes white. The pain of his mother's
love and her head separated from her body remains
a cautionary tale. The way his father gnawed away
his own front paws for freedom, but could not
crawl away, does too. He misses his many siblings,
even the ones he couldn't stand to smell.
Especially the younger, tastier ones. But doesn't look back.
Forward is the only path where death and danger lurk.
But at least there is a way. No longer does he bother
with a close textual reading of the pompous publications
abandoned by American Fancy Rat and Mouse Association.
His smaller eyes and thick, blunt nose have better things

to render. He knows though his body is bulky and thick, he must be able to squeeze through any opening the size of a quarter. A demanding diet. He rejoices in swimming, but burrows with reluctance.

While good for the claws, it's off-putting in attracting the 12 teated females he's so fond of. And whose company he rejoices, if only for a short time. But a short time is his allotment in the wilds of the city. It's not about the years, short though they may be. Home is wherever the next meal is. No truth could be greater.

Stock Boy

He was working in the stockroom, sorting out the produce, feeling the sweat dripping down his back, moving boxes from the pallets into his cart. Feeling the eyes of the big bosses on him as they milled around with their white shirts and ties and clipboards in hand. He'd been working here how many? -- twenty three years -- the "Produce Manager" (just a glorified Stock Boy) and he was still at the mercy of these white collar guys who knew nothing about the business but were numbers guys sent in by the chain that took over the store to cut costs, their eyes on the bottom line, patting him on the back like they understood him, were just like him. When everyone knew they were nothing like him at all, knew nothing about him. They went home every night in their Caddies and Jags to their mansions and swimming pools and nannies taking care of their babies. And he had to have eyes in the back of his head, watch his every move now, because they could make or break the life of a poor bum like him.

And after his shift was over, punching out, yawning, stretching, pulling off his green company apron, hanging it in his locker, and

moving slowly to the door, past the registers, waving to the cashiers, getting into his 2006 Chevy Cobalt, turning the key in the lock, getting it to start the second time, and making his way out of the parking lot, heading to his little white ranch house that looked like all the other ranch houses on his street, his spirits rising at the thought of seeing Lucille's smile when she opened the door, welcoming him into her arms, where he would kiss her gently, not letting her know what was in his head -- how he wanted to cry, just cry for the day behind him, and the night ahead.

Fork Juice in the Orange Section

I tried to buy orange juice and I didn't

I was looking for forks

There is no orange juice in the fork section

If you should ever find yourself in a grocery store, don't go to the
fork section looking for orange juice

I am 22 years old

I don't consider myself a successful 22 year old

My life is a big empty void

I like orange juice; I like to drink it; I like it without pulp

I don't think that I enjoy orange juice any more or any less than the
average person

My life has no meaning

I am no longer in the fork section

The fork section has no orange juice

The fork section has no meaning

I was supposed to buy a fork because my other one broke

Seeing no orange juice there, I left the fork section and went to
another section

I went to a whole other grocery store

Same story: no orange juice in the fork section

The Bathroom at The Hungarian Pastry Shop

I tottered to the bathroom
At The Hungarian Pastry Shop,
The Viennese coffee moving through
My digestive tract, faster than
The dissolution of the
Austrian Empire.

And I had need to rapidly
Depose a fleeing Kaiser.

I always am apprehensive
Going to the toilet
At the Hungarian Pastry Shop.

As there is only one stall, for men, women,
College students that aren't as broke
As they like to proclaim they are:
Pretenders to the radical anarcho-collective
Of Bohemia.

But it is difficult to perform
A colonic coup when the proletariat
Keeps knocking on my parliament privy.
And the clamours for release
Almost make me forget that I have secured
The key resource -- and thus the power.

I remember my privilege of stewarding
My Holed-up Hofburg,
When I see all of the notes -- graffiti is too loose a term --
That dynasties of philosophers have scribbled out.

“Peter Pan is just a kid in a straight jacket”

“I can count to Potato”

“You can’t stop the signal..”

“We vandalize things that aren’t ours, with quotes we didn’t write, to impress people taking shits.”

“CAPTIALISM MAIMS”

The power they wield is not codified, but symbolized in pen.

Musings themselves are nigh worthless --

But the markings symbolize their monopoly over time.

Leisurely time these philosophers sat, thinking with pants around ankles

Cuddling up to warming porcelain,

Ignoring the pounding masses outside who scream “bread...bread must go!”

Did these crapping Kierkegaard Kaisars hike up their undies
Before doodling out these meditations on constipation?
Did they waddle, half-wiped, to scrawl half-baked philosophy?
Or did they simply enter the bathroom with the sole intent of
Making their voices known?
Purposefully overriding the function of this people's burg --
To provide relief.
These hypocritical demagogues
Their philosophy is rent-seeking.
They are a caca-stocracy
Governance by the shit.

I wash my hands, aggressively gooping soap onto my fingers
As if to wash away any time I squandered,
Leaving them undried -- sopping wet,
So when I exit back into
The Hungarian Pastry Shop
I will look hurried and harried,
One of the people,
I'll announce, "she's all yours, comrade,"
As I wave away the stink of the landed gentry.

The back of my hand presses above a scrawl on the door,
And I see the film of unrinsed soap drip past a final thought,

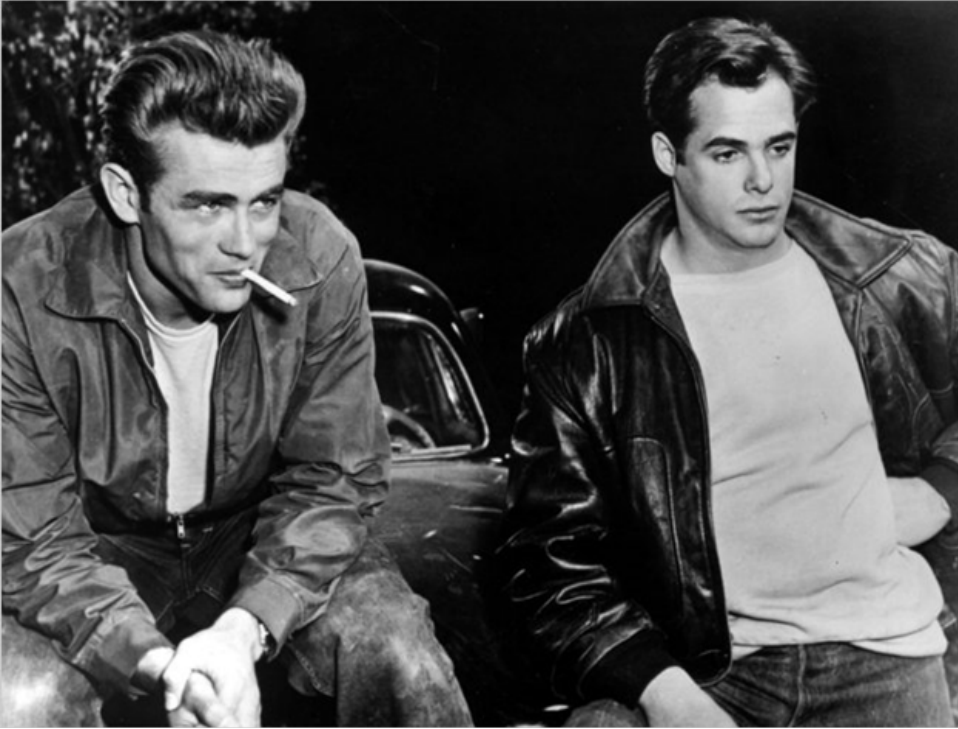
"There used to be Many beautiful words Here!"

My conceit feels useless,
Next to such an honest, melancholy thought.
My soap is simply soap.
Bohemia is merely a region on a map.
My shit is not a Kaiser.

“There used to be Many beautiful words Here!”
At The Hungarian Pastry Shop...

At the risk of monopolizing your precious time,
I...I thought I should pass that along.

Chickie-Runs



On the Road star gazing,
Bill Haley's comets come.
kicking stones to stolen cars,
Jim & Buzz wonder "Why do we do this?"

the road could have ended
at Elvis' hips but they
kept doing this:
the Beatles, Rolling Stones,

The Doors, Motown, Hendrix-
Sunday bests surrendering
to Saturday Night Fevers,
God save the Queen,

No future for you,
Bowie, Run DMC,
Wu-Tang-
cars keep racing,

cuffs keep catching
door handles,
Mary Quant minis,
hoodies, Vans,

Back to the Future
Slappy grinds & rail slides,
playing S.K.A.T.E
in private parking garages,

waxing youth,
rebels without causes,
doing this like
reruns-

new generations
supplanting old ones
in high speed
chickie runs.

Do we know
what we're doing?
Do we see a pattern?
Plato, what is a chickie-run?

[Photo credit: James Dean and Corey Allen on the set of Rebel Without a Cause, 1955, Getty images.]

Pack Rat

“Rat” is a word that conjures
Filth, darkness, telling tales to trouble,
Scurrying, awful animal vermin.
I had no notion any different.
No idea of charm or endearing aspect.
I only knew what I’d been told.
Movie and TV characters,
Stereotypes of evil.
A tough rodent I ought to shun,
Carries disease.

But I had a pack rat once,
Living under the warm corner of
My hot tub in the dogs’ run.
She did not ask my permission
To move in, nor did she
Announce her presence directly.
Instead, I had to discover her,
First suspecting her
From her habits of collection.

In the mornings I found
All kinds of things near the tub—
Sequins, buttons, beads,
Dog poop, ribbon, yarn, pencil ends,
An ever-changing array,
Depending on what the night
Had offered most recently.
She must have had an eye
For fashion and glamour.

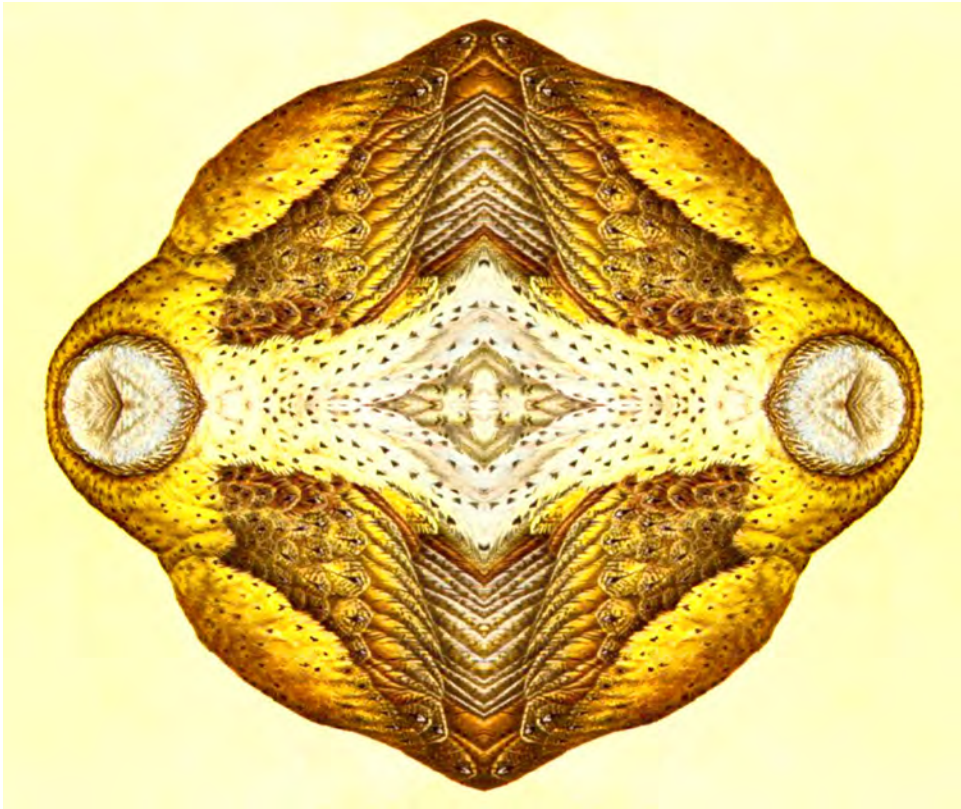
Well, maybe also scatophilia.
After all, why acquire dog poop?
I mean, you can see the reason
For beads, sequins and
Ribbons and lace, right?
But all that stuff was left
Just outside her front door,
As if she had it ready for
Her next trip to the airport.

If I cleaned her front step
She would just pile up
More new things the next night.
And I was worried for
Her safety. The dogs were
Not always civil. So
A “pest removal” service
Was called in on the case,
No kill, of course.

A steel trap was baited
And set near her primary zone
of operations by the tub.
Apple and peanut butter--
Irresistible.
She was trapped
The first night.
I took her down to our
Neighborhood trash site
And set her free there.

Figured she could make
A good living on trash
And not get mauled by
My dogs at least.
But I was sorry to part with her—
Her fluffy whiteness, pink tail,
Stand out whiskers,
Rapidly whiffling nose and
Bright button eyes made
Me wish to travel with her.

Climbing the Wind



Meditations on The Creation

I

God came into this world, naked and crying.

“Ma, ma”

“Ma, what do I do?”

But God ain’t have a ma.

God was alone.

God wept the universe into existence.

II

God made up the world

Having seen lots of other universes

And having become bored of consuming,

He decided to take a shot at something people would remember him by.

Whatever people ended up being.

III

God had an accident.

God kicked over a can of Campbell’s primordial soup.

Spilling the hydrogen gravy all over the cosmic countertop

Dropping the can onto spacetime with a knackered bang!

“Oops.”

“It’s your mess now, child.”

IV

God needed a soundtrack
To accompany creation.
To welcome people to Heaven.
To herald Revelation.
So God made Enya.
And she was Good.
God loves Enya.

V

God passed the Devil, minding his own business.
“Ain’t I seen you before?” God said.
“You must’ve.” The Devil replied.
“You made me.”
“I ain’t remember that.” Said God.
“That seems pretty dumb of me.”
“I’m grateful you did either way.” Said the Devil.
“I don’t want to die.”

Winner of The Magnolia Review Ink Award

Nathan Dennis

VI

God got lazy. Making life was exhausting.

All the little molecules of DNA and RNA were always snapping apart.

And his phospholipids never made a perfect bilayer.

So he decided to optimize, streamline, increase efficiency.

His action item was evolution.

“I call it organic intelligence.”

“The important thing is I started it.”

“No one will forget that. Right?”

VII

God was very anxious the whole week.

He had worked very hard on Earth.

And didn't want to disappoint.

Disappointment gives God very bad anxiety.

“Is it good?” “Is it good?” He'd cry out past the Angels,

Past the vault above the heavens,

“Is it good?”

...

“Is it good?”

He went to bed, shaking with panic.

“Is it good?” “Is it good?”

When sleep finally took him, a voice carefully peered from past where God could reach.

A voice that curled open on the petals of a small Daisy.

“It is good.”

VIII

“Am I good?” “Am I good?”

I went to bed shaking with panic.

“Am I good?”

I cried as sleep finally took

“Am I good?”

...

A muted siren moaned out on 145th street,

“Daisies don’t grow very well in Manhattan.”

Decisions

At the junction of today and tomorrow
you can find me swinging back and forth
like a dead man on the gallows, I the
victim and the perpetrator of the un-
pardonable sin of indecision.

Which way doth the wind blow today
I wonder? To go or not to go? To do
or not to do? To let him go and face
Siberia in my bed at night?

Or accept once more his feeble words,
his efforts to justify the unjustifiable,
defend the indefensible, to calm
my permanently ruffled feathers, and
tolerate, yet again, eternal compromise?

Friends offer gratuitous opinions,
I listen, and my corpse of indecision
stirs and swings in their direction,
seeking the true north of any compass,
happy to feel their validation.

But decisions must be made. So I cut
adrift the weight upon the gallows and
kick it into life, take a stance and prepare
myself for my decision, and mine alone,
before it is too late to reclaim my life.

Ingenue Meets Gravity

Ingenue found out the painful truths that worldly adults already know.
They rocked her for a while but she wouldn't let the shine be dimmed
from her rose-lensed glasses. She took the lesson in fast,
marginally reduced her expectations of human nature.
A mature response from a girl who'd just reached full height,
from a newly-minted woman. Life's precious despite
its blemishes and half-wrecked systems.
It takes a hometown heroine to convince the jaded
among us to genuinely root for other folks. Ingenue succeeds.
It takes full gravity to hold her to the planet's surface whatsoever.
Ether dreams have nothing on her aims. She's still a confirmed believer
in the bedrock, fundamental good of you, and you, and you.

A House of Glass

My grandfather once set aluminum foil on fire in this microwave. It was wrapped around what must have been a chicken sandwich from Kentucky Fried Chicken. It must have been because I can only recall ever eating two meals in that kitchen: Pancakes and Kentucky Fried Chicken. The dining table had a set of heavy wooden chairs, and my legs would swing above the carpet, too short to touch. He set the aluminum foil on fire and laughed as he took the sandwich out and swatted at the flames. The dinner plates had checkered apples on them. My mother had the same set: they were gifts from my grandfather and his wife, He third wife, Mary. Who we never called “grandmother” or “mamaw” but simply, Mary.

That house smelled like autumn. Like apples and fresh pine. That house was full of things we weren't allowed to touch. A giant Chinese boat made of jade which sat on a coffee table. I remember when Mary bought it and my grandfather scoffed at it as he put it together. It shined through the greenest light my eyes had ever seen. Every year there were two Christmas trees: the tall evergreen in the living room and the white,

smaller tree in the pantry and laundry room. One year they had a black cat that loved to climb into the evergreen and hide. Were it not for the glowing yellow eyes, the cat went unnoticed. Then the white tree, the small one. Which had no strings of lights but instead held plastic toys. Dalmatian toys from McDonalds which were released the year *101 Dalmatians* was made.

I have frequent dreams about that house. A brick house with only one floor. With cement geese outside that had outfits for every holiday and season. With wooden bears cut by chainsaws, some of which my grandfather made. The house with the large sliding glass window. The same window I sat behind and cried into one summer night when someone shot my grandfather's horse. The house with the brown fences where the horses went out to pasture. The house with the wooden playhouses. One which was made like a tiny house years before it was a trend. The one with brown shudders and a koi fish pond in front of it. Where I caught fist-sized goldfish with my hands and threw them into the pond water.

That was where, one winter while playing in the snow with my brother, I found a dead cat. A black

and white cat frozen stiff with its mouth opened wide. Its body curled into a tight coil and eyes open like frozen ornaments. Like jewels that were meant to be put on display and never touched. Which reminded me of the outhouse Mary had built for show. No one ever dared use it, which was not what it was for. Behind it ran a fake clothesline with pairs of women's underwear which were the size of a car hood. Each with little messages, jokes, printed across the back. *Things to look at. Not to touch.*

They bought a wooden, gliding swing and built a canopy over it. It was made of wood too but my grandfather planted roses in it and weaved fake roses among the real. This way no light ever entered that place. The swing was made so that there were two seats, enough seating for four people. So that you could face someone opposite you as you glided under the roses. Blue, yellow, and pink roses. Some real and others not.

Perhaps the outside of the house had remained standing longer than. The swing sets and horses made out of old tires which we rode like real horses. The castle made out of cinderblocks which was, at least, seven feet tall. And then the smaller storage building that became a home for dogs. A storage building that my grandfather remodeled so that it housed his Chihuahuas: Peaches and Roxy. There were oth-

ers too, whose names I forgot. The Chihuahuas that lived in the house had names like Chocolate Drop and Cocoa. They had their own beds and heat lamps with cedar wood chips all around. Even the dogs lived large. These small dogs had their own home.

Sometimes I would wake up before my grandfather and Mary did. Always on the living room couch or the recliner chair. Never with the television on because Mary forbid me to sleep with it on, even though I did so at home. I would crawl down the hallway on hand and knee. All the way to the back bedroom. The room where they slept. A room decorated in Pegasus statues. The famous horses with wings. Tiny and white and magical. With shades of pink and blue and purple. Glass and gems which adorned every wall and flat surface. So I would crawl and reach up to grab Mary's hand or the sleeve of her nightgown. *Mary, I'm hungry.* She would roll over and tell me it was okay. Then my grandfather would make pancakes sometimes in the shape of teddy bears. Always served on the apple plates.

When I was ten years old my grandfather recovered from cancer and Mary left him. He came to live with us, in our smaller home. A home made of wood and not red bricks. A home that did hold a single Pegasus. He was quiet. In all of the years that came and passed

and he lived with us, he never spoke a word. His hair grew white and the black hair faded. He did not buy us Christmas gifts, he did not make pancakes. He was broke and homeless after the divorce. So he came to live with us. He brought only one dog with him, the one he was awarded in the split.

When I was seventeen he became violently sick one night. My mother had knocked on his bedroom door to check on him. He did not answer. She opened the door and saw that he had urinated all over himself, that he could not speak. He was nearly dead then. I ran across the street for help and watched as the men in my family carried him down the stairs of our house. The smell of fall, of wood, was gone. By then my mother only had a few apple plates left in our cabinets. He had diabetes and didn't yet know. His sugar was in the thousands. After that he couldn't eat like he used to. By this time the grandfather I knew did not exist anymore. We could speak to him, be near him. His eyes seemed to be glassed over, encased and untouchable.

I dream about that house so often. As though I'm walking through it, the carpeted halls. I see the photos on the wall of every family vacation or holiday. The bathtub that had a shampoo dispenser in it. The bathroom with the tropical fish shower curtain and toilet seat. All the way to the back of the house

where the garage sat. The garage housed an entire Christmas village with a train. Most of which was behind glass, untouchable. The same garage where my grandfather made his own ammunition using expensive presses which smelled like pure lead and metal. I dream about crawling into their bedroom. Thirteen years after leaving it behind and never having gone back, I dream about it. It is as though I am dreaming of a deceased member of our family. Many deceased members. The loss of it feels so sharp and alive. I am certain that if all the years that have passed are simply a dream, I would wake up tomorrow in that house. On the blue couch and I would crawl and on my hands and knees once again.

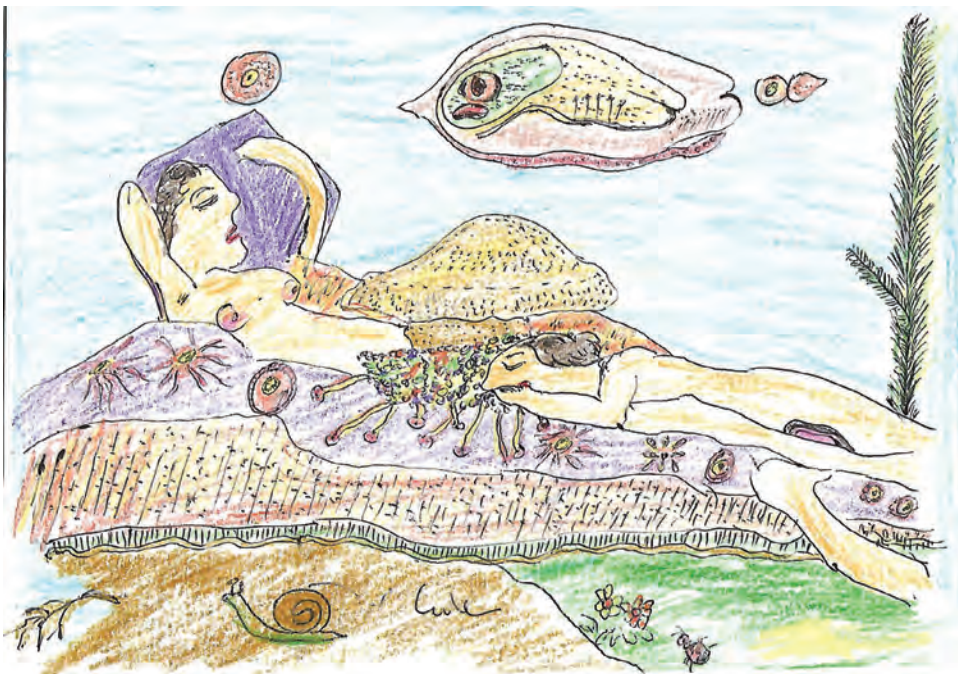
Autumn Melodies

“Autumn Spider”

(Song Caminos Rancheros/Fall Equinox 1975/
Gioia).

The Great Blafigia, Vol. II E III

Once there was a spider
Just finishing her web
But autumn came
With red and yellow leaves, and the wind
That blew her web away.



She fell on a white bench

Part of this magic park

Where I've seen many lovers' shadows

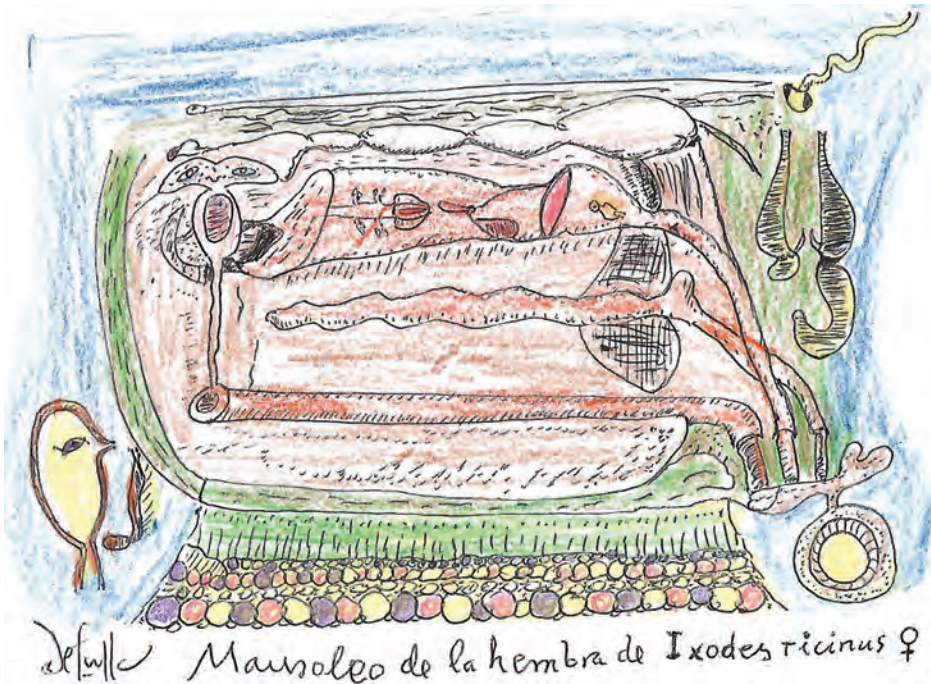
And I sang it all to my self.



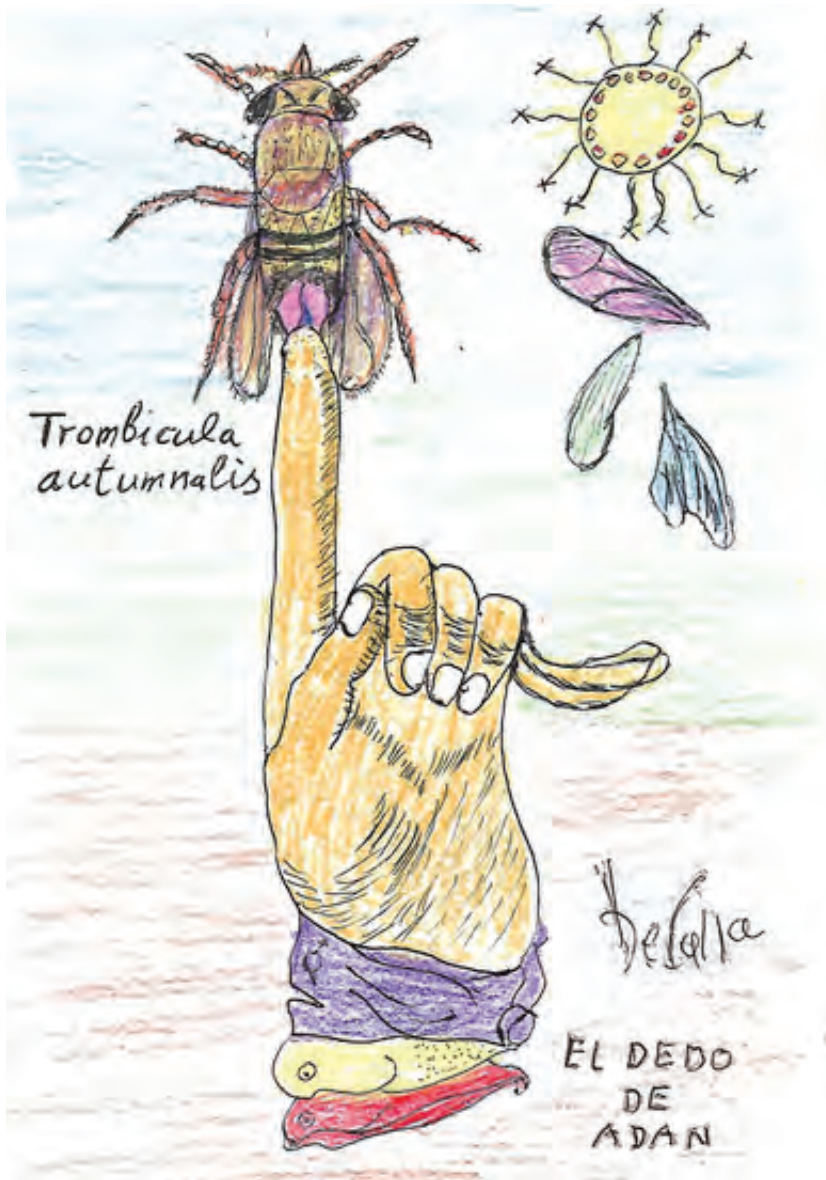
**This park had many words
Sprouting all around
So I spent a lot of time
Just looking at the ground.**



The ground became so warm and soft
That I just had to lay down,
A world of words lying beside me
And the spider, who had found under my arms
A windproof corner
Began again to weave her life.



I have been lying on the ground since then
Eating the words beside me.
Today I shall eat all the legtters
That spell simplicity.



Autumn Spider

Once there was a spider
 Just finishing her web
 But autumn came
 with red and yellow leaves, and the wind
 blew away her web away.

She fell on a white bench
 part of this magic park
 where I've seen many lovers' shadows
 and I sang it all to my self.

This park had many words
 sprouting all around
 so I spent a lot of time
 just looking at the ground.

The ground became so warm and soft
 that I just had to lay down,
 a world of words lying beside me
 and the spider, who had found under my
 a wonderful corner arms
 began again to weave her life.

I have been lying on the ground since
 making the words beside me, then
 Today I shall get all the letters
 that spell simplicity--

(Song Caminos Rancheros/Fall Equinox
 1975/Gioia)

Judith's Skull

In a Canadian museum there is a skull shown,
a dinosaur skull has been put on display.
Just the head, not a cornucopia of bones,
but a new species to show from back in the day.
Bill Shipp was in Montana, like Indiana Jones,
being an archeologist when his shovel gave way.
He discovered a new species, which he got to own,
the skull was in his basement for ten years to stay.
At first, his discovery was completely unknown,
but Canada is where the skull was sent far away.
Shipp shipped the skull to Doctor Jordan Mallon,
the scientist who could prevent the skull from decay.
A dinosaur skull doesn't belong in a basement,
but in a museum, it would need no replacement.

Not

Nothing is all around us—

absent leaves from the bonsai
tell me it is either dormant or
dead and I assume the latter

the TV is not on because I
don't want it to be on now

there are the words that are
said and then there are words
unsaid and those are the ones
that worry me the most

no

un-uh

nope

the unchecked

the lack of questions

sunlight is there I suppose
behind these late winter clouds

I have dug a hole
in preparation for new flowers
perennials this time around

The Women on the Falling Elevator, Going Up

The Women on the Falling Elevator, Going Up

1. Jacqueline, Not Jackie

They don't know the truth about you, but they'll say they do. They'll tell you all about your life, your family, how it felt to be a woman, and then they will refer back to the pink dress. It was that pink dress that started your life, but you know the end came all too quickly in that moment pink became rouge.

You were the woman who wanted to change things, tear down those drab walls, string new lights up in the foyer, motion movers with their strength to placing furniture here and there, get rid of those terrible drapes, the carpet that had that coffee stain no one else noticed but you. You wanted to make color in this colorful world, use the brush to mix black and white until it became one.

Your husband was the one they got to first, in the back of the car, in the back of his back, one shot after the other, and you could have said it was you, you could have said you were the one who got shot, but you didn't. You got away with your life, you changed things,

meant for them to be changed, and felt things with your hands, soft, cushioned by the gloves that scooped matter into a pile to put back in his head.

Long ago, there seemed to be order in your life, riding a horse, galloping through those open fields of home, the grass being beaten down hoof after hoof, metal on green. That order was taken away by some man from some knoll, some man from some high window, some man.

You used to snap photographs of happiness. Snap. You remember that time he laughed so hard, his back began hurting, his spine twisting into shapes that only men could make. Snap. You remember that time your sister told you not to get married to that man. You remember that time all of the world was taking photos of you in a dress, photos of your dead husband, all of the world was looking at you, staring at you, then it all went down from there.

2. Letters of Not Passion

1856

Garfield,

You make me furious. Your intentions of these letters have been lost, your graduation has been in vain, and you parade with a raccoon all your days, marching here and there with your hands up other girls' stockings. You find yourself lacking in the regards of passion, Gar. You are nothing but a swine, his head up his posterior, carrying about with Becky's and Susan's and women from New York. I cannot believe you are this immoral being, waltzing in my life by words, claiming physicality scared your inner core, your soul, and that we shouldn't touch each other in the places Adam and Eve knew about, saw, fled from, birthed us, our ancestors, our children, loins pressed against each other, fires beginning and extinguishing, groping fingers in the soul, the void, the very core of my womanhood. I long for words, Gar, but you no longer wish to parlé in my social circles, my beings, classics, shows with funny hats, hats with funny names. You don't wish to love me with passion, Gar, no love can come out of our relationship. I shall return to my teaching post and fill my time with logical words.

Crete

*

1858

Gar,

You are a broken man, Gar. You are a terrible man, broken. You frequent New York too much, focusing on the city rising, the buildings building, the times are changing, and you are too busy with your dick in some girl, your verge in some Sally. You claimed to be taking care of your sick mother, but all she did was call for you from her sickbed, calling for her James to come back to her, to come back to her teat to suckle, to get his life force from. I've been focusing on Newton, the way he described things in fantastical ways, but furthermore, I've discovered this thing called gravity. Did you know that we are continuously moving, falling towards the ground? Did you know we are attracted to each other because of this thing called magnetism? They're making groundbreaking research, Gar, and this explains why I still love you, but I hate you. You are the scum of the earth I fall towards, carelessly.

I hear of rumors of some war coming, but I know you'll tell me if that's untrue or not.

Love, Crete.

*

1879

James,

Passion has left the very bones of our relationship, striped of life, gone without a cause, gravity has pulled it down. I've seen a man perform tricks with pulley systems, defying gravity with rope and wheels and buckets of shit. Besides that, I've heard you're thinking of running for presidency of the United States of white man's land. I can't believe you haven't told me about this, haven't told your children about this. They cry at night for their father, père, and you haven't been here since he died that night. Instead, we've filled holes with books and plays and laughter and enjoyment of art, but that's no way to live. You're not here now, and you weren't here when he died, you were alone in the world of desire, and I was the beacon of passion, the light shining towards a sea of despair, where our child shall forever toil.

I will not support your presidency. You will forever be the femme in our relationship, wearing the gown your mother laid out for you before she died, and twisting your body into shapes that only women can make. Gravity will help you, pull you further towards the land of desire, multiply your suffering times one billion. Do not fret, honey. I am here for you, as always a woman is there for her woman.

Lucretia Rudolph Garfield

Ruben E. Smith

*

1881

James Abram Garfield,

Your passion is dead. You are gone. Mollie wanted me to include her in this letter, but I told her to write her own. She says she misses you dearly, says you're not the same person now that you're dead, in the ground, buried with a marker coming very soon. There's talk of railroads, Gar. They talk about death being something like wheels on steel, moving fast, smoke boiling out of the body. Gar, gravity has taken you. You have made me someone I was not. I was the man of our house because you couldn't get your things together, your values were construed, missing from your passion, your life was nothing but a term ending in death, your vice president having to take up what you left off. What you couldn't finish because you were a small man, a man with woman parts, a man with the void in him. And now you're gone too soon. Oh, I miss our talks about future plans, the smell of old books, old tales, old white men talking of god, morals, god, morals, and more god. I miss your hands and how they would try to stoke a fire, how they were too small for even that, and then when I asked you to button my night gown in the dark, your small hands couldn't even do that. I'm so upset with you, and your ways make me sick to my stomach. I need to lie down by the lantern for warmth because the void you've left can no longer be filled. I'm too old to remarry.

171

My birthing canal is barren like that painting you showed me of the Sahara desert. You said there was so much sand there, our children could build sandcastles out of it for years and never be bored. But they're grown. They don't have time for sandcastles anymore, Gar.

I hope you see your mother. I hope she's doing well, not calling for her James to come back to her sickbed and fetch her a glass of well water.

I'm sorry things happened this way, the way they wanted me to be a woman, but I was a man. I'm sorry I was a man. I'm sorry I was the person in your life, the person you relied on for secrets, but you couldn't open your heart to me the way you opened your trousers to those other women. You're akin to the swine that bugger one another behind the fence.

I hope you are well wherever you are.

Love,

Crete

3. Lincoln, Johnson, & Reagan Walk in an Elevator

I already know what you're thinking. It sounds like the basis of a joke, the punchline is coming soon, but the thing is, this isn't the way it went down. Both literally and metaphorically. That

shit was hard to read about in the newspaper, the way they described the mangled limbs tangled around things that they weren't supposed to be bent around. They didn't report about it on the news, but what did you expect when some women who don't mean anything anymore get on an elevator and it crashes. Nobody wants to watch that shit on their TV, half-plastered by whatever liquor they could find in their cabinets, half-sober by the reality they have to watch because what else is on TV, right?

Death can hollow some people out like the Native Americans used to hollow out pieces of wood for their canoes. So can love, and that was why it was so hard for me to finish the article about my dead partner. Nancy was always a good woman, always head strong, never meant any harm. The cable went snap, then wam, bam, thank you, kind sir, the elevator crashed from the thirty-seventh floor, going all the way down to the bottom of shit-city, hold the city.

Poor Nancy. She didn't know the other two women on the elevator, didn't know they shared the first names with famous First Ladies of the White House, like Nance did. She didn't know that the newspapers would title the article that opening for a joke. She didn't know that the cable would snap and tomorrow would never come for them.

I recall that one time she walked into our bedroom on the forty-first floor, the studio apartment of our dreams,

and she was totally nude. I told her then that she was not movie star material. She smirked at me, looked at my naked body, and told me I was to be worshipped like the saints. She didn't believe in God, and now I don't either. I think it was the elevator crash that did it for me, or the fact that my mother doesn't support my relationship with Nancy. "Girls are to be with men, not women," she said to me in her stubborn voice of ignorance and nurture.

Nancy was the "woman" of our relationship, though she hated labels, said they caused too much hatred in the world, yet she called my mom a self-righteous bitch, hell-bent on having the perfect daughter with a perfect husband with perfect grandchildren with a perfect home. I said to her, "Nuclear," and she laughed so hard she spit the leftovers from sex out.

A lot of debate on whether or not Nancy went to heaven has come up since her funeral. When our friends came over last night to cheer me up, we shared several shots and they comforted me with the whole "she went to heaven because she was good" bullshit. I knew Nancy, and according to my mother, she went to hell. H-E-Double hockey-sticks, as my dad would have said.

There's something about being a woman in this world, something about bending your body into shapes that only humans can make, reaching towards endless stars, expanses, skies, dark holes to fill our own. We have

larger brains than men, yet we're the ones who had to carry all that weight on our backs for our husbands, our fathers, our sons, to shove on forward until the gravity pulled us back down to earth to be buried. I often stare at the pictures of the First Ladies, their dresses so loose and tight, their faces distant from their husbands or fathers. They are the women that the president stuck his finger in, the women that were supposed to be models for the Christian home of tomorrow and today, the women that the president hit when he was angry about the country, the women that had to raise their own children while their father played Chinese checkers on a chess board, and the women that had to be women forever and always.

I stick my hand beneath the sheets where Nancy would have been, feel where her body would have morphed into the mattress, and I wonder if her extra ribs saved her heart from being destroyed in the fall. There is no definite answer here, and I can't bring myself to think about a bursting heart in a pile of knotted metal. I can't bring myself to get to the punchline of that joke that I have to live with from now on.

Love Loss

Everything is loss's son:

The loss of sun is dark.

The loss of sleep is dream.

The loss of sky is cloud.

The loss of silence is song.

Everything is loss's father:

I lose each day what I'd begun,
what I had dreamt the night before
becomes undream when I awake.

Clear love is illusion's loss.

Clear love is child surrendered.

I give each day up into dark.

I sleep to dream, cloud to sky,
song to silence, sun to son.

And in all loss, I discover you.

Open like the wind

to fill my loss with hunger,

running your breath through me

in a single singing cost

as I am found by loss.

Little Liza

Little Liza

That's your name?
Butter could never melt
your Thai mouth,
making English words
in far-off Bangkok,
where playgirls
looking for cock to bang,
what else,
zip along
on motor scooters,
looking for you, brother,
taking you
right, right, left, left,
right to Hotel Ecstasy,
right into your arms,
palsied with desire.

Two by two
or in a bunch,
like Brantôme's band
of jolly jumpers,
the black-maned cowgirls
of Soi Cowboy
stand at the doors,
the windows,
cruise the streets
wide-eyed and ready for
bumpy combat, a little
of the old in and out;
for a long moment
more than a thumb plugged
in the eternal hole in the dike.

The value of satisfaction
in the vales and dales
of loamy female loins;
your wild oats measured out
in the coin of any realm.

Leetle kid,
you fockee me?
Shy girl-lashed
paratroopers hem
and haw.

Beautiful, transporting as bhang
in this carnivorous market,
the boyhood dreams come true
and the boys dream,
dropping their pants and
Little Liza or
whatever your proper name,
your dark Asian eyes,
your furry doolittle
not wet with
tears of love for
me or Joe Bunkbuddy
or any little thing.

A word from the author regarding Little Liza.

I know little about Thai culture and the poem is not about Thai culture. I don't think of prostitutes as seductresses, whatever their nation or race and riding around on motor scooters or standing in doorways is not very seductive. Prostitution is about business, not seduction, but even with the commercial aspect overshadowing the human element of the transaction, the relationship between prostitute and customer can be a lot more complicated than one would think. Without putting too fine a point on it, some of the poem is based on my own experiences in that milieu when I was in the US Army years ago.

The end of the poem is harsh and graphic because that kind of life takes the life right out of women. I have witnessed it first hand in that "carnivorous market" I mention in the poem. A lot of these very young soldiers, at least in my day, had never been with a woman (even a woman in the sex trade) and had no real concept that this was fundamentally business for the prostitute, not sex; they did not really understand that the woman's mind and thoughts were always a million miles away, even in the act and that there was never any real intimacy. Those soldiers with experience had different attitudes, but I was focused on the innocent ones to make my point. After all, it was the sixties, before the sexual revolution and a lot of these soldiers were teenagers.

Of Grace, Hatred, Preying and Lady-Bugs

Maybe Grace is what we do/ without hatred....

Praying Mantis, by Anne Marie Macari

Where did it go, that grace-
without hatred? How did it turn,
vanish, then leave us lost? Trash us
to bins of void, the banished spaces?

We can't go back,
the maws of rant and rage
are all too close
upon our hungry, crying minds,
so desperate now from putrefying lies.

Even the praying mantis kindly dotes
upon her cuddly caterpillar kin,
before she moves
in poised reflection,
yes, elegant contemplation

to strike.

But hey, here's the rub—

we've overlooked our touch, forgotten
the elegance of dragonflies,
their flit of parchment wings
to airs of gossamer dance.

Their grasp of hate never was:
they leave only shadows behind.

Where did it go that grace,
when maws of hate and rage
roared through our gentle world,
devoured even the tiny lady-bug

whose house was on fire,
her children alone?

Brides

FINISHED, HE CLIMBED down from her, stuffing himself back into his jeans. In the kitchen he wolfed down a slab of leftover pie, lemon meringue. It had become a habit since she'd arrived: snacking greedily afterwards.

A psychiatrist might say overeating and smoking pot was his way of dealing with the shame, but he stayed clear of witch doctors.

"We're all wacked in our own way," he told Cory. "Even the shrinks."

"Amen to that," said his pal, who'd been force-fed Ritalin as a kid. "Everyone's nuts."

MOTHER, WHO'D BEEN working in the garden, found him hunched over his laptop.

"Where's Tina?"

"Resting. I think I'm wearing her out."

She glanced at the screen.

"Any more replies?"

He scrolled through the emails.

"Hello," he read aloud. "I am twenty-seven years open-minded and very funny girl. I enjoy animals and nature and music that arouse my soul. I am looking for man to share with my destiny. Let's chat. *Anastasia, Irkutsk.*"

Mother slipped on her glasses and studied the photo.

"She isn't twenty-seven."

"That's OK," he said. "I'm not a gold medal triathlete."

"And those boobs aren't real."

"Well, I'm not really a successful businessman."

"Read another one."

"I am romantic, creative, honest and kind woman. I am forty years, but my heart is young. I have a certificate from the" – I can't pronounce this word – "Institute of Technology. *Olga, Moscow.*"

Mother said, "I hear some of these things are scams. They target lonely guys."

"Yikes!"

"You're not lonely, son. You have me. Me and Tina."

HIS BIRTH NAME was Vanya Viktorov Gregorovich, which was composed from the names of his ancestors, none of whom he'd ever met. That's them in the out-of-focus black and whites on the mantel: grim, broad-beamed men with short, powerful limbs; shapeless, potato-fed women with rough, man-sized hands, just like Mother.

He'd always wondered why, in all

those photos, there wasn't a single smile.

"What's to smile about?" Mother said. "There was always a war or a famine. In those days, times like that, smiling would be sacrilege. Besides, people didn't care for their teeth like they do these days."

The kids at school said his name was too hard to pronounce, so they shortened it to Vanya, then again to Van, as in Van Morrison, the pop singer of Brown Eyed Girl. Eventually he had his name legally changed to Van Greg. It sounded more Canadian.

One day after work his millworker father stretched out on the sofa for a nap and never woke up. It had been just he and Mother ever since. They lived on a hobby farm with a few pigs and chickens. Loveable creatures, almost family members, but invariably dinner.

AFTER GRADUATING HIGH school he worked at a car wash. It was nearby, and he didn't have to go back to school for anything. When the business closed he worked the occasional shift as a security guard. He liked to pretend the walkie-talkie strapped to his belt was a revolver.

"A lady in my gin rummy group saw you in your uniform," Mother said. It was breakfast; she was eating Frosted Flakes; he, Cheerios with

slices of banana. "She asked if you were a policeman."

"What did you tell her?"

"That you were a homicide detective."

"Think she believed you?"

"Who cares?"

ON CRAIGSLIST HE learned of a telemarketing job selling holiday time shares to places like Hawaii and Mexico. There were hundreds of candidates, some of them with university, and some of whom had actually visited Hawaii and/or Mexico. To help cull the supplicants, he was asked to work an unpaid shift.

"It's all about the voice," the floor manager, a young, fast-talking man with greased hair said after he'd manned the phones a few hours. "I'm afraid nobody believed yours."

Cory – they'd met in high school – helped him land the security gig.

"Business is booming," said Cory. Acne discoloured his cheeks like flecks of paint.

"Why?"

"People are frightened."

"Of what?"

"Rape. Muslims. Of each other mostly."

CORY SENT HIM the link for the website where he'd found Oxana, who was from Saint Petersburg. She didn't have any money, so Cory took out a loan to pay for her airfare. He used his Toyota as collateral.

A few days after her arrival he invited Mother and him to dinner, a salty canned borscht and a slice of tough black bread. Mother made her rhubarb pudding; he picked up a bottle of vodka.

Oxana knew some English, but she didn't use it much. When speaking her own language, her lip curled; the words rocketed from her mouth like spit.

"What do you like best about Canada?" Van asked her.

"Who said I like Canada?" she said. "This one?" She sneered at Cory, who shadowed her like a puppy. "I want snow, I can stay home. This one tell me Canada has palm tree."

She yanked open the drapes. The window looked out over an icy parking lot. Mounds of dirty snow separated the cars.

"Only palm tree is in lobby downstairs. It's plastic."

He thought Cory looked snazzy in his uniform. Boots polished, the lapels heavy with a fruit salad of meaningless pins and badges. They watched him put away a second bowl of rhubarb pudding, grunting like one of their pigs.

Mother whispered, "She looks like she wants to smack him."

But Oxana looked damned fine to his eyes. A bit chunky, a slutty application of makeup; just the way he liked them: all woman, all the time.

She could smack him anytime.

"That one is going to dump him," Mother said, Cory and Oxana whisper-arguing in the kitchen.

Which was, of course, exactly what happened. Cory came home from work one night to find his fiancée, his first girlfriend ever, gone. So was about seventy dollars he'd hidden in a sock.

"She didn't even leave a note," Cory said.

"Was she good in the sack, at least?" he asked. The two of them were guarding a lumberyard, the night shift, sharing a doobie.

"She was Catholic," Cory said. "She wanted to wait until we were married."

"A Catholic?" Mother scoffed when informed of Oxana's flight. "Watch Fox News, don't be fooled. Once a Bolshevik, always a Bolshevik."

WHEN THE NEED was strong he visited a massage parlour in the next town over. The Vatican, as it was called, was an end unit in a run-down mall. The online ad promised discreet parking around the back.

He always called ahead and booked Vanessa, who was from, well, he wasn't sure where. Near China, he supposed, as she had sloped, heavily made-up eyes and muffin-size breasts. Vanessa rifled through his wallet while he show-

ered. When he could, he salted it with a few dollars.

“Pwostate massage?”

“Sold,” he’d say.

Vanessa filed the nails of her right hand and slipped on a translucent glove.

“What finger you like today, Mr.?”

“Same as always,” he said. “Your two longest.”

ON SUNDAYS he’d take the bus into the city. Lunch at Burger King, use up the coupons Mother hoarded. He’d walk around downtown and into the park. It was good to get away. Away from Mother, who talked too much but said little. Away from Tina, who didn’t talk at all.

He’d admire the couples strolling the trails. They looked fulfilled, alive. It didn’t seem to matter if they were fat or thin, beautiful or ordinary like him. Companionship, it seemed, made people happy. At least, Mother always said, until they got to know one another.

He’d consider the girls passing him on the street. Were they as lonely as he was? Was there a special someone for him, like the song says? Can a person die of loneliness?

Help! He wanted to cry out. Because I think I am.

TINA HAD BEEN Mother’s idea.

“Until you get your mojo back,” she’d said.

Mother watched a lot of TV. She spoke like characters on her favourite programs.

“Take a yoga class,” she said.

“There are lots of gals, and most of the guys are queer. Good odds.”

The day Tina arrived, Mother went grocery shopping. She wanted to give them some alone time.

“Well?” she asked on her return.

“Same as the others,” he said.

Tina spent more time with Mother than she did with him. She squatted between the rows as Mother tended the garden or watched the horses in the neighbour’s upper pasture. She spent much of the mornings in front of the flat screen; Mother loved the game shows.

“DEAR ANASTASIA,” HE wrote.

“Thank you for the photos. You are very beautiful. In your last email you said you would like to visit Canada, but you didn’t have enough money. If you could tell me how much you need, I’ll see what I can do.”

“Vanya Viktorov Gregorovich,” she promptly replied, as he had shared with her his birth name, hoping it would increase his worth. “Thank you for your kindness message. I am excited to vacation at Canada and meet finally my dream man. I think about you every day and all night. I can make you happy with my true love. *Anastasia, Urkutsk.*”

Attached was a Jpeg, cut off at the shoulders, of a pair of C cup breasts with button-size nipples. Under them, on a strip of cardboard, was scrawled, 'All Yurs.'

MOTHER'S HANDS BEGAN to shake when he informed her "the woman who has agreed to be my bride" would be arriving in three weeks, and that he, meaning Mother, would be underwriting Anastasia's "wedding preparation costs."

"There's an old proverb about marriage," Mother said.

He'd heard all the old proverbs many times. Proverbs about growing old, proverbs about working hard, falling in love. Most of the proverbs were about money.

"I've heard the one about marriage," he said.

She told him again anyway: "A man should pray once before going to sea, twice before going to war, and three times before getting married."

"Yes, Mother."

She agreed to cash an investment certificate so he could get a proper haircut and some new clothes. He also needed a root canal and cleaning. What was left of the cash was forwarded to Urkutsch. He held back enough for one last visit to The Vatican.

EARLY ON THE day of Anastasia's scheduled arrival he was looking out the living room window when a seagull landed with a perfunctory *splat* just a few feet from Mother's roadside produce stand. That's weird, he thought, as the farmhouse was some distance from tidewater. The gull didn't appear horizontally like a malfunctioning plane, its engine sputtering, trying to reach a runway, nor had it been tossed there overnight from a passing vehicle. One minute it was wheeling and swooping in the cloudless July sky, the next minute it was tumbling like a stone. The end of the road, you might say.

When he went outside to investigate, a woman of Mother's vintage was toeing the hapless avian.

"Where I come from," she said, "a bird falls out of the sky in front of your house, it's bad juju. You have to do something."

"Where do you come from?" he asked.

"Aren't you observant," the woman replied. "I've been your neighbour for more than twenty years. I've seen you in diapers."

"What do you suggest, neighbour?"

"I wouldn't know. But don't put it off: This is serious business. By the way, who's the new girl? I was beginning to think you were -"

He kicked the gull into the ditch and returned to the house.

HE WAS SIPPING coffee in the Arrivals lounge when he received the email on his laptop. Mother was in the ladies' room. The plane was scheduled to land in a few minutes. He was wearing his security guard uniform; he wanted her first impression to be a good one.

"Vanya Viktorov Gregorovich," the message began. "The money you send me for expenses and exit fees was seized by corrupt officials. I try to stop them but they say they hurt family members. This is great tragedy for our life. Please send ten thousand American dollars or they will take me out. Your fiancée, with true loving. *Anastasia, Irkutsk.*"

Mother returned to the lounge. She seemed agitated.

"There was no toilet paper," she said.

"What did you do?"

"You don't want to know."

He showed her the email.

"If the corrupt officials don't take out the harlot," Mother said, "I will."

"It was that effing bird," he said. "The juju."

THEY NEVER SPOKE again of Anastasia from Irkutsk. How could she tell him the emails were likely written by an Ivan or a Dmitry. Life is tough, she wanted to tell her pre-

vious boy, and especially tough for the stupid. But she didn't, not while he was hurting. Not when he was driving. That would be stupid.

Tina was relaxing on the deck when they arrived home. She was watching a frisky foal in the upper pasture. An attentive mare grazed nearby.

"Hope you have a good appetite!" Mother called out to her. "Tex-Mex tonight."

MOTHER WOKE FROM her nap thinking she smelled something burning. Had she left the stove on? Did he fall asleep again while smoking one of those marijuana cigarettes? She raced through the house, checking each room, shouting his name. She found him stoking a fire in the oil drum behind the chicken coop.

"I had to do something," he said. "The juju."

Her pleading hands reached out from the crackling flames, the vanishing limbs dripping liquid vinyl. Mother wanted to halt the immolation, to grant the poor girl clemency. By the time the garden hose was unfurled, it was too late.

I'm in a Painting by Hopper

It's two a.m.
and I stop in at some all-night diner.
It's not like I'm starving
but I can always eat
when I'm not tired enough to sleep.

Every other place on the avenue
is shuttered
except for the strip club.
But its neon promises something
I know it can't deliver.
The diner's chalkboard special
doesn't aim as high
and always gets its mediocrity right.

I sit at the counter,
beside the glass rack
with the sorry looking pies.
I'm sure they've been there
longer than the lifetimes
of some butterflies.
But that's part of their charm.
Or, at least, with wedges removed,
fruit slopping to the side,
meringues flat as a fried egg on a plate,
they're unashamed to look like I feel.
And if I ever meet someone who bakes

I'll have something to compare her to.

I order coffee and, yes,
a slice of the apple pie.
When it comes to solitude,
I like to do it right.
There's only a couple of others
in the joint.
We spread out accordingly.

This is not the kind of place
where we used to hang.
No cheap but amiable restaurant
with the two of us
loving the look of each other
across the table.
No, this is strictly for eating alone,
for sipping, nibbling, and staring into oblivion.
Even if a guy was with someone here,
the ritual would be the same.

It's two a.m.
I'm in some place
which may as well be my head.
On a diet of java and pie,
I do a fine imitation of random thoughts.
A sign says that the coffee is bottomless.
Knowing I won't hit bottom
is a good thing.

In the Great Green Room

People were sucked out of the airplane,
the last rows of economy class,
after the mid-air collision
clipped the tail from the fuselage.

Before we fell into a dive
I thought the pilot might save the rest of us.
I flashed to when my girls were small,
reading Goodnight Moon at bedtime.
The golden age of early fatherhood—
I didn't wish I was younger or older.

Then we dove and I blacked out.
Many of the others didn't survive.
If we hadn't crashed into water,
if the pilot didn't pull up before impact,
I wouldn't be here to tell you.

I Awoke with the Homeless

I awoke with the homeless
on my mind
the noxious scent of open latrines
and ancient, musty tents.

A three-legged dog
lies in the shade of an overturned shopping cart
at the corner of Alameda and Taylor,
his red-faced owner holding her cardboard sign

that said yes she will just use it to buy booze
Passing drivers small, hand out bills

to prove they aren't haters .

A ring of flotsam drowns the creekbed
which stinks now of offal and detritus.
Couples no longer-- children no longer
brave the adjoining biking trail.

A crazy man rides all day in the streetcar—
I've seen him sleeping in a culvert downtown—
growls into the feather mounted on his neck brace
as though it were a microphone
and all of us in the trolley with him

have to pretend not to hear his mad ravings
although it is deafeningly clear
exactly what he isn't saying.

Crossing Copper River

There's comes a time you don't get to shrug and walk away and this was one of them.

When the kid came slamming into Old Jeff's general store the way he did— a rush of chill air from the door, sneakers slapping the floor—it was pretty clear something was up.

I'd never noticed him much but I knew the kid belonged to a guy who'd showed up a year or so ago, said he was putting up a broadcast radio station. That seemed a peculiar thing to do way out here in the Alaska backcountry, so I figured yeah sure and never paid it much mind.

The guy and his wife, Holcomb their name was, showed up a year or so ago in a big old crew cab, pulling a sizeable rig, which they set up on a couple acres on the edge of the village. They kept to themselves. The kid, Kenny, was one of the home-schooled kids always around; fourteen or so I guess, skinny like they are at that age, sun-dark enough to pass for a native, with a haircut that looked like his ma did it when she noticed,

which is the way it was for a lot of kids.

We were setting in the back of the store, Carl Yazzie up on the edge of his chair, his gut hanging over his belt, his craggy old face lit up, right at the best part of his story, his hands out to show where he'd been standing and where the Swedish professor had been standing in the fishing camp when the bear came out of the woods. We'd heard it a bunch of times, Carl knew how to string it out. It was uncommonly funny the way the bear come shambling out of the woods and the Swedish professor shit his pants. There's certain things you want to do and not do when a bear shows up, and shitting your pants is pretty near the bottom of the list, bears having a real good sense of smell and being on the curious side.

The door banged behind the kid and he came skittering across the planks back to where we was sitting. It was a big place built years ago, lots of raw timber, no windows, and at the back where the hardware shelves petered out, Old Jeff kept half-a-dozen chairs and apple boxes scrounged from

here and there circled up under a sixty-watt bulb hanging from a cross beam.

Carl fell silent as the kid skidded up. Holding himself there in front of the seven of us, the kid give us the eye, catching his breath, color high in his cheeks. He wore high-top sneakers, faded jeans and a down vest over a white tee shirt. It had been snowing in flurries all day and there were flecks in his hair. He took a couple deep ones, and gathered himself. I expected some yelling. What I got was a voice all level and calm. I remember exactly what he said.

“There’s a man on the other side of the river calling for help.”

We looked at him, wondering what the hell, not knowing if he might be playing a joke, put up to it by somebody’s wife, or maybe the cheechako kid had gone round the bend. The back country, the isolation, a couple hundred miles from the nearest traffic sign, that does it to some. It had to be one or the other, a joke or the crazies, because there was no way on God’s green earth, especially at full spring rush, somebody could show up alive on the other side of the Copper River.

If you took a handful of toothpicks, the kind with points, and bundled them together in your fist and imagined the tips of

them all white with snow, that was about what you saw when you flew over a lot of this country in winter, particularly to the north and east, the other side of the Copper.

The river started a hundred miles or so off in the mountains, fed from the Denali Range, the Talkeetnas and the Wrangells. At spring breakup, who knows how many million acre-feet of snow and ice turned into water and came hurling down through rock canyons in one lunatic plunge to Valdez and the North Pacific, going hell for leather. There weren’t no bridges across the Copper, and on the other side, it was pure emptiness and mountains. Anybody who tried to get to the Copper from that direction would be dead long before they made it.

So there wasn’t one of us setting there who placed much credence in what young Kenny said.

Among our bunch of ne’er-do-wells—hunters, trappers, fishermen, guides, and general backcountry riff-raff, some of whom (including yours truly), would just as soon not have any official notice taken of them—was Hicky Johnson, a square-built, wide-shouldered commercial fisherman who went off in the summer to work one crab boat or another up in the Bearing Sea. He wore his grey-streaked hair in a long ponytail.

Hicky was the one who most often spoke up first and loudest, as he did now.

"You're that Holcomb kid, ain't you?"

"I am." The kid's gaze was steady.

Hicky shifted and put his head at an angle.

"Well, if there is a man on the other side of the river calling for help, how do you think he got there?"

I could see the impatience come up in the way the kid twitched.

"How should I know how he got there?" he said. "You gonna do something or you just gonna sit there and ask me a bunch of dumb questions?"

He didn't say it but I could hear it in the kid's voice: sit there on your big fat butt. Yeah, he wasn't fourteen at all. Maybe a good deal older, but built on the small side, kind of fragile-looking.

Hicky glared at the back-talk then come to his feet and took three big strides, his hand out to grab the kid by his vest, but by the time he got there the kid was at the front door looking back to see if Hicky was following. Hicky was heavy and slow, and the kid was quick.

The door slammed as the kid went out and Hicky stood there looking after him. Then he said,

"Dammit!" and headed for the row of hooks where we hung our coats.

We trooped across the muddy road, a chill wind swirling snowflakes out of a grim sky, passed through a sparse stand of jack pine and come out onto the rounded river rock that shifted underfoot as we made our way down to the water.

The long grey afternoon of on-and-off snow was getting on toward dusk, but visibility wasn't that bad. The river was about a hundred and fifty yards across.

We scanned the other bank and Burt Becenti said, "There's nary a thing over there."

The other side of the river was much the same as this side: twenty feet of river rock from water's edge back to a stand of pine.

"Burt, you're as blind as a fish worm in a coffee can," Tommy Nakai said. "See him there just to the right of that white rock?"

There was a fair-sized piece of granite, and just to the downstream side of it, right at the water's edge, was a dark, longish shape.

"That's a driftwood log," Burt said, "got away from some prospector building a sluice or a shake table somewhere upstream."

"Nope," Tommy said, "it's a man all in black."

"The hell you say," Burt said.

About that time Old Jeff Oxendine showed up from the store and handed Hicky a pair of U.S. Navy surplus deck binoculars.

"Hold still," Hicky said to me and propped an elbow on my shoulder to steady the glasses as he peered across the river.

All doubt disappeared as the shape across the river raised an arm and waved it lazy-like back and forth.

"He's saying something," Hicky said, "I can see his mouth moving."

The river was thundering right along with a deep roar, pushing up standing waves that tumbled into foam as it came up against the boulders that studded the riverbed.

"I heard him," Dickie Bear said. He'd been standing off a bit from the rest of us.

"Well what did he say?" Morgan Chavis said.

"He said help," Dickie Bear replied. "What do you think he's gonna say, please pass the gravy?"

Hicky passed the binoculars to me. Through them I could see it was as Tommy said: a man in dark clothes, what looked like an oilcloth raincoat and the sort of wide-brim black hat a prospector might wear. It appeared he had a beard, though holding the binoculars without a support, the image was shaky.

I passed the binoculars along and they went 'round amongst us.

As we took turns looking, Hicky said what I'd been thinking: "Ain't that a too-bad thing. Son-of-a-gun is stuck for sure."

"Gonna be cold tonight," Morgan Chavis put in, meaning it was going to go well below freezing and it was no night to be laying beside a river in your raincoat.

Beyond that no one had much to say. We were all thinking the same: There was no way for that guy to get from that side of the river over to ours. The Copper was boiling along, a cataract angry as the devil and cold as death. From time to time chunks of ice the size of washtubs broke off upstream and careened along through the rapids, banging and knocking against boulders. Spend two minutes in that freezing water and your hands and arms are too cold to grab onto anything. Five minutes later, if you're still above water, you don't care anymore.

We stood there and watched, no one with anything much to say. I didn't want to be there, but there wasn't no way get away from it. I wanted to say, hey, can't do no good here, let's go put on the coffeepot. I think the guys felt the same. But there comes a time you don't get to shrug and walk away and this was one of them.

It was downright unpleasant to spend a dull sunless twilight looking

at a man across a river who's as good as dead.

Then Holcomb's big crew cab bounced through the trees, slewed across the river rock, turned sharp and come up short, the truck bed aimed at the river. Hanging off the back of the truck was an upside-down aluminum boat, one of those fourteen-footers like a lot of us had. Hanging tight with both hands to the bow rope of the boat, his feet braced against a tire well, was the Holcomb kid, Kenny.

Kenny's dad, Conley, piled out of one door of the truck and Jack Goddard came out the other. Right then my reckoning of Conley Holcomb as a nutcase with a harebrained idea underwent an on-the-spot alteration. Any man that Jack Goddard took up with, well, that meant something.

Jack ran the Standard Oil terminal in this end of the country, supplying folks with the stuff you need to survive, everything from gasoline to aviation fuel to arctic synthetic grease. When he wasn't doing that, he was hunting and fishing. He'd grown up in Alaska and there wasn't a whole lot he didn't know about the ways of this country.

They had that boat out of the bed of the truck and down to the water's edge in nothing flat. The outboard motor had been under

the boat, and that was clamped to the stern in two minutes. A bundle wrapped in a tarp came out of the truck and went into the boat. All this with no more talking among the three of them than grab that, lift together, a little this way, and set her down easy.

The bow on the rocks, the stern in the water, Jack stood beside the boat and gave the river a good look-see, a slow-moving gaze, careful and thoughtful. He was six-three or so, and lanky, in Levis and wool shirt. He kept his hair cut short and his whiskers at maybe a three-day growth. None of us had any reason to shave everyday.

The bunch of us had stood there quiet and stupid, rubberneckers at a stranger's funeral, with nothing to say, but Hicky Johnson couldn't hold back.

"Ain't no way you'll make it over and back," he said.

The river was a churning torrent, breaking and spilling among the rounded boulders that dappled the streambed for five miles or more in either direction. It was melt water, milky in places, turquoise where the light caught it, from the fine granite and quartz powder it held suspended. The sediment came from rocks grinding together underneath the mountain glaciers, and the river smashing the rocks and rolling them along. There

were standing waves where surges came up against outcrops, then deep eddies behind with sharp back currents.

Jack said, "Think so, huh?"

Jack gave Hicky a bit of time to answer, and when he didn't, spoke again: "Ain't you got a boat leaning up against the back of your cabin over yonder?"

We all knew that Hicky did have a boat, and that his cabin was pretty close by.

I seen the color come up Hicky's neck into his cheeks. He said, "You'll get swamped and capsize, or you'll shear a pin and that'll be the end of it."

With mention of the shear pin Hicky was pointing out the steel pin, an inch long or so, that goes between the propeller and the driveshaft of an outboard motor. It's set up so if the prop hits a rock, the pin shears in half to keep the driveshaft from getting bent. It's easy to fix a shear pin, but a drive shaft, that's a horse of another breed entirely. When the pin shears, the prop and the driveshaft are disconnected and the boat's got no power. You're finished going anywhere.

Jack took his time replying.

"Thanks for that, Hicky. I guess I should pay particular attention to not trying to drive through rocks, huh?"

At that Hicky turned away and stomped back to where he was standing.

What Hicky didn't know is that anyone who's going to run a boat on the Copper, we take a welding torch to that shear pin feature and make sure it ain't ever going to shear no matter what the prop hits.

Jack gave a couple instructions to Conley and Kenny, then stepped into the boat and made his way to the stern. He tilted the outboard down so the prop was in the water and gave a pull to the starting rope. The motor caught on the first pull and Conley Holcomb shoved the bow off the rocks, heading it upstream.

I'd never imagined it would come to somebody trying to take a boat across the Copper this time of year, so I'd never pictured how it might be done. But now that the boat was in the water, my first thought was that you'd want to rev that motor up and get the boat going up on top of the water so the hull ran as shallow as she could.

But that's not what Jack did. Feet spread, he stood tall in the stern, the outboard's control arm canted up into one hand so he could both steer and turn the grip to adjust the throttle.

He tickled the power and nudged things to hold the boat steady against the current, not

going anywhere. I could see him surveying the river, gauging the depth, plotting things out.

Then he edged that boat out into the river, moving it as slow and careful as an old lady on ice skates. As much as the river cascaded past the boat, Jack held it against the rushing water, bobbing to and fro here and there, but overall steady and smooth. He slipped past riffles and rocks, sometimes on the low side, sometimes above. At one point he went thirty or forty yards upstream, picking his way along a way across. Then again he tried a passage downstream from us. The river powered along, but Jack matched its force, sometimes easing with it, sometimes dancing upstream against it, but always in control of where he was and where he was going. He slipped and inched his way across the river, twirled out of a backwash or two, gyrated against narrow channels where the river went extra hard between big rocks, and the boat skipped, bounced, and darted along. Jack went across that river the way you'd tiptoe barefoot across a floor strewn with broken glass, one small, cautious step at a time.

It took him the better part of twenty minutes to reach the other bank, and when he did it was as if all of us watching let out our breath at the same time.

Then Hicky spoke up: "He made it over, but with that man in the boat it's going to ride deeper, won't be that easy to frisk about like he done."

Nobody had anything to say to that, as I'm pretty sure all our hopes were that Jack would make it back okay. I was watching through the glasses as Jack spent a bit of time with the guy, wrapping him in the blankets he'd brought over and so on. Then he half-carried him and got him situated in the boat and shoved off the far bank.

About that time another vehicle came backing down over the river rock. This time it was the white SUV belonging to Elizabeth Manygoats. Liz had been a medic in the Navy and she was the closest we had to a doctor in this part of the country. It was Conley Holcomb and Kenny who'd gone and got her, of course. None of the rest of us fools were anywhere near to thinking that Jack Goddard might actually go across the river and come back with a man who needed medical attention.

We watched as Jack navigated the boat, now just a bit lower in the water, back across the river. Yeah he brought that boat across the river so easy wasn't no doubt he had it charted out.

It went smooth as anything, and then all at once, no more that thirty feet away from us, Jack eased

the boat around the downstream side of a sizeable boulder and the boat's bottom seemed to catch on something, maybe a submerged rock. At the same time a wayward current caught the hull and the result was the boat tilted hard over to the upstream side. As it did, the prospector grabbed the dipping gunnel and hoisted himself to that side of the boat, maybe wanting to see how far they had left to go, or maybe scared of the sudden pitch. The standing wave behind the big rock got purchase on what little freeboard was left, and pulled the side of the boat down the last few inches and dumped the boat full of water in less time than it takes to say it.

The prospector started howling something fierce, and Jack was shouting at the prospector. I couldn't understand what either one of them said, though I figured the prospector was yowling get me the hell out of here and Jack was probably yelling shut up and sit down you damn fool.

For a few seconds the boat wallowed like a drunken whale not knowing which way was home. Then, three-quarters full of water but kept afloat by the built-in air compartments, the river caught it and the boat began to ease downstream with the current, the prospector clinging to the gunnel to

keep from being washed away and bawling his lungs out.

Hicky Johnson beside me muttered, "That'll be an end of it. They're finished."

To this very day I have no idea what I would have done in that situation, and I dearly hope I never have occasion to find out. But I can tell you what Jack Goddard did. Standing knee deep in water in the back of that boat he gunned the throttle wide open, shoving the back end of the boat down and bringing the bow up so the water went in a wave to the back of the boat where a bunch of it sloshed out over the transom. Jack pointed the boat toward us and it plowed ahead, scraping and bouncing over shallows, the outboard whining at top speed and kicking up when it the bottom. When the boat got to within grabbing distance, a bunch of the boys who had waded out grabbed it and hauled it up on the rocky beach. Then me and Dickie Bear and Morgan Chavis picked up the soaking wet prospector, who had quieted down now that he was safe, and run him up the rocks and into the back of Liz Manygoats SUV that was sitting there with the back end open and Liz on the blankets waiting for him. Morgan slammed the trunk lid down and Conley Holcomb drove that prospector away from there.

That's what he turned out to be, a prospector. From what I heard, he was thirty miles upstream or so when he dropped a big old pine tree across a narrow part of the river. Since the opportunity was right there, he figured he'd go across on that tree, not that hard to do stepping among the branches, and take a look-see at what was on the other side. Prospectors are always wanting to see what's on the other side of whatever's in front of them. Of course the ice and water piled up against that tree, and soon pushed it back against the bank, and the prospector's bridge back across the river was gone. By the time he got to the spot across from us, he was scratched up and bruised and had hypothermia, and was about starved. He wouldn't of lasted through one more night.

Dickie, Morgan, and I came back down to where a bunch of the boys had gathered around Jack Goddard. I could tell from the way he held himself that he didn't really need the boys to tell him what it was he'd done since he already pretty much knew it.

After a couple minutes the boys figured that out and we headed back to the general store.

Jack Goddard went back to running the Standard Oil terminal when he wasn't prowling the countryside, and in case you're

interested, Conley Holcomb and his boy Kenny did indeed put up a broadcast radio station, and by God if you don't believe me you can tune it in for your ownself if you're ever out in this neck of the woods.

As for Hicky Johnson, I never seen him again. Somebody said he lit out the next day, headed up to Dutch Harbor to get work on a crab boat, and I guess that might be true. All I know for sure is he never came back anywhere around here.

Pisces

Silver glints in a second milky way
of sunken scales, one shining drop
of life and its adjunct
appear beneath a lake's glimmering
sheet. Two fish in concert flirt
with a wave's crest as fine jewels
are wont to meet within a single
ring.

You and I peer from the bridge
like laundry over a line. At play
on the eddies of the lake's breadth,
courting the waters course,
our reflections rebound and shake
like two prongs fixed to the same
tuning fork.

Pie Astronomy

Priests and scientists argue over
neuroscience and cosmology—

I eat a Moon Pie.

All the joys of the universe baked
into soft goodness—dreams
swim in creamy galactic replica—
swallowed by a welcome black hole—

Yes, everything can exist at once.

Space is God's home, and I enjoy
the desserts of The Big Bang—

My Magnolia Gamble

This spring

I will wait,

gamble on the wind

her precarious ways

trust the clouds—as the magnolias do—

and the cold, its flakes to come,

that they not eclipse the sun, its warmth

and swaths of calm caress.

This spring

I'll open my soul to song—

tell my heart to listen close to the beat

of hummingbird wings,

their shimmering ruby throats

so I can wander free—

beyond dread thunderclap of storm

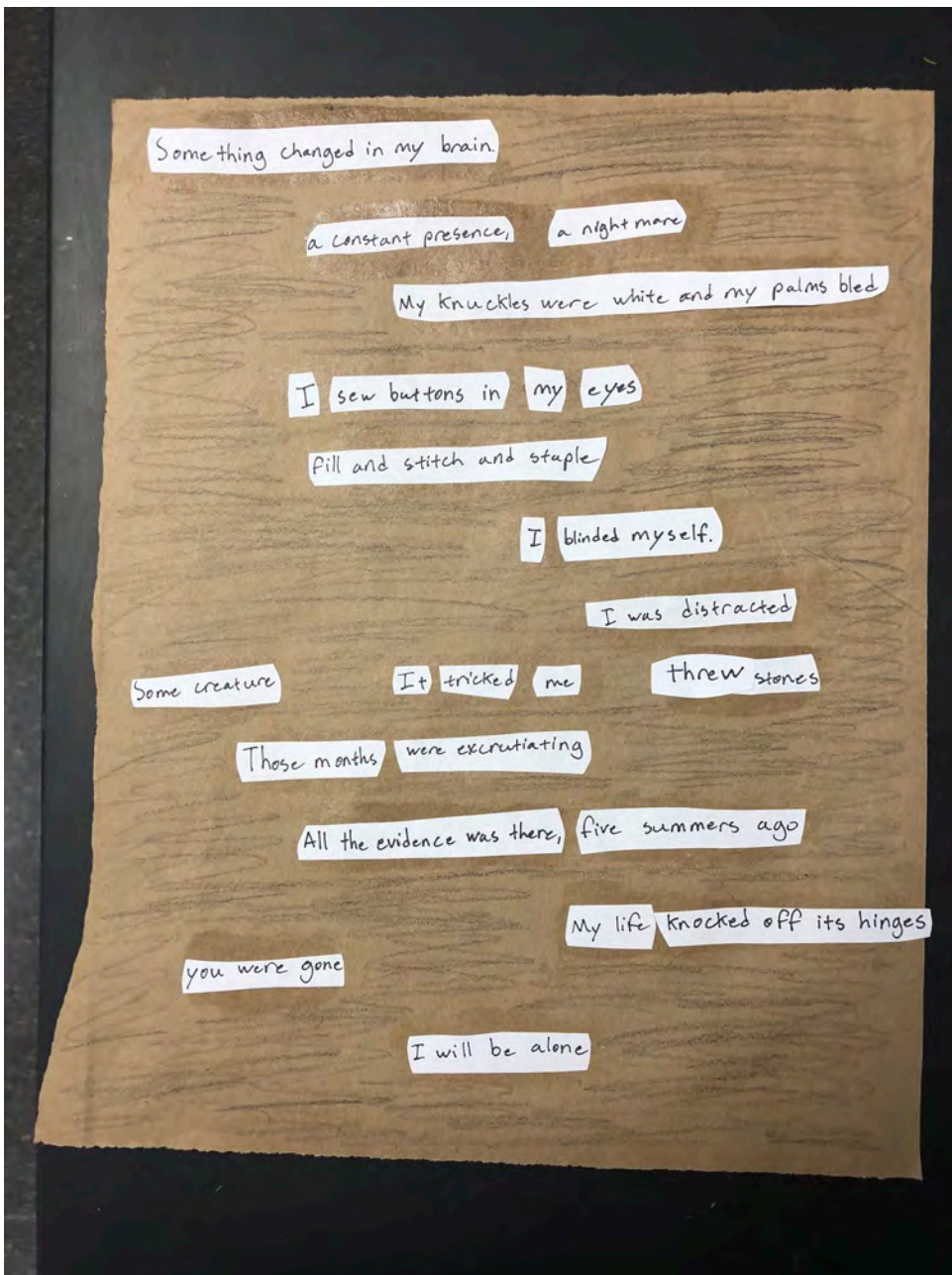
its wrest and twist of days—

free and deft

with a breath brisk

from an air of hope.

Recovery



Something changed in my brain.

a constant presence,

a night mare

My knuckles were white and my palms bled

I sew buttons in my eyes

Fill and stitch and staple

I blinded myself.

I was distracted

Some creature

It tricked me

threw stones

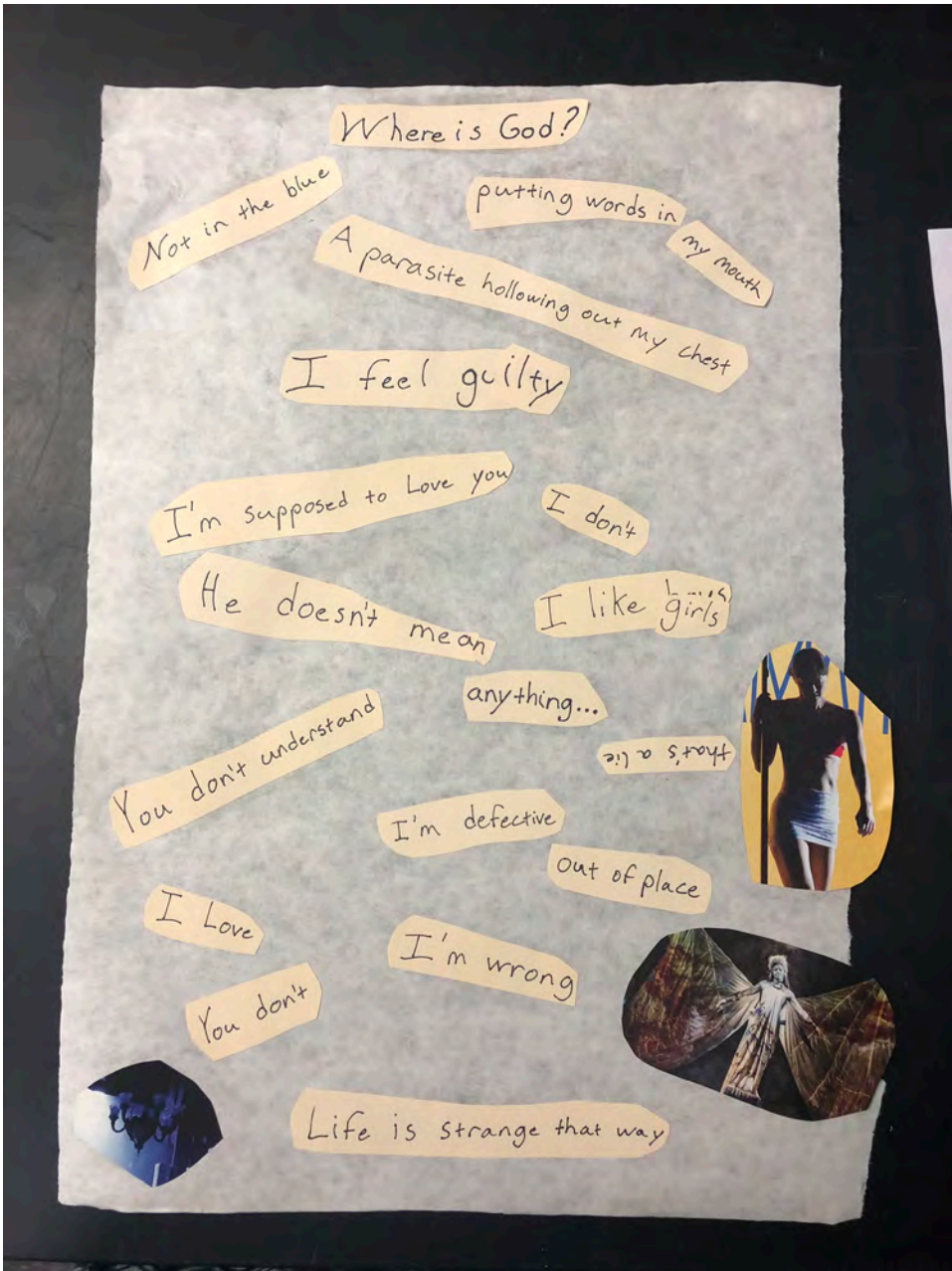
Those months were excruciating

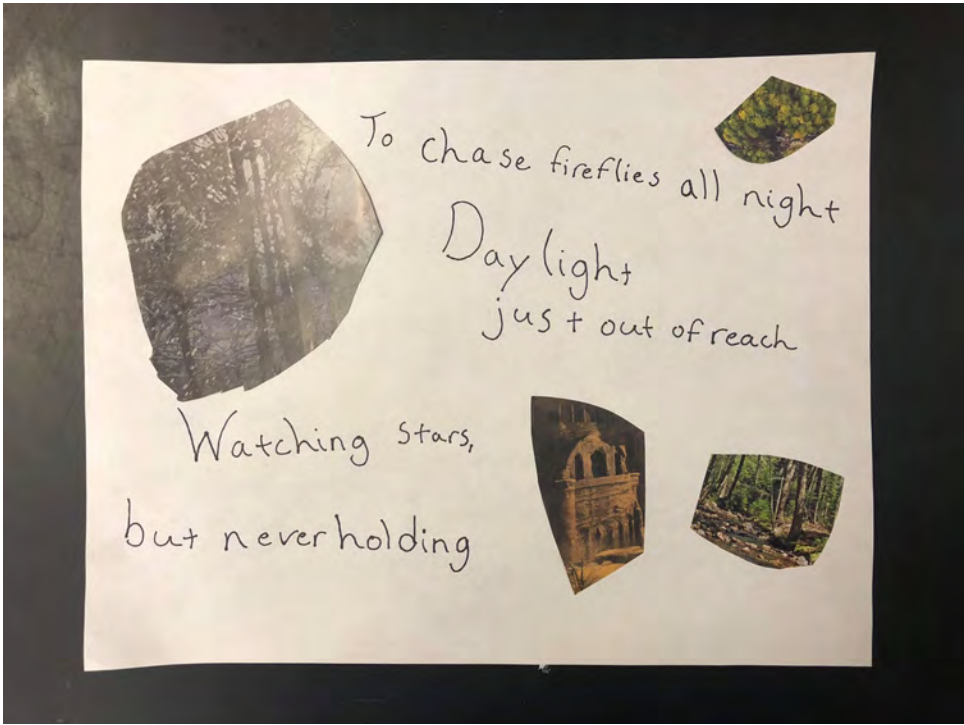
All the evidence was there, five summers ago

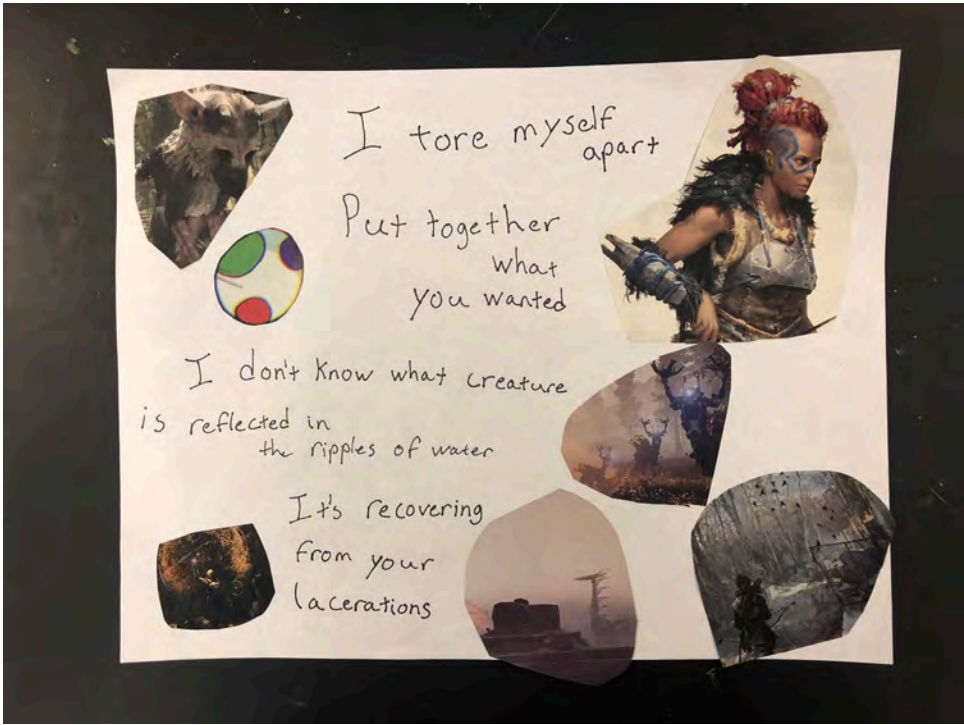
My life knocked off its hinges

you were gone

I will be alone











Lost and Found

Where are you going
walking so fast into death?
Speak the names of those
who raft you on dark rivers.

There are no fathers there
in nobody's sky.
There is no singing that mends
your pieces out of dark rivers.

Sons become older than fathers
when fathers become nothing.
Fathers are dressed in white
and kissed like cold winter.

The light wanders daily.
The world dresses trees in pied death.
Sons put on fathers' masks when
Halloween laughs ruseful night.

after Willam Blake's "The Little Boy Lost"

In the Valley of the Ohlone

In the valley of Ohlone
ran the bison and the elk
and the skies were full of fat goose
and the rivers carried salmon
and the crab teemed in the bay shore
and the sun was always shining
in the Eden of Ohlone
where the naked people dwelt.

Naked but for spears and arrows
made for wolves and for coyotes
and their children did not wander
with the cougar always watching
but the game was always plenty
in the plains of the Ohlone
even grizzly bears could live there
where the naked people lived.

When the missionaries came
they brought their Satan into Eden
and their cruel repeating rifle
slew the grizzly and Ohlone.

Then came violent, hungry masses
and they dirtied all the waters
while they dug for yellow metal
and they hunted down the cougar
and they burned the thule village
and they massacred the hunters
and they raped and killed the women
and enslaved the orphan children.

Once the villagers were slaughtered
then the white man brought his cattle
hunted down the last few grizzlies
as the skies were cleared of gamebird
and they emptied out the rivers
turning water toward their cropland
(even their corn was rapacious)
until nothing wild was left here.

Now the valley of Ohlone
has been paved and covered over
with bright boxes made of concrete
the last bird the beggar raven.
Skinny cougars and coyotes
may find refuge in the mountains
but not grizzly bear or wolf.
Yet, don't think that both are gone now

for their spirits linger still
and they call to you, the wild,
lure you youths out from your boxes
made of concrete and enslavement.
“Go! Strip off your prison clothing!
Wear the sunshine on your body
follow, up into the mountains,
follow cougar and coyote!

“Come, you drudgery-bred youth
with your wan tattoos and piercings!
Run from office and from factory!
Leave the life of greed and hatred,
Strip down to your naked wholeness!
Find the wildness of the grizzly,
swim with salmon in the rivers.
Find the wild of the Ohlone!”

James Joyce's Challenge

I once crossed Dublin, blindfolded
and sober, in search of church
without a pub nearby. The two
go hand in hand taking money
from those who might otherwise eat.
I managed not to stumble into God
along the way, but was less fortunate
when I fell face-first into an open pint
of Guinness, or three. No more than four.

A Pigeon

When Efraín comes in, you look down with both eyes wide open as if you were searching for a small object on the uneven surface of the mosaic floor. The rain lashes down outside, and the café becomes a perfect place for people scrambling for shelter. You know Efraín's routine: stopping by Café Rívoli from Monday to Friday after work to wind down with his favorite drink.

After ordering a double espresso from the bar, Efraín takes off his raincoat, puts down his briefcase, and sits at one of the tables. You look at him sideways. He has a tinge of grey in his sideburns and goatee you loved so much, and keeps combing his hair briskly with his fingers, which always made his hair bristle. "Bright Moments" drifts through the speakers mounted on shelves. The diners cast shadows stretching across the red wall like night guards. Short tables add intimacy to the subtle mood.

You have imagined this moment so many times, toying with different scenarios. Before the mirror you have rehearsed gestures, the movements of your hands, and appropriate words. You were going to wear cold colors because you thought you should

project an air of serenity. It took you two years to choose the most convenient place, the restaurant where he eats his lunch or the café, and you thought the latter was a neutral space, a place fit for meetings. That's how you chose it. Deciding on a date posed a dreadful dilemma. You spent only a few quiet months without thinking about it, and for many more months, you were filled with distress. You sank into labyrinths of insomnia and inquietude. Six years passed as you suffered these ups and downs.

Now you arrive at the café as the dark clouds threaten to spew large drops of rain that would dampen your soul, without wearing any of the clothing items you bought for this occasion. You see your own figure reflected in the glass door of Rívoli. You stare at it for a moment and try to recognize the disheveled, haggard woman. You lower your head and go in.

Efraín will arrive in thirty minutes. When you glance at your wristwatch, you feel the urge to run out and get lost on the streets. You manage to control yourself, clenching your fists. You don't want coffee – your memories are enough to keep you alert, with your heart in your mouth. As the waiter serves

your tea, he looks at your hands. When he notices scratches on them, you hide them by reflex. You don't get offended when he twirls his index finger in a circle at his temple as he heads back to the bar. A waitress joins in on the taunting – they may be right.

Flashes of lightning illuminate your face, giving a welcome to the coming storm. It arrives abruptly, with the whipping curtains of rain. You can't help but burst into tears when the sky drops its seeds. Gusts blow beads of rain, splashing them. A strong draft seeps into Rívoli. Some tables are empty. The drumbeat of rain and the clamor of voices drown the chattering of your teeth. Two men seated at the table near the entrance have noticed you crying, and they cast discreet glances at you. Today you have so many things working against you: your surroundings, your clothes, and your main concern – the inevitable. You know talking about life and birth is not the same as talking about death. Giving the news of loss without announcing gain first seems confusing. Time swallowed the appropriate moment and you allowed it to happen. For six years your son had kept your loneliness at bay and given you joy. Today the pain looms large, and every morning you wake from a restless slumber, feeling the ghost of a

childlike kiss. You miss his large eyes, his mischiefs, his dimples, and the complacent look on his face when you scolded him. As you step into his bedroom, which you haven't been able to clean out, the pain rips through you. At times, trembling, you wish yourself dead so that you can spit out the lump in your throat that makes it hard to breathe. There are times when you hurl curses, getting angry at circumstances. Then exhausted, you hug his clothes and kiss his photos. One day you wished Efraín had been by your side. Since then, the idea of sharing the pain has been circling in your head. That's why you're in the café.

For a moment you doubt that he will come. The rain keeps pouring down, finding itself in an intermittent battle with the wind. You look down at the floor when he finally passes by you. Then he sits at the table next to you.

Efraín's espresso is already on his table. He stoops down to take a book out of his briefcase and then sees you. Your gaze, thick and simmering, locks with his. You're thinner, and your short hair makes him hesitate. Six years are not that long or perhaps they would not matter if attraction and harmony existed.

Your turmoil brews inside you again as you face uncertainty, your eyes still fixed on the floor. Then, in this café surrounded by

shops and buildings, where the routine dominates, a white-grey pigeon flies. Neither you nor Efraín can tell exactly where it comes from. Some invisible string pulls you. You stand up as he steps toward you. Not even giving him time to react, you run out to cry in the rain, to carry grief alone with the same legs with which you carried your outdated clothes.

*Translated from Spanish by
Toshiya Kamei

mother lode

You have always wanted opals from me, gifts your father gave me, the huge white Australian opal pendant that you wore for your high school yearbook photo, still fiery in black and white, so when I noticed that my little Jamaican opal earrings were missing, I suspected you had taken them to India, relieved that they were not carelessly misplaced but I forgot that opals are unlucky if they aren't your birthstone and sure enough you were near the Pakistani border on September eleventh, the Indian phone system as noisy as a double drum shearer loader in a coalmine, Father stranded in Singapore himself urging you to leave Bharatpur or visit relatives Down Under or at least go south and me at home, the tv constantly embedding in my brain both the threat of Muslim extremist behavior and images of Vikram Seth describing riots in Indian villages that flare up like stoked ore furnaces, opalescent, so you finally followed our advice and headed to Goa on the Portuguese coast where you said fishermen greeted you and your new partner Richard each morning with a smile as you emerged from the aqua sea and in diamond December you came home and returned the opal earrings to October me.

No Candy

Last night as leaves darkened
to hues of rougeing sunset
and the roads stretched slow
beneath our weary minds, we
arrived home to our city
from weeks travelled—
trips and visits and friends.

And in our same city the infants
and children cry, their minds trying to warm
with plastic blankets, as they lie on cement floors—
steel cages, set four-square around.

Dinner was light nonetheless fulfilling,
sandwiches with cheese,
bologna, ciabatta bread,
and juice, milk to quench our thirst
from fatigue of heat, the order of travel,
endless travail of car.

And in our same city the infants and children
sob—tears of longing, tears of memories gone,
no mothers to comfort their shaking,
their shivering souls, no sun or sunset
to stroke their desperate arms.

Dessert was tasty, a true delight:
coffee ice cream for me, a cookie
or two, and a candy bar for him—
his favorite, Snickers of course.

And in our city, the children cling
to wire-mesh dolls, no mother in sight—
the crinkling of blankets pretends to soothe
but offers no candy or comfort
to our bewildered charge.

The Mandjet

The fog curdles forth,
Enveloping the bay and the massive crags that jut forth
as do bastions 'pon antiquated forts carved for cannonade.

Skewing sight

The thick air clings to the burnished skin of thémigré
Who struggles forward
Alone again
His companion-nomad having fallen victim to settlement.

No matter, he presses on.
The hissing air coiling 'round his entire figure

Slogging onward as the thinnest of clouds; yet the thickest to the breath,
Yanks at his ankles,
And trips him forward in chaotic tumbles, mimicking the crashes of the
waves,
That do battle with the crags 'pon this far north land.

Legs stiffen, buckling under the pressure of a thousand leagues, that never
Give pause. Emotionless miles,
Arrogantly fixed in their distance,
Refusing to grant thémigré
A mere fluke in consistency

No matter.
Such is his task
And he hath resigned himself
To such fate.
“tis fate after all...

Yet? Behold!
‘Pon the western shore of the bay that moments before had been a mere
effervescent glance betwixt his journey,

A coporeality permeates this rare, white, benign, miasma.

A woman! No... lady?
A Compatriot in this crusade for reciprocation.

Clad in samite.
She arises from the chopping, visceral sea.
Holding a thin; imperial scepter

It arises, and the sea abates
Stilling, becoming as of glass.

She extends an arm.
Her marble-carved wrist uncurls and extends, all five fingers beckon.

The fog vanishes,
As if the horn of Gabriel sounded their demise.
Gusted away.
Every mitochondria in his body sounds,
Stirs, forging ecstatic energy that writhes to the surface of his skin.
As do the photons from the great sol finally escape.

And he moves. Glides,
Runs, slowly, staggering,
Pain sparks as hammer to superheated ore.
The slag rushing through his knees
As unrefined muscles are wrought into blades
Impervious to the foils of exhaustive mortality.

He carries no longer! The excitement of banishing solitude overpowers
The rationality of pain
And he flies forward
Racing towards She who remains still, save for a metamorphosistastical
smile.

The fog returns, stampeding in abaft the crags,
Gushing under his feet.
Propelling him out onto the fierce sea-cliffs
Like Mercurial sandals long unadorned.

The sheer speed that he reaches, tears the clothes from his body

And the fog wrap him in living garments, which whirl and spin about,
deftly floating above his skin.

He runs, clearing the final crag,
And the seaglass rises to meet his leap.

Vapor, ice, and liquid,
All meet as naiads to ferry thémigré to his newfound muse.

A tear trickles past her eye's defenses.
'Tis caught by the wind, and settles 'pon the cheek of the boy.
It seeps into his skin, imbuing him with the power of salvation
Granting him the final strength to travel the final half a league
To her: his Nike.

The fog dissipates 'pon contact.

They fall into another,
Crying, crying

He holds her in th'embrace to mark a new age.
Forging new time, new matter...nay, new existence!
The scepter rises from the ocean
Becoming the mast of a forgotten caravel,
Arising,
To reveal a crow's nest, cradling the young couple,
To reveal sails of pure, unfurled mythril
To reveal a ship carved from the trees of Eden,

The fog fades into the distance,
Restraining itself to a transparent haze,
Slightly obscuring the horizon
But allowing the glimpse of the fleeing sun
To bathe the mariners in rays of charge and determination.

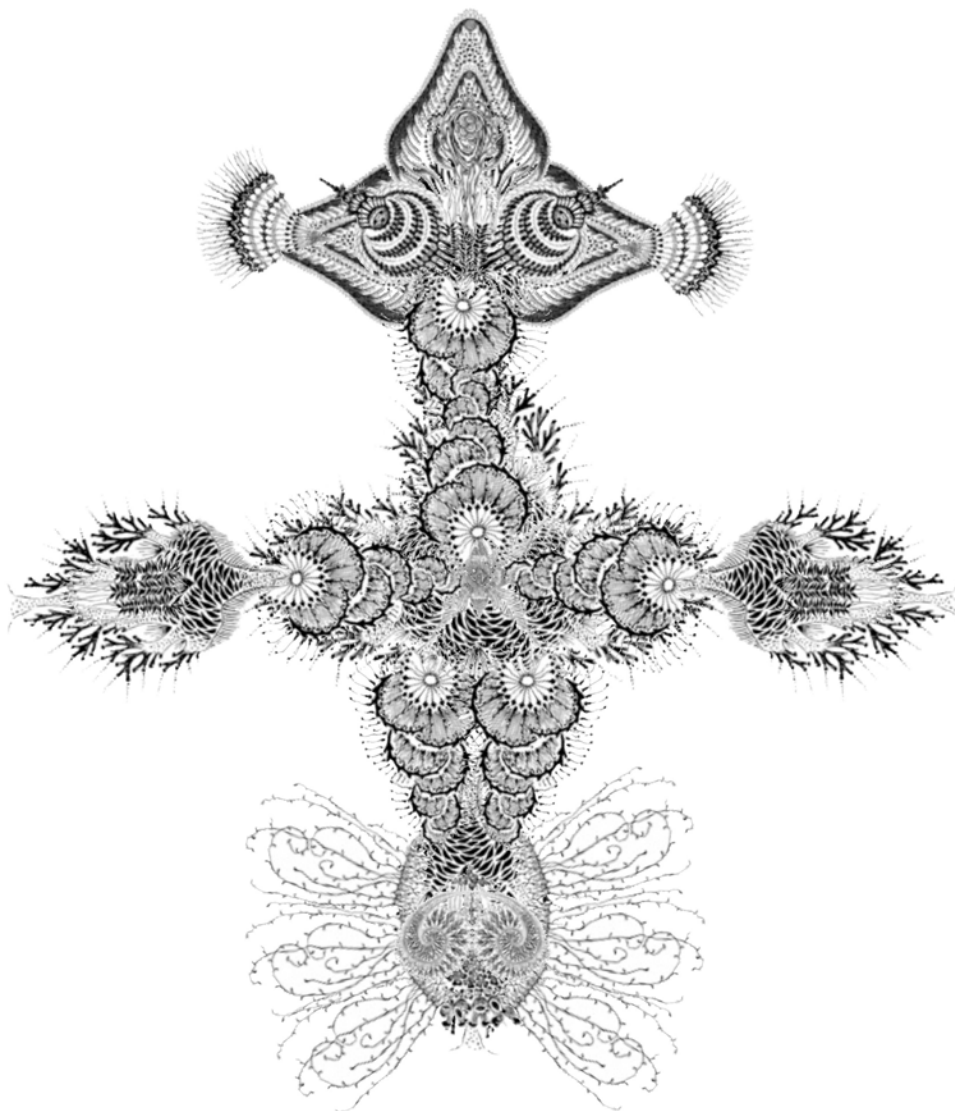
They scurry down the rigging,
Excitement stealing any frivolous banter,
Grasping at the helm in tandem.

They forgo the tethers of charts and maps,
Relying on the celestial spheres to offer orientation
On this fantastic voyage,
Into the lands unknown.

This fantastic voyage,
A bequest for finishing the leagues thousandfold.

This fantastic voyage;
The Expedition of Paradise:
Within this fantastic voyage
The Mariners are finally home.

Beyond the Immediate Trapdoor



Narcoleptic Stallion

When they named you Narcoleptic Stallion,
your inner circle of family and friends
bet more than they had in their pockets or bank
that you'd burst from the womb in black tipped flames,
spurs cutting your side like a thug on Provigil,
demanding life's green unfold in his hands
or he'd climb the rotten tree of you and bleed
the leaves to the ground. And this was just race
number one: the first breath after the jockey
swore he never intended to be a nurse,
never intended on being so short
even an infant could crush him like a pill
and force their way down Flicker's wet throat
in a pastoral, tweaked, contemplative way,
like all god's children riding bareback to church
singing Yippie YI Yo Ki Yay.

Found in My Inbox

We think you need Viagra
to make your life complete.
Don't turn your back on Obama—
the revenge he plots will be sweet!
Before they ban this flashlight,
you'd better buy a bunch!
Stock up on the juice of acai
for your purgative lunch.
Don't miss your IRS refund—
it's going, going, gone!
Isn't woodworking grand?
Carve your own maple fawn!
There's offenders next door to your family
better download our map!
Are you drowning in emails too spamly?
Then boy, have we got your app!

Glory Unremarkable

When they named her Glory Unremarkable
none of the lightning strikes that day
had permission to hit the bus carrying
exclamation points quickly out of town.
The migration patterns of Trumpeter swans
shuffled the sky like a blackjack dealer
whose hairy arms graciously burned
to distract her from sex as an act of flight,
from sex as an act between beak and worm
poking and rolling in the praises of mud.
Intrigued by her imperfection, by how
the nectar of morning's song fell to its death
from night's pink spoon, I opened my mouth
for the slow motion spill, as the sky blacked out
and thunder failed to stop me from driving the bus.

Number One Pork Chop Man

“I tell him you Number One Pork Chop Man!” Su said in her charming, and I think intentional, broken accent. Everything she said sounded angry, even when she was joking. She then looked at me and cackled. Su was short and round and held the arm of a slightly hunched, lean man with dark, lined skin who wore a white apron and white hat, pointed at me and rattled off something in Chinese. With a serious look on his face, he nodded at me and grunted. He then spun on his heels and went back to kitchen.

Su came over and put her arm around me, and squeezed. “He like you,” she said, and laughed again. A good foot taller, I pulled her close while balancing my plate that was piled high with steaming noodles, vegetables, and her husband’s signature dish, Garlic Pork. “That man is a genius,” I said, “and you’re not too bad either.”

Su was my Chinese god-mother. At least that’s what I called her. She fed me, tried to teach me a little Cantonese, and how to use chopsticks, although I only got the hang of one.

China Inn was in a low-traffic shopping center in Rocky Mount, wedged between Raleigh and the Outer Banks of North Carolina. The

restaurant was next door to a pet store, which of course invited plenty of stereotypical jokes. In the 1980s, before the proliferation of buffet style and takeout Asian restaurants on every corner, China Inn was a high-end restaurant. Everything was cliché red: murals, the cushions in the high back chairs, the vinyl booths, the doors, the cloth napkins, leaving only white linen tablecloths and dark woodwork for contrast. At least a half hour wait on Friday and Saturday nights was required for a table. In our area, it was about as exotic as an eatery got, and drew an interesting mix of business people, professionals, farmers, retirees, and laborers.

Common dishes on Chinese menus everywhere such as Beef Szechuan and Sweet and Sour Pork, were prepared in uncommon ways. The beef was sliced piecrust thin, lightly spiced and tossed with green onions. The pork was deep fried until it puffed up like a cotton ball and was served with vegetables, fresh pineapple, and an extra-sweet sauce. Their food was a treat, not anything like the offerings of the “fast food” takeout places that have sprouted up in shopping centers everywhere like mushrooms after a spring rain. As times changed, buffets became

the standard in the Chinese food business. China Inn eventually followed this path, first adding lunch, then later, weekend dinner buffets, but the food was never greasy or engulfed in MSG.

Chinese food made its way into America via San Francisco and the great influx of railroad workers in the 19th century. Dishes had to be adapted to American tastes and available ingredients. It is a well-known legend that the very Chinese-sounding dish “chop suey” was created from leftovers thrown together. Anything with a tomato sauce or even with broccoli has been Americanized, since tomatoes are a product of Native Americans and American broccoli is quite different than that in China. Fortune cookies were invented in California.

Ironically, in an era of dining that places a premium on heritage and authentic ethnic foods, American palates might be grateful. I have a nephew who works all over Asia, and he told me that most of the time when he orders Chinese food, it is swimming in grease. He often sees cats and dogs in cages tucked away in alleys and side streets next to eateries.

The food was always hot and fresh, and the family who owned it only made going there more interesting. It was more than that, though. They would laugh and joke,

and even sometimes bicker, but for that they would switch from English to Chinese. Su was a character. She always seemed to be skeptical of new customers, even to the point of being curt, turning her face into a scowl of mistrust when she dealt with the unfamiliar. But that all changed after a couple of visits — loyalty earned conversation. If she saw you coming from the parking lot, she'd have a table ready and your drinks on the way. If she saw you in Target or the grocery store, she would call you by whatever your regular order was, and put her hands on her hips, laughing.

For my wife and I, China Inn became our “go to” place. We went to China Inn to celebrate job promotions, the day we went into business for ourselves, birthdays, and eventually, we just headed there every Friday night. Friends and family often tagged along, and some nights there might be 20 of us. Su or her sister gave us the private back room. We always had a great time, and like a typical godmother, Su would chide us to eat more.

China Inn had signature dishes, with the same names you see everywhere, but something was always a little different, a little better. There was a variation of Kung Pao (no peanuts, ahead of the curve in food allergy service), General Tso's Chicken, and Hot and Sour Soup (which I swear cured winter head colds better than any prescription).

The best was Garlic Pork — very thinly sliced, marinated, bite-sized pieces of lightly fried tenderloin, tossed in a dark, sweet, garlic and red pepper glaze with onions. It wasn't even on the menu, but a special order for "insiders" only. On nights they didn't have the delicacy on the buffet, Su appeared out of nowhere, laughing, with a huge plate she delivered to our table, usually with a word about us not being disappointed. Sometimes, she slipped us a container to take home.

"Don't let Alan see the bag," Su would lean over and tell me, as if we slipping me contraband to sneak past her brother-in-law, who worked the register. "You know how he is."

There are plenty of theories about the dish General Tso's chicken. I've never been in a Chinese restaurant that didn't list it on the menu, and it tastes about the same everywhere.

It is believed the dish originated in Taiwan, and was introduced in New York in the 1970s. There were many General Tso's in Chinese military history, but it is believed the dish was named to honor Tso Tsung-tang, who crushed Muslim rebels and defeated the Russians in the late 1800s.

"Su," I asked one night, "Are all these recipes from your family? Do you ever miss China?"

"Not really," she said. "Just Hong Kong. Glad to be out of China. Garlic Pork recipe come from New York, not China. My husband make up."

One night, when our daughter Holly was about three, Su announced that it was time for Holly to get a tour of the kitchen. We thought Holly would protest, as she was still shy, but went right along with Su, long brown curls bouncing along. After what seemed like an eternity, the two emerged from the double doors, Holly clinging to bags of goodies stuffed with rice, fortune cookies, chopsticks, chocolate pirouettes and candies. "She's the perfect baby," Su said, beaming as a proud grandmother might.

We never thought about China Inn not being there. That is, until one night when Su looked distraught.

"My brother-in-law is selling this place, moving back to Maryland," Su said, barely masking her resentment. It was obvious she was not happy about the decision, even though she said she and her husband would stay and work for the new owners.

We went back once or twice after the transition. It just wasn't the same. The waitresses argued about who had to wait which tables. The restaurant was not crowded. Su was furious. "Nobody wants to work. This not going to last," she told us.

There is a scene in the cult classic, “A Christmas Story,” which runs on a cable network for 24-straight hours at Christmas every year that I can’t watch without thinking of China Inn. Ralphie and the rest of the Parkers have their traditional Christmas turkey ruined when the neighbors’ dogs ransack the kitchen and decimate the bird. The family heads out to find someplace open on Christmas — it turns out to be The Chop Suey Palace.

The family orders the closest thing they can find to turkey on the menu, which is Peking Duck, with the head still intact. Everyone at the table stares at the somewhat unnerving scene. Then the proprietor whips the cleaver down and decapitates the bird, relieving the tension that quickly converts into giggles and laughter and allows the Parkers to finally let loose of all that Christmas tension and stress.

We never ordered Peking Duck, and I don’t know if it was even on the menu. China Inn was less about the food as time passed and more about being an event to look forward to all week, a time for family and friends, and mostly laughter. Su was often the cleaver, the catalyst for all that, always with a gruff staccato followed by a warm embrace.

Shortly after it was sold, China Inn was no more. Shuttered

behind those red doors were a lot of good memories — college decisions, engagements, pregnancy announcements, promotions, teasing, plans and dreams were passed across those tables, right along with the soy sauce.

There was my best friend’s knack for running a serving spoon into a stainless steel tray and managing to get nothing but meat, no vegetables, as he constructed his “fried plate,” a second serving with a purpose. We relished how the other waitresses thought my nephew was my brother, which meant they also thought my oldest sister was my mom. We laughed at my three stick-thin nephews, who were told by Su they needed to “put some meat on ‘dose bones!” We debated whether fried rice and lo mein were merely a distraction from the finer things on the buffet. We talked about plans for the future, some realized, some failed. We talked about loves lost, starting families, and never once did I consider that our time together and the place would ever cease to exist.

I’m glad we couldn’t see the future, because it would not have made us savor the moment more, it would have made us feel we were on the clock, and consider that time was slipping from us, that lives were being lived faster than we knew, and that we’d never gather as that special group again. Those dinners were a rare time in life when taking some-

thing for granted made the world right.

We've not had truly perfect Chinese food since. We've been to Raleigh, Wilson, other eateries in Rocky Mount, and Greenville, and had friends in other cities stay on vigil. We tried Thai and Korean and Japanese, much of it quite good, but nothing just right. And never any Garlic Pork.

The space is now occupied by a barbecue joint and I've found myself asking was the food really that much better than anywhere else? Was the 1980s chic atmosphere that key? Am I simply imagining something to be better than it was, as our brains often do when an experience slowly morphs into a memory?

Or, was it being part of something, something about my family and those who took us into their world and became extended family, even though we had absolutely nothing in common? There are places to get good food and decent service, but there is no Su to make it just right, to look out for the Number One Pork Chop Man.

On Finding an Abandoned Firepit

The open pore of cloud
unswallows sun from heaven—
desire is flesh made star
in heat and fire—

A wood of word flames,
becomes an ash of remnant—
what signifies by consummation
in water, light and heat—

My had makes flame
from thought and woodfall—
A hope of water suspended
in gray that gathers us—

A laugher of birds
leaves the barrened trees—
Winter graced in substance
slowing into being—

Become you/me then
this hereafter black stained—
A firepit empty of its heat,
dark memory of its light—

Gray memory pauses
and I step into its silence—
holding a faith of desire
in your abundant hand—

Freak-Show

Her body has always been rubbery.
She can tie herself up
like a ribbon,
fold her legs into a cat's cradle,
even touch the back of her throat
with her toes.
She says she's double-jointed.
Maybe triple-jointed.
But it's a skill she has no use for.
So why does she keep
contorting herself into these
outrageous positions?
She can't help herself, she says.

When she was younger,
she was her friends' personal freak-show.
"Be a butterfly," they'd say.
"Or a rocking chair."
But that was years ago.
Her friends went off in search
of male companionship.
A circus trick could not connect
with burgeoning feelings.

But, at home alone
and waiting for the phone to ring,
she wraps herself up
into a tight ball of string
and her insides do the same.
She is too old for this,
too old for what she is.
Ligaments are taut.
Emotions are strained.
She has never learned to unfold.

Enter the Apocalypse

Now sense some coming apocalypse,
now expect some ripe recipe
for total disaster;
in the first nanoseconds
of God's hideous anger,
fortified with worse than
fire and brimstone,
the earth, our mother,
overcome, overcooked,
glows hot and red,
our red-hot mama
can't be saved;
the heat, the deadly radiation
patiently
seek our bones, our marrow, our cells.

From Pensacola to Beijing
and all points west, east,
north, south, everything
dead or alive,
rocks to rooks
to cats to Kathy next door
burnt to a crisp;
look at the charred trees
in the garden of Eden
where Eve's lovely breasts
and the rest of her used to sit;
the patient farmer turned to charcoal
along with his plough;
even the dead and buried wake,
turn and peer up
through bone holes, wormy eyes;
some citizens see nothing
but the removal of agriculture
in their situation,
an end to the fertile earth;
others, passing on from
a life of faulty digestion,
sour guts and Paregoric
show faith in the power of death;
no hurt to them, this ravishing terminus.

The typewriter building in Rome,
the Taj Mahal, Saint Peter's dome,
start to smoke, then
in the blink of an eye,
like fiery wedding cakes
go up in a blaze;
oceans boil away, roaring their anguish,
their seasoning burning in white heaps;
the glaciers cry away their
mass in floods of icy water;
mountains melt like butter,
rained on by the corona
of some enormous nearby sun.

The shroud of death spreads over
the broad burning earth and
then the horror of too much Assyrian orange
takes away resemblance from everything,
leaving the remains of blackened bits and pieces,
unidentified debris, piles of nothing
turning to dust and less than dust.

We don't have enough time for all of it,
over the eons slowly creeping
and no need describing
the whole extinction, my fellow shareholders;
a spectacular dish for special occasions,
but expensive and terminal;
beyond its horribly radiant gate,
beyond God's towering cloud of wrath,
wherever he is,
there is nothing.

When He Caught the Big One

Mom stood on one side of the hospital bed, my sister Andrea and I held hands on the other, and between the three of us lay my father, dying. Mom held a tissue up to her nose even though she had so far refused to cry. Andrea and I hadn't touched since we were kids so the contact of our interlaced fingers felt strange, but we held tight to each other and waited for Dad's final words. *Come on, Dad. This is it. Your last moment on this earth. Say something important. Make something of this opportunity.* But we knew better than to hope too hard. Dad turned his pale face and opened his mouth, his bristly skin moving like antique leather, and in a strained voice he said what we all expected him to say. "Teddy doesn't deserve to be in the Hall of Fame."

Andrea rested her other hand on dad's arm. "Oh, Papa. We know."

"Someone should take his picture down." He closed his eyes and his breath escaped him. "I hope someone takes his picture down."

That was when Mom finally cried, maybe because the fifty-two years she had spent with this man was about to end, or maybe because the final thought he bequeathed on the world pertained to a sixty-

year-old fishing feud instead of her. Either way, she let herself go on for a minute, then stomped her foot a few times. "There you have it." And then, much quieter, "Bastard."

Andrea shook Dad's arm to extend the goodbye. "Are you still here?" The machines told us his body was still alive, so she tried harder to summon him back. His head bobbed when she pushed on his shoulder, but he produced no movement of his own. Andrea and Mom stared at him as if a few more minutes would imprint him in their memories in a way the previous five decades hadn't.

I had pictured this moment differently. I thought it would be significant, perhaps noble, but it was just another old man dying in a podunk hospital, the same scene happening in three other rooms in this hallway alone.

My back couldn't handle all the standing, but the room didn't have any chairs. "Did we really do everything we could about the picture? We talked to the museum administrators?"

"Dozens of times," replied Mom.

"What about a lawsuit? I could file an injunction, then they'd have to investigate."

“Let it go, Gary. No one cares anymore.”

But that was exactly the problem. Dad was gone, his children had moved away, and now he missed his last chance for reconciliation with Mom. Whatever tiny legacy he left would evaporate within a year, but before I could argue, Andrea touched my arm and whispered, “Not now,” so the room quieted again.

After a few minutes I stepped away and found Dad’s doctor staring at a computer tablet by the nurses’ station. He looked about my age. Maybe we had gone to high school together thirty years ago, and like so many of the town’s kids he had been unable to escape. Even in his white doctor’s coat he wore the northwoods like a disease: untrimmed beard, hunched back, old shoes.

“He talked a little more,” I said, and the doctor turned.

“He may hang on for a while longer.”

“What else can we do?”

He patted my arm until I pulled away. “At this point, not much. If it was just the most recent stroke, we might have more options, but he’s been having mini-strokes for quite some time.” He shook his head, probably the same as he had done for the three other sons in the hallway trying to manage their fathers’ deaths. “His brain is too far gone.”

Back in the room I stood against the wall, away from the bed. Of course there was something that could be done. There’s always something that can be done.

* * *

Dad’s feud started in September of 1962 when he was fourteen years old and he went fishing on Loon Lake with his uncle Ted and his cousin Ted Jr., who everyone called “Teddy.” They trailered Ted’s boat over and had been on the water for two hours when something hit Dad’s red and white daredevil lure. He fought the fish for almost forty-five minutes until Uncle Ted managed to get it in the net. It was a northern pike, and it was incredible. They returned to shore to weigh and measure the monster, and at 38.5 pounds and 46 inches it set the record for the largest American freshwater pike ever caught in the lower forty-eight states. It was the day every serious angler dreams of.

But that’s when the trouble began. Uncle Ted had only one shot left on the roll of film in the camera he kept in his truck, and in the middle of all the weighing and measuring hubbub the picture he managed to snap was of Teddy holding the fish, not Dad. Uncle Ted claimed it was an innocent mistake, and most of the family believed him, but that meant when the Fishing Hall of Fame in Hayward asked for

a photograph to hang in the gallery of record-setting catches, the one of Teddy with Dad's fish was the only option. On the back of the photo Grandma wrote an explanation, that Harold (not pictured) actually caught the fish, but at the museum no one is allowed to turn the picture over. It's in a glass case surrounded by snapshots of other happy people straining to hold up their enormous trophies. And so, until someone else catches another improbably large northern and the picture is replaced, Teddy gets credit for Dad's fish.

Most people would have gotten over this infraction, except before he was anything else—a husband, a father, an electrician—my Dad was a fisherman. Fishing was all he did, no matter how much Mom begged him not to and cried when he left. He went out before and after work and on the weekends. Holidays offered perfect stretches of extended time for angling, as soon as meals were eaten and presents were opened. He tried bringing Andrea and I along when we were little, but those trips stopped because we never took it as seriously as he wanted us to. He could have been a good family man between ice-out and fishing opener, but he spent that time restringing his reels and rearranging his tackle boxes. Likewise, when ice first glazed the lakes and forced him to

stay on land, instead of focusing on us, he went out every day to auger holes and check the thickness until it reached the six inches necessary to hold his ice-fishing shack. Most years five-and-a-half was close enough.

Even though Dad's last words may have been devastating to Mom, they made sense. He had accomplished one thing in his life that people could remember him by, but no one would unless someone did something about Teddy's picture.

* * *

A couple hours after Dad spoke for the final time, Mom sighed and grabbed her coat. "Well. I'm not standing around here all night."

The doctor confirmed that Dad would probably hang on until morning, so the three of us piled into the old man's truck to drive home. Andrea sat in the middle, even though mom was smaller. It would have been a good time to talk, but that's not how our family worked. Instead Mom stared out the windshield. For a few blocks the passing street lights reflected in her glasses, but then we left the tiny island of civilization surrounding the hospital and entered the woods, where there was no light. If I could have seen her expression then I would have known what to say, but in the darkness I could only assume she wanted to be left alone. That's

what I told myself, at least.

Now that Dad was gone, Andrea and I needed to decide what to do with Mom. We needed to start caring, but we were both so busy in our respective cities on opposite coasts. And Mom was never the type of person who appreciated being cared for.

I parked the truck in the garage and we crammed into the entryway and tried to find places in the closet for our coats.

“Is anyone hungry?” asked Mom. “I can make something.”

While she disappeared into the kitchen and started yelling out the contents of the freezer, I snuck down the hallway to Dad’s fishing room. No one was allowed in there. Taxidermied fish covered the walls, along with bookshelves that held fishing magazines and every fishing book and calendar we had gotten him for Father’s Days and birthdays over the years. Dad had this weird superstitious habit: after he caught a respectable fish, he would “retire” the bait he had used. He claimed each lure had one good catch in it, and if he kept spent baits in his tackle box they would suck the fish-catching power from all the others. So, he displayed his successful spoons and jigs and spinners in shadow boxes, with his old poles and reels tacked to the walls in between.

Little had changed about the room since the last time I had

been allowed in, except for one thing. One of the walls had been stripped of its artifacts. The display boxes had been piled in the corner, the stuffed fish and fishing tackle propped against one of the bookshelves. He wasn’t technically dead yet and already his memory was being dismantled. I left, slamming the door behind me.

In the kitchen Mom pulled a bright blue box out of the freezer. “We’re having fish sticks. How many do you want?” She looked at the label. “A serving is six, I think.”

I tried not to sound mad. “Why is there stuff on the floor in dad’s room?”

Mom didn’t pause, even for a second. “I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“Yes, you do. You took a bunch of his decorations down.”

“I was trying to clean.” She crouched slowly to find a pan in the cupboard. “I was dusting and they fell.”

“You can’t invade his room.”

She stood and slammed the pan on the counter. It sounded like thunder. “If I said I was cleaning, that means I was just cleaning in there. Now drop it.”

I don’t know what sort of life Mom imagined when she was young, but I bet it wasn’t marrying an absent fisherman and raising two kids who wanted nothing more than to move out of nowhere backwater Wisconsin. She lived her whole life

in the house her husband bought after their marriage. They only took one long-distance vacation, a trip to New Orleans, where Dad learned he didn't care for planes or spicy food. After that, Madison was the most exotic locale in Mom's life, a place she visited only a handful of times for nieces' and nephews' weddings. After her child-rearing, she tried a few different jobs that were actually the same job, standing behind different cash registers and trying to talk to people who had other things to do.

These are the realities that distance protected us from. Now that I was home, I felt awful, but I had to push those emotions aside. Today wasn't about her. Today was about my dying father. He had one final wish that no one could grant him. I left the kitchen.

Andrea was standing in her old room, refolding the clothes in her open suitcase as if she was inoculating herself from whatever thoughts of home plagued her as well. "Did mom mention fish sticks?" she asked. "I'm not eating fish sticks."

"Me neither." I shut the door, in case Mom could hear us. "I have to get out of here. Come with me."

"Where are we going?"

"To find something decent to eat."

* * *

After stopping at several darkened restaurants, we discovered

the only place that sold any sort of food after midnight was the gas station in town, which happened to lay across the highway from the North American Freshwater Fishing Museum and Hall of Fame. It probably wasn't a coincidence. My subconscious knew we would end up next to the building that housed the picture of Teddy with Dad's fish. We sat in the cab of Dad's truck in the gas station parking lot while Andrea ate a granola bar and hunger forced me to choke down a microwaved meatball sub.

"This might be the last time I come back," I said.

"That's a little dramatic," Andrea said.

"I'm serious. When mom dies I have no interest in dealing with that house." A car drove past us on the highway, the only one we'd seen since our drive over. "Do you think she's happy?"

"I don't think she's ever been happy."

"Not happy, then. Do you think she's okay?"

"I'm sure she's fine. She has friends. She only seems so bad because we're seeing her during such a sad time."

Without the engine running, the chill permeated the car. It might have fallen below freezing; I hadn't checked. "How about you? Are you happy?"

Andrea thought for a moment. "Absolutely. The firm's doing

well. I make it up to Tahoe with my friends every couple of months." She swiped her hair behind her ear. "I started a foundation."

"Animals?"

"Single mothers."

"Good for you. I'm glad you're doing well."

It was funny. Both Andrea and I had dressed like we still lived there, except we didn't get it quite right. We wore jeans, but ours probably cost five times what they charged over at the Fleet Farm. We both had on sweaters, except ours were fitted fashionably to our post-middle aged bodies, and they were made out of fibers ill-suited to actually keeping one warm in the early spring chill. The Nieman Marcus Backwoods line, not intended for actual rural living.

"We should talk more," I said.

"You and me?"

"All of us. Mom, too."

Andrea nodded, even though I could tell she was as skeptical as I was. "I'd like that. I think Mom would as well."

I couldn't take my eyes off the museum, which occupied a hexagonal building with wings that radiated out like the spokes of a wheel. "What do you think would happen if we snuck in and took Teddy's photo?"

"Why would we do that?"

"For Dad. Give an old man his last wish."

"He doesn't deserve it."

"He's dying. He was gone a lot, but he's still our dad." I crumpled the remaining half of the sandwich into its wrapper and tried to rid the taste left in my mouth with some bottled water. It didn't work. "I'm just going to check. Maybe I can get the door open."

"That's a terrible idea,"

Andrea said. "Trespassing, breaking and entering..."

"It'll be fine. Come with me."

"No."

"Seriously, let's go."

It was how all of our adventures started when we were kids. I instigated, Andrea resisted at first, then relented. This wouldn't be our first nighttime escapade, even if it might be our last.

We closed the truck doors quietly, then jogged across the highway. No headlights shone in either direction, even in the distance. The ditch on the other side was deeper than I had assumed, so I grabbed Andrea's hand to steady her as we tromped through the leftover snow at the bottom. After climbing the grassy slope on the other side we reached the chain-link fence that ran behind the big spruce trees.

We definitely weren't kids anymore, and our attempts at getting over the chest-high fence proved it. I had to boost Andrea up, and she landed on the other side without too much trouble, but my effort was a disaster. My feet

wouldn't fit in the holes and I tore off a belt loop that snagged on the top. Coming down the other side I hit my knee on the bar, causing me to wince and limp and swear all the way across the broad lawn dotted with benches, planters, and tremendous statues of fish.

The glass doors to the museum wouldn't budge, of course. I cupped my hands to see inside while Andrea whispered, "Are you satisfied now? Unless you know how to pick the lock, there's no way we're getting in."

"I have no idea how to pick locks."

"Then let's go."

Most decisions in my life had been made with time and reason. Moving out of the Midwest, attending law school, building a practice, all those had been intentional choices with clear understandings of the possible outcomes. But what I decided to do outside the museum carried no such contemplation. It just happened.

I crouched down next to the bushes that framed the door and ran my hands along the ground. Next to the wall was a rock I assumed would be plenty big enough. After standing and planting my feet, I brought it up to my neck and shotputted it towards the door. The glass shattered and rained down, much louder than I expected.

Andrea stepped back with her mouth open. "What in the hell did you just do?"

"No turning back now."

The museum hadn't changed at all. Same green carpet, same wood paneled walls. Same musty smell. Dad had dragged us there dozens of times when we were kids, enough that we each had found our own favorite highlights. Somewhere in the fishing lure wing was a hand-carved frog with big eyes and a silly smile that I loved. Andrea always stopped at the shiny chrome outboard motor from the 30's. Both of us would cower in front of the model of the world-record catfish with its terrifying teeth while Dad would say, "What would you do if you saw one of those things coming at you? Huh?" Those were good memories.

"What if there's an alarm?" asked Andrea.

We paused across from the Native American fishing display. "I don't hear anything."

The Hall of Fame wing consisted of big wood cases on the walls that held hundreds of photographs of fish. Every type, every variation. Largest bluegill in the country, live bait. Largest bluegill in the country, artificial bait. Largest bluegill in Wisconsin, live bait, artificial bait, heaviest walleye, longest walleye, live bait, artificial bait, every fish held by a man, with a few women and kids scattered around, some smiling and almost all of them

wearing as much pride on their faces as they ever had and probably ever would.

The picture of Teddy holding dad's fish hung halfway down the far wall, right at eye level. We didn't need to search for it—every childhood trip to the museum ended with the three of us admiring Dad's greatest accomplishment. "There it is," Dad would say, then cover his mouth with his hand. When we got bored we would wander away, but Dad would just stand there, silent, staring for what felt like hours. In the photo the sky is blue, the water under the dock is calm, and Teddy in his white t-shirt and Brewers cap smiles with as much satisfaction as anyone else in the display.

The glass door clicked when it opened and the picture released from its tape without any resistance, as if it hadn't been adhered at all. We crept back through the museum with the photo in my pocket, but there was no need to be quiet anymore because the sheriff's deputy waited for us at the front door.

* * *

Andrea and I shared one of the three jail cells in the back of Hayward's old brick police station. The deputy said he had to hold us until the museum director could ascertain what all had been stolen, except she wasn't answering her phone so we might have to wait until she showed up for work the

next morning. I called Mom to let her know where we were, and I told her not to come, but she drove over anyway.

She stood against the back wall of the hallway outside the cells, as far away from us as she could. "What were you thinking?"

I rested my elbows on the bars. "We were fulfilling Dad's last wish."

"He was an idiot. You're an idiot too."

Andrea sat on the metal bench along the side of the cell. She yawned. It was well after 1:00 AM. "We got carried away, obviously. But I think the deputy will release us if you talk to him."

Mom rested her hands on her hips. "You want me to talk to him?"

"Yeah. Vouch for us."

"I can't do that. You're criminals. You belong here."

I should have come home more. It had been a little over thirty years since I graduated high school and left, and I tried to return every other Christmas, but usually it was every third or fourth. When I managed to follow through on my bi-monthly phone call, Dad would always ask if I could make it back some summer so he could show me his new boat or his new depth finder, and I always told him I'd try, but it seemed pointless. My presence didn't matter. Dad ignored everyone to add more fish trophies to his

room, Mom did her best to survive him, and me coming home wouldn't make any difference. But staying away sure hadn't helped either.

I tried smiling at Mom, wholesome and penitent. "Could you come here, please?"

"Why?"

"I want to give you something."

We made eye contact, and I could tell she was curious. Teddy had weighed us all down for so long that maybe righting the ancient fishing wrong would help. Maybe it could be the closure we all needed.

I took the picture out of my pocket. "Please make sure Dad gets this."

She took the photo, held it low, and stared at it for a few moments. Then she sighed, looked from me to Andrea and back again, and tore it into a dozen pieces. She didn't say anything until all the fragments had fluttered to the floor.

"I hope I see you tomorrow at the hospital." Mom walked out. She moved slow, slower than she probably wanted and slower than I cared to acknowledge. She had become such an old woman. Without Dad, maybe she could find some of the freedom she had always wanted. She deserved it, in spite of how this day had gone.

After Mom left, Andrea's laughter echoed between the cold cinderblock walls. "You knew that was going to happen, right?" She lay

down on the bench. "I'm with you. I'm never coming back either."

I believed her. I believed she wouldn't. As for me, I suddenly wasn't so sure.

* * *

Dad died the following afternoon, without waking up again. Andrea and Mom were there with him. I was not. Instead, I was fishing.

Preparing for the trip was easy; Dad's gear was always packed and ready to go. I hooked the boat trailer to his truck and drove until I found a lake. Opening weekend hadn't happened yet, but after the previous night's mission I had apparently become comfortable with breaking the law. Who would've thought?

Out in the aluminum fishing boat I deconstructed one of Dad's displays of retired lures, then another. I made sure every bait got a few casts. I didn't bring the right jacket, so the breeze felt cold. I didn't grab Dad's seat cushions, so my back started to ache from sitting on the hard metal seat. But I caught a fish. I wasn't exactly sure what kind it was, and I struggled getting it off the hook, but it was a big one. Yeah, I think it was a big one.

Government Shutdown

When they named him Government Shutdown
all empirical inclinations to trust
what his body said and did
were held without bail in the emperor's mind,
a holding tank the size of a germ
untouched by bleach on a housewife's sponge
to make the world a cleaner place
for lies to act against the ruled
in the form of civilized laws.
His willingness to hang us all
with puritan curtains like Emily had
protecting her from the moon were
cause enough to spoil a good meal,
cause enough for a country to act
as if the future was nothing more
than a reason for hating the past.
Aversion's attempt to poison the water,
to make the heart an unlivable place,
only made attachment scream louder
till all evildoers went deaf. Fingernails
broke two inches deep in the effort
to save and explain. A most pitiful day
was had by all, the newly born and
soon to be dead.

A Little Elegy for Death

The shroud of death engulfs you, and your countenance
stays still the calmest I have ever seen; I look back
to a moment earlier when you might have held my hand —
a moment later, I am not allowed to unveil your face.

You lay cold on ice; I wait to hear your voice again.

In time, I'll learn to love cemeteries more than our home.

Pieces of Intimacy

1

Tomorrow may bring famine,
But tonight,
You come naked,
Subtle as a crescent apricot moon.
Tomorrow may bring famine,
But tonight,
You come naked,
A secret pathway
That ends at a breath
Between a pair of ripened lips.

2

Afternoons,
Hidden in our cramped bedroom,
Half-naked pouring stale Spanish wine,
(Probably fermented and bottled in La Rioja)
Rolling the last of our cigarettes,
Watching Autumn's breeze
Lift the curtains
To fan our alabaster bodies.

3

Naked,

With no secrets

Between our bodies,

Just the scent

Of the brine of the sea.

4

We remained entangled
Across the tiled kitchen floor,
Whispering to one another
In our spontaneous nudity.
I toying with her hair,
Her olive body,
As her fingers anchored
To the small of my back.

Blue Rose



Abandoned Observatory

Who keeps the stars watched? The night's garden
lies stagnant.

Constellations have become inconsistent as bodies
coalesce into puddles like a tipped jug's contents.

Tangled orbits streak the outermost.

What hand neglects to spin the heaven's hoary top?

The firmament is no longer luminous, a watchman
somewhere is slumped over at her post.

Time sees frivolity tie knots into a comet's tail.

Neither you nor I bear witness as the machinations
of the dark stop, lying together atop a ridge, beside
the abandoned observatory.

alt-right killer

Her son, facing murder charges, is being called an 'alt-right killer.' This mother blames herself.

A 17-year-old has been charged with shooting and killing Scott Fricker and Buckley Kuhn-Fricker in Reston, Va., on Dec. 22, 2017. (Patrick Martin/The Washington Post)

By Justin Jouvenal March 27 at 7:00 AM Email the author

Her troubled son had been up for two nights straight, inconsolable over a breakup, when she pulled him into her bed to soothe him. She never meant to doze, but woke with a start at 4:26 a.m.

The 17-year-old was gone — and so were the car keys she had hidden under her pillow.

She darted through her Northern Virginia home, calling his name, before reaching out to his ex-girlfriend's mother. The texted words sent waves of dread through her. "He is here. We are calling police."

The mother expected to see a single officer as she drove toward the ex-girlfriend's home. Instead, she found dozens of police cruisers, a gurney on the front lawn and an officer yelling at her to get to a nearby hospital.

What happened?

At the emergency room, the news hit her with the force of a punch. "Your son has a serious head injury," a doctor said. "He shot himself, and he shot two other people."

Through a pair of doors, she found him in a bed. The bullet had bored a hole between her son's eyebrows.

When she asked about the victims, an officer said quietly of the ex-girlfriend's parents, "They're deceased, ma'am."

She loved her son, but as doctors prepped him for surgery she blurted out a dark question she still has trouble believing any mother could utter: "Why are we saving him because he killed two people?"

The teen's mother agreed to speak publicly for the first time since the December shootings of Scott Fricker, 48, and Buckley Kuhn-Fricker, 43, because she says she is profoundly regretful and blames herself. It is a story of a growing darkness, a tangled teen relationship and missed chances to intervene.

She knows, perhaps better than anyone, how her son struggled with mental-health issues for much of his life. But it was only after the killings, she said, that she learned the full extent of his

From the Washington Post March 27, 2018

A Wing and a Prayer

Just a few days ago I adopted a beautiful little cat from a no-kill shelter, named her Jamila, Arabic for beautiful, because she is, and she's been trying to thank me for choosing her ever since. Endearing little habits like placing her head on my pillow at night and purring loudly in my ear, and very early this morning jumping up on the bed, on top of me, with her catnip mouse, playing catch and release all over me. So very adorable, but then, a little later, tired of the unresponsive mouse, I see her playing by my bed with something I cannot recognize in the dim early dawn. Turning on the light I see two blobs on the carpet, put my glasses on, get out of bed, and lift up one blob: a couple of detached wings. Hmmm. Lying very close, maimed and feebly struggling, missing a few legs as well as its wings, its head hanging by a thread, is the amputee, a very large roach indeed. The intrepid hunter looks at me proudly, hoping for an early breakfast as well as praise. Quickly dispatching the mangled roach down the toilet, I can only pray that Jamila, doesn't jump on the bed one night and proudly offer me a live roach with all its beastly bits attached.

Spitting Distance

Allison stood in the lobby of the Cineplex waiting for the 1:40 pm show to finish. She couldn't give up just yet. She wore the blue skirt that Zachary had always liked; somehow it suggested happier occasions. Two teenagers walked by, and one of them said, "Well, hey there sexy." The other, noticing her anxiety, said "Have a good day," as if reaching for an apology he wasn't sure how to make. She was relieved when they left. It hurt her to be watched.

The kid wearing a backward hat behind the concessions counter called out to her, "Good deals on snacks during the afternoon movies." She felt buying popcorn was a prerequisite for standing in the lobby. So, she bought a large, persuaded to do so because it was "only a quarter more." Allison did everything expected of her—so she wouldn't draw any attention to herself.

Then the modest crowd cleared out of the theater. They moved in succession as though they had done it over and over in earlier lives. Every detail of her routine was the same except for the one miraculous moment she was waiting for. She handed over her ticket to the usher, and as the last

family exited, she continued to find her seat.

A young, yawning woman was sweeping up the leftover popcorn kernels and empty soda cups from the earlier crowd. Allison stood there hoping she wouldn't have to speak. She was never great at social interaction. For several years Zachary was the one who tied her to the rest of the world. She thought of how depressed Zachary would be to know she spent another day in this dark place. She turned around to leave, but then spun right back. The changing of direction almost made her sick.

This was her wedding anniversary.

Everyone who tried to comfort her would talk about focusing on the things she had. If someone had acquired many *things*, does that make it easier to live without the most important one? She was married to Zachary for seven years, and she never once had a vision for living without him. Why couldn't these pseudo-philosophers see that?

The timing was impeccable, almost cosmic. For the film to be in movie theaters during her wedding anniversary brought a sliver of optimism, but she knew the typical box office run only lasted a few

weeks. Once more, life seemed to be slipping away from her. This was a bit of sparkle though, and for at least a moment it was like Zachary was there.

When she discovered that “Spitting Distance” was still showing in a movie theater over 200-hundred miles away, she told herself that she shouldn’t. She heard the voice of her brother telling her it wasn’t healthy. He didn’t think she was crazy exactly, but he feared for her stability. Allison told him she would stop, but this might be her final time with Zachary. She was revitalized the moment she decided to go. This one small thing lifted her out of the abyss. This was a slice of life in a world full of the lifeless.

Once again, she put on the dress he liked the most and went to meet her husband. She sat in a dwindling crowd of noisy, laughing somebodies—and awaited Zachary’s arrival. She tried to detach herself from the shrill sounds and foul odors, but something stretched over the divide between her and her surroundings. A word. A terrible whisper. Someone behind her in a casual conversation said “accident.” She slunk her head down and held her breath. She placed the palms of her hands over her eyelids and pressed. She didn’t want to see. That’s why she came. She needed this image of him, this projection, so she could erase the picture of him being crushed behind a deflated airbag.

She detested every single person in the theater. They were a plague on her. She felt like they were all working on her somehow. Zachary was always well-mannered and helpful to those around him. At all times he thought about the well-being of others. From the time he took over his father’s trucking company, he had tried to invent ways of creating stability, reassurance, and comfort in his employee’s work. He wanted those who worked in the office to have a full complement of personal days and the best ergonomic chairs on the market. Those in the garage were offered several breaks and catered lunches each workday. His father, although retired, would always tell him a sympathetic approach would sink the business for everyone. Zachary would chuckle and tell him that comfort didn’t equate to laziness, it paralleled security.

The movie started. Her moment didn’t come until 52 minutes into the film. It was a poorly written comedy about the exploits of two college buddies bumbling across the country to find love—it was a ridiculous place to see Zachary. He was only in the scene by chance—he was walking along the street in the background during filming. The moment was captured coincidentally, and now it was his unlikely reflection still operating in the world. The editors of the film had seen the moment and kept it as a trifling

flash of authenticity. The story itself had little to do with reality, but fate saw it fit to keep something of Zachary's life prolonged.

Allison tried to comprehend it, to get a sense of what it would mean. Even this one trivial gesture of his would cease to exist in the world. She knew she should have stopped going. She never intended to see the movie dozens of times over the past three weeks. Each time she told herself it would be the last. Sure, there were DVD's and Blue-rays, and the movie would be streaming in a few weeks, but Zachary wouldn't be out in the open. He wouldn't be interacting with crowds or even the acned teenagers running the dump. Zachary wouldn't be there any longer, waiting to be seen. Instead, he would be thrown out with the film—compacted—debris—trash.

Allison scooted up in her chair and took the longest breath of her life. She needed fresh air, but she couldn't leave now. She couldn't miss Zachary. Her fingernails dug into the armrests. She would not be moved.

The two actors in the movie have reached the sidewalk—they stop. The woman talking on her cell phone appears at the top left of the screen. And there, as the woman circles, the baby! The two lead characters begin their long, drawn out argument. People pass and pay no attention to the baby or the wom-

an. Then, as if hailing something unseen, her hands go up towards the screen. She sees her husband. The tears in her eyes blur him down to a silhouette, but his gait is unmistakable. She imagines he walks right off the screen and down the aisle. It's the opposite scene of their wedding day, but the ending in her mind's eye is the same... they leave together.

Zachary sees the baby. He goes up to the woman holding him over her shoulder; he is speaking to him, trying to calm his disquiet. The woman never notices Zachary, and she continues her conversation unaware. Allison can almost hear the warmth and kindness of his voice as he speaks to the baby. He looks down—finds a tiny shoe, gently places it back on the child's foot and secures it. Anyone else would have picked up the shoe and handed it to the mother. There is only so much effort most people will inject into their good deeds. Then he says something to the child—performs a peek-a-boo—then walks away.

But the baby cries at his absence. He can't let go of this warmhearted man. Zachary turns and makes a silly face. Again, he turns to go. But just before he passes from sight, he looks back over his shoulder and smiles. Then Zachary is gone.

She would always sit for a minute or two after the scene. She was steeped in the magic and did

not want the miracle to give out. She didn't possess it though. That's why she attended every screening possible—to grasp for something she could not seize.

When the charm had passed, she got up from her seat and left. It was the most challenging exit she endured to this point. She was so drained that when her brother approached her, she wasn't shocked or mad. She had told him before she had to deal with this in her way, in her own time. She begged him to leave her alone. Now, here he was, staring her in the face. But it didn't matter tonight. He didn't say much. There was pity in his eyes.

"Oh, Allison. I thought you wouldn't do this anymore," he said.

"How did you know I came out here?" she asked.

"I went to your house. When you weren't there, I Google'd 'Spitting Distance' show times."

"I don't know why you came all the way out here."

"Allison, C'mon," he said, "I wish Heather never told you about this!"

It was Heather who told her that Zachary was in "Spitting Distance." She was reluctant to tell Allison at first but thought if she were in the same situation she would want to know. Allison's brother didn't support it from the beginning. He thought it would only lead to more heartbreak.

Everything seemed backward to Allison tonight. She knew she wouldn't be staying by herself now. Her brother would take her home to his family instead. She didn't have enough fight left in her to say no. She went with him, listless, trudging forward in a senseless world.

For the next two weeks that was her existence. Her brother and sister-in-law talked to her about things like hope and hobbies. Allison offered no challenges to their assertions. They were right, but she didn't have the inner strength to follow through on anything. They didn't understand—they had no idea how it was with her and Zachary. Now that he was gone, it was impossible for her to do what they wanted her to, to be the person she was before the accident.

The more people that reached out to her, the more isolated she felt. She knew they couldn't connect with her. So, in desperation, she searched the internet for start times. Drained by the exertion of keeping herself from searching and overwhelmed by the dread she had waited too long, she set her concentration on reaching Zachary.

She came across an old theater almost 400 miles away that played out of favor and second run movies at a bargain price. If she left at once and didn't hit much traffic, she could make the last show at 9:40 pm. She decided, and everything

else was a blur. Panic drove her. Every cell in her body was pressing forward. The animated confect-ions had already danced across the screen when she arrived nearly seven hours later.

She had never been this late before and could not sit where she normally would. She was livid. Just as Allison took a seat, a man with two small children plopped right next to her. The father looked over at Allison and smiled as if he were pleased to be welcomed by her. Allison did nothing. She wanted to be alone, but as always, she didn't want anyone to focus on her, so she chose not to get up and move.

Allison knew this was the last time she would see Zachary engage with the world. She tried to prepare mentally, but the only thing she wanted was to lunge at him tonight, to grab him. If she didn't get hold of him tonight, she never would. She knew she could reach Zachary if she could only—

She didn't know how to finish it. She just knew he could be reached.

The little girl seated next to her fidgeted in her seat and kept stealing stares at Allison. Allison did her best to ignore the child's presence. She tried to erase the entire crowd in her mind. She needed to clear them out, push them off to the sides so he could glide down the aisle toward her. But she couldn't shake the child. It was late, almost

ten, and she was too young to be out so late. She was repeatedly yawning. As Zachary's moment in the movie approached, Allison was too aware of the child who had fallen asleep. Her head had dropped awkwardly between the two seats. She looked very uncomfortable. Allison's irritation was palpable. This was her last opportunity with Zachary—her last.

The moment had arrived when something went wrong. The screen flickered and pixilated. There was a terrible whirr of feedback. After the two jokers on screen reached the sidewalk, and just as Zachary was about to appear, there was a skip—a blue screen—a mishmash of images. It was like a collision—it looked like time ceasing to be.

"No! Oh my god!" she said struggling for breath. Those around her booed and joked.

"It was awful anyway!"

"Where's my refund?"

"Someone's getting fired tonight!"

They laughed. They didn't care. The movie continued off-center, she could just make out Zachary hunched over fixing the baby's shoe—but it was leaping around—and everyone was cackling. And then—it froze on Zachary. The picture steadied on Zachary's smile before he left the scene. It was like Zachary was lingering, waiting for that beam to reach Allison. Out of the distortion and confusion—out of the wounds and the insignifi-

cant—Zachary was steady, making everything tolerable.

As the movie was restored and continued, Allison positioned her shoulder under the little's girls unsupported head without waking her. After she did it, she felt something emerging. So much of her effort was wasted pushing others aside and lurking in the shadows waiting for Zachary. She understood that following his image was not the way to reach him. She waited each time for a moment to arrive, yet there were endless chances among those she believed to be in the way. Zachary had always done the thoughtful things—as he had done with the baby's shoe. She repositioned herself so that the child could find comfort and that is where she found the truth. For the first time since she lost him, she had him. For all the people in the theater and all the people in the world, this was the truth! It mended and absolved as Zachary's smile had restored the movie. The closer she moved toward others the closer she moved toward him.

Homeless VII

One wheel is broken
on my shopping cart
and I can't fix it.

The guys at the supermarket
are real watchful these days,
so I can't swipe another one.

Maybe I can snag
one of those postal carts
with the cloth sides,
so no one can see
what's inside.

A Jar of mayonnaise explodes

open after too many days in darkness
and unyielding heat. Its lid and seal
both expanded, one after the other,
to let loose, not food poisoning, they are
after all, newly made of pasteurized eggs
with little risk of contamination. And fear
of death has lost its meaning since life
on earth has been given a death sentence
with no hope of a parole, and no chance
of an after-the-fact presidential pardon.
Global warming. Climate change. Call it
what you will – a kick-your-own-ass ending.

A Pipe of Ghosted Smoke

For Bill Shuter

Incense clothed me
in an aisle of remembering,
incense of a dark church,
incense of tobacco smoke.

He turned his faith my way
and spoke in Greek and Aramaic
as I shrugged off his forgetting
his own birthday was the day
before mine.

“Writing poetry is not the same
as reading Pater.” No,
we crossed those words
when New Year’s Eve welcomed us
with an agnostic recitation
of Wallace Stevens and red wine.

His monk's condo
wore walls of horizontal books
and he laid his hand on one
I had neglected to read.
“Do you remember the index?
Or the rare book room
on the ninth level?”

Before I could answer,
he decided that Rome and New York
were both empty now,
wrapped in the odors of it all
as if in greasy butcher paper.
Outside the snow phantomed
to the earth in careful, quiet crystals.

“We all most live until we don't.”
The light behind him,
his gray beard like gray dust
haloing his red lips,
as if a pipe still hung there
drifting with silence.

So late, too late, his glands
defeated, his life force
unjuiced and as still as a song
etched into unplayed vinyl
sheathed into its musty sleeve.

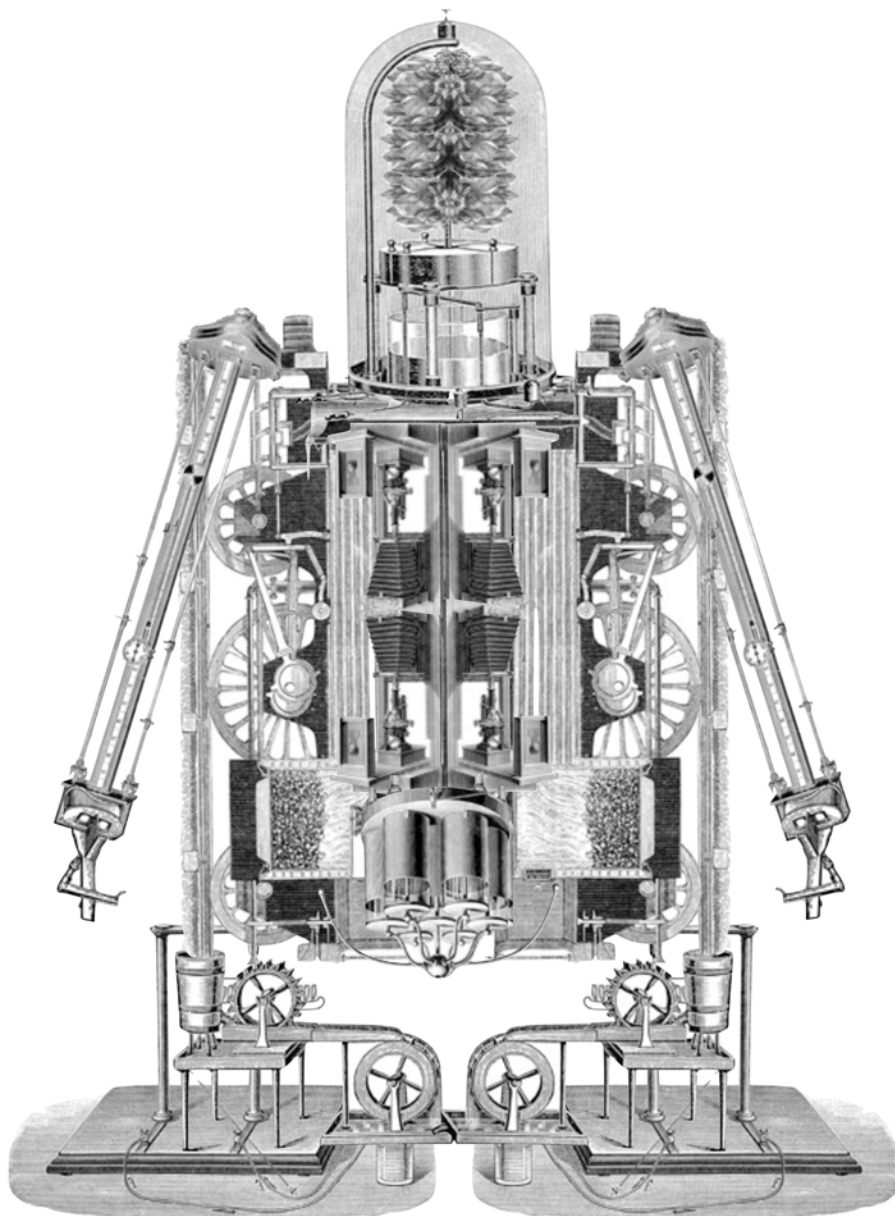
“Somewhere, the train I wanted
has missed its station.”
Midnight paused us between days,
and I looked for the flowers
that I should hold.

I walked the hallway to his kitchen
where cheese and bread and olive oil
would have been plated
for this holiest of secular Seders,
this mass of empty syllables
spoken in an English with no dictionary.

When I turned back, he was
absent like a shadow gone
when too much light casts itself
into the darkest corner
of a cold room.

vI sat into his reading chair,
tasted the perfume of his
burnt tobacco, and looked hard
into hands prayer-full
of empty smoke.

Unsettling as the Strobe Light's Hesitation



Yellow does not have a season,

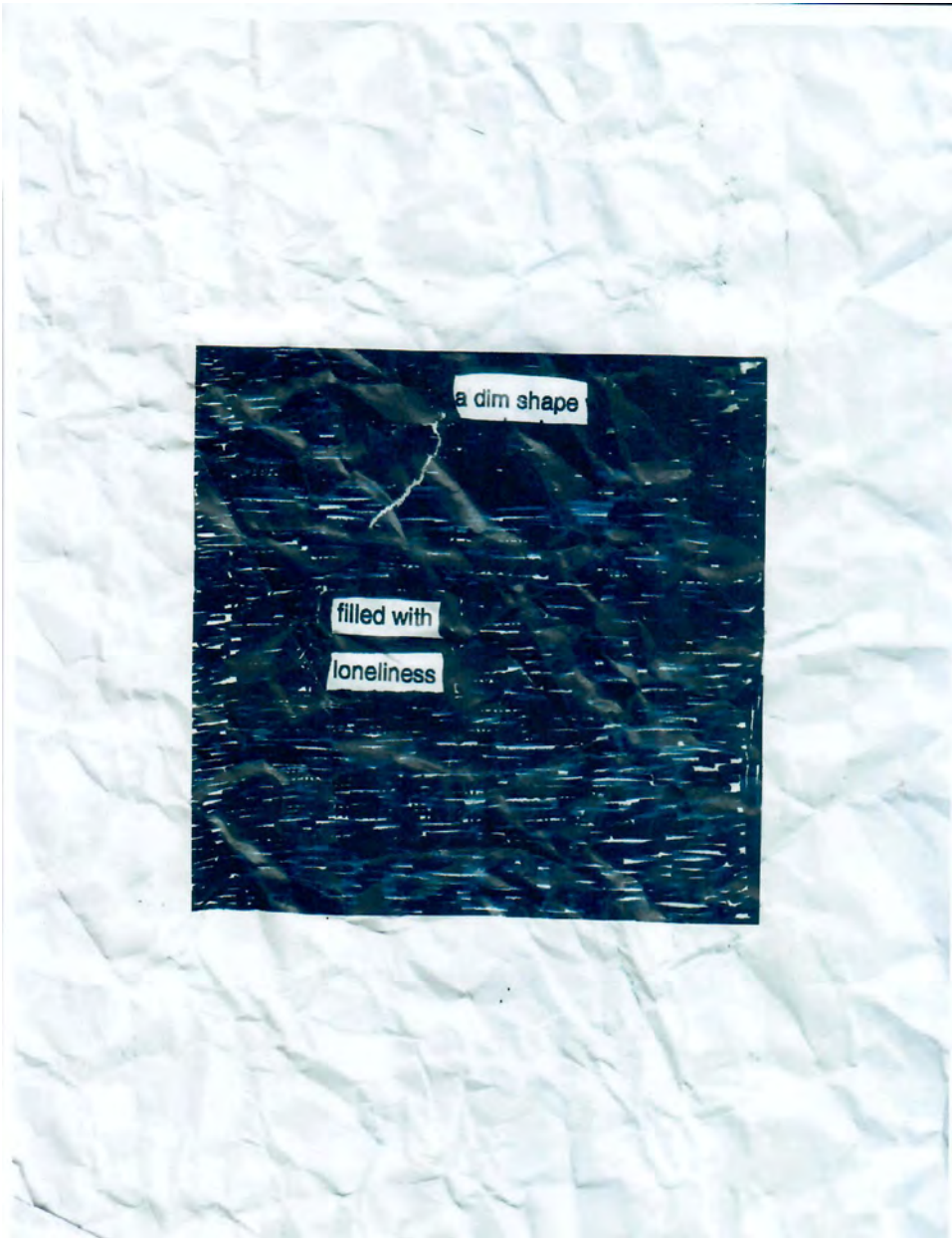
is not limited to the roadsides of New Mexico in fall, when swaths of wild sunflowers wave their cheery salutation to passers-by, and the Sangre de Cristo mountains are daubed with cheerful yellow aspens, amid brooding dark green pines.

Yellow, for me, is the color of happy. My childhood bedroom curtains, vibrant yellow, rendering every morning bright and sunny, even in overcast England, and my bedroom wallpaper of broad yellow stripes with musical instruments parading down the walls, playing their hidden melodies to my impressionable young ears.

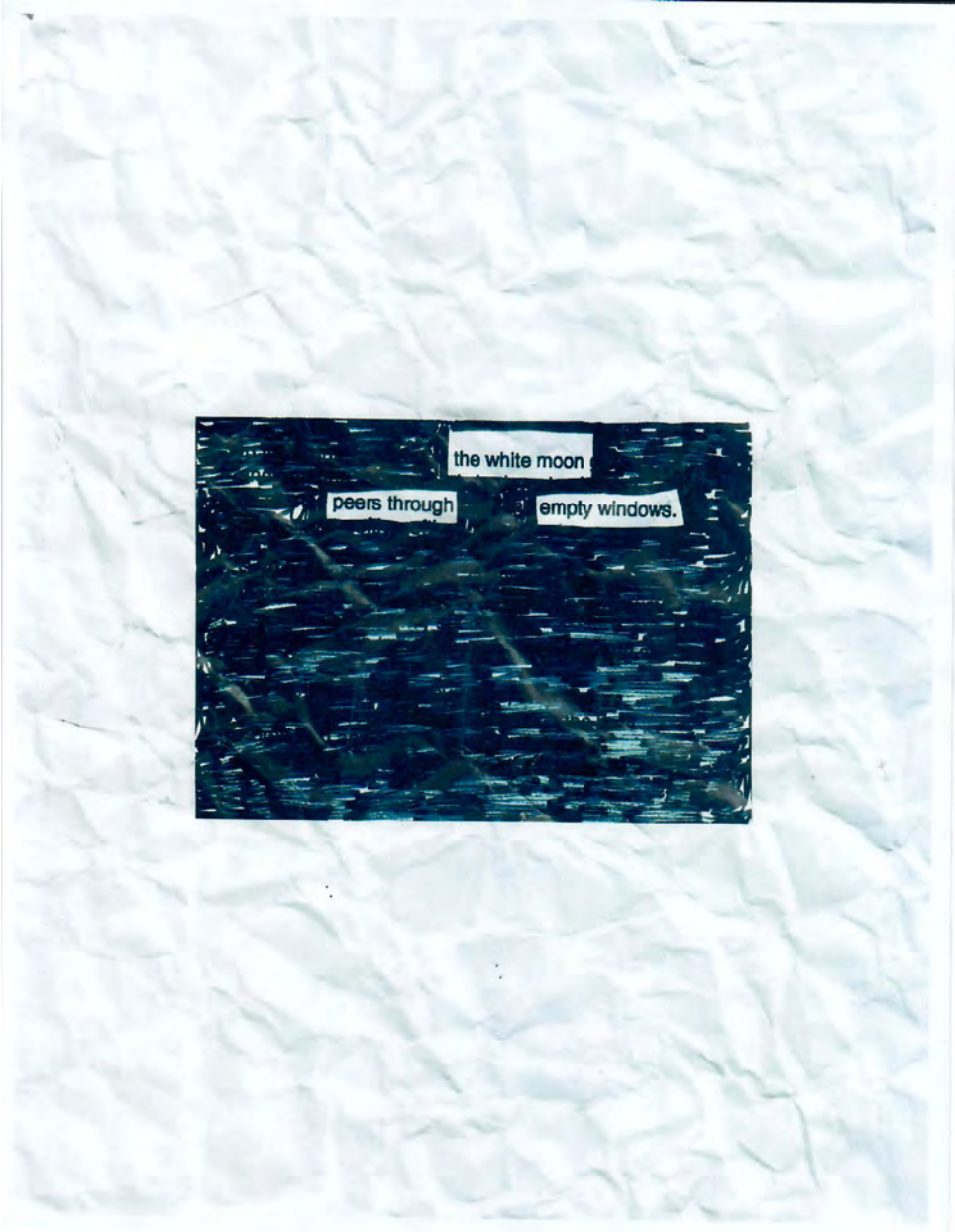
Yellow belongs to Mercury, and stimulates the nervous system, confers a quick intellect and wisdom, or so tradition has it, and this the Buddha knew, so he clothed his monks in saffron robes. I like to meditate on a piece of topaz-colored silk, a sari edged with gold, purchased in India, and feel certain my practice is exalted by the color yellow.

The year is strangely quiet











The year is

strangely quiet.

love is

a dim shape

filled with
loneliness

A deer bleeds on the hill

the white moon
peers through empty windows.

an icy wind sweeps
Over our graves

--Theresa Williams

Source: *Dark Seasons: A Selection of Georg Trakl Poems*, trans. from the German by Robin Skelton. Broken Jaw Press, 1994. Pages 13, 15, 17, 19, and 27

The Last Car

Riding in the last car, keeping watch,
yellowing cairns recede into the earth
while smoke glides from the stack
and stalks after the train as one's eye
longing for thirst may hold fast
to a cistern.

The track's clink is reminiscent of
a clock with its works stretched out
indefinitely. Dirt lengths magnified
in glints of the aft window
are the only metric of time passing.
From the window there is no train.
Each moment sees the ground
retreat, a tableland is not one stone
yet each monolith shrinks to little
more than a stain before fading
entirely.

Having wandered a long way off,
sharing a last word, couplings talk
with silver that faintly sounds
from the confines of the drawers
in the dining car. Not all objects
of value can be left behind
or driven into the earth with a spike.
Broad swaths of the landscape pass
and each is just another place where
the train refuses to stop.

Untitled



The Magnolia Review Ink Award

The Magnolia Review Ink Award Winner is “Meditations on the Creation” by Nathan Dennis. The imagery created a relatable experience to modern readers, and the repetition of dialogue is a wonderful view into the self-doubt yet continued persistence that plagues all artists and creators.

Honorable mentions are “In the Morning, They Disappear” by J. B. Santillan and “Recovery” by Wade McCullough. /Santillan’s prose about death, dreams, and collection is a fascinating take on how obsession can either connect one to the world or shut it out entirely, and McCullough’s poetry and collage growing into color show a wonderful sequence of the creation of something beautiful from nothing.

Aretha Lemon is a graduate of the Bowling Green State University Creative Writing program with poems published in the *Prairie Margins* literary magazine and the Silver Birch Press.

Letter from the Editor

Welcome to the ninth issue of The Magnolia Review. Great news is still on its way! In November 2018 I launched a Kickstarter project to get Volume 4, Issue 1, and Volume 4, Issue 2 in print. Even though the project did not reach its goal and therefore did not receive any funding, I do appreciate and want to thank every person who backed the project. I especially want to thank those who have donated since then to help with the mailing costs, since I used my savings to print copies of Volume 4, Issue 1. Copies are available for \$15 each, through PayPal on the site, or just send a check to Suzanna Anderson at PO Box 1332, Reynoldsburg, OH 43068. Shipping is \$4. The goal is still to hand each contributor two free copies of his or her work, and ship them for every issue of The Magnolia Review. So I am working on translating the archived issues into InDesign and into print form. That is the goal for 2019. The ideal goal is for the past issues to fund the upcoming issue's contributor copies and mailing costs.

This is the first issue where there is a paywall from the start for the entire magazine. There will always be a free sample available, to help those who just want a glimpse to see if his or her work is compatible with the magazine. I do not want to prevent people from submitting just because they do not have the money to pay \$15 per issue. The literary magazine world and publishing world has been changing with the advent of digital publishing. People are still reading books. People are still writing words. People are still creating art.

This issue's theme was Lost and Found. Volume 5, Issue 2, out in July, the theme is questions.

Let's do our part, by writing our words, creating our artwork, and sharing our words and artwork with the world. 2019 is going to be great. Thank you for reading, and check out the next issue in July 2019.

Suzanna Anderson

Editor-in-Chief and Founder of The Magnolia Review

Reviews

Blunt Force by Gary Beck. United Kingdom: Wordcatcher Publishing, 2018. 110 pages. \$5.99, electronic, \$10.99 paperback.

It is always a pleasure to read Gary Beck's words. *Blunt Force* is no different. This poetry collection explores the military, homelessness, and other crises that people deal with on a regular basis.

The poem "Combat Zone" is a perfect example of what it means to be a soldier and return to home, only to be reminded of the battlefield: "Bursts of fire, / bodies duck for cover, / hug the earth / hope they don't get hit, / time seems to stop / until the gunshots end / and they resume play / in a Bronx park." The turn of the final two lines draws the reader and the speaker into the present environment, and how quickly PTSD can flash back.

In "Rain Delay," the two stanzas mirror each other, as one waits for the rain to stop so "...I can go to the park / for a concert" and in the second stanza, "Someone else / sits indoors, / tense, / frustrated, / hoping / for / the / rain / to start, / so he can save his crop / from drought."

Protest is a common theme with the original "Protest" and eight more numbered poems throughout the collection. In "Protest IX," the speaker is part of the group that sets up tents; however, "but the wealthy mayor / ordered tents

taken down / so we'd melt away / with the first snow, / stop annoying / the servants of privilege, / yet some of us stayed / despite the coming freeze / hoping Americans / might remember Valley Forge."

—Suzanna Anderson

The Remission of Order by Gary Beck. Amazon Digital Services LLC, 2018. 139 pages. \$5.99, electronic, \$11.99, paperback.

Gary Beck's poetry explores the problems of homelessness, starvation, and other crises that Americans face in living paycheck to paycheck or losing their homes, as well as their actions in fighting overseas or at home. In "Purple Heart Revisited" "Our children shed / invisible blood. / The scars are real, / ongoing agonies / with slow recovery, urging us to heal / unseen wounds / with medals of appreciation / for hazardous service" (16)

Beck's language is strong and on point throughout. "Voices of the Dead II" the speaker looks to a grandmother for advice, but the speaker did not listen to her advice when she was alive, and "Now I'm at a crossroads / between criminal acts / and the need for something else, / a better, safer future / where I don't hurt anyone." (23).

In “Disregard” the repetition of dreams and then the speaker falls into unconscious activity: “Dreams of falling / from perilous heights / snap us awake / just before impact. / Dreams of pursuit / by malevolent hordes / snap us awake / just before capture. / Unconscious activity / denies nature’s mandate / for refreshing rest, / designed to prepare us / for demanding tomorrows” (36).

The “demanding tomorrows” come in “Hallowed Be Thy Gun” where the family’s musket is handed down through the generations to fight in America’s wars and conflicts (44).

Yet at home the problems of food and hunger linger, especially in “A La Carte” “The manager lurks in the doorway / puffing on a cigarette. / No customers move past him. / The stove grows cold, / the food grows old, / the waiters hulk near tables, / captives of unused menus” (40). The theme of hunger continues in “Motivation” where “hungry elephants stampede, and “...people forgot / that the big beasts / couldn’t go shopping for food / at the local supermarket” (99).

Even with the pain of the past, present, and the bleak future at first glance, there is still hope. In “Seasonal Yearning,” the speaker says, “When winter gifts its killing cold / and distant hopes of spring grow old, / I know that I will surely miss / the blossoms of the clematis” (112). America has had problems in the past and will continue to have problems in the future, but there is hope that life will improve for everyone

—Suzanna Anderson

Overhead from Longing by Judith Alexander Brice. Cincinnati, OH: David Robert Books, 2018. 130 pages. \$20.00, paperback.

Brice opens the collection with a quote from Barbara Crooker, *Radiance*, with “Sometimes, I am startled out of myself / like this morning, when the wild geese came squawking.... [and yet] / They stitch up the sky, and it is whole again.” The first poem is “The geese stitch up the sky,” and the first stanza asks, “Or is it each and every one of the birds— / not just the flying geese— / but our warbler, oriole and kite / who in our dimmest, darkest hours, / can frisk our pockets of despair?” (15).

Brice has brilliant choices of words, too many to list here. But one of my favorites from “Migraine” is “Heaving shadows blacken my mind, / mist all grass underfoot, and drench / me in fields with desolate dark— // though quickly a Towhee trill / might quaver me awake, / rustle my blighted brain, / even grab its bilious gaze // to catch silken embers of sun / as they topaz the sky” (27). And in “These three years—” the pain of waiting rooms and doctors suggesting a walker, “More anguish / than a soul could know / more struggle / than a poem can own” (106-107).

The title poem “Overhead from Longing,” is dedicated to Charlie, April 19, 2017, where “Sometimes, your voice catches me / from beyond and overhead, from your longing / love—I think of your timbre, / the tremolo and cords it strikes, reminiscent / always of starlings, their cantabile

speech, / as they learned to sing—no, talk, to Mozart” (37).

In “Vespers of Fireflies,” the indentations of the line are like the flash of fireflies in the image of “a four year old / had just been given / a brand new / flashlight / (a tiny one for sure) / and all the while delighted / in jumping / from creaking log / up to rock / then down / to swampy bog, / each second switching / his winking wand / on, / then off, / then on / once more” (85).

Brice’s poems explore memory, birds, pain, and more. This is a beautiful collection that is a must-have on the bookshelf, shared with friends, and reread often.

—Suzanna Anderson

Bombing the Thinker by Darren C. Demaree. Gardena, CA: Backlash Press, 2018. 152 pages. \$, paperback.

Demaree opens with “A Letter to Auguste Rodin about Useless Wine,” and “We’ve been mud / & bird // & dealt with / terrible loneliness” and “again was left / wanting // more bronze, / more marble” (9-10).

In “A Letter to Auguste Rodin, Explaining the Bombing of the Thinker,” the speaker says, “We know there can be / no comfort for a dead man // about a cloned son / that never actually lived, / but this felt like the right // thing to do under such / circumstances. We’ve / decided not to heal him. // He will remain un-alive. / He will be placed back on / his pedestal, without repair” (37-38).

Because the Thinker was “Originally Named the Poet” it is interesting how Demaree uses that name in poetry to see that “If he had stayed / simply The Poet // that fire would / have ruined him. // He stayed scarred. / He stayed here” (66).

There are moments of imagination, like in “A Damaged Thinker #20” where “...I heard none // of the explosion, because I was / too taken by a neck that won’t / move. I fell face-first. I felt // cheated by the placement / of the dynamite. If I fell back, / I could have had the sky” (47-48).

There are moments of humor, like when the speaker whispers a dirty joke in The Thinker’s ear, or in “Poem #164 about the Thinker Bombing Makes Me Laugh” that the crash from the pedestal was instead from a moment where The Thinker “just tried // to stand up / after a hundred years / of weight // & thought / he fell, splayed / against the concrete, // his legs bronzed / & asleep from effort, / his embarrassment // too much to explain” (116).

It was joy to read Demaree’s collection about The Thinker and art, exploring art and poetry together, and playing with language and line breaks.

—Suzanna Anderson

Lady, You Shot Me by Darren C. Demaree. Montreal, Canada: 8th House Publishing, 2018. 78 pages. \$14.88, paperback.

Demaree studied the music and narratives of Sam Cooke. In “Decorating the Phrase,” the tercet stanzas begin with “Every word / shares two skins / with the tongue // that releases it / into the world / & Sam Cooke // could lift / & separate / the same word // fifteen times / in a row / & you would // still believe / there was a soul / in the repetition” (5).

Because Sam Cooke was a singer and composer, the musical elements wove into the poems like “Crop” and “A Harmony So Tight You Could See It In the Air.” In “Crop,” “Some songs / begin with a tether, / but they never end // that way / & if they try to / they become hymn // for a God / that might allow / such harness // to be attached / to the rockets / of one man // opening / the back of his throat / to charge the heavens” (6). Music is more than a sound, it touches other senses in “A Harmony So Tight You Could See It In the Air” ““If there is a music to save / us, we must rub it // all over our bodies, / until the scent overwhelms / the rest of the empty air” (20).

“Lady, You Shot Me #16” with the repeating line “Don’t fight it” at the beginning of the stanzas is well placed, and the repetition is striking when read aloud.

Don’t fight it,
the feeling always
burns at first.

Don’t fight it,
the feeling always
confuses the witness.

Don’t fight it,
the feeling always
ends with a shutter.

Don’t fight it,
the feeling is always
a story we tell.

(23)

Demaree’s collection about Sam Cooke is a fantastic read, especially while listening to Sam Cooke sing.

—Suzanna Anderson

Never One for Promises by Sarah A. Etlinger. American Fork, Utah: Kelsay Books, 2018. 49 pages. \$14.00, paperback.

I studied music for years. All of those years learning to read the notes and play in rhythm was an education in itself and paved the way for poetry. But Sarah Etlinger's poetry is music, an education in the rhythm and space of silence within those musical melodies. I first read her work when she submitted to *The Magnolia Review*, and I was immediately captivated. I rarely accept entire packets, but Etlinger's was one of the few. Etlinger's poetry is a beautiful collection of images of lovers and how they connect and disconnect. From Noah to Zeus to Kant readers to God on the subway, Etlinger carries the reader through a narrative of love, hope, and loss.

In "Summer Aubade," the speaker begins "Sometimes we feel more than we ever are: // hammocked in your arms / we fade into summer's / constellations / ... until dawn erases the stars." Such a beautiful way to end a poem! The depth of Etlinger's word choice is striking in every line, a word never out of place, a line break just so pretty perfect that I can't imagine this poem existing in a different way. Her word choices are precise and open the world into possibilities that I couldn't imagine without her voicing them. Images I've seen but haven't described in such gorgeous detail. I can't even choose a favorite poem because I love them all.

I hope the reader enjoys every word in this collection as much as I have. Defi-

nitely on the list of poetry that I will come back repeatedly. Etlinger's work is a presence you need in your life. I look forward to reading her next poetry collection.

—Suzanna Anderson

An Absolutely Remarkable Thing by Hank Green. New York: Dutton, 2018. 352 pages. \$26.00, hardcover.

I reread Patrick Rothfuss's words on the back cover several times: "Fun and full of truth. To be honest, I'm a little irritated at how good the book is. I don't need this kind of competition." Because I agree that this book is good, and it is Hank Green's first novel. The reader goes on a journey with April May as she finds a giant sculpture and makes a video with her friend Andy that goes viral. She deals with the fame and makes discoveries about the sculpture.

Overall I loved the use of emails and Tweets in the novel. Since April May won fame from social media and the Internet, it is only appropriate to share them in the story. The subject line is included, like **NO! THIS ONE! READ THIS ONE FIRST!** and **READ THIS ONE FIRST** and **You said it was warm?** followed by the email itself (20-23). And the tweets, for example,

March 17

@PrimPat1ot: Sometimes I wonder how much people like April May are being paid to shill for the government.

@AprilMaybeNot: They pay me in PopTarts. So. Many. PopTarts. Why did I sign this deal? I have a problematic number of PopTarts. (169)

But perhaps my favorite part of the novel is not only watching April May deal with the sudden rise to fame, but her theory of tiered fame. I will only share a portion of it here.

Tier 1: Popularity

You are a big deal in your high school or neighborhood. You have a peculiar vehicle that people around town recognize, you are a pastor at a medium-to-large church, you were once the star of the high school football team.

Tier 2: Notoriety

You are recognized and/or well-known within certain circles.

Tier 3: Working-Class Fame

A lot of people know who you are and they are distributed around the world.

Tier 4: True Fame

You get recognized by fans enough that it is a legitimate burden.

Tier 5: Divinity

You are known by every person in your world, and you are such a big deal that they no longer consider you a person. ...You are not currently alive.” (121-122).

An exciting read that I could not put down until I finished it. I hope you enjoy it as much as I do, and recommend it highly to others.

—Suzanna Anderson

Mark the Dwarf by Jack D. Harvey.
Amazon Digital Services LLC, 2015.
328 pages. \$2.99, electronic.

Mark is an elderly dwarf living in Phoenix, Arizona. He receives two mysterious letters and embarks on a quest filled with interesting characters in novel situations. I laughed throughout the story, and even though I did not understand every allusion to history and literature, I was still able to enjoy the story.

Harvey’s language is top notch, and there are too many examples to quote them all. Mark goes bowling and finds himself in a new adventure: “He held a hand up in front of his face, but could see nothing. After a short period of time, Mark had a sensation of descending at a tremendous rate of speed—like being in an elevator free-falling through space. Mark remembered something he read about Einstein’s Special Theory of Relativity and an elevator—the concept of no frame of reference; a simple analogy for the common reader and this analogy had always frightened him....Mark waited motionless for what was coming next. Slowly, the pitch-black dark gave way to grayness and then to a kind of pearl gray that seemed to emanate from every direction. Mark began to

make out some features far below him, emerging from the mist. As the air cleared and visibility was restored, he realized immediately that he was high up in the air, maybe a thousand feet or more from the ground or whatever the surface was below and that he was sitting on the edge of a dilapidated cement sill that stretched on as far as he could see. The flat green surface below was so far away that he might as well have been in an airplane for all the detail he could make out—was this a shallow green sea or a green landscape? The only thing that he could be sure of was that the color of the surface below was green; a green that was indescribable and almost unendurable to look at; the greenness of green, the color green, stripped of its disguises.”

This is one of the most original books that I have read in a long while. Whimsical and full of truth, Harvey explores the elements of time, clowns, and what it means to be living in this modern world of ours.

—Suzanna Anderson

The Frayed Edge of Memory by James Croal Jackson. Cleveland, OH: Writing Knights Press, 2017. 44 pages. \$10.00, paperback.

I have been reading James Croal Jackson's work since he submitted poetry to the Volume 1, Issue 2 of *The Magnolia Review*. I'm thrilled that his work is also in Volume 3, Issue 2 and Volume 4, Issue 2. It is exciting to read his collection *The Frayed Edge of Memory*

and share with you a selection of my favorite lines, though really I would share the entire collection.

In “All the Bulbs are Burning Out,” the speaker begins, “I am scared to death / of death. // Not just the *big* death / but tiny deaths, too. // All the bulbs are burning out / in my house one by one. // In living, we accrue small darkneses. // Mirror to mirror: void / where my eyes should be” (6). Jackson's language is strong as he builds his images. The build up to the line “we accrue small darkneses” is just one of those hooks of truth that you immediately recognize when you read it. Small darkneses! Yes, that is what that is!

His short poems are as powerful as the longer poems. One of the short poems in the collection, “Freckles,” connects counting sheep in order to sleep with music: “Your freckles / count more easily / than make-believe sheep // I count in / quarter-note trills // remnants // between loneliness / and / sleep” (8).

Fog recurs throughout the collection. In “Foggy Mornings,” the speaker says, “When mirrors were our only reflections, / our pasts—behind / doors rusted, opened only to / reveal slow decisions— / lovers like mud / in shallow potholes” (9).

Jackson's language in “Utah Sandstone” propels forward through the lines, “I run from exceptional red. / Distance. Majestic arches. Loop- / de-loop of common want. Canyons, / or peace of mind. Say Zen. Say / Zion. Watch as wind-up forests / spiral from sand. Leaves whisper” (15).

The collection's title comes from "Skeletons of New Year's Eve" where "...hope is like a kaleidoscope, a conjecture. / Each dying wave returns, even at the frayed edge // of memory, how the dead are lavish with flowers / and stories. Still, we press on to uncork // our champagne future: drafts of breath in each / new year, dead waves haunting the mortal tide // with no specific beginning, no obvious end" (16). A poem often shares a title with the collection. However, the title of this collection comes from a line in "Skeletons of New Year's Eve," and that is refreshing, especially since the strength of "frayed edge // of memory" with the line break is powerful in the poem.

I hope you enjoy this collection, and I look forward to reading more of Jackson's work in the future.

—Suzanna Anderson

Mishigamaa by Robert Krantz. Amazon Digital Services LLC, 2017. 22 pages. \$5.38, paperback.

Krantz submitted to the first issue of *The Magnolia Review*. His poems are magnetic and show poetic mastery. His language builds strong and lasting images. His chosen language sounds a melodious music to read aloud, a rhythm that you have to play to completion.

In "Pearl," the speaker begins with, "I remember the wheat fields / of Iowa and the photograph / of you I took with me, / and how neither ever really ended." The speaker continues, "We

ate and loved / much in that decade, / collided with stars, / authored myths / and stuffed our age-spotted hands / into denim pockets." The image and sound carries through the lines, building to the final image of "The half shells we find on beaches / were once a thing joined together, / breathing, and grinding / new pearls into place." The poem builds like a pearl, with the images stringing together into a cohesive piece.

Laundry can be boring. The speaker reflects on his fellow laundry-doers in "Load," where "The bachelors in the laundromat / spill their words / like bleach / on black clothes, / speak of condos / and alimonies— / thick humidities turning." The clothes transform into more, they are "damp thoughts" as they wash, and they "... breathe[s] / restless poems / into my blues and grays. / Soon this summer rain / will end, volume of water / striking pavement / will knob itself silent." Krantz ends the poem with a moment that draws the reader back to the reality of the laundromat, "The cash machine, / against the flecked wall, / reminds me to change."

The collection ends with "Pathfinder," about a hatchet and its story. It shares the story of two boys cutting down a tree and of a sibling wrestling game gone awry.

Overall, Krantz's poems are musical and full of images that inspire looking at mundane events in a new and interesting way. I look forward to reading more of Krantz's work.

—Suzanna Anderson

Firefly: Big Damn Hero by James Lovegrove. London: Titan Books, 2018. 336 pages. \$20.66, hardcover.

With fourteen episodes, a movie, a graphic novel, and a board game, *Firefly* has hooked the hearts of many. And with this novel of the crew on another adventure, it is a rip-roaring fun time. There are summaries throughout to ground the reader where the book takes place in the episode timeline. For example, the crew takes a job from Badger, and when River mimics his accent, “Oi, bint, none of your lip,” Badger retorted, but truth was, he had a soft spot for River, cultivated last time they’d met, when he’d held the crew hostage. ‘I washed before I come ‘ere today. Clean as a whistle’” (18).

Simon is still trying to undo the Alliance’s damage to River, and “After he had decoded the letters River sent from the Academy—the Alliance-run experimental center that had methodically driven her mad—Simon had spent countless sleepless nights wondering if she was dead. In a way, she was. The fantasy of her future had turned to dust” (124).

The reader learns more about Mal’s past and his coming of age on the planet Shadow with flashbacks. The reader meets the Four Amigos, Mal’s friends and cohorts on Shadow.

The Chinese is still present, *Tā mā de* and *Gǒu shǐ* and *mèi mèi*. It was pleasing to see the Chinese woven into the text and the story. Overall it was fun read to spend time with the crew as they delivered cargo and encountered conflicts along the way.

Titan Books has two more upcoming titles in the *Firefly* universe, *The Magnificent Nine* by James Lovegrove, available March 2019, and *Generations* by Tim Lebbon, available October 2019.

—Suzanna Anderson

I Exist. Therefore I Am by Shirani Rajapakse. Amazon Digital Services LLC, 2018. 179 pages. \$7.99, electronic. \$15.99, paperback.

Rajapakse has traveled to India often, and these stories “...were written at two stages of my life and represents the eight years I spent in India, working and travelling to cities and also some of the remote places where I encountered many instances of negativity towards women and girls. Some of the incidents I came across or heard about are too painful to recount or fictionalize. The tales I have included here are a mere fraction of the lives touched during my stay.”

In “Drink Your Milk and Go to Sleep,” a married woman continues to carry girls while her husband and mother-in-law want a boy child. Her family takes her to a midwife who “...was famed for helping women with problems. She must be good because women from all over the land visited her to find

solutions to their sorrows. She didn't talk much. There was no time for any words as it was obvious why we were all there. She had lots of customers like me waiting to be served every day. She gave me something to drink when I got home."

As a widow, Gayathri Devi was "... waiting to die" in the story "On Death Row." In the beginning of the story, Gayathri Devi "...had been sitting here in the same place for a while, not caring about what happened around her. She'd seen the colors change in the sky a thousand and one times and more and was no longer interested. Was no longer overjoyed. She no longer anticipated the fading beauty of the end of the day as she did the first time she arrived." The widows "...were a burden on the young, an unnecessary life that needed to be cared for, fed, clothed and helped along the way. There was no time, no money or room left in houses for the likes of these women that passed their expiration date and were still sitting on the shelf, when whatever little money the families had were needed for the hungry mouths to feed, the demands of school and the dowries to be collected throughout their lives. Women like Gayathri Devi were put aside and left to themselves and what better way to get rid of the unwanted than to send them to God."

The collection's title comes from the story "I Exist. There I Am." Those words are the opening line and the refrain carried throughout the story. "I rest deep inside you, wrapped up tight like an old woman swathed in quilts in the desert during winter when it's too

cold to do anything but sit by the fire and wish it was summer once again." "You see me through the folds of fat projected onto the screen and can only discern a small shape with a centre that beats like a drum. The sound and rhythm unlike the drums they played at your union, but a drum just the same. Thudak, thudak, thudak, it beats softly. You place your hand on your stomach but you can't feel me, nor can you hear the drum beats of my heart pounding inside me. Only the machine can tell you that."

And in "Secrets" "Rules kept the family together, rules made things work the way it was supposed to."

Each story is heart breaking in its own way. I can't even begin to imagine the stories that were too painful to recount or fictionalize. Rajapakse's prose is as strong as her poetry. The characters' pain is real and their circumstances resonate. I hope for a brighter future.

—Suzanna Anderson

Final Inventory by David Anthony Sam. Johnston, PA: Prolific Press Inc., 2018. 22 pages. \$8.95, paperback.

Every time I read a poem by David Anthony Sam, I am filled with his images and strong language, people I can connect to, and a voice that propels me to the end (and often back to the beginning to read the poem again.) His collection *Final Inventory* is no different, except it is about his dying mother and the years without her.

In “Anticipation,” a young speaker is coming home as his mother watches him. The mother waits as the speaker “...studied the ground for / shallow holes where / rain had gathered sunlight / into clear reflection. // Behind sun-mirrored glass, / she waited her elation, / knowing I must leap / every heaven to splash / any puddle I could find” (3).

The collection’s title comes from the poem “Final Inventory (On Her Dying)” and the repetition of “wait” throughout is a strong pull as it moves the pace forward and slows down. The “wait” changes, from “I think it needs thinning / or it will not bloom / another spring. Wait...” to “Wait...wait. / Open the door to my / dining room... Do I still have that furniture? / Do I still...Wait...” (10-11).

Green beans were part of childhood dinners with pudding for dessert in “The Independence of Green Beans.” Sam explores the experience and memory of picking green beans in the garden and preparing them for supper as a child. As an adult in the second stanza, the speaker makes green beans and pudding for supper, and says, “Here, in this distance from childhood, / I must mother myself a new life” (20).

The collection ends with “Reverberant” where “All this world / depends on echoes: / canyons walking concrete— / waves breaking the ocean.... // While I break my pieces into their fragments, / my ears attune / to that vacant place / where your voice was / when last we spoke” (21).

Death is truly not the end for the ones we love. Sam’s mother may be gone, but the poems here remember her memory. Her presence will pen more words about her life and the love a son has for his mother.

—Suzanna Anderson

Depression Hates a Moving Target: How Running With My Dog Brought Me Back From the Brink by Nita Sweeney. Miami, Florida: Mango, 2019. 288 pages. \$18.99, paperback.

Personally, I hate running unless I am chasing down a tennis ball on the court. So Nita’s goal of running a marathon is not a goal for me. However, I loved reading about how Nita returned to her love of running and started small with a kitchen timer in her neighborhood before she was able to run a full marathon.

The prologue begins as Nita is running the marathon. Nita’s mind says negative things like “Who do you think you are?” and “You’re old and fat. People will make fun of you and you’ll die of heart failure.” But Nita keeps running. Her niece Jamey died, and she was a runner. Nita’s friend Kim said running was fun, and Fiona bought shoes to start running. Small moments add up to convince Nita to start running again. She runs with her dog Morgan, aka Mr. Dawg, slowly building the momentum to complete her first 5K.

You can return to something you used to enjoy. Start small. Your goal may not be running, but Nita's story is inspiring as I return to my past loves of art, reading, spending time in the snow, and so on. Enjoy your journey, even the steps that seem like you will never reach the finish line.

—Suzanna Anderson

Contributors

Sudeep Adhikari is a structural engineer/Lecturer from Kathmandu, Nepal. His recent publications were with *Beatnik Cowboys*, *Chiron Review*, *The Ekphrastic Review*, *Midnight Lane Boutique*, *Occulum*, *Silver Birch Press*, *Eunoia Review*, *Utt Poetry* and *Spilling Cocoa over Martin Amis*. Also a Pushcart Prize nominee for the year 2018, Sudeep is currently working on his fourth poetry book “*Hyper-Real Reboots*,” which is scheduled for publication in September 2018 through Weasel Press, Texas, USA.

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*.

Rey Armenteros is a Los Angeles-based painter whose expressionistic brand of surrealism was largely shaped by the Far East iconography he encountered during his several years in Seoul, Korea. He writes a blog on the methodologies of art titled, *Through Concentrated Breath*, <http://blog.reyarmenteros.com/>.

Jan Ball has had 274 poems published or accepted in journals in the U.S., Great Britain, Canada, India and Ireland in journals like: *Atlanta Review*, *Calyx*, *Connecticut Review*, *Main Street Rag*, *Phoebe*, and *Verse Wisconsin*. Her two chapbooks and first full length poetry book were published by Finishing Line Press. When not writing, Jan likes to work in the garden at her farm and work out in Chicago at FFC with her personal trainer. She and her husband travel a lot but like to cook for friends when they are home.

Gary Beck has spent most of his adult life as a theater director. He has 14 published chapbooks. His poetry collections include: *Days of Destruction* (Skive Press), *Expectations* (Rogue Scholars Press). *Dawn in Cities*, *Assault on Nature*, *Songs of a Clerk*, *Civilized Ways*, *Displays*, *Perceptions*, *Fault Lines*, *Tremors*, *Perturbations* and *Rude Awakenings* (Winter Goose Publishing) *The Remission of Order*, *Contusions* and *Desperate Seeker* will be published by Winter Goose Publishing. *Conditioned Response* (Nazar Look). *Resonance* (Dreaming Big Publications). *Virtual Living* (Thurston Howl Publications). *Blossoms of Decay*, *Expectations* and *Blunt Force* (Wordcatcher Publishing). His novels include: *Extreme Change* (Cogwheel Press), *Flawed Connections* (Black Rose Writing), *Call to Valor* and *Crumbling Ramparts* (Gnome on Pigs Productions). As part of the continuing series, 'Stand to Arms Marines', Gnome on Pigs Productions will publish the third book in the series, *Raise High the Walls*. *Sudden Conflicts* (Lillicat Publishers). *Acts of Defiance* and *Flare Up* will be published by Wordcatcher Publishing. *Extreme Change* will be published by Winter Goose Publishing. His short story collections include, *A Glimpse of Youth* (Sweatshoppe Publications). *Now I Accuse and other stories* (Winter Goose Publishing). *Dogs Don't Send Flowers and other stories* will be published by Wordcatcher Publishing. *The Republic of Dreams and other essays* will be published by Gnome on Pigs Productions. 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. He lives in New York City.

Susan P. Blevins was born in England, lived 26 years in Italy, and has now resided in the USA for the past 25 years, first in Taos, NM, and currently in Houston, TX. While living in Rome she had a weekly column in an international, English-language newspaper, writing about food and restaurant reviews primarily, though not exclusively. Since living in the USA, she has written pieces on gardens and gardening for N. American and European publications, and she is now writing stories of her life and travels, and poetry, and gaining traction in various literary publications such as *New Verse News*, *Feminine Collective*, *Mused Bellaonline*, *Write Place at the Write Time*, *Scarlet Leaf*, to mention just a few. She loves reading, writing, cats, classical music, and stimulating conversation.

Michael K. Brantley is the author of *Memory Cards* (2015, BRW) and the forthcoming *Galvanized: The Unlikely Odyssey of a Carolina Confederate* (2019, Univ. of Nebraska). He has an MFA from Queens University of Charlotte and teaches English at N.C. Wesleyan College.

Judith Alexander Brice, a retired Pittsburgh psychiatrist, has the honorable distinction of being married to a wonderful poet—namely, Charles W. Brice—who has published widely including in *The Magnolia Review!* This first drew her attention to this very eclectic lovely journal, which happens to have a name that called to one of her enclosed poems, “My Magnolia Gamble.” Dr. Brice has published in many on-line and print journals and newspapers including *The Paterson Literary Review*, *Vox Populi.com*, *The Pittsburgh Post-Gazette*, *Versewrights.com*, and *Annals of Internal Medicine* among others. Her first book, *Renditions in a Palette*, appeared in 2013. Her second book, *Overhead From Longing*, has just hit the shelves.

Alexandra Brinkman is a student at Bowling Green State University.

Frank De Canio Took various poetry and writing courses At BMCC in Manhattan and Jersey City State College in New Jersey and has attended poetry workshops in Manhattan for many years.

Aidan Coleman has published two collections of poetry, and his work has appeared in *Best Australian Poems*, *The Australian*, *Australian Book Review*, *Poetry Ireland Review*, *Glasgow Review of Books*, *Poetry Salzburg Review*, and *Virginia Quarterly Review*. He is currently writing a biography of the poet John Forbes.

Daniel de Culla is a writer, poet, and photographer. He’s a member of the Spanish Writers Association, Earthly Writers International Caucus, Poets of the World, International Authors (IA), Surrealism Art, and others, and director of *Gallo Tricolor Review* and *Robespierre Review*. He participated in many Festivals of Poetry, and Theater in Madrid, Burgos, Berlin, Minden, Hannover, and Geneve. He has exposed in many galleries from Madrid, Burgos, London, and Amsterdam. He is moving among North Hollywood, Madrid, and Burgos. Contact him via email at gallotricolor@yahoo.com.

Lydia A. Cyrus is a central Appalachian writer from Huntington, West Virginia. She is an award-winning scholar and her work has been featured in various places in print and online. She is a proud Mountain Woman who strives to make positive change in and about Appalachia. She lives in Lafayette, Indiana with her strong will and sense of truth, which guide her wherever she goes.

Nathan Dennis is a Manhattan based playwright and poet of Floridian extraction. A graduate of NYU Tisch Department of Dramatic Writing, his most recent play, *Lord of Florida*, was workshopped by PrismHouse Theatre Company in the Fall of 2017. He is the founder of *Little Shitty Theatre Company* which is developing his new play about a descent through the inferno: *Circle of Shit*. Further information on current and past projects can be found at nathandennis.ink

Deborah H. Doolittle has lived in lots of different places but now calls North Carolina home. She has an MA in Women's Studies and an MFA in Creative Writing and teaches at Coastal Carolina Community College. She is the author of *No Crazy Notions*, *That Echo*, and *Floribunda*. Some of her poems have recently appeared (or will soon appear) in *Albatross*, *Eclectica*, *Hubbub*, *Chiron Review*, *Poets Espresso Review*, *Slipstream*, and *Steam Ticket*. She shares a home with her husband, three housecats, and a backyard full of birds.

Steven Goff studied psychology, creative writing, and publishing at Drexel University. He enjoys writing personal poems indicative of life in the Philadelphia area as well as ekphrastic and literary leaning poetry. His other interests include making music and mosaic art. Goff's poems have appeared in such publications as *Pendora Magazine*, *The 33rd*, and *Literary Yard*.

Dave Gregory used to live and work at sea but now writes in a bay-windowed, book-lined room. Currently a reader for *Gigantic Sequins*, his work has appeared in many publications such as *Literally Stories*, *Ellipsis*, and *Bull & Cross*. <https://courtlandavenue.wordpress.com/> and <https://twitter.com/CourtlandAvenue>

John Grey is an Australian poet, US resident. Recently published in the *Homestead Review*, *Poetry East* and *Columbia Review* with work upcoming in the *Roanoke Review*, *the Hawaii Review*, and *North Dakota Quarterly*.

Jack D. Harvey's poetry has appeared in *Scrivener*, *The Comstock Review*, *The Magnolia Review*, *The Antioch Review*, *The Piedmont Poetry Journal* and a number of other online and in print poetry magazines over the years. The author has been a Pushcart nominee and over the years has been published in a few anthologies.

Kevin Haslam is a content writer and communications professional. He was a paint salesman before shifting to writing where he earned an MA in English at Morehead State University. He resides in Cranston, Rhode Island, with his wife and two boys, and he can be found at www.KevinHaslamAuthor.com.

Born in London, Michael Paul Hogan is a poet, fiction writer, and literary essayist whose work has been featured extensively in the USA, UK, India, and China. He is the author of six volumes of poetry, the most recent of which, *Chinese Bolero*, with illustrations by the great contemporary painter Li Bin, was published in 2015.

Erica Michaels Hollander is a lawyer, artist, psychodramatist and poet. With her husband and her pooch, she lives in the Front Range of the Rockies in Colorado and seeks to express her vision in a number of ways.

Mark Hudson Mark Hudson is an Illinois poet and artist, who spends most of his time writing and doing art. He has a degree in creative writing from Columbia College, in Chicago, and has been published many times in print, online, and internationally. To check out his poetry on the web, go to Illinoispoets.org.

In a past century Heikki Huotari attended a one-room school and spent summers on a forest-fire lookout tower, is now a retired math professor, and has published three chapbooks, one of which won the Gambling The Aisle prize, and one collection, *Fractal Idyll* (A..P Press). Another collection is in press.

Nancy Byrne Iannucci teaches history and lives poetry in Troy, NY. Her poetry can be found in numerous publications including *Allegro Poetry Magazine*, *Gargoyle*, *Autumn Sky Poetry Daily*, *Typehouse Literary Magazine*, *Riggwelter Press*, *Three Drops from a Cauldron*, and *Picaroon Poetry* to name a few. Her debut book of poetry, *Temptation of Wood*, was recently published by *Nixes Mate Review*.

Jayant Kashyap, a *Pushcart Prize* nominee, has had his poetry in *Barren* and *StepAway* magazines, among others; one of his poems was featured in the *Healing Words* awards ceremony (Sept 2017), and another won the third-place in Young Poets Network's *Bletchley Park challenge* (Dec 2018). His collaborative poems with Lisa Stice now appear in zines, and he is now a food blogger for Shahi Dastarkhan's *Foodie's Desk*. His debut chapbook, *Survival*, is to come from NY-based Clare Songbirds Publishing House. He is also the co-founder and editor of *Bold + Italic*.

Wade McCullough is a student at Bowling Green State University and studies popular culture and creative writing.

Don McLellan has worked as a journalist in Canada, South Korea, and Hong Kong. He has published two story collections, *In the Quiet After Slaughter* (Libros Libertad), shortlisted for a 2009 ReLit Award, and *Brunch with the Jackals* (Thistledown Press, 2015). More at donmclellan.com.

Todd Mercer was nominated for Best of the Net in 2018. Mercer won 1st, 2nd & 3rd place of the Kent County Dyer-Ives Poetry Prizes and the won Grand Rapids Festival Flash Fiction Prize. His digital chapbook *Life-wish Maintenance* is posted at *Right Hand Pointing*. Recent work appears in: *Leaves of Ink*, *The Pangolin Review*, *Postcard Poems and Prose*, *Praxis* and *Soft Cartel*.

Daniel Edward Moore lives in Washington on Whidbey Island. His poems have been found at *Spoon River Poetry Review*, *Rattle*, *Columbia Journal* and others. His poems will soon be found at *Hawaii Review*, *Blue Fifth Review*, *Plainsongs*, *The Museum Of Americana*, *West Trade Review*, *Frontier Poetry Journal*, *Flexible Persona Literary Journal*, *AJI Magazine*, and *Duende Literary Journal*. His book *Confessions of a Pentecostal Buddhist*, can be found on Amazon. His work has been nominated for a Pushcart Prize. Visit Daniel at danieledwardmoore.com.

Donají Olmedo was born in Mexico City, where she still lives today. English translations of her fiction have appeared in various venues, including *The Bitter Oleander*, *Gargoyle Magazine*, *The McNeese Review*, and *xo Orpheus: Fifty New Myths*. She blogs at *Casa de Ateh* and edits the chapbook of the same name, where she publishes the work of young Mexican writers.

Simon Perchik is an attorney whose poems have appeared in *Partisan Review*, *Forge*, *Poetry*, *Osiris*, *The New Yorker* and elsewhere. His most recent collection is *The Osiris Poems* published by *boxofchalk*, 2017. For more information including free e-books and his essay “Magic, Illusion and Other Realities” please visit his website at www.simonperchik.com. To view one of his interviews please follow this link <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MSK774rtfx8>

Zachary A. Philips dreams of living a tiny home. He enjoys hiking and would like to write a poem or two at the top of a fourteener someday.

Mari Posa is a proud Philadelphian by way of Madrid, due to personal ambitions. He is a graduate from West Virginia University with a degree in Sociology. Recently, Posa relocated to Southern California.

Eric Rasmussen has placed short fiction in *Fugue*, *Sundog Lit*, *Gulf Stream*, *Black Fox Literary*, and *South Carolina Review*, among others. He serves as editor of the regional literary journal *Barstow & Grand*, and fiction reader for *Split Lip Magazine*. He earned his MFA at Augsburg University in Minneapolis and currently resides in Eau Claire, WI.

Born in Pennsylvania, David Anthony Sam is the proud grandson of peasant immigrants from Poland and Syria. He lives now in Virginia with his wife and life partner, Linda. Sam has four collections and his poetry has appeared in over 80 journals and publications. His chapbook, *Finite to Fail: Poems after Dickinson*, was the 2016 Grand Prize winner of GFT Press Chapbook Contest and his collection *All Night over Bones* received an Honorable Mention for the 2016 Homebound Poetry Prize. www.davidanthonysam.com In 2017, his poems were accepted by *50 Haikus*; *Aji Magazine*; *Allegro Poetry Magazine*; *Burningword Literary Journal*; *Chantwood Magazine*; *The Deadly Writers Patrol*; *Dual Coast Magazine*; *Foliolate Oak Literary Magazine*; *Fredericksburg Literary and Art Review*; *GFT Press One in Four*; *Glass: A Journal of Poetry*; *Gravel: A Literary Journal*; *Heron Tree*; *The Hungry Chimera*; *Into the Void Magazine*; *Inwood Indiana*; *Literature Today*; *The Muse: An International Journal of Poetry*; *The Mystic Blue Review*; *Nourish*; *Piedmont Virginian Magazine*; *Poetry Quarterly*; *The Ravens Perch*; *Red Earth Review*; *The Sea Letter*; *Smoky Blue Literary and Arts Magazine*; *Summerset Review*; *Temenos Journal*; *Three Line Poetry*; *Two Cities Review*; *The Voices Project*; *The Wayfarer*; and *The Write Place at the Write Time*.

J.B. Santillan is a student at Central Washington University. Her interests include sketching, collecting art books, and driving through backroads.

Marygrace Schumann is a writer, educator, editor, and Virgo with a bachelors degree in Creative Writing from Columbia College Chicago. She has worked as an editorial writer for *Chicago Woman Magazine*, a production editor and typesetter for *Hair Trigger 39*, a contributing editor for *Hair Trigger 2.0*, a staff writer for *Shredded Magazine*, and as an editorial intern for *Chief Learning Officer*, an offset of Human Capital Media. Her writing has been featured in *Thrice Publishing*, *Hair Trigger 39*, *Chicago Woman*, *Chief Learning Officer*, and *Shredded*. When she's not writing, teaching or editing, she's serenading everybody around her with '80s music and taking her role as Mom Friend way too seriously.

Sydnee Smailes is currently an undergraduate student at Bowling Green State University studying Creative Writing. Outside of writing, she spends most of her time tending to her three cats, water dragon, and a boat load of fish. After school she plans on taking a year off and then going to back to school to pursue her Masters Degree in fiction.

Ruben E. Smith is a current English major student at Northwestern State University in Natchitoches, Louisiana. He likes to write short fiction, nonfiction, and the occasional poem, while also finding time to argue about Faulkner, speak French, and read Fitzgerald. Some of his work has been published in *Argus Art & Literary Magazine*.

William L. Spencer has published fiction and non-fiction in the *San Diego Reader* and *West Coast Review* (Simon Fraser University). His short story “In the System” was published online by *Uprising Review* in 2017 (pen name Carlos Dunning). Short story “What I Done” is in the Spring 2018 issue of *Furtive Dalliance Literary Review* available on Amazon, and a piece of experimental fiction “The Bastard Died On Me” is online at SoftCartel.com. Two stories were published in *The Magnolia Review Volume 4, Issue 2*. Spencer can be found on Scribophile.com as “Carlos Dunning” and an author interview is at: <https://verysherryterry.wordpress.com/2018/04/02/author-interview-william-l-spencer/>

Penn Stewart lives and writes in Wichita Falls, Texas. He has a big brown lab named Yoda and a Les Paul guitar named Betsy. Neither of them come when called. His latest flash fiction will appear in the *Iron Horse Review*, his longer stuff is up at *Pacifica Literary Review* and *Literary Orphans*, and he’s got a chapbook of stories coming out called *The Water in Our Veins*.

Lisa Stice is a poet/mother/military spouse. She is the author of *Permanent Change of Station* (Middle West Press, 2018) and *Uniform* (Aldrich Press, 2016). 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. @LisaSticePoet

Ash Strange is a freshman from Bowling Green State University, majoring in creative writing. She was born in Las Vegas, Nevada, and grew up in Lima, Ohio, for most of her childhood years, going on to live in California, Oklahoma, and Florida. She lives with her aunt, uncle, her two cousins, and her two brothers. She often writes every day about almost everything she can think of, including her life experiences. Some of her hobbies include art, listening to music, and going out with friends.

Lee Triplett is a poet, voracious reader, seeker, bipolar depressive, pianist, queer, and South Carolinian. A student of poetry, piano performance, and computer science in college, she immerses herself in poets to whom she is drawn. Her poetry has been published in *Amethyst Review* and is forthcoming in *Mused: The BellaOnline Literary Review*. She currently lives in Tega Cay, South Carolina.

Mitchell Waldman's fiction, poetry, and essays have appeared in numerous publications, including *The Waterhouse Review*, *Crack the Spine*, *The Houston Literary Review*, *The Faircloth Review*, *Epiphany*, *Wilderness House Literary Magazine*, *The Battered Suitcase*, and many other magazines and anthologies. He is also the author of the novel, *A Face in the Moon*, and the story collection, *Petty Offenses and Crimes of the Heart* (Wind Publications), and serves as Fiction Editor for *Blue Lake Review*. (For more info, see his website at <http://mitchwaldman.homestead.com>).

Thomas Wattie studied philosophy at the University of Toronto. He answers the phone at a pizza place. His interests also include biking, cooking and trap music. He would prefer to answer the phone somewhere else.

Richard Weaver lives in Baltimore's Inner Harbor where he volunteers with the Maryland Book Bank, and acts as the Archivist-at-large for a Jesuit college. He is the author of *The Stars Undone* (Duende Press). His poems have appeared in *River Poet's Journal*, *Southern Review*, *Little Patuxent Review*, *Loch Raven Review*, *Adelaide*, *Slush Pile*, and *Elsewhere*. (Yes, there is a magazine named Elsewhere).

Theresa Williams lives and teaches in Northwest Ohio. Her current project is a Sketchbook novel called *The Diary of Lea Knight*. It traces the inner life of Lea Knight, who has recently lost a baby. Theresa twice received Individual Excellence Grants from The Ohio Arts Council and has been published in numerous journals, including *Gargoyle*, *Hunger Mountain*, and *The Sun*.

Bill Wolak has just published his fifteenth book of poetry entitled *The Nakedness Defense* with Ekstasis Editions. His collages have appeared recently in *Naked in New Hope 2017*, *The 2017 Seattle Erotic Art Festival*, *Poetic Illusion*, *The Riverside Gallery, Hackensack, NJ*, *the 2018 Dirty Show in Detroit*, *2018 The Rochester Erotic Arts Festival*, and *The 2018 Montreal Erotic Art Festival*.