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ginosko

A Greek word meaning

to perceive, understand, realize, come to know;
knowledge that has an inception, a progress, an attainment.
The recognition of truth from experience.

γινώσκω
Dan Pope: What’s the worst part about being a writer?

James Salter: Having to do it. Anyone will tell you that. Or having done it and failed.

Dan Pope: The best part?

James Salter: The greatness of that world and feeling a part of it. There is a reality in it that is greater than other realities even though it cannot replace them. When you read something wonderful there is no awkward afterwards or sense of having used something up. It’s still there, it is still waiting for you, the thrill doesn’t fade.
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The girl who floats is trapped in bends. She’s contorted, askew, sipping beer and imagining the people in her life as figurines.

She lives in a town that she can’t get away from. She sees the same wisteria grow in her apartment complex for twenty three years now.

There’s texts and calls from a boy she liked for a while, but she puts her phone on airplane mode, automatic voicemail.

One day, this boy summoned the courage to drive the hour to her place and knock on her door. He held a small bouquet of sunflowers, the water dripping fast from the stem onto his shoes, bought not more than ten minutes ago from a mom and pop florist. She peeks from her bedroom window, finger holding down the flimsy blinds, and he looks handsome. She chews her lip but can’t conjure up the same taste that she can for beer and silent judgment. She closes the blinds and he leaves the flowers on her outside table. Eventually, she takes the flowers and throws them along with the wisteria, packs them tightly in the fine wet dirt.

She lays in bed later on, music playing on her phone at a low volume, TV on but muted, and she’s thinking about the boy that she ignored. She imagines a version of him that would be tougher, maybe more tattoos and a smell of grease and tobacco. She does what she has to do to make herself go. The music switches to advertisements. She doesn’t care. She can’t go anyway. She gets up and sips a beer, ignores the draft through the windows that she’s been meaning to repair.

After a few days, she sits down at the kitchen table, fingering a mark that was made years ago. She grabs a Sharpie and fills it in. She has her phone in her hand. She drafts a text, taking a while because in her mind, she’s in a terrible bend. Contorted, hard to breathe, but relaxed.
As she texts with a quivering thumb, she has to stop and look out the window at the
wisteria. She frowns and she puts the phone down and she thinks sees the boy
somewhere in the bush.
When she goes outside to look, it’s raining. It’s pelting her lightly and the water is
getting caught in her mess of hair. Through a thin mist, she is able to see the makings
of a town she can’t get away from and the figurines that drive in and out of it, weaving
around and about in tune, and she feels sorry for them. She is floating brilliantly away
from all of them and they’ll never catch up. She lets a big laugh go in the rain. She’s
saving her last one for later tonight, when she decides to reach out to the boy. And why
not, she says. He won’t be expecting it.
Lips Split

On a Sunday the sort of sad who will have only dread for a bedfellow, the sky pregnant with snow, her lip splits

and she licks the pain again and again, new teeth shooting up to keep open what nature and time work to suture.

Some operating grace tends the universe. Some mechanics constructed itself in order to carry out orders. Potent

light travels fast as light to light the color of blood. She, spiraling even in stillness. The front of her mind heavy

with Other and Else and down her chin bitten blood remains in motion, the spectral radiating between each atom.
Woman Patiently Turning Her Lover Into a Good Man

The Martyrdom of Water; Holy Holy Holy
climbing down the deepest fissures
to lie alone at the bottoms of the lowest places
so not even the air has to occupy them, only the sound
of its own dripping for company, crying against the sharp rock.
A woman patiently turning her lover into a good man.

I do not want to be water anymore, Lord.
I do not wish to adjust my size and shape
and abundance at the whim of another. I do
not wish to conform to whatever vessel idle hands
pour me into. I do not wish to live in the bottoms of bellies
and drown under oils and bile, trying to glimpse the light
from the window of one extant throat.

The largesse of my soul
Must no longer be bestowed this way
Lord, muddy me with some new compound.
Something insoluble.
I Can Grasp Your Sadness

I can pinch up your sadness, a salt passing through pores – days of heart-ached nights grate off the uncut block of you, grind to blunted, marking your passage. Handprints of your slight acidity, your pH imbalance on your whittled world.

I can lift your sadness dense as lead with knees bent and deep breath and careful not to use my back. This meteorite, this power cell in half-life that makes the meters of my neck stipple, my lungs rush to grasp their bars and scream their near-forgotten captivity.

I can pluck your sadness with work gloves in our dark foyer after a telltale crunch underfoot, stairs reclaimed in midwinter dusk by slices of reflection, hateful feline tapetum lucidum, bristling with anticipation.

I can extract it from its fixture, forceps yanking at the maxilla of our home together. Will it snap shut upon us. Will it swallow us, broken off and throbbing.
Ilex paraguariensis

Tonight your cock
wedged itself between us
like a child afraid
of monsters
and we, parents so close
to the comfort of oblivion
were too exhausted
to hassle it back
to its own bed.
In the beginning sex
was what we stood over
and marveled at,
brushing off its bones
in the bedrock as though
we had unearthed perhaps
some common ancestor.
Now it settles
down over me—a fog
I use to lose sight of
the path beneath,
a reason we create together
to make camp earlier and earlier
each night. Our fire
blackens the night starring
all around us. We roll about
and rub our bellies
too full
of the game you killed
we had to finish
before it spoiled.
Socks and Underwear

Spirited from hiding places between bureau and wall

under the bed like mischievous children, or burrowed in borrowed drawers

In the midst of a darned herd. Gathered, washed in strange soaps and

piled into a wrinkled plastic bag. Gifts I waited 17 months to give myself

with your cool hands.
Foreign Matters

we find the tail-finned sun
that fills the day;
the breeze
travels and rises.

notice
sand sting our eyes
laughter, I believe
your serious stare.
the sun sings
to the breeze
hears jagged laughter
on the wind
and the rage in the sun
the wind
and the sand
and dull eyes
and perhaps endless
we sing
across the branches
that bend
in the highway’s arms.
Low Fidelity

After Dad finished cursing the picture, he told me bring in the kitchen high chair and as I stood on the seat he had me hold up the rabbit ears while he critiqued the picture. He threw more fucks and shits out at me and the TV. Then he told me to get a roll of tin foil and he showed me how to carefully crush one piece into a ball and to fold another sheet into a flag. Then we wrapped the foil on the bent telescopic antennae where I positioned the rabbit ears.

When that failed, we moved the black and white set from the wall while Dad had me unfasten the twenty-odd screws that held the back on. Then Dad had me turn on the set and we watched the city of tubes where the science of a picture glowed against a schematic of the guts glued to the side of the set. The dark, impenetrable diagram could not have been more foreign to me. Usually we found a few burned out tubes so we drove them to the Rexall drug store where they had a tube tester and assorted sizes of tubes. The large contraption looked dodgy to me, a little sinister. We plugged the faulty tubes into the slots and Dad let me turn the grimy dial. A needle would move. The needle pointed either at “Replace” or “Weak” or “Good.” We bought some new tubes. Dad let me carry them. “Do not drop ‘em. Those are gold.” Dad then pushed his glasses back on to his nose. “You should become a TV repairman. TV is becoming a big thing.”
After we replaced the tubes, screwed the back together, the picture blinked with fuzz and lines and shook with black and white dots. Dad cursed some more. Mom left the room while my brothers hid out in the basement. I performed gymnastics again with the rabbit ears while Mom came back out from the back bedroom. “Please just call Jerry Seahall.” When he wasn’t throwing parcels with Dad at the PO, Jerry moonlighted as a TV repairman. Dad sometimes fixed Jerry’s station wagon. Jerry always could fix the TV; he was patient and methodical, his tools arranged neat as surgical instruments. He always gave us a break on the price. After Jerry left, I asked, “Should I take the tin foil off?” “No. Let’s leave it on, just in case. I think it helped the picture.”
Evening Prayer

*Music fathoms the sky.*
—Charles Baudelaire

Night rests in its jail
while birds dream
of bushes—
There damp breezes
cannot smother the blue love
that scratches and hums above the eaves.

Ancient avalanches of light slowly descend and gods loosen their angers, reveal a monstrous peace.

The aquarium we live in
gurgles while we sleep.
His brother had been holed up in the basement for five days, and only came up to eat and wash. There was a hole in the wall beside the basement door, and sometimes he peeped through it to see what his brother was doing. The hole wasn’t big enough for complete eye navigation, and so all he could see was his brother’s back, hunched over a table before him, the stained white straps of an apron circling his neck and waist.

On the rare times he found his brother inside the house, he asked him about the work in the basement, but received no reply. He wished their father was here. His brother was more amicable when their father was around, and by now the man would have made him tell them what he was working on in the basement.

But their father was a drunk who drank in his study in the morning, drank in his study in the evening, took a trunk of alcohol with him when he went hunting, and sometimes drove away from the estate in his 1960s Rolls Royce, not returning for days and even weeks.

The last time he’d been home, he’d had a big row with the boy’s brother, and by the next morning he and his car were gone. He was used to seeing his father and elder brother quarreling, they were close, and they sometimes went together to scare away trespassers on the estate, but they also fought a lot. His brother disapproved of their father’s drinking, of his tendency to abandon them in the house for days, and he also blamed him for their mother’s disappearance.

Since his brother was cooped up in the basement, he was forced to be alone inside the big house. And he wasn’t good at being on his own, unlike his brother, who could stay in his room all day resecting his toys.

He made a sandwich and took it in a tray to the basement door, knocking and waiting for his brother to appear, tall and lean, with his crazy hair sprouting out of his head like weeds. He was without his apron and gloves, and he frowned as he collected the tray, baring the way with his body until he could shut the door.

He went around the house to see if he could enter the basement through the subterranean hatch in the ground, but his brother had locked that entry way from inside too.

He waited for his brother to ascend for food, and then he circled back to try the basement lock, but it was stiff and ancient, and he could not get in. He returned to his room disheartened, but just before he gave up, an idea came to him, a sure way to make his brother lose his guard.

And so the next day he played loud music in his room, stole one of his father’s guns and crept out of the house, crushing nettles and dry twigs as he pranced into the wood, until he had arrived at an adequate distance from his house.
The rifle he’d selected was heavy, and he had to use both hands in prepping it up. Even then he was scared. But he held his breath and squeezed the trigger, the recoil buckling his shoulder and forcing him to cry out in pain, tears running down his cheeks. But he had to do it again, in case his brother hadn’t heard the first shot. And so he braced himself, and experienced the pain a second time, his arm dropping useless at his side afterwards.

He threw the rifle under some bushes and began to run home, using a path he knew his brother wouldn’t take, while his shoulder hurt, and slowed him down.

The house was empty when he got in, he could feel its vacancy seep into his consciousness. He rushed over to the basement and tried the door knob. It gave way in his grip, and the door shifted back to admit him into the dank, shaded room.

He’d spent so much time plotting how to get into the basement, feeling so anxious and frustrated that he hadn’t made room for any other emotion. Now he felt fear. The darkness and the mold filled him with dread. He stepped on top of something soft, and when he bent down and picked it up he saw that it was his brother’s apron, slippery and stained. He dropped it and stared at his red palms, not wanting to take one more step.

But it was too late, he was only a couple of inches away from his brother’s work table, with its liquid jars and metallic instruments, and he could already see what his brother had been working on. But shock made him disbelieve his eyes, and he went closer to be very sure.

And then he was filled with horror, his stomach lurched and he wanted to vomit. He used the back of his good hand to stopper his mouth, and he felt streams of sweat glide down his back. The face on the table was unrecognizable, the skin green, eye socket and nose hole empty, a very pungent odor exhaling from it. It was in essence a mask, but a rotten and putrid one.

He heard footsteps outside the door, and then the knob began to turn. He looked around him, but there wasn’t a trace of any weapon in sight. His shoulder throbbed, and he felt a sharp pang in his forehead, as he swallowed saliva and waited for his fate.
He stepped off the curb, seeking more light. He slid from a shadow on the sidewalk into a stream of sunbathed traffic. In the space of a short stride he was dead. Mangled on the pavement. Torn clothes. Blood. Bits of flesh, a hand flat on the ash grey cement.

He’d been told he wasn’t finished, over and over, by the priest who took the time to see him during his dips in morale. “You’re never finished.” His wife would add when he came home rattled, but quiet. They’d sit in the fading light together at the kitchen table. A patch of mauve sky was carved out of the wall by the window frame. This hurrying sorrow always came over him at the edge of Spring twilights. Each year he hoped his desperation would at least be different. He’d tried to effect this by being in other places, doing other things and seeing another person.

After his absences his wife seemed to know without saying. At least that was how it felt every time she reached across the table. Her soft hand nudged a teacup aside, slid over his cold, arthritic knuckles. Her touch filled his fingers, then his whole body, joints-through-bones-to-muscle, with a sweet, awful, sensation of forgiveness.

“I’m so ashamed.” He murmured. The candle between them flickered.

The evening star sparkled at the centre of the square of now deepening indigo sky above them. His wife sighed, or breathed out gently, or both. He was never sure. Hours seemed to pass like this as tears fell onto his cheeks, down his nose and then into his empty cup. There, tea leaves stuck in a pattern, shifted with each arriving droplet as if they were alive. Like a huge cloud raining over a tiny closed world, he wept. In the slight pool at the bottom of the cup, two or three more leaves stirred; Floating, then still, in their clear puddle, the little creatures were filled with detail, like the extended instants that are close-ups in a motion picture. It was in the bottom of his teacup one afternoon that the scene of his final move surged up into his mind. He saw his last step suggested as one dark brown leaf became a stain of crimson.

“Of what?” His wife’s kind voice stirred him.

All he could see was red. All he could hear was her breathing. A pigeon cooed outside. The sound of the wind in the trees was followed by a distant rumbling. Thunder clapped far away. Out of its roar, the engine of a speeding car emerged. As the motor’s grinding faded, a draft of air snuffed the candle between them. They became silhouettes. Each, as dark midnight blue, as the other; Their forms accentuated by an orange halo as the streetlamp beyond their window came on.

“Of everything.” whispered the man.

~
“He was never finished because he was always hurrying.” said the priest to another cleric who had just sat down in the kitchen they shared. A spoonful of jam was dissolving in his mouth as he spread butter on a ragged piece of toast. Dipping his knife into a sticky preserve jar again, he kicked the fridge door shut and slid into a chair. The other priest got up and stood in the doorway. “I told him to slow down. I suggested a gentler pace on several occasions.”

A dollop of jam fell onto a newspaper open on the table. The other priest darting from the doorway, took out his handkerchief, wiped away the red confection. Then he ran the cloth under the tap at a huge, white porcelain sink which became scarlet, then pink, then seemed even whiter as the sugary mass dissolved. After squeezing out the water, he spread the stained material out on the counter. The other priest sat with his head down. He was shaking. On the newspaper the moisture left by the spilled preserve had darkened a spot on a photo of a highway. Accentuated in this way, it appeared there was a hand reaching out of the road.

~

At the once shivering priest’s funeral, some years later, the wife presided. “...it is never ending.” She offered, breathing in deeply... The death of her husband sliding as he did, from shadow to light, had precipitated a seismic shift in the world. Shame was displaced by some kind of sunlit hope and the other priest had moved out of the doorway for good. He married the widow who became the first priest in the Belfast, Irish Catholic Church who happened to be a woman. She didn’t know her first funeral was to be that said for the man who had always made her first husband feel so ashamed. The priest who became her next husband wasn’t aware of their connection either. “World without end” everybody intoned.

The sun kept shining wildly as the mourners gathered around the shadow that was the priest’s grave. The woman said a blessing, stood a long time in silence. Then she sighed or breathed out, as if she might slide gently down into the dark earth.
I still have imaginary friends. I’m almost 30.

It was last week that Shelby came to speak with me. It’s not like her to be so interactive, not with her sulking blonde ringlets and her wincing cherub face. I don’t know if Shelby even classifies as an imaginary friend. More like an imaginary git.

So there she was, sitting on that little chair of hers, swinging those little white legs beneath her. I don’t know what is wrong with her, perhaps it’s childhood depression or some other clinical disorder. I suppose in her day they would have called it melancholy.

“Peter’s gone,” she said, which made me snap my chin up quickly. Peter is my favourite. He’s also kind of sexy. He’s all thin and wears ripped jeans and has a tattoo on his right hand of a hooded Death figure with a scythe. The veins in his hands bulge beneath his skin, and he has floppy brown hair. Peter is very sarcastic. He says nasty but funny things about people as they pass us by.

“What do you mean by gone?” I asked, concerned.

“He’s gone.” She made a “ffft” sound with her lips and wiggled her fingers, jazz-hands style, into the air to give the impression of utter and spontaneous evaporation. She was onto something. I hadn’t seen Peter all week, not since that last Saturday when we smoked Marlboro Reds together at Salamanca Square (Peter can’t actually smoke of course - I kind of mentally duplicate cigarettes for him). But not since then.

I quickly became a flopping head of hair, a miserable guts. Peter is my favourite, and ever since Shelby spoke to me last week, I haven’t been able to concentrate at work. That’s a problem as I’m not very good at my job as it is. I work as a telephone market researcher. I don’t have to sell anything to anyone, but I do have to call people from long lists and ask them to answer surveys. It’s not a great job, and they could easily replace us with online polling. But there always seems to be plenty of shifts – and plenty of grief from every unsuspecting and unwitting “surveyee” who answers their phone. When I’m not on top of my game, I invariably cop abuse. People tell me I’m a “dickhead” or that the survey is “bullshit” or that I need to “get a real job”. They’re very creative. Jimmy says I need to believe in what I’m doing. He says it’s like that book, *The Secret*. He reckons if you’re in a good mood, when you’re happy with yourself, when you’re feeling confident – nothing can stop you and no-one will ever refuse to answer your surveys. But Jimmy is a dickhead.
The whole imaginary friends thing started out with Mallory. It happened when I first saw *Family Ties* when I was really little, like in the late 80s. I’m not talking about the actress who played Mallory, Justine Bateman. I’m talking about Mallory Keaton herself – vacuous, smiling and glamorous. She started hanging around some years after the show had actually finished screening. It was Mallory that set me up to ask Dave Smelton out in Year 7. She told me how to do my hair (crimped) and what make-up to wear (burgundy blush and matching lipstick). I was so angry with her when Dave said *no way Jose*, smirking the whole time, his mates Brent Goodman and Saul Brown flanking him like Armani models. Dave looked as if the idea of going out with someone like me was a big fat joke. Which of course, it was. It turned out Mallory thought it was a joke too.

“What did you expect,” she sneered at me with her spoilt American voice. “It’s not like you’re *attractive*.”

So when Mallory dematerialised – fffft – I wasn’t upset. I never wanted to feel the way I did with Dave ever again.

Losing Peter was different to losing Mallory, and not just because he was sexy and never set me up to look like a loser. Quite honestly, it’s depressing when even your own creation rejects you. A fierce sensation poked at me like sharpened pencils in my stomach.

I should clarify that I don’t actually “see” Peter or Shelby – or even Mallory – with my real eyes. It’s more something that happens in my mind. They come and go as they please, and we have all kinds of conversations. Sometimes they tell me things I don’t want to hear, but I still like having them around.

I know what you’re thinking. Of course I don’t tell people about them. I used to, when I was very young. I told my parents about Mallory, just before my dad moved out. Mum had tried to smack me, yelling at me not to tell fibs. And another time, more recently when I was really, really drunk on Johnny Walker at my uncle’s birthday party, I told my cousin Bianca. I was mortified the next day. People don’t think well of people with imaginary friends. They think they are mental.

And then Shelby was gone too. I was again disappointed, even though Shelby tended to annoy me a bit. There was something about her being so unhappy despite having a pretty face that irritated me. It seems to me that pretty people shouldn’t be sad ever. But still, she was my imaginary friend. And it’s depressing when even your own creation rejects you.

**
It’s been months. It’s been ages since I felt like this. I clocked in at work last Tuesday and pulled in my seat close to the desk, ignoring Jimmy and his crap jokes. It’s not the fact that Jimmy likes me that’s the problem; it’s the fact that Jimmy thinks he’s in with a chance. As if I am just made for a guy who still wears Reeboks (with the tongue pulled right out) and chequered shirts sometimes smeared with tomato sauce stains that you can see he’s rubbed at, but not washed out. If a guy like that thinks he’s in with a chance, what the fuck does that say about me?

I’d dialled 10 numbers in a row that morning without any luck. I knew without Peter or Shelby around, I’d lost my any kind of mojo I might have otherwise had. I felt small, like a hard little pea. Hopefully not too much of a pea, though. Looking over at Jimmy with his mouth agape, I suddenly felt terribly sorry for all the vegetables that Jimmy must have eaten over the years. I felt such sympathy for the poor broccoli and potatoes, trembling on the plate, as they looked up at Jimmy’s salivating mouth and the dark hole that lay beyond.

I dialed number 11. A smooth, pleasant, male voice answered. I gave him the dullard spiel and politely asked for five minutes of his morning to make Australia a better place. I hoped Mr Smooth Operator didn’t hear the fear of rejection turning my voice into glassware.

“Sure.”

I wasn’t expecting that, not on a morning like this.

“Ah, great. So, Mr um Goodman, can you tell me about your most recent music purchase. Was it: a) a CD from a real-world music store, b) a download from an internet merchant such as iTunes, Amazon or Google Play, or c) streaming online from services such as Spotify?”

But then – a hesitation. My surveyee had stalled.

“Monica, is that Monica from Rosetta High? I remember that voice,” Mr Goodman – Mr Brent Goodman – said.

I couldn’t answer. Nothing good could come from a conversation like this. Considering my bottom-of-the-barrel status and my barely-there social skills during my formative years, it was really not in my interest for people to remember me. I felt myself turn into a piece of scorched dog hair under that white heat coming out of the phone. Feelings I haven’t had since high school suddenly punched in my stomach, pushing out through my fingertips like hairpins, wrapping chicken wire around my throat.
It must have been an out-of-body experience, because there I was again, late 1990s in the schoolyard. Chunky, no friends and no personality. I was known as being so boring and shy that my nickname was “Monochrome Mon” – named by one of the cool, arty girls who was not only super beautiful, but a really fucking talented photographer. I could feel the shame burning like uranium through my cheeks as the popular students watched me back away from Dave, my large bottom and my crimped hair wobbling as I ran to safety.

“Monica?” Brent asked again. I hung up before he could rub it in even further.

**

I’d have done just about anything to get them back, and in fact I attempted a number of strategies. I downloaded a hypnotherapy track from some random Scottish website promising me that I’d “meet my spirit guide” if I concentrated enough. My imaginary friends weren’t really spirit guides, but I guessed they were, you know, cut from the same heavenly cloth. It didn’t work, and my stomach was aching terribly.

I prayed. I took time off work. I smoked weed. I drank gin. I even tried hyperventilating. Nothing worked, but I didn’t stop hoping, peeping around corners, checking under my bed.

And then, a message from Brent. I found it hard to believe he’d bothered looking me up on Facebook. I don’t know why someone would go to all that effort with someone they thought was so laughable. But there it was, 5:01am on Thursday, a message from one Brent Goodman.

“Hey Monica, really nice to chat to you the other day. How have you been?”

My stomach heaved, a visceral response. It was too much. I ran to the toilet, sick from something, I don’t know what. I vomited up all those pieces of caustic reality. I heaved up all those pieces of world and people and Jimmy and Mallory and crimped hair and small peas. The universe had been a problem for so long, and I watched it trickle down the sides of the bowl, floating in brown chunks on the surface of the water. I flushed it away.

If bad luck is a virus, can it be treated by a doctor?

Could Pfizer one day release a pill for self belief?

In the olden days, that’s what they did. Purged themselves of demons. You could be walking down the street and BAM you’d sneeze and a demon would try to enter your body unless someone graciously uttered those all-protective words: bless you. If no-one said it in time, you could find yourself having blood let or being exorcised by your friendly local priest or even paying to get yourself some nice, good old fashioned black
magic.

Of course, none of us believe in hocus pocus these days. But my body was feeling better, and I think my head was too. It was like I’d purged my soul and it was back to all nice and clean like a tumbler straight from the dishwasher.

On my way back to bed, my dressing gown stained with small, smelly pieces of spew, I saw Shelby’s blonde ringlets flash by the stove. It was always a worry when Shelby was in the kitchen.

“Shelby, please don’t stick your head in the microwave again tonight. You know it stuffs up the power points.”

She sulked away and hid in the kitty litter.

When I sat back in bed and fired up my laptop, Peter was there.

“Hey,” he said. “Got a smoke?”

“Where have you been?” I asked, flicking a piece of brown off my ankle.

“Oh, I had a couple of gigs.”

I snuggled down in bed and a little smug grin crept up on my face, despite my best efforts to play it cool.

My phone went off again that night and I lazily reached over Peter’s leather jacket, which he’d left haphazardly over my crochet blanket. It was a message from Brent again. This time there was no message, just a phone number.
The light of the early morning lets me know we’re finally safe for a few hours. As the sun rises, the world I left home for beckons me through the window, but we’re both trapped in here. Two girls – unseen by the people of Amsterdam – still praying for the freedom we were once promised.

When we first arrived in this place, my head was full of stories – whispers of the new world just waiting for me here in Holland. They were left there by a man, a man who appeared at my old home one day, like a shadow in the morning light, who said he could spirit me away. My mother was worried and afraid, but since my father had died, she couldn’t take care of all her children anymore – she thought the eldest would have a better life abroad. She was wrong.

The man offered my mother some money and promised that I would earn even more once I was settled in my new life. When she asked what I’d be doing, he replied, “Hostess work in a nightclub.”

I wasn’t sure what that meant at the time, but my mother seemed pleased with it. I was asked to leave the room – to go and see to my brother and sisters – while the adults continued to talk about what the future held for me.

I still don’t blame my mother for what happened, she wanted what was best for me, and I wanted what was best for my family. When the devil talks only of light and hope, you don’t try and look for the darkness hidden in his words.

So I was taken away, my mother gave up my passport and I travelled with the man to Sofia. The journey was a long one and I was left in the back of the car with nothing to eat or drink. All I could do was stare out of the window as the world I knew drifted away...

The man never told me his name, and stopped talking to me once we were about an hour away from my village. I wanted to go back, but I had no idea how I could...I was trapped and I always would be from that moment forward.

We remained in Sofia for a few days; I was kept in a small, dark room with two other women. The one seemed excited about her new life and kept a smile on her face the whole time we were together. The other girl appeared as afraid as I was – staying in the corner of the room and whispering to herself quietly. None of us ever spoke to each other. My only comfort came in the prayers my father had taught me, and I constantly found my lips forming soundless words to free my soul from where I was, even if my body would have to stay there.

Eventually, a different man came to see me and told me all my documents were ready, and that we would leave for Amsterdam in the morning. The other girls seemed jealous of me, but they still said nothing. I was the first of them to leave.
I don’t remember much of the journey from there – I was still afraid, but part of me truly believed I would be leading a better life in this new country. More importantly, I thought I’d be able to send money back home to my family, so that they could share my success, too.

Everything I hoped for evaporated once I finally saw where I’d be staying. It was a horrible, dirty place – a building hidden in a backstreet – as if the city itself wanted to forget it was there. The man who had driven me to this place opened the backdoor of the car and quickly led me inside.

The hall we entered was full of smoke and the stench of sweat hung in the air like a bad memory. A woman in a long fur coat came over to see me, and asked if I knew what work I would be doing there. I answered that I did, but that I hadn’t been trained as a hostess and slowly admitted I wasn’t sure what exactly what I’d have to do…

The woman’s mouth curled into a smile and she waved the man behind me away. I felt safe with her for some reason, and the way she slid her arm around my neck made me feel at home for the first time since I’d left my village. My mother often wore an old fur coat, and the way this woman’s sleeve embraced me was like being back in my mother’s arms…if only for a moment.

“I have a man here to see you,” the woman said softly in my ear. “He wants to spend some time with you, alone.”

I glanced up at her and my trust began to crumple away, there was a look in her eyes as if she were examining a pig for slaughter.

“Don’t be frightened, sweet one,” she whispered, before lifting my face up to hers. “He’s a kind man, a friend of mine, you’ll be safe with him.”

I let the woman lead me into one of the backrooms of the club. It was made up like a bedroom and a short man was already sitting on the bed when we arrived. The woman and man began talking in a language I didn’t understand, but both of them were laughing a lot. It seemed to me that they really were good friends.

The woman finally removed her arm from around my shoulders and instead led me by the hand towards the man on the bed. She crouched down a little and tried to put my hand on his leg – I pulled it away immediately and ran to leave the room. She grabbed my wrist and slapped me across the face.

“Do you have any idea how much you owe us?” she shouted in Bulgarian, before turning to the man and talking quickly in her own language. She looked back at me and her voice took on a much quieter, darker tone. “You have the passport, the visa, staying here with us! So much to pay off…”

I shook my head violently and tried to make for the door again. The woman twisted my wrist so hard I thought it would snap in two. I fell to the floor in pain and she pushed me back towards the man.

My face lay almost in his lap and she applauded me wildly. “Now you have the right idea!” she snorted. “Please him and you please us.”

The woman said something again to the man before turning on her heel and leaving.
the room. I was left completely alone with this stranger, bent on my knees before him, his eyes hungry like the stray dogs of my village – a hunger I knew could never be satisfied. He would always want more.

I couldn’t understand anything he said to me, but he made himself clear by the way he pushed and pulled me about. He would snarl something at me through gritted teeth, his breath hot on my face and neck, and all I could do was focus on the door. I was just waiting for the handle to turn, for my family to burst through and rescue me from this inferno I had found myself in.

My father used to read the bible to me before he died. Whenever he would describe hell, I always hid myself under the covers of my bed – but he would slowly pull down the sheet and assure me that no girl so sweet and innocent could ever end up in a place like that. He was wrong, too.

I never stopped looking at the door the whole time; I tried to study every inch of it to take my mind away from the pain.

The man left the room wordlessly after he’d finished, and for a brief moment I was completely alone.

It couldn’t last. It didn’t last, and the woman from before swiftly re-entered the room just moments later.

“It won’t always be so difficult,” she said, “if you don’t resist next time.”

The woman lifted me off the bed and set about making it up again – whilst I just stood there completely numb. Painfully, slowly, life started to return to my broken body and I grabbed my clothes to cover my shame. As I struggled to get dressed, I could see the woman was doing everything possible to avoid looking at me – as if somewhere buried deep inside of her there was something like shame for what she had let happen. As if looking at me and having to physically face the consequence of her cruelty would be too much – and shatter her fragile little world. I knew at that moment she was the biggest coward I had met so far.

Eventually, she ushered me upstairs and casually opened the door into another small room – the room that was to become my final prison. Another girl was already there, one much younger than me, seemingly asleep on a mattress in the corner of the room.

The woman pointed to the girl and whispered, “She’s from the same place as you, I arranged that.” I think that was intended as an act of kindness, another way for her to absolve herself of everything she had done… and all that she would do.

And that’s how I ended up here with Ivana. Here in this prison cell of a room overlooking the beautiful city of Amsterdam. A city whose bells chime every hour as if they’re trying to call us to freedom, as though they’re trying to tell us to keep the faith. Now is the between stage where we will be given food and water, a few hours where we don’t have to put our bodies through the burning agony of having strangers explore us – exploiting us like the shores of a foreign land. A few hours a day is all we have, and it’s never enough to close the wounds.
I hold Ivana’s hand tighter in my grasp and smile softly at her – the morning light faintly warm on our bodies. I haven’t got the energy to smile at her warmly like I used to. When I first met her, I would tell her everything would be all right, that it would all become easier. I’ve stopped saying that to her now, I know it won’t be.

Ivana never tells me the things she’s done since arriving here; she’s never once let a word of the past pass her lips. She’s focused on the future – on us – on the here and now. I try to manage her expectations and dreams, a girl so young should be able to hope for the world, but I have to gently stop her from running away from reality. I don’t mean to be cruel, but I know it’s kinder to protect her from shattered illusions. She truly believes that any day now we’ll be free, that this infinite debt we’re in will somehow be paid off – that our captors will let us go and wander the streets of Amsterdam and live the lives we were promised. I wish I had that kind of hope, but I don’t.

Though I have no faith in our captors, for as long as the city continues to cry out to us – I will dream of escape. Working in the dark is for the devil, so we must wait for the light to burn his eyes, for the city’s sweet music to ring in his ears – only when he is blind and deaf will we be able to slip away unnoticed. That is why each time the handle to our room turns I feel my heart leap, once it was always with the hope for some savior. Now, it is with fear of who might lie behind it...
Naked Pain

written all over her mute body
  eyes the color of crushed
      Japanese plums—
chipped teeth locked in a rictus grin
  rimmed by torn lips
      crack open
just enough for a bruised tongue to
  lick the copious fluid running down
      scarred cheeks onto swollen breasts
imprinted with the red fingers
      of a speed-crazed
          Wall Street Adonis—
left arm hanging
  useless beside her
      disfigured torso
          twisted into
an abnormal shape
      more like
          a contorted hickory
than
an upright
oak as yet
unbent by
old age or
ravaged by
canker rot—
she the target of treachery
      concealed in adamant recitations
          of love & devotion
      guarantees that next time
          will never take place—
whatever she fears she’s learned
      not to speak
The Vivisector

to please her invited guests
seated around the table draped in starched linens
    set with her best china & sterling silver
the hostess serves clear broth
    floating with watercress
followed by a salad of baby greens
    figs & edible flowers
excuses herself to prepare the main course in
    the kitchen where she mashes waxy
    potatoes with thick cream
artfully arranges lightly-steamed vegetables
    around the meat that lies awake
    knees bent & arms folded
    on an immense porcelain plate
    she has inherited

platter held high at her breasts the hostess
marches triumphantly into the dining room
    to appreciative applause    pauses
a moment for effect then sets it down
    beside a stack of warmed dinner plates
wields her tongue like the tip
    of a very fine blade
to find the point on the pièce de résistance
    where the moist flesh is yielding & joints
    can be wrested apart
    with minimal effort—
although it is painful being served for dinner
    the daughter    a model main course
    remains mute when her
tendons & internal organs are put on display
    in order to make her mother’s
dinner party
    a crowning success
Whatever You Say

at midnight she calls
me to meet her in
the field to the west
of her house

although I am frightened by the
cries of an owl
the absence of light
I go as she bids me—

she stands in the furrows
ready for planting
luminous snakes encircle her head
hands the claws of a jaguar

*come, come, my sweet*
*be a good girl*
*it’s mother who needs you*

trembling, I kneel at her feet
*ah, daughter, I am thirsty*
*what did you bring me to drink?*
nothing, Mother, I am afraid

*not to worry* she says
& chops off my head
*blood tastes better than water*
slaking her thirst & licking her paws

*ah, daughter, I am starving*
*what did you bring me to eat?*
nothing, Mother, I am afraid

*not to worry,* she says as
she rips out my heart
chops off my limbs
*flesh is sweeter than fruit*
& nearly as tender
ah, daughter, now that you’ve fed me I must to my work—
if you don’t mind
I’ll just plant your remains
with the seeds I am sowing
so you can feed the corn
as you did me & as I fed you first with my blood & then
with my milk
Domestic Life

— Every 9 seconds in the US
a woman is assaulted or beaten

pain is a familiar fellow
who sits gripping her torn shoulder
good company
on days she might otherwise
be alone
the striking colors of contusion mar
her eye sockets & pale cheeks
stung by the tears that
leak out of her heart
poorly set bones in her arms ache
whether she stands or she sits

but much as she would like to show
pain the door
it will not leave her side or her back
the warrior’s oath:
can’t leave a casualty behind

at night
bed check
all tucked safely in

at daybreak
fall out,
one, two
both reporting

a regular platoon
camaraderie
insured
by the buddy system

intact
enclosed
like the full
metal jacket
encased
in the gun
of her man
Pain—An Interlude: Playing Teakettle

If I tell you my pain \((n)\) and you pass it \((n-3)\) on I will have less pain than I did \((n-1)\) and you will have less pain \((n-2)\) than I do. If your friend tells it \((n-4)\) too, she will have less pain \((n-3)\) than you \((n-2)\) and much less than me \((n-1)\). If your friend’s friend passes it \((n-5)\) on, she will have less pain \((n-4)\) than your friend \((n-3)\) and much less than you \((n-2)\). If your friend’s friend passes it \((n-6)\) back to me, it will no longer be pain at all but something completely *new*.
When Winter Comes

I should tear the phone
off the wall—pluck it out
at the source
       like a tongue at the roots

after we talk I measure out my life
       by pacing the green
       geometry of my lawn
finding strength
       in the intersection of shadows

there’s too much color
       in our relationship—
       my blood-red opposition
       his coal-black persistence
both inflaming my nerves

I seek relief in the muted blues & greens
       of my gardens
where I wait for the cool
       tranquility of the plum colored sky
that I can hold to my cheek like a fruit
       finding solace
       deep in its silent curves

what will I do when winter
comes—

spill the red on the snow
like the muskrat
       who left his
       foot in the trap?
The Time I Said Nothing

occurred in a tiki bar on the leeward side
    of Costa Rica where even the nights
    were hot
I sat with friends drinking beer
    who talked politics & joked good-naturedly—
while I watched a bear of a man with a straggly ponytail
    who was dressed like what he thought Hemingway
    might wear
I thought to myself: this man with rheumy sunburned eyes
    this man laughs too much
reaching reaching endlessly pawing & sniffing after
    the clasped hands of
a delicate girl—no more than a child really
    who was young enough
    to be his granddaughter—slender
    even thin in her sleeveless dress
    splashed with tropical birds & flowers
strands of her hair pulled loose from braids plaited
    by an amateur
    had become a nimbus in the poorly-lit bar
what were they to one another I asked myself as this man leaned
    hard across a small wooden table
    in his urgent need to
    possess her innocence
Crossing Guard

pedestrian X-ing
how thoughtful to
warn folks on foot
they’ll be wiped out
ahead or does
it describe how
ordinary the X-ing is
nothing special just pe-
destrian can
there be a nondescript
pederast [no etymological
relation oh—
custom of the past:
Greek men so loved
their boys they buggered
them then dispensed
friendship advice
assistance [the youth
doubtless needed this
as today’s children
need a X-ing guard
garbed in rigid yellow plastic
to stop the traffic-
king
from moving
what thoughts cross
the guard’s reptilian mind
as he sends his charges
safely on their way—
does he wish for ancient
Greece to rise again that
he might worship his
heart’s delight in
public places proof he
is an upstanding member
of the state’s elite
right-fully holding
power over all the rest
or does he simply check
postings
on the internet
When Amanda gets to the house just after ten on Saturday morning, her dad is in her brother’s old bedroom. That’s where Carl stays now, along with Deano’s single bed and dresser. Deano’s taken the larger bedroom, the one upstairs that used to belong to his parents, the one furthest from the bath. Carl’s peeling vinyl lounge chair has also been moved, and that’s where Amanda finds him—yellowing undershirt, wrinkled brown slacks, slippers—looking emaciated and unkempt. Deano’s 19-inch television, the one he got when he graduated Chaminade High School, is on FOX where some on-air celebrity is sitting on a couch discussing immigration while the hem of her skirt rides almost around her waist.

Carl seems calm, but he smells like a mouse decaying inside a wall and the stench permeates the entire bedroom.

“I have an idea,” Amanda says. “Why don’t you get gussied up and we’ll take a walk? It’s beautiful out.”

Actually, it’s overcast and unseasonable chilly for mid-June. Not that it matters, Carl hasn’t heard a word she’s said. He’s holding his glasses in one hand while wiping them with a disintegrating Kleenex in the other. When he puts them back on, he squints at the TV screen.

“Look at the taters on that,” he says.

Deano is still asleep. He’s currently working graveyard shift, and there’s little Amanda can do until he gets up.

“I’m just going to put on some coffee,” Amanda says, patting her dad’s shoulder. He nods like a bird pecking at grass seed, but then stops.

“Jesus Christ,” he says. “When did you get here?”

The house is on Premont Street where Amanda spent the first twenty years of her life. A two-decade long tag-team match in which she and her brother opposed their parents. Eighteen years ago, at a neighbor’s Fourth of July cookout, she met this guy from Connecticut. He claimed that his true calling was as a talent agent, but for the time being he was working as “an automotive sales consultant.” Amanda had just gotten her AAS in Dental Hygiene from Nassau Community College and was ready for a life change, so she married the guy the following September. Her brother’s parting words, as the newlyweds left Leonard’s Palazzo for a honeymoon in Daytona were, “So now what?”

Deano, still in high school, was seventeen. Their mother, Emmy, expected the boy to graduate, move on to Cathedral or St. Joe’s Seminary, and become a Catholic priest. Deano’s mediocre grades dictated otherwise. He eventually enrolled at Old Westbury, but found college boring and a waste of time. Before he’d completed his sophomore
year, Deano took the written exam to become a Nassau County Police Officer, and passed.

Amanda visited frequently and the family seemed—minus her—the same as always. Her father was aloof and unpredictable, her mother a maintenance drunk who worked at the county clerk’s office and lied about having a college education. But no one expected Mom to die just over two years ago, a seemingly healthy woman almost nineteen years younger than her husband.

One night after an especially bitter argument over what Carl referred to as “Deano’s dumbass life choices,” Carl told his son to clear out. Deano packed up the following morning and moved to the only place he could find, a rented room a few minutes away in Williston Park. Carl was fine, thank you very much, on his own. A cheapskate by nature, he’d saved a pile thanks to forty-plus years at Brooklyn Union Gas Company. A retirement package, plus stock options, plus Social Security. He still drove, still visited his brother upstate, still bowled in a league every Wednesday night. Amanda dropped in at least once a month and fulfilled what she considered an obligation; she treated her father to dinner at Vito’s Macaroni Grill, the only restaurant he’d eat at.

Last summer, Carl started getting rattled. Could tell you every ship he served on in the Navy. Every sailor he was stationed with. Every port. But ask him why he was wearing two different shoes… No idea. Amanda justified it. This was what happened when people reached a certain age. She made Deano promise to drive by more often, to keep a somewhat constant hand on the tiller.

It was also around this time that Amanda’s marriage collapsed like a two-legged table. Her name was Jade and she worked at Curry Brothers Chevrolet in accounts receivable. Jade played banjo and harmonica and sang Tammy Wynette songs. Amanda’s husband had taken her to see Jade perform at a bar in Garden City, but all Amanda recalled were press-on nails and one leg noticeably shorter than the other. Her soon-to-be ex left a final note on the nightstand. Under a crudely sketched telephone, he’d written, “Sorry, babe. Show biz called.” Amanda got to keep the house, the Chevy Tahoe, and not enough cash to pay off either.

One October evening, she received a phone call from the old neighborhood. Mrs. Battisto, retired from the DMV, lived four houses down. She said Carl had walked in her front door while she and Mr. Battisto were in the living room enjoying some cocoa, looked around, said, “Wrong house,” and left. Her father didn’t touch alcohol, so Amanda knew that wasn’t the problem. Less than a week later, Mrs. B called again. This time it involved the police. It seems Carl had called and reported his car stolen. Said he looked out the window and saw “a black feller” driving away in it. An officer came out and found the automobile a few slots down, in front of the Battisto house. “I love your dad,” Mrs. Battisto said, “but I worry about him in that house alone.” She added, “I was going to call your brother, but I figured he was…”

A moron? Amanda thought to herself. “…probably busy,” Mrs. Battisto said.
Two months after the “black feller” incident, Deano phoned to report that their dad had nearly burned the house down. Apparently, Carl was heating soup on the stove and the dish towel he was using as a pot holder went up. The curtains over the sink caught, but Carl was able to control the damage by using the faucet spray hose. Somebody passing by heard the detector beeping, saw an open window with smoke billowing out, and called 911.

“He needs close supervision,” Amanda told her brother. “Maybe we can pay Mrs. Battisto a few bucks to look in.”

“I have a better idea,” Deano said.

He’d met this woman the same summer that Carl started slipping. It was at one of those outdoor carnivals in some mall parking area. The woman—Kaylee—had been dating the Ferris wheel operator and that’s where they broke it off. She spotted Deano, who’d been walking foot patrol, getting sick next to one of the food trucks. His uniform cap had blown off and she retrieved it, then gave him a half-bottle of water to rinse with. By Christmas, they decided to move in together. She lived at home with her parents, he still had the rented room. Money was tight and Kaylee had lost her job at a book bindery in Huntington almost a year ago. They were “ready and willing,” as Deano put it, to move in with Carl and “take the bull by the horns.” Amanda wasn’t crazy about this, but it was a solution. Her biggest nightmare had always been moving back home, picking up her life where she left it, hearing every neighbor ask what happened.

“So when do I get to meet her?” Amanda asked.

The initial meeting took place that following weekend. Carl had already been relocated to the smaller room, but he seemed resigned, even cooperative. Kaylee was another story. Amanda disliked the woman immediately, and the feeling appeared to be mutual. Kaylee, stubby and round with platinum hair so short it looked chewed off, spoke with a lisp and wore a giant crucifix on a silver chain.

It was during their first dinner together, Chinese food ordered in. Carl had chosen to eat in his room, captivated by something called Hercules on Ice.

“You should think about taking your father up there with you for a month,” Kaylee said.

“Give me and Deano some time off.”

“I work full time,” Amanda reminded her.

“So does Deano.”

Amanda glanced over at her brother who seemed to be busy studying his chicken lo mein.

“I thought between the two of you…”

Amanda left the statement hanging as Carl, totally nude, walked into the kitchen holding the white cardboard take-out container, chopsticks stabbed in the middle like rabbit ears.
“What is this slop?” he asked.

Carl had treated his wife respectfully, affectionately at times, even when she was in her fifties, even when throat cancer had stolen her ability to speak. He never tried to hide the fact that he considered children—especially his own—a nuisance. When they were babies they screeched and shit themselves. As toddlers they got into their mother’s jewelry box and their father’s can of paint thinner. As teens, they were either uncommunicative or confrontational.

“They’re like those sucker fish that attach themselves to sharks,” Amanda heard him say one summer night. They were driving home from her uncle’s place in Glens Falls, it was past midnight, and Carl—windows open and shirt totally unbuttoned—obviously thought both kids were asleep in the back.

“Keep your voice down,” her mother whispered.

“They should be kept in a tank,” Carl said, still loud enough to be heard. “Drop in some food and tap on the glass when you want their attention.”

Amanda, eyes shut tight, wrapped an arm around her sleeping brother and pulled closer to him.

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Presently, both women are in the kitchen. Amanda is at the sink filling the glass carafe, Kaylee is standing behind the kitchen table like it’s a dike and Amanda is flood water.

“Deano usually gets up ‘round one-thirty,” Kaylee says.

“He’s a growing boy,” Amanda says. “Needs his sleep.”

“He told you ‘bout the incident?”

Amanda nods. The “incident” is why she’s here. It took place earlier in the week. The straw that broke the camel’s back, as Deano might say. Amanda pours the water into the coffee maker, slides the basket filled with ground coffee into place, flicks it on

“I don’t believe in interfering in family matters,” Kaylee says. “Ask my opinion, and I’ll offer it, but I’m no buttinsky.”

“I appreciate that,” Amanda says.

“Would you like my opinion?”

“I think my brother and I can probably work this out.”

“Good luck,” Kaylee says. She turns, opens a cabinet, starts rearranging stuff that doesn’t need rearranging.

“I’ll be in my room,” Amanda says.

“Oh,” Kaylee says, facing her. “About that.”

The incident involved this kid named Jimmy Kwon.

Deano has always been a big believer in proper car maintenance: oil changes, tune-ups, tire rotation, all of it. His plan was not complicated. He’d get up at seven and drop his Jeep Liberty off with his pal Rudy, an ex-con who worked out of his own garage. Kylee would follow in Carl’s car, they’d have breakfast at Friendly’s, then drive back to
the house. The entire ordeal wouldn’t take more than a couple of hours. Carl would likely sleep until they got back. Mrs. Battisto was at Wednesday morning mass, but just to be safe they’d asked Jimmy Kwon if he’d like to pick up a couple of bucks by staying at the house. The Kwons, originally from Seoul, were new to the neighborhood. Their English wasn’t perfect, but it was pretty good.

“About time,” they heard Carl say as they returned around nine-thirty. Jimmy, cowering in one corner of the living room, looked too frightened to speak in any language, while Carl—dressed in a plaid pajamas—wielded a butcher knife as if it was a bayonet.

“Call the authorities,” Carl ordered. “Tell them we got ourselves a gook combatant.” Jimmy’s parents were not thrilled when they heard the story. Mr. Kwon, a New York City actuary, even threatened legal action regarding a potential “hate crime.”

Amanda’s room is across the narrow hallway from where Carl now sleeps, but when she looks around she hardly recognizes it. The wall posters she’s had up since high school—The Eagles and Fleetwood Mac, Philip Michael Thomas and The Fonz—are gone. Her books and knickknacks, her soccer trophies and stuffed animals, gone. So are the shelves that held them. Her bed has been replaced by a long flat work surface above which rolls of wrapping paper are on mounted spindles. Where her dresser used to be, there are two four-foot high plastic storage cabinets. Each drawer is see-through, and Amanda notices ribbons, different colored tissue paper, neon gift bags, flattened boxes, glue and glitter.

“Your brother said I could do what I wanted,” Kaylee says.

“What happened to my furniture?!”

“We had a tag sale,” Kylee says as she leans against the door jamb. “It went.”

“Where am I supposed to sleep?!”

Kaylee shrugs. “Living room couch?”

“It doesn’t even fold out!”


Amanda pictures grabbing a pair of scissors from the work area, stabbing Kaylee in the neck, then wrapping her dead body like a gift and leaving it on the curb for the sanitation crew.

Half-past noon and Deano still isn’t up, so Amanda suggests to her dad that they have lunch at Vito’s Macaroni Grill—just the two of them—and the old man nods.

“But you have to take a shower and change first,” she says. Amanda opens his dresser, picks out some clean clothes, a set of once-white underwear, socks. Beneath his bed, she finds a pair of sneakers with Velcro closures. She folds everything and leaves the stack on the downstairs toilet lid, then runs the shower. She brings Carl inside, instructs him on what to do, tells him she’ll be waiting, and closes the door between them.
Kaylee is running the vacuum in the living room, but switches it off when Amanda walks in. “Do you really think this is a good idea?” she asks. “Elderly people die from slips in the tub.”
“At least he’ll be clean.”
“What if he locks himself in? There’s pills in there.”
“Kaylee?”
“What?”
“Mind your own business, all right?”
Kaylee stares at Amanda and for a second the woman’s fixed gaze makes her shudder.
“Your funeral,” Kaylee says before she flicks the vacuum back on.
When Carl comes out a few minutes later, he’s changed his clothes and reeks of cologne. Amanda suspects he hasn’t even gotten close to soap or water.
“We’ll be back shortly, Emmy!” he calls toward Kaylee’s hunched frame.
“God willing!” Kaylee calls back.
The old man is the first one out the door. “What are you waiting for, Manda?” he says.
“An engraved invitation?”

* * *

She feels as if she has to tell somebody, so over pizza Amanda says, “Guess what, Dad? This old gal has a date tomorrow morning.”
“I like the way they used to make the pizza,” Carl says.
“He’s a high school science teacher. We met online.”
“They don’t even put garlic salt out. You have to beg them for it.”
“Our first official date is tomorrow morning. Guess where we’re going?”
Carl says nothing.
“He’s taking me birdwatching,” Amanda laughs. “Isn’t that funny?”
Carl reaches for a shaker of oregano and knocks his half-filled glass of Coke over. As Amanda blots up what she can with a handful of napkins, Carl looks around the crowded restaurant.
“Don’t look at me,” he says. “I wasn’t the one yapping about birds.”

After lunch, they wander over to Roosevelt Field and walk around. Carl has lost a step or two, but if Amanda slows down he’s able to keep up.
“We here to get something for your mother?” he asks as they enter Macy’s.
The question concerns Amanda the same way his referring to Kaylee as “Emmy” did.
“I thought maybe we could get you a few things,” she says. “The undershirts you have aren’t good enough to shine shoes with.”
She finds a four-pack of Hanes Tagless Crewnecks, holds them up, asks him what he thinks.
“Sissy,” he says.
“Too bad. We’re buying them.”
“Waste of good money,” he tells her.

Deano is up and dressed by the time they get back. Kaylee has left to do some grocery shopping, so brother and sister pretty much have the run of the house. Deano considers himself an outdoors man. He’s set up shop on the side deck, the redwood picnic table his desk, a manila folder in front of him. Amanda on the opposite bench, sits like some diplomat at a peace summit, willing to agree to almost anything.
Deano has not been idle. He’s checked around, looked online at what the state and county have to offer. He’s determined that the minuses, including questionable sanitary conditions and apathetic staff, far outweigh the plusses. He opens the manila folder and takes out the only thing inside, a thin color brochure.
“I was thinking maybe this,” he says.

Amanda spreads it flat, looks at pictures of an indoor pool, a fitness center, a screening room. There’s not a single person in any one of them.
“I’ve done some homework,” Deano says. “Best deal out there.” Amanda studies the brochure more closely. Lucia Living Community. It’s in Suffolk County, maybe an hour-and-a-half away. “I set up an appointment for later today,” he says. “Figured we can drive out and ask some serious questions.”
“How much?” she asks, and Deano gives her the bottom-line price: $2,800 a month. “I talked to a lawyer,” Deano says. “He’s working on getting me guardianship. That way I have access to Dad’s money.”
Amanda looks out into the small side yard where her father stacks fallen branches into a pile by the chain-link fence, then squats down and holds his palms above them like he’s warming his hands over a fire.
“What time do that want us there?” she says.

They leave at four for a five-fifteen appointment. Amanda’s uncomfortable with the thought of her father being alone with Kaylee, so she calls Mrs. Battisto who volunteers to come at five with stuffed shells and a tossed salad.
They take Amanda’s Tahoe, but Deano insists on driving. They’ve just merged onto I-495 when he asks her for the first time what she thinks of Kaylee. Amanda hesitates, then comes out with it. “She doesn’t seem very intelligent.”
She’s surprised when Deano says, “I know.”
“I mean, what’s with the gift wrapping room?”
“No idea.”
“Dad seems confused by the whole set-up.”
Deano shrugs. “To be honest with you,” he says, “I wouldn’t mind getting rid of her.”
“Do it then.”
“It’s just that she’s so...helpless.”
Amanda laughs. “Maybe Mom was right,” she says. “Maybe you should have become
a priest.”
“She’s also pregnant.”

The woman who shows them around, Miss Spicer, has the personality of an undertaker in training. Tasteful black dress, gold locket, dark crepe soled oxfords. She leads them through the dining room as dinner is being prepared, and into the common room where a game of Scattergories is in full swing. “Tomorrow afternoon,” she says, “we’ll all be shuttling to Walmart.”

They’re shown an available apartment—double occupancy—that includes cable TV, WiFi, and easy access to the facility’s “Town Square.” The unit is also equipped with an emergency pull cord and a sliding lever—a moon on one side, a sun on the other—mounted to the front door. “Our residents are instructed to move the lever to the appropriate time of day,” Miss Spicer says. “It’s one of the many ways we have to assure they’re still alive.”

* * *

Halfway home, her cellphone chirps. It’s Mrs. Battisto calling to say that she has to bail out early, that her husband got violently ill after returning from LobsterPalooza. Amanda tells her that’s fine, that they’re not more than a half-hour away, that she’s sure Kaylee can handle things. “Wow,” she says after they’ve driven a few more miles. “It just hit me. You’re going to be a dad.” Deano nods. “How does that make you feel?”
“Tell the truth?” he says, “I think I’m gonna like it.”
“Really?”
“Yeah,” he says. “I think it’s the one thing I might be good at.”

They’re about ten minutes from the house when the ABS dash light comes on. “Goddamn,” Deano says. He pulls over to the shoulder of the road, turns the vehicle off, starts it up again. The light pops back on. “It’s your breaks,” he tells her. “When were you thinking of heading back?”
“Tomorrow morning,” she says. “Can it wait?”
Deano shakes his head. “Too risky,” he says. He takes out his own cell phone and starts to punch in a number. “I have this buddy. Rudy. Great mechanic. Let’s have him take a look.”
“Right now?”
“I won’t sleep if we don’t.”

He drops Amanda off in front of the house, tells her he’ll grab a ride back with Rudy. Amanda hears the voices before she even all the way inside. “Go ahead,” Kaylee says. “It’s for you.”
She peeks into her brother’s old room and sees Carl seated on the edge of the bed. Kaylee is standing close to him, her back to the doorway. She’s got something in her
hand, something she’d extending, and Amanda notices it’s wrapped in brilliant foil paper.
“I picked it out special,” Kaylee says.
Carl takes the package from her and carefully unwraps it.
“Like it?”
“I love it,” he says. “It’s just what I wanted.” When he holds it up, Amanda sees that it’s the four-pack of undershirts she’d bought earlier. “Manda!” he says. “Look!” Kaylee turns, sees Amanda, and turns red as cherry cough syrup.
“We were just...”
“No,” Amanda says. “It’s all right.”
“I didn’t...”
“It’s fine.”
Kaylee looks around the room like an actor who’s forgotten her lines. “Get ready for bed,” she tells Carl, then turns sideways to pass Amanda. Obediently, Carl begins unbuttoning his shirt. “That woman is the only one who knows what I like,” he says.
Deano calls a few minutes later while Amanda, alone in the kitchen, eats corn chips and drinks beer from a can.
“Rudy’ll have the car for you by morning, but he needs to go looking for a part.”
“At night?”
“That’s when he does his best work.” Deano laughs, then says, “Do you think somebody could pick me up?”

Kaylee miscarries in August and spends three weeks in bed crying. Deano chides her nonstop, and by September she’s back living with her parents. Amanda visits just about every weekend now, and one Sunday afternoon, as they sit in the kitchen drinking sangria and finishing leftover Mexican, he surprises her.
“You should think about moving back,” he says. “We could fix up your room any way you want.”
“I don’t think so.”
“Why not?”
“Two reasons. Number one, I’m kind of seeing somebody now.”
“And number two?”
“I’ve always found this place about as appealing as a shit sandwich.” This makes Deano laugh. He pours himself some more sangria, but when he reaches toward his sister’s glass she holds her hand over the top.
“I have to drive,” she tells him.
Later today she plans to travel out to Suffolk County alone. Deano has passed on the trip, saying he can’t take seeing the old man anymore. Carl has been transferred from Assisted Living to Memory Care, and now he seldom recognizes his own kids.
“Do you ever stop and ask yourself why we’re still doing this?” he asks.
“Doing what?”
Deano gathers their dishes and puts them in the sink.
“Bending over backwards. Kissing his ass. The man has done squat for us.”
“He’s our father, Deano.”
“He’s our father. Big deal. He stuck his dick in a woman so now we’re supposed to
offer unconditional love?” Amanda shrugs, drains her glass. Deano points over to the
rectangular package on the counter under the cabinets. It’s about half the size of a
cigarette carton, wrapped in gold paper with white shooting stars and wrapped with red
ribbon.
“What did you get him this time?”
“Chocolate-covered mini-pretzels,” she says. “Supposed to be the best in
Connecticut.”
“Expensive?”
“Filet mignon prices.”
“Does he ever even open them?”
Amanda shakes her head. “Not while I’m there. But I imagine the staff pigs out once I
leave.”
Deano picks up the box, puts it on the center of the table, sits back down. “Let’s eat ‘em,” he says.
“Deano…”
“C’mon,” he says. “Just this once. Get drunk, forget about driving, and eat us some
chocolate-covered mini-pretzels.” When Amanda says nothing, her brother refills her
glass, then slides the box closer to her. “Go ahead. Open it.”
Amanda smiles the way she used to when they were both kids and one dared the
other to do something like drink from the toilet. “You open it,” she says pushing the box
back in his direction.
“You think I won’t?”
The ribbon is taken off carefully, but by the time he gets to the tape, Deano is ripping in
like some crazed diabetic. The wrapping paper flies, the lid is flipped open, the waxed
paper is parted.
“Whatever you paid?” Deano says, his mouth both chewing and forming words. “Well
worth the money.”
He reaches in a second time, takes out a pretzel, extends it toward his sister. She
doesn’t take it from him, but just opens her mouth like she used to when they were
little.
“Stick out your tongue,” he says, and when she does he places it gently, almost like a
sacrament, almost like holy communion.
Simplification
Mitchell Krockmalnik Grabois

My friend Ed is trying to simplify his life. He sells possessions. He unfriends Facebook friends who have died. He encourages me to do the same. But my possessions insulate me from oblivion. My friends who have died may want to contact me. I don’t have a Ouija board but I have Facebook. I don’t want your advice, Ed. I don’t want your desperation. Smoke billows from your laptop. Cremations are in progress.

My father was an electrical engineer. He pioneered drones. Like God himself, he brought death unseen from the sky. He was a bad father, but he’s still my Facebook friend.

I live in squalor and celebrate ignorance. I earned a Bachelor’s from Harvard, then a law degree from an institution equally prestigious. Now I live surrounded by filth. I’ve abandoned the upstairs of my house and live in the entryway, a broad hallway with a cot and couple of dressers stuffed with stained clothes, their tops overflowing with Philosophy books. There’s too much crap on the stairs for me or anyone to get upstairs. I need some synthetic two-stroke engine oil. I need a new spark plug. My old one is fouled. I’m not going to weed wack my overgrown yard but I’ll wack someone else’s, and they’ll pay me to do it.

Hornets grow from the ground like grass, stingers up. Our minds opened by mescaline, we walk through this field barefoot, mindless of pain or toxin. Anyone allergic to wasp stings would already be dead. The sun sets orange over the mountain. The elbows of my brown sweater are frayed. We are eating a diet consisting solely of Thai chicken soup made with coconut and lemon grass. Despite the infusion of coconut, I suddenly feel itchy all over. I compulsively consume an entire package of Benadryl. My cousin killed herself with an overdose of Benadryl. The coroner could not tell me how much Benadryl she had taken. No one kept a record of how many empty packages surrounded her body.
The actors who play Batman and Superman get in a fight over who will ride the pygmy elephant at the Cinco de Mayo carnival. This is out of sight of all the little Mexican-American children who stand by the side of the road waiting, eating churros. It starts as a fistfight, but devolves to ground fighting, as fights often do. The actors who play these superheroes are not trained fighters. Both are clumsy and ineffective. They roll around in the dust, like women cat-fighting over a man.

Finally Batman pins Superman. He gets to his feet, dusts off his costume, and goes off to ride the elephant, while Superman sits on the ground rubbing injured parts of his face and body. A rat crawls up on his shoulder and whispers suicidal thoughts in his ear, which he tries to ignore. But he hates playing Superman, hates having to avoid bars for fear some patron will challenge him to a fight or arm wrestling match. He is actually pretty weak, and wants to be playing Hamlet.

_Stones are Tums in this dyspeptic universe_, Superman (the actor that plays Superman) tells me. We’re sitting next to each other in a bar, he in his red, white and blue suit, me in my black wool suit, but we haven’t introduced each other and, before this, have not spoken a word. _In other words: I can’t stomach the world. In other words: human nature is too much to take. Acid reflux is an aggravation, especially when I’m rescuing Lois Lane. Unseen by the cameras, I belch in her face, and she despises me._

On the TV above the bar, an acrobat on a unicycle balances a ten-foot stack of dishes. I can make out a slice of pizza and a Ruben sandwich. He pedals backwards. He balances a ball on his nose. With his chin, he eases a bottle of Tums from his shirt pocket. I think: He and Superman are brothers in suffering.

He tosses the bottle in the air. The tablets fly out like a spray of stars. All the constellations have stories. They all have something to say.

I wasn’t going to tell you, but I am suffering from stomach cancer. In the early days, friends would hear the news and say: I’m sorry. I’d nearly shout at them: _Don’t tell me you’re sorry. Tell Cancer you’re sorry, because I’m going to kick Cancer’s ass, send him back to the Cancer Ward where he belongs, where he can lay on a bed naked and bleeding, and lick his wounds._ That’s what I said in the early days, the Days of Hubris.

God engineered the Universe, a masterwork. His animal designs contain mind-boggling genetics. But He fails at communication. He’s a monster. When His children misbehave all he can think to do is drown them all, like a future sex offender down at the riverbank with a burlap sack of new kittens. He is worse than Frankenstein’s monster. His clumsiness knows no bounds. Still, He demands our love and obedience.
I wrote about nature, about parents and children, the terrible things they do to each other, about unemployment, poverty and humiliation, every decade a new twist, or really, just a different slant on the same dirge. Now every poem is a sonnet to sexual dysfunction, and an ode to Viagra. There's a new calm in the world. I'm a master of resignation. I might sound old but I'm not.

I cannot stop looking at your photo, in the digital frame my aunt has set up in her parlor, and is lit twenty-four hours a day like an electric memorial candle. Your overmedicated blue eyes are bright as marbles. Under your blue denim shirt, your skin is energetic, as are your small pointy breasts.

The photo fades to one of Odetta, the blues singer. She holds up her hand like a milagro. It is glowing bright white, as if it lives in another universe, one in which slavery never existed.

Then that photo dissolves, and there you are again, freckles on your nose and under the illuminated marbles that are your eyes, your throat bony, your expression inscrutable.

Dissolve, then: Louise Bourgeois, one of my aunt’s cultural heroes, in profile. My aunt wears a red beret. Her fingers are black with ink, fingers that drove my uncle away. Louise holds her hand out, as Odetta did, a shared language of offered touch. Louise’s hand looks painful to hold open. It is more natural closed over a brush or sculptural tool.

One of her spider structures sold for $10.7 million. She knows that 10.7 million of anything is a worthless abstraction. In her advanced age, she resembles Georgia O'Keeffe in her advanced age. Georgia said: Whether you succeed or not is irrelevant. There is no such thing. Making your unknown known is the important thing. Dissolve. I awake from a two-second nap. Here you are again, no more scrutable, making your known unknown. “It's time to boil the forceps,” you used to say. Your eyes are so blue, they have sucked in the sky and left the world sunk in blackness.
Little Dust
Mitchell Krockmalnik Grabois

I sat in the dusty library. A sandstorm raged outside. I’d gotten in before the world choked me with dust. I felt the wind through the many cracks.
I flipped on a computer. The librarian gave me a dirty look, unmindful that I could pick her up and toss her into the storm, effortlessly, like tossing a bag of stolen pistachios. Some girl who thought she was the Lamb of God came to help me. I knew she wanted my big, black dick in her. I knew she wanted to expire in the storm. She led me like a dumb animal. We searched for my mother’s name.
Motherfuck there she is, her mug shot. At 6 foot 3, 290 pounds, she looks mean as King Kong. I came out of that.
Her first name was Wilma. Her nickname was “Big Dust,” her last name same as mine.
The storm abated. The librarian asked me to leave.
The Lamb of God and I walked out to her rusted-out Chevy pick-up and got in. She started the engine with a roar. She drove out into the grasslands.

There were thousands of tarantulas on the hunt for mates out there, and I knew if we stayed there, slept in the bed of her pickup, and walked through the Grasslands night and day, I would be saved.
By moonlight, the tarantulas’ bodies would spell out words as powerful and esoteric as those in the Kabbalah, but I’d tell them: I’m Little Dust. I don’t want words. I just want to feel your bristly bodies, filled with sex urge, filled with the promise of procreation.
Christopher died in 2005 when it was cold in Tampa. Not long after, I was raped near a bowling alley while some people I knew sang karaoke inside. Before that year, I wouldn’t have thought of stripping as a cure for grief. It worked, in a way.

Our friendship was strange. Mostly we sat on my bedroom floor and watched movies while Christopher brushed my hair. He would brush until the credits rolled and I’d lose sensation in my scalp. I never suggested it. Other times we’d walk past rows of bars on Channelside and to the University of Tampa with its imitation minarets and then to the Hillsborough River, which I would jump into later but not with him.

We both worked at Penney’s. I was eighteen. Christopher was twenty-six. I’d seen him around the store very early or very late, switching out the marketing posters. He carried a purse, which he’d made by sewing two pieces of felt together and gluing smaller felt cutouts shaped like stars and moons onto the background. The hot glue had dripped spots onto the material and hardened into a semen-white Spackle. We stood exposed by the back entrance; he bummed a cigarette.

And who are you? he said.
I introduced myself.
No. He wagged his index finger. I’m going to call you Olive.
Olive, I said. Why?
The way a full moon reflects onto surfaces. You know how I mean?
Uh, I said.
So, he said. You’re Olive.
And that’s how Christopher erased my real name, creating enough of a space for me to forget myself in.

We clocked out of work at eight-thirty. It was fall; it was a Tuesday or Wednesday. We smoked cigarettes out of my hatchback’s crank windows. Sex workers jaywalked Nebraska Avenue; men trailed them. Someone wailed Rochelle again and again. I turned left at the Shell Feed store and drove around back and parked. Well, I said. See you at work.

Honey, Christopher said, come up for a little while.
He leaned over and unclasped my seat belt.
I don’t know, I said.
Please? Come see where I do my thing.
He was doing that thing he sometimes did: lower lip, plaintive lilt, leaning in.
Smelled like: patchouli and soured clothes. I couldn’t tell if I the pity I felt was a defense against anger or whether the anger I felt was a defense against pity.

Okay, I said. Just for a second.

We walked toward cinderblock apartments under metal-bright flood lights. Someone had spray painted FUK NARCZ on one of the doors. Christopher started toward a set of broken stairs where a man sat smoking a glass pipe. I stopped and looked toward the receding highway.

Olive, Christopher said.

Fibrous smoke in our direction.

‘Sup, Jaime, Christopher said.

The man nodded, looked me up and down, as if to say: What business. At the top of the stairs, Christopher pressed against a door and stepped aside.

Ladies first, he said.

You don’t lock up? I said.

He went in and flipped a light switch. We stood in a bare efficiency kitchen.

Welcome, he said, to Christopher’s palace.

I could see the entire apartment. No couch, no kitchen table. A mattress on the bedroom floor. A beanbag chair. And hundreds of magazine cutouts glued onto poster board. Most of the cutouts were of women: women shopping, women shaving, women applying makeup or frozen in mid-air jump. They covered the walls.

I let my eyes pass from one image to the next, slowly turning in the small room, and as I did I tried to imagine how it had come into existence—tried to imagine it being made: Christopher carrying armfuls of magazines up the stairs and sitting on patchy carpet, alone in his bedroom, cutting and gluing women’s faces for hours. He stood in the bedroom doorway, watching me, and when I turned my eyes on him, I was surprised to see tears.

My friends, he said, remind me to smile and be happy.

He moved from the doorway and pulled a stack of posters from behind a dresser.

I’m going to take those down when I have the money and put these up, he said.

The posters he held had photographs pinned to them. Photos of newsstands, of bakeries, of full and empty parking lots. Photos of objects on sidewalks: cans, lottery stubs, plastic bags, sneakers.

They’re different, I said. They’re real.

I know, he said.

He slid the posters back behind the dresser.

But you need cash for disposables and prints, he said.

He took a bag from his pocket and some papers and sat on the floor and began to roll a joint. I stood. Sliding glass doors led to a small porch. I could just make out the trails of the downtown spotlights.

Those were years when I believed I was broken and still believed the break could be fixed. And because I believed that I could be fixed, any attempt to patch the inner
hole did not feel futile. Those were years when I could still hear the word fun without worrying the meaning to death. When the hurt was neon and hadn’t yet spread thin into colorless bands. Even after I got the phone call, even after the club, some plugs worked.

Do you have anything to drink, I said.
Not really, Christopher said.
He stood and licked the edge of the paper to seal the joint.
So you do? I said.
I might have some vodka, he said. Trust me, though—you wouldn’t want it.
That’s fine, I said. Will you check?

2—

We spent that night on the porch, chain-smoking and sharing excerpts from our histories. He told me he’d been born several states away, had lived for a while with a stepfather, and then another, and another, until the third man pulled a knife on Christopher while Christopher’s mom was at work. He told me about boarding an Amtrak with a bag in each hand and about calling his mother outside of a gas station in Georgia. I told him about the suburbs and first love and the way hurt goes hidden behind lawn statues.

Why did you come here? I said. Tampa’s a shithole.
A shithole, he repeated. I don’t know. Little piece of sunshine country.
Forget it, I said.
Darci, he said. Darci Lou is why Tampa. You’ve never seen anything like her.
Who’s Darci? I said.

——

I must have passed out because I hadn’t planned to stay over. When I woke, light was striping in from the porch blinds. I lay on my side, pressed toward the wall; the sheets were damp with sweat and the room smelled of stale pot. I turned and the ground gave out. Christopher stood over me, his pants around his ankles.

Please, he said. Put your mouth on it.
What, I said, are you doing.
Please, he said. Please.
What the fuck, I said. I can’t do this.
I backed against the wall and shoved my feet into my shoes.
I’m leaving, I said. I’m fucking leaving.
He didn’t say anything. He didn’t move, either. He stayed like that while I walked out and pulled the front door behind me.
It was dawn. Light seeped into the parking lot, violet and lemon. As I drove, Nebraska Avenue revealed its squat houses, its trash-strewn shoulders, and a sterile confused sadness filled me. This was not my world, or anyone else's. This was a rented world, a hideaway bed in the corner room of a stranger’s house, which you visit once, and never again.

——

Darci Lou looks like the best version of her name. The apartment door opens to a curtain of blond hair; its just-washed fragrance escapes into the humid afternoon. Particulate matter. Four press-on French tips tap the door’s faded cobalt paint, and I take all this in before seeing her face.

Come in, she says.

In a voice like silt. I step into a generic apartment and into clouds of Nagchampa and sage. Dream wave vocals spill from a portable stereo. Darci Lou stops in the middle of the living room and turns; the curtain parts, and her face is a silent movie frame.

Have a seat I guess, she says.

I shrink against a leather sectional while she rifles through a cardboard box. Here and there, tea-lights flash and wax onto the carpet. She finds what she was looking for and takes a seat on the opposing couch.

Christopher would’ve wanted you to have this, she says.

In a voice like mud. I take the journal from her outstretched hand and study the cover: a swirl of clashing tie-dyed colors.

Thanks, I say. This means a lot.

Yeah, she says.

She lights a cigarette and stares into a bare beige wall and through to somewhere else.

Thanks for coming to the memorial, she says.

——

This year, the central California valley bears dust and little else. Sky almonds into sky; perpetual haze cloaks the Diablo Range for miles. Particulate matter. Meanwhile, I search for words to erase in a small town. Some provisional chronology. What have I seen what did I see. Where the house used to be. The ceaseless green lawns and the sun on pavement. Taillights in the Florida dusk. Life has traded something. What could it be?

On screen, anchors tether this bone-dry to that drowning. Strange to pray for rain amid flooding. On screen, I peep haunts of a decade long past and hold my breath against their submersion. In the background, the Hillsborough River surges. Against
those frames, I dream of utopian exchange: weather for weather.

3—

The last glimpse of Darci would be like the first, except by then the sun had receded into the Florida backdrop, its lemon-cherry burn smoldering the oaks at the edge of the complex, blond curtain retreating behind cobalt in slow motion then all at once. In the car, I open to the first page and keep going, and when I’ve finished I sit for a while with the book in my hands and try for something clearer, can’t. Some departing gift: a half dozen pages of sentimental fragments. What’s left: less information than I had.

——

The Temple Terrace Penney’s has been gone for years. The next time I saw Christopher, it was first through poor symbolism, and then never again. He’d walked away from the men’s department as I was arriving. The roses he’d left sat on the checkout counter, along with a card that pleaded for understanding. I kept flashing back to the address: Dear Olive, it said. The cut flowers sat in my room for a week as a dozen reminders of good intentions gone bad.

——

When the hurricane spares Tampa, I keep track of its path, and watch it barrel minutely toward home. It is something to imagine the impending taking of memory, and nothing quite like the terror of beauty turned violent. I cull images of groves and highway curves and choke dread at the thought of their afterimages. We tell stories of intention—this origin, that destination—that never quite land. With my eyes on simulated weather, I think: if only there were some way of bridging the gap. Outside, bubblegum clouds announce the Californian sunset, belie the stuff we’re breathing in. Here, land thirsts for water; across the country, water homes for land.
by Rod Zink

Mary’s First Breakdown

school bus, morning (1974)

The naked ankle
of my mother crossed the window
ledge, drawing blood dark like
screams
one morning as my sister and I
began to walk down the road
toward yellow bus

The unclean fingers of our stepfather
pulling her varicosed thighs
back in and tucking them under flowered
nightgown;
but next came her flailing arms
and face, her lips contorted, calling out
Mommy wil protect you!
I, six, and my sister not yet
five when we looked at one
another
knowing even then much too
clearly
something had gone wrong
with mother as we
stepping into puddled pot-holes
skipped yesterday without boots
galoshes, slickers
or umbrella
through headlights and rain

We slunked, trudging toward
the green seats of laughing children
and cold stares from Mrs.
Deck as we climbed on board
the yellow bus. It was
as if she knew, like we
hollow and sunken faces
the word sanitarium
and the keys thrown away—
the door once closed unsteadily locks
behind the slide of ribbed steps
brakes released, the bus rolling back
and we
bracing the seats,

unseated

then, lurching forward

as
bus leans
weighted around corner
out toward road bend—

my sister eventually forced down
by bobby cox
and I two seats back
nearly entombed
within violet’s pink silk lily

that mother would be
going away for a long time

I watching for my sister and she
for me
through water circles
and we never quite the same
to laugh as others
Alice and the Stink Bug

I think of her
often

in the
looking glass—

unguarded, alone

I pass by the mirror
searching for sanctuary
but settle for a wayward seat

the toilet paper
smells like fried chicken
a product of recycling—
of our own
and that of the
earth
eventually overcome

by an expanding sun
with the other planets, the
moon, the solar system
gradually pulled into
a yawning event
horizon
where light tricks
the eye

from outside Alice frozen

less expression
reflected, her nose
ear, fingers multiplied, obscured—
an infinite holographic smear
but within,
beyond view
torn silently asunder

e l o n g a t e d i n a s t r e a m

of movement and al\text{ignm}ent
realigned, her
dreams, toed

whispers unrecognizable
punch through somewhere
and emerge, perhaps,
on the other side
of lightless

rebirth

energy and matter
reformed, materialize in
new silhouettes

spread out—
postured in different patterns
and arrangements

"Does she remember?"
I wonder, I want to know—
Did she hear
the wooden flute
I carved for her wake,
its deep shrill melody broken
as I spy another dead
stink bug
atop the bathroom register,
cold, rusted
spindled legs, reaching
crossed, stiff, above
its armored back.
lullaby

the syllables bump
together,
the words
not smooth or polished,
but unpracticed,
as we
cautious—
unsteadily forward
stumble
into melody
gardens
not our own,
smelling of dreams,
honeysuckled notes,
sweet well-manicured
lawns, but we begin
tripping in rhythm
over feet our own,
the sidewalk narrow,
its uneven mortar
ledges between
until together,
we create
harmony—elegant
on its own terms,
like the trumble
of your breath,
as you fall asleep
in my awkward
arms
Croatan
Sean Jackson

As the sun cooked Carla’s legs, she imagined knotted sticks of jerky, or the way women went around peanut-butter dark in the old days, chain-smoking Virginia Slims on the beach while the depleted ozone layer encouraged ultraviolet rays to practically fornicate with various melanomas.

It was curious to her how the images of back-in-the-day feminists catching rays without compromising their freedoms was what she focused on. Freedom has been on her mind a lot. Maybe it was the flicker of a sunset on the bay, or the way the osprey glided through the rain, resilient to an unknown purpose. She wondered if it was because she’d turned forty, since people have talked about milestone numbers (and thirty was one, even if it was a blur—at the time obscured by events raging in her life).

Carla propped up on elbows and wondered where Sam might be. Maybe he’d drank too much beer again and had gone stumbling face-first into the barnacled pilings under the pier. He’d come home before with a face full of parking lot gravel, so it was only a matter of time until he smacked into a blackened, storm-twisted pole as he staggered around under the stars.

She rubbed baby oil on her stomach, a decent belly for forty, not bad but not so great, either. She looked around at all those teen-something, ab-machined body parts that might come from a Barbie assembly line. That will never change. There was a time when she met that sex appeal threshold, for like three summers, three unforgettable summers.

There’s something to be said to be in that part of life where you’re not building shady memories, things that you’ll want to forget. If pressed to put a name to it, she’d go with maturity. Or stability.

She brought a book of poems to read but figured what’s the sense of that while lying around in the hot sand with so many other things to think about. Where was a poet going to take her that she wasn’t already going? And anyway, nobody could read under such a glaring sun.

So she watched a shaggy-haired plain kid, maybe twelve, who sat idly next to a sandcastle he’d finished an hour ago, waiting for girls to walk by so he could spy on them from under his considerable bangs, just another scrawny kid invisible to everyone. He felt like the heads on Easter Island, gazing out into a world that had no use for any spiritual gift of sight.

“Carla Jones?”

Pretty near scared her out of her top. A roving dad with a skinny-legged young daughter in tow, she nearly as tall as him already, a girl whose first period hadn’t arrived yet, figured Carla.
“Dan.” And for the sake of all that was holy and unholy, she couldn’t recall his last name. The surf thundered and she smiled, hoping the informal was enough for her good-natured, portly classmate from Teagarden High—Dan-whathaveyou, a likable enough guy the jocks called Dildo Dan, or something in that vein.

“God, you look great. I mean, not in a sexual way—” and Dan turned to his pixie daughter who had looked away to the surfers out lying on their boards waiting for rare swells. “It’s just that—it’s been years and look at you. Honey” his daughter rolled her cornflower blue eyes his way “this is Carla Jones, we were in marching band together.”

“It’s Davies now,” Carla corrected.

“Hi.” She wore braces, how sweet. Dan took real good care of her.

“Hey there, sweetie,” Carla said, shielding her eyes with a knife hand, even with sunglasses on.

“This is Tammy. Me and Gwen—my and Gwen’s youngest. Do you remember Gwen Cottle? No, well we have a son around somewhere, too. He was building sandcastles not too long ago.”

Dan searched by rotating his neckless head until he spied the kid lobbing wet sand at the walls of a mini stone fortress, similar to one they’d visited in Wales. Castle-kid had docile eyes that swung lazily toward Dan and blue-eyed Tammy.

Dan pointed. “That’s Miles.”

“He doesn’t need to come over,” she said, waving. “I see him. They’re beautiful, Dan.”

“Thanks.” He sucked in his gut and lifted his soft chin. “Who woulda thought, huh?”

“Well—”

Sam had never wanted kids. He enjoyed skiing and traveling way too much, not to mention diving for “treasure” around all those sunken pirate ships. Making hay while the sun was still shining, was how he described it. Though he’d been down to the Queen Anne’s Revenge four times (diving with a cokehead buddy, and with much stealth, due to the fact they were trespassing), he’d yet to bring up a single coin or even a chunk of a dessert plate.

“It was nice meeting you,” Tammy said, tugging at her dad’s hand to get his stumpy legs moving.

“Sure enough was, sweetie.”

She watched them plod away, pause beside castle-boy to say something, then march down the waterline, threading through gaggles of starlets and flexing boys all trying to have an unforgettable summer of their own.

Miles glanced over at her, shy as a bird. She wondered if he could see her soul inside her body, what should be a shadowy soul, no doubt clouded with regrets and mistakes and, of major disappointment, good things she’d never said or done.

But Dan had said she looked great, so that was something, though what exactly she wasn’t sure. Maybe she’d figure it out, and maybe she wouldn’t.

She dug her phone out from under a folded towel and texted Sam.
Babe where r u!

She stared at the exclamation point but decided not to fix it. Let him think what he thinks.

A mom and a toddler nearby headed for the hissing surf and she decided to follow. She stood and pulled the bottom of her bikini into place—into places where it belonged, rather than lurk in crevices that didn’t need lurking into. Her left foot was asleep, so she took a slow and measured pace to the water, careful not to step on anybody’s stuff.

When her toes got wet she thought of her mother. Now there was a woman who’d lived with real abandon, a live wire who tore into things like her time down here was limited. And so it was. But she’d taken Carla into the sea when she was but a baby, a kewpie doll with fins and water wings, plunging into the churning Ocracoke waves time and again.

When the water reached her knees, there was a drop-off straight to her shoulders. She paddled past a bobbing boy in goggles and snorkel. He went under and she knew he was looking at her ass and tits, a total pervert. Like she wouldn’t know what he was doing, sheesh.

“Hey!” the mom called. “Catch that for me?”

A cute, pink whale floated right under Carla’s nose, and she plucked it up and tossed it over. The girl’s mouth formed an O and she smacked at the toy, nearly sending it away again.

A trio of brown pelicans whooshed past between Carla and the surfers, gliding on the other side of the afternoon’s thin breakers.

“Ah!” the little girl cried out. “Kitties!”

“Not kitties, they’re birds. Birds, darling.”

The peeping Tom surfaced right behind Carla, flushing his snorkel with a godawful snort.

She watched one of the surfers wipe a coil of strawberry hair from his eyes as he positioned into a gentle swell, coming up to one knee, then to his feet—arms spread like pelican wings—until the wave abruptly petered out and he fell sideways, catching the board with one hand as he went under.

“Shhweeet!” the peeper croaked. She glared at the pimply kid, a vacationer from the looks of his chalky complexion. He immediately glumped back underwater, the tip of his crappy snorkel giving away his meandering location.

Back on her towel, Carla dried her hair. Sam used to say it was the sexiest thing she did—that the way her head titled and her breasts jiggled, it melted him to his very core. She glanced around, but nothing had changed in a while. Miles had taken off while she was out for her plunge, and that was about it. She checked her phone. Sam had replied, which was damned good for him because she wasn’t going to hang on the beach and wait for his crazy ass.

@ Skippers 4 beers. Come have some w/me
This wasn’t anything she was interested in. If they can’t have fun without drinking

“Thanks again,” the mom said as she tottered past with the tiny girl who chewed on the smiling whale with her chicklet teeth. Carla smiled.

“Sure enough.” She crinkled her nose at the girl. “Hi, little doll.”

She loaded her stuff into a shoulder bag and worked her way up the dunes, weaving through groggy sunbathers. A couple who looked to be in their early twenties smooched under a Hawaiian Tropic umbrella, merging into a passionate, ropey kiss of the kind Carla had forgotten about. The girl had her hand on his throat like she couldn’t get enough of him.

The sea oats crackled in the breeze as she crested the dune and took the stairs down into the parking lot. She stopped and tugged on her sandals just before the pavement began.

One thing she remembered about her first year with Sam, he’d often say that she was somebody he’d never expected to find, that person whom he fell hopelessly in love with. That’s how he wound up relating to her, staying fixated on what she brought to the table. But she believed him there at the beginning, when he sang her praises. His eyes backed it up, those sea-greens pouring into hers with equal parts affection and desire. And she rolled like a log in his cold Canadian river, going wherever he pushed her, for as long as it took, with zero chance to ever exit his current.

People do these things, is what she has finally settled on. They reach for things that aren’t there, grab hold of people who aren’t in love with them, and they brace for judgement. And when the wheel doesn’t land right, they cry out, all in a rage and with an animal’s fury. But they knew better all along. They just didn’t want to admit that they knew.

Her phone rang. “Hey, lady.” Rachel’s husky voice purred from her android as Carla sat in her Jeep and pinned her hair back using the rearview. If she was going to take the hardtop off, it was best to go ahead and do something with her hair before it dried in a whirl of wild tangles.

Rachel was telling her that Sam had come by the Rocky Racoon and done shots at the bar beside a barely legal co-ed wearing little more than a UNC logo.

“You know I hate to see a grown man act like that,” Rachel said.

“It ain’t a surprise to me,” said Carla, “not anymore.”

“What’s come between the two of you?”

Carla thought for a minute. Perhaps a hundred images sped through her mind, each one consisting of her sitting alone somewhere, doing something without Sam, resolved to enjoy herself despite his absence. Or maybe as a result of it.

“Love can die of natural causes,” she said. “Same as a person.”

“Not as often as it’s ended directly by one person or the other,” Rachel said.

“It happens more often than you think. Believe me, I know. I’m living that slow, artless, pain-like-a-toothache death of it.”
“I hate to see it.”
“Sure, so do I.”

She drove to the Bahama Mama’s on the bypass road and went in for organic cocoa butter, the kind that was helping keep wrinkles from spiderwebbing her face like she saw happening to so many ladies her age. What if she were to become single again? What then? She couldn’t go around with crinkly eyes and mouth looking like some heyday witch bragging she was two years clean and sober, or some tacky crap like that.

The cashier whistled.

“You got some sun today, girl.” Reece was one of those nondenominational worshippers who wore a Jesus around her neck but would sneak out back on her break and fire up a thick joint, no hesitation. _There’s nothing wrong with complex people_, her mother used to say.

“You think so?” Carla said, checking the redness of her arms.
Reece nodded as she scanned the bottle. “Slather it on thick,” she grinned.

On the way home she read another text from Sam: _be home late again horny_.
He meant “sorry.” But that’s karma. That’s what feeling invincible will do for you.

After sunset, out on the water, osprey wheeled softly down into their nests. Sam had put up five or six hand-wrought nests atop channel markers in the bay, against the wishes of wildlife officers. But once the osprey settled in, the feds couldn’t move them. So they had a perpetual air show, especially in the devil’s hour between day and night, when the birds returned from hunting in the salt marshes.

She went out on the deck and set up her tripod, aiming a telephoto lens at the center marker, where a female they’d named Eleanor was raising three chicks. They called her Eleanor in honor of the mother of Virginia Dare, of Lost Colony lore.

_There’s something about a refined woman dying in the hellish swamps of a foreign land that just intrigues me to no end_, she told Sam.

Carla tucked her eye into the camera and waited, sensing that a gliding shadow from off to the west would be Eleanor, arriving soon to drop tasty young bowfin to her babies.

The wings dipped, then arched back up into a V, and Eleanor settled on the rim with her black talons gripped to Sam’s woven nest. A shiny fingerling dropped into a chick’s throat and Carla fired off a few shots. As a freelancer, she’s sold everywhere from _Garden & Gun_ to the _Huffington Post_. In a previous life she worked two tours in Afghanistan for the Associated Press, documenting what nature would survive the fighting and what wouldn’t. There’s a jagged scar on the back of her head from a Humvee wreck, the result of her press caravan getting lit up by Taliban hidden in rocky crags above the road. She still has nightmares of lying in the dust facedown as blood drips into her eyes and mouth, a heavy Dutch boy spread across her legs with a hole the size of a fig above his eye.
She sat in her beloved rainbow-colored Adirondack and watched the fireflies honk on and off at the water’s edge. Eleanor had given her last cry of the night and the frogs were tuned up for hours of operatic nonsense.

Nothing from Sam as midnight came and went.
She met him after returning from overseas, just before turning thirty. She figured at thirty she’d make a better choice, that she’d be able to understand what makes a person good, and what turns them inside-out. She tries to be a vigilant, self-reliant woman who spends most of her time shooting waterfowl and protected loggerheads, finding depths of field that amaze photo editors from New York to Paris. The local paper, the Island Times, used to email her asking if she wanted to shoot this or that for them. Finally they stopped, and she went about her business framing snowy egrets on Pea Island, or hounding dumbstruck vacationers caught in an oceanfront hotel during a hurricane.

She went to the Hindu Kush to follow snow leopards through the mountains. She got caught up in a clique of Le Monde journos, and befriended an intense Catalan woman taking photos of dead mujahideen. They marveled at the path they were taking, a route mimicking Alexander the Great’s. Early one morning, someone burned a dead dog to keep the wolves away and that’s what caught the Taliban’s attention.

She made her own cracked wheat bagels with a recipe that her mother brought from New Jersey. The woman was an exotic bird on the North Carolina coast—a Northern Jew with a license to practice medicine. It was her practice in Buxton that led to her death, after a boy vacationing from Africa came in with an infection in his eye that turned out to be a deadly pathogen. The boy died, too. It was in all the papers, and there’s a YouTube clip of Walter Kronkite reporting it, with a picture over his shoulder of Carla’s mother wearing her favorite blue headscarf (totally Seventies) and smiling like all of her greatest days lie ahead.

The morning sun rose over the Spanish oaks to the east of their bayside home. A bar of sunlight warmed Sam’s empty spot in their bed.
She packed her beach bag, this time loading her camera and lens because she hoped to get some shots of the pelicans and young surfers if they returned there next to the pier. A nasally radio deejay rattled off the beach forecast, which called for hot sun, a light onshore breeze, a slight chance of afternoon showers, and possible rip currents in the usual places.
Back on her beach towel, she laid on her stomach for a while and dozed as the sun caressed her skin like oven-warm lips. She peeked out at one point and grinned to see good old Miles back at his castle-building, as he stared at the legs and breasts of endless bathing beauties tromping up and down the strand, gathering it all in so he could figure out his place in the world, the relationship world, which she considers an
unsolvable puzzle.

The mom and her darling baby girl came back and sat in the sand with a Disney-themed bucket and digging tools. The girl happily tossed more sand on her mother’s oiled legs than she got into the bucket. After a while they got up and slowly inched into the water.

Carla sat up and watched a pair of gangly young surfers paddle out, tipping over a few gentle waves, laughing at the overdressed tourists fishing along the rails of the old pier. She pulled out her camera and got ready.

*Im back @ the house where r u?* Sam texted. She glanced down at her phone, shook her head, and flipped it over. She has wondered what advice her mother would give. Would she understand that Carla stays with Sam only because she hasn’t figured out what to do next? Would she tolerate her daughter’s—there’s only one thing to call it—laziness in staying with him?

Her father, god bless him, gave the final toast at her and Sam’s wedding. He may as well have lifted his wine glass and announced that he was about to drop dead from an aneurysm, since he would be gone in a few short weeks.

The wind flapped the edges of her towel and she swung the lens along the breakers, still not seeing any pelicans. They would make a great shot with all those swimmers in the foreground.

And then it happened. Kind of like when the Humvee shook violently, and the blacked-out windows blew in all hellish, with tongues of fire and what seemed like brimstone, and someone cried out that her hand was gone.

There was a lot of screaming out on the water. At first she thought it was a shark, but the surfers weren’t scrambling to get out of the breakers, rather they were gliding over to an anxious knot of bobbers who pointed frantically into the water.

The young mother didn’t know where her girl was. She was so brightly dressed—yellow swimsuit, pink goggles, and maybe those had been yellow water wings, too. It would be like hiding tennis balls in a bathtub.

People dove down. The surfers slid off their boards and stayed under for a good while. The mother wailed and thrashed and screamed her daughter’s name: *Abby!* *Abby!*

A three-wheeler roared up and two muscled lifeguards jumped off and pounced into the surf, dragging bright-red buoys behind them.

*Babe where’s the Tylenol?!*

She stood with the rest of them, beside young Miles and Dan, who’d showed up out of nowhere with an appropriately distressed Tammy, who kept her hands cupped over her nose and mouth in horror. People kept calling the girl’s name. One of the
lifeguards dragged the mother out of the water and sat her in the wet sand, told her to please calm down that he didn’t want to have to do CPR on her right now.

Then little Abby bobbed up, sluiced along in a gentle wave that whispered itself onto the beach and deposited her, limp as a rag doll, right at her mother’s feet. The young woman stared at the body, with its wet hair coiled around a tiny, serene face that gazed indifferently at a few white clouds roaming an otherwise perfect blue sky.

Carla numbly lifted her camera and snapped one quick shot before she grabbed her bag and towel and marched straight to her Jeep. She carefully pinned her hair back, turned on the radio, and proceeded to drive off the island westward in a single, slow-motion lunge toward a place where she imagined little Virginia Dare may’ve gone off to, never to utter a word into history about it, but arriving there just the same.

If she’d thought of it sooner, Carla would have swung by the house and carved CROATAN on the front door. Instead, with the hardtop off and her music loud, she raced up the bypass, then sped across the bridge, the expansion joints clacking with each step closer to some new thing, the water alive with an electric sun, and a few osprey out doing what they could to keep life on track.
Gifts Half Taken

Overripe watermelon and vodka
rewards for moving you out
and a kiss on the cheek in the hall
with a regret that I had a girlfriend

—but even more—

I am engaged

So even though you are still attractive
in the middle of your fifth decade
four long complete

I just smile at the peck, don't comment
just lug some more boxes to the truck

in the cold rain
and I know your divorce
causes you pain
I certainly can listen
but I cannot remain
Not Lost

At the birthday skating party for my once friend Josh
first grade long ago
I became separated from the wheeled group.
After a far-ranging frustrated search (for a seven-year-old),
I ceased and propped my rolling self by the wall
separating rink from worn carpeted floor
and at the point of tears, a forgotten cipher in the crowd,
a hand on my head, a kiss on my cheek, a quick whisper in my ear
Mrs. Johnson, the party-mother, had found me
she guided me back
to my little peers
tears away, smile returned
and she has never been lost
Kin Recognition

Doesn't concern me, don't know
you very well—you've gotta be
at seventy or—five—so the low

voices hushing out "heart"
and "how are you doing?"
just slide by me like passing silk,

like the waning, weakening generation
of which you are a current member
in your white hair and modest exertion

though absent for weeks and even more
modest in these bending efforts and slower
in traverse from machine to machine—
vehicles to health, hospital, or hearse—
where we certainly go after the two
former have exhausted their limited use.

. . . The silk spins to sandpaper in the loom
of thought, sound, and sight. I look on you
in renewed effort, cast a wish, a common line.
Down Time

Time loosens when lengthened
then lies like the soft wool
of a bathrobe belt, pulled
clean through the loops
when boy carelessly rises
from bed to mother's
breakfast, forty year gone,

a harmless twist, no serpent
for the heel, folded and inert
upon the floor, to be retrieved
and tied to action at a later,
more insistent hour but at ease
for now, little noticed until called
to pick up that forgotten slack
Late Found Fall

Doc’s been dead for twenty years now,

snuffed quickly by pancreatic cancer,

but I only found out ten years after the event,

so it’s as if the end had never occurred, while I

larked on, lived on as the master of Greek and Latin

succumbed to what is older than Athens or Rome

and its declensions that still continue

in the minds of teachers and pupils:

anima, animae, et cetera

long after his decline and fall,

unknown in my west and east

—Rhine and Danube—
as I had entered my middle ages
well beyond the frontiers of my time
within the orb of his Classical age.
Grip

Fresh rubber redolent of old times
in auto stores when accompanying
my father and his easy manner

("How they bitin'?")

with the clerks beyond the counter,
which I certainly could not match,
so find myself alone in the aisles

a generation and more down,
with car wax in my clutches
and perfunctory payment to come,

though with an intent to try

("How 'bout that game last night?")
those fresh tires stacked, almost oily
to the touch, encourage from their
rich black eminence—brand-factory-new—
so that they renew.
We made arrangements for dinner at 7.30. She is late as usual. A kiss on the cheek is the reward for my patience, once she arrives. She sits across the table and grabs some bread, which she greedily puts in her mouth, after dipping it in the spicy sauce, without apologizing for the delay, as if all the time in the world belongs to her alone, and she decides to offer it at will to whomever she thinks may deserve it. She obviously doesn’t think I deserve much time, since she takes for granted the fact I don’t complain.

I give her a kiss. I’m really happy to see her. Today is our anniversary after all. We celebrate three whole years together. Three years during which she has been generously offering me some of her time.

“Shall we order?”

I take a fast look at the menu. I thought he would have ordered already for both of us. He must be suspecting something. Otherwise, I can’t explain his romantic behavior lately, nor his insistence to meet at an Italian restaurant, which brings to mind our first trip together. He tries to make me feel guilty for my mistake, to show me the best of him and then punish me by leaving me in cold blood. He doesn’t even mention out trip to Florence. He wants me to dive into nostalgia, without making his effort obvious. He pretends he doesn’t remember. Yet he’s there, in the alleys in which we were lost, attempting to locate the enormous Cathedral. Among the old furniture of the hotel that made me want to decorate our home in antiques. Coming back home, the idea seemed repulsing. Perhaps they looked so appealing because they were there, in their natural environment. Perhaps our love too found its natural environment there and proved unsuitable for our city.

“I’ll take risotto with mushrooms.”

“I’ll take the same,” I say to to the waiter, pretending I make the decision after thoroughly studying the menu. In reality, I’m so excited that I don’t care about food at all. I admire her calmness and determination though. Her habit of paying attention to details, when details are unimportant. Details, like choosing the right food before the big proposal, seem worthless to my poor mind. Even the ring is unimportant, yet I chose it carefully and I will be paying it for three years, only to please her and offer the moment the importance it deserves. A moment that doesn’t require even more importance, yet to her eyes, details count. Therefore I will go by her rules for once, at
least for tonight.
My mind wonders freely in the alleys of Florence, through the same tastes that
caressed our palate back then, while she tells me about her day, as if it was a huge
achievement. In reality, she answered some phone calls, arranged some appointments
and took some decisions that only slightly do they influence other people’s lives.
However, she looks certain she performed tasks of great importance and I’m not willing
to be the one to spoil her delusion. Not tonight.
I make an effort to focus on the present. Typical fault of mine are those nostalgic dives
into the past, while the present is happening right in front of my eyes, waiting to
become a future memory, in which I will dive when it transforms to past.
“Would you like some more wine?”

He fills my glass with more wine. I’ve had enough of it, yet I’d love to drink some more,
in an effort to forget about his condescending glance. I’m fully aware he doesn’t
appreciate my job, yet tonight he feigns appreciation. In Florence, away from
obligations and stress, that’s where our love flourished. That was the only place that
made me feel alive, although under normal circumstances, love is supposed to be
enough, regardless of location. That was the land of freedom. Where we had nothing
to prove to each other, except for our affection. We woke up early, not out of fear of
missing appointments, but to not miss the day, to not let time slip away without fully
enjoying it. All our senses were satisfied there, among street musicians with guitars or
violins, in a city like an outdoor museum, yet what we mostly enjoyed were the smells
and the tastes, our touches and caresses.
I don’t know what he’s waiting for, yet to me the waiting is torturing. I will ask him to
break up at first chance, avoiding the drama, before he has time to reject me first.
For a while, I think about last Sunday. It was a business trip, we drank more than we
should and ended up in bed with my boss. We spent the night together, a night I could
never forget. He belongs to the determined kind of men. He’s one of those men who
know what they want and how to get it. Totally different, that is, to the man who sits
across the table.
For a while I drift away, until my glance catches a target across the room. I feel dizzy,
my head hurts, my hands begin trembling. I can’t constrain them so I discreetly place
them under the table. I feel like smoking.
“Is smoking allowed in here?”

I light a cigarette for her. I watch her hands tremble when she takes it. I follow her eyes
across the room. Cold sweat stains my expensive white shirt. Their eyes battle above
the restaurant tables, like two giants fighting, invisible to mortals, above the real world,
which keeps on spinning as if nothing of importance is happening. Nothing truly
important is happening for the rest of the restaurant’s visitors; this moment only matters to me and it feels like a window is now open, through which I see the fight of two determined beasts to defeat each other, to eat each other’s fleshes, or conquer one another and then conquer the world. And while spoons and forks and knives move up and down and a sweet melody fills the room, yet without soothing the pain, while their glances continue fighting above customers who unsuspiciously bite and swallow and drink in between laughter and small talk, the waiters running around to keep up with orders and wishes, while all this happen, the only spectator of the battle finally recognizes love in the eyes of his beloved woman. Yet it’s love for another man.

“Excuse me for a second. I have to use the bathroom.”

♀

For a while, our eyes meet. I was honest with him. I told him I would soon separate. He chose silence. I now see why.

I watch my boss kissing her gently on the forehead. He then holds her hand, throwing glances my way. He probably fears I will make a scene. The man who shares my table, now heading to the toilet, is suddenly valuable. Tender is my gaze as I watch him walk away. My boss looks my way again, his eyes clearly hostile this time. I stand up and head to their table. Hostility has now been replaced by fear. Pure fear overwhelms him, as he tries to feign calmness while introducing me. I look at his wife in pity. I grab a glass of water and throw it at his face. All customers turn around and stare. I fix my hair and return to my table. He grabs her arm and takes her out of the restaurant. I can now go on with my meal. I won’t allow the few teardrops on my cheek to spoil the night.

♂

I throw the ring in the sip and watch it disappear. So long Florence. So long fairy tale. No more “happily ever afters”. That’s real life.

Determined, I walk back to our table. I see her wipe her tears with a handkerchief. I’m not sure whether she’s upset over our own fairy tale ending, or if she feels let down by her new love that disappointed her. However, I feel anger subsiding, like a wave that came rushing to the shore, and now pulls back and mingles with other unidentified feelings, in the ocean of uncharted emotion.

“Shall we have desert?” I ask her, yet she has already ordered sweets for both of us.

♀

The bittersweet tiramisu soothes my sadness. I can see disappointment in his eyes, aversion alternating tenderness. I feel his hand touching mine. I stare at him, wondering. This could be the right moment for me to tell him the truth. He won’t forgive me. Come tomorrow, I will be unemployed. However, what bothers me the most is that
"Will you marry me?" I ask, without even realizing what I’m saying. Words seem to pop up from inside without my control, along with a piece of my soul. For a moment, I believe it’s an application automatically running, after being programmed to run at a certain time and date, without the choice to cancel. I’m mistaken. Words don’t stem out of my brain, they’re not a logical result of my thoughts, they fall like tears from my soul, which has seized control and spits words without processing them first. Perhaps it’s just the tiramisu that melted on my heart, softening it.

I stare at him amazed. I owe him the truth.  
"I have to confess something first," I mumble.

"You don’t have to confess anything. You only have to answer the question."

I watch her smile.

"Of course, I will," I say relieved, without second thought, diving into the warmth of all memories uniting us, enjoying one more bite from the tiramisu, that tastes the same as the ones we tried again and again at breakfast in Florence. I’m there again, impatiently waiting for the day – or my life beside him – to begin. That passion of old times, that passion that deserted us without notice, is no longer here and I looked for it elsewhere, like a spoiled kid, who stubbornly demands the toy back, when taken away. In my attempt to win back what was lost I almost let something more important slide through my fingers. Something bigger than a simple toy. Bigger than a fairy tale. I’m not empty handed though. I have love.

We order a last piece of tiramisu, a last dive into memories. I pick up a piece of paper, one of those tiny pieces destined to enwrap smoke and become cigarettes and I change the purpose of its existence. I wrap it around, bring the ends together, until it looks like a ring. The real ring now travels in underground pipes and I will be paying it for long, yet I don’t mind. It’s better for our shared life to start with something more authentic. Tastes mingle with memories and offer a satisfactory end to our fairy tale. Real life is about to start.
It’s sunset. Shredded, blooded clouds leak into the sky as the blue purples, thickening into night. The dinghy wobbles on the gelatine swell, dimpled textures of the sea unfolding endlessly in all directions. Jonah sits and watches the thick silver body of The Fish as it sleeps along the little boat’s spine. She senses, beside her, the knife - still as a predator, waiting. She can feel its reptilian mind woken and pitiless. The salivating blade anticipating its first lick of The Fish’s flesh.

She imagines the blade gnawing into The Fish. Its scales splitting into ruby mouths - gaping, and pink foaming. Then the meat juicing through her teeth, cooking in the acid of her gut. Energy seeping into her blood, sloshing through her rusted tubes, rinsing her of her weakness and restoring her. Amen.

Her right hand is wedged into the folds of her thighs, enjoying the warmth beneath her sodden jeans. She is so hungry and tired that as her hands seek heat in the creases of her flesh and the exterior of her sex, there is no erotic spark, just a fragile glow offering small comfort to her frigid fingertips.

Her belt is unbuckled. She slides her palm from between her thighs and slips the angles of her wrist from the elastic of her underwear. Her hand knocks the brass of her belt which chimes dully. She freezes at the sound and watches The Fish. It’s eyes are shut. Ripples of light shimmer across it’s long body. Its gills pulse and breath wobbles through its belly. Still asleep. Jonah slips her fingers from her jeans. They are weak and damp and warm. She reaches for the blade that rests like an alligator in the pool of water that slops up and down the boat’s spine. Ready to eat.

She plans. She will peel the blade from its puddle, she will stand in silence - balanced in order not to syncopate the boat’s steady waltz - and she will fall forward to chop through The Fish’s gills quickly before it can wake. Before it can open its eyes and see her. That is key - that its eyes remain shut. If The Fish were to wake and catch her in the act the shame would be unbearable. It would sear all the rawness from her heart. It’s the sort of shame, she thinks, that you can never escape. Her fingertips dip into the puddle surrounding the blade. The water tingles, electric.

“It’s night time?” The Fish speaks, it’s eyes remain closed. Jonah’s hand freezes mid-movement.

“Almost. The sun’s setting.” She retracts her fingers into fist, coils her arm back into her body, and lays her hand awkwardly in her lap. She looks out into indigo sky, the emptiness of space pouring into the atmosphere, diluting its colour, washing it like a tide into the cosmos.
“I must leave you soon. I’m thirsty and hungry. You must be to.” The Fish shivers in the pooled water.

“I’m ok.” speaking makes Jonah want to cry. Her neck is hot and swollen with guilt. The words catch in the flesh-folds of her throat like smoke and she coughs them out, “Promise me you’ll come back?”

The Fish peels back its eye-lids and squirms on the deck, turning one emerald iris sideways to see Jonah. Her shivering frame reclined along the hull, her head resting against the stern, her jeans soaking in the inch of water that sloshes with the swell, her eyes absorbed by the thickening night as it unfolds its dark tentacles into the dulling colours of day. “Don’t look at me like that.” she says. The Fish chuckles, and yanks the angles of its mouth into a grin.

“I’ll see you soon.” Then - slapping its tail-fin, throwing its body into motion, whipping its flesh into a wave - it vaults onto the boat’s lip, and slips into the blackening sea.

* 

Jonah watches bubbles blister, fizz and burst around the hull, but other than that the sea is fat and calm. It’s skin erupts in plump ripples that rock across the world, seeping into each other, fattening into swell, spilling invisibly into the dark chaos of its deep. Jonah watches the sea as the dusk drains colour from the world and wets the edges of all things. Her hands bleed into the boat, the boat bleeds into the sea, the sea bleeds into the sky, and soon all is black other than the viscous dairy of stars pouring from the distant cunt of God, spreading their twinkle through the sky and through the water, and the moonlight dripping and settling as luminous oil across formless quivering.

Jonah becomes aware, again, of the blade lying awake and unblinking beside her. She imagines the wind whispering across its sharpness. She imagines plunging the cool blade into her tummy and imagines it to be like pouring water from a jug into a bowl. Below the boat she can sense the motion of giant beasts rippling up from deep. In the logic of her half-sleep she understands the sea itself to be the flesh of some cosmic creature. A moving, feeding thing, upon whom she squirms - as gnat or bacteria or cell. A thing driven by the same hunger that gnaws inside of her abdomen. She senses, above her, the motion of many similarly enormous creatures swimming through the black-syrup of space, their ripples beating out in swell and wave, crashing into the invisible limits of the universe. She imagines she is in the mouth of such a beast, the depths of the night are its upper jaw, the sea its tongue. She feels herself in this mouth being sucked towards a throat, trickling in a current of saliva toward a deeper darkness where she will be dissolved and made new. Amen. She imagines herself expand into the cosmic dimensions of these creatures, and larger, so large she can swallow them.
Her cells are spinning and sputtering galaxies, metabolising engines sparking her blood in its bubbling. But as she expands so does her tiredness, and the sadness that blackens her marrow. She, even as a titan, is still weak and wrecked and ready to be swallowed by something even bigger, but perhaps even more wrecked, and in all the unfolding dimensions of time and space that spiral infinitely up and down - there is no joy or spark of life, just the slow digestion of weaker things and the ebb and dim of hunger. Amen.

She wakes. Her throat is salted and sore. The silver dawn is clarified in cold. Great grey clouds soak into the sky like dirty rags. She prays that they might wring themselves and juice into her open mouth. She turns her back on her blade and rolls onto her side, pillowing her hands. Her jeans are soaking. She shivers and folds her limbs in around ribs. She hums the tune of a song her mother taught her about the kindness of wind.

The Fish slaps into the timber of the boat, wriggling, smiling, gumming its chompless jaw, depositing mouth-loads of balled seaweed onto the deck. “Here.” it says. “Eat this.” Jonah pinches fingerfuls past her tongue, to avoid the taste. The seaweed chews like rubber, bursting slowly. The swallow stings salty.

Jonah sits and shivers in the silver chill, tracing the glazed lamp of sun as it swims home below the clouds, lathering grey light over the green sea. The Fish sits attentively opposite and asks her to start again - from the beginning, before closing its eyes and reclining belly up in the wobble of deck water. Jonah senses her knife ready to slither into her fingertips. Her belly acids bubbling ready to liquefy The Fish’s soft pink meat. But, no. No, not yet.

Instead of gutting The Fish, she begins her story:

“There were four of us. A man, a woman, a both, and me. The man was my father, the woman was my mother, The Both was a stranger and I was a little girl. We lived, all four of us, in a fishing town. My father had ancestors who were Bulls and Goats, he took after them in many ways: His hooves and horns, his temper, the way he would strap himself to our cart and struggle up the rocky slopes above our house to plant grain in patches of juicy soil, the large ring in his septum. Each evening he would sit cross-legged on a chair by the fire, his knees covered in a blanket knitted from wolf-hair. He was a kind man. I miss him.

My mother was from Bird People. She was jet black with long fingernails. At night she would sprout feathers and circle the Moon, leading a group of local Bird Women in ceremony. She was respected by the town, feared even. Our kitchen was a shopfront
from where she sold potions and fermented vegetables. She had a black cabinet in our cellar amongst the oaking wines and sprouting mushrooms, which she kept locked and covered. She was smart, her eyes would bleed. I respect her, and I miss her.

The Both was a grey, featureless human shape. It had legs, arms and a head, but no face, or nipples, or sex organs. It’s body was cold, almost fog, almost leather, you couldn’t see it when you looked directly at it, it would slip like soap to your peripheries. It never spoke but we understood each other. It had no eyes but I could always tell where it was looking. Mostly at me. As a baby, it would sit beside me as I played, and I would babble to it. At night I would fall asleep in my cot as it stood in the corner. At dinner it would stand in the living room, looking through the door way. My parents never spoke to it, or acknowledged it, but they would change when it watched them. They would stiffen or get sad. When I asked them who, or what, this thing was - they would get worried and confused. I felt crazy.

I learned not to talk about The Both and I began to fear it. It would stay at home when I went to school, floating mute through the house, dusting our timber with its light step. Perhaps touching all my dolls, I thought, and wiping itself over all my books and jewellery. I learned to hate home, I learned to hate The Both. The more I ignored it the more intense its focus on me became. I could feel it from the School. I could feel it looking down from our home wedged in the armpit of the mountain, onto the town and into my classroom. I got very sad, very tired, very angry, very scared. I shaved my head, stole potions from my mother, studied the darker languages of the Birds, and even spoke them in anger at my parents. I would spend hours watching the television trying to soak my mind with the throbbing neon, to drown out the intense gaze of The Both. It followed me around the house, treading on my heels, squeezing next to me on the couch, its faceless head always trained on me, begging me to pay attention to it - but I would not.

When I was thirteen, after my first bleed, it started to follow me into town. It would leave the house with me in the morning, it would sit beside me in the backseat of my Dad’s car. I would crank the radio and pull my hood over my head. My poor Dad would ask me questions and I would shrug and grunt. The Both would sit on the swings in the school playground. I could see it through the classroom window. I could see its feet below the door of the stall when I shat.

The potions would help, so would the herbs I smoked with my friends. I would have sex with boys in cars hoping to make the Both feel awkward, but it would sit behind the car and I’d see its foggy grey figure in the rearview mirror as the boys came. They would cry when I slapped them and ridiculed them and spat on them, saying they were weak, and small, and pathetic, and hadn’t satisfied me at all! They’d kick me out of their cars into the rain, and I’d struggle to put my underwear and shoes on, before
trudging back up the hill with The Both. “I HATE YOU.” I’d scream. “LEAVE ME ALONE!” - but it wouldn’t.

At seventeen I was going to kill myself by throwing myself from the cliffs above the bay to burst upon the rocks. I was there, bending my toes over the lip of the cliff, waiting for a strong breeze to lift me into the night. Ready to fall, for my skin to split, for my innards to fizz and foam, and be stirred into the giant soup. The Both stood beside me. It was scared, I think. It was definitely confused. I waited, but couldn’t leap. The breeze never came. I pulled my phone from my back pocket, my wallet, my keys, a small bag of powdered yik2figs I’d stolen from my mother, and my knife. I placed them all in a pile. A totem in honour of that fucked-up chick with the shaved head. I squatted over the totem and pissed. It seemed right. More mysterious, more fucked-up. I shook myself dry, pulled up my jeans, and as moved back to my position on the cliff The Both blocked my path. “Move you grey cunt.” I said. “Move you creepy long fucker. You’ve ruined my life, but where I’m going you cannot follow.” It gripped my shoulder with its long fingers, its eyeless face moved close to mine. Its breath was cold, and made me so, so sad. And then it spoke. It made no sound but I felt a voice, not a voice composed of vibration but of meaning, glowing in the meat of my brain. “Don’t. There is more to be done.” is all it said. I turned and grabbed my piss covered knife from the piss covered totem. I slashed at its grey body, but it drifted back and away to the edge of the forest. I gave it the finger as I leapt into the sea. I remember black and cold, I remember feeling your slimy body slip around my legs, I remember you guiding me, breathing into my mouth, and then I woke up here.”

* 

The Fish is asleep. Jonah is crying, snotting, banging the heel of her palm into her forehead saying “Idiot, idiot, idiot!” She is thirsty. So thirsty, and tired and cold. All she wants is to hear her mother’s song, or feel her father’s palm on her neck, or to be dead. The knife sits beside her, unblinking, psychopathic. She is so hungry and so weak. A breeze wheezes over the swell, shrinking her skin tight around her bones. Her goosebumps sprout little black feathers, as sometimes happens to her under stress. A stubble prickle across her limbs. She whispers to herself “No, I am not a Bird. I am not the daughter of a Bird. I am not Bull or Goat and have no hoofed ancestors. My body is not blood and muscle, or bone. I am not meat or matter. My thoughts are not even vapour, they are the shadow of vapour. I am Nothing. I am Emptiness. I do not need to eat, because I don’t exist. I don’t need to escape because I am nowhere. Amen.” Her pulse thickens, slows, her skin sucks her feathers back inside, and the acid of her stomach ceases its sizzling. Her eyes glow a dim black and the slushing of the sea peels gently across her brain. Nothing. For a sweet moment, nothing. But the hunger gnawing at her gut lining and the thirst scratching at her throat and tongue, and the cold aching her bones, and the incessant heaviness of gravity that pummels down
from the ancient sky, and the pain of being *something* drags her back from the deep and peaceful dark - and into the boat where she sits across from a sleeping fish and beside a woken blade.

She finds her fingers swimming through the puddle toward her knife, gripping its wooden handle and unsheathing the cold-shining tongue from its water. Grey light blazes from its metal. She stands and considers, for a moment, whether to plunge the blade into her belly or The Fish. To decide she sings an old song the children in her village would sing to decide who would be ‘it’. With each syllable she points the blade to her neck, then to The Fish, then to her neck, then to The Fish.

“*The tiger eats the mushroom*
*The viper sucks the grape*
*The animals are hungry*
*For the forest that they taste*…”

The sharp angle of the blade rests on the flesh below her throat, she pauses shuddering with the thrill. This is the moment, if she were playing with her school friends back in the village, where everyone would scream giddy and point, and then shuffle into a new order. Jonah tips the blade toward The Fish and begins the second verse, the new rhythm indicates an acceleration in speed. She whispers her song quietly to herself.

“*A rabbit squeezes through the dirt,*
*A wagon wheels around the Earth,*
*The Earth is singing human Hymns,*
*The arctic stained with afterbirth!”*

The blade returns to the nape of her neck, the village kids would be screaming again, re-ordering themselves, mouthing the next verse to divine where the song would land, not wanting to be *it*.

“*Hilly toppy*
*Prayey singy*
*All the longing*
*Happy bringy*
*Holly doodle*
*Garlic noodles*
*Spicy broth*
*With curdled poodle*
*Winky cheeky*
*Never speaky*
*Mumma’s bedroom*
This time the blade has selected The Fish ready for the final verse.

“All creation melts to glass
Mountains soak into the past
Cathedrals worn and spat to paste
Earth dissolved by outer space

You - Are - The - One - Who - God - Chose…”

Jonah looks at The Fish over the knife’s pointed tongue. She can feel the blade ringing like a struck bell, its vibration wriggling into the bones of her hand and squirming up her arm. The ringing infests her rib cage, and drips down each of her vertebrae, pooling in her pelvis. She feels alive. She feels warmth spread across her shoulder blades. Her hunger screeches up and down the tubes of her stomach, and drums on the walls of her bowels. She places one foot in front of the other as she steps down the boat, wading ankle deep through the salt water. Each step sets a ripple rolling, banging into the boat’s curve and bouncing back to collide with other ripples. The quiet puddle within the dinghy squirms like a trapped crowd, lapping at The Fish’s flanks.

Jonah grips the knife tightly in her left hand. She walks in perfect balance along the centre of the boat so as not to set it rocking. She reaches The Fish and squats. Her bending knees crack, the cracks shoot through the silence. Jonah holds her breath, but it’s too late. The Fish’s eyes open, it stares at Jonah. Before opening its mouth to say

“I was just dreaming about you.”

Jonah remains silent, staring, squeezing the juice from the blade.

“You were in Nineveh. A great city. A neon amoeba shivering on the plain. It’s coloured lights glowing rancid into the great fog that chugs from its pipes into the hot desert night. Within the fog, stained into rainbows by flashing signs and billboards and electric screens, the prostitutes wear gas masks with their leather bikinis so they can survive their street walks and hide their acid-rot faces. The businessmen live in skyscraper hotels, they work high in diamond office blocks, they gamble in enormous casinos that drip gold light and spill their cash sounds into the streets. They move from building to building in bulletproof cars, their air always purified before being pumped into their lungs. In the streets even the hot dog vendors wear gas masks and sell their hot-dogs shrink wrapped, to be eaten safely inside. The hustlers just wrap material over their mouths, the street kids cough as they play. Clowns walk the streets and hurt themselves for money. They cut into their thighs with razors blades, or bang their heads against the pavement before springing to their feet and yelling ta-dah! This is great entertainment to the businessmen who fling dollar bills and business cards from
their tinted windows. There are no trees or flowerbeds in the streets, nothing can grow in the fog. Instead they have puddles of neon light, and public screens that play news and reality TV shows about the King of Nineveh and his daughters. Silly people.”

The blade squirms in Jonah’s hand, impatient, hungry. Jonah grips it. Her knuckle bones almost visible through her thin skin.

“You will go to Nineveh. You will become famous. You will be the exotic singer from the distant land who sprouts feathers as she sings and sprouts hoofs as she dances. You will perform in their most famous casino, your life will be luxurious. You will not need a gas mask. You will be like the business men, driven from air-conditioned garage to air-conditioned garage in an air-conditioned limousine. Eventually the King will summon you. His daughters will be jealous. They will try to kill you. You will show him the rituals of the Birds, so he can summon an ancient Demon whom he craves to know. That Demon will destroy the Ninevites. Their great fog will sigh into the dessert and be blown from Earth into the enormous night.”

The Fish looks towards the knife salivating in Jonah’s trembling hand. Its voice falters for a moment. “Please, just let me finish telling you my dream.” Jonah raises the blade and shakes her head, “No I can’t” she says, her voice wet with tears.

“The Demon you help him conjure will be the thing you call the Both. The Both will be summoned from its spiritual existence into the material space of the King’s palace. You will be shocked and scared. The King will feel incredibly powerful. Everyone in Nineveh will be able to see the Both. You will not trust it. you will flee from the Palace, abandon your life as a singer and live in the slums. The Both will follow you. Not physically. Physically he will remain in the castle. But he will be on all the reality shows - on all the city’s screens - standing in the background as the King’s silly daughters giggle and shop. Standing beside the King as he smokes cigars in his office. The Both’s gaze will infect the city. You will find solace in the practices of your ancestors. You will fly each night to circle the moon, you will lead a young group of prostitutes in the ceremonies of the Birds, you will trample a small path of soil in your buildings courtyard with your hooves and there you will plant a pumpkin seed, the way your father taught you to. You will shit on the seed, it will sprout and it will grow. It will be the only living plant in Nineveh, people will travel from all suburbs to come see it. A lone bee will buzz through the choking fog to pollinate it. And that bee will be considered a miracle and will become a symbol of the resistance. And although The Both will stare at you as you cough in the streets, and although his gaze will be as ubiquitous as it was when you were in the village, you will be happy. Your potions will treat the sick children, your wisdom will harden the women, even the clowns will cease bloodying themselves in your presence as you will make them laugh, reminding them of the silliness of life. Then one day a worm will eat through the pumpkin vine and it will
withers, blacken and rot. This will destroy you, though it has no right to.”

Jonah’s vision is blurring behind tears, The Fish is a splotch, until she blinks and her eyelashes mash the tears from her eyeballs, then The Fish is a fish with one emerald eye looking into hers, glancing at the knife in her hand. Her eyes fill and blur again and, relieved by the blindness, Jonah doesn’t blink - but raises her knife hand and cleaves through The Fish’s leather with a chop, pressing her fist through the pulp meat, splitting bones, bubbling blood, until the blade locks its teeth into wood. Its ravenous hunger drains from its tongue. Jonah tosses The Fish’s head from the boat, its emerald eyes still staring as it floats away on the swell in a pink cloud. She chews into its body, scales splitting up into her teeth. She tears chunks of flesh away from the soft bones. The taste is the iron of blood, the tang of salt, and the rot smell of sea. The blood soaks into her tongue, rolls across back of her throat, and slips into the bubbling acids of her belly where it is dissolved and made new. Amen.

*

Jonah lies along the wet spine of the dinghy, surrounded by the slosh and tap of the swell on the wood. She closes her eyes and imagines the setting Sun, unstuck from the sky, falling like a gilded leaf toward the magnetic belly of the sea. She lies still as dark replaces the day and moonlight marbles her flesh, which pimples into feathers. The stress that sprouts the black from her body is not caused by guilt - but by its absence. By her perfect satisfaction with her actions. The rightness of killing and eating when hungry. The wholesomeness of chewing flesh. The goodness of death. Amen.

As she lies back in the boat, looking up toward the slithering milk of stars, she feels the sea being tugged toward the swollen moon, breaking apart into a gentle rain, falling up toward the emptiness of space. And with this weightless feeling she dissolves into a deep sleep.

When she wakes at midnight, the dampened thump of distant music wafts in the breeze. She sits up, the sea is still congealed, fleshed across the Earth. She scans the horizon and sees a neon bloom wedged between the thick black lips of sea and night pressing together in the distance. The coloured lights of a distant city. A rainbow blaze, glazed in fog. The light washes up into space, scrubbing out the stars, diluting the blackness into greyness. Nineveh. The glow of its media invading the infinite night.

Jonah sits on the rim of the dinghy and for hours is sucked toward Nineveh’s glowing harbour. The night dissolves into dawn and in the grey light she studies the mandala of entrails stacked and spilling on the deck. The ribbons of blood, and the grey bones, thin as hair, that wrap through the pink mush and purple tubing. The flaps of flesh, one side scaled silver, the other seeping crimson through white meat. Her mother knew
how to discern the future through the spilling of guts and blood, the net weaved by the dribbling. She could tell, through the entrails of a chicken, whether a woman would get pregnant, or whether a man would get rich. But all Jonah can divine from the pulp before her is that she is no longer hungry, and that although the world is thick with the minds and songs of creatures so large she can’t imagine them, and so small she can’t perceive them - she is still more utterly alone that she thought possible.

The continent grows toward her. A treeless wasteland, and the city of Nineveh: a neon amoeba sizzling on the plain.
The Great Divide

On the beach two girls
still young enough to reject the parts
that differ them from boys
bury those parts in an oblong hole
they’ve dug in the sand.

Soles touching, they face each other.
One blocks the sun from her eyes
as the other nods her head over and over.

Around them swirl two boys
a hair’s breadth younger,
whooping and hollering
going hammer and tongs
at building and pummeling
tunnels and turrets.

Isn’t this always the way
girls whispering, knitting
themselves together
boys careening
barely missing each other.
In My Second Coming

From the womb I will tumble chanting Mandarin, will feast on cod,
tiptoe unbound in red satin slippers embroidered with crescent moons.

Is it true the Chinese abhor big feet?

Upon rising I will sing, take cold showers will triple-back off balance beams won’t give a hoot if the iceman cometh.

Unlike Tyrone in Long Day’s Journey I will refuse to squander my gift for the bitch promise of success. What the hell was it I wanted to buy? he asked. A pig with black ears

I will breed and will not give a fig if I cannot inhabit a gabled mansion or sip salted gimlets from Waterford glass or if anyone swallows a word I say.
After I Was Raised
John 11

Sweaty fingers touch my garments
as I scoop water from the well. No one understands
the voluptuousness of the sun, the scent
of breeding women, copper-colored, the chickens
pecking at my toes, the cacophony of chatter
the busybodies, the visitors
with their mitzvahs and challah.

Still Martha clucks about me like a brood hen
oiling my skin, clipping my nails.
And her endless braying
about Jesus, Jesus...kneeling I speak
of the unredeemed souls I have seen.
Tiny cymbals din in my ear.
Another’s voice cackles in my throat.
The Man Who Was Immaculate  
John 8, 1-11

To the oglers who condemned the woman taken in adultery, Jesus said,  
“Let him who is without sin, cast the first stone,” then stooped and doodled on the ground.  
Suppose, among the temple oglers, one man, umber-eyed and lean, who thought himself pure, perhaps tempted by her, but resisted, obeyed Jesus and flung a jagged stone which hit her square above the eye, a shot so hard, it punctured her brow, stunned her, knocked her to her knees, her full-breasted body trembling like a willow in a squall.

Suddenly, she bolts upright, raising her hand, blinded by the blood- she thought it sudden night- commingling with her tears like pink pearls dripping on the hem of His garment, searches for the hand of Christ, still doodling in the sand, while he who was without sin warmed another stone in his calloused, hot hand.
Acceptance

I do not know if you love me as I love you. No matter.

When I ride
the curves and edges of your body

I feel I have fallen off a cliff.
But if early on a summer evening

under a eucalyptus you wish
to whisper sweet syllables into my ear

and wind a vine about my heart
I will lie

silent and listen to the sound
of rain falling on the lime green leaves.
Little Murders

In the summer of soap
you are ninety nine
and 44/100 % pure-hearted,
Your feet barely
sweep the floor.
You sit tall and
listen. Nothing you do measures up.

Each week you begin again
with a fresh bar of Ivory
carving the head,
breast, wings, the beak.

Sweat clouds your glasses.
Your fingers stiffen, bleed.
Bearing your wingless gift home,
you dig in your nails and scrub
from your hands the ruby stains.
My Old Man Never Shut Up

Perched
in your over stuffed chair
flush with the kitchen
where mother and I stewed and boiled
to the thrum of your Castlewellan lilt,
by God, Dad, ‘twere a born poet ye.
A pity you never
shut your gob long enough
to etch your rubies in stone.

* 

Arra, daughter, then you’d have naught
of your own worth
a twit. A soft Yankee life
has ground your guile into bog butter.
That Leitrim lug you wed
has curdled you into comfort
has spun you into a fish monger
peddlin’ blues and carp
on cobbled streets. Stop
mollycoddlin’ yourself
like a pig with black feet.
Sharpen your hobbled wits
and with that cutting edge,
spit out the eye
of a spud and plunk it in
the soil. The harvest will be sweet.
Mendacity

I’m sorry I did not feed your cat
I was skimming the waves
on the back of a dolphin.
I was hitching a ride
on an East river ferry;
its fog horn keening through the dark.

I’m sorry I did not feed your cat.
The truth is I’m allergic to cats.
I concede he is splendid
in his Maine coon coat
but when he tiptoes across
the back of my chair
he creeps me out. When he cuddles my feet
and stares at me
I fear he’s planning my demise.

I am not Brunhilde.
Ich bin ein Berliner.
I am an icy White Russian.
I am the Great Horned Owl
you saw in the forest
pumping its wild wings
when your father took you owling.

Under a frosty moon your feet crunched
over crisp snow and the two of you
hooted and hooted and hooted
until I hooted back. Your toes turned to stone
in your black boots. That was your old man,
*Grin and bear it*…
Mine?
I am the owl who cursed his name.
Unlike Our Jewish Brethren Who Have Revived a Ritual of Tending for Their Dead

Had we been the ones, O Adonai, who washed her tiny body, swaddled her in linen as we chanted
*Myp love, my dove, my beautiful one*
her lily-like feet, slender and long, might not still tiptoe through our dreams startling us awake, reminding us we are not yet quickened ourselves.

We allowed the weeping nurses to take her broken body from us and return her frozen. Hold her, they urged. Her bruises powdered, her neck scars hidden by a white cap’s bow and a high-collared gown all her cousins had worn before her.
He Pulls Off

his glasses and tosses them
into the back seat

of his red VW convertible. He wanted nothing
between him and me. We lived glued
to a Giotto blue sky
peeling petals from April dogwoods,
hollow-eyed angels
swigging whiskey in a local pub.

That was before denials and foul vowels
sputtered over teacups.

While he always saw everything
clear, unmuddled by the moon,
I often made a spectacle of myself.
And I over-bleached his shorts and tees
til they were pure
white and filled with holes.
by Emily Strauss

**Extremis**

at the point of death
black night's shroud
is worn backward—
dark drapes pull us

away from morning
back to the extremis
of need, the burning
arms of a red sunset

framing hopes unmet
by the coming evening
when the light fades,
promising merely stars.

We stand alone waiting
for something to grace us,
a salvation of moonlight
to fall upon our heads

but only shadows arrive
a cold hand beckons us
and a longing for warmth
despite our woolen capes.
Waiting

he's just waiting—
for the moon to rise
dinner to end, the dryer
snow melting off the deck
and once more sweeping
dust keeps gathering

he waits some more
summer and winter
birthdays, anniversaries
grandchild, a neighbor's death
or his oldest friend

eat more whole grains
the doctor says
one glass of red wine
no more—
wait again for the alarm
morning dog walk
he's gray-muzzled too
ambles patiently
you're quite a pair
on the road
wave to Frank's tractor
or the storefront with tired
benches on the square

wait to eat dinner
turn on the news
answer game show
questions, the sound
pushing back the dark time
of fears, Mary in her grave
now he waits to join her
the doctor tells him
he's strong, drink more
water, another procedure
the heart unsteady
shriveled dick useless

he's waiting for light
for something hopeful
waiting for another day
Bodies Dancing

the body dances unto its own poetry
we vibrate with our words humming
words shiver, dancing to exhaustion
geese call across barren winter fields

we vibrate with our songs humming
and awake at dawn to hazy blue light
geese march across frozen winter fields
cottonwood trunks dance in the wind

we rise after dawn to dusky blue light
our body dances within its own poetry
cottonwood trees stripped in the wind
now shivering, we dance to exhaustion
The Wreck of a Marriage

We two come to explore the wreck but no one tells us where we have arrived in so many words we need a map of words to describe, no, to explain what we can no longer overlook

this place witness to our broken lives, the ruins of living and of bedrooms, of dark nights with the sea blowing up a storm, this place drowned in memories we are too cowardly to face;

hence the bare bones of old timbers a broken rib cage, a burned-out vessel carrying ghosts: here is the place we lost courage, here the place we must re-visit to assess the damage the prison that binds us like fish in this sunken hull

this the wreck we must explore over and over before it becomes dross, a net with death caught in it. We return to experience wreckage remember the black drifting currents that pulled us apart not a motion but a thing itself

a true myth from among our lies here a ladder to enter the depths not a question of power but another story we could tell like sharks feeding among a school of sardines hovering near the sunken wheel-house whose guidance we have lost.
The Hay Truck

We stand in the field waiting. The hay truck comes out of the desert below where alfalfa grows in circles greened by the Colorado River's muddy flow.

We wait in the field, dumb in December in the thin dead weeds.

The hay truck will come bleating around the bend before 5 AM, lights piercing the black road, mountain sheep on the rocky outcrops above.

The hay truck is near, we feel the frozen ground rumbling light will soon appear down east along the road, up the mountain.

We are waiting for fragrant grass bundles thrown down, it will take all day, hooves stamping, noses snorting we run to meet the fence, open the gate

the driver steps down onto frost, his tire tracks white, we move off a ways flip our ears at the idling engine watch warily, hides steaming at dawn.

The hay truck is empty now, backs out, the driver waves, we nod, smell green grass. The hay man returns to the desert down to the Colorado River's red banks

bighorn sheep, dark chocolate cliffs where he sleeps. We close the gate, hay piled high, return to the oaken cover.
by Rose Mary Boehm

**Glimpses**

So I got close. Thought it would be easy. Looked through a hole in the veil and saw glory. Looked over my shoulder and saw stark, black skeletons of waiting trees just below the window, crows in rows of black, and loud voices. There were memories of April freshness and summer heat and imperfect sex. Love too. Your hand, and the faces of those who loved me. Murmured prayers. And in the reflection of all imperfection I saw myself and my need filled by a world where all things are as they ought to be.
Portent

The pharaoh’s dream:
seven ears of corn
blasted by the east wind.

Moses summons the east wind
to bring the locusts
and to part the Red Sea.

The east wind.
Destruction of the wicked
called forth by God himself.

Mary Poppins arrives
carried by the east wind
and will stay
‘until the wind changes.’

Sherlock: ‘There’s an east wind coming, Watson.’
‘You left the East Wind to me,’ said Gimli,
‘but I will say naught of it.’
‘That is as it should be,’ says Aragorn.
‘In Minas Tirith they endure the East Wind,
but they do not ask it for tidings...’

In ‘Bleak House’, Mr Jarndyce
refers to the east wind:
‘I am always conscious of an uncomfortable
sensation now and then
when the wind is blowing in the east.”

Genghis Khan: the east wind
that changed the map of the world.
Not staying for supper with great-great Auntie in Cyprus

We slowly puffed our way up that steep hill, passing the meadows full of anemones and sheep, tripping around pot holes and big stones.

The Mediterranean sparkled in the distance, a bold fisherman was far out, just rounding those large rocks I had seen from close up and which from this height seemed insignificant. But the boat looked smaller still and vulnerable. 
*Mum, Dad, is it much further?*

Some suntanned urchins were giggling behind a large boulder. When we got closer they ran ahead, clearly about to announce our imminent arrival. Old men sitting outside the *kafetéria* turned their heads towards the strangers. *Kalispera.*

The old woman, dressed in black billowing skirts, with a black shawl almost covering her face and falling over her shoulders, appeared at the top of the path, her arms open, her toothless mouth opening and closing. *Kalispera theia,* said the father of my children.

He disappeard into black. Then the kids got kissed. They wiped their faces. My daughter was inidgnant. *Yuk, she’s got a moustache,* she squeaked.

I banked on Auntie Maria not understanding a word of English and approached. Maria smelled of fried lamb and woodsmoke. Her kiss was sticky.

*My husband translated towards me. Will you stay for supper?* Maria had asked while grabbing the neck of a passing chicken. When we both declined, she unclenched her fingers.
**Tropical Insomnia**

Stark rainforest lake, greens, all shades, all reflections. Colors like jewels peep from behind giant ferns and wild cotton bushes. The sun’s hasty exit. Sudden night, slow moon, shrieking voices, insistent cicadas. Are there monkeys in the dark tree?

A first tropical night, starbursts on lapping water, the parrot a silent silhouette against Prussian blue.

Dizzy fireflies turning themselves off and on, making patterns hovering over the heat-resistant lawn. An encyclopedia of bugs pressing their weird little bodies against the screen. Rustlings in the eves of the roof woven from palm fronds.

When the jungle voices finally die, the cockerel takes up the slack and the parrot screeches out the early morning news.
You rang, Sir?

Boris Karloff. Face hewn from hard wood, twinkle hidden behind the eyes. Monsters live in me, hunch behind every pillar, waiting in every dark corner. I think perhaps love will, too, like Beauty and the Beast.

We drive through the part of eastern Europe where woods belong to elves and the little people. Where evil queens find apples to poison beautiful princesses, where Jorinde is enslaved by the wicked witch, where Hänsel und Gretel wander still.

Wolves and bears. Of course. The car eats black asphalt. In the headlights grey motes, on the windscreen splat insects. No yellow lines. No street lights. No one else in the night. Only rain. Only blackness as the kilometers rush underneath. I hear the trees’ warning, feel them closing in.

Orange lights. Military men. The border post. I remember another border. Another night. Safety catches clicking in quick succession. The bleak monster is a little man in a greatcoat, collar up. He wields a red stamp. "Next..."
What Doesn't Pass
Garth Gilchrist

Just before Christmas of her 87th year the stroke came.
We marched the turkey and all its fixin's to her hospital room
"What a revoltin' development!" she kept saying, but
Smiled from ear to ear to have us there, though one side drooped,
And we, thrilled she was still with us, thought
Her impossibly frail body could not last the year.
She sailed on for four

Well, not sailed. For twenty years she'd hobbled
On a bad leg, crippled when old childhood injuries caught up with her
And then her sight went, despite the twice daily drops, and costly magnifying devices,
Slowly eclipsed with the glaucoma her family's women all fell prey to.
Now, with the stroke, both walking and seeing were done.

She took it as a relief from the struggle. She didn't fight.
Always so independent, now bed was a good home.
Neither did she complain
Somehow she contained herself within herself,
Her whole life gathered full
In that frail frame where it didn't look like it could fit.

The goodness she'd shown so many had somehow grown
And dwelt within her, too.
The artesian faith she'd plumbed to meet her goliath-size trials -
My father's depression and brother's incarceration,
Cancer and widowhood, the worries my sister and I delivered --
Now glowed quietly under those white sheets
As she lay softly auraed in the fullness of her own spirit

Visitors came, people she'd loved substantially for years,
And you'd think they would have come now to comfort her, and yet
It was they who received her blessing, and they who left
Cheered, reassured, hopeful, strengthened.
She was like that, life-giving.
She welcomed company, wanted to be in on all the talk,  
But equally welcomed solitude. "I'm never alone," she said  
"God is with me," and sometimes she saw beings  
In those last months she melted away like ice.  
She nibbled tiny morsels, and got so thin we teased her  
She might die of evaporation, that we'd pull the covers  
Back one morning and find nothing at all. She laughed at that,  
Strangely tickled with the idea

I lay beside her, my solid 210 pounds of mountain walker's body near her  
Little bird's nest of delicate bones, soft skin, scarce sinew.  
She was raised in the terrible scarcity of the great depression,  
Walked with no shoes to school when she lost them in the corn fields.  
Father bought her new ones when the snows came.  
She'd borne the war years, then built the homestead  
Together with dad before he died, then kept it going after,  
And raised the family and conquered her illness  
Nurtured her children heroically through their many trials and cooked  
Ten thousand meals, chaired committees, built a half dozen prayer groups,  
Counseled and healed dozens who came to her desperate and hopeful.

All of that now held in her seventy-pound frame, nobly held.  
Old age is unquestionably humiliating, all fresh beauty and modesty lost  
Yet she was lovely still, burdened with grace, skin soft as old silk,  
Hair full and thanks full, and inexplicably  
Her blind eyes twinkled. How could they?  
Often, when she smiled, a potent goodness radiated, and youth mixed with age.  "I still feel young," she used to say, amazing me.

Lying close in those last months, holding her hand,  
So little left of her now, yet I could sense  
An astonishing vitality beside me - No decrepit, aged, spent life  
Instead this miraculous glowing freshness, a sweetness like meadow flowers  
Spirit feels like this, I thought. I knew then, even more sure of  
The great being she was, that nothing would pass but body.  
Her life inextinguishable, though it would lift beyond my grasp.
by Brian Kirven

Heft and Aloft

Up out of a dream
with exotic birds
both dark and light,
a turkey vulture and me
worship the sun.

Mute bird’s face
up in Bishop pine,
covered in shadow,
stares down at mine,
as I mirror
widespread wings
in sun salutation pose.

A residue clings,
mine’s mental,
the carrion’s: dew
that the sun burns through.

I feel like I have a hat on.
Head and jaw hold on to
the lingering weight
of my night guard.

Like the glassy bay at high tide,
this life is filled
with a certain heaviness,
at times bathed by soft light.
Clouds in Formation

These days,
stray clouds seem to spring up
with increasing frequency
from no clear source,
rudderless…

Tonight,
bathed in pinkish gray dusk,
a legion of Rasta dreadlocks
splayed out in a radial fan
of thick beaming bands
bolts out from the sun
in peaceful Pacific Ocean revolt
against sea level rising
and prejudice on the mainland.
The defiant braids shake free,
push through fear
in a school of altocumulus mackerel
eastward against these divided States,
against Manifest Destiny
and climate change.

An arm-in-arm cloud protest,
lifted and sent on its way
by the sunken sun,
leaves behind such a growing array
of united resistance,
rises above a pestilent land,
to break through
a wall of fog and darkness
to forge a path of light
on the darkest of nights.
Speculations of His Last Moments

*For Monte Neil Kirven, killed in the Tubbs Fire of Northern California on October 9th, 2017*

My gut cannot digest
the un-digestable,
head cannot wrap itself around
the unthinkable scene
that haunts my mind.
Whole body cannot wrest
any sense of any of this,
what he might have thought,
seen or dreamed from bed
when the flames and fumes flared
through nostrils unprepared.
I refuse to accept the unacceptable.
I’m tearing my hair out
caring about whys and wherefores.

We’ve scuffled lifetimes
across rocky hillsides,
steep thorny slopes,
cliff sides with red fire in our eyes
clouded in the mind,
blinded by pride,
crazed with beehives
burning up our insides,
words trapped in our enflamed,
constricted throats,
until they explode.

We’ve stumbled along
lost and alone for generations,
seeking some kind of
external edge or prize
to get us to feel alive.
A genetic thread
binds a broken lineage
grasping for its true masculine roots.
So we’ve expressed it outdoors
in forced feats of animal endurance
without fatherly praise,
foolhardy outings to fill inner voids
with scratches, tears and shrieks inside,
scarred, traumatized and marred
without witnessed tears.
Same old fleeting filling up
for the sake of feeling something, anything,
like ill-advised wars,
pointless suffering.

No matter how I try to rationalize
how it might have been
appropriate for my dad Monte to rage
against the rising of the fire light,
screaming against the hot wind
as he went for shrieking falcons,
to push through near death
once again,
I cannot take in
to my gouged insides
whatever happened to him
in those hideous moments,
cannot hold it,
in light of the reality
that death didn’t just barge in,
in the middle of the night
but tore through
like an enormous torch.
The shadow of doubt
that makes the hope
that he might have passed
with a low gasp in the height
of the fire storm, inside,
still feels like small comfort.

This poem arose out of fresh ashes in the immediate aftermath of one of the deadliest fires in California history that killed my father. It expresses the disbelief during what Elizabeth Kubler Ross called the denial stage of grieving. The theme of dissociation from such a sudden shocking loss ties into the larger experience of trauma, and the poem also explores how that deeply-seated trauma moves across generations of males in Western culture and how the rift between them increases the desolation of the grief.
The Captain’s Hat
James William Gardner

It was the year that my Grandmother Cooper came with us to the beach. I remember I was five. At first, she seemed out of place. It was strange to see her in a bathing suit because she was so old. Then too, she wore this funny white rubber cap so that she wouldn’t ruin her permanent. I never understood about permanents anyway, but Grandmother was always talking about hers. She stayed underneath the umbrella most of the time, but once she did get out in the water.

We always did the same things at the beach. We’d stay a whole week and we always stayed at the same place, Hart’s Villa Motel. Not only that, but we always used to get the same room. It hung out over the swimming pool and there was a high balcony where we used to sit at night and listen to the waves and talk about stuff. At first, I was afraid to go out on it. I said, “What if it falls off?” Daddy said that I didn’t need to worry about that, that it was good and strong. After that I wasn’t scared anymore.

Anyway, like I say we always did the same things. The first night we’d get a bucket of chicken and eat supper up in the room. Then, after it got dark we’d go for a walk on the beach. We’d walk a long way, all the way to the pier and we’d go out on the pier and watch the people fishing and talk to them. That’s when I met Captain Jack. He was out there every night. He was a fat, red faced man with real yellow teeth, but he had the coolest hat. I don’t think that he was really a captain, but that’s what I called him because he wore a white captain’s hat with a shinny black bill and a gold strap across the front. He always called me Sonny Boy.

“Well, are you back again, Sonny Boy?”

“Yes Sir,” I said. “Have you caught anything this evening?”

“A few,” he said. Then he opened the Styrofoam cooler and showed me his fish.

“Are you going to carry them back to your house and eat them?” I said.

“You better know it,” he said smiling. Then, he let me hold his fishing pole for a little while, but I didn’t catch anything. It was still awful fun though.

On the last night at the beach we’d go down to the pavilion. We’d get foot long hotdogs and Pepsi-Colas in bottles and sit at this long counter and eat off high stools. Then, we’d go play games and get our pictures taken in these little green booths. Me and my Momma and Daddy would all squeeze in and pull the curtain shut. Then Daddy would put the money in and say to get ready. We’d make funny faces and the flash bulb would go off. You used to get four pictures for a dollar. They’d come out of a slot on a little strip.

“Come on Grandmother, “I said. “Get your picture taken.”
She said, “Oh, y’all don’t want no picture of me.”

“Go on Leona. Get in there and get your picture with Bobby,” said my Daddy. So
she got in with me and we made faces. In one my Grandmother crossed her eyes and stuck out her tongue. I was surprised. When we saw it we all laughed. Then, me and Momma stood in front of this funny mirror that made your legs real short and your head real long and skinny. After that we’d go across the street to the amusement park and ride the rides and get pink cotton candy.

The last thing that we’d do on the last night is go get a souvenir. We’d go to this big gift shop called The Gay Dolphin. I looked forward to it every year. Daddy didn’t like it. He thought that it was a rip off. He’d just hand Momma some money and wait outside on a bench. Me and Momma and Grandmother went in.

It had everything: big sand buckets and shovels, things made out of shells, pirate guns, salt water taffy, even hermit crabs that you could carry back home for pets. I remember that my cousin Amy Lee had one. She named it Buster Crab, but it died. Momma said that they always died so I never got one. Grandmother told me to pick out anything that I wanted within reason. That meant that it couldn’t cost too much. So, I went all over the store looking for something really special. Then, I saw it. It was in a little display case filled with all kinds of hats. Right between a sailor’s cap and a black pirate’s hat was a white captain’s hat just like Captain Jacks. I mean exactly like his right down to the fancy gold strip and the anchor on the front.

I ran and found my Grandmother. “Come see what I picked out!” I said. I grabbed her hand and pulled her across the store to the hat display. “Look!”

“Oh my,” she said. “Ain’t that fancy? Is that what you want?”

“Yes Ma’am,” I said. “Is that within reason?”

“I think so,” she said.

A woman with real black hair came over. “Can I help y’all?” she said. I pointed to the captain’s hat. “I want that!”

“Well, let’s see if we can find one to fit your head,” she said smiling.

“Is that a real captain’s hat?”

“I reckon so,” said the woman. She reached up on a shelf and pulled one out of a box and handed it over the counter. “Try that one on for size.”

I put it on my head. It fit perfect. “That looks fine,” my Grandmother said.

“There’s a mirror over there,” said the woman. I walked over to see myself. It was so cool I could barely stand it. I pushed it back on my head the way that Captain Jack wore his. Then my Grandmother paid the woman. I remember that it cost four dollars. I didn’t take it off my head until I went to bed that night. Then, I put it by my pillow and stared at it until I fell asleep.

The next morning I wore it to the pancake house for breakfast. The waitress looked at me and said, “Good morning Captain. What is your name?”

“Bobby,” I said.

“Well now Captain Bobby, what would you like?”

“Pancakes,” I said.

After we finished eating, we went back to the motel and packed up to go. Right
before we left Momma took a picture of me out by the pool in my new hat. Then we climbed in the station wagon and headed for home. Our car didn’t have air conditioning so we all rolled the windows down. The traffic headed out of town was heavy. I remember that it was bumper to bumper and there was a big tractor-trailer right behind us.

That’s when it happened. Before I knew it I felt my new hat loosen and fly off my head and out the open window. I whirled around in the seat and saw it bouncing down the road. Then, before my eyes the big tractor-trailer drove right over top of it. “Daddy!” I hollered. “Stop the car!” But there was no reason to. My cool captain’s hat was gone and there was no place to pull over anyway. Lord, I cried all the way home. To have had something so wonderful for such a brief period of time and then to loose it that way was a horrible feeling. I’ve had that feeling several times over the years. It always feels the same way that it did back then. But, things come and things go.

Momma said that we’d get another captain’s hat next year, but by then I didn’t want one as bad.
Track 21

*for mom and dad*

Heron occupies an island of rock
a few feet from the shore
waves obey human motivations
with blues that swirl in consternation

Heron stands
miles out of mind
legs dwindled
eyes drawn to the tree line

Old Tipping Rock looms like a joke that failed to land
above this audience of bluffs and rocky sands
his white face and grey hair illuminated
in the campfire of sound reflecting sunlight

Heron guardian to
the shore that breathes
with sandlungs
the continent sighs and heaves

Heron fishes by not fishing
catching words swimming through the ink
heron flies by not flying
it soars and dives circling around in think

Heron sees by not seeing
black flows in every dab of pink
heron steps by not stepping
its feet planted firmly on the brink

Heron please stay
for this country can’t fade
under the intense gaze
resolute in your still endeavors
Track 23

The dishwasher talks to the pans
and they tell him all their secrets,
like what actually happened
when the pot called the kettle black
and how it feels to sit upon flames.

*It doesn’t hurt exactly,*
*it’s just the strain you feel*
*when you really have to take a piss.*
*But I’ve never pissed so that*
*is just a guess. It feels like something*
*needs to be released from our concavity,*
*the wholeness that can only*
*exist in emptiness steps forth*
*in culinary mastery*
*smelling of garlic and cumin.*

This is his twelfth job in three months.
He shows up early, leaves late,
works hard but the door seems
like the only constant
in these warm, chaotic kitchens
of flying dishes and scattered voices
with terrible tidings such as
“we have a sixteen top on table four.”
In all of these restaurants, dirty
jokes emanate from the cooks
in streams of boiling grease

while chemicals burn reddened hands
undressing themselves of water. The owners
must cut costs. Outside, it’s a summer
night. Pink air softens the poverty
on the sidewalks. Trees proclaim
arrogant retorts to winter. He must leave.
but always come back to these jobs.
The beans and rice run out, he longs
for a bottle. Maybe he'll keep this job though.

He enjoys his conversations with the pans
and the chemicals in the dishwater
don’t burn his hands. Tonight,
the pans tell him they’re jealous
of the plates, remains of food
racing like marbles off the porcelain
sheen. But the pans retain the grooves
of their offerings, knots of cooked fat
wound into the metal. They beg him
to free them of this acne. He can’t

scrub away the scars so he runs a towel
slowly along the blemishes and hangs
them proudly over the ovens, a gallery
of iron smiles like a picturesque people
standing outside of a courthouse
in a mass, triumphant pose. In this row,

he finally sees order. His hands are wrinkled
and scraped in two spots, a waitress doesn’t
give him his share of the tips, the owner
says he might need to cut his hours;
the dishwasher has done his work.
Track 45

Burst of rain on a sunny day
and I open my umbrella
to catch a glimpse of the glimmering whispers,
hints dropped from the clouds. I think
this would be a good day to skip work
and get Chinese food with a friend
I haven’t seen in years. We could read
our fortune cookies out loud
ending them with the words “in bed”
like we did when we were young, “you will have
great success in bed” or “someone
will give you a gift in bed.” The sun
is getting lost in a crowd of clouds now
but she’s holding up her hands and shouting
that she doesn’t want us to go.
So many are watching me out here
as I try to decide if I’m walking to or fro.
So many smiles constrain my arms and legs,
this is what happens
when you enter the freedom of the world.
Our joys are binds, happy ropes
pulling us closely towards a scrutinizing face.
When I relax in the trusted company of family
how unbearable it is to make them laugh!
The wind picks up, a jogger passes me
on this shabby street corner
in a bright pink tracksuit, shoes brand new
and treading the ground with disdain.
I must admit that it is a relief when
she doesn’t so much as glance at me
and I can’t help but stare at her
sweating guilt guided by an ipod
towards the salvation of a martini at five o’clock.
I walk past a Catholic school, steel fence clamoring the anguish of every rubber ball it touches. The playground sounds like water falling from a great height upon a hundred bells. Children are crowded into their cabals, clusters springing tortures. Now they are pointing at me in what must be a vision of some second grade blasphemy. But no, the May rain must have ceased a long time ago, the sun is back in a cloudless sky, and I realize I’m still pondering it all under an open umbrella.
Track 47
for my mom

In my mother’s garden,
a grove of birch lets the wind
run its hands through her hair;
the smell of sage
will give you the kind of long embrace
that becomes uncomfortable
in a crowd of sunflowers; a small pond
murmurs, looking for the man
who made him; the brick path
leads to a glass table and a boiler
before its abrupt end
at the gardens edge, as if
each were a character in a Jane Austen
novel shot dead on the Idaho prairie.

On the east side of this garden
there is a bulbous tomato
hanging in the heavy shade of the leaves,
red eye glowing in darkness. Mom is
pulling out weeds as the spade
clinks discontentments off
the rocky soil. Everything comes down
hard in Camas County;
the sun, the snow, the law,
the sweat from her neck
and the curls it has straightened. Glancing
at the tomato, she is filled with
apocalyptic thoughts from Revelation.  
Is The Great Red Dragon between the rows?
Are The Two Beasts rising up from the sod?
Is this the first drop of blood
falling from the sky? She
shudders and gets back to
digging up the roots,
green leaves snarling and biting blue gloves
in a kind of encroaching ecstasy.
The dog clangs a bark against the rocky
Idaho air. She’s in
the road again. My mom
runs to get her. The dog
is prancing and panting along the road.
Her tongue is lolling and her canine
face is pulled up in that idiot grin of dogs
that somehow makes them look both more
and less human. In the watery asphalt air,
the smile seems like a mocking
demonic reflection. Mom grabs her
by the neck. A few minutes later,
she is back in the garden
and in the leaves the scarlet threat
lingers, whispering a multitude of seeds.
She feels the presence
of the ripe and rotund glow
finding its voice in summer shadows.

She rises, brushes the beards
of dirt from her knees, walks over
and reaches into the darkness.
Gasping for breath, she pulls out
the formidable fruit and takes
a large, juicy bite wondering about
all the movies she’s been missing
on account of the violence.
I am five. I may be four or six but I think I am five, so it is 1973.
It must be winter, there is slush on the ground and beautiful powdery pockets of snow lightly kiss the windows of the car. But I do not notice. I am too excited. I am not alone in the car. There are five of us, my three older sisters, I am the baby, the "wee wun". We are driving and I am cold but I do not notice. My body is a coiled spring, a jack-in-the-box ready to pop. I am cold because I am not accustomed to such journeys and my clothes feel unfamiliar, maybe because they are new? But this is a momentous day, a special day so I must be wearing the uniform. The uniform of the well cared for child. The uniform of the birthday, the first day at school, the uniform of new clothes which declares "today is a special day".

A lady is driving the car. She is not my mother, my mother is an abstract concept to me. It has not been so long that I have forgotten her, I remember her features, her thick wavy hair, and her voice but she is abstract because I do not understand that she is my mother. I do not know what a mother does or does not do. When I am afraid or sad or lonely, it is not my mother's name "mummy" I whisper under my breath. No, she is abstract. I do not know if she is nice, it is too confusing.

The lady driving is Gill. She speaks to us in a velvety tone, a type of nurturing, calming voice, well rehearsed. She is always cheerful, optimistic and calm. She is nice but she has no power.

We drive and drive, the journey seems endless. I am small, even for my age I am small. I know this because I have overheard the adults, "she is very small for her age". I do not understand why I am small. I just am. So I cannot see out of the car windows very well, just the tops of the buildings on and on. But I do not care, I am too excited. A knot in my stomach, my arms and legs rigid with anticipation but fidgeting all the same.

I am excited because today is the day I will see him. The deity. The perfect being. The blinding white light to which I allow myself to be drawn. The one, in my tiny five-year-old mind who is perfect and can do anything. I try to visualise him but his face refuses to come to the front of my mind, anyway, it does not matter because I will see him and he will see me and he will be most pleased to see me because I am the youngest, the "wee wun", and I have the best gift.

Soon, the landscape begins to change. I no longer see the tops of the tall residential buildings but a different vista, a vast, wide grey expanse. I do not know where this building begins or ends and still I do not care.

"We're here". I do not know where "here" is. I do not see the grey anymore. I see a Disneyland, a sprawling magical kingdom, the beautiful reds and yellows of some ancient emperors' palace. It is, and it must be, for this is where he is.
In we go, hushed voices, hands shaken. Conversations far beyond my understanding are had. Gill is capable and efficient and my sisters look afraid. Here we are, with our new clothes and winter coats. Four pairs of knobbly skinny knees chattering all at the same time. It is warmer inside but still we shake. I do not care, for I have the best gift. He will love mine the most and he will love me the most. The final I's are dotted and T's crossed and for the first time we are spoken to directly, "now girls, we have a wee bit to walk so you girls just stay with Gill, OK? We all nod. Along we walk, a corridor of grey endless doors. It seems as if it should be frightening. But this is not the prison proper, this is the administration block. We will not go to the main prison, we are special, we will go to a special room. A room for special visitors. And all the while we hold hands, but never let go of the precious objects. I do not know what gift each of my sisters have been given to pass on to the deity. I only know that gripped tightly in my hand, as if it were the most precious of treasures, is the toothbrush.

It may be green, or red, or blue. I do not know. I am not aware. But I know I have the best gift and I cannot wait to give it. We are shown into a room, a quiet comfortable room. I know this is not a sitting room because we are not in a house. It is grey and blue, but less so. It looks like an office but makes me feel different. In fact, this is the family room and as we enter my sisters begin to nudge and whisper to one another. I do not remember if Gill stays in the room, I suppose she does. We sit. We wait. Then all at once he is here, accompanied by men in blue uniforms. Two of them, I think they must be policemen but I do not know why? Maybe embraces were had, hugs, kisses. Declarations of loyalty. knees may have been sat upon and hands held. To this I cannot testify because I do not remember, but I suppose that is how the time was passed. I cannot testify to it because when he, the deity, the king, the saint of saints enters, the rest of the world evaporates. He is all encompassing. I see only two things, his face, handsome and kind. I do not see the drab prison uniform or the badly shaven chin. I see only the aura around him, that blinding white light which draws me in. And I see the toothbrush. All too soon the visit is over. The time is up and we must say our good-bye's. The toothbrush, which I have gripped tightly and jealously in my hand, but until now have not mentioned, is suddenly thrust before him. "This is for you", I say. It is all I say. It may be the only words I utter during the entire visit. I do not know; my memory does not want to unlock all of its' secrets. "I'm sorry hen, we're not allowed to accept any gifts". I do not know who "we" are. I
only have a toothbrush for him? but I see the sadness in his face, still, he must accept the gift so I try again- "You keep it hen".

The disappointment is too much, I begin to cry. Before I realise it we are out of the special room. Now I am not aware of the long corridor, the grey, the clanking of keys. I am protesting, screaming, stalling, making myself heavy. But it is no use, Gill is strong and pulls and pulls. Still I have the gift, the toothbrush. Dragging, dragging, small feet slipping on the cold wet slush. The snow has stopped. I try digging in my heels but it does not work. I am not aware of it but I am wailing and screaming the word "daddy".

We are back in the car. My feet are wet and cold but I do not care, because I still have the gift, and the rejection is too much. If my sisters are upset I am not aware. No-one else exists but me and I do not understand. We drive away, past the prison. Away from the rejection, away from the turmoil of emotion which my tiny five-year-old mind cannot interpret.

My wails eventually turn into a kind of sobbing hiccups, the kind a mother would recognise. But these sobs are mine. They are unusual, unfamiliar. I do not cry. I have learned not to cry but I do not know why or when I learned this, I just know I do not cry. A light rain on the car windows replaces the snow of earlier and soon I am aware of a familiarity outside. We have arrived in the town in which we now live. Past the school I have just started. Past my classroom and the warm friendly tone of my first teacher, Miss Railey. She plays guitar and is nice, but she has no power. As we drive closer I am aware of a different feeling, a different knot in my stomach, a different kind of anticipation.

My sisters are quiet and Gill is chatting. I realise she has been talking the whole way back but now, as we near, I feel a resignation. A capitulation in her voice. She knows her time with us is nearly up. Her job done.

Then finally we are here. A weight, a narrowing of the world, a suffocation comes all around me. Number 69. We are here, and outside the tidy terraced house stands the couple.

Uncle Patrick and auntie Maeve. Of course, they are not my real aunt and uncle.

He is a rotund man, a caricature. I do not know where he works, or if he works. He may even be retired, but he is gone, he is not present in our daily lives. He is kind and funny, he wears buttoned down braces and sometimes in the summer, he sits on a deckchair or tending his vegetable patch in the small back garden and I have actually seen him wearing a handkerchief tied at four corners on his head!, he is a postcard from a long forgotten age and he is kind..

So he has no power.

She is different. The crocodile grin. A painted on mask. She is old, they are both old,
very, very old. But that is to my Childs' eye. In fact they are both only in their 50's, but she is old. She is small and skinny with the solid, starched hairdo of a respectable older woman. And she too is wearing her uniform. The tunic of many colours, a swirly colourful pattern which hurts my eyes and reminds me of vomit. A throwback to the psychedelic styles of the late 60's. Homogenised and diluted until it has become impotent, no more than a cheerful pattern for the older lady to wear. And she is smoking. The prop is never out of her hand.

It is time to get out of the car. I look around at the faces of my sisters. There is a sad, heavy, unspoken truth hanging in the air. They do not speak, because there is nothing to say and because, we are not allowed to speak.

Gill opens the car door for me "goodbye yellow car", I say to myself. I am five so I am fickle. I do not feel so bad now. But then I catch the eye of auntie Maeve, and for a second, just a second, the mask slips and I see something else.

I glance down at my hand and realise the gift is still there, in fact my knuckles are white and stiff because I have held it so tight.

It does not seem so special now and as I climb out of the car my hand relaxes and discreetly, secretly, and without any effort, I drop the toothbrush onto the back seat. I make my way towards auntie Maeve who is not nice. But that is a tale for another day.
You warn your son from the age of three -
beware the stranger who palms chocolate
like a universal greeting.
Pull the wind from the sky and tuck it
beneath your feet so you can fly
away from his candy store smile and home to me.

But you have neglected to warn him about
the man who grows fidget spinners from
his fingertips and invites
your son to come close enough
to pluck the one ripening, berry like, on his left thumb
while his other hand reaches
to snare your son in the mist net so he can
measure him with calipers and leg gauges,
band the sparrow slim right leg above
the ankle encased in
white sports sock with blue stripe.

He will catch and release today
because your son is part of a migrating flock of boys,
but the man has binoculared his eyes to watch from
the bench as your son flits about the park
and he is there when your son steps out of the
communal child nest at the bell sound
each afternoon, waiting to cast the mist net again.
This time there are no plans for band and release.

The empty cage waits on the man's kitchen table,
tray lined with stories of yesterday's children.
I parked the car
in the shadows under the Dutch elm
where the streetlight did not
penetrate, and waited behind the wheel,
not moving anything but my eyes,
which watched the rearview mirror,
the road ahead, the front door of the house,
the upstairs window - still dark - and tried
not to breathe so the windows wouldn't
fog up. This is my first broken heart,
and I am irrational. My drivers license is
barely a month old, and this is only the second
time I've driven my parents' car alone.
What am I going to do if I see your bedroom
light come on? If I see a car slowly creeping
up the street, turning its light off as it nears
the driveway, pulling in and parking, and two figures
sitting in the front seat, talking or kissing?
If I'm honest with myself, which is not easy for me
at this age, I would say I wanted to see this boy,
see what he looks like, if he is handsomer than me;
I want to watch him kiss you from the shadows,
to see how he does it, to see where he puts his hands -
on your shoulders, around your waist, on your ass? -
and to see how you kiss him back. I am insecure
about everything I do and am, and you knew it.
Teenage hearts rebound quickly, I know this now, but
there in the car, I felt an unbridgeable chasm in my chest
at the thought of you and this summer camp boy,
wondering at all the chemical reactions I was sure
were taking place between you. You'd let me feel
your breasts and between your legs, you'd sucked
my cock under the bleachers during Homecoming,
but what had you let him do? Was his dick bigger than mine?
The windows fogged, I breathed.
I cracked the window and cold night air slithered
down the back of my neck, down the front of my shirt,
like the winter night we had lain on the dock at the lake, you in your bra and panties, me in my underwear, and your cold numb hand rested on my stomach like a frozen fish, and you caressed up and down my body and I lay with my eyes open staring up at the Big Dipper, wishing you would stop touching me with that cold hand, erect though I was, and I waited and finally turned my head and kissed you just to feel some warmth. I had opened my eyes as we kissed, and overhead I had seen a satellite blaze across the sky, a red arc moving like a thought, and a deeper and more awful chill ran through me as I thought that surely we are being watched by unseen eyes, the way someone who has lost something peers into every dark place, hoping to find it, even when he knows it is not there for the seeing.
Healer
JW Burns

To say he was indifferent would be a delaying tactic.

By way of music, all he ever heard was the cello. Saw Saw Saw Seen. Of course he never acknowledged it was the cello, acknowledged less than shit about music or anything else. There were days when his internal clock failed to tick, nights wondering where the ending began, others when he rolled in the dust like a dog. But when the wet heat rose off the pavement he wanted to be in the middle of it—arms and legs reaching as far as these might intuit.

'Sometimes I have to wash him or the smell would be unbearable,' she wrinkled her nose, but her grin could have filled a 5 gallon bucket.

'Perception, cognition, simple grasp, hope, comfort, contemplation...we don't know how, or even if any of these things relate to him,' allowed another of those close to him.

Savant or luminary? all that was evident, plainly recordable, was the result of his touch on flesh, wood, metal, cloth or any other organic or inorganic material.

He can sit on the nubby carpet in his otherwise bare room for hours. Modified lotus position, gym shorts and a T-shirt, his head and torso bending forward, rocking backward, drooping left/right, lolling, straightening, sagging—on and on, modifications frequent, no measurable pattern to the churning.

During these periods he's verbally unreachable. No one tries anymore. At other times he seems acutely alert if usually unresponsive. When he runs, which he can do for miles at a steady pace, he can identity with gamma rays sobbing their way into black holes, feels a sharp edge of heart pierce the pericardium as this organ digs out of the rorschachan depths to emerge roiling like a comet through bristling darkness.
'Even when he's here he's not here. Somewhere else/who knows? I'm not even sure he does.' With that she pauses beside his closed door for perhaps 30 seconds, moves on.

Ever so often he finds it necessary to set fire to the inside of his stomach. In order to do a proper job of this, he must first fast for as long as 24 hours. During the fast, friction in the form of precocious rushes developed between his organs, lungs rubbing heart kneading liver stroking bladder and so on. Accelerating to quantum speeds, these interactions finally generate heat on a internally molten level. The aftermath of this state leaves him lashed to the joy of being alive; not pleasure derived from the world comprising his physical environment or the various living creatures inhabiting this world—but rather a trance-like gaiety founded in his own existence. Independent of experience, keenly observant in the moment.

'It's freaky, of course, but you get used to it.' One of those close to the healer stood before the stove stirring a large pot of chili. 'The scream tho...something else.'

Most of the generated heat comes to reside in his stomach. As the temperature rises, his torso hardens to dolomite creating a vessel worthy to hold fire, his limbs tingling until arms and legs vibrate in perfect harmony. Sweat shapes his frozen face, a radiant mask. Only a drop or two of blood drips from each eye. The single scream comes not so much from his person as from the mesonic reef his mind has forged of genes marooned beyond the reaches of their physical boundaries.

The fire makes itself known to the outside world in low thin wisps of acidic smoke, this mixed with perfumed remnants of a reputation earned and re-earned by those forces bent on straightening the passage of time. The smoke is followed by an oily red mist making gentle love to hallowed emptiness at once enthralled and forgotten, wispy scents rising like disappearing offspring.
Any release comes almost unnoticed, hinted of tangled vapor, maybe a low hiss or two. He pulls at his ears, slaps his forehead, comes to vaguely resemble the Elephant Buddha gracing a pedestal outside the Temple of Docketless Jitters on the throwaway side of the grubby river maintaining the underarm flow loosed at twilight.

They usually arrive covered in swamp; ears stuffed full of inedible algae cum regret, noses clogged, mouths engraving every spoken word with at least 20 more hidden ones. One at a time, individuals are ushered into an austere, beige room (walls, floor, ceiling, chair), invited to sit. After a few minutes he enters, walks quickly to stand in front of the one seated. Either he touches the person lightly on the head for no more than 10 seconds, or touches the object which they are holding, again for the same brief interval. Then he leaves the room, disappearing into a brisk streak of suddenly bestial cello.

Instructed on how to act beforehand, the person in the chair counts to 20, gets up and leaves the room. Within 24 hours, either the person or the object is healed—made right by being released from physical or psychological distress or otherwise repaired good as any chase can achieve; perhaps better than any durable capture. Subsequent to the healing process, some of those involved chose to become occasional members of the Meditative Physis, an assemblage of semi-sacred disciples devoted to promoting, securing and preserving the healer.

However, he needs little in the way of material/emotional support, in fact, needs nothing of the latter. The former is provided by the donations gratefully offered by those rewarded by his touch. A small staff, likewise pledged to a term of minimal income and possessions during their limited tenure of service, manage the day-to-day functioning of the healing operation. In way thus far not revealed, the healer has made it clear that the healing will immediately end should anything approaching doctrine, decree, veneration, piety, etc., be introduced into the arrangement.
Furthermore, there's no indication that any kind of power grab, corporate or underworld takeover, any shit move that would take the healing operation out of the direct control of the healer would succeed. Rumor has it that more than one grifting or strong arm attempt has ended furtively.

Apparently any trespassers full of power play dreams entering the healing compound have emerged totally mindless, refugees from consciousness, able to walk but little else. Most of this blank slate condition wore off over the next few weeks, but no one who had attempted such trespass was able to remember anything concerning their visit to the healer. According to the clatter, for these folk the mere mention of the healer would cause a brief but harrowing relapse.

Worms crawl up the outside of the healing bubble, night settling down like a hen on an egg.

'I went to the kitchen for a snack, maybe a bit bored, not sleeping. The healer was sitting on the floor, heels raised on thighs, lamp light casting a variegated pattern on his skin. He was naked.' The speaker is a former staff member now employed as a buyer for a chain of department stores.

'At first I was frightened. He didn't move or really acknowledge me even when I moved in front of him. But somehow I knew that he knew I was there. The air seemed suddenly polished, everything, frig, stove cabinets, sink having a bright sweetness.' She tossed back a thick ruby hair, touched her cheek.

'In the flesh he was nothing and priceless, thin speckled shoulders, tin-can chest, limbs like the edges of puzzle pieces...but when you saw him, well it was all clear as clear could be, your vision, your thoughts, the world--'

At that moment an appreciative grin smeared her face, eyes blinking back a series of aftershocks. 'So I pulled my shirt over my head, unzipped my shorts, let everything go...knelt down and nibbled his lips until we were kissing—he responded
slowly, firmly. When it seemed right, I sat on his lap and we made love...a long constant harvest culminating in a vivid silent sunrise.'

Perhaps you can see him now where he sits on his carpet, sips water, chews raw fish and veggies, immerses his whole self in warm water every 24 hours, dreams of that fire reducing everything to a wind-pecked pile of ash.

Perhaps not.
"Growing up, there was this kid named Craig Malvern. He was short and kind of scrawny but cute, or at least I thought so, with sandy blonde hair and a mole on his left cheek that was attractive more than it was off-putting. As long as I remember his hair was always blonde. When we were in grade school, he wore this bowl cut and that made his head look like a light bulb. It really did look like a light bulb in the right light. You should've seen it.

"Craig was fast, even as far as little kids go. We used to play tag on the playground, in the snow, too, and the teachers would watch us kids zip along the blacktop of the basketball courts, which nobody used during the winter anyhow, but no one barely used them during the fall and spring neither. They didn't even have nets! Anyway, Craig was always champion at tag. And it got to the point where kids used to challenge him just to run to the fences at the far ends of the courts and back. And you know what? Craig beat em' every time. He never fucking lost. At least, I never saw him lose. That kid could zoom. There was one time I tried to catch Craig because, believe it or not, I used to be pretty quick at one point before the alcohol and the drugs and the what not and what have you."

She looks down at her body for a moment the way someone might while cradling a recently deceased kitten and then continues.

"But I never could catch Craig." Then she said something under her breathe that Jim couldn't quite hear that sounded like, "Fast little twit," but could have been anything. And on she went: "He'd turn corners so fast you'd think he was a jack rabbit. Must've been outrunning somethin', ya know, in the spiritual sense or whatever. Kid ran with purpose, even at play. But this one time, I was within a step, a step, of Craig."

She holds up a single finger to illustrate her point and bounces it as she speaks. "I could have reached out with one hand and grabbed his shirt I was so close." The finger fell back into her lap. "It had been raining and, just like he always did right when we thought someone finally had im', Craig turned a corner sharp. Reeeal sharp. I tried to go with him and came up with nothing but an asphalt sandwich. All it took was one juke," the finger pops up again, "and that was that. I remember I was wearing these super-cute yellow rain boots that day, too, and had a matching yellow slicker my mom bought for me. Rain was splashing all up and around us as we ran on that blacktop. That was always my favorite. It slowed some of the other kids down, but it never slowed me. It never slowed Craig down, either. Never. Craig was fast and by the time he got to high school he was even faster."
"So, around his senior... junior year? Senior year, yeah. I would have been a senior, too. I know that only because of my outfit that day. Funny how you remember stuff because of little things like that, huh?" She laughed a little and then cleared her throat. "Craig had about fifteen schools trying to recruit him. I remember seeing him in the halls being led to Mr. Dorsey's office, the school principal, on more than one occasion, with he and some other suited ass hat, the school sports director guy or something probably, shaking hands and being overly polite with another ass hat who was wearing one of those ass hat nametags they made all visitors put on. Guy looked important enough. Craig always wore his letterman's jacket. He was still pretty cute for a snobby jock. I would've fucked him if he'd of asked. Those abs were worth the price of admission." She laughed to herself again. Jim didn't and disregarded sudden awareness of his moreover soft body.

"One day I'm out at the track, skipping science or math or some class I didn't give a shit about and dicking around with my friend Julie on the bleachers. We used to sit out there and smoke cigarettes. Sometimes we'd smoke joints if Julie could score the weed from her dad, or we'd just say fuck it and chalk the rest of the day up as bullshit and go back to one of our houses and read Cosmo or any other adult magazine we could get our hands on and then make fun of the other kids still stuck in class. But, we're sitting on the bleachers doing shit, watching who else but Craig Malvern rocket around the track and sucking down Virginia Slims like candy. No surprise there. I'm pretty sure he had some special permit or pass from study hall to dip out and get some extra work in with the coach during those periods. Teachers saw to it the lucky bastard always had a study hall each quarter, and I mean always. And, I guess, why not, since the kid was the Jesus Christ of running or whatever, ya know? It always just seemed to me like a lot of work. In the gym, on the track, at the rec center; he was always pushing. Work, work, work, work, work. Blah! To me it was always looking like he was being pushed by others, but he must've liked it because he really took to it and kept at it. Good for him, I say, ya know?

"Well, he's running and he's running; he must've run about fifty goddamn laps that day. I remember Julie called out, "Run, Forest, Run"; she thought she was pretty fucking funny back then. I guess it kind of was." She sneered but it failed to reach its full potential and waned almost immediately. "And then, just like that, as he's comin' around the back, ya know, like this," she motioned with her hands in a wide, sweeping arc, "he just drops. Bam! As if he's had his legs kicked out from underneath him. I don't know if it was shock or whatever that thing is called: 'Post-Dramatic Stress Disorder'? But I saw it, Jim. I saw..."

"Saw what?" Jim said delicately trying to coax Amy. He placed a hand on her back
to find her bare skin cold and ripe with fresh gooseflesh.

"I saw his left leg fold like a wet piece of paper right at the ankle." She reached out and rubbed at hers unconsciously. "It was the damndest thing. He wasn't even running hard. It looked like he might have even been jogging, but that bone, shit, that bone just didn't want anything to do with it. It tried to leap right out of him. It did, and about a pint of blood followed all over the track. Even though we were only about thirty yards away, I remember feeling as if I was watching that boy on the ground from on top of a mountain. It was so weird. We both, me and Julie, we just sort of stood there without making much noise or movements. It was Julie that finally spoke. It was only like a minute later but it felt like an hour, but she said, 'There go all his hopes and dreams,' as casually as reading the newspaper out loud."

Amy paused again. Every ounce of the memory was coming back to her, even more so than when she saw Jim's seared hand in the kitchen earlier in the day. A stray tear rolled down her cheek and paused on her chin before diving into the abyss of comforter and clothing below. Her gaze tightened and it looked like she was staring an ancient enemy in the face, seeking revenge for a wounded family member.

And then she said, "I punched that bitch right in the face."

Jim, caught off guard, let out a laugh of complete surprise that came out like, "hyuck".

"You punched her?"

"Damn right I did!" Amy's voice towered. "I knocked that piece of shit straight down the first three rows of bleachers, got up, told her to fuck herself, and then ran over to help Craig. By the time I got there, two teachers and the track coach were already looking him over. That's when I got a close up of the leg. Looked fake, like a rubber mold of a person's ankle and shin, just dangling there. And the bone, uggghhhhh." She grimaced hard and looked like she was fighting land wars in her bowels. "The bone poked right out of his ankle. I remember it looked so white against the black rubber of the track. It looked as white as the painted lines, if not whiter. Just a splintered stub.

"They eventually picked him up and threw him onto the back of one of those big, gas golf carts that took him to an ambulance out front of the school. Even though Julie was a bitch for saying that, I didn't think he'd ever run again neither. But, ya know what? It's the craziest thing. Turns out, some years later, a good-for-nothing boyfriend of mine was watching ESPN, like usual, late at night and there were these recaps from a track and field event held in Oregon or some other place. Anyway, there was Craig Malvern running for Ohio State coming around the back end of some race or another. I remember dropping everything once I realized it was him, with the sight of that bone
stabbin’ at me in my mind. He comes around that back end and runs straight through the finish line, as if that day back when had never happened. He had a smile on his face, too. Looked cute. Always did, though. The announcer guys said he helped his team place at nationals. I’m pretty sure that was the event, but it was a pretty long time ago, five or six years. Can you imagine?"

Silence. Long, interminable silence.

Finally, Jim asked, "So what was scary? Witnessing a compound fracture? I don't get it." It was apparent the story wasn’t over. The look on Amy’s face was of extreme concern. She ground her teeth and pressed a hand against her forehead and pushed her hair up and out of the way of her face like she was trying to raise it to the ceiling. When she spoke, it was obvious.

"I don't know, Jim. White-picket fence and all that bullshit? Taking the kids you haven’t had the time to pop out yet to soccer practice or ballet or, God, I don’t know, the dentist? I mean, if it wasn't for his running, Craig would have been a dime a dozen. Ya know? You just never know, ya know? One minute you’re rounding the back end of a track and the next your whole life is broken into little white fragments on an indifferent rubberized whatever."

In agreement but not necessarily satisfied Jim conceded he understood and urged her to continue with a simple, "Uh huh."

"Um," Amy said trying to regain her train of thought. Then she furrowed her eyebrows. "Hey, shut the fuck up, Jimbo, I'm trying to tell you a story. Do you want to hear it or not?"

Jim wiped the grin that had grown on his face and nodded apologetically.

Amy responded hotly with a short, "Thank you," and then continued on:

"So some years before, my mom and I get this letter in the mail from the U.S. Government. Letter says dad's been shot and killed in action. Desert Storm. I only knew a little what had been going on; mostly about a guy named “Sa-damn” and a bunch of palaces he wasn’t letting the government look into. We hadn't heard from my dad in years, not since he left my mother. But, just like that, he was gone. Dead. Out of the equation. No more hope for letters, no more hope for surprise visits. Nothing. They said a .50 caliber slug ate him. He was in a humvee convoy. My mother never even said a word. The only reason I found out was because she left the letter sitting out on the kitchen counter after reading it before falling into to a bottle in the bedroom. By the time I got home from school that day she was already sleeping in a mess of her own tears and partially regurgitated Olde English. It wasn’t unusual to see her like that, so I
didn’t think much of it at the time. But, when I read the letter, I got real worried. Mom always drank, but this time was different. It went on and on and on and on. I don’t know why she ever drank that shit anyway. Horrible. But the entire time I spent taking care of her and making sure she was OK she never even asked once how I was. For a while there I honestly thought my father’s death was going to be what did her in, not that I really understood why she got upset about it in the first place. She screwed pretty much everything with at least four legs while my father fought overseas, so why would she care that he died? Especially since they hadn’t even been together in years."

Jim nodded.

"But that was tough. It was tough to watch my mother fold in even worse than usual like that, and it was tough to wake up each morning knowing that the flame I always held to catch back up with my father was snuffed, and without asking. I didn’t know it at first, but when I saw Craig Malvern’s ankle snap in two pieces like that, I realized life, the best of things, whatever you want to call it, it could all be taken from us at any moment, even when we’re having fun. And it scared the hell out of me more than any fucking movie or spook house or dark woods ever has when I read that letter, I’ll tell you that much. That's why I punched Julie square in the eye."

"But you'd still try, right?"

"Huh?"

"Knowing that life is short and probably fleeting faster than we could ever really understand or recognize, you’d still live, you’d still try; do the things you enjoy doing regardless. That's what I I’m getting at."

"Oh, for sure. Yeah, no, what am I going to do instead? Twiddle my fucking thumbs in a plastic bubble? No, I got out there and started living, hard."

A small silence crept between the two for a moment. They could hear cars passing on the street below.

"Do you think that's why your mother stayed with your father?"

"You mean while she was cheating?"

"Yeah."

Amy's face twisted into a look of concern Jim hadn't seen before. "I think that's the only reason she stayed with my father. She knew he loved her. That was a real thing. Real, not like those dramas on TV or anything. My mother knew
it, but she couldn't change who she was. She just got to this place where she knew he
would continue to love her regardless of what she did, and just like Craig, fell into a
groove. 'If it's not broke, it probably doesn't need fixing'? I think she probably thought
that. In fact, I can almost guarantee it. And why shouldn't she feel that way. They had
worked hard to build what they had and things had been good long enough and no one
was the wiser to her little rendezvous until I stumbled in on her and one of the ladies
she served with. My mom knew better than anyone that she would eventually get
cought. And a part of me would like to think she made friends with it long before the
hammer ever actually came down, especially since she reacted to the separation like
she was buying headache pills at Walgreen’s or something. It wasn’t a thing, ya know?
No thing. And Craig probably knew better than anyone his leg could have snapped like
that at any moment. But he ran all the same."

"Did he ever complain much?"

"Who? Craig? Nah. I don't remember him ever complaining, not even when he
broke his leg. He just sat there. He even smiled if I remember. Like he knew it was
going to happen; that he was going to get back on his feet and win that event in
college even before it ever happened."

Jim laid back on his pillow and stared up lazily at the ceiling. Visions of a young
Craig Malvern, as best as he could imagine him, ran jackrabbit fast laps around an
ambiguous high school track.

“Amy,” he said hesitantly, trying his best not to sound accusatory, “You didn't turn
that burner on earlier this morning by accident or anything did you?”

Amy, almost instantly, shot back, “No way! Uh, huh. No way! No way! I was in the
fucking bedroom. You saw me!” She cleared her throat and rolled over on her side
facing away from him. “Why would I do something like that to you anyhow?”

“I don’t know,” he said apologetically. “I have no idea.”

She rolled over to face him again and, with her eyes mostly closed, softly planted a
kiss on his cheek. It felt like electricity. She stroked the spot where she kissed him with
the back of her hand and fingers and rubbed the back of his head. “Don't lose sleep
over it, Jimbo. We made it, and it’s just the two of us now. No hiding or waiting. Plus,
your hand will be good again soon.” She smiled brightly, in a way rare for her, and a
moment later was on her other side and already beginning to snore.

Jim brought his hand front and center and rotated the bandages around to get a
closer look at all sides. He had no idea why Amy would do anything even remotely close to purposefully turning a burner on to hurt him, and he knew it. The logistics of the feat alone were sketchy, at best. He thought about Craig Malvern again and then stole a quick glance over at his bedmate to see if she was really asleep. She was. He couldn't feel his hand anymore. He couldn't feel much of anything, actually. He felt sleepy, and a little high, but that was about it. He stared at the ceiling for sometime, not really thinking about anything purposefully. Just letting the day, in little snippets, blot in and out of his forethoughts. It actually took him a couple of hours to realize that somewhere near the end of Amy's story he had begun to doze off and had been in and out of sleep for awhile. He awoke sometime after midnight having to use the bathroom, as pain pills many times make their users prone to do so. The last thing he heard before completely falling under was Amy talking about possibly making a sandwich in the kitchen in a bit and a small clatter coming from the end of the hall.
Some Reality

The cars slide
sideways
along the crease
of this reality,
some reality,
the one that
carries still faces
afloat in steel bellies,
looking through
a hot, black gas,
the faces
floating along the crease

some reality;
boy on a sidewalk
standing in his place,
rooted to a wellspring
(obviously, for he is)
clapping and calling
while cars slide by
uninterrupted
some reality when
a thought, a toenail sliver skims
the shallows, one
mind passing
the shallows
mind passing
the boy; that the boy will soon
taste the shame of his vivacity made naked by the weight of all indifference
by the weight by the weight
Soon became then:
the boy’s joyful face limbs frozen, jerked by the flashing terror from knowing the massiveness that doesn’t matter which now includes
himself
all before the shared
thought had sunk
below the surface,
before the car had passed
Easter Morning, Reflections on a Young Man

I

Yesterday, in the laundromat
you slouched with your friends
earbuds, loose fat shoes unlaced
like any kid your age.

We nod, you know me.
I’m more than a familiar face,
more than just an adult –
a father of some kids you know.
I know you,
we breathe the same town.

Two weeks ago
I watched you beatbox a capella
ruling the high school stage
loving your moment with the others
making your place with them
shining at us in the dark.

A couple years ago
I watched you flail in spring sun
running track, straining
your every effort to be like the others
in their proud physical moments, unable.
Years ago
I watched you gasp and squirm
in the glue gun/ folk song Cub Scout world
unable to be like the others
shaping some kind of magical bonds
confusing you, confusing your mother
desperate for you, both of you unable.

So much so,
we each carry our destinies.

I’ve heard lately
that you are a concern
that you are being disciplined,
the infractions no longer regarded as minor
no longer being ignored
the punishments have grown more severe.

You

You see the trail, don’t you
from here to the marked cell door,
leading to those
who you know will destroy you
because you are different.

Unless,
you go fucking nuts, act so fucking off the wall
that maybe they’ll think twice before
they fuck with you.
Because that’s all you’ve got.

It scares the shit out of you, doesn’t it
knowing at your deepest core how crazy
things are going to be
now, when everyone is telling you it’s time
to be a man.

I heard last week
that you are going into the Marines,
going where the discipline is clean
dignified, glorified,
where it is hallowed in some part of you
that absorbs the myth -
the broadcast myth, the whispered
seeping myth, the hushed myth.

Hushed
You will be with those others, making death
making misery
in some place away or some place near,
and always some place within, where
you band with those others to keep silent
from the world what you have done.

Don’t become this.
The killing machine will rape your soul
as sure as the sun shines silver
this Easter morning.

II

You must find the stories
more quiet than the clamoring myths,
about the rape, the killing, about the souls
who followed the war song.
There will always be war.
There will always be souls like yours
feeding the wars.
Listen to the quiet stories,
    understand
the price of grasping the death myth,
    understand
the others who carry thousand yard stares -
    shattered souls.

Listen to your quiet heart.

Believe your quiet self
    believe your value.
    I saw you two weeks ago
beatboxing, shining in the dark.
    I know that about you.
Enrique and I are driving. Actually, I'm driving because Enrique doesn't have a car. We are trying to get to Sausalito from San Francisco to hear a two-person band he likes, a husband and wife team. Enrique, I call him Enry, like *ornery* for short, says, "The wife plays a wicked bass." The highway to the Golden Gate is backed up...19th...stop and go, so I decide to turn off to the right on Geary and try to go around, even though the other way, along the bay and the Presidio is probably backed up too. I'm nervous because going somewhere with Enry like this is a rarity. We end up driving on side streets next to expensive homes. Enry talks about sex and money as usual.

"I have a friend who travels all over with women. They pay for everything," he says.

"Do you want that?" I say.

"Yeah, I'd like to get a gig like that."

"A gigolo gig?"

We laugh, and I think he's joking, maybe not. Who knows. I wonder silently about the women who pay a man's way, about the man who accepts that. How do they feel about each other?

Enry likes the hills and the expensive houses. "I've never been in this part of the city." So now we are justified in taking this detour.

"Shortcut," I say--and laugh. This is one of my ex-husband's nicknames, earned from taking circuitous routes to daycare and to the BART. Once, I timed his route and it took at least ten minutes more than it would've if he'd just taken the more direct route. I think he really just wanted to stay out of traffic. There's something to be said for that.

We are talking about the crookedest street in San Francisco, Lombard. (How did we get on this topic?) and Enry says, "That's not the crookedest street in San Francisco. I've been down plenty of streets here that are much more crooked." Lombard zig-zags back and forth in one long treacherous block. Tourists wait in line in their cars to go down it. I burned out my brakes waiting because I had a stick shift at the time.

I don't say anything. Enry knows a lot of things I don't, and this could be true, although I doubt it. I try not to compete with him where knowing things is concerned. I've seen the elevated vocabulary in his poems. I know a few things he doesn't, but I
don't feel the need to fill him in. Still I think he's just messing with me, trying to engage me in competitive banter, but I'm not like that. I like banter, just not when it comes to facts. I have too many holes in my education.

Finally, we are at the top of Divisadero where it dips down to the bay.

"Eeeee!" I squeak and squeeze the steering wheel. I'm afraid of heights and the street to the water is a straight shot down about eight blocks of hill.

"Go for it!" Enry says, "Just gun it like Thelma and Louise!" But there's a stop sign at the end of every block, so his encouragement is silly. Inside, I don't like his reference because I am much older than Enry and I feel categorized, like the women in the movie. Enry has a thing about my being older than him. It's why he won't go anywhere with me.

At the bottom of the hill, he says, "There are some pretty seedy motels in this area. You just came this way so we could stay in one," which is weird because we just had sex at his place.

I start to joke, "Yeah, I want to stay in a motel that has a tube of leftover lube in the bedside drawer and a bed that vibrates."

"I stayed in one once that had a huge red stain on the mattress, like someone had been shot and killed there." he says.

I tell Enry how my friend Mario, who died suddenly last year from an asthma attack, once texted me and asked me to stay in a Motel 6 in the city with him.

"Did you?" he asks.

"No, I told you. I never did with him."

"Oh, yeah, your greatest regret. Do you wish you had now?"

"No," I say. "That was never going to happen. It just wasn't going to. And that's not my greatest regret. Not even close."

"What is?" he asks.

"Too many," I say.

My mind flashes: My first husband begging me, begging me not to leave him. "Please stay. Don't go. Just don't go."

My second husband talking to me in the garden at the end of the driveway, after his disappearance for three days, where I asked him, "What do you think we should do?"
My older daughter and I, thought he had gone and killed himself. I don't know how she knew that he might've been suicidal. We tried calling the cops to look for his car, but he finally showed up.

"Separate," he answered.

A week before we separated was my birthday. We had a huge party at our house. Two girlfriends of mine came over and kept bugging me to show them his paintings in the studio shed, but he wasn't painting. He wasn't doing anything anymore, just working. At the end of the evening, one of the girlfriends came over and said, "You and your husband are the two most in-love married couple I've ever seen. You still hold hands. You still hug each other. It's unbelievable."

Enrique and I finally pull up in the line and make it onto the bridge. I am silent. The bridge is awash in the lightest fog, but it's a super-warm Sunday.

I tell Enry, "There's a sign on the bridge that says: *People who jump from this bridge may suffer serious bodily injury or die,*" and he laughs.

But then he remembers what I told him one morning while we were in bed, and he says, "Did you think he was going to jump from the bridge?"

And I say, "Yes."

We talk about the documentary some guy made about suicides on the bridge, but as we get across, I change the subject.

"Is this bar we're going to the one where you met the tent girl?" I say.

But he says, "No."

Enry told me about a weird chick he met in Sausalito one Sunday who he thought had fabricated a whole story about owning a tent company...a Fortune 500 yurt company. He said she told him she worked for the *Harry Potter* movies in New Zealand and had made a bunch of money there, and that she had used the money to come to the U.S. and form this successful tent company...yurt company. He didn't go home with her. He thought she was lying. He said she looked disheveled. Enry is always meeting some weird chick and then tells me about her. It's a hang-up he has--wanting to impress me with how many women flirt with him or want him. The thing about that situation is when he got home, he looked her up and she had been telling him the truth.

When he told me about it, I laughed and said, "You screwed up! You could've been with the tent lady right now."
It's nice to go listen to music with a man and joke about sex. If I'd been able to do this with a man before now, or if they'd a been able to joke with me, things might've been different. If we'd even talked about sex, things might've been different.

We drive down the long curvy street into the small bayside city. I don't care for this town very much, too monied, too chi-chi touristy. I've never felt like I belong in this kind of environment.

At the No-Name bar, we sit and listen to the couple playing Tears for Fears, "Everybody Wants to Rule the World." That's a throwback to the 80's for me...a drive to the rodeo in Montana, a case of champagne. Enry jokes about how cute the waitress is, and do I want a threesome with her? or maybe he's not messing with me.

I remind him that we already talked about this. "Two men and me, not two women and you." Enry tells me that can be arranged. I tolerate these stupid conversations. I've heard this same conversation from a different man, a younger man, too, and I still don't know if either one of them was serious. If Enry knew what a cliche his conversation was, he might stop saying the same things over and over again. He's a poet. He should know better.

He's always asking me if I ever want to get married again. Let's be clear. This conversation is always about Enry's fear that I want him to marry me or even just be in a real relationship with him.

I always tell him no, I never want to get married again. I told that to Mario. I meant it.

An older man with an all-white, slightly shaggy, beachy look to him walks by. Oversized white, short-sleeved linen shirt, oversized to hide the pot of the older man belly. He looks like a lot of the guys on the dating website I try to visit once in a while.

That's my future husband," I say.

Enrique laughs and then comes the question again, "Do you think you'll ever get married again?"

But then in all seriousness, I say, "No, I am never getting married again."

"Never?" Enry says. He sounds like he doesn't believe me.

"No," I say. "Not unless he's loaded to the gills and willing to sign it all over to me," I joke.

"Then I might consider it."

Enry doesn't have any money.
"That guy is a tourist," I say.

"No," he says. "I think he's a regular here," which tells me Enrique is a regular here.

I look at the couple playing on the stage. The husband is playing the guitar, stepping on an acoustic pedal from time to time, and the wife is fingerling the bass in such a way that I can't stop watching her—she's so intent and so good, her fingers move quickly and aptly. I wonder how they got to be such a couple, a husband and wife who both play instruments, who play together, work together. They don't smile while they work or even look at each other, but I can feel this vibe between them that they have done this many times, that they are secure together. I think about them rehearsing together in their house, Maybe they have a studio. Enry keeps jumping up between songs and asking them to play songs he knows they know or thinks they know.

The husband says to him, "After this one." Or he smiles indulgently. Enrique is a music freak in the best way possible. He's always recommending music for me to listen to. I remember how my first husband listened to music—back then, albums—all the time and had his own tastes. Very little room for my own. But his tastes developed mine and I'm grateful for that now. I'm able to say yes, I like them, or I know who they are, whenever Enry talks about some band. Besides, who doesn't know who Van Halen is—maybe some twenty-five-year old.

I think about another couple I know, a husband-and-wife team. They are both writers. The wife is a photographer, and now the husband is taking photographs, too. They made a film together about a major battle in the Vietnam War, and they travel around the country promoting it together. Some pretty meaningful stuff. They go to the Cowboy Poet convention together. They get along so well. I never see them irritated with each other. There's all this respect and pride.

I wonder and wish I knew how to find someone who would be like that with me. Someone who likes to write and talk...to joke around with, listen to music with, go hear bands with. To go out with.

Enry pops up one more time between sets to talk to the husband about the music, so I take a picture of him with my cell phone while his back is turned to me. Then the couple starts playing again and Enry sits down.
They Came like Flies to Honey

How a word sticks
said in a trance of childhood
& draws an echo
so the word is a cave
& in it muffled cries of
prisoners tormented by
their own sound.

The honeyed word was _lekfanz_.
My mother when irked by her narrow
cell said _lekfanz_ on toast.
_Lekfanz_ stuck, an evil meal,
one the enemy would eat.
Never would I speak it.

One day I asked the _rebbe_ who
made a face to break a commandment.
How this sweet man spoke
stung my young propriety.
"Shit," he said. "It means
shit."

The word still called
but no innocence rang out.
Sweet, it now repelled,
offended by drawing the will
beyond its good intent. Best
forget a source of muffled
cries & enjoy simpler pleasures.

Ancient memories may not be
forgotten. Years later wise Sol
told me why. A mystery word
has plagued me, I said & asked.
"_Lekfanz_," & he made a vinegar face,
"means jam." Silence & a let down.
Then, "They spread white bread thick with raspberry jam. Tables set out by the railway station. Like flies to honey. No Jew starving could resist. Trains took them away. Licking lekfanz from shriveled fingers."
Ignatia is for grief

By a river where curbstones are higher, in narrow canyons, under a steel bridge: to wait. Morning lifts dew from cobble, from paint flakes on brick, from crumbling smokestacks, a dog let out from night. For what? Sound of a planer, of leather stitching, of boxes crushed, of lids from coffee cups pried open & thrown lightly to the gutter. The swirl of what is not, an unseen elevator, words behind a closed window, muttering traffic logs a new inch, a new milestone, the headlines: all retracts a weight uneven on the heel, balanced on an iron edge, patient as a body’s life slowly drops like a breath of tanner's brew from the loft, descends, descends from a boot strap held aloft.
Messenger's Song

Ants swarm the hill &
behind a world scorched, pitted.
We are being remade
as a wind drones over strand &
earth is turned faceless like the sea.
Can we hear cries from a black
mountain cell where men's lives are
extracted, drop by drop, by instruments
of pain? Laurel & ash wither
by the cave. We must not mend other things
while reed grows brittle &
voice cracks, least of all the
safety of words--music from victims'
throes made pleasing to the ear.
An ingenious idol Tiberius
ordered, burnished gold, sings
while a body is roasted, screaming
inside. We must tear apart that
beauty & hear within the padded cell
a muffled tread, fall of
rubber billyclub, gnashing
of teeth, a death sigh as
the soul escapes. Under our feet
sand turns black. We must
seek out the tormentor--ourselves--
in acrid night while we
can lift an arm to kill.
Moonlighting as a taxi driver in his hometown, Carlos drove his own minivan on the graveyard shift, working to pay off loans he accumulated as a mature student. Carlos also occasionally wrote poetry, published in literary magazines, and toured with a local rock band, but his life so far disappointed him on nights like these. Still, he couldn’t say he regretted his friendship with Raven, but he thought the fact they headed in separate directions allowed her to flourish. Her cousin agreed, although he was not certain she, a social worker, who enjoyed drinking, could be considered a reliable source. Years ago, when Raven graduated from nursing college, he trained in journalism at a community college, but he later lost his job as photojournalist after the newspaper was bought by a competitor, which closed the weekly as a money-losing proposition. Carlos abandoned civic-mindedness, community spirit, and local journalism forever after.

With news of the election of Donald Trump as President on the dash radio, Carlos drove Raven from the Beaverbrook Municipal Airport to her parents’ home, the same house Carlos visited when he was her high school boyfriend. Now, years later, he did not think she even recognized him, although she was not Raven, tall, fetching high school senior, or even Nurse Northcliff anymore. As a cabdriver, he heard she became a medical doctor, but he was not surprised. He always admired her intelligence and assertive personality as well as her looks, and believed she possessed the qualities to succeed. He could never understand, though, why she was so anxious to lose her virginity.

That summer night back in 1983, as Raven tuned the radio to the local radio station, which played The Police’s “Every Breath You Take,” her mother gave her a longwinded speech about attending nursing college. As a native, Mrs. Northcliff said, Raven had an obligation to attend nursing college and make a name for herself. But Raven did not want to attend college because her mother wanted her to become a nurse. Raven’s mother, who worked as an Oji-Cree translator at the federal government hospital for indigenous peoples from reserves up north and living in the town of Beaverbrook, wanted her daughter to become the first in the family to obtain a college degree and become a member of a white man’s profession.

“Why should I care to enter a white man’s profession? Nursing isn’t a man’s job, anyway.”

Raven was not interested in arguing with her mother about college and race. Still, Raven's high school teachers informed her mother her daughter was a natural, who
succeeded effortlessly, always at the top of her class. Raven had the highest grades of any student in her Queen Elizabeth District High School classes, including chemistry, biology, and physics, so, her mother insisted, she’d waste her life by not attending college. Nursing paid good wages and she could take her skills across the country and find work anywhere. Raven told her mother she was pushy and getting way ahead of herself, but Roberta handed her the college application form in the brown envelope. Settling the matter in her own mind, Roberta wrote a check for the application fees, which she inserted into the manila envelope.

Raven stared at the forms and business envelope with a huge frown and grimace on her face, which she propped up with an upraised arm and knuckles. Her mother slapped her on the cheek and slammed the forms on her bedroom desktop. She was grounded! Mrs. Northcliff warned her daughter she couldn’t leave the house until she completed the college application, not even visit her cousin. Meanwhile, Raven was ready to burn secretly the papers in the woodstove or fireplace, or even the incinerator in the backyard.

Then Mrs. Northcliff, opening a bottle of beer, stepped through the sliding doors outside to the patio to seethe, smoke, and drink beside the propane barbecue and lawn furniture. Raven decided to head to Sacred Heart School to meet Carlos. She escaped through the back door and walked along the path that encircled the baseball diamond. Then she strode past the federal government hospital, which served indigenous peoples from reserves up north and in the town. The wind blew through her long dark hair and her aquiline face, which, along with her height, slightly over six feet, Carlos considered her most attractive traits.

Raven strolled down Third Avenue and then Front Street, checking her pocket to ensure she carried the condom, part of a collection she managed to build. Carlos discovered the collection when she invited him to her bedroom, where he discovered the condoms in a Rolling Stones boxed set. He figured she meant for him to make the discovery, since she knew he enjoyed the Rolling Stones. She insisted on showing him her collection of cassette tapes and vinyl albums, inherited from her parents.

Walking in front of the Beaverbrook Hotel, she noticed the trunk of the taxi was open and beer cases stored in the trunk. Fresh from a weekend trip for a rock concert in Winnipeg, the cabdriver, reading the novelization of the *Star Wars* movie, bought from the newsstand in the train station, resting the paperback on the padded steering wheel.

“Your trunk is open,” Raven said to the cabdriver, whom she recognized and whom she thought of as her petite cowboy.

“Did you want one?” Assuming he spoke about beer, she shook her head. Merely nodding beneath his cowboy hat, he warned, “You dropped something.”

Looking down at the sidewalk, Raven saw the packaged condom fell out of her pocket when she motioned backwards to his trunk of beer. Hoping he hadn’t noticed the condom, she continued to walk along Front Street to the playground of her former
Catholic grade school. She stopped at a convenience store near the school grounds and bought an ice cream sandwich and a can of Coke.

As she ate the ice cream sandwich and drank the cola, she daydreamed on the swings. She dreamt of Carlos’ embrace and of him inside her, but he was not a physically intimate or touchy-feely guy. If Raven couldn't persuade him to be her lover, she warned, she might possibly do something desperate. She thought her petite cowboy, the cabdriver, who dressed in a cowboy hat, boots, a leather jacket, a denim jacket and pants, who looked like a downsized version of the Marlboro Man, might be a candidate. She suspected there was something more than kindness motivating him to offer her a free ride. Years later, Carlos learned the RCMP came to their Northwestern Ontario hometown and arrested him to face an outstanding charge of murder in Quebec.

That night, Raven also longed for the pint of rum, which she concealed along with a condom, in one of the numerous pockets of Carlos’ black leather jacket. Raven smoked a cigarette, which her mother, whom she wished would not be so angry, expressly forbade in the house, despite the fact she smoked incessantly inside and outside of the house. Raven did not care what her mother complained about; she listened to her complaints and commands less as she matured. The house was always filled with anger and disagreements, which was why she spent so much time away from home. Still, everyone was amazed at how well she did in school, since she hardly studied. And Carlos certainly considered Raven smarter, but, saying he could do better, she complained he was bookish, and a failure in high school. She often argued with Carlos, telling him she resented him rationalizing his derelictions of duty and was tired of him disappointing friends and teachers.

The last night he spent with Raven she found him on the grounds of Catholic elementary school, which neither attended for five years, sitting on the swings of their, perusing a book. Raven was frustrated and annoyed he was constantly reading, or writing, especially since she believed he read everything but his school texts, and wrote anything but his school assignments. She couldn’t understand why he was such a rebel. Now he was reading a small paperback book, a volume of Philip Larkin poems, which he bought from Lakehead University bookstore during a high school trip to tour the campus and meet academic recruiters.

Carlos admired Raven’s shaggy dark hair, the pleasing curves and shapes of her hips and thighs, her strong legs and arms, and the somewhat masculine broadness and squareness of her shoulders, but he considered her height even more appealing: she was six feet tall. But she didn’t appreciate him expressing his admiration in poetry; his lyricism made her self-conscious and a little nauseous. Indeed, Carlos thought Raven could easily pass for a statuesque model who ferried the envelopes and awards at glamorous television award banquets. Back then Carlos was dismissive of television, as he went to his bedroom to read a book and type out a poem from his handwriting on napkins.
While he was content to fantasize about Raven, Carlos realized she desired physical passion, but he knew sex could be complicated. He knew from his experience with Raven’s cousin and her friend sex was messy, physically demanding, and potentially disappointing. At that time, he decided he could only be a reluctant party to sex, and he didn’t want to risk sexually transmitted diseases, especially with AIDS and HIV infection starting to make countless headlines.

Slouched, smoking a cigarette, hacking, deriving consolation from poetry, struggling to overcome his facial tics, he nervously asked her why she visited the playground. "Well, we were supposed to meet here, weren’t we? I mean, you keep hanging out in the schoolyard."

"I come to read here because I got kicked out of Lee's Cafes. I guess I had too many refills and didn’t order enough Chinese food. Daisy complained the restaurant isn’t a reading room, and the library in this town is usually closed, especially during the summer."

"Don't you have anything better to do, like work at a summer job?"

"If you’re father hired me, I’d have a job at the hospital. Your mother could get you a job at the Zone hospital. Why don’t you have a summer job?"

"She doesn’t do the hiring. Can’t you find a job with your father at the high school?"

"I don’t want to work as a janitor or cleaner or with my father, period."

Carlos asked if she felt like taking a chance, climbing up to the roof of the high school. Standing behind him on the swing, she touched him, stroked his arms, massaging his back. He realized she longed for intimacy, but he grew angry and dropped the paperback in the rut of the swing.

"Listen, Raven, I know you’re anxious to lose your virginity—"

"You don’t have to raise your voice and talk about it in public."

"This isn’t the public; it’s our Catholic schoolyard, and it’s empty during the summer."

"But I don’t want you talking that way."

"That’s why I don’t want to have sex with you; you don’t want to talk. I don’t want to be accused of taking advantage of you or using you afterwards."

"But you’re not using me. We like each other, and you don’t want to make love because I’m native."

"That’s bull. We don’t need to do the double backed beast if we like each other."

"So is this about your small penis?"

"Come up with me on the roof and maybe we’ll do the beast with two backs."

Carlos told her they could listen to his The Rolling Stones Tattoo You cassette tape on the Sony Walkman, and discuss avant-garde poetry, but this time, although he sometimes felt nervous and self-conscious around her, he neither stuttered, stammered, or spoke swiftly.

"To read—what? You mean you have to climb all the way to the high school roof to talk mumbo jumbo?"
Shrugging his shoulders, he thought the soft sell approach wasn’t going to succeed. “Maybe we can do the beast with two backs.”

Knowing she liked to drink occasionally, he described the bottles of port he stashed on the high school roof. He borrowed several bottles of port and madeira from his parents’ liquor cabinet because no guests drank the liquor, and they were his two favourite alcoholic beverages. Initially hesitant, she decided to accompany him to the grounds of the high school. They hiked along the roads at the edge of town to their high school, seeking the obscure, less travelled route because they didn’t want to be seen together to avoid a hiss fit from her parents. They climbed up the ledges of the teachers’ staff room window. When he heaved himself onto the lower roof, he almost fell, head first into a pile of bricks. Meanwhile, Raven simply climbed a ladder she discovered lying besides some dismantled scaffolding. Afraid of the police and neighbours, they scurried through the blackness across the puddles, which had accumulated on the tarry surface, until he stumbled into a man asleep on the roof. He could smell liquor emanating from the man and then noticed the empty bottle of port lying alongside the man. Somehow he had found his stash. He ducked, headed back, and said flatly, "Guess what. We're lost. Ah, let's just wait a sec while I figure out where we are."

"You make me climb a roof to read poetry?"

Carlos mumbled, "Listen, I’m not dragging you anyplace; I'm not forcing you to do anything against your will, either. You want to leave, take off. This place is a nice romantic setting where we can sip some port and read interesting poetry, OK? Remember: I've got that stash of wine here somewhere."

"You telling the truth?"

"I'd never lie to you."

"That might make it worthwhile."

Then, however, with annoyance creeping into his voice, Carlos said, "By the way, what was this about the condoms you put in my jacket pocket. Did you want my mother to catch me? Are you trying to give me ideas?"

“It’s protection,” she replied, "but I guess you wouldn’t understand."

Carlos lifted the lubricated condom in a silver foil wrapper from yet another of his jacket’s pockets. Suddenly, through the lake of humid darkness, they were caught in the flashing of the white and red lights, flashing and twirling from the police cruiser roof. They thought the police spotted them on the roof, and the cruiser slowly drove through the parking lot and down the rutted road towards the dilapidated portables and decaying buildings that the regional school board called a high school. But the police pursued a pair of youth, who waved sparklers and hurtled firecrackers.

"Carlos,” Raven exclaimed excitedly, "it's the cops!"

Carlos crouched down and led her hurriedly along the roof. “It’s safer up here.”

“It’s dark up here, you blockhead.”

Blockhead: the last word Carlos heard before he tripped over a cable and a rusted
eavestrough. He catapulted off the lower roof and crashed to the lawn of the courtyard, falling like a bird struck by a shotgun blast onto the ground and grass of the courtyard fourteen feet below. Stunned, his nose bleeding, he felt as if he broke his right leg, as he lay on his back. Raven couldn’t see him through the darkness. Finally, she reached the edge of the roof and spotted him on the ground of the courtyard. Unaware of the nature of his injuries, sobbing, she pleaded: "Carlos, it looks like the cops are coming; so, come on, hurry, please, get up."

"I’m sorry, Raven, but I can’t move."
"What do you mean, you can’t move?"
"I’ve broken my leg, I think," he said. "Honestly, I feel like I must be a quadriplegic or a paraplegic now."
"Just like that you're a cripple?"
"What happens when you dive and hit a rock? You think there’s a delayed response?"
"Oh, you're such a jerk," she groaned, clenching her brow through her long thick black hair, shaking her head. For once, she didn't seem worried or self-conscious about mussing and tousling her carefully conditioned and groomed hair. "I'm in huge trouble now. My parents will ground me for the rest of my life. No, my parents will murder me when they find out I snuck up onto the high school roof to fool around with you."

"You’re what—seventeen? eighteen years old?—you’re capable of making your own decisions. And, yeah, me of all people: low class trash like me."
"No, I’m already eighteen years old. And I didn’t mean it that way," she protested. Seated on the edge of the roof, she stretched and sighed. "Well," she demanded, "what do we do now, wise guy, read poetry? What happens when your rescuers find the pot and port? What are you going to tell them?"

Wishing he hadn't lent her jacket when she complained the night chill was causing her to shiver, he groaned, "Okay, you threw my jacket on the roof."
"You want me to take the blame?"
"No, I’m not asking you to take the blame. And don't worry about the port; it’s stashed away, OK? At least it should be.”
"I’m not worried about dope and wine because I didn’t even see any."
"I’m concerned about the contraband you’re carrying in my jacket you’re wearing. For a start, toss me down the joint; once the cops, get a hold of me, I bet they're going to search me."
"A rubber is contraband? I thought its safe sex."
"Who said anything about a rubber? Face it, Raven, you’re obsessed with losing your virginity, when you’re only seventeen and you’ve plenty of time."
"I actually turned eighteen recently."
"And you’re still a virgin. That’s a real calamity."
"Can you just shut up?"
“Yes, we have a huge audience on the rooftop, including a drunk sleeping beside the vents. And I’m sorry, but I realized booze was the only way to get you here, and I’m sorry I catered to that need.”

“You’re voice is grating on me.”

“Anyway, I want to warn you: sex will be the biggest disappointment and letdown of your life. I think you’ll see the pattern repeated over and over again.”

“How do you know?”

“I’ve limited experience, which has already taught me sex is better in literature and film, or even pornography.”

“Will you please shut up?”

“And when you’re a guy, you need to worry about being accused of taking advantage of a girl.”

“What do you know about sex? Who have you slept with?”

Carlos didn’t want to reveal he slept with her cousin and her cousin’s friend and ended up regretting every minute of the impulsive fling. He had been reading Charles Dickens’ A Tale of Two Cities at Lee’s Cafe downtown on Front Street, studying, cramming late at night, after midnight, into the early morning hours of Friday for his Grade Twelve high school English exam in several hours. As he walked home after midnight, Raven’s cousin and friend drove down Front Street. The young women, one a nurse, one a social worker, asked him if he wanted a ride. He accepted the offer of the ride home, believing it would be rude to decline since they were neighbours, with Raven’s cousin living in a duplex down the street from his parents’ house. When they arrived at the duplex the pair rented, they insisted he join them inside. They were both quite attractive. He nervously thumbed A Tale of Two Cities, which he found a compulsively good read, and went inside their apartment, although he thought he should get some sleep before his midterm examination at midmorning. They poured him some whiskey and ginger ale, kissed him, and asked him if he wanted some oral pleasure or manual stimulation. By the time he left the duplex at four am, he felt angry at himself, for succumbing to temptation, for losing his virginity in a casual sexual encounter, a melange el trois, no less, for failing to satisfy them, since he became flaccid and impotent as he considered deadlines. They were quite eager and demanding, and, as they urged him on, he was so anxious he became impotent.

He proceeded with his lecture from the vantage point on the roof where he lay incapacitated: “There’s sexually transmitted disease, syphilis, gonorrhea, and then there’s herpes, which you will never get rid of, which will mess with you for life.”

“You’re just neurotic and paranoid. For somebody who claims he broke his leg, you sure are talkative.”

“OK. Can you just toss me down the joint in my pocket, unless you’ve already smoked it.”

“You know I don’t care for weed; I now know that’s all you care about. No wonder you’re always paranoid about cops catching you.”
"We are trespassing and right now I can’t move."
"You idiot, why did you bring me up on the roof anyway?"
"Ms. Simm gave me a month’s worth of detention. I actually hoped if we had a rooftop retreat you could persuade me not to drop out of grade twelve English so I could get my credits and graduate."
"You got detentions because you have an attitude problem and you never attend class."
"That’s because Ms. Simm doesn’t like me."
"That’s because you don’t like Ms. Simm. You’ve got some kind of personality conflict with her."
Unable to summon the energy to swat or slap a mosquito that bit him and sucked blood from his veins until its tiny form bloated a translucent red, Carlos lay stunned on the ground of the courtyard. He sensed his right leg was broken; he wasn’t certain whether he could summon the strength and energy and suffer the pain to rescue himself. He would have to find the resolution to walk, since it looked as if Raven wasn’t getting a police or ambulance to help. He tried joking that, unless she wanted to see him arrested on drug possession charges, she better quiet down and let him destroy the evidence, but he didn’t think she appreciated his sense of humor.
"Did you ever think that you worry too much?"
"I don’t worry enough: looks like I’m in danger of not graduating and I don’t care."
"I can’t believe you; I should just leave."
"I don’t know why you just haven’t left already."
"And leave you here when you say you’ve got a broken leg?"
"Just hand me down the joint, please. It should be in one of the top right hand pockets of my jacket."
Raven found the condom while she searched his zippered, buckled leather jacket for the joint. Uncertain when she would need it, she decided to keep the prophylactic. She cursed him beneath her breath, while she searched through the multitude of pockets that riddled and zigzagged his worn, leather jacket. Finally, she found the joint. After securely inserting the condom into her wallet, she stepped around the roof’s edge until, when she leaned over, she hovered as closely as she could above him. Tempted to drop a loose brick on him, she instead tossed the joint down on him in a near perfect pitch. Having rerolled and tightened both twisted ends of the messy joint, he ignited the marijuana with his lighter. He dragged on the handmade cigarette and contemplated a fresh approach. Stoned, he began to feel slightly paranoid and delusional. He called up to Raven, begging she come down to help him, but she went mute and refused to help, especially when he started talking about pregnancy and unwanted babies. She thought he missed the whole point of the condom. By the few flood lights mounted on the roof, he watched her wipe the tears in her eyes, and if it wasn't for the buzz he felt, he might have cared, but he felt
passive. He couldn’t believe she actually believed in romance with him; actually, he figured, she probably desired the raw physicality and sensation of sex more.

"What are we supposed to do now? Fly a helicopter to hoist you out of the courtyard? Huh?" Raven asked.

"Can’t you come down to help me," Carlos moaned. “Or do you want to call my parents so they can get me out of this hole."

"Wonderful." Raven backed away from the inner edge of the roof that bordered the courtyard. "Give me all the dirty work."

"This excruciating pain is just killing me."

Raven headed towards the ladder, which she left leaning against the wall.

Verging on panic, Carlos gasped, gazing at the stars. “I’m high: I’m soaring right there alongside the space shuttle. I think I’m in shock from this broken leg. I think I’ve finally found a cure for my insomnia."

“Your insomnia. You’re just a nighthawk, but you’re always prattling on about your insomnia.”

“Wait a second,” he implored, “Hand me down that literature anthology.”

Ignoring his pain, Raven asked, "You want this silly book of poems now?"

"I need something to console me—to ease the pain while I'm lying here on the hard, cold, dewy ground, dying."

Unzipping compartments of his weathered leather jacket, Raven fumbled through his pockets, littered with candy bars, fishing tackle, cassette tapes, chewing gum, rolling papers, matches, cigarettes. She called him every derogatory name she could think, as she searched through the darkness for the tattered paperback book.

"Hurry. Just get me that anthology," Carlos said. He felt as if he would lose consciousness, possibly go into shock, any minute soon. She found the poetry volume and drilled the slim book, pitching it down, so it smashed his face, causing his nose to bleed more. "Stay where you are, please, don't leave; I want you to hear part of this poem by Philip Larkin."

Having cleared his throat, he loudly recited, enunciating with a CBC radio announcer’s diction Philip Larkin’s poem, but she was not amused or appreciative of Larkin’s poetic art, particularly the lines about sexual intercourse. Groaning, he winced and gasped as he felt pain when he laughed. Later, Raven didn’t bother to visit him in the hospital, but heard he was lucky he didn’t die because the fracture in his femur could have ruptured his femoral artery. "So, what do you think about that? They're probably Larkin’s most famous lines."

"It's trashy, and you ought to be ashamed of yourself; you're pathetic."

"Raven, wait, keep an open mind; here's what else he has to say. It's not only profound but I think you'll like it."

"I used to think you were a half-decent guy, but after this crazy adventure I don't know. Now I see you for what you really are."

“What am I?"

“A loser.”
“Because I read poems?”
“You’re definitely sexist.”
“Because I want to be with you?”
“I want to be with you, but you want to read poetry.”
“Because I want to share my love of poetry?”
“I don’t want to argue right now, especially with you.”
“Neither do I.”
“You pushed me past the limit of my tolerance, and I’m going home.”

Raven took his wallet before she thoroughly shook his jacket, haphazardly scattering the contents of his pockets around the roof abutting the courtyard. Then she threw his leather jacket into the courtyard, a full four meters whence he, paralyzed, stoned, surrendered to injury. He then paused reading the Philips Larkin volume of poetry to listen, but he only heard her footsteps on rooftop cinders followed by a muffled voice. He thought he heard her complaining and sobbing, but soon the sounds receded and faded into the distance of the night, which turned chilly.

“Just don’t let me die here, eh, Raven?” Lying in severe pain and shock, Carlos stared at the clear nighttime summertime sky for several meditative minutes. He felt mild elation, cannabis induced euphoria, and decided to make an effort to leave. He carefully stood up on his feet, but the pain in his right leg was excruciating. He tried to find a comfortable position sitting down, brushed the soil stains from his shirt sleeves and elbows, swept the grass off his pants, and wiped the blood from his nose with his t-shirt. Worried about cops on the prowl, he limped through the courtyard and pulled the door handle to the high school. Since his father was a caretaker at the high school, he was surprised when the door opened. Sometimes, he accompanied his father on patrols during the weekend, and a task his father gave him was to check for unlocked doors. He went from classroom to classroom and teachers’ offices, checking to ensure doors were locked. Limping down the hallway, he dragged himself out of the high school building through the nearest exit. He hobbled along the road to his parents’ house, down Second Avenue from the high school. When he arrived at home, he felt incredulous he managed to limp home in excruciating pain. He lost consciousness on the couch from shock, and his parents called the ambulance, when they saw his thigh was swollen.

Raven headed straight home, seething, directing her smoldering anger at Carlos for mocking her, making her feel evil person because she felt desire and longing. Meanwhile, something about the whole episode made her realize she needed to leave her hometown of Beaverbrook and abandon people like Carlos. As her anger surged and abated, she thought Carlos was a good fellow with admirable goals and intentions, even though she was convinced becoming a poet was not an ideal career goal for someone who would never move from Beaverbrook or succeed outside his hometown. She believed he would be lucky to become a conductor or locomotive engineer with the railroad or a forest fire fighter or a mill worker or machinist, if the sawmill or the
pulp and paper mill ever reopened. He was also Portuguese, and her parents gave her the impression they would rather she hung around people who were more white or less brown-skinned. If she hung around with her own kind, her parents preferred these friends came from indigenous families who avoided drugs and alcohol and were more successful and comfortable financially. The more she thought about his words about sex the more she realized he was probably right. Besides, sex with someone who did not brush his teeth, shower, or shave regularly was probably not the best idea and even a compromise.

When Raven arrived home later that night, she headed straight to the desk in her bedroom. She sat at her hardwood desk, pulled out her ballpoint pen, and removed the university application from the legal size brown envelope. She double-checked to ensure she filled out the application properly. In a personal and background information section she was asked the most challenging question: why she wanted to be a nurse. Raven wrote quickly, brainstorming: She wanted to be involved in the caring professions; she needed to have purpose and meaning in life, which meant helping her fellow human being in time of crisis and illness. She also wished to join a profession people normally didn’t associate with indigenous peoples. She wanted to be the first college graduate and nurse in the family.

Having answered the questions with what she considered the right degree of commitment, earnestness, and passion, she completed the application at one o’clock in the morning. Licking the envelope, she noticed her mother already put on a postage stamp. Worried her mother would catch her, she crept from the house, walking the streets past midnight. Raven walked towards the post office, past the twenty-four convenience store, gas bar, hotel, stores, and offices on Front Street. Then she walked past the taxi stand, where the cabdriver, the petite cowboy, frequently offered her a ride, free, no charges—he was always quick to add. Raven dropped the envelope into the post office letterbox, while a police cruiser drove past. The officer gazed at her hard, before she ducked back down the alleyway, for the shortcut across town. She hurried home, striding quickly along the dirt back lane, and she even jogged. While she passed the back of the movie theatre and pharmacy on the alleyway, she saw headlights and worried about the police stopping her. The cabdriver idled his taxi, opened the passenger window, and through the dark beneath the car interior light asked her if she wanted a ride. She already made one crucial decision about her life. She knew subconsciously this would be another, and so she decided to accept the ride from the petite cowboy.

“Do you want to go to the sandpit?”

She was a talkative person, but now, bordering on panic, she decided words were not the appropriate response. “Yes.”

The taxi-driver drove his cab along the eastern highway out of town, gravel, hardtop, for a few kilometres. Then he turned the taxicab onto a gravel road, which led to a sandpit. To her surprise, he drove through the sandpit, which she had visited
several times before during summer night pit parties, where the high school students built a bonfire, played loud music, drank beer and smoked grass. He drove uphill to another logging road, covered with tall grass and stopped the taxi at the creek that washed out the road. Francis turned his head.

“Do you want to?”

The cabdriver was such a tiny guy, a little more than five feet in height while Raven was six feet tall. Francis bore the image of a modern cowboy, wearing the denim, blue jean jacket and pants, leather vest, and a cowboy hat and boots, although he had long, thick curly hair. Raven actually considered him handsome but smallish and from her fleeting acquaintance of him considered him her petite cowboy. “Was that a yes?” He glanced at her from the driver’s seat, gazing at the rear view mirror and turning, and she nodded her head. “Was that a yes?” he demanded louder, through the dark car interior, the murmuring car radio, tuned to CBC am radio, and the artificial pine scent. “For Christ’s sake, yes!”

“Good.”

The cabbie came out of the driver’s seat and opened the back door. Taking off his jean jacket and his denim shirt and unbuckling his pants, he complained about the heat and humidity, even during the night. She noticed sweat and body odour emanated from his direction, as she tugged down her jeans, pulled off her t–shirt, and handed him the condom. He looked at the new condom, which she took from Carlos. He looked at her as if she was a police officer who had handed him a speeding ticket and scowled. He tossed the foil wrapped condom into the bushes at the side of the road. He looked fiercely into her eyes and then slammed the passenger drove. He hopped into the driver’s seat and sped home. Francis knew exactly where she lived, but he drove past her house on the crescent off First Avenue. Instead, he dropped her off at the spectators’ stands and dugouts alongside the baseball diamond, across the street from the curling club and the golf course, and ordered her to head straight home. “A young woman like you shouldn’t be on the street this late at night. Go home.”

She resented receiving orders from him and snarled. She felt disgusted and ashamed of herself, anxious more than ever to leave Beaverbrook, attending college, starting a new life anywhere but her hometown. She slowly strolled home, to her parents’ house at the end of the crescent, and the night was calm, still, and beautiful. When she left town for college, she thought, she would miss the wilderness and the outdoors, and the crystal clear starry nights.

2016

As Donald Trump made his victory speech, broadcast from the dash radio tuned to CBC radio, Carlos glanced in the rear–view mirror: his taxi passengers was indeed Raven. Indeed, she was the same six foot woman, possessed the same aquiline facial features, the same long dark hair, which, however, now had streaks of grey. She was no longer so thin, but he received the distinct impression she actually looked more
attractive than ever, perhaps because she dressed elegantly, had more curves, and her grooming was refined. When Carlos knew her, he was a ruffian, but he had grown to appreciate someone who made an effort to look sharp. “The fare?” she demanded curtly, as the car idled in the driveway of her parent’s house, and Carlos cleared the cab fare on the taxi meter. “There’s a glitch in the odometer. Your ride is on the house.”

“What?”

“Beaverbrook needs all the doctors they can get.”

“How did you know I was a doctor?”

“The dispatcher radioed you might have a cure for my insomnia.”

As she dug through her handbag, he realized she did not recognize his face or voice. “Actually, I think I should be grateful,” Raven said. “I don’t have cash handy, there’s no automated teller machine around, and I don’t suppose you accept credit cards.”

“Sounds like it’s win-win and we’re both in luck.” As Carlos reversed in his minivan taxicab, he felt slightly relieved that she exhibited that one personality trait he noticed previously when she was a teenager: she seemed self-absorbed. He was merely relieved, though, he was not the young man who robbed her of her innocence, even though he was the classmate she tried to enlist. He thought that was a relief, as his mind drifted to the past, the summer of 1983, and the last time they spent quality time together. She couldn’t believe that any cabdriver would ever offer a free ride and could never remember getting a free cab ride from any taxi driver before, except, she remembered, the petite cowboy. Then her mind flashed and she realized Carlos had been her driver that night. She couldn’t believe she didn’t recognize him, even if it had been decades since she last spent time with him.
Spinifex
B. R. Dionysius

(i)

I had heard about you all my life, but only seen your stalks on wide electronic plains. A feature plant of my triangular home state that could fit three Texas’ inside it, or twenty-five Englands condensed like nest material. So far out from Brisbane that you may as well have been a blooming spiral galaxy, your arms radiating a white-dead, winter-grass heat from western Queensland; from Winton’s jump ups.

(ii)

I confess that I mistook you at first. I called you Mitchell grass, so named I assume after our infamous Major; that exploring mass murderer who got a pink cockatoo, some mountain ranges & long clumpy grass named after him. Naïve to when the liminal transition occurred, maybe just outside of Ilfracombe, where I pulled over like a road-rage victim because my wife’s eyes had lucked on an Australian Bustard’s severed head, floating haint-like, the broken centre line of its neck rising like a magnesium flare over the prickly grass field; this interwar zeppelin cruising to its destiny. The failure to identify my own inner botany of coarseness & anger, softened by seeing this lifer; single specimen, a metre tall, who earlier in a small town park some egg-collecting & animal hunting bozo had said tasted good, but if the meat had worms in it, then you knew they hadn’t fed on grain.
This egg-thief who boasted a better collection than the Melbourne museum & scurried rat-like throughout wetlands & woodlands stealing the golden treasure inside. Who was ‘more green than the greenies’ because he erected bird boxes around his house, a bit like Nostferatu I guess keeping his Transylvanian soil safe within his coffin.

(iii)

Your knee-high tentacled growth confirmed when we saw corroborating evidence, more lifers; spinifex pigeons at the Nareen jump up that plunged under your anemone shade to avoid the 30 degree winter sun. Their black war paint criss-crossed over their cheeks like a rugby player’s grease. Deep bronzed plumage, crests taller than TV towers, twice the length of their crested coastal cousins. These feathery antennae that bobbed & stiffened when we stopped the 4WD & jumped out entangled in the gear of our enthusiasm. Again, I was driving & didn’t see them first; my eyes locked on to the red-ribbed dirt track that lay flat & exhausted like some giant-sized funky condom.

(iv)

She spotted them, a flock of twelve, disciple-scrawny the spinifex a bush humpy that we used to build on school camps, a fragile tent of fringed grass heads, a little like wheat burnt by the sun. These birds true to their race that bobbed just ahead of us mimicking feathered Min-Min lights that kept an even pace; panicked by these non-goats, these big ferals who stalked them with cameras, bird guides tucked into pants like stick-grenades. These tawny-ruffled apostles that fluted their shrill dogma as they skipped just out of reach like a lost ideology & left the blushing desert sand behind, wings overpowering gravity like a mob avenging themselves upon a dictator.
The occasional salt-pan like the skin of a burst blister, a circle’s dead heart where the spinifex doesn’t dare to tread, where no scrappy bush or special ops bird can put down a deposit. That inner glow of satisfaction of verifying nature’s rumours, the documentary’s bias. Spinifex emblazoned on the landscape’s drab uniform like a military patch, like courage, like bravery. Like a Victoria Cross the outback awards itself every day for surviving.
DISCRETION

You can’t keep
the rabid scavengers
from picking the bones clean

or puking up the putrid flesh
to feed their famished fledglings

all those upturned beaks unrestrained
snapping open and shut

scarfing down
each half-digested morsel

But be discrete

It is unwise
to approach the nesting ground
without protective camouflage
during a feeding frenzy

or with a weak stomach.
GRATIA INFUSA

If grace
is a substance
poured into us

it will congeal

Then character
is indelible

and all our flaws
are stamped in

Ink is indelible

Character however
is not

Hubris is indelible
Hope is not

Let character
and hope gel

And don’t forget
to break the mold.
MOST CERTAINLY TRUE

The latter rain

and the things of which
it is a certain sign

the face
of those things
made certain

those things
of which the rain
is certain
made more certain still

The drought is ended

And plenty reigns
where scarce is scant

and scarcely
to be believed and
scantily clad

beheld more scarcely still.
OUR INHERITANCE

A legacy
that is not
ash and bone

is a bonfire
of vanity

All flesh
is subject to
the iron smelting furnace

The furnace of affliction
is our great heritage

And we are
the beneficiaries

or flesh and blood
is not our benefactor

and we are not
its rightful heirs.
THE BATTLE ONE

You fought
our fight

and won for us
the day

and one more night

against the night’s
surcease

and morning’s
plunder

But now
henceforth
I must insist
we fight as one

No one
who fights thus
fights alone

or dies apart
except as one

no matter
how lonely the outpost

or solitary the confinement.
Reunion
Keertika Lotni

Maria sat alone. Too much interaction with strangers made her uncomfortable, sometimes. This was one such time. She was shivering from the hill cold and the fear of the reunion that would follow. She was a woman who had unwittingly decided to be on a common reunion that contained the big shot schools of the cold hill town. As she sat on the last bench of the wooden middle row she tried to look out of the far window, and couldn't. Well yes the trees were lashing in the rainstorm and one could still view the wet lake from god– knows–what– angle nonetheless, she couldn't keep watching the fury while looking at the bench occupants next to the window. Awkward. Middle row students get nothing. No protection from either sides, no protection to hide novels or ‘boys’ school magazines. But if you had friends you wouldn't need any, and if your friends were of an adventurous spirit! Your world was a nostalgic post card view of naughty paradise. The latter was absent here.

She looked Jesus in the eye right ahead on the wall. He wanted to get off the cross and cloth himself. He wanted hot coffee and a warm friend, he wanted love and he wanted Maria to have all that he couldn't have, all that people wouldn't let him have, he was a God for whom there was no place in heaven, Maria felt. Be comfortable! she reprimanded herself, it's the same classroom you spent intermediate in. Anxiety clutched her, not one that makes you over think, rather one that makes you acutely aware. Like the way it happens to amateur smokers; the smoke gets on them, not making one dizzy but granting microscopic awareness, yes it happens. Maria felt droplets of water slipping down the rough hair on her forehead, minute droplets formed a water bonnet on her hair. A guy was staring at the watery bonnet, she wiped it.

People had been grouped randomly into various classrooms, hers was a small classroom yet big enough to contain those who mattered. Diagonally sat the once upon a time suitor. To the right sat an erstwhile crush and right before her sat the one who had slightly disturbed the normal functioning of the human heart that did not readjust. There was no emotion, but yes, obsession. On the front row, rightmost edge, sat the ‘best friend’ who had blamed her for thieving. Two places behind her was the one ‘friend’ who would move away if someone saw them together, lest she got a bad name for keeping bad company. Few rows behind, to the left of her sat the friend she should have cared more about, one who was shameless, honest and didn't care. Another best friend waved to her, caught up among other friends. Maria waved nervously.
Maria was famous again. She realised it when she saw the baritone passing by the door, hard jaw, intimidating eyes that matched the soft flowing brown hair. His hands had felt hard on her waist, wet from the rain. He walked away, not giving a damn. The dreaded reunion began. There were about forty people, all adults now, aware of each other, wet from the rain, there hot body vapours rising quick, transpiring into each other like many lovers silently moaning on a bed. A trying- to- be-jolly young priest began his introduction, now everyone knew he was, he existed. He wrote three words on the board, -

‘communication’,

‘your best quality’.

The trick was to connect the dots and to communicate to the class whatever you liked about yourself.

Maria liked the trick, well who remembers people's names? One remembers words, words that go deeper than the sound of one's name, which sounds unreal anyways because one seldom calls out one's own name. He asks Maria to begin. Everyone looks at the girl who was seen with a stranger at 12 in the afternoon, it was four pm now, lots of time for rumours that spread like wildfire. She couldn't reply. The question was passed to others, who answered with pedestrian replies, except the erstwhile crush who was seductively gallant even when he abused. People liked a lot many things, they were just being people. Most had 'communicated'. That baritone with the jaw line walked coolly past the classroom. All attention swung back to Maria she desperately clutched her dark green coat. "So Maria, that man is your acquaintance right? You walked with him to school." An assertion not a question. Silence. The jolly priest remembered her name.

Yes, replied Maria.

That was the way with her, the moment she found her voice everything became secondary and she captivated your senses. "I was walking to school alone and was quite near the gate when a horde of monkeys tried to get at me, he was on a bike he warned me to be careful and offered a ride. I was scared, I sat behind him, we reached school, it had begun to rain, he had a bright blue umbrella. He offered to drop me to the classroom, he ushered me under the big umbrella, left me here and went away, now I'm here. And everyone's talking about me." The silence was pristine, like an untouched Himalayan snowflake.

"Its fine, we need something to take us from day to day, that's why people like what they like. Music, work, drugs, hobbies, being practical, aiming big, these are all things
that keep us from reality, that is nothingness, just like gossip does. Gossip is also communication, it's useful. You can give any excuse but somewhere you try to avoid reckoning." The priest nodded.

"What is interesting is the 'subject' of gossip, it can while existing elsewhere calm your blood from boiling in the veins, add a touch of colour to morose lives or give something to get imaginative about. I'm able to be this spark sometimes. Yes. That's what I like about myself." The best friend conveyed a victorious high five with her eyes, the gossipers found new gossip and the not cared for friend (adolescent classifications) smirked a welcome smirk.
Smoky evenings
Keertika Lotni

Returned to where the morn began;
The secret shack that holds no name
The curve of her behind is placed
On little dancing mickey’s cane.
There is a world of nothingness
Of ruby toes of shimmer teal
She wonders of this nothingness
Enwrapping all the party meal
If you have those informal guts
To hold her tongue so you could see
The lazy mountain breaking down
A rubble pool reality;
The open windows closing doors
The betrayal of checking glance
a replay of realities,
a pretty face, a darling smile
In pleasant things in ditching time
Denying unhappy truths.
Hesitant realities.
Trouble Man
Douglas Cole

I awoke from a deep sleep hearing the sound of screaming. Some commotion. A fight. I got up out of bed. I couldn’t hear any specific words, but it was a fight all right. Right outside my door I heard a thump, a banging, more screaming. So I opened my door, and right there on the walkway I saw a man, a big man with a bald head, dragging a woman by her feet. She was holding onto the railing. He was trying to pull her loose. I stayed in the doorway and said, “What are you doing?”

They both froze. The man’s eyes burned mad-dog fury at me. The woman gripped the railing, her head down. There was nothing that I could imagine that could yank her loose. That was a righteous grip. A life-grip. Oh man, I thought, this is someone else’s problem. Why am I getting involved? This can only lead to trouble.

Then the man let go. And without saying a word, he turned and went down the stairs. That was it. He was gone. I couldn’t see where he went, and it was a very real fear that he might come back.

The woman didn’t move.

“Are you all right?” I said.

It felt like I stood there a long time in that open door. She didn’t speak, didn’t move. I could hear her breathing, though.

“You okay?” I said again.

And then she looked up. I could see the fight-haze clearing from her, could see her coming around. I think I knew something of that place. And I could see her fear like graffiti bolts around her chest. She stood up. She was tall, slender, straight black hair, eyes wide with black lines under them. She was in blue jeans, no shoes, a sleeveless t-shirt.

“Can I come in for a minute?” she asked.

That was the last thing I wanted, to have her in my apartment, especially if the man came back. I didn’t want anything messing up my parole, and this felt like something that could mess up my parole. But what else could I do? “Sure,” I said, and I let her come in and closed the door.

She sat down on my couch, leg jittering fast. “You mind if I smoke a cigarette?” she asked.

“No, go ahead.”

She lit up a cigarette. She smoked it hard. I could see her mind working fast, too, calculating escape routes. Then she jumped up and looked out the window. I almost asked, is he there? Then she went across the room to my little kitchenette. Then she came back. “Do you have a phone I could borrow?”

“Sure,” I said, and I picked it up off the table next to the bed and handed it to her.

She went back to the kitchen, and I heard her trying to talk quietly to someone in
those loud hiss-tones. “...can you get me?...yeah...now...please...no, I can’t stay here...please...yeah...I’ll see you, just wait out front.”

I looked out the window myself, then, but I didn’t see anyone.

She came back into the room. She had finished her cigarette and started a new one. She sat down on the couch again, leg going like a piston. I sat down on the edge of the bed.

“I’m sorry about this,” she said. “And thank you. I don’t know. He might have killed me. He could have killed me. He’s capable of it, I know that. No one else came out. I’m sure they all heard.”

I didn’t say anything. I was just hoping that whoever she called would come fast.

“He’s fucking crazy. fucking high. Fuck. Fucking asshole.”

She was trembling, close to crying, hands shaking, cigarette shaking.

“Our boyfriend?” I don’t know why I said that. It didn’t matter to me.

She sort of snort laughed.

“I wouldn’t call him that.” She looked at me then. I don’t know what she was looking for. Judgment? “He moved in with me not that long ago. He’s supposed to be in prison. Seriously. He would be in prison. I mean it. He’s such a fucking loser. A thief. Dealer. He would’ve been in jail, but the cops fucked up and forgot to read him his rights or some shit. So they had to let him go. He was arrested, and they had to let him go. And then he moves in with me. I let him move in with me.”

“You live downstairs?”

“Yeah. You just moved in, didn’t you?”

“Yeah.”

“I’ve seen you. I’m Sharon.”

“Tom.”

“The asshole’s Rob. Avoid him.”

A silent, nodded, minimal, formal agreement passed between us, odd in the moment, this moment quite intimate as I stood in the middle of one of the worst moments, or what looked like one of the worst moments, of her life. But what could I know of the moments of her life? That twisted dream narrative? You open a door...

“...My friend will be here any minute, and I’ll get out of your space.”

“It’s okay,” I said. But I knew I would feel better once she left. Although, now that I had opened that door, I had no idea what was coming next, what I had let myself into, what this man, Rob, would do. She seemed to know what I was thinking, and she gave me a look, something, that said she didn’t know either.

And so she smoked. And we listened and waited.

“He’s insane,” she said. And her leg jittered so hard I could feel the floor shaking. And we waited. Every sound jolted us both with the thought that he was back. She got up and looked out the window, sat down, smoked, rubbed her upper arm, rose, looked out the window, sat, smoked... I sat there, trapped in my own apartment. Heavy dread.
The friend arrived at last. Sharon jumped up when she heard the short horn blast. “That’s them,” she said, looking out the window. “Really, thanks. And I’m sorry about this.”

“Don’t be,” I said.

She opened the door but hesitated. There was still the gauntlet to pass, going down the stairs, that troll down there waiting. Fear radiated from her in a pulsing red corona. She glanced at me, smiled, then went out and ran down the stairs. I watched. Her friends in the car below opened the passenger door for her. She jumped in, and the car took off with a sound like I’m outta here.

I only waited a moment, looking down the stairs, listening, feeling the empty street cool radiating. Then I closed the door, turned off the lights and went to bed. I lay awake for a long time listening to the nothing that was there.
The Mango Tree
Dan Belanger

In 1927, at the age of eighteen, Aunt Mae, and her older sister, Flora, left our modest home in Trench Town, Jamaica, to seek a better life in America. Flora found her’s three years later in the arms of James Washington, a jazz saxophonist who lived and worked in Harlem. It wasn’t long after their meeting that James and Flora fell in love, married and had three beautiful children; two girls and a boy.

Aunt Mae, who went on to live, for the next sixty years, in a small rent controlled apartment above the diner where she worked as a waitress in Bedford Stuyvesant, Brooklyn, was still waiting for her American dream to come true. With her high cheek bones, dark, velvety smooth skin and big brown eyes, Aunt Mae was an undeniable and ageless beauty. Her six foot two stature, however, made her taller than most men who found her height excessive and intimidating. So she never married, and, aside from two brief romances, lived most of her days alone.

Flora, who had her arms full raising a family in Upper Manhattan, never returned to Jamaica Aunt Mae came home to Trench Town to stay with us for a few weeks just as the mangos were coming into season every year. She never failed, upon each visit, to keep up her tradition of climbing to the top of the lovely mango tree that grew in our front yard. The entire family would come out in the yard to watch. When she reached the top of the tree, she picked the ripe mangos, and tossed them down to us.

“Have a treat, Light Side,” Aunt Mae would say as she tossed me a mango. Light Side was the nick name that Aunt Mae gave me upon our first meeting shortly after the tragic event that brought us together. My biological parents, an American couple, were drowned when the fishing boat we’d leased for the afternoon, capsized after being hit by an errant wave while vacationing on the island. So after Aunt Mae’s fisherman grandfather, William, fished me out of Montego Bay, her family took me in without a second thought.

With the exception of a few nasty side glances and mean looks, the community was accepting of me, and I had a happy childhood. Aunt Mae, as sturdy as a tree and stronger than any of the men in Trench Town, was always there to protect me, so anyone who might have wanted to give me a hard time thought better of it.

This year, for the first time since leaving the island, Aunt Mae, who, up until then, never admitted to fearing anything, told us that she felt apprehensive about traveling home. ICE agents had knocked drown the door of her Mexican neighbor, and taken him away. That was just three weeks prior to her annual sojourn.

Although she had become a citizen of the United States many years prior, she was afraid that if she left the US, she might not be allowed to return. She knew that it wasn’t a completely rational fear. She had, though, seen many illogical things happen in her days. She’d witnessed many injustices, clerical errors, and cases of mistaken
identity that had caused great pain and hardships for innocent people of color. Nevertheless, overcoming her anxieties, she returned to Trench Town.

We were all glad to see that she was looking as strong and healthy as ever. Still, she was getting older and now that she was seventy-eight, we were beginning to get worried that she would not be able to complete the strenuous climb that she insisted on attempting. We felt the same way when she turned eighty-eight and ninety-eight. Each time, she proved us wrong. The family, who continued our tradition of gathering in the front yard to watch, cheered each time that Aunt Mae reached the top of the mango tree. After tossing the mangos down to us, Aunt Mae would shimmy down the tree trunk and join us in feasting upon the delicious fruit. When Aunt Mae turned one hundred, she had a stroke. She still managed to return to the island, but had to use a walker to get around. No one thought that she would attempt her annual climb. Again, we were all wrong. Not only did she attempt the climb, she made it to the top, disappearing amongst the leaves and ripe mangos. We all cheered, and continued cheering for the next seven years as Aunt Mae proved us wrong each year by accomplishing her annual feat.

At one hundred and eight, Aunt Mae began to say and do things that we didn’t quite understand. On her first night with us that year, I found her lying flat on her back out in the yard in the full moonlight.

“Aunt Mae!” I exclaimed. “What are you doing out here? Why aren’t you in bed?”

“I seen him in there,” Aunt Mae said.

“Who?” I asked.

“The ICE man,” she replied. “He’s been after me all year. So far, I been dodging him, though.”

“There’s no one here, Aunt Mae,” I tried to reassure her. “Just the family.”

“I seen him, though,” Aunt Mae insisted. “He’s trying to deport me.”

“But this is Jamaica, Aunt Mae,” I said. “This is your home. And anyway, you’re a citizen of the United States. He can’t deport you.”

“No, he can’t,” Aunt Mae agreed. “He won’t stop trying, though. He’s been after me all year.”

“Time for bed, Aunt Mae,” I said.

“You’re right, Light Side” Aunt Mar said. “You need to rest up so you can catch the mangos I toss down to you.”

So Aunt Mae went back to bed. The next morning, as happened every year, we all cheered as Aunt Mae disappeared amongst the leaves at the top of the mango tree.

I caught the single mango that came flying out of the tree.

We all cheered, waiting for Aunt Mae to toss down more mangos, and then shimmy down. When, after several minutes passed, there was no sign of Aunt Mae, I climbed up to the top of the tree. The sunlight, shining down through the tree limbs blinded me for an instant. It couldn’t have been more than a second or two later that, blinking back the glare, I saw Aunt Mae looking down at me with a broad smile on her face. As
a slight wind caused the limbs to tremble, a shadow sprang to life. It seemed to grab at Aunt Mae’s ankle, as if it was trying to pull her down out of the tree, but Aunt Mae was too quick. She leapt right up out of the tree and disappeared into the sun.

I climbed down from the tree.

“She’s not there,” I told the others.

They all gathered close around the tree trunk and peered upwards. Everyone saw that it was true. Aunt Mae was gone. Bewildered, we went slowly into the house and ate dinner in silence. The next day I went out and picked the mangos. Aunt Mae’s niece, Mary, my Jamaican sister, served them for desert that evening. We all agreed that they were the sweetest mangos that any of us had ever tasted.
Selfies at Sunset
Jennie Cesario

Some sunsets are softer than others, smudged and silvery, seamlessly sewing a day into an evening.

This is our view – just such a sunset shimmering on a harbor, silhouetting sailboats at anchor, their masts backlit in a subtle mosaic of streaky pinks deepening to purples and seeping to blues.

We're at the end of a dock, my husband and I, and another couple, dear friends with whom we're catching up after a long stint apart. And we've fallen into easy conversation, the sun taking its leave graciously around us -- bluffs becoming blurs, shorelines shrinking to shadow.

As we talk, our gazes alternately drift out over the harbor. And perhaps it's just me (I do lapse to dreaminess sometimes), but this cusp of twilight seems almost delicate; not just to the eye, but to the feel. Tangibly soft, all of it -- the sunset and the sea scent and the sense of something hushed, the hum of life gone low.

My friend takes a photo with her phone, but I know the picture won't do it justice -- the essence of the evening, the gossamer of it. The music of a restaurant band lilts across the water. And even the ferry horn seems mild, low-decibel in the distance.

There are three teenage girls with us on the dock, strangers to us. Luminous with youth, clear-eyed and tan, their faces so fresh I don't think they can be past fifteen, maybe sixteen, years old. And they too are taking pictures. Not of the picturesque scene, as my friend had done, but of themselves. Selfies at sunset. And not just a few. Their phone cameras snap on silently, nearly unceasingly. And though my friend and I have observed this kind of ritual before, we exchange glances, both a bit bemused.

We two couples talk on -- kids and careers, books and politics, movies and memories. Minutes pass and the light lapses lower and lower and all the time I'm half-aware of the girls -- posing and snapping and studying their faces on their screens; filtering and editing and then pausing not a moment before posing and snapping again.

And again.

And again and again and again.

May my words here be as soft as the evening, because my heart toward these girls is as tender as those fading rays of light silverying the water. Strangers though they are, I'm strangely concerned for them. Because though there's no sin in a selfie, per se --
even in successive selfies, perhaps -- as I watch them out of the corner of my eye I can't seem to silence one thought: "Forgive them, for they know not what they do!"

They're just teenagers, I know. Caught up in the spirit of the age they've innocently inherited. But that sunset -- O that sunset! -- it's more than a mere backdrop, more than a photo-opportunity, more than the painted scenery in their own personal show. This story's bigger than they are -- way bigger. And they're missing it, heads in their phones, minds on their faces. Backs to the view, they're facing the wrong way. Aren't they?

An officer comes to close the dock, and we head for some ice cream, leaving the selfie-snapping girls behind. As I savor my chocolate and blackberry, I ask my friend her thoughts. "It's like they're trying to convince themselves of something with all those selfies," she says, and I think she's wise. Because all that selfie-snapping is more than merely documenting a good time. There had been something almost frenzied about it, almost compulsive. Something over-the-top.

My friend and I were teens in another time. (And now we're both mothers of teenage girls.) We had our own zeitgeist to contend with. At fifteen I often spent long hours lying on my couch, watching top videos again and again and again on MTV. Between times I slow-danced with a similar vanity, my face in the three-way mirror in the bathroom, eyes begging to see something like beauty. Something desirable. Something worth noticing.

So I understand. Truly, I do.

There are sorrows in every soul that can't be articulated. Even to oneself. And even the very young may know such sorrows -- the end of childhood innocence and wonder, the waking up to a world of death and loss, and, particularly for young women, a world of sexual vulnerability and judgment. A world in which, sadly, their worth might be measured in selfies. A world in which self-absorption is a tool of survival and too many sunsets go unseen.

So here's what I wish I could say to those girls back on the dock. I'd stimulate their thinking with some questions if I could: Can a selfie make you safe? Swallow the emptiness? Give shape to your soul? Can it validate the meaning of your existence? Verify the very fact that you're alive? Even a little?

Because, in a way, girls, if you're honest with yourselves, aren't those the things you're looking for, deep down? The fears you're trying to quell, the voids you're trying to fill,
the unacknowledged pain you're trying to ease, with 'likes' and 'loves' and compliments and comments on your beauty and all the scripted pretense of your life?

Your selfies shout: "Stop! Look at me! Pay attention to who I am!" But maybe, just maybe, you're the one who needs to stop. You're the one who needs to look.

To start paying attention.

"Look carefully and listen closely and pay attention to everything I am going to show you, for that is why you have been brought here," the Old Testament prophet Ezekial was once told.

And so I'm thinking about this now -- the fact that I've been brought here, to this time, to this place, for a purpose, and that a big part of that purpose is simply paying attention. Paying attention to sunsets and sea scents and to the sad souls around me and to what God may be showing me in a gossamer evening and in girls on a dock in need of some grace.

Girls just like me...

Funny how, when a theme is thread into your thinking, it can stay with you, weaving in and out of your days, like a seam being sewn into your soul's sanctification. Our evening at the harbor ends, and soon after I come across this line: “Prayer is first of all a means of listening.”

And it occurs to me that if we're trying to avoid prayer, the first thing we might do is stop paying attention, get distracted, oblivious, small-minded and self-absorbed. We might squeeze our eyes shut to beauty. Pretend not to see things that might stir us to reverence, to an awe-filled response to our world. We might stick our heads in the TV or the mirror or social media or our phones.

We might turn our backs on sunsets.

A few nights later, at another harbor, the sunset is fiery, pyrotechnic after a heat wave, the antithesis of the smudged softness I'd enjoyed with my husband and friends.

Sometimes God nudges tenderly, I think. Other times, it seems, he breaks open the clouds.

Are we looking carefully? Are we listening closely?

Are we paying attention?
The Last Confession
Martha Bátiz

I met Farah at work. We are telemarketers. It’s not a nice job, but it is the only one I could get as a newcomer, and it helps me pay my rent and food. I walk to the office, sit down at my little desk, and tackle faceless names and numbers they assign to me. I call the customers and read my script to them, and most of the time they hang up on me or insult me or yell at me. How dare I interrupt their meal or their work or their privacy or whatever. At the beginning I couldn’t sell anything, so one morning my boss threatened to fire me, which then turned out to be a blessing because that’s how Farah and I became friends. I was crying in the washroom during one of our breaks. She offered me some advice. She gave me a hug! Nobody had touched me since I’d left home. I just broke down when I felt her warmth, her smell of saffron and sandalwood. I hugged her back and thought I would never be able to stop crying. She later joked that I had made her chador all wet, and I asked her what a chador was, and when she told me we both smiled.

Our office is a small place, yet everyone comes from a different country (none from mine, though, and nobody speaks Spanish except me). If somebody took a picture of my co-workers and myself together and sent it back home, my cousins would laugh and say we look like one of those old ads that Benetton posted everywhere in the eighties. Yes, in my country we were never rich but we were trendy and aware of the latest fashions, even if the faces on the poster didn’t resemble our daily world. Ours is a homogenous society, that’s why we were so easy to catch, so easy to brainwash. But I like to fantasize: with such a picture in my hand, I would tell my family something like this: “Sí, in Toronto I don’t even know where in the map to find the country where this coworker here comes from, but that’s okay because we smile at one another every morning and sometimes we share food, and it’s a great feeling, sabes?” My cousin Pedro would have known what I mean. Not only would he have understood, he’d have wanted to come and see for himself. Maybe even try to hook up with some girl whose name he would have fun mispronouncing… Ay, Pedro, I miss you so much. If we only knew where your body is, what they did to you…. Aunt Clara has probably worn herself out by now looking for him, trying to find anything out. Her hair had already turned grey when they arrested me, and she was not even fifty. If only I was brave enough to speak with her again…

I’m happy—if you can ever be happy about things like these—that my mom wasn’t alive when they took me. I couldn’t have handled the thought of them doing something to her because of me. I couldn’t have handled the thought of her crying because of my choices. And if somebody had ever told me that the only person who would have understood me was the woman underneath the black veil, I wouldn’t have believed it. But now I live in Toronto, and since I take walks at thirty degrees below zero, anything
is possible.

Farah, a few years older than me, has the most beautiful dark hair. I saw it when she took off her veil—we were alone—to show me her biggest scar. In both our countries, anyone who is against the regime gets killed. Or imprisoned and tortured, at least in mine.

Until this morning.

Farah and I have a lot in common: we know what pain and fear taste like, the flavour and texture of our blood. We both have lost everything and everyone. Other people’s cries are like tattoos inside my skull. Shrill, deep, under a tsunami of loud salsa music. I have nightmares almost every night: I deserve them. That’s why I won’t ever be able to face Aunt Clara and my cousins again. That’s why I’m glad my mother passed away before all this happened.

I need to go back to the letters, back to writing the list, but it’s so hard. It’s much nicer to just stand here by the window. The streets are almost empty, which is strange considering it’s Saturday and the storm is scheduled to begin later this afternoon. I can’t help smiling when I see someone walking their dog and the dog is all dressed up. If Aunt Clara had heard about dogs wearing boots, she would have laughed until her jaws hurt. Some dogs’ boots are nicer and cozier than mine. Farah thinks it’s funny, too. She belongs to a group of survivors and refugees who get together every once in a while to comfort one another. She has asked me to come along, but I don’t know if I can do that. I don’t know if I can endure listening to their stories. And I would be so scared to find someone from my homeland. What would I say then? What excuse could I give? How could I ever look them in the eye? What could I say? How could I ever look them in the eye? How could I ever look them in the eye?

With Farah it’s different. We can laugh at dogs wearing matching boots and coats, and if we feel like it, we can also talk, but mostly we don’t anymore, and that’s fine. She doesn’t know my entire truth. Nobody does. The moment my words have a sound of their own and leave my body they will be impossible to take back. And I’m scared to confront them. In English there is a word or a name for almost everything. Refugee and PTSD are some of the first I learned. When they are said out loud, people seem to understand, they turn benevolent and generous. Nothing wrong with that, but what do they really understand, I wonder. Unlike me, most of them do know where their loved ones have been laid to rest. There is another convenient word to go with this, too, which I was taught upon arrival: closure. What an unbearable, cruel word. A pain so big can’t be closed down.

Many times I’ve wondered about what Aunt Clara would say if I told her that people in Toronto actually live in basements. And that, when I refused to rent one, all I had to say was, “I’m a refugee and have been diagnosed with PTSD, so I can’t live in a basement, thank you.” Very polite, very politically correct. I am a fast learner. Nobody needs to know what happened—or if anything happened at all. Aunt Clara would have understood, though. She too would have rejected the basement apartment.

I got sick at work once. There was a mouse underneath one of the desks, a little brown mouse. I screamed so loudly I scared everyone. I ran to the washroom and
locked myself in. I felt like my heart was about to break free from my chest. I threw up all over my clothes and was practically out of breath when the paramedics arrived. There's a name for that, too: *panic attack*. Farah looked me in the eye, she knew there were no words to describe what had driven me to the washroom. “Whenever you’re ready,” she’d said, “I’ll be there.” Hence today’s call, the letters and the list. I will take her at her word. Our English is equally awkward, but I have learned since I arrived in Toronto that all languages become the same when spoken through sorrow.

*This is a fragment of the story, not the complete story, and that the entire piece can be found in my newly-released short-story collection Plaza Requiem: Stories at the Edge of Ordinary Lives, published by Exile Editions in Canada.*
living small

I am a mere visitor nearly motionless
as encroaching dawn brings dark outlines into focus.
So close, poised on white tile, a chameleon
is a skinny statue oblivious to shoes
big as boulders. A grey brown lizard
with eyes focused—mere dots, almost
too tiny to see tuned to invisible directions,
moves now a fraction of an inch.

A tail seems to stretch forever, and thin reptile
toes are prehistoric. Here, natives
without effort alter skin shades to fit shadows,
changes in heat and wind. As light shifts
we are together but separate on this patio,
our heads facing the coastal inland waterway.
In my vacation shorts and bright shirt
I am an awkward cow in a tropical land,
dressed for blundering spectacle—
knowing nothing about changing colors,
or how to be invisible in the grass.
Nothing about the community of cousins
perched as lookouts on the white picket fence.
Nothing about reptile settled history
or refined rituals or how to act out stages
of being invisible.

As giant Number One, I can’t explain nuances
of lizard religion etched in delicate scales,
or point to where their neighborhoods begin.
I couldn’t explain to the kids who soon
will appear how living and dying without
fanfare can be drama enough. Or what
it means to live in a niche for a lifetime
as stilled art, without leaving a visible footprint.
Halloween every day

Somehow a piece of our disguise still sticks to us
Rilke, The Notebooks of Malte Laurids Briggs

The art of almost shimmers as the youngest
looks to the mirror, expects beauty
frozen in awkward becoming.
A future beckons from rising fog,
for she loves fragments of rhythm,
a fiction more dream than real
where a golden city creates a skyline,
with rocky outcrops looking upon misty views.

Friends “neither real beings nor actors” smile
and gesture as if caught in-between,
with yoga movements up and out,
arms pushing beyond sleeves
as if adolescent awkward pain was
carefully orchestrated.

Already time as shifted, for the neighbor kid
mowing the lawn has shot up into geekdom,
though he is still skinny in his ill-fitting
wardrobe.

Growls come from Uncle Len
in the other room, who recently has chosen
to not matter, even as he laments that
adolescents have grown rough and uncouth.

He thinks he is still a country club dude,
though his fleshy jowls and ancient hat
show his time has passed. His memory leaks—
forgotten days of hitchhiking on the cusp.

Somehow Len and my friend Georgia
are entwined as one dream,
where forgotten romance and scarred
friends gang together with young eyes

even as this maturing day flickers,
then clarifies, then blurs in fog.
We are animals

I had a friend like a possum, with thin gray-black hair who hissed through teeth too tiny. Often shy, he hid from his ugliness when scared, and played dead. Other times he acted as if he was born privileged, with permission to eat cat food in the Master’s garage. Over time he adjusted to human disdain for his pink-skinned pig-like status.

Once in morning golden light, I saw first thing that the neighbor kid was a bull dog clone, with no pretty angle and jowls prone to drool, hair so short that I could see nits and fleas leaping in glee. It took years for his parents to admit that he smelled like a dog, and acted like he would lick his privates, which were too often exposed.

For many years, like a character in a good Russian novel, I tried to be a cat relaxed in a rich dream, living with static electricity crinkling from a paw. Even now I love most how a cat’s eyes open slow like it owns time, having seen enough of secret worlds to stretch and yawn, ready to stalk through all that will come.

In recent mornings, despite my sins and affinity for violence, animals have lost their fear and cluster close, teaching an innocence that pushes at arrogance in its myriad layered forms. The word is out that these creatures who watch every move I am ashamed to admit know that I am one of them.
The Particular Preference of Ghosts


Mother passed last month, was meaning to yard sale, weed through. Oh, such accumulations. What to Keep? Let go? What would George have done?

She glides now between the walnut credenza and dining table, fingertips a particular crystal champagne flute, its delicate frilled edge and purple stem like a lily. She raises it to toast all the things necessary, then drifts to the violet sofa, darkened in twilight, tagged $100.00 or best offer and is gone.

I nestle the fluted glass in my bag.
$5.00 for the only one left of two.
Her Cat

Circles me as prey, a furry thing
stalked but never caught. She prances
side angles in, steady, steadfast
as if she’s still that six-week old ball of mink grey
blinking astonishment into an old woman's heart, promising
to slow her descent with a simple romp-wonder, determined nip-tug
at the sleeve rescue from the sinkhole of dying alone.
It happened anyway.

And you, my mother’s cat, in your two-year-old teens found yourself
alone in her apartment, mewing an orphan ache into the caverns
of her pink slippers next to the hamper steeped in her drifting scent.

My brothers said, "You can take Mom's cat"
as if I’m the family keeper of loose ends, bleached photos
the womb for her homeless children.

"No," I said, "I can't . . . Wouldn't be . . .
No, Not possible." All the while meaning, I don't want to.

You, my mother’s cat, became the fair feline
of a kind-hearted stranger and his girlfriend, playing house
or some other grown-up thing.
He later sent photos of you in your new kingdom
adored, groomed, organically fed.
I wished it had been Mom
on that throne, the one that always eluded her
making her always elusive.

But you, my mother's cat, as real as she is dust
keep coming back
again now, four years she's dead
and the kind-hearted man without his girlfriend
is moving on without you.

"I thought of you first," he said, "next of kin."
"No," I said, "I can't . . . Wouldn't be . . .
No. Not possible" all the while wondering
how many lives before I stop missing her.
Dead Letters

I can no longer read
e-mails to Lara, my screen name
before the split-up
before I added the numbers, 62
to disassociate him—me
in time, habitat and cyberspace.

But Lara still lives
receives pieces of me gone afield
stores in my personal Iron Mountain
rants, rebuttals, love notes
sent by accidental numeric omission.

I imagine Lara spying
on my life
wonder if she misses me, remotely likes me.
I sometimes write to her on purpose
sweet-toned words
like a bereaved spouse.

Nothing.

I try hacking with old passwords
a few other tricks.
I need to reach her, hear her voice
the silly way she makes verbs out of nouns
like passengering, breakfasting
teases in closings, seduces with spaces.

Nothing.

Could there be
a dead letters email office
where a ghost of myself
fades with old photographs
perfume and ink?

I'll keep writing to you, Lara
without the 62
keep trying to make contact.
Video

A
lop-sided
scotch pine
garland loops
wedding band
gold glistening
round
ghost fingers
hooking
stained glass
and
candy canes
placing
tinsel tiers
in
evergreen
for
the Angel
atop
Christmas
our last.
That Saturday one of the horses broke down in the seventh race. When Paul Blocker arrived from the stable area, he could see the jockey lying on the dirt. The horse ambulance had arrived. The jockey was repeating something in Spanish which sounded like a prayer. The horse’s left leg was dangling. Blood, horse neighing and shouting surrounded him.

It took four members from the gate crew to get the horse into the horse ambulance. The attending veterinarian climbed into the van behind the horse where he would quickly administer a lethal injection. Paul Blocker made a mental note to phone the knackers after the races.

Later that day, he found himself standing at the gates that shuttered the dead horse from view. He had ordered two of the maintenance men to cover the gates with a thick coat of white paint. Now he pressed a rectangular piece of plywood to the painted slats of the right gate. He removed one of six nails from between his teeth and pounded it through the corner of the plywood. When he finished pounding the last nail into the bottom corner, he stepped back a few feet in order to scrutinize the words he had painted:

REST IN PEACE
BEHIND DEATH’S GATES

Paul Blocker gazed at the patches of blood that had dried along the edge of the puddle where he stood. He recalled the mud fights in the orphanage where he had been raised. How he began knocking kids flat when he had suddenly grown big during the summer of his sixteenth year. Vietnam memories flashed through his mind, the day-by-day numbness, the advice given him by Xavier Lopez when Paul had been no more than a green grunt – “Never raise your head!” Paul remembered the words on the note his wife left a week after their son turned eighteen:

“I’m moving to Tucson where it isn’t cold like you.”

How that note was followed by a year long binge that ended in the office of the president of the town where he worked and lived.

“If I don’t let you go, Paul, next election the other side will be accusing me of keeping a ghost payroll.”

How the village president shook his head, then unexpectedly said: “Go see Moon. He’s got a tip on a job for you.”

“Police work?”

“No, you can’t work for us again. You know of Matthew Cleary, Junior – the owner
of Hickory Downs racetrack?"
  "Yea, he gives money to St. Hughs for scholarships."
  "Well, he just retired and his son, M-III, has taken over. He needs an assistant to
head maintenance and… troubleshoot for him."
  "Troubleshoot!"
  "Let Moon make the call for you. M-III’s not a bad guy. You do right by him, he’ll
do right by you."
  "But Bill, it’s the racetrack!"
  "It’s an opportunity. Don’t overlook it. You’re over fifty. Where else are you going
to go?"
  That was the stroke of whatever luck he wanted to call it that sent Paul Blocker to
Hickory Downs.

A few days after the horse’s death, Paul stomped over to the gate, grabbed a claw
hammer out of the hand of the maintenance man and slammed him against the side of
the barn. A loose brick fell to the ground as the maintenance man’s shoulders hit the
wall.
  "What the hell you doing!" he hollered.
  The maintenance man raised his hands above his head.
  "Paul," he said. "Not me. M-III told me to take it down."
  "Get outta here!" he said.
  He could hear the maintenance man’s rough overalls scraping together as the he
hurried away. Paul walked toward the garage. A few minutes later he returned with
half a dozen nails squeezed between the crooked fingers of his left hand, his right fist
squeezing the claw hammer.
  The sign hung diagonally from the one nail which had not been removed. He
placed four nails between his teeth, placed the fifth against the opposite corner of the
sign and began pounding. As he finished pounding the final nail into the top of the
sign, a baby blue BMW came to a stop behind him.
  "Behind death’s gates!” a voice came out from the half open car window.
  Paul Blocker turned to stare at M-III in the driver’s seat.
  "This is a racetrack, Paul. Not a concentration camp."
  He remained silent
  "Take the sign down, Paul," M-III ordered.
  Paul Blocker turned and resumed pounding. M-III turned off the engine and
climbed out from his car.
  "Give me that hammer. I’ll take it down myself."
  "I’ll break your wrist if you try," Paul said over his shoulder.
  M-III froze in front of his open car door.
  "You’ve never been like this with me, Paul. Why?"
  "That’s my business. The sign stays."
M-III stared at Paul. Slowly, a smile appeared across M-III’s face. His shoulders relaxed.

“You know what the marriage counselor told me and my wife?”

“I don’t care,” Paul responded.

“We strive for win-win solutions to our marital problems.’ Then she looked straight into my eyes and said: ‘I don’t see how you and Mary both can come out winners if you are engaging in infidelity, Mathew.’ I wanted to keep screwing the waitress up in the Truman room. My wife wanted me to stop. If I didn’t, she was threatening divorce. With my deep pockets, she would have had lawyers lined up to the sidewalk dying to take her case.”

M-III bent forward.

“You know what I came up with?”

Paul gave a final blow to the nail. He pushed his palm against the four corners of the sign, then turned to face M-III.

“Compartment four,” M-III answered.

M-III leaned back and smiled.

“I could tell the marriage counselor wasn’t happy. I had taken her own idea from one of our past sessions and re-packaged it. Compartment four, Paul. That’s where the wife and husband have their own private matters that the other doesn’t know about. A ‘don’t ask, don’t tell’ for marriage, you might say. The wife accepted it. She hasn’t threatened divorce since. All I have to do is remain discreet which, thanks to your help, I’ve been able to do.”

“Your point?”


M-III lowered himself back into the driver’s seat of his BMW.

“Make sure you paint over the right words, Paul,” he said.

M-III started his car, pulled the shift forward and drove off.

Paul Blocker walked over to the maintenance garage, picked up a can of white paint and walked back.

“‘Win-win,’” he said to himself as he began painting over the words. “Paul Blocker is a chump. Maybe I should paint that.”

Two weeks later, Paul Blocker had the familiar task of getting his drunk boss out from the squad car, into the apartment above barn two and onto the double bed inside. Paul had carried the mattress to that bed up the steps five years ago. When the two maintenance men had gone to lift the box spring from the van, Paul Blocker had stopped them.
“Leave it,” he had said. “I’ll put a piece of plywood under the mattress. He needs to be sore and uncomfortable after every binge.”

The squad car had driven off. Paul held his boss upright by grasping the belt looping through the rear of M-III’s pants. He began steering the president of Hickory Downs toward the steps leading to the apartment. From the corner of his eye, he spotted a small time trainer named Janet Hastings staring at him from the open doors of barn three. He gave her a cold stare and nodded at her to scram.

When he got to the metal steps, Paul began repeating: “Step, step. Up, up.”

He raised M-III off the last metal step, set him down, then began maneuvering him toward the end of the building. The metal door to the apartment was just a few feet away, its curtains closed. He held his boss upright as he instinctively grabbed the correct key from the dozen keys hanging from his belt. He inserted the key. The door to the apartment sprang open. Performing a ritual he had performed dozens of times over the years, Paul laid his boss across the width of the double bed, lifted his legs and swiveled him length-wise.

M-III’s white shirt hung loose. His blue tie was undone. He breathed heavily. His jacket had been discarded at one of the bars he had hit during this latest binge.

Paul Blocker made a fist with his right hand.

“I could punch his face,” he thought.

He stared at M-III’s dark trousers which had slid up both legs, exposing the white soft skin of his calves. Paul opened the door and gently closed it behind him.

At six thirty the next morning Paul Blocker was staring down at M-III who lay face up on the double bed. Like a corpse suddenly coming to life, M-III opened his eyes.

“Paul?” he murmured.

“Paul!” he said loudly when there was no answer.

“I’m right in front of you.”

“Where am I?”

“In the apartment.”

There was another long silence. Paul Blocker could see his boss trying to clear his head, trying to line up his thoughts and place them into coherent words.

“How’d I get here?” he asked.

“The Chief of Police drove you here.”

“Chief of Police!”

“Yea.”

“Which one?”

“The one whose boss is grateful to you and your father for keeping the racetrack in his town.”

“Moon?”

“Yea, Moon.”

He could see M-III coming around now.

“Any mess to clean up?”
“As soon as the patrolman who stopped you radioed your name into the station, Moon gave an order for the rookie to stay with you. Can you believe it? The rookie wanted to call the tow truck and take you down to the station.”

Paul paused for a few seconds, then said: “Moon said that when the rookie asked you to blow into the breathalyzer, you told the rookie to blow his own prick.”

“What’d he do?”

“The rookie pulled you out from your car. I’m afraid he was a little rough before he handcuffed you.”

A few seconds of silence passed between them.

“Moon called the town president. The president told Moon to drive you back to the track personally.” Paul paused. “That was nice of Moon.”

“Between taxes and jobs… Hickory Downs pumps a few million into this town every year. He better be nice. I don’t care if I ran over his mother, he better be nice.”

“I had to lift you up every step,” Paul said to him.

“I was that wasted?”

His boss stared at the ceiling. M–III tried raising himself from the bed, and fell backwards onto the two pillows Paul Blocker had arranged beneath him.

“I’m glad you don’t carry a gun. I’d tell you to hand it over so I could blow my stupid brains out. And you’d be stupid enough to oblige me.” He paused. “Moon. So Moon drove me back personally.”

“Once a year you tell me how you want to off yourself. You and I both know you’d never do it. So why say it?”

“Because I need to hear myself say it, that’s why.”

Paul moved closer to the bed. He bent down to within a few inches from M–III’s nose.

“You know what?” he said softly. “You want forgiveness. That’s it. You want to be forgiven.”

“Of course I want forgiveness! I’ve brought shame upon five generations of Clearys!”

Paul Blocker jerked his head away.

“Bullshit. All you Clearys have been boozers and womanizers. Always. You can’t help it. It’s in your genes.”

“Except for my grandfather. He’s the only one….”

“…. who brought respectability to the racing industry. Jesus, now I have to hear it for the fiftieth time.

“And why shouldn’t you hear it, dammit! The President of the United States visiting Hickory Downs in an election year!”

“President Harry S. Truman, himself…. Paul Blocker interjected, mockingly. “Yes, Harry S. Truman. President of the United States of America.”

M–III pushed himself forward.

“Truman was the most powerful man on the planet! And he came to watch
“You weren’t even born when Truman visited,” Paul returned.

“It doesn’t matter. It was a point in time absolutely crucial for the Clearys. Like my grandfather used to tell me: ‘we had gone from the days of a hick president sending the Clearys off to Cold Harbor to hosting a president in an election year.’”

“Don’t kid yourself!” Paul Blocker shot back. “You don’t want to know how many of those body bags in ‘Nam had the names Mahoney, Carey, Flanagan tagged to them. And now sons keep coming home as corpses from the Middle East with another Texas politician responsible….”

I’m the only the purebred Irishman and future owner of Hickory Downs who gets to scream politics. I contribute — state and national. You don’t contribute shit.”

After a few seconds of silence passed between them, M-III said: “I’m sorry… I’m sorry those orphanage people never told you about your blood line. If you ever want me to have one of my staff look into it….”

“It wouldn’t change anything,” Paul interrupted coldly.

M-III tried to raise himself from the pillow again, and fell back. Paul Blocker grabbed the pillows under him and, holding M-III upright now, gently wedged the pillows between his back and the wooden bed frame. His rough hands eased M-III backwards where he remained in a stable upright position. M-III looked up at Paul.

“You never once tried to get me to go for… help. Why is that Paul? It worked for you. You haven’t touched a drop since your first day here.”

“If you ever did want to go, I’ll tell you right now you’d have to listen to a bunch of drunks tell you about acceptance.”

“I don’t accept anything from anybody!” M-III snapped.

“That’s why I never tried to get you to go. You’d shoot it down like you shot it down just now.”

Paul Blocker paused: “One thing about meetings,” he said “They don’t have their hands in your pocket trying to grab your dough. How much did that marriage counselor take you for?”

“I can’t help it your wife left you. Don’t hold it against me that I did what was needed to stop mine from leaving me. And to answer your question: a lot less than it would of cost for a divorce.”

M-III stared in front of him.

“I never dream when I’m drunk. My mind keeps re-running Janet Hastings standing in front of barn three, gawking at me. I know I didn’t dreamt it. It had to be real. What about that, Paul?”

“Janet Hastings is nothing. I don’t think she even…”

“I knew it! She saw me! You need to tell me these things when I sober up! Understand!”

“I’m ready to tell you how Arthur T. Doorlander is ready to wipe the floor with us, and you pull me up over a shoe-string drunk trainer who saw me drag you out of
Moon’s car! Come on, Mat. Give us both a break.”

“Don’t change the subject, Paul. I don’t care if she has to sleep under the bridge. I want that boozing Peeping Jane off my track three hours after I step out this door. That’s a non-negotiable order. Understand.”

“Well I’ll be goddamn! For twelve years I’ve been mopping up your vomit. I’ve called your daddy and your step mama to reassure them that you weren’t lying dead in a west side crack house – a knife stuck up your ass. For twelve years, I’ve been your baby sitter and your heavy. And now you pull me up because I didn’t… inform you about Janet Hastings. You want her off? Yes sir, boss. You got it.”

“And you don’t have it! That’s why I’m president of this racetrack! That gossip-mongering drunk will tell the whole track what she saw if we don’t toss her out now! If Doorlander found out I fell off the wagon, he could order his people to move against us before we had a chance to protect ourselves.”

M-III turned his head and stared up at Paul Blocker.

“What time is it?”

“Seven o’clock.”

“I want her off by ten o’clock.”

“And her three horses?”

“God dammit, Paul. Horses don’t gossip. I got no problem with Janet Hastings’ horses. She can take her horses to Mitchell’s stable. We’ll give him three extra stalls to accommodate them. Tell Janet Hastings she can come back on the track the end of February. By then we should have this problem with Doorlander straightened out.”

M-III pulled the blanket off, and straightened up in bed.

“Don’t be so sure about that. It’s no go on your counter-offer to Doorlander,” Paul said. “That’s what I was going to tell you. Talk with your accountant. He told me Doorlander’s people laughed when they heard your price. They said you meet his price or Mister Doorlander will demolish all eight barns.”

“Demolish!”

“Raze them,’ they said.” Paul Blocker paused. “It makes no sense, destroying those barns.”


“You shouldn’t have let him get a hold of those barns.”

“Who would have guessed he was going to buy the note on Gator’s track. The barns went with it. That was a move impossible to stop.”

“I wish the Krauts had blown his tank apart during the war. It would have saved us having to fight him. Jesus Christ. That sick son-of-a-bitch wants to be the only track in the state.”

“That’s Doorlander,” M-III said. “He takes no prisoners.”
“Well, you can’t let him ruin us,” Paul Blocker answered. “There’s going to be at least one track in this state to compete with him. It’s going to be us, and if that old man doesn’t like it, let him croak. Better yet, let someone croak him for us.”

“The Cleary family never played it that way, Paul. You know that.”

“It’s just that…. All Doorlander has working for him is a bunch of toadies in white shirts. They’re soft, Matt. Real soft.”

“Soft enough to have a private line to the governor. We can’t beat Doorlander, Paul. We don’t have his money. We don’t have his clout. But we can live with him. We can survive until…."

“…. he croaks. I know.”

“Arthur T. Doorlander can’t live forever. But the Cleary family will live forever. I have three sons, two daughters and twelve nieces and nephews. Whatever God put in our genes, He sure put offspring in them. Now Doorlander…. His one daughter can’t have children. And his only son is a fine, cultured gay gentleman who finds horse racing too dirty for his soft hands.” M–III paused. “When Doorlander goes, the Doorlander family will be out of horse racing. We don’t need to be street fighters. Just survivors.”

“Do you really believe that?”

“I know it.”

After a moment of silence, M–III said: “Doorlander isn’t my biggest nightmare.”

“The man trying to send you into bankruptcy isn’t your biggest nightmare? Tell me, what nightmare out of the dozen that keep you awake is your biggest?”

“Outside the gates of this racetrack the game has changed. A corporation makes a decision that threatens to put you out of business and there’s nobody you can call to… hash it out. Today we have to deal with business management graduates interested only in the bottom line. That’s the world… I have to operate in.”

Paul looked down at M–III.

“After I got shipped to ‘Nam, I saw Xavier Lopez take a bullet in the chest. Today, I go to the store to buy a jacket…. I look at the label: ‘Made in Vietnam.’ The war’s over. Business is business.”

“And the Clearys survive… only to pawn the family name for a buck. That is the nightmare that outweighs all the rest.”

M–III swiveled around in the bed to place his feet on the wooden floor. He ran his hands through black hair streaked with gray. He gave a sigh.

“Get me out of here,” he said.

It was training hours at Hickory Downs. Horses were getting exercised out on the track. Jock’s agents were navigating between the barns with young jockeys at their side. No one seemed to notice when Paul Blocker and M–III closed the door behind them and descended the metal steps.

Paul Blocker watched his boss climb into the driver’s side of a security vehicle,
drive through the opened security gate and turn north toward the executive offices.
“At least he let her keep her horses,” he thought.
Then he headed toward Janet Hastings’ barn.
At First There Was Only Night
Ken Massicotte

1) At first there was only night, infinite density expanding, dark matter in outer halos bursting in filaments; before a planetary embryo rammed the earth exploded into moon, and their crusts roiled in a magma sea; 600 million years and the earth pooled a shallow ocean and small islands, swamp, reptiles and in the sand the small bipedal prints.

Take my hand someone gestured. I’m hungry and almost always afraid. I’m lonely, someone tried to say but there were no words. So they sat at night and sang low soothing sounds till they huddled and slept.

2) They ran in packs with darts and slings cool, lithe, relentless; feasted, foraged, and woke some nights from dreams of deadly nightshade, mandrake – canine, feline sailing on the wind stalking prey on trails divined from avian heights, before gods or prophets or laws.
And some sought night in daylight in caves, visions of fractured time in pigment and chisel in stone. A black bull, 17 ft. long hyenas, giant elk pulsing in motion on the damp walls; archers dancing on floating planes poised like hummingbirds – the souls of the slain unbound by death; handprints like prisoners, pleading like ghosts.

3) Look, look, the children cried, leaping off the yellow bus, racing up the prairie drive, sundogs and last night an archer. Diamond dust, said the middle one, chronicler of sky and wonder – summer’s radiant drift of meteor rain, and white pelicans with black tipped wings riding the harvest thermal.

We could have been gods. We scan the galaxies for signs. If they are watching they would see, through thousands of years, temples and shrines, the smoke of sacrifice, the blessed ones with slender limbs and heron’s gait. Celestials calling us trapped like sand in black eddies.
“Edgar I nothing am.” (King Lear II.ii)

My classroom full of seniors
does not know what to do—
this scene too discomforting
for a bright, cold afternoon.
they laugh and call him “crazy,”
“weird”
Edgar coming unto his own
and his own receiving him not
too hunted for unblinking trust
too broken and betrayed
lost in Lear’s immanent cosmos
stripped and bare and flayed
Edgar worse than Bedlam beggar
Edgar nevermore
this Edgar can’t be stomached
nor ignored
so we suppress a distancing yawn or scoff
and disavow our mirror;
refuse to love
this creature too familiar;
and swear,
swear by everything but our souls that he’s now nothing to do with us,
that we simply cannot recognize—
grimed face and elfed hair, rosemary gashes,
a body perilously exposed.
The Birds of Phnom Penh

She felt the desperate flutter of an unfit messenger
Against her caved and earnest hands,
But her eyes stayed fixed
On heaven

As she burdened her winged hope
With dreams and thanks and fears
To be carried high

Above the silt-brown river,
the reticent palace,
and these dusty streets.

We (in this place ever the observed observers)
Witnessed her certainty in this small miracle—
A chance to commune with the object
Of all her fervent belief,
For the price of a small bird.

The sacramental moment unfolded.

We watched her fingers bloom.

But this bird,
Given neither the capacity nor the mandate to love,
Did not soar to God,
But fell back to our earth,
Upon the ground we now all shared,
And preyed upon the garbage at her feet.
Empty Library

“Dort, wo man Büchen verbrennt, verbrennt man am Ende auch Menschen.” – Heinrich Heine

There is space on these white, barren shelves,
For every immolated word
Consumed in their swift, blind sacrifice
On the altar of the self.
There were words that might have seen and known
The spread of the whole world’s fear.
In smoke disappeared Dostoevsky,
And in flames Heine’s warning drowned.
That black night in this now quiet courtyard,
Watching every eager flame dance,
Stood tall students turned into weapons,
With eyes, minds, and hearts grown hard.
Or if not hard—worse—affixed, and one
With a promise and collective vision
Darker than any one of their dreams—
All together, all alone,
All unaware that that first conflagration,
Which burns on within its own tomb
Would, as it was bound to do, outlive
Both their movement and the fear,
Would, in the end, throw constant, smokeless light
Upward at the sun during day,
And would, from beneath the same courtyard,
Disallow complete darkness at night.
Just Lost Children

Two days after Christmas and the cheer has left the driver of Bus 35 from Downtown, Portland. Two young Japanese tourists tenderized into inaction by the driver's beating insistence, voice rising, repetition the only strategy. *Your app is wrong. It's wrong. Ladies, listen. It's w-r-o-n-g!* Passengers laugh in shared shock, Rosa Parks rising to offer her seat, but only my wife Jill helps, bridging the gap of a tiny percent of genetics that justified internment camps, atomic revenge. Jill acts as intermediate, speaking no Japanese, offering a kind voice, enthusiasm, the fairy magic that softens monsters and makes heroes out of hermits. Problem suddenly fixed, the journey continues, the two Japanese students thankful in high pitched delighted voices of children, just lost children.
Suddenly Night

Half an hour ago we were on the front
deck, finishing drinks, watching the sun
purple the sky, blush clouds, butter
golden orange the two softly rounded
buttes opposite, birds darting to safe roosts.
Suddenly night unrolls its darkening cloth.
The first stars proudly lighting the path.
Saturn sneaking through the fir tree.
Cars are bright dots on the distance road
that wriggles the rim of the Columbia river.
Bright house lights and insects clicking.
A single bat drunk on darkness clatters
through its sleepy start. Tree silhouettes
filling shrinking spaces, all to be covered.
Never Left

I call Berlin home
but when called back
I make the same assumption:
I know my home

like the back of my hand.
But this hand
is too lined, older.
I turn it over

as I am turned over
by the same streets
I think I recognize.
I mislay my bearings

long enough to be
young again.
My compass is spun
ninety degrees east

confused by radioactive
memory. A giddy tourist,
I turn to the map,
find the city blurring

sounds of the underground,
street names like siblings,
even the fonts
are family,

lining for my nest.
That wall snaking across
my hand, older,
more lined.
The Singing Sea at Florence, OR

No one is with us. No one is playing that instrument, a hollowed bone horn? No,

the salty wind humming air over strings of stone, thousands of tons of sea

defence boulders hauled in place by bored soldiers. On the abandoned beach

beside us the litter of noisy nights when wind drummed hard, waving trunks bleached

bone grey; jumbled graveyard, of broken limbs, weathered husks. The haunting humming

goes on, the sea listening to its existence echoing inside discarded seashells.

A song of salt wind and sand washed percussion; needing no audience, no applause.
The Freight Train at Night

The young night drips sleep into me. Suddenly a wail waves up six hundred feet from tracks along the far side of the Columbia River. A freight train is slipping through the Gorge, crying through Hood River, headed to Portland. Another wail, a knowing sound that washes over me, resurfacing lost faces seen in dreams, sadness. Fading grumbles, the kilometre of freight tailing off. Night fills me and I sink into the river, searching for the morning.
by Howard Winn

ESTATE SALE

A life is spread out on the lawn and spills over the curb onto the driveway where a worn reclining chair now wears the hand painted sign that proclaims Estate Sale in sprawling red Magic Marker while a middle-aged woman sits in a kitchen chair by a kitchen table waiting covered with the detritus of existence a shiny toaster a waffle maker a steam iron and she is the daughter of the deceased whose estate this is although the quarter acre on which this raised ranch resides is hardly an estate as racks of used clothing near an old bicycle blow in the breezes circulating from the commuting cars hurrying by to live a life that will no doubt come to this though few of the rushing workers have time to consider that fate but it is the middle-aged daughter left behind to sweep up the left over articles who now knows truly that the end requires distribution of the stuff accumulated that seemed necessary at the time but that at the end is just some thing to be disposed of in the inglorious revelations on the green lawn in front of this empty raised ranch where no one lives but memories and objects outworn
HAVE YOU THANKED GOD YET TODAY?

He poses his question on a cardboard sign attached to a broom handle without the brush and waves it at each car that drives by the intersection into the Mall and rattles a can extended into traffic as far as safety allows. We assume he has gotten coins for his message although I would guess he prefers bills but no credit cards accepted on his corner. His clothes are ragged as is his gray beard untrimmed over his torn blue work shirt. His hair is long and uncut as it brushes his shoulders and hides his collar. “Praise God,” he shouts at cars who do not stop but often speed up to get past this figure like a character in a horror movie as he appears about to lurch into the traffic. I drive slowly past to get a better view but he seems to sense a sucker for his pitch so I speed up like many of the others and he gives me the finger in a quite ungodly gesture from some other world or life. As I drive on I wonder if he has thanked God today for his present condition and just what kind of deity is he promoting?
ELECTION

Buy a state governor from our overstock jumble sale. Maybe even a president if you have the cash. They can both be had at a markdown of a few million per gov or pres, but hurry since some are under indictment and the sell-by date is fast approaching. There is still time to arrange a tasteful gerrymandering preparation to suit every palate and pocket book although the purchase may have to include a few state senators as a side dish or antipasto before the main meal, since the bill of fare is not a la carte for the special but a table d'hôte menu. Hurry in to the governor’s bistro. It is not meant for just anyone with desires or needs, but for those special people with champagne taste and the investments to match.
HEARING AID

With a bleep, the hearing aid battery goes dead and the world becomes silent. The listener is warned but given no respite. Birdsong vanishes, as does the power mower in the next yard. The new silence of the solar system seems real without the microphone. People move lips and say nothing. Stars do not resonate in the universe without a detector. Does a tree create a sound if it falls in the forest and no one is there to hear? Speak cliché. Insert new battery and come back to life or its replica.
We walked in the Plunge’s tepid water. Brother Brock, our Church of Christ preacher, condemned mixed bathing. None of us could swim. Instead, we splashed as we moved from the shallow to the deep end where I walked on tiptoes, dipped my face in the water, and emerged, fearing as I sputtered the Lord’s retribution. Still, the mermaid’s enticement prevailed.

Each Father’s Day we futilely swatted at flies and mosquitoes as the sun scorched the tin roof of the Allard Pavilion. Tired of our grumbling about the heat, Mother made Daddy escort us across the road to the rocky bed of the Paluxy River where we waded and rocks scraped the bottom of our feet, but it was water, and the shade was cooler than the pavilion.

After we ate English pea salad and garden fresh green beans with red potatoes, they passed around a tan Stetson hat and asked for donations so they could rent the pavilion next year. Lela Hurley discussed progress in updating the 1942 Allard Book in raw hopes the progeny would some day want to recapture family lore when they could not clearly recite the story of Aunt Sarah sheltering her three children from Indian attack in an unsettled Texas landscape.

Today, by FB we share a group photo of the 1956 reunion where my great-grandmother had passed away recently. A distant Missouri cousin attended. Daddy held me and my sister. A sultry breeze nipped at Mother’s neck—or that is the story I self-create—Mrs. Joiner (my grandmother) clutched a vinyl dark purse. Her brother Uncle Ray in khakis smelled of lighter fluid and made plans to hunt and fish with the Bass Brothers at Cousin Jack Langdon’s Granbury lake house. Although there was no lineal connection, Langdons often gathered with the Allards since two Langdon sisters and a cousin married three Allard brothers, one couple being Mrs. Joiner’s parents.
She desperately clung to fading traditions.
Her grandfather fought in the last Civil War battle.
Tough as saddle bags, a great uncle brewed coffee
While Indian arrows landed almost at his back.
In olden times the reunion lasted a whole weekend.
Some of her aunts and uncles rented cabins at Oak Dale Park,
And children didn’t clamor to walk in the tepid water of the Plunge.

So much we should have realized while we
changed into our polyester swimsuits
and inhaled thick minerals that real swimmers easily adapted to.
before hey crossed over the concrete barrier to swim in nine feet water
or to dive from the board into the water, to emerge later.

*The name Allard is derived from two old Gaulist words: "all-eor" which means "very strong,"
interpreted as a mark by some of robust physique; by others, as a symbol of moral worth: nobleness
of soul, bravery in combat.
“Death, be not proud.”

I thought Paladin wrote
The words he recited.
He carried a calling card
And sold his services
For one-thousand dollars.

Daddy measured Jolly Time Popcorn
Into the crusted-coal pressure cooker
He added the just-right amount
Of oil and salt, but no oleo-margarine
He held tight to the handle
While he coddled the pressure cooker
And turned it upside down and shook
Popped corn into Mother's
Largest mixing bowl
She handed us each unmatched
Cereal bowls and doled out
Portions which we munched on
And then came back for more
This was our Saturday night supper—
And we drank Coca-cola or Dr. Pepper

In love with words and ideas,
I counted days till once again
Paladin composed verbal images.
My sisters endured him as they waited
For Mr. Dillon’s opening duel
And for Festus and Doc Adams
To verbally jab each other
Like Moe physically maimed
The other two stooges.

Our Saturday nights ended:
Twenty-Mule Team Borax
The Old Ranger, then Ronald Reagan
Death Valley Days. And taxidermists
Cleaned skull cavities with borax
To mount one more rhino
Slain on safari by Americans
Who also paid for services rendered.
Where

Did I get lost in the fever,
behind the smiles, between the pins,
the doubts & prayers, the middle
of rust, amazed at anguish,
deception, the green?

I’m not beside the dirge,
the ruthless, above disgust,
adhered to absence, mixed
with ashes, horror & delirium.

I’m not with my shadow,
my gestures, beyond my norms,
in the depths of slumber,
my echo & vagaries.

I’m sure I that I’m there.
I'm lost.
Toilets

I’m in love
with a homeless man.
We’ve got a lot

in common,
lawyers politicians
rejection.

We have heated discussions
about the face-fucking
activity in D.C. toilets.

But when he grabs
my dick & licks my nipples
it’s just me & him
Taurus

after looking at a Remedios Varo painting

What delirious dream drew your yellow figure,
winged bull, feminine face, horse legs, sad look and mustache
you rise lost in self-created limbo
expelled from your house, the second in the zodiacal path
away from your earth element
you cross with visible resignation the constellations of the canvas
and there is not enough space for you in catalogs and scholarly classifications there
are no phrases that translate your drama using other phrases
because the astral loneliness that you inhabit is only yours
you come to me with an ignited arrow narrowly missing my eyes
you come from the pit of the past, a dark bird carrying charcoal wounds in its beak
you talk to me about the internal scorch that crying leaves
the tedium that engulfs us for several days making it impossible to speak to others
the links found between the departure of the man I loved (also Taurus)
and your pathetic sovereignty in the void
the memory that moves away slowly like a beggar tired of alms
somehow all this abandoned you at last
and blood nebula covers your body.
THE COMMON DENOMINATOR OF NOTHING

So dark a substance
in such fecund space,

small, fragile things
in a lingering universe,

Emily captured
solitary white moths,

and Sylvia chased
breathless black bees;

both knew in the end
the feeling

of nothingness
was better shut in,

but the feeling is best
when dead.
GETTING READY TO GO OUT

The evening sky, wet-cement gray, is upside-down deep, moist and heated. Depressed and listening to the cicada-mimicking buzz-hissing of his shaver in the bedroom, I watch yet another jagged-edged streak bolt down, hear the electric, growling roar bounce off the wall directly beyond the window above my nice, warm bath; I lie still in soapless water and wait until another strike shakes my submerged soul.
THE NATURE OF NEURONS

It’s as if the inner self bleeds
a shadow through the light
blue backdrop, scoria hillside,
subtle shades of fertile green;
while it tends to lend more
to this urbanless scene,
bending endless projections
onto the mental screen,
my soul is not the gentle
artwork of any landscape
but a looming lens
that makes the beauty
seem strangely dark—one
more human mind never so
designed to define a world
shaped outside its grasp.
NOTES TO SELF ON GOALS

A bad goal is to use a meter for monitoring existence, blood pressure or glucose numbers that set your day, your mood, or your tolerance for host servers that go down just when you need them to function; the world is virtually never what you expect with all this technology defining reality; a good goal is to place it all in perspective.
SLAVES OF MODIFICATION

Everything wants life, even captive viruses, so they succumb to human whims that translate their lives into controlled scientific servitude, arriving at the splice site, carrying donor DNA into foreign cells—hosts to transformation to code and replicate and replicate.
A Privileged Poet

Everything’s dying and passing
and it’s only maybe
just a little sweet. I mean,
we’ve pretty much plucked
that grape an squeezed it through.
Luckily, I want to be who I am,
diagnosed with several ailments
and able to stay moody all day.
I am beset on all sides
by people who resent the Given
and the light.

Back in the day, I don’t
want to be about time. I was
old and now I’m young, or the
opposite, whatever. Don’t blame
me when the wind comes in
and my thoughts get untethered.
I need a helmet to filter this stuff.
Releasement? I’m a sorrowful bird
getting ice water at the Ritz-Carlton.
I’ve seen guys less sick than I
end up in supported housing. And I scored
some stepped-on stuff in Washington Square
and everyone said “Cuckoo” and I said
“Are you guys messing with me” and
I guess when I end up heating a can of
beans over a fire in a barrel and haven’t had
my meds in a week and I begin
to hallucinate it will be time to worry
about what idiot jackass is running the country.
I'm Fascinated by My Illness

I was set alight, I was totally
being there. They got, on the other hand,
one thing terribly wrong:
I never said
I was a speleologist;
I said
I was *like* a speleologist. And you
can take that to mean
amphora or aporia.
I never thought it could happen again.
Maybe it hasn’t. Maybe not in “Reality.”

I came too early, too early, to
the family reunion. I was getting
glimpses of the other world. I was
like the albatross. There was no
explanation, no reason, but I still
had to conclude everything was beautiful.
I was ravaged under the Kincaid print.
I was beat down by the potato salad.
Later, displaced in the periphery, it
no longer mattered whether I was right or wrong.

“What doom and gloom,” my Dead Dad said.
“All of your songs are slow and sad.”
But I was a bird-like anomaly! All my
people came from Liverpool through West Virginia
and they were all ready to revolt. They drank
in bars with dirt floors and fought in the
lowest ranks. So I’m the multi-colored sheep,
coronated on the manicured lawn as I roll one.
I celebrate your attempts and ability to graduate from the foster care system. Here's your cap a gown, your diploma, a speech in your honor, for surviving an hour, a day, years of the unspeakable and then having the courage to stand up for yourself. I applaud you wildly for fighting for your physical and mental health, you're sobriety, your education, your selfhood. Bedwetting, food hoarding, flashbacks, night terrors, temper tantrums, selective mutism. When five years old you wore three layers of clothing. Protection? Ha! Lie, steal, smear shit on the walls. Who wouldn't?

Here's that athletic scholarship. Honestly, who could run away, pack, eat, size up a shelter faster than you? Couldn't keep your grades up to play sports? Well darn those pesky social workers - talk about interference. Too busy playing dead anyway. That's a game you learned well. I say you earned one of those full free rides. Well, not exactly free.

Plaques, awards, trophies in your honor for having the guts to go to therapy, scratching for the money to pay for it. One wildflower at a time, no rose strewn path. You found your trail with a pickaxe, one inch at a time, after mining the depths of your soul. Here's a bed of roses for the tenacity to get up every day and go to work, often two jobs, while going to school. One class at a time. Some classes twice. Gathered your bouquet one flower at a time. Struggled with speech, reading and writing; diagnosis this diagnosis that. Meth mother and lost siblings interfere with your concentration? Fake it till you make it while having to swallow the truth. What a performance. Red carpet made of blood. No childhood photos (well, no childhood) but you can took at People magazine. Celebrity selflies. Hey, can I have your autograph?

Behind bars again? I give you the keys to the city. Unlock the horrors of your mind, open the collective heart.

For your patience for having to listen to insufferable, ignorant, painful remarks, I dedicate a symphony to you. Here are the season tickets to the opera. You could write your own.

Pomp and circumstance, parades and confetti. Phi Beta Kappa "The love of wisdom the guide of life." You are a society of the hardest won wisdom. Impressive--your resolve for understanding and your determination to know your dignity. I crown you with a wreath of laurel leaves. Here is your honorary degree. You know so much. You know what's wrong. And it's not you.
Coring the Moon
Selected Poems by Kenneth Frost

Some insights by Carolyn Gelland into seven poems

The dreamy person who sits at a desk, pen in hand, year after year, seems an unlikely hero, and yet he is. "Only the poem can record the dream," as Keats observed. It is exhilarating to participate in a kind of reality that eludes explanation. Frost's deep reading of philosophy opens up for him in his poems the psyches of Wittgenstein, Nietzsche, Kurt Godel; his experience of military combat and injury are relived and more profoundly understood in the persons of Nathan Bedford Forrest, Richard the Lionhearted, an assassin, and others; years lived in his native New York City yield a kind a jazzy rhythm and edge to his poems; and, more recently, Maine offers visions of deer, coyotes, snow, the moon, silence, a chance to dig deep.

In his poem "Wittgenstein in Norway," the inner life of a famously intense thinker is depicted with a profound emotional identification.

WITTGENSTEIN IN NORWAY

The sun loses control of day on the lake ice, banging a drum with a blackjack till a mad dog crouches beside me stretching his eyeteeth in icicles.
A single cloud,
a damaged hemisphere,
floats over my head.
I think alone,
sing alone,
eat and talk alone,
wear the smile
twelve-year-olds
smile,
while my fellow
logician,
Bach, instructs
the glass harmonica
of the dog’s teeth.

Wittgenstein worked in philosophy at a depth that was close to poetry, and that is why "the sun loses/ control of day," and day--or logic--escapes into mystery. Yet the process of thinking at that level is such hard work that the sun bangs "a drum/ with a blackjack/ till a mad dog" seems to crouch "beside me/ stretching/ his eyeteeth/ in icicles."

In the next stanza we glimpse the vulnerability of the genius who has almost wrecked himself in strenuous intellectual work asA single cloud,a damaged hemisphere, floats over my head--certainly the protagonist's mental state, along with the loneliness:

I think alone,
sing alone,
eat and talk alone

and the seeming imbecility of the philosopher in his otherness who

wear(s) the smile
twelve-year-olds
smile.

The strange music of new relationships of thought richly references Bach, the closest of all musicians to Wittgenstein in his approach to composition, Bach, his "fellow logician." The bubbling sound of the glass harmonica suggests springs of thought and inner life juxtaposed with the menace of the dog's teeth, like icicles, or terror of madness.
The baby was born with a toy trumpet for a mouth. We fed him milk through the brass nipple till he burped on his own.

He cried. Crying mastered the horn,

summoned all the people to the swaying hills.

The childhood of a gifted person is described in the form of a fairy-tale in this poem. In contrast to the complexity of "Wittgenstein in Norway," we are told quite directly the astonishing fact that

The baby was born with a toy trumpet for a mouth.

We know, therefore, that the baby had been given his musical gift at birth and as such was unlike all others, with his unusual mouth. As parents, "we" had to improvise as we cared for our sacred monster, our prodigy:

We fed him milk through the brass nipple till he burped on his own.

He cried.
He cried like a normal baby, but also, in the case of this special baby, "Crying/
mastered the horn." What does that mean? That by crying and experiencing life, and
also "crying" because of the hard work required to "master the horn," he became an
artist, a "master." And, as a "master," he had authority. He attracted and

summoned
all the people
to the swaying
hills.

--a happy Chagall-like ending to the poem: fame, success, crowds swaying and
dancing, even the hills swaying to his music. Slipped into the fable-poem is a
cautionary note about the irremediable singularity, even oddity, of the artist, and the
cost to him and those around him of nurturing his gift.

*                   *                     *

LINDBERGH'S LAST FLIGHT

Some Chinese emperor
had a sword sharp enough
not to disturb a hair.
He gave the victim snuff.
The victim sneezed his head
into a basket, taught
himself words for the dead
and went into the thought.
His thoughts had walked on sand
suspending the Red Sea
as though a flash compound,
flesh and eternity,
were normal, kind and slow.
Death felt he had out-tricked
me fifty years ago.
I jet to you, old fact.
A subtle and wide-ranging metaphysical synthesis of a folk-tale from China and the story of Exodus along with Lindbergh's last flight, the poem devolves from a "victim" who had so cunningly been decapitated yet whose thoughts nevertheless had supernaturally suspended the Red Sea to a world-famous and world-weary superhero for whom life, after his solo trans-Atlantic flight, was an anti-climax, for whom, indeed, the "flash compound,/ flesh and eternity" of heroism was anything but "normal, kind and slow."

*                      *                      *

An eleven-word poem which includes its title, "The Assassin" is a psychological thriller with an extreme understatedness which enhances the menace.

THE ASSASSIN

lays
one
hand
on
the
clock,
pets
its
daggers.

There are no ornaments or descriptions here. The laconic narrative vibrates like a drum in the tension between compactness of form and the suggestion of imminent offstage violence in the content.

"The assassin/ lays/ one/ hand/ on/ the/ clock"

He is on schedule; in his preternatural probably drugged calm, we feel the weight of his existential and radical rage, loneliness and egotism. He "pets" the hour- and minute-hands that remind him reassuringly of daggers, his weapons. In this he is childlike and naive--for him the daggers are like toys or pets--his mode of interaction in an unreal world.

*                      *                      *
NIETZSCHE IN ROME

Dazzled by crystals,
I unpack time.
Mirages help me,
waving their hips like Salome wooing
the Baptist's head,
just holding
on to the
magnetic hair.
I am not here
to be
somewhere.
I am here
to be mad.

Nietzsche could be considered a philosophic assassin ("God is dead"), and like the assassin in the previous poem, he is mad, though in Nietzsche's case, he is mad in the wilderness of his intellectual brilliance. That is why he is "dazzled by crystals" and seduced by mirages "waving their hips/ like Salome wooing/ the Baptist's head"--drawn to, and repelled by, the "magnetic hair."

Inspiration for this poem is found in some correspondence between Nietzsche and Strindberg, each man pushing sanity to the outer limits to explore what insights might be revealed in that uncharted, dazzlingly heretical territory that could not be found on any map:

I am not here
to be
somewhere.
I am here
to be mad.

* * *
TIME ON ITS OWN

Did you ever drift
like smoke
from the will's
cremation in a cigarette?
If I were anywhere
to be found
I would think
something through
the universe
grinning like skidmarks from a tire.

Somewhere beyond
my centipede of echoes
someone insists, "Climb higher, a circus dive
will pull along
cold feet."

Time is on its own,
it comes on
swaying,
slowly pawing the ground,
searching the world like trash.

Andrei Tarkovsky, the Russian film director, writes in his book *Sculpting in Time*, "Time is necessary to man, so that, made flesh, he may be able to recognize himself as a personality.... Time is a state: the flame in which there lives the salamander of the human soul.... Time cannot vanish without a trace, for it is a subjective, spiritual category; and the time we have lived settles in our soul as an experience placed within time."
Likewise in this poem, in the suspension of time drifting "like smoke"; or in the abrogation of time, as in "Time is on its own," the person, if he could be found, would grin "like skid marks from a tire." Haunted by a "centipede of echoes" goading him to undertake meaningless circus dives even though his fears, his "cold feet," need to be pulled along, he is lost, nowhere, as untethered time, "time on its own...swaying,/ slowly paw(s) the ground,/ searching the world like trash."

*                       *                  *

TUMBLEWEED

Tumbleweed
a burning bush talking to itself

burning bush
tumbleweed

Will I wake up
in the jazz band at desperation's core

Tumbleweed is a diaspore that, once it is mature and dry, dies to itself, detaches from its root or stem and tumbles away in the wind. Despite its apparent aimless uselessness, the tumbleweed is here elevated to the status of a burning bush, the bush which enunciates the name of God. However, since no one is visibly present "at desperation's core," it appears to talk to itself. The question of whether "I" will wake up to listen to this cosmic conversation between heaven and earth is left as open and unpunctuated as the improvisational music played by the jazz band, each instrument playing a riff off the other.
Smallwood:
How did you decide on Franz Kafka for your new poetry collection?

Skillman:
I read “Metamorphosis” again, and was very taken with it. After a span of thirty years since the last reading, the story took on new dimensions. Then I read “The Stoker,” “The Judgment,” and “Letter to His Father,” as these have been reissued in a new edition titled *The Sons* (Schocken Books, Inc., 1989). After a visit to San Francisco, I wrote “Kafka’s Wound” and continued to find myself thinking and writing about Kafka. It took awhile before I realized the series might become a collection.

Smallwood:
What are some of the most interesting things about him you discovered?

Skillman:
I learned that his relationship with his father was extremely complicated, and that helped my understanding of his work. In addition, he suffered greatly from intense
sensitivities as well as, of course, the chronic illness of consumption/tuberculosis. His passion to write, his insomnia, and the hours he kept made me feel some identification with him, and I continued to read more of his letters. In this regard the book *Franz Kafka: Letters to Friends, Family, and Editors* was invaluable (transl. Richard and Clara Winston, Schocken Books, NY, 1977).

I was surprised to find that Kafka felt such self contempt that he viewed himself as a son who should be sacrificed, as in the Biblical story of Abraham and Isaac. At the point I learned this I’d written a couple poems on that very subject, and experienced the sense of an encounter with the author, apart from space-time.

Smallwood:
The Notes section in the back of *Kafka’s Shadow* (3 pages) share some of the scholarship necessary for such an ambitious collection. How long did it take to write the book?

Skillman:  
*Kafka’s Shadow* took about three years to complete. As mentioned earlier, the book *Letters to Friends, Family, and Editors* provided inspiration when coupled with his stories and, especially, “Letter to His Father.” The interest and support of my writing groups and colleagues, in particular Christianne Balk, provided impetus to continue.

Smallwood::
When and how did you begin your interest in translations? What classes did you take in languages?

Skillman:
My interest in translation began when I went to the University of Washington in 1994–95, ostensibly to get a PhD in Comparative Literature. That journey didn’t work out, but in the process I fell in love with the theory and art of translation. I have taken French and lived in Paris for three months—just long enough to become a Francophile.

Smallwood:
You have been nominated for the Pushcart, Best of the Web. Please share how you came to be a poet? What other kinds of writing do you do?

Skillman:
I began writing in a journal in high school, but even before that, I had an elementary school teacher who taught poetry. And while my parents were both scientific (PhD’s in physics and math), they were also avid readers and lovers of music and all the arts. They took us to plays and concerts. I think the years of voracious reading likely determined my interest in literature.

I have written fiction and non-fiction as well. A ‘how to’: *Broken Lines—The Art & Craft of Poetry* is the most serious effort I’ve made so far in non-fiction. There are many
projects I would like to pursue, but the reality is one has to pick and choose.

Smallwood:
What poets have influenced you the most?

Skillman:
There are so many! In particular I like the associative poets, among them Celan, Vallejo, Transtromer, RenÈ Char, and Franz Wright. I taught a “Great American Poets” course for several quarters and fell again for Williams, Bishop, Dickinson, Plath, Stevens, Eliot, Pound, et al. I also feel a great affinity for Jack Gilbert’s work. Roethke, Beth Bentley, Nelson Bentley, Stafford, Wagoner—all the Northwest poets. Milosz, Levine, Edith Sodergran, Adrienne Rich, Cavafy, Lucille Clifton. Wakoski, and all the beat poets. The thing is to continue reading, knowing one will never plumb the extant canon of virtuoso poetry.

Smallwood:
How do you decide the number of stanzas, length of lines in your poems: what is your progression, steps, in composing?

Skillman:
Generally a poem begins as a fragment and then gathers steam. There are times when the form pours out with the poem, (a poem pours out fully formed) but those are rare and far between. I like to follow David Wagoner’s advice—take of your censorial hat when you write, let it sit, and then go back to the piece with your editorial hat. To write anything at all one must be in a receptive frame of mind, and not add judgments as to whether the would be poem is ‘good’ or ‘bad.’ The formal arrangement can come later. Exceptions abound, however. If you want to write a sonnet, villanelle or other set form, then you have to be intentional: count beats and employ rhyme and/or half rhymes.

Smallwood:
What is your usual writing schedule for the day?

Skillman:
I don’t adhere to a strict schedule. There are days when I revise, and days when I explore other forms of art, such as painting. Writing requires wide reading as well—it all takes time—so flexibility is key. Simply maintaining the body, house, and extended family takes longer as I get older, so there are periods when writing happens only in the mind, with ideas. If that kind of ‘air creativity’ becomes more serious it might take the form of note-taking, marginalia, and/or soft research. When I feel the need to stop what I’m doing and write, I take that
seriously.

Smallwood:
Have you begun working on another collection?

Skillman:
Yes! I have a collection seeking a publisher. It has been a finalist at a few contests. Time will tell. Writing poems includes so many aspects; publishing so many facets. I feel lucky and blessed to be have been given the chance to write.

* * *

One of the many awards that noted American poet, Judith Skillman has received is from the Academy of American Poets for Storm while Red Town, and Prisoner of the Swifts were Washington State Book Award finalists. Her poems have been included in such journals as Shenandoah, Prairie Schooner, FIELD and her collaborative translations in various journals; she’s in Best Indie Verse of New England. Her latest full poetry collection is Kafka’s Shadow. Deerbrook Editions, Cumberland, Maine; 77 pages; $16.95; paperback; 2017. ISBN 978-0-9975051-4-6

https://www.amazon.com/Kafkas-Shadow-Judith-Skillman/dp/0997505141

http://thebookendsreview.com/2017/10/18/interview-w-judith-skillman/
Fans can visit her on www.judithskillman.com
Eliot’s Waste Land and Modern Civilization
Mohammad Rokanuzzaman

T.S. Eliot was one of the eminent and prominent figures as a poet of war who was able to depict the real picture of the crises time known as ‘Age of Worry’. Though he created the great work The Waste Land in 1922, he could predict what will be happened in the near future. Eliot was successfully able to connect the then existing panorama with the modern age by using ‘mythical method’. He would like to follow the poem and connects existing panoramic setbacks of modern life to antiquities. Thus, it implies a reproachful question on modernism. Exposing a picture of mundane wasteland that symbolically suggests the spiritual death of modern men, Eliot ties the malaise with the eternal human problem and looks east for a possible remedy.

He portrayed regeneration and hopefulness seems far-fetched. It portrays the world where tension, anxiety, depression, unrest above all an extreme decay of morality non-hygienic environment. The postwar disillusionment of the 1920s led many literary figures to voice out the predicament and moral dilemma that modern life faces. Of many poets of war, T.S. Eliot is a distinguished figure and a leading voice in picturing the crises of the time known as ‘age of worry’. His groundbreaking poem, The Waste Land (1922) appears like an earthquake and deconstructs the structure of modernism and everything it offered. It portrays a claustrophobic world where regeneration and hopefulness seem far-fetched. This ‘disease of the age’ becomes the core issue of the poem. Eliot follows the ‘mythical method’ in the poem and connects existing panoramic setbacks of modern life to antiquities. Thus, it implies a reproachful question on modernism. Exposing a picture of mundane wasteland that symbolically suggests the spiritual death of modern men, Eliot ties the malaise with the eternal human problem and looks east for a possible remedy.

\[\text{Burning burning burning burning} \]
\[O \text{ Lord Thou pluckest me out} \]
\[O \text{ Lord Thou pluckest} \]
\[\text{Burning} \]
\[\text{The Fire Sermon (308-311), The Waste Land}\]

The burning of this passage might make us think of hellfire but it also may refer to the "Fire Sermon" from which the name of the poem has been selected. The “Fire Sermon” is not actually a Christian reference, but an allusion to the spiritual teacher Buddha, who taught people to resist their worldly appetites for sex, money, and power in order to live a life of peace. From this point onward, "The Waste Land" starts to look at non-Christian religions as potential places of rebirth for Western culture. Eliot
especially seems to like the idea of asceticism, which means giving up all worldly pleasures in order to pursue a life of spiritual enlightenment. If today’s Western culture is any indication, though, Eliot might have lost that battle.

\[\text{But at my back in a cold blast I hear} \]
\[\text{The rattle of the bones, and chuckle spread from ear to ear.}\]

\[\text{The Fire Sermon, The Waste Land}\]

Lifelessness and Futility of the Modern Life in \textit{The Waste Land}\n
The poem displays the disillusionment, hopelessness, failure, and cynicism of modern life. Throughout the poem, we have experienced the same failure in different mood and situation. Loss of faith is one of the worst features that modern life is bearing in its heart. This is why the poet looks forward to seeing another regeneration of modern lives: “In light of the desolation of the West, Eliot feels that another Renaissance is necessary; the preceding one more Western society from its root, the Christian religion.” (Hentea 317-18). Eliot strives for unfolding the predicaments and having a solution to them. The Waste Land is an expedition of “human failure and of perennial quest for salvation” (Bhagawati 337). Below is a brief description of these crises that prevails the poem.

Not only in the wasteland Eliot’s greatest work but it may also be considered among the greatest work of all modernist literature around the problems especially the emotional and spiritual crises that engulfed Europe after the First World War. The poem's epigraph is taken from the satirical whom the Sibyl (a woman with prophetic powers who ages but never dies) took at the future and proclaims that she only wants to die. The sibyl predicament mirrors what Eliot sees as his own, living in a culture that has decayed and withered but will not expire and he is forced to live with reminders of its former glory.

Greatly influenced by Jessie Weston’s from Ritual to Romance and Sir Jone Frazier’s, “The Golden Bough” the wasteland brings in the ancient fertility rituals in modern thought and religion to seek out a solution for the diseased modern world. Particular focus has been given on the story of the fisher king. According to myths either the king or his soldier raped the runs of the holy chapel and the act resulted, into his impotency and the drought and bareness of his country. Eliot pieces up the wasteland of the Fisher King as an appropriate description of the state of modern society. The important difference, of course, is that in Eliot’s world there is no way to heal the Fisher King; perhaps there is not Fisher king at all. The disease is too complicated in this world because it involves entitling generation and the whole continent.
The first section of "The Burial of the Dead" can be seen as a modified dramatic monolog where the four speakers find themselves surrounded by dead people and imprisoned by circumstances like wars. It is almost like the problems of Eliot’s other bore perforce who could not communicate with the world around him. It opens with a reference to Chaucer’s Canterbury Tales. In this case, though April is not the happy month of pilgrimages and storytelling. It is instead the time when the land should be regenerating a long winter:

April is the cruelest month, breeding  
Lilacs out of the dead land, mixing  
Memory and desire stirring........  
Winter kept us warm........

But for the people modern world regeneration is painful, for, it brings back reminders of a more fertile and happier past. In the modern world, winter, the time of forgetfulness and members, is indeed preferable. Marie’s childhood recollections are also painful: The simple world of cousins sledding, and coffee in the park has been replaced by a complex set of emotional and political consequence resulting from the war.

The two woman of the second section of the poem represent the two sides of modern sexuality; white one side of this sexuality is ban and self-destruction, the other is rampant sex life associated with a lack of culture and rapid aging. The first woman is associated by allusion with Cleopatra or Dedo, two great queens who committed suicide for love. The second women lie has done everything the right way married supported her soldier husband, born children yet she is being punished by her body. Interestingly, these section ends with a line echoing Ophelia’s suicide speech in “Hamlet” which links lie to the woman in the first section of the poem, who has also been compared to famous female suicides, the regenerative quality is lacking in these women because they have not been able to have meaningful relationships simply because they don’t know. The opening two stanzas of “The Fire Sermon” describe the ultimate” wasteland” as Eliot sees it:

The river's tent is broken: the last fingers of leaf  
Clutch and sink into the wet bank. The wind  
Crosses the brown land, unheard. The nymphs are departed.  
The Fire Sermon, The Waste Land

Shantih shantih shantih  
What the Thunder Said (433-434), The Waste Land
In the concluding lines, Eliot pronounces six words the Hindu spiritual texts, the *Upanishads*. The first three words mean "Giving," "compassion," and "self-control," while the last three are a repetition of Shantih, which means "The peace which passeth all understanding." This might actually be the closest the Eliot ever gets to hopefulness in this poem, which is saying a lot. Now that we modern folks have lost our cultural memory, Eliot wonders if maybe we might be able to look to other cultures for spiritual wisdom. There is no confusion in the final section of "The Waste Land" that really gets behind the idea of overcoming individual ego, giving up any quest for individual greatness, and living a life of peace and compassion.

April is the cruelest month,
Breeding lilacs out of the dead land,
Mixing memory and desire,
Stirring dull roots with spring rain.” (ll. 1–4)

The theme of “The Waste Land” represents Eliot’s intention as one of the most important modern poems. The work also addresses modernity and the lost connection to high culture and fine art. Eliot’s concept of utopia was rapidly drifting even as he created this piece. The poem seems confusing even to the most attentive audiences. Eliot portrays the images like classic literature which alienates many readers. The literature referenced pans across various cultures even including foreign languages. The use of a variety of works created what Pericles Lewis calls a “collage of poetic fragments to create the sense of speaking for an entire culture in crisis.” Eliot challenged the audience to critically analyze the poem in hopes of sparking a connection to a dying tradition. Lewis continues to explain how “the poet seeks to address modern problems—the war, industrialization, abortion, urban life-and at the same time to participate in a literary tradition.” The *Waste Land*'s coded language initially seems jumbled; however, under the obscure references is a vital message.

And I will show you something different from either
Your shadow at morning striding behind you
Or your shadow at evening rising to meet you;
I will show you fear in a handful of dust. (ll 27–30)

The poem has been composed into five parts and each part contains different speakers, time, and location. The poem quickly leaves behind even the most skilled reader as Eliot seamlessly makes his transitions. The opening of the poem is called “The Burial of The Dead” and is seemingly the easiest to follow. However, the tone is
sober as there is continuously referencing to death and rebirth. Nature is used as a vehicle to explain the endless cycle which seems to exhaust the speaker. Section one dives into deep childhood memories that show a clear yearning due to unmet desires. Yet even this portion that initially is simple to follow shifts into what appears to be a completely different work.

Eliot visits various topics throughout the next four sections. The topics range from Greek mythology, lackluster sexual encounters, and death of a sailor. Throughout the three middle portions, the shifts and allusions are almost impossible to follow during the first read as “the fragments merge with one another, pass into one another” (Levenson). This proves Eliot to be successful in his attempt to force the reader to be conscientious. While reading one is left with this overwhelming spinning sensation as each speaker seems to be begging to be heard. This could be a direct connection to Eliot’s personal feelings of the decline of humanity that he is witnessing. Lewis best explains this by describing:

*The method of assembling “fragments” or “broken images” from the past into a sort of mosaic allows him at once to suggest parallels between contemporary problems and earlier historical situations and to disorient the reader, turning the reading process into a model of modern, urban confusion. It parallels the cubist use of collage, calling attention to the linguistic texture of the poem itself and to the material.*

Like Matthew Arnold and Theodor W. Adorno, Eliot also appreciated the diligence of thought and attention to culture and art. The poem functions as an outlet for Eliot’s anxieties around the loss of cultural and moral identity or moral degradation. He is vocalizing his distaste for his surroundings in the Post World War I. The title The Waste Land describes his sentiments of the dry infertile world. The world that “lacks traditional structures of authority and belief”, thus, only containing “soil that may not be conducive to new growth” (Lewis). Section five of the poem reconnects to the initial ideas found in section one. Eliot Says:

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“There is not even silence in the mountains
But dry sterile thunder without rain
There is not even solitude in the mountains (ll 341–343)
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Various metaphors have been used to describe the moral degradation taking place in life. Eliot’s writing techniques are unique in style as he contrasts popular culture to ancient culture in a deliberate attempt to disorient the reader. The text is truly arrogant as only a few are meant to understand and grasp the fragmented work. Eliot uses his knowledge of the literary canon to address the downfall of humanity due to greed, and the need for instant satisfaction. One could argue that Eliot is speaking directly to the
public or to no one at all. His message would likely fall upon deaf ears, or ears unable to decode his complex language. The writing is, in reality, a modern one as he uses different imagery, switching of characters, and intentional fragmentation. All of these techniques are used to declare his objections of the morally corrupt world. Thomas Eliot’s Utopia was rapidly slipping away as a dystopian world full of culture that now “impresses the same stamp on everything” (Adorno) emerged.
BELIEF & TECHNIQUE FOR MODERN PROSE
Jack Kerouac

1. Scribbled secret notebooks, and wild typewritten pages, for yr own joy
2. Submissive to everything, open, listening
3. Try never get drunk outside yr own house
4. Be in love with yr life
5. Something that you feel will find its own form
6. Be crazy dumb saint of the mind
7. Blow as deep as you want to blow
8. Write what you want bottomless from bottom of the mind
9. The unspeakable visions of the individual
10. No time for poetry but exactly what is
11. Visionary tics shivering in the chest
12. In tranced fixation dreaming upon object before you
13. Remove literary, grammatical and syntactical inhibition
14. Like Proust be an old tea head of time
15. Telling the true story of the world in interior monolog
16. The jewel center of interest is the eye within the eye
17. Write in recollection and amazement for yourself
18. Work from pithy middle eye out, swimming in language sea
19. Accept loss forever
20. Believe in the holy contour of life
21. Struggle to sketch the flow that already exists intact in mind
22. Don't think of words when you stop but to see picture better
23. Keep track of every day the date emblazoned in yr morning
24. No fear or shame in the dignity of yr experience, language & knowledge
25. Write for the world to read and see yr exact pictures of it
26. Bookmovie is the movie in words, the visual American form
27. In praise of Character in the Bleak inhuman Loneliness
28. Composing wild, undisciplined, pure, coming in from under, crazier the better
29. You're a Genius all the time
30. Writer-Director of Earthly movies Sponsored & Angeled in Heaven
CONTRIBUTORS


I live in New Jersey with my dead dog and four live plants

In 2006 The Backwaters Press published his first book of poems titled, Dare. He has worked as a truck driver, weed whacker, garbage man, teacher, tutor, substitute teacher, and administrator. He has taught creative writing at the University of Arkansas, University of Nebraska at Omaha, and at Creighton University.
His awards include an Intro Journals Award for Poetry from AWP, two Lily Peter Fellowships, the Holt Prize for Poetry, and National Finalist for the Ruth Lily Prize. In 2003, he received an encouragement award from the Nebraska Arts Council. He was nominated for a Pushcart prize in 2014.


Magdalena Randal is a European correspondent for the Saltwire news service in Nova Scotia, Canada. She also writes a bimonthly column from Paris, France for the New Glasgow Evening News.
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Mitchell Krockmalnik Grabois  has had over twelve-hundred of his poems and fictions appear in literary magazines in the U.S. and abroad, including GINOSKO. He has been nominated for numerous prizes. His novel, Two-Headed Dog, based on his work as a clinical psychologist in a state hospital, is available for Kindle and Nook, or as a print edition. To see more of his work, google Mitchell Krockmalnik Grabois. He lives in Denver.

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Rod Zink  is an Assistant Professor of English and Humanities at Penn State Harrisburg. In addition to Creative Writing, he teaches courses and conducts scholarship in the fields of Composition Studies, Technical Writing, New Literacies, and Genre Theories. Besides writing, teaching, and his research, Rod enjoys collecting typewriters and the convergence of art, earth, the human animal, and all things mechanical, which is often
expressed through the creation of his metal sculptures, which adorn the walls, tables
floors, and ceilings of his apartment.

Sean Jackson’s debut novel, *Haw*, was published in June 2015 by Harvard Square
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Street Rag, The Potomac Review, Niche*, and *Cleaver*, among other literary
magazines. He was a 2011 Million Writers Award nominee.

John Zedolik  For thirteen years John taught English and Latin in a private school.
Eventually, he wrote a dissertation that focused on the pragmatic comedy of the
Canterbury Tales, thereby completing his Ph.D. in English. He has had many jobs in
his life including archaeological field assistant, obituary writer, and television-screen-
factory worker, which—he hopes—have contributed in positive and intriguing ways to
his writing. He has had poems published in such journals as *The Alembic, Ascent
Aspirations (CAN), The Chaffin Journal, Common Ground Review, The Journal (UK),
Pulsar Poetry Webzine (UK), Third Wednesday, Transom*, and in the *Pittsburgh Post-
Gazette*. He also has numerous poems forthcoming this year and next in a variety of
publications. His iPhone is now his primary poetry notebook, and he hopes his use of
technology in regard to this ancient art form continues to be fruitful.

Mileva Anastasiadou is a neurologist, living and working in Athens, Greece. Her work
can be found in many journals and anthologies, such as the *Molotov Cocktail, Maudlin
house, Menacing Hedge, Jellyfish Review, Asymmetry Fiction* and others. She has
published two books in Greek and a collection of short stories in English (*Once Upon a
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Samuel Trotman is an actor and theatre maker based on the South Coast of NSW,
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Liz Dolan’s poetry manuscript, *A Secret of Long Life*, nominated for a Pushcart, has
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Emily Strauss has an M.A. in English, but is self-taught in poetry, which she has
written since college Over 400 of her poems appear in a wide variety of online venues
and in anthologies, in the U.S. and abroad. She is a Best of the Net and two-time
Pushcart nominee. The natural world of the American West is generally her framework;
she also considers the narratives of people and places around her. She is a retired
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**Rose Mary Boehm** A German-born UK national, she lives and works in Lima, Peru.
Author of **TANGENTS**, a poetry collection published in the UK in 2010/2011, her work
has been widely published in US poetry journals (online and print). She was twice
winner of the **Goodreads** monthly competition, a new poetry collection (**From the Ruhr
to Somewhere Near Dresden 1939-1949 : A Child’s Journey**) has been published by
Aldrich Press in May 2016, and another new collection (**Peru Blues**) is about to be
published by Kelsay Books.

**Garth Gilchrist** Hailing from the woods of the Pacific Northwest and the mountains of
California’s Sierra, Garth Gilchrist toured the US and abroad as a performing
storyteller, poet, conference presenter and nature educator for decades sharing
nature's power to heal and awaken us to more vital experience of life, and as a window
on the sacred. He is well known for his keen portrayals of John Muir, the Scottish
American naturalist. Garth has produced 5 CDs of environmental stories. His first book
of poetry, **The Mountains Within**, was released by Regent Press in February, 2017.

**Brian Kirven** graduated with a film writing degree from San Francisco State University,
and long, open-ended motorcycle travels across the Americas, inspired by the Beats,
dominated his twenties. A California Poet in the Schools, teaching from West Marin
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the music and spoken word program "Learning Curve" on KWMR in Point Reyes
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**James William Gardner** A native of Southwest Virginia, James William Gardner
writes extensively about the contemporary American south. The writer explores
aspects of southern culture often overlooked: the downtrodden, the impoverished and
those marginalized by society. His work has been nominated for the 2016 Pushcart
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**Benjamin Schmitt** is the Best Book Award and Pushcart nominated author of two
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conspiracy to get you in bed** (Kelsay Books, 2013). His new poems have appeared or
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Review**, and elsewhere. You can read his scary stories for kids in the Amazon Rapids
app. He lives with his wife and daughter in Seattle where he also reviews books,
curates a reading series, and teaches workshops to people of all ages.

**Ronnie Farrell** I am female, 49, and a mature student studying English, History and Sociology at Maynooth University in County Kildare, (Rep of Ireland). My short story is hopefully going to be part of a larger collection of poignant anecdotes told from the perspective of a child experiencing an unusual and turbulent childhood. Hope you like it, thanks.

**Katelyn Thomas** is a poet and photographer who works in the children’s department of her local library. She spends her free time hiking, reading and watching her rambunctious hens cavorting in the sunlight. She has most recently been published in *Social Justice Poetry* and *Haiku Journal*.

**Jeffrey Welker** I have published a novel, The New Man (Epidemic Books, Seattle 2016) but this is my first attempt at submitting poetry.

**JW Burns** lives in Florida. Recent stories and poems have appeared in *Rivet, Cardinal Sins* and *Olentangy Review*.

**Chad W. Lutz** was born in Akron, Ohio, in 1986 and raised in the neighboring suburb of Stow. A 2008 graduate of Kent State University's English program, Chad attends Mills College in pursuit of an MFA in Creative Writing. Their writing has been featured in *Diverse Voices Quarterly*, Kind of a Hurricane Press, Haunted Waters Press, and was awarded the top prize in literary fiction by *Bacopa Review* for their 2017 contest.

**Ea Burke** Born in Philadelphia, Ea Burke now lives in southern Vermont where he practices law. Writing is a dear passion. His poetry has been published in *Hearsay, Chrysalis*, and *PoemCity* on several occasions.

**Jamey Genna** teaches writing classes in the East Bay area of San Francisco and received her Masters in Writing from the University of San Francisco. Her short fiction has been published in many fine literary magazines such as *Crab Orchard Review, Eleven Eleven, The Iowa Review, Georgetown Review*, and *580 Split*, among others. Along with reading for many Bay area venues, she also hosts a seasonal reading series at the Bazaar Cafe in San Francisco called Summer Sparks: an eclectic mix of flash prose and poetry.

**David Appelbaum** treads a thin line between poetry and philosophy. A professor of philosophy at SUNY New Paltz, his work, in a series of books, focuses on the transcendent nature of ordinary things, including *Everyday Spirits* [SUNY Press, 1995]. In addition, his thought shows a special interest in the performance of the speaking voice. For ten years, he was editor-in-chief of *Parabola Magazine*, with its concern for wisdom traditions and the search for meaning. Publisher of Codhill Press, an
independent literary small press which he founded fifteen years ago, he has produced a booklist of nearly one hundred titles, including authors of international reputation. A number of collections of his own poems have been published, including most recently Jiggerweed [Finishing Line Press, 2011] and Letters and Found Poems of Edisa and Chloe [Codhill Press, 2013].


Born and raised in Sioux Lookout, Ontario, I’m the son of Portuguese immigrants from the Azores. My education includes graduation from 2-year GAS at Humber College in Etobicoke with concentration in psychology, 3-year journalism at Centennial College in East York, and the Specialized Honors BA in English from York University in North York. I’ve worked as a research assistant for the Sioux Lookout Public Library and as a research assistant in waste management for the SLKT public works department and regional recycle association. I also worked with the disabled for the Sioux Lookout Association for Community Living. Following a long time fascination with psychology, economics, and investments, I recently completed the Canadian Securities Course.

Manuscript Prize. He teaches English at Ipswich Grammar School and lives in Riverhills, Brisbane, Australia.

Patrick Theron Erickson, a resident of Garland, Texas, a Tree City, just south of Duck Creek, is a retired parish pastor put out to pasture himself. His work has appeared in Grey Sparrow Journal, Cobalt Review, and Burningword Literary Journal, among other publications, and more recently in The Main Street Rag, Wilderness House Literary Review, Tipton Poetry Journal, Right Hand Pointing, and Danse Macabre.

Keertika Lotni I am a 20 something university scholar situated in Delhi. I love reading and totally adore the many routes of escapism that my love for literature provides. I am from the town of lakes and hills, a feature that is adamant on defining me.

Douglas Cole has published four collections of poetry and a novella. His work appears in anthologies such as Best New Writing, Bully Anthology, and Coming Off The Line as well as journals such as The Chicago Quarterly Review, Chiron, The Galway Review, Red Rock Review, Midwest Quarterly, and Slipstream. He has been nominated twice for a Pushcart and Best of the Net, and has received the Leslie Hunt Memorial Prize in Poetry, judged by T.R. Hummer; the Best of Poetry Award from Clapboard House; First Prize in the “Picture Worth 500 Words” from Tattoo Highway. His website is douglastcole.com.


Dan has a Bachelor of Arts Degree in English Literature from Clark University and a Masters in Social Work from Hunter College. He has directed programs in the field of HIV care and prevention services in the South and Central Bronx. He currently direct a New York statewide HIV Quality of Care Program.”

Jennie Cesario I live and write in Long Island, New York, where I share a home with my husband and college-age twins. I hold a degree in Journalism from American University, and I'm passionate about making connections between life and literature and illumining both in the searchlight of faith. A version of this piece was first published on my personal blog where it resonated among my very limited following. For more
samples of my work, please feel free to visit my blog at dappledthoughts.com.

Martha Batiz  I am a Mexican-Canadian writer living in Toronto since 2003. I have always written in Spanish, my native language, but the need to cross the language border in order to build a career as a writer in Canada has inspired me to write in English, and my first short-story collection in this, my adoptive language, has just been published. Plaza Requiem (Exile Editions, Canada, Nov. 2017) is a collection that features some of my best stories self-translated from their Spanish versions, alongside new stories written especially for this project. For Ginosko, I chose an excerpt of a story which was a finalist in the CVC Short Story Contest, organized by Gloria Vanderbilt with Exile Editions. "The Last Confession" is the story that closes Plaza Requiem. I don't know if it's the right length as my computer couldn't open your guidelines for the submission of excerpts, but should you be interested in my work, I can always adjust this to fit your needs, or follow up in any way that you see fit. Excerpt of “The Last Confession,” a story in Plaza Requiem, Stories at the Edge of Ordinary Lives.

Mark Vogel has published short stories in Cities and Roads, Knight Literary Journal, Whimperbang, SN Review, and Our Stories. Poetry has appeared in Poetry Midwest, English Journal, Cape Rock, Dark Sky, Cold Mountain Review, Broken Bridge Review and other journals. He is currently Professor of English at Appalachian State University in Boone, North Carolina, and directs the Appalachian Writing Project.

Catherine Arra is a native of the Hudson Valley in upstate New York where she lives with wildlife and changing seasons until winter when she migrates to Florida’s Space Coast to commune with alligators, palms trees, and the occasional rocket. She is the author of three chapbooks, most recently, Tales of Intrigue & Plumage (FutureCycle Press, 2017). A former English and writing teacher, Arra now teaches part time and facilitates a local writers’ group. Find her at www.catherinearra.com


Ken Massicotte is from Canada but now lives in Canterbury, UK. He has published in several journals, including: River Poets Journal; Turk’s Head Review; Glass: A Journal of Poetry; Wilderness House Literary Review; Gray Sparrow; Every Day Poems; and Poetry Quarterly.
Rob Stadick teaches high school English at Front Range Christian School in Littleton, Colorado, where he lives with his wife. He has never previously been published.

Matthew James Friday has had over 60 poems published in many UK and worldwide magazines and journals, including, recently: The Brasilia Review (Brazil), Drawntreader (UK), New Contrast (South Africa), Sheila Na-Gig (USA) and Poetry Salzburg (Austria).

Howard Winn's work has been published in Dalhousie Review, The Long Story, Galway Review, Antigonish Review, Chaffin Review, Evansville Review, 3288 Review, Straylight Literary Magazine, and Blueline. He has a novel coming out soon from Propertius Press. His B. A. is from Vassar College. His M. A. from the Stanford University Creative Writing Program. His doctoral work was done at N. Y. U. He is Professor of English at SUNY.

Donna Walker-Nixon was a full professor at the University of Mary Hardin-Baylor, where she received the distinction of receiving the Mary Stevens Piper award for excellence in teaching. She currently serves as an adjunct lecturer at Baylor. She lists her five primary professional achievements as 1) founding Windhover: A Journal of Christian Literature in 1997, 2) co-editing the Her Texas series with her friend and mentor James Ward Lee, 3) co-founding The Langdon Review of the Arts in Texas, 4) publishing her novel Canaan's Oothoon, and 5) serving as lead editor Her Texas, which has boosted Donna's faith that the voices of women writers and artists truly mean something to both men and women.

Sergio A. Ortiz is a two-time Pushcart nominee, a four-time Best of the Web nominee, and 2016 Best of the Net nominee. His poems have appeared or are forthcoming in FRIGG, Tipton Poetry Journal, Drunk Monkeys, Bitterzeot Magazine, and ONE, Jacar Press. He is currently working on his first full-length collection of poems, Elephant Graveyard.

Yvette A. Schnoeker-Shorb My work has appeared in Clockhouse, Depth Insights Journal, Watershed Review, Foliate Oak, Terrain.org, SLAB: A Literary Magazine, Kudzu House Quarterly, Caesura, the anthology Talking Back and Looking Forward: An Educational Revolution in Poetry and Prose (Rowman & Littlefield Publishing Group), and many others, with work forthcoming in Weber—The Contemporary West, The American Journal of Nursing, Switchback, and others. In addition to past Pushcart Prize and Best of the Net nominations, my work received more recent Honorable Mentions in 2016 from both Port Yonder Press and Erbacce Press. I have been an educator, a researcher, and an editor, and am co-founder of Native West Press, a
Matthew Freeman’s latest offering is a chapbook called Trying to Take a Nap and was published by Kattywompus Press. It documents a week during which the poet just couldn’t fall asleep. Everything I Love Restored is his most recent full-length collection and was published by Coffeetown Press.

Mara Cesaretti lives in San Anselmo, CA. She practices as an MFT. As a former foster mother she has enjoyed working with foster children as well as those in military service and their families. mara_cesaretti@comcast.net.

Carolyn Gelland is the author of two collections of poems: Dream-Shuttle (2013) and Four-Alarm House (2012), both published by Main Street Rag. Her poems have been widely published in literary journals, including The Bitter Oleander, Rosebud, The Cafe Review. Her essays and reviews have or will appear in The Notre Dame Review, The Anglican Theological Review, and others. She lives in Maine.
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Carol Smallwood’s recent poetry collections include: In Hubble’s Shadow (Shanti Arts, 2017); (Prisms, Particles, and Refractions Finishing Line Press, 2017).

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