



ginosko literary journal

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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

The writer feels dead as bleached wood,
dry as a riverbed in drought.

For a way out, search the depths of the soul
for a spirit;

beg, if need be,
for a sign of life.

The dark inside of the mind
lies hidden;

thoughts must be brought like a child
from the womb,
terrified and screaming.

– Lu Chi

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Songs for the Penny Man

Kathleen Lynch

*"Sometimes what almost happens but doesn't, shapes us
as much as what actually happens."*

- Serena Pichou

He was forbidden to us because he lived alone and looked strange. His was the worst yard in the neighborhood—two broken cars, weeds, trash, gaps in the fence. But I went to him.

The big kids said he gave a penny for each song they'd sing. Most of them were sneaking behind their parents' backs for the money. Well, I was too.

It was the July before I started second grade—I wasn't a "first grade baby, born in the Navy" anymore. I felt brave enough to go alone.

So I went to him. He did scare me a little, but I didn't know why. His face didn't smile or frown, but just stayed flat, His eyes pierced but tried not to look into mine, so I had to catch him looking.

He was standing in his garage near tools hung on a board with a lot of holes in it. It seemed he was not doing much, just looking at magazines. I said, "I came to sing... for a penny?"

Mostly, I knew hymns. The first time, my voice came out like wires, like chalk breaking. He gave me no coin. My face got hot and even in the dim garage I knew he could tell I was blushing.

So, he stood, quiet, looking at me. Then he said, "Just talk... tell me... tell me... about... your family." I didn't understand. Then I thought of my mother. It was as if I saw her face leaning in on me, her rust-red hair draped over one eye.

"My mom's hair is naturally curly... and... and her own color," I whispered. One penny.

"Her arm got mashed in the washtub wringer once. She had to wear a sling."
Another.

The summer took on a shape the way a drift of clouds can look like nothing, then a lion. The sound my coffee can made changed as the pennies rose. One day I told him, "I want to be a ballerina when I grow up."

Nothing. A stretched silence. Then I began to understand. He wanted to hear about real things—about stuff that happens in our family: my father drunk and cursing while the cement set too fast on the botched patio, my brothers dragging a wagon of scrap wood for a fort. He wanted to hear how one sister helped the other apply a tiny Avon lipstick sample, and showed her how to wipe it off fast with cold cream before our

mother caught them.

He paid to hear about my parakeets, Sunshine and Moon, who clung to my waist-long braids while I did the dishes, and about our disappeared dog, Taps—how I walked up and down the block a whole day crying for him. How I dried my tears with my loosed hair, thinking I was like Mary Magdalene.

One time the garage seemed darker than usual. He had pulled the hinged door mostly shut. I wedged in.

Without saying anything, he lifted one of my braids. It lay across his palm like a bird fallen from its nest, and he looked at it that way. His hand trembled a little. His face seemed damp and I could smell his breath. Whiskey, like my dad's sometimes.

"*What?*" I asked, nervous, because he stared extra long at my braid resting in his hand.

I felt something was turning into something else.

He stepped back, shaking his head hard as if saying NO NO NO.

He drew a deep, shaky breath, dug into his pocket, pulled out a fist of coins. "Take it. Take it all, and go," he said in a rough, rushed voice.

I did, and heard him push the garage door all the way shut while he was still inside. After that, he was hardly home at all. Once I saw him going from his garage to back porch and I waved, but he acted like he didn't see me.

I bought Jujubes, jawbreakers, and nickel rainbow note pads, where I practiced cursive, drew horses, or pretty ladies in profile like on matchbook covers.

That summer I got roller skates, from my next door neighbor. I'd told Mr. Aperson my dream in which I could skate really, really well.

By the next week, he got his only daughter's skates, out of storage. She was a grown woman now. Somehow he made them look new and shiny and gave me a key.

I fell down over and over, not like in the dream, but finally I could skate like the big kids.

I began to wonder if I really could become a ballerina, and whether I would turn pretty like Mama when I grew up.

I wondered what I might become, and if I would turn out to be a lucky girl.

FIRST JOB

Robert Julius

The day you turn sixteen, your parents make you get a job in a nursing home kitchen. They say it'll teach you a good work ethic. They say it'll make you respect the elderly. That first day you come in, you see a lot of older bodies. You see a lot of good care and a lot of bad care. You see a lot of things you might not want to see. You see former Marines pissing themselves in wheelchairs. You see old women putting on makeup to try and buy themselves a few years. Or to remember their youth. You see the way a body dies. How it takes the time it takes. You don't watch anyone die. But first, a plate returns empty. Not a morsel scraped into the trash. The next day, a plate returns half- empty. You scrape away the gristle, the hard parts not easily chewed. A plate returns in a week with one or two bites taken. Then, the plate returns as it went up. There comes a point when the plate stops going up at all. You have a quick side conversation in the kitchen with the dishwasher. Did you hear that Ed passed away? And you remember a month ago you served him his food in the dining room, you helped him with his napkin, and he sat next to the lovely blind woman who needed to know whether her Salisbury steak was at 12 o'clock or at 6, and she told you your hands felt soft, and hers fit in your palms, just like a baby's.

Two Part Inventions

Terese Robison

On this cold Fall morning, Deirdre can't leave her bed. The day looked like an enormous distance to get through when she woke, and she wants to roll it back under her lids.

Deirdre departed a long and baleful marriage recently. She tells her support women she commits little suicides sometimes, cutting herself accidentally in the kitchen when she's there.

She needs to be cleaning it, cleaning her house, so when the paramedics come (because she's older than middle-aged and living an unhealthful life), they won't be shocked at the mess. Or if she's assaulted, the man won't tell her it's the filthiest house he's ever raped in--but there's so much work to do that it's hard to start and she remains in bed.

Unexpectedly, the doorbell rings and Deirdre cringes. It rings five times. The two chimes of the bell sound like someone calling merrily, "Hi there"; thank God it's stopped.

But glass is breaking. Just as she's dozing off, glass in the patio door is crashing! She screams.

No one will hear the breaking glass or her scream because her neighbors in this rural New Hampshire area are almost a mile away; in this instant, she knows she'll die. She's willed it with so many death-thoughts, the phony suicides. The scream seems to go on and on; her closed eyes seem closed for minutes, but a face is looming over hers a few seconds after the break-in, covered (*of course!*) with a dark mask--she did not will *this*.

Is it a Spiderman mask? He's tall; she takes this in—he's lowering himself sitting next to her on her bed, and he covers her mouth. "Scream, you die right now." He whispers, "Bitch."

She shakes her head to get his hand off her. She doesn't dare bite him because the other hand mashes a pistol into her nose. He seems to think she's agreed not to scream, and he takes away his hand to grasp her wrists. "Now talk," he orders her. "You're going to undress," he says. "Slowly," as if this were merely a scene in a movie and not the risk of her life. Deirdre is sweating and chilled, and whirling with the sense that her attacker doesn't sound sure of himself—is his voice young? Is *he* young--like her daughter and son, surfing in Hawaii now; would there be some hope of survival if he weren't hardened, if his pistol weren't drilling into her cheek?

"Talk?" she says faintly. Is this demand from a movie she should know?

"Tell me a story," he barks. "And take off the disgusting robe."

She almost laughs; the robe is so old, but she hasn't thrown it away. "I'll be cold," she says. "You broke the door."

He clutches her shoulder, pulls at the cloth. “Is this cold?” He wrenches it off. The material of her pink gown is threadbare.

“What kind of story?”

He grunts, “What you told a kid.” Her children’s photos are on the dresser. He must have seen them. She can’t recall what she read to them except Winnie the Pooh, which would relax her if she weren’t naked now, her wrists tied with a cord that hurts her thin skin. He yanks them above her head. The pistol lies beside her pillow.

“What’s your fuckin’ name?” He’s straddling her, but waiting.

“Deirdre,” she rasps.

“Dear what?” he sneers.

“Deirdre,” she yells at him.

“Quiet! If you’re not quiet when you talk to me, you die. Sounds like writing a letter—”

“What?” she says, contracting her bony shoulders when he presses the skin of one with his teeth.

He repeats her name. She thinks something she’s never thought before; she can’t recall her mother saying her name. Was her mother too busy? The irony feels apt. Her father called her Dee Dee.

“So where’s the nice story for me?” He’s pulling one of her nipples, but not as roughly as she fears he will, not twisting it—not, thank God—biting her there.

Deirdre’s gaze, fixed on the ceiling till this moment, catches a small spot of flowered wallpaper in the guest room across the hall. She remembers her mother arranging dried flowers when she wasn’t designing women’s wear in the career she prized above all. Deirdre would wander outside and take walks around different neighborhoods to look at yards and trees and gardens with arbors. Gardens are a childhood, she thinks, seeing again winding paths luxuriant with pink and velvety white smells. She entered overgrown plots, tangled and dark; you didn’t know where to step, she remembers; you crawled through damp tunnels between bushes and hid there, dreaming of, what? (Staying, not going home.) Further on came a rose garden, untended, beyond a white picket fence, full of sunlight, bursting-apart corollas, strewn petals. Deirdre tells the rapist all this; it couldn’t be enough to save her life.

“Keep going,” he says, pinching her stomach.

“I don’t remember!” She’s trembling with fear and a creepy pleasure in being touched. “What do you want? Please!”

“The nice stuff you had, or your kids had, I told you.” He opens his fly then, as she knew he would; he pushes her thighs wide and inserts himself, the mask scratching her as he sprawls. Her heart races, and she tries to think. She knows what he wants—a child’s blanket she never had, a scene that wouldn’t be a farce.

Instead she remembers fantasies—a vision of butterflies gliding through the house, alighting on cabinets and hovering at the windows. Or a different one. “Imagine,” she murmurs unsteadily, “swimming through your house, all the dirt you haven’t cleaned

mounding like sand castles.”

Perhaps he’s soothed? He comes with almost a sob, and lies heavily on her narrow body. He moves down a little. “I said talk. Go on,” he warns.

The sight of her purse across the room comforts her. Is there enough inside it to buy safety? “You want money?” she asks. “Will you go?”

“You don’t get it,” he sneers, his voice muffled against her breast.

“I don’t know more stories. No fairy tales,” she cries. “My children are gone. They suffered when I didn’t leave their father.” She begins weeping. “I abused my life. It’s no good to you--”

He’s silent. Is he sleeping, somehow? He begins to shudder, and she thinks now he will kill her or rape her again, and again. Did she really envision suicide back when she was depressed, not terrorized? She glimpses the clock on the side table, dares to look at it. Twenty minutes have passed, that’s all. If she lives, God, she’ll forgive everything.

He releases her wrists from the cord, grasps the pistol. She wonders, desperately, what did he do before committing crime, what normal thing did he appreciate?

She pictures drawings and cutout shapes her children made in kindergarten. Crescents and circles, orange wedges, the moon. Her son once told her the moon looked so flat he could roll it into a taco. He’d felt clever, and smiled. She drones now about aspects of nature, the moon, how nice it is to see and think of those good things, and she’s hoping, somehow, that he *does*; she talks hypnotically. On and on...

by Michael Hettich

Extinction

The creature my mother had been once was hiding
in a supermarket magazine photograph, as though
she were a stylish shoe; the animal my father
had fancied as *himself*
was howling at the moon
like the wolf in that famous ad campaign
that taught us how to act both wild and stylish,
like a new kind of gesture. We had lost all the creatures
that weren't of our ilk, like we'd lost certain aunts
and uncles to their snapshots. And then we started losing
those animals inside us, as our sleep started dreaming
in languages of follicle and cuticle, fingernail
and ear wax, sand and snot. Until something
moved around inside again, wilder than we'd ever been
and almost as vivid as the world, and it hurt
like language must have done once, or maybe even love.

Constellation

1.

Before we start shooting salt into the sky
to cool the planet and cloud our days,

perhaps we should simply
sit down in the shade
with stories, of moons that break open into flowers,
of foxes that sleep at the foot of our beds
to keep our feet wild. And before we start dreaming

floating cities adrift on a rising
ocean, perhaps we should undress ourselves
of who we've become, slip out of the habits
we've devised to feign our innocence, and swim
out into the deeper water

until whatever's still phosphorescent
within us glows like small constellations
beneath which the huge, warm-blooded swimmers,
with minds and memories, and songs that might teach us
new ways to hear, are moving through the darkness.

2.

Imagine the feel of their huge backs rubbing
against our pale feet, as they move on through the night.

To Blow Away Like Mist

A man I knew felt sometimes as though a dog was stuck inside his body, almost as large as he was—black lab or golden retriever—unable to move in that cramped dark, yet waiting for something, listening to the sounds outside him, in the world.

When humans were lost in the rubble of disasters, dogs like his inner life worked tirelessly—beyond exhaustion, even to the point of death—to save the victims, or locate their bodies.

The man knew he wasn't gifted with that kind of vivid selflessness, that he lacked the keen senses such heroic dogs need.

This realization always opened a great emptiness inside him:

He could let himself seem to blow away then, like mist in tall grass at dawn before anyone's walked there or even looked out at it, when the day's breeze rises and each blade of grass is lifted into clarity, each stalk standing more taut as it dries,

and the small birds swoop down to disappear there for a moment then swirl themselves up into the unencumbered sky.

The Ghost Trees

And now a certain kind of scientist says
the weather in various parts of the world
is growing exhausted and just wants to lie down
for a nap, or maybe for a longer dose
of oblivion, so its dreams can be
re-spawned, its creatures large and small
replenished to wildness, the air re-folded
into its invisible origami, even
human language shot-through again
with sap. In the clear-cut woods--
raw ground and stumps--invisible trees
are learning to move from one place to another,
blurring paths and meadows; the people
who live there call them *fathers who turned
away without waving goodbye, and learned
to dance slowly*; they contrast them with the boulders
and rocks, who truly know how to dance
in slow time, even as the humans and the creatures
in fur and the creatures in feathers leave
their bodies and all the bodies they passed through
to arrive at now through eternities--but still
we pretend they cast shadows across the ground,
and still we pretend they bear fruit.

Starting from Sleep

She tells me our bodies are nets dropped into the ocean. And when they are pulled up, the minnows are spilled out to flip flop and strangle.

And then we are tossed back over, to dream:

*I talk, she says, to my great-great-grandchildren
by treating all things with whatever compassion
I've drawn from the grace I've been shown. And those children
thank me already, and dream of being born.*

The wild parts of everything are disappearing everywhere.

Wood grain faint fingerprint
pores eyes blue breathing
wind dust mind afternoon
tide lips and sudden flowers.

The Horses

In that place you never want to talk about, there were horse skins hanging from nails in the barn where there once had been horses. You told me your parents

would go in there sometimes and strip each other naked and slip into those horse skins. You've said their bodies would seem to grow larger to fill that slack skin

until they were actual horses. And you stood there in the bare yard waiting for those horses to push open that barn door with their massive heads and limp off

as though they were overworked and world-weary, out into the tall grass; their ribs showed gaunt, their eyes were filmy, and flies made a dark cloud

around their slack bodies, but still they walked out there while you aired-out the barn, gathered their clothing, folded it neatly, and set it in a pile

on the bench for later. Then you went inside to nap and wander though the house. You cooked yourself a big meal—something you loved—and then you waited

for the moon to rise full through the still afternoon. And that night you would carry out the saddles and reins, bit and blinders, or you'd walk out

in your nightgown to ride your mother and father bareback, until they remembered who they were by the feel of your small legs around them.

Big Bend

Driving through the desert, we think of the children deciding to lie down for a rest, holding hands. We wonder at their parents. We are driving to the river, cool and relaxed, squinting in the early sun despite our dark glasses. We want to touch the river, maybe wade there, lie down in the cool water and let ourselves be carried down river. We want to echo our voices against the canyon walls. We think of the children, and their parents, setting out across the wide desert, still cool and dripping from crossing the river. Sheep graze on the other side as we sit in the shade of the canyon, cool from the river though the day's already burning and somewhere the children are walking, holding hands, thinking of the river, their parents and home as they look across the desert and seem to see a river quivering the air like a dream. We are driving, cool and refreshed and talking of our plans for when we get home from the desert; we are listening to music or news of what's happened far away but we're thinking of the river and the canyon, and of the children walking slowly, holding each other across the wide desert, alone.

The Hike

I decided to walk a big circle that day
to see what I could see. It felt good to have a body
after weeks at the desk; it felt good to saunter
alone, not talking except in my head,
maybe singing a little. If there were crows
cawing I'd reply, I thought, and if a deer
watched from the trees, maybe I would see it,
as I knew I'd see breezes moving through the grasses,
as I knew I'd see spider webs. Maybe I'd sit down
and read or write a little. If I could just open
myself a little wider, I thought, I might be something
instead of just someone, for a little while.
I might even try to stand still for an hour,
or lie down off the path where no one could see me
and pretend to dry up and blow away. I could be
a gesture signaling through the trees. Watch me
move as emptiness through the energetic air
like a glint you didn't see. But you thought you did.

Her Eyes and Ears

Robert D Kirvel

Leslie sometimes hid her body, making it flat in the cranny behind an open door, to decide what was true or not and whether life in Waynesville might reveal something worth knowing. But for now, she angled to let some light in from behind a curtain.

From her upstairs bedroom window she could look out across the street without being seen, not that the older boy ever looked up in her direction. Dad spit out the boy's name at dinner once, saying any guy like that Charlie person over there was nothing but a limp-wristed pussy, but if Leslie's neighbor did look skinny as all get-out, she could tell there was nothing limp in the way he tended roses in his front yard.

One day she watched Charlie stand up to another kid who started spinning a cat over his head. Leslie saw her neighbor cradle the animal afterward, but the following day an ambulance screamed up the street with its siren going. The paramedics loaded Charlie for the hospital with both his wrists hanging down from a stretcher not because Dad was right about the wrists, but because of the bullets. Somebody said they found the cat hanging from a tree, and someone else thought they nabbed the ones who shot Charlie, but nothing ever came of it that Leslie ever heard.

After the roses across the street went to rust, she kept an eye out for something that might acknowledge the actions of her neighbor, Charlie. Thinking maybe it would come from nature, she pictured how a ray of kindness might look if a person could see such a thing, but nothing like that entered through her window that summer, and it made Leslie think kindness only brings hurt when it shows up at all.

A week after the ambulance, Dad lost his job at the plant to those illegal immigrants who worked for peanuts and got free food stamps plus free medical and education for their truckloads of illegal kids. Or at least the cheaters worked for peanuts until the factory moved to some third-world place where more takers cheated for even less money while honest Americans had to pay all the welfare taxes just the same. Pressed behind a living-room door, Leslie listened while her father talked to himself and drank out of a bottle during the day to swallow his misery.

Leslie could see how work makes a person mad but no work makes someone angrier. It made her think: work can end up killing you while cheaters destroy a whole town like Waynesville, and even an entire country as some were saying.

After school started, she watched from a distance the new girl who had to bring her lunch of weird-looking food to the cafeteria in a paper bag and sit at a table to eat by

herself every day because the new girl didn't have money for hot cafeteria food and didn't know anybody to sit with. It made Leslie think how sorrow invites scorn until she sat down across the table from the new girl and found out she was from a town called Tapalpa. It was supposed to be warm and pretty there even though it was hard to understand about the beauty because of the girl's lame way of speaking English. Talking about Tapalpa was the first time Leslie ever saw the new girl smile.

They all complained to the teacher how the older kids cut in lunch line ahead of the younger grades—especially Leslie's grade—because that's how the lunch line always worked in school. It had something to do with seniority, everybody said, so too bad if you're low man on the totem pole. Just too bad if it took them half the lunch period just to get their trays. But then the teacher told them one day, "If you all behave for the rest of the morning, you can get out five minutes early for lunch." So everybody got quiet as mice after that, and they were allowed out of the classroom five minutes early before the big line formed, and it made Leslie think about how people can be controlled, sometimes with punishment, but the best way for control was by inflicting pleasure.

A couple of houses down from Charlie's place with the roses turned to rust and weeds, Aischa Wassef was always talking about the flea markets, which she went to every weekend during fair-weather months. The woman put her things on a folding table, mostly junk she bartered from other flea markets, except for one item according to Leslie's Mom. To anybody with money, Aischa would bring out a folder of people whose addresses and phone numbers she'd collected over the years. The album showed Mexican workers and their addresses, if they had an address, along with other people from Syria and Burma and places like Somalia. They were people Aisha and her neighbors hired to do small jobs around the house, and although Aisha was not a citizen either according to gossip—after all, just look at that name of hers—she'd figured out how information about other people pays off. Sometimes just the phone numbers were enough for people who wanted to hire a baby sitter or lawn-mower man or a heavy lifter. One time two men from ICE paid Aisha a wad of cash for the whole folder, and that afternoon Aisha went straight to the supermarket and bought a whole tenderloin and a case of beer then bragged about it to Mom.

Which was how Leslie figured out something about the value of knowledge and how information is the enemy of certain people. And it made her think information can put you in jail or on a boat to China like her Dad said ought to happen.

On weekends when she wasn't working, Leslie's Mom stared into a mirror and pulled her eyebrows out of her head one at a time with tweezers to make her face beautiful. For added beauty during the week, Mom stuffed her feet into shoes with tall heels until her feet got sore from dressing up so high at work. Her dad didn't say anything about the shoes or even notice them, but maybe someone at work did, or it was the only way

Mom had to show her feelings. Maybe it was a way to get something into her life about how Mom might have wanted to live.

Beauty, Leslie decided, was about something you want to feel inside but don't really feel, so you do something to the outside of you. It made her think how beauty can hurt even more than kindness.

Her father grew angrier than ever in December and went red in the face about how those protestors in the streets didn't understand why blue lives matter too and all lives matter, and education is for the rich to lord it over everybody else. He said it was a working people thing against city people with their stupid city ideas about freedom and loyalty. Freedom really meant something to individuals like himself, even though there was no money for Christmas presents, but upholding the law meant nothing at all to those people marching out there on the streets.

Leslie thought how education sometimes makes you arrogant. Not smart in a good way but narrow-minded and proud.

Somebody in church told the story about a parent standing in the cemetery in front of a dead child's grave, and asking for a sign from heaven showing the dead child was going to be okay in heaven. Then at that very minute a robin flew down from thin air and landed right on the dead child's headstone, and that was the sign they were looking for. Even when another girl at school got all snarly about how anybody could buy a stupid plastic bird at the store and throw it up there on a headstone just like you could stick a fake Jesus on your dashboard, even then, Leslie knew what she believed about the bird on the headstone and about faith as well. It made Leslie think you can prove there is a God even if some people don't ever want to see it.

Following the accident and loss of his car, Dad complained even more about the takers out there, especially insurance companies that would rob your last penny and hold a wrecked car for ransom because you couldn't afford the deductible, and them expecting you to understand insurance policy words like "depreciation" and "contributory negligence." So who were they kidding? Then the police could take your freedom away as well with the backing of a crap government that could take everything else you own. Crazy liberal takers were the ones who were all in it together to take your guns and make women kill their unborn babies. And the cheaters who are handed everything on a silver platter like welfare benefits get away without ever contributing a thing to anybody in society. And the absence of trust in ideals that once made this country work and now were being tossed out the window because everybody was so lazy.

Leslie could see how much of what her dad said boiled down to money especially now that he wasn't bringing a paycheck home. It made her think that trust in democracy is mostly about money, and almost everything else is about money too. It made her think money just brings sadness and maybe poverty brings happiness, or at least free stuff if you were lazy enough to sit around all day and rake it in.

Just like the doctor who told Mom about this patient coming into the office with some complaint about how much pain he was in all the time, not exactly asking for drugs out loud, but you knew what he wanted just the same. Those opioids. So when the doctor told his patient to remove his clothing so he could examine him, the doctor noticed the pricy sneakers the man was wearing and the costly tattoos all over the man's body. And then the doctor saw the gold ring the man had through his nose, and the doctor asked his patient how he planned to pay for the examination and medical treatment the man might need, and the patient just laughed in his face and said he was on welfare of course, so there was no problem because he didn't have to pay a dime. So the doctor yelled at the man and told him to get out of his office right now and that he would report the man to the authorities for lying and taking advantage of the system and robbing the country with handouts.

Which made Leslie see how people live in bubbles. The patient lived in his cheater welfare bubble. There were work bubbles and school bubbles and unemployment and church bubbles, but mostly there were pain bubbles and fear bubbles. But maybe fear was good because it kept you on your toes, and if you were not in pain or fearful enough you could get a bullet through your body.

Only so much light snuck in from behind the curtains and doorways to reach Leslie, but she knew what she knew about her world. She knew no matter what anybody said, her own truth fit the world she saw and lived in, and if the things other people said didn't match what she saw and lived, well then, their ideas weren't worth much to begin with because they were not true to her life.

The teacher told the class one day that all the ideas in our head are copies of what we see, hear, or feel. In addition, what we think about in our head all comes from what we experience. The teacher said that big explanation about every single idea inside us came from a philosopher whose name was David Hume. Then when a smart-ass boy in the class said, "What about dragons? I can see dragons in my head, but I never saw one really," the teacher smiled.

"Well, you've seen a lizard and a bird too, haven't you? Just put your bird's wings on a lizard, and stick a match in its mouth and you've got the whole idea of a dragon."

After that, the teacher wrote a list on the board and asked everyone in the class to

write down his or her ideas about the topics they picked. Then they had to write at least one sentence, so Leslie looked hard for a long time at the words on the blackboard written in white chalk.

Beauty, paintings, poetry, and opera.

Work, education, and money.

Truth, kindness, and punishment.

Religion, money, and cheaters.

Words like that. She knew nothing about paintings or poetry or opera. Leslie did the best she could with the words she selected from the list on the blackboard.

She picked kindness because she felt confident in her knowledge. Leslie wrote there is a price to pay for every kind thing you do, and the price for being kind is pain.

Leslie felt she knew quite a bit about work too, so she wrote that first work makes you mad, and then when you can't work anymore, it makes you madder yet.

About punishment, she knew for sure that in school, punishment hardly ever worked. Getting out of class early worked like crazy though.

Education was tricky. It seemed important to watch out for information because knowledge could be a dangerous thing and could come back to grab at you and trip you up if you gave it out to just anyone. So she wrote knowing things is fine as long as you don't get into something like aborting babies and people who want to vaccinate everybody after they proved for a fact it makes you brain damaged.

About beauty, Leslie knew that when people are unhappy or feel they are broken, then they think beauty is a way to mend things, so beauty is like kindness. They both make you think you feel better and then they bring hurt. Plus, look at all the women who dress like they're asking for it, so who's fault is that?

About religion, Leslie had to think a while. After a time, she wrote there is a reason for everything happening the way it happens because God is up there, and you can prove it. God created everything, not like that Darwin person who believed in apes, except God did not create sin, which is all man's doing on account of free will or some such.

About money and cheaters, she knew it's not fair when people push in line ahead of you. It's not fair when they take your job and make you pay for their food stamps to buy garbage at the store like giving chocolate to a stupid dog. Who are these people who come over here and can't even speak English and think they deserve something for

nothing? Except (Leslie wrote) maybe one girl I know from Tapalpa who could maybe be a friend of mine if she would just learn to talk more like an American.

In putting down on paper what she felt about life, Leslie knew her ideas came from what she saw with her eyes and heard with her ears. Real things. She'd seen things from behind a bedroom curtain and a living room door when no one even knew she was there, so those things were true. She'd heard things in school and other places around town. Had Leslie been told by her teacher—or by a shot-at neighbor or a girl from Tapalpa—that ignorance of the real cause of anything is what becomes opinion, and repeated opinion becomes belief, and belief is often mistaken, she would have rolled her eyes in her head to show she was not the least bit ignorant in that way. Leslie could not be fooled so easily.

Instead, the teacher told everyone in class that as far as this lesson was concerned, there were no right or wrong answers. The teacher kept things on the positive side, giving everybody an A and repeating how every one of her students was a winner. It wasn't a big surprise either because, as Dad said to Leslie many times, her teacher was drowning up to her snowflake eyebrows in baloney.

by Patrick Duggan

12

We, all of us,
dragged our bins and bags
(the garbage our garages hide)
by flashlight,
-- beams breaking into shards of day,
to the center
of the street, choking drains
building from the crowd
a taste like bitter cardamom coffee,
new soles on old leather shoes
stitched by such tiny hands.
We've built the solace
of a private room
from the beams and plaster
of collapsed and shoddy empire
leaving
only a ladder
upright from graveyard soil
into the sky,
a tree house in an empty city.

17

Dance like you're soap bubbles
on a red wax crayon line,
like we don't
have a shared history snuck
into the skin: this moment
is winter. We missed sunrise-
shaded petals brushing
our jacket sleeves -- pant-cuffs
skirting one last cold
puddle. I hurt in the full sun,
looking down at the denim stains
on my hands – all these footsteps
all around us in their otherness
like universes colliding or pebbles
clicking across sidewalks.

19

There's golden poverty here
among the heroin needles,
men and women are out there
with dirt-stains and crucifixes
stepping two at a time
in line to see scarecrows stuffed
with sweatshirts and dry wheat.

Look closely and there's teeth
to this. Angry heaves as rain-soaked
pallets are stacked
one at a time onto clouds
and flannel rhetoric and refugees
with dust caught in their throats.

There were giants in the Earth
in those days – trash heaps
filled with orange peels and paperbacks
and blind men and tulips. The Western
sky afire with writers
from the Beltway: Valkyries
in the palm leaves.

A gray and evangelical backdrop
of two-income households. God
help us, there are nine planets now
(eight that we can see). There's
space bending toward
loud wealth on the television.

by Susan L Leary

The Old Man & the Sea

In the end, I tell my brother that Santiago was cursed. The beast caught only to be eaten by sharks. Everyone aware of the old man's failure. The flesh, torn & rotted. The very bones of the marlin washed ashore. But no, my brother says. Santiago was not cursed. Rather, he knew happiness is without proof. That after 84 days at sea, the sea was simply enough. & that should an old man return with his old bones intact, it must be the opposite of cursed is to live.

X-Ray Impression #6: End of the World

When God first saw you, he thought:
with your bones, I will build a mountain.

Its spine rounded
& laden with fruit.

Its face, so steep—so beautiful,
that once in its grave,

the earth would turn itself over
& over,

aching for its hills.

For its wind-gathered trees & valleys,
where, at a time, the blackest,

most iridescent starlings came to wash.

Where lovers, like ourselves, took a bath.

Tasted the sweet liquor of rain
as it fell —& saved

for God, every broken share
of sky.

Because God knew that from your bones,
the world would want to return.

That in the deep scree of your body,
he could store heaven's dirt.

Portrait of the Body as Phantom Limb

What's the purpose of cloud, hail, or rain if not for sky to witness the enormity of its fracture? In summer, pollen scatters like gilded salt across the fields & months later, a thousand streams will begin quieting themselves over roots. How we can break & break & break until no point of breaking. Laying here now, I know the feeling. Of what it means to be completely alive & yet unable to explain myself. To explain *this body*. How in it, most days I can feel like I am dying & never be dying. Everything that's happened collecting in its soil the way a fresh wound pools inside itself: measured, dramatic, entirely inhabiting. That I am never sure how to tend to or acknowledge it. All the ways I overflow within myself from myself. Each day another field burned, though not a deer leaving. In this life, we can stand on the eve of almost anything. But we cannot stand on the eve of a bone's refusal of its flesh. So look now at yourself & look lovingly. Because of this, there can be no disinheritance. No morning when the whole of you will not return to yourself in a slow shudder, as if a single, blood-startled limb.

Joyful Poem, with Creation Story

Last night I woke to Eve who said she'd come to place the seeds of herself in my hands. Immediately, all the splendor of dust & rib & Adam. Everything the faintest shade of orchid. & so I held what was the meat of her between my fingers. What felt like burst flowers. What felt like the softer pieces of star & yet still, I could not fathom her making. I must say I am not surprised. That not much makes sense as it begins. The first fall of snow. The atmosphere rising from its seat at the table & now: wind. As for the end, will not even the final breath elude me? Will it not escape quietly into itself & into sky? Perhaps what God meant when he first said, *joy*. When he said, let death not be unlike each brilliant morning. When we wake & we are body. When we rise, unappalled, from that beautiful nothingness from which everything gets its start.

First Song

Summer again,

my mother at the piano in the sun-spilt sheen
of the living room & me,
not making a sound.

So much of my girl-life spent abstaining from myself,

built to slip between rooms

& bodies more beautiful than my own.

& so my mother, who plays

& plays for hours

songs learned in grammar school from the nuns.

Plays them as if the very teeth

I refuse to move in my mouth,

her peach-white fingers coaxing

from the garden

the shyest of peach-white flowers to grow,

to bare

a face— *any* face.

The world waking. Everything in tune.

That there must be something in me calling me

to come, to stumble inside from the pool

& suppose in another

an aspect of grace.

My mother: she sings of God's dream for a skyful of earth.

Tells how the stars were made.

At eight, I want to know how I was made.

How my mother could be so self-trusting & I

so desperate to be comfortable knowing anything *by heart*,

like this strange girl-form, half-naked

& dripping wet

with its bone-ache to practice what it means

being alive.

That all I can do is stand there, hidden,

in a kind of makeshift

silence,

fearing the cadence of my body's entirety.

afraid,

even,

to breathe,

that if I did

I might reveal too much.

Because mixed with the smell

of chlorine

& into the tiny cave of my pruned hands
were the first words I ever spoke,

This is my mother.

Say it again— *This is my mother.*

& who better to teach me to sing?

Vic Elizabeth Laborde

I buried Portland like a trunk of rats. For years, I chased my mother through evictions, 51-50 holds, and suicide attempts, filling cardboard boxes with plastic ashtrays and Kmart clothes, shuttling her from one broken-down apartment to the next. And then one night she swallowed enough pills to kill a family of four. A police officer stopped by to deliver the news – my life sentence as caretaker was overturned.

At her funeral, my brother threw a handful of dirt on the coffin. By late afternoon, he had polished off a fifth of vodka minus the shot he poured for me. I gave him a brief hug goodbye, tossed what little I owned into a VW Bug, and headed south for Oakland. And there I remained in a 1950s stucco one-bedroom off Lake Merritt until my brother called from Good Sam three days before Christmas. He had totaled his Jeep. Punctured his lung. There was something in Travis' voice that sounded like despair. He kept repeating that he was okay but in a lot of trouble and couldn't talk about it over the phone. So, I did what I always did. Came to the rescue.

On Christmas Eve I sat in the arrival area at the Portland airport with my black duffel bag. I waited next to the windows on the lookout for a white Ford F-150, not understanding how my brother could buy a new truck when he couldn't afford basic liability insurance, much less collision to cover his last accident. And he wasn't exactly top sales guy at Sports Authority.

My call went to voicemail: "Yo. Travis in da house. I wanna talk to you but I can't find da phone. Leave a message, I'll get back wi'dyou."

My throat tightened. "We said 8:15 p.m. in baggage claim. You on the way?" I stared as the stretch of taxis, minivans, and passenger cars leaving the airport for the night. The last MAX train left at nine. With a teaching salary that barely covered rent and utilities, I couldn't afford a taxi, much less this costly last-minute plane ticket to Portland. My cellphone vibrated.

"Wassup, sis?" Travis sounded buzzed.

"Not much. Just wondering when you're gonna pick me up."

"Hey Mary, Merry Christmas! Isn't that awesome? Mary like you and Mother Mary who's the reason for the holiday and Merry like Merry Fucking Christmas. Get it?" He laughed for a long time.

"Where are you?"

"I'm on 'da way. Hold tight. Got caught up in crazy holiday traffic."

Since when did Portland have traffic on Christmas Eve?

"Are you there, Mary?"

I looked through the window at the rain coming down. "I guess so."

"Be there in a flash. Have a drink for me. Hey, why not have two?" He started to laugh again. "There's a big ass Caddy about to pull into my lane. Gotta go."

I walked outside toward the passenger waiting area.

After twenty minutes, another call. "Mary, I don't know how to tell you this." His tongue sounded anesthetized. "I'm on the way to Timberline with this hot little sweetie."

"What?"

"I called my friend, Vic. He's on his way to pick you up. You'll like him."

"You're sending someone whose name rhymes with dick?"

"He's got this sweet black Corvette. Think of it like a free escort service. How cool is that?"

"Tell Vic not to come."

"He owns a swag bar. You'll dig it." His words slurred together like cursive.

A dark car drove up. "I can't believe you're doing this to me, Travis."

The passenger window lowered, an older guy leaned in. "Sorry I'm late, Mary."

Should I answer in German, pretend I didn't understand?

Vic left the Corvette running while he exited the vehicle. His crewcut had more salt than pepper. His Bruno Magli shoes were polished and new.

"I'm sorry my brother asked you to pick me up. I'm taking the MAX into town."

Vic took a step closer. "Travis made me promise on my mother's grave I'd bring you back from the airport. Besides, it's a holiday and trains already quit running for the night."

"I appreciate your offer, but I'm good." Though Corvette Man seemed harmless, I didn't trust him. Maybe I'd lived in Oakland too long or maybe smart people didn't get into stranger's cars. Something about not wanting to become the next missing persons case. Then again, this was Travis' friend, so why did I have to analyze this to death?

"Travis will kill me if I don't take care of you."

"I doubt that."

"You're probably right." When he grinned, thin crow's feet etched into the skin around his eyes. "Your brother's a character. Loves to tell jokes at my bar. Gets all the girls to laugh."

"Travis is your customer. Is that how you met?"

"More like my bouncer. One night, he asks if I'm hiring. I liked him, so I gave him a shot. Kid's a great worker. Always on time."

At least Travis had something going for him.

"Travis is good people." The car keys jangled in Vic's hand. "Listen, it's pissing rain. Let me give you a lift."

He wasn't kidding. Water pooled on the road and streamed into the storm drains. "I don't want to inconvenience you."

"It's no trouble." Before I could protest, he picked up my dingy bag and tossed it into the trunk. He patted the hood of his car. "You ever ridden in one of these?"

I shook my head.

"You're in for a treat." He slid his hand over the wet surface. I noticed his gold watch, encrusted with large diamonds. How did a guy who looked like a refrigerator

repairman own something that cost more than my car, clothes, and furniture combined?

He opened the passenger door – even in the dim light, I could tell the floor mats were worn. Same as the upholstery on the seats, graying and thin.

Vic joined the trickle of cars leaving the airport, his thick fingers clasp the red and black steering wheel. I wanted to turn some music on to fill the silence, but the button was broken. I wasn't sure what to talk about with my brother's middle-aged friend. "Travis tells me you go by Vic. I don't meet many people by that name."

He signaled before turning onto the freeway ramp. "It was passed down from my great granddad. We're fighters. Every last one of us."

"Fighters, as in boxers?"

"Yes, ma'am. Super middleweight amateur champ in my heyday." He patted the belly hanging over his brown belt. "I haven't boxed since '96."

I tapped my lanky shoulder. "Me neither."

He made this odd sound, a cross between a cough and a laugh. "That would be something, Mary Ellen Dennison on the canvas bobbing and weaving."

"You know my middle name?"

He zipped across two lanes, "Travis loves to talk about you."

I tugged my hoodie past my eyebrows, covering most of my face. "Sounds like you two are pretty close."

"Travis is family."

We merged onto I-205 South. The rain slowed down and I tried to picture Travis sharing intimate details about his life with Vic. Maybe this guy was a father figure of some sort.

The car picked up speed. "Which makes you family, Mary. We're spending our first Christmas together, driving home."

"Portland isn't home," I said. "It's only a spot on the map."

He tapped the steering wheel with his gloved thumb. "But it's your hometown. You spent holidays here. Surely, you have fond memories of being with your family at Christmas."

I stared at the guardrail speeding past, one reflector after another. "When I was a kid, I loved it. But when you grow up, it's not the same." I wanted to believe Christmas was a magical time, but Dad was spaced out on Miller Lites and Mom basted the turkey between highballs. I never could figure out who was better-basted, Mom or the turkey. We were like four ghosts drifting from room to room connected by the din of the TV set.

The Corvette accelerated. I watched the needle go past 70 then 80 then 90. My voice pitched. "Don't you worry about speeding tickets?"

"No." Vic rocketed past the Gateway Exit. He kept his neck locked in place, barely blinking. And then he decelerated. "You've had a wild year teaching in," he paused for several seconds. "Oakland, isn't it?"

Did Travis run his fool mouth about where I worked? “Oh, it’s been okay.”

“That’s not what I hear.” The rain picked up. Vic turned the windshield wipers to a faster setting. “I heard you got into some trouble.”

Ever since I started at Highland, I’d felt hopeless. I stayed up late writing comments in kids’ journals. Told them how remarkable they were. Teach for America believed we could save kids’ lives. Save these kid’s lives? I was lucky if I could save their weekend. I never told anyone how I felt inside. Did Travis make up a bunch of stuff about me or was Vic making this up as he went along?

He put his hand on the armrest between us. “Tell me more about Oakland.”

Open up to Vic? Not on his life. “The A’s are really something.” I noticed a ragged two-inch scar on his neck which didn’t look self-inflicted.

“Maybe I should fly down and catch a game with you. I’m connected. I could snatch up tickets right behind the dugout.” He snapped his fingers in the space between us, “Just like that.”

I had known pushy people, but no one like this. “I don’t think my boyfriend would like --”

He interrupted. “Travis told me you’re not dating anyone. You don’t have many friends. Your parents are six-feet under. There’s just Travis and your dead-end job.”

The wiper blades swished water back and forth, making it hard to see the road. It seemed impossible for the Corvette to glide through this rainstorm without hydroplaning or spinning into a guardrail. I wanted to tell him to slow down, but challenging him would only make things worse.

Vic placed his chunky fingers at the back of my neck. He squeezed hard then released. From his pocket, he yanked out a key ring with black letters inscribed on a plastic yellow circle with a smiley face: *It’s cute how stupid you are*. “Travis wanted you to have these.” I watched the key chain dangle from his gloved fingers, my eyes fixed on the word *stupid* swinging in midair. “I promised to escort you. We’ll be there in ten.”

He tossed the keychain between my legs. I wanted to pretend it wasn’t there. Why had Travis sent this freak to pick me up? What was going on?

Vic dug his fingers into my thigh. “You’re scrawny. But I don’t mind doing a skinny bitch once in a while.”

Oh Jesus, oh Jesus, oh Jesus. My eight-week self-defense course wasn’t worth a shit against a guy this size. I tried to slow my breathing and get ahold of the fear spiraling in every direction. I twisted in my seat to face Vic. I had to fake my way through the next ten minutes and get him to drop his guard. “Sounds like you’re not into skinny girls. What other kinds of women turn you on?”

He held his gaze on the road. “I don’t kiss and tell.”

My heart picked up speed. I saw the Lloyd Center buildings whirring past then the green, purple and red lights of the Morrison Bridge reflecting on the Willamette River.

His right hand moved from my thigh to the cuff of my sweatshirt. “Take this off.”

I used this breathy voice, like I was defenseless. “I’m cold. Can I leave it on for

now?”

He lifted his hand from me, made a fist then slammed my rib cage so hard something cracked. I curled forward. Couldn't breathe.

Vic's voice was full of rage. "Take it off. Now."

The pain tore through my side. I slowly removed the bulky hoodie which made me look bigger than I was.

Vic glanced at my chest. "You wear a T-shirt well."

Never in my life did I dream I'd be in a Corvette with a thug telling me to take my clothes off. Didn't that happen to dumb sorority girls who rolled out of bars at closing time?

"The sweatshirt's a good start. Keep going."

"I'm not sure what you mean."

"Really, Mary? In seventh grade, you gave head to a pimply kid behind the bleachers then you let him come back for seconds after school. Travis said his friends took you for a few spins. You were a DQ full-meal-deal at the ripe age of 12, so quit your goody-goody routine."

After I got together with that boy, word got around. Groups of boys cornered me in the hallway and copped a feel while their friends stood guard, blocking onlookers. Kids scribbled on my locker: *Eat that ham, Road Whore, On Your Knees, Slob On My Knob*. I scrubbed off the words, but new ones appeared the next day. It got so bad the school called my parents in for a meeting. My folks transferred me to another middle school – ever since, I'd dressed in Converse and baggy clothes. Deep down, I never recovered from seventh grade, so I couldn't believe Travis shared my humiliation with another human being, much less this creep.

Vic grabbed hold of my T-shirt collar. With one hard pull, he split the seam open. "You better not piss me off."

The Corvette rolled onto the bridge. We were five minutes from Travis' apartment. Five minutes from do or die. Hold on. Keep playing along. When the car stops, reach for your purse, open the car door, and run for your fucking life.

"Vic, let's wait until we're inside Travis' apartment. It'll be more special if we're in private."

He grabbed my hair like he was going to rip it out. I'll never know how he kept his hand steady on the steering wheel while holding my head so taut. "Last warning. Take it off."

I glanced out the window, hoping we were at 19th only to see the 12th Avenue sign. Dammit. Seven more blocks to go. I could do this. I could get out of this car intact. I reached for the bottom of my T-shirt and dragged it over my head, the adrenaline and fear counterbalancing the pain in my rib cage. I looked down at the red and purple welt he had given me a few minutes before.

Vic said, "A red bra. Of course. Why aren't you more ashamed?" He shoved me into the passenger door. My head thwacked against the window, blood rushing into my

skull. He unbuttoned the top of his shirt and exposed a dark splash of hair. I wasn't going to let this happen. I'd scrape his eyes out. I'd ram his nose into his brain.

He turned the wheel sharply at 19th Avenue. Travis' apartment building was coming up on the right. While Vic backed up to parallel park, I visualized my escape. I'd casually open the door, absently reach for my purse, lift myself out of the passenger seat then leave my bag in the trunk as I bolted down the street towards the Firehouse two blocks away.

He straightened the wheel and moved the car a few inches forward before cutting the engine. Vic snatched Travis' keys from my lap. I reached over for the door latch. Nothing. I pulled the latch again. A click but it didn't open.

"When did I say you could leave? Do tell, Miss Mary."

Like the knob to the radio, the door handle didn't work. I looked out the window. The sidewalks were empty. The stores were closed. All I could see were shadows of alders swaying against the wet pavement. Is this how it ends, not with a whimper, but one of those T.S. Eliot bangs?

He rubbed his mouth with his large fingers while he stared at me. "You leave when I let you out. Not before."

I scanned the road for someone, anyone to help me, but the roads were deserted, just as I was in this awful car.

Vic reached in his jacket and drew out a pocket knife with a bone handle. He opened it and brought the blade close to my face. "I had this aunt. She loved to take in filthy strays. Ugly mutts, feral cats. A do-gooder, just like you."

I felt dizzy. My eyes darted around the car, desperately searching for something to use as a weapon. But there was nothing.

He said, "You want to save people. Dirty slum children. Don't you know that people born from scum die in scum? Don't you know how hopeless it is, trying to save those people?"

Vic pulled my face close to his, forcing me to look at the gray stubble on his double chin. "I suppose it was one of those hopeless nights when you decided it was not enough to save the rat children of Oakland. You had to save something closer to home." He used a saccharine tone. "Was it one of those sad little nights over a stack of papers that you decided to help Travis? Silly Mary, trying to poke your nose where it doesn't belong."

The rain drizzled lightly on the hood of the car. "Vic, it's Christmas Eve and Travis is all I got left. This is a family visit. Nothing more."

He waved the exposed blade in the air, seemingly at nothing. "Do you know how Travis got that new truck he's so proud of? What he did to get the down payment?"

I didn't want to find out. My survival depended on knowing as little as possible. I reached across the center compartment to touch Vic's leg. He latched onto my wrist and jabbed his thumb between the cartilage and the bone. It felt like an ice pick prying into my skin.

I needed to pretend. I had to pretend. I used a soft voice. “Let’s go upstairs, Vic. Just you and me.”

He kept ahold of my wrist. I kept my head down, breathing through the pain.

“D’you know your brother was dying to meet you tonight? Wanted to show off his new truck. That is, until I gave him that first drink. And then he downed another and another. Soon, he was sloppy drunk in the back of a limousine with one of my girls.”

The rain splattered against the windshield and the roof of the car. I looked at the sign over Travis’ apartment building, The Grovesmore. My heart beat so fast I thought it was going to blow up.

“Travis was desperate to see you, but I told him I’d take care of you, and take care of you I will, Mary.” Vic pushed the flat end of his knife against my cheek. “You’ll cooperate, won’t you?”

As if there were any answer other than... “Yes.”

The knife slid downward to my throat, making a light scratching sound. Vic brought his face next to mine. “Yes, what? Mary, Mary, Quite Contrary?”

Though my heart pounded like a bomb was going off inside my chest, I used a steady voice. “Yes. I will cooperate. I’ll do what you want.”

“That’s a good girl. Did you really think you could straighten out Travis’ life? Didn’t anyone tell you the only person you can save in this life is yourself?”

I felt his breath warm against my ear when I said, “You’re probably right.”

“Travis liked to spill his guts at my bar – that kid moves his mouth when he gets a drink in him. He gave away all your nasty secrets, Mary, and you’re someone he actually cares about. Which makes him untrustworthy. The DA wants Travis to sign a plea deal. Accuse me of money laundering, extortion, rape, drug trafficking, assault with a deadly weapon, forgery, and manslaughter. That ain’t gonna happen.”

Vic’s cell buzzed and he let go of me. While scrolling through his messages with his fat index finger, he rattled off a bunch of shit about how easy it is to make victims disappear. “CSI Las Vegas had it all wrong. The police don’t spend much time investigating homicides for nobodies like you. Same with lowlifes like Travis. Now get your sweatshirt on, Mary. It’s time to go upstairs.”

Forcing myself to inhale, I reached down for my hoodie. No sooner had I put my hands through the sleeves when Vic had moved around the car, unlocking my door. I rushed to poke my head through the top. With the knife visible in his left hand, Vic knelt beside me, blocking my exit with his body. “Give me your purse. You won’t be needing that.”

I tried to peer around his large frame. Nobody in sight. If I yelled *fire*, who would hear? I put my head down, holding out hope I could find a way out of this. His polished Bruno Maglis reflected the streetlights – my ex used to wear slick shoes like that, shoes with no tread. Shoes with no tread!

He took my hand and led me out of the passenger seat.

I knew he’d rape me first and kill me second. My body would disappear somewhere

in the forest range between here and the Pacific Ocean. When Vic reached to shut the passenger door, I slammed my free fist as hard as I could against the weak carpal bones at the edge of his wrist. His hand released exactly as the self-defense instructor described. I whirled away, hearing the preternatural sound of his knife cleave into my upper back. But I didn't stop. I kept running, feeling the blood oozing out, warm against my skin. I kept running, hoping my sneakers could outdistance Vic's slippery shoes. I got to the end of 19th Avenue, the 18th Avenue sign looming ahead.

I kept running towards the Fire Station on 17th hearing something whiz by my ear and bounce against the stop sign. I could hear his footsteps coming up behind me, but I wouldn't look back. I kept running. I thought of Travis and this nightmare called his life. No matter how this night played out, if Travis came clean with the DA, he had a chance to break free and start over. I kept running though I couldn't feel my feet. My breath condensed, cloudy wisps wrapping around my face.

I was half-way down 18th, almost to the firehouse. Maybe someone would see me running and try to help? Then I heard another shot followed by a hollow explosion. Vic's bullet hit my right shoulder. My arm went dead. I heaved it into my chest and held it against my body with my left arm while my legs shuffled underneath. Only a couple hundred feet to go. The lights outside the firehouse shone down on the pavement as I kept running towards them, holding my life and my brother's in my one good hand.

Dance Partner

Gregory Davis

8am. You're tall and thin, like me. Quiet, like me. You will hold the drugs that can cure me. Maybe. You've had many partners before. Dime a dance relationships. How many lived? How many died? Today I am yours.

8:05am. You're the skinny girl who wants a rack. Stuffing toilet paper into your bra. Without a chest you are nothing. No use to me. Just another skinny wallflower.

8:10am. I like you more with the drug bags hanging from your hooks. Lana Turner in her tight sweater.

8:15am. Hooked up. The meds flow into me. No soft-shoe here. Do the stomp on the cancer cells. Make me weak and anaemic . Make me so compromised that a kid with a snot nose could kill me. Make me nauseous, tired, depressed and angry. Make me cry.

10:00am. Come with me, shuffling to the bathroom to piss. To the fridge for a soda. To the hallway to stretch jittery legs. We are clumsy this first time.

10:30am. I am a private man. I hate your intrusions. This black ballet of ours. You mark me as one of them: the scared, the sick, the dying.

11:30am. I put on head phones to block out the clicks and beeps of your med regulator. Close my eyes and stop counting the drops of Cisplatin falling from the drug bag to the tube connected to me. You win against these childish efforts to to block you from my consciousness. Whenever I need to move about we begin again our awkward jig.

Noon. This room. This medicinal ballroom. I count fifteen others with me in this dance marathon. Three chairs down a lady is weeping. Soft words from the nurses. She settles down and continues her treatment. Dance marathon rules are simple. Keep moving and you're still in the game. Stop moving and you're out. This room. So full of fear.

12:30pm. Next to me is a leukemia sufferer. He is gaunt with sickness and exhaustion. He tells me his battle has been going on for eleven years. Tells me this is the third reoccurrence of the disease. Next to him his wife asserts that he will get better. When she leaves for a minute he looks at me and says, "I'm tired of the fight. I can't say this to my wife." Jesus. Am I witnessing the beginning of the end? A last, spent foxtrot to oblivion?

12:45pm. Unhooked. No polite disengaging here. No coquettish backward glance. No we.

12:50pm. My senses are hyper alert. Hoping against common sense to detect the slightest change. One of my lymph nodes is the size of a golf balls it shrinking? Is my hair falling out? Nothing.

1pm. Another session tomorrow. And the next day. Many days. Until the band stops playing and we can go our separate ways. No lightness of step. We will cling to each other. Keep our knees from touching the floor. Smell each other's rank sweat. Keep clutching until we are the last couple standing. The winners. Ready to split our prize and walk away from each other forever.

by William Snyder

A POEM FOUND IN AN AD AND DESIRE

She stands in snow, a wood frame house to her left, the load end of a dumping-truck to her right suggesting sugar beets, Minnesota. She wears a dark green hat, wool perhaps, with chevrons about the circumference. Round face, high cheek bones, gray eyes. Fur collar about her neck, shirt collar open. She regards me as if to say, *I am solid. There is nothing to hide. I might interest you.*

She interests me. I click her a dozen times, a dozen days running. She is thirty-six, she says, and seeks a man for *Commitment. Date. Friendship. Intimacy.* All of the above. *So where to begin?* she asks. *Marriage didn't work,* she says. *Let's sit down in a booth and just talk for a while. I'm not looking for Mr. Perfect, I'm just looking for Mr. Close Enough.*

I make a sign-in name, a password, credit twenty dollars. Write. To *fargo_natalie*. Then a week, three weeks, and today, a message. *I'm a sexual person,* she says, *and I should be upfront from the get-go. I'm very open-minded,* she says, *when it comes to what goes on under the sheets. I have my homepage at <http://natalies.pagehere.com>. I just don't like to restrict my options,* she says, *if you know what I mean.* I do.

WILLEM BLUE

Almond Blossoms

Vincent Van Gogh, 1890

He's looking up and I'm
looking up and our necks
are bending backwards
and our Adams apples
jut like broken thumbs,
and our backbones
strain and crack, and our
balances waver like
drunken idlers leaning—
all for the blossoms,
the almond blossoms—
the almond tree, the gray
trunk, the white bloom,
the pink petal, the gray
twig, the brown branch,
the hard knot, the deft
flower folded, the ready
bud ready, the knarly
twist, the yellow swirl,
the sky blue milk blue
vein blue, the
unimaginable blue
that cannot be worldly,
but must be the blue
of god and dream
and breath and love
and genius. The blue of
wish, of salute, of birth.
The birth of a boy,
his nephew child, his
brother's son, Willem.

MOUSE

I saw it yesterday—like the finger
from an old gray glove, it slunk
between the house and deck.
Today, in the workroom, I ask
if poison is the answer. Joan crooks
her arms, twists her eyes
and lips, and with wheezing squeaks,
does a death-throws-of-a-mouse
routine. We laugh, but later, I ask
Sandy if outside mice can get in, say
how I imagine them
misting in through cellar windows—
four-legged Vlads. *Only if*, she says,
you've got cracks in your foundation.

Yes, I've had my share of cracks.
And mice. Like in Philly in '86,
the apartment on Corinthian with
the prison opposite, its stone wall
blotting sunlight at four, three
in winter, and how I'd wake
at night dreaming mice had pawed
across my face and neck as I slept
on my sliver of foam. I'd return
to sleep thinking, *oh, ugly dream*,
the dream sparked by night-time
mice gnawing kitchen bags for crusts
or peanut crumbs or cabbage leaves.
But how, mornings, I'd find
droppings between the foam and wall
and think that maybe they really had
prowled my face. Then somehow,
by the next night around, I'd
forget, or refuse to acknowledge—

I don't know why. But it was an odd,
dark time. The bleak, cold city, its
paucity of light. And the pavement,
the sirens, the trash. The bleak job
in the portable class and the laughing,
silly kids. The days going by
like windowless rooms above dark,

greasy streets. I bought sticky traps—
but would find them dragged across
the linoleum, mice paws stuck
and tortured. Then metal hammers
that cracked, crunching feet, legs, necks.
But they kept on and on. So,
finally, poison. And they were gone.
For good. Though it was a while before
I was gone from Philly. I'll buy
some again, I guess, despite Joan's act,
then think of all the cracks I've patched,
or tried to, with concrete, or
persuasion, or charm. Or poison. Though
sometimes, with a little fit of resolve.

the boy in the basement

Corina K Skentzou

*Don't whisper as you'll wake up the boy in the basement
His skin feels like porcelain and from his round doe eyes with shallow glances he
embraces you
His smile sarcastically mirrors our smile and our cry
Please listen to his tears when guiding his laughter as he passes
He is your puppet, he is just a boy in the basement
imprisoned in his dreams; the dreams that we pretend are his*

The Backyard

It is cold outside. He looks around the small backyard. His flowers are giving up to the winter. He digs his hands in the dirt and uproots the tomato plant. He is six feet tall, with a slender figure and broad shoulders. His eyes have the color of the honey and his ebony black hair is curly and shining long below his shoulders. His nose is straight and firm, resembles the nose of a Roman statue. He wears army black leather boots without strings. His jeans have hollows on the knees and his shirt has a red faded color. He looks neither young nor old. He takes the last tomatoes from the ground and puts them in a plastic bag. He claps his hands and gets rid of the dirt.

“Adammmmm...”

He does not respond immediately.

“What?” His voice is flat.

“What are you doing down there?” his mother, Rebecca, asks with a pretentious calm voice.

He ignores her.

“Adam...I'm talking to you.”

“I figured out...I think you were screaming at me.”

Rebecca goes down to the backyard at a fast pace. She is thin; her figure takes you back to the sixties. She wears bell-shaped trousers and her blonde hair contradicts her black turtleneck blouse.

“Baby, what are you doing outside with that cold? Oh my God! You’re just wearing a T-shirt?”

“I work on my plants.”

“Oh! What happened to your tomato plant?” Rebecca asks with a pretentiously surprising-this-time voice.

“Just died, Mom. Winter is coming. End of season.”

“But I checked the tomatoes this morning, and the plant was okay.”

“I removed it.”

Her cat-eyes become round, full of concern.

“Why?”

“Because I wanted to,” he says with a firm but calm voice.

“Did you get your medication today?”

He is not looking at her. He hits his boots on the concrete floor. Rebecca rushes into her next question.

“Well...are you coming for dinner later? Sam and Dina are coming for dinner. We are going to have a good time.

“Maybe,” he says, and he is walking away from her. He goes to the lower level. The stairs are at the side of the backyard. He opens the door and he gets inside the basement.

The Basement

The basement has four separate rooms: a bathroom, a kitchen, a bedroom and a living room. For the last forty years the basement hid Rebecca’s antique collection. Adam picked up some antiques that he liked. The rest he asked his parents to remove from the basement.

The renovation was Jonathan’s idea at first. He thought that some privacy would be good for Adam. It is still considered a basement due to the lack of natural light. However, Adam made it so beautiful. He almost renovated the whole thing by himself. He worked on the basement for six months.

He scratched some parts of the walls and exposed the bricks. He put in wooden floors. He made a huge bookcase from wood and glass. He put thick white carpets on the living room floor. He painted the antiques in bright yellow and blue colors. He spent his life there and in the backyard for the last two years. Rebecca insisted he also move his piano there. Adam agreed; however, he does not play often anymore. He feels that its sound reveals personal information. Perhaps he will ask them to buy an electric piano. He will put his headphones on and will express himself in private. He decided, he will ask for the electric piano tomorrow.

Servitude

You have your way. I have my way.
As of the right way, the correct way,
and the only way, it does not exist.
Friedrich Nietzsche

Rebecca rushes into the kitchen. She mechanically opens the refrigerator and takes the milk and the butter. She rinses some milk into a bowl and adds the butter. She stirs them with strong, fast moves. She is not focused and the bowl falls down on the floor. She cleans up. She decides that mashed potatoes should not accompany their dinner. Rice is better with her stew, she thinks. She recalls the backyard scene with Adam. Did he seem disorganized? Did he have a flat affect? What is going to happen if he has stopped his medication. Her racing thoughts are exhausting. Nothing is wrong, she strictly assures herself. She gets back to cooking. Jonathan comes into the kitchen.

“Hey, you didn’t hear the bell?”

“No, I was at the backyard.”

“Sam and Dina are here.”

“Oh really? I didn’t hear them at all.”

She goes to the living room.

“Welcome, welcome...Dina! This dress is gorgeous!”

“I picked it up,” Sam says.

“Of course! My son is famous for his taste both in women and style,” Rebecca says and is winking at him. Dina is blushing.

“How are you, Rebecca?” she says.

“I’m good—too much work though.”

“Yes, Sam told me. This is good though.”

“I’m not complaining, love.”

“Mom, stop the chitchat! What goodies are you cooking for us?”

“My famous stew and rice.”

“Rice! No mashed potatoes anymore?”

“Oh, my big boy wants mashed potatoes. I will do it with mashed potatoes next time; rice is healthier after all.”

“Do you mean that you will cook stew again? This is considered variety, for real!” Jonathan says in a teasing tone.

“Ok, you stay here...I’m going in my kitchen to cook my healthy rice, if this is okay with Mr. Jonathan.”

“We allow you, Mom, go ahead.”

“Do you need any help?” Dina asks.

“You stay there—this dress is too pretty for cooking.”

“I can wear an apron.”

“You stay here, end of story,” Rebecca pseudo-seriously says. Sam goes into the kitchen five minutes after his mother. He hugs her from behind while she is serving the rice onto a big plate.

“What’s wrong again?”

“Nothing is wrong, sweetie,” she says and breaks into tears.

“What happens with him again?”

“He looks weird; he went out with a T-shirt in that cold. He destroyed his tomato plant. His face looks so indifferent. He is hiding himself for two weeks in a row in this rabbit hole. He does not play the piano at all. He does not even come up to get some food.”

“This is classic Adam. Come on, Mom, Adam is always like that. Plus, when somebody works with his hands, they can get hot. This is your paranoia; these are not relapse signs.”

“You are like your father. There isn’t anything wrong. I’m just paranoid! Do you remember what happened last year? I had seen the signs, and you ignored me.”

“Mom, this was last year. Now he has new meds. He seems better.”

“Oh, really? Does he seem better to you? Have you even given him a call to see how he is?”

“Enough! I have my own life to take care of. My life is not about Adam.”

“Mine is about Adam, though!”

“You better get a life, Mom.”

“When you are a parent, perhaps, you will understand.”

“Well...we will be parents soon! That’s why we came over, to tell you.” Rebecca smiles and hugs Sam. Her mind almost escaped from the basement.

They are sitting at the living room’s table. Rebecca set her special occasion silverware. She does not sit with them. She moves around and serves them.

“Can you sit down for a minute? You make me dizzy,” Sam says. Then, he takes his fork and hits his glass.

“Family, silence please. I have to announce to you that Dina and I are expecting a child!” Jonathan hugs Dina, who sits next to him.

“Such great news! You made my day.”

“Please, Sam, go downstairs to tell Adam. He will be happy to hear,” Rebecca says.

“Ok, I’m going.”

Sam walks outside the house and rings Adam’s bell. He never goes to him from the backyard’s door. He hears Adam’s sleepy and slow steps. Then silence. He feels Adam behind the door. He listens to his heavy breath.

“Who is this?”

“This is Sam.”

“Who?”

“Sam...open the door.”

“Wait a minute.” Sam hears him walking fast and then he hears a strong thud. Some things are falling down.

“What are you doing, man? Just open the door.”

“Wait!” Sam detects an intense, disgusting odor.

“Open the door!”

“Go away!”

“Adam...open the fucking door.”

More noise.

“What the fuck are you doing over there?”

“Fuck off.”

Sam runs upstairs. He is passing the living room fast. Rebecca follows him. Her plate falls down and breaks into pieces. Jonathan and Dina, speechless, look at each other. Sam enters the kitchen, opens the door and goes down the steps. Rebecca is following him. He kicks the basement’s door. The door resists and he kicks it again, stronger this time. The door cracks and finally opens.

“Mom, stay there.”

“No...I’m coming.”

The smell slaps them in the face. Sam enters, passes the bedroom and goes to the living room. He accidentally bumps into the bookcase and the books fall on the floor.

Adam, wearing only his underwear, runs in the living room.

“Fucking bastard...get off my place. Leave!” Adam screams.

Rebecca comes in.

“Leave, Mom.”

“Adam...baby. What’s wrong?”

“Leave! You fucking whore.”

Rebecca cries.

“Mom, go upstairs and call 911.”

Rebecca obeys. She climbs the stairs with vitality. Jonathan and Dina are in the kitchen.

“What is going on?” Jonathan asks hesitantly.

She ignores him; she tries to find her cell. It is in her pocket. She calls 911. Sam follows the smell. Adam tries to stop him. Sam hugs him, trying to immobilize him, but Adam starts biting his arms. Sam, in pain, slaps him in the face and Adam falls down. Sam makes sure that he has lost consciousness and grabs his feet to drag him in the bedroom. He leaves his brother’s unconscious body there and locks the door behind.

The smell comes from the bathroom. When he opens the door, the smell becomes paralyzing. He pulls the shower curtain and a lake of blood appears. He gets on his knees and throws up. A cat’s dead body lies on the bathtub.

Stagnation

Truths and roses have thorns
around them.

Henry David Thoreau

He is lying on the bed and staring at the white ceiling. He cannot sleep. Tomorrow he will be discharged. He has stayed here for forty days. He has not seen Rebecca and the rest of the family. They always come on the visitation days; every Wednesday and Sunday. But, he never shows up.

The doctor told him that he has to take his medicine. He liked the way the doctor put it. He told him to imagine a person who suffers from diabetes and needs to take her insulin for life. This is exactly what he suffers from, a disease. But his disease is psychiatric. Maybe, he reconsiders. The doctor added that he needs to find things to do outside the house, to find hobbies and socialize with others, for instance. Perhaps, to continue his piano studies. He was accepted at Juilliard three years ago. He attended three semesters there. His professors were impressed. Then he suffered an acute episode. It was such an embarrassing experience. The only thing that he remembers from that day is lying naked on the floor of the school's dining area and the people's cold glances on his skin. He still cannot decide which was colder. He decided that he will never go to Juilliard again. Maybe he could transfer his credits to Hartt School. It is a good school and is far away from Brooklyn, far away from his family.

His thoughts do not allow him to sleep. He is excited, he has so many goals. He will start playing the piano. He will call Shaun and Brennan; good friends of his, from Juilliard. He will definitely reconnect with them. He remembers that they had called when he was in the hospital. He was ashamed to call them back. He will change this. But before anything, he wants to do a long hike.

He remembers that he, Brennan and Shaun planned to hike the Appalachian Trail. Two weeks before the trip he had one of his most serious episodes. His friends did the hike. He did the hospitalization.

His excitement drags him out of bed. He goes to the living room. It is empty and dark. Everyone is asleep. He does not turn on the lights. He likes the darkness and the silence. He sits on the couch and whispers to himself, "This time I will do it...all alone. All alone...this time I will do it."

"Nobody can stop me. Nobody can stop me."

He goes back to his room and lies on the bed. *Nobody can stop me*, the voice in his head keeps telling him until he is falling asleep.

It is 8:30 a.m. The nurse gently wakes him up.

"Adam, wake up. Your family is here. It is time to go home!"

Adam feels his legs heavy. He slowly gets up and stretches. His big green bag is waiting for him next to the door. He walks to the sink and washes his face with cold water. He looks at his reflection in the mirror. He smiles with confidence at the man in

the mirror.

Rebecca and Jonathan are waiting for him in the living room. Rebecca is wearing a long green skirt, Adam's gift. Jonathan is watching television.

"I can't believe how indifferent you are."

"I beg your pardon?"

"You seem like you don't care that our son is released today. I can't understand how you do it!"

"What do you want me to do?" Jonathan says, without unlocking his eyes from the television.

"Is it appropriate to watch TV right now? Our son is coming in any minute—do you want him to see your careless attitude?"

"You have issues, Rebecca...and finally, shut up."

"How dare you talk to me in that way?" Rebecca says, and looks him in his eyes.

"You give me the privilege...and you know something? All this is your fault."

"What do you mean?" Rebecca asks with surprising terror.

"You have castrated him; he is a pet."

"What exactly do you not understand? He is sick. If you want to be in denial, go ahead. I'm not leaving my son alone—my son is not a burden to me."

Adam is there for a while and listens to everything. *Nobody can stop me*, his angel-guardian voice soothes him.

"You mean that he is a burden to me?"

"Oh, yes...of course he is... Do you think that we do not see? You work overtime, you grab every opportunity that takes you away from home."

"You know something? Yes, I do, not because of him, but because of you. I wish I could divorce you."

“Well...what holds you back?”

Adam observes them. They are not his parents, they are actors playing in a soap opera. He decides to change the channel and goes inside the living room.

“Adam!”

“Hey, what’s up?”

“How do you feel, man?” Jonathan asks.

“Why were you not showing up?” Rebecca says.

“Because he did not want to show up,” Jonathan replied, instead of Adam.

“Whatever you want, baby.”

“Mom, I’m not a baby.”

“For me you will always be my baby.”

“Give me your bag,” said Jonathan.

“I can carry it myself...” He looks at Jonathan and adds, “Thank you, though.”

They are walking in the parking lot. He sees their car from far away. They came with the Mini Cooper. He loves the Mini Cooper. First of all, he likes its color that is red. Secondly, he likes the Beatles. He smiles.

“May I drive?”

Rebecca rushes to respond, “I think it is not a good...”

Jonathan interrupts, “Sure,” he says, and throws the keys to Adam.

They get in the car. Rebecca wants to sit next to Adam. Jonathan shows her the backseat. She hesitates and then she goes in.

She looks at Adam’s face through the front mirror. He seems happy. Her son is so handsome. The sunlight touches his face and his eyes become yellow. She prays silently. She prays to God, to Buddha, to anyone, for this to be the last time that Adam

comes here.

Adam drives; Jonathan has put the Beatles in the cassette player. They sing together.

Rebecca gradually relaxes. She remembers herself and Jonathan when the kids were young. They were so in love. All together they used to go on road trips with this old uncomfortable Mini Cooper; her first car. She and Jonathan were holding hands while Bob Dylan was singing on the radio,

*How does it feel
How does it feel
To be without a home
Like a complete unknown
Like a rolling stone?*

What happened to them? Why? She observes Adam's strong hands on the wheel. These beautiful hands have engaged in both terrible and magnificent things, she thinks.

He was first diagnosed when he was eight years old. The teacher called and asked her to hurry up. She remembers that she almost got into an accident, she was driving that fast. She had found Adam lying down on the floor, screaming and yelling. This hysteric boy did not resemble her smiley Adam at all. This boy was drowned in fear. The headmaster informed her that he had attacked one of his classmates with a wooden baseball rope. The other child had to go to the hospital for stitches. The teacher said that the whole incident was out of the blue; he suddenly attacked the other child. Rebecca did not believe them. She told them that this could not have happened. Most probably the other kid has done something to Adam. Adam continued to inarticulately scream until the ambulance came. Rebecca sat on her knees and started fondling his hair. He kicked her away but she came to him again until he kicked and punched her in the face. She still has the taste of the blood in her mouth.

The car's horn brings her back to the present. They are driving on Emmons Avenue, almost home. She sees the seagulls. They dive in the water and then fly away.

They arrive. Adam gets out of the car and he is all smiles. Jonathan helps Rebecca to get out from the backseat. Adam immediately goes downstairs. Rebecca and Jonathan unlock their door. Jonathan goes directly to the living room and Rebecca to the kitchen. She sees Adam in the backyard. She opens the window.

"I cooked for you—lasagna with ground beef."

He looks at her.

“Thank you, Mom.”

“I cooked this morning, but I will warm them up and bring it to you downstairs.”

“I will eat with you guys.”

Rebecca could not feel happier. Perhaps this time will be the last time. He looks so healthy. She has not seen him like this for years.

Adam and Jonathan are sitting at the table. She looks at Jonathan and tries to make eye contact. They are looking to each other. She smiles at him but he is already looking down to the floor. She serves the food.

“Yummy, this arugula salad is so fresh, Mom.”

“I know! Do you like the vinaigrette?”

“Delicious, precisely sweet and sour!”

“Yes, I have put mustard, balsamic vinegar, and honey.”

Rebecca tries to preserve the small talk.

“I am thinking to apply to Hartt School.”

“That is an amazing idea!” Jonathan cannot hide his reflexive enthusiasm.

“That’s nice,” Rebecca hesitantly says.

“What’s wrong, Mom? You are not happy that I will be back in the world?”

Rebecca tries to organize her thoughts. She has to pick up the right words.

“I’m very happy with what you just said, Adam...”

“But...?”

“There is no ‘but,’” Jonathan intervenes. Rebecca pierces Jonathan with her firm look.

“Mom, talk to me. What’s wrong?”

“Nothing is wrong, Adam. Hartt School is perfect,” Jonathan says.

Jonathan makes her anxious and furious.

“No Jonathan, Hartt School is in Connecticut and this is *not* perfect.”

“Can you tell this to me, Mom? I’m the one who is going to Hartt School.”

“Look, Adam, you have lost the privilege to go wherever you want.”

“Rebecca!” Jonathan shouts to her.

“What did you just say?” Adam said.

“I said that you are not stabilized.” Her throat is dry; she drinks some water and adds, “You have never been stabilized for more than three months. How are you going to live in Connecticut? Away from us?”

“You mean away from you,” Adam calmly says.

“Rebecca, stop this, please. Are you serious? Adam just came home.”

“From where?” She cannot believe how mean she can be, where this resentment is coming from. She looks at Jonathan and adds, “You do not have anything to say, uh? Do not bother, I will say. Adam just came from the nuthouse.”

Adam leaves the table. He calmly walks to the kitchen. He is a tall man but suddenly he looks like a young boy. He opens the kitchen door and walks down the stairs. He does not rush at all. He walks through the backyard and unlocks the door. He is in the basement now.

A man can do what he wants
but do not want what he wants.
Arthur Schopenhauer

The Revelation: Preparation

Sam stops the car outside the house. Sarah has her headphones on. Lady Gaga yells to them via the headphones.

“Can you stop this? Uncle Adam is leaving,” Dina strictly says to Sarah.

“It’s okay, don’t worry about it,” Adam says.

“Are you sure that you want to stay all alone here?”

“Oh yes...New Jersey is a different continent for me.”

“Look, I would suggest that it is better to come with us. You were too close with Mom,” Sam says and cannot hold his tears.

Sarah puts the headphones on.

“Sarah! For God’s sake! Can you show some respect? Your grandma was buried three hours ago. Shame on you.”

Adam pats Sam on his shoulder.

“I will be fine; you better take care of yourself.” Sam smiles.

“Good night, brother, I will call you in the morning.”

“Good night, all.”

“Good night.”

Dina pokes Sarah.

“Good night, Uncle Adam.”

Adam smiles to them and walks to his door. He takes out the key from his pocket and while he is ready to unlock the door, he walks back and climbs his parents’ stairs. He checks his keychain and finds the key. He hesitantly walks inside. He looks around. The house is still alive. Rebecca’s wheelchair is placed next to the kitchen table. He listens to the tick-tock from the clock on the wall. He walks in the living room. Her antique armchair sits in the corner. Rebecca’s porcelain dolls, expressionless, are looking at him through their glass-grave. He never liked her dolls; their empty eyes always scared him. He goes in her bedroom, and the sheets feel warm. He grabs her pillow and smells it. He smells her perfume. She is still here in her absence. He lies on her bed and falls asleep.

He wakes up fresh. The early morning light fondles his face; the birds are tweeting. There is not absence in this room, there is no grief. His mother’s robe still hangs from the doorknob. He walks to the window and closes the shutters. He walks in each room,

closes the shutters and the doors behind.

The Revelation: Action

He walks at a slow pace, not because his back bag is heavy; rather, he enjoys feeling each step that he takes. He stops and takes the map from his bag. He has arrived in North Carolina. He puts the map back in his bag. He continues walking slowly among trees that are so tall they hide the sun. Until he reaches a glade. He slowly walks to the light. All these years in the basement, he is so thirsty for light. He closes his eyes, he cannot stand such beauty. He frees his shoulder from his back-bag. He deeply breathes the cold air and feels his body rejuvenated. This sense of liberation is unfamiliar, even scary. He unzips his bag pocket and takes out the orange bottle. He opens the bottle and throws the pills away.

*How does it feel
How does it feel
To be on your own
With no direction home
Like a complete unknown
Like a rolling stone?*

Bob Dylan

FOLLOWING INSTRUCTIONS

Paul Tarrago

FADE IN to a grey, sludge-heavy river, slow-flowing through the City centre. The shot is held for a beat too long then DISSOLVES across to a BIG CLOSE UP of an old pocket watch with missing hands, yet the tick still faintly audible.

CUT to a man in a bell tower, frenziedly trying to load a rifle magazine. DITHER DISSOLVE to his parents encountering him in the street, dressed as a girl guide, then looking away in shame.

There then follows a series of RAPID LAP DISSOLVES of the following images in this precise order: a reed clogged storm drain; a very modern office building (distant); an abandoned child's tricycle, lying upturned; the same building (a bit closer); detail of the tricycle's front wheel: it has a puncture; the same building (slightly closer still) with the light from the lower floor windows beginning to pulse, to flicker...

The lights on the office wall have started flashing - it is happening. Or the battery needs replacing? No, it is happening. For real and for now. Shutdown.

We head along dispersal path A: through the double doors, taking the centre stairs, but WITHOUT operating any electronic equipment en route. We flick no switches, and make no naked flames, rapid moves or careless talk; there's no badinage, blitz spirit or *cris de coeur*.

So we make the stone face, don the poker eye, as we proceed like occupants of an ant farm struck or bee hive rattled.

Out in the lobby our cards are stamped, our teeth checked. Come on come on *come* on we think. Then there's the sobriety test. Badge scan. *Come on*.

Finally, after having assumed the holding-pattern position for sufficient time, we are allowed to exit. So, still button lipped, and in as near as dammit slow motion, we start to shuffle in neat half-steps back out into the light.

Outside, Aubrey is waiting for us: ready to call Team Register and talk pep. She stands beneath the baobab, one foot either side of the meridian line, in an I've-been-waiting gesture, or maybe an I-span-the globe stance. Everyone does it, it's what such lines suggest.

And maybe that's their main role now: photo hot-spots, places to play Colossus, to play leader.

(leg splay, arm gesture arm gesture)

(Grrrooar - bigger than BIG! LARGER than large!)
(can you take another picture please, my eyes were closed)

I get the sense this is just a drill, judging by her expression, though this won't be up for discussion. And as she's with her sister - the one who looks like me - I reckon we're headed for a singalong. Either way I'm making sure to stick to the back, away from the fence, the nearest I can be to being Outside but with the path to Inside clear, close and convenient.

Fresh boarding has been erected along the perimeter fence; Debbie points this out to me, as if I hadn't noticed. But she makes me look harder, longer and then I get it: the boards have been put up on the outside, by the public. *They* don't want to see *us*. Oh.

Aubrey's sister is reaching for something behind the tree. Uh, it's her banjo.

The camera TILTS and TRACKS UP the trunk of the baobab until our p.o.v. is among the lower branches. Here the camera gradually TILTS DOWN back level, parallel with the ground, looking out in the direction of the docks. A TIME LAPSE sequence ensues in which the clouds flit across the sky, becoming ever heavier and darker until the first rumble of thunder is heard.

DISSOLVE to an empty, dust-caked shop window. The first drops of rain ping upon it, momentarily cling, then start to dribble down. There's a lightning flash, some thunder. Then, with a second flash, we CUT to the bell tower exterior.

A rumble of thunder soundtracks a CROSS FADE to its interior: the rifle man is now lying face down. We see him from on high, looking directly down upon his body: he is twisted, like he's been dropped from a height.

A slowly descending CRANE SHOT reveals that he is breathing.

Further: he is sleeping.

And eventually: that despite such bodily contortion, his face is a model of beatific calm.

Slow FADE TO BLACK.

I Am From Miles Back and Got Miles To Go

Jim Meirose

All under every predicament needs water. So we struck out for water. So good so far? Eh so is it Sonboy?

Good.

We walked together but him backwise and me in my now and there they seemed t' b' up ahead so I took my lead and went up to the three common workmen working there ah. By the look of their massively appropriate to the job hand-held tools I did know them. These being non-territorial as a breed when not cornered, I stepped up thinking to say, Do you guys have any water? I am from miles back and got miles to go. A few chugs of water will charge me up fresh. The truck blew a tire and—tell you man I am really upset—but sensed strongly that a question formed that way would yield a reply like, Okay but you'll have to kill three hours or ten 'till I check our truck for your water. I really got to finish this here big bronze bowl first. This does not allow my pausing halfway—so I slowed not wanting to close the gap too quickly and halved my steps to slow us—okay I had it and stepped up thinking to say, Do you guys have any water? I am from miles back and got miles to go. A few chugs of water's all. Tell you man I am really upset—but as he approached, we sensed that a question formed that way would yield something like, Okay but you'll have to kill three hours or ten 'till I check our truck for your water—so I slowed not wanting to close the gap too quickly and halved my steps back again—but—then I had it stepped up meaning to ask, Do you guys have any water? I am from miles back. Tell you man I am really upset—but as he approached, we sensed the reply would just be, Okay but you'll have to kill three hours or ten—so slowing not wanting to close the gap quickly my steps were halved again and again, then we moved forward to say, Do you guys have any water? Tell you man I am really upset—but that question would surely just get a mere Okay but you'll have to, so I halved the pace yet further and then we had it stepped up saying Do you guys tell you man I am really upset—but on approach again that question would merely yield, Okay so his ours my steps halved down by half and then we blurted just Tell you man I am really upset—oh there we were facing off face off facing oh and—the second of the three stood there watching—tell you man I am really upset—and there was no way on earth to know that way down in the dark hot silent his stomach warmed around the following several instants—tell you man I—seeing we two faced off frozen tight and tight, so—what do we do if water's what's needed? Do we open the top? Or would that be an insult? Tell you man—when handing a water to every other person we never opened the top up but—but—Tell you man—when actually have we been asked for a water by a passerby of any kind most likely if we have at all, they have not had this—problem—oh. So I asked them, Do you guys have any water?

Tell you man—give water to the thief on the Lord's right, first.
Watery sweatdripping.
Or, Tell you man—take a hot soak.
Ovendoor down from the sky flowing bakeheat.
Okay but you'll have to kill three hours—
Bake simmeryfresh.
Tell you—so we asked out, Do you guys have any water? I am from miles back and
got miles to go.
Crunchy shreds.
Okay but you'll have to kill three hours or ten 'till I check our truck for your water.
Bonebleach. Emptyclear hot bottles thrown around.
And again; very simply; Do you guys have any water? I am from miles back and got
miles to go. A few chugs of water will charge me up fresh. Come see me!
But dawn awakes—shake shake go cold water.
Come see me please!
Okay but you'll have to kill three hours or ten 'till I check our truck for your water. I
really got to finish this here big bronze bowl first.
Got to seem so okay—hey Sonboy.
Cigarette?
Oh ah.
All finally, I asked them, Do you guys have any water? I am from miles back and
got miles to go. A few chugs of water will charge me up fresh. The truck blew a tire
and—tell you man I am really upset.
Step it. Step it back—Sonboy?
Okay but you'll have to kill three hours or ten 'till I check our truck for your water. I
really got to finish this here big bronze bowl first. This does not allow my pausing
halfway.
Oh—yes of course. Of course—but—
Sonboy!
Sonboy you did not answer. Do not act up in front of the nice man.
One last time, Sonboy.
Cigarette?

by Nicholas Alti

were my hair dandelions & my heritage a poltergeist orgy

were my limbs corpse flowers
you'd think I was a flower of corpses
thus explaining my feverish rot scent
but really I'm just unhygienic & self-conscious
were my limbs corpse flowers
through a feeble telescope, from far away,
you might admit I'm not horrendous,
at least when I'm blooming I blossom

were my hair dandelions
I'd be nightmare Christ's oracle
& probably not so poor at oral
were my hair dandelions
I'd sacrifice nothing for anyone
but my tongue would glisten
glide upon genitalia
like a warm amphibian
or a wet piece of birch bark

were my heritage a poltergeist orgy
nobody would know if the moaning was haunting or heresy
folks might even wink to each other
smiling as they passed my childhood home
were my heritage a poltergeist orgy
there'd be more ectoplasm on the carpet
& significantly less psychological manipulation

were my fingers longitudinal
I could at least tell you I'm east
of the vernal equinox, east of
bygone woes & the giant spider web
of heaven; were my fingers longitudinal
I could flex my crooked extremities
& crack the very Earth inward
spilling everything into my mouth

were my mouth the center of the Earth
& the Earth the center of the universe
I could devour stars & gods & cephalopods
merely by weeping & gasping for breath
I could kiss cacti & rodents & thimbles
were my mouth the center of the Earth
I could forget the dandelion that made me lovely
fell out of my hair, entirely un-miraculous

Tinctures for bottom feeders

I worship exclusively false idols
& hail only orgasm

I'm bottom feeding on evergreens
teeth out, beckoning the cumulous pressing

closer down on atmosphere
rushing against my queasy cranium

my life is in my own
altruistic hand my hand is

in my own alembic mouth
confused lickfuck I'm loving

myself like a made up nebula might
like a frog

in an abandoned canoe
on the moon

crooning for a pond to be born
for an actionable dream

it's said god is within us thus
this god eat god world

but I love you like absinthe & opiates at once
I love you like a smitten martyr's useless death

every sober second feels like
the apex of unpleasant intoxication

I mean most things feel like a bad trip
so if you want to croon to the moon then croon

I want to hear your heartbeat from Orion
I want to hear your feet move from Jupiter

give us your breath exhausted & radiant
give us your soul through your undulating tongue

Carcass Somnambulism

a rift emerged, became entirety a spiraling down
like a squid toward darkness like a skull toward concrete or plywood or
wildflower
wherever the body decides *overwhelmed*

there's opprobrium enough in drinking too much alone
without drunkenly telling others about drinking too much alone

count the amount of Lorcets or Norcos you can dry-swallow without organic kombucha
as the volume increases perhaps comes feelings
of accomplishment or, hopefully, vacancy

:: ::

of the carcass somnambulism:

here I lie preaching into the carpet about my potential to be forgiven,
the way a handful of pills
looks oddly like a handful
of something you should swallow
especially if the colors don't match

paradigm shift : misaligned guess : catastrophe, a plummeting

I'm not here for wisdom I'm here for
another handful

let again this night be either doldrums or terror

each nothing is horror what happens is not enough

Phantasm & Turtles

One thing you can see for yourself is a lake, if there is one near you.

Seen at the bottom is a hallucination
of what you imagine sleep without nightmares looks like. Or,
turtles.

Exist in ephemera
yes touch this lip
you ghoul you vesper I'll
hold you dear
as long as you let me.

I wake like a carcass into schism

but it is okay that the day begins haunted,

that it ends possessed, because sometimes

I see turtles in the water

& you left a few strands of hair on my bed.

Landscape of the Wounded, in Red

Dinner is green beans & applesauce,
hard boiled from a robin's nest with
pepper and mold festered lemon peels.

This is finger food,
this is solitude. I rub my mouth
against anything.

*

Sweet little ghosts of
skeletons from forgotten martyrs
cradle me to sleep (I a wee babe).

They leave my sweaters hairless, which is nice,
but they're a queasy lot—
a foreboding scent,
chicken bone & still water, the texture &
tension of my family when together.

*

Now, when I lie on the carpet
blowing crumbs across the fabric, waiting for daylight,
I seek leftovers, skin of a river birch
wet with dew, aroma of dawn & honeysuckle.

*

There are a handful of days before I forget
that somebody I cared so greatly for
told me something extraordinarily important
about staying out of dirt at night
& avoiding excess.

If only my father was Earth's molten inner core & my mother the very waves receding

I have no idea how any of this is working
on a molecular or theoretical level
if ghosts are only invisible if they die a bloodless death
if bloodlessness is a prerequisite for family
or is that just a lack of contempt

I was raised on earthquakes, marital abdication
& whatever TV dinner was on sale on Sundays

the unexpected sad thing is the Salisbury steak
tastes like the boiling hearts of those you love
so do you see why I can't cook? where are my people
frightened of kitchens? shattered like plates?
I did my best to horde gushers & saltines
& when I abandoned even these shortly later for liquor
I discovered family was up to you
who you choose to love, what you chose to swallow

still I'm grateful these things I do to dismantle
myself work, how skilled a chef I am at flaying alive
this body, at numbing & hacking apart my brain
it is okay I am 24 & still want to cry
when I either try or forget how to preheat an oven
these instruments for sustenance
one less thing I have to worry about
burning myself on, about throwing my heart in
with oil & fire & lightning & rage

it isn't that my heart comes from the singing moon
inspiring a very low tide, that all might see
luminescent flowers glinting on the shore as waves recede
I am nothing so lovely or stable as water
however, I am low, I am subterranean
& will continue to plunge deeper into earth
toward a burning center that molds me into ooze
not only holds me warmly but creates me so

Pareidolia as a Coping Mechanism for Hurting and Dread

Let me try to smooth the crease, the division
that left the star sprawled on its belly
in the parking lot.

*The light will shine down
this way you can't look up.*

Maybe clouds look like shapes
because I need something
to fill the chasm
I try not to reflect into the celestial

& this is good in the way
someone might cover
with their body
a grenade in a small room.

/// /// /// /// /// /// /// /// /// ///

There is freedom in considering the day crashing down
& never again arising, or, tomorrow as a carcass.

/// /// /// /// /// /// /// /// /// ///

I am a cube in which energy flusters/flounders/besmears itself.
Maxwell's Demon has been exorcised,
who else finds this catastrophic?
Consequentially insinuating I must do something to get something—
mathematically, this is a formidable formula.

How greatly I fear this next effort to find happiness will prove the equation of feeling
worthwhile
is an obscene one, with a finite amount of answers in which I can only hope some
variable works
before I must confront the inevitable nothingness in which my dispossession of health
stays me.

/// /// /// /// /// /// /// /// /// ///

The next time I lift my eyes
toward the sky, I will allow decomposition
into disparate molecules,
that I may waft away into oblivion,
join the formless horizon, melt into ephemera
with the clouds, the confessions, the sighs

& the rest of the amorphous emptiness so terrifying.
Parable of Aggregates

The hypnotic pendulum swings until meeting an equally insane
& questionable force.

The plaque with a lame & pilfered quote on the kitchen wall
isn't as inspiring when high to incapacity on the kitchen floor.

//

This bleak stratosphere witnessed: puked moon, starvomit.

Where from this Earth can you look
to avoid seeing timelessness exert its wicked inertia?

//

Because living for the hope of morphing into a forest of carnations
is as sanctimonious as it is negligent
& a 23 foot python just ate somebody

feet first. I would have watched my body gradually fragment,
decrease, might even say

*Well aren't I like the fire started in the final storm's eye?
Aren't I a thing to smear on a wall?*

as if I were melted magnolias
or a cellmate's blood

//

Pharmacy is fine art. Metaphysics is street drugs. Street drugs
are also unfortunately effected by inflation.

My attempts at reification
are getting noticeably worse.

//

There is a parable about tetrahedrons & hydrocodone
which elicits that an aggregate of molecules (human)
among an aggregate of aggregate molecules (humans)
needs particularly formed aggregates (pills)
to stop postulating about stupid fucking parables.

//

Maybe one day a story will say something akin to salvation
instead of salivating into open palms of the begging ill,

because swallowing my own spit does not alleviate my thirst,
it just means I don't know if I can make it back to bed
if for any reason I leave it.

terra incognita (or, “comfort” as MACS1149-JD1 receding)

I want to find a treasure chest
specifically a 3.3 MB .jpeg treasure chest
filled with sarcastic eyeballs
the eyes will look me up
then down
then roll
my monitor is filthy & covered in dust
my body is flimsy & covered in hurt
the eyes will look at each other
lovingly
I look at my face
as little as possible
this abundant treasure will take up
any remaining space on my hard drive
like how the last drink
actually makes it harder to sleep
the eyes rub against each other
sensual gelatinous globular orgy
I can't stop noticing how uncomfortable it is
that the sides of my toes are always touching
I look outside
for distraction
it looks like
how outside looks
which is fine
the leaves cluttering the trees
reminds me of my toes touching
it feels iconoclastic
the eyes are pressed hard against my monitor
looking at me lovingly
sensual
inviting me to the orgy
& I'm nervous
I've never been in an orgy
let alone the cynosure of one
the hard drive is full to capacity
I can easily lessen myself
without much immediately noticeable injury

so I take out my eyes
& tape them to the monitor
remove my lips
staple them to the monitor
take off my tongue
nail it to the monitor
of course, all of this arranged
as a face might look
& now I can look at myself
say in genuine astonishment
with a hand gently covering
what remains of my mouth
why, you beautiful, pain-free thing
so full of treasure

SHAME

Mark Walters

When I was in graduate school, I would look forward to early Thursday mornings, when I'd have a nearby laundry mat to myself. I'd sit in a booth, the only sound the slosh of the washers, the soft thump and hum of my drying clothes, and I'd read Faulkner and Spivak, sip coffee and eat a warm bear claw from the bakery next door. But sometimes in the winter an old homeless man, bearded and unsmiling, would limp inside to a booth near the dryers to sit with his arms crossed, stare at the steamed windows by the front door. As he warmed, the smell of urine and unwashed flesh would fill the space, and I'd slow my chewing, read for a third time the same paragraph, and feel a kind of fury that he was there.

I'd thought about this experience for a long time, it never quite leaving me, the shame of it, and so, hoping to learn something, to follow some threads, I asked friends to share with me some small regret or sin or sorrow they've carried around for years, something that occasionally pricked at them even as they went about their lives. They all humbly admitted that there were many to choose from, some more scandalous than others, and some, whether large or small, simply unspeakable. These are all decent, law-abiding folks, though I suppose the very capacity for introspection and consequent regret or at least acknowledgment of bad behavior is what makes them decent in the first place: they perhaps live a little like Seneca, who each night would examine himself, "measure his deeds and words," and say, "See that you don't do that again. This time I pardon you."

You'd be scared to death of someone who didn't engage in at least some form of this accounting, who'd just draw a blank in response to my request, or worse, claim, as is sometimes fashionable, to have no regrets.

A. lived in Chicago with two women she'd met as an undergraduate, one of whom began to annoy her. This woman was subtly competitive, would frame questions or make sly observations designed to highlight her own successes and, implicitly, A.'s failures. One evening, after some months of simmering, A. confronted her. The woman had been out with the third roommate, doing fun things, while A. had stayed behind, feeling bad about herself and drinking wine, and so when the woman returned home, said hello happily, A. let her have it. She shouted and railed and scolded, until finally the woman went to her room. They didn't speak to one another again, and after a month the woman moved out. One day two years later, A. saw her in the city, on the El platform, and the woman, when she recognized A., appeared suddenly stricken, and ran away.

While collecting the stories, I shared with a colleague, in very general terms and with no mention of names, the case of one participant who'd sent a description of conduct so innocuous as to be sweet, something along the lines of waiting for her receipt at a grocery store and pretending not to see an acquaintance whose habit of talking would surely make her late for an appointment. I imagined that indeed this was the sort of act that might haunt this woman—the deliberate looking away from one who waited and watched for a sign of recognition. But my colleague, upon hearing the story, shook his head and suggested that right there, behind that tepid confession, was the axe murderer.

To be fair--despite my Lutheran background, the call to *esto peccator et pecca fortiter*, to sin and sin strongly, forgoing those piddling little sins most confessed, their only revealing a lack of faith in the power of God's grace—I'd solicited small, ordinary regrets, because I found them more illuminating than the infidelities and thefts and murders we're typically drawn to, and because I wasn't offering, and no one was seeking, absolution.

When **B.** and his wife were young parents to two daughters—a three-year-old and a newborn--another couple in their church lost their own baby to SIDS. Visitation was on a Wednesday night, and so after church activities, B. and his family drove to the funeral home, where they walked into the chapel while the visitation was in progress, carrying their daughters in their arms, and looking upon the faces of the grieving couple and all those in line who turned to stare.

I'd heard an interview with Michael Finkel, the author of *The Stranger in the Woods: The Extraordinary Story of the Last True Hermit*, about Christopher Knight, who'd lived hidden in the Maine wilderness for twenty-seven years. Because I was thinking about things, I bought the book and read it, being at one point particularly taken with Knight's saying that in his solitude he'd lost his identity: "There was no audience, no one to perform for. There was no need to define myself."

One evening, while **C.** was working at a Noodles & Co. in the town where she attended college, a young woman came in who was hungry but without enough to pay for a meal. So C. put together a combination of items for her that approximated the money the woman had, bolstered by C's own contribution. The woman, shy and grateful, ate and then left. A month or so later, C. went out drinking with a group of friends, and then to a small diner where they sat at a large table and gave their orders to a waitress whom C. suddenly recognized as the young woman she'd fed. More loudly than she'd intended, C. promised the woman that she'd bring her plenty of Noodles & Co. coupons, and the woman blushed and lowered her face.

I was thinking about how we make sense of the world and our stories and ourselves and others through the imposition of structures of relationship upon them, the most common being those of binary oppositions—black/white; large/small; clean/unclean; good/evil, and so on—and how then nothing appears to have meaning except in relation to and distinction from other things. And how, through enlightenment or in seclusion, we lose these distinctions and so our identities. Like hermits, mystics, monks and post-structuralists, we transcend the idea of our individuality, which only exists in comparison to and separation from everyone and everything, including God.

And I thought of Krishna, in the Bhagavad Gita, telling Arjuna that all living entities are born into delusion, bewildered by dualities arising from desire and hate.

D. and an old friend left their wives behind and took a trip to another city to attend a former classmate's wedding. While **D.** enjoyed the company of his traveling companion, he'd always secretly detested this man's wife, whom he found to be pretentious and cruel. So during a layover, **D.** began describing how attracted he still was—even after six years of marriage!—to his own wife, how beautiful he still found her. His friend listened but offered no similar declarations regarding his own wife, who, as **D.** knew, had gained substantial weight during the same period, her hair thinning and her skin grown rough and red. Later that night, **D.** heard his friend on the phone, arguing with her, his voice rising with impatience and anger, and **D.** felt deeply satisfied.

In a conversation about a familiar subject—how social media encourages the construction of identity, the self, through images displayed, consumed, and evaluated by viewers—a colleague lamented the larger preclusion of authentic relationships with others, invoking Martin Buber's I-It and I-Thou relationships, the former revealed in our thinking of another instrumentally and apart from us, perhaps only in terms of what that person can or can't do for us, and the latter in our perceiving another intimately, as connected to us boundlessly in and through love.

In her first professional theatre job in Philadelphia, **E.** met a veteran character actor who worked regularly on stage there and in New York. During the course of the show and in the months following, they became friends, the older actor a trusted confidant and mentor to the younger one. Within the following year, two incredible things happened: first, at age sixty-five, the actor was cast in his first Broadway show; and, second, he was diagnosed with colon cancer. Aware of the biases against older actors, and terrified of revealing his diagnosis, the actor determined to fight the disease quietly. He told **E.** of the matter in the strictest confidence, adamant that no one should know. **E.** kept his secret, and felt honored to have it. A few months later, cast in another show, **E.** met and came to admire a woman who'd known the older actor for decades, and who considered him part of her own family. One day **E.** and this woman

were alone in the dressing room, and E. asked her how he was doing. The woman looked at E. cautiously, and said that he was fine, and E., seeing her hesitation, said, “I know,” repeating the words several times to make her meaning clear, feeling a particular satisfaction in being part of this intimacy. But something else also occurred in that moment—a slow, small loosening: within the following weeks, E. discussed the older actor’s health issues with another mutual friend, and as time went on, and the wider theater community grew more interested in the man’s work on Broadway, and questions arose around him, E. once again revealed her secret to someone—an ex-boyfriend who was working in the casting department of another theater—and though she made him swear not to tell, he, of course, did, sharing it with someone else almost immediately. While E. maintained her friendship with the older actor, and he continued to be encouraging about her work, and warm and loving toward her, he’d grow suddenly short when she’d ask about his health. “Fine,” he’d say, or “Everything’s good.” That year E. moved away from Philadelphia, and, shortly after, the actor died. E. was unable to make his funeral, but later, upon returning, drove two hours out of the city to find the cemetery where he was buried, stopping to buy flowers, a shovel, and a gallon of water so she’d have something to leave at his headstone.

There’s a Kevin Canty short story whose opening lines I love: “All his life McHenry had lived with someone watching him: a mother, a father, a wife, a daughter, his customers So he learned to look like he was working when he worked. He learned to act like a father when his daughter was around, to look like a husband when Marnie needed a husband.”

F. was working for a program that helped establish community gardens in rural, predominantly African-American areas of the south. His job in the beginning stages was to talk with residents, to listen and explain, and to determine their interest in and commitment to the project, ultimately identifying a group of young adults who might undergo training to be community organizers around food issues. Over a two-month period, he conducted interviews with a dozen men and women in the neighborhood, paying each twenty dollars. He believed that people were the experts on their own lives and communities, and he worked hard to demonstrate his respect for them, posing deep, open-ended questions that would elicit personal stories and communicate something of their dreams and desires; he listened carefully, and recorded the interviews so that he could focus his attention on the participant, and later transcribe his or her remarks. One afternoon a young man came to him. F. interviewed the man, but felt that he offered little and what he did sounded vaguely like something he’d heard before. Still, F. paid him, and watched as he crossed the street and walked toward a shopping center. Later, checking his notes, he discovered that he had in fact spoken to the man just a few weeks earlier, and that the man had returned, not even bothering to change his name, or his stories, having apparently

seen in F. something familiar.

In his *Confessions*, St. Augustine laments his early attraction to the theatre, largely because it exercised the pleasure hidden in seeing another's pain. Tragedy staged leads us not to action—the characters' agony is *imaginary*—but to an indulgence in sadness itself. We'll pay to watch, and will earnestly applaud, that which makes us weep. How often have I been watching a heartbreaking scene in a movie theater, only to hear someone's phone ring, or a child complain, and my suspension of disbelief breaks, my emotion drains, and my heart grows suddenly cold and critical as I'm denied the tender joys of sorrow!

Then again, those joys are very real--compassion stimulating the pleasure and reward circuits of the brain, indications that we come by our caregiving and cooperative impulses naturally--evolutionarily, epigenetically--the neurophysiological and social benefits high. But as anyone knows who's ever made the move from compassion to altruism, from the desire to relieve suffering to actually relieving it, that ultimate action itself produces the greatest, longest-lasting reward. Simply feeling sorry for folks without doing anything about it is at best a fleeting joy, a recreational activity, and at worst, a perverse compulsion.

On a planned girls' weekend in Florida, **G.**'s friend from graduate school brought another friend of her own, whom she thought G. would like. This woman was in fact one of the most kind and generous people G. had ever met, the sort of woman who, she learned, literally fed the hungry and comforted the grieving, gave her time to those in need, stranger or not, and in social situations made certain everyone was included and comfortable. In the airport, on the day of their departures, G., as a kind of repayment for the loveliness this woman had shown her over the weekend, went off to buy their lunches, and returned with small cartons of wings for herself and her graduate-school friend, and one containing a hummus, avocado, and feta sandwich for the third woman, who G. remembered was a vegetarian. Soon, however, G's carton grew smeared and cluttered with bones and clumsy to pick through, and because the clean space in the third woman's carton grew as she ate her sandwich, G. asked if she might put some of these bones in it. The woman looked startled by the request, and then tipped her face downward, and only gave a small shake of her head.

Because it takes a certain sensitivity to recognize the small woundings we cause—the signs often subtle and our defense moves reflexive—there can be something fine and moving about our even noticing and (unless we're bullies or psychopaths) desiring to erase, reverse, or remedy them. But if we can't or don't, if our compassionate impulses are never acted upon, that may come to constitute our regret, hold it intact: the victims of our impatient or selfish or casual, distracted cruelties remaining forever in that instant of the tipped face, the bewildered stare, or the breathless voice.

When H. went to pick her first-grade daughter up from school, both she and one of her little friends got in the car. The friend immediately announced that her mother had said it would be okay if she visited their house after school. H. didn't quite believe this, but because the line of cars behind her was long, and the school volunteer on the sidewalk was waving her forward, she decided to bring the girl along and, once home, call the mother to ensure she knew about the arrangement. But when she did just that, only the answering machine picked up, and so H. left a message. She tried again in ten minutes with no luck, and again after that, the girl's mother this time answering, her voice quick and breathless. The mother explained that when her older children (with whom the little girl normally walked) had come home without their sister, and didn't know where she was, she'd gone out searching for her. H. listened to this, and then she apologized and apologized.

A friend once admitted to me that one of his calculations in anticipating or reckoning his response to someone's suffering was whether he could be blamed for it. Someone might, for instance, fall from a ladder and break her leg, and he could live comfortably enough with that, provided he had nothing to do with it. If he had failed to hold the ladder steady or simply walked by and called her name and she lost her balance, he'd be miserable. But less for her pain, than his culpability. I've often myself rationalized not acting in a case where someone was or might be in need—a car stalled on the side of the road? I would have stopped but was going too fast! A Salvation Army volunteer beside a red kettle? All I had was a twenty-dollar bill! A friend whose husband's death I never properly acknowledged? I was so busy, and then too much time had passed.

It seems I was forever rehearsing alibis and statements of defense I might have to deliver someday to someone. You don't want to get in trouble, after all, or have people think ill of you.

I. and her new boyfriend and her visiting parents were sitting on the patio of a cafe in the boyfriend's Colorado hometown, surrounded by raft guides, rock climbers, and other 20-something adventure seekers. I. and her boyfriend fit in with this crowd; her middle-aged parents, I. believed, were perfect foils to it. At one point, her mother, happy, enjoying herself, cried out from across the table that the boyfriend must come celebrate Christmas in Missouri with their family! And I., startled and humiliated, said something sharp and dismissive to her, a reflex grown habitual over the past years. Her mother made a little joke, and her father moved the conversation in another direction, but I. saw her mother bow her head and take small bites of her salad, and dab her mouth with her napkin, and turn it and touch it to the corner of her eye, and look up again, trying to smile.

One of my favorite biblical lines is Job's rebuke of God: "Will you not look away from me for a while, let me alone until I swallow my spittle?"

J., an Englishman in his last year of graduate studies in the United States, worked evenings at a bar on the campus of the midwestern university he attended. There, he became friendly with another bartender, a young man who was taken with J.'s accent and thus, one evening, shared with him his love of Monty Python. He owned a book about the comedy group that he was certain J. would find very interesting, and the next night brought it to work, offering to loan it to J., and then with a Sharpie carefully writing his name upon the top of the closed pages, so that if one flipped them, the letters would grow, ineradicably, into view. J. didn't read much of the book, not liking the few portions of it he did, and he certainly would never have bought it for himself! In fact, he didn't give the book much more thought, until years later when he discovered it in his own collection, on the shelves of his study at another university in another town, the young bartender's name still pressed in his deliberate hand upon the top of the closed pages.

Here's something else I was thinking about: how empathy—literally "in feeling"—is to enter into someone's perspective and feel what that person might feel, and how a common binary opposition between intuition and analysis argues that because intuition is fluid, participatory, and interested in the whole, it's necessary to empathy; but because analysis is static, detached, and interested in dissecting and categorizing, it is not, and in fact is often antithetical to empathy, sometimes actually killing the object, either figuratively or literally.

K. complained to a couple of coworkers that a lot of people in the office were going overboard celebrating pregnancies and childbirths. What, he wondered, was the big deal? As a species, humans had been reproducing since the dawn of their existence. Single-celled organisms even longer. Did people want a medal for performing this basic function inherent in being a living organism? Something that's occurred for billions of years across a multitude of species and countless individuals? Later, one of the two co-workers who'd listened to Q's words confided that the other's wife was undergoing fertility treatments, and that the woman who was about to give birth, and whose small office party had provoked Q.'s anger, had suffered two miscarriages the year before.

I'd always thought of shame as a radical act of empathy, the assumption of another's perspective, seeing ourselves through the eyes of that figure, whether it's someone we've harmed, disappointed, or angered. But then it occurred to me that since what we're seeing is ourselves, trying to imagine ourselves as seen by someone else, it's still pretty much about us.

There's an old joke about the self-absorbed guy monopolizing a conversation with stories of himself, who at some point seems to recognize his rudeness and so asks his auditor, "Enough about me. What do *you* think about me?"

At the Denver Museum of Natural History, **L.** was part of a team of four volunteer coordinators for a temporary exhibit from China. The lead person of this group was out of town for a week, so **L.** and the other two women conducted the training sessions for hundreds of new volunteers. When the lead coordinator returned, she took **L.** aside to tell her that the other two women were unhappy because **L.** when speaking to the groups, habitually use "I" rather than "we," giving the impression that she was single-handedly running the whole program.

And so I found that I could no longer pray, not only because I'd lost my faith in a God responsive to those prayers (for too many reasons to name here), but, paradoxically, because I couldn't yet shake the idea that He was *still* watching and listening and judging them, or, rather, judging me. I sought to please God in the subject and conduct of those prayers, with the result being that even if they were on behalf of other people, or that I might be of help and comfort to other people, it was really *me* I was worried about. So as I began to doubt the authenticity of even my intercessory prayers, I began to doubt all of my compassionate responses to other people's suffering, how, for instance, I might be watching the evening news and think how sad it was that this woman lost her home in the flooding following Hurricane Harvey, and my throat might even thicken, my heart sag a little, but behind it all I'd imagine God watching me, nodding with approval.

Like the lawyer who asks Jesus what he must do to inherit the kingdom of God, and so prompts the Parable of the Good Samaritan, if I were ever to get off my mule to help a beaten and robbed stranger, there's a good chance I'd be doing it to get into Heaven.

When **M.** was in college in Ohio, her boyfriend moved to California, and so she traveled there during spring break to visit him. Learning of this, her grandparents--whom she loved dearly but too rarely saw, and who, as luck would have it, lived nearby--invited the couple to their house for a day or two. But the boyfriend refused to go, and asked **M.** not to go, as well. **M.** was aware that, even in Ohio, the boyfriend had grown increasingly possessive of her, and since he'd left would often become sullen over the phone upon hearing news of her activities or friends. "Don't go," he said about her grandparents' invitation. "Stay here with me." And so **M.**, because she believed she was in love, and though she knew it would hurt her grandparents deeply, called them to say that she'd not be coming.

But when I thought about intuition, I'd think of things like Peter Matthiessen's

description, in *The Snow Leopard*, of his young son, how he, “forsaking all his toys, . . . would stand for near an hour in his sandbox in the orchard, as doves and redwings came and went on the warm wind, the leaves dancing, the clouds flying, birdsong and sweet smell of privet and rose. The child was not observing: he was at rest in the very center of the universe, a part of things, unaware of endings and beginnings, still in unison with the primordial nature of creation, letting all light and phenomena pour through. Ecstasy is identity with all existence.... There was no self to separate him from the bird or flower. “

And I'd think about Thich Nhat Hanh saying, “You are what you are looking for.”

N. always tried to be very positive with his young daughter, who was a good student, well behaved, but very shy. One evening at dinner, when she was in middle school, she seemed to be going on incessantly about something that was important to her, some aspect of her insecurity that frustrated N., because it made clear that all his and his wife's efforts to bolster her self-esteem were not helping a bit. N. was tired and worried about matters at work, and in a moment of weakness and impatience said something unkind to her, something which likely undercut all the encouragement he'd offered. N. apologized immediately, and his daughter nodded, but she did not lift her eyes from her plate or say another word that evening.

I was drawn to the Buddhist concept, long and increasingly validated in the hard sciences, of Inter-being—that nothing exists on its own, independently, permanently, but, rather, everything is made up of other things; all changes; all is connected; *this* is, because *that* is.

I'd think about the cumulative, fluid, complex process of being, that every life is woven into every other, inextricably, and the ethical implications of *that*.

After **O.** had taken a new, higher-paying job at another company, he found himself beset by fears that he'd fail, and so when his manager, who had connections with his previous employer, said anything to him in a light or off-hand way, O. was certain that he was being gently mocked, and his head would grow light imagining the sources and references. So one evening he called a former colleague, a man with whom, over the years, he'd become friends, and he explained his suspicions, and asked the friend whether he'd had any contact with his new manager. The friend said, in a surprised, emphatic way, that of course he had not, and though O. then tried then to change the subject, to move to ordinary things, his friend's responses grew brief, and after the phone call ended, they never spoke again.

A traditional metaphor: I can't bathe in the same river twice, because the river flows and changes on going. And because I'm also constantly changing, even on a cellular

level, the river can't receive the same me at two different times. And as I swim and am leaving parts of me in the river, so I'm absorbing parts of the river as I swim.

P.'s mother-in-law was generous and loving and active, and though she was only able to visit her daughter's family a few times a year, and for never more than two or three days at a time, **P.** began to find her presence unbearable. She'd tend to and play with the grandchildren, and help prepare all meals, and laugh gaily throughout the house, and **P.** would grow quiet and short with her, sometimes ignoring her altogether, or rising and leaving a room she entered. He wasn't quite certain why he behaved in this way, or sometimes that he even had, until his wife would privately point it out; but he was unable or unwilling to change it, until, typically, the last hours of her visit, when he'd become warm and gracious again, understanding that now she must return to her own home, on the other side of the state, where her other daughter--self-indulgent, rude, and addicted to opiates--lived with her.

So that's something: the me who resented the homeless man is far upstream from the me who writes about it. Still, my action, or inaction, altered and became part of me, the flow of me, and so also others—certainly the homeless man himself--in some ways I can readily imagine, and in many more I can't begin to.

And this—There's not a thing confessed in these pages that I couldn't see myself doing at some point in my life, but what brought the confessor to that moment, that act—as common and extraordinary as it is--and the effects of it on him or her and everyone involved initially and after, and on and on, I can only guess, broadly, absurdly reductively, until language and thought finally fail.

As part of **Q.**'s seminary coursework, he had to “experience a crisis,” during which, his professor explained, he needed to be “the presence of God” for those there. **Q.** was reluctant, and so the last to undergo this test, his professor at the end of the term waiting in a hospital with him, waiting by the phone, from which a call finally came. In Room 326, a man had just died, surrounded by his family. **Q.** was to go in, introduce himself, and offer comfort. But when he arrived and opened the door, the family, gathered about the bed of the dead man, turned to look at him—their faces pale with grief and bewilderment--and **Q.** stood silent for a beat, and then apologized, claiming that he must have the wrong room, and then he softly closed the door and fled.

Tone Poem

We've been living with two selves all along:
the one we're slowly getting to know
& the witnessing one: becoming.
Stunned from seeing the ugly double—

red-eyed dandy, anus-brain. Skin
sans graft, the inner walls
concussed. We're at the crux of wonderment
& tech sophistication: The candles wax

when we turn them on by converter > point & click.
Today you're mooning far away, un-
fastened at the front. Maybe a mouth sounds
mad if it rattles on of hurt & hazing.

But what a thing to be blamed for
wanting solace. I tell you sleep is hygiene
& I'm not beside the point.
Imagine walking on the spot of constant luminosity,

wherever you look, the lot beyond > dissolving.
Lead in the breastbone breaking / chaos /
process of creation /
& all the in-between degrees of grey.

Tumbrel

Mouth of the river,
 snake & cave.
Mouth of the cauldron,

cut & skull. Mouth of the
epileptic jaw, the maw & Ma,
 the tongue—

mouth of words made imprecise
 by time.

A bestiary
 dangles from my salivary glands,
the weapon in my belly ~ caught in the craw.

In one dim frame I'm dumping bones—the wail
on your face is ancient. Apparently, we've been here
& I've done this stuff before.

Let's not say hysterical
though the hiss is almost minty ...

& paranormal isn't a word I normally choose to use, except
when it converges—

 pressing a flat-bed trolley into the breath of a metrical foot.

Brink

I let my mind go forage
in the tussle, at the flux,

found some stray ideas
by the brink:

idea of indications faintly
augured in the ether—clearer

than the cant dispersed as fact.
Idea of isolation in support

of solidarity. Solitude
the seed to inside out.

Sitting still on hallowed
ground, wearing linsey-

woolsey, parsing fate from
destiny & waiting.

Suffering efficiently the light.

Breath the major motion,
repetition the respite.

Being more immediate
than freeing. Freeness

as idea of the brain
obliged to change.

Morality engendered
from the depths.

Tips

Deidre Jaye Byrne

Usually I don't mind training the new girls, but half of them show up not even knowing the menu. Not that hard; it's only four pages. Instead of paying mind to the right way to do things, they're always eyeing my tips, acting so sure they can do it, like it's so easy. 'Till they do that first shift on their own. Oh yeah, I've seen more than one girl crying 'cause it got busy and she got all confused and twisted around. And people can get mean when they're hungry. I once read where it said that waitin' tables and bein' an air traffic controller are some of the most stressful jobs there is.

I'm pretty patient, and I don't usually complain; I think that's why Jack always sets the new girls up with me. Also, I don't cut corners. We have a particular way we open up the dining room and a way we close it down. 'Bout four months ago Jack added in a new girl, Yvonne. I had a feeling about her at first, couldn't say what it was. She was a fast learner, always rushin' to know the next thing. She had a good rhythm for timing her tables and we worked together pretty well. It'll be hard to find someone who can pick up the slack.

Fridays are always busy, but last week there was a party of eight, who were gonna be coming in just at the peak of the dinner rush, seven-thirty or so. Still, I figured between Yvonne and me, and Jack helpin' out, things would be fine. Like I said, Yvonne was pretty quick. And we had a new girl with us that night, so, worst case, we'd have an extra pair of hands.

Yvonne was all business-like to work with, not unpleasant, but not real friendly. I'd seen her once or twice in town; but even after I worked with her a while, she would barely look at me. She usually had her kids with her, and that seemed to take all her attention, not in a good way, if you know what I mean. But when she was workin', you'd have thought she was the mayor of the whole county. She seemed to know everyone who walked in the door, rushin' up to greet them, menus in hand, all smiles and cheery like she was at a pep rally or something. And she was ready to direct them right to her station. Always took 'em to her station.

You can imagine, that didn't fly too well with the other girls, her hoggin' the tables like that. Jack had a talk with her, a couple of times, and she always had a sorry look and a story about who they were: her cousin's daughter-in-law or her landlord or her kid's teacher or some made up thing. The second or third time, he got a little sterner with her. Don't you know, she switched it up somehow and next thing, customers were comin' in and askin' to sit at her table. It was like she trained them. The thing with waiting tables, especially around here is, if you don't have regular customers, you don't have no customers at all. But you gotta let them pick you, not tell 'em where they got to sit.

So, for Yvonne, being a hard worker, even if she wasn't always being fair with the other girls, this job was the answer to her own money troubles. Most everyone knew her story, partly because she had a way of letting you know, just in little pieces. I found out from Mrs. Simmons; she sits behind me at church. Her brother-in-law is related to Yvonne's husband, a cousin or some other way. Mrs. Simmons told me Yvonne had five small kids and a husband. Guy'd been a real hard worker till he took a tumble off a beam they were hoisting up at that new medical building on North 35. He was on a cane for a while, doing fine, then one day he just fell down; had some kind of a seizure or stroke. Can't use his right arm at all now, jaw's a little off, and his leg on that one side is kind of canty.

Usually, Yvonne made dinner for them all before she came to work, but sometimes if she couldn't, her husband came in with the kids and she'd give them dinner at the back table by the kitchen door. It was always sad, seeing the kids cuttin' up their dad's food and all. But these were real young kids and after a bit they'd start squabbling; don't think the oldest was more than eight or nine, and Yvonne, she'd be on them right away, hissing, almost growlin' at them. They'd quiet right down and scoot out pretty fast after that, and every time, she'd chase after them saying, kinda loud, "Yeah, you go on home now, I'll settle up tonight with my tips, can't be expecting Jack to feed us for free..." I don't think she ever really paid, except the first time when she made a big show of getting her money into the till and printing the check to show "paid."

Jack was wise to her, I'm pretty sure, but he's a soft touch; he'd act like he didn't notice and let her slide. Nobody wanted to see them kids go hungry. He's had his own hard troubles, Jack has. Dug himself out of a pile of debt his old man left him with. Almost lost this place. So, he knows all about tough times and what you gotta do. But he also treats his customers like gold -- like family, really. And he's been good to us girls, too. Never seen him lose his temper before last Friday, I'm tellin' you.

Got no kids of my own, but days I work at the day care center in the church on the other side of town. I've seen the toll money troubles takes on these working moms.

We had to call Pastor in once; this one mom got so mad she was dragging the kid, I mean dragging him, like you wouldn't even drag a bad dog, across the parking lot and the gravel was cutting up that little boy's legs and face and she just didn't care, screaming and swearing like a sailor. Good thing it was Pastor came, and not the sheriff. Pastor just picked up the little boy and put his arm around the mom. You could see her crumple up right then and there. They all went off to the church office. Pastor gave the mom a prayer, cleaned up the little boy and put a couple of band aids on his knees. I seen how kids can make life harder. And money is always a problem around here.

So, yeah, Yvonne's got too many kids and not enough money, a harsh burden on anyone, like carryin' a cast iron frying pan around all the time. But she did work hard, never still, like she was all wound up from the minute she got here. Like she wanted to hurry up. Like if she could just work fast enough, she could get the hell out. She didn't

like leaving her kids with her husband, I knew that. But she didn't like to see any tables on her station sit empty. If business was slow, she'd go half crazy, looking out the window saying under her breath, "Where the hell's the customers? Where the hell's the customers?" on and on, like she was casting a spell. It was a little intense, I'm telling you. "It's all about the turn around," she liked to say.

Mind you, she wouldn't rush anyone once they'd hustled all right, and she never let you forget she needed the money. Probably shouldn't have done it, but sometimes I'd let her pick up a table or two on my station. She didn't like no charity being given to her, but for what schemes she made to take on her own, so I'd just tell her an excuse like, "Oh, I got a sore foot," or, "My back's bothering me today." Just to try and help. I'm not saying I expected her to be grateful; just don't think she should have been snippy with me, that's all I'm saying. I got feelings, too, like everybody else.

Past few weeks, I'd been hearing a few of the girls say Yvonne was back at her old tricks, even though Jack'd warned her about snatching tables. Mostly, my idea is, if Jack don't see it, I don't say nothin', but I know some of the other girls complained to him. I'm tired by the end of the week, so I could look the other way if she snatched a table from me now and then. For me, this job is a few extra dollars, good to have especially in the winter when the heat's so expensive. And sometimes I buy myself something special.

So there we were, a busy Friday and the kind where it got busy early. That was unusual and I think it kind of disrupted our rhythm, 'specially since I had this new girl trailing me like a puppy missing its mom. I like to start the new girls slow, but almost as soon as we got ourselves set up, folks started moving from the bar, lookin' to be seated for dinner. I had the new girl set up two tables together in the alcove, for that party of eight we had coming in. But it seemed like every time I came out from the kitchen with bread baskets or salads, there was another few customers wanting a table. Jack always helps when he can, but the bartender hadn't shown up yet, so Jack was trying to do the seating and make the drinks. The place was filling up steady.

When the Parkers came in, I was sure the big table was for them. Mrs. Parker was all dolled up, wearing a skirt and a pretty sweater, her hair just done up that day. She even had on jewelry, which I'd never seen before. And Mr. Parker in a shirt and tie, if you can believe it. I mean, we're not really a fancy place. We got table cloths, but mostly that's to cover the age of the tables. Also, there's not a lot of places to go around here. There's a pizza joint about a mile north, and then the biker bar south of the lake. It's part of how Jack can do so good. Keeps it like a family place. Even the bar ain't rough; they don't serve shots. So, it's sort of the only place to go if you don't want to drive too far.

Anyway, the Parkers moved here from the city a few years back. They come in a couple times a week. This night they even had their kids with them, grown kids. I recognized them from pictures Mrs. Parker showed me once. Nice family, a boy and a girl, and another couple of people, maybe the kids' girlfriend and boyfriend, and two

neighbors, besides. All of a sudden, I saw Yvonne up by the front door there, talking to them, showing them pictures of her kids, of all things, as if they're old friends. That surprised me. Being friendly's all right, but we got a load of people coming in and this wasn't no time for show and tell.

I knew the Parkers were no relation of Yvonne's and, fact is, they usually liked to sit at my station; just seems to work out that way. Mr. Parker, he's retired from a manager job and Mrs. Parker, she used to be a librarian. I'm telling you that, but you'd know it yourself as soon as you took a look at her. She's built of almost nothing, her hair's grey and cut close, and she wears her little half glasses on one of those chains around her neck. She talks like she's always reading, too. They're both real nice, friendly, real chatty, like they might be lookin' for someone to talk to.

We got to talking once about books once, Mrs. Parker and me, and before I knew it, she started bringing in books to give me, saying she just finished them and had no room. And they still left a nice tip, too. Couple of times she asked if I was interested in a book club with her, said I could bring any of my friends along. That's another reason why I think she was lonely. It was nice of her thinkin' I'd be smart enough to be in a book club with her, but I'd be embarrassed to try and keep up, so I said thanks for the books, but just slid past the book club talk.

Other customers are coming in, but Yvonne don't notice them at all. She's stuck herself on the Parkers, getting almost flirty, like one of those cosmetic counter ladies who tell you how that lipstick is just right for your color. She was pouring it on, I could tell, and I thought it was a bad idea, but I saw Jack getting ready to shoo Yvonne off back to her own tables and get the Parkers seated. As Jack started talking to them, Yvonne came up to me and said, "They're going to my station, I told them to tell Jack they should sit at my station. I know they tip real good and I need the extra money. You can get plenty of other tables."

Now, I told you I usually don't care about letting her have an extra table now and then, but her tone put me off, like she was bossing me around. I knew her car just broke down last week, and I knew her youngest had some kind of bone trouble, but I felt hard toward her attitude. She had an almost mean look in her eye, which made no sense 'cause she could have just asked if I minded and I woulda said fine, go ahead. I knew about the Parkers' tips, too.

Story goes that about five or six years ago, Mr. Parker won some kind of lottery. I don't play those games myself, seems like a waste of hope and luck. The Parkers always tipped real fine, regular twenty percent, but on special days, like before Christmas or Easter or if they were coming in for some kind of occasion, they'd give a hundred dollars. No, I'm not kidding you. It was a shock the first time, 'cause it looked like they hadn't left no tip at all, and then when Betty, she don't work here no more, busted her ankle, she went to clear the table there was an envelope under one of the plates, and it just had a smile drawn on it and said, "Thank You." One clean, brand new hundred-dollar bill. It was crazy, but they must have really liked doing it because

we saw them giggling as they sneaked out the door, and they've done it more than once.

Betty didn't think it was real, but Jack checked it and said it was. She tried to thank them the next time they come in, but they acted like they had no idea what she was going on about till she had to drop it or have an argument.

For Yvonne, waitin' on the Parkers was gonna be a big deal.

I saw Jack sit them at the big table in my station. Even if I was inclined to say anything to Jack about where the Parkers should sit, or what Yvonne was wanting, there wasn't time and I was practically standing right at the table when they come over, anyway.

I told Mrs. Parker how nice she looked while they were all getting seated and while I was taking their drinks order, Mr. Parker said to his wife, in that on purpose voice customers like to use, "And what would you like to drink, birthday girl?" so I could know they were here for her birthday.

Just when I finished up the drink slip and dropped it off at the bar, I heard the plates going into the bus pan there at the side station, loud. I turned around thinking maybe it was the new girl. Jack don't like plates getting treated rough. But it was Yvonne and she seemed upset, maybe even mad.

"Everything okay there?"

She walked away, then snapped her head around so all I could see was a face full of mean. "It's fine for you, all right," she said, and walked off, a load of heat trailing behind her.

The dinner crowd hadn't gotten to the full-on crazy yet, so I had a minute to follow her when she went into the kitchen. We were gettin' busier by the minute and I needed for us to be working together, especially since I had that newbie on my tail. Yvonne could be pretty intense, but I'd never seen her angry, at least not angry at me. Not that I know of.

It was clear she knew I was following her; she near crashed into the busboy. Real sudden, she stopped short, wheeled around to me and leaned in with her voice low, her spit spraying as she snarled, "They were supposed to be my table and you took 'em."

"Who're you talking about?" She was brewing a batch of temper, the kind I'd heard about, and I had no time for that, so I admit it, I played dumb. Two new sets of customers had just come in and I seen Jack seat each one at different sides of the dining room. "You just got another table and you can take that one Jack put on my station for yours, too."

"That party of eight in your alcove."

"The Parkers? Geez, Jack just sat them there. The other table wasn't set up yet. You'll be getting plenty tonight. You know well as I do, it's gonna be a busy night. Don't get yourself all worried now."

"I told you I was set for getting' them put at my station."

I didn't like her tone, but I heard the call bell for my order, so I just moved on. I don't think it pays to get in a fight, and besides, there's other ways to tussle without makin' a full-on scrap.

There was no question, she didn't like the way things were going, and in this work, if you serve the dinners with a side order of your bad mood, it's gonna bite you. That whole next hour she had a hot attitude coming right out of her skin and a whole cloud of nasty over her head. Jack saw it, too. By then, the dinner rush was full on and Jack was still trying to run the seating and the bar, trying to keep things smooth. While I was going back and forth, I overheard a guy and his wife, they're regulars, tell Jack, "...it wasn't anything she said, but she acted the whole time like we were a bother." And later another one, "I don't like to complain, but her attitude..." and there was the way she'd been tossing dishes in the bus pan and biting off the cooks' heads. It seemed the more customers came in, the more tables Yvonne got, the madder she was.

Carryin' all that huff and dander around, of course it threw off her rhythm so that she started messin' up. Not a lot, just missing a drink here, forgetting a soup spoon somewhere else, and it all cost extra steps, and time wasted. Now, like I said, Jack is easy going, unless you mess with his customers. Then, all bets are off. He'll be understanding to a point, but he likes his customers coming back. I could see he wanted to "have a word" -- that's what he calls it -- with Yvonne, but there just wasn't time, so I thought I could maybe give her a heads up, a chance to cool off or reset or whatever. I caught up with her at the pick-up rail. I got up close, tryin not to be loud.

"Looks like you could use a breather. I can take that order out for you."

Well, you would have thought I'd suggested she eat a box of rotten snails or something 'cause right there she shoved at me with the plates she'd been pulling to deliver and started yelling, "Yeah, sure, why don't you take all my goddamn tables, back stabber."

"Hey, girl, I was just trying to help. Don't take your troubles out on me..."

Maybe that wasn't the right thing to say, but I wasn't lettin anybody push plates at me. I can still see her in my mind, shaking with God's fury. She was full blown mad, didn't even wait for me to finish what I wanted to say -- and I had more to say, you know it -- when all I saw was the back of her, shoving the doors out of the kitchen so hard they banged off the walls. Fifteen feet away I could hear her, she was that loud, yelling to no one that I could see, "Damn straight I won't take it out on you..." She marched outta the kitchen like a whole army of pissed-off North Koreans. I knew nothing good was gonna happen then. I grabbed the plates for table six and followed Yvonne out. I didn't know yet what was coming, but I knew it was gonna be bad.

She was movin' fast, headed right for the Parkers' table. I wanted everything to slow down then, like in those disaster movies, so I could maybe get a chance to change the way it was going. Instead, my brain took a snapshot of that happy family; unsuspecting, that's what they were. Mrs. Parker was smiling at everyone; her kids were laughing, and Mr. Parker was holding his glass like he was making a toast or

telling a story. I saw Yvonne stomp to the table. I couldn't hear what she was saying at first, but when I got closer, I saw all their faces change, their smiles closed up and they just stared at Yvonne. Mrs. Parker and Mr. Parker looked confused, the both of them, and then I was close enough to hear everything, though I didn't need to be that close anymore because the entire dining room was silent and all anyone could hear was Yvonne.

"...and I *told* you to tell Jack you wanted to sit at my station, and you all just smile with your fat-ass smiles, like we never talked, like I never showed you pictures of my kids, like you didn't know I was *needing* to wait on you. You all think you can just move here with your prize money and your oh-we're-just-such-nice-people shit. I got five kids to feed and a broken husband who don't work. I don't have no prize money. I have to work every goddammed day, runnin' my ass off, and I still can't pay my bills. So fuck you, stupid bitch, and your broken-ass old man. Now why don't you just take your dirty money and get the hell out of here."

Of course, by then the whole place was filled up with trouble. The pickup bell was chiming and chiming; the cooks had no idea what was going on. From where I was standing, I could see the guys at the bar, glasses in mid-air, stunned. Yvonne's words hung in the air like the last ring of a shotgun. If it had been me, I would have just got mad and told Yvonne my own piece of mind. But Mrs. Parker wasn't that kind of person. She just sat there, looking at her husband. You could see he was just trying to get a sense of what had just happened, while Mrs. Parker's face and lips were all scrunched up, like maybe she was going to cry. My thinking stopped for a minute; I tried to take in the slow motion all around me. Yvonne had already moved away from the Parker's table and was heading for the ladies' room.

Jack was on her in a minute; cut her right off before she could hide out. I watched him drop on her like a hawk on its target. In a second, he had his hand around her wrist, leading her off the floor like the tantrum child she had just showed herself to be.

The pick-up bell kept ringin' and the cooks were getting madder, even started hollering, "Pick up! Pick up NOW!" The whole scene felt like when you see an accident and you don't think you'll know what to do, but you just do the next natural thing. So, like that I moved to the kitchen to get my next pick up order. By the time I got back out to the dining room and delivered to table eleven, people were talking again, quietly, going all on about what kind of crazy scene just happened. I looked over to where the Parkers had been sitting. Except for Mr. Parker standing by the table, holding his wallet, the rest were gone. At the door I saw the back of Mrs. Parker's coat, her son's arm wrapped over her shoulder, like he was protecting her, and her daughter held the door. I went right over to Mr. Parker.

"Well, I'm sorry about that," said Mr. Parker, shaking his head slowly, pulling his wallet out. "If I can just have the bill..."

"Oh no, Mr. Parker, not for one hot minute am I giving you a bill. I don't know what snapped Yvonne, but Jack is gonna want to show you he's so sorry for what just

happened. He's absolutely gonna tell me not to give you no kind of bill at all." Mr. Parker still looked confused and I wanted to just hug him, but everyone was still staring a bit and talking low.

"Well, I'm sorry all the same," he said, slowly, as if he really didn't understand where his family went to, wasn't sure of much at all. "I know it wasn't your fault." He began to shrug on his overcoat and looked for a moment at his fist as it came through the first sleeve, "Almost forgot to say thank you." And he took a hold of my arm and slipped a folded bill into my hand. His hand was warm, and dry, but I could feel it shakin' a little too. "That's for you." Then he opened his wallet again, "And give this to that poor girl, too." He pushed another hundred into my hand.

I wanted to say no, no way I was taking another penny from him, especially not for that girl and what she'd done to them. I kind of didn't even want my money from him; I could feel it wasn't right, but I didn't say a word. But also, I couldn't make myself give it back. I wasn't sure just what to do. Didn't want to make him feel worse than I could see he was feelin'. Or maybe that's just what I told myself.

Through the glass of the kitchen doors, I saw Jack tear Yvonne's time card in half and kick the trash barrel by the back door. Everything zoomed back to normal speed then. I woke up and knew right away there was no one left but me and that new girl to handle the dining room. I looked back into the kitchen; Yvonne and her coat were going out the back door. Mr. Parker was moving through the parking lot by then.

The rest of the night, I let those two hundreds sit there at the bottom of my pocket-- couldn't think about them -- and hustled to get those backed up orders out.

Well, I don't have to tell you, I ran my ass off that night. Made a bundle, too.

Her, deconstructed

John Ellis

She was a dancer, she said, as in that was her occupation—ballet, contemporary. He had never been to a ballet and wondered how one pursued such a career, but as he looked at her, he was assured of her success, seeing how the apices of her shoulders dispensed threadlike limbs, lines and features formed in geometric symmetry—an asymptote of jaw, her hair pulled into a crowning sphere, eyes as antipodal points. He watched how she laughed—with ease, but with a posture like a column of marble, or steel. He asked to see her again.

To the café she wore spotted blue, her figure etched against the hem of the dress, her hair down now, arresting her shoulders. She spoke of the conservatory in Connecticut, performing in Austin, San Diego, now here—all small companies but she enjoyed the work. But fourteen was a relatively late start for a dancer, she told him; at twenty-three, she had much more to accomplish. *You'll do it*, he said.

They left the café, and he was drawn in then, not just by beauty but by the resolute, the unswerving person so certain of what was forthcoming. As far as he was concerned, he felt the same about her; she had always been his, and he knew that he was in love the way a man often is—inevitably.

With little and without ceremony, they took their life together in a city with bridges spanning a bay, spanning possibilities. They sat by the water and looked east, drove the east bridge, peered back to where they had been, to the harbor excised in fog. They drove further and it emerged then as things tend to do when one crosses from one thing to another, from one place to another: the bridge's last span was a disorder of cranes and trucks, trucks and cranes and men with acetylene torches undoing panels and trusses, piece by piece. In the wake of 1989, a seismic retrofit had begun and a new portion of bridge stretched northeast, parallel to the old span. As the sun turned a corner in the west, they realized they wouldn't be driving the old span much longer.

Each day, she danced, rehearsed, auditioned. On stage, light bent around her, around limbs, muscle, and sinew. She was music in motion, and he knew what she knew, that she was what she was born to be—an architecture of movement, brick and mortar of abdomen, bolt and truss of backbone. Humerus and ulna extended into pointed fingers, knees flexed into pistons, all in a singular construction.

Between her own performances, they went together to see ballets on the city's big stage—*Swan Lake*, *Nutcracker*, Balanchine's *Serenade*. Sometimes, he watched her eyes follow the dancers; *one day, I will be there too*, her eyes said to him.

After her biggest performance—a rendition of *Faust* at the Cowell Theatre—he gave her a framed playbill, her picture. There had been an audience of hundreds, and he kissed her that night and told her how proud of her he was. She smiled, but there

was something more; her palms traversed her legs, calming an ache. *Too much rehearsing*, she said and she held ice to her hips to dull the pain. He remembered that after her last performance she had held ice to her hips then, too. *It'll get better*, she said.

After the new eastern span stood fully constructed, they drove the east bridge again. They looked toward the old span, to an underwater marine foundation surrounded by barges. People watched as the water leapt, the foundation undone—imploded—by demolition. Men were already on the next truss, dismantling it.

In the months that followed, she began to see a physical therapist and, eventually, a doctor. The doctor gave her medication. She saw another doctor, but the shot didn't last. Another doctor asked for an x-ray. *This is what I see*, the last doctor told her, *congenital hip dysplasia*. She left the office and went home.

He came back that evening, heard her in the kitchen. *What's wrong*, he asked. She stood up, a silhouette in the light of the lamp behind her, her legs stretched in darkness. She moved to the other room and wept, alone.

He drove her now to the appointments, the doctors, the x-rays. In an examination room, she wore a hospital gown, and through it he could see the lines, bowed now into arches. She said nothing, her eyes exploring the linoleum; many nights, the ache had been worse, and she hadn't slept. The doctor entered, held the x-ray, his mouth slanted, eyebrow quivering. He asked her to lie down on the examination table. He moved her legs in circles. *I don't know about that*, the doctor said to her question, *but surgery—both hips, would be best*. The doctor left and the door closed suddenly, as if shutting them in from the outside.

She lay against the sheet paper stretched over the table. She pointed one foot, then the other. He stared at them. *Tondu*, he remembered, *that's a tondu*. They left the hospital room, and in the time it took to walk the hallway, the lobby, the parking lot, he heard the doctor's voice again, repeating: *replaced*.

Evening collapsed in pastels. In the car, dusk formed a gray screen in the passenger window behind her, and he saw her as if in the beginning when none of it was yet all of it was and he wondered how all of it had happened. Each year had been unlike the one that followed; the outcome of one no better or worse than before, just more discrete from it, building toward something and eventually, this. This year, he thought, she looked like someone, something, undone.

She looked through the passenger window. He creased his eyebrows, turned on the car then turned it off again. Together, they wept.

Each day, each rehearsal and performance, pulled at something, a thread drawn taut, drawing one thing toward another. She spoke to a surgeon but she still wasn't sure; there were too many possibilities. She danced, pressed ice to her hips, went to the physical therapist each week, the chiropractor and the acupuncturist and the masseuse. He remembered the first time when, walking behind her, he noticed it—her

legs twisting as if each moved separately, confused by the movement of the other. He stood next to her, held her hand, and she leaned against him. Sometimes, she buried her face in her arms and he knew not to ask, knew only that this was the process, that of one thing giving way to another. Although she couldn't remember exactly when it happened, she found herself in a place where she danced less and less then not at all. She had crossed something, a recess inside of her, and she walked further from it now, from where she had been each day before. She looked back sometimes to imagine or remember what that other place had been or what it had offered her and what she had felt or needed or wanted from it, still wanting what she wanted sometimes when she stared at the framed playbill. But here, on this side of things, something else emerged, not necessarily better, but not worse.

They drove once more over the new eastern span. It was a self-anchored suspension bridge, someone had told them, the world's widest and more sound than its predecessor. It was modern, beautiful. The old span sat alone. Each week, another pylon had been removed and it seemed to drift farther into the bay, bare bones of trusses sinking into evening as if it had never been, as many would never even know it existed.

She looked behind her one last time. *So, this is how things are, she said; there is a beginning and there is an end, and one must look at what one did have and for what comes of it, for what comes instead.*

He looked at her, but she wasn't looking at the old span anymore. It was behind them now, and they drove faster, into something new.

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The Magic Lamp

Richard Risemberg

I barely remember the apartment we lived in then, except that the building was long, low, painted pink, and undistinguished, but I remember well the narrow courtyard that we shared with a similar building next door. That was where I spent most of my time as a little kid, before I started going to school. We lived in a shabby part of East Hollywood that had none of the glamour of the more famous part of Hollywood two miles west. Not even the fake glamour: just strip malls, liquor stores, laundromats, and bars. Our street—the usual too-wide asphalt desert lined with palm trees and desiccating lawns—dead-ended into Hollywood Boulevard itself, which had nothing to recommend it here. And our building was just past the alley that served a strip mall on the famous boulevard itself. For what it's worth, my earliest memories were made there, though we moved out after less than two years. My mother told me, much later, that we left because one night she looked out her window and saw a derelict masturbating furiously in the alley, while he looked in at her. It was that kind of a neighborhood. Life is tough.

I came back thirty years later looking for an old man I used to know. I figured he was probably dead, but maybe not: I'm sure he wasn't as old as I thought he was, back when I was four and my father not even thirty yet. The street looked about the same as I remembered it: spacious and dull, seemingly covered with an insubstantial dust that took the newness out of everything, although nothing much was new anyway. Not the aging apartment houses, all two stories tall and clad in faded stucco; not the cars slouched at the curb; not the tilting palm trees with their ruffs of dead leaves high overhead. Only the garbage cans looked fresh: plastic bins in glossy black, green, and blue, recently given out by the city to encourage recycling. On the day I came back to my old street they huddled like gossips every fifty feet or so, spilling bits of trash into the gutter. The dusty sky overhead seemed the same as in my childhood days, though the news articles all claimed less smog. If I raised my eyes over the dark roofs at the end of the block, I could see the famous hills, dry and brown with patches of dead green. They held up the notorious Hollywood sign near the crest of the tallest ridge, soft-edged in the haze.

When I came to my old home, I was satisfied to see that it was still painted pink, though an even duller pink than I remembered. There were still bird-of-paradise plants under the windows, their leaves still dusty. There was still the long walkway between the two buildings, and the narrow strips of grass that bordered it. The grass wasn't quite dead but was on the way.

The old man I sought had lived in the building next door, which was similar in style but painted a dull green. He was kindly, as was his wife, but what drew me to them was a small low-wattage table lamp he had that fascinated me endlessly. It was in the

form of a covered wagon, and the canvas top was the lampshade. The old man kept his apartment dark, the shades always drawn and not many lights on. I don't know how we met, probably his wife and my mother met in the courtyard and fell into some sort of friendship, but when I went into his apartment with her once and the covered wagon lamp was glowing in the dim warm shadow of the room, I suddenly felt that I was in the presence of magic. From that moment I went to the old man's door several times a week, knocked, invited myself in, and asked him to turn on the lamp. The glow of the canvas top hinted somehow of a world within, and I would stand there, rapt with sensations of the depth of life.

I know it doesn't make much sense, and that had I encountered the lamp as an adult I would have laughed at it, but I was four and feeling lost, as I suppose most children often feel, and the lamp, with its soft glow also looking lost yet cozy in the old man's darkened room, became, for a little while at least, the center of gravity of my life. The old man was indulgent, and I seem to remember a wistful smile on his face as he watched me staring at the lamp. I noticed him in the corner of my vision, with my mother hovering, apologetic, in the shadows beyond him. It doesn't make much sense to me now, but I remember being a lonely kid, and the covered wagon lamp, symbol of a home that followed you wherever you went and kept you safe and warm, meant something to me even if I couldn't say what it was back then. It was not a warm or safe world we lived in, and I knew it even at the age of four. Also, the old man and his wife were normal people, and never indulged in raging arguments as my parents did. That was certainly part of the appeal.

I learned my letters very young and was able to read the numbers on the doors of the two buildings that hemmed in my world. The old man lived in 103, on the ground floor. The grown-up version of myself walked up to the door and knocked, with no hope whatsoever of finding the old man at home. The door opened, and a woman of about my age, maybe a little older, looked out at me from the shadows within. Her face wore the neutral mask you put on to greet strangers at your door, hiding the fear of maniacs or the tedious anticipation of salesmen and evangelists. "Yes? How can I help you?"

"I apologize for bothering you. I am here in a sort of indulgent quest, you might say."

The mask gazed at me unchanged. I began to notice what she looked like: round-faced, with dark hair cut shortish, medium height and build, a very ordinary-looking woman who stood relaxed despite facing an unknown man at her door. I went on: "I used to live across the courtyard, in 108, when I was a kid. And an older fellow lived here who became sort of friend to me. Mr. Thomas. I was just wondering if he was by any chance still alive, and I could thank him for being a friend to the sorry little kid I was. Of course it's been thirty years; you might not even have heard of him. But I was in the neighborhood today, so I thought..."

"Mr. Thomas," she said. "Yes, I knew him. Of course I knew him. He was my uncle. My mom was his youngest sister. He must have appreciated your visits. My Aunt Ellen

couldn't have kids of her own." She straightened up and offered me her hand. "Dina Harris. And you are?"

"Sammy Gross." We shook hands, and she invited me in.

"Leave the door open," she said. "It's too dark in here."

"Your uncle liked it dark, as I recall."

"Yeah. I remember I found it depressing as a kid."

We sat down in separate armchairs. I looked around but didn't see my lamp. "So you used to visit him too?"

"Of course. He was my uncle."

I leaned forward: "Do you remember a little lamp he had? The covered-wagon lamp?"

She screwed up her face the way people do when they're trying to remember something. In the crossing light from the door she looked prettier. The her face brightened: "Oh, yeah, the covered-wagon lamp. That cheesy old thing."

"I suppose it was cheesy, but I loved that lamp as a kid...you've seen it, then?"

"Sure. We came in the evenings, most of the time. So the lamp would be on." She stared into a dark corner of the room for a moment. "I hadn't given it a thought for years till you mentioned it. It did sort of have pride of place in the room, didn't it? But it never meant anything to me. I'm sorry."

"Don't worry. Everyone's different, and I've figured that out over the years. Where's Mr. Thomas now? He would be very old, I suppose."

"Uncle Jimmy died three years ago. It was just after his ninetieth birthday. Aunt Ellen was the same age, and she lived on about six months longer. They were happy people, I think. That's not so common, is it?"

"I guess not. Did he live here all his life?"

"Oh, no. He was from Denver, came out to work in the movies. Ended up a tailor, like he was back home, but for the studios. It was something, right? He moved to one of those assisted-living places a few years before he passed. I moved in here to take care of his stuff and just stayed. The building owner liked him and lets me pay the same rent. And now they're stuck with me, I guess. Of course it's a rent-controlled building. It's not a great neighborhood anyway, as I'm sure you noticed."

I nodded. "Well, Mr. Thomas made it nicer for one little kid at least. But here's the big question: do you know what happened to the lamp?"

"The lamp? Oh, yeah, the covered-wagon lamp. You know, I think I still have it. I was going to take it to the Goodwill shop but never got around to it. You're tall; come help me."

I followed her to the bedroom, which was brightly lighted by a big south-facing window. Bird-of-paradise plants nodded in the sun between the window and the building next door. I could see someone else's bedroom window across the narrow space outside, with a collection of rubber duckies lined up between the glass and the shade. Everybody has their own childhood talisman, I guess. Mr. Thomas's niece

opened a closet and gestured towards a high, dark corner. "There are two boxes up there, pushed way back, I think one of them has your lamp." She edged out of the closet as I went in; we were almost close enough to touch.

"All right if I move some of these clothes around to reach them?"

"Yeah, it's just my winter sweaters. I don't use them much out here."

There was a faint perfume in the otherwise stale air of the closet, probably from the sweaters. I shuffled things around, making a bit of a jumble of it all, then carefully edged the boxes off the shelf and brought them down.

The box on the top of the stack held old photographs, most of them in black and white. Dina took it from me once we had opened it and sat on the bed looking through the snapshots. The other box was heavier, and when I opened it, the lamp was right there, in one corner of the box, surrounded by a jumble of gloves, handkerchiefs, and knit hats, all crushed together. There was also a flat cardboard carton at the bottom, printed with the logo of a fancy department store that had gone out of business years before. I put the box down on the bed and pulled out the lamp. One end of the shade—the awning of the covered wagon—had been pushed in, the wires that shaped it bent. I held it up in the light. It felt heavy in my hands: the base was of porcelain, glazed brown to make it look like wood, but it was too shiny, even after years in a box, to sustain the illusion. At least not in the light of day. It was, as Dina had said, cheesy. I realized that I had never, as a kid, dared to touch the lamp. I remembered my littler self standing in Mr. Thomas's darkened living room and looking at it and feeling that mixture of comfort and awe that you feel as an adolescent when you stare at a campfire under a vast starry sky in the mountains. Now, in my grown-up hands, in the bright glare of Dina's window, it lost all its mystery. Some illusions live only in darkness. No one sits and stares into a campfire in the light of noon, though it's irresistible at night. I held the lump of cold porcelain in my hands and felt my childhood die away.

"You can have it," a voice said. I had forgotten about Dina. "And this too. I thought I might find it." She handed me a photograph of Mr. Thomas and his wife sitting in armchairs on either side of the little table that held my lamp. The photo had been taken with flash; it was harsh, the covered-wagon lamp as stripped of mystery in it as it was in my hands in Dina's bedroom.

"Thanks," I said. I felt oddly stupid, a feeling that overcame me frequently when I was a kid even though I did fine in school.

She went back to the living room, and I followed. The front door was still open. She stood by it and waited for me to step outside. The she said, "I've seen some pictures of Uncle Jimmy posing with a little kid. Think it might be you?"

I shrugged. "I don't know. My father was kind of a photography buff at the time, even though he didn't take very good pictures. So I had to 'hold still for the camera' a lot. Maybe."

"You got a card or something? With your phone number?"

"Yeah, of course. My work card. It's okay to call me there." I shuffled one of the

business cards out of my wallet and handed it to her. She looked it over, then shrugged and put it in a pocket of her jeans.

"If I can find it, I'll call you, okay? Might take a while, there's another box of pictures under the bed. You know how it is."

"Sure. No hurry. I guess we'll both be around for a while."

"With luck," she said.

"I'm sorry I was too late to thank him for being a sort of friend."

"He died happy. Happier than most folks, I think. Maybe being your sort-of friend helped him too, you know?"

"Thanks, Dina. I appreciate it."

She shrugged again. "No big deal. Good-bye, Sammy. I'll probably call." She closed the door. I left, and walked back down the block, away from Dina's building. In the sunlight, the covered-wagon lamp looked tackier than ever. I saw a tiny rip in the lampshade; I hadn't seen it in Dina's room. The dangling cord bumped against my knee. I went to a cluster of trashbins and threw it into one of them. I had to think about it a while, but I couldn't come up with a reason to keep it. It fell on top of a broken doll and a pile of chicken bones. Sic transit gloria and all that. I kept the snapshot of Mr. Thomas and his wife. Maybe Dina would call. I hoped she would.

Faded Photo

Karen Barr

The bodice clings to her blooming bust. The fitted waistline constricts her ample center. Not rotund, but robust for her small stature, she fills the white gown with its open neckline revealing just a hint of creamy cleavage. The expanding curve of her belly concealed by its multi-pleated skirt.

She stands, not at the altar—the bride-to-be—but espoused, in defense. Her head pulled back, lips parted, accepting, yet hesitant, wary; arm stretching forward, her body tilted in both supplication and refrain.

On the tips of her fingers, a square of white frosted sponge cake feigning meekness, faith, trust in union while seeking to disarm and strike. Their chosen weapon in this first tournament of trust between husband and wife.

Opposite stands the man she is bound to, heart and soul. The husband whose bed she will share. The man whose name she will bear. The yang to her yin; the champion of her causes.

His stance, aggressive, forward, confident. He also holds the cake in suspect, although he wields his weapon more surely and with disarming charm. A young, playful smile lights his face. An easy face to love. And love they had. In a flurry of flying clothes, heated kisses and fumbling limbs. Awkward beneath her childhood quilt, they flailed and consecrated in full view of her beloved God—her guilt shielded and her body veiled by the sweaty back and pumping hips of her husband-soon-to-be.

She had determined to flout her mother's desires and slash her cake from nose to chin across her lover's face. To defy the meek and mild-mannered role expected of her. To prove not only to her family and congregation, but to this man she would now spend her life with, that there were spunk and spontaneity beneath her fleshy facade. To silently declare that this was not a heart to be trifled with. That regardless of the image reflected in her mirror, today she would stand as a strong, beautiful, intelligent woman warrior. A worthy opponent. Fierce and fearless protector of the fruit of their sinful desires. A sound only she could hear—the heartbeat of the fetus floating in her womb.

But now, she wavers, her resolve weakens. Looking into his deep, warm eyes, she feels at this moment, maybe only for this moment, he might see that vision of her soul. As their hands pass in midair, knuckles brushing, she buckles, caves, surrenders to his dashing demeanor.

As his weapon strokes her cheeks and slides across her face, leaving a white, sticky trail, her fingers meet their target and gently press the cake between his lips.

It is autumn, I suppose. Almost all the leaves have gone from the trees. But it isn't that blue-sky autumn that you see on all the travel adverts. This is Manchester autumn. Grey sky, drizzle, not all that cold and yet they're full of Christmas thoughts.

I push open the door of the swish new café on Deansgate. It's like a Tardis. It stretches further and further back. Will I ever find Will in here? If he even turns up. "Can I help you?" asks the lively young man at the counter.

I order an Americano.

"Take a seat. We'll bring it over," he says and hands me a small piece of plastic with a number three on it.

It's all bright colours in here but it smells of wet clothing and the colours clash with my mood. I stare at the grey floor. I sip the Americano. It's bitter and the cup is peculiar. You somehow can't hold it by the handle. It's too small.

Will doesn't arrive.

I check my phone several times. Nothing. From anyone. I text Will. No reply.

I finish my coffee and walk back to my empty flat in the Royal apartments. I go straight to bed. There is at least something comforting about the mattress, the pillows and the duvet.

The next day I can't be bothered to get up. I phone the office and say I won't be in.

And so it goes on. Day after day.

I don't bother getting dressed. I rarely shower or clean my teeth. I become obsessed with day time TV and get stressed if programmes I want to watch are on at the same time and I forget to record them or I can't find them on catch-up later.

I eat little but I do drink a couple of glasses of wine a day. When the cupboard is bare I'll send for Tesco's or maybe even Booth's. Why not?

They keep ringing me from work. I must self-certify. I'll need a doctor's note. Will I come in to talk to HR? Would it help if they sent someone round?

I ignore them all and let them all go to voicemail.

It gets greyer. I stop enjoying the soaps and the wine. I'm still taking the tablets though. Could I take more of them and sink into oblivion forever? I study the label. I somehow find the strength to go online and find out as much as I can about them. I can't figure out what would be the best dosage, though. Or what they'll do before they kill me. I don't want to be very ill before I die. They'd probably get to me and pump my stomach anyway.

What about throwing myself down the stairs? Or slitting my wrists and lying in the bath? If I had a car I could attach a pipe to the exhaust and feed it into the window.

But I can't be sure any of this will work. I'll probably bosh it and end up alive and in pain. Not to mention how it might upset other people. We can't have that. We mustn't make life difficult for other people.

I just want the colours back. The tablets used to do that.

My phone pings. A text from Will.

"Sorry I didn't see you the other week. Dad took a turn for the worse and I had to rush off to Spain. Lost my phone. Turned up again today. Worried about you. Not seen you in ages."

I notice that the grey is now tinged with very pale pink. The phone still in my hand, I speed dial the surgery. Michaela picks up. Thank goodness. She's the sensible one and the doctors do as she says.

"I'm not good," I say. "I don't think the pills are working anymore and I can't get out of the house."

"We'll get someone round to you. After lunch. Can you hang on until then?"

"Yes," I whisper and put down the phone. The pink deepens and the grey is fading to white.

What We Are Given

Jean Ryan

For her last thirteen years, my partner's mother lived with us. That the end of her life would be the end of this arrangement was a certainty we did not discuss.

Not that May ever really took part in discussions. Shy and withholding, she offered almost nothing in the way of opinions or desires. In as few words as possible, she would answer direct questions; more often she sidled away, moving onto some rescuing task. She would sometimes pose questions herself, but these were usually associated with the household—what time we'd be home, or when we wanted dinner, or how much food the cats should be given—never anything personal. I suppose she assumed that others were as disinclined as she was to divulge information about themselves. It was as if she were trying to erase herself, the way she shrugged off her worth and inched toward the sidelines. As quiet as she was, and as slight, you could sometimes forget she was in the room.

But May had a heart—that much she couldn't hide. If Cindy or I were grieving over a loss—a pet, a job, a hope crushed—she would cross the room and give us a hug, sometimes she wept with us. Grief she understood, having lost friends as well as her husband. Though Fred died relatively young, at 63, May never sought the companionship of another man, nor did anyone urge her to. Such a thing was impossible; to know May was to know this. I never heard her utter a word against her husband, though she might have. A hard worker, Fred was also a drinker. Like everything else, she kept her chagrin over this to herself. As far as I could tell, there was nothing more important to her than loyalty to family, except perhaps work. May had a fierce sense of duty, giving devout attention to even the smallest chores.

In the first couple years after May moved in with us, other widows in the neighborhood invited her on various excursions, but she wouldn't even join them for coffee, let alone a bus trip to Reno, and eventually they stopped asking. In the beginning, I think she was simply reluctant to share her history with others; later, as her dementia gained ground, her life became a daily battle to hide this affliction, and she retreated further into herself.

These were the hardest years, when she knew she was losing her mind. Nothing frustrated her more than her inability to access the words she wanted. Gradually, inevitably, her melancholy turned to acrimony. She saw no compensations in growing older, and almost daily she reminded us how painful the experience was, the suffering we had in store. If May could be accused of any cruelty, it was this. Silent on other topics, she managed to find words of discouragement.

I was, am, her daughter's partner—actually, I'm her legal spouse. The lesbian daughter-in-law, I was likely not May's first pick for Cindy, and I understand this: May came from a different time, and she was not the sort of person who broke rules of any kind. I recall the way she pursed her lips at the sight of a black man with a white woman. There was no question that she disapproved of my relationship with her daughter, no doubt that had she ever voted, which she didn't, she would have voted against our right to wed.

You can imagine this uneasy dynamic. An elderly woman forced by her diminishing faculties to live in a situation she inwardly condemned, and two much younger women compelled to accommodate her. It could have been worse, I reminded myself. May was tidy, quiet, respectful of privacy—surely that was enough to ask of her. What more did I want? What could I expect from this damaged woman who was no more pleased with the living arrangement than I was? Cindy had told me that May had not had an easy beginning, that her father was a tyrant who, thwarting the possibility of lice, shaved his daughter's head, then sent her off to school. Knowing such things about my mother-in-law, couldn't I make room for the small inconveniences of cohabitation?

Friends used to tell me that my acceptance of the situation was uncommon, even heroic. Let me assure you, I was no hero. Memories of my intolerance, my smallness, shame me to this day. I fumed over her timorous ways, shook my head over her conformist behavior. Most of all, I resented her negativity, which seemed to invade every room of the house. I wanted her to show more gratitude for life itself, to age with a modicum of grace. Sometimes I literally turned my back on her, made no secret of my annoyance. There were days I wanted to move out, when I didn't think I could stand another minute of her constant presence. There she always was, a witness to the worst of me.

Then there were other days when, appalled by my conduct, I would scramble for another chance. I would carry her toast and coffee up the stairs to her room—she could not manage these things as time went on—and seeing her timid smile, her pale grasping hands, I was gutted with remorse. I would pat her shoulder, ask if she needed anything else, wish her a good day. There were times when, leaving the house, I would suddenly panic at the thought of never seeing her again, and I would rush back up the stairs and give her a hug goodbye. I wanted redemption; I wanted her to see that I was better than she believed. More and more often, I did not believe this myself. She had me pegged me from the start, I thought, and had kept her silence for fear of causing trouble.

Eventually, leaving her alone became too risky, and we hired a senior care helper to oversee things when we were at work. May did not welcome this development, with

any of the women we tried, and I know that the job was not easy. She was becoming more than a helper could handle, a challenge even for Cindy and me. One night we tucked her in, and a couple hours later we found her walking through the house, fully dressed, holding a folded blanket on which she had assembled various items—scissors, a pencil, paper clips, her watch—intent on bringing these things to a place she couldn't name. Not long after that, when she lost her way even in the house, we moved her into an assisted living facility, where she declined more swiftly. At that point, fully eclipsed by dementia, she had become more docile and affectionate. There were moments she even seemed to enjoy the place, the other residents, as well as the songs and various shows provided by the staff. She died four months later, at the age of 84.

Some maintain that people can time their death, that they will often spare loved ones by passing away in their absence. Though this may have been May's wish, to shield her daughter from the agony of that moment, I find it hard to believe that mine was the company she preferred. Cindy, who had been staying day and night in the room with her mother, had an appointment that morning in a city an hour away. I was alone with May, faced with a task for which I felt neither suited nor worthy. (The nurse, assessing the change in May's condition, had gone to fetch an administrator.) May was not cognizant then; two days earlier she had slipped into an unresponsive state, and we were told that she was likely blind but could still hear. When her breathing grew ragged, I put my hands on her shoulders and I spoke to her. Over and over I told her that I loved her, that Cindy loved her, that soon she would see Fred again, and all her friends, that she was going to a place of peace and unimaginable beauty. The words poured from me without thought or pause, and I knew she heard them, because she tried very hard to answer. Over and over, she mouthed the word "love," tried to make it audible, to make it known, and I told her that we knew.

In the first few weeks after her death, May came to us in sleep. Cindy and I had the same sort of dreams: short sweet visions of a happy, peaceful woman. Embarrassed by her false teeth, May used to smile with her mouth closed. In our dreams, her smile was unguarded, and I am comforted still by the memory of those images.

I spent long hours going through her faultless possessions, searching for clues, proof of her affection. She had saved nearly all her correspondence and notes, some of which brought me to tears: physical descriptions of people we had introduced her to, along with their names. I had no idea that she was making such earnest efforts to keep her life from flying apart. There was scant evidence of me in her belongings—a couple pictures of me and Cindy, a notice of a cooking contest I'd won. She had not saved any of my cards, and while this saddened me, I was not surprised. In more ways than one, her death was my discharge. I had a little more room in this world; someone who

had caught me at my worst was gone.

Maybe she did love me, at the end. When she was trying to mouth that word, maybe she was including me. I can look back over those thirteen years and recall more than a few tender moments between us.

There could have been more. We could have loved each other better. With others, I have begun. That is what death teaches, what it gives us. A place from which to start.

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by Matthew James Friday

How the Cookie Crumbles

The Corner of SW 4th Av & SW Washington,
the Java Man cafe, base for city Patrol Officers
taking a break, late lunch, coffee catch ups.

Two Patrol Officers: one is younger, newly

qualified, sharp lines, fresh haircut, first
days on the job, learning about law courts.

More important lesson to discuss: love.

Younger recruit recently burned, dumped

his nearly married-her-relationship after
finding her toying with other new recruits.

He wants to state his case, question motives,
show pity for the other wronged men.

He rationalises his new wisdom: never
cheat. One secret slip-up was enough. Weighs
heavy on his conscience - how could he have
married her? She left, so no need for confession.

Interrupted by a homeless man with lump
on his head, false leg, begs to have his 5L bottle
filled. No. Owner does not want to encourage.

Water fountain in a nearby park. Good day.

Older P.O. knows about love, how people connect,
how rebounds fail, being 'footloose and fancy free'
Can be a fantasy. He drifted from his son's mother.
Marriages in The Force Rarely Last. Official.

They compare notes of female cadets won
and lost. Calls come in: fight in public lavatories,
crazy dude pushing people on the street,
needs picking up. Naked homeless man. East

Burnside. Older P.O. talks about the city sucks
up the river of homeless, the incessant heat,
insufficient A.C. at home. Joking about nudity.
Gotta see this. Bang back coffee, thank
the owner, roll out unhurried. Return

a few minutes later, laughing. Crazy pusher
caught. Naked dude put his clothes on
and walked off down the street. Back to
lunch. Just how the old cookie crumbles.

Beach Colours of the Tuscany Coast

On the beach of *Forte Dei Marmi*,
exclusive Marble Fort, background
of grey Apuane Alps veined white
glaciers of marble, the Carrara quarries
Michelangelo loved so much he laid
roads to his waiting ships, blue hazing
back into white. The beaches filled
with olive skinned Italians, richly
chipped but burnt Russians in yellow
sun hats, rows of white towel-covered
blue sunbeds, deckchairs, mostly empty.
Wandering through it all, immigrant
salesman buzzing about junk: glossy
glasses, bright balls, shimmering dresses,
neon iphone cases, bath towels of rainbow
hues, leaning towers of sun hats on dark
north African heads, some Nigerian,
darker than secret migration stories;
all waved away like wasps. Marginally
luckier Asian women in white overalls
offering massages to dozing Davids.

Hawks in Sudkreuz Station, Berlin

They flock in the lower concourse,
perched on benches, an eye
on the escalators, another watching
the supermarket exit, swooping
in for tidbits, scraps of generosity
hassled out of the hands
of commuters, tourists, poor migrant
birds - the hawks do not discriminate,
tattered feathers, bald spots, talons
encrusted with blood and vomit,
flurry of filth when wings are flapped,
a poor crop praying on, praying.

Late February Evening in the Bavarian Alps

Snow fills the orange cone of light,
white waterfall of falling flakes.
The same light reaches out
to an arm of hedge-high snow
and then is lost in the evening
of darkness deepened by mountain
clouds. The still houses punctuated
with rectangles of yellow, sudden
life, someone preparing a meal.
Above a piano is playing, notes
rolling out to remind the winter
that it has only days left to impress,
to remind me that what is beautiful
is found in stillness, snow, darkness.

Hurry Away

In the *Kaiser and Kuche* cafe in Seefeld
an old man slides in from the snow and sits
quietly by the door, orders *café und kuchen*
as perhaps he does every afternoon,
tradition. Clothed in shades of grey,
his bald head an Alpine mountain rising
out of snow-lined trees. Polished black shoes
- an effort should always be made.

My wife says I eat like he does: tongue
rummaging my mouth, licking my lips,
nodding my head to the timely tastes.
She likes him. *That will be you in years to come.*
But where are you? I don't want to be
alone, paying the bill while still drinking,
wiping my face with a handkerchief,
crumbs stuck in the same corners
no one left to tell me, so I hurry away.

Only or Without

At Konigssee we crave crepes.
A man sells them from a shop
with a name that's just a list
of the food he quickly sells.

I ask for crepes with *only* bananas
but ask for *without*. We laugh
about the German we are both
trying to learn: only is *nur*.

He's from Bosnia-Herzegovina,
no time to notice the beauty
of the lake, he tells my wife.
I am working, all the time, working.

Folding crepes, frying sausages,
waffles, coffee-to-go – anything
the tourists, mostly Chinese,
want before hurrying to the boats,

drink famously cold lake water,
chew snow dusted cliffs, gulp at
Mount Waztmann, finish and
leave him to prepare fresh batter.

Sniffing Death

On English roads blood-caked
sacks of fur and agonised features
are foxes, badgers, rabbits,
sometimes too smeared to
recognize as childhood friends.

Here on the Oregon coast,
a few miles from Pacific City,
there is a large black bundle
cutting the middle of the road.
A sprawled body of a baby bear

stretched out as if asleep,
a cuddly toy dropped out of a
car window. We wonder
where its mother is, how long
she stays at the roadside,
sniffing death and growling.

Something Better to Do in Olomouc, Czech Republic

Late Saturday afternoon in Horní náměstí, the Upper Square in Olomouc. A few drifting tourists. A moody, immature storm spitting threats. Swifts diving for cover, pigeons hurrying to roost. A wind trying to conduct something dramatic, long promised.

Without announcement or applause an orchestra appears from out of the Town Hall, as if bubbling out of the astronomical Clock, the one the Soviets rebuilt with a procession of proletariats. There used to be Saints but they were martyred in 1942 by the Nazis, not satisfied with suffocating the sounds of the city's Jews.

The orchestra unpacks their cases around one of the baroque fountains, Hercules with his mace ready to strike, trampling the hydra, many mouths gushing water. Twelve violinists and three cellists, all of them teenagers of varying heights and ages. Organised in a semi-circle, they tune up without a fuss, confirm the first song and flash-mob into music.

Amazement leaps from bow to brow. The storm holds off. A crowd gathers in minutes, smartphones out, toddlers wriggling with joy. We, the middle-aged, witness the impossible: young people with something better to do. For us. Playing as well as any professional adults.

Julius Caesar, the legendary founder, would halt his ambitions watching these teenagers play. A white bird crowns Holy Trinity Column where Apostles, surviving Saints and even Mary nod along. The youngest – a boy with a mare's mop of hair – shows his mature skills, skittering bow over strings, fellow musicians lined up behind, patiently gifting him this moment.

Now applause, applause for each piece, for each teenager's moment of glory even when two bulging men, prowling for beer, walk through the orchestra, guts twitching. Nothing can deter the teenage spirits except time, which runs out, clock striking.

They pack up and are gone in seconds, leaving everyone looking around, wondering the same questions, music ringing.

by E. Martin Pedersen

Sleeping in Beds

This one used before me by writers of dreamscripts, poets of snooze
Sucking in a genius breath of Robert Louis Stevenson or Sharon Olds
I can sense their backs in this crease, their eyes pointed at the same dark heaven.
When the lesbians made it here on my side
their fingers crawling like ants going home
what did they leave unexpressed?
metaphors I could salt away, literary passion even I can fake,
What magnetic particles were disturbed
by lightning nightmares, death-haunts of green dogs,
And will be now by my snorts and gulps ripping through still air.

Or in my hospital stretcher-bed
thousands have consumed the blinding light
and then passed on to relaxed black
What did they leave after the cleaning up?
Could they focus on Liliana's legs,
find their slippers by groping feet for the long shuffle
Will their last growling cries enter my sinew?

Sleeping with grandpa
after seeing his limpy watersnake
I feel uncomfortable, his smell of oldness
Does that remain in the batt?
The train station benches in northern Greece
Scrunched into goldilocks four-poster crib of blue butterflies
Brothel hammocks, cigarette-burns and vinegar
Or the swish of my college friends doing the unexpected by my side.

It is wrong
to travel so much, always sleeping in second-hand bunks
To leave the warmth of her side in the morning
the wet sweat of my head on the pillow
the investment I've made in that ceiling

My wife's lovers before me.

My step-daughter giving birth in my bed.
Is a bed a fortress?
like an island, defensible
against what harmless terrors
Will it fly?

I resolve
to find out
to own my first bed
and sleep differently
Where no one has slept before.

The Straightest Line on Earth

A straighter line than a half moon or a pine tree
The straightest line on earth
The horizon
The sea falling off into space between Messina and Reggio Calabria
Dark clouds
Beige Ionian
Late afternoon October
The color of my eyes,
They tell me.

The equator doesn't exist
Christmas neither
My day job least of all
All pretend -- this doll is dancing -- for pretend.
In Denver they don't wear their hats backwards
In Anchorage no umbrellas
In Hell the food's better – all barbeque
 candied yams
 green beans in onion sauce
 cornbread dripping with butter
 baked cinnamon apples

So the dogs bark, who will shut them up?
Bats spelling their names in the air
The spiderplant making fingershadows on the wall
In the closet, a fetus of Playdoh®
The woman in the dunes
Last on my list of all-time best

Doesn't exist
Isn't straight
Like the horizon
Fantasy
Beyond which
From the other side perhaps

Only sea-monsters
And drop-off
Into smoke.

To His Coyote Mistress:

tired enough, spacey enough, lagging
from two days in the Death Valley floor touching the ground and flying above the
ground and the whirr of the big engines along the canyon boulder alleys and tasting
the salt of the earth
inhaling the pew Bad water, 282 feet under the sea
in a place where I had no business being
where breathing's a chore,
driving alone far over the speed limit,
breaking away from that devil's country club
conversing with spirits rather loudly
a/c on, windows up tight, chilled
falling back on brilliant mindless word games
a fill-in blank created to fill
in the pitch black joshua tree jungle gym
tan sand glow ahead
the past as dark as tobacco spit – no peeking
can we get home fast please?

I drove on hard
and jerked
not swerved
when
as un/expectedly
Coyote came
to teach me a lesson
on the other side
of Bakersfield.

My entire life every second from my first abovewater whoosh
the appearance of the light had a hole in it for Coyote to race towards
with a gap in sound for a zip from left to right
with two solid thumps that I knew better than my first and middle names
Coyote-cide revealed my real name and the names of many things,
each distinct clump of dormant desert sage.

I had to stiffen
it all depended on my stiffening, could I do it correctly?
pass
Coyote, my generous adjudicator

even now I continue to go rigid
my elbows lock tight
my visive rays tractored on, to long glowing rectangles blipping into an arrow
like the green-face boys in the silos who will get the order
to start the fun
and the procedure, step two, step one
step forward, an Arthur Murray tango with Coyote on its hind legs
bigfoot black footprints to follow
just the way it is supposed to be when *you* get the news
that there is finally a date, a countdown
you're lucky, not everyone gets a date
but you have waited patiently in line and you get yours, pardner
from a man with large glasses and a spotless white coat, is he Walter Cronkite?
that man who seems to be a doctor has got Coyote's vacuum eyes.

In the desert the spirit is stronger
brittle skeletons are all around us near,
do you hear
the music
of the sphere?

Coyote took my four grandparents one by one, not all together
to clean the generational slate
and my mother
who's taken to shakin'
and my skinny father
writes dreaming animals
on deck
in the hole
let's sing the anthem
let's wave the banner
follow protocol
then everything will be all right
Coyote will whisper from behind his hand, "guess, go on, guess."

I am not endangered, are you?
are you the rare beast or
should I feel helpful?
pest, rodent, locust
I don't know you (but, of course, I do)
I shouldn't know you

I can't know you, I am you
white as a low moonbeam on a silicon flat Mica Mojave snowfield
up north you can hide better, but you're right about one thing,
I invaded your turf.

Especially at the Candlestick Festival, October 1989
remembering the almost 60,000 Americans

I am so proud of what you did

Coyote stands at the exit and high-fives each hand touched
they tried to rock us, huh?

the mother of Coyote tried to test our guts

she laughed as she showed us that we were riding a bull

but we laughed back that we knew

our elders know and teach us

with stories, dances, chants

you are riding a bull, they say

your children will get sick one day

your loved ones will stop loving . . .

all you have will be lost . . .

We know it all, why do they call us Elmer Fudds?

Coyote wants to know

fuck you Coyote, you can't shake me off my Nordic track

I'm steadfast in my left-right march

aware, self-deceived, aware, self-deceived

follower of a false faith

I freely choose to believe.

Slap me alive twice, slapslap

illusory love of love that equals the lie

keep me awake on the road

I can be satisfied with the somewhat real, somewhat unreal

the myth of maturity,

the crime of empathy, the

warning,

omen,

the ultimate compliment

the ultimate lover.

The 45 Degree Angle

I am stinking rich
deservedly
I invented a plastic bottle
for toilet cleaning
I patented it for \$100
at the U.S. Patent Office
Washington, D.C.
a long time ago.

Instead of the usual squirt
the neck twist distorts
to a 45 degree angle
not 40 or 50 degrees
so that one can spray
the bowl cleaner
with odor eliminator and lime scale remover
upwards under the rim
where no one could squirt before.

Life is better now
at that exact angle
not my life though
my kids and wife were spoiled brats
so we all broke up
good riddance, leeches
my lover kept the jewels and the Benz
I have this fabulous house in the hills
with a non-English speaking maid
where I retired early from plastics
at 45, after my one great intuition.

Guess where I got
the 45 degree angle
that saved the world
and introduced an age of leisure?
I should be King of All I See
yet I'm all alone
with nothing left to do
except contemplate
my 45.

BS Train

"Congratulations to those customers fortunate enough to take advantage of our limited-time offer." (American Airlines pilot to passengers traveling from Phoenix to Milwaukee)

a tiny snail meets a thin
blade of grass
grey squirrel darts up and
down the same maple tree
the maple tree distributes
seeds and leaves
holding roots with brothers
sisters underground
under clouds forming far from the
weather-balancing tornado

- what's on your plate today
- nobody cares about you
- you'll never know yourself
- can you read these words
- the eternal things barely seen

by come-and-goers
with bitcoin fortunes
rip-off schemes
grease the wheels
corner the market
control the supply chain
of situational ethics

you make one another feel
worthy of love but you're
not or you wouldn't be so
riled, unsatisfied
suicidal apoplectic
narcoleptic epileptic
septic peptic
and cataleptic

the deer are migrating further
north to escape us
becoming nocturnal to survive
yet humans will join the list, then
they will return to their homes
post-exile
in ad-land
mad-land
poison candy
bad-land

through the Montana flatlands
Colorado, Kansas
through New Mexico, Nevada
Utah, storm up ahead
fully visible
the train is long
on the B & S line
they're adding cars every day
invent new lines, new names
a card-shark in every compartment
a hooker offering something wild
two-for-one or
50% off or large
mail-in rebates
on many items
sounds pretty good

so you can fit in with your
surroundings
or jump on
an empty car
and ride
the only way
to get anywhere
but here.

Origami
Mauricio Palazzo
translated by Toshiya Kamei

I

I arrived in Japan just like all those who run away from something, those who have got nothing to lose, and those who can't stay in one place for too long. I arrived in Japan following a girl, which is the only other way to get there. I wasn't particularly interested in its great directors, ancient sanctuaries, or manga or anime. I didn't like the women either: the tourists who came to Easter Island were almost all dwarfs with ridiculous hats, plunging into the water in full swimsuits brought back from the sixties. But when I saw her in the Plaza de Hanga Roa that afternoon – her long, half-wavy hair, her catlike eyes that know how to put on a sad face so well, her heart-shaped mouth barely covering her rabbit teeth that aren't symmetrical at all – I knew I had found the woman of my life.

Call me naive, but I still believe in love. You won't be able to dissuade me. Everywhere, every day lovers find each other, recognize each other from their past lives, and that's it: one follows the other to the antipodes. And he leaves everything, shuts down the magazine that brought him more problems than money, sells his books, bed, TV, bike, clothes, everything. He rids himself of everything and is left with only what fits in a backpack. What hurts him most, of course, are the books. And his eleven-year-old son. But that is another kind of pain that can't be explained.

We were facing the king of the island. Dressed only in a loincloth and covered in tattoos, he blew a giant shell with a goat's breath and chanted loudly, calling his people to listen to what he had to say. We were the only ones there on that cloudy afternoon – her, my photographer, and me. And the old man who was screaming. Suddenly a girl passed by, looked at the king, and put her finger to her temple.

“Hey, buddy, don't waste your time listening to this crazy man!”

It must be said that no one on the island believed that Agterama descended from the royal Miru clan, a tribe everyone else claimed to belong to. Nor is he the right one to govern the designs of the Kingdom of Rapa Nui. But that doesn't mean he's a fool. He knows full well how to exploit tourists who fall in love with the island. Like many Rapanui, anyway, who always offer deals too good to be true, why not put up some cabins and set up a beach bar in front of the ocean? I wanted to interview Agterama – who claimed to have convinced a French lawyer to file a lawsuit against Chile with the Hague Tribunal – and she came with a reddish face from Anakena Beach by bicycle. And so it was. When I saw her, I told my photographer that I had to talk to that girl, that just by seeing her something pushed me toward her with an unstoppable force and she took the picture just because he doesn't come to see anyone.

I can be very seductive if I set my mind to it. Her name was Marie. That night I gave her a shy kiss. The next day I hugged her slender waist and the third night she slept with me. Things happen fast on the island and I can confirm that we were immeasurably happy. All the rainbows shined for us. We snuggled up together under the stars and the glow of sunsets in Tahai, skinny-dipped at night at Ovahe, laughed until dawn, and ate the sweetest guavas and the best grilled fish in the world on a banana leaf with its little flower on the side. Oh, what beautiful days. The whole world revolved around us.

We went out to ride a tandem bike, pedaling in unison. Most people greeted us, but some Rapanui, jealous, cursed at me:

“That Japanese girl is mine! Go back to your country to find yours!”

That didn't keep them from asking me for money from time to time. My savings were scarce. The magazine came out once every four months and I had already been scammed twice. The first time was Blanca, my partner in the magazine, famous for having burned down the house of a cousin who had built on a plot that apparently belonged to her. Uncle Cacho was the second time. Someday I will talk about him, his thin beard with braids and his rotten teeth, and everything I went through on that island. But here there's no space for that. You have to get to Japan. Time is running out. She must continue to travel the world and still has six months left. The tickets are bought, the itinerary is done, she has taken a break from college, her grandfather is dying, and she's only twenty-one.

Seven times I went to leave her at the airport and every time I managed to convince her to stay a few days with me, until one night she started to do the math and told me that I could accompany her for the remainder of the trip with seven thousand dollars. Once in Tokyo, we would see. She would resume her art studies and get a job in any store, and I could give Spanish classes, publish my articles in newspapers and travel magazines, get an absolutely illegal dishwasher position in some Latin American bar or, in a worst-case scenario, sing my flimsy Leonardo Favio repertoire on the guitar through the streets in exchange for enough coins for cigarettes, beer, and subway tickets.

I left for a cybercafé, only to confirm that I was dead broke. However, the bank, very kindly, offered me a “pre-approved” loan via mail... for up to seven thousand dollars.

It wasn't hard to decide. My dream had always been to travel the world and Marie was the only valid excuse to leave my son for who knew how long. In the next few days, I shut down the magazine, sold everything, and went to Santiago to meet my family. The plan was to take out the loan and leave for India, to continue traveling together until we arrived in Tokyo.

“What sources of income do you have?” asked a bank agent when I was in front of him.

“None. I’ve just shut down the magazine I owned on Easter Island.”

“Hmm... May I ask what you intend to do with the money?”

“I fell in love with a Japanese girl and I’m going away with her.”

“To Japan?”

“That’s right.”

He cleared his throat and returned to the paperwork, leaning over the table:

“How do you plan to pay it back?”

“Doing whatever it takes.” I shrugged, as if it weren’t such a big deal.

“Any good credit?”

“An apartment with a thirty-year mortgage loan. I’ve paid one year.”

After thinking about it for a few seconds, he pretended to get on my side and finished off, already coaching me.

“I believe you. I’ll go along with you. You’ll be fine.”

And he gave me the money, thinking he received the Business of the Month award.

Then we traveled. Five months. India, Thailand, Cambodia, Vietnam, and China.

We were even happier.

She sometimes says we fought a lot on that trip.

I remember we screwed a lot.

We flew into Nagoya from Beijing on a hot March morning. After five months of backpacking, I looked like an indigent hippie: skinny, long hair reaching past the middle of my back, dreadlocks fitting for the proudest Rastafarian and the little flags of all the countries we had visited sewn onto our backpacks. To make us look cool, we even added the flags of countries we hadn't managed to go to.

When I handed over my passport with the customs declaration form to an immigration official, he looked at me with a grim expression and snapped, "You have only six dollars for your stay in Japan?"

"No, that's how much cash I've got in my pocket. The little paper asks how much cash I've got on me. But I've got three thousand dollars left on my credit cards." I brandished a couple of credit cards, knowing that both had been nearly maxed out.

"Your departure ticket out of Japan?"

"I don't have it. It's just that we're traveling in Asia and this is just a stop to visit my girlfriend's parents. Then we'll continue toward Polynesia." I lied without shame.

He examined me carefully, thumbed through the pages of my passport again, checking the stamps, and dashed off to a back office. He argued animatedly with two other officials and then the three of them came back and told me, very kindly by the way, to follow them to the office, where they interrogated me again. I began to sweat, which aggravated their suspicions. Then they called Marie and harassed her with questions.

"Who's this man?"

"My friend," she answered, believing it was better to say that rather than saying we were a couple.

"What brought him to Japan?"

"Vacation. We're traveling around the world." She showed the little flags on her backpack.

"Where is he going to stay in Japan?"

"My family's house."

"What does your father do?"

"He's a police officer."

"Is your father aware that you're coming back with a friend?"

"Of course. Besides, I have a letter of invitation."

She spread a sheet of paper, written by her and with the "hanko," a seal with her family name, clearly stamped.

One of the officials read it with great care and returned to the matter at hand:

"Will your family be responsible for your friend during his stay in Japan? Because here he declared that he has only six dollars."

"We'll stay at my family's house and then we'll continue traveling," she stressed with the most cosmopolitan tone her youth allowed her to muster.

They moved us to another office and we listened to them deliberate about us. Marie and I looked at each other, with the certainty that if they didn't let me in, I'd have to go back to Chile and our romance would come to an inevitable end. We held hands and waited with our hearts in our throats. Suddenly the voices stopped and one of them came out and handed me back my passport, stamped with a three-month tourist visa.

"Nihon e yokoso," he said in a dry tone, without moving a single muscle in his face.

"Welcome to Japan." Japanese never sounded so beautiful to me. I had managed to overcome the most difficult obstacle and now I had three months to get a job and immerse myself in my new life. Being an optimist by nature, I firmly believed that my innate charm and good looks would do the rest.

I had no idea how wrong I was.

III

Her father was waiting for us at Nagoya Station. Tall and wary, he was so nervous about meeting me that he shook my hand and bowed in greeting at the same time, babbling some English words. He didn't even hug Marie, but that's how the Japanese are. Even if they are apart from each other for years, when they meet again, they just nod and say "okaeri" (welcome home) or "hisashiburi" (long time no see). She was the youngest of three girls and none of them had ever brought a boyfriend home before. My fear was that Seiichiro-san wanted to slice me into sashimi with his katana for having seduced his daughter, still only twenty-one years old, but instead he thanked me for taking care of her on the trip. Her sisters and grandmother also expressed their enthusiasm for meeting Marie's first boyfriend. Only her mother maintained a certain distance, probably worried about our twelve-year age difference, my hippie looks, and a résumé that included a divorce and a son, obviously a terrible match according to the nuptial codes not only of Japan, but also of the entire world.

Of course, I had to sleep in the room where they stored the piano, dusty family keepsakes, and a sack of rice.

At night, after dinner, Seiichiro-san would smoke and gulp one beer after another until his face turned bright red and he went to bed. Her mother and sisters also worked early, so Marie and I stayed up drinking green tea and listening to her grandmother tell us about the adventures of her late husband, who had fought in the Second World War and spent some time in Siberia. "Fought" is perhaps not quite accurate, because as he had a lame arm from having fallen from a tree as a child, and as he was also very tall and therefore an easy target, he was assigned to the kitchen, where he managed to survive until the end of the war. The Japanese surrender caught him by surprise somewhere in northeastern China. Left to their own devices, he and a group of comrades crossed a bridge and entered the forest. They wandered for a few days, stealing chickens and eggs from peasants until they fell into the hands of the Russians. Wounded, sick, famished, and crowded, packed in the train, lashed by the Siberian winds that sneaked through the cracks of the carriages, they must have gone through hell.

But the grandfather was born under a lucky star. He managed to survive and when they arrived at the prison camp, they were lined up in rows and the guard asked:

"Who has worked in the kitchen before!?"

He raised his ill-fated arm right away, and with that, he gained a position next to the stove. He spent four years peeling tons of potatoes and boiling tons of cabbages. He never spoke much about those four years. He had seen death very close at hand, and it was better not to remember all that. When he returned home without any glory because the Japanese had already embraced capitalism and forgotten these lost soldiers, he married the fiancée he had left behind and worked in a sake factory until the end of his days.

After putting on weight for a few days, we left for Tokyo to get a place to settle and start our exciting new life. But after visiting a couple of tiny and quite expensive apartments, we finally had to settle for renting a three-by-three-meter room to Vincent, a Frenchman who rented a small apartment in Itabashi, perhaps the least colorful neighborhood in Tokyo. His daily routine consisted of playing video games for hours on end, doing odd “arubaito” jobs, teaching English and French once in a while, and frequenting raves and bringing home a different girl every time. When I left in the morning, I saw tiny high heels his latest conquest had left in the front door. I suppose it was in those days, sniffing the shoes of those strangers to imagine them better, that I developed a cheerful fetish for Japanese women’s graceful feet.

Armed with limitless optimism, I went out to look for a job, while Marie resumed her studies and got a sales clerk position at GAP. However, I soon learned that my efforts would be in vain: without a work visa, I was turned down by a Mexican restaurant, an English school, a Spanish school, a videogame company, and the only Spanish-language newspaper in all of Japan. Inevitably, it was going belly up.

One night, thanks to my long hair, I was about to be hired as a matchmaker priest by a “salaryman” I met in a bar and who thought I was a dead ringer for Jesus.

“Japanese couples want to get married in the Western style, so we have fake chapels and priests, just actors who perform the service that has no validity whatsoever. We play the wedding march and you must dress as a priest, act like one, repeat a speech we have prepared, and congratulate family members. It’s very easy and pays well. Are you interested?”

I would have been the happiest man in the world marrying Japanese couples and having a good time in one party after another. I would have been the best matchmaker priest in the world! I would adopt a kindly expression and adorn my speech on the sacred nature of the marital bond with a thousand flourishes, while making it clear that they must stay together through both good and bad times. I would congratulate parents and in the meantime I could flirt with unmarried girlfriends. Unfortunately, my language skills were almost nil and although I promised to call him once I got better at it, I never quite got around to it. I never learned to read or write during the three years I spent in Japan.

Meanwhile, we lived on Marie’s meager salary. I got my visa extended for another three months and had some articles published in Chilean magazines. I gave private English classes for a few weeks to a group of retirees, who didn’t understand anything, in a small school in Saitama. The owner had no fear for the foreigners and paid us peanuts. But soon I realized that it was more expensive to go to work than to stay home. Without work and without a visa to get it, in the fifth month I had to stay cooped up in our tiny room in thirty-five degrees of heat while a summer storm raged outside. I ate rice and a stew of beef, carrots, and potatoes with the cheapest curry and thrown into a futon nowhere near soft, a futon that was nothing more than a flimsy mat few centimeters thick. You couldn’t even sleep on your side, let alone face down, without

getting your body cramped. In short, a futon in which I had no choice but to sleep like a pharaoh or spooning, with the sheets sweaty, and the windows closed to keep mosquitoes from sneaking in, while watching five movies a day, many of them pornographic, by the way.

My dream was falling apart and the whole world was crumbling down around me.

Parra's biography on the table, he kindly discarded my girlfriend's photos one by one. One evening Marie brought home a copy of *Transit*, the best Japanese travel magazine, which was looking for contributors for the next special issue on the South American Andes. A few days later we were in front of Kato-san, its editor-at-large. With a Japanese edition of folksinger Violeta one. Dressed in an office lady's suit, she sweated profusely from being so nervous.

Kato-san was tall and thin, his hair dyed blond, was practically beardless, and had a catlike air. He took pains to grow an imperceptible mustache and responded to everything with that "hum, hum" so typical among the Japanese. He turned to me, who hadn't said a word until that moment, and asked:

"Paraso-san, what do you know about Violeta Parra?"

"I know where she was born, where she grew up, where she studied, where she died, and where we can see her work in Chile. I can arrange interviews with her brother, a great poet, and with other great artists who knew her in person," I said quickly.

"Hum, hum..."

"I can also let you save money in the logistics of travel and hotels."

"Hum, hum... Could you make a two-week plan, listing the cities we would visit and what we would do there?"

"I'll send it to you tomorrow. When do you want to travel?"

"ASAP."

Ten days later we were flying to Chile with photographer Tommy-san. He was short and wore an Afro mane that was absolutely natural and very rare among the Japanese, who usually have thick and bristly hair. We hit it off right away. Unlike Kato-san, a man of few words, Tommy was funny and talkative and together they made a couple we could well describe as Japan's Don Quixote and Sancho. As soon as we arrived at a friend's house, I kindly offered them a package of marijuana and for two weeks we set out to retrace our greatest composer's footsteps throughout Chile. When one morning we arrived at Las Cruces and showed up unannounced at Violeta Parra's brother Nicanor's door, the word "punk" graffitied on it, it was the poet himself who came to meet us with a surprised yet sly smile.

"Good morning, Don Nicanor! Sorry to drop by out of the blue, but we couldn't reach you by phone. With these gentlemen you see here, we are writing an article on the life of your sister Violeta for a very important Japanese magazine. We have traveled thousands of kilometers by plane and on local buses, just to meet you and ask you to spare us a few minutes of your precious time," I said with my best smile.

Kato and Tommy bowed in ceremonious respect and offered the bottle of wine and the box of chocolates we had brought along as a sign of goodwill.

Parra received both men with courtesy, opened the box of chocolates, offered one to each of us, pondered its flavor, and then kindly apologized for not letting us in, arguing that he didn't give interviews so untimely. However, he wanted to know more about our company, the places we had visited, the people we had interviewed, and if his sister was really so famous in Japan that they came from the other side of the world to interview him.

"Of course!" we said in chorus. "A documentary on her life was recently shown on a state-run TV channel, and that's why we are here."

"Are you from Tokyo?"

"Yes..."

"Well, I would like to go to Kyoto and after that I think I can die in peace. I would love to visit the Temple of the Golden Pavilion, the Temple of the Silver Pavilion and meditate in the Zen Garden. There is so much history there... Is it true that there are more than two thousand temples?"

"Of course, of course, and perfectly preserved!"

Parra scratched his nose for a few seconds and, as if it were nothing, launched his proposal: "Is there some way that you could take me to Kyoto? I could give a lecture at a university. If so, I'm delighted to give you the interview."

The three of us gaped at each other. It was impossible to promise something like that, although we could manage it with the embassy, of course, look for resources, join forces, and try to organize a visit. Parra then gave us some apples from his garden, again apologized for not letting us in, and said goodbye, kindly but inexorably, with a Pound's poem and the express task of arranging not just a tour of Kyoto but throughout the country.

At the end of our journey, we arrived at the ruined house where Violeta was born, in San Carlos, a small town near Chillán. A faded announcement posted on the façade by some state cultural office claimed that there would soon be a museum in honor of the founder of the Parra dynasty. We asked the neighbors for permission and jumped over the fence to go into a garden centering around an old orange tree in bloom. Weeds reigned. The house was made of adobe, large and dark, and the sour smell of oblivion had impregnated its walls. Its wooden skeletal structure remained, along with a public school chair and an old poster, hanging from a beam, of Violeta playing the Venezuelan cuatro. Even the pipes had been stolen. When the sun slowly began to set behind the orange tree, I took out a cigarette, Tommy connected the speaker, and we sat on the porch to smoke and listen once more to the album *Las últimas composiciones* as the afternoon fell silent. The pristine and plaintive voice of Violeta filled all corners of the house again and for a deep moment the three of us could imagine the drunken father tuning the guitar and the cries and jokes of the Parra children, barefooted, poorly dressed, and a little dirty, getting ready to sell water in the

cemetery or flowers in the Chillán market.

Maybe because of that magical moment, and despite the fact that the Japanese codes require years of social interaction to establish a true friendship, when we returned to Japan, the good-hearted Kato-san, risking his own skin, agreed to write a fake contract with which I was able to obtain the long-yearned-for visa as a journalist and language teacher.

The trick was in the ID card. In Japan, in some part-time jobs or auto parts plants, immigrant bars and restaurants, shady nightclubs, and barely legal strip bars, no one cares which of the ten types of visa you've got as long as you have a number to which they can charge your taxes and a bank account where they deposit your slavish wages.

Making a living in Japan, at least when you're an immigrant, is almost like being a slave.

Geodes

Brian Kirven

When was the first geode found, and by whom? I wonder what that person felt in their heart when they cracked one open to its magical core.

This was more than a mere Easter Egg hunt in the backyard. Unbeknownst to me, in the desert northeast of our home in coastal San Diego County, the dry earth held something even more exciting than chocolate.

Mr. Schwenkmeyer, our family friend, and a geologist with whom we'd gone on many camping trips to the Baja desert, knew about this site called the Potato Patch, filled with geodes. He drove with his wife Verle while my mom dove us three kids to a pale basin before low, crusty volcanic desert slopes, where we set about with picks and shovels, into the ground.

Very soon, we started to uncover the chalky, egg-shaped rocks. Mr. Schwenkmeyer, also a herpetologist from the San Diego Natural History museum where my father had worked, had a sun-scorched red face, reflecting his many years of desert collecting. He licked one of them and said to me, "this is going to be pretty. Knock it in half."

At age four, the small-sized pick felt heavy, and my first shot missed, catching only dust. The second shot chipped one small white shard off the egg, showing the grayish blue color of the lining. I sighed. Mr. Schwenkmeyer held back his laughter, but not a mild chuckle. The third shot smacked the middle of the rock, creating two equal chunks, faced down. When I turned them over, crystallized white and blue gray ridges swirled at the edges of a turquoise center.

My face beamed and my heart opened with excitement, as did my mother's eyes for me. I shrieked in delight. Finally something, of this earth, I could touch, which was real, yet at the same time could transport me into an otherworldly feeling. Geode roughly means, "Earth like," in Greek. Each spherical rock, a microcosm of our planet, of ourselves, contains something of Mother Earth, but also implies something not of this earth, and that intrigued me. The smooth hard shell of the geode protects its jeweled encasement from geological weathering, like the higher self of a person can be sheltered from the vagaries of the external world.

In youth, I preferred my solitary world to the playful derision of my older siblings and mainstream 70's American TV culture. I loved to stray off toward the jewels of nature. Grasshopper collecting on our summer visits to our aunt in Montana, occupied much of my time and attention there. A budding sportscaster in my own mind, I recreated baseball, basketball, and football games along with finger tennis executed along an imaginary mindscape. I loved to collect: seashells, baseball cards, grasshoppers and now geodes, and later words and names to put to them to make

lists. These are all things I could do by myself. Being lost in my own world was where I often found myself most at home. It felt safe.

I continued to dig and dig. Supervised by Mr. Schwenkmeyer, I began to shovel the spots he pointed out, and went about collecting the bulbous stones that ranged from golf ball to Nerf football sizes. Between me, my older brother and sister the oldest, no one went about collecting as many geodes nor with such zeal, as I did. I branched out to the edges of the site on my own. I didn't want to stop, so immersed and obsessed was I in finding these moonlike stones, and cracking them open to reveal a dazzling gleam and glow. They practically had to drag me back to the family Jeep Cherokee to head home.

The hollow cavity at the center of the geode also resonated with me. My parents had recently separated, and life seemed strange and empty without my father around. But these geodes served to remind me how darkly encased things can tend to shine in the middle with luminous mystical life. There is a mystery hidden within things, and so I came to see that many things in this life often remain unseen, until cracked open, like people who've long held up their masks. A lot of the time we can be rough, drab and lumpy on the outside until something breaks us open and the inner light is revealed. Though unable to articulate this at the time, geodes gave me a reason to live, knowing that brilliance beams at the heart of things, waiting to be opened.

by John L Stanizzi

12.17.18

4.08 p.m.

30 degrees

Pushed east to west, the only open water purls against the ice,
orange-light of winter-dusk infuses late afternoon with a
nocturne melancholy – the open water is black and silky,
dark settles in to itself as one final chickadee clicks in the half-light.

12.22.18
11.27 a.m.
40 degrees

Perched on hundreds of branches in the woods, this
overture performed by quarrels of sparrows, this treatise
names the day *winter*, the pond *thawed*, and the cardinal and the bluejay
divine the branches on which they perch consecrated with color.



1.30.19
10.09 a.m.
23 degrees

Perusing the tops of the cedar, a rouge of robins searches for cedar-berries occluded by the overnight snow which erupted and was gone, noteworthy only because of its alacrity, leaving behind a downy two inches that has now begun to freeze although the sun shines brightly.



1.31.19
10.09 a.m.
0 degrees

It was extraordinarily bitter day, I remember, zero by the thermometer...
-Samuel Beckett
-Endgame (Spoken by Hamm)

Praise the windless dawn and the cardinal that pulls her
ochre ribbon through the bitter air and joins two males
noble in the very top of the cedar, noiseless until they see me
darkening the fresh snow in the shadow of their trinity.

3.17.19
8.51 a.m.
30 degrees

Packets of pussy willows over the stream gleam, the onus of spring in those furry blossoms, and the crows' ruckus under enormous white clouds and over the melting pond, discount all the other bird song with their rackets racheting.



3.18.2019
11.51 a.m.
25 degrees

W.S. Merwin
September 30, 1927 – March 15, 2019

Point to any tree, any snag for that matter, all gradual, all named, occasions so insignificant, so intimate, that their creating went unnoticed, will go unnoticed unless it is to say, in a whisper to myself, the denotation of each of these trees is that they are William's trees, here and everywhere.

3.19.2019
11.51 a.m.
25 degrees

Phonetics fill the air all day every day. The oozy red-winged black bird, the *purty-purty-purty* of the northern cardinal, and these days the pond is no longer dominating metal gray, but somber soft shades, tones of movement.

3.21.2019
2.23 p.m.
49 degrees

Paragraph of starlings, grackles, cowbirds, red-winged blackbirds --
ogling them from her blind at the stream's shore, *Girl-Lilla Cat*
notices every movement of every bird, and every bird screeches its
demand that she stay put, enjoy the water in the stream, and pay them no mind.

3.22.2019
10.15 a.m.
36 degrees

Placid showers on the back of the hawk that
overstates his elegance in flight over the pond,
notations of what it might speak to the trees in the
drizzling rain, and what the trees might answer in return, if they could.

3.23.2019
8.24 a.m.
27 degrees

Predecessor to this early spring, a foot of fresh snow,
orderly and untainted, has fallen where the nuthatch laughs.
Nowadays, with spring's blooming the only thing on my mind, this
declamatory twelve inches of snow has me asking the trees how they do it.



Photographs by John L Stanizzi

It Began

Clara Luna

It began when someone asked me for an asprin on the steps of Bear's Lair
And ended in a campground at night in Mendocino a year later
So many details wrapped somewhere I thought if I put it all on paper
Stuffed it in a bottle, and threw it East I could untie this particular
Knot in the long weave of lovers I used to know. This one,

The first and the last from New York, the first and the last
Jew, probably why I thought he was a brother
As well as a lover, a kind of teacher, you know, soul mate,
Even though I saw a letter from his wife he abandoned
In a gas station halfway across here and there

Like a lot of young women I thought that would never be me
"You're the coolest chick in Berkeley," he said
After a month of sleeping together in my rooming house
On University Ave, so persuasively I gave up the other lover
From the next room and only saw him again once in the mid 90s

In Auburn town, us both married to other people but Jeff,
I memorized every inch of his cigarette dope skin, you see
I always wanted to be a boy like him, a boy of cynicism
Laughing his laugh when they landed on the moon,
His Bronx accent irresistible. Oh college is so bourgeois,

He said, and maybe he was right, so I walked out, off
To that Victorian in S.F. and took off my clothes, over
And over, I posed naked for artists, pornographers, masturbators,
But the only one I loved, the only one I had sex with was Jeff.
Guess you could say he pimped me, because I have

Always understood prostitutes and how close I came
To being one in the company, oh but Jeff, he got tired of me
Or I would have agreed. He dropped me off in front of a forest,
Said I love you I love you, I love you, and then he was gone,
So I slept with one stranger and another, hefted my khaki backpack

And stuck out my thumb, wanted to be Jack Kerouac, not one
Of those girls men passed around, but instead I went to a house

In SF where they shot pornos, and stayed with a couple of men
Who had sex with each other and me on Ocean Beach. 1970.
Working as nude dancer in North Beach. I injured my shins

You see and had to rest, sent a desperate plea to Jeff, how I
Found him who knows how, but he never visited, instead
His brother found me and I slept for him for the crumbs
I found in resemblance, because you see Jeff was my boy self,
My brother in crime and underworld life, surely I thought

He would come to see me, but now, when next I was biking
To class back in Berkeley, and he called me bluestocking,
And another time he kissed me under a lamppost and told me
He used me, he used me but I remember Tilden Park
Stoned on acid and I climbed on the back of a white horse

And the rider said you're with me now and took off
And I jumped off the horse and ran back to Jeff,
My safety, my net, who said I used you, I used you
Was the only time anyone said that to me and it
Soaked in my pores you see, it did and I hated men

For years I did, but now that I've raised a son and raising
More and wrote a biography of a utopian man,
My old self returns with so many rags like the torn dress
I found on the streets and wore braless. The Insect Trust
An album I still have, Country Joe I remember

When the record would stick when we were having sex
On Benvenue, those months when he was tired of me.
The letter he wrote when I was back at my parents
Is the sky blue does it rain much I wish you were between
My legs right now with your body and your beautiful

Smile. I burned it a few years ago, our story ended there
But there was a postscript, I found Jeff selling Real Estate
In New York, my Jeff, grown old like me. He didn't remember
Saying I used you, I used you, but he believed in me,
Apologized and as night falls over our youth, our middle age,

Old age and death beckons, as the world we took for granted
Crumbles into dust and extinction, I think I will wrap these
Notes into a bottle. I will throw it East as the wheel turns
Of all my lovers, he is one of the few still alive. And this bottle,
This bottle drifts on the rising seas. So let my children never know

How I lived, in the sixties, this me, once upon a time.

Rue des Indigents

Jim Ross

After pilgrimaging solo along France's *le chemin St. Jacques*—rarely certain where or even if I'd find a bed for the night—I finally returned to Paris to fly home. On my last, late-October night in the residential 19th arrondissement, I stepped out for a pre-dinner walk to explore the locks over the Canal St. Martin nearby. Circa 1870, the canal inspired impressionist Alfred Sisley to capture canal life in a series of celebrated oils. In 1936, Cabaret singer Édith Piaf, aka: La Môme, sang about St. Martin's Canal in one of her first hits, "Les mômes de la cloche." And in the 2001 film *Amélie*, the main character, *Amélie Poulain*, enjoys skipping stones through the canal's locks, even as she tries to change the lives of others for the better while struggling with her own isolation.

En route to the Canal, I passed two women wearing hooded black coats who stood motionless, like statues or performance artists, on a shaded street corner opposite the Jaurès Metro. One's masked hood covered almost all of her face. The other's pale, gaunt face was mostly eye-accessible. Out of the corner of my eye, it appeared that a heap of backpacks stood next to them. I wondered, had their bus gotten lost and stranded them? Did the backpacks they guarded belong to children who still rode the meandering bus?

On my return from the canal, I saw the two hooded women hadn't budged. Perhaps they really *were* statues. I maintained my stride, but turned and looked at them directly for the first time. My eyes locked with those of the woman with the gaunt face. When I reached my hotel room, her face stayed with me. The Affligem Blonde I'd pined for all day as I roamed Paris's streets in a semi-dehydrated state would have to wait. I had to go back to make a connection, if only to find out why they were there at dusk guarding a heap of backpacks.

In the preceding months, the knitting that bound everything I called "me" together had ripped and I'd fast unraveled. I told people I was going on a pilgrimage to engage in a prolonged act of contemplation. I'd walk the greenest, most celebrated of the four pathways across France that feed into Spain's road to Santiago de Compostella: *le chemin vers Saint-Jacques de Compostelle*, aka the GR65. Remarkably, people bought that. Secretly, I planned to lose myself and maybe not even come back. Granting her blessing, my wife implored, "Just go, but please come back." I needed to create space, make tracks, and re-learn how to breathe. Soon after the Fall Equinox, I flew via Paris to Toulouse en route to the GR65.

Along the trail, most pilgrims could have been mistaken for homeless. Many of us lived on the fly, carried our entire lives and immediate possessions on our backs, and had little or no idea where we'd spend the night. Like many pilgrims, I refused to make

reservations because I couldn't predict how far I'd want or be able to walk from day to day. Millions before me made no reservations and accepted "come what may" so, so would I, *Que sera sera!*

There were some close calls, largely because most Gites had shuttered for the season by mid-October. The few still open were brimming full and reluctantly turned the overage away. One night, as a last resort, I nearly slept in a 17th century, doorless, stone-and-clay shepherd's shelter; on another, in an alley with a stray German shepherd who'd adopted me and become my fast companion. Earlier that day, she'd saved me from the horns of a charging cow by counter-charging the cow. Unwisely, I tended to continue walking long past sunset with no notion of where I'd settle down for the night. At the comical extreme, I'd spent one restless night cocooned in bubble wrap on the kitchen floor of a priest's house.

As I approached, the two women didn't flinch. The one with the gaunt face had removed her hood, revealing a fuller face and a clear complexion with none of the signs of excessive sun exposure usually observed in homeless street people. The second woman, olive-complected, still wore a masked hood that revealed only her eyes, nose, and hair-lined upper lip. What I'd mistaken for a pile of backpacks was a mammoth shopping cart stuffed with small suitcases, carry-ons, backpacks, and multiple water bottles varying in fullness. I saw no scraps of food, no shopping or trash bags, no collection cup, plate, bowl, or box, no sign to explain who they were and why they were there. Instead of sitting on a step or portable chair, or sitting or lying on the ground, they stood upright like sentries. Neither reached out or made entreaties to passersby. In short, nothing whatsoever suggested they were homeless.

Both women turned to me but neither cracked a smile or spoke a word. When I said "Bonjour," they reciprocated in unison. I asked if they spoke English, expecting "no" or dead silence. Instead, the younger one said, "Not so well, but I understand it, and I can speak it." Up close, the unhooded one looked around 30; the masked one, around 60. The younger's partially-open coat revealed multiple layers beneath the outer one. The masked one's coat resembled monk's robes, but I guessed she wore multiple layers too.

I said, "I saw you standing here, when I went out and came back, as if you protected something. I wondered, why are you here so late? Why do you just stand here?"

The younger spoke to the older in French. I assume she repeated my question. The older answered in French before the younger said, "I would like to introduce you to my mother. We are poor and homeless because circumstances never imagined resulted in our losing everything we own except for what you see in this shopping cart. Feel free to ask questions, as you wish."

The routine we crafted was that I'd asked the daughter a question, she'd confer with her mother, and eventually the daughter would answer me. Occasionally, the two seemed to argue over the meaning of a question, how to respond, or whether to dismiss my question. Now and then, the daughter sternly warned me, "You used a word in your question that carries a different meaning in French than you probably intend. Would you like to rephrase your question?"

As the conversation gathered momentum, the daughter increasingly answered without conferring with her mother, or pointedly asked me, "Is that really the question you want to ask?"

After biting my tongue as long as I could, I asked, "What caused your being thrown onto on the street?"

The daughter answered, "Do you want a social answer or an individual answer?"

I said, "Whichever, both if you like."

She daughter began to offer a social explanation, but interrupted herself: "You don't need to know the answer to appreciate the circumstances that resulted in our living on the street"

I said, "You're homeless now. You live on the street. But you're obviously university educated, both of you. You haven't been poor all your lives. You've known life's comforts."

The daughter said, "That's true, we both attended university. We had a roof over our heads. We enjoyed many of life's comforts. Until we lost everything, we had no understanding of what being poor felt like. Now, the street is our bedroom."

As we spoke, they gradually stood at ease. Eventually, they began passing cigarettes back and forth with an insistence that belied the almost austere sense of control they'd shown earlier. Occasionally, one snatched a cigarette away from the other like a child saying, "No, it's mine." I rationalized that a cigarette's stinging warmth—on their fingertips, on their lips, in their mouths, and in their lungs—buffered them momentarily from the rapidly dropping temperature. I noticed the daughter's fingers were heavily stained by nicotine; grit was crammed under her fingernails, into her cuticles, and under callouses. The monk's robes covered the mother's hands, but my guess was they looked about the same.

I couldn't resist saying, "Smoking is expensive and one of the worst things for your health."

Without consulting her mother, the daughter responded, "But this is all we do, we don't use drugs, we don't even smoke cannabis."

After 45 minutes, I tried handing the daughter a 10 Euro note. Without touching it, the daughter conferred with her mother, then said, "*We're glad to talk with you. You don't have to pay us to talk with us.*" After mammoth grocrefusing my 10 Euro note, the daughter took a three-quarters full liter water bottle from the ery basket, took a long sip, and passed it to her mother.

Initially, I'd kept my eyes on the daughter, waiting for what she'd have to say next, ignoring the back-and-forth between mother and daughter as they formulated a response. I didn't even look at the mother during these negotiations. I suspect the mother, likewise, only attended to her daughter. But gradually, mother and I began to focus on whoever happened to be speaking. She and I came to look almost exclusively at each other while listening to daughter's voice in the background. I came to understand the mother better once she adjusted the mask attached to her hood so I could see her lips fully. The daughter's role evolved into supplementing or confirming what the mother and I had already come to understand.

The energy balance also shifted and they began to fire questions at me. Gradually, they were asking me more questions than I asked them.

At one point, the daughter asked, "What kind of work do you do?"

I said, "Research on the health and well-being of children."

She asked, "You mean medical research?"

I said, "No, more about health behaviors that increase likelihood of illness or death, either now or in the future, like unprotected sex, or carrying weapons, or using tobacco."

She asked, "Where do you look for your inspiration, what books or where else?"

At first her question stunned me, but then I confessed, "I like your question, but I have to admit most of my research is funded by the government, so very little ever seems inspired."

She asked, "What is your academic field?"

I said, "Psychology."

Turning the tables, I asked, "What were *your* academic fields?"

She answered, "Knowing our academic fields won't help you understand our circumstances."

After pausing, she asked, "Are you Christian?"

I said "Yes, of a sort, but I believe, if god exists, the divine resides *in you and me*. Religion should give us peace and hope, rather than cause disputes and wars. Do you two have a religion?"

She said, "No, we don't believe in god and we place no value on religion. "

Several times, I asked where they generally slept at night and where they planned to spend the night that fast approached.

Her answer was, "We often sleep on the street, and we probably will tonight, but we don't know yet. We'll see."

I asked, "Do you usually stay in the same part of the city?"

She said "No, we keep moving around with no real plan."

I asked, "Are there social service agencies that help provide shelter for the homeless?"

She said, "I don't know, maybe, but whatever they do doesn't address the underlying situation. People who are homeless stay homeless. They're stuck."

I asked, "How will you get out of this situation? It's cold and it's going to be getting colder."

She said, "Maybe we won't."

I took money out of my pockets once or twice more, and again they silently shook me off, as if I'd rudely interrupted a private conversation.

Now and then, they passed a cigarette or water bottle back and forth.

After I made a remark about homelessness in America, they both opened their eyes wide, as if stunned. After they spoke to each other in French, the daughter said, "We had no idea you were American. You surprise us. I thought there were no homeless in America."

I said, "To the contrary, America has homeless people everywhere."

She retorted, "But Rudy Giuliani said, 'there are no homeless in New York.'"

I said, "Rudy Giuliani hasn't been mayor of New York for a long time. And, when he said there were no homeless in New York, there were over 40,000. He wanted to make the homeless disappear. To him, they were a scourge on his city. He tried to force people out of homelessness by depriving them of services as if by punishing them, people would finally see the light and do something constructive to remedy their situation. As if it were that simple."

She asked, "In America, are most of the homeless in New York?"

I answered, "Not at all. They're everywhere, especially in cities. When they have a choice, they migrate to places where nights aren't too cold. They flock to states in the West that have temperate climates. I've been to Portland, Oregon where there are lots of services for the homeless, even little houses to live in. The problem is, the economy there tanked after the economic collapse, so it's hard for people to find jobs and stop being homeless."

The daughter said, "That's what I'm saying. We once had a good life. We graduated from universities. But, we lost everything except what you see. Even if we could find jobs, how can we find our way out? How do we ever get back the life we had, or any kind of life?"

Inevitably, we gravitated back to, "How do you think you will . . .?" to which the response was always, "Maybe we won't."

After a pause, the daughter asked, "*People stop and talk with us because they have a need. What is your need?*"

Without hesitation, I said, "I've been away from home traveling by myself for a month. I wanted to make a connection with other human beings. I felt like talking."

Mother and daughter shook their heads. The daughter, shaking her hands too, said, "*You walked by us twice. What ate at you to make you come back? What made you stop? Why did you want to talk with us?*"

I said, "I saw your face."

Mother and daughter had an animated exchange, either because they couldn't figure out what "I saw your face" meant, or because they wanted to hear me articulate

more explicitly why I came back and stayed. She could've asked, "What do you mean by you saw my face?" or "What did my face say to you that brought you back here?" but she didn't.

Instead, she asked, "*From talking with people, they stop to talk with us because they have a need of their own. What need in you brought you back and kept you here?*"

I said, "I came back to find out what you were doing here, why you were guarding a tower of backpacks. It made no sense. I stayed because I could feel your not knowing where you'd spend the night and your 'Maybe we won't.'"

Still puzzled, she asked, "What did you feel?"

I said, "When I walked in the mountains, nearly every day, I had no idea where I'd spend the night. Sometimes, I got in trouble because lodgings closed for the season, or I arrived too late. Also, long ago, when I was 24, still at university, I had no place to live for a while, no money, and almost no possessions because I'd been robbed, twice. So I slept every night in the forest. It was September, so I didn't suffer. But, this year, I've known the desperate feeling when you think the bottom's falling out. I came to France because I felt—I was afraid—I was about to lose everything, but in a different way."

The daughter asked, "Are you're saying, you can feel what it's like to have lost everything and have no idea how to rise above these conditions?"

I answered, "No, I can't appreciate what it means to have lost everything, to live out of a shopping cart, to have no idea every day where you'll find shelter and when or if you'll begin to find a way out. Perhaps I can begin to understand 'maybe we won't' because in recent months, when I was frightened and depressed, I saw no way out, but now, I've begun to see a little daylight. Finally, I'm thinking, 'Maybe I can.'"

We'd spoken for nearly two hours. Long ago, day had morphed into night, and Indian summer had surrendered to autumn. The two women must've felt cozy warm in their heavy coats and multiple layers, but I shivered. "I wish we had a fire!" I said out loud, meaning to say it to myself.

The daughter said, "We need to move out of this place because it gets dangerous during the night, especially for women."

When I asked where they'd sleep, I got the standard "We'll see" response.

I told them my first name, and asked them theirs, but the daughter declined, saying "Our names don't matter."

I said the daughter was about my own daughter's age and the mother was about mine. Looking straight into my eyes, the mother smiled for the first time—widely, lips shut—and answered, "Que ce détail reste toujours mystérieuse. The daughter translated this as, "Let that detail remain forever mysterious," but the mother's smile said it all. No translation was needed.

My heart said I should give them my hotel room at The Libertel and fend for myself. However, the hotel's reception clerk guarded the lobby's entry doors like the mythical

dog Cerberus, as if the outer world represented Hades, and the souls of the damned were trying to sneak in. These two wouldn't pass muster.

I reached out as if to take hold of the daughter's right hand and she reached out with hers. As I took her hand, I stuffed a 20 Euro note into it, closed her hand and held it shut until she stopped trying to open it. I looked her in the eyes and she looked back into mine, silently. I turned to face the mother and back toward the daughter. Finally, the mother spoke and the daughter translated, but again, none was needed. "We accept your money and we thank you. We will use it to buy food."

The daughter dropped an empty liter water bottle back into the mammoth shopping cart. Together mother and daughter began pushing their cart across Avenue Secretan. "Bon Nuit" were the last words we exchanged.

On my flight home the next morning, I toyed with the question: who were they, really? Were they truly who and what they represented, a mother and daughter on hard times? Perhaps, instead, was the older woman a university professor and her alleged daughter actually a doctoral student out conducting dissertation research? Or were they were political activists out to play on the public's compassion for the plight of the homeless? Or were they media celebrities or film makers conducting investigative research?

Why did I even doubt who they claimed to be? Precisely because they didn't look, behave, or talk like any other homeless people I've ever met. They didn't ask for money; to the contrary, they did their best to refuse my money. What they wanted instead was to engage passersby, even a stray American like me, in conversation about homelessness. The upshot was: it can happen to you and, if it does, don't bet on finding the exit door. If one assumes all university-educated homeless women in Paris speak and act like existential philosophers, there was nothing whatsoever odd about how they spoke, thought, behaved, and drew me in.

In the end, whoever they were, all that matters is the question they asked, the one that ended with, "What is your need?"



previously published in *Change Seven*

by Michel Steven Krug

Fever

It's like the power flickers
When fever grips the brain
A perforated slip masking
Ordinary thought including

The default idea that
A plate of spaghetti
Cures all ills.
Comes a point when sleep

Should come easily except the heart's
Metronome beats forte
And getting warm means
Getting sweaty as if a gaslight

Was roasting you for some
Ritualistic rationale of purification
When all it does is acquaint
you with the ultimate exile.

Truth Is...

I.

Truth lies
within lies

The truth can be seen as clearly as wind
Like Democracy, sentient,

Often requires
an F4
tornado
to be
noticed

By most, so controlled by fans.

We're constantly walking down
Darkened hallways,

Tripping over truths,
Falling over what we've left
In the most obvious places

That we treat as oblivion.

Truth is breakthroughs of magnitude,
Edison let there be light

Aristotle debunking Apologists,

Di Vinci,
daily evolutions of the present

As the truth is each sun
Sheds light, illuminates colors of

Truth, so palpable

If the comfort found in narcissistic empty vessels
Is resisted,

So at sunset,
When candles are lit
And Prayers uttered
Mantras revisited

The light of the day
Accedes to the tones
And cooling of space
About which Goddard is correct,
That each quark
Evokes Platonic love.

And though we lack personal telescopes,
(although one day available
in real time in the pc),

Ultimately, to grasp unanimity
Winter's cold white blanket
Must quiet quickened illiteracy.

Progression of knowledge is as colorless to most as wind.

Truth is,
One of the few absolutes
It overwhelms this obsessive quest

Is the state of joy,

packaged and sold

In toys,

most pure when naked.

II.

Truth is, that all
Truth has wrinkles.
The truth crests and can
Occasionally be surfed

Mothers
Dice, cook the truth and
I've tasted it in the soup she makes.
Truth can be bland
In the words of an unelectable politician
Or as revelatory
as the
As the explosion of a cayenne pepper.

The truth can be seen or lost
In pictures.

The truth can either be told
To children in the laps of parents
Or passed on as generational, deceptive folly

As genealogical anguish
Mixed in the Kool-Aid.

But perhaps the purest truth
Purest sight,

is

Tasted in the sharing
Of our Nakedness

With our eyes closed
After we see the truth.

Humidity

Humidity hangs like a chemise
over summer crabgrass and scurrying rabbits
It was a middle-aged summer day
The one you promise me
Each August and I imagine
My parents exchanging vows
At the Commodore Hotel
Where F Scott used to shout
Amid the mirrors and sweating
Skirts. It was time to cut the
Grass like so many frayed
Whiskers and I shredded the
Greenery before the humidity
congealed thinking during the buzz about
Dr. Richard Diver and
How he thought marrying unhappiness
Would cure his beloved with his brilliance.

Borrowing the Sun

Love bikes near the glacial lakes
Where Minneapolis kids chatter
About a trip to Constitution Square
, parenthood together
Flying, driving, walking across the colonies
Devouring halls of history
Then walking the sands of the Jersey Shore
Children chasing waves, building moats
, While I presumed her presence,
Not her absent poses
Connecting her happiness to me
Like the waves licking the shore
Rather than the unarticulated
Homage to herself passed to a world
I did not know and on this beach
I became invisible
Like one of the anonymous gulls
Trying to hover
, Captive to Chopin's *Minute Waltz*
In the wind.

Extraction Poem

You pull me right off
Toss me in a sack

It's terribly claustrophobic
And my skin dries gradually

Until you unexpectedly
Enroll me in some hot

Rolling cauldron
And there I darken

On the outside
Maintaining my internal

Energy and oils
And you then you

Ship me and my
Colleagues to these

Talking rooms where
I'm scooped and bagged

And sometimes ground
Until I'm flooded

With scalding water
That extracts my moxie

And the last I remember
I sense the essence of

Me consumed by others
Transferring my ardor

Leaving me a pancake
Of muddy residue.

Scraps

What moves you tonight?
Fatigue as heavy as pyramid stones?
Feelings stirred and blended
By today's dialogues
Filled with confetti meanings
That you reconstruct not
Knowing whether the inferences
Drawn are utterly true
Or terrifyingly misleading
Or do you leave the scraps in a
Heap beside your bed
Waiting for her to hold you
Tenderly or is she cloistered
Behind a screen seeking admiration.

The Quiet Hours

A.M. Gwynn

Jon was a child of the Hungerwinter of 1944. His mother had starved to death when he was four, his father long before sent by train to Germany by the Nazis to work their war machine. The only thing Jon remembered of her was the pattern of her dress, stiff against her thin legs, her stillness on the bed. He couldn't remember his father's face, only the last words he'd said, "Take care of mama." No one would hear from him again.

He had survived eating tulip bulbs, potato peelings he found in the grass, thrown to the bony dairy cows, themselves near death. Now and again, someone would give broth or shelter. Despite the pity for him and those orphans like him, everyone was struggling to survive the brutality of the winter and the occupation. The occupying forces had blocked all food supply from entering the West. No one could spare much but scraps. All of the Netherlands was sick, starving, freezing. Most days and nights there was no electricity or running water.

It took many years after the liberation by allied forces for the country's health to recover. But there were wounds and scars that would never heal. Some years after the famine had ended, Jon was diagnosed with Coeliac Disease. As a young man of twenty-two, he was diagnosed with clinical depression. Many children who survived the Hungerwinter had various cognitive or physical ailments that would plague them into adulthood: schizophrenia, suicide, nervous diseases, birth defects.

Wraith-like and translucent, Jon dropped into the over-stuffed chair. "I'll forget soon. Places, people, all I've accomplished. You." He made a steeple with his hands and gazed beyond the small window over the rooftops. He waved my hand away when I reached out to stroke his cheek and asked me to leave him. I shut the door behind me reluctantly and left him at his desk, the deepening shadows of the quiet room changing the shape of his face.

#

We knew almost nothing about Jon's new disease, though we had listened intently to the doctors, read the literature they gave us for what to expect, how it could happen to someone so young. At forty-four, Early-onset Dementia was something we would never imagine touching our lives. Jon was strong, active, his imagination alive, working on his papers until the early hours of morning most days. He was calm with resignation. He had a premonition he told me. The evil of the Third Reich ran so deep it had cursed the world for decades, maybe longer. He knew he would never escape

so easily.

I was wild with desperation. We had set off for the sixty-five-kilometer journey home after another long and fruitless meeting with doctors. I forced him to meet another doctor and another. He felt it an imposition on the precious time that he could be writing. He was settled in the passenger seat, humming a '70's rock tune. The longer we drove in silence, the angrier I became at his lack of alarm at what we were facing. What he was facing. I pulled the rental car over to the shoulder at an exit in Leiden and turned off the engine.

"So you have a death wish?"

He didn't respond, his chest rising and falling in easy rhythm as he gazed at the passing traffic, rocking the little compact forward with each passing blur of color.

"We'll go to Munich, Vienna. Hello?"

"Listen, you better get going, it's illegal to stop here."

I flung myself over the wheel and began to weep bitterly.

"Here. Stop it now."

He pulled me into his arms, the last unhurried moment we would ever have.

#

We were referred to the research of the Famine Birth Cohort Study in Amsterdam, a decades-long endeavor involved in studying the lifelong effects of famine on fetal development, children born to mothers suffering from malnutrition or starvation during the Hongerwinter, and children who suffered famine in childhood.

Jon had been a healthy child before the occupation. I combed the study for a connection between his near starvation in childhood and the dementia he'd now been told would rob him of all memory of it. There was nothing definitive but neither was there any data to rule it out. Even though it mattered little what the culprit was, I wanted an enemy to visualize, to blame, and rage against.

We existed day by day, hour by hour without a reason other than to simply exist. All plans were canceled. No new plans made. The disease began inching closer and I was not ready. I was not ready for how cognitive awareness would play its cruel game with us. Every moment of clarity was a celebration. Jon had refused my pleading to see doctors in Munich. He was racing time and he would lose, why couldn't I just not accept it? Fatalism had never been an aspect of his personality. The entire world now

strange, and a stranger.

I cared for him with devotion. We visited doctors numerous times over the months; a change to report or explore, new medication trials. Jon was suffering what the doctors termed Rapid Cognitive Decline. Jon said he was suffering from fools who didn't know how to let go of things in which they had no control. I only knew time was squeezing the life out of him, and I could do nothing but watch.

#

"What does this mean?" Jon raged at me from across the desk. Crumpling the paper he held up, he threw it at me, reached out and ripped the book I held from my hands.

"What's wrong?" I knew his moods could change without hint now but never certain if they meant he needed something from me or were just the effects of the decline. He tore at his hair, raged at nothing and everything. I sat unmoving, afraid to approach him and comfort. A few moments later he retrieved the book and caressed it gently.

"My books. My work. Words are leaving me, Karen."

I said nothing but went to him and caressed his cheek. I smiled to myself when his thick hair fell over his eyes, and he swiped at it ardently. Jon. He was still Jon. Winter had come early that year. How frightening we both were, fragile and raw. There had never been a moment I had thought to run but I was exhausted, mentally and physically. I could turn to no one and my own health flagged. My senses, hyper with the constant struggle, were at once dulled by weariness.

#

My nerves frayed, I slapped Jon hard across his cheek, and we both stood stunned for a time.

"Did I really deserve that?"

"How could you ever ask such a thing? I won't listen to any more of this."

"If you love me, Karen, you'll hear me out while I'm still making sense."

"Shut up!" I placed my hands over my ears. I wouldn't hear any more of death or having any hand in it. I brought my face up to his, enraged and hurt, then folded my hands in my lap, waiting for the heat of anger to ebb. "How can you ask me that?"

"For a moment, indulge me. If you care."

I had indulged him the world. Loved him, cared for him, fought for him. I needed a drink, a pill, a soft place I could bury my head under and forget.

"When you love someone, you don't want them to suffer."

"Do you think I want you to suffer?"

"No. You've been my lover, my friend. My mother. My sister. This is why you're the only one I can ask. Because I know, you would follow my heart's wishes."

"I am the one person you can't ask! Don't you understand that?"

"Do you truly love me?"

"You're asking me to kill you at worst, stand by silently and let it happen at best."

"I'm a shell of myself. Don't you understand? I'm the ghost of a human being. A husk. No longer tasting life, only surviving it. Waiting, waiting for what will certainly come. This is not life."

"There are still beautiful moments. Has everything been a lie? I should be what makes you want to live as long as you can."

"How much longer? I'm asking you to help me. Help me if you love me."

The siren of an ambulance rushing toward someone or away with someone startled me, and I went to the window to scan the street below. My bones ached. I felt I would never put two intelligent thoughts together again. There was no question what he was asking was unthinkable to me. The days of clarity were narrowing for us both.

#

The headache that had overpowered me the night before was a dull throbbing when I awoke. Jon was missing from the bed and I lay for a few moments listening to the sounds of the chatter of children on the street. I pulled myself to the edge of the bed. The aching went away when I stood.

I went in search of Jon, first the living room, kitchen, his study, finally the bathroom. I didn't know in what state he was in, and I wanted to tread lightly as the night before had been a hard one for both of us. I needed to push that conversation from my mind. It was only October, but the days had already become bitterly cold. I pulled my robe tighter and stepped into my slippers. As I stepped into the hall, I

noticed Jon's coat and winter boots were gone. He's gone for his walk. He still kept to his morning walks when he was having a good day. A small but solid hope.

It improved my mood and I went to a hot shower, lingering long enough for the heat to loosen the tension of the night before. When I finished, I called out, in hopes Jon had returned. The house was still empty and I dressed, then put the kettle on for tea.

I found a note pushed through the kettle handle. "*Sweetheart, there is a key. See it there on my desk? It is the safe key. Open the safe. I love you.*"

Has he left a surprise for me? How long would he remember the little sweet things that pleased me? I took the kettle from the burner and went to the study to find the key on his clean, tidy desk.

I opened the safe in curiosity and found two large envelopes, a large file of papers bound in heavy leather cording. Otherwise, the safe was empty. I took the whole bundle of contents from the safe to the desk. The top envelope was thick, addressed to me. The second envelope, page thin, addressed: *Dr. Levy: Universiteit van Amsterdam.*

I opened the envelope for me. There was a letter, stacks of guilder notes, bank wrapped. A small square key labeled bank safe deposit box. Uneasily, I glanced at the stacks of notes, there had to be a million guildens or more in notes. I began to read the letter. "*Beautiful Karen, where can I begin? You will need this money...*"

I dropped the letter, panicked. The knowing slamming into my brain. The loud knock at the door lifted me from the floor and I flew to open it, ready to scold him for scaring me into sudden illness.

"Hello, Miss. I'm Inspector Visser, this is Inspector de Boer. May we come inside a moment to speak to you?"

They removed their hats in unison and the buzzing in my ears became a deep whine, the long dark tunnel that appeared in my vision threw me off balance and I crashed backward into the hall.

#

I was given the last effects of what they found in his coat and pants. A watch that no longer kept time, his wallet with identification, a photograph of the two of us we had taken in Prague. His glasses with the one small scratch on the left lens. So little to hold for someone who was bigger than life. I stamped and sent along the letter addressed

to Dr. Levy. I settled matters with our apartment and spent last moments with our old friends. I couldn't remain in the city for long after that and returned to New York, distancing myself from the best ten years, and the longest last year of my life.

For a long time after, I carried deep guilt. Had I failed him? If I had helped him, would he have died so alone? Did I drive him to that lonely end by refusing to hear his cry of humanity, causing his desperation? It haunted me. It haunts me still, in the quiet hours when alone with my thoughts though I know I could have never done as he had asked of me. He took the only way out he felt he could, out of the impending existence he felt was no existence, torture for someone like him. There was never anger, only a deep, abiding emptiness.

All of us leave something behind, as brief as we are. Jon left me so much. There is no life which doesn't teach, doesn't leave its mark upon another. I believe Jon discovered the full essence of what it means to be human. To ponder the very nature of life, death, time. I know he did not make his decision lightly but with the deepest consideration. We weep yet find a time of rejoicing. We stumble but battle on. We suffer and are renewed. The grip on life is delicate, fragile but with a relentless grip on life we must carry on despite. *Carry on, despite.*

by Joseph Murphy

Failure to See The Stars

— *After César Vallejo*

What if our hopes were strewn before us? Flung
at our feet like broken laces? What if truth
was just a token,
oddly shaped, useless?

Would it matter if the sky
wrenched the ears from our skulls?

When we walked out one morning
and fell to our knees,
would the shallowness of our breath matter?

Maybe the insects would be happier without us;
trees would begin to write
their own poems; the loam's voice
would be clearer, brighter.

Down at the very bottom,
where we've lined up our grievances and hatreds,
light still emanates
from the pebbles we haven't crushed.

At the very top, light also radiates
through the hatch
that Buddha opened.

Who can see it? Feel its warmth?

How diminished we've become. A falling leaf
bruises our foreheads! Tarnished silver
scores our brows!

So much grief.

Grief from the hollowness
of a feigned smile; from the separation
of locked arms; from a failure to see
stars embedded within our hands.

Our Wings Held Steady

The clock's hands
wriggled through the nest
we'd built to contain them.

Songs began struggling through the surface of our dreams.

The ticking stopped. A seed
ignited; what had been a ribbon
became the key we'd sought.

Our wings held steady as gravity pursued us. Wordless,
we swept above our longings,
wonder and dreadfalling from our mouths.

Leaving the Path

The evening light bent downward
until it broke free;
shattered.

The night's cry for help
went unanswered; regret festering
from its bitter logic.

How to restart? Regain fluidity?

Looking away, I let the map
fall from my hands. Leaving the path,
I pin my hopes to a bare wall,
wanting to slow the clock; remeasure
the width of my latest dream.

Renewed, I begin to climb; view
the horizon's gleam.

The weight has lifted. My words
begin to resonate
through root and stone.

A Discovery

A friend once said...

“Did you know
a stone can flutter
in a leaf’s vein; in an oak ring’s
bloom.

That’s something to believe!

Did you know a breeze
can sift the wake
of a wave’s nimble shadow.

That’s something to remember!

And did you know

— suddenly —

a poem can dash
across your fingertips; reshape
the soft, the brittle;

remove distinctions; restore
a yearning for silence.

That’s really something!”

Breathing Freely

Night crept from its latest skin,
borrowing beneath a star-shaped mountain.

When it emerged, we rose
from our hiding places;
planets we cherished
swirled above our joined hands.

Night, remembering our faces,
drew a circle around shared memories
we cling to, allowing them to warm
hands and feet
of the yet-to-be-born.

Just before sunrise,
lifting night above our shoulders,
we began to chant
what the sea had promised to chant with us,
once our cages are emptied
and we can breathe freely.

HAVEN

Kilmeny MacMichael

My most recent guests decided to leave early. I suppose it is my fault.

I was happy to see children come through the gates. I've always liked children. They were a family of four – two kids, a mother and father. The little girl was six or seven, and the little boy a few years younger.

I've been welcoming guests for a long time, but strangers still leave me self-conscious.

The mother and father were distressingly quick to investigate the master bedroom.

I don't generally like ghouls. The people who come to stay here only because they know my lovely died here. I hear some of them ask if the bed is the same bed he died on. You think his family would keep such a bed? That it would be rented out? Really? You think that over several decades I wouldn't have my beds changed regardless of what may or may not have happened on them? What do you think I am?

It was not a good start to the visit.

I much prefer those who come seeking a bit of old-fashioned glamour and luxury while they visit the resort town that has grown up about me. I am happy to provide a little pampering and quiet in what is otherwise a rather cacophonous place.

I am proud to be on the architectural appreciation lists as well as the celebrity tours. In my own way, I am still a star.

The little girl and boy wandered from dining room to kitchen, past the bar. The boy stood on stools, turned on taps in every sink he could reach. The girl found a chair on the covered patio and curled up into it. I hummed "Au Claire de Lune" to her until she fell asleep.

After a while, the parents noticed the running water and rushed about closing all the taps again. "Maybe it's true the place is haunted," the father said.

Some guests hope to see my lovely's ghost. Perhaps they think he'll come materializing out of the pool to offer them a grin, a handshake and an autograph.

I would like to see that too. That's not how these things work.

Every house echoes with the memories of those who have lived within. We remember those who have chosen to be with us. We remember parties and arguments and joys and tears. But it takes time to get to know a person, to begin to draw them

into our memories. And when we see a steady stream of visitors — as I do, now, and have done for years, there are many who I remember very little. But everyone brings me a little touch of their life.

I remember my lovely. He and his family lived in Los Angeles a lot of the time, of course. But when they could, they would come to stay with me here.

When he first came, I was young and sparkling and empty, and it was he, and his family and friends, who first filled me with memories, who first filled me with life. It was so exciting! Journalists begged for a chance to see us together.

My lovely could sing. When he was sober, he was a sweet guy. *Everybody* said so. Tender-hearted. A bit of a worrier. A bit prone to accidents and mistakes. But sweet.

Sometimes – bad times – he was not so sweet. He drank too much. Too often and too much, towards the end.

No, I am not haunted. I am alive, feel alive. But you never forget your first.

This morning, the little girl's mother attempted a sketch in her artist's notebook. She had a case filled with pencils and marker pens. When the girl told her mother about hearing music last night – my music! – the mother frowned and said that she must have heard some noise drifting in from downtown. *Noise!*

I worry when people study *me* closely enough to sketch.

I can't help but worry that my cracks show. I am no longer young. Oh, I'm not old. What's a few decades to a house? But in certain lights these days, you can see where the repair work has taken place.

The little girl danced herself around the patio, singing "The Hokey Pokey." Like a natural performer.

I would like to be. It's a lot of work, always having to keep entertaining, keep up this flowers-in-all-seasons façade. Some guests seem like good people. Only, hardly anyone stays for long enough for me to get to know them anymore. It's just hello-good-bye, please don't track dirt on the floors and don't steal the replica artwork. It's a nuisance.

It's a little lonely.

The little girl seemed good-natured. I would have liked to know her better.

There isn't a real break coming up in my schedule until some time in May. It can get to be a bit much. Sometimes I run out of patience. I hope I can make it through the tourist season without completely losing my shingles.

After breakfast, I saw the mother putting a bottle of sleeping pills in a medicine cabinet. I made the bottle disappear.

My lovely was sick, you know. Unwell. Suffering. He was ill.

After scolding their children and searching me up and down, the parents called my current caretaker to report the “theft.” The caretaker told them it was not the first time sedatives had gone missing in the house.

I won’t have sleeping pills here. Not anymore.

The caretaker recommended keeping medications in their car. I can’t do anything outside of myself. I can only watch the yard and drive and gate.

I admit I felt a little sullen about the caretaker abetting these guests in their quest to drug themselves.

I probably shouldn’t have spat the pills back at the mother.

It couldn’t have possibly hurt her. She only screamed because it was a surprise, not because it hurt.

And I only did it because I cared.

Of course I cared. I care about everyone who stays with me.

That’s a fundamental part of what a house does. A house is to *provide safety* – and – *protect*. A house is a shelter. A house has to be what it is.

I tried to provide a safe refuge for my lovely. I failed. If there’s any haunting being done here, I am haunted by my failure.

Surely you must have seen one or two of his films. He deserved better roles. He did. He wasn’t what the critics said, just badly ageing beefcake.

The little boy got one of his mother’s marker pens, and before I could do anything about it, he’d scrawled on one of my walls. Why can’t parents today raise children right?

I admit, I growled at the little boy. I was sorry afterwards, it wasn’t his fault his parents are fools.

Orange has never been a good look for me.

The father didn’t believe the boy, about my growl, but the mother did.

“That’s it,” she said, gathering everyone in my kitchen, where the father was microwaving a cup of coffee. “Now the children are being threatened. Time to leave.”

Microwaving a cup of coffee. I ask you.

The father said, “But this long weekend here is for you. It’s what you asked for. We won’t get a refund.”

“Not everything is about money! This house is unfriendly. I felt bad vibes the moment I walked in,” the mother lied.

“I shouldn’t have told you about those stupid ghost rumours. A guy croaked here once. Big deal. It’s still just a house.”

The mother said, “You stay if you want. The children and I’ll go to a hotel.”

The little girl started to cry. “I don’t want to leave, I like it here.”

You see? She is a dear.

The mother went to pack up their things, and the father glared at the microwave, muttering something about a typical waste of hundreds of dollars. I turned the microwave off. And on. And off. And on. And off. The father backed away.

Quietly, I swung the kitchen door shut behind him. The father’s eyes bulged when he backed into it.

Ha. Just a house indeed.

The little girl clapped her hands.

I am fed up with hearing about “suicide.” If renal failure is the ultimate cause of death for someone with cancer, you don’t say it was their kidneys that killed them, do you? You say they died from cancer. If someone with depression dies from an overdose, why don’t you say that depression killed them? Depression killed my lovely. It was horrible to watch. I cried.

I nearly ruined my paint.

The show must go on. I have a tradition to carry. I must perform. I must continue to charm and please, to entertain, soothe and satisfy. I can only try.

As the family fled outside, I softly called after the little girl with the kindest words I know.

“One day, darling, you too might be a star.”

by Gregorio Tafoya

Nights

You go to bed early on nights when you are waiting for your new, almost girlfriend to text back. Pretending like you are truly disturbed about her well being—knowing her cocaine history and drinking proclivities—but your ego won't let you get away with that.

Two double messages: the first pair a riffy joke, followed by a phone call a tasteful twenty minutes later; then a second pair of double messages now with strained casual concern. Final phone call, right before ten PM, knowing she won't answer, but telling yourself you're just being dutiful.

After three hours of rolling over and checking your phone every 5 minutes and ghost vibration, you fire up the laptop, put Frank Ocean's "Nights" on repeat and read the Bloomberg Asia headlines and torrent albums you only have a passing interest in during daylight hours. You start following new people on finance Twitter.

You check her social media for evidence. Looking for wholesome clues as to why she has chosen to hurt you so silently. No Instagram pics of an early night in pajamas, or tweets about turning in to a fluffy down comforter.

Around three in the morning you clap the laptop shut and switch to headphones, finding "Nights" on the mobile and hoping Ocean sounds can put you to sleep. But you're not tryna sleep, you're looking for comfort, going through the whole cycle of emotions via three bar lyrics.

*Working through your worst night
If I get my money right,
You know I won't need you*

The song gets you so well. It massages the parts of you that are sore. Assuaging your ego, through it's dismissiveness of your base head girlfriend and it's positive ratings on Metacritic.

*I ain't tryna keep you
Can't keep up a conversation
Can't nobody reach you*

Right before the three-minute mark you start the song over, right after Frank croons about waiting all night, *been waiting on you all my night*.

The night passes in three-minute intervals and you lay awake until the sick morning light barges in through the drape-less bedroom window like an obnoxious drunk. It was her, your coke-addled ex-girlfriend who said you needed drapes. That the flimsy blinds just wouldn't do.

You pause the song at *Time to start your day bruh*, acting like it was fate but knowing that you could find that line in your sleep. Also, you are dissatisfied with Amazon's drape selections.

In the shower you sing bits and pieces of the song, oscillating between a mock-dramatic tone and a sincere cooing. While applying conditioner you two-in-one cry and laugh. You're too distraught to jack off.

She texted back while you were in the shower. Green light blinking and you make a halfhearted attempt to dry yourself before snatching your phone.

Hey baby, sorry, left my phone in the car and crashed on the sofa.

Figures pretty girl, we'll catch up later.

You let the song blare up again from the underrated phone speaker, wiping at the mirror evaporation and pointing at yourself like you're that nigga.

No sleep in my body

No bitch in my body

New beginnings.

Soft Refusal

FR HU DUR CONSENT LETTER

Female respondent hung up during consent letter. It was the most common call note he had to type into the system. He didn't blame them. Halfway through his memorized spill he had to catch his second wind and take a breath. That was something that was mentioned in his supervisor review.

INTERVIEW 24123 needs to work on breath control.

A good day was getting one survey completed during his nine-hour shift. Usually a post-partum woman was so desperate for a reprieve that she suffered through the grueling fifteen to twenty-five minute survey and stuck with him. Even during the invasive and oddly judgmental questions regarding the immunization of children 12 months to 4 years old.

And at how many months did infant R first receive something other than breast milk?

Strangely, that wasn't the question that turned most respondents off. They were somehow eager to prove that their administering of other liquids to their children was both responsible and well researched.

The question that most turned off respondents dealt with income.

"Look I don't know what that has to do with my baby Newcombe"

"So because we don't make six-figures is that going to count against us in the survey?"

"Combined family income? So it's just assumed that I am dependent on a man to raise this baby huh?"

His response was standard.

"The questions about income are just to provide general demographic information to ensure a thorough and rigorous study."

Usually he was in the middle of enunciating "demographic" when the disconnect bubble popped up on his screen.

It was mind-numbing work, but it was the best job available and he treated it as such. Always reading verbatim, never interacting with the respondent off script, except to

offer his single mandatory retention line, and remaining professional throughout.

Some guys got so caught up in the monotony that they did stupid shit. They would flirt with any female voice on the other line, asking them a million variations of “does it get lonely,” and push the boundaries of their brief interviewer to interviewee relationship to a breaking point.

He got just as excited to hear a female voice as the next guy, somewhat because his heuristics told him that a female was more likely to complete a survey than a male one, but also because the only other female voices he heard all day were drenched with a masculine authority.

But he wasn't retarded. He knew the confines of his role. Sooner or later that recorded line came back to bite every one of those guys who pushed themselves to far into the private lives of their respondents.

The most spectacular way a guy lost his job was when he reached a local (within 100 miles) pizza parlor, and ordered a pan crust with all the fixings. It arrived before their shift was over and word had already gotten out that a surprise was in store.

It was no surprise however that the guy who had done the ordering was slapped with a \$100 fine, the rounded up amount of the delivery, and a 30 day hole shot.

So no, most of the time all he did was do his job, go back to his bunk at 4 pm after nine plus hours of dialing, and collect anywhere from \$75 to \$115 a month, depending on his performance.

by Lenny DellaRocca

Murder in a Very Fine Restaurant

It's the end of the world.
She explodes lipstick, white gloves and dark eyes
across a crowd of hats and silverware.
Her lovers, struggling for taxis,
hang from chandeliers.
I'm under arrest in a country
where love is illegal.
She smiles for oblivion, for no one, a waiter.
Her face, served with rubies, doesn't look my way,
which is like falling from the rings of Saturn.
I thought I knew where I was going: left
at yawn straight on through to ashtray.
But now this, this sudden expiration date
on everything but her.

Attack of the 50-Foot Woman

When I think of my first marriage
I realize how, as a child, movies
of the 1950s tuned my psyche—

that black and white film
with the angry woman driving through the desert
when a fireball races across the sky.

You know the one, my love, B movie
featuring Alison Hayes who plays
an abused socialite with a history of drinking.

She runs around town warning
of a space creature, but because
she's just been released from an institution

nobody believes her especially
her jacket-and-tie husband, Harry Archer,
who's more interested in floozy Honey Parker.

The angry wife, Nancy, becomes a giant
after exposure to radiation.
Taller than a high-voltage tower

on the movie poster she's all legs and tits
like those seething sirens on the covers
of sleazy detective magazines.

The film ends when Nancy picks Harry
up with one hand as bullets fly, which causes
the power lines to explode killing them both.

Whatever Happened to Joe Romano?

The last time I saw Joe he asked me if he should marry his pregnant girlfriend, put off mortuary school. George, our former bass player, said he'd heard Joe owned a funeral home in Poughkeepsie. A private message from Kevin says he remembers that list of cool band names I'd made up in English class. I sent back a Wow! face. I remember that list. Late 60s, and Joe chose *Lightyear*. I liked *The Black Pills*, or *Starfreak*. Our only gig was a pool party behind a motel. Steve couldn't keep a beat because a woman in a lounge chair opened her legs so wide he saw pubic hair. I ran into Steve in the 90s. He was just out of prison and did I remember Andrea, the girl whose older brother rode a three-wheeled bike? She's doing life for stabbing a guy behind a bar on Pembroke Road. She thought he had five grand in his pocket but it was only a ten dollar bill. The last time I saw Andrea was at the Dangerous Pearl out on State Road 7. They called her Dallas. Her bush was a black heart. Said it was nursing school money and her boyfriend rode with the Outlaws. I looked over my shoulder. Don't be scared, she said, Buster won't be here for at least thirty minutes. Something in her eyes said I had less than ten.

For the Love of Man

(After Meryl Stratford, and with apologies to Denise Duhamel)

Little girls dress as angels for Halloween
but we never hear them say
they want to be angels when they grow up.
Which leads me to a friend's poem
about a guardian angel who,
after falling in love with a man,
slips into the body of a woman.
Which leads me to the idea
that immortals can trade eternity
for a few decades of love.
And sex.
Raphael get out your blues and reds
and paint the heavens breaking.
Are angels able to choose flesh over grace?
Or do they inhabit the bones
like spirits of exotic birds?
Were they dust and breath first,
judged worthy of wings,
vulvas smoothed over
by the hand of God?
Which leads me to women's bodies.
I like them. A lot.
Still, I've wondered what it would be like
to be canvas instead of brush,
art so imagined and real
as to draw down angels,
let them have their way with me.

Aisle of Bras

My wife is hoping for the perfect,
not the cheap
as I gaze across the aisle at women
who look at me
as they inspect the merchandise.
Do they think I'm thinking
about their sizes, visualizing, judging?
Marie seeks something that lifts and separates,
dangles one and two at a time by the straps.
I sit on a leather bench outside fitting rooms
where women whoosh in and out
with peach and pink dainties
trying to conceal semi-finalists
while I pretend not to think
about what I'm thinking about,
which is not the water spot on the ceiling,
a little left of the music speaker,
which is playing "Close to You" by the Carpenters.
The sales lady puts the rejected bras back on metal bars,
gives me a look like I spilled coffee on her white dress.
She doesn't like me.
I get up just as Marie chooses a red lacy thing.
To try and sound like I know a thing or two about bras,
I inform the sales lady I'd read that 80 percent of women
wear the wrong size.
But she doesn't want any information about anything
to do with the size of boobs
by a man.
I'm tolerated on this island only because I'm attached
to a member of her tribe
who hunts with a credit card.
And what chafes and pinches the sales lady most—
the card given her with a smile by Marie
has my name on it.

Sacré Coeur

for Marie

Every rib cage has something soft
it wants to protect.
Let mine be the night we walked
until your feet blistered in Paris,
when the tower flashed.
And the afternoon in Versailles,
when two girls kissed on a bench,
or the woman crushing oranges
for visitors swatting bees.
I remember all of it—
our tour guide in Rome
telling us these old mansions
are now apartments—*Look*, she said
in broken English pointing to a door,
the bell of many names.

Your face is my ticket home my love,
where I'll salve your wounds
with ointment purchased the morning
a flock of pigeons peeked
into our hotel window.
I'll raise your feet in my hands
to absolve the sins of walking too far
along the Seine listening
to the bells of Notre Dame,
and I'll surround you with my arms
still aching with lifting the moon
above the Grand Canal while a man
in a gondola sang to the open
windows of Venice.

Let the soft place in my ribs
be that my love,
let it be days we drank espresso
looking at angels wielding swords,
and nights among cafes and chestnut
trees lining the avenues, radiating out
like so many spokes in a wheel.

La Mia Famiglia

I fantasize a large house.
My grandparents are alive,
give them a room off the front door,
my parents next to them. Maybe not.
Nobody wants old arguments about
card games, how much bread
goes in the meatballs,
who gets what when somebody dies.
I give myself a corner room on the third floor
so I can watch my grandfather
walk among old trees.
Aunt Anna pulls up in her black '47 Olds
full of groceries and fireworks.
Aunt Clara in Uncle Nick's taxi,
purple bandana tight around her head.
Aunt Grace, whose house was a
gallery of saints, gets out of the car
clutching bouquets of fresh *basilico*.
Aunt Roz on the maple-lined walk with Max,
friendly German shepherd, (until she says "Watch him").
Aunt Angie says telling fortunes is a thing of the past,
she's a born-again Christian now.
I can't decide which of her two
husbands will share her room
until I choose Uncle Johnny,
who left her in Brooklyn with three kids,
not Uncle Ted, who she met
playing handball outside the home for
destitute women and children.
Uncle Frank balances grandpa's
cane on his nose at the front door.
A morning of robes and nightgowns,
coffee beneath the poplars.
Everyone talks at the same time.
I move my chair closer to the trees
where elders talk about family in *Italia*,
who died before I was born.
This is the story I want most to hear.
This is why this house was built.

My Mother Amends Her Story

Now that I'm dead,
eleven years in the afterlife
has given me the courage
to tell the truth:

The neighbor who had come
through the door that day
when we lived in the projects?
Didn't come through the door. Not really.
She had Mr. Grossman break it down.
They shut off the gas,
opened the windows, carried
Celia, Ernie and Phil outside,
threw water on my face.
I told her and everyone else
gathered outside the door
that Celia was just tall enough to reach the stove,
and since I couldn't smell,
we fell asleep.

It was cold. It was Brooklyn.
I couldn't see beyond
the cheap curtains.

There was an argument with your father.
I had been seeing a man.
I had hoped your father
would drive his truck
up past Connecticut
and not come back.
I didn't want it to be him
who found us.

Trouble

Even without a chimney or fireplace presents appeared under the scrawny tree. Even after my mother said Santa wasn't coming because my father lost his job. She showed me a roll of red tickets saying I was to give one to the lady at school for hot lunch. John and I sat under the tinsel and colored bulbs in our tiger and leopard pajamas. I was the tiger. I was older, more dangerous. John took my new fire engine apart. He said he wanted to see how the lights worked. In a few days all our presents were gone. So was the tree, which my cousin Paul burned in the back yard. It looked like the Statue of Liberty sleeping in the snow before he lit the match. John and I cut the red velvet curtains my mother made into strips with scissors we found in the kitchen junk drawer while she was outside showing someone the rose bushes surrounding the Mother of God, that blue and white statue of Mary with her arms extended downward, her palms open as if she was about to explain something. Sometimes a bird sat on her head. It was a nice day. When my father came home from looking for a job, he was supposed to beat us, but he never said a word. John and I spent the rest of the day in separate bedrooms. When we were together there was always trouble. I kept looking up trying to figure out how Santa got into the house. I never asked John how he spent his day in my sister's room, where one night she made me stand in the corner while that song Does Your Chewing Gum Lose Its Flavor On The Bedpost Overnight played on her transistor while she slept. I stood there a long time. I don't remember what I did wrong.

Bobby's House

My aunt pulls the pink Crayon
from my fingers
Pink is for girls
Bobby uses purple to color his house
Besides I'm going outside the lines
Look at Bobby's house, he colors
inside the lines
Bobby is neat, his clothes match
his hair always combed
and he has lots of toys and games
Seven months older, I insist
I counted the correct number
of Monopoly squares
Bobby tells his mom I'm cheating
My aunt moves my wheel barrow
four squares back
Bobby wins
Later I hear her tell her coffee friends
Bobby is more muscular than I am
I look at my biceps
Is Popeye's spinach not working?
After our late afternoon bath
in the gray utility sink downstairs
Bobby and I stand backs against the wall
My aunt wants to measure us
She doesn't mark the wall though
She just stands there
looking at us naked.

SIX JAZZ-RELATED POEMS BY JOHN MENAGHAN

Trajectory

Louis Armstrong

Standing on a stage in East Berlin 1965
Kennedy dead a year and more blew
his head clean off ain't nobody safe
nohow if shit like that's allowed
one thing for damn sure man
ain't no Berliner no more

Crack even now I hear that shot got
me whisked off to the Colored
Waif's Home faster than—
what?--a speeding bullet
back in 1912 well at
least they taught
me to play

Sleepy time down South my colored
ass same as it ever was Dallas
Vietnam N'Orleans same
danger menace to
my people

Taking shots at me because
they wanted me to be
something I wasn't
couldn't be just
wasn't me

At least I drew the line at
Little Rock and made it
clear to Ike he ought
to let my people
go to school
that is

The whiz of one lone bullet leavin'
my stepfather's pistol midnight
New Year's Eve so long ago
well leave it all behind ya
ain't that right and blow
like nothing's wrong
then sing a song
and smile

Beat them Beatles now didn't I
number one and here I am at
64 a place I never planned
to go will never be again
blowing smoke and fire
at the crowd and
smiling always
smiling right
out loud

Fatha

Earl Hines

I.

I was playing around Pittsburgh
before the word “jazz” was invented.

Met Louis in a poolroom in Chicago
—Musicians Union, 39th and State—
who told me I played “trumpet style.”

I guess he meant the way I charged
the rhythm like some bull enraged by red.
Accented off-beats. Stopped on a dime.
Went quiet when you least expected it.

II.

At the Grand Terrace heading my own band
I thought I’d arrived, become the man.
But no, the man was Mr. Al Capone.

One night he called the band together,
advised us all to mind our business,
like those three monkeys:
hear nothing, see nothing,
say nothing.

Didn’t need to tell me twice.
I used to hear plenty
--all the things they planned—
but never told a soul.

Didn’t want to end up in the lake
with chains around my feet.

III.

First Negro man to bring his band
all around the South.
Not so much a tour
as an invasion.

In Alabama once a bomb
went off beneath the stage.
And if we didn't none of us get hurt
we didn't play so well after that either.

Police loved to threaten us too.

Hard to find places to sleep or eat.

Guess you could call us
the first Freedom Riders.

IV.

The way I like to play now
I'm an explorer.

I'm looking for something
all the time.

It's almost like
I'm trying to talk.

Sometimes, playing,
I find myself lost.

Needing to find my way
back to the melody.

Stroll down one path.
Another. Two
or three more.

Smiling.

Trying things
that take even
me by surprise.

Never panic, though.
Always make it home.

Didn't think I could do it?
Neither did I.

Indestructible

Just get up there and let it rip!
--Anita O'Day

I was no junkie, but when the press
made me out to be that got me curious.

After my second bust, I'd started
drinking to stop smoking pot.

But feeling that heroin rush, I thought:
Oh good, now I don't need to drink.

It never defined me, though. Back then,
it was something you did to feel better.

And hey, I was only an addict 14 years!
I've lived a whole lot longer than that.

What stopped me? Well, not that spell
for possession down at Terminal Island.

But OD'ing in Beverly Hills did the trick.
Went cold turkey, and that was that.

The price of being a hip, swinging chick
had finally become too great to pay.

Now I can't even read my own book.
It just makes me cry too much.

But you play today! You don't
worry about what's gone.

With singing, you never know
when you might lose the voice,

and that makes me appreciate

still singing well. I am always

thanking God for yet another
season, month, performance.

When I'm singing, I'm happy.
I'm doing what I can do.

And look at me! I turned out to be
a singer who's not on dope.

What to Do

You can do anything you want . . . if you know what to do.

---Betty Carter

The more you do a song
the more you learn
about the tune,
your concept of that tune.
Then I'm free.
Then I just move
any way I want,
go with it
musically.

Bending notes downward
in long sighing phrases.
Reaching into the depths.

Never know what I'll do next.
Change tempos.
Dynamics.
Rearrange lyrics
into off-the-beat
patterns.

Every night different.
Every tune.

Scatting
and
sighing
and
moaning.
Making
each
song
mine.

But it's artifice,
arranged.
Singing at first
against just piano,
or bass.
Then each
new player
jumping in
right on time.
Adjusting the tempo.
Shifting shockingly fast.
Sculpting the sound.
Moving back and forth
between
emotional flow
and artistic control.
Moving the audience
in more ways than one.
If you're sitting
in that audience
ready to fight me
from the very beginning,
I'm going to have
a hard time
getting to you.
But if you've got
a heart at all,
I'm going to get it.
Each and every time.

Fifteen Seconds

Steve Lacy

In fifteen seconds the difference between
composition and improvisation is in
composition you have all the
time you want to decide
what to say in fifteen
seconds while in
improvisation
you have
fifteen
seconds

by Anthony Watts

immanence

show me the light
i cried

here
 over here
 it' s here

sang the thousand-and-one
waterbeads on

gossamer
and blade

blindfold in thought i prowl
the bleak

perimeter
and all the while
 the Centre
twinkles
 merrily

and is everywhere

*

Via Negativa

Once when the world was thronged with all
Separate, unique and beautiful beings,
I followed after with outstretched hands
To see them vanish in peals of mocking laughter.

Momentum bore me on into the dark.

Unmade, dis-egoed, something I still called 'I'
Rode out of nowhere straddling a beam of light,
Stumbled to earth, the air still shaken
With merriest laughter (had I mistaken the note,
For they were gone now, the mocked one and the mocker?)

And fell into the outstretched welcoming arms
Of all God's separate, unique and beautiful beings.

Imagine

Imagine a man somewhere – anywhere –
between the millstones
of earth and sky; and let those two
great silent stones
keep infinite distance between them
just long enough
for him
to marvel.

Give him eyes in his head
that he can both open
to see the world outside
and close
to see the world inside;

and let each world be endlessly engaged
in inventing the other
and as he looks
(now at the outer world, now at the inner)
permit him to see nothing
but imagery;

and when the ancestors come and the protesters
and the rest of the mind-molesters, when they come hawking
their bright-eyed explanations
(each in turn presenting some well-laid plan
with clear red arrow stating *YOU ARE HERE*)

let him see
nothing
but imagery;

and lest he go mad
and hurt himself
trying to run from the outer and inner worlds
(which never let up, no, not even for a second)
let him be nourished by the light of another world,
a third world –
from time to time, when he is least expecting it,
let it break through, that strange light, let it flow

through the eyes of a girl who doesn't know she's beautiful
or a sleeping child or a certain arrangement of words
or a tune or a change in the weather

and let him look to that light constantly

while he makes for himself a kind of sanity
with small imperfect things.

Tao

*You are not the same people who left that station
Or who will arrive at any terminus...*

(T.S. Eliot)

Toss a pebble in the lake:
the ripple when it dies
along the edge is not the same
as when you watched it rise.

Ripples pass across the lake
only because your eye
follows where the water peaks
and dips sequentially.

Nothing comes and nothing goes;
this play of silver and black
(a mirror and its back)
Is what the water does.

This surface agitation
of something deep and still –
this simulated motion
towards some destination –

our lives, so called, that seem
to flow towards a certain end –
are phantoms conjured by the breeze.
We're water in the wind.

*

Many the little speeches we rehearse,
So few deliver:
Ourselves flow, thoughts disperse –
A raft of sticks on the river.

Womanhood

Mubanga Kalimamukwento

Ever since Grandpa died, *Ambuya*—Grandma rations her affection in morsels, like the last bits of beef in a stew. Some to Daddy, her first son, less to Mummy, the one who stole him from her bosom. It's almost as if Grandpa took Grandma's joy with him to his grave. What's left of it she lavishes on you, her only grandchild. Whenever she calls you to her room, her round face unravels a smile, with a dimple pressed deep in her left cheek, identical to yours.

In exchange for your presence, she tells you stories about anything and everything: Daddy as a child, about her upbringing in the '40s, trips to Lusaka with Grandpa. You devour them and ask for more.

So, when you hear her shrill voice call, "Falesi!" you abandon your *chiyato* game on the veranda, tossing the pebbles and racing inside.

Storytime.

"*Maa?*" you answer.

"Bring me sweet water," she says. Code for *Chibuku*, the local brew which Daddy does a poor job of hiding in the pantry, behind the Kellogg's.

You sneak into the kitchen and bring her a box of the beer, to which she grins.

"Lock the door, *mashina*," she says, calling you *namesake*.

You smile back and turn the key without question. After all, *Ambuya* has asked for stranger things; just last week she told you to scrape an anthill off a tree for her to eat because she was craving salt.

Sit, she says by patting the woven reed of the *mpasa*.

You nestle into her, breathing her in: Vaseline and Lifebuoy.

She shifts to face you.

"Tell me a story."

"This story is about me," she replies, "but it's also about you."

You fold your palms under your chin.

"*Maziba ayo*"—she points a crooked finger at your budding breasts— "mean, playtime is over."

You chuckle, but your pits prickle, and you squirm.

She takes a sip and continues, "When your Grandfather married me, I had to be sent back to my parents because I wasn't ready for him."

You furrow your thick brows.

"So, I'll prepare you, and you'll NEVER be sent back, okay?" She seizes your arm at NEVER, startling you, but you nod. This is *Ambuya*, after all, who, when you were seven, taught you to braid your curls into three-strand twists so that it was easy to comb for your first day of school.

“Good, now take off your pant.” Her voice drops to a whisper, so soft it’s almost not there, like the frizz sprouting between your legs.

Your eyes bulge. “M-m-y pant?” you stammer, your heartbeat rising furiously.

She sips again and nods. “We must start early.”

This is Ambuya, the one who taught me how to sew my skirts when I ripped them from rough play, you pacify yourself. The thought quiets your heart, silences your question, and you do as she says.

The cotton undies slip off, and your legs prickle with goosebumps.

“Let’s see,” she says, bending closer.

She gulps the last of the beer and forces your legs open.

You yelp.

“Shh.”

“I’ll bring more sweet water,” you blurt.

“Shh,” she repeats as she reaches between your legs to pull at two pieces of flesh you didn’t know were there.

You bite your bottom lip, taste metal, and force your lids closed.

She pulls again.

You swallow saliva. “I need to urinate!”

“Not yet,” she says, reaching into the hollow between her sagging breasts to remove a tiny yellow bottle. She runs her fingers inside and rubs the sticky contents on the flaps of skin she just stretched. She’s so gentle, it’s as though she’s smearing Vicks VapoRub to your chest when you have a cold, so you whimper a, “Thank you,” through your tears.

“*Osalila,*” she says, wiping your cheeks, “*ndiye ukazi.*” *This is womanhood.*

You nod.

She hands you the container.

“*Kudonsa,*” she says, making a tugging motion, “is a rite of passage. Do it every night until they grow nice and long.”

You wince. “*Kudonsa?*”

“So that you will make a good wife for your husband one day.”

Her gummy smile returns as she explains, “Every good house has curtains. A good wife is like a house. Without those, you will be like a house without curtains. You understand?”

You don’t. But you let the word, “*Ukazi,*” crawl off your tongue and you nod vigorously. *She’s never lied.*

“Good. I’ll check next week.”

You stumble to the door, struggle to get it open, and step into the sitting room, where you are shocked to note that, unlike you, nothing has changed. Daddy’s suede chair sits where you left it, between the Sony stereo and Mummy’s potted flowers. Daddy, nose in a newspaper, is perched in his seat.

Did he hear?

“Everything okay?” he asks.

Yes?

You stare at his large peanut-butter-coloured hands, at the screaming red newspaper headlines, at the open door where your dog is fighting flies from his ear; you dart your eyes anywhere but at his face, which will surely catch your lie. “Yes, Daddy,” you mumble.

In the kitchen, Mummy takes one look at you, rolls her eyes, and asks, “What is it?”

“Nothing!” leaps out of your throat.

“You’re not in trouble again, are you?” she presses.

You mull over the word *trouble*, recalling your habit of biting the neighbourhood children whenever you lose a game.

“No.”

Was it not Mummy who said to not speak ill of elders? Had she not told you over and over to listen to the wisdom of the old? “What elders see sitting down, a child cannot see standing up,” being her favourite proverb.

So, you caress the secret, though it sears through you and repeat, “no,” more to yourself than to Mummy.

“Good,” she clips, returning to her cooking.

At night, you lie awake in your bed and examine the contents of the container *Ambuya* gave you: mango leaves and charcoal, shredded and crushed into Vaseline. You lather the concoction on your still sore labia and pull, until they’re sweating like your brow, and you can’t take anymore.

Every night, as sure as moonlight, you do it. *Kudonsa*—tugging, wincing, crying, sweating.

“Until when?” you plead with *Ambuya* when she checks your progress, a week later, as promised.

“You can stop when they’re this long,” she says, showing you her pinkie.

You gape and wait for her to smile.

“Shut your mouth,” she snaps. “Curtains, remember?” She points at the murky ones hanging from her window.

You nod.

Kudonsa until they dangle between your legs when you shower, sweat when you cover them with underwear, and itch against your widening thighs.

When, early the next year, your parents drive you to Kasisi Girls’ Secondary School to start Grade Eight, you learn that you’re part of a larger cult, joined together by *kudonsa*. Some peeking like a shy toddler, others, wagging like a dog’s tongue. But everyone united by the curtains that hang between your legs as you take cold showers together each morning.

After study hour, huddled up in your bunk beds, you giggle and share the reasons for your curtains as bedtime stories, where you learn that your stretched labia are

called, *malepe*.

“What are they for?” someone asks.

“I heard they help in delivery,” offers one, met by sniggers that bounce off the dormitory walls.

“How?” you ask.

“Stretching, to help the baby out,” she replies; this time the girls murmur back, churning her words.

“No,” interjects another. “My sister said they help hold a man’s penis in place.”

“I heard it makes you watery...that you lose feeling...” a hesitant whisper.

“*Ai*, not that! They’re for a woman’s pleasure; you just have to know where to touch.”

“It’s true! The man plays with them until it’s nice for you.”

“Every good house has curtains, and a good wife is like that house.” This is you, closing the matter, met by nods and silence.

The word *pleasure* lingers with you though, so, that night, you test out the theory and try to pry it out with your fingers. When it eludes you, you stop, leaving it for the school holidays, when you will surely ask *Ambuya* yourself, about the curtains’ other uses. But, she dies before then, buried together with these secrets.

Ten years have come and gone since then, and still, you wait. In this decade, your period started, at first unreliable but then settling on the 21st of every month, another fragment of the womanhood puzzle.

You’ve straightened your kink, bleached your skin raw, fading your rich ebony everywhere but your knuckles, which remain stubbornly charred, like *Ambuya*’s. You’ve finished high school and trained to be a nurse at Lusaka Apex Medical University. You fell in love with Sam, who was doing his residency at the Levy Mwanawasa Hospital, at the same time that you did your practical nurses’ training. And though he persisted, tugging at your tight uniform whenever he caught you alone, you made him wait. Because, before *Ambuya* died, she also told you to save the curtains for a husband.

So, when Sam proposed with cubic zirconia and gold, you knew the answer.

Mummy found you a choice *Alangizi*, to give you traditional marriage counselling and fill in the last pieces of the puzzle on your body. When she checked the length of your curtains, the *Alangizi* beamed. “A woman in full,” she assured Mummy.

Now, the reveal is here!

Dr Sam Chanda weds Falesi Tembo, announce the golden letters. Saturday, January 7th, 2017, at The University of Zambia Chapel, 10.00 am, followed by a reception at The Mulungushi International Conference Centre at 7.00 pm.

Pulsating with excitement, you arrive, an hour late, to a church brimming with people.

Mummy has planted herself at the front of the chapel, her suit matching the pastel peach and green of the walls, with a giant feather of a hat to mark her place in the crowd. Mother of the bride.

“Ready?” Daddy asks.

“Yes,” you say, meeting his eyes this time.

Clutching Daddy’s arm, you glide in, catching a glimpse of the crowd: family and friends you haven’t seen in years; Mummy’s church crew and their spinster daughters. All of them smiling and clicking their phones’ cameras.

You did it!

Your prize is waiting at the end of the pew: the reason you stretched the skin between your legs to three inches; the reason you now wear a string of plastic beads around your waist, and don fingernail-length tattoos on your lower back, rubbed dry with herbs, that turned them from bleeding to black. Tall and bespectacled in a three-piece navy suit.

You curl your lips upwards and go through the motions of the day.

Posing for photos outside the Holiday Inn. Lunching with your ten-man bridal party. Dancing into the reception and pausing for the fervent ululations of the guests, drunk with glee and cold beer.

Then finally comes the climax in a white hotel room, with red rose petals on the plush king-size bed.

Sam fumbles with the latch on your bra, traces your nipples with his tongue. His fingers falter between your legs as he pushes your panties off, the familiar brush of cotton over your bare legs giving you goosebumps—a breeze of pleasure.

You watch his face for excitement, recognition, as his hands graze over your labia, but his eyes are shut as he rips into you with a groan.

You moan and dig your French tips into his back, but feel nothing between your legs except a raw pain each time he thrusts.

“*Osalila. Ndiye ukazi,*” the ghost of *Ambuya* whispers.

Sam shudders and grins. “Did you enjoy it, baby?”

You nod, and he rolls over, sated.

He’s happy, you think. *He won’t send me away*. But your words don’t soothe you. Your fingers twitch, a memory of something lost, as you try to reach for a salve you haven’t used in so long. But it isn’t there—just the ache between your legs.

Outside, the world continues, unchanged.

Wheels rumble over Addis Ababa, crickets chirp in the shrubs, security guards stalk the hotel grounds, chatting and laughing. You lie there in the darkness, listening to your husband snore, all the while wondering, “Is this womanhood?”

by Ally Schwam

On Monet Drive

I.

When Mom and Dad choose this little house
they know I'll be an artist.

They let me choose the color of my new bedroom
and I pick bright turquoise.
Dad dips my hand in the paint
helps me press a tiny handprint
onto the closet wall.

I am only 4 years old when I plant a stick in our new backyard
hoping for a tree.

II.

We adopt a dog and let her run in the backyard.
She's always yipping and yapping and peeing on the brick patio
and I love her.

During recess I tell the new boy, Robby,
that he should play the Monster in Monster Tag
because he's ugly.

We become best friends.

III.

Somehow, the stick in the backyard is now taller than our house.
Its thick leaves embrace my bedroom window
as if to say thank you.

At the close of summer, Mom and I plant pansies together.
They will last the winter, she says. I imagine
yellow and purple explosions under
the white snow.

IV.

Our dog dies. The brick patio is quiet and spotlessly clean.
I don't love it.

Robby and I read old poems we wrote when we were young.
We are surrounded by pictures of all our smiling friends
taped to the turquoise walls.

We are so weird, he laughs, reading of llamas and limeade
and creamed chowder.

I don't want him to move away.

V.

The local pool opens some evenings
in the brisk heat of summer.

I float beneath the water, entranced by the underwater lamps
the yellow reaching into the dark purple.

Mom and Dad tell me we are moving
and I'm surprised that I'm not sad.

In the middle of the night, I take the photos
off the turquoise walls. I sit on my bed
and trace the leaves pressed against the window
as if to say

thank you.

Someday I'll Love Ally Schwam

After Ocean Vuong / Roger Reeves / Frank O'Hara

Ally, don't be afraid.
Middle school is cruel & unusual punishment
& you will survive. Even in the middle
of the night you are strong enough
to summon the sun. Ally, dawn sleeps
inside you, it is just quiet.
I do not mean silent. Don't be afraid
of your own words. Your hands
are just doing everything they can.
Don't be afraid to sit at the table
with a friend of a friend. This is called
progress. Remember, you know
how to dance, even if they call it
passive, or tearful, or lonely. Ally,
when it hurts to see the birthday decorations
sprouting on all the lockers
but never yours, remember
the cake waiting for you at home. Remember
to play the video games you love,
to walk the long way home
just to say hello to the trees. Ally,
one day you won't be afraid
to sleep alone. When darkness comes,
you can strike a match
against your skin. Ally,
it will light.

I Sleep in the Fish Tank

I grab the large tank with both hands
and dump it out onto the tile floor

Fish writhe belly-up and breathless
as the water leaves them—
Only the moon is a witness

peering through the bay windows
as I peel off my clothes

climb inside
compressing my body—fetal position—
against the glass
gravel caking my lips and thighs

I just wanted to visit
a different world—
Be a king for once

Be safe

On the floor, a small castle
broken—
The moon casting its shadow
away from here

Orange Slices

You're standing in your kitchen eating orange slices from a cup.

It's 2 am.

Only the kitchen light is on.

Only the kitchen exists.

Your cat is lapping water from a steel bowl on the floor.

You listen.

The oranges are sweet.

The water is sloshing back and forth against the steel.

You drink the juice from the plastic cup.

The juice is sweet.

Where did the oranges come from?

Who's hand put them in your mouth?

You never want to go to sleep.

There's too much to learn.

There's too much to create.

God Owns a Carwash in Iowa

God owns a carwash in Iowa.
I've never been to Iowa, and I don't know if I care to go.
Soap glides down a windshield
and children giggle in the back seat.

I've never been to Iowa, but maybe I should visit.
God lives in a trailer park next to a single mother,
who makes bacon in the morning and feeds it
to the stray dogs panting on her doorstep.

God goes fishing on the weekends
and throws all the fish back, sometimes the hooks
still caught deep in their lips.

The sun boils in Iowa and I know no one who lives there,
but I can imagine the writers living there and smoking cigarettes together
as the sun teeters on the horizon.

I can imagine farms and tractors and
the land laid out before me like an ocean.

Where do I want to belong? Where does God belong
and why do I keep thinking about her
humming to herself as she cooks dinner for one.

by Uzomah Ugwu

“sweet surrender”

A method off track
ungraceful efforts to
Make its way back

Used to jump bridges
As a kid or did the filled prescriptions
Taken bring that conclusion in my head
Using illusions while delusions
Destruct memorizing eyes
That don't believe in a sign of hope
While on and off this legal dope
In this life, tied to this diagnosis like rope

Slowly saying goodbye to a part of reality
Allows me to sleep with both eyes never shut
Then comes knocking a loud whisper
On an invisible door with cups of more change
From what was real and what was fake
In my memory banks
That looked like empty lakes
With each pill that I would take

“Is it not you daddy”

It became quite clear my dear, is it father I am supposed to call you
You had no business to do here, yet you stayed and left when it suited you

Locked in chains from moving aimlessly in your maze
How I came through it still amazes me and gates me in fear of being back there again

How you motioned a curtain call on my life not once but more than twice
Sitting at a stall so young I wondered if it would again be bright or if it ever was at all

Other fathers were there for their young
But you not you, you had just begun to lead with a tongue

So heavy in grief it rest on my feet not letting me go or flee anywhere
Let me not speak of your verbal guns that shot so sharply and had me on the run
constantly

You were a great pretender like paying the bills made you
a father a kid would Want to keep and remember

living in hell, with belt lashes, cigarette burns where you were no ordinary dad
you were mad with fury and took it out on us, on me solely

at your peaks for guts and glory
to conclude this horror story

“arsenal of pills”

Against the corners of the mind using
Nothing but might to defeat the fight within
Boiling with the heat, rising with bubbles
covered with hives

Ready to strike me my feet and then I am
Pushed pulled and tugged in a direction
That has been the one that must come
One by one

Shoot out like bullets from a loaded gun
The pills go down fast while
the damage lasts long
Biting my tongue as they go down
piercing my tongue
No more data for their charts

Been too awake to sleep to see my dreams
Which are nothing
so like this battle mentally settles the score
The doctors have won the war
Where my mental scars burn away another skin
And a place where a person was there before

“Junior’s dream”

He developed needs at seventeen
To be everything but the dream
That arrived as nightmares with
No places to go

Junior let go of the forces
Going with winds kin to lighter skies
That hid storms that lay in
His mother’s fragile smile

He became an old being
When it was time to stand alone
On light footed foundations
That would not front the bill
To keep his dreams young
With appeal so he had to let them go.

“Crossed over sleep”

Night crossed her legs over
and over again the whole night
Blocking my peace unable
to sleep with the way her legs crossed
it made my night unstable

I walked on broken spaces
where my mental was lethal
With eyes, afraid to shut

I stood interrupted by what had departed
Promises you should not keep
crept in my conscious laying

Its burden on pillows of thoughts
that shocked every vessel in me
Moving slowly to the conclusion
in all this confusion
That would lead me to a coffin half rotten

My bridges to sanity broke as I spoke of these
conditions to a mister that appeared not to listen
as I came near noticing his disappearance
I embraced my horror and fell to the torture
And the smell of fear this night had made of me

Such a bad girl is it what makes me fall a pretend sleep
Night after night I count sheep
headed to the factory to make clothes
Out of their coats so I have something to wear

I in haste tore the program schedule
that reads far from here
That was all that was written
making it different from when it
First was read by my delusional soaked eyes
and just like that

The legs began a dance on my head
like my nights were meant
For madness not sweet dreams in bed
Night crossed her legs
while I lost my mind in a bottomless pit

“limited body expressions”

Buttons misplaced all over the place
Scattered among a torn shirt worn
And stressed out amongst the body
To display the hindsight of the fashion cues
Or clues that abuse the visual of the institutions
That have this fabric mayhem mapped out

Not allowing freedom in your clothes or
Applying and exercising your freedoms elsewhere
Particularly within their doors

Can not have a hat to cover the madness or a
Belt to hold your pants from falling to the floor
To collect your thoughts where you walk all over them
Drawn blood from medical vampires yield results
Determining if you will stay or leave this space

Just imagine the air out there its been so long
But something has gone wrong your doctor is gone
For the weekend and the one on call can not write you
A ticket back to freedom, just explore you for a brief moment
While you exercise your demons

Which gives your body more weight and a mind
Out of place spinning and bouncing off the walls
While your pants fall off
And your breasts freely disagree
with the lack of control
For your bra had wire in them , also a
fashion mistake within these halls
Making you question where did this all begin
And if you would ever again
wear the clothes you were once sitting in

by Erren Geraud Kelly

A Stranger In Moscow

Moscow is a long way from
Boston
But America will never
let her children go hungry
and the song plays again
as men sit at the table
in the community kitchen
searching for brotherhood

we still believe in democracy
though hackers crown our
rulers
I tell a friend about a russian
poetry book, i downloaded
on my tablet

i wonder if anna karenina
could spit rhymes on point
and look cool in bling ?

i pray to god daily, but i still
believe the election was
rigged

but he's just a man,
we are a country

i won't allow myself to
be blinded by the bling
of the christmas lights
and black friday specials
i know who i bow to

i hear the song again
as i walk the streets
of moscow
i let the rain pelt me
it feels like diamonds

a comrade walks by me
he speaks to me in a
" moose and squirrel "
accent

it feels like home

---For Andy

Mary Jane And Winter

Snow rarely fell on Hillsboro
But it blanketed the town
And Mary Jane took her daughters
Blake and Miranda to make
Snowmen

Blake said Mary Jane was
As pale as a snowflake
Which Miranda was quick to
Point out was a derogatory term
Used to describe a millennial
Who was progressive, which
Mary wasn't, but that she was
Merely the color of a snowflake
Blake laid down in the snow
And made a snow angel
Which made Mary Jane
Pretend she was with the
Black Diver skiing.

She saw the way he glided
On the skis, like an
Expert. When Mary Jane
And The Diver went ice
Skating, they held each other
Hands as they spun around
Clumsily.

Mary Jane looked at Miranda
And Blake, pretending they
We're biracial children
Night married to day
She caught a snowflake
And held it in her hand
And thought about the
Black Diver
And how a simple choice
Could have lasting
Repercussions

Young Poet

She reads a poem like
She's uncovering a frog's
Skin
Her willingness to dance with
words alone
Makes her a poet
But the words roll around in
Her mouth like bites of
Latke and she is one long
Tomboy's song
The song of her DNA is her
Sonnet
She gets it
She is a song of science
As she reveals herself
To others
But even if the audience
Was just us, our love of poetry
Would be applause
Enough

Maybe she could write the
Poem that cures
Cancer or Hatred?
Her verse is the medicine
That moves a
Mountain...
Science and art dance away
In the shadows
As god is smiling...

Black History Month

Hollywood finally broke
Down and gave Spike
An Oscar, for all the years
They didn't
Not far from the Chinese
Theatre where the Oscars
Are held, I once sat in a
Coffeehouse, and wrote
Poems and read books
And dreamed dreams bigger
Than me
This has not been a good
Month for black men
Bill Cosby sits in a jail cell
With a God complex
Jussie Smollet suddenly remembered
He was black, and R. Kelly's
Singing songs in A minor
Words are the only things
Of value I own
And yet, they are the only
Thing I need

A BBW On The Cover Of Cosmo

She is no longer the sarcastic, funny sidekick
But a temptress
At first glance I smile
I think of Maggie, an ex from
Twenty years ago
Who bragged when she
Was younger and cuter
She stole other girls
Boyfriend's, with a cat
Ate the canary grin
I tell a co worker at the
Soup kitchen, she should
Moved down south
Brothas always love a girl
With some meat on her bones
And I don't feel weird that Melissa
McCarthy turns me on like
Jennifer Lawrence
I check out a girl on the train
Watching her cellulite butt
Jiggle to it's own music
As she walks
As she catches me looking
And she smiles
Times are changing....

by Thom Young

Love

love came back
to haunt
us
with a gun
in her hands
we sat over
a bowl of cold cereal
and
laughed
at how the world
used to be
I never saw her again
after that
but sometimes
I hurt for no reason
at all.

War

they made war
on
the lunch break
listening to the last waltz
of the American dream
and planted flowers
in the dull cities
just to see them die
pretty little things
bitter little things
mad little things
ladies
with murder in their eyes
a world full
of hate and petro
souls
at last.

Monkey

see the circus
see
the monkeys
some in red, white,
and blue
a love that hates
and disagrees
monkey see
monkey kill
the glowing screen
says
yes we can
a future
to eat ice pops
in the metal sun
yes
we can.

by Cambra Koczkur

White Lies

Name.

I need a name,
she searches my face.

So I give her my childhood
nickname. *I am your daughter.*

She gazes at me. *Another name.*

So I state mine in full, maiden first
then married. I tell her my husband's
name and those of her grandchildren,
dressed in Sunday-go-to-church best,
and she nods when I have finished.

I use her napkin to clean remnants
of lunch forgotten from her fingers
and floral shirt. Then push her chair into
the parlor where she smiles and opens
for the children's hugs. Later, as we are
saying our goodbyes she searches my
face again and finds her words. *You are
so beautiful, she says, I will never forget
you. I will never forget who you are.*

Thank you, Mama.

I know, I lie.

I know.

Jargon

Sometimes when doctors cut a baby from a woman, scars grow, adhere and choke internal organs causing periodic discomfort or chronic pain. It all depends on how the healing tissue forms. You cannot see adhesions on common tests, like X-rays, but they are immediately evident during subsequent surgeries.

So said the doctor. So said the mother.
So say I and every woman crippled-whole,
with scars unseen and binding, new and old.

To My Love

I tried to find a love poem for you-
something romantic
about frozen pizza two nights a week.
Cheap.
Thin crust.
Pepperoni.

I searched for sonnets or odes
to collapsing on the couch
after bedtime stories,
kisses on foreheads and
tucking snug-as-a-bug
the children in.
Then, church-laughing
red-faced, tears streaming
until some small person stirs.

I looked for poignant, timeless
verse about predictable-
fights over bathroom counter space,
trash day every Tuesday.
How the rattle of your keys in our door
is the rising sun of my every evening.

There was nothing.

Not one poem
described the way your laughter
over the silver cadence
of our children's play
is too heavy for my breath to hold
without pause.

The beauty of your
broad back curved to
empty the dishwasher,
the space you create
for my silences
and fears.

Poets are dumb.

But we know the uncommon
magic of common things. So,
while our youngest child
won't sleep,
again,
and the neighbor's dog barks
incessantly,
I'll write my own
sickening
proclamation of affection,
to thank you
for the clumsy grace
we make together
and remind you
again
that it's your turn
to empty
the dishwasher,
my love.

Near the Exit

I saw the armchair from a distance.
At seventy-five, its floral pattern blurred
as I merged right, past it, toward home.
Furniture doesn't feel- isn't cognizant
that it was new and chosen once.
It can't bask in the bleaching sun
or smell the coming rain. But I
ten miles from the nursing home
where mother kissed me, and could
not recall my name, had to blink
the sting from eyes that see and know.

1947-1962

When Grandpap was working a rig,
the anonymous man would write
to Grandmother at her school.
She'd find an envelope without postmark
among letters addressed to her boss.

The anonymous man thought she had
sexy legs, perfect breasts, and
a husband who didn't deserve her.
He said she was lovely in the blue dress
she wore to the store yesterday.

In the days before cell phones,
Grandmother drove home alone
and cared for my young mother
with windows locked
and a Derringer close at hand.

Decades later she'd wonder
when the letters stopped
if the man had died, gone to jail,
or taken interest in a younger girl.
A silence as unsettling as noise.

Blind Strike

Every oil pump bucking
on oxidized metal flanks
amid a vast expanse
of cracked clay and
knee-high prairie grass
was Daddy's office
in my young mind.

Two decades beyond
his passing, I still fight
urges to park my car
on highway shoulders
and run toward the rising
iron giants, childish hopes
beneath pounding feet.

Shh

Sometimes I hate the damn picket fence,
the apple trees that flower, then defecate
their sweet rot onto the bindweed lawn,
every drywalled room blocking blue sky.

Sometimes I hear the creaking stainless
steel door of the refrigerator and want
to take a ball peen hammer to its shiny
surface until it, too, is distressed.

Sometimes I want to sneak into the zoo
at night, lay beneath the jungle fronds,
and dream among the residents of
wild days before beautiful enclosures.

School Days

Sometimes we hide light bulbs
to keep the children safe.

Fold papers to forego metal
clips and staples- too much risk.

Plastic bottles, never cans.
Yarn instead of shoelaces,
only the brand that breaks.

Last week, client R.T.
put fists through dry wall
used teeth to pull out nails.

Client C.J. tore tin foil,
swallowed it in shards.

The boys made hooch from orange juice,
stolen sugar on their window sills.

Now we take bottle lids
to slow the fermentation
that can appear inevitable.

My job is to teach them math.

David, April Calls

I wish you'd seen this spring my friend.
I wrote to you of rising and our debt of love,
but should have said that morning light
will bathe each blade of grass in silver
Pastures overnight will fill with green
and trees along the avenues
will burst in bloom like songs of praise.
Did you forget the coming thaw?
If I had found the words,
would you have stayed?

This Spring is brighter than the others,
sitting, as it does, against such loss.
The birds' clear songs call out for hope
to show her face again,
melodies of welcome bright cliché.
You should have heard the sunrise-
how it pronounced your name.
The tree boughs sag,
beloved chosen brother,
to find you still asleep.

Six Days on the Mountain

Andrew Jason Jacono

On the first day we waded through seven miles of rainforest. The air was so humid it was visible, a dense white mist that stuffed our pores, and the mud was so thick it swallowed our boots. My father pulled his split ends back into a ponytail, flicked dew out of his beard, and admired the mossy trees twisting into great green canopies above us. I listened to the nearby coos of swinging colobus monkeys and tried to reassure myself that climbing a 19,000-foot Tanzanian mountain half the world away from home was the best way to bond with my father.

On the second day we trekked moorlands at 10,000 feet. The air was thin and made our lungs sore, but the scenery was so beautiful that it dulled our pain. On either side of us, wispy clouds rolled out over faraway savannahs. Ahead, past miles of violet lobelias, giant groundsel, and precipitous slopes, sat Kilimanjaro's whitecapped summit. My father and I pulled each other up slippery boulder inclines that sliced our hands and knees and we tried not to laugh at the absurdity of this first mountaineering journey.

On the third day I woke two hours before our next departure, stepped over my father's snoring body, and sat on the edge of a craggy overhang beside our tent. I wondered what would happen if I leapt to the flatlands below. How long would I fall for? How hard would I hit the ground? What would I think of on the way down? When you're watching your feet dangle over a thousand feet of open air, it's hard not to be morbidly curious. But I wasn't afraid. There's something relieving about being so high up, completely at the mercy of gravity and the gusting wind at your back. Maybe it's the realization that it's impossible to always be in control.

On the fourth day we shuffled through six miles of alpine desert, gravel and scree scuttling under our feet. The landscape looked like the moon's: gray, desolate, dipping in craterous patches every few hundred meters. Three hours into the hike we arrived at the Barranco Wall, a massive ridge of igneous rock. We'd soon be among the innumerable dots we could see scaling it, a fact that my father, with his wide eyes, blistered skin, and trembling legs, didn't seem to be taking lightly. I was dreading it, too, but I tried to look composed, straightening my back and praying that false bravery was enough to pass for the real thing. The climb was full of awkward slipping and scrambling over boulders and rock overhangs, but as we rose, we managed to work into a groove, catching and supporting each other whenever we fell. Although my calves were numb, I was grinning like an idiot, and my father was cackling like he'd lost his mind. At the top of the wall we could see, not ten miles away, Kilimanjaro's enormous, domelike summit, the glaciers dripping from its top. We posed for a picture in front of it.

On the fifth day we camped at 15,300 feet, just under the shadow of the peak. The summit push would take all of our remaining energy. To prepare, we stretched our legs, picked dirt off each other's faces, and ate four helpings of rice and beans for dinner. Though that night we lay in our sleeping bags for eight hours, we only rested for two, shifting and groaning and hacking dry coughs brought on by the altitude.

On the sixth day we woke at midnight. The temperature was well below zero, and the night was so dark that all we could see without headlamps were each other's silhouettes. We marched, trudged, dug our trekking poles into the scree. The slopes were so steep that we often tripped and fell forward. The only things we could hear were our footsteps and stilted breathing. We wondered if we'd succeed or if we'd become the mountain's freshest casualties. The agony was so incredible that we considered turning back, but seven hours later, our faces glinting with frost, we wobbled onto the summit. The sun had just broken over the horizon, its light warm and gently pink. It was difficult to walk, but I shambled to the edge of the peak to better view the clouds and glaciers below.

Behind me, I could hear my father's shuffling and then felt a hand on my shoulder. He swiveled me around and looked at me with his big blue eyes and told me he loved me more than anything. That he was proud of us. He hugged me and started to cry, something I'd never seen him do. And in his tight embrace, I did, too.

My Date With Marc Chagall

Robin Gregory

When I was a kid, I used to like to build forts and dress like Zorro. At a certain point, I had to ask myself if I could make a living doing this, and realized I couldn't, so I decided to be an artist. I loved the Expressionists, especially Marc Chagall. In fact, I give him some credit for why I became a writer. First, I spent a few years studying art. Much later, when my husband and I visited France, I wanted to find Mr. Chagall. I had questions. I found his address in an international registry: *La Colline, St. Paul-de-Vence*. No numbers, no letters. It took a bit of snooping around, but we did find the beautiful, old estate high on a hill above a dirt road. There was a wrought-iron gate with the word *La Colline* forged in it. Not so hard to find. My gosh, I thought, he probably welcomes visitors! Here was the plan: we were going to leave a potted plant at the gate, along with an invitation to meet for coffee at our hotel. How could he resist? We came all the way from the US to meet him! Anyway, what harm in asking, right? When I got out of the car to deliver the plant, I leaned down and grabbed hold of the gate, which it turns out had just been freshly painted. I recoiled to look at my black hand, and set off an alarm across the valley. Then this herd of Doberman's the size of small horses came bounding down the hill toward me bearing teeth. I dropped the stuff, raced back to the car, and we sped away like a couple of banditos. NOTE TO MYSELF: *This is the kind of thing that happens, and the next thing you know, there's a warrant out for your arrest, and you end up in some rat-infested island prison, and following a hair-raising escape, you launch an elaborate plot to extract a bitter revenge against your betrayers... or not.* So here's how Mr. Chagall helped me become a writer: I learned from this experience that it's a lot more fun to tell a story than it ever was to paint. I spent a few years studying Literature and Creative Writing, and worked for a while as a journalist. Surprisingly, my first novel was about a girl who wanted to be an artist, but ended up a writer. Nowadays, when I'm not writing about boy-wonders and aliens and fainting goats, I look after my son, make maps with my husband, drink tea, and am thinking of transforming that first novel into a series of knock-knock jokes. Who knows what makes a good writer? You don't have to make money at it, or get a film deal, or win awards, or even publish your work. You could just start by stalking famous painters.

I touch my father's shoulder to let him know we're here, but - for the first time - he doesn't recognize me. My daughter Charlotte notices and hides a quiet weep. I start to worry. Dad's memory has deteriorated even in the last month. I wonder whether I should have brought her, but she wanted to see him. Like many with autism, Charlotte is deadly honest and unafraid of difficult questions. However, like most 15-year-olds, she's not used to watching Alzheimer's progress so quickly.

In my mind I beg her silently, don't ask him about dying or memory loss. I wished we'd rehearsed with a role-playing session or social story. But she's not five years old anymore. I can no longer whisper the right responses into her ear. Then I remember that when she asks questions in her trademark forthright manner, people respond in remarkable ways. We'd recently had dinner with a widowed friend and her twin teenage sons. Charlotte asked the boys what it was like to grow up without their father, who died when they were two. Their mother and I fell silent at her question, but the boys, after a beat, answered thoughtfully. Later, my friend told me no-one asks them about that.

Now, Charlotte and my Dad face each other across the empty table. Both look uncertain. My heartbeat floods the silence between them. They seem subdued in this strange environment, a Home that is not a home. My anxiety makes my ears splinter. Charlotte reaches her hand across the table. Dad looks at it for a long minute, not sure what she's doing. She leaves it there, resting halfway between them. Then instinct kicks in and he grasps her hand: the dignity of a man who knows this gesture is important while not knowing exactly who we are. Perhaps he is responding to the need for a kind touch or - ever the gentleman - recognizing an offering that would be rude to decline. I can't see inside the workings of his mind. In Charlotte, often a mystery, I see the grace of a girl who has figured out how to navigate societal structures not designed for her. Who recognizes another human's unspoken need. Who is drenched with love and sorrow for her grandfather. It occurs to me that her daily battle of figuring out why neurotypicals (people without autism) act as they do has given her an advantage in facing these moments that shift our lives.

The two of them remain quiet, holding hands. Every fibre of my being wants to suggest questions they can ask each other. Introduce a topic of conversation about one of their shared interests. Less than a few years ago they would talk endlessly about African animals, the species and genus of various mammals, geography. They each grew up reading encyclopedias, 60 years apart.

Despite all the words in my head, something powerful keeps me quiet. I shut down my internal monologue and look at my father and my daughter. Their body language is relaxed, at peace. Neither is straining to talk. All the tension in the air is pulsing from me alone. It comes to me - I was wrong in my assessment. They are, in fact, neither

subdued nor anxious. They are content. I breathe. My toes unfurl. My anxiety spirals around my head and floats away as I observe their tight cocoon of silence and love. And then, out of the silence, the first words.

“I love you, Grandpa.”

“I love you, too.”

He doesn't speak her name but it doesn't matter. Names aren't all that important. When Charlotte was 5, her developmental pediatrician offered me tissues and told me it was her strengths, as much as her challenges, that helped him diagnose her with autism. Since then I've thought of her strengths – her rote memory for example – as her superpowers. Today, in the way she has found to connect with my father, I see a new power – one which has nothing to do with autism.

My Dad's thoughts have distilled. He has forgotten about his career, the street addresses where he lived, his work colleagues. But he knows the love of his life, my beautiful mother, and talks of her endlessly whether she's there or not. He remembers the words to the songs that make him happy; Oklahoma, My Bonnie Lies over the Ocean, Waltzing Matilda. His gorgeous baritone still fills a room, hitting every note. In this home he is the star of the music group. His distilled memory means our conversations are always joyful, only about the good things. I wish we'd always got along this well! It's easy to take him back to his childhood dog or a loved vacation spot or his brother and sister.

Quite often, people act differently around Charlotte and Dad. Well-meaning people might speak louder, slower, make awkward chatter. Charlotte, like Dad, doesn't linger on small talk, doesn't see the point of unnecessary actions. When you start up a conversation with her you'll probably learn something new within minutes about cell animation or when the Democratic Congo changed its name and why.

Our visit has come to an end. I stand to leave. He turns to me in delight, as if I've just arrived. “Why Lisa! How delightful to see you my girl. What would I do without you. You are my sunshine and I thank God for you every day.” Charlotte and I leave with joy in our hearts.

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I Promise Gentleness

Sheila E. Murphy

I promise gentleness will lead you back
to where you will recall
beginning.

The women you are hearing now remind you
what you never said
but will.

An easy way to forward what you dreamed
is to decide today is that
and claim.

How perfectly your purity imagined turned to flesh
how noticeable
now.

If ever you are quiet then the circumstances will
speak back the lack
of separation.

Hold On

A Pueblo Indian Prayer

Hold on to what is good,
even if it's a handful of earth.

Hold on to what you believe,
even if it's a tree that stands by itself.

Hold on to what you must do,
even if it's a long way from here.

Hold on to your life,
even if it's easier to let go.

Hold on to my hand,
even if I've gone away from you.

CONTRIBUTORS

Kathleen Lynch has published poetry in many literary magazines, and has had work included in textbooks and multiple anthologies. Most recently, she won a 2018 Pushcart Prize. In addition to her 4 chapbooks and full book, *HINGE* (winner of Black Zinnias national poetry book prize), her next manuscript, *LUCKY WITNESS* is forthcoming next month from Blue Light Press.

Robert Julius is a writer and poet from Pittsburgh, PA. Currently, he lives in Columbus, OH where he studies at The Ohio State University and serves as the poetry editor for *The Journal*. His work has been featured in *The Indiana Review: Online*, *Brine Literary Magazine*, and elsewhere. Most recently, he won the Haidee Forsyth Burkhardt Award in Creative Nonfiction at OSU.

Terese Robison has lived, in almost equal thirds of her life, in Mexico, California, and New York. She's been an editor, interpreter, and tutor/mentor for youth on probation and now teaches writing at community colleges. Her work has appeared in *Hiram Poetry Review*, *West Texas Literary Review*, *Tahoma Literary Review*, **82 Review*, *Monkeybicycle*, *Queen Mob's Teahouse*, and several anthologies; other appearances are forthcoming. A collection of her stories was developed in postgraduate study with Janet Burroway and Marisa Silver.

Michael Hettich has published over a dozen books and chapbooks of poetry, most recently "Bluer and More Vast" (Hysterical Books, 2018), "The Frozen Harbor" (Red Dragonfly Press, 2017) and "Systems of Vanishing" (University of Tampa, 2014). A new book, "To Start and Orchard," is forthcoming from Press 53. A long-time resident of Miami, he recently moved with his wife to Black Mountain, NC. His website is michaelhettich.com

Robert D. Kirvel, a Ph.D. in neuropsychology, is a Pushcart Prize (twice) and Best of the Net nominee for fiction. Awards include the Chautauqua 2017 Editor's Prize, the 2016 Fulton Prize for the Short Story, and a 2015 ArtPrize for creative nonfiction. He has published in England, Ireland, New Zealand, and Germany; in translation and anthologies; and in several dozen U.S. literary journals, such as *Arts & Letters*. His novel, *Shooting the Wire*, is forthcoming from Eyewear Publishing, London.

Patrick Duggan is originally from the Merrimack Valley in New Hampshire, and studied writing and literature at Emerson College in Boston, Massachusetts, and California College of the Arts in San Francisco. He's the author of the chapbook *The City Is Burning* (2018 Monday Night Press), has been lucky enough to be a National Poetry Series finalist, and his poems have appeared in *Beeswax Magazine*, 26

Magazine, Noö Magazine, Monday Night, Shampoo, Parthenon West Review, Oranges and Sardines, Gangsters in Concrete, Mirage: A Periodical, Bay Area Correspondence School, and The Inman Review.

Susan L. Leary's poetry has been published or is forthcoming in such places as *Into the Void*, *Posit Journal*, *Arcturus* (Chicago Review of Books), *Heavy Feather Review*, and *Gone Lawn*. She has been nominated for both the Pushcart Prize and Best of the Net, and her chapbook, *This Girl, Your Disciple* is forthcoming from *Finishing Line Press* in August 2019. She teaches English Composition at the University of Miami in Coral Gables, FL. Find her at www.susanleary.com.

Elizabeth Laborde She left the white-gray skies of Portland, Oregon for the open road, traveling up and down the West Coast from Los Angeles to Crooked Creek, Alaska. Along the way, she collected stories she writes about from her home in the Santa Cruz Mountains. Her work has appeared in *Conte* and *Salt River View*. Currently, she seeks a literary agent to represent her debut psychological suspense novel, *Vernonia*.

Gregory Davis is sixty-five years old. He is retired from a major aluminum company in Spokane Valley Wa, where he spent forty-three years as a grunt on the factory floor. He has been writing for three years.

William Snyder I have published poems in *Poet Lore*, *Folio*, *Cottonwood*, and *Southern Humanities Review*, among others, Poetry Prize, winner of the 2002 Kinloch Rivers Chapbook competition; I was the co-winner of the 2001 Grolier Poetry Prize; The CONSEQUENCE Prize in Poetry, 2013; the 2015 Claire Keyes Poetry Prize. I teach writing and literature at Concordia College, Moorhead, MN.

Corina K Skentzou I am a new unpublished writer. My short fiction is based on my 12 years of experience as a psychotherapist in NYC.

Paul Tarrago is an experimental filmmaker and writer living in London, England. Recent writings have appeared in *The Wrong Quarterly*, *2HB*, *decomp magazinE*, *Leopardskin and Limes*, *Ink, sweat and tears* and *Burningword Literary Journal*. He currently works as a lecturer at the University of the Arts London. His most recent short story collection is *The Water Rabbits* (2018). Before that came *The Mascot Moth and several other pieces* (2013). Both are available from both good and bad booksellers.
www.paultarrago.net

Jim Meirose's short work has appeared in numerous venues, and his published novels include "Understanding Franklin Thompson" (JEF pubs), "Sunday Dinner with

Father Dwyer" (Optional books) and "The Box" (Scarlet Leaf Press). Info at [@weirdoes](http://www.jimmeirose.com)

Nicholas Alti, an MFA candidate at The University of Alabama originally from rural Southwest Michigan. I've been a fiction and poetry reader for *Third Coast*, an assistant poetry editor at New Issues Press, and am currently an assistant editor for poetry and fiction at *The Black Warrior Review*. My work has appeared or is forthcoming in *DIALOGIST*, *Newfound*, *Pretty Owl Poetry*, *Barely South Review*, and *Yes, Poetry*, among elsewhere.

Elizabeth Laborde She left the white-gray skies of Portland, Oregon for the open road, traveling up and down the West Coast from Los Angeles to Crooked Creek, Alaska. Along the way, she collected stories she writes about from her home in the Santa Cruz Mountains. Her work has appeared in *Conte* and *Salt River View*. Currently, she seeks a literary agent to represent her debut psychological suspense novel, Vernonia.

Mark Walters' work has appeared in *Word & Image*, *National Lampoon*, *Christianity & Literature*, *Carve Magazine*, and *The Atlantic Monthly*, among other magazines and journals. He teaches creative writing and American literature at William Jewell College.

Elana Wolff is a Toronto-based writer of poetry and creative nonfiction, editor, and designer and instructor of social art courses. Her work has appeared in Canadian and international publications and has garnered awards. Recently her poems have appeared (or will appear) in *Grain*, *The Maynard*, *The League of Canadian Poets Tree Anthology*, *Tamaracks: Canadian Poetry for the 21st Century (US)*, *Minerva Rising (US)*, *Another Dysfunctional Cancer Poem Anthology*, *Typishly*, *Vallum*, *White Wall Review*, *Acta Victoriana*, and *Room*. Elana's fifth collection, Everything Reminds You of Something Else, was released with Guernica Editions in 2017.

Deidre Jaye Byrne- Retired from teaching, lawyering and Long Island, Deidre lives happily in the Mid Hudson Valley of New York, where she spends her time reading all the books she bought when she was working. She is a student at the Writers Studio Hudson Valley. Her work has appeared in *The Avalon Literary Review*, *Forth Magazine*, *Down in the Dirt*, and *Literally Stories (UK)*.

John Ellis has lived in Africa, Europe, and throughout the United States, serving as a teacher, missionary, and U.S. Soldier. His essays, articles, and book reviews have been featured in *Relief*, *Able Muse*, *Embodied Effigies*, *Jonah Magazine*, and others. Ellis earned an M.F.A. at Saint Mary's College of California, where he was a graduate fellow. He serves as a contributing editor for the *Journal of Veterans Studies*.

Richard Risemberg was born into a Jewish-Italian household in Argentina, and brought to Los Angeles to escape the fascist regime of his homeland, and has lived there since, except for a digression to Paris in the turbulent Eighties. He attended Pepperdine University on a scholarship won in a writing competition, but left in his last year to work. He has worked jobs from gritty to glitzy, starting in a motorcycle shop and progressing through offices, retail, an independent design and manufacturing business, and most recently a stint managing an adult literacy program at a library branch in one of the poorest neighborhoods of the city. All has become source material for his writing.

He has pursued journalism, photography, and editorial writing, which, combined with his years in motorcycle culture, introduced him to the darker side of the dream. His fiction concentrates on working-class life, homelessness, and cultures of violence, and the indifference of the Dominant Culture to it all.

Mr. Risemberg has published stories, poems, essays, editorials, and articles in edited publications including the *Los Angeles Downtown News*, the *Los Angeles Business Journal*, *Momentum*, and, on the literary side, *Snowy Egret*, *Juxta*, *Terrain*, *Empty Mirror*, *Switchblade*, *Mystery Tribune*, *Ginosko Literary Journal*, *Scarlet Leaf Review*, *Front Porch Review*, *Ornery Quarterly*, *Fiction on the Web UK*, *American Writers Review*, and *Short Edition*, with pieces currently slated to appear in 2019 in *Edify*, *Fear of Monkeys*, and *Bangalore Review*.

Karen Barr has had short stories published in literary magazines in the U.S. and UK. She is a four-time winner of the Write Invite online competition, based in the UK. Karen is the Staff, and Student Adviser at Writer's Village University where she has, both designed and facilitated courses for their MFA Certificate Program. She currently working toward her three-year MFA.

Gill James I am published by, amongst others, *Tabby Cat Press*, *The Red Telephone*, *Butterfly*, *The Professional and Higher Partnership* and *Continuum*. I am a Lecturer in Creative Writing at Salford University. I have an MA in Writing for Children and PhD in Creative and Critical Writing

Jean Ryan, a native Vermonter, lives in Lillian AL. Her stories and essays have appeared in a variety of journals and anthologies. Nominated several times for a Pushcart Prize, she has also published a novel, Lost Sister. Her debut collection of short stories, Survival Skills, was published by Ashland Creek Press and short-listed for a Lambda Literary Award. Lovers and Loners, her second story collection, was published in 2017. Her collection of nature essays, Strange Company, is available in digital form, paperback and audio.

Matthew James Friday has had over 60 poems published in numerous international magazines and journals, including, recently: *All the Sins* (UK), *The Ear* (USA), *Brushfire Literature & Arts Journal* (USA), and the *Waterford Teachers Centre* (Ireland). The mini-chapbooks All the Ways to Love, Waters of Oregon and The Words Unsaid were published by the Origami Poems Project (USA).

E. Martin Pedersen, originally from San Francisco, has lived for over 35 years in eastern Sicily where he teaches English at the local university. His poetry has appeared in *The James Dickey Review*, *Ink Sweat and Tears*, *Mused*, *Oddville*, *Former People*, *The Bitchin' Kitsch* and others. Martin is an alum of the Squaw Valley Community of Writers. He blogs at: emartinpedersenwriter.blogspot.it

Mauricio Palazzo is a journalist based in Santiago de Chile. He is the author of Origami (2016). His work has appeared in *Eunoia Review* and *Verity La*.

Toshiya Kamei holds an MFA in Literary Translation from the University of Arkansas. His translations of Latin American literature include My Father Thinks I'm a Fakir by Claudia Apablaza, South Exit by Carlos Bortoni, and Silent Herons by Selfa Chew.

Brian Kirven graduated with a film writing degree from San Francisco State University, minoring in creative writing, and later obtained an M.A. in Spanish after long, open-ended motorcycle travels across the length and width of the Americas. A California Poet in the Schools, teaching from West Marin elementary schools to Marin Juvenile Hall, Brian is the author of the poetry collection Shorelines: A Traveler Comes Home to the Tide Zone. He now looks to treat his settled life in West Marin like travel, discovering things fresh and anew at home.

John L. Stanizzi is author of Ecstasy Among Ghosts, Sleepwalking, Dance Against the Wall, After the Bell, Hallelujah Time!, High Tide – Ebb Tide, Four Bits – Fifty 50-Word Pieces, and Chants. His poems have appeared in *Prairie Schooner*, *American Life in Poetry*, *The New York Quarterly*, *Blue Mountain Review*, *Paterson Literary Review*, *The Cortland Review*, *Rattle*, *Tar River Poetry*, and many others. Stanizzi has been translated into Italian and his work has appeared in many journals in Italy. He has read at venues all over New England, and his newest collection, Sundowning, will be out later this year with *Main Street Mag*. Stanizzi teaches literature at Manchester Community College in Manchester, CT and he lives with his wife, Carol, in Coventry.

Clara Luna is the pseudonym for a former university professor of Women's Studies who dwells in the forests of Northern California. Her work has been published in various journals and she has received grants and fellowships for her writing. She also has a few history books to her name as well as a much lauded poetry book.

Jim Ross After retiring from a career in public health research in 2015, Jim Ross resumed creative pursuits in hopes of resuscitating his long-neglected left brain. He's since published 75 pieces of nonfiction, several poems, and 200 photos in 80 journals in North America, Europe, and Asia. His publications include *1966*, *Bombay Gin*, *Columbia Journal*, *Entropy*, *Friends Journal*, *Gravel*, *Ilanot Review*, *Lunch Ticket*, *Kestrel*, *MAKE*, *Pif*, *The Atlantic*, and *Thin Air*. He and his wife--parents of two health professionals and grandparents of four wee ones--split their time between Maryland and West Virginia.

Michel Steven Krug I'm a Minneapolis poet, fiction writer, former journalist, Johns Hopkins Writing Seminars graduate, Loft Literary Center member and practicing lawyer.

My poems have appeared in *Poets Reading the News*, *Door Is A Jar*, *Raven's Perch*, *Tuck Magazine*, *Poetry24*, *2 Elizabeths*, *Main Street Rag*, *the Brooklyn Review* and other literary magazines.

A.M. Gwynn writes short story, poetry, and flash fiction. Her work has appeared in *Prachya Review*, *War, Literature & the Arts*, *Grey Sparrow Journal*, *Consequence Magazine*, *Wilderness House Literary Review*, and other literary venues.

Joseph Murphy has been published in a wide range of print and online journals. He is the author of three poetry collections, *Shoreline of the Heart*, *Having Lived* and *Crafting Wings*. His new collection, *The Shaman Speaks*, is forthcoming from Middle Creek Publishing. Murphy is also a member of the Colorado Authors' League and for eight years (2010–18) was poetry editor for an online literary publication, *Halfway Down the Stairs*.

Kilmeny MacMichael lives in western Canada's Okanagan Valley, where she writes flash and short fiction. She has been published in *Anti-Lang* and online with *The Ilanot Review*, *Watershed Review*, *Sleet Magazine*, and other publications.

Gregorio Tafoya is an aspiring novelist with an advanced degree in comparative literature from Project Gutenberg. He will forever be jealous of the creator of storiesaboutprince.blogspot.com and wishes to have been the first writer to lament, in an author bio, about not writing the play *Arcadia*. His fiction has appeared in fleasonthedog.com and in modernliterature.org.

Lenny DellaRocca is founder and co-publisher of South Florida Poetry Journal-*SoFloPoJo*. His collection, *Things I See in the Fire* won the Yellow Jacket Press Chapbook Contest for 2017. He has 4 collections of poetry. The latest is *Festival of Dangerous Ideas* (Unsolicited press, 2019). Over the decades his work has appeared in *Nimrod*, *Seattle Review*, *Poet Lore*, *Wisconsin Review*, *POEM*, *Laurel Review*,

Sunstone and other journals. He lives in Delray Beach, FL.

John Menaghan, a prize-winning poet and playwright, has published four books with Salmon Poetry (Ireland): All the Money in the World (1999), She Alone (2006), What Vanishes (2009) and Here and Gone (2014). A fifth book, composed entirely of jazz-related poems, is forthcoming from Salmon. His short plays have to date received a total of 6 productions, and one--“A Rumor of Rain”--was published in *The Hollow & Other Plays* (2008). His poems have appeared in a wide variety of journals, including *The Hopkins Review*, *Ambit*, *Brilliant Corners*, *Poetry Ireland*, *Atlanta Review*, *Ginosko*, and *American Arts Quarterly*. Menaghan has been nominated for a Pushcart Prize in four of the last six years.

Anthony Watts has been writing ‘seriously’ for about 40 years. He has won 26 First Prizes in poetry competitions and was longlisted for the National Poetry Competition 2014. His poems have appeared in magazines and anthologies, including *Poetry Salzburg Review*, *The Rialto* and *Riggwelter*. His fifth collection, Stiles, is due to be published by Paekakariki Press. His home is in rural Somerset and his main interests are poetry, music, walking and binge thinking – activities which he finds can be happily combined.

Mubanga Kalimamukwento I am an emerging writer whose first full manuscript, “The Mourning Bird,” is shortlisted for the Dinaane Debut Fiction Award, formerly the European Union Award. I am a Hubert Humphrey (Fulbright) Fellow at the University of Minnesota’s Humphrey School of Public Affairs whose work has been published or is forthcoming in *The Advocates of Human Rights*, *Two Sisters Writing and Publishing* and the *Dreamers Creative Writing Magazine*

Ally Schwam is a poet, artist, and professional UX Designer. Her poetry is forthcoming in *Levee Magazine* and *SurVision Magazine* and has previously appeared in *Dream Noir*, *Tupelo Press’ 30/30 Project*, and others. She lives in Cambridge, MA.

Uzomah Ugwu My work has been featured in *Prelude Magazine*, *Tuck Magazine*, *Wild Word*, *Light Journal*, *Voice of Eve*, *Angel City Review*, *Scarlet Leaf Review*. I am the Contributing/Poetry Editor for *A Tired Heroine* magazine. I am also the Contributing Interviewer for *Interlocutor*.

Erren Geraud Kelly I am a Two-Time Pushcart nominated poet from Boston. I have been writing for 28 years and have over 300 publications in print and online in such publications as *Hiram Poetry Review*, *Mudfish*, *Poetry Magazine*(online), *Ceremony*, *Cacti Fur*, *Bitterzoet*, *Cactus Heart*, *Similar Peaks*, *Gloom Cupboard*, *Poetry Salzburg* and other publications. My most recent publication was in *Black Heart Literary Journal*; I have also been published in anthologies such as Fertile Ground, and Beyond The Frontier. My work can also be seen on [Youtube](#) under the "[Gallery Cabaret](#)," links.

I am also the author of the book, Disturbing The Peace, on Night Ballet Press. I received my B.A. in English-Creative Writing from Louisiana State University in Baton Rouge. I also love to read and I love to travel, having visited 45 states and Canada and Europe. The themes in my writings vary, but I have always had a soft spot for subjects and people who are not in the mainstream. But I never limit myself to anything, I always try to keep an open mind.

Thom Young is a writer from Texas. A 2016 Pushcart Prize nominee. His work has been in *Poetry Quarterly*, *3am magazine*, *Thieves Jargon*, *Word Riot*, *The Legendary*, *48th Street Press*, *The Zombie Logic Review*, *Commonline Journal*, and many other places. Featured poet and critic of social media poetry on PBS Newshour.

Cambra Koczur is a teacher, visual artist, and mother of two. Her poetry has most recently been seen in *Rattle's Poets Respond* and is forthcoming in *Mothers Always Write*.

Andrew Jason Jacono is a writer, musician, and mountaineer who recently graduated Wesleyan University with a degree in English and French Studies. A proud Manhattan native, he has been telling stories ever since he could talk. His work has previously appeared or is forthcoming in *Cleaver Magazine*, *Green Briar Review*, *The Write Launch*, and *Litbreak Magazine*, among others. If you'd like to learn more about him, or keep up with what he's doing, you can visit his website: www.andrewjacono.com

ROBIN GREGORY is an American screenwriter and international, award-winning novelist who describes her work as magical realism. She studied French, Literature, and Creative Writing, and is a lifelong student of mysticism. Her debut novel, *Book One* of an upcoming trilogy, *The Improbable Wonders of Moojie Littleman*, won Best Books of the Year from Kirkus Reviews, IPPY, Foreword Reviews' Indiefab, and more. She lives in California with her husband and son.

Lisa Alletson's creative non-fiction and poetry has been published in the *Globe and Mail*, *The Write Launch*, and will be featured in *Blank Spaces* in 2020. Her writing can be found on Instagram at <https://www.instagram.com/lisaalletson/>. She has lived in South Africa and England, and now resides in Toronto,

Sheila E. Murphy is an American poet who has been writing and publishing actively since 1978. Her book titled *Reporting Live from You Know Where* won the Hay(na)Ku Poetry Book Prize Competition from Meritage Press (U.S.A.) and xPress(ed) (Finland). Also in 2018, Broken Sleep Books brought out the book *As If To Tempt the Diatonic Marvel from the Ivory*. Luna Bisonte Prods released *Underscore* in that same year, featuring a collaborative visual book by K.S. Ernst and Sheila E. Murphy. Murphy is the recipient of the Gertrude Stein Award for her book *Letters to Unfinished J.* (Green

Integer Press, 2003). Murphy is known for working in forms including such as the ghazal, haibun, and pantoum in her individual writing. As an active collaborator, she has worked with Douglas Barbour on an extended poem called “Continuations.” Murphy’s visual work, both individual and collaborative, is shown in galleries and in private collections. Initially educated in instrumental and vocal music, Murphy is associated with music in poetry. She earns her living as a professor, organizational consultant, speaker, and researcher and holds the PhD degree. She has lived in Phoenix, Arizona throughout her adult life.

