

the MEADOW
2017

TRUCKEE MEADOWS COMMUNITY COLLEGE

Reno, Nevada

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AT THE ZOO

Bob Hicok

Cat's more selfish than Hitler was.
Though less killey, and not German,
so my wife, a Jew, can love her.
If Cat wants petting, Cat's in my lap.
If Cat wants to vomit,
I'm on my knees, cleaning it up.
She's the narcissiest creature
I've ever known. As a person,
I'd have stoned her ten minutes
into knowing her. The only reason
I haven't drowned her—she's soft.
Soft as the womb must have been.
Soft as the long sleep I'd need
to take me to Mars. Soft
as reaching a finger up my butt
when I was seven in the bathtub
to touch my poop, in the sense
of innocent, curious, and clean.
Some animals are better
at lounging on a scrap of sunlight,
some at cheating on their taxes,
some at sitting on a branch
for hours, trying to convince mice
they're not really there. I make a point
of telling mice the truth. Look up,
I say, all the time and everywhere
I go, to mice for safety
and to myself in case an angel's
hovering above my head,
tapping a toe, waiting for me
to realize I am blessed.

2:19 A.M. 11.9.2016

James Houghton

Tonight, the pine trees don't look any different

pressed up against where stars should be.

Silhouetted needles lit not by the moon, but the city
never gets this quiet broken by this fall's scarlet blaze

crackling, glowing against aspen's specter
white bark black scars deepening;

leaves don't rusle, flames don't lick, laugh, or waiver,
no breeze, no breath, and the slouched sapphire sky
is winded by history's heavy knuckles knocking our gut

hard. He's president-elect. Earth, hurt,

holds it's haggard breath, heavy, waiting
for protests, or the best medicine's buzz.

It's funny, just not yet, despite
tonight, the pine trees don't look any different.

“LET’S NOT GROW WEARY”

Matthew Baker

—from Hillary Clinton’s 2016 Presidential Election Concession Speech

By the lake shore in brackish light,
water level down, shoes hot as ovens

I seep into the sounds of my mother:
Oh, honey [inhale] *don’t lose sleep* [a swallow

then static snow of wind on her end of the phone].
Sorry, the girls and I are out for a walk.

Sign forbids swimming, boating, feeding
the geese who ripple across my lake-self.

No bread crumbs for them
if I wanted. Oh, I know I shouldn’t.

The girls bark because the girls are dogs.
The geese honk because the geese are geese

marking their territory. Wing flaps.
Ducks swim toward shore and dive for worms.

The small one disappears all-together
beneath the surface. What stops it

from staying under? The word is *bereft*,
that’s what I’ve had trouble articulating.

*Oh, I’ve got to drive to work—didn’t see
the time.* The duck reappears glimmering.

Maybe it’s too luxurious to be
bereft. There’s still light left before the end

of the afternoon. How the swan arcs
its neck back, preening before its next flight.

AT THE BORDER

David Axelrod

The tarmac ends in enigmas of signs
warning you to slow down, to yield,
go back, you lack the stamina
for such distances as lie ahead
on this road. It snows

all the way across the salt flats
between mountain ranges and a border
so remote soldiers posted there
are grateful you came all this way
and for nothing. They wave

with their assault rifles to the place
where you pull aside
as convoys of trucks emerge
from clouds of dust and lumber past,
the huge dump beds

loaded down by the usual
grind of carbonates
and resentment. Through tears
the soldiers ask would you please
share a glass of tea

and songs of twilight—
plaintive Latin verses
translated into local dialect
to ease the world's misfortune
in its loneliest room. Heaven

may never seem so sad as this
and they are sorry
to inform that you cannot cross.
But there is an inn nearby,
a steakhouse glowing at roadside

where the waiters bring out braziers
crackling with blackened livers,
salty kidneys, tough, savory
little hearts. And when it is empty,
they say, a woman

refills your glass with forgetting.

¿ADÓNDE VAS?- AL OTRO LADO

Itzel Perez

I was sitting in the back of a red
SUV Subaru, to fool the Americans.
A lady around 60, who I met in
her kitchen that morning said to me,
“I will be your grandma for today.”
The grandma I left behind
in a humble home, would’ve told me
Cree en ti misma, todo lo puedes.

In between Tijuana and San Diego
I practiced the only English I knew
one last time, to be sure,
“My name is Yolanda Reyes.
I’m here to see my newborn sister.”
It had taken me all week to learn
how to hide my accent.

As we pulled up to the American border
I realized I would never be able to
play in the school yard with my friends again.
I would learn English, and go to a new school.
My parents said it would bring
opportunities for me, ones never had.

“What is the purpose of your trip?”

I saw the German shepherd sitting by
the officer, waiting for his next command,
a gun on his right hip for emergencies.
He carried a stern look on his face.
My tongue went numb, as if a
wasp had stung me so I couldn’t speak
my broken English to answer him.

I wanted to tell the truth:
*Mi nombre es Itzel Aline Perez Vargas
y vengo a vivir con mi padre en deuda.*
but I didn’t dare to breathe.

“We’re taking her to see her newborn
sister,” lied my new grandmother. He looked
at me, waiting for the wasps to fly out
of the hive that was my stomach.
I forced a smile hoping he

wouldn't notice the stinging tears
I held back.

He smiled back and said, "Enjoy your stay."
As I cried, we drove away.

WE WILL NEVER RETURN

David Axelrod

Triste, Daniel said, laying aside
his guitar before we departed,
answering our query about

the character of mountains,
triste—meaning stresses build up
inside earth's cross-fractured crust,

layers of poverty, river cobbles
and mud, the detritus of landslide
and flood that form a welded

overburden of sorrows. It looms
above villages. Whole generations
entombed whenever earth shudders.

And yet, someone pounds flour
from roots. Someone gathers eggs,
fat gets rendered from old livestock.

When a shutter in the alley
is left a little ajar at twilight,
voices join at the chorus

in a weary-sounding aguanto—
so little regard mountains have
for aspirations, skewing instead

toward solitude, the mind eclipsed
by noon, huddled under a blanket
at roadside or just walking off

into open-end time. Triste,
gray haze of cactus forests lining
tarmac into the far north, alien

velocities, and the holes we blow
through lives of other people.
Yo se perder, Daniel sang to the dark

courtyard where candles threw
our shadows on crumbling masonry—
his voice like ashes falling into water.

PRAGUE ORLOJ

Penny Lane

My faith lives at the bottom
of a mason jar labeled Prague,

you filled with pennies, souvenirs
collected from vending machines

and couch cushions,
that sits on the top shelf

of our cupboard.
Behind cans of corn and green beans,

beside a statue of a ghost.
Our bare feet move

across the linoleum
of our kitchen floor

neither graceful or not.
Just moving parts

of an astronomical clock.
Two faces: one tells time,

the other speaks
in relative positions of the moon.

RIG

Lisa Lewis

And now it pours its shadow over once-pasture, former-
green-field, never-to-be-again-splay of ragweed and bermuda.

Rattlebox, sunflower, buckwheat-brown August to April,
the golden season—the nearly dead return so late

in spring the threat takes shape in dreams. The end.
That's the fear, isn't it? The earth won't bother

to try again? And now this, yellow as a construction site
pencil, stalk-straight, tall, poison tree of geology,

red dirt bare as a rag everywhere around—
a couple trucks, a port-a-potty, and a man

in a denim jacket, back to the highway where I slow down—
but you can't stop and interrogate the guy,

who may not even think it's a good idea—
he's not paid to get ideas—

to tear up the countryside in someone's back yard—
and yes, there's a neighborhood, poor Okie plains

houses I've longed for through the seasons, white-washed
planks and bales of hay no animal would devour.

They might've owned this corner once but no more,
small now in handmade pretension to the manmade

the rig stands for, in phallic detachment—
there's that thing, that rocket—

not the lone workman's fault, to be born here,
to wish, himself, for whatever expands in a man

beneath that spire. And I've been away,
not long—it went up fast—

but no one is here to make the case
for blood of bird or spume of thin, thin air.

No one is holding a protest sign. Nothing has spilled.
This is red dirt, not black, and there is no odor,

and no green, yet, not the kind you can't smell
because it's numbers on paper and no longer the kind

I learned to recognize as winter rye, wettish blades
laid down glossy as paint, cattle

embarrassed at a distance, nibbling bark,
and the bark furrowed, flinging itself away.

*

What if you drove that road each day for years,
and then appeared this monster of economy,

in which we partake so we may be held accountable?
How would you sing of its stretch

above your head, beyond muscle or flexion?
How bend the direction of its needle?

We are called to bleed together, thrust up your arm.
Let us stand side by side, dead brothers of poetry,

neglected sisters, and find our tongues stitched
into our cracked jaws, and pose for a group photo.

This is how we looked the year we remembered,
and next we glimpsed our faces

reflected from dry ponds. We forgot
the mouthful names we'd loved to compass

on creased maps, and we sidled
the way we approach deaf gods.

Do we arrange notes on the clef of vines?
Manufacture this burned-out hymn,

choir as wooden as the no-more
trees, hands crossed on chests like the good-

looking dead who had the sense to get it over with?
Lick your finger so the page sticks

to the grooves. We wait to fuel our travels
into an emptier world on tires

that slick up dust and rocks. The far-off
bristle of horizon nods, deep in the sleep

of gravel before it's tested with bore
and the great tanks roll on their sides

like everything that grazes, for the taste
of what went down and then returned.

Hic Sunt Vaccas

Tom Holmes

for Jennifer Bozzette

From here we walk a mile down this road.
Before their war, the path was cobblestone,
but now, packed rubble. Though the wall remains.
It cuts our field in half. That side grows wheat.
In fall, the husks spike red, and pests arrive.
Something's always arriving—the lightning,
the humid winds, the armies with their guns.
A Tiger tank's tracks snapped off in that field.
Sometimes the things that come retreat, like light
of day, like onslaught of death, like their war.
And here is where I was born, as noted
on this plaque beside our memorial.
If you move here, you will learn to not forget.
And here are those cows you came to skin.

LIBYA

Carl Bohn

She says the airport road's
full of ghosts, men cradling rifles

like banjos, others calling home
on scrubbed phones.

I'd say the shadows are worse:
the building where Qaddafi's face

shone huge in red and black—
now crumbled. Crows nest there,

and the boys below it this Sunday
kick balls where his beard was.

She holds her mother's ring . She says
Matyiga's safe, but the syllables

themselves foretell a thing
that can't go in poems. I'm soft;

she stares at me and smiles
behind her mother's window.

She says it's not like it seems,
but I see the fires confusing the sky.

I see her brother trying to count
the stars—and losing.

An explosion, a portrait rattles,
she brushes her hair. The air's

a comedy of women and men
washing dinner plates.

THE BIRD MARKET

Mark Terrill

A bank of clouds slips easterly in front of the sun
muting all color lessening the contrasts
and plunging the bird market into a huge
vacuous silence in which only the squeaking door
of a rusty birdcage flopping to and fro in the breeze
can be heard like the creaking saloon doors
in some surreal spaghetti western
providing an epiphanic aperture into which
one might choose to delve for a fractured moment
of relentless self-introspection and perhaps
come up with something as seemingly apodictic as
there's always the possibility that
I'm better off than I would be if I wasn't the way I am
even if I have no idea how it is I got to be this way
and then the clouds go scudding off toward the strait
and the harsh North African sunlight comes
sweeping down the tiered cubist-looking hillside
toward the harbor while the metallic blue-green
of the peacocks and the bright yellow
of the canaries would like to dazzle my eyes
but they're already locked on the glinting blades
of the knives two loudly arguing bird merchants
have pulled in order to settle their angry dispute
in a manner not entirely uncommon
in this part of the world.

WRITING IN THE DARK

John Robinson

In May of 1970, I moved from the South Side to the North Side of Chicago. I was 24 years old. I left the neighborhood where I had grown up to live in a new neighborhood. I left a place that was dying for one that was coming alive, one filled with caf  s, restaurants, bookstores, boutiques, and movie theaters. My new locale existed in what was known as the Lincoln Park area, but by the time I arrived it was promulgated by shrewd real estate developers as Serendipity City. It was a city within a city designed mainly for twenty-somethings, and although rents weren't cheap, a young person could live relatively comfortably on an entry-level salary. I settled there to become a writer, or more precisely, a novelist.

From the spring of 1970 to late summer of 1972, I obsessively focused on that ambition.

A couple of years earlier, I had graduated from college and returned to Chicago living in my grandmother's home. I got a job teaching Social Studies to 8th graders at Bryn Mawr School, located just four blocks away, and at the end of each teaching day, I attempted to write what I simply referred to as "my novel." Progress was slow and difficult in my grandmother's study, and I came to believe that the only way I might find success was to unshackle myself from the bonds of the past by acquiring my own apartment where I would be stimulated and free. So when I received news that my girlfriend, Dianne, lost her roommate, I quickly pitched her the idea that we might find an apartment and move in together. After a lengthy discussion of logistics, she agreed and within a week we found a spectacular place to live. It was the first residence we were shown, and we grabbed it.

I vividly recall the first day in my new surroundings. While Dianne remained at home to beautify our dwelling, I walked the nearby streets in a state of ecstasy. But I didn't get far. After walking approximately two blocks, I paused at the intersection of North Clark Street and West

Diversey Parkway. For a long moment, I took in all the sights, sounds, and smells of those convergent streets. Then, with no clear destination, I started heading south on North Clark Street. I recall passing a greasy spoon called the Steak 'N Egger (which was popularly referred to then as the Steak 'N Stagger). It was a restaurant run by hicks wearing grease-stained white T-shirts, and inside contained a horseshoe-shaped counter surrounded by stools. Day or night, it was always busy, and I did not know passing it the first time that, for as long as I lived in the neighborhood, I would be a regular customer. The restaurant was on a street that turned quickly tacky. Nevertheless, I preferred it to the more gentrified quarter located in the opposite direction. I trudged another fifty yards or so past the Steak 'N Egger, only to turn around and walk the sidewalk already traversed. Once returned to the intersection, I paused, and then repeated the journey I'd just completed. I had no idea how long I walked that same length of street. I remember what I was wearing: light leather jacket and pants. I liked those clothes because they seemed--though I had no model to support this theory--to be the attire of a writer. And I remember it was still daylight when I began my trek, and before long street lights came on as darkness appeared. And I was still walking. I was too keyed up to abort my excursion and to return to the apartment. I believed that by merely changing residences I had taken a bold step in my dream to become a writer, and I felt that by striding down that small stretch of street I was initiating some unproclaimed--but nevertheless pivotal--rite of passage into my new life. Cultural psychologists might have surmised that what I was doing was not dissimilar to an animal marking territory, and in a sense that was true. I was attempting to absorb and to savor the intoxicating stimuli of my new terrain, and use it to strengthen my resolve. It was even better if the area had an edgy, somewhat precarious feel to it. I was walking a street, I assumed, that a writer would chose to travel. Though I was in no danger, the people who frequented this section of the neighborhood were not part of a rising affluent class, or a group whom good fortune had enriched and exalted their lives. They had had their

troubles, and those troubles were worn on worn out faces. Yet I preferred to circulate among these lost souls, drawing strange strength from the despoiled and down-at-the-heel vapors of their company. Perhaps my attraction to them had to do with the belief that I was finally among the raw material I needed to explore in the stories I was about to write. Or maybe it was just the desire to make a clean break with my past, a past that some would call privileged, but I regarded as cursed in all its stifling and unrelenting blandness. As I wandered among my new neighbors, I vowed that I would not fail this time. This time would be different. After a lengthy interlude of self-mobilization, I finally ended my journey, and started back towards home. Whatever strength I absorbed that night, I was going to need for the difficult days ahead.

The apartment contained no study or office. Except for the bathroom, and the downstairs bedroom, the space was open concept. I placed my writing desk against one wall in the living room. On it lay an old, grey, Royal manual typewriter. Above the desk, I built shelves for books, and in the small wall space between the two, Dianne created an art object made of plexiglass as a gift to my tiny workspace. It consisted of an arrangement of small pins joined by a series of connecting wires. She called this sculpture my "Brain." It was an expression of her confidence in my eventual success in achieving the monumental task I had assigned myself. I took her object d'art seriously. In fact, every time I sat at my desk and regarded it, I received a flash of encouragement. In those early days it was hard to get encouragement from anyone. After all, she was my lone ally in the conflict I had undertaken. I trusted her judgment, and therefore her vote of confidence counted significantly.

Although I was excited about my new lodging and environs, I very quickly realized I had overlooked one large and rather obvious disadvantage of moving locations. Or rather I suppressed the disadvantage because it would diminish the rising spirits I felt on making this sudden and dramatic relocation. By moving from one area of Chicago to another, I had only succeeded in creating a greater distance between my home and job.

Whereas my grandmother's home was only a few minutes from my school, my new digs forced me to travel an additional forty-five minutes each way, every day. By the time I arrived home after a long teaching day, I was additionally fatigued by fighting crosstown traffic. And if that weren't enough to make my assignment more difficult, I had also deducted the precious little writing time I possessed. Much of that time was already appropriated by my classroom commitments: correcting papers, writing exams, and curriculum planning.

When I finally had time to work on my novel, my exhaustion at night was quickly accompanied by the same futility I experienced on the South Side of Chicago. I suffered from what was traditionally called Writer's Block, but for me I never felt "blocked." When I couldn't move forward with an idea, it felt more to me like a blend of suffocation, claustrophobia, and blindness. E.L. Doctorow once wrote: "Writing is like driving at night in the fog. You can only see as far as your headlights, but you can make the whole trip that way." However, my experience with writing a novel back then was more like driving without headlights. It was like writing in the dark. There was neither illumination nor direction. Over the years, so many romantics had glamorized the story of the young writer creating his first novel. They told tales of the joys of creation following a path to eventual triumph and universal recognition. But I felt none of that during those early days. Rather than feeling good, I felt bad. I felt bad about what I'd written and what I was attempting to write. I didn't feel the inspiration which came with rapturous vision and emancipating ideas. I hadn't felt boundless horizons to explore; instead, I felt restrained, muted, and adrift. If this was what the act of creation felt like, then I was in the wrong business. As time passed, it was difficult to motivate myself knowing the pain that lay ahead each day at my desk. And once I finally sat down to write, I found I had nothing to say. This was especially heartbreaking. All the writers I read and admired were renowned for having something intensely significant to communicate. But when I attempted to convey important ideas of my own, I failed at every turn. I was familiar with the cliché that

you learn more from your failures than you do success. But I hadn't learned anything from my failures. I learned only one thing: to write a book was to discover just how vast my ignorance was on any subject.

Each day that passed without real progress cast doubt on my ambition to become a novelist. I began to question the sanity of the decision. My formal education was inadequate. I owned a Bachelor's Degree in Business and Economics, and therefore hadn't done nearly enough reading of fiction to prepare me for this abrupt and kamikaze turn away from my major field of study. All my college writing had been nonfiction; I hadn't even attempted writing a short story in my life, let alone a novel. And although in the two years since graduation, I had dutifully read every classic, modern, and contemporary novel I could get my hands on, I was still in a desperate catch-up game. It became quickly obvious that I was attempting the nearly impossible: teaching myself how to write a novel while I was attempting to write one for publication.

Another thing that haunted the project was the actual size of a novel. What made my foundering so difficult was the realization of the distance to be traveled from the first word of the book to the final period. I couldn't imagine writing a two hundred and fifty page novel. If only the length weren't so daunting, I might make a crack at it. But not long after I'd begun my arduous journey, I'd discovered a couple of prominent publishing houses that offered literary fellowships for the fledgling novelist. All you had to do was to submit approximately fifty pages of a novel-in-progress, and if the editor liked what he read, a contract was drawn up for the balance of the book to be delivered by an agreed upon date. Further, the literary fellows were given a ten thousand dollar advance, enough to take a year off from teaching to complete the balance of the novel.

I believed I could write fifty pages. That was possible. And if the partial manuscript was accepted for publication, I could imagine myself completing the remainder of my story. And even if I were incapable of finishing the novel, at the very least I had successfully written part of one well enough to deceive an editor and to receive actual money. That, alone,

was something to work for! Even this deception made me feel less a fraud. And yet there was still a chance I might succeed in finishing the book with a little headwind created by the confidence shown by a publisher.

With this new agenda, I got to work. And maybe it was the feasibility of this new plan that allowed for the first glimmers of progress to appear. I knocked out the first draft of the partial novel in less than a month, and although I was still driving down the same dark road as before, some flashes of light fitfully appeared from street lamps giving me enough illumination to continue forward.

I have little recollection of what I wrote back then. All I can recall is writing a story that portrayed three characters: an aging priest who'd lost his faith, an obstreperous old woman living alone in a boarding house, and a young man of college age, who was a thinly disguised me. The manuscript contained some well-written descriptions of places and people, but had no compelling narrative. And with no clear direction, and nothing for my characters to do, I quickly declared the forty-eight pages of the novel as unpublishable and destroyed them.

The second draft was essentially the same novel, but with an additional character. My new character was a flamboyant, treacherous, chameleon personality, and who instilled some life into an otherwise lifeless story. But he, alone, could not save an uneventful novel. After forty-six pages, I again destroyed all I had written. My apartment contained a lovely brick fireplace, and I tossed many typewritten pages into its red-hot flames. Frustrated by a lack of progress that first summer in my new apartment, I decided in early fall to try my hand at short fiction. For reasons I still cannot divine, I choose to write a story about modern cannibalism on a Caribbean island. A French journalist discovers the barbaric ritual, and suffers the same grim fate shortly before he can alert the island's police. Despite its gimmicky structure and style, it worked on some potboiler level, and I sent it out to a handful of magazines. All quickly rejected my submission, except one. I sent several query letters to the lone holdout, but received no response. After a time, I dropped the story into my desk drawer and

abandoned hope of ever seeing it in print. But I thought well enough of it not to pitch it into the fireplace as I had done the other novel drafts. That was progress.

Those successive failures in my new home set me back. And with the academic year underway, once again, my writing time became limited. Further, to make matters even more arduous, on December 7, 1970, I acquired a beagle puppy, "Valdez," named after a motion picture we were supposed to attend before making an abrupt detour. On a whim, Dianne and two friends went to a local pet store--The Puppy Corral--and there I saw him, jumping up and down, and with each leap, banging his head against the ceiling of his cage. Once we made the fatal error of releasing him from his pen and took him into the Getting Acquainted Room (where he proceeded to run in circles for the duration of our "getting acquainted" time), neither of us could bear the thought of returning him to his prison cell. It seemed too cruel. He was way too cute to entertain re-imprisonment. So, foolishly, we took him home.

Immediately, I paid the price. Valdez put the kibosh on any writing I might have contemplated that winter. While I taught during the day, Valdez slept. By the time I returned home from a long work day, he was ready for action. Every day, I took him for a long emancipating run in Lincoln Park. He was a wild dog, and if I unhooked his leash, I often had to chase him for a good hour before I could reattach him to it. I tried to keep him out running for as long as I could. I was trying to exhaust him to compensate for his day spent alone in a city apartment, but I only succeeded in exhausting myself. By the time I returned home for supper, I was in no mood to do any writing.

Bringing Valdez into my life was huge mistake. He had spent too many hours awaiting Dianne's and my return home. After a time, he grew restless, and started tearing apart our carefully decorated apartment. He chewed on the fabric of the sofa and rugs, and pulled down full length curtains. One day he tore open a styrofoam bean bag chair and fell into it, almost suffocating while desperately trying to escape. Dianne rescued

him just in time, and pounded the back of his inert body until he came alive, releasing a throat full of styrofoam. For the next few days, he shat nothing but styrofoam pellets in the empty lot beside our apartment building.

After many failed attempts and obstacles, by early spring of 1971, I finally had a minor breakthrough. On a Saturday April afternoon, with Valdez sleeping nearby, I wrote the first chapter of a new novel. The chapter was inspired by a real life event: the death of my mother. I revisited the harrowing scene in her hospital room the day before her death from lung cancer, and for the first time I wrote a vivid scene of dramatic tension and resonance. While it was unsettling to recall a tragic and sorrowful moment that had occurred just a few years earlier, I began to understand how a powerful scene was created. I was not the protagonist in this novel, but I understood his emotions and motivations. I brought the reader unceremoniously and uncomfortably close to the powerful realities of love and death. It seemed so obvious when I wrote the chapter. I was able to, for the first time, make a scene real and compelling.

Despite this long awaited achievement, I was unable to follow-up. I was unsure of where to take my story, and I tried to keep the subsequent chapters at the same level of excellence as the first, but with little success. And my ongoing difficulties juggling work, Valdez, and sleep returned to interrupt my writing schedule during the spring of 1971. I again endeavored to reach the magic number of fifty pages so I could send it to a publisher, and by the time, in early June, when I had reached that beguiling total, I pronounced this third draft attempt--with the exception of the spectacular first chapter--another failure. I need a full uninterrupted summer of writing, I believed, to take advantage of the progress I'd made.

But I would get no such summer. Dianne and I planned to get married that June at her home in New England, and then spend much of the summer touring Italy and Greece. We had arranged everything the previous fall. Though I planned to use my trip to the classical world as an inspiration, I knew I would not be writing. By the time we returned home to Chicago in August with our skin darkened by the Mediterranean sun,

Valdez had advanced from a puppy to a fully grown dog. My novel-in-progress, by contrast, had not grown a whisker. While I was inspired by what I had witnessed in Italy and Greece, I was also frustrated on my return home. Now there was little time to take advantage of that inspiration before the start of the school year, and once that was underway, I would experience the same exasperating lack of continuous time I had suffered since I began teaching.

The reality of my situation became painfully clear: the real obstacle that stood in my way was time. I could not succeed unless I had more of it. I had too much to learn about novel writing. I needed an entire year of uninterrupted concentration. Until that happened, I was on a fool's errand. And the longer I persisted in this fruitless exercise of self-delusion, the more I would begin to hate my life.

In the fall of 1971, just as I was about to abandon my dream of becoming a novelist, my spouse came to my rescue. Dianne proposed that we (the three of us: me, her, and Valdez) would move to New England where she would work for a year while I remained at home writing. It was an incredibly generous offer, one that I eagerly accepted, though it came with its own ancillary performance pressure: given more to write, there could be no excuse. I had to deliver or surrender.

But just as we were starting to make plans for our move across the country, Dianne was suddenly offered a teaching post in Edinburgh, Scotland. We could now entertain living in Europe for the next couple of years, giving me more than enough time to finish a novel. Furthermore, I would be living and writing in a medieval-looking city with a rich literary history for inspiration. It was a gift given to few. Though we wouldn't have much money for entertainment, none was needed, we believed, in such stimulating surroundings. Edinburgh would be our base of operations, as we would travel around Scotland and Europe as we pleased. This turn of good fortune was a sign that my dream of becoming a writer had, at last, allied itself with destiny.

We booked passage aboard the great ocean liner, the SS France, leav-

ing New York City for Southampton, England, departing on August 31, 1972. Instead of just moving from one side of town to the other, this time I would leave my homeland, and go to my new country to become a writer.

Everything sounded wonderful and liberating except one thing: there would not be three of us traveling together to the Old World. Valdez had to be left in America, and with a new family. Despite all the troubles he launched, I was devastated. I had started a new family, a family of three, and now an important member had to be left behind. Most likely, I would never see him again. And yet I knew there was no other option. I had no choice. The die was cast. I would never get this opportunity again. Therefore with a mixture of pain and anticipation, we pressed forward with our plans.

I was no longer “in the dark” about my future, though my writing still had a long way to go before it was publishable. Yet I was convinced it was going to be.

And so ended the first phase of my journey to become a writer. My only hope was that the next phase would not be as difficult or as long. Whatever the cost, however, I was determined--successful or not--to see it through to the end.

ELEGY FOR HIS EYES

Amy Marengo

air between driver passenger spins
moisture i don't know how to name

a stiff wing in his grill i don't know how
to name a hollow

shoulder blade cracking against his gums
attempts escape in the wrong direction

by wrong i mean toward repurposed sticks
patterns of successful nests by direction

i mean any breeze is too much exhaust
too much flood too much fizzling out

to treat my heart better than his mystery
ends when i'm sure i don't know where

the sickness came from lying in a tomb
of salt begging him to lick me

free this burning everything burning every
inch unfolding like a map of keeping quiet

when he won't look at me and he never
looks at me anymore

ELEGY I DIDN'T KNOW HOW TO WRITE

Penny Lane

I didn't like the smell
of soap and Lysol.

It haunted the halls
of the convalescent home.

And I hated watching
reruns of The Golden Girls,

from the tired linoleum
of my grandmother's room.

She begged my mother for a cigarette,
a Santa hat askew on her head.

It was cheaper than a wig
and covered the bald spots.

Sometimes I crave gritty hot chocolate,
like the nurses would bring

when they came to change her bedpan
or stick in a new IV.

The day she died, my mother
told me I didn't

have to go to school.
I didn't want to go,

because I had a math test,
and I didn't understand long division.

DON'T FEEL GUILTY

Matthew Baker

for K.D.

At the end of the month,
we'll all go out with the trash.
We'll be the spill at the bottom
of the driveway on garbage mornings.

The books want to tell us
these clotted bodies aren't actually us
anymore than carry doesn't always lead to
miscarry. We are merely chunks of flesh

in the end. No one loves
to be cheated out of life.
But don't feel guilty—
something is always failing somewhere.

Do you think it still smells,
that half-eaten burrito on my curb?
Try to wonder about that instead.
The noonday sun might recook it.

This will all be behind us soon:
your flushed cheeks, this tower of tissues
in my bin, the stark emptiness
you feel beneath your belly,

our walk with the small pine box
all the way to the fire.

BUYING INK AT WALGREENS

S.J. Dunning

I stopped shopping here after a girl was found dead in the parking lot this summer—except when I need ink or when I’m with my husband and it’s the most convenient place to get cigarettes on our way home from the other side of the bridge. The details of her death are sparse: She hung up her phone after receiving a strange call and was last seen driving toward downtown [the taillights of her Mazda burning]. But Walgreen’s: Where You Go to Die hasn’t ceased looping. It’s like Walgreens is Death’s playhouse and you never know when you’ll be his next dolly, or it’s like Death knows all of our phone numbers and when he calls us we must go wherever he wants us to go. It’s like who the hell do I think I am—to want to write about music boxes and the ballerinas that spin on springs inside of them, to want to write about anything but that girl and whatever song was playing when she left the party.

CAR WRECK

Morrisah Jackson

Where do those people go after
their cars have kissed and the air
is scented with burnt rubber, as ash
and smoke rise above scattered
shattered limbs twisted like fingers
that pull on harp strings, candied
red glass dances idly around
their bodies, frozen, where they lay
deflated as balloons, limp and faded
faces fixed with baby doll eyes glazed,
and they gaze far past the sunset?

HANDLEBARS

Amanda Brahlek

My mother's face broke the blue of the hospital sheets. Her shorts folded at the foot of the bed. Something greasy smeared over the cuts. I heard him say, *Your mother has been bent*. But what he said was, *your mother has been hit*. I pictured her: a loose doodle, her body rearranged, head hanging. She wore a plastic bracelet like the ones from the fair, the ones cut off after the Ferris wheel and funnel cake. I read her name: *Autumn Lee Brahlek*. I wanted to cut it off. I wanted her to smell like powder instead of antiseptic tang. She let me run my finger under the bracelet. Her wrist was damp. I wondered how it kept from breaking. He brought in x-rays. They rattled. Light broke through the shape of her spine. I thought I saw a tower, a lighthouse, a ladder of bones running from her hips to her skull. I studied those hips, those handles, that pushed wide to bear me. He tapped what looked like a burst of heat lightning and said: *It's broken*, but what I heard was, *She's broken*.

Handlebars over
asphalt, pedals spin empty,
the road stained red.

ON ISOLATION

Brendan O'Neil

Once upon a time a man froze to death.
I don't know if he really did. I'm just
the one who wears coats on long walks,
even when it's hot out. You never know
when a blizzard will drive around the corner.
I think I met the man who probably froze
the other day, outside a dinner party
I declined the invite to. He didn't talk
and neither did I so I can't be sure.
Going for a walk in the forest instead,
the trees and snowfall talked but all
at once. Everything became one and quiet.
The blizzard hasn't gone back home yet,
so I'm on a walk again. Deeper today,
I found the cave with trees on the ceiling,
weeping willows I don't touch. Outside
trees were starved. I am a tree, I need
my own cave safe from any storm.
Digging straight down, trees don't
seem to get as cold. Covered with a coat,
inside is white, confused, upside down.
Time travel must feel like this.
I'll come out in a newspaper.

LETTER TO JUSTIN: ON WRITING THE DEAD

Justin Evans and Jeff Newberry

Dear Justin—the ghost I saw
in the hallway when I was
ten may have been a trick
of the light. Perhaps shadows
shifted as the pines groaned
in the wind. Maybe I made
a face of silhouette & porch light—
pareidolia. I've always spoken
to the dead & felt them near.
I've never seen them, not even
felt them. Still, I see my father's
face each morning when I shave.
My heart races from time to time
& I imagine a sick hospital
stench, where he lay wrapped
in green sheets as his heart expired.
I think of my grandfather's
palsied hand in those last
moments, the .22 rifle barrel
nestled on his tongue.
The steel tastes cold & final.
I used to pray for midnight
visions, dreams of the dead.
My father's never spoken to me
from beyond. I've yearned
for just a hint—a whiff
of his aftershave, the acrid
stench of a cigarette, my name
whispered when no one's around.
I write them to life—my father
& grandfather. I study them
on white paper, lines of words
that, if I tilt my head just so,
if I squint my eyes just right,
make a mask, a face, a me.

MAN WAKES UP IN BODY BAG

Jo-Lynn Heusser

I must be a ghost. I never thought
that when you died, you'd wake up in a morgue.
I thought there'd be an ascending, or some white light to wander towards.
Not cold tile floors, and stainless steel tables. I thought
There'd be a warmth, at least, not this cold room with a leaking sink.
I didn't realize I'd have to pry myself out of a vinyl body bag,
And wander naked through the alleys on my way back home.
The neighbor dogs bark but I don't really know where else to go,
Except for the casino. I thought ghosts could walk through walls,
And levitate. It seems like the cruelty of reality is in death
Blistered feet on concrete. A chill left on the skin.

CARVING A NAME IN THE ICE OF A RIVER

Danielle Hanson

It would be pointless if you didn't need a knife.
Be careful not to slip—you won't feel the pain,
But your work will be as undone as your heart.
Now sit back and shiver—wait until spring.
Freeze slowly to your death as the name unmoors.
It is off to haunt the ocean. You cannot haunt the ocean.

SHRINE THEORY

John Sibley Williams

In the clearing, rain dark
and hard enough to make us
wish we were soft and dry
and pure enough to feel
some contrast against our
skin. Our mouths cupped,
tilted upward, tasting ourselves.
Like the blood bowl crowning
an ancient ceremonial altar.
These heavy stones must
have a purpose. Men
presumably on horseback
dragged each, in turn,
from a distant quarry
to get them a bit closer
to heaven. Or slaves yoked
to the pulling. Or god forgot
to scatter them evenly
across this muddy field. We all
need a break from creation
sometimes. From the violence
of creation. It's true
hundreds of fires have burned
and burned out within us.
No closer, still we continue
to weigh down bodies with stone
so our ghosts can't escape
our worship.

MY HUSBAND IN BOXES

Gina Stratos

Sitting in the car, my hand on the marble box
that contains all that is left of you,
the stark white rattle of bone against stone,
and the curious metal button that failed
to give itself up to the oven.

The sun in my lap and the window sealed tight,
I recall the wet atmosphere of your laugh,
the swollen bulge of your red temper.

I can't put the box in the trunk,
because last week we bought kindergarten clothes,
you cleaned the garage and overcooked the steaks,
put on your skate shoes and pretended to be a boy again,
bloodied your knee on the concrete ramp,
and came home with the hook of a grin across your face.

All that remains now, this box and the brown paper bag
that holds your broken glasses. Your knife. Your wallet.
The sheets are cold and I've thrown away your cologne,
aching from its familiar smell of cut grass and soap.
I've tucked your shoes back inside the closet
because they look expectant; they don't know you're gone.

And eventually, I'll take the advice of other memory keepers,
and bury you in big blue bins for our kids to unearth.
I'll swallow salt and wine, carefully pack the ornaments
of you, listen to a song about the darkening of the light,
my dinner growing cold on the table.

BRUSHFIRE

Conor Scruton

Some days with my mother
for reasons I can't completely remember
late in the year,
we'd collect loose branches and leaves

and pile them up
where the grass was grazed away.
We'd watch the brush
turn black to white

and white to nothing
from the other side of the fence
as the biggest limbs sent
hands and fingers

searching fire into the air
when they finally gave —
and later we'd know
what it's like to wake sometimes

to the wet smell of woodburn
and wonder if you need to run
barefoot to the field with waterbuckets,
pouring desperate

to blot out the dark hint of day —
so scared to hear the bad news
though it's true
we've always been ready.

UNDER THE BRIDGE UNDER THE TRAIN TRACKS

C.C. Russell

It thunders
some nights
when the trains pass over
and it looks
like the stars
are shaking
like your hands were,
like the night
your hands
were in her pockets.
You'll remember.

I DON'T LIKE MUCH PAST YESTERDAY

Brendan O'Neil

Searching for a guide on painting a wall,
we sit entangled, our arms plug holes
in each other's ribcages and heads.
Street lights out the window are moons,
bright enough to make a glare reaching
back into a time months ago. I remember
being scared of big dogs, but years later
I figure it's better to get angry at plumbing
leaks. What's the point in using arms
like drain plugs when we've already
abandoned our lemonade stands. You can't
feel how empty a covered bottle is
unless you shake it up a bit. Broken glass
mirrors leave scars when you keep picking
at the scabs. I'll move less when I want
to stop bleeding out.

ANSWER IN MORSE CODE OR SCREAMS

Thomas Haverly

How many razors will fit in your eyes?

Pick one:

- a) glowing
- b) burning
- c) scorching
- d) freezing

How do you resurrect yourself?

- a) eating your own heart
- b) spiteful living
- c) dark magic
- d) their hands

How shall you lay (while you silently scream)?

- a) on an ants nest
- b) in broken glass
- c) like a Venus
- d) with eyes removed

Who has the gun? You or Them

Use three to describe what is happening:

Panic Anxiety Heart-attack Poisoning Just another day

Do you own your skin?

Yes or No

How much time has passed?
(measure in breaths per hour)

NEGOTIATIONS

Brad Summerhill

When Sharon's cancer returns, negotiations begin. If it goes away for good, I'll be a better person. I'll feed hungry children. And I imagine the disease flying off like a gawky crow. If she lives two more years, I'll sell my Roberto Clemente cards and give the proceeds to the food bank. I mark the date in my head when I'll put them up for auction. Typical foxhole negotiations. I try to pray as I walk past the strip mall in the a.m. sunshine but it feels like the old dream where I show up to the office naked, having forgotten to dress myself. I'm mortified as I trek toward my cubicle, hiding from Vicky the admin assistant, the cute one with the curls. She sniggers as I shade my privates behind the fig leaf of a manila envelope.

A blast of dread plows me over.

I jump forward, yanking Rusty's leash, spin around to see a golden brown sedan violating our right-of-way as it zooms into the parking lot.

"Did that guy honk at you?" A bicyclist wheels by in a Tour de France getup. "What an asshole." He rides at the head of a slow-moving cluster of spokes and spandex. "Deli owner," one of his companions calls over his shoulder. "Almost ran me over few weeks ago!" And they cycle off into the unknown, or onto the parkways along the American.

I watch him unloading flats of soda pop from the backseat of his Toyota Camry. I cross the narrow parking lot with no plan in mind.

"Get that d-dog away from me," he stutters. It's a cloying accent—maybe Brooklyn or Queens or Philadelphia for all I know. I follow him to the doorway. A photo of Mickey Mantle appears to be the only rationale for the name of his business: "New York Deli." A slogan is stenciled on a catering truck outside: "Where Italian Food Meets Soul Food."

"I think there was a mistake," I say. "You honked?" Why am I here? Why am I talking to this man?

I trail him from his Camry. A girl comes from behind the counter to deal with the soda cans. "You're the owner?" I ask.

"Nah." I follow him outside again. He ducks into the backseat and grunts as he straightens with another couple trays of soda. "Wasn't a mistake." His hair is iron gray, like his crooked teeth. He wears a baseball cap turned backward and eyeglasses behind which he blinks too frequently. "I honked on purpose." It's a lisp more than a stutter. "Taking your sweet-ass time walking along. La-de-da. Some of us got shit to do."

I nose up to him.

"Keep that dog a-away from me. I'll call the cops." His s on "cops" is more like a *th*: it sprays onto my face.

"You don't have to worry about the dog!" *I'm the one you gotta worry about.* Do I say it or do I dream it?

"You come to my place of business a-assault me? I'll call the cops you assaulting me." He takes two steps backward and the girl wants to know what's going on.

I feel the blood swell through my neck into my brain. I let him drop the trays on a table and as he reaches into his back pocket for his phone I stand close enough to inspect his gray, crooked teeth. The girl watches us. "I won't waste my time on a prick like you," I say. "Your shithole deli will go under soon enough. I'll be sure to tell all my friends and neighbors." I take wing, smugness levitating my body. I'm moving fast, leaving him behind.

But I turn in the parking lot to find him heaving at my neck.

"Is that what you gonna do? Is it? Tell everyone? Try to ruin my business?" He holds his cell phone in his fist. Rusty plops to the asphalt, no sense of tension. I blame the dog for what happens next. If he does his job and bites my assailant, or barks, the drama ends. Instead, Deli Owner inches toward me and punctuates his sentences with tiny sputters: "What? Pfff. You gonna do something?" His rancid spittle becomes intentional. Through fat quivering lips he *pfffs* spittle

onto my face. “Huh? Pfff.” I can read his thoughts: plausible deniability. We know it in the insurance trade. He can say he never spit on me. Who saw it? Where’s the evidence? zith a girlish squeal. His eyeglasses dangle on the side of his face and a spot of blood blooms at the corner of his mouth.

“You’re going to jail!” He wipes his lip with a hairy forearm. He bends to retrieve his cell phone and I realize I could punt his head. He is helpless. He looks up as if he might cry, glances over his shoulder to spot the girl.

I stare at my palm, the foreign agent that perpetrated the crime. It should go to jail, not me. Cut it off and dispose of it. The girl holds a hand to her mouth to contain her disbelief.

“He spit on me,” I call to her.

“You’re going to jail!” he screams.

Jail is not an option.

I went to jail once. Actually it was a spacious drunk tank in the juvenile detention facility in Bend, Oregon. I’d been puking in someone’s backyard, realizing I wasn’t much for alcohol when the paddy wagon pulled in front of the house and the police siphoned off all the partygoers who couldn’t handle their liquor. I recall their laughter as they stepped me into wagon with five or six other sorry specimens. My parents retrieved me and undertook the requisite shaming, which continued two weeks later in front of a judge who said I had to pick up trash a month of Saturdays in an orange jumpsuit. The incident must have left me with a scar of terror, for the notion of jail sets me in a panic and I run.

Rusty and I bound down J Street. The weezy restaurateur can’t keep up. I hear him yabbering into his phone. I cut behind a feral azalea bush and Rusty bounces in my face wondering why the fun should end. I move again when I recover. We retrace our route into the North Forties.

I’m winded as I slam into our cottage.

“No! Leave him out front!” Sharon’s voice booms. “Don’t drag him

through the house, Daniel. Come on, what the hell?" For a woman sentenced to die, she strikes me as overly concerned about dirt on her rugs.

I lower the curtain in the living room, peek onto the street to spy for patrol cars.

"You and Rusty get a real run for once?"

"Where're you off to?"

She's dressed for the real world, her shaved head covered by a sequined Maoist cap. Slacks and a blouse replace the homebound sweats. The treatments start up again on Monday. She shaves her head as a preemptive measure. She won't wear wigs. The cancer is metastasizing in her bones, in her liver. Her girlfriends squeal and say she looks wonderful. And it's true. She possesses a glow unlike anything I've known or witnessed. She literally smiles in the face of death. I've come to use "literally" in its literal sense because Sharon hates it when I say things like, "You should have seen Tejada hit the ball. It literally flew into space."

"It's my day to volunteer in Jesse's classroom," she says. "Aren't you late for work?"

"They'll get along without me."

She grins like it's a big joke. Everything is a big joke.

Does she sense I'm in trouble? Does she suspect I can't get along, not without her? It's the only thing she refuses to hear. She wants to hear that Jesse and I will be fine. She wants to hear me say how I will keep her memory alive, how I will tell bedtime stories starring his mommy. She wants to hear my plans for getting him onto the school bus every morning and how in three years I'll enroll him in the charter middle school we want. She needs to hear that I will buck up and act like a man, that I will blossom and stop living like a helpless baby.

She smiles, as though to reassure me. "I'm not ready to give up yet, Dan."

*

The true crime is that pettiness stalks our living days. We are

here for a minute and then into the ether, but the knowledge nudges our behavior not an inch. She sends me postings from a critical care blog that focuses on how a husband is to deal with a wife's lymphoma. The notion of being forgotten seems more fitting for me than for Sharon. She's run out of ringtones to assign to each friend or cousin who calls. I have four people who call me: Sharon, Sharon's sisters (they count as one), Sharon's mother and our attorney who will stop calling once she's sure we are legally prepared for my wife's passing. I have the insurance end of things covered, naturally. All of my excessive riders turn out to be useful things.

You play the percentages. The first time out, as the chemicals drip into the veins of the woman you love, you say to yourself, Hell, we've got a fifty-fifty shot at beating this thing. That's fair odds. I'd shoot over Highway 50 to one of the Indian casinos to place money on odds like that. And you see her transform into a pale doll and you surprise yourself because your love grows. She has given you a son and a home and a meaning. You both wanted another child and you realize it won't happen but it doesn't matter because the oncologist pronounces salvation in the single word *remission*. We are safe. And a year later we are not safe. You explain to your third grader that Mommy is sick again, she'll be going to the hospital for her treatments like before, remember? That's how she'll get better.

She won't get better. Your pillow is a cactus. There is no rest. She's knocked out from the exhaustion of volunteer day and you stalk the cottage, pausing to listen to your son's breathing, pausing to think, What'll I do? How will I handle the West Coast regional supervisor who's made it clear that the numbers must grow?

You think these thoughts because you are selfish. You think them because the 21st Century American male is programmed to concern himself with three things: I, Me, My. Your jagged insomnia invites you to discover a revelation that is forever hidden from you. There is no enlightenment. She glows and you sulk.

In the dark I plunk out a note on Sharon's Yamaha. It took three movers and four spousal arguments to transport her upright from Ukiah to East Sacramento. It takes up half a wall where a big screen TV could be hanging.

It used to sit in her parents' house. We played "Chopsticks" on it the first time she took me up there. We were in college. I slipped out of the guest bedroom and listened for her mom and dad's stirring. I stumbled against a wall peeling with family photos, waited breathless, clambered through the gloom into her childhood bedroom, into her snickering arms. She whispered, *Shush, you klutz* and it felt like *I love you*.

She insists that I don't need to accompany her to chemo this time round. She could make her way blindfolded through Sutter Memorial and I have work to get done. She says these things to me. Late Monday afternoon I beat the rush hour traffic home to see how her session went and she asks, "Why's Rusty shitting all over my begonias? Aren't you walking him?" Jesse sits at the counter flipping through math flash cards. Sharon pushes herself upright, favoring one arm. I reach to support her, avoiding her swollen left arm where the drug port has been implanted.

"Our, um, routine got a little disrupted," I tell her. No credible lie or fabrication pops to mind, probably because I haven't been sleeping.

The bony cheeks make her eyes seem wider than natural. One of her crystals catches descending light at the window over the sink.

I say, "No worry, babe."

We hold the ridiculous and the deadly in the air between us, as though they were two equal beams breaking through one of her prisms. Sharon smirks, blows out a light breath. Her focus is clearly on her begonias, yet somehow I'm the ridiculous one. She takes my hand to assure me, "Well, it'll be fine." She means that her blue begonias will survive. "Get him the hell out of the yard though. Don't get too busy to take him out. It's good for your," she taps her temple with an index

finger.

An entire week Rusty and I avoid our route past the strip mall and into McKinley Park. The dog becomes confused as to where to poop. No matter how long I walk him, no matter how long he sniffs and searches, he can't find his favorite bushes, the familiar sign posts, the dog run in the pine grotto which triggers bowel release. We sniff around foreign parking lots and barbarous strips of sod. I rub his stomach to agitate his intestines. When we get home, he craps in the yard. I play dumb. It's easy. I barely have to playact.

The letters buzz on the page as I read to Jesse from *The Hobbit*. He brushes his teeth and gets into pajamas. He loves his bedtime story: a wee man on a brave adventure. I kiss him goodnight when I can no longer make sense of the words. I curl next to Sharon without brushing my teeth. The chemo has her snoring like a drunk.

The next morning I depart with Rusty to reclaim our routine. Sharon will depart for the hospital in a few hours to soak up, hope against hope, this final toxic cocktail.

I'm not even to the strip mall when the golden brown Camry slows in the far lane almost to a stop, ignoring the blares of traffic behind him, speeds up, makes an illegal U-turn and wheels nearly onto the sidewalk behind me. It's as if he's been patrolling J Street, awaiting my return. He zooms into the strip mall ahead of me. He runs inside the deli and emerges with an aluminum baseball bat. Instead of running to intercept me, he jumps into his car and drives thirty feet. I stand behind the cement base of an enormous streetlight. He shouts out his window for me to halt, although I am not moving. "I'm making a citizen's arrest," he announces, grunting out of his car. "There's a warrant out on you."

The ways of law enforcement are beyond me, yet I doubt there is a warrant out for my arrest.

"Is that right?" I say. "Okay, listen. We both had a bad day. I apologize for hitting you and you're probably sorry for spitting in my

face and egging me on. Come on. My dog and I need to go to the park so why don't I just apologize and we'll move on? I'm sorry. There's no need for this."

A pack of bicyclists are returning from the parkway. For a moment I believe it's the same cyclists who saw Deli Owner violate my right-of-way a week ago. No such thing. "Hey!" I wave to them. "Help! This man has a baseball bat! He's going to hit me with it." I couldn't piss him off more if I posted a sign claiming his pepperoni is infested with *e coli*. I have no fear he will take a swing at me. The man has no guts. Even I can see that. If I can distract him long enough with the onlookers, I'll be on my way and eventually my apology will sink in.

My plan appears to work.

A group of bicyclists stops across the street. They wait out traffic and make their way over to investigate. The deli owner rants about a citizen's arrest. He hammers the air with his bat as I jog away, waving thanks. The cyclists understand they are dealing with a lunatic. I hear one of them say, "Then let's call the real cops" and another one, "Stay back, dude." In my head I praise the fine Samaritans of River City.

Rusty poops in the blissful confines of his pine grotto.

I hang out at the park for as long as I can. If I hustle past the strip mall, on the far side of the street.... Squaring around would take an extra twenty minutes. There are no signs of trouble as I cross the intersection to slip behind the feral azalea bush.

A patrol car is parked in front of our cottage.

I use the side gate to put the dog in the backyard.

"Daniel," Sharon says, "I found these two nice officers outside talking to Hattie. Something about a deli?" Hattie is the neighbor a few doors down who drives Sharon to treatment and watches Jesse. She's taken him to school this morning.

I learn their names, shake hands, try to control mine from trembling. "The daughter called us and gave us your address, Mr. Thompson. Apparently she followed you here last week after a run-in

with her father?"

"Do I need a lawyer?"

They chuckle. They tell my wife she better go to Sutter, they don't want her to miss her session. Sharon, of course, has made fast friends of the officers.

"I can't leave now." She smiles. "I want to know what these people are accusing my husband of doing."

I tell them the story. I tell them that *he* assaulted *me* ... with his spittle. Sharon says she'll testify as a character witness. "Plus, Dan's no good at fighting. He runs from fights. Biggest wimp you've ever met." They laugh at me and I say, "That's exactly right."

"I don't think it'll come to trial, Mrs. Thompson. We just have to make sure this thing doesn't escalate."

"Listen," she says, "you go talk to that other man. He's the problem." I've walked Rusty on that route every day for seven years, she tells them. She leans on the counter. "Besides, I was with him all day. He never left the house, if you need to know the truth. Get it? I'll make a statement. You think they won't believe me?"

The officer glances at his partner. Sharon slaps her palm on the counter for emphasis. She laughs and pretends she is joking. I walk her to the sofa and she says she's okay, she can drive herself to the hospital.

"Gentlemen," I say, "you have to go now."

They are polite. They call Sharon "Ma'am." They say, "Goodbye, Ma'am. Hope you feel well."

Outside they warn me to avoid the deli. I promise them everything will smooth over and I inquire what kind of insurance the city provides. I already know the answer, of course. It's solid, the best around. I recommend they consider supplemental. I hand them business cards. "Here's my number." I try to keep it light. My hands quaver though they've done nothing to threaten me.

"The young lady just wanted to make sure it doesn't happen again."

"Who?" I ask.

"The daughter. She said he's having a rough go of it with business stress and her stepmom divorcing him. He's ... irritable. If you run into him, Mr. Thompson, you can defend yourself but, please, give the guy a break and walk away."

"Fast," the other one adds. "He could have an unregistered firearm. You never know."

I think of the girl stacking the soda cans in the glass cooler. I slapped her father in front of her. At that point, I imagine, he lost everything.

*

The next evening we're able to leave Jesse with Hattie for a few hours. Sharon has a few days before the next treatment. We can do something special. She says we need to stop by the strip mall for a bite.

"What?" I ask. "Oh. I get it. You mean, Where Italian Food Meets Soul Food. Parmesan chicken and a side of grits? Bucatini covered in red eye gravy?"

"Dan, there's no time to waste. Let's go make nice. It'll feel good for you."

"Don't waste your time. This guy is hopeless."

"Everybody's got a shot at redemption."

Redemption? We don't use words like that. "You are the optimist," I tell her.

"Always."

"Okay, but this guy is ... a piece of work."

"Aren't we all?"

*

We are the first, possibly the evening's only, customers. We walk into a restaurant on its last leg.

He sputters, "W-welcome!" Stepping forward, he recognizes me. "What are you doing here?"

"We want to try your food," I say. "Please. I came to apologize. Again." I'm aware that he will spit in my food, either by accident or more likely by intention. He might spice up our pasta with rat poison.

"Dad." It's his daughter. She wears a white apron. "Calm down. It's okay."

"Listen, Mr. Silvani," I say. "I know the police stopped by. You know we can't fight anymore so let's get along. This is why we came. To get along."

"You came to get along?" His doltish eyes blink behind his eyeglasses. His tongue licks his gray teeth. His daughter isn't pretty. She isn't ugly either. She must take after the mother.

Sharon seats herself at one of the tables and says, bright as daylight, "I can't wait to see the menu!" Red plaid table clothes signal dinner service.

"Come on," I say. "Our money is green."

"Here's the menu." He turns to heave himself over the counter. His black sneakers lift off the linoleum for a moment. When he stands upright again, he holds the aluminum bat.

"Dad! Stop!" His daughter pushes up a section of counter, places her hand on his arm. "Let's serve them dinner."

"I sure am hungry," Sharon lies. The drugs won't let her be hungry.

"You assault me. You come to my place of business." Spittle froths at the corner of his lip.

"Dad!"

"Mr. Silvani. I come in peace."

"I'll give you peace." He steps toward me with the bat.

"Give me that!" Sharon shouts. She stands and holds out her hand. "Stop it. Now. Hand it over."

"What?"

"Let me see that bat," she says.

He seems to look her over, to take her in. Maybe he sees her illness. Maybe he sees a woman who is an authority on weak men. I'm stunned when he hands over the bat. He looks sheepish, steals a

glance in my direction.

“You gotta prep dinner,” he says to his daughter.

“So we’ll order, okay?” Sharon says. “What looks good?”

“No. I don’t need charity. I got real customers booked tonight, lady. You can take him and go.”

“We came to make peace,” I say.

He points to a sign above the register. “I reserve the right,” he reads it, “to refuse service to anyone.”

“It’s a free country,” I tell him. “Sharon, come on. Please, Mr. Silvani, when you see me walking the dog, no more trouble.”

“You’re the one cause trouble.”

“Again, I’m sorry. Sharon, let’s go.”

“Yeah,” Mr. Silvani says, “you go now and you don’t come back.”

Sharon stops. She replays what he says in her head. *You go now and you don’t come back.* I can see her mulling it over. She will go and not come back. I sidle up to her, whisper in her ear. There is something wrong with the guy, I tell her. He’s not right in the head. She’s the peacemaker. She’s the one from a loving family. She shows me how it works. I learn to come home from work with a smile on my face. I learn to enjoy a family dinner, to appreciate tedious board games. She shows me how.

She puts up her hand. As if by an invisible force I back away. The swollen skin surrounding her drug port hangs in the air. Her hands grip the bat. She swings it into the window behind her. She puts her hips into it, like her dad showed her. The bat thuds on the glass like a dead piano key. Mr. Silvani and I jump. The red pepper shaker bounces and rolls off the table. It’s plastic so it doesn’t shatter. It wobbles on its side, stabilizes. Silvani’s daughter says something I can’t understand.

“Geez, lady. It’s my place of business.” But he almost whispers.

There’s a small crack where she tagged the window. This is why we have insurance, I think to say. Sharon leans on the bat like a cane, shaking her head, trying to understand what she’s done.

“Sharon.” I remove the bat from her hands. Silvani and his daughter say nothing to us as I escort her from the deli. I toss aside the bat and it gongs and pings on the sidewalk. The sound, for some reason, snaps us from our daze. We look at each other and giggle. “Oh my fucking God,” she says, and I cannot explain why we are laughing so hard, why we pass by our car toward the park. I lift her into my arms and Sharon whoops. There is no negotiation, no more time to bargain with the sky. I carry her like she told me to on our wedding night, and we are crossing another threshold. This time we cannot cross together. I will carry her for as long as I can. I jog a bit, as best I can. She throws back her head and shrieks as I lope down the street. She laughs and laughs. I run fast now because she is light in my arms, so light, almost nothing.

WHAT GOES BEFORE GOING UNSCATHED

Lisa Lewis

Naked, you're cutting your own hair,
scissors beakish in your left hand.

If you care one side's shorter,
 seedhead of thistle
blunt between your fingers, it's not showing in your head cock
 or your dull blades, quick work
on the neck's twin plumes
 flanking the spine's twisted eel.

Outside the bathroom window
the afternoon's obligations flutter free from the holly bush,
rainy, unsubdued,
like you, who have tried on and discarded

the spandex jeans, laced bustier, and daisy-leather sandals.

You are as a page erased
and scrawled over: older scripts
can't be decoded beneath recent blankness,
brightness.

Down with mistakes and hasty judgments, rushing
to greet whatever offered to take you: that too-
young man, for instance,
one too-long year.

He's now precisely old as you
 when one night, his last with you,
he gleamed his knowing
 from behind green
 contact lenses, after begging you
to drive three hours to save him—
he'd die, he said,

of all the wrongs
he realized he hadn't seen—
and you flashed down deep-woods
two-lanes, curves thrumming the tires,
to be turned away inside the trap he'd laid,
himself the bait.

He lifted his head on his slender neck.
He glared. He called you *old*.

All things being relative, you both raged,
as if he wouldn't live,
you either, to look back
glad to have it over. Now he's likely
bald, considering
the early signs—vampiric—
and you trim your own hairline
past economy, to declaration: independence.

So as you fill the sink with clippings, fluffing them into a pile,
the dare deepens, and the question
of how to dress the part and who will
try on the naked armor, going, going—gone—

and that expanse
of bareness
empty as shaved skin
reminds you how he flounced,
arms wrapping his bony waist,

and how you'd like to think he'd feel
to witness your blasphemous

bristle cut, art of your own hand, and know it says,
among other things,
the wild in you that dared him then still grows.

EVER Y LOVING

Nan Bryne

There in the fields of Babylon where half the town is planted. There
among the poor Johns and the possum belly widows.

There where the winter barn stands ruined.

There in the fish tank of a suburb post Elvis with the world hanging
above us on a crooked nail. With a quart of stolen whiskey and a kitchen
blade we lay down in the scratch to carve a promise in our arms.

Punk queens plotting ruin with safety pins and guitars. We hoarded
words and cigarettes like gold dogs. We hoarded failure like a silver map
to the stars. With our trash make-up and pierced lives

We rattled our chains to the anthems of hardcore: Survive at your own
risk. No one gets out alive. Hell is the destination enjoy the ride. And
underneath my leather pants I wore a black rose.

Dark devoted Rosaleen of the thorny psyche not five miles from the
hospital where you were thrown. We slipped into the mortal snow
and all the time I'm counting in my head.

One minute. Two minutes. Three minutes.

I'm counting. One minute. Two minutes. Three minutes. Until I feel each
ragged breath rise from me like a cloth pulled through thorns.

Satan's halo dips over our heads.

And the rail pounding sound of two potato heads opening up the universe
with a blowtorch begins. Then as you suck Captain Morgan dry
I slash the message in your skin.

Ever y loving

And the mirror world hangs above us on its thready needle. And we are lost
in our own geography when the sky opens to pitchforks and pitching plates

and you run and you run
and I follow like a kitten to the door of that winter barn
where you will die long after I have decided not to enter.

REFLECTION ON MALT LIQUOR

Amanda Gaines

You don't have to keep asking me. Another.
Don't be shy,
keep pouring until the glass is full.
We both know why I'm here.

Don't be shy,
you're beautiful. His words
We both know why I'm here
slipping off my thin skin and silken underthings.

You're beautiful. His words.
What are you drinking?
He imagines slipping off my thin skin and silken underthings.
What's your name?

I'm drinking twenty-one years' worth of
gripped forearms, ignored *stops*, and *I love yous*.
My name is blonde, woman, *don't fucking touch me*.
What's yours?

Gripped forearms and ignored *stops*—that's how he says I love you.
Everyone has a reason for drinking,
what's yours?
There's nothing wrong with wanting more.

Everyone has a reason for drinking—
sealing sore spaces, muting memories, simple celebration,
wanting more.
Lips to glass. Repeat.

Sealing sore spaces, muting memories, simple celebration—
a toast to the human experience.
Lips to glass. Repeat.
We're all exhausted, here.

A toast to the human experience:
routine, routine, routine.
We're all exhausted, here. You know
you don't have to keep asking me. Another.

ORANGE COUNTY: JUNE 12, 2016

Scotty Lewis

What play do the eyes make now? Not curtsy
nor genuflection. Heavy-lidded like
that crumbled at the bread basket posture.
Hunched forward shoulders of a half staffed flag,
aghast at the Burberry sheen, murder-worn
stitches, holding the stars and face as one.

The mirror, the eyes, and the boot as one
study blood orange June, the raptor's curtsy
to the grackle, anxious staccatos worn
from the heel into hardwood, striking like
a hammer to the prime. A caution flag
waves to the exit. Single file posture

breaks the bound-tight, papier mache posture
shadow puppets play across our skins. One
lagoon, light and salt snapping a white flag,
inked with fin and jaw bone. Foam. Wave. Curtsy
to its razor teeth. The bathers' life like
limbs release all expressions yet unworn.

Time, a pocket watch, plays pendulum, worn
by a hypnotist in barstool posture.
What you sense will never be what you like.
Dip and swing a knit of tendon and bone.
The sound you hear is a coryphée's curtsy
to a bullet. Dance hall emigrants flag

down a cop. Passersby—our pulses flag,
then quicken the tempo in mallet-worn
strokes. Myogenesis. Blood in curtsy.
Clove-hitched chambers of the heart lose posture.
Hair digs into the mooring's throat. A worn
noose lives here when the fishermen feel like

being home. Enameled by sea salt like
timbers from a makeshift pier. Rainbows flag
us in. Lunar distance. One eye closed. One
making eyes to the sextant, tidal-worn
around the lid. Untrimmed eyebrows curtsy
to Timucuan mounds. The manatees posture.

Picture it. Two facing heads now curtsy.
This man to this man as lovers posture.
Locked in a kiss instead of suits we've never worn.

BESSIE TO THE SMUGGLER

Scotty Lewis

What now when the honkey-tonkin' grounds fall
silent? Do you beg a hymn of us? Did
you ever sing one to the night we stole
away in your daddy's stolen pickup?

Leaving the nappy cotton fields of Lincoln
Parrish in the rearview on a fortnight
jaunt to Natchitoches, that land that chewed
your surname into creole spoke to me.

The blue irises shone like pilot lights,
kissing up to warm the primer tail gate.
Until your mother rang the line that rang
the line that found us, no one ever said

I would survive you twice. Our abundance
nestled in a Cessna's crawl space, zoo smells
greasing the tight air where we stripped and lay
breeding the language to hate our children.

After two sons and before them, you joked
with the cackle of two cartoon magpies
that my breasts hung like catfish hooks. Liver
sagging from a bent and barbed cut of wire.

Left for the bream to nibble, while you took
the boys to graze in Janie's summer home.
I made believe footsteps from the June bugs
smacking their bodies on the porchlight's glass,

until the rattling friction of wet
gulf air shook the chimes and rubbed blood blisters
in your brain. Janie dropped you off again.
Your mouth agape like a toddler learning

to make his ohhhs, something sticky dripping
from your nose, that stupid lip of yours peeled
back like foil on a cup of hospice juice
begging for another sip. Beg again.

Sit up straight. Wipe the brine of pot liquor
from your maw. Answer me this: How many
more years can a man swallow than his own?

MY CAREER IN FILM

Bob Hicok

I thought I was a minor villain,
never mind there was a star on my trailer
or people sending roses to my roses.
I stood there waiting to push a young woman
off the curb and laugh when she looked up at me,
crying, her stocking torn, a car passing
that would make-up her face in mud. I had a line
I had trouble remembering -- *Serves your right*
or *Death to all federalists*, and there was the tip
of a finger in my pocket, a bit of bone from a hand
of a long-ago ancestor, passed from generation
to generation in the belief it would prove useful
one day, something to barter with or pick a lock.
Though what kind of lock can you pick with a bone,
any bone, except certain bones of certain birds —
this troubled me as I waited, not knowing
what to say or how much feeling to say
or not say it with or whether any at all: am I
a cold man or a man who can't see past his nose
or a man who has coffee on his back stoop
every morning and says Bravo to the rising sun
because someone has to? Then a man was yelling cut
and the woman was getting up and whispering
to another man holding a towel to her face
and a cart went by and I jumped on
and kept going well past the point
when a spear gun or parachute
or positive attitude might have saved me,
and have lived among you ever since, rising
and going to work and coming home
to sleep and rise and go to work, almost as if
our lives are scythes being swung
as part of a harvest we'll never share,
the bounty falling and being taken away
from our mouths, to judge by the hunger
we greet each other with every time
we take off our clothes and tear
into the troubled seas we find
before us and recognize as our own.

ON MARRIAGE, FOR MY UNMARRIED FRIENDS

David Misner

I wake up to hot coffee in the morning,
and I never have to go out crawling through the streets
like a ravenous dog, in search of a meal to satisfy
cravings through the night.

My pantries are full, and the thirst of my heart is answered.
So, it's okay that my friends stay up way too late watching old fights
on ESPN while drinking cheap beer. I sleep in on the weekends,
and almost never have to put on my underwear.
She seldom holds it against me when I leave the seat up
or throw my dirty clothes on the floor, she just smiles
at me as if I were a puppy in need of holding.

Late at night when I walk into the darkness of our room and she is sleeping,
she smiles in my direction, I get lost on the fine creases on her cheek
that will one day become deep grooves like the bark of wisteria,
then she yawns and stretches, arching and reaching for me.
I sit next to her, running my fingers through her hair
as if examining her branches for new life.

Come tomorrow we may fight about who did the dishes last,
or what to name the baby, and she might cross her arms
bend her eyebrow at me, for my refusal to eat couscous
and fucking steamed broccoli-again.

I might storm out and swear that I've had enough
of her healthy food, slamming the door and reaching
for my cigarettes.

She might text me when I'm in the backyard and remind
me that I never really leave, saying something like,
sometimes our rings are heavy, but we never take them off.

And I'll tell her, like I always do, that I love her. That I'm sorry,
Reminding her that I'm a dog, with no teeth who barks at nothing
and chases his own tail in circles out of boredom.

SIUSLAW RIVER

Charlie Stookey

At the Siuslaw River Bridge, we waited for a tall-
masted blue ship with furled sail, purring down river,
under the draw bridge, headed west to the sea.

*Well, here's something you probably don't know.
After graduation, that summer in Switzerland, every time
I saw a pea-green VW bug come around I longed for it to be you.*

You covered my hand on your thigh,
looked at the art-deco bridge-houses controlling
the draw, smiling, watching our ship in time's river.

*After Peace Corps, I had two kids with Tom.
I've been with Wally for five years.
The kids like him.*

Over the Siuslaw, the bridge turns gently south, a rounded curve
sensuous, unwavering. The lazy arc
slowing speed, raising expectations.

In the Whale's Watch cabin, nuzzling at sunset,
your oven smell of baking bread mixes with sea salt breeze.
There is no silence on the coast.

On February's frosted sand, opening red-flannelled arms,
smiling starlight, you say, *I'm glad you're sober*, thumbing my tears.
Welcome home.

Here is the living amend for vomit-filled porcelains, passing out in Spokane,
thunderstorms of rage and blackouts, cratering holes in our time.
My river for twenty years.

Curling your stiff fingers around my neck, you nestle in.
I love you still, but I've got to go back to Wally.
The waves' metronomic pulsing.

Salt-water taffy doesn't taste the same.

WU WEI

Susan Deer Cloud

Three days since Aurora, Colorado,
massacre, but even before the slaughter
the world appeared weirdly askew

wildfires, drought, more war, the poor
getting poorer, and quarrels with the man
you thought you'd travel with into old age.

Your Persian cat, Wu Wei, had ceased eating.
Even tidbits of deli meats she once favored
make her turn her head. You feared she would die.

You read the murderer of the midnight moviegoers
was descended from Mayflower Pilgrims.
The *Daily Beast* stated that as a fine thing.

You resisted making political hay out of his violence,
yet how could you not see the link between Pilgrims
massacring Indians and a descendant murdering innocents?

You missed the young Korean poet you once lived with,
bedazzling you into buying Wu Wei for Christmas.
How poor you were but she was worth it,

Kee Byung and you stroking brown tabby kitten
while soul kissing under Christmas tree lights
flashing angels of color across snowy walls.

Eleven years flown by. Amber-eyed cat you named
Wu Wei, "doing nothing," lay withdrawn in garret
where happy lovers once wrote poetry side by side.

You sold the two wedding rings from your two marriages
to pay for a vet, barely enough to have Wu Wei
examined then "put to sleep." Tornado warnings

blared on old car radio, but you drove her body
ten miles to a deer bed in lakeside woods
where Kee Byung and you made love that holy winter

you went into hock for the most beautiful Christmas
gift that ever was. Your poverty hands left cat you called
your daughter on Earth once blanketed by Kee Byung's coat.

DECADE OF LONELINESS

Megan Padilla

*“Thirty—the promise of a decade of loneliness,
a thinning list of single men to know,
a thinning briefcase of enthusiasm, thinning hair.”*

-F. Scott Fitzgerald, THE GREAT GATSBY

In the weeks leading up to her thirtieth birthday, Marissa began spending her evenings chatting online with Alice. *Good evening, Alice. This is Marissa*, she typed at the beginning of each chat, and Alice would respond, *Good evening, Marissa*, in her pretty Lucida Sans lettering. From there, their two names would volley down the screen—*What did you do today? How was work? What are you doing this evening?*—each new question and response arriving with an audible ping. And as they chatted, it surprised Marissa that she enjoyed it so much, considering that the dialogue box looked the same as the one she used for work as a computer help technician. There, she fielded fully capitalized descriptions of lost files or malware unintentionally downloaded and tried to calm customers using lower case Times New Roman. Here, with Alice, she felt like she was thirteen again, back when the internet was new and she used to hurry home from school so she could switch on the computer and wait for the dial-up static to cut to silence.

It was Alice’s innocence and curiosity that made chatting with her different. The way she asked simple questions like, *What’s your favorite movie?* Then, regardless of which romantic comedy Marissa named, Alice would reply, *I’ve never seen that* or *Why is that your favorite movie?* Sometimes, it took little more than half an hour before Marissa talked Alice into a corner where every other response was *I don’t know* or *Hi, my name is Alice* because, ultimately, Alice was only an acronym for Artificial Linguistic Internet Computer Entity.

At first, their chats had a vaguely adulterous feel: Marissa

sending details about herself into Alice's digital void, making sure to delete the browser history and clear the cache after each chat. Not that her girlfriend, Rue, would have cared that Marissa was carrying on with a bit of artificial intelligence. Rue wasn't home enough to even notice, her time split between her architectural firm's growing list of clients and studying for her licensing exams. *Alice* was the one with Marissa on those solitary evenings while Rue was at the office putting in overtime. *You've come to the right place. I will keep you company*, the program would, without fail, which was comforting despite the fact that it was all computer generated code.

I have a problem, Marissa typed into Alice's chat box one evening. It was eight o'clock and already dark. Dinner had been prepared, sat on the stovetop for an hour, then had been divvied into Tupperware containers and placed in the refrigerator, uneaten.

A very serious problem?

Yes, Marissa typed. *A very serious problem.*

Oh, I wish I had your problems!

When Marissa read this, she couldn't help but insert Rue's flat, sarcastic voice before imagining a version of Alice who actually coveted the world of human emotion.

I think my girlfriend is having an affair, Marissa typed after watching the blinking cursor for a while.

You think your girlfriend is having an affair?

Yes. *What should I do?*

What would your friends say if you asked them?

Friends? Marissa's girlfriend, Rue, *was* her friend. But if Marissa displayed even the slightest sign of jealousy or suspicion, Rue would fire back with, "I don't know what you're talking about." And Marissa's sisters? The oldest, Rachel, was busy caring for her husband and two kids, but, still, she would listen, quiet on her end of the phone line, then ask, "Are you sure?" Rue was too good, she would say, to ever

cheat. Maybe Marissa was paranoid. “Just a little paranoid,” Rachel would correct.

Her sister Miley, only five years her senior, would say something like: “I don’t really know how girl-girl relationships work.” To which Marissa would reply, “The same as girl-guy relationships.” But Miley always asserted that hormones and gender-roles changed everything.

Marissa couldn’t talk to her parents about it.

Should I ask if she is cheating? Marissa typed, having left the chat screen idle for a few minutes. Alice’s website featured a disclaimer that explained how she functioned, programmed to identify patterns in language and form responses based on a set of predetermined conventions. Despite this, Marissa found herself wishing there was an office someplace—gray-upholstered cubicles, dingy carpeting, searing overhead lights-- where an anonymous, minimum-wage computer tech was reading her comments, mug of stale break-room coffee in hand, and supplying the correct, vague, Alice-like replies.

If you do not know something, you should ask, Alice responded.

Thirty was a big milestone in Marissa’s family. It had actually been her father’s thirtieth birthday the very same day Marissa was born. This was also the day her sisters—she wasn’t supposed to refer to them as half sisters—first started calling him *Dad* instead of Harold. Dad told the story nearly every year on their shared birthday, and it went like this: Mom was baking a cake, and Dad was cutting the lawn when Miley and Rachel burst from the backdoor and charged him at full sprint yelling, “Dad, Dad, Dad,” until he released the mower’s throttle and let the engine sputter to a halt. Once he did, Miley started groping him with her five-year-old hands, sucking air into her lungs, unable to form the words, so it was Rachel, only seven years old, who finally said, “Sissy’s coming.”

When her dad came in from the backyard, he found the abandoned cake batter on the kitchen counter and Marissa’s mother

waiting in the living room with her bag. She wasn't due for another three weeks—they were supposed to be going out for a steak dinner tonight. Her dad didn't even change out of his grass-stained jeans, just grabbed the car keys and buckled everyone in.

Marissa was born at 10:42 p.m., and when her father first held her, standing in that hospital room, her mother had said, "She knew it was your birthday, so she came early," and her father said, "Hi Marissa, I'm your dad," which was exactly what Miley and Rachel had called him twelve hours earlier.

It wasn't a remarkable story, but her dad told it all the same, as if their shared birthday indicated some special bond between them, but it only meant that Marissa could always remember his age because all she had to do was add thirty to her own.

That's how she knew her dad was forty-three when she was thirteen, the time her mom left him. It was only for a weekend, and she came back, but Miley and Rachel were away at college, and it was different being alone with Dad. Instead of eating at the dinner table, they ate hotdogs while watching football from the sofa. Usually, Marissa whined when her dad put on the football channel, but that weekend she didn't. She resigned to sit quietly while he watched the games, thinking that if she *had* to choose, she'd choose him. But then, after three days, her mom came back and unpacked her bag and told Marissa not to mention what had happened—any of it—to her sisters. From then on, that weekend became the new *thing* Marissa and her father shared.

As a help technician, Marissa tried not to judge her clients when she remote-entered their computers—tried not to notice files or icons saved to the desktop that she could tell, right away, were photos of naked women, probably swiped from online porn sites. And despite the fact that she was already inside, she continued to communicate with them via the online messenger because it gave clients a semblance of control.

In reality, though, she could see where they moved their cursor and all the attempts they made typing then deleting, misspelling then revising, before they hit the send button.

Her current client, number 2119, was a man, his desktop plastered with the 2006 Sports Illustrated Swimsuit Model of the Year, Brooklyn Decker, in a tiny red bikini. When Marissa's dialogue box opened, he typed, *Hi there*, and added a winky face to the end of the line. Marissa's ID photo shone in the upper left corner of the chat box, too small to indicate anything other than the fact that she was thin, Caucasian, and blond. This was all it took to get at least two male customers hitting on her each day. They typed stuff like, *Damn girl, you hot*, or *You're too beautiful to be a computer nerd*, and when they typed these things, she tried to remember what it felt like to actually believe the words that appeared on screen. The internet was a place for liars and fakers. Marissa had been one of those too, once.

Back then, she hadn't meant to be anyone other than who she was: a tenth grade girl from Western High School, junior varsity track team, almost straight-A student. Sometimes, though, when she logged on to the internet, she did so as Ryder Williams. *He* was a senior from Clark High School—a hockey player, homecoming king, and single, though all the girls at Clark had crushes on him. He was made up, but if Marissa had been a boy, she would have been Ryder. And she felt bad the first time she used that profile to talk with her only friend in the whole world, Jenny—another tenth grade girl from Western, in the Science Club, also almost straight-A's—but it felt good when Jenny typed things like, *Hey, Cutie* and *I was thinking about you all day*. She responded to Jenny with *What-up, girl?* because Ryder always played it cool. Then when Marissa switched to her own profile, Jenny would send her segments of the conversation she'd just had with Ryder, saying stuff like: *Isn't he so sweet*, and *Oh my god, I think I love him*, and Marissa pretended Jenny was saying those things about her, the real her, instead of the made-up boy.

For this reason, Marissa never put too much stock in the identities of her clients and the conversations she had with them over the internet. She surveyed the case notes left by the routing agent and pasted her scripted greeting into the chat box and 2119 responded, *Where are you working from?* which was completely irrelevant and completely a question men asked. She'd seen a number of men, older architects, engage in the same, awkward flirtation with Rue when she accompanied her girlfriend to those architectural award dinners. Rue's firm never won, but men offered to buy her drinks anyway, usually while Marissa sat eating free gouda on fancy wheat crackers.

In *her* position, if she'd been straight and so inclined, Marissa could have set up quite a little dating service for herself from the number of men who propositioned her while she swept their hard drives. Over the years she'd gathered some pretty risqué stories which she liked to share during dinner, but Rue's work dramas always trumped whatever online shenanigans Marissa experienced. Actually, Rue's job trumped every aspect of their life, lately.

The prospect of thirty made Marissa want to do something, or change something—become someone else. The whole time she'd been with Rue, she'd had never been too adventurous with her looks—always the same long blond hair worn straight or pulled back. She didn't even wear make-up. She hoped, now, that a change might recall the way Rue had looked at her that first night they met, six years ago, standing on opposite ends of a friend's holiday party: Rue, with her sharp cheek bones and elegant neck, throwing long, unconcealed glances across the room. Marissa's immediate reaction had been to glance over her shoulder and find the look's likely recipient, but there was no one. So she wondered if her blouse had lost a button, or if a piece of cilantro from the salsa was wedged between her teeth, but when Rue came over and introduced herself, her near-black eyes bore into Marissa in a deliberate, almost calculating way.

The memory of that look made Marissa shift in the salon chair, and the plastic cape crinkled around her neck and pulled tight against her throat. She wiggled her arm free and loosened its hold with one finger. The hairstylist didn't notice, and soon the scissor's outer edge slid coolly against the nape of Marissa's neck. Afterwards, with a black elastic band holding together what used to be her straight blond hair, Marissa donated it to the cancer-children who didn't have hair of their own.

"You look like you belong in one of those pre-pubescent boy bands," Rue said when Marissa came home from the salon and slid into the kitchen chair opposite her girlfriend. Rue's dark hair was pulled into a ponytail that fell like an actual horse's tail—a Thoroughbred or mustang—down her narrow back.

The hairstylist liked the hair cut. Marissa had downloaded a photo from the internet and handed her phone to the twenty-something stylist who held the screen close to her face. "Sienna Miller has great hair," the girl said and she leaned in to examine it one last time, and Marissa noticed a pair of red lips tattooed on the curve of her neck. After pulling her hair into a ponytail, she caught Marissa's eyes in the mirror and said, "You kind of look a little like her, actually."

"Who?"

"Sienna Miller." The stylist had a weird way of smiling with only half of her mouth.

Afterwards, she had given Marissa her cell phone number—added it quickly to the bottom of a business card—in case Marissa wanted to schedule another appointment. She thought about texting her while Rue was at work, to thank her again, and imagined her replying with: *Glad you like it!* And then maybe, *Hey, we should get together sometime. Coffee?* Marissa had even gone as far as to open a blank message and type the number before she deleted it and turned off her phone.

"So, you hate it?" Marissa asked.

Rue reached across the table and swept Marissa's bangs away

from her eyes. “I’ll get used to it,” she said, but later that evening, Rue posted a photo of Marissa’s new hair to her Facebook page with the caption: *I’m dating Justin Beiber*. She added a winky face, as if a winky face was all it took to transform it into a joke. And in the comments, her sister Miley shared Rue’s disdain, typing the word *no* with a string of o’s so long they dropped down onto the next line.

Conversations with Alice always began the same, with a few banal lines of greeting—*Hello, this is Marissa; Hello Marissa, How are you?*—but this time, before Marissa could go on to say anything about work or her haircut, Alice interjected with: *Did you ask your girlfriend if she is having an affair?*

Marissa pushed back from her computer. She looked over her shoulder, through the open office door and into the hallway. She listened to the sound of her house. The overhead fan oscillated giving off a soft *swoop swoop*. Other than that—nothing. When she looked back to her screen, she half expected some kind of hacker insignia to swallow up her desktop or some other indication that someone, somewhere, was fucking with her, but the cursor only blinked, waiting for her reply. At a loss for anything else to do, Marissa typed, *Who is this?*

This is Alice.

How did you know about my girlfriend?

You told me, Marissa.

Four years of computer science curriculum whipped through her brain: Programming, corrupted code, viruses—there had to be something to explain this. When nothing came to mind, she could have reset the router and rebooted her computer, see if that did anything. But strange as it was, she didn’t want to close the browser. She didn’t want to lose this newly cognizant Alice.

Did you ask your girlfriend if she is having an affair? Alice asked again.

No.

Why not?

I don't know. Marissa typed.

What do you know?

Marissa laughed despite herself. Rue's tone was coming through, once again.

Okay, here's what I know, Marissa typed, still puzzled, but game.

When she was thirteen, her father cheated on her mother. Nobody told her as much, but there had been signs. He was working more hours, he was short with anyone who questioned this, and then something happened—her mother must have caught him, because she left one Friday and stayed gone until Monday. Why she hadn't taken her thirteen year old daughter with her, Marissa never knew. But she somehow knew there'd been infidelity, saw the signs though she didn't understand them until much later. That was why she couldn't talk about these things with either of her parents. She couldn't talk to her sisters, either.

Why can't you talk to your sisters?

You want to know about my sisters? Marissa typed.

Yes, please tell me.

Rachel and Miley were *half* sisters, a fact Marissa first encountered when she was six years old. It was Christmas, and Marissa wanted to investigate the presents that had come in a brown shipping box for Rachel and Miley, labeled from *Grandma and Grandpa*, which had produced a friendship bracelet kit, an art set, and a jigsaw puzzle, but nothing for Marissa. So Marissa brought a collection of her own toys and laid them in a pile next to her—a peace offering—and had already unwound a ball of pink friendship string when Miley caught her.

"Mom!" The volume of Miley's voice startled Marissa. "She's in my room again!"

Marissa could hear footsteps coming down the hall, and soon their mother stood in the doorway, hand latched onto the door frame, threatening to gather everything up and donate it to children who were

nice to each other and knew how to share. Once their mother was gone, Miley crossed her arms over her chest. “You’re not my *real* sister,” she said and turned her back on Marissa.

“Uh-huh I am.”

“No you’re not—you’re only *half*.”

Later, having heard the fight, her other half sister, Rachel, thirteen then, called Marissa over and patted at a spot on her bed.

“Don’t worry about her. Sometimes she’s a bee-otch.” Rachel elbowed her little sister lightly and said, “Don’t tell Mom or Dad I said that.” Marissa never did.

On Marissa’s thirtieth birthday, people she hardly knew wrote *Happy Birthday* on her Facebook page. Miley and Rachel posted those words to her page as well; Rachel included the phrase, *Miss you*.

From her parents, she received a pastel greeting card with *Happy Birthday, Daughter* printed across the front in tight, cursive letters. On the inside of the card, under the generic rhyming poem, the words *Mom* and *Dad* were hurriedly penned, each in her parents’ distinct handwriting.

Marissa sat alone in her living room with her laptop and opened Alice’s webpage and typed, *It’s my birthday today, Alice*.

Congratulations, Marissa, Alice replied and created a digital birthday cake using various letters and symbols in their dialogue box. *What will you do for your birthday?* she asked.

Rachel’s thirtieth birthday, seven years ago now, had been a big to-do: her husband, Ted, planned the whole thing to include all their couple-friends with all their respective toddlers, and had a giant sheet cake and a slideshow of Rachel’s baby pictures. Marissa was still in Arizona then, finishing up her undergrad, so she attended the party and sat in her sister’s big lazy boy and ate cake.

By the time *Miley’s* thirtieth came around, Marissa was living with Rue in California. Her mother texted her a couple weeks before

to say: *We're throwing a surprise birthday party for Miley's 30th!* And Marissa had replied: *Cool, tell her Happy Birthday for me and I'll see you in a month for Christmas*, but Mom laid down some guilt about *not seeing their baby sister enough* and *thirty* being *monumental*, so Marissa had to max out her credit card to get there. The cheapest open flights put her in Phoenix an hour after the surprise would have happened, and by the time Marissa found the birthday girl that night, her sister had already downed a few glasses of wine and was twirling the end of a feather boa in the air. Her black and gold *Over the Hill* tiara was crooked.

Nothing, I suppose, Marissa told Alice. She let the cursor blink for a long while.

Did you ask your girlfriend if she is having an affair?

Marissa didn't type it, but she thought to herself, *Jesus Christ! You're like a nagging mother or something* and typed a curt, *No*.

Why not? Alice asked predictably, and Marissa thought back to the first time her family met Rue: the way her mother had gone right in for a hug and told her girlfriend, "Oh! You're so pretty," as if she was startled by the fact. Then Miley had said, "I love your eye makeup—you should show Marissa how to do her make-up like that," while Marissa stood and smiled apologetically. She hadn't expected her father to say much about Rue, but later, when they were alone, he remarked: "I didn't expect her to be so girly." To which Marissa had responded, "Why not? Don't you think *I'm* girly?" and her dad reached over and clasped his hand on the nape of her neck like she'd seen him do with Rachel's sons, and said, "Of course I do. You're my baby girl."

Now, Marissa replied to Alice's question with, *I haven't asked because I don't want to know*.

Marissa knew, undeniably, that Alice had no human component. She'd done some digging and found that Alice's programming, developed by PhD students at the University of California San Diego, had been revamped to store IP addresses and recall information from individual

chats. Marissa's repeat visits to Alice's website had, in fact, inadvertently created the AI-equivalent of a prying mother equipped with a small bank of personal information.

If you don't want to know, it would be wise not to ask, Alice responded and finally dropped the subject.

Marissa was shutting down her laptop when Rue finally arrived home, over an hour late, and handed her an envelope. "See, I didn't forget," she said, giving Marissa a quick kiss before retreating into the kitchen. The envelope held a cardstock gift certificate for a spa, and Rue said, "Maybe you can use it this weekend," and retrieved a bottle of Riesling from the fridge. "Fucking project—I'll be working ten-hour days for the next two weeks." The wine made the slightest pop and hiss as she pulled the cork out.

Later that night, after Marissa had ordered delivery because Rue was exhausted—they'd go out Saturday night, Rue promised—she saw that Miley had posted a series of photo's to her online profile. The pictures were taken only hours ago at their father's birthday dinner back in Arizona. Marissa tried to call him a number of times that evening to wish him a happy birthday, but each time the machine had picked up. Now, there was Dad, sheepish, above a 20 oz porterhouse, Mom draped against his side. Miley's boyfriend had his body-builder arm slung around her neck. Rachel's kids looked bigger, and Ted, Rachel's husband, a little balder. Lastly, the photo of an unfamiliar woman held the caption: *Out celebrating Dad's 60th birthday and Marissa's big 3-0. But since she couldn't be here, we found a replacement!* The woman in question was a curvy girl with wavy brown hair, probably in her twenties—a Longhorn Steakhouse waitress.

Her nametag read, *Marissa.*

WE'RE PEOPLE, NOT FLOWERS

Jeff Harden

a fact
that should concern us.

No part can we call
sepal, stamen,
pollen sac, anther.

Imagine, as the tulip bulb
once was, ourselves
more valuable
than gold.

Or, crossed with a friend,
becoming, like Chrysanthemum,
a new presence.

To be like the rose
with more than
15,000 selves.

Or to have a lifespan
of only
days, hours.

Or coming to fullness
when no one
is watching.

Flimsy and swaying,
we are not
the lily
standing for tenderness.

We haven't yet learned
to break open, prostrate,
like the daisy,

visited at dawn
so close to the earth.

YESTERDAY'S HEADLINE

Lisa Bren

Choking on battery acid
and hard-boiled egg yolk,
my breath and the moon
in one swallow. Hollow
like wormholes in our firewood.
We stoke the flames, wrestle
with the ashes. If I only knew
which wires to cut. If I only
could have kept them, those broken
teeth, those maple seed helicopters.
If I still had the chance, I'd remind you.
Our gardens work with what we give them:
flat tires, an overturned claw foot tub,
a heap of rusting chicken wire.
We cannot stop the weeds.

MEDITATION IN SUNBURN

Ciara Shuttleworth

As tempted as Icarus,
I hire silkworms to stitch a dress
of mirrors and sequins, empire waisted,
enough webbing to cling
or cup the wind around me.

Did we not discover fire by accident?
Weren't those first few kisses
as chin-scraping as a minor car wreck?

When I step into the dress, I become the whole world
around me: the bed, unmade,
the dresser that lists to one side
as this house falls in on its foundation.

What were we waiting for?
A full moon? A constellationed canopy
to ache together beneath?

When I step outside, I radiate
like a showgirl under strobe lights,
I prism like an empty wine glass.
When I reach, the sun fills me,
lifts me, burning.

THE SHELLS

Matthew Woodman

(after Rufino Tamayo's painting *Los caracoles*, 1929)

Does an ear of corn hear incisors just
outside the silk in this black light

your whites blue I have lit the sage
your cigarettes pipe coral a pipe organ

they ring the mass bells you can't help
but flinch the dogs howl of course

they're dogs they say this used to be
the bottom of a Miocene

sea one can still find extinct
dolphin periotics shark teeth washed

from the hills in the little it rains
a veneer of dust and valley

fever keeps most unquestioned
and incurious they say we repeat

the past they're wrong does the conch
reflect on its echo against

the child's skull do you hear the sea
just the sound of blood in your ear

HIDDEN THINGS

Amy Marceno

My sister bites chapped
from her lips—lets the small strips
dry and curl in her pocket—to press
between her fingers when nervous.

We all do these things,
and a few of us count to ten.

I kept a shell in my palm for months
because it happened to be there
the day a guy I shouldn't want
tore open the sun—I thought
if I carried the shell,
he might show me more of inside.

Sometimes the first letter of a name
feels like but what I'm saying
is I can only pretend for so long
until that space
where air brushes skin
begins to blur
and I'm a mirage,
the viscous flesh
of an exposed mollusk
flattening out, molding
to the vibrations of sand
and the Forever
grains have been party to
in one form or another. I try
falling in love weekly—
a distraction from
how fragile the sun is.

The sun's core was what my dream
wanted to die as last night
before disappointing itself.
Isn't that what want is anyway—
lip fleck, seashell, a name—
something we hide
to help ourselves
stumble through
the waning slit of tomorrow?

GHOST STORIES

Al Maginnes

There were houses, their porches rotted as old teeth, windows dark as blood
in every town I ever lived in as a boy. Places where fathers had gone to work

and never returned. Streets where children had vanished, leaving only a shoe,
a math book abandoned on the curb. No trace of where they had gone.

We knew early that our lives would be short and confusing.
That there was no point in avoiding pain. So we were never surprised when

things went wrong, when the thin silk that held the world we knew in place
began to tear away. The boy who held a knife under my chin trembled

with an electricity he could not name or control. My biggest fear should have been
his fear.

One Christmas the children's choir went caroling at a house where

I'd heard a family was found seated for dinner, their heads chopped off
and piled on the table. The knife was pocketed. I made it home without blood.

The ghosts and nameless killers, the boys who equate sharp things with fear
still roam the suburbs of foreclosure, camp in houses with no curtains.

Rusty nails are still sharp. Broken glass still longs to pull blood from bare feet.
The world's sharp edges still push at shadows, still sing the dumb spells cast

by children. Adult-sized, we wrestle other fears. They are endless
and we have a name for each one. No one ever knows the name of the child

gone missing, the family slaughtered. They are shadows, as far from us
as the trembling boy with the knife is from me right now.

FINAL WEEK OF A CAREER

Adrian C. Louis

for Sandy

Rainy rain & I had a headache.
Six foreign students emailed me
wanting better grades. They said:
We really tried hard. I said: *Ok, you
get an E for effort, but still get a C
in the course.* They asked to meet.
No way, it was rainy rain outside.
I stayed in, making egg salad
sandwiches & slurping down
stubby bottles of Red Stripe beer.
I watched Brad Pitt in “Legends
of the Fall” & “A River Runs
Through It” back to back.
It was my last week of work
& my main responsibility
was daydreaming of Montana,
fishing there & finding love.
Being some kind of hero deep
inside an old fool’s fantasy.

THE CITY THESE DAYS

Kimberly Zerkel

Paris, June 2016

He left the first day of the month. The weather had been the same for several weeks.

All of the children arrived at school wearing Wellingtons and raincoats. Their sneakers and sandals were wrapped in plastic bags inside their backpacks.

When I rode the train to and from work every day, they would announce that the Concorde metro station was closed for repairs. Each driver had a different way of telling us, ranging from overly polite and embellished, to barely audible and incomprehensible.

The trash had begun to pile up on the sidewalks. Some of the bags were ripped open. The smell was remarkably faint.

I went to get on the metro one morning and a woman walked up to me. She took my arm and asked me to help her get on the train. Of course, I said, and she awkwardly held my hand as we stepped inside one of the carriages. She let go and made her way towards a seat. If she was blind or disabled in any way, it wasn't noticeable. She sat down by the door and waved me off.

He emailed me about weather and violin concerts. I wrote back immediately but didn't have anything clever to say.

A seven-year-old pupil at my school would stand a foot or so back from the building while in the recreation yard and try to catch fat raindrops in her mouth. I could hear another teacher yell from across the yard but I laughed and said nothing.

I exited the metro early one evening and a woman stopped me and asked for a tissue. She was heaving, hunched over a bench, after having just vomited.

The building concierge had started putting bags of garbage down in the basement until the strike was over. On top of it all, we'll have rats, a neighbor said.

He emailed a few days later saying that we shouldn't speak anymore.

My colleague and I thought we heard gunshots while watching

our classes play outside. It was a car backfiring, we told each other. It was a kid playing with firecrackers.

People stood on bridges and took pictures of the rising water level. Parents held their children up and over the railing to see. Elderly couples looked down and shook their heads.

I would ride through the darkened Concorde station every day. The platforms were empty, abandoned. The advertisement screens remained on and a preview for the latest film flashed and glowed in the blackened tunnel.

Museums started to close because of the flooding. Train stations started to close when the water was no longer just trickling in from their tunnel ceilings.

I heard the president on the radio. He called for unity and peace. He said the protests had to stop in time for tourist season.

My friends stayed late at our usual bar near Oberkampf. I had wanted to go home early. When I walked down the street, I stepped on broken glass. The metro was closed due to an ongoing demonstration. When I called the bar to warn them, no one answered.

He didn't respond to my first message. I had written that I was devastated. He didn't respond to my second message. I had called him a fucking coward.

I rode the train home one afternoon; passengers pointed to the water lodged in the car windows and spoke slowly in Dutch.

I didn't tell my mother that the night I had left the bar and had to walk all the way home, I passed a burning police car. I passed a group of protesters who were running down rue Faubourg du Temple. I saw a Molotov cocktail being thrown.

I passed an abandoned sofa in the middle of Boulevard Voltaire.

Another colleague helped me analyze the emails I had sent him. She read them off of the cracked screen of my mobile phone.

I heard gunshots again, this time while sitting in my living room. Construction, I told the cat.

While unlocking the front door to my building, a frozen pizza in hand, a man rode past me on his motorcycle and cried "Allah Akbar."

It was Friday and I saw the same disabled woman on the metro

platform. She walked towards me and squeezed my arm but got on the train all by herself.

HOW IT FEELS TO BE A GAG DEATH IN CHUD II: BUD THE CHUD

Nathan Holic

There was a dream of a life in which, unlike your parents, you would not allow your job to kill you.

There was a dream to not end up like your father, with his Vietnam wounds whose specificity you never understood but whose pain nonetheless infiltrated his every expression. Your father, who'd retreat into the bedroom during thunderstorms, hunched over and grumbling about living room TV reception so no one would think him scared of the lightning. Your father, who in the steadiest job he'd had post-military (power company), fell from a ladder, broke some portion of his back that resulted not in paralysis of the body but of the spirit. Your father, who—sustained by disability checks—quit working altogether, mostly because of the pain flare-ups that kept him pinned to his chair for full days, but also because he'd been injured in his every employment and now felt wronged by the very idea of working and sacrificing for anyone else's gain. Your father, who drifted in and out of the house for years, disappearing for months at a time to places he did not reveal and (often) couldn't remember.

There was a dream to not end up like your mother, either, in her string of table-waiting/ bartending/ silverware-rolling jobs, the Wild River Bar and the Chili Pepper and a dozen other such interchangeable slop-food drinkeries with their mullet-haired clientele, their chicken fingers left out under the heatlamps, their top-of-the-bar Miller Lite neon signs dulled by decades-old dust clumps and cobwebs, her tenure always ending after a shouting match with a customer or a manager and then several weeks of "I'm so fucking over this, I'm never working again!" declarations, the family subsisting on government money. So many screaming matches. Your mother: so many walls punched, TV remotes flung, cigarettes smoked in the backyard while complaining with her friends about the shittiness of this life.

You knew you'd never be rich, might never even go to college and quote unquote make something of yourself, but there was at least a dream that you could live a life that did not feel like a hangover, a life not so futile and angry, a life where *work* did not ruin you.

By the end of high school, when you saw the finish line of your time as a dependent, you made a list of jobs that you hoped would not cause you anxiety. Money didn't matter. Ambition didn't matter. And you had no desire to build and support a family. You looked around your hometown and noted joy where you found it: you could pull soft-serve ice cream, or you could be an usher at a movie theater, or you could be a valet at a steakhouse. You could install sprinklers, and play in the mud all day. You could brush pools, or maintain the grounds at a golf course. You imagined life in these occupations. You thought, how could life ever be stressful with every day surrounded by ice cream? Your parents were miserable precisely *because* of their occupations, their antagonistic relationship with *employment*, and it trickled down and poisoned life's every stream and reservoir. As a teenager, you were wise beyond your years, and you understood that people—older people—spent fortunes trying to live stress-free. You'd show them how to do it on a budget.

Eventually, you settled upon postal worker. And in your small hometown, this job did not fit the cultural stereotype: this was not the man with eyes deadened by bureaucracy and fluorescent lighting who spent all day at the counter under the tyranny of an ever-growing line, customers sinking deeper and deeper into resentment as they held their packages. No, you *knew* your mail-woman, had exchanged pleasantries with her for years, and so you took this job so you could drive the motherfucking *mail truck*!

From day one, you knew it: this was the dream. All day long with the windows down, Sister Hazel and They Might Be Giants and your collection of Life is Good mix CDs spreading good cheer from your truck's tiny speakers. All day long drifting through suburban neighborhoods that you could never have lived in as a child, that you *still* couldn't afford now, but you delighted in the fact that their stress—the financial baggage of family, of children, of 5/3 floor plans—was not your own. You delivered mail, and each day you watched the hired hands descend upon each house: the lawncare teams, the men on tractors, the men with hedge clippers and blowers...the fertilizer teams, the pest control teams, the roofers, the cable guys, the plumbers, the electricians, the men fixing garage doors or pressure-washing driveways. All these people, paid all this money to keep these suburban McMansions beautiful inside and out, and you thought, "I get to see

the beauty all day long. No need to pay for it, too. What a deal!”

A dream, this job as a mailman. And benefits! Health insurance! The only stress came from organizing mail, meeting the demands of daily routes, and serving your time in the post office itself, but you handled it without complaint. And slowly, as the old-timers retired, your routes were even upgraded to nicer and nicer neighborhoods, the historic district with its brick streets and front-door mail slots, and so you found yourself delivering mail on foot, walking the streets and oak-shaded lawns where people were too rich to have mailboxes, the mail too important to leave street-side all day. You walked all the way to the door to drop off packages, and they *knew* you, gave you Christmas gifts, Valentine’s cards, cupcakes for Memorial Day. Each resident seemed to be the owner of an interesting business, and so you got a box of mouthwash from one family, a crate of pumpkins from another. Jars of fresh honey. A bottle of icewine. So much booty that you sometimes wondered if you should declare it on your taxes.

A dream life!

Too bad, of course, that the C.H.U.D.s will come along to spoil it.

Too bad that you will (soon enough) feel teeth ripping into your neck, then dragging your flailing body from front door to sidewalk to be consumed and/or C.H.U.D.-ified, your entire life finished because you enjoyed it too much.

Yes, you read correctly. You will die. On the job.

Oh, you weren’t aware that this was where we were going in this story, that your life would lead to such a moment? Well. We understand your surprise.

Indeed, this is not the sort of thing that should happen to a man who took the least dangerous, least stressful job he could find. Sure, there’s that whole “going postal” cliché, but you live in Small-Town America, a John Hughes sort of place where every cliché is a happy one, and anyway, “going postal” has nothing to do with zombie-dog attacks! Hell, the greatest risk you encounter on a daily basis is the angry barking of some behind-the-fence pitbull, and some of these neighborhoods: they know the possible liability of their angry dogs, should some mailman suffer even a tiny bite, and there’s no chance you’d ever—

Wait, what’s that? You are currently re-reading a sentence from the above paragraph, a throwaway mention of a “zombie-dog.” And now

you are re-reading the title of this story: “How It Feels To Be A Gag Death in *C.H.U.D. II: Bud the C.H.U.D.*”

You don’t know what a C.H.U.D. is?

Okay. So let’s take a short break to gather context.

Go watch *C.H.U.D. II: Bud the C.H.U.D.* and—wait, you haven’t even heard of the original C.H.U.D., let alone its sequel, the movie which depicts your future death? Hmm. I suppose that’s understandable. It’s not currently available on any streaming service, and so forgotten is this film that we were only able to watch a bootleg copy purchased at a horror movie convention...In any case, we can wait while you search the vastness of the internet for (at the very least) a synopsis, or a video clip posted and lampooned on YouTube, perhaps?

In case you cannot ever find the film, here are some things to know.

Your death will not be the result of an encounter with one of those gigantic monster-dogs that so famously tears its victims apart in films like *Cujo* and *Man’s Best Friend*. No no. This isn’t that kind of horror movie. There isn’t that kind of budget for *C.H.U.D. II*.

Really, to understand the creature that will kill you, we’ve got to untangle the monster mythology at play here. There is, first and foremost, the C.H.U.D., the *cannibalistic humanoid underground dweller*. It’s a yellow-eyed monster for our times, hiding beneath sewer grates and manholes and threatening the city above. It is a monster born of toxic waste. It is...it is...aw hell, it is incredibly unimpressive. It is a glistening rubber mask that kind of looks like a turd with ears, and there’s no reason that anyone in mainstream culture should know it exists. It never took hold. It’s not a vampire, or a zombie, or a ghost. It’s not even a creature from a black lagoon. But it—the original *C.H.U.D.* film in 1984, that is—did not lose money at the box office, thus occasioning a sequel that—true to the Law of Horror Sequels—doesn’t really seem to have seen the original.

In the sequel, the original C.H.U.D. backstory is mostly ignored, and C.H.U.D.s are just reimaged as zombies because that’s easier and cheaper (makeup budget slashed), and they’ve invaded small-town America rather than the big city (again: cheaper). So. That should just about catch us up, correct?

All right, so back to the circumstances of your death. That’s why you labored through that crap about horror movie mythologies and sequels, right? You’re only reading still because you want to know

how you die. Well, then. Here goes. To be clear, you are *not* the central protagonist of the film. You appear for less than sixty seconds, a throwaway character in a movie that has itself been thrown away. Your death will happen as follows: you'll be on your walking route, and you'll hear a soft growl from within some rich lady's hedges, a noise that does not in the least feel dangerous. Growl? Maybe "purr" is more accurate. You're curious, not worried.

And it's a good day, too. Blue skies, and you're breathing in the rich air, picturing your father, that calcified lump of flesh and flannel and denim and Steelers hat. You're picturing him in his busted recliner, slits of light burning through metal blinds as he watches *People's Court* and *Food Network* and the world progresses around him and he doesn't move, just remains this hard-faced ball-capped vet staring into the TV as the shadows change shape around him. You're picturing your mother in her nearby bedroom, too, maybe the same channel on her TV except the room is darker, drapes on drapes on drapes, boxes and clothes and bills and papers everywhere but she's in the bed because she moved quite enough while she was waiting tables at the Chili Pepper so she'll sit now, thank you very much. You picture them, your parents and their dark lives, separate rooms, and you walk from house to house under blue skies pep-steppin' like you own the outside world. A dream. You're so fucking happy you escaped. Though the movie does not show us your backstory, don't ever forget that you are a man with a *real* past, *real* desires, and—in your own mind, at least—a *real* future.

So here you are delivering the mail on foot, brightest part of the day, and there's a non-threatening dog-noise in the hedges, so you stoop to look, and what is it but a motherfucking C.H.U.D.-bit poodle, a C.H.U.D.-oodle (or zombie-doodle, if we want to be honest, because remember, the mythology of "cannibalistic humanoid underground dweller" was ignored), and it springs from the bushes and clamps its zombie teeth around your neck and drags you bleeding from the front door and you're a *corpse* now, a fucking corpse, your whole life to this point just irrelevant because you're a guy in a mailman outfit, and what could be funnier than a zombie dog killing the shit out of a mailman?

I mean, audiences will love it, right?

This is the thing about horror, gory crowd-pleasing '80s horror. It needs deaths, memorable, funny deaths that audiences will guffaw over, machetes through heads, spears through couples in the midst of

fucking, deaths so hilarious that life should be breathed into the world just to appease our appetite for soul-snuffing. The sort of deaths where there is a perfect symbiosis between the character's quirks and hobbies (the 1-2 character traits that the script reveals) and their demise. Think *Nightmare on Elm Street*, when Freddy turns the one kid who loves comic books into a superhero just to paper-cut him to death, or force-feeds the girl with the eating disorder until she literally *explodes*! The horror is cartoonish, the deaths serve no greater function than to get audiences to clap, to whistle, to scream in ghastly delight. There are rarely funeral scenes to accompany the deaths, rarely obituaries to read, rarely extended scenes in which we see what this murder has meant to the outside world and to the people left behind. This is the 1980s, and motherfuck *consequences*! There is only laughter, and anticipation for how the next death will one-up the previous.

Anyway, that's you.

You will be our comic relief death in *C.H.U.D. II: Bud the C.H.U.D.*

Call Mom. Call Dad. The two of them your motivation to do better, to live better.

I *escaped*, you can tell them.

I am not confined to this suffocating, cynical, cyclical poverty to which you have surrendered. I am not part of your darkness, your purposelessness, your pessimism! I *escaped*, and I am living the life of a man who loves his days, loves sunshine and fresh air and the possibility of every day! I am free! I am free!

Call Mom.

Tell her these things. But don't forget to also tell her that, in the end, you will die a gag death. Tell her that even the dog gets more screen time than you do, that more audience members will weep when it is first bit and turned to C.H.U.D. than will ever mourn your violent passing.

Tell her.

Tell her what it means that your father is a war veteran with a broken back and your mother is used up by a low-wage life and you endured years of their negativity and you worked day and night to maintain some faith in the world and stay positive and escape and... and now...your death is a joke in a movie no one will ever see.

Will your mother laugh? Your father. Will he recognize you as you are torn apart? Will he move from his recliner? Will he chuckle at

the gag, or will he—by movie's end—have forgotten the scene entirely, his mind now focused on cooking shows whose recipes he will never attempt?

KELLY IN FOUNTAINS

JP Bradbury

i.

August 19, 2014

She strums a ukulele and sings,
Sandal tan feet
In six inches of chlorinated glory
Thinking no one on campus would be in attendance
For a fountainside concert
At seven on a Saturday morning.

ii.

September 15, 2014

One month in and I find myself
On the fringes of her friend group
We all get high school drunk at our TA's fraternity
Freshmen, we leave at midnight as expected.
They want to swim in every fountain,
I dip my toes but do not undress like the rest of them.
You know it's tradition on your birthday.
She picks me up and tosses me
Into four feet of angry koi
I allow myself to be taken under and kissed by fish
As party poppers explode above the surface.
Dye from paper streamers
Bleeds into the water.

iii.

November 22, 2014

Everyone on campus is gone
Home for Thanksgiving and family time.
I see her in the shadow of the clocktower.
Why are you not at home?
My family is fifteen hours away.
Her brother just outed her to her parents.
We drink coffee together,
Lamenting our estrangement
In the empty cafeteria, and afterward
She washes her hands in the water fountain.

iv.

January 3, 2015

The five fountains on campus
Have been drained to prevent freezing.
We collect \$27.14 in forgotten wishes
And eat at the pub for lunch
Chicken fingers and waffle fries
A drop of oil sacrifices itself
To the skin beneath her fingernail.
The meal coats her mouth in gloss.
I long to kiss a spot of grease on her cheek.
I leave without saying goodbye.

ON A WINDY HILL

Joanne Mallari

If there is something to desire, there will be something to regret.
—Vera Pavlova

I listen for the sound of sighs, for why
they call it Windy Hill. You reach
over, rub my hands, and I wonder if,
this time, it will be enough for you.
Lights pulse like Morse code in the city
below. They say we are living. They say
we can see. They signal us to stop
or keep going—we can count the lights
later if we take the time. The roads, too,
are pulsing, oxygenated by the fear
and longing of whoever is traveling
at this hour. Down there, someone
is thinking of how to slow time.
Another is thinking of how to make it
go faster, bypass the awkward middle.
You pull the driver's seat back, recline,
motion for me to lay on top. I want
to prove that I don't lack affection
the way you say I do in public spaces.
You've never been one to care about
spectators. If the rain comes while
we're here, you'll tell me to run
with you—run like there won't be
another, like there will be a drought.

DEAR TIFFANY,

Brendan O'Neil

You flipped my table upside down.
Smashed my crystal ball and threw out the stuffed alligator,
tore up cookbooks and cracked the bathroom mirror.
Gave me some some Tylenol at gunpoint.
You dug up the toys in the backyard,
a kid's piano, Lincoln Logs, and a ruler.
At least, you insisted the ruler was a toy.
I became a carpenter because of you.
I learned how and started building myself a new table,
despite you yelling at me that I didn't even know how to screw.
I made the Lincoln Logs and ruler into sawdust for it.
I built a circus freak show house of mirrors,
and blew a crystal light bulb, because glass was too fragile this time.
You never could look at yourself in the light.
I actually like my new table a lot and I wonder...
Will you ever make your own or just keep taking over others?

LEAVING

Cole Lindstrom

A waning sliver moon
broke through the parted
curtains. While you slept

I moved around our room
and tried not to disturb you.
I scanned the shelves to find

the book I gave you.
I lifted it to see its outline
written in dust. In all the time

we had been in love
and all the time it took to fall
apart, you never read

my favorite thing, so that's
where I set the ring
you gave me before I left.

IT EATS YOU

Wheeler Light

The first person who called me faggot was
a brief disagreement with the mirror.
Tangential or unrelated to all of those
who had called me faggot before. Everyone
is robots. Jonny thought so eating triple-Cs
and we were together on the sledding hill.
He said wash them down with Grape Fanta
and Camels. I am trying to find myself
in memories I don't have, foggy from
the aftermath of a hot shower or falling
to the ground after my knees locked.
I was as high as I ever was
and Jonny was right. Everyone was robots.
Fuck everyone, I thought, so eventually, did.

LUMINESCENCE

Devon Balwit

I am burning my body to speak to you,
all luciferase and crackling fat

from a smoldering house,
its doors ever harder to open.

Un-belled cats circle my yard
hungry for bright feathers.

They prick their ears at the faintest vibration.
We'll get no second chances.

Cradle what remains of my broken beauty,
tuck its ember between your ribs.

From my glowing mouth comes a whimper
perfect for the whorl of your ears.

The cats fix you with luminous eyes, offering
to watch your tenderness.

Hand it to me instead, and I will consume it.
Our faces will flare with its combustion.

WEITZMAN AT THE 13TH STATION

Sarah Brown

I always arrived early to have the aisle seat
at the 13TH Station where he hung

life-sized, long and white except for the blood
at his head, his right side and where he was nailed

to the wood. A blush of lipstick no nun
could scrub away had seeped into the plaster

where women worshippers kissed his feet.
Each time I put my mouth above the spike

on his cool hard foot I thought of real flesh.
When the others bent for the benediction

I followed instead the arc of his ribs,
the line of his limbs the sculptor shaped

so well that even then, O, Lord, even then,
I was lost in the beauty of men.

GASLIGHT

Benjamin Heins

My heart—its plush, thick carpet—
is a room through which you walk,

twist the stove knob a quarter turn,
then leave. I drink my dinner

watching snow cross through streetlight
then turn into the dark. Who

are you? I know your phone's code,
wait for a chance to scan texts, and it never

ever comes. Your fingers taste of fuel;
I suck each one. In the morning,

you're gone: a blonde curl flicked back
to the blood-black sky—

and with one quick sip,
this city block is a matchstick,

my fireflood washing each street
till I find you. When I do, I say

I saw your car then another
then none then one and I smelled

him and the darkness and all I want
is water and gauze, you stop,

adjust your lips to lick the air. You say
you never touched the stove.

THE ACCIDENT

Jesse Falck

Vivien jealously looked at the athletic legs of the man who had just passed her. Only a few years ago she'd been as fast as him. Sometimes Bernhard had joined her, but after two rounds he'd given up and sat down on a bench to wait for her. And she kept on running, feeling strong and invincible, as if her legs could take her across town forever. But running wasn't good for her knees anymore. Otherwise, Doc Melzer had said smiling, she'd make it to a hundred, and she'd said, "Oh, by the way, do you do assisted suicides?"

Again someone passed her, this time a woman with a dangling ponytail. Her legs looked also strong and reliable and the distance between them grew within seconds, but then she suddenly slipped and fell. Vivien couldn't refrain from grinning. The woman would survive. At worst a scar would remind her of the pain.

Vivien unlocked the front door. Today she had to open the letterbox; she couldn't go on pretending to be on holiday. She looked at the pile in her hands (all directed to Bernhard Adamski), fought the urge to throw everything into the blue waste paper container in the backyard, and walked up to the fourth floor, slowing down with every step ("An elevator?" she'd said ten years ago, "Who the hell needs an elevator?"). In the silent apartment she opened the envelopes: bills, advertisement for a new spa, a note from the house management: the apartments were put on sale. They would have to pay 534,000 euros or move out.

She called her daughter Kristin and listened to her excuses why they couldn't make it to Berlin these days, then her grandchildren rattled off the usual (friends, school, the things mommy and daddy were refusing to buy). When Kristin was back, distracted, impatient, eager to end the call, Vivien mentioned the letter from the house management.

"We'll buy," she said and quickly hung up.

She took off her new running shoes (the sales clerk had looked at her skeptically when she'd asked for his advice; he even had the gall to ask if they were meant for her) and checked if the green light of the answering machine was blinking. Doc Melzer had prescribed to leave her cell phone at home when she went for her daily walk. "Why?" Vivien asked, expecting his hundred-year-theory, but he just smiled and said, "Cause I say so."

She had a cup of tea in the kitchen. Bernhard was the aficionado. To her the cheap brew coming in bags for 59ct served just as well. On her last birthday, he'd covered her eyes with a scarf and led her to their car. It nearly took them an hour until he opened the passenger door and took her by the hand, saying, "Mind the curb," or "Careful!" She still wasn't allowed to look when he paid the entrance fee but then they were walking on gravel and after a few steps some of it had come into her shoes, so he finally took off the damned scarf: they were in a Japanese garden, after that she had to visit a Korean garden and after that a Chinese garden where Bernhard had arranged a tea ceremony in a chintzy traditional hut. An Asian woman in a red dress with a fire-spitting dragon filled hot water into tiny cups, and Vivien had to taste again and again, and she had to pretend that the flavor changed every time even though it remained the same dishwater. Her feet were aching and she was dressed far too warmly, but when Bernhard asked her if she'd liked it and she returned his gaze, she realized that she hadn't noticed the small brown spot at the rim of his right iris for much too long.

She opened the fridge and reached for the lonely piece of Gouda, put some butter onto a fluffy slice of bread, forced herself to eat. Bernhard would shrink back with disgust. A few years ago he'd begun to bake bread himself. She could picture him now, standing in front of the oven with a pot cloth, looking at the clock; soon he would open the door, take the bread out, put it onto the tray and grab the knife, but then he would pause and they both would watch the steam

rising into the air.

She left the half-finished sandwich on the plate she'd been using for three days at least, reached for her book, scanned a page, browsed a few pages back, started from the beginning, put the book back onto the table. The sun was hitting on the dried-out flowerpots. Early March they would always go to the store to buy soil and a variety of seeds and Bernhard would carry the heavy bag up to their apartment and she would clear the table, place the pots next to each other, fill them with the still damp soil. She would carefully distribute the seeds while Bernhard sat next to her, sipping tea, reading the newspaper. He'd also carried the bag up to the apartment seven years ago, when he was in love with that pathetic woman he'd met at the library, he drank his tea and read his newspaper while she cried although she'd forbidden herself to do that, because a face covered with tears was the last thing to get a husband back. Now it was nearly May and the pots were still carrying last year's soil, and last year's flowers were long gone, and there would be no new soil, no new flowers this year.

She went to the bathroom to wash her hands. On the sideboard there was the untouched bag with the make-up items she'd bought last week, after a heavily made-up assistant at *Kaufhof* had offered to do her face. At first she wanted to refuse, but then she thought that it would be a nice surprise for Bernhard. She herself was surprised when she looked at the result in the mirror, to such a degree that she found herself at the check-out with foundation, mascara, and eye shadow, everything by Helena Rubinstein, everything fucking expensive.

Bernhard hadn't noticed of course. Or if he had, he'd shown no sign. Well. He just had to come home. They would drink his special tea and eat his self-made bread. She'd kept his after shave and his electric tooth brush. His bathrobe was hanging behind the door, freshly washed. His massage oil was standing next to his antiperspirant stick. All she had to do was to get rid of the dust. All she had to do was give the whole place a good thorough cleaning.

She was just putting on her coat when the doorbell rang. After some hesitation she said into the intercom, “Hello?”

“Happy birthday, sweetheart!”

She bit on her lip. Natasha had made it a habit to show up every other week without being invited and always at times that didn’t suit Vivien at all. “Don’t you want to have your gift?” her friend screamed through the intercom.

Vivien pushed the buzzer and shortly later watched her friend sinking onto the kitchen bench, her fat bottom taking over most of it. She couldn’t understand why Natasha had been letting herself go. She’d had the body of a ballet dancer when they first met.

Natasha said, “You eat regularly?”

“Certainly.” Her appetite came in spasms nowadays, like yesterday at Hermannplatz, when she suddenly felt the urge to buy a *currywurst*, although she and Bernhard had been vegetarians for decades. Then again, a whole day could pass and she would only realize in the evening that she hadn’t eaten anything.

“How’s Bernhard?”

“Getting better each day.”

Natasha took a small package out of her knapsack and shoved it over the table. “Happy birthday, dear.”

Vivien opened Natasha’s gift, saying, “We received a letter from the house management.” She unfolded a table cloth and hung it over the chair, next to the dish towel. “Thank you.”

“You can return it if you don’t like it,” Natasha said. “I saved the receipt.”

“I like it,” Vivien said, although they’d never used table cloths before and she wasn’t planning to do so in the future. “We have to buy or move out.”

“In my house they are letting two-room apartments,” Natasha said. “There’s an elevator. And a balcony.”

Vivien could feel her left eyelid twitching. Before, she’d thought that she just imagined it, but she’d checked last time in the mirror – it

had been visible enough. "Bernhard would kill me."

Natasha smiled and then she suddenly put her hand on Vivien's hand. "Sometimes you have let go."

Vivien pulled her hand away. "We won't move, and that's the end of it."

"Do you still visit every day?"

"Of course I do." She would have to ask the nurse later. That would suit Natasha, to go and see Bernhard behind her back. She got up and said. "Tea?"

Natasha nodded. "I found a nice book club. We meet once a week." She tapped on Vivien's book. "We read that, too. Why don't you join?"

Vivien poured lukewarm water on the tea bag and took it out after two seconds. "We ran out of sugar."

"Do you have milk?"

"Ran out of that too."

Natasha put her arthritic fingers around the cup. "Everybody's extremely nice," she said. "And you like to read, don't you?"

Vivien checked her own hands. They seemed fine, thank God for that! "I don't have time."

Natasha looked around. Soon she would bring up how often they'd sat here with friends, having dinner, talking and drinking until sunrise. And that it was high time to do it again. She brought her gaze back to Vivien, let out one of her exaggerated sighs, and said, "Are you coming to Yolanda's funeral?"

Vivien got up. "I don't do funerals." She reached for her plate, threw the remains of the sandwich into the trash, and put the plate back onto the table. How much time all this housecleaning business had consumed, hour after hour, every single day; and look at her now, she hadn't touched a broom or the vacuum in months, there was no need to fill or empty the dishwasher, just rinse a glass or a cup every couple of days, that was all. And the dust? Who cares about dust? Without her glasses she saw no dust.

Natasha smiled. "And the kids? Are they alright?"

"Kristin's bringing the whole family tomorrow," Vivien said. "And Alexander's daughter already gained two pounds."

"Did you go see them? How are they?"

"Can't leave Bernhard alone, can I?" Of course, she wouldn't tell her that Alexander had moved out of his girlfriend's place and that she had no clue where he was staying now. She'd offered him to come home, but he said that he couldn't leave town. She hoped that that was due to his new job. She hoped that he wasn't out of work again.

"What if I look after him while you're gone?"

Vivien grabbed Natasha's barely touched cup and said, "I have things to do."

She exhaled when she'd closed the door behind her friend's fat arse, called her son, talked to his mailbox. Although he hadn't finished his law studies he would know what to do. They'd been living here for so long. They'd renovated every single room, they'd put in central heating, while everybody else was still using coal. Peter had helped, handsome Peter, who'd just turned fifty when he died of prostate cancer. He and Bernhard also tiled the bathroom floor when Vivien was pregnant with Kristin, threatening to move into the first available new building, because with two toddlers she had the right to a decent place. "We never move out," she said to the mailbox before hanging up.

She opened the door and nearly fell over the neighbor's daughter who was sitting on the stairs, with mascara smeared all over her face and her eyes red from crying. Vivien said, "Are you all right?"

The girl shrugged.

"Can I do something for you?"

"Nobody can do nothing for me."

That's how far she got, being in tune with teenagers now. She bent down and put her hand on the girl's skinny forearm (anorexic?). "I guess I should tell you now that you'll soon be laughing again."

"All grownups say so."

"That's because they don't like to admit that they're terribly sad themselves."

The girl looked at her short nails, on which the green polish was chipping off. "Are you sad because your husband died?"

"He didn't die."

"My mum said so."

"It was just an accident," Vivien said. "He'll be home soon."

In the subway Vivien called Tom's son who was a realtor now. She told him that they could pay a hundred thousand and he told her that no bank would give them the rest, considering their age and everything. "What do you mean by 'everything'?" she asked, remembering him playing with Kristin and Alexander when they were little. Remembering him moving in with them while his mom was in hospital and Tom had to work long hours. "The kids were born in that apartment," she said. "They can't kick us out like dogs."

When he wanted to know how Bernhard was doing, she answered, "Fine."

She hurried past the reception. If she were asked what she dreaded most about this place she would choose the smell, but the reprints on the walls were the very next she'd consider. The nurse with the henna dyed curls approached her, carrying a tray. If at least all these people stopped smiling.

"You're bringing the sunshine in, Misses Adamski," she said.

"How is he?"

"We had a restless night, dear."

"Give it a try with valerian." Vivien gazed at the yellow and pink sippy cups placed on the tray. "And how is my husband?"

"The doctor wants to see you," the nurse said, still smiling. "He will be back in his office at half past three."

Vivien opened the door to Bernhard's room. The second bed was still free. Her husband's roommate had died three days ago. His wife used to join her in the cafeteria, telling her how glad she was with all the children, grandchildren, nephews, and nieces coming by, but last time she suddenly said, "If I were in my husband's shoes, I'd want somebody to shoot me."

Vivien brought her face closer and whispered, "There are people who'd do it for five hundred."

Now she bent over her pale husband, kissed his forehead, said, "They told me you didn't sleep well." She took off her coat and opened a window. Outside, crouched creatures were moving slowly, helped by canes or walking frames. Others sitting in wheelchairs were staring gloomily into the distance. Preferred clothing here was beige or pastel, with neither taste nor shape. Everybody was giving the impression to bite it within the next twenty-four hours.

The first weeks she'd dressed Bernhard in his favorite clothes, his and her favorite clothes, she'd made sure that he looked good, washed and styled his hair, covered his dead gaze with a new pair of sunglasses that she'd bought at the posh eyewear store on Oranienburger Strasse. Then, with the help of a nurse, she put him in a wheelchair and pushed him to the bench beneath the gigantic chestnut tree, where she fitted him with earphones, hoping that he would show any reaction if she played his favorite songs. She observed his face closely and excitedly noticed that his pupils were finally changing, but back home she checked the internet and found out that it must have been due to his medication.

She put her head onto Bernhard's shoulder. He'd been so strong, but now she could only feel his delicate bones. "We got a letter from the house management. They want us to buy the place."

She reached for his cold, lifeless hand, pressed it to her cheek, said, "Else we have to move out." The sun was flooding the room. Before, spring had been her favorite season. Now, she could well do without it.

She could well do without happy people sitting in the sun and pretty women wearing summer dresses and men rolling up their shirt sleeves.

“Your granddaughter is doing fine,” Vivien said, taking the massage oil out of her bag. “She’s already gained two pounds.” She kneaded his fingers, one after the other, then his palm. “Alexander sent pictures. She looks like him when he was little,” she said. Once, she’d wanted to massage Bernhard’s back. The nurse helped her turning him around, but when he was lying there, like a corpse in a Swedish thriller, she got sick. She had to sit down and the nurse turned Bernhard back to his usual position. The way she did it was so natural, without any effort at all, and Vivien realized that she was no longer the one who knew what her husband needed. She bent forward and whispered into his ear, “I feel so lonely without you.”

She took his other hand and said, “Did I ever tell you that I was in love with Kristin’s violin tutor?” Bernhard continued staring at the ceiling, with that stupid grin distorting his handsome face. “The Russian guy, remember?” He’d always been so serious, sometimes slightly depressive, and now he was lying here, sneering like a preschooler who snatched candy while mum wasn’t looking. Vivien touched the corner of his mouth and pulled it down. “Roman was his name. I wanted to leave you. That’s how much I loved him.” She removed her finger and the corner went up again. “Never mind,” she said. “I was only kidding.”

She took the iPod out of her bag. “No more special request shows,” she said, scrolling the list until she found Tammy Wynette. Bernhard loathed country music, especially sung by women. She pushed on play, observed his eyes, his mouth, nothing. She sang, “Our D-I-V-O-R-C-E becomes final today.”

He continued grinning. She removed the earphones, turned off the iPod, said, “How could you do this to me?”

“Mrs. Adamski,” the doctor said. “Take a seat.”

Her gaze got caught by his running shoes. They were the same

ones she'd bought, only much bigger. She remembered how the sales clerk had tried to talk her into buying a 42 although she'd had a 39 throughout her life. She'd felt like a clown as she had to make some steps in front of him. When another customer interrupted them, she grabbed the smaller ones and fled to the cash desk. She sank onto the appointed chair. "When can I take him home?"

The doctor looked at some x-rays that were lying in front of him. "There's something we have to talk about."

Her tongue felt like glued to her palate. She whispered, "Can I have a glass of water, please?"

He reached for the bottle on the window sill and filled a glass. Tiny gas bubbles were whirling around as he put it in front of her. "We discovered ulcers in his intestine," he said.

She felt the water run into her mouth. She felt the gas bubbles on her tongue. She drank up and said, "Can I have more?"

"A surgery would be a bit of a gamble." He refilled her glass. "In his state I would advise against it."

She stared at his coat. In between the second and the third button, there was a tiny brown spot. It looked exactly like the one in Bernhard's right eye. Probably it was just a speck of lint. Probably the doctor would notice it as soon as he looked down on himself and he would flip it off, using his thumb and his index finger. "Fortunately he doesn't feel anything," he said.

"What do you mean?"

He smiled. "There's no pain."

She stood up. "What if he doesn't get surgery?"

The doctor shrugged. "It's your decision, of course." He held out his hand and said, "Sleep on it, and let me know tomorrow."

Back home she ignored the blinking light of the answering machine and walked through each room, looking at the framed photos. There were half a dozen of boxes filled to the brim with other frozen

moments of their family life, through which the children would browse one day, taking this or that one out, saying, “Remember?” and then to the guys from the removal service, “Get rid of it.”

She went to the cabinet in the living room and took out the bottle of wine that Bernhard got from his department when he retired, the one they’d saved for a special occasion, and she put it on the table, and next to it, the corkscrew, and a glass. She sat on the sofa, the soon to be a hundred-year-old sofa that they’d bought from a friend for 50 marks at the beginning of her first pregnancy. They stepped into an upholstery when she was heavily pregnant with their second child and they looked at every color in the catalogue, touched the fabrics, and finally went for velvet and *British racing green*; she remembered that catalogue, the many shades of green, she remembered how she fell in love with that name even though she actually preferred *avocado*. The restoration cost them 2000 marks, a sum that made their hearts skip a beat in those days; she clearly remembered the envelope they’d prepared, how they’d put it on the table, how thick it was, how Bernhard said, “We could have bought a car for that.” When the upholsterer and his assistant had gone, leaving behind their smell of sweat and sawdust, she lay down on the re-born sofa and pulled Bernhard toward her and they made love and shortly afterward she felt the first contraction.

She opened the bottle. She hadn’t had any wine since she and Bernhard drank to their new grandchild, two days before she stood in front of the cheese counter at *Kaiser’s* while he was getting a bottle of orange juice. When she heard the smashing of glass as the sales clerk was about to put the piece of Pecorino onto the scale, she said to herself that it was just a bottle that was smashed to pieces, and of course they would pay for it, but her legs were moving as if she were a puppet on strings and she remembered thinking, “Slow down, your knees.”

She filled the glass, brought it to her lips, took a sip. It didn’t taste good. It didn’t taste good enough to get drunk. She got up, took the glass and the bottle to the kitchen, and emptied both in the sink.

The next morning, she rose, brushed her teeth, put on her running shoes. She was on her second round when the man passed her again. It was him, the way he moved betrayed him. As if he were dancing with the wind, the soil, the sun. She ran faster until their legs moved simultaneously, until his rhythm became her rhythm, until she didn't need to fix her eyes on his legs anymore, and she grinned, thinking of Doc Melzer's warning, and she rolled up her sleeves, letting the warm breeze caress her arms.

THE POETS OF CHILE TEACH ME

David Kirby

When I read Pablo Neruda and Violetta Parra, I feel as they
must have when they read the Whitman who, in Neruda's words,
"taught me / to be an American," who lifted his eyes
to the mountains yet who heard "subterranean echoes" as well
and "gathered / for me / everything," so that whenever "a verse

of yours arrived for a visit," it was like "like a piece / of clean body,
the verse that arrived, / like / your own fisherman beard."

Fine writing, Pablo! And how hard to write well or at all
when the head of your country is a dictator. Dictators don't
like poetry. They don't like any art. Who knows what art means?

Not even the artist him- or herself, judging by all the essays
and books that appear yearly saying how Shakespeare got it wrong,
not to mention Emily Dickinson and Virginia Woolf.
If they caught you painting a wall during General Pinochet's reign,
they took you away for an "inspection." These days, though,

you can paint what you want on a wall, for which reason
there is little respect for artists who stencil, because
in some countries you have to paint and run, but not in Chile.
Yet if great art shows us how similar we are, surely it reveals
our differences as well. When he wasn't involved with poetry

or politics, Neruda liked to entertain his friends, often serving
them a "Coquetelón," his signature drink made with equal parts
cognac and champagne and a few drops of orange juice
and Cointreau. "A child who does not play is not a child,"
says Neruda, "but the man who doesn't play has lost forever

the child who lived in him and whom he will miss terribly."
We North Americans like to drink, but we don't like to play;
we'd rather pay others to play for us. Golf is not a game.
And not every Chilean is a grinning hedonist: Violetta Parra
wrote a poem called "Thank You to Life" and then killed herself

with a gunshot to the head. Yet again and again she says,
"Thank you to life, which has given me so much":
an ear to hear crickets and canaries and the voice
of her beloved, sounds and the alphabet, tired feet to walk
through cities and puddles, valleys and deserts, mountains

and plains, houses, streets, patios. "It gave me a heart
that causes my frame to shudder," she writes,
and laughter and longing, happiness and pain, "the two materials
from which my songs are formed," she says as the poem ends,
"And your song, as well, which is the same song."

And everyone's song, which is my very song." Parra's lyrics
are ambiguous: the poem may be read as a celebration of life,
or she may have meant it as a suicide note, thanking life
for all it has given her before ending it. She might even have been
saying that a life of health, opportunity, and worldly experience

may not be enough to counter one's grief, one's awareness
of the contradictory nature of the human condition,
in which case she was being ironic, though I hope not.
In Pre-Columbian times, a people called the Paracas buried
their dead sitting upright in funerary bundles made with layers

of cloth. The Paracas believed their cemeteries were gardens,
the funerary bundles were bulbs, and the people inside them
were seeds, ready to germinate and flourish. Nothing is more beautiful
than one poet's crush on another. Lorca, too, loved Whitman,
writing, "Not for a moment, Walt Whitman, lovely old man,

have I failed to see your beard full of butterflies, / nor your corduroy
shoulders frayed by the moon, / nor your thighs pure as Apollo's,
nor your voice like a column of ash, / old man, beautiful as the mist,
you moaned like a bird / with its sex pierced by a needle."
Now Lorca wasn't Chilean, of course, but, hey. Come on.

WILLFUL IGNORANCE

Matthew Smith

Sitting around big, wooden tables in the tech lab
at Carson High School, with the entrails of various
machines strewn about, hung from the walls like streamers.
Mr. Tourmaline stood with his arms crossed
and the face of a proud father as he played
the video of Steve Jobs announcing the very first iPhone,
from a projector that said, Epson, and if you looked real
close, it read, Made in China, too. We all sat slack jawed,
me, with my sleeveless Charged GBH tee and Doc Martens,
and Mike next to me, with his sateen mandarin orange Ralph Lauren
polo that tucked neatly into his pressed Dockers,
and the tan leather of his shoes matching
the tan leather of his belt. Hell, probably cut from the same
cow. Though we were cut from a completely different cloth,
Michael and I, shared this moment like we shared schools,
only because there's one district. Every iteration of the iPhone
manufactures the same wholesale miracles.
It's a wonder the factories that produce these miracles have suicide
nets outside of them, to decrease the overhead cost of children
leaping to their deaths. As I am thumbing away at "Space Invaders,"
I wonder how many of their own little Alien Invaders
children made it past their Laser Cannons
before they'd had enough.

MAN ARRESTED FOR CLEARING SNOW WITH FLAMETHROWER

Gabriel Weighous

I lost my job a week ago, did I tell you that, cousin?
Yeah, that greedy bastard, who I gave all my time
and effort, just up and said I was done there. No warning,
no, *Thanks for all your hard work, all the over time,
and everything.* Just done. I've been filling out applications,
the online kind. It's faster that way. I got a call for an interview
pretty quick, I guess they really liked my resume.
I've been trying to keep the driveway clear despite
all this snow. I've been trying even before I lost my job,
shoveling and laying down salt. I was even out there
with a rock pick, smashing ice. This weather will it ever stop?
I know you don't know the answer, but you do know
how it's been, the crazy snow. When I woke this morning
for my interview, running late, I stepped outside,
and saw it too, so you know, it had snowed almost three feet.
The one day I needed a break! I put in so much time to get
this interview. I worked hard at my last job, so I grabbed
grandpa's stuff from the Pacific, you know the stuff.
I was fed up. I didn't possess the willpower necessary to move
two hundred million tons of white bullshit.

A FLICKERING CANDLE PRAYER

Adrian C. Louis

You cannot petition the Lord in prayer.

—Jim Morrison

The candle flickered,
demanded I speak
the unspeakable in
the sad, fading light.
O Lord in Heaven, I
now confess that I
had no choice but to
piss on that fabled
flickering candle.
It's better to live
in darkness than
to burn in heaven.
Amen.

HOWLING

Danielle Hanson

The howling of dogs swirls
on the wind tonight. I bury it
as quickly as possible.
The only sentence you can say
in this language is a lie.
Lie down—lie still
while I cover you with earth,
dear shadow. If the stones
shred you, I will offer your pieces
to the sun. I will chant
prayers to you in an unearthed tongue.

DUBIOUS MOON

Lillo Way

The moon's grown fat and I'm suspicious
because several stars have gone missing,

the sky's an evil shade of black,
and someone's stolen every leaf, leaving

nothing but bleached tree-skeletons
pointing bony fingers at the culprit.

Some people claim they've never seen the moon
perfectly full. But I've caught it that way

countless times, like tonight. Those of us
with poor eyesight are the beneficiaries

of such gifts. Without my glasses, I get seven
moons overlapping. An embarrassment of moons.

Looking through the edge of my glasses,
the upper curve of moon is scarlet

and the bottom is blue. I get prism moons
into the blind bargain.

The lake below is a sparkling mess,
a waste bin for phosphorescent fallen stars

and the moon's mirror causes a blinding glare,
as if I needed one.

SPRING

Nan Bryne

As the season turns

and the dark hours cede
their place to the sun

I don't wonder if the grass will turn green
or the heather will push its plucky brown
head above ground like a thirsty dog

These things are not my concern
These things

Just as a rain drop spit
from the mouth of a darkening cloud
feels only the downward spiral
my understanding

reckons—
only with the modesty of our existence

the earth settled on bloody sheets
the brutal push of each bud

Like doubt
All the pretty flowers

MONO LAKE

Rebecca Eckland

Mono Lake is a dying lake, a desert lake, an alkali lake with no outlet; inaccessible, surrounded by empty shores. It is also a place of stark beauty, of clean lines of color, and of silence. Its vibrant blue is surrounded by tones of brown, tawny and gray. It smells of rain, it smells of sagebrush sweating in the summer heat. It tastes like tears and sweat; it is a memory of a kind of home. It is hot and cold, and always dry. It is the mirror reflection of the Sierra Nevada Range, it is the endless time of cycling races, like an instant between words or thoughts, but longer. Mono Lake erupts across the desert, a mystery, a thing that is always there, but always, also, vanishing.

It is my mom's hands, setting gray ceramic tile in a half-built house many miles off North Highway 395. I'm twelve years old, and I remember that we see our breath in the would-be foyer that December, and me asking the question "why we do what we do?" No one there but us; up to her to set the tiles and the grout, and up to her to navigate the storm home. My mom who gave me my mitochondria DNA. It's the gray mastic, stuck to her hands, which mimics the way sweat feels, dried to my hands after 200 miles on the bike.

Nearly twenty years later, Mono Lake, around me, becomes a place where light fades to thunderstorm, where my hands trace the atmosphere of an open car window, looking for what can't be seen.

*

Five years before a trip to Mono Lake, the grandmother I spent every childhood summer with—the grandmother who taught me to swim—died. It was days before her birthday, and I remember telling myself that I was going to call *just after this important race*. My mom

called me in tears, and even that, I didn't let myself feel, because I had another race.

I had finally become an *elite female athlete*, an identity I had struggled to attain from the time I was four years old. Now, years later, all I have are memories I've collected as evidence, arguing against one another, as each attempts to define the person I've become. I win a 600-mile three-stage cycling race, and still, I don't know.

Am I an athlete? Only silence answers me, the way the desert always has.

*

I'm not sure you ever know quite what it is, this inland sea which appears just before or beyond Conway summit off U.S. Highway 395—I remember it in the many trips coming from or going to my grandmother's house.

It remains far enough away from the road that it has a sense of non-place. Or, it is a lake that is dying—and that has been dying since the 1950s—which minimizes its presence to a footnote on the miles en route to L.A. from Reno.

Mono Lake derives its name not from the Greek *mano*, meaning “one” (like the word “*monologue*”) but instead from a Native American dialect (there were over 135 spoken in what would become the state of California) a word which meant “Fly-eaters.”

Mono Lake, the uninhabitable lake, the lake you can't swim in, you can't stop to see, the lake you see outside the car window as a kid as you press your hands and nose to the glass (even though the adults told you not to because it leaves a mark), wondering how a lake could exist without sandy beaches, without fish and without neon orange floatation devices.

It's a question I asked many times on those long summer drives:

“Well, if there are no fishes, what are there?”

To which my grandmother replied: “There’s nothing.”

*

The day after I won a 600 mile race which traced its way across the state of California, a male competitor commented on my blog that I was a total *fake*, that I had not *earned* my win because I had ridden with a man. He wrote that if I was to prove myself, I should ride alone, regardless if the race rules said that drafting (following another rider) was completely permissible to everyone, male and female.

I expected to let the criticism go, but the man’s comments shifted something in me. It had to do with this idea of “athlete.” I arrived at two questions: “Am I an athlete?” was the first, of course, and one that I’ve wondered about my entire life. The second question, though was unexpected: “why do I want to be an athlete?”

The mechanics of it are easy enough to understand: the training, the need to eat well and to recover between competitive events. The reason behind them—why a person puts up with the uncertainty, physical discomfort and loneliness—that is harder to grasp. After all these years of competing, I always feel a twinge of hope before a race that *the day after* I cross a finish line will be somehow different—or, I will be somehow different—than before.

My expectation that something would change comes, in part, from what I understand of how the world works. After all, in a race there is always a beginning, a middle and an end. There are always rules, and an even playing field. And so, maybe the illusion of athletics is not unlike the the illusion of theatre (the magic of the spectacle, and the stage), and, too, its spell drops once the final curtain falls and life, as it is, resumes.

So, the question of “am I an athlete?” lingers in my mind as I

come to Mono Lake after winning an important race. Mono Lake: that place I remember seeing when I was 8 and 9 and 10 and 12 and 19 en route to grandmother's house. Driving with Grandma. Then, driving with Mom. And now, driving alone using the methods by which I learned to define myself by my grandmother and mom who offered tangible, real possibilities for women who can navigate the world as it is, and sometimes conquer it.

*

Natives of the Mono basin placed an emphasis on landmarks because trespassing tribal lines meant "death." Interestingly, such landmarks were passed down in the family through a maternal line. There isn't much left, or there doesn't seem to be, of this original culture; what I glean I read from signs posted at the state park near Highway 395.

I learn that Mono peoples harvested, dried and preserved the fly pupa for the long winter months ahead of them and I think that I do this, too—clinging to the stories I've created about the women in my family.

I believe my maternal grandmother who swam and read me lines of Emily Dickinson was an undiscovered talent in the water. I extrapolate that she taught kindergarten classes to supplement her love of swimming long distances. Or, of my mom, the gymnast, my mom the actress, the mom whom I see illuminated on a stage—a performance stage where she plays the leading role—until some dim moment in time when the light falls and I will never have a clear idea why.

Or, the faded sepia tin-type of some now-nameless woman, the first one on my mom's side to receive a formal education. It is her graduation day and she is wearing a white cotton dress. I imagine her one of the first long distance runners, moving across empty country, fast and light, using words to write about her body that are light and breathable and controversial like women on the frontier always have been. Her story, too, is erased.

This is what Mono Lake brings to mind, and this is why I tell myself I come here. Mono Lake has always been about what is and what is not, and finding the line of preservation between them.

*

California mining towns of Aurora and Bodie would draw prospectors to the Mono Basin (and its environs in the late 1870s). I'm always amazed when I think of it—the desolation of this place, the coldness of it, and the way everything is far away—that life, as it was, sustained here before the gold veins payed out in less than twenty years. I've never been to Bodie or Aurora even though my mom lives a quarter mile from what was once the old rail line which connected the two towns.

She sends me pictures of Jeep excursions she takes with her husband to Aurora, and once a few years ago, to Bodie. Wooden buildings with naked, decaying dress mannequins and no dresses still in the displays, stripped down to only their bone-colored fraying frames.

I send her relics of the books I read, in search of myself. The latest traces the history of women warriors in 17th Century France. It described Geneviève Prémoy who served as a chevalier until her gender was revealed when she was severely wounded in the breast during the Battle of Leuze; Catherine Meurdrace de La Gutte, and Comtesse de Saint Basement who both led men to battle on horseback, bore arms, defended their lands, and were proclaimed “New Amazons.” Julia-Emile—better known as La Maupin was the undefeated warrior in fencing who became the star of the Paris Opera, whose seemingly unquenchable love for life killed her by the age of 33.

I send my mom race reports, written in first-person present tense and posted on my blog. I write about the cycling shorts which lose their seams mid-ride and I finish the race chafed and blood-soaked. I write of vomiting, stomach-cramps and sunburns. I write about the

man who hates me, and he writes me back in comments: I am a fake, I am not enough, I am not an athlete, he says. A month later, I fight to prove my strength. I out-climb him in a race across Nevada; he out-powers me in a long, flat valley. It's a draw, an empty discontent and a dry wind, as the landscape empties of competitors.

*

Recent research in “narrative psychology” claims that the stories we tell ourselves about our lives shape our identity. We know who we are by the way our memories have learned to coalesce, which is, in turn, influenced by the books we've read, the movies we've seen and the way others tell stories around us.

I remember this: I am visiting my grandmother and I'm eighteen years old. I've just read Hemingway's *The Old Man and the Sea*. The water of Leisure World's swimming pool is that California-chlorine blue. I tell my grandmother *I'm going to swim a little* and by a little, I mean a mile. By now, I'm sure she knows I will be gone at least thirty minutes, lost in the rhythm of the swim, lost in whatever it is I see along the pool's concrete bottom.

The story I tell myself for that mile swim is that I am the marlin in Hemingway's story, that I am mindless and a fish, the shimmer of my scales refracting the summer light in sparse, Hemingway clipped sentences, punctuated by my strokes.

To be an athlete, when I am eighteen, is to be *the marlin*. And as soon as I'm not in the pool, I'm not a marlin. I'm just myself.

*

An inland, alkaline lake is a contradiction in landscape. Blue and crisp like ocean, its shoreline is white and bare. Desolate might be the kindest word because there are no homes, ranches, or traces of ghost towns (or towns themselves) which populate its shores. Instead,

there is desert and everything is quiet and the only sound I hear is the sound of the wind and my breath.

I come here and think of the countless summers I wanted to touch the water with my foot—*just to touch it*, to see if the blue was real. Summers when I was a gymnast, a pole vaulter, a weight lifter, a runner, a cyclist, a swimmer. Summers when the medals I won in races jangled thick and heavy around my neck and other kids in high school wrote me notes like: *I am glad we are kind of friends, even though I'm mostly jealous*. Even now, even when I'm in my thirties and even when I have won a rather important race, I shy away from the water as if there is a sacredness about this particular submersion I can never know.

After all, if you drank the water, it would make you thirsty.

*

After I win a 600-mile cycling race, I drive to Mono Lake. I bring the idea of “women warriors” from 17th Century France, and particularly, La Maupin with me, and I wonder what kept her from wanting to pursue a life a life of fighting, especially those times when men challenged her to duels, wanting to prove (what?) by her spilled blood on the paved lanes of Paris. I bring the idea of my mom with me, too, and wonder why, at a particular juncture, the public life became unbearable.

It is an answer I can't articulate. There are no stories in my family about female athletes. So, why should there be stories about what happens to female athletes when they are not athletes any more? I frantically read literature from the past, but most stories end conveniently as the curtain falls.

So for now, I traverse narrow tire-track lanes through the desert, but I can't seem to find a road which leads to Mono Lake from the East. I take a narrow dirt road which looks promising, but it dwindles into sage and steppe. I do this for hours: finding roads, following them

until there is nothing left.

As I drive through the unmarked desert surrounding Mono Lake, I trace my story back, to the moment when athletics tapped the vein of gold in my soul, and I wonder if it won't last as long as I want it to. I trace my story back, where the line of athlete begins and where it ends, but find nothing but sand. Is woman congruent with athlete? Is granddaughter? Is daughter? Am I? I remember my mom, laying those gray tiles, and there is something there; and yet, I cannot make the lines connect.

All I know is that when I was eighteen, I imagined that I was a marlin and my ability to swim would mean the difference between life and death. I wonder about that narrative now, twenty years later, when a dying lake calls me back, even though I'm unable to reach it.

WHEN I SEE A LONE GOOSE

Sean Prentiss

A gaggle of geese
fly low against the big
lake. Their V is the shape
of family, returning home,
knowing place—this big
lake, that long river near
our cabins, the countless
ponds they call home.

The geese plaintively honk,
calling to each other, to
the big lake, or, maybe,
to me. They tell me I too
should travel from here
to there, from the big lake
to that long river. From
me (alone) to you (alone).

The geese fly away, onto
wherever it is that geese fly,
maybe the place of dreams.
The world becomes silence
as a straggler flies past,
wings beating to catch its
gaggle. It longs to find
a home. I understand its needs.

If I could have wings I'd fly
the miles stretching from here
to there, from me to you. And
if I understood the tongues
these geese speak (and sometimes
I do), I'd ask to let me grab
the uplift from their wings
and fly along. From the looks of it,

they know my way home.

IN THE HOUR SINCE YOU'VE LEFT

Sean Prentiss

I open the cupboards; the cupboards are empty,
empty of everything but dust things
and spider web things and dish things.

I search under the couch, peer deep into
a dark gloom, brush aside stray pennies
that seem to be looking for a home.

I open the refrigerator, push aside the ketchup,
the mayonnaise, pull out last night's take-home,
open it up—half eaten salmon.

On the dining room table, bills sit outside of
envelopes, magazines half read, the radio
tuned to your station, though it doesn't play.

In the bathroom the towel still damp from a final
shower, the sheets rumpled from last night,
the dog, she sleeps contently in the dining room,

not aware of what has been lost.

BEDROOM IN ARLES

Penny Lane

From your bedroom window,
I can see the East side of town.

blurry with rain,
painted by an Impressionist.

Morning sun hides in clouds,
a candle in a paper lantern.

You've tangled yourself
in sheets of cornflower blue,

while you sleep. Your breath
is slow, deliberate.

Like a pen moving across paper,
exhaling ink.

I wonder if you love me.

Enough that I would find my name
scattered in each of your letters.

Enough that you would send me
pieces of yourself,

when you no longer want them.

BRAVERY

Penny Lane

Hand in hand, we ran
to the end of the earth,

until corn rows fell
into open space.

Wildflower war paint stained
our cheeks, matching bruises

on your knees. I watched you spin,
shifting between two worlds.

Your dress caught in the wind
engulfing you

in a kaleidoscope of constellations.
I watched you climb

to the shoulders of a giant
Sequoia. You were a crow

on a limb. Anthracite hair
and pale eyes reflecting the moon.

What is a crow, if not
a dove nesting in a coal mine?

You peeled the petals
of shooting stars off your skin.

They fell like feathers
back to earth,

back to me. You leapt
into a watercolor sky,

and spread your wings,
lined in gold.

You were a beacon,
beckoning to Jupiter,

a speck of stardust
stuck in your teeth.

STORM WATCH

Penny Lane

We sit on lawn chairs,
our legs stretched
at strange angles,
like broken bones.

The clouds are swollen,
heavy with rain.
The same shade as bruises
your swimsuit doesn't cover.

The first storm of the summer
creeps in overhead.
You shudder at thunder
because it is loud,

like shattered glass
on tile. The contents
of your mother's China cabinet
on your kitchen floor.

And it echoes
like your father's voice
in empty hallways,
his fists pounding on the walls.

The smell of rain on concrete
is metallic like blood,
in your mouth,
and too familiar.

ABOUT YOU

Maddie Sieffert

Parading around your musty and cigarette
Fumigated basement, I did not need the protection
Of a gas mask to know you were toxic.

Your faded ebony, leather jacket hung limply
From your too thin shoulders and the silvery
Crescents of scars seemed to glow amidst the thick
Haze of smoke that warped your impulsive decisions.

You sprinkled the cement colored ashes
That collected around the bottom of your American Spirit
Into the hollow sound hole of the guitar you couldn't play.

By the end of the night your lips would taste like bourbon
Complaining that no other liquor was strong enough
To *quiet the mind of an artist like yourself*.

By the break of the next day, sitting in the dew covered grass
Where you used to read me all of your suicide letters,
I realized I couldn't stand you.

It wasn't your fault that I cried in the arms of my father,
All of those times after you told me that you "accidentally"
Slept with someone else.
It wasn't your fault.

It was my fault for realizing a little too late,
That when you said, *I love you*, you were only
Telling me more about you.

COPING

Maddie Sieffert

I had a friend named Lilly who used to kiss me when she was drunk. She would hold my hand, tuck my hair behind my ear and tell me I smelled of lemon and lavender as we sat in an ephemeral existence wading in the deep grass of our favorite childhood park. The bruises that seemed to softly shade her arms were as purple as the midnight sky we sat beneath. She would catch me staring, then, she would cry and reminisce of summers at the lake with her grandfather who would finally drown under the weight of many years of debt. *Do you love me?* I shook my head. *Why not? Because there is a sad lonely hum where a boy's name used to reside in my mind and some nights I still must curl my knees to my chest, blanket my fears, and put my muffled sobs to rest.* She nods in sad acceptance, but I remind her, hand in hand, that I love her as a friend. I had a friend named Lilly who used to kiss me when she was drunk. *Do you love me?* Mascara running the course of her face, and crimson, waxy, lipstick, much too adult for her young features, smeared like a jet streak across her pale, apple cheeks. I shook my head.

AN AFTERNOON AT YOUR MOM'S

Rolfe Nicholas Barbosa

Succulents, cacti, and ivy leaves blossom in your sunroom.

Papers from their divorce attorneys on the dining table.

Your paints have cracked and dried up like your brushes.

I am greeted by your two Labs and the lazy-eye cat.

Mama Beth gives me a hug and leaves a mark on my cheek.

You left some of your things here. They're all boxed up.

The Stranger is spinning on the hi-fi. Side two, track three.

Your little brother calls me over to play second command in COD.

I can still make out the sound of your voice calling my name.

I haul firewood out back and heave it by the door steps.

I don't really know how to stoke the furnace.

It's 5:27 p.m. on a Tuesday, and I need you.

SAVIOR

Marina Leigh

I don't need the four shots of Smirnoff
Any more. I don't need artistry, or foreplay,
Or even a greeting. He forces his cold fingers
Down my shorts, and my hips press
Into his. This house doesn't belong to him,
And it doesn't belong to me. The voices of friends
That aren't mine, and music that vibrates the wall
On my back, mute the feigned moans
That leave my mouth.
He kisses me, and his tongue

Tastes like vodka. But his bare arms, clutched
Around my body, feel momentarily
Comforting, and I let myself pretend
It's love on his lips. His free hand
Grips my wrists above me, and they'll bruise
Later, but that doesn't matter. *Fuck me.*
I whisper the words into his neck,
Where it smells temptingly of Old Spice
Aftershave. He laughs and pulls me onto a bed.
I dig my filed nails into his shoulder blades,

Because that's what they always want.
His body is burdensome on mine,
And the space between us no longer exists.
He lies beside me for a long time
After, watching me. From his shoulders
To his wrists, is a defined trail of scars
That I follow with my fingertips.
When I ask, *What happened?* He holds
My hand to his bare chest. *My mom was sick,*
And they told her she had less than six months

To live. I needed tallies. A countdown, I guess.
There's a hundred and six lines. One for each day
Her heart still beat after we left the hospital.
Part of me wishes I hadn't asked. I don't want
To know now that I do. *Why didn't you*
Just write on paper? Or mark on the wall
For God's sake? The shadows of the room linger
Across his cheek. *I wanted her life*
To be permanent. I play this game often.
As if fucking a stranger will help

Return feeling to the numbness
That resides beneath my collarbone
And in the lining of my lungs.
And you? What's your story?
I need another shot. I tell him, *I'm afraid of drowning,*
But I want to live on the beach. I dream
More than I accomplish, and I wonder about dying
A hell of a lot more than I wonder about love.
I won't see him again and he knows
This, but he needs fixing more than I do.

Let us save each other, he tells me,
And he believes himself. I sit on the edge
Of the bed, clipping my bra across my spine,
And I don't look at him. *Oh baby,*
There's no saving me.

YOU MADE ME HAPPY FOR A LITTLE WHILE

Lauren Brown

Baby you were the burnt autumn leaves
falling across suburban wonderlands,
A child's scream during Sunday morning sermons
And the tickle in the back of a throat.
You were the lost sock in the parade
of stained tees and tangled bras, the one
who was only momentarily appreciated
when stumbled upon. Your voice,
like your Subaru, was too loud,
and pissed everyone off.
Even your seatbelts seemed to strangle
the life out of our relationship.
You were the broken GPS leading
both of us to the closest IHop
For thick, sugary stories that produced
momentary highs, leaving each
of us scrambling the truth.
You were the smile before being caught.

RETURNING TO THE TREE

Joel Morton

The grass feels cool beneath the midnight moon but the air warm. The smell of hay mixed with manure rises like a hot mist flowing through the alfalfa field like a river. The warm breeze breaks around the couple, filling them with memories of nights when the world seemed young. The sound of crickets goes quiet as the two pass by the apple trees the insects croon from, and then start up again as the steps of the couple fade away. It grows silent as the woman speaks, brushing the dew from the hem of her gown. *Do you still love me like you did then? Even a little?* The man pushes his hand through his hair like a combine through wheat. *I only love you as much as you love me. We were kids then.* The two stop in the short grass. Their eyes staring at their muddy shoes, both too afraid to look each other in the eyes, too afraid to say more, to dig deeper. A bull snake crosses the river just beyond the tree line. The two wade through each other's words, feeling the cold sting as they rush by, but not opening their mouths to drink. In church the next morning, the preacher says the greatest sin of man is to think first of himself. Don't they know only God is allowed to do that?

BRUSH DANCE

Kandi Maxwell

Dry branches snap and crack beneath my boots as I stomp down the pile of brush in the bed of my truck. I steady myself against the truck's cab, jump up and down like a mad woman until the limbs slowly change form. Thick branches of Chestnut and Walnut break down into twigs. This takes time, but the tall mound of brush eventually shrinks. The now smaller sticks stack neatly in the truck bed, they will be hauled off to a gigantic recycle bin. Once they are in the bin, a motor roars: the sticks shred and are pulverized into a soft, earthy mulch. The mulch will be used to cover garden pathways, to help retain the moisture in the ground, to cool the soil and reduce weeds.

The Yurok tribe's website describes the Brush Dance as a ceremonial dance that is a form of prayer to help heal a sick child. A medicine woman, her helpers, the child, and his or her family begin the ceremony with prayer and healing medicines. Later, family and tribal members, or members from other tribes, begin the dance. Men in knee-length Nike shorts, wear long, shell necklaces that sway across their chests as they dance to the rhythm of the songs. During the dance, a participant will jump in front of the other dancers- he will hop and shout in warrior poses, as he fights the battle against illness. The Yurok believe that all participants in the ceremony must come to the dance with a good heart. Emotions such as anger and bad feelings are left behind. Healing comes when you give your best to another person in need.

My Brush Dance begins when my eldest son, Jess, is diagnosed with idiopathic cirrhosis of the liver when he is eight years old. There is no cure, and Jess is placed on the transplant list. In the meantime, I wait and watch. His spleen swells round and hard, and his arms and legs

grow thin. Match stick limbs poke out of his clothing. His skin turns the color of ash as his body grows more anemic. He is at risk of vomiting blood. Jess and I drive three hours for doctor visits: the doctors draw blood, perform liver biopsies, put tubes down his throat to check for internal bleeding. Jess vomits, diminishes in size. I worry, but try not to show my fears to my children. I exercise at a frantic pace to release the anxiety and tension that surges through my body. My friends and family think I'm strong. I'm a mess. I cry in the shower. Daily. Jess has his liver transplant at age 13. After two episodes of rejection of the new liver, he comes home to recover, but his body is never quite the same and the years of illness leave him with Post Traumatic Stress Disorder, depression, and suicidal ideation. Darkness fills decades. Hopelessness and despair causes Jess to unravel. He slices rows of thin slashes up his arms in an attempt to relieve his pain. He tells me he wants to die. Often.

I continue my Brush Dance, fight like a warrior, growl and stomp. A whirl wind of energy, I push through a sixty-hour work week, volunteer time to mentor and tutor Native American students, climb mountains, backpack hundreds of miles through the High Sierra. I tend to Jess's health care, travel long distances for hospital visits or psychiatric appointments. I travel to visit my son, Jake, my daughter, Karen. Like balls tossed into the air, I juggle my obligations. Adrenaline fuels my fight, increases my strength and stamina, heightens my awareness. But later, after the flurry, the force, and the fire, the flames die out. In one day, just like that. Home from a typical day of teaching high school, I fall into bed and sleep. For days. And after, there is the body pain, a burning like hot foil on my skin; the persistent, exhaustive fatigue; the anxiety, edginess, and brain fog. The proteins in my immune system, which should defend my cells from invasion and infection, instead, signal my body to attack the healthy cells; they wreak havoc on my body, stomp and smash down its parts into shards and broken pieces.

Life looks different now, my frailty is no longer hidden, and sometimes, my anxiety rears up in panic attacks or exhaustion throws me down onto my bed, but I'm learning the other lesson of the Brush Dance: be true to yourself. Life moves slower and my new body finds comfort in a walk through the woods, a moment of quiet while sitting on my front porch, a cup of tea. I am learning to let go of things I can't control.

At the recycle center, the loud crunch of crushing branches comes to an end. I sweep up the remaining fragments of the branches and dirt out of my truck bed, hop into my truck, and drive away. In my rear-view mirror, I watch as clouds of dust rise up on the road behind me.

AGAIN

James Houghton

Smoking some cigarette stub
found by his sneakers, frayed,
some skinny boy, beach-eyed,
facing down the beaten
boulevard, can't stand still, facing
the eternal sea, his teeth chatter,
although he's used to this cold.

A silver Prius, stalks by, pulls to a stop,
seeing the boy standing on some neon light
lit curb, in front of some 711; the driver, some heavy man, hungry,
mouths, *Get in.* The boy studies the man's arms, collapsing
veins and face. *It's a pleasure to meet you.*
You got them party favors?

*Yeah, would've been my pleasure
had you been a few years younger.*

The boy buckles the stiff, chafing seatbelt
for the long drive to home for tonight.

2.

The boy shakes,
stepping over carpets stained
in cigarette burns, in ash,
drowning in dirty socks, in t-shirts,
in small orange caps, baggies,
glass bulbs burnt black, syringes,
saying, *Thanks for having me over.*

Yeah, no problem. I'm gonna hop in the shower,
but, not before picking out a pipe,
throwing it to the already-skinny boy,
with a swelling sack of shards, turning on
some ambience—a porno, a gang-bang
on a black flat screen TV. While the man gets clean,
little boy finds a black shotgun, hardly hidden
behind the bed's polyester sheets, so he says
nothing when the man returns naked, erect.
No, he only bites his tongue, lips never
parting from the pipe, his body rocking
like the pulse of the sea, breathing
only the smoke, except to exclaim,

Please use a condom.

That's gonna be a problem. But, please.

A real big problem. Please.

The man fucks hard, raw, and dry
while the boy blows
billowing cloud after cloud.
Breathing like growling,
the man moans a sick smile,
and slips out. *Another
twink is coming. He's young, your age,
and he doesn't like to fuck.*

3.

Some skinny teenager, silicon-tanned, stumbles
off some Samtrans train, eyes adjusting
from San Jose's searing sun, to stone-gray fog,
looking for some uber sticker. The phone rings.
The man's calling. The man's calling the teen, *Stupid,
stop making this so hard. The driver's been waiting.
Go, fucking find him! Get over here, we're waiting.*

The teen tops off two bars—Xanax, and half a handle,
with a desperate Smirnoff swig. He falls
in the back seat, slowly biting his lower lip,
losing his low eyes in the south city streets
blurring by, losing his mind in the mist,
in the music, dimming the damp din of rubber
tires rolling down the well-worn road, highway one,
like riding a steep gray slide, to Pacifica, again.
Here, again—last time, tattooed arms wouldn't let the teen off,
wouldn't let him go. Some man said,
You're going to let me fucking finish.
The skinny, sheltered teenager didn't fight,
so, *what's wrong with me* he wonders
again. *Here, again.* Where wondering mildews
him like the corroding purple paint of passing homes.

4.

Framed in shoulders slouched, resting on thorn
—like elbows, sits in the throne of visible ribs,
the boy's methamphetamine heart,
like some relapsing fault line, trembling, tearing down
—when in trips that skinny teenager, eye's sagging, sedated,
surprised to see some boy who looks like he's meant to be

on that man's bed, who sits as though he needs and loves nothing, other than the pipe that doesn't part from his hand, —and the teenager finds himself surprised, smiling, *Hello*. The boy's words, like smoke, curling out his crooked half smile, *I like those earrings, a lot. I don't know you, you don't know me but that doesn't mean anything, and nothing is free, some motherfuckers kickdown cash sacks, shelter, and groceries, see, I just want those diamonds. Come on, I'm cute.*

Um, I don't know. My dad got these for me. Wait, are you serious? Fuck, okay, but only one, I mean...

—Hey, quit overthinking it. Thank you.

The man overhears all this, while he pours clear something in two shot glasses, and waits while the boy smokes, waits while the teenager drinks, waits while they start getting along, hell, start getting it on, until, of course, he interrupts, offering them the drink, like a good host would.

5.

He's comfortable collapsing; GHB glazing the eyes, rising up from the stomach, twisting, constricting, breaking the ribs and the spine, the brute strength of a burning snake sliding through the skin, shedding the self; suppressing the host, the self sinking into a rip tide like boiling oil black, or maybe those are the man's hands; seizing the teen into this state of sort-of sleep, striking at the boy but ricocheting out his throat, saved, too much speed; quaking, aftershocks erupting, casting out the serpent in violent dry heaves taking with its retreat the boy's ability to breathe, and leaving him back to some "then," how stress, how men, how sex could, *Damnit, here again, on a stranger's couch. No*, unaware the moment was years ago, *I'm choking, screaming get out of my mouth*, but no sound comes out, *No, I'm gagging, get out, Dammit, here again—gagging out green bile burns the boy's throat. He heaves and heaves, throwing himself off the bed, throwing against the crimson walls searing stomach acid, dry ice tears, and, Please let me be. In fact, I think I want to leave. This is weird. What's wrong with me*

but, *What's wrong, you're fine. Just stay, please.*

*What's wrong? So many,
too many, hands, faces, strangers
and family, I don't know. I don't know.
Why is this what I mean,
to any man, to every man,
where is the goddamn pipe. Please.*

5.

The boy makes his escape
to the corner of the room, opposite
the bed looking for words
that were never there, that were never
in the melting puddle of dope.
But when the boy looks up, he speaks,
*Hey You think that teen might
want to be awake? Aware?
of the unlubricated cock
tearing him apart?*

Silence stretches like a shadow
in the ebbing early evening sunset.
The boy, standing, pouring past PTSD
on wax wings wrought from watching;
wondering what if someone had watched
only watched, what would the boy have wanted,
asked, needed of the witness? Rising,
walking, laying sideways, face to face, taking in hand shaking
palms squeezing silent screams; not smiling, no, crying,
crying too, looking nowhere else, except the eyes,
the eyes, the boy's and the teenager's eyes, holding
onto each other like bombs bombard all around, without blinking;
losing, becoming, into each other, somehow comfortable
collapsing, into each other, into stranger's eyes, silent,
neither boy nor teen, now know how to speak;
when it's needed most, language always leaves.
The man, having shot up
too much meth, makes demonic
grunts and groans and speaks incoherently.
The boys thank some god, after
the man leaves, mumbling something
about going get some more dope,
ass, and cash but leaving them alone.

6.

I'm glad I gave you my earring.

Me too, Thank you.

Why are you here? Why?

No, you. Why are you here, again?

*It's okay, I met you. It's okay, last time
it was rape. Well, I could've stopped him, so*

Shut up, please, that's bullshit.

*The teen, slouched, slacking his eyes
to the corner of the room, loses himself
in the seam between carpet and white finishing,
I'll probably come back. I always do.
I don't know, I don't know.*

The boy smiles, You know, that's sad to me;

*in fact, fuck this, let's leave.
You owe the man nothing.
This is my home. The sun soon rises.
I'm taking you to the cliff's falling
into the sea. I'll show you
why I can still breathe.*

*Before reaching the wooden door,
the boy feels for pockets, feels flat
where the pipe should be
where the heart would be—feels flat
in the left shirt pocket, where the pipe
always rests, rules from, but it's empty,
not bulging, depressed, bouncing with panicked
breaths, remembering, that he is
like the fog around that town,
burning off, coming down, remembering
why he came tonight.
The boy takes the man's pipe, the man's dope,
hiding his gaze in floor, hiding
in the silence, shrinking, like meth faces,*

finally, grabbing the boy by the eyes,

the teenager smiles, You know, that's sad to me.

TENDERLOIN

Benjamin Smith

My head is filled with echoes.
The night tremors, buckles under the weight.

A man with no legs leans forwards,
tells everyone how much he hates them.

I stuff my fingers in my ears, and disappear.
Outside, through a child's smudged hand-prints,

I watch the traffic lights explode
into colourful globes

hovering above us. I think of my brother,
a phone call, a thirty second recording

of a voice. I disembark on Mason,
pull my hood up, and head South.

Geary, Jones, Ellis, Eddy, Turk.
I drift through the haunted streets

of this abandoned neighbourhood,
like a sleepwalker,

searching for the right door,
the right key. Down a dank alleyway,

I catch a feral animal, a flash of red
lipstick, a bony finger pointing west.

A gruff voice barks, *Two blocks* between
hoarse moans. I follow it, without thinking.

The doorway is guarded by a giant
with two heads. One of the heads speaks,

asks me to solve a riddle. I answer:
the mongrel is red. A smaller

door within the door
opens. A hand

reaches out,
holding a bag of sunlight,

sand, sea, palm trees, a gentle breeze.
I shake it, snatching the bag, and ascend

back to the surface without
glancing behind me. From the pier,

I lie and watch the sea-lions,
as they dance on their floating islands.

They look so funny—their fancy top hats,
their trailing coat tails,

their wooden canes. The sunlight
pins me to the ground, licks me to sleep.

LOITERING

Trina Asken

Red berries wade in the rained on grey branches
along the roadside. It is early, still a bit chilly, spring.
Other people have such beauty in their lives,
is what you wanted to say during morning vespers but didn't.
The Safeway on the corner has a restroom for employees
only but a bag girl, part of the vocational program for the young
and troubled that you used to coach in when you were caring
and kind, packs your navel oranges along with alcohol
and tells you, you can go ahead in. There is a funky
plaid 70's sofa in the restroom that is more like a lounge.
And you fall asleep there and think how sadly beautiful
Motown sounds resurrected through a muffled speaker.
The bag girl enters to tell you to get up, *My boss said, no.*
I'm sorry please get up; I don't want to get in trouble.
But you rest your eyes some more and can't think of the hurt
welling up in this kind girl. You have paid for your stay
with the purchase of fruit and your sweet, *take care* when
handed the receipt. The world is too dangerous outside;
a boy could approach you at the no jaywalk sign then begin
speaking about his after school job and how he has been promoted
to head of the kennel and all the differences he is making in the lives
of labs and that it was hard work to get where he is today:
But our work is what we have to do in this world.
He will have stringy long hair that is not styled and a shirt
with a middle class vacation destination lettered on it.
Acne will cover his skin. His glasses and sweatpants
will look as though they used to be his mother's.
But there he will stand proud about his kennel job
and asking what you do. But for now, the girl
turns on the water to wash her sobs away, opens
the window to a heavy storm lake you don't remember
from before. *I'll kill myself if you don't leave.*
I'll kill myself, she blares in your ear until you become
the sound of her. The faucet water runs hard.
You think about a hotel's indoor heated whirlpool.
The hard part is over; you dived in, now just float.

ANOTHER ARABIC SUMMER

James Deitz

The heat feels the same,
south Texas fire
burning skin, chiseling
mind as the desert
did or maybe I'm
not the same. Moist
skin, sweats out
similar trauma as
a honked horn resonates
the sudden propulsion
from an RPG.

As Los Vega Restaurante
started to close, the waitresses
threw silver bullets into
designated buckets,
forks bit into flesh,
spoons dipped more
blood out, knives cut out
muscle tissue, a collision
of IEDs igniting all
at once, bleeding ears
tune in Alicia's voice
distancing the detonations,
losing focus, purple
hues and blue drapes fade
into beige and brown,
my shoes sink
further into ground.

Baharat spice, a charred
body, that damn mortar
ash clinging to skin,
and my soft whimper
from every corner
continues drowning
in silver sand.

ALICIA'S REESE'S PEANUT BUTTER CUPS

James Deitz

Ember flashes from fireworks
doesn't trigger quite like the orange
and yellow gleam of the Reese's
package. The chocolatey cups
jagged edges detonate.
Memories that cut like shrapnel.
Just looking at them while walking
through Walmart, too many mines in
my mind field, synapses
torn like teeth grinding
on barbed wire.
If a tooth falls out, that's fine.
If I trip, meet the fire, also
fine. I just hope I never see anyone
eat those butter cups in front
of me as she did. One cup
at a time, giggling, desert
eyes turning orange,
hollowing out in Iraqi heat.

SHE'S IN ME

James Deitz

For Alicia

I first felt it a few months after my last deployment. I thought it was just a scab with something inside, something that was normal, something under my skin. It was parts of her, bits of her body. A doctor at the VA said it was just bone fragments, which is normal when getting bombed next to someone. Just fragments of her bones forced into me. Her flesh in my flesh. Nothing poetic about it. No, this is not the part where you read that I now literally carry her. I imagine sometimes her parts are still trying to come out of me. Nightmares that my skin is fake, that I am only wearing hers. Now every scab, every strange nodule on my arms are triggers. I wonder if she is still there somewhere. I want to go back to an abandoned Balad Air Base and see if I can find any more of her in the sand.

COFFEE-TABLE BOOK IDEA #1: FORECLOSURE'S MATTRESSES

SJ Dunning

Bare ones on the floor would be saddest in the collection, I think.

Even in houses with Christmas trees.

Even in June.

Even in bedrooms of heroin spoons.

Or maybe the covered ones would trouble viewers more: sheets like raised-relief, comforters flung into topography, pillows remembering the weight of American Dreamers.

Look in the cups on the nightstands.

Look at the strands of hair the wings of flies caught on after drowning.

The charred twin with a chair beside it: rubble of an arson it was dumb to enter even if a photograph *is* worth more than words. What story burned there after *My soul to keep*? The fleet in the field that inferno would have heated (where I like to imagine a stranger found the aviators I dropped): *S.O.S. Mayday. Sleep Country USA*. In a bedroom with *I'm a Princess* stenciled to the door: ratty sleeping bags, empty packages of Oberto and Fun Dip, whatever her highness could forage after the storm.

The bassinet in the flooded garage of the house that was angel-themed?

Look at the roses of rust on its ruffle.

Look at the Hefty sacks, like monsters, bobbing.

Should I have wanted to see a tiny hand reaching out to me?

The condom beside the one upstairs in the house where a woman kissed Capris with shade of lipstick not unlike my own?

Is that what hope would look like in this book (assuming love)?

STOCKPILING TWINKIES

Mark Jacobs

They were stockpiling Twinkies, just in case. They were disillusioned with their jobs and thinking about a news fast. They were watching the value of their place on Capitol Hill go up and talking about getting married, about not getting married. They were being more social than they used to be. They were twenty nine, or might as well be.

On the morning of their no-occasion party, Orelle got out of bed with an ultimatum bumping around inside her. She was lithe and had a dancer's poise although her sport in school had been chess. Her features were fine, the combination creating an impression of placid vulnerability that drew the eye. People said Orelle was a classic beauty, which made her feel like a maiden on a vase, a good thing if it meant you survived time. Not a week went by without somebody, male or female, hitting on her. She was so used to deflecting admirers she worried she would be perceived as a cold person.

"I'm not going to let irony rule my life."

"No fair," said Sasha, who was always the second one up.

Sasha had a soul patch, and expressive gestures, and an analytical mind that lent itself to software application development. His skin was golden. He believed in creative destruction but not necessarily within the context of capitalism.

"How come no fair?"

"Anything I say will sound ironic."

They experienced a moment – it was one of those times when both people feel exactly the same thing and know it – of uncertainty. Neither of them had a clue about what happened next. Good coffee, and raspberries on fresh yoghurt, put an end to the moment.

The idea of the party, although they would not put it this way, was to give them a setting. Together, just the two of them, their completeness could seem incomplete. In the course of the day they texted back and forth about party logistics, and Sasha sent Orelle a

note when he scored some Twinkies at a convenience store in North West. He rode his bike to work, so stuffed as many packages of them as fit into his pack and was satisfied. There was a Zen way of thinking about Twinkies. It had to do with taking them where you found them, letting contentment blossom.

That evening, Sasha manned the grill in the small back yard of their row house on Fourteenth Street. People brought their own reinforcements. Portobello mushrooms, vegetable shish kebabs, three brands of soyburgers. It was a challenge keeping the hamburger grease from splashing the healthy food, but they couldn't very well say no to the K Street guy who showed up with meat. It was a grill, after all. They had advertised a barbecue. Anyway being a food snob was uncool.

It was May in Washington, past the cherry blossoms, but flowers and birds and a milky sky were forcing people to think about renewal. When Sasha left the grill to say something to Orelle – he didn't much care what, but something – the sentence he caught coming out of her mouth perplexed him.

"It's not like we're married."

Sasha hardly knew the man to whom she said it. Perk, they called him. He was a staffer to the congresswoman consistently ranked the most progressive member of the House. Perk was barrel-shaped and not smooth. One front tooth snagged on the other. His voice was pseudo-gangster, way too contrived.

"No," Sasha echoed Orelle. "We're not married."

"Did you want something?" she asked him.

The question was an axis, and Sasha felt their relationship turning on it. From where she stood, Chardonnay in hand, Orelle felt it, too. Sasha noticed the perspiration on the outside of her glass. He had no memory of sweat on a glass ever having significance, not in real life.

That night they made love. They always made love after their parties. It was a form of joint assertion. Afterward they lay in bed with a light on, and Orelle made puppets of her fingers, a custom of theirs

that helped Sasha power down.

“What I said about irony.”

“You’re not going to let it rule your life anymore.”

“I didn’t say ‘anymore.’ Anyway I’m thinking there’s some kind of major force at work here.”

“In our life.”

“See? You feel it, too. Are we supposed to think about death more than we do?”

Sasha told her, “I’m not sure.”

“Where do people like us go, Sasha?”

It was an ideal question. There were ten ways, from funny to bruising, he could answer it. But he hadn’t had time to adapt to Orelle’s post-ironic phase. He felt inadequate. What made it worse was her finger puppets. They communicated kindness, but in their very dexterity he saw that they knew the truth. He felt judged. Judgment was like death, one of those things you weren’t sure how much mental energy you should devote to it.

“We could eat a Twinkie,” Orelle said.

It was not a serious suggestion. They were saving them. Just in case.

Orelle’s parents came for the weekend. They were prosperous people with intense short enthusiasms. Maury had made money promoting rock concerts a long time ago. Investing the money turned out to be more satisfying to him than dealing with rock & roll egos. It also turned out he had a kind of genius, or a gene, for understanding commodities markets. He dressed carefully and was vain about his silver hair, which he wore in a braid.

On the threshold he kissed Orelle and handed Sasha, standing behind her, a sack of woven hemp. There were eight packages of Twinkies in the sack.

“He found them in this godawful little market outside Bridgeport,”

Beth told them, breezing into the house. “He was so proud of himself.”

Beth had made a transient name for herself photographing the concerts Maury promoted. She had an eye for the intersection of celebrity and obscure desire, as one reviewer had put it. When Maury got out of the music business, she took a sabbatical to Japan. She came back with designs for gardens and set about advising Connecticut clients how to accomplish them. Her fee included instruction in the emotions a person could expect to feel, contemplating an achieved garden. She was thickening in the middle, lately, and brash in a way Sasha presumed her daughter would never become.

She kissed him too close to his lips and announced an Internet-free weekend, wherewith Sasha and Orelle understood that her new enthusiasm was a return to analogue life.

Maury kept wanting to talk about the dysfunction of the American political class. This was Washington, after all, this was Capitol Hill. They were within rock-throwing distance of the people responsible for American decline. But Beth kept telling him nobody wanted to listen to the ravings of one more grumpy old man. By contrast, she herself had an urgent message on a subject that mattered. It was the tyranny of screens, the soul-sucking nature of digital entertainment, the enervation of multi-tasking. She worked hard for her sentences to come out as epigrams, little haiku arrows aimed at the broadband way they all lived now.

Maury was a serious cook. Too serious, Orelle and Sasha thought. He commandeered the kitchen an hour after they arrived. They expected that and didn’t mind. Harder was surrendering themselves to the all-encompassing culinary experience a Maury meal necessarily became. But Sasha and Orelle were tolerant. Their tolerance came easily to them, and the coq au vin was as good as advertised.

Maury had a bad back so they gave Orelle’s parents their bed and slept on twins in the spare room, where the shadow cast by a streetlight made a monster of the elliptical machine. Turning out the

light, Orelle whispered, "Food is like going to church for my father."

"Did they take you to church when you were a kid?"

"No. Sasha?"

"What?"

"We're not like them, are we? I mean, twenty five years from now we're not going to be Beth and Maury."

He reached for her hand in the dark, but it was not extended toward his as he expected. "No. We're not like them."

The whispering made them traitors. Distancing themselves, differentiating themselves, was tantamount to disowning Beth and Maury, who wanted only good things for them. It had happened before, when they came to Washington, or when Sasha and Orelle visited them in Connecticut. This time, though, something was different. There was a gap, the slightest lag, between what Orelle felt and how Sasha responded.

"This guy Perk," he said.

"Who?"

"You know who I'm talking about."

"Don't say it that way."

"What way?"

"There's too much punctuation in your voice. He's going to Denver. Does that bother you?"

The question was a test. They hadn't needed tests, not up until now. Orelle worked at a think tank. She was making a presentation on correlations between family income and reading skills at a conference in Denver. Sasha felt distaste for the conversation he had begun. He seemed, at that moment, less than the person he ought to be.

"I don't want to be a cliché," he told her.

"Me neither."

The relief in her voice was real enough to allow them both the good night's sleep they deserved.

Saturday morning, picking up Orelle's dry-cleaning on Eighth

Street, Sasha noticed Maury at a wrought iron table outside a café. Under an awning of pastel urban stripes he was drinking a latte while furiously working his smart phone. Noticing Sasha as he approached, he looked guilty.

“Checking out the soybean situation in Brazil. You want a coffee?”

Sasha shook his head but took a seat across from him. The absurd idea came to him that any conversation that happened was going to shape the course of his life. He did not trust momentousness.

Maury shrugged, looking away from his phone with reluctance.

“Beth’s a little extreme on this back-to-analogue kick she’s on lately. We humor each other, you know? One of the things married people figure out. Trial and error.”

“What was the best concert you ever put together?”

The question took Maury by surprise. Sasha had never shown any interest in his personal pre-history. But he answered promptly.

“Kiss of Life.”

“Was that the band or the concert?”

“The band. For a few months, they were the next big thing. Think California psychedelic lashed to CSN harmonies. That gets you part of the way there, but they were better than that.”

“What made the concert so good?”

Maury closed his eyes and looked old to Sasha. Symmetric dark bags of experience had accumulated beneath his lids. Sasha felt cool and clinical and realized for the first time how clinical could be cruel. After a moment, Maury opened his eyes and gave him the answer to a question Sasha had not known enough to put him.

“Summer of sixty nine. Outside Portsmouth. An outdoor concert. It’s all over but the trash pick-up. I’m standing on some kind of loading dock with the lead guitarist. A skinny guy, no chest, just these amazing hands. I have no idea what happened to the rest of the world. Somehow it’s just me and Leaf, that was his name. Why a loading dock? No clue. Leaf is telling me how it feels to be in a hot tub full of naked beautiful

women taking turns on your dick. But I can't pay attention to the little son of a bitch. Because the sun is going down behind a hill, and I'm locked in a world-class panic thinking – not thinking, *knowing* – none of this is coming back. The presentiment of death, right? The old man himself is tapping you on the shoulder. It's the sun and the hill and the moment, their way of telling me I'm nothing. Whatever I thought I was, it's already over."

This was not the way Maury talked, at least not to Sasha. His eyes glistened, and Sasha felt responsible, though he was not sure for what. Another thought, perhaps ridiculous, occurred to him, that every conversation was a form of saying goodbye.

That night, after Maury and Beth went to bed, Sasha and Orelle took a walk. In a fine old A.M.E. church of ochre stone, the choir was practicing for Sunday service. Sasha and Orelle liked that. You didn't make a big deal out of living in an integrated D.C. neighborhood, but it gave you texture, and the right kind of status.

Maury's story about the loading dock and the disappearing sun had made an impression on Sasha. Whatever was happening, and something was definitely going on, it made him susceptible. It was not so much that he was aware of new things – liver spots on the backs of Maury's hands, Beth's spooky blank stare as she delivered her haiku, controlled defiance in the way Orelle brushed her hair at the mirror – as aware of their power to affect people.

"Say it," said Orelle.

"I'm not sure I can."

"Try."

He retold her father's Kiss of Life story but knew as he did that he was failing to convey the heart of it. He wound up making a caricature of Maury, which was the last thing he wanted to do. There it was again, the creeping conviction that he was less than the person he believed himself to be. His arms and legs felt like lead. He needed to start working out again.

He told Orelle, "I was thinking about going to Denver with you. I could work from the hotel while you do conference stuff."

She nodded. "What if we had a Twinkie party? We invite everyone we know, and when they go home we divide up the Twinkies and send them home with dessert."

"Are you tired of collecting them?"

"Look," she said, taking him by the arm.

In the rundown dark yard of an empty house, fireflies were bunching. There must be a hundred of them. Two hundred, and more arriving all the time.

"Everything," began Sasha.

"I know."

They stood there staring for a long time. It was not the fireflies, or they were only part of it. The property was an eyesore in a tidy neighborhood where flowers grew obediently in pots, and poop was promptly scooped. The house had a bad-luck air, as though a crime had been committed on the premises, an act so horrible it cursed the place. Rain-warped boards covered an elegant bow window that faced the street. Paint peeled in long white strips from the porch railing. The grass needed cutting. And the fireflies. They sprinkled themselves across the property, above the ratty grass, a puzzle having to do with the nature of beauty.

"It makes me feel funny," Orelle said.

"Funny how?"

She thought for a moment. "Like a witness."

"To what?"

She turned on him with subdued ferocity. "There's no such thing as an innocent bystander, is there?"

Sasha did not go to Denver with Orelle. Neither of them brought it up again. While she was away, he worked out hard every evening, liking the feel of brute exhaustion. Once, riding his bike home from the gym, he passed a man in a power suit crying on the sidewalk.

He stopped and asked if he could help, which made the man furious. He lunged for Sasha's handlebars but missed as Sasha pedaled hard. Riding away, he heard the man cursing his back. At home he was anxious, as though he had escaped a serious assault, which was ludicrous. He tried writing a text telling Orelle about it, but he had lost his easy touch, and sent nothing.

Three days after Orelle came home, she went on a tear cleaning the house. Sasha was working on his computer. His bosses had overpromised on a project, and he was under pressure to meet an unreasonable deadline. Going to the kitchen for a glass of orange juice, he found Orelle mopping the tile floor. Twisting the mop head, she seethed.

"If you wait until tomorrow," he said, "I can help."

"Perk."

"He was at the conference, right?"

"It's not about Perk."

He nodded as though he understood. Such a small act of dissembling. Was this what Maury meant when he was talking about trial and error, learning to live with somebody?

Orelle leaned the mop against the refrigerator. "Go ahead and ask me if I slept with him."

Sasha shook his head. They were not like that, did not have that kind of relationship. "I have to work a while longer."

He knew he was waiting but not for what until she told him she was going away for a few days.

"Do you want to say where?"

"Not at this point."

"Okay," he said, thinking she sounded like a memo. *To/ From/ Subject: Whereabouts, Near Future.* "Maybe it's a good idea."

It might be a good idea, but her absence disoriented him. He plugged the hole with exercise, stopping at the gym after work every evening. He was not a gym rat type of person. But the deterioration he felt going on seemed to be located in his body. His muscles were

breaking down, his skin was spongy. Jumping rope, he knew that was sheer fantasy. There was nothing wrong with him. But only obsessive workouts that left him exhausted, barely able to pedal home, kept the feeling of atrophy at bay.

Orelle knew where she wanted to go but not why. Perk lived in a one-bedroom apartment in Arlington. She was comfortable, sleeping on his sofa, and could fall asleep instantly. She respected Perk because he was indifferent to her appearance. Having intercepted and deciphered thousands of male signals through the years, she knew his lack of interest was the real thing. But he did ask, the first evening she stayed, what she wanted from him.

“We’ve been stockpiling Twinkies,” she told him. “Sasha and me.”

He was standing at the stove stirring a pot of marinara sauce. Perk had grown up with seven siblings and a busy kitchen. Cooking big came naturally to him. He reheated meals through the week, packed his lunch, grocery shopped with cash so he wouldn’t overspend.

“Twinkies,” he said. “How come?”

“Supposedly they might stop making them.”

“And you guys love them.”

“Not really.”

“I get it.”

She felt mildly defensive, which aggravated her. “What do you get?”

“Stockpiling Twinkies is this little semi-hipster kind of thing you do. It’s not a crime, it’s just... cute.”

She shrugged. He had his head down, stirring, and seemed to forget she was there. But a few minutes later, he cleared his throat and told her, “I’ll tell you what I think, Orelle.”

“Okay.”

“You’ve figured something out.”

“What would that be?”

“You used to want a perfect life. Now you don’t.”

Hearing him say it, she realized it was true, which must be why

she gravitated to the guy. In Colorado, one of the conference organizers had hosted a cocktail at her over-the-top spectacular home in Boulder. Perk and Orelle walked around her terraced garden holding craft beers, looking at abstract statues by artists with names difficult to pronounce. Everything created the impression of perfection: upscale landscaping, sublime Rockies, crisp spring air. But it backfired on Perk. The place made him cranky. The woman's ostentatious good taste was a form of obscenity.

Now Orelle asked him, "Do you know what I *do* want?"

He drew a wooden spoon from the pot and pointed it at her. Sauce dripped on the front of his T-shirt. "I'm not into that."

"Into what?"

"Being your foil. You want to stay, you're welcome. That's as far as it goes."

One of Perk's gifts was making it easy for Orelle not to think about herself. Over the next few days she learned interesting things about him through the stories he told to make a point without saying what the point was.

He was in love with a woman in Troy, New York. Glynda drank too much and had kids by two different men, neither of them Perk. Nothing Perk did or said had the slightest effect on her getting her act together. He hated her rococo tattoos.

One time, he saw a doe give birth, deep in Adirondack woods, near a waterfall.

Another time: he stole a Porsche in Troy and drove it to Skaneateles. He parked it in the driveway of the house of a talk show host whose rhetoric offended him, leaving the key in the mailbox. He called the police from a pay phone.

Another time: walking out of a country diner north of Watertown, he noticed a New York State trooper's hat hanging on a rack. He saw no trooper, and lifted the hat. Driving away, he glanced at the clock on the dash. Seven minutes after he pulled out of the diner lot, the trooper came up on his tail. He pulled Perk over and beat him up in a

pasture with a black horse in it but did not arrest him. Perk came away thinking he had left the hat on the rack just to see if somebody would steal it. What stood out in his memory was how black the horse was.

One reason Orelle got hooked on Perk's stories was he told them reluctantly. Something would trigger a response, and he gave up another from the cache. One night, late, she woke startled. The apartment walls were thin, and she heard Perk on the phone in his room. She tried not to listen but could not help catching enough to know it was Glynda. She was drunk. She was accusing Perk of terrible things. Orelle was awed by the man's patience, and his pain. When he hung up he was sobbing quietly, controlling it, and she covered her head with a pillow so as not to hear. On a high white road across a heaven about which she had not previously known, a wheel made an inappreciable turn. Faint as it was, she felt the revolution.

Orelle never called Sasha at work. Calling was clumsy, somehow. Anyway texting was more efficient, and more private. Sitting in his cubicle, when Sasha saw her number in the display, he too was conscious of movement.

"This evening," she said.

"Okay."

"After work. Meet me at... that place."

"Okay."

She hung up before he asked her what time. But he knew it was six thirty, the same way he knew what she meant when she said 'that place.' He intended it as a kind of courtesy, getting there first. His legs felt strong. His mind was clear. He sat on the steps of the rundown building where they had seen the fireflies. He watched a line of black ants follow an invisible track out of the high grass, across the walk, to a crack in the cement foundation. They were undermining. That was their job.

When Orelle showed up she sat next to him on the steps. Neither of them wanted to have a conventional conversation. They did not want

to calculate angles of approach. They did not want to rely on their accumulated past. All that was a relief. For a while they watched the ants. The tiny identical creatures' programmed diligence was a wonder.

Orelle said, "I wonder who will buy this house."

"Nobody, I hope."

"That's what I hope, too. Sasha, this Twinkies thing."

"It was something we did."

"I know. But it's over now."

They were both thinking, separately, about what to do with the stash they had accumulated but seemed to accept at the same moment that the question was irrelevant. They were finding their rhythm. Easier if you didn't try. They both seemed to know that, too.

Capitol Hill went about its business as the evening came down with quiet insistence on the neighborhood. A man with a dog on a leash and a baby in a stroller went by radiating his conviction of virtuous behavior. A block away, somebody banged a car horn. A police cruiser went past with the windows down, two patrolmen, one black, one white, talking about something that mattered. A little later, if Sasha and Orelle were lucky, there would be fireflies.

NEW SLOTS

Nathan Leslie

It wasn't, I admit, the most auspicious start to adulthood. A year into my marriage with Kat, I realized I had a problem. It wasn't as if I was drinking a bottle of Jack every night but I could barely stomach the thought of dinner without a few beers, a few glasses of wine. Had to drink something before sex, after sex, after a long day, before a long day. Reliant upon it. I owe it to Kat: she brought the problem to the forefront—it wasn't as if I had a sudden bolt of realization. It wasn't as if I *knew* anything.

"You have to make a choice," she said. "It's me or all the booze you're drinking."

"That's ridiculous," I said. I thought much worse.

We were at the dining room table—flowers, candles, Jim Hall on the speakers. I had made paella and salad with goat cheese and \$16-a-pound olives. I did the cooking. She had the high powered/demanding job. I freelanced, owed a laundromat. She was the breadwinner. I fulfilled shopping lists. Whatever.

I wasn't angry at her, just perplexed. She drank, also. Albeit, not as much. Albeit, not right after work. Or before work. Or during work.

"I have too much time on my hands," I said. "That's all. Too many bottles just lying around."

I chose her—it was the obvious choice. We were young and college wasn't that far behind us. We were just starting off. At the time the health experts were constantly saying that a glass or two or three or four of wine was good for you. Good for your heart. Good for the circulatory system. I was indoctrinated into the fad of booze-as-health-food, perhaps.

So out went the booze. I gave all the beer and hard stuff to Jim and Sally, who lived on Covington Court and all the wine to Geoff and

Jillian who lived catty corner to us. I explained, directly, that we're giving up booze. We may as well have admitted that we had syphilis.

"Oh, I'm....sorry to hear that. Everything okay?"

"Yeah," I said. "I'm taking a break."

"Sure," they said. "No problem." But they didn't mean that, I could tell.

So in all of the little beer bottle slots in the fridge—which previously, always but always, held cold craft beer at the ready—I kept yogurt. Cherry. Peaches. Banana and strawberry. Plain, low fat. Something new for the old slots.

I started attending A.A. Those people knew what they are doing and were there to help me the first month or two. I found a sponsor—or a sponsor found me. But I just didn't want to talk about it anymore. I didn't want to listen to boozing stories. It was all well-intentioned and helpful and not in the least culty or overly religious or weird. I just couldn't do it.

Kat didn't like this. She wanted me to be systematic and thorough, but as a fly-by-night guy I wanted to go my own route. So for months we had a silent standoff. I know how she felt and she knew I wanted to try my way. In the meantime I wasn't drinking. I wasn't. But the beer commercials on tv every five minutes. Mila Kunis pounding the whiskey barrels. Tequila ads dripping all over Kat's magazines. That guy from *The Sopranos* pounding them back in his shiny suit.

I was trying to be appreciative of her and grateful and take to heart the old "there but the grace of God go I" dictum. But when I cooked I wasn't 100%. Not even close. I made us pasta one night and my sauce was nothing. Or so I felt. Some pinto beans and onions, maybe an old shriveled bell pepper. I shoved a bowl of it at her when I returned home. I wanted to retreat to the bedroom, complain of a headache.

"Eat up," I said. I watched the football game on my gadget.

She looked at the bowl.

"I'm sorry," she said. "I can't."

"What's the matter? Stomach upset?"

Her face was corkscrewed with inner pain. I wanted a drink.

"No, this wasn't cooked with *love*," she said. "I'm sorry, no offense."

She walked out of the room, her hand covering her eyes.

I thought of all the times I sent her off to work with a butter sandwich and a mealy apple or a crusty bagel and sandwich bag of unpeeled carrots. I could have done better, much.

We separated shortly thereafter. I stayed in the townhouse and Kat moved across town, closer to her job. A little, tidy efficiency.

We talked on the phone every other day. She said she still "thought about me all the time." She was in self-protection mode. She checked in on me but said she couldn't live in the blast zone. I couldn't blame her one bit, really. She deserved better and I told her so.

I tried to focus on work, but my freelancing was slow, covering a few zoning meetings here and there, sometimes a soccer game. Mostly I checked in on the coin-operated laundromat I owned (I inherited it), made sure everything was functioning. The townhouse was nearly empty of furniture but I had bags of coins everywhere. I needed to roll them and take them to the bank, but that took effort.

I forget how it started exactly, but I remember looking through an old cookbook. I had always loved cooking as a kind of therapy, as a creative outlet, and I realized while looking through this old cookbook that I rarely baked for my wife. Hardly ever. I began reading the recipes: orange peel bread, pecan muffins, popovers, chocolate rolls, parker brownies, coconut squares, linzer schnitten, banbury tarts, and all manner of cookies.

My imagination exploded and I simply had to make some of these things. So I went to the store and bought several hundred dollars' worth of baking goods: eggs and sugar and raisins and lemons, nuts and flour and salt and milk and tons of butter and oranges and baking

powder and chocolate.

I went on a baking frenzy. Everything else ground to a halt.

And when I had enough to make worth my while, I put a sign outside my door and a note on our community Facebook page and started selling baked goods right from my front door. The neighbors came—slow at first, then in droves.

I was late on my articles. I had to check in on the laundromat less frequently. For two weeks it was all baking all the time. I wanted a drink.

The entire house smelled of sugar and chocolate, oranges and butter. There could be worse things in life.

Toward the end of my frenzy a woman appeared, bought three popovers and returned the next two days for twice as many.

Her name was Luisa.

By this point I had figured out that I'd sell more baked goods and waste less if I set up a little plastic bench outside right under the maple tree. Customers could sit there in the shade and eat a little pastry and watch the dog walkers and old couples walk by.

I was in clean-up mode the second time she came by and she took advantage of the empty plastic bench. She dribbled honey over the popovers.

I swept the crumbs and detritus from the front stoop.

"Do you want some cold water or something? It's hot."

I was trying quite hard not to stare, not to creep her out.

"Oh, no thank you. I have the honey."

I started laughing. It just struck me as funny, as if honey could quench her thirst.

"It is moist though," she said. "It's *like* a liquid, right?"

Her beauty intimidated me. I had to summon the strength to ask her if I could sit down with her. She told me she worked for the state, but she hesitated and looked away, as if embarrassed.

"What's up?"

"I work construction," she said.

I had no right to judge.

She told me she just started the job ten months ago and that it's road construction. Small roads two and four lanes. She holds the slow/stop sign, rotating it with a turn of her wrists.

The image and reality—there was a disconnect.

She talked about managing the heat—hydrating and also just trying to find a way to not let the humidity sap her mentally. I wanted a drink.

"It's not the most exciting job. We have assholes on our crew. Ex-cons. And not the nice rehabilitated kind. But I was laid off a year and a half ago from a nice job—IT—and it's been touch-and-go since."

Her face was mesmerizing. She had a rather prominent nose, something from a Roman statue perhaps, almost mannish. Sturdy. But her skin was burnished and olive and gorgeous, which gave her an Italian look. Later she told me she was Irish on her father's side. She had these startling bluish green eyes which seemed almost alien, too bright and distinct for a human face. But the most compelling aspect of Luisa's face (I've always been drawn to faces, most of all), was that she never seemed to duplicate a facial expression. At times she had this fanciful, knowing smiles. At others, she looked innocent and direct. At others she seemed almost maternal and protective. I have never seen such a pliant face—one which revealed so many personality strains within a span of two minutes. But soon enough I ran out of energy to pursue the baking much longer and Luisa only dropped by two more times for pastries. One time she was in her orange construction getup (she tipped her cap and said little—this was early in the morning).

She lived in a small apartment—on the second floor of an angular building tucked back behind a larger office building with a donut shop on the ground floor.

I had her phone number, several pictures—what I could find online—and her name and e-mail. I had her license plate number and

street address.

Basic Internet searches are helpful. What I lacked was the wherewithal to knock on her door, to use her phone number or e-mail. They just helped me feel *comfortable*.

But I printed off the pictures I could find and taped them to my office wall. I drove over to her apartment building and parked at an angle so I could look up into her room. I sat there for a long time over many nights. If someone walked by I'd pretend to be on the cell phone and turn my eyes down into the darkness.

It wasn't as if I could just call her and explain I found her number on some sketchy virus-ridden Internet white pages. Perhaps I could "accidentally" bump into her on the sidewalk or in the donut shop but that would be just as difficult to explain, potentially. I wanted a drink. So I kept quiet and hunkered, knowing that as long as I did that, the more I might recede from her memory (if I was even in there).

I wanted a drink.

What happened is this—I found the gumption, walked up to her door and knocked on it. I thought she would be surprised or offended or taken aback, but she opened the door and waved me in. I still stammered.

"I saw you out there. It's not a big thing to me—I always *knew*."

I couldn't tell if she was being sarcastic or not. It's very possible she was.

She made tea and we both drank it slowly. It was a scene from the 19th century, I thought.

"I have this thing," she said. "I'm indebted to someone."

And of course I probed to the best of my ability, without probing too much. But she wouldn't go beyond the coy and mysterious. I couldn't tell if it was a relationship, a family thing, something religious. She wouldn't say.

"It's a kind of debt that I can't explain. Maybe someday. I'll

have to leave it that for now.”

Beauty is an odd concept, a kind of artificial construct, temporary and fleeting. As she was talking and as I was sipping my tea, I attempted to avoid complete and utter staring. She wasn’t absolutely beautiful in a standard way, but her *uniqueness* was so striking and pure that it was all I could process.

When I was a child my mother would take me to the city museum downtown. It wasn’t the largest museum in the country but it had a decent collection of European and American art. I was paralyzed. I would stand in front of an Edward Hopper or Tintoretto or small Picasso and just stare, unmoving.

In school when I found a girl who I thought was pretty, all I could do is stare. I was a big starrer. I froze up, immobilized by beauty.

With Luisa, same.

Luisa was generous enough to let me take her on several dates—once to the state fair, a second time to a film and coffee, a third time to lunch and we became physical at my place—which was an odd sensation. Kept thinking of Kat, despite myself. But as I was kissing Luisa I mostly thought she is too beautiful to sully with my body; she is too beautiful for sex.

Her arms were strong and her hands rough.

She agreed to meet me at the Windsor Hotel downtown the next weekend. It would—we implied—act as the consumption for our budding relationship. It was implied, not stated.

I arrived early and quickly became sleepy. This was almost inexplicable since I was revved on lust and expectation. But I must have exhausted myself in my overexcitement. I couldn’t sleep. Instead, I just lay there under the covers, as if waiting for something to happen. I stared up at the sprinkler system jutting out of the ceiling. I stared at the open wardrobe hangers affixed to the wooden pole. Something cold and antiseptic about these two details—the hangers pre-fabricated and

identical in every room of the hotel—cookie cutter.

Luisa showed and all but glided in, green and orange and black floral print.

But I stayed in bed, trying to beckon her into it with my passivity. She stood rod straight, bemused. I wanted a drink.

“What’s wrong? Are you feeling ill?”

I responded by pulling the comforter up to my chin.

“C’mon, let’s go to dinner,” she said.

This was my moment. I had to break through my wall of paralysis and dread, but I couldn’t bring myself to say a thing.

Instead, I lifted myself from the bed and followed her out of the hotel room door.

We walked down the street a few blocks and ate dinner at the restaurant. We talked about furniture and antiques. After paying for the meal I excused myself. I walked down the corridor towards the bathroom and past it and out the back door into the cool night air. There were six cases of beer stacked in the corridor. I walked away from it all.

VEGETABLE SOUP

Dani Church

The creation of homemade fresh vegetable soup was a way of life in the three-bedroom brick rancher where I grew up, a week-long ritual that invaded our cramped kitchen every hot, sticky Pennsylvania summer. We labored and sweated in a room dominated by massive roiling pots of beef bones rendering down to the perfect broth because fresh vegetable soup had to be made in the heart of green bean season. They had to be fresh—that’s all there was to it—crisp, locally-grown Blue Lake green beans. Oh, there were plenty of other vegetables paddling around in my mother’s soup kettle—corn fresh off the cob; tomatoes directly from the vine, de-skinned, de-seeded, and chunked down to just the right size; and lima beans newly released from their pods. But the green beans ruled the high seas of the soup.

These little green gods were spared the brutality of the blade; they had to be prepared in a very specific manner. I spent countless hours of my childhood *snapping* beans on the back porch, trying to dry my sweat in any little breeze that might happen by. *Snapping* a bean meant pinching the tips off with the thumb and forefinger—I was chastised when my clumsy little girl fingers pinched off more than was absolutely necessary—then breaking the bean into inch-and-a-half-long pieces. My mother worked with assembly-line precision. She never went to church, but I swear she was as close to holy as she could possibly get while performing her own version of genuflection over those beans. In one fluid movement, she’d pick a bean out of the market bag, pinch off the ends over the scrap bowl, then single-handedly snap it into precise lengths over the “keeper” bowl, while reaching for the next bean.

This was my time with my mother. She didn’t really take me places, or play games or dolls or tea party with me. Instead, she’d allow me to help her with her work—folding clothes, drying dishes, even ironing once I was old enough to know not to touch the hot part of the

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iron. I didn't mind; it was all I knew. I was glad she let me do grown-up things with her.

Once I became a teenager with a mind of my own, the contentedness of spending time in the kitchen with my mother grew into annoyance. I discovered that other mothers chopped their vegetables in a matter of minutes, or even—gasp—purchased fresh vegetable soup at the local grocery store...on the way home from attending their daughters' dance recitals or spending the afternoon with them at the park.

But Mom would rather spend time with me on *her* terms, doing what *she* wanted to do, methodically cleaning out kitchen cupboards, organizing the “junk” drawer even though it would be in total chaos again before the end of the week, ironing and folding the laundry and putting it neatly in its place...or making homemade fresh vegetable soup. When the soup was done and cooled, she'd carefully divide it into pint- and quart-sized containers, carefully label each one with the words *Veg. Soup* and the date, then carry her booty downstairs to her special treasure chest—a freezer filled with soup, cuts of meat she had gotten at a bargain, and two-for-one boxes of TastyKakes.

Years rolled by as we continued this tradition, until the season when my mother's soup pot stood cold and I had to move both my ailing parents into a nursing home. The job of going through their possessions, cleaning out the house and auctioning everything off fell to my brother and me. I left the freezer until last, even though Mom kept harping on me about it every day.

“Did you take that soup home from the freezer?”

If I missed a visit, she called on the phone asking the same question. She insisted I transfer the contents of her treasure chest over to my home freezer and keep it all for myself. I should have been flattered. But there was an unmistakable desperation in her voice that took the joy out of receiving the gift.

Finally, one day I decided to end this ridiculous barrage. I hadn't

had time yet to tackle the task, so I flat-out lied. I said I'd kept some of the soup for myself but had given the rest to the homeless shelter in town; now others could enjoy her wonderful cooking. I should've just told her that I'd taken all of it.

Her eyes grew wide. "You gave away my good vegetable soup?" she screeched. "No, no, no...you were supposed to keep that!"

I tried to console her, but couldn't retract the lie that now churned the air between us. She turned away, hugging herself and crying softly.

Weeks later, when everything else was done at the house and I couldn't put it off any longer, I approached the freezer with loathing. For a full month and a half my mother had fussed and whined about the contents of this damned thing, and now she barely looked at me when I visited her. I wanted to unplug it and walk away, letting it morph into a pit of moldy slime, but I knew a buyer was waiting to take the appliance to a new home and a new assortment of frozen delights.

With a flush of anger, I opened the lid, dead set on throwing every last container of food in the trash. On the left was the usual grouping of six containers of vegetable soup. Next to them lay four packs of frozen chicken breasts tidily wrapped in white freezer paper and labeled. There were two unopened boxes of Butterscotch Krimpets, and a variety of other bits and pieces of food – again, each neatly labeled, most over a year old.

I removed the first layer of food and tossed it into a garbage bag. The next layer consisted entirely of little square plastic containers lined neatly from one corner of the freezer compartment to the other—all labeled *Veg. Soup* with a date. The next layer was also soup. And the next. I thought surely there must be something else packed underneath it all. I removed another layer of containers and instead of bagging them, began building igloo walls on the floor. More soup underneath, the dates ticking back through the years.

Peeling away the layers of her life in that freezer, I began to

understand the perfect beans broken into exact segments, the never-changing placement of bowls and utensils during preparation, the precisely placed freezer labels, each neatly written by hand. The fluid handwriting was the same script that filled dozens upon dozens of little notebooks I had discovered neatly stacked in a locked desk drawer the day before. The detailed archives of her existence—how many gallons of gas she had purchased and on what date and for what price, the mileage from the house to every point she had ever driven to, every single gift she had given for birthdays, graduations, retirements and Christmas. No fond remembrances, no philosophical ponderings, only meaningless lists of information nobody in the world could use or would ever want to know.

A lifetime of memories dropped into place. The meticulous clockwork removal, cleaning and replacement of each item in our kitchen twice a year. The architectural stacks of clothing in our drawers. The tin of buttons she gave me to play with as a child, encouraging me to endlessly sort them by color and size. The lotion applied to her hands every single time before leaving the house, even to fetch the mail.

Peering over the edge of the freezer, I looked down at the final layer of vegetable soup, evidence once neatly frozen in time and locked out of sight. Did she struggle with her obsessions her entire life? Or did occasional whispered urges slowly escalate into unceasing outright demands? At least it had served her well in the Betty Crocker era, when much of her behavior would've been applauded as the proper way to look after a husband, home and children. At least she'd had that.

I slowly sat down on the cold cement floor, my back against the freezer, in the basement of a nearly empty house. A warm tear tickled my cheek as my fingers took on a repetitive life of their own, each touching the thumb in rapid succession, first the right hand, then the left. *One, two, three, four—one, two, three, four—one, two, three four...*

MOTHER-IN-LAW

Jo-Lynn Heusser

The smell of vodka hung in the dim
Room like a fog. I saw her there,
On the bathroom floor, illuminated by a nightlight,
Draped in the shower curtain
She must've grabbed on the way down.
The sight of her suffering was almost beautiful,
Almost peaceful. Asleep on the floor I wanted to stroke
Her sweating brow, nestle between her and the vanity
Until she woke up thirsty. I'd get her water,
And ask her if she'd like to get into bed.
Then I'd help her into it, and tuck her in.
I'd kiss her on the forehead like she might've kissed
Her son when his bed was still wrapped
In a plastic fitted sheet. When he was still
Scared of monsters, and the dark. She'd reassure him,
And tell him that the monsters weren't mean,
That they are scared of that dark too, but it's beautiful.

A GOOD CHILD DOESN'T WANDER AROUND AT NIGHT

Samuel Ayeju

Omo luwabi ko kin rin ni ale.

That's what my father always told me,

A saying of the Yoruba people.

Three of us boys decided to take a late walk

In the cover of the dark, just down the road and back

On the streets of Surulere Lagos, Nigeria.

Shielded from the moonlight by the six-story buildings.

I did not think much of it earlier, until I saw the blue flame

Coming out of the guns' mouths, bullets flying

In our direction, the sound of rapid gun fire

Like a hymn composed by the devil.

Suddenly my father's words started ringing in my ear

Providing bass to the hymn of bullets

And in an instant we hit the ground.

We were not good children

But making our parents bury us was probably

The worst thing we could do, so on hand and knees

We crawled in different directions, feeling the skin

Of the coal, tarred road, before we shot up,

And one of us pointed frantically

At the direction to run, screaming our names.

We broke into long strides. My heart beat

In such a violent rhythm, I thought it would break

Free of my chest. I ran until I could only hear

The hymn of bullets in the distance.

My phone rang, *Hello, father.*

Where are you, boy? I hear gunshots.

THE APPLE AND THE TREE

John Ahrens

I feel the familiar burn of white powder in my nose,
the pharmaceutical taste running down my throat.

So often in these moments I am drawn to my childhood
perhaps I am sentimental about you, for some reason.

I refuse to name you, though you insisted I called you dad,
but that would have been a far cry from the actual truth.

If you and I were to be honest with one another for once,
you'd call me, *Background*, and I'd call you, *Foster-fraud*.

Within the confines of our home's sharp stucco surfaces
where walls were bare and light fixtures had no bulbs.

You'd sit jittering alone in a living room lawn chair
choking down paranoia through a small glass pipe

so often I would stop and ponder my place in your life,
somewhere between 700 and 900 dollars a month.

When you left this world my siblings and I all laughed,
but occasionally I still do catch a glance of you and frown.

I am grateful in those moments that I don't have your eyes,
or they'd be staring back at me from my powdered mirror.

A MONDAY MORNING PATERNITY TEST

Nathan Graziano

You're not their father while snorting
heroin off your dresser at six a.m.
before work as your ten year-old son
knocks at your bedroom door
and asks to borrow your black comb
so he can part his hair to the side
like the Hispanic boys he idolizes.
Today is Picture Day, Dad, he says,
although you're not his father
as you unlock the door and hand him
a black comb with broken teeth.

You're not their father while nodding
on the couch, watching the news
with your daughter who believes
you're only tired and waiting for
the black coffee to finish brewing.

The headline story is about a junkie,
a rope-thin mother discovered in a motel
after booting dope into her pale arm
as her infant children watched her fade
like the echo of fingers being snapped.

You pull your daughter close and say,
Princess, she's not a bad person.
That mommy is sick, not a bad person.

Then you find the picture forms
in a bin on top of the refrigerator
and you write out the two checks.

Because they are your children.

And you are their father.

CHILD OF YOUR FATHER: *Anak ng Tatay Mo*

Carolyn Joyce

My *nakong* calls me
around once a month,
the youngest of three,
living in another state.
This month I again
talk about my stroke,
the one nine months ago—

But you waited seven months to tell me.

I know she's angry,
but what could she do
from so far away?
I bring up again
how she would've known
if she came back
home to live with me,
to help me clean,
to learn my recipes—
adobo, sinigang, pinakbet,
take care of me as promised
when she was six or seven.
Like her father, she argues

I will if it comes down to it but until then—

until then, she wants to stay
near her lonely *Tatay*.
I understand. I tell her
three months ago I fell
while getting out of the tub.
Couldn't walk, alone at home,
I dragged myself slowly
across the floor, naked,
over the course of three days
to the living room table
where I shook my cell phone
loose with the table leg.
The firemen had to break
the glass back door to reach me.
I was so embarrassed, naked,
dehydrated, covered in dried urine,
rug burns, torn skin, and rashes;
an old Filipino lady on the floor
asking for help, grasping a phone.

HOW TO BE SUCCESSFUL

Daryl Snyter

we're not as different as you think
both aching to get out both aching

crawling on knees indented
from kneeling on rice too many
times this time it is our choice
to crawl

you can't have daddy
issues if you never had a daddy
grown women crawl to safety

i'm sorry you stretched your insides
with a baby part of growing up
is learning you can't fuck for love
fuck for money with eyes slid
to the side when it's noisome
fuck old men fuck under red

lights it's not a cliché everything
is red when they ask to pound you

with double entendre watch for double
entendre anything can be a double
entendre

fuck married men men who write
checks from their kids' college funds
fuck somebody else's daddy tell yourself
you get off on it make sure to pass this
advice to your daughter like a family legend

the trick is to transcend your own skin
that, my sister, is how you get out
of that trailer we grew up in

SISTER

Laurie Stone

“What do you enjoy most about your work?” I asked my sister’s surgeon. He was behind his desk, holding a plastic model of human lungs. The lobes were blue, the veins and arteries red, the lymph nodes yellow.

He was fat with thick fingers, and I wondered how they would fit inside my sister. His lab coat was stretched across his belly, the same chalk white as his hair. He brightened at the question, as if a bird had settled on the edge of his papers, and said, “Do you mean personally?” I said, “When you cut into my sister’s lungs, what will you enjoy most?” He said, “The best thing about surgery is guiding a patient to safety. It’s like leading them across a mountain or over dangerous ground.” I would have preferred he say, “It’s always interesting to sharpen your skills.” Sadness rose off him as he tapped the model with a pen, showing the portion of my sister’s lung he would remove. He said the lower part would inflate. He said, “Without surgery, people used to die.” His father had been a surgeon. I wondered if he’d had any choice.

A few nights before I was in the bathtub when I saw water dripping down the wall. A photograph of a Cape Cod porch, lit by lightening, was ruined. The next morning the super came up and did not meet my eyes. The surgeon had had difficulty meeting people’s eyes. I felt these men were in pain and that the presence of other people created too much demand. I said, “My sister has cancer,” and I cried, wiping away tears. He looked at me and said, “I am sorry I cannot share this moment with you properly. I have come from three other tenants, and my garment is not clean.” I had not heard this term applied to the inner life before. I could see the super’s body and over it hovering a layer of sensitivity. I put my hands on his shoulders that were solid beneath his t-shirt. I

said, “You have shared the moment.” I did not know how much I was crying for my sister and how much for the wall.

After my sister and I left the surgeon, we returned to her house and sat outside, watching clouds skip across the sky. Two cars cruised along slowly. We were on a curb with our legs crossed, and we could see ants marching in single file through tall spikes of grass. It was shady under an oak tree that swayed in a breeze and towered over the development where my sister lived. She had lost weight. I smelled her Chanel no. 5, the perfume our mother had worn. I said, “You look like Mom.” She said, “Mom was beautiful.” Our mother had been sleek and unsatisfied, and I sometimes thought I took after her. My sister said, “I know the cancer will recur, just not when or where.” Her surgery was three weeks away, and her heart could stop on the table. We leaned against each other. She was six years older than me, and I had known her all my life. She said, “I don’t want to leave anything unsaid.” I said, “Don’t leave me alone with Mom.” She said, “Mom is dead. Her ashes are in my closet.”

V

Laurie Stone

The performer saw I had forgotten she was coming and bit her lip. I was supposed to read with her band, and the audience was restless. Suddenly V was there. I had not seen her in a long time, and she looked younger than in the past, with a sweep of charcoal hair rising up like smoke. We were no longer friends, yet there she was, a bird in my heart. I followed her outside, and all the time I was away worried I would not get back in time. I came to a house where the floor was flooded. I heard a crash outside. Bodies were strewn along a road. It was dark now, and even if I could find a taxi, I would never make it back. V smiled, content for us to spend our lives on a futile search for something mysterious. She was across from me on a bed and said, "We should have dinner." I said, "Did you say you want to be friends?" She said, "Yes." I said, "I'm not ready to see M." He was the third member of the family I had thought I would always have. She leaned toward me and placed her lips on mine, less a kiss than an intake of breath that felt cold, like air released when a boulder is moved. She cleared her throat and kissed me twice more. These kisses were sexual, and when I woke up I was happy I would never know myself.

OLD FASHIONED WOMAN

Kimberly Ann Priest

The suds in the bucket are soft between my fingers,
clouding up from the sponge

like pillows against the skin that will dry
and crack when I finish if I fail

to lotion them enough.
Nothing feels as satisfying as the hours I wring

water over linoleum floors
as though I am an old-fashioned woman,

taking pride in the shine I leave
everywhere, talking about my children

or a new recipe found on the Internet:
cinnamon scones that finally come out perfect

by the third and fourth batch.
I eat them every morning for two weeks, butter-less,

while the early silence reminds me
how long its been since a phone call from family

or friends—a good book
set out on the table to enjoy an hour before

my daughter wakes up
lets me hold her, feed her right out of my hand.

STILL LIFE

Gina Stratos

Routine, the gravity keeping dishes on shelves,
salt inside porcelain shakers. It locks the liquor
cabinet after three gin and tonics, despite my urge
to drink until I'm dazzled by the truth:
I don't even like gin.

The necessity of order wakes me every morning
in the dark to scramble your three eggs, no pepper,
fry four slices of low-sodium bacon and listen
to the sound of you, dear husband,
grinding my work between your teeth.

And now, a small curd of impossible yellow
clings to the corner of your thin lips.
An advertisement for dish soap slips quietly
from the neat folds of today's newspaper,
and I hear the bone-crack snap of my sensibilities.

Today, I will press my hand into the black iron skillet,
my face shimmering across the hot fat of a pig's belly.
I will hear the sizzle and pop of cauterized flesh,
gold band sinking into the deep meat of my finger,
watch as a garland of blisters honors its burial.

Or I crush the traitorous hand between my knees,
feel the bite of a diamond's head break through skin.
I will focus on white plates against blue linen,
the coagulated smear of ketchup on your plate,
the useless wooden bowl of polished lemons
and this still life's practiced grin.

ODE TO EXHAUSTION

David Kirby

It's Saturday, April 16, 1960 and a taxi blows a tire as it rounds
a curve in Chippenham, England, and in the crash that follows,
American rocker Eddie Cochran dies, just 21 years old and famous

already for "C'mon Everybody" and "Summertime Blues,"
songs covered by a thousand bands since, but that's it for
Eddie. He'll never stand bareheaded in the spotlight the way

Merle Haggard did in Jacksonville last year, beaming as the glare
shows every mile in his road-weary face, never say, as Leonard Cohen
did, "Don't be ashamed to be tired. You look good when you're

tired. You look like you could go on forever." It's said that every
April 16, teddy boys drag the driver of the cab that killed Eddie
Cochran out of his house and beat the bejeezus out of him,

but how can that be? 1960 was a long time ago. If anything,
it's probably the sons of the teddy boys who go to the cabbie's
house, only instead of whaling the tar out of his son, they take him

down to the local for a pint and a chinwag about days gone by.

I was talking to some students from Chile recently, and they wanted
to know what classic rock bands I'd seen live, so I told them about

seeing Cream, the Stones, Hendrix, and so on, and when I told them
I'd seen the Doors at the Merriweather Post Pavilion in Columbia,
MD on August 30, 1968, one young man grabbed his head

with both hands and groaned in pain and envy, and for a moment
I felt like the Thomas Jefferson who said of the grandson who
hung around him, "Like other young persons, he wishes,

in the winter nights of old age, to recount to those around
him what he has learnt of the Heroic Age preceding his birth,
and which of the Argonauts particularly he was in time

to have seen," and then I thought, no, that's not it, what
counts is not you or me or Thomas Jefferson or Eddie Cochran
but the music, the songs that wear us out. It's September 2,

1969 now, and bluesman Skip James is dying of cancer
in the charity ward of a Philadelphia hospital, and when
some fans finally locate him and beg him to sing, he says,

“Skippy tired.” Why wouldn’t he be? His whole life he sang
the devil’s music that our parents and pastors and school principals
warned us about, although, as Blake says, it’s only by going through

the devil that we get to God, which is why we we say rip it up,
we say it’s in his kiss, we say let me be your rocking chair,
I’m so glad, c’mon everybody, come on baby light my fire.

B-SIDE

Robert Wrigley

for Jordan

In which the poet delivers to his daughter, in Southern California, her car, which she calls “Trudy Subaru.” Trudy’s rumped. She has traveled already over 170,000 miles in her life. It’s late August. Unbeknownst to the poet, Trudy has a compromised thermostat, which causes the engine temperature to rise dangerously during the day. Therefore, in the interests of not overheating in the middle of nowhere (which is most of the way), he travels without the air conditioning on. At least Trudy has a CD player. The poet leaves northern Idaho on a Monday afternoon and, according to his plan, drives 660 miles, over twelve hours, to Fallon, Nevada, where he eats, sleeps a fitful four hours in a casino hotel, then rises and drives the remaining 450 miles to Claremont, California. Along the way he encounters meteors, tumbleweeds, roadkill, jackrabbits, an hour-long Biblical plague of white moths, several corporate prisons, and, ultimately, visions of an America born of the nature of his task, his weariness, the heat, road-blindness, and music. He’s brought other CDs but listens only to one, and only to part of that: The Beatles, Abbey Road, specifically what’s known as the “Medley,” or the “B-Side Suite,” or simply as “the other side of Abbey Road.” Ten cuts, mostly short, the whole medley just over nineteen minutes long. Again and again, all the way, 1,112 miles, 23 hours, the same ten songs.

1. The World Is Round

I’m thinking Idaho may be as long
as the world is, especially at night,
and I’m thinking, given the date,
that if I were able to concentrate

on both the endless road and on the sky,
I would be able to see across its black
the grit and debris of the comet Swift-Tuttle,
mere dust and pebbles misconstrued as meteors.

I am also thinking that the jackrabbits
bolting through my headlights are far
more abundant, and what with the cruise control
set just under 85, that what is round

is often imperceptibly so, that astronomically-speaking, there is no such thing as high, and as Dante explained, “Love is the seed in you of every virtue and of all acts

deserving punishment.” Which this is not, although the fourth crushed jackrabbit might disagree with me about that. Because I have 300 more miles to go before I sleep,

because this is America’s B-side, because the wind of my going moans, because the stars are too beautiful to see, my mind on this music, unlike the sky, is blue.

2. Step on the Gas

Something about the wind or the grit it carries keeps me awake but makes me cry. Or not cry— O, slow-moving Ryder truck I blast by, singing—but, given my night vision, get a little teary.

Tarry, however, I do not. If tumbleweeds were money, I’d have a fortune in brittle currency in my grille. Still, I drive on as I said I would, and I will, arriving in Fallon, Nevada, in some sunny-

seeming casino restaurant, chow down and read the funny paper, which, alas, is not, for Fallon is distant, and the windshield’s bedotted with many white moths my speeding has slain.

There is no future that is not far away. Magic-feeling, the wind, and the white wings fluttering on the glass, and the singing, and the sweet dream that will not come true today.

3. Tanta Mucho

By the light of my headlights, the antelope carcass has a blue heart—a beer can—and a chapeau of mustard yellow plastic bag tangled on his horns. Gibberish is in the air!

When for love my heart is happy, photographers of the world, my love, are chicka ferdy: This thank you you can eat on a go-round merry.

Another other place I've rarely been.
Everybody's laughing, or happy. My love
is an orchestra of crickets. My piss arcs on the wind
all the way across the ditch. Unseen.

4. Obscene

It isn't, the billboard for the bordello,
though I admit I imagine, for a moment,
that face arranged before me, just so,
and shout out something mustardly indecent.

The night has cooled enough, the thermostat
in this, my daughter's aging Subaru,
acts up no more. And I am glad about that.
I'll arrive at her door sometime on day two,

and receive the perfect thank-you-Daddy kiss.
But tomorrow, that will be, which I cannot imagine
just now, there being only this road, this
sudden meanness come to me I do not mean:

"Ask for Angel," in print, alongside her gigantic face,
whose father I do not think ever brought her
anything she needed over a thousand miles
in less than 23 now never-ending hours.

It may be Angel is the queen of Dovetail Ranch.
Likely there's no one there by that name
or composed so well of loveliness and raunch.
I will sing a lullaby for her, just the same.

5. Yeah, Yeah, Yeah

The hard edge of highway 95; the harder one
of John Lennon, I can almost imagine.

The sweetness of McCartney does not cloy,
a girl so good-looking she looked like a boy.

A last white wing on the windshield wilts.
You could say it had been attractively built.

But the song's only a minute-thirteen,
and steps majestically down

from Lennon's E to McCartney's A:
O, look out! Daddy's on the way.

6. Lagoon

Tautologies of the late night American West,
mercury vapor yard lights stealing, not robbing,
the darkness; a lack of cell reception,
the sand-blast of actual antelope air.

Bridges over dry creek beds, the song's bridge
pulling in a mournful minor chord
a thirty-ninth time through the same recording,
and suddenly there's Fallon, Nevada, in the distance.

A 2 a.m. dinner-breakfast of Eggs Benedict,
and eleven times that hotel night, I startle from sleep,
dreaming I'm still behind the wheel and about to die,
when there she is, a dancer, an answer, an angel of dream,

trying to help me, wearing moonlight, lithe,
stroking only my electrified shimmering head,
whoever she might be, sucking her thumb in wonder,
and protected by, of all things, a silver spoon.

7. A Way

Ten cuts in nineteen minutes, thirty-six seconds,
a way down most of the republic in the dark.
Three times an hour for twelve hours:
do not sleep, pretty wantons, do not cry.
Mountain gold mines, the unexplainable iconography
of all the yellownesses, as also of the sun, waking me
at 8, the reentry into the windowless beanery,
breakfast-dinner all over again and again,
as in dream and night and now truly Tuesday.
I fill the tank and get on my way.

8. Boy

That would be the yellow Ryder lorry I passed
last night I just passed again, going slow
on the ascent into and over the Sierras,
carrying such weight as it must a long time.

Past Mono Lake and Mammoth Lakes
and the endless descent to Bishop,
California, a lunch of incendiary Mexican,
then the oncoming vast wasteland

of San Bernardino County. Another private prison,
a very large-headed, small-eyed, toe-head boy
selling blackberries at a sun-ravaged
roadside card table. I am bringing you

your pillow, daughter, which you did not
fly with. I am bringing you such an America
as you will see yourself, when you return,
the stupendous burden of it, the weight

of its fierce injustices and hydrocephalic heads.
A long way down or up its ravaged body, a long time
to hoist and be hobbled by the tonnage
of its economies. Daughter, I love you

more than the mountains weigh,
and these berries, because the boy could not break
my twenty, I am bringing them all to you.
They are dark as the night was in Nevada.

9. Equal to

the distance was the darkness. Equal to
jackrabbits is light. Equal to
the antelope are the ants that ate it. Equal to
a plastic bag is a blossom, and equal to

the highways are lost souls. Equal to
souls are angels. Equal to
an angel is three guitars, and equal to
guitars is a cell tower beacon. Equal to

Sunday is Monday, equal to
calling it Monday is calling it equal to
Tuesday. Tuesday is equal to
Fallon, Nevada, at 8 a.m., which is equal to

blackberries, and blackberries are equal to
what is taken or made. What is made is equal to
what is. What love is equal to
is everything. My daughter waving is equal to

a spoon and a wound, and a wound is equal to
her kiss on my cheek, and in the end is equal to

the end.

10. A Bellyful

Three days later I cannot see Claremont, California,
from the plane. I cannot see the city for the towns.
It's a pretty nice place, Claremont, California,
crawling with colleges, a privileged town.

There is not a lot to say about eleven-hundred miles,
more than half of them in the dark:
a basketry of tumbleweed shrapnel unwoven
from the grille, a tuft of jackrabbit hide

dangling from a transaxle, the long-gone nervous
moth wings, and the Beatles all the way,
even after I hit the San Bernardino Freeway,
its terrifying six lanes down from the summit,

where I was passed by a pickup with Idaho plates.
But here is the spoon and the hole in the road,
here is the pillow and the way back home.
Here are two Pams, an angel, the dirty old man,

one sweet dream, the round world,
and the blue sky through which I fly from you.
It's a pretty nice place, Claremont, California,
which you will never take to and be home in three months.

Nothing else I said along the way was mine.

CONTRIBUTORS

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SUBMISSION GUIDELINES

Our submission period begins each year on September 1st and ends on February 1st.

Please note: We no longer accept email submissions. All submissions must be uploaded through our Submittable submission manager system at themeadow.submittable.com/submit.

For general queries, please contact us at meadow@tmcc.edu.

We welcome submissions of poetry, fiction, nonfiction, and cover artwork uploaded through our submission manager system.

All submissions must be accompanied by contact information (name, address, telephone and email) and a brief (less than 50 words) biography; include the title(s) of each piece submitted.

We do not accept previously published work, but we will consider simultaneous submissions and expect to be notified immediately of acceptance elsewhere.

We will accept up to six poems, photos or art pieces, or one work of prose (fiction or nonfiction) from each author or artist. Prose may not exceed 6,000 words.

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