

the  Meadow
2022

Truckee Meadows Community College
Reno, Nevada

The Meadow is the annual literary arts journal published every spring by Truckee Meadows Community College (TMCC) in Reno, Nevada. Students interested in creative writing and small press publishing are encouraged to participate on the editorial board. Visit www.tmcc.edu/meadow for information and submission guidelines or contact the Editor-in-Chief at meadow@tmcc.edu or through the English department at (775) 673-7092.

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The Meadow is indexed in *The International Directory of Little Magazines and Small Presses*.

Our address is Editor-in-Chief, *The Meadow*, Truckee Meadows Community College, English Department, Vista B300, 7000 Dandini Blvd., Reno, Nevada, 89512.

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Cover Art: *Untitled #7* by Lily Hargrave,

www.tmcc.edu/meadow

ISSN: 1974-7473

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The Ambulance Took Away Another Person Today

Alice "Lucky" Lacerenza

I go to college and live at the women's shelter,
so instead of homework I do shelter work.
Everything I have achieved in my life
I have done out of selfishness
for myself, so I can help others.
My caseworker is barely out of college,
and I have made myself her success story.
I like myself because I am with me 24 hours a day.
I am a good person. I care
about everyone, but I care about me
the most. Once or twice I got lost
in the shadows, and I made my own light.
I can be my own star, navigational compass,
and even a lighthouse. A blind lady
hangs out in the hallway.
I always ask her if she needs anything.
I am happy she always tells me, *No*.
One time she said, *Yes*, I almost ran away.
I stayed and asked what she needed.
She asked me to read to her. I was so happy.
I read to her and tried to make her see.
Today, when the ambulance shows up
there are two people inside it.
The ambulance also has a person
in the back when they drive away.
There is always a bed open
at the women's shelter after they leave.

filaments

Robin Gow

when the birds died
we collected them
in a glass holy-goblet.
blew on them softly
until they turned to light.
still though, on the right afternoon
i will turn on a fire
& hear a thousand wing-beats.
nestlings falling toward flight.
during the years without a sun
we had no idea what each other looked like.
spent our days re-telling
the stories of our lives
until they were as short
as a sentence each. “i caught a devil
in the creek rocks” &
“my mother couldn’t remember my name”
& “without the smell of lavender
i’d be dead.” i want to learn
to catalog my losses without
living only for them. this is
easier said than done. here is where
the birds died. we have light
because the birds folded inward
& opened orchidly onto the room.
my sentence is “i was a girl
& then, i was a boy & now i am
a prophet.” i saw feathers
behind my eyelids since before
i knew what they were called—

thought of them as collected eyelashes.
i try to blink as often
as possible. pretending what i see
is a series of photographs.
one following the other.
maybe there is a lake kept by the gods
where a polaroid of every second lives.
if i could i spend the rest of my days
swimming there in search
of an image of the last bird.
her wings are what make
every shadow in me. i would steal
her image for myself. maybe slip it
beneath my pillow as i slept.
absorb some of that boundlessness.
commiserate over our desires
to fracture in illumination.
a loon calls as i turn on my desk lamp.
outside, a flock of yesterdays
passes beneath the always.
i take a picture of my hands
& add it to the inventory.

plenty

Kolbe Riney

didn't know, don't know / why you'd want more / and that's why I never understood / goldilocks leaving a bed too big for her / Like, I want / to be too comfortable / actually / I want to be the softest thing possible / Like, we're both really full / and covered in fur / and settling in for a really long nap / And I want our table to be a spool of thread / where we hold mouse tea parties / and use the yarn to knit sweaters / for our neighbors / the frog, toad, and mole / but like, enough sweaters, you know? / like, enough to clothe the whole village / like, I want them to have extras! / and when we talk, I want every word / to feel like blowing kisses / and for every step to be like walking home / from the bar with your best-best friends / where we can't feel our legs moving / and we just got done laughing / and everything is pink / And mostly, I want us to wake up in the spring / and gather blackberries in picnic baskets / shaped ideally for someone with silly-big paws / and I want to spend all afternoon making jam / and eating more than enough extras on the side / until our lips come back sticky and purple / and when we kiss, we don't even wipe it off.

big love

Kolbe Riney

Today I find some of the clearest / photographs ever taken / of Jupiter /
Her surface, a pastel blue and coral / acid trip of ever- / swirling eddies
/ And that makes me think, you know / that maybe Jupiter is a dancer /
and also a curly girl / and she's *definitely* bisexual / that I know for sure /
And I think Jupiter / likes to wear denim jackets / with the patches on the
sides / that say, LOVE THE UNLOVED / and fuzzy pink leg warmers /
and scrunchies / And I think Jupiter is a lover / of all those hated / by the
world, like / she has a pet rat / and feeds the possums on her doorstep /
and she never clears away her cobwebs / And I think Jupiter understands
me / like, I think she's right / here with me, hoping / for a softer year: / a
year / of romantic / comedies without the misogyny this time / and books
/ where people love each other / in the gentle way / and nothing else / and
men you meet in bars / who order the super fruity cock- / tails and sip
them through a swirly straw / without any shame / And the truth is / I
think Jupiter can't tell the difference / between loving and being in love
/ because when it gets big it all feels / like the same thing / even with
strangers / and so every friend she's ever had / still feels like a lover / And
she's really big, you know! / she's like, really big / and she relishes it! / like,
she licks her fingers / and even takes / samples from the grocery where she
works.

Minor Miracles in Time Travel

Patrick Meeds

I keep a clock in every room of my house
and they are all set to slightly different times.
That way I can move from room to room
gaining or losing minutes as I go.
If I get bad news on the phone in the kitchen
I can just step into the living room
where it's a five minutes earlier and it's like
it never really happened. If you ask the piano
in the hall what time it is, it will say 4/4 or maybe
6/8 if it's feeling jazzy. What else would you expect
a piano to say? Was the song written today?
400 years ago? Doesn't matter to a piano.
It's made of wood, and in the old days, ivory.
Just like Washington's teeth. Did you know
that John Adams wanted him to be known as
His Highness, Protector of Their Liberties.
Their being the thirteen original colonies.
A little much if you ask me. But then nobody
asks me. That probably has something to do
with my inaccurate timekeeping or where I keep
my piano. Give me a break though. It's heavy
and after the accident my doctor told me
I would never play again. Of course that was then.
This is now.

Thirty Thieves and the Thunder Chief

Patrick Meeds

In one square inch of sky
there are so many stars
But that doesn't change the fact
that Iowa City is far away
from here. It has nothing to do with gravity.
Nothing to do with longitude
and latitude. Counter clockwise
just feels more natural.
I mean let's be honest.
We've got this whole thing
ass backwards anyway. We
should be focused on entering the water
with the smallest splash possible
not plugging our noses and screaming
cannon ball as loud as we can. Hey
look at me, look at me. Someone
tricked you and made you believe
that's all it would take to make you happy.
As if
Everything needs a fresh coat of paint
once in a while. Sooner or later
everything decomposes.
My friend Mike used to do this trick
at the bar where he pulled
himself through a metal coat hanger
but we forgave him. We still loved
him. But what do I know?
The last decision I made
was twenty years ago and it was wrong.
Yes, I have ghosts
it's just that they're not all dead yet.

A Tooth is a Tree

Matthew Burnside

Boy is burying a tooth in the earth. “A tooth is not a tree,” mother has tried her best to teach him. Boy is insistent though, all gunked up with dreaming. Every night his parents bicker, shaking their pillows. Help is needed. Professional help I mean, father decides, as Boy watches tooth slumbering in a hole in the backyard. Definitely not natural, mother agrees. It is agreed then. Boy will receive help. Years of sessions go by and Boy is still gunked up with dreaming. Mind full of dreamy cobwebs. Sleek nets to catch all the ghosts haunting his dreamy heart with ghostsinging. It is futile, reports the professional one day. Boy is beyond help. A tooth is not a tree! mother yells in a fit of desperation, shaking him like a pillow. If only they looked outside they’d see skeletal branches tickled by the sun—beautiful white boughs holding up the entire weight of the sky. Boy feels tooth in his heart blooming its big roots out into the wide world. One day, an orchard of teeth. Boy forgives, because Boy sees. It’s not their fault some people never learn to see beyond the windows.

The Walk

Merlin Ural Rivera

Day four—the sun is still black,
the dust roasted brown like torrefied wheat,
a splash of salt-white air above the desert.

Forward burst those who know where they're going,
a wondrous perestroika blooming in their heads,
not a drop of sweat on their silk ties,
ambitions tall like sequoias.

The jugglers—a slow parade—
are left behind,
eyes in the sky, and questions, questions
curving in the air like slimy intestines.

Yet another *poète maudit* among them,
and a brush-biter with blue teeth,
cigarette-slim dancers and trumpeters
blowing moonlight out of horns.

Tongues red and slippery, lead-heavy with wine,
like soldiers out of harness,
they trudge along aimless,
and dream of sixteen cups of coffee, and opium,

things promised to them at the edge of the world
things that children, hereabouts, pay to see.

The tide, they say to those ahead, the tide is ebbing.

Ode to a Newport

Richard Martin

They're made in Winston-Salem, North Carolina.
Salem is short for Jerusalem. I was
smoking and drinking in line for a haunted house
and this Mormon Girl coughed at me.
Later in life she marched for We the People
down a hall crowned with tobacco leaves that will soon be
either demolished like a Confederate baby-killer
or called only acanthus leaves,
renamed like a highway heading South towards
Freedom/Past where the Native Peoples dwell
and smoke tobacco as ritual. God, I miss ritual.
Probably needing a smoke like never before,
feeling the tobacco mixed in my blood
like myrrh mixed with the wine Matthew begged Jesus
to drink just outside Jerusalem's tall walls.
I too would beg to join them in their circle,
sitting on one hand
and keeping my white mouth shut
so as not to be as some strange snowman piping off
sorry... sorry.... over and over
wide eyed and scared like the last kitten in the box.
I hope I would feel welcome in their ritual
in a way that only people with iron hearts can feel
and in a haze of everyone's charcoaled breath
and eased constitution was a law
they have learned worth teaching
by putting fire to leaf and lesson to lips.

How to Write a Poem

Christine Neuman

First, read two collections of poems
by Sacramento, California poets.
Then, when that doesn't give you any ideas—
ponder about last year,
when you actually had a life,
before Covid-19 shut down the world.
Right when you started going to the SPC
and met a hot guy who asked,
Do you want me to sit with you?
Then walk outside until the leaves turn to
brown-yellowish mush,
then you know you've gone too far
turn back around
lay in the mud and stare into the sky,
until the clouds turn into an older man's
long earlobes.
Take the night off.
Fuck it, take the whole week off.
Take shots of vodka and then
tell your ex you love him.
Wake up, take it all back.
Imagine yourself happy.
Then take that back too.
Offer to walk your neighbor's dog,
leave it at the park.
Then, when your neighbor knocks at the door
give them an alias,
after telling them you have no idea
what they're talking about.
Go to the grocery store
after masturbating. Buy yourself a cake.
You deserve it.

Lesson Number One

Casey Fuller

you don't have to believe
in fate or faith
or god but believe me
when i say i was stuck
for three hours
driving my mom's
four-door hyundai sonata
or whatever it was
sitting next to
my favorite poet
who i just picked up
at the airport
completely inconveniently
placed between
the largest city
in the pacific northwest
and two military bases
that just seemed to
let all our soldiers out
improbably on leave
so there we were
my hero and me
in my mom's hyundai
or whatever it was
where he was catching on
i knew about his
recursive and unfurling
clause-laden constructions
seemingly unattached
to life in any possible way
until their ends
suddenly sucker punch you
in such a way
you end up repeating
a small set of

luminous words
for years
when i asked him
why he titled his poems
using lines from other poems
he looked at me
in what i thought
would be much more
just smiled
and said
to confuse my lovers
he had flip flops on
a heather blue t-shirt
a small satchel
a baseball cap
that referred to nothing
no luggage
smelled of coconut soap
and only had one change of clothes
i looked at him closely
to remember
for us all
when he asked to stop off
at a grocery store
he said he really had
very little to teach anyone
as we walked in
a run down thriftway
he bought a bag of
spicy pork rinds
and two twist top
bottles of chardonnay
and as we were
going through check out
he held up his three items
and whispered to me
in words that seem to bookend
a mysteriousness
lesson number one

The Penis Goes

Ruby Peru

I must have been in about the third grade when my mother told me how a woman gets pregnant. I hadn't asked and wasn't the least bit interested. In fact, when sitting in the bathtub, I used to place a washcloth over my vagina in order to avoid contemplating its mystery. Shame around bodily functions permeated the atmosphere of our home without ever being discussed or rationalized.

One day, Mom simply walked into my bedroom, shut the door, and said, "I'm going to tell you where babies come from."

I now suspect that, like the "there is no Santa Claus" conversation, this had been brought on by my older sister finding out and my mother trying to make sure I heard the news from an adult first. But whatever the reason Mom chose to have this conversation on that particular day, she wasn't any more eager for it than me. Her rigid posture and pinched face made her look as if she had fallen into a vat of discomfort. Wherever babies came from, it was clearly nowhere good.

I knew the grim expression my mother wore. I had seen it many times. It meant that, like a self-programming robot, she had set herself on a mission to complete an unpleasant task, and no power on Earth could change her course of action. I knew I could have picked up my oboe and marched around the room squawking out "Hot Cross Buns," pausing only to smash the bedroom window with my rusty horseshoe collection and impale myself upon the shards, and she would have just spoken louder.

My parents were atheists, or agnostics at best, but behaved just like the strict, fifties-era protestants they had been raised to be. It simply never occurred to either of them to change their attitudes or ethics when they ceased to believe in the

very premise behind them. Religion-wise, I only know that my mother always had great admiration for Quakers and the Amish and Laura Ingalls Wilder—notions of wholesomeness, that, I think, centered around the idea of well-behaved children and beautiful, handmade quilts with which to cover their genital-free bodies.

Doing her impersonation of a modern, open-minded, TV-type mom, she sat on the edge of my bed and performed what some people might consider a comforting smile.

“When a man and woman sleep together,” she said, “the penis goes into the vagina.”

She added something about sperm and eggs and ovaries, but my mind was already whirring. I fell into a great quandary trying to figure out how a penis could “go” into a vagina while their respective owners were asleep.

I was particularly confused by the way she said, “The penis goes.” It gave the distinct impression that penises did things on their own, without their owners’ consent or encouragement. The penis goes to the grocery store. The penis goes to a matinee. The penis goes to the vagina. Who knows where it’ll go next?

But how does it “go?” I wondered. *Does it detach? Does it fly? Does it grow legs like a fish emerging from primordial ooze?* I wondered if the hapless penis knew where it was going, or if it simply wandered around until it bumped into something, perhaps a vagina.

As my mother droned on about who-knows-what, I reasoned that the detachable-flying-penis line of reasoning seemed untenable, so I came up with a second theory.

In order to unite these particular organs while in the land of nod, the man and woman in question would have to fall asleep without underwear, lying close together, then thrash around so much in their sleep that his penis happened to slip inside her vagina. *Highly unlikely*, I thought. In fact, it now seemed a won-

der that humans had populated the Earth at all, and it made sense that babies were often referred to as “miracles.” Perhaps this was why people didn’t like to talk about baby-making. The project’s very hopelessness aroused anxiety.

At the time, I was known as a violent sleeper, and whenever I slept in the same bed with my sisters, they’d wake up with my hand flopping over someone’s face or my toenails digging into someone’s leg, so I assumed the hypothetical pregnancy-seeking man and woman were like me, only worse. These poor parasomniacs would have to simultaneously endure grand mal seizures in order to conceive.

I tuned back in to Mom’s lecture once more when she admonished, “You must be very careful not to get pregnant by accident!”

This mysterious statement, and the stern tone in which it was couched, seemed to imply that one could engage in both purposeful and accidental activity while asleep. And, for some reason, I was already to blame for failing to discern the difference.

Clearly, I thought, if a girl didn’t want to get pregnant, all she had to do was not sleep in the same bed with a boy, which, since I wasn’t even friends with any boys, seemed pretty easy to achieve. But if, for some reason, I had to sleep in a bed with a boy—and I tried to imagine what epic natural disaster or overcrowded Christmas gathering would engender such conditions—I ought to keep my underwear on. I resolved that, if such a situation should arise, I would wear underpants, a union suit, and flannel pajamas to boot.

Still, I couldn’t get over the serious warning about the possibility of accidental pregnancy. It was as if she thought I might carelessly fall asleep somewhere outside the house or, perhaps, allow a stranger to fall asleep inside it. And yet, our house was no open-doored community center where neighborhood boys wandered inside at will to show off soapbox derby cars and

bear glad tidings on lazy summer days. No. The whole idea of accidental pregnancy simply made no sense at all.

My mother then presented me with a boxed set of books called *The Life Cycle Library*, which she instructed me to consult, should I have any further questions on the matter. Questions? Yeah, I had a few, but “inferring information from the context” was a scholastic skill at which I excelled, so I felt confident I could read between the lines here.

The only explanation for all this came to me quite clearly. Our street must be chock-full of incurable somnambulists who roamed, zombielike, up and down the length of Finlandia Court at night, wandering into one another’s houses and launching into epileptic seizures in other peoples’ beds. Any pregnancy resulting from such an event, I deduced, would certainly qualify as accidental.

I thought perhaps Mom’s admonishment to avoid accidental pregnancy was simply a roundabout warning to lock the front door. I resolved to lock my bedroom door, too, and perhaps push a chair up against it, just to be sure. As a final precaution, I thought, I could make a habit of sleeping in three layers of clothing, although I didn’t really want to.

Strangely, my mother used to pat my bottom sometimes when I came downstairs in my nightgown to say goodnight. The idea was to make sure I wasn’t wearing underwear. “The body needs to breathe!” she used to say, creating an uncomfortable intimacy that existed in no other context. Now, with the marauders to fear, the requirement for the body to “breathe” made even less sense.

I had no idea how I was supposed to prevent pregnancy while also letting my body breathe but deduced the expected precautionary measures must have more to do with locked doors than extra clothes. Thus far, however, I hadn’t seen Mom being overly concerned with fortifying the premises each night, so I thought perhaps the responsibility for this fell to me. I imagined, with the setting of the sun, I’d shove our massive dining room table up

against the front door. That ought to do it.

Finally, and with clear reluctance, Mom asked, “Any questions?”

I felt sure I had filled the gaps in her sketchy explanation of the sex act well enough, so I shook my head no. Somehow, I knew it would be silly, or at least frowned upon, to ask for details about the sleepwalking, epileptic neighbors—by far, the only interesting part of this entire sordid tale. Since she hadn’t discussed the neighbors directly, I assumed their nightly forays were another taboo, unmentionable subject.

When Mom left the room, she pulled the door shut behind her, as if to quarantine me with my dangerous, new knowledge. I opened the first book of *The Life Cycle Library* and felt almost flattered at how drastically my mother had overestimated my reading ability. The book was as dry and technical as a furniture assembly manual, with fewer pictures. Furthermore, its chapters discussed all kinds of irrelevant topics like fallopian tubes and cervixes and gestation periods. There was nothing in the book at all about the real issue we had just not discussed.

I stuck the stupid books on a shelf and contemplated my grand, four-poster canopy bed, where I used to feel like a princess and now felt like a sitting duck. I lifted up the coverlet’s edge to examine the empty space beneath the box spring. While it still seemed vaguely plausible that a penis could go to a matinee, I felt it highly unlikely that sleepwalkers would crawl under beds.

The minute I hear an intruder, I thought, I’ll just dive under there.

Those Seen Driving West

Melanie Perish

We travel California 37, Sears Point Road inland
past Vallejo, the sky smooth with raw-silk clouds.

Through my window flats near the overpass.

There may be birds, but I see three small tents,
one patched with duct tape; a man wearing two coats,

carries a duffle, a plastic sack. Marks of ragged,

no wings in sight. You look out your window,
think you see a raft of canvasbacks, but we are

late. You wonder if you will ever be able to show me

the locked-lace and waxy feathers up close. We see
no spindle-legged sanderling, no deep diving duck.

Some lives are not wild, but both visible

and invisible. Are they forgotten? It is too late
for yellow-headed blackbirds to mate and raise young.

Dirty white deli-bags blight the roadside, blur by.

A leather-faced woman walks the narrow dirt shoulder.
Her back to us, she pulls at her camo jacket, adjusts

the straps of her pack. Ahead, a turn twists like rope
through belt loops, like the serpentine neck of a heron.

We stop for gas and bathrooms before Guadal Canal Village.
You read me facts about salt ponds, terns, a snowy something.

I do not see most of what you say.

When We Broke Up

Melanie Perish

for her

When my words were whimsy
our days were wings and touch.
Your hands were slow, my mouth
on your mouth found tongues had a language
where vowels shaped breath and sighs
were better than punctuation.

Both of us thought we spoke
and listened. Neither of us imagined
our lives were written with different
alphabets. My dictionary included
contradictions to your father; and the photo
that proved me right. Your lexicon had
too many synonyms for silence or omission.
Both of us know the range of a father's voice.

Do not remember me as a fragment.
Do not remember me as the thorn
in your family's pride. The patriarchs
are mesmerizing as the wrinkled air above the road
with its hot, thin shimmer—but this signals
thirst. Remember me as the woman
committed to voice. Remember me
as the heart that breaks and breaks open.

Widow Blues

Susan Landgraf

Yes, he and I had holes in our commitment,
but we'd taught ourselves to darn.
We'd used words that cut and ripped,
but we learned to curb our tongues.

These is old blues

We were gonna make it to fifty
stepping right or aside: One two
one two three. We laughed at the holes
in our shoes. We danced a ragged tune.

and I sing em like any woman do

Some countries a woman throws herself
onto a pyre and burns.
Me, I went out and bought a single bed
after I picked up the urn.

These the old blues

Last week I found a check he'd signed.
Today I found a knot he'd tied.
But there isn't even one map to be found
that shows me where he's gone.

*my song ain't enough
my song ain't through*

It's no fun cooking for one.
No fun going to a party, sleeping alone.
Some days I can't help myself:
Mother Fucker, please come home.

The Last Gifts We Gave Each Other

Richard Baldo

You stood there as I backed to the door.
I am sure you wanted me to remember you
this way, still mine.

You leaned slightly back,
your hip and hands against
the top of your desk.
Your ex will arrive in twenty minutes
to resume his place and take mine.

Reconciled, ready to pack your office,
to move west, you gave me
that naked look of yours,
posed in your office tableau.

I reconciled myself to close the door
on Venus uncovered.

I took you in and left you there
as the door closed
on the slit of eye contact,
cut off.

You always said you liked the feeling
of the wet stream as it runs
down the inside of your thigh,

the white result of
the last goodbye.

Less Bombs to Ponder in the After-Life Glow

Daniel Edward Moore

meant meeting was easy it was March in Seattle
with evening chilled like an iced black coffee

and your platinum hair a radar for aliens
guiding us both to the Victrola Café,

wearing what the future would need from our past:
my ox blood Doc Martens and your silver fur coat.

Only a gun could have stopped me from feeling
how fast my feet could run in leather,

how majestic a fox looks praying while falling,
but I didn't have a bullet to my name

no tiny killers in my pocket size heart
to convince you to take me back to my place

where in an hour I was dialing your number
to tell you I was done pondering.

The Things I Hate

Sean Prentiss

I hate your thin lips and how
you talk tonight at Jewel's
Bar about always wanting
to paint a picture so perfectly
that every viewer possesses
a single shared image. I hate
how not a single painting of yours
hangs on my walls four states
away. I hate how you no longer
paint, how you're so much
a could-have, should-have,
almost-did but now all that remains
from those days is your smoking.
You used to have a brush
in one hand, a cigarette in
the other. I hate those Marlboro
Lights and what they might
do to you in twenty years, not
that it's my concern since
I only see you maybe once
every two years. I hate how
even though we haven't
spoken in years, you turn
to me at the bar, cigarette
between fingers and ask, *Do you
remember that first night
we made love?* I hate how
the bartender can hear
my whispered, *Yes.*
I hate that while we talked

about those old days of love,
you drank the bar dry.
So did I, but I hate it still.
Though I understand
your drinking because I'd
drink as much as you if I
drove a forklift, if I lived,
still, in this dead-end.
And I hate how tonight,
after the bar, we return
to my cabin, our favorite
place in the world, the slow
river outside, and you turn
to me, swaying, and ask,
*Do you want to have
a child with me?* I hate
how surprised I am. I hate
how I have no idea that this
was where tonight was going.
I hate how badly I want to say,
Yes. So badly, *Yes. Yes.*
I hate how I remain silent.
I hate how I say nothing.
I hate how soon you drive
away.

Little Ears

Kelly M. Houle

The harsh words still ringing in our ears
sting like the wedge of light in our eyes

every time the door swings open,
but when it closes we begin to see

each other again, searching the table
for signs of all the ways

we are the same—two glasses,
water, a slice of fresh lemon,

napkins we place on our laps,
the kind of bread you have to break

then hand to the other, the plate
to collect the pits of bitter olives

we tolerate on our tongues,
the songs not so different

from the day we first kissed,
the way we sat in silence afterward,

taking sips of wine,
confessing our desires to the dish

of *little ears* in butter and garlic,
we wanted to share, take turns

slipping the curled folds into our mouths,
we closed our eyes, swallowed them whole.

Journal Entry: Rain Crow

David B. Prather

Supposedly, mourning doves mate for life,
which means their instinct for courtship rituals
is used only once. After that, there is only nesting

or grief. Grief is an instinct, almost a punishment
for loving what we cannot hold onto, no matter
how hard we try. I don't mean to question

the claims of ornithologists with the word
supposedly. I believe the science and observation.
Bald Eagles and Mute Swans also practice

monogamy. The Whooping Crane, too.

And there are others that show their devotion
in feathers and flight, migration and molt.

This morning, one dove calls for rain,
which is what my grandmother taught me,
to believe in superstition, explanations

of the world through fear and fantasy. Now
that I am older, I feel the approach of clouds.
Why don't I sing? Why don't I go to the door

and croon for the coming storm? *Plaintive*.

That's another word. Especially when I turn
the television on in another room to keep

the house from feeling lonely. I'd be lying
if I said the house was not a symbol for me.
Prevarication runs in my veins. And the dove

is purported to be a symbol for peace,
but I haven't seen much of that around here
lately. Though I must admit the hour is still.

Barometric pressure drops too slowly for a storm.

Maybe a light rain or drizzle, just enough to keep me indoors, haunting every room. I wouldn't normally

think myself a ghost, but this trill and coo is spiritual.

No wonder the gods choose birds as vessels.
My favorite dream is the one in which I can fly.

Crows

Rebecca A. Eckland

Yin and yang are not circles but oppositional fields
Vibrating through bird nests, tangled into the feathers

Of a baby crow fallen from the nest he brought home.
The crow nestled on a white towel on the kitchen floor scattered

With birdseed constellations when I came home from the office to find
He was determined to save it.

Are mysteries born into the dark matter of the universe
Black like my suit and tie? When I was an athlete, I thought I knew

What strength was. Saving time by traversing space.
It catches up to me, in my bruised ribs and fractured pelvis.

That makes me wonder if a strong woman is a monster—
Frankenstein and neon green:

One leg up, an arm's length away
Primal womb, the body's language, a spiral ontology

And centrifugal forge around which a murder of crows
At twilight sculpt orbits in stardust.

Meanwhile he, on the kitchen floor, tiny seeds turned to dust
Trying to feed the baby crow with a fused beak:

I'd rather die than. Google tells me that it won't; evolution
Hates domestic scenes. I wait until the pink winter sky turns dark

When solar flares and electron clouds collide above a bare tree
To return the baby to its nest in an industrial park.

He does it for me—for love, he says
—And tells me about snow that looked like stars

—A gentle lullaby—the sounds
Of the world falling asleep.

But I tell him I promised long ago
I'd never be a mother.

Something's Bugging Me

Shellie Richards

The Metamorphosis is a novella written by Franz Kafka and published in 1915. In the story, Gregor Samsa, a salesman, wakes to find himself transformed into a roach/beetle. His sister Grete (pronounced Greta) is compassionate at first, bringing him food and even defending him. But she soon tires of Gregor's bug-state. This is a story told from Grete's POV set in contemporary time.

The homemade poster sign on the door said, SOMETHING BUGGING YOU? ALL ARE WELCOME in large, black Sharpie print.

Grete Samsa walked inside the plain, one-story brick building and straight over to the folding table with coffee and doughnuts. She poured a cup of coffee and mixed in a bit of dry powder creamer, took a sip, spat it out in the garbage can, and tossed out the remainder. Nothing tasted good anymore.

Across the room, people had already begun to sit in a large circle, shifting their fannies in the metal folding chairs and greeting one another. Grete picked at the doughnuts, mostly fresh. Glazed, jelly, powder, and sour-cream cake. Nothing looked good. Empty-handed, Grete walked slowly to the circle of chairs, her balance off today, though she couldn't say why.

"Welcome, everyone!" Max, a Unitarian minister who led the support group, spoke. "I see a lot of familiar faces around the room today. Is there anyone here who is new?" An old black man raised his hand.

"Welcome!" everyone said in unison, and Grete thought the collective voice sounded cultlike, something out of Waco, Texas.

"A couple of housekeeping notes before we get started. There's a signup sheet for snacks on the table next to the doughnuts; if anyone would like to bring something next time,

that would be greatly appreciated. Also, we're nearly out of coffee cups."

"I can bring snacks on Thursday," a faceless voice volunteered.

"Great, thank you." Max clasped his hands. "Okay, let's get started. Who would like to share first, please? Anyone?"

"I'll go." A middle-aged woman wearing a quilted jacket and orthotic sneakers stared at the floor as she talked.

"Walter and I celebrated thirty-seven years of married life last month, right around the same time he started to change. First, it was just his torso. *A thorax*. He woke one day with a thorax where his torso had been. Walter had a small tattoo, his only one." She palmed her heart. "My name in tiny letters on his chest. Gone. *Erased*. But, I was steadfast—*thankful* even, that I could still look into his big brown eyes, talk to him at night about the news, share a bowl of popcorn while we watched a rom-com." She dabbed her eyes with a tissue. "Then...he just..." She began to sob silently into her quilted sleeve.

"Take your time. We've all been there," Max soothed.

She looked up and scanned the circle. "He's an ant. My big, handsome 6'3", 250-pound man is a big red ant. I still love him, I do. But every day he walks the same route, to and from the sugar bowl, back and forth, back and forth. He's created a tiny pile of granules in the corner of our kitchen. I haven't cleaned it yet because it seems to mean something to him—this tiny pile of sugar. Last week, I noticed others following him, all in a line, back and forth from the sugar bowl to the corner and back again. He has friends, now, other than me. He was my best friend, my only friend, and now he has dozens and I've got no one." She blew into her tissue. "I just don't know how much more I can take."

Silence fell across the room, people nodding. Grete understood. They all understood. It occurred to Grete that Gregor had no friends, and she felt her heart thump with gratitude.

The thought of more than one roach sent a chill down her spine. She was grateful for this group, too. Until she started coming, everything that had happened to her had felt like some sort of sick inside joke. But there were others who suffered. And for that, Grete was thankful.

A young guy broke the quiet. “I get it. I hear ya. My girlfriend Jessica—” he held up a photo of a beautiful girl standing on the beach, “—this is her before. She’s a wasp. A fucking wasp. Of course, I still love her, but she flies at me all the time and if she stings me, that’s it. She’s getting the fucking swatter.” He clapped his hands loudly, and Grete jumped in her seat. “I know what you all must be thinking, but I’m allergic and she knows it. I’m scared out of my damned mind. Scared of my girl who I loved.”

The black man spoke, his voice measured, and Grete thought he sounded like Morgan Freeman. “My lady is a tick. Last week, I looked everywhere for her. All over the house, tore the place apart. Guess where I found her? On me. Never mind where. Not important. What could I do to remove her from my...self? I couldn’t take a match to her; I’d killed her. My sweetheart. I got some tweezers, careful not to squeeze her too hard, ya know? And I plucked her off my...well, I got her off of me.” His body shook with the memory. “She’d been on a while so, ya know, she was full of blood. Doctor says I might have Lyme disease now. What do I do, y’all? She’ll be back. I know it.” He dusted some powdered sugar from his jeans.

Grete was beginning to feel better about her home situation. Gregor was a roach and so far, the worst thing he’d done was crawl across a photo, leaving an iridescent trail of some kind, and while he hadn’t eaten his bread or milk, he’d finished most of the rotted cheese she’d set out for him. She wasn’t one to share, but she needed to get this off her chest, hear herself say the words out loud about the brother she’d loved. About her fears. Maybe if she gave voice to them, got them out into

the world, she could look at them, beat them. Before she could speak, another began talking.

“My wife Sheila.” He bit into a sour-cream cake doughnut and chewed; food spilled from his mouth as he talked. “She’s my worst nightmare. We’d had a fight, a biggie, the night before. I was seeing this other lady...a bartender I got friendly with one night. Sheila found out about it, and we had a huge fight. She threw things at me, smashed my new TV in the middle of a Cubs game and poured out all of my scotch. Macallan. I didn’t care. I just wanted to make it right with her and now...I can’t. Worst part is she’s a black widow. She hasn’t tried anything, yet—she just watches me with all those eyes. It’s creepy as hell. She positions herself so that the red hourglass is always in view. And I know she’s doing it on purpose. A red hourglass where her beautiful breasts used to be...so perky and full. Anyway, point is I’m scared. She scares the hell outta me. I don’t want to kill her, but if I don’t kill her, she might kill me, right?”

There was an audible “ooh” from the crowd. Everyone certainly had their individual circumstances. Again, Grete thought about Gregor, about how she’d felt sorry for him at first, how she’d sobbed into her pillow and then brought him food...moved his furniture in his room so he could crawl where he wanted, hide when he wanted. Now, she was tired. Tired of listening to her parents’ complaints, tired of being the only one to take care of Gregor, tired of waiting on him to change back into the human he once was. Now, she just wanted to smash him. To hear the snap of his legs, the crack of his belly, and watch whatever insides he had ooze out all over the floor. *Is it murder if you kill a bug?* Do they even have souls? She was angry at the world. Gregor had been their family’s sole income for years. Her parents didn’t work and she was in school, and now everything had gone to hell. She rubbed her legs together and flapped her arms. Everyone was watching her now. *Talk. Say it.*

They are waiting.

Grete spoke, her voice stronger than she expected. “My brother Gregor was a successful salesman. He put food on the table for my family. Bread, fresh fruit, and cheeses from the market. It seems like so long ago now.” Grete looked at the group, making eye contact with each person around the circle, their faces twisting at her words. Clearly, they were uncomfortable in their metal chairs. Grete felt perfectly fine. In fact, as she talked, she began to feel as light as a feather.

“At first, I took him food. I pitied him, my poor brother who’d done so much for us.” Grete paused and looked out the window at the passersby all in shorts and skirts. Warmer weather meant bare legs. Grete licked her lips as she talked on.

“Wasn’t long before I figured out Gregor wasn’t interested in fresh bread or milk, and I swapped his daily snack for rotted cheese and fruit,” Grete continued, distracted by the woman next to her in short sleeves, her pale, fleshy arms crossed tightly as she sneered at Grete.

“He spends most of his days crawling up and down the walls, but last week Gregor came out of his room for the first time. Mother says he was showing off, being obstinate. We’d had some boarders, and he embarrassed our entire family.”

Outside the window, a sparrow pecked at the ground. Grete instinctively shrank, making herself small, invisible. The bird frightened her, and she wondered if anyone else felt the same way. Glancing around, she could see that indeed they did. They were horrified; their faces told the story. A man across the room rolled a newspaper and eyed Grete suspiciously. *Was he going to hit her?* Suddenly, the woman next to her spoke, interrupting Grete. *Why was she interrupting?*

“Like most of you, I’ve lost someone close to me. Beth was my best friend...”

Grete spoke out. “Excuse me, I wasn’t done talking...”

The woman looked at Grete with disgust as the man came at

her with a rolled-up newspaper, when suddenly Grete bit the woman's arm, sucking her fill.

The man hovered, newspaper in hand as Max slowly lowered the man's arm.

"No violence here, please. She'll be gone in seven days. Let her be," Max reasoned.

"She bit me! That little bitch bit me!" the woman wailed and, grabbing the rolled-up newspaper, came at Grete with all of her temper. Grete ducked and darted; she swarmed without a swarm.

"Let Grete finish talking," Max urged.

"She's not talking! She's buzzing! We can't even understand her anymore!"

"Remember," Max calmly reminded the group, his hands motioning to tamp down the emotional boil, "we are here to learn to accept one another. This is a safe place."

"I can't take it no more." The young guy screamed and swatted the air as Grete buzzed above his head. A group conscience took hold. *It was Waco.* "Get her!"

Max lunged, throwing himself in front of the woman with the rolled-up newspaper.

"Violence is not the answer!" Max's lamentations rang through the air, falling on unsympathetic ears.

"Outta my way, skeeter-lover!" The large woman shoved him to the ground, her Route 44 Cherry Limeade spilling everywhere, people sliding, one man licking the floor instinctively as his legs shrunk and were replaced by six fuzzy protrusions.

In the mayhem, the woman with the rolled-up newspaper got what she wanted. Grete's body lay in pieces on the ground.

Max shook his head in sadness as he gently scraped Grete from the floor. As the group began to file out, the old black man called Max to the table. Grete had signed up to bring snacks to the next meeting. "Look at this." The man pointed to the sheet.

Beside her name on the signup sheet, *O-positive*.

We Convert Under Pressure

Kolena Jones Kayembe

Materials under high pressure cannot retain their shape. Almost anything when subjected to tremendous pressure turns on it itself: expanding, collapsing, or converting into a denser form.

I pass through the sliding doors. Catch my breath. Fight off the spins. The woman behind the desk, lips ironed into a negative smile, hands me clipboard, which I pass off—my hands are shaking. The cashier asks for a credit card and the man next to me hands one over. The best I can do is collapse into the chair against the wall, waiting for a nurse to appear with a chair on wheels. She guides me into it, handling me like a porcelain vessel on the verge of cracking and, together, we glide through a nondescript corridor. Tracks of fluorescent blaze above and the speckle of linoleum slaps below.

Wheelchairs serve a purpose, but I hate them because they make me feel weak. I used to push my father around in one when he became too ill to use his legs. Up and down linoleum halls we'd race with an imaginary wind at our backs. Spinning out of control, we'd use those wheels to outrace the shadows tethered to his broken body—temporarily holding off the unseen messengers exhaling their conclusive intentions down his neck.

I block out the smack of rubber as we roll through two sets of double doors into a large room that smells of homelessness, discharged pus, and bleach. The ceiling is perforated. Cool white shines down. *Gross*. My skin looks blistered and mottled. A landscape of ruddy undertones, I've turned a pigment of rust that's made by the application of pressure and heat.

'Trauma' is stenciled on several of the doors to smaller rooms; places filled with appliances that function as trackers,

benefactors and, in some cases, electrical heartbeats. Action lights up the triage. The nurse's station bustles with activity. Beds are full of patients. We roll past a man's space that smells of cold cuts and bile. Seated in the upright position he caresses a mangled, hairy leg with bone protruding through the shin at a, curiously, near right angle. Dried vomit is stuck to his chin as he rocks gently and hums, finding comfort in his own internalized, self-soothing rhythm.

Dropped off at bed number five we're told someone will be with us shortly because my case is urgent—the word used, in fact, is 'acute'. My boyfriend helps me out of my clothes and into the gown folded neatly on the bed. I grimace as his fingers brush the welts on my back. The touch ignites a cauterizing burn, which suggests I am losing control over a body that is rapidly compressing.

20:17 | 100/70mmHg | ♥ 80 bpm | 37.9 °C | SpO2 92%

A woman in navy scrubs approaches my bedside. "My name is Katherine," she says, explaining that's *Katherine Old World style*, with a 'K' instead of a 'C'. Surrounded by a cloud of lavender, rubbing alcohol, and hint of jasmine, Katherine hooks me up to various machines so I, in part, become automated. The plastic clothespin hugging my finger glows red and I channel E.T., pointing the digit at my boyfriend. He reaches out and nervously laughs. Katherine's eyes skip between the Timex on her wrist to the internal workings posted on the screen. I take a peek at the monitor, pretending to know what I'm looking for while ignoring the obvious, which is: *it's become a challenge to breathe*.

Katherine asks a series of questions I try to answer. Pretty in a Kappa Kappa Gamma way, she is tall and bronzed, thin and cute. Ponytail swishing, her hair gleams like solar flares while her upside-down, heart-shaped face is highly expressive, relaying more than words ever could. See those benches of

wrinkles on her forehead? They signal concern. The way she bites her bottom lip suggests uncertainty. When she puffs out her cheeks trouble is about to find me. Her right hand (the one sporting a diamond, two carats, formed under pressure) reaches for mine and, like a heat-seeking missile, her gaze locks onto the monitor. I think, *Sorority sister, I see you. Check your face. Your reaction is worrisome.*

I don't need to see my reflection to know I have turned cartoonish—graphic and exaggerated. What ought to be skin appears nothing of the sort. Blanketed with grotesque wheals this is an invasion caused by a reaction to a substance that shouldn't be in my system and my body is breaking down to save itself. Battalions of histamine bombard soft tissue and pulverize organs. Hives form, stateless and oblivious of borders—flaming, they roll across my epidermis. This is one way we respond under duress. Materials cannot retain their shape when placed under any sort of pressure.

Katherine calls for assistance as the rattling in my chest picks up. My boyfriend calls to her across the bed. His fingers close around my wrist, knuckles turning a paler shade of white. A bespectacled doctor arrives in a blur of mauve, the muscles in her jaw so taut that her veins blaze cerulean under the light. Katherine steps back and I see two wet half-moons under her arms. Her sweat smells slightly sweet, like honey mixed with mulch. The doctor asks me to focus, “Inhale please,” and I oblige. But when I open my mouth the expected rush of air is replaced by a gasp as I take in something else.

20:24 | 98/62mmHg | ♥ 95 bpm | 38.1 °C | SpO2 90%

“Michael!”

The raspy declaration ricochets off the walls, originating from the far corner of the room. Old Yeller sounds elderly because the underlying treble she projects is tired and overworked. The woman seems to be caught in a winding

desperation caused by a condition more mental than physical. A whipstitch of disorientation runs along the edge of her words as she, twisted and broken, calls out, hoping for a response. I turn my head to block out the shrieks only to be confronted by a pocket of mauve pitched against steely and frigid shades of blue. *Rotten colour for curtains*, I think before the woman at the end of the line screams for Michael again.

Husband? Father? Child? I'd put my money on son. Something about the scream suggests maternal knowing, but I care less as I approach the lip of an unseen ridge where, at the edge, my cells begin to liquefy. Katherine sways. My eyeballs waltz. My face is so hot it could give off smoke. Almost anything, if needed, will turn on it itself. Breakable is an airway that narrows and threatens to collapse, ushering in a singular apocalypse.

20:32 | 92/60mmHg | ♥ 99 bpm | 38.3 °C | SpO2 89%

The alarms and flashing lights happen in tandem. Code blue. Everything is blue in this goddamned place. Scrubs. Curtains. Pills. Bodies short on life. The trays are as blue as the straws and bedding. Blue must be the colour of the door that Death steps through.

The man in bed six coded less than a few seconds ago. His pulse nodded off and stretched out flat for the second time that night. The lull of the monitor trips the alarms, sending a flurry of warm bodies to his side. Security guards order non-staff and patients out of the room. Doctors shout over the clipped voices of nurses. Everyone fights to be heard over the machine's high-pitched din.

"Move!"

"I can't find a pulse!"

"Where the fuck is Peter?"

The scrimmage intensifies as metal crashes into metal and metal breaches flesh. A scalpel slices skin—the sound of a tear

being made in silk. More people squeeze behind the curtain, causing it to wave back and forth in surrender. A flag that ought to be white is, instead, a breathtaking shade of blue. The medical staff jockey for position and the rest of us lie still. I listen to the series of beeps that serve as the warning of the coming charge.

Clear!

Thousands of volts flood the grid and a body becomes electric. Valves oscillate as the engine of a man's heart is jump-started with a rudimentary shock. *Sizzle, thump, thump.* The man's body rises and slams into the bed. The monitor emits an ear-splitting tone before stabilizing its tempo. There is silence and a beat. Air tornadoes down a tube. The forced aeration is followed by a set of ragged gasps. The resulting surge sounds both glacial and accidental.

Sighs of relief precede the parting of the curtain as personnel return to their other charges. But the man in bed number six seems to have other plans; intent on leaving tonight he codes once more, tripping the alarms. Above the avalanche of sound Nancy shrieks, "MichaAAAAAAAAAAAAael!" drawing out the last syllable. In that moment, I see a shadow pause through the curtains next to my bed. The drone of the old woman's voice causes Death to turn his head and shiver.

20:43 | 78/54mmHg | ♥ 107 bpm | 38.4 °C | SpO2 87%

We double-checked with the kitchen staff. I didn't have that much. The mask on my face forces air past inflamed tissue while a metallic bite makes me flinch. *Fuck, she's missed the vein.* A bruise forms at the port of entry as I look away from the mandala stain forming on the starched white sheet below my arm. Kappa Kappa Gamma issues an apology and removes the rubber band, swiftly moving to the other side where she ties a pretty bow at the base of my bicep. *Snip!* She slaps the new checkpoint with heavy-handed intention. "Much better,"

she says, threading a 16-gauge needle into a throbbing patch of skin. Tape rips and metal is fastened. Katherine reaches up and turns a valve. The floodgates open and gravity pulls at the liquid in the bag. Highways of veins transport fluid to counteract the compression taking place.

Up, down, and around it goes. I feel the bloat. My blood smacks of brine. I lick a crack at the corner of my lip while the doctor rubs a new eruption on my shoulder. She motions for Katherine to join her on the other side of the bed and, in a voice that ought to be several decibels lower, she attempts to take back control and put a stop to the ongoing assault on my body.

“Administer the Prednisone.”

“Wait, why not—?”

“No, only if necessary. We’re not there yet.”

“But why wait?” Kappa Katherine pats my leg in the spirit of sisterhood.

“If the Prednisone’s a bust go for the adrenaline, but call over Peter just in case. He’s already done two intubations. Maybe this will be lucky number three.”

Trinity. Triad. Troika. Why are threesomes, almost always, auspicious? High on sodium I click my tongue and watch as a tray of syringes and cutting instruments roll up next to my bed. “Please Sir,” that’s the doctor trying to relocate my boyfriend who just returned to the triage following the code blue. Her hand is on his arm and his nails dig into my palm the moment my chest starts to seize.

Taking a page from old Nancy, I try to yell but only manage a hybrid wheeze-cough-choke. All hands take flight as I struggle to breathe and my muscles involuntarily contract. Katherine places the fingers of her jewelled hand on top of the catheter in my arm and, with an upwards jerk, replaces the saline with something else. It rapidly enters my system and everyone waits. Nothing occurs. Like a deer crossing a country road at dusk, I sense a collision is about to take place. And, *Oh great,*

Peter has breached the inner circle, fingering something I can't quite see. I look at Katherine. *Don't let him force his way in*, I plead, eyes wide. He might be attractive, but I don't want Peter and his fucking cutting instruments anywhere near me.

I make a secondary attempt to speak when the machine next to my bed interrupts and lets out a series of beeps. I feel a constriction and a spike. My body is a minefield. This is a total systems breach. The sensation tearing through my limbs is electrifying, and the discordance in the room causes a dizzying sense of dissociation. *Blue. Panic. Blue. Pressure. Blue. Mass.* I want to remove every stitch of clothing because if I don't, I will catch fire and burn through a mattress already soaked with sweat. I claw at my sternum and kick my legs, vaguely aware of the attempt to excavate and depart. I want to use my nails to flay skin that burns. I want to use my hands to crush this vessel that is going down, Titanic in nature.

My eyes are almost swollen shut but I catch sight of fingers that look like fat, boiled sausages. Or maybe miniature erections? *Wait, they're mine.* Inflated and bent out of shape, my appendages have become so ductile and exaggerated their very structure has changed form, like skinny balloons clowns favour at children's parties. It's a giraffe! No, a pretzel! Wait, it's a plane!

Up, up and away.

Capillaries expand. Heat rises. Atoms dissolve.

Moments from short-circuiting, my blood begins to roil.

20:47 | 78/50mmHg | ♥ 140 bpm | 38.4 °C | SpO2 85%

"Now!" the doctor hisses as the machine blurts out mechanical modulations in a language only I, in my hallucinatory state, understand.

Beep: Attention! Beep: Achtung! Warning! Beep!

Your life is nothing but a whisper, the transcription reads.

Beep. Beep. Beep.

Under pressure you will convert.

Orders are barked. Katherine speaks softly or maybe she yells. My sorority sister looks worse for the wear. Every sound is muffled, like dirt is packed into my ears. My limbs convulse. I open and close my hands, reaching for someone to take them, but the only person to touch me is Peter.

Fuck you, I think. Blinking, I say, Get the fuck out of here.

He is so close I can see the patterns within the perfect circle that cradles his pupils, an expansion of jagged EKG lines. And the colour? Cadet blue, of course. Longing to be intimate on a whole other level, Peter hovers until his face is the only one I see. I blink until the dark clouds at the edge of my vision swell, which is when the doctor pushes Katherine aside. Peter places his hand on the crown of my head and the someone mumbles while fumbling with the ties on my gown.

“Here we go,” the doctor says.

There is a flash. Incandescence. Everything collapses inwards until I become so dense, I think I might implode. Katherine hands another syringe to the doctor with a new set of benched marks on her pretty face. It is then I surrender to all the gods I don't believe in and turn myself over to something arcane and unseen. I surrender because all lives end by way of compression.

I pray though I have little faith in much of anything.

20:49 | 76/50 mmHg | ♥ 153 bpm | 38.4 °C | SpO2 81%

Elemental worship. Cosmic substance. Wind.

My father once told me air is the most powerful substance because it is a shapeshifter. A rogue in disguise. Air takes on countless forms. Hot or cold, dry or wet, sweet or mineral, the immaculate child of ether is a stratospheric vagrant in that it caresses, smothers, and fuels. Wind drags, expels, bites. Divinity manifest, air is the only periodic particle to fill us up.

And, as I learn, not enough takes us out.

20:51 | 120/79mmHg | ♥ 69 bpm | 37.9 °C | SpO2 92%

“Michael!”

Adrenaline rush. Pupils dilate. Heat evacuates through my pores. The inflammation subsides and...just like that, air rushes down my windpipe. The molecular revolution sounds like tires spinning on gravel. My first inhalations are followed by a series of *pops*—elasticated snaps that arrive in sets of threes.

Air bubbles burst in my ears as blood congeals, plasma thickens, and organs stretch. Fibers twitch and contracted alveoli puff up, reopening for business. My body reestablishes a new baseline in time with the cadence of a heart that, in search of its own diffuse logic, beats a mantra inside my chest. The eerily transcendent rhythm guides the reactivation of my senses. Full bladder. Aching joints. Pain behind my eyes. Corrosive taste of metal on my lips. With the return of my faculties I conclude I'm the recipient of a windfall, so I flap my wrists in a 'come hither' motion. It's time to collect my winnings. Someone pass me my chips.

Katherine smiles. The doctor nods. Peter wipes a bead of sweat from his temple. They quietly acknowledge their success at pulling another body back from the brink. That sheared edge of animation where the crush of pressure can usher in permanent darkness. Where everything dims unless there's enough expansion for light to filter in. The feat momentarily shifts the mood in a space where accidents, genetics, and external catalysts irrevocably alter physical vessels. Inflamed organs, clotted veins, weeping wounds, and driving under the influence, plus dehydration, system failures, arrested hearts, storms of cytokines, and minds and bodies in various stages of brokenness. A chemical imbalance in Nancy's brain caused her perception to collapse. A decade of drug use prompts the heartbeat of Code Blue to take flight. As for me, my arch nemesis is

extraordinarily uninteresting.

Bad fruit is what got me. Cherries are my Kryptonite.

00:35 | 112/76mmHg | ♥ 61 bpm | 37.6 °C | SpO2 97%

The triage has been quiet for so long the sound of the monitors have fallen into step—modular beeps that sound like the brass section in a clumsy, corporeal band. High-pitched *bings* follow staccato *baps*. I glance at the blood caked on my arm. Drawn out at the time the needle went in, the asymmetrical drops overlapped until a big circle formed. Existential, this spoked wheel is comprised of four, no, five dimensions and the fifth is where compression occurs.

Suddenly cold, I pull the sheet up to my chin until a set of cotton wrinkles form under my neck. My boyfriend reaches over to iron out the creases, his hand lingering on an exposed patch of clear skin. Kappa Katherine approaches and tells me I'm free to go, handing over a set of prescriptive papers that need to be filled on the way out. One by one, she takes away my superpowers—electrodes, clips, and catheters—while flashing a thousand-watt smile so intense it is temporarily blinding. “It’s not your time,” she says before heading for Nancy’s bed at the end of the room.

I exchange my gown for the clothes I came in with and take the hand of a man I love so he can lead us towards the exit—eager to leave the speckled linoleum and fluorescent sheen behind. Gossamer filaments blowing past each other on the arms of hurricanes, we transfigure in the eye of every storm. Every breath is a roll of the dice since anything that takes on the burden of stress cannot retain its shape. We cross over another threshold and the doors begin to slide shut behind us.

“*Michael!*” the old woman screams, a tempest gathering strength.

All matter, when under pressure, must find a way to convert.

More Than Myself

Richard Martin

When I finally got good and scared the first thing to happen was I ripped my yard to pieces. Replaced a wild flower bed with a mechanical one designed to preserve wetness and absorb heat. The annuals resting here with mandated nutrients and forced oxygen. That made me feel better about the things beyond preservation and conservation; the natural workings of CO₂ and the depletion of my Sun's energy. So, I wheel her charity to its destination. To the Professional of recycled masses, broken and fragile glasses. He has the power to both hurt and help, purely at his discretion. He is well into a story about 3 soldiers who almost died when their tanks ventilation systems went down. He saved them from suffocation. He then takes my worries for a minute and we're off to home, the world and myself. Our thoughts find us easily in the dead quiet. The world thinks, *I must keep going, regardless. Fill me with all the poisons you want as long I keep turning!* I'm thinking, *The world could end any minute. When it does, I hope it believes I loved it more than myself.* I stand there fractured, completely fucked on what to do next. The world tries to fit into her mechanical flower bed but the tailored stone cut at the sores of her surface, and rakes natural blasphemy on someone who loves me. in wonder at their caskets, instead of in disgust.

The World

Erek Lively

World Wrecked—metal mind
felled trees, strip mined
automation brought ease.

Ease came to lethargy on elytra's wings
cobble stone replaced
rolling hills, and the coast.

We dried the silvery rills.
We burned the world
by commodifying hell stone.

When the village children ask,
from behind their panopticonic
home, "Father, mother, what was the world like?"

Will they answer, "It seems in memory
that the grass was green, fish swam
free, cows ate wheat and wandered.

Even the pigs and the sheep called
the plains and woods home.
Chickens laid eggs and walked on

their own weary way. Great sweeping woods
blanketed the land in shade. Back then
metal was beneath the stone and
we were not coal choked."

My Father's Orange Tree

Austin Crago

In April sun I
watched my father
carefully carve the soil
with a scalpel
like trowel.
The hole left
filled with roots
of an orange tree.
The tree and I stood
watching each other,
when it passed
my head
and stole a cloud
straight from heaven.
In spring its branches
gifted me with
oranges, filling the empty
space in my stomach.
Winter came, painting
the lawn with its brown,
dead leaves.
Each leaf that fell,
I counted, waiting for
the last one to meet
The earth.
On January 2nd, through
the window,
I sat unmoved,
Letting that last leaf
wave to me as it fell.

New Year's Day

Simon Anton Nino Diego Baena

Early morning
through my window

an old neighbor
is burying his pet dog

on the front lawn
he shovels the earth

with resolve
ignoring the cold

with the scar of a century
on his brow

(He keeps the urn
of his wife

and the rifle close)
as if he is God himself

but the light's radiance
shadowed his face

with rain

early one morning

George Perreault

my youngest brother died
soon enough it was still
yesterday back home,

a day with thirteen stones
strung out like beads
along Asylum Avenue.

i'd asked my brother
how he was doing and he said
i'm dying

and he wondered about heaven
in a simple act of faith
for that's how he was built.

he'd lived long enough there was
a word for what he was, a word
honored among some tribes,

and there was some latinate
for how he'd pass, like fruit
never shaken from the limb.

he'd saved up silver and gold,
and left it all to the church
after paying for a pantomime,

smoke drifting from a thurible
as in days dressed with
cassock and surplice or sage-

smudged nights in a sweat lodge
chanting *oiseau noir, osieau noir*
in search of something else.

there was a ferry to the island,
to and from a graveyard
familiar as the classics.

my brother had arranged
for a wooden cube lowered
into an earthen cube

where his wife was waiting,
and like blackbirds
we hovered on our wings.

Ferrier

Matthew Baker

—with a line adapted from Spencer Reece’s “ICU”

So many trips with your cart down the throat of the white hall
with the faded carpet and chipped paint—
then back. Like a gondolier ferrying parcels and pills
to the dying. You knew you would find them. You knew
you would lose them, but not in the ways you sometimes did.
You said this was your way to repay
a debt accrued over years. When your own mother
was dying—her atrophying lungs, the tracheotomy hole
working less and less—you could not be
anywhere but your own job. How you had
little to lean on. So much to do. At each room
you linger long enough to remember whose scratch-scarred skin
you should slather with lotion,
whose dresser is dotted with photos of dead husbands and living
children. “I can’t think about that”—
the fact they’ll never leave alive. Each window hosts a film
of grime. This facility underfunded to the point
not even regular cleaning occurs. “Recently,
it has been rough,” you offer. One of your patients,
who gave you recipes and shopping tips for years, has declined—
dementia. She will not let you touch even the bed
of her roommate whom she imagines you will maim.
You with your cart of catheters and creams.
You with your stethoscope, who will lean down slowly
and place your hand gently on each patients’ chest—
as if to reassure them the passage will not be rocky.
The waves not choppy but smooth as marble
and reflective enough to watch the passing
of their best years in the mirage of their faces
morphing back into more youthful curves, un-creased
from the deep, wrinkled wells of their present
foreheads and cheeks. O you who want only to help

but have been cast out, forgive her. She does not know,
cannot help but try to protect what little she can still protect.
Now, the lights turn low. Your charges drift
to sleep. Exhale as you dock back at shore
at the end of your shift. Set down your oar
and remove your badge. In a day,
you can do only what you can do
before you, too, must lay yourself down.
Until then: pick up your keys
and walk out the door.

Pandemic Aubade with Dying Scene

Murray Silverstein

Zooming last night with friends, Julie mentioned a show,
and, “We saw it,” you said. “Wasn’t that dying scene great,”

she said, “when the guy comes to from his stroke,
and tries to kiss everyone on the mouth?”

“Hold me,” you said, when we’d clicked out,
“I did not expect to live in such an unusual time.”

Here is what, this morning, I know: Good orgasms
begin in the toes, slowly

advancing north, ever and shamelessly north.
Praise to the toes, I say, through which the big thing enters.

The death count, our country broken—all that
must wait. There’s a waxwing at the window,

a rising almost-summer sun—let’s carve it, love,
in ignorance, like initials on a tree: It’s dawn,
and we’re responsible, but not for everything.

This isn't an Elegy. Caldor isn't Dead

Taylor Graham

Our forest-away-from-home, torched last summer.

It's December. I'm driving foothills up mid-Sierra
—coming back. Muscle-memory knows all
the curves. Here's the turnoff onto logging road.
In that canyon the blaze started—the fire's
giant footprint shown on TV news while flames
kept changing direction, sweeping through.

A moonscape with still-standing pine-crowns
lost in cloud. I let Loki out of the car.
What's dead ash and char to a dog? Freest hike
ever—no people, no cars, no fences.

A chunk of quartz left over from Gold Rush—
what does it care for fire? A log charred shiny-black
as dragon scales. A manmade artefact: like a book
splayed open metallic; each unreadable leaf
rings silver. What is the script, the secret message?

Loki marks scat of a forest creature come back
to its home in ash. A swath of winter grass pushes
through soil dozed for the firefight. Now,
December sun breaks through cloud, and in midst
of burn, a stringer of manzanita, deer-brush,
ponderosa, oak, and incense cedar—untouched.

Prayers I Said

Melanie Unruh

It's one of those rare cloudy days when only the dark, hulking base of the Sandias is visible, the mountaintops ringed in white haze. The whole desert shivers blue, reverting back to the seascape it once was. I gaze out the tiny square of my kitchen window, taking in the bruised cityscape. My body hums with an inexplicable urge to go dig in the clay-like dirt and unearth the bones of ancient sea monsters.

Instead, I listen to the voicemail again.

“Michaela, it's Mom. It's 7:55 on Friday morning. There's a bit of a situation with your sister. Apparently she was trying to shoplift at the grocery store last night. They found her with these steaks—Oh, God, does it really matter? Anyway, your father and I are working out the bail situation. Please call me.”

I've given up on explaining to my mother that cell phones provide dates and times for messages. Even in a crisis, she has to share this useless information.

I try not to think about my sister. Those times when I do, she feels like some kind of childhood artifact I turn over in my hands, searching for something—a smell, a sensation, a sound, anything—that will tell me that I didn't just imagine growing up with a sibling. Whoever she has become now is a grotesque caricature of the girl I used to sit beside at the dinner table, slipping my cooked carrots to her because I hated them and she loved doing anything sneaky.

Whenever my sister, Brigid, is about to come roaring back into my life, I get a sensation like an animal before a storm: my skin prickles and I have a sudden urge to lie down. But there is no time. I take a mug of coffee out the back door to my roommate Judah's new, slightly lopsided yurt. Nothing's hooked up yet, so he still has to cook and use the bathroom in

the house. Albuquerque in the spring is no place I'd want to be in an off-the-grid yurt, but not much bothers Judah.

"Thanks, Mik," he says, as he takes the blue mug and rubs the sleep from his eyes. After few sips, he squints at me. "You look awful. Lupita?"

"Brigid," I counter.

He rolls his eyes. "What's it this time?"

"Grand theft rib-eye."

"She only gets away with this shit because she's white." He's gearing up to go on a rant, and I'm in no mood, but of course I take the bait.

"Says the straight, white, middle-class dude."

He shrugs. "I don't break the law."

Got a permit for this?" I gesture at the walls around us, smirking.

He rises from his cot, his 6'2" frame stooped under the sloping side of his sad structure. "I'm only testing it out before someone buys it. Aren't you gonna be late for work?"

I check my phone. "Dammit."

"Hey," he calls as I dash across the yard. "You don't deserve this shit from either of them."

Lupita is waiting for me at the employee entrance, her hair a plaited black snake tossed over one shoulder, when I arrive at the library. "I know." I slip my ID badge around my neck. "I'll make it up to you."

"There's no time today," she says, her full lips in a pout.

"When do we open again together?" I run my hand over the schedule on the wall. "Sunday. I'll come in early, so we can—"

She pulls me to her. Before I can protest, she kisses me hard on the mouth. I lean in to pull her closer and she backs off. "You better," she says, before turning on her heel and sauntering out to the front desk.

One day I'm going to get carpal tunnel from the monotony that is shelving customers' holds. Most of my coworkers go out of their way to avoid it, but I don't mind the task. It's better than having to interact with the public. Plus I like to turn it into a game. For example: based on their book preferences, which customers would likely sleep together? (*The Lowland* and *On Beauty*—literary types tend to stick together). Or which customers would be able to survive the zombie apocalypse? (*A Dance with Dragons* and *Middlemarch*—anyone able to commit to such long books could throw down with a zombie or two). Sometimes I try to string together the book titles sitting side by side: *The Husband's Secret*, *City of Bones*; *If I Stay Wild*; *Unravel Me*, *Bossypants*; And *The Mountains Echoed*, *the Secret History*.

Once a local writer hosted a library program where she helped people write six-word memoirs. It seemed a little reductive at first but then I started thinking up one for my sister and found it surprisingly easy: *Unstable woman-child adventures at others' expense*.

It started with little things when we were kids. A pair of silver hoop earrings at the mall. Teacups from our aunt's good China. Then a cat from a shelter, a neighbor's laptop, a stop sign. Sometimes we found the things she took; other times she hid them so well they were never seen again. About six months ago, Brigid went to a dealership to test drive a car, which she then stole. For weeks, both my parents and the police scoured the city for her. Normally I stay out of her mess, but then I saw her driving downtown in a car I'd never seen. Without thinking, I did a U-turn and followed her to a dingy apartment complex near the university. The car turned out to be another one entirely, not the one she took from the dealer, which still has yet to turn up.

When I called my mother, she lamented, "I hate to say it, but I think your sister belongs in jail right now."

I should have known her tough love wouldn't stick, though.

Within hours, my sister was out again on my parents' dime.

The holds shelf is an entire wall of books. You have to lay each book on its spine so that the slip with the customer's name on it sticks out from the top. When I started shelving today, as I was setting a book between two others, a strange feeling of reverence came over me. It's hard to explain but the act felt very much like a prayer: creating a space, placing the book with care and deliberation. I don't know if I consider each book its own prayer or the same prayer repeated over and over: *Save my sister.*

Dostoyevsky as prayer.

Suze Orman as prayer.

Amanda Knox as prayer.

Roxane Gay, Jhumpa Lahiri, Clive Cussler, Anne Frank—all prayers.

I wonder if God finds certain prayers more acceptable. Is there a hierarchy like in the literary world? Does she value Isabel Allende over Sue Gratfton? Or is nonfiction a worthier offering?

I don't tell anyone about the things that go on in my head. Even Lupita doesn't know about my shelving games, most especially this new one. Unlike me, she's still a practicing Catholic. She also knows nothing of my sister's perpetual drama.

Lupita is almost a full foot shorter than me, even in her high-heeled boots. Her eyes are charcoal with tiny flecks of gold in them. Everyone at work calls her Pita. Not me. I always found her too pretty, too intimidating to pal around with. But then we started doing whatever it is we're doing. She lives with her boyfriend, and as far as anyone knows, she's straight, so the only time she lets me kiss her or put my hands on her is when we sneak into our boss, Katherine's office on days we open the library alone.

I see her boyfriend, Danny, sometimes when he comes to pick her up at closing. He's small and rugged, one of those well-mus-

pled, compact outdoorsy types. If he's ever seen the inside of a book, I bet it's Bret Easton Ellis or *Chicken Soup for the Hiker's Soul*. On the rare occasions when Lupita talks about him, it's to complain that he lacks ambition. He's an assistant manager at Starbucks, and his only other goals in life seem to be drinking and hiking with his friends. I'm not exactly going places myself; I've been in the same job—library paraprofessional, which basically means I do the same stuff as a librarian, but I have less schooling and make less money—for seven years. But I'm not the one *dating* her, so I only have to be ambitious enough to pull her into the office and lock the door. We've been doing whatever this is for the past eight months, since she was transferred to my branch, Alhambra.

She once commented that she doesn't want me to pity her. I assured her that I don't, leaving out the part about how I reserve all my pity for Brigid, who is a frequent flyer in jail and rehab, Band-Aid institutions that cannot address what's broken at her core.

As I eat my lunch in the break room, I stare at the pictures of library personae non-gratae that adorn the bulletin board. These are people who have struck staff members, watched porn on the public computers, guzzled the library's hand sanitizer. Recently we had to take one picture down because the man, who was homeless and, as it turns out, schizophrenic, was shot to death by the police in the foothills of the mountains. Everyone in Albuquerque knows his face now.

My chest ached as I watched Katherine throw his mug shot in the garbage with the morning's coffee grounds. He used to come in and tell us that the mountains were packing up and leaving town. I heard his name on the news, but now I've forgotten it.

I'm shelving holds again this morning. It's hard to find

reverence in the titles I'm coming across now, though.

Heaven is for Real is too on the nose. And the four *Fifty Shades* books I come across feel dirty to the touch (literally: I read that in Belgium, copies of the book tested positive for traces of *herpes and cocaine*). But eventually I come across more lyrical titles, ones that remind me of Brigid: *The Night Circus*, *The Ocean at the End of the Lane*, *The Casual Vacancy*...

Lupita charges up to me, braid swinging, a look I can't read on her perfect heart of a face. "Guess what," she says, a little breathless.

I raise my eyebrows but don't give her the satisfaction of saying *what*.

She bites her lip. "Danny proposed to me last night."

The books I'm holding slip from my hands and thud on the floor. Several patrons turn to stare at us.

Lupita sighs. "You gonna ask me anything?"

I give her a withering stare as I bend to gather the fallen books: *Outbreak*, a *Cat Who* mystery, *The Fault in Our Stars*. That last one could definitely be a line from a prayer. But I'm in the mood to blaspheme today. "Does he know you like pussy?"

She whips around to see if anyone heard. "What's your problem?" she hisses before pushing a cart off into the stacks. I want to chase after her and hack off her beautiful hair.

I can't say I'm surprised. Though she's ambivalent about the guy, I figured he would ask eventually and she'd say yes. She probably thinks she was doing me a favor, telling me so I wouldn't have to hear it from someone else. But what the hell did she expect?

I've been ignoring the insistent vibrations of my phone for at least a half hour. All I wanted was to finish these books but then Lupita lobbed her grenade at me. I'm having trouble remembering the goddamn alphabet. Finally, I pull my phone from my pocket and see that I have three missed calls and a voicemail from Mom. "It's 10:14 on Saturday. Brigid's out," her

weary recorded voice says. “She says she wants to see you.”

I open my locker, and a swatch of baby blue, my favorite color, catches my eye. It’s a hat made from thick, chunky yarn, the top adorned with a ridiculous pom pom. There’s a note inside, but I already know who made it.

To keep you warm when I’m not around.

Lupita is a knitting wizard. I wouldn’t be surprised if she made the entire hat last night after Danny proposed, the tiny diamond winking on her left hand as her needles clicked over this wretched, perfect parting gift.

When I head out to the parking lot at the end of the day, my car is gone. I want to scream, but all that comes out is animal laughter. That’s what you get for telling your sister where you work. I call Judah and he says he’ll be right over.

While I wait, I sit on the low stone wall that rings the parking lot. The mountains are silent, just a dark outline behind me in the dusk. At the crest, the radio tower lights flicker on. *We are here*, they seem to say.

Danny pulls up in his Chevy and Lupita strides towards him in her sleek gray pants and black boots. I’ve memorized just about every inch of her, but I’ve never seen her barefoot. I imagine unzipping her boots and watching her pad around the room, her toenails painted a surprising mint or mustard.

The sun slips behind the sleeping volcanoes in the west and the woman I’m trying very hard not to love slides into her fiancé’s car. They share a brief kiss, passionless for a newly engaged couple, but still I grip the wall until my fingers ache. I try to imagine the words passing between them.

The headlights flicker across my body as Danny makes a wide turn, the pom pom a beacon atop my vacant face.

When Judah pulls up a minute later, ABBA is blaring from his Prius. *Mamma Mia, here I go again*. He rolls down the window.

“You call for an Uber er what, Miss?” he yells in a thick New Mexican accent.

I slump into the passenger seat and he gives me a tentative smile. “Hey, at least your car isn’t worth much. She probably won’t try to sell it.”

I groan.

“Netflix and queso?” he asks and I nod.

Today is Sunday, so it’s my Friday. I have to open with *her*. I wake up early and agonize over what to wear, but in the end, I settle on a basic green button-down shirt and black pinstripe pants. I leave her hat on my pillow.

The back door to the library opens before I can even put the key in the lock. I brush past Lupita to my locker. She hovers behind me, a static electricity running up and down my back. “Will you just say whatever it is?” I open my locker and shove my purse inside.

When I turn around, her eyes are on the floor. “I’m sorry,” she whispers.

All of my anger deflates at her expression. “Hey,” I say, standing up, taking her face in my hands. “I understand.”

I don’t really, but what else is there to say? At the end of the day, regardless of whatever she actually wants, she’s going to play the part of a the good girl and please her parents.

I kiss her, a gesture of goodbye, acceptance, I think, but her mouth responds with such hunger that I forget Danny even exists. So does she, I guess, because the next thing I know we’re in Katherine’s office, and she’s sitting on the desk beckoning me to her.

After, I kiss her forehead and leave her there, crying, because I know this can’t go on. I’m going to ask for a transfer.

Clouds cast pockets of shadow on the Sandias, as though the two are conspiring together, concealing secrets. Some people

say there are hidden bunkers built into the mountains, where the government hides nuclear weapons and other end-of-the-world caches. I, for one, hope that the mountains' secrets aren't anything so prosaic.

Usually the holds slow down over the weekend, but not today. Now I'm thinking about prayer and the people coming to pick up these books. What do Kelly Carrillo, John Gold, Donna Gainsway, and Eliseo Guzman pray about? What would they do differently if they were related to my sister?

Lupita is avoiding me, which is fine. The morning passes in a blur of names and paper slips and missed prayers. Before I know it, it's lunchtime.

"*Lord,*" Sheila, a brash, middle-aged clerk, says, bursting into the break room. "We've got a nut bucket out there, ranting and raving. Katherine's on the phone with the police."

We're obviously no strangers to unwell community members. There was a domestic abuse situation a few months ago where a woman ran into the circulation room and barricaded herself inside while her husband railed at the door. Another time, a man put a bag of piss-soaked DVDs in the book drop and the poor clerk who found it still wears elbow-length rubber gloves whenever she has to check in returned items.

I sit at a table in the corner, my back to the door, with a bag of pretzels in one hand and an old copy of *People* in the other. There's a picture of some HGTV host and her kid, a strawberry blond girl with a goofy grin, one of her two front teeth missing.

The first time I lost a tooth, Brigid asked to see it. With reluctance, I handed over the still bloodied pearl. She pretended to pop it into her mouth and I chased her around the room, grasping for it. She held up her hands in surrender, and then placed the tooth on her outstretched palm. Brigid stared at it for a long time. Arlo, our Jack Russell, raced into the room, barking. I stooped to pet him. When I looked back at Brigid, there was nothing in her open palm and her nose was bleeding.

“Where’s my tooth?” I demanded.

Brigid gave me an empty stare before wiping at her nose, smearing the blood across her cheek.

“Did you *eat* my tooth, buttface?”

But she would never say what happened.

Shelia keeps running into the break room to give updates on the screaming woman. I can vaguely hear the yelling from where I sit, but I don’t have to go out there again for 36 more minutes and I’m glad of it.

I shovel pretzels into my mouth and continue studying the blank space where the little girl’s tooth used to be.

Sheila returns, her voice quiet. “She’s asking for you.”

There are only two guys who work at Alhambra Library and when they’re both off, I often draw the short stick as the tallest woman. I turn. “Did Katherine say—”

“The nut bu—.” Shelia reconsiders. “She’s asking for you by name.”

A charge surges through my body and the hair on my arms prickles. I glance at the dilapidated Aztec-print couch in the corner, thinking how good it would feel to just rest there for a minute, but instead, I head out front.

She’s a paper lantern of a woman. Her hair is knotted and greasy, her pale lips chapped. A sleeveless lime green dress cleaves to her just above her knees. Her limbs are wiry and she has on a purple beanie pulled low, her eyes barely peeking out.

She waves her arms in the air, shouting unintelligible words, which shoot up into the domed ceiling over the front desk, echoing through the whole building.

I stop several feet behind her. “Brigid,” I say.

She whirls and glares at me.

“Well, *here* she is. It took you long enough. They were telling me you weren’t here, but I knew you were.”

My body tenses. “Really? Because my car isn’t. You know anything about that?”

“Um, no.” She scoffs and adjusts her hat.

“Okay,” I say, trying to keep my voice level. People are staring. Every customer and coworker gapes at us. I catch a glimpse of a long, black braid out of the corner of my eye and take a deep breath. “I was just checking. You did steal another car once.”

“I *told* you. I didn’t steal anything. Things just—” Brigid screams.

“Like the steaks?” I ask coolly. “Can we talk about this outside?”

“You think you’re better than me, don’t you?”

I roll my eyes. “Look, *keep your voice down*. Let’s go for a walk outside.” I move toward her and she lashes out at me, her ragged pink nails catching on my wrist.

Suddenly Lupita is beside me, grasping my hand.

I shrug her off. “It’s fine.”

“Are you fucking my sister or something?”

Lupita’s charcoal eyes widen, as though it’s never occurred to her that anyone else, even my own sister, knows I’m a lesbian.

I shake my head. “What do you want, Brig?”

“I want you to believe me,” she says.

“About what?”

“That I’m a good person.”

“I never said you weren’t.”

A siren trills faintly.

Brigid’s weeping now, but it only makes my chest tighten, my fists clench. “I’m done,” I say. “They’re going to put you on the perp wall. Did you know that? You’ll never be welcome here or anywhere else decent people go.”

The siren grows louder and Brigid narrows her eyes at me. “Whatever. You’ll be sorry when I’m gone. Me and the mountains,” she says and runs out the door before I can say another word.

My coworkers skirt me the rest of the day, eyes averted, faces

blushing question marks. Late in the afternoon, I go into the stacks to look for a psychology book for a customer. I turn and nearly jump out of my skin when I find Lupita standing inches behind me.

“Jesus. What?”

She clasps her hands. “You okay, Michaela?”

“Peachy,” I mutter.

“I’m sorry,” she says.

“It’s whatever, she—”

“I mean about everything. About us.”

I gesture to her ring. “Did he find that thing in a cereal box?”

Before she can respond, I shoulder past her toward the ref desk.

Since they know who my sister is, it’s easy enough to get a picture of her. They pull it off Facebook. You’d think it would be a step up from an actual mug shot, but Katherine found this really deranged selfie where Brigid’s eye make-up is thick and smeary, all blacks and greens and purples swirling over a hideous Joker grin. This unflattering photo is already pinned up in the spot vacated by the murdered homeless man, the one who was also talking nonsense about the mountains. I shiver. What is to become of my sister?

When I was ten and Brigid was 14, we were playing soccer barefoot in the backyard, and a scorpion stung me. Our parents were at the grocery store, but my sister, a former Girl Scout raised in the southwest, immediately sprung into action. She carried me inside, cleaned my foot with a soapy water, put a cold compress on the bite, and called Poison Control.

“Yes, I did that,” she told the operator. “Mmhmm, okay. Monitor for signs of—” She wrote something on our mom’s yellow butterfly pad, sounding not unlike our mother herself.

When she got off the phone, I demanded, “Monitor for signs of what? Is my foot going to fall off or something?”

“You’re going to be fine, Mik. Let’s just wait for Mom and Dad. How about we—”

“Where’s the scorpion?”

“It’s fine.” She shook her head. “It’s gone. I took care of it.”

“Did you kill it?” I asked. I wanted the thing crushed and also wanted to know that it was off living a good life with its little scorpion family, somewhere far away.

“No,” she said, looking away. “But you don’t have to worry about it anymore.”

A memory drifted up in me then, an opaque image of a tooth, a bloody nose. My brain sputtered as I tried to understand why it wanted to connect these two events.

We sat together on the couch, my sore foot up on the arm, leaning back against her. She kissed the top of my head.

In less than a year, Brigid would go to rehab for the first time, where she would stab another girl in the ribs with a fork. Because she was white and my parents found a good lawyer, she got off with community service.

Once she came home, everything made her angry. She was never my protector again.

It’s still dark when Judah shakes me awake and I burrow under my pillow. “Move back into the house already and stop hurting yourself.” A few weeks ago I had to drive him to the emergency room because he tripped in his yurt in the middle of the night and sprained his ankle. The place was wall-to-wall people—bleeding, screaming, taking ragged breaths. We sat in the waiting room until well after the sun came up.

Judah lifts the pillow and simply says, “Come.”

I follow him into the living room and he points to the TV. There on the screen is the library, *my library*, burning.

I blink at the image.

“They said it looks like arson.”

I call Lupita.

“What time is it?” she mumbles.

“Alhambra is on fire.”

Danny is camping in the mountains and he took the car he and Lupita share, and mine’s still M.I.A., so I pick her up in Judah’s. We park at the elementary school across the street from the library and watch the rising orange flames. Smoke pours out of the green roof as firefighters pull on the long hoses like they’re playing tug-of-war.

Lupita squeezes my hand. “Maybe they can still save it. Either way, we won’t be out of a job. They can send us to another branch.”

The sky has slipped from black to gray. The sun will be up soon.

“It’s Brigid,” I say.

“Huh?”

“My sister did this.”

“What? Did she tell you that?”

“I just know.”

I think of how I shamed my sister. In her broken brain, the only way to avoid going on the perp wall was to burn the building to the ground.

My mind goes to all of things that are burning: the displays I finished setting up last week, the frayed orange carpeting the city has been promising to replace for years, the banks of public computers, the ancient break room couch, Katherine’s desk, the holds shelf.

The sun rises at our backs, spilling light onto the scene before us.

Sirens echo through the neighborhood. For a second, I believe they’re not for the fire, but for Brigid herself, that everyone else is in the same state of panic as I am, their hearts beating as mine: *what-has-she-done, what-has-she-done, what-has-she-done.*

One of the firefighters begins screaming and pointing East. One by one, the others look up and stop what they're doing. A hose, bursting with water, gets loose, and it flails with such intensity that it knocks several of them down. But none of the others seem to notice. Even from across the street, the dread on their faces is evident.

When we turn, it's as if we've entered a hazy, unfamiliar painting. We are staring at the sun, which seems like a normal sight, until we realize we shouldn't be able to see it yet.

The mountains are gone.

They are not shrouded in clouds or smoke: they simply aren't there. The anchor for the city, the skyline, our lives, has vanished.

Lupita leaps from the Prius.

The steaks. The cars.

I have to find my sister, I think, following this woman who will never ever love me, as she stumbles across the parking lot in the direction of the wrecked horizon. It makes no sense, but Brigid is the only person I want with me right now. She has destroyed everything, yet I'd rather be with her, staring at this dreadful hole she's ripped in the landscape.

The tooth. The scorpion.

Lupita is on the ground now. She calls for Danny, sobbing, and I turn from her.

The mountains.

I cross the street and breathe in the smoke, letting the ash from the prayers I said for Brigid fill my lungs.

Against the Flow

Daniel Deisinger

The only thing other than desolation and craters for miles in any direction were three people and what lay inches from their toes—they stared at it open-mouthed. Limp, hot wind pushed gray dust over their boots. Hazy clouds hid the sun. “I really can’t believe it,” Amanda Pallus said. “There it is. A river. A real-life river.”

“Wow,” Jacob Winqvist said. He knelt and lowered his hand into the colorless water. He whipped it out, spraying Amanda and Doctor Bailey. “Cold!”

“That’s how most rivers were,” Elizabeth Bailey said, wiping her face. “They flowed out of mountains or from caves where the ambient temperature was much cooler. They were frequently made from melted ice and snow. During the spring, rivers got much larger as snow melted.”

“Is that what’s happening now?” Amanda asked. She shrugged her backpack off and set it on the gray ground, digging out the radio.

“Temperature variations might have largely gone the way of the cardinal, but we still have seasons, and as long as I haven’t been missing the signs, we should be somewhere between mid-fall and the beginning of winter right now,” Bailey said. Her eyes followed the river’s mighty flow.

“Then where did this river come from?” Jacob asked.

“I have no idea,” Bailey said. “But I’ll hand in my doctorate if we don’t try and figure it out.”

“Come in Control, this is Amanda. Come in Control, this is Amanda, over.” Amanda depressed the radio’s button and waited. Static crackled. Behind her, Bailey and Jacob carried a pair of canoes, light enough for even slight, slim Jacob to carry,

to the river.

“We read you Amanda. What’s your status, over.”

Amanda pressed the radio’s button. “We’re at the designated location. We...there’s a river.”

“Say again, Amanda, there’s a river? A real river?”

“Christy, it’s the wildest thing,” Amanda said. “There’s so much water, just flowing. It’s freezing. The report was telling the truth.”

“But....” Static crackled for a moment. “Rivers don’t exist anymore. They just don’t.”

“The tappers must have missed this one,” Amanda said. “They’re going to be ecstatic. This much fresh water is going to do so much good for everyone. Think about it!”

“I am thinking about it,” Christine said over the radio. “I’m getting thirsty thinking about it. Any idea how wide it is?”

“We haven’t done any surveying,” Amanda said, glancing at the swift water. “But it could be fifty feet.”

“Fifty feet across! Amanda, you’re going to be a hero!”

“Maybe!” Amanda looked up. “Gotta go. The canoes are ready.”

“You’ll be okay on your own?” Bailey asked Jacob. Jacob couldn’t tear his eyes away from the rushing water. Frothing peaks shot up and fell back down into swirling eddies.

“I’ve never done it on real water, but I took everything the simulations threw at me and came out alive,” Jacob said. “Besides, Amanda should stay with you. I have more experience.”

“Right. So which will it be—headwaters or mouth?”

Jacob looked north, where the water rushed from, and south, where it rushed to. “Uh....”

Bailey sighed. “The headwaters are where it starts, the mouth is where it ends.”

“Mouth for me,” Jacob said. “I want to see where this beauty

ends up.”

“Right.” Bailey turned to Amanda. “We’re going north. Just us girls.”

“Check your radio before I pack up the equipment,” Amanda told Jacob. Jacob took out his radio and hit the call button. A tone went off on Amanda’s radio.

In a minute Amanda and Bailey pushed their canoe into the water. The river flowed over their waterproof boots and pants, and though they stayed dry the river sucked warmth away as they loaded their supplies in and climbed aboard. Jacob did the same with the smaller canoe.

“Check in every three hours,” Bailey said. “Make sure to track your location so you can get back here. And don’t do anything stupid.”

“Yes ma’am,” Jacob said, shooting a lopsided salute to go along with his goofy grin. “You two stay safe. Just your luck, you’ll see the world’s last grizzly bear.”

They climbed into their canoes and pushed off. Jacob pointed south--the river whisked him away; in a moment he was out of sight. Amanda and Bailey used the canoe’s small engines to point north and engaged the main motor at the canoe’s stern, and despite the river’s force they jetted forward.

Water leaped up at them, sometimes sneaking into the canoe, though it quickly drained out. The paddles they held trailed in the water, ready to help them maneuver in case of emergencies.

“What did you think when you first heard the report?” Bailey, at the front of the canoe, asked Amanda. She glanced back. “Did you believe it?”

“Of course I didn’t,” Amanda said. “A river. In this day and age. Fresh water flowing as free as you please. Maybe if it was a small stream, but a river this big would be at the top of the tappers’ list. Did you believe it?”

“No, not really,” Bailey said. They passed flat, featureless

fields. "I guess it could have been an underground stream exposed by a bomb, or a little stream like you said. You know what the funny thing is? About twenty years ago, right when I started with the Resources Department, we got a similar report about the river. We figured it was just a joke, and when we went looking for it, we didn't find anything."

"How could you have missed it?" Amanda asked as she steered the canoe into the center of the river.

"No clue. Maybe the report was wrong, or maybe our equipment was wrong. Back then the department was doing everything it could to find more resources, and we didn't devote a lot of time to it. I expect before long this river will slink back underground and that will be the end of our journey."

The river remained above ground. Their canoe zipped along, and Amanda took to trailing her hand in the water. "Fish. I wonder if it has fish."

"Even if there are any, we won't want to eat them," Bailey said. "They're probably the most irradiated things on the planet. I would recommend keeping your hands out of the water."

Amanda sighed and lifted her hand out, looking at the western bank as she did so. She gasped and waved. "Doctor! Look!"

The person standing on the bank gaped at them. "This river is going to be common knowledge before too long," Amanda said. "Did you ever think you would get to do something like this, Doctor?"

Bailey frowned at the person standing on the bank. "No, not really."

"Come in, Jacob." Amanda waited. "Jacob, come in."

Bailey guided the canoe. Dusty dead trees choked both banks of the river. "It looks like pictures I've seen of right after the bombs," Bailey said. "Just dead forests everywhere."

“Jacob, come in. Come in, Jacob. Ugh.” Amanda put her radio away. “Probably having the time of his life. It’s been more than three hours.”

“I’m sure he’ll notice eventually,” Bailey said. “He’s excitable, but responsible. Once we-”

A thunderclap deafened them. Light burned into their eyes and through their skulls. A shockwave struck them and the canoe bucked. They threw themselves down into the canoe, but the next moment sound and light returned to normalcy. The canoe continued its northward course unperturbed. Black sparks dug tunnels through their vision. For a split-second, before it had grown too bright, the sudden light had captured their surroundings like a camera--land on fire, trees bending under world-ending weight, and the river frothing, jumping, torn to shreds.

They huddled together for a few quiet seconds until Bailey lifted her head. “Amanda. Look. Trees.”

All kinds flanked the river--both sides. Green and dark brown. Yellow, unhindered sunlight pounded gleaming leaves instead of struggling through dust clouds. The river had turned blue, as had the sky. Amanda shielded her eyes from the sun.

“What happened? Where did they come from? What was that flash? The sky...It’s blue! The dust is gone!” Her eyes found the trees. “They can’t...they can’t be real. There’s no way this many living trees and an untapped river are out here in the middle of nowhere and nobody knows about them,” she said. “Can we stop?”

“I want to,” Bailey said. “But we should...a weeping willow.”

The tree trailed long, emerald vines into shimmering sapphire water. Limbs sank under their own full, lush weight. “My grandfather told me about them,” Bailey said. Tears clogged her voice. “I don’t believe it.”

“It’s beautiful,” Amanda said, mouth hanging open. “We have to stop. We have to get proof. This is going to...it’s going to...it’s

gonna blow their minds!”

Bailey directed the canoe to the bank. When it ran aground, she jumped out and rushed to the tree, stopping an inch from a vine. Her hand trembled as she brushed her fingers against a leaf. She pinched it, rubbing her thumb over it, and covered her mouth. “Look at you,” she whispered. “Aren’t you beautiful.”

“Smile, Doctor!” Amanda said, taking a picture just as Bailey turned her head.

“Don’t use flash!” Bailey said. “It might damage the trees!”

Amanda walked around the tree, inspecting it from all sides. “Doctor, if this tree got through the bombs, then I don’t think my camera’s little flash is going to hurt it. Do you want to take...Doctor.”

Bailey joined her, pushing through hanging vines. They stood on a hill, overlooking more trees than either had seen in their lives, trees to their dried and barren memories seemed to go on forever. Such a deep green color going on and on.

“A forest,” Bailey said. “Amanda, take a picture. Take as many as you can.”

“Jacob is going to flip his lid when we show him,” Amanda said. They had spent an hour taking pictures, inspecting trees, and wondering to each other. “He’s always wanted-oh, he left a message.”

“Hi girls, just checking in. Hey Amanda, turn your radio on! The river’s still going, but it’s narrowed a little bit. Nothing much to look at, hopefully you’re having a good time. It’s lonely! Catch you soon! Jacob out.”

Amanda tried to contact him as soon as they got the canoe back into the river, but he didn’t pick up. “Jacob, you’re not going to believe it! Something happened and then...we found trees! We found a forest! I thought I was going to cry! We took plenty of pictures, so we’ll let you see them once we meet back up. It was like...Jacob, I don’t even know. It was like looking

into the past. Amanda out.”

The trees grew ever denser, greener, and bigger, reaching over the river even as it widened. Amanda talked excitedly—“Look, Doctor, that flower is red!”—but Bailey had fallen into thoughtful silence. They continued in this manner until Amanda’s voice rose to a shriek: “Doctor, there’s something coming at us!”

Bailey, searching her bag at the back of the canoe, snapped out of her daze and whipped her head around. Nothing floated with them on the river, and nothing peered out at them through the veil of dark vines and branches. “What? Where?”

“There!” Amanda pointed into the sky, at a distant foggy mass, and Bailey relaxed.

“It’s just a mountain, Amanda,” she said.

“Mountains? Doctor, how is that possible? A river maybe, a forest maybe, but a mountain? How could we not know about a mountain?”

“I need to do some research,” Bailey said. “Keep us in the center of the river.”

She tried to connect her computer to the servers at the Department’s headquarters. “Having trouble connecting. Right.” She dug through the records she had on her computer but didn’t have access to the right information.

“Doctor...buildings.”

Bailey looked up. Gray squares, windows unbroken, peeked over treetops. Figures inside drifted like ghosts. “I think I’ve figured it out,” Amanda said. “Somehow the bombs didn’t affect this area. Maybe the people here don’t even know about the war. They’re cut off and they don’t even know why. We should stop and...where did they go?”

Only trees, and the looming mountain, surrounded them. The buildings, melted like snow under the fierce winter sun, had disappeared, and the ghosts inside them were gone as well.

The river wound and twisted, and led them up the mountain.

“A forest? You’re pulling my leg, Amanda. Wish I had seen something a tenth as interesting. The river is a little narrower still, and the land is just this awful flat prairie. It’s so dry. Other than that, everything’s fine. One of these days we’ll actually connect with each other. Jacob out.”

Amanda listened to the message and left her own, again unable to reach Jacob.

“Sorry you haven’t seen much, Jacob. I swear the forest was real. But we’re seeing much more than that. We’re on our way up a mountain right now. We saw buildings. Birds! I practically fell out of the canoe when we heard them singing! Something’s going on here; the Doctor and I have a few ideas. She won’t tell me hers yet. I think we’ve found an area that somehow wasn’t affected by the bombs.

“The Doctor wants you to check in every hour from now on. Amanda out.”

The band of brown-skinned men standing on the riverbank startled Amanda into silence. They held spears and bows and had feathers in their hair. Dirty furs and hides covered their bodies. They stared at Amanda the way she stared at them, too surprised to do anything. Then, the men sang.

Bailey jerked up from her computer, rocking the canoe side-to-side. The men cried aloud, wailing, and after a moment the women discerned a melody.

It sent shivers down their spines, like the whistle of descending bombs. They sat in their canoe and listened; mouths glued shut. The tribe followed them, snaking through the trees, and though they carried weapons none ever came to bear toward the river.

The river trailed away, and the men faded behind them. Their song dwindled, farther and farther, and then as if a great blade of silence descended onto them it stopped; Amanda and

Bailey ascended the mountain and looked over trees fading into the curving horizon. The sun sank, turning the sky orange and pink, stunning both women. Two hours had passed. Jacob hadn't checked in yet.

Wondrous darkness fell. Stars emerged for a performance, gilding themselves with fire, lightning, ice, and the brilliant green of trees, at least to Amanda's young eyes. She had never seen stars before.

The floodlight at the front of the canoe revealed deep black water. The river flowed down the mountain as the canoe climbed it without fault. Amanda had fallen to silence. Fear, excitement, confusion, and discovery mixed in Bailey's stomach. Amanda had sent message after message to Jacob and had heard nothing in return.

"I don't think we'll be able to reach him until we go back down the mountain," Bailey said, eyes on the stars.

"Do you know what's going on, Doctor?" Amanda said. She gripped the canoe tight enough to turn her knuckles white.

"I think I might," Bailey said. "But I don't think anyone will ever figure out. If I'm right, we'll find out at the top of the mountain. At the river's headwaters."

"What will be there?"

Bailey kept her eyes up. "Genesis."

The river originated from an immense lake at the top of the mountain, and when their canoe tipped up it, like mounting a waterfall, silence gripped them fast. No springs fed into the lake; their canoe slipped over the surface like a blade over dry skin.

"I don't understand," Amanda said. "I thought rivers were fed by springs. Where is the water coming from? This lake can't possibly provide all that water."

Bailey kept her eyes up. Amanda turned around and glanced at her. "Doctor?"

“Look.”

Amanda looked up. Stars clustered together--old friends delighted to reunite. She felt she could have dipped her hand in the Milky Way's white band.

The stars drew closer together, into a single point, snuffing out every light in existence. Amanda gasped, but nothing came from her mouth. She floated in warm emptiness.

And like a bomb bursting and throwing the old world down, the stars exploded out again--at her, around her. Burning through her body. Frying her hair and turning her skin to boiling parchment. Their heat and energy tore past her face; her skin bubbled and fell from her skull as she screamed.

She sat in the canoe again, whole, unhurt, looking up at the stars in their places. Firm, solid as if ground to stand upon.

“My first clue was the person we saw after starting out,” Bailey said later. They sat at the edge of the lake. The stars expanded and coalesced without pause in an hours-long rhythm, and when they gathered to a single point both women looked away. “The report from decades ago mentioned two people in a canoe on the river. It's why we thought it was a joke. I didn't expect the river to go back so far.”

Amanda whispered. “Doctor, will we be able to get back?”

“I believe so,” Bailey said. “We've tracked our progress.” She closed her eyes. “The difference was small at first--just twenty years. We went past the bombs--to when the trees stood--and back farther and farther. We're far before them, now.”

“Doctor, the river...how?”

Bailey shook her head. “We might never know. If we can harness it, we can do incredible things--stop the bombs, help the past, prepare for the future.”

They rested for the night. That's all it was there. Night.

While the stars expanded out around them, Amanda took pictures. The glittering balls of fire kept her attention as she lowered the camera, and she sent her thoughts out among

them. All the time it took to create them, the immense energy. How far back they had gone. Billions of years, and yet they had only traveled a few hours.

She turned to Bailey, who had her computer open and was recording notes. “Doctor...if the headwaters show us creation... where is Jacob going?”

From where Amanda, Bailey, and Jacob had entered the river, it flowed for a while, uninteresting. As Jacob reported, it narrowed. Slowly. But faster as time went on.

From fifty feet across to forty, to twenty, to five; it dwindled to a narrow stream, weak and dawdling as if from a drooling idiot’s mouth.

It became a single drop, and it reached the edge of a cliff and hung in darkness until it fell and rippled in a black pond. The ripples washed back and forth before the pond returned to glass, reflecting tall, straight, dead-black trees and blood-red leaves going on forever. A slight, slim, glowing-white leaf drifted down from the dying river and landed in the glassy pond; it faded and then was gone.

Tyrone

Gina Stratos

Because you are metal, sharp
gravel in your throat, no
soft edges, so I thought

Because our love is bruised
fruit – imperfect and damaged
but still good enough to eat

When I hold my two fingers
to my head, pull the trigger
you understand, *yes, indeed*

Remember all of the little
deaths we shared

And your eyes are the color
of my mother's, and the weight
of you feels like home

Can I tell you how I hope
you dream of me, think
of the storm in my kiss?

You don't, and you won't
but I'll take you anyway

You, the tongue lodged
in the quicksand of my throat
when I need to be speechless

And with you, I don't need
to say a word

My Heart May Burst From My Chest

Nichole Zachary

You are my father's 1964 Mustang.
In that, you are rust-coated metal, old leather
seats stained with spilt Cherry Coke, same intoxicating
scent of exhaust fumes. Once, I yelped loud, leg
scolded on the red-hot pipe and you smoothed aloe
gel over the angry mark left behind. Thursdays were Trash
Days with smoke lifted from full, brown boxes of memories
the day I fell onto wood chips. The same memory
I sift through to prove I'm only clumsy. Sarah
Houck once pulled me aside from our friends
at the Mall to tell me that I lie
too much. I lied back, "No. I don't."
I've never actually burned my leg before. You are warm
and clean and smell of vanilla soap
and love.

I find myself repeating these opposite-truths to appease
the ravenous creature who lives in between my tonsils. If I feed
it right, I am rewarded with a yellow quilted blanket
embroidered with tiny daisies and you, who kisses me
on my forehead. *Mune ga hachikire-sōde.*
You grab my arm from the gear shift, reach
between my seatbelt and unravel the words I've gifted you.
"Nic is carefree. Nic is fun. Nic is cool and completely undamaged."
One day these lies will carry me away from my bloated body.
Away like spit from a pastor's mouth as it bursts from the lips.
Soft lips, like buttery pillows and blanket static you chase
away with wool balls. Let's try again, go
on a trip. A place we can crawl over smooth, oval
stones and the shadows we left behind. To the mountains
and their collection of gathered green leaves and blue birds
who only chirp their truth. The Mustang may leave me
then and drive itself towards the halfway line between before
and now. I will try to keep my foot off of the brake.

Then Do not Go on a Double Date

Xochitl Nunez-Gutierrez

Listen, you don't want to be in a car that comes to a sharp halt because your leftover box of Italian you paid for at the Olive Garden

almost flies off your lap. How the clicks and clacks of two mouths conjoining, begin to radiate from the back seat. As your

date heavily stares waiting for you to replicate their actions. You continue to face forward, and he lightly taps your shoulder,

gesturing to follow him outside. Don't bother, he didn't even open your door, you say to yourself. But you follow against your advice

and sit beside him on the roof of his SUV, the low humming of the engine filling the silence of the empty Walmart parking lot.

Until your friends rock the car along with the muffled radio music playing inside. You beg for them to turn those 80's tunes higher

because you can hear more than clicks and clacks this time. Your date wipes the sweat from his palm, before he grabs yours.

It sticks to your skin like toothpaste on a sink. But the pulse of your hand starts to sing in his. His smile asking forgiveness

for the noise below. The night's stars fall when you search his eyes. They are blue like the ocean and a wave creeps in pulling you with it.

So, if this is not what you want, then do not go on a double date.

Love Before Your Porchlight Went Out

Alexandra E. Quick

The porchlight used to be radiant
while his hands held my waist,
and they caressed my skin in the summers,
I admired his love for me.

Yesterday, standing at his door,
my breath slowed to feel the stillness in the night,
the moonlight wrapped its arms around me,
my lungs were held, compressed and vacant.
I cannot recall the last time he left me breathless.

I preached my reasons while he brushed
dew along my lash line and onto his shirt,
my head grew heavier while it rested on his shoulder.
Now I'm left with just the golden porchlight,
and how his tears had looked in it.

Mi Alebrije

Cindy Aguilar

My lover's beauty resembles a peacock,

Que hermoso.

His hands like an eagle's claw that grip onto me,

Fuerza de aguilá.

Who could be wiser than him?

Nadie se compara.

We create hearts with our hands

The same way swans do with their necks.

There's no name to this animal,

Alebrije, will have to do.

Fiori di Como

Karley Pardue

On our first date, you brought
me to a casino. I didn't know

how to gamble with anything
other than love. *I want you*

to see this, you said. On the ceiling,
bright glass beamed like your smile

in shades of colors too deep
for new beginnings. You shared

a story about a field of wildflowers,
a hot summer afternoon, and weakness;

your hand was warm in mine. You waited
for me to open up like a spring blossom.

I never told you I didn't see flowers
above us that day, in the lobby where

our story began, because I didn't want
to be the only one who imagined the sting

of a sea of shimmering jellyfish,
beautiful but dangerous.

In Montenegro, The Day I Loved You

Jordan Lee Mumm

The setting sun reflected
Off of rain-worn cobblestones.
Warm, brass streetlamps lit
Our way beyond the church building
Where we slept that week
On the floor, on mattresses
A few feet apart.

A warm breeze offered up
The smell of sweet figs, and rosemary.
Speckled goats on vine-covered balconies
Awaited their slaughter, as families
Gathered under terracotta rooftops
To celebrate Eid al-Adha.

We walked with friends
Then alone, your arms and mine
Swinging, hands colliding as we went.
You sang in your wide, Swiss voice
Something by the Beatles. Bright
And poppy, your exaggerated syllables.

Your eyes seemed greener
Than usual. When you looked
At me, I forgot that I existed,
Felt as if I would drift into the Adriatic
Sea we were walking toward.
I could've been a boat.
I could've been the salty air.

I remember stumbling
On the downhill path. You reached
Out, caught my arm, steadied
Me with your hand on my back, and held
It there, a while, staring at me until
The sun sank. I turned away
And we walked, quietly, home.

Two Months After Mailing the Poem About Her Eyes

Jordan Lee Mumm

I found a bluebird
Dead in the sand
In the olive grove.

The monks drifted
From tree to tree,
Trimming the twisted branches.
The snapping sound of wood and shears
Overwhelmed their whispered prayers.

The desert sun scorched
My skin, and sweat
Gathered in my beard.

Shimmering mosaic icons watched
From the chapel's outer walls,
As I imagined myself one of the brothers
In the dark robes, the silent simplicity.
The vows I would make, to be so gentle.

When her azure feathers
Caught my eye
I paused from the work.

A contrast to the orange
Of the Arizona dirt, her bright wings
Seemed like a piece of fallen sky.
This was not where she belonged
On the ground, low and broken.

I could not pray
Looking at death
This sorrow, this fall.

She would fade away soon
Shrink into the ground and disappear.
And the sweet song she carried
That I might've heard before
A voice, which now, I would not know.

Because I Want To

Jesus I. Jimenez Agramon

Thinking about you is like waking up hungry
Except I never wake up.
Hunger hurts my head sending anger through my skin.
The light in your smile blinded the security of my thoughts.
You smelled like the way the clouds looked that day.
You remind me of Elvis Presley eating an In-N-Out burger.
Thinking about you is like eating an In-N-Out burger.
The night was unexpected, granting wishes after sunset.
The windows of the room applauded for a wish fulfilled.
The electricity in our heads stretched to our fingertips
Linking each other like synapses of a neuron.
It was there in the living room on the two-seater couch
Where your cheeks met my lips for the first time.
The soft texture of your thoughts
Laid gently over us as you kissed my hands.
I wondered if walking up the stairs caused us to end.
The glass box of our rules broke free as it shattered inside us,
Slicing our friendship into fractions.
The angels of our thoughts fled the moment I invited you in.
Jesus doesn't want you to see him differently.
It wasn't until my conscience was telling me, *Chill out.*
It wasn't fair that we decided to switch shoes
Because I liked your laces. I was being selfish.
I sleep until I forget your name.

For Sale By Owner

Scott Ragland

I put the house on the market and start to pack things up to get a head-start for when it sells. In a drawer in my desk I find the map she drew before going into quarantine to show me the locations of potted plants to water in the back-yard garden, tucked in among the tall phlox and hydrangeas. Eighteen altogether, with six on each terrace, drawn in 3-D and labeled, *Caladiums, Impatiens, Geraniums*. At the top she wrote *Don't let them die* with a smiley face.

It'd been early August, in a dry stretch without the usual afternoon thunderstorms. I used the hose with the sprayer, giving each pot ten seconds like she'd told me, counting them off in my head.

She'd stayed in our bedroom, watching British comedies and re-reading Jane Austen, the window curtains pulled back so she could see the garden. Sometimes she tapped the glass to get my attention and blew me a kiss with both hands.

When we bought the house I insisted on putting in the terraces to give her more flat ground to work with, knowing how much making things grow meant to her. Each spring the morning after the last frost date I'd carry around bags of mulch and peat moss and leave her "to work your magic." She'd reserve the pots for annuals, "for something new to look forward to."

Before the summer humidity and mosquitoes got too bad we'd sit on the back deck in the evenings, drinking wine, the twilight air flush with the fragrance of the blooms. "To another year," she'd say, raising her glass. "And to many more," I'd say, raising mine.

Now weeds fill the pots, buttercups and clover, living at the

mercy of the rain.

In the hospital at first she used a tablet to video chat. We'd talk about a favorite restaurant closing, how we'd miss the margaritas. We'd talk about the beard I was growing, how there was more salt than pepper. We'd talk about the kids, how we'd buy plane tickets for them to come see us "when this is all over." She'd ask about the garden, and I'd go out to the backyard and show her, walking around the terraces like I was taking her on a tour, and pause when she wanted to see something more closely. "So far so good," she'd say.

The wife looking at the house says she's a gardener. "Her thumb is green as grass," the husband says. "I just keep out of the way."

"Wise man," I say.

I tell the wife about the pots.

"Sold," she says.

"I have a map," I say.

Que Será

Marlene Olin

She is sitting in her car. The words *South Miami Library* front the building. Mothers push strollers while old men poke the stairs with their canes. Like a voyeur, she watches.

One by one the cars move from the parking lot to the road, negotiate the stop sign, merge into traffic. In the distance a yellow light blinks. She sits. Bobs her head. Blinks. If she's patient, and Lord knows she is patient, her mind will eventually reboot. For now, she waits and blinks.

The minutes pass. And soon another pull demands her attention. She has to pee, she needs to go! Though the keys are in her hand, she has no idea what to do with them. She runs her hand over the dials and knobs. There's supposed to be a slot. Wherever is the slot?

Next she eyes her purse. Her handbag, ridiculously large and strappy, is stuffed with millions of objects her daughter insists on and nothing useful. A rain slicker. A bottle of aspirin. A granola bar. If only she had that thing. It's black. It's boxy. Relax, she tells herself. The words will come if she just relaxes. If not now, later. During The Ellen Show. Or when she's drifting off to sleep.

She finds her cellphone in the depths of detritus, underneath tissues and gum wrappers and assorted coins. But this too is ridiculously complicated. She runs her fingers over the numbers yet nothing happens. Like magic, something's supposed to happen. There are buttons, too many buttons. She presses one button and her daughter is supposed to answer, another button her husband, another a sister up north. But now nothing. Nothing. Nothing. Nothing.

Something deep and fundamental has betrayed her. She stares at her fingers like they're strangers. They're the append-

ages of an old woman, bony and knobby, a skeleton's fingers. If life were a race, her fingers have crossed the finish line first. And even though her fingers punch and poke and crawl like crabs up and down the screen-the numbers stay relentlessly frozen.

It's getting hot in the car. Each breath clouds the windshield. And slowly the panic, the feeling she has been trying to tamp down, starts to take over.

There have been other moments. Moments she has weathered and survived. But right now fear rolls in like a wave. Soon she'll be swimming in a sea of sweat. Her face. Her neck. Her arms. And sure enough, when she pinches her blouse, it's soaked. And when she pats her crotch, her pants are damp as well.

Experience has taught her to ride the storm. But soon the panic grows. Her neck feels too big, her blouse too small. It's like an octopus is squeezing, its tentacles reaching, its eyes bulging. Air. Air. Air.

Then, mercifully, a hand raps at her window. Someone has opened her door. *Are you all right, lady?* It's cooler outside the car than inside. A breeze brushes her neck. Children laugh. Somewhere music plays.

There, there, says the stranger. Then she takes Fran by the arm and leads her into the building.

Six months later her husband and daughter meet in a coffee shop. They park themselves in a booth and hold up their menus like shields. After delaying the inevitable, the daughter lays her menu down first.

"So how's Mom, Pops?"

It's Marvin's job to provide updates. But each doctor's appointment is worse than the next. Once life was served simple. You paid your taxes. You followed rules. But now up is down and down is up. One would assume that a geriatric psychiatrist

would be geriatric. Someone with a few a gray hairs and a smidge of gravitas. Instead she was young enough to be his daughter. Maybe forty or forty-five. Practically a teenager.

Dr. Gonzalez sat at her desk armed not with a stack of papers--a stack of papers you could wrestle and write on and thumb through--no, this woman sat her desk and scrolled her laptop as if she were clothes shopping or checking her mail. The whole process seemed so sterile, so nonchalant, so easy. But that's what it's come to, thinks Marvin. His wife's diagnosis just a bunch of words swimming on a flat blue screen.

"Her best prospect," said Gonzalez, *"is putting her in a facility. You know. Like a Memory Care Unit."*

Once again the waitress tops their coffee.

"So Mom's senile?" says Lisa. "Is it definite? Are you sure?"

Lisa's their oldest one, the one who aimed for the A plus, who takes her job and her marriage seriously. The other two. Who could keep up? His son Brian is saving the world somewhere in Africa. His daughter Lauren crashes her way through broken relationships and dead-end jobs.

"They showed me the MRI's, the tests, you name it," says Marvin. Then he dabs an eye with his sleeve. "Your mother has spaghetti brain. There're no pills, no cure, no therapy. Once you board the train, you can't get off."

"We have social workers who can steer you," said Gonzalez. *"It's better this way. For her. For you."*

"You've got insurance. Right?" says Lisa. "So we hire an aide. And aide whose only job is to watch her 24/7."

"They've done studies," said Gonzalez. *"They have statistics. The life expectancy of someone with Alzheimer's is five to ten years from the date of diagnosis. The life expectancy of their caregiver? Not so much."*

Weren't they supposed to teach doctor's compassion? Where the hell did bedside manners go?

Lisa twirls the spoon in the coffee, the cream spiraling, the spoon clinking. A Milky Way in the palm of her hand. "But

you're okay. Right, Pop? I don't have to worry about you, too. Right?"

Marvin assesses his daughter. Then he outfits the words to suit the need.

"I do have trouble with the computer." Then he throws in a wink. "I mean I know I'm not a robot. You know I'm not a robot. But it can take me twenty thirty minutes between the highway signs and the boat pictures just to prove it."

"Very funny, Dad. I mean this is a lot to take in. Mom was everything. She cooked the holidays, she watched the kids. I mean who's going to fill in? There's a big hole. A huge hole."

Then the tears stream down.

"And that input button on the TV remote. Never ever press it. Once you press *input*, your whole day's shot."

She fishes a tissue from her purse and starts wiping. "You taking this act on the road?"

A builder by trade, Marvin is a tinkerer by nature. He finds it helpful to keep his hands busy. So while he talks, he fidgets. First he leans back on the vinyl seat. Then he lines up the salt and peppers shakers with the little packets of sweetener. When he's satisfied with their orderly progression, he flanks his lineup with the catsup and mustard bottles.

What *does* he tell his daughter? Frannie, his wife of fifty-three years—his partner, his rock, his soul mate—was slipping fast. Each day a little more of her disappeared. She was always the smart one, the book club devotee, the one who pressed their kids to shoot for Ivy League schools.

But now a new Frannie has taken her place. A time traveler. During breakfast she's in the twenty-first century, getting dressed and sorting the mail. Then by lunch she's back in high school with her family in Brooklyn. Singing more than talking now. Happier, too.

"You go to the doctor's. Right, Dad?" says Lisa. "You get checked out?"

As long as Marvin could remember, he and Frannie were the benchwarmers, the people on standby with a helping hand. A sick grandchild. A mortgage payment. Tuition for a special needs school. Whenever their kids needed help, they were backup.

But at what point, he wonders, do the roles switch? What happens when the caregivers need caring?

First there were the bruises. Then the nosebleeds. His skin is so fragile his arms resemble topographical maps. Of course, he doesn't trust doctors. Why should he trust doctors? But some things you can't argue with, and unless you're an idiot, a fact's a fact.

And the fact is that Marvin's worried. It seems like he's always tired. And no one is happy with his blood work. Numbers that ought to be low were rocketing up. And numbers that ought to be high were plummeting.

His daughter's waiting. Though Lisa's fifty, a little girl stays buried deep inside. Her eyes are wide, her face hopeful. He always kept the answers in his pocket. What's a father for? Like a magician, he'd pull them one at a time.

Now a cloud of sadness swallows him. He looks at Lisa and draws on a smile. "No one has a crystal ball, sweetie. Do I intend to live forever? Absolutely."

But then again...certain restrictions may apply.

A year later is the funeral. Though they knew the end was coming, it's still a shock when it does. It falls on Lisa and her husband Jeff to make arrangements.

The logistics are daunting. Fly her brother in from Tanzania. Foot her sister's transportation from New York. Pick out the casket. Buy a plot. Most difficult are the endless phone calls to friends and relatives, the patient explaining, the sobs, the *so sorrys*.

An entire week from Lisa's life simply vanishes. For in

addition to her parents, there are other demands as well. Her job teaching at the high school. The challenge of two teenage daughters. Of course, Jeff is a help. Competent, efficient Jeff. But his consulting business consumes every hour of every day.

Her routine used to run like the gears of a clock. But now knots twist her stomach. Each morning she glances in the mirror and plucks another gray hair. And at night when she showers, her eyes flood with tears, the tears running with the water, so many tears the drain discerns no difference, just buckets of water circling down.

She isn't sure what she mourns the most. The loss of a dearly loved father or her life as she once knew it.

The day of is a monumental hurdle. Lisa has allocated three hours to get Fran showered and dressed. The aide, a Haitian woman, suggests music while they work. How about, she says, Perry Como? Meanwhile Lisa has fortified herself for the task at hand.

"Dad died, remember Mom? Marvin? Your husband?" Then she thrusts out a photograph of her father. "We're going to his funeral, Mom. We're in Miami, today is Wednesday and we're very very sad."

But Fran is preoccupied. While one hand sits in her lap, a finger traces her arm from the wrist up, humming. Her brow is furrowed, her mind still. It's as if her finger's journey consumes all her energy and attention. Lisa has no idea if her mother's heard a word.

"Your sister Louise is going to be there. Remember your sister, Louise?" Lisa waves another photo. Fran and Louise are posing with a birthday cake. Fran looks around ten, Louise younger. "Louise, Mom. Remember?"

All at once Fran's eyes widen. Then she breaks into song.
A, you're adorable!

Hours later at the funeral service, Lisa is shocked at by how frail her Aunt Louise has become. Unlike Fran, her mind is

intact. But she walks with a cane and shakes like the needle of a compass. Her hands. Her chin. Since her husband's long dead, both of her sons flank her sides.

Though it's October, the weather's warm and soupy. They trudge in their suits and their dresses, their shoes crunching over cemetery stones, their heels caught in the grass. A tarp attached to four poles shades the coffin as well as twenty folding chairs. The immediate family takes the first row. Then the older relatives, whatever aunts and uncles are left, take the remaining seats. The rest of the crowd hovers.

"Marvin was a devoted, father, brother, husband, and friend," says the Rabbi.

Lisa eyes her mother. She has refused to sit. Instead, she stands by one of the poles with the aide.

"Let us bow our heads," says the Rabbi, "and remember a very special man."

Over the sounds of sniffing and shuffling, a plane pierces the sky. Jeff is clutching her elbow while Lisa's daughters, Ashley and Heather, wait nearby.

They haven't eaten in hours. The afternoon is relentlessly hot. And it occurs to no one that the Haitian aide is on the verge of heatstroke. While she holds Fran's purse with one hand, she clutches the funeral program with the other. Then trying to keep upright, she fans herself in quick short bursts. Only when the Rabbi finishes talking, when it's time to cover the casket with shovels of dirt, does anyone pay attention. Plump and perspired in her polyester pantsuit, the aide is teetering. Lisa's girls lean over and speak first.

Ashley's a cheerleader. Tall. Blond. "Does anyone know where Grandma is?"

Heather 's her scholar. Driven. Ambitious. "I saw her wandering by those headstones a few minutes ago. Over there. By Lieberman and Schwartz."

"What?" says Lisa. "She just wandered off? You let Grandma

wander off?

For a short second, Lisa indulges in the luxury of being incredulous. If you combined the political savvy of one daughter with the charm of the other, you'd get a total human being with a lick of horse sense.

As soon as the aide realizes her mistake, she lets out a blood-curdling scream. Then one hundred people disperse in every direction. From the shadows emerges the funeral director.

"In case you forgot, there's a lake behind the mausoleum," he says. "And a canal along the entrance, too."

Lisa takes him in. The purple tie. The orange tan. The white teeth. The man looks already embalmed. "So what are you saying?"

Now it's Jeff's turn to step forward. "He's saying he's on the walkie-talkie. He's saying he has some men posted by every waterway in this godforsaken establishment until we find your mother."

It's Louise who ultimately saves the day. Like she had when they were children playing Hide and Seek, she and her sons travel from gravesite to gravesite giving the all clear. "Olly olly oxen free! Olly olly oxen free!" And sure enough, after two hours of searching, Fran finally is coaxed out. Slowly she emerges from behind an oak tree. Though dehydrated and dirty, she's unharmed. Oblivious to her family and friends, she had been patiently waiting, lost but eager to be found.

At first, Lisa assumes that an assisted living facility provides assistance. After all, her mother could be worse. She goes to the bathroom herself, eats with a good appetite, and with prodding, showers.

Of course, they take extra precautions. Unplug the microwave and the stove. Clear the knives. But still the first week is a disaster. Her mother, a walker in her prime, someone who prided herself on keeping in shape, likes to wander. A cop finds

her the first time, negotiating a six-lane highway two blocks away. The second time a waitress calls them from a deli after checking the ID that loops Fran's neck.

Soon it's Lisa's turn to meet with Dr. Gonzalez.

"Your mother, more or less, is in an interim stage of the disease. An assisted living facility is limited. In the number of staff, in the way they implement their safety protocols. Many of the people living there have only physical disabilities. Your mother's situation is different."

Lisa takes a closer look at the diplomas on the wall. None of the universities seem remotely familiar.

"I've been in those Alzheimer's wards," says Lisa. "They're nightmares. People wear diapers and bibs. And the smell. One place I visited didn't even have beds. Instead, they put mattresses on the floor. Mattresses! People were writhing on the carpet."

Gonzalez nods. "In the old days we used restraints. Medieval, right? But when we did away with restraints, patients bolted. Leapt over bedrails. Broke pelvises and hips. Of course, we have pressure pads to alert the staff when someone gets up. But you'd be surprised by how quick an eighty-year-old can be."

Lisa blinks. "So sleeping on the floor is your clever solution?"

"It's ingenious, really," says Gonzalez. "It's awfully hard to get up once you're down."

Lisa grabs her purse. Then heading toward the door, she pauses. "It's barbaric, if you ask me. These people were teachers and lawyers and accountants. What about dignity? Dying is easy if this is what living looks like."

Lisa is nothing if not determined. When her daughter Ashley wanted to be a cheerleader, she hired a gymnast to train her. When Heather wanted to ace the SAT's, they found the best tutor in the business. So she approaches her mother's condition like a project.

She thinks, we can beat this.

She thinks, craziness can be conquered.

She thinks, Best. Daughter. Ever.

On the next visit, she goes with opened eyes. Sure the cafeteria sparkles, the help is courteous, and the entertainment nonstop. But now she notices the quiet footsteps up and down the hallways, the women of varying ethnicities wearing orthopedic shoes. Some are guiding wheelchairs while others carry trays of food. Even though the Green Briar Home for the Aged costs a small fortune, it's the aides who make the world spin. She immediately hires round-the-clock help for her mother.

If she can't visit Fran every day, she makes sure that a friend or a relative does. Then she spends an entire afternoon pushing a cart up and the down the aisles of an educational toy store. She buys flashcards. Puzzles. Picture books. Her efforts are more than determined. They're inspired. She imagines the two of them on magazine covers. *AARP. Reader's Digest*. Her mother will become the poster child for Alzheimer's, that one-in-a-million success story. The headline will read: *If We Outsmarted Dementia, You Can, Too!*

But fantasy and reality refuse to intersect. Week after week, she drills her mother only to leave both of them in tears.

The routine is the always the same. First Lisa holds up a postcard of South Florida. "We live in the city of..."

Fran's first guess never wavers. "Brooklyn!" she shouts.

Then tugging the string, Fran grabs the tail of the kite, rattling off everything she can remember. "Our house is on Flatbush Avenue. Our number's Nightingale 7-5544. We see movies at the Paramount and watch baseball at Ebbett's Field. Then there's Adelman's Deli. Don't you love Adelman's?"

Laughing, like it's a game.

But Lisa remains undeterred. Instead, she sets her jaw and moves onto the next exercise. A daily newspaper is laid on the table. "You see the date, Mom? Yesterday was Monday and

tomorrow's Wednesday. So what's today, Mom? You can do it. Just tell me the date."

By now Fran has reverted to singing. *Blue moon...you saw me standing...*

But Lisa digs in harder. It's as if her mother's loss is her loss, too. While the aide folds and refolds the laundry, Lisa holds up yet another picture of the family. "My high school graduation, Mom. Here's me, Brian, Lauren, and Daddy. Remember Marvin, Mom? Remember your husband, Marvin?"

Rarely, there are moments of recognition. Moments where Fran's eyes will twinkle and a light shines. She'll glance around the apartment and know who and where she is. But what follows is invariably painful.

"Marvin, where's Marvin? He should be home for dinner by now."

And for perhaps the hundredth time, Lisa will tell her that Marvin's dead.

By New Year's, the social worker demands a meeting. They're parked in a small office. Outside, a line of walkers and wheelchairs are making their way to bingo.

The social worker's black. Bulky. Busy. Since her schedule's a mile long, there's no time for social niceties. Piles of papers sit on her desk. On the wall, her family smiles.

"Your mother is deteriorating more quickly than we expected, Lisa. We had to up her meds. She's grown agitated and anxious. Especially after your visits."

Lisa sits a little straighter in her chair.

"So we take her to get detoxed, so to speak. To our lounge on the first floor. We've got Nathan's hot dogs. Sinatra singing. And tapes of old movies on a loop. It takes them back to New York in the 50's. Makes them happy."

Lisa's appalled. "So you're aiding and abetting her delusions?"

The social worker stands up, picks up her clipboard and heads toward the door. “How many times you go on an elevator and there’s no thirteenth floor? Of course, it’s ridiculous. There’s no empty space between twelve and fourteen. There’s no thirteenth floor filled with dusty furniture and ghosts. But as soon as that twelfth floor passes under our feet, we feel taller, don’t we? Lighter. Bouncier. It’s like collective amnesia. We all of us tricked death.”

Outside the bingo game has started. Even though they’ve only been playing for two minutes, a lady’s jumping in her chair and screaming. *I won! I won!*

“Sometimes we need our delusions, Lisa. They’re our security blankets, our ace in the hole when we’re holding a lousy hand. And your mother, and all the other poor souls fighting this disease, need kindness like air. Like oxygen. Without it they’ll just shrivel up and die.”

One by one the pages of the calendar flip. Valentine’s Day. Mother’s Day. Father’s day. Thanksgiving. The pace of Lisa’s interventions slackens. Only when Christmas rolls around, does she insist that the whole family visit.

Her dress is a montage of rhinestones and sequins. For the others, she insists on red and green. Then armed with Jeff on one side and her daughters on the other they proceed down the hall. Twinkly lights loop the ceiling. In the distance they hear children’s voices. Instead of antiseptic, pinecones perfume the air.

“Prepare yourselves,” says Lisa. “Dr. Edelman dresses as Santa. Plus there’s eggnog and a plastic evergreen.”

Her daughters are audibly sulking. They would rather be anywhere else.

“Like, why are we here?” says Ashley.

“I mean we could hire stand-ins,” says Heather. “Would it make a difference?”

Meanwhile they are busy hiking up their skirts and tousling their hair. Then Lisa notices other teenagers walking the halls. They are sulking, too.

“And there’s a boyfriend,” says Lisa. “Don’t forget to be nice to the boyfriend.”

Of course, she’s sad. Lisa wears sadness like a sweater. Only now she’s tossing it aside. Her new mantra is block the bad and grab the good. If there’s a contest for functional families, she’s gunning for the prize.

She thinks, I can do this.

Her husband Jeff has been suspiciously quiet. But there’s no denying the bounce in his step and the ear-to-ear grin that’s a gloat. For instead of being burdens, his parents are perfect. Nearing eighty, they golf, they cruise, they ski. Lisa should be glad for them, really.

She thinks, I am not a failure.

She thinks, I will savor my accomplishments.

She thinks, my mother’s happy and resilient. Only death shuts a door.

Soon the sound of laughter cannot be denied. When the cafeteria doors swing open, even Lisa’s girls are surprised. They are facing a winter wonderland, complete with fake snow and orderlies dressed like elves. Up on a makeshift stage, a choir from a local school is performing. Since lots of families have already arrived, it takes them a good five minutes to locate Fran.

She’s next to her new friend, Harvey. He’s a polio patient, propped in a wheelchair, his arms useless by his side.

“They’re seeing more and more of it,” whispers Lisa. “They thought they were cured. Then sixty years later the disease boomerangs back.”

Instead of greeting Fran, the family finds a table and watches. The social worker says it’s best this way. If Fran recognizes them, she’ll walk over. If not, they should let her be. So they sit

and wait.

Across the room Fran keeps busy, flitting like a butterfly between her new beau and the food display. She brings him coffee and holds it to his lips. She straightens a napkin on his lap. She rearranges the jacket on his shoulders.

Meanwhile they sit and wait. And after what seems endless minutes, Fran stares in their direction. Then in the smallest of steps, she shyly walks their way. The four of them stand like soldiers, speechless, their hands by their sides.

First Fran kisses Lisa. "I know you. You. You. You."

They have been down this road before. While the questions have stayed the same, the answers now have changed.

Lisa grasps both of Fran's hands. Though brown and mottled, they're surprisingly soft. Then she looks deep into her mother's eyes. "Mom, what day is today?"

Pleased with herself, Fran smiles. "Today is today."

"And where are you?" says Lisa. "Do you know where you are?"

As the choir descends the stage, they continue to sing, wrapping their audience in hugs. *All is calm, All is bright.*

"I'm home," says Fran. In one great flourish, her arm sweeps the room. "This is my home." Then she kisses her daughter again.

The moment is warm and gooey, something Lisa will cling to and cherish in years to come. It feels like she just sipped hot chocolate. It feels like a marshmallow moustache is hovering just above her lip.

She thinks, I can be stronger.

She thinks, I can love bigger.

She thinks, I can let go.

Out Here in the Country

Mark Sanders

the television is a big rock adorning an old shelf,
and the radio in the work shed plays some country song
heard a million times though the words are indecipherable.
The real tune is the traffic on the farm road, a quarter mile off,
akin to the occasional bee that hums the balm,
and the news is horses trodding and crossing paths
carved through grass, the chitter of scissortails
and mockingbirds, echo of absence down the slope
to the creek bottom. The cattle across the way
are where they need to be, murmuring;
oaks and pines, where they need to be, buffering
encroachment. Clouds where they need to be, sitting
and catching their breaths before gamboling away.
The fence that needs repair—whine and barb
Enough.

Let the world dissolve,
I might not even know.

In February on Farm Road

Mark Sanders

The old man steps outside,
a cold winter's morning
when the pasture is whitened over
in hoarfrost, the fence wire,
the berried holly shrubs
about the porch. The very sky
is white like frost, and his breathing
deepens the whiteness of it.
It is good to be this cold
and to enjoy it, he thinks,
as in the manner he enjoys cardinals
riding fences or wires, rocking
shrub branches, the white air.
It is good it is good it is good
to be so cold and alone and alive
that he should not worry
because worry will burn itself out,
and ash of embers of hardest oak
be white as another kind of frost.

Pastoral

Erin Wilson

In black boiled wool, we are walking
the farmlands together in winter.
I am prattling on about Andrew Wyeth.
The winter grasses. Well, you know winter grasses...

Maybe it is like those old gold sheriff badges.
Something of me was hammered into a gold star
and that gold star was hammered into you.

Everywhere we look: white expanses,
bunches of pale yellow bromegrass and fescue,
electric lines breaking into kestrels, ravens, crows,
flying stars that spread into the fine striations of feathers,

which land deftly like rivets driven into barn boards.

We both dream of living in a barn someday.
I am being nostalgic. You are dreaming of the future.
Golden thread, holding fields together, stitches friably through snow.

Ghazal

Jordan Deveraux

What is the wind, what is it.

—Gertrude Stein

If it no longer blew, who of us would grieve the wind?
Or when we're gone, will it be bereaved, the wind?

On garbage day in the city letters
eddy in the air, but still no one can read the wind.

Where my family lives smokestacks burn all night
and day. The fumes make it hard to breathe the wind.

In Visconti's film Venetians scapegoat
the scirocco while cholera plants its seeds in wind.

In our time, with windows open in classrooms to vent
sick air, children write to the hum of freezing wind.

A twister pulled out telephone poles on the plains.
I parked under a bridge to not be seen by wind.

On the fourth of July I lit a firework that spread
to dry weeds. A bounty of flames to feed the wind.

The ghost of my great-grandmother lives on
a clothesline, filling collars, legs, sleeves with wind.

Unlike a river it cannot be channeled
moated or crossed. A god that must be appeased, the wind.

Though Jordan means "to descend" I have no
direction. A confused mass of need, me. The wind.

*

Simon Perchik

The hands that soothe your forehead
are lifting the moon from the same grave
it's returned to by morning—both hands

and the slow climbing turn that points
where Spring too no longer dies forever
though for a few hours you become a sea

lowering the Earth between your fingers
for waves, wiping clear the shore
as proof it never happened and winter

is still in the ground, waiting for the horizon
to return, bring back the sky, this time
as the sound that once lit up its life.

Rebirth

Kate Case

Rain brings a new life.

Flowers bloom and grass grows green.

Will it work for me?

The Room I Grew Up In

Benjamin M. Vandeventer

Lying on the blue and white plaid couch
my mom got for free, from the neighbor
waiting to leave for Mars, I look at the bed
my grandfather and uncle slept in
that I now sleep in. The carpet's gone,
splintered plywood holds up furniture
that was here before me and some
that we picked up on the roadside.
I remember when the dresser holding
my clothes was filled with comic books sealed
in plastic sleeves and thirty-year-old
candy left by my uncle when he left for UCSD.
The constant rattle of the swamp cooler
draws my attention away from things
that are gone to things that have never left.
Sunlight glints off worn strings
on the guitar I wrote my first song on.
Laughter rises from the backyard through
the open window behind me.
My brothers scare away the fledgling
robins as they run across the grass swinging
driftwood clubs I collected before I worried
about whether my SAT scores
were good enough. A traveler in a book
I read more than once wondered
if he would ever look down
into that valley again.

Yesterday

Ace Boggess

Watched a football game. My team lost—
a dull three-hour affair. I thought about
the night before when dark swallowed all &

pleasures were passed around like salt shakers;
the night before that, a fulfilling quiet
except for reading a poem to an audience

on Zoom—the night before & the night before
always better than the day at hand. Later,
I swam in chilly water, releasing

frustration in strokes & constant motion,
before settling to watch a show
about survivors during an apocalypse,

or after. I wasn't bored, just somewhat lazy,
falling asleep in my chair, computer on my lap
closing its one bright eye & dreaming, too.

Heat Wave

Christopher Locke

Sun plucking sky like a sheet
music of bees, all of us hiding
in parlors and basements dug by
others long vanished. Humidity
sags between trees like church
bells underwater. No escape, no
amusement in the turkey sandwiches
stiffening atop plates, countertop
breadcrumbs a tiny Stonehenge
for ants dizzy at the offering. It is
not a day for creditors or salesmen;
a day with you on your hands and knees
in the garden like you've come
seeking forgiveness, nature rendered
sick and unbeautified. I cannot even
find solace in the quick dart of gold
finch, his back shamed yellow like
the sun—the original bully—as I stand
blinded in my yard, grass curling
beneath me like the toes of the dead.

A Whispering World

Sergey Gerasimov

The afternoon path whispers
when it thinks
you don't hear.

It whispers, talking to the wilted grasses,
rowan trees, dog roses,
a long-legged fox nervously smelling the empty air,
to all the descendants of tiny bubbles
that used to swirl
in the primordial broth,
that still realize they are brothers, sisters,
parts of the current.

But not to you, man made of salt,
plodding your way
across the current.

Please, stop here.

There's no need to hurry.

The pig-hoofed time will lick you off with
its wet invisible tongue all the same.

Everything you've managed to do
will become indistinguishable from
the innumerable things you've never succeeded in doing,
and from many more things
you've failed to notice.

You'd better dissolve in this.

Close your eyes: you are in a forest of sounds.

It grows out of silence,
which is quieter than silence,
and it's not at all disturbed
by the faraway barking of dogs,
by the rhythmic thumping of music in an uphill village,
or laughter of a jolly company beyond the river,
that rings like sounds of lepers' bells.

Through the Window

Kimberly Ann Priest

The boy shadows her, his five-foot-seven frame
several inches taller,

and his shoulders, wider—even
his smile grows larger than hers on his face. She is

womanly, and not. She is
powerful

and not.
She grew quickly into her withers and mane

until she became
one of her father's horses

owning the barnyard so completely
they don't even need to make the ground quake.

But they do,
sometimes.

Through the window I watch them accelerate,
pound the field,

shimmy with adolescence.
Like my daughter with her headphones on: shake, shake,

shake—free as she can be
in a bathrobe before she gives a damn about

her hair, her hips,
her face.

Post-Menopausal Vulture Watcher

Laura King

After a storm felled their eucalyptus,
they moved in across the street.
Their faces, splotchy red, their heads
covered by a few thin pinions;
they nest in a sycamore, where they stare
from above as I pick up feathers drifting
down my driveway, each one shaped as a shaft.
Despite their size the birds don't hunt,
but every evening they teeter in the sky
circling above the park to sniff out fresh carrion.
Months ago, when they hatched their young,
the downy rounds, about the size of silver dollars,
floated in my garden and clung to rose petals.
Now they're teaching the fledglings to fly.
The adolescents arc in thermal currents
between adults that form groups called kettles;
they learn to trust their developed
sense of smell. On cold California mornings,
they spread out their wings in a magnificently
awkward wingspan and rest west,
so the rising sun warms their crooked backs.

Grasshoppers Have Invaded Las Vegas and Experts Say It Could Last

Jeff Whitney

You want love to be like that: hungry,
everywhere, wild air that makes
the world big-small and bright, undots
every question mark. I've tried to write this
before. I called it *Shame*. Shame
for running from my family into
the dark. Shame for finding a family
in that darkness. Shame for holding in
this swarm of feeling. Shame to see it
eat up the world.

Its shadow like the dream that follows me
to every dark: I fill the belly of a scarebird
the exact shape of me, use hockey pucks
for eyes, then hang myself in the garden
where I watch something move through
the grass that must be a rope dreaming
of being a snake dreaming of dragons.
It coils around me like rope, yes,
it coils around me like that.

Eggs and Paintballs

Benjamin Murray

At dusk the clouds oozed around the orange ceiling of the sky, mirroring the cut, golden pasture on which we walked, carrying a bucket of fresh water for the chickens in the barn. My brother talked about the Dart, how it was leaking near the water pump, and how he'd have to walk to Alan's down the road for a new one, seeing how Alan worked at Daley's back in the day, wrenching on Chryslers and Dodge, spitting on Chevrolets when they coughed or slouched into his bay. My brother liked to dissect every problem, think of all the ways for something to break, fall apart, and then how to fix or correct or remanufacture, etc. Or he'd talk about his new paintball gun, how the metal was painted green with splotches of brown and black, just like the army. I'd to tune him out, count the fence posts around the corral, watch red paint chips flutter off the old dark wood of the barn. To our right, our neighbor's pasture was bare, except for a dirt track looping up and down their fences. Our barn used to be a source of fascination. When I was little, I would stand on my bed to look out my bedroom window and watch the rain reflect off the shingles; how it gleamed when the showers passed, the red paint reinvigorated, like an older tattoo recolored. My brother and I walked in single file, him up front, and my feet fitting inside his footprints left behind in the broken tan stalks and grass.

"But, I don't think it's the weep hole. At least, from where the puddle forms on the driveway. And you know dad insists that it's the bypass hose, but the connections look fine. I even tightened them, which you know you shouldn't have to do. And there would be a puddle on top the intake manifold, given that..."

I didn't really need to count the fence posts. There were 22.

We creaked open the door and squeezed in, the dark room

felt cold compared to the open pasture, smelled like it always did: Hay and chickenshit. Oscar and Rooney, the two roosters strutted, scratching at the ground in front of us. The hens, Henrietta, Gilda, Violet, and Sara pecked and cocked their heads to look at our faces. They love us, I thought, filling their water feeders. And then I heard I what I had heard throughout this summer, the noise that did not instill me with fear or anger until I saw Dad throw a blender full of blended bananas at their driveway, until I saw mom sitting on the hood of our station wagon, smoking cigarettes, staring at our neighbor's pristine front lawn, their immaculate siding and energy saving windows. And then Dad phoned the police last week. He called, standing with the corded phone on the back patio, the cord uncurling and stretching, yelling into the receiver that they were causing harm to us, breaking noise ordinances that may or may not have existed.

The *brap brap* of the motorcycle rose as it approached the barn, then turned to follow their other fence, making a perimeter on the dirt track. When it went by, the chickens seemed to explode, squawking, running and flying up and down, trying to find some sort of shelter. By the time the bike's roar subsided, the chickens had found a curved piece of plywood, which they hid under, their yellow feet flexing into the floor of hay.

"Those fucks!" my brother shouted, dropping the bag of feed. He grabbed my arm, pulled us through the door in time to see Mary accelerate out of a curve, on her way around again. Her red hair flowed behind her, billowing from her black helmet. She liked to wear a face guard and goggles, so the only way to tell it was her, of course it always was, was by her hair, by her red trimmed jacket and pants and boots. While I understood we had to hate her, had to hate her family and their dog that barked at butterflies and their plants; especially, Mom had said to me in the kitchen as she chopped carrots for a stew, their fucking tulips. Our neighbor had a double or triple line of tulips

of various colors growing in their front yard by their front chain link fence. I thought they were nice and pretty, though I knew better than to say anything. They did attract bees, though, and Dad was attacked by a bunch of them one afternoon while mowing the lawn. He cursed, throwing his shoes at them, howling every time one stung or bit. It was as if he had forgot a certain series of dance moves, and now it was audition time underneath bright, hot stage lights.

A dust cloud rolled behind her bike. She maneuvered around bumps and small jumps with ease. She was training, or something like that, and her parents had built a course for her. But now she was riding every afternoon, despite Dad's actions and Mom's scowling and even my brother's little talks with Mary. They would meet on the fence line before it got too dark for them to see, standing face-to-face, their arms folded in reverse image of each other, talking over the barbed wire, gesturing to the barn, to our house and theirs. I watched them from my bedroom window, but then I'd get bored and slump down the wall, balling into a lump on my sheets, tired from the day, from school, from the swings or kickball.

"Go make sure Dad knows," he turned back to the barn. "I'll finish up here."

I was about to run back to the house, about to count the seconds it took for me to sprint from the corral to the fence for the backyard, about to open the kitchen door and see Mom over a Pyrex bowl full of melted chocolate, about to tap Dad on the arm, even though he was already dialing and peering through the blinds at Mary; but she cut a corner too sharp, and she bounced over a ridge and flew over the handlebars, kicking up dirt and dust into the air, her helmet flung, her gloves gone. It looked as if she got tired of riding and wanted to do cartwheels instead. The bike idled and fell, tangling in the barbed wire fence, dying in those metal arms. The house felt faraway, distant, a fog of sunlight shimmered, the windows were blank, the back door

remained closed. It was quiet.

He burst out of the barn, his arms cut from the door, looping through the short grass to the fence, hesitating for a moment, his hands on the barbed wire, and then jumping over, tearing his jeans, crawled to Mary. Her eyes were closed, and because of her red hair and the last light of the sun, it looked like she wore a halo. I stood near the fence. Blood bubbled from her nostrils. She was breathing. He took her shoulder in his hand, as if he was picking up one of our chickens, and shook, hoping to wake her. In the distant, in the past, in the time before the crash, I heard the voices of Mom and Dad; and then her parents started yelling and running, their dog barked and flashed yellowed teeth, and all those noises echoed off the sides of the houses and our old, red barn.

Sometimes when I dream, I imagine the outer world, the real one, the one we all walk in, run in, stand and sit on, creeps into my slumber; what other reason would there be for a bear in a top hat to intrude on my dream of eating ice cream on the docks at Waits Lake? There were already catfish swaying on the edge of the dock, holding fins, staring at the moon, which rained down salt and vinegar chips. They tasted fishy, the chips, not the catfish. They were so nice, young and old lovers staring at the same orange moon.

I wished I could've stayed in that dreamscape, but Dad insisted on shouting from our front yard this morning, which caused Mom to say what she never said, "Shit." I heard it through my open window. The sun sliced through the closed blinds, and my pale blue walls glistened where the light struck. She said it all the time, lately; she said it looking out the kitchen window, looking at the barn, watching the blobs of feathers roaming the corral, as if she knew something I didn't.

"Well, look at this shit," Mom said.

"Can't fucking believe it," Dad said. "Get the hose, Adam."

My brother hurried to the side of the house, started pulling the green hose around the lilac bush.

I avoided what I could, but I still got my feet wet and crunchy. They, or I guess someone, had thrown eggs at our house in the middle of night. I wondered if it happened while I was in my dream, and that the sound of the chips hitting the dock wasn't the sound of eggs slamming against our walls, against the roof and the garage door. The driveway held the remnants of at least a dozen eggs. It looked like our house was decorated for Easter.

"You know who did this," Mom said. She scowled, her brow crumpled, toward the direction of our neighbor.

"I know. It's obvious," Dad took the hose from Adam, checking how tight the connection was for the nozzle. "Okay, turn it on." It took most of the morning and into the afternoon for Dad to spray down the house. He'd turn his head, crinkling his neck, at our neighbor's house, muttering frantically under his breath, I assumed, a steady stream of curses. Though, I imagine it was worse than anything I heard when he worked on the truck, or when he messed with the furnace, or when he spent a week on fixing the corral fence, digging out the posts, smashing his fingers and thumbs. Perhaps one of my favorites was when he changed out the fridge. He forgot to plug it in before sliding and shimmy it into its hole, and instead of easing it out, he got on top of the counter with his tummy flattening my report card, and strained to reach the outlet, pouring out profanity after curse, "Fuck this fucking shit dick, you gonorrhoea infested cock eye, asshole, shit-eater. Get the fuck into the goddamn holes. You piece of shit-dick, Nazi ass-fucker, let me, just..." It was a whole production. When he finally got the fridge in, he said that someday I would mature into the gift of persuasive negotiation. That's what he called it.

Mary had been okay. She had walked from the crash to their house, her hair resting on her black jacket looked tired, defeated, the curls and waves frizzy and exhausted. But a couple days

later, I saw her walking the track, her boots scuffing the dirt. She'd kick rocks off the track. Sometimes, she would place her hands on the barbed wire, where she would meet my brother and look at the barn, the chickens pecking the ground. It felt weird without the bike roaring through the late afternoon. The chickens moved easier; they stopped hiding under the curved piece of plywood.

Her parents had yelled at my parents who cursed back. That's how she left us; she walked back to their house, her red hair muted in the semi-darkness, the approaching of night, and we all stood, with the fence between us, pointing and shouting that Adam had distracted her, that I had somehow messed with her bike or the track, how they etc. Adam left for our house soon after Mary departed.

That afternoon, with the house drying off from the hose, we walked through the pasture, carrying fresh water for the chickens. Mary was on her track, going the opposite direction she usually went.

"Do you think she did it?" I said. Every evening I think it's impossible to carry all this water, but somehow, we managed. My hands hurt from the bucket's plastic handle.

"Of course it was them. They are a bunch of assholes, all of them."

That seemed to settle it.

"We have to protect each other, the chickens, the house. If they think they can mess with us, they got another thing coming."

I nodded. The chickens cooed and ran to us when we got inside. It smelled how it should: Hay and chickenshit.

"Listen," he said, filling the feeders, petting Henrietta, picking up Oscar, "I'm going to get back at them. Don't worry." Oscar bobbed his head, his bright red comb the texture of asphalt moved with each stilted shake. "This will stop it all."

I thought he meant that he would collect our eggs and return

the favor, or maybe shoot their parents with his paintball gun. But he wouldn't tell me; he only petted each chicken, adjusted the heat lamps in the corners. He was really annoying, sometimes.

That night, I stood on my bed and watched my brother and Mary at the barbed wire fence. She was absent for a couple days, but now they were back at it. I wondered what curses he used with her? She used with him? Then it got too dark, and I still was wondering if you could pick up a dream where you left it? Was it on the floor, waiting for you to walk over it, for you to peer down into its supposed confinements, smiling for another round or continuation? I thought I heard the chickens squawking, faraway, on another shore, another island, another country, another planet; the dock was still there, but the catfish were gone. Rain was actual rain, not salt and vinegar chips, and that frightened me.

The next morning, I watched Tom and Jerry chase and escape each other through a kitchen, underneath a set of table legs, out an open door, around the corner of yellow, cream colored house with red shutters. Jerry managed to escape by diving into a hole amongst the grass, which triggered a spring that launched an egg into Tom's face. It seeped down his whiskers, revealing his annoyed and thwarted face. Jerry fell over laughing, holding his tummy. I didn't blame him; it was funny. I did feel bad, though, for Jerry; that poor cat.

My brother sat down next to me. He kept nudging me with his elbow, so finally I turned to him and raised an eyebrow. He nodded to the front yard. I wondered if we had got attacked again, but then I remembered his secret plan. He muted the TV and led the way outside. It was still early. The sun was fully over the horizon, but since it was Sunday, everyone was still sleeping. He walked to our mailbox, which was next to our neighbor's, and leaned against their chain link fence. I followed

his gaze.

Every one of their tulips were missing. No, not missing. Their petals were gone. What once was a wide strip of three rows of tulips of various yellows, oranges, and reds, there was now the same strip of green vibrant stalks. The closest stalk seemed to wobble in the breeze. It was rather romantic, or nice, that the stalks were now the thing to look at, instead of the actual flowers.

They were going to be pissed. “You did this?” I whispered. It felt cold outside, even with the sun on our backs.

“I don’t know what you’re talking about. I just thought it was interesting.”

The closest stalk oozed some kind of clear fluid. It was its blood or tears. I couldn’t decide which. They were all wet, fresh from the cut, from the shears.

“Where are the heads? The tops?”

“I don’t know.” He put an arm around my shoulder and directed me back inside. “Let’s enjoy some cartoons.”

It didn’t take long. Mom woke, started fixing eggs and bacon and pancakes. Dad shuffled from their bedroom, his hand groping for coffee, blinking his eyes hard against the sun, which was now fully filtering through the front window. He grunted at the TV, and walked out into the front yard, presumably to see if we were struck again. He was a heavy sleeper. I remember when I used to get scared, and waking up from bad dreams, I would run to their bed, and Mom would roll Dad out of the way; it felt like I was in an animated, warm valley—except of coyote calls, it was the huffing of Dad’s breathing mixed with Mom’s resounding snores. I always fell asleep.

We sat at the kitchen table, our feet tapping away the morning. Dad talked about what he had to do for work tomorrow, the places he had to go to get this or that for the plant, and Mom listened, probably thinking about what to make me for lunch tomorrow. Right now, I thought chicken nuggets. Or maybe mac

and cheese.

And, as I thought about what was on tomorrow, if it was more Tom and Jerry, a short shout sounded outside. It was almost a quick horn, a tight staccato of a blare that froze us at the table. Mom held her forkful of pancakes between her and the plate. Dad cocked his head, and for the first time, I realized he kinda looked like Oscar; even his hair resembled our roosters' spiked comb. My brother kept eating away, oblivious, happy. A different voice rang out in our collective silence, penetrated our walls and windows, shot around our table and legs, our last name, "Hansons!"

For the second time this morning, which was twice more than usual, we ventured to the front yard, moving as one, our hands and arms and legs touching, and stood on the steps, looking at our neighbors. They both were on their knees in front of their decapitated tulips. They both had bathrobes on of pale blue. I noticed that on each one was a name written in cursive red script: Dan and Jessica. She held a coffee mug by her side, empty. He cradled a plastic watering can. I couldn't believe how upset they were; their tulips never looked better.

That day, all day, I worried about a counterstrike, some sort of retaliation. I looked out the front window during every commercial, making a circuit with my eyes across our driveway, our green grass, the flowerpots on the steps, the small tree in the corner, our mailbox, and then their chain link fence. Adam said he had plans to go over to a friend's house tonight, to work on a school project. Of course, Mom and Dad, who were suspicious of him, immediately denied that request. They asked him over and over again, throughout the morning and afternoon, did he do it, where did he put the tulip petals, etc. At one point, they cornered him at the kitchen table, just after lunch, and demanded that he talk, but he only shrugged. He didn't even seem that mad that he couldn't escape tonight.

I had a routine. Every ten minutes, I would stop what I was doing and spend ten seconds at the front window, and then run to mine, which had the best view of the backyard and pasture and barn. Well, the second-best view if you counted the kitchen window, but I couldn't keep getting more water, Mom would get curious. And I was going to the bathroom a lot. Dad raised his eyebrows each time I got up, but he didn't question anything; he drank coffee, splayed out on his armchair, watching the news.

At one point, I saw Mary's parents walk down the street with a plastic bag. They would walk along the side of the road, keeping their eyes in the ditch that ran along, parallel to the sidewalk. Then they would linger in front of our house on the street, the bag filling and emptying with the breeze. Their slippers were dirty, and their bathrobes trailed behind them, scraping up leaves and pine needles.

Dusk fell, and nothing happened. I felt anxious; I knew they would get us back. I feared for our house, our yard, my Mom and Dad and Adam, who kept to his bedroom all day, only leaving for food, and our chickens—I pictured them huddled underneath that piece of curved plywood, flexing their feet. I constantly stood on my bed, pressing my nose to the window, squinting to see the barn and corral, seeking any movement. Adam kept the chickens inside, which only made me more nervous: If he was scared, I didn't know what to be.

But when we walked in the pasture, my feet filling his footprints, there was nothing out of the ordinary. The barn smelled correct. Oscar and Rooney and the hens were all there, strutting, feeling even more at ease with the lack of Mary's motorcycle. But I couldn't shake the feeling that something was wrong. When we closed door, saying goodnight, Adam walked to the barbed wire fence. Mary was on the track again, in jeans and a blue hoodie, following the path she would take if she were on her bike, her hands on a pretend handlebar, twisting

her right hand, working the levers for the brake or clutch or whatever those levers did. Adam would know, but he was already at the fence, and I knew my place was on the path we had created, back to the house.

Mom and Dad were in the living room, watching some Western. The man rode a horse, a rifle in his hands, shooting at some hills. People with bows fell off rocks, holding their chests or they slumped down the side of cliffs. The man spurred his horse on, desperate, on some mission. He arrived at a creek and submerged his hands in the water, a dark liquid clouded over rocks and stones, mingled with passing twigs. Mom started to cry, and Dad averted his eyes.

Like always, I watched Adam and Mary at the barbed wire fence. I imagined they discussed the tulips. Would she get an answer out of him? Was he telling her to, according to Dad, fuck off? I worried. It was getting harder to see, the sun gone, the sky purple and darkening with each blink. I fought off sleep and snuck into my brother's room. I knew it was in his dresser. I had seen him with it for months now, since he got it for his birthday. Its metal was sleek, an army camo printed on every surface, even the handle. The CO2 was next to it, heavy and full. A bag of red paintballs was half empty. Sometimes, before it got too dark, he would shoot in the backyard, using our shed as a backdrop for his targets, soda and beer cans, squeezing, not pulling as he corrected me, the trigger, producing a puff out of the barrel, causing a thud/thrush sound, followed by the clank of a can crumpling and bouncing off the sawhorse. The gun itself was lighter than I expected.

By the time I got back to the window, I couldn't see a thing. My gut felt squirmy. Was she in the barn right now? Were her parents in on it? Stealing our chickens? Hurting them? I carried the paintball gun, having already screwed the CO2 tank to it and filled it with paintballs, to the kitchen. Mom and Dad were still watching TV, the cowboy sat around a fire now, his

horse in the background, a metal cup dangling from his fingers. He said to someone off camera to “put another pie on the fire.” Mom and Dad ate popcorn from a plastic bowl. A beer sweated in Mom’s hand.

I snuck out the back, quietly closing the door. It was dark now, but the heat of the land kept the chill away. I could see the fence of the back yard, the barn as a shadow, the light of the heat lamps passing through slats. I made my way down the path to the barn, slowly feeling with my feet, keeping my eyes alert for any movement. Sometimes, chickens would block out a section of light, so that it looked as if there were fireflies dancing between me and the barn. And then the barn door creaked open. It was Mary.

I flung myself down. Peering over the tops of the grass and weeds, I saw her close the door, and make her way to the barbed wire. It didn’t look like she had anything with her. But maybe she did something to the chickens. Maybe she poisoned them. Maybe she kicked them senseless, tore feathers off them. She held up the barbed wire to slip between them, walked on her track. The thought of her messing with us, our chickens, filled me with heat. I couldn’t let her get away with this. Adam would’ve wanted me to protect our stuff, our animals. Mom and Dad would be proud and understanding. They would nod their heads when I told them, saying how it was the only choice available. It was only paintballs.

I rose, like a warrior, like a cowboy, lifted the gun, and lined her up. She was almost at their house now, ten seconds to the door. I squeezed the trigger. I squeezed it again. I kept squeezing. There was a slight kick. The *thush* of the paintballs leaving the barrel was louder than I remembered. I couldn’t tell if I had got her, but I heard her scream, ducking inside their house. Their dog came out barking and I hit it with one of my last shots and I heard it growl and yelp. I lowered the gun and watched their dog scramble into a row of flowerpots, knocking

them over. Their porch light turned on, and I saw that I had hit their house multiple times. Their yellow dog ran in circles limping. I had hit it in the leg, which it favored, and what I couldn't see then, but would see later, that one of the paintballs found its target in the dog's eye; blood and paint mixed down its snout.

I felt hollowed out. Behind me, the barn door opened. Adam stood with his shirt in his hand, silhouetted in the light of the heat lamps. Behind him, strewn over the hay and wood chips, at the feet of the chickens, who were fine, were the heads of the tulips, like rose petals. They were beautiful. And then all that shouting.

Originality

Jacob L. Ledesma

Tonight, I am standing drunk in a park, talking to two strangers. I will not remember their names, nor could I pick their faces out of a crowd. However, I will remember that one of them calls me *a book of clichés*. I don't remember what brought us to that conversational thread, but I remember he said, *Where do you get all these? You're like a collection of sayings. Don't you have any original thoughts?* And for a moment I am taken aback. I lean back in the swing that I have planted myself and look up to the night sky. What does it mean to be original anyway? Everything is derivative, these swings were based on swings that came before. Even before that the parts that make them had to be made, and you can trace those even further. Was I any different, how could I be? My very being is derivative, both metaphorically and literally. When my personality was shaped by the material conditions I lived in and my body is a combination of my parents. And the same was true of them. As I looked out past stars that every life has lived and died under to the expanse of nothing, I wondered. Was everything just a copy of a copy, one long game of telephone stretching into infinity from the one first moment of originality? I could not know, but as I sat there breathing in the cold night air and listening to the faint humming of cars in the distance, I also realized it was all individual. This swing set, though it had been based on other things before wasn't those things, it was here. Because it was here, it was different to all the others that were not. All the things that had happened over its life had changed it made it unique, purely because no other swing had experienced the exact same things. I was no different. I was a quilt sewn together of patches of other things, scraps of people I had loved and words that had connected with me. Yet I was entirely my own. I may not have been original, but I was an individual. I looked back at the night sky and saw it in a way that could only be seen through my eyes, and with the confidence that can only come from a drunken epiphany I say, *I may not be original. I mean nothing is, but like I'm still my own thing. Nothing else could be me. Ya know like, I may not be original, but I am like ... individual.* One of the strangers offers a slight chuckle, *That's what we're talking about, like what does that mean?*

I'm Nobody to Judge

Heather Arbuckle

In line for gas, I stand tapping the glossy plastic
of my American Express against the seam of my slacks.
In front of me you stand six-feet tall,
tussled blonde hair, still wearing your letterman jacket
as if to shove your legacy down our throats
like you did every day senior year.

I'll never forget how you embarrassed me
in the hallways for my paper bag lunches
or the busted buttons on my hand-me-down coat.
How I used to cry in sharpie tagged bathroom stalls,
and wish your prestigious existence
would be wiped out by disease or famine.

At the pump next to mine your car sputters.
Against it a braless woman exhales cigarette smoke,
and rubs the bulging womb of her belly.
Out from under the hood, the blue of your jacket
is stained in oil, skin worn thin and tired.
Head down you mutter to me,
You gotta dollar?
I slide the gold zipper of my purse
open, and hand you a five.
You smile, and I can see darkness
through the gap that now separates your front tooth
from your canine.

Cleave

Drew Cannon

The cheap bottled wine from the liquor store down the block, had been thrown and shattered downstairs. Parent's distant slurred screams accompanied her crawl through a cracked window. Trembling fingers wormed their way around her army green pack's thick nylon straps laying slack over shoulders. She idly gnawed at the stud imbedded within her bottom lip, as she scrutinized over the backpack, to ensure everything was there for the third time. Sparing a brief glance to the metal and punk band pins, her gaze was drawn to the rainbow flag hidden under a fold, from parents' narrowed eyes and lips cast, in their all too familiar snarl.

The crescent moon smirked as she clambered down the aged fire escape's rusted metal. Her skateboard hummed and clacked past plastic bottles and the crumbling asphalt. She grinded to a halt as something crawled out. The dog limped behind the corner, a paltry shadow hiding from unknown atrocities only its single clouded eye could know. Fur, matted and greasy, had cigarette burns intermixed with dried blood clinging to flattened ears. It didn't dare a glance at her, trembling with tucked tail into the darkest corner of the alley. In her curious approach, it startled and yelped, mourning to anyone to spare suffering. In her hesitation, it scurried away, gingerly limping on one back paw. The creature couldn't be saved.

The imposingly tall tan building was uptown,
and drunks rarely shambled toward its holy crosses,
pews, and stained glass illuminated angels.
Seraph's faces wrenched toward exclusive heavens,
shunning away from the sinners painting their walls.
The chilled can pressed into her irritated cuts,
through greying, smeared bandages and soothing
the forearm of its dull throbbing pleasure.
Surroundings lacking a witness, she began to cleave.
The bright dripping lines slithered over the wall,
each stroke of aerosol was a blade reducing
her parents to slivers, obliterating that dog's former
owner. Their crimson spouted out, an arc of carnage
drowning begging bricks, and into her crying gashes.
At the end, the moon was overhead, the nightlight
shone down upon the pair of angels embracing
one another on the wall, long blonde hair in a halo
around the two women's heads. Their prismatic wings
outstretched, their lips so close.

Nathan J. Deer Buys the Beer

Nathan Graziano

A mouth-breathing middle-aged man
with tufts of black hair on his knuckles
told me to stand still and lift my chin
as he snapped a quick Polaroid picture
of my acne-splattered face, my head framed
by a box on the left corner of a poster board
background of a New Jersey driver's license.

Once laminated, I became Nathan J. Deer
from Toms River, a 23 year-old drifter
with no back story or arrests on his record.
While he approached the liquor store counter,
Nathan J. Deer who—unlike me—exuded
confidence like a thin ocean mist at low-tide.
He grinned as the cashier, a gangly old man
who owned the store, placed the case of beer
on the counter between them, and Nathan J. Deer
handed the old man his ID without being asked.

My friends waited in Darren's car, parked
behind the liquor store as I placed the beer
in the trunk then we drank it on the train tracks
and spiked the cans and spit at the half-moon.
Later, I got drunk and cried about for no reason
and wished on a shooting star that I wasn't me.

The Training of Zebras

Forest Arthur Ormes

I take my voice to the high note and hold it. I lower the next line a notch, then another. Now I take my voice notch by notch to the highest note—"The Land of the Free"—and smoothly without a pause between words so the audience hardly realizes the change, I lower my voice just enough so that the lyrics remain connected in spite of the shift: "And the Home of the Brave."

The crowd of patrons in the grandstand remains frozen, staring in my direction. Then the spell dissolves and the crowd breaks into an uneven buzz similar to the buzz I remember hearing that time my mother's boyfriend treated me to a night of inter-city golden gloves matches.

I can hear the familiar comments dropping from their tongues and out their mouths as I walk past.

"The kid needs an agent," says an older jockey's agent.

"Why in God's name is he singing here?" a girl says to her boyfriend as I head for the exit.

An old man sits in the same high stool he has sat upon for as long as I can remember, his eyes fixed on the racing form, slightly crooked as if frozen in this position for the past hundred years. Which is exactly how long Hickory Downs has been around. Al Capone used to attend races here. That of course was long before Hickory Downs had become the rundown track it is today.

The hotwalkers, grooms and exercise riders on the track call me, "*Pajarito*," Little Bird in English. Sometimes they tease how I talk through my nose. Now and then they joke how my face resembles a fish. I don't mind—not too much.

I begin thinking about Mary's Child, and how the freezing wind is blowing over his exposed ears and open eyes. He used

to be sensitive about his ears. Mary's Child listened to me for over a year as I walked him round the shed row. Never once did he joke about my face, or tease that I talk through my nose. I loved him for it, though he was just a cheap claimer.

Mary's Child stopped listening to me after he collapsed in yesterday's third race. He was dead before the vet got to him.

After leaving the grandstand, I edge my way along the outer circle of the track. I come out in the parking lot surrounding the backstretch kitchen. Behind the kitchen, I halt in front of the gates where Mary's Child lies. It took four men to pull him into the ambulance, then transport him to this spot where they dump all the dead horses.

I am on my knees, bending to stare at him through a small hole where one of the maintenance men mistakenly drilled too low. The chain and padlock holding the gate together tap coldly against the top of my uncovered head. It is Christmas Eve Day. Before I hurry toward my other gig as a hotwalker, I promise Mary's Child I will visit him one more time before the knackers come to take him away.

You can search all you want. You will not find the number 13 anywhere at Hickory Downs. Not on a barn wall. Not above a stall. Not even on the door of a dormitory room. Numbers are important, especially when the Cleary family who owns Hickory Downs adds up the handle for the day.

A hotwalker like me would be considered a fraction below one, but above zero.

The horse I am walking today in barn 12 B is a filly who ran fourth in yesterday's fifth race. In terms of numbers, her finish paid her feed and vet bill—no more. My trainer, Phillip Farmington, is from Trinidad. He has ten horses in his stable with a fifty per cent partnership in each except for today's fourth place finisher, Mary's Miracle. He owns her outright. Mr.

Farmington reads a lot of bible and names his horses based on his favorite passages.

When I started free-lancing with his outfit, Mr. Farmington told me he had gotten rich by giving inspirational talks in the auditoriums of expensive substance abuse programs. Then he warned me that, if I ever showed up to work under the influence of alcohol or drugs, he would fire me on the spot. After I showed up straight for six weeks, Mr. Farmington began to praise my talent and declare that with my voice I could become an opera singer.

“Effort, and more effort.” he says to me as he holds out a five-dollar bill, advance pay for walking Mary’s Miracle.

I take the bill with as much dignity as anyone can muster who has just been given a four-word, unwanted lecture. I hold the horse still and, looking directly into the eyes of Mr. Farmington, ask:

“Is it possible to train zebras?”

“What?” he answers.

“Can you put a saddle on a zebra and teach him to gallop with a rider?”

He stares at me a few seconds, and then says: “If your skill at speaking was one quarter of your singing voice, you could pack an auditorium.”

Then he smiles and mutters, “Zebras.” He shakes his head and, dropping his smile, orders: “This horse is hot. Walk her the full thirty-five minutes.”

“Zebras,” he mutters again, as he walks to the door of the barn, pulls it open with his good right arm—his left is shrunk-en, you might say, deformed—and closes it behind him.

I begin walking Mary’s Miracle, thinking how Mary’s Child is so frozen now that I could not even brush his tail.

I walk the horse the full thirty-five minutes. I put her in the stall, remove her halter and head for my room. As I climb the

stairs, and then walk along the balcony, the sound of radios and human voices from the dorms assault my ears. I insert my key into the lock of room number thirty-one—my age in less than a month. The fan from the wall heater grates against my eardrums. Sometimes the heat in my room stops working, and then just starts up again on its own. I have put in a repair-request with the head of maintenance, Paul Blocker, but so far my heater has not gotten repaired or replaced.

No racing tomorrow, Christmas Day, no Anthems to sing, I remind myself as I fall asleep on the mattress in the corner.

Two hours later, I wake up, but lie in bed another half hour before pushing myself up from the mattress. I strip down to my underwear, cover myself with a thick blue bathrobe, and then grab a soap and towel. As I close the door and lock it behind me, the wind hits me immediately. It penetrates my bathrobe, freezing my legs and arms. I keep my hand on the banister as I head for one of two bathrooms serving the twenty-five rooms in my quadrant.

During the shower, when I am not peeking out from the curtain to make sure no one has entered, I try to take my mind off the memory of feeding Mary's Child a peppermint from my open hand. Less than an hour later I am standing in my room warming up my voice by singing up and down the scale in preparation for the Christmas Eve services to be held in a small hall next to the backstretch kitchen.

After sliding my legs through a pair of jeans, I slip a hooded gray sweat shirt over my head and zip it up just short of my Adams apple. I open my mouth and release a C note just to make sure my larynx has enough space behind the pressure of the zipper.

I close and lock my door. Carefully, I climb down the frozen metal stairs. Walking against a wind blasting from the northwest, I tilt my head in the same direction as the old man sitting on that high stool in the grand stand, reading his racing form

day after day, week after week, year after year. I wonder if I am fated to become like him. A novelty caught up in a routine so familiar that people no longer notice. I deliberately raise my head into the wind and cover it with the gray hood. I purse my lips, instinctively protecting my throat from the freezing onslaught.

One of security's Green Wasps comes up and pulls in front of me to block my way. The Popeye-sized forearm propped on the steering wheel of the Wasp belongs to Paul Blocker. From his thick neck his head nods for me to get inside.

"You're heading to Reverend Kruger's Christmas Eve service?"

"Yes, sir," I answer as I climb in.

"You can, sir, my boss. Don't, sir, me. Just answer: 'Yes, that's where I'm going, Paul.'"

"Yes, that's where I'm going... Paul."

"You sang the Anthem well today, Villalobos," he says.

"Thank you... Paul," I answer.

I stare over at him as he slows the Jeep to a crawl. The Green Wasp comes to a dead stop in front of the kitchen. He pushes a slight smile at me as I open the door

"Oh... Villalobos," he says, stopping my escape just as I have raised my foot to walk away.

"Michael Villalobos," my voice flatly corrects him.

"Tell that padre friend of yours that he better end his service and merry-making no later than ten o'clock. He's lucky the boss lets him in here at all."

I stand there, holding the door open, the wind blowing against my neck and shoulders.

"I'll tell Reverend Kruger that you said...."

"Not, 'I said. The boss said, Villalobos. Mathew Cleary the Third. Understand!"

"It's Villalobos. Michael Villalobos."

"Christ, man! Just give him the message and tell him it's

from M-III.”

I stare back at his thick hands and heavy frame, wondering how many integers of value M-III places on him.

“Can I go now?” I say.

“Don’t forget to tell him. “

“I will tell him... Paul,” I answer.

“After you give him the message, give him a message from me.”

I continue standing in the cold.

“Tell Revered Kruger that Paul Blocker wishes him, Happy Christmas.”

“Ah... it’s Merry Christmas... Paul. That’s how everyone greets....”

“Get out of here!” he says and reaches over to grab the door and slam it shut.

He pulls his Green Wasp in front of me, blocking me from stepping forward. He idles it for a few seconds, reverses and drives off toward the barns.

I am reviewing the songs I plan to sing this evening as I open the glass door to the kitchen. I have decided not to deliver Paul Blocker’s orders from M-III. That way, if Reverend Kruger’s services go past ten, he can honestly claim he wasn’t informed. M-III won’t kick me off the track if I tell Paul I forgot. He needs me for the National Anthem.

In the kitchen, I spot a foreman and one of his hotwalkers sitting at one of the dozen small tables.

“Merry Christmas, Bill,” I say to the foreman. “Merry Christmas, Lalo,” I say to his younger companion.

Bill looks at me and says: “You are singing tonight?”

“Yes, I am singing tonight.”

I step into the next room.

It is early. Reverend Kruger sits in the middle of two dozen chairs arranged in a circle. He is reading from his bible. He has

placed the paperback hymnals, buckled from wear, on each of the empty seats.

“Paul Blocker says ‘Happy Christmas,’” I say, interrupting his reading.

A smile has appeared on Reverend Kruger’s face.

“Thanks for coming here tonight, Michael,” he says. “It means a lot to the people who attend.” Reverend Kruger pauses, staring at the floor now. “I’m never sure... when you sing at my services... whether people attend in order to worship or to hear your voice. But you know what?”

“What, Reverend Pete?”

“I believe it’s one and the same. Whether they come to hear you sing, or me preach. Both are worship.”

An hour later almost two dozen people have filled the chairs and another dozen are standing around them.

“Our own Michael Villalobos will offer solo presentations of several Christmas hymns,” Reverend Kruger announces. “Denise Erhardt will be his accompanist on guitar. Michael will begin with *Adeste Fidelis*.”

If I hear a recording one time in any language, whether German, Italian, French, Latin, Spanish or, in the case of a couple folksongs, Polish, I can sing it exactly as it was rendered. I can’t say how or why I possess this ability. Since I can remember, I have always been able to do so. I can’t speak one word of these foreign tongues, except Spanish which my mother spoke.

I begin singing immediately.

*“Adeste fidelis,
Laeti triumphantes,
Venite, Venite in Bethlehem,
Natum videte Regem Angelorum.”*

I notice Reverend Kruger’s pretty accompanist is singing along with me during the chorus. As I continue, I can feel the notes roll softly from my tongue and out my mouth, massaging

the walls and corners of the room before settling upon the ears of each man and woman sitting and standing in our circle.

*“Ergo qui natus, die hodierna,
Jesu, tibi sit gloria,
Patris aeterni, verbum caro factum...”*

After concluding, Reverend Kruger leads the congregation through the song in English. I look around at the weathered faces ranging from black to brown to white as marble and, in the case of the two hard drinking small-time trainers, pasty. Everyone wears blue jeans and flannel shirts except Reverend Kruger who wears a cleric’s collar and black suit. His accompanist, Denis, wears the colors of Christmas: pants, black; silk blouse, red; the scarf round her neck, green. The colors enhance her just as some languages enhance a piece of music.

“Michael will sing “Silent Night” in the German,” Reverend Kruger announces to the group.

I clear my throat. *“Stille Nacht! Heil’ge Nacht!”* I begin. *“Alles schlaft; eisam wacht.”*

After I finish, I blend into the English translation as if the German and the English are one tongue. I look around at each member of Reverend Kruger’s congregation. I can’t help thinking how all of us are squeezed into this small room beside the kitchen. I imagine all of us standing together in a circle outside the closed gates where Mary’s Child lies dead and silent. The gates open, revealing a wooden cradle stuffed with hay, providing Baby Jesus with a straw mattress upon which He can lay his head and rest his body. Mary and Joseph stand by his side, holding hands. A goat stands behind them. A rat scurries into the dark. I think of peace on earth, but the image of dead Mary’s Child pushes peace away.

Suddenly, without giving a head’s up to Reverend Kruger, I begin singing:

“I heard the bells on Christmas Day,

Their old familiar carols play,

I can feel my voice rise to an uncommon perfection. I begin thinking of those neighing horses whose lives mean no more than Caesar's coin to most of their owners. My voice penetrates the walls of the racetrack kitchen. I can see Bill and Lalo standing in the doorway, ready to guzzle their beer but motionless in their attention to my voice as I sing:

*“And in despair I bowed my head,
There is no peace on earth, I said.
For hate is strong and mocks the song,
Of Peace on earth good will to men.”*

I end here, leaving the last more hopeful verse unsung. Then, in a cracking, hoarse voice, Reverend Kruger sings the ending:

*“And pealed the bells more loud and deep,
God is not dead nor doth He sleep.
The wrong shall fail, the right prevail,
With peace on earth good will to men.”*

Reverend Kruger glances around the circle of racetrackers, and begins reading from the bible:

“And so it was, that while they were there, the days were accomplished that she should be delivered. And she brought forth her first born son, and wrapped him in swaddling clothes, and laid him in a manger; because there was no room for them in the inn. And when they were departed, behold the angel of the Lord appeareth to Joseph in a dream, saying, ‘Arise, and take the young child and his mother, and flee into Egypt and be thou there until I bring thee word; for Herod will seek the young child to destroy him.’”

The room has become silent. Reverend Kruger stares at each man and woman sitting and standing in our circle.

“Jesus Christ was born in the same kind of stable where each one of you works seven days a week,” he begins. “He worked with his hands as you work with your hands. He suffered in the

flesh as you suffer in the flesh. How can any one person here truly believe that He would ever forsake you? No matter what you may have done in your life, no matter how many times you may have been abandoned, He, Jesus Christ, will never abandon you.”

Reverend Kruger bows his head and closes his eyes in silent prayer. After a minute, he opens his eyes and says: “On the table next to the door, you will find plenty of doughnuts and eggnog. Please take as much as you like. Peace be with you. Merry Christmas.”

I begin walking toward the door.

“Michael,” I hear a voice behind me.

I turn around. It is Denise. I cannot help admiring her beautiful blue eyes beneath her light brown hair.

I stand perfectly still, not daring to move toward her

“Michael,” she repeats. “Stay. Have eggnog and doughnuts with us.”

Within the sanctuary of my thoughts, I think: “I have promised to visit Mary’s Child.”

I stare at her high cheek bones and perfect Roman nose. I think of my crooked teeth and narrow chin.

“Thank you,” I answer.

I know it is my voice and not me who is being asked to join her for eggnog and doughnuts. I am standing near her now, holding a cardboard cup. She is pouring eggnog into it. I squeeze the cup in order to stop my nervousness from shaking my hand.

“Michael?” she repeats.

The conversation surrounding me hurts my ears. I cannot recognize one bar of music in any of the words.

“What? I’m sorry. I couldn’t, ah”

“What are you doing on Christmas Day, Michael?”

I want to answer her, but I do not want to embarrass her by saying that I am staying in my room and watching a movie.

“Michael?”

“I am going to spend it at my mother’s,” I answer.

My mother died five years ago on her fifty-first birthday. My father left after I was born. He died in a town outside Guadalajara a few years later.

“Oh. And where does your mother live?”

“In the city.”

“Do you have other members of your family joining you?”

I can feel the pain in my eardrums now as the surrounding talk crescendos. I do not want to lie to her twice, so I tell her the truth.

“My sister lives in Los Angeles. She is married with one boy and one girl.”

“How old are they?”

“Eight and ten.”

“Michael?” she asks.

Denis must be the same age I am. “Yes, Denise,” I answer.

“How can you sing so beautifully and at the same time talk like... well, I mean...uh....”

I deliberately smile to help her feel less embarrassed.

“You sing exquisitely, Michael,” she says. “It makes me want to thank God for allowing me to witness the beauty of your voice.”

To help calm my nervousness, I say to her: “Zebras.”

“What?” she responds.

“I wonder if you can train zebras just like we train thoroughbreds. Can you put a saddle on them and train them to jog and gallop?”

“Well... I’ve never thought about....”

“The training of zebras would be amazing. Don’t you think?”

“I hope you keep singing at Reverend Kruger’s services. It means so much to him that you come here on Christmas and sing to the racetrack people who rarely get to experience beauty.”

“They experience the beauty of the horses. The horses are so beautiful that I sometimes... when I’m alone in the barns... sing to them. And when I do, they lower their heads and listen.”

“You are talking poetry, Michael.”

The echoing of all the voices in the room have become an overwhelming din.

“Do you think zebras would listen to me sing the way the horses listen?” I ask.

But Denise is no longer in front of me. She is now talking with Reverend Kruger.

No one notices as I grab my jacket. From the corner of my eye, I spot Phillip Farmington talking to James Pickett, the outrider. I wonder how I missed seeing him until now.

As I leave, sitting at a small round table in the kitchen, I can see Bill and Lalo with half a dozen empty cans of beer lined in front of them. When Bill looks up and sees me, he slurs: “You have a gift, Michael. A real gift.”

I manage to return his smile as I hurry toward the glass door and walk out into the freezing night air.

Ten million stars light my way toward Mary’s Child. I grasp a large cinder block as I pass the maintenance garage. Standing in front of the gates, staring at Paul Blocker’s hand-painted sign reading, Rest Briefly Here in Peace, I raise the block above my head with both hands and bring it down on the padlock.

The lock opens beneath the blow.

I undo the chain, and swing the gates open. Beneath the stars, Mary’s Child looks like a beautiful bay-colored champion who is resting for the night. I ignore the frozen blood around his nostrils.

I bend down and rub his head between the ears. I massage his frozen muzzle.

“Hey, boy,” I say.

I shake my head and collect myself. Rising to my feet, I turn

and begin to sing.

“The first Noel

The angels did say

As I continue, I look up and see a dozen people along the balcony of my dorm, 12B. They are standing there, in the freezing night, listening. One woman is holding a baby; another man is hugging his wife. One lone man has raised his arms in praise.

I can feel the cold now. I reach beneath my jacket and zip my sweatshirt up to my chin.

Was to certain poor shepherds

In fields where they lay.”

I stare at the families standing along the balcony. Then I look up at the stars, raise my voice to the highest pitch and project it to the heavens.

“Noel, Noel,

Born is the King of Israel.”

I bow my head now, kneel, and lie down beside Mary’s Child to sleep until the frozen night takes me to the same heavens where Mary’s Child moves among the stars free from all the numbers and integers that trainers and owners and racetrack presidents bring down upon those of us reduced to fractions. I can feel my mouth smiling in the frozen night.

Suddenly a rough hand grasps my shoulder. I look up at the face behind the hand.

“What are you doing?”

“Keeping you from croaking on M-III’s private property, Villalobos,” Paul Blocker answers.

As he lifts me to my feet, I look past him to see that the balcony is empty.

“Do you know where they’d take you if I called the police now and told them you tried to croak yourself! Do you know, Villalobos!”

“Do you know?” I respond.

“Don’t get smart!”

Suddenly my knees collapse. Paul Blocker reaches out and grabs me with his right hand before I hit the frozen dirt. Then he turns me around, grasps me by my brown belt and propels me toward the Green Wasp which sits idling behind us, the driver’s door open. He opens the passenger door and shoves me inside. After uttering something I can’t understand, he starts the engine and takes the Green Wasp along the dirt road lining the shed rows.

He stops in front of barn 12 B, gets out, opens the door and yanks me from the seat. I get lifted up each step until we get to the top. I can feel his fist in my back as his forearm pushes me along the balcony where I can still hear the voices of the families who had left their rooms to hear me sing. One older woman has stuck her head out the door to stare. When she sees Paul Blocker, she quickly slams the door.

Paul Blocker uses his master key to open the door of my room. He switches the light on as we enter.

“It’s freezing in here!” he says.

Balancing me with his fist wrapped around my belt, he punches the heat button with his left hand.

“Sometimes the heater stops and I can’t get it going again,” I say to him. “I wrote the repair request last week and put it on your desk.”

“That would be pure Paul Blocker luck. Save you from freezing to death just to find you dead from hypothermia in your own room. Then it’s my fault.”

Paul looks around.

“You can’t sleep here,” he says.

He pauses about as long as I hold a note at the end of the National Anthem.

“Get going, Villalobos,” he finally commands.

We leave my room, descend the stairs and climb into the Wasp.

“Where are you taking me, Paul?”

He says nothing. He brings the Wasp to a halt in front of barn 3. My feet barely touch the metal as Paul lifts me by my belt up each step leading to the dorms above the barn. At the top, he steers me to the left, past a row of rooms.

“You’re not going to hurt me, are you?”

“I’m putting you in the apartment where I stash M-III after one of his benders.”

“What?”

“Shut up and turn right.”

Paul grabs a key from the ring of keys hanging from his belt. In one motion, he inserts it and the door springs open. The room lights up.

I can see a stove, refrigerator, one of those liquid giant TV screens, coffee table, couch, curtains, a shelf full of DVDs and a double bed.

“I’ll have your heater fixed by day after tomorrow. The extra key’s hanging on the nail above the light switch. Lock up when you leave. I don’t need M-III hearing his door was left open on top of me putting you up in his room for two nights. Did you hear what I said?”

“Did you hear me sing in the kitchen tonight?”

“You may have a voice like those fancy trained opera singers—better, in my ignorant opinion—but you’re a racetracker, Villalobos. Stuck here, just like me.” He glances around the kitchen. “Food’s in the refrigerator. Eat everything in it, if you want. I keep it stocked. Watch tv. Watch any DVD you want. Go to sleep on the bed, not the couch. I expect you to be out of here day after tomorrow. Leave the key in my office.”

“Paul?” I say, as he opens the door to leave.

He turns.

“Happy Christmas.”

“Good God!” he says, then turns and leaves.

Half an hour later I have eaten a turkey and Swiss cheese sand-

wich on rye. I finish a glass of orange juice, then lie down upon M-III's double bed. I fall asleep immediately.

I am dreaming now. I am standing in the African savannah with zebras. I am alone and it is mid-day. The sun is bright, but not hot. The zebras are eating the grass growing for miles around in the open fields. They do not seem to mind my presence.

As I begin to sing words of my own composition, the zebras stare up at me:

*“Zebras with your beautiful stripes
Zebras who gallop and play,
You never feel the weight of men
On your backs and shoulders.”*

The zebras stare at me a few more moments before returning to graze.

First Birthday

Sonya Dunning

—for my daughter, September 2020

Chest to chest, we're rocking
with the ocean. I'm in no rush to lay you down.

Earlier, a dish broke on the kitchen floor, startling
you, and I

remembered being small—worried
about fault.

I'm sorry
if you are now, too.

I'm sorry we couldn't play outside today. I'm sorry
your party was short.

So much is burning so close to us
even our sunflowers have quit looking for a sky.

We have to be careful how we touch
what we touch.

I shift
so you don't have to feel it,

the crack when I sing little star,
what you are—

yours the only heart but my own to have ever kept
beating in my body.

When I sigh, you're quick
to wrap your arms around my neck, curling into me
as in utero.

Shhh, I say above the noise machine
lullabying us both.

Here's your new doll. Hold her as closely as you want.
Listen to the waves.

Pink Moon

Laura Read

On the last night of class, Stephanie wondered
if Beauvoir was being descriptive or prescriptive
in her chapter on “Childhood”

when she said that what happened to the girl
when she was young meant it was over for her
when she grew up.

I could tell Stephanie was worried about the girl
she’d been and if what she’d become was her fault
or if she just couldn’t help it.

What *had* Beauvoir meant?
It was Stephanie’s presentation,
and we hadn’t read the chapter but we all knew

the tone Simone could take.
After class I can’t hold any more words
like *ontological* or *phenomenology* in my head

or even *Being or Becoming* and it’s a Pink Moon,
so I go for a walk with my friends,
all of them Philosophers,

and we follow the river to the university
where I first learned about Being and Becoming
and then I said maybe we should just walk

to my Childhood house, it’s so close.
No one could believe it because they’d left
their Childhoods in other cities, but I like a little

knickknack shelf I can dust when I’m old
where I’ll keep one of those Easter eggs you can open
and inside there’s a bunch of small rabbits.

I imagine I’ll get it down to show a (current) child
who has come by selling something.
I’ll say, *Oh, you’re a child! I was one once!*

And the way I am now may or may not be my fault!
Then I'll show her my Childhood, right there
in the egg, and I won't even know how weird I am
as I write her a check.

Last night we came at my Childhood
from an angle. I thought we could cross

right through the playground of my grade school,
but you couldn't do that without
climbing a fence, something I'd never done

as a child so I didn't feel I could do as a woman
because Simone said I was cooked.
We had to go through the alley.

By the time we were getting close to my house,
my friends were distracted and chatting
about the Present, and I had to bring them back

to Childhood with a touch of sternness.
I showed them Cush's house on the corner,
and told them her son had a go-kart

and always flipped me off, and the Andersons
kept their dog outside all the time on a chain.
When we got to my house, I said,

Well, this is it! like people say in movies when
their date is dropping them off,
and then there's that moment when you wonder

if they're going to kiss.

I wasn't thinking that my friends were going
to kiss me, exactly, but it did feel like

something might happen. The moon was not pink,
but it was large and full and looked like a picture.
It's called a Pink Moon because of spring,

because of pink phlox which covers the rocks
in the gardens we walk by, it's called Pink Moon
not for what it looks like but for the time

when it appears. Yes, timing is everything.
For example, this place didn't look like much
back then, but now I watch it every night.

Letting Go of Me

Jesse Curran

*I need more grace
than I thought.*

—Rumi

Like stars of day
the tulips are bursting
and the children return
to the lost kingdom
of swings and sandbox.
Winter's gone. But even
with one shot in my arm
I'm broken. A year
with no childcare, and all
the lonely zoom boxes.
Winter's gone, but I'm still bundled
even in the sun, even when I run.
Out in the yard, my girl
is wearing knee socks
moccasins, a unicorn dress
and a rainbow belt.
In one hand, a wiggler
in the other, a fistful of wild onions.
She's piling them in my grandpa's
tin pail, one of the only things I took
before his goods hit the dumpster.
He also died in April, also
a spring-winter. Also,
this maw
between elegy
and April.
No one wants to read a poem
about despair.
I want to read a poem
about wigglers and onions
the clang in the pail

when a gem stone hits bottom.
I need more grace than I thought
to lift me, to let go of me.
I need a reason to shed my sweatpants
to wear a white dress, a straw hat,
the old strappy espadrilles.
To let down my long hair.
I need more grace than I thought
or just to know she's there
in front of me
with her hands in the dirt,
designing her posies—bouquets
of dandelion and wild violet
delivering the wigglers
to my lilacs, chewing
on a whisp of her
sun-streaked
hair.

Cutter

Gina Stratos

When my youngest daughter
cut her arms into fleshy ribbons,
I watched her damp teeth move,
her mouth a cave echoing
 every motherly failure
 every single tenderness
 left on the table to rot

In her bedroom, I rummage
through drawers, too late, they say
remove every knife, rusted razor,
colorful sewing pins, their bright
heads a kind of circus laughter,
a child-like lie

I contemplate pulling every tack
from her walls decorated with blue
art, bulging eyes, but still, the smell
of her sandalwood hair lingers
as a promise unfulfilled

She would laugh if I called it a prayer

That's my fault, too

Can she hurt herself with cardboard?
 Can she open a vein with tweezers?
 Where do I store my kitchen knives?

Oh, my heart, what have we done?

A Six-Year-Old at the Bar

Jaclynn Kiessling

As my brother's boss yells and cusses at him from behind the counter, I climb up on an empty stool where a slit in the faux leather seat scratches the underside of my legs. *What the fuck is she doing in here? You can't bring her in here. She needs to leave right fucking now.* My brother stares him down, this man with the greying beard and small watery eyes and tells him that he's not going to leave his baby sister in the car by herself in the middle of the night. He doesn't tell his boss that dad lives at his girlfriend's or how mom is a silhouette under harsh streetlights accepting rides from shadows with expensive cars. Music pulses from speakers hidden high in the ceiling, and I turn away from the 40-inch TVs mounted on the wall to watch the elevator of a man's Adam apple as he gulps a drink and then gasps against the bitterness. Along the counter, rounds of whiskey, beer, rum, and tequila slosh into glasses that catch a flash of neon green or pink from the strobe lights as they are lifted to welcoming lips. My brother weaves between patrons and the other bartenders, flirting with the stringy blonde down at the end of the bar and slides her an extra drink when she smiles at him. There's a chorus of groans from the pool table after one of the men misses his shot. The woman beside me slides off her stool and slips away to the door with a man who doesn't stop rubbing her ass even when she stumbles into him and his head slams into the doorjamb. Instead, they howl with laughter and start talking about some woman named Cassie who hated sitcoms and had a cat she mummified. I locked eyes with the boss across the counter, and he lets me be.

Sunday Ritual

Heather Arbuckle

Its Sunday morning, I should be in church.
Instead, I'm parked at the entrance of Golden Creek,
the forest trails just outside of the city. I stared silently
at the cross dangling from my rear-view mirror,
and my stomach felt hollow.

I left the car and began to walk down the path,
surrounded by wild flowers and the hymn of buzzing bees.
I found a flat tree stump overlooking the creek,
just below the shade of a blossoming apple tree,
my bare feet in the water. Embracing the current's cleanse,
I consumed an apple from the tree as my sacrament,
and rejoiced in the bird choir. The sun reigned
down upon my face, wrapping me in its warmth.
No longer did my stomach feel empty, it was whole.

My state of calm only interrupted by a sudden phone call.
You overslept for church again, Sweetheart,
my dad preached. I looked around
and inhaled the fragrance of my wild cosmos.
I know, Father. I know.

Ten Feet Below My Driveway is a Field

Nichole Zachary

After school every day Father told me to fill
A trash bag with weeds from the large
field of wildflowers nestled in the view
from my old bedroom window.
He said a nice yard is important to Mom,
Who worked as the sun did, dawn to dusk.
There were never any gloves to use, my
father kept them in his truck, locked.
The stems of my fingers were scraped
Red, raw, and bleeding from the bite
Of the weeds fighting back as I ripped
Them from their earth, roots flailing.
I yanked the potential stinging nettle,
dry grass and green thistle from the ground,
sweat dripped from my nose like water
splashed onto the dusty earth as rain.
Somedays I pulled so many, I filled two bags,
Dirt taking up the space reserved for my perseverance
Or whatever else we call the fear of failure.
I sometimes avoided pulling the soft flowers
To allow what's beautiful to live.
But as I ran out of weeds to fill those bags,
I killed those beautiful flowers
To give the weeds more room to grow.

Candle Thin and Candle Tricky

Susan Johnson

Childhood a throw rug bathed in sneezes.
Endless card games of war. Chased out,
we marched through thigh-deep snow, not

stopping until we crested the neighborhood
hill. Not for the views but for the freedom
of it: striding, always plowing ahead.

Until radiation turned mother into a cloud.
The sun blocked, we checked for portents
scanning the palm of the sky. But what did

we know? Light candle thin and candle tricky.
The word mother embedded in the word
chemotherapy but that only discerned later,

after the gates had closed. Crossing enemy
territory, we tried wiping the horizon clean.
A worm in our heads kept steering us toward

water so its larva could swim and breed more
worms to enter our heads. To maintain course,
we followed stonewalls like veins. But where

was the heart of the matter? Off somewhere
faintly beating. It's not life but death that
goes on, little huts of it offering little shelter.

It's where we thought the answers were hidden.
But doubt continued to scupper the expedition.
With no clear direction, we stumbled across

scraggy fields always remembering to thank
mother for the gift of two legs and arms so
on clear nights we could paddle to the moon.

St. Dominick's Orphanage, 1945-1950

Lenny DellaRocca

He says he saw peacocks this morning in the cemetery.
Then he told me about
the nun who took him
into a closet
with a wire hair brush,
and that his father
had come to visit
twice in five years.
Children wore
new shoes, he says,
but changed back
into shoes stuffed
with newspaper
after visitors went home.
There were German prisoners
at a camp across the field
standing outside all day.
They were singing.
Once, he was made to sit on the stoop for three months
for smiling at Jenny.
He counted ants.
When he ran away
they found him sleeping
under the George
Washington bridge.
All the kids learned
to read each
other's eyes
in the mess hall. Talk,
he said, and they were
dragged from the table,
brought upstairs
to the bald Marine
who made them bend over a chair.
And every time the girls came
outside he looked at Jenny,
and she looked at him from the other side of the fence.

The Young Man Who Preferred Education

Oscar Hernandez

During summers a young man works with his father.
The boy grows tired of cutting wet broccoli all week.
At his house he plays with his plastic action figures
And marbles behind closed doors.
He sees a kid at school using the newest iPhone
And wishes he could do the same.
When his first chin hair appears, he plays with it.
He shows it off at the dinner table.
His father says, *Ya! Tienes que ser un hombre
Y ayudar a la Familia.* He had kept the boy's mouth shut.
The young man knew he would one day fill his father's
Shoes full of mud and grass. The first time
The young man visited his school counselor
His eyes opened to many job opportunities.
For four years the counselor picked him up for school
And dropped him off at his house after.
The young man then walked at graduation
While his father was unable to attend due to work.
His first day of college he moved in with his grandma.
She made chicken soup. She knew he did not like broccoli.

sky burial

John Sibley Williams

the sea is called / a body & the children
/ are still dying / so far from here / & here

sometimes / bones rearranged into / drowned
or *dragged off* skyward / *biopsied* or *blood-*

slicked pavement / at night / when the white
pines cut against an un- / white sky / history

moving its mouth / without speaking / my
daughters who are beginning / again to look

like *other* / like bullets exiting / our country's
borrowed language / white / language / rage

& hue / what I cannot hold / of them I hold
so close the sea / still a body / aches & sings

its shame / aches & sings & washes clean
all evidence / that to be an echo means once

you wailed / once the sea & sky & white white
stars / & their bodies / still living inside us—

Girlhood Eulogy

Danielle Shorr

I stopped playing with dolls
long before I stopped wanting to

one day it was Barbie and the next
it was something grown

a padded bra or a thong with a metal charm, drugstore
makeup I didn't know how to put on correctly

my bedroom full of stuffed animals,
my jeans saying otherwise

I couldn't tell you what age
stopped me from being a girl

or when woman became, just that
it happened and I don't remember when

I wanted to be sexy before
I knew what sex was

I couldn't tell you when I actually learned, just that
it happened before I could swallow pills

I wanted to love the color pink
so I chose blue instead

I wanted to play with Barbies
so I stayed out all night with men I called boys

I wanted to be wanted
so I got rid of the things I adored

still sleeping with my security
blanket, I smoked on the way to school

at some point I was supposed to hate my mom, even if
I still slept on her bedroom floor sometimes

I don't know what to call it
but I know what it is. And who doesn't?

I was a woman before I had the body,
the accessories, the age

in the doorframe of my closet, on top of shower tiles
or between bed sheets, floating in hallways

Now I stand in my library and stare
at the dolls in my possession

Most bought online in pristine condition, their boxes
lined up neatly on Ikea shelves

I want to open them, but something
tells me I'm not supposed to

San Jose, California Shooting Duplex

Julie Weiss

A day can lodge an image in a brain.
My daughter's front tooth fell into her bowl.

Bodies fell into the fire of a grudge.
Some gaps on earth will never be filled.

Somewhere, a child's eyes are filled with gaps.
Tonight, a fairy will leave three shiny coins.

Taptejdeep left his hiding place to help friends.
Ghosts swim red, splash under my pillow.

My children splash each other in the tub.
Guns are blooming in sweet American soil.

I sweeten their mouths with a pocketful
of lies. I'm buried in poems of ways to die.

Bury me in my children's fairy smiles
instead of this image, lodged in my brain.

Checkers with Grandpa

Annie Brown

The sun filtered through the window
of a 1970s single wide trailer.

Brown paneling encased the walls
tried to bring in the warmth of wood
to the dim living room.

At six, I sat across from grandpa.

A checkerboard,
placed on a plastic tv tray
a cracked floral pattern
peeked out beneath the board.

Cigarette haze lingered in the room.

As we played this game,
the chatter from mom and grandma
drifted in from the sunny kitchen.

His shaky hands
rattled the pieces around the board.

I accidentally brushed against his calf.

He leaned in close,

You can go higher

In a hushed voice.

His black eyes
gleamed in hope.

He twisted a smile.

I shrank,
knowing of his nakedness
beneath that worn white robe.

The stinging metallic taste
raised to my throat.

I looked at grandma's shelves
full of blown glass paper weights.

The clear smooth orbs
with a firework of colors inside,
shiny and clean.

Bones

Huina Zheng

The day started earlier than usual for Ye and Chou. Today was different because she needed to catch the train to her hometown, a small village in the southeastern area of Guangdong province in China. She hadn't been to see her family in nearly two years.

"You should eat to avoid low blood sugar," said Chou.

"I have no appetite." Ye took a bite of a steamed stuffed bun and put it down. "Besides, you know I don't want to go." She gave him a sullen glare.

"But it's your big brother's tomb moving ceremony. Your ancestors and big brother have a new tomb. It must be something important, or your parents wouldn't insist that you show up." Chou poured a glass of milk and handed it to Ye.

"I don't remember him. I was only five when he died. I don't even remember what he looked like."

"Don't you Hakkas value funeral culture?" His eyes met hers across the table.

"They do, but female descendants have no place in my culture. Father only took my brother to visit our ancestors' graves during the Tomb Sweeping Festival. When I asked Father to take me there, you know what he said?" She paused and took a deep breath. "He laughed. He wouldn't even bother to answer as if I had asked for a ridiculous favor. One main reason the Hakkas want sons is that they need their male descendants to remember them, pay respects, and clean their graves. This male-dominated culture is why daughters are not valued. I hate my own culture!" Her whole body shook.

"But parents love their children. I believe your parents must..." Chou placed a hand on Ye's shoulder.

She shook his hands off. "You know nothing! Just because

you are the only child in your family and your parents adore you, it doesn't mean that every child is valued. You don't understand what it feels like being a daughter is a crime! I am never part of the family. My parents raised me as if they wasted their time and money." She had to stop to breathe. "My parents don't even like you. Why do you always stand up for them?"

"When they know me better, I am sure they will like me and..." He gave her a gentle smile.

"No, they won't!"

Ye got up, snatched her backpack, and left.

She looked out the train window. Bright sunshine flooded the wooded terrain, the rolling hills and receding trees. Father's sneer floated into her mind. Old humiliations and rage rose within her. Her cell phone vibrated.

Chou: You barely had breakfast. I put some biscuits in your bag just in case.

She put down her phone. She was still mad, but could she blame him for his innocence? She never told Chou why her parents didn't like him. Besides, Chou always saw the good in others. Wasn't it why she was attracted to him? She always struggled with a worthless feeling, but Chou saw the best qualities in her and helped her see them herself. A moment later, her phone vibrated again.

Chou: Sorry. I should be more understanding.

Ye sighed and typed: *That's all right. I shouldn't be mad in the first place.*

After she walked out of the station, several motorcycle drivers approached her and asked where she wanted to go. She was not sure if she would recognize the distant cousin who was supposed to meet her. There was no taxi in the remote countryside station. She spotted a young man standing before a car and hesitantly walked towards him.

"Ye?" he asked. She nodded and got in. "Your first time back

here?" he asked.

"No. I went several times as a kid, but I haven't visited since I was 15." She looked outside the window as he kept talking.

"I saw a woman with long black hair. I thought it was you. I almost waved at her, but I saw that she was holding a baby so knew it couldn't be you." Her cousin's words jogged her memory of the red-lips lady. Ye shivered.

The car embarked on a dusty, unpaved course that took them up-and-down over thirty minutes. She was silent the rest of the trip.

She saw her mother standing before a litchi tree. She got out the car and thanked her cousin. She walked towards Mother who wore a green blouse and a long, black skirt. An emerald spider was embroidered on the blouse. It flickered in the sunlight. Mother's eyes were large and saucy, and the deep marks on her eyelids swept straight into her temples. Mom was beautiful, Ye thought, even though she got old, her eyes were still young.

Mother stared her up and down. Ye wore a black cardigan, jeans, and white sneakers stained with dust. Her long black hair was scraped back from her face in a ponytail. Her complexion and lips were a little pale; she often stayed up late to work overtime, and she had several blemishes on her forehead and dark circles under her eyes.

Mother sighed, "You should dress yourself up. Red suits you. Don't always wear black, grey, or brown. Those colors are for old women."

"It's inappropriate to dress in red at *dage's* tomb." They didn't talk about her late brother after he passed away. Ye felt awkward to say *dage*, big brother.

"You know I don't mean dressing like that for today," Mother raised her voice.

"Where is Father, Min and Hua?" she looked around, not wanting to argue.

“Min is helping your father prepare for the ceremony to move your *dage’s* bones into the new tomb. Taotao is sleeping in the car and your sister is with her.” Mother explained.

They walked towards the tomb. Surrounded by litchi trees there stood a white cuboid stone house. Dark blue tiles covered the roof with two slopes that formed a triangle at each side. The tiles looked like fish scales. Beside the tomb there was a path made of the same stones as the white house. Ye and Mother walked down the steps.

Ye saw a concrete rectangle floor in front of the stone house where a row of bright red flowers grew. The fiery red seemed like fire under the sunshine, burning up life. The contrast of colors gave Ye a sense of vertigo and unreality.

Min and Father burned paper money in a grate before the stone house. “*Dajie*, good to see you,” Min greeted her. *Dajie*, big sister.

Ye turned to look at the house. It had two rooms, each with a hollowed-out iron door. Father said, “Pottery vessels with a dozen of your ancestors’ bones were placed in the left tomb. We put the vessel with your *dage’s* bones in the right side.” Ye tried to say something in reply, yet she could only force a smile. She stood in the sun, stupefied, her cheeks burning. In the southern China’s winter, it was hot. Ye felt herself sweating slightly. She heard footsteps, and then she saw her younger sister, Hua.

Hua had a beautiful oval face, large and remarkably beautiful eyes, a thin nose, and a small plump mouth. Her skin was fair. She had bangs at the front of her forehead, part of her hair was braided, and the rest pulled down naturally. She wore a white shirt with lace sleeves, light yellow jacket, and camel pleated skirt. It showed her slender straight legs. She did not look like in mid-twenties, but more like a teenager.

“Where is your daughter?” Ye asked.

“Sleeping in the car. Mother said the ceremony will end soon, so I’d better come down.” She took the incense Mother gave her.

They all stood before *dage's* pottery vessel. With both hands holding incense, they bowed three times. Mother spoke to *dage*, "We are all here to see you. Your sisters and brother are grownups so you may not recognize them. Take a good look at them. As the eldest son, you must bless and protect your siblings. Hear me? If you don't do your work, I will reprimand you." Mother said so as if *dage* stood before her, still alive. And then Mother turned to her remaining children. "Greet your *dage*. He must miss you very much," she said in a choked voice.

"*Dage*, we are all fine. You can rest in peace." Min put the incense in the censer after saying so.

"*Dage*, we miss you." Hua did the same after saying it. *How could you remember dage as you were only three years old when he passed away?* Ye wanted to blurt out, but a skeleton hand covered her mouth.

She stood there, staring at the pottery vessel with her big brother's name on it. She murmured, "I will take care of them. Don't worry." When she put the incense in the censer, for a brief second, she saw a woman with long black hair, red lips and red heels smile at her, holding a baby in her arms.

In the shadow of the house, she suddenly felt chilly. The tears that rolled down her face felt chilled. She lifted the back of her hand and wiped them.

"Now with a new tomb, your *dage* can finally have a house of his own. He does not need to take up his residence with our ancestors, crowding the occupants of the little house." Mother put her incense in the censer. "Just five years after we buried him, we unearthed his remains, collected them in a pottery vessel and buried him in the family mausoleum. I remember it as though it happened yesterday." Mother paused and wrinkled her brows in contemplation.

Scenes of the first months after *dage's* death rose before Ye's eyes- Father worked away from home and returned late at night, Mother stayed at bed and cried all day and night.

Granny stayed with them for a few months and cooked. Ye had to grow up overnight and took care of herself and Hua. Ye never witnessed *dage's* secondary burial ceremony. The secondary burial practice was due to the constant move of the Hakkas. For centuries, the forefathers of the Hakka people were constantly on the road. Whenever they moved again, they would unearth their ancestors' remains and bury them near their new dwelling place. Her ancestors could rest assured that wherever their descendants went, they would keep the remains of them nearby. Yet she did not know where she would be buried after she died, probably in her future husband's family mausoleum. This was not the place for her bones. She felt isolated and distant at *dage's* new tomb. Why would her parents insist they all show today?

Mother continued, "This morning, I picked up his bones and placed them into the new pottery vessel. It's nothing scary. Your brother's bones were so small. He was just a little boy when he died."

Dage was 7 when he died. I was 5, Hua was 3, and xiaomei would have been four months old. Ye could only call her youngest sister *xiaomei* because she "disappeared" a few days after she was born, before she even had a name. They never talked about *dage* or *xiaomei*. Ye remembered asking Mother where *xiaomei* was when she could not find her, and Mother told her *xiaomei* passed away and warned her to never bring it up again. Mother never explained why *dage* and *xiaomei* were taboo.

Ye wanted to ask Hua if she remembered *xiaomei* and the woman with red lips and red heels. Ye remembered the woman also gave Hua a red packet that contained lucky money as a Spring Festival gift per the custom and commented that *xiaomei* looked exactly like Hua. But how could you count on a three-year-old's memory? So, Ye never mentioned *xiaomei* to her sister.

As Mother promised, the ceremony ended quickly. They

headed to a restaurant.

“*Dajie*, you should eat more. You are too skinny,” Min said while driving.

“I don’t want to become fat,” Ye replied.

“Your brother cares about you. You will look as beautiful as your sister if you put on five kilograms’ weight,” Mother declared.

“Can we just not talk about my body shape?” she frowned. Her phone vibrated.

Chou: Have you eaten yet?

Ye: No. On our way to the restaurant.

Ye had to constantly remind herself her family and Chou showed their love and care for her by asking, but the questions always left her drained.

“Have you eaten yet?”

“What did you have for lunch?”

“Did you enjoy your meal?”

“Have you had enough?” Ye could recall all the questions her family asked each time she returned home. What else could they talk about? During the years she left home, they had grown farther apart and become familiar strangers.

“You should treat yourself right. Buy a new cell phone. You have been using that phone since college. Look at this latest iPhone. Your sister bought it for me. You should buy this one, too.” Mother took out her phone from her handbag and showed her.

“Mom, I can’t afford it. I told you. We are saving for a down payment on a house.”

“Who is this ‘we’? Your father and I won’t approve. Come home next month and meet Mr. Zhang instead. He is a business partner of your uncle. He owns a large construction company. You won’t need to work so hard to buy a house. Look at your sister. She married a rich man, and she doesn’t even need to work.”

“Yes, but the house proprietary certificate is in her husband’s name, who bought it before they got married. That means Hua will never get the house once they get divorced.” She adopted a brisk businesslike tone.

“You are jealous of your sister. That’s wrong. Besides, Chou is still a student, making no money at all.”

“He is doing his Ph.D.,” she corrected Mother.

“A doctoral degree in history? What job can he get and how much money can he make?” Mother shook her head.

Ye opened and shut her mouth. She looked down at her cell phone.

Chou: Everything okay?

Ye: So far so good.

“Chou makes me feel worthy,” she said looking outside. The car bounced along a bumpy mountain road. Ye saw a wide stretch of litchi trees with dense foliage. They resembled green umbrellas.

“Nonsense! When you have a rich husband and sons, you will be worthy then.”

Hearing this, Ye felt disgusted, and a brace of mountain that came into view looked like mottled, brown-and-yellow horses clopping down a dusty road through clouds of dirt.

“Mom, would you please stop! If you like Mr. Zhang this much, you should get a divorce and marry him.”

“*Dajie*, Mom worried about you. She does so for your own good,” Min said. Ye felt Min looking at her through the rear-view mirror. She shot him a dead look.

“That’s it! He is your brother. You only have *one* brother.” Mother’s voice rose to a shriek.

“Why do you always act like I have more than one sister? I also only have one sister!” Ye fixed Mother with an angry stare. *Where was xiaomei? Was she still alive? If she did die, where were her bones?* She felt like yelling, but a skeleton hand covered her mouth, and another rounded her throat.

“We are your *family*. You always hurt our feelings.” Mother dabbed her eyes with a napkin.

Mom, I worked and paid for my college tuition. I paid for Hua’s college tuition. I also paid for the down payment of your son’s car. I did my obligation as the eldest daughter. She sucked in her bottom lip and clenched her fists instead of reminding them of all she had done. It was never enough. Mother always told her that a married daughter was just like water that had been poured- she didn’t belong to her parents anymore. Her parents spent time and money raising her, so naturally, they expected her to repay them before she got married. She was forever the daughter-in-law that belonged to her future husband’s family in her parents’ eyes. The silence was pregnant with strangled screams.

“If your *dage* were alive, I wouldn’t even have this conversation with you. You only have one brother left! Only one!”

A whimpering sound rushed past Ye’s ears; the sound she always heard when she was overwhelmed by rage and pain.

“At least you have a son.” Ye unclenched her fingers and looked down at the nail marks on her right palm.

“Yes, I have a son. I have only one son left,” Mother whispered.

Ye recalled that so often on her way to the bathroom at midnight, she passed Mother’s bedroom and heard her whimper *dage*’s name. An enormous heaviness came over her. “I am sorry you lost a son. It must be hard. I am sorry, I really am.” She patted Mother on the arm.

They sat around the round table in the restaurant. Ye sat next to Hua and Taotao. She glanced over the meat dishes and sighed. Her family always assumed that she was on a diet and would not believe that she simply preferred a light diet to meat, but she did not want to argue. She reached out to pick broccoli.

“The shrimp is fresh and delicious. Have some,” Mother

reached over with her chopsticks to refill Hua's and Ye's bowls.

"Thanks, Mom." Hua smiled back at Mother, shelled shrimp and put it in her mouth. "Yes, it's delicious. Mom, you should also have some." Hua put shrimp in Mother's rice bowl.

"Your auntie always encourages me to have more shrimp. She said eating shrimp can slow down aging," Mother said casually.

"I think she only said so in the hope that you will buy shrimp from her. She eats shrimp almost every day. Even though she is your age, she looks at least ten years your senior." Mother and Hua laughed together. The smile disappeared to be replaced by a frown when she saw that Ye didn't eat any shrimp. "Ye you should eat more meat."

"Mom, I am allergic to shrimp," Ye replied without looking up.

"Nonsense! You have never been allergic to any food. You are always a fussy eater, just like your father."

"That's because you never cooked shrimp when I was young."

"Because you, Min and Hua never wanted to have shrimp. You thought it troublesome to shell shrimp. That's why." Mother put down her chopsticks.

"Mom, *dajie* just doesn't like it," Min tried to help. He added, "*Dajie*, try these pig trotters simmered in red sauce. They are delicious."

"Get over it. Just have lunch," Father said in a firm voice.

Father stubbed out his cigarette in a ceramic dish on the table. In the smoky light, Mother's mouth was closed, but her chopsticks kept moving around the plate, as if looking for something. She picked up a rib and put it down. Ye put broccoli in her mouth and chewed.

As if the silence became too awkward, Mother said, "Your father has stayed in this restaurant and hotel for over a month, supervising the construction of your *dage's* new tomb. Now it's completed, he can go home with us today."

“That must have been hard,” Ye managed to say.

“Now that your *dage’s* tomb was built in accordance with *feng shui* principles, it will bless us all. Hua must be pregnant with a son,” Mother beamed as she looked at Hua.

“Pregnant?” Ye turned to look at the slight bulge in Hua’s belly.

“Two months,” she replied.

“I hope it is a son,” Ye managed to sound sincere.

“Thanks, *dajie*,” Hua said so as she tried to feed Taotao bone soup with a spoon. Taotao’s lips were closed tightly and turned her face away. “Open your mouth! It’s time to eat,” said Hua sternly.

“Maybe she is not hungry,” Ye said.

“It’s past lunch time. She must eat.”

As Hua put the spoon to Taotao’s mouth, she pushed, and the soup spilled out of the spoon.

“Pa!” Hua slapped her face, and Taotao cried. “Shut up! Stop crying or I will slap you again!” Hua hissed and raised her hand. Ye felt blood rush to her head and her chest felt rather tight, as if Mother had just slapped her.

“You should be more patient. She is just a baby. I will take Taotao out for a walk, and you can have lunch,” said Mother. She picked up Taotao and walked outside saying “Mommy shouldn’t slap Taotao. Granny is here. Taotao is a good girl,” Mother walked out of the room and rocked Taotao gently in her arms.

It was surreal to Ye that Mother doted on Taotao. Perhaps getting old made Mother better tempered. Ye slowly set her chopsticks down. She thought for a moment and said to Hua, “You know, the parent-child relationship we encountered in childhood is our model. This forms our character and determines how we will treat our children.”

“What are you trying to say?” Hua raised her eyebrows.

“I am saying that you don’t need to treat your daughter the

way Mother treated us. Life was hard on Mother. In her day girls were inferior, but it's different now. You can learn to love your daughter."

Hua wrinkled her small nose and snorted, "That's easy for you to say. Why don't you wait until you have a daughter and show me how you are going to love her?"

"I should just mind my own business." Ye raised her cup and drained it in one swallow.

"*Dajie*, what time is your train? I can drive you," said Min as he poured more tea for her. Ye tapped her fingers on the table to express thanks, and replied, "4 p.m."

"You should come home with us and stay the night. We are family. Family stays close and together. You can go back to Guangzhou tomorrow. You haven't come home for so long," Mother said as she walked towards the table.

"I can't. I have to work."

"It's better to marry a successful man than to work." Mother nagged.

"Mom, why don't you sit down and eat? You barely ate. Hua must be full, and she can take care of Taotao." Ye summoned up a smile.

"You should..." Before Mother completed the sentence, Father said sternly, "Just eat. A family is supposed to have a decent meal together."

On the train to Guangzhou, Ye looked out at farmland. The rails reflected the waning ray of light in the afternoon sun. A hurried sound vaguely sounded in her ears, and it grew louder and louder, until a loud whistle rang through the sky. She saw a train's red front and green car section, glass window and blue curtains. Her family's words always had the power to destroy her. Like words, the train had a destructive power and the power to create great wonder. She wished she could separate from the sights, sounds and sensations. The train whooshed by,

and sound trailed off.

It was nearly seven when Ye reached home. Chou took her in his arms.

“Are you hungry?” He asked while reaching for her hand.

“Just a little,” she smiled.

“Your hands are so cold. Have some porridge. It can warm you up.”

Chou put the porridge into bowls and placed them onto the table. They sat down to eat. Ye took a spoonful, blowing to cool it.

“I am sorry for what I said this morning,” she started.

He patted her hand.

“I was just mad at the male-dominated culture. Nowadays people are cremated after death. I don’t think the Hakkas can keep the secondary burial culture anymore. Yet my parents will always prefer males,” she said calmly. She wanted to explain to Chou why she remained resolutely opposed to this culture, but the woman with red lips and red heels surfaced in her mind.

“But...” Chou hesitated.

“I know. They are my parents.” He would never understand. She was already an ungrateful daughter. It would always be her fault. She had better keep that opinion to herself.

“I will wash the dishes. I know you have homework,” she said. After they finished dinner, Ye took both bowls and spoons to the sink. She rolled up the sleeves, turned on the tap, picked up a bowl and put it under the water. She rubbed a rag over the bowl. The woman with red lips grinned at her from the bottom of the sink. She lost her grip and the bowl split open.

“You okay?” Chou rushed over.

“Mother said I always broke things. It’s my fault. Why is it always my fault?” she choked out.

“No one blames you.” Chou put her arms around her.

“Could you please let me alone?” she pushed him away. Then she remembered Chou once told her that when she was angry,

she acted like a hedgehog, either spreading out all the quills or rolling into a ball. She murmured, "Sorry. I am just tired."

"I know," he patted her on the back, and added, "Take a shower, and go to bed early."

Ye took melatonin and went to bed. She remembered it was lunar New Year when that woman with red lips and red heels arrived because Mother always dressed them red for Chinese spring festival. The woman gave she and Hua a red pocket with lucky money. She guessed *xiaomei* was born a few days before. Ye drifted off, remembering *dage* was severely ill, and Father and Mother were busy running around for money. Everyone was poor. She saw the woman gave Mother a thick red pocket. The woman held *xiaomei* in her arms and walked out of her house. She tried to yell "stop," but the woman turned around, "Shh!" She whispered, her skeleton hand covering Ye's mouth.

In the deep of night, Chou woke from long, shuddering sobs. He didn't turn on the light but held her in his arms, her back against his chest, her unkempt hair brushing his face. "There. There. I am here. I understand," said Chou tenderly, like a mother trying to calm her child.

The Hands of Che Guevara

Patrick Dawson

The morning of vivid color has paled to a white silence. Motionless lizards cling to walls, to the black skeletons of trees. In the marketplace, the shops and stalls are all shuttered against the heat except for one ancient mestiza who sits under the shadow of a tree with her brightly colored cloths. Her lips are parted in prayer. Perhaps in answer, a slight breeze stirs her white hair. In the quiet, a boy's cart makes the barbed sound of metal on the stones, the empty road that leads to the sea. Marina sits alone, listening to the beat of boy footsteps passing the cantina window. Sandy told her more than once he would make it out to the sea, but he never did. Across the plaza, there is the small square of trees where he sought to hide. She won't allow herself to look there, where a garden is now planted with yellow and white flowers. At the top of the church, where the Madonna sits, sunlight strikes pale gold script: *Los Santos Martires*. The Holy Martyrs. There is an urgent beat of memory then. It is as though she is the sole listener to a countless sea of murmurs. She feels light and floating, the moment amplified by stillness and the immobile shimmering heat and the once familiar smells. An instant in which the image draws near and once more, impossibly, it is just after dark and she hears the random notes tiptoe again from the open window. The barest smile forms. Years fall away, petals from a flower yielding to time.

"It was a long time ago..."

Somehow, she can hear the old man's voice again and agrees. Marina wishes she could turn to him and tell him so. As always, the thought of the voice is melodic and soothing. A voice of abandoned days. She focuses on the sound of the voice and the rhythmic notes only she hears, the counterpoint they

weave, their whisper of intimacy, the smooth ebb and flow like a splinter of moonlight gliding in and out of clouds. The vision of San Pedro de la Cruz as it was, dusty, rutted streets, the wide plaza with the Madonna, all of it rising out of the rhythm of the voice and the music that faded long ago.

She looks at the unswept floor of the cantina, feeling for the husk of these memories, what remains of them. A silent old woman has brought her a small glass which rests near her hand, cloudy, amber liquid coating the bottom. Marina raises it to an old photo of Che propped on a shelf near the door, dust covering its face. The young warrior of revolution, eyes alight, a troop of rebels at his feet in some jungle, secure in his righteousness. A long-forgotten image from a magazine comes back to her: his shirtless corpse lying on a slab surrounded by different soldiers laughing, his open eyes staring up, searching like a saint. She thinks of all that once lay behind the eyes, the desperate acts, the ceaseless pull of revolution, a final volley of shots. The martyr's death.

Marina resents the stillness, regrets the absence of voices now. All around her, the tired pueblo seems to be sleeping and her thoughts give way to a swell of regret. *I came here to save my brother then.* Despite everything, that much I know. Well, not only him, I came to help people who needed it. But it was Sandy's idea to come. *I came to help.* She says this aloud in a soft voice. *I meant to help, only that.*

"Yes, that's what you said then too." The old man's words rise up gently from the stillness and leave some absolution in their wake, perhaps just forgiveness. Forgiveness will do.

What were you playing? In your room that night, can you remember the melody?

"Of course, it was an old Cuban love song." The old man's words glide through her mind, intimate like the whisper of a secret. "I learned it in Havana before the revolution, before Castro. There was music everywhere then."

What was it called?

“*El Amor Muere Lentamente*. It means...love dies slowly. You see, the music we had to play back then was mostly for the dancing, with a quick, samba beat.”

She is sure she can hear his fingers snapping rhythmically.

“But now and then I got to play a mournful saxophone, though still a bit jazzy, when the lovers danced slowly.” The voice is wistful and trails off like the notes once did. “*El amor muere...*”

Lentamente. Very sad. This she says out loud to the amber in the glass, which stirs with the trembling of her hands.

“Yes, but love must be sad sometimes or you will never taste its sweetness, no?” Then it seems, she can almost hear him sigh. “And Havana then was sweet but sometimes fiery. *Fue legendario* .”

But legends end, Marina thinks, and love.

Then the music, the fragrant memory of it, is rising to the surface once more, and she remembers the flutes of dahlias in the window box and the shimmer of light just behind and an orchestra of cicadas calling into the warm night. When Marina first saw this and heard the music, she was walking in the evening. She listened as it rose from the dark. She knows she was part of all this, of the music and the streets and the force of nature that was her brother when he collided with fate.

“Why did he come, *tu hermano?*”

This she cannot really answer, or does not want to. Even now.

What she does have is the faint memory of her brother always tagging along. An image she cannot keep from nudging into the present, though right now she doesn't want it to. But it is pushing everything else aside.

There was a Sunday morning when he carried his shoes silently into my room with the wallpaper of silvery birds that I loved. Where are we going, he said in the little boy voice. California—I answered without

hesitation—in a covered wagon with horses, and his velvet-blue eyes smiled. I tied his shoes and led him quietly down the back stairs so they wouldn't hear. It was always better to be quiet after the nights when they screamed at each other, the rasp of our stepfather's voice splitting the darkness, calling our mother names I didn't understand. Some of those nights I would hear Sandy crying and tiptoe into his room, climb in beside him and rock him into silence.

So quietly then, the back stairs to the back door to the screened-in porch with the broken step that I lifted him over. I remember the worn dirt path through the arc of magnolia and ivy and my brother's tiny feet in the shoes I tied scuffling up the dry red dust. How far is California he asked, and I looked off into the distance as though calculating a wise and thoughtful answer. We were almost to the river bank with the sagging, splintered dock where the water ran deep and fishermen stood without moving in the pale light. It's way on the other side of the river I said, pointing to the distance, and I could see the doubt creep into his face.

Then I said—again thoughtfully—it may be too far to go today and it looks like it might rain. Walking beside me, he nodded back—also thoughtfully—and I could have cried at the beauty of his five-year-old eyes that were the same pure blue as the river water coursing down through the mountain rocks and pushing past us. The rush of noise it made reminded me of a night wind in a storm. But I knew that beyond the reed-studded banks just ahead where it curved out of sight, the river turned into shallows that would be calm and white in the sun.

There was a trail that ran all the way around the dense undergrowth of the bottomland, but that was a long way and I had seen snakes there and it was easier just to slip into the river.

I felt the cold of the water, how good it was against my skin and the warm sun that answered it on my face and neck. Bright yellowy light that made me squint and turn back to smile at Sandy standing at the very edge of blue river. I knew he was afraid since he could not really swim, and I was a ten-year-old blond mermaid who had no fear, so I couldn't really appreciate his fright. I knew it was there but I could not feel it and that's when I said it to him.

Don't be a baby. It's not that deep.

That was it exactly, and I could see he felt shamed. And wanting to please me, he stepped once, twice into the water and when he fell, I was sure he would bounce up laughing but he stayed under for too long, only the tiny arms waving just above the waterline like tree limbs in a stiff wind. I felt the panic as the slender form of him slid past me in the current and later I would realize it was just his tiny foot, the last part of him that I grabbed, taking him back from the river's grasp. I saw the dark line of water and the terror of his eyes just below it and imagined the fear of losing him in the moment before his arms went around my neck. I have never known anyone to hold me that tightly, that way, his breath like an engine and ribbons of wet grass stuck to his face as if the river had marked him. Then we were on the riverbank in the broken shade of the trees and California was still far away on the other side of the river, and on that morning we were many days from losing each other.

A finger of sun is now at the cantina window, pointing toward the old photograph. Marina shudders at the strangeness of straddling time. Love doesn't die slowly, she thinks. It doesn't die at all.

"You should have said that to him." The old man's answer is like the murmur in a dream.

Yes, you're right, I should have.

Maybe in those years when he wrote me long letters. Handwritten letters, paragraph flowing from paragraph like his life was a long novel, as though he had an abundance of time. Beautiful in a way, his long, looping script bent forward like an old man walking, letters completely given over to college mishaps, or the short flirtation with the priesthood, or those months in a county jail in Colorado that he made sound harmless, even entertaining somehow, as though he and the other inmates were actors in a television sitcom. And the times he was sent to Sandwood, the florid descriptions of his therapists there, comical in his telling, that unintentionally read like Kafka. All his letters full of disoriented wisdom, full of details

of his life that left her slightly disappointed in him.

And always near the end, scribbled like an afterthought, some memory of a moment they had shared together...I have been thinking of that time I saw you with your high school boyfriend, he wrote, all those **BUTTONS** (block letters, caps) undone on my sister's shirt. And I was so sure you were the sweet, innocent type.

Just like that, and then the sweet sign off:

Your best bro (your only one) king of the inmates...Sandy.

Letters that Marina always read through at least twice, all kept carefully through the years. Some days she wanted to save him so badly, but she didn't write back that often, even when his letters struggled to camouflage the despondency and he kept mentioning his new apartment in Boston and he was sure she had good friends living there, right?

But life always got in the way.

"But you are thoughtful and kind, everyone says so, don't they?" Another glass of amber has appeared as she weighs this. The old man's voice is a mirage drifting from the smoke of the cantina, like the blue smoke of the Cuban cigarettes he was never without, the haze obscuring him like a mist of angels. She once listened to him play Coltrane's version of *My Favorite Things* note for note with the cigarette dangling from two fingers until it was nothing but ash. She knew it was note for note because when she was first married, David made her listen to that album over and over and over again. Coltrane is a God, he'd say in his stoned murmur and lift the needle back to the start of the song. Even then, early on, she knew David was a mistake. But she liked to believe she was thoughtful and kind and knew how to care for people, to nurture them...

"So what brought you to our modest little town of San Pedro? For that matter, what brought you to Nicaragua?"

Marina knows the voice is teasing and testing her, and she laughs.

It was the music in the name, she whispers. Nic-a-rag-ua. That's what brought me. The lyrical sound of it caught hold of me, exuded some pleasure I had never known, something exotic. I heard joy in the name. I once went to Barcelona looking for the same thing. Bar-cel-o-na.

“Nicaragua was nothing like Barcelona, certainly not then with all the trouble.” The voice laughs between coughs from the blue smoke. “Havana was though, in the old days. Some days it was like a city given over to joy.”

And still you left...

“*La Revolución*, it changed everything. There was a woman in Havana that I cared for very much,” The old man’s words drift as though faraway, filled with the music of regret. “For many, many years, there was never a day I failed to think of her, right up until the end. I wanted to marry her, but they made me leave the country. You see, we had played for the Yanquis, took their money, so some of us were not pure enough for their revolution. No more Yanquis, no more dancing, no more money. *Nada*. The music stopped.”

Yes, that's how it was with my marriage. The music just...stopped. I never told anyone that except Sandy. That's when he told me to go away somewhere—the farther the better—to get that music out of my head. Then my brilliant brother said, “Let's go to Nicaragua. They're trying to remake the country. There's a lot you can do, you can help them. And I can get my head together.”

With her finger, she pushes a stray cigarette ash from the table, remembering his way of making crazy sound altogether sensible. But she was finally done with law school. And done with being married. He was done with, well, Sandy had no ties.

“You were ready to do something, a thing *muy importante*. So you come to help us with our revolution.” There is irony in the voice she hears. “Twenty-five years before, I had no choice but to come home. But you should have stayed away.”

After a moment, she thinks yes, we should have, but then remembers how earnest Sandy was, how his eyes lit up at the

romance of it, just like that day at the river. California in a covered wagon. Me and my brother, who just wanted to tag along for the ride. Just as always.

I knew we were too old by then to just sneak off, even if that's what Sandy wanted. But I felt we had to tell our parents, that I had to tell them.

It was so long ago and a continent away. Yet, even now, she remembers every detail. The absolute dark around the house. Insects battering the screened porch. Her mother and stepfather, the spilled entrails of their contempt still filling that place after so many years. The long plastic tube snaking around his face to the canister on the chair and his ridicule staining everything. Her mother meek in the corner. And the thing she always tried to put out of her mind. They expected her to protect Sandy, always. As though they weren't part of it.

My stepfather wouldn't even look at me. "Why would you go there?" He said this to me between gasps like a swimmer coming up for air. "Those dirty people should take care of themselves. You'll get killed or raped. And they're Communists."

Because I can help them and they need help, I said, though I wasn't really sure how I would help.

"Listen to Dolly Do-Gooder, why don't you help yourself, your fucking marriage? Or that dope-dealing, felon brother of yours?"

I remember that Sandy was upstairs through all this, and I hoped he couldn't hear. I wanted to go and hold him, shut all of it out. I still wonder at what they knew and did not know of their own son. Or of me? They had no idea it was him egging me on. So I didn't tell them Sandy would tag along with his sister once more. To get away from everything, he'd said. Well, I knew something of that too.

She fingers the rim of her glass and toes the layer of dust at her feet into two overlapping circles.

It was the last time we were all together, but I didn't know that then.

She is sure she can hear the old man fingering the keys of his horn like he did before starting to play, and the voice is

thoughtful. “When you first came, things were not so bad. I could play my horn in the cantina or the plaza at night.”

It was the first night, or one of the first nights, she could see it all now. After dinner, walking and there were the notes, those perfect notes and Sandy said that’s good jazz I hear. The old man was on a rickety stool, the saxophone resting on one knee, his head bowed, a shower of white hair crowding his closed eyes and by his foot, a frayed hat holding one silver coin that he tapped gently with the rhythm.

“Yes, on a good night I could make a *córdoba* or two. The sweet melody of free enterprise.” The tone of his voice, which Marina is almost sure she can hear, holds some irony once more. “My little capitalist experiment in the midst of revolution.”

Sandy put a dollar in your hat and you nodded and your face filled with a smile.

“You used to walk together after dinner, didn’t you?” The man’s voice describes this as if reciting the pieces of a story.

Almost every night, she thinks. It was always evening when she got back from work negotiating for food in the barrio, or trying to. On the days when there was enough food to give away. After the soldiers took what they wanted.

The past is opening to her now.

Then, if the streets were quiet and there was no fighting, Sandy would be waiting in the lobby of the pensión and we would go out and walk. He called those walks his therapy. He always wore sunglasses and this yellow Panama hat he bought at the airport. People stared at him but he never noticed.

“They probably thought he was CIA. A gringo in sunglasses. There was a lot of paranoia then.”

He really liked your music.

She is certain she hears the old man’s tired sigh again.

“And I liked him. That first night in the plaza, I could tell he knew something about the jazz sound.”

Well, I taught him everything he knew.

She laughs again, and she can feel the woman at the bar watching. Then her mind slowly calls up the image, a dream revealing itself. Sandy watching the old man play, lost in it, eyelids not quite closed, drifting.

“But I couldn’t help him, not with that problem.” The old man’s words are like a wish that lingers. “I recognized it, saw it in his eyes when he took off the sunglasses. I had seen so many with it years before, the musicians I played with and their women too. Lost to everything in their haze. So I just played him the music. We do what we can do, no more.”

Why didn’t I see it, why didn’t I know? About him?

“Didn’t you?”

She has never been able to answer this, not really. And there was so much to do then. So much fighting, the hunger, the countless frightened eyes. So many that needed her help. Sandy was getting better, she told herself. He was so far from the disapproval at home that it seemed like he was getting better. She had watched him on the plane ride down, how he was so excited he talked constantly the first hour. Then he went to the bathroom for a while and when he came back down the aisle with his head down, his eyes seemed dusted with some private sorrow no one could touch, and he was silent the rest of the way.

I should have done, what? Something...

“None of us is blameless, *mi querida*...”

She has re-read all his letters, including the last one that he had written that afternoon. The one she didn’t get to see until afterwards, that he was going back home.

I didn’t know it, but there were other letters he wrote me then, ones he never sent. I might have understood more. That evening all he told me was that he wanted to stay at the pensión, that he was tired. His voice was dead somehow.

“That was the night you were to come to my house. I had

saved the good Mezcal for the two of you. When you asked how you would know which house was mine, I told you just to listen for the music.”

His voice blends with what she sees in memory. A street named for a saint. The tiny homes of white stone, roofs of flattened tin cans, the aroma of dry dust and pale vaporuous smoke drifting from each house. Then from nearby, the ascent of memorable rhythm and notes. She had leaned her head back then and the last sunlight of evening slanted across the rooftops and was warm on her face as she listened. Coltrane but with Latin rhythm somehow, from an open window framed with faint light and the shadow of the old man swaying with his horn, each pure note gliding gracefully one into another.

I was going to stand outside and listen until you finished, but just then I heard the gunfire, what sounded like dozens of shots some streets away, and it seemed within moments, the shots were much nearer.

“And that’s when I came out and saw you,” the old man’s voice says.

You had the sax in one hand and held the screen door open with the other. Come here quick, girl. You said it in English like you understood I wouldn’t know what to do. Then you shouted in Spanish, Aqui, aqui!

Sitting alone, the past is wide open to her now and she can hear the ragged crack of the bullet that had frozen her at the doorway.

I remember stumbling when you grabbed my arm and pulled me toward you. It was the first time I was really afraid there.

“There was much to be afraid of. Sandinistas, Contras, militias. No one really had all the power, so they would shoot each other in the streets. You must have known that.”

I can remember the shots. Volleys of them, not too distant, and the shouting. You pushed me down on the floor by your bed and there was the smell of tobacco in the bedspread and I closed my eyes. I was so frightened. Then you turned out the lights.

“Si, but when I looked out again, there was a yellow Panama

hat. He was walking, almost drifting near the square by the trees, in his own world despite the shooting. Looking around as if searching for something, someone.”

Someone to tag along with, she thinks, or maybe to say goodbye. For a moment, Marina can feel the water in the river the time she managed to save him.

Then you went back out in the street...

“We do what we can. I cannot explain it.” What she hears now is like a sacred whisper. “He seemed so lost, like a child.”

Yes, a child, that was him. All these years, I wanted to believe I could have saved him, kept him from it all.

“We cannot help everyone. I was an old man. That is why I went out. Bravado is easy for an old man with little time left.” The voice now is tired, distant like an echo.

It is late. The last pale light has come to the sky above the cantina. The slow gathering dark, the dim lamps of houses showing and the steady rise of night breeze that gathers up memories. Just in the suddenness of this moment, in the shadows, Marina can almost picture the old man’s face, the snow-like beard and the tired kind eyes. The way it was in the room back then with the strong cigarette smell, the tile floor worn shiny and the sudden glint of light on his saxophone when he opened the door. In the moment before he went out into the street after Sandy. The shouting and the awful noise. The terrible silence.

She and the old man, joined once, joined now, inseparable like moons drawn close by gravity.

She has thought of coming back here many times, as if there was something still to find. A letter still unopened, unread. Some solace that will change it all. There is the unhurried sound of evening birds. Her gaze settles on the photograph by the door and beyond, the unchanging worn streets, just as they used to be, despite the price paid by people in their revolutions. After he was ambushed, they had cut off the warrior’s hands to

identify him, then buried him that way. An unmarked grave, the indifferent earth. She had read it in a book. *Las Manos de Che Guevara*.

There is the sound of a door closing, the old woman slipping off. Marina leans back in the light that is now evening and starts to cry silently, bathed in thoughts of Sandy and the old man's face. The voice is gone. There is just the silence now that tells her everything, and no one else is listening. It has taken many years for her to come back. She is repeating the words to herself, her lips moving over them.

The revolution is a memory. *Viva la revolución*.

Dear Sylvia

Laura Read

When I was 32, I was driving home from work
on Sunset Boulevard, which sounds more picturesque

than it is: there's an old coffee shop that is sometimes
an ice cream shop and is now boarded up

because of the pandemic, a bar called Lucky You
that had just opened at the beginning

of the pandemic and is closed now too.
Railroad tracks that look like relics except

that a train is always coming, persistent
as history, so the rattling is part of the background

of every thought I've ever had
in my little car on the way to and from

my job, which was sometimes all the time
and space in a day when I could *hear my own thoughts*,

as my mother used to say when I asked her why
she stayed up so late and was always tired.

This day when I was 32, I heard my own thoughts.
They were saying, *When you get home,*

*there might be enough time to take the boys
to the park before you make dinner.*

They were saying I should grade at least ten
essays before bed. Then again, park, dinner, essays.

And then, why is there so much ringing?
And then, what they call a breakthrough,

as I took the turn by where Lucky You
is now but wasn't then,

Maybe it's not like this for everyone.

Maybe I shouldn't tell you this,

but my husband used to say I was having
a Sylvia Plath day when he came home

from work and I left him immediately
with the children. I know you are not a joke,

but when you're dead, this is the one of the things
you can become.

I don't know if you had the repeating.
Or the ringing. But I know the electroshock

made it so that a thought Esther had
would "swing loose like a noose,"

which is what I like about
selective serotonin reuptake inhibitors.

When I was 32, I went to a therapist named Linda
who wore the quiet kind of clogs that said

she was comfortable with herself.
There were certain things she was okay with me feeling

and other things she wasn't, which felt like home.
Her office had a loveseat and a picture of her son,

and remembering this made me sad when I read
her obituary a few years ago.

She fired me, which I found strange.
Said she'd done all she could.

This also felt familiar, so I shrugged and went.
I was 35 by then. I had another therapist

in my 40s. She also has some things she'll listen to
and some things she won't.

When I tried to tell my mother I'd had sex,
she put her hand up between us.

How did she know? I hadn't said anything yet!
Am I always about to say something

upsetting to mothers and therapists?
Are my thoughts that transgressive and transparent?

Sylvia, I don't think we would have liked each other
In Real Life, which is something we say now.

Because we have a virtual world on our computers
and phones where we can talk with each other

in print (not Real Life), where you and I thrive.
In Real Life, I prefer women who have been

as conditioned as I have. I don't want to have to do
all the procuring of actual and figurative drinks.

But in print, I want a woman who tells
the truth. Who resists. Who knows when she's served

two kinds of beans together at the hospital
that they're messing with her. Everyone knows

you don't eat two kinds of beans together.
Just who do they think she is?

Aubade with the World Ending

Jeff William Acosta

See their faces drift
not to the violin strings
of a tripwire, but

the lullaby it makes
when it touches the midnight
hour. The dead

passes like wind
through a wind chime
when the radio plays

“if the world was ending.”
Imagine singing
inside your shell

asking to be spared.
In this world, where breathing
is as close as fingers

trying to pull a trigger,
I was begging. Above me,
no moons could guard my teeth

nor traces of a few stars
can be seen through a rifle’s
scope. On my knees,

only the blank shells
blanket the cold
webs of our feet. Open,

my mother says
 and I opened my mouth
wide like an unpinned hand

 grenade—blossoming
like auburn skies,
 like rose petals

spreading its boneless wings
 in the late dawn, like burning cities,
like napalm strikes. Some mornings,

 I try to forget I'd wake up
with a trigger, with a hole
 in my eye, where a bird can perch

only to be seen on my sea-black tinted iris
 as they consider my wounds
as their own and try to live.

Daylight

Jeff William Acosta

Here we are
only fireflies and naked little monsters in the dark—

prismatic lights
elaborately dissembling our bodies
with eyelids as our only covers.

Imagine underneath
the tongue: your throat dead

along with others patiently waiting
for each perpetual passing of the day.

Body still intact. You start to wonder

if clasped hands might be the end
of praying.

Imagine the morphing of summer sun and the horizon: Do you call it
daylight?

Let me call it *daylight*
but not autumn despite the red
despite the sky shredding
 with gunfire
despite the blood
 clotting
in our veins. Despite the president's
speech last night. Despite bullets
headed on our way.

The Vow

Joseph Fasano

When we are done with our ghosts,
they come to us one last time
in our new lives.

They stand on the threshold,
or in the kitchen
rinsing a bowl,

or smoothing a moon in the linens.
We are strangers to them now,
and they to us. We stand

looking past them into the yard,
where a child, the one
we never had,

runs through a sprinkler
singing hymns we swung from years ago.
Whatever we have done to them,

whatever they have done to us—
the words spoken in rage, the moment
we wept begging on our knees—

we walk to them now
and take them by the hands
and listen to the same wind

in the linens, the grasses
battering the transoms
like music we did not sing

to each other, the trouble
of the madness we once danced to,

the true music

we did not dance in the moon.
It is summer;
let it be summer;

the rooms smell of jasmine,
of yarrow;
the cats are basking in the windows.

And when we've waited
in the late light
and its coldness, when we've brushed the dust

from off each other's shoulders,
we look up into the eyes
we had forgotten

and see there, for the first time
in ages, the lost face
of the one life

we have turned from,
our own face
in the mirrors of our houses, waiting

where it's waited
all these hours,
asking us, asking us

to come home now.
Say my name, it whispers to us. Say it.
And all these seasons

later, love,
we say it;
all these seasons

later, love, we do.

Narcissus

Joseph Fasano

Say you had stumbled,
all winter,
through the rough country
of yourself.
Say you had drawn the bow of your heart
at the dark edge of the forest
and let the does go by,
let them drink
from the dark face of the river.

It is winter, it has always
been winter,
and say you had followed them
where they were going—

through the willows, through the silence, through the dark pines—

and when you'd come, at last,
to the riverside,
you'd knelt down in the deep leaves
and seen him: a child
in the shivering
of the river,
staring up from the ruins
of the new moon.

Wouldn't that also be mercy:
to drag your hand
through that changed face
in the water

and to see, there,
at the scarred heart
of the darkness,

the moonlight that you must have been
before ruin

and the ruin of you
undoing you in the moonlight

and the brief and sweetest moments
when the two of you
are equally beautiful.

The Source

Joseph Fasano

Spring again, I have come to the end
of the river, the place
where the deer lay down their bones, where fireweed

bursts through the leather
of old Chevys

and wild boys lay their buck-slugs
in the seat-backs—

where handprints smudge the dust
of windscreens
where a life, fresh-breathed, was entered
by another, just to be deep

in the thrill of it, just to be someone, just to be here.

Silence

in the deep weeds, and for weeks
I've thought of the Goshen woods,
of the mosses just north of Goshen, New York,
where I lay out, at seventeen,
seven empty bridles in my hands. The horses
were a neighbor's, and I had no stake in it

except everything, except that I guessed, as a child
would,
that nothing in this life would ever

not matter, the sound of rain
in maples
like your mother's voice the last time
you heard it, a burning

in your hands you have no words for, the river
through the trees like seven feral things
breathing, waiting, daring you to try.

Those were the longest nights of my life, no one
around but the sap whispering in the larch-fire, the pulse
of rain in the leaves,
the faintest echo of coyotes on the far side of the mountain.

I didn't know how to enter a thing
any more than I knew how to leave one, but the Neversink
was the swiftest
it had been—boat-rot, old chains
in its embankments—and those horses

stomped and snorted in the darkness on the far
shore, and how are the dead
not like the living—
how will they ever bring back themselves?

Often, when the moon
makes its way through the spruces
in this place
like someone carrying the brass, dismantled bed
of someone or other's child, the night-birds
trilling in the dogwoods as they do
after snow, the first stars darkening
the branches,

I'm
twenty-five again, curled in a snow-squall in the lean-to
on Hunter Mountain, praying to outlast the night.
I'd only gone up to leave my wedding ring
and my own bones
and a note to be unfolded by
the snows alone—

cedar-rot, the scent
of my own salt in my canvas pants,

but even the wind
has a say, even the wind rubbing its bridleless face
against those dovetails,

and without wishing it
I was a child again, searching for those horses
on the far side of the river. Time
is what we do with one another

and I remember how they fled from me
when I climbed the bank, how poor
we are, how the body belongs to no one.
I remember there are laws we live by, and we almost know them.
I remember knowing I would come back with nothing
but dust, nothing but morning in my hands.

Spring again, and

it's madness, this life. It's buck-slugs in the old Chevy
of your own heart, and when I hike out

and take the train
into the city

and climb the stairs to shoulder open
this rented door, I can—tell it—I can smell my own breath
in my plague mask, deep
as cedar, trembling
as the laurels on the far side of the mountain

and I'm thirty again,
lying out under the cold stars
of the Telegraph Pass, Alaska,
the cold stars that were not the bones

of any father in any river,
and I know
it's time.

That was the longest night of my life, that briar, that fire

dying down, the stars
like the lost ash of travelers,

and when I looked down
in those waters—moonlight, blue
spruce, pine-sap—it was the face
of the stranger who had led me, and he was
older, more father
than son now; he was
not lost in that savage place; he was
not afraid
and I

sat back and left my bread
for what had carried me

and I let the fire die
for the final stars,
and I sipped from the dark source
of the river,
and I followed him down the far side of the mountain.

Spring again,
and there comes a time
when the rain ceases in the grille-work
of this city
and children are bickering in the alleys
and a hunger creeps into your gut
you cannot explain, a burning

in your hands you cannot have back,
the morning like a mare's chin
on your shoulder.

Twenty-five years ago I used to walk out into the dark
and lift a saddle from the others
and cinch the girth into Cinnamon
and ride up into the mountains and build a fire
by that bend in the Neversink River
where someone hung a steering wheel
in the branches
and the scent is old leather

and velvet
and everything you've never hoped to enter.

It is still there.

I lost her
on the far side of the river

and I'm told they found them
down in the talus across the county line, galloped
all night from the callings
of some mad-eyed child,
their bodies twisted in the stone-dust
of the quarry, the cliff-face rising
slate and ancient in the morning light
behind them, their roan coats salted
with labor,
the briar of the long climb
in their knees.

Listen, the wind says. Listen.

There is shattered glass
and plague masks
in the alleys.

And the far stars
are still there in the clearings.

And the river runs
through the green weeds of the valley.

And the wind makes
an old song
in the oak groves—high up

in the laurels
and the blackthorn—

calling

on its wild way

to the river,

through the moon and the spruces

and the lupine

and the empty, blindered bridles in the trees.

— New York City, 2021

Contributors

Jeff William Acosta is a Filipino poet from Ilocos Sur, Philippines. He is a co-winner of the Sahaya: Timpalak Pampanitikan (STP) 2021 ng UP Sentro ng Wikang Filipino-Diliman, 2021 Jack Grapes Poetry semifinalist and *Boston Review* Annual Poetry Contest semifinalist. His poems have been published in *Voice & Verse Poetry Magazine*, *The Dark Horse*, *CAROUSEL*, *Matter Press*, *The Margins* and elsewhere.

Cindy Aguilar is a student at Truckee Meadows Community College.

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Matthew W. Baker currently lives in Richardson, Texas where he's pursuing a PhD in Literature. He received his M.F.A. from the University of Nevada, Reno and is the author of *Undoing the Hide's Taut Musculature* (Finishing Line Press, 2019). Other work has appeared or will appear in *The Atlanta Review*, *The Briar Cliff Review*, *The Baltimore Review*, *The Summerset Review*, *Booth Journal*, *Sundog Lit*, among others. You can follow him on Twitter @mmbakes.

Richard Baldo is a clinical psychologist, and that experience informs much of his poetry. He has been writing poetry off and on since his college days and began more intense writing efforts over the past 12 years. His few previous publications are professional. He won the University of Nevada, Reno English Department's D.Q. Award in Spring 2020.

Ace Boggess is author of six books of poetry, most recently *Escape Envy* (Brick Road Poetry Press, 2021). His poems have appeared in *Michigan Quarterly Review*, *Harvard Review*, *Notre Dame Review*, *Rattle*, and other journals. An ex-con, he lives in Charleston, West Virginia, where he writes and tries to stay out of trouble.

Annie Brown is a former student of Truckee Meadows Community College. She draws her inspiration from her childhood in rural Northern Nevada. She is currently living in Nevada.

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Patrick Dawson spent nearly three decades as a broadcast journalist, during which he was nominated for three Emmy Awards and was twice the recipient of Emmy awards for Outstanding Writing in News. His short story, "The Language of Rivers," was the recipient of the 45th New Millennium Writings prize for fiction in 2018. His story, "Threesome," was a finalist in Narrative's Fall 2018 contest and also longlisted for the Virginia Woolf Award for Short Fiction. He was a semifinalist for the 2021 Thomas Wolfe Fiction Prize and his story, "Purgatory," was longlisted for the Pulp Literature Press Hummingbird Fiction Prize. He was selected as a participant in the

2021 Bread Loaf Writers Conference and the upcoming Sirenland Writers Conference in Italy. His work has been published in *New Millennium Writings*, *Cowboy Jamboree* and *Sky Island Journal*.

Daniel Deisinger lives in Minnesota and writes for work and fun. His work has appeared in more than twenty publications, including *Havik*, *White Wall Review*, *Castabout Literature*, *Defenestration Magazine*, and *Ripples in Space*. His serial “Voices in My Head” is available on Kindle Vella. His twitter is @Danny_Deisinger, and his website is saturday-story-Time.weebly.com.

Lenny DellaRocca is founder and co-publisher of South Florida Poetry Journal-*SoFloPoJo*, which can be found at www.soflopojo.com. His work has appeared in *The Meadow*, and other fine journals.

Jordan Deveraux's poems have been published in *Bodega*, *The Shore*, *Slant*, *The Meadow*, and *Gravel*. Originally from Utah, he now lives in Queens, where he works as a substitute teacher, and rides skateboards on Sundays.

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Rebecca A. Eckland, M.F.A., M.A., M.A. is a professional nonfiction writer based in Reno, Nevada. She is co-author of the 2018 bestselling memoir *A Court of Refuge: Stories from the Bench of America's First Mental Health Court* by Judge Ginger Lerner-Wren. She is also the ghostwriter for the 2013 memoir *Cracked, but Not Broken: Surviving and Thriving After a Suicide Attempt* by Kevin Hines, which has been printed in two editions, and is the inspiration for the 2019 film *The Ripple Effect*. Her work has been published in *Hotel Amerika*, *TAYO Literary Magazine*, *Weber: The Contemporary West* and several others. She is also a certified Soul-Based Coach and through her business, With Wings, LLC, she offers

entrepreneurs, artists and all those seeking clarity on their next steps in life and business support on cultivating their creativity and moving forward on their life journeys.

Joseph Fasano is the author of the novel *The Dark Heart of Every Wild Thing* (Platypus Press, 2020) and four books of poetry: *The Crossing* (2018), *Vincent* (2015), *Inheritance* (2014), and *Fugue for Other Hands* (2013). His honors include the Cider Press Review Book Award, the Rattle Poetry Prize, and six Pushcart Prize nominations. His writing has appeared in *The Times Literary Supplement*, *The Yale Review*, *The Southern Review*, *The Missouri Review*, *Boston Review*, *Measure*, *Verse Daily*, the *PEN Poetry Series*, *American Poets*, *Pank*, *Tin House*, and the Academy of American Poets' poem-a-day program, among other publications. He teaches at Columbia University and Manhattanville College, he serves on the Editorial Board of Alice James Books, and he is the Founder of the Poem for You Series.

Casey Fuller's work has appeared in *ZYZZYVA*, *The Portland Review*, *Crab Creek Review*, *Two Hawks*, and *Nothing to Declare: A Guide to the Flash Sequence*. Fuller has been awarded the Jeanne Lohmann Poetry Prize and The Floating Bridge Chapbook Award for, *A Fort Made of Doors*.

Nathan Graziano lives in Manchester, New Hampshire, with his wife. A high school teacher, he's the author of many books of fiction and poetry. Graziano also writes a column for *Manchester Ink Link* and was named the 2020 Columnist of Year by the New Hampshire Press Association. For more information, visit his website: www.nathangraziano.com.

Sergey Gerasimov is a Ukraine-based writer. His stories and poems have appeared in *Adbusters*, *Clarkesworld Magazine*, *Strange Horizons*, *J Journal*, *Triggerfish Critical Review*, among others. His last book is *Oasis* published by Gypsy Shadow.

Robin Gow is a trans poet and young adult author from rural Pennsylvania. They are the author of *Our Lady of Perpetual Degeneracy* (Tolsun Books 2020) and the chapbook *Honeysuckle* (Finishing Line Press 2019). Their first young adult novel, *A Million Quiet Revolutions* is forthcoming March 2022 with FSG Books for Young Readers. Gow's poetry has been published in *Poetry*, *Southampton Review*, and *Yemassee*.

Taylor Graham is a volunteer search-and-rescue dog handler and served as El Dorado County's inaugural Poet Laureate. Her poems are included in *Villanelles*, *California Poetry: From the Gold Rush to the Present*, and *California Fire & Water: A Climate Crisis Anthology*.

Lily Hargrave is an artist and photographer who will be pursuing her Bachelor's in Fine Arts at the University of Nevada, Reno in the fall. She has exhibited art locally in a solo exhibition at TMCC, as well as at the Depot Gallery in Sparks, and the Sierra Arts Gallery in downtown Reno.

Oscar Hernandez is a student at Truckee Meadows Community College.

Kelly Houle is a writer and visual artist whose poetry has been published in *Crab Orchard Review*, *Red Rock Review*, *Sequestrum*, and *Written Here and There: Community of Writers Poetry Review 2020 Anthology*. She has an M.F.A. in creative writing from Arizona State University.

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Former athlete and relapsed student, **Kolena Jones Kayembe** is a Caribbean-Canadian writer, editor, and photographer. Forever on the move—from the Americas to Europe, Asia, the Middle East and

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Alice “Lucky” Lacerenza is a student at Truckee Meadows Community College.

Susan Landgraf was awarded an Academy of American Poets’ Laureate award in 2020. Two Sylvias Press published *The Inspired Poet* in 2019. More than 400 poems have appeared in *Prairie Schooner*, *Poet Lore*, *Margie*, *Nimrod*, *Calyx*, and others. Other books include *What We Bury Changes the Ground and Other Voices*. A former journalist, she taught at Highline College for 30 years and at Shanghai Jiao Tong University. She served as Poet Laureate of Auburn, Washington, from 2018-2020.

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Erek Lively has worked closely with the prose side of the literary magazine *The Meadow* for the last several years. Most recently he graduated with a Master’s Degree in Medieval Studies from the University of Leeds.

Christopher Locke was born in New Hampshire and received his M.F.A. from Goddard College. His poems have appeared in, among others, *The North American Review*, *Verse Daily*, *Southwest Review*, *The Literary Review*, *The Sun*, *West Branch*, *Rattle*, *32 Poems*, *Rhino*, and NPR’s Morning Edition and Ireland’s Radio One. He won the Black River Chapbook Award (Black

Lawrence Press—2020) for his collection of short stories *25 Trumbulls Road*. His latest poetry collection, *Music For Ghosts*, (NYQ Books) and memoir, *Without Saints*, (Black Lawrence Press) are both due in 2022. Chris lives in the Adirondacks where he teaches English at North Country Community College and SUNY Plattsburgh.

Richard Martin is a student at Truckee Meadows Community College. This is his second appearance in *The Meadow*, and his writing has also been published online at Nevada Humanities Heart to Heart, which is a series of essays and multimedia presentations created by Nevadans that highlight diverse, personal perspectives from all corners of the Silver State, reflecting on life during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Patrick Meeds lives in Syracuse, New York and studies writing at the Syracuse YMCA's Downtown Writer's Center. He has been previously published in *Stone Canoe literary journal*, *the New Ohio Review*, *Tupelo Quarterly*, *the Atticus Review*, *Whiskey Island*, *Guernica*, *The Main Street Rag*, *The Inflectionist*, *The Blotter* and *Mayday Magazine*.

Daniel Edward Moore's book *Waxing the Dents* was a finalist for the Brick Road Poetry Prize and published in 2020. His recent book, *Psalmania* was a finalist for the Four Way Books Levis Prize in Poetry.

Jordan Lee Mumm is a native of Northern Nevada, a student at Truckee Meadows Community College, and serves on poetry editorial board for *The Meadow*. She is a former missionary, and likes to explore religion and relationships in her writing. Jordan can never get her fountain pen to run smoothly without first staining her fingers with ink, she owns too many hats, and is very excited to be published for the first time.

Benjamin Murray is a graduate of Eastern Washington University's M.F.A. program and an advisor for Transformation Tuesday, a poetry and performance event with a focus on marginalized voices. He enjoys roaming the woods of the Pacific Northwest for Sasquatch and kaya-

king rivers. His work has been published or is forthcoming in *Arkana*, *Cobalt*, *Rock & Sling*, *Pamplemousse*, *Sweet Tree Review*, *Stone Coast Review*, *River River*, *Construction Literary Magazine*, and *Southern Humanities Review*. His flash piece, “So, Coach Andrews Interrogates Me,” was shortlisted for *Columbia Journal*’s special edition on Uprising.

Christine Neuman is a graduate student in the creative writing program at Sacramento State University. She likes to read surrealism, mostly James Tate and Frank O’Hara, and write weird poetry herself. She has been published in *Cough Syrup* and *!LaPlante!*

Xochitl Nunez-Gutierrez is a student at Truckee Meadows Community College.

Marlene Olin was born in Brooklyn, raised in Miami, and educated at the University of Michigan. Her short stories and essays have been published in journals such as *The Massachusetts Review*, *Catapult*, *PANK*, and *The Baltimore Review*. She is the recipient of both the 2015 Rick Demarinis Fiction Award and the 2018 So To Speak Fiction Prize. Her work has been nominated for the Pushcart Prize, Best of The Net, Best Small Fictions, and for inclusion in Best American Short Stories.

Forest Ormes’s stories have appeared in past issues of *Amazing Stories Magazine*, *Blue Lake Review*, *Long Story*, *North Dakota Quarterly*, *Red Savina* and *Ginosko Literary Journal*.

Karley Pardue earned her M.F.A. from the University of Nevada, Reno. Her writing often explores complex relationships, the landscape of the West, and the natural world. She is a lovechild of rural Oregon, urban Nevada, and exotic New Zealand. For now, she continues to live in Reno with her two cats.

Simon Perchik’s poetry has also appeared in *Partisan Review*, *The Nation*, *The New Yorker* and elsewhere.

Melanie Perish's poems have appeared in *Calyx*, *Sinister Wisdom*, *West Trestle Review*, *Persimmon Tree*, and other publications. *Passions & Gratitudes* (Black Rock, 2012) and *The Fishing Poems* (Meridian Press, 2016) are recent.

She's grateful for an indelible education from professors, mentors, and other poets. She believes reading makes you beautiful.

George Perreault has published in journals and anthologies in the US and elsewhere.

Ruby Peru's studies with Kurt Vonnegut, David Foster Wallace, and Alan Arkin inspired her novel *Bits of String Too Small to Save*, which won NYC Big Book Award's "distinguished favorite" (2021).

David B. Prather is the author of *We Were Birds* from Main Street Rag Publishing. His work has appeared in many print and online journals, including *Prairie Schooner*, *Seneca Review*, and several others. He lives in Parkersburg, West Virginia.

Kimberly Ann Priest is the author of *Slaughter the One Bird* (Sundress 2021) and the chapbooks *The Optimist Shelters in Place* (Harbor Editions 2022), *Parrot Flower* (Glass 2021), *Still Life* (PANK, 2020) and *White Goat Black Sheep* (FLP 2018). Her poetry has appeared in several literary journals including *Salamander*, *Slipstream*, *Borderlands*, *RiverSedge*, and *The Berkeley Poetry Review* and she is a winner of the 2019 Heartland Poetry Prize in the *New Poetry from the Midwest* anthology by New American Press. A former book reviewer for *NewPages* and intern with Sundress Publications, she is currently Assistant Professor of First-Year Writing at Michigan State University.

Alexandra E. Quick is a student at Truckee Meadows Community College.

Scott Ragland's stories have appeared in *Beloit Fiction Journal*, *Newfound*, *Ambit*, *The Common* (online), *Fiction International*, *Cherry Tree*, *CutBank* (online), *the minnesota review*, *Brilliant Flash Fiction*, and *Cutthroat*, among others. He lives in Carrboro, N.C., with his wife Ann, two dogs, and a cat.

Laura Read is the author of *Dresses from the Old Country* (BOA, 2018), *Instructions for My Mother's Funeral* (University of Pittsburgh Press, 2012), and *The Chewbacca on Hollywood Boulevard Reminds Me of You* (Floating Bridge Press, 2011). She served as poet laureate for Spokane, Washington from 2015-17 and teaches at Spokane Falls Community College.

Shellie Richards currently teaches writing at Vanderbilt University. Her creative writing has appeared in *bioStories*, *Blue Lake Review*, *Coachella Review*, *Cream City Review*, *Oatmeal Magazine*, *Bending Genres*, *Bartleby Snopes* (where she was awarded Story of the Month), *JONAHmagazine*, *The Chaffey Review*, and *Waxing & Waning* among others.

Kolbe Riney is a queer poet and nurse from Tucson, Arizona. Their work is featured or forthcoming in *Tinderbox*, *Passages North*, *Arc Poetry Magazine*, *the Chestnut Review*, and others. They were nominated to the Best of the Net and their manuscript, *mythic*, was short listed for the 2021 Sexton Prize. Learn more at kolberiney.wixsite.com/website.

Merlin Ural Rivera earned an M.F.A. in fiction from The New School. His writing has appeared in *Rattle*, *Rhino*, *The Greensboro Review* and *Natural Bridge*, among other journals. Born in Bulgaria and raised in Turkey, he now lives in New Jersey and teaches writing and literature at the School of Visual Arts.

Benjamin M. Vandeventer is a student at Truckee Meadows Community College.

Mark Sanders most recent books are *Conditions of Grace: New and Selected Poems and Landscapes, With Hourses*. Two edited works, *A Sandhills Reader* and *The Weight of the Weather: Regarding the Poetry of Ted Kooser*, won the Nebraska Book Award in 2016 and 2018. Recent poems have appeared in *Prairie Schooner*, *Solo Novo*, *Midwest Quarterly*, *Bosque*, and *Prairie Fire* (Canada).

Danielle Shorr (she/her/hers) is an M.F.A. alum and professor of disability/queer rhetoric at Chapman University. She has a fear of commitment in regard to novel writing and an affinity for wiener dogs. Her work has been published by *Lunch Ticket*, *Vassar Review*, *Hobart*, *Split Lip*, *Redivider*, etc. and is forthcoming in *The Florida Review*.

Murray Silverstein has been published in *RATTLE*, *The Brooklyn Review*, *Spillway*, *Poetry East*, *West Marin Review*, *Nimrod*, *Connecticut Review*, *ZYZZYVA*, *California Quarterly*, *Fourteen Hills*, *The MacGuffin*, and *Under a Warm Green Linden*, among others.

Gina Stratos is a writer living in northern Nevada. She enjoys collecting words, sipping buttery Chardonnay, and correcting other people's grammar. Her work can be read in *The Meadow*, *Door Is a Jar*, *Rabid Oak*, and *Dark River Review*.

Melanie Unruh has an M.F.A. in fiction from the University of New Mexico. Her work has appeared in *Two Hawks Quarterly*, *The Boiler*, *New Ohio Review*, *Post Road*, *Sixfold*, and *Cutthroat*, among others. Her nonfiction received notable mention in *Best American Essays*. She currently is at work on a YA novel and a short story collection. She lives in New Mexico with her husband, two sons, and two cats.

Julie Weiss is the author of *The Places We Empty* (Kelsay Books, 2021), her debut collection. She was a finalist in *Alexandria Quarterly's* First Line Poetry Series, and she was shortlisted for *Kissing Dynamite's* Microchap Series. Her work appears in *Perhappened*, *The Lumiere Review*, *Sky Island Journal*, and others. She lives in Spain.

Jeff Whitney is the author of five chapbooks, two of which were co-written with Philip Schaefer. Recent poems can be found in *Adroit*, *Passages North*, *Pleiades*, *Sycamore Review*, and *Tin House Online*. He lives in Portland.

John Sibley Williams is the author of eight poetry collections, including *Scale Model of a Country at Dawn* (Cider Press Review Poetry Award), *The Drowning House* (Elixir Press Poetry Award), *As One Fire Consumes Another* (Orison Poetry Prize), *Skin Memory* (Backwaters Prize, University of Nebraska Press), and *Summon* (JuxtaProse Chapbook Prize). He serves as editor of *The Inflectionist Review* and founder of the Caesura Poetry Workshop series. Previous publishing credits include *Best American Poetry*, *Yale Review*, *Verse Daily*, *North American Review*, *Prairie Schooner*, and *TriQuarterly*.

Erin Wilson's poems have recently appeared or are forthcoming in *The Shore*, *Crab Creek Review*, *The South Carolina Review*, *CV2*, *Channel Magazine*, *The Inflectionist Review*, and in numerous other publications and anthologies internationally. Her first collection is *At Home with Disquiet*. She lives in a small town on Robinson-Huron Treaty territory in Northern Ontario, the traditional lands of the Anishnawbek.

Nichole Zachary is a student at Truckee Meadows Community College and will be transferring to University of Nevada, Reno for the Fall 2022 semester to pursue a bachelor's degree in Creative Writing and Literature. She hopes to publish her own collection of poetry and prose in the near future. Her writing inspiration comes from her childhood experiences while growing up in Monterey, California.

Huina Zheng was born and grew up in south China. Huina has worked as a college essay coach since graduating from Guangdong University of Foreign Studies, China, where she studied English (British and American Literature track). Huina currently live in Guangzhou city, China with her husband and daughter, and she is pursuing online M.A. in English at Arizona State University.

Submission Guidelines

Our submission period begins each year on August 15th and ends on January 15th.

Please note: We no longer accept email submissions. All submissions must be uploaded through our Submittable submission management 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 management system.

All submissions must be accompanied by contact information (name, address, telephone, email, and a brief (fewer than 50 words) biography; include the title(s) for 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 five poems, photos or artwork pieces or one work of prose (fiction or nonfiction) from each author or artist. Prose may not exceed 5,000 words.

