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Reno, Nevada

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Suppose you're in a meadow

Joanne Mallari

and someone has hurt your heart.
I'll tell you what a therapist
told me, which is that ruminating
on the past breeds depression.
The light will not be more lovely
than it is now, on a winter morning,
when all the intensity of a summer
sunset fits into a few minutes
before 9am. Winter welcomes
a twin energy, like last night
when I drew Inanna's card
from a deck of divine women.
She invited me to strip down
below my ego. A fortune cookie said
a heart never breaks, but the ego does—
pretty good advice from a mass-produced
wisdom, which will turn cliché
once we spill the hell out of it—
for this reason, I no longer trust sayings
like *Everything happens for a reason*
or *You reap what you sow.* Suppose
you're in a meadow and someone
has broken your ego. I'll tell you
what a yogi told me: When a lover
says goodbye, the signs are subtle.
You might not remember what you say
in the moment, but you'll recall
the lead-up, the small motions
like aftershocks in reverse. Notice
how your soon-to-be ex fingers your hair
the way one would fan a letter
in the heat of July. Notice how they look
past your ear, as though preparing
to report the weather.

Shadow Mountains Alibi Suite

Jeffrey Alfier

Dawn breaches the black willow and yucca
that pass for a shaded yard.

August drifts with the pace of a hearse,
the silence of a courtroom on the brink of a verdict.

Postcard coyotes are ambulant scabs of hunger.
Breakfast is salty radish soup. No news

but the half-fiction of children you're accused of siring
—broken ledgers of vamps on lingerie nights.

You consider Mojave winds off playa clay
and vanished lakebeds,

so many plaster Virgin Marys left bleaching
in yards of brome and beardgrass.

Your only neighbor owns a horse she likely stole
from her ex —some saddle nag she never rides.

Tonight you hear her hum the faint glow of a tune
she once hummed to a fevered child.

A Letter to be Stuffed into an Abandoned Mailbox

Lily C. Nieminen

I'm writing to you because there are sirens wailing
outside my window tonight. They've been going for hours,
and in the whine, I hear your voice
telling me how much you hate Reno,
how we've got to get out.
I found myself halfway down our street,
barefoot on the sidewalk outside your house—
and I know you don't live there anymore,
but I haven't been inside since you left,
and the cricket song was just the same
as when we were ten, so I shouted up to your window
that we can leave now, disappear into the tan hills
and become sagebrush, and when the July fires come
we will float away as white smoke, turn the sky red,
and watch how the casino lights glow through us.
Yesterday, while sitting at the bus stop,
I watched a coyote pick at what remained of a cat,
tire treads zig-zagged through calico fur.
I thought of when we would walk to school together,
huddled close on the skinny sidewalk as cars raced by,
the morning sun casting exhausted shadows,
the day tired before it had even awoken. The rabbits
would always find their way into the road,
and we would find them, dead,
a few feet from the sidewalk—
I know how you feel about them,
but I don't think they're stupid,
just punished by the place they wound up in

while desperately trying to escape.
That cat didn't mean to wander into the road
and neither did the coyote.
The only difference between them
is that one stays hungry as the other goes cold.
I walked home when the crickets went quiet
to find that the sirens had moved on,
and my silent room aches like the goathead in my sole.
I hope that you will pull me from that shimmering asphalt
if I don't quite make it across—
or, at least, eat what is left of me
and let the sun bake away the stain.

Geothermal

Stacy Boe Miller

Once we lived
on the bottom half of the world.

It was summer
there, and we were falling

apart. We were happy
when drinking and our children

happy in the water heated by the veins
of a volcano. Their bodies

in the refraction, magnified
like my love for the things

they adore: a meringue
on the tongue, small dogs

in sweaters, bites of steak still red
in the middle. You didn't know

I wanted to leave you, and they
didn't know. It was so quiet

under the steaming water. I kept
going down to listen

to nothing. Soon everyone waiting
on shore. I came up

to breathe and beg, *Please,*
just one more time.

Landscape: Out Loud and in Silence

Cathy Allman

Daylight smashes my chimeras like ocean waves smash shell.
Being was once inside those sharp carcasses that make sand
painful to walk on. I lift myself in slow motion.
The mind over matter doctor says that this pain in my lower back
is to distract me from my repressed emotions—

my suppressed unconscious ocean all stirred and muddy.
Some of the restless water is rain, some poisoned runoff, some high
water table
in this time of saturation. Most of it just melted glacier.
I say, *I love you.* Again. Out loud and in silence.
The atmosphere of our long marriage floods, burns whole towns.
Out our high-rise window, I see the empty lot that waits.
In the meantime, geese dot the grass and weeds.

Cicadas shriek. I can't hear the sirens or church bells.
My ears ring. My only number is a cell phone,
I can't remember the word to end my thought,
then, I can't remember the thought, but I can remember
my childhood phone number memorized like my prayers
in case I let go of my mother's hand, and she couldn't find me.

October in Tennessee

Jordan Lee Mumm

The damp air crawls its way through my skin,
Wrapping its frost around my bones. So, I shiver
All day long, through morning prayer, community lunch,
My teeth chatter, even as I walk in the afternoon sun,
Carrying a broom and dustpan down the gravel path
To the laundry room.

The heat is hardly ever on in here, but the yellow
Glow at night, the slight warmth of rusted
Dryers running draws bugs in. Today, it's my chore to clean
The little shack, so that I and other young missionaries
Don't get stinkbugs stuck in the tread of our shoes,
Or track too many false ladybugs into the cold chapel.

Light streams in through the window, trapped
In dust that floats stagnant in the air. Beetles line
The windowsill, scatter themselves, half-dead, across
The peeling linoleum floor. There is a sound like windchimes
Twinkling as I sweep hundreds of exoskeletons into a pile.

I watch as some of their legs begin to twitch.
The shiny little hill I've made climbs over itself
In creeping undulation. Most of them wake up.
Their melody bounces off rotting walls
As I sweep them from floor, to pan, to trash bin.

What was once

Mark Sanders

a horse, there—on the circle of clay
near dewberries and clumps of rye;
a spot eroded where mesquite has sprung,
limbs limp with summer heat—what
he was that fell and broke like a wooden bridge
has leapt the last fence.
                See him graze
the high plain above the river, wind
through sagebrush and bunchgrass, spruce and ash
belling like a man who would whistle him in.
                No need
to turn and join, he obeys
instead the cadence along a switchback laid
through stone, his hooves had carved it deep—
he has trod the means so long.
                No cause
to run, what is the point? See. How lush
the scrubby pasture of sky is, let rain douse
or snow slant the scree-slid world—as if this
is just another day, he sets his face. He goes.

—for Rusty

Aubade for August

Lora Robinson

This morning I woke clinging to your collar
before the veil lifted and you were gone

again, melting crystalline, a broken fever.
Once, (though you forced my hand)

I thought to reach through the veil
and snatch a soul from raw oblivion

and into some kind of warmer hollow.
I woke again fuller, multitudinous

carrying petals and pomegranates to your feet.
When I watched you wither the fruit

and crush every flower between
the threshers of your fists,

I knew I had to send it back. Back to ash, rain,
some ruin of earth you could not salt. There is nothing

left to touch or remember now. The asters
droop in the shadow. The smoke left

my hands many years ago. Still,
on this side, I search for you, though I find

only glittering stars of bone, dry lightning,
the misnamed phenomena of our marriage.

And on this morning I wake again, under sheets
evacuating wreckage and memory. I smooth the duvet

and tuck you back in: a formless future,
the heaviest ghost.

Aubade

Wendy Barry

Ah, love, there is change upon my dresser
for your parking. The kid needs a lunch packed
today, and a check for guitar lessons.
There's sliced chicken in the deli drawer,
but the cheese is somewhat iffy. I will
get more yellow mustard, too. The dogs have
been fed, despite what they tell you. Do not
listen to their blandishments. The pibble
has taken her thyroid medication.
I found those socks you were looking for, and
have put them on your nightstand. We will need
to renew our flood insurance. It has
gone up—surprise—like sea levels and the
cost of parking on the darkling plain. Though
the sea was calm last night, the water will
rise, so let me know if you go surfing.
You will need more change for parking. Your eyes
are nothing like the sun—boon companion—
which is hot and brutal and a busy
old fool, unruly and ignorant of
how much we sweat under a weary life. Yours
are brown and green like the earth and the leaves.
I will be late tonight. A dumb meeting.
People will ask questions that don't need to
be asked. I think some of them don't have homes
to go to. I did not watch the news this
morning, so do not tell me what fresh
hell is up. Ignorant armies clash. Some-
where it is always night.

Silvery Ridge

Austin J. Arazosa

Over the summer / I worked / with drivers /
Out of state / drivers / looking for work /
See I've lived here / Nevada / my home /
Spent a lot of time looking at / mountains /
Those who look / long / and hard enough /
Can picture Rose / the way Her range spreads /
Head / laying south / feet / pointing north /
Those drivers think / I'm crazy / how I've
Tried to draw Her / they don't take the time to
See the picture / appreciate the land they are
Driving on / they come for the riches /
Yet lose it / to screens with bright lights /
Those true to the land / see Her riches /
White silk in the cold months / that drape
Her body / shielding her children /
Of the valley / yet warding off all /
Those who don't respect Her / Drivers
Not ready for the cold / unable to handle
Her icy tears / carpeting the land /
Early morning breath / fogs over the city /
Rose / leaving kisses of *pogonip*

Notebook of Place: Fort Worden – State Park and Arts Center–Washington

Susan Landgraf

1. *Five days of rain*, Richard Hugo had written David Wagoner, *and I love it.*

2. Weather report: Rain and fog all week. It's July in the low 60s and Marilyn from the Bronx shivers in her summer clothes. Alice Walker borrows socks.

3. Half the window in my barrack room lets in the fort's parade ground and a ring of maples. The other half clouds.

One summer a woman was so filled with clouds she threatened to jump off the barrack's balcony.

4. Swallows lace the air, a threadless weaving. When the world is shapeless, there are swallows.

5. The tribes rowed their long boats to shore yesterday in the old tradition. Today they leave, rowing the grey sea again under a grey sky.

6. Crow caws more insistent, more grating than accusations.

7. I caw as I put pen to page asking for a few good words.

8. A year ago today my husband called just before midnight *...fast-growing... inoperable... Don't drive tonight. Come in the morning.*

And I told him in the hospital after I drove out of the fog: *Don't be afraid. You can leave. You can go. I'll be okay.*

I learned we build fogs in our brains, during the new normal times that aren't normal, and hope for a lighthouse.

9. Now another day of fog carrying on its secret conversation with the rain. Four pens' worth of words, and Chris Abani is writing about a watch ticking in a coffin.

10. Clever watches.

Do You Know South Wells Avenue in Reno?

Guadalupe Izquierdo Robles

Querido South Wells Avenue?
Not Wells Avenue, but south of that.
Crossing over the Truckee River, the border
Of the North and South of it. You'll know
You reached it when you see Mundo Latino store.

You would have then reached the neighborhood.
A *barrio* in which Latino culture shines,
With all the many shops littered on the street—
Boutiques, venues, dance classes, taqueria,
Clothing, and salons. Our marks

Were left on the walls, our art being the first
To scream our presence on the street.
Murals with *El Chavo del Ocho*, reminisce of an icon
Of our childhood. The many depictions of *La Catrina*
On the walls of the businesses.

Her looks may change but her jewelry and expensive taste
Stays on each graffitied wall. She was meant to mock the expensive taste
But now, we aspire to have at least half of what she is adorned with.
Then we wanted to be able to reach that American Dream,
And now we want to be able to get the Latino Dream.

The American Dream was never ours, never
Meant to be ours since we are not American. *Nosotros*
Somos the ones who must make it big, if not us then who?
The stores on that street are owned by people who saw a chance
¿Y dijieron por qué no?

Behind those official ones are the self-made ones in homes,
Ice creams for the dessert heat and tamales in the cold that keeps
Us inside with *La Abuelita* hot chocolate. Bought from *El Marketon*,
The store that had every child pointing at the *piñatas*
Of the childhood characters flying above their heads.

From *las princesas* to *la Chilindrina* to the *Luchadores*
To *Quico* are admired from below. Looking up at the paper mâché,
That holds many treasures. All that is soon to be seen after
Taking a beating, *en la vida nada se viene de fácil.* Our successes
Do not come easy. They come after *hechandole ganas.*

That's what is seen on these streets, those who
Have put in *El esfuerzo*. South Wells Avenue, has people
Who come with a goal and the idea of greatness. Hope
To be dressed the same as *La Catrina*, with success
Draped across her neck and pride adorned on her wrist.

Coyote and The Old Man

Jason Boling

The old man made a wish and, true to his nature, the coyote answered.

Down the trail he snuffed the grasses and the briar. He edged close to town. Out of the trees he crossed the street, tail down. The coyote was not undernourished, but his scrag of red hair made him seem so. He moved the way a hangman delivers a joke at the gallows.

The road empty and quiet. A quiet thick and blurry enough to fool around with the town's boundaries. Only the relays clicking in the traffic lights hinted at distance.

His nails scratched on the asphalt.

To pave the earth is the devil's dream.

At the shop the old man was preparing to open. Polishing fingerprints from the display case like he was cleaning up after a war. A single lamp in the front room put off a low, warm light. The old man adjusted his glasses. The coffeepot hissed and gurgled in the back room.

Coyote found the door and scratched. The old man let him in. Their eyes met as he passed. He shook his coat from head to tail and stood up with a careful dignity.

"So you did it?"

"I did it," the coyote said, looking around. The room smelled like cigarette smoke and baby powder. He sat down in a chair and crossed his legs. Next to him the glass case piled full of broken-hearted treasures. Watches unwound and stopped. Jewelry boxes pin cushioned full of wedding bands. An antique black pistol still capable of anything. Coyote scanned the cases, marveling at the mortgaged bounty of mankind.

In a few thousand years, these will be the artifacts they dust off and catalog.

The old man went away and came clinking back with a tray of coffees and sugar.

"Well, I guess that's that," he said, sprinkling sugar into one of the cups and passing it over. The old man tried a smile in his skeletal way. Wet shining at the corners of his lips. The coyote blew across his cup and looked at the man.

Outside people began to fill the sidewalk, shuffling off to whatever cage the gods had decided they fit. People who didn't know what was coming. No one ever knows. The old man sat across from the coyote and rubbed his hands down his trousers. Tapped his foot. He put his elbows on his knees and looked at his folded hands. His face long and bent like a cigarette ash.

"When?" he said.

The coyote yawned with a set of teeth designed for the true nature of the world. He clattered his coffee cup down on the tray. "Sooner than you think. This afternoon, if the wind stays. You should pack up, if you have anything worth saving, and go."

He let out a breath, and the coyote could smell his breakfast and liquor. The old man had tired eyes like old army blankets, his white hair combed straight back.

"I think I'll stay," the old man said. After a moment he went to the door and rolled the lock. "And I could use some company while we all go to heaven."

He stood looking out the window. His hand fell from the knob.

The coyote rose quietly and crept down the hall behind the counter and into the bathroom, closing the door behind him. A flat tube of toothpaste sat on the sink with the old man's comb and water glass. Pill bottles toppled here and there like a board game after an argument. Signs of the man's living. His hackles rose for a moment at the incomprehensible magic of his reflection in the mirror.

The coyote hopped to the back of the toilet, then stood on

the window ledge with his tail up and alert. His heart leapt at the thought of killing the man. Saw the quick snap at his neck. Imagined the iron taste of blood as he nosed open the window, took one look back, then scrabbled out into the world.

Back on the trail he went to see. To marvel at his work. He would settle with the old man later. He moved in a lope, ignoring the smell of a rabbit nest. The coffee had taken his appetite and hidden it somewhere safe and away. Above him little gray birds skittled up and dissolved into the clouds. He thought he caught a whiff of woodsmoke. His mind drifted as he passed among the trees.

And it was this drifting that caused him to mistake the boy for something else. Mistake him for nothing at all or anything, like an ice cream truck or a mermaid, but as he drew closer the shape resolved, and the angles of his bicycle could no longer be mistaken for anything occurring in nature. He slowed to a trot and stopped next to the boy sitting on his mountain bike in the middle of the trail.

"Excuse me," the coyote said, and the boy screamed like he was being skinned by a cannibal. He tried to get his feet onto the pedals but could not look away from the thing before him that, first of all, should not be standing naturally on its hind legs and, least of all, speaking perfect English.

When he told the story throughout his life, he would always mention that the coyote sounded a little like he was from southern California.

"Calm down," the coyote said. "I know this may seem a little unconventional, but I'm going to need your bicycle. I have an emergency to attend to."

"My what?" His eyes began to well up. He fumbled and dropped the granola bar he was unwrapping. The boy was blond and portly and inconsolable. He had a birthmark on his cheek the color of a Band-Aid.

The coyote did not hold this terror against him. The child had

no way of understanding. But, also, he felt no pity for the boy. When he thought of killing and eating the fattier parts of him, he did not act. That was enough.

Coming very close, the coyote looked into the boy's eyes and slowly pried his fingers from the handlebars. His knuckles had gone white as concrete.

"I need you to get off the bike," he said, baring his teeth. "Now."

He had seen many of man's inventions. Highways screaming with noise that he dared not cross. Logging machines grinding forests extinct with an industrial cruelty that only the God of Hell could have dreamt up. He had seen rivers dammed to a trickle. He had watched the butterflies flutter and migrate away, never to return. But of all man's inventions, second only to fire, the bicycle was his most diabolical.

He flew down the trail now, skinny coyote legs pumping the pedals, wind in his fur, mouth hanging wide, laughing like an imbecile.

Back in the shop the old man wiped his eyes and turned from the window. "Coyote?" he said to the empty room.

In the bathroom he pulled the window down and straightened up his things. Put the pill bottles away and picked up the towel and clothes from the soggy floor, embarrassed by the coyote having seen his conditions.

In the front room he pulled the blinds almost closed. He poured a strong drink, sat down, and closed his eyes. He saw his wife's green summer dress. Her very last dress. The small sunflower print tracing her on his memory like constellation lines connecting stars.

There was a last time the wind was in her hair.

You never know which time is the last time for anything.

He finished his drink and said out loud to no one at all: Shit.

In the clearing he leaned the bike against a smoking stump. The flames had done their work. A black river of hell was headed directly toward the town. The coyote kept his thoughts simple. The old man made his wish, and he granted it. The old man longed for something lost. The fire was something. Gas cans are something. Road flares are something.

If something swallowed the world, left would be a space for something new.

A gallon of gas and a road flare.

That one be made whole, many be broken.

He would settle with the old man later.

Satisfied, he mounted the bicycle and pedaled hard down the trail toward town. No sign of the boy on the path. He skirted the fire's line at a distance, but the smoke was thicker every moment. He finally gave up on the bike and ran low and fast. Purpose filled him. His nails pulling in the earth.

The old man was pacing by the window and opened the door quickly when he saw the coyote coming across the street. A wall of smoke towered behind him like a city of charcoal roses.

Inside the old man continued to pace. The coyote watched his shoes move back and forth. Time has an appetite for details. No one will remember the creak of the floor. How one of the laces dragged the rug, untied. How he wrung his long, bony hands, polishing his regrets into an invisible ball so heavy and bright that even angels wouldn't dare look at it.

Pine embers Roman-candled across the street. Drifting in arcs like cigarettes thumped into the wind. Sirens dopplered away in the distance, growing smaller and smaller, like comets flung away from the sun.

"You think we should call it off?" The old man's cheeks looked dry as palm tree husk.

"Call it off?" The coyote laughed his high, chittering laugh. He stood and walked over to the man. His wild eyes flashed

like museum amber.

He said, “Listen to me, old man. Even the gods are at war with boredom. Your wish is a delight.” He motioned for the man to look out the window. The flames lapping in the tree line.

“As you shrink, the world grows.”

The coyote made a quiet, thoughtful circle of the room, then sat and crossed his arms.

“Can’t you see? Mankind’s suicide is nature’s first honor killing.”

“She worked at the beauty shop for years,” the old man said. He had brought the bottle of scotch from the back room and was pouring them tall.

“Until she couldn’t anymore. At the end they caught her talking to those Styrofoam heads they use to hold the wigs. Had names for all of them…” The coyote drummed his fingers on his knee. He could smell the onions and foil from the old man’s TV dinner. He sensed the faint pulse in the old man’s neck. “I kept her home after that. After a while, it got cruel for her, and that lasted a long time. Then one day it was over, just like that. Then I bought this place, and now, well, I guess that’s that.”

The coyote yawned. “Do you have any cigarettes?”

“I think, somewhere, let me look.”

The old man came back with an old, crumpled pack of Parliaments and shook one out.

“I quit a long time ago but keep these around. You never know,” he said.

“If you don’t mind…” the coyote said, holding up his fore-paws.

“Oh yes, of course,” the old man stammered and popped a match. The coyote drew deeply and looked at the man. His shabby sweater. Bad teeth. Bad bones. Bad luck. This thing before him. The final product of every scientific advancement of his species.

A living war trophy to their victory over nature.

He could smell the skid marks in the old man's underpants.

"I think it's time we settle up," the coyote said, finishing his cigarette and snuffing it out.

"Are you ready?" he said, baring his teeth a little. His honey-colored eyes. The hackles on his neck standing up in anticipation.

"I guess so." The old man stood and picked up his scotch, took a long swallow, and put down his glass. He dug in his pockets and gingerly produced the keys. The coyote was on his feet, tail wagging like some lesser servile canine.

"Just take care of her. She meant a great deal to me."

Handing over the car keys, the old man was saying, "You know, in fifty years I never missed an oil change…" But the coyote was already out the door, never mind the witnesses. He darted to the old man's Buick on his hind legs, threw open the door. Key in the ignition. He put the top down first, then jammed it into gear, popped the clutch, and was gone.

In the street, embers from the fire danced circles in the sky and fell, creating a carnival world, live and alight.

Creation Myth of My Father

Stacy Boe Miller

He cracks his elbows
on his mother's young
death. At the funeral,
adults say, *Stay*
out of the way.

His calves grow stone
hitchhiking gravel. He lights
a driver's cigarette,
and also his beard.

Blows from bar fights
across his chest. And a woman
latched to his back defending
her boyfriend. His face, boxing-glove
leather. He's skinning a deer. Just one

rodeo. His fingers
and knees—concrete
trucks grind sunrise.

He sets a teenage wife down
among cactus, antelope, and twenty below.

There's a broken baby
who can be fixed for $30,000,
three too early to live, and two outside
putting pennies on the train track.

He's a forest so big, we hide
and seek through him. A map
we check so often,
we never learn

the direction of the trails.
He's a bridge I've crossed
so many times, I don't
know how I'll swim.

Back Then My Father Hated Trees

Sandra Fees

A useless thing Daddy said
and worse the way each young
summer the brittle tree heaved bucket

loads of flecked pears unyielding
as tiny gourds only once in secret
not believing I tried to bite through

skin the year he brought the chainsaw
I was inconsolable by the time

the three apple trees out back were felled
like an ancient civilization I knew
their bitter taste too now that he's

gone I think of our last morning at the nursing
home in the courtyard the ornamental
cherry danced fruitless Daddy

smiled I can't be sure that he was
wrong I can't be sure a tree knows
better knows the right season

to shrug or forgive or when to pink.

Silence

Laura Ohlman

It doesn't matter that my father
and I don't talk for weeks, days gone by
where I wonder if the sheet over his body
still rises with breath. I often think
about that house, the boxes stacked soon
to topple in the dining room, shelves
collecting dust, extra fridges kept
in my childhood bedroom,
and the porcelain doll that looks
like me, smiling from beside his bed.
Maybe the carpet still smells
like milk rotting within its fibers, or
I can find a shirt of my mother's
preserved in a plastic bag, the scent of her
perfume and shreds of skin
reminding me her shadow once
crossed paths with mine too. But these days,
I do what I can to forget about my father,
how he sits on the rear porch late
to look for meteors, back hunched in a plastic chair
while the wind hangs around his shoulders.
Everything around him broken,
the wooden swing we all used to fit
on together, the screened deck,
televisions with the wires cut out
of the back, collected albums with nothing
to play them, and his neuropathic legs
unable to push the pedals
of his Dodge Charger. I can't take
care of him, or sleep with 2 a.m. intercom calls,

or understand how I insist on overcooking
his scrambled eggs, or listen
when he tells me about his *sexy nurse,*
who is *like a daughter to him*, and it's cruel
to abandon an old man in bed,
skin peeling off his arms
from where they touch the bedspread,
and the days pass by where I wait
imagining the last time I saw him,
tears fogging the inside of his glasses,
and he asked, *You're leaving?*
Who will take care of me now?
And I told him I didn't care,
the house so still I could clap a palm
to the air, and I hugged him
goodbye, and said *I love you*
as I walked away months ago . . .
Both of us knowing I could never
turn back.

Laurels

Christine Kwon

I

When mother passes the door
I pretend to be dead
Flowers growing from my eyes

Or I cover my face with a book
Complaints seeping from my body
And dripping moss

II

I lie down in my hole
And say here I'm ready

But she just stands there
With this look

III

Mother and I go down the stairs together.
She is dead.

We hold the rail, the wooden steps
soft and slit open as parted lips.
It's cold where we walk.

I remember she was bitter
like a fawn frozen in a blue slab of ice,
bitter melting in the spring.
And I imagine she had fear, nights
of intense longing.

Now she cries.

Munching on metal, on flowers and blood.
Is she cold or am I?
This is love, she says.

Baby Blue

Aleynah Lovendino

They still keep your cotton blanket
in their top drawer, remembering

the soft skin of your hands, clean
from the world. They still feel your weight

on their chests, when your six pounds
broke their hearts the moment they held you.

All they had was twenty-seven hours
before endless days of mourning.

The morning you left their arms
they echoed your fragile cries and begged,

begged for your clothes to be filled
with small hands and small feet.

Six months later they still have the room
with a cradle and a ceiling of stars,

but the flash of the supernova shatters
every moment they longed for.

Latency Period

Angie Macri

Then they moved into a house the color of doves,
not the kind a magician used
or those in the good book
but mourning doves, river bluffs
come alive and in flight
with a song that followed her all her life
although she couldn't know that then, young
as she was. Small
they seemed to say when startled into sudden rise
by her, by her dog, by something
she couldn't see. After the first winter,

her parents sided the house with white aluminum.
The gray asphalt siding still hung underneath,
couldn't be removed
because of asbestos backing, thin fibers that could enter their lungs
if they made dust
so they didn't.
Fire resistant, rot resistant,
made to look like stone, yet not,
it had been rough like stone when she would touch. Crystals
would not come off
no matter how often she tried.

We Have Left the Body

Emily M. Green

All day on the phone, I wait through the same recorded pitch
to sell wings: bone in, bone out, or traditional. When the live voice
answers, I ask, Do you take checks? Put down on paper,
it's all symbols. My mother, in shorts, sported legs chewed

through by fleas. Through God's grace, they sent us an able man
to fumigate. Save for the foundation, the Temple went unfinished.
Gold and silver were desired. Under the burden of August humidity,
Grandma said, Cold hands; warm heart. If what connects us

is pennies, waste, and water. And I must ask, and I must ask,
and I must ask. With her last child, Mom's calves swelled,
her craggy toenails went uncut. My baby brother crawled
late. The incoming calls are always a question of debt. As a child,

I left my body at night and climbed the tree that called upon
my bedroom window. Climbing was forbidden by the adults,
and all the lower branches were sawed off. Only with wings
could anyone disobey their order. The string is left attached,

the frayed end dangles reminders. This is the list of clans
who have been in exile. Grandma died, and we left the body
in the hospital room, IV still in her arm. At the viewing, no one could
distinguish between the woman and her velvet suit, crushed and blue.

There's a Street I Try Not to Drive on Anymore

Henry Flippo

Every so often when I'm driving
along the road that passes by my old home
where we used to play as kids,
I pass by a corner that my mother
used to warn me against—
where no one would see me
in the morning, the sun in their eyes,
when the clouds burn away
and leave fiery remains.
When the day is most like this I see
him—my once-neighbor,
my erstwhile friend;
a boisterous boy who was nothing like me
but kept me company all the same,
and he's lying in the road.

There's dust on his shoes,
dried rubber and tar
marring his Sketchers.
His t-shirt—
cherry red, Pokémon on his chest—
hangs loosely over ripped jeans—
blond hair covers his face;
he catches the light pouring from above
and scatters it,
colors awash
amidst a sea of asphalt.
Breath rises slowly in his chest.

He lies still—
eyes closed—
peaceful, hands folded over his chest,
underneath a sky that was gray—
that wanted to be gray—
and will be again,
but for now burns
in a pained motley
of visual noise.

I cannot know what he thinks he wants.
I cannot know if he knows that no one can save him,
that it will be too late before anyone realizes.

And I do not see him get up
like I know he did.
I do not see him walk, sullen, back into my front yard
as though nothing had happened,
as if the grit he dusted off his back didn't exist.
The corner is blind,
so blind, it cannot see
that the boy lying in the middle of the road
does not crave for death,
and when I do pass that road
I see only that—
he who has decided that he is finished—
and not he who decided to stand up thirty seconds later.

He lies there for as long as it takes,
as if this moment is all there is,
and I drive over him.

Elegy to a Life Lived Apart

John Fenton

You are like the model of a son I had in a dream years ago,
Then stumbling upon it in the boxes, covered in dust,
I stand at the edges unable to grasp
The life I missed.

The clamoring. The dead. The Living.
Screaming through my mind,
With every un-ordained thought pulling at me,
To carrying your lifeless mother down the steps.
I wanted to change my life in that moment,
But my only weapons were lies and half-truths,
Surrounded by
A body-armor of fears in a desperate attempt
And wasted.

I didn't stop running that day.
I missed feeding you.
I missed diaper changes.
I missed late night issues with your G-tube.
Trips to the hospital.
I missed every first.

Now, on the other side of 13 years,
We are like those old veterans
Who stand around each other.
Both having shared a terrible experience,
Wanting to be near,
Knowing nothing can be spoken.

I don't know you

And I don't know how to know you.
I stand around and suffer the cost of our present,
Each less deserved than the next.
Hoping my effort will be recompense for the harms,
And my presence will suffice.
Where all that I am and anything I may be could suffice

The day you enter the world
Because it transported me,
To the swirling chaos of combat,
Where blood trades for life and all its petty consequences.
Stricken by the screams as the sound from the report of a rifle,
Breaking a dam in my chest
To send the oozing pain of choices into action
Some sort of muscle memory
I prayed I'd been able
To have forgotten.

Judgment Call

Paul Ilechko

The next time I took off the bandages
I walked all the way to the bridge against
the better judgment of the both of us
this was mostly because I wanted to see
the swallows to see their brilliant flashes
of color as they skimmed above the fast
moving river before soaring upwards into
the sky this theme is a constant in life
a pushing beyond the safe beyond
the static until the richness of what is
possible becomes inevitable and I try
to trace this pattern back to certain events
in childhood feeling a surety that all
origin stories are discoverable that with
sufficient effort you can get close enough
to touch it to trace your fingers across
the yellowing paper on which the story
is written because all events in a life will
eventually give something back even to
a broken body its wounds wrapped
in bandages fastened in place for your own
protection lights flashing on the machines
that surround you while you sleep dreaming
of swallows that live under the bridge.

Chauffeuring Mom

Zachary Greenhill

As I take a screwdriver to the plastic trim of my new car
I do so to invoke some memory of our weekly trips to the hospital.
And I'm sorry that all I was able to provide was a 1990 Dodge Neon
Whose heat didn't work and whose radio was permanently
Tuned to the only station we both disliked. So we made fun
Of Garth Brooks while bundled in our puffy winter coats,
And you always called me a gentleman for getting the door
For you, even though we both knew it didn't open from the inside.
I never told you how your wheelchair gouged my car each time
It was taken out, or how you left my passenger seat smelling
Like incontinence, or that I hadn't paid my insurance in a year,
So I shouldered those burdens as long as they lasted,
And once I was able to take the bus, I sold that car
To the scrapyard on the edge of town for $300, because caring
For an aging car isn't cheap, and it served its purpose.

Elegy for [Deadname]

Nathaniel J. Mojica

I hope you were happy in life.
Even though mommy and daddy slept in different beds,
Or when daddy would help you with your science projects
That were required every year.
How you would both wing them the night before,
Boys vs. Girls, comparing reflexes,
Because neither of you cared.

You would jump on the neighbor's trampoline
Pretending to be a superhero with ice powers,
Then go inside to play Pokémon
But you'd only ever choose Ninetales
Cause you thought it was cute.
You would play with toy cars in the dirt,
Then watch Ben 10,
While your sister would cradle dolls.
I don't blame you for not knowing.
It would have been a lot easier if you did though.

Puberty hit you in 3rd grade.
I still remember you crying in the aisle
As mommy picked out the pads for you,
Then having to go to class late
Red-faced, from tears and embarrassment.

Would it be easier if you were still here?
I don't think any of us would be happy.
I wouldn't say I'm glad you died,
But I wouldn't be here if you didn't.
I get to carry the memories of you with me:

The ocean of undiagnosed anxiety,
And crying sessions holding yourself close
As the hot water hits your skin.

The day you died
We stood in the elevator of the clinic
Headed away from our sweet doctor
Who had just handed you my prescription.
As mommy started crying,
She hugged you for the last time,
And me for the first.

The Moment

Tom Gartner

We all agreed that someone from the company should go to Darcy's memorial service. We just had different ideas about who it should be. The obvious thing was for Wade and Caroline to go. Wind River Outfitters was their business, and Darcy had been their operations manager for the first two years. Caroline was willing, it seemed to me, but Wade flat out refused:

"Twin Falls—with the drive, that's a full day. I'm too fucking far behind as it is. And so are you, Caroline."

I could read the subtext easily enough, or I thought I could. The memorial was on my day off, but they'd give me comp time. "I'll go," I said. "Not a problem." I'd only overlapped with Darcy for a few months, but I'd liked her well enough: hard worker, team player, talented climber, relentless drinker. I'd admired her sense of adventure even if I'd had a feeling it might end up this way.

Wade nodded. Caroline didn't. He blinked at her. "What?"

"Remember the time I got so stoned at Ross's party that she had to walk me home?"

"Sure. She was more stoned than you were."

"But she did it anyway. Right?"

"Right." Reluctantly, but he wasn't going to argue it.

"So, I'm going." That was Caroline: pathologically loyal to friends, family, co-workers, ex-boyfriends, stuffed animals she'd had as a child. "Rob, you don't need to, it's your day off."

I glanced at Wade to see if he'd cave, because I figured she was counting on that. But as so often with them, I was being too cynical. Because he did give in—sighed, looked down at his calendar, then up at her with a wry smile—and she waved him off.

"No, it's fine."

They went back and forth a couple of times, but he seemed

happy enough not to go.

"Same for you, Rob," she said. "I'll be fine by myself."

I looked at Wade again. If she went by herself, he was going to be carless all day, and there would be messy logistics around getting Shari, their four-year-old, to and from daycare. So this was an easy read. I'd known him for fifteen years, and more often than not he'd been the one helping me. If he wanted me to go, I was going.

The drive north into Idaho, the service, the reception, the drive back: Wade wasn't wrong that it was a big chunk of time. To be honest, I was nervous about spending most of a day with Caroline. Not that she and I had any problem with each other, but I'd only known her for the year I'd been working for their company, and this was different from sharing workspaces, even going out with her and Wade for drinks or dinner. If anything, I liked her too much, and I wasn't sure I could make intelligent conversation for that long.

But of course, there was Darcy to talk about, and the business: a shopfront in a mall outside Salt Lake City, a warehouse out by the airport, ten employees including the three of us. The name was Wade's little play on words, as "Wind" and "River" suggested the elements we sold protection against, but the Wind Rivers are a Wyoming mountain range and climbing gear was our specialty. Wade and I climbed when we could—no shortage of opportunities in Utah, Wyoming, Idaho, Colorado—but Darcy had been more ambitious. When she left the company, it had been to live in Chamonix and climb in the Alps.

"I won't say there weren't any hard feelings." Caroline rolled her window all the way down as we headed out of Salt Lake City toward the Idaho line. She could never get enough fresh air. For all the time she spent outdoors, though, her cheeks never showed more than the faintest bloom of tan. "It was complicated. But you can't hold people back."

Complicated, I assumed, was her way of saying she didn't want to talk about it. So I was curious, but I didn't push. "Right. There's no way she was going to stay with Wind River forever."

"It's ironic, I was glad when she came back from Europe. I was sure she was going to get herself killed in the Alps. Then this."

Darcy had signed on as a seasonal firefighter with the Forest Service, a foot-in-the-door gig. She'd died when a bulldozer overturned on a backcountry ridge.

"We would have taken her back," Caroline said. "At least I would have. But she never asked."

At least I would have. I pondered that phrase as a few more miles of highway unwound: sweeping curves up a brushy canyon, rounded buttresses of cinnamon-colored rock all along one side. Eventually Caroline went on:

"She was always so idealistic about everything."

There was an unspoken fault line there, one it had taken me months to understand. When Wade had offered me the job, he'd described the company as a baby REI, and that had been good enough. I'd been in San Francisco, still unmoored after a bad breakup, working at a bike shop for minimum wage, fighting with my landlord, piling up credit card debt.

But Wind River meant one thing for Wade—top-drawer gear for people who could afford it and knew what to do with it—while for Darcy, who'd worked at Patagonia and North Face, it meant, or at least she wanted it to mean, caring more about the environment than the bottom line. Caroline, I thought, had been torn. I'd just been clueless. My role, the way I saw it, was just to do whatever I could to help Wade and Caroline, and I still thought that could be uncomplicated.

About fifty miles into Idaho, we drove through a burn zone, a valley full of blackened trees and scrub, the ground pale grey with ash, the crumpled hulk of a box truck in a roadside trench.

"Jesus Christ," I said as it went on for mile after mile. "When did this happen?"

"Last month," Caroline said. "Don't you remember? We had all that smoke for a couple of days."

"O.K., right." I remembered now, hearing about the highway being closed. "But this isn't the same one..."

"No. That was way up by the Tetons. Much smaller fire, out in the middle of nowhere. They've got no business trying to snuff out every lightning strike. All it does is let the fuel load get bigger. Darcy hated that. So there's some more irony for you."

Where I grew up, a small ranch on the Lost Coast in northern California, we sure as hell did stomp on every spark. But I knew it was different in these huge tracts of open country. Darcy had been vocal enough about it. "Never quite understood why she took the job, then."

"She wanted to change it from the inside." Caroline shook her head, the same way she always did when Wade and I started planning expeditions that were too hard and too expensive to ever happen. "The Forest Service. Change. From the inside."

"Not likely?"

"My father worked for the Forest Service for twenty years. He said she might as well have gone to DC and impaled herself on the fence around the White House."

The service was in a Catholic church, which didn't seem like Darcy, but apparently it was the church her family went to, and she'd at least stayed in touch. We got there at the last minute and slipped into a pew near the back. An older woman in tears, shaking and stumbling, was being helped out by two young men. The priest had taken the stage but didn't seem sure if he should start. I counted heads—the place was nearly full. Two hundred? Surprisingly many older people, mostly in conservative dark suits or dresses; a few restless teenagers; half a dozen very quiet children, Darcy's nieces and nephews,

Caroline thought; some horsey women with stone-faced cowboys; but mostly Darcy's own tribe, thirtysomethings with tans and scars and tattoos, some of them in jeans, T-shirts, North Face jackets, a few of them looking around as if they wondered where the bar was.

Of course, really there was no way to slice this group into neat demographics. I only had to look at Caroline to know that. Knee-length black dress, pale blonde hair pulled back in a loose chignon, small square Zuni earrings (a long-ago gift from Darcy), stubbornly unfashionable shoes. You could have built any story you wanted around her: soccer mom, Mormon missionary, rich man's wife, high school teacher, poet. Her features had a softness and balance that maybe didn't amount to beauty, but it was a face that had struck me, before I ever heard her speak a word, with her intelligence and kindness.

As for me, it might have seemed obvious where I fit in, but it wasn't so straightforward, that fault line again. I knew that, like so many of Darcy's friends—climbers, kayakers, mountain bikers—I had that weathered, slightly dusty, uncomfortable-indoors look. But these were Forest Service people, environmental lawyers and engineers, biologists, geologists, EPA officials. I could and did hang with some of them in the outdoors, but ultimately, they had a calling and I was a guy who sold equipment.

I've been to memorials that were contemplative, convivial, light-hearted even, but this wasn't one of them. All through the service, you could hear the squeaks and groans and sobs of people trying not to lose it. An older man in front of us was praying, bent almost double. Two women at the far end of our pew were clinging together, one with her face in the other's shoulder. The friends and family who spoke didn't have funny stories or fond reminiscences to offer. They were angry, baffled, shattered. I don't know if priests are supposed to work some healing magic, and it would have been a tough task here, but

this one was like a robot, droning formulas, ordering everyone to stand up, sit down, recite this or that. Even the climbers in the group seemed stunned, and climbers go to a lot of funerals. I got it—rockfall, avalanche, a broken hold, a rappelling screwup; that shit happens. But a fucking bulldozer?

As the priest rambled on, I set myself the pleasant task of recalling some of the people whose funerals had most appalled me. Declan Hall, a tenth-grade classmate who'd fallen off a rope swing—weeping teachers and parents everywhere. My mother, who'd killed herself and then served as the centerpiece of what was basically a cocktail party for my father's artist friends. Zach Wollam, a friend of Wade's and mine whose drinking had led him to go for a walk in the traffic lanes of U.S. 101.

Sometimes your thoughts go places you'd rather they didn't. I couldn't remember Zach's funeral without thinking of Monica, the woman I'd been with at the time. She'd left me suddenly only a few weeks later, and no doubt Zach's death figured into the when if not the why. And, another mental wrong turn, it was hard not to compare Monica—volatile, driven, sharp-edged even when she was sweet—to Caroline, whose sadness and strength were so gentle they were almost hidden.

By the time the service was over, I was deeply sympathetic with the folks eager for a drink. As was Caroline, apparently. The reception was in a hall across the street from the church. After we'd stood in a line and shaken hands with Darcy's parents and siblings, she swept me over to the drinks table, seized a couple of glasses of white wine, and put one in my hand.

"To Darcy." She bumped my glass with hers, and we drank. Oddly, ridiculously, it felt somehow as if out of all the people there, we were the only ones who'd really known her. Within a couple of minutes Caroline had drained her glass. I gave her mine and took another from the table.

Because I was driving, I stayed a couple of drinks behind her. As we drifted out of the reception hall into a garden full of

statues of saints, I thought again of the contrast between her and Monica—like matter and anti-matter really, right down to Monica being dramatically dark-haired and Caroline being a green-eyed blonde. Best not to ever let them meet, lest the universe be annihilated. Or me, at least.

I must have smiled or shaken my head at that thought, or maybe at the ensuing thought that it wasn't smart to be comparing my ex-girlfriend with my best friend's (and coincidentally my employer's) wife.

"What?" Caroline asked.

I shook my head, stuck—couldn't go back, couldn't go forward. "Thinking about bad funerals," was the best I could come up with.

"Ah. Hilarious." Apparently, I hadn't fooled her. "Do tell."

"One I went to with Monica. For a friend who got himself killed. She wasn't very sympathetic."

"She sounds lovely. Is this the one who left in the middle of the night?"

"That's her. It was really good when it was good. But I guess by the end there wasn't much trust left."

No reply for a moment. I looked at her, expecting to see some typically mild expression, at most a frown. Instead, she was staring at the ground, her eyes squinched up as though she might cry.

"In the end it's all about trust, isn't it?" she said finally.

"It is." I said it very softly, because I had no idea where this was going.

"Which makes it really unfortunate that I can't trust Wade."

I wasn't even sure I'd heard right, because first, it was so bizarre for Caroline to blurt that out, and second, it seemed so obviously wrong, so unlikely to be true of Wade. To me at that moment, he was solidity personified. He'd taken me in when I left home at seventeen; now again he'd given me a refuge when I was struggling after Monica left. It may sound trite to say I would have trusted him with my life, but I already had, dozens

of times, when we climbed together.

Of course, a climbing partnership has a whole different set of demands than a marriage.

"Caroline," I said. "Everything I hear, he adores you."

"I can't talk about this here." She stood up, shaking her head, swayed, almost fell. I put out a hand, but she ignored it.

I followed her out of the reception. She looked back once, wobbled again. It occurred to me that I'd seen her drunk a time or two lately—but fewer than I'd seen myself, so surely not a problem.

She didn't pause for more than a few seconds to say goodbye to anyone, which was unlike her. As we crossed the parking lot, a light rain began to fall—out of nowhere, it seemed to me, but when I looked up, I saw a blur of dark grey cloud. No wind, the rain so soft it hit the pavement and the parked cars soundlessly; for the moment, no one else in view; a sudden chill as the cloud settled over us.

I went to open the passenger-side door for her, but she stood in the way, her back to the car, facing me. Still, no one around. It felt like a moment when something might happen.

"Do you get why I couldn't talk about it in there?"

I really wanted to have an answer. But was a wrong answer worse than no answer? She had such an air of permanence standing there. Some faces seem assembled, a collection of features joined well or badly. Caroline's seemed cast, all of one piece, a broad curve of jawline angling up and back to her temples, her forehead and cheeks smooth vertical surfaces with subtle clouds of color chasing each other under the translucent exterior.

"Darcy?" I said. I was starting to think I didn't want to hear this, because as sad as it may sound, Wade and Caroline had become the stable center of my life, the reference point that had replaced Monica. But I'd started the over-sharing, the talk about trust, so here we were.

"Yeah, Darcy."

"I don't understand."

She stood to one side, I opened the door for her, we got in the car. I could hear the rain finally, pinging on the roof. "She told me this after she came back from France. About why she left."

I'd come to work one morning to find Darcy gone. Wade told me she'd given notice two weeks previously and hadn't wanted anyone else to know she was leaving. Which at the time had seemed plausible enough.

"You remember we had an issue about the Cumulus jackets? The ones from Malaysia?"

"I remember Darcy wanted to kill the line."

"Right. The manufacturer was paying his workers a third of what he told us he was. And his silent partner was a logging company."

"And we did kill it, didn't we?"

"Yes. Darcy kept after Wade until he finally canceled all our orders. But…" She stopped, started again in a rougher voice. "He wasn't happy. He gave in, I think because he knew I was going to come down on her side if he asked me. But he told her it wasn't her role to make those decisions."

"Which was true, right?"

A small twisting smile, like she'd known I'd say that. "Except she was right, and he was wrong."

"OK, also true."

"Anyway, that's not the point. He said it wasn't her role… but it could be her role."

"Meaning what?"

"If she slept with him."

"Seriously?"

"That's what she told me. He said he could do things for her, but she would have to do things for him. And he put one hand in her hair—you know, that beautiful hair of Darcy's—and one hand…"

Caroline spread the fingers of her right hand and placed it against my chest. Lightly, neutrally, as if she didn't know how it

made me feel.

"I know I should believe this," I said, "but I have trouble believing this." Because it was simply a fact that Wade knew how lucky he was to be with Caroline. He'd been a mess when he came to the Rockies. He'd been in jail in California for dealing pot, had broken up with a long-time girlfriend, was drinking so much he couldn't hold a job. She'd seen through all that, had stayed with him and straightened him out, and he hadn't forgotten it. Maybe there was room in the cracks of that story for the one she was telling me now. I hoped not. "So that's why she left?"

"The next day. That was all made up, what Wade told you about her giving notice."

"What did he tell you?"

"At the time? That they argued about Cumulus, he gave in but told her not to pull that shit again, she got mad and quit on the spot."

"Which to be fair, sounds exactly like Darcy."

She shrugged.

Thunder boomed in the distance, then closer. The rain was falling harder now, blurring on the windshield. A man in a black suit sprinted to his car.

I didn't know if she wanted to have a conversation about it, or if she just wanted to vent. But I was still hoping, I guess, to convince both of us that nothing had happened. Or that if it had, they could somehow move past it.

"It's not even so much about what could have happened. It's the whole idea that he could be so crass, that he could try to use her idealism to get her in bed."

"Yeah, that's just not the Wade I know."

"Me either. I thought." She swung her head to look at me, half profiled, one green eye poised on me, the other just a glimpse of eyelashes. "You know Wade's father, right?"

Oh hell, I thought. Do I have to be the one to tell her this story? "Yeah, I know Aaron."

She sensed something in the way I said it. She squinted at me,

paused for a second, shrugged. “Charming guy, right? But kind of a wastrel. Goes through money, goes through women, not too good at staying sober, not too honest.”

“Fair description.”

“They don’t talk much. My impression’s been that Wade tries not to be like Aaron.”

“I think that’s right. I think he tries really hard.”

“But maybe some of that’s in him, whether he likes it or not.”

“God, I hope not.”

She grabbed my arm. “Why? Tell me, Rob.”

“I’m not sure exactly how bad a guy Aaron is,” I said. “But bad enough. Long story short? He tried to rape my girlfriend. My then girlfriend. Monica.”

“He what? No.” She shook her head. “Rob—really?”

“I guess if I were his lawyer, I’d say that he made a pass at her that he thought was welcome, but it wasn’t. And he was drunk, so he didn’t back off fast enough.” I stopped to wonder why, even hypothetically, I was giving Aaron the benefit of the doubt. “But the fact is, she had to break his knee to get him off her.”

“She did that? Good for her.”

Of course, then I had to tell her the whole story. We’d met Aaron through Wade, and he’d hired us to manage a restaurant he was opening on the Oregon coast. All great until two days before the opening, when Monica was alone in the restaurant late at night and Aaron stopped in. I was home, sick with bronchitis. He groped her, threw her down on a table, and showed no signs of taking no for an answer until she smashed his knee.

Obviously, that was the end of our working for him. We hadn’t gone to the police about it, just taken the severance pay Aaron offered and left town. I’m not sure that sat right with either of us, but so much happened so fast that summer we never had a chance to figure out how we felt.

“That’s horrible,” Caroline said. “I knew I didn’t like him. I

didn't know he was that bad."

"But like you said, Wade tries not to be like him."

Drops of rain still clung to her hair and the shoulders of her sweater. I started the car, turned on the heat and the defrost.

"Here's what I don't get, though." She looked down, and she seemed to be talking more to herself than to me. "Wade never told me about it. I mean, he knows, right?"

"He does. I told him. I don't guess he heard anything about it from Aaron."

"No. So that's weird, right? That Wade didn't tell me."

I took my time answering. There was something about talking to Caroline: an almost inquisitorial quality to her gentle looks and soft replies, so that you felt she'd know if you answered less than truthfully. "If you're thinking maybe it was no big deal to him..."

"I guess I am."

"No, he understood. It was completely fucked up."

"You don't have to defend him."

"I'm not. After Darcy told you that…" I stopped in mid-sentence, because it suddenly sounded to me like I was doubting her.

"Did I ask him again what happened? Of course I did. He said it wasn't like Darcy told me, he was baiting her because he was pissed off. He might have laid a hand on her, he didn't remember. But not seriously, not with any intent. She blew it all out of proportion. Simple as that. Which is what he would say, right?"

"It is. I don't know what to say, Caroline. Either way you're the victim here, someone was lying to you. I'd like to think it wasn't Wade."

"Sure, so would I. It's just a little hard to do."

"I see that." I was almost wishing I hadn't told her about Aaron. But how could I not have? "You know I'm on your side."

"Of course. I wouldn't have told you any of this if I didn't trust you."

Which somehow surprised me, that it wasn't just the alcohol and the emotion of the memorial, that she would think of me as the person she could talk to about this.

"It's just—I'll never know now. I'll never be sure. And neither will you." It felt like she was slipping away, out of the conversation and into some world of her own, some interior debate I couldn't affect. There were things between her and Wade I had no business knowing, that was a given. What had never occurred to me before was that I might be put in the position of taking sides.

Rain fell off and on as we drove south. Caroline came out of her trance, and we talked about various inconsequential things—the neighborhood where I lived in Salt Lake City, Jon Krakauer's book about Everest, the latest Mormon Church scandal. This was more like her normal mode. She was interested in seemingly everything, always had questions, always wanted to know what other people thought. The interest was real, but it hadn't struck me until now that it served to deflect the conversation from herself. You just didn't learn that much about her feelings.

As we drove into the burn zone again, the sky lit up, thunder shook everything. The rain went from a soft tapping to a furious deluge that the windshield wipers couldn't clear. I was blind for a moment, just holding the wheel straight and hoping.

"This doesn't happen in California," I said lightly when I could see the road again.

"More coming, too." Caroline leaned toward the windshield to look up at the clouds.

The sky flashed again, grey to silver. Thunder, a chain of explosions. The sound of the rain on the car roof got louder, more staccato. Raindrops started bouncing off the hood, then hailstones, mixed with the rain at first, then just a torrent of white BBs, white peas, white marbles, flying, bouncing in every direction, piling up on the ground, in the burned trees, on the

hood, the windshield, clogging the wipers, crunching under the tires. The steering wheel had that light feeling it gets when control is about to be transferred from you to random chance.

"Yeah, no," I muttered, took my foot off the accelerator, let the speed drift down to 30, pumped the brakes, pulled onto the dirt shoulder. The car was a battered old Civic I'd brought from San Francisco, and it didn't want to die any more than we did. It lurched and skidded to a stop. A semi blasted by and lifted a wave of water, mud, and hail onto us.

"Wow," Caroline said, and I shook my head. We looked at each other. It didn't feel like there was much oxygen in the air. "Good job." She patted my elbow and smiled, an ineffable, conspiratorial glimmer.

The cannonade of hail went on for another five minutes, and then faded back into a light rain. I got out of the car to sweep the piles of half-melted hailstones off the hood and windshield. Caroline did the same thing though I motioned for her to stay in the car. Steam was rising in tendrils from the hood, from the pavement, from the trees.

We got back in the car, damp from the rain, bringing the smell of ashes and ozone with us. Caroline's hair had little hailstones in it, was wildly askew, a damp strand over one eye. I reached across, just meaning—seriously, just meaning to flip that one strand out of her way—but as I leaned toward her, she leaned toward me, thinking I meant more, and then I did mean more.

Sometimes kisses just feel like kisses, like your mouth touching someone else's mouth. This felt like a small star had gone supernova there in the front seat of the Civic. Light, heat, a shock wave—It didn't last long, but long enough to know that we both meant it, and then we were staring at each other from six inches away. Her cheeks were glowing, her eyes were wide in surprise, and the errant strand of hair was still dangling there. She slapped it back.

"Oh, hell," I said.

"That did not just happen." She turned away, covered her face with both hands.

"I'm sorry," I said, and I was, but I wasn't. It's clear enough now that I'd wanted this, that I'd wanted it ever since I met her, but in that moment, it was a revelation to me. Or at least it was a revelation that it could actually happen. "I just..."

"No, *I'm* sorry," she said, glancing at me and then away, like she was afraid to hear my explanation. "My fault." She squeezed my arm hard with both hands. "Totally my fault."

"Caroline..."

"That did not just happen. All right? Literally. It never happened."

I looked back at her, and a part of me wanted to say, It did happen, though. Shouldn't we at least talk about why?

But another part of me knew that she was right, that we had to just erase that moment. And I knew, too, that she wasn't going to change her mind. She was too strong for that, and too loyal to Wade, even now. Which was all part of what I loved about her.

Somehow the car keys had ended up on the seat between us. She put them in my hand, and I felt simultaneously the bite of the intricate metal edges and the soft pressure of her fingers, still cold from the rain.

"We should get going," she said. "We don't want to be late getting back."

baby, your blood

Madison King

pick weeds at dusk
brag to your friend
that mosquitoes don't like our blood,
that's what mama says.

mamaw says it's all that dr pepper,
all that ambrosia salad,
all that margarine on white bread.

ask your grandpa for a slip-n-slide for christmas,
make it yourself out of mud
and white t-shirts for easter.

no new tack for this year's fair,
take mom's from '89
when her hair was self-permed
and she danced with all the boys.

sleep on the front porch when it gets hot
just like dad did.

go barefoot on a blistering day
after cousin told you not to—

cry when your aunt
and her itching dog
gnash their grey gums at you.

Pyre for the Gutter Things

Kaitlyn Schneider

Once, I walked eight miles with no shoes,
just so I could hold a single dead dove
in my trembling hands and the emptiness
the meat wasps leave as they crawled
from her empty chest, only to vault into
the next set of headlights. I remember,
that June I walked every night down
the parkway, my gaze always stuck
to the dim seam where the road
meets the sidewalk and I prayed
only to find a lighter,
just a single
goddamn
lighter
Anything to keep the scars
on my wrists warm and stinging
as softly as the day they were made.
But there were only cigarette butts,
shards of glass, and the stiff, lonely wasps
and I swore, if I found even a single match stick,
that I'd send them off too, in some solace of burning
flesh. This feels nothing like consolation.
And I could only go back, retracing
each bloody footprint, ripping
at the concrete, with only
a carcass
to show for it.

Christmas is in 25 Days, and the Discovery Channel Said

Kiley Smith

Aztecs got what they wanted by sacrificing people
to pits & if the pit is some hole you dug

in the dust of the backyard with a garden
trowel—the one with the red handle—then the bodies

you throw in should make something happen.
Since ants don't add up to much & I've watched

them carve like a million tunnels in my ant farm,
I'll sift dirt over two crickets instead & ask

for a DC 12-inch Superman action figure. But Aztecs
also cut the hearts out, still beating, of sacrifices.

Now, I've never heard of a bug with a heart,
but the neighbors watch their Chihuahua—little

Hector with his blue sweaters and black booties—
closer than anyone should care about a glorified rat.

So, a moth with long brown wings I caught should beat
enough to summon a Razor Crest Star Wars Lego set.

Self Portrait as the Poet Afraid of the Sun, Children, and Regular People

Christine Kwon

We quit smoking in June.
I drive around town
looking at people hungrily,
their hands, any telltale smoke
issuing from mouths,
the smell drives me wild.
I'm a big, bad wolf.
Around my friends
I'm Dracula
drinking in their youth hungrily.
They're all beautiful.
They're all so beautiful I must
have chosen them
for their beauty or made them up
in my head.
There's Amelia who wears a thin black ribbon
around her thin long neck.
The boy with black hair,
The tall, blonde
with long, long fingers.
There's the boy in New York
who is always wearing a suit
and has the body of a god.
Who reads books,
sleeps with many beautiful men,
who only has to reach out
and there's a new hand there,
a rose, a vial of juice, a cigarette.

You shouldn't mess with me,
I throw all the chopped heads
into the sea, except for one,
this I hold
and like a Greek I stand there,
the epitome of tragedy, arms wide open.
Listen to me—the woods are coming to life again.
The trees walking towards us.
The fire's never gone out.
Pass the threshold of trampled
lavender and come into my room.
I'm a monster. I'll never let you out.

The Bad Seed

Kathryn Levy

I eat grownups for breakfast—I
soak them in milk and crush them with teaspoons.
On the back of the bus I travel to my castle
where the grownups keep screaming, but
only at each other. When the teacher says, *Now*
we can make up new stories, I place
the grownups in coffins—they will
have to stop telling. And when
Mommy still calls, *I can see you,*
you Monster, I cover my ears, run
round and around the players in the playground.
It is recess, the time to finally be free,
so I dodge all the balls they throw at my body—
the grownups disguised, the ones who won't die.
As I pack up my books, fold
each of my pictures, Mommy is spreading
a feast of return—my wrinkles on a platter, some
salvation in a bottle: *Now you'll be us, because*
we can't ever die. —I eat
my fingers for supper, scream
only at myself. And write out my story:
The Bad Seed Who Learned Nothing—but
to sit at a table, pretending to be
so polite. *No killing tonight*, I
whisper to the grownups, *and still no way*
to survive.

Mirages

Kathryn Levy

No songs for these nights. Though
the man in the moon won't stop staring.
No lover to hold her, though one
almost appears in her dreams of the desert.
They say that mirages can
almost be entered. Until you come close—and find
only desert. They claim the sands
will cover each body. But the winds keep blowing
even that last shelter away. They claim and they claim,
like the waves on the beach—the
unreachable waves that used to be lovers.
She turns to her husband—can't we
lie here all night? He laughs and drags her
back to their life. They claim these nights
will take care of themselves. She lies like a corpse
waiting for the moon to adore her again.
Or merely waiting—the sad
truth tellers mutter. Or now they
won't even mutter. What's
the use of more telling? But the corpse
has a story. We all have a story, buried
too deep to unearth in
these nights.

Razor

Jeffrey H. MacLachlan

still working at the store still working at the store

full-time lifer named razor retired so I took over

his spot & he got that nickname after the dumb

fuck sliced his ring finger with a pineapple core

machine & you'd think surviving trauma would've saved

mary & me but she became

a ghost and drifted away from this town

in heavenly ascension & she

writes brochures for cyber security

or something it's one of those careers that takes

until the second round to explain & by then I lose

interest & order something darker

& murdering days to hangovers after forty

feels so goddamn trash but what else do you

do with wednesdays off & your weeks

are cleaved in half & thoughts

seem scattered these days & the muzak

lyrics stretch across my decades & they

are all about the same theme & the store

commissioned a life -size cardboard

cutout of Jason Voorhees lowering

forged machetes upon my missing head

& now tourists can stick

their necks through this hole & take

comical photographs & saccharine

muzak fucking echoes from the coeds

Moth

Kimberly Ann Priest

Orion lifts his nose, takes
aim,

the arrow never leaving the bow—
it waits.

Most visible hunter in the sky,
what have you to fear?
Poised,
dauntless,

you make your enemies wither
into their naked eye.

Sunrise hides you.
If the creature below points up exclaiming *Look!*
she is answered with nothing but white,

white, white.
No one believes you are sharp
and guileless—

never having let your arrow
go.

The bodies on the windowsill are not pocked
with holes, not one
shot through.

They were watching you
by day, marking your position in
the sky—
a glass shield
attached to each agile frame.

I didn't feel my paper wings blistering,
opening, growing

heavy with light.

How Could Something as Beautiful as Rain Represent Something so Ugly?

Isabella Tucker

From a mere bit of overflow
Off the roof, I collected
The sky's poisoned tears
To use for my watercolor.
Harsh blues shade busy streets.
Greens and grays for crumpled chip bags.
Earlier, when a metal fence, made blinding
By the sun, shone as bright as a diamond,
I had watched a boy and his mother
And their dog with a frilly pink collar.
They discarded a green effervescent doggie bag,
Yet an empty trash can was only a foot away.
Maybe they thought the glaring colors
Would hold too much pride
To be accused of wrongdoing.
Now, I sit.
Clouds overhead angrily fist fighting
Baby blue. Yelling could be heard
From the cracked window
Behind me. Doors creaked
From nosey neighbors poking their heads out.
I guess a rusted spoon
Was found again, along with a lighter.
Someone once told me that rain could rinse
You of any sin.
So, I drew the person in question,
Then held up my canvas
For all the sky to see.

pine-smoked quail with roasted turnips and sweet potatoes

Andrew Mercer

Will somebody wear them to the fair?
—Minnie Riperton's "Les Fleur"

Snapped moments simmer beneath layers of earth. Time breaks silence and cannot leave well enough alone, tears through dew and frost. New spring sun ferments remnants, left over leaves and cracked egg shells. The crows that hatched from them last are full grown and now dig past their only safety. *Will somebody wear them to the fair? Will someone catch their reflection and run headlong into the mirror?* Asleep, time stops mattering. Asleep, whole worlds bloom and die. Asleep, we eat ourselves, burying deeper into slow dug holes, swallowing small stones.

Sunday Visits

Lori White

My mother stopped getting out of bed. She stopped eating, stopped clutching her little Sheltie stuffed dog, stopped looking out her bedroom window at the sun, the tree, the basket of geraniums hanging from its branches. This was before I returned to California, the guardian of my brother's ashes. We were a family dying out of order—the father buried five years ago, then the son before the mother. At some point during those weeks away, while I was mothering her eldest son to his death, my mother decided to let go. Somehow, she'd sensed my brother's death, some way only a mother could, some vibration in her empty womb, some tremor rattling her bones. Her brain didn't work right any longer, but her intuition still rumbled underground, a seismic signal the earth was about to erupt around her. Somehow, she knew the safest place to be was in bed.

I visited my mother the day before I flew to Atlanta to help my brother die, my Sunday morning visit, like every week, when I came to her bedroom window, the blinds up and the glass slid open only three inches, as close as I was allowed. She sat in her wheelchair, waiting for me—the caregivers had readied her, *It's Sunday! Lori's coming!* My mother cried when she first saw me, then blew me kisses and waved for me to come inside—that much still remained, her need to hold my face, to kiss my lips, to touch her Sunday visitor whose name she rarely spoke but whose face she always recognized.

These days I didn't recognize my mother. The caregivers liked to curl her hair and put in barrettes or ribbons, ornaments my mother never would have allowed. Her nails were often painted, more chipped than polished, and not in a natural shade she would have liked—beige, shell pink—but in bright

coral or royal blue, colors that came from the caregivers' purses to help pass the time. This is what happens to residents inside memory care units. They slowly lose what little they brought with them, even their personal preferences, details only their family would remember: black coffee and oatmeal every morning; a hamburger and French fries, never a pork chop; or a crisp Cobb salad with blue cheese dressing, not a thick tangle of fettucine swimming in cream sauce.

No matter how many clothes I wrote my mother's name and room number on, black Sharpie capital letters smudged inside bra cups and underwear waistbands, off they'd be bundled to the laundry, then returned to someone else's room—and not necessarily a woman's, given the number of times I found men's boxers and briefs in my mother's drawers. Only the stuffed Sheltie dog remained in my mother's room, probably because she rarely let go of it unless it was time to bathe (usually my mother, but once or twice, the dog too), and even then, the caregivers would give her the dog afterwards to stop her crying while they dried her off and dressed her. I bought a new dog on Amazon whenever the old one became too caked with food and God knows what else and wrote her room number on the tiny tag sewn into the tail. Swapping the dogs took a little planning, how to remove the old one from her grip and offer her the fluffy replacement, a maneuver that became easier over time. When I left, I hid the worn-out pup under my jacket until I got to the dumpster.

I didn't fully appreciate this love my mother had for her doggie until I was leaving for the airport to fly to my brother. While my partner put my suitcase in the car, I stood frozen in the driveway, deciding whether to go back inside to get my old Teddy bear from the linen closet. It had sat behind a stack of sheets for years and years. I hadn't considered his company since I was little—maybe once or twice during my first year of college. But at that moment in the driveway, I sensed the

magnitude of what awaited me in Atlanta, a wave of fear that telegraphed some primal childhood need not to be alone.

I left without the bear, but a few days later, once my brother was settled into hospice, I ordered a stuffed lemur from Amazon with yellow eyes and a beanbag bottom, something to hold through the nights I laid awake on my brother's sofa, listening for his cries.

The lemur floats around my office now, on the bookshelf or the loveseat, a reminder of those weeks with my brother I doubt I'll ever need. The Sheltie is buried with my mother, a backup companion in case she couldn't find my father.

On the Sundays I visited, before the window and the masks, I wheeled my mother to the café downstairs for popcorn and coffee, then outside to do laps around the parking lot. She liked to read the license plates and the signs marking the reserved spaces. These were for the residents in independent living who could still drive, the people who stared at us whenever I wheeled my mother into the dining room for chocolate ice cream, as though watching their future roll by their table. The waitresses would tell me how much I resembled my mother, and like those residents watching us, I glimpsed my possible future and shivered.

Sugar is the strongest taste the cognitively impaired can detect, a happy accident for us both. I gave my mother whatever she wanted until her stomach ached. My purse was stuffed with candy—Tootsie Rolls and miniature Snickers bars and a baggie of Haribo gummy bears I'd left to harden in a crystal bowl on my coffee table until they reached the chewiness she liked, the same system my mother taught me back when she had the same crystal bowl and a coffee table, a house and a husband, back when she knew her limit of sweets but sometimes ignored it, when she was still cognizant of her gorging on gummy bears and the stomachache that would inevitably make

her stop.

My brother was also fond of the Haribo bears, though more to buy than to eat. I found five-pound bags of them he had hidden in his bedroom drawers and bathroom cabinets in case he got a craving in the middle of the night. I tossed the bags in the trash without checking the expiration dates; the yellowed plastic and the pale bears inside, drained of their artificial colors, indicated their age and neglect.

Once my mother was full of sweets, I pulled a nail clipper and a tweezer from my bag, tools too sharp for the caregivers to use. The clipper was shaped like a fish when folded closed, a gift from my father years ago after a trip they'd taken to Carmel. I put the fish clipper in my mother's hand and told her Ronnie gave it to me. His name was my prelude to the mental exercise I ran her through every Sunday. The power of the mind—even one as damaged as hers—might open that invisible gate and lead her away from this kind of living she never wanted, never planned for, back to my father, whose name—Ronnie, Ronnie—she called out each night before she fell asleep.

I began by pointing to the sky, then told her Ronnie was waiting for her. She followed my gaze up as high as the trees or the stucco building's tiled roof until I coaxed her higher, all the way up to the Sunday blue. Once I had her attention, I asked if she was ready to go to him, then paused to hear a Yes! that never came. When she lowered her gaze to me again, her expression was a scramble, her eyebrows knitted, as though irritated at my insolence, yet her eyes sad with a longing, I'm still certain, to be with my father again.

Perhaps I should take some credit for opening that invisible gate. While I was in Atlanta with my brother, a caregiver was changing my mother one morning when she looked up at the bedroom ceiling and said, *I'm not ready yet, Ronnie.*

In a few weeks, she would be.

After I flew home with my brother's ashes, I went to visit my mother at her window the Sunday following mandatory testing and quarantine. This time she wasn't waiting for me. She lay in bed, motionless and unresponsive when I peeked through the blinds and pounded on the glass, and when I yelled her name so loudly a caregiver came into her room because I'd disturbed the resident next door.

That night I left a message for the home's director in hopes of striking a bargain with her to get inside. When she called me Monday morning, I told her the story of my brother's death, the flight to Atlanta before Christmas to help him on his way, then weeks later, flying home with his ashes at the height of the pandemic. It was a story shaped by fear and loss, with details all too common in the director's world, where death was far too ordinary to have pulled much weight. Yet, at the end of my tale, the director granted me three days inside my mother's room—compassionate care, she called it, a loophole in the pandemic protocol for families willing to obey the rules and accept the risks. I'd be masked and gowned and gloved—with only my voice and my eyes, blinking behind my eyeglasses and face shield, to spark my mother's recognition.

Perhaps I did tell my mother about my brother during those days together, not with words, but with the music my brother had asked me to play for him, over and over, piano covers of hits from the film and stage, sad melodies that now soothed my mother the way they'd eased him. After she died, I compiled a playlist and labeled it, "Music for Transitioning," though I knew I'd never play those songs again.

I committed the same mistakes I'd made with my brother, coaxing too many swallows of Ensure until up they came, waves of chocolate lapping down her nightgown and sheets. Like with my brother, I pulled down my mask and let my mother kiss me on the lips, a pandemic taboo I'd pay for that night in bed as I waited for the sore throat and the fever to

surface. My mother and I passed those three days sitting together, reading each other's eyes. I made her laugh when I pulled down my mask and made crazy faces for her, the way a stranger might entertain a baby. She squeezed my hand the way my brother had each time I whispered, *Don't worry, I'm here.*

I told her stories from my childhood, the same ones I'd told my brother when he was dying: the tableclothed buffets at our grandparents' fancy supper club or the trips to our family cabin in the Sierra Nevada where we skied and hiked. I was telling one of those stories when I missed my brother's final breath.

The room was quiet when my mother died, but for the music I'd played for my brother, music for compassionate care, music for transitioning. The Sheltie watched from the bookcase, waiting, until I tucked it in beside her. A nurse came in to take my mother's vitals, and I barked at her to get out. My mother was already gone, through that invisible gate, off to find her beloved Ronnie; only her body hadn't let go yet. I smoothed the dark circles around my mother's eyes with one hand; the other rested on her chest, feeling for its last rise and fall. I tried counting the seconds between the breaths but got confused. I needed to stay focused, the way I'd been when I sat beside my father's bed five years before and watched as his blue eyes closed. I needed to witness my mother's last moment, the moment I'd missed with my brother, convinced that this was my last chance to understand where they all disappeared to.

My parents left no instructions for when they died beyond the two plots I'd insisted they choose. We picked a spot in the cemetery that overlooked a duck pond we went to when I was young. The rest they said they didn't care about. I don't think they had the strength to weather those decisions—the casket and the flowers. This is what children are for.

Unlike my parents, my brother left detailed instructions. I was to take him on a road trip across his beloved California,

depositing him high in the Sierra Nevada mountains and along the Point Reyes coast. I took a few liberties with his requests—I'd earned the right to. The cemetery was our first stop. I dug between my parents' plots with my fingers, loosening the grassy roots so I could mix handfuls of my father with handfuls of my brother and handfuls from our mother's fresh grave. I was returning my brother to my parents' care, reordering our family out of order, healing their pain and mine.

During My Third Week in Paris, I Am Given a Detailed List of Sins to Consider Confessing

Jordan Lee Mumm

The pastors lead us into a studio apartment
They say is about to be renovated.
For now, the walls are grey and shadowed
Tinged yellow in places, mold
Spotted, mildew stained and thin.
Gnats gather around a dripping faucet,
But the whole place stinks of sitting water.

The room is dark, with only a couple slivers
Of light coming through a set of blue shudders
And an open door in the corner
Revealing the cobbled concrete driveway
Outside, full of colorful debris and stones.

I've known the other students only three
Weeks. Chairs are arranged in a semicircle,
Facing the guest speaker, visiting for the five days.
Beside him, sits an empty metal chair.
He asks for a volunteer, and all of us with our
Torn out notebook pages, shift in our seats,
Look down at the tiled floor, thick with grime.

When my turn comes, I unfold a page full
Of scribbles, and additions so dense I can
Hardly recognize the words. I lie. Or,
I don't say it all. I don't describe her strong hands,
Her easy wave of cropped auburn hair,
Or the emerald of her eyes. I only say
That I wanted her, then watch a dozen strangers
Nod quietly in the darkened room.

To Michael

Jordan Lee Mumm

In another life
You were something like a brother.
Everything you said was so cool,
You were intense, like me,
I wanted to outsmart you,
To grow up to be like you,
To argue with you, so I could
Figure out how to win.

We'd discuss the meaning of the word
Prophet. Agree that there was a certain
Nonconformity to their calling.
Debate what might be
An injustice worth flipping the tables over
In our own churches.

Then, there were days when we would play
Guitar in your apartment
With the slanted ceiling
While your wife found the notes
Perfectly on her keyboard.

That place smelled of comfort:
Laundry, and rain,
And canned green beans.

I'm sorry I don't visit.
Still, I listen to John Denver,
And Prine. I eat fried ravioli.
I talk with my hands, like you do.

Today, I told my mom
About your favorite revivalist,
Charles Finney, his ideas
Regarding faith, I explained
Why I disagree with his point
That we are responsible for the souls
Of our brothers,
In prayer.
She didn't argue with me about it.

Lately, I wonder
Do you feel the weight of my
Salvation on your shoulders
When you sit in the chapel?

Do you imagine
What I would say during
Road trips in that big blue van
What "maybe" I would pose
About the intensity of Jeremiah in his wailing?
Which "well" you might pass back
While you drive through unending
Miles of golden wheat fields?

Friend, I have changed a little,
But I think there's something
About you and I that is still the same.
And when you ask your questions,
When some pastor calls you
Rebel, remember what you told me
About the prophets.

Returning His Things with a Note 1976

Melanie Perish

Apartment Keys

Here is the key to the lobby door, a brownstone, no doorman. The key to the mailbox that stacked bills in both our names, adverts addressed to Resident, letters to me. Keys to the apartment: the police lock with the vertical bar behind the door. the top deadbolt, the bottom deadbolt. These were the keys I put between my fingers when I rode the A Train at night. I've returned the key words: desire, yes, poems, work, yes, read, teach, yes, careless, yes, us, no. *If you get published before I do, you'll find your things on the doorstep,* you said. I held out my hand. *Here are the keys.*

Clothes

Yours: the blue wool sweater your Uncle Sven knitted in physical therapy. I wore it under a camo jacket with the watch cap you hated. Returned touch: rough as wool, smooth as rayon yes; tight short skirt, yes, raw silk tucked into linen pants, no. Jewelry both gold and silver, not up for negotiation. But here is the birthday cardigan I never wore because I never wore them. You like cardigan girls. You'll give it again. But you naked, your calves and thighs, your high, tight ass–all those years you crouched behind home plate. All those times we fucked or made love. Naked I'm not returning.

Booze

The scotch is mine. Keep the burgundy, the Mateus. I didn't buy the Coors. See the drinks I've returned: the single cocktail before a formal

dinner, yes; tequila shots, vodka shots, yes; your attempt at gin barfed in the middle of Bleeker Street, no. Here is the Guiness. I won't simmer beer, beef, and barley any time soon. You liked stew. I liked to nibble carrot coins, measure the parsnip chunks, count the wedges of red onion. I liked the heft of the knife in my hand, the edge.

Books

Cinderblock-and-board bookshelves, the planks stained dark then stained with the wet bottoms of beer bottles, yours. Scotch glasses, mine. We loaned books to friends, to students. So many and most with each of our names printed on inside covers, lefthandcorner, never in script or pencil. Then the unmarked ones. T.S. Eliot, yours. William Blake, mine. Charles Olson, yours. Audre Lorde, mine. Adrienne Rich: *Snapshots of a Daughter-in-Law,* yours. *Diving Into the Wreck,* mine. I fought you for *The Will to Change.* And got it.

Love Letter to the World

Melanie Perish

I believe you always show up for the funeral. There's no
expiration date on grief. I think *specimen* is
an antiseptic word that could be cut from any sentence
that includes *unearthed.* I believe I am part bus stop,
milk pitcher, tailor, tornado siren, and saddle blanket.
I know I'm made of pond mud, peonies,
and the dull, skulking wind of November. Stand
in it. Stand in any wind with a friend and wonder
if you could ever be their North star.

Become randy as the marmot who lives
between both boulders. Decide if the swallowtail
you saw near the bell flower could star in your next
poem. Consider who would open that poem
and read it. Touch someone and feel
texture, temperature, the changed purpose of your fingers.
Watch the lips of your friend when they yawn
and see if you yawn back or would rather kiss them.
If you kiss them, decide if this is the first or the last one.

A Letter to my Tina

Sami Lampe

Do you remember that one 4/20?
It was a Tuesday, sophomore year.
Instead of attending 5th period,

We set out a picnic, of chocolate
Mousse, cheddar Ruffles and Sprite.
We smoked then we ate then smoked again.

I miss the way we would bellow from
The deepest parts of ourselves, anything
And everything was funny to us.

Then you made me laugh right as I
Swallowed a mouthful of food.
I was choking, but it just made it funnier.

But then I really started to lose it
And I couldn't breathe, the whites
Of my eyes turning red, still laughing.

I could see you starting to worry.
You leaned over and patted my back,
Tears streaming down my face.

You hit my back one more time,
And I projectile vomited on the sand
Ruffles and motherfucking chocolate mousse.

Concerned, but still smiling you looked at me
With tears in your eyes, and we laughed
For so long it was like 10 years of therapy.

That was one my first moments of freedom.
You looked at my puke on the sand, all the junk
Partly digested, only to be spit out.

You got up, moved the picnic
Five feet to the side, like you've seen that
Happen every day of your life.

It was like all the fucked-up things
That ever happened to us suddenly didn't exist.
It felt like I was a goddamn newborn baby.

The Polaroid

Joshua Skroch

I picked up the old paperback book off my shelf,
Held together by pale-yellow lines of glue. The cover torn.

I flipped my fingers through the dog-eared pages,
And I could smell that old book smell.

Your picture fell out onto the floor, a Polaroid.
I grabbed the white frame and studied for a moment.

It was the final days of summer before our senior year,
Holding a Bible, you blew the curls out of your face, and smiled.

I remembered that one time we dug ourselves out of the snow.
We were coming home from Sac as the storm rolled in.

My Corolla's bald tires kept sliding all over the fresh slush.
Wheels spinning, we were stuck on the side of the road.

I found a blue three ring binder in the back seat.
Fingers numb, I used it to shovel the snow from my tires.

Stepping on the gas with my drenched black hi-tops
We'd move forward about 6 feet before digging again.

We needed help. Shivering in my flannel, I was hopeless.
But you told me to have faith, as we hiked along the highway.

We found someone in yellow overalls, willing to sell us chains
He wanted forty bucks to help, but agreed to our last fifteen.

A couple years back, I looked you up on Facebook.
I recognized that smile in your profile picture, and the curly locks

That pushed out from underneath a red MAGA hat. You posed
There with your husband and sons while holding an AR-15.

On your feed you kneeled for the cross, and stood for your flag.
You declared that all lives matter, that we needed a wall.

I looked down and took a final look at the faded image
Then tucked it into an old encyclopedia collecting dust.

A Further Examination of Jail Birds and People

John Fenton

Can't ever imagine the birds singing until they do,
each morning in the rubbing your eyes light,
a cooing surprise.
So, maybe I find a moment contented.

Steam surging from my cup watching the birds.

If birds were like people,
I don't imagine there would be music
for my mornings. And this shithole of a prison
would crumble,

dust would choke the air for miles,
and people would laugh, because
who the fuck cares about prisoners,

'cept that they stay. Feeding birds.
Bread crumbs. "I walked my ass to the chow hall
to get you that." And watch them peck and scratch.

I like seeing the birds fight each other
flapping their wings and biting for the neck
the victor strutting off a new domain.

If birds were like people, it wouldn't stop there,
to lose would be to die in a cage somewhere
rotted away, every feather plucked from the skin
and atrophied, withering the mind to tolerate
the intolerable,

to break the spirit with the crushing sound of an egg
being stepped on.

The Difference

Torrey Barnato

There is holding hands,
and there is how you like
holding on to my pinky finger.
People hug,
but I prefer the way
you do a little jig
while we embrace.
You leave your shirt and shorts folded
in a perfectly neat pile when you take
a shower while mine
lay a mess on the hardwood floor.
You like to have every part of life
planned out down to the last detail
while I'd rather not think about the specifics
until they present themselves.
I'll make your favorite fried rice,
you'd rather doordash cereal
with almond milk. You'll drift
off to sleep and begin
to snore within seconds
while I stay up cuddling
your messily tattooed forearm
until the sun makes
its first appearance above
the horizon.
I thank whatever god
or fate
or supernatural forces
that we are opposites.
I'm glad that life knocked me down

how it did, took away all
the ones I thought
I loved.
It's like the universe
was trying to tell me
to stop trying so hard,
trying to tell me
that good things would
fall into my lap
if I just trusted it.

Personals

Laura Celise Lippman

Some say I have a degree in worry but they are wrong.
It's a Ph.D. in catastrophe. That said, all's OK now and then
with a few forgotten highs and many remembered lows.
I used to like houseplants but now I mostly weed. I love dahlias
but mine tend to wither. There are water shortages interspersed
with deluges. Oh, and I tend to be contrarian.
On the subject of animals: Ctenophores were family favorites—
my dad filled my mother's water glasses with their soft floaty
and occasionally luminescent forms when he ran out of specimen jars.
Fires are warm and wonderful if our toddlers don't wander into them.
I am shrinking in all dimensions now.
Maybe someday I will be an angel on the head of a pin.
We were going to have our neighbor's trees trimmed
but the arborist told us time and the Bronze Birch Borer Beetle
would save us a lot of money. He was right.
If I could remember that I put a pot on the stove, I might cook.
I won music awards but they got away from me.
I am good at talking back and bad at talking nice.
If this were New York City, my feet would hurt.
Women wearing spike heels better Uber everywhere.
I beg for attention. It's easier to net birds than you think but
it's a shitload of trouble to get them out wings intact.
Beware of owls. I find praying mantises
in the strangest places. I would like to see Elvis somewhere.
I've aged out of cataclysmic metamorphosis
and I can't find my siblings' arguments or sea stars.
Move over God, you clod, I'm taking the helm.

It's Not My Fault

Kian Razi

I stuttered before I learned to speak. It wasn't your run-of-the-mill, sliding on your Ss kind of stutter either. Mine was of the ego-shattering, soul-crushing, life-altering variety. Saying something simple like, *I had cereal for breakfast*, demanded a lot of work from my facial muscles. I was lucky to get out the word *breakfast* by lunchtime. I taught myself new ways for saying the same thing, like replacing *for breakfast* with *this morning*, the S and M sounds soft and merciful, the whole thing a significantly easier dismount and landing. Of the entire English alphabet, vowels were the least menacing, downright sympathetic when up against letters like B and P. Still, every sentence demanded a long runway.

The list of a stutterer's heartaches is long and overwhelming. Struggling to get a sentence off the ground must be the most painful heartache of them all. Repeatedly failing to achieve smooth, coherent self-expression dampens the impact of your words. What's the purpose of having consciousness if you can't fully share your life experiences with other sentient beings? How could I ever explain what life was like for me to anyone unlike me?

"What's it like being Iranian?" the chaperone asked. I was in the sixth grade, leaving an otherwise unremarkable field trip to Pike Place Market. Crammed inside a grunting, rattling wood-paneled station wagon with a handful of classmates, I thought I had misheard our chaperone, but no, she did in fact pronounce the word Iran with a long I, which always irked me, and still does.

"Wha-wha-what-what's it li-li-like?" I said, sputtering worse than the car's engine. Even today, all it takes is a tincture of

unease to cause a relapse.

I'd never considered what it was like being me in that way, a way that I had no choice being. What's a proper response? Ululations out the backseat window? Scare the shit out of everyone? I knew how Dad would've reacted to such an inquiry. Like him, I did not appreciate the innocent premise to the question, but unlike him, I didn't call her an idiot, at least not to her face.

"But it isn't your fault you're Iranian," she helpfully added. "You know that, right?"

My classmates were silent. To squash the awkwardness, I suddenly found myself agreeing with this idiot, that no, it wasn't my fault. In fact, it wasn't my choice at all. How about that?

At dinner that night, Dad asked if I had finished my homework yet, which was expected, but I hadn't touched my homework at all, which wasn't. I was too consumed with thoughts about returning to Pike Place to worry about homework. Specifically, I wanted to return to the comic book shop on the ground floor to pilfer the latest edition of Superman. A focused obsession with the Man of Steel basically defined my childhood. The archetype of the mild-mannered, physically, and verbally inept gentleman who literally stammers as he speaks but possesses secret powers of unparalleled greatness revealed during times of distress was the most potent story ever planted in my young, fertile mind. I made it an obligation to keep up with my hero's many storylines.

Instead of offering up the truth, I blurted out what the chaperone had said. Dad looked at me like I needed to repeat myself. I did and his whole facial structure changed.

"You gotta be fucking kidding me," he said in Farsi. Sometimes it was difficult to understand what he was saying when he spoke through gritted teeth.

I've always hated discussing race. I avoid it like a lot of

things because it rouses passions I can't control. Dad felt differently. He was no social justice warrior; he was just inclined to identify with the marginalized and downtrodden. There's no shortage of romance in seeing yourself as someone who had overcome obstacles thrown in your way by groups higher on the social order, groups afraid of losing their station in life, no less to a perceived mongrel. As far as he was concerned, anyone who besmirched this romanticized self-regard would need to pay a heavy price.

On top of the touchy subject of race, one of Dad's cooks had drunk himself into a stupor that day. Dad reeked of food and misery from having been in the sweltering kitchen at the restaurant filling in again. He hated being a restaurant owner.

"That it wasn't your fault…?" he repeated, as if trying to make it make sense. His lips curled into a snarl. That angry face could burn a hole in concrete. "I'm coming to your school tomorrow."

I felt another bad episode coming on. "Nnn-nuh-nuh-nuh-nnno, no," I struggled. "Puh-puh-puh-plee-plee-please don't," I stammered.

"Are you embarrassed by me? Does your dad embarrass you?"

If only I could fly away under my own power…

"That bitch works there?" Anger had a way of putting Dad's misogyny on full display.

"She's one-one-one of the mmmuh-mmmuh-moms who came on the field trip."

He wasn't listening anymore, too consumed with righteous anger, the worst kind. The next morning, he charged into Principal Eckhardt's office splenetic and ready to unload.

"I don't-don't-don't know who the fuck that woman thinks she is," he said, spitting his rage all over the principal's desk, stabbing a finger at him. "Do you-you-you think it's okay to say such a dumb thing? Do you?"

A debilitating stutter was just one of a handful of unpleasant traits and habits I inherited from Dad. My stutter was more severe than his, though. Dad only stuttered when furious and speaking English: lips tightening, eyelids fluttering like a wounded fledgling trying to take flight after falling from the nest. It's hard to take someone seriously when they stutter during a rage-fueled tirade; it breaks the tension, and not in a good way. But I never had to stifle a chuckle when a stutter overwhelmed him. Struggling to express his inner thoughts and feelings cogently was withering enough. Besides, mocking him would only annihilate us both. Iranians are not suicide bombers.

Dad lacked the tools to manage his stutter efficiently, which meant that in English, he lacked the persuasive skills to change anyone's mind; he couldn't crumple people the way he could in Farsi. In Farsi, this confrontation with Principal Eckhardt would've been one long, smooth berserker tirade with no interruptions.

The English language exposed a vulnerability that Dad spent his life trying to hide, like so many other things about himself. Not doing so resulted in torrents of self-loathing—something all stutterers who haven't acquired coping skills feel after stammering in public. But Dad's self-loathing manifested as rage. Hearing me stutter always pissed him off too. He would bark at me to stop and take a deep breath, advice that made me self-conscious and my stutter worse.

"Do you know anything about Rumi?" he asked Principal Eckhardt that morning in his office.

Oh no, I thought, here he goes.

"The great-great-greatest poet of all tuh-tuh-time!"

Defending his ethnicity by reaching back centuries and then ranting about it with Khomeini-like perorations was not uncommon. Dad would seize upon these grandiose ideas of

Iranian greatness so intensively that he elevated them too high for me to grasp fully. With a direct connection to his ethnic homeland, it was easy for him to summon these passions, whereas I felt a close but somewhat detached connection to my ethnicity. I was born in Iran but came to the U.S. at the age of one, a boy between worlds.

Where did Dad's energetic bloviating of the past leave me? Occasionally, these tales of Iran's cultural significance created a Fortress of Ethnicity I could enter from time to time, roam around in and appreciate, as if in a museum. However, this was not one of those occasions. I stood in the corner of the principal's office feeling myself shrink under the force of my humiliation. I wanted to burrow into the wall like a rat and disappear. The principal just sat there taking it too.

Dad had his finger in the air now. "And guess what-what-what else? He was Persian. That's right. Omar Khayyam!" he said. "Omar Khayyam!" He briefly stopped ranting, believing that merely uttering the name of a Persian poet amassed significance if you just let it hang in the air for a second, the accumulating weight of greatness bearing down on you.

Iranians never call Iran Persia or themselves Persian; it's an exonym Iranian-Americans use to make other Americans feel safe around us. Persia connotes an ancient and mysterious culture of ornate rugs, jangly belly dancers, and bejeweled royalty. Who wouldn't find that collection of cliché images alluring? As a way of circumventing others' prejudgment, Dad encouraged me to call myself Persian whenever asked about my background.

"The great-great-greatest architects, mathematicians, thinkers of all time!" he continued. And then solemnly, "Persians invented the concept of human rights. Human. Rights."

Human Rights? Rumi? Omar Khayyam? Could anyone be more comically Iranian?

Dad quickly returned to spraying his anger everywhere, "Fff-fff-ffffive-five-five thousand years of history! It's not my

son's fault he's Iranian? Are you kidding me?"

"I'll speak to his teacher right away," Principal Eckhardt managed to squeeze in. "It'll never happen again. It was wrong."

"It better not happen again, or else you'll have a muh-muh-much bigger problem on-on-on your-your-your hands."

It looked like Principal Eckhardt was suppressing a laugh.

Dad told me to get my ass to class while he returned to the ungrateful world of restaurant ownership. A single dad raising two boys, Ali Razi Hamedani had a lot on his mind in those days, and not a lot of productive ways of blowing off steam.

From kindergarten through third grade, I took speech therapy at Sunnycrest Elementary in Kent, Washington. This was many years before the dissolution of my parents' marriage. My schedule was Mondays, Wednesdays, and Fridays right after first recess. Coming in from the playground, I braced for the crackle of the intercom and the school secretary announcing my name, telling me to "please report to Ms. Brady's office for speech therapy." I wasn't allowed to go straight to therapy after recess and I never understood why.

I was already on my feet when the announcement came, clutching my Xeroxed workbook of lessons on how not to sound like my thoughts were fragmented. I rode another wave of susurrated mockery from the classroom down the hall to Ms. Brady's office where I shut the door behind me like a refugee on the run.

Ms. Brady was middle-aged, had tight blonde curls, and wore thick reading glasses. She was the type who volunteered at soup kitchens and offered the shawl on her back to a shivering drifter. On our first day working together, she asked if I had a favorite thing, maybe a superhero I liked, maybe Batman or Spiderman? She was patient as I struggled with my hero's name, took a perforated square of printer paper and a box of

crayons and drew Superman's insignia, using my input on color and design. She taped the insignia to the only window in the room, one that looked out onto the soccer field, and never said a word about it. The red and yellow S took on extra salience after that, lending the jolt of confidence I needed to get through my lessons, to say nothing of those superfluous intercom announcements.

I practiced the sounds, rhythms, and tongue-twisting fables meant to rewire my brain. I play-stuttered with Ms. Brady, deliberately stuttering on sounds that I had less difficulty with as a way of developing strategies to overcome the severe stutter I did have with the more problematic sounds in my lexicon. Ms. Brady thought that having learned two languages simultaneously was a contributing factor to my stutter, which was already exacerbated by having a parent with the same problem.

"Simply let the words flow," Ms. Brady would gently say, turning the pages of my workbook languorously, as if in a dream. While she made it virtually impossible for me not to try my very best, there was nothing simple about "letting the words flow." Undermining what I truly wanted to communicate by picking words that were easier to say had been my way of life. Gradual improvements to my speech notwithstanding, I was determined to secure an even larger vocabulary.

I started reading books meant for adults. Northwest Paperworks, the tiny bookstore behind Dad's restaurant, adorned its shop window with new releases, and Whitley Streiber's *Communion*, a supposed true accounting of an alien abduction, was one of those. The alien drawing on the book's cover—a massive egg-shaped head with big black eyes—was equal parts terrifying and fascinating. Imagining the alien as something alive in the universe was almost inconceivable. What was it like to be an alien? What was it like to travel

lightyears through space? What planet was it from?

The read was slow going at first. I kept stopping to look up words I didn't know, and sometimes ones I thought I knew but wanted clarity. Soon the book's plot was a distraction. I became convinced of the reality of cosmic interlopers with an ambiguous need to violate human bodies. I was also convinced that I too would wake up on a slab in a brightly lit room surrounded by emotionally detached creatures. Most nights I was too scared to sleep, but enjoyed being afraid, so much so that sharing this exciting feeling of dread seemed like a good idea.

One night, Peter Choi stayed over. He was the only other kid in my class with immigrant parents, so we naturally gravitated to one another. Peter's dad was the owner of Mr. Choi's Taekwondo. Mr. Choi was short, lean, and muscular. He never looked out of breath, frustrated with an aging body, or exhausted with living. I thought Peter's dad was awesome.

That night in the dark, I read passages from *Communion* to Peter by flashlight, skipping to all the good parts. Outside of the warm, nonjudgmental walls of Ms. Brady's office, this night was the first time I found myself speaking without stuttering. Evidently, if the spoken words weren't a rendition of my thoughts, then I could say them with ease. Reading aloud was my superpower.

Lying in a sleeping bag on the floor of my bedroom, Peter's gaze was fixed on the door, waiting for it to creak open like it does in the book, watching as a grey-skinned diminutive humanoid cranes its head inside and stares at him with large unblinking black eyes.

Easily threatened by his imagination, Peter told me to stop reading. He shifted away from me, crumpling the trash bag lining his sleeping bag. I wondered what Peter's fearless dad felt about having a bedwetter for a son.

"Did you hear that?" Peter said. "What was that?"

It was nothing of course; the house settling, or the wind

knocking around the dogwood branches outside. Peter's Casio watch chimed, and he shut it off. The chime was meant to trigger Peter to get up and pee, whether or not he had to go. It took another couple chimes before he got the nerve to creep across the hallway to the bathroom.

A second after he left my room, I heard a high-pitched, blood-curdling scream, and then the sound of someone running down the hall. I leapt out of bed and saw my paternal grandmother, Madarjoon, in her prayer dress—a one-piece covering from head to toe, all white with pink blossom patterns and an oval cutout for her face—chasing Peter with arms outstretched. She had just finished washing herself for Allah, had thrown on the prayer dress and was exiting the bathroom when Peter ran smack into her. In the dark, she must have looked like a malevolent ghost trying to catch him.

We found Peter shaking and crying on the kitchen floor. He had pissed himself. With all the lights on in the house and everyone up, Dad explained to him what had happened in an uncharacteristically calm and measured tone. But there was no consoling Peter. He wanted to go home, and Mr. Choi came and got his son.

When I returned to school that following Monday, an uppity blonde girl named Sarah, whose family owned horses and who trained in dressage, asked me if I worshipped the devil. Before I even had a chance to unload my backpack and sit down at my desk, a rumor had gone around school that I came from a family of Satan worshipers. To hear it first from a blonde-haired, blue-eyed girl, a person who already struck me as quintessentially American, widened the gap I felt between my inner world and the one I inhabited, between the nascent superhero within and the awkward boob without.

The Clark Kent/Superman dichotomy was and is so deeply rooted in my mind that even as an adult I find myself reverting to a belief that I possess a secret greatness whenever faced

with my humiliation. I continue to tell myself that someday there will be overwhelming proof of said greatness.

Whether Peter made the slander exactly how I'd heard it, or whether it evolved through a game of telephone, mattered not. Having classmates call me a devil worshipper for a good, solid week, and asking why my grandmother haunted the halls of our home as a ghost at night produced the same anxiety as the onset of a bad stutter. At this point, I wasn't stuttering much, but once again I found myself stuck in my tracks, body temperature climbing a hundred degrees in seconds, jaw muscles tensing up. I kept my trap shut for a while, just like I used to, before starting speech therapy. The link between my speech impediment and ethnicity was clearer than ever.

For the terrible trauma he endured, Peter stopped being my friend, and then lied about me and my family, ripping away Madarjoon's chador to expose something evil and strange, distorting her true character: a complicated, frail, yet fiercely determined matriarch with a direct line to Allah and His will. It seems that no one can bear to live life without answers and explanations.

Takes One to Know One

Corrina M. Angel-Baumgartner

When my mom was at work, her husband
used to lock me out of my own home.
I'd make metallic thunder when I beat the steel screen,
a mesh cymbal clanging beneath my open palm.

Show me your green card.
That's a racist redneck's idea of a joke.
Wrong house, there are no wet backs here.

He'd twist the deadbolt quickly back and forth—
too quickly for me to twist the brass handle, hot
from baking in the sun, and pull it open
before it was locked again.

What's so attractive about a drunk who tells racist jokes?
And what does a racist want with my mother
and all her Mexican kids?

He says he loves us as if we were his own,
but he doesn't have any, so what does that mean?
Is this what love is supposed to look like?
They want me to call him dad. Maybe I should.

I suppose I'm a lot like him. I tense up around people
who look different from me. I feel uneasy
around blonde haired, blue-eyed white people.

Especially the ones who remind me of him.
Who stink like cigarettes and fury,
and mutter things under their breath.
Pointing syllables just sharp enough to scare me.

Who drive big trucks blasting country music loud
to let people like me know exactly who they are.
When I meet people like that, I wonder if they'll love me

enough to lock me out and mock me for being
who I am. I wonder if they'll find me funny enough
to laugh at me while I cry in the heat, begging,
Please, just let me in.

Finding "What's to Love?" On a Flight Home After a Week of Corporate Bullshit

JoDee Renae

I sit in 23-A, hungover from a corporate convention
that served up daily banquets of stale acronyms,
sky-high sales goals, and motivation disguised
as a bright-white t-shirt; company values
and trademarked logos splashed on the back in blue.
On the front, in red: I "heart" my job.
What's to love? I think to myself.

In that moment I want to feel the quiet sleep
of an old-growth-forest under a fresh blanket of snow
free from life's intrusive foot-falls.

I glance at the stranger next to me. She huddles
under the allotted, scratchy wool blanket,
her eyes petite pools of brown surrounded by red rimmed
globes of white, hair mussed and tousled from
rubbing hard against the seatback, her small fingers
locked like talons around the shared arm rest.

I cover her hand with mine, slip my fingers under
her grip, lift, bring it to rest between
the warmth of my palms,
How can I help?

Stay, just here, just like this? her gaze pleads,
as she squeezes my hand,
salty tears spilling over the curves of her face,
landing on the grasp of our shared need,
I squeeze back.

Patrick Swayze and Me

Nathan Graziano

Young and in love, we spooned in the late-afternoon,
our limbs tangled on the couch in her mom's house.

Constellations of acne peppered my face, sweat
from wrestling practice soaking my Guns N' Roses t-shirt.

As my left hand inch-wormed toward her breasts
she insisted we play *Dirty Dancing* on the VCR

so she could watch a lithe, shirtless Patrick Swayze
ooze sex and sway his hulky hips to 50s tunes.

My girlfriend cooed when I blew into her ear
but it took me years to realize the sweaty hands

moving across her flesh weren't mine; her blue eyes
never moved from the screen as she fantasized

that she was running down an aisle and leaping
into Patrick Swayze's strong hands as he held her

high above his head, sturdy for the world to see,
her back arched and arms spread wide like an angel.

Quarters in My Pocket

Enrique Jimenez Jr.

The old and dusty faded car came to a halt,
warning everyone in a mile's distance.
Lowering my head, I picked up my backpack.
My mother kissed me on the forehead.

Warning everyone in a mile's distance,
she handed me a roll of quarters.
My mother kissed me on the forehead.
A crowd of boys looked towards me laughing.

She handed me a roll of quarters,
quickly I hid the quarters in my pocket.
A crowd of boys looked towards me laughing.
A huge kid followed me towards the lunchroom.

Quickly I hid the quarters in my pocket.
They jingled against my keys with every step.
A huge kid followed me towards the lunchroom.
He shoved me to the ground, demanding my quarters.

The quarters jingled with every step I took.
I looked around for a teacher for help.
He shoved me to the ground, demanding my quarters.
I squeezed the roll of quarters into my hand.

I looked around for a teacher for help.
The dirt had stained my brand-new sweater.
I squeezed the roll of quarters into my hand,
and punched the bully, making it rain quarters.

The dirt had stained my brand-new sweater,
lowering my head, I picked up my backpack,
after I punched the bully, making it rain quarters,
as the old and dusty faded car came to a halt.

A Note from Victoria

Thomas J. Cruz

She left a note on my bedside table and was gone.
It was folded into a paper crane, my sister's favorite animal.
When you read this, I will probably be gone.
Don't try to look for me. I don't want you to.

She folded it into an origami crane, her favorite animal.
The clean sheet of paper I hoped to never see.
Don't try to look for me. I don't want you to.
As much as I want to see you, mom and dad won't let me.

The white paper note I hoped to never see
sat on my cluttered desk behind my thick glasses.
As much as I want to help you, mom and dad won't let me.
But who will help me with my homework?

It was sitting on my cluttered desk behind my glasses
in front of the family photos where she and I smile together.
But who can help me with math homework
now that she is gone?

In front of the Disneyland photos where she and I are together
is the goodbye letter from my sister, cast out for falling in love.
And now that she is gone
I have become an only child.

Other than the note, my sister, who fell in love with her
left me green carnations to represent who she is.
She told me I would never be an only child
that she would always be with me.

I kept the green carnations beside
the note she left on my bedside table.
    She said she would always be with me,
        but when I read her note, she was already gone.

Deaf Lives in Reno

Vanessa Garcia

A girl deaf and grew up in Reno.
The cities, towns and hills are drought, humid,
dirty, and a little rainy.
See the sound of thunder in the night.
A little girl can't hear thunder, can see
the thunder and rainy. She is
sad and lonely in the dark room,
feels inept, noncommunicating, struggles.
Dyslexia with reading.
No one teaches how to use handshape,
complex languages. She is
still in the dark room, bawl and wailing,
can't socialize with friends and families.
How to communicate with them?

She is deaf in the dark room.

She stands and sees the sunrise bright and shiny,
sees the man walking and wearing
the white clothes shiny behind the sun bright.
She feels in her heartbeat, so she runs and hides.
The tree cherries blossoms and her heartbeat is fast!
Her eyes crush on him.
He is a beautiful smiley, handsome, a Korean
and famous man, dramatic, and singing.
It's beautiful, the white snow connects white shiny.
In her heart is melting, romantic, and drooling.

Waging Peace

David Stewart

I approached the French customs area at Paris's Charles de Gaulle Airport and surveyed the room, unsure which lineup I should join.

"*Américain?*" a uniformed woman asked me in a continental French accent. It was a straightforward question, yet I balked before answering—and not just because of the jet lag. It was only the second time I'd travelled to Europe since I had naturalized as a U.S. citizen seven years earlier. And even though I was well-established in the U.S. by this time, in the spring of 2007, it still felt odd to self-declare as an American.

"*Euh ... oui*," I confirmed, in Canadian French. Not only was this the correct answer, but I was visiting France to attend a U.S.-government sponsored event: a Franco-American diplomatic summit called Waging Peace. The U.S. Embassy in France had convened American and French practitioners to share best practices on the topic of integrating immigrants into local communities. The least I could do for my American hosts was to fully embrace my adopted national identity.

After clearing customs, I spotted a bespectacled Frenchman holding a sign with my name on it. He introduced himself as Sylvain, and explained that he worked with Cités Unies, a local NGO that had partnered with the U.S. Embassy here to organize the summit. He led me across the terminal to a group of American community leaders who'd also flown in from U.S. cities like St. Louis and Columbus, and escorted us to another gate for our connecting flight to Lyon.

Two hours later, I collected my luggage in Lyon's St.-Exupéry Airport and found the exit. It was nice to be back in France, where I'd attended law school as a Rotary Scholar more than a decade earlier. In those days I was an "ambassador of goodwill,"

teaching the French about my Canadian culture. Now I was a U.S. citizen returning to share insights about my immigrant life.

I hopped a taxi and chatted up the North African cabbie en route to the hotel. As I gazed out the cab window, I wondered what lay in store for me at tomorrow's event. I'd been invited to participate in the Waging Peace summit on account of my recent work helping immigrants adjust to their new homes in North Carolina. For the previous five years I'd been running one of Charlotte's leading immigration law clinics, along with other programs to help immigrants find housing, learn English and connect to our local community.

The immigration theme was clearly in my wheelhouse. But as a relatively new American, I nonetheless felt uncomfortable representing the U.S.'s interests abroad. Did my work with immigrants give me the standing to help the U.S. government promote its immigration policies at a diplomatic summit? Was I really that integrated?

The next morning, I smoothed my blazer and adjusted the kerchief poking out of its breast pocket, then ascended the burgundy-carpeted stairwell of the city hall in Lyon. The mayor kicked things off with a warm welcome to the eighty or so attendees, and offered thoughts on Lyon's current challenges in welcoming immigrants into its community. He also promised to walk us through his city's immigrant neighbourhoods later that day.

The opening panel featured three American leaders of non-profits sharing their best practices in organizing community events that celebrate immigrant groups in the U.S., such as ethnic fairs or festivals. Afterwards, I asked one of the French delegates, from Charlotte's sister city of Limoges, if he had gleaned any lessons from the discussion that he might apply in his work with immigrants in his home city.

"*Oui*," he answered with a wink, and he joked sarcastically that he could host a Latino festival.

I chuckled at the gag, since of course France did not have many Latino immigrants. But I also thought, *Yikes!* The French were not buying what we Americans were selling.

The sessions flew by, and soon I headed downstairs for a sit-down lunch. I entered the grand dining hall, admiring its vaulted ceilings, wooden tables and elegant place settings. I sat next to our American hosts: diplomats stationed at the U.S. Embassy in Paris. They were well informed on the conference's key topic of immigrant integration, yet as they shared their enthusiasm for the conference, I detected an ulterior motive behind the statecraft. In this post-9/11 era, the U.S. worried that France's predominantly Muslim ghettos were breeding grounds for terrorism, and the Americans were coaxing the French to take this threat more seriously. But if the goal was to influence France's domestic priorities, then the U.S. hadn't done itself any favours by serving a wine-free lunch in this iconic wine-growing region. Not a great way to win French hearts and minds.

Afterwards, I rejoined my breakout group upstairs, where we were about to discuss best practices in policing immigrant neighbourhoods. As our group kicked off a discussion, a twenty-something woman wearing a U.S. State Department badge approached me.

"Excuse me. A gentleman over there said that you speak French?"

"Yes, why?"

"We have a lively discussion going on at another table, and our translators are having trouble keeping up. We were hoping you could serve as a translator? I hate to pull you from your group, but we're in a bit of a jam."

Wow. First no wine at lunch, now no competent translators. This Bush foreign policy team was a real winner. But since this

was a diplomatic gathering, I kept those thoughts to myself. I wasn't trained as a translator, but thanks to my bilingual Quebec upbringing, I figured I could do a decent job of it. So I pulled up a chair to my new table.

On one side were two African Americans with LAPD—COMMUNITY RELATIONS, and COLUMBUS, OHIO—CHIEF OF POLICE, respectively, on their name badges. They had short haircuts and were dressed in civilian suits and ties. Across the table sat two smaller men with groomed moustaches, wearing the formal blue gendarmerie uniform of Montpellier, France.

One gendarme pleaded for my intervention straightaway.

"*Quand nous entr-r-rons dans les quar-r-rtiers immigr-r-rants* ..." he said, making eye contact with me. He was gesticulating and trilling his r's with a Languedocien flair.

I translated to English in real time, glancing at the African Americans as I spoke: "When we patrol these immigrant neighbourhoods ..."

The gendarme continued: "... *nous entr-r-rons avec de la for-r-rce. Et nous tapons tr-r-rès for-r-rt*."

I translated again: "... we go in with a show of force. We strike ... hard."

The two African Americans were holding their heads in dismay, moaning, "No, no," under their breath. When I finished speaking, the LAPD guy spoke up first.

"Nah, man, you can't do that!" he said, looking imploringly at me, then the gendarmes, then back to me. "Tell them. When I was a kid in L.A., that's how the cops came into our neighbourhood."

The gendarmes twirled their moustaches in silence. Although they hadn't understood everything the officer had said, they seemed nonplussed by his emotional response. They turned towards me and listened intently as I translated.

The L.A. officer continued, "And what happened is, over

time, the cops became the enemy. We were trained to hate the police, to fear them. And it turned into a kinda war mindset. No one on their side was listening to anyone on our side, and vice versa."

The Ohio chief of police was nodding in approval.

I repeated their advice back to the gendarmes, in French: "... *la police deviant l'ennemi ... un esprit guerrier* ..." They were hanging on every word. One of them was taking notes, while the other asked a question.

"*Mais, comment voulez-vous qu'on fasse notr-r-e boulot, alor-r-s?*"

I translated again: "But how are we supposed do our jobs without patrols?"

"It's called 'community relations,'" the L.A. officer said, enunciating carefully and pointing at the title on his name tag.

"Yep," the Ohio police chief chimed in. "You go into the neighbourhoods when everything's fine to get to know the folks on your beat. And they get to know you too. That way, when a problem comes up down the road, you can get information without turnin' folks against you."

The back and forth went on another twenty minutes until our next break. Afterwards the gendarme who'd been jotting down notes during the discussion found me on the stairwell.

"*Merci*," he said. And he explained that the Americans' perspectives had given him lots to think about.

I shook his hand, then ducked outside for an espresso at a sidewalk café. I stood at a small outdoor table, picked up the lemon rind off the saucer and dabbed it along the rim of the tiny cup. As I sipped the coffee, I wondered if maybe we Americans had achieved something here after all. It was a small step, but one gendarme had started to see things in a different way. Now if only I could talk to someone about serving Châteauneuf-du-Pape with dinner tonight.

I returned to North Carolina invigorated and refreshed. The

conference had opened my eyes to how cities everywhere were struggling with the same issues we'd been seeing in Charlotte. And by asking me to translate at the event, our American hosts had valued my bilingual, Canadian upbringing—something I hadn't always felt during my early years in the U.S. I'd been invited to France to share my experience integrating immigrants into America, but by the end of the conference I was the one who felt more integrated.

Yet as America grew steadily more familiar in the months following the conference, Canada felt more distant. Now that I had kids in school, I wasn't able to travel there as frequently. And when I did make it north of the border, I noticed that Canadians were correcting my pronunciation of words like "resources" or "process," making me self-conscious about losing my accent. Some of my friends and family even chastised me about the U.S.'s ongoing invasion of Iraq, as if it were my fault. It was a disquieting feeling, but I put it out of my mind. This is how integration goes, I told myself. Every day I become a little more American.

Then one morning, I visited my dentist's office in Charlotte for a routine cleaning. After the hygienist finished polishing my teeth, I stayed in the chair, staring at my shoes while waiting for the dentist to come in and check for cavities. He finally entered, wearing scrubs and a mask he had lowered from his mouth. He held a thin film up to the light. It looked like an X-ray of my teeth and gums. He had a quizzical look on his face, like something wasn't quite right.

"Uh, sir?" my dentist asked in a pleasant Southern drawl, examining the slide.

"Yes?"

He dropped the sheet and looked at me. "Are you Canadian?"

"Sorry?" I asked, even though I'd heard his question. I had already given away the game by offering an apologetic, indirect response to a direct American question.

"I was asking if you're a Canadian," he repeated.

"Actually ... yes. Why?"

"I noticed on your X-ray that you had your twelve-year molars extracted to make room for your wisdom teeth to grow in their place. Kinda weird. It's a practice you never see here, but I heard it was common in Canada, at least for a time. So it got me wondering if you're Canadian."

"Wow," I marvelled. "That's the first time someone guessed my nationality by inspecting my mouth."

"Well," said the dentist. "You'd be surprised how much you can tell about a man by looking at his teeth."

I smiled. No matter how much I'd acculturated in America, my dental X-rays would always reveal my Canadian roots.

Three Months

Lily C. Nieminen

That's how long you've been high for,
you tell me, restless fingers
tap tapping against the steering wheel,
keeping time with the anemic rain
that refuses to wash the dust
from the hood of your Civic.

I watch a droplet roll down the windshield
before being caught by the crack
that runs across the glass,
the water made ruby red
by the burning cherries of taillights.

The air between us aches with this admission
like the cracked tooth in my mouth,
and as you wait for my response,
I chew on my cigarette rather than light it.

The ash gray sky stares me down,
telling me to make warmth
where your car's heater cannot
and the November wind refuses.

I want to say something perfect and profound.
Something that will make your addiction a roach
we can flick out the window, something that will heal
a friendship cracked by a year of silence.

I like to tell myself that if I knew the words
that would comfort you and brush away your sadness,

I would pluck them from my lips
and press the shining pieces of ivory
into your skinny fingers,
one piece for me and one piece for you.

But when I feel the weight of them on my tongue,
my jaw aches and threatens to shatter,
so, I keep them in the dark where they blacken,
a rot that tastes just like nicotine.

Taillights go dark, traffic creeping forward.
I offer half a laugh and a *Damn, really?*
A clove stuffed into the black hole in my gums.
The musty car air now absent of pain, invulnerable.
As you roll your window down to ash,
I watch another raindrop roll across the windshield,
disappearing into that crack.

Addicted to Forgetting

Kaela L. Hale

A dim purple hue
softly falls on the silhouettes around her,
kissing the tip of her Greek sculpted nose.
A shot in hand,
“What’s your biggest fear?” she asks.
Hers is drowning. No, falling.

Country music? No. Pop?
Is there supposed to be a theme to this party?
“You have pretty eyes,” she mouths.
I can’t look away from hers.

Trap music. “I hate this music.”
Me too.
She makes music.
They should play that instead.
“Want another?” she yells.
Yes.

Hair held back. Water.
Gentle hands,
“It’s okay, babe. Let it out.”
Babe? Thank you.

“C’mon one more,” she says.
Of course, darling.
She likes fireball.
I can’t stand to look at it.

Unfamiliar bed. Whose?
Blonde? No, brown hair.
Right.
Did we leave?
No.

Forfeited

Sheree La Puma

Drunk & choked with rage, I cut my body (small)
like a fish that meets a violent end. Bare hands
wet & stained with blood. I am surely not alone.
This need. This vanishing. This lack of skin
sketched into the background like a dark secret
ready to announce itself. I did not know what I
was capable of when Ann went missing. Yet, I
fantasized about the decision, running off to Paris,
that chiseled man. I imagined the room. Like nectar
in a communal jar, his lips sucking on bare legs.
When she called her husband, relief, their daughter
giggling in the receiver, oblivious. Expecting but
not understanding the ethics of a second chance,
I, too, want to follow the morning light, pull desire
from its throat. By now, I'm sure my friends regret
asking about my girls, would we meet again. Their
father, dead, part of the mix. Guilt, headless &
strung to the fence. Oh, the things we cannot fix
crawling back into bed at dawn. Knees wet from
kneeling on damp earth, having buried myself.

Simulation

Lenny DellaRocca

If it's what they say it is, I'll walk up the street to Fob's.
He'll be out smoking
with his dog, Moony.
His pipe burning
black cavendish
dreamy as a cuff link.
The weather fine
for crows with shiny
things in the trees. But
even with all that
the news will creep up
like a cat with a bad
mood in its eyes.
Not much anyone can do,
this is so small a planet.
If he were alive my father
would just look at me
with the old blue ones. He was good at that, house silence.
But I'm sure somebody
will run the numbers
again. Meantime,
I'll throw a bash.
Have the white smocks
over for drinks. Give them
something of Fob's
only spiced up sweet
with a wink. Urge them
to rethink the situation.
I'll take my cards out.
We'll all jig about and before
we watch the rockets go up
we'll drink our tomorrows
from our shoes, shut the lights
and chase each other around
in the dark. Kiss our lovelies. Everything will be just fine.

That Kind of Mother

Stacy Boe Miller

I like to walk my neighborhood in a shirt my daughter cut short
without asking because she wanted the world
to see my belly, and right now it's full

of soup we made from two big, sweet onions and the bones of a deer
that ran these hills until my husband stood over her crying
in a wheat field because he hadn't seen the fawn. All of that is in my belly

too as I walk past a porch of teenagers smoking and trying not to look
at each other's beautiful, young legs. If they look up they'll see me and
might look away
from the stretch marks showing above the rim of my jeans. Their
discomfort

doesn't bother me. They'd be surprised by their own bones
waiting inside. I know bones, and I'm not surprised anymore.
Soup and the absence of surprise floating around in me

alongside the songs my mom would sing on Sundays. Her coral
Estee Lauder lips. If she saw me watching her mouth move,
she'd brush my forearm lightly with her painted nails until I couldn't

help but close my eyes. Her belly, stretch mark free, but she didn't
walk her neighborhood in a shirt too short for a woman
her age, and I never considered until just now that she might have longed
to do so.

All that Glitters

Zachary Greenhill

A person could wish me goodnight or a good morning and both would be acceptable, but there wasn't a person in the casino to do so. I stood behind an empty baccarat game staring out into an expanse of slot machines covered in a fine layer of soot. My cards formed a neat stack in the center of the blue felt that was stretched over the surface of the table. My table was one of four that orbited a central pillar tucked away into one of the far corners of the casino. Each side of the pillar had a piece of yellow-stained plastic that was illuminated from the back, like an old bus stop advertisement. The koi fish that were painted onto the front of the displays appeared sun damaged, even though it was impossible for the sun's light to reach anything near where I was standing. In front of me existed rows of empty slot machines, roughly fifteen wide by five deep. Each one playing their demos in a consistent loop like animated tombstones placed on pedestals. The bright neon lights that covered each machine did more to illuminate the area than the old chandeliers that hung from the ceiling. Beyond those machines existed the primary pit, where a dozen other dealers stood behind their games like toy soldiers waiting for someone to play with them. Their heads craned back so they could see the TV's that hung in each corner of the main pit.

The pit I was in, however, had no TVs within eyesight. No other dealers to pass the time. No distractions I could throw myself towards. The only other person who I was sharing the space with was my supervisor, whose game of solitaire must have been riveting, as the clicks his mouse made per second outpaced the tempo of the yacht rock that was playing in the background. *At least this is peaceful*, I thought to myself, *I could do with some peace.*

I let out a small sigh and shifted my feet and looked towards a specific group of machines whose progressive jackpots were linked to other casinos across the state. As people in other casinos played, the progressive would occasionally increase by a few cents. They say "a sucker is born every minute," but at those hours it was a lot closer to 15 seconds. By performing some quick math, I could estimate how much time had passed, and how much time I had until my next break. I typically wasn't off by more than a dollar.

As I pressed my damp palm into the casino doors, I took a deep breath before I entered, and braced myself for the tongue lashing I was about to receive. I crossed the threshold into the dim building, and the air in my lungs was quickly swapped out with smoke as my eyes adjusted to the light. Before my pupils had fully dilated, I heard the words "You're late" emanating from the main pit. I looked over and could make out the silhouette of my blackjack instructor standing in the middle of the table games, her arms crossed in front of her chest. Even without seeing the look on her face, the glare she sent in my direction was like a bayonet to the abdomen. I offered whatever paltry excuse I could as I sheepishly walked past her, towards the punch-clock.

I swiped my badge and another voice, from somewhere behind me, said, "Late on your first day, that's an interesting choice." I turned around and saw a man with a half-cocked smile and a nicotine-stained nametag that read *WES*. He had small glasses, a round face, and short gray hair that was parted on the right side. I stood there for a moment in silence, trying to process the situation, when his smile broke into a light laugh and he said, "I'll be watching you today."

"I thought that was surveillance's job?" I replied.

"Good! You have a sense of humor," Wes replied as he laughed a little more, "all the new dealers get an old guy like

me to watch 'em… So you only make the same mistakes as me."

Wes' demeanor was not something I was used to. My blackjack instructor had created an image that the casino was a serious place, a place where humor was almost forbidden. This made sense to me, as my only real exposure to casinos was through James Bond novels, and the Robert De Niro movie Casino. Wes, however, treated my tardiness, and other events, like a joke. Overall, he seemed more suited to being a mall Santa than a person who worked in a casino his entire life.

During our breaks he would tell me stories from when his nametag was still white. He talked about the flood in 1997. How they closed the table games so the dealers could pile sandbags in front of the doors, and how security had to physically remove people from slot machines as the basement began to overflow. He told me about his wife, how they had met in blackjack school, and how she had been recently fired after working there for over 30 years. He even showed me the back way into the pit, so that if I'm ever late again I can sneak in undetected.

By the end of day my head hurt, my feet were sore, and my hands had begun to cramp. As Wes and I stood over the punch-clock, he asked, "Want one more piece of advice?"

"Of course," I replied, hoping that I could retain his wisdom amongst my stressed mind.

Without so much of a pause, he said, "Get out," as he ran his card through the terminal.

"That's what I'm doing next," thinking it was only natural to leave after clocking out. His eyes shifted up from the clock towards me. The smile he had worn for most of the day was gone, replaced by a sincere, almost fatherly look.

"Get out," he repeated. "I've seen too many people like you walk through those doors only to watch them get chewed up by this place. They see the money, and it's good, but they eventually give up, they settle. Don't be like me."

When the 4th digit on the progressive turned over I knew my shift was almost over, and I started looking towards the doors waiting for my relief to show up. As I did though I noticed someone heading in my direction. From my right, I saw a man in a wheelchair whose back and seat were made of thin blue vinyl. A tube ran from the man's nose to the end of the chair's left armrest where he clutched a small oxygen tank in an arthritic grip. His other hand was nested into a large blanket that pooled over his seat, rubbing against the tires as he moved. Both of his legs dangled off the edge freely and were just long enough to allow the soles of his shoes to touch the ground. He used the minimum contact his feet made with the floor to inch himself towards my game in an awkward sort of doggy paddle.

As he crept further into my field of vision I stood motionless. *Please don't make me work*, I thought to myself, *just a few minutes before I go home*. When his chair stopped right in front of my game however, my hopes were crushed, and without saying a word, I began to scoop up my cards. As I started shuffling, I noticed that he had not moved, or even acknowledged my presence. It became clear he was not interested in playing. Rather he had become stuck on a tear in the carpet, and his means of locomotion didn't generate enough force to push him out. So, he sat there, resigned to his fate.

Before I could bring my supervisor's attention to the situation, a cocktail waitress rounded the corner and said, "Hi there!" She continued by asking the man, "Do you need any help?"

"I wanna get over der," he replied. Each syllable was raspy and weak as if it were being broadcast through layers of static. Had he not lifted his arm to signify direction I wouldn't have been able to understand what he said.

"And is there anything I could get you to drink?" the waitress

asked, finishing her typical speech.

"Yeah," the man said with enthusiasm, taking a moment to catch his breath. "I want a coffee. With eight creams. And ten sugars."

"Of course…." she replied. Her voice trailing off as she pushed the man further into the casino.

As the two disappeared into the distance I saw my relief walk through the door, and for the first time in 7 hours a smile cracked across my face. *Wow*, I thought to myself, *I really can't wait to get out of here*. I laughed a little at how time can change any perception.

Roughly two decades prior my family and I were racing through a casino as if we were late for an appointment. My dad was wearing the bluest pair of jeans he owned, and a polo shirt. He pushed my mother in her wheelchair, and their combined momentum dragged me along as I hung onto the tail of his polo. We were like a dogsled team fighting through a blizzard of smoke and noise while slaloming between tables and slots. All the while my father complained about how he would never be able to get the smell of cigarettes out of his nice clothes.

My mom also disliked the smell of smoke, but her sense of smell wasn't as sharp as my father's. My dad wouldn't even dine indoors if the restaurant had a smoking section, so when he agreed to take us to a restaurant in a casino for my 7th birthday, my mother and I were both shocked. By the time we arrived my father's patience was already thin. So, the more time we spent in the haze filled maze, the more his patience wore down, and the faster he pushed my mother's chair. Deeper and deeper we plunged into the casino.

"We're lost," my mother shouted from the front of the convoy. Her words fighting for dominance above the roar of the music and machines.

My father pressed forward. "The sign said it was over here!"

Each word clearly enunciated, an indicator of his frustration.

Whatever my mother said next was drowned out by the noises coming from every direction, but it caused my dad to come to an immediate halt. Unable to stop myself in time I slammed into my father, causing him to only momentarily avert his gaze in my direction before continuing the search for where we were going. Once I recovered my footing I looked up and saw a massive replica of an antique mining machine.

It was shaped like the Eiffel Tower, connecting to the ground at four points that eventually led up to a peak at the top. As its green frame increased in height, so did the amount of clockwork that adorned its exterior. Some of the pieces provided nothing but show. Others twisted and swayed with each other in unison, mimicking functionality. At its peak sat a pulley that moved a small elevator up and down its center. Every time the elevator reached the top of the structure I thought it might open, exposing whatever treasure that lay within.

Underneath the structure were some table games sectioned off with velvet rope. Out of the four tables there was only a singular player. He sat sideways in his chair with his right arm slung over the back, displaying one of the worn leather patches on his tweed coat. He held a cigar in his other hand, the bright red tip bobbing up and down from his face to the ashtray in front of him. Each time the elevator on the mining machine fell to the earth it would produce a small draft, wafting the blue smoke from his cigar right at me. It smelt sweet, almost like chocolate, unlike any smoke I had smelled before.

The dealer stood facing him. He towered over the table and was peeling individual bills from a much larger stack of money. Each bill was picked, inspected, and placed on the table in front of him until the last bill was carefully laid down with the rest. Then, with the same timing and efficiency as the gears and wheels that moved above him; he scooped up the cash, formed it into a singular brick, and dropped into some deep recess below

his table. I had never seen so much money in one place before, and just like that, it was gone.

In fascination I let go of my father's shirt and wandered towards the scene. I passed under the velvet ropes with ease and got right next to the game that was centered directly under the tower, and I stood there, my neck craned back as far as it would go. My eyes moved back and forth between the innards of the mining machine, and the game that was right next to me. It was like I had been invited to the stage of a magic show, uncertain as to what would happen next, but I was more than willing to wait and find out.

As my relief walked into the pit and approached the game, I tried my best to hide my excitement of being released from this dungeon. "What are you doing here?" she asked. "Don't you usually work day shift?"

"Usually." We started to swap places. "I'm going to be working late for a while now, probably."

"Why's that?"

"Because of that guy from yesterday," I answered while fishing my swipe card from my pocket.

"What happened yesterday?"

It was only noon, and the craps game was packed so tightly people stood sideways trying to squeeze bets between the elbows of others. The heat from their bodies and the smell of alcohol made it feel closer to a mosh pit than a casino, but they don't let you smoke at concert venues.

Stacks of red and green gaming chips covered the felt, acting as obstacles for the dice as they tumbled down the layout. The two other dealers who were with me on the game were hunched over, keeping careful track of what bets belonged to whom. I stood opposite of them, watching the dice as they traveled down the length of the table, knocking chips a few chips off the top of

one of the stacks as they came to a rest. "SEVEN!" I yelled, as I scooped up the dice with the wooden rake. "Line away seven!"

The table produced an audible sigh while my coworkers and I sprang into action. We worked together as a single unit, scooping up the losses and sorting them into organized piles that sat directly in front of us. Before the progressive jackpots had a chance to update, the table was free of chips and money, and we were ready to begin anew. I passed the dice to the next player and, within three rolls, he too sevened out. The table once again groaned in displeasure while my coworkers and I performed our automated tasks.

With each loss more and more people left the game until only one person remained. He was a familiar face that we had seen all weekend. He clung to the end of the game as if it were a ship about to throw him overboard. The elastic on his sweatpants cut his gut into two sections, and his shirt had the same familiar stain it did yesterday. He would complain to anyone in earshot about how he had lost enough money to buy the place, and maybe he was right. As I passed the dice to him, I thought to myself, *here we go again.*

He picked up the dice and gently lobbed them upwards. They carved an upside-down U shape through the air and landed about a foot shy from the end of the table. "TEN!" I yelled, causing my fellow dealers to bend over and pay the winning bets. Once finished, I passed the dice back to him and said, "It looked like the dice didn't reach the end that time. Rules say they have to bounce off the back wall of the table."

He provided no acknowledgement to what I said, and instead tried his best to mimic his throw from last time, both dice landing short of the end.

"NINE!" I called out. "Looks like they were still a little short that time."

This time he provided an audible grunt as I passed him the dice. But still, he produced the same results when he threw

them, as if he were purposely trying to test my patience.

"EIGHT! Look," I said, my tone dropping sharply, "I *need* both dice to reach the end of the table. Understand?"

"I'm-tryin!" he finally replied, his words sloshing together with no space in between.

Upon his acknowledgement I sent him the dice and asked, "Would you like me to find you some lighter dice?"

His gaze immediately shot in my direction as he picked up the dice and hurled them in a straight line towards the back of the table. Both dice striking the back wall and bouncing in two different directions. The first was sent back in the direction it came and stopped about halfway down the table directly in front of me. The other was launched straight up into the sky like a defective firework that failed to detonate. When it finally came back down, it landed right next to its counterpart and stopped. "SEVEN!" I projected across the casino.

His eyes widened as he looked down at the handful of chips that sat in front him. He stood there for a second, and in the silence that surrounded the game you could hear small huffs of air being forced out of his nose. He then picked up his remaining money, turned around, and with the same force he launched the dice with, he threw his chips directly at the pillar that was now in front him. They exploded on impact. Fragments of red, green, and brass were sent flying into every direction, littering the casino floor with cheap plastic confetti. The pit fell quiet as everyone within earshot turned to see what was going on. The man did an about-face and stared in dismay at the location where his chips used to be. "Where's my FUCKING money!?" he cried, as if he thought the person who threw his money and himself were two different people.

My coworkers and I stood there speechless. I did a broad sweep with the stick to highlight the bits of debris that now covered the floor. He turned his head towards the fragments of his money, and I saw the rage in his face get replaced by that

of disbelief. He seemed lost, like he wanted to ask for help but wasn't sure who, or what, to ask at this point. His eyes became puffy, and before he could shed a tear, he shuffled away from the game without saying a word.

When I clocked out that evening the casino manager pulled me aside to inform me my schedule had been changed, and that I would be coming in much earlier for the next few weeks. I didn't bother asking why. I already knew, and even if my guess was wrong, I didn't care. After our very one-sided meeting, I rushed out to my dad who had offered me a ride home that day.

"You smell like smoke," he said, before I even had a chance to close the door on his truck.

"I know," I replied in an exasperated grunt.

His voice moved from annoyance to worry. "Everything okay?"

"Yeah." I closed the passenger side door. "I think they're going to send me to the dungeon."

"That sounds bad."

"Not as bad as you'd think," I said as I buckled my seatbelt in.

Lost Traveler

Sean Prentiss

A lost traveler here
looks in vain for the sky.
Cold Mountain

The city in winter is so cold
crowded row homes cough
out snow, sunless yards wheeze
until everything alive dies
(or sleeps), a gray lowers until
I am a lost traveler here in my
own city, searching in vain
for any sign of any sky.

Permission

Max Heinegg

To sit still when he's reeling,
thumbs in loose pants, leaning
on the sitting room chair, eyes closed
to read the scroll of notes unfurling
at the end of the *Messiah*—he turns it up like a teenager
to say, *It's all about the ending.*
What right could I have to darken the gate
of that gone dreaming,
or to call him out for heading straight past us
with a brown bag after
telling us he was headed for his office,
that room without a mirror.
Thinking there was a comfort I wouldn't grant,
that I would deny him anything.

Beaux-Arts

Jana Harris

Rue de la Bienfaisance, Paris, 1837
Rosa Bonheur, b. 1822

In the long Louvre salons
my tiny footfalls reverberated
against walls and ceilings
like the naves of Notre Dame.
Girls not permitted to enroll, but
I was allowed to set up an easel.
The Dutch masters enraptured me;
pictures with horses, dogs, sheep—
my Polaris. I made studies:
sky, middle distance, vanishing point.

"Rosa, guard your virtue,"
Pere warned about the students,
except for the few spinsters, who
like me, were allowed in
to make copies. They heeded
the same advice: Never alone,
never in a corner; be especially careful
of sculpture galleries, an assailant
might hide behind a Roman bust
or marble Venus; position your easel
in full view. Not to become so absorbed
as to allow attack from behind;
at all times keep your third eye open.

Hard to imagine the National School
of Fine Arts more treacherous
than the Marais alleys of my childhood
frequented by few gentlemen
fops or coxcombs. I jutted
my chin, clicked my heels, strutted

like a cavalry officer and
was jeered at and nicknamed
the Little Hussar. No one dared
lay a hand on me. And I got even
for their ridicule—my caricatures:
rodent chin, raptor-nosed. And again
when they saw how good my copies.

Picture me on my first day:
Off to the Louvre in my checked dress,
long sleeves, white collar, short stylish
matching cape, skirts falling just above
the floor secreting trousers underneath.
My hair sliced off, its copper sheen
—like *Mere's*—snatching the sun.
Always under one arm the album
where I sketched whatever caught
my eye. In the other hand
a lunch basket of fried potatoes.
My strides lengthened past
the Colonnade entering through
the high-arched carriageway
of the residence of kings. Inside—
the smooth evenness of a tiled floor
so effortless to tread—Royal art,
art plundered from churches,
the spoils of Napoleon.
I stood speechless in front
of Fra Angelico's transformation
of color and Caravaggio's play
of light and dark, then began
to shake so badly that my right hand
lost her guile.

I could draw nothing,
and returned home in tears.

Over Greenland

Richard Robbins

Finally at 34,000 feet, the way opens for the blackest word she will ever say, the ground suddenly irrelevant except as memory, and the birds, the nearest birds, six miles below.

Why was it she never knew the altitude of heart. Why was its drumming all these years a lie until now, all these strangers asleep in their seats, the last child whimpering.

One day in America, the boy she loved more than a pony or the color orange opened up his mouth to her, a kind of night she could look into, there inside the small night behind her house, there under its high ceiling of stars.

Down the street trouble raged all afternoon, the neighbors and their shouting. So was born the dream where bullet and explosion turn to one word and one sullen gesture after another.

Then those years on her own, marriage small as a space behind her house. Where crickets collected, they made noise dark as a boy's mouth.

What's the word she's about to say now, looking up and up, where blue turns to black. The birds listen from their low places.

When she finally says it, everyone is singing in their sleep. Even as engines roar across the thin air. Even as the wrinkled ranges of ice fan out like sentences beneath her.

Cadralor #16
"On Some Agencies of Electricity"

Lori Howe

1. A Hoax of Ornithologists

In a week of smoke-edged mornings strung like red flags across the West, I splash a glass of cold black tea with coconut milk, retreat to the shade and turn on the sprinklers: respite for birds who swoop greedy through the frothed edges, wings like cupped hands. The sprinkler arcs liquid silver, waving back and forth in the close air like fans in a hot church: folded paper, painted scripture. A sparrow sings into the blue air: my hair loosens at the sound, and I think of the clutch of congregants who insist with Old Testament fervor that birds are not real, packing terror into tiny spaces where there is no room to ask is anything is real, compressing fear of masks and of tap water that catches fire, fear of classrooms running with blood: not as carbon compacts into something harder, but into small handfuls of heat and feathers and clackety feet that perch on the back fence and sing out our silent agonies, in a language that to our grateful ears sounds so very much like joy.

2. The Fine Art of Making Common Salt—W. Browning, 1748

You'll know us by the scent of rosemary, a fine wafting of wood fires, of rye dough rising. Saint-Guenole: step inside to the call of a good beef stew (eight hours, low flame, a melting of herbs and wine) a glad chiming of glasses. Against winter's long hunger: a deep white bowl of oyster stew (blue gloves, curved knife), French onion floating under golden rafts of gruyere: a hunk of bread, still warm; salted butter, a deep glass of house red (1 free refill): $10. Take your second glass to the fire; put up your feet. Coffee is always free. We'll bring you fresh pineapple cake baked with ginger, molasses, a thimble of rum, a crown of whipped cream. Read, travel to the coast of your dreams, where a whole town washed to sea in 1468. See the salt gatherers with their rakes, shoals of herring shining at dusk, Basque ships filled with salt, sails golden with late sun, heading for secret cod-grounds alive with whiskered bodies. Taste the peat of the fire. Stay.

3. Isolation, or "On Some Agencies of Electricity"

Driving away from you, my love, my eyes seek the rearview mirror, mountains strung like a week's worth of blue coveralls hanging quietly on the line, the east windows of distant houses holding the last of the day: a shelf of bottles on a bar beside a warmer sea. I think of Sir Humphry Davy, the British chemist from Cornwall who invented electrochemistry, how he isolated potassium and sodium and then danced with awkward joy around his solitary room; experimenting with nitrous oxide, he was astonished at how it made him laugh. In 1813, Davy and Faraday used the "burning glass" of the Grand Duke of Tuscany to ignite diamond, proving it pure carbon. Behind my eyes, you and I are secret isolates, agencies of electricity. Below the mountains, a wisp of smoke: an old red tractor, its rake pulling up small golden potatoes, leaving them floating in its wake, waiting to be steamed and buttered and strewn with salt, before everything disappears into night's mouth.

4. A Pulsing

When the Impressionists painted Antarctica, the critics despaired—10x20-foot canvasses, empty stretches of white—but touch the skin, find its palette: the glowing white of an old stone swimming pool, waiting for water; the blush of peonies, full, round globes pinkening in the sun; a feathering of egrets; full bellies of halibut glowing fat and clean in the violet bed of the sea. Oh, the sea: a longhouse roofed in fish, its muslin walls agleam with abalone, knuckled with oyster shells, floating rich in kelp, in the glowing history of whale-kin. Touch your hand to the wet, seaborne edge, watch it blossom in a glove of purest salt. Turn the painting into the light; see the outline of lovers, bodies entwined beneath the cool surface, flowing like plankton, a pulsing of sapphire mussels behind their eyes. Oh, the last continent and the space between us, air quiet with mist, jeweled with desire: our own ionosphere, charged with heat and light.

5. Invisible Meridians

In 1735, Charles Marie de La Condamine measured equatorial South America, armed with faith in the measurability of all that is; he could combine such a number with one at the Arctic Circle, yield a sum the size and shape of the Earth. In his travels, though, he wrote of his love for watching gulls drop clams onto the rocks to open them during

winter storms. I always thought I could read the end of our story in the weather forecast: the meteorologist's sleight of hand, miraculous snows in August. But now here you are in your white shirt, sleeves rolled, your strong legs that always know exactly who they are, your eyes a blue humor of the bay. It's a weather that means what it says, sways between us like an empty tangerine dress. I could lean all night toward the curve of your lips, lean with you toward fullness, a bed beneath the lemon trees, a window. Laughter rises in the next street, scattering peacocks, and all that is left is the taste of your mouth, a rush of emeralds, you, you, your quickening.

Contributors

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Madison King is a graduate student in the English Literature and Language program at California State University, Bakersfield. She was born and raised on a small sheep ranch in Hilmar in the Central Valley of California where she loved to barrel race, take care of baby lambs, and practiced food sovereignty. She now lives in Bakersfield with her partner and her cat Odysseus.

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Rattle, Calyx, and others. She's given workshops and readings in the USA and abroad and served as Poet Laureate of Auburn, Washington, from 2018 to 2020.

Kathryn Levy is the author of the poetry collections *Losing the Moon* and *Reports*, a finalist for the Midwest Book Award. She has been awarded fellowships from Yaddo, MacDowell and VCCA, among others.

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Aleynah Lovendino is a native of Washington state and is a current student of Truckee Meadows Community College. She has an eye for the arts, with a main focus toward written work. Poetry is a love she has explored for several years as she is working toward pursuing a degree in Creative Writing.

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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.

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JoDee Renae was born and raised in Reno, Nevada. At age 60 she decided to get a much-delayed degree and is attending Truckee Meadows Community College. She started in the English department due to her love of reading and a desire to learn to write. Her poem is a result of that learning. The poem in this issue is her second published work.

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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 though 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 mangement 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.