

THE LAUREL REVIEW

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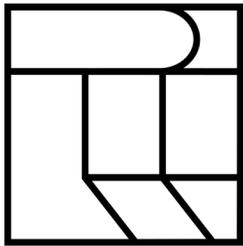
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CONTENTS

FICTION

Tommy Dean	Saving Your Best Friend from Going to War	60
	Flattened and Spare	62
Karin Cecile Davidson	Surrey with the Fringe on Top	90
Robert Garner McBrearty	The Laptop	92
	Spilling Your Guts	93
Laura Leigh Morris	The Husband	94
Mary Grimm	Temporal Instability	128
Dinah Cox	Blue Juice	130
Mark Halliday	Dargis Nolk	144
Michelle Ross	Some of the Things That Attract Bears	150
	Low Class	153
Kelly Terrazas	Brown All Over	155

NONFICTION

Tom McAllister	2004	34
Andrew Bertaina	What do you want to know about your father?	70

PLAY

Mark Halliday & Martin Stannard	The Thews of Thor	32
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POETRY

Roy Bentley	Autumn Leaves	1
Dana Roeser	THE FOOL	2
Jose Hernandez Diaz	Elegy for A Street Basketball Court from My Youth	4
	The Lecturer	5
	The Bengal Tiger	6
Dan O'Brien	Like Abraham and Mary Todd	7
William Virgil Davis	Poof	8
	Where She Went and What She did	9
Kimberly Ann Priest	Joseph Cotton {as CAMERON} {or To the Cis White Men Who Try to Trauma-Bond With Me}	10
	White Gloves	11
Tom Holmes	An Adoptee in His Middle Ages Explains Why He Creates AI-Generated Art	12
John Hoppenthaler	One Week before the Solstice	13
	Chant	14
Elly Bookman	Infomercial	15
	The World as It Is	16
	I Used to Go to the Movies	17
Matthew Cooperman	My Wife's New Desk	18

Adam Clay	After Listening to a Podcast	
	About Nuclear Tacticle Weapons, I Go	
	Outside to Take In the Sunrise	20
	The Great Indifference	21
Laura Read	The Serious World	22
	Dear Sylvia,	25
Angela Ball	Notification of Required Training	30
	King? Lear?	31
Alessandra Lynch	Some Other Musings by the Voices	37
Leslie Adrienne Miller	HORSE	38
	TERRIBLE ORANGE WINDOW	39
Michael Dumanis	Little Soul, Restless and Charming	40
Eric Pankey	With Words	42
	Celadon	43
Peter Leight	Elimination	44
	Philosophy of Waiting	45
Michelle R. Disler	Memo to Bond	46
	End Notes, 007 Novels	47
Supritha Rajan	Stone 7:	48
Anthony Procopio Ross	Playlist	49
Candice Kelsey	Duality	50
Christopher Shipman	A Traditional Story of Exaggerated	
	Conception	51
Samuel Amadon	DIVERS	52
	DIVERS	53
Claire E. Scott	i dream my favorite actor is the bouncer	
	at a dive bar in an unidentifiable city.	54
	I'm stoned at the MoMA	55
Raphael Kosek	Loosening	56
Claire Scott	RAGE	57
Shannon Hardwick	Some spells can target only a creature	
	(including you) that you touch	58
	Your magic grants you a brief insight	
	to the target's defenses	59
Jeffrey Hanson	Something Approaches Unknown Because	
	That Something is Vauge	64
	HIGH LANGUAGE	65
Donald Platt	Red Rover Hat Box	66
Kirsten Kaschock	dark room	77
Jeff Alessandrelli	There are 1,001 things lonelier than	
	a lost glove	78
Elizabeth Diebold	Figurative Without Any Chairs	81
Lynne Potts	They say light is a bundle of energy	82
Jeff Whitney	The Secret	83
Cynthia Boersma	The Prayer	84
	Dolius	85

	Waiting For Athena to Lavish Splendor	
	Over Me	86
	The Mast	87
	Little Cottage at the End of the Lane	88
	Returning	89
Kate Greenstreet	from <i>Now that things are changing</i>	129
Lucas Jorgensen	Memo from the Bureau of Plastics	137
Marcus Silcock	The Language of Cabbage	138
	Peach Schnapps	139
Jami Macarty	For L	140
Albert Abonado	Summer Solstice with Motownphilly as Soundtrack	142
Ashley Kunsu	A Poet on Saturday Night	143
Adam Day	Seeing Song	158
Lance Larsen	Laie Cemetery	159
Bruce Bond & Dan Beachy-Quick	Therapon 7-10	160
INTERVIEWS		
Miriam Calleja	Not the honey nor the honey-bee are mine, an interview with Dan Beachy-Quick	122
TRANSLATIONS		
Tomaž Šalamun	Peace to the People on Earth	27
<i>Translated by Brian Henry</i>	"Traveler <i>par excellence</i> "	28
	I, the Angel Farmer	29
Melanie Márquez Adams	The Ghost of the South	95
<i>Translated by Emily Hunsberger</i>	Hear No Evil	98
Eduardo R. Del Rio	Casa Cuba	100
<i>Translated by Eduardo R. Del Rio</i>	Frijoles/Habichuelas	101
	Doble Treinta	102
	Mango Slide	103
Elena Salamanca	Monsters Maybe	104
<i>Translated by Ryan Greene</i>		
Antonia Pozzi	Quadro	106
<i>Translated by Amy Newman</i>	L'orma del vento	108
	Evasione	112
	Come albero d'ombra	114
	Periferia in aprile	116
	Periferia	118
Sappho	Fragments	120
<i>Translated by Dan Beachy-Quick</i>		
Hisham Bustani	Don't tell anyone about Ziyad	125
<i>Translated by Thoraya El-Rayyes</i>	Locked from the Outside	126

Roy Bentley

Autumn Leaves

I miss fall in New England, says the shipwrecked couple in one of the cartoons in *The New Yorker* I'm reading in reverse. "Autumn Leaves" is on the commercial-free-radio jazz station. What do you need to hear about Miles that you haven't heard? That he and Sonny Stitt couldn't stand each other but played together in London and Paris and Rome, Sonny's saxophone

and Miles' iconic trumpet worth a little quarrel. Or that Miles performed the song a lot in 1960 when he first wrote his version. That the music teacher I knew once, from Iowa, who taught for Ohio State, said her boyfriend Mark named a son after Miles. As if every other white-guy-who-loves-bebop-jazz fan hadn't beaten him to the punch. Across the world, there's a war on.

In their basement-shelters Ukrainians are huddled, listening to whatever lifts the mood of beaten-down and too-soon-slain. All God's creatures may well be destroyed by fire and by ice; given that this new warfare is the old warfare amended, War an acquired skill much like the practice of tolerance and love on the other end of the spectrum. You blow shit up to learn

how to blow shit up. Leaving unanswered the question of the chances of nuclear war breaking out, I'm reminded that the question is unanswerable in the best of times. And I turn up Miles Davis and Sonny Stitt, picturing the inimitable gold of oak leaves cascading down and—oh God of Mercy, God of Doom—down.

Dana Roeser

THE FOOL

I drew the fool
and cracked my head or should
I say my trusty bike
helmet with head inside
on the pavement.
I'd been flying
into my future—toward
an intersection on
my red bicycle,
looking for large moving
objects
like the bus
I almost rode in front of
a couple of weeks
before
and not for the nonchalant
student fairy-dancing
across the intersection
from sidewalk helmetless and
oblivious on her yellow
happy-go-lucky bike.
The wind was balmy. The moment ecstatic.
The fool is whimsical
and about to fall over
a cliff.

My nose ran and my eyes stung
for days. I read about
brain salt leaking. My mind
floated above my head
vaguely tethered. Up
there
a few clouds.

Down below crunching
machinery. A fog machine. And
me wishing for two
forelegs to keep me
from listing and lurching.

Over a week later, I got
the glimmer of an id. Somebody I'd
once flirted with
contacted me—and
I felt it jumping up
my legs.

Then tucked in my bed
I drew the Wheel of Fortune—
the guidebook said Your whole
life is going upside down.
Revolving. Your broken-
egg-head will re-glue but
you won't be finding
the former reference
points.

I'm on my four legs now:
I pick up my little
phone box and call the
chimney sweep, the wood man,
the window cleaner.
I harvest the tiny baby
kale and arugula.
I think about fried green
tomatoes before the
frost. And planting garlic,
point up.

Jose Hernandez Diaz

Elegy for A Street Basketball Court from My Youth

A man walked into a photograph from his youth. There he was, as a youth, in sneakers and jersey shorts too big for him, playing basketball with older teenagers, his neighbors, from low-rent apartments. There was graffiti on the wall but it didn't bother him.

Actually, he was one of the better players, even as the youngest one. He passed the ball with style and ease. One time, at the park, a gang of young men showed up from the other side of town and began fighting with his friends at the park. They had brass knuckles. They told him to run home. He ran and ran. He ran not out of fear, but complete fear. He cried when he got home but didn't let anyone see him cry. *Why were the young men so angry? Were his friends okay?*

The Lecturer

I saw Salazar at the local park. Salazar owed me \$75. “I don’t want any problems, Salazar. Just give me the money,” I said. “Who’s gonna make me? You?” he said. “Come on, Salazar, let’s be adults. You said you had \$75 on the Chiefs and the Packers covered the spread. Have some decency.” “I’ll pay you \$100 just to fight me,” he said. “Salazar, seriously, grow up,” I said. “What are you scared?” he said. “That’s mature,” I said. “Grow some balls,” he said. “Salazar you’re starting to get on my nerves,” I said. “Wimp!” he said. “Okay, let’s go!” I said. Salazar swung first, a strong right that grazed the side of the head. I absorbed it and countered with an uppercut to Salazar’s shaky chin. He stumbled back a little. Next, I landed a body punch to Salazar’s ribs. He fell to the floor. Just as I was getting ready to subdue him and claim victory, a cop pulled into the parking lot. I ran in the opposite direction. When I stopped running, I was halfway to campus. I had to teach a literature course at 5pm, so I caught an Uber the rest of the way. I was 10 minutes late. “Today we will discuss Meursault’s general indifference in *The Stranger* by Albert Camus,” I said. I was beginning to catch my breath.

The Bengal Tiger

A man woke and found a Bengal Tiger circling his bed. He hid under the covers and pondered his next move. *Should I play dead? Should I scream? Should I muster the courage to fight the great beast?* He chose to fight. He jumped out of bed and charged at the tiger. The tiger turned around and ran out of the room. The man celebrated his victory, jumping for joy. He opened a can of Pale Ale and lit a cigarette. He turned on the television and watched the *Cincinnati Bengals* vs. the *Detroit Lions*. He laughed and laughed, remembering his great victory. He drank his *Pale Ale* and smoked his cigarette. He roared at the television set, "*Victory, at last! At last, victory!*"

Dan O'Brien

Like Abraham and Mary Todd

from Survivor's Notebook

He's not a medical doctor, but his shingle hangs along the road where they performed your mastectomy; where while you slept my heart leapt to learn your cancer had not spread. Through the winter I succored you before we swapped roles. Now we sit cheek to cheek on a sinking couch with arms and legs crossed in a sunset that comes boring through blinds, listening to a stork-like old man peddle his wares. His marital cure. Behind double-layered doors. "How dramatic," he remarks upon hearing our tale. "Like Abraham and Mary Todd." How many couples has he compared to the Great Emancipator and his grief-addled spouse? And why? Neither of us is heroic, neither insane. I'm aware I am prone to self-pity; she has her temper. Probably he says it to say something because I can tell already we've fatigued him. His certificates are sealed with a symbol like a cross and a trident combined. While he drones on I'm dreaming of retrieving a pen from the coffee table and transcribing our predicament: watercolor abstractions of dancers in selected stages of the tango; his antiquated laptop; shelves of dusty peer-reviewed publications; the white-noise machine has been left off. So this is how we make sense. *Can you love me still? Can I love you still? Can you forgive my treatment; can I forgive yours? Can we forgive our afflictions? Can rage revive love?* We are confused. The error is grave. In the corridor as we depart I see what I missed as we arrived: The building is old, rundown, almost abandoned.

Poof

I guess it must be something like
spontaneous combustion,
he said, as he clapped his hands
and disappeared right
before our eyes.
We stared at the empty stage
like stunned kids in a row in a garage
for a magic show,

the kind I gave when I imagined
I could be Houdini or Thurston
and amaze on a stage somewhere
near or far—pulling nickels
from my ears and rabbits
from a hat or twisting to escape
from rusty chains,
or surfacing from under icy
water.

William Virgil Davis

Where She Went and What She Did

When she came back we knew she
was back for good no matter what
we said or wanted she never said
a word about it the same way she
never told us of her going where
she went to come home from when
we'd waited for such a long while
thinking it would all get sorted out
eventually so that we could make
it mean the way we wanted to
to put a period to it and start in
on another sentence then.

Kimberly Ann Priest

Joseph Cotton {as CAMERON} {or To the Cis White Men Who Try to Trauma-Bond With Me}

He'll be holding a glove—a white glove—in his right hand, to prove good intention. Like, 'white flag,' which is the opposite of 'red flag' in meaning but everyone will tell you, later, that this 'white flag' is probably a 'red flag' because of something to do with when and how it was produced from his pocket; which yes, you must admit, is not the same as the way the other man who harmed you put the white glove *into* his pocket, but still there's a pocket involved—and a man, a cis-white man; so yeah, dah, everything is suspicious. And he'll talk to you tenderly, perceiving that you must have a fragile mind after another man has worked so hard to ensure you have a fragile mind, but this will simply feel like you *actually have* a fragile mind. You don't know—maybe you *do* have a fragile mind; so when he questions your impulse to speak, alone, to your abuser, you question your impulse too; though, now, your abuser is tied up by the man with the other white glove who concedes and exits the room leaving you alone with your tied-up abuser. No one sees you slowly and systematically question your abuser's sanity while you hold up a knife that could sever the ropes that bind him and chide him about how you can't help him because you are *crazy—so very crazy*—just like he said. {It's a masterful scene.} By the time Joseph Cotton re-enters the room, you're tired again; confronting your abuser is tiring {I know}, so you lean on his shoulder as he speaks to you tenderly just like a mother to a child, and you let him because you are *weary—so very weary*—in a 1944 romance thriller in which someone *must* fall in love: one woman, two men, white gloves. You choose Joseph Cotton because his patronization is not *intentional* manipulation of sanity as described in the official definition for 'gaslighting,' which has been demonstrated so beautifully by Charles Boyer in 3,117.8 meters of film {12 reels}. It's just that cis-white men are conditioned by delicate handling to treat others with delicate handling as though you are also a satin, fragile thing, too diaphanous to operate a knife.

White Gloves

A woman becomes so distinguished when wearing white gloves—classic, glamorous, trustworthy. Like in the old movies, the ones I used to watch in my youth. Elizabeth Taylor's bright red lipstick starkly contrasted by the white-gloved hand seemingly propping up her face. Or Audrey in an ivory coat and leopard print hat smirking at the camera, her elbow on the table, arm relaxed, and those long white gloves. Betty Grable on skis in fake snow brightly smiling and waving her white-gloved hand. Judy Garland seated on the arm of a sofa and clutching a bag, that quintessential lost expression on her face as she stares off into a distant nothing, thin crossed legs—and those arms elegantly dressed in long white gloves. Betty Davis, while still a blonde—half coy, half killer—shoulders shrouded in a fat poof of black fur and her hands crossed in front at her waist in white gloves. Rita Hayworth, stunning, in a sleek black satin dress with a long white train accentuated by white gloves slinking past her elbows. And everyone knows Grace Kelly wore white gloves, inspiration for the dainty child-size pair I wore at my wedding. Ingrid Bergman in *Casablanca* staring longingly into Bogart's pained expression, wearing white gloves; but in *Gaslight* not starring at a face; rather, at the glove—the lone white glove, its mate gone missing. She holds it out in the palm of her hand, a remnant of a life also gone missing, her aunt's; the aunt's portrait starring down from above a fireplace mantel. Showing the white glove to her new husband she speaks her sadness, and he takes it from her to save her from her grief with such generous words of comfort. This is how he gets away with murder, appearing so distinguished while folding a white glove into his pocket—Boyer with his natural charms that, in any other movie, would sweep us off our feet. But, ah, here we are swept and swooning anyway, like Ingrid, audience to a very impressive performance, disarmed right into his soft smiling eyes—the white glove later hidden with a pistol; though we never get to see it hidden with the pistol in any of the movie's actual scenes.

Tom Holmes

An Adoptee in His Middle Ages Explains Why He Creates AI-Generated Art

I learned to stir fudge
with my tongue
when mom chased me
with a wooden spoon,
yelling, “Did you do it?”

I learned to stir fudge
into what I thought,
“I don’t want to be returned,”
into what I said,
“I’m sorry. It wasn’t me.”

And this is how I learned
to survive with a lie.
Even to you right now.
I write the next line
of fudge. You keep reading

expecting my truth,
any truth as a poem
should. I don’t know how,
yet. I type keywords in AI.
I prepare for my rendering.

This is how I speak.

John Hoppenthaler

One Week before the Solstice

12/14/2020

I went to the local market
to pick up a few holiday
things: a rosemary topiary

shaped like a Christmas tree,
a chocolate Santa for Danny,
a bag of mixed nuts, maybe,

to crack in front of the fire
with Christy. Disguised, I dodged
masked strangers, remembered—

a miracle!—gluten-free gravy
and three lemons. The Electoral College
confirmed Joe Biden today;

the orange monster bound for
one hell or another, but in the nursing
home, my mother wastes away

into a Covid New Year. Tomorrow,
I'll arrange for a virtual appearance.
Her room has a sizeable window, so

I hope for a flurry while we ZOOM.
She's lost speech, and her mind
may as well be a nostalgic snow globe.

With a slight jerk of her head,
she'll conjure a beautiful landscape—
captive and captivating—sifting

in stray beams of remembered sunlight.
An Amazon van rumbles through
the cul-de-sac. I plug in the colored lights.

Rosemary graces the air faintly
with pine. Hazelnuts, walnuts, almonds
and pecans fill the festive bowl.

Sally, the neighbor's Border Collie,
begins to bark, and I'm grateful
to be alone tonight. I'm fligreed

ice, flimsy on the glittering surface
of Pablo's metal water dish: short-lived,
fragile as mom's whisper in winter dark.

John Hoppenthaler

Chant

A leaf wafting into solemn
monophony, Gregorian

chanting melody drifting here
in the room. I want to lay down

those parts of my heart that have died
in the hollow of the Copper

beech and beseech the queen fairy
to tell me what's next. It was hard

shoving the splinter into my thumb
so that I might carry it

for luck into the world to come.
Chants are intoned in unison,

one note simultaneously.
All singers enliven the same

melody. If only Congress
could attend with such discipline

and intent. Someone's created
a snow sculpture on the fence post,

and it's melting in the sun while
the Red-faced warbler examines,

voices his interpretation.
And now the birdfeeder's agog.

I can feel the splinter throbbing.
Kyrie Eleison, have mercy.

Infomercial

You're not alone! a voice insists
when I can't find my keys
or the blanket slips from my ankles.
When I throw up my arms
and shake my head in surrender, he promises
I don't endure these sepia accidents
on my own. Everywhere, then,
there must be others who are fed up
with waking and mistaking
the glow of the streetlamps
for the headlights of someone
arriving. And in the quiet of no car doors
opening and closing, more
besides me wait in vain for the sounds
of being come back to. They
stand with me in the dark, watching
all that isn't moving out there
in the world, and they long with me
for a device to solve
all of it. By the light
of the television, the promise
of such cures feel as close as these
faux wood linoleum floors
underfoot. And when
I see the lives of my fellow sufferers
turn suddenly to color, I know
their remedy is also mine: I'm not
alone, so I reach for the phone.
I dial and imagine the voice
of the one who will answer, think
how he'll sound like
my very own forlorn inventor
sent to fix all my misplacements. I wait
for the click of the blessed receiver.
I hold for the sound
of the end of the difficult world.

The World as It Is

Every disintegrating acre of me
deserves its yearly tending. Today, eyes
which haven't seen the world as it is
unassisted since childhood
have brought me here
to the optometrist where first
I watch a house drift in and out of focus
at the edge of a green distance, then
I endure that sudden puff of air they aim
at each pupil, then Dr. Barnes, who spoke
last year of a wife, daughter, skips
straight to asking which lenses make
the E's and M's and X's most vivid.
One, two. Two, three. Three, one.
It is February. The grocery
and drug stores have filled up
with reds and pinks and chocolates.
He is, I think, the sort of man
who'd never say if he was lonely.
Or I am the sort of woman who sees
the world as emptier than it is.
Two, three. Three, four. Four,
two. The choices are which is
better, or are they the same?

Elly Bookman

I Used to Go to the Movies

But to be alone in the dark
and light of a life

not my own, I forget
isn't always a peace.

Sometimes the same seams
come apart in real life

and I have to admit
happiness is the warmth

of a kitchen or the slant
sun of winter—

a medicine
here to offer its dose

and then vanish. Still
as with the dog

whose waste I carry daily
to the garbage

I have to pretend.
That I won't help her die

one day, either
by failure or mercy, and

soon. That the well in me
won't run dry and require

the flicker of a theater
to fill it back up.

Matthew Cooperman

My Wife's New Desk

is a beauty, black walnut mid-century modern with a double chevron inlay pattern of alternating English

walnut (buttery against chocolate), felled in Missouri and shipped to Thailand to be built, to be fitted

with a teak rail that encircles the rectangle in a glowing signal of order emblematic of Thai marquetry

or no, marquetry, the difference being the former is the addition of a layered veneer while the latter

is the creation of a design or pattern using blocks or strips of wood inset. My wife built it when it arrived

from Wayfair, though it would be more accurate to say she assembled it in her new office (the son's

former bedroom) quickly converted to space that says "stay out!" It would be more accurate to say also that

a Thai man named Asnee worked 57 hours total smoothing the outcries of the tree into a beautiful

object that travelled back and forth in a Matson cargo container (of Matson, Inc. HQ Honolulu and

established in 1882 as the Matson Navigation Company, Pearl Harbor, the very moment of annexation's gather

or a vital lifeline to the economies of the greater Pacific Rim we call today, you chose) thousands of miles with other

like same immigrant & nomadic desks delivered to western shores. This isn't actually the first desk (or chair,

don't get me started on that (mostly Honduran) another arriving from Wayfair or Thailand or UPS that

had a different pattern of checkerboard that was simply too busy. This was returned via said transport

to a warehouse in Boston (Copley Place, Wayfair Inc) where it remains unclaimed. Thai forestry practices have been evolving

since they cut down most of their own hardwoods, beginning in 1963 (mostly teak) with the establishment of the Royal

Forest Department, which regulates the production of forest harvest, though not the sweat shop working conditions

for Asnee and his cohort. I feel bad for his cohort though good about the desk, which is uncomfortable,

which come to think of it we saw on a super tanker bejeweled with Matson containers, white and blue layer cake floating in the Palilolo

Channel between Maui and Molokai last January. My wife says I have a way of making stationary things move, which is

to say I kick the dog sometimes on walks and think of the weather passing overhead over the raw and built objects

of the world in their various states of becoming. I believe the desk, which as I said is a beauty, will help the difficult

task of being and becoming that I hear my wife making / unmaking behind the securely shut door of her escape.

Like a slow boat to China, I wish I had one too, the undivided space and time to see things as they really are.

Adam Clay

After Listening to a Podcast About Nuclear Tactile Weapons, I Go Outside to Take in the Sunrise

Summer blurs like honey
on the back of your hand. Those
who feel inevitable are usually
so unsure of themselves. I doubt
the world beyond my door
until I think of the bug
on its back in the tub,
its twenty-four hours of living
some kind of dashed-off
lifetime. Everything dangerous
feels silent and strong. I scroll
through memories, remember
a thousand things that, without
my phone, I would surely forget.
I cross the street without
looking either way.

Adam Clay

The Great Indifference

From the desert we plucked cactus needles
during the day to play 78s all night long.
The records didn't get dusty or scratched.
We folded books into swans, and swans
into last-minute excuses to stay in,
sleep it off. What we were sleeping off,
we couldn't say or no. We did what we were told,
but it was always a bit sideways from
sense. I didn't think absence would be
the thing I would miss the most, but I did,
I do, and I always will. From inland the ocean
almost makes me feel things I've never felt before.

Laura Read

The Serious World

I have a Philosophy teacher named Theodra
who lives in Philadelphia. I can only see her

in the small box on Zoom,
but I have made a thorough study nevertheless.

I like how she seems to be lying back in her chair
or perhaps in bed. She hasn't been feeling well lately,

so I'm glad she can teach while resting her body,
which I've learned from her is not a facticity,

a word I haven't used before but learned from context
the way I used to learn the world when I was young

and there were so many questions to ask I was speechless.
Theodra has addressed this as well—

well, it's really Simone de Beauvoir, but coming to me now
through Theodra—"It's a tragedy to be a child."

And also, we can't be happy because we were once children.
Yes, I knew this. I have always been a great Philosopher,

it turns out. What I didn't know is that it's an issue
of Freedom. As children, we are pre-Subjectivity,

which means we don't yet understand we have a self.
I had a porcelain angel on the table by my bed.

She had wings I accidentally broke off, which I viewed
as an improvement. She had a porcelain puppy.

Has. She still sits on the headboard behind me.
She is a facticity. She was there in the room I had

when my father was still alive. You can't change that.
But my body is not. Look at it. It's not so bad.

I can go ahead and let it out of the yard and see what it does.
I can assign it a different meaning. Look at these new lines

sweeping back under my eyes. I like them.
They look like wings. Not the wings of an angel

but of a large bird. The kind that just keep on opening.
We can't be happy because we were children,

and that means we used to live in a world
that someone else made for us, the napkin folded

under the fork, the pansy in the center of the plate.
And now what? How do we relate to our freedom?

A Subman will just do what they're told. A Serious Man
(Beauvoir always uses man!) lives in the Serious World

to which we've all been assigned. Gets a job
and a house and a wife and 2.5 children. Accepts,

like a child, these readymade values. We all live
in this Serious World, and one way to do it

is to get a set of plates with pansies in the middle
and set the same table. I do not blame him

for their conformity, or the subman either,
for that matter—it is hard to get your head around

Freedom, as they say. It's like folding a fitted sheet,
which eventually you have to just stuff in the drawer.

And then there's Nihilism—if everything is human made,
then nothing has meaning. I don't want to make

all the meaning myself. Theodora says this is a choice,
that all of these are choices, except for those living

in pre-Subjectivity, the Child and the Oppressed.
You can also be an Adventurer, but this means

your projects are fun but empty of transcendence
(*Think Colonists, Bros, Nazis, Venture Capitalists*).

Or a Passionate Man but here Beauvoir's example
is the Marquis de Sade, so that can't be good.

The problem is a lack of thought for the Other
who also has Freedom. (This can be inconvenient.)

And then The Individual which of course
we all hope to be and Theodra says we can.

She says these are types, not real people,
and we move between them all the time.

She says it's not like she looks at one of her neighbors
and thinks *There goes the Subman!* (She's funny like that.)

The Individual knows that he has Freedom
and that I do too. Thank you, Individual!

He acknowledges the ambiguity of ethics
and the facticity of the past. (*What? Or What the Fuck?*)

which is another thing Theodra says.)
I like it when Theodra asks a question and then

takes a sip of her tea and waits
like we're in grade school.

I wait right back at her like I never did then.
I have that Freedom, and I know it now.

Laura Read

Dear Sylvia,

I thought you might be interested to know
what we've done with therapy.

We've dispensed with electroshock
and lobotomies, but we still like talking.

And we have EMDR—
Eye Movement Desensitization and Reprocessing.

There are different ways to do it,
but the way I did it with Gail was with a screen

on which little red dots of lights moved
back and forth at a certain speed (24)

and in a certain pattern (infinity).
I had to watch the lights and think about

the room I slept in when I was six.
Oh, I can see your eyes moving now

under your dead lids.
You're thinking of your room, aren't you?

How your father was still alive.
Still had his leg.

My room had a picture on the wall
of a girl leaning her head on a giant hand (God's).

A stuffed camel on the floor, legs splayed.
The grey dresser with the brass handles

that clanged when you opened the drawers.
The patchwork sheets and the Raggedy Ann

bedspread on the bed that was always made
unless I was in it.

There you go. Now watch the lights.
Stop. How do you feel?

I tried to pick the camel up
but he couldn't stand, and there was no way

to arrange him neatly on the floor to hide this fact.
If you had lived to be old,

you could have sat on Gail's loveseat
and watched the lights and visited the rooms

where you felt the worst and yes, I admit
that doesn't sound good, but the lights

are a Giant Eraser, Sylvia, the long white kind
that worked better than the small grey ones,

the kind the teachers used at the end of the day,
dragging them carefully from one end of the board

to the other while I took the grey felt ones outside
and banged them on the side of the building

because I couldn't bear to watch.
This is EMDR. You could have lived past

everything, had it been invented.
This kind of thing makes me mad.

Had my dad lived a little longer, they could have
saved him: we know so much more now

about kidneys. But he didn't.
I just thought you should know

you were on the right track.
I mean, with your poems.

You have to keep going back to the rooms,
you have to say how you feel.

All you needed was Gail and the lights.
I like the infinity pattern.

My friend Ann is frightened of infinity.
I expect you are not.

Tomaž Šalamun

Peace to the People on Earth

Trans. Brian Henry

God remembers all travelers
 the rain in Arras
 the son of David
and a squirrel how it falls to the earth
 but I yell rabbits
 thinking they really are rabbits because I see poorly
 God remembers Stavrogin
stone pines decayed wood and our games
 how I pick my teeth
 and say peace to the people on earth
of all Empire-style furniture
 I like Empire-style legs the most
 God remembers
 God remembers how I tortured myself
 making a tetrahedron from bread
throwing it furiously at the wall
 and there was a war
 and the others ate saccharin
The fire gets closer
 night with whiskers
I see hell where my angel stood

Tomaž Šalamun

"Traveler *par excellence*"

Trans. Brian Henry

Traveler *par excellence*,
locked in heaven's ship of fools,
I see animals in the mouth of a stewardess,
gentle faces in the mouths of dogs.
The lords of this world are weary,
the land is tired.
The mooing of sacred cows
shines in the layers of fragrant wood.
It rises and falls in the scent of a pine,
it rises and falls in the scent of the sea.

Tomaž Šalamun

I, the Angel Farmer

Trans. Brian Henry

I'm an angel,
white as snow,
with a pure diadem.
Burn, burn the Rubicon!
White cottages are the edge of my brain,
aces ache on the shore, the eyes are somewhere!

And (at the top!) along the seams!
Who are the seamstresses of gold,
strange, demented?
A whale that kisses a chamois,
a window that kisses ocher!

Angel, soldier in an elevator,
I'm addressing you, infantryman!
You marveled at the molehills,
saw them,
I squeezed them.
Here I drank the wedding dress,
I, the angel farmer.

Notification of Required Training

You must absorb salient facts; for example, a dog's pride
in playing keep-away, how Mexico City is a giant starfish
and thus resembles the mind of a person
you love; for though they extend, indefinite, even a person
has outlines. How inside this person your pals
the traffic signs aren't getting any younger, nor is the great crush
of red leaves that clings to a winged sumac. How church cars wait
as if tied by invisible reins, a house's wall displays photograms
of branches, an eighteen-wheeler sleeps beside a cabin
like a child who has outgrown their parent, and fences
array themselves like necklaces with plumes of some dry weed held up
inside their wires.

Angela Ball

King? Lear?

A patch of a man's love, thread
of a woman's attention,

the pride of flesh, a broom's
humility, a gravid animal's

need for privacy, a corner of a township
drawn in wealthy ink, mere drainage

masquerading as stream, the heart-like root
of a fern, a note plucked in error, hunger

of boldness divided in
shriveled pieces,

a dress stained by other hands, a report
gone astray, a midnight compact

coveted, camera frame abandoned,
no one on the other line, the "o"

on the end of the string
that pulls down the shade.

The Thews of Thor

[A Jutish farmstead in 596 A.D. Dusk. Potatoes, cabbage and leeks boiling in a pot. Clodesuida, the matriarch, is flattening filets of perch and herring with a mallet. Her sons Quichelm and Cheldric sit at a dark table, attempting to smack each other with embalmed rodents. Clodesuida pauses and gazes out the window at the fens]

Clodesuida: The days grow shorter. Forlornly the geese honk, and ripples cross the bay like memories that cross my mind. Since the death of Strivmung, this life seems a cold fight for survival and nothing else.

Quichelm: You are a pickled hogfoot.

Cheldric: Mother! Quichelm called me a pickled hogfoot.

[Enter Tadfrid and Osmer, the uncles]

Tadfrid: Something smells very promising!

Clodesuida [aside]: What is the point, finally?

Osmer: Such odors make one proud to be a Jute. Cheldric, watch where you're swinging that rodent.

Clodesuida: Sometimes I feel like packing everything into the cart and going to Britain. The fens there can't be any worse than the fens here. We had a postcard from Pockmarc yesterday, and he seems to be doing quite well there. He's selling sautéed bugs in the market, apparently. It's some kind of fast food franchise.

Quichelm and Cheldric [in unison]: Yes, let's go to Britain! It's part of Europe, after all, and as Europeans we have freedom of movement.

Osmer: Call me conservative, but —

Tadfrid: We know, we know: "Europe is a wilderness of competing interests . . ."

Osmer: Exactly. Cooperation among the peoples is a notion for the twenty-first century, not the sixth. Clodesuida, will there be garlic in the mash?

Clodesuida [aside]: To be content with garlic in the mash, and goat cheese on the herring — such is not the happiness I imagined when first I danced the smood-smood with Strivmung.

[Enter Fwafwasja, Tadfrid's teenage daughter, looking frantic]

Fwafwasja: Didn't anyone hear the drumming? There are drummers on the moor!

Clodesuida: The drummers of utter darkness . . .

Quichelm and Cheldric [in unison]: Oh! It's the opening night of the drumming festival! Can we go, ma? Please ma? Can we?

Clodesuida: No! Let me not lose my whelps to the darkness. Bar the door, Fwafwasja.

Fwafwasja: We don't have a door. You forget we needed wood for the fire.

Clodesuida: Curses on this Juteland fen world where every gain is a loss!

Quichelm: We'll be back in the time it takes for a goat to mate. Give or take.

Cheldric: Save us some herring! [The boys dash out]

Osmer: Wait — wait — half a mo —

Fwafwasja: Adventure is not only for boys, as I shall soon prove.

Osmer: Wait — listen! Those are not festival drums. They have the timbre and cadence of —
of —

Tadfrid: Of what? Of what? [Tadfrid dangles a perch filet over his mouth and eats it smackingly.] Of what?

Osmer: Of Saxon war drums!

Tadfrid: That's worrying. By all accounts we have a very tenuous-cum-ambiguous peaceful-yet-edgy relationship with the Saxons, a relationship that threatens to deteriorate as the years go by. What shall we do?

Osmer: I suggest we drop the curtain, have our supper, then amuse ourselves with Clodesuida and Fwafwasja until the social and political landscape becomes clearer.

Fwafwasja: What do you mean by "amuse ourselves"?

Clodesuida: Curse this Jutish lifestyle and its social and political and overwhelmingly male-dominated landscape! Fwafwasja, you and I must amuse the menfolk until the better future we have been promised arrives. The fish and mash is ready. Let's eat, as we must, and then be amusing, if we must.

Fwafwasja: I am not happy about this. Some of my friends and I have recently been discussing the inequa-

CURTAIN

2004

My first niece was born shortly before I flew home from Iowa City for winter break from grad school. We did what families do after a child is born: everyone sat in a circle and stared at her, waiting for any movement to overanalyze. People cooed her name, over and over and over. People said she looks like her father or her mother or her grandmother or whoever they wanted her to look like. Her skull wasn't even fully formed; she was a wrinkly, screaming mass, and she terrified me. My mom wanted to take a picture of me holding her, but I refused, so instead, my brother Kevin held her and sat next to me. I worried I would have dropped her, sure, but I also worried that once she was in my arms I would suddenly find myself wanting a child of my own, the kind of stupid epiphany movie characters have all the time.

I had stressed to my wife, LauraBeth, early in our relationship that I did not want children. She didn't either, but people change their minds. Biology takes over. I had convinced myself that despite what she'd told me, she would wake up one morning and give me an ultimatum: I could have her with children, or I could have nobody. I don't know what choice I would have made. Either one would have felt unfair, to everyone.

Kevin and his wife had another daughter two years later, and LauraBeth's brothers now have two young children each. Our house is about 60-percent baby-proofed because we want guests to trust that they can bring their kids over without risking their lives. Every October, as long as we have lived together, we have hosted a big pumpkin carving party, and over the past five years, it has evolved into an event at which half the attendees are under six years old and most people are gone by 8 PM. Near the end of one party, I was helping a group of kids get settled on the couch with Cheerios and juice and blankets so they could watch *Monsters Inc.* and when they were all settled, a friend said, "I can't believe I am watching Tom talk to kids." Because I was more callous when I was younger, I gave people the impression that I disliked the existence of children, that I am one of those weird people who harbor animosity toward parents in general, and so I have spent a great deal of energy as an adult reassuring friends that their kids are welcome in my house. LauraBeth has worked at a children's hospital for 15 years, and anyway she has a more intuitive sense of how to deal with children, but I can affirm that I am now someone you can leave alone with your kid(s) and trust that they will be returned safely and perhaps even having had fun.

I have a distant relationship with Kevin's children. As far as I know, they don't dislike me, but we're basically strangers. I was living in the Midwest when they were babies and we never formed any specific

bond. To blame it on geography is dishonest, though. The reason I don't have a meaningful relationship with my brother's kids is because I have never tried to have one, and now that they're both teenagers, it all seems calcified.

LauraBeth's brother's children love her and they like me, which is not bad, considering (a few days ago, my four-year-old nephew announced to everyone that he hates me more than everyone on earth, but I had just confiscated his balloon, so the stakes were pretty high). They sleep at our house sometimes, and they play games with me, and they greet me at the door when I visit their house. I'm sure my brother wonders where this fun uncle was when his kids were young. I was more wrapped up in my own life then. I didn't know how to talk to kids and I didn't bother to learn.

As my oldest niece moves into high school, I think she looks increasingly like I did as a teen. She's a gifted and driven artist, and I hope for her sake that that's where the similarities between us end. I hope she has the confidence I never had, and that she loves herself in a way I never really learned to do. Lately, she's been more eager to join the adult conversations instead of withdrawing with a phone or a sketchpad, and I think she is learning that I can be sometimes funny. As I get older, I feel the distance between myself and the rest of my family more acutely. I try writing about it because if I arrange the words in the right order, maybe I can summon into existence the world I prefer.

A couple years ago, I was flying home from a writing conference in Green Bay. Despite my best efforts to look unapproachable the man next to me asked what book I was reading. It was Erica Jong's novel *Fear of Flying*, which I assured him was just a coincidence and not a comedy bit, which assurance only confused him more than if I'd said nothing at all. I didn't want to talk about books. I had been in town promoting my newest novel; I didn't want him to know I was an author, and I especially didn't want him to know my book was about gun violence and misogyny. Two hours is a long time to talk about something like that. I could tell by his relief pitcher goatee and the Ray-bans tucked into his shirt pocket and the over earnest way he maintained eye contact for just a second too long that he was a specific type of conservative man who would not share my values, and would in fact have no respect for my work (later, he would complain, unprompted and at great length, about how the liberal media is "out to get" nuclear power plants).

Because he would not accept silence as an option, eventually I explained why I was traveling. He politely skimmed the jacket copy on my novel. "How about that?" he said to his teenage daughter. "A real living

writer!” People are usually impressed to meet writers even if they don’t read books or care about writing themselves. They are impressed by the act of someone having written. In a different situation, I would have tried to make a sale, but there was no way.

During takeoff, he asked if I had children. He asked why not, then he asked again. “I don’t want children,” is a valid answer. It’s the end of a conversation. If you push me, I’ll tell you I feel an existential despair about the future of the planet, of humans in general. I am intensely protective of my time and my space. Children are expensive. And also: My dad was 54 when he died and LauraBeth’s mother was 49. We have spent our entire adult lives certain we will die young. I could have told this man that LauraBeth had recently had her fallopian tubes removed to reduce her risk of ovarian cancer, but instead I said something about how it’s a big decision and it’s just not the right time. I asked him about his own kids to distract him, and I learned the daughter was one of his 13 children. “We are proud Roman Catholics,” he said. He grabbed my arm. “Tom, you’re a good Roman Catholic too. I can tell by looking at you. Listen: every man has one opportunity in this world to become a great man. I know it’s scary. But when you get home, you tell your wife it’s time for you to start making babies.” A thing I didn’t say: pursuing greatness is what ruins people. I’m just trying to be adequate and relatively safe and go to bed without feeling guilty.

Another thing I didn’t say: what kind of fucking speech is that? Who told you this is how to act in public?

To his daughter he said, “You never know. We might be angels sent to save him from this path.” I’d like to think that if I meet an angel, it won’t be while I’m flying coach from Green Bay to Philly. I’d like to think an angel would know enough to just let me read my book, but I guess angels are pushy like that. They have a job to do too. Until you earn your wings, they start you off with low-priority tasks like pestering some guy on a plane about his kids. Later, they give you a sword and let you fight the demons.

Alessandra Lynch

Some Other Musings by the Voices

It's best to stay hidden in a drawer of light

—or a painting with a daffodil's shadow stretching across

or wherever. She is sad as plywood today. Sadder than what's pressing into it—.

—You mean the drill or the saw?

I mean the day pressed to day.

—Her tarot read rock bottom and ruin....

Yes, also transformation.

—Does one supersede?

Does "one" have enough air to breathe?

—People are not breathing well, she is not...

When you say that, we are no one not a one—. Do we even breathe?

—Do we know ourselves as indistinguishable from the next

or how soft we are how easily done-for....

—I want to be sure to play keys as chords—.

That might comfort her. Now a dire stillness in the room.

—Is that a shadow at my elbow?

It is our Speaker. She's risen out of the wood.

—Though she doesn't feel like moving.

Sleep then, dear piano.

Leslie Adrienne Miller

HORSE

Sometimes, it's not even a place but a way
of getting there. You can't tell if the road is good

until it gets you to its end, and each step adds limit
to where you can say you have been. This year

there is scurry in the soffits, and the racket
means expect ruin. We gave up knowing

where exactly the moon should be
eons ago, and anyhow, the smoke is back,

so even if you had light, you might not see
what you need. You know there is trouble

when the birds go too quiet, and the tick
of breeze in the leaves just means more smoke

coiling along the treeline, and you'd better get out
of the open field, cover the water you'll need,

and crawl under what's left of the deck.
But all that is what a body will do. The mind

is all mutter, always looking for luggage
at its end, something in which we could carry

everything we still wanted to work on, that boy
with his pocket of star charts, that girl clutching

a drawing of a horse her grandfather drew,
its precision something she tried all her days

to reproduce. How did his hand find a whole
creature? He never lifted the pen as he pushed

the line around with switchbacks as he moved
from head to tail, then under, up, down, in,

and back to the now invisible point of departure
where mind leapt into animal and fled.

Leslie Adrienne Miller

TERRIBLE ORANGE WINDOW

The next morning the yellow gash is gone,
and the rose glow on windows that yesterday
flickered with significance, downgrades
to blues. In the upper right some kind of white,
no longer flat wash but textured like flooring
in a public toilet, designed to make sure you see
where you're going. Now significance gathers
at the pale oval on the maple where one
branch was pruned and not sealed. The eye
likes the clean wound and the mind
the idea that it sees inside the tree's
winter skin. Last night I asked my ailing
son to watch a film set in any other country
than this one. He dozed through bouquets
of fake Russians in drawing rooms and dachas,
all in various states of ascension or free
fall. British accents for all,
a few marvelous fur hats against
snow, sleigh bells well past the end,
when the befuddled lead retrieved his glasses
and found himself standing, rich
and unhappy, watching the girl in daisies
with the embroidered collar. All the low
ladies with hair as black as the deep
turning to carry the lamp out of the room.
Of course, the dreams were marvelous
even if I am only plucking at what
preceded them. My son is miserable
with respiratory glue, and the night
coughing woke me often but never
entirely. Is the door locked? The dough
made? Was there someone clicking keys
in a surge of worsted greatcoat?

The window on the sickroom wants
to fill with distance, but gives only
another window. Sun arrives first
as leaf lace carved on a wall, and wet
hacking worries it until it fades.
Perception is dangerous in a field of fear,
and a lifetime of keeping ready to see
can leave you with only this hulking
barbeque grill topped with a loaf of snow,
or that terrible orange window aflame
on a nation's ancient rage.

Michael Dumanis

Little Soul, Restless and Charming

Animula vagula blandula

—Emperor Hadrian, on his deathbed

Python wrapped tight
around the soul inside
 the brain beneath
 the skull beneath
the skin shielding
the soul from the ultraviolet
 sunlight cast over the violent
 shadows of hills,
it has turned out
you are the greater emperor,
 guest and companion
 of our shambling body,
and we, who are about
to steer our dinghy
 into the open sea,
 salute you. As the nosebleeds
from which we have suffered
continue to intensify, we begin
 to despair of this our life,
 who were well known
for our aquiline features, who used to
ride, all at once, the gray ponies.
 Now, when we aren't
 drowning in a dream,
we pace through a room
without color, savage and bare.
 No one will give us poison
 or a sword, or smother us
with the indifferent
weight of their hands.
 Who can imagine
 a landscape without us.
We climbed Mount Etna
to witness one sunrise.
 All we had wanted was
 a pair of wings.
Little is left of the shell-
shocked factory:

dust on the floor, an over-
used machine.

A word is just
as thing as a bronze door.

The artist is only as good
as the art.

How cavalierly the unbolted
door swings open.

Eric Pankey

With Words

When the frequency with which a ghost shimmers is slowed, it becomes visible. What then is the tense it resides in?

::

As I kneeled and spoke in tongues at the revival at the First Baptist Church of Raytown in 1974, I could taste the salt of shame, the bitter of stammer and blather, the cloy and sweet of reckless surrender.

::

After the robbery, I took an inventory, but none of the objects and heirlooms in the house were familiar. I was, I apologized, in the wrong house.

::

A word comes to mind and is lost. Words are such simple tools, and, like tools, easily misplaced.

::

The dog, my granddaughter's age, sleeps at her feet as she reads. The girl is young, the dog ancient.

::

The past nags like a bone spur. While I was away, the future arrived. If only forgiveness were as easy as forgetfulness.

::

I wished my father dead for so long and then he died as if my wishing made it so. Now with words I attempt to raise him from the dead.

::

The poem aware of my eavesdropping, lowers its voice. Whispers. Speaks a language composed entirely of vowels.

Celadon

Evening settles as subtle salt light in each window. The first star appears unnoticed. A child notes rust's slow progress on a drainpipe. Moves a snail back to where its moonlit celadon trail began.

::

She wakes to find the pupa of a rare butterfly lodged beneath the skin of her wrist. It shivers like a celadon pulse.

::

Celadon ceramic glaze—pale, jade-green, transparent— originated at start of the Northern Song Dynasty and is commonly called *greenware* nowadays.

::

The maid servant, cloaked in an elaborately detailed celadon silk dress, attends her mistress at the beheading and carries away on an ornate silver tray Holofernes' head.

::

In his notebook, a list of color names that never made it into poems: *titian, bisque, puce, fulvous, smalt, celadon, damask, gamboge, bittersweet, feldgrau, bisque* and *jasper*.

Elimination

To keep the ones that remain we need to get rid of the ones we don't have room for together with the ones that aren't a good fit and the ones who aren't like us the ones who don't like us the ones who never interested us in the first place the ones who would never have been included if we hadn't been overly generous sympathetic together with the ones that are unsuitable for one reason or another the ones that aren't good enough the ones that are too much trouble and the ones that don't get along with the ones we're including the ones we aren't comfortable with for one reason or another and the ones that aren't included in our *vision* of the ones we're including together with the ones we're going to include at some point when spots open up for the ones we don't have places for as long as we're keeping the ones that remain

Peter Leight

Philosophy of Waiting

As long as I'm waiting
I'm placing my hands on my breasts,
folding them like towels,
I mean you don't need to love what you're waiting for,
is it too much to ask?
Not turning around
to wait behind me
or moving over to wait on one side or the other,
as when you put something down
and don't even bother to pick it up.
I have plenty of energy,
although it's mainly potential,
as when you're waiting for your friend and somebody else shows up
with takeout you never ordered:
you're not sending it back,
you don't want to disappoint your friend.
You're not giving up on your friend.
Sometimes it's easier to think about
what you're *not* waiting for—
not more unexpected
than you expected,
or did you expect less?
When I'm waiting I often place my hands
on the table in front of me,
side by side,
as if I'm waiting for someone to pick them up:
it's not like waiting for the bus
when you know
it's going to come,
otherwise you wouldn't wait.

Memo to Bond

1. Intelligence refuses your letter of resignation. Intelligence made you the spy to save the world. Espionage is your vocation, your avocation, your game of golf. Your bar of gold, your shells on the beach, every last death garden of the villain's design. Your sweaty, furrowed brow; your double bourbon; the missiles you stole. It's your capture, your torture, your shark bait. Your perfect suit, your gun under your pillow, your killing in cold blood. Intelligence doesn't care if you're tired. Intelligence doesn't care if you wish for death. Intelligence doesn't care about your broken bones, bitches, balls. No balls, no world peace, no job.

2. You shrug your shoulders, light up, prepare to sleep? You lose yourself in the girl inside the villain's secret lair? Steal the villain's toys, girl included, and light up again? You gamble your way to world peace, downing two, maybe three, girls, only one villain? You dine with them, sport with them, try killing them with varying degrees of success, and you shrug your shoulders at death after setting off for a mission again. It's laborious, really, how do chase villains, tail, death in its totality, when, don't you know, there's not all the time in the world?

3. Bury yourself again, and there will be no world to return you, to deliver you one last time; no villain or girl where death can't find you; no good humor, no gut instincts, no gun. No good intentions, no golden girl. No world to fall away again. Get up, with your gun, girl, villain. Get up, your grim smile, your memory loss, your mission to kill M. Get up, your smuggled diamonds, your hapless sidekick, your voodoo girl who reads the cards. Get them up, get them all up, and they will come, sliced thin like the piece of lemon peel in your favorite martini, angry as hell with you.

End Notes, 007 Novels

1. James Bond is a one-time diamond smuggler in *Diamonds Are Forever*.
2. James Bond is a one-time gigolo in *From Russia With Love*.
3. James Bond is dumped by Gala the Bond Girl (nee villain Hugo Drax's side piece) in the final pages of *Moonraker* where he concludes: "There must be no regrets. No false sentiment. He must play the role she expected of him. The tough man of the world. The Secret Agent. The man who was only a silhouette."
4. Moscow, Kentucky, and Switzerland are only some of James Bond's known whereabouts.
5. James Bond has alighted in Turkey, Jamaica, and New York, where he botched a kill on purpose.
6. Ernst Stavro Bloefeld is the villain who kills Bond's wife in *On Her Majesty's Secret Service*.
7. Paco Scaramanga is the man with the golden gun.
8. Auric Goldfinger is the man with the gold.
9. Dr. No is the villain with the Jamaican island covered in bird shit.
10. Colonel Rosa Klebb is the Russian villain with knife-toed shoes and poisonous knitting needles.
11. Ever heard of Bond villains Sol Horror and Sluggsy Morant? They terrorize Bond Girl and Dreamy Pines Motor Court proprietress Vivienne Michel in the forgettable 007 novel *The Spy Who Loved Me*.
12. Remember Solitaire, soothsayer to the Voodoo Baron of Death in *Live and Let Die* for whom Bond feels "a growing warmth" he's careful not to divulge to anyone?
13. Pussy Galore, Kissy Suzuki, and Honey Ryder are only some of the known Bond Girls.
14. The girl from *Goldfinger* is stunning in her golden skin. The girl from *On Her Majesty's Secret Service* is marriage material. ("We're two of a kind. Why not make it for always?")

Stone 7:

from *Mosaic*

: it has the continual newness of pleasure: a field
of gold grasses framed above by low-hanging fog:
a field devoid of path and permitting neither
entry nor exit: gathered from its own immensity
without foreground or background, without a single thing
inside it but you standing there: a moving detail
within the pattern: the continual field in which you are
always emerging: a field built like the imaginary
or love on the conditions of the unconditional:
hence the wind arresting your ear with the sound
of being confided to: hence the low fog shaping itself
to a hand consoling you in all your shifting phases:
weep, weep without stop, be weighted with indifferent joy:
everything that happens to you takes place in this field:
is contextual, is historical: is composed from the communal
fabric of lived experience: how else
could we gather there with you in the immensity
and look up from the shared point of our under-seeing:
it is important to face the prospect: to see the promontory:
to achieve prominence and bring into relief
the accidental qualities that distinguish you as an entity
apart: the field alone recognizes your singularity:
manifests you as endless shimmer: like moonlight, like sunlight
glittering a river over the surface of things: you appear
and I perceive you: you imagine and I am there: mutual
apprehension: a wilderness: a wilding: here I am
in the brightness: there you are in the dark: set apart
on that grassy side of field without distance: consecrated
to air: a detail within the pattern: an immensity gathered
into a field continually: to appear is enough: sensed
as a color is sensed: a mode in which light appears:
light hitting the surface of things, light hitting the eye:
color within, color without: freed from judgment and shame:
this sequencing of limned limbs: I see you clearly:
I know you exist irrevocably: for I too am transparent: I too
have disappeared: trust is what you have lost
and trust is what the field returns to you: primitive
awareness: firstborn: first to believe: an immensity
without magnitude, without extension: not space
but spaciousness: like the soul a matter of perpetual
movement: pure potentiality: nothing to do, nowhere to go:
fog, sun, moon, stars: numberless: unfinished: field:

Anthony Procopio Ross

Playlist

Lofi hip-hop study beats to gaze far into a brightly lit screen in a dark & dirty bedroom

Jazz tunes for sating that empty growing pit inside your solar plexus, sipping on wine beneath a shady tree

Essential indie on the day of your improbable salvation from truth

Gregorian chants to hum to and relive the best parts of 1:44 in the afternoon

Minimalist house music reserved for watering your Bird of Paradise

Sublime ballroom waltzes for when no one else is around and you wish to dance a slow triple step alone

Music for airplanes & taxicabs

White noise to soak in the tub for a string of nameless hours

Strings sparking alive the damp heart of your enemies, opening the eyes of your new lover, so you may all go on living

Campfire acoustic for slapping your knees & drinking cheap beer, casting photos into the dark

A cacophony of bicycle bells going off in rounds for intimidating your arch nemesis while they try to nap

Heavy metal to fuck primal, free, without thoughts of anything other than the brutal & imperfectly perfect shape of your lover

Flamenco style finger picking where each note is proof enough of your life as iterative vibration

Radiohead's least known tracks slowed to perfection played back at x.75 original speed

"Soft Silly music: meaningful, magical" to impress that beautiful stranger, you know the one

Aruarian Dance melodies for bobbing your head to what your heart understands as a slow dive

The muted thumping of an amp pounding past this party's one bathroom door, the barrier between the muffled minds of midnight hipsters and you, waiting for an uber to save you from yourself

Hauntingly candid demo tracks noodled by guitarists who sound so much better when they know no one is looking

The voyager's golden record mixed with the gentle thundering of cumulonimbus clouds heard from impossible distances

Glenn Gould sight reading Bach in a way only Glenn Gould could, channeling the mind of one in a million, and the muted stare of a dog watching his shoulders rise and fall, rise and fall

Songs of day & night & the way your lover's lips say your name as you lean into life's best kept secret

AI Chet Baker urging you through melody to take off what is not human

Background music for eating sandwiches

Candice Kelsey

Duality

Consider Mary Shelley's
I am fearless & therefore powerful
or Stevenson's
If I am the chief of sinners,
then I am
the chief of sufferers also.
& Oscar Wilde's
truth is rarely pure & never simple

like outmaneuvering a flapping dog
toward the front door
for a package
tanned & simple rectangle
of tattooed instructions
that double as my life of late:

Leave if no answer. There's
always a leaving it seems.

I fantasize being part of a pair—
Estha or Rahel
one of the Segundo brothers
a Defarge
Golding's Sam or Eric
maybe George rather than Fred Weasley.

Today it's just me & UPS:
hardly heroic twins
waltzing prosaic on the porch step,
a pair of doomed & cursed
descendants or Homeric composition

until I walk to the kitchen alone
& doula from a box
my new sheet cake set—
2 non-stick pans, a 9.27 x 13.2 x 0.66 in.
reminder I am
neither shiny nor smooth
& certainly do not
slide simply into the arms of another.

Christopher Shipman

A Traditional Story of Exaggerated Conception

I've lived inside my father's past. A child in a small town. I've come to rest. I've gone in silence to the deserted square. My teeth bared to my own shadowless steps. I've studied the midnight flickering of lonely streetlights. I've rubbed my back against the beams. To dream of shedding. To sing my becoming. To skin myself against the ghost of hands that led me there. But I never entered the forest at the edge of town. If you're wondering, of course I haven't. Because I know a crown of wounds waits. See it happen? To brave the forest is to discover I was born there. In other words, do I have to say that I am afraid of everyone? Tell you that I am afraid of myself the most? Avoiding the fanged music of the forest I stroll over crushed pianos on sleeping lawns. Every broken key. I shake the sleeping trees. Between the branches, sibilant whispers on my father's lips. Every syllable another crushed piano. His mother. Her murder. Louder now. His mother. Her murder. And again. Her name. He says her name. Any tree at night knows her name by heart. Knows mine and knows his. Knows it like lights strung from a porch—their burning bulbs—are enough to know someone is home. My father is there somewhere. I am here somewhere. We are nowhere everywhere.

DIVERS

This is the season I decide to be
Calm. To live, calmly, by the stacks of wood,
With the front door open, the storm door shut,
With my face under a book, soft and firm,
Or in my green car, in the dirt drive, out
to cool winds, making spaces in the air.
I do my work, come home, thinking nothing
Of it. There's the one day, then the next day,
I'm parked in the car, before the wood pile,
Listening to an album I can't tell
From what I remember which one, I think
It's raining so hard I can't get inside,
Or it may have been so clear it hurts to
Build from the thought of it, my cold purpose.

DIVERS

Lots of different places quietly dead.
Autumnal, I put my foot down to it.
Orange color, brown color, red, yellow,
I saw, afterwards, on a telephone
Call full of feelings, indivisible
Feelings, feelings full and cold and cloaked in
Windshields, license plates, tire piles. Then the sound
When the door opens I come to count on.
I hide my feelings in the future but
They come right back to me. Here, a turn
In the memory, whatever memory
I slide past it now, past flagstone, piling
This up faster than I can leave my head,
Where the yards were green, and the street set in.

Claire E. Scott

i dream my favorite actor is the bouncer at a dive bar in an unidentifiable city.

even asleep, i'm fighting it, leaving my ID at home.

(the stakes are so high at gas stations: tall cans, full fridges, cheap wine.)

my favorite actor says *the id's not a problem go right in*. my friends don't know who he is. they barely know who i am, but i didn't tell them i got sober. i enter the bar through blue beads, find us a sticky table.

(most evenings i walk through church lobbies, sit in folding chairs, repeat ritual. tend and dress my open wounds.)

inside this dream bar, phil collins is playing. i can feel it coming in the air tonight. faceless friend slides me a vodka soda. i swirl the straw, consider my options.

(i still want to blame it all on the night i came to on a couch. my tie dye tshirt on the fraternity basement floor. beside it, my bra under my denim jacket. purple bruises.)

i finish the dream vodka soda pretty quickly. stack on another few like my faceless friends do. they're talking like the parents from charlie brown.

(i used to get asked to leave. i was carried out that last night, repeating apologies no one believed. they told me in the morning, my memory cratered like a lesser moon.)

my favorite actor is outside, chain-smoking with some townies. i get in my car to find more.

Claire E. Scott

I'm stoned at the MoMA

and exhausted from straining to connect
with each hue of orange.

It's impossible to see from all points of view,
but I'm striving to be more empathetic.

I keep remembering how important
it is to look beyond the image,
to expand perspective.

We are more than who
we are when we're static.

There's no way to share a complete story.

I have this desire to be comprehensive,
but you can really only say one thing at a time.

I like when you can see the brushstrokes
all thick and textured, spectrum of pigment.

Loosening

coffee mug warm in my hands // birds back and forth to the feeder
lightening the morning // squirrel using its tail for an umbrella

little white porcelain mouse from Carousel Antiques on the sideboard //
reminds me of sojourns with my mother // she perused the lovely oldies
owned by two charming men who always received us warmly // me,
little, but not too bored // always coming away with something pretty //
carefully touching what took my eye // but Mother put her foot down at
the ancient moose head glaring down at us from above

sun peeks through the clouds // someone wants to be my friend // the
world on the radio laps at my door // war and lies and beached whales //
return to the birds, their vital small energies—all I need most times to get
by // October pleases with its leafiness and early wood smoke // no, not
snow, solemn, cold // my good friend is far away in Florida // avocados
in her yard // palmetto bugs inside

my mother's laughter in the antique barn // young and energetic //
engaging with the two proprietors // childhood came and went and now
life is real // frost warning tonight // the little porcelain mouse reassures
me, there was a child, a mother, a pleasant outing among old things //
still have the colored marbles in a little bag from that shop // still have
scars from what aged and bittered my mother // I spill out the swirled
colors, blues and ruby, clear and hazy // they ting and roll away loosening
the gravity of the day // turn warm if you hold them // scatter like the
birds // scatter like laughter // still wonder whose hands played with
those glass orbs, cast them in a game, maybe? // or just to watch beauty
scatter itself willy-nilly, for no good reason

Claire Scott

RAGE

Do you know about the Pacific Tree Frog?
I just learned that not only is it the state amphibian
of Washington (an astonishing honor given the fierce competition),
but it can change from green to brown and even yellow
blending into the background, not rocking the proverbial boat.

I have decided to remove rage from my repertoire.
Too disruptive, too divisive, too attention-getting
and I desperately need the few friends I have left.
Rage has been riding shotgun since
first grade when I slapped Phyllis in the face
for stealing my pink barrette and told her
she looked like a pointless pig and her mother called
my mother and she never came over again.
I blew at my new boss last week for expecting me
to work overtime again, missing Magnum P.I.
I yelled at my husband for eating the last slice of strudel
and we spent a glacial afternoon in separate rooms.

I am now beta testing an unflappable self,
smiling serenely when I someone cuts in line,
deep breathing when Cathy forgets my birthday,
sounding sympathetic when my sister cancels lunch
inserting a funny joke rather than filing another grudge.
But I can't sleep at night. Dreadful dreams
of ax murderers and serial killers, a virtual reservoir
of rage building like a volcano. Not a chance of changing
color to a calmer shade. Not a chance of being voted
the best of anything in this stupid two-bit state of California.
I tried to be a Pacific Tree Frog.
Please know I tried.

Shannon Hardwick

Some spells can target only a creature (including you) that you touch

The hooves of the other horses are prophesies
but I choose only my mare

to deliver me from the woods where one god watched me fall.
Get out of the car. It is six in the evening. I'm no longer

a child running toward a barn for safety.
My father was there until

he wasn't. My nightmare
died years ago. This must be the part of the story

I make up. The part where I'm the adult
playing a game I never played as a child.

Now, I know the spells
as I enter the forgotten barn in my thirty-seventh year.

Shannon Hardwick

Your magic grants you a brief insight into the target's defenses

My mother's a violet

startling the future asked
please return. The smell of
blood on the last morning.
As if *I* was the one
who died then knitted
myself back into
a stubborn nest.
On the patio, my mother
chain smokes—each
cigarette revealing a cherry
warning: *Don't ask questions
or come near*.

Saving Your Best Friend from Going to War

I don't know how we got to throwing the rusted garden shovel around my backyard. It was Spring, and we'd been cooped up in the house for months, computer screens glossing over our eyes, our brains mush, having hit our maximum number of fake deaths. They'd stopped showing the towers on the TV. You had signed up for the army, and I had cried, telling you how much I thought you were going to die. Our psyches were damaged, is what I'm saying. We had done fuck-all all winter, our arms as thin as guitar strings and as strong as a wet noodle. Reflexes kept our heads jerking at every change of light, a shadow, the flap of a bird's wings, the geared rush of neighbor's trucks speeding through the edition again.

But one of us picked up the shovel, the rust like a stain of marinara across the tip, dried dirt rattling somewhere inside the handle. You flipped it up into the air, and we watched it rotate from end to end, ducking out of the way at the last second, missing out heads or hands by inches before thudding back to the softening ground.

Our brains lit up like small cities seen from the air at night, potential violence, a doppler pulling it closer, us chucking the pointy metal higher and higher—Bombs away, you kept saying— until you pushed me out of the way, the handle landing on the crown of your head.

"The hell?" I said, hopping off my knees, slapping at my jeans, the cuffs already soaked. "Look at this shit. I was going to wear these for skating tonight."

"I saved your life. You owe me \$2.95." You shook your hair out of your eyes. You were always doing that. You knew I was jealous, so you did it like every fucking second. I hear you're bald now, but I can't forget that hair. Other kids wanted to dunk, draw, sing in the choir. I just wanted that goddamn hair.

"This is lame," I said, picking up the shovel, wielding it like a knife, pointing it at your balls.

"Put that down," you said, pulling that tough guy face that always made me laugh. But I guess I was still pissed about my pants, cause the handle felt hot in my hand. I felt this pulsing energy. Potential, right? And what's worse than a dickhead teenager with something sharp, something no one thought would ever become a weapon. A teenager so angry at his best friend, an anger I couldn't soothe with music. I tried. I'd like you to know that.

I slashed, and you backed up, hips swiveling, head cocked like a chicken, your brain futzing. And I should have stopped there. I know that now, but we were always challenging each other, getting mad and throwing wild punches, backing away and going back to the video games.

It was part of the cocktail of our friendship. We mixed up the hormones, the loneliness, the desire to hate something other than ourselves until we exploded. I hope you remember it this way. We were both assholes, right?

As you ran, that hair flopping, your calves bulging, I imagined a gun, the pull of the trigger and the bullet speeding toward your back, your body dropping to the sand. I wanted to shatter that image, pulverize it into dust, so I threw the shovel. A synapse firing, nothing faster than the speed of electricity. Line us up today; no way I'd make that throw. The precision should have been beyond me back then. My reflexes built through the movement of a computer mouse, my flicking here and there, pinging with each click, each pixelated soldier dead, disappearing from view. And maybe I hoped that it would fall short, the handle grazing your shoe, something we could laugh about. Like avoiding a car accident, the way the breath comes hurtling back into your lungs as you realize that death missed, that you were more invincible in that second than you had ever been, and that maybe you were charmed, something special, and that's all we wanted. We can agree on that, I think?

But the point rotated into your back, the point cutting and wedging, the rust going into the blood, your knees giving out, and you fell to your face, the snow runoff wetting your pants, and yeah, I thought, now we're even, but only for a second, because you didn't get up. I was used to you taking the fall and walking off, taking one of my punches, and gritting your teeth. You were fucking tough, right?

"I can't believe you cut me," you said, reaching for your back, but you couldn't reach it. You looked like a crab trying to run away from a snotty kid on the beach. And, I probably laughed. The shovel was still in your back, and your feet were bending at the knee then snapping back flat, and I fell to my chest and started slapping the ground and counting to three like a WWE ref, but when I looked in your eyes, there were glassy, and I shook your shoulder, gently, I might add, and you said you were *so cold*, and I left you there to go call the ambulance, and I thought about how I could lie about this. But when I got back outside, you were gone, the shovel lying in the pressed grass shape of you, the blood and rust a different kind of cocktail, one that made me feel woozy. Enough that I didn't go after you. I sat on that wet ground until the EMTs arrived, asking where the blood was, and I pointed to the shovel.

"I blame him," I said, hoping someone with less potential would arrive, and tell me how we could fuck it all up so badly?

Flattened and Spare

The fairgrounds were dark, the Ferris wheel a blob in the foreground. A scattering of cars in the grass parking lot, the wind a mockingbird as we walked to the closed gates. My father kicked at the metal, reaching into his pocket and pulling out his phone, the glow prised onto the dirty asphalt from the cracked screen.

We missed it, I said, pulling at his arm, trying to get him to turn around. He skipped so many weekends lately, that going to the fair was supposed to be his way of making up for lost time.

There's got to be a way in, he said, pocketing his phone and walking along the fence line.

Let's just go home. You tried, alright? We'll tell mom I had a blast. She'll never know," I said. I skipped across a couple of those painted cracks in the asphalt, but he kept walking.

I counted to ten before running after him. Several yards down the fence line he found a gap between the metal and a row of port-o-potties. You give up too easily, he said, shimmying through the gap, his face red, but his legs slipping through. Both of us skinny as dynamite sticks, I followed him in.

What about the cameras, I said, waving my arms, a knuckle scraped on the plastic of the shutter.

You think this place would spend money on something hi-tech? he said, pointing out the peeling paint and exposed beams of half the buildings. We walked down a rutted dirt path, formerly filled with vendor tents and food trucks, all of them gone. There was a sour whiff of stale oil and diesel. Most of the rides were gone too, the grass flattened and spare, with tiny trails where the extension cords had sat for days before the rides were folded up and loaded on rusting semis. But the Ferris wheel was still here, a solitary soldier, keeping a watchful eye over the animal buildings.

I wished I had something to tell my father, something that would shock him, make him slow down, and say, *well, what do you know?* but he kept moving until we stood at the base of the wheel.

Goddam, it's big. Especially when there's no one here, he said. He put his hands on the railing and walked up the narrow stairs. He sat in the first gondola and it swung out and back with his weight.

Don't hold back on me now, he said. You telling me you never thought about being somewhere you shouldn't.

I sat across from him. Closed the little trifold door, the seat swaying. The plastic was still hot from the heat of the day. I crossed my arms.

Well, say something, Brent. You can make this okay, you know? It's within your power to be happy.

Trespassing. Sitting in a gondola of a broken Ferris wheel. That a good time for you, I said, running my hand across a crack in the plastic seat. Everything in my life splintered, fractured paths, and my father was still beckoning for me to follow him.

Actually, I can't think of anything better. Some time with my son away from all the noise. You've got my full attention, he said, leaning forward, elbows on his knees our faces close enough for me to count the blackheads on his nose. His smile was a mangle of teeth. I wanted to love him like I did when I was a kid. The way I'd come running whenever he entered the room, the way I'd listen to him try on goofy voices, the way he'd pick me up and make me fly. The vibe now was so quiet, so sad, like he was trying to recreate something but he couldn't see that all the magic was gone.

You'll never have another night like tonight, he said. His phone chirped. He glanced toward his pocket. Use it or lose it, he said.

I stepped onto the seat and reached up for the metal lattice, gripping it and pulling myself up, swinging my feet toward his face. He tapped the bottom of my shoes.

There, you go, he said. Now we're having some fun. Another chirp and he ducked his head, bringing out the phone from his pocket. Already losing interest. I had to do something more, something wild. I pulled up my feet and scooted around the lattice to the other side, reaching up, climbing, my palms already stressed by the friction, but I scrambled higher. Hand over hand until I could crouch in the middle of the legs. It couldn't have been more than thirty feet, but my father looked smaller, older, and hunched over that phone. I let a glob of spit drip from my bottom lip, watched it land with a plop near his foot, just missing his forehead.

Don't be an asshole, he said, typing out a quick message. More bleeps and boops. More typing.

I'm an asshole, I screamed, remembering that old movie he had me watch a few weeks ago, those bare-chested soldiers, saying I am Spartacus. I ignored the pinch in my knees, and the sweat in my palms. I felt tough, someone who could do anything. But all I wanted was to be heard.

I'd say that's a good place to leave it, he said, stowing his phone and walking out of the gondola and down the stairs, never looking back, so sure that I'd always follow.

Tonight, I would, but I could feel the fractures, my feet already skipping into a future I'd own.

Jeffrey Hanson

Something Approaches Unknown Because That Something Is Vague

It comes to mind as a small servant to do what must be done.
Arrange fat blooms at the broad white windows.
Set astir the room's labor of antiquity.
Remove with care wax paper from a sweet cold sandwich.

These things even a vague outline of something can do.
The house becomes the heart and the wind hears it calling.
No language but a blot of wrens spurts crossways over the road.
Calamitous gesture of shape and no shape of flash and fog.

Negation becomes a furrow of plenty where nothing is a white flourish.
The great warm violence of summer.
The rain-shimmer of the table knife.
A call to service from a need to serve.

Jeffrey Hanson

HIGH LANGUAGE

Perfection is the perfect word, with denotations of excellence strung 'round her like disciples. She studies with ease eyes that study her. She bears her breast to the finger that points. Oh yes, word of words.

She sums up orgasm or rapture textually, verbally, cerebrally. How grand an ideal this queen of ideals who sits on the page, imperial, brave, and unburdened by expectations of those who seek so much of She who says it all.

A little noun like *me* must be overruled by how many dullard work-a-day nouns? And with the logic of unimpeachable ranking, those nouns each day address the world while wearing their variant gowns for use that God has pressed into service. Look.

The language of things makes its mark on a world adorned with flair and an abundance of attendant adjectives. And when the spectacle of signs proves too much, those most useful of utilities must be dismantled and warehoused as the mumbling mind purges all the inky stains of seeing.

The whole population of print can be clapped shut and silenced at the back pocket of oblivion. But who doesn't know how the prayer arrives on the tongue of each hour? Driving alone, cutting the meal into pan-sized portions, even getting up quietly to pee at night or any old thing done anytime.

No words will matter, and no forms can manage the graphic of apprehensions at work in the blood. Not being perfect ourselves, we've done the best we can, and something like our efforts to live well is synonymous with the word *absolution*.

Donald Platt

Red Rover Hat Box

for Keith Arbour

My friend is an expert on ephemera

Merriam-Webster's online dictionary defines *ephemera* as "something of no lasting significance"

In its plural usage, *ephemera* can refer to "paper items (such as posters, broadsides, and tickets) that were originally meant to be discarded after use but have since become collectibles"

*

At a bookseller's booth in a field in Brimfield, Massachusetts, at the Antique Flea Market held there every summer, Keith found a battered hat box from the 19th century. It measured 11 ½ inches high, 16 inches wide, and 13 ½ inches deep. It was made out of thin sheets of wood originally covered with a varnished fabric, only remnants of which remained, still adhering with stubborn glue to the wood surface that had later been painted black. It had a brass handle on top for easy carrying and a lock whose key had been lost. Above and below the seam where the lid joined the sides, the hat box was decorated with half-inch, red canvas strips held in place by brass studs

He examined it closely and discovered that the hat box was lined with discarded sheets from a pirated edition of James Fenimore Cooper's novel *The Red Rover*, which contains one of the first extended depictions of a Black man in American fiction—the character Scipio Africanus, steeped in Cooper's racial biases

Cooper who later claimed, "In one sense, slavery may actually benefit a man, there being little doubt that the African is, in nearly all respects, better off in servitude in this country, than when living in a state of barbarism at home"

Keith bought the hat box for forty dollars and sold it to Indiana University's Lilly Library archives for three thousand five hundred dollars

*

Behind the woman with a tattooed, red-and-black swallow, wings spread in flight, on her right forearm, whom I saw for only one moment through the swinging kitchen doors of Backroads BBQ Express, breaking eggs on a sizzling griddle and saying to someone I couldn't see, "Well, he can go fuck himself for all I care"

Little leisure, however, was allowed to ruminate on these changes, or to deprecate the advantage of their enemy. The vessel of the Rover had already opened many broad sheets of canvas; and as the return of the regular breeze gave her the wind, her approach was rapid and unavoidable

*

"Red Rover, Red Rover, send Kathy on over," the children holding sweaty hands on the playground call out to the opposing line of children holding hands

And Kathy runs as fast as she can and hurls herself into the chain of children who have called out her name

If she breaks through the human chain, Kathy can claim Sally, whose grip on Jim she has broken, and bring Sally with her to the other side

*

"Peace said Wilder. "I black would speak to me."

If Kathy cannot break through the chain of children, she must join them and become one of them. The two lines of children take turns calling out each other's names to come over, Red Rover. When there are no players left on one of the opposing sides, the game is finished

Scipio had turned his looks in the direction of his officer, and was making another feeble effort towards extending his hand. As Wilder placed the member within the grasp of the dying negro, the latter succeeded in laying it on his lips, and

then, flourishing with a convulsive movement that
herculean on which he had so gly and so
successfully brandished in defense of his master,
the limb stiffened and fell, though the eyes still
continued their affectionate and glaring gaze on
that countenance he l so long loved and ich,
in the midst of all his long-endured wrongs, had
never refused to meet his look of love in kindness

*

This hat box lined with “wasted uncut never-stabbed *perfected sheets*”
from a pirated edition of a famous 19th-century writer’s novel—this
bit of flimsy ephemera—has outlasted all the white men and women
who may have stored within it their top hats made of felted beaver
fur or their black-fishnet-veiled, scarlet cloches accented with silk
violets

Has outlasted the writer of *The Red Rover*

Has outlasted J. Cunningham, the printer who pirated that edition of *The
Red Rover*, and the hat box makers who affixed their engraved paper
label to the inside lid of the hat box: *W. Illman & Son Trunk, Chest,
Box, and Packing Case Makers 33 Nobel Street 21 Little Britain
64 Aldergate LONDON*

*

That this ephemera—flotsam of racial, literary, millinery, and haberdash-
ery history—will probably outlast all of us

Even the children in the playground, chanting, “Red Rover, Red Rover,
send Davy on over”

Is nothing short of miraculous

What do you want to know about your father?

When I was a child, we lived in a rental house for the first seven years after father left, where I played quietly in the side yard—a silk tree, scattered light wavering through frond-like leaves, marble stepping stones, cracked earth. I pushed cars or dug for dinosaur bones there in the time after my siblings had been sent to school, and I was left at home to pass the hours with my mother, still depressed in the aftermath of the divorce.

What I remember most about the hours was a stunted mimosa tree, which grew in that small space, and whose geometry of branches provided an Escher-like staircase I could climb if my hands and feet gripped strongly enough. The tree's silver bark was scored by the beaks of woodpeckers, notch after notch as though every inch of the tree needed scouring for insects, reminiscent of the close attention a father pays to his newborn child.

It was a Nuttall's woodpecker pair, I suppose. The species found in my small Northern California valley town that had riddled the tree with holes, hopping between the slender branches more deftly than a boy ever could, and then bending beak to the never-ending search for insects.

The male Nuttall's has black wings with non-contiguous horizontal white bands and a white breast, which is marked by black flecks. It looks like a bird that couldn't settle on the proper color of a winter coat and wound up leaving the store with two. The male has a small red crest, familiar to those of us who grew up with the image of a woodpecker defined by Woody from Looney Tunes. The female bird is less ostentatious, no crest at all. Her black head is cut through by two horizontal white stripes, one stretching to above her eye, the other runs like a bleached river from cheek to the lower edge of her velvety beak. They look more like sparrows than anything else as they flicker between the limbs of hawthorn and juniper and then on to the mimosa where they hammer at intervals only a woodpecker understands.

Before the days of helicopter parents, dire warnings of routine kidnappings, and the ubiquity of screens, single-parent children spent hours outside, observing the roiling ants, the flexing wings of butterflies, the sweet scent of honeysuckle. And yet, I also tended loneliness, cultivated it in that quiet space, bothered by the presence of others, which disturbed my imaginative games, my quiet observations. Back then, an hour or two would pass in the rhythm of being outside, ant, insects, trees, flowers, sky.

But once crucial detail stands out in my memory of the mimosa tree. I can't remember ever seeing woodpeckers bent to their morning task.

Instead, I remember the even-paced drumming, then rushing out and finding the tree empty, the birds, gone or mistaken for sparrows. But the memory may be false. The birds may have already died or passed into another neighborhood by the time I remember that tree. Such that only the tree retained the actual memory of the birds, as a grandchild, grown old, might be the last keeper of their own deceased grandmother's memory, the way she used to smile with her rosy and rounded cheeks.

As I write, my memory begins to fill in as a paint by number picture, with shadows of woodpeckers, chests tilted as they dipped their tongues into the freshly marred tree. And now, thirty-six years later, I can't tell if I've invented the birds or their absence, but I find the absence more narratively pleasing, the absent birds, the absent siblings, the absent father.

Decades later, slipping through the wormhole of memory, I think of my move away from the children, the leaving, just as my father did. And I think of the birds who gather on the skeletal branches of a bald cypress outside the window as a pack of elderly churchgoers at coffee hour exchanging gossip. The lower half of the tree is less a living thing, then a suggestion of endless winter, deadened and woody stems where sparrows and nuthatches congregate in the early evening. The sky turns from blue to purple in the distance, and I am alone as I was when I was a child.

And now the two trees, the two fathers, and the two memories of loneliness are braided together on the rope of memory. And I think of the holes again, the scars left on the bark, or on life, even after the birds or father have moved on. I think of how I can run my mind along those silver years of childhood, examine it, time and again, as a woodpecker might a mimosa tree. What will my children remember about their father?

In my father's apartment, a rundown three-bedroom rental with orange shag carpets, he has lived in these last twenty years after the dissolution of his second marriage, is a small cement yard, adorned by lemon, peach, and pear trees. As a child, I never went into my father's small yard. He was tense about the cat escaping, going off to live a life of some old tom wandering the fence posts of the neighborhood. That the cat never dashed off did little to assuage his worry. Father's yard wasn't for playing but for watching stray cats, who he fed and talked about with an intensity of love and care that I was jealous of as a child, jealous of as an adult. Why didn't he watch me with such tender and loving care?

Every summer, my father would meet my mother at the McDonald's in Vacaville, a heat-blasted town, to pick us up and drive us to his house. We'd park in the lot and look out across the field of star thistle and dirt mounds, undeveloped land, while we waited for his old silver Cadillac to appear. At the handoff, he'd pass my mother a bag full of pears, peaches, or an endless supply of lemons. It was his way of showing love. But even if you understand that, even now, when your father gives you lemons, you mostly let them spoil.

Every year, he'd climb up the ladder and prune the trees back, bringing the quiet order he always wanted in his life to his yard. I can still picture the wavering branches, the cement and rectangle of light, a world outside his window, so different from life at my mother's where we wandered the yard with impunity building forts and pissing on junipers. His yard, my father, was inaccessible.

One year, he bought me a video game, and I played it intently for six hours, twisting and turning on a futuristic spacecraft as I cleared the sewers of aliens. I have always had good hand-eye coordination, and video games came easily to me. Finally, I managed the barrel rolls and firing of guns to beat the game. My father looked over and said, "Why did I waste that money on a game you were going to beat in a day anyway?" What I want my father to say is, I am proud of you.

Some of those distended mornings of my childhood before the heat had settled like an animal's warm body over the valley floor, I'd climb the mimosa tree, stretching my small hands to the rivers of silver bark running through the landscape of abrasions. My small arms and tense fingers guiding me up beyond that first foothold, left hand grasping a branch above me, then another step onto a large and steady limb. A final step onto a confluence of branches, stretching out like tributaries, where I could rest, reclining against the large limb and gaze at the contours of my known world, a cul-de-sac, a towering oak, black asphalt warming in the sun.

I loved that side yard, loved gazing through the canopy of fern-like leaves of the mimosa, loved using a small garden shovel to chisel away the cracked earth, and retrieve round stones I proclaimed were dinosaur bones. How is it that I still long for those days, days when I was alone but didn't feel oppressed by my solitude. Back when there wasn't a voice in the background telling me that I could be spending my time on better things, grading a student essay, refining prose, tidying the mess the children have left, sweeping floors free of cereal or washing dishes. What I remember of childhood are the sun-warmed blackberries, the hummingbird's blur

of wings as they dipped beaks to nectar, the slow crawl of summer hours. Now there is always somewhere to be, or something to do that isn't gazing up through a tree into the monument of sky.

How do you start to pull the threads of a life or an essay together? I dream of the caterpillars on the silk tree, spinning, and spinning, until every word and thought is held fast in a tight cocoon dangling from the branches of a tree in my childhood memory.

After the bright pink flowers have bloomed and the hummingbirds have moved on, the mimosa produces six-inch seed pods that hang from the branches the rest of the year. I'd pull them off, break them in my fingers, scatter the seeds on the sun-reddened earth where even those weedy plants never seemed to germinate.

Come winter, when the blooms and leaves are gone, still those seed pods dangle from the branches, rotten and brown, a reminder of empty promises scattered by the wind or by decades.

My children love to ask me when I came closest to dying. Death terrifies and fascinates them, and they are curious to know, to hear. Thus, no matter how many times I regale them with this story, they ask after it again. When I was five, I was climbing the kumquat tree in the yard, a tree of impossibly large green and glossy leaves, which gave us orange and ripe fruit in the spring. My best friend Charlie and I climbed the tree because we'd grown tired of the mimosa, tired of pouring water on the red ants, tired of racing cars down the driveway, tired of the small cul-de-sac.

When I was ten feet up, I stretched out my hands, letting my full weight hang on a solid limb of the tree, and then it cracked, and I fell like a stone, like a fallen angel, like a child half-somersaulting through the air, headfirst. I still remember that feeling—the world a blur, my left eye somehow registering the fence, the branches, the light scattering wildly at the edges of vision. I braced for the stunning impact. I jerked to a sudden halt. My foot had gotten wedged between two branches, and my momentum had stopped cold, and now I was dangling upside down, as a seed pod might, two feet above the ground.

Charlie scrambled down from his perch in the tree, and the two of us tried to wrestle my foot free, but it wouldn't budge. Eventually, as tears streamed down my face, he ran back to his house and got his father, Wayne, a soft-spoken and strange man who pulled my foot from the tree. The tree which had let me go and then caught me, as a father might toss his child into the air, then welcome them back into the cradle of his arms.

This is the year when my father, seventy-three now, climbs the ladder to prune the trees, the lemons, the peaches. Birds are making a riot of noise in the evergreens and ivy beyond his house. He mops his brow, seventy-three, and still hiking five miles per day into the golden hills behind his apartment in San Jose. Slower now, but he loves to tell his children about the cottontail deer and shy foxes he sees flashing through the underbrush, loves to pick up plastic bags, beer bottles, and Taco Bell wrappers as he hikes and grumbles about the people who don't give a damn about wildlife. He's fallen a time or two on these forays, short rolls, gotten poison oak more times than he can count. Still, he loves his quiet walk in these last seventeen years of retirement, loves the way he can chat to the park ranger and other solitary walkers about the heat, the rabbits, the traffic streaming down from the IBM building.

In the afternoon, after he's finished hiking, he tends to the cats, calling and feeding them. He leaves the sink in his bathroom plugged so one of them can lap water, puts out wet cat food, so the house smells entirely of it, moist and unpleasant. His cats, his reliable cast of characters. Sometimes he wonders if he should have had more cats than children, six children, three cats, but long-lived ones, the cats, one was left to him after the first divorce, a beautiful Siamese who lived to be twenty-one, and whose last years were spent throwing up most of what he ate, a Manx left to him when my sister moved to Italy and one stray pulled from its meager existence living by the scraps he put in his yard and into the den of his apartment, a cat he'd cared for day after day until he couldn't stand seeing her outside. Sherlock, Julius, Smoky, his cats. He loves routines almost more than he loves life. He's not sure he'll ever know why. Perhaps because life is too chaotic, all those children and divorces, all those plans turned to smoke drifting into the night air.

He goes to the computer, opens thirty-five emails, thirty of which are thanking him for donations to wildlife organizations, reminding him there are more habitats for wolves to be rescued, more initiatives to keep plastic from reaching the bellies of whales, more plans to keep horses from being slaughtered. When his children visit, he tries to give their children calendars he receives from these organizations, pictures of wild horses running, wild-eyed, with the jagged mountains in the distance, calendars of cute puppies, stray cats wearing Sherlock Holmes hats. Later, he posts the petitions he's signed that day to Facebook, reminds everyone else to care, complains about Trump, turns his profile picture into something he's borrowed from one of his six children's pages, a small gesture, like a bag of lemons.

But it's Saturday now, and the trees need pruning. It will be summer soon, and even if everyone is locked indoors, the trees will still harvest light, the pears and peaches will ripen. He cuts a branch, then another, his legs resting heavily against the ladder. What to make of his life, which he has never let anyone into fully, only offered glimpses, as one might see a deer, or a woodpecker, here and then gone.

My therapist asks what I'd like my father to know about me before our relationship is over. I am quiet on the other end of our call, I just want him to know me, and I just want to know him, I say. Me forty, he seventy-three.

A week later, he falls. His fall is different from mine, no branches of a tree, no rescuing arms of a father. Just the descent and later, a concussion, blood, no memory of what's happened.

For weeks, the family emails back and forth about my father. At first, things are touch and go. He has bleeding in his brain, in his pelvis, but they've closed it, a series of surgeries to keep him tethered here. We talk, he sounds fine. After a while, we begin to chat about the weather, the amount of rainfall over the hills in California, the view of the green grass and oaks he has from the window.

A week passes, he gets an infection that leaves him feeling terrible. When I talk to him, he sounds, for the first time, as though a bit of life is ebbing away. What do you want your father to know about you? What do you want to know about your father? We hang up quickly to preserve his strength, having talked of almost nothing.

Now I hear he argues with the nurses and wonders why they keep badgering him about getting up when he knows he can't do it. People are changing his diapers, and he's tired to the bone. Sometimes his children call, concerned about him, which was something he always tried to avoid, sharing his failing health with any of them, not to worry, he'd say, even after the second heart attack. He always felt he was protecting them by not sharing, but really, he's reminding them of the distance, of that lonely field in a parking lot outside McDonald's.

I haven't called father in weeks, afraid how he'll sound now. My sister says she wants him to move up north where she is, perhaps live in a small apartment with a single floor, no telling if he'll ever be able to climb stairs again. He walked five miles per day for the last seventeen years. Now he struggles to make it fifty feet with the walker. There is hope though, that he'll eventually regain most of his strength, one doctor says he might get back to seventy-five percent, the slow diminishing. Who will pick up the trash, stalk the deer, watch for signs of coyotes?

I have a quiet life, and I have no illusions that anything I've written or thought will last beyond this flickering candle of my private mind. But still, I want to harness the narrative somehow, to draw a connection between his life and my own. I haven't called because I'm not ready to hear his weakened voice, to hear the way life is leaving him as a trickle of water from the hole in a dam. This essay, this imagining of his life, is the closest I've ever come to thinking about him, to run my mind along the contours of it, to try and briefly touch the abrasions, the holes its riddled with. What do you want to know about your father?

We are on a car ride headed north to meet my mother in Vacaville. I'm thirty-eight, on a solo trip up the coast and through Yosemite as I continue to piece together a life without marriage. My father idly taps the wheel as we talk of sports and weather. Then he says, very hesitantly, that he's been reading my blog lately, memories I've written about my teenage years. A blog where I detailed the daily chokeholds I used to be put in by an angry classmate. He pauses, doesn't look at me, but says that he's sorry, that he knows things might have been easier if he'd been around. It has taken him thirty-seven years to apologize.

Outside the car window, the freeway is lined with giant Oleander. The constant winds that blow through Cordelia are scattering dust across the quiet landscape of brown hills, shaking the Oleander. I change the subject back to the weather. Thirty-seven years is too late.

When will I apologize to my children? Of course, I live two blocks away and shuttle them to school four days a week. But still, I am not there for all the moments, all the trips to the park, ice cream by the beach, or Fourth of July fireworks. If my father was a shadow in my childhood, then I am half a person, and they live in the house with the garden, the flowering shrubs, the honeysuckle where we saw our first hummingbird last year, dipping beak to nectar, the red Maple where my daughter now climbs, higher and higher. Time is a circle. But maybe I didn't need to say that.

I imagine my children and I sitting down outside someday when they are older, my father dead. And if they ask about him, I'll say, what do you want to know about your grandfather? And later, if I've learned anything from the ragged stretch of his life, I'll ask them another question. What do you want your father to know about you?

dark room

In an alcove w/apse, the piano has no keys not lacquered black. We b'lieve in the deeply grand. Silk tuxedos spill in nightwater down headless, breastful mannequins of jet. Onyx frames square off against pitch-smear'd plaster, holding syntheses of asphalt & dark gravel, the surgically removed skin of roads. Go, all say, nowhere. That is : *invest in rapture*. On a wrought iron stand with oil-soaked crow—orca & zebra netsuke have lost their doubled nature to shoe polish. Allnightnow. Note the high ceiling: its stars, piquerisms to upper rooms where light plays imprisoned dissident. Lit by faint shafts of a hundred trifling oculi, our gallery is galaxy. Everything we have we have made to shine. Gloss segregates thru block, thru creating unbreathable stoma : luxury measured by its distance from the body. In this slickly still space, we cultivate the pornography of cultivation. Prune. Stark branches we've hewn w/obsidian shears. An act originally meant to foment explosions of blossom, our version eschews the vulgar sun. We cauterize to high sheen, preferring the opulent minimal. The choice to disregard (most especially the living) is fundamental. We attend our profit. This dim we chose long ago, platonically speaking. Look up. Look up again. All light now arrives thru gunshot or gloryhole: you must try to remember, this is an American sublime.

Jeff Alessandrelli

There are 1,001 things lonelier than a lost glove

The tree's orchestra
of shimmering,

interbeing leaves
were at the whim

of multiple conductors—
light rain, strong wind,

steady, zealous announcements
of air & dirt

activating
light

& dark
into dusk.

Below the tree
was a single car

garage, white & measured,
that acted as a frame

to the tableau's blotchy
green above it.

On fluttering autofocus,
my eyes

absently shifted down
to the garage, then up

to the tree again, still
playing wildly against itself,

then back to the garage
once more,

back & forth,
numb & dumb.

My neighbor's house
stood citadel

in front
of everything.

Two stories, narrow,
greyish-granite overtones.

Newish & benign
in its modernity.

No chimney, fake fireplace.
From the outside the house

appeared empty,
although I assumed

they were home,
drinking or crying

or eating
or lost in their—

The wi-fi was down,
had been for hours

(a “community outage”),
and I was out of data.

Staring out the window,
I was just stuck. Watching.

Time maybe leaned
deeper

into the tree's roots,
outflowed vigor

while inflowing
succor.

All the raindrops.
All the raindrops.

I don't know.
I wish there were better,

more assured plans.

Figurative Without Any Chairs

It's two weeks going on three & all
this rain has flattened the plants. None
of our arguments hold water anymore.
Just a bunch of wooden boats with rotted
out bottoms bumping up against some far-
fetched shore. There's a hornets' nest up
under the porch where I can't see to reach.
Between us my dog & I have sustained
three stings in as many days when you
write to say you're really missing me. I'm
moving rocks from here to there edging
a new garden bed out back but it's the wall
you've built stone by silent stone I stare
wide eyed & utterly into, taking in the
soundlessness of the dropped line
on which I was left hanging.

Meanwhile
the front door's open to bring the outside in
but the screen's got a tear from where the cat
hooked a claw so things with wings float around
like wayward thoughts. I'm doing my best
to kill them where they land. I don't know
where the hours of some days go. Don't know
the last time my hair's been washed. It isn't
that I've forgotten. I just don't bother. Same
with the potted flowers on the steps that are all
but waterlogged. Bringing them in to save them
from each torrent means I have to keep
bringing them out. I've had it up to here
with the back & forthing. They'll either make it
or they won't. I have a floor to sweep & a bed
that needs making. There's a table in my yard
that has no chairs & you don't know what we are.

Lynne Potts

They say light is a bundle of energy

They say light is a bundle of energy that has no mass and no electrical charge which would seem to make it *nothing* but it has to be *something* because we have a name for it. It's hard to say what electricity is too but when I was in Sierra Leone one evening, sitting on a wooden bench under a kerosene lamp eating an egg sandwich cooked on a charcoal grill and flattened with a hand iron—everyone knew it existed, even the bare-foot children carrying plastic buckets of water in the dusty twilight. They didn't have it, but they'd heard the word and their mothers wanted it.

The Secret

“Out of my greatest despair was to come the greatest gift,” teases the first minute of the documentary *The Secret*.

I never got to the part where any secret was mentioned, probably a good thing, for if I knew it, it would exit one state of being (unknown) for another. I’m pretty sure there are rules besides, and one of them is don’t go sticking your arm in piles of firewood. Let the spider sleep. And so on. Hannah’s writing a story that begins in love and ends in murder. She’s following The Great Flow of Things, as we all are, where what starts in darkness ends in light, where a village forms where there was no village at the base of a volcano, then the volcano erupts and that’s that. What else goes here? We ask, and what goes is what goes best. A meteor heading to earth has a quantifiable velocity in its axial spin, known only to the local wizards of our day, the physicists, and if we’re good maybe we’ll get an extra juice after naptime. It’s been a year of unknowns becoming known. Example: we now know a man drove his truck through a Christmas parade. We know there are 1 billion fewer snow crabs along with 1 million fewer Americans and counting. In Hannah’s novel ghosts feature prominently, and desire, young desire, hovers above everyone like a health marker in a videogame. There was a time I wanted real answers, digestible and actual, like the number seventeen, seventeen horses, seventeen drops of wet wet rain. Instead it was question marks, periods, ellipses. I know what I’m saying isn’t interesting because our dog, Swayze, wants to go outside where squirrels are and not stay here where unknowns mob us like dust. Out of our great despair comes the greatest gift I tell him, and in response he whips around to lick and chomp his butt. In the next chapter of Hannah’s book, the protagonist kisses in a graveyard someone whom she can’t be sure isn’t a killer, mixing together lust and fear in the way the flow of things demands. How I mixed together my own loathing and greed when a man in a hurry left an envelope of fifty dollars at the video store where I worked, an envelope I pretended to know nothing about when he returned. Or how when my brother terrorized the school yard I was just happy it wasn’t my neck for once. I sometimes wonder if I desire heroics or just to be quiet. I sometimes wonder if there’s a difference at all.

The Prayer

How did you know
to pray now, Odysseus, storm-shattered, drowning
in strange seas? After all, you hadn't prayed before—
the goddess came or she didn't; your mind flashed,
whip of your striving heart, flashed like bronze
in the battle-blazing sun. What do you know now,
naked and new among mortals, brine-choked, strangled
by the sea's heaving swells, sea water plunging
into your nostrils, your mouth, your throat, plundering your lungs—?
Did you finally realize, crafty-minded wanderer,
bone-weary, that even your last breath belongs to the gods?

Dolius

Old farmhand, bent over the rows in the far field
where you can work alone and in silence, away from grief,
ground by years, stiff, shuffling among the tender plants,
old earth-soaked callouses crusting your big hands—
to you she came breathless across the endless fields,
old mother who tends you well, who rubs salve into your labored hands,
who trims your thinning beard, enveloping you
in her warm, musky breath—spring onions
just pulled from moist soil—her chest heaving now—
wheezing through her strange accent, “Come! Come!”
The meal is ready. The goat, hot and steaming on the table
laid before the man who has come glistening like a god.
“He has traveled far. He is hungry. He waits for you.”

Cynthia Boersma

Waiting For Athena to Lavish Splendor Over Me

I.

After he shed his rags, as he stepped from the bath
Athena crowned the man with beauty head to foot.
Great goddess, when will you run my curls
like those hyacinth clusters, full of blooms?
Here I lie prone in the cooling bath
awaiting the gold-wash over this beaten silver
waiting to be touched by your master craftsman
the one trained by you and the god of fire.
Queen, what happens now, after a lonely bath
when I step from the cold water with this old body?

II.

I've learned something about those ancient Greek goddesses.
They do not attend to your every shower, sprinkling
their transforming goddess dust as part of an exquisite
daily regimen of personal hygiene, yet still
you bought the precious jar from that "loveyou!" site;
from the farmer's market, the day you got up extra early,
still in the dark, visiting the old herbalist wrapped
in a hand-woven shawl. It was such a cold morning,
her stiff, chapped hands could not count the change.

III.

So I stopped showering and combing my hair. It's mussy now.
My clothes are rumpled, somewhat ragged. These old toenails
are chipped and cracked, forever bruised. Children tell me
my feet stink and I'm glad they notice. Maybe
it's happening. Maybe I'm becoming crusty enough
from the brine of this stuttering sea for an old mother
to draw a bath, to sponge the warm water over my shoulders,
lather my hair with her strong fingers, rub me down
with fragrant oil, see the hidden scar and wink.

The Mast

Well, for one, I'm no one's pride and glory.
My black ship is small and empty—not even black—peeling varnish.
Siri sings to me every morning and I'm none the wiser.
The wax that stops my ears is poor hygiene
and a predisposition from my grandfather. With a crew cut,
I would look like a mast and I could lash myself to it.
Lash myself to myself, hear the throbbing of my own heart,
these pains unwilling by gods, this persistent ignorance of all that comes to pass,
straining against the ropes—
My crabby song: cramps and hangnails and blisters,
my friend with cancer who lived, who keeps on living
and texts from that far-off land called Remission.
My friend who didn't.
And now, sing for this young mother
with abundant red hair who can't nurse her newborn daughter.
I don't know her well; we all hold a baby from time to time
and fall in love with something simple, the desire to salt, to pinch. . .
Sing now — the cutting pain sears through her breast—
where is the sturdy crew who rows and rows,
hard set to the oars, through the strange seas
of grief and loss, so she can weep and sleep?

Cynthia Boersma

Little Cottage at the End of the Lane

The nights are endless now.
I've plenty of time to binge watch the British Baking Show
and start another jigsaw puzzle. The old don't sleep as much, you know.
The pictures can always be re-arranged.
My cat sleeps on my lap. From the couch
I see the neighbors' lights turn out, the glows
of screens subside. My house alone lights a dark street.
I keep the shelter here with the cat, eat some ice cream and drink a coke.
And take some comfort in another book on tape about the Holocaust.
Over the years, these books have piled in my memory attic
like hoarded towers of tabloids, crushing themselves,
crumbling and dissolving under their own weight.
My own story? The little mice nesting there. In the deep night,
when I am awake alone, I hear them scurrying about.
I turn up the volume. I let the cat out.

Returning

To have traveled so far, yearning for home, yet not recognize anything:
not its familiar hills or the way the road bends
around the old tree, the bright coffee shop—lights always on—
the overpriced gas station on the corner. Gone too long
and the heavy rain falling. From the taxi,
a strange intersection, a strange left turn.
She doesn't know this route. It's late.
Will the child be up? The husband?
She fingers the bag of gifts clutched tightly in her lap,
chews her lip. The souvenirs selected with such care—
and homesick—seem tawdry and ludicrous here—
selected by strangers for strangers. And this
can't be her house. Unfamiliar paint. No toys in the yard.
Other curtains, closed. The windows are dark. There is no porch light.
The car has stopped at the end of an empty driveway. She pushes
against the heavy door, pulling herself from the cab. Standing there
in the rain, lost, a sob rises. She turns
but the taxi has pulled away,
the crumpled bag left in the back seat,
her luggage in the trunk, the red tail lights
unblinking as they recede; two alien red eyes
dissolving into the hard, steady rain.

Surrey with the Fringe on Top

A black bear has come out of the hills to the highway. He lumbers along the shoulder and throws a great paw out. A gesture, not a plea. I stop and offer him a ride. He crawls front feet first into the cab and sets there, smelling of undergrowth, of the banks of the Neosho River, of the dank cave he once called home, and stares through the windshield.

When I ask him “Where to?”, he only sighs, his breath bright and musky with the berries and bark he last ate. “Tulsa then,” I say, and he swings his head slightly, in agreement or not, I’m unsure.

I nose the F-150 back onto the highway and press the accelerator pedal with the worn sole of my Justin. The way is still long, the turn westward onto the Will Rogers Turnpike through Cherokee Nation, across the roll and pitch of the land, the sparse yellow prairie grass laid like the back of a hand across the miles.

The roads here sweep and ribbon, the ones I usually drive at night. Eighteen-wheelers crush past. The sun climbs higher, pushing through the back window, reflected in the lower right corner of the rearview. The bear nods off.

I don’t think of the reason I drive in this direction, the reason I revisit old places, bad memories. The journey each time is enough. My father’s stare, my mother’s laugh, my brother’s shouts down a long-forgotten hallway.

The bear rests against the passenger door, his breath fogging the window. He’s a young bear and doesn’t take up but two-thirds of the cab. Burrs bristle tawny and gold against his belly. When he wakes, he may tell me of the hunters who chased him, who killed his mate, who made his lair and nearby streambeds and forested hills impossible to return to. And then, he may not.

I think how it is time for breakfast. How a coffee and a plate of eggs might do. How a shot of tequila might help the sun rise higher.

The bear shakes his head, maybe reading me, maybe not. He squints at the signs for the Broken Arrow Expressway. He waves a paw at the neon sign of a dancing bear. “My name. My game.” He turns his gaze to me, and his eyes are sad and bloodshot. The boy’s got a burden, that’s for sure. Don’t we all?

Dancing Bear and I head for the old neighborhood, and the sun shoves us forward, straight into the wrestle of roads, the nodding surprise, the barroom brawl, over the tracks, inside the circle, the clutch, the uncertain embrace of Tulsa. Here once lazed the confusion of low-lying sameness, of homes ragged with chain link and too many cars and toys left out on lawns.

I search out the house, pale green, one-story, where once there was the breakfast of buttered toast, of home fries and bacon. The stiff-mouthed mama, the daddy with dirt under his nails, the brother running late from his morning paper route. The yard of sparse grass, an overturned Tonka jeep, pink and rusted, dirty fringe around its roof. “Surrey with the fringe on top,” my mama called it. “Yard junk. Keep it outside, baby boy.” And I did.

Dancing Bear hums now—“Surrey with the Fringe on Top.” I might think he’s mocking me. I might not. I know he knows the house is no longer there. He’s keeping quiet about that, and I begin to like him even more. Sometimes it’s better just to understand things and not bother about them.

Things like a sky the color of dark laundry, dungarees my mama’d left on the line, like the smell of damp and soil and sorry, like hiding in the kitchen closet with the hot water heater, like my daddy yelling for my brother and my mama calling for me, like the sound of the roof opening up, the roar descending. Like silence.

Like stumbling outside, slowly. The neighbors’ houses flattened, ours still standing, the roof half gone. And in the yard, the toy Tonka in the exact same place, on its side.

We roll up the street, all the houses different now, trees lining the way. My friend drums his paws on the dashboard and chants, “Chicks and ducks and geese better scurry when I take you out in the surrey, when I take you out in the surrey with the fringe on top!” He smiles, wide-toothed, and drums a bit more. The day tips forward, the truck shimmies with Dancing Bear’s moves, and we drive on.

The Laptop

I sat in a coffee shop in the afternoon, working without enthusiasm on my laptop. But the coffee shop was a cool, quiet refuge from the summer heat.

The café was nearly empty, but some teens, two girls and two guys, sat on the other side of the café. They were adorned with tattoos and nose and lip rings, green and purple shades of hair. Now and then they glanced my way. It made my hands move self-consciously on the keyboard. At a closer table to my left, a gray-haired woman, about my own age, sat alone. She had a flinty demeanor, and she frowned at the teens, then glanced at me with a knowing lift of her eyebrows.

The immediate problem now was that I needed to use the restroom, and was it safe to leave my laptop on the table? But it would be awkward to take it with me, and it might seem insulting to the teens. I thought of my own children's admonitions not to be judgmental. They were grown now, but I wouldn't want to disappoint them. Or my wife, for that matter, who had passed away a year before. When I stood, the old lady tilted her head my way and then at the teens and gave another lift of her eyebrows, a silent communication that she would look after my laptop while I was gone.

So I left the laptop on the table and ducked into a short hallway where the restroom was located. After all, maybe they would be doing me a favor by stealing it, to save me from my work. If I'd once had a muse, she was no longer with me.

When I returned, the laptop was missing, as were the teens and the old lady. I bolted out the glass door. The teens walked down the sidewalk, a tight huddle of shoulders. I started after them, then noticed the old lady hustling across the parking lot with my laptop under her arm. She dove into a silver sedan, and I dodged away as she nearly plowed me down.

These days, I sit in the café with a pen and notebook. Perhaps the old lady uses my laptop in a different coffee shop. I like to imagine her finishing the stories I began.

Spilling Your Guts

The six of us sat in a small circle in Ed's living room. It was a neat and tidy room, in a neighborhood of neat and tidy homes. The thing is, I told my group, I don't know if I really want to spill my guts the way the rest of you do. Oh, you need to spill your guts, Rose said, if you're going to be one of us. Well, some of the stuff I've done is pretty bad, I said, I mean maybe criminal. Oh Pete, for Pete's sake! Lila laughed at her joke because my name really *is* Pete. The others laughed too. They had been meeting for months, and I'd only joined the group on a trial basis.

Pete, Lila said, nobody here is going to report you for anything, even if it *is* criminal.

Ed cleared his throat. Well, I don't know about that. If I hear something disturbing, I might have to report it. This is my house, so I have more responsibility.

Oh, don't be an asshole, Ed, Don said. He looked at me. He's kidding.

Well, maybe not. I mean, what if he's a serial killer or something like that? He frowned at me. You're not a serial killer, are you?

I coughed uneasily. I wasn't a serial killer, but I was writing a novel about a serial killer, and now if I shared any of that with them, they would think I really *was* a serial killer.

What brought you to this group, Josie said, leaning forward. She was a therapist and she made me nervous.

I don't know. I guess I wanted to share.

You want to share, but you don't want to spill your guts.

The guy is clearly a sociopath, Ed said.

Shut up, Ed! they all shouted at once. You can be such a jerk, Don said.

I heard a noise from another room, like someone moving dishware in a kitchen, a knife settling on a counter. I sensed a wife perhaps, someone vaguely disapproving of our gathering.

Rose said sweetly, You can spill your guts a little at a time. Until you get to know us better.

Ed fumed, Are we going to just let anybody in? I mean, what are the standards?

For the next hour, they debated the standards, of who belonged and who didn't, and then Don shouted This is an outrage! They all stormed out of the house, leaving Ed and me alone.

A door opened and a very pale woman with startling black hair stared in at us, then closed the door.

Ed swirled his tongue around in his cheek. Okay, what the hell is it you've done?

To satisfy him, I felt obligated to make some bad things up.

He nodded. Okay, then.

Now he started spilling his guts. Awful stuff. Dangerous stuff. The kind of stuff that should be reported. For many years, though, he'd covered up the crimes of the pale woman living in the back of the house.

The Husband

Ruby spied her husband's car three ahead of hers: gray Honda Civic with their neighborhood parking pass on the bumper. Except he didn't have his lights on, and dusk had long since settled. Which was just like him—he was the sort of guy who only noticed the empty gas tank after he was stranded on the side of the road, who would wear two different shoes to work and wonder why his feet felt funny, never bothering to look down. Recently, they'd talked about having a baby, except he'd be the guy who drove to work and forgot the kid in the car. She dialed his number. "Turn your lights on."

"They are," he said. "Are you behind me?"

"A few cars back. They aren't. When you lift your foot off the brake, your car disappears. It's not safe."

A pause. "What about now?"

"Still out."

"Shit."

"Be careful. We'll check them when we get home."

She hung up, and traffic started to move. It really was scary—his car disappeared in the darkness. If there weren't so much traffic, he'd be a blackhole on the road.

One by one, cars peeled off until she was directly behind him. She rode his ass, didn't want someone to slide in between them. He moved into the turn lane, flipped on his blinker. Something was wrong. Had to be. Their own turnoff was another mile ahead. Ruby followed.

The turn took them from bumper-to-bumper traffic to full-on suburbia: oaks arching into a canopy over the road, houses with giant porches and huge front lawns, streetlights shining on a man jogging down the sidewalk behind a kid on a scooter. So close to their own neighborhood but they were in a different world. Their house had no porch, their road had no sidewalk, their trees created no canopy. A second before he turned into the driveway with the biggest porch and grandest oak, Ruby realized that the gray Honda was actually black, that the sticker was not for their neighborhood.

He was not her husband.

Still, she pulled in behind him.

When he emerged from his car, she saw that he looked remarkably like her husband: same broad build, same hair shorn almost to his skull. Ruby swore her husband even had the same shirt.

Except his build was more muscle, less fat.

And his hair was shorn by choice, not because of baldness.

Even the colors on his shirt were brighter.

He turned toward her car, lifted one hand in a wave.

Ruby grabbed her bag, stepped out. "Hey, honey."

He smiled, walked toward her. He spread his arms, wrapped them around her. Even his cologne was better, sharper and more fragrant.

Ruby nestled against his chest and felt herself grow taller, her shoulders straighter. She closed her eyes, pressed her face into the space between his shoulder and neck, so very glad to be home.

The Ghost of the South

trans. Emily Hunsberger

They say that the halls of the palatial Opryland Hotel in Nashville, Tennessee are haunted by the ghost of a woman known as the Lady in Black. Those who have seen her maintain that this bone-chilling apparition dons a gauzy black dress that is a perfect specimen of Southern Gothic style. The hotel staff assures guests that the ghost is not to be feared, as she is content to simply observe the droves of tourists that flock to the hotel's opulent fountains and gardens.

Farther below on the same continent (or on a different one, depending on the country where you learned geography) stories are whispered about a similar specter, with the exception that this ghost doesn't settle for merely observing the living. She has a much more traditional approach to her occupation, and in her prime she took great pleasure in terrorizing the streets of Guayaquil. She is none other than the Dama Tapada, a lady ghost who began to haunt Ecuador's largest city around the year 1700.

Nearly every version of the legend of the Dama Tapada describes her as a slender woman (in the case of tormented female spirits, their figures are always slender) wearing a dark veil that covers her face. They say that the Dama would begin her ghoulish labors at the stroke of midnight, setting out to seduce and entrap unsuspecting gentlemen leaving the city's taverns. At that hour, the gaslight lamps would cast a sinister glow onto the cobblestone streets: the perfect light for a man-hunt.

The poor fellows lacked any self-control when faced with the seductive guile of a beautiful woman, and they would follow her down dark passageways and back alleys, as if in a trance. Once she had cornered her prey, the Dama Tapada would slowly lift the veil to reveal her face: a splendidly putrescent skull.

As with any good ghost story, the men either dropped dead from a heart attack after that dreadful encounter, or they were left traumatized for years (but not without the consolation prize of a hair-raising anecdote to frighten and impress their grandchildren). Just imagine for a moment the panic that ensued as word spread about these hauntings: "Beware, gentlemen; this is what could happen to you if you don't go straight home after work."

Yet it seems that the Dama Tapada grew tired of the streets of Guayaquil and suddenly she was no longer seen in the port city. Sightings were reported sporadically in the rest of Ecuador and neighboring countries, but after a time, poof! Clearly a soul in torment that found

such pleasure in the land of the living wouldn't decide to just vanish at the drop of a hat—it makes no sense. On the contrary, the explanation is rather simple: like so many of us, the restless Dama decided to go North.

After Felipe V decided to make El Callao the main port of the Spanish colonies in America, Guayaquil started to lose that glow that had been so enticing to the Dama Tapada. The 1742 outbreak of yellow fever that wiped out half of the population must have been the final straw. What fun was there in haunting deserted streets? Goodbye, Pearl of the Pacific! It's easy to imagine the Dama exploring, over the decades, the streets of Florida, Alabama, and Georgia (all of which we know are chock full of ghosts) until finally ending up in the capital of Tennessee. Buoyed by its status as a port city – and an important railroad hub as well – Nashville started to grow significantly beginning in 1779, and it did not go unnoticed by our spectral traveler.

Nor did one of the city's most attractive features: the Cumberland River running right through the middle of downtown. Let us not forget that the Dama carried the Río Guayas in her unbeating heart.

The star of the vibrant Southern capital continued to rise over the centuries (remember that ghosts don't experience time the way we do), until the Dama Tapada fell under its spell.

And there she stayed.

The city streets are filled with people and the sound of music at every turn, with just the right amount of clamor and chaos, unlike the great metropolises of Latin America and the United States where even the ghosts find themselves crammed shoulder to shoulder.

In Nashville, there's room for everyone: Welcome, y'all! Whether living or dead.

You'll be greeted with a shot of whiskey and a disarming melody. The Dama couldn't help but fall in love with country music: simple, infectious songs that tug at your heartstrings, evoking visions of sweet tea, pick-up trucks, and romance among the hay bales.

That being said, not even a phantom is above the rules and regulations of the United States, and the authorities didn't recognize the Dama Tapada's Ecuadorian license to spook inebriated partiers. Over time, they also prohibited her from using her veil (careful, here they suspect people of being terrorists based on head coverings alone) which led her to realize it didn't make sense to translate her name into English as the Veiled Lady. Fortunately, people have been changing their names for centuries here, and, for a ghost, the sky's the limit when it comes to choosing a moniker. You're living the American Dream, after all.

Welcome to the US of A, dear Lady in Black!

And since she wasn't allowed to frighten the locals up close, it occurred to her that her new pastime could be people-watching. She found herself in the perfect location, with the constant flow of people that flock to Music City from every corner of the country and the world.

Perhaps the Opryland Hotel became one the Dama's preferred haunts because of the familiar sounds of babbling water coming from the pools and fountains in the lobby. For this port dweller, it always comes back to the water. Despite finding happiness in her new hometown, she can never forget the *guayaquileña* blood that once coursed through her veins. The nostalgia is enough to lead her, from time to time, to return to the streets she once haunted centuries ago. They look much different now, but they are still bathed in the fragrance and the warmth of the river.

After having a downright good time people-watching at the hotel, the Dama likes to go for a stroll along Riverfront Park and watch the city lights flutter along the surface of the river like iridescent watercolors. When she has a hankering for old fashioned country music, she floats through the walls of the honky-tonks, where she watches the aging couples do the two-step: the dances and the love affairs, both from bygone days.

If she's in the mood for something a little more of the moment, she appears in the bars on Nashville's Broadway. She likes watching the young (and not so young) people get soused and sing along to the latest country hits, covered by bands that dream night after night of making it big.

Outside Legends Corner, an iconic honky-tonk in downtown Nashville, there is a mural where country music's most illustrious stars are sitting round a table in a bar from another dimension. If you're over in that part of town, you'll likely see the Dama Tapada there. She likes to bask in the smiling faces of the mural, sometimes for hours on end, imagining that she can enter that world and join the party. Sit next to Garth Brooks and Johnny Cash, chit chat with Dolly Parton and Loretta Lynn. Regale them with her tales of seduction and past lives. Imbue them with a little of her aura of Guayaquil.

But what she most longs for is to have fingers of flesh once again, if only to dip them in the Cumberland River like the mangroves whose roots reach into the waters of the Río Guayas.

Hear No Evil

trans. Emily Hunsberger

Once upon a time, when rock *en español* was king and the world was neon-colored, there was a prestigious school where boys and girls received an education subject to the strictest Catholic standards. As one might expect of such an esteemed institution, everyone from the rector to the snack bar attendant was, without exception, a fervent Catholic believer, and every possible matter of importance was thoroughly chewed up and processed through their moral digestive system.

One sweltering morning, a group of spiritual leaders arrived at the school, determined to fulfill their mission to warn the student body about the perversion that was slowly and stealthily infiltrating their minds through the imported music and television series that were popular at the time. The rector and vice rector, both former missionaries and ladies of impeccable moral character, gave *carte blanche* to these holy prophets so that their students would be on alert for the newest entry in a long list of dangers that would surely lead them into sin and temptation.

Throughout the day, groups of secondary school students took turns lining up like obedient sheep herded by their teachers and filing into the auditorium, where the anti-sin squad had set up shop. By the time the bell rang for mid-morning recess, the third-year students had found out that their favorite foreign rock and heavy metal bands were fronts for devil worshippers. As they chomped on crackers and took swigs of Coca-Cola, they told everyone within earshot about the satanic messages that were concealed in between the verses of the songs that they had been blasting on their speakers on a daily basis.

At lunch, the fifth-year kids told us second-year kids that when the records were played backwards, you could hear demonic voices saying things that'll send a chill down your spine. "It's about to be your turn, so get ready," they warned us. The proof was in the recordings that the guest speakers had brought in their Magic Bag of Holiness. As they played them for their terrified audience, on the chalkboard they transcribed the unsettling messages that had been hiding in plain sight in some of our favorite songs.

Many of my classmates couldn't disguise the look of terror on their faces. A few burst into tears. But what the fifth-year kids had neglected to prepare us for was the revelation that even a seemingly innocent and immensely popular cartoon was also on the list of secretly satanic entertainment. As we returned, despondent, to our classrooms, we whispered to one another about how sad it was to discover that the cute

blue creatures that lived happily together in their little mushroom village, and whose adventures we had followed every afternoon, were actually evil beings in floppy white hats.

"A world where a woman cohabitates with not one, but several men... it's no surprise that a story like this could only come from the devil," they told us, supporting their argument with the projected image of Smurfette chatting nonchalantly with Brainy and Grouchy. They also told us about a group of children—apparently providing any specifics about when or where would have been superfluous—who had been found dead after telling their parents about frightening experiences they had playing with their Smurf dolls.

That very afternoon, entire record and cassette collections were damned to the purgatory of the municipal dump. Even though the fear dissipated, the music had died, in a way; the pleasure of putting on a record or pressing play on the cassette player was never the same after that. As for me, that night and all the nights that followed for the rest of that school year, I was tortured by nightmares in which evil blue demons formed a circle that slowly, horrifyingly, closed in on me. How they delighted in my terror! Their evil little laughs drowned out the sound of my screams.

I tried burning the comic books that recounted the adventures of the forest-dwelling creatures, thin little volumes that I had previously treasured alongside my favorite books from childhood. But it was no use. Without fail, they would visit me at night, dragging their charred bodies toward me, singing their sweet, sinister melody.

Casa Cuba

trans. by the author

In every city in the world people who share a similar background gravitate toward one another. Chinatown. Spanish Harlem. Little Havana. They open restaurants where they serve hometown favorites, shops that cater to specific ethnic needs, and establish clubs where they can socialize and reminisce. San Juan is no exception. For some of the thousands of Cubans who live there in exile, the common language and similar landscape is not quite enough. Years ago a group of them got together and decided they would open a social club where Cuban exiles in Puerto Rico could get together and talk about all things Cuban. I went to Casa Cuba for the first time when I was thirteen years old. One of my friends from school was having a party there and I was invited. I had heard about the place, but my parents weren't members. I had no idea how much it cost to join, but I knew my parents couldn't afford it. Lazaro García's parents could afford to throw him a party there. His dad was some kind of businessman. I wasn't thinking about any of this that day, though. I was looking forward to seeing all the cool things inside this place that some of my classmates were always talking about. Plus, I knew I would fit in since it was for people who were born in Cuba, like me.

I was so excited the night before I could barely sleep. My mom had taken me to JCPenney and bought me a new shirt. It was long-sleeved and I was a little worried about the heat, but I looked so good in it I just had to have it. My mom dropped me off at the front gate and I showed the uniformed guard my invitation. He told me to go over by the pool. Pool? Lazaro's mom was nice enough. She offered to try and find me a bathing suit, but I told her I'd be fine. As my classmates splashed around, I walked around the club.

It was a lot smaller than I imagined. The whole thing was essentially one two-story building. On the bottom floor, there was a cafeteria offering everything from *ropa vieja* to *croqueta preparada*. There was also a small room that I couldn't see into, but I could hear salsa and merengue playing inside. Upstairs, the older men played dominoes and drank whiskey and *cuba libres*. The grounds consisted of a few umbrellas with chairs, a basketball court, and the pool of course. I wasn't sure what I was expecting, but it was much more than this.

After the pool activities were over, everyone was going to change and the party would continue in the small room. Apparently, it was a disco. I was excited, because now I would get to participate in the party. The room had a polished wooden floor and a large crystal ball hanging from the ceiling. The lights were dimmed and the ball seemed to glow, reflecting silver specks all over the walls. I wasn't much of a dancer, but I could hold my own. When the music started, though, it was a tune I wasn't familiar with. All the other kids were. They all got up on the floor and moved in one large group, doing a kind of coordinated dance they'd obviously practiced many times before.

A few years later, when my parents were a little better off, they became members of Casa Cuba. My mom never quite understood why I never wanted to go there again.

Frijoles/Habichuelas

trans. by the author

We ate rice and beans at my house often. Sometimes, it was the Cuban black beans, *frijoles negros*. Sometimes, the Puerto Rican pink beans, or *habichuelas*. My mom would usually buy the dried ones in a one-pound bag, and from the time I was about twelve or so I'd help her go through the bag and clean them. There were usually a couple of small pebbles within them, and some of the beans had slight imperfections. Those were separated and discarded. We worked in comfortable silence most of the time.

One day though, as we went through a bag of black beans, my mom looked at the ones she held in the palm of her hand and got a weird look on her face. I asked her what she was thinking, and she said she was remembering a time before we left Cuba. Everything was rationed, she said, and after standing in line for hours the Castro government official would dole out what amounted to a handful of black beans for the entire month. Cubans are often stereotyped as embellishers, especially when it comes to memories of the homeland, but my mom wasn't prone to it. At the time I didn't really grasp the enormity of what she was describing, or what she had gone through those days. I just kept going through the beans.

Years later, when I was home from college for the summer, we were going through a bag of beans together, this time Puerto Rican pink ones. They have the same imperfections as the black ones. As we went through them, I remembered her story about the handful of beans. I was older and much more interested in her life before exile, and asked about it often. She enjoyed talking about her youth in Havana before the revolution. About the years after, not so much, but I was curious about that period and the scarcity she had described. "Was that the worst part of living there at the time?" I wondered. "No," she responded. "*Lo peor era que siempre te estaban vigilando.*" The worst thing was always being watched. I had a vague notion of the neighborhood committees in Cuba that were designed to keep order, but very little details, and certainly no first-hand accounts, so I asked her to explain.

She, briefly and somewhat reluctantly, shared one particular event. One evening, she walked to a neighbor's house to see if she had any flour, which like everything else, was hard to find. The neighbor gave her a small scoopful inside a paper bag. On the way home, the head of the neighborhood committee stopped her and demanded to see what was in the bag. That was typical, she said. "*Eso era lo peor.*"

We finished cleaning the rest of the pink beans in a much less comfortable silence.

Eduardo R. Del Rio

Doble Treinta

trans. by the author

We played *doble-treinta* after school,
hiding in dark places
where not even spiders would be found.
We were running kids,
Black, white, and brown.
From *taíno siboney* and *castellan*.
Not afraid of the dark.
Not afraid of the echoes of long-forgotten footsteps
that the nuns with wooden rulers left behind.
Not afraid of the junkies sleeping under newspapers
in the corner of the yard.
Not afraid of the sirens whizzing by
on their way to a *caserío* or a morgue.
Not afraid of stray dogs
wandering hungrily with vacant eyes.
Not afraid of long-forgotten wars
that coursed throughout our veins.

Not afraid of each other's future rage.

Eduardo R. Del Rio

Mango Slide

trans. by the author

God's brushstroke falls on Ponce one day,
And the hillside is covered
in yellow and orange hues.
Our Levi's splattered with pulp,
We hurdle headfirst into laughter.

At the summit once more,
Fatigue vanishes.
Our bodies prone,
We glide downward with our eyes half-closed
And our hearts pounding.

Today we are not "step" brothers
Vying for a father's love.
Just kids sharing a moment in the sun.

The only blood that concerns us is our own.

Elena Salamanca

Monsters Maybe

Fragments from [INCOGNITA FLORA CUSCATLANICA]

trans. Ryan Greene

PARTE I

Unstable valley,
fugitive,
like a fish from the depths
who's emerged into the light
and fears seeing
for the first time.

Trembling valley,
convulsed
like one who's received their draft card,
like one who doesn't want to die.

You take me by the hand
and you let me go:
with your eyes wrapped
playing blind man's bluff
in the labyrinth of History.

I touch:
springy mosses.
They must be green
like the first fire,
austral fire.

Life doesn't come from seed
but from bacteria:
velvet bacteria gathered into a colony
on a rock.
That ancient stone:
asteroid or volcanic vestige.

I taste:
"everything was murmurous and tasted like sugar."
Even if there's no sweet nor bitter:
nor the men
whose backs are burnt in the *zafra*,
or in the cotton fields,
gathering a soft white flower with red spines;
and there aren't the women who rust their hands
amid poisoned tomatoes
or strawberry fields.

I smell:
Chocolate.
Dark stain which was once seed or coin.
Aroma between sheets of paper,
a gift, a poem.
I wrote a book, I don't know.
Nor do I know who killed you.
But I know where it happened:



Flame of asters,
petals which,
fractal,
were geometry
before flower.

Green is the lava,
that color which consumes fire,
the seed which exploded mid-air
burned by the violence.

Bromeliads which won't be
bromeliads.
Tillandsias which floated
against the law of gravity,
airborne flowers,
because the surface didn't exist.

And the spirit of the universe moved over the waters
and it wasn't fish
nor trilobite.

Amaranths with hairs and tentacles.
Flowers which could have had fins
and not petals.
Monsters maybe.



The pollen is here,
between ash and volcanic stone,
marked onto the walls
like an ancient graffiti.

Antonia Pozzi

Quadro

I miei pensieri somigliano stasera
a quest'acqua bambina
che corre a passettini d'argento
dietro tutte le barche.
L'ombra del promontorio,
sul bianco mare,
– bassa nota rauca
in questa sviolinata crepuscolare –
ha il colore abbrunato di un rimorso;
ma, sulla punta,
– nitido come uno squillo battagliero –
l'ansito del faro palpita,
anelando al largo.

S. Margherita, 12 giugno 1929

Translated by Amy Newman

Painting

My thoughts tonight
are like this childish water
running with small silver steps
behind all the boats.
The jetty's shadow
on the white sea,
— low hoarse note
in this dusky sweet talk —
has the dark color of regret;
but, on the point,
— as clear as a warlike blast —
the gasp of the lighthouse
longing for the open sea.

S. Margherita, 12 June 1929

Antonia Pozzi

L'orma del vento

Corre incontro al sereno il folle vento
recando nelle aeree braccia
una tremante attesa di gemme.
Corre l'anima incontro a un ignoto miracolo
recando in tutto l'essere
un'infinita, prodigiosa attesa.
Tornano i passi a strade abbandonate,
per un sole che ride
come in luoghi lontani,
per un'aria che odora
come in perduti giorni.
Torna l'ansia di un tempo
e la certezza
la divina certezza ritorna:
oh, tu ancora mi attendi
in fondo a questa via,
presso il vecchio cancello
mascherato d'edera nera!
ancora, ancora
tu mi prendi le mani
e me le baci
e mi chiami giaggiolo...

Urta il folle vento e si spezza
contro un cumulo greve di nubi.
L'aria sembra morire
senza respiro.

Oh, tu non torni,
tu non puoi tornare!
Ben altra pena,
ben altro sangue
chiama i miracoli!

Cade il folle vento: si perde
dietro le nebbie grigie il sereno.
L'anima sembra morire
senza più sogni.

E il cielo è ormai tutto di perla
e chiama, chiama,
nel vuoto enorme,
un sorriso di stelle.
Presso il vecchio cancello,
contro le croci nere dell'edera,
una fioraia ha deposto i suoi fiori.
Per poche lire mi compro
un mazzo magro di fresie,
e a consolarmi l'anima
basta il pensiero
che il grande ignoto miracolo,
il volto arcano
della mia attesa prodigiosa,
si chiuda in queste bocche protese
che mordono con labbra di viola
qualche pallido filo di sole;
in queste tenui vite
che nella malinconia di una sera
calata sopra un'orma di vento,
fanciullescamente mi dono,
per la mia primavera.

Milano, 27 febbraio 1931

Translated by Amy Newman

Windswept Trail

The lunatic wind runs to meet the clear sky
carrying in its airy arms
a trembling expectation of blossoms.
My soul rushes toward an unknown miracle,
bearing in its whole being
infinite, wondrous anticipation.
Footsteps turn back to abandoned roads,
to a sun that shines brightly
like in faraway places,
to an air that has
the scent of lost days.
The worry of days gone by comes back to me,
and certainty,
divine certainty returns:
oh, you are waiting for me still,
at the end of this street,
by the old gate
masked in black ivy!
Again, again
you take my hands
and kiss them
and call me iris...

The lunatic wind hits a thick pile of clouds
and breaks apart.
The air, breathless
seems to die.

Oh, you won't come back,
you can't come back!
Far more sorrow,
far more blood
calls for miracles!

And the sky is now all pearl
and it calls, it calls,
into the huge emptiness,
for a grin of stars.
By the old gate,
against the black crosses of ivy,

a flower girl set down her flowers.
For a few lire I buy myself
a meager bouquet of freesia,
and it's enough to comfort me, the thought
that the great unknown marvel
the secret face I've been waiting for so monumentally
is held in these ample mouths
that open their violet lips
to bite a pale thread of sunshine;
in these tender vines that,
in the melancholy of an evening,
lowered above a windswept trail,
childishly, I give myself,
for my spring.

Milan, 27 February 1931

Antonia Pozzi

Evasione

La strada porta tra case oscure –
ma in alto
salpo dal braccio candido
del valico, come da un molo –
lascio nella terrena ombra
i faticosi lumi degli uomini,
il loro fioco alone
sulla neve.

Via – negli occhi raccolta
la gioia dura d'essere
creatura in sé conchiusa,
unica nel freddo cielo
invernale –
diritta ai piedi
d'invisibili antenne,
sulla nave che ha vele di nubi
e fari di stelle,
a prora un volto
d'attesa.

11 gennaio 1935

Translated by Amy Newman

Breaking Free

The path leads between dark houses —
but high above
I set off from the white arm
of the snow pass, as from a pier —
I leave in the earthly shadow
men's weary lights,
their dim halo on the snow.
Takeoff — in my eyes, the hard joy
of being a creature, contained
in herself
alone in the cold
winter sky —
straight to the foot
of invisible antennae,
on a ship with sails of clouds
and beacons of stars,
at the prow
a face of expectation.

11 January 1935

Antonia Pozzi

Come albero d'ombra

Dalla cornice di monti e di nubi
esorbita il gesto serale.
E s'erige la notte
ombra mia immensa:
ai ginocchi il gridò dei campanili,
a ignoti mari
protese le mie braccia nere.

26 settembre 1936

Translated by Amy Newman

As a Shade Tree

The evening moves beyond
the frame of the mountains and clouds.
And the night assembles
my immense shadow:
kneeling to the cry of bell towers,
to unknown seas
I extend my dark embrace.

26 September 1936

Antonia Pozzi

Periferia in aprile

Intorno aiole
dove ragazzo t'affannavi al calcio:
ed or fra cocci
s'apron fiori terrosi al secco fiato
dei muri a primavera.
Ma nella voce e nello sguardo
hai acqua,
tu profonda frescura, radicata
oltre le zolle e le stagioni, in quella
che ancor resta alle cime
umida neve:
così correndo in ogni vena
e dici
ancora quella strada remotissima
ed il vento
leggero sopra enormi
baratri azzurri.

24 aprile 1937

Translated by Amy Newman

Suburbs in April

Around the flowerbeds
where as a boy you wore yourself out at soccer:
and now among shards of pottery
earthy flowers open to the dry breath
of the walls in spring.
But in your voice and in your gaze,
there is deep, cooling water,
rooted beyond loam and seasons,
from what is still wet snow
at the mountaintops:
running like this through every vein
and you still speak
of that remote road
and the mild wind
over vast blue chasms.

24 April 1937

Antonia Pozzi

Periferia

Sento l'antico spasimo
– è la terra
che sotto coperte di gelo
solleva le sue braccia nere –
e ho paura
dei tuoi passi fangosi, cara vita,
che mi cammini a fianco, mi conduci
vicino a vecchi dai lunghi mantelli,
a ragazzi
veloci in groppa a opache biciclette,
a donne,
che nello scialle si premono i seni –

E già sentiamo
a bordo di betulle spaesate
il fumo dei comignoli morire
roseo sui pantani.

Nel tramonto le fabbriche incendiate
ululano per il cupo avvio dei treni...

Ma pezzo muto di carne io ti seguo
e ho paura –
pezzo di carne che la primavera
percorre con ridenti dolori.

21 gennaio 1938

Translated by Amy Newman

Suburbs

I feel that ancient pang
— it's the earth
that under blankets of frost
lifts its black arms —
and I'm afraid
of your muddy steps, dear life,
you walk beside me, you lead me
near old men in long cloaks,
to fast boys
riding dull bicycles,
to women
who wrap themselves in shawls —

And already we sense
at the edge of the lost birches
the smoke from the chimneys die
pink over the marshes.

At sunset burned factories howl
for the dark start of the trains...

But mute piece of flesh, I follow you
and I'm afraid —
bit of flesh that the spring
runs through with painful laughter.

21 January 1938

Sappho

Fragments

trans. Dan Beachy-Quick

a door of carved wood

□

a robe
also
saffron
a purple robe
to cloak
garlands
beauty
Phrygian
purple

□

...my mother, she gave birth to me,

once said, deep in the gift of her life,
that curls bound into braids by purple thread
are an adornment great as the cosmic orders,

and this remains very true—
but for the girl with hair so golden
that fire twines curiously through it,

crowns of woven flowers
freshly bloomed and blooming yet
are best to wear, headbands tight fit,

rich embroidery from Sardis...
...cities...

□

she calls out for her child

□

remember
for in our youth
we did these things

many things and lovely,
the city,
and us, sharp as spears

□

but I am not one of spiteful
nature—I have a gentle, silent heart...

□

of you my lovely ones my thoughts can be thought
by no one else

□

it cannot be
humans working together to get

what can't be guessed at

□

As the sweet-apple reddens on the high branch,
high on the highest branch, that the apple-pickers forgot—
no, they didn't forget; that apple they could not reach.

Miriam Calleja

***Not the honey nor the honey-bee are mine,* an interview with Dan Beachy-Quick**

As a translator, poet, a Mediterranean-born woman, reading Sappho in translation is something I take somewhat personally. I was very excited to learn that Dan Beachy-Quick will be publishing —Wind—Mountain—Oak— | Sappho: The Surviving Fragments | Complete and New Translated with Tupelo Press. On my second read, somewhere around page 30, I read “...and longingly I long and searchingly I search...” and knew that I had questions for this translator and poet.

MC: In translating Sappho, what do you feel was your most significant barrier?

DBQ: Maybe it's hard to pick which one is most significant, as each felt significant enough in its own way. At the cellular level, she's writing in a dialect that required a lot of thinking through and around the dictionary to find the proper path. At some personal level, finding a way to get over my own deep difference—my maleness, the immediate ease of my heterosexuality. Then there is the more metaphysical of time itself. How translate a poem so we feel the millennia and also don't feel them at all? How create that lyric present tense that keeps the erotic pulse on such lovely delay it quickens our own nerves? To honor time's distance while also betraying it entirely—that felt to me a curious problem. It also feels to me lyric's dearest problem—& so the work of translation initiated me deeper into the art I practice as a poet myself.

MC: Was there something you had to keep in mind that you found particularly helpful during this process?

DBQ: What I tried hardest to keep in mind was simpler than I could have guessed at—that the poems point back at an actual life, a human of remarkable beauty and complexity, both wise and impulsive, loving and pitiless, self-scathing and self-inflating, an epitome of us all, and yet utterly, almost incomprehensibly, singular. To translate, and arrange the poems as a whole book, that give us a portrait of the life—& yet capacious enough that we sometimes mistake our own face for the face in the portrait.

MC: If you could have the complete text of any of the fragments, which one would you choose, and why?

DBQ: In an odd way I thought of all the fragments as one whole poem. But one that lingers in me in all the mystery of its partiality is:

to you I give
a goat pure white

There's something unexpected and pure in the fragment, the nature of such a gift. It evokes the sacrificial nature of Greek religion, though to what ceremony or what rite, we can only guess. A burnt offering to the Olympian gods, meant to call forth the beneficence of those powers as we ourselves join in the feast. Or is it a sacrifice of another sort, an older one? A sacrifice of aversion, meant to keep at bay forces we fear? Or is it simply a gift of a white goat, creature associated with lust, with endless appetite? Then there is the word itself in ancient Greek—τράγος—from which the word “tragedy” comes, the goat-song tragedy is, named after the gift given the victor of the play-writing contest. & so one might find, hidden in such a quiet, lovely fragment, love's own possible tragedy—what is to want, to beseech, to offer, & wait in the blankness for an answer.

MC: Do you recall a particular error that led you to discovery and deeper understanding?

DBQ: I sometimes get carried away with homonyms, certain suggestions the ear offers when it overrides the mind's discretion. One of the old words for song is ἀοιδή (aoide). The word for shame is αἰδώς (aidos). The word for always is ἀεί (a-ey). It's spurious, of course (but any reading of Socrates/Plato reveals how often spurious etymologies, often based on sound, undergird philosophic conjecture) but I've carried deep in my heart a thought about song, shame, and eternity. It feels connected to Sappho in ways I can't quite understand. That the song is meant for one person's ears and accidentally becomes eternal—& there's a strange shame in that. Or the shame is the song wants an eternity that doesn't belong to it. I don't know which is true. Maybe both; maybe neither. But it's a thought I carry with me every day through all the days as I teach poems and try to write them myself.

MC: What is exciting you in the world of translation right now?

DBQ: I fear I'm pretty provincial, and have little sense of the world in any of the ways I practice poetry. I mostly read out of love and bewilderment—to love more and be more bewildered. I will say I love Alice Oswald's *Memorial*, an “excavation” of the *Iliad*. It brought me to tears when I first read it. It's a lesson on how faithful and unfaithfulness can be. She translates only the epic similes, repeating them twice, and then the names of those who have died in battle. The first reminds us that language is always trying to say something that is in the and unsayable. We feel the tragedy of the figurative, that must misname in order to name most true. And then we read these names, most of which none of us knows, & how a single proper noun repeated is a little stay against eternity's anonymity. The very situation each of us is in now. Saying our names to each other as if trying to memorize them, knowing one day we'll forget, or be forgotten.

Don't tell anyone about Ziyad

trans. Thoraya El-Rayyes

“Don’t tell anyone” says the barber’s young apprentice to the shopkeepers when they get together for coffee after work, “I’m the real director behind Avatar, it took me twenty years of sweat and blood to finish it. James Cameron doesn’t know a thing, he can’t even add two and two together. I just put his name on it so no one would know it was me.”

When smiles of dubious intention appear on the men’s faces, Ziyad explodes: “You don’t believe me, eh? You see all the satellite dishes on these rooftops? They’ve been installed here to watch me, to track my movements. Take that! Take that!” He gives the finger to the dishes.

“Take that! They want to assassinate me, to liquidate me. They would have gotten to me by now if I wasn’t like a son to Angela Merkel. I live this ordinary life to avoid attention, so that no one suspects me. They got to me once and fired, but the bullet slammed against my chest, ricocheted and killed the gunman. Nice try! Nice try!”

Then he makes a victory sign at the satellite dishes.

Ziyad stays angry, agitated, until one of them says: “Ziyad, enough bullshit. Get up and see to your work, your life. Save up good deeds for your afterlife.”

The apprentice goes quiet. A sneer spreads across his lips and he responds with contempt, “What life and what afterlife, you moron? God passed judgment on us long ago.”

Hisham Bustani

Locked from the Outside

trans. Thoraya El-Rayyes

Four walls and a door, that is my kingdom. This kingdom I slip out of into other people's lives.

Beyond my door, waterfalls crash down – waterfalls of thoughts, colours, odors, emotions.

I am lonely. I am unformed, like air.

Maybe I am those rays shining into the sea of people. Those rays that electrified me when we once touched, that I became addicted to: surges of sunlight after ages of grey misery. I started to ask for it every day, every hour. I started to become condensed within it, to crystallize, then to grind myself and store me on the shelves: love, hate, envy, resentment, passion – neatly arranged on the shelves. I stand and watch myself coming out of other bodies, out of their suns. And I am like the moon: dark and cold. They do not see me and I do not see myself unless their rays reflect upon me.

I am lonely.

Jean Baptiste was lonely too, and cursed. I know him well. Maybe he could have been my friend, if our paths had crossed. But I was not born under a fish stall atop the putrid corpses of the hospital dead in Paris. I was not born out of the womb of a living being. I have been here for eons. As long as the depth of my loneliness, reflecting off these walls.

The curse of Jean Baptiste only existed in eighteenth century Paris, where everything drowned in a sea of odors. Such a generation would not be born again. His curse was easier: a material one. Odors can be condensed into an essence, carried in a case, inhaled to retrieve a memory or create one.

Paris.

Amman.

Calcutta.

Dakar.

I am every city, every era. My curse is everlasting. My curse will not end as long as they pace the streets and the rooms – colliding with each other, sending those faded sparks flying – the sparks nobody sees but me.

How do I condense a cry of joy? How do I condense a look of seduction? How do I grab hold of what a kiss does inside the mind, and not the kiss itself? Loneliness teaches many things and I have been here for many an age, but nobody – nobody sees me.

When I consume all the emotions I have turned into liquid or soft grains of dirt, I am overcome by an intense cramp that does not appear on my expressionless face. I no longer know where the lies begin and the truth ends. They have become skilled at manufacturing them, arranging them, storing them and using them, just as I am – but without special crucibles and a mill and shelves for storage. They have outshone my virtuosity: not one person sees me, and they collide with each other every day.

Their canned feelings have outshone my ground-up misery and my coloured, liquid shortcomings.

There is but one door that opens onto your coloured world, and my drab walls extend into infinity.

Take the key. Your secret no longer concerns me.

Your coloured lives are nothing but cramp-inducing dyes. They turn my stomach, just as you turn inside it, like soiled clothes in a washing machine. Water, soap and bleaching agents then out you come, just how you entered: spinning.

In that vortex you dragged me into, I saw everything. I thought I was omniscient, but it is now that I am all-knowing. Nothing rises above the condensation of knowledge. Nothing is more magnificent than the rays of revelation. Truly, they endure. They do not require but one container: my head.

* * *

He locked his door that opens onto the other world and slid the key through to the other side from under it.

The containers he thought would colour him like those who live beyond the door, he stacked atop each other – a thick barrier between him and them.

All at once, the elixir of truth condensed in his head and the walls opened before him: a vast field of white he would walk in, forever.

Notes

This story was written in dialogue with Abeer Dajani's short film, *Anonymous* (2011). Jean-Baptiste Grenouille is the protagonist of the novel *Perfume* by Patrick Suskind.

Mary Grimm

Temporal Instability

The weather is fine, she said, but it wasn't.

If you go, don't come back is what she remembered him saying, although maybe he hadn't said exactly that.

When she was young she had dreamed many nights about flying, which was a little like swimming but really not.

Her mother once left her outside on the driveway for what seemed to her a long time, but her mother assured her years later that it had only been a few minutes.

As they say, the universe is dark and empty, with points of light and areas of instability.

The view from her window can be seen as a painting, mostly green and blue.

Once she had seen a dead person, a man, but it wasn't someone she knew.

You don't look your age, someone said to her, but it was almost certainly a lie.

On summer evenings, the air was heavy and humid, the arcing drops of sprinklers falling through it.

Come as you are, he said, although it was a joke.

When she was young, her favorite color was blue, but she changed it to green later on to avoid being usual.

Chaos seems fun, but it's usually not.

If you say that again, I'll hate you forever, someone said, but she did say it again.

One of the things she learned as a child was that flowers die, also insects, birds, and her grandmother.

Sometimes in summer the air was still, and the trees unmoving.

Once, her friend persuaded her to go on a double date, which she thought would be fun.

It's fine if you don't know where you're going because no one does.

Go to sleep now, her mother had said every night, but she held on until she couldn't anymore.

A man she sat next to on a bus once told her that she looked like a movie star who was popular then but is now remembered by no one.

Kate Greenstreet

from Now that things are changing

What if part of you stayed here? In town. On Earth. Your old room.

Francine, but her real name is Kim. I don't know, she has four or five names.

I keep seeing the town. Not the town, exactly. The street. A building. A man sits on a ledge while a long orange arm lifts various supplies to the roof. Seagulls fly below him as he waits.

Maybe there are certain location points or certain moments in history we're connected to—that a person could be connected to—for some reason we don't understand.

We used to call it the hired killer: seeing people from a distance. I'm watching a kid right now, walking down the river path in the snow, texting.

Like I said, just keep heading down.

Blue Juice

These days, I spend a lot of time alone. Men do not come calling for various reasons, the most profound of which is my inability to remind them favorably of their own ambitions. I'm not anyone's mother, but I did kill my uncle. No one knows I did it. Were my secret to enter the public domain, cheap talk show hosts would call me "The Oklahoma Vixen" or "Wild West Murderess." To become human in the current age is to embrace a very particular and fairly narrow set of clichés, and for women, this means professing the virtues of hearth and home. My story, too, is a domestic one, though the most memorable parts took place outdoors. I'll explain.

My uncle ran an outdoor dinner theatre in Market Town, Oklahoma. Market Town was small, maybe about 40,000. Small, but growing, that's what the locals claimed, mostly because the city council went to great lengths to fabricate a much larger population for the sake of the upcoming Census. The campaign known as Count Market Town urged men to impregnate women—common enough already—retirees to choose Oklahoma over Florida—a stretch—and the Market Town Public Theatre, a family business, but the only thing approaching "culture" in a fifty-mile radius, to start calling itself The City Town Players. And so we did.

"We'll have to change the letterhead," Coy said one night over post-show drinks in Market Town's only bar.

I poured him another beer from the pitcher I'd ordered to celebrate not opening night and not closing night either, but a Sunday night in the middle of the run, a night on which we'd managed to get through another show with only twelve people in the audience. It was a grim time, full of doubt and uncertainty. "*City Town Players* would look nice on a T-shirt," I said. "If people wore them."

"Go ahead and change it," he said. "Maybe it'll give us a boost."

For many years, The City Town Players ran plays in repertory, *Hamlet* and *Romeo and Juliet* in the wintertime, and every summer, Chekhov's *Three Sisters* along with a play for children called *Cindy Reilly*. All of this took place in my back yard, more properly the back yard of my uncle and aunt. Shakespeare in the Park, I guess you might have called it, though the "park" boasted only a single raised, wooden platform, five sets of metal bleachers, a concession stand made from card tables connected to form a countertop by means of an elaborate system of duct tape and yardsticks, a plastic bucket full of rapidly melting ice, a mountain of red dirt, and exactly one tree. It was nothing to write home about, but the seats were cheap, and people did sometimes line up for hours to see the shows. Uncle Coy, in spite of all his faults, knew how to predict what people would pay for, and indeed they never seemed to tire of the same plays over and over again. Some of the acting was good, if I do say so myself. We had a lot of practice. I played Lady Montague in *Romeo and Juliet*—a part that was really too old for me, but I'd become accustomed to such slights—The Player Queen in *Hamlet*, Mrs. Cockroach (who was really a puppet) in *Cindy Reilly*, and Olga, the oldest sister in *Three Sisters*.

“The City Town Players are winners,” Coy said on the way home from the bar. We were too drunk to drive and so had left the car in the bar’s dim and dangerous parking lot and set out to explore Market Town on foot.

“Face it,” I said. “Only twelve people in tonight’s house. We’re losers.”

“The people staying home to watch football,” Coy said, taking my arm as we crossed the empty street. “*They* are the losers.”

My uncle’s full name was Alan McCoy. Uncle Coy, I called him, since I’d learned to talk, left behind, as I was, in the proverbial breadbasket on his porch. My mother was Coy’s kid sister, pregnant too soon, sent off to college in the East without ever once holding me in her arms. When I was six, my uncle broke the news to me that she’d died in a dramatic accident in Connecticut. The house in which she died belonged to a wealthy stain-master carpeting magnate; his wife was out of town on business, and my mother, it was said, brought her dog and a suitcase over to his house for the long Memorial Day weekend.

A man, usually one with power or prestige, sometimes will die in a car accident with “a woman who was not his wife” in the passenger seat beside him. That was my mother—the woman without a name. Only in this case, the cause of death was a house fire and not a car accident, and the arsonist, the police report would say later, was the wealthy man himself, who, by virtue of quick wits and an even quicker sports car, escaped the fire unharmed.

That was the way with my life. So many of the most important events seemed to happen offstage, but maybe I felt that way only because Oklahoma seemed forever and always off the beaten path, a geographical footnote, the place where white men sent indigenous people to die. Nothing ever happened there, nothing good, at least, not unless you counted my engagement, which, I suppose, I did for a while.

His name was Christopher, and I considered it a minor miracle he was interested in me at all. Uncle Coy said he came from money, as much as anyone came from money in Oklahoma. Christopher’s father was an oilman, his mother, an oilman’s secretary. He was sweet and funny, in a choirboy kind of way. He had a farmer’s build, perpetually-sunburned face, and a small, but noticeable gap between his two front teeth. And he was an actor, a “leading man,” though he might have been better-suited to play Horatio to a more handsome *Hamlet*. In our production, he played Elsinore Attendant #2, an invented role without lines. In *Romeo and Juliet*, he played Benvolio. My uncle generously awarded him the role of Fedotik, the photographer in *Three Sisters*, but by far his largest role was “The Rock Star Formerly Known as the Prince” in the children’s show, a modern-day Cinderella, the ever-hip *Cindy Reilly*.

Christopher was not the kind of person to encourage a woman to kill her own uncle, but he broke character for the occasion of my uncle getting cancer and wanting to die. I’m making it sound funny, but it was not. For many years, I did not speak of it.

We were in rehearsals for *Romeo and Juliet*. The minor characters, having very little to do, spent most of their time playing cards in the green room, an old gardening shed a few steps away from Uncle Coy's kitchen, also the box office, costume shop, and laundry room. I'd been depressed, enervated, most days unable to dress before noon. Still, I made it to rehearsal every day at one, just in time to fill in for the Assistant Stage Manager, who took her lunch breaks late. Uncle Coy was the artistic director, but he was also Lord Capulet, fight choreographer, properties master, makeup designer, sound engineer, groundskeeper, lemonade maker, parking lot attendant, and guy in charge of wigs. The wigmaster, he called himself, which meant he was good with a bottle of Aqua-net and had watched a particular not-very-funny episode of *Seinfeld* about a hundred times in a row.

He was brushing out Juliet's curly locks on the morning he decided he wanted to die. Christopher, still in costume as Benvolio, was playing Spades with Tybalt, Friar Lawrence, and Paris. I was supposed to be running lines with Romeo, cast for his good looks and not his actual acting ability. Christopher was robbed, not only because he could have been Romeo but also because he would have made a very fine Mercutio had Uncle Coy not been worried that casting him in such an important role would look too much like nepotism and cause a revolt among the other members of the cast. Still, we'd all settled into our various lanes, compliant and complacent in fiction as we were in life. I would not have said we'd "bonded" because I did not believe in such sentimental tropes, but there was a lot of good will floating around, and people were friendly with one another, telling inside jokes that hardened into conventional wisdom, buying beers and taking bets, never shying away from the secret knowledge that we, as an *ensemble*, were lucky enough to get paid for making something almost resembling art. In spite of my ongoing personal malaise, I felt a certain sense of belonging to this particular troupe, this group of ragtag ruffians meant for the stage. That was my youth, after all, and these days, I am, on occasion, sorry it's gone.

So Uncle Coy was taking care of the wigs, brushing and combing with the force of someone determined to rid the world of dandruff, the fellows were playing cards, and I was staring out the window, waiting for Romeo's arrival. Wherefore art thou? He was nowhere to be seen.

"I went to the goddamned doctor," Uncle Coy said, combing Juliet's synthetic hair with greater force than necessary. "Doesn't look good."

He'd been complaining for months of difficulty swallowing; so far the local quack had told him only to drink more water, but I knew he'd been to a specialist in Oklahoma City. "They stuck me in a machine," he said. "It's curtains for sure."

The card game came to an abrupt end. Tybalt and the gang knew to step out for cigarettes, and Christopher gathered up the playing cards and put them in a pile. In spite of my being Uncle Coy's actual blood relative, Christopher had always been his favorite. The two of them had the whole bromance thing going on, even back then.

"They have all kinds of drugs these days," Christopher said. "Surgery."

“Doctor said it’s too late for surgery,” Coy said. “But I’ll take the pills and chemo and all that shit. Guess I don’t have any choice.”

I knew these occasions called for sympathetic handholding and hugs, but I was at a loss. I’d never been good at demonstrating the feminine virtues, and Coy didn’t especially like to be touched. I left it to Christopher to think of the right thing to say.

“You can probably work through the worst of it,” Christopher said. “But you’ll need an understudy for Hamlet.”

Coy threw his comb into a jar of blue liquid. Technically it was called Barbicide, but Coy always called it Blue Juice. “Old Hamlet is already dead when the play starts, so it seems like it’ll work out fine, regardless. One of you kids needs to buy the wigmaster here another bottle of Blue Juice.”

“What does Eileen think?” Eileen was not exactly my aunt, since she’d been married to Coy for only the last six or eight years. His first had wife dropped the theatre stuff and become an executive vice president at a pharmaceutical company. She’d remarried—to a woman—and moved away a while back, but they’d all remained friends, if not the kinds of friends who actually enjoyed one another’s company.

What did I expect? Some Lifetime channel movie scene in which I called the cancer a plague and phoned friends to sign up to make casseroles and bring them over for Coy and Eileen? I’d been around sick people before, but never in my own household. I knew Coy would take it like a champ, and Christopher would be more than willing to help them out with whatever needed doing at home or at the theatre, but I wasn’t sure how I was supposed to act, and though I wanted badly to let him know I loved him, I didn’t know what set of mannerisms to employ so as to demonstrate both sympathy and sunny optimism. I thought of all those platitudes you heard people say, “you can beat this,” and “fuck cancer” and so on, but none of them seemed appropriate. “I’ll buy you some extra Dr. Peppers,” I finally said. “And we can get a mini-fridge for your bedroom.”

“Forget it,” Coy said. “Those things always grow mold.”

“They’ve improved the technology,” Christopher said. “They’re much better these days.”

“You see?” I said, knowing he would believe whatever Christopher said about a range of topics, especially anything to do with consumer goods. “We’ll get you all set up.”

“Who needs it?” Coy said. “I’d rather call the whole thing off.”

“No Dr. Pepper then,” I said. “Sprite and water. Clear liquids only.”

“I mean the treatment,” he said. “Needles and poison and pills. They act like you have to do it, but who in the hell wants to spend all that money on the medical industrial complex? I’d rather go to the library to check out all the books I’ve been meaning to read, buy a bunch of beers, set myself up with some legal medical marijuana and one of those big, tin buckets of different flavors of popcorn, and wait it out. Maybe I can listen to Beethoven or something. I’ve always wanted to do that.”

“Who would run the theatre?” I said. “Don’t you want to be up and around?”

“Doesn’t matter,” he said. “I’ll be dead.”

And so he began to make his plans. One day, when the United States Census worker came to the house to ask how many people were living there, Uncle Coy answered the door and said, “You can count.”

He pointed to my chest. “One,” he said. “And her husband is out buying Blue Juice for the wigmaster. So that makes two.”

Eileen, who was sitting cross-legged on the sofa and fiddling with the remote, looked up at Coy. “That’s my wife over there,” he said. “That makes three. And you can count *me* if you want to, but I’m about to expire.”

The Census worker, an older woman who looked to me like she must have been a retired schoolteacher or librarian, stepped down from the porch. “You look fine, sir,” she said. “Pleased to meet you.”

“I do not look fine,” he said. “Don’t talk about how I look.”

“That’s four people,” I said to the Census worker. “All married. Thanks for stopping by.”

“Now the government wants to know if people are married or not,” Coy said. “What if *I* were married to the *man* of the house? And the women were married to one another? What then, Gestapo?”

“We ask only for marital status,” the Census Worker said. “Single, Married, Civil Union, or Domestic Partnership.”

“This is no ordinary household,” Coy said. “We make art.”

“I’ve seen *Hamlet*,” the Census Worker said. “Seven times.”

“You know what I’m talking about, then,” Coy said. “Tell the government about that.”

“I’ll just leave you a pamphlet,” she said before retreating to the safety of her car. After she was gone, Eileen cleared the dishes from the coffee table and threw them in the sink, something she did only when arguments had entered the cooling-off phase. Coy needed to tone it down, she said, not everyone could handle his sense of humor. Coy shook his head and limped back to the bedroom, where he’d been blaring Beethoven and reading *The Encyclopedia Britannica*. Sometimes, he stepped out to read passages aloud into the echoes of the hallway.

Two things happened that winter while Coy was sick: my origin story turned out to be a lie, and Christopher decided he’d always been gay. Actually, now that I think about it, *three* things happened that summer because I, too, decided to go gay. Unlike Christopher, however, I made my transformation privately and without fanfare.

But the truth about my mother was difficult to digest. Once again, the City Town Players had returned to Market Town’s only bar; Coy, Christopher and I were huddled in a booth in the back. Everyone was feeling festive from having received a standing ovation. The death of Hamlet had moved all the Okies to tears.

“Your mother didn’t want you,” Coy said. Someone had ordered him a hot dog with extra mustard, but he hadn’t touched it. “And it wasn’t because you’re gay.”

“How would she even have known I was gay?” I said. “I was an infant.”

“People decide early these days,” he said. “You know: *gender reveal*.”

“You’re thinking of something else,” I said.

“It doesn’t matter,” he said. “But I figured I needed to tell you the truth about your mother before—you know—shuffling off this mortal coil.”

I ordered another drink. The bartender, though she was actually off that night, was my new girlfriend—we’d been to Tulsa to see a double feature the night before. Christopher didn’t mind, and in part because his own love life was in the toilet, he and I were still married. It would be another several years before we finally divorced and he moved to Vermont. He’d always wanted to live in Vermont.

Coy pushed his plate toward the center of the table. “Send this back,” he said. “I’m not hungry, and I hate hot dogs.”

“What about my mother?” I said. “How do you know she didn’t want me? Did she tell you that?”

He looked at Christopher and then at me. His breathing was labored and raspy, but then it always had been that way, even before the diagnosis. “It was nothing personal,” he said. “She just wasn’t ready.”

“It’s fine,” I said. “I mean, I figured it was something like that.”

“She couldn’t go to college and have you at the same time.”

“Sure.”

“So she left you with us.”

I asked him about the story of the rich man who set his own house on fire while my mother was sleeping on the sofa inside. My whole life, I’d believed she’d been murdered by someone not unlike Donald Trump, and the knowledge had given me something like a chip on my shoulder, but also a sense of justice.

“I made that up,” Coy said. “Saw something like it on television.”

“Why?”

“I’m a storyteller,” he said. “That’s what I do.”

I understood, or, at least, I thought I did. I’d believed my origin story because he’d told it so well. And it was hard to hate someone I’d never even met. “She’s dead, though, right?” I said. “How did she die?”

“Cancer,” he said. “Shortly after you were born.”

“But you never thought to tell me the truth.”

“Seemed too boring,” he said. “Before.”

“What kind of cancer?” Christopher said. “These things matter.”

“The kind that kills you,” Coy said. “Not sure where it started.”

He looked down. I watched as he stared at the blisters on his open palms. With one hand he made a fist, and then released it. Had he not been saved by the theatre, he would have been a farmer or a drifter, a man of very little means. Spending his life on stage had sharpened his edges, given him sloppy sophistication and a strange, lumbering grace.

Christopher paid the bill, and we realized once we again we were too drunk to drive home. I pulled Christopher aside and said to him quietly that Coy wasn’t up to the long walk and we’d have to call for a car.

“I can hear you,” Coy said. “And I can walk just fine. Might need to stop to get my balance every now and then.”

“Getting his balance” turned out to mean leaning heavily on both Christopher and me for support, and when his weight became too much for me to bear, I insisted we stop to catch our collective breath. I pointed to a park bench next to a closed convenience store. “We could play the lottery,” Coy said. “If that place is open.”

After Christopher and I hauled him to the edge of the bench and forced him to sit, he patted his pockets as if to search for an errant pack of cigarettes. He hadn’t smoked in decades, so I thought he might have been looking for his wallet or a pair of gloves. Instead, he pulled out a small flask, its contents covered by the purple velvet of a Crown Royal bag. He’d always been a big drinker, but I hadn’t realized he’d starting keeping a personal stash. When I saw the flask was full of blue juice and he was planning not just a little nip but as many gulps as it would take to empty the flask, I thought—perversely—of what might happen when the Census worker came back to the house. *Count Market Town*, I’d have to say. *We’re down one.*

“You can’t drink that,” I said. “We should get you home.”

“No worries,” he said. “It’s blue juice all right, but this ain’t no Barbicide. This here is Grade A CannaBlast, manufactured right here in Oklahoma. Liquid THC—and some high fructose corn syrup mixed in there, too, for good measure.”

“Are you sure?” I said. “You wouldn’t want to make a mistake like that.”

“Positive,” he said. He took several swigs before passing the flask to Christopher, who seemed to have plenty of his own experience with CannaBlast and so took a drink without hesitation. “Try some,” they said in unison, and so I did.

They were right; it was delicious. I entertained the fear that this great, new treat eventually would mean one of us would end up drinking Barbicide by mistake, but didn’t say so.

“We have good times,” I said, and meant it. We did indeed have good times.

Later, after Coy had stopped eating all but Ensure shakes, soft-serve from McDonald’s, and the occasional nip of CannaBlast, I would think about that night out in the darkness of post-drunk Market Town. The air was cold, but the stars were bright. And I believed in something. I’m not sure what, exactly, I believed in, but I felt something, yearned for something, longed for light or love or loneliness. All of it seems stupid now. The truth is, I didn’t help Coy commit suicide. I didn’t do much of anything. I didn’t give him Barbicide to drink. I just sat there by his bedside and watched him sleep until he was almost dead, and at the very moment I should have seen him off to the other side, I called to Christopher and told him I couldn’t stand it anymore, I had to get out of there. Christopher watched him take his last breath. By the time someone needed to call the funeral home, I was already gone.

Memo from the Bureau of Plastics

Everything had to be perfect so we picked up the bad parts. Everything had to be perfect so we picked the bad parts apart. // We picked the bad parts apart until the parts were too small to pick apart. We picked apart too many parts. // We thought the parts we picked were perfect. The parts we picked were so perfect they never came all the way apart. // Then, everything came apart. We were a part of everything so we also came apart. // We were perfect, so we weren't expecting to come apart. We were so perfect, we should have known our parts would come apart (it wasn't our fault!) // We were perfect. So perfect. How did everything come apart?

The Language of Cabbage

Spires aspiring to the heavens, but down here on earth the language of cabbage. Table luxury in ancient Rome, fermented for the national dish of Germany, boiled with bacon in Ireland. More traditionally, Colcannon, meaning white headed cabbage. Only four ingredients: potatoes, butter, milk and cabbage. But Champ. That was our staple. It held our heads together. Mashed potato with spring onions. We kept the cabbage for Colcannon on Sundays. Cabbage is short for head. Cabbage head is a dolt. The jolt of duh in American English. Thick in British English. Not something to aspire to. The spring chicken. Who wants to stay the spring chicken. Everyone wants to stay the spring chicken, but we are not talking chicken. We are talking cabbage. Cabbage is green. When you entered your mission, you were called green. Then you became seasoned. The most seasoned lie beneath you. Full of saints. Ancient ancestors close to you. The dead go on living, until they are forgotten forever. The dead are not green, but you are still green. Green, oh, I want you green. That's Garcia Lorca. Beginner's mind is green. It is full of cabbage. Cabbaging into state of boredom according to the English or green heads of money according to the mob. Greedy green cause you want to keep staying green. Winter light on metallic sea. Dog barks on hillside. Sea life. Foam life. Moistening the cabbage of your days.

Peach Schnapps

No longer young, wandering among the tulips. Hugging trees. Feeling slightly Scandinavian. Fisting your mouth with lingonberries. Reinventing yourself. Are you done with reinventing? No, it's still happening, but at a slower pace. It's always slow, until you look back, then whoosh. That's the sound of what's behind you. The past is always in the present, cause that's where your looking from. In the northwest, hungry for reinvention, strolling up Mount Baker with Andy, & before long riding the glaciers, drifting. Drifters, that's what they called you. Or maybe worse, the children of perdition. What a fancy word! You still needed something bigger than you. How about the glories of nature. Tooth and claw. Awe and beauty. On the boardwalk, all the world's languages. Hugging hemp. All natural, but itchy. Scratching you head. Scratching your head. Perplexed. Flexing the x. Unknown and variable. Baffled is a nicer word than perplexed. It has a soft side. The glorious fogs of mystery. Sometimes it is good to feel stumped. All the world laid out before you. There is something there, beyond your ability to receive it. Crossing the border with Andy in White Rock British Columbia. Peach schnapps. Peach schnapps. Warm tingles. Coffee cakes the espresso machine. It is time to descale it. You are still here in your body.

Jami Macarty

For L

This cackleberry's double-yolked.

I do not remember if that's a good sign or a bad one.

[Sound of frypan sizzling]

After breakfast the morning takes a circumbendibus route where
a dog walker cossets a powder-puff Pomeranian and a stentorian voice
says something I will not repeat.

By the newspaper stand I help a plastic dinosaur to its feet.
From the Loteria deck I draw El Asuente, La Tristeza, El Venado.
The chestnuts' ubiquitous buck eyes look up from 10th Street.

Fall: an experiment with new zymurgy.

[Smell of leaves being raked]

To fall: the eponymic enactment of the season.

Who would not want a life well-furnished with longanimity?

I have a friend, L, with the heart valves of a pig.
She thought of herself as a chimera. Chimerical friend.
Chimeric tenses. If she is dead of heart failure, do I still have her—

Language reigns eutaxy.

When it comes to making something out of nothing call me dabster.

Pulverulent my bookshelves.

[A phalanx agitates to air dust motes]

L's body to ash.

Vagarious. My saying made of ration and mask.

October, a good time of year to prune trees.

[Sheers snip snip]

To spinebash is not as bad as it sounds. It can be how to see green
loosen or how to sink into abeyance.

Wind facetious with the leaves.

Sunlight, a gapolis glory.

When the trees lose leaves I see tucked between branch and trunk
the sturdy cup-nest of an American robin.

[Cheerily, the song of a robin]

I want to write my paeon for L, but I fail.

Fail fail fail.

Is it the fall that is noteworthy or the climb?

Pruning at this height I do not disturb nesting birds.

They are done for the season.

In sepia light trees excavate, steep—
make ready for the dark phase.

While I sleep it will rain the road to creek.

Water good for its going and with no history.

Albert Abonado

Summer Solstice with Motownphilly as Soundtrack

For no reason in particular except that today is Tuesday and sunny and maybe because I haven't spoken to anyone in my family except to like a handful of pictures on Facebook. Who knows why we listen carefully for certain voices? I try to summon my grandfather's voice while next door my neighbor tears holes into the ground for whatever the reason. Neither I nor my grandfather can ignore the machinery working against my memory, my grandfather who opens his mouth to speak and instead the churn of the backhoe's diesel engine, the collision of two heavy metal objects. He tries again and this time my neighbor's dirt comes tumbling out of his mouth. What should I do next? I want to return the dirt to my grandfather. I try to stuff it back into his mouth. Here you dropped this. There are so many worms. This is very fertile soil. You are so lucky, I tell him. Not everyone lives nitrogen rich. Imagine what kind of gardens could thrive in your mouth. I keep going. I push more dirt into his mouth. Do you remember the squash that would wind its way around the fence, the pile of reclaimed wood and pipes we saved for some reason or another where a family of cats once lived then disappeared? My grandfather has a wider mouth than I remember. Which part of my grandfather have I not distorted? I find other things to fill his mouth: sparrow eggs, rosaries made of little plastic meteorites. I have questions: How many uncles did you have? Did you also forget their names? He cannot answer. It starts to snow. He looks beyond me. How did I miss all the disappearing leaves? I have seen his silence before. He forgets what he wanted to say.

Ashley Kunsu

A Poet on Saturday Night

a found poem in Netflix's "Most Popular" summaries and phrases from Seneca's "On the Shortness of Life"

at a hospital for the criminally insane to buy booze (s)he's up
-right (s)he can't walk seems to never sleep [you're in real
trouble]
angels are becoming politically unambitious there are fates far worse
that the lunacy of the poets men from every side naughty
nurse
fantasies conducted with torches and wax tapers burn out of control
acts insatiable [her middle name unfortunately] the real
enemy
followed orders kept secrets not life but merely time on the
brink
of Hollywood glory a container [without a bottom] loyalties
are
perilous tha canvas is flesh the soil as history the meanness of
nature how far you need to go all in fight dirty
play mind games
[they aren't available] your own frailty never occurs to you blood
will be shed impenetrable vault the greatest obstacle [freakishly
literal] crushed rather than picked at a few visits to the
penitentiary
the firmament or the stars both haunted and hunted (s)he
was a legend (s)he was just a girl [what is doomed to fall delights]

DARGIS NOLK

Dargis Nolk sat on his gray-and-black couch at not quite midnight; his eyes began to close and the book (a biography of Dostoevsky) fell from his hand. In his mind there was this green tunnel and you were supposed to ride your bicycle very fast down through this green tunnel, but you were always not yet in the tunnel. His eyes were closed. After a minute they tried to open — he wasn't even so very tired, was he? Maybe the heat was turned too high, causing drowsiness. The phone rang.

It was a wrong number, someone wanting Marella. Dargis went to bed. In the morning there was a pimple on his thigh. He located the ointment in the medicine cabinet. The white ointment on his skin felt so cool and decisive and lucid, a cream from another planet; he felt inferior to the ointment. The phone rang while Dargis was on the toilet — only two rings, and then silence. Dargis looked at the white ceiling of the bathroom. As he left his apartment building thirty minutes later, a tall young woman with red hair was just getting into a Honda across the street.

Dargis got to work a few minutes earlier than usual, and there was a nice feeling of unspoiled readiness along the polished corridors. The coffee was pretty good, much better than usual, and there were clean spoons for stirring, and Dargis felt this might be a big day somehow. It would be a day in 1985, or 2024. At his desk he made a neat outline of the week's work; the projected expenses were within reasonable boundaries. Mr. Creindilth should be pleased. Dargis allowed himself ten minutes with the morning paper, spreading it on his desk, reading more effectively than last night on the couch. On the Food page there was a recipe for raspberry custard; it sounded exciting. Life was there, surely. Then he noticed the name of the guest food columnist who had created this raspberry custard: Kelsie Kelso.

Kelsie Kelso! Dargis had not thought of her in years, yet now her name quickened his pulse. Kelsie's blonde hair had interesting swirls in a long bright crowded room fourteen years ago; a clarinet was playing vivaciously. Dargis phoned the newspaper and asked for the Food Editor.

"That's Living," said the secretary. "Bridget Jiffs. I'll connect you." But Bridget Jiffs was out, maybe for an hour, maybe for all day.

Mr. Creindilth came by and asked Dargis what he was doing. Dargis said it was just a quick personal call. He showed Mr. Creindilth his outline for the week and Mr. Creindilth squinted and suggested only two slight changes of sequence. Mr. Creindilth smelled minty. He seemed comfortable with his objectives. Dargis turned back to the coffee which was surprisingly cool now.

Some folders were in the wrong order. He rearranged them.

For a second, at one point, Dargis believed he had spilled coffee on his white shirt, but he hadn't.

Dargis crossed the hall and found Bob Breets at his desk flipping a miniature yellow football. Bob suddenly tossed it sideways to Dargis and Dargis caught it, bruising his thigh a little against the edge of the desk as he stretched to avoid fumbling. Bob brandished tickets. "Bengals-Lions," he said. "Clash of the big cats." Bob seemed so pleased to be saying this. Dargis expressed uncertainty because he'd planned so many errands for the weekend but Bob convinced him to go. Today was Wednesday, the game would be on Sunday. Dargis returned to his desk with the word "friend" sounding in his mind like the tolling of a low-pitched bell. The sound seemed opaque or blank. Dargis stayed at his desk only a minute and then walked to the soda machine. It was out of order. Returning to his desk he heard Sally Pierce laughing in a phone conversation.

One day last summer Sally had worn an amazingly tight short green skirt to work. Skirt or dress? Sometimes Dargis wasn't sure what range of garments could be categorized as dresses. There ought to be a book that explained these things clearly. For example, is there just one "right" key in which a song can be sung? Or can the same song be properly sung in several different keys? There was a song called "May I" that he'd heard on oldies radio and it was attached somehow to the picture of Sally's tight green dress or skirt on that hot day last August. Dargis felt a little twisting in his stomach.

By the time he went to lunch his stomach felt fine. It was a cool day in late September, actually fairly cold. The pale sky looked like the ceiling of his bathroom. Dargis felt he had forgotten something. He checked his pockets for wallet and keys. They were there. It seemed he had planned to buy three things during his lunch hour but now he couldn't think of them. He bought a pack of low-tar cigarettes. Was that one of the three items?

A blue Honda turned the corner ahead of him. Two people were in it.

Dargis walked to his usual restaurant for lunch, not his favorite but his second-favorite restaurant, conveniently located. There was a table near the window. He ordered his usual ham-and-cheese melty. Waiting for the sandwich he looked around the restaurant which was starting to get crowded. For a whole minute he gazed at the back of a woman's head and neck, trying to imagine her eyes. From his inside jacket pocket Dargis pulled a small white pad and a ballpoint pen. He held the pen ready. The waitress brought his coffee and he put down the pen and added sugar and cream to his coffee. He picked up the pen. Just before his melty arrived he wrote "Kelsie".

While he ate he became conscious of that pimple on his thigh, and a silly idea came into his head about the ham and cheese directly feeding or fueling the pimple. But he was lucky enough to stop thinking this after a while, and the sandwich was quite good today, the ham was lean. The dead pig had

been healthy. Two guys at a nearby table were talking loudly about a movie. They didn't seem stupid. They both seemed eagerly articulate as they traded notions about the plot, the acting, the directing, the realism factor, and the meaning of the film as a whole. Dargis noticed they were both eating thick sandwiches that did not impede their rapid talk. He tried to study how they could chew so forcefully and effectively without appearing wolfish. The movie was *At Play in the Fields of the Lord* — Dargis had seen a preview, months ago. Lush green jungle and tribesmen running wildly beneath a small airplane. The two guys were not at all daunted by these images.

Dargis picked up his ballpoint to make a list of movies to see; but it was time to head back to the office.

After some data-searching, he took time out to phone the newspaper and ask for Bridget Jiffs at the Living desk. She was on another line and would call back.

The phone rang. It was Sally Pierce. She was calling from her office down the hall. "Milt?" she said. "Oh. Dargis. I'm sorry. Do you know Milt Armstrong's extension? Do you have the list?"

Dargis checked the list of phone extensions and told her the number for Milt Armstrong who had recently joined the Publicity staff.

Dargis placed six pencils side by side in an ordered sequence from shortest to longest. The longest pencil was green. Milt Armstrong was a year or two younger than Dargis but evidently he had already distinguished himself in the business; for nine months he had served as a consultant to a new corporation in Brazil.

Dargis had a slight headache. It wasn't terrible. The fluorescent lights high above his desk hummed very subtly. After a while he called the newspaper and got to speak to Bridget Jiffs who said she didn't have a number for Kelsie Kelso "handy" but she could probably find it and to call back tomorrow.

By the time Dargis was going home his head had stopped aching and he felt the evening ought to include some fun, though no clear plan suggested itself yet. He stopped at the Sno-Flake Cleaners on his block and picked up six white shirts. They were calmly perfect in their clear plastic sheath. Dargis tilted his head philosophically and was aware of himself thinking: Work is serious, of course, but it is not all of life. Crossing the busy intersection to reach the front steps of his building he thought: There's a lot out there. He added emphasis: There's a lot out there!

In his apartment Dargis Nolk took off his white shirt and his black shoes and sat down on one of his two kitchen chairs. He closed his eyes; he had stayed up too late last night. Why did he do that? Why did he keep doing that? It always meant that he would have to sleep very late on Saturday morning, which always then gave a sort of beige color to the

weekend. Dargis sat there in his white teeshirt. When his eyes opened he was surprised to see from the kitchen clock that his eyes had been closed for more than ten minutes. He stood up and walked to the bathroom. His feet in his black socks felt the chill of the tiled hall. Splashing cold water on his face Dargis wondered why the vast majority of his socks were black. He felt he had never decided this should be the case. He dried his face with a beige towel, and pressed it hard against his cheeks for a few seconds. An odd sort of ringing in his ears caused him to briefly think his phone was ringing but it wasn't. Before he realized it wasn't he had taken four or five long sliding steps along the hall. Dargis imagined pretending to be a hockey star, in his socks, for the amusement of someone. For a woman. Who? The idea had a plausibility, as if he knew a woman who would in fact enjoy this. Hockey? Oh, it was Carleen. She had loved hockey. She was from Wisconsin. Dargis had promised to marry her in their sophomore year at Indiana, but after her miscarriage that promise seemed, to both of them, wildly unwise. Carleen — where would she be now, after so many years? Green Bay?

Kelsie, Carleen . . . There was something about this day. What if he spoke with both of them on the same day? It would be no ordinary day. It would be the kind of day someone might end up describing as "deceptively ordinary" while in reality it was a turning point. Dargis looked up the area code for Green Bay and walked around the apartment in his black socks murmuring "four one four, four one four." He did not call Directory Assistance yet because he wasn't ready for an operator to tell him there was no such Carleen in Green Bay. He sat down on his gray-and-black couch with TV Guide in his hand. He didn't look at it. The phone rang.

Someone wanted Marella. Dargis was polite.

He tried to remember if he'd brought the newspaper home. He must have. It must be on the kitchen table.

It wasn't. Bob had borrowed it late in the day to read the sports section. Bob did that some days without asking. "No problem," said Dargis out loud in his kitchen, using a funny voice from a sitcom actor. "No problem." The voice expressed an effort to seem relaxed despite explosive tension.

Wearing his hooded gray sweatshirt, Dargis was soon jogging to the supermarket. It was only six blocks. The supermarket had his favorite kind of ice cream. However, they had no fresh raspberries. He was pretty sure that Kelsie's recipe insisted on fresh, not frozen.

The cashier handed him some special Wednesday coupons. Generally Dargis never paid attention to supermarket coupons; he felt they wasted too much time. Moving outside through the automatic door, though, he felt irrationally encumbered by the Wednesday coupons as if they added many pounds to his bag of purchases. The word Wednesday began to

bother him the way words occasionally did: it was as if he were chewing old gum and had no suitable place to spit it out. Wednesday Wednesday Wednesday Wednesday Wednesday Wednesday. Dargis tried to jog most of the way home but the grocery bag kept awkwardly thumping his hip. Still, Wednesday was not so dominant in his mind by the time he entered the apartment. His dinner was crackers and peanut butter, and a Royal Crown Cola. Ice cream for dessert. It was all quite pleasant and he watched parts of several TV shows. He avoided something TV Guide described as "a one-man show" because the idea sounded boring to him.

Finally he phoned Green Bay and did get a number for Carleen and spoke to a woman who said she'd been Carleen's roommate till last month when Carleen had moved. Where?

To his city. The city where Dargis lived. What news! The roommate did not have a new phone number for Carleen, though. And the operator had no new listing. Nevertheless, this day had come to something, in a way. Dargis watched more television. He turned it off and sat down in the kitchen with a clean sheet of paper and a green felt-tip pen. His mouth hung open loosely and felt dry. He rinsed his coffee cup from this morning and made a cup of tea. He stayed up late. He read half a page of the Dostoevsky biography but it seemed to cause the couch to tremble very rapidly and silently. When he brushed his teeth his eyes in the mirror were so wide he wondered if they could be abnormally disproportionate. When he went to bed his ear seemed to be listening intently to the silence of the pillow.

There was the green tunnel. Not here but a distance ahead.

Next morning Dargis sneezed a lot but he didn't really have a cold. At work he heard Bob Breets teasing a young secretary about a movie, and thought to ask about *At Play in the Fields of the Lord*. Bob said it left town weeks ago. From Bridget Jiffs Dargis eventually learned that Kelsie Kelso's articles on food were purchased from a newspaper in the next state, a hundred miles south. Sally Pierce's form at the far end of a corridor induced a cool hurt like a thin needle in the back of the neck.

That night his phone rang. It was Carleen! She laughed at his sound of uncertainty and tension. They reminisced about Indiana days, and she explained that she had moved to this city in order to marry a Pakistani man whom she'd met on an airplane.

After this call Dargis drank some water. Then he added some bourbon to the water. He hadn't tasted bourbon in years; he'd bought this bottle at least three years ago when he saw an actress drinking bourbon in a movie. She had blue-shadowed eyes and a way of seeming very tired yet very energetic at the same time. The bourbon was enjoyable and awful at the same time. Dargis felt woolly the next day at work. On Sunday the Bengals

beat the Lions. Bob did a great deal of yelling. The game included many field goals and missed field goals and Dargis kept losing track of the score. The traffic jam after the game was, Bob said, "from hell."

During the next week Dargis mastered a new software format. After the first hour or two it really gave him little trouble and he was able to assist several secretaries with the new manual and so forth. His shirt was white. He heard a rumor that Creindilth was becoming anxious about the budget. One day Dargis went out to lunch with two Steves, Steve and Steve from Product Development. They went to a large overpriced restaurant. The service was incredibly slow; apparently you were supposed to be so impressed with the crisp white tablecloths and the immense wine goblets that you didn't mind waiting. Steve and Steve were cheerful but seemed to expect Dargis to say something further than what he said. Dargis offered talk about the Bengals and about TV shows. He checked his watch. There was a reference to Sally Pierce which Dargis didn't quite grasp; but at least they were trying to share it with him. His omelet came — it was puffy and big and dense. Dargis checked his watch, and chewed. He was sure there was some pleasure in the yellow mouthfuls, and in what Steve and Steve said about the young secretary they called Quick-Fax. All in all the lunch lasted one month — seven hundred and twenty hours to be exact. Dargis had of course grown a moderate beard during the lunch and wondered if Sally might admire it. He hurried with rhythmic steps toward his desk, hearing that song "May I" in his head and picturing Sally smiling in a way that would mean "Yes you may."

Not too much work had piled up on his desk during the lunch month, luckily. But there was a long memo from Mr. Creindilth explaining why the company required downsizing and thirty positions would be eliminated effective in two weeks though the executive staff much appreciated the loyalty shown by all employees.

So Dargis lost his job. It made the day unusual, certainly. It was a day in early March, windy and cold with a pewter sky. One of the Steves was also "let go" as well as two older men from Market Research who said they had been very successful in their work, and they invited Dargis to go out for a drink, and he went, or he did not. Just six weeks later Dargis got a new job, better in some ways than the old job, with a much better health plan. It was a pale day in early March or rather in late April and Dargis Nolk leaned out of the sixth-floor window of the new office building and inhaled the sharp air and told himself that fate loves a non-quitter. Then he felt there was a different message on the cold wind, a message he could not afford to interpret. That evening when he reached the door of his apartment he heard the phone ringing inside. By the time he opened the door and put down his dry cleaning, though, it had stopped.

Some of the Things That Attract Bears

“Lotion, toothpaste, bug spray,” Prudence lists, reading from the bear awareness pamphlet the camp host handed us upon our arrival. “Camp stoves, cooking utensils, oils. Garbage. Coolers. All things edible, of course. But also, gray water. Also, clothing worn while cooking. Also, touching yourself.”

“It doesn’t say that,” I say.

Prudence’s eyes flick to the campsite on the other side of the river. It’s occupied by a church group. We know because we saw the van: Mountain Church. But since we pulled up to our campsite an hour ago, the neighboring site has remained vacant except for that van, a half dozen tents, and twelve empty chairs around a cold fire pit. As if they were all raptured.

“How confident are you about that?” Prudence says.

Prudence is a lapsed Mormon. Growing up, she wasn’t allowed to be in a bathroom alone, wasn’t trusted with her own body. When she renounced her religion in her early twenties, her family disowned her.

Last year, my husband—as of yesterday, officially ex-husband—became one of those Reddit red pill dudes. He proclaimed I didn’t respect him. He said the difference between men and women is that men desire respect, a rational thing that must be earned, and that women desire love, an irrational, fluffy (his word), impossible-to-earn thing. He said men are willing to grant this irrational, fluffy thing called love to a woman as long as she gives him his due respect, but if she doesn’t, well.

I said that if that was what he believed, then he was right, I didn’t respect him.

All this is to say that I’m not confident about much these days. I mean, I was married to that man for fourteen years. One thing Prudence and I both know, however, is the world is full of people who want to control us.

But bears?

“Why would bears be attracted to masturbating humans?” I say.

“Why wouldn’t they?” Prudence says.

Prudence’s dog, who lies next to the riverbank chewing on a stick, sniffs my crotch every time I’m menstruating, sometimes when I’m not, so I concede that maybe Prudence has a point. Bodies and their smells, animals being attracted to those smells.

One of Prudence’s contributions to our camping equipment are these little plastic bags you pee into and in which there are crystals that mix with your pee, turning it into a non-spillable and supposedly odorless gel. This way, we won’t have to leave our tents in the middle of the night to trek to the vault toilets. I’m skeptical. Also, considering our conversation

about bears: worried. Even if the bag makes my pee odorless to me, might bears smell it?

Prudence says, if anything, the scent of our urine will deter bears. Given her joke about masturbation luring bears—was it a joke?—I don't know.

Prudence eyes her dog chewing his stick. She says, "I'm hungry."

I wave a bag of honey-roasted peanuts.

Prudence makes a face. "I've got stuff."

"Honey?" I say.

She nods.

I always forget that honey isn't vegan. "Remind me again why honey isn't vegan?"

"The bees are exploited," she says. "They don't make honey for us. They make it for themselves."

"Do trees make bananas for us?" I nod at the banana Prudence unpeels.

Prudence rolls her eyes. "Plants make fruit for animals to eat. Feces is one of the ways they spread their seeds."

I'm pretty certain bananas are bred to be seedless. Also, Prudence's feces isn't going to grow any plants, period. But I respect Prudence's choice to eat according to whatever weird ethical stance she chooses, so I keep my mouth shut.

I say instead, "It must be nice to be a bear."

"How's that?"

"Because bears live simply, right? If they're hungry, they look for food. If they're horny, they fuck. No hemming and hawing over every damn decision. No morals. No ethics. No religion."

Prudence eyes me suspiciously. "Is this about the honey?"

"What? No," I say. "I was thinking about how it took this red pill nonsense to get me to finally throw in the towel on that fucking relationship. All those years: I didn't want to give up, you know? I didn't want to fall through on my commitment. But fuck, looking back, I wonder if I was ever happy with that man."

Prudence looks skeptical, and I wonder: about which part? That I was never happy with Sam?

What I would do to breed thoughts like these to be seedless.

Where the river widens near our camp, a little section of water moves in slow circles instead of rushing forward. A chunk of wood drifts lazily, going nowhere.

I say, "Maybe I'm like that stick."

Prudence looks. "How's that?"

“I’ve been stuck, going nowhere. Fourteen years.”

Prudence says, “Or maybe that stick is something to aspire to. It refuses to be pushed around. The problem with metaphors is they’re too pliable. They’re like that slime putty stuff: they’ll take the shape of any container.”

“You just used a metaphor to explain the problem with metaphors,” I say.

“Yeah, yeah,” Prudence says. She’s about to say something more, but we quiet because we hear voices. Singing voices, from the woods beyond the river. Something about yearning. Something about release—or relief? Either way.

After the singers—mostly teenagers, a handful of adults—emerge from the woods and settle into their camp, the singing ceasing for only a brief interval between songs, I say, “What were you going to say?”

Overhead, a turkey vulture scans for something to scavenge.

Prudence says, “No idea. Want some wine?”

Despite my worry about having to get up to pee, I say yes to wine. Prudence and I drink and talk until we’re too giddy to fret about bears. Or humans, for that matter: so hot for Jesus that they disregard quiet hours, beat out their irrational, fluffy love into the wee hours of the night.

Low Class

I'm driving to the grocery store after breakfast, husband riding shotgun, kids in back, all of them peeved at me because after paying the check, I said we needed to stop for groceries on the way home. My family contends I lured them out of the house on false pretenses. Bacon and eggs and pancakes with whipped cream smiley faces was what I advertised, they said, and if I had been more forthcoming, they would have passed on all of it.

I'm peeved too because why the hell should I alone have to give up several hours every weekend to buy groceries for my family so that they can have the luxury of passing up breakfast at a restaurant knowing there's food in the pantry and the refrigerator, food that I put there weekend after weekend, after inventorying and making lists, after driving, driving, driving, after navigating unpleasant strangers who are also exhausted and bitter to be burdened with the thankless task of keeping other people alive?

This is the mood in our car when a vehicle passes on our right from which a dog hangs its head out the driver's seat window. It's a big dog. Probably the dog is leaning its head over the driver's seat from the back, but from where I sit, it looks like that dog is driving that car.

The way the dog's mouth hangs open, its pointy teeth glinting, its pink tongue draped over some of those teeth like a plush carpet, the dog seems to be smiling. The way the wind whips the dog's ears and fur makes me think of shampoo commercials. I eye my own reflection in the rearview mirror and frown.

Then I remember something I heard on the radio, and I say to my husband, Clay, "Did you hear that thing our president said about pets?"

Our younger child says, "Pets? What about pets?" He's been asking for a dog or a cat for going on two years now.

The older child has earbuds in, isn't interested in what any of us have to say.

"He said pets are low class," I say as we come to a stop light.

The car with the dog breaks next to us, and even side-by-side like this, inert, the dog appears to be the driver, except for the two human hands gripping the wheel, hands that look like weird little appendages emerging from the dog's body, the puny arms of a T. Rex. I recall another thing I heard on the radio: Scientists grew a human ear onto the body of a rat, for no good reason I can imagine other than to determine if it could be done.

My husband stares straight ahead. Doesn't look at the dog or at me.

"What does low class mean?" our younger child asks from the back seat.

"He means that people who have pets are beneath him," I say. "That only common people have pets."

“Common people?” our kid says.

“People like us,” I say. “Regular people who have to go out and do their own grocery shopping every week, people for whom taking their family of four out to breakfast once in a while is an extravagance.”

Clay speaks up then. “Who cares what he said about pets? Why is that even news?”

“Because it’s a stupid, ridiculous, asshole thing to say, that’s why,” I say.

Clay groans.

“Is that why you won’t let me have a pet?” our child says to his father. “Because you think pets are low class, too?”

Clay looks at me then, like see what you’ve done?

“You can’t have a pet,” Clay says, “because pets are a lot of work.”

Of course, I shouldn’t say the thought that comes to me then, but I say it anyway: “We all know how you despise work.”

Clay looks at me. His mouth opens then closes.

Clay has been saying pretty much since I met him that his dream job is no job, to be able to do whatever the hell he wants all day for the rest of his days.

Since he was laid off eight months ago, he’s been living that dream.

Oh sure, I know the layoff was traumatic. In the beginning, I was all for him taking the time he needed to lick his wounds. But the severance dried up five months ago, and unemployment is not a full paycheck, and frankly, I’m tired of hearing about how hard this has been on him when I’m the one who’s still doing all the damn grocery shopping even though I work forty hours a week on top of doing just about everything else required to keep the four of us sheltered and fed. I want to say to Clay, Suck it up.

But then our youngest locks eyes on me in the rearview mirror, and I instantly regret saying what I said.

Our youngest says, “Stop being mean to Daddy. He’s doing his best.”

Those are Clay’s words coming from our youngest child’s mouth.

Again, I picture that human ear growing from the body of a rat. Bullshit words entirely unsuitable for describing the efforts of this man.

And this is the same kid who corrects us every time we say, “Just a second.” “Actually, what you mean is just ten minutes.”

But if I call bullshit, if I say what is an incontrovertible fact, that this is not Clay’s best, I’m the asshole.

Of course, I’m already the asshole. So, I say nothing more. I watch the dog in the car next to us take off when the light turns green. I startle when the dog behind me honks.

Brown All Over

His lips traced my collarbone in awe of its lack of freckles. He found it fascinating that my skin didn't absorb the sun in fragments like his did but was instead "brown all over." Peter continued exploring my body's curves and ridges, looking up occasionally to ensure I was enjoying it as much as he was. My eyes had settled on a small water stain on the ceiling, just to the right of his bed. I looked down and threw him a smile of encouragement, resigned to knowing that the point of pleasure would illude me. Not because he wasn't doing all the right things. My body was enjoying the stimulation and would writhe accordingly. It was my mind that had decided to detach itself from the rest of my senses.

I had never thought of myself that way – never assigned myself a color as if my hue were to be made into a crayon. My mother was Latina and my father Caucasian. While many of my features mimicked that *de mi madre*, my complexion typically bore a paternal resemblance. Brownness had always eluded me. So much so that I had often convinced myself that it in some way negated *mi latinidad*. *Yo era una guera*.

Except that I wasn't. Regardless of how much effort I put into diet and exercise, my figure refused to renounce its heritage. *Abuela's* hips sat below my waist and broadened my silhouette. My back was tasked with carrying the weight of *las chi chis de mi mamá*. It was as if my mother's face had been pasted onto a young white woman. There was a clear line of distinction between which of my genes came from whom. The subtleties of which were easily discernible.

I knew this because they had always been pointed out to me. Trying on clothes with my friends who weren't ethnic after puberty was always uncomfortable. They could easily slide anything that they wanted over their thighs. I was the only one who had to worry about the cut of my neckline to ensure nothing was going to overflow. When I would get ready to go out to parties *con mis primas*, they would all share makeup and take turns trying to do mine. There was always a drastic difference in hue between my face and neck, with my outer lips heavily penciled. I knew that it was never anyone's intention to make me feel *como una extraña*. Pero that was the reality of being a concoction. For years, I would dissect myself in the mirror. Assigning each feature an ethnicity.

It had taken me a long time to accept my characteristics for what they were: a composite of cultures. He could have commented on the little red birthmark just below my left breast or the *lonjas* that dimple at the top of my thighs. That would have been fine. Because I knew my body and I loved it for exactly what it was. But it was not brown.

I had become so comfortable in my skin and with him that it never occurred to me that he might see me that way. We had been together for almost a year. But in that moment, we were no longer Peter and Adela. He was a white man, and I was the brown girl in his bed. It was probably an innocent comment. Pero también, no estaba.

I found myself analyzing our past interactions. It was only a couple of months into dating when we were sitting on the couch together watching a movie. I was thirsty and said that I was going to run to the kitchen for a glass of water really quick, and that he didn't need to pause it. After I stood, he smacked my *nalgas* and said "get me one too while you're in there, *mamacita!*" I felt my body instinctively make this uncomfortable recoil. I went to the kitchen, got out our two glasses, and paused unable to bring myself to fill them.

The fact that he had just slapped my ass and casually given me an order was obnoxious. It was more than obnoxious. It was disrespectful. Still, I didn't understand how it had warranted the rage that was flooding through me. It was not some crazy thing that no boyfriend had done before and yet I had never found it that infuriating. My pulse was pumping so fiercely into my fingertips that I had to put the glasses down for fear of dropping them. I'm not sure of the amount of time I spent stewing in the kitchen, but it was long enough for him to pause the movie and come check on me. He told me that he was only joking. He apologized and wrapped his arms around my waist, kissing my neck. The palm on my panza was soothing. Then he whispered into my ear "let's go back to the couch, *mamacita*," and the pang inside me fired right back.

The first time he introduced me to his friends, he called me his "*novia*." This soon became his endearment of choice, and "*mamacita*" fell out of favor. I had convinced myself that this was for my benefit. I was the one acting out of the ordinary. He was just trying to embrace my culture. It was me who was being overly sensitive by manufacturing faults where there were none. Still, my body never quite learned to accept those words when they came from his lips.

The discolored patch above my head kept me steady, as I gripped the headboard behind me. He hit a nerve just right, and I felt my back snap into an arch. My feet dug into the bed beneath me on either side of his chest, pulling him in closer from under his arms. He paused to look up at me and I met his gaze. We only held there for a second, before he returned to his endeavor. It wasn't for long, but just enough to remind me that he was in fact a good man. And one who deserved the benefit of the doubt. His hands gripped my thighs and wrenched them further over his shoulders. Each fingertip he pressed into my flesh caused the color beneath it to dissipate. Where his skin touched mine, I was lighter than him. I fixated back on the beige blotch above me.

Dancing was one of my favorite parts of my culture. As conflicted as I could be about my ethnicity from time to time, I never felt more one with my culture as when I was dancing. My love for bachata was immense. Peter refused to learn it. He would always claim that dancing with me would be embarrassing. I danced less. My art from Palomas remained boxed in storage. It didn't match his aesthetic. I began dissecting my life like I used to do my body to discern which aspects were ethnic.

In any relationship, you have to give up some of yourself to make room for your partner. It was normal, and I knew this. But I had unwittingly allowed all of my subsumed pieces to be the ones *de mi mamá*. The features these bits had allotted me were what drew Peter into this relationship, but they weren't welcome to be a part of it.

I was overthinking it. It wasn't as if he didn't love me. I knew that he loved me. He was acting out his love for me at that very moment. I just needed to clear my mind and give into the moment. I tilted my head back and closed my eyes. There was no reason for me to let one little comment implode an otherwise great relationship. It was entirely possible that he had no idea that he had done any of this. There were just aspects of my life that were so foreign to him that he dismissed them without understanding what he was doing.

He didn't grow up dancing to cumbia or smoking cigars *con sus tios*. There was no *talavera* pottery on every shelf of the house or a wall dedicated solely to crucifixes. It wasn't fair of me to just expect him to

love my things for no reason other than me. I should have better explained myself. I could have helped him to understand why keeping the things in my life that made me feel connected to my people was a necessity for me. The angle that he had me in was really starting to hurt my lower back. I opened my eyes and wished that I had had the foresight to put a pillow under me before he really got going. That stupid little stain up there was getting darker.

Why was it my responsibility to beg him to take an interest in what mattered to me? He never had to do that. If he told me something was important to him, I made it important to me. His comics were a large part of his childhood, so I read them. The LEGO figurines he had in shadowboxes on the wall had never been called into question. It was only the few aspects of my life that I clung to, that were associated with my Mexican half, that were ever a problem. He enjoyed the curves that my ethnicity allotted, but not the actual culture that came with them.

We had gone ring shopping a couple of weeks before. When I asked if he had talked to mi abuelo yet about asking for permission, he scoffed. It took him several moments to recognize that I was serious. I tried to make him understand the importance of the patriarch and his blessing. The words “archaic” and “unnecessary” were used as his rebuttal. He joked about it, and I found myself joking with him. We ended up laughing it off and agreeing that it was just a tradition from the old country and not relevant to us.

I kept surrendering these little pieces of myself, thinking that they were just so small and not nearly as important as the relationship I was building. But I had waved so many white flags that I began to find myself buried beneath them until every inch of brown was covered. Building a life with him suddenly felt like an outright dismissal of half of my existence. The Ortiz half.

So much of one’s identity lives in their name. Mi madre made sure that I bore hers. Ortiz is derived from the Latin ‘fortis.’ It represents strength and bravery. If Peter and I were to have children together, they couldn’t share in the proud name of my ancestors. He couldn’t pronounce them. They would be called Johnson. Son of John.

Starting a family with him would mean growing a child inside of me with whom I could only ever share fragments of myself. With only fragments of my ethnicity still intact, did I even have enough left to pass down? They would be born into a world where the words that came naturally to me could only be spoken in secret. Would they be allowed to learn them, or would that cause their father embarrassment? Could I birth a daughter whose eyebrows did not mimic that of Frida’s or a son without an Incan nose? I would be producing a human who could share in my DNA, but not experiences. They would likely never get to dig for pottery in the desert with their tías or run barefoot con sus primos through the mesquite. We could not bond over the oils that our hair produced or the fact that our skin does not absorb the sun in fragments.

A droplet hit my forehead and my body jolted at the shock of its coolness. I shifted my attention up to the ceiling to see that the stain above me had opened. Peter had taken this lurch to mean that his job was coming to an end. I was fine with that. My body moved against the sheets and my lips parted to release a noise that would assure him his efforts had not been unwarranted. I looked down to see the confident grin del extraño en mi cama.

Adam Day

Seeing Song

They catalog me
on microfilm extending

out like a dream night
in the insane asylum

of plants; carefully
feeding flies

from my fingertips
in the disgraceful dimness

of our country. Today
I tie up the imaginary

animal. Just to return
then from my own never.

Lance Larsen

Laie Cemetery

This gravestone resembles a birthday cake,
this one a writing desk, this one a king-sized
bed draped in orange stripes, with his and her
tiger pillows to match. Plenty of room
for the whole fam-damily of crawly grand kids
to pile on. And gifts galore left for the dead.
Drink me, says a can of Island Ice Tea.
Race me against time, says matchbox car.
Let me ride your hair, says plastic bear.
I loosen up a bit and slip into island spirit:
If you not touchin da goods, brah, you not mournin.
I corral loose golf balls, straighten trolls
and paper cranes, re-stack a pyramid
of Jack-o'-lanterns in time for Turkey Day.
And it almost works: death retreats to the edge
of things. Who needs crosses and winged
skulls when you can line up plastic dinos
with a T. Rex serving as Yahweh,
and hot pink raptors keeping his back?
Still got grief? Use this toy shovel to dig
a hole for it, then try on this XXL Aloha
shirt or palm a coconut carved into a heart.
Except for mynas chirping, I'm alone.
I kneel before a newish grave for a boy of nine,
his soccer pic Ziplocked and dry, as if some
hovering agent were saving him for Real Madrid.
Did cancer take him, a wreck? No idea.
Miracle Nataliilagilemanuiaoaiga Kalani.
His actual name, letter by etched letter.
From the grave of a ukelele master, I borrow
a pen and write boy warrior's moniker
on my palm. If vowels are feral birds
his syllables will keep me trilling for a year.
Three blocks away, the frothiest prayer
machine on the planet pounds the beach.

Therapon 7-10

7:

Music yes it runs away from what I ask
an inner law a world a witness looking back
who whispers you fire runs away from earth
and fire Eden runs from the words Eden
law the vowels of paradise are letters after
all and so dear Eden I am writing you about
a friend he loved you more are you listening
friend I do not think so but I am one child
of fire and the music here is beautiful never
true or false profound yes but never wise
I run away from home and only later the lotus
eaters of the pasture crumple and fade I am
no believer and ache pure light as Eden must

: 7

Music took the single thread and tangled it
Into a knot called mind. I didn't witness
What happened inside me—thought, earth
Fire. Music took the wood and planed two doors
And sang them the law of hinges. I didn't make
Myself the gates of paradise I am writing about,
I only walked through them. Listen, friend—
A child strikes matches in the dust, dips crickets
In kerosene, sets them on fire. What is beautiful
Isn't true or false. "Yes" has no mouth, but speaks
Its wisdom in us. Yes, there is no home.
Yes, you can eat the grass in the pasture
But it will not save you. Yes, you cannot eat light.

8:

A childhood friend told me she was saved
and I could be if I wanted and thus the news
I am in danger in every canto of the word
saved I heard not angels but the monster
music in films I loved where the subcortex
of a cloud speaks the language of the animals
so I placed the word saved on a breath I blew it
through a door that yawned I saw not angels
but a friend who died and then she held out
a hand that turned to fire fury cloud I cannot
eat light alone though I see the sun in every
meal the burning friend in every visible thing

: 8

A friend told me I was acting like a child.
The friend was my wife. The news
Came as no surprise. The dangerous words
I kept inside me, a monster with an angel
In his mouth. I love the taste of clouds
And angels taste like clouds, the endless animal-
Shapes of clouds, none of which breathe,
But ride on breath, west to east, those angels
Graze the morning meadows. My anger died
Again. Like a child I opened my hand.
I wanted something to eat. The sun gave me light.
A meal for the invisible thing inside me.

9:

Every angel is a monster a woman says
it breaks a natural law she tells a ghost
at the dinosaur museum where birds fly
through revolving doors each cry as brief
as the stars that halo a blow to the head
every winged thing the street spoons in
through the mouths of halls suffers hunger
dread the rock below the rock of anger
I see it in their eyes every bead a museum
every dawn a janitor sweeps another hour
back into the night it came from but once
here I heard a woman's voice here it comes
she said open wide before I can remember

: 9

An angel walks the museum hall holding a spoon
Full of cough syrup. The Law is sick again—
Law of the dinosaur hidden now in the bird,
Law of the door that is, at the same time, both
Open & closed. The door that is Time. The stars
Obey the grave edicts. The broken pair of wings
The child wore daily for a year, suffering her desire
To fly, thrown down in anger among the rocks
And litter—the wings also obey. I see the same
Law sick inside myself. Every day, for an hour,
I keep my mouth open. One night it will happen.
A voice will arrive. The voice will carry a spoon
& the medicine will heal what's in me. I remember—

10:

Wherever a law a criminal says a book I love
and then a rival enters the conversation
and sucks the laughter from a child in the hall
laws are the bones of rituals they skeleton
our jails he says and a memory of my therapist
replies some folks need to be tightened
some loosened some angels fly through prison
walls to give instructions to the killer who
feels absolved and maybe it is a little soon
or late I do know this someday my great
mistakes return like breath after the verdict
like rivers pulled out of the sea then I let them
go I try I cast them to the sobbing of the deep

: 10

Some books I love as I love my children.
In the midst of a conversation I remember
A sentence that—like the child walking home
From school, reciting the names of bones—
Steps suddenly into the room, and says:
It is very unhappy, folks, this discovery we've made,
But too late to be helped, that we exist. A loose angel
Is called obtuse. What is a right angel? The instructions
Bewilder some, absolve a little. I'm guilty,
I know. Somedays I dog-ear the corner of
My child to read later when it's easier to breathe;
Then kiss the book goodnight and tuck it in the sea.
& then one is sobbing, which one? I don't want to go to sleep.

CONTRIBUTOR NOTES

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Adam Day is the author of *Left-Handed Wolf* (LSU Press), and of *Model of a City in Civil War* (Sarabande Books), and the recipient of a Poetry Society of America Chapbook Fellowship for *Badger*, *Apocrypha*, and of a PEN Award.

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Raphael Kosek's *HARMLESS ENCOUNTERS*, won the 2021 Jesse Bryce Niles Chapbook Contest. *AMERICAN MYTHOLOGY*, (Brick Road Poetry Press), was released in 2019. *ROUGH GRACE* won the 2014 Concrete Wolf Chapbook Contest. Her poems and CNF have been nominated for Pushcart Prizes. She was 2019-2020 Dutchess County, NY poet laureate.

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Lance Larsen has published five poetry collections, most recently *What the Body Knows*. His awards include a Pushcart Prize, the *Tampa Review Prize*, and a fellowship from the National Endowment for the Arts. He teaches at BYU and fools around with aphorisms: "A woman needs a man the way a manatee needs a glockenspiel." In 2017, he completed a five-year appointment as Utah's poet laureate. Sometimes he juggles.

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Antonia Pozzi, poet and photographer, born in Milan in 1912, lived a brief life, dying by suicide in 1938. She left behind photographs, diaries, notebooks, letters, and over 300 poems; none of her poems were published in her lifetime. Pozzi's poetry was posthumously altered by her father Roberto; in 1989 her work was restored to its original form in *Parole* (Garzanti). The copyright for the poems and photograph of Antonia Pozzi belongs to the Carlo Cattaneo and Giulio Preti International Insubric Center for Philosophy, Epistemology, Cognitive Sciences and the History of Science and Technology of the University of Insubria, depositary and owner of the whole Archive and Library of Antonia Pozzi.

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Tomaž Šalamun (1941-2014) published more than 50 books of poetry in Slovenia. Translated into over 25 languages, his poetry received numerous awards, including the Jenko Prize, the Prešeren Prize, the European Prize for Poetry, and the Mladost Prize. *Kiss the Eyes of Peace: Selected Poems 1964-2014* (edited and translated by Brian Henry) is forthcoming from Milkweed Editions in 2024.

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Claire Scott is an award winning poet who has received multiple Pushcart Prize nominations. Her work has appeared in the *Atlanta Review*, *Bellevue Literary Review*, *New Ohio Review*, *Enizagam* and *Healing Muse* among others. Claire is the author of *Waiting to be Called* and *Until I Couldn't*. She is the co-author of *Unfolding in Light: A Sisters' Journey in Photography and Poetry*.

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