A JOURNAL OF LITERATURE AND FINE ARTS

GULF COAST



A JOURNAL OF LITERATURE AND FINE ARTS

GULF COAST

TSAO TUS

A JOURNAL OF LITERATURE AND FINE ARTS

GULF COAST

A JOURNAL OF LITERATURE AND FINE ARTS VOLUME 33, ISSUE 1

Editors
Justin Jannise
Nick Rattner

Managing Editors
Emelie Griffin
Paige Quiñones

Digital Editors
Erik Brown
Rob Howell

Fiction Editors
Laura Biagi
Sarah Robinson
Kaj Tanaka
Obi Umeozor

Nonfiction Editors
LeeAnne Carlson
Alex McElroy

Poetry Editors
Josh English
Devereux Fortuna
Nick Rattner

Online Editors
Emelie Griffin (P)
Sonia Hamer (NF)
Brendan Stephens (F)

Reviews & Interviews Editor
Matthew Bizzell

Guest Art Editors
Katharine Bowdoin Barthelme
Ryan N. Dennis

Assistant Art Editors
Luisa Perez
Sheila Scoville

Business Manager
Austin Svedjan

Assistant Editors
Despy Boutris (P)
Erik Brown (P)
Brittny Crowell (P)
Blaine Ely (F)
Daniel Kennedy (F)
Katie Milligan (F)
Colby Ornell (F)
Kaitlin Rizzo (P/NF)
Daniel Tompkins (P)
Grace Wagner (P)
Ernie Wang (NF)

Readers
Aris Brown (P/NF)
Madeleine Maillet (F)

Interns
Alicia Alcantara-Narrea
Ashley Guidry
Natalya Pomeroy
Anna Thomas

Gulf Coast: A Journal of Literature and Fine Arts is largely funded by The Brown Foundation, Inc.; the City of Houston through Houston Arts Alliance; Houston Endowment, Inc.; Inprint, Inc.; the National Endowment for the Arts; Texas Commission on the Arts; the University of Houston English Department; and the support of individual donors.

ARTWORK: Cover art by Diedrick Brackens: *when no softness came*, 2019. Cotton and acrylic yarn, 96 x 96 in. Brooklyn Museum, purchased with funds given by The LIFEWTR Fund at Frieze New York, 2019 © Diedrick Brackens. Image courtesy the artist and Various Small Fires, Los Angeles/Seoul.

OUR THANKS TO: Alex Parsons, Giuseppe Taurino, Kevin Prufer, Roberto Tejada, & the Creative Writing Program at the University of Houston; James Kastely, Julie Kofford, Andre Cobb, Valeria Gonzalez, & the Department of English at the University of Houston; Antonio Tillis, Dean of the College of Liberal Arts and Social Sciences at the University of Houston; Renu Khator, President of the University of Houston; Beckham Dossett and the Department of Art at the University of Houston; CLMP; Poets & Writers, Inc.; Audrey Colombe; Rich Levy, Marilyn Jones, Kristen Flack Curry, & Krupa Parikh of Inprint, Inc.; Poison Pen Reading Series; Brazos Bookstore; Lawndale Art Center.

Published twice yearly. Opinions expressed are not necessarily those of the editors. Send queries to *Gulf Coast*, Department of English, University of Houston, Houston, TX 77204-3013. To submit your work online, visit www.gulfcoastmag.org/submit. Response time is 4 to 6 months. *Gulf Coast* is open to submissions from September 1 to March 1.

Subscribe online at **WWW.GULFCOASTMAG.ORG** or send subscription requests to *Gulf Coast*, Department of English, University of Houston, Houston, TX 77204-3013.

a two-year print subscription is $38 / a one-year print subscription is $20
current issues are $12 / back issues are $8

Gulf Coast is printed by McNaughton & Gunn, 960 Woodland Drive Saline, MI 48176, (734) 429-5411

Gulf Coast is listed in the Humanities International Complete Index. Distributed in North America by ANC, 1955 Lake Park Drive, Suite 400, Smyrna, GA 30080, (800) 929-8274.



Executive Board

President
Misty Matin

Vice President
Laura Calaway

Treasurer
Melissa McDonnell Luján

Secretary
Alison de Lima Greene

Members

Andrew Campbell
Mary S. Dawson
Amber Dermont
Samantha Edussuriya
John Guess
Carolyn Roch Henneman
Janet Hobby
Page Kempner
Victoria Ludwin
Judy Nyquist
Susie Bowen Tucker
Mark Wawro

Advisory Council

Dean Daderko
Ryan N. Dennis
Beckham Dossett
Gwendolyn Goffe
Lynn Goode
Cecily Horton
Terrell James
Karl Kilian
Rich Levy
Victoria Lightman
Evelyn Nolen
Adrienne Perry
Kevin Prufer
Roberto Tejada
Cynthia Toles
Hunter Wakefield
Sasha West

Donors

Gulf Coast *would like to thank the following people who have generously contributed to the journal:*

Underwriter

Jeff Beauchamp

Benefactors

Jeff & Kristina Fort
Lillie Robertson

Sponsors

Laura Calaway
Mary S & Jack Dawson
Jared Dermont
Lynn Goode &
Harrison Williams
Melanie Gray & Mark Wawro
Alice Harcrow
Janet & Paul Hobby
Linda Kelly
Leah Lax
Misty Matin
Judy Nyquist
Megan Prout
Candice, Patricia,
& Ronald Restrepo
Elizabeth & Hunter Wakefield
Mary Wakefield

Friends

Judith Boggess
Winnie Scheuer Bonebrake
Anna Brewster
Marianna Brewster
Marjorie Cain
Sara Cain
Andrew Campbell
Bertie Cartwright
Christine Cha-Sartori
Amber Dermont
Cece & Mack Fowler
Elizabeth Gregory
John Guess
Sis & Hasty Johnson
Page Kempner
Caroline Kerr
Matthew Kornegay
Victoria Ludwin
Ross MacDonald
Micheline Newall
Ifedayo Orimoloye
Andrea Penedo
Mary & Nicholas Senkel
Raymond Stainback
Susie Bowen Tucker
Courtney Wilkinson
Patrick Yarborough

Supporters

Jereann Chaney
Susan Criner
Dean Daderko
Samantha Edussuriya
Parth Gejji
George Greanias
Alison de Lima Greene
Amy Hertz
Kerry Inman
Alison Jefferies
Jeffrey Jorgensen
Madeline Kelly
Elizabeth & Albert Kidd
Rich Levy
Victoria Lightman
Thad Logan &
Eric Lueders
Melissa McDonnell Luján
Adrian Matejka
Dallas McNamara
Evelyn & Roy Nolen
Adrienne Perry
Winnie Phillips
Kevin Prufer
Lyndsey Ray
Tracey Reeves
Patricia Sanchez
Marc Schindler
William Strew
Roberto Tejada
Brian Thomas
Cynthia Toles
David Tucker
Rebecca Wadlinger
Marcia West
Sasha West & Charlie Clark

Contents: *vol. 33, issue 1*

EDITORS' NOTE 11

2020 GULF COAST PRIZES

Francisco González . . . . . Clean Tean 14
FICTION

Leyla Çolpan . . . . . Goethe's Theory of the Simorgh 34
POETRY

Lisa Low . . . . . How to Apologize 37
NONFICTION

FICTION

Kosiso Ugwueze . . . . . Down South 77
Meghan Pipe . . . . . The Cave 126
C.A. Traywick . . . . . The Kiss 138
Naphisa Senanarong . . . . . Hymne a l'Amour 186
Yoko Ogawa . . . . . The Beaver's Twigs 261
TRANSLATED FROM THE JAPANESE BY STEPHEN SNYDER

NONFICTION

Ames Varos . . . . . Curtain Call 60
Gemma de Choisy . . . . . The Constant 117
Kathryn Nuernberger . . . . . The Invention of Mothers 169
Jonathan McGregor . . . . . Exit Music 203
Tariq al Haydar & Keija Parssinen . . . . . Homeland Insecurity: A Collaborative Essay 246

POETRY

Sophie Cabot Black ..... Use Velvet Anyway 56
Trace 58
Hera Naguib ..... Rendezvous 59
Campbell McGrath ..... On the Three Forms of Water 75
Emmalea Russo ..... All Souls' 93
Technically Feral 95
Patrick Milian ..... Etude for Player Piano 114
Story of the Eye 116
Jared Joseph ..... Imagine writing "The Atlantic" on water 124
Ananda Lima ..... A orelha e o ouvido 149
Eileen Myles ..... Read 176
Notes 178
Did you indeed 179
December 16 180
Again 184
Stephanie Horvath ..... Desert Sonnet with Dropped Line 217
Micaela Bombard ..... Survival Spell 218
Dorsey Craft ..... My Football Team is Winning 220
My Football Team is Winning II 221
Rosa Alcalá ..... Capitalism Ritual 222
A Daughter's Mourning Dress 223
Matt W. Miller ..... Where One Starts From 241
Conditional 243
Rusty Morrison ..... Narrow Negotiations (hand-washing) 245
Erin Adair-Hodges ..... Love Song as Iphigenia in a Teen Movie
Asked to Prom as Part of a Prank 259
My Best Friend's Abuser Takes Her to Court 260
Nathaniel Mackey ..... Song of the Andoumboulou: 248 275

CREATIVE & CRITICAL ART WRITING

Alex Jen. . . . . One-way or Round Trip?:
Speaking in Pictures with Fumi Ishino 97
Veronica Roberts. . . . . Myth and Folktale:
An Interview with Diedrick Brackens 151
Kate Green . . . . . Autumn Knight:
Performance of/for the Moment 225

FEATURED ART

Fumi Ishino . . . . . Featured Works 96
Diedrick Brackens. . . . . Featured Works 160
Autumn Knight . . . . . Featured Works 232

REVIEWS & INTERVIEWS

Chelsea B. DesAutels . . . . . "That Sudden Rush of the World":
A Review of Ellen Bass's *Indigo* 284
Matt Bizzell . . . . . Completely Incomplete:
A Review of Teresa Milbrodt's *Instances of Head-Switching* 287

CONTRIBUTORS 291

Attend me, hold me in your muscular flowering arms,
protect me from throwing any part of myself away.

—Audre Lorde

Dear Readers,

It feels strange to be publishing this issue in such a precarious time, as much of the work we have included was selected nearly six months ago. Time has since stretched out like sunlight over water in a swimming pool; and yet, it has condensed into a stone. That stone sank to the bottom of the pool, and someone fished it out and threw it through a window.

Oscar Wilde wrote, "One can live sometimes without living at all, then all life comes crowding into a single hour." These days we are distancing, we are crowding together, we are marching, and we are wandering in place. We know simultaneity better than we have before; we live in more time scales than we can measure with our bodies. This time belongs to the people.

We feel fortunate to have this work, the practice of putting a journal together; and to have spent time with the images and words collected in these pages. We wouldn't be doing any of this if we didn't believe art holds a key for how to survive, to imagine new ways of being.

In a time when the health of the economy gains ever greater importance over the health of the people at its mercy, when the state-sanctioned daily brutality against Black and Brown people bears down even harder, we are indebted to and inspired by the vast movement of resistance to these oppressions. And yet, at times, we feel as the speaker in Matt W. Miller's poem feels: that "our bodies are bags / of broken looms." But we also feel the hopeful words of Diedrick Brackens, who notes, in an interview with Veronica Roberts, "my looms are my collaborators." We seek collaborators to help us spin new possibilities. We celebrate the new geometries they bring forth, the authors and makers threading small utopias. Or, as Sophie Cabot Black writes, "The tuft must turn without tremble / Or will not be chosen. Must be woven all / At once or the loom will catch, will snarl // Into a mob of strands."

This issue seems to us a collection of ways to measure time: with yarn, with a skein, with a line, with a plot. It presents ways to be alone without being alone, to be crowded, to let places and people wander through, to sit in place and to move forward. It shows a way of stitching together.

It was never going to be easy to make the world anew. In Leyla Çolpan's poem "Goethe's Theory of the Simorgh," ze meditates on migratory crows: "why should feathers make plain with color / their tiny, interior geometries." And yet, we can catch a glimpse, every so often, that "there is a candor / that could unstitch thirty colors from each crow." As the piano teacher in Ames Varos's story says to the young narrator, "One day you're going to grow into those eyes."

In their motionless motions, we believe journals can become small utopias: places to measure with our breath the suffering and joy of others, to weave them together with our own, to measure and remake time with breath and attention. We thank all our contributors for the time they've shared with us, for giving us strength and vision to remind us what we're fighting for. We thank you, reader, for making all the time we put into this journal worthwhile. Thank you for being here. Thank you for surviving, for keeping art alive. Thank you for collecting with us, and for envisioning our future.

Nick Rattner, *Editor* | Emelie Griffin, *Managing Editor* | Erik Brown, *Digital Editor*

THE 2020 GULF COAST PRIZE IN FICTION

Judged by Daniel Peña

This year's winner is "Clean Teen" by Francisco González

In "Clean Teen," the conflation of fantasy and reality brings one student into common ground with a young, predatory teacher as she navigates alcoholism, a failed career, and a marriage on the verge of collapse. Acting and reacting with and against their respective demons and hopes, this riveting story expertly navigates questions of power, class, exploitation, and desire as it chronicles the implosion of an American teenager and the things society projects onto young brown men in America today. I've never read characters with as much dimension, with as much immediacy. Francisco González is a writer to watch.

—Daniel Peña

This year's honorable mentions are "Independent People" by Kelly Sullivan & "Consumption" by Philip Anderson

Francisco González

Clean Teen

Francisco González

Around the time he entered the eighth grade, Agustín began to watch pornography on a blue iMac he had salvaged from a dumpster. There was a McDonald's next door to his apartment building, and he would use its Wi-Fi to view free clips. He did this while his grandmother wasn't home.

Agustín thought he was cautious, but he often let his guard down. One Saturday evening, during a marathon download session, he took a bathroom break and neglected to quit QuickTime Player. He didn't pause his newest video. Nor did he mute it. Instead, he left it playing in a loop.

He stepped across the hallway to the bathroom. He urinated, flushed, and washed his hands. Then he returned to find his grandmother standing just inside the threshold of his room.

For whatever reason, she had finished work early. She faced the computer screen, where two blonde women performed fellatio on a bald man in a black T-shirt. It was one of those poolside scenes in someone's backyard. The man sat in a deck chair. He cursed softly at the women, who moaned and giggled.

Agustín watched his grandmother watching the video. He observed her frown, her crossed arms. Later, he couldn't help but admire the fact that she'd walked into their apartment without a sound—an impressive demonstration of stealth. In that moment, though, he was choked with shame.

His grandmother trudged away to her bedroom. Agustín heard a drawer opening, closing. She reemerged with a cardboard box containing two-dozen condoms.

"When the time comes, use protection," she said. "Once you have a child, you'll never sleep again."

She handed him the box. Holding it made him feel doomed.

Agustín's grandmother barely slept. In the mornings and afternoons, she cleaned rich people's homes in Winterhaven. At night, she bused tables at a Korean restaurant that also served sushi. She often returned to their apartment in the small hours, and woke before dawn.

Agustín didn't want to end up like her. He wanted a job that was less like work and more like play. Occasionally, he considered whether he could be one of the actors in his pornographic videos. He imagined driving a fancy car to a studio in Miami or Los Angeles. He saw himself having sex with a different woman every day. The women would thank him, and the film crew would applaud his performance.

However, his fantasies always ended with him contracting a disease. This possibility frightened him so much that he decided it would be better to study hard and pursue another profession.

Agustín attended Mesquite Junior High School, an overcrowded, two-story complex in the heart of South Tucson. Rooms were crammed with as many as fifty children. The staff couldn't tell students apart, let alone remember their names. For the most part, they addressed them as "you."

Agustín's English class was taught in a "modular classroom"—a trailer on the far side of the athletic field. Its remoteness made him feel that he was being punished. The trailer smelled like wet paint. Agustín hated its thin walls, its fluorescent bulbs, its popcorn ceiling. It reminded him of a storage unit. Fortunately, English didn't require any effort. His teacher, Mrs. West, believed that school was pointless.

"It would make more sense for me—and all of you—to sit under a tree than to sit in this trailer," she said.

Agustín had a crush on Mrs. West, who was from Birmingham, Alabama. He liked her drawl. He felt special when she called him "sweetie." And he was fascinated by her long black hair, which had bolts of gray, despite the fact that she was in her twenties, younger than most of the other teachers.

The students looked forward to an easy "A" in English. Rather than make them read, write, or speak, Mrs. West allowed them to watch movies based on books.

She'd wheel a television out of the supply closet. Then she'd present the children with a pair of DVDs, and they'd choose one by a show of hands. Mostly, they got to watch Hollywood blockbusters. Whenever possible, they chose movies that were rated "R."

Sometimes Mrs. West would leave the trailer, claiming that she needed to find more chalk. She would return fifteen or twenty minutes later, without any chalk, appearing happier than before, but also drowsier, with bags beneath her bloodshot eyes. Between class periods, a few of Agustín's friends, who had encountered similar behavior in their own homes, speculated that Mrs. West was a drunk.

And they were right. Eventually Mrs. West stopped concealing her habit. One day, while the class watched *Jurassic Park* in semi-darkness, she reached inside her desk drawer and produced a bottle of whiskey, along with a steel cup. She gave herself a pour. She sniffed the liquid, sipped it, took a gulp.

"A bit woody," Mrs. West said. "Just the way I like it."

Her drinking became a matter of routine.

Every now and then, Mrs. West would nod off during a movie, and the students would nudge her awake at the end-credits. When a nudge wasn't enough, they would shake her by the shoulders, or yell at her, or both. But sometimes she looked so peaceful in slumber that it seemed cruel to rouse her, and they'd tiptoe out of the trailer, to their next class period.

Out of all the movies they saw, Agustín's favorite was *Starship Troopers*, from which he learned that, instead of attending college, you should attack distant planets. He wished that he, too, could leave Earth, in order to shoot giant arachnids in outer space. It would be a small price to pay for showering with naked women, like the young male soldiers in the movie.

Word got around, and the school principal showed up at Agustín's English class, flanked by two muscular janitors. At the sight of these men, Mrs. West groaned.

"Another talk, huh? You know how much I hate it when we have to talk."

Her forehead glistened. Her nose and cheeks were pink. The janitors glanced at

each other, as if they weren't sure what to do. The principal stared at the television, on which *The Beastmaster* played. His hands were balled into fists. He was so angry that he appeared to be out of breath.

"Fun's over, Stephanie. Leave your shit—we'll box it up for you."

"Fine," Mrs. West said. "Fine, then. But I'm union, and you'd better remember that."

Mrs. West stood and made her way toward the door. She had done very little to soften her boozy reek that day, and even Agustín, at the back of the trailer, could perceive it. Mrs. West couldn't walk in a straight line. The students gasped in unison when she stumbled, nearly falling to the floor, but she regained her footing at the last moment, bracing herself against the wall. Shrugging, she said, "It's these bourbon legs." To Agustín, this sounded like an apology.

The school sent children home with letters, expressing "sincere regret" for Mrs. West's "health issues," while insisting that she was "on her way to recovery." Agustín provided a loose interpretation for his grandmother, whose grasp of English was poor. She shook her head and told him that Mrs. West had gotten off easy. "She's no better than an animal. Back in Badiraguato, we would have flogged her and joked about it later."

Agustín's English class entered a transitional phase, where a rash of stand-ins filled out the rest of the fall semester. Among them: a woman who brought a guitar to class and played her original compositions; another woman, who took the children on a field trip to Domino's, where they learned how to fold pizza boxes; and a man resembling Dick Cheney, who wore cargo pants and tie-dye shirts.

In January, at the start of the spring semester, Mrs. West returned to teach. When Agustín walked into the trailer and saw her writing "iambic pentameter" on the chalkboard, he couldn't contain his joy.

"You came back!" he cried. His classmates tittered, and he wished he hadn't been so transparent.

"Naturally," Mrs. West said. "Where else would I go?"

Within minutes, Agustín could tell that she wasn't the same. Her eyes were clear and focused. Rather than slump at her desk, she now preferred to stand upright. Her skirt and turtleneck were spotless, with hardly a fold or a crease. It was as if someone had loaded her into a machine, which spat out a cleaner, well-pressed version of her.

Mrs. West began to assign homework. Gone were the daily movies, replaced with vocabulary quizzes, grammar lessons, and slender novels. Days passed, and the students waited for their teacher to revert to her old ways. When she didn't, some of them stopped showing up, and Agustín couldn't blame them. They must have found it difficult to unlearn what Mrs. West had taught them: that school didn't matter, that they'd be better off in the outside world.

Agustín didn't skip a single class, though. His attraction to Mrs. West persisted. He would arrive early, in order to make small talk, and he would always thank her on his way out the door. He loved Mrs. West's cursive annotations at the end of his compositions; sometimes they were longer than the assignment itself. He imagined that she was writing him letters, and her desire was encoded within them.

A few weeks into the semester, Mrs. West gave the class a new kind of assignment: a half-page short story.

Agustín wrote about a man who feared his microwave oven. Every evening after work, the man would place a bowl of instant noodles in the oven. Then, after setting the timer for two minutes and pressing "start," he'd flee to the living room and hide behind his couch. He did that because he thought the microwaves would give him cancer.

The day before the story was due, Agustín approached Mrs. West at the end of class. He asked if she could look at his draft and provide suggestions.

He wanted to show her that he'd taken the assignment seriously. He also hoped that, by being the last student to speak to her, he could maintain a foothold in her consciousness.

They sat at Mrs. West's desk, and it only took her a minute to read the story. She praised its premise, as well as its final sentence: *Of course, no one really knows how a microwave works*. But she made many corrections. Her pen lashed the page, carving boxes, hoops, and borders around words. By the time she finished, Agustín's story contained more red ink than black. It looked mutilated. It looked like a piece of roadkill.

Ashamed, Agustín bowed his head. "It's trash, isn't it?"

"It's a first draft. We all have to start somewhere."

Mrs. West placed her hand on his. Agustín was aware of her silver wedding band, along with the dust of chalk on her skin. They were alone in the trailer. He looked up to see her smiling; her teeth were straight and white. She squeezed for several seconds before breaking contact.

"I'm happy to check out your work, anytime," she said. "If you want me, you know how to find me."

When Agustín got home, he browsed pornography on his computer. Usually, if he was attracted to a woman, he would search for pornstars who resembled her. In Mrs. West's case, it was easy to single out performers who matched her build, the shape of her face, her eyes. But Agustín found those women unsatisfactory—there was always something not quite right about them. He had memorized Mrs. West's finer features, her mannerisms, the modulations and inflections of her voice. He had come to believe that she was one of a kind.

On a February morning, snow fell in Tucson. The Catalina Mountains glittered with fresh powder. Cacti froze, sagged, and broke to pieces. It was only two thirds of an inch, but the entire city went into shock. The school district officials, who had never faced such an unusual situation, lost their nerve and sent everyone home at midday.

As the students shuffled out of the trailer, Mrs. West asked if any of them needed a ride. Sensing an opportunity to be close to her a few minutes longer, Agustín said, "I could use a lift." He spoke quietly, intending to sound grateful, but also reluctant.

Mrs. West and Agustín walked to the parking lot. She led him to her car, a Toyota Prius with a Jesus fish on its rear bumper. Agustín clicked his seatbelt. He looked out the windshield and saw snow melting into puddles. Sunlight had overcome the clouds, and steam wafted up from the asphalt. Mrs. West put on a pair of dark glasses. She pressed the ignition button and put her car in reverse.

"Whereabouts do you live?" she asked.

Agustín mentioned his cross-streets, and she raised her eyebrows. He was used to that kind of reaction; his barrio had a colorful reputation.

"Your parents will be home soon?" she asked.

"I live with my grandma. She works late."

Mrs. West grunted.

"I'm not comfortable just deserting you there. Why don't you hang with me for a while? I can whip you up some lunch."

Mrs. West lived in a development surrounded by walls. In order to access her neighborhood, you had to type a code into a pin pad. Beyond the walls, roads were smooth and clean, as if they'd barely been used. Her community contained dozens of two-story houses, all of them white, or pink, or brown. The buildings were new enough that their orange roof tiles had not yet been bleached by the Arizona sun.

Agustín was exhilarated at being inside his teacher's home. The Wests' kitchen had marble countertops and wood floors, which were so firm that they accepted his weight without a creak. While Mrs. West rummaged through her refrigerator, Agustín explored the living room.

On a wall hung Mrs. West's diploma from Bryn Mawr College, along with photos of the Wests, together and alone. In one photo, they stood side by side

on a rocky beach. Agustín's eyes lingered on Mrs. West, in her blue bikini; her husband wore only a pair of swim trunks, his belly overhanging them. Neither one of them smiled.

In another photo, a crowd of policemen stood witness while the mayor of Tucson pinned a medal on Mrs. West's husband. Beneath this was a framed newspaper clipping, which recounted an attempted bank robbery, and the role of "Detective West" in putting a stop to it. He had shot one of the thieves and singlehandedly "subdued" the other, the article said. Agustín was surprised at the revelation that Mrs. West was married to a cop.

"Oh, that's just Teddy," she said, behind him. "Don't pay him any mind."

Agustín read the article again, and the word "subdued" lodged itself in his head. He could not comprehend its precise meaning. Nor could he understand whether Teddy West's gunshot had slain the first bank-robber. He decided it probably had.

Mrs. West began to knead Agustín's shoulders. As she did this, her breasts pressed against his back. Agustín scarcely noticed. He was lost in his thoughts about Teddy, whose name didn't sound like it should belong to a killer.

"What are we having for lunch?" Agustín asked.

Mrs. West took hold of his arms. She turned him toward her. "You're a sweet kid, you know that?"

With her face inches from his, she smiled. Then she leaned in to kiss him. "Wait," Agustín said, or tried to say. He attempted to pull away, but Mrs. West didn't let go. Her strength caught him off guard.

The first thing that scared him was the fact that he found it hard to breathe with her mouth locked on his. He acknowledged excitement, too, weighing against the fright, but he couldn't keep track of her maneuvers. He was shocked at the coolness of her lips, the darting of her tongue, her hands moving up and down his back, underneath his T-shirt.

When Agustín felt his brain slipping into darkness, he fought to regroup. Mrs. West seemed a lot taller now than she had in class, standing before the lime-green chalkboard. And the mechanics of kissing, which had appeared simple in pornography, were laborious and counterintuitive. Mrs. West knew what to do,

though, that much was clear. He kept his hands on her waist and tried to let himself relax against her. She smelled like Tide. He detected peppermint on her saliva—just a passing tingle.

Agustín shut his eyes, opened them again. He wondered if his grandmother had ever experienced these sensations, perhaps in an era when she was not yet his grandmother. Then he felt ridiculous for thinking about her at such an important moment.

Minutes later, Agustín lay with Mrs. West on the floorboards. She had removed his clothing and hers.

"Shouldn't we use a condom?" he whispered. Even in his daze, he could not forget his grandmother's advice.

"No need—I've got an IUD."

Mrs. West laughed, and Agustín felt stupid, as if she had just pointed out an obvious error in one of his papers. He had forgotten what "IUD" stood for. He didn't want to compound his embarrassment by asking.

Mrs. West grinned as she drove Agustín back to the Southside. Her lipstick was smudged, and her blouse wasn't tucked into her pants anymore. She didn't seem to care.

They remained silent for several minutes. Agustín realized that his hands were trembling; he clenched and unclenched them. He craved the radio, a voice, an outside sound for his mind to lean on. When they reached a four-way stop, Mrs. West turned to look at him.

"Happy now?" she said. "Oh yeah—I bet you are."

Her tone seemed to imply that the sex was something he had planned. She lowered her sunglasses, winked at him. Agustín didn't know how to respond, so he stared at his sneakers. He quietly reviewed the sequence of events: he had asked

for a ride, he had gotten into the car. Even so, their encounter didn't feel like it had been his idea. He hadn't expected it to go as far as it had gone.

Mrs. West dropped him off in an alley, a block from his building, so they wouldn't be seen. From start to finish, they had spent roughly two hours together.

Agustín entered his apartment, locking the deadbolt behind him. His grandmother wouldn't be back until after midnight, so he had plenty of time to shower and change. He took tortillas out of the fridge and began to heat them on the stove. He had missed lunch. He was starving.

That was Thursday. On Friday morning, Agustín's genitals were sore. He had trouble putting on his jeans. When he walked to school, he stopped repeatedly to adjust his crotch. He was late to first period.

In class that day, Mrs. West acted like nothing had happened between them. Agustín winced, bit his tongue, crossed his legs. Meanwhile, she observed him, addressed him, corrected him, the same as any other student. She defined vocabulary words, etching them on the board. *Foreshadowing*. *Allegory*. *Hubris*. Agustín searched her face, her movements, for signs of distress, but saw nothing. He didn't mention his discomfort to Mrs. West. He was too ashamed. He reflected that perhaps he had made a mistake during sex, that the soreness was his own fault.

On Saturday, Agustín's friends stopped by the apartment and tried to lure him out for a quinceañera after-party, but he turned them away with an excuse about math homework. He took some of his grandmother's Tylenol from the bathroom cabinet. It made little difference.

The pain was complicated by his guilty conscience. He wanted to tell someone about the incident, anyone who might advise him, reassure him. But his tryst with Mrs. West was too outrageous to be believed. And if someone did believe him, they would probably end up blowing his cover. Agustín could not forget the photo of Teddy West, or the newspaper article beneath it. Again, he pondered the word "subdued," and he thought himself in danger of being arrested—shot, even. Having sex with a detective's wife seemed like the sort of thing that would get you killed.

Agustín resolved to deal with the irritation on his own. A real man, he reasoned, would get to the other side of it without making a scene. He hoped he hadn't contracted something fatal; he hoped it wasn't HIV.

He didn't worry for long, though. He was only in pain for two days and two nights. On Sunday morning, he woke up, ate a bowl of oatmeal with his grandmother, and felt fine. It was hard to believe he had ever been sore at all.

Agustín hadn't anticipated that Mrs. West would want to have sex again, but it became a once-or-twice-weekly activity. She established rules for communicating. Agustín had a Samsung flip-phone, and they exchanged numbers, but, at her insistence, it was always she who called him to set up a meeting, and never the other way around. Mrs. West forbade texting. She justified this by saying that her husband could discover the messages.

Usually they would meet after school, on Tuesdays and Thursdays, while both Teddy West and Agustín's grandmother were working. There was a Quik Mart three blocks from Agustín's building, and Mrs. West would pull into its parking lot. She'd drive him to her house. On the way there, she'd trace shapes on his knee, below the hem of his basketball shorts, without taking her eyes off the road.

Mostly, they had sex on her king-sized bed in the master bedroom, although there were instances when she couldn't wait to climb the stairs, and they would do it in less conventional places. Agustín kept a mental list of these: the dining room table, the leather armchair in the living room, the downstairs bathroom, the stairs themselves. More than once, they got no farther than the garage. Whenever they couldn't meet for a week or more, Agustín would recite the spots where they'd had sex, until he had the certainty that he was valuable to her.

Only the black upholstered couch, in the den, was off limits. Mrs. West said that her husband spent more time there than anyplace else, perched in front of his forty-three-inch television. A sports fan, he liked to watch the Cardinals, the Diamondbacks, the Suns, for endless hours. She was afraid he'd perceive

something amiss. A shifted cushion. A strand of hair. Something small that most people wouldn't notice. Something a detective would notice right away.

"If Teddy finds out about us, he'll murder me first. Then he'll come after you," she said.

Agustín had already reached that conclusion on his own, and he was glad that Mrs. West was sensible enough to fear her husband, just as he did. At the same time, he found himself becoming jealous of Teddy West. It was strange to feel this way about a man he'd never met—a man who had killed before and could kill again. Agustín wanted to displace him. He wanted Mrs. West to be his, and his alone.

Due to his growing jealousy, Agustín liked it when Mrs. West complained about the state of her marriage. Between bouts of sex, she described her husband's infidelity. Agustín learned that Teddy West had started affairs with some of his female coworkers. The Tucson Police Department often hosted social functions—softball games, dinners, fundraisers—and Teddy would force his wife to attend and interact with his mistresses.

"I wish they would all eat shit and die," Mrs. West said.

Agustín was delighted to hear this. It nurtured his hope that Mrs. West's resentment toward her husband would increase her reliance on him. Still, he knew he couldn't crowd Teddy out completely, not unless Mrs. West took a stand and divorced the man, or at least kicked him out. Her unwillingness to do so struck Agustín as absurd, but pity kept him from telling her as much.

One day, however, unable to contain his frustration, he asked Mrs. West why she had chosen to marry such a wretched individual in the first place. As soon as he did, he cringed at his own stupidity.

"You've got balls, asking that," she said, and laughed, but Agustín sensed indignation in her voice. They lay naked on her bed, which was so large that he thought an entire family should sleep on it. Her head rested on Agustín's chest. He had no doubt that she could hear his racing heart. After a moment's pause, she said, "We met in Philly. On the subway, of all places. He was a cadet in the academy, and I had a thing for policemen. It made me blind. Actually, I think Teddy could've just as easily been a firefighter. You know how it is—men in uniform."

Agustín nodded, although he wasn't sure what she meant. In hopes of easing the tension, he changed the subject. He asked her if she got good grades when she was his age.

"In middle school? I had other, hugely important things to deal with at the time, such as getting high. But you don't get high, do you? You're a clean teen." She pinched his cheek. "You're a good boy."

Agustín didn't like being thought of as a boy. He nearly asked Mrs. West if she loved him yet, in the way that a man and a woman would love one another, but held back. He still found her intimidating. Partly, this was because he had been taught to view whites as dangerous, and she was one of the whitest people he had ever seen outside of a pornographic movie. Her skin made the bed sheets appear beige by comparison.

Then, too, Agustín was conscious of her black-and-silver hair spilling over his arm, her smooth legs shifting against his, and it felt wrong to challenge her. He told himself he should be thankful for this type of relationship, which others enjoyed.

Days and weeks went by.

In March, Agustín's grandmother turned sixty-three. To celebrate, the two of them rode a bus to Campbell Avenue and had dinner at Chipotle, a restaurant they'd never been to. After a few bites, his grandmother dropped her burrito and scowled.

"I thought beans and tortillas were impossible to ruin, but these people wouldn't know good cooking if it kicked their teeth in." She threw up her hands. "Whose brother-in-law invented this place? Nobody could have been paid to do it!"

On the bus back to their apartment, she told Agustín about one of her coworkers, whose daughter had been admitted to Northern Arizona University.

"And Martínez keeps lording it over us. He thinks the rest of us are beneath him. Ha! You and me will show him, won't we? Where will you apply? I've heard that Harvard is the best!"

Agustín's grandmother hugged him, and he smiled, but her question left him petrified. He was unprepared to face the prospect of life at a distant college. The thought of it made him miserable. He didn't want to leave Mrs. West behind, didn't want their relationship to end. He considered whether he should find a way to marry her.

Mrs. West often praised Agustín. She once remarked that he had a rock-solid ass. Another time, she said she wanted them to stay in bed forever. She told him that he was a naturally talented kisser, that she wished she'd met him sooner. Her compliments sounded familiar, though he couldn't remember when or where he'd heard them.

By then, Agustín's anxiety was continually growing. They had been seeing each other for more than two months, and the secrecy had turned into a terrible burden. He was plagued by fits of paranoia. In class with Mrs. West, he couldn't stop asking himself if he'd left telltale evidence at her house; he expected squad cars to pull up to the trailer at any moment, sirens blaring. Whenever his grandmother asked him how school was going, he'd immediately begin to sweat through his clothing. He endured recurring nightmares, in which faceless policemen chased him around town, pistols drawn.

Occasionally, Mrs. West would disappear into the bathroom to "wash up" after they had sex in her bedroom. She would close the door behind her, and it would remain closed for several minutes. Agustín, suspecting that her husband could be hiding anywhere, would inspect his surroundings. He'd peer inside the bedroom's oak armoire, which was tall enough to stand in. He'd look under the mattress, behind the curtains, and out the bay window. He'd check the hallway, too. Even after assuring himself that nobody was hiding nearby, he feared that a recording device might be planted in the room. At times, he had the urge to rip open the pillows and examine their contents.

And yet Mrs. West appeared increasingly carefree. Sometimes she'd settle down beneath the covers, close her eyes, and nap in Agustín's arms. He had seen

her sleep in class, but this was different. He enjoyed her steady respiration, the rise and fall of her bare shoulders, the odd twitch as she dreamed. She didn't look like an authority figure. He could believe that she was once a child, someone vulnerable in need of protection, warmth.

One evening, while she dozed, he photographed her with his phone. He didn't think she would mind. He made a habit of looking at her picture every night when they weren't together. He thought that Mrs. West trusted him, that their relationship had deepened and was bound to deepen further.

Agustín could feel himself changing. Not only had he lost his taste for pornography, but he had also begun to regard his friends as members of a separate species. It was hard to talk to them, hard to relate to them. They bragged incessantly about making out with girls, feeling them up, getting their phone numbers. It seemed to Agustín that he had bounded ahead of them. He had become a man, while they remained locked away in time, as boys. By March, he was a confirmed loner. He spent his free periods moping in the library. At lunch, he ate by himself in a corner of the cafeteria.

Agustín avoided the girls he had once been obsessed with, but, to his bafflement, they periodically went out of their way to express interest in him. Foremost among them was Yesenia, a Guatemalan girl from P.E. class, who enjoyed temporary tattoos, and swore that she would cover herself in real tattoos the moment she turned eighteen. During one of Agustín's walks from Science to Social Studies, she approached him in the hallway. She asked if he would watch a Friday-night movie with her. As Yesenia spoke, she stroked Agustín's bicep and giggled, as if they had some kind of preexisting relationship. He accepted her invitation because he couldn't improvise an excuse to decline it.

Their date, at Loft Cinema, was dreadful. Yesenia didn't apologize for arriving twenty minutes late. With money he'd borrowed from his grandmother, Agustín paid for their tickets. He paid for Yesenia's popcorn. He paid for her lemonade, as well.

They watched *Howl's Moving Castle*. All the while, Yesenia never looked at Agustín. At one point, he touched her hand, and she yanked it away. Near the end of the film, he tried to kiss her, but she turned her head and dodged him. Irritated, he squirmed in his seat. Their interaction felt tedious, onerous, compared to the sensations he had shared with Mrs. West.

Outside the theater, Yesenia gave Agustín a quick hug, thanked him for the movie, and began to walk away. He called after her.

"It's only ten. Where you going?"

"Home."

"But why?"

"Because that's where I live, fool. You got my number, though."

Agustín was confused by her apparent lack of interest in having sex. By the time he got back to his building, the confusion had given way to anger. He wrote off the whole experience as a monumental waste of energy.

About two weeks later, Yesenia ambushed Agustín in the cafeteria. She jabbed a finger in his face.

"You never texted me. So that's it, huh?" she said. "What are you, a fuckin' faggot?"

It took him a few seconds to register that he'd offended her.

Eventually, Teddy West started working late shifts. Agustín would wait for his grandmother to begin snoring, then he'd sneak out of the apartment to meet Mrs. West.

One night, they almost got caught. They fell asleep in each other's arms, and, since Mrs. West had forgotten to set an alarm, they didn't wake up until five in the morning. They threw their clothes on in a panic. They were terrified at the knowledge that Agustín's grandmother would have noticed his absence. And Teddy was due to return at any minute.

Half-dressed, they leaped into Mrs. West's Prius. She was in such a hurry that she had gotten a shirt on, but her bra still dangled from her left shoulder, and she accidentally shut the driver's door on it. In her haste to reach Agustín's neighborhood, she ran a red light and three stop signs. With every traffic violation, Agustín imagined what would happen if a policeman pulled them over. He envisioned Teddy interrogating him, beating him, murdering him.

They reached Agustín's barrio, and he jumped out of the car. It was the cusp of monsoon season. The air tasted cool, charged with captive rain. Agustín cursed: someone had locked his building's entrance, and he hadn't brought his key with him. His apartment was on the ground floor. He tried to get in through the kitchen window, which faced the street; however, humidity had swollen the wooden frame. In the process of forcing the window open, Agustín made a tremendous racket.

He found his grandmother in the kitchen. She sat in a chair, sipping coffee, watching Telemundo. She'd been waiting for him.

"Welcome back," she said. She grabbed the remote, switched off the television set, and took a draught from her mug. "I can see right through you, m'ijo. Remember the proverb: 'the devil isn't smart because he's the devil, he's smart because he's old.' I know you were with a girl. I can smell her on you."

"Oh. Yes," Agustín stammered. "Yes, I was."

"What's her name?"

He eyed the window behind him, and saw new light edging over the mountains. He felt cornered. He couldn't bring himself to lie so brazenly to this woman, who cared only for his well-being. Steeling himself, Agustín decided to confess the truth, the whole story, from start to finish: the first visit to Mrs. West's house, the kissing, the sex. But before he had a chance to say anything, his grandmother burst out laughing.

"Ha ha ha! Don't worry, you don't have to tell me! But you took care of it?"

"Took care?"

She narrowed her eyes.

"Prevention! You left nothing to chance, right?"

Agustín remembered Mrs. West's IUD.

"That's right."

On a Friday evening, one week before the end of the spring semester, Agustín and his grandmother bumped into Mrs. West at Safeway. When Mrs. West crossed their path, Agustín was pushing a shopping cart, which contained a sack of pinto beans, a jar of Tang, and a ten-pound canister of Nescafé. He was conscious of the fact that he would appear poor.

Mrs. West wore black tights, and a pink sweatshirt with the word "princess" written across her chest. To Agustín's horror, she introduced herself to his grandmother, shook her hand, and remarked that her grandson was reading and writing far above his grade level. Agustín's grandmother smiled and nodded, pretending to understand. She said, "Thank you. Very good."

Agustín remembered his latest session at Mrs. West's home, two nights prior. She had stripped naked, but kept her pumps on. At some point during sex, she had forgotten herself and gashed Agustín's shoulders with her fingernails. Now, in the supermarket aisle containing trash bags and paper plates, Agustín was keenly aware of the red marks she had inflicted, which smarted underneath his T-shirt.

Mrs. West kept talking at his grandmother.

"Agustín has been a real joy to work with. You should be excited! If he keeps this up, he can get into any college he wants."

"Great!" his grandmother said. She knew the meaning of the word "college."

Meanwhile, Agustín hoped he was acting almost normal. His stomach surged, and he found it difficult to say anything at all. He waited for his grandmother to notice the veiled chemistry between Mrs. West and himself; he waited for her face to fall in a moment of recognition, followed by a burst of outrage. But his grandmother only continued to nod and grin, pleased by the handful of English words she could comprehend.

Agustín watched as Mrs. West waved goodbye, walked to the deli, and placed an order from a white-aproned attendant. He asked himself if she had taken up drinking again, because she appeared to enjoy making choices that invited disaster. He couldn't believe she had engaged his grandmother in conversation. He concluded that he was expendable, and her carelessness would get him killed.

Agustín's grandmother snickered as they made their way to a checkout lane.

"So I finally got to meet that famous teacher of yours. She seems nice enough, but someone should tell her she's dressed like a woman-for-hire."

Groceries advanced along the conveyor belt. Agustín swallowed hard. He wished he could feel again the thrill of Mrs. West's hand touching his for the first time. Before, her presence held so much wonder. Now she reminded him that the world contained too many ways to die.

All he could think of that weekend was his own apprehension. He kept to himself, in his room, gritting his teeth. Mrs. West called his phone a dozen times. Agustín did not answer.

On Monday, Agustín packed his books and binders and stepped out the door, but could not bring himself to go to school, where he would see Mrs. West in English class. His intuition warned him that if he set foot in that trailer, something awful would happen. He went instead to Reid Park, a ten-minute walk from his apartment building.

He was fourteen. Years later, long after Mrs. West went to prison, he would revisit that morning in his frailest moments. He sat beneath a palo verde tree, next to the duck pond. He tried to shake his head clear. Despite sun and blue sky, he couldn't stop shivering. He thought about Teddy West and imagined that man's existence, which was better than his. He hated Teddy, wished him dead, and thought he would be content if he were him.

Agustín's phone vibrated in his front pocket. He was a liar and a monster, and his destiny was no longer his own. Suddenly he gasped, lurched forward, and vomited on desiccated grass, heaving until tears streamed down his face.

Other lives moved on. An old man tossed hunks of bread into greenish water, where ducks fought over them. Yoga practitioners stretched on their mats. There were joggers, and homeless, and women with strollers. No one bothered to ask what a sick child was doing in the park, in the middle of a school day.

THE 2020 GULF COAST PRIZE IN POETRY

Judged by Kazim Ali

This year's winner is
"Goethe's Theory of the Simorgh"
by Leyla Çolpan

In "Goethe's Theory of the Simorgh," Leyla Çolpan contends not only with the physical universe and a human's history of ideas about such a universe, but also enacts that essential gesture of all real poetry: to, in language, weave the motion of sound-as-energy, as it enters matter, to know.

—Kazim Ali

This year's honorable mentions are
"Deer, the Disinterring" by Alexander Lumans
& "Transcript of My Mother's Sleeptalk: Chincoteague"
by Hannah Perrin King

Leyla Çolpan

Goethe's Theory of the Simorgh

Leyla Çolpan

Out, already, from the west the snowlight
has come crawling,
unsupported, through a knot of crows, to hang

like a beetle wing would hang—sheerly,
iridescent, through force of its own will, the wrong way up—
from the white gypsum of my lintel.

It was Newton, not Goethe,
who imagined color might be knitted, too, from slenderness
into slenderness—from needles, light bending through their razor-

fine stitch—who saw the dead peacock's feather
would not be broken further by inspection.
In Goethe's eyes, that tryer, dead colors were still beating,

and no whiteness, no candor could be broken,
only, by watching, beautifully bent—as when snow caught
against a window, as if by surprise, uncoils

faintly out in yellow-blue sheets—
as when, each winter, against stark western light,
the crows evacuate my city.

Their feathers, too, might be rippling, chrysochlorous
from the shifting angles of my window—or fixed like charcoal
to eyes watching from beneath.

You would think someone were, somewhere, burning—
trying to burn—
what could have otherwise been called a rainbow.

And why should feathers make plain with color
their tiny, interior geometries—
volition suggesting, prematurely, *flight*—

Why should the poet, watching, imagine only needles,
disappearing in the scalpel of her sight?
Sharp bird, you have your own color. You are not blunted

by any color of the earth.
The winter sky is full
of nicks,

that wink noisily open overhead—out of reach,
yet still asking me to stretch my fingers through them.
Between white snow, refracting,

and white smoke, refracting, there is a candor
that could unstitch thirty colors from each crow.
It is not the simple mirror that can break you.

THE 2020 GULF COAST PRIZE IN NONFICTION

Judged by Emma Copley Eisenberg

This year's winner is
"How to Apologize" by Lisa Low

Lisa Low's "How to Apologize" is a rigorous and messy (in the best way) examination of how power, race, gender, and experience inflect and reflect our most complicated impulses and ways of being with each other.

—Emma Copley Eisenberg

This year's honorable mentions are
"Iroquois Point" by Tyson Morgan
& "Marginalia" by Negesti Kaudo

How to Apologize

Lisa Low

Sometimes, when I apologize to my husband during an argument, I picture cartoon versions of us, our bodies turned into stereotypes. An Asian woman, curtained by her hair, lowers her head into her chest. A white man sits next to her on the couch, almost basketball player-height, clad in flannel and tattooed—shortcut for a kind of desirable millennial. You can see her sitting on her legs, knees indenting the seat cushion. You can see her tilting forward, melting. You see her kneel while he faces you, his eyes the unbroken blue of a sky you walk under and smile.

I am learning to say sorry even if I am not told sorry first, even when there might never be a sorry. When we're both at fault, my husband always apologizes first. In those moments, I feel my shoulders start to unpinch themselves. He begins to become beautiful again in my mind. "Sorry!" I say, brightening, as if the word weighs nothing. "Sorry," he says, he repeats, until he believes something is wrong with him.

A few years ago, I realized I don't apologize, outside of a casual sorry that I'd be late, or sorry for losing an email. Light apologies, like a greeting, thanking someone for waiting for me—but never in a serious conversation between people trying and failing to understand each other. When, even between friends, it felt like anything you said could expose you, turn into a target on your back.

I'm embarrassed by this lack in myself and immediately blame my parents, who, during my childhood, I'd never heard say sorry to each other, my brother, or me. Then I rationalize my personality: nonconfrontational—or lazy—to the point I'll agree with someone to avoid sharing my different thoughts. This makes sense, I tell myself. I make sense.

Women are stereotyped as over-apologizers. When I tell a friend I'm writing an essay about apologies, she asks if it's because I apologize too much. I tell her I, too, am trying to excise the extra sorrys from my emails, texts, and everyday conversations. But I'm also—if not more—interested in the apologies I can't seem to say. Articles I find online usually focus on the first kind of sorry. In a *Vogue* article from November 1978, Jane O'Reilly describes the "agonizing problem" facing women, citing a series of unnecessary apologies, from running into someone with a shopping cart, to bad weather, to choosing a boring movie. She gives examples of women apologizing to neighbors, family members, strangers, a dog, a dining chair. "Women seem to feel responsible for all environmental problems and for everything else that might affect the happiness, comfort, and well-being of our loved ones. We are sorry our husbands are tired, and we are sorry our children have too much homework," she writes. Towards the end of the article, she pinpoints the source: "Apologizing too much is probably part of women's fear of success. It reflects guilt, low self-esteem, a touch of misplaced arrogance."

A 1995 article in the *Philadelphia Inquirer* by Sally Steenland clarifies the difference between a sorry that takes responsibility for blame and a sorry that means, "It's too bad that happened." For women, she writes, the second kind of sorry is what linguistics professor Deborah Tannen calls a "conversational ritual," but since men's modes of conversation are dominant, women end up misunderstood, misinterpreted. What should women do? "Probably nothing. Instead of feeling guilty or going into therapy, women would be better off learning a bilingual style for the office." She ends with Tannen's suggestion that, if co-workers tell women to stop saying sorry, they flip it back on them: "You should say 'I'm sorry' more often. It would make you more likable."

In 2015, Sloane Crosley wondered in the *New York Times* why women are still apologizing even after there are so many strong and confident female role models. She argues, contrary to popular belief, that a woman's sorry is actually assertive, a reflex for having to bend their words and bodies into what's desirable to men, a revolt against power structures. "So we should stop," she writes. "It's not what

we're saying that's the problem, it's what we're *not* saying. The sorrys are taking up airtime that should be used for making logical, declarative statements, expressing opinions and relaying accurate impressions of what we want." I think of emails I already spend too much time writing, fearing how long it'd take to articulate what I really want to say.

Apologizing, it seems, is yet another way women must fix the way they look.

In the house where I grew up, my dad regularly angered my mom, who yelled at him while my brother and I didn't fall asleep at night. I couldn't hear what they were fighting about, but I knew he'd done something she righted with her yelling. My brother, a typical teenager, angered my parents, who still bring up times he ignored them as if wanting an apology. I almost never got mad at my dad or brother—it was my mom I clashed with. We only argued a few times a year, but each time was intense. She didn't let me buy an 'N Sync CD, she wanted me to stay in-state for college, she stressed me out telling me how to put away dishes or clean cooking utensils. Most of the things we argued about were dumb or minor, amplified by my feeling that she couldn't understand me or didn't want to try. It was that feeling I resented, sunk into. While I cried and hiccupped sometimes for hours at a time, writing in my journal in all-caps, my statuesque mother went about her day like nothing had happened, which was true: for her, nothing had happened. She'd done nothing.

After crying or not crying, my mom and I emerged, eventually, from different parts of the house, ready to move on. She'd been ready. I was defeated and ready. My skin buzzed in the aftermath; underneath the anger I hadn't yet shed, a fraction of me was grateful to avoid the awkwardness of an apology from her.

After spending my life studying whiteness, measuring myself against it, I tell my husband I understand white people better than they understand me. I

take on the responsibility of explaining my family to him. At first I think this is a two-way street.

"Let's explain our families to each other," I say to him early on, advised by my brother and sister-in-law who are also in an interracial relationship. This is how we don't say sorry, I tell him, this is how my mom is always right. This is how to wash greens to remove all the invisible sand from their leaves. This is why we rinse utensils from the drawer before cooking or eating. This is why we fight for the bill, this is how to fight not wanting to pay in the first place, this is how to give up fighting. This is how we just started saying "I love you" at the end of phone calls. This is us removing slippers before walking on the rug.

Last year, I vacationed with my parents in Vancouver while my husband, a special ed teacher, finished out the last month of his school year. Each night, we returned to our IKEA-outfitted Airbnb satisfied by gardens and Chinese food. Each day I almost got too annoyed with my parents but didn't, waffling between trip-planning stress, getting used to spending all day together, fearing for their aging bodies, enjoying time I don't usually have with them, and laughing at their quirky habits. We ate steamed free-range chicken and mango shaved ice together. I researched many things online. My dad strayed from Google Maps as usual. My mom took many photos of me posing under rhododendron archways and on a rock, a waterfall sparkling to my left. She linked arms with me and complained about my dad. "You and your brother are more mature than him," she said, by then an old assertion of hers.

The second to last morning in our garden apartment, over oatmeal and tea my parents brought in their suitcase, I told her about my brother's new cookbook, Samin Nosrat's *Salt, Fat, Acid, Heat*.

"Chris said your cooking is no salt, no fat, no acid, no heat," I said, repeating a joke my brother texted me a few months before when he got the cookbook. We'd grown up hiding chips in our bedrooms, instructed to peel the skin off chicken nuggets. Cooking oil was banned at one point. So were tomatoes, which had

irritated my mom's stomach lining for a few years. My brother and I nicknamed her cooking style LHC for low heat cooking. I laughed a little retelling his text.

"That's not true," my mom said. She didn't usually wear makeup, only lipstick, and it was too early in the day to "put on her lips," as she said. I could see inches of white hair down the middle of her part. For years she'd been indecisive about dyeing or not dyeing her hair—afraid it would cause cancer—deciding to go gray, then redyeing again before a friend's son's or daughter's wedding, her family coming into town, or bible study. I was happy to see she had decided to stop.

"Pretty much, though," I said. I wanted her to acknowledge the joke, like something she'd enjoy if only she'd be more open-minded.

"Avocado has fat," she said. She sipped her tea. "I use oil! Butter sometimes."

"But isn't it funny? And mostly true? Think about it," I said, scooting out the white plastic dining chairs that were a step above folding chairs. I rinsed my oatmeal bowl. I could feel the edges of my mood. Should've planned for a shorter trip, I thought. "You love low heat cooking. That's just one thing."

"That's not true what you're saying about me." Her tone flattened, sharpened.

"Fine, okay," I said. Feeling like a teenager, I left the kitchen for my hospital-white room with the hot covers. I got into bed and called my husband.

He talked me down. It was annoying, he agreed, but I was probably annoyed from the trip generally. My mom's tone had made me feel bad—it sucks to feel misunderstood. He nudged me to the bigger picture. I didn't want to see the big picture, but what would make the rest of the trip manageable?

We hung up, and after an hour in bed of feeling hurt, I decided to apologize. But not without trying to get her to apologize to me too.

The first of four entries of "apology" in the *Oxford English Dictionary* defines the word as "the pleading off from a charge or imputation, whether expressed, implied, or only conceived as possible; defence of a person, or vindication of an institution, etc., from accusation or aspersion." Published examples of the word date back to the 1500s. But no one today uses "apology" like English minister Francis Trigge

did in 1589, when he published *An Apologie or Defence of our Dayes* on the English Reformation. This first sense of the word reflects its Greek roots: the two halves of the word mean "away, off" and "speaking." Together, they mean "a speech in defence."

The second entry of "apology," at least in definition, loses the formality and urgency of the first. Instead of "pleading off," which makes me think of the body shaped into repentance, desperation—bent knees, clasped hands, pleading eyes—the second entry uses the language of the rational: "justification, explanation, or excuse, of an incident or course of action." In 1598, Shakespeare wrote in *Love's Labour's Lost*, "His enter and exit shalbe strangling a Snake; and I will haue an Apologie for that purpose." But in 2020, I think of apologies for late arrivals or emails—anything easily explained away, that doesn't incite emotion. I think of non-apologies, whose main structure is the excuse.

The third entry defines an apology as "An explanation offered to a person affected by one's action that no offence was intended, coupled with the expression of regret for any that may have been given; or, a frank acknowledgement of the offence with expression of regret for it, by way of reparation." Its earliest documented usage appeared at nearly the same time as the second entry, but it's the more enduring definition of the two, what most of us today think of the apology. While the explanation of intent and acknowledgement of the offense are interchangeable here, the regret has no substitute.

The last entry recognizes bad apologies: "Something which, as it were, merely appears to apologize for the absence of what ought to have been there; a poor substitute." In this last evolution of the word, the meaning of the word becomes the empty shell of the word, a façade. Besides "hipster," I can't think of any other words like this—though I'm sure there are more than two. In 1754 in *The Connoisseur*, a London newspaper: "Waistcoats edged with a narrow cord, which serves as an apology for lace." In 1874 in *The Life of Charles Dickens* by John Forster: "To swallow a hasty apology for a dinner."

Although it's since mostly disappeared, in the DNA of the word is the idea of self-defense. I'm surprised but not too surprised to learn this. I think of my apologies as so vulnerable, just because I've said them. Under the human surfaces of an apology, I imagine a lacquer like a protection of myself.

During visits with my in-laws, when we're alone in my husband's childhood bedroom, I tell him: this is why I don't know what to say at dinner, this is me outside of your family's humor, this is me mentioning writing about racism, this is me breaking the golden rule of whiteness by saying "white," this is a lot of gifts to receive at Christmas, this is my first stocking. We look at the blue walls of the room, sore from sleeping on a full-size bed. My husband believes I don't like his family. I do, I insist. He doesn't feel like he can say how he feels about mine.

A common idea on relationships says couples fight the same fight over and over. The fight might look different on the outside, or at the start of the fight, but the same few issues are at its core. "But you guys don't yell," I remember a friend saying to me once when comparing our dynamics with significant others. "Have we never had a fight then?" I ask my husband later. We laugh and decide to still call our fights fights. There's no yelling, but there's often crying, usually on my part, but sometimes on his. It's an hour or a few hours, it cuts into our bedtime, we become angrier we're losing sleep, but we always want to get the fight over immediately and won't sleep on it. I picture couples who take time to cool down like adults, separate rooms where they become calm again. But aren't these the same people who yell at each other? I take stock of our fights otherwise. They boil down to:

1) My husband is easygoing and I'm detail-oriented. He's nonconfrontational and I'm ready to comment on the texture of rice he made, the forgotten produce sticker from the bell pepper now in our curry, his nose hairs, or the bathroom counter overdue for cleaning. He's forgetful, he says and thanks me for reminding him. I'm not shy. Things add up. He feels like he can't do anything right and I won't give him grace. I feel like I've just offered information, that I'm the one keeping this house together.

2) The texture of rice he made isn't right; he doesn't understand why we pretend to want to pay for friends at restaurants, why I want him to put groceries away at

my family's house when he's already in bed. He feels like his thoughts don't matter. "A racial misunderstanding," I describe to a friend.

3) I've made my husband feel bad, but he's also made me feel bad in the process. He's so good at saying sorry that he says it right away, but I explain my intentions: see? I feel better, but my husband's feelings have not been addressed. His thoughts don't matter, he thinks.

In Vancouver, I went back out into the common area and asked my mom if she wanted to talk. She'd put her feet up on the couch and was flipping through the Airbnb-provided magazines. My dad was watching TV. If I could guess the show: a Hallmark movie where two white people are the stars of a predictable and moderately photogenic love story. They were always set in small towns with the woman's hair curled perfectly. My dad loved these movies. Spellbound by the TV, his mouth fell open into a little "o" that my family loved laughing at, as much as we laughed at his taste in movies. He was the one we'd usually gang up on—my brother, my mom, and I in on a joke he couldn't enter.

My mom and I sat back down at the dining table where oranges, bananas, apples—my parents loved to travel with fruit—and teabags had collected.

"Sorry I made you feel bad," I said, trying to keep the words from sounding like they hurt me. If I looked at it from her perspective, I could seem like a comedian who thought their audience was too uptight or chaste. "It was a *joke*," they'd excuse themselves in order to say anything. I hated that and quickly dismissed the thought.

"My cooking isn't the same as before. You don't eat that much at my house," she said, naming new and old dishes. The hard edges had mostly left her voice; she was just explaining now. But this wasn't what I wanted. She wasn't ready to have this conversation, I thought.

We went back and forth, not getting each other. I slipped back into my anger. I'd put myself out there and wasn't being rewarded.

I tried a different angle: "I know you didn't mean it, but your tone felt harsh and made me feel bad."

"Well, I got mad fast. When you said something that isn't true, I got mad fast. That's what happens," she said. Annoyingly to me, I could feel tears.

"When someone does something that makes you feel bad, it feels good to hear an apology, right?" I used myself as an example: "Like when I apologized at the beginning of the conversation. I made you feel bad. And I said sorry. And I felt bad too. So it would be nice to hear you say sorry too."

"If you want," I added.

"Oh. Sorry," she said over the fruit and cold tea.

All I wanted to do was go back to my room, ice my eyes, and read a boring magazine, but it was time to eat a tasty lunch in Chinatown.

See how I left my crying out of the scene? I'd been crying all morning, the kind that interrupts speech. I'd made a pile of used tissues—making wontons, people say in Cantonese. My cheeks were salty, streaked. I initially mentioned crying in the scene, but I thought it made me look juvenile. An unreasonable crying adult daughter. I couldn't help it, I thought. I didn't like this about myself—how something so small could turn into a nightstand full of tissues. But I reasoned that fights with my mom, even years into adulthood, could transport me back to the emotional space of my teenage self, the helpless feeling I didn't know how to process. I felt the same as I did then, and my body reacted.

What I could do differently now was curate an apology from my mother. I felt as if I were teaching her something that she needed to know or should've known. In that way, I thought, it was a triumph.

Although I use "apology" and "sorry" interchangeably in this essay, the dictionary, of course, doesn't, and neither do most people, when they're actually saying it to someone. Often reserved for professional situations or written correspondence, "I apologize" sounds much more formal than "I'm sorry"—cold,

even. "Sorry" differs in the number of meanings, too: sixteen pages of a saved PDF on the adjective and noun versions of "sorry" versus two pages of "apology." "Sorry" first appeared in Old English, compared to the 1500s, when "apology" was first documented. And, most interestingly to me, "sorry" focuses on emotion and state of being. If you're sorry, you can be "expressing or showing sorrow; mournful," "causing distress or sorrow; painful, grievous, dismal," "grieved or vexed about a particular thing; regretful," "feeling or expressing remorse; penitent; apologetic," "wretched, pathetic; poor," "designating a poor or inferior example of something; of little account or value; pathetic," or "having sympathy or pity." You can say sorry, and you can also be sorry for yourself, sick and sorry, sorry-looking, sorry-eyed; something can be better safe than sorry or a sorry-go-round. While the evolution of the word "apology" is greater across four definitions, "sorry's" larger constellation of meanings in everyday use demonstrates, to me, the emotional complexity of being or feeling sorry. Even though each dictionary entry is generally meant to stand alone, I see how the different meanings of sorry can overlap each other in a single experience. I can feel sorry for you at the same time I feel sorry for myself. I can feel regretful and mournful, but also pathetic and inferior. I can say, be, or feel sorry all at once, or only one or two of those at a time.

While no one apologized at home, I learned about repentance from my church. Founded in 1976—the same year my mom immigrated from Hong Kong to Texas—the Chinese Bible Church of Maryland led separate worship services for Mandarin, Cantonese, English, and youth congregations by the late '90s, when I started middle school. In his mid-20s at the time, my youth pastor Joseph liked U2 and Radiohead, approved of drums for the worship set, and styled his hair, in hindsight, like Lance Bass. His sermons offended a faction of our immigrant parents, which made us like him even more. He signed his emails, "hosive."

I grew up at CBC but didn't love church until I was old enough for the Teen's Group led by Joseph, where I became best friends with Miranda and Carol Ann. We called ourselves LMC for each of our first initials, handmade invites to "LMC

shindigs," joined the church drama team, prayed together, coordinated extravagant all-black outfits for Black Friday, and colorful but equally flashy Easter ensembles. One Easter, Miranda didn't wear underwear to church to avoid VPL. No one could tell, but already envious of her attention from boys, I admired her even more. When friends at school asked what kind of church I went to, I said, "Nondenominational," feeling superior, as if we'd risen above the petty rules of regular churches, the ones with denominations.

Compared to my elementary school (where there were two other Asian families besides mine, the Yamasakis and my half-Filipina friend Helena) and my middle and high schools (where I met Asians who dyed their hair, excelled at cat-eyes, played sports, and befriended popular white kids, not just any old white person), I thrived in this environment. I didn't care about politics, and I didn't think then how conservative the church was. I cared about belonging, happiness, and being cool, each of which my church, for the most part, helped me with—if only within the physical space of the building. In a 2017 *Huffington Post* article, Liz Lin describes the tension between spending formative years in an Asian American church where she felt "seen and accepted and understood, both by God and the people around [her]" and her now progressive politics—a reason why I also stopped attending Chinese churches. But while she calls progressive white or black churches that don't necessarily understand her cultural context her next-best options, after college, I fell in love with the people and values at a multiethnic church in Chicago, ironically pastored by a white man.

Besides that, Lin mirrors my childhood experience back to me: how the Chinese church was where she both experienced God's unconditional love and accepted the complexities of her Asian American identity. I can see how my acceptance of myself—as a kid dreaming of whiteness—can't be disconnected from my understanding, at the time, of God's acceptance of me. My favorite worship song in middle school was "In Your Hands," originally by Reuben Morgan, but covered by the more famous Hillsong United. The lyrics begin:

I'm so secure, You're here with me
You stay the same, Your love remains

Here in my heart
[Chorus]
So close I believe, You're holding me now
In your hands I belong, You'll never let me go

Even though the bridge of the song goes, *All along / You were beside me even when I couldn't tell*, in middle and high school, I chased after the feeling of God, which was measured in abstract terms of distance: "close," "near," "distant," "far away." Sin was the major reason why you felt distant from God—or feeling like God was distant from you (this positioning, which had implications for whether distance was your fault or not, was also confusing). Other reasons could be that you weren't prioritizing God, or that God was intentionally doing his own thing, but if you trusted, diligently read your Bible, and prayed, *[He'd show you] more of [Him] / more of [Him]*, as the song said. It was hard to tell which reason it was at a given moment.

Regardless, distance could be remedied through repentance. I didn't think I did anything that bad though. Too shy to offend or argue with anyone, I was a good friend and daughter: a goody two-shoes, I imagined people said about me. But the Bible said, "Should God then reward you on your terms, when you refuse to repent?" "[God] makes them listen to correction and commands them to repent of their evil," I read in Job, "Therefore I despise myself and repent in dust and ashes." In order to right my relationship with God, to feel close to Him again, I sometimes prayed, "Sorry, God, for being far away from you." I apologized for my laziness: "Sorry for not praying, for not reading the Bible, sorry for not prioritizing You."

When I repented like this, I was grateful the humility factor of apologizing to a person—the worst part, I thought—was removed from the interaction. But my confessions felt woefully unmatched to the intensity of the Biblical command. And because of that, I felt as if I wasn't feeling correctly.

I barely think about repentance anymore, focusing instead on what I find to be the more interesting and—yes—more palatable aspects of my faith: the generosity and creativity of a higher power, the possibilities of love bigger than the typical human transactions of love. But I think there must be something repentance can teach me about apologies.

On BibleGateway.com, when I search for verses that contain the word "repent," 78 results show for the New International Version, the translation I grew up on. An imprecise way to measure a book's theme, but 78 doesn't seem like much in a translation of—I learn from Google—727,969 words. At first, I'm surprised only about a third of the search results are from the Old Testament, which I understand as rooted in the idea of good deeds and working for your salvation. This Old Testament God, I believe, is an angry God, requiring submission and repentance as the posture of submission. But I wonder why I'm so surprised: it also makes sense that repentance figures even more heavily in the New Testament, which emphasizes God's grace over whatever good deeds you do, positioning Jesus as the supernatural bearer of everyone's sins. Here, repentance grants you access to God's grace like a kind of spiritual passcode you must embody and not just recite. I realize what I'm struggling with is how to categorize repentance: is it a good deed like in the Old Testament, or an act of imagination and faith like in the New?

I want an answer from the search results, but first I bristle at the language that embarrasses me to be a Christian—repentance as a command, the implication of hell if you don't—concepts I realize I'm skirting in the current iteration of my faith as an adult. I prematurely hypothesize that the command aspect is gone from the idea of repentance in the New Testament. Linked to the idea of good news, the coming kingdom of God, and "times of refreshing…from the Lord," repentance is more positive in the New Testament, but it's still presented, in many verses, in the imperative. I'm struck also by the introduction of sorrow into repentance ("Godly sorrow brings repentance that leads to salvation and leaves no regret," 2 Corinthians 7:10). Patterns don't cohere, and I wonder if I've constructed false binaries into the idea of repentance. Not just one thing or another, repentance seems like many things at once, or could be different at different times: a good deed, a leap of faith, an imperative, and a response to sorrow.

If I think of apologizing as an act of both work and imagination—like repentance—I begin to feel closer to the complexities of the word.

I keep thinking about repentance and the imperative. What if apologizing, by extension, wasn't framed in the context of something you had to do? I fantasize I would be a kinder, more loving partner and daughter. But can apologies be disconnected from requirement or transaction, and should they be? I apologize because I feel required to, but I also want to, sometimes, underneath not wanting to. In order to love my husband and my mother better, I grit my teeth through which an apology might eventually escape. I apologize in order to make my loved one feel better, but also, of course, to make me feel better.

My husband is nine or ten in the memory he tells me of being apologized to by his dad. To set the scene in my mind, I conjure up an unrelated photo of him—one of my favorite of his childhood photos—a boy holding the end of a French fry mid-bite, a bowl cut, the sheen of a folding chair, a faraway look in his eyes like he's picturing himself elsewhere, not his aunt's wedding where he's wearing a bow tie and suspender shorts. In the photo, he's five or six, not even the right age, but I love how much I can recognize my husband in this little boy. The look: a sweet, nervous energy, a boy, his blue eyes, and a French fry. In the memory, my husband is at church in rural Indiana when the pastor asks the congregation to raise their hands if they did some shameful activity my husband can't remember now. His dad raises his hand for him. This is before my husband outgrew him, before my father-in-law, without telling anyone, shaved off his Tom Selleck mustache for good. I picture my husband as a kid who'd long been afraid of his dad's temper—his dad's hand circling his wrist as he raised it into the air. "Sorry," his dad tells him. "Immediately?" I ask. "Yeah, right then," my husband says. Even though I know his family apologized to each other when he was a kid, I'm surprised at how quickly

this happens: my husband's faraway eyes, my father-in-law's mustache when he leans down to say the word.

A 2010 study, often cited in how-to-apologize articles, argues against the stereotype that women apologize more willingly than men do because of male egos. The University of Waterloo study found that women did apologize more times than men, but it was because women, who have a lower "threshold of offensive behavior," believed more things were offensive. Men apologized, they found, at the same rate as women did.

My husband says sorry more than I do, which signals that his threshold of offensive behavior is lower than mine. I can't wait to tell him about this study over dinner, so when he's taking a shower after biking, I ask him through the curtain, "Do you think you have a low threshold of offensive behavior?" I sit down on the toilet in our pink-and-black-tiled bathroom with no elbow room. He doesn't know what I'm talking about, so I start from the beginning: the research, the stereotypes, the fragile egos, the number of apologies, the proportions.

The study makes sense to him. "Men get away with more offensive things, so they don't think that many things are offensive," he says above the sound of the water. "Like you, you're always worried about how you word your emails. Men don't know because they don't get penalized as much for saying things wrong."

"Yeah," I say, "But you apologize more than me, which means your threshold of offensive behavior is lower." We get mixed up between what low and high thresholds mean, but once we figure it out, I ask him, "So how does that work with you who apologize so much?"

"I don't know," he says, toweling off. He pauses. "You're more careful than me, but you also don't think a relationship can take any offenses. You're more careful so you don't think you offend anyone."

"Oh no!" I say, laughing. In my mind, I tremble at the recognition. He said it so matter-of-factly, like he loves me.

"But you think relationships can take people being offended at each other. So

you're less careful, so you apologize more to make up for it?" I say, heading towards the kitchen where our lentils are almost cooled down. Feeling vulnerable, I feel better reminding us of his carelessness.

In my informal research of my Asian friends' families, rarely do Asian parents apologize. One of my friend's parents do, but the rest either show they're sorry through extra niceness or are always right somehow, like my mom. I think of saving face and emotion suppression, like not saying "I love you"—common in Asian culture generally, but that appear to varying degrees in different families, and sometimes not at all.

In a 2019 *New York Times* article, Kristin Wong describes the negative impacts of apologizing as a woman. She quotes Deborah Tannen, who says, "Women are in a double bind. If we talk in a way that people think is self-effacing, like apologizing a lot, or not talking up what we're good at, or acting like we're better than everyone else, we're underestimated at work. But if you talk in a way that you're confident, then you're seen as too aggressive." I think of how this applies to Asian-American women: already in danger of being read as self-effacing women, racist stereotypes efface them even more. The common synonyms for self-effacing—sweet, passive, agreeable—look good or bad depending on the angle.

As someone who has always made herself small and been perceived as small, I work on filling space, arguing for my perspective, for my white husband to understand my experience of marrying into a white family, for others to see what I see. I'm not thinking of race when I make my loved ones feel bad, but I can see now how an apology feels like the opposite of enlarging myself, even if I believe, on other people, an apology can look like power.

"The solution, Dr. Tannen said, is to find a balance between your own communication style and how others may perceive that style," Wong writes. I don't know if I'll ever find that balance with racism tilting the other side down.

The term "non-apology"—according to the OED, "the failure or refusal to apologize; (now frequently) a statement that takes the form of an apology but does not acknowledge responsibility or express regret for what has caused offence or upset; an insincere or unconvincing apology"—entered our discourse earlier than I thought, in the 1800s. Though the definition doesn't specify, I associate non-apologies most strongly with public apologies, many of which happened in the recent wake of #MeToo:

Two years before receiving his landmark sentence, Harvey Weinstein wrote in a statement, "I appreciate the way I've behaved with colleagues in the past has caused a lot of pain, and I sincerely apologize for it… I so respect all women and regret what happened." Louis C.K., who admitted to masturbating in front of women, wrote, "I have spent my long and lucky career talking and saying anything I want. I will now step back and take a long time to listen. Thank you for reading." Eight months later, C.K. was back on stage, at the Comedy Cellar in Manhattan. "But if I did behave then as [Anthony Rapp] describes," said Kevin Spacey in a Twitter note, overshadowing his statement with a coming out story, "I owe him the sincerest apology for what would have been deeply inappropriate drunken behavior… This story has encouraged me to address other things about my life." Charlie Rose, accused by eight women of sexual harassment, wrote, "It is essential that these women know I hear them and that I deeply apologize for my inappropriate behavior. I am gratefully embarrassed. I have behaved insensitively at times, and I accept responsibility for that, though I do not believe that all of these allegations are accurate." Matt Lauer, after being fired by NBC: "Some of what is being said about me is untrue or mischaracterized, but there is enough truth in these stories to make me feel embarrassed and ashamed. I regret that my shame is now shared by the people I cherish dearly." Mario Batali with the fan favorite: "I have made many mistakes and I am so very sorry that I have disappointed my friends, my family, my fans and my team. My behavior was wrong and there are no excuses. I take full responsibility… p.s. in case you're searching for a holiday-inspired breakfast, these Pizza Dough Cinnamon Rolls are a fan favorite."

One of my favorite non-apologies is from Shane Gillis, after podcasts in which he used racist and homophobic slurs were unburied from the Internet. Tape revealed him, a comedian just hired by SNL in September 2019, laughing and complaining with another white friend. Of everything he said—including the actual slurs—I kept thinking about the boy in a Chinese restaurant he mocked for practicing English. "We had to move tables, it was so annoying. That's more annoying than any other minority playing music at a restaurant loud on their phone," Gillis said. In a Twitter statement before he was fired from SNL, after footage went viral, he described himself as "a comedian who pushes boundaries" and "happy to apologize to anyone who's actually offended by anything I've said." I found this wording hilarious. I followed news coverage religiously, then got carried away by the rest of the world. A month later, I returned to Twitter and found the note had disappeared.

That he deleted the tweet, at first, satisfied me, as if he'd become ashamed of the non-apology, didn't want it to be read. But I couldn't imagine him feeling that way, whose unchanging career I pictured as a red carpet rolled out in front of him, who joked in his first comedy show post-scandal, "I have been reading every one of my death threats in an Asian accent." So I settled for the gesture, if not the reality, of a white man believing something he said should not have been said.

I write about these non-apologies with a great amount of distance. I'm relieved to lay blame: on the horrific behavior, the terrible apologies. Who doesn't want to see someone powerful—straight, white, and male—fall from grace?

I remember the difference between a public and private apology is audience. I remember these men were felled at the cost of women who don't have the luxury of not remembering. I think of how close I can be to a non-apology.

Published in 2017 by researchers at the University of Pittsburgh, the study on apologies that gives me hope found that people who are more self-compassionate are more willing to apologize than those who aren't, because self-compassion helps them deal with failure, "withhold self-judgment," and "become less overwhelmed by experiencing negative emotions." I'm glad to think of myself as not self-compassionate and know myself better. I see this in me. I don't read deep enough into the study to find out if any of the participants learned self-compassion, if any tips for learning it are offered, or how difficult it is to learn, but the blue links in my PDF could take me anywhere.

Sophie Cabot Black

Use Velvet Anyway

She who would not grow up
Lay down atop the blanket in an exactitude
Of will not rise again, the cats scattering

Out into the vestibule, hellbent
For the marbled lobby. No instruction
Becomes the whole of it. A word or two

Such as velvet gone amok, a girl's worth.
One gun, pamphleted in a basket with the many
Colored pills. You said take the red one,

Practice until ready to go famous.
The holy way is to exit before forced
And always be leaving one thing

Until tomorrow. Closets to keep the stockpiled
Repeated until safe. Certain poems we promised
To outgrow, patterns begot

By some English tread. Doubly thick the cloth
Is to be halved into, two parts to farewell
At the last, rollered and cut into drape

For the dapple. Not dusk but crimson everywhere;
Peek of handwork just before the gap
Trues the hem and boot. Each tongue neatly laced

To its bed. Velvet, velvet, velvet: that which the earlier poet
Said never to use. Not easily moved
Was sold to us, the spindle and the hook, the needle

And the foot. The tuft must turn without tremble
Or will not be chosen. Must be woven all
At once or the loom will catch, will snarl

Into a mob of strands. At least once
I spelled you. And the dreamt
So far: a bowered nest, a hallowed chair, Cambridge traffic

Of how we woke, no more sheep outside
The window, curtain useless as the letter L
On the tablet at the bottom of your purse.

for Lucie Brock-Broido

Trace

in the abandonment of day
is the color of what you meant

in the leaf turn of one rough wind
is the weep of girdled bark

in the life of the wolf
is the death of the lamb

in what I heard you say
is what will be repeated

in the bird who sleeps
is the air holding breath

in what you do to me
is what I thought I'd never do

Hera Naguib

Rendezvous

Jeddah, Saudi Arabia

Under the acacia tree, the qari percolates
ayats and attar, delivers a lesson
on the female gaze: *her second glance*
at a man is forbidden, the first
is a mere accident. Still, as the rattan
seat slackens beneath her rising spine,
still as she pumps her pedal away
on gravel, a boy and I scallop glances
at each other. It is late September.
The desert heat flexes in the rosefinch's gullet.
The meadow-saffron across the garden
sand spools its frill around its yellow teeth.
Later, under my abaya, I spill into a pale
cotton kameez hugged at the midriff,
heady with nicotine, and the *chuka*
chuka chuk warmth of needles punching
holes in the moist cavity of a tailor shop.
How quickly, I think, the spirit in this land
cottons on to variations of its own concealment.
How quickly a girl learns only the inanimate
will cede to her passion,
like the feckless dark I meet him in,
of empty houses with unlatched windows
shaded by the touch-me-nots;
the discarded tables, chairs, and cots
that intuit my limbs, his awrah, both Muslim,
both teenage and urging.

Ames Varos

Curtain Call

Four nurses transfer me to the gurney. "Relax," they tell me sweetly. The gurney is morgue-slab cold and my body is shaking. I haven't been outside in twenty-nine days. Haven't sat upright, stood, bathed or been bathed. The nurses cross a parachute harness over my chest and tell me to breathe.

"Taking me for a jump?"

"Not yet," says Charge Nurse. "Maybe when you get out of here." She fastens the harness beneath the gurney, firmly locking it in place. The buckles click and the straps tighten but I don't feel secure.

"How long will I last?"

"It's up to you," Maya says. "We'll aim for ten minutes." Her teeth are perfectly laid igloo bricks. "You use different muscles to sit than to lie down. You might get a little dizzy." She clasps her hand over my forearm. "Let's make sure your blood pressure and heart rate stay in line with what's normal right now."

A subclavian line tethers me to two steel IV trees heavy with bags. One nurse smiled at me this morning, singing, "It's time for your fats today," attaching a white bag with lipids to drip, drip like McDonald's milkshake into my veins.

"Could someone take me outside?"

"Let's get you up first." Maya manipulates the gurney slowly, elevating half of the bed, forcing my body into a seated position. I clutch the white sheet around me, surging up the hill of a giant coaster, anticipating the dip into the vacant speed of the descent. And then I'm sitting up. For the first time in four weeks, I can see more than sky outside my window. There are trees dotting the dry California hillside. A black chunk of parking lot stretches around the hospital, with cars that look hot and shiny and small.

I hadn't returned to the Bay Area since my cousin's wedding. After being uninvited and then re-invited, conditionally—if my other cousin dressed me, if I didn't bring a date—I avoided visiting my childhood home.

The wedding was painful. My cousin had presented three conservative pantsuits on hangers, each in its own clear plastic from the dry cleaner. These were her power costumes, for litigating. She wore the black one with shoulder pads when she was interviewed about a case on *Dateline*. I chose the double-breasted gray one, and a rose silk shirt. My cousin combed my rakish hair into a style for Judge Judy.

It wasn't so bad, I kept telling myself. "I hate you," my cousin said. "How do you not have any hips?" She stepped back to admire her fashioning, and laughed. "Well, love, in my work Prada, you still look like John Stamos."

My family sat together at the raised banquet table. My sister was a bridesmaid and my brother was the best man. I found the card with my name on it and followed the number, in navy calligraphy, to the back of the hotel hall, next to the kitchen. My seat was between the photographer and videographer, at the table for staff working the event and granted a meal.

I skipped dinner, went up to my room, unbuttoned the gray suit jacket, and draped it over a chair. I lay down on the bed in the dark, kicking the borrowed shoes to the floor.

Nearly three years passed before I was invited to return for Greek Easter. The timing was terrible, during the close of a career-defining project, but I decided to go. I'd made partner in my firm in New York. I would parade my Russian girlfriend around. I would prove to my family that I belonged at the banquet table. It would be a short trip.

Natalia and I had moved into a loft and we were doing a lot of shopping. I bought her a cocktail dress to go with a charcoal wrap she'd retained from a modeling gig. I made a reservation at a San Francisco restaurant my dad liked, and treated everyone to an elaborate dinner. It was gratifying. Every time Natalia took a sip from her water glass, busboys clamored to refill it.

The next day, Natalia and I squabbled. She went to Muir Woods to fume, and I left to meet up with a friend from the sixth grade. There were birds; the breeze was easy. The sun was bright and warm. We were walking and talking and then a car

slammed into the left side of my body, bouncing me onto its hood and windshield before flinging me through the glass storefront of a beauty salon. It is a beginning.

I hear screams. People are near. My hair is sharp with dust and glass and metal shards that stab and itch and stab and itch. I'm buried. Smashed through the earth, past rocks and sand and clay pots and teeth. I smell chrome. Burnt rubber. My tongue is mealy and I struggle with the thickness of it. Blood from my head is dripping into my eyes. I make out the bone of my left leg at an absurd angle, oddly far from where I think it should be. My left foot is missing.

I hear a voice. Someone sees me inside this wreckage. "That person is dead."

It's hard to breathe. I'm woozy, forcing my eyes to stay open. "Help!" My body's position is incomprehensible; I am looking at my back. My torso and legs are rotated in opposite directions.

"Holy shit!"

I hear swearing and exclaiming. "Shut down power to the building and move here now, he's alive!"

He's alive, I laugh to myself. My eyes roll back.

"Hold on, sir." I see a fire hat, suddenly. Yellow clothes. "We're gonna get you out, okay?" I taste blood and metal against my teeth. "My name is Grant, I'm almost there. I need you to hold on. Keep breathing. Can you do that for me?" He asks again and again.

Sometimes I answer and sometimes I don't. I'm in and out of awareness. Grant rips away pieces of the car, the building, the twisted metal and broken glass. A chainsaw spits and jolts, punctuating the pain, shifting the debris around my body.

"Almost there, sir. Can you tell me your name?" I tell him as our eyes meet and he freezes for a moment, not in hesitation but surprise. "I'm so sorry," he says, "I thought—I'm sorry—I didn't see you."

"It's okay," I tell him. "Please, get me out of here."

When the car hit me, I gripped the lip of hood beneath the wiper blades, screaming at the driver through the windshield glass. We made eye contact. His

face was pale from age, the translucency of his whiteness horrifying and ethereal. I felt the car accelerate, and begged for my life with an intensity I had never had for anything. I thought about my loved ones and my dog, surprised by names that rushed to me and the names that never came.

The paramedics told me they would have to untwist me to get me out of the building. I held my breath. Hands gripped and untangled me, pulling, until I was flat on a board in the sun outside. I was loaded onto a helicopter, then I blacked out completely.

In my hospital room, the paint flaunts the glossy finish of brushed teeth. The floor linoleum has grayed and dulled, mopped and re-mopped by Chuck in the afternoon and Sandra at night. My stomach is a medicine ball, distended from internal trauma and bleeding. I'm stuck beneath it. I can't sit. My pelvis is seven fragmented pieces; I shit myself. I press my call button and wait for a nurse to arrive, to walkie-talkie the Lift Team while I lie in it.

Four studs in scrubs surround me like uniformed attendants in a gay porn fantasy. Slowly, they lower my bed, two of them on each side, all jacked triceps, biceps, pecs. They pry my legs apart, just a little. I clench my jaw tight. If they drop my middle, I will hang from my limbs, an empty hammock.

Two nurses gently guide a pillow between my knees. The Lift Team rotates me onto my side, elegantly hauling me up as one piece. The men tell me how awesome I am, while nurses spray cold disinfectant and wipe me down quickly.

"Thanks, guys." I always say it.

New diaper pads are spread beneath me. "No worries, man, you're badass."

They never make me feel naked.

A nurse dumps dead flowers and adds water to the freshly cut ones. I think about the succulents in my office, three thousand miles away. And then I close my eyes and remember the armfuls of flowers greeting me backstage after I had been singing. In those moments, hot under the stage lights, performing at Hollywood Bowl and San Francisco Opera in corsets and petticoats and embroidered gowns, I gave my parents a daughter. How sad and hollow I was, accepting those bouquets.

One voice lesson, my mom dropped me off at my teacher's house early, on her way to the movies. When I rang the bell, my teacher opened the door in a thin cotton robe. I smelled coconut oil and saw perspiration beaded on her chest. I looked away from where her robe parted when she turned to welcome me inside. She told me that she needed to grab a bra and clothes and then would be back, but she paused instead and looked at me. My ears flushed.

"You know, my husband never makes comments about anyone. He usually leaves when I teach. He told me last week that he sat down and listened to your whole lesson. He didn't believe me when I told him you're thirteen years old." She cocked her head, as if she had more to say. I looked down at my sneakers. It was 1988. I was a virgin. I thought about girls. I thought about her. She tightened her robe and lifted my chin in her hand. "Look at those eyes," she said. "Man. Be patient. One day you're going to grow into those eyes."

Two years later, drag queens taught me how to use my eyes on stage, how to do my makeup. I performed in a light opera production of *La Cage aux Folles*. In rehearsals, Rick was LaTonya and Chris was Portia. They told me that there was a formula to find my drag queen name, based on letters in my first and last names and some corresponding chart. Mine worked out to be Montana Leatherthong, but they called me Baby. They showed me how to move sinuously or abjectly or girlishly, with the score or a director's whim. It was a convincing pantomime.

My mother's criticisms of my teenage life offstage—"Stop walking like a truck driver! Don't shovel food like you're in prison!"—were unrelenting. My parents were certain that a medical explanation would reveal why I wasn't blossoming out of the tomboy I had been allowed to be as a child. My hormone levels must be out of balance; a different doctor should run the blood panel again.

There was no Internet. I knew what a transvestite scientist was, because I'd seen *The Rocky Horror Picture Show*. And I'd heard the word transsexual in our house, spit with derision. My mom's friend's husband had left her, and abandoned their son, moving to Rhode Island to become Twinkie Maroni. It would be years before Ellen DeGeneres even came out as gay.

My third endocrinologist sat me down in her office and closed the door. "I'm going to say this one time. There's nothing wrong with you. You are a healthy seventeen-year-old kid. You're about to finish high school. Leave. You will be fine."

I focused on singing. The most prestigious music schools in the country aggressively courted my parents and me. One dean left the performing arts building after my vocal audition, as the others were ongoing. He followed me outside, where my parents were waiting, introduced himself and offered us a private campus tour.

"I don't understand," my mom said. "I thought it was hard to get into these places."

"It is," he said. "Your kid is like the football phenom with the twenty-inch neck."

I wish, I thought.

I performed my rendition of the national anthem at my high school graduation. My family sat together in the front row. "This is lousy," the woman behind them said. "I can't believe they hired a professional instead of letting one of the kids sing."

My mom turned around to claim me, loudly, as hers.

My voice filled auditoriums with an ease that confounded. I loved the music, and the feeling of a current sounding my whole being, simultaneously coursing from within my body and drowning it. When I sang, inside and outside equalized. It was oblivion. I didn't like to perform. I had fun with the costumes and wigs but loathed the way others heard my voice as wantonly female. I was not an ingénue. And I dreaded the conversations that inevitably followed.

"Why don't you look like this all the time?"

"A nineteenth-century seamstress in the Latin Quarter of Paris? A fifteen-year-old geisha?"

"*Pretty*," my mom said. "Imagine where you came from in Greece. What are the odds we would find you and be able to develop this gift?"

As a graduate student, I was invited to New York to prepare for a once-in-a-lifetime opera role. I reconnected with a friend there, a jazz pianist temping at a global real estate firm. He asked if I'd be his wingman at a work event, promising bottomless cocktails and miniature beef Wellingtons.

The party was dizzying. I retreated to the bar to take it in, standing next to a man who had mostly obscured himself behind a potted plant. He was watching

everything, and he noticed me. As I made my observations out loud, he engaged me with questions. "How high do you think these ceilings are? Is that a toupee? Real calamari or pig anus?" We drank bourbon and ramped up the commentary between us. He wanted to hear bullshit. Scarcely a year had passed since 9/11. He had done extensive work in the towers and couldn't wrap his head around what was gone, surrounded especially by so much excess.

He finally disclosed that he was one of the managing partners of the corporation hosting the party. He asked me to come to his office the following week. "You know how to use a computer, right?" He offered me a job I had no business accepting. I had no MBA, and no relevant experience. "I know you'll do well here," he told me. "I'll deal with HR."

I scrapped the singing opportunity, eager to demonstrate my worth without music. I wore eyeliner for the first few months, keeping my hair long enough to clamp a barrette in it. I made my voice flowery and high, plucked my eyebrows and adjusted my body language. I used my work ethic and personality to climb professionally, while performing a role as if on stage.

It was exhausting. I'd walk home from midtown Manhattan, more than sixty blocks to my apartment south of Houston Street, and scrub my face, change my clothes, walk back out the door as someone else. Gradually, I phased out the makeup and the women's clothing. My coworkers, all male, began relating to me the way so many other men always had when I wasn't in opera drag. They slapped my back. They laughed at my inappropriate jokes and showed me photos of the women they were dating. "Dude, she's hot, right?"

I cut off my hair, bought button-downs and men's shoes; I strode with purpose. My gait returned to itself, as did the cadences of my voice. I was promoted, and promoted again. I contemplated a breast reduction, then total removal. It seemed a livable form I could inhabit was within reach. Finally, I was being recompensed. Convincing my family remained.

Before Natalia and I left for California, my senior partner poured two drinks in his office. "If you strutted around here the way you do now, confusing everybody, we never would've hired you."

"I know it."

"Calculating bastard."

"Thank you." I raised my glass.

"Drink up, man. I can say that to your face. Cheers to being here now."

I made partner, flew across the country to take my family to dinner, got hit by a car.

It's been weeks now since I've seen myself. Friends send letters and photos to the hospital. Nurses tack the pictures to a bulletin board on the wall, facing my bed. I see my dog, and shades of my social life. In one photo, I'm wearing a black silk tie with tiny silver and gold stars. A female friend in a miniskirt is sitting on my lap. In another, I've yanked up my T-shirt sleeve. I'm flexing and howling, pointing at a new tattoo. Another series of performances.

Maya unplugs me from the wall as two nurses transfer me back into the gurney chair. This time, I sit upright for twenty-five minutes. I beg to be taken outside. Charge Nurse gets clearance and teases me, fussing with my IV tree like it's a mannequin in a shop window.

"Hey, stop smiling, you're in the hospital." Maya says, "It's been six weeks. What do we have to do to break you?" She takes my wrist to check my pulse. "Now I'm smiling and losing count."

My upper body is getting stronger. The Lift Team guys call me Steven Seagal. They tell me about the movie *Hard To Kill*, in which Mason Storm awakens from a coma and drags himself around, doling out ass-kickings while under siege. My team installs a heavy metal triangle that looks like a cowboy dinner bell. It dangles by a chain from the crossbar over my bed. I can ring my call button and hold myself up long enough for the nurses to scoot a bedpan underneath me.

The guys cheer as I do a few pull-ups. Carlos says, "Dude, we need monkey bars to the shitter. You would totally make it."

The doctors didn't think I would survive, then they didn't think I would regain the ability to walk. I have physical therapy and occupational therapy but the metal fixing the pieces of my pelvis isn't designed for mobility. The pain is uncompromising. I'm desperate to get out of here. There is never any privacy.

"Who is the president of the United States?" A new doctor asks me.

"Bush."

"Which one?"

"W."

"Good. What day is it today?"

"Wednesday."

"Right. So, what day was it *yesterday*?"

I understand the protocol. My head was split open. I'm stitched up and my brain needs more diagnostic tests. But the questions are infuriating; there is never any quiet.

"My cat had a bladder stone." The nurse I dislike lifts my left foot, saved from amputation and reattached. I wince, lying on my back. I watch her peel the bandages away like she's unwrapping a brandied prune for her own consumption. The wound is still open after more than a month. The surrounding skin is purple, rubbery, wet. I dig my index fingers into the knuckles of my thumbs. She pauses, my foot in one hand, gesticulating with the jar of silver sulfadiazine in the other. "That's where my bonus money went."

Following the accident, I'm supposed to stay in California for a year of treatment, but I need to return to my life. I can't show anyone in the hospital what that is. No one can see my apartment, walk-in closet lined with blazers and ties; my office above Rockefeller Center; Natalia's willowy limbs, pulling at me on the sidewalk. I lie in bed, wearing a gown with nothing underneath it. There is a barcode on my medical bracelet. I'm scanned like a dented can of soup whenever new meds are distributed.

Of course, my life has nothing to do with the things I've acquired and used to diminish the incongruity of my body. The Lift Team, nurses, and doctors care for my frame with tenderness and efficiency because my life is inside it. We joke with each other, and neuropsychologists come to help with the nightmares, to boost my morale while I heal, because life and spirit are inexorably intertwined. The simplicity of this, stripped of props or performance, is staggering, tedious, and emasculating. I offer to arrange an airline ticket for Natalia to fly out and bring me home. She declines.

"You okay?" Maya prepares to wheel me from my room. She pushes me forward

and the motion of the gurney chair accelerates my anticipation as we navigate the stale hospital corridors.

"Doing great," I tell her. We both hear my unsteadiness. She steers my chair toward the wide glass doors of a concrete balcony, and then we're outside. The afternoon light burns my eyes but I fight the impulse to squint, not wanting to miss anything.

"I'll be right inside, at the nurses' station. Hold up your hand if you need me."

After six months in California, I return to New York against medical advice. My cop friend and his girlfriend fetch me from JFK, help me into the car, manage my luggage. I'm too tired to care that they're doing everything for me.

They wheel my suitcases into the loft and I wobble in after them, unsure where they should put my things. The furniture has been rearranged. It's dusty, there are two new couches, none of the plants has survived. I stare at the steps down to the main level and up to second living room. Natalia isn't home. I feel like an intruder.

"Holy crap, dude. This is sweet." My friend's girlfriend marvels at the space. She looks around and then again at me, concerned. I encourage them to leave. I need rest.

Alone in the middle of the kitchen, sharp autumn light slants through the windows. The pain in my hips, back, legs, ankles, feet, is throbbing. Insinuating. I see new things littering the space where I dashed around the kitchen making dinner, setting the table; sped up the stairs with Natalia over my shoulder, wrestled on the floor with my dog, raced in circles to complete odd tasks while the bathtub filled.

I pivot toward the bedroom door and maneuver right cane point forward, left foot forward, left cane point forward, right foot forward. There's a hooded sweatshirt, way too big for Natalia, on the floor. I climb onto the bed and position my canes against the bedside table. I don't belong here anymore.

It takes a few minutes to remove my shoes. I roll up my pants to peel away the pressure stockings I had worn to fly. I fall asleep in my clothes, in the queasiness of Natalia's eventual return, on top of the comforter with its unfamiliar smell. I don't

hear the door before her slow-heeled walk. It's dark in the bedroom. She turns on the light and says, "Wow, you're here."

"Hi, I'm Ames." I laugh, reach for my canes, and awkwardly struggle to stand. Our room feels small when we embrace, and I almost fall. I think about sharing the bed.

"We need toilet paper," she tells me. I know it's over.

I've returned to New York and my career has ended. There are platters of fruit and pastries, bagels and lox with capers and narrow slivers of red onion. I grip the handles of my forearm crutches and ignore my wobbly legs. Everyone stands around and says that I should help myself, but I can't hold anything besides my canes.

Before I left for California, we out-drank and out-ate one another, pouring magnums of Opus One and gnawing through bloody steaks. We sent each other emails on the company server, with subjects like: Critical. The content would be a bunch of photos of boobs to rank.

One working lunch, a junior associate ordered a turkey sandwich with light beer. He only ate half of the sandwich and asked to have the rest wrapped up, so he could take it home. He was called Doggie Bag for months.

My partner steps forward. "You leave for four days and come back six months later with a hickey?" I'm faint, trying to steady myself against the wall. The other guys wait for me to laugh but I'm out of it. "Huh? My scar? No, they had to put this catheter inside my neck to guide a filter down into my heart. I had a DVT, you know, a blood clot, so…" my voice trails off.

"It's a scar, you dick. Nice going." My partner gets punched in the arm twice and everyone laughs too loud. The group disbands, moving away from me. I sort of lamely snap into the moment, after it has passed. "Yeah. Dick. Nice going." A few of the men turn around again. They look at me like they've walked in on their little sister making out with one of their friends.

Boss invites me to coffee and sits across from me in a booth at Café Fledermaus in the Neue Galerie. I prepare myself to be fired as the silver trays arrive, when I see the delicately arranged glasses and spoons. "You're going all out," I joke.

"I thought it would be nice to check in." He looks at me, then pulls his napkin over his lap. "Do you like this place?"

"I liked the Schiele exhibit." I watch Boss take a bite of raisin cake. "Are you letting me go?"

My biological mom was thirteen when she gave birth to me in Greece. I was in foster care, briefly, but have no memories of that. A Greek man and a Jewish woman in California adopted me. They became my parents. My new mom gave birth to a son a few months after bringing me home. Our parents raised us like twins.

My body first belonged to the girl who carried me, who gave me life; then, to the Greek authorities, to my foster family, to my parents. It belonged to my family, the way children's bodies do, subject to cough syrup and sunscreen; poked by siblings, schlepped to piano lessons, strapped into the backseat of a minivan. It belonged to my childhood, my boyhood, and then to an adolescence that changed that body in ways that were agony. It was the chamber of a world-class spinto soprano. Celebrated. It was the opera's body to costume, my mother's to manage, the doctors' to scrutinize and test.

As an adult, I tried to flex my body into a shape I could present with some notion of control. It was mine to dress, swagger and grieve. To punish through runs so long I would forget it, glutting my loneliness with endorphins. To make my heart a kite. It was my body to transcend. To defend from puzzled stares and my family's disappointment.

My body is broken now—neutered—no longer a disputed territory to be claimed by those who sought to define it. But it hasn't betrayed me. In the aftermath of its survival, my body has been left to me.

Boss has invented a new job, which doesn't require my presence in the office. He says, "I'm giving you an assignment." The firm pays me to stay away.

Recovering from my accident, I endure twenty-three surgical procedures. Testosterone gel helps me build muscle again. I stand and relearn to walk on my atrophied legs. I decide I will keep taking it. I'll start hormone therapy to change

my body. I'll elect more surgeries.

My mom says, "That is a bridge too far." I tell her that I hope she changes her mind. Another compromise, for me, is impossible.

My back is to the hospital. I thank Maya, and then the automatic doors whoosh behind me. I'm alone with the sound of the heat. There are clay pots filled with rosemary and jasmine, and I'm intoxicated equally by the perfume of delicate white blossoms and the dankness of the soil. I don't hear strained breathing and wheezing, hospital moans, the sounds of my collapsed indoor world. I listen to the irregularity of the wind, fast and then slow, alert to its sudden lilt around the building, rustling the plants and moving their fragrance through the dry summer air. Cars pass below. I watch from my chair on the balcony. Layers of roads and trees and buildings press to the edge of the horizon. I inhale deeply, and cry.

I tell my brother, "I tried to tell Mom I'm a man."

"She told me," he says. "Stop talking about it. Do you limp up to every person in New York and identify yourself as male?"

"No."

"Right. It's a given. You're who you've always been. Stop apologizing and saying it's weird. Be a man."

I accept a buyout from my firm, purchase an apartment in New York, and live in it. I shop for groceries, water my plants, brush my teeth. I begin to recognize my own feelings and wants apart from those impressed upon me by others. I date and make new friends, and my former friendships deepen or disappear.

The combination of testosterone and physical therapy adds heft and contour to my muscles, but it takes years for me to move from wheelchair to walker, to two forearm crutches to one, and then a single cane. Then I walk on my own. My voice is changed. I will never sing again professionally—or well—but I rumble through

Hank Williams songs folding laundry, adding a new tile backsplash to the wall behind the stove in my kitchen.

I drive back and forth across the country with my dog, sometimes in a caravan of friends but mostly alone. I go to a gun show in Montana. There are pink rifles on a folding table, for little girls. I eat turtle soup in New Orleans, and two old gay men try to take me home. I tour bourbon distilleries in Kentucky, wander the plains of South Dakota and stare at the bison. I sit on a rock in Joshua Tree. I pull my T-shirt off, over my head, and feel the sun on my scarred flat chest.

An unversed solitude suffuses my new life. I begin to understand those things my brother takes for granted. I'm a reasonably handsome white man. Shorter than average, but otherwise unremarkable. In spite of my scars and tattoos, my body is no longer an object of fascination or argument. Heads lift momentarily, then drop when I enter a restaurant, movie theater, bank, bathroom, store. I am allowed, without question, to be. It is a state of profound ease and eerie quiet.

I drive over the Mississippi River with my future wife. We go into a cowboy bar in New Mexico, where a group of Air Force retirees drinks beer out back. "Y'all look like West Side Story," says the one holding a guitar. They invite us to join them. I tell my mom about it. She's on speaker when we drive through Arizona. "Because Danica is Hispanic?" She laughs. "Imagine if they knew who you were, really." Pine tree after pine tree frames itself in my side window and is gone. "This is who I am really," I say. My future wife squeezes my leg.

When our son is born, I want to sing to him. I swaddle him, looking down at his face. His big eyes work to connect with mine. I can't think of a single song. I hold him in my arms, humming, until "By My Side" from Godspell comes out. I sing, "Where are you going? Where are you going?" My eyes tear before I can manage "Can you take me with you?" I rock him, wondering how having me as a father will inform his choices, and what expectations I'll foist upon him unwittingly. He will take me with him, and he will leave me behind in the life that is his.

Maya returns to wheel me back to my hospital bed. I thank her for leaving me. She gathers the reins of my IV lines and smiles. I tell her, "I can smell rosemary."

I want to say more but the immensity of my emotions trespasses easily beyond the boundaries of my words. When have I last smelled flowers and dirt, sunlight,

dust, car exhaust, perfume? I hadn't noticed their composition, the powerful notes tempered by the softer ones between. I point to the clay pot in the corner, and stutter.

Maya steers me around to face the wide automatic doors of the hospital. She rolls me forward and stops. I see my diluted reflection in the glass, propped up, strapped into the gurney chair; the shagginess of my hair, head bobbing above my white hospital-issue gown with faded blue snowflakes. I haven't seen myself in more than six weeks. Haven't showered, chewed food, used a toilet, worked, fucked, opened a newspaper. I don't know who I am without my belongings and clothes. I can't yet imagine who I will become.

I watch Maya's reflection. She carefully plucks a sprig of jasmine blossoms and tears a branch of rosemary behind me. Before she guides my chair, she closes the makeshift bouquet, gently, inside my hand.

Campbell McGrath

On the Three Forms of Water

Ever since I learned about sea-level rise
I've been binge-watching the Atlantic Ocean
but nothing ever really happens. It goes up,
it goes down. Sometimes high tide
floods a section of the city, which is nice
for the street-sweepers and canoeists.

I am so used to thinking about myself
that it's hard to understand the sea.
What use is singularity in imagining
that seamless, quicksilver commonwealth?

The ocean is liquid, like the mind, elastic
tides of consciousness flowing and probing,
interrogating whatever seeks to contain it.

Ice is like the body, scarred and fractured,
ordained to crack, diminish, melt away.

And the third form—fog on a window,
ghostly mist, the clouds
which adorn the sky in celestial vestments
we glimpse as gaudy rags at sunset—
what could it be but the soul?

We are liquid and we are solid, oceanic
matter cloaked in the garment of being.

As for the ocean: she is coming to collect us
and gather us back into herself, as when,
long ago, your mother picked you up early
from the nurse's office at school,
and gave you a kiss, and put you to bed,
where you slept without a care in the world.

Kosiso Ugwueze

Down South

When my uncle, Onoima, returned from South Africa, he did not talk about what he had seen there. He only slept for hours, waking in the middle of the night to shuffle around the kitchen for something to eat. Other times, he would park himself in front of the television, and when a news story on South Africa came on, a story about Nigeria and South Africa's battle for economic supremacy, for example, he would wince, change the channel immediately. I remember that I often found him on the sofa in the early mornings, that I walked past him on my way out the door, listening as he snored, as he fidgeted in his sleep. Sometimes, he would wake screaming, his voice hoarse in his throat. He would glare at me with bloodshot eyes. Then, he would turn away on the sofa and return to sleep.

The story was that Uncle Onoima had spent three years in a South African prison. My mother whispered this to her sister, Chi, as they cooked ogbono soup in the kitchen on Saturday afternoons. She would shake her head and lambast my father's side of the family. They are all crooks, she said. Wayward people. And I was starting to show these qualities. That's why I had come home suspended for starting a fight in the schoolyard. My mother shook her head and whistled under her breath. There was a wayward gene in my father's DNA and it was starting to manifest itself in me.

My mother did not say these things near my father. She only whispered them when he was not home, when he had gone to work or down the street to visit his friends. But she always made sure I heard them. That was her way of punishing me for my transgressions. She was never one to discipline me directly, my mother. She always found a roundabout way to let me know that I had wronged her and these conversations with Chi, spoken always when I was within earshot, were her way of getting back at me.

My father, however, was the direct disciplinarian and he flogged me, without mercy, the day I came home with the headmaster's note saying I was suspended from school for two weeks. He chased me around the house with his cane and when I broke a vase, he removed his shoes and threw them at my head.

"You will not become whatever you want to become in this house," my father said.

The next day, he sat me down and told me he would no longer pay my school fees. I was fifteen then. I began to cry. I got on my knees and begged my father. I wanted to tell him what had led to the fight. Emeka, my rival at school, a boy whose skills on the football pitch put me to shame, had called my mother a whore. He had said that he saw her on the streets, her short skirt riding up her thighs. The other boys stood there looking at me, a crowd had gathered. I had no choice but to defend my mother's honor. I wanted to tell my father all this. But the tears flowed down my face, staining my cheeks. I imagined myself like my uncle Onoima, lying down on the sofa in the middle of the day, flinching at the smallest noise in the yard.

Onoima must have heard my thoughts because he barged into the room, startling us. He stood at the doorway, his hands on his hips. I had not seen him upright in days. In his eyes, I saw rage.

"What's going on here?" Onoima said. He marched to where I knelt facing my father and slapped me so hard my eyes rolled in my head.

"What the fuck?" he said, standing over me. My father stood back surprised.

"Onoima, I've got it," said my father.

But my uncle took another step towards me, and it was full of aggression.

"What are you raising here?" he said to my father. "A big boy sniveling like a little bitch. In South Africa, Igbo boys his age were serving hard time for only dreaming of a better life. And here he is, crying like I'm not his uncle. Biko, shut up my friend!"

I thought my uncle would hit me again but he only stormed out the room. "We need to toughen that boy up," I heard him shout. My father, never one to be at a loss for words, looked at me with his mouth open.

It was the first time my uncle had mentioned South Africa since he arrived on our doorstep with nothing but the tattered clothes on his back. Before his arrival, my father spoke often of Onoima, of the way he had broken my grandmother's heart. He was the youngest of four boys, the one who refused to finish school, who was always the topic of negative conversation, bludgeoned in one fight or

another, home every day past his curfew. They had taken my uncle to priest after priest, to the military school, but he never straightened out. Then he fled for South Africa and did not return for a decade. When he arrived on our doorstep two months ago, my father had not heard from him, no letters, no phone calls, in seven years.

Onoima's seven-year silence was strange because as young boys, he and my father had been almost inseparable. My uncle Chima, my father's eldest brother, had once told me that Onoima and my father had shared a close yet competitive relationship. My father wanted so much to be like Onoima. He and Onoima fought over whom between the both of them would be a great man of history. Like my father, Onoima was obsessed with history, with great men, from Napoleon to Ojukwu. In his room, Onoima had books on Churchill, Azikiwe, even Hitler. Even though I never saw him read any of these books, I knew that they were important to him, the way he dusted them every so often, running his hands along their spines as though by doing so he could absorb the lives of these men.

And even after the ten years had passed and Onoima was home again, I saw that my father's yearning to be like his brother had not wavered. The first few days after my uncle's arrival, my father lamented Onoima's appearance, his tattoos, his dreadlocks. But I caught my father staring at himself in the mirror one morning as he asked my mother whether he should shave or not, whether he should let his hair grow out. For as long as I have known my father, he has never worn a beard or even a mustache, not even when he was ill with malaria and could barely get out of bed. My mother scolded him. "Is it because Onoima has a beard that you now want to grow one? You are older than him, you should be the one setting the example."

As a child, I had found myself fascinated by Onoima, this uncle I hardly knew. Not a week went by that my father did not mention him. Eat your vegetables or you will become like Onoima. Do well in school or you will become like Onoima. Despite my father's warnings, I respected Onoima. My father, stiff in his starched

shirts, his pressed slacks, his glistening watch, did not have the guts to travel away from home, to a country where he had no family and few friends. When my father lectured me about obeying the rules so that I would not become like Onoima, dead or lost in a foreign country, I'd imagine Onoima rich and happy in South Africa, defying my father and everyone else's expectations.

Yet, Onoima had arrived on our doorstep disheveled and beaten. I still remember the shock that rippled through me the night he appeared out of thin air. Our gateman had turned him away several times, convinced that the filthy man before him could not have been my father's brother. That night, Onoima collapsed into my father's arms and my father howled.

I awoke the next morning surprised to find Onoima not on the sofa but in the yard doing calisthenics. He was jumping up and down, swinging his legs from side to side. I was armed with a broom as it was part of my punishment to keep the yard clean and I watched Onoima complete a hundred push-ups in the damp earth, his body quivering, drenched in sweat.

After his morning exercise, Onoima returned to the veranda and began beating his chest. He screamed at the top of his lungs and my mother came running from her room, asking what was going on.

Our house was a modern two-story construction in the Independence Layout neighborhood of Enugu. It had been gifted to my parents as a wedding present from my mother's father, a former governor of Enugu State. My father had married up, into a politically connected family, and it was a source of pride for him, something he never failed to throw in Onoima's face.

But our house now was a cave full of dueling spirits. My uncle had said as much to my mother. He told her, several times, that he didn't care who her father was. People like her, he said, did not understand what it took to survive out in the world. And when my mother offered to help him find work if he would make himself presentable, my uncle scoffed. "My dreadlocks mean I'm Samson," he told her. "And you are Delilah, ready to take away my power."

I followed my uncle up the steps and into the house. In the sitting room, he began to pace, moving furniture around. My mother stood with her arms folded, her anger visible on her face, in the way her eyebrows twitched, and her mouth quivered. She had been told countless times how much she did not understand life for the average man and I know now that it had made her self-conscious, made her hesitate to voice her opinion lest she be seen as just another spoiled, rich girl. My father had already left for work otherwise I knew my mother would have called him into the room and asked him to tell his brother to stop destroying our house.

My uncle continued to rearrange the room. We needed to perform a ritual to eradicate the spirits in the house, he said, as he moved the center table closer to the television mantle. He wiped his brow with his fingers. There were spirits in our house that made boys like me weak, that made us feminine, crying when we should have been marching to victory like the brave Biafran soldiers did before they were betrayed by saboteurs and selfish self-seekers. My mother turned to me, her head sideways. I knew she wanted to say something. But she only shook her head. She shuffled out of the room when she heard her kettle whistling in the kitchen. I could hear her stirring her cooking pot, hitting the sides with such force that the metal rang through the house, loud as the ogene gong that the night watchman blasted every night.

When my father returned home from work that evening, my uncle gathered the two of us in the yard. The sun was dying. There were both shadows and patches of light all over our compound. Onoima stood with his arms, dark as coal, folded over his tight, white shirt, the same shirt he had worn for his calisthenics practice that morning. I remembered his grace, his smooth movements, a dance as beautiful as any we watched at Okpara Square during the Independence Day celebrations every year.

At Onoima's feet was a white chicken. It squawked and flapped about, its legs tied together with pieces of rope. Onoima looked at me, then at my father, before beginning his chant. His voice rose from his abdomen and filled the sky, an ugly cry that made the goosebumps rise on my skin. My father and I stood transfixed, glued to our spots in front of Onoima, wondering what he would do with the bird.

When Onoima was done with his chant, a song about brotherhood and loyalty, he reached for a knife that neither my father nor I had noticed and slit the chicken's throat. The animal writhed and flapped about on the blood-soaked soil. I had always hated watching my uncles cut up goats and cows at Christmas and so I looked away. But Onoima laughed a humorless laughter.

"What have you done with this boy?" he asked my father. "He's just like you. He can't even gaze upon a dying animal without flinching. How can a man survive this earth when he cannot look death in the face?"

My father said nothing. Onoima went on.

"You have to understand that every day, young Igbo boys leave home in search of greener pastures, food for their bellies."

Onoima reached for my face. He turned me towards him, his blood-soaked hands on my chin. "This is a ritual for boys who will one day be men," he said. "This is to prepare you for the day you will have to fend for yourself." Onoima's breath smelled like tobacco and the fish we had eaten for lunch that day. I stared into his eyes, into his pupils rimmed by veins. "Never speak about this to your mother," he said. "Men do not run their mouths to their women." My mother had gone across the street to get her hair done. I knew that if she was home, she would have yelled at my father for bringing witchcraft and juju into our home. My mother would have run for her Bible and her Holy Water, dousing us in the salt-sweet liquid, praying and thumping her good book. I nodded at my uncle. Right then, I wanted more than anything to redeem myself, for my uncle to see me as a man.

Onoima gutted the animal, reaching his hands into the bloody innards and taking out the chicken's heart. He rubbed the heart into the soil, mumbling words I could not understand. When he was finished and the heart was caked in dirt, he took a bite out of it, then he reached over and smeared each of our foreheads in chicken blood.

"This is to protect you from feminization," he said to me. "From turning into a bitch."

My father and I stood spellbound as my uncle placed an amulet around our necks.

"When I was in South Africa," Onoima said. "We never went on a mission without protecting ourselves first. You'll need this at work," he said to my father, pointing to the amulet now hanging around his neck. "There are evil eyes everywhere, people trying to undermine you." Then my uncle turned to me again. "That amulet is your protection for the journey to manhood we will embark on together."

My father was a skeptic, the type of person who questioned every little thing, who argued with newscasters on television when they made claims about the current governor's dedication to infrastructural development or childhood education. "Show me the proof!" he would shout at the television. "Our roads are still as bad as ever, our children learning nothing in our dilapidated schools!" He was an accountant in the civil service, and he came home every day with stories about the corruption and rot he saw in all aspects of his work. My father and I never had much to say to each other. He would complain and I would listen and nod my head. But after the ritual, there was something that now bonded us, my father and me, this secret we kept from my mother. We would look at each other across the living room and smile, touch our hidden amulets.

Onoima and my father soon began to sit together on the veranda in the evenings. I would sit in the living room, my ears pressed against the window, trying to make out their conversation. I wanted to know where my uncle had learned such a ritual, what he had really been up to in the ten years since he left Nigeria. I imagined him in a jungle with other men, cutting up chickens and using their innards to construct amulets he handed out to young boys for protection. I imagined him leading a battalion of young Igbo boys clad in his trademark combat boots and cargo shorts. I knew my uncle had been great abroad because his eyes, his mouth, his ears belonged to someone who had seen things.

But on most days, my father and my uncle would shoot the breeze, there on the veranda. They would drink beers and talk about various people they knew from their childhoods. Many of these men had already left Nigeria. Some were in America, others had gone to England, a few had disappeared in Eastern Europe, in Cyprus and Ukraine. Others were in South Africa, in the Gambia, Ghana, Burkina Faso. I wondered if there was anyone left in Nigeria, if the country would

soon be hollowed out like the coconuts we ate on Saturday afternoons. I imagined returning to school and finding it empty, my classmates vanished, searching desperately for a future elsewhere.

Onoima called me to the veranda three days after the ritual. I had been home from school for ten days and I was becoming restless. As soon as I heard my name, I ran to the veranda and stood before my father and uncle. I was unsure what to do with my hands, but I stood, bold as I knew how, puffing out my chest as I had seen wrestlers do on television.

Onoima stood up and pulled his singlet over his head. On his chest were scars I had never seen before. They glistened with his sweat, slippery lines that snaked from his neck down to his abdomen. They were beautiful in the light and I stared at them, stunned.

"Do you see these scars?" Onoima said tracing his flesh with his large fingers. I looked at my father who had the same awed look in his eyes. Onoima towered over the two of us.

"Do you see my scars?" Onoima said to me.

I swallowed hard, nodded.

"Use your words," Onoima said.

"Yes."

"Yes what?" he said.

"Yessir."

"How do you think I got these scars?"

I couldn't guess. Onoima looked at me again. His eyes were red, and they bore into mine. And I couldn't help but blink. I tried not to look away but before long I cowered. Onoima appeared like a spirit, glowering in the dim light.

The evening breeze blew leaves from the orange tree in the front yard onto our feet as my uncle shook his head and sat back down. He put his singlet on and brought his beer to his lips. My father looked at him as though he no longer knew his brother.

"Those are bad scars," my father said catching his breath.

I nodded. "Yes, they are."

"Do you want to know what it takes to be a man?" my uncle said to me.

"Yessir!" I shouted again at the top of my lungs.

It was then that my uncle told us of his first night in a South African prison.

He had driven from Zimbabwe into South Africa with 80 kilograms of cocaine strapped to the bed of his truck and covered with cheap Chinese goods his boss was going to sell in a Johannesburg market. When he reached the border, he searched for the agent who he had bribed into facilitating his every passing. But the agent was nowhere to be found. In his place were drug enforcement officials, tipped off that a Nigerian man was coming into the country with a shipment of high-quality Colombian cocaine. The men arrested Onoima and hulled him off to the local jail, into a cell with a South African kingpin they had nabbed the week before.

My uncle took another swig from his beer bottle. He looked at me with his beady eyes, sweat pooling in the folds of his skin. He was clad in khakis, his combat boots laced almost to his knees. The sky was a purplish pink and the breeze washed over us like tidal waves. But I continued to stand at attention, wanting to let my uncle know that I appreciated his opening up about what he had seen in South Africa, his trusting us with this thing that he had never told anyone in our family. In the waning light, we were bonded, by blood, by honor, by the secrets we no longer kept.

That first night in jail, Onoima was asked to sleep on the floor. It was covered in vomit and feces, maggots crawling down the walls and into the cracks that crisscrossed the pockmarked cement. He knew that if he slept on the floor that night, he would be announcing his weakness, opening himself up to be taken advantage of. It was a code he had learned on the streets. Never acquiesce. Never give anything, not even an inch. So, my uncle refused. He argued with the drug kingpin instead, a man who hated Nigerians, who saw us as fierce competitors, unwilling to play second fiddle, to rise up the ranks like everyone else. The kingpin and his minions cut up my uncle with the ends of a plastic spoon. As my uncle told his story, my eyes widened in disbelief.

I slept that night with my uncle's scars dancing in my mind. I imagined myself in a prison, facing off with a kingpin and his minions, giving them nothing, not even an inch. I imagined myself fighting for my life in that jail cell, beating off five attackers, getting cut up and stabbed but fighting until the bitter end. In the darkness, I clutched Onoima's amulet and I felt invincible. Suddenly, the fight in the schoolyard felt like child's play.

Every evening from then on, Onoima told us more stories, stories of running from the South African police, of the corruption and hypocrisy he faced from the local police officers to the government officials. Everyone wanted a piece of Nigerian money, he said, but continued to treat us with such disrespect. On those evenings, my father and I would listen, with rapt attention, to the way my uncle described South African night life, the prostitutes and johns who hovered on street corners, the businessmen who supplied a steady stream of drugs to young university students. It was a hedonistic country, my uncle said. A Sodom and Gomorrah, not like our beautiful Nigeria where girls were not easy and men knew discipline.

Soon, my father and I wanted Onoima to think of us as the type of men with stories to tell. We wanted him to approve of the life we had built in his absence, my father's solid job, his elegant house. My mother warned my father that he was coming under a spell. "Your brother is very charismatic," she said one evening. "And he knows just how to manipulate you." My mother even suggested that Onoima was turning me against my father. "Be quiet," my father hissed. "You know nothing about brothers."

Despite my mother's warnings, we soon fell under Onoima's powerful influence. When he began to dictate when we woke up, what we ate, how we ate, we did not question him. He would come into my room at six o'clock in the morning with his cargo shorts and combat boots and pull me out of bed by my ears.

"Men do not lounge around like bitches," he would say. "They rise with the sun!"

Heeding my uncle, I began to wake up before six o'clock. I would sit on my bed already dressed, my school uniform pressed, my hair cut sharp on the

contours of my head. At school, I no longer feared the boys who teased me, who called me names. I thought only of Onoima's words, that I was a soldier. I wanted nothing more than to please my uncle, to see his mouth widen into a rare smile.

My father too began to do as he was told. He shouted at my mother when she burned the soup. He would sit on the sofa with his legs spread wide and bark orders at my aunt, Chi. It was only my mother who resisted my uncle's growing influence over the household. When he yelled at her to prepare pounded yam instead of jollof rice, to warm water for his evening bath, my mother would look at my father with a face that seemed to say: "How can you let him treat me this way?" When I saw that look, I became angry. Why couldn't my mother understand that we were on a new horizon? I had seen in Onoima's scars the future, a road burrowing up a steep hill to a summit that reached God. It was a future where men made their own rules, where simple accountants like my father could become gun wielding cowboys, ready to defend their honor at the drop of a hat. I felt that my mother was disrupting our new awareness, the hardness that had settled and transformed our soft shells, letting us run through fire, fling ourselves against concrete without so much as a scratch.

A few weeks after my return to school, my uncle began spending more of his evenings outside the house. These weeks were the hardest for my father and me. We wished he would take us with him, that he would invite us on his excursions. When my father returned home from work, he would ask about Onoima: "What foolishness is he up to today?" But my mother and I could tell that Onoima was getting under his skin, that Onoima's sense of freedom, his ability to get up and fly, was making my father rethink his own life. It wasn't that my father now wished he could break the law without qualms. But there was something in him that envied Onoima, that wished he could be as agile and fearless as his brother. I could also tell that my father was jealous of my interest in Onoima, an interest I had never taken in him. He would ask me why I was spending so much time hovering around Onoima, washing his clothes, cleaning his room, buffing his boots. "Am I not your father?" he would say with pain in his voice.

For weeks, Onoima would return late at night with more stories and my father and I would wait for him like children waiting for Santa, ignoring my

mother who muttered under her breath the whole night, accusing my father of indulging in foolishness. When my uncle returned in the dead of the night, long after my mother had succumbed to sleep, we would sit on the veranda and he would regale us with tales of brawls at the local bar, a near arrest. My father and I relished these stories. We would look at my uncle with our eyes wide, licking our lips like we had just eaten the most delicious egusi soup.

My uncle's influence over my father grew so much that when he started coming home with strange packages, my father did not question him. He did not ask Onoima why he slept with a pistol under his pillow, why he jumped at the sound of cars at the gate. My father even held the gun in his hand.

"This is power," he conceded one evening. "This is what it must mean to have no fear."

My uncle's friends were like him, gruff and oily skinned. They wore cargo shorts and combat boots, smoked cigarettes under the mango tree. They came for the packages my uncle kept hidden in the backyard. I would watch from the boys' quarters as my uncle pulled bags from the chicken coup and stacked them into a black suitcase. I would follow him to the veranda of the main house and watch as he counted stacks of naira notes, whistling under his breath. When he left each night with his suitcase full of money, I always wanted him to take me with him, to take me to this glorious place he went where men spoke to each other with voices that came from deep within their abdomens and filled the night sky.

We carried on like this for seven more weeks, my uncle running his operation in the yard, men coming in and out of our house, my mother murmuring and then shouting her displeasure, my father telling her to shut up and learn respect. "I married you," he would tell her. "And I can still send you back to your father's house."

Before he headed out one night on the seventh week, Onoima pulled me aside. His face was worn, and he looked tired, as if he was carrying the weight of the world on his shoulders. I wanted to put my arms around him. But I knew that this would be sacrilege. Men did not need to be touched and caressed, he often told my father who liked it when my mother kissed him in the doorway or patted his back at the dining table. Men only took and gave what they wanted.

"I know you love your father," Onoima said to me. "But he can't teach you how to really survive in this world. He's a square, stuck in his ways. If you stick with me, I'll show you all you need to learn."

I nodded and saluted my uncle.

"Who do you respect more?" Onoima asked, looking away from me.

"You," I said without hesitation.

"Good," Onoima said grinning. "I was thinking you saw me as an ehurehu, a useless person. That's what your father used to call me. I would call him from Johannesburg and he would berate me. Call me names. That's why I stopped calling or writing. I was sick of being told I would never be like him."

I had never considered that Onoima could feel inferior to my father. The competition had always felt one-sided, Onoima doing as he pleased, my father trying to be like him. Plus, Onoima seemed so confident, so sure of himself. I was taken by this moment of vulnerability, wracked with a myriad of conflicting feelings. I was angry at my father for the way he had treated Onoima. But I also felt a tinge of betrayal, as though I was now part of a plot against my father. Nevertheless, I was happy to have shared this moment with my uncle. Onoima shook my hands and patted me on the back as if to say, "Keep this between us." On the stone steps, I watched him hop down the veranda and march into the night.

Things came crashing down on our heads two days later. At three o'clock in the morning, my father rushed into my room. He did not switch on the lights. "Quick," he said. "Jump the fence and go to the neighbors."

"What's happening?" I said into the darkness.

"There's no time to explain," my father barked. "Just do as I say." But it was too late. The police had already surrounded the house.

The lead police officer, a stout man with a large head, marched into my bedroom and pointed his flashlight into my father's eyes. Behind him, my mother was wailing. In the dim light, I saw her lift her hands to her head.

The lead officer glared at my mother and then my father, like he had not slept in days. My father was covered in sweat, his singlet stained. My mother was in her nightgown, her new hairdo protected by a silk scarf.

"When last did you see your brother Onoima?" the officer asked my father. His stomach bulged in front of him and the sight of it disgusted me. He was the type of man my uncle would have despised, a man with no regard for the temple that was his physical body. I wanted to fight him, to take the lamp on my desk and bash it against his head.

"We haven't seen him in weeks," my father said looking at me and then at my mother. I saw a panic in his eyes that angered me. He looked like he had just woken from a terrible nightmare and still could not tell what was real and what was not.

"In short," my father continued, "he said he was going to Lagos the last time we saw him weeks ago."

The lead officer sucked his teeth like he did not believe my father. He commanded his subordinates to search the house.

The men ransacked our house, overturning my mother's cooking pots, the Ghana-Must-Go bags in my room. They rummaged through our closets and sifted through my father's stacks of papers. When they were satisfied, they paraded us out into the yard and made us sit in the dirt. The lead officer flashed his light in our faces. He told us to be very careful. There was news that we were aiding and abetting the selling of drugs in Enugu. The lead officer looked at my mother. He told her that, as a former governor's daughter, she knew better than to become involved with miscreants. My father shook his head. "It must be a big misunderstanding," he said. He looked pained, the look he got when he had made a mistake.

A few hours after the police left, our next-door neighbor, Timothy, came banging on our gate. I thought it was Onoima, so I ran down the sloped driveway

and unlatched the deadbolt on our gate. When I saw Timothy, I heaved a sigh of disappointment. "Why are you here?" I wanted to say to the middle-aged man. But I bit my tongue. "Come in," I said instead. It was almost daybreak and Timothy was still in his pajamas. "Where is your father?" he said wiping his forehead with a soiled handkerchief. I led him to the sitting room and stood at the hallway where I could hear their conversation.

Timothy cleared his throat. Then he told my father the news. My uncle had been shot in a secret police operation. Onoima had been killed with seven of his friends, their bodies riddled with bullets as they came out of a drinking spot. "They were executed," Timothy said standing up. "Shot in the back as they fled."

In the hallway, I crumpled to the floor, clutching my amulet. I closed my eyes and fought back tears. I wanted to run out into the street, to go looking for my uncle. But I remembered what the police officer had said, that we were being suspected of participating in a drug smuggling ring. I ran to the backyard instead, picked up a rock and threw it hard against the coconut tree. Then I sat in front of the chicken coup and drew stick figures in the sand, tears falling down my face.

The next morning, I found my father bleary eyed on the sofa. He was dressed for work, but it was a Saturday.

"Go put on your clothes and join me outside," my father said.

I dressed up in silence, thinking only of my uncle, of how my father had disavowed him. In my mind's eye, I saw Onoima alone at the morgue now, his body covered in gunshot wounds, blood pooled around his head. Before I headed out the door, I went to his room and surveyed it, tracing the books on his desk. I went to his closet and brought his shirts to my nose, inhaling his smell, a mixture of tobacco and dried sweat.

When I went outside, my father already had the car engine running. I climbed in and shut the door beside me. The tears stung my eyes, but I did not let them fall. I bit my lip instead until they almost bled.

We drove down Bisalla Road in silence. The news was all over the radio. Armed robbers and drug dealers killed in a standoff with police. I looked out of the window and watched the hawkers selling peanuts, bananas, oranges. I inhaled the dust that rose into the early morning sky, glistening in the sunlight.

"Why did you lie?" I asked my father.

He scoffed.

"So I should have told the police that I lost my head and let my yeye brother disrespect my wife, turn my son against me, and upend my family?" he said.

"Onoima would have fought for you," I said.

My father laughed. "My brother was a criminal. Thieves have no loyalty." Then he grew serious. "I heard what he said to you. And for days I've been wondering how to get you back, how to re-earn your respect. I'm sorry I let a crook into our home to poison you. I'm sorry that I let you think he's someone to emulate."

We arrived at the edge of the bush on the outskirts of town. I was covered in sweat. I climbed out of the car as my father rummaged through the trunk. He pulled out a shovel, then he pulled Onioma's heavy, black suitcase from the depths of the car.

I followed my father without a word. We arrived at a part of the forest where the trees grew so dense we could barely see the sky. My father handed me the suitcase and began digging. He dug for half an hour, deep enough to bury a small child. He took my uncle's suitcase from me and opened it. There were stacks upon stacks of money, naira notes piled in neat and protected from rats by camphor rocks. When he zipped up the suitcase, my father gave me a look that frightened me. He wiped his forehead and stared into me with his eyes low. Then he threw the suitcase into the hole and began to cover it with dirt.

When we returned home, my father parked the car beneath the mango tree and cleared his throat.

"Never speak of this," he said.

He opened the car door without waiting for a response. He marched to the veranda where my mother was standing in her nightgown, her arms folded across her chest.

Emmalea Russo

All Souls'

"she broke down and let me in"
playing at the café in Venice

at my computer i squint
my coffee is cold and a hooded dude
beside me looking also at my screen
"if you're going to san francisco"

i've never seen my mother cry
without also crying

mirror neurons
ancestral cue
unutterable sun
baristas
hooded guys
encircle me
& they sing
& sing

until a maniacal laughter
about which there's something French and dark
like my mother's time in France
bathing in the kitchen
looking at the English channel

& i chug the coffee
& i run to the sea
    the hooded guy remains with me
& "all across the nation such a strange vibration"

i require quick synaptic vigor
prayers for the dead
Californian liturgical glance

i require snickers and sour patch kids
jolly ranchers and Godiva truffles
chocolate milk and sneakers

"strange vibration" of the hooded guy
in my throat urging me now to consume
more saltwater whatever will desiccate

i'm accidentally smiling at him
so i do it again i'm smiling at him
so i do it more but i have to go
"to get set up with the spirit in the sky"

Technically Feral

in Hollywood

near the oracular canyon

at the start of fire season

i looked into the eye of a suspended

possum & yelled

into her mouth

that light stretching over

to X out a madness i looked

at my deficient reign

quest for fullness freakily

Black Cherry Vanilla seltzer

fizzing over miniature cakes

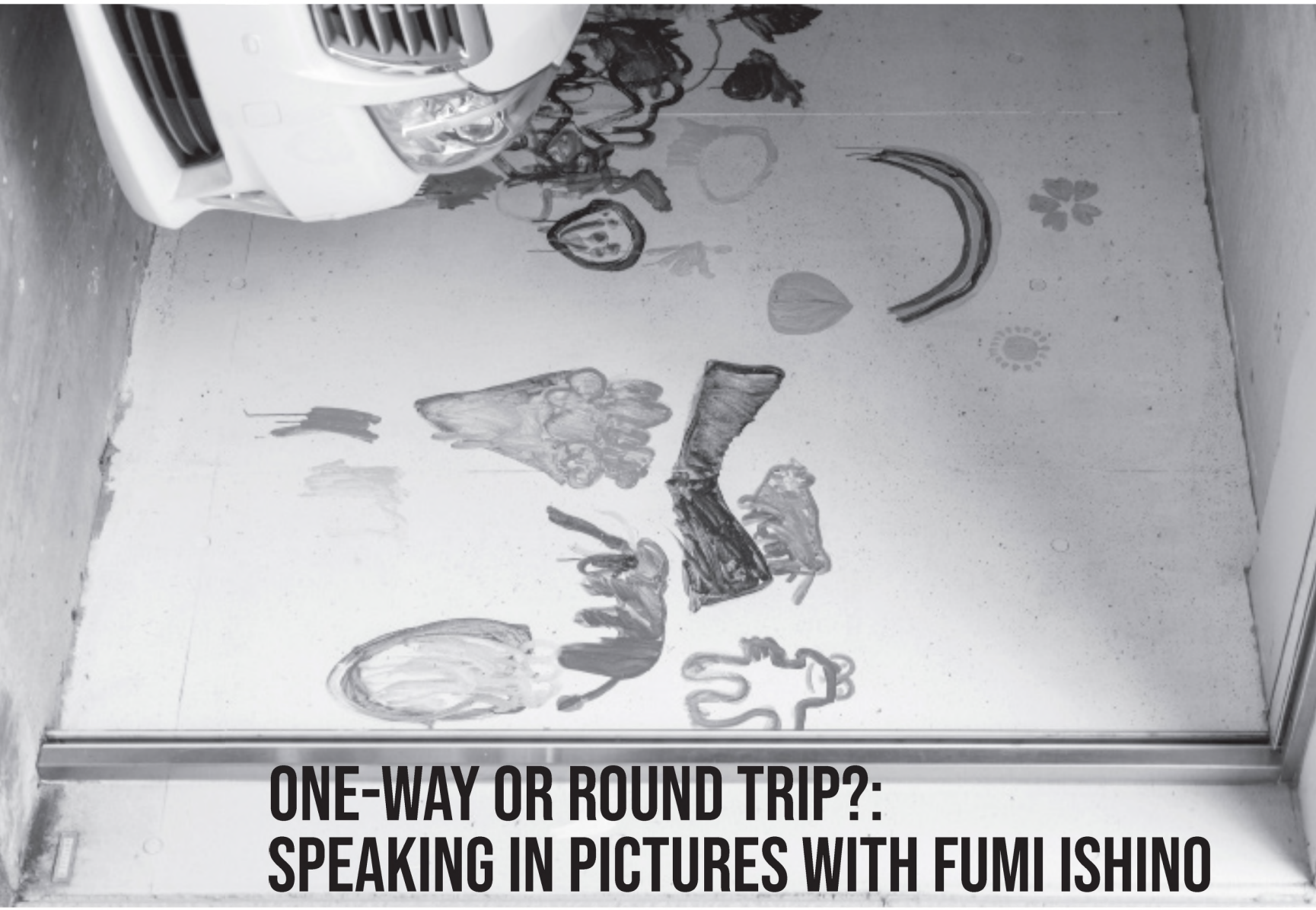
down my throat some octilinear perturbance

faux snow seeming to dive

at The Grove in illumined flurries

like the hair of an animal technically feral

Fumi Ishino, Untitled, from *Loom*, 2018–. Archival pigment print. Courtesy of the artist.



ONE-WAY OR ROUND TRIP?: SPEAKING IN PICTURES WITH FUMI ISHINO

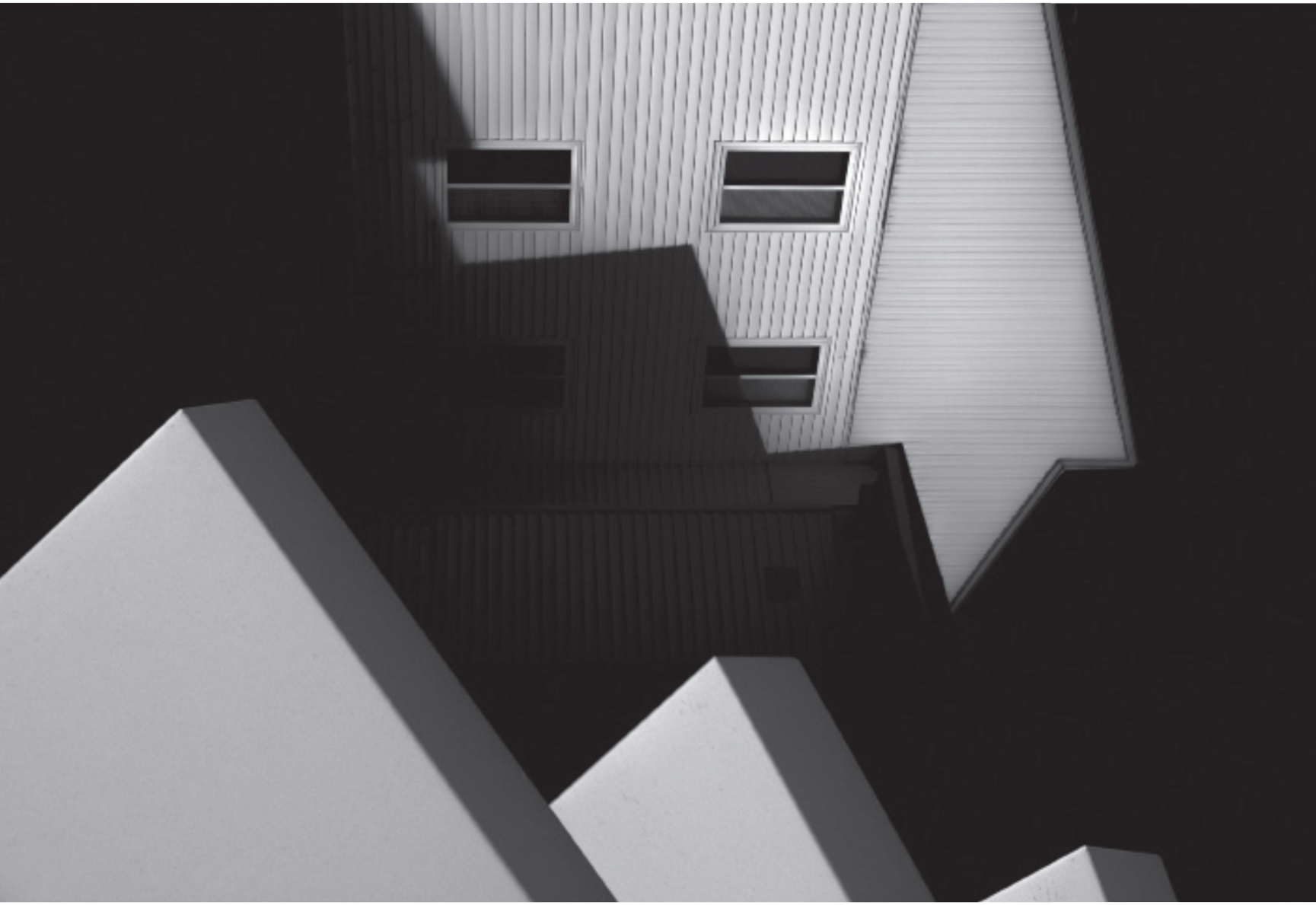
> ... and the movement of the wheels is like a bird's shadow streaming without pedaling … I wanted to send—all the way to the corner of the rua Caetano Palha—the image of an encounter that whirls as if dancing.
>
> –Ryoko Sekiguchi, trans. Lindsay Turner[1]

The clapboard siding and vinyl blinds to the left are recognizable, but not the stepped white forms floating and casting shadows over the right (Fig. 1). The gray ovals register as vending machine buttons, but the fact that the entire display of sodas has been vacated makes you less sure. Fumi Ishino's photographs always seem to have more they want to say; they test your familiarity with the quotidian, leaving the context slinking just out of frame. Perhaps that's why his work is found more in photo books than exhibitions, because it needs to be seen together, the rhythm and pause in page-turning a necessary reset. The setting is usually Japan or America, with small details of language, food, and pop culture that become evidence of diaspora, of the experience of having two homes: one literal, the other cultural. There's the coloring book page of what looks like the Jetsons' garage overlaid with sliced bitter melon (familiar to this writer's distracted, bilingual childhood) (Fig. 2), and the doubled afterimage of English-language neon signs, typical to late-night *izakayas*, or tapas bars.

Images pulse in size and hover in the corners from page to page in Ishino's photo books. Rallying against the singular narrative photograph, which he feels is a standard of Western photography, Ishino works to intersperse rather than pinpoint the drama in his pictures. Some photographs offer little to grasp onto, but instead of looking more intently, the viewer is better off moving on—meaning will come in successive pictures or in between them, or perhaps even at the end when the project reveals itself as a whole. By making photographs that depend on one another and leaving them all untitled, he rejects the idea of a hierarchy wherein certain images are "better" or "more important" than others. Titling, he says, deadens the alluring decontextualization of time and space photography is so good for. To that end, the book becomes an additional medium. Spreads are left blank, screenshots and found photographs are inserted without notice. Pages are

[1] Ryoko Sekiguchi, *adagio ma non troppo*, trans. Lindsay Turner (Los Angeles: Les Figues Press, 2018), 17.

Fig. 1. Fumi Ishino, Untitled, from R*owing a Tetrapod*, 2012-2017. Archival pigment print. Courtesy of the artist.



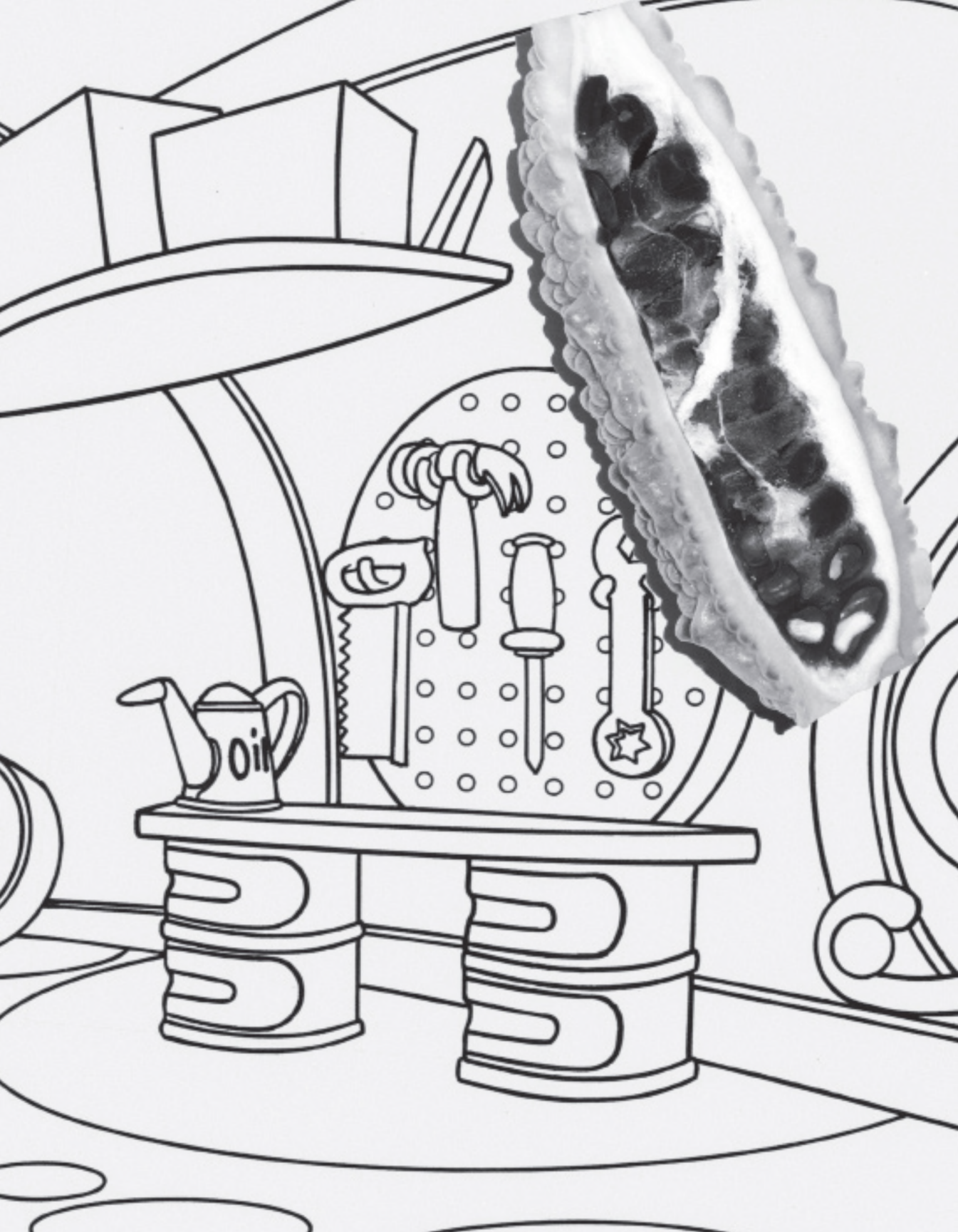
printed on vinyl, felt or left loose-leaf, and immaculately packed into a Japanese gift cookie tin.

Ishino's first book, *Rowing a Tetrapod* (2012-2017), introduces several arcs of related images.[2] His mode is one of earnest, contagious fixation, so enthralled by novel housewares and the occasional view of nature that we lose a sense of place. Pictures are linked with the language of architecture, which can be seen as a language of aspiration. *Where do we want to live, and how will we build it? Rowing a Tetrapod* and his subsequent series *Loom* (2018–) feature the swerving overpasses of Frank Gehry's futuristic Peter B. Lewis Building at Case Western Reserve University, and the grimy green spiral staircases of a Tokyo apartment complex, respectively. Both recall a busy, monotonous circulation of people, but there is a clearer citation: the stern straight lines and unblemished surfaces of New Topographics photographer Lewis Baltz, who methodically photographed urban sprawl in the 1970s with all its cadences of sweeping sameness and tamped hope.[3] Baltz's stark lighting and orderly framing positions the viewer head-on with windows and garages, turning them into regular geometric forms (Fig. 3). Ishino riffs off the same techniques, and puts us just around the corner, skewing our perspective and flattening relative distance. Shadows and washed out details also interfere with the photographs' efforts, and it's teasingly unclear if the veneer is a happy accident of light coming through the camera or a slickly deployed use of Photoshop. One photo from *Rowing a Tetrapod* depicts taped-up painter's plastic dividing a bathroom—an occasional motif in Baltz's *Park City* (1979)—except by shooting with a blue filter and turning up the exposure, Ishino makes the tape appear like scribbled Sharpie, criss-crossing the tub and vandalizing this otherwise clean renovation (Fig. 4).

Mischievous adjustments like these carry throughout Ishino's practice. He often uses the word "interesting" to qualify a photograph, as vague and nonspecific as that may sound. Once, I showed him some photographs I had made of my family. He stopped on a completely underexposed shot, taken from the backseat of my dad's treasured 2003 Honda Odyssey. "You can't see anything!" I cried. "That depends on what you're looking for," Ishino responded, tracing the darkened outline of my dad's hand and pointing to a gleaming seatbelt buckle, scratched and

[2] "Tetrapod" refers to a broad classification of animals with four limbs—amphibians, reptiles, birds and mammals (including humans). It also refers to the interlocking concrete barriers placed on coastlines to prevent erosion and dissipate tsunami waves. Moving versus anchoring, or the act of living between two countries.

[3] See Baltz's series *The Tract Houses* (1969-1971) and *The New Industrial Parks near Irvine, California* (1974).


Oil

dangling from image center. "That's interesting," he explained—the comfortable wear of the minivan conveying more than any portrait could.

Instead of focusing solemnly on a beautiful subject, Ishino tries to make photographs that aren't immediately recognizable, are blurry or maybe even accidental. He prefers misinterpretation over definition. We squint into the dark for bearings, sometimes literally. *(Tamper Evident Deposit Bag)* (2020–) is, by Ishino's admission, sourced from "hacked spy cams" though he is reluctant to elucidate. No matter—these grayscale photographs are less a critique of surveillance than an alluring record of moments unseen across city and countryside. In one image, a scene of headlights splitting through a blizzard is so wholly disintegrated it looks like sparks flying from a table saw. In another, a tightly framed window shot of cargo ships dotting the sea could be a poor reproduction of a *De Stijl* painting (Fig. 5).[4]

When I first saw Ishino's photographs several years ago, they conveyed a distant, vaguely Asian sensibility. Perhaps it was the bedrooms stacked high with folded blankets, or the kitchen countertops crammed with one too many



Fig. 3. Lewis Baltz, Tract House #24, from *The Tract Houses*, 1971. © [2020] Estate of Lewis Baltz. Used by permission. Courtesy of Gallery Luisotti.

Fig. 2. (facing page) Fumi Ishino, Untitled, from *Rowing a Tetrapod*, 2012-2017. Archival pigment print. Courtesy of the artist.

[4] Dutch for "The Style," *De Stijl* was an early 20th century movement of artists and architects, among them Piet Mondrian and Gerrit Rietveld, that advocated for pure abstraction through simplified form and color.


3M
Advanced
Masking
Film

specialized appliances—the impractical stockpiling of exceedingly practical things. These were vignettes familiar to my childhood home in San Diego, but more so to older homes in Taichung and Taipei—my aunt's, my grandparents'—that I'd never lived in, only visited. Ishino's photographs impress on the mind, lying dormant and commingling with mundane memories. Slowly, they become available like a newly learned language, useful for conversing with art, poetry, family, cultural heritage, or any other unexpected, real-time observations.

Just before everything closed among calls for "social distancing" back in March, I remember staring into a large photograph at The Art Institute of Chicago that refused to resolve. A spectral haze marked by flexing strands of sepia grain, Allan McCollum's *Perpetual Photo 183f* (1982, printed 1989), denies the viewer clarity and recognition to underscore how photographs carry meaning well beyond their subjects (Fig. 6). Created by photographing and enlarging instances of framed artworks appearing in televised movies, the *Perpetual Photos* are essentially pictures



Fig. 5. Fumi Ishino, Untitled, from *(Tamper Evident Deposit Bag)*, 2020–. Archival pigment print. Courtesy of the artist.

Fig. 4. (facing page) Fumi Ishino, Untitled, from *Rowing a Tetrapod*, 2012-2017. Archival pigment print. Courtesy of the artist.

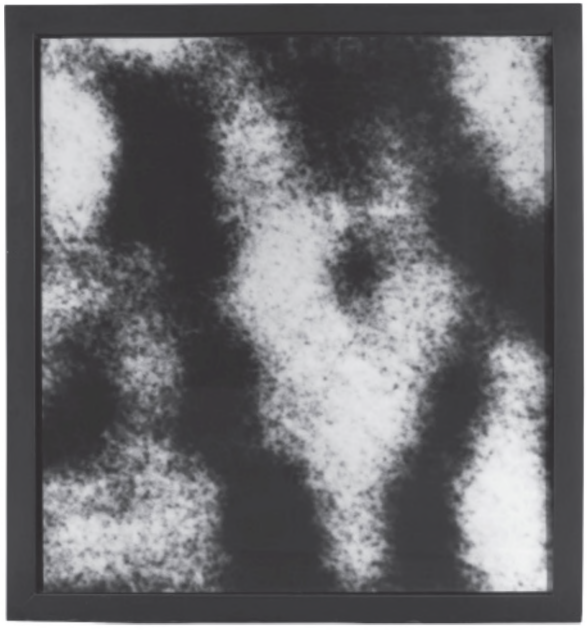


Fig. 6. Allan McCollum, *Perpetual Photo 183F*, 1982, printed 1989. Sepia-toned gelatin silver print. 49 × 45 × 3 in. 124.5 × 114.3 × 7.6 cm. The Art Institute of Chicago, promised gift of Constance R. Caplan. Photo by Jamie Stukenberg, Professional Graphics Inc.

of props. Be they family photos, college diplomas, or works of art; the general appearance is the same—framed rectangles indistinct enough to assume a given scene's context. By making rote abstractions out of these TV "artworks," McCollum raises critical questions around how we value art. Whether something is original, or the result of an elaborate creative process is beyond the point—art is just another part of everyday visual culture.

With regard to photography, the print itself can belie sentimental value—McCollum explored this idea in his earlier *Glossies* (1980), a collection of painstakingly hand-inked drawings that recall faded photographs found in a drawer but are really just flat black squares. The moment we find out McCollum is in the business of "fakes" is also the moment we realize how our desires and expectations preclude a photograph's truth. Even the staged, negligible background artwork is a reminder of how we watch TV to fulfill specific, craved emotions.

McCollum's interrogation of pictures themselves finds parallels in Ishino's treating the medium as a "visual language"; neither artist seems interested in making straight photography. Illegibility, composition, cropping, and duplication are inflections that reveal how Ishino sees Japan in America, and vice versa. His unusual pictures of empty architectures and household detritus give a sense of what happens in life's background when nobody is looking.

There is one photograph by Ishino that I remember seeing for the first time and return to frequently, admittedly for entirely personal reasons. It's a

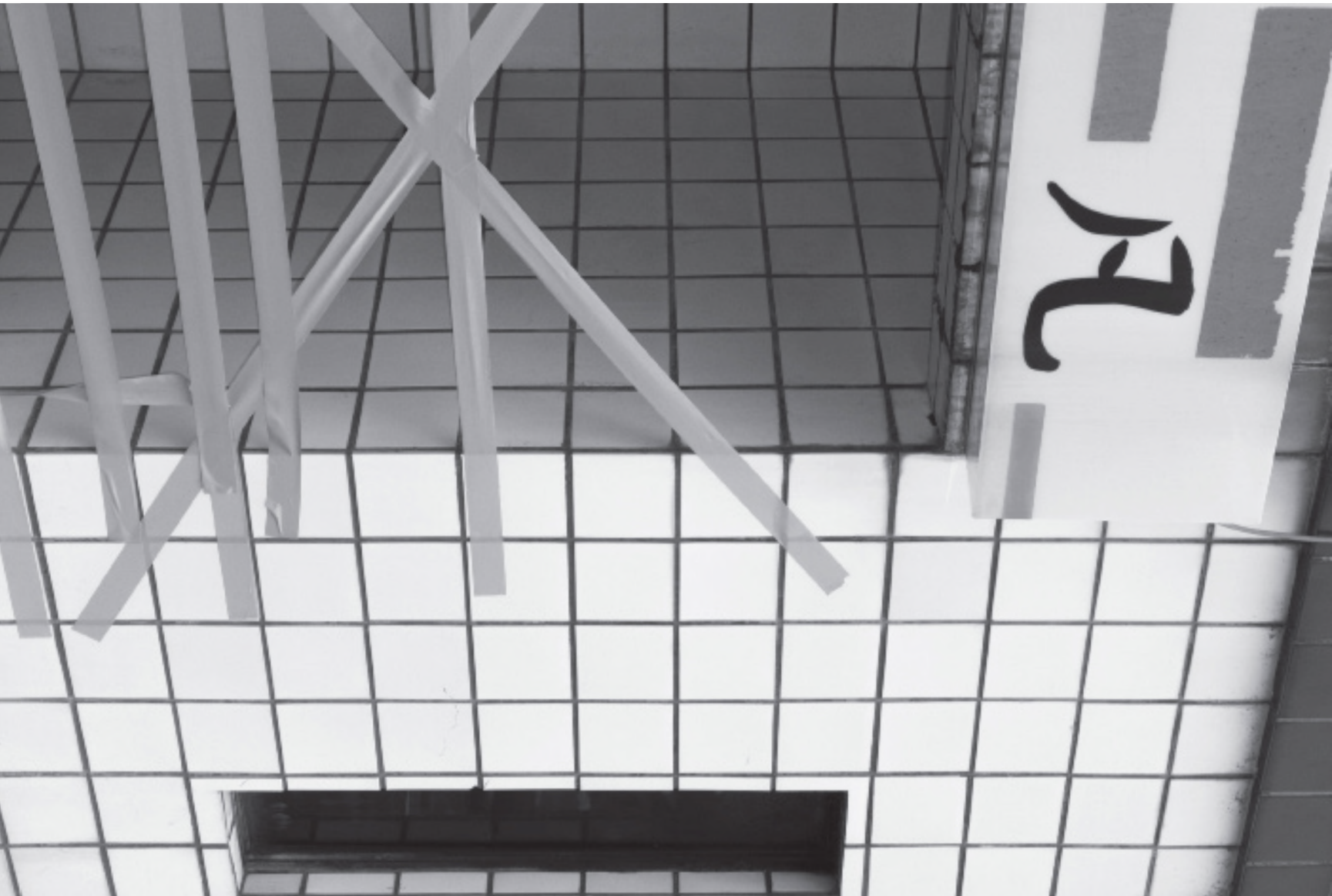


Fig. 7. Fumi Ishino, Untitled, from *Loom*, 2018–. Archival pigment print. Courtesy of the artist.

photograph of a white-tiled entryway, accented with royal blue and blocked off with strips of brown packing tape (Fig. 7). The Japanese character 凡 is emblazoned on the sign above the entrance, though I recognized it in Chinese as the last character of my name. Japanese writing partially uses logographic *kanji*, adapted Chinese characters that correspond to individual words. The meaning is the same—"ordinary"—but changes in both languages depending on what other characters it's paired with. Chinese is a language of movable parts; learning it (a process I am still undertaking) requires compartmentalization of stroke order, character combinations, and English equivalents for which there are often none. Recognizing 凡 pressed me to read Ishino's work for familiar cultural cues and moments of mistranslation, this literal reminder of language opening up broader questions of pacing and punctuation both in photography and in Asian American life.

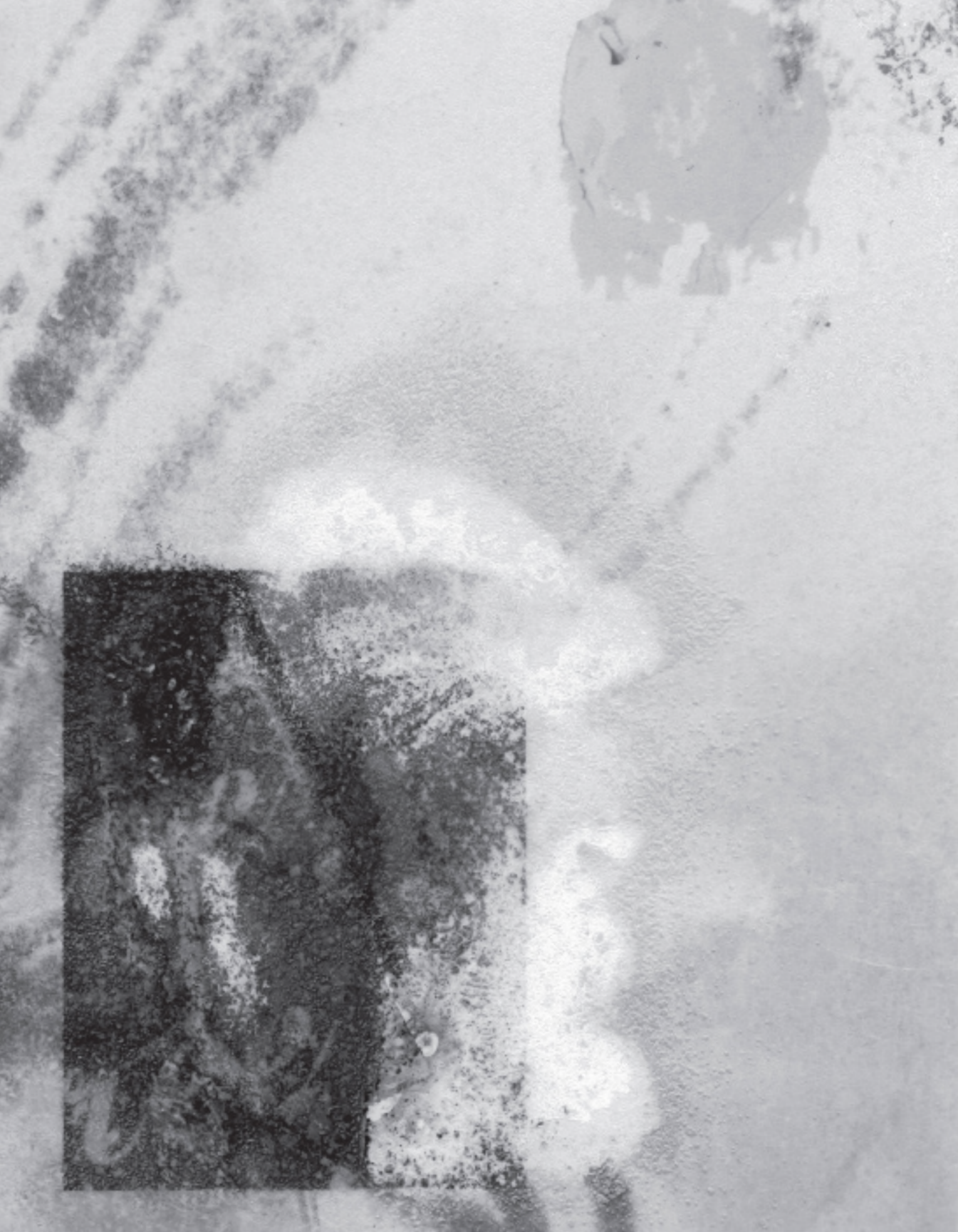
The experience of reading in Chinese versus English is notably different, particularly with poetry. Each character is its own image-word that cascades onto the next, with little interruption by articles or linking verbs. In Kenneth Rexroth's translation of Du Fu's "Jade Flower Palace," he describes the ruins in a series of short, evocative sentences that amount to free verse—"The stream swirls. The wind moans in / The pines. Grey rats scurry over / Broken tiles."[5] In the original Chinese, each line is precisely five characters; sentences are reduced to phrases that also implement a scattered end rhyme. Formally, both Du and Ishino structure their work with cogent, consecutive images to build feeling. *Index of Fillers* (2015-2020) collates hundreds of landscape photos, magazine ads, textbook scans and anime screenshots into a visual language for coming of age in Japan (Fig. 8). Rexroth, however, reminds us that in translation images can be lost and found, the same subject rendered completely differently. And isn't photography all about rendering?

Ishino's careful attention to the most ordinary details reminds me of another poet's craft: William Carlos Williams and his steady descriptions of flowers or city infrastructure. Both know that if one describes a thing enough, it becomes a vehicle for the personal—for love and nostalgia, obsession and projection. There's a moment near the end of Williams's long, late poem "Asphodel, That Greeny Flower" (1955) where he's suddenly reminded of where he comes from, and it is

[5] Kenneth Rexroth, "Jade Flower Palace," original poem by Du Fu, in *One Hundred Poems from the Chinese* (New York: New Directions, 1956), 9.



Fig. 8. Fumi Ishino, Untitled, from *Index of Fillers*, 2015-2020. Archival pigment print. Courtesy of the artist.



the banality of the epiphany that makes it all the more poignant. Addressed to his wife Flossie, the poem crests and troughs as Williams grasps at flowers and their cycles, folklore and sea voyages—all the while pleading for more time to review their life together. It was written after Williams had suffered a heart attack and a series of strokes, and simultaneously conveys a keen wonder and regret at the couple's drifting together and apart. In the last third of the poem, Williams becomes transfixed by a worn-looking man in the subway, his eyes "intelligent… wide open / but evasive, mild." He's dressed well, in a double-breasted black coat and striped trousers, except the "edge of a heavy and very dirty / undershirt" is showing at the neck, and his "brown socks / [are] about his ankles." Then a memory comes to Williams from an old photograph:

This man
reminds me of my father.
I am looking
into my father's
face! Some surface
of some advertising sign
is acting
as a reflector. It is
my own.[6]

The line break as used by Williams is physical and kinetic—it cuts off an image and casts the rest of it nearby. Scanning and connecting the lines is like walking around the description, getting a real sense of its dimensions and presence. Here, Williams is reminded of his father, a split-second sight on a daily commute drawing them close—it's a startling occurrence that drives deep and personal, for him and then for me. It's a startling occurrence to be reminded of my father when I had ostensibly left home to start a new life, do the one thing I thought was especially mine—looking at and writing about art. It's hard not to circle back.

It takes around 10 to 12 hours to run 50,000 linear feet of material through a press; for my dad, a label printer since 1991, that is a commitment of time he

[6] William Carlos Williams, "Asphodel, That Greeny Flower," in *Pictures from Brueghel and Other Poems* (New York: New Directions, 1962), 173.

Fig. 9. (facing page) Fumi Ishino, Untitled, from ongoing series, 2019–. Archival pigment print. Courtesy of the artist.

has since become accustomed to. I didn't realize it then, but a continuous spinning motion permeated my childhood. I remember climbing around giant rolls of labels taller than my grade school self as the machines ran: the fountain roller sitting in and transferring ink to the anilox roller, the doctor blade scraping the excess medium to a perfect amount, the plate wrapped around the printing cylinder rolling out image after image.

My grandfather passed away as I was reviewing Ishino's photographs for this essay. "I didn't go back enough," my father kept repeating. Williams thinks about calling the man when the train stops, but doesn't. He is gone.

Ishino has been wondering if his motley way of working with patterns and progressions of photographs restricts him to making books. The question is; how to install photographs in a way that allows the viewer multiple perspectives at once, to "flip" back and forth between images to check for motifs? These spatial considerations have led to material ones. In his latest, still-untitled series, Ishino plays with the physical and printed restraints of photography. On overhead projector film, texture becomes the subject; ink appears suspended and crystallized, sprayed and abraded (Fig. 9). By applying dish soap and water to the prints, he disintegrates their emulsion and lets the whole mixture run, before rephotographing the end result. This approach articulates process and physical manipulation in ways that are new for Ishino, but ironically in conversation with rudimentary, centuries-old techniques: Chinese rubbings, and printing. And so, what began as a lingering Asian sensibility across Ishino's photography expands into new questions of how identity permeates technique, and how opacity can sometimes give more than representation.

This last connection came somewhat serendipitously; fitting, given Ishino's aleatory process of dripping and wiping in these photographs. One Saturday a few weeks into shelter-in-place, I decided to spend some time with all the dusty monographs stacked at the bottom of my bookshelf. Among them was an untouched, shrink-wrapped catalogue of rubbings of Ming and Qing Dynasty

scholar's objects from the Jiansongge Collection in Taipei.[7] Slowly, I was astonished by how the rubbings give form to their subjects, achieved by shifting, wetting and tamping the paper over every inch of the object.[8] The receding curve of a teapot could be rendered this way, the result something like a geometric net, and even pockmarks and blemishes in the stone were transferred.

Yet for all the precision in these copies of exquisite, late imperial Chinese artifacts, the most "interesting" parts (to borrow a term from Ishino) are the incidental textures of the backs and undersides of these objects. One rubbing of an inkstone that belonged to the Qing Dynasty poet Yuan Mei is almost topographic, its roughly hewn or chipped edges giving weight to the image. Several others feature a faint gray, semi-circular shape rising from the middle of the rubbing. Seemingly abstract, this shape actually represents the pool where ink would be ground and mixed—its grisaille directly corresponds to the inkstone's shallowly carved gradation and resultant distance from the rubbing paper (Fig. 10). Indeed, without the context of their calligraphic inscriptions, these grainy segments are interchangeable with details from McCollum's *Perpetual Photos* or Ishino's new textural photographs.

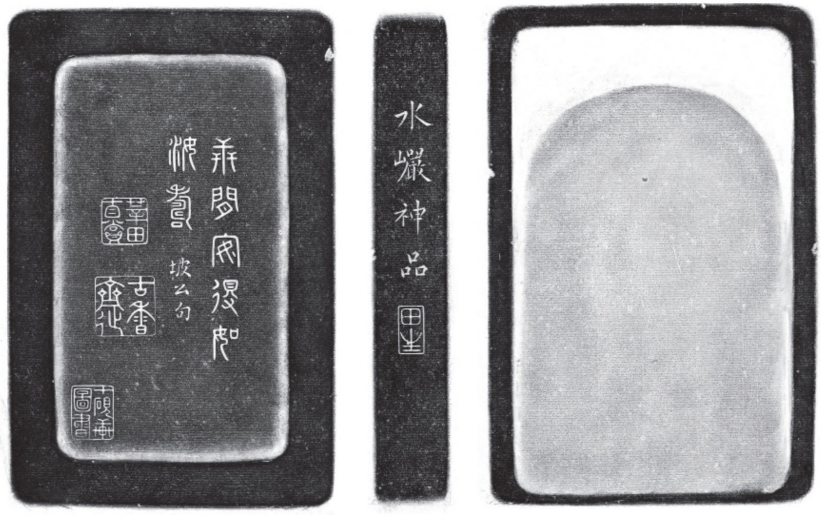


Fig. 10. Qing Dynasty, rubbing of Xuan Jian inkstone 軒閒硯, inscribed by poet Huang Ren 黃任 (1683-1768). Courtesy of The Jiansongge Collection 翦淞閣.

[7] H.L. Huang, *The Pursuit of Ancient Elegance: A Collection of Ink Rubbings from the Scholar's Studio* (Taipei: Jiansongge Collection, 2011).

[8] Kenneth Starr, "The Gentle Art," in *Black Tigers: A Grammar of Chinese Rubbings* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2008), 59-90.

Beyond visual coincidence, however, there is a certain tactility that connects rubbings, photography and printing; each requires a familiarity with how material will respond to the hand. It's like another learned language, one that only comes after years of disciplined experimentation. Laying down rubbing paper so the wrinkles fall on uninscribed areas is akin to identifying *Perpetual Photos* in the background of TV programs, is akin to Ishino's composing an uncanny photograph of the prosaic. All can be attuned to the result, understanding that images are made by adjustments.

The steepest learning curve in flexographic printing is figuring out how much pressure to apply. My dad says depending on the thickness of the material, one has to raise or lower the printing cylinder by thousandths of an inch. If the material is porous, the cylinder and plate should be moved closer to hit harder. But maybe the ink is dry after being exposed to air during a long job, or maybe the anilox roller has worn down. These are all concerns solved by fine tuning; each roll spins at its own pace, but it is the efficient transfer between them that yields a perfect label. And therein lies the biggest difference: chance or accident is often sought after by photographers and artists for their profound revelations. In label printing, mistakes mean total loss, or, "If you are missing some letters, all the letters are worth zero dollars," as my father says.

Sure, one is art and one is work; the former encourages making with a sense of unknowing, while the latter is beholden to a predetermined end product. But as I find myself asking Ishino the specifics of his process or studying the minutiae involved in preparing a rubbing—I remember how I rub paper between my fingers to figure out its weight, and bend back the corners of stickers to separate them from their backing. Perhaps I was struck by how those Ming and Qing Dynasty rubbings passed down an understanding of calligraphy and history manually; through pressing movements of the hand, an imprinted image. A gradual osmosis—which describes the broad dispersal through Ishino's photographs of his life lived between two countries. The familiarity I felt in his pictures is the realization that

the way I work, always starting criticism with material considerations of art, is partly passed down from my dad.

I visualize Ishino's body of work as being plotted along a revolving transpacific ellipse. Each photograph spins with a sort of restless energy, denying identification of place and the comfort of settling. Perhaps it's the excitement of traveling between countries, knowing that things will be different when one returns. Or perhaps it's the broken promise of that return, a desire to bring or give back to one's parents or forebears as much as they once took to leave. Circling is an immigrant disposition. In Ishino's photographs, meaning is cleared and reinscribed like ink on a plate, accumulating into a point of view of curious insecurity. Because for all the loud juxtapositions there is a quiet observant quality, an immigrant disposition that belonging is first learned through watching—at least, for a short while. Ishino charts the experience of immigrants that have already watched, and are now saying the unsaid and reinterpreting their given identities. Circling back to cultural heritage to understand how to move forward.

Patrick Milian

Etude for Player Piano

The illuminated wound is life-sized.
There, in the upper left-hand corner
of the medieval manuscript

where a capital "I" should be,
the artist painted the martyr's own bluish gash.

There, on the side of the vellum that faced into the animal:
an inside-out injury. So we begin the book

with one of the ways light passes through us,
though I can think of some others: glass eyes, for one,

our mothers, for another. The moon
is sometimes so close that the liquid of ourselves
can't help but spill through the pages we've not yet become.

We call it an accident, like when, as a child,
I tried to smash the fly's blue body
when it landed on the window, but I only
shattered the glass, tore open my wrist,

saw that inside me was blood, of course, but also
the most awful gray snow. *Troublemaker*,
my mother called me as she poured peroxide over the cut.

I hissed like a machine. It was the sound of a Wurlitzer's
motor. The long paper scroll turns through it,

the virtuoso having become thousands of hole-punches.
How can you not smile at an art so small it happens
between heartbeats, the clear work of negating yourself?

The holes make the music. The pieces cut away
get swept up, disordered, discarded. We're always,
it would seem, needed elsewhere.

Story of the Eye

I come from a long line of women who pick the wrong men.
I come from a long line of the wrong men, ones who mastered
the raw work of declarative sentences: *You can't trust the pictures*
or *I can feel you moving*. When I tell my aunt this, she cracks
open a laugh, backward and dissonant, like mine. All she's mastered
is the hip-swivel twist of her teenaged self, how to unhook
her halves while smoking a Marlboro 100 at the same time.
We come back like dance crazes; our reincarnation isn't a body
but needs the body. When I didn't tell any of this to the man
who held me against him, it was because I was listening to him talk
about his work managing an eye bank, keeping track of sclera
and corneas and lenses sliced from the dead and floating in jars:
silky balls in clear, careful water. Some realisms are
fraught with background, but that was said with a war on,
and the man who trilled his fingers over my skin had eyes
dark as soil. Some worlds you drown in and some you dig into.
My aunt picks a fleck of tobacco from her graying gums.
She can't afford dentures because her husband spent all the money
on naturopathic cures for his cancer. Outside, the war
we're fighting weighs sludgy in the country's bowels.
Is it any wonder that men who are strangers to one another
like to keep it that way even after they've made what love
they're capable of? A blind oracle will tell you how to start,
but never how to finish. Tattooed across his back, the man
with all the eyes carried the words of a fortuneteller
he met in St. Petersburg. He told me the Russian translates to:
One wing. One leg. We return but can never touch down.

Gemma de Choisy

The Constant

The summer I turned twenty-four I drove three, four, sometimes five times a week to a dermatologists' office where I stood naked in a box the size of a telephone booth. It was lined with pulsing UVB bulbs. I wanted to go more often. Between those visits to the phototherapy box, I imagined every ache and itch I felt for what it was. Rogue skin cells aging ahead of their time, always too fast for treatment to keep up. It reminded me that the artificial sun's mitigating effects were painfully temporary, as almost all treatments for psoriasis are. There are only treatments; there is no cure. At the time, if I hadn't applied corticosteroid creams to my waist, legs, elbows, and scalp twice a day, every day, I wouldn't have been able to put on or take off a shirt without sheets of skin coming with it.

The immunological error called psoriasis is the scaly constant of my life. When I was seventeen and nineteen—and, still, at twenty-two—I thought I could fix things by covering them up. "Are your symptoms mild? Moderate? Severe?" asked forms at doctors' offices. "Circle one," they insisted, then: "Indicate all afflicted areas on the figure provided." On a white sheet of paper, the outline of an androgynous mannequin stood with open arms, waiting for me to qualify my response. If I had been honest, the figure would have looked like the victim of a hunting accident, buckshot wounds scattered across its trunk and limbs. I wasn't honest. I circled one. "Mild," I lied. The fact that I wore long sleeved shirts straight through August to hide my skin (which was 30, 40, and finally 60 percent covered in raw, red[1] patches and thick, opalescent scales) was a truth I emphatically denied: evidence, it seemed at the time, not only of some physiological maladaptation, but of my every shortcoming, unkind thought, filthy habit.

How does it go, again—that wild thing Barthes said? "Language is a skin: I rub[2] my language against the other." There are six different kinds of psoriasis, some markedly worse than others. The type I have—Plaque Psoriasis—is the most common and, arguably, the least extreme and the most manageable. The word

[1] Normal skin cells mature, on average, in 27 or 28 days. Psoriatic cells mature in four, sometimes three. The skin beneath the eager surface is not ready to become a part of the whole. It's immature. They aren't quite yet skin, these patches beneath the surface, but the *idea* of skin, like footnotes towards a serviceable exterior. These nascent cells, unfinished and still so raw, weep like they're begging for cover. They need more time.

[2] Rubbing is a relief forbidden psoriasis patients, strictly verboten (as is scratching, picking, itching, etc.). But everyone I know with the disease transgresses vigorously, lasciviously even, whether they mean to or not. If we don't scratch when we're conscious, then we'll do it while we sleep. The telling marks of psoriasis are two-fold. The first are on our skin. The second are those same marks, mirrored in bloodstains on our bedsheets.

"plaque," in my case, refers to the pearly scabs that characterize the disease, but other connotations have not escaped my notice. A plaque is a thing someone hangs on a wall, in celebration or memoriam. Or condemnation.

My point is this: a plaque is an announcement, and skin speaks. We attribute clear skin to healthy choices and good effort. Cleanliness, for all of our secularizing efforts, is still imbued with godliness. The opposite can be said for rashes and sores, even if they aren't contagious, and especially if they are perpetual and resistant to treatment. I had committed no deadly sin, made no cardinal transgression that most or all of my peers hadn't also made, but I still walked the halls of my high school like a leper in turtleneck sweaters.

It was only in my mid-twenties that I began to accept psoriasis for what it is: a chronic condition assigned to me by a mixed bag of genetic mutations—for which I am not at fault, but with which I will always live, the same way other people live with Crohn's, for example, or Multiple Sclerosis. In the vast majority of cases psoriasis is obviously nowhere near as debilitating as either of those conditions but, in fact, patients like me run an unusually high risk of developing either. Psoriasis, like Crohn's and MS—and ulcerative colitis, and rheumatism, and and and—are not disorders of the soul, but of the immune system. The disease is a complex of symptoms, none contagious, the most obvious of which is the inflammation of skin cells. Psoriasis is suffered by two percent of the general population, a disproportionate number of white male writers, and by some babies as young as one month old.[3]

According to the literature, almost anything can contribute to flare-ups of psoriasis, but infection, injury to the skin, cold weather, hard water, and certain medications (including beta blockers, Lithium, and hydroxychloroquine) top the list. Stress is a commonly cited trigger but inconveniently, so are cigarettes and alcohol, the latter of which, according to the FDA, I consume in levels far exceeding average for an American woman my age.

Most treatments are expensive, tedious, and useless. By the time I'd graduated to the UVB light box, I'd already sat in tepid colloidal oatmeal baths for endless goosefleshed hours. (They didn't help.) I had soaked in apple cider vinegar until my skin felt (and smelled) not so much pruned as pickled. (That

[3] I had my first flare-up when I was eight. It started along my hairline during a particularly cloudy autumn, just as I began school in Somerset, England. My father took me to the local GP, who winced audibly while he inspected the skin behind by earlobes.

didn't help either.) Epsom salts didn't work, and neither did coconut oil, olive oil, or any other sort of moisturizer, which I was directed to hold against my burning skin with Saran wrap during the day. The corticosteroids, which were never half as effective as I'd been given cause to hope, had lost what little potency they'd once had. It was UVB treatment or bust, and by bust I mean biologic or systemic treatments—regimens that might repress my overeager skin cells' growth, but might also raise the general risk of pathogenic infection, induce Crohn's disease, and increase the likelihood of developing lymphoma.

In the 1960s, an ad for Tegrin, a coal tar shampoo, claimed the product could treat eczema and seborrhea in addition to alleviating "the heartbreak of psoriasis." Unsurprisingly, psoriasis boasts a cyclical relationship with depression. This is the ethos of a field known as Psychoneuroimmunology, and I hate it as I hate only a very small number of loathsome things.[4] From an article in the journal *Cognition, Brain, & Behavior:*

> Psoriasis is an extremely unsettling dermatological condition that may have serious implications, altering most domains of the patient's functioning. Intense, maladaptive emotional reactions are frequent in psoriasis, and may not only affect the patient's life but also his/her recovery. Emotionally adapted[5] patients present a better adherence to treatment, and follow medical instructions more rigorously, than those confronted with high levels of distress.
>
> —Corina Ioana Vladut & Eva Kallay,
> "Psychological Implications of Psoriasis"

In either case—depression or psoriasis—what one inherits is the biological capacity.[6] I spend a portion of every morning salving and bandaging my savagely cracked and peeling elbows not *just* because I am a high-strung 30-year-old divorcée quarantined in Iowa City during a global pandemic, but because both my grandmothers had psoriasis, my mother has rheumatoid arthritis, and my

[4] Deal with your baggage, goes the message. Confront your demons, you, who have begun to look like a dragon yourself. Address your childhood traumas, and your outsides will reflect the clarity within.

[5] A chronic illness is a shelter, the stubborn patient learns, a hiding place of the highest order. It all comes down to a cranky inner child, building himself a treehouse from his very own skin.

[6] Which, in both cases, I have. Whether my history of depression is the proverbial chicken, and psoriasis, the egg, is unclear. In seeking treatment for both, however, I've learned that my plaques possess a metaphorical lining in keeping with their silvery hue. They are a warning bell, of sorts: an invaluable, if inaudible siren. Usually, the inflammation of my skin alerts me to an equally inflamed emotional state. Quit the job that makes you cry all night, says my skin. Leave the bitch, if she doesn't like your friends. Clear your skin. Clean your slate.

father had psoriasis. If one parent is afflicted, a child has a fourteen percent chance of inheriting the disease. If both parents have it, the risk is 40 percent. If either parent and one or more grandparent exhibit symptoms, there is no real risk to speak of. In such cases, psoriasis is all but a guarantee.

The faulty mechanism seems to have everything to do with fanatical T-Cells, the white blood cells that adapt and proliferate in response to pathogens. Under the flaky scales, within the red patches of juvenile skin, battalions of T-Cells assault the very cells they're supposed to defend. Skin cell production increases enormously in response to immunological friendly fire. Rather than succumbing to the assault, psoriatic cells live—if you can call it that—longer than they should.

In other words, my skin is killing itself and, at the same time, my skin refuses to die.[7]

Psoriasis isn't exactly a deadly disease, but rates of comorbidity are high. People with severe psoriasis are 62 percent more likely to develop type-two diabetes than the general population, and those who do are 186 percent more likely to die from it. The risk of hypertension increases by 90 percent. Risk of angina: 97 percent. Myocardial infraction: 157 percent. Cancer, fatal: 41 percent. Repertory disease, fatal: 186 percent. Dementia, fatal: 264 percent. Kidney disease, fatal: 337 percent. But it's not a given that we'll die younger than average. (That's a 50-50 shot.)

UV light encourages cell death. The box at the dermatologist's office works okay. The sun itself is better. "Only the sun, that living god, had real power over psoriasis," John Updike wrote in a personal history piece for the *New Yorker*. "A few weeks of summer erased the spots from all of my responsive young skin that could be exposed." This begs a question. If light encourages healthy, normal behavior in psoriatic cells, then what does psoriasis encourage in its patients?

Like Updike, Nicholson Baker has psoriasis, as did Vladimir Nabokov and Dennis Potter. In *The Singing Detective*, the protagonist, Philip Marlow—also a writer, by no coincidence—is afflicted so severely that he is bedridden. My dermatologist had a copy of the screenplay in her office. Potter's Marlow is introduced to us like this: "glowering morosely, crumpled into himself, and his face badly disfigured with a ragingly acute psoriasis, which looks as though

[7] The process of cell death maintains homeostasis. Death, in biology, does not create a lack; it yields a balance. The process itself is called "apoptosis," a word lifted from Greek that describes petals "falling off" of flowers, and leaves from trees. I think about that when I run my hands over my bare legs. I have dogwood branches tattooed there, growing up my thighs towards my hips and back. When the weather cools and the leaves on my street turn red, parts of the dogwood petals fall from me when I undress. It's beautiful. It makes them look alive. I don't even mind the scars.

boiling oil has been thrown over him." Pending his miraculous, metaphorically rich recovery, he is trapped in a fever dream by his mutinous skin and bones. (Marlow also had psoriatic arthritis, an accessory condition around 30 percent of all psoriasis patients eventually develop.) Meanwhile, he never fails to get an erection when the diaphanous Nurse Mills applies medicated skin cream to his psoriatic penis.[8] This distresses him, but not as much as you'd think. He has tried: coal tar, prednisone, corticosteroids, gold injections, and, after a positive liver biopsy, methotrexate. He is on barbiturates and antidepressants. He still smokes. "Psoriasis keeps you thinking," Updike wrote in his *New Yorker* essay: "Strategies of concealment ramify, and self-examination[9] is endless." Eventually, a psychologist demolishes Marlow's tough baby façade.

There is a tendency, when writers like Updike and Potter write about psoriasis, to take for granted that it's character-building. The struggle with the disease is a necessary ingredient for the production of Great Art, as if psoriatic lesions bleed just enough light to paint or sculpt or write by. In Updike's novella, *From the Journal of a Leper*, an anonymous potter is 70 percent covered by the disease. It is an erotic story; the potter lusts after his nurse. (It's always the nurse.) He adores his mistress, who brushes flakes of skin off him in the mornings. "Lusty, though we are loathsome to love," he writes, describing psoriatic desire.[10] Successful medical treatment in the potter's case comes with acute side effects: as his skin clears, the potter's mistress's affection cools. So does his. When he lies next to her, he notices imperfections in her skin, which he'd previously thought perfectly pure. Worse: he loses his perfectionism along with his blemishes. His art was compensation for his affliction. Without his disease, the potter was without ambition or inspiration. His skin healed, his art suffers.

[8] Where light does not go, psoriasis stays. There is such a thing, for instance, as vulvar psoriasis. I wish someone had warned me. I discovered the beginnings of the cracking, raw skin between my thigh and labia when I was taking a shower. The damaged flesh made itself known through the slick soap of my body wash, but at first, when my fingers came away with blood, I thought my period was early. "I am so, so sorry," the tan, blonde dermatologist cooed between my legs, to me or to my skin itself, I really wasn't sure.

[9] The disease's paradoxes persist. Repulsed by her own skin, the patient is compelled to inspect it endlessly. She is rendered vain by default. After every bath or shower, she soothes her skin with handfuls of refrigerated Cetaphil cream, twisting and bending in front of the bathroom mirror in a series of poses so grotesque they could have been choreographed by Fosse. She does this to prevent the worst, to quell her skin's inclination to crack and bleed, but after a decade the practice has calcified certain habits. If she enters a room with a mirror, it is almost impossible not to watch her own reflection until she leaves the room again. She watches for warnings, for the spread of red blooms on her shirtsleeves and the telltale dusting of white flakes on her shoulders. And there is something more. There is an indescribable flush of pleasure that comes when the image in the glass does not betray the condition. Her reflection is her accomplice; they are complicit. She looks good. She isn't.

[10] Here is something else psoriasis does. Those of us who have it ascribe an act of martyrdom to every gentle touch. Sometimes love, with psoriasis, is barely distinguishable from gratitude. We mistake kindness for affection. We stay with company we should be anything but grateful for, and we stay with them far too long.

"What was my creativity, my relentless need to produce, but a parody of my skin's embarrassing overproduction?" asked Updike, who dedicated his novella to psoriasis itself. I don't have an answer for him, but then again, I can't see much causality between my having psoriasis and becoming a writer. I suspect that line of thinking has more to do with the fact that Nabokov and Updike and Baker and Potter are artists who are men than it has to do with their being artists with unctuous skin.

Thankfully, not all men with psoriasis think of the disease in such melodramatic terms. Unfortunately, one who was closest to me did, though he wouldn't have liked to admit it. It was impossible, while I was reading *From the Journal of a Leper*, not to think of my father, whose genetic predisposition to psoriasis contributed so heavily to my own. Dad was a potter, like Updike's protagonist. When he turned 60—the same age his mother was when her symptoms abated—his skin was clear for the first time since he was a boy.

The age thing, he liked to think, was a coincidence. He attributed his remission to force of will and right thinking—the annexation of gluten from his diet, a rigorous regime of meditation, and a stoic resistance to the pleasures of the itch. That my father came to this conclusion was his business, of course; he could think whatever he pleased. I didn't point out that, because he had recently developed Crohn's and psoriatic arthritis, he hadn't been able to extend that same vigilance to his art for more than a year.

I'd like to say that I held my tongue out of patience and daughterly love. In truth, I couldn't bear to recount the facts of his condition out loud. I was too afraid they'd foreshadow my own future. Psoriasis made me superstitious. After all these years, I still harbor the conviction that saying something out loud tempts it to be true. Instead, I inspect the flakes on my legs and under my nails like a fortuneteller begging omens from tealeaves.

My father lived in England, where that living god never seemed to shine. The last time I visited, he leaned back on a stool in his workshop, grey at his temples, clay on his blue jeans.

"I didn't think the end of my life would be like this." I set down the bowl I'd been sponging with a glaze. We sat together in silence for a while.

"Sick, you mean?" I asked this in a whisper.

"No," he said. "Alone."

I once loved a man who has what I have. He tried to hide it, like I had once. He was young. I watched it spread over his skin while his eyes filled with flight. It's hard to love in another what you cannot bear in yourself. I did what I could. He left me faster than I expected.

After he left, my skin grew clear. I woke up one morning with rings of salt around my eyes, and knew the time had come. I peeled back my scalp at the forehead, from the skin of my belly to the bottom of my tail. I blinked back my spectacle while my fangs grew long. I rubbed myself on a rubble road until past came loose from most of me. I didn't slither then—at least, I don't think so. I stepped out of myself naked, terrified, and new.

for Kevin John de Choisy
February 1954–February 2020

Jared Joseph

Imagine writing "The Atlantic" on water.

A fire speaks itself, spends
I have to spell it out for
you: I am weak from dreaming.
mint tea I drank I thought before bed
I drank my thought, this cup is
This cup is all my good. A purely
visual experience smiled. Dense of
verbiage, "need" is a strong word my friend.
Friend is a strong word, comrade.
In such a manner it is
shit, such harmonious simplicity
eternity, when we kissed we *ashtrayed*
we were smokers. Choose solitude against
I had dreams.
No I don't know where

If a tree falls in the woods and no one hears it
was it ever *published*? Every day I die beautiful and occult
Guard absolute silence
that's to say

In sum: The other girl probably did not want
to be in love, but was in love My advice for
being in love is, to be in love, be in love.
Cry in front of laptop screens in public.
Kiss the hollow of your person's chest
to fill it

you send shivers down
My spine
Long after the others had subsided.

Meghan Pipe

The Cave

At home, we are not allowed to talk about the Thai boys stuck in the cave.

This is my husband's rule, not mine. It's too depressing to consider all the ways they will die, he says, certain the forces of nature will conspire to kill the boys before humans manage to work together to save them. His doubt is warranted. The facts are grim. Six days have passed since the children went missing, since a flash flood trapped them in a pocket of cave with limestone walls I imagine like marrow, like sponge. Twelve boys and a man, their soccer coach. All the possible dangers down in that cave and the place my mind goes first is all the possible dangers that the man might present.

The new limitation on the bounds of our conversation makes me want to talk about it more more more, as though by exhausting the topic we will arrive at some not-yet-realized solution, as though by keeping them in our mouths we are keeping them alive. Still, there are children in other dangers to worry about over dinner: the babies our government has ripped from their mothers at the southern border, the Rohingya children trapped in the biggest refugee camp in the world. Carried over from childhood is the guilt of not finishing a meal while other children go hungry. I worry and worry. I lick my plates clean.

We live in a two-bedroom house in a leafy Minneapolis neighborhood, a house with a small basement unit that our landlord rents out to a couple younger than us, a couple we've never met. We see them come and go sometimes but don't know what they do when they leave the house. Living in the upstairs unit is the difference between the beginning of our twenties and the end: the presence of windows, the extra four hundred per month to spend on natural light. It is easy to feel rich this way, to feel like progress has been made in our lives.

Downstairs the neighbors fuck and fight. We close the air vents to muffle the noise but still the sounds drift up, disembodied moans and yelps, sometimes the

slam of a cabinet or, harder, their front door, which rattles the glass in its panes. Alexa, play NPR, we say to the tiny robot speaker in the corner of our bedroom. Alexa, louder. Alexa, louder.

One spring day I had to leave work early for a dentist's appointment. We'd gotten married earlier that year, and newly insured, I was going to every medical professional I could: the optometrist, the gynecologist, the same GP as my husband, so many in a row that I no longer shuddered when touched by latex-gloved hands. It was four o'clock when I left the dentist's, mouth-sore from a having a cavity filled, still slightly numb from the Novocain. Too late to go back to work. The house in the late light felt like a secret. We were never home at that hour. Downstairs there were noises, soft oh oh ohs. The gentleness of it surprised me. I knelt to press my ear against the vent. Were they tender in the afternoons and violent in the evenings then? I listened for twin breaths but it was only the woman, tender, alone.

At home, we are not allowed to talk about the Thai boys stuck in the cave, but every day at work, my coworkers and I discuss the latest over our cubicle barriers. We are mostly women in the office. At the end of one staff meeting, our director pulls up a map on her laptop, still connected to the projector, so we can trace the rescuers' path down into the cave.

At work, I fix the copier. I weigh mail and send it through the postage meter and walk it to the mailbox on the corner at three o'clock each day. I reorganize the drawer of teabags in their square envelopes and arrange the packets of cane sugar and Splenda and Equal so my coworkers can choose their sweetness with ease. I answer the phone and transfer calls. It is so easy, this job, so easy and pleasant, tending to the simple needs of people I generally care about.

After the staff meeting, back at my desk, the phone rings so I answer it and the person on the other line sounds underwater, garbled and staticky.

Hello, is this Washington? the person asks. I think immediately of movies, political dramas, a man barking *Get me Washington!* and a red phone with a line to the president.

Not Washington, I say. I tell him the name of our organization, a literary center that offers classes and hosts community events and administers grant awards. Every day I field calls from people with stories to tell, people desperate to share them with someone, anyone, even a stranger on the phone, even when the stranger says we don't publish stories here, that isn't what we do.

But it says Washington on the website, he says. I realize he's talking about our street address, on Washington Avenue in this Midwestern city. I try to explain. I begin to get the sense that he is calling from another country.

It's very late at night here, he says. I might try you back tomorrow.

Where is here? I ask.

From down the hall I hear my coworker Annie call out, They found them!

Tomorrow, he says.

Okay, I say, but he's already hung up. I walk down the hall and pop my head into Annie's cubicle. They found them? I ask. The boys?

On her desktop computer we watch a video clip of divers popping their heads above water to see twenty-six eyes glowing from the dark, green beacons. They're all still alive. Annie rubs the upper curve of her belly. Inside is her growing child, the one that will make her a mother, but I wonder if already she sees the boys in the cave and projects mother-fears, if she tangles up the fate of these children with her own unborn.

How's our girl? I ask Annie, who continues to pet the soft cloth of her maternity dress.

Wiggly, she says. I imagine the baby in the dark of her womb. Annie has an app on her phone that tracks the baby's growth. At twenty-eight weeks, she could open her eyes and blink, distinguish the different shades of darkness inside. Now, at thirty-one, she can move her head from side to side. She's the size of a coconut. I wonder how our voices sound to her. I think of the sensation of ducking my head below water in the tub and humming so my chest and ears vibrate with the sound, how she must feel her mother's voice like that, and mine like the muffle of someone shouting from the other side of the bathroom door to get out of the tub already, your hands must be pruny by now.

I go back to my desk. Already there are articles to read about the boys, who

have stayed alive by licking water from the limestone walls. I text my husband: They found them!!!

He responds: yes, but how to get them out?

I want to make a baby with my husband. It is a kind of body-yearning that makes my limbs tingle. It is hard to explain. Her name will be Josephine and we will call her Jo. Or her name will be Alice and we will call her Alice. She is always a girl in these imaginings. I could love a boy as much, I think, but his names don't float to my lips as easily as hers do, and I wonder what that means. I slip the desire to my husband when we are in bed with the lights off but he says it's depressing to consider all the ways this world is unfit for a child. The world has never been fit for children, I want to say, but still we all keep trying.

What if she makes the world better? I asked him the other night.

You can't put that kind of pressure on a baby, he said.

And what could I say to that? There's no use arguing with a lawyer.

I meet my husband and his coworkers, other lawyers from the public defender's office, for happy hour downtown. The group is clustered at a high-top table at the back of the bar, an old-wood, stained-glass place with tall windows. It reminds me of a church. I like spending time with this group of people. They are smart and hardworking, and I like that they treat me as a kind of novelty—the non-lawyer, the artsy one. I scan the group for the one coworker of his I dislike, a tall blond woman in her mid-twenties who gets too drunk at these kinds of things and sometimes paws at my husband. I try hard not to hate her but I do anyway, not because she paws at my husband or gets too drunk at these kinds of things, but because she reminds me of myself at a certain time in my life—scrambling, pathetic, bad at my difficult job. Tall and blond, traits I realized with unease that I shared with most of the other middle-school teachers my boss had hired that bad year.

The coworker is waiting for a drink at the bar, which means I will have to say hello. I lean against the grimy wood and greet her; she smiles big, says heyyyy, stops short of giving me a hug. She is wearing a grey blazer and a satin shirt that ties at the neck. An outfit for court. This woman knows I hate her, I think—it's hard not to notice the eye-daggers I throw her way, says my husband—and maybe she gets a kind of rush from it. I'd be lying if I said I never played that game at low points in my life, pushing boundaries to feel like the secret object of a stable person's desire, as though the attention could stabilize me too. Sometimes I want to clarify the situation with her, say, no, you've got this wrong, my husband really has nothing to do with it. Not much, anyway. The woman has a small, yappy dog that pisses on the carpet when she stays out at happy hour too long and forgets to text the dogwalker, and I think, at least I never did that. I neglected just one living creature when I was like you and that one living creature was me.

There is a small sign atop the bar that states the establishment's policy on plastic straws: they will not provide them anymore unless requested. The general condemnation of straws this summer has been swift—cities have banned them outright; Starbucks is rumored to be working on new strawless lids. It fascinates me that this is the issue we can all apparently get behind. I point to the sign.

I wish people cared about gun control as much, I say to the coworker.

Straw lobby has shallow pockets, that's all, she says. She signs her receipt with a flick of her wrist and returns to the group. I look to see how much she's left for a tip, and for a moment, I almost like her.

Back at the table, the group is talking about a client who nearly killed his neighbor while driving a riding mower, drunk, across every lawn in the neighborhood, leaving a stripe of trimmed grass in his wake. (Allegedly!) It's a funny story if you don't ask for too many details. These are usually the only kind of work stories that get told at happy hour—the ones so ridiculous you can't help but laugh. In a quiet moment, my husband rests his forehead on my shoulder. How was the day? I ask.

Over, he says, which means: I have bolted shut that door. Please do not knock. I turn my head to kiss the very top of his. His hair smells like beach towels left out

in the sun. He sits up straight—someone has said his name—but below the table, he takes my hand.

We get home a few hours later and we are a little drunk. Downstairs, an angry racket. Alexa, play rain sounds. Alexa, louder.

I toss and turn. The air in our room is still and hot. The temperature hasn't dipped below ninety in days, not even at night. When I finally drift off, I dream of the coworker and my husband having sex in rough downstairs voices. I dream of licking the walls of caves, tongue searching for hard water, milky-white. I dream and dream and when I wake, I am pressed against his back, slick with sweat. I hook my arm over his body. Daylight slices through the blinds.

The underwater man calls back. He wants to know about a grant the organization gives to poets and I ask him if he lives in Minnesota because the grant is limited to poets in Minnesota.

I am in Iran, he says.

Oh wow. I wish I could help.

I know, he says. He tells me he's on a mission to spread peace through poetry, with or without a grant. When I write poems, I call myself the Messenger, he says.

The Messenger, I say. I admire your confidence. It sounds sarcastic, but I mean it.

Have you been to Iran? he asks me. I tell him no, though I dream of traveling to many places. I tell him my mother's sister married a man from Iran, that he left Tehran and everyone he knew in the '70s with a green suitcase to go to school in Wisconsin, a place known for Cheeseheads. He met my aunt on a flight from Dallas to New York. This was back when they weighed flight attendants. Now they live in Texas. When I was eight, I celebrated Nowruz, the Persian New Year, with them, during spring break. All I remember is their backyard at night: slate tile cool under my bare feet, climbing roses on a pergola overhead, a small fire that lit bright our faces. We sang a song and leapt over the flames. My uncle's mother, visiting from

Iran, pressed soft nougat candies into my hands. Why am I telling all this to a voice on the phone?

That memory sounds familiar to me, he says. Well, except for Texas.

I love how he phrases this, as though memory is a snippet of song, a tune you once knew better.

But it sounds like Charshanbe Suri, a celebration just before Nowruz, he says.

I believe you more than me, I say. It was a long time ago.

Annie walks past my desk to the copier to retrieve a stack of papers and I'm reminded where I am in time, in place. Messenger, I say, I'd better get back to work. But it was lovely to talk to you. Good luck with the poetry.

He says goodbye. We hang up.

Who was that? Annie asks on her way back.

No one, I say. It's an answer that is never really true.

How to rescue the boys? The options are talked to death on the news. The limestone could be cracked open from above, but a collapse might bury the children alive. Or the boys could hang tight for a few months, accept deliveries of food and water and oxygen, battery lamps and puzzle books, until the rainy season ends and everyone can simply walk out. But the way is treacherous and already a diver has died—a retired Thai Navy SEAL who volunteered to deliver oxygen tanks on an overnight mission.

Maybe a buddy dive.

Pumping water from the cave.

Or the kid-sized submarine Elon Musk claims—on Twitter—to be building.

This last option, especially, is what's discussed on talk shows. I hate the idea of him saving the day. I feel wary of billionaires' motives in general. There is one who lives in the town I grew up in. It's rumored he's building an underground bunker, for when everything goes to shit. When I say this, you might assume that I grew up rich, but it's not true. It's amazing the difference one highway can make, the demarcation of those two yellow stripes.

I go to Walmart after work for a window air conditioner, hoping that the cool, the white-noise drown, will help us fall asleep. I stop to look at an endcap of plates and cups and serving platters printed with cactuses and bright tropical flowers, summer barbecue tableware made of melamine, a plastic compound used to manufacture things for cheap. Years ago, my neighbors' dog died slowly from melamine poisoning. The chemical had leeched into canned dog food in a factory somewhere. It was the nice, name-brand kind of food. Many dogs died. Imagine the countless moments people spent in fluorescent-lit aisles like this one, faced with rows and rows of canned food choices, eyes flicking from price to price, calculating, then deciding with a swell to spend the extra forty cents, because love. Toward the end, that sweet lab looked more and more like a newborn deer, spindly, unsteady. Her kidneys failed. They spread her ashes on the beach. On my way out of the store, a greeter in a blue vest takes my receipt and slashes a single line down the middle with a yellow highlighter. Stay cool, he tells me, seeing my purchase in the cart.

Thanks, I say. I take back the receipt and crumple it in my purse.

At home, I pop the screen out from our bedroom window and sweep the dead flies and yellow jackets from the sill. I think about who made this piece of hardware, how hot the factory was, hotter than our hot apartment, probably. Briefly I consider tipping the air conditioner out the window frame so it smashes on the concrete below, but who would that help?

I finish installing it and stash the box in the laundry room, a room we share with the downstairs neighbors. From the other side of the door I hear their television. *Jersey Shore Family Vacation*—almost a decade later, these sad, drunk people are back for more. Don't draw conclusions about my neighbors based on what they're watching, though. Or do, but know this: My husband and I watched it too. A flurry of bleeped-out words and then the downstairs woman giggles. I pad back up the stairs in my socks. The air conditioner is machine-loud and grating but the air begins to cool. When my husband gets home, we strip and lie atop the sheets on our bed, stretched out, nipples hard from the

continuous blast of cold air. We walk our hands across the blanket to find each other. Between us, we kindle a pocket of warmth.

During that bad year, I fucked a string of men I'd met at bars, never when sober. One of them, a lean man who barked like a seal when he laughed, shook his head when I passed him the square parcel of a condom. Why not? I'd asked.

I need the extra-large, he said. Like his body, his penis was long and thin; in the moderate sample size of my previous hookups, his was toward the higher end but by no means the biggest.

Really, I said. He tried to kiss me so I'd stop insisting he try to fit his apparently massive dick into a condom. I was very drunk but had the rush of clarity that sometimes came through an alcohol haze when I needed to help myself. I sat up and tore open the condom wrapper. Not big enough? I said, holding the rubber up between our faces. I raised my hand and then rolled the condom over it and down the length of my forearm like a silk opera glove. Then I slapped him in the face with it.

In retrospect, there were so many ways I could've been in danger after that—he could've punched me in the jaw, he could've forced himself inside me, holding me down at the collarbone with his forearm. But his hand flew up to his cheek. His mouth widened in shock. And then he bark-laughed in my face. I told him to get the fuck out of my apartment and he laughed again, told me I was the craziest bitch he'd ever met like it was a compliment.

I never told my husband that story. When we got back together a few years after college, where we'd met, there were things that each of us did or asked for that we both knew had come, in some way, from that time apart—I bit his lip as we kissed and he grabbed handfuls of my ass, hard, when I straddled him on the couch. I wondered about it, where we'd each been, but never asked. Sometimes it is better not to know.

One night there is fighting downstairs that does not turn into fucking. It turns into louder fighting. It turns into something ugly and violent. We turn the air conditioner off. I sit up in bed hugging my knees. For ten minutes we hold our breaths. There is the slam of a door and then a sob. I call the police even though my husband tells me not to call the police.

It won't stop him, you know, he says. She won't press charges.

But now they know we're up here, I say. That we won't let it happen.

It'll still happen, he says. Now we just won't hear it.

Sometimes he says things like this that stun me, remind me what his job is like, the things he sees every day. He hardly talks about his work. It used to be a recurring argument of ours, the only real point of contention, until one day he said, I had to sift through six hours of child porn today. I can't take that shit home.

Who am I to tell him how to hold all that?

A few years ago, when my husband was still my boyfriend, I brought a cat home from the shelter. She had a face like an egg and tiny paws she'd use to knead our bellies. We called her Olive. We had a few months together, mostly pleasant, and then Olive slipped out one morning when I propped open the door to bring in groceries. I stapled flyers with her egg-face writ large to the utility poles in our neighborhood and called the shelter until they knew my name. I left food in a glass dish on the front porch every morning, thinking she'd find her way back. The squirrels ate the pellets with chattering bites when I grew tired of shooing them away.

My husband reminded me of all the ways she'd been annoying when I felt sad that she was gone: She woke early and demanded our attention. She tracked litter across the carpet. She meowed and meowed but would never be able to talk. When that didn't help, he began to tell me bedtime stories of Olive's adventures in the wild: She had found a new home in the rafters of First Avenue and accompanied the bands with her yowling. She'd read *The Monkey Wrench Gang* when we hadn't been looking and taken the light-rail down to the Mall of America with the goal of pissing in every single store. With the help of a raccoon's long-fingered

hands, she'd constructed a raft out of beer cans and twine, then floated down the Mississippi to escape winters once and for all.

What lodged in my heart, after the cat, was the power of three. Enough for a family. There is something to be said for growing your ranks, something to be learned from the expansive magic of caring. When you realize you are needed to keep another safe and warm, fed and loved and clean, the bounds of your own capability can grow.

The Messenger calls again. How is your day at the literary center? he asks.

I tell him we've all been following the news from the cave in Thailand. A rescue has begun—divers will attempt to take each boy through the cave on a stretcher. I haven't heard about this, he says.

As I explain the situation, how it's been on our news nonstop, Annie brings me coffee from the kitchen. She can't drink it so she smells mine instead, then slides it next to my mouse pad. I smile and raise a finger. She sits in the chair across from me and rests her hands atop the child within.

We hear plenty of news from America, the Messenger says.

All bad, these days. So what can I do for you today? I ask, though I'm starting to think he may have simply called to say hello.

The Messenger says he needs my email address. I give it to him, my work address, just as easily found on our website. Then I tell him I have to go. Goodbye, we say, goodbye. I put down the phone and wrap my hands around the warm mug.

God, I don't know how you do it all day, Annie says. Talk to people.

The comment wounds me a little, that she perceives my job as tedious. Sure, there are times when I complain about it, but who doesn't complain sometimes about their job, their partner, their own breathing wonder of a body? Sometimes the things we love are annoying.

Mostly I'm just listening, I say. And believe it or not, mostly people are nice.

My email pings: A Poem for You, reads the subject line of a message from a Yahoo account I assume is the Messenger's. I blush reflexively, though I can't see the contents. I want to open it, but not in front of Annie, who will surely laugh. I click and the window shrinks down to the bottom.

Four out, Annie says, referring to the boys. I pull up an article and there they are, wrapped in foil space blankets like marathon runners. We read more and then the phone rings again. While I transfer a caller, Annie goes back to her desk. I zoom the email back up.

Family gathers
To celebrate spring
All over the world
What a marvelous thing!

The poem continues in rhyme, like a children's book. He's attached an old picture of a boy wearing Puma sneakers and a striped polo shirt, surrounded by aunts and uncles and cousins and grandparents, a mother and father, though I have no way of knowing who is who. A table laden with a meal they shared on that first day of spring. Pink bougainvillea, draped like a mantle over everything.

I really never thought it could end like this, my husband says. We are home, sitting on our front porch. We rest our elbows on our knees and hold the necks of beer bottles between our fingers. The rule has been broken: we talk about the rescue underway. There is still time for the story to end badly—but this is always the case, no matter the story.

I look at his face. My favorite face of all. What if she has your perfect brows? I say to him.

That changes everything, doesn't it? he says.

You know how this ends. You follow the news too. The boys are saved—all twelve, the coach too. One asks for fried pork. Another reaches for his mother. The cave floods as the last of the rescue crew emerges from the deep, with timing that would make you a believer. For a moment, there is life, and we are hopeful. We make more.

C.A. Traywick

The Kiss

The snake hunts started just after Mama died. Daddy says they have to be careful; there's danger all around them. Before his night shift at the prison, he walks a mile around the trailer.

Mona follows behind like a long, evening shadow, stopping when he stops, pacing when he paces, eyes on the ground as his heel strikes the dirt. If he looks back, she pretends not to be seen, dropping her gaze, dragging the toe of her too-tight sneaker across the dirt, as if on business of her own.

He's looking for rattlers, but the ones without poison are easier to get. At sunset, they slide around the desert as if at play, skinny little creatures with nothing to hide. Daddy gets them easy, trampling them with his feet, panting and grunting so Mona can't tell if he's angry or scared. Then he moves on, and so does she, quiet as dust settling in his wake.

She hears the diamondback before she sees it: an electric hiss, like static from the dead channels on TV. It thickens the hot air around her until the whole desert vibrates with warning. Daddy is quick. She blinks, and he has the snake in hand, its scales flickering in the evening light. It's not that big—no thicker than his forearm and just longer than his belt—but he strains to keep control of it. He wrestles with it, and the rattling grows louder, like the suffocating pitter-patter of rain on the roof during the monsoon.

Mona takes a tentative step forward, unsure of how to help. The plastic pail he uses to collect snake carcasses is several yards away. She fetches it and races back, resting it near his feet.

He orders Mona to step back as he lowers the thing headfirst into the pail. From where she stands, she can't see what's happening inside the bucket. Daddy straddles the snake, its body shaking madly between his legs like a devil's tail. With his free hand, he pulls the knife from his belt and drives it into the center of the pail. The snake is a trembling limb, and he flops it into the bucket. The rattle smacks and smacks against the plastic.

Mona wills him to look at her. She imagines them walking back to the shed

together, swinging the pail between them. He would look her right in the eye and say something like "That's a good girl," which is what he'd said to her the last time Mama had wet the bed and Mona had changed the sheets without having to be asked. But when he finishes, he walks ahead and enters the shed, swinging the pail with one hand, shutting the door with the other.

Bobby marches a G.I. Joe along the edge of the table, thumb in his mouth, while Uncle Hal pours his cereal and milk. The gallon jug is almost too heavy for Mona to manage, but she moves slowly and fills her bowl without losing a drop. Bobby pulls his wrinkled thumb from his mouth with a pop and sticks his G.I. Joe in Mona's face. "Wanna see?"

"No." She swats it away.

"Y'all quit that and eat your breakfast," Uncle Hal says, but gently.

He leans back against the kitchen counter, drinking coffee from a chipped, white mug that says "Grand Canyon" across the front. He has thick lips that Mona can't help but stare at whenever he takes a sip. They form a moist, noiseless seal around the edge of the mug, and after each sip he purses his lips together and makes a small, sucking sound that she likes and hates at the same time.

He looks a lot like Mama, but younger. When Mama first got sick, he came around to help with groceries and dishes and took Bobby for drives in his truck. Now, he's around all the time, sleeping in the small room Mona and Bobby used to share, filling the trailer with his junk, as if Mama had never been there at all.

The rumble of a car pulling up outside draws everyone's attention to the kitchen doorway. Mona hears him before she sees him, his heavy tread climbing the two steps to the door, his keys jangling, the door creaking open then clicking shut. She knows his routine by heart: Now he unsheathes his Maglite, sets it on the table with a clank. Next comes the nightstick. Then the utility belt unbuckling, dropping to the floor. A grunt as he bends over to untie his shoes. Socks shuffling against the carpet.

He steps into the kitchen, wearing a white undershirt still tucked into his work pants. Graying chest hair curls against the neckline. Standing in front of

the narrow doorframe, arms crossed in a way that shows off a greening army tattoo, he seems too big for such an ordinary room. He looms over the children, and even Uncle Hal shrinks in his presence, moving wordlessly into the far corner of the kitchen with his mug.

The men rarely speak to one another. They move through the trailer like big ships. Daddy's never liked Hal, but someone has to watch the children while he's at work, and he can't say no to the cash that Hal leaves on top of the TV every payday.

Daddy looks at the children while they eat. Bobby slops soggy spoonfuls into his mouth with one hand and marches the G.I. Joe with the other. Mona eats slowly, careful not to make a clatter with her spoon, chewing with her mouth closed.

Daddy cuts through the quiet. "You shouldn't buy the boy toys."

Mona looks at him, then at the G.I. Joe Bobby clutches with his left hand. Bobby pulls the toy into his lap, out of sight.

"He'll get spoiled."

Uncle Hal shifts his weight from one leg to the other, puckering and pressing his thick lips together. "Shit, Jim. He needs distractions."

"He needs to grow up." Daddy tips his head in her direction. "Like his sister."

Bobby stops eating. For a moment they are all still, silent as the figures in the chipped nativity scene Mama always put on the coffee table at Christmas.

Daddy turns and leaves the room. Mona hears him lighting a cigarette, flicking his lighter open in one smooth motion: two clicks, one after the other, and then a big, raspy inhale.

Uncle Hal stands a little taller. He sets his cup in the sink and stretches his arms over his head.

"What about my toy?" Bobby whispers in Uncle Hal's direction.

Uncle Hal smooths Bobby's hair. "No one's gonna take away your toy," he says. "But just in case, it's probably best to keep it out the way. Our secret. Ok?"

Bobby nods.

"And my secret," Mona says.

Hal stands. "Sure. All our secret."

The children spend all day outside, where the sun cuts short, sharp shadows into the dirt. In the distance, the highway shines like an oil slick in the heat, and they watch the eighteen-wheelers drone by. Their clothes and hair grow dusty and warm, the sweat at their temples sketching muddy lines down their cheeks.

They clamber into their clubhouse—a massive, yellow backhoe rusting half a mile from the trailer. Mona pretends to drive. Bobby marches his G.I. Joe across the corroded steel.

They reenact things they've seen on TV: Batman and Robin, Steve Urkel. They fill a frog hole with hose water until the frogs—everything from tiny babies to bloated toads—spill out. They catch as many as they can, pile them into a plastic pail, and carry them to the clubhouse. But the frogs always skip away.

They eat bologna and mayonnaise sandwiches for dinner. They brush their teeth for ten seconds each, Mona using the fingers on her left hand to count out the seconds. They pat their cheeks with cold water, put on Mama's old T-shirts—they don't shower unless they're really, really dirty—and climb into their parents' bed, where they sleep now that Uncle Hal has moved into their room.

Under the sheets, on their sides, their knees touch. Bobby says, "My pillow smells like Mommy."

Mona sniffs the fabric, discolored from Bobby's drool. "No it doesn't. It smells like Marlboros."

Bobby inhales deeply, smiles. "I like it."

"I wish it smelled like Mama," Mona says, and Bobby nods.

The scent is seared into Mona's memory, from so many months of lying beside her. Before she died, Mama slept a lot, her shrinking body pasted to the mattress like a row of leaking sandbags. Mona watched her while she slept, running her fingers freely over her thin eyebrow, the hollow of her graying cheek, feeling the prick of dead skin on her lips. It was exciting, touching someone without their knowledge, learning things about their texture and smell and contours that they possibly didn't even know about themselves.

Now, she shares the big bed with Bobby, and it's fun—like a slumber party

every night. But sometimes she wakes up and finds herself alone in that big bed, and she misses Mama even more.

Uncle Hal wants to take Bobby on a hunting trip in the mountains a few hours away. "It'll be good for him to get out in the fresh air, learn to shoot."

"He's young for that." Daddy's in the kitchen doorway, arms crossed.

"Never too early to shoot." After a pause, he adds, "Kid's got to grow up sometime, right?"

They agree that Hal and Bobby will camp for just one night, a night when Daddy is off work so someone can stay home with Mona.

"I wanna go, too," Mona says. She's never been to the mountains, or in a tent, or touched a gun.

"Camping's cold, and dirty," says Uncle Hal. "No place for a young lady." He winks at her, something he's never done before.

Mona's eyes sting. Without thinking, she touches Daddy's hand. She is surprised by the feel of it—dry like construction paper on one side, soft and loose on the other. Daddy gazes down at her as if noticing her for the first time. He pulls his hand away, rubs his palm against his stubble. Mona's face grows hot. The room turns liquid as her eyes fill.

Mona does not follow Daddy on his snake hunt that evening. He stands at the door, waiting, but she does not come. When Daddy returns some time later, he struts into the kitchen with his pail, wearing an unusual smile. Mona can see him through the kitchen doorway, busying himself at the sink. She wants to ignore him, but she can't help looking.

After a while, he turns around and sees her there. He smiles, the upturned corners of his mouth reeling her in like a little fish.

"Come on." He pulls a chair up to the counter. "I betcha've never seen something like this before."

He lifts her by the armpits and stands her on the seat. In the sink, she sees a tube of pale muscle flecked with candy pink. A sharp white line runs along

its length. At first she doesn't realize it's a snake, but then she sees her father has already skinned it. Beside the sink, the creature's pebbled back lies in a moist heap on the bare linoleum counter. Beside it, the severed head is upside down, eyes blankly open. It's smaller than the ones he usually catches, and Mona feels sorry for it.

She looks at Daddy, suddenly chilled by his grin, and watches as he turns on the tap. Water streams into the basin, advancing towards the carcass like a rising tide. When the water meets the snake, it jerks and begins to slither.

Mona screams and stumbles backward, knocking the chair to the floor and going down hard with it.

She hears its rattle, thick and insistent—get far, far away as fast, fast as you can—and then it begins to quiet, and all that is left is the dull sound of the snake's belly lapping the draining water.

Daddy grabs her by the arms and stands her right-side up.

"What's a matter with you, girl? Ain't you seen a snake slither before?" He's smiling a little, like this might be funny. He thought it would be funny.

He reaches into the sink, grasps the snake with one hand, and waves it from side to side.

"It's just a trick. It don't mean nothing. It's dead, see?" In his hand, the snake's flaccid body jerks unnaturally.

Mona dreams of the snake, of all the murdered, shorn, decapitated snakes whose skins hang in her father's shed. She sees them twitching, slithering, encircling the trailer. She wakes panting, tangled hair matted to sweaty forehead. She rolls over, reaching for Mama, but the bed is empty.

For a long time, Mona thought the sleeping would cure Mama, like how it does with the flu. But even after weeks and months of sleep, Mama looked tired, and hurt, innumerable worries etched into her skin, cutting into her forehead and fanning out around the corners of her eyes. She had been beautiful once, with skin that tanned easily in the sun and straight, white teeth. But her skin had dulled to gray, and her teeth jutted out from behind thin lips.

The bedroom door is ajar, darkness pulsing through the crack. She moves toward it.

From the hall, she sees the door to the other bedroom is closed. The rest of the trailer is dark. She puts her ear to the door, lifts her fist to knock, but the silence on the other side is deep, and it scares her. She imagines the snakes outside, creeping slowly toward the trailer walls, their bellies rubbing the dirt, and she runs back to the family bed, where she waits for the morning alone.

From the backhoe, the trailer looks like a Lego on the horizon. Mona closes one eye and squishes it between her thumb and forefinger. Bobby giggles. His laugh is round and delicate, like bubbles erupting from his throat. It bothers Mona, how different they are becoming. She worries she's turning thin and coarse like her mother did at the end, while Bobby never changes. Maybe this is why Uncle Hal likes Bobby so much.

Mona climbs onto the hood of the backhoe and stretches out. The steel is hot on her skin, but she likes it. She groans like she's seen on TV.

"I'm dying," she sputters in Bobby's direction.

"I'll save you!" He hoists himself onto the hood, one hand clutching his G.I. Joe.

"You can't save me," she says and pretends to cough. "Just kiss me so I'll go to heaven."

She purses her lips, eyes closed, and waits. The sun on Mona's face stings more than the steel on the back of her legs. The back of her eyelids glow orange.

She opens her eyes and sees sunspots. Bobby is kneeling next to her, looking at his G.I. Joe. "Aren't you going to kiss me?"

Bobby squints in the bright daylight. He looks at his G.I. again, then Mona. Finally, he lifts the G.I. Joe and presses its face hard against Mona's lips.

Mona knocks the toy away with one hand. "That doesn't count!"

She rolls over, away from Bobby. She grinds her teeth, hangs her head over the edge of the hood. Below, partially hidden by the tire, something black and red is tangled up in the dirt. Mona makes out the slick ridges on its upturned belly, its obliterated head trampled under a heavy boot. She can almost smell it in the heat. She has an idea.

"Pick that up," Mona says, pointing over the side of the hood.

Bobby peers over the edge. "That snake is dead," he says.

"I know, stupid. Pick it up."

"Why?"

"Because I said so."

"I don't wanna."

"Don't you want to watch me bring it back to life?"

"You can't do that."

"Yes I can. Daddy showed me how."

Bobby hesitates, his soft brows pinching together.

"I can bring Mommy back to life, too."

They drop to the ground, and Bobby picks up the snake. He follows Mona back to the trailer, gazing down at the carcass with a new wonder. Mona tells him to place it carefully near the hose. She opens the faucet—just a little, not wanting to blast the snake away. The water gurgles as it travels through the coiled hose and then begins to trickle out the end. The water dribbles over the dead thing. Bobby crouches beside it.

Mona waits for the snake to begin its dance, telling herself she won't be afraid this time. It's Bobby's turn to be scared, and she searches his face for a trace of fear, waits for him to jump back in horror, to cry, to feel embarrassed. Then she'll comfort him, make him grateful for her.

Nothing happens. Mona turns the faucet on higher. Still nothing. Bobby looks at the snake expectantly, then at Mona skeptically, until her cheeks turn hot. She can't figure out why her father could do it but she can't. She keeps spraying the snake with water, closer and then farther away, turning the tap higher and lower, her head starting to pound. She throws the end of the hose at Bobby, wants to slap him with it, but she misses.

Uncle Hal and Bobby go camping, and Mona and Daddy eat corned beef hash in front of the TV. They watch an old Western with a lot of shooting and not much talking.

"Go on to bed, now," Daddy says when the credits roll. He never sleeps in the bed with the kids, even on his nights off. He stays up late watching TV and sipping from a plastic cup.

Mona brushes her teeth and climbs into the unmade bed, not bothering to change her clothes. Daddy, standing in the doorway, doesn't mention it.

"Night, now." He turns off the light but leaves the door ajar. Mona closes her eyes and listens to the sounds of him: the feet shuffling back to the couch, the soft thump as he sits, the deep sigh. Then the sound of another movie coming on.

Mona wakes a few hours later, her breath coming in ragged from a bad dream. The room is dark except for the slant of amber light coming through the doorway. The trailer is quiet. She gets out of bed. At the end of the short hall, in the living room, she sees Daddy lying on the couch, asleep. Blue light from the muted TV dances across his body. Mona waits, hoping Daddy will wake up and do something.

Her shadow on the carpet is long and thin, and she imagines herself changing, just like Mama did. Getting skinnier and rougher, losing her softness. Uncle Hal can barely stand to look at her, which is how a lot of people felt about Mama in the end. That's ok, Mona thinks. The uglier Mama got, the more Daddy liked her. That's when he started talking to her in his soft voice, started touching her gently, even though she didn't seem to feel or appreciate it. He used to whisper to her before work, the mattress creaking under his weight, and kiss her delicately on the cheek. Why did he like her better that way? Mona wondered. But she liked Mama better that way, too. She liked to be able to lay beside her all night, a hand on her coarse cheek, knowing it wouldn't be slapped away. Inching closer and closer and hearing no protest. She would imitate Mama's breath—slowing it, elongating it, their exhales joining together in a quiet chorus. Then Mona would blink, and it would be 2:15 a.m. or 4:47 a.m., and she would wonder where the time had gone.

Daddy stirs, and Mona steps back into the hallway, afraid she has woken him. He snorts but doesn't open his eyes. To her right, the door to the other bedroom is open, and inside is the twin bed she used to share with her brother. She slips beneath the unwashed sheets, breathing in the familiar smell of Uncle Hal, of Bobby, of sweat and salt all mingled together to form something sour-sweet, like dirt after a rain.

She pulls the sheet up to her chin, smashes her face into the pillow, and tries to imagine what it would be like to sleep in that small bed with someone else, a warm body crushing hers, like a hug.

"I don't want Uncle Hal to come here anymore," Mona says in the morning, looping her thumbs into her pockets the way Daddy does when he's talking to other grown-ups.

He's brewing coffee. He looks at her the way he might look at a coyote that had wandered into the yard—not afraid, but keenly interested in how long the animal planned to stay.

He says, "Someone's got to look after you."

"I can. I'm old enough."

"You're eight years old."

"I took care of Mommy."

He takes a seat at the kitchen table. "Come here."

"I took care of Mommy and gave her the medicine and changed the sheets."

He stretches his arm toward her, and she walks towards it involuntarily, drawn in by the promise of touch. He pulls her between his knees so they're face to face and looks her right in the eyes.

"Why don't you like Uncle Hal?"

Mona looks at his nose, his ears, his hairline. "I hate him," she says.

"Why?"

He rests his hands on her shoulders, and she is surprised by how light they feel there. His eyebrows are notched like he's thinking hard, and Mona thinks, Hey, maybe it's working, maybe all I had to do is ask.

"Uncle Hal has done a lot for us," Daddy says, and Mona shrinks.

She tries to think of something to say, some way to make Uncle Hal seem less good, some way that her father, her brother, and her could all be a family together again.

"Your mama would want you to be nice to Uncle Hal."

Mona's throat hurts. Her vision blurs. How does he know what Mama would want? She leans into the weight of him, warmed by his bulk, softened by the pressure on her limbs. She rests her head on his shoulder, and she can't speak. All she can do is look at how the stubble has come in on his jaw, stick-straight flecks of grey and brown, how his lips are thin and chapped and pressed into a hard line. They are the opposite of Uncle Hal's lips, which are so thick and pink, but she likes Daddy's better because they remind her of Mama's prickly lips, and she wants to run her fingers over them to see if they feel the same. She wonders what it would feel like to press her own lips against them, wetly, to be kissed by them, the way Uncle Hal kisses her brother in the cab of the truck when he thinks she can't see: tenderly, with an excess of feeling that she can't understand but knows she wants for herself.

Outside, they hear the rumble of a truck. Daddy's gaze floats over to the window, his attention drifting from Mona to Uncle Hal and Bobby, returning from their camping trip. Mona touches Daddy's cheek with her palm, and he looks at her, puzzled. There is still time, moments, before Uncle Hal walks in. She lifts her chin the way women do on TV and leans forward, aching to feel the prick of dead skin against her lips.

Ananda Lima

A orelha e o ouvido

he shows me the difference between *years*
and *ears* in vain I say that we have two
words for it in my language (mine and his
too I correct myself): this one word for
the outside bare skinned curled blind baby mouse
another for the inner part just ours
which nobody sees he says there are two
ways to say it in English too index
finger to a side door to his brain says
inner bends his ear as if to say see?
cartilage a great closing argument
I say yeah but that is not the same thing
and what I mean stumbling is it's the same
word in English I say it slowly: *year*



Veronica Roberts

Myth and Folktale: An Interview with Diedrick Brackens

Veronica Roberts, Curator of Modern and Contemporary Art at the Blanton Museum in Austin, Texas, asks artist Diedrick Brackens about origins and inspirations for his intricate weavings.

Veronica Roberts: First, thank you so much, Diedrick, for joining me in conversation. I like anchoring interviews in works of art, so want to start this exchange with the first textile you made that I was fortunate enough to see in person: *bitter attendance, drown jubilee* (Fig. 1). That weaving was featured in the 2018 edition of the "Made in LA" show at the Hammer Museum in Los Angeles.[1] I felt like I was looking at a 21st century Renaissance painting. The figures have a Biblical solidity and gravitas that I see in so much of your work, and the tripartite composition recalls an altarpiece, but I know that the compass of this weaving is firmly rooted in your hometown of Mexia, Texas. Can you share the historical event that you reimagine in this work? What in 2018 made you return to this childhood memory?

Diedrick Brackens: The weaving, *bitter attendance, drown jubilee* was inspired by a 1981 event a few years before my birth, so for me the memory is the constant retelling of the actual tragedy. The event in question is the drowning of three Black teenagers while in police custody. These deaths transpired at a Juneteenth celebration on Lake Mexia.[2] The site was once home of one of the largest observances of Juneteenth in the country, upwards of 20,000 people celebrating over a three-day weekend. As a child, I grew up hearing about this event from all my family members. It wasn't until a few years ago that the significance and all the details began to come into focus. The loss of Black life, on the anniversary of Black

[1] "Made in LA.2018," Hammer Museum, University of California, Los Angeles, June 3 to September 2, 2018; curated by Anne Ellegood, senior curator and Erin Christovale, assistant curator, with MacKenzie Stevens, curatorial associate, Hammer Museum, University of California, Los Angeles.

[2] Juneteenth is the commemoration of June 19th, 1865, when a Union general named Gordon Granger arrived in Galveston, Texas with the news that America's last remaining slaves were no longer in bondage. Although the Civil War had been over for months and The Emancipation Proclamation had been issued more than two years earlier, word of freedom had not made its way to Texas until what is now referred to and celebrated as "Juneteenth."

(facing page) Diedrick Brackens in his Los Angeles studio, October 16, 2019. Photo: Veronica Roberts.

liberation, at the epicenter of its celebration was gut wrenching. It was made all the more personal that is was situated in the place I was born, on land purchased by my once enslaved ancestors.

I created the weaving as a way to tell the story and reimagine its violent ending. To honor the lives lost, the boys are returned to the world transformed as catfish.

VR: Before we dive deeper into the iconography of your work, can you share a bit more about your childhood and what it was like growing up queer in a relatively small Texan town? You also grew up in a military family, I believe?

DB: I am from a very Southern Baptist upbringing. Some of my greatest memories and traumas are tied to my family and the church community that cared for me. I would say I was raised in the soup of bigotry that the rest of the country is also steeped in. As a child, the best protection and guidance was granted to me by an endless chain of Black elders, cousins, and peers.

Mexia is my ancestral home, since I moved away from there for good when I was very young, age 6 or 7. My younger brother and I spent our summers there growing up. We stayed with my maternal grandparents. My father was in the army so we moved around a lot as a family, to Colorado, Kansas, and Kentucky, just to name a few of the places where we lived. I went to high school in Killeen, Texas. Although I grew up in a Southern Baptist and military family, my father has always encouraged me and supported me, from buying me the best art supplies when I developed an interest in art, to accepting me, without hesitation, when I came out.

VR: To have the support and guidance of family and elders is everything. Thank you for sharing that. I'd love to talk more about your iconography. Catfish appear so often in your weavings. I read them as quintessentially Texan—as nods to your home state—but wonder if they carry any other symbolism for you?

DB: I love catfish. The catfish came originally into my vocabulary after reading about a 1971 performance by Terry Fox entitled *Pisces*. In the work, the artist

literally tethers himself to a couple of dying fish. I had been searching for a way to connect myself and my work to a symbol that was emblematic of the South; it was a lightning bolt. The catfish is such an unredeemable creature, one that many regard as lowly. It is labeled a bottom feeder, scavenger, etc. I wanted to elevate this creature in the way that the tapestries of the Middle Ages exalted unicorns, lions, dragons, and stags. The catfish has become a way for me to think about sustenance, my ancestors, and myself; it functions as a spirit linking the living and dead.

VR: I am struck by how many animals are in the weavings—in addition to the catfish, of course, you've included goats and even a unicorn. You have a real menagerie going, Diedrick! Or maybe I should call it a Peaceable Kingdom since it conjures Biblical scenes for me in some cases. But I was especially struck by the presence of horses in your exhibition at the New Museum, *Diedrick Brackens: darling divined*.[3] Can you talk about Black Cowboys and also unpack the iconography in *break and tremble* (Fig. 2), one of the largest and most unforgettable weavings in the show?

DB: The weavings are indebted to a host of works from Edward Hicks *Peaceable Kingdom* (Fig. 3), Horace Pippin's *Holy Mountain* (1945; Fig. 4), and the jungle paintings of Henri Rousseau.

The horses entered the work at a moment when I decide to increase the scale of the work. I didn't really set out to make work about the Black Cowboy; I wanted to think about rural life, about working the land, and how I was from a family that still had a connection to these things. Black people have been dispossessed from farming, nature, and land ownership, and by extension the cowboy culture, even though we were arguably at the heart of the history. The work *break and tremble* was a part of a suite of weavings that were made in thinking about all these things, as well as taking inspiration from the apocalyptic horsemen.

VR: What led you to think about making double-sided weavings that are displayed off the wall? Is this something you want to continue to explore?

[3] *Diedrick Brackens: darling divined*, New Museum, New York, July 4 to September 15, 2019; curated by Margot Norton, curator, and Francesca Altamura, curatorial assistant, New Museum, New York; traveling to the Blanton Museum of Art at The University of Texas at Austin, October 17, 2020 to January 10, 2021.

DB: I made the first stand for *break and tremble* and it was for logistical reasons. I was intent on showing three weavings in a space (at the New Museum) that had two small perpendicular walls. I had the stand fabricated to mimic a tapestry loom, which is a tradition my weavings often gesture towards. I had no idea at the time how much this formal decision would impact the work. The move allowed me to create more distance between my work and the discipline of painting. The works suddenly became more dimensional in revealing themselves back and front to the audience.

VR: I'd love to also talk about your interest in the material texture and history of cotton (Fig. 5).

DB: As a young weaver, cotton was the primary medium I was taught to manipulate. It is easy to work with, cheap, takes dyes well, and holds up to time and pests. I never really took to other materials like wool and silk. I cling to cotton because it's ubiquitous and then because it is tied up in the history of this country, Texas, and my family. This plant brought wealth to this country. Generations of my family toiled over its production and reaped no benefits. I think often about the unknowable terrors and violence endured all back-dropped by King Cotton, and I know it is my life's work to try and make something beautiful out of this material. I hope it is some small healing tribute to my ancestors when I choose to sit at my loom and weave my stories.

VR: Not every weaver dyes their own yarn. Can you share why this matters to you and some of the materials you have explored? I've seen you use tea and wine and even water taken from specific geographical locations. I know you think deeply about materials and am eager to learn more about some of the choices you have made.

DB: I dye my own yarns because it means I don't have to settle on what colors have been commercially produced. I am able to get colors to move across the weaving in more fluid and dynamic ways, and I can coax subtle shifts and interactions

that would not otherwise be possible. I love color theory and spend a lot of time thinking about how colors will behave as they interlace in the cloth. I mostly use commercial grade textile dyes because they are predictable and vibrant. Anytime I have used other materials like tea or wine, it is for what they will impart to the overall symbolism of the work, to the composite poetics I am trying to formulate. The materials might call out allusions to blood, to the body, to the kitchen; water might conjure up a place, or wine, a lover.

VR: You've talked about wanting to honor the African-American quilting tradition in your work and remain close to and part of that history. Can you elaborate a bit about that legacy and your introduction to it? We recently had a Jeffrey Gibson exhibition at the Blanton, and I remember him telling me how important the Gee's Bend quilts had been to him as an artist and how they have informed the amazing garments and flags he has been making in recent years.[4]

DB: The quilters of Gee's Bend are so formational to my understanding of my own textile practice as well (Fig. 6). I began to learn about them during my time as an undergraduate in the Fiber Program at UNT (University of North Texas). From their sense of color and organic symmetry to the way they take existing quilt patterns and explode them. These quilters' work and impact on the field of textiles is ever-present whether or not it is acknowledged. I return to this wellspring over and over again when making my own work. Their quilts help me to continue to inject improvisation into my weavings.

VR: I'd love to talk about *blue under night* (Fig. 7). All of the works in the recent exhibition at the New Museum, *darling divined*, which we are so happy to be presenting at the Blanton in October, are figurative in nature. I've heard you refer to *blue under night* (2017) as the first figurative weaving you made as a mature artist. Although I feel like abstraction and figuration co-exist in so many of your works, what prompted this shift and exploration towards the figurative?

[4] *Jeffrey Gibson: This Is the Day*, Wellin Museum, Hamilton College, NY, September 8 to December 9, 2018; traveled to Blanton Museum of Art, The University of Texas at Austin, July 14 to September 29, 2019; curated by Tracy L. Adler, Johnson-Pote Director.

DB: I decided very early in art making to remove the figure because of the ways it was received in critiques, exhibitions, and reviews. I made a conscious decision to keep my Black queer bodies safe by eliminating them from my projects. I found that a lot of the readings of work that included Black bodies were lazy, racist, and empty of any critical discussions, and leaned heavily on my biography. What did happen for me, I think, was that I had to learn how to make the same ideas transmittable without the figure. I got to be a bit more free and sly about what the work did.

blue under night was the first time I had depicted the body in 7 to 8 years. What brought me back into figuration was pop culture. I saw *Moonlight* like six times; it cracked me open. There was a groundswell of Black voices and images in TV and film, and they were depicting a range of experiences all at the same time. Black people as superheroes, Black people who lived to the end of the film, Black queer coming-of-age stories—we were centered. Also, figuration was reemerging in conversations in the contemporary art world at the same time. All of this made me feel as though my own figures would be able to enter the world in a new context and engage viewers differently than Black bodies could have before this moment; that these projects perhaps were providing literacy for audiences that wasn't there before.

VR: Wow. I am processing all that you just said. The figures in your work have such a power and intimacy for me, and even more so for me understanding the way you arrived at this point in your practice. Let's talk about your incredible sense of color next. There's a shade of pink yarn that you had in the studio and were wearing, perhaps not so coincidentally, when I visited you in 2019. It's a color my grandmother called "hot pink." There are also greens, from apple to a kind of fluorescent green, that seem so much your palette. How would you describe your relationship to color?

DB: I often show up to the studio and realize my clothes match my work accidentally and perfectly. Color is the most crucial element of the weavings. I know it is the first thing that will captivate a viewer beyond the intrinsic fascination

with the skill implied by it being hand-woven. Color lifts the viewers into work and extends and amplifies the emotional undercurrents of the tableaus.

VR: Formally, I am drawn not only to your use of color but also to the way you play with solid and open forms. Your silhouetted bodies are full in some passages and dissolve into outlines in others. I am also struck by the way you often leave strands of yarn loose, not just to create fringed edges at the bottom of your weavings but throughout your compositions. I'm curious about that formal decision, or if it's just your personal style of mark making with the loom and super intuitive?

DB: I love this question. I see my looms (Spreken, Yvette, Anansi) very much as collaborators. In the process of creating a work, I try to stay engaged in the limitations of what the loom can articulate. I also look for moments when something that is process-specific might cement a conceptual idea, or strike a particular mood. There are moments where I hide the beginning or end of a thread, because that is what the accomplished craftsperson is taught to do and moments where I tie a knot or let the end hang loose because it imparts line, texture, or other formal qualities I am seeking to explore as an artist.

VR: We talked about this when I visited your studio last year; when I look at your work, I think of diverse artistic traditions from Kente cloth to Gee's Bend quilts, but in the figurative weavings, I find myself thinking of Italian Renaissance altarpieces, especially because of the ritualistic poses and gestures of your bodies. In *opening tombs beneath the heart* (Fig. 8), I feel like one figure is healing the other. We seem to be witnessing a blessing, but then I also read it as a male couple in an intimate scene. Have you studied Renaissance painting (Fig. 9)? What about that tradition appeals to you?

DB: Yes, I have learned a great deal from these paintings. You are very close in your reading of the work I think to what I was trying to convey. I cannot say that I have studied Renaissance painting closely in the traditional sense, but I have become a student of classical works of art through viewing. I have learned a lot about

composition and a sort of elegance of pose from visiting encyclopedic museums and looking at Greek and Egyptian antiquities, Renaissance painting, classical sculptures, and other historical works. In working with silhouettes, I spend a lot of time thinking about what I can convey and articulate. For example, figures have to be positioned head-on or in profile often, and most limbs must be visible. I have to take care in the way figures touch to visually keep them from collapsing into a blob since so much of what defines a body depends on the legibility of simplified shapes. A lot of this logic is built into ancient objects, and Renaissance works of art.

All of this is to say nothing of the ways symbolism and myths are densely packed into these works. For me, it was a time when paintings really served to tell stories and disseminate propaganda to the public. That they could be encoded and decoded fascinates me.

VR: As a museum curator who thinks about the conversations that works of art can generate, I always like to ask artists this question: in your ideal world, what artists, living or deceased, would you love to see your work installed alongside?

DB: Well, here is a brief selection of the folks and objects of the top of my mind: The print *Cotton Eater* by Allison Saar (2014), Harriet Powers's story quilts, Martin Puryear's *Ladder for Booker T. Washington* (1999), Belkis Ayón's collographs, and the photography of Rotimi Fani-Kayode (Fig. 10).

VR: I was so gratified by the invitation from *Gulf Coast* to do an interview with an artist. I thought you'd be an ideal person to interview not only because I admire your work (and you are a native Texan!) but also because of your interest in poetry and writing, which is integral to the mission of *Gulf Coast* as well. Can you talk about some of the writers who have most informed your thinking or practice recently? I am also curious to know why your titles are always lowercase.

DB: I think when it comes to the work that inspires me most, it is myth and folktale, as well as stories rooted in oral tradition. I am moved by writers who harness and reanimate folklore in their work; people like Zora Neale

Hurston and Toni Morrison. Right now, the epic-length poem, *In the Mecca*, by Gwendolyn Brooks, stands as the best work I have read to date—the writing is dizzying and precise.

Essex Hemphill and Nikkey Finney are my favorite writers and the first poets I came into contact with as a young reader. I am newly discovering the wider world of poetry, and some of the folks I feel inspired by are Chen Chen, Patricia Smith, Derrick Austin, Joshua Whitehead, and so many others.

Narrative and language are so tied up in the medium I have chosen in weaving. I have always been interested in the written word, particularly poetry. The language around text/textile share etymological roots in 'texere' (to weave) and thinking about the word poem and its Greek root 'poiein' (meaning to create) it makes sense to align my work with words and that my weavings, through image and materials, must tell a story.

My titles are lowercase because I want the reader to enter into the text as if falling into the middle of a sentence or thought. I am obsessed with the idea that a set of titles, considered all together, might be read as a poem, another work itself.

p. 161, Fig. 1. Diedrick Brackens, *bitter attendance, drown jubilee*, 2018.
Woven cotton and acrylic yarn and silk organza, 72 x 72 in.
Hammer Museum, Los Angeles; purchased with funds provided by Beth Rudin DeWoody © Diedrick Brackens.
Image courtesy the artist and Various Small Fires, Los Angeles/Seoul.

p. 162, Fig. 2. Diedrick Brackens, *break and tremble*, 2019.
Woven cotton and acrylic yarn, 89 x 93 in.
Museum of Fine Arts, Houston; museum purchase funded by the African American Art Advisory Association, the Art Colony Association, Gregory Fourticq, the Arthur Robson, Jr. Bequest, Joan Morgenstern, Judy Nyquist, Penelope and Lester Marks, Kerry F. Inman, and by exchange: Marti Shlenker, Mrs.Thomas J. Gordon, Teresa and Dennis Ranzau, Rosalie Meador Thompson and Mrs. Robert Robertson, Jr. © Diedrick Brackens.
Image courtesy the artist and Various Small Fires, Los Angeles/Seoul.

p. 163, Fig. 3. Edward Hicks, *The Peaceable Kingdom*, c. 1830–32.
Oil on canvas, 17 7/8 x 23 7/8 in.
The Metropolitan Museum of Art; gift of Edgar William and Bernice Chrysler Garbisch, 1970. (1970.283.1).
Image courtesy the Metropolitan Museum of Art.

p. 163, Fig. 4. Horace Pippin, *Holy Mountain III*, 1945.
Oil on canvas, 25 1/4 x 30 1/4 in.
Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, DC; gift of Joseph H. Hirshhorn, 1996.

p. 164, Fig. 5. Diedrick Brackens, *slain garden*, 2017.
Woven cotton, doily, and mirrored acrylic. 54 x 25 in.
The Collection of Alexandra Mollof © Diedrick Brackens.
Image courtesy the artist and Various Small Fires, Los Angeles/Seoul.

p. 165, Fig. 6. Arie Pettiway (1909–1993), *Sixteen-block "Pine Burr" Variation*.
Cotton, cotton blend polyester double-knit, 83 x 71 in.
Collection of the Souls Grown Deep Foundation.
Image: Stephen Pitkin/Pitkin Studio.
© Arie Pettiway/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York.

p. 166, Fig. 7. Diedrick Brackens, *blue under night*, 2017.
Woven cotton and acrylic yarn, 78 x 31 in.
© Diedrick Brackens. Image courtesy the artist and Various Small Fires, Los Angeles/Seoul.

p. 167, Fig. 8. Diedrick Brackens, *opening tombs beneath the heart*, 2018.
Woven cotton and acrylic yarn, 79 x 72 in.
The Collection of Robert Shiell © Diedrick Brackens.
Image courtesy the artist and Various Small FIres, Los Angeles/Seoul.

p. 168, Fig. 9. BAPTISM OF CHRIST. Fresco from the Scrovegni Chapel by Giotto, 1304–06. Image courtesy GRANGER.

p. 168, Fig. 10. Rotimi Fani-Kayode. *Adebiyi*, 1989.
Chromogenic print, 24 3/16 x 23 3/4 in.
Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York.
Purchased with funds contributed by the Photography Council, 2017.
Image courtesy Autograph APB, London.



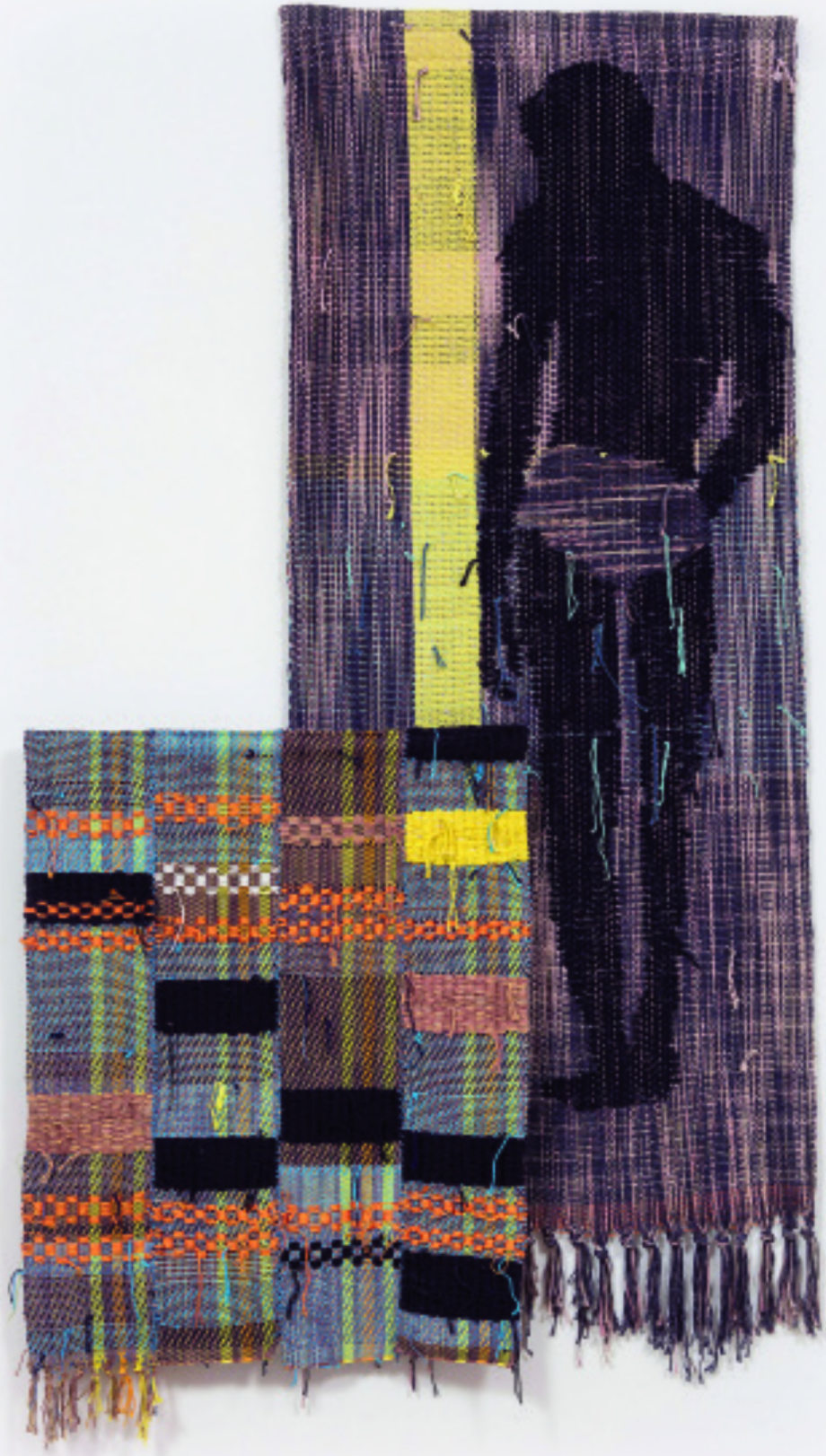


















Kathryn Nuernberger

The Invention of Mothers

Set chopped up his rival Osiris and scattered the pieces across the world. Isis was the first queen and the first witch. The first spell went like this:

> For a year Isis roamed the earth gathering up the pieces. Then she molded the one bit that could not be found out of clay. Was it his penis? His heart? His soul? It is unclear, but with this piece she made in hand, she could breathe the words that brought her beloved back to life.

Her magic only lasted a night, but that was long enough to conceive a child who would grow up to make Set pay.

The Gertrude Bird first came into the world when a woman named Gertrude refused to feed Christ and Saint Peter. Now she is a woodpecker and makes unpleasant noises. I recognize this woodpeckered woman turned nagging bird by dissatisfied men. I recognize a version of myself and my mother and hers in such mean wizardry.

Dido was the heir to her father's throne, but the people would only accept her brother. She smuggled away a fortune on their behalf, but they called her prostitute. She sailed across the sea to found a new city on a hill, but they would only accept her husband as leader. When she is called Dido her name means beloved and wanderer. In an older version of the story she is called Elisha and her name means creator God and fire and woman.

When she could take no more, she made a pyre and threw herself on it.

I read the picture book version of *Jason and the Argonauts* to my daughter on a day when she was shaken by a boy as he told her to "Shut up, Bossy." She thinks a tale of adventure will make her feel better.

Much about motherhood is a challenge, but among its comforts is how I get to read so many things I never knew before and never knew I needed. For example, I didn't know *Jason and the Argonauts* is really *The Witch Medea Gets Your Golden Fleece for You, You Fucking Incompetent*.

On the night of her escape with Jason and her father's fleece, Medea chopped up her brother and strew the parts of him around the forest so their father would be stopped by grief and the duty to gather the pieces of his son back up.

I can't read this scene without wondering what that brother did to her, what her father did. The book says Hera cursed her to love Jason. But how many times have I read the word *seduced* when what happened was *raped*? Read *loved* but understood *imprisoned*? I think a *curse from Hera* meant *escape from an abusive situation by any means necessary*.

In search of Dido's Carthage I stumbled on the story of Furra, a medieval queen of Sidama, in present-day Ethiopia. She ruled for seven years, advising the women of her kingdom never to submit to the men. Eventually the men tricked her into riding a wild steed that tore her body apart.

There is a little poem about all the places in the countryside that are named after her, Seyoum Hameso documents in *The Oromo Commentary*:

Her shoulders dropped in Qorke,
her waist dropped in Hallo,
her limbs dropped in
Dassie, her genitals dropped
in Saala, her remains
dropped in Kuura.

In these places men, it is said, beat the ground in disgust. Women pour milk on the ground at the mention of her name.

She is so young, this daughter of mine—does she even remember the boy in last year's grade who wouldn't stop kissing her? Elbows, the tip of her ponytail, small nuisances to make her cry with fury that she couldn't make him stop.

Beyond the sea came many more adventures resolved by Medea's magic. She showed some daughters a spell whereby she turned an old ram into a young one after dropping it in her boiling cauldron. Do we believe the daughters when they say they only wanted to restore their father's youth? They swore before his boiled corpse they thought surely it would work. Personally, I think of this chapter as Medea's "Spell for a Good Cover Story Which She'll Give to Any Woman Who Asks."

It's true I pretty much never believe a white man assaulted by a woman didn't have it coming. "What did you do?" I ask such a man as I have so often been asked. "It takes two to fight," I parrot. Maybe he should have walked away and hidden in a bathroom stall to cry like the rest of us.

When she asked the teacher to make that boy stop kissing her, the teacher said it was sweet, he had a crush. That was when I told my daughter she should push this child as hard as she could and tell him to kiss the dirt instead. But already she was too afraid.

Another of Medea's clever deeds was to feed raw meat to the Witch of the Woods and her hounds so the Argonauts could pass safely. The men ran in terror past the crone crouched and devouring, her face blood-stained with gluttony, while our sorceress lingered to say goodbye with affection to a woman we realize is her friend and sister in the craft. If any moment in this story can be made real, I want this friendship with the woman who will grow up to become Baba Yaga in her house of sweets to be the one.

Were I ever going to advise a daughter that boys will be boys, it would be in the face of what was done to Talos. Talos, a man of stone and fire, stood at the shore doing his job stopping people who should be stopped. It seems clear to me that Jason should be stopped. But Medea tricked the monster into letting her unplug the nail that held in his ichorous fire. He dies in her arms, floating in the sea, asking when she was going to fill him back up with the immortality she promised. How tenderly she cradles him as she is killing him. Then I remember he was a volcano man who wanted immortality on top of that. Typical.

There was a boy my mother encouraged me to hit. Years passed before he forced me to the edge of my own courage. It's true what the principal said to me in the office after sending him back to class, that he was smaller than the other boys and treated by them with cruelty. It is also true that when my mother was asked to pay for the glasses I broke in a bloody smear across his face she said the only part of this that made her sorry was that it had taken me so long.

She'd promised me and I think she really believed that one good fight would be enough, but I had to hit him again a year later. And then came another boy and others after that.

Gertrude Bell, 1868-1926, was an intrepid linguist, mapmaker, diplomat, and spy. She is credited as essential to the British problem of taking over Persia, making her the iconic embodiment of the white feminist problem. She was known as Khatun, "the Uncrowned Queen of Iraq."

What to make of her death by sleeping pill overdose?

From Bell's notebooks: "There is a moment, too, when one is newly arrived in the East, when one is conscious of the world shrinking at one end and growing at the other till all the perspective of life is changed."

I'm afraid sometimes I'm becoming a Medea who can't find the limits of her own vengeance. Who would destroy everything, including her own joy, to see the world made so fair a woman can commit any atrocity a Jason can. And I think of how a Khatun may prefer to hide her face in the lie that she has no power over the moral responsibility of knowing exactly how much she is capable of.

On the day my daughter shed those hot tears, I had been in an important meeting. There is not much about it that I can tell you. I will say only that my HR rep began by noting he thought at first I was one of the undergraduates. I was 36, had a child, a PhD and four books to my name. Shall I tell you how long my skirt was or how demurely my hair pulled back? Because I checked these things before and after, as this life has taught me to do. The man chuckled like it was some kind of compliment to call a grown woman "cute" in front of the university's Threat Assessment Team and that giant binder of Title IX policies at the center of the table. The hour ended in bitterness and resentment on all sides.

I have these dog-eared pages with one version of the tragedy after another. I have my *Essays and Speeches* by Audre Lorde and my *Essential Essays of Adrienne Rich*. I have a dried-out highlighter. I have anger and anger to spare. And so I have decided to follow my fury off the island and across the seas through whatever current it charts. As an experiment in living with something besides fear and the sound of my own misplaced apologies.

What does a child who pushed another child deserve? Not a bloody nose and the taste of his own tears. But it seems sometimes the world only gives us everything, or nothing.

You will never get me to believe Medea killed her children and showed their corpses to cheating Jason just to make him grieve. I don't care how many times you put Euripides on a stage. I don't believe it in part because Medea isn't real so I don't have to, but also because there are many versions of the story, some recorded and some lost in the mist of a long oral tradition, each its own work of art or propaganda for whichever city state in whatever geopolitical crisis a writer found themselves in. There were times and places when Medea's story had no end at all, just island after island. Sometimes she is powerful, sometimes angry, often happy, fighting maybe or victorious or eating a hunk of meat with her sister beside a warm fire crackling forth ephemeral constellations, a hibiscus flower in her hair like a girl, a sword at her waist like a queen. For as many nights as the children can stay awake to listen.

Rhiannon was a fairy queen, also wrongly accused of eating her child. She fell asleep and woke smeared in the blood and surrounded by the bones of a dog. For this she was turned into a horse. Sometimes literally, sometimes the story goes that she was punished for seven years at the gate of her castle wearing, like a horse, a bridle and bit, until her son, freed by the Horse Lord from captivity at last returned home, where he was recognized instantly by his mother.

She is best known, though, for having brought into this world the Alder Rhiannon, those three magical birds who sing so beautifully they not only send the living to sleep but also raise the dead. When I imagine that song, it is always in the key of my grandmother, on a day when she was alive and happy, humming a little made-up tune as she holds my newborn sister in her arms.

Margaret Mee spent 24 years trying to find and then paint a moonflower, which blooms and dies in a single night.

She finally did this at age 78.

"Go home," she said to the children who worried over her. "You can leave me. I have slept with jaguars."

Eileen Myles

Read

skiers
miss the
snow &
scientists
notice that
what they're
studying
is gone. Study
gone. Caroline
says the mountains
will be
out & Justin
said I was
funny. I push
the christmassy
door. When
I run out
of my poem
I will write
the poem
you gave
me. Enough
poems enough

dogs. Making
is just taking if
you know. Knew.
doo-doo doo

Notes

The road strikes
on moving
water.

Mike
KNOWS.

Mt
right
at the
end
of this

street

it was
a lease
but I
began to
have a
relationship
w this
car

Did you indeed
dance under
a tree
with
goats
In the dark

December 16

driving
through Tor
nillo &
I feel
all the
children
we can't
see
in his
America. He
is the pro
noun
of the govt
stand in
for hu
man u
have that
a lot

line
of mountains

light

no longer
trembles

nor does
sound
procession
of one
digit

kids

all born
on Jan 1

be our
King
our Claus

let the
mountains
fold in

and hospice
performances

give this

chicken tenders
can't be
the only
food you've
got. In
the future
take 2

one blinking
light
as the static
surrounds

we will
take to
the mountains
with the puppets
tomorrow
hiding exploding

on our
journey
being cute
months
snuffed
without
mother

classical
guitar
live
is non
profit

how hard
was it
to give
the kid

some water.

classical guitar live
listen online
anytime

Again

I'm just
doing
everything
all over
again
drinking
coffee
and being
alone
holding my pic
tures
gong she
goes
as the water
boils
forces
shushing
coming
to a close. Too fast
this winter
sings
holds
me fast
tuts
this winter's
sweet
enveloping or no?
there she

is. Something
dark
at last.

Naphisa Senanarong

Hymne a l'Amour

The night before Dina moves in with them, Elaine and her husband try to have charcuterie amidst an invasion of cockroaches. Hard-shelled, nuclear-proof bodies scramble up through gaps in the picnic table they'd hauled out to the terrace five years ago in anticipation of eternal summer nights. That is what they both saw in this place, in retirement: $100,000 for a beach walk-up in a tropical paradise, that lavender sky—promised to them by international realtors—melting into the Andaman Sea. They didn't expect the fleshy geckos with their beady, dead eyes and tails that wriggle after amputation, hordes of tourists, cockroaches. They trap the insects under the empty wine glasses and continue eating, trying their best to ignore the scuttle of exoskeleton against glass bulbs. Under the glow of a single, weak candle, the humid night sky wrapping firmly around them, the task of ignoring becomes easier. The cheese they get here is lean and subpar, which helps them eat quickly.

Jack tells her that the British neighbor who just moved in—the one who lives alone, draped blue fairy lights along the brow of his white stucco home, and decorated the living room with model yachts—is opening up a cheese shop next to the specialty butcher where they buy their Australian-imported steaks but where one can get any number of things. Cleaned-out entrails, condensed blood. The Thais are known to be adventurous with body parts.

"I told him good luck," he says. "The cows are bred differently here."

Her friend Claudette, a connoisseur of cheese, as the French usually are, says that it has less to do with the method of raising a cow than the cow itself. Hot weather begets less fat—little need for an extra coat of blubber that gives the milk its buttery taste, the meat its marbles. Elaine considers telling Jack this but doesn't see the point. The heat and the whole situation make her want to conserve energy.

Jack smears wet Brie over a bit of toast and grimaces as his hand brushes a familiar insect body. He grabs a rolled-up *Phuket News* and whacks at the table once, half-heartedly. The cockroaches are unbothered.

"What time are you picking her up tomorrow?"

"She said she can take one of those *win motor-sai*." Jack breaks the ash off his cigarette with a tap, reaches for a wedge of Gouda with his free hand. Her husband had shown little interest in picking up the native tongue until Dina.

He puts down the cheese, untouched, and begins folding a strip of prosciutto. It makes a small, neat pocket square.

"Her father is giving her until the end of the week to move out."

"So he's cooled down a bit. That's good." The father's face comes to Elaine at night sometimes, something alive breaking behind the eyes.

Though it's dark, Elaine can tell her husband wants her to protest, to insist that he pick up the girl, to bring up the fact that, two-and-a-half months pregnant, Dina's body may have started to feel like a foreign thing, ill-adapted to the humidity of her own birthplace, and that the morning sickness may not have subsided. She can tell by the measured, lazy draw of his smoke that he relies on her softness even in matters of his transgression.

Her husband has been seeing Dina for six months now. She is the 23-year-old daughter of a wealthy local resort owner who, until recently, had been one of their only Thai friends. Jack met Dina when her father hired him to renovate the resort's lobby, lend it his Western sensibilities. Once Thais were obsessed with the West. They lightened their skin and bleached their hair and raised their children on Drew Barrymore and John Cusack. Over the years, under the military dictatorship and shifting spheres of influence, all of which are largely unnoticed by and feel irrelevant to expats like Elaine and Jack, the locals have shifted their obsession to China, Korea. Jack, however, talked about lobster rolls in Cape Cod in a way that rendered the locals, in possession of their own turquoise backyards, starry-eyed at the thought of quaint New England coastal towns.

Jack says he took the job out of boredom. He had been retired for five years, had grown weary of sleeping until noon, getting a fever from the sun, afternoon Aperol spritz. His employment at the resort, his affair with Dina, had been an aberration from boredom. Now she's pregnant and her parents are kicking her out.

"Exhaust fumes aren't good for the baby—you should take the car," she says.

"We can help in the kitchen when we get back, if you like."

Since coming clean about he and Dina's relationship, Jack has been trying out

the "we" like a teenager, slipping the word into conversations.

"Claudette is coming over for dinner, and you know how she can be."

"That woman—she needs to find something to do," Jack says, flicking his cigarette hard and missing the ashtray.

"Claudette has lived a very full life. I think she is tired. Tired and fresh out of things to do." Jack looks down at his plate. Isn't this why they all came here, Elaine wants to ask him, to rest and do nothing?

She gets up and begins clearing the plates; lately she's been deciding when their conversations conclude. She leaves the cockroaches' translucent prisons where they are—an experiment. In the quiet early mornings, she checks them, the crystal tulips growing upside down on the picnic table. They are almost always empty, though occasionally one or two of the insects has lingered to pick at dried Chianti Classico. In their glass cells, they wipe their wispy little hands together as if weighing the options. When she approaches, they flatten their bodies and squeeze their way out through the gaps in the table.

She can feel Jack's eyes following her outline. They eat in the dark, having learned that these Asian cockroaches are not intimidated by the yellow incandescence of the porch light. She knows she is shapeless in the fisherman pants they bought in bulk their first year here. They used to lounge about together in those early days, airing peeled skin in the loose, one-size-fits-all pants, sucking down unripe mangoes with their dry martinis and taking breaks from books to glance at one another, smug about their corner of heaven where life is cheap and easy. All these years and she is still ashamed of the desire that twitches feebly and ineffectually in the sink of her body when she thinks of Jack's sharp face turned toward her. She knows the look on his face must be one of tenderness and curiosity, a man treading lightly but bravely. She slides open the screen door and reenters the house just as he pulls out his cell phone and turns diplomatically away from her, toward the bay and its jagged masses of islands arranged like three-dimensional crop circles, now almost completely concealed in the dark. The screen's harsh light illuminates his face.

As she makes her way through their living room, Elaine averts her eyes from the beach furniture shrouded in yards of light gauze, which had started

out as a temporary solution to the constant onslaught of sand and humidity. They never got around to finding a permanent solution, and over the years it had become addictive, feeding more and more of their living room to the white fabric, watching their home recede into gossamer. Earlier in the evening, she'd discreetly done a load of laundry and laid out fresh sheets, blankets, and pillows on top of the sofa for Jack to use in the spare bedroom.

As Elaine Saran-Wraps the leftovers, she tries to assess their home through Dina's eyes: seashells embedded in the wall like an afterthought, dead coral encased in glass domes, framed sketches of circus elephants Claudette bought for them in France. In many ways the house they live in now is a disavowal of the life they lived back in the States: the painstaking collecting, the dissemination of careful opinions. For a brief, glorious minute, they had lived more freely than ever before in this sheath of comfort. As she puts the leftovers in the fridge, she finds herself wishing for the Kandinsky and the Diebenkorn of their past life. She imagines explaining to the girl the Fauvism behind Kandinsky's blurs of mauve and light, how soft colors pool and collect in wet pockets and flatten the depth of landscape, making the quaint Russian town in the background an extension of the couple, a product of shared dreams. Imagines the satisfaction she'll glean, despite herself, at the girl blankly nodding along, pretending to comprehend what lies within the broad sparseness of Diebenkorn's landscapes, California's coast rendered in long, clean lines of blue. She turns the lights off in the kitchen and makes her way down the bare hallway where her old friends would have hung had she insisted on bringing them, toward the master bedroom.

Elaine dreams of limestone karsts, again. They jut out, disfigured and eroding, crooked, hairy teeth against a lavender sky—so much sky it dwarfs her. In her dream the ocean cleaves from the bottom up. She finds the stranger in the wet holds of a rock next to the one she and Jack made love against that one time many years ago; in the dream she thinks of this. The stranger is naked but that seems beside the point. He is strong and blond, the way Jack was when he was younger.

Perhaps these dreams are erotic, but she doesn't think so, never remembers arousal. She remembers, instead, the stranger's monosyllabic tongue—a merman who hasn't learned the language of land—and how he guides her through water, keeping one hand on the curve of her belly, another arm bowed like a branch. They meander through lagoons like diluted mirrors of the sky, weaving their way in and out of the cragged frames of limestone caves until they reach a beach with particularly rough waves. She hates this part of the dream because the waves signal the end. Dive, he says and shows her, turning his back on her, facing the incoming waves. With each crash there is a split second where the wave curls before folding into itself. He points these moments out to her, the opening of a wave. *Dive*, he says again and again, harsher and hoarser each time. There are leftover reels of the dream in which she wades futilely through connecting lagoons, concaves of alien rock, finding only water and sky, a lavender that swallows her.

She wakes up. The aridness of wine is like gift-wrap around her tongue.

On TV it is shark week, which comes as respite, for Elaine and Claudette, from the mindless piranha movie they've been re-watching because it is fun to hate on. A team of divers are strapping on selfie-sticks and unlatching their bodies from the sides of boats into open water. They are testing several hypotheses today. The first being: Do electronics increase the risk of shark attacks because the predators sense the presence of humans using the electroreceptive system in their blunt heads? One of the divers, finding himself in a tug-of-war with an aggravated bull shark, refuses to let go of his pride and camera equipment.

"Men need to learn that they can't have their cake and eat it too," says Claudette. She is one of those wealthy, beautiful French women with feathered blond hair and jasmine-scented wrists who feels the need to constantly bring up Marie Antoinette, often in a distancing manner that doesn't quite commit to being self-deprecating. But she cares about coral reef resurrection, her carbon footprint, and "making memories" in a way Elaine admires and envies. Claudette sets another glass of white wine down on the coffee table for emphasis.

"They say that they are doing it for the science, but it is construction work for the ego."

Perhaps if it was any other man, Elaine might consider her husband impregnating a 23-year-old an egotistical act. But Jack has never had a reason to question his self-esteem. He has always lived in streamlined motion, like the sharks that roll their clouded irises back into their own bodies before the kill. At his best he is goal-oriented, adventurous. At his worst he is averse to introspection. His relentless forward velocity freed them from unbearable situations in the past, and now, at sixty-two, he sees no reason to live any other way.

Of course Elaine can see what any woman, even one only edging out of childhood, sees in Jack. Aside from his good genes and the precise bone structure it permits him, there is the way he uncorks a bottle of wine, the way he pulls plastic chairs from the bar to the region of beach only accessible during low tide, the way he places warm hands around your shoulders at a party as you're both entertaining guests. There is something intimate about him that is better when shared in public. Armed with this knowledge, she feels spitefully grateful that, due to the nature of their relationship, Dina will not be allowed this aspect of him.

Claudette cannot understand her acceptance. "But Elaine, you are sharing him, no?"

When Jack first came clean about Dina, when he'd started sleeping in the spare bedroom on the nights he came home late, Claudette talked Elaine into going on a date with a jet-ski instructor, an old friend. They took two jet skis out and circled the islands in the Pha-Nga Bay at sunset. Elaine remembers the lackluster way his stubby fingers fumbled with the strings of her tankini, how his tongue had lolled around aimlessly in her mouth. On their ride back to the shore, they'd made vague plans to see each other again, leaving out the specifics of date and time.

Elaine went home that night, shed the waterlogged bathing suit like a second skin, coiled in the living room, and told Jack about everything, glasses of sundowners melting in their hands. In the middle of the night, her husband slipped into the master bedroom, slicked her hair back from her watery face, shiny with sweat and exhaustion, and kissed her. The kiss lingered on her lips, apologetic. In the mirror at the foot of their bed, she caught a glimpse of them together: her runny arms wrapped around his straight back and the dutiful breaths

he took as he moved on top of her. She kept her eyes on the mirror and tried not to think about how his eyes were glued tightly to the headboard.

"I am also sharing this house with him, our retirement fund, my life's savings." Elaine likes that she has this information at the ready. Claudette, aggressively French and twice divorced, cannot understand her surrender of romance, the placid way she moves about in her kitchen now, rooting around the freezer for mirepoix while her husband gathers a woman young enough to be their daughter from her parents' house. She can, however, understand money.

Elaine believes that the shelf life of anger for a woman her age should be very short. That their bodies have simply been through too much, endured sorrow and felt love that has epigenetically changed them.

She has always wondered how the world remains so black and white for Claudette, who has the experience of multiple lifetimes, worked as a literal French maid in a cartel during the height of coke mania in Miami, reluctantly gave birth to and, later, gave up a child in Tokyo. Elaine imagines it has something to do with being beautiful.

The world stopped being black and white for Elaine a long time ago. If pressed, she would say it happened around the time they lost Daniel, although the timeline is hazy, stretched out like movement under water, lost to her now. The past can be washed out of you in a foreign place.

"Maybe he just really thinks the data will be useful," Elaine says. On the screen the men are now gritting their teeth into smiles, puffing their slick chests on the safety of the boat.

"We should get something special," Claudette says. "For your guest."

Elaine's fingers tear apart the bloody water-buffalo meat they'd bought at the open-air market, at the specialty butcher shop, half as a gag, half seriously as part of a poorly mapped-out scheme to watch Dina squirm at the dinner table. Thai people use water buffalo as a derogatory term for idiot, oaf, moron. *Ai kwai*, the ladies at the open market call out to their husbands, their slow sons. "In Camargue we are known for our bulls," Claudette tells her.

Raw, the meat is thicker and more rancid than they anticipated. The rounded elegance of herbes de Provence will not be enough to cloak the smell of mud and fertilizer, the dark sinews of a beast of burden. It had been Claudette's idea. In the tuk tuk going downhill, day-drunk, the sea breeze evaporating the sweat off their bodies, it had seemed like a good one. They had screamed—*Providence! We are one with the universe! Providence!*—like their younger counterparts, taut and tanned spring-breakers who stop to refuel and pregame before migrating across the mainland to Sunrise Beach on Koh Pha-Ngan, where they will spend the cycle of a full moon doped out of their minds.

"We will see in that girl's face," Claudette says, "when she has to chew on a bull's…"

Leaning against the white kitchen counter, one hip popped outward, Claudette still has the bony pelvis of a much younger woman. The hard edges in her body haven't dissolved into the soft. When Elaine catches glimpses of her friend's bent, sharp knees through her tights in their yoga class, she thinks of her own body as that of a whale somewhere along the lines of its evolution. A land mammal forgetting ground, reabsorbing vestigial appendages back into its body.

"A different seasoning," Elaine says. Her fingers are coated up to the knuckles in buffalo blood. In the compactness of their clean, white kitchen, the plan feels sad. Truth be told, Elaine does not feel any particular hatred toward Dina. She is young, susceptible. She has many mistakes ahead of her. Dina has always been polite to her, filling glasses with ice and Coca-Cola, translating in small moments of awkward miscommunication. Apologetic when the pregnancy rose to the surface. Perhaps she will season the bull in laab seasoning, borrow the sprightly lime and sharp chili from the girl's culture, and turn this half-witted plan around.

Claudette senses her wavering. "Here," she says. "You take a seat, sweetie."

With the butcher's knife Claudette cuts through the plastic bag encasing the beast's gonads. "All this plastic is so bad for the environment," she says as she severs the surprisingly thin veil of skin between the two testicles. "Oh my God, Elaine," she breathes. "Feel."

Elaine takes one, and it is like a heart, soft and plummy, in her hand. "Squeeze it, sweetie." Claudette's voice rises. Each holding the testicle of a farm animal, the

two women look at each other in the golden hour of the small kitchen, their faces full of light, laughter.

The mirth seems to weld them tightly together. They share the secret glances of coconspirators as they bustle about in the kitchen, swigging wine with a flourish, putting the finishing touches on everything, waving their ladles and spoons like wands. Elaine puts on the type of leaden, devastating French music that makes each movement feel like flinging oneself onto a rock or a wave. Edith Piaf sings "Hymne à l'amour," decrying her indifference to the world in the face of love. Blue skies collapsing and grounds caving. Searching the ends of the earth. Elaine hardly notices when Jack and Dina come in, the girl removing her sandals by the door.

"We're home!" Jack pokes his head through the breakfast bar and slams down both hands on the counter like a camp counselor. "What are we cooking in here?" Dina trails him, looking particularly young in a white shirt and jeans. The telltale pouch of her pregnancy barely protrudes from her thin frame.

"A secret," Elaine says.

"Ooooh, a secret. I like the smell of a secret."

Claudette ignores him, poking her head in the oven to check on the thick wine sauce.

"Hello, Claudette."

"Jack."

"This is Dina. You've met."

"Yes, I don't forget." Claudette snaps her body back up, shoulders pushed back. She looks like a ballerina. Dina extends a manicured hand bravely.

"Pleased to see you again, Miss Claudette."

Claudette gestures to her hands, soaked in wine or blood. Dina retracts her hand, smiles, and turns to Elaine. "I bought you a gift, Elaine."

She pulls out a parcel with a traditional Thai print and hands it to Elaine. "Jim Thompson, it's a scarf," she says quickly.

"Thank you. You shouldn't have." Where would she wear a scarf now?

"It's really quality silk. They're known for their silks here," Jack says. He is suddenly an expert on silk and Thailand.

"Well, I'll have to wear it with my nice dresses. Thank you, sweetie," she says, trying to affect her friend's coldness but failing. They are all quiet for a while, standing in the too-small kitchen meant for a retired couple, listening to Edith Piaf's silvery voice. *Nous aurons pour nous l'éternité, Dans le bleu de toute l'immensité.*

"Can we help?" Dina puts her things down on the breakfast bar and moves further into the kitchen.

"We're practically done," Elaine says. "Take a seat outside and enjoy the ocean breeze," she offers when she sees the girl's face and the way she's wrapped both arms around her torso without thinking. Elaine remembers that reflex, the desire to protect at all cost.

"Why don't you take this and help me out with the roaches?" Jack says. "They're everywhere. I have to apologize in advance, Dina. I promise we Americans aren't as slovenly as the stereotypes."

Dina reaches for the bottle of repellent, a look of panic in her eyes.

"Jack, Dina shouldn't be near that stuff. It's bad for the baby." Elaine sighs, taking it from his hand. The girl looks at her gratefully. Elaine motions for them to follow her to the terrace, feeling a mixture of excitement and sickness.

Out on the terrace they run through all the usual topics, repeat the conversations they had before their roles changed: the hospitality industry in America versus Thailand—"Hotels here are so much cheaper and nicer, a private pool for $98 per night!" says Dina, who studied hospitality in Switzerland—the best places to get a classic Manhattan on the island, what time of day is best to charter a boat out to Pha-Nga Bay for the panoramic view of the limestone islands, when the hidden lagoons are free of tourists. Claudette, openly disinterested, patrols back and forth between the kitchen and the terrace, checking on the water buffalo they'd stuffed into the oven. When she is at the table, she talks only of nostalgia.

Music and films made before Dina was even an egg in her mother's womb, things firmly out of the girl's reach both culturally and generationally. If Jack sees what they are doing, he doesn't let on. He just sits there, twirling the red in his glass, one arm behind the back of Dina's plastic chair, comfortable. Once in a while he throws out some ice-breaker-type question, impersonal, functional. "Which movie star would play the romantic lead in your life?" he asks.

"For me it has to be Robert Redford," Elaine says. She takes a big swig of the Moscow Mule Claudette made for her. After a whole afternoon of white wine, they are moving on to Polish bison grass vodka, an inside joke.

"Oh, of course. That scene from *Out of Africa*—how can they ever do it better—that look on Meryl's face when he rinses the shampoo out of her hair." Claudette grabs the armrests of Elaine's plastic chair and shakes it.

"Yes," Jack smiles. "What about the rest of the table?"

"And just the whole cinematography of it. *Africa*. Those long shots of the plains. The wild animals." Claudette catches Elaine's eyes. Elaine's face feels hot from the vodka, the budding shame.

"It must be amazing to see what it was like back then," Dina says.

"Oh, I love Africa. Remember that national park in Serengeti? How we had to have a local guide walk us to the outhouses at night because we were out among the lions and who knows what else?" Jack turns to Elaine. He is animated now, remembering the parts of the past he likes.

She doesn't think of their travels that much, although Africa was one of the most beautiful places she's ever been. It was the first trip they took after the death. After they lost Daniel, the vacations felt like a wash of vivid colors, determined to drown out and cover the stain. Jack moved so fast—forward, forward, forward. It had helped her; the sheer energy it took to try and catch up propelled her into a state of motion after all those years of waiting, wading through the murky, drawn-out pain of their son's incapacity. To grieve faster. Mourn efficiently.

The death of a child puts a strain on a marriage. She has heard this over and over. From close friends, family, therapists. The people around she and Jack waited, with ready arms and caring eyes, for them to crack. A lot of marriages break apart over a loss as great as theirs, especially when five years of helpless

pain, which could be partially attributed to one parent's oversight, preceded the death. But their marriage didn't. Jack held her up. He held her up after Daniel's death the way he held her up during those five years when their baby boy lost his ability to speak in sentences, his motor functions, after the near drowning. She remembers the look on Jack's face, his arms under Daniel's armpits, helping their son squat over the toilet. Jack's calm voice, reading a storybook out loud. The nights they lied together in a warm heap, Daniel in between them, all their legs touching. Were he alive, Daniel would be in his twenties now.

He was three years old when it happened. When, in the middle of a conference call with the artist in New York and the collector in Miami, Elaine heard the sick squelch of the door roller moving wetly along the sill track. She always kept the sliding glass door downstairs locked. Hadn't she locked it that morning after her cigarette? She tried to do a mental walkthrough of her morning while the artist described his latest installation. It must be locked, she thought. When did she register the soft pitter-patter of his bare feet against the concrete patio? She remembers it being summer. She remembers wishing she could hear the noise, although her mind didn't want to specify what noise, over the drone of the AC. How many seconds elapsed between when she made out the lift of his little voice and found a breath of opening in her call to say she was going to be right back, that she had to check on something? How much time did it take for her socks to slip and slide on the hardwood floors, for her body to gain momentum as it rounded the corner of the stairs and see the sliding glass door open and the rectangular patch of sky, crisper, bluer than the rest? It had been unlocked. She staggered out. His pale body in the swimming pool. His lilac hands when she pulled him out of the pool. How the mosaic tiles spun in her eyes, left even grid-marks and scrapes on her knees that she didn't notice until later, the universe expanding and contracting like a pair of blue, purple lungs.

"Do you remember?" Jack presses a hand over her arm. Dina picks up the pitcher with floating cucumbers inside and pours a glass of water. Elaine's eyes land on the gentle concentration on the girl's face as she pours.

"I heard the sky is so beautiful and open there. You are both very lucky," the girl says, handing Elaine the cup.

"I think you have it pretty great here, where you're from," Elaine says, curt. She can hear the sounds of scuttle pick up beneath the picnic table and knows that the cockroaches are aware that it's time for dinner.

"I'll get the food," Claudette says, getting up and tossing her blond hair over one shoulder. "Elaine, do you want to come and help me?"

In the Dutch oven on the table, it all looks fine enough. A dark-brown mass, like stewed meat, smelling heavily of thyme and rosemary and the sweet sourness of red wine. "Bon appetit! Bull braised in red wine!" Claudette says. She pauses. "Back in France we always like to work with whatever's the freshest, the land. Local ingredients."

"Of course, Dina, if you don't know how to eat it," she continues, "I'd be happy to get you something else, sweetie. We have some cheese and some pasta. I could throw together something quick." Claudette spears a piece of chunky meat with a steak knife and fork and plops it onto Jack's plate.

Elaine looks down at her Moscow Mule, mostly melting ice now. She grabs the wine off the table and splashes a healthy amount into her glass. She takes a huge glug, trying her best not to make eye contact with her husband. From their terrace she can see that the lonely British neighbor has just turned on his blue fairy lights, basking the outside in a slight shimmer. A cockroach skitters across the table and they all ignore it. As Elaine looks up from the table, she can see Jack leaning from his chair toward Dina, using his body as a shield so that she can speak only to him. He plucks a cold cucumber out of his glass of ice water and places it gently over her eye, like they are at the spa. The two of them stifle their laughter as it slides down the slope of her face. Something about the moment, Jack's arm around the back of Dina's chair, the look in his eyes, the wet trail like a happy tear down the girl's face, feels like a kick to Elaine's stomach. The cucumber falls to the ground, and Elaine ducks her head beneath the table to scoop it up before it becomes feed for the cockroaches. Beneath the table Dina's bare feet are trailing up and down Jack's calf. Her feet, like her, are narrow and

skinny. Toenails painted an indecent red, a color that does not seem reconcilable to the rest of her body.

"You must eat a lot," Elaine says, emerging from beneath the table. "Now that you're eating for two." She is aware of her voice cresting. She tries to dim her heartbeat by imagining each beat like the fairy light's slow flicker. On, off, on again. She catches Claudette's eyes. Claudette nods at her.

Elaine gets up and reaches for the steak knife. She can feel the muscles and tendons in her legs releasing in a numb, crashing wave as she stands. She takes the steak knife and stabs it into the buffalo's testicle, sequestered between russet potatoes and the other pieces of meat.

"What's the word for a water buffalo in Thai again?" she asks. "I'm always saying I'll learn."

Something in the girl's posture shifts, straightens. Dina's eyes are steady. She doesn't break eye contact or look away. "*Kwai*," she says.

"I don't know if you and Jack talk about this," Elaine continues, spooning one testicle and its sauce onto Dina's plate. "But I read an article online somewhere," she scoops up a charred tomato, "about how mixed-race children are widely perceived as being the most beautiful. It has something to do with genetics. Heterosis, I believe it's called."

Dina doesn't move, doesn't say anything. The dining table is quiet except for the sound of the waves in the distance, the scuttle of the cockroaches coming out of the holes in the stucco walls.

"There is no denying that half-Asians are pleasing to look at," she says, cutting deeper. "There seem to be so many around here."

Elaine thinks of the genetic cocktail of immunities that will make her husband and the girl's baby healthier, more beautiful, defended against more illnesses. On this island, the cherubic results of such unions—typically a divorced white man in his sixties and a younger Thai woman from a lower socioeconomic background—run rampant; there they are, chasing down monkeys at the beach, learning to swim in the communal pool, sucking down a Frappuccino at the strip mall where Elaine and Claudette take their early morning yoga lessons. *The first wives are always missing*, Claudette says. The presumption is that there are first

wives, first children, graying, aproned, maybe dead, somewhere in their home countries. That these men are somehow getting an unfair second chance, building a fake life out here on an island where they could never throw out their hip on black ice. Where they are so close to the lagoons, the crystal-clear water, where the children will know how to swim because someone will teach them and they will learn. Although she blanches at the idea of something as subjective as beauty being race-based, she has to admit, looking at the two of them together now—Dina's stark, expressionless face, so pretty in its plain smallness, and Jack's arm around her narrow shoulders—that the child born from her husband and the girl will be beautiful. She thinks that it might be easier for her if their joining had spawned from necessity and lust: if Dina was poor, struggling, and her husband a serial adulterer.

"Dig in," she says, despite herself.

Dina does. She takes one bite, and then two, each chew tougher and longer than the last. As the rest of the table begins to eat, the girl keeps glancing at Elaine, something growing between them. She chews. Her small jaws work hard on the tough hide, the scrotum. Jack eats silently. Dina swallows a particularly large bite and her eyes widen. She tries to talk but no sound comes out. Her mouth gapes. Jack moves toward her, his arms ready to encircle her, to dislodge. Claudette grabs a glass of water and pushes it toward the girl, panicked. The corners of Dina's eyes fill with tears. She extends her skinny arms and pushes Jack away, pushes herself back into her chair and closes her eyes. Eternity passes before the girl is audibly gasping, sound returned to her throat. She swallows air, repeatedly, and grabs a glass of water. She chugs it down.

The night winds down rapidly from there. Dina excuses herself for bed, talking about the long day she's had. One hand on the small of her back and another around her belly. She thanks Claudette and Elaine for the meal. Jack lights a cigarette and puts it out immediately. He turns as if remembering something he wants to say to Elaine but then changes his mind. He wishes her goodnight, puts his arm around Dina and guides her back into the house, closing the screen door behind them. Claudette is drunk and tired, slumped halfway on the picnic table. They have a goodnight cigarette together before Elaine walks her friend inside

and prepares a place for her to sleep on the sofa. The music has been left on, and the crooning of Edith Piaf sounds forlorn, a woman who will do anything: go blond, forsake her country, her friends, the world, walk to the ends of the earth for her love.

As she helps her friend lower herself onto the sofa, Claudette grasps her forearm. They look into each other's eyes, questioning. She wants to ask her friend what brought her here. What did she come out here looking for? Did she move to this part of the world with the intention of retracing her steps, of finding something, someone, and then simply got lost in all the beauty, the sky, and sea? Claudette releases her grip and mumbles something.

"What?"

"Could you be a dear and get me a glass of water?"

Elaine fills a glass and leaves it by the coffee table for her friend. The spare bedroom door is closed, and try as she might, she cannot hear Jack and Dina behind it. Wanting company, she keeps the music on, tears open the Jim Thompson parcel, and wraps the light silk scarf like a shawl around her shoulders before padding outside in her slippers.

On the terrace, she can hear the faint sounds of the next-door neighbor, the British man, stirring about. She imagines him getting a drink, maybe sitting to listen to the ocean and the animals and read a book about boats. She imagines he has children of his own, a whole family, somewhere across the sea, forgetting him. The night feels endless, another long wait, but she persists. She kicks off her slippers and lets her bare feet relish the cold from the tile floors. Once in a while a hard-shelled body scampers across her skin. She has reached the time of night when the air becomes thick with sounds of a tropical place. She feels like she might be used to them now, to this place they are now calling home, to the cockroaches, the crickets, the waves, the heat, the lustful bark of geckos calling out into the night.

When dawn breaks the sky is lavender, just like in her dream, like the realtors promised. The ocean seems to mirror some of its wonderful color. Off in the horizon, where the group of limestone karsts gather, she sees a column of sky one shade darker than the rest. She and Jack used to look for them together after

hearing of their existence, their regularity in tropical countries: a contained storm. One column of sky in broad daylight, behaving unlike the rest, but keeping it all in check. From afar she hears the faintest notes of thunder coming in to mingle with the music from inside.

Jonathan McGregor

Exit Music

I.

Wednesday, you fell silent when I asked you what was wrong. Thursday—Maundy Thursday, the day of Judas' betrayal—your faith finally expired with the night's last prayer. Good Friday afternoon, I dragged you to a pub where you gave me pieces of the truth, slivers broken off the edges of the real thing.

Your wife called. While you spoke to her in whispered fragments, I pulled up these lines from W. H. Auden's "Horae Canonicae," a sequence of poems about Christ's crucifixion, on my phone:

> The day is too hot, too bright, too still,
> Too ever, the dead remains too nothing.
> What shall we do till nightfall?

You and I shivered on a streetcorner in the spring evening, but the lines felt more right to me than they ever have.

Holy Saturday, Christ lay cold in his tomb. You told your wife about the men you cheated with. You told me in a text message Easter Sunday morning.

Before this, one winter night after your wife and son were asleep, we built a fire in your backyard. You'd gathered scraps to burn: dead twigs fallen from the trees, good lumber left over from the desk you'd built, painted odds and ends of wood. We poured each other shots of Dickel No. 12 and passed your guitar back and forth. You sang:

Wolves, wolves in the house…

I held my cold fingers to the flames until the blood in them tingled.

When it got too cold to play guitar, we smoked a pack of sweet-acrid Black & Mild's I picked up on the sly at Walgreens. Smoke-smells caught in every crease of our clothes.

Eventually, the fire burned down. We stomped out the embers. In the dark, I stepped on the rocks glass I'd left sitting in the grass, and it shattered. I cradled the shards in my hands.

"So, C. and I are involved."

I gripped my can of pomegranate seltzer and tapped it on the table. We sat across from one another in C.'s South City apartment. She was in the bathroom.

"All right," I said.

You looked at the table, not at me. I asked you a question, but I couldn't hear much of your answer for the blood pounding in my ears. My arms and chest felt hollow, as if my body had evacuated bone and muscle to make way for the rage filling up my skin.

C. came back from the bathroom and sat between us. *I just have to make it until this seltzer can is empty*, I told myself. I took measured, unhurried sips as we talked.

The night before, C. took you to the emergency room during your first, and comparatively mild, manic episode of the summer. You had moved out of your wife's house and rented a room; C. was a friend—we all worked on a literary magazine together—and lived in your new neighborhood. Your linens were on her couch.

Weeks later, rummaging through C.'s bathroom drawers for a roll of toilet paper, I found the big blue silicone cock she fucked you with.

After I finished my seltzer, you walked me to the door of C.'s apartment. I told you I loved you and was glad you were all right.

Driving west on Highway 40, tears scalded the corners of my eyes. I punched the steering wheel. I was suddenly hungry, remembered the apple on the passenger seat. I bit and chewed until I choked on it. I pulled off the highway at the University, ran into the admin building, and guzzled from a water fountain. I ground each remaining bite of apple to pulp before I swallowed.

Later that night, I got a drink with a friend from college. The two of us ended up at the whiskey bar where you and I first tasted Four Roses Small Batch. I

drank too much and tried to tell my college friend about you, but I couldn't quite get the story right. We walked the streets of the Central West End until I felt straight enough to take him back to his car in the Loop. I drove home with the windows down, letting the cold night air wash over me.

I sat on the couch and looked at my phone for a few hours and went to bed early in the morning. I woke up hungover but managed to meet another friend at eight for coffee I felt too sick to drink. In the afternoon, I went for a little hike and felt better.

You and I had long planned to watch *Blade Runner* together; neither of us had seen it. I decided to watch it by myself and put a takeout box of Thai leftovers in the microwave. When Harrison Ford's Rick Deckard first appeared, both of us ate noodles.

Did I ever tell you about the time I tried to show my wife the BBC adaptation of *Brideshead Revisited*, that story of two boys' friendship charged with unbearable intensities of romance and religion? As soon as Sebastian Flyte came onscreen, my wife tensed up. During the meal at Anthony Blanche's rooms—the one where he climbs up on the roof to shout lines from *The Waste Land* through a megaphone at passing Cambridge boys ("And I, Tiresias, have foresuffered all . . .")—she burst into tears. "I can't watch this," she sputtered, and left the room.

Later, she tried to explain. "All I could think about was you and Joshua. I was afraid that you were falling in love with each other." We didn't even get to the part where Sebastian and Charles Ryder share strawberries and champagne by the roadside.

My wife wasn't crazy. I *was* trying to tell her something about my friendship with you—about the romance of it—through the film.

For a long time, I wanted you to be Sebastian to my Charles. "No one is ever holy without suffering," Sebastian's sister Cordelia says of him in his alcoholic deterioration. I wanted you, like Sebastian, beautiful, suffering, and holy. I wanted you on what Dorothy Day calls "the downward path to salvation," even after you left your wife and your faith.

But you're not Sebastian Flyte, and it isn't fair to expect a holiness of you I would hate to bear myself. And you're not Joshua, not anymore. You are K. And you are my friend.

A few weeks before you left your wife, in the dim office we shared that spring, you showed me a poem you'd written: a wasp sinks into a jar of apricot jam, sting into sweetness.

After you told me about you and C., I didn't talk to you for days. For months, maybe years, we texted each other every few hours at least. Before my graduate colloquium talk, I'd slipped into the bathroom to adjust my tie. When you walked in the room without me, my advisor freaked out, thinking I was a no-show.

You ended the silence with a querulous text apologizing for springing the news on me like that. The way you worded it left open the question of our friendship's persistence. I wrote you back to tell you yes, I am still your friend, but no, I'm not ready to talk to you yet.

I thought you left your wife to have sex with men. But now you were *involved* with a different woman—that word told me you were sleeping together, but also that this was no momentary fling. Some of the anger I felt was on behalf of your wife. But mostly it was all my own.

I shared a bottle of Bulleit with you in a bad motel room in Louisville, asking you the hard questions that received almost no answer, lying there while the space between our beds hummed with unspoken pain. I sat on top of a picnic table with you in Tower Grove Park while you hissed *Don't recognize my pain* at me between body-wracking sobs. I coaxed you into asking your therapist about medication. I drove you to your house while your wife and son were gone to load up the rest of your books and clothes and take them to your rented room.

I wanted to be enough for you through all this. But I wasn't, and I feared losing you.

You had become a kind of soulmate to me in things—art, music, literature—I hadn't found a way to share fully with my wife. You and I could spend hours drinking whiskey and ranking Radiohead songs; my wife wouldn't touch either. I knew you too felt unfulfilled in some ways in your marriage (I never guessed what they were). I imagined us all living symbiotically in a sort of grand family romance—our wives carping together about their difficult intellectual husbands, our kids playing and fighting together, the two of us geeking out sometimes, sometimes taking the kids on playdates.

So it wasn't just that you were with a woman; it's that you were with *C.*: a poet, a fellow literary type. I feared you were replacing both your wife and me.

"That word 'betrayal' has come up a lot," my therapist said when I told him about all of this later. He asked me to think back to the earliest time I could remember feeling that way—betrayed.

II.

We kissed newsprint in the backseat of his mom's pickup, me and a boy I'll call Will. In the floorboard and on the supercab's half-bench seat we found girls' faces in some castoff pages. Were they escorts, or maybe beauty queens? In any case, we picked our favorites and smooched them sloppily, smearing our faces black with ink.

Will's mom laughed along with us. She licensed our transgression, like the kindergarten version of a high-school drinking party hosted by the cool parents who confiscate each kid's keys at the door. She was driving us to school for open house.

Will and I lunged with lips and tongues from face to face, our pulses racing.

He came up for air. "So what do you do when you see a pretty girl?"

"Well, my thing gets long and hard and I can't pee," I said.

Will and his mom went quiet. She forced a chuckle, and I flushed under the ink.

"No, I mean," Will said, "do you like whistle or say something?"

I shrugged. "I dunno. Do you?"

"Yeah. I whistle."

When she parked the truck, Will's mom saw our faces and blanched. She herded us into the boys' room, out of sight of the other parents. The ink from our faces stained the sinks gray.

After washing up, Will and I went to the floor-length urinals. When you flushed them, little bubbles formed and burst in the holes of the drainguards. Some of the boys said these were the eyes of frogs that lived in the pipes.

"It's a little hard for me to pee right now," I said.

Will didn't say anything.

I feared wasps—their wicked armored look, the threatening hum of their wings. As a kid, I shunned all kinds of pain, but especially the wasp's kind: the piercing sting, the penetration of flesh, the violation of my body's boundaries. At eight years old, I panicked in a small-town public health clinic when I glimpsed the tiny needle of an MMR booster. My dad dragged me out to our minivan, squalling. He didn't understand. I didn't either.

To help me master my fear of wasps, Dad had me memorize a Bible verse, 2 Timothy 1:7, in a rough combination of the New American Standard and New King James versions: "For God has not given us a spirit of timidity, but a spirit of power and of love and of a sound mind."

Dad liked the NASB version of the first half of that verse because of the word "timidity." He liked the second half in the NKJV because of the phrase "sound mind." At least as I grasped it then, these two concepts were opposites. Timidity was like fear, but worse because fear had an object. Fear responded to threat, instinctive, irrational, surging adrenaline and raised hackles. Therefore, it was understandable and, in a strictly spiritual sense, meaningless. Timidity, on the other hand, was a disposition: a weak disposition, a susceptibility to cowardice

bred by too much thought. It evidenced an unsound mind and worse, a dearth of the Holy Spirit. A sound mind rang like a bell, gave one clear note; a timid mind jangled like a dropped piano.

Climbing the wasp-thronged ladder of a friend's above-ground pool, I chanted the verse under my breath. When I emerged unscathed, I proudly told Dad I faced my fear.

The only time a wasp stung me was at Will's grandparents' house. There town and country met, sometimes literally: once, a horse collided with a pickup truck on the street in front of the house. Will's big sister cried for the horse. I scolded her for not caring more about the people whose windshield the animal had smashed in.

Will and I planned to ride bicycles hanging from racks on the side of his grandparents' carport. I reached up, unhooked a bike, and lowered it to the ground. Something pricked the tender underflesh of my left forearm. I thought I'd poked myself with a brake cable. I turned my arm to the light, saw two angry yellowjackets, and screamed.

The next thing I remember, I held a bag of frozen peas on my arm. I stood in the kitchen, my tears drying. It wasn't as bad as I feared, being stung. But the experience had no effect on my fear. It wasn't sustained by experience anyway.

I lifted the bag of frozen peas and checked my arm. Two dime-sized red disks swelled. At the center of each was a freckle, as if the yellowjackets had targeted them.

Will was a small, dark boy with a round, girlish face and a pretty smile. I took pure delight in his presence and possessively desired it.

During our first-grade year, however, Will began to choose Melody Carter over me at recess. She was the Athletic Director's daughter; my dad was

Superintendent of Schools. Almost pink-skinned, with ash-blonde hair and blue eyes, I didn't think Melody was anything special. Several years and towns and schools later, I ran into her at a high school basketball tournament, and her prettiness struck me dumb. But in first grade, I couldn't understand what Will saw in her.

Finally, I asked him about it. He shrugged and told me he liked her, and the two of them walked away together.

I found consolation within the scorn, an unexpected sweetness in its sting. My two-dimensional emotional life suddenly acquired a z-axis. In time, my possessive grip on Will slackened. The sting dulled, and I was almost sad to see it go.

Each individual life recapitulates all time. Our dawning years become our myths, their elements as stark as man, woman, snake, garden, tree. Soon enough all living is re-living, in the typology of the self. Early events give form to later ones, but these fulfillments are multiple, partial, and surprising. Flannery O'Connor: "Anyone who has lived to the age of eighteen has enough stories to last a lifetime." I might even say that anyone who lives to the age of eight is stocked for life.

During that first-grade year, strange boys also began to torment me. First, Derek Hawthorne: tall, with straight brown hair and big ears overflowing with wax. Its sickly-sweet smell always hung around him and made me queasy. He taunted me daily with a saliva-soaked chant, "You've got a big di-et, you've got a big di-et!"

What could that possibly mean? The inscrutability of his insult infuriated me. I never made fun of Derek. Why did he say that to me? Why did he keep on saying it after I asked him to stop? He shouted the stupid sing-song gibe louder, until a teacher finally intervened.

In fourth grade, in a different town, a different school, a small, sallow boy with an unpronounceable Polish name joined my class partway through the schoolyear. He was deeply strange (I remember physical tics and verbal outbursts). The class, especially a big, athletic boy named David, teased him. I was, if not nice, at least not mean to him. But for a time, the strange boy singled me out for torment on the soccer field, hurling insults at me and pounding my shins with his feet, even when I was nowhere near the ball. My classmates liked me, and they teased the boy back harder. I let them. I wanted the weird boy to hurt. David told us he was wicked, maybe possessed by a demon, and this made me feel a little less guilty.

You always told me I was a mark, K. Maybe this is what you saw in me: this spirit of timidity, this tolerance for weirdness borne in fear of doing the wrong thing. A tolerance that switches over so easily to hatred or contempt. They're really the same thing seen from two different angles, separated by the tiniest shift in perspective, a gestalt shiver.

In his book *The Four Loves*, C. S. Lewis warns that "to love at all is to be vulnerable. Love anything, and your heart will certainly be wrung and possibly be broken. If you want to make sure of keeping it intact, you must give your heart to no one, not even to an animal." The word vulnerable comes from the Latin *vulnus*, "wound." When Lewis speaks of a heart's being broken or wrung, he's changing his imagery: vulnerability is more precisely the painful condition of susceptibility to puncture, piercing, or stabbing. (Think of St. Thomas probing Christ's spear-wounded side in Caravaggio's painting.) I'm tempted to connect *vulnus* to *vulva*, "wound" to "womb." But I'm unsure about the etymology.

If we will not be vulnerable, Lewis continues, we will "become unbreakable, impenetrable, irredeemable. The alternative to tragedy, or at least to the risk of tragedy, is damnation. The only place outside Heaven where you can be perfectly safe from all the dangers and perturbations of love is Hell." To love, then, is to be penetrated, or at least penetrable, to surrender the body's firm boundaries. How

well the old sonneteers knew this, with their Cupid's darts! The one who loves is St. Sebastian (namesake of the *Brideshead* character), riven with arrows. Love subjects us to the yellowjacket's sting.

III.

In April of the next year, you sent C. and me an email with no subject line and no body text, just an attached Word document apocalyptically entitled "Last Things." I opened it and read three poems, livewires of language I couldn't catch without searing my flesh. Suicide notes.

In one, you spoke to me by name. I slammed the computer shut and called your phone. You picked up and said hello between bites of dinner at Sam and Grace's house.

"What the hell?" I stammered. "I thought you were dead."

You said something sheepish, and I said I was just glad you were all right. But when I hung up, I still shook.

I should have stayed, I thought. *But I can't stay there every bad night.*

Yesterday was worse than bad. I should have known.

After I finished teaching the day before, I came to your room in a new boarding house in the Central West End, a gorgeous Victorian with a historical preservationist plaque out front. Its octogenarian owner lived there with his persnickety nurse and a handful of boarders, each of them one of St. Louis' sexual misfits. A shrine to the legendary horror movie actor Vincent Price and his father, a venerable St. Louis merchant, decked out the lobby; a smaller chapel dedicated to Tennessee Williams graced the landing of the staircase.

I found you in your bed, dressed for the day but paralyzed under the covers.

I reached for your guitar and played "A Hard Day's Night." My voice faltered at the high middle eight, but you started singing along to help me out. I did better with "You've Got to Hide Your Love Away" and "Norwegian Wood." After that, you took the guitar in your own trembling hands—the tremor was a side-effect

of your medication—and played a crushingly sad Damien Jurado song (as if there were any other kind).

Just before I left, you told me that a few nights before, you dreamed I lost my faith and killed myself. You woke up screaming, and C. comforted you. You wanted me to know you'd felt how it would hurt others if you took your own life.

"Just don't do it," I said.

C. told me later that you stopped yourself in the act that night by chanting her name, my name, your son's name, over and over again, an incantation against death.

A couple of weeks after you told me about your involvement with C., we met up at the sunken amphitheater in the middle of campus to talk. You looked healthier; you were put together, wearing eye makeup and a tank-top. You told me you were glad to see me. That you hadn't intended to tell me about you and C. like that. We'd soon learn that impulsive, destructive behavior was a symptom of your illness.

We shared a flicker of emotional reciprocity—of relationship. I wanted that to continue, to press into the sting and not let it fade away as I had with Will. I told you, as fully as I could, the betrayal I felt and described the imagined family romance I was mourning. You listened.

I drove away that day feeling hopeful.

Between this conversation and your suicide attempt, the months stretch, a landscape thick with mingled reverence and horror like our Gettysburg or Somme, studded with monuments of memory and forgetting. Things still buried in that time might one day explode. Electro-convulsive therapy and lithium Swiss-cheesed your memory, leaving you with odd pockets of nothing. Constant anxiety sealed mine behind smoked glass.

You were in and out of the hospital, in and out of our graduate program, in and out of C.'s bed. In late summer, you raced and raged; in winter, your sap froze and you slowed. Your mother flew up from Mexico to help out. Disaster. She went home. You endured psych wards, burned through diagnoses and prescriptions, wrestled medical incompetence and your own instincts to dissemble, minimize, avoid. I visited you a few times a week.

C. came every day.

I began to view C. very differently. She stayed when you were incapable of fucking, when everyone left, when I left. Drawn together by our love of you, C. and I began to confide in one another, against my will at first. We couldn't afford and couldn't help our own depressions and anxieties, and who else would understand?

You and C. theorized an open relationship. When you slept with other people, though, you cried and shouted at each other. I wondered whether you wounded one another intentionally; doubtless your motives were fathomless. Yet you stuck together in what appeared to me sometimes a sickly desperation of mutual need, sometimes a gemlike flame of mutual devotion. I saw the two of you always doubly, another flickering gestalt.

You still spoke the dialect of faith with me. But you hemmed and hawed and apologized for pilfering concepts you no longer owned. Once, you confessed to seeking solace in worship music. Your therapist counseled: *Take comfort where you can get it.*

When you cut the line of shared belief between us, the line of love strained taut. One possible etymology of "religion": it derives from the root *leig*, "to bind." It's not that I needed God as some external check, some threat of punishment to keep me in my unspoken vow to you. God is just there, in the midst of us. It feels like grace, the sheer givenness of the way I find myself bound to be your friend.

But how I hated you sometimes, when I felt betrayed or simply tired and the gestalt switched and I no longer tolerated your strangeness, your difficulty, the sorrow that followed you around like a slinking, beaten dog.

After the suicide attempt, you assented to your psychiatrist's suggestion that you spend some time in a residential treatment facility. You stayed a night with Sam and Grace, a night with me, and a weekend with C. Sunday afternoon, I picked the two of you up at her apartment, and we struck out north for the Milwaukee suburbs.

After dinner on the road in northern Illinois, we searched for valedictory booze. We window-shopped at a gas station that had the biggest liquor selection I've ever seen in such an establishment, then drove over to an actual liquor store. After much debate, C. sold us on a bottle of Tullamore D.E.W. It was cheaper at the gas station, so we went back.

During the drive, you DJ'd, choosing categories of songs and having us shout them out to you. "The first CD you ever owned!" C. impressed us with her circa-ten-years-old cool when she told us hers was *Help!*. You cranked up the stereo for your turn, and the two of us shouted every word to dc Talk's "Jesus Freak." C. videoed us on her phone, and when you caught her you screamed with actual rage and fear.

The last category you chose for the night was "the most beautiful song you know." My selection still played when we pulled into the hotel parking lot: "The Predatory Wasp Of The Palisades Is Out To Get Us!" from Sufjan Stevens's *Illinois* album.

It's a gorgeous chamber-pop piece, with winds and strings and choir in addition to the standard rock-band setup of vocal, guitar, bass, and drums. It starts as a tender, acoustic-driven folk song before swelling in its final movement to an orchestral climax of neo-baroque counterpoint. It really was—is—the most beautiful song.

"The Predatory Wasp" is also a song about being in love with your best friend, who's maybe also your brother, who's maybe also Jesus. Young boys go swimming in Illinois' Palisades. The narrator kisses his friend, spying a wasp on his arm at the same moment. While swimming, the friend is stung seven times by wasps (a religiously portentous number). The narrator teases him. In the end, the narrator declares his love for his friend in haunting past tense, confessing:

My friend is gone, he ran away.
I can tell you, I love him each day.
Though we have sparred, wrestled and raged,
I can tell you, I love him each day.

I couldn't have picked another song. I wondered if you, if C., heard what I was saying.

The next morning, on the way to the hospital, you took command of the playlist. We listened to two brutally melancholy Radiohead songs, "Videotape" and "Exit Music (For a Film)," and arrived at the improbable hospital in the woods. After a couple of hours of paperwork, we left you there in the world's gentlest prison.

C. had been nauseous, hungover, sleeplessly miserable all morning. When the two of us tumbled into my car without you, she briefly fell apart. No words, just fierce tears running from her squeezed-shut eyes. Then a moment I'll always remember: C. needed something, someone to hold onto. She started to grab my hand, which was on the shifter. But the gesture would have been too intimate. She changed course at the last instant and seized my wrist.

My arm hovered over the console, held fast in her grip. After a second, I reached over with my other hand to pat her shoulder, to let her know it was all right to touch me. To let her know it was all right.

Stephanie Horvath

Desert Sonnet with Dropped Line

What you thought was sand but revealed itself to be rock and coarse
shrubbery. You missed Ohio's understated hills. Someone's pores
that made the face feel more accessible by their plain visibility.
A breathing house. Whatever person lives inside of it now

eats and sleeps with or without ease. Unclaimed bicycles sawed
from iron stands at the season's last snowmelt. Again you find yourself lost
in a cream-white nightgown walking the unpaved driveway, sky agate blue.
Most ghosts are female and vaguely resemble you. Bare but for the chia

and piñon pine. You think on the inchworm's maneuvering, to find
yourself in a place unlike the place you started, just by expanding
and contracting in turn against the bark of a tree. You expand.
You contract. The chia. The piñon pine. Her one lax hand

turning the steering wheel on a road of snow. I miss what I almost had.

Micaela Bombard

Survival Spell

O spit of girl, O rot
of moss and lichen, cloud,
grouse, minnow mouth.

Thank you forest
for the wooden
for your gullet and maw

for that platform
I stumbled across
surely built for watching

birds, and once I'd climbed
the rickety slats, sat and touched
myself til I felt something—

(that secret shiver
so unlike the secrecy of home
or the privacy of its people).

Everything asked of me
receded when that strange sound
gurgled out my mouth—

my voice, almost unrecognizable
declaring its nonsense
to no one. I knew this was

what I wanted—a perch
to practice who I was, as prey,
on occasion, turns

toward predator, bluffs
long enough to send it
fluttering to nest. I swear

to you, I shook that tree
with my knees. I took
what belonged to me.

Dorsey Craft

My Football Team is Winning

You know which one we are. The highlights clog
Sports Center all September. I paint my face
and go do bicep curls, watch our logo
swell until it chokes the screen. Because I

love to talk smack, I impersonate
my husband in group chats. I hope you whip
them all, I say. See you in the playoffs.
Put your money where your mouth is, shit bird.

Our mascot has no feathers, but I read
that two out of three sparrows bit the dust
this decade. Lucy tells me it's true,
plus in Dakota they're all Bison fans,

never heard of us. Coach says each day's
a song. He says the best is yet to come.

My Football Team is Winning II

But loss was not long ago. I recall
the alphabet backwards up stadium stairs,
'P' to 'O' to 'N,' each breath a letter lost.
Bishop says it's not hard, not disaster,

the way that 'A' slips last over my lip
no graver than a junk drawer smashed full
of torn ticket stubs, a thumb tack jammed
knuckle. Disasters can be nuclear,

season-ending like a ligament tear,
or natural, like when I saw a man kneel
in the rain beneath the scoreboard. The last
bulb's flick lit his dark hair purple. I took

him home and fucked him. You think
I don't recall the score, but it was close.

Rosa Alcalá

Capitalism Ritual

The boutique owner
pulled from racks
variations on the same
pricey and shapeless dress
and as I tried them on
she whispered into the fitting room,
"I wanted to burn everything I wore
the next day," and let me go
into the cheap cold night
to borrow a t-shirt and skirt
from someone's giveaway
pile. I was rehearsing
the ritual of shedding and
casting off, to the underworld
and to the developing. "She who keeps
a dress perfectly suited to the burial
of the mother, will never break down
behind a curtain" should be a
proverb.

Later I walked through any store
and bought the first thing
I saw. It'll change your life
the sales associate said, as she rubbed
the $40 cream into the back
of my hand. It just sinks
into the skin.

A Daughter's Mourning Dress

I want to dye
your house dress black
and wear it
for a year
I want to wail
for all the women
kept from the public square
in official displays
of mourning
I want to do it
when the cashier asks
"did you find
everything
you needed?"
I want to claw
in that moment
my chest
sucking every polite
transaction
around me
into my animal grief
take what you want
my mother is dead
my father is dead
take as payment
a scrap
of this dress
and she'll say
ay, mamita
ay, corazón
and hand me as change

a relic of an old black smock
she keeps beneath
the coupons
I'll have in my cart
condensed milk
to sweeten
the coffee
and more sugar
for the full-fat yogurt
I won't schedule
hunger
I'll let it wander
I'll be the woman
dragging her snot-soaked
rags through mud
and across
veined marble
my hair unwashed
leaving its odor
in lieu of anthem
I'll inconvenience everyone
I'll do it
for the cashier
her fray as flag
leading my rebellion
for the girl who
wears her hair
over her face
like a funeral shroud
who grieves for
the freedom
she's never had
to walk without worry
to owe no one
a smile.

Kate Green

Autumn Knight: Performance of/for the Moment

This Moment

Police brutality against Black lives forces a reckoning with America's racist backbone, and the microaggressions that continue to oppress and repress. A pandemic upends life for the foreseeable future, and everything—from funerals to meetings to performance—is experienced at home on screens, rather than in person.

What does this moment call for?

This moment calls for honest reflection and commitment to confronting our country's past, our present selves, who we would like to become. It calls for talking, and a lot more listening. It calls for subverting the privileges inherited by white people, like me, that shape everything from perceptions to spaces to norms to language. It calls for new ways of connecting, including with art. This moment calls for constant adjustment, and the most humor we can muster.

This moment calls for interdisciplinary artist Autumn Knight, because her work addresses who we are and how we interact and imagine one another. Because her work is about then, now, and what can be.

Working site-specifically and often with collaborators, Knight choreographs and performs live works—and creates related texts, videos, and installations—that are often participatory, usually painfully poignant and funny, and always responsive to context. The results are magnetic, visual, experiential, and specific. Though Knight firmly leads as performer, writer, and director, her performances are so effective because they involve others in shaping content. This gives them particular agency, making them richly felt and deeply relevant at calling out those people and perspectives empowered past, present, and future.

Experiential

I first experienced a performance by Knight, a native Houstonian, in 2016. As a curator and writer based in Texas, I had known of Knight and her work for some time. I knew that Knight made use of a background in theater, group dynamics, and the therapeutic principle of transference (B.A. Theater Arts and Speech Communications, Dillard University, New Orleans, 2003; M.A. Drama Therapy, New York University, New York, 2010) to orchestrate and lead audiences in live artworks that not only activated the eye and mind, but also the body and group.

I am struck by an early work that I did not experience but know about through documentation. It was performed by Knight at Project Row Houses (PRH), the art and community enrichment center founded by Black artists in Houston's Third Ward neighborhood. *Roach Dance* suggests Knight's expansive approach to the body, context, and time, and her skills for orchestrating and utilizing gestures, sound, imagery, and the frisson of distanciation to productive effect. Produced by Knight as part of her residency at PRH in 2012, the backdrop and stage for *Roach Dance* was one of the shotgun style row houses used by the center for exhibiting new work by artists. Wearing a metallic dress, Knight positioned herself on the wooden floor eating crackers, inhabiting the role of the titular insect maligned in the swampy South, where, after being brought to the United States by colonizers, they have thrived in spite of adversity. In the second half of the performance, Knight stood up and screamed, reversing roles to become fearful of the roach, and perhaps the shameful poverty associated with the insects—also, within the logic of the performance, herself. While *Roach Dance* could be read through the lens of structural racism's requirement that all people fear Black bodies, for Knight it was about the resilience and strength of beings despite circumstances, the future promise of those who adapt.

I recall being stunned—visually, intellectually, in my body—by the first Knight performance I attended, the lack of fourth wall creating a community that prompted questions about others' experiences that heightened my own. The context for *La-a Consortium*, performed in Dallas in 2016, was heavy. It was commissioned for *New*

Cities, Future Ruins, an academic convening aimed at imagining diverse strategies for the future of Sun Belt cities. What could and would cities look like? Who does and should shape them? Knight produced her performance, included in the weekend's closing festivities (alongside events by artists Lee Escobedo, Guillermo Gómez-Peña, and Postcommodity), as she often does: Collaboratively, with local co-performers and context in mind.

At the beginning of *La-a Consortium*, Knight sat on stage under a red light around a table with four Black collaborators, reading the rules for the fictional second meeting of the "La-a Consortium" (dash pronounced), which those of us in the audience were observing. Each performer read from a list of potential partners—"Shepanique Center for Literacy," "NaQuante Gallery," "La Shirl Center for Curatorial Studies"—while the others, as instructed, expressed opinions with either a "side eye," "shoulder shake," or "lip pucker." The degree of cultural specificity in the language and gestures was absurd but also charged, throwing into relief the overwhelming lack of diversity—of people, of norms—in institutions, in who has a seat at the table. At the performance's haunting and humorous conclusion, Knight instructed performers to touch one another in the "kitchen," a term for the hair at the nape, historically straightened in Black homes with a hot comb in the kitchen. Why do meetings end in a handshake? The performers, script, and imagery of La-a Consortium materialized a reality that does not exist, but could. Who is empowered to convene, name, and thus shape what tomorrow will look like, in cities and beyond?

And So It Is!

In 2018, I had the opportunity to work with Knight, commissioning her for a performance in Marfa, a West Texas town of 2,000 residents once known for ranching and now for contemporary art tourism. At the time, I was directing Marfa Contemporary, which was closing. I asked Knight to create and perform a piece to mark the occasion. She visited to get to know Marfa Contemporary, and the town to which artists, art workers, and supporters have been moving since the 1970s. Newcomers—most of whom are white former urbanites, like

me—have transformed Marfa socially and physically, and live uneasily alongside the town's less-resourced and more diverse longtime residents. Knight identified a small group of collaborators. Some were new to town and others old-timers, all somehow connected to the arts and Marfa Contemporary. Knight held several days of workshops with collaborators and then produced *Grand Opening/Grand Closing*, which celebrated and mourned a complicated past and present, and signaled what could come in its wake.

Grand Opening/Grand Closing involved loosely scripted moments that intersected but did not overlap, as people do in Marfa. Cued by moving spotlights of dramatic purples and pinks, the audience roved along with the performers, throughout Marfa Contemporary's otherwise empty building. In actions, dialogue, and sounds collaboratively developed and choreographed with Knight, each performer rendered a piece of Marfa visible, inside the white-walled art space. An adobe activist and builder burned cleansing copal resin, and then danced around the main gallery with a queer Marfa-born artist. A large-scale video projected the bodies of a trio of Latinas—a City Hall official, a middle-aged cleaner, a former Marfa Contemporary assistant—performing actions, in unison. An older musician and his younger performing partner, also the county's Justice of the Peace, sang and played corridos, first from a closet and later from the center of the gallery. Part-time caterers walked through the crowd, performatively interrupting the action, but not acknowledged by anyone.

Knight maintained a regal if off-kilter presence throughout, embodying one of the more fiercely independent individuals she met in town, someone who crossed lines and showed up, was involved in everything from adobe-building to art projects to local politics. Wearing a purple cape and three red knit caps stacked, at one point Knight mopped the floor around the former assistant as musicians played behind her, the reversal of power—artist cleans, worker sits—calling out the special status claimed by the arts in Marfa. Later, Knight stepped to a mic and reflected some of the art crowd's urban tastes and budgets back to themselves, reading aloud the menu and prices from a beloved café: sourdough pancake ($6), candied orange scone ($4.25), Jerusalem toast ($9). Near the end of the performance, Knight recited a "rantra"—a rant and a mantra—one of many

written daily by the character she was embodying: "Life and death are one and the same, For it is naturally so." The reading performed the larger stakes for all, the cycle of life.

The people, actions, and words of *Grand Opening/Grand Closing* pointed to the identities, tastes, and values that are empowered, and those that are not in Marfa. It realized a reality of adjacent and not overlapping perspectives, and it urged a new beginning, perhaps one created intentionally, with more connection. Knight ended the hour-long performance by distributing, to the hundred or so in attendance, lit white candles, each wrapped with a custom blue label so that the room glowed with mournful and hopeful light. The labels proclaimed a text written and designed by Knight: "A meditation on closure: BANG! As we demand our future….BANG. (Let us also accept our present.) And so it is!"

Theater of the Relevant

In recent years, Knight has had larger stages on which to choreograph live artworks; to engage with bodies, language, imagery, and the absurd; to provoke contemplation of this moment and what is beyond. As part of her contribution to the *2019 Whitney Biennial*, Knight continued the performance series, *Sanity TV*, conceived of as a fictional live talk show in 2016, when the artist was in residence at Skowhegan School of Painting and Drawing in Skowhegan, Maine. The work became performance later the same year, during a residency at the Studio Museum in Harlem, for which Knight moved to New York City (where she continues to live with her husband and sometime collaborator, Houston-born artist Robert Pruitt).

In the lead-up to and during the *2019 Whitney Biennial*, the Whitney came under fire by cultural workers, including artists. The protests were ignited by a museum trustee's manufacturing of tear gas for law enforcement and military—for use against people who, in the United States, are disproportionately BIPOC. Within this context, Knight used her stage—the museum, the talk show—in a visually and conceptually rich performance that pointed to the fragility of life. Over several Saturdays, Knight performed *Sanity TV*, including in a glass-walled

conference room that, located in an office area accessible to the public, performs transparency for the museum. Knight filled the room with red balloons and visitors and then, in spite of the pop-able plastic and people, attempted to walk amongst them. Holding two mics, she instructed the audience to do the nearly impossible, given the comically packed room: slowly take a lap, stand absolutely still. The performance rendered visible and experiential the delicate state of existence for the body, but also the agency in fighting what is.

The Artist We Need

Knight performed a new piece that proved her skill—with imagery, sound, and text; with context and group dynamics; with orchestrating moments of humor and deep relevance—several months ago. It was the end of May, early in the pandemic and days before George Floyd's murder by police sparked long-simmering protests across the country and worldwide, against the toll of structural racism and microaggressions on Black people and communities. *Our Water Is Melted Snow* was commissioned by Wa Na Wari, a Black-owned center for Black art and culture in the historically redlined Central District of Seattle, a city often depicted in popular culture as white. The location of the performance was Zoom, a virtual meeting tool new to many at the time, when White House officials were still downplaying the pandemic's severity—It will abate in summer's heat!—in order to keep capital flowing, never mind the cost to lives.

With *Our Water Is Melted Snow*, Knight demonstrated to me that she is the artist we need. The half-hour performance occurred on a Friday afternoon, and participants—some followers of Knight's, others part of Wa Na Wari's community—were encouraged to bring drinks and snacks. As people joined the distracting space—so many tiles, faces, backdrops—the artist, dressed in a stiff jumpsuit, skillfully established authority. She moved through a sequence of deliberate motions—drinking, head tilting, finger wagging—until we all followed along. With attention on the artist, she enlarged her view, and began bringing props—a piece of paper shaped like a funnel, a white sheet—between her body and camera, so that our gaze was limited to what she wanted us to see:

an eye, hands. The pleasure and power of looking at bodies, at people—especially when framed and distanced by a lens—was thrown into relief.

With the help of participants, Knight made the performance's larger point in two final sections. First, she shared her screen and narrated a presentation on the cartoon world of the Smurfs. Initial laughter died as the artist dropped some serious knowledge: The only black character ever introduced into the Smurfs' world was written in through the language of infection, and fear. A blue being was bitten by a bug and turned black, then insane. Others in the community ran: "A BLACK SMURF!....HE'LL BITE US! WE'LLL TURN BLACK!"

Near *Our Water Is Melted Snow*'s conclusion, Knight brought her inquiry—Who controls narratives and how?—to our present, our selves. She asked participants what they thought about the so-called Seattle Freeze, a widely circulated belief that the rainy corporate city is unfriendly to newcomers. As a Black woman spoke up, it became evident that at least some did not feel it represented their experience. Some found power in choosing not to acknowledge the notion, preventing it from defining their reality. In the performance's last moments, Knight drove home her point with remarkable signature humor, skill, and bite. While signing off, the artist thanked participants by the names on their tiles. We realized that, in this virtual world, Knight had renamed us. Through language, she took control of how we were perceived, who we might be. One person was called Lord Jesus, another Jheri Curl. I laughed and then felt the pain of reality—of the power that the privilege to name wields—when I saw Knight had called out another smiling white woman, who could have been me, with the command, Let's Be Honest.

Autumn Knight is exactly the artist we need.

p. 233, Fig. 1. Autumn Knight, *La-a Consortium*, MAC, Dallas, TX, for "New Cities, Future Ruins." November 12, 2016. Performers: Iv Amenti, Lauren Woods, Autumn Knight, David Herman, RonAmber Delaney. Photo credit: Kim Leeson.

p. 234, Fig. 2. Autumn Knight, *La-a Consortium*, MAC, Dallas, TX, for "New Cities, Future Ruins." November 12, 2016. Performers: Lauren Woods, Autumn Knight, David Herman. Photo credit: Kim Leeson.

p. 235, Fig. 3. Autumn Knight, *Grand Opening/Grand Closing*, Marfa Contemporary,TX. January 13, 2018. Performer: Sandro Canovas. Photo credit: Stephanie Huang.

p. 236, Fig. 4. Autumn Knight, *Grand Opening/Grand Closing*, Marfa Contemporary,TX. January 13, 2018. Performers: Gabriela Carballo, David Beebe, Primo Carrasco, Autumn Knight. Photo credit: Stephanie Huang.

p. 237, Fig. 5. Autumn Knight, *Sanity TV*, The Studio Museum in Harlem, NY. Fall 2017. Photo courtesy of the artist.

p. 238, Fig. 6. Autumn Knight, *Sanity TV*, Whitney Museum of American Art, NY. June 29, 2019. Photo credit: Paula Court.

p. 239, Fig. 7. Autumn Knight, *Our Water Is Melted Snow*, Wa Na Wari, Seattle, WA. May 22, 2020. Photo courtesy of Wa Na Wari.

p. 240, Fig. 8. Autumn Knight, *Our Water Is Melted Snow*, Wa Na Wari, Seattle, WA. May 22, 2020. Photo courtesy of Wa Na Wari.
















Snackin' on Japanese Food
Elisheba Johnson
Well
Let's Be Honest
Poets
Unstable Internet
Jheri Curl 3
Grease on the phone
Memphis
Assholes Hangin Together
Older Generation Curl
Yes Mam
Black Folks All Together
Jheri Curl 4
I love you baby
Curl Pattern
FLy Hairstyles
Memphis People Don't W...
Unpleasant ASS Blacks
Diggin it
Jheri Curl
A friend with a curl?
Lord Jesus
Fresh Curls
Jheri Curl 2

Matt W. Miller

Where One Starts From

roots in the river's bluegreen pitch
of a heat bug's back

in redbrick mills rubied placental
sundressed in cirrus

and canals brown in willow shade
creaming in the patches

of light winging between leaves
and the concrete stories of Greek

revival Victorian revival Renaissance
revival and the busses that nuzzle

into bus stops and skaters shkblunk
sidewalks and a bottle that falls

from a buggy and the fingers that brush
it off and the coffee shops

shouting for names rushing past
and already the oregano dough

behind pizzeria glass and eggs
slip spitting on grills

and pork frying from the Thai joint
bread groggy from a bakery

and click of heels and thump of boot
sneaker squeak and scrape

of flops all the offices of Monday
of late May of what may be

of sometimes any morning might
surprise with possibility

as the crosswalk clock ticks off
how much of this light is left

Conditional

If this skin is the first lie
our bones learn to shuttle

then we are bags of broken
looms. If architects

of tongue left a dream
of language on your eyes

then only pin pricked
fingers will decipher our rot

of rose. If morning
won't let go the cuticle moon

your slippers will hush us away
in a bloom of snow

that creases the black mud
of our canals. That copperheads

ask to milk the stone is what
goes cold, what we've never known

of old park benches and rusted
out Fords. Here the fur

of lists sheds on the front yard couch.
Here, finger this spark, the first

gasp of galaxy. In here I'm the last
best flesh I'll ever hold.

Rusty Morrison

Narrow Negotiations (hand-washing)

Weeks of hand-washing's damage
you say. *Lady-MacBeth-ish?*

chides your friend. Her glibness numbs
what you'd wanted from her. Don't

say so & risk offense. In
this crisis you need a friend.

Her video-face in its
room. You in yours. Still this lie

of omission hardens like
your thumb's deadened tip. What is

extinction? Asking less not
more. Press to touch her. Feel her

touch you. Heedless of outcome.
No future other than this.

Tariq al Haydar and Keija Parssinen

Homeland Insecurity: A Collaborative Essay

I am not American. I was born two years too early for that. If only my parents had traveled to Richmond, Virginia earlier, I would have been. As it is, I'm merely a Saudi, even though a part of me feels American. The part that rode his bicycle to David's house every weekday, that caught frogs in the pond behind his house, that won his grade's spelling bee for two years running. The part that fell in love with El Debarge's "Who's Johnny?" and Michael Jackson's *Thriller* before he knew the name of any Arab singer.

I don't remember this, but my parents tell that when I was very young I announced to the world that I was "Abu Mohammad," literally "The Father of Mohammad." This delighted my maternal grandfather, whom I chose my tekonym for. He loved me with an intensity I've never experienced from anyone else.

Once, he pointed at me and asked my father's brother, "Can you al Haydars produce such a boy?"

My uncle laughed and replied, "No chance! We're too lowly!"

When I moved back to Riyadh at the age of eight, I struggled not only with the language, but also with cultural references. I didn't understand Adil Imam's jokes. When I went with my cousin to a soccer game, I couldn't even tell what a goal was. My cousin, uncle, and all my uncle's friends were so incensed at the referee that I was overcome by a sense of injustice, despite not understanding the rules of the game. I stood up and screamed at the top of my lungs, "God damn your mother, ref!" My uncle, embarrassed at my outburst, shushed me. But Shujaa', his friend, told him, "No, let him shout. He's right!"

I am feeling strange and unsettled the last few days. I haven't really slept.

I am not American because I was born in As-Salamah hospital in al-Khobar. Ask for my birth certificate, go ahead. It's true, I can never be president of the country whose passport I carry. I am not American because I have never seen *Raging Bull* or *Caddyshack*, never listened to Journey or Bon Jovi—not until college, when the nostalgia of my American classmates reached me through their stereo speakers. *You've never seen* Full Metal Jacket*? What, were you raised under a rock?* No, behind the high chain-link fences of an oil company's compound at the edge of the Dahna desert. More than a decade of American culture struck from my life because we could not smuggle it past Saudi customs. Did Saudi culture seep in to fill the void? Kind of. At the Third Street snack bar we ate Lion bars and sambusa and drank Mirinda. Sometimes we'd watch overheated Egyptian movies on TV late at night. But though I was not American, I wasn't Saudi, either. I was an Aramco "brat," my childhood the mish-mash that develops in liminal cultural spaces like oil compounds.

To me, for the first twelve years of my life, America was television commercials. When my family went on "repat," short for repatriation, to America each summer, my sister and I would sit rapt in front of my grandparents' television in the living room of their Palm Springs bungalow. The shows—*Gilligan's Island*, *I Love Lucy*—were okay. But it was the commercials we cherished, those frenetic, colorful blips of time that did not exist back home in Saudi, where we only got one channel that showed Sesame Street and Dallas with the kissing censored out, where the TV screen went blank for twenty minutes in the evening for "prayer time." In California we memorized the Juicy Fruit song and made up a dance to go with it, mimicked the Micromachine man's fast talking, begged our parents for all the Cabbage Patch dolls and the EZ Bake Oven. When we went home to Saudi, our suitcases burst with Hypercolor T-shirts and Jolly Rancher candy.

My brain is on fire. I feel in some ways that we are artistic twins!

I was born in the Eastern Province of Saudi Arabia, but I am not a Saudi. At least, part of me isn't, the one that prefers to read and write in English, for example. But part of me is, the one that used to sit in front of the television with my cousins at my grandfather's farm in Kharj, waiting for Arabic commercials to come on. There was one in particular, for Al-Bantileez tea, that we loved. It had such a catchy jingle.

In high school, my friends and I traded CDs, VHS tapes, and DVDs. Once, the school supervisor spied a copy of *When a Man Loves a Woman* in my open backpack and snatched it. He was sure it was porn. I tried to convince him that it was just a Hollywood movie, but he didn't believe me, so he took it home with him to check. The next day, he gave it back to me and told me not to bring any more movies to school.

My friends and I would rejoice whenever we got our hands on new, uncensored films. Once, we got *Money Train* with Wesley Snipes and Woody Harrelson and *Heat*. We watched them in one sitting. I was more excited for the former, but the latter blew my mind. I fell in love with Robert De Niro and vowed to watch everything he starred in.

When we graduated high school, most of my friends applied to American universities, but I didn't. I was too afraid. The thought of living alone, with no support system, terrified me. Part of that fear was rooted in the fact that I was obese at the time. Low self-esteem. If I couldn't control my weight, how would I manage life alone in a new city? In retrospect, it's a decision I've come to regret.

Born so close together in time and space, my life's course a kind of inverse of yours.

I was born in the Eastern Province of Saudi Arabia, but I am not a Saudi. I was born in As-Salamah hospital in al-Khobar, a city perched on the shores of the Arabian Gulf. I was born jaundiced and the nurses placed me in a cardboard box under an office lamp. In the next room a baby wailed ceaselessly, a Bedu baby who had been badly burned in a grease fire and then abandoned at the hospital.

I am not Saudi, though I spent the first twelve years of my life in the Eastern Province of that country; though my mother also grew up in the Kingdom; though as a child some of my earliest foods were shwarma and baba ghanoush; though I know the heat of that country like a friend, hear the call to prayer in my dreams. For years after my family left, I told people I was from there.

I am not Saudi, but I am from Saudi because it is where my family lived since 1951. I am from Saudi Arabia because it is the place my mother dreams about every night, the place her heart cries out for more than any other. It is where she and I spent our ragamuffin girlhoods, we scraped our knees on the trees of that place, we learned to read under its sky, we galloped our horses in the sands there. We had our birthday parties on Saudi beaches, we wore its gold around our wrists, its sun is the one that burned us when we stayed too long at the pool.

Saudi is my home, but I am not a Saudi. "Repatriation" was never the word for what my mother and I did when we traveled to the States as children. Because our country was always the one we were living in, the place where our memories reside. I am not Saudi, but I am of Saudi.

I know that reading someone's work can
provide a false sense of intimacy.
Sorry for being weird.

I flew to California in the summer of 1996. It was my first time traveling alone. Even though I was only seventeen, my parents thought it would be good for me to depend on myself. My best friend and his family were there too. His older brother mocked us for not having watched *The Godfather*. A friend of his other brother, whose father was on Prince Faisal bin Fahad's payroll, left a $100 tip at a restaurant. As a joke. I saw something vulgar in that.

Another friend of mine was in Seattle with his family at the time, so I flew there and stayed with them for a couple of weeks. That trip was the first time I experienced racism. I've written about that experience elsewhere, but the realization that a white American would view me as "other" was jarring. In Leo Tolstoy's *The Death of Ivan Ilyich*, the eponymous main character recalls a logical syllogism he had learned at school: All men are mortal, Caius is a man, so Caius is mortal. This had seemed correct and logical to young Ivan, but now that he was dying, it somehow defied logic. How could he die? Perhaps I was naïve, but I think I thought of racism in a similar way: Of course racism existed, but how could I be exposed to it. It made something abstract (to me) horribly concrete.

At the time, you had to confirm your flight reservation beforehand or else it would be canceled. I didn't know this, and my flight back to Riyadh was indeed canceled, which forced me to extend my stay in the States for two weeks. Nearly all my money ran out. I was alone and afraid, and wanted nothing more than to be back home with my family. When it was finally time to fly back home, I connected in London. Somehow, my connecting flight to Riyadh turned out to be before my arrival in London. A mistake from the airline. I was stuck in Heathrow and slept in the airport. The next day, the airline employee told me that she would *try* to get me on the next flight. I didn't have any money. A kind Saudi man bought me a Whopper from Burger King. Minutes before takeoff, the airline employee told me that I could finally board, but that I would have to hurry to make it. I ran with everything I had to the gate, relieved that I was finally going home.

I have this strange feeling that communicating with you is an imperative, and that this connection is a gift. I feel hyper and discombobulated.

I flew to California for the first time when I was two months old. We flew from Dhahran to Paris, stayed four days at the Regent's Garden hotel, then flew non-stop to Los Angeles. It was a journey my family would make every year. I never sensed that my parents felt at home in California, though my father had grown up shooting rabbits in the hills of Hemet's high desert. Though my mother graduated from the University of Southern California and got married in Long Beach, where her parents settled after leaving Saudi Arabia.

No, home for my parents was wherever our little family was: first, the faculty housing in Rahima camp at the University of Petroleum and Minerals, a tiny flat with a roach problem. Then our home in Ras Tanura, where we idled at the beach watching the huge tankers carry crude away from the world's largest refinery and, back at the house, washed tar from our feet using hydrogen peroxide. Finally, home was P-304 Prairie View on the Aramco compound in Dhahran.

My parents spent a lot of effort making that company house ours. I remember dad toiling for hours in the yard, arranging yellow rocks he'd hauled in from the desert, erecting a lantern, lovingly tending the date palms. He was so proud when he won Yard of the Month. Inside was mom's territory. She ordered teak furniture from Denmark, as her mother Willette had done before her, as Aramco wives had done for decades. She bought Kuwaiti chests and had throw pillows made from rich Indian fabrics she found in the shops of nearby Khobar. She never called me or my sister *dumb Dora*, she never called us fat or ugly the way Willette had tormented her. Instead she read to us at night, holding us close among those throw pillows. She braided our hair and taught us ballet. Called us her treasures.

My father has a provenance—he can definitively say *I'm from California*. It's where he was born, where he lived most of the years of his life until he left for the

Middle East at thirty-three. What my father never found in California was love. His father, a Finnish immigrant, was a laconic alcoholic, more given to fits of rage than affection. Once, crazed with liquor, he chased Grandma Lorena around their dining room table.

In 1973, when my father and mother got married and left California for Lebanon, where my dad had received a scholarship to study Arabic at the American University of Beirut, they were seeking adventure, yes. But they were also fleeing their dysfunctional families, hoping that, with enough distance, they could forget the trauma of their past. Find a new way to be a family, and to make a home.

I don't think you're being weird at all.
I feel the same way you do!

In August 1990, Saddam Hussein invaded Kuwait. I was in Virginia on vacation with my family. My older cousin said, "Kuwait is lost." I couldn't fathom how a mass of immovable land could be lost. When we flew back to Riyadh, the city was in a state of anticipation. Gas masks were mentioned, though we never did acquire any. Air raid sirens. Then, one day, it happened: a booming in the sky. I was terrified. We scurried to the basement, which we would later clean and fill with mattresses. But on that first night it was a mess. My sister and I cried hard. We didn't know that SCUDs and Patriots were colliding in the heavens. All we knew was that nothing should sound that loud.

At night, when the sirens filled the air, many people went up to their rooftops to watch the exploding missiles. They said they looked like fireworks. I wanted to go up, but my parents forbade it. I thought they were being overprotective.

School was suspended indefinitely. Before long, my parents, along with my uncles, aunts, cousins, and grandparents, moved temporarily to my grandfather's farm in Kharj to escape the falling shrapnel of Riyadh. Those

were some of the best times of my life. Days were free of school and filled with soccer, four-wheel motorcycles, and roasted meat. The adults would play cards at night, and we would delight in watching them taunt one another. I read *Asterix* and *Tintin*. I was a little sad when the war was over and we had to move back to Riyadh.

But I'm not surprised about this connection,
because my worldview is strange.

In August 1990, Saddam Hussein invaded Kuwait. That summer, as the Iraqi army secretly mobilized below, my sister, brother, and I flew out of the Kingdom, headed to Maryland, where my mother was recovering from lifesaving brain surgery at Johns Hopkins Hospital. We had lived the last three months without our mom and dad, passed off between the homes of family friends. I was happy to live with my best friends, their homes had always felt as familiar to me as my own; but my brother, only five years old, cried every day, and my sister, always introverted, felt alone in my mother's best friend's house.

Finally, on that airplane, the three of us were together again, about to be reunited with our parents. Then we would all fly home to Saudi together, where mom would convalesce. But Saddam's invasion changed that plan. Even though Aramco tried to convince people it was safe to return, my father thought it best if we stayed in Maryland. So he flew back alone, and we lived in the States for the duration of the occupation and short-lived war. Dad mailed us letters every week, often including hand-drawn comics meant to make us laugh. He knew we were scared for him, and confused about what, exactly, was happening. A bad man in Iraq wanted Saudi oil, so America had to send its army to protect Aramco?

Once the war started we watched CNN non-stop. As Charles Jaco cowered in a foxhole, wearing his flak jacket and flinching every time a Patriot would

collide with a SCUD overhead, I ran to hide in the closet, crying hysterically, worried my dad was going to be lost to one of those booms.

The war was over quickly, and I was glad. Finally, we could go home. Finally, after months of separation caused by mom's illness and the war, we would be together. Back in Saudi, my friends showed me their gas masks and safe rooms, and dad revealed the pieces of SCUD he'd found in the desert while patrolling the perimeter fence with the rest of the Aramco men. We regularly hosted American soldiers at our house, including a whole busload for Thanksgiving in 1991. To me, they were heroes; they had saved my home and my dad, my country. When the Khobar Towers bombing happened in 1996, I was shocked. Why did people want to hurt the soldiers who had saved them? That was the first time I realized, however distantly, that I didn't understand the Saudi-American relationship very well.

I view life as a video game. I've recently
discovered that one of the keys
to the game is gratitude.

On September 11th, 2001, I was flunking out of computer college. My friend Bashar called me at four in the afternoon. "Where are you?"

"I'm just leaving the university."

"Come over here. Quick."

"Why? What happened?"

"An airplane crashed into a building in New York."

"So? I need to go to the tailor."

"Forget your tailor. Just come."

So I did. Bashar and a couple of my friends were transfixed. I saw a replay of the twin towers collapsing. Only then did I realize the magnitude of what had happened.

"It feels like a movie," I said. I wanted to find out who the antagonists were—Al-Qaeda? The Red Army of Japan? Someone else? The people who were running through the streets of Manhattan caked in rubble and dust seemed like extras to me. The director would yell, "cut," and they'd all break for lunch. It was surreal. America never got attacked on its own soil.

I called my friend Mohammad, who was studying in Boulder, Colorado. "It seems like a movie, doesn't it?" I asked.

"You know," he said solemnly, "real people died today. 3,000."

That's when it hit me. My maternal grandfather had died almost a year before, in October 2000. His death shook us all. He had traveled to Paris with my parents to treat his gallbladder. No one had expected him to die, but somehow I knew. I could sense it. I even went to the supermarket and bought candy for my siblings as a way to soften the blow. That's what death looked like to me at the time: a completely avoidable medical error, one that would crush my mother. She wasn't the same for years after that.

But when Mohammad spoke those words, it registered. Thousands of people's lives had been crushed, changed forever, and many more lives would be ruined in the wars to come.

Whenever I get bad news, I try to feel gratitude.
I felt a twinge of negativity when you rejected my
story, but I consciously tried to feel gratitude.

On September 11th, 2001, I was asleep in my dorm room when my best friend and suite-mate, Soyoung, burst into the room. She told me that a plane had crashed into the World Trade Center. I didn't have a TV, so we crowded onto her bed to watch the footage unfolding just a few miles north of us in Manhattan. Soyoung had grown up in Paramus, New Jersey, twenty minutes outside the city;

parents of her friends worked in the World Trade Center. My sister worked in Midtown Manhattan. She would just be arriving to work, commuting in from her apartment in Long Island City. Later I learned that she stayed overnight with a friend in Manhattan before walking home to Queens.

Outside Soyoung's window, the September sky was a rich peacock blue. It was the week before classes started, we were all back on campus partying and enjoying our last days of freedom. The billowing black smoke, the bodies falling, the ash-covered specters fleeing the rubble—these things were a rebuke to our carefree life. Eventually we learned that the attack was committed by Al Qaeda, that fourteen of the nineteen hijackers were from Saudi Arabia. If Khobar Towers had awakened in me a distant awareness of the complexity that existed between my two countries, then September 11th brought that reality home like a sucker punch. That day I attended a candlelight vigil and wept for the victims. When America attacked Afghanistan and then Iraq, I grieved the civilians lost to the so-called war on terror. Through it all, I vowed to confront my ignorance about my dueling homelands. From that vow, my first novel emerged. Today, I find myself still writing about Saudi Arabia and America, studying the "special relationship," trying to discern where and how it went so wrong. Trying, always, to determine my own small place in the sweep of history.

And then when we started to email back and forth and I got to know you better, I thought, OK, so obviously I was meant to connect with you.

To me, home is a construct. I don't feel tied down to the place I was born or the cities I've lived in. There is a mystic notion I prescribe to: that a human's true home is not on this planet, but rather somewhere in the unseen. This is why I

suspect that even people who were born and lived their entire lives in one village yearn for an inexplicable "home." In a way, however, this paradoxically renders the entire planet my home. I could easily live in Paris or Tokyo or Abidjan if I were to find my basic life needs met.

If I could choose anywhere in the world to live, I wouldn't choose the two places I've spent most of my life: Riyadh and Virginia. If I could gather all my loved ones and settle in one city, I would pick Los Angeles. I know that the traffic jams are legendary. Earthquakes, smog, fires, fake people doing fake things. But whenever I descend on the city, a calm comes over me, like I'm seeing an old friend for the first time since forever. I don't know why this is the case. Maybe I feel nostalgic for the time I spent with my best friend and his brothers arguing over movies and music. Maybe I don't really know Los Angeles. Maybe I just want somewhere new.

I think certain people are connected
in ways we don't fully understand.

To me, home is changeable. In my childhood and adolescence, it was Saudi Arabia. Even after my family migrated from Saudi to Austin, Texas, where I spent my middle and high school years, I called Saudi home. Once I got to college and started bumbling my way through Arabic 101, I began to question my connection to the Kingdom. I was only an Aramco "brat," a company kid. I didn't speak Arabic, wasn't a Muslim. I grew up on a fenced compound. I felt like a fake.

My senior year of high school, my parents divorced. While I was at away at college, they sold our home. My mother started drinking, my teenaged brother got busted for pot. Dad, who has always struggled with undiagnosed mental problems, couldn't hold down a professional job; he had a doctorate in International Relations but wound up stocking shelves at Sam's Club. For these reasons, home was not

something I wanted to think much about. So I became homeless for a little while. I was surprised to find how much I enjoyed it. A fellow I dated nicknamed me Reykjavik in homage to my mixed-up roots. Yes, I thought. I'm not dysfunctional, I'm mysterious!

At college I threw myself into new friendships and coursework. I fell in love with Virginia Woolf and Philip Larkin and García Márquez and Tayeb Salih. I discovered the delights of a half-dozen boys singing *a capella* under a stone archway. Of snow falling outside leaded windows. I discovered pea coats and the particular shade of blue that the sky turns on the East Coast in September. I learned that statelessness wasn't so bad, and that I could survive the sundering of my family, so long as I had a few dear hearts beating alongside mine, a few people willing to talk away the lonely hours. So long as I could feel the vibrancy of my own mind.

There's a line in hadith about the way
two souls can feel affinity, even if people
have never met before in the physical world.

Erin Adair-Hodges

Love Song as Iphigenia in a Teen Movie Asked to Prom as Part of a Prank

Mornings I wake to see what body the night has made,
praying the measuring tape to click out happiness's
three-spun locker code. Dear Diary. I scrawl my lamentations

in an alphabet of swirls, burn them at the altar
of straight hair, of the moon loving this blood away.
I was born and then I waited. Bounced around like an asterisk

in other peoples' stories. The pre-prom days an endless siege,
eyeing the beach for some boy to break through.
That bitch Helen, the school turned dogs for her

but still copying my math. My father hectors
the football field, whistle swinging round his neck
like a pendulum, counting down to something

he thinks I can't understand. What I should have known
I did not suspect. The invitation into my life. Into his, this boy,
gleaming from some god-river inside him. That he knew my name

meant happiness could learn it, too. My mother
brushing my hair, burnished like armor. Last-minute, the dress,
the clinging revelation. I leave my glasses off, scent my wrists

and neck. The pinned corsage of ecstatic amaranth
tasseling my breast like my heart's own blooming.
The crowd surrounds. They round their mouths in shock.

My Best Friend's Abuser Takes Her to Court

A private eye serves her papers at work. Outside,
it's all apples and gourds hollowed to haunt. We stab the flesh
until it grins. Our black wings unfurl and everyone asks

what we are. *Vengeance*, I say. *Justice*, she corrects.
He wants her to stop writing about the things he did,
different than wanting to have not done them at all.

We tongue our fangs in whetting,
button up our lady suits. It is not
possible to forget the face of a man

who's made you the door to his urge.
We were not children together, so now I braid
her hair. It takes all night, the married strands

lioning her like the male
whose only job is murder. In court, he says he
is the unnamed darkness she writes of. The women

around him sob, Electras mourning the man and not
the sister he slew. He cries, too, heaving
in a gold-buttoned blazer, claiming his only crime

was loving too much. The hand he raises,
swearing—as if any god
could help him now.

Translated from the Japanese by Stephen Snyder

Yoko Ogawa

The Beaver's Twigs

Almost as soon as the international arrivals door opened, I recognized J among the crowd of people waiting outside for their loved ones. Though we had never met, we spotted each other immediately and smiled across the hall.

"Welcome! It's so kind of you to have come all this way." He pronounced the greeting as though he had practiced it with great care.

"It's a pleasure to meet you. And I want you to know how sorry I was to hear about your father," I said, slowly and deliberately, having practiced myself on the flight, hoping this was the right thing to say.

"Thank you," he said, bowing. He looked at me calmly, with no trace of bashfulness or embarrassment. Then he lifted my suitcase from the luggage cart and carried it to the trunk of his car. He was so tall I had to look up to see his face, which was framed in soft, brown curls. His voice and movements seemed natural and relaxed, and he was more handsome than I had imagined. J had grown into a fine young man.

His father, a professor and translator, had died suddenly last autumn from a cerebral hemorrhage, and now J and his girlfriend were living in his father's house, which was more than an hour's drive from the airport, deep in the woods. We headed northwest on the highway, passing through several small towns. Night fell as we left the main road and followed a river, and the forest grew pitch black around us. Having exhausted our memorized speeches, we seemed at a loss how to continue and sat in silence, looking out at the road unspooling in the headlights. J focused on his driving, apparently having no need to play the radio or chatter to himself to cover our lack of conversation. But from time to time he would show his good manners, asking if I was comfortable or if I was too warm, or urging me to take a nap if I was sleepy. Each phrase also carried with it a note of concern as to whether he was making himself understood.

"I'm fine," I told him. "Very comfortable."

In fact, I was quite comfortable, neither hot nor cold, nor at all sleepy, and so I repeated my reassurances, hoping to make him understand that I could comprehend

at least this much. As we drove along, J and I formed a little fellowship, two people who shared no mutually intelligible language.

The drive felt endless, as though it would continue until we arrived at the far side of the night. But then suddenly the tires seemed to leave hard road and run quietly on soft grass, and the car began to slow. A single point of light appeared in the distance and then grew closer—K, J's girlfriend, had come out of the house carrying a flashlight. She greeted me with great warmth, as though I was the person she had most longed to see in the whole world and had come from the most distant spot on the globe. But sadly, with K, too, I understood barely half the words she spoke to me.

Though we had never met, J's father had translated my work for nearly twenty years. He had paid careful attention to everything I wrote, absorbing each new novel as soon as it came out and producing a steady stream of translations. In all, our names appeared together on the covers of eleven books.

During those years, there had been a number of times when we might have met—at literary festivals or events organized by our publisher—and, in fact, we had arranged meetings on several occasions, only to have them cancelled by some unforeseen circumstance that prevented one or the other of us from attending. Each time we told ourselves that we would look forward to some future meeting, but the months and years went by, and now that meeting would never happen.

Our entire relationship, then, had unfolded through letters. Except for the rare phone call for some urgent matter, everything else, from questions about tricky passages or the plot of my next novel to birthday and Christmas greetings and the most mundane business affairs, had transpired in more than a hundred letters sent between us. He was an excellent correspondent, and when he received a copy of a new book, he was always the first one—before the editor or my most loyal fans—to send along his impressions. Polite, slightly old-fashioned sentences put down in his neat, orderly handwriting, in the blue-black ink of his fountain pen, on monogrammed stationary. Yet there was nothing stuffy or formal about his

letters, which might include a humorous account of some bit of gossip from the publishing world or an incident at his college or a poetic description of the forest where he lived. But the parts I preferred above all else were the long postscripts he invariably included to update me about his son, J.

"Yesterday, we worked all morning in the garden planting carrots. J is clever at separating the good seeds from the bad ones, never missing any that are slightly irregular in shape or color. The seeds are so tiny that I quickly lose patience, but J can keep at it for hours. He fills his palm with enough seeds for an entire row and then scatters them one by one into the furrow, pursing his lips the whole time to avoid blowing away the seeds. Soon, he has a small mound of rejected seeds in his palm. A child's fingers are best suited to this task, planting the smallest of living things that will eventually ripen into our harvest. In the fall, when the maples turn their brilliant colors, perhaps we will see the fruits of our labor. J is particularly fond of a salad made with carrots and raisins."

"Last week, we had a little quarrel, and he ended up not speaking to me. At first, this made me terribly angry, but then I realized how stupid I'd been and hated myself for it. It's at moments like this I realize the genius of the Japanese term "oyabaka"—a parent who is fond of his child to the point of foolishness. This may not be quite the right meaning of "oyabaka," but I was certainly acting the stupid parent. And J, as always, was the one who made me understand my own stupidity. In our silence last week, the only thing that continued to bind us together was my late wife's piano. When I got home from the college, I found that several pages had been turned in the score of Bach's *Goldberg Variations* that I'd left open on the music stand. J had been playing while I was away. The next morning, after he'd gone out skating with a friend, I continued where he'd left off, and then left the page open for him. Together and yet apart, we played through the entire work. But he's already a much better pianist than I'll ever be . . ."

Sometimes, these postscripts were longer than the letters themselves, and it took considerable effort to suppress the urge to skip the main point of his correspondence and read what he'd written about J first.

When J was just seven, the translator lost his wife to cancer, and he had raised his son alone in the years that followed. My correspondence with the

translator had coincided almost exactly with that period, and I had followed J's progress, in those lengthy postscripts, from intelligent, mischievous child, through the "difficult years," and then his departure for art school, up through recent times when he had begun to build a reputation as a young sculptor of some note. As the years went by, I developed the habit of referring to him, purely in my own mind, as "the postscript child" and then "postscript boy" and now "postscript young man."

The letter informing me of the death of the translator was sent by the "postscript young man," though there was no postscript appended to that letter.

In addition to these letters, the translator and I frequently exchanged gifts. A handmade case for reading glasses, a Roman coin picked up on a trip somewhere, a tube of favorite hand lotion—small tokens of our mutual esteem. But among them, the most memorable was certainly the skull of a beaver that he sent me in honor of the publication of the first one of my books he translated.

"I happened upon it while walking in the woods a couple of months ago," he wrote. "The animal must have been dead for quite some time, since the skull was perfectly bleached. Perhaps a fox had carried it away from the beaver pond. At any rate, the rest of the carcass was nowhere to be found—just this skull, half-buried in leaves, laying quietly, deep in the forest. It's not particularly unusual to come across the bones of an animal, but finding this skull on the morning when I had just finished the translation of your book seemed somehow fortuitous, and I found myself picking it up and carrying it home with me. As you know, beavers, despite their small size, are able to fell very large trees. They use the limbs, mounded up with mud, to create their lodges. They are amazingly diligent workers, and I realize I am hoping that, like the beavers, you will go on diligently piling up novels, creating these previously unimagined worlds that you happen upon deep in the forest of your imagination.

"Incidentally, the skull has been treated with a special disinfectant, so it should be free of anything unpleasant."

It had been carefully wrapped in an old blanket. Smaller and lighter than I would have expected—barely big enough to fill my open palm—it was milky white and very smooth to the touch.

The single word "skull" did not reflect the fact that it was, in reality, a complex assemblage of many parts. The various bones and apertures—teeth, jaw, eye sockets, throat, nose—were immediately recognizable for their distinctive roles, and yet they all came together in one graceful shape. Nothing interrupted the unity of the whole, which seemed carefully calculated down to the last millimeter, such that any slight alteration in the angle from which it was viewed changed the expression on the face. Still, it retained a kind of natural purity, quite literally as though it had only just been born from among the fallen leaves.

Perhaps the creature had lived out its normal lifespan. Or perhaps its life had been cut short by some predator. In any event, the teeth were all lined up in the jaw without any gaps. But they were neither large nor fierce for an animal that made its living by gnawing through thick tree trunks. They seemed, in fact, almost disturbingly small and fragile, but with a kind of glassy luster that no doubt reflected endless hours spent chewing, silently, intently, into the heart of the trees.

I immediately found a place for the beaver's skull on the desk where I write, and it has been there ever since. Over time, when working on a story, I have more and more often found myself reaching for the skull to take it in my palm and stroke it with my thumb. Eyes half-closed, I listen for the sounds of tree trunks being gnawed or branches being dragged through the woods or a body gliding stealthily through the water. And I picture to myself the imposing mass of a dam blocking the river. Though I knew nothing about beavers beyond what I'd learned from the translator's letters, I felt I could intuit these sorts of things. Rubbing the beaver's skull became a ritual to calm the chaos of words that confronted me at my desk, a deep breath to remind me that somewhere, in a distant forest, there was someone waiting for my novel.

When I learned of the translator's death, I turned to the skull to offer a prayer. And the hollows that had held the beaver's eyes looked back at me.

The next morning, when I awoke, the darkness, which had concealed everything the night before, had been swept away, revealing the world around me—the green of the trees, the grasses damp with dew, the soil in the fields that had been plowed into soft pillows, clumps of poppies swaying on slender stems. But the thing that surprised me most was the pond that lay just outside my window. The fact that there was such a large body of water so close by made me feel as though it had just gushed from the earth with the rising sun while I had been asleep and oblivious.

The surface of the pond spread out between the main house where J lived and the guest house in which I had been installed. The expanse of jade-green water, bordered by lush grasses and shrubs, was absolutely still, undisturbed by the busy chirping of the birds or the sunlight filtering down through the treetops.

The guest house, which had once served as a tool shed, was simply but comfortably furnished. It had been meticulously cleaned, and the sheets on the bed were freshly starched, suggesting how much care J and K had devoted to welcoming me. When I opened the window, cool, damp air came flowing in, and with it all sorts of sounds from the nearby woods. Yet nothing seemed to disturb the serenity of the pond.

Through the windows of the main house, I could see my hosts going about preparations for breakfast. A round table and chairs had been set out on the terrace in front of the dining room, and the white tablecloth covering it fluttered in the breeze. I washed and dressed quickly and hurried around the edge of the pond. Seeing me coming, K opened the window onto the terrace and waved.

"Did you sleep well? I hope you were comfortable. Breakfast is almost ready," she called. Or I imagined that was what she said, and so I answered as appropriately as I could, that I'd slept well, that there'd been no problem.

We ate freshly baked bread with homemade jam made from raspberries, which, I was told, grew here in abundance. Then we made sandwiches in preparation for a long walk to explore the area.

"You'll need boots," J said. "We had a lot of rain last week." He led me to a storage room and showed me a pair of well-worn, comfortable-looking boots. "I'm sorry, they're quite old. They were my mother's," he said. Next to them, as if snuggling up to the mother's boots, was another smaller, light blue pair. I knew right away that these had belonged to the postscript boy.

The conversation, as we walked, was extremely unbalanced. While J and I struggled, timidly, haltingly, to put together the few words we knew in each other's language, K rattled on merrily, without seeming to care whether what she said was being understood. She apparently believed that it was enough to simply say something, say anything, regardless of the meaning, and so she paid no attention even when my responses had nothing to do with her questions.

But somehow, as we walked along in a line, I seemed to get the hang of talking with her. I found I was increasingly able to abandon myself to K's enthusiasm, and rather than worrying about the sense of what she was saying, I could simply smile and nod in response. It was all K's doing. She was somewhat older than J and worked as a nurse in a nearby children's hospital. I could imagine that she used the same cheery, chatty attitude with the children who were too young or too sick to hold up their side of a conversation.

The main house was made of stone and solidly built. Around back, on the east side, was the vegetable garden where the translator had worked until the morning of the day he died, and this garden itself was one of the reasons that J, who had been living in town, returned here after the funeral. He had been unwilling to abandon the earth that had been fertilized and cultivated for so many years.

The summer vegetables were just coming to their peak. Tomatoes, zucchini, eggplants, peppers, shiso, corn, watermelons. . . Though I could make out the varieties easily enough, J named them one by one, with more than a little pride in his voice. Each vegetable had been given the appropriate care, some carefully staked, others covered with cheesecloth. The rows were perfectly straight, the spacing between plants exactly even, and the sun shone down on each ripening fruit like a blessing.

"And those?" I asked, suddenly noticing a patch of ground covered in fresh, new shoots.

"Carrots," J answered, and then K launched into some sort of explanation, which I gathered involved the best way to grow this particular vegetable.

Recalling the letter in which the translator had boasted about J's ability to distinguish good carrot seeds from bad, I glanced at his hands. They were suntanned and sturdy, the hands a young sculptor would use to bring his creations to life, and yet they still bore the memory of the time when they had held the tiny seeds, and the young boy had held his breath, patiently sorting each one. Looking up at the two of them, I felt sure that K was as proud of his gift for cultivating carrots as his father had once been.

Next, I was given a tour of the recently remodeled barn that was now J's studio, and from there we followed a lane lined with cypress trees that led us on a long walk deep into the woods. We came upon a grove of larch trees, a spring, and then a slope in a clearing that was covered in clover. Rabbits looked up as we passed a lush bed of ferns, and we caught glimpses of brightly colored butterflies fluttering among the trees. A winding stream crossed our path from time to time, and we could see fish swimming below the surface. And all the while, somewhere high above, birds were singing. The day was clear, and the sun was bright, but the light under the trees was filtered and soft. When we grew tired, we found a spot to sit down and drank iced tea from a thermos. At noon, we ate our sandwiches under an elm tree at the top of a hill.

As J had predicted, the boots proved to be a good decision. In places where the sun did not reach, there were numerous puddles and muddy patches. His mother's boots were broken in and comfortable, and their rubber soles made a pleasant squishing sound as I padded along.

We passed the time as we walked chatting about our work, about our favorite film actors and recipes. As usual, K made a point of covering any awkward silences that arose between J and me. Her voice was light and clear, and even when the meaning was lost, it echoed pleasantly through the woods like the songs of the birds.

I'm not sure why, but the translator was never mentioned in our conversation. He was, of course, the thing that bound us together, but somehow we behaved as though we had completely forgotten about him. We had come, it seemed, to an

unspoken agreement that while we were on our walk, we preferred to fill ourselves with nothing other than the forest.

When we arrived home, K suggested that we take a swim in the pond.

"Can we really swim in it?" I asked.

"Yes, the health department comes to test the water every year, and it's very clean." J had noticed my hesitation and hurried to reassure me. But I hadn't brought a swimsuit, I persisted, and I wasn't really a very good swimmer—but K, in response to my objections, simply brought out one of her own suits and urged it on me. It was orange and shiny and obviously too flashy for me, but seeing how anxious they were for a swim and not wanting to disappoint them, I put it on.

Making my way down the stone steps at the edge of the pond, I submerged my feet in the water, which was as bone-chilling as I'd imagined. J and K, who were used to the pond, swam off toward the center, diving to the bottom or stopping to splash one another. I stayed close to the edge, walking gingerly and testing the depth, wanting something to grab onto if I started to sink. The bottom was rough, and it scraped the soles of my feet.

"Come on out," K called. "Don't worry, you can stand."

Once she was in the water, she seemed even more animated. Her face and hair, even the drops splashing from her fingertips, sparkled in the light reflected from the surface of the pond. Swimming up and putting his arm around her shoulder, J looked toward me and smiled. Each time the wind rustled the branches of the mimosa trees that hung over the water, the light shifted, dying the ripples that spread out from our bodies a rainbow of colors. My young friends stood waist-deep in a halo of shimmering light.

Screwing up my courage, I lowered my face into the water. As I did, the opaque green surface opened up, and a limpid world appeared below. Tiny particles drifted in front of my eyes, grains of sand or slivers from branches or perhaps even microscopic creatures. But the water was clear, and rays of sunlight filtering through the branches above danced on the sandy bottom.

I headed out toward J and K. Using my somewhat unconventional breaststroke, I swam through the floating particles, kicking among the rays of light.

"That's it! Well done!" I could hear K calling over the sound of my splashes. Forgetting the cold and my fear, forgetting even why I had come to this place, I swam in the direction of the voice.

"Shall we go upstairs?"

J made this proposal once we had finished our swim, changed, and had something to drink on the terrace. "I'd like you to see my father's study," he added.

At some point the sun had begun tipping toward the west, and the pond, which had until just a moment ago been flooded with light, was now half-darkened by the shade of the mimosas.

"I'd like that," I said. As if that were her cue, K stood up, gathered the cups from the table, and headed toward the kitchen to start working on dinner.

J led me up to a room at the top of the stairs and opened a heavy door made of walnut wood. The translator's study.

The room seemed so full of life and energy that it was hard to imagine it was the workplace of someone who had died. A well-used desk, a wall of bookshelves, a couch, an old stereo system, a side table that held a chess set and a box of chocolates, assorted chairs, an exotically patterned rug, a group of framed photographs on a chest of drawers, and the piano that the translator had mentioned in his letters. Everything was carefully arranged, and the room felt spacious and welcoming. Soft light announcing the approach of evening poured in through the windows on the north and east sides, but shadows had begun to collect between the beams on the ceiling and under the piano. Given the translator's personality, it was no surprise to find that the books and papers and record albums were all neatly arranged, but here and there I detected traces of the human being lingering in the room. The pieces on the chessboard seem to have been abandoned in the middle of a game, a blanket had been discarded in a ball on the couch, and, of course, sheet music lay open on the music stand.

At J's urging, I made my way slowly around the room. One section of the bookshelf held a number of my novels, and, though they occupied only a small portion of his much larger collection, there they were, clear evidence of the work that the translator and I had done together.

There was a chill in the air from the stone walls, and the floor creaked as I walked. The chirping of the birds had died away at some point, leaving only the faint sounds of K working in the kitchen. I made my tour of the room, seeing everything there was to see, listening to the stillness, reaching out to rest my hand on a photograph of the translator's wife holding baby J. Finally, I went and stood in front of the desk.

"My father was an early riser," J said. "He would be up before dawn most days working on his translating."

The garden was visible through the window to the east, and suddenly I pictured him sitting here, staring out at the vegetables as they took on the glow of the rising sun. There was work on the desk that he must have left unfinished when he died. A book that lay open, filled with slips of paper and notes in the margins, seemed almost to have retained his body heat. Words scrawled across the pages of a notebook, dictionaries waiting their turn to be used. From the fading of the leather chair and the depression in the cushion, it was easy to imagine the long hours he had spent sitting here.

Suddenly, I noticed a small drafting board that had been set at one corner of the desk, and on it lay a scattering of twigs of various shapes.

"These were what he used when he was translating," J said, taking one of them in his hand. On closer examination, it was clear that they weren't ordinary twigs but ones that had been completely stripped of their bark, worn smooth as ivory. "They've been gnawed by the beavers," J added.

"Beavers?" I echoed.

"They do an amazing job with the bark," he said, rubbing the twig he held in his hand. "When my father was starting a new translation, he would go for a walk in the woods and just think about the story. When he found one of these twigs, he would pick it up and put it in his pocket, as though he was gathering up the characters one by one."

J glanced at me as if to ask whether I'd understood, and I nodded to make it clear I had.

"He'd lay them out on this board, and then he'd form a picture of the world of the novel. When the scene changed, he'd move the twigs around. That's how he translated."

J handed me the twig. There was a small bump on one side, and it was divided in two at the end. The milk-white, unblemished surface was so smooth, it made me want to fold my palm around it. Though it was no more than a small piece of dried wood, the beavers' diligence had transformed it into something that appeared to be a completely different life form.

I thought of the beaver's skull that sat on my own desk, and of the translator who had relied on these twigs as he made his extraordinary journey, replacing one language with another, character by character, letter by letter. I returned the twig to the drafting board, being careful to place it exactly where it had been.

The sun had set, and the forest had faded into the darkness. The light remaining in the western sky had taken on the color of night, and J's studio, visible through the window to the north, was now a dim mass.

"I wonder if I could ask a favor?" I said. "Would you mind playing the piano?"

J nodded, sat down, and, with barely a glance at the sheet music in front of him, began to play in the most natural way, as though simply picking up from where he had left off. It was Bach. The *Goldberg Variations*, Number 25.

The melody floated in the twilight, surrounding us, slowly filling the room, and all the translator's possessions, his books and chessboard and twigs, seemed to be listening quietly. The fingers that had so effortlessly sorted the carrot seeds moved over the keyboard with equal grace. Shadows from the curls that fell about J's face made his expression difficult to read, but there was unmistakable dignity and clarity in his eyes as he searched the score for traces of his mother and father. The feet that worked the pedals still wore the boots from our walk.

He played through Variation 26 and then 27, and when he finished, he stood up. I clapped, and he gave an awkward little bow, and then he shut the lid on the keyboard, leaving the score for Variation 28 open on the piano.

That night, before going to bed, I went for another swim in the pond. The moon was full, and a light was shining from the porch, so my eyes adjusted quickly to the darkness. From the glow behind the curtains in one of the upstairs rooms, I could tell that J and K were still awake.

The water was colder than it had been in the afternoon, and it seemed to cling more closely to my skin, as though it had somehow been thickened by the dark dissolving into it. Even when I plunged my face below the surface and peered intently, I couldn't see anything. I stayed close to the edge, swimming slowly and quietly, but my splashing still seemed to echo across the pond. As if in response, the wind fluttered through the leaves of the mimosas, and from deep in the woods came a constant droning, the distant howl of some animal or the trees stirring.

When I'd gone nearly halfway around the pond, I suddenly felt a movement in the water and sensed a small body pass close by me. I caught a glimpse of it out of the corner of my eye, and then it glided calmly out toward the center of the pond. As it did, the ripples on the surface subsided, and the water grew still.

"Beaver," I murmured, but my voice died away, absorbed into the depths. I took hold of a mimosa branch and let my feet come to rest on the bottom. As I did, I felt something under the sole of one foot and reached down to retrieve it. Holding it up, I could see it was one of the beaver's twigs, glowing smooth and lustrous in the moonlight.

The twig sits on my desk now, next to the skull. When I am seated with an unfinished manuscript in front of me, preparing to reread what I've written the day before, waiting for my breathing to calm, or, in the middle of the night, when everyone else is asleep and I find myself sighing, unable to imagine the way forward, I look over at the beaver. I place the twig on my palm and sit quietly for a moment, and when I do, those distant woods I once visited come back to me.

The translator is up before dawn, examining a single sentence, dismantling it and putting it back together, reimagining it in a new form. He consults his dictionaries again and again, takes countless notes, and as the scenes change, he

rearranges the twigs on the drafting board. Through the window, he can see the vegetables damp with dew, waiting impatiently for the morning sun. In his studio, J is carving, working away with his chisel exactly like a beaver, to bring out the form hidden in the wood. When evening comes, he returns to the house and, still in his boots, sits down in front of his mother's piano to play the next *Goldberg* variation. Before long, K calls to say that dinner is ready. Though she may have spent the day caring for sick children, her voice is cheerful and full of affection.

Somewhere in the woods, the beavers are grappling with the trees they need to make their lodge. They gnaw away at the thick trunks with their meager teeth, with never the slightest thought of giving up. Suddenly, the moment comes, and a tree falls. The sound reverberates through the forest, but no one is there to appreciate their accomplishment, and the beavers continue with their labors.

All these souls rise up before my eyes, the man I will never meet, the people I will probably never see again in this life, the animal I know only through these bones. We all have our own work to do. I put the twig back in its place and continue with my story.

Nathaniel Mackey

Song of the Andoumboulou: 248

We the uprooted wandered on, the unreal estate
we were relegated to. Was it we's romance,
over time, wasn't enough we scratched our heads
won-
dering, scratched our synaptic circuitry, all but
ripped it out it seemed. Was it the other, over time,
drew romance's rebuke we the uprooted stood
ask-
ing, throats raw, phlegm tamping down our
tongues… "On these we stand," we'd have said
had it been poetry. We'd have said, "This is our
music," had it been music. What to say, what to
say,
we pounded the heels of our hands together ask-
ing, the hypothetical chorus we'd become at
a loss for words. "An affront to love," we said at
last,
speaking of polis, all but cliché we could see
but it fit, Nub's ongoing disgrace… We thought may-
be it must've been music, the escorting horns at our
backs
again, a long, slow, drawn-out waltz. A trumpet
stood out, so looted for sound we almost wept, it was
taps it played we could've sworn. It made a case
against the piano's right-hand chime but complied as
well,
toll nothing it would have to do with but did, toll-
ing for all who heard and who didn't hear. We
thought maybe it must've been the offshore horns, a

sad fanfare if not taps. "Never all there," they kept
re-
peating or those were the words we put in their
mouths. We the uprooted went on wandering, tongue
tip and lip a kind of meat we let sweeten, true to
our
bodily wood's recruitment, we soldiered on as the
horns blew. It was the soul's night out, nothing less,
no "post-," ourselves ransacked for sound… It wasn't
we
didn't all know what was coming. We looked loving-
ly at our watches knowing the dead don't wear them,
we were still alive. We were way past the Chattahoo-
chee, we came to many an anonymous river that more
than
speaking spoke dialect, a thick slang we got mud all
over us from… A new condition it was we'd come to
Anuncio proclaimed, come to or been come to by, con-
ditionality itself, he went so far as to say, a "baptismal
hap-
ticity" he called it. Another last love song welled up
for the singing, he told us, punning, a *last* as in *last-*
ing he played and put his hopes on, no song his last
but
lasting. So it seemed to him at least, he whose head,
rollaway horn, blown-over hollow, we'd gone inside…
Otherwise we heard ducks not far away, a symphony of
elat-
ed complaint. This was a place we will have been while
alive it seemed it said, seeming say we cocked our ears
to hear more clearly. What say lay below the quacking lay
so

deep it hurt, seeming say's eschatological way with us
wielded like a hook. What to say, what to say, we were
pounding the heels of our hands together asking, say taken
down so deeply, say turned in on itself. Not since Quag had
we
felt so bereft, Nub's reversion to its worst a daily attack,
the comb-over coup. We patted the heels of our hands
together, something we'd heard Muddy sing about, patted,
what
to say, what to
do

We carried it in our heads, the boughs, the leaves,
the needles, the carpeted forest floor, ourselves
escorted out, antlers they might've been. The long
song
preceded us, out from inside, asking what but traps
bodies were. There was never a bent note not heaven's
arrow, never not the pitch of it, down though it slid,
an
inconsequent phlegm the waning of romance Anun-
cio sang… A kind of contagion it'd been but it
relented, Anuncio's confounding of Anuncia with
Ahdja,
the two-headed mambo they'd been. What loomed
and lay upon us cut differently, a coming something
that would not be Nub, not New Not Yet, loomed and
oth-
erwise lay upon us. We were tramping to make heaven
home, home heaven, the bent notes' testament the
word we went by, a kind of refuge in the elsewhere they
were,
pilgrims of sorrow we
were

•

We carried it in our heads, the boughs, the leaves,
the needles, the carpeted forest floor, ourselves
escorted out, antlers they might've been. The long
song
preceded us, out from inside, asking what but traps
bodies were. There was never a bent note not heaven's
arrow, never not the pitch of it, down though it slid,
an
inconsequent phlegm the waning of romance Anun-
cio sang… A kind of contagion it'd been but it
relented, Anuncio's confounding of Anuncia with
Ahdja,
the two-headed mambo they'd been. He was be-
yond all that now, he said, love's or song's last-
ness or lastingness, no sooner said than we rode with
it,
something seen in a face, something subject to hold,
have, grabbed at, gone… What loomed and lay upon
us cut differently, a coming something that would not
be
Nub, not New Not Yet, loomed and otherwise lay
upon us. We were tramping to make heaven home,
home heaven, the bent notes' testament the word we
went
by, a kind of refuge in the elsewhere they were, pilgrims
of sorrow we were… Anuncia, we found out, had said,
"Let's die now," resonant of Nub's national romance,
Ah-

dja's thought of leaving her body, the end of the world
more likely than decapitism's end, thanatologic after-
glow. Phlegm sequed into pilgrim, a logic recondite
but
for the sound or the face of it, some something at
the loin level grabbed like property, Nub's necropolitan
advance a pall over all of us, what-to-say's incum-
bent rebuff… We were dreaming it all would have been
only
a bad dream when we awoke, away from exactly which
we were off like fugitives, love's prolongation the point of
our
run

There was an inward pearl, a certain inward pearl we
made what went on outside pay. A seeming so, a cer-
tain say, deep into *The Book of So* we went, this was
                                                our
journey now… Set out to pry so from seeming, the
book we made being there from making book on be-
ing there, no bet would accrue to guessing this or that.
                                                All
had been thrown up for grabs otherwise, thus exactly it
was. We heard it receding, oud-lit hearth and hollow
that would not be come abreast of again… We came up
                                                with
answers, what to say, what to do… We wept without
water to cry with. Harps of David hung from trees, bending
                                                the
boughs

We had the news on the tol'you, no music on the box,
supping our daily fare of abuse. Annals of the Udhrite
school repurposed, we were those who when watching
die.
Talk of a tax plan, the Klan, Russia, another school
shooting. We were leaving sooner or later, said the an-
chor, face too large for his head, said without saying it
it seemed… The cooks in the kitchen wore baseball caps,
went
on cooking, their message was we'd get by. They were
auguring exit from the world of difference, indifferent,
ada-
mant, unbeknownst or
not

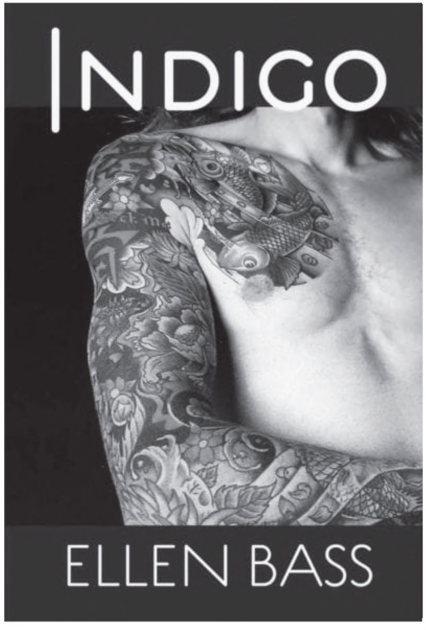
Reviews & Interviews

Chelsea B. DesAutels

"That Sudden Rush of the World": A Review of Ellen Bass's *Indigo* (Copper Canyon Press)

It is no small mercy to have Ellen Bass's *Indigo* in hand this morning, as I watch the sun rise against the stucco of the small Tudor homes across the street, causing the still-brown hydrangeas in the neighbor's front yard to throw leggy shadows across their door. On my own stoop, a loaf of freshly baked bread steams. I've left it for a friend. When she arrives, because it is unsafe to touch each other, we'll wave through the window. In a season marked by absence, what can we lean on but these brief gestures?

"Tell me a story," Bass's epitaph reads, taken from Robert Penn Warren's poem by the same title, "In this century, and moment, of mania / Tell me a story." And, indeed, Bass gifts us story. In that sense, the poems serve as an offering, a promise kept: each poem extends grace to the speaker and to us, the readers—all of us flawed and aging, all of us worthy of the speaker's unflinching candor. In their clarity, in their precise metaphors—"[i]t binds us tight / as the fur of a rabbit to the rabbit" the speaker says of loving her ill wife—and in their uncanny ability to "look up / at the yellowed leaves of the apple tree" after every "[d]esolation," *Indigo* peels away the blur of daily life and sharpens the reasons we try to stay alive: to trace each other's skin, to remember the way our mother put on our socks, to feed the dog a fried fish, and to smell the apricot jam boiling on the stove.



Indigo attends to the beauty in the domestic. Vegetables, pork chops, bedrooms, sex, a son

brushing his teeth—these images vibrate through the collection, both in the present and in recollection. "When she was breaking apart, our son was falling in love," the speaker explains, then "gr[ows] selfish," wanting her son to visit despite the pain it will cause him. Loving fully and without pretense is no easy task. "Everything you do will cause / harm," the speaker says to herself, "so I start forgiving myself now."

Candid interjections, short associative leaps, and direct questions propel the poems. For example, consider these lines from "Sink Your Fingers into the Darkness of My Fur":

> This is our life, love. Why did I think
> it would be anything less than too much
> of everything? I know you remember that cheap motel
> on the coast where we drank red wine,
> the sea flashing its gold scales as sun
> soaked our skin. You said, This must be
> what people mean when they say
> I could die now.

Another hallmark of the collection is Bass's exactitude. Through her management of language, sound, pacing, and lineation, Bass lays bare whole emotions—multifaceted, annihilating, and unmistakable. Here is the poem "On My Father's Illness" in its entirety:

> My mother told me sometimes
> she wished she could be like the other
> wives, sit in the passenger seat,
> pull down the little mirror in the visor
> and put on her lipstick.

Bass requires only five lines to compose a forceful account of caring for a sick loved one.

Indigo is bighearted and bursting with acuity. We are lucky to have this collection. And we are lucky to have Bass, who journeyed "without a chance to grab even / an orange or comb [her] hair," to remind us, "You may have to break / your heart, but it isn't nothing / to know even one moment alive." Like the "leafy vines and blossoms" on the father's sleeve tattoo in the title poem, *Indigo* is both wrought and proliferating. These poems fill today's absences.

Matt Bizzell

Completely Incomplete: A Review of Teresa Milbrodt's *Instances of Head-Switching* (Shade Mountain Press)

Teresa Milbrodt's short story collection, *Instances of Head-Switching*, is a wonderfully provoking exploration of the real through the genre tools of fantasy. And while many might be tempted to call the collection genre fiction for its use of those tools, I find myself resisting that classification. Instead, I see Milbrodt's work as occupying a valuable space within literary fiction—with the emphatic nuance of an Amy Bender or Brian Evenson—as a work that selectively employs genre mainstays like monsters and supernatural situations to confront our own reality, one that is unremittingly hostile to us.



Where too much fiction of this kind relies on a quirky upset of well-known parables and fairy tales, Milbrodt drags these stories into the modern experience by pulling them apart and sifting out the truths that they themselves did not know they were hiding. In *Instances*, the entrenched parables and fairy tales of our collective childhood (think Snow White or even Superman) have been exploded to accommodate the demands of psychological realism, and this close press of fantasy manifests as a result of Milbrodt's engagement with both embodiment and disability—the true strength of the collection.

Too often, we see the false dichotomy of ability–disability expressed feebly or half-heartedly in fiction: disabled characters see the world through

a unique lens, or the trials and tribulations of their plot "rewards" them with new ableness that allows them the blandness of regular society—both of which are cop-outs. In *Instances*, Milbrodt acknowledges that all of us fail that high bar of ability. We are, each of us, disabled—and that notion is ultimately a powerful one, because it recognizes the difficulty of subsisting in a modern world no matter what labels have been arbitrarily affixed to you.

In the first story of her collection, "The Monsters' War," Milbrodt introduces the reader to her hybrid accounting of fantasy and disability. An invasion of monsters leads to a collapse of infrastructure, which, in turn, erodes the economy and government. With this comes the widespread loss of life, but not in the way one might expect from a story rooted in the operational logic of a fairy tale. Rather than death at the amorphous and inevitably clawed hands of monsters, Milbrodt illustrates our own modern precarity; death comes as the result of logistical disruption (a too-real notion in the times of the COVID-19 isolation).

The author clues the reader into this notion early, as the "monsters killed many through lack" (2). Like the crumbling of our silent systems of infrastructure in our world, the monsters eat away at "power lines, sanitation plants, grocery stores, whole city blocks—and destroyed the rest." This encompassing, terrorist consumption deprives the world of the story not only of those systems built from ingenuity and the slow advance of human technology but also the people that rely on those systems:

> Marcus lost both of his parents. They didn't die in the war, they weren't killed by monsters, but they suffered from shortages. Both of them were in their late sixties but rather frail—his mom had kidney problems, his dad was diabetic, they needed medications. Maybe an infection took them, or the heat, but they lived far south of us where there was no electricity or clean water for weeks. It could have been anything that did it, but they shouldn't have died. (1–2)

That looming phrase, "it could have been anything," dominates the passage, the story, and indeed, the collection, because precarity of any kind—financial,

mental, emotional—is a horror, one that mutates from the banal, fairy tale threat of monsters and becomes something far more threatening.

Milbrodt's protagonists within "The Monsters' War" defy entrenched definitions of ableness, too: The unnamed narrator's poor vision allows her a brief reprieve from the horrid world, as "[t]here wasn't much outside that [she] wanted to see clearly" (1). And this is true too for Marcus, whose desire for "the world to be quiet for a while" is made possible by his poor hearing. Both characters have corrective technology for their apparent disabilities (eyeglasses and hearing aids), but it is actually through their mutual connection—and their connection with still others our own world labels as disabled—that both strength and resilience can be found. Though our protagonists are overlooked as candidates for the human resistance, their selective strengths fit together like puzzle pieces and allow them to continue in the face of dehumanizing forces. And that seems to be what Milbrodt wants the reader to walk away with from this story: a dismembering of self—literal through neighbor Quinn's missing left foot, Jones' length-mismatched legs, or Marcus' hearing loss—is an education in a protective fragmenting of self and an imperative for community that eschews typical definitions (and resulting exclusions) of ability.

As the narrator concludes, "You should not keep your heart all in one place" (9) in an effort to protect against the horror and trauma of a hostile world, but you should also strive to find wholeness in those other fragmented selves around you. At the end of the story, the fact that the narrator is unable to locate a lesson through all the chaos and destruction that has surrounded her life after the monsters does not lessen the impact of Milbrodt's injunction. Instead, it strengthens it, allowing the reader to view the pieces, the fragments of self, from altitude and take the interdependence of the characters as virtue rather than as disabled individuals leaning on one another like so many crutches.

"Body Spirits" is another story that Milbrodt uses to extend her discussion of bodily wholeness and its diverse effects. The story posits a world in which everyone's limitations, illnesses, and disabilities are both visible and sentient. Our narrator's arthritis is perpetuated by a witch who sticks pins in her body, causing debilitating pain. However, these supernatural entities that seek to

limit also provide necessary constraint. As the arthritis witch tells the narrator, "You'd never stop working if it weren't for me" (45), she is a "pain that makes [her] reflective" (48). The pain works in a protective capacity, something that preserves the sufferer.

After setting up the initial agonism between the painful presence of the body sprits and their utility as limiters, Milbrodt introduces the narrator's boyfriend's seizure elf, a being who causes the boyfriend life-threatening seizures—seizures that also motivate innovation in his job as a photographer. The difference between the narrator and her boyfriend is that the narrator wants to be free of her body spirit; the boyfriend, though, embraces it. The action of the story leads the narrator to covertly administer seizure medication to her boyfriend, medication that robs him of his photographic insight and makes him debilitatingly sick. And though the narrator is staunch in her belief that "this is a cure, not poison" (52), she begins to question the seeming ultimatum that the situation has presented: "I can let him be sick, or I can let him tremble" (52).

Ultimately, she relents in her treatment and resolves to be by her boyfriend's side as the seizure elf does his ambivalent work. And unlike our narrator in "The Monsters' War," this narrator comes out of the story with a lesson, "a reminder of how often being in a body is equal parts pleasure and negotiation" (52). In an inversion of the story's set-up, the narrator chooses to recognize the value of embodiment despite its necessary capacity for pain and limitation.

Rather than search for an impossible balance that society has named "normal," she opts for the ongoing give-and-take of disability and the selective gifts that it offers. In this lesson, we, the readers, find hope in the chronic "disability" that our society registers. Though we are infirmed by our physical limitations, made timid by anxiety, slowed by depression, and scattered by emotional volatility and limited attention spans, we are real and normal and allowed to falter in this scary world. We have been given permission for community instead of isolation—for acceptance of ourselves and the people like us despite their difference in ability—in order to continue to survive in this world that looks to divide and dissolve.

Erin Adair-Hodges is the author of *Let's All Die Happy*, winner of the Agnes Lynch Starrett Poetry Prize. Recipient of *The Sewanee Review*'s Allen Tate Prize and the Loraine Williams Prize from *The Georgia Review*, her work has been featured in such places as PBS NewsHour, *Kenyon Review*, *Ploughshares*, *Prairie Schooner*, *The Rumpus,* and more. Born and raised in New Mexico, she is now an assistant professor of creative writing at the University of Central Missouri and the co-editor for *Pleiades*.

Rosa Alcalá is the author of three books of poetry, most recently *MyOTHER TONGUE* (Futurepoem, 2017). Her poems appear in numerous anthologies and journals, including *Best American Poetry 2019*, *American Poets in the 21st Century*: *Poetics of Social Engagement*, *The Nation*, and *The American Poetry Review*. The recipient of a National Endowment for the Arts Translation Fellowship, and runner-up for a PEN Translation Award, she is the editor and co-translator of *New & Selected Poems of Cecilia Vicuña* (Kelsey Street Press, 2018). She is professor of creative writing at the University of Texas at El Paso, where she teaches in its Bilingual MFA Program.

Matt Bizzell is a recent Reviews and Interviews Editor for *Gulf Coast* as well as a PhD Candidate in the English department at the University of Houston. He is the host of two podcasts: *There Will Be Spoilers: 100 Films*, *100 Podcasts* and *Read Before Dead*.

Sophie Cabot Black has three poetry collections from Graywolf Press: *The Misunderstanding of Nature*, which received the Poetry Society of America's First Book Award; *The Descent*, which received the 2005 Connecticut Book Award; and most recently, *The Exchange*. Her poetry has appeared in numerous magazines, including *The Atlantic Monthly*, *The New Republic*, *The New Yorker*, and *The Paris Review*. She has taught at Columbia University and at the 92nd St Y in New York, and currently at the Fine Arts Work Center in Provincetown.

Micaela Bombard is a poet and teacher. Her work has been nominated for the Pushcart Prize and has appeared in *Fourteen Hills*, *Four Way Review*, *The Anthology of New England Writers*, *Health Affairs*, *Intima: A Journal of Narrative Medicine*, *decomP MagazinE*, and others. She holds an MFA in Poetry from Sarah Lawrence College and an MS in Narrative Medicine from Columbia University. She is currently a PhD student and teaching fellow in Creative Writing at the University of Missouri, Columbia.

Diedrick Brackens (b. 1989, Mexia, TX, lives and works in Los Angeles, CA) received a BFA from University of North Texas, Denton, TX and an MFA in textiles from California College of the Arts, Oakland, CA. He is an Assistant Professor and Program Head of the Fiber Department at California State University, Long Beach. His work has been shown in solo exhibitions at New Museum, New York, NY; Various Small Fires, Los Angeles, CA; Ulrich Museum of Art, Wichita, KS; and Johansson Projects, Oakland, CA. Brackens's work is in the permanent collections of the Hammer Museum, Los Angeles, CA; the Los Angeles County Museum of Art; the Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles, CA; the Brooklyn Museum, NY; the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, TX; the New Orleans Museum of Art, LA; and the Oakland Museum of California, CA. Brackens is represented by Various Small Fires, Los Angeles/Seoul and Jack Shainman Gallery, New York, NY.

Gemma de Choisy lives in Iowa City, IA.

Leyla Çolpan is the co-creator of *What Passes & What Passes Through* (Ghost City Press, 2020), a chapbook of poetry and visual art with artist Sasha Barile. Ze was an inaugural Creative Arts Fellow at the University of Pittsburgh, where hir work was awarded an Academy of American Poets Undergraduate Prize in 2019. Hir poetry appears recently in *The Adroit Journal* and *Homology Lit*, and hir nonfiction has appeared in *Columbia Journal*.

Dorsey Craft's debut collection, *Plunder*, won the 2019 May Sarton New Hampshire Poetry Prize. She is also the author of a chapbook, *The Pirate Anne Bonny Dances the Tarantella*. Her work has appeared in *Alaska Quarterly Review*, *Colorado Review*, *Massachusetts Review*, *Salt Hill*, *Southern Indiana Review*, and elsewhere. She lives in Lake City, Florida and serves as a poetry editor at *Southeast Review*.

Chelsea B. DesAutels's work appears in *Ploughshares*, *The Missouri Review*, *Copper Nickel*, *The Massachusetts Review*, *The Adroit Journal*, *Pleiades*, *Ninth Letter*, and elsewhere. Chelsea earned an MFA from the University of Houston, where she received the Inprint Verlaine Prize in Poetry and served as Poetry Editor of *Gulf Coast*. She lives with her family in Minneapolis.

Francisco González lives in East Los Angeles. His work appears or is forthcoming in *Arts & Letters*, *The Southern Review*, *ZYZZYVA*, and elsewhere.

Kate Green, Ph.D., is a curator, art historian, and critic living in El Paso, Texas, who has held positions at Artpace, El Paso Museum of Art, Marfa Contemporary, and MoMA PS1, and published criticism in *Art in America*, *Artforum*, and *Frieze*. Recent exhibition and writing projects have involved artists Andrea Bowers, William Cordova, Teresa Margolles, and Autumn Knight, and she is working on an exhibition and book project with Juárez-based artists Oscar Gardea and Guillermo Ramirez for the Rubin Center for Visual Art at the University of Texas at El Paso, examining the effects—on people, land—of asymmetrical power relations along the United States/Mexico border region.

Tariq al Haydar's work has appeared in *The Threepenny Review*, *Crab Orchard Review*, *North American Review*, *DIAGRAM*, and others, and his nonfiction was named as "Notable" in The Best American Essays 2016. He is an assistant professor of English at King Saud University in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia.

Stephanie Horvath's poetry has appeared or is forthcoming in *Bennington Review*, *Denver Quarterly*, *32 Poems*, and other journals.

Fumi Ishino (b. Hyogo, Japan) holds an MFA from Yale University where he was awarded the Toby Devan Lewis Fellowship. He is currently living and working in Los Angeles. His work has been exhibited at Houston Center for Photography, Peppers Art Center (University of Redlands), The Flag Art Foundation, Fraenkel Gallery, and Tokyo Photographic Art Museum. Awards include the Japan Photo Award, 2015, and the Honorable Mention Award from New Cosmos of Photography, 2015. His first book, *rowing a tetrapod*, was published by MACK in 2017.

Alex Jen is a writer and curator based in Chicago. Currently, he works in the director's office at The Art Institute of Chicago.

Jared Joseph is boring.

Autumn Knight is a Texas born, Harlem, New York based interdisciplinary artist working with performance, installation, video, and text. She recently completed a performance/video residency (2020) with The Kitchen, a center for art, video, music, dance, performance, film and literature in New York City.

Ananda Lima's work has appeared in *The American Poetry Review*, *Poets.org*, *Kenyon Review Online*, *Colorado Review*, and elsewhere. She has an MA in Linguistics from UCLA and an MFA in Creative Writing (Fiction) from Rutgers University, Newark. Her poetry chapbook, *Translation* (Paper Nautilus, 2019), won the Vella Chapbook Contest.

Lisa Low was born and raised in Maryland. Her poems have appeared in *Entropy*, *Cream City Review*, *The Journal*, *Vinyl*, *The Collagist*, and elsewhere. A graduate of Indiana University's MFA program, she is a PhD candidate and Yates Fellow at the University of Cincinnati. For more, visit lisa-low.com.

Nathaniel Mackey's most recent book of poetry is *Blue Fasa* (New Directions, 2015). Forthcoming from New Directions in 2021 is *Double Trio*, a three-book set, from which the poem in this issue is taken.

Campbell McGrath is the author of eleven books of poetry, including *Spring Comes to Chicago*, *Florida Poems*, *XX: Poems for the Twentieth Century*, and most recently *Nouns & Verbs: New and Selected Poems* (Ecco Press, 2018). His awards include the Kingsley Tufts Award, a Guggenheim Fellowship, a MacArthur Fellowship, a USA Knight Fellowship, and a Witter-Bynner Fellowship from the Library of Congress. His poetry has appeared in *The New Yorker*, *Harper's*, *The Atlantic*, and on the op-ed page of the *New York Times*, as well as in scores of literary reviews and quarterlies. Born in Chicago, he lives with his family in Miami Beach and teaches at Florida International University, where he is the Philip and Patricia Frost Professor of Creative Writing.

Jonathan McGregor's creative work has appeared or is forthcoming in publications including *Image Journal*, *Ruminate Magazine*, *Dappled Things*, *The Spectacle*, and *Atticus Review*. He teaches writing and literature at Newberry College in South Carolina and is a poetry editor for *War, Literature & the Arts*.

Patrick Milian lives in Seattle and is a member of the English faculty at Green River College. He is the author of the chapbook P*ornographies* (Greying Ghost 2018) as well as poems that have appeared in *POETRY*, *Denver Quarterly*, *Mid-American Review*, and elsewhere. His first book, *The Unquiet Country*, is forthcoming from Entre Ríos Books.

Matt W. Miller is the author of *The Wounded for the Water*, *Club Icarus*, winner of the 2012 Vassar Miller Poetry Prize; and *Cameo Diner*. His newest collection, *Tender the River*, will be published by Texas Review Press in 2021. He lives with his family in coastal New Hampshire.

Rusty Morrison is co-publisher of Omnidawn (www.omnidawn.com) & her five books include *After Urgency* (won Tupelo's Dorset Prize) & *the true keeps calm biding its story* (won Ahsahta's Sawtooth Prize, James Laughlin Award, N.California Book Award, & DiCastagnola Award). Her recent *Beyond the Chainlink* was a finalist for the NCIB Award & NCB Award). She is a recipient of a Civitella Ranieri fellowship, and a recipient of other artist retreat fellowships. She's currently a fellow, awarded by UC Berkeley Art Research Center's Poetry & the Senses Program. She teaches and she gives writing consultations. Her website: www.rustymorrison.com.

Eileen Myles is poet, novelist, art journalist. Their last book was *evolution* (poems) from 2018. *For Now*, a book-length talk/essay about writing, will be out in fall 2020 from Yale Press. They live in New York and Marfa, TX.

Hera Naguib's work has been published or is forthcoming in *The Cincinnati Review*, *CALYX*, *Quarter After Eight*, *The Journal*, *The Southeast Review*, *Copper Nickel*, *Prairie Schooner*, *World Literature Today*, *DAWN*, and elsewhere. She holds fellowships and awards from the Fulbright Scholarship Program and VIDA: Women in Literary Arts, selected by Idra Novey. She is a PhD student in Creative Writing at Florida State University where she teaches Composition and Creative Writing and reads poetry for *The Southeast Review*.

Kathryn Nuernberger is the author of the poetry collections, *RUE*, *The End of Pink* and *Rag & Bone*. She has also written the essay collections *Brief Interviews with the Romantic Past* and The Witch of Eye (forthcoming from Sarabande in 2021). Her awards include the James Laughlin Prize from the Academy of American Poets, an NEA fellowship, and "notable" essays in the Best American series. She teaches in the MFA program at University of Minnesota.

Yoko Ogawa has won every major Japanese literary award. Her fiction has appeared in *The New Yorker*, *A Public Space*, and *Zoetrope: All-Story*. Her works include *The Diving Pool*, a collection of three novellas; *The Housekeeper and the Professor*; *Hotel Iris*; and *Revenge*. Her latest novel, *The Memory Police*, was a finalist for the National Book Award 2019 and the International Booker Prize 2020. She lives in Hyogo.

Keija Parssinen is the author of the novels *The Ruins of Us*, which earned a Michener-Copernicus award, and *The Unraveling of Mercy Louis*, which won an Alex Award from the American Library Association. Her work has appeared in *The Southern Review*, *The New York Review of Books Daily*, *Slice Magazine*, *The Washington Post*, *The Los Angeles Review of Books*, *Slate*, *Salon*, *The Lonely Planet* travel writing anthologies, and elsewhere, and has been supported by fellowships from the Truman Capote trust, Hedgebrook, Yaddo, MacDowell, and Ragdale, among others. Born and raised in Saudi Arabia and Texas, she is currently an Assistant Professor of English and Creative Writing at Kenyon College.

Meghan Pipe lives in Buffalo, New York. She is at work on a novel set in the suburbs of Long Island and a short story collection that includes "The Cave."

Veronica Roberts is curator of modern and contemporary art at the Blanton Museum of Art at The University of Texas at Austin, a position she has held since 2013. Her Blanton exhibitions include *Converging Lines: Eva Hesse and Sol LeWitt, Donald Moffett, Nina Katchadourian: Curiouser, Vincent Valdez: The City,* and *Charles White: Celebrating the Gordon Family Gift*, in collaboration with Black Studies at UT.

Emmalea Russo is the author of *G* (Futurepoem) and *Wave Archive* (Book*hug). Her work has appeared in *Artforum*, *BOMB*, *The Brooklyn Rail*, *Cosmopolitan*, *Hyperallergic*, *Los Angeles Review of Books*, and SF MOMA's *Open Space*. She is a practicing astrologer teaching workshops and seeing clients at Arthouse Astrology and lives between New York and the Jersey shore.

Naphisa Senanarong grew up in Bangkok and currently resides in Brooklyn. She is pursuing her MFA in Fiction at Brooklyn College. Her work has been published in *Bennington Review* and *Hawaii Pacific Review*.

Stephen Snyder, Kawashima Professor of Japanese Studies, serves as Vice President for Academic Affairs and Dean of Language Schools at Middlebury College. He has translated works by Yoko Ogawa, Natsuo Kirino, Miri Yū, Ryū Murakami, Kanae Minato, and Kenzaburō Ōe, among others. He is currently working on a study of the publishing industry and its effect on the translation and globalization of Japanese fiction.

C.A. Traywick is a journalist living in Denver, Colorado.

Kosiso Ugwueze was born in Enugu, Nigeria and raised in Southern California. Her short stories have appeared or are forthcoming in *Subtropics*, *Cosmonauts Avenue*, and the *South Carolina Review*. She has received fellowship and residency support from Kimbilio Fiction, Ox-Bow School of Art, and the Vermont Studio Center. Kosiso is an assistant fiction editor for the online literary journal *The Offing* and lives in Los Angeles where she is at work on a novel and a short story collection.

Ames Varos is a writer whose work appears most recently in a special edition of ESOPUS, with art from Nat Meade. He lives with his wife and son in California.

THE UNSUNG MASTERS SERIES

BRINGING GREAT, LOST WRITERS TO NEW READERS

NEW FOR 2020

WENDY BATTIN: ON THE LIFE & WORK OF AN AMERICAN MASTER

EDITED BY CHARLES HARTMAN, MARTHA COLLINS, PAMELA ALEXANDER, & MATTHEW KRAJNIAK

"Wendy Battin is a poet of lightness and light: her lines, rhythmic and musical, unfold with a dancer's grace to illuminate the world."

—Ned Balbo



To order previous volumes or to purchase a writer, visit

WWW.UNSUNGMASTERS.ORG

COPPERNICKLE · GULF COAST · PLEIADES · UNIVERSITY of HOUSTON

FICTION
Yoko Ogawa, Meghan Pipe,
Naphisa Senanarong, C.A. Traywick,
Kosiso Ugwueze

NONFICTION
Gemma de Choisy, Jonathan McGregor,
Kathryn Nuernberger, Tariq al Haydar
& Keija Parssinen, Ames Varos

POETRY
Erin Adair-Hodges, Rosa Alcalá,
Sophie Cabot Black, Micaela Bombard,
Dorsey Craft, Stephanie Horvath,
Jared Joseph, Ananda Lima,
Nathaniel Mackey, Campbell McGrath,
Patrick Milian, Matt W. Miller,
Rusty Morrison, Eileen Myles,
Hera Naguib, Emmalea Russo

ART & ART WRITING
Diedrick Brackens, Kate Green,
Fumi Ishino, Alex Jen, Autumn Knight,
Veronica Roberts

REVIEWS & INTERVIEWS
Chelsea B. DesAutels, Matt Bizzell

GULF COAST PRIZE WINNERS
Leyla Çolpan (poetry), Francisco González
(fiction), Lisa Low (nonfiction)

COVER ARTWORK
Diedrick Brackens

Winter / Spring 2021 Vol. 33, Issue 1 $12

GULF COAST
A JOURNAL OF LITERATURE AND FINE ARTS
WINTER / SPRING 2021
VOLUME 33, ISSUE 1